Center for an Urban Future

www.nycfuture.org SEPTEMBER 2011

FOSTERING CAREERS

As many as half of the young people who age out of New York City's foster care system don't have jobs, a key reason why an alarming number of foster youth essentially go from being minor wards of the state to adult wards of the state. Far more could be done to prepare these young people for the world of work.

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The report was generously funded by the Child Welfare Fund and the Pinkerton Foundation. General operating support for City Futures has been provided by Bernard F. and Alva B. Gimbel Foundation, Deutsche Bank, Fund for the City of New York, Salesforce Foundation, The Scherman Foundation, Inc., and Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock.

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New York City has never been a particularly easy place for teenagers and young adults to break into the workforce. Even during the boom years of the 2000s, the city's unemployment rate for teens between the ages of 16 and 19 hovered just under 20 percent. By the end of 2010, it had risen to 40 percent.

As shocking as these numbers are, however, young people aging out of the city's foster care system appear to be faring even worse. Based on dozens of interviews with child welfare practitioners across the five boroughs, we estimate that that no more than half of the young people who have recently left the foster care system have jobs at any given time. With nearly 1,000 foster youth aging out of the system every year, that means that close to 500 young people each year are failing to connect with the world of work.

The tragic result is that far too many foster youth go from being minor wards of the state to adult wards of the state, with high rates of incarceration, public assistance use and homelessness. According to the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), one out of ten foster youth in New York City who left foster care in the mid-2000s entered a homeless shelter within the year. And within three years, one of five entered a homeless shelter.

These dismal outcomes might very well be different if more foster youth were able to access—and hold onto—jobs. But, as we show in this report, not enough is being done to help foster youth connect to jobs and careers. While there is a lot that is right with the child welfare system today, neither the city agencies that oversee the child welfare system nor the private foster care agencies that provide direct services to foster youth are adequately equipped to help young people who are aging out of the system to succeed as adults. And the greatest shortcomings are with assisting foster youth to prepare for the workforce.

This study takes an in-depth look at the challenges foster youth have in getting and keeping jobs as adults and examines what the various players in the city's foster care and workforce development systems are—and aren't—doing to help young people transition from foster care into adulthood. It offers a range of recommendations on what could be done to improve employment and educational outcomes of young people aging out of the system. The study is based on an extensive data analysis as well as interviews and focus groups with more than three dozen experts and practitioners in foster care, workforce development, youth development and education.

As of 2010, there were approximately 16,000 young people in foster care in New York City, of whom 7,000 were between the ages of 14 and 21 and 2,000 over the age of 18.[1] Foster youth must leave care by age 21, although many leave earlier. Over the past decade, an average of 918 young people have aged out of the foster care system each year—with a high of 984 in 2008 and a low of 832 in 2005.[2]

While it's clear how many New Yorkers move out of the system every year, unfortunately no one—not the city and not the city's foster care agencies—tracks employment outcomes among former foster youth in New York City. But though data is lacking, the long list of foster care professionals we interviewed were in broad agreement: an alarmingly high number of foster youth are not working.

"It's quite apparent to me that former foster children fare poorly in the job market," says Richard Altman, executive director of the Jewish Child Care Association (JCCA), one of the city's largest foster care agencies. "Children in foster care are behind on every indicator for future employment success once they leave care."

Most of those we spoke with estimated that around 50 percent of their former clients are unemployed. "Of the foster care alumni removed from family and aging out of care, the number who fail to find stable employment is probably 50 percent or higher—at least," says Jeremy Kohomban, executive director of Children's Village and one of the nation's most respected foster care experts.

Foster youth are not the only young people who struggle in today's labor market. The likelihood that a teenager can find employment has dropped steadily over the past decade due to shifts in the national economy, and the recession has only worsened and accelerated the trend. One particularly troubling indication of how badly young people in New York City are faring is that in 2009, the most recent year for which the city has data, there were roughly 177,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 24—almost one in five New Yorkers in this age group—who were neither in school nor in jobs. Three out of four of these youth have been jobless for a year or more and are referred to as "disconnected" from school and work.

Most of these "disconnected" young people have never gone through New York's foster care system. However, experts who study disconnected youth have found that teenagers in foster care are much more likely to disconnect from school and work than other youth. Indeed, foster youth are greatly over-represented in every adult population that is considered dysfunctional—prison, welfare, homeless shelters.

Although there is no official data on employment outcomes of foster care youth in New York, studies at the national level confirm the anecdotal information we have gathered. The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Midwest Study) is an ongoing cohort analysis that has been tracking a sample of young people from Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois as they transition out of foster care into adulthood. The researchers—a team involving Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago; Partners for Our Children at the University of Washington, Seattle; the University of Wisconsin Survey Center; and the public child welfare agencies in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin—found that youth in the study struggle more than other youth. Half were unemployed at age 21 and the same share was unemployed three years later. Of those who were employed, almost a third was working part-time. Of those who were unemployed, one out of six was incarcerated.

If, as in the Midwest study—and as we heard in our interviews—half of the former foster youth in New York City are unemployed at any given time, then about 1,400 of the nearly 2,800 alumni between the ages of 21 and 24 are likely to be out of work.

One chronic effect of unemployment is loss of housing and homelessness. Here we do have some

information on what foster youth experience in adulthood. Dennis Culhane, a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, matched data held by the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and the Department of Homeless Services (DHS). He found that 13 percent of youth over the age of 17 who left the foster care system in 1996 entered a city homeless shelter within three years. When ACS and DHS revisited the study in 2008 with a similar methodology (looking at youth who left care ages 16 and older), they found that the situation had worsened: of all youth ages 16 and older who left care in 2004, 21 percent had entered a DHS homeless shelter within three years. In less than a decade, the likelihood of homelessness had increased by more than one-third.

There are clear reasons why foster youth are having difficulty entering and staying in the workforce. Perhaps the clearest and most unambiguous problem is in education. Employers are increasingly likely to hire only high school graduates, making low-literacy youth less employable each year. According to data we received from the New York City Department of Education, only 15 percent of foster youth in 8th grade have English or math skills at or above grade level—roughly one-third the proportion of all 8th grade students.

A primary cause of poor school performance is multiple foster care placements. The average youth who ages out of care has moved from one home to another seven times. Each time the youth is likely to change schools and miss days or weeks of class, and each time fall behind a little more. Practitioners in the field report that multiple placements cause other problems too: a wariness and mistrust of adults, emotional trauma that compounds the trauma of being removed from parents, lack of close connections and socialization with other youth. The effect on work habits can be highly destructive. "While an employer might understand and be sensitive to these issues, their expectation is that employees come ready to work, that they will be punctual, in attendance consistently and that they approach work with a focused and positive outlook," says Courtney Hawkins, vice president of education and youth services at at F.E.G.S., one of the largest social service agencies and providers of foster care services in New York. "And while many of us take these work characteristics for granted, they're often a challenge for foster care youth."

"Of foster care alumni, the number who fail to find stable employment is probably 50 percent or higher—at least"

While foster youth face greater hurdles than other young people in getting into the workforce, there's little doubt that the systems responsible for foster care, youth-oriented workforce development and adult workforce development could be doing more to help foster youth access jobs.

The Administration for Children's Services (ACS) oversees all aspects of the city's child welfare system, from investigating reports of child abuse to ensuring the well being of young people in foster care. While ACS has improved in many aspects over the past decade, its budget for foster care programs has fallen from $903 million in 2000 to $782 million in 2010. The decline is largely attributable to a sharp drop in the overall population of those in foster care. The problem is that very little of the money saved has been invested in the young people aging out of the system. ACS also abolished the Office of Youth Development, a budget-driven move which, according to several professionals in the field, undermined the agency's ability to focus on the needs of foster youth as a discrete population. (ACS declined to be interviewed for this report. The agency requested that we submit written questions, which we did several months ago, but responses to our questions have not been provided as of the publication date.)

"Where agencies might intervene on educational matters, there's no sense of obligation to intervene in the same way for employment"

To its credit, ACS has two promising initiatives underway: Building Bridges, a series of workshops coordinated by F.E.G.S., the Workforce Professionals Training Institute (WPTI), and the New York City Employment and Training Coalition (NYCETC) in partnership with ACS, that brings together the foster care and workforce development communities; and the Career & Employment Support Project, a pilot project operated by the Columbia University-based Workplace Center that seeks to build capacity to provide evidence-based career development and employment support among foster care agencies.

Foster care agencies are arguably in the best position to help strengthen the workforce readiness of their clients, and some have launched promising initiatives. But for most of these agencies, workforce development is not a strength. While each agency has a designated "Preparing Youth for Adulthood" coordinator who manages the aging out transition, the real work of preparing young people for careers must start long before foster youth are ready to leave the system—as early as age 14, if possible. Many agencies have limited connections with employers and lack specialized expertise in workforce development, making it difficult to cultivate external internships, connect foster youth to entry-level job openings, or prepare them to take the GED. "Where they might intervene on educational matters, there's no sense of obligation to intervene in the same way for employment," says Nanette Schrandt, director of juvenile services at the Legal Aid Society. Furthermore, caseloads are typically double the level recommended by the state Office of Children and Family Services, and caseworker turnover is high.

On the workforce development side, many youth and adults get assistance from the city's Workforce1 Career Centers. But vulnerable youth like those in foster care have a difficult time leveraging the system to prepare for and obtain jobs. "If you're a young person aging out of foster care and you're not work-ready, the career center is not your first stop, and it shouldn't be your first stop." says Francine Delgado, senior vice president for New York City programs and national technical assistance at Seedco, the nonprofit organization that manages the Manhattan and Bronx Career Workforce1 Career Centers." The Career Centers serve the needs of employers who want work-ready employees, and they are not well-suited to prepare youth who need high-intensity services to prepare them for jobs. Instead, workforce professionals recommend that foster youth be directed to community-based organizations who can perform that preparation. These community-based organizations will typically be funded, at least in part, by the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD).

DYCD funds several programs to serve vulnerable youth, and these programs may in fact provide valuable educational and workforce readiness services to foster youth. However, the scale of the services they provide has declined sharply over time. According to DYCD estimates, the Out-of-School Youth program (OSY) serves a population of more than 88,000 youth who are out of school, out of work, and lacking a high school diploma or GED. But OSY is funded to serve only 1,900 teens, or about 2 percent of the youth identified by DYCD as needing assistance—and older youth between ages 22 and 24 are ineligible.

Foster youth also suffer from the antiquated standards imposed by the federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA), which funds most of DYCD's budget. For example, OSY holds providers accountable for—and provides some of its funding on the basis of—hitting performance targets for the number of youth who get jobs, enroll in college, or obtain their GED or another credential. For some youth, these are realistic

standards, and there is no question that market-recognized credentials are key to getting and keeping jobs in today's economy. But a foster youth reading at a fourth-grade level faces major barriers to employment. That youth may need several years to reach these standards, and OSY lacks support for interim milestones along the way. OSY is a robust and valuable program, but it is also symptomatic of the difficulty DYCD faces in designing and funding programs tailored to meet the workforce needs of low-skilled foster youth.

The Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) is DYCD's most high-profile program and its largest, with more than 35,000 summer internships provided in 2010. DYCD managers noticed that foster youth struggled to succeed in SYEP, and they took steps to serve foster youth by setting aside 600 "vulnerable youth" slots. These slots, available to foster youth, court-involved youth and runaway and homeless youth, provide additional supports to ensure successful completion of the internship. However, only 224 foster youth obtained vulnerable youth slots in 2010. Foster youth who belong to an agency that lacks a relationship with a vulnerable youth contractor must take their chances with the general SYEP lottery. Only 10 percent of all eligible foster youth (about 700 teens) obtained SYEP internships in 2010.

The most promising direction for strengthening the work readiness of foster youth appears to be in providing coordinated education and employment-related services that are designed with the specific needs of foster care youth in mind. One important initiative on this front is the Academy, a project conceived by five foster care agencies, funded by the Heckscher Foundation, and operated by F.E.G.S. Health and Human Services System, which provides a wide range of services to help vulnerable children, youth, adults and families. F.E.G.S. had already built a suite of education and workforce services for thousands of disconnected and at-risk youth, providing a strong base for Heckscher's foster youth initiative.

The Academy provides a wide spectrum of education and employment services, including pre-GED and GED training, career and college exploration, sheltered internships, supported external internships, support for job interviews and job search/placement services. The structure puts a high premium on the Academy's "no-reject/no eject" policy, which states that youth who leave can always come back. In addition, the Academy matches each youth with an adult "Youth Advisor" who will hopefully build a stable relationship with that youth. Results thus far are impressive for this population: Four out of ten obtain jobs, almost half pass the GED or increase their academic level, and most youth who enter the program stay with it and gradually improve their work readiness and education. The achievements of the Academy, along with similar programs created by the Children's Aid Society and Fedcap, suggest that developing a separate level of workforce and educational services for foster youth may dramatically improve their life outcomes.

On the whole, we determined that the current system for strengthening work readiness among foster youth benefits from the commitment and sophistication of leaders in the foster care and youth development sectors. But the overall system is underfunded relative to the level of need, especially in services that would improve literacy and math skills among out of school youth. Further, the city should strengthen its efforts along four dimensions: coordination between the foster care, adult workforce, youth-oriented workforce and public education systems; data collection and analysis that cross system lines and extend into adulthood; work readiness services that target the neediest youth; and development of a comprehensive array of educational and workforce preferences to ensure that foster youth have access to programs from which they might otherwise be excluded.

New York City is not powerless to help foster youth. As the surrogate parent for thousands of youth, it is ultimately responsible for their well-being as adults. By coordinating the efforts of the city agencies that provide foster care, workforce development and education, and by investing in integrated work readiness and educational services to out-of-school foster youth, the city could help foster youth connect to jobs and careers. That would keep the next generation of foster youth alumni off the streets, out of prisons and welfare offices, and on the tax rolls.

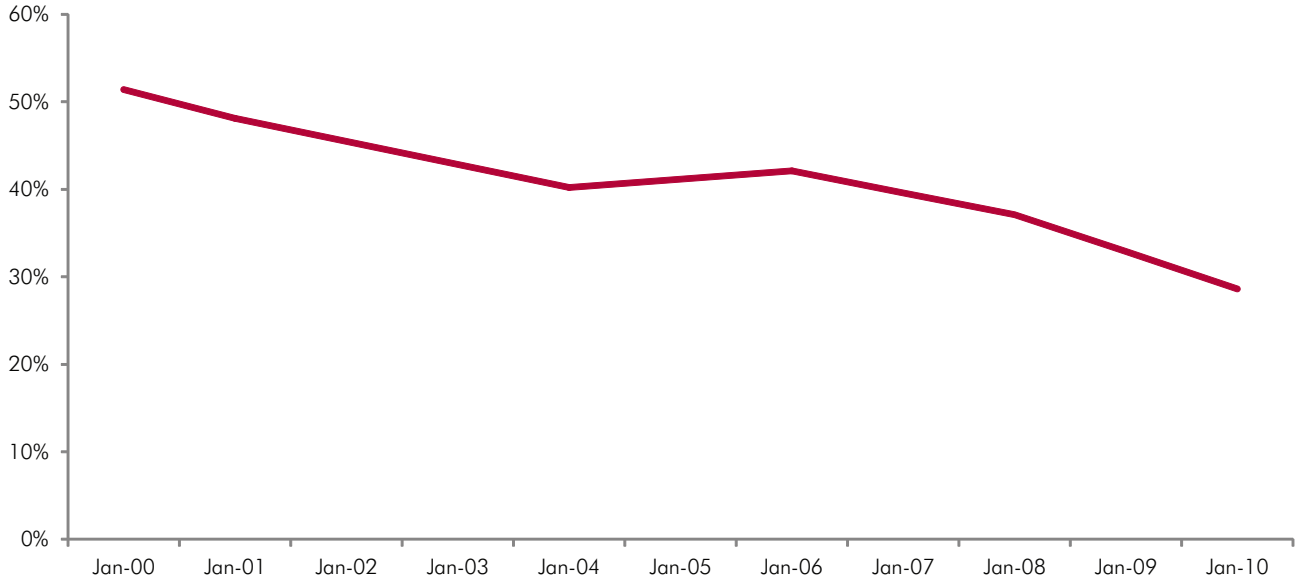
YOUTH IN THE LABOR MARKET: NO EASY PATHS TO ADULTHOOD

For youth anywhere, in any generation, work experience matters. Young people with a summer job or an after-school shift may think that the paycheck is the point. But they are earning more than wages. On the job, they learn vital lessons about workplace culture and employer expectations: show up on time; dress nicely; don't talk back even if provoked; help out coworkers and they'll help you out. They gain the first items on their resume that could impress a future employer, and find out what kind of work they like to do, or hate doing.

It is therefore cause for alarm if large numbers of young people can't get or keep jobs. Studies have found that youth who suffer from prolonged unemployment can suffer "scarring effects" that depress their earnings and employment record as adults. In today's economy, that fear is more than just theoretical. First, as traditional jobs filled by youth are increasingly automated or shipped overseas, youth employment is falling dramatically. Andrew Sum, a labor economist at Northeastern University, has found that the share of teenagers ages 16-19 in the workforce has dropped from 51 percent in 2000 to 29 percent in 2010—their lowest employment rate since the end of World War II. Over that same time period, the share of prime-age workers dropped only slightly, and senior citizens actually entered the workforce in greater numbers.[3]

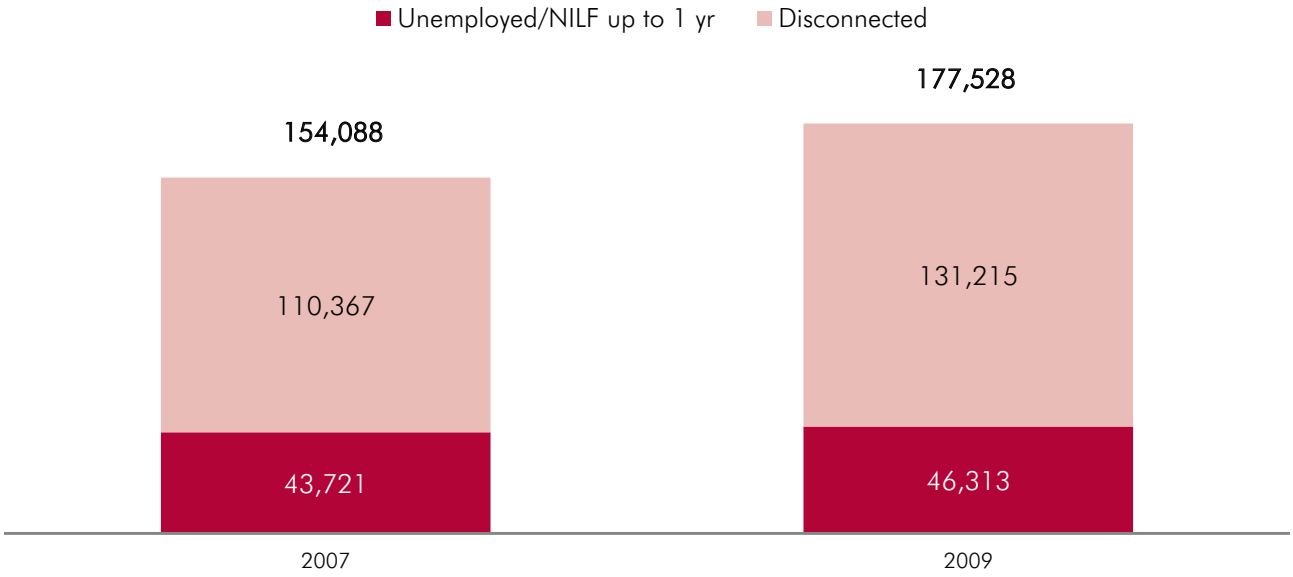
The nation's economic hard times have aggravated this long-term trend. "Unemployment of young adults is at the highest level ever," notes Peter Kleinbard, founder and senior consultant to the Youth Development Institute. In New York City, the recession has wreaked havoc on the youth workforce. Unemployment among teens aged 16-19 doubled between 2007 and 2010, from 20% to

Chart 1: Employment to Population Ratio of Teens Ages 16-19 in the U.S., June 2000 to June 2010, Selected Years



Source: Andrew Sum et al, Northeastern Center for Labor Market Studies.[4]

Chart 2: Youth out of School Ages 16-24 by Employment Status, 2007 and 2009



NILF: not in labor force.
Source: American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau. Compiled by New York City Labor Market Information Service.

40%.[5] Employers and youth counselors report that adults with more consistent employment records are taking jobs that young people would have obtained prior to the recession.

Most hard-hit in any recession are high school dropouts. They face extraordinary obstacles to getting and keeping work. "Jobs have never been worse for young people and jobs have never been worse for people without high school diplomas," says Lazar Treschan, director of youth policy at the Community Service Society. "So young people without high school diplomas are behind the eight-ball."

Those who are most likely to fail in their transition to adulthood are so-called disconnected youth—young people who are out of school and unemployed over a long period of time, and who often lack strong connections to caring adults and community supports. The size of this core group of struggling youth depends on the yardstick being used. According to data from the American Community Survey, in the mid-2000s only about 7 percent of youth in the United States between the ages of 16 and 24 were out of work for a year or more and also out of school. At that time, however, the problem was worse in New York City, where one out of nine youth in New York City—more than 114,000 in all—were disconnected from school and work. By 2009, the number of disconnected youth in the city had climbed to 131,000, with another 46,000 out of work and school for periods ranging up to a year.[6]

Within the disconnected youth population, teens in foster care and young adults who have left care loom large. When Jacob Rosch, a researcher at Public Impact, a think tank in the Research Triangle region of North Carolina, started digging into past studies on disconnected youth, he found several subgroups massively over-represented among disconnected youth—notably court-involved youth, young mothers and foster youth. Of the 1.3 million disconnected teenagers ages 14-17, more than one-quarter were foster youth. Of those foster youth, almost four in ten were already high school dropouts.

Foster youth suffer disproportionately from a weak labor market in part because they are low-income, minority youth with poor educational attainment—the exact profile of youth losing out in today's economy. But they also suffer because of the unique handicaps of being raised to adulthood by strangers.

PROFILE OF FOSTER YOUTH IN CARE

Taken as a whole, the state and local governments of the United States comprise the world's largest parental unit. As of September 30, 2009, there were 423,773 children in the American foster care system.[7] That number, substantially smaller than a decade earlier (by about one-fifth), and constituting about half of one percent of all children under age 18, nonetheless imposes a staggering responsibility for state and local agencies.

"Foster care stems from what amounts to a police action by the state," notes Jim Purcell, president of the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies, the trade association for foster care providers in New York State. He emphasizes what a profound decision it represents for a local government to remove a child from his or her parents.

Having removed the child, caseworkers then explore strategies for moving the child back to a permanent living arrangement as soon as practically possible. In many cases, they provide services to parents that enable reunification with their child inside a year. Children may also be adopted, in most cases by related family members.

Numerous other children, however, are unable to leave foster care. They grow up in a system designed for temporary, short-term stays. But the numbers are inexorable: the longer a child stays in foster care, the more likely it is that child will age out of care. Other factors matter too. Children who enter in adolescence are more likely to age out, as are children with severe mental health or developmental disabilities.

For many years, policymakers knew little about the fate of foster children who entered adulthood on their own. Starting in the late 1990s, however, two landmark studies pulled aside the veil. A research team from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago launched the Midwest Evaluation on the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth to track foster children from Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa from adolescence into adulthood.[8] Another team working for Casey Family Programs, a foundation devoted to strengthening the child welfare and foster care systems, launched the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study to follow foster children in Oregon and Washington State.[9]

The two studies arrived at similar and alarming results. Many of the foster youth they followed aged out —most often at age 18—and quickly slipped off the path to self-sufficiency and normal patterns of adult development. Foster youth were far more likely than other youth to become unemployed, live on the streets, go to

Table 1: Outcomes of Former Foster Youth in Their Early Twenties Compared to the General Population of Young Adults

Outcome	Former Foster Youth	All Young Adults
Jail or prison within last year	7%	0.1%
No HS Diploma or GED	24%	7%
GED, No Diploma	10%	5%
Attained 4-yr degree or above	3%	24%
Enrolled in 4-year or graduate degree program	5%	16%
Currently Employed	48%	76%
Less than $10K Income Last Year (if employed)	56%	33%
Any Savings/Checking Account	47%	85%
Not enough money to pay rent	29%	7%
Evicted	9%	0.7%
Drug dependence[a]	8%	0.8%
Post-traumatic stress disorder[a]	25%	4%

Source: Midwest Study; a. Northwest Study.

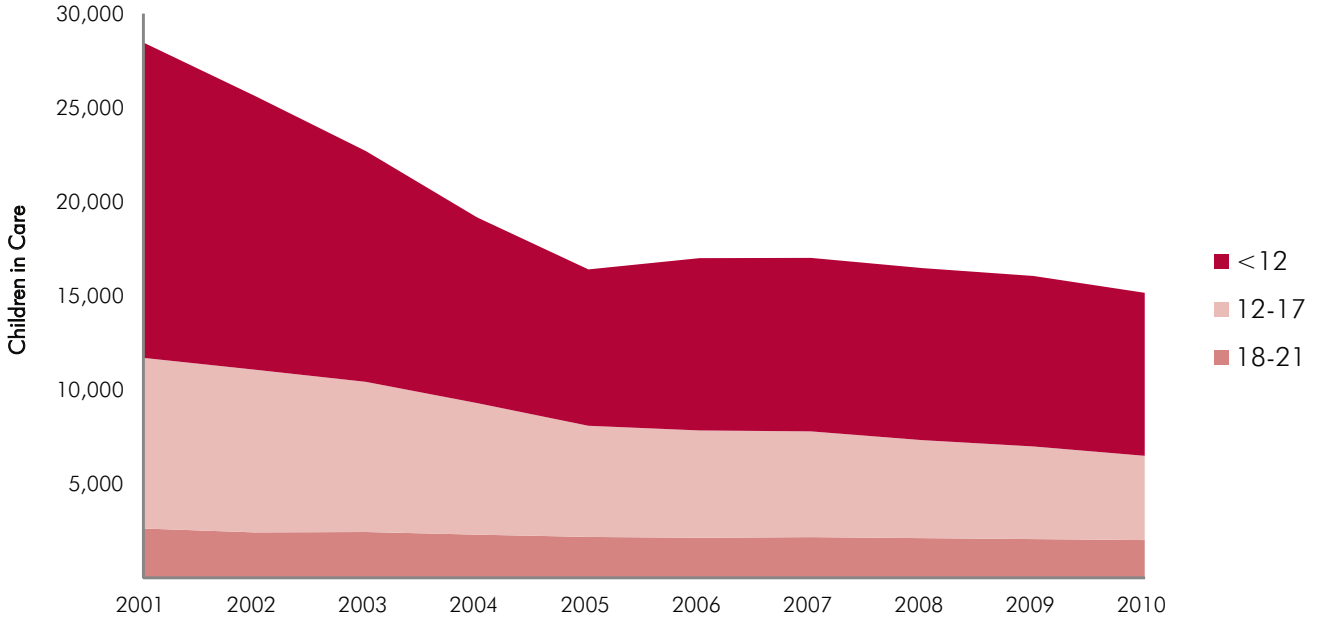
prison, bear children at an earlier age, and drop out of school.

In 2010, New York City had roughly 16,000 children in foster care, and of that population, just over 2,000 were between the ages of 18 and 21. About two-thirds will age out on their own, rather than be reunified with their family or adopted. In eight other states, those older youth would not be in care at all. New York was one of the first states to allow foster youth to remain in care beyond their 18th birthday. The added time makes a huge difference for many foster youth. They have more time to prepare for adult responsibilities, to make educational and career plans, to choose their own time to leave care. Over the past decade, foster youth have increasingly made the decision to stay in care longer. In 2001, only one in four youth waited until age 21 to age out. In 2009, the share of late leavers had doubled to more than half. "It's absolutely a positive trend to see more young people staying until 21," says Jane Golden, vice president for child welfare policy at Children's Aid Society.

About 4 percent of all the nation's foster youth live in New York City. If their experience in care leaves something to be desired—and they will tell you it does—the previous generation of foster youth two decades ago had it much worse. During the 1980s, the crack epidemic ravaged low-income communities throughout the city, leaving many children to grow into adulthood on their own. The city's flailing child welfare system drew protracted lawsuits and stinging criticism from child welfare advocates. In 1991, the foster care caseload swelled to a historic peak of more than 50,000 children and youth. The Administration for Children's Services, founded in 1997, responded with a three-pronged initiative to bring it down. The agency's caseworkers expanded preventive care to help families stay together. They used similar techniques to reunite children with their parents after a few months. And they worked hard to find adoptive families, especially among relatives of the child in care, such as grandparents.

The population of younger children in foster care has dropped steadily over the past two decades—although that decline has leveled off during the past five years in the wake of child welfare scandals. One perverse result, however, is that older youth in care now make up a large and growing component of the foster care population. In 2000, only 9 percent of all children in care were 18 or older. By 2010, more than 13 percent were. In those ten years, the number of children in care under age 12 had been cut by half to about 8,700.

Chart 3: Children in Care by Age Group, 2001-2010



Source: Administration for Children's Services and the Center for New York City Affairs

FOSTER YOUTH IN THE WORKFORCE

The city has no data on the employment outcomes of young people who have left New York foster care system, but it is hardly a secret that foster youth across the five boroughs are struggling to obtain and hold onto jobs. What came as a surprise in our interviews with numerous child welfare practitioners was just how poorly foster youth are doing in the workforce when they leave the system. Indeed, there was broad consensus among those we spoke with that roughly half of all foster youth aging out of the system are unemployed at any given time.

"If I had to estimate how many [foster] youth gain employment, I'd say about half," says Miriam Saintil, a vocational specialist for SCO Family of Services.

Landing a job is only half the battle, however, and not necessarily the most difficult half. Foster youth struggle to keep jobs as well. Ebony Coles, a caseworker for St. Vincent's Services, has found that only one-third of her clients obtained employment and another one-quarter obtained vocational work, such as supported internships. Of those, three out of four were gone within six months.

> "With foster youth, there's no latitude for mistakes. A foster youth who loses a job could be in a shelter in a month."

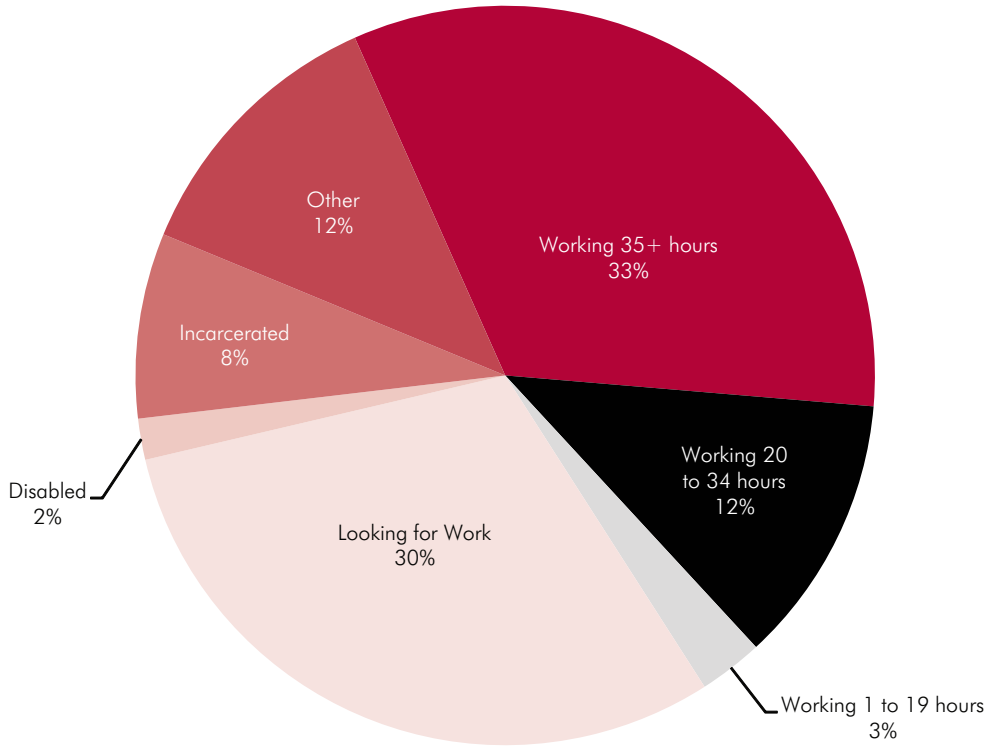
These assessments from the front lines of foster care in New York track closely with the most respected survey of foster youth employment outcomes in adulthood, the Midwest Study. Mark Courtney and his colleagues from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago followed foster children in Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa from age 17 into adulthood. The researchers surveyed foster youth roughly every other year to find out their experiences as they prepared to leave foster care, aged out and took on the responsibilities of adulthood.[10]

Among Chapin Hall's daunting findings:

- At age 24, fewer than half of all foster youth are working (48 percent), compared to 75 percent in the general population. Only one in three foster youth are working full-time. Three in ten foster youth are looking for work, while the rest of the unemployed foster youth are incarcerated, disabled, or not looking for work. (See Chart 4.)[11]
- The proportion of unemployed foster youth actually rises between age 21 and age 24, from 49 percent to 52 percent.
- Men and women face different challenges. Among men, one out of six were incarcerated at age 24 (16 percent), and almost six in ten had been convicted of a crime since age 18. No women were incarcerated. But two-thirds of young women aging out of foster care were mothers by age 24, and roughly three-quarters of all unemployed women were mothers.
- African-Americans who left the foster care system faced more daunting employment prospects: only two-fifths were employed at age 24, whereas three-fifths of all white youth were employed.[12]

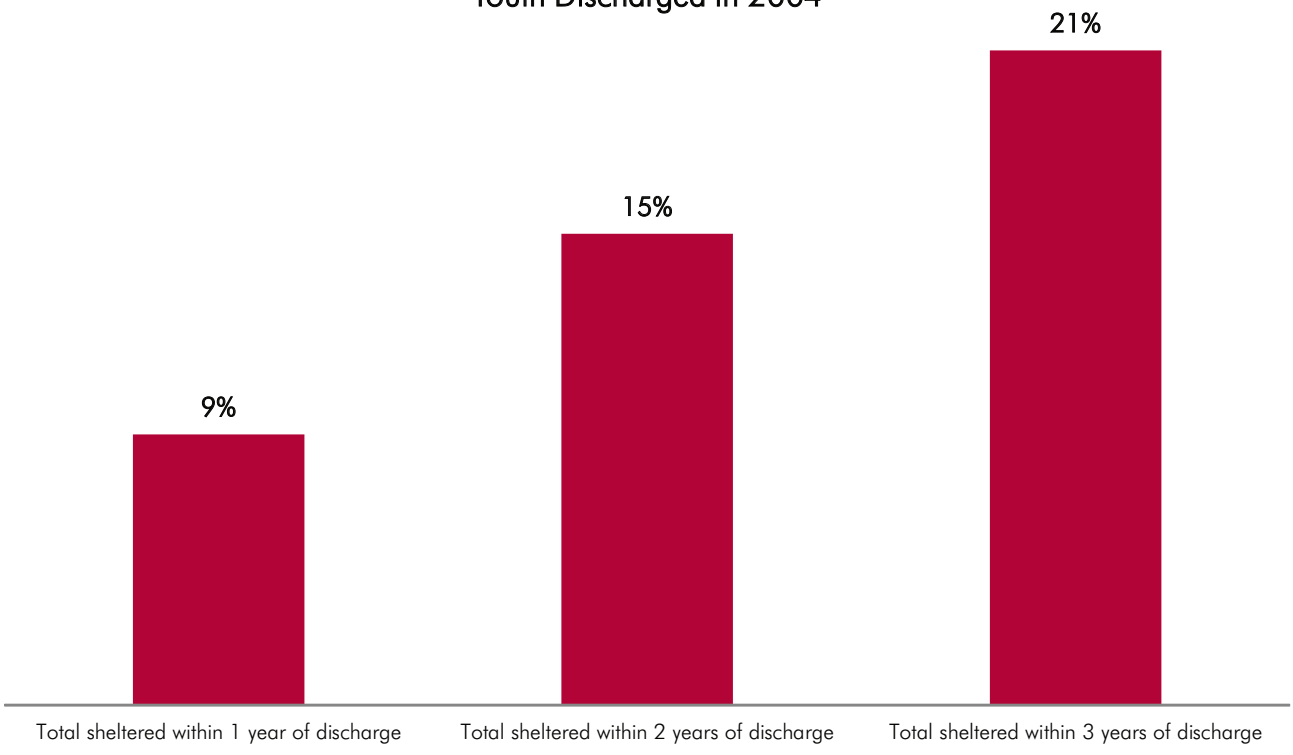
The implications for New York City are straightforward and unsettling. In 2006, 936 foster youth aged out of care in New York City. If the ratios found in the Midwest Study hold true for New York, 487 of those youth would be out of work at age 24, and another 137 would

Chart 4: Employment Profile of Foster Youth at Age 24



Source: Jennifer Hook and Mark Courtney, Employment of Former Foster Youth as Young Adults, April 2011.

Chart 5: Time from Foster Care Discharge to Shelter Entry, Youth Discharged in 2004



Source: Administration for Children's Services and Department of Homeless Services.

be working only part-time. Furthermore, given the rule of thumb that roughly half of all foster youth are out of work at any given time between ages 21 and 24, the affected population goes up considerably. In New York, for example, that would be about 1,800 foster youth. In comparison to the overall population of youth, or even the overall population of disconnected youth, 1,800 may seem like a drop in the bucket. But it represents an extremely high rate of failure in connecting with the labor market.

Not only are foster youth more likely to be unemployed, the wages they earn when employed are extremely low compared to other young adults. Chapin Hall found that almost two-thirds of all foster youth (64 percent) have annual income below the poverty level at ages 23 and 24. Another study carried out by Jennifer Macomber for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) found that only 11 percent of foster youth earned a livable wage at age 24, compared to 17 percent of youth from low-income families in the same states. Three in ten foster youth earned virtually no income from age 16 to age 24.[13]

The HHS study found that foster youth tend to be grouped into one of four job categories: those who never connect with the workforce, those who take longer to connect, those who initially connect and then drop out of the labor market, and those who consistently connect to the workforce.[14] The latter group probably needs educational assistance but not help with work readiness. But only one out of five foster youth can be described as consistent connecters. The interventions for the other three groups will probably differ dramatically.

Despite this diversity of experience, foster youth are more likely to need a boost than other youth with support from family members. "Of course all foster youth do not fail in school or in the job market," says Rae Linefsky, a leading consultant on youth development and child welfare. "But clearly there are many more who need extra help and support."

New York City lacks an infrastructure to support the work readiness needs of foster youth. But as the Macomber study implies, the lack of infrastructure does not mean that foster youth fail to get jobs. More often, the failures are less direct. For example, many foster youth get jobs in retail or food service with unpredictable schedules that make it difficult for them to stay in school or even attend GED classes. "In retail, the premium is flexibility," observes Rachel deAragon, a transitional counselor at Good Shepherd Services. "You may only be working 10 hours, but it's never the same 10 hours each week. If you're taking a GED course every Tuesday, that doesn't fit with the way retail works." These jobs also tend to lack job security, benefits or potential for advancement.

ACS holds foster care agencies accountable for ensuring that foster youth find work before they age out of care. According to line staff at agencies with whom we spoke, they are able to find jobs for the majority of youth transitioning out of care, with the notable exceptions of youths with serious mental illness or young mothers who lack subsidized child care. But jobs found in haste are often unstable. Many foster youth who are employed at emancipation lose their jobs within six months, at which point they struggle to support themselves.

The consequences of not effectively supporting foster youth in their transitions to adulthood are serious. Many foster youth slip from being minor wards of the state as children to adult wards of the state as prison inmates, welfare recipients or residents of homeless shelters. These systems are expensive, and early intervention could avert the need for former foster youth to enter them.

While a number of factors lead to foster care alumni depending on public systems for support, lack of attachment to the working world is a central cause. Foster care practitioners have long wrestled with the catch-22 of employment and housing: youth need jobs to pay the rent, but they can't get and keep jobs without stable housing. deAragon has seen the pattern far too

often: "With foster youth, there's no latitude for mistakes. This job supports their apartment. A foster youth who loses a job could be in a shelter in a month."

The pink-slip to shelter path is well documented. Foster youth who age out live much closer to the edge than do other young adults. The Midwest Study found that three in ten former foster youth did not have enough money to pay the rent at some point in the previous year—four times the rate of other young adults. Nine percent had actually been evicted within the past year, compared to less than one percent among all young adults.

"All foster youth do not fail in school or in the job market. But clearly there are many more who need extra help and support."

In New York City, Dennis Culhane, a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, persuaded the Administration for Children's Services and the Department of Homeless Services to match their databases, crossing ACS's data on former foster youth with DHS's data on shelter applicants. Culhane succeeded in tracking the number of foster youth who left foster care after age 17 and entered a DHS homeless shelter at least once within three years.

What Culhane found shocked even those who expected foster youth to be over-represented in homeless shelters. Between 1991 and 1999, 15 percent of all foster youth leaving care entered the DHS shelter system within three years, roughly 300 annually.[15] Former foster youth were so prone to homelessness that, despite the vanishingly small number of former children in care as a share of all young adults in New York City, they accounted for one out of five young adults in the DHS shelter system. Women were more than twice as likely to enter a homeless shelter as men, and most women were accompanied by children. On the bright side, though, the rate dropped steadily, from 19 percent in 1991 to 13 percent in 1999.

Culhane's findings contributed to major policy changes around housing, in which the city invested in supportive housing for former foster youth and other youth at high risk of homelessness. However, little was done to strengthen foster youth's work readiness and educational attainment. In 2008, ACS and DHS matched their databases again. The methodology was slightly different in that they looked at all youth who had left the system after age 16, rather than age 17 as Culhane did. Nonetheless, their findings were clearly dispiriting. Homelessness among foster youth had actually climbed since 1999, the last year of Culhane's study. Of the 2,510 youth who left care in 2004, 385 of them, or 21 percent, entered a homeless shelter at least once within the next three years.[16]

Discovering that one out of five former foster youth entered a DHS shelter within three years was disturbing enough—especially since the rate would likely have been higher if it had included shelters operated by the Department of Youth and Community Development or private providers such as Covenant House. But the ACS/DHS data showed other disturbing facts as well. For example, one out of ten youth who left care between 2004 and 2006 entered a DHS homeless shelter within a year. In addition, four out of five former foster youth entering a shelter were parents with children—thus perpetuating the multi-generational failure of disconnected youth to stabilize their chaotic lives.

HOW YOUTH START CAREERS – AND WHY FOSTER YOUTH OFTEN DO NOT

Young people have no ticket that guarantees success as an adult. Some children from privileged settings slip behind as adults, while others reared in grinding poverty rise to great success. But it's hard to disagree with Harlem Children Zone's CEO Geoffrey Canada, when he vented his displeasure at rags-to-riches stories: "I'm tired of hearing about kids in poor neighborhoods who beat the odds. I want to change the odds."

In order to change the odds for foster youth and other at-risk teens, the city needs to provide support along several dimensions that more advantaged youth expect to receive: high quality standards-based education; information and exposure to career options; opportunities to develop leadership skills; strong connections to caring adults; access to safe places to interact with their peers; and support services to prepare them for living independently.[17] Youth with access to all or most of these assets have the best opportunities to succeed.

Workforce experts suggest that youth need to proceed gradually to identify and achieve their lifetime goals. Lauren Gates, director of the Workplace Center at the Columbia University School of Social Work, uses the concept of "vocational adolescence" to describe a process for finding a career path. "Vocational adolescence is a time for exploring what you like to do," says Gates. "You try out jobs to find what you like and don't like to do, what you're good at and what doesn't fit you." Over time youths figure out what kind of workplaces they like and the kind of work they like doing. Eventually they develop an idea of the kind of career they want to pursue.

But Gates, who has done extensive work in foster care systems, believes that vocational adolescence gets interrupted for young people in foster care. "The natural flow of having your parents as a model for what a good worker is, and using your home as a secure place from which to go out and try different work experiences, may not happen with foster youth," says Gates. "Or it may happen in a very disruptive way."

We found ample confirmation of Gates' perspective from employers, foster care and youth development providers, and foster youth themselves, who often feel quite different from other youth. They are more likely to suffer emotional burdens that other youth do not, struggle with poor literacy and numeracy, and start out behind in the development of social and professional networks.

Youth in the foster care system have been forcibly removed from their biological families, followed by frequent moves from one setting to another. As a result, many foster youth are short-tempered and wary of strangers. Their lack of trust can be a survival trait in foster care, but it's self-destructive in a work setting. "Foster youth have a shorter fuse, to be totally honest," says Kristina Sepulveda, youth director at Henry Street Settlement. Much of Sepulveda's time is spent placing foster youth with employers for internships, and staying on top of them to manage occasional blow-ups. "These kids get fired a lot."

Mental illness and emotional trauma are common among foster youth, in some cases to the extent of obstructing their ability to interview with employers or carry out work tasks. The researchers behind the Northwest Study made the startling discovery that one in four foster youth have suffered post-traumatic stress disorder in the past year—a rate twice as high as that experienced by U.S. war veterans.[18] The implications for getting and keeping jobs are unmistakable.

"When somebody interviews me, I get nervous. I can't look them straight in the eye," says Ellen, an anxious teenager, explaining her all-too-

obvious emotional distress. Short conversations with Ellen pinwheel into explorations of her tangled relationships with foster families and siblings. Ellen is only beginning to develop the self-confidence and discipline needed to start a new job through an internal internship at the Academy.

Interviews with employers who provided jobs and internships to foster youth revealed many of the same issues. The manager of Hastings Video, an independent video rental store, said that foster youth who came for internships were just like other kids who worked in her store, but that they "needed more structure." A preschool director reported that she had hired several foster youth interns for permanent positions. Still, "they come here with so much baggage," and "they need other people around them encouraging them," says Margaret Lynch, director of Auntie Jean's Paccor Preschool in Jamaica, Queens. The need for encouragement is a consistent theme among both employers and youth development professionals. "I find that foster youth need a level of care and support that is greater than most other youth, and if they don't receive it, they will not succeed," says Marc Grillo, volunteer coordinator at Housing Works, which provides internships for foster youth and other at-risk teens. He reports issues with attendance and punctuality. These are problems for non-foster youth as well, but Grillo believes that the lack of parental structure exacerbates the problem for foster youth: "Being accountable for your schedule is a privilege of having homes and families."

Inadequate literacy skills and stunted educational attainment handicap work readiness among thousands of teenagers in New York City. With large numbers of applicants for every position, employers frequently require a high school diploma or GED. Even in jobs that typically do not call for secondary education, some level of literacy has become standard. Janitors, for example, must be able to read the labels on their cleaning solutions. "Work readiness by itself will not be enough," says Mala Thakur, executive director of the National Youth Employment Coalition. "You'll hit a dead end in the labor market. That's why many youth employment programs are connecting work readiness to preparation for secondary and postsecondary credentials."

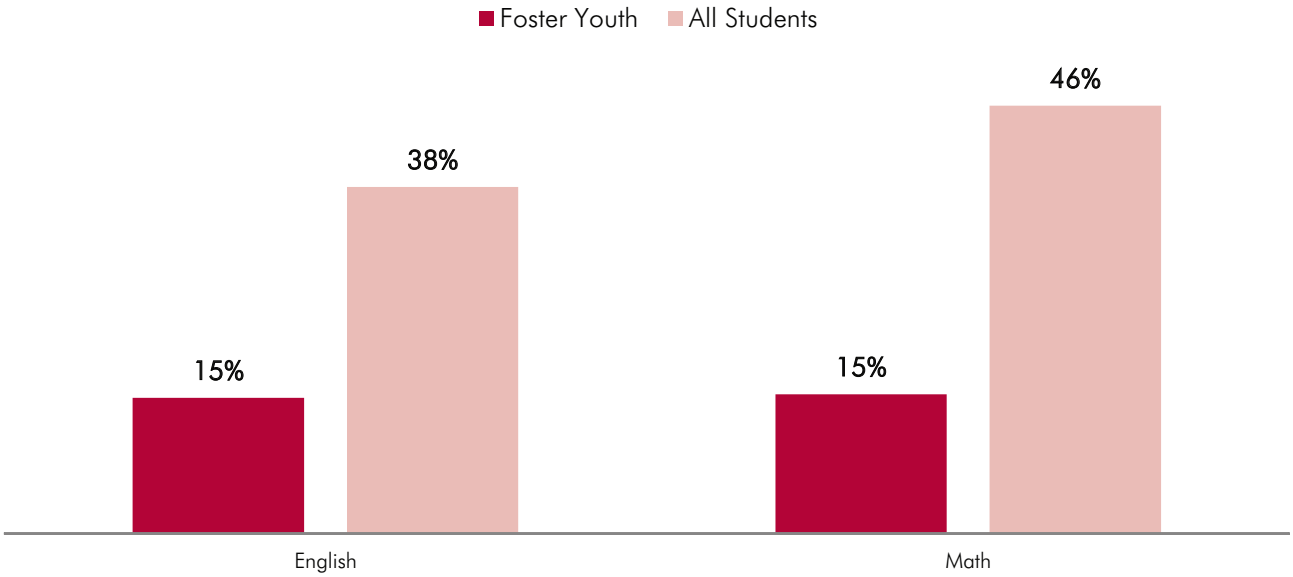
"Foster youth need a level of care and support that is greater than most other youth, and if they don't receive it, they will not succeed."

Yet education can be a painful ordeal for foster youth. Traumatized and moved from one school to another each time their foster care placement changes, they are prone to slipping behind their peers. As a result, low literacy and lack of a high school diploma frequently disqualify foster youth from jobs they could otherwise obtain. According to data from the New York City Department of Education that we requested for this study, foster youth in 8th grade score significantly lower than their peers. On average, they are twice as likely to score at the lowest performance level in English and three times as likely to score at the lowest performance level in math. Furthermore, only 15 percent of all foster youth in 8th grade meet or exceed state standards in either subject by scoring in performance levels three or four.[19]

"Every move pushes them back and further stunts their educational achievement," says Jeremy Kohomban of Children's Village. "You know how tough high school is if you never moved once? Imagine going to three different schools in three years, or worse. It's crazy."

Finally, foster youth enter the job market with fewer social assets than other youth. Teenagers with parents and extended families enjoy many benefits, small and large, that they may not appreciate at the time: contacts who know about job openings, relatives who provide advice and feedback about problems at work, and parents who both model the importance of hard work and demand it from their children. Youth in foster care, on the other hand, cannot ask a parent or

Chart 6: Comparison of foster youth and all students in 8th Grade Performing at or above Grade Level in English and Math, 2010



Source: NYC Department of Small Business Services. All funds in 2011 adjusted dollars.

close relative to explain how to apply for a job, coach them on a resume, or explain why some comment they made at the workplace might have led to harsh discipline from a supervisor. Foster care agencies and foster parents constantly grapple with the priorities of keeping their young wards safe and healthy. To expect them to also replace these social assets is asking a great deal.

The absence of social assets becomes a special problem for single mothers in the foster care system who need jobs and want to work. There are many single parents in New York City's low-income communities, and the high incidence of single parents among foster youth should come as no surprise. Unlike other single parents, however, foster youth rarely have relatives to whom they can turn for child care. Surprisingly, the city does not provide any special eligibility class for foster youth. The consequences are predictable. "We've dealt with a lot of girls who have children and can't pay for day care and therefore can't work," reports Ariane Nolfo of the Legal Aid Society's Juvenile Rights Practice. "They have to be on public assistance to get a child care voucher. Most of the girls we work with want to be employed, they want to go to school, but they can't afford the day care that is required."

One finding of our interviews came as something of a surprise: a belief among foster care professionals that the regulations designed to protect foster youth actually damage the development of a strong work ethic. The child welfare paradigm puts a strong emphasis on protecting the safety of children who have been entrusted to care. That emphasis is certainly understandable, particularly for younger children who cannot protect themselves. As children become youths, however, they must be exposed to risk in order to develop into adults. Several informants expressed the view that the rule-based environment around foster youth, coupled with the lack of adult role models, often leads to a sense of entitlement to services which can be expressed as laziness.

It is important not to idealize the behavior of youth outside the foster care system. As the vocational adolescence concept implies, getting fired from a job—or walking out—is a common experience for most youths. It takes time to learn the ways of the working world. Indeed, when we spoke with employers, some found foster youth to be very similar to other youth they had hired.

Foster youth can and do succeed in the workplace. But as youth who are being raised by the government, they need and deserve many different kinds of assistance—help that is available in New York City, but which too many foster youth cannot locate or access.

PART II

HELPING FOSTER YOUTH GET JOBS: WHAT IT WILL TAKE

There is no single system of care that can ensure that foster youth get stable jobs and become self-sufficient in the labor market. Rather, they need help from at least four systems:

1. The foster care system is responsible for helping foster youth achieve permanency and successful outcomes. But providers within this system often lack access to the work readiness and educational services needed to assure the best possible outcomes.

2. The adult workforce development system can help youth train for careers, obtain professional certifications, and connect to prospective employers. But workforce development providers are focused on the needs of employers. They generally do not provide special preparation for young people or clients with barriers to employment.

3. The youth-oriented workforce development system provides resources targeted to the needs of disadvantaged youth. But the youth development system is far too small to meet the need for its services, and youth with the greatest needs have difficulty accessing some programs.

4. The public education system seeks to ensure that all youth obtain the educational skills and credentials needed to compete in a 21st century economy. New York City's Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation helps youth falling behind in school, a group that includes many foster youth, to stay on track for graduation. However, the system does not provide services specifically tailored to the needs of foster youth.

With the exception of the Department of Education, which is outside the scope of this report, the efforts of these systems and their organizing departments are considered individually in what follows. However, in a larger sense, critiques of individual agencies miss the point. The managers of programs in all of these departments are struggling to deliver the best possible services in the face of round after round of budget cuts, working within administrative and funding structures that make collaboration infuriatingly difficult. Yet these obstacles must be overcome. The needs of foster youth are too complex for any one agency to meet them. Our research suggests that only a collaborative effort by key stakeholders, strategically directed, can move the needle in any measurable way.

WHAT THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM DOES FOR FOSTER YOUTH – AND WHERE IT FALLS SHORT

The Administration for Children's Services oversees the full spectrum of New York City's child welfare system. ACS investigates parental abuse and neglect reports and provides preventive services where possible to keep families together. The agency also oversees foster care providers to ensure the safety and permanency of almost 15,000 children in foster care. ACS declined to be interviewed for this study, instead requesting a set of written questions. Those questions were submitted, but ACS did not respond to them by the publication deadline.

ACS has the profound responsibility of overseeing the care of children who have been removed from their families. In many states, youth leave foster care at age 18. New York was one of the first states to allow foster youth to stay until age 21. Youth ages 18 and older represent a growing share of the foster youth caseload. In early 2005, ACS overhauled its child welfare and foster care strategy to emphasize three principles: rightsizing, reinvesting, and realigning.[20] First, ACS would rightsize the provider network. The foster care census had already dropped precipitously, from 49,000 in 1991 to just under 19,000 in 2004. But ACS proposed reducing the caseload to 15,000 within three years. This would require terminating some contracts with underperforming foster care agencies. Second, ACS would reinvest savings from the falling caseload into steps that would further reduce that caseload: preventing out-of-home placement through family support services and supporting rapid reunification with the family, rapid adoption and post-adoption aftercare services. Third, ACS would realign its provider network to de-emphasize congregate care providers (group homes long criticized for high costs and poor outcomes) and build up its network of foster family-based and relative foster care.

The strategy was notable for implementing policies based on the best available evidence and stakeholder input. For example, advocates and providers had long called for a shift away from congregate care. Now it was official city policy. Other policy directions, such as strengthening neighborhood-based foster care agencies, have proven more difficult to sustain.

Much of ACS's strategy ratified and organized trends already in progress, notably routing savings from reduced caseloads into prevention, a change already in progress at the time. The steep caseload drop since 1991 had reduced the foster care budget substantially, and those savings could have been removed from ACS and applied to other agencies' budget gaps. But the agency made the case for retaining the funds and investing them in improvements at the front end: better staffing levels for child welfare caseworkers, prevention of out-of-home placement through services to families at risk, rapid reunification with family members or adoption, along with so-called aftercare services to minimize the likelihood of a return to foster care.

That policy makes sense, up to a point, and has paid dividends in the form of continued reductions in caseload. But the re-investment policy conspicuously avoids investing in those children in care who age out of the system. "Foster care is a far smaller part of the budget than it was ten years ago," notes Andrew White, executive director of the Center for New York City Affairs, a policy institute at the New School which publishes Child Welfare Watch. "That money has not been spent in the system."

In 2000, the foster care budget was larger than the budget for child welfare and prevention. In the ensuing decade, the foster care budget—funding to care for children and youth who have been removed from their parents and to prepare foster youth for the responsibilities

of adulthood—fell by 13 percent and the child welfare budget rose by 68 percent. As of 2010, child welfare was slightly larger than foster care. (See chart 7.)

In 2006, ACS launched Preparing Youth for Adulthood (PYA), a new initiative designed to more effectively structure the relationship between foster care agencies and foster youth through a transitional system with clear goals, measurable outcomes and provider accountability. PYA set out six goals to assist foster youth in their transition to adulthood, outcomes to measure success in achieving each goal, and specific changes in ACS's protocols to hold both the agency and its foster care providers accountable for meeting these outcomes.

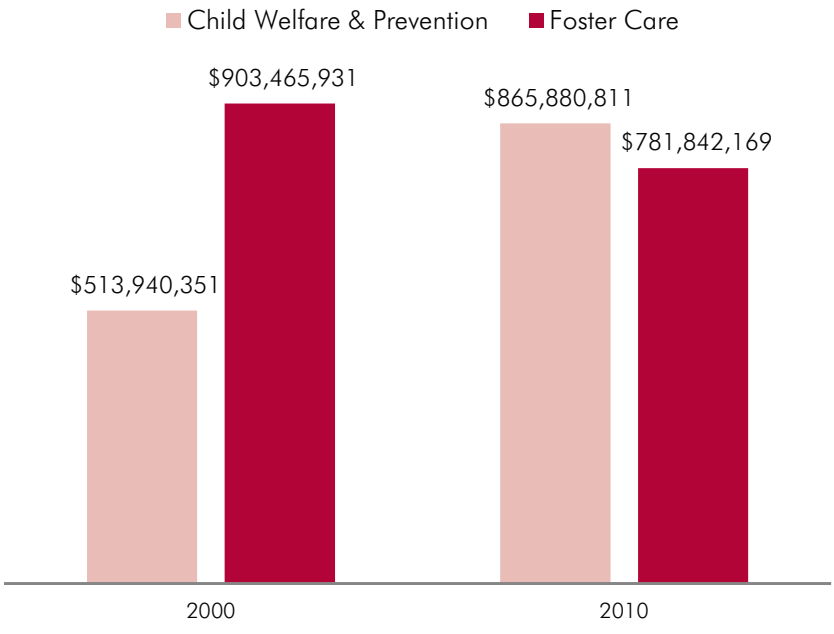
Two of the initiative's goals are relevant to this report. Goal 3 states that "youth will be afforded opportunities to advance their education and personal development." Goal 4 states that "Youth will be encouraged to take increasing responsibility for their work and life decisions, and their positive decisions are reinforced." In both instances, the foster care agencies that contract with ACS are expected to take the lead.

Yet foster care agencies are not, for the most part, naturally suited to advancing youths' education, or guiding them to take increasing responsibility for their work and life decisions. As we will discuss in the next section, the agencies are understaffed and underfunded. Every day begins with triage, as caseworkers start with their two key priorities: ensuring the safety of the children in their care and helping them build permanent relationships with caring adults. Preparing them to enter the workforce is often put off, not least because caseworkers may lack personal expertise in this area.

There is some good news, however. ACS has recently launched two initiatives that hold particular promise in developing and institutionalizing work readiness capacity at foster care agencies. In 2009, ACS rolled out "Building Bridges: Connecting the Foster Care and Workforce Communities to Support Positive Outcomes for Youth." The Building Bridges initiative is intended to support workforce readiness among foster youth by improving "connections and collaboration between foster care providers and community-based workforce development providers via a more systemic approach." To that end, ACS is bringing together staff from foster care agencies and workforce development providers for a series of workshops. ACS is partnering with the Workforce Professional Training Institute, F.E.G.S. Health and Human Services System and the New York City Employment and Training Coalition (NYCETC) to organize the workshops, as well as a set of supporting activities, such as site visits and a Google Group for "sharing examples of fruitful collaboration."[21] In addition, NYCETC is developing a resource directory of the young adult workforce development community in New York.

In addition to Building Bridges, the Workplace Center, a research group based at Columbia University School of Social Work, has obtained ACS's collaborative support for the Career &

Chart 7: Change in Funding for Child Welfare and Foster Between 2000 and 2010



Source: New York City Independent Budget Office

Employment Support Project, an initiative funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Joseph LeRoy and Ann C. Warner Fund. "Our goal is to build a national model for promoting evidence based career development and employment support for youth in foster care," says Lauren Gates, the Workplace Center's director. To that end, the Workplace Center has selected three foster care agencies to pilot various strategies, such as educational workshops, agency self-assessments to identify agency goals for increasing career development and employment support, and strategic planning teams to specify the steps needed to move toward reaching those goals.

It is impossible to gauge the overall success of foster care agencies in meeting PYA's goals, even though the white paper establishing PYA set forth both educational and work readiness outcome measures. In education, ACS pledged to measure and increase achievement of high school diplomas and GEDs, as well as enrollment in postsecondary educational programs. In work readiness, ACS pledged to measure and increase the number of youth enrolled in vocational programs who obtain work experience. However, information on achievement of these outcomes was unavailable from the ACS website, and ACS did not provide the information in response to an information request.

In addition, the Department of Education was not able to provide a graduation rate for foster youth, although they did make available English Language Arts and Math scale scores for foster youth in 8th grade. The most likely conclusion, although unconfirmed, is that ACS has not succeeded in tracking achievement of educational and work readiness indicators. That would be quite damaging to the success of PYA, since the outcome measures are supposed to measure success toward PYA's goals and provide a "feedback loop" to identify the most effective interventions on behalf of foster youth.

Failure to report high school graduation rates for foster youth may also have the effect of obscuring the serious challenges that foster youth face. Given their low literacy and numeracy rates in 8th grade, high dropout rates seem almost inevitable—and a clear priority for city action.

It is also noteworthy that only one of the four education and employment outcomes is actually an outcome, in the sense of measuring something inherently of value to the youth. To achieve PYA's third goal, ACS pledged to track high school graduation rates, which correlate strongly with more stable employment and higher income. The workforce indicators, however, are interim measures, tracked in precisely the same way that safety and health measures are tracked: through regular audits to verify that youth are receiving vocational services. Such an approach does not ensure that foster youth are actually being prepared for jobs and careers. Work readiness is an incremental process that at-risk youth achieve one step at a time.

ACS managers may feel that they do not have the capacity to track sequential achievement of interim measures effectively. But at the very least, there are questions to be raised about measuring the effectiveness of work readiness preparation based on simple process measures that lack an evidence base to demonstrate any clear correlation with work readiness or career success.

PYA has been budgeted at $17.5 million annually. Much of that budget appears to have been transferred from the Office of Youth Development (OYD), which ACS abolished in 2008. This office within ACS took lead responsibility for older foster youth, seeking to partner with private organizations to improve transitions for foster youth and provide guidance to foster care agencies. ACS has not publicly explained why it eliminated OYD, but the office is still mourned by many in the foster care community.

"It was a highly effective group," says one longtime foster care professional. "Everybody liked them. They got a lot of input from agencies, and they did a lot of really great stuff: they had a hookup with the SUNY colleges, they had a computer room where the young people could come and learn computer skills, they had computer skill programs during the summer. It was a program with a lot of vitality." The closure of OYD was mentioned independently by a number of knowledgeable insiders as a sign of declining resources and lack of a commitment to supporting older foster youth.

FOSTER CARE AGENCIES WORK TO PREPARE FOSTER YOUTH FOR WORK

Foster care agencies are supposed to help prepare foster youth for jobs and careers. ACS has contracted with these agencies to oversee the full range of services provided to children and youth in care. Yet foster care agencies face a dilemma. Their fundamental responsibility is to ensure the safety and permanency of foster children and youth. It is a protective function. But preparing foster youth for the workforce requires a very different skillset, and even a different mindset.

Outside experts familiar with foster care agencies felt that most provided only modest work readiness support, although they would like to do more. "Many of the organizations who work with foster care youth want to help with employment related programs," says Rae Linefsky. "But most agencies don't have the workforce background to balance all the issues that the youth may bring to the table."

The problem is further compounded by the increasing complexity and specialization required to master multiple fields of high complexity, such as social services, education and workforce training. The difficulty of mastering each of these areas should not be underestimated. Julie Farber, vice president of planning, policy and special initiatives for F.E.G.S. Health and Human Services System, argues that foster care agencies should remain focused on their responsibility to assure safety and permanency. "To ask foster care agencies to become expert in education and workforce is unrealistic and inefficient," says Farber. "Should every foster care agency in the city build up the resources to teach GED and pre-GED and adult basic education classes? Should they all be re-inventing the wheel and doing job development and job preparation? That doesn't really make sense."

Yet foster care agencies are the surrogate parents for thousands of adolescents and teenagers in care. So what does make sense? Based on input from various professionals in foster care and workforce training, the following functions seem appropriate for all foster care agencies:

- Helping adolescents explore possible careers, starting around 14 or 15. Agency staff and foster parents need to get foster youth started sooner than they may realize. "If you start at 18, you're lost," advises Rachel deAragon, a transition counselor at Good Shepherd Services. "You've got to start thinking about jobs in early adolescence."
- Learning how to refer youth to workforce training and education providers. Referrals take expertise too. Some workforce development providers are prepared to help low-skilled foster youth, some are not. Some can provide assistance to youth with a juvenile justice or special needs background, others do not. "Foster care providers need to know how to make a good referral," says Lauren Gates of the Workplace Center. "They have to assess whether that young person is ready for that referral and make sure that workforce development provider is a good match."
- Monitoring and providing ongoing support for foster youth receiving services from a workforce provider or employer. Once a youth is participating in a workforce training program or working at a private-sector internship, the agency's supportive role continues to be vital, because setbacks are common. A youth might get angry at the employer, or fail to show up, or get sick and not understand the importance of calling in. A caseworker who stays on top of youth can make a difference.

Not all agencies are prepared to execute these responsibilities. Some are more accustomed to dealing with younger children, who comprise the largest group of out-of-home placements, and they may not know how to integrate workforce readiness in the transition planning process.

"Where agencies might intervene on educational matters," says Nanette Schrandt of the Legal Aid Society's Juvenile Rights Project, "there's no sense of obligation to intervene in the same way for employment. They expect youth to find these skills and hone them on their own." Another outside expert on foster care agency concurs: "I would say the majority of foster care agencies do not explicitly include employment as part of the transition planning." Preparing youth for employment and connecting them to jobs should be part of an integrated transition process, but too often agencies treat them separately from other responsibilities associated with safety and permanency. As a result, they wait too long and miss opportunities to integrate work readiness into transitional planning.

standard. "Current caseloads for foster care in New York City are about double the recommended level," says Jim Purcell, executive director of the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies.

Nonetheless, many foster care agencies are seeking to provide work readiness services for the youth in their care. Some achievements in that area are quite impressive. Children's Village has created a constellation of sheltered internships, several of which lead to market-recognized certificates. The Children's Aid Society has established the Next Generation Center in the South Bronx, which provides integrated educational and work-related services to foster youth and other vulnerable youth. The Catholic Guardian Society and Home Bureau is preparing to launch a partnership with Swissport,

"Should every foster care agency in the city build up the resources to teach GED and pre-GED and adult basic education classes? Should they all be re-inventing the wheel and doing job development and job preparation? That doesn't really make sense."

The problem is not simply one of unfamiliarity with workforce development and educational strategies. Foster care agencies are perpetually understaffed and transient workplaces. When the organization Children's Rights studied a sample of children in the New York City foster care system, they found extremely high turnover among caseworkers.[22] Over a two-year period, half the children in the study had three or more caseworkers. The Children's Rights researchers also found alarmingly high caseloads. Where the state child welfare agency recommends a maximum caseload of 11-12 children, they found that only one out of four agencies met this

an airport supply company, to train foster youth for entry-level jobs serving JFK and LaGuardia Airports. Some foster care agencies, particularly those with sufficient scale and a critical mass of youth in care, have the capability to provide direct assistance in work readiness.

Yet the leaders of foster care agencies are the first ones to admit that the youth they serve, especially the older ones, would benefit from much deeper workforce training and educational services than they can provide. These youth need access to New York City's diverse workforce development sector.

FOSTER YOUTH AND THE WORKFORCE TRAINING SYSTEM IN NEW YORK CITY

The workforce development sector in New York City should be an important resource for foster youth. By almost anyone's reckoning, it is the largest, most diverse community of workforce providers in the United States, and one of the most innovative. Yet it is not meeting the needs of foster youth. As usual, some of the blame must go to funding, especially declining support from the federal government. But there is also a disconnect between foster youth and the various workforce development providers.

The adult workforce community, funded and overseen by the Department of Small Business Services (SBS), is most helpful to clients who already have work experience and can be quickly matched to prospective employers—a description which does not cover most foster youth. The youth-oriented workforce community, funded and overseen by the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), provides important services to many low-skilled youth, including foster youth, but also puts barriers in the way of foster youth who could otherwise benefit from their programs.

Workforce training providers play a vital role in New York City, despite sharp declines in funding over the past decade. The primary traditional funding source for workforce services is the federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA), which supports job training, job matching, career counseling and other services for both youth and adults. However, the federal government has slashed its workforce support by more than half over the past decade, even as the deteriorating economy has deepened the pool of unemployed workers seeking workforce training and related services.[23]

The core of the adult workforce development system is the city's network of Workforce1 Career Centers. The city operates nine of these career centers, one in each borough and four devoted to key economic sectors. All but one were established within the past decade, so they provide a fresh resource for unemployed New Yorkers. The centers connect employers to skilled workers, and provide training and placement services to the city's adult workforce. Services include job search resource rooms, personalized career counseling, advice on interviewing for a job, assistance creating resumes and cover letters, and job placement services.[24] Despite the slow deflation of their federal funding, the career centers have become ever more central to the city's workforce development landscape.

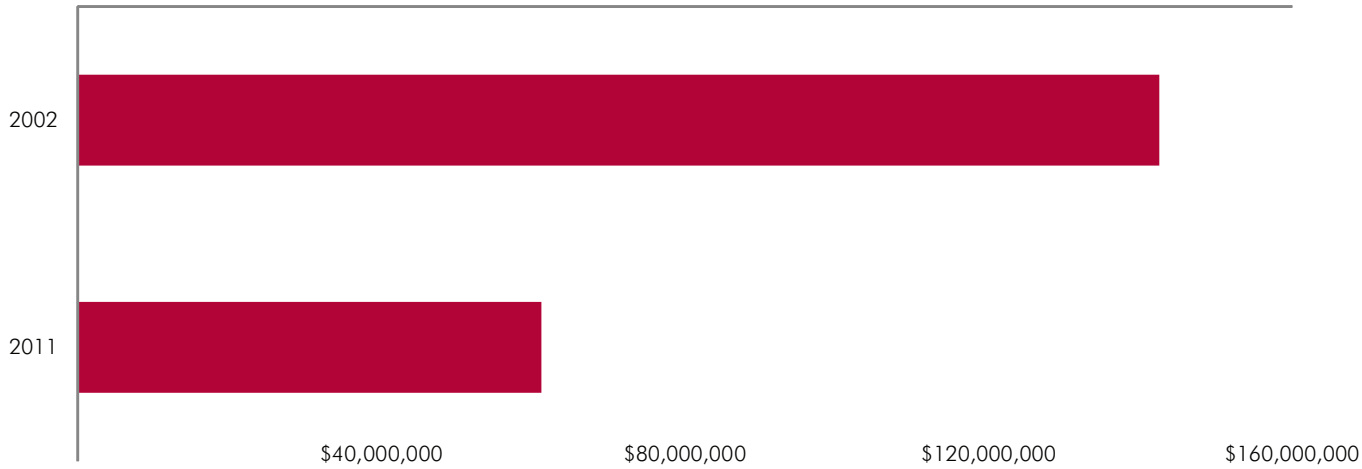
They are not, however, in business to serve youth or any other specific population. "We're not necessarily thinking about where the person is coming from," says Paula Bailey, senior vice president of Grant Associates, the firm charged with operating the Brooklyn and Queens career centers.

That doesn't mean that career centers fail to serve youth or young adults. Of the roughly 35,000 clients placed in jobs by the career centers in 2010 and the first quarter of 2011, about 10,000, more than one-quarter, were between ages 18 to 24. Of those successful clients, 1,400 of them had less than a high school diploma or GED, which means that only about 4 percent of all clients placed by Workforce1 Centers fit the educational profile of a high-needs foster youth. According to Bailey, most employers she deals with require a high school diploma or GED.

Nor is education the only issue. Bailey notes that many youth arrive with only a sporadic work record. Yet they are competing against adults, most of whom can show more consistent patterns of employment.

Beyond their competitive disadvantages, foster youth have trouble navigating the complex

Chart 8: Total Federal Workforce Investment Act Allocation for NYC, 2002 and 2011



Numbers are expressed in constant 2010 dollars. Source: One System for One City, City of New York, May 2011, p. 81.

world of the adult workforce development system. "These systems are overwhelming," says Iris Johnson, youth development director at the Jewish Child Care Center of New York. "A lot of them need their hands held and taught how to speak to people, how to advocate for themselves. We tend to think that when someone is 19 or 20 years old, they can do this on their own. But they can't."

There seems to be general consensus among workforce professionals that a disadvantaged youth who walks into a Workforce1 Career Center without preparation or mentorship is probably making a mistake. Francine Delgado, who manages the Manhattan and Bronx career centers for Seedco, delivers a blunt warning: "if you're a young person aging out of foster care and you're not work-ready, the career center is not your first stop, and it shouldn't be your first stop."

Where should the first stop be? Our research points to foster youth's neighborhood community based organization, or CBO. Career centers depend more and more on CBOs to prepare youth and adults to compete for jobs, and those who walk in lacking work readiness are likely to be referred to a CBO for further training. Indeed, SBS has established a formal program called Community Partners to structure the ties between career centers and CBOs. Community Partners is designed to expand the pipeline of job-ready candidates into the career centers by enabling CBOs that provide workforce preparation services (such as career counseling and supported internships) and educational services (such as GED prep) to refer their clients to career centers. The CBO is expected to screen its clients for work-readiness—including attainment of a GED or high school diploma—before referring the client to the career center. In return, career center staff meet monthly with their CBO counterparts to highlight job orders from specific employers and provide technical assistance on matching specific individuals with specific occupations.

Young adults referred to career centers by CBOs have much higher placement rates. According to an evaluation funded by the city's Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO), clients referred through CBOs have a job placement rate that is approximately four times that of other career center clients, despite their lower educational attainment and greater likelihood of belonging to a minority population.[25]

The partnership between CBOs and the adult workforce sector represents a promising strategy. But in a sense, it simply transfers the burden of workforce preparation. The Community Partners initiative finances a relationship between career centers and CBOs, but it does not cover costs incurred by the CBOs to educate and prepare foster youth for the adult workforce system. That funding must come from other sources, most commonly the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development.

SMALL YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM TRIES TO MEET A BIG WORK READINESS NEED

In many other cities, one agency disburses federal workforce funding. In New York City, the Department of Small Business Services (SBS) disburses adult-oriented workforce funds, and the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) disburses youth-oriented workforce funds. In 2010, SBS served about 150,000 New Yorkers, and DYCD about 72,000.

DYCD operates six key programs with a mix of city, state and federal funding. (See table 2) Of those, by far the largest and most high-profile is the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP). Other DYCD programs target vulnerable youth, including foster youth, for workforce-related services. However, only SYEP and the Young Adult Literacy Program are structured to serve the population of foster youth most in need of services that support work readiness.

DYCD's primary funding source is the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA). WIA provides funds tailored to the needs of disadvantaged youth, particularly those in "special populations" with barriers to employment, such as foster youth. But WIA has two profound shortcomings: steeply declining funding over time, and restrictions placed on funding that discourage service to the neediest youth. The federal government has slashed WIA funding again and again (the city's share of WIA funds have dropped from $142.5 million in 2002 to $67 million in 2010), depriving DYCD of the resources needed to reach disadvantaged youth on a large scale.

WIA also relies on cumbersome performance requirements that discourage providers from serving the neediest youth, even in programs created to serve them. These standards—job placement, job retention and postsecondary entry—may have seemed easier to track and achieve in the boom economy of the late 1990s, when WIA was enacted. But in today's recessionary economy, states can only meet these goals by serving youth (and adults, for that matter) who already have some work experience and a higher level of literacy and numeracy.

Table 2: Programs operated by the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development, FY 2010

Program	Participants	Funding (in $millions)
Young Adult Internship Program	1,360	$8.3
Adult Literacy Program	9,153	$ 8.1
Young Adult Literacy Program	300	$ 1.0
Out of School Youth	1,881	$ 15.1
Immigrant Opportunity Initiative	2,059	$ 1.0
Summer Youth Employment Program	52,255	$ 51.5
Total	67,008	$ 85.0

Source: One System for One City, City of New York, May 2011.

Each state must submit a plan to the federal Education and Training Administration (ETA) committing to meet WIA performance standards. If the state falls short, it can lose funding or fail to receive incentive grant funding available to states that exceed performance targets. As a result, the performance measures' influence cascades down to New York City and other localities, and from there to the service providers. When city agencies release requests for proposals (RFPs) to potential contractors for WIA-financed programs, the contracts must include WIA Youth performance indicators, even where they may clash with the purpose of the program. "For WIA-funded programs, the statutory requirements and achievement levels set by New York State for performance outcomes require us to take steps to ensure that our contractors

THE SUMMER YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

The major program in DYCD's portfolio is the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), which offers summer internships at a wide range of public and private employers each year. SYEP has been hailed for providing early employment opportunities to thousands of New York's teens between the ages of 14 and 21. In 2007, we urged the federal government to "resume substantial support for summer youth employment programs, helping New York City and other localities place many thousands more young people into jobs."[30] At that point, federal funding had plummeted by 87 percent since 2000, forcing New York City and New York State to step into the funding gap—an unsustainable burden. In 2006, the city was able to field 41,000 summer jobs. Three years later, federal stimulus funding enabled the city to expand enrollment to more than 50,000 young people, comparable to participation a decade earlier.

But that was an exceptional year. The next year, federal funding shrank to its usual modest level, and SYEP enrollment capacity fell hard. In 2010, more than 140,000 youth competed in lotteries for 35,000 internships. Only one in four youths were able to obtain internship slots. Due to additional state budget cuts, SYEP capacity fell by more than one-third in 2011 to 23,000 slots, along with another 5,000 privately-funded slots. Workforce experts find the steady decline in summer youth internships deeply troubling. Foster youth, who lack access to other routes for obtaining internships, are likely to be especially hard-hit. "The Summer Youth Employment Program is an important way that kids in foster care can actually get work experience," says Lauren Gates of the Workplace Center.

In 2009, DYCD created "vulnerable youth" slots, a carve-out program within SYEP to provide enhanced services to foster youth, as well as court-involved youth and runaway and homeless youth. "Our commissioner really felt the need to target vulnerable youth," recalls DYCD assistant commissioner Alan Cheng. "We started looking at different ways to help those who needed extra assistance." Thanks to stimulus funds available in 2009, DYCD was able to set aside 1,050 slots for vulnerable youth, but the next year capacity was cut back to 600. To its credit, DYCD has set aside the same number of slots for the 2011 program year even though budget cuts forced a significant cutback in the overall number of positions in SYEP.

Vulnerable youth contractors offer supports unavailable within the general SYEP program. Kristina Sepulveda, director of youth services at the largest vulnerable-youth contractor, Henry Street Settlement, says that case managers interview the youth and match them to employers with whom they are more likely to succeed. After the placement, they stay on top of the workplace relationship so that if something goes wrong, they have a chance to get it back on track again. "I have a vulnerable youth caseworker who really just does crisis control during the program," says Sepulveda.

The vulnerable youth contractors generally do not fill their slots by the kind of lottery used in the general population. Instead, they work with partner agencies and provide opportunities primarily to foster youth in those agencies. Sepulveda points out that working with a small number of agencies gives her staff the opportunity to provide more specialized attention to youth and their caseworkers.

However, the system can seem inequitable to agencies who lack relationships with the vulnerable youth contractors, since their youth may never even have the opportunity to apply for a vulnerable youth slot. "Every year we have a meeting where they put the vulnerable youth providers in a room, and I always have to say I'm booked," says Sepulveda. "Because we did these slot assignments back in February." Foster care agency caseworkers with whom we spoke reported that vanishingly small fractions of the foster youth they assist are able to obtain vulnerable youth slots or, in fact, any SYEP slots at all.

Lack of access to SYEP should come as no surprise. Of the 600 vulnerable youth slots in 2010, 226 went to foster youth. Yet there are more than 7,000 foster youth ages 14 and above, plus several hundred former foster youth who aged out of care between ages 18 and 21. Not all apply for SYEP. Yet if only half of all foster youth applied, each youth would have only one chance in twenty of gaining a vulnerable youth slot. DYCD staff point out that a foster youth denied access to a vulnerable youth slot can still win a slot in the general SYEP lottery. Just under 500 foster youth did exactly that in 2010. According to DYCD records, their overall success rate was 30 percent, five percentage points higher than the general population.

The overall picture for youth-oriented workforce development is one of innovative programs to meet the needs of vulnerable youth, but also serious obstacles, notably sharply inadequate scale, disincentives to serve low-literacy, high-need youth, and lack of clear connections to the child welfare community.

and program participants can meet relatively high performance levels," noted Daniel Symon, DYCD's chief contracting officer, in defending the stringent performance standards contained in the agency's 2010 RFP for its Out-Of-School Youth program.[26]

The reality in New York is that the programs to serve disadvantaged youth are too small, and some of them do not provide adequate preparation time to enable unprepared youth to become prepared. "In all of the programs we run, a tremendous amount of 'creaming' is involved, and the people who really need help get lost in the shuffle," says Jessica Nathan, director of workforce development at BronxWorks, which offers employment services across the borough, including several programs targeted at youth. "We have two weeks to get them ready for a serious commitment. If they need 9 or 10 weeks, it won't work for them."

Perhaps the most robust and comprehensive program to serve New York's disconnected youth is the Out of School Youth Program (OSY). Under OSY, the city funds CBOs to provide complementary educational and educational services, along with supportive social services. The services are available to all disconnected youth between the ages of 16 and 21. OSY is intended to meet the needs of a population of disconnected youth lacking a high school diploma or GED that DYCD estimates at approximately 88,000 youth between ages 16 to 24.[27] But DYCD is only funded to provide 1,881 of those youth annually, just 2 percent of the estimated need. Furthermore, older disconnected youth are ineligible, leaving them without access to comparable services.

OSY also has limitations that tend to discourage providers from serving high-needs youth. Notably, youth are eligible for only one year of service, plus follow-up services for another year. For some youth, this may be sufficient. Some providers prefer to offer only short-term services to connect youth to opportunities in retail or other entry-level positions so that the youth do not become dependent on their services. For other youth, however, a year of direct service may be inadequate. ETA, the federal agency that administers WIA, warns localities against one-year terms: "Youth with many barriers to education and employment require intensive, long-term services, making unrealistic for these youth to achieve successful outcomes…within the one-year timeframes written into many contracts between WIBs and service providers."[28] DYCD is also required to hold providers accountable for meeting WIA performance measures, which may be unrealistic for some youth in the current down job market.

The Young Adult Internship Program (YAIP) offers supported internships for vulnerable youth, including opportunities in the private sector, wrap-around supportive services and a strong possibility of post-internship placement with the employer. According to a CEO evaluation, four out of five youth completed their internships and more than one-third obtained post-internship placement with the employer.[29]

YAIP's goals would seem designed for high-needs foster youth. According to the RFP, the target population is disconnected youth, or young adults who are neither in school nor working and who live in communities with high poverty rates. Furthermore, DYCD encourages applicants to serve "especially vulnerable disconnected youth," including foster youth. In practice, however, YAIP serves only the more job-ready among disconnected youth. Participants must enter reading at a middle-school level, and they receive only 2-4 weeks of preparation. That preparation is targeted to the needs of the employer, and indeed the evaluator suggests that four weeks may be too long for such preparation. But YAIP lacks a bridge to bring along youth at low levels of literacy and job readiness to the point where they can appropriately enroll in an internship program that could boost their life opportunities. "The reality is that you've got to put the most prepared person in front of the employer," notes one experienced workforce professional. "The question, though, is what are you doing to get people prepared?"

New York City lacks a sufficient volume of workforce preparedness services for all youth, and more particularly a sufficient volume of work-readiness services to help the highest-need youth. "There is little for those who have a variety of issues—educational, emotional, and so on—to fit into the meager youth slots we have in New York City," observes Rae Linefsky, a member of the city's Youth Council.

REACHING FOR THE FUTURE: THE ACADEMY

It is often said that no single model can meet the developmental needs of foster youth, which run a spectrum as diverse as other youth. But it's not really necessary to have such a model. Several programs are already available for vulnerable youth, including foster youth, who graduate high school and show that they can hold down a job for a sustained period of time. The gap to be filled is on the lower end, with foster youth who have dropped out of high school or fallen behind—teens struggling with low literacy skills, little to no work experience, and possibly emotional trauma. Few services or models are designed to help these high-needs youth.

But there are a handful, and perhaps the most successful is the Academy, run by F.E.G.S. Health and Human Services System in the Bronx.

The Academy started with a conversation between Julia Bator, senior program officer at the Heckscher Foundation, and David Jones, president of the Community Service Society, about the lack of services for high-needs foster youth aging out of care. "I was just appalled," Bator remembers. After months of informal research, Bator recruited the CEOs of five foster care agencies to develop a new model of services to foster youth. Each agency served a critical mass of youth in care: Good Shepherd Services, Safespace, SCO Family of Services, Children's Village, and JCCA-NY.

The leaders of these agencies were deeply frustrated with the status quo. "We've made many efforts over the years to create training programs, job readiness programs, soft skills training, stipend programs," says Richard Altman, CEO of JCCA-NY. "A lot of kids took good advantage of that, but we ended up each year with an outlier group of kids that we didn't know how to deal with, that were nonresponsive to this kind of effort, that were going on to become statistics in terms of homelessness or incarceration or substance abuse as young adults. This was deeply dismaying to all of us." The agency leaders admitted that they were not getting the results they wanted for many of the youth in their care on their own.

Heckscher disbursed small planning grants to the five agencies, which they used to meet on a biweekly basis. In brainstorming sessions, the CEOs of the five agencies imagined a program that would address the complex needs of the youth in their care. What would an ideal program look like? It should offer services to strengthen job readiness, literacy, life skills. The program should be positioned outside the child welfare system so that it could build trust with youth who viewed their agencies with suspicion, develop specialized work readiness and education expertise, and extend support to youth after leaving care. Affordable housing came up repeatedly but was ruled out because it was too hard and expensive.

At last they issued an invitation for organizations to operate the program, and settled on two: F.E.G.S. and The Door, a youth services agency located in lower Manhattan. The two organizations agreed to operate the new project jointly, and the foster care agencies agreed to refer youth to receive their services. Two years later, The Door departed. Since 2008, F.E.G.S. has operated the Academy and refined its model.

The two features that define the Academy and set it apart from other workforce or educational programs are its "primary person" approach and its policy of "no eject/no reject."

Primary Person: Youth who enroll in the Academy are matched with a Youth Advisor who helps them identify their goals, provides ongoing support and encourages them to return if they drop out. It might seem obvious that a teenager would want to deal with one person instead of many people, but it contrasts dramatically with

the typical foster care experience of frequent turnover and dislocation. "What I hear over and over again from the youth is that if they've had so many families, they've had double that number of caseworkers," reports Linda Vaughan, the Academy's program director. "There is so much caseworker turnover." The Academy has been successful in retaining its Youth Advisors, who mentor foster care youth over time and develop trusting relationships with them.

No-eject/No-reject: The Academy, unlike most youth development programs, has no entry requirement other than barring youth who may be a threat to themselves or others. There is no literacy standard, no work-readiness threshold, no mental health criterion. Any foster youth can be referred to the Academy, which ensures that the Academy serves young people who may have a slow trajectory towards their ultimate goals. These youth are often screened out of other programs. Once enrolled, youth can always leave and come back, even if they blew up at their Youth Advisor at the last visit or aged out of care last year. There are consequences for inappropriate behavior, but the program does not expel participants. "There's no discharge policy at the Academy," notes Lou Miceli, executive director of JobsFirst NYC and a prominent youth development expert who participated in the development of the Academy. "This freaks the youth out. What do you mean I can just keep coming back? Typically they do something young and adolescent in nature and then wait to see what happens. That's when you see change happen." Miceli views no-eject/no-reject as the centerpiece of the Academy model.

The Academy provides services in three areas:

- Educational services, which includes tutoring and homework assistance for in-school youth; Pre-GED and GED classes for out-of-school youth; and post-secondary education exploration and planning;
- Career development services, which includes career exploration, job readiness training, job shadowing, internships and job placement;
- Supportive services, which includes mentoring, counseling, personal skills development and social activities.

Critically, the Academy integrates these services to make them more effective. Many youth receive all three. "What makes the difference is the integration between the education and the workforce component," observes Allon Yaroni, who co-authored an outside evaluation of the Academy for the Vera Institute of Justice.[31] "In the traditional model, youth need to choose between the education and workforce components. They tend to choose work over education and get stuck in low-paying jobs." Furthermore, multiple service referrals require long subway rides and schedule conflicts, which in turn lead to countless no-shows. At the Academy, youth receive the key services connected to starting a career under one roof. Academy outcome data show that participants who pursue both educational and work readiness tracks are much more likely to attain a GED or obtain a job than those who only pursue one track.[32]

F.E.G.S. utilizes its CareerFirsts model, a carefully synchronized set of work-readiness tools for foster youth, starting with career counseling at entry and at regular intervals afterwards. Sheltered internships within the organization provide youth with a low-risk exposure to workplace routine, followed if possible by external internships with companies or non-profit organizations. F.E.G.S. caseworkers stay in regular contact with employers to ensure that these internships stay on track. When youth seem to be ready for employment, F.E.G.S. holds mock interviews to prepare them for the real ones, and organizes regular group expeditions to employers with job openings.

Shana, one of the young people we interviewed for this study, found her experience with the Academy empowering. "When I came in we spoke about where I'm going to be in the next few years," she said. "[My Youth Advisor] went over my resume with me and talked to me about the programs they have over here. That's how I got my job as a Certified Nursing Assistant. She put me in the field that I wanted. She didn't just say, here, you're going to do an internship. Because

most kids will take anything as an internship, they don't care what it is. She really worked with me to say, 'here's what you want, we're going to try to get you in the field that you want.'

Participants face daunting obstacles. According to Academy records, 90 percent of participants are black or Hispanic; almost 60 percent were not in school at the time of referral; and two-thirds were living in congregate care facilities, which historically have the worst outcomes in adulthood. One-third entered reading at a 1st-6th grade level. All youth are of high school age or older, yet only one in six could read at a high school level.[33]

Given the distance so many foster youth in the Academy have to travel, their outcomes are impressive. Four in ten found employment through the program, and another three in ten are still active and looking. Likewise, half of the participants either earned a GED or increased their reading and math proficiency by at least one academic level. Another two out of ten are still actively engaged the educational program. Roughly three in ten participants drop out and leave, but many of these dropouts return over time due to the no eject/no reject policy.[34] The cost per youth served is about $5,000, less than alternative programs, and a small fraction of the city's costs per homeless shelter resident or per prisoner.

The Academy is clearly a best practice initiative for low-skilled foster youth. Yet it suffers from unstable and inadequate funding. The Heckscher Foundation phased out funding in 2009, forcing F.E.G.S. to hustle for new private funding to fill the gap. With support from other private foundations, the Academy serves about as many foster youth as it did in the Heckscher era. But the Academy was forced to drop its external internship program, and its dependence on private foundation grants makes long-term planning almost impossible. "Volatility is the biggest challenge facing the Academy," says Julie Farber of F.E.G.S. "All of our grants are year to year."

The Academy also lacks dedicated public funding. One obvious solution would be for the city or state to fund the Academy—or even to expand the model to other boroughs. No such proposal is in the offing, however, despite ACS Commissioner John Mattingly's public support for the Academy and its model. Current foster care funding does not permit support for new levels of care to youth in care.

OTHER PROMISING FOSTER YOUTH INITIATIVES

Fedcap, Beyond Permanency: Fedcap is a workforce organization that serves as a preferred provider for federal government contracts, such as facility management for the Statue of Liberty. Fedcap has launched a workforce readiness initiative for foster youth that provides supervised internships followed by job placements with Fedcap's partners. Fedcap has managed to place two-thirds of their participants in full- or part-time jobs, and nine out of ten are still employed a year later. The program has served approximately 300 foster youth to date.

Children's Aid Society, Next Generation Center: In 2006, the Children's Aid Society founded a multi-service center in the South Bronx to support disconnected and at-risk youth, with targeted outreach to foster youth and court-involved youth. Next Gen shares some features in common with the Academy: each youth is assigned a coach to ensure a stable adult presence, and the center focuses on providing education, employment and life skills development under one roof.

The Door, Passport to Success: This program was funded as Part of the U.S. Department of Labor's five-city Foster Youth Demonstration Project." The Door developed an intensive 16-week education and work readiness program to serve low-skilled foster youth, many of whom were AWOL from their foster care agencies. The New York City program started later than its peers in other cities and showed weaker outcomes. But it also confirmed the effectiveness of key strategies, such as utilizing a single "life coach," sheltered internships, and intensive career exploration. The initiative terminated in 2008.

HELPING FOSTER YOUTH GET AND KEEP JOBS AND LAUNCH CAREERS: WHAT THE CURRENT SYSTEM LACKS

If foster youth are to start careers and become productive and self-sufficient adults, they will need support from the city that has become their surrogate parent. For the city to provide that support, several different systems would have to work closely together – not the foster care system alone, but also adult workforce development, youth-oriented workforce development, and public P-12 education at the very least. The city would have to develop an evidence base to determine what innovations help foster youth achieve self-sufficiency and then invest in those innovations. Very little of this is happening right now. On the contrary: despite the high level of competence and commitment of staff in all four fields, we observed several key deficiencies in the work-readiness environment for foster youth.

Coordination between systems is the exception rather than the rule. The tendency in any regulatory landscape is to develop programmatic silos that hamper collaboration between systems. Those silos make seamless support for foster youth in New York City extremely difficult. "If you aggregate the entire investment that the city makes in workforce development, it's quite significant," says Randy Peers, Executive Director of Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow, a leading workforce training provider in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. "But we haven't tried to build a system across the different funding streams. That's the central challenge." Peers reports that until ACS's recent Building Bridges initiative, foster care caseworkers did not reach out to his organization for support in developing work readiness skills for young adults in their care.

Still, some instances of inter-agency collaboration show promise: the Building Bridges workshops that bring together foster care and workforce development providers; a memorandum of understanding between ACS and DOE so that student data can be provided to foster care agencies; and a one-time data match between ACS and DHS to identify former foster youth in DHS homeless shelters. But real coordination of services would involve much more, starting with high-level interagency coordination of New York City's foster care, workforce, youth development and education agencies to plan collaborative initiatives in support of foster youth. Given the persistent economic downturn and the disenfranchisement of aging-out foster care youth from the labor market, an integrated approach is called for, in which public and private funders collaborate with direct service organizations from both the youth-oriented workforce community and the foster care system.

Inadequate data analysis hampers tracking foster youth outcomes across systems and into adulthood. Surprisingly little data is available on foster youth in New York City. For example, we found it impossible to obtain the on-time high school graduation rate for youth in care, even though ACS committed to tracking graduation rates in 2006. ACS was able to provide the raw number of annual graduation outcomes for foster youth—how many foster youth received high school diplomas, GED credentials or local diplomas in 2010—but this is a far cry from the detailed and regularly updated academic information ACS would need to influence educational outcomes and test interventions. DOE was able to identify a population of foster youth (while cautioning that it is likely to be incomplete) and extrapolate ELA/math scores for that population, but not to calculate graduation rates. Furthermore, information was not available on "crossover youth": foster care youth who are also involved in the juvenile justice system.

We also discovered that the city knows almost nothing about the employment and educational

outcomes of former foster youth. In fairness, most American cities have found it difficult to track foster youth into adulthood. But in the absence of such information, foster care providers are left to speculate as to the effectiveness of their efforts to support youth who transition out of care. Such a gap would not be taken for granted in other fields. For example, ACS is working closely with DOE to track young children from pre-kindergarten into public schooling, and CUNY is working with DOE to track high school graduates into college. In both cases, policymakers understand that the effectiveness of a developmental system can only be judged by how well its subjects perform at the next level. A successful foster youth model should improve the youth's readiness to succeed in the workplace and in postsecondary education. Unfortunately, we did not find any ongoing project to track foster youth into adulthood.

Workforce development systems reward creaming—or cherry-picking—by educational attainment and work readiness. It is important to measure and reward performance, so that providers who provide high-quality services can be rewarded, and the most effective models can be identified and brought to scale. But performance-based programs can also provide an incentive to screen out applicants who might drive down performance numbers. That has proven to be a major drag on the provision of services to foster youth. Guided in part by the demands of the federal Workforce Investment Act, city agencies have set completion of a high school diploma or GED as the primary educational goal, and work placement and retention as the primary work-related goal. Both goals are appropriate but inadequate. "If you work with populations that are at lower numeracy and literacy levels," says Mala Thakur, executive director of the National Youth Employment Coalition, "you're setting them up for failure if you do not include performance measures that measure progress over time."

In education, the urgent need is to develop performance outcomes short of graduation. Only 15 percent of foster youth in 8th grade read at or above grade level, making support for low-literacy foster youth imperative. "We need more training programs that start with pre-GED," says Sister Paulette LoMonaco, CEO of Good Shepherd Services. That will require performance measures for grade gains that measure the distance traveled, not merely the credential achieved. In workforce, the terrible job market for teens makes strict reliance on job placement and retention measures a sure recipe for creaming. "The easiest thing is to focus on employability," argues Dianne Morales, executive director of Phipps Development Corporation and former CEO of The Door. "But if the real objective is to break the cycle of poverty, you don't want to make it all about job placement." Creating more flexible outcomes around internships might provide a useful alternative.

Foster youth compete on a level playing field that should be tilted in their favor. When it comes to education and employment, the city has done little to give foster youth an edge. In this case, a level playing field amounts to a fixed game. These youth were removed from their parents and placed in the care of the state. Nor have they, for the most part, received special opportunities because of their status as foster youth. On the contrary, they typically received an inferior education, due to frequent placements and school reassignments, and suffered emotional stresses most of us could never imagine. Unlike other disconnected teens, youth in the foster care system are unlikely to have any family supports when they leave care. Yet foster youth receive no preference for most youth development programs, the adult workforce system doesn't even keep track of them, foster youth with children cannot even obtain subsidized child care vouchers unless they go on welfare, and no GED slots are reserved solely for foster youth. The state's college financial aid system, the Tuition Assistance Program, actually discriminates against foster youth by reserving higher benefits and lower income eligibility thresholds for young people lucky enough to have parents. The city and state should give foster youth every possible break in training for the workforce, in getting jobs, and in obtaining the education they need to succeed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The city and state should invest in better educational and workforce outcomes for foster youth. The across-the-board trend of deterioration in funding of services that support foster youth is remarkable. ACS has been forced to reduce its staffing capacity to support youth in transition. Foster care agencies have been given specific goals, but they receive no dedicated funding to accomplish them. The city agency that funds initiatives for out of school youth has been forced to scale back its programs to a level where they cannot be expected to significantly improve the overall outcomes of the city's disconnected youth—including those in the foster care system. The common denominator of these inadequate programs for foster youth is an inadequate commitment from city, state and federal government. Little can be done at present about the federal government's pennywise and pound-foolish cuts to the Workforce Investment Act. But the city and state can make better choices as well:

- First, by earmarking new revenues to support foster youth—revenues that will be repaid several times over by increased tax revenue and reduced spending on incarceration, public assistance, Medicaid and other social services.

- Second, by unifying and aligning funding streams and programs to the extent possible, as envisioned in the city's landmark One System for One City report. For example, the Community Service Society and Resilience Advocacy Project have proposed that the city Human Resources Administration should encourage youth to enroll in high-functioning programs in other agencies, such as DOE's Learning To Work program and DYCD's Young Adult Internship Program—and, crucially, that it should invest public assistance funding in these programs rather than its own adult-oriented Back to Work program.[35] Not only is the CSS/RAP proposal worth considering on its own merits, it opens an important conversation about how the city's "workforce workhorses" can do a better job of pulling in the same direction.

ACS should restructure workforce and educational outcomes to emphasize early career exploration and interim outcomes leading to long-term success. The current system requires that agencies refer young people for vocational training and put documentation in the case file to be verified by auditors. But this is an approach developed for the protection of health and safety. It does not reflect the process of personal growth, in which major outcomes are achieved through incremental attainment of interim goals. A workforce pathway may call for progression from an internal sheltered internship to an external internship to supported job search activities. An educational pathway may start with pre-GED training. In all cases, however, foster care agencies should be encouraged to start in adolescence for those youth not already planning for reunification or adoption.

ACS should establish an office tasked with assisting foster youth. Foster youth would greatly benefit from having an office within ACS devoted to their needs. When ACS abolished the Office of Youth Development, ACS managers argued that youth development should be the responsibility of all foster care staff, not just those in a single office. It is certainly true that changing the organizational chart is typically overrated as a means of bringing about positive change, and that ACS staff continue to serve the needs of foster youth through the Preparing Youth for Adulthood program and new initiatives like Building Bridges. Yet it is also clear that the agency has lost focus in serving foster youth. Where child welfare agencies in other cities are

building partnerships with private employers and alliances with other city and state agencies, little seems to be happening at ACS—and that needs to change.

Such an office should steer and not row, meaning that it should not undertake small-scale projects that overlap with the responsibilities of other stakeholders. Some high-priority tasks might include: negotiations with major employers to develop supported internships for foster youth; development of data sharing agreements with city and state agencies; high-profile events and initiatives to call the public's attention to the aspirations of foster youth; regular convenings of foster care professionals to hear and discuss the latest strategies for improving workforce readiness, educational attainment and other key goals; and management of an "innovation fund" to try new strategies. Another possibility might be to co-locate the office at DYCD so as to better coordinate inter-agency efforts.

ACS should develop a close partnership with key agencies, notably DYCD, SBS, DOE and HRA. We did not see evidence of coordination between ACS and other city agencies, but such coordination would benefit all of these agencies. The underlying framework of the collaboration would not be simply to support foster youth, but to retarget youth-related efforts to the most vulnerable youth. In some cases, this will lead to specific initiatives around foster youth (e.g., ensuring that all foster youth are properly coded as such in DOE databases, so that they can be targeted for supportive services), but in other cases, initiatives might properly extend to other vulnerable youth, especially youth involved in the juvenile justice system and single teenage parents.

ACS should provide presumptive eligibility to child care vouchers for foster youth with children. ACS already provides public assistance recipients with presumptive eligibility for child care, leading many foster youth to transition out of foster care directly into the welfare system. After all, they have no other option to receive subsidized care for their children. It should come as no surprise that one out of ten foster youth enter a homeless shelter within a year of leaving care, and that three out of four of those former foster youth enter family shelters with their children. It would make much more sense to automatically enroll female foster youth with children in the voucher system, and to continue that eligibility for at least a year after emancipation.

DYCD and the State Department of Labor should negotiate performance standards that enable the agency to provide work-related services to the most vulnerable youth, especially foster youth. Where a program serves employers, such as the Young Adult Internship Program, it should maintain appropriate standards, but with an opportunity for less-prepared youth to gain the preparation they need to qualify. Where a program is intended to serve high-need youth, such as the Out-of-School Youth program, it should change features that may discourage providers from serving those youth.

DYCD should develop presumptive eligibility for foster youth applying for the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP). DYCD deserves credit for seeking to provide foster youth with enhanced access to SYEP through its "vulnerable youth" slots. But there are at least two shortcomings to this system. First, foster youth may have less access or no access at all to vulnerable youth slots unless they are lucky enough to belong to a foster care agency that partners with a vulnerable youth contractor. Second, there are only 600 vulnerable youth slots, of which foster youth received fewer than half in 2010. Foster youth who apply for the general SYEP pool have the same chance in the lottery as every other youth. Both structural features are inequitable. One response would be to provide presumptive eligibility for foster youth applying to the general SYEP pool. SYEP should serve the most vulnerable youth first, and foster youth certainly qualify by that criterion.

ACS should develop a plan for tracking foster youth into adulthood using wage matching and education databases. The city has recently identified access to the state Wage Reporting System as a citywide workforce priority. This could be potentially important for foster youth, as it would create the capacity to track their employment outcomes into adulthood. If the city can determine the employment patterns of former foster youth, it can determine how successful current foster care practices are in preparing them for adulthood. Furthermore, it will create the capacity to identify and test interventions to improve foster care.

The Center for Employment Opportunity (CEO) should fund one or more institutions that provide integrated workforce and educational services to foster youth, and evaluate the results. The Academy appears to be a highly promising approach to assist foster youth in achieving better employment and educational outcomes, and similar programs operated by Fedcap, Children's Aid Society and The Door also point the way toward a model that could dramatically improve foster youth outcomes at a citywide scale. At present, the Academy and its sister programs do not receive dedicated public funding. Some informants for this study found the notion that the city or state would fund a new level of care for foster youth to be impractical at best. We cannot expect to change the life outcomes of foster youth, however, by hugging the shore. One incremental strategy would leverage CEO's unique role. This city agency provides seed funding for promising initiatives, often drawing on private philanthropic support, and disconnected youth are one of the populations CEO has targeted for new funding. CEO should allocate some level of new funding to the Academy or a similar organization for a fixed term, along with a concrete plan for an evaluation to be conducted by CEO's private consultants. If the results are positive, public funding and replication of this model should be put on the table for consideration.

The state and city should create a task force to identify possible opportunities to create presumptive eligibility or preferences for foster youth, particularly in employment, workforce training and education. One source of untapped potential for foster youth is in the area of preferences and set-asides. At present, foster youth face the same obstacles to participation in government-funded educational, work-readiness and work-support programs as all other applicants. Yet foster youth face special obstacles that, to a large degree, have been imposed by the government itself. ACS and the state Office of Children and Family Services, possibly in coordination with the state Children's Cabinet, should systematically review every program to which foster youth could apply and identify opportunities to facilitate their participation. In fact, they could go further yet, looking at preferences for civil service examinations and hiring policies.

ENDNOTES

1. The census of those in the foster care system has since dropped below 15,000.
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9. Peter J. Pecora et al, *Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study*, Casey Family Programs, March 2005.
10. Courtney op cit.
11. Jennifer Hook and Mark Courtney, *Employment of Former Foster Youth as Young Adults: Evidence from the Midwest Study*, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, March 2010. Also see Jennifer Hook and Mark Courtney, *Employment of Former Foster Youth as Young Adults: The Importance of Human, Personal, and Social Capital*, unpublished, April 2011.
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14. Ibid.
15. Dennis Culhane and Jung Min Park, *Homelessness and Child Welfare Services in New York City: Exploring Trends and Opportunities for Improving Outcomes for Children and Youth*, paper commissioned by the Administration for Children's Services in New York City, January 2007.
16. Note that 2,510 figure includes all youth who left care after age 16, including those who aged out on their own, reunited with family members, or were adopted.
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20. *Protecting Children and Strengthening Families: A Plan to Realign New York City's Child Welfare System*, New York City Administration for Children's Services, February 2005
21. "Building Bridges: Systemic Collaboration between Workforce Development and Foster Care Agencies," *NYC Workforce Weekly*, May 27, 2011.
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26. Daniel Symon, "Addendum #2 re Out-of-School Youth (OSY) Workforce Development Programs," New York City Department of Youth and Community Development, January 29, 2010.
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28. Oates ibid.
29. *Evaluation of the Young Adult Internship Program: Analysis of Existing Participant Data*, report prepared for New York City Center for Economic Opportunity by Westat and Metis Associates, July 2009.
30. David Fischer, *Summer Help*, Center for an Urban Future, June 2007.
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32. F.E.G.S. Health and Human Services System Data Summary for Center for an Urban Future, April 2011.
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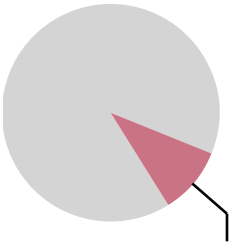
Center for an Urban Future

15% of foster youth in 8th grade perform math at grade level vs **46%** of all NYC 8th graders

15% of foster youth in 8th grade read and write at grade level vs. **38%** of all NYC 8th graders



Only **10%** of all eligible foster youth obtained summer youth internships in 2010

Federal dollars for workforce training in NYC dropped by

↓57%

over the past decade, from **$142 million** to **$61 million**

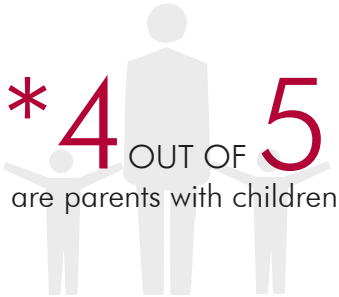
1 in 10 foster youth who left care in 2004 entered a homeless shelter within a year*

6 out of 7 young adults connected to a job via NYC career centers held a high school diploma or GED

1 in 5 entered a homeless shelter within three years of leaving care

HALF

of all former foster youth in NYC, about **1800** young adults between ages 21 and 24, are likely to be out of work



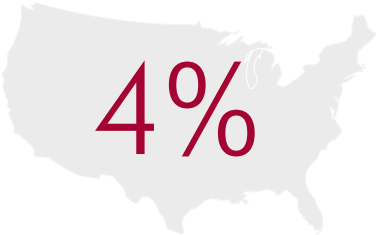
*4 OUT OF 5 are parents with children

16,000

children and youth in foster care as of 2010, down from **51,000** in 1991

2,000

over age 18



4%

of nation's children and youth in foster care live in New York City

The recession drove up the number of disconnected youth in New York City by

↑14%

between 2007 and 2009, from **114,000** to **131,000**

FOSTERING CAREERS

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