Preparing for a "Next Generation" Evaluation of Independent Living Programs for Youth in Foster Care

Project Overview

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Youth transitioning out of foster care and into adulthood need many supports to navigate the challenges they face. Over the past three decades, federal child welfare policy has significantly increased the availability of those supports. In 1999, the Foster Care Independence Act amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to create the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (the Chafee Program). This amendment doubled the maximum amount of funds potentially available to states for independent living services and gave states greater discretion over how they use those funds. In addition to allowing states to provide services such as training in daily living skills, education and employment assistance, counseling, case management, and a written transitional independent living plan, this amendment also allowed them to use up to 30 percent of Chafee funds for room and board.[1] More recently, a provision in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 gave states an option to extend eligibility for Title IV-E foster care for youth beyond age 18 until age 21. In states that have taken this option, young people can receive an additional three years of foster care support to prepare for the transition into adulthood.

Chafee-Funded Independent Living Services: What We Know About What Works

The Foster Care Independence Act requires that a small percentage of Chafee Program funding be set aside for the rigorous evaluation of independent living programs that are "innovative or of potential national significance." According to the legislation, evaluations must assess programs' effects on employment, education, and personal development. In 2003, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) contracted with the Urban Institute and its partners, Chapin Hall at the University of

Chicago and the National Opinion Research Center, to conduct the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs. Of the four programs evaluated using a randomized control design, only one had a statistically significant effect on youth outcomes.[2] Nearly 15 years after the Chafee Program's creation, the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs is still the only rigorous evaluation of independent living programs for youth transitioning out of foster care. Thus, we still know little about which independent living programs are effective, for which youth they can be most effective, and which program components are essential.

Planning an Evaluation Agenda

In 2012, ACF contracted with the Urban Institute and its partner Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago to plan for the next generation of evaluation activities funded by the Chafee Program. As part of that planning process, the team reviewed current research on youth in foster care. Using this research, we developed a conceptual framework outlining core developmental assets youth need for success in adulthood and fundamental ways the foster care system (e.g., independent living programs and services, foster parents, family members, or other supports) can help facilitate their preparation. We also created a typology of existing independent living programs, identifying 10 different domains and describing available research evidence on each. To further aid research planning in three areas of special interest to ACF—education, employment, and financial literacy and asset-building programs for youth in foster care and young adults formerly in foster care—the team held meetings with researchers, federal staff, and program experts. Each domain-specific meeting focused on discussion of (1) the current research evidence on program effectiveness for youth in foster care, for vulnerable youth in the general population (e.g., low-income youth), and, in the employment domain, for adults; (2) potential programs or types of programs serving youth in foster care ready or nearing readiness for evaluation; and (3) programs serving other youth populations that could be modified to serve youth in foster care and then evaluated.

This brief presents the conceptual framework, typology, and central conclusions from our planning efforts for an agenda for future evaluations. We present the details in a full report, forthcoming in 2015.[3] Three additional briefs in this series discuss in more detail the research evidence on education, employment, and financial literacy or asset-building programs and services.

Conceptual Framework: Transition to Adulthood for Youth in Foster Care

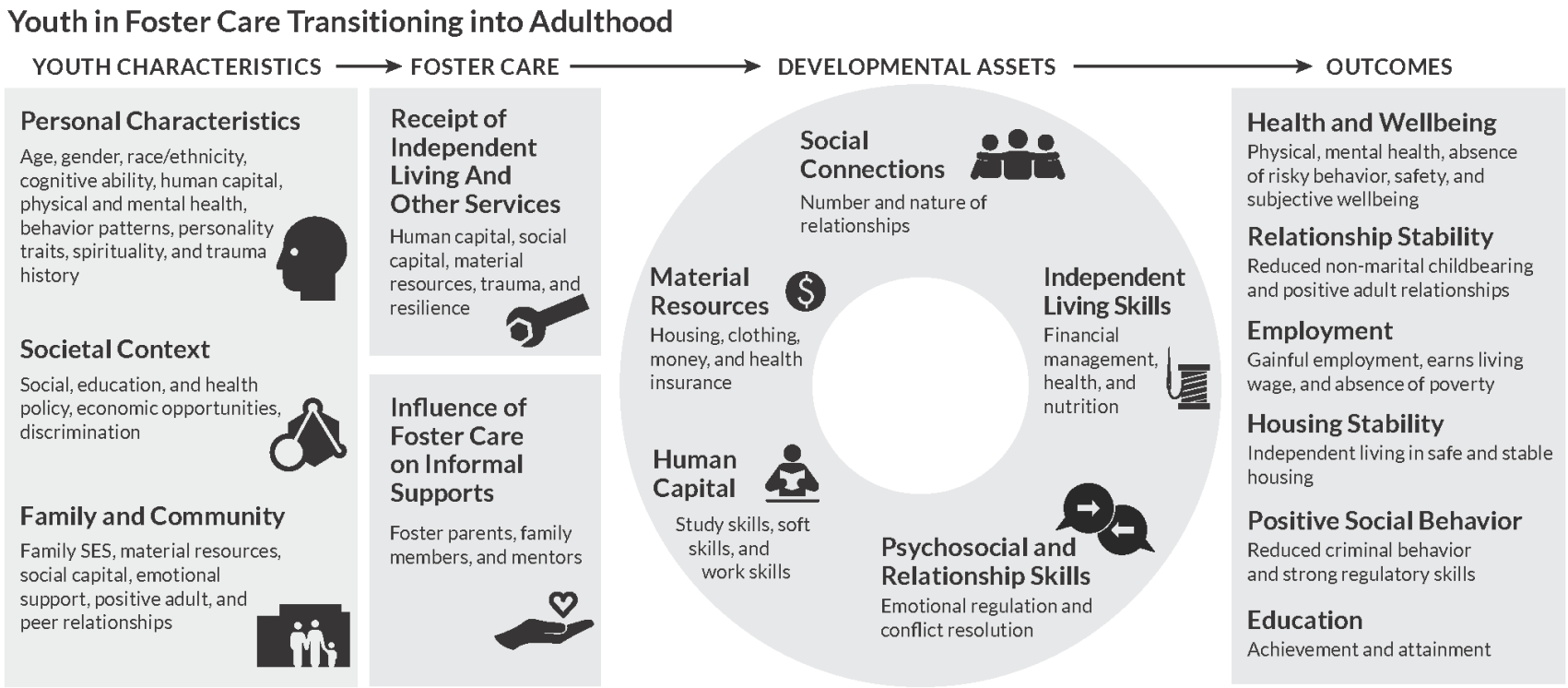
Research highlights generally poor outcomes for youth in foster care during the transition to adulthood. Research also suggests that there are distinct subgroups of youth: some who fare well and others who encounter many challenges. Youths' diverse experiences and needs suggest that we should consider how well services are targeted to these needs when engaging in program development and evaluation.

Our conceptual framework (figure 1) informs program development and evaluation efforts. The model takes into account trauma from maltreatment and subsequent experiences in care that may make the transition to adulthood more difficult for youth in foster care than for other young people. However, it also highlights that like all youth, youth in foster care approach the transition to adulthood with many individual characteristics and experiences that influence their ability to transition successfully. This implies that services should be tailored to meet each youth's individual needs rather than provided uniformly to all youth in care.

According to the framework, youth aging out of foster care move through the transition to adulthood with different personal assets and characteristics (e.g., age, gender, race or ethnicity, cognitive ability, physical and mental health, personality, spirituality, trauma history, and overall well-being), as well as different resources and supports (e.g., material resources, safety and security information, family socioeconomic status, emotional support, and adult and peer relationships). Youth, whether directly or indirectly, are also influenced by their social contexts (e.g., community opportunities, legal and policy systems, economic opportunity, and access to community services and supports). Their paths to independence may include formal participation in independent living programs or other skill- and competency-building programs and services. Although youth who participate in formal programs may be exposed to many activities intended to provide them with the developmental assets necessary for positive long-term outcomes,[4] the quality, intensity, and appropriateness of these programs for the recipient may vary. For some youth, the path to independence could also include (or only include) informal support from foster parents, family members, mentors, or others who facilitate independent living skill development. Some youth, in contrast, may not receive any formal or informal independent living skills training.

FIGURE 1

Conceptual Framework of the Transition to Adulthood for Youth in Foster Care



Source: Authors' review of the literature and discussions with program administrators and evaluators.

Our model emphasizes the diverse experiences youth bring to the transition to adulthood and maintains that those experiences interact with the supports they have (or lack) as they move toward independence. The model suggests that youth acquire developmental assets (including material resources, independent living skills, social capital, human capital, and psychosocial and relationship skills) to different degrees along the way. The development of these assets influences their intermediate- and longer-term outcomes in such important life domains as health and well-being, relationship stability, employment, positive social behavior, and education.

Typology of Programs Serving Youth Transitioning to Adulthood

The conceptual model above suggests that the child welfare system influences the transition to adulthood for youth in foster care primarily through (1) formal independent living programs and other programs and services and (2) its effect on informal supports (i.e., the connections youth have with responsible adults during the transition to adulthood). To better understand how existing programs directly and indirectly affect the transition to adulthood for youth in foster care, we developed a typology of programs to inform choices about which programs to include in future evaluations of the Chafee Program. The definition of program domains in the typology was guided by the research literature and lessons from previous efforts to categorize such programs. Our identification of programs included a review of the literature, an internet search for information on programs currently serving youth transitioning to adulthood, and contact with leaders in the field. We assigned programs to one or more domain (e.g., education, employment, and housing) and then made a preliminary assessment of their potential for future evaluation. We considered programs exhibiting the following criteria as initially promising prospects for future evaluation:

- Providing services permitted under the Chafee Program
- Focusing on the Chafee Program's specified outcomes[5]
- Successfully targeting services to the intended population by considering the different needs, experiences, and competencies of youth in foster care (i.e., youths' heterogeneity)
- Addressing shortcomings in existing services
- Using evidence-based program models or having other supporting evidence about their effectiveness (this criterion is particularly important for program models not currently targeted to youth in foster care)

We found that the existing service array fits conceptually into 10 categories, shown in table 1.

TABLE 1

Typology of Independent Living Programs

	Independent living programs and services[6]	Description
1	Education services	Education services fall broadly into three categories: (1) high school completion programs; (2) college access programs; and (3) college success programs. These programs are designed to (1) increase high school graduation, (2) increase college readiness and enrollment, and (3) increase college retention and graduation.
2	Employment services	Employment services help youth prepare for the workforce, identify careers or jobs or interests, and gain and maintain employment during or after leaving care. Some programs only target employment; others integrate these services with broader intervention approaches.
3	Housing	Housing interventions fall into two general domains: (1) programs to help youth find and apply for existing community housing and (2) programs that provide or subsidize housing for current or former foster youth. Many of these programs also provide ongoing case management and may be limited to specific populations (e.g., pregnant or parenting girls).
4	Mentoring	These programs seek to provide youth with a caring and supportive nonparental adult. Programs often differ in the relationship between the mentor and the youth (e.g., some mentors are young adults with whom the youth has had a previous relationship with; others are similarly aged youth in transition). These programs are implemented in many settings, most commonly school- or community-based settings.
5	Behavioral health services	Behavioral health services for youth in foster care are delivered through many modalities and settings, ranging from inpatient residential care to multisystem, community-based models. Some public child-welfare agencies directly provide psychotherapeutic and trauma-informed services to foster youth in transition and contract for such services. Agencies play an important role in educating and linking transitioning youth to behavioral health services to which they are entitled.
6	Permanency enhancement	Permanency-enhancement interventions focus primarily on identifying, developing, and supporting relationships with immediate and extended family and other adults to whom youth feel a connection.
7	Pregnancy prevention	Pregnancy prevention programs take on many forms and take place in different settings. Many of these programs use a group milieu to educate youth (primarily females) about the consequences of risky sexual behavior and to empower youth to make thoughtful decisions about sexual behavior and pregnancy.
8	Parenting support	Most parenting support programs provide support and parenting skills training that promote health and well-being for young parents and their children. Services are commonly delivered as individual or family sessions, multifamily group sessions, or home-based observations and interventions. They may take place in the home, community, or a clinical setting.
9	Financial literacy and asset building	Asset-building programs commonly focus on the administration of individual development accounts, which help participants accumulate assets by matching their contributions to an account used for a prespecified purpose. Individual development accounts usually provide matches on savings made for three primary purposes: postsecondary education, small business development, and home purchase. Financial literacy programs aim to increase financial knowledge and skills, often through education, training, or direct experience with mainstream financial services.
10	Multicomponent services	Multicomponent services reflect the fact that foster youth can experience challenges across multiple domains. These programs offer a "one-stop shop" approach that may both reduce service duplication and avoid instances where needs are not identified and addressed.

Source: Authors' review of the literature and discussions with program administrators and evaluators.

Notes: Although it is not included as a separate category in the typology, many programs facilitate the development of relational competencies in the context of other services. These programs conceptualize improving young people's psychosocial and relationship skills as their primary goal and seek to accomplish this through engagement in the world of work, mentoring, or other types of services presented in the table above.

Across all 10 domains, we find little experimental research (i.e., studies randomly assigning participants to a treatment or control group) on programs specifically targeting youth transitioning out of foster care. Thus, we are unable to draw conclusions about best practices. We identify more methodologically rigorous studies of programs targeting other populations of at-risk youth. Though many of these youth populations face similar challenges to—and may even include—youth in foster care, we do not know whether these programs serving broader youth populations will produce similar outcomes for youth transitioning out of foster care. Youth in foster care often face more barriers and may be harder to serve on average than the youth population included in many of these evaluations. Our review suggests that there is evidence of positive impacts on target outcomes in some of the domains of services presented above, most notably in mentoring, behavioral health, pregnancy prevention, and parenting-support services. Few experimental evaluations of programs serving vulnerable youth in other domains, such as education and employment services, have been conducted, and few have shown even modest limited positive impacts on target outcomes. A more detailed review of the existing evidence base across the 10 domains will be presented in the full report.

Revisiting our typology with an eye toward readiness for rigorous experimental evaluation, we group programs into three basic categories: (1) those that are fully ready for an evaluation of program impacts; (2) those that are not ready for evaluation presently, but could be ready with support developing logic models, assessing targeting and referral processes, and increasing the program's reliance on evidence-based practices; and (3) evidence-based programs serving other vulnerable populations that could also serve youth in foster care or are just beginning to serve youth in foster care.[7] Though few programs are in the "fully ready" category, many more fall into the other categories offering promising opportunities for future evaluation. Next steps for making these programs fully ready to be rigorously evaluated include assessing who they target and addressing any potential implementation issues.

Moving the Research Agenda Forward

ACF is considering a new round of evaluation activities to better determine what program models are most likely to help youth and improve their long-term well-being. As we learned from the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs, the field will require a joint effort from different entities—including government and philanthropy, program developers (state and local), and the research community—to further this agenda. Based on what we have learned, we pose the following questions for stakeholders involved in funding, developing, or evaluating programs to consider:

- What specific outcome is the program helping youth achieve?
- What developmental assets would the program help youth in foster care acquire so that they are better prepared to achieve the targeted outcomes?
- What current evidence, if any, exists that suggests the program model is associated with positive outcomes?

- Which subgroups of youth is the program intended to serve (program targeting) and is the program model suitably designed for those populations?

By asking and addressing these questions, the field will be better prepared to evaluate and learn more about services funded through the Chafee Program.

Notes

1. The use of Chafee room and board funds varies by state. The most common uses of these funds include covering rental start-up costs, ongoing support, and emergency uses. More information on how states use Chafee funds for housing needs can be found in Pergamit, McDaniel, and Hawkins (2012).
2. For the final reports from the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs, please see "Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs (Chafee Independent Living Evaluation Project)," Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, accessed June 26, 2014, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse_neglect/chafee/index.html.
3. "Planning a Next Generation Evaluation Agenda for the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, 2011–2014," Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, accessed September 24, 2014, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/research/project/planning-a-next-generation-evaluation-agenda-for-the-john-h-chafee-foster.
4. A review of the available literature suggests that the core developmental assets to acquire during the transition to independence include (1) independent living skills, such as the ability to manage personal finances, health, and nutrition; (2) social capital; (3) human capital, such as education and employment skills; (4) psychological and relationship skills; and (5) material resources, such as housing, clothing, money, and health insurance. Acquisition of these developmental assets influences outcomes in such life domains as education, employment, health and well-being, relationship stability, antisocial behaviors, and housing stability.
5. The specified outcomes of the Chafee Program, as defined in the National Youth in Transition Database, include financial self-sufficiency, experience with homelessness, educational attainment, positive connections with adults, high-risk behavior, and access to health insurance ("About NYTD," Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services, published July 8, 2012, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/about-nytd?page=all).
6. Additional information on education, employment, and financial literacy and asset-building services for foster youth is available in a three-part brief series. See "Planning a Next Generation Evaluation Agenda for the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, 2011–2014," Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, accessed September 24, 2014, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/research/project/planning-a-next-generation-evaluation-agenda-for-the-john-h-chafee-foster.
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