Number of Youth Aging out of Foster Care Continues to Rise; Increasing 64 percent since 1999

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By Marci McCoy-Roth, Madelyn Freundlich and Timothy Ross

Washington, D.C. – At the end of September 2008, some 463,000 children were living in the nation's foster care system, in most cases as a result of abuse or neglect.[i] Foster care is intended to be a temporary safety net for children who were suspected to have been abused or neglected. Ideally, children leave care for a safe, permanent family—either by reunifying with a birth parent, guardianship with a relative, or adoption. Federal data show that approximately 85 percent of all children who left foster care in 2007 were discharged to one of these three options.[ii]

But the child welfare system does not find a permanent family for every child. In 2008, 29,000 youth or ten percent of the children exiting the system were emancipated from foster care (this is also referred to as "aging out" of foster care) at the age of 18 or older without a safe, permanent family. In the ten years since the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act and the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, the number of children who age out of the system has increased steadily, with a nearly 64 percent increase. Since 1999, approximately 228,000 youth have "aged out" of foster care nationally.

Figure 1 - Number of Youth Aging Out of Foster Care (1999-2007)
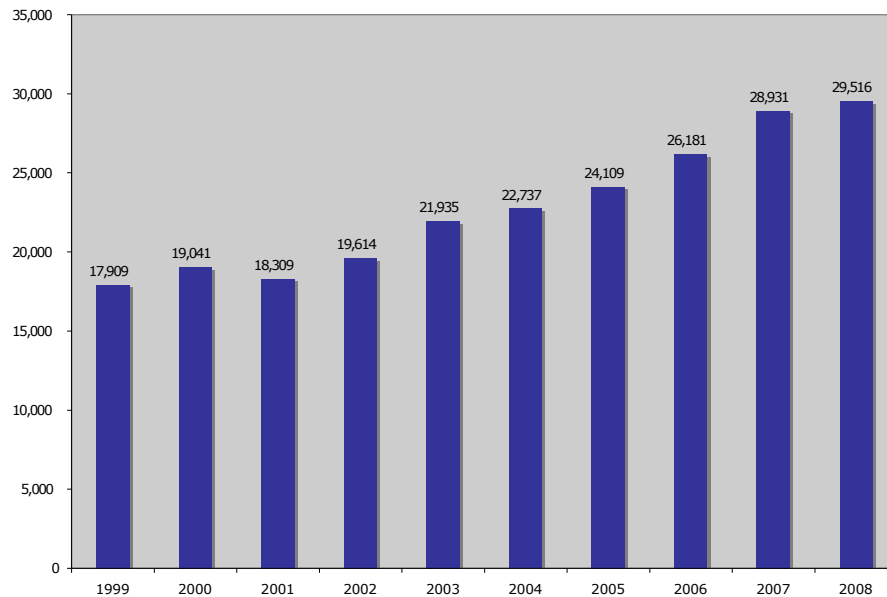
The percentage of all exits from foster care that were due to youth aging out has likewise increased. In 2000, the percentage of exits to aging out was 7.1 percent. The percentage of exits to aging out increased each year and by 2007, it had increased by more than one third to 9.9 percent.

Many youth who leave foster care at 18 years of age or older entered foster care as teenagers.   As they prepare to leave care, they need support and services to help them begin the transition to

adulthood and prepare for work and personal responsibilities. Studies of youth who leave foster care without a safe, permanent family reveal consistently negative life outcomes. One found that 25 percent of foster care alumni who aged out did not have a high school diploma or GED.[iii] Another study found that less than 2 percent finished college compared with 23 percent of youth in the general population.[iv] Over half of youth who aged out of foster care experienced one or more episodes of homelessness, and nearly 30 percent were incarcerated at some point–many times the rate for other young adults.[v] Youth who aged out of foster care were less likely to be employed or to have health insurance than were their peers who had not been in foster care.[vi] These negative experiences compromise these young adults' abilities to lead independent, fulfilling and productive lives and create substantial costs for government.

Some states have much higher percentages of young people who age out of foster care than others. Virginia, Maine, Illinois and the District of Columbia had the highest percentage of total exits to aging out in 2007 (30%, 22%, 21% and 21% respectively), while Alabama, Mississippi and Indiana had the lowest percentage of total exits to aging out (5%, 5% and 4% respectively). See Table 1 for a list of ten states with the largest percent of exits due to youth aging out.

Table 1 – States with largest percent of total exits due to youth aging out (FY 2007)

State	Number of youth who aged out	Percent of youth who aged out
Virginia	1,013	30
Maine	202	22
Illinois	1,245	21
DC	157	21
Massachusetts	1,150	19
Maryland	461	17
Connecticut	499	16
California	5,188	12
New Jersey	830	12
New York	1,506	12

More information is needed to explain this wide variation which, in all likelihood, is affected by a number of factors. For example, states that have focused their efforts on reducing lengths of stay for younger children entering foster care may have higher percentages of older youth aging out of care. Similarly, states that invest in services for older youth in care and allow them to stay in foster care longer may have more older youth who remain in care past age 18. Some experts argue that some states may not emphasize permanency for older youth because of the perception that youth receive more services when they remain in foster care. In addition, the rate at which older youth enter foster care varies significantly across the states. State policies and practices for the placement of teens in foster care vary significantly. As a result, an analysis of a state's aging out numbers must take into account other contextual variables.

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That said, an analysis of the percentage of children and youth in foster care by age reveals some troubling trends for older youth. Specifically, the percentage of the total foster care caseload over the age of 14 has increased steadily since 1998. This trend may explain, at least partially, the increases in the number of youth aging out, and it suggests that until more youth between the ages of 14 and 18 achieve permanence, the number of youth aging out will continue to grow. See Table 2 for the percentages of children and youth in foster care by age range for each year, 2000 through 2007. We note that this analysis is point-in-time and that a cohort analysis might reveal alternative explanations, including the possibility that exits to permanency are occurring more quickly for children in some age ranges (perhaps due to the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997.) As Table 2 shows, the percentage of the foster care population comprised of children age 2 and younger rose by 35 percent between 1999 and 2007 while the percentage of the foster care population comprised of children between the ages of 3 and 13 dropped significantly. The percentage of children and youth in foster care who are 14 through 18 has continued to grow while financial resources to serve this population through the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act has remained the same each year.

Table 2 – Percentage of children and youth in foster care by age 1999 - 2007

Year	Percent Age 0-2	Percent Age 3-7	Percent Age 8-13	Percent Age 14-18	Percent Age Over 18	Percent Age unknown
1999	14.2	24.9	31.1	28.3	1.6	0.02
2000	14.5	23.4	30.9	29.3	1.9	0.02
2001	14.7	22.6	30.7	29.9	2.1	0.01
2002	15.2	22.1	30.0	30.8	1.8	0.1
2003	15.9	22.00	28.7	31.7	1.7	0.1
2004	16.6	22.1	27.2	32.4	1.7	0.1
2005	17.6	22.5	25.5	32.4	1.9	0.1
2006	18.5	22.8	24.4	32.2	1.9	0.2
2007	19.1	23.2	23.7	32.1	1.7	0.03

Expected Impact of Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008

In contrast to research that indicates that longer stays in foster care for younger children are associated with more negative outcomes, some studies suggest that older youth in foster care benefit from having the option to stay in care longer. Prior to the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 ("Fostering Connections"), however, states that allowed youth to stay in foster care past age 18 did so without any federal financial assistance. Currently, some states extend foster care for youth age 18 and older,[vii] but youth often must meet education or other requirements in order to be eligible for extended foster care (for a state-by-state resource of policies for older youth in foster care, see www.childwelfarepolicy.org).

The Fostering Connections law allows states to offer foster care, guardianship or adoption assistance to youth between ages 18 and 21, and extends eligibility for Medicaid and Chafee Act benefits to

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youth in foster care to age 21 as well.[viii] States will now receive federal assistance to match state resources to pay for the costs of extending foster care for youth ages 18 through 21 who are eligible for IV-E maintenance payments and who are enrolled in school, employed, in an activity promoting or removing barriers to employment, or who are unable to participate in employment or education as a result of a mental or physical illness. By encouraging states to invest more resources in supporting foster youth's transition to adulthood, federal lawmakers hope that the new law will help more youth leaving foster care have independent and productive lives.

About the Authors

Marci McCoy-Roth, McCoy-Roth Strategies, is a strategic advisor to the Fostering Connections Resource Center (www.fosteringconnections.org). She can be reached at mmroth@fosteringconnections.org or marci@mrstrategies.com. Madelyn Freundlich is a consultant to the Resource Center. She can be reached at mdf@excalconsulting.com. Tim Ross directs the Child Welfare Program Area at Child Trends. He can be reached at tross@childtrends.org.

Acknowledgments

About the Fostering Connections Resource Center

The Fostering Connections Resource Center is a gathering place of information, training and tools related to furthering the implementation of the Fostering Connections law. Specifically, the Resource Center aims to connect implementers with the latest information and the best experts and advocates working on these issues. The Fostering Connections Resource Center is supported through the generous contributions of the Annie E Casey Foundation, Casey Family Programs, Dave Thomas Foundation on Adoption, Duke Endowment, Eckerd Family Foundation, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, Sierra Health Foundation, Stuart Foundation and Walter S. Johnson Foundation. Child Trends and The Finance Project have primary responsibility for managing the Resource Center. The information and materials disseminated by the Resource Center have been assembled from a variety of sources, including state and national experts, leading child welfare organizations and state agencies.

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Appendix A – Number and percentage of youth exiting foster care who aged out by state 2007

State	Number of youth exiting who aged out	Percent of all exits who are youth aging out
Alabama	198	5
Alaska	64	8
Arizona	573	8
Arkansas	331	9
California	5,188	12
Colorado	405	6
Connecticut	499	16
Delaware	82	9
District of Columbia	157	21
Florida	1,339	6
Georgia	730	8
Hawaii	152	9
Idaho	123	8
Illinois	1,245	21
Indiana	304	4
Iowa	463	9
Kansas	416	12
Kentucky	624	12
Louisiana	280	8
Maine	202	22
Maryland	461	17
Massachusetts	1,150	19
Michigan	795	9
Minnesota	725	10
Mississippi	93	5
Missouri	292	6
Montana	92	8
Nebraska	365	10
Nevada	207	6
New Hampshire	56	9
New Jersey	830	12

New Mexico	127	6
New York	1,506	12
North Carolina	499	9
North Dakota	66	7
Ohio	1,166	11
Oklahoma	523	8
Oregon	310	6
Pennsylvania	1,064	8
Rhode Island	161	9
South Carolina	328	10
South Dakota	95	7
Tennessee	739	11
Texas	1,440	9
Utah	203	11
Vermont	67	10
Virginia	1,013	30
Washington	403	6
West Virginia	216	8
Wisconsin	506	11
Wyoming	58	6
National	**28,931**	**10**

Endnotes

[i] Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System Report (December 2009). Accessed: December 30, 2009 at www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report16.htm.

[ii] Unless otherwise noted, the analyses contained within this brief are based on federal data from 1998 to 2007 prepared for Child Trends by the National Data Archive for Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN) at Cornell from the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS). Special thanks to Michael Dineen of NDACAN for his assistance.

[iii] Mark Courtney, Amy Dworsky, Gretchen Cusick, Judy Havlicek, Alfred Perez, Tom Keller, "Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 21." Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago, (December 2007): 68-70.

[iv] Peter Pecora, Ronald Kessler, Jason Williams, Kirk O'Brien, Chris Downs, Diana English, James White, Eva Hiripi, Catherine White, Tamera Wiggins, & Kate Holmes, "Improving Foster Family Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study." Casey Family Programs, (2005). http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/NorthwestAlumniStudy.htm (accessed December 9, 2009),

[v] Peter Pecora et al. "Improving Foster Family Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study."

[vi] M.B. Kushel, I. H. Yen, L. Gee, & M.E. Courtney, "Homelessness and Health Care Access After Emancipation: Results From the Midwest Evaluation of Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth." Archives of Pediatric Medicine 161 no. 10 (2007).

[vii] American Bar Association. (n.d.). Youth Transitioning from Foster Care. http://www.abanet.org/child/transitioning.pdf (accessed December 9, 2009).

[viii] Chafee benefits include independent living services to help youth prepare for adulthood: educational services, employment services, housing assistance, and other services designed to provide youth with the skills they need to have productive adult lives.

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