

Families

for Life:

Addressing the Needs of Older Children and Youth in Foster Care



Fact Sheet Two: Why Family Permanence is Critical for Older Children and Youth in Foster Care

Every child needs and deserves a safe, loving, and nurturing family that will provide unconditional emotional support. Yet for the 517,000 children in foster care, these essential family connections often are lost. African-American and minority youth who are disproportionately placed in the system are especially at risk.

Today, too many children in foster care are:

- Removed from their parents when they might have remained safely at home with less costly family preservation services;
- Bounced from one foster family or group home to the next;
- Separated from siblings; or
- Placed with strangers when loving relatives would care for them willingly, with modest support.

Too many children in foster care – particularly older youth and those with special needs – remain for years in residential programs rather than in loving families. According to the most recent (2004) federal data on youth in care:

- Nearly 50 percent (255,364) were age 11 or older;
- 20 percent were not living with families;
- 58 percent were minorities, with African Americans comprising 34 percent, Hispanics 18 percent, Native Americans 2 percent and Asians 1 percent;
- Service plans for many called for long-term foster care and emancipation rather than family reunification, guardianship placement or adoption;
- More than 20,000 will be left on their own with no meaningful connection to a family member or caring adult when they reach the age of majority.

Outcomes for youth who have “aged out” of care continue to be poor:

- In one study, 46 percent had not completed high school; 50 percent were unemployed; and 25 percent had experienced homelessness four years after leaving care;¹
- 80 percent of youths did not earn enough to be fully self-supporting four years after leaving care;² and
- In another study, more than 20 percent had been arrested since leaving care, and 90 percent were earning less than \$10,000 a year, according to a survey of 19-year-old former foster youth from Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin.³

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1. Cook, R., A National Evaluation of Title IV-E Foster Care Independent Living Programs for Youth, Phase 2 (Final Report) (Rockville, MD: Westat, Inc., 1991).

2. Ibid.

3. Courtney et al, Midwest Evaluation of Adult Functioning: Outcomes at 19, Chapin Hall Center for Children, May 2005.