

Educational Outcomes for Children and Youth in Foster and Out-of-Home Care

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For the over 800,000 children and youth served in foster care each year in the United States, educational success is a potential positive counterweight to abuse, neglect, separation, and impermanence. Positive school experiences enhance their well-being, help them make more successful transitions to adulthood, and increase their chances for personal fulfillment and economic self-sufficiency, as well as their ability to contribute to society.

Unfortunately, the educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care are dismal. As this current research summary reveals, young people in foster care are in educational crises. Although data are limited, particularly national data, research makes it clear that serious issues must be addressed to ensure the educational success of children and youth in foster care.

National Foster Care Data

The following data are based on the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services AFCARS report: *Preliminary FY 2005 Estimates as of September 2006*.¹

TABLE 1. NATIONAL FOSTER CARE STATISTICS

Children and Youth in Foster Care	Percentages/Numbers
Children and youth served in foster care during 2005	Over 800,000 (about 1% of child population ²)
Children and youth in foster care on September 30, 2005	513,000
Young children in foster care (age 0–4)	28% (142,163)
School age children in foster care (age 5–18)	71% (360,848)
Young adults in foster care (age 18–20)	5% (23,997)
Children and youth of color in foster care	57%
Male children and youth in foster care	52%
Number of youth who emancipated/aged out of foster care in 2005	9% (24,407)
Children and youth exiting foster care who had been in care for one year or more	50%
Children and youth exiting foster care who had been in care for three years or more	17%

School Placement Stability/Enrollment Issues

School Mobility Rates of Children and Youth in Foster Care

- Children and youth have an average of one to two home placement changes per year while in out-of-home care.³
- A 2001 study of more than 4,500 children and youth in foster care in Washington State found that, at both the elementary and secondary levels, twice as many youth in foster care as youth not in care had changed schools during the year.⁴
- In a 2000 New York study of 70 children and youth in foster care, more than 75% did not remain in their school once placed in foster care, and almost 65% had been transferred in the middle of the school year.⁵
- A 2004–2005 three-state study of youth aging out of care (the Midwest Study) by Chapin Hall revealed substantial levels of school mobility associated with placement in out-of-home care. Over a third of young adults reported having had five or more school changes.⁶

- School mobility rates are highest for those entering care for the first time. According to another Chapin Hall study in 2004 of almost 16,000 children and youth in the Chicago Public School system, over two-thirds switched schools shortly after their initial placement in out-of-home care.⁷
- A study of 1,082 Casey Family Programs foster care alumni served across the country found that over two-thirds (68%) of them had attended three or more different elementary schools and a third (33%) had attended five or more.⁸

Negative Effects of School Mobility

- A 1996 study of students in Chicago Public Schools found that students who had changed schools four or more times had lost approximately one year of educational growth by their sixth year.⁹
- A 1999 study found that California high school students who changed schools even once were less than half as likely to graduate as those who did not change schools, even when controlling for other variables that affect high school completion.¹⁰
- In the Casey national study of 1,082 foster care alumni throughout the country, youth who had had one fewer placement change per year were almost twice as likely to graduate from high school before leaving care.¹¹
- A 2004 study in Philadelphia of 1,635 children over age two found that multiple placements and episodic foster care increased the probability of high mental health service use.¹²

Suspensions/Expulsions

- Two-thirds (67%) of youth in out-of-home care in the Midwest Study had been suspended from school at least once compared to 28% in a national sample of general population youth. About one sixth (17%) of the Midwest youth had been expelled compared with 5% of the general population sample.¹³

Enrollment Issues

- In the New York study, 42% of the children and youth did not begin school immediately upon entering foster care. Nearly half of these young people said that they were kept out of school because of lost or misplaced school records.¹⁴
- A 2001 Bay Area study of over 300 foster parents found that “missing information from prior schools increased the odds of enrollment delays by 6.5 times.”¹⁵

Academic Outcomes

Academic Achievement

- The Washington State study found that children and youth in foster care attending public schools scored 16 to 20 percentile points below non-foster youth in statewide standardized tests at grades three, six, and nine.¹⁶
- Youth in foster care in the Midwest Study, interviewed primarily after completing 10th or 11th grade, on average read at only a seventh grade level. Approximately 44% read at high school level or higher. Few excelled in academic subjects, especially relative to a comparable national sample. Less than one in five received an “A” in English, math, history, or science.¹⁷
- Chapin Hall’s research on Chicago Public School children and youth in out-of-home care indicates they lag at least half a school year behind demographically similar students in the same schools. (There is an overall achievement gap of upwards of one year. However, some of this is attributed to the low-performing schools that many of them attend.) Almost 50% of third to eighth grade students in out-of-home care scored in the bottom quartile on the reading section of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) test.¹⁸

Grade Retention/Old for Grade

- In the Washington State study, twice as many youth in foster care at both the elementary and secondary levels repeated a grade compared to youth not in care.¹⁹
- Nearly 45% of youth in care in the New York State study reported being retained at least once in school.²⁰
- In the Midwest Study, 37% of youth in foster care (compared with 22% of a comparable national sample) reported repeating a grade.²¹
- Chicago Public School students in out-of-home care were almost twice as likely as other students to be at least a year older for their grade, even after demographic factors were taken into account and comparisons made to other students attending the same schools.²²
- The national study of Casey foster care alumni found that 36% of them had repeated a grade.²³

Special Education Issues

Number of Youth in Special Education

- Numerous studies indicate anywhere between one-quarter and nearly one-half (23%–47%) of children and youth in out-of-home care in the U.S. receive special education services at some point in their schooling.²⁴ The national average of school-aged children and youth served in special education each year is close to 12%.²⁵
- At both the elementary and secondary levels, more than twice as many foster youth as non-foster youth in the Washington State study had enrolled in special education programs.²⁶
- Nearly half of the youth in foster care in the Midwest Study had been placed in special education at least once during the course of their education.²⁷
- Chicago Public School students in out-of-home care between sixth and eighth grades were classified as eligible for special education nearly three times more frequently than students not in care.²⁸
- 38% of Casey foster care alumni reported they had been enrolled in supplemental education classes for youth needing extra help.

Advocacy Regarding Special Education Services

- An Oregon study done in 2006 compared a group of 45 youth in foster care in special education to a group in special education, but not in foster care. They found that:²⁹
 - » The education and transition plans of foster youth were lower in quality.
 - » The transition plans of the foster care group were half as likely as the comparison group's plans to contain goals regarding education after high school (31% vs. 60%).
 - » Youth in foster care were less likely to have an advocate (i.e., family member, foster parent, or educational surrogate) present at their planning process meeting (42% vs. 69%).
- In the Bay Area study, 68% of the school-age children in foster care reviewed were identified as having special needs, yet only 36% were receiving special education services.³⁰
- In the New York study, Advocates for Children of New York found that:
 - » 90% of biological parents of children in foster care surveyed did not participate in any special education processes concerning their child.³¹
 - » 60% of caseworkers/social workers surveyed “were not aware of existing laws when referring children to special education” and over 50% said “that their clients did not receive appropriate services very often while in foster care.”³²
- A 1990 study in Oregon found that children who had multiple foster care placements and who needed special education were less likely to receive those services than children in more stable placements.

Mental, Emotional and Behavioral Issues

Mental Health

- In a 2005 study of foster care alumni in Oregon and Washington (the Northwest Alumni Study), 54% of alumni had one or more mental health disorders in the past 12 months, such as depression, social phobia or panic syndrome (compared with 22% of general population).³³
- In the same study, 25% had post-traumatic stress disorder within the past 12 months (compared with 4% of general population), which is twice the rate of U.S. war veterans.³⁴
- A 2003 study that surveyed key child welfare administrators in 92 localities about their policies for screening children entering out of home care found that only 43% of them provided comprehensive assessments that included physical, mental health, and developmental examinations.³⁵

Emotional and Behavioral Issues

- Recent research in Chicago confirmed previous statewide research findings that children in foster care are significantly more likely than children in the general population to have a special education classification of an emotional or behavioral disturbance.³⁶
- Several studies have found that children and youth in foster care are significantly more likely to have school behavior problems and that they have higher rates of suspensions and expulsions from school.³⁷

High School Completion Rates

High School Completion Rates/Drop-Out Rates

- A 2006 report by the EPE Research Center indicates that the nationwide high school completion rate for all students is 70%. More are lost in ninth than in any other grade (9th: 35%; 10th: 28%; 11th: 20%; 12th: 17%).³⁸
- Studies have found differing rates of high school completion (through a degree or GED), by youth in out-of-home care, though the measures have been defined somewhat differently:
 - » In the Washington State study, 59% of youth in foster care enrolled in 11th grade completed high school by the end of 12th grade.³⁹
 - » The young adults in the Northwest Alumni Study and the Casey national alumni study completed high school (via diploma or GED) at rates of 85% and 86%, respectively, by age 25, which is comparable to the general population rate. Both studies found, however, much higher GED completion rates compared to the general population (5%): over one in four (29%) in the Northwest study,⁴⁰ and one in five (19%) in the Casey national study.⁴¹
 - » In the Midwest Study, approximately 58% of youth in foster care had a high school degree at age 19, compared to 87% of their same-age peers in a comparable national sample.⁴²
 - » A national study in 1994 of young adults who had been discharged from foster care found that 54% had completed high school.⁴³
 - » In the Chapin Hall study of Chicago Public School youth, fifteen-year-old students in out-of-home care were about half as likely as other students to have graduated 5 years later, with significantly higher percentages of students in care having dropped out (55%) or incarcerated (10%).⁴⁴
- A 1997 study on long-term outcomes for children in foster care on a national level found that youth in foster care are more than twice as likely (37% vs. 16%) to have dropped out of high school than non-foster youth. Five years later, 77% of the former foster youth who had dropped out of high school had completed a high school diploma or GED, compared with 93% of the non-foster youth who had dropped out.⁴⁵

Factors Contributing to Dropping Out

- A 1995 nationwide study of over 17,000 students found that being retained even once between first and eighth grade makes a student four times more likely to drop out than a classmate who was never held back, even after controlling for multiple factors.⁴⁶
- School mobility has also been implicated as a clear risk factor for dropout in several studies.⁴⁷
- The recent EPE Research Center report indicates that repeating a grade, changing schools, and behavior problems are among the host of signals that a student is likely to leave school without a traditional diploma.⁴⁸
- The book *Drop Outs in America* reports research that shows the following students are at risk for dropping out: students of color, students who had been held back, students who are older than others in their grade, and English-language learners.⁴⁹

Postsecondary Preparation, Entrance, and Completion

College Aspiration/Preparation

- The majority (80%) of those youth in out-of-home care interviewed in the Midwest Study at age 17–18 hoped and expected to graduate from college eventually.⁵³
- Foster youth with high educational aspirations, on average, were found to have higher reading achievement compared to foster youth with lower aspirations in a 2003 study of Illinois youth age 16–17.⁵⁴
- A national study done in 1997 indicates that only 15% of youth in foster care are likely to be enrolled in college preparatory classes versus 32% of students not in foster care, even when they have similar test scores and grades.⁵⁵
- Strong academic preparation has been found to be the single most important factor in enrolling and succeeding in a postsecondary program. However, in the United States, studies of the general population have found that:
 - » Only 32% of all students leave high school qualified to attend a four-year college.⁵⁶
 - » Only 20% of all African American and 16% of all Hispanic students leave high school college-ready.⁵⁷
 - » Between 30-60% of students “now require remedial education upon entry to college, depending on the type of institution they attend.”⁵⁸

Postsecondary Entrance/Completion Rates

- The Northwest Alumni Study⁵⁰ found that of the foster care alumni who were interviewed:
 - » 43% completed some education beyond high school.
 - » 21% completed any degree/certificate beyond high school.
 - » 16% completed a vocational degree (22% among those age 25 or older).
 - » 1.8% completed a bachelor’s degree (3% among those age 25 or older) compared to the general population rate of 24%.
- Estimates from a range of studies vary widely for college enrollment rates (7–48%) and graduation rates (1–8%).⁵¹
- The Casey national alumni study reported college completion rates of 9% (at any age) compared to the general population rate of 24%.⁵²

Social/Economic Issues

Social Issues

- In the Midwest Study, by about 19 years of age, young women in foster care were more than twice as likely to have been pregnant by age 19 compared with their peers not in foster care.⁵⁹
- The Midwest Study also found that youth aging out of the child welfare system had higher rates of offending across a range of behaviors from property crimes to serious violent crimes than their same age peers. Both male and female foster youth, for example, were over 10 times more likely to report having been arrested since age 18 than youth in a comparative sample.⁶⁰
- In the Northwest Alumni Study, more than one in five alumni reported experiencing homelessness since discharge from foster care.⁶¹ In the Midwest Study, one in seven youth reported experiencing homelessness since leaving care.⁶²

GED vs. High School Diploma

- In research done in 1998 analyzing the educational and labor market performance of GED recipients, it was found that individuals earning a GED credential instead of a high school diploma spend less time working, experience more job turnover, and earn lower wages. They were also half as likely to earn associate's degrees and even less likely to earn bachelor's degrees.⁶³

Economic Impact

- Compared to graduates, the EPE Research Center found that high school dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, earn lower wages, have higher rates of public assistance, be single parents, and have children at a younger age.⁶⁴

TABLE 2. SELECTED OUTCOMES BY EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

	Employment Rate (Mar '06)	Unemployment Rate (Mar '06)	Earning Power (Median Earnings, '04)
Dropouts	42%	8%	\$18,085
HS Graduate	60%	5%	\$26,104
Some College	70%	4%	\$30,610
College Grad	76%	2%	\$47,317

(EPE Research Center, Diplomas Count, 2006)

- According to the Northwest Alumni Study, alumni of the foster care system experience difficult employment and financial situations once they become 18 and age out of the system.⁶⁵
 - » One-third lived at or below poverty (three times the national rate).
 - » One-third had no health insurance (twice the national rate).
 - » Their employment rate was 80% (compared with 95% of same-aged members of the general population).
 - » 17% were currently receiving cash public assistance.

Supportive Factors

Staying in Foster Care After Age 18

- The Midwest Study⁶⁶ found that:
 - » Young adults who stayed in care after 18 were more than twice as likely to be enrolled in a school or training program as those who had been discharged.
 - » Young adults who stayed in care after 18, who had a high school diploma or GED, were over three times as likely as those no longer in care to be enrolled in a 2- or 4-year college.
 - » Compared to the 19 year olds still in foster care, those who left the system were more likely to have become pregnant.⁶⁷

Table 3. Current Educational Enrollment: Midwest Study (n=603)

Educational Enrollment	Young Adults Still In Care	Young Adults No Longer In Care
Not Enrolled	33.3%	69.2%
High School or GED	20.9%	10.1%
Vocational Training	8.5%	9.1%
2-Year College	26.6%	7.9%
4-Year College	10.6%	3.8%

Caring, Stable Relationships

- A study conducted with 216 emancipated foster youth attending a four-year university found that social support was an important factor in their educational success: nearly 87% had either a friend or family member to ask for help or advice if needed, 80% had contact with their birth family, and 60% still maintained relationships with their foster or kin-care parents.⁶⁸
- A qualitative study of 38 educationally high-achieving (obtained at least a BA degree) former foster youth found that most of the young adults had a mentor or a role-model, with whom the youth had a close relationship. One in three young adults believed that for former foster youth to succeed in higher education, they need the continued support and advice of a mentor or other adults who understands their experiences.⁶⁹

Existence of Education Advocates

- Multiple studies indicate that foster children often lack a knowledgeable, consistent educational advocate.⁷⁰
- Further studies indicate that foster parents, social workers, and judges who are entrusted with the welfare of the child in care too often lack the training and awareness to provide the educational advocacy that children in care especially need.⁷¹

Early Childhood Education/Early Intervention

General Early Learning Research

- Only 18% of the foster parents in the 2000 New York study reported that children under their care were enrolled in preschool programs. Of the foster parents who indicated that none of the foster children they cared for were enrolled in preschool programs, 80% reported that no one advised them to enroll these children in such programs.⁷²
- The Chicago Longitudinal Study followed the education and social development of more than 1,500 low-income children served by the Chicago Child-Parent Center. When compared to a peer group who did not receive the center's services, participants had a 41% lower rate of juvenile arrest for violent offenses, 41% fewer special education placements, and 51% fewer allegations of child abuse and neglect. At age 21, the participants had a 20% higher rate of high school completion. Every dollar invested in the program returned four dollars to the public in reduced costs of crime, welfare, and remedial education (2001 data).⁷³
- The High/Scope Perry Preschool is a multi-year study of 123 low income African-American children who were assessed to be at high risk of school failure. Fifty-eight received a high-quality preschool program at ages 3 and 4; the other 65 children received no preschool program. Forty years later, the group that received high-quality early learning had higher IQs at age 5, higher high school graduation rates, fewer arrests, and higher median annual incomes than those who received no preschool.⁷⁴

Early Intervention

- A 2005 national study on 2,813 young children in child welfare found that about 40% of toddlers and 50% of preschoolers have high developmental and behavioral needs; however, only 23% of children overall are receiving services for these issues.⁷⁵
- 89% of the biological parents in the 2000 New York study stated that they were unaware of, and never informed about, the Early Intervention program while their children were in foster care. Without parental consent, most children in foster care cannot receive these services.⁷⁶

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Endnotes

Research compiled by the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education.

- 1 National AFCARS data (2007)
- 2 Kids Count (2007)
- 3 National AFCARS data (2002)
- 4 Burley & Halpern, 2001, p. 1
- 5 Advocates for Children of New York, Inc., 2000, p. 5
- 6 Courtney, et al., 2004, p. 42
- 7 Smithgall et al., 2004, p. 46
- 8 Pecora, et al., 2006, p. 223
- 9 Kerbow, University of Chicago, 1996, p. 20
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- 24 Courtney, et al., 2004 (47% of 732); Smithgall, et al., 2004 (45% of 1,216 sixth through eighth graders); Burley and Halpern, 2001 (23% of 1,423 third graders, 29% of 1,539 six graders, 24% of 1,597 ninth graders); Choice, et al., 2001 (36% of 303); Advocates for Children of New York Inc., 2000 (30% of 70); Zanghi, 1999 (41% of 134); Jones, et. al., 1998 (23% of 249); Goerge, et al., 1992 (29.1% of 14,714)
- 25 IDEA Part B Child Count (2005), Table 1-10 and IDEA Part B Data Fact Sheet. The percentage of children ages 6-17 served by IDEA in the United States in 2005 at a certain point in time was 11.59%. It is not a cumulative count of all students served throughout the year and actual percentage may be slightly higher. States have different eligibility criteria for each disability category. As a result, the proportion of students with a particular disability differs from state to state. Accessed 8/29/07 at: www.ideadata.org/arc_toc7.asp#partbCC.
- 26 Burley & Halpern, 2001, p. 16
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- 28 Smithgall et al., 2004, p. 58
- 29 Geenen & Powers, 2006, pp. 9-11
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- 52 Pecora, et al., 2006, p. 225
- 53 Courtney, et al., 2004, p. 39
- 54 Shin, 2003, p. 622
- 55 Blome, 1997, p. 47
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