Oregon’s Foster Youth: Waiting for a Unified Systems’ Approach

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There are well over 11,000 children in the Oregon foster care system every year, many of them considered to be the most vulnerable population of youth, often the victims of child abuse and neglect. In 2015 in Oregon, there were 11,430 youth recorded in the foster care system with 59% of them considered Priority Youth*, those ages 6-15 at risk of disengaging from school. The population was nearly split in half regarding gender, with males representing a slightly higher number of youth in care (51.9%) compared to their females counterparts (48.1%). [1]

**Racial and Ethnic Disparities of Foster Youth: Over-representation for Many Youth of Color**

Although there have been a number of interventions set forth to address the over-representation of American Indian/Alaskan Native and African American youth in the foster care system in Oregon, there hasn’t been any noticeable success in reducing those numbers.

Census data reports that 2% of Oregon’s population is Black or African American and 1.4% American Indian and Alaska Native. Although those numbers may seem small, there is over-representation of both ethnic groups in the foster care system compared to overall population in Oregon. [1] This graph below was created from information retrieved from a Department of Human Service (DHS) data set.

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*Priority Youth (6-15 years of age) and Opportunity Youth (16-24 years of age) are youth who are disengaged or at risk of being disengaged from the education system and or workforce.*
From 2008 - 2015, African Americans were the only race where the number of youth in care from age 15 and up surpassed their most vulnerable youth in care (0-2 years of age). In all other races, youth between the ages of 0-2 surpassed their age 15 and over youth. This holds true for all races with the exception of Asian/Pacific Islanders, where during 2008-2012 the number of youth in care for ages 15 and up outnumbered their 0-2 year old population, but only by 4 youth on average. [1]

Foster Youth at School and Work
A four year FosterClub study following 116 Oregon foster youth from 2011-2015 showed that in 2011, 92% of the 17 year-old foster youth were enrolled and attending school and only 10% of them worked full or part-time jobs. In 2013 (now 19 years old), only 50% of the youth were engaged and attending school and 41% of the youth worked full- or part-time. By 2015 (now 21 years old), only 19% of the youth were enrolled and attending school and 42% of the youth worked full- or part-time. [2] These categories are not mutually exclusive.

Nationally, foster youth scored 15-20 percentage points lower than their non-foster youth counterparts in statewide achievement tests. Foster youth who were in short-term care have, on average, the same educational deficits as children who were in long-term foster care. [3]

Between 2005 and 2012, 1,036 Oregon foster youth received the federal Chafee Grant for the first time to pursue their post-secondary education degree from a community college, proprietary
school, or a private or public four year university, yet only 117 (11.3%) of them received a degree. An analysis of the Chafee Grant foster youth recipients by institution type and degree received shows that:

- Of the 800 attending a community college, 55 (6.9%) of these youth received a degree.
- Of the 122 who attended a proprietary institution, only 4 (3.3%) of these youth received a degree.
- Of the 86 attending a 4 year public college, 42 (48.8%) of the youth received a degree.
- Of the 28 foster youth receiving the grant for the first time and attended a 4 year private college, 16 (57.1%) received a degree. [4]

**Facing Incredible Odds**

After exiting the foster care system, foster youth are more likely than their non-foster care peers to perform poorly in schools, become homeless, have criminal involvement, and have unfavorable employment outcomes up to the age of 30 [5]. Due to struggles of transitioning successfully out of adolescence into adulthood, they are more likely to engage in risky behaviors leading to a number of obstructive consequences. These outcomes are not isolated to any subpopulation within foster care youth and are not dependent on the foster youth’s length of stay. [3]

One of our most vulnerable youth populations in Oregon are foster youth and they are exiting the foster care system without the proper supports, skills, training and opportunities to transition into adulthood successfully. The successful transition from adolescence to early adulthood requires youth to have skills and resources to graduate high school and then go to college or enter the workforce. [6] [7]

The four-year foster care follow-up study noted earlier demonstrates that these youth are disengaging from school and employment at far greater rates than their peers. The study shows that 42% of foster youth became disengaged from education between the ages of 17-19 and 31% of them obtain some type of employment. Based on the age of disengagement from education, these jobs are less likely to be living wage opportunities. Between the ages of 19-21, another 30% of the youth are disengaged from education and only 1% of them obtain some type of employment which would suggest that 58% of these youth are not employed. [2]

The same study showed that in 2011, 26% of the youth reported having been incarcerated at some point. This number dropped to 9% in 2013, and rose again slightly to 10% in 2015. [2] The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that in the general public, less than 2% of all young people
will experience incarceration by the age of 20, [8] which puts the foster youth in Oregon well over the national average for the general population of youth experiencing incarceration.

The youth in the foster care system who experience some type of incarceration are characterized as crossover youth, multi-agency youth, or dual system youth. These youth often experience some type of trauma which can manifest itself in delinquent behavior. Currently, there’s about 2,000 Oregon foster youth who are committed to Oregon Youth Authority. [9]

The study attempts to get some insight on homelessness for these youth as well by asking them if they have experienced homelessness in the last two years. In 2011, 23% reported experiencing homelessness in the previous two years. The rate decreased to 16% in 2013 and then to 14% in 2015. [8]

Uniform training, services, positive supportive networks and job experiences while in care and out of care are associated with more positive outcomes for these youth and their communities. Despite the creation and implementation of Independent Living initiatives, foster youth are exiting out of state care with little to no success in transitioning from wards of the court to autonomous adults. [10]

Aligning Foster Youth Programs and Services: A YDC Mandate
The Youth Development Council (YDC) believes that with the right resources, strategies and practices in place to confront barriers, youth will achieve improved academic and workforce success. Our values are centered on supporting and funding inclusive, evidence- and practice-based programs that use and encourage a sustainable approach to serve *Priority Youth and Opportunity Youth*, ages 6-24.

The Youth Development Council recognizes that foster youth are involved with multiple systems, and without proper alignment of these systems (Oregon Youth Authority, the Higher Education Coordinating Commission, the Oregon Department of Education, the Department of Human Services, etc.), a vast majority of these youth will continue to experience negative lifelong outcomes.

Foster youth are required to receive services while they are in state care, but these services are being implemented in silos and rarely result in a youth obtaining the needed comprehensive services to assist them with academic and workforce success.
Positive Youth Development
The most beneficial out-of-school programs for serving foster youth are programs implementing a Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework. The youth that are involved with these programs report that the programs have positively influenced their life choices and their ability to pursue higher education and enter the workforce. [11]

PYD programs positively impact the healthy development of foster youth by assisting them to develop diverse skills and support networks. [12] Out-of-school time programs that promote education and instill a sense of belonging and competence can develop characteristics that help youth make the transition to young adulthood. [13] Strong mentoring connections to positive adults also contributes to positive outcomes for vulnerable youth. [14] Out-of-school time programs that focus on positive youth development are extremely beneficial for foster youth, since many aspects of PYD overlap with college and workforce readiness. [7]

The most effective out of school programs are comprehensive, offer a diversity of elements in their program, allow for flexibility in how youth decide to be involved [15] and would incorporate PYD principles. These types of programs would also include academic support and engagement in learning, technology integration and project-based learning, workforce skill development or paid internships, service learning, and diverse, relevant learning opportunities.

An increase in coordination between community based organizations, the K-12 system, colleges and child welfare agencies is needed in order for foster youth to have a smooth transition from high school to higher education [16]. This serves as a type of “wraparound” service providing a multi-dimensional, positive social support system for the youth. For this system to succeed, it will take a collective approach in developing programs, financial and other supports targeting foster youth to place them on a college trajectory, or job training that leads to stable and meaningful employment [16].

Investing in Foster Youth Success: The Return on Investment
The most cost effective way to serve foster youth and their families is to take a preventative approach. The initial costs of services such as counseling, out of school programs, mentors, paid internships, transportation, etc. are trivial compared to the cost of reactive services or societal costs. Because a number of these foster youth are returning to foster care, relying on government assistance, experiencing homelessness, and becoming involved with the juvenile justice system and later the criminal justice system, addressing their needs early on would have a direct effect on what is being spent across all systems. [17]
Wilder Research and the University of Minnesota estimated that an effective and comprehensive youth intervention program costing around $2,000 per participant returns benefits of $4.89 for every dollar of the cost, and that is reported to be based on very conservative assumptions about effects and valuations. It was observed that the more targeted the program, the greater the return in investment. A targeted program to reduce recidivism of property crimes costing approximately $200 per participant returned benefits of $8.18 per dollar invested. [17] In other words, if the program specifically targeted foster youth and their barriers, a higher return in investment would follow.

The Harvard Business School Association of Oregon completed a social return on investment analysis in 2012 for an Oregon community-based organization. They estimated that for every 100 program graduates, there is a total of $3.4 million in lifetime social benefit. The social return on investment is 26.8 times the cost of the program. This benefit is calculated throughout the graduate’s lifetime and the ripple effect it has on siblings, classmates and the graduate’s descendants. [18] This program provides a report that states that 85% of their program graduates have earned a high school diploma or GED (when 50% of total participants have a parent who didn’t complete high school), 97% avoided the Juvenile Justice System (when at least 60% of participants have one or more parents who have been incarcerated), and that 98% of adolescents avoided early parenting (despite at least 60% having been born to a teen parent). [18]

**Recommendations for Action**

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a significant transition for youth due to the amount of responsibility that comes with being an adult and the fact that the majority of one’s life is spent as an adult. This transition is more difficult for youth who are in foster care and additional supports will need to be in place for them to have a fair chance. The impact of not being prepared is a long lasting one that not only affects the individual foster youth, but also their community as a whole. Successful transition from adolescent to adulthood depends on some core and adaptive resources (parenting quality, socioeconomic status, adult support, coping skills, future motivation, etc.) that foster youth may not have the best of, or access to, so this places them at a higher risk of not being successful during this transition period.

Out of school programs grounded in positive youth development principles can assist foster youth to overcome barriers to learning and enhance their academic achievement and social skills while reducing their involvement in adolescent problem behaviors [19]. With continued and increased funding to these community based organizations who work collectively within their communities to serve Oregon’s Priority and Opportunity Youth, they will be able to provide the support to instill foster youth with the skills, competencies and opportunities
needed to change the trajectory of their lives, which will in turn change the landscape of our state.

Youth Development Council Recommendations:

- Increase funding to community based organizations that work collectively within their communities to serve Oregon’s Priority and Opportunity Foster Youth. Ensure that culturally and developmentally appropriate placements are available for all children and youth in Oregon’s Foster Care.
- Provide more than financial support to assist foster youth in reaching their education and career goals. Wraparound supports, including additional services such as strong mentors, are essential to ensure foster youth are securely transitioning into adulthood.
- Ensure that all services and agencies are unified and working collectively to serve foster youth. Ensure consistency in data collection, monitoring and interpretation across systems.
- Appoint cultural advocates for populations that are over represented in foster care to ensure that culture is being respected and considered in all interactions and decisions. It is recommended that this advocate would report to Central Office.
Works Cited


OREGON'S FOSTER YOUTH: WAITING FOR A UNIFIED SYSTEMS' -APPROACH


FURTHER READING


C. McKay, "The resilient community: Implications for out of school programming.," Child and