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

11,430 Oregon Foster Youth

There are well over 11,000 children in Oregon's foster care system every year. In 2015, there were 11,430 youth in the foster care system, many of them considered to be the most vulnerable population of youth, often the victims of child abuse and neglect.

59% of those youth were school aged-youth and older (*Priority Youth and Opportunity Youth) [1].

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 female counterparts (48.1%) [1]

Crossover youth, also referred to as multi-agency youth, or dual system youth, often experience some type of trauma which can manifest itself in delinquent behavior. Currently, there are about 2,000 Oregon foster youth who are committed to the Oregon Youth Authority [19].

A FosterClub study following 116 Oregon foster youth, aged 17, discovered that after the first 2 years there was a 42% drop in school enrollment and a 31% increase in employment. At the end of 4 years, 73% were no longer enrolled in school and only 32% were employed [2].

African American youth are disproportionately represented among older foster youth at a rate even greater than among very young African American youth, which is not found for any other racial group [1].

Key Findings

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

A 7-year study of 1036 foster youth in Oregon who received the federal Chafee Grant for the first time to pursue their secondary education degree from a community college, proprietary school, or a private or public 4 year university, found that only 117 (11.3%) of them received a degree [4].
Yesterday's Issues Remains Today's Problem: Disparities in Child Welfare

Although there have been a number of interventions to address 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.

2014 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 the overall population in Oregon. The bar graph below illustrates the over-representation of both ethnic groups in the foster care system compared to their overall population’s representation in Oregon [1].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>% Represented in Population</th>
<th>% Represented in Foster Care</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/AN</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>68.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American/Black</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>69.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>69.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information from Oregon Child Welfare Data Set and retrieved from https://rom.socwelf.ku.edu/Oregon_Public/MyReports.aspx

Foster Youth Lack Proper Supports for Academic Success

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] 73% of the foster youth were no longer enrolled in school at the end of this study; although 32% of these youth were working after the study, there was only a 1% increase after the first two years.

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). [1]

Information from Oregon Child Welfare Data Set and retrieved from https://rom.socwelf.ku.edu/Oregon_Public/MyReports.aspx

Youth 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]
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. Council 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 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.

Between the years of 2005-2012, 1036 foster youth in Oregon received the federal Chafee Grant for the first time to pursue their secondary education degree from a community college, proprietary school, or a private or public 4 year university, yet only 117 (11.3%) of them received a degree [4]. Of the 800 foster youth who received the Chafee Grant for the first time and attended a community college, 55 (6.9%) of these youth received a degree. Of the 122 foster youth who received the grant for the first time and attended a proprietary school, only 4 (3.3%) of these youth received a degree.

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. Addressing their needs early on would have a direct effect on what is being spent across all systems.

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 this calculation is based on conservative assumptions about effects and valuations. The more targeted the program, the greater the return on investment. [16]

An Investment with Powerful Results

The Harvard Business School Association of Oregon completed a social return on investment analysis in 2012 for an Oregon community-based organization. It was 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 community-based organization's program. This benefit is calculated throughout the graduate's lifetime along with the ripple effect it has on siblings, classmates and the graduate's descendants. The report states that 85% of 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 an incarcerated parent or two), and that 98% of adolescents avoided early parenting (despite at least 60% having been born to a teen parent). [17]
Positive Youth Development: An approach that works
The most beneficial out-of-school programs serving foster youth are programs implementing a Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework. PYD programs positively impact healthy development of foster youth by helping them develop diverse skills and support networks. [11] Out-of-school time programs promoting education and instilling a sense of belonging and competence develop supports that help youth make the transition to young adulthood. [12] Strong mentoring connections to positive adults contribute to positive outcomes for vulnerable youth. [13] Out-of-school time programs focusing 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 [14] 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 [15]. 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 to develop 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 [15].

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Recommendations for Action
The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a significant transition for youth due to the amount of responsibility that comes with it 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 be needed to help change the trajectory of their lives. The following recommendations could change the outlook for foster youth in Oregon:

- Increase funding to community-based organizations that work collectively within their communities to serve Oregon’s Priority and Opportunity foster youth. Ensure culturally and developmentally appropriate placements are available for all foster youth.
- Provide more than financial support to help foster youth reach their educational and career goals.
- Wraparound supports, including additional services such as strong adult mentors, are essential to ensure foster youth are securely transitioning into adulthood.
- Ensure that all foster youth-serving agencies are working collaboratively, aligning their work, and working strategically 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. This advocate would report to the Central Office at DHS.

Works Cited
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