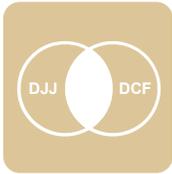


DUALY
SERVED YOUTH

Child Welfare and the Transition to Adulthood: Investigating Placement Status and Subsequent Arrests

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Issue

Utilizing administrative data from child welfare, juvenile justice, and adult corrections, the current study fills a gap in the literature by analyzing justice outcomes for older adolescents involved with the child welfare system regardless of their placement status.

Adolescents associated with the child welfare system encounter significant barriers in the transition to adulthood. As a result, various federal policies have been put in place to help facilitate a more viable transition by providing both hard and soft services for foster youth to achieve milestones such as living independently, obtaining a diploma, attending college or maintaining steady employment. Unfortunately, these same services are not available to youth who are involved with child welfare services as part of an intact family case.

The purpose of the current study was to investigate whether these intact family cases (also making the transition to adulthood) were in fact at equal risk of justice involvement as compared with similar youth living with foster families. The authors are focused on this area of study because of the relative size of the intact family case subpopulation (as a total share of the entire child welfare population) and because of the cited literature on living (or remaining) in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The analyses are guided by the following two research questions: 1) how do intact and out-of-home cases compare with regard to demographics; and 2) are intact family cases at equal risk of subsequent justice contact (i.e. arrest) as compared with foster care cases?

Findings

The overall risk of subsequent arrest is high regardless of the subgroup. At the “low” end of the spectrum, 59 percent youth in long-term out-of-home placements and youth associated with short-term intact family cases experienced at least one subsequent arrest. This estimate indicates that the majority of all youth making the transition to adulthood are likely to have official contact with the justice system.

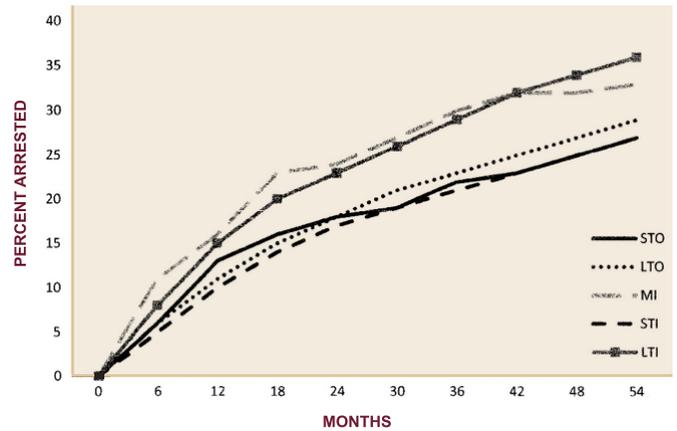
Subsequent arrests: type and overall estimates (n = 9874)

	SHORT-TERM OHP (573)	LONG-TERM OHP (2836)	MIXED INTACT (339)	SHORT-TERM INTACT (2957)	LONG-TERM INTACT (3169)
Violent	210 (37)	1080 (38)	136 (37)	879 (30)	1464 (46)
Weapons	38 (7)	162 (6)	18 (5)	107 (4)	208 (7)
Property	251 (44)	1256 (44)	148 (44)	1109 (38)	1738 (55)
Drugs	158 (28)	637 (22)	85 (25)	793 (27)	1060 (33)
Other	185 (32)	762 (27)	104 (31)	815 (28)	1259 (40)
Detention	217 (38)	1084 (38)	118 (35)	776 (26)	1439 (35)
Totals	355 (62)	1682 (59)	207 (61)	1762 (59)	2439 (77)

The groups are as follows: 1) short-term OHP: Youth in out-of-home placement for less than 1 year prior to (and including) their 17th birthday; 2) long-term OHP: Youth in out-of-home placement for 1 year or more prior to their 17th birthday; 3) mixed intact: Youth who were reunified (“at home with parents”) at the time of their 17th birthday but were previously in a substitute care setting; 4) short-term intact: Youth who were reunified (“at home with parents”) at the time of their 17th birthday but in out-of-home placements, and had an open case for less than 1 year prior to age 17; 5) long-term intact: Youth who were reunified (“at home with parents”) at the time of their 17th birthday but in out-of-home placements, and had an open case for 1 year or more prior to age 17.

Findings (continued)

Fig 1. Proportion arrested over time by placement status ($n = 9874$).
STO short-term intact, *LTO* long-term intact, *MI* mixed intact, *STI* short-term intact, *LTI* long-term intact



The authors report that adolescents associated with long-term intact family cases were significantly more likely to experience a subsequent arrest, even after controlling for other important covariates. These findings raise questions about the narrow targeting of services intended to improve outcomes for child welfare youth making the transition to adulthood and the need for more research focused on a population of youth that reside in the shadows of a largely overwhelmed system.

Implications

The findings reported in the current study indicate that, when researchers consider all adolescents making the transition to adulthood—not just those in substitute care settings—former foster youth are not associated with the highest rates of justice involvement. In fact, long-term foster youth were associated with significantly lower rates of contact with the justice system as compared with long-term intact family cases.

The current findings clearly indicate there exists a substantial number of youth making the transition to adulthood as part of an intact family case. In fact, of the 17-year-olds selected in the current study, 62 percent were associated with a short-term or long-term intact family case.

The current study extends the transition to adulthood literature by investigating the association between justice contact (official arrests) and the placement status of youth at 17 years of age. To date, the overwhelming majority of studies on the transition to adulthood from child welfare focus on the formal foster care population. Yet there are substantially more high-risk adolescents associated with open intact family cases at the beginning of this same developmental period. Limited focus on intact family cases is nothing short of a lost opportunity to support critical gains and facilitate a smooth transition to adulthood.

Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Brown, A., Cary, C., Love, K., & Vorhies, V. (2011). Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Lee, J., Courtney, M., & Tajima, E. (2014). Extended foster care support during the transition to adulthood: Effect on the risk of arrest. *Children and Youth Services Review, 42*, 34–42.

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