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March 2010

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Distinct Subgroups of Former Foster Youth during Young Adulthood: Implications for Policy and Practice

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Introduction

Social policy concerning foster youth making the transition to adulthood has evolved significantly since the late 1980s (Courtney, 2009). The Independent Living Initiative of 1986 provided states funds for soft services intended to help prepare older adolescents in foster care to live independently by age 18. The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 increased funding for such services, but recognized the need for continuing support past age 18 by encouraging states to provide the services up to age 21. That law, and its later expansion through the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program, also expanded the kinds of support states could provide beyond soft services to include housing, health insurance, and direct support for postsecondary education. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections Act) fundamentally changed the nature of federal support for young people in state care by extending entitlement funding

under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to age 21 beginning in Fiscal Year 2011.

The Fostering Connections Act allows states to claim Title IV-E reimbursement for the costs of maintenance payments to traditional foster care providers (i.e., family foster homes, kinship foster homes, and group care providers) and administration of the foster care program, as is the case for foster care provided to minors. It will also allow states to claim reimbursement for support and administration of supervised independent living settings, recognizing the developmental needs of young adults to learn to live independently. For states to claim reimbursement on behalf of a young adult in care, the young person must be either: 1) completing high school or an equivalency program; 2) enrolled in postsecondary or vocational school; 3) participating in a program or activity designed to promote, or remove barriers to, employment; 4) employed for at least 80 hours per month; or 5) incapable of doing any of these activities due to a medical condition.

Thus, although the Fostering Connections Act provides states with entitlement funding and great flexibility in terms of the nature of the care being provided for young adults, it also imposes considerable responsibilities on the states and the young people themselves in order for states to receive reimbursement. Young people who do not or cannot participate in the activities required for eligibility, and who do not meet the yet-to-be determined criteria for a “medical condition,” will not be eligible to remain in care. It remains unclear how many states will take up the option made available under the Fostering Connections Act to extend foster care past age 18 and, for those states who take up the option, how they will implement the provisions directed towards young adults. Information on the characteristics and needs of former foster youth making the transition to adulthood is sorely needed to assist states as they decide whether and how to implement the Fostering Connections Act’s older-youth provisions.

In this issue brief, we use information provided by young people participating in the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Midwest Study) to identify distinct subgroups of young adults making the transition to adulthood based on their experiences across several key transition domains. The characteristics of these subgroups call for a nuanced approach to policy and practice directed towards foster youth in transition. Some of the subgroups may be difficult to serve under the policy framework provided by the Fostering Connections Act.

A Person-Oriented Approach to Understanding Foster Youth in Transition

Applied research often attempts to provide insight into how to assist populations by examining how individual variables, such as characteristics or experiences,

are associated with a particular outcome, such as employment or education. Although this *variable-oriented* approach can be quite useful in identifying risk and protective factors associated with a particular outcome, it can miss important ways in which the characteristics and experiences of individuals are associated with each other.

An alternative to the variable-oriented approach to understanding human development is the *person-oriented* approach, which assumes that development cannot be understood by examining single factors in isolation from their relationships with other interacting factors (Magnusson, 1995). From this perspective, individual development is a function of the pattern of relevant factors, and research emphasizes identification of organized configurations of interactive factors that distinguish different subgroups of individuals in the population (Bergman & Magnusson, 1997; Magnusson, 1998).

Practitioners working with vulnerable populations know that a one-size-fits-all approach seldom meets the needs of a population that exhibits great heterogeneity. Identification of distinct subgroups of a vulnerable population, such as foster youth making the transition to adulthood, can help inform efforts to better design and target policies, programs, and practice. Indeed, earlier analysis of data from the Midwest Study identified four distinct subgroups of youth about to make the transition from foster care to adulthood, groups whose dissimilar needs clearly call for distinct sets of services (Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007). Whether former foster youth further along in the transition to adulthood can be classified into subgroups, and—if so—what the characteristics of those subgroups indicate about the adequacy of current child welfare policy, remains an important question.

Sample and Method

In this issue brief, we apply the person-oriented approach to identifying subgroups of former foster youth at age 23 and 24. The study population is drawn from the participants in the Midwest Study, which has been following a sample of 732 young people from Iowa ($n = 63$), Wisconsin ($n = 195$), and Illinois ($n = 474$) as they age out of foster care and transition to adulthood. Foster youth in these three states were eligible to participate in the study if they (1) had entered care before their 16th birthday; (2) were still in care at age 17; and (3) had been removed from home for reasons other than delinquency. Study participants were 17 or 18 years old at the time of their first interview. Eighty-two percent ($n = 603$) were re-interviewed at age 19, 81 percent ($n = 591$) were re-interviewed at age 21, and 82 percent ($n = 602$) were re-interviewed at ages 23 and 24.^{1,2} For the analyses reported here, we rely on a sample of 584 (97%) of the 602 young people interviewed at age 23 or 24, excluding those for whom we were missing data on all or most of the key variables used in our analyses. All of the information used in our analyses came from interviews with the study participants.

We use *latent class analysis*, which identifies subpopulations based on their particular patterns across multiple indicators (Goodman, 1974; McCutcheon, 1987), to generate distinctive multi-dimensional profiles of transitioning foster youth. These profiles vary with respect to a small number of conceptually relevant factors:

- Living arrangement (i.e., average number of moves and living in one's own place; average number of moves but living with relatives, friends, or others;

high number of moves or living in jail, treatment facility, a motel, or homeless)³

- Educational attainment (i.e., less than a high school diploma; a high school diploma; some college; associate's degree or more college)
- Currently employed
- Children (i.e., none; at least one child resides with the parent; nonresident children only)
- Convicted of a crime since leaving care

Living independently, completing one's education, obtaining employment, and establishing a family are all typical markers of attaining adulthood in the U.S. (Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005). However, our indicators also attempt to capture important variation in the experiences of the Midwest Study participants. For example, although housing instability and/or institutionalization would likely be too rare to include as an indicator of living arrangement for the overall population of young adults, this category represents over one-fifth of the Midwest Study population. Similarly, because it is more common among Midwest Study participants to have at least one nonresident child (16.3%) than it is to have ever been married (14.9%), we use whether the study participant has any living children and whether any of their children are not living with them, rather than marital status, as indicators of family formation. Finally, we include an indicator of involvement with the adult criminal justice system as an important indicator for foster youth in transition. Although avoidance of involvement in the criminal justice system is not typically seen as an indicator of having achieved adult status, criminal conviction can significantly limit one's options, and nearly one-quarter (24.1%) of Midwest Study participants were convicted of a crime after leaving foster care.

¹ For additional information, see Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap (2010).

² All eligible youth were included in Iowa and Wisconsin, whereas a two-thirds sample was drawn for Illinois.

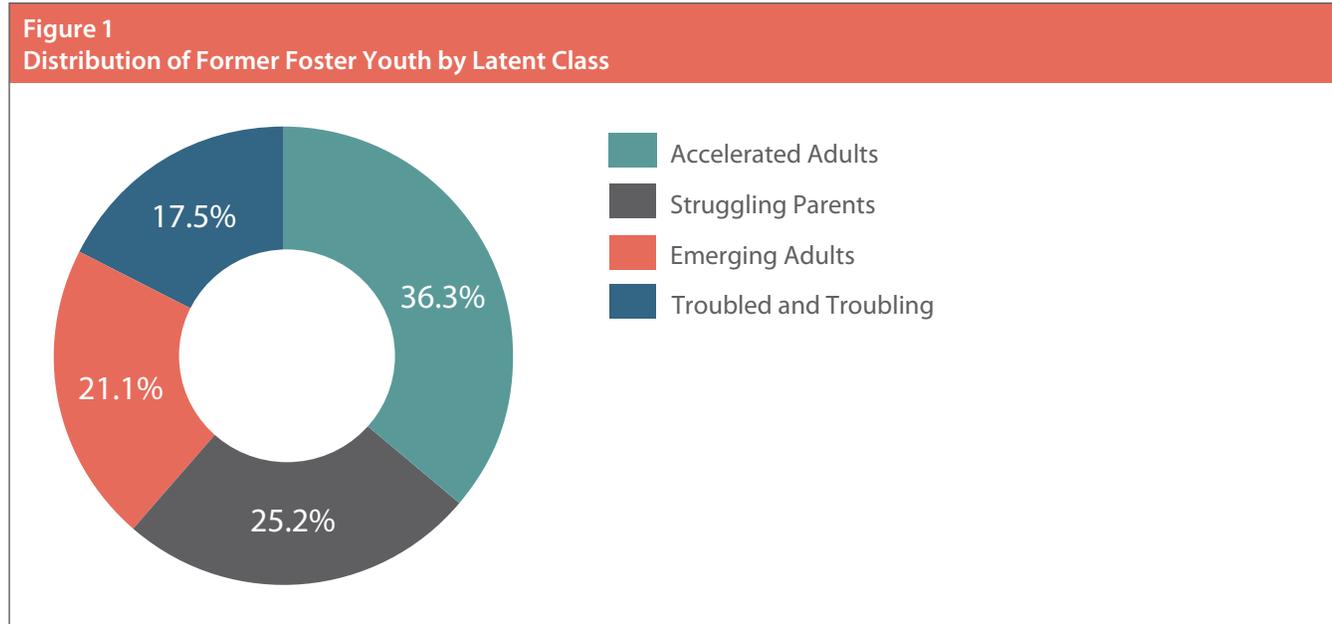
³ We created a variable measuring the number of moves per year since discharge from care. Youth who moved 1.5 times per year or more are classified as "high moves" (13% of youth). All other youth are classified as "average moves."

Distinct Classes of Former Foster Youth as Young Adults

Our latent class analysis revealed four classes or subgroups of former foster youth, each of which is described below.⁴ Figure 1 compares the profiles of the four classes of former foster youth based on the indicators of the transition to adulthood that were used to identify the subgroups. It shows the percentage of each group that experienced a given transition outcome as well as the percentage of the total sample

that experienced each outcome. Figure 1 displays the distribution of the Midwest Study participants at age 23 or 24 across the four classes. We also compared the classes on a range of other characteristics and experiences in order to obtain a better sense of how the classes differ from one another.⁵ Our descriptions below take advantage of statistically significant differences between groups to highlight between-group similarities and differences.

Class 1, the largest class of former foster youths ($n = 222$; 36.3% of the sample), we refer to as *Accelerated*



⁴ The latent class analysis was conducted using Latent Gold software. Model fit statistics indicated that a four-cluster model was a clear improvement over a three-cluster model and that a five-cluster model did not significantly improve model fit. Study participants were assigned to the class for which their estimated probability of assignment was greatest.

⁵ Covariates used in analyzing between-group differences included: gender; race; current school enrollment; economic well-being (ever employed; number of employer benefits; ever homeless or couch surfed; number of economic hardships experienced in the past year; food insecurity); current receipt of government benefits (Unemployment Insurance; Worker's Compensation; Supplemental Security Income, SSI; food stamps; public housing/rental assistance; Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, TANF; Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, WIC); physical health; mental health symptoms during the past 12 months assessed using the Composite International Diagnostic Inventory (depression; PTSD; alcohol use issues; substance use issues); current receipt of mental health services (counseling for psychological, or emotional problem; prescribed medication for a psychological or emotional problem; hospitalized due to emotional, psychological, or mental health problems; treatment for alcohol or substance abuse); perceived preparation for independent living (very or somewhat prepared for independent living at exit; very or somewhat prepared for independent living now); perceptions of the transition to adulthood (perceived rate of growing up compared to others; perceived rate of taking on adult responsibilities compared to others; "how old do you feel" compared to others; "how often do you think of yourself as an adult"); married or cohabiting; social network and social supports (has enough people to count on; to talk to; to ask for favors; to ask for money); any violent or nonviolent victimization. See Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap (2010) for more information about the measures used in this study.

Adults. Nearly two-thirds (63%) are female. Members of this class are the most likely to live on their own in a fairly stable situation. Almost all have a high school diploma, over half have attended some college, and they are the most likely to have a college degree. Members of this class are also the most likely to be currently employed. Nearly half have resident children and very few have nonresident children. They report a rate of criminal conviction that is lower than all but one of the other groups. This group does not stand out on other major indicators of functioning (e.g., social support, health, mental health and substance

use problems, or economic hardships). However, this does not mean that they have not experienced any difficulties. For example, nearly one-third (32.5%) has been homeless or couch surfed, over one-third (36.8%) received food stamps at age 23 or 24, and 17 percent report recent symptoms of PTSD. We refer to this group as Accelerated Adults because its members are the most likely to have successfully made key transitions (e.g., living independently, beginning to raise children, completing their secondary education) during early adulthood. Their responses to questions about how they have experienced the transition to

Table 1 Profiles of the Latent Classes on Classification Variables (N=584 of 602; 3.0% missing)					
	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	Totals
Proportion of Sample	36.3	25.2	21.1	17.5	100.0
Living arrangement					
Average moves with own place	83.5	45.6	0.0	0.0	41.8
Average moves with relatives, friends, or other	0.0	44.2	100.0	28.4	37.2
High moves or jail, treatment, motel, or homeless	16.5	10.2	0.0	71.6	21.1
Educational attainment					
Less than HS degree	1.9	44.2	8.9	40.2	20.7
HS degree	43.9	52.4	45.5	49.0	47.3
Some college	42.0	3.4	37.4	10.8	25.9
AA degree or more	12.3	0.0	8.1	0.0	6.2
Currently employed					
Yes	74.5	25.2	63.4	9.8	48.5
No	25.5	74.8	36.6	90.2	51.5
Children					
None	48.1	2.0	73.2	52.0	42.5
Non resident	5.7	7.5	18.7	48.0	16.3
Resident	46.2	90.5	8.1	0.0	41.3
Convicted since leaving care					
No	86.3	85.7	94.3	17.6	75.9
Yes	13.7	14.3	5.7	82.4	24.1
N					
	212	147	123	102	584

adulthood so far provide some confirmation for our assessment; this group is most likely to report that they feel they have had to “grow up” faster and “take on adult responsibilities” faster than their peers.

Class 2, making up about one-quarter of the Midwest Study sample at age 23 or 24 ($n = 147$; 25.2% of the sample), we refer to as *Struggling Parents*. Nearly three-quarters are female. Members of this class are more likely to be African American and less likely to be white than the sample as a whole. All but 2 percent of this group have a least one living child, nearly all have resident children, and relatively few have a nonresident child. This group is also the most likely to be married or cohabiting. About equal numbers have their own place or live with relatives, friends, or others. This group is the least likely to have finished high school, the least likely to have attended college, and the least likely to be currently enrolled in school. Only one-quarter is currently employed, the lowest rate of employment among the groups without a high level of institutionalization. Their rate of criminal conviction is similar to that of the *Accelerated Adults*. This group is the most likely to receive need-based government benefits (e.g., 70.7% received food stamps). It also reports the lowest levels of social support among the groups without a high level of institutionalization. We refer to this group as *Struggling Parents* because it appears that their experience is dominated by their parenting, often under very difficult circumstances.

Class 3, making up about one-fifth of the former foster youth ($n = 123$; 21.1% of the sample), we refer to as *Emerging Adults*. Slightly over half of this group is male. All are living with friends, relatives, or in other settings that are not their own. The vast majority have finished high school and they have the second-highest rate of having at least some college. They also have the second-highest rate of current employment. They are least likely to have children (27%) and over two-thirds of those with children have nonresident children. This group has the lowest rate of criminal conviction.

In addition, they are least likely to have ever been married and the least likely to have ever been homeless or couch surfed. We refer to this group as *Emerging Adults* because we believe that they most clearly exhibit the characteristics of the young people about whom the developmental scholar Jeffrey Arnett (2000) coined the term. Taking into account demographic changes in Western societies that have seen young people becoming independent of their families later in life, Arnett’s theory describes emerging adulthood as a developmental period that allows young people a prolonged period of independent role exploration during their late teens and twenties. We see our *Emerging Adults* as most resembling Arnett’s description in that they are delaying some transition markers (e.g., living on their own, finishing school, having children) while generally avoiding hardship. Consistent with this view, the *Emerging Adults* are less likely than the *Accelerated Adults* or *Struggling Parents* to see themselves as growing up faster or taking on adult responsibilities faster than their peers.

Class 4, making up a bit less than one-fifth of the Midwest Study population at age 23 or 24 ($n = 102$; 17.5% of the sample), we refer to as *Troubled and Troubling*. The vast majority of this group is male. They are the most likely group by far to be currently incarcerated, otherwise institutionalized, homeless, and/or to have experienced high residential mobility. Two-fifths have not finished high school and only about one-tenth have any college. This group is least likely to be currently employed. Although nearly half have children, none are living with their children. Over four-fifths report a criminal conviction since age 18, a rate over five times that of any other group. In addition, this group is least likely to have felt prepared to be on their own at exit from care, most likely to report mental health and/or substance use problems, and most likely to have been homeless or couch surfed. This group also reports the lowest levels of social support and highest rate of victimization compared to the other groups. We refer to this group as *Troubled and Troubling* because

it exhibits a wide range of psychosocial problems and poses challenges to the broader community.

Discussion and Implications

Using latent class analysis, we identified four distinct classes of young people making the transition to adulthood from foster care. Before describing potential implications of our findings for social policy and practice, it is important to take into account some of the limitations of our analyses. First, although the measures we used to identify the latent classes all make sense as indicators of the transition to adulthood, they are not the only indicators that we could have used, and latent class analysis is sensitive to the indicators used to identify underlying patterns within a population. We experimented with different ways of measuring the transition domains of interest and found that our results, while somewhat sensitive to how we measured things, generally confirmed the presence of subgroups similar to those we report here. Nevertheless, an analysis based on other indicators of the transition to adulthood might turn up different results.

Second, our analyses are based on the experiences of young people who have all aged out of the foster care system and are now 23 to 24 years old, potentially calling into question the relevance of our findings to policies and practices directed towards young people who are 21 or younger. We recognize this potential limitation. However, we used data collected from the young people participating in the Midwest Study at 23 or 24 because they provide the first comprehensive look at how former foster youth are faring during their early 20s. The success of child welfare policy should to some extent be judged by its lasting impact on those it is intended to serve. Moreover, the characteristics that we used as indicators to identify the latent classes reflect experiences that accumulated over time and are therefore subject to the influence of child welfare policy and practice. Finally, since states can use ETV

funds to support education of former foster youth to age 23, it is important to know how former foster youth are faring at that age.

We believe that the four distinct subgroups of former foster youth we identified indicate that older adolescents and young adults involved with the child welfare system need more targeted policy and practice. The largest group we identified, *Accelerated Adults*, appears to be faring reasonably well for the most part, but has had to grow up fast. They are mostly living on their own, employed, and parenting their children if they have any. They have generally avoided the criminal justice system, have a high school degree, and some are continuing their education. The size of this group and its level of success in negotiating the transition to adulthood should dispel any notion that former foster youth are doomed to failure as adults. However, the fact that some still suffer economically suggests that they need access to concrete assistance from time to time. In addition, this group might benefit from support in continuing their education, including childcare, given how many of them are parenting. The Fostering Connections Act provisions allowing young people to remain in care past age 18, combined with the availability of education support including the ETV program, would appear to provide a policy framework to support effective social work practice with this group.

The size of the *Struggling Parents* group and the magnitude of their need across many dimensions call for serious attention to the needs of current and former foster youth who are parents. Indeed, 50.6 percent of the young women in the Midwest Study are living with at least one child by age 21 and 61.7 percent are doing so by age 23 or 24, demonstrating that parenting is not just an issue for *Struggling Parents* (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010). In addition to childcare and other support raising their children, the *Struggling Parents* need help acquiring and maintaining employment and continuing their

education. Educational support is particularly important given that only a bit more than half of them have even a high school degree, making it unlikely they will be able to obtain employment that will allow them to support their families. The absence of any mention in the Fostering Connections Act of parenting foster youth seems to be a significant omission. Unless states make a serious effort to design programs especially for this group, it seems likely that many *Struggling Parents* will find it difficult to meet the employment or education requirements of the law and may be forced out of care well before their 21st birthday.

The *Emerging Adults* class indicates that some former foster youth appear to be able to take advantage of their young adult years to engage in the kind of exploration that is typical of many young adults. They are generally employed or in school, have avoided trouble, are very likely to be relying on family for a place to live and other forms of support, and are relatively unlikely to be encumbered by the responsibilities associated with parenting. The Fostering Connections Act provisions allowing young people to remain in care past age 18 seem generally appropriate for this group, as long as states are able to be flexible in supporting young people who live with their family from time to time after age 18. Licensing regulations regarding kinship foster care past age 18 could have significant implications for this group. This group highlights the need for child welfare agencies to understand that, in many cases, they are actually engaged in co-parenting with a young person's family of origin (Courtney, 2009). How the federal government and states define a supervised independent living setting is also likely to have important implications for this group.

Our study findings suggest that almost one-fifth of foster youth making the transition to adulthood, the *Troubled and Troubling* group, likely needs significant help, perhaps for many years, managing a range of challenges. They are likely to suffer from mental and behavioral health problems, to have acquired

limited human capital, to have children who they are not actively parenting, and to be periodically if not chronically involved with the criminal justice system. The last two challenges in particular speak to the likelihood that the communities in which these young people live will see them as troubling. Clearly, greater success at addressing mental and behavioral health problems of adolescents in foster care could reduce the size of this young adult population. How *medical condition* is defined by regulation will have much to do with whether these young people are excluded from foster care after 18, as they are unlikely to be able to continuously meet the employment or education requirements for eligibility under the new law.

Finally, one clear policy and practice implication of our findings is the need for the child welfare system to be able to collaborate with and rely on other public institutions in carrying out its new mission of continuing to parent foster youth into young adulthood. These young people have significant needs in the areas of education, employment, parenting, health, and behavior. While the child welfare system should be held accountable for attending to these needs, it should not try to reinvent the wheel in doing so by creating new services where other public institutions already have expertise and infrastructure. At the same time, these other institutions should be held accountable for playing their part in the “corporate parenting” of current and former foster youth (Courtney 2009; Pokempner & Courtney, 2008).

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Recommended Citation

Courtney, M. E., Hook, J. L., & Lee, J. S. (2010) *Distinct Subgroups of Former Foster Youth during the Transition to Adulthood: Implications for Policy and Practice*. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

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