

Programs and Services to help Foster Care Leavers during their Transition to Adulthood: A Study Comparing Chicago (Illinois) to Barcelona (Catalonia)

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SUMMARY

1. Introduction

The transition to adulthood in postindustrial societies has become increasingly complex in recent decades due to the high cost of living and high rates of youth unemployment. This transition can be particularly challenging for those in foster care. Many studies show that low educational levels, unemployment, job instability, poverty, lack of housing, teenage motherhood, and delinquency are common problems among youth in foster care in the United States (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006a, 2006b; Courtney et al., 2007a; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 1998, 2001; Courtney, Dworsky, Keller, Havlicek & Bost, 2005; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Hughes et al., 2008) and in Catalonia (Montserrat, Casas, Malo, & Bertran, 2011; Oriol, Sala-Roca, & Filella, 2015; Sala Roca, Jariot Garcia, Villalba Biarnes, & Rodríguez, 2009; Sala Roca, Villalba Biarnes, Jariot Garcia, & Rodríguez, 2009; Sala-Roca, Villalba Biarnes, Jariot Garcia, & Arnau Sabates, 2012; Zarate, Sala, & Arnau, 2013).

Despite differences in the number of youth in foster homes with families or residential care and the role that the juvenile courts play in the supervision of those youth, both cities (Barcelona and Chicago) have a range of programs and services aimed at helping youth when they reach 18 and begin their transition to adulthood. This study compares the transitional programs and services available to foster youth in Chicago (Illinois) with those available to foster youth in Barcelona (Catalonia). It is intended to highlight the respective strengths and weaknesses of each system and provide guidance to practitioners, researchers, and policymakers.

2. Methods

A variety of methods were used to gather information about the transitional services in both jurisdictions. These included a document review of statutes, regulations and procedures, research and evaluation reports, and websites; an analysis of secondary data on foster care populations; and exploratory qualitative child welfare professionals. Interviews were conducted with 20 professionals from service-providing agencies (nine in Chicago and eleven in Barcelona), four staff members of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), one person from the Office of the Cook County Public Guardian in Chicago and two people from the Direcció General d'Atenció a la Infància i Adolescència (DGAIA, the Catalan Children Welfare Department) in Barcelona. The purpose of the interviews was to better understand transition services and programs from the perspective of professionals involved in service provision. Among the topics covered were types and aims of transition services and programs, youth characteristics and eligibility criteria, types of staff and their qualifications, data on youth outcomes and program effectiveness, and program strengths and challenges.

3. Summary of Results

3.1. Approaches to Emancipation

In the United States, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 gives states the option to extend federally funded foster care from 18 to 21 years old. Illinois is one of 21 states that has taken advantage of this option. To be eligible for federally funded foster care, youth aged 18 and older must be in school, working, preparing for employment,

or have a disability. However, in Illinois, and especially in the Cook County, juvenile courts may keep a youth's case open until they are 21, even if the youth does not meet the eligibility requirements, if doing so would be in the youth's best interest.

The benefits of allowing youth to remain under the care and supervision of child welfare system beyond age 18 were demonstrated by the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Midwest Study). This longitudinal study of young people transitioning to adulthood in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin found that those who remained in care until age 21 tended to have better outcomes, including higher rates of postsecondary enrollment, higher rates of employment, and lower rates of incarceration, than those who left care at age 18 (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006a, 2006b; Courtney et al., 2007a; 2007b; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). For that reason, extended care could benefit the government in terms of long-term cost reduction (Peters, Dworsky, Courtney, & Pollack, 2009).

In Catalonia, the Law of the Rights and Opportunities of Children and Adolescents (LDOIA), established that youth are discharged from foster care at age 18, although some youth, especially those with less resources or family support, are able to access services until age 21. Each program has specific requirements that youth must meet to remain eligible, such as following an individual case plan agreed upon with their social educator or being involved in either work or training.

Even though the child welfare systems in both the Catalonia and Illinois jurisdictions aim to help youth in foster care with the transition to adulthood, they do so from different perspectives. In Catalonia, the main aim is to promote autonomy. As soon as a youth reaches 18, they are considered a young adult and are expected to follow their case plan and abide by program rules. However, youth do not always demonstrate the level of autonomy that is expected and, consequently, lose access to services. For example, Montserrat, Casas, and Sisteró (2015) found that more than half of the youth in a housing program violated their living arrangement contract.

In contrast, although autonomy is promoted, the priority in Illinois is protection. Youth in Illinois are seen as adolescents who are not mature enough to assume the responsibility of looking after themselves, due not only to their age but also to the trauma they have experienced. For this reason, youth do not lose access to services even if they do not follow the rules or adhere to their case plan. For example, a placement alternative contract can be made to place youth who are not able to adapt to a transitional living program with an adult caregiver who can provide supervision.

3.2. Transition Services and Programs

These differences in approaches to working with older foster youth lead to different services and programs. For instance, in Catalonia, the housing program has three residences with 24/7 on-site supervision for less autonomous youth, but the majority of youth over age 18 live in 3- or 4-bedroom apartments supervised by a social educator who visits twice a week. Youth in the housing program are expected to pay for their living expenses, including rent and food, with their monthly emancipation payment or the PIMRI, a subsidy for the general low-income population. This expectation is set to help youth become aware of the cost of living and learn how to manage their own money.

Some youth in Illinois remain with a relative or a nonrelative foster family until age 21. Others prefer to move into a transitional or independent living program. Youth in transitional living programs (TLPs) share an apartment with a roommate and are supervised 24/7 by on-site staff. DCFS pays the agency that manages the TLP to house the youth so they do not pay rent. Youth in independent living programs (ILOs) live in their own apartments in the community and are expected to assume increasing responsibility for their rent and other living expenses.

Youth in Illinois are also eligible for a one-time emancipation payment of up to \$1,200 through a program called Countdown to 21. To be eligible, youth must complete a financial literacy course and develop a transition plan.

Another example of a difference between these two approaches is the availability of services and other resources specifically for youth in foster care. In Barcelona, there are no specialized programs for young people once they reach age 18. Instead, they are referred to community-based services that are available to the general public and to at-risk youth. This approach is thought to promote normalization by helping youth become part of the community and increasing their familiarity with services they may need, not just during their transition to adulthood, but also throughout their adult life.

Although foster youth in Chicago may use services based in the community, child welfare agencies often develop specialized employment or other programs exclusively for 18-to 21-year-olds in care. This reflects a belief that many community-based programs, including programs for at-risk youth, do not address the unique needs of this population. There are also agencies that specialize in serving particularly challenging subgroups of youth, such as those with criminal records, those with serious mental illness, or those who have exhibited problematic sexual behaviors.

Finally, although child welfare professionals in Chicago and Barcelona face similar problems, such as a

lack of commitment on the part of some youths to follow their case plan, their approach to solving those problems are quite different. In Barcelona, the focus is on motivating youth to work on their case plan and learning contract through tutorials. In Chicago, the strategy is to provide youth with services tailored to meet their needs

3.3. Staff Involved

The type of staff who provide services to current and former foster youth is another important difference between Chicago and Barcelona. In Catalonia, the social educator, who has a degree in social education, is typically the only professional involved with transitional housing services and foster group homes for children under 18. Social educators help youth develop living and financial management skills, provide supervision, and assist youth with the design of their individualized education plan. Serving these multiple roles gives the social educator an opportunity to develop a trusting relationship with the youth. However, this model does not allow for a multidisciplinary approach.

By contrast, in Illinois the range of professionals who work with youth in transitional living programs tends to be more diverse. On the one hand, the 24/7 on-site support staff who help youth learn skills and provide supervision are not required to have more than a high school diploma or specialized training on how to work with youth. This may help explain the high rate of staff turnover and the difficulty staff have building trusting relationships with some youth. On the other hand, caseworkers who are only required to visit youth twice per month are responsible for reviewing transition or discharge plans, monitoring progress, and ensuring that educational, personal, and social needs are being met. These professionals must have a degree in social work or another related field. In some cases, other professionals, such as psychologists, vocational support workers, and art therapists, may be part of multidisciplinary teams that provide the basis for more innovative and intensive interventions.

3.4. Youth Voice

Another difference between the two approaches is the opportunity for youths to make their voices heard. In Illinois, youths are organized in seven regional Youth Advisory Boards (YAB) and one statewide YAB that provides the DCFS director with suggestions to address their problems and needs. These YABs help youth build their decision-making, leadership, and communication skills. Catalonia has no advisory boards for youths in foster care. Although residential centers have regular assemblies for all the youths and staff as part of their internal dynamics, their purpose is

not to discuss general questions related to services and policies.

3.5. Evaluation and Research

There is a more extensive and consolidated culture of evaluation in Illinois than in Catalonia. This is reflected in the implementation of Performance Based Contracting (PBC) (Kearney, McEwen, Bloom-Ellis, & Jordan, 2010), which uses objective indicators to evaluate whether the private child welfare agencies are achieving benchmarks set by DCFS. DCFS has contracts with a number of universities and research centers throughout the state to conduct evaluations. In fact, the federal government funds long-term demonstration projects to evaluate “promising” programs, some lasting up to five years, with the intent of identifying best practices that can potentially be implemented nationwide

Equally important, Illinois was one of three states that participated in the Midwest Study carried out by Mark Courtney’s research team (<http://www.chapinhall.org/research/report/midwest-evaluation-adult-functioning-former-foster-youth>). In Catalonia, this culture of evaluation is still in its infancy, although professionals and the DGAIA are aware of the need for longitudinal studies on care leavers.

3.6. Beyond 21: What happens the “day after?”

Although the approach in Illinois is more protective while youth are still in care, this protection ends abruptly at 21, when youth in need of ongoing assistance must apply for public aid from programs for the general population of low-income individuals and families. However, former foster youth are eligible for health insurance coverage, in the form of Medicaid, until they are 26. Those pursuing postsecondary education or training are also eligible for up to \$5,000 in assistance per year to help pay the costs of attending school until they are 23 years old. In this sense, the contrast between what youth experience while they are in care and what they experience after they leave may be more dramatic in Illinois than in Catalonia where the adult welfare system offers more protective services than in the United States.

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