

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



Will I Make It on My Own? Voices and Visions of 17-Year-Old Youth in Transition

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Foster care, independent living, child welfare, life transition

POPULATION GROUP

Youth in and leaving care

STEPPING UP THEMES

Strong, Supportive Friends & Families;
Education, Training & Apprenticeships

RESEARCH ORIGIN

United States

SOURCE

Academic Article (peer reviewed)

“By engaging and empowering youth in the process of research, youth radically learn that their voices can create effective change in policy and programming and ultimately function as the impetus that transforms their lives and the lives of the youth whom we serve.”

1. What is the research about?

The transition from adolescence to adulthood includes many emotional, physical and cognitive changes. For youth who are transitioning out of foster care, the changes and challenges are often even greater. For many of these youth, this period is marked by additional challenges often related to navigating education systems, securing stable employment and housing, and maintaining positive and close relationships. It is important to understand the needs of these youth, so they are equipped to live independently and are able to thrive despite the challenges they face.

This research was conducted to better understand the experience of youth transitioning out of foster care. Specifically, the researchers wanted to gain a better understanding of how youth experience transitions related to housing, education and employment.

2. Where did the research take place?

This study took place in the United States; it does not specify the location of the research participants.

3. Who is this research about?

108 females and 90 males participated in this study. All of the youth were 17 years old and in foster care, about to transition out. Of the participants, 44% were Caucasian and 51% were African American.

4. How was the research done?

This was a 5-year longitudinal mixed method study. The first phase of research took place over a year from October 1, 2010 to September 30, 2011. The survey “Voices and Visions of Youth in Transition” examined nine critical areas relating to transitions and included closed and open questions. Surveys were sent to the participating youth by way of phone, mail or Internet based on their preference. The researchers plan to follow-up with respondents annually at four subsequent points in time.

5. What are the key findings?

- **Secondary School:** The study found that most youth identified needing personal habits and skills (motivation, good grades), adequate resources, social support and transportation to finish high school.

- **Employment:** 95% of youth reported having neither a full-time or part-time job. When asked about barriers to employment they identified needing transportation, resources, access to computer, guidance and a home to be successful.
- **Shelter:** One in every 5 youth reported that they had experienced homelessness at one point in their life. When asked about their housing needs most youth identified income, transportation and access to house listings as barriers to obtaining and sustaining stable housing.
- **Adult Supportive Relationships:** Ninety-one percent of youth reported having a close and trusting relationship with at least one adult whom they could approach for emotional support and guidance. Most often youth identified their birth parents as that support person. Second to birth parents, siblings and foster parents were also identified.
- **Transition Plans:** With respect to the transition plans, 60% of the youth did not know about their transition plan nor did they know how they could contribute to one. The majority of youth also identified that most of their concerns about transitioning out of care were with respect to being alone without the proper support and not being able to secure housing. Some youth also expressed concerns about having the skills to make it on their own, while others clearly stated that they were not ready to leave care.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

This research provides insight into the lived experience of youth transitioning from the foster care system to independent living. This research supports the need for intentional youth engagement in transition planning starting at the age of 17. It also provides a guide for youth workers to ensure they ask youth about their concerns regarding housing, finances, resources and relationships. Where youth identify support persons, youth workers should include those people in the transition plan and clearly outline how they will continue to support the youth once they are discharged from foster care.

Youth workers should engage youth in goal setting by asking what they want to accomplish in the next five years of their life and make the plan purposeful by supporting the youth's goals and aspirations. Youth should be given the opportunity to discuss their fears and anxieties and workers should be sensitive to those during planning. Most importantly, plans should be realistic and attainable for the youth, and all successes, no matter how small, should be acknowledged and celebrated.



Jones, T., Mitchell, M., Renema, S. (2015) Will I make it on my own? Voices and visions of 17 year-old youth in transition. *The Journal of Child Adolescent Social Work*, 32, 291-300. DOI 10.1007/s10560-014-0364-2