

Policy Brief

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Postsecondary Education Access among Young Parents Aging-Out of Foster Care

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Most young people in foster care aspire to go to college, [1] but for many, obtaining a college degree remains an unattainable goal. Research shows that less than half enroll in a postsecondary education program by age 25, and only a fraction of those who enroll successfully obtain a credential. [2] Early parenthood, which is exceedingly common among youth in foster care, [3] may be a barrier to pursuing postsecondary education. In recent years, there has been significant momentum behind policy solutions that improve college access and success, like College Promise programs which make college tuition and fee-free and leverage wraparound student support. However, the challenges that early parenthood presents to young people in foster care with aspirations for postsecondary education have largely

been absent from policy discussions. This omission is concerning because postsecondary education has become increasingly essential to economic security and upward mobility in the United States, both of which are critical for young parents in foster care.

This brief draws attention to this issue by examining the disparity in access to postsecondary education between young parents in foster care and their non-parent peers using data collected from a large, national sample. It also offers recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and educational advocates. As Promise programs continue gaining traction at the local and state level, it is essential that policy solutions be built with the unique needs of different student groups in mind in order to advance equitable educational attainment. These recommendations are designed to provide young parents in foster care with the services and supports they need to successfully enroll in and complete postsecondary education programs.

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Svetlana Shpiegel is an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work and Child Advocacy at Montclair State University, New Jersey. Her research focuses on the functioning of adolescents and young adults aging-out of the foster care system. She is particularly interested in early pregnancy and parenthood among current and former foster youth, and the effects of parenthood on their socioeconomic outcomes. Dr. Shpiegel has expertise working with large administrative datasets, such as the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), and the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS).

Background

Many young people in foster care become parents at an early age. [4] Approximately 20% of young women and 10% of young men in foster care have given birth to or fathered a child by age 19 [5, 6]. By age 21, those figures are 40% and 20%, respectively. [4, 7]. The demands of parenthood, especially in the early years of a child's life, may preclude young people from pursuing and completing postsecondary education programs. For young parents, the demands of caring for a child may be exacerbated by the challenges associated with making the transition from being in foster care to living on their own. Indeed, studies of youth aging out of foster care have found that young parents are less likely than their non-parent peers to enroll in college [8, 9, 10]. Additionally, parenting responsibilities are a common reason for dropping out of college among this population [11]. At the same time, young parents in foster care are often motivated to pursue a college education to improve their own and their children's futures [12, 13].

Although prior research shows that young parents in foster care are less likely than their non-parent peers to enroll in college, none of these studies focused specifically on that disparity or on the actions needed to ensure that early parenthood is not a major barrier to postsecondary education. The research we describe here is one of the first studies investigating access to postsecondary education among young parents who have experienced foster care using data from a national sample.

Research Overview

We analyzed data from the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), a national database that the Administration for Children and Families was required to create by the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. NYTD tracks the independent living services provided to young people in foster care and the outcomes of youth who are eligible for those services.[14] These outcomes, which include educational attainment and early parenthood, are measured using survey data that states are required to collect from young people who are or were in foster care at ages 17, 19, and 21. Our sample consisted of the 6,462 young people (3,669 females and 2,793 males) in the 2014 NYTD cohort, who completed the baseline survey at age 17 and two follow-up surveys at ages 19 and 21.

At age 21, 29% of these young people reported being enrolled in a postsecondary education program or having a postsecondary credential. However, this percentage was considerably lower for young people who had given birth to or fathered a child by age 21 than for their non-parent peers (19% and 33% respectively). This difference cannot be explained by gender differences in access to postsecondary education. Although the percentage of young women who reported giving birth by age 21 was twice as high as the percentage of young men who reported fathering a child (38% compared to 17%), the percentage of young women who reported being enrolled in a postsecondary education program or having a postsecondary credential was higher than the percentage of young men (33% compared to 25%).



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Finally, young parents who were still in foster care at age 19 were more likely to report being enrolled in a postsecondary education program or having a postsecondary credential at age 21 than young parents who had already exited the child welfare system (26% compared to 16%). However, they were less likely to report being enrolled in a postsecondary education program or having a postsecondary credential than non-parents regardless of whether those non-parents were still in foster care or not (38% and 30%, respectively).

Implications and Policy/Practice Recommendations

These disparities in access to postsecondary education between young parents in foster care and their non-parent peers can probably be attributed to a combination of factors including the demands of caring for young children, particularly in the absence of high quality, affordable childcare, and the need to prioritize employment over education to ensure that basic needs are being met. Given that postsecondary education has been shown to increase both employment and earnings among young people who experienced foster care, [15] the observed disparities in access to postsecondary education may have a lasting impact in the form of lower earnings and increased dependence on public assistance. Additionally, studies have indicated that parental educational attainment can have a significant indirect effect on a child's educational success [16], so these disparities could contribute to multi-generational negative impacts.

Increasing access to postsecondary education among young parents who have experienced foster care will require a concerted effort on the part of practitioners, policymakers, and educational advocates. These efforts should include:

- **Providing adequate financial supports**

In the absence of substantial financial assistance, young parents who have experienced foster care may decide to forgo their educational plans and enter the workforce. This financial assistance should cover their tuition and fees as well as their daily expenses, such as housing and childcare. It should also consist primarily of grants rather than loans so as not to burden these parents with a lot of student debt. Moreover, because certain sources of financial aid may be easier to access while students are still in care (e.g., independent living stipends, Education Training Vouchers), these parents should be encouraged to remain in foster care for as long as they are able.

- **Providing adequate childcare assistance**

Young parents who have experienced foster care need help paying for childcare, but childcare assistance payments may not fully cover the cost. Childcare assistance programs should consider increasing the subsidy that these parents are eligible to receive so that they are not required to work more than 15 hours per week while attending school, which could jeopardize their academic success. [17]



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- **Providing access to high quality childcare**
 Childcare slots in campus-based or campus-adjacent childcare centers are often highly coveted and waitlists can be long. A number of those slots could be set aside for young parents who have experienced foster care.
- **Providing access to campus-based family housing or other housing supports**
 Safe, stable, and affordable housing is essential if foster youth are able to pursue postsecondary education. The consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 waives the 30% limitation states can draw down to support older youth with housing under Chafee Foster Care Independence Act. Using this resource to increase the capacity of institutions of higher education to offer campus-based housing, where these students can live year-round can substantially increase their ability to attend four-year colleges and universities. Additionally, these COVID resources could also be used to provide housing subsidies through the Family Unification Program (FUP) or the Housing Choice Voucher program for off-campus housing which would help students with foster care histories attend two-year colleges and technical schools.
- **Redesigning campus support programs**
 Campus support programs provide wraparound supports to address the needs of students who have experienced foster care. However, these programs generally do not address the unique needs of students who are parenting. Moving forward, these programs should consider how they might address parenting-related needs and reach out to young parents who have experienced foster care about the availability of those supports.
- **Extending foster care to age 21**
 Since 2010, states have had the option to extended federally funded foster care from age 18 to age 21 under the Fostering Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, and more than half the states have thus far exercised this option. [18] Given that access to postsecondary education was higher among young parents who were still in foster care at age 19 than among those who had already exited, states that have not extended foster care to age 21 should consider doing so.

Conclusion

Young parents who have experienced foster care are less likely to access postsecondary education programs than their non-parent peers. If these young parents are to pursue postsecondary education, they will need a range of supports including adequate financial assistance, safe and affordable housing, and high quality childcare. Although such supports require a significant financial investment on the part of the state and the federal governments, research suggests that the returns on those investments are likely to be substantial. As policies like College Promise continue to spread across the country, the incorporation of targeted support services like these could have significant positive impacts on educational outcomes for vulnerable students.

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