

Special Foreword

Twenty Years after the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 ('Chafee'): What We Know Now About Meeting the Needs of Teens and Young Adults

This two-volume special issue of *Child Welfare* is dedicated to honoring the 20th anniversary of the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L. 106–169), designated as the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP, commonly referred to as “Chafee”). Chafee was the first *federal* child welfare legislation to focus on teens transitioning from foster care. This landmark legislation has given rise to many innovative services and supports for teens who are preparing for or are involved with transitioning from foster care.

The Chafee legislation completely replaced the former Independent Living Initiatives (from 1986, funded as part of Title IV-E in the Social Security Act) and designated a number of modifications to Independent Living (IL) services for youth in foster care. Specific improvements included increasing the federal allocation of monies for IL services by revamping the distribution of funds according to the proportion of youth in states’ foster caseloads, which essentially doubled the federal allocation that existed under the IL Initiatives. Moreover, Chafee mandated youth involvement and voice in designing their IL services and expanded eligibility criteria of youth who could be served by Chafee-funded programs (Congressional Research Service, 2008; National Foster Care Awareness Project, 2000). For example, Chafee provided states the option to expand the age range of initiating IL services to foster youth at a much younger age—14 years old—instead of initiating services at age 16. Second, states could opt to serve youth who may have left foster care prior to turning age 18, including youth who have not technically “aged out” of the system. In other words, youth from foster

care do not have to technically “age out” of the child welfare system to qualify for services in early adulthood. Third, states could opt to use a portion of their Chafee funds to provide resources and benefits to foster care alumni up to age 21 (e.g., Medicaid coverage, housing assistance). Thus, by moving away from the narrow age range of 16–18 years for receipt of services, as determined by the Independent Living Initiatives of 1986, Chafee encompasses a broad perspective of this youth population and that preparation for aging out requires advanced and ongoing provision of services and supports (National Foster Care Awareness Project, 2000; Simmel, Shpiegel, & Murshid, 2013). These Chafee mandates reflect an awareness that adolescent development extends into young adulthood and the belief that teens’ needs do not automatically subside at age 18.

Much progress has been made in the past two decades to rigorously identify evidence-based strategies for addressing the needs, strengths, and challenges of this vulnerable youth population. At least some of this work can be partially attributable to Chafee. Relatedly, the Chafee legislation was noteworthy for mandating a rigorous evaluation of exemplary IL programs, in 2001–2010, around the country to determine the efficacy of their services on short- and long-term outcomes for teens from foster care (National Foster Care Awareness Project, 2000). More about this research effort can be viewed at the Administration for Children and Families website: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/multi-site-evaluation-of-foster-youth-programs-chafee-independent-living>.

In all, Chafee was instrumental in highlighting the unique developmental circumstances of teens involved with foster care, and that their child welfare entry, involvement, and trajectories were (and continue to be) markedly distinct from those of infants and toddlers involved with the system. Chafee was passed at a time when little was understood about adolescent neurobiological and socio-behavioral development and few interventions existed that focused on the distinct developmental needs specifically regarding teens involved in foster care. In recent years, however, research has prioritized developing a deeper understanding of myriad aspects of teens’ developmental maturation

processes, and the challenges many child-serving systems face in addressing this developmental stage. This complexity was recently critically and comprehensively discussed in the 2019 National Academy of Sciences report entitled *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for all Youth*.

While the passage of Chafee can be lauded as a landmark policy achievement for youth from foster care, the 20-year anniversary also provides an opportunity to examine the progress the child welfare community has made since Chafee, as well as the challenges that need to be addressed. It can be argued that Chafee was premised on the presumption that for many teens, emancipation from foster care was their only likely outcome. Yet, at present, teens account for about 25% of the general population, but make up more than 34% of individuals in foster care (AFCARS, 2017). This represents an issue of disproportionality and denotes a population at risk while *currently involved* with the child welfare system, not just when they age out. The lack of real permanency, both legal and relational, is associated with the multiple risks that young people face as they transition from foster care. Research conducted both before and after the passage of Chafee has documented the experiences and circumstances of youth who transition out of the child welfare system (Barth, 1990; Collins, 2004; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesbitt, 2001). Exiting care is frequently a problematic period for youth, as many depart the child welfare system ill-prepared for life on their own, devoid of family and other environmental supports to assist them. Moreover, teens currently involved with foster care face a number of mental health, educational, vocational, interpersonal, and health related challenges (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017; Hambrick, Oppenheim-Weller, N'zi, & Taussig, 2016; Oshima, Narendorf, & McMillen, 2013; Simmel, 2012; Simmel, Shpiegel, & Murshid, 2013). Finally, the current understanding of racial disproportionality and disparity is challenging the field to grapple with other seemingly immutable issues.

This collaboration with the Child Welfare League of America represents a chance to collectively reflect on the progress that the child

welfare community has made in the past two decades as well as a challenge to reexamine presumptions about the developmental needs of teens and improve their opportunities as they transition into adulthood.

In this two-volume special issue, our goal is to feature research and programmatic advances in services and supports for this population, as well as highlight how aspects of adolescent development figure prominently in enhancing the field's knowledge about teens who are involved with or are aging out of the child welfare system. This special issue conveys tremendous expansion by the child welfare research, policy, and practice communities toward improving our efforts on behalf of—and oftentimes alongside—this population of teens. And yet, we also know that many challenges remain in addressing programmatic and policy gaps for them as well as how research can be implemented to help fill these gaps.

The first volume of this special double issue focuses on the needs, challenges, and strengths of teens who are *primarily* currently involved with the child welfare system, on the cusp of aging out, or are reflecting back on how their time in foster care could have been improved. This volume also focuses on teens who were formerly involved with both child welfare and juvenile justice systems. This first volume closes with a section on enhancing research methods with this population as well as suggested next steps in the research agenda for the child welfare community. The second volume of this special double issue focuses *primarily* on the population of older teens and/or young adults (i.e., youth who are transition-aged, or “transition-aged youth”/TAY) as they are aging out of the foster care system. The articles in this second volume emphasize the developmental strengths and needs for this population as they navigate the transition into young adulthood.

In the first volume, the issue opens with a set of articles focusing on the importance of preventing teens' entry into out of home care and on how permanency is associated with adolescents' well-being. Taussig and colleagues, in the first article, describe a study utilizing experimental design to examine an intervention program for families of teens who are involved in the child welfare system. With a focus on permanency

outcomes as one measure of the program's efficacy, a critical component of the study is their use of a positive youth development framework in conceptualizing the program studied. Next is an article by Angelici, Dohn, and Clarkson Freeman, who describe the extent to which programmatic efforts in Delaware have been successful in preventing teens' entry into out of home care. Subsequently, Cabrera and colleagues present on a study of the impact of placement with family on youth well-being and legal permanency among a sample of youth who were in out-of-home care.

The next set of articles in this first volume emphasizes critical components of teens' well-being while in foster care. Clemens uses state child welfare and education administrative data to identify risk factors associated with dropping out of school for 7th–12th graders, illuminating several risk areas that could be targeted for early interventions for this population. Spinelli, Riley, St. Jean, Ellis, Bogard, and Kisiel use a qualitative approach to convey the results of their needs assessment work with service providers and youth aged 14–21 about supports and services needed while involved with foster care or while transitioning out of care. Mountz and colleagues describe the results of a qualitative study with youth formerly in foster care who are LGBTQ, who discussed their experiences about their lives before, during, and after foster care involvement in Los Angeles. Participants emphasized the structural obstacles they encountered while in care and as they navigated transitioning out of care, offering useful recommendations for addressing these and other challenges. In the next article, Hokanson, Golden, Singer, and Cosner Berzin discuss their results from a qualitative study with TAY who reflect on developmental constructs associated with adolescence—namely, independence and interdependence, and the role these constructs have in planning for aging out of care. This section concludes with an article by Moretti, O'Donnell, and Kelly, who describe an evaluation study of a program for foster caregivers of teens that utilizes an attachment-based and trauma-informed approach to addressing the care of teens with mental health and trauma-related difficulties.

The next two articles in Volume 1 center on teens who are “dual system”—those who were formerly involved with both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. This research project is a longitudinal project that began as the participants were involved with these child-serving systems, and then followed them into young adulthood. Saldana, Campbell, Leve, and Chamberlain describe the results of their longitudinal study that examines the long term economic implications of an alternative treatment program for this dually involved population. In a related study, Franz, Griffin, Saldana, and Leve describe the long-term trajectories of adolescent females as they transitioned out of these child-serving systems, and the influence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on the young women’s mental health.

Volume 1 closes with two articles that describe research methods with this teen population. First, Rosenberg, Kelley, Kelley, and Flannigan critically explore the strengths and limitations of using the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), a Chafee-mandated data collection effort for all states to track youth who had received at least one IL intervention while in care. In this article, the authors offer methodological strategies for addressing the complexity of this dataset (e.g., high attrition rates due to the unstable living circumstances of this young adult population). And, in a piece that was specifically invited for this special issue, Collins critically examines the state of research on teens involved with or who are transitioning out of the foster care system. She describes some of the successful trends and methods that have been employed in this line of research, as well as a useful blueprint for next steps that the research community may consider in making their research policy relevant.

In Volume 2 of this special issue, we open with an article that was specifically invited for this special issue by Poirier and colleagues from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, wherein the authors provide a comprehensive overview of adolescent development and of how the latest scientific developments in neurobiological science have had or could have an impact on child welfare programs and policies.

The next set of articles emphasizes the context for support and services needed at the time of transitioning out of care. In Perez and colleagues' article, they use NYTD data to examine subgroups of teens in foster care and the factors associated with the groups' service receipt at age 17. This is followed by an article by Leathers and colleagues, who use a mixed methods approach to examine perceptions of support during the transition period and the importance of youth involvement in the decision-making process.

Subsequently, this second volume presents a number of studies addressing the experiences of TAY, primarily focused on their navigation of young adult systems, settings, and environments. Mountz and colleagues utilized qualitative methods to examine the post-secondary educational experiences of TAY who identify as LGBTQ. Moreover, the participants offered insights about their experiences in the education while still involved with the foster care system, as well as the utility of campus-based supports while attending post-secondary institutions. The second article in this section is by Horn, who also presents a qualitative study on post-secondary educational outcomes for TAY. His article emphasizes the need for consistent and authentic mentoring for foster care alumni attending post-secondary institutions, as well as the role that stigma often plays for marginalized communities in higher education programs. The third article is by Salazar and colleagues, who describe their analysis of NYTD data to examine factors associated with engagement in post-secondary institutions for youth transitioning out of foster care. The fourth article in this cluster, by Katz and Geiger, utilizes qualitative methods to examine the mechanisms for accessing support and resources for youth attending post-secondary institutions. In the subsequent two articles, the focus shifts toward understanding critical components of how youth from foster care navigate developmental tasks of young adulthood. Brandon-Friedman and Fortenberry provide the results of their quantitative analysis of data related to the impact of ACEs and histories of childhood sexual abuse on their current sexual health and well-being. Finally, Cazares and Hernandez use

NYTD data to examine and comprehensively describe the vulnerable population of youth formerly in foster care who are currently homeless and who are also mothers.

The next set of articles in Volume 2 emphasizes positive attributes related to working with teens from foster care or advancements that TAY have made for themselves and/or on behalf of teens in the foster care system. Narendorf and colleagues describe the results of their qualitative examination of mentoring efforts for TAY. Hokasnon and colleagues also use qualitative methods to describe how resilience is understood and manifested by youth currently or formerly involved with child welfare. Subsequently, Augsberger and colleagues describe their qualitative study of youth engagement and of how youth currently or formerly involved with child welfare are engaged with policy advocacy on behalf of teens in foster care. Finally, Mishrasky and colleagues provide a comprehensive description of YouthThrive, a research-informed program model to support the well-being of teens in foster care and as they prepare to transition into young adulthood.

We close this special issue with an overview of the current context of federal child welfare policy and how pertinent legislation is rapidly evolving in their efforts to address the needs, strengths, and challenges of teens involved with foster care and who are in the process of transitioning from the system.

Ultimately, we hope that readers of this special issue will more fully appreciate the depth and breadth of research on this important topic and how researchers, advocates, and many other professionals continue to contribute to improving outcomes for all youth in and transitioning from foster care. We hope that this special issue will serve as a catalyst and call to action for another significant recommitment to this critical effort.

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