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Addressing Homelessness among
Youth Aging Out of Foster Care:
A Social Networks Approach

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Each year approximately 20,000 youth age out of the foster care system in the US – roughly 7% of those currently in care

The research is clear that there are negative outcomes for youth that are associated with aging out of foster care (e.g., *Stott & Gustavsson, 2010; Courtney, 2005*):

- Half who age out don't have a high school diploma
- Unemployment rates range from 25-50%
- Majority are in poverty and one-third receive government assistance
- One-third to one-half have been arrested and/or jailed
- One-quarter report substance abuse
- 30 - 75% have either been pregnant or the parent of a child
- **As many as 40% have experienced homelessness**

When a young person becomes homeless, they face much higher risk for many serious adverse outcomes, including:

– Trauma experiences and suicide attempts

– Physical and sexual victimization

– Commercial sexual exploitation and exposure to the drug trade

– Sexually transmitted diseases

– Gang involvement

– Early mortality

(McManus & Thompson, 2008; Rew, 2008; Stiffman, 1989; Yoder et al., 2003; Fisher & Wilson, 1995; Kurtz et al., 1991; Tyler et al., 2004; Thompson et al., 2001; Roy et al., 2004)

Nationally, about **30%** of homeless adults report foster care histories, compared to **4%** of the general public (*Dworsky et al., 2013, citing Harris, 2009*):

- **22%** of the Northwest Foster Care Alumni study were homeless for at least one day within a year of leaving care (*Pecora et al., 2006*)

- **36%** in Nevada (*Reilly, 2003*), **28%** in Maryland (*Daining & Depanfilis, 2007*), and **37% of FFY aged 19-20 in Massachusetts had been homeless at some point since age 18** (*Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010*)

- In California, **65% of emancipating foster youth lacked safe and affordable housing** (*California Department of Social Services, 2002*)
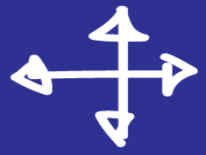
What leads to youth homelessness?

The reasons adolescents become homeless generally fall into three inter-related categories: **family problems** (e.g. abuse/neglect, substance issues, family conflict), **economic problems**, and **residential instability** *(National Coalition for the Homeless, 1999)*

- As with HRY in general, those in foster care may be **"pushed or thrown from the home because of family problems, such as family violence or substance abuse, family conflict, and disagreements with caretakers about adolescent behavior"** (*Johnson et al., 2005, citing Yoder et al., 2001*)
- LGBTQ youth and young adults are more likely to be "pushed or thrown" from their families and into the foster care and/or homeless and runaway youth systems because of their sexual or gender identity
  - http://nationalhomeless.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/LGBTQ-Homelessness.pdf

Importantly, when compared to youth with similar backgrounds (specifically race, poverty status, family risk, education, drug use, teen parenthood), **FFY were still more likely to experience homelessness**, housing instability, poor neighborhood quality, and reliance on public assistance (*Berzin, Rhodes, & Curtis, 2011*)

- Baseline data was gathered for 732 youth in foster care aged 16-17 in Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin for the *Midwest Evaluation of the Functioning of Former Foster Youth* ("the Midwest Study")

- At age 19 (*Dworsky & Courtney, 2009*), the risk of experiencing homelessness was higher for those who had:
  - Run away more than once while in care
  - Were in a group care setting at baseline (age 16-17)
  - Were physically abused before entering care
  - Engaged in more delinquent behaviors
  - Did not feel very close to a biological parent or grandparent

- A recent preview of a United Way report in King County, WA, found similar factors increasing risk of foster youth homelessness: multiple placements, frequent school changes, disrupted adoption, early parenting, African American (see http://crosscut.com/2015/01/united-way-report-foster-care-homelessness-kroman/)

24% of Midwest Study participants aged 23-24 had ever been homeless (*Courtney et al., 2011*), and **31%** had been homeless by age 26 (*Dworsky et al., 2013*) -- predictors of increased risk:

- running away while in foster care
- greater placement instability
- being male
- having a history of physical abuse
- engaging in more delinquent behaviors
- having symptoms of a mental health disorder

In a study in New York City, **19%** of former child welfare service users entered public shelters within 10 years of child welfare system exit (*Park, et al., 2004*):

- More likely (**22%**) to enter public shelters if they were in out-of-home placements, compared to preventative in-home services (11%)
- Highest if they ran away from child welfare (**34%**) or exited to independent living (**26%**), lower if they were reunified with family (19%)
- Each year of increase in age at exit is associated with a 31% increase of risk of homelessness

According to Park et al. (2004), there are two primary theories why foster youth are vulnerable to homelessness:

1. They are poorly prepared for independent living – they leave care without finishing school, having a job, or making living arrangements, and in many cases these arrangements are with relatives, who may be experiencing the unstable conditions that led to child welfare involvement in the first place
2. The experiences these youth have in their families of origin and in the child welfare system may make them more vulnerable to psychosocial problems that impact their ability to get and maintain stable housing

A third perspective we'll be working from today:

3. Child welfare involvement **uniquely hinders protective social network functions** that could alleviate some of the psychosocial (and other) impacts experienced by youth due to family of origin challenges and the experience of being in care

The networks of many older foster youth have been compromised:

– Disrupted family and community relationships

– Long-term placement and/or placement instability, group homes, residential treatment

– *Social network disruption* → sparse networks, disengagement from services, problem behaviors, poor social adjustment, fewer positive relationships, lower support capacity

Keller et al. (2007) identified two large subgroups of foster youth at age 17:

– **38%** - "Competent & Connected" - placement stability, felt they had many supportive relationships, and were experiencing success in education and employment

– **43%** - "Distressed & Disconnected" - placement instability, relatively low social support and service engagement, and few attachments to supportive adults

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Recent studies using a common measure of perceived social support don't provide much guidance for designing and delivering services:

- Social support is associated with well-being and life satisfaction, and foster youth feel supported "most of the time" on average (*Dinisman, et al., 2013; Dinisman, 2014*)
- Midwest Study youth consistently report feeling support is available "most of the time" (*Courtney et al., 2011*), even in "Distressed & Disconnected" group (*Keller et al., 2007*)
- Mixed findings of support in predicting outcomes (*Cusick et al., 2012; Salazar et al., 2011*)

Alternatively, Greeson et al. (2015) asked youth how many people they had providing different kinds of support, and found that support declined over time for all study youth (regardless of other factors), and was not influenced by participation in a life-skills ILP

So how can we think about social support as a social network function that can be facilitated?

Innovative approach for understanding the context of support provision:

– Different from measuring perceived social support

– Systematically measures the direct and indirect ties between an identified set of people

– Personal network analysis focuses on <u>one</u> person and their relationships

Social network methods can be used to identify:

– *Structural patterns* – network size and interconnectedness (**density**)

– *Compositional patterns* – **range** of member attributes or **diversity** of social roles

– *Relational characteristics* – **strength** of network ties (e.g., frequency, closeness, and duration) and the content of the interaction (e.g., types of social support)

The Connections Project (TCP) at New Avenues for Youth (Portland, OR)

– Designed based on a social network perspective

– "the network is the client"

– Focused on building two kinds of social capital

- **Bonding capital** – strong and interconnected long-term relationships providing everyday emotional and concrete support (aka, permanency, "family")

- **Bridging capital** – less close, shorter-term, instrumental connections often providing informational support as needed

– Intervention begins and ends with network assessment

- Did activities add new connections? Maintain and/or strengthen existing connections? Create new inter-connections among members?

Network mapping is a simple method to capture network size, composition, and interconnectedness (see Blakeslee, 2012; 2015)
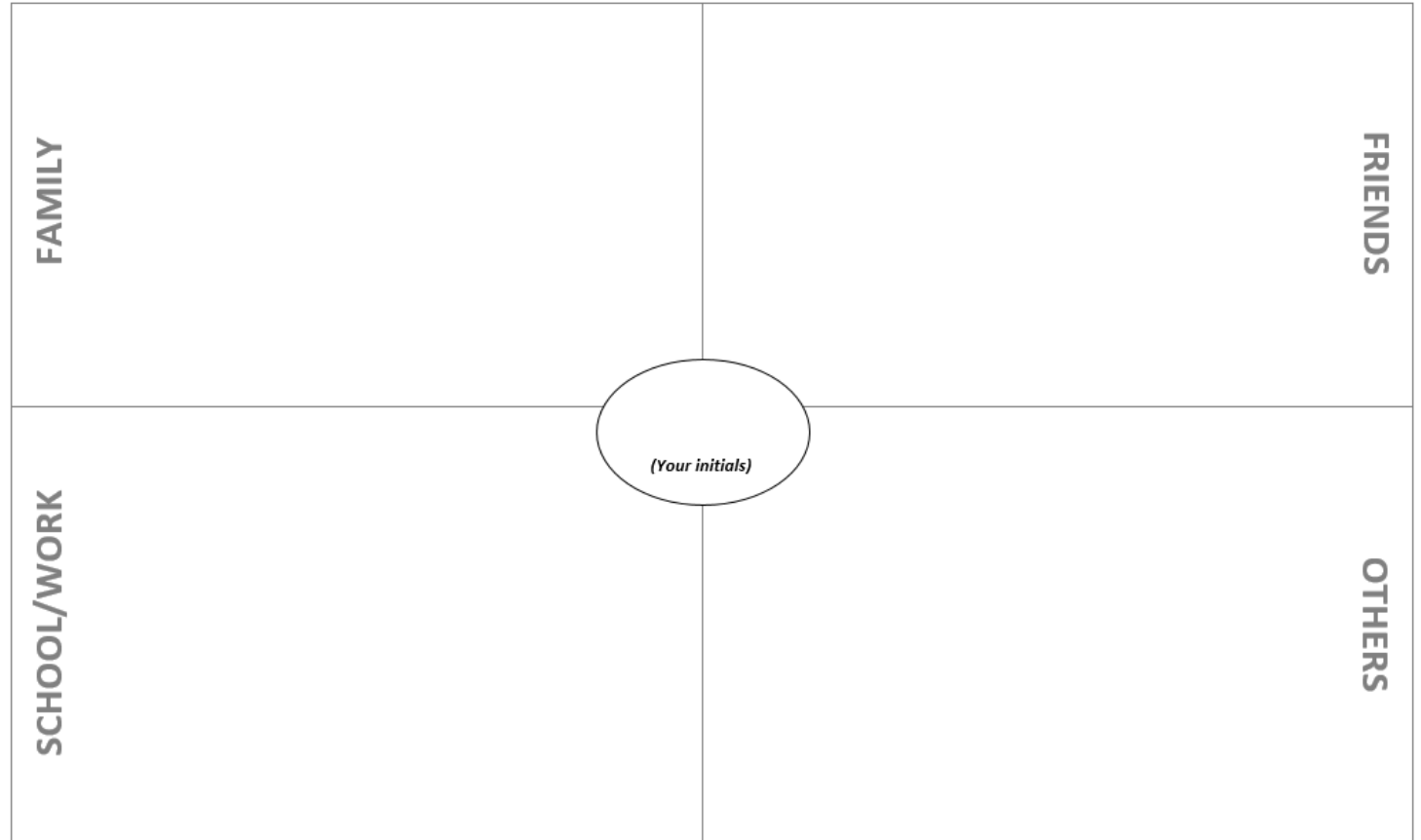
FAMILY

FRIENDS

(Your initials)

SCHOOL/WORK

OTHERS

Student Support Network Map
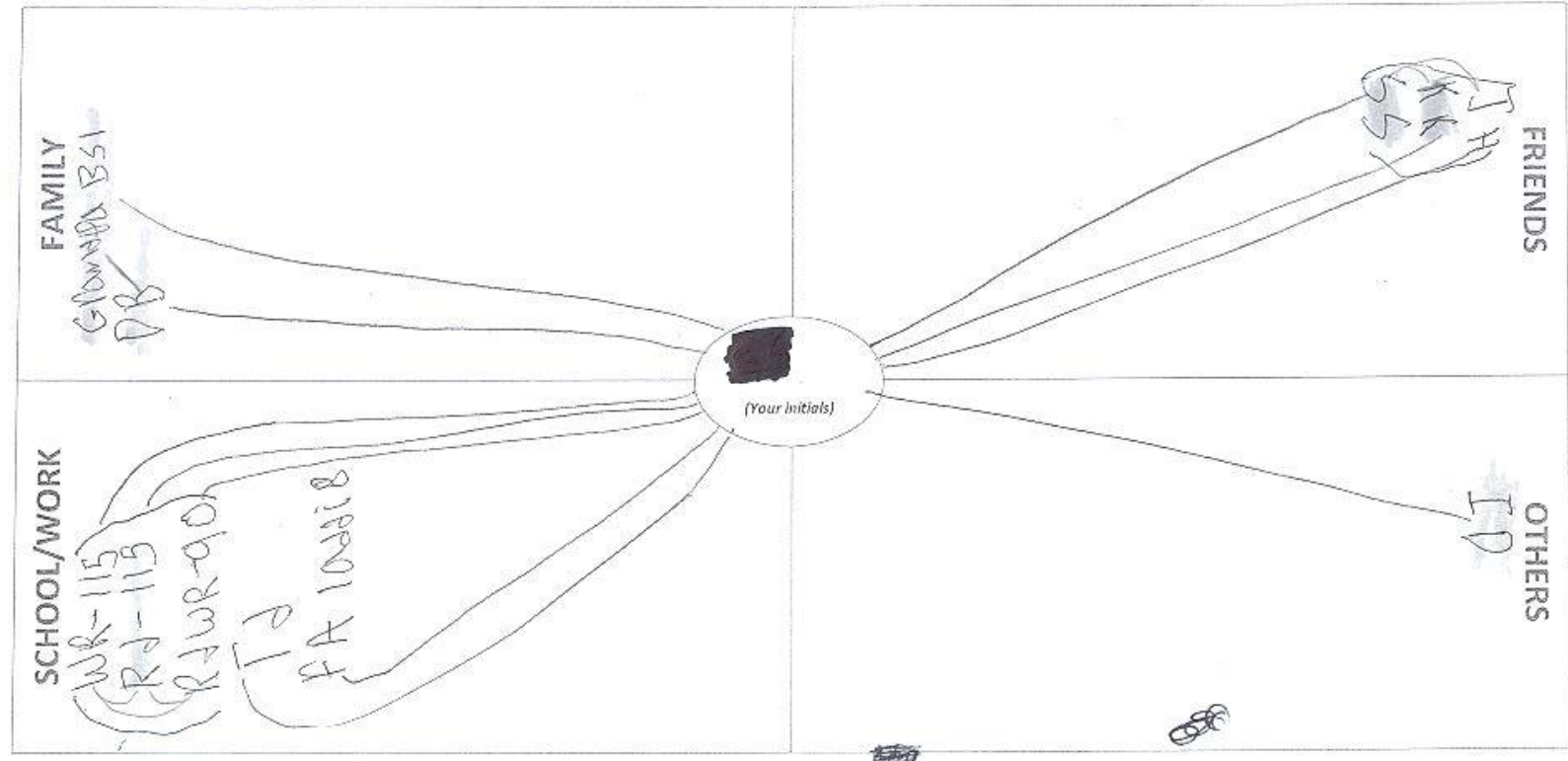
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Gathering more data tells you how "strong" the network ties are, how much support they provide, how often, and what kind of support (Blakeslee, 2012; 2015)

Name	Person's Role in Your Life	Academic Support	Career Support	Daily Living	How often?	How close?	How long?
A		Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Monthly Weekly Daily	Not close Close Very close	Less than a year 1-5 years More than five
B		Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Monthly Weekly Daily	Not close Close Very close	Less than a year 1-5 years More than five
C		Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Monthly Weekly Daily	Not close Close Very close	Less than a year 1-5 years More than five
D		Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Monthly Weekly Daily	Not close Close Very close	Less than a year 1-5 years More than five
E		Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Monthly Weekly Daily	Not close Close Very close	Less than a year 1-5 years More than five
F		Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Monthly Weekly Daily	Not close Close Very close	Less than a year 1-5 years More than five
G		Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Monthly Weekly Daily	Not close Close Very close	Less than a year 1-5 years More than five
H		Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Monthly Weekly Daily	Not close Close Very close	Less than a year 1-5 years More than five
I		Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Monthly Weekly Daily	Not close Close Very close	Less than a year 1-5 years More than five
J		Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Emotional Informational Concrete	Monthly Weekly Daily	Not close Close Very close	Less than a year 1-5 years More than five

Student Support Network Grid

Network Intervention Activities

Network Impact	Intervention Activities
IDENTIFY POTENTIAL NETWORK MEMBERS	• Network assessment • Discussion with youth and network members about sources of support
EXPAND NETWORK SUPPORT CAPACITY (*bridging capital*)	• Prep for support expansion (e.g., educate new network members) • Increase network diversity (e.g., introduce youth to unfamiliar social environments) • Broaden support received from current ties (e.g., discuss new ways to support) • Coach "natural mentors" to more effectively support youth
INCREASE NETWORK COHESION (*bonding capital*)	• Prep for support increase (e.g., educate current network members) • Connect members to each other, especially across social spheres • Encourage "family-like" network monitoring and resource-sharing • Strengthen individual relationships (frequency, closeness, etc.) • Coach network members to resolve conflict
WORK ON RELATIONSHIP SKILLS WITH YOUTH	General coaching, not about a specific relationship

Qualitative/quantitative network assessment in practice:

– Are there family-based connections that will likely be maintained?

– Does the youth and/or their informal support rely on the caseworker or foster parent as a connecting tie to help youth continue accessing services?

– Are informal members providing multiple kinds of support? Are there family members for concrete support? Do informal ties provide informational support?

– Is there compositional diversity to increase network range? Ties from different social spheres? Parent figures? Service providers? Friends?

– Are network ties stable? If there is a lot of member turnover, are members being replaced by people providing as much support?

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Recognize emerging adulthood as a distinct developmental period that is not well-served using the same rules and regulations of the child-serving system:

- Re-think many adolescent placements (e.g. host homes, mentor parents, placement agreements) – work with placement resources to **extend to youth the rights and responsibilities distinct to this developmental stage**
- Support youth safely at home whenever possible, or with relatives that may have been ruled out as placements for a child due– such environments may be a better alternative than group homes or homelessness
- Support youth in re-connecting in healthy ways with family, and in healing from grief, loss, and trauma to allow for new attachments to develop

- Re-think many services (e.g., ILP) for foster youth, move away from "one size fits all" and consider skills training as ONE component of transition readiness programming – e.g.:
  - the CORE (Creating Ongoing Relationships Effectively) model (*Nesmsith & Christopherson, 2014*) – promising early findings, youth feel more empowered, have more supportive relationships, better regulate emotions
  - the MyLife self-determination model (e.g., *Powers, Geenen, et al., 2012*)
  - See the "Preparing for a "Next Generation" Evaluation of Independent Living Programs for Youth in Foster Care" (*McDaniel, Courtney, Pergamit, & Lowenstein, 2014*) brief for a new conceptual framework for thinking about independent living services in the broader context

- Make foster placement an attractive option for young people 18-20, interpret federal guidelines around education/employment hours generously
- Let transition-age youth return if desired after declining services
- Plan in terms of "housing careers", not just the next placement (see *Collins & Curtis, 2011*)–what do the next 10 years look like? How will providers and young adults recognize living situations that may lead to homelessness? (also see *Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013*)

Thank you for listening! Questions?

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