Youth Taking Charge of Their Lives

Better Futures Project
Pathways to Positive Futures

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Youth Exiting Foster Care: Compounded Marginality

• Approximately 350,000 youth in U.S. foster care system
  • Almost 24,000 age out of foster care each year
• Numerous barriers
  • Abuse, family stressors, placement change, separation from bio family, restricted educational opportunity, lack of supportive adults, low expectations, stigma
  • A highly intersectional group
    • Disproportionately youth of color, especially African American and Native American; and disproportionately identified with disabilities and mental health conditions
• Trajectory of dismal young adult outcomes is well-documented
  • Poverty, unemployment, low postsecondary participation, homelessness, social isolation, incarceration, early parenting, drug and alcohol abuse, poor mental and physical health
Efforts to Improve Outcomes

- 1999 John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act and amendments
  - Independent living (ILP) services
  - Educational Training Vouchers
  - Chafee housing assistance
- More states allowing youth to remain in care until 21
- State college tuition assistance
- Affordable Care Act health coverage until 26

Despite these enhancements...

- Very modest improvements have been realized
- Efficacy of ILP services or any other approaches has not been substantiated
Supporting Youth to Take Charge of their Lives Through Self-determination Enhancement

- Self-directed action to achieve personally valued goals – change agency
- Cross-cutting components
  - Consistent, committed, accepting, and transparent relationship with an adult or near peer coach
  - Learn to apply achievement, partnership, and self-regulation strategies to achieve self-defined goals
  - Do activities in the community that support goal achievement
  - Workshops with peers and successful near peers: youth-defined topics and fun
  - Self-attribution of success through achieving goals and managing barriers
- Experimental Studies
  - My Life Pilot (n=69)
  - Project Success (n=133)
  - Better Futures (n=67)
  - My Life (n=350)
  - Over 600 youth in foster care, ages 15-18 at enrollment
  - Population-based, inclusive recruitment
  - Intervention for 9-12 months with high fidelity
  - Baseline, post-intervention, and 6-12 month follow-along assessment; low attrition
Highlights of Findings to Date (at follow-up)

• Across Studies:
  • Increased youth self-determination, quality of life, direction of transition planning, accomplishments, independent living and/or postsecondary preparation

• My Life Pilot
  • 72% vs. 50% completed high school
  • 45% vs. 28% employed

• Better Futures
  • 73% vs. 36% enrolled in higher education
  • Significant differences on measures of mental health empowerment and hope

• Project Success
  • Increased credits toward high school graduation
  • 60% vs. 37% employed
  • Reductions in depression and anxiety
Maylyn’s Words of Wisdom

- Work through the students, not around them
- Meet them where they are and listen
- Include them in decisions that are about them and let them lead their meetings
- Keep communication open, positive and transparent
- Recognize young person’s goals and support those goals even if you don’t agree with them
- Interpret lack of follow-through as a need for more support
- Assist, encourage and challenge youth