Perspectives of Youth and Young Adults

To learn more about the perspectives of youth and young adults that could provide useful information for transition practice and programming relevant to housing issues, we conducted an extensive review of the literature that featured first-person accounts from young people about their transition experiences, preferences, helpful resources, and issues that were difficult or got in the way of progress. In this section we present themes from this "youth view of transition" as a foundation for identifying implications for practice, program, and policy in the transition process, with specific references to housing issues when they were addressed.

Our research review focuses on issues that may have an impact on housing access and outcomes for the most vulnerable young people — those with mental health challenges, those who have been in foster care or group homes, young people who have been housed and/or treated in the juvenile justice system, and those who are or have been homeless. We found nine studies that focus solely on youth and young adults with mental health concerns and directly solicited their experiences and ideas, and one study involving young adults with mental health conditions who were also homeless.[39] Five studies collected information from youth who had experience with both the mental health and child welfare systems, and one study featured the voices of young adults with both developmental disabilities and mental health issues.[111]

We included 18 articles designed to learn from youth with foster care experience and nine studies for which homeless youth were the primary informants. We also included a study that gathered the perspectives of youth with physical or intellectual disabilities,[89] and a study of post-secondary transitions among Navajo Indians.[68] A list of the studies of youth perspectives by category that were reviewed is available in Appendix A.

As noted earlier, there is considerable overlap across these groups of young people. It is estimated that nearly two-thirds of young people in foster care have emotional, behavioral, or other mental health conditions,[31] and the rates are even higher in juvenile justice settings.[74,151] Edidin, et al.[35] report that the lifetime prevalence of psychiatric disorders among homeless youth is almost twice as high as in their peers who have housing. Perlman and colleagues found high rates of depression, suicide ideation and attempts, and self-harm for homeless youth in a national data set.[113] For many young people, it is difficult to know whether being homeless is the result of mental health problems, a major contributor to them, or both, but there is considerable evidence that homelessness has a cumulative negative effect on physical and mental

health.[86,137] Young adults with serious mental health conditions and former foster care youth often end up on the street.[31] Because of this overlap we have summarized common findings of the perspectives of young people across these groups.

Themes Reflected in Studies of Young People's Perspectives

Expectations for independence seemed unrealistic and confusing to some youth

Some young people found it difficult to see how they would be ready to transition.[27,28,44] For example, one young person said that the practice he got (for transition) was not sufficient preparation. He was hoping for a job training program that would provide housing and training in everyday skills, such as working and driving.[27, p. 593] In several studies young adults also expressed concerns about expectations that they should become independent.[27,28,62,99,126] Other young people expressed excitement about emancipating from a mental health program, describing turning 21 as "the start of a great life," or "a whole new change... a whole new story."[78, p. 211] Some young adults in the same program also expressed difficulty imagining and forming plans for the future.[78]

Mitchell, et al.[92] interviewed 17-year-old foster youth about their transition planning. Sixty percent of the young people were either not aware of their transition plans or didn't know if they had played a role in them. In several studies young people expressed anxiety over perceived losses upon transition; these included financial insecurity, loss of social support from staff, peers, and relationships with foster parents. They were also uncomfortable with perceived pressure toward

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high levels of self-reliance.[27,92,100] Macomber[88] discusses youth with anxiety and/or depressive disorders, noting that anxiety about transitioning may be especially acute for youth with these mental health concerns. In a study of youth transitioning from residential care to treatment foster homes,[100] many young people looked forward to increased freedom and normative experiences and relationships in foster homes, as compared to the restrictiveness they experienced in congregate care. When they were interviewed 2–3 months after moving to the treatment foster homes, some youth who had had trouble relating to their new foster parents appeared to have shifted to focusing more on being self-reliant and less on building better relationships with foster parents.

Implications for practice, programs, and policy:

• Staff working directly with young people may need training and support to deal with concerns about transition that may be felt, if not expressed, by the youth that they serve.

• Hiring, training, and supervision processes can be directed to understanding and supporting the developmental needs of transition-age youth, especially those who have been in out-of-home placement. This activity may include dealing with trauma related to youths' pre- and post-placement experiences, and elevated levels of anxiety. Staff may also benefit from mental health consultation about how to be most supportive to youth and young adults in transition.

• Youth are more invested when they take leadership in planning.[132] Some programs use tested, structured transition processes such as Achieve My Plan

(AMP)[155] that helps youth approach planning in manageable segments, or the Transition to Independence Process (TIP) model.[21]

• A positive policy change has been extending eligibility for foster care to age 21 in 25 states and the District of Columbia (as of 7/28/17) according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.[102] Many states that have not extended foster care eligibility beyond 18 do offer other services to former foster youth between 18-21 years of age.

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Young people may both want support and resist it

Ambivalence about wanting to be independent may result in accepting guidance and support at times, and rejecting it at others.[12,70,126,127,142] On the one hand, young adults don't want to be treated like children, and want to be given choices, but they also want support and help when it is needed. This finding may reflect the developmental place of many youth and young adults. Gonzales and Andvig[49] report a similar phenomenon among adults with mental illness who discussed their experiences with acquiring and maintaining housing.

Ryan and Thompson[126] noted that this "oscillation" between the desire for independence and need for formal support may be frustrating and discouraging for providers.

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Implications for practice, program, and policy:

- Staff working with transition-age youth and young adults may need information about typical adolescent and young adult development[4] and specific strategies about how to deal with the ambivalence about independence and help-seeking that is common in this developmental period.

- Approaches such as motivational interviewing may address ambivalence about seeking/using help.[38]

- Staff training may also help staff understand and support young people who have experience with out-of-home placement (separation, instability) and possible trauma related to their pre- and post-placement experiences.

- Policies regarding access and eligibility that allow for instances of multiple entry, exit, and re-entry would better address the developmental realities of young adulthood.

Wide-ranging views of program helpfulness and quality

In several studies, youth and young adults identified both positive and challenging aspects of programs designed to prepare them for transition. Some youth felt that they had little preparation for transition, and didn't have a chance to practice skills while in care.[40,44,99] Some youth observed that their foster parents, child welfare workers, or transition program staff did not always have the information they needed (e.g., housing, employment, or financial assistance).[99,129]

Across studies, many young people expressed a desire to make their own choices, wanting the freedom to make decisions, and be self-determined.[70,89,115,117,124,141] Examining the housing experiences of young people with first-episode psychosis, Roy, et al.[124] found that some youth were forced to move out of their parents' homes before they felt ready to do so. Some were asked to move out because their parents (sometimes in consultation with mental health professionals) thought that "it was time," believing that leaving home was a way to encourage independence. Some young people felt excluded from this decision-making process.

Several youth in a study by Geenen and Powers[44] felt that caseworkers did not include them in decision-making. One young adult expressed anger about caseworkers "making plans behind your back and then inform[ing] you after it's done."[44, p. 1090] Similarly, young people wanted foster parents and caseworkers to give them more flexibility to make decisions: "We need to see what's out there, what's out there for me, so I make my own mistakes and I can learn from them."[44, p. 1090] Foster parents in this study stated that agency

concerns about safety constrained them from allowing foster children as much freedom as they might give their own children.

Youth interviewed by Samuels and Pryce[127] provided another perspective that appears to be a variant of self-determination. Some young people anticipating the prospect of aging out of foster care had developed an intense sense of self-reliance that included rejection of help and characterized asking for help from others as a sign of weakness. The authors commented that this self-reliance may have reflected young people's belief that no one else would help. While youth in several studies[20,44,129] felt that they were not sufficiently involved in decisions that affected them, in a study by Freundlich[40] some young people stated that they did have sufficient input, or that they made decisions by themselves.

Youths' concerns about "mixed messages" given by transitional or independent living programs appeared in several studies. Young people reported that they were asked to develop independent living skills, find employment, and take care of themselves, but that their programs, especially residential transitional living programs, were quite structured, and did not include many opportunities to make choices and develop life skills[44,99] Curry and Abrams[28] identified the positive effects of flexible program structure and boundaries in a program that included opportunities for transitioning youth to make choices and expand the areas in which they felt competent.
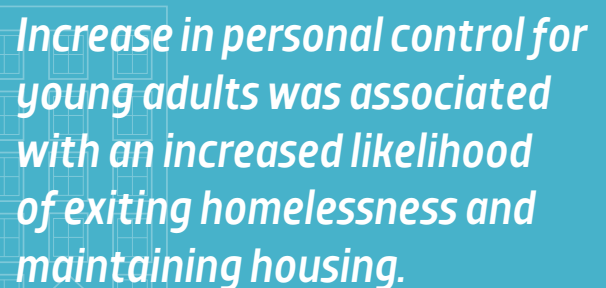
Florida Youth Shine, Let Kids be Kids, is an example of positive policy change designed to address foster youths' longing for normalcy.[139] In 2013 the Florida legislature passed House Bill 215 that removed many barriers to foster children's being allowed to engage in normal childhood activities (e.g., driving, dating or sleeping overnight at a friend's house). Expanded latitude for foster parents and group home operators to allow foster children more freedom also increases the ability of foster youth to make choices and function more independently. Florida Youth Shine, an organization of current and former foster youth, played a key role in this policy change.

A positive program example for homeless young adults addresses the issue of self-determination and engaging severely marginalized youth. This strengths-based program described by Slesnick and colleagues[137] emphasized choice for program participants. The researchers found that increase in personal control for young adults was associated with an increased likelihood of exiting homelessness and maintaining housing.

Implications for practice, program, and policy:

- It may be useful to review program design and philosophy, rules, or expectations that seem contradictory. Look for places where structure might be relaxed to offer more responsibility, choice, and opportunities for skill-building to young clientele. Involving staff and young people in this review could help lay the foundation for changes in structure and practice.

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- Consider engaging young people in discussions about the sometimes-conflicting goals of providing guidance, structure and safety, and preparing young people to live and work independently. Young adults may offer useful suggestions about how to blend and address both goals.

- Clarify which agency or program has responsibility for providing information and skill-building needed by transition-age youth and young adults.

Youth and young adult participants in several studies placed a high value on relationships.

Support needs

Several types of needed support identified by transition-age youth included *emotional support* from caring adults and peers, *instrumental support* (e.g., help finding and securing housing and financial assistance), and *informational support* about services, school, jobs, and transportation.[141] A desire for belonging, support, caring, and respect were also expressed by youth and young adult informants.[99,129]

Youth and young adult participants in several studies placed a high value on relationships.[44,52,129,134] Jivanjee, Kruzich and Gordon[72] reported that youth expressed the desire to have friendships; more broadly, Munford and Sanders[95] found that youth wanted to build safe and secure connections with others. Youth also spoke positively about staff going above and beyond the minimum they had to do.[99] The quality of desired relationships with staff was addressed by youth who placed high importance on unconditional regard and emotional support.[123] Describing the help and support they received from their youth advocates (caseworkers), Native American/Alaska Native youth valued the relationships they had, especially if the advocates were culturally similar.[41] In this study, "support" included the provision of structure, holding youth accountable for working toward their goals, and emotional and informational support.

Not infrequently, when youth who had experienced foster or congregate care talked about their relationships, they were referring to their caseworkers in the child welfare system, or staff in group living situations. Examining social networks and supportive relationships of former foster youth, Singer and colleagues[134] noted that the young people expressed high levels of attachment and high expectations of professional child welfare workers. These researchers cautioned that because these relationships are temporary under the current system, workers must be "transparent and honest with foster youth about the impermanency of their relationship."[134, p. 2116]

Over the last 15 years, considerable attention has been given to helping transition-age youth and young adults expand their social networks so that they will have ongoing sources of support. Both formal mentoring that matches young people with volunteer or paid adults[138] and "natural mentors," adults known and nominated by the young person,[53,98] are models that

are receiving increased attention. In a study of non-kin natural mentors, youth identified "keeping on track," instrumental, informational, and emotional support as positive contributions that these adult mentors made to their lives.[98]

Addressing the support needs of transition-age youth is complicated by the reality that because youth and young adults are at various levels of experience and development, an individualized approach is essential, but difficult to accomplish in many current programs. A related issue is that youths' complex and multiple needs for support may be difficult for any one practitioner or program to address.

Implications for practice, program, and policy:

- Addressing the support needs of a youth with a variety of experiences is likely to require coordination across community resources and learning opportunities.[140]

- Individualized planning and coordination requires enriched staff resources, sometimes accomplished by limiting the number of youth served to allow for adequate service levels for each youth;

- Funds available for transition planning and services are outstripped by need. Transition failures are very costly to transitioning youth and young adults, and to society. The siloed systems of funding and services may keep the "big picture" from being understood or addressed.

- Although young people identified many types of positive support provided by natural mentors, it is unrealistic to expect that volunteers can substantially replace the need for formal services for young people who have multiple needs and few personal resources.

Findings from this review of studies that gather and reflect the perspectives of young adults may be useful in the work of planning and implementing housing options for youth with serious mental health challenges, and for other youth with experience in the child welfare, juvenile justice, or other child-serving systems.