



# Center for Family and Demographic Research

Bowling Green State University



## OHIO POPULATION NEWS: Aging Out of Foster Care

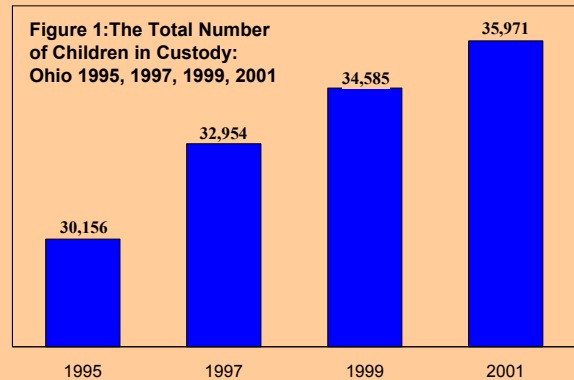
The foster care system, like the welfare system, is intended to be only a temporary solution for family problems. Foster parents provide temporary monitored care for children while social workers help family members address the problems that interfere with childrearing. The vast majority of children placed in foster care are reunited with a family member within 18 months. However, some children remain in foster care until they are emancipated at age 18. These older children growing up in foster care have the greatest need for stability, care, education, and training.

To address the problems associated with transitioning out of the home, the State of Ohio passed an Independent Living Bill which mandates that youth in foster care between the ages of 16-18 receive independent living services. In addition, this bill allows emancipated youth between the ages of 18 and 21 to be eligible for services from their local PCSA if they sign an agreement with the Department of Jobs and Family Services and agree to invest in their own personal responsibility (PSCAO). Independent living skills training includes addressing simple daily care tasks, like grocery shopping, budgeting, cleaning, and paying bills. The training also includes preparation for job-seeking, such as resume writing and interviewing skills, and advice about seeking low-income housing.

However, counties, and foster care jurisdictions within counties, vary greatly in the types and generosity of in-kind, cash, and service aid they provide to foster youth who are 18 or older. Some counties work with judges to extend the state's legal custody over some of these young adults, in order to allow them to remain in the foster parents' home while they complete their GED or high school degrees. Other counties provide "bridge" programming, a safety net of services that help the legally emancipated foster youth manage financial and personal emergencies. Most of this post-emancipation programming is for a very small sub-set of the foster youth and provided on a case-by-case basis.

**This CFDR policy brief examines the process of transitioning out of the foster care system from the perspectives of those who have experienced it firsthand.** In 2003, we interviewed foster care parents who provide care for older teen foster children who "aged out" of foster care; social workers and case managers who plan placements, provide independent living skills training, and monitor the success of emancipated foster youth; and foster-care-experienced youth themselves. Each of these groups has unique insights about the challenges facing youth who come of age in foster care. We explore their views about the effectiveness of current policies and programs for foster care children aging out of the system, their advice about what policymakers and legislators, judges, caseworkers, and foster parents should keep in mind as they help young adults leave foster care; and their suggestions for improvements to foster care systems that would aid teenagers and young adults to become independent.

Figure 1: The Total Number of Children in Custody: Ohio 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001



During the year 2001, there were 35,971 children in the custody of the State of Ohio. Figure 1 details the increasing number of children in custody. It is important to note that while the number of children in custody is increasing, **the rate of increase is slowing**. For example, the rate of increase between 1995 and 1997 was 9.3% compared with an increase of 4.0% between the years 1999 and 2000.

- **Temporary Custody:** children are placed in temporary custody while efforts are made to reunify them with their families.
- **Permanent Custody:** the parental rights of the children have been terminated.
- **Planned Permanent Living Arrangement:** a custody arrangement for those children who are not returned home but will continue a relationship with their parent(s).

Table A: Percentage Distribution by Custody Type

	Temporary	Permanent	Permanent Planned Living Arrangements	Total
0 to 5	39	25	1	30
6 to 11	28	34	8	27
12+	33	40	91	43
White	51	43	48	48
Black	46	56	50	49
Other	3	1	2	3

**The population in foster care looks markedly different from the population of children in Ohio overall.** Although Black children account for only 14 percent of the population under age 18 in Ohio, they comprise nearly half (49%) of the population in custody (see Table A). This disproportional distribution can be seen across all custody types.

Source: Public Children Services Association of Ohio. State Profiles of Children in Custody Accessed online at <http://www.pcsao.org>

**WHAT FOSTER CARE EXPERIENCED ADULTS WANT POLICYMAKERS TO KNOW ABOUT FOSTER CARE YOUTH**

**They crave (and lack) ‘Normalcy.’**

Foster-care-experienced adults all felt a deep desire to be “normal,” like everyone else, but felt that oftentimes normalcy and constancy were absent in foster care systems. As one said, “it seems automatically that if you’re in foster care, you’re not normal.” Caseworkers concurred, reporting that nurturing normalcy was an important part of a successful transition.

**They see their wider communities as unkind and hostile to foster youth.**

The foster-care-experienced young adults reported hostile, stigmatizing treatment by their community networks and foster parents. They felt that they were treated differently than other children by their schools, doctors, and peer networks.

Both foster-care-experienced adults and caseworkers felt that this hostile treatment by communities, coupled with indifference by foster parents could pose a barrier to a foster youth’s successful transition to adulthood. They discussed the necessity of positive personal relationships in the community and loving care by foster parents as a necessary condition for healthy adulthood.

**Like any young 18 year old, they want their freedom, but often they get more freedom than they can handle.**

Foster parents, caseworkers, and foster-care-experienced adults all pointed out that “turning 18” is very meaningful in American culture — it’s the legal age of adulthood. Young adults are excited about their chance to make their own way. However, in most families, legal independence is not tied completely to social or financial independence. Families help their young adult children move toward successful adulthood, by providing a safety net, protecting against the occasional failure, helping with small financial emergencies, and often funding a large part of post-high school education.

As one caseworker said, *“It is a time when kids want to be out on their own. And there is this model for them where they can go out and make mistakes and still come back home. I don’t think that we have that in our foster care system or in our child welfare system. I think that primarily we don’t have the financial support for that to happen.”*

**Many have anti-social behaviors and emotional problems that leave them ill-prepared for independence.**

Foster-care-experienced adults, foster parents, and caseworkers all reported in great detail that they think that youth who transition out of foster care are burdened by troubles that bar them from becoming successful, independent adults. They talked about the anxieties and anti-social behaviors that grow out of a childhood of multiple placements, multiple family reunifications, and multiple life traumas. Foster-care-experienced youth discussed their poor communication and relationship skills, their inability to manage emotional disruptions that arise from dealing with grief, worry, anger, and stress from childhood traumas. Many struggled with poor choices in partners, early parenthood, problems with their biological families, and a constant shuffle from “house to house to house to house” in a series of bad relationships to avoid homelessness.

**Many foster children make rash decisions as the legal age of 18 approaches.**

Another foster care worker said that part of the problem is that foster youth look forward to the magical age of 18 when they can leave their foster home and the perceived injustices of the foster care system, but that as their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday approaches, they become fearful and anxious about what is really out in the real world for them. **In this tense time period, foster youth often make rash decisions and inappropriate choices and may act out angrily toward their foster parents.** Caseworkers argue that policymakers need to understand that at this critical point in their life, foster youth often permanently cut off services, which they later realize they desperately need.

*“It is better for them to stay in foster care. If they have a nurturing family they are getting care in and they can stay there and graduate from high school and have a normal life that is what we would want them to do. So, we don’t try to get them out. We try to keep them in good placement and then help them make a plan.”*

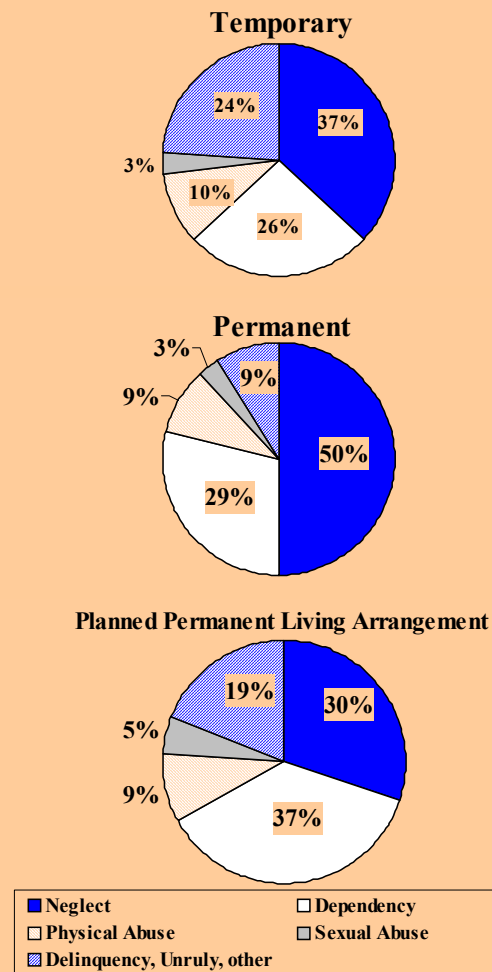
--Ohio Foster Care Case Worker

*“Before the foster parents or anybody can teach you life skills, they need to show that they really do sincerely care. I know some foster parents really care. They’re doing foster care because they love children.”*

*“I think that foster kids usually act out because they want to know, ‘are you going to love me because my parents don’t seem to, so I want to know if you will.’ I think the biggest thing that the agencies and foster homes fall short on is not caring. You are not going to want to hear anything or learn anything about independent living from someone who doesn’t really care, if you make it when you are out of their home.”*

-2 -Ohio Foster Care Experienced Adults

**Figure 2: Court Rationale for Placement for 21,239 children in custody on January 1, 2002**



Source: PSCAO

## SEVEN WAYS TO IMPROVE THE CHANCES OF A FOSTER CARE CHILD'S SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION TOWARD INDEPENDENCE

### 1. Intervene earlier and more aggressively to end a child's abuse

Foster parents were vehement in their concerns about the structure of foster care systems that emphasized family reunification, even in the face of the birth families' ongoing physical or sexual mistreatment of the child. They strongly felt that State foster care and adoption services need to curtail parental rights quickly, in cases of gross violence or danger to the child.

### 2. Provide for post-emancipation mental and physical health needs

Foster parents and caseworkers said that foster children were shortchanged in their access to quality health care, especially for mental health services. Foster care youth are often on several drugs for multiple physical and mental conditions and receive little quality medical monitoring. The counseling they receive is inadequate and often disrupted by their frequent moves between placements. Foster parents and caseworkers noted that the lack of health care reaches crisis proportions when foster youth are legally emancipated. **Indeed, all of the foster-care-experienced adults talked about the physical and mental problems they struggled to conquer and the enormous difficulties they faced trying to access health care.** All reported that they either had no health care coverage at all after emancipation or received minimal services through Medicaid. Several said that they were not able to access mental health counseling, rehabilitation therapies, or help with purchasing drugs or monitoring their dosages. **One foster parent said, "They need caseworkers and counselors to follow them post-emancipation, continue with counseling, and give advice about where to get help with addictions, troubles, and mental health barriers."**

### 3. Prepare them for future relationships with their birth families and communities

Foster care workers reported that the majority of emancipated youth seek out their birth families and communities, as part of their strategies for understanding their past planning their future. Sometimes birth families looked for the emancipated children and moved in with them, purely for financial gain and the chance to exploit their child's resources.

Foster care workers felt that youth would benefit from two types of post-emancipation services. **First, they felt that foster-care-experienced young adults should have probationary counseling from an advocate who would help them negotiate smart decision-making about personal relationships and living arrangements.**

This advocate would visit the emancipated youth until they both felt that the youth was managing life well and avoiding detrimental situations. **Second, they felt that foster-care-experienced young adults would benefit from foster system-mediated meetings with their biological families to help them filter out negative dimensions and focus on developing positive relationships, if possible.**

### 4. Target their educational and vocational disadvantages

The interviews indicate that two major education problems face foster youth as they approach emancipation. First, and most troubling, many foster youth reach age 18 with major educational disadvantages, not just a lack of a high school degree or GED. They are often years behind their grade level and functionally illiterate. Many have developmental impairments or behavioral problems that make attaining education difficult.

Second, foster care youth often drop out of school at age 18, rather than attain a high school degree or complete their equivalencies. Most quickly come to regret this decision in the months or few years following emancipation, but by then the costs of returning to school are prohibitive.

Caseworkers and foster parents felt that foster youth should receive far greater investments in their education in two fundamental ways. They should be allowed to extend their custody until they have completed their GED or earned a high school diploma. Also, those who emancipate and terminate custody before receiving a high school equivalency should be allowed to receive financial and other support to earn their high school or college degree later, if they come to recognize the advantages of seeking higher education. **Furthermore, they should receive far greater vocational training both during their foster care custody and during the immediate years after emancipation, regardless of whether they have plans for college or not.** Caseworkers felt that vocational training should be heavily targeted to help them secure service or industrial sector employment in the areas the foster-care-experienced adults are likely to live.

*"When you keep them for two or three years, the child improves tremendously. The parents do nothing to fulfill the case plan, and the next thing you know, the parents take that kid that was on its way to success. That child comes to us in three months a mess. A mess from heck that you can't refix."*

*"I just think we're really missing it somewhere along the line. I think we give parents way too many chances, until these kids are so destroyed. I think there's nothing wrong with adoption."*

--2 Ohio Foster Parents

*"We have a lot of kids who have parents that end up moving in with them. Let's say they have a strong sense of obligation in some capacity to their parents or cousins, or relatives in any capacity. 'This is my family.' We continually talk about not allowing people into your life that bring you down and take you down that path that you've already overcome, and sometimes it just pulls them right back down. They're being used on a regular basis. So, unfortunately, they don't get away from a lot of the negative behaviors and people from the past."*

--Ohio Foster Care Worker

One foster care worker said, *"Most of our kids are extremely delinquent in education, so they're anywhere from a year to two years behind to begin with."* Another reported, *"Some of them here, they will never be able to pass a GED. Never."*

## 5. Create stronger life skills programs, start those programs earlier

Many foster parents and caseworkers often felt that life skills training occurred too late and was of little value. They reported that by the time children were aged 15, they were already overwhelmed by the stresses of surviving their abusive pasts or the anxieties caused by multiple placements. The children had little energy to devote to life skills training and they received few coordinated resources and little one-on-one attention from foster agencies. Much of the benefit of life skills training was limited by system restrictions, such as restrictions on receiving a driver's license. **Thus, foster parents, caseworkers, and youth felt the State of Ohio would benefit from developing stronger, better coordinated, and more richly funded life skills programs.**

## 7. Start an advocate program

The foster-care-experienced adults agreed with foster parents and caseworkers about the benefits that bridge programming could provide and how much they might enhance the quality of life and likelihood of successful independence for foster youth. Their interviews indicate that they would especially support any bridge programming that would give them access to an advocate. **The commented frequently about how much they wished they had someone who could understand the problems they were facing as young adults coming out of the foster care system.** They do not want a caseworker, but they want someone to help them with evaluating education, employment, and housing plans, managing bills, and blowing off steam when personal pressures overwhelm. They want an advocate rather than caseworker because they think it would show greater respect for their home and newly-emancipated life.

This research was supported by the *BGSU Partnerships for Community Action* (PCA). An organization that is dedicated to redefining the relationship between the University and the broader community through building and supporting campus/community projects based on reciprocity, co-equal participation, and mutual benefit. <http://www.bgsu.edu/offices/pca/>

## 6. Invest heavily in bridge programming

Foster parents and caseworkers all called for the creation of stable, well-funded bridge programs that would provide a safety net for emancipated youth as they face their first years out of the foster home. They were frustrated that county and agency financial limitations were the primary reasons foster youth did not receive post-emancipation services. **Most felt that foster youth should have multiple forms of services and funds available through their mid-twenties.** Other caseworkers suggested that agencies should consider paying foster parents to serve as mentors to foster-care-experienced adults, during the years following emancipation. This enhanced role for foster parents would help emancipated youth have a sense of family and community, which may buffer them from feeling isolated when they face major problems.

**It's important to note that most caseworkers felt that additional expert staff should be hired and agencies should be created to manage post-emancipation and bridge program services.** They felt that they were already over-burdened with providing even rudimentary post-emancipation care, in addition to their main responsibilities, and thus were in no position to combine their current caseload with the rigors of following and serving a highly mobile population of young adults.

**Table B: Living Arrangement by Custody Status in Percentages**

	Temporary	Permanent	Permanent Planned Living Arrangements
Family Foster Home	57	68	57
Relative/Kinship Home	28	7	6
Group Home/Residential Care	10	9	30
Adoptive	0	13	0
Independent Living/Other	5	3	7

Source: PSCAO

Table B provides a look at the living arrangements of Ohio's children in custody. Just over two-thirds of children in permanent custody remain in foster homes.

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