
HELP YOUTH TRANSITION INTO ADULTHOOD



Policy Brief

For most young people, marking their 18th birthday is a time of celebration, launching the beginning of higher education or the start of a career. But for youth with mental health challenges, or who have been in state custody – whether in the juvenile justice or child welfare systems – the transition into adulthood can be fraught with anxiety. The prospect of ending up jobless or homeless is a very real threat.

Youth in Foster Care

A study of youth aging out of foster care in the Midwest found:

- Fewer than one-third were enrolled in an education or training program, and only 11% were enrolled in college
- Fewer than half were employed, and for those who were, employment was sporadic, rarely providing financial security
- Less than half received independent living services and only 50% received education services
- Twenty-five percent did not have enough to eat and one in seven had been homeless
- Nearly half of the females were pregnant by age 19 and were more than twice as likely to have at least one child
- Thirty-three percent had been arrested in the last year and 23.7% spent at least one night in a correctional facility

Youth in the Juvenile Justice System

Youth exiting the juvenile justice system face additional challenges. The U.S. Department of Education reports that the interruption of education can have devastating results, with fewer than 43% of youth in detention returning to school after release, and another 16% dropping out within five months. Youth who end up confined in juvenile facilities suffer some of the worst odds of long-term success of any youth cohort in the nation.

Youth at Risk

There is a third group of young people who, though they may not have been in state custody, experience conditions in their daily lives that place their health, safety, physical and mental health at risk. The Oklahoma City Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force reported in September

RECOMMENDATION:

The 2009 Children's Agenda supports the creation of an initiative to help youth transition into adulthood through education, behavioral health, social services and employment services.

2007 that there are at least 1,500 homeless children in Oklahoma City Public Schools and that families are the fastest growing group of the homeless population.

Oklahoma's Disconnected Youth

In Oklahoma, young people involved in our state systems represent a multi-million dollar investment – from a child's initial contact with authorities, through the court process and juvenile detention or multiple out-of-home placements. There are a variety of programs – educational, drug treatment, mental health, rehabilitation, medical services – that the state provides to help at-risk teens move toward independence and productivity. Yet for many, all of these services come to an abrupt halt when they "age out" of the system. Even with Independent Living and job training programs, there are over 60,000 young people in Oklahoma (ages 18-24) who are not in school or in the military and not working, and have no degree beyond high school.

Oklahoma's Investment at Risk

Depending upon the level of care, the financial investment by the State of Oklahoma can range from \$8,260 for a young person in foster care for one year to over \$108,000 per year for a youth in juvenile institutional care. Oklahoma's investment will be squandered if we do not ensure a productive transition for these adolescents into the job market, stable housing and independent living.

Each and every child in Oklahoma deserves a chance to work toward a productive future and Oklahoma needs each and every child to enter adulthood with the skills, relationships and community supports that will help us all compete in this global economy.