

Characteristics and Experiences of Former Foster Youth in Postsecondary Education

By: [Jacob Gross](#)

Former foster youth (hereafter foster youth) lag behind their peers in attaining a postsecondary credential.¹ Although studies have found that over 70 percent of foster youth aspire to attend college,² their access to and success in postsecondary education remains low. Compared to 60 percent of non-foster youth, about 20 percent of foster youth attend college,³ and studies estimate their graduation rates at 1 to 11 percent.⁴ In a national report on foster youth and educational attainment,⁵ Wolanin writes:

If foster youth completed high school and attended postsecondary education at the same rate as their peers, nearly 100,000 additional foster youth in the 18 to 25-year-old age group would be attending higher education. This is the size of the gap in opportunity for higher education between foster youth and their peers, and it is the magnitude of the policy problem to equalize opportunities for foster youth.

Abstract

This policy brief examines disparities between foster youth and non-foster youth in postsecondary education. Data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) provides information on foster youth in postsecondary education and their experiences and challenges obtaining a postsecondary credential. It also makes clear a need for additional research to better understand the needs of these students and how to support them.

About the Author

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Education policymakers are paying increased attention to long-term outcomes for foster youth. In 2008, for example, three federal laws were passed with provisions addressing educational opportunity for foster youth: the Fostering Connections Act, the College Cost Reduction Act, and the Higher Education Opportunity Act. These policies addressed issues such as providing foster youth with information about postsecondary education, making it easier for foster youth to be declared independent for financial aid purposes, and increasing state funding to help foster youth pay for college.⁶

Moreover, colleges and universities appear to be investing more in the support services foster youth need to succeed by providing scholarships, year-round housing, counseling, health care, and more.⁷

Despite increased efforts to help foster youth succeed, little research exists on their postsecondary educational experiences, especially at a national level. This policy brief aims to help fill that gap. Using data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), it provides information about the demographics and enrollment characteristics of foster youth in postsecondary education. It also addresses their access to financial aid.

Prior Research

A few empirical studies have focused on postsecondary educational outcomes for foster youth.⁸ Collectively, they find that foster youth face a number of barriers to attaining a postsecondary credential.

Foster youth are less likely than their peers to complete high school and less likely to be academically prepared for college. Blome's⁹ analysis of a nationally representative cohort of high school sophomores from 1980 to 1992¹⁰

found that 15 percent of foster youth were enrolled in a college preparatory track, compared to 32 percent of a comparison group. Poor performance on standardized tests by foster youth lends further evidence that these youth face issues of access due to low levels of academic preparation.¹¹

Despite increased efforts to help foster youth succeed, little research exists on their postsecondary educational experiences, especially at the national level.

Once enrolled in college, foster youth may lack the institutional¹² and financial support¹³ they need to graduate. Although some colleges and universities have implemented

programs and policies to meet the needs of foster youth,¹⁴ most student affairs educators remain unfamiliar with these students' needs. Financial barriers include lack of support from family to pay for school¹⁵ and lack of awareness of financial aid options.¹⁶

Data and Analysis

A challenge in conducting research on foster youth in postsecondary education is the lack of nationally representative data that contain information about students' experiences in foster care (e.g., length of time in care) as well as in postsecondary education (e.g., enrollment characteristics). For the purposes of this brief, I utilize data from multiple years (i.e., 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012) of the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS). NPSAS provides nationally representative data on postsecondary students and institutions, with a special focus on finances and financial aid (<http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/npsas/about.asp>). Specifically, I focus on all undergraduates enrolled in postsecondary education, comparing students who identified on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) as having deceased parents, being wards of the court, or being in foster care at any time since they turned 13 to students who did not identify in this way.



It is not possible to discern which of these students were foster youth alone, unfortunately. For instance, students whose parents were deceased but lived with close relatives would be grouped with students who were placed in foster homes. I recognize there may be considerable differences in the students' experiences growing up (e.g., stability, educational disruptions, abuse or neglect), all of which could impact their educational attainment later in life, and discuss this data limitation later in this paper. Nonetheless, comparing these two groups allows us to identify some of the challenges that former foster youth face in attaining a postsecondary credential.

In the interest of brevity, I hereafter refer to students who identified on the FAFSA as having deceased parents, being wards of the court, or being in foster care at any time since they turned 13 as foster youth, and those who did not identify in this way as non-foster youth.

Demographics

Foster youth in postsecondary education differed from non-foster youth demographically in a number of ways. African Americans/Blacks were overrepresented relative to the student population, whereas Asian Americans were underrepresented (see Table 1). These differences mirror the population of foster youth nationally (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport22.pdf>).

Table 1: NPSAS demographic characteristics, 2012

		Non-foster youth	Foster youth
Gender*	Male	45.4%	44.8%
	Female	54.6	55.2
Race/ethnicity	White	59.6	47.3
	Black or African American	12.5	24.9
	Hispanic or Latino	17.0	17.0
	Asian	6.5	5.0
	American Indian or Alaska Native	0.7	0.9
	Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander	0.5	1.3
	More than one race	3.2	3.6
Has dependent children		6.1	7.7
Parents' highest education level	Do not know	2.7	9.9
	Did not complete high school	4.9	8.4
	High school diploma or equivalent	21.4	31.4
	Vocational/technical training	4.0	2.8
	Associate degree	7.5	6.6
	Some college but no degree	14.7	15.9
	Bachelor's Degree or higher	44.7	25.0

Note: Differences significant at 0.05 level, unless noted with *; Source: NPSAS:2012, using WTA000



A slightly higher proportion of foster youth had dependent children than non-foster youth (7.7 percent, compared to 6.1 percent). In addition, foster youth were more likely to be first-generation compared to their non-foster youth peers.

Enrollment and Academic Characteristics

Next, I looked at a variety of college enrollment characteristics, including attendance patterns, types of institutions attended, and fields of study (see Table 2). Foster youth were more likely to delay their enrollment in postsecondary education following high school graduation, to attend part-time, and to take developmental education courses; all of these factors are associated with decreased chances of completing a postsecondary degree. In addition, their cumulative undergraduate GPA was, on average, lower than non-foster youth.

Foster youth were more likely to enroll in public institutions, and they also enrolled in for-profit institutions in greater proportion than their non-foster youth peers. They were significantly more likely to attend a two-year institution.

Foster youth were more likely to major in applied studies, business, and general studies than non-foster youth. In addition, foster youth were more likely to enroll in a certificate or associate degree program (see Table 3, next page).

Table 2: NPSAS college enrollment characteristics, 2012

		Non-foster youth	Foster youth
Delayed enrollment into PSE		21.5%	36.3%
Attendance intensity in fall	Not enrolled	19.3	27.0
	Full-time	65.2	52.0
	Part-time	15.4	21.0
Ever taken remedial courses		27.2	29.7
Class level	1st year undergraduate	42.3	64.4
	2nd year undergraduate	25.5	19.7
	3rd year undergraduate	13.5	7.9
	4th year undergraduate	14.4	5.4
	5th year undergraduate	1.6	0.6
	Unclassified/other	2.6	2.0
Control	Public	76.0	77.3
	Private not-for-profit	16.5	9.2
	Private for-profit	7.5	13.5
Institution level	4-year	58.6	40.6
	2-year	39.4	55.4
	Less than 2-year	1.9	4.1
Enrolled in HBCU		1.9	2.2
Grade point average (average)		2.71	2.32

Note: Differences significant at 0.05 level, unless noted with *; Source: NPSAS:2012, using WTA000



Finances and Financial Aid

Although there was no statistically significant difference between foster youth and non-foster youth in the proportion working (excluding work-study), foster youth worked more hours on average than their non-foster youth peers. Moreover, foster youth were less likely to have a checking or savings account, and they carried a higher average balance on credit cards (see Table 4).

Finally, foster youth had a lower expected family contribution than their non-foster youth peers, which is not surprising given that they are considered independent for financial aid purposes (see Table 5, next page). On average, they received more in need-based aid each year than non-foster youth, and they

Table 3: NPSAS academic characteristics, 2012

	Non-foster youth	Foster youth
Field of study		
Undecided	2.7%	3.7%
Computer and information sciences	3.2	2.5
Engineering and engineering technology	5.6	4.1
Bio & phys science, sci tech, math, agriculture	8.8	5.7
General studies and other	11.0	14.7
Social sciences	8.4	6.7
Humanities	7.7	6.0
Health care fields	14.9	14.6
Business	13.8	15.9
Education	5.7	4.3
Other applied	18.2	21.7
Undergraduate degree program		
Certificate	5.7	9.7
Associate's degree	36.6	52.2
Bachelor's degree	55.5	37.1
Not in a degree program	2.2	0.9

Note: Differences significant at 0.05 level, unless noted with *; Source: NPSAS:2012, using WTA000

Table 4: NPSAS employment and credit card use, 2012

	Non-foster youth	Foster youth
Held a job (excluding work-study)*	58.5%	58.6%
Bank accounts: had checking or savings account	91.3%	84.6%
Job: Earnings from work while enrolled (excluding work-study)	\$3,755	\$4,504
Job: Hours worked per week (excluding work-study)	14	17
Credit cards: balance due on all credit cards	\$1,688	\$1,729
Credit cards: used credit cards to pay tuition and fees in 2011-12	24.1%	25.7%
Credit cards: only source available to pay tuition and fees in 2011-12	64.0%	65.5%

Note: Differences significant at 0.05 level, unless noted with *; Source: NPSAS:2012, using WTA000



Table 5: NPSAS average financial aid, by type, 2000 to 2012

	2000		2004		2008		2012	
	Non-foster youth	Foster youth						
Expected Family Contribution	\$ 8,432.37	\$ 1,845.06	\$ 13,006.22	\$ 3,244.68	\$ 13,749.74	\$ 1,355.14	\$ 11,269.00	\$ 759.00
Federal Pell grant	2,572.49	5,439.02	909.17	\$2,724.76	714.02	1,812.93	1,339.00	2,550.00
Direct Subsidized Loans	2,143.28	2,536.26	1,101.73	\$1,704.18	1,052.81	1,220.05	1,232.00	1,189.00
Direct Unsubsidized Loans	1,309.94	1,460.44	795.01	\$1,166.38	638.97	851.25	1,118.00	1,192.00
State need-based grants	568.57	852.85	313.60	\$701.48	381.67	592.87	381.00	440.00
State merit-only grants	86.40	34.84	548.80	\$321.85	964.89	288.40	1,163.00	490.00
Institutional grants total	1,605.37	735.79	1,032.96	\$790.88	1,643.54	979.90	2,113.00	1,260.00
Institutional merit-only grants	539.30	249.45	467.65	\$264.09	813.73	258.38	1,009.00	380.00

Note: All figures in 2012 dollars, using the Higher Education Cost Adjustment; Source: NPSAS:2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, using weights STDYWT, WTA00, WTA00, WTA00 respectively



also borrowed more in Stafford Subsidized and Unsubsidized Loans.

Though they received more financial aid overall, foster youth received less *institutional* aid than their non-foster youth peers. This was largely because non-foster youth received the bulk of merit-based aid.

The gap between foster youth and non-foster youth in average merit-based aid increased from 2000 to 2012, as colleges have redirected financial aid resources from need-based to merit-based aid in an effort to attract high achieving students. This is cause for concern, since foster youth are less academically prepared by standard measures of merit (e.g., ACT scores) and face obstacles in their academic preparation, such as attending multiple schools, making them less likely to qualify for merit-based aid.¹⁸

Another reason foster youth received less institutional aid is that they are more likely to attend community colleges and for-profit institutions that award less institutional aid (merit- or need-based) generally.

The Need for Better Data

A challenge in describing the experiences and characteristics of foster youth in postsecondary education is the lack of good data. As mentioned previously, federal education datasets lack clear identifiers of former foster youth and contain little information about respondents' experiences with the social welfare system or in postsecondary education. Those that do address postsecondary experiences have limited sample sizes, in part due to the low numbers of former foster youth who attend college.

Federal education datasets lack clear identifiers of former foster youth and contain little information about respondents' experiences with the social welfare system or in postsecondary education.

In addition, there simply has been no effort focused on collecting educational data about former foster youth. What data do exist largely come from questions on the FAFSA, which were designed to determine whether an aid applicant is independent for financial purposes. The form was never intended to collect relevant data about foster youth specifically.

Since this analysis relies on the FAFSA, a limitation is an inability to discern which students were actually former foster youth as opposed to students with deceased parents or emancipated minors. This is an important

distinction, as these groups may differ substantially in ways that affect their educational opportunity and attainment. For this reason, some caution is warranted in interpreting the findings presented here.¹⁹

Given current limitations with federal research datasets, statewide longitudinal databases may offer an alternative source of information for understanding the educational trajectories of foster youth. Databases at the state level—often created for administrative purposes by agencies such as higher education coordinating boards and social service agencies—contain individual-level data that often provides information about students' experiences in foster care as well as in educational settings. Although 25 states now link foster care and K-12 education data,²⁰ it is not clear to what extent these data are linked to postsecondary education data.

The work of Berger, Cancian, Han, Noyes, & Rios-Salas (2015)²¹ offers an example of how researchers can use linked statewide data systems. Specifically, Berger and colleagues use individual-level files linking data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Child Protective Services, and other public social welfare programs



to understand the relationship between out-of-home placement and academic performance.

Conclusions

Although care should be taken in interpreting the descriptive data presented here, this exploratory analysis points to a variety of college enrollment experiences that may present barriers for former foster youth and warrant further research: delaying their enrollment, enrolling part-time, incurring more debt than non-foster youth peers, and enrolling in development education courses.

Moreover, the finding that foster youth enroll at higher rates in community colleges and in associate degree programs points to a need to better understand the distribution of foster youth support programs at different types of institutions. Colleges and universities appear to be increasingly recognizing foster youth as an underserved population,²² and anecdotally, it appears that a growing number of institutions are developing programs designed to support the personal, academic, social, and financial needs of these students. Some work²³ has attempted to understand the design and impact of these programs, but little is known about where they are based. If these programs are disproportionately located at four-year institutions, the needs of foster youth at community colleges may be going unmet.

Recommendations

Policymakers' growing attention to foster youth along with increased efforts at colleges and universities to support this population speak to the need for more evidence and better understanding to inform policy and practice. A few recommendations emerge from this analysis.

1. Researchers should inventory existing datasets to identify those that can answer questions about foster youth at all levels of education and detail what policy-relevant questions remain.

2. Researchers should look for ways to collaborate with officials in education and social service agencies to acquire longitudinal data on the educational experiences of current and former foster youth.
3. As part of the development of educational longitudinal surveys such as the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, the Beginning Postsecondary Students survey, or the Educational Longitudinal Survey, a technical review panel should be convened to craft a limited set of research and policy-focused questions about foster youth for inclusion in the surveys.
4. Researchers should inventory campus-based support for foster youth.

Inventory Existing Datasets

In the absence of detailed education data about foster youth, researchers have to rely on existing datasets, such as statewide longitudinal education data, foster-specific data (e.g., the Midwest Study²⁴), or nationally representative surveys (e.g., NPSAS). However, we need a clearer picture of the extent to which these datasets are representative of former foster youth, what information is available (e.g., time spent in care) across the datasets, and what vital information is lacking. An inventory of datasets collected for research purposes (e.g., NPSAS and the Midwest Study), along with administrative datasets (e.g., statewide longitudinal education data systems) showing areas of coverage, would help researchers and policymakers alike better understand where attention is needed.

Collaborate with Education and Social Service Agencies

Much of the data that is needed to answer policy-relevant questions about foster youth likely exists to some degree in the administrative data systems of state education and social service agencies. These data systems may not be able to answer all questions (such as the educational aspirations



of foster youth], but they represent a source of much-needed information for better understanding the educational trajectories of these students. The work by Berger and colleagues (2015), discussed previously, represents a model for collaboration with agencies to access this key data.

Add Questions Specific to Foster Youth to National Surveys

The National Center for Education Statistics, which oversees the collection of federal education datasets for research purposes, should consider adding questions specific to foster youth to upcoming administrations of national surveys. For example, the next iteration of the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study might ask respondents if they were in foster care, and if so, the length of stay and the ages at which they experienced out-of-home care. Minimally, experts on foster youth should be included on upcoming technical review panels for survey revisions to advise on data collection.

Inventory Campus-based Support Programs

An inventory of campus-based support programs for foster youth would provide information on whether the programs are located where the greatest need is, given that foster youth are more likely to enroll in associate degree programs at community colleges than non-foster youth. In addition, knowing the common design features of these programs may be an instructive first step in conducting outcome evaluations.



Endnotes

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19 One limitation of using NPSAS data collected from the FAFSA is that the question related to being a former foster youth has changed over time. For example, in 2004-2005 and 2008-2009 (two NPSAS collection years), the question asked, “Are both of your parents deceased, or are you or were you (until age 18) a ward/dependent of the court?” However, in 2012-13 (also a NPSAS collection year) the question was reworded to include students who may have been a dependent or ward of the court from age 13 on. It read, “At any time since you turned age 13, were both your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a dependent or ward of the court?” Also, this section of the FAFSA incorporated skip logic, so that once a student answered ‘yes’ to any part of the question about dependency, they did not receive the next question. As a consequence, the NPSAS 2012 had more missing data for this question than prior survey administrations, and the responses were imputed in the restricted-use data files containing data at the student (as opposed to the group) level.

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24 According to Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, “*The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth* (Midwest Study) is a longitudinal study that has been following a sample of young people from Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois as they transition out of foster care into adulthood. It is a collaborative effort involving Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago; the University of Wisconsin Survey Center; and the public child welfare agencies in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin.” (<http://www.chapinhall.org/research/report/midwest-evaluation-adult-functioning-former-foster-youth>)



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