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Programs and Policy Goals for Helping Vulnerable Youth as They Move into Adulthood

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Self-reliance and independence are national ideals. Young adults eagerly anticipate the day they can live on their own. What we sometimes fail to realize, however, is that young adults in their 20s today seldom are truly on their own. As researchers at the Network on Transitions to Adulthood have documented, the transition to adulthood during the past 40 years has become more protracted and difficult for most youth. Most young people, in fact, continue to depend on their parents for financial help, health insurance, or a place to live between jobs.¹ Yet, not all parents have the resources to offer these supports, and still others face even greater demands because their children have physical, mental, or behavioral problems. More strikingly, some youth have no families at all to fall back on.

On Your Own without a Net (forthcoming in fall 2005 from University of Chicago Press), an edited volume by Network researchers D. Wayne Osgood, E. Michael Foster, Constance Flanagan, and Gretchen Ruth, paints the first comprehensive picture of early adulthood for those without family support or for those whose physical, mental, or behavioral problems create special barriers to independence.

This brief outlines the shared themes and needs across the groups examined in the book: those who are leaving foster care, those with backgrounds in the juvenile justice or adult criminal justice systems, with physical or mental disabilities, those estranged from their families and at risk of homelessness, and those leaving the special education system. The remaining eight briefs in this series (www.pop.upenn.edu/transad) focus on the specific populations of vulnerable youth.

Attaining Adulthood

The youth addressed in this volume are either challenged physically or mentally or have not had the social and familial supports so important to most young adults. Many of these youth have relied on government programs during adolescence or perhaps longer. Others, however, have landed in systems that likely compounded their trouble, such as the juvenile justice system. Many others have struggled alone in the face of family hardship and poverty, which can both contribute to and compound the original problems.

Their struggles seldom end when they turn 18, yet often the supports do. Eligibility for many of the services ends at age 18 or 21. If the services do not end completely, they change. Medicare and Social Security programs are prime examples (see brief by White and Galloway). In addition, these youth often face demands that their peers do not. Youth leaving foster care, for example, must find housing, without the security of a family's safety net.

In addition to these problems, these youth are often the least prepared to assume adult responsibilities. Many have dropped out of school, others may lack a set of skills required in today's labor force, or lack the maturity or life skills to cope. Still others have physical limitations that can affect their work opportunities. Not surprisingly, these youth often fare poorly. Relative to other youth, they are more likely to be unemployed, to have children outside of marriage, to be socially isolated, to commit crimes, and to live in poverty. Often lacking goals or the skills to attain

¹ Rick Settersten et al., editors, *On the Frontier to Adulthood* (University of Chicago Press, 2005). For the policy briefs based on the book and for more information on the Network, see www.pop.upenn.edu/transad

them, they flounder. Five years after leaving school, 30% of the youth in special education classes had been arrested (see brief by Levine and Wagner). About one-third of emotionally disturbed youth in special education are arrested at least once during their adolescence.

What do these youth need to become successful adults? How can society most effectively invest to enhance their chances for success? The book offers several policy and program options, stressing the themes of resilience and social inclusion to emphasize that, despite the challenges faced, these youth have the potential for success, and that everyone benefits from helping these youth become successful contributors to society. What follows are several overarching approaches that can aid all of the youth, regardless of their specific vulnerabilities.

Policy and Program Goals

The first avenue for enhancing these young adults' prospects is to improve programs and policies that benefit *all* youth. Indeed, raising the minimum wage, improving school curricula, improving support services at community colleges, and providing universal health care likely would benefit these vulnerable populations even more than less vulnerable youth. In addition, we must improve the programs and services for these youth as children. Juvenile justice is a prime example (see brief by Chung and Altschuler). Although a seemingly daunting task, teaching life skills, offering real job training, and enabling these youth to show society that they can be responsible members of their communities is a start. In addition, better transition planning is needed, and here, special education offers a promising model of such planning (see Levine and Wagner brief).

A second strategy is to increase access to programs and services for these youth. Although removing all age restrictions on Medicaid and other supportive programs is impractical, we should examine which programs and policies will be most effective for these groups over their life span, and expand access for those services.

The nation also should move from fragmented, disconnected child and adult systems of support toward a singular system focused on the needs of young people. At an administrative level, such a system might entail better integrating eligibility requirements. However, system-level change will not benefit youth until service quality is improved. Better training for professionals serving youth is needed. Doctors, for example, receive little or no training in dealing with various developmental needs of young adults in these populations (see the brief by Blum and White for more information).

Involving families more directly in the planning and support of their children is also needed. Such a family focus would recognize the diversity of the children and youth served. Likewise, improving community-level services can help ensure that families have access to services in their own communities, where they feel most comfortable.

More funding is needed for programs and supports. Youth leaving foster care, for example, receive only about \$700 *per year* for housing (see brief by Courtney). Furthermore, during times of tight budgets, states do not even implement all the supports at their disposal. For example, states can extend Medicaid coverage beyond age 21 to young adults leaving foster care, but few have done so. In addition, we must learn more about these populations and what works. This volume is a step in that direction, but as became clear in assembling it, wide gaps in our knowledge remain. Our hope is that our understanding of emerging adulthood will come to mirror our growing understanding of adolescence, which has benefited greatly from the attention of researchers to this important time.

Ultimately, improving policies and programs for young adults benefits society as a whole. At a minimum, attending to youths' needs during the transition to adulthood should reduce later problems, such as crime. More thoughtful policy, however, can ensure that these youth become productive contributors to society through work and through their contributions to family and community as engaged citizens.

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The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of a few generations, and these changes are challenging youth's psychological and social development. Some are adapting well, but many others are floundering as they prepare to leave home, finish school, find jobs, and start families. The network is both documenting these cultural and social shifts, and exploring how families, government, and social institutions are shaping the course of young adults' development. The Network is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.