

At what age do young people become adults?

Monica Dowling and Courtney Hougham make the case for extending the age limit for young people to receive care

In today's society, at what age do young people become adults? With 18 being the societal and legal norm of transition from youth to adulthood, the foster care system was a reflection of society and foster care services ended when a child turned 18. However, times have changed and, unfortunately, the foster care system has been slow to change with them. With a decline in the job market and more young adults choosing post-secondary education, the age at which young adults are leaving the nest has shifted. In the United Kingdom, 49 per cent of young adults aged 20-24 are still living at home (Office of National Statistics, 2014), and 56 per cent in the United States (Fry, 2013). If young adults are living at home longer, the foster care system should reflect this change allowing foster care youth similar opportunities.

Education

In general, young people are choosing to live at home longer, giving them the freedom to continue with their education. Years of research have shown that receiving a post-secondary education has socioeconomic benefits. A young adult with a Bachelor's degree has a much greater earning potential than one without. Unfortunately, research from the United States has also shown that when young adults leave foster care at the age of 18, they are less likely to have a high school diploma, more likely to be unemployed and homeless, and, if they are employed, they will earn about \$8,000 less a year than their counterparts in the general population (Courtney et al., 2010). On the other hand, young people

who were allowed to remain in foster care until the age of 21 were twice as likely to complete a college degree, thus increasing the likelihood of a boost in socioeconomic status. If allowing young adults to remain in foster care three more years can increase their opportunities and access to education, it seems like the logical step to take. As young people are more likely to remain at home in the general population until the age of 24, the foster care system should reflect this social trend.

Costs

The main deterrent to increasing the age young adults are allowed to remain in foster care is the cost to the government. In the United States, the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act 2008* gives states the option to continue supporting foster care services past the age of 18 if the young person is in school or employed. Currently 36 out of 50 states have state-funded foster care for young adults until the age of 21 or over – Connecticut funds up to the age of 23 – typically stipulating that the young person is attending school. Some states require a discharge plan and signed agreement by the young person to continue their education.

In the UK, the National Audit Office (2014a) estimates the average annual spend of a year's foster care is between £29,000 - £31,000 compared to £131,000 - £135,000 for residential care – so while an extra three years' costs may be high at the outset, the long-term benefits of extended foster care can outweigh the initial costs. Young adults who are allowed to remain in foster care until the age of 21 or older, giving

them the opportunity to continue their education, are less likely to be reliant on the public welfare system. However, with budgets being slashed and programme cuts happening across the board, the short-term costs loom larger than the long-term benefits.

On 13 March 2014, a new *Children and Families Act* was given royal assent in the UK which includes giving children in foster care the choice to stay with their foster families until their 21st birthday, if the young person, foster carers and social workers want to continue this living arrangement. This change to the law (part five) was strongly lobbied for by the Fostering Network in their Staying Put and Don't Move Me campaigns. They argued that young people leaving care need to have more say about when they are ready to live independently, rather than being forced out before they have developed an appropriate level of maturity and life skills. Furthermore the *Young Person's Guide to the Children and Families Act 2014* (Department for Education, 2014) states 'Unless staying put is not right for the young person, the council (local authority) must give the former foster carers the advice, help and money they need for the young person to stay on until they are 21'.

Young people and foster carers in Scotland are much more fortunate: because the *Children and Young People Act (Scotland) 2014* has extended the age at which care leavers can continue to receive after care support from local authorities from up to 21 years to up to 26 years.

Austerity

However the Local Government Association (2014) points out in their report:

Councils are currently halfway through a scheduled 40 per cent cut in funding from central government. Having delivered £10 billion of savings in the three years from 2011/12, local authorities have to find the same savings again in the next two years. As a result of these cuts, councils in many areas will not

have enough money to meet all their statutory responsibilities.

Some councils will be relying on reserves to buy time, especially for preventative and early intervention strategies, which are costly to undertake, and the savings from a reduced reliance on care services are unlocked only several years later. In the case of the extension of foster care to 21 year olds, the cost benefits may not be seen in local authorities at all but in a reduction in unemployment and prison statistics and as a drop in admissions to homeless hostels.

Two National Audit office reports question whether continuing local authority cuts are sustainable (2014b) and whether the Department for Education is meeting its objectives to improve the quality of care and the stability of placements for children in care (2014a).

Outcomes

Local authorities in the UK take children into care to improve outcomes for them, but children in care do less well in school than their peers. In 2012/2013, 15 per cent of children in care achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, including Mathematics and English, compared with 58 per cent of children not in care. They are also more likely to experience problems in later life, which can have a wider social impact and lead to higher costs to the public purse. For example, at the end of 2013, 34 per cent of 19-year-olds who were in care at the age of 16 were not in employment, education or training (NEET), compared with 15.5 per cent of 18-year-olds.

Research cited by the National Audit Office (by York University) has

estimated the lifetime cost of a young person being NEET at £56,000 a year. While the National Audit Office (2014a) report does not refer to the *Children and Families Act*, or the extension of foster care until 21, one of the report's recommendations could ensure that national contracts included the choice for fostered young people to stay with foster parents until they are 21:

D. Support effective commissioning of foster places by developing a standard national contract for foster carers for use by local authorities or independent providers.

Concerns

While the policy of extending foster care for all young people in care until 21 in the *Children and Families Act* is a positive step forward, the funding for this preventative long-term childcare policy when child protection is statutory, urgent and continues to be underfunded in the current political regime is a major concern. A significant worry for local authorities is future cuts to social

care for children at a time of on-going sexual exploitation cases.

For example Birmingham Council's 'We Need to Get it Right' Inquiry pinpointed 83 children, 80 of them girls, as being most at risk

of sexual exploitation and 44 of this group were in care (not foster care). The Council acknowledged that this number could be the tip of the iceberg (Morris, 2014).

Despite the initial costs, the long-term benefits to young adults in foster care specifically, and society generally, could make the extension of the foster care age well worth it and local governments would be well-served to include the age

extension for foster care in their budgets.

Extending the foster care age could produce an increase in an educated work force, a decrease in homeless and/or sexually exploited young adults, a reduction in early pregnancies amongst young women leaving foster care, and a decline in the numbers of young adults relying on welfare from the age of 18 onward. Enabling young people in foster care to achieve successes like their counterparts in the general population will only happen if the age of foster care is extended to 21 or beyond. ■

Professor Monica Dowling is based at the Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University College, London.

Dr Courtney Hougham is a Principal Planning Analyst, Hennepin County Department of Community Corrections and Rehabilitation, USA

References

Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Lee, J., and Raap, M. (2010), *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at ages 23 and 24*, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, USA.

Department for Education (2014), *Young Person's Guide to the Children and Families Act 2014*, London: The Stationery Office.

Fry, R. (2013), 'A Rising Share of Young Adults Live in Their Parents' Home', Pew Research Center.

Local Government Association (2014), *Under pressure, How councils are planning for future cuts*, London: Local Government Association.

Morris S. (2014), 'Birmingham sex abuse report finds 132 children at risk', *The Guardian*, 25 November.

National Audit Office (2014a), *Children in care*, HC787, London: The Stationery Office.

National Audit Office (2014b), *Financial sustainability of local authorities*, HC 783, London: The Stationery Office.

Office for National Statistics (2014), *Large increase in 20 to 34-year-olds living with parents since 1996*, London: Office for National Statistics.