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Aging Out

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Aging Out

by Sarah James

At a time in the United States when a record number of parents are financially and emotionally supporting their children well into adulthood, one group of adolescents and probably the most ill prepared, is forced to fend for themselves at age eighteen. Each year, approximately 20,000 American adolescents "age out" of the foster care system, often without the resources needed to live successfully on their own for the first time. Usually without a family support system, savings or training for independent living, odds are doubly against these youth already at increased risk for negative economic and social outcomes. Children in the foster care system typically come from poor communities, receive inadequate education, undergo frequent school changes and have suffered abuse and neglect as children, which prompted their placement in foster care.

Wayne State University's Research Group on Homelessness and Poverty and the group's founder, Professor Paul Toro, have been studying the issue of homelessness from a variety of angles since the 1980s. "I never get bored with studying this issue because homelessness is such a complicated problem," says Dr. Toro. "We are probably the only scholars in the world who have studied most aspects of homelessness, from public opinion to prevalence to intervention to prevention research."

Their research findings led them to the foster care population. "We became interested in the population of kids who have aged out of foster care because there have been a whole series of studies, including some of ours, in which homeless adults have been asked about their history, and an amazingly high number indicate that they have been in foster care," explains Dr. Toro. He estimates that less than 2 percent of the overall population in the United States has been in the foster care system. However, among homeless adults, that number rises to as high as 35 percent in some studies. With a rate of homelessness over 15 times that of the general population, foster care youth are at significant risk of becoming homeless as young adults.

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Through a grant from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, the Research Group on Homelessness and Poverty has been tracking the welfare of 400 at-risk youth into adulthood over a seven-year period. This project, termed Housing, Adolescence, and Life Outcomes (HALO), examines the housing situation, educational and income status, substance use, conduct problems, psychological health, experience of community and

Dr. Paul Toro, professor of psychology

domestic violence, sexual behavior, recent stressful events, and physical health symptoms of its participants. Measures from the HALO study were modified and applied to a follow-up study targeting youth who have aged out of the foster care system and have been on their own for an average of 3.5 years. Michigan's Department of Human Services provided names and contact information on the 816 young adults in the Detroit tri-county area foster care system that turned 18 (the age in which youth are released from the foster care system) in 2002-2003. Since data was more than three years old, Dr. Toro was pleased that his research assistants were able to track down one third of the youth and nearly all who were contacted agreed to be interviewed.

Despite the obvious need, Dr. Toro says that many foster children have reported receiving no preparation for life skills before leaving the foster care system and nearly half have not received training in how to obtain housing services. And this shows in the interview results. "If you look at the group prospectively," shares Dr. Toro, "you see lots of problems. For example, 17 percent, within this 3.5-year period, have spent some time literally homeless, on the streets, in a shelter, in an abandoned building, this kind of situation. And even more, 49 percent, if you want to include a broader definition of homelessness, what I might call precarious housing – living with somebody but knowing they could kick you out at anytime, or staying with friends for a few days and not knowing

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where you'll go next. That's just one outcome. If you look at other things, like education, only 41 percent finished high school, another 16 percent got a GED, but we're still talking more than 40 percent who don't have a high school education or GED. The employment situation shows that the kids were working, on average, only about half of the time during the 3.5 year follow-up period and that the average income, when they were working, was only $598 per month. The most common workplace was fast food. So, these kids are not doing well in terms of jobs or educational attainment. Almost half, 48 percent, have received some kind of public assistance, such as food stamps or welfare."

The next step is intervention research. Data from the telephone surveys will be used to design a comprehensive intervention program that will provide a continuum of educational, psychosocial, medical and practical support before and during the transition into adulthood. Dr. Toro and his research team expect to begin with a small-scale intervention pilot study in which they will interview 100-200 adolescents who are close to aging out of the foster care system. They will collect data on how these teenagers are doing at the beginning of the study and provide a random half of the group with intervention. Afterward, they will assess what worked and what didn't, in order to demonstrate a model that can help prevent homelessness and other negative outcomes in the foster care population. They would then like to apply this model on a larger, national, and possibly international, scale.

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About Dr. Paul Toro: Dr. Paul Toro earned his bachelor's degree in psychology from the State University of New York at New Paltz and his doctoral degree in clinical/community psychology from the University of Rochester. He joined Wayne State in 1992. You can learn more about his research at http://sun.science.wayne.edu/~ptoro/.

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