



HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL

Contacts: Candice Douglass: 425.214.2704
John Chambers: 202.285.0448
John Lacey: 617.432.0442

Former Foster Children in Washington and Oregon Suffer Post Traumatic Stress Disorder at Twice the Rate of U.S. War Veterans, According to New Study

Findings Point to Need to Increase Access to Mental Health Services

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) A new study released today by Casey Family Programs, Harvard Medical School, the State of Washington Office of Children's Administration Research, and the State of Oregon Department of Human Services, shows that rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among adults who were formerly placed in foster care (alumni), were up to twice as high as U.S. war veterans.

Few studies have examined how children in foster care have fared as adults, and even fewer studies have identified what changes in foster care services could improve their lives. The *Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study* provides new information in both areas.

"These findings are a wake-up call for the nation to make foster care and the well-being of hundreds of thousands of our most vulnerable children a national priority," said Ruth W. Massinga, president and CEO of Casey Family Programs, the largest national foundation whose sole mission is to provide and improve—and ultimately prevent the need for—foster care. "These children enter the child welfare system because of traumatic family circumstances and through no fault of their own. We have a responsibility to provide them with good, permanent homes to help them repair the hurt and succeed in life. At Casey Family Programs, we are using this new research to ensure we are addressing these children's needs more effectively."

Despite facing many challenges, including unstable living conditions and child abuse, more than 20 percent of adults formerly in foster care placement through both private and public agencies were found to be doing well.

The majority, however, still faced major challenges in the areas of mental health, education, and employment. One-third of youth formerly in foster care had incomes at or below the poverty level, one-third had no health insurance, and nearly a quarter had experienced homelessness after leaving foster care.

Researchers examined the long-term effects of foster care on adults who are now between the ages of 20-33. Although the study participants were from Oregon and Washington, the findings were indicative of national trends, according to researchers.

This study serves as a valuable tool for keeping the state of Washington on the right course in improving the foster care system through our comprehensive Kids Come First reform initiative. The initiative seeks to reduce the need for foster care placements, reduce time spent in foster care and ensure that kids and youth in foster care get the services and support they need to become successful adults," said Uma Ahluwalia, assistant secretary of the Children's Administration in the state's Department of Social and Health Services. "The data from this study provides us with a baseline for measuring the success of our reforms."

-more-

Many adults who spent time in foster care as children are in fragile economic situations, researchers found. The employment rate for study participants was 80 percent, compared to 95 percent for the general population of a similar age.

"The information in this study is unique as it comes directly from young adults who have exited foster care, said Ramona Foley, assistant director, Oregon Department of Human Services, Children, Adults and Families. "Their reflections on their own experiences not only provide us insight into the child welfare system, but also provide us an extraordinary opportunity to identify changes that must be made if we are to improve the quality of systems which currently serve Oregon's foster children and youth,"

In addition to the PTSD finding, more than half (54.4%) of adults formerly in foster care had clinical levels of at least one mental health problem within the previous 12 months, such as depression, social phobia, panic syndrome, and anxiety.

"These findings are significant because they document clear and substantial need for treatment in a large population of youth who are already in the system and available for treatment. The action implications are clear," said Ron Kessler, Professor of Health Care Policy at Harvard Medical School Department of Health Care Policy.

In 2003, 800,000 children were served by foster care services, and 523,000 children were still in care at the end of that year – more than double the number two decades ago. Each year 20,000 young people between the ages of 18 and 21 must leave the foster care system when they become legal adults, and many are left without any support, family connections, or the skills they need to succeed in life.

Findings from the study also revealed that a disproportionate number of youth who were formerly in foster care completed high school via a GED instead of a high school diploma. (56% received a diploma, 29% received a GED, compared to 82 percent, and 5 percent for the general population.) Completion rates for post-secondary education were also low among youth formerly in foster care (16% completed a vocational degree).

"The findings underscore the urgent need to improve the support provided to children and youth in foster care," said Massinga. Key recommendations from the study include:

- Reduce how many times a child moves on their way to a permanent home
- Encourage the establishment of life-long connections with foster parents and other supportive adults
- Increase access to effective medical and mental health treatment
- Improve foster parent orientation and training with respect to identifying and addressing child mental health needs
- Adopt measures to increase high school graduation rates with diplomas and not GEDs.
- Inform older youth about local college-preparatory programs, such as Gear-Up, TRIO, and Upward Bound, and help them enroll in these programs
- Expand youth employment programs
- Strengthen housing programs to prevent homelessness

"I am really excited about this study because we now have concrete information on the outcomes of young people aging out of foster care," said Mary Herrick, an Issaquah, WA resident who spent over seven years in the foster care system as a young adult. "This study validates what we have all known: that the more homes youths are placed in, the more likely they will have mental health issues, lower educational outcomes and ultimately less ability to earn above poverty level wages. It is my hope that as a community we will rise up and take responsibility for our children, and that future generations of foster children will have a better life because of our efforts."

In conducting the study, researchers reviewed records of 659 youth formerly in foster care, 479 of whom were interviewed. The study was conducted through a collaborative effort led by Casey Family Programs, which included Harvard Medical School, the University of Michigan, the State of Washington Office of Children's Administration Research, the University of Washington, and the State of Oregon Department of Human Services.

###

Casey Family Programs is the largest national operating foundation whose mission is to provide and improve—and ultimately prevent the need for—foster care. The foundation draws on its 40 years of experience and expert research and analysis to improve the lives of children and youth in foster care in two important ways: by providing direct services and support to foster families; and promoting improvements in child welfare practice and policy. The Seattle-based foundation was established in 1966 by U.P.S. founder Jim Casey and currently has a \$2 billion endowment.