



May 2003

Public Opinion about Youth Transitioning from Foster Care to Adulthood

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative is a grant-making foundation spearheading a major national effort to help youth in foster care make successful transitions to adulthood. In the fall of 2002, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative hired Lake Snell Perry & Associates (LSPA) to conduct a study exploring public knowledge of and perceptions about the challenges facing young people leaving foster care. This study had two components: a nationwide telephone survey and five focus groups.

This study shows little awareness – but a significant level of concern – about the challenges facing young people transitioning from foster care to adulthood. Moreover, the study shows broad public support for transitional assistance.

Here are the main findings:

- The foster care system and the issues facing its alumni are not top-of-mind issues for most Americans. The majority say they know little about foster care. Americans have mixed opinions about how well the foster care system serves those in its care.
- Most Americans agree that age 18 is too young for people – be they young people leaving foster care or other young people – to be completely on their own. Most appreciate the special challenges that foster care alumni face in their transition to adulthood.
- Americans believe it is important to provide assistance to those aging out of foster care. The public feels these young people need to learn about money management, be moved toward independence and self-sufficiency, and make connections in their communities.

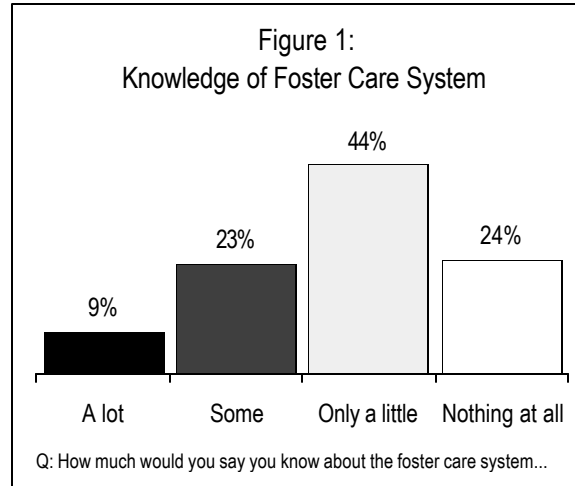
Partial findings follow:

Findings

Most Americans Say They Know Little about Foster Care. A Minority Know a Fair Amount about the System.

A two-thirds majority (68%) of Americans say they know little or nothing about the foster care system. (Figure 1) One in 10 say they know a lot about foster care and just under a quarter say they know some.

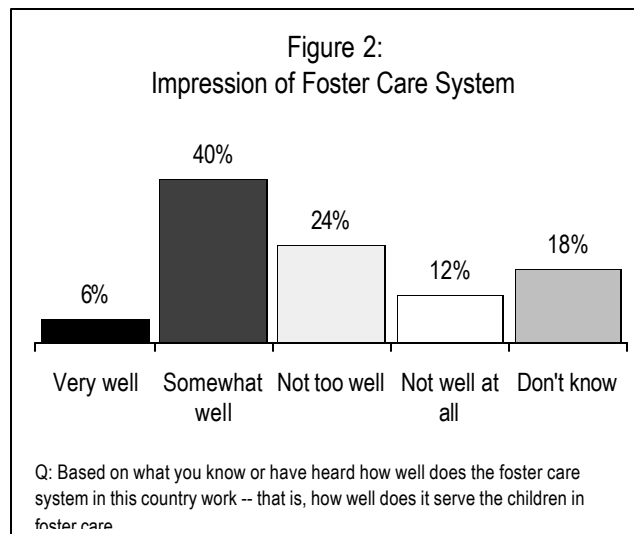
In response to another question, a third (34%) of respondents report having had direct experience with the foster care program. Most (28%) say they have “known or dealt with foster children or parents in [their] personal life or through work or volunteer activities.” Six percent say they themselves have experience as a foster child or parent.



People Have Mixed Impressions of What Kind of Job The System Does. Many Simply Do Not Know Enough to Even Guess.

Survey respondents were asked how well the foster care system serves the children in its care. As Figure 2 shows, one in twenty (6%) feel the system does a very good job. A four in ten plurality (40%) say they system does somewhat well. Over a third (36%) feel the system does not too well or not well at all. Almost two in ten (18%) could not give a rating, demonstrating a lack of familiarity with the system.

Focus groups participants had similarly mixed impressions of the foster care system. Some assume that the system must be okay since “a lot of kids go through it.” Others have negative perceptions of the system. However, those with negative impressions note that these impressions are likely shaped by media coverage which, by its very nature, focuses on the negative.



The Media – Particularly The News Media – is Where Most People Get Their Information about Foster Care.

Most people have learned what they know about the foster care system from the media – particularly the news media. Six in ten (62%) say they have learned a lot (30%) or some (32%) of what they know from the news. Only 12 percent report having learned nothing from this source. Not all news media are equal in this regard. The majority of those who get information from the news media say they have gathered the most information from television news (62%). Fewer say their main source has been print media (32%) or radio (5%). The entertainment media is also a source for some members of the public. A third (35%) say they have learned at least some of what they know about foster care from the TV shows and movies. A third (32%) have obtained no information from this source.

Just over a third (36%) of Americans say they have learned a lot (16%) or some (20%) of what they know about foster care from things that have happened with their family or friends or in their neighborhood or community. The same percentage (36%) have gained no knowledge or information at all from this source.

Most Believe 18 is too Early to Expect Young People to be Completely on Their Own.

Americans' opinions about support for youth leaving foster care are informed in part by their feelings about young people's transition to adulthood.

Most Americans agree that age 18 is too young for people – be they foster care alumni or others – to be completely on their own. Survey respondents say the age at which most average young people are completely on their own is 23. A third (32%) feel most are not on their own until age 25 or older. Moreover, most Americans believe that young people leaving foster care face special challenges during these years. Seven in ten (69%) believe young people leaving foster care are more likely than other young people to have problems during their transition to adulthood. Only two in 10 (20%) feel they are no more likely to face extra challenges.

Americans are not necessarily in favor extending the existing foster care system. When asked whether 18 is the right age for people to “age out” of foster care, 46 percent say it is too young and the same percent say it is about right. This finding seems to reflect mixed feelings about extending traditional foster care beyond age 18, rather than opposition to helping those leaving foster care in their transition to adulthood. Indeed, as the next section shows, there is strong support for helping those aging out of foster care. Even among those who feel 18 is the right age for aging out, the large majority (89%) support helping foster care alumni transition to adulthood.

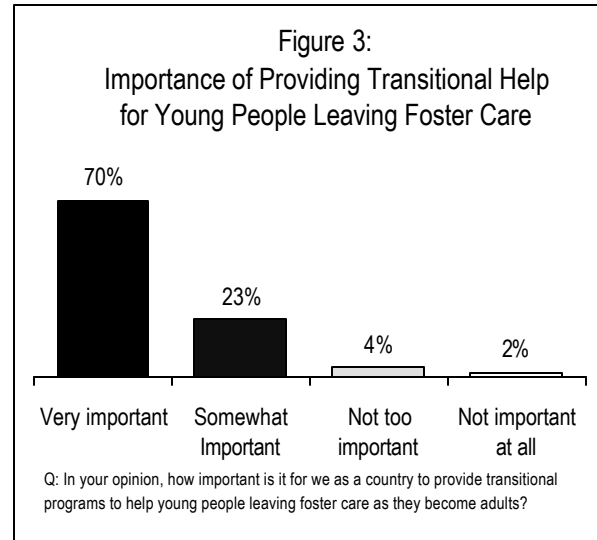
Americans' feelings about the importance of assisting young people leaving foster care is captured well by this quote from a focus group participant:

“Once the child reaches 18 he is grown physically but a lot of time they are mentally unprepared because of the lack of experience of being independent and being a productive member of society. Instead of just throwing them out there, they need a couple of more years in some type of support system. The system may not be as intensive but something to give them a step up. Everyone will benefit, not only the child but also the community will benefit.”

There is Strong, Across-the-Board Support for Helping Young People Leaving Foster Care.

Over nine in ten (93%) Americans feel providing transitional programs for young people leaving foster care is important. Seven in ten (70%) say it is very important. (Figure 3)

Support for transitional assistance is strong across the board, though some groups feel especially strongly about the importance of providing this help. Women are more likely than men to feel providing this assistance is very important (78% vs. 62%). Nine in ten (90%) African-Americans and eight in ten Hispanics (80%) feel this is very important. Whites are slightly less likely to feel this is a very important priority (66%) though the majority still do. Democrats are more likely than others to say this is very important (79%). Nevertheless, majorities of Republicans (64%) and Independents (65%) say providing transitional assistance is very important.



Focus group results suggest participants have varied reasons for wanting to provide this support – some altruistic and others rooted in self-interest. Many participants feel as a society we have an obligation to help young people leaving foster care; simply put, it is the right thing to do. As a focus group participant explains: “I think that is very important. It is not right to take an 18-year-old person and just stick them out into the world like that. They need support. It should not just stop after they walk out the door. It should be an ongoing process.” Others argue that it is in society’s self-interest to help these young people transition successfully to adulthood. They point out that without assistance few will be productive, contributing members of society and some may instead end up on the welfare rolls, on the streets, or in prison.

People Have Clear-cut Ideas about the Characteristics Transitional Programs Should Have.

Americans feel strongly that programs designed to help young people leaving foster care should have specific elements and characteristics. Large majorities believe such programs should:

- teach young people about managing and saving money (98% say this is important),
- help them move toward independence and self-sufficiency (98%),
- involve them in planning for and making decisions about their own futures (98%), and
- facilitate connections with individuals (97%) and institutions (96%) in their communities.

Appendix A: Methodology in Brief

This study has two components: focus groups and a survey. Five focus groups were conducted in October, 2002 in Houston and Baltimore. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 65 and included a mix of men and women, as well as parents and non-parents. Groups were conducted with non-Hispanic whites (2 groups), African Americans (2) and Hispanics (1) and were limited to those who pay at least some attention to current events. The second component is a nationwide RDD (random digit dial) telephone survey of 1,121 Americans age 18 and older. It included an over-sample of respondents in Texas and California. This survey was conducted from January 15 through 22, 2003.