

Opinion When foster care ends, 18-year-olds still need support

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The “financial umbilical cord” [between American parents and children is getting longer](#). Fifty-seven percent of people ages 18 to 24 [live with a parent](#) — as do 21 percent of 25-to-29-year-olds. And 31 percent of young adults [rely “a great deal” or “a fair amount”](#) on their parents for emotional support. For many American kids, the gradual glide path to adulthood comes with an ample parental safety net.

But there’s one group of young people who enter adulthood much more abruptly, and with much less support: the roughly 20,000 teenagers who, in

bureaucratic euphemism, “graduate” from foster care each year. And while some states are trying to provide “extended” foster care, the most vulnerable young adults in the country deserve more — as close as possible to the kind of creativity and commitment biological and adoptive parents offer their own kids.

Political debates about foster care often focus on whether too many — or too few — children are entering the system. But the number of foster families is already insufficient. Even before the covid-19 pandemic, foster parents were in short supply, leaving children to bunk in hotels, offices or even psychiatric hospitals while they waited for family placements. In all but six states, the number of registered foster homes fell sharply during the pandemic.

That shortage seems likely to exacerbate a long-standing problem. For more than 20 years, an average of 22,500 children have aged out of foster care each year without returning to their families or being adopted.

Too many of these young adults face serious struggles. According to [surveys conducted](#) by the National Youth in Transition Database, between 2018 and 2022, 19 percent of such 19-year-olds had experienced homelessness at some point. Thirteen percent of them had been imprisoned in the previous two years. Ten percent of them had been referred for substance abuse treatment. Meanwhile, 8 percent of those 19-year-olds already had children of their own.

It’s no wonder they need help. Given the rise of extended adolescence, it’s jarring to imagine what happens to kids who are simply evicted into adulthood.

“How on Earth can an 18-year-old navigate completely alone?” says Jennifer Rodriguez, the executive director of the Youth Law Center and herself a former foster youth. “I can raise my hand and say, not very well.”

Concerned about outcomes like these, [Congress in 1999 authorized funding](#) for state programs aimed at children aging out of foster care and in 2008 provided additional financial support for states that chose to end foster care eligibility at 21 instead of 18. The result is a patchwork system of eligibility for housing assistance, the right to return to foster care, and work or education requirements for ongoing support. Even with that funding, Rodriguez argues that what's missing is what young adults who grew up without parents need most: unconditional support and room to fail.

One place to start might be with presumptive eligibility for benefits such as housing assistance, access to social workers, child-care subsidies and even a guaranteed income up to a certain age. Rather than [forcing foster care graduates](#) to prove they need ongoing support, better to follow the model of California by simply enrolling 18-year-olds in services and letting them opt out as they wish.

Another step is to think creatively about securing housing for foster care graduates. Take the problem of finding a co-signer for a young person's first apartment lease. In Mecklenburg County, N.C., the Youth and Family Services Division under the direction of Charles Bradley has started signing master leases on behalf of program participants. That not only makes it easier for these young adults to secure housing, but it means if they are asked to leave an apartment, an eviction won't go on a former foster youth's permanent record, barring them from housing in the future.

It's also important to make sure that housing rules foster independence and interpersonal connections rather than hindering them. Some states, for example, [don't let participants in extended foster care](#) share an apartment with a romantic partner, even if a young couple is raising a child together and that child could benefit from the presence of both parents. Congregate settings might have stricter rules about who can visit than college dorms do

or impose curfews on residents, trapping extended foster care recipients in a kind of extended adolescence when they're meant to be preparing for adulthood.

Then, there are the bigger dreams: A [new report from the Youth Law Center](#), the Institute for the Future and California Youth Connection imagines giving foster graduates the option to take housing aid as a lump sum that they could use to get on the property ladder, much as affluent parents might help with a down payment.

Another innovation could help young adults with housing and education simultaneously. One study in Illinois found that just [35 percent of foster care graduates make it to college](#), never mind complete a degree. What would make it easier? Well, for Sahaad Washington, a former foster kid who is now a North Carolina mortgage loan officer, it was "devastating" to learn that she had to leave her college's dorms for spring break. She knew so little about college when she enrolled that she assumed that one benefit of attendance was four years of continuous housing.

To meet the needs of students like Washington — and of foster care graduates like the college's own president, Anthony J. Davis — Livingstone College in Salisbury, N.C., is experimenting with a program that allows young adults to come live at the school immediately upon emancipation and to stay there until they obtain their degrees. If a small historically black college with a \$6.2 million endowment can make this sort of commitment, surely wealthier institutions can follow its example.

No policy or program can replace a loving parent. But if the government is going to end up acting in that role, it ought to be more ambitious, both for who those kids can turn out to be, and for what the agencies serving those children and young adults can provide.