A Review of Literature on Independent Living of Youths in Foster and Residential Care

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This review of the research literature on independent living of youths in foster and residential care was prepared as part of the Ohio Independent Living Study that was conducted by IAR during 1999 and 2000.[1] The review was conducted to provide an informed context for the full study and was guided by two general questions. 1) What are the characteristics and needs of youths in foster care, especially those likely to face the transition from care to living on their own? This question has been addressed in a number of studies by focusing on older adolescents still in care as well as young adults recently discharged from out-of-home care. In many instances, their characteristics (e.g., educational status) and relationships (e.g., potentially supportive relatives) reveal directly the extent of need for assistance and services. 2) What kinds of services do exist and should exist to prepare youths for independent living and to support them after they have left care, and how effective are those services? In seeking to answer these questions, the existing literature focuses to varying degrees on both independent living programs and outcomes of such programs.

The most comprehensive research following up on youths formerly in foster care was conducted Westat, Inc. over a decade ago (Westat 1988, 1991, and Cook 1994). This research involved a representative national sample of 1,644 youths discharged from care during 1987 and 1988. It examined Title IV-E Foster Care Independent Living programs and the IL service needs of foster care youths. The study examined the relation of various measures of outcomes two to four years after youths were discharge from life-skills training programs. Two earlier studies of former foster youths were Festinger's (1983) study of 364 individuals who had left care in the New York Metropolitan City area and the study by Jones and Moses (1984) of 328 youths in West Virginia. Later studies of outcomes after foster care have included Barth (1990), Courtney and Piliavin (1998), and Mallon (1998) that included 55, 113, and 46 individuals, respectively. More recently, a follow-up study of 25 youths formerly in foster care by McMillan et al. (1997) focused on the youths' opinions about what had been the most and the least helpful to them in achieving their independence, rather than on objective outcomes. In addition, McMillan and Tucker (1999) did case record reviews on 252 youths.

This work has been supplemented by a body of research examining independent living programs (e.g., Stehno 1987, Scannapieco et al. 1995, and Colca and Colca 1996), addressing particular IL program elements (e.g., mentoring (Mech et al. 1995) and educational services (Ayasse 1995)), exploring youths' needs and readiness for IL (e.g., English et al. 1994a and Goerge et al. 1992), and assessing service availability and

delivery (e.g., DeWoody et al. 1993). The increasing concern for the fate of children "aging out" of the foster care system and the resulting attention given to IL programs has resulted in special issues of journals (e.g., Children and Youth Services Review v.16 n.3-4), conference proceedings (e.g., Mech and Rycraft 1995), and edited volumes (e.g., Maluccio et al. 1990) devoted to the subject. Concerning integration with child welfare generally, Waldinger and Furman (1994) show the benefits of coordinating ongoing child welfare services with emancipation preparation services, especially the benefits of encapsulating both kinds of activities in a single person. An exemplary type of community integration is illustrated by Mech, Pride, and Rycraft (1995) in their discussion of mentoring programs for adolescents in foster care across the nation.

Characteristics and Needs of Youths

In keeping with the suggestion of Mech (1994) that research on independent living follow a needs-based research agenda, this section examines the problems faced by youths about to leave the foster care system and the kinds of IL services needed to address those problems.

Support Networks

The review begins with what is arguably the most basic need of older youths discharged from out-of-home care. Many such youths have developmental disabilities or have emotional or health problems. They often have not completed high school. Their work experience is often spotty and jobs they are able to obtain generally do not pay a living wage. But these problems are to a greater or lesser extent found in the general population of 18 year olds. Most importantly, few youths in our society in this age range are ready to live on their own. The norm is for people to continue to depend on parents and relatives well into their mid-20's, as they acquire the skills and experience necessary to be self sufficient.

The term independent living can be used in a way that de-emphasizes the social dimension of adult life. Certain individual skills are indeed necessary to survive in modern society. Starting a bank account, cooking a meal, and driving a car are all things that are usually done individually. People acquire these and many other one-person skills as they advance into adulthood, and in this sense they become independent. But in a larger sense, human beings remain dependent or interdependent all their lives. Younger adults who are trying to make it on their own are particularly in need of interpersonal and social supports. Self-sufficiency normally develops within rather than apart from such a context. This is no less true of former foster children than anyone else.

A complicating factor for foster children is that they are often estranged in some way from the very people that most of their peers depend upon for support early in their adult lives. Most are in foster care because of abuse, neglect or abandonment by immediate family members. Delinquents and status offenders frequently also have a history of abuse, neglect, or rejection by their families or have experienced highly

strained and tenuous relationships with them. Relationships with their families more often appear to be poor than good for older youths in foster care. Immediate family members often visit children in placement sporadically if at all. This was confirmed for the sample of older Ohio youths in out-of-home care in the present study (Chapter Four).

This view of relationships between youths in foster care and their families can lead to the false conclusion that families that ignore their children should be discounted. A repeated and counterintuitive finding of research on youths who have left foster care supports just the opposite conclusion. Ties often remain with families, including extended family members, even when relationships are judged to be so poor that placement permanency goals have been changed from reunification to adoption or independent living. Regardless of judgments about the quality of child-family relationships, even those found to be demonstrably poor, substantial proportions of youths who age-out of foster care or are emancipated return to live with their family members and other relatives. For example, 54 percent of youths in the Westat (1991) study went to live with their family or extended family upon discharge, and 38 percent were still living in this situation 2.5 to 4 years later. Two-thirds of the youths studied by Barth (1990) reported monthly contact with family and relatives. In the follow-up by Courtney and Piliaven (1998), 40 percent of the youths reported that their families had tried to help them, 46 percent indicated their families provided emotional support to them, and 49 percent agreed that they could talk with family members about problems; about one-third lived with relatives after discharge, and family members were the most common source of monetary help immediately after discharge. McMillan and Tucker (1999) reported that 26 percent of the youths studied were living with relatives at the time of their discharge, and 10 percent of the placements were not planned, involving situations in which the agency could find no other placements for the youths or in which the youths had run away from placement to live with their families. A relatively large percentage of youths (57 percent) in the Westat study reported that they had strong concrete or emotional support networks, which included family members, after leaving care.

Courtney and Barth (1996) concluded that for long-term residents in foster care, ignoring maintenance of kinship ties and focusing solely on preparation for independent living overlooks the reality of the post emancipation situation for many, perhaps most, youths (see also, DeWoody 1993). In this light, the prudent course in independent living programs would be to explore resources of families and relatives for all youths in long-term care even in cases where reunification is no longer considered a case goal. McMillen and Tucker (1999) note that an independent living plan is no reason to de-emphasize visitation between older youths and family members.

When children are first removed from the natal home, however, the primary system concern is for their safety, and generally family contacts are limited. Unless reunification is being pursued as a viable option, family-based services may not be provided. When such services are provided, efforts often center on counseling and therapy. As valuable as these services may be, other issues are equally or more important when looking toward discharge of older youths from out-of-home care. Building on-

going, supportive relationships between children and their families may require early and sustained efforts surrounding employment, income, housing, and other assistance needed by youths who return to or depend on their families after discharge. It is also true that such efforts may fail. In this light, McMillen and Tucker suggest incorporation of "survival skills" for coping with family problems (such as chemical dependency, mental illness, and poverty) into training for independent living.

The value of nurturing relationships with relatives is supported by outcomes associated with kinship care arrangements. Inglehart (1995) found that youths in kinship care were significantly more likely to expect to live with a relative after foster care or high school. She suggests that this kind of care may soften the effects of the foster care system as it relates to readiness for independent living. In a study of 152 randomly selected adolescents who were still in foster care, Inglehart (1994) showed a relationship between the ability of youths to find help and resources on their own and whether or not they were in contact with their fathers. Courtney and Barth (1996) found that kinship care at last placement was significantly related to successful exit from out-of-home care, where "unsuccessful" referred to such actions as running away, incarceration, placement in a psychiatric hospital, abduction or death and "successful" referred to reunification with family or kin, adoption, or emancipation to independent living. This suggests being able to rely on kin may be a critical predictor of successfully negotiating early emancipation.

Some youths may fall back on their immediate family or other relatives when they leave care because the have no other alternatives. Another option for programs is to develop alternative support systems. Relationships with foster providers sometimes continue beyond care. For instance, in the Westat study about nine percent of youths lived with foster parents immediately after discharge from foster care. Courtney and Piliaven indicated that about one third of their sample were able to stay with foster parents after they technically left care. A programming option is to build upon and extend the relationships established in foster care through specialized foster homes for transitioning youths, host homes, as well as mentors inside and outside of foster homes.

Emotional and Behavioral Issues

Most children in the child welfare system who have been in placement have a poor basis for personal growth, given their start in troubled families. Early and repeated removals from home and multiple placements in foster homes and other facilities disrupt continuity in mature emotional development. A high proportion have emotional problems (the primary disabling condition among foster youth), and correlative behavior issues. Behaviors such as truancy, running away from care, dropping out of school are in part evidence of emotional withdrawal. Similarly, risky behavior, including unprotected sex and drug and alcohol abuse, may be signs of emotional problems. In the Westat study (1991), 38 percent of youths were clinically diagnosed as emotionally disturbed. Fifty percent reported using illegal drugs since discharge; 25 percent reported having trouble with the law, and about half of these said the problem involved drugs or alcohol.

Courtney and Piliavin (1998) administered a standardized mental health scale to youths who had been out of foster care and found that scores were significantly lower than those of youths in the general population. In their study, 27 percent of males and 10 percent of females had been incarcerated at least once since leaving care.

Risky sexual behavior is especially threatening to a healthy life. Auslander et al. (1998) discuss this problem in relation to HIV prevention for youths in independent living programs. Barth (1990) can be cited regarding the correlates of risk behavior generally: histories of physical or sexual abuse, neglect, family instability and disruption, poor health, educational deficits, substance abuse, and delinquent behavior. Auslander and her associates illustrate the relationship between educational aspirations and the risk status of youths. For example, teens who planned to attend college had greater HIV-related knowledge, held more desirable attitudes toward HIV prevention, and reported fewer intentions to engage in HIV-risk behaviors than teens who did not plan to attend college. They also suggest that educational aspirations can be promoted through improved "life options" for youths, such as saving accounts or scholarships for education. By being provided with assets that expand their life options youths may think and behave in less risky ways and as if they have a future worth protecting.

Pregnancy and Parenthood

Birth rates among young women leaving care tend to be quite high. In Barth's (1990) study 40 percent had a pregnancy shortly following emancipation, while in the Westat (1991) study 24 percent of males had fathered a child within 2.5 to 4 years after leaving care and 60 percent of the females had given birth. At the same time, about a quarter of the women in the general population aged 18 to 24 had given birth. In the Westat study girls with emotional problems and disabilities were less likely to have given birth to a child, a finding replicated in the present study for young women while they were in care. In addition, less stability in foster care was associated with giving birth.

Education

As a result of educational neglect prior to entering the child welfare system and frequent changes in placement and schools subsequently, many of these youths are behind their grade level. Those who had been abused or neglected are more likely to have significant educational deficits. Many have learning disabilities and/or have received special education services, a topic taken up in the present research. A high proportion have repeated grades, and some have dropped out of school, so that by the time of discharge from foster care a substantial proportion of youths have not yet reached their senior year in high school.

The rate of high school completion upon discharge from foster care was 48 percent in the 1887-88 national sample (Westat 1991). This figure had risen to 54 percent by the time the youths were interviewed two to four years after discharge. This

compares to 80 percent of individuals nationally in the 18 to 24 year age range that had completed high school. Barth (1990) found that just 45 percent of the youths (age 21) in his study had completed high school. More recently, Courtney and Piliavin (1998) found that 55 percent of 113 Wisconsin foster care youths had completed high school 12 to 18 months after discharge.

Some of these problems will be averted by increasing the stability of out-of-home placement and, thereby, reducing changes in schools attended. The latter is a correlate of difficulties in school and grade failure. Assessments performed of educational progress and problems and educational plans for children are essential. This includes information gathered about disabilities and needs for special services. Assistance of various kinds are in order, including tutoring, GED programs, and dropout prevention programs. They need also to include advocacy, particularly in helping the youths get educational entitlements and financial aid for school. One of the findings of Ayasse (1995) when studying programs to expedite and advocate for the education of foster children in California was that information about foster children's educational needs was not tracked by their caseworkers in any consistent fashion.

Life Skills

Youths in foster care have the same needs as other young people to learn skills necessary for daily living, such as how to handle and save money, how to shop for and cook food, how to drive and maintain a vehicle, and how to locate and obtain housing. They are at a disadvantage, however, because usually due to family circumstances and multiple placements they have not had the normal continuum of informal skill-learning experiences. To compensate for this deficiency, formal classes in life skills are a principle focus of most current independent living programs.

The Westat study focused on 10 general skill areas: money management, knowledge about health care, family planning, knowledge about continuing education, skills associated with employment, home management, social skills, obtaining housing, obtaining legal assistance, and finding community resources. As a rule less than half of the youths in the study (leaving care in 1987 and 1988) had received skill training in each area. The exceptions were money (55 percent), home (66 percent), and social (70 percent).

Employment and Income

Employment rates prior to leaving out-of-home care have been found to be relatively low. For example, only 39 percent of the youths in the Westat (1991) study had any job experience. At follow-up some years later, 38 percent had maintained employment for one year. About 48 percent had held a full-time job during the ensuing period at a median weekly salary of $205. A somewhat larger proportion (75 percent) was working in Barth's (1990) follow-up. In Courtney and Piliavin's (1998) study 50 percent were employed and average wages were less than $200 per week. In the Westat

study only 17 percent of youths were self-supporting through their jobs. About a third (32 percent) survived through their earnings coupled with other sources of income. The remaining 51 percent of individuals with no jobs either were totally dependent on other sources of income (44 percent) or received welfare (7 percent).

Earnings will vary depending on the job market. From the standpoint of preparation for employment, however, earnings are primarily dependent on the level of education and/or skill training an individual has achieved. This is why educational programs are so important for youths in foster care. Earnings are dependent secondarily on work experience, attitudes toward work, job search skills, and job maintenance skills. A wide array of services concerned with these secondary requirements for employment have been developed to help move youths into the work force. These include career counseling, cooperative education, assessments for employment, apprenticeships, summer employment (through JTPA), job search training, job coaching and counseling, supported employment, mentors, and on-the-job training.

Services to Prepare for Independent Living

Since the initiation of the Federal Independent Living legislation in 1986 numerous descriptive presentations of particular programs have been published along with a few studies of the effectiveness of entire programs or particular parts of programs.

Standards for Independent Living Programs

The *Standards for Independent Living* of the Child Welfare League of America (1989) are relevant for understanding the elements necessary for an effective independent living program. Many of the program activities and services advocated in the CWLA standards a decade ago were explicitly included in the 1999 Foster Care Independence Act, as will be apparent in the following description.

Assumptions of the Standards. The CWLA standards define the target group for independent living services as young people separated from their homes who are in need of obtaining the skills necessary to live healthy, productive and responsible lives as self-sufficient adults. The standards assume the primary value of the biological family and the importance of reuniting children who have been removed with their parents whenever possible. When reunification is not possible, the standards assume that:

- Planning for independent living requires a clearly stated written plan.
- Youths should be involved in the IL planning process.
- The earlier the process toward self-sufficiency can begin, the more effective will be the result.

- Planning for independent living requires realistic time frames that take into account the absence of the security of a stable family in the lives of youths in out-of-home care.

- Post-emancipation services may be necessary for youths.

- Foster parents and child welfare workers must be available to provide support and to serve as role models and instructors of youths.

- Biological families should be included in the IL preparation process to the fullest extent possible.

Coordination. Coordination of the service delivery system is a primary emphasis of the standards. Coordination implies a sense of shared purpose of the various elements of the service system necessary to promote independent living and clear definitions of roles and responsibilities of each participating agency and individual. The following should be linked together in a coordinated IL program.

- Social work services by caseworkers, social workers, counselors, and others are essential.

- The program must ensure linkage with educational services, including assessment and career guidance and help for the youth in negotiating access to schools of various kinds. This will include special education and alternative educational programs.

- Linkage to employment services should be a part of any IL program, including assessment, access to community employment and training programs, training in work habits, job leads, and job development.

- Health services must be available to the youths, including services to pregnant teens and teen parents.

- Help in finding suitable living arrangements is essential. Such housing services should include education about housing choices, procedures in finding and maintaining housing, tenants rights education, and advocacy to obtain adequate, affordable housing.

- Legal services should be available to youths in the IL program.

- Socialization, culture and recreational services such as interacting with adult role models, peer support, and community service programs are important as well.

- Aftercare services should be available, including financial assistance, employment counseling and support, crisis counseling, emergency shelters, housing assistance,

information and referral services, community service opportunities, peer support programs, and advocacy.

Social Work. The CWLA standards emphasize the need for the social work process. Among other elements, the standards recommend the use of a team approach, formal and informal experiences and instruction, experiential learning, and group and individual counseling. Caseloads of workers who are providing case management and coordination services should be no larger than 20 youths. Assessment of personal and life skills is a critical component of the program. The social worker should be responsible for insuring that the child has opportunities to learn independent living skills and that a transition plan is in place for the youth.

Independent Living Skills. Youths need assistance in a number of areas that will be important for their adult life. The CWLA standards include a focus on the following areas:

- Help to the youth in assessing his or her own strengths and needs.
- Learning how to identify and define his or her own problems.
- Learning how to perceive options and make choices.
- Understanding of the sources of stress and how to manage it.
- Planning for the future.
- How to obtain information about a family's personal, medical, and social history.
- Understanding and coping with past losses, rejection, and anger.
- How to locate, obtain and maintain a residence.
- Personal care.
- Locating and using community resources.
- Forming meaningful adult relationships.

Residential Services. Finally, an independent living program should include a continuum of residential services. These will include the standard out-of-home arrangements as a start: emergency care, foster family care, group homes, and residential treatment centers. The program should also include, as appropriate, special IL arrangements in residential treatment centers and group homes, supervised apartments, semi-supervised apartment, and boarding homes. As will be shown below, a broader array of IL arrangements has developed since the CWLA standards were written.

Acquiring the Skills Necessary to Live Independently

Most young people pickup the everyday skills that they will need as adults from their families. No matter how caring and helpful the family, however, few young people at age 18 have all the skills they need for living on their own in modern society. Consequently, the norm for youths in this country is to gradually acquire the knowledge and skills they need over several years *after they have finished high school.* Various surveys may be cited, but the general consensus is that young adults remain dependent on their parents for financial assistance and emotional support on average until they reach their mid-20's, and they continue to acquire the know-how necessary for living apart from their parents throughout this period. Contrast this picture with that of youths exiting foster care at age 18. They typically have not had strong family support. If most youths in supportive families are not ready to live on their own at age 18 how many fewer former foster youths are ready? This is the fundamental challenge involved in independent living programs: The deficits arising from poor early environments and lack of family support must be overcome *and* foster youths must learn and develop *more rapidly* and be self-sufficient *earlier in life* than is normally the case for their more fortunate peers.

By permitting funds to be expended for youths in the 18 to 21-year age range and for room and board, the 1999 independent living legislation takes important steps toward the development of realistic programs. Supports are now possible that extend slightly further into adulthood.

From the start of interest in independent living programs and certainly from the beginning of Federal legislation in the 1980's, life-skills preparation and training has been considered an essential part of an independent living program. The most common methods are classroom training

Skills Assessment

The 1999 independent living legislation will require states to begin to measure outcomes for youths in independent living programs and to generate information on their characteristics. Assessment of skills at various points in time would seem to be a logical part of this process. Apart from what programs might require in the future, however, assessment of skills is a critical step in designing an individualized independent living plan for any given youth. This will include assessment of life skills in preparation for life-skills training, of basic educational skills (math, reading and composition), and other skills in preparation for post-secondary education.

Little formal research was found on skill assessment of youths preparing for independent living. Paper and pencil tests exist to assess the readiness of youths in foster care for independent living and their educational preparation. Hahn (1994) conducted a comparative study of four different assessment tools. The *Test of Adult Basic Education*

(TABE) is a normed standardized test that can be used to determine the grade-level-equivalent of youths and to estimate the probability of their passing the GED (high school equivalency) test. The *Tests for Everyday Living (TEL)* measures life skills in seven areas: job search skills, job related behavior, health care, home management, purchasing habits, banking, and budgeting. The most widely used instrument in Ohio (see Chapter Three) is the *Daniel Memorial Institute's Independent Living Assessment for Life Skills*. This test covers a broader range of life skills than the TEL. The fourth test that Hahn looked at was the *Effective Social Skills (ESS)* test, which measures relationship skills in regard to peers, adults and self. Hahn was less interested in comparing the results of these tests than in determining what they, as a group, told him about the sample of youths tested (231 foster youths in a summer youth program in New York City). This battery of instruments tested "hard" skills such as math and reading comprehension, as well as so-called "soft" personal and social skills. The study revealed that a set of youths (from one-fifth to one-third) were at the bottom in any particular skill, although the needs varied from one youth to another. Not all foster youths need everything, but clearly a relatively large minority needs special assistance with many things.

Training for Independent Living

The CWLA standards discussed above strongly promote life-skills education for older youths in foster care. Such training is the most common feature of independent living programs, including those in Ohio, as will be evident in Chapter Three.

Specific life skills services are currently required in Ohio (State Regulations 5101:2-42-19). They are to be provided to each child in substitute care who has attained the age of 16 years. They can be provided in a variety of ways—through mentors, public agency workers, private agency workers, community agencies, organizations or schools. The services are to include:

1. Daily living skills, including maintaining a residence; home management; shopping; money management; utilization of community services; utilization of leisure time; and personal care, hygiene, and safety.

2. Personal decision making and communication skills.

3. Evaluating personal educational needs.

4. Planning for a job or career.

5. Securing and maintaining employment.

6. Securing a residence.

7. Planning for health care needs.

8. Building a positive self-image and self-esteem.

Local offices offer such skill training in various ways in Ohio. In offices in more populous areas where large numbers of older youths are found in foster care, formal classes are held on a regular basis. These are discussed at various points in the next three chapters.

In smaller and more rural offices, where only a handful of older youths may be in foster care at any one time, formal classes are not always practical and training tends to occur on an individual basis. One approach is to coordinate training across several areas and between different agencies. Johnson (1988) described an example of this method. In that project, the JTPA (Job Training Partnership Act) summer youth employment program was utilized in three rural counties as a method of teaching independent living skills. Workers arranged for a wide variety of jobs and training experiences through the JTPA program. The program also included weekly group seminars that emphasized the development of hard skills, such as money management, meal preparation, apartment hunting, and interpersonal skills, such as living with a roommate and making decisions. The seminars were continued during the school year. The JTPA summer youth employment program offers an opportunity for experiential learning that can be much more valuable to foster youth than classroom training alone. Some examples of the use of the summer youth employment program for youths in out-of-home placement were also found in Ohio and are discussed in the next chapter.

The program described by Johnson brought groups of foster youths together for experiential learning and group discussions. In a study by McMillen et al. (1997) of former foster youths in independent living the importance of meeting other young people in similar situations was emphasized by study participants. These individuals felt that the IL activities in which they participated--particularly seminars, camps, conferences, and reunions--reduced their isolation and the stigma of being in out-of-home care. Such shared experiences may, in fact, be one of the major benefits of life-skills training classes.

Does life-skills training really assist youths after they have been discharged from care? Some support for the value of the training can be found in the reports of youths interviewed for the present study (Chapter Five). As to systematic studies of long-term effects, there are very few. A major objective of the Westat (1991) study was determining whether relationships could be found between life skills training and outcomes after foster care. As noted above, less than half of the youths in that study had received instruction in most of the ten skill areas considered. The study looked at seven outcomes: 1) ability to maintain a job at least one year, 2) graduating from high school, 3) ability to access health care when needed, 4) whether the youth was a cost to the community (on welfare, in jail, or on Medicaid), 5) avoidance of early parenthood, 6) overall satisfaction with life, 7) presence of a social network, and 8) overall success as measured by the sum of the previous seven outcomes. Regression analyses were conducted that also took into consideration certain differences in demographics, services, and life experiences. The study first divided youths into those who received no life-skills

training at all and those who received any training at all. *No difference was found between these two groups on any of the outcome measures.* Then the study focused on youths that had received skill training in five core areas *in combination* (money, credit, consumer, education, and employment). With these youths, who had received training in all these areas, significantly improved outcomes were found in areas 1, 3, 4, 7, and 8. Training in a combination of a few individual skill areas seemed to be related to outcomes, but only three of these were logically related: getting training in accessing health care services was associated with greater ability to access health care (3), training in how to find further educational (training) opportunities was related to maintaining a job (1), and employment-related training was associated with lower cost to the community (4). The most relevant conclusion was that consistent training in the five core areas has positive consequences in the lives of youths.

The Westat study remains the only comprehensive study of the value of life-skills training for older youths in foster care. Yet, the conclusions must be accepted cautiously. No foster care system of which we are aware, and this includes Ohio, requires youths to participate in life-skills training. Attempts are made to persuade youths, incentives are provided, foster parents are contacted, but youths can simply refuse and those that do participate may drop out or participate half-heartedly. Four separate sets of measures and analyses on a cohort of foster youths are necessary to effectively determine the value of life-skills training. 1) The skills that youths actually have at discharge from care must be determined. 2) The sources of the skills should be identified, isolating those that were acquired through formal classes or tutoring and those acquired informally. 3) Other skill acquisition after leaving care should be determined. 4) Outcomes in adult life that flow directly from the skills must be measured and related to the presence or absence of skills from various sources. Take the simple example of cooking skills: Do youths know how to cook when they are emancipated? Did they learn the skills in formal classes or in other ways? Did they acquire cooking skills after leaving care and how? Do they cook for themselves and which skills and sources of skills are associated with this behavior?

Scannapieco et al. (1995) evaluated an independent living program of life-skills training in a setting of intensive social work. This program involved master's level ILP social workers with smaller caseloads. The goal was to offer intensive relationship-based services involving home visits; work with the families, peers, and foster providers of youths; meetings with the youth at least twice monthly; and coordination of services. Individual services such as life-skills instruction and practice, counseling, advocacy, and resource referral were offered. Youths participated in groups with others who were also in the independent living program. The researchers selected a sample of 44 individuals who participated in the program and a comparison group of 46 youths in foster care who did not. The study found that by the end of their stay in care the youths exposed to the independent living program were significantly more likely to have graduated from high school, have a history of employment, be living on their own, be self-supportive and be employed at case closing. Outcomes were not tracked beyond case closing. However, the study provides modest support for the assertion that differences do result from intensive and individualized IL services that offer the social work elements mentioned in the CWLA standards.

Youths learn in various ways and, while life-skills training may be important, there are other ways of learning that are equally or more important. Experiential learning of the skills necessary to live independently is preferable as a rule to classroom learning. Skills are composed of theoretical and practical knowledge as well as habits of behavior that are formed through practice. Formal classes and individual tutoring can be valuable starting points or adjuncts to learning how to live on one's own. Mock experiences (e.g., handling play money or role playing the process of applying for a job or purchasing a car) may also be valuable. But neither can replace the fundamental methods of skill acquisition: observing the actions of models and practicing on one's own. Social learning theory suggests that complex behaviors can be picked up with astonishing speed and efficiency by observing another competent person (a model) enacting the behavior. Learning from a model is then refined and cemented into place through trial and error experiences: learning by doing. Learning by doing involves making mistakes, then making corrections, and making further mistakes that are in turn corrected. The frequency of mistakes declines as the behavior is learned. This process applies to everyday how-to skills, such as cooking a meal, as well as to social skills, like getting along with a roommate or learning how to cooperate with fellow workers on the job.

Learning through models has been accomplished in independent living programs through *mentors* and, as indicated in the 1999 legislation, *dedicated adults*. Mentoring usually involves an older individual in a one-to-one relationship with a younger person. The relationship centers on assisting the development of the person being mentored through direct instruction and encouragement and indirectly through example. Mech et al. (1995) visited and studied 29 mentoring programs across the United States that served adolescents in foster care. Five mentoring program models emerged from this research:

- *Transitional life-skills mentors* provide young people with social support, friendship and serve as role models in making the transition from foster care to independent living. The mentors are recruited from a wide variety of community organizations and settings. They are typically older than 21 years of age and are matched with receptive youths in foster care. This was the most common type of mentoring discovered the Mech et al. study.

- *Cultural-empowerment mentors* are recruited from the same cultural or ethnic group as the youths. The fundamental idea is to offer each youth a positive role model from her or her minority group and a means of overcoming the negative messages about the group from the general society. These mentors are found in specific target populations and cannot be recruited through general advertising in the community.

- *Corporate-business mentors* come from the business community and provide jobs, monitor work experience, and offer career development to adolescents in foster care who are motivated to participate. Businesses are recruited that in turn offer the mentors to the youths. The social agency acts as intermediary facilitating the relationship.

- *Mentors for young people* are experienced mothers matched with a young pregnant female. The mentors under this model endeavor first to assist, instruct, and encourage the girls regarding child rearing and then to guide them toward self-sufficiency. The goal is to help the girls avoid abusing or neglecting their own children in the future. Recruitment in the Akron, Ohio program studied by Mech et al. was accomplished via a human interest newspaper story on the program published on Mother's Day, that resulted in a flood of volunteers.

- Under the *mentor homes* model four to six adolescents are placed with an adult mentor. The program works with at-risk youth, and the mentor is responsible for guiding the youths in relation to education, employment, community services and so on. The mentors are usually college students who live in the homes. Beside teaching basic living skills they service as positive models to the youths of behaviors in which the youths themselves are usually engaged, such as getting to school and work on time and studying for classes.

On the negative side Greim (1995) points out the folly of expecting mentors to replace the full array of social services needed by youths transitioning to independent living. Mentors provide instruction, support and act as role models. Other supports must be provided in the traditional fashion. Mentoring is typically a volunteer activity, and, as Greim noted, such programs entail outlay of substantial resources, especially regular supervision to keep mentors involved and committed to the program. However, he and his associates at Public/Private Ventures found evidence that mentoring programs can be made to work in concert with other needed services at an anchoring program site.

Regarding learning by doing, a study of life-skills knowledge by Mech et al. (1994) may be supportive. This research confirmed that youths in the most unrestricted out-of-home living situations (scattered site apartments, see below) where they were most in charge of their own lives scored highest in a life-skills inventory. These results suggest that the more extensive the independence permitted to youths, the better the acquisition of life skills. On the other hand, it is possible that the observed differences could be explained by the selection process: the most competent youths were chosen for this kind of living, and for this reason rather than their living situation, they scored better at a later time on a life-skills inventory. The problem cannot easily be addressed experimentally, but an alternative method might be a careful study of the criteria applied in the process of assigning to independent living, along with assessments of life skills before and after assignment to various living situations and, most importantly, a review of the opportunities to acquire life skills that each youth experienced.

Educational Programs

We have seen that youths in foster care and those who leave care to live on their own tend to be educationally behind others their own age. Grade level in school at discharge, high school completion rates, and dropout rates serve to confirm this. Data collected in the present study will show this to be true for Ohio as well. Hahn (1994), in

a study reviewed above of assessments of youths in the 16 to 19 years age range, showed that basic math, reading and writing skills were quite low in a substantial minority of foster youth, suggesting the need for special programs to build those skills among that population.

Evidence exists, however, within the research literature on the value of programs that promote the education of youths in out-of-home care. Ayasse (1995) reported on several school-based programs in California designed to provide educational services to youths in foster care. Ayasse first reviewed studies showing that the educational achievement of children was significantly influenced by multiple foster placements. Children who have been abused and neglected tend to exhibit greater behavior problems, including significant deficits in school. There is evidence of discrepancies between the need for and the reception of special education services among foster children. In addition, there is evidence from various states that child welfare caseworkers do not track educational services in a consistent fashion. This suggests that special efforts to promote and enhance the educational experiences of youths in care might pay off in improved outcomes. The programs reviewed by Ayasse included four core service components: school placement/student advocacy, tutoring, counseling and employment readiness. Individuals receiving these services had higher rates of graduation than other individuals in foster care. They gained at least an average of 3.2 months academic growth for each month of tutoring and they earned more academic credits. Dropout rates were reduced and maladaptive behavior was reduced.

Finishing high school before emancipation or aging out of foster care is critical. Strong evidence was found in the present study showing that the likelihood that individuals who have not completed high school before discharge will drop out after discharge. This finding was reinforced by the reports of program operators concerning this problem. Programs such as those described by Ayasse can increase the likelihood of success. In addition, programs to bring back youths who have dropped out into alternative schools or GED preparation programs have been successful (see the discussion of the efforts of the Syntaxis program in Columbus, Ohio in the next chapter).

Another consideration is suggested by Mech and Che-Man Fung (1999) in a recent study of 171 youths emancipated from foster care in Illinois. That research showed that educational achievement was higher for youths who were placed in less-restrictive settings while in foster care. Institutional, residential and hospital settings were the most restrictive placements. Restrictiveness was considered to decline in group homes, then foster and relative homes, and finally in transitional apartments. Mech and Che-Man Fung recognized that restrictiveness probably varies considerably *within* each particular type, but believed that placements within foster homes and transitional apartments were on average probably the least restrictive as well as the most effective settings in which to prepare foster youths for independence. Substantially more youths from these kinds of settings enrolled in postsecondary education or training programs. One idea that has not been studied is that placing youths out on their own in scattered site apartments may, by distancing them from foster homes and group homes, turn them toward school as their primary social group and thereby increase school attendance.

Transitional Living

The most comprehensive descriptive handbook of alternatives for transitional living is found in Kroner (1999). The author describes in detail housing options and practical issues surrounding the operation of housing programs. Kroner presents eleven types of programs that are the basis of the following descriptions. The types are roughly arranged from least to most restrictive. Kroner emphasizes the value of learning by doing in an environment with real-world consequences. The greater the freedom afforded to the youth, the higher the probability that necessary skills will be acquired and practiced. On the other hand, it is also true that the greater the freedom, the greater the likelihood that problems will develop.

In each of the following arrangements, subsidies were provided to the young people. When they were living in private arrangements, this included rent. In these and in several other types of housing, youths received subsidies for food and personal items as well.

1. Scattered-Site Apartments. These are the least restrictive living arrangements. They are individual apartments where youths, typically 17 years old, usually live alone. As a rule, they are rented from private landlords. There may be daily supervision by independent living program staff when individuals first move in, but later this drops back to once or twice a week. Rent and other expenses are paid by the program, and youths are provided with stipends for food and personal items. Youths may take over expenses as they approach emancipation. In many cases they take over the apartment lease after discharge.

2. Supervised Apartments. Such apartments are usually clustered together in an apartment building and the building is usually owned by the agency. Live-in or overnight staff supervise the apartments. Youths assume most responsibilities in this environment but the agency maintains greater control and can provided for youths that need daily attention, supervision and counseling.

3. Shared Homes. These are houses where several young people live. They take responsibility for the house. The house may be minimally supervised or there may be live-in adults. Otherwise, the residents are responsible for their own personal affairs like those in the previous two types.

4. Live-in Adult/Peer Roommate Apartments. In this living situation a young person shares an apartment with an adult or older roommate. The roommate may be a student. The person sharing the apartment is selected to be a mentor or a role model for the youth. The apartment may be rented by the adult or by the agency. This has the advantage of combining mentoring and independent living. The mentor homes found by Mech et at (1995) are examples of this kind of arrangement.

5. Specialized Foster Homes. Foster parents in these homes are specially trained to impart independent living skills. Older youths in foster care are placed in such homes prior to discharge. This affords the benefits of participation in family life. Another advantage is that some foster parents permit foster youths to remain in their homes after being discharged by the agency, or to return to the home from time to time.

6. Host Homes. Youths rent a room and live as in the specialized foster home, but host homes are not licensed as foster homes. Usually young people live with greater freedom than in specialized foster homes, but these living situations can have many of the same advantages. Host families can be family friends, former foster parents, neighbors, or others who might have a natural bond with the youth.

7. Boarding Homes. These are facilities that provide rooms where young people live individually with minimal supervision. These are useful for short-term living needs. The situation is very much like apartment living, although certain facilities may be shared.

8. Transitional Group Homes. These homes are usually affiliated with a residential treatment center. Youths may move from the center to the group home where they begin to assume greater personal responsibility and are given greater freedom.

9. Shelters. This refers to short-term emergency housing. They are available to meet crisis needs, such as a living situation for a) older youths who cannot return home and are candidates for apartments or b) youths who have failed at apartment living and need a place to go temporarily.

10. Subsidized Housing. Under this arrangement youths may choose their own living arrangements. The program provides a stipend (similar to several of the other IL arrangements) to pay for rent, food, and supplies.

11. Residential Treatment Centers. These are facilities that serve larger groups of youths in group or institutional living arrangements. In some cases these centers have on-site programs that are less restrictive. In others, they may have a program for placing youths in scattered-site apartments.

Various descriptions of housing programs can be found in the literature (e.g., Brickman et al., 1991 and Colca and Colca, 1996), but no studies have been conducted that evaluate the relative effectiveness of different living arrangements.

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[1] See the IAR Report: "An Evaluation of Independent Living Services in Ohio: Digest of Findings and Conclusions" by L. Anthony Loman and Gary L. Siegel, February 2000. This paper can be downloaded in PDF format from http://www.iarstl.org.