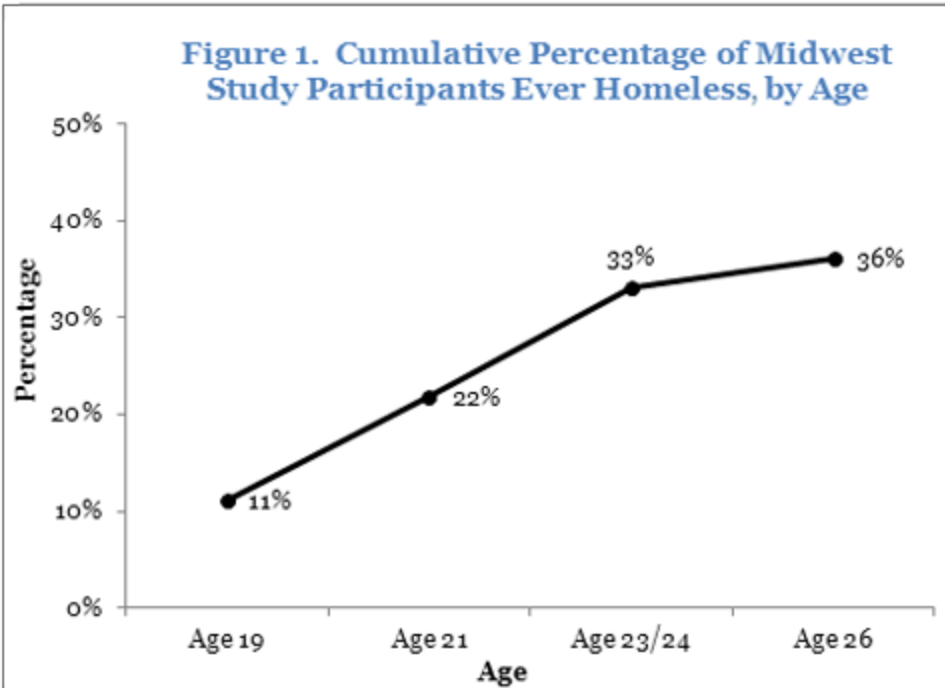


Predictors of Homelessness during the Transition from Foster Care to Adulthood

Youth who age out of foster care face a number of challenges during the transition to adulthood. Among the greatest may be achieving housing stability. A number of studies published over the past two decades have found high rates of homelessness among former foster youth who aged out of care. Although this suggests that youth who age out of foster care are at high risk of becoming homeless, not much is known about which youth are most at risk.

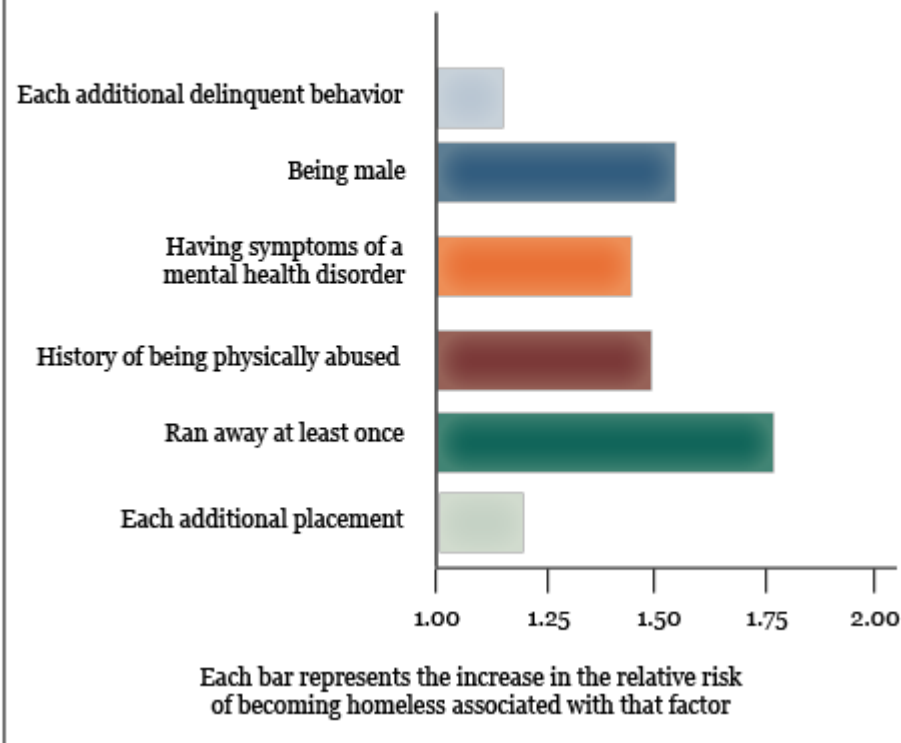
Researchers at Chapin Hall recently used survey data from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (the Midwest Study) to address this gap in the research. The Midwest Study followed more than 700 study participants from 2002-2003, when they were age 17 or 18, through 2010-2011, when they were age 26, as they transitioned out of foster care in three Midwestern states: Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin.

Consistent with results of prior studies, the researchers found a high rate of homelessness among the Midwest Study sample. By age 26, 36% of the young people whose outcomes were known had reported at least one episode of homelessness. (“Homeless” was defined as having to “sleep in a place where people weren't meant to sleep, or sleep in a homeless shelter, or [not having] a regular residence in which to sleep.”) This means that more than one in three of the young people in the Midwest Study were homeless for at least one night after aging out of foster care.



The study's longitudinal design allowed researchers to look at the relationship between the risk of becoming homeless and a variety of factors. Their analysis identified six factors that were associated with an increased risk of becoming homeless. In Figure 2, each of those six factors is represented by a bar. The length of the bar can be thought of as the increase in the risk associated with that factor. The risk of becoming homeless was higher for young people who had run away at least once from a foster care placement and for those who had experienced more placement changes. Additionally, being male, having been physically abused prior to entering foster care, engaging in more delinquent behaviors, and having symptoms of a mental health disorder were also associated with a higher risk of homelessness.

Figure 2. Predictors of Homelessness among Youth Aging out of Foster Care



Although researchers found some support for the idea that closeness to family would be a protective factor, the evidence was weak. They speculated that their definition of family may have been too narrow because it only included biological parents and grandparents.

The findings from this study suggest that much remains to be done to prevent young people aging out of foster care from becoming homeless. This includes ensuring that all youth have a concrete plan for housing after they age out, providing opportunities for youth to build financial assets, and increasing the availability of housing assistance specifically for this population. These results also point to a need for more targeted interventions, such as more hands-on housing search assistance and transitional living programs, aimed at those who are most at risk of homelessness. Equally important is evaluating those interventions to learn what approaches are most effective in preventing homelessness and with whom they work best.