

The North Carolina Independent Living Program: A Comparison of Outcomes for Participants and Nonparticipants

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Abstract:

Effectiveness of a state independent living program (ILP) was evaluated by comparing outcomes for program participants and nonparticipants in four core areas: housing, education, employment, and financial self-sufficiency. One to three years after discharge from care, ILP participants were more likely to be living independently or paying all of their housing expenses while living with others than were the nonparticipants. Program participants also reported a higher level of educational attainment and aspirations. There were no statistically significant differences regarding employment or financial self-sufficiency. Findings are compared with those of similar studies, and recommendations for program modification are described.

Article:

Concerns about adolescents in foster care increased during the 1980s as large numbers of youth aged out of care rather than returning to their families or being adopted. During this time, adolescents in out-of-home placement accounted for between 40% and 50% of foster care caseloads (Lammert & Timberlake, 1986). In 1987, Congress appropriated funds for states to implement programs to assist adolescents in foster care to make the transition to independent living. States were given flexibility in implementation of these independent living programs (ILPs), within guide-lines that specified reimbursable types of activities and expenditures. ILPs may involve a variety of services: informal learning opportunities in foster homes; training programs designed to teach basic employment, education, money and household management skills; support groups; supervised living arrangements; stipends for education; and counseling (Cook, 1988; Sims, 1988).

Only a few studies have evaluated the effectiveness of ILPs in pre-paring young people for independent living. These studies focus on outcomes for youth after they have left care in such areas as employment, economic well being, education, and housing. However, only one of these studies involved a comparison group of young people who had not received independent living services (Shippensburg University, 1993). Because of the small size of that sample and the lack of other similar studies, the extent to which ILPs actually make a difference in the lives of foster youth is unknown. The present study attempts to bring more clarity to this question by comparing outcomes for participants and nonparticipants in the North Carolina ILP.

Status of Research

In a review of four follow-up studies of former foster wards (Barth, 1990; Cook, 1991; Festinger, 1983; Jones & Moses, 1984), Mech (1994) concluded that these youth were likely to have serious educational deficits, to be unemployed or employed in low-paying jobs, to have difficulties in securing satisfactory housing, and to be in receipt of some form of public assistance. The vulnerability of former wards is also apparent when they are compared with similarly aged youth in the general population: former foster youth are at greater risk for noncompletion of high school, having a standard of living below the national poverty level, being a public assistance recipient, having unstable housing, and having difficulty accessing health care (Cook, 1994).

Most of what we know about the impact of ILPs on outcomes for former foster youth comes from three studies: a national evaluation of the Title IV-E ILP conducted by Westat for the U. S. Administration for Children, Youth, and Families (Cook, 1991; 1992; 1994) and evaluations of state level ILPs in Pennsylvania (Shippensburg University, 1993) and Nebraska (Center on Children, Families, & the Law, 1994). This section will review general conclusions of these three studies.

Westat

The Westat project (Cook, 1990; 1991; 1994) involved two phases. Phase 1 gathered case record data from a national multistage stratified probability sample of 1644 youth who left care between January 1987 and July 1988. Phase 2 involved interviews with 810 of these youth to obtain information about their adaptation after leaving foster care. Eight outcome measures were used: ability to maintain a job for at least a year; education status; ability to access health care; cost to community; avoiding young parenthood; overall satisfaction with life; availability of a social network; and a composite measure of independent living. The authors compared former foster youth, youth in the general population, and youth living below the poverty line on these variables. They concluded that

"with respect to educational completion, young parenthood, and the use of public assistance, discharged foster care youth more closely resembled 18 to 24 year-olds living below the poverty level than they do 18 to 24 year-olds in the general population." (Cook, 1994, p. 213)

They also found that former foster youth frequently had support networks after leaving care, including people they could turn to for "help, advice, and closeness" (Cook, 1994, p. 220).

Researchers examined the effect of independent living skills training on the 8 outcomes and found no significant difference between youth that received no skills training and youth that received some skills training. However, training in multiple skill areas was associated with better outcomes, and training in the 5 core areas of budgeting, obtaining credit, consumer credit, education, and employment increased the likelihood of positive outcomes in these areas as well as in the areas of accessing health care, satisfaction with life, and overall self-sufficiency.

Nebraska

The Center on Children, Families & the Law (1994) surveyed youth a year after discharge from care. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they had received preparation in independent living and to rate their current functioning in 8 core areas: employment; money; family planning; health; education; housing; community resources; and house-hold management. A response rate of 48% was reported, based on a population of 121 former wards for whom adequate addresses were available. There was no differentiation between former wards that did and did not receive IL services or among wards who received varying levels of service.

Researchers concluded that former Nebraska wards were functioning relatively better than youth reported by Barth (1990), Cook (1991), Festinger, (1983), and Jones and Moses (1986). A smaller percentage of female wards had become pregnant, employment outcomes were consistent or better, reliance upon public aid was similar or less, and educational outcomes by far exceeded those cited in the previous studies. All respondents over age 20 had completed high school or a GED program.

Sixty-five percent of respondents reported receiving some type of help in preparing for independent living, with the most help received in the areas of handling money and budgeting, running a household, and finding a job. Youth who received such help were no more likely than those who reported receiving no help to feel prepared to live on their own. The majority of respondents (regardless of whether they reported receiving ILP services) indicated they felt prepared to live on their own when they left care and that they were doing well or very well in each of the 8 core areas of functioning. Areas in which they perceived themselves as functioning the best were household management and employment, while they reported the most difficulties in housing, accessing

community resources, education, and family planning.

Pennsylvania

Shippensburg University (1993) evaluated Pennsylvania's ILP by surveying former foster youth 1 year after discharge from care. Although the response rate was low (24% for ILP participants; 41% for nonparticipants), this is the only study located which used a comparison group of youth who did not participate in an ILP. Outcome measures were similar to those in the Nebraska and Westat studies: use of public assistance; educational completion; employment status; living arrangements; youths' perception of the importance of life skills; involvement in social organizations and activities; and a composite index of independence. Only 2 of the 7 out-come measures indicated significant differences between ILP participants and nonparticipants: ILP participants were more likely than nonparticipants to be living independently one year after discharge from care and to be participating in social organizations and activities.

This study also examined the relationship between various demo-graphic and foster care variables at the time of discharge from care (age, sex, race, number of placements, family involvement, special needs, parenthood, receipt of follow-up services, and level of self-sufficiency) and outcomes for youth one year later. Although researchers did not distinguish between participants and nonparticipants in their analysis of the relationship between discharge variables and outcome indicators, these findings do provide valuable information for predicting outcomes for youth in care. Older youth and those not receiving follow-up services were more likely to have independent living arrangements than their younger counterparts and those receiving follow-up services. However, living arrangements at the time of discharge did not reliably predict living arrangements a year later. Older and employed youth were more likely to have completed high school and beyond than those who were younger and unemployed. Education completed at discharge also predicted education completed at follow-up. Older and male youth were more likely to be employed, as were those without special needs and those who had completed high school or beyond. Employment status at discharge appeared to have a moderate effect on employment status a year later. Receipt of public assistance one year after discharge did not appear to be affected by any of the demographic or foster care variables at discharge other than receipt of public assistance at discharge. The only discharge variable that affected level of self-sufficiency a year later was receipt of follow-up services: youth who did not receive such services were more likely to be functioning at a higher level of independence than those who did. Participation in social organizations and activities a year after discharge was more likely among males, those who had not completed high school, youths without special needs, and those living independently.

In summary, former ILP participants in Pennsylvania were found to exhibit higher levels of self-sufficiency and independence on the overall index than nonparticipants. In addition, youth who completed high school and beyond and those who did not receive public assistance or follow-up services exhibited higher levels of self-sufficiency. Researchers concluded that youth who participated in ILPs were more likely to be self-sufficient upon discharge from care and, one year after leaving care, were more likely to be living on their own, socially involved, and exhibiting greater levels of independence.

Summary of Findings from Previous Studies

It is difficult to make definitive statements about the effect of ILP participation on foster youth based on these studies. Although all three studies examined similar outcome variables, the samples and methodologies vary, making comparisons difficult. Furthermore, two of these studies did not include comparison groups. With this caveat, some general statements can be made.

There are few documented differences between outcomes for former ILP participants and nonparticipants. The Pennsylvania findings seem to indicate that, overall, program participants were better able to adapt to the challenges of independent living, but there was no clear advantage in any one outcome area. The Westat study supported the idea that ILPs can effectively prepare youth for independent living if a multiple skills training approach is used. However, that same study raised concern about overall functioning of former foster youth, as they appeared to function below the level of similarly aged youth in the general population. Results from the

Nebraska study are promising in that they seemed to indicate the potential for former foster youth to have positive outcomes, especially in the areas of education and avoiding early parenthood. However, program components that might facilitate higher levels of adaptation were not discussed in that study.

Evaluation of North Carolina's ILP

The purpose of this project was to evaluate the effectiveness of North Carolina's ILP. The evaluation examined both program inputs in the form of services offered and program outputs in terms of the outcomes for youth that had been discharged from the foster care system. This paper presents findings related to program impact and thus will focus primarily on outcomes for foster youth. Information about services offered, as documented through interviews with ILP staff and youth who were participating in an ILP at the time of the study, will be incorporated into the discussion section to shed light on the findings.

Independent Living Services in North Carolina

In North Carolina, social services, including ILPs, are county-administered. Federal law and state policy require that all eligible youth be assessed to determine their need for services and that case plans for eligible youth include an independent living (IL) component. Beyond that requirement, each county agency decides on the nature of its ILP and how allocated funds will be spent. Some counties operate structured ILPs that include monthly group meetings and other activities during which youth have the opportunity to learn and practice basic living skills. Other counties provide IL services on an individual basis only and do not have a structured program with group activities.

Methodology

This exploratory study of ILP program impact involved measurement of outcome indicators for a group of former foster youth that had participated in an ILP and a comparison group of foster youth that had not been involved in an ILP. Data was collected using a mail questionnaire. In addition, interviews were conducted with current ILP participants and staff to ascertain their perceptions of ILPs and their impact on youth in care.

Sample

Using a stratified cluster sampling design, two counties within each of the four Department of Social Services regions of the state were selected such that one county was in a Metropolitan Statistical Area and one in a predominantly rural area. Agency administrators in each county were asked to participate in the evaluation and, in all cases but one, agreed. An additional county was recruited for that region.

ILP participants were defined as those youth that had received ILP services beyond the required initial LLP assessment. Nonparticipants were defined as foster youth that did not receive ILP services. Using state and county records, we identified 275 ILP participants in the selected counties who had exited foster care during a 3 year period between July 1992 and July 1995. Of these, addresses were available for 137 former wards. ILP nonparticipants from each county who had also left care during the same time frame formed the subject pool for the comparison group. Nonparticipants were selected as a random sample from lists provided by county agencies.

Survey questionnaires were mailed to all 137 ILP participants and to an equal number of nonparticipants from each county. Initially the response rate was a disappointingly low 25%, despite an offer of a \$25 incentive. There appeared to be two primary reasons for the low response rate: lack of current addresses for former foster youth and reluctance of friends, foster parents, and relatives to provide current addresses. Frequently, the latest address the agency had for the youth was not accurate. Friends, foster parents, and relatives appeared to be protecting youth from bill collectors as they frequently asked researchers who phoned them whether they were from a collection agency. Despite these challenges, additional efforts to track respondents through phone calls to parents, foster parents, and other persons who might have known the whereabouts of youth improved the response rate to 32% for ILP participants (n=44) and 23% (n=32) for nonparticipants. Previous researchers have demonstrated the difficulty of locating former foster youth (Barth, 1990; Festinger, 1983), and our sample size is comparable to that of other studies of foster youth. For instance, the response rate in the Pennsylvania

study (Shippensburg, 1993) was 24% for ILP participants and 41% for nonparticipants (see Table 1). The Nebraska study involved only 55 former wards, although their response rate of 48% was higher than either the Pennsylvania study or this study of North Carolina youth.

Table 1 presents demographic characteristics for ILP participants and nonparticipants, along with similar variables for the samples in the 3 studies described above. There were no significant differences between the two groups on the variables of gender or race. Although the ILP participants were slightly older than nonparticipants, this difference was not substantial. It is reasonable to ask whether the difference between the two groups on age might account for any group differences regarding outcomes. The small sample size prevented us from running additional statistical tests to rule out the potential affects of age, so it is important that this difference be considered when interpreting the findings.

Qualitative data regarding IL programming was collected through interviews with current ILP participants and county staff. A total of 46 youth aged 15 - 21 and 13 staff were interviewed. An interview guide was used to structure the conversations with both youth and staff. Youth were interviewed both in groups and individually. Staff members were inter-viewed individually, in pairs, or in small groups.

Table 1.
Demographic variables of samples from previous and the current study.

Variable	Westat N=810	Ne- braska N=58	Pennsylvania		North Carolina	
			ILP n=32	NonILP n=24	ILP n=44	NonILP n=32
<i>Age</i>						
Range	18-24	17-21	15-21 ¹	15-21 ¹	17-24 ³	16-21
Mean	NR	18.8	NR	NR	19	18 ³
Median	21	NR	NR	NR	19	18
<i>Sex</i>						
Male	43%	22%	47%	42%	37%	52%
Female	57%	78%	53%	58%	63%	48%
<i>Race</i>						
Caucasian	61%	85%	41%	29%	38%	43%
African American	30%	3%	59%	71%	60%	57%
Other	8%	7%	0	0	2% ²	0

¹ Age at discharge from care; interview conducted 1 year later

² Native Americans

³ Age at time of survey; $t = 3.47$, $p < .001$

NR signifies Not reported

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was designed specifically for this evaluation, based on the goals of the NC ILP and measures used in other studies. Questions focused on four core outcome areas: housing and living arrangements; education and training; employment and earnings; and financial self-sufficiency. Specific indicators for outcomes related to housing and living arrangements included: degree of independence in living arrangements; ability to pay housing expenses; stability of housing and living arrangements; and quality and level of satisfaction with housing and living arrangements. Indicators for education and training outcomes were educational attainment, current enrollment, and future plans for education/training. Employment and earnings outcomes were measured in terms of current employment, wages and number of hours worked, and episodes of unemployment. Financial self-sufficiency was indicated by extent of financial dependency on parents or others and ability to manage money and pay bills. Respondents were asked to answer questions about each of these four areas both retrospectively, thinking back to the time of dis-charge from foster care (1-3 years prior to the study), and at the time of the survey. Questions were also included about respondents' perceptions of help they received in each of the four core areas.

Data Analysis

Originally, the intent was to correlate outcomes for youth with a number of variables, including demographic characteristics, level of participation in various ILP activities, length of time in foster care, and length of time since leaving care. The small sample size and the high degree of variability among county ILPs made it impossible to conduct these types of analyses with sufficient confidence. Thus, the data presented in this article are primarily in the form of descriptive statistics. Wherever possible, we applied t-tests to determine if there were significant differences between the two groups on outcome measures. We also calculated the maximum margin of error that might be expected in generalizing these findings from the sample to the population under study (Blalock & Blalock, 1968). Our computations indicated that the maximum error (where responses are split in a 50% - 50% distribution) for simple frequencies is +/- 5.5% at a 95% level of confidence.

Findings

This section presents an assessment of the impact of the ILP in terms of outcomes for the four core areas of independent living. Youth perceptions of the help they received and the helpfulness of the ILP in relation to each of the core areas are also reported.

Housing and Living Arrangements

Table 2 presents data related to housing outcomes. Living arrangements were defined as independent (living by oneself or with own children, with spouse or partner, with friends or other unrelated persons) or not independent (living with parents, foster parents, or relatives). According to this criterion, 68% of ILP participants had independent living arrangements at the time of the survey, compared to 41% of the nonparticipants. More than half (55%) of ILP participants were meeting part or all of their housing expenses, compared to 38% of nonparticipants, regardless of type of living arrangement. We applied a more stringent test of independence in housing and living arrangements: ability to bear housing expenses while living independently. There was no difference between the two groups on this variable. However, ILP participants who shared accommodations with others were significantly more likely to be paying their entire share of housing expenses than were nonparticipants.

Table 2
Housing Outcomes 1 - 3 Years after Leaving Care

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>ILP</i> (n=44)	<i>NonILP</i> (n= 32)	<i>t</i>
Living independently	68%	41%	2.40*
Paying all housing expenses	30%	19%	n.s.
Paying part of housing expenses	25%	19%	n.s.
Paying all housing expenses while living independently	60%	60%	n.s
Paying all housing expenses while living with others	25%	0%	3.79*
Number of residences since leaving care	2.6	2.0	n.s.
Average length of stay per residence	2.3 years	2.3 years	n.s.
One or more episodes of homelessness since leaving care	52%	53%	n.s.

*p < .05

Stability of housing arrangements was measured by the average number of places youth had lived since leaving foster care, the average length of stay in each place, and whether they had ever been homeless. There were no significant differences between the two groups on any of these variables.

Another indicator of goal attainment in independent living is the degree of satisfaction with one's housing situation. Forty-five percent of ILP participants and 34% of nonparticipants were completely satisfied with their present housing, while 41% and 47% were somewhat satisfied, respectively. A higher level of satisfaction among ILP participants is perhaps due to the fact that more of them were living independently at the time of the survey.

Education

Table 3 reports educational attainment at the time of the survey. Fifty-eight percent of ILP participants had completed high school or a GED, including those who went on to complete a postsecondary program. Of those who were currently enrolled in an educational program, 11% of ILP participants and 25% of nonparticipants were still in high school, reflecting the somewhat younger age of the nonparticipants. Of those nonparticipants not still in high school at the time of the survey, only 18% had completed high school, and none had completed a postsecondary program. It is particularly noteworthy that 16% of ILP participants were in college at the time of the study while none of the nonparticipants were.

Table 3
Education outcomes 1 - 3 Years after Leaving Care.

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>ILP</i> (n=44)	<i>NonILP</i> (n= 32)	<i>t</i>
Completed high school or GED	37%	18%	n.s.
Completed technical/vocational program or some college	21%	0%	3.38*
Currently enrolled in educational program	46%	34%	n.s.
Currently in college	16%	0%	2.86*
Desire for college degree	36%	29%	n.s.
Desire for post-graduate or professional education	21%	10%	n.s.
Would be satisfied with high school degree or GED	19%	48%	2.69*

*p < .05

Employment

Table 4 indicates employment outcomes. Fifty-nine percent of ILP participants were employed either part or full time, as compared with 44% of nonparticipants. The average hourly earnings for all respondents who were working at the time of the survey were \$5.50. Only about 10% earned more than \$6.50 per hour. There was no significant difference in the wages of the ILP participants and the nonparticipants. The difference between the two groups on number of hours worked per week is mainly due to the fact that a greater proportion of ILP participants were working full time.

In relation to employment stability, youth that were working at the time of discharge from care were less likely to have experienced an episode of unemployment after leaving care. Furthermore, only 13% of ILP youth that were working at the time of discharge from care had experienced an episode of unemployment for more than one month after leaving care.

Table 4
Employment outcomes 1 - 3 years after leaving care.

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>ILP</i> (n=44)	<i>NonILP</i> (n= 32)	<i>t</i>
Employed full time	41%	22%	n.s.
Employed part time	18%	22%	n.s.
Hours worked per week	39	29	n.s.
Experienced unemployment for more than 1 month since leaving care	63%	81%	n.s.
Average number of episodes of unemployment	1.9	2.4	n.s.
Average length of longest period of unemployment	8.5 months	11 months	n.s.

Financial Self-sufficiency

Financial self-sufficiency measures examined the extent to which youth relied on financial resources other than their personal earnings. Figure 1 shows the percent distribution of ILP participants and nonparticipants who utilized various public entitlements. Although the differences between the two groups are not statistically significant, ILP participants tended to utilize housing, AFDC, WIC, and Emergency Assistance at a higher rate than the nonparticipants, possibly due to the larger number of female respondents in that group. Nearly half of ILP participants and nonparticipants depended on Medicaid for health care, this being the most utilized entitlement.

The most common nonpublic source of financial assistance reported by respondents was parents and relatives, with 26% of the ILP participants and 28% of the nonparticipants reporting receipt of financial support from parents, adoptive parents, and relatives in the month preceding the survey. Friends and other unrelated persons provided financial support to 23% of ILP participants and 13% of nonparticipants. Nearly one-fourth (25%) of ILP participants received assistance from other sources as child support, free housing, and gifts from individuals.

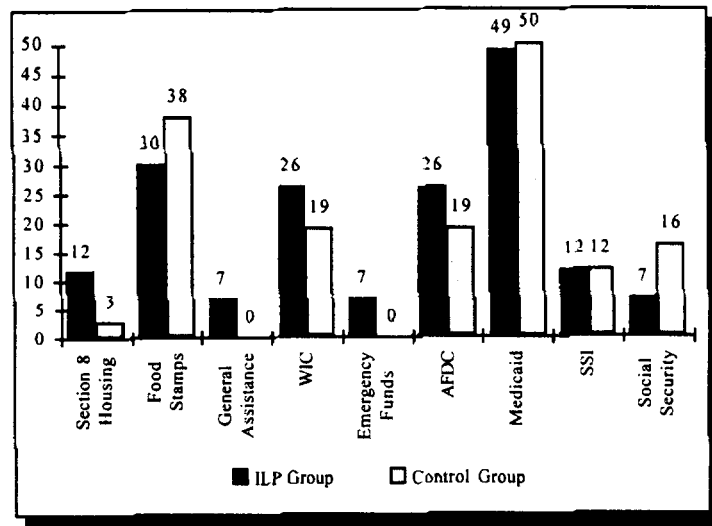


Figure 1
Percent Distribution of Youth Receiving Various Types of Public Assistance

Another indicator of financial self-sufficiency is the ability to pay one's bills on a regular basis. Forty-eight percent of ILP participants and 28% of nonparticipants indicated they had such difficulty sometimes. Having trouble "sometimes" is the most frequent response and should be interpreted with caution due to the common response bias in favor of a middle category on a likert scale. However, the significant difference between ILP participants and nonparticipants was that the latter often had difficulty in paying bills: nonparticipants were five times more likely (25%) to have had this problem often than were ILP participants (5%) ($t = 2.60$, $p < .05$).

Youth Perceptions of Help They Received

Survey respondents were asked to indicate if they received any assistance (such as counseling, advice, or formal training) while in care or immediately after discharge with finding and keeping a place to live, with their education, or to help prepare them for employment, and, if so, from whom. Sources of help were divided into two categories, professional (assistance received from foster care workers, group home staff, or staff of other public or private agencies, including schools) and personal (parents and other relatives, foster parents, friends).

Overall, 48% of ILP participants and 22% of nonparticipants indicated receiving some type of assistance with housing ($t = 2.44$; $p < .05$). A majority of ILP participants (62%) received this assistance from personal sources while only 38% reported receiving such assistance from professionals. In contrast, nonparticipants tended to receive housing assistance from professionals (56%) rather than from family or friends (44%), although the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant.

There was a striking and significant difference between the two groups in regard to assistance they received with their education: 52% of ILP participants vs. 25% of nonparticipants reported receiving such help ($t = 2.48$; $p < .05$). Of those, 74% of ILP participants received help from professionals as compared with 43% of nonparticipants. On the other hand, assistance from parents, foster parents, relatives, and friends was almost twice as frequent (57%) for nonparticipants as for ILP participants (26%).

A majority of respondents in both groups indicated they received no assistance in preparing for employment (57% of ILP participants and 78% of nonparticipants; $t = 1.98$; $p < .06$). Of those who did receive such assistance, 53% of ILP participants and 43% of nonparticipants said they received help from professionals; 47% of participants and 57% of nonparticipants received help from personal sources.

Respondents were also asked about the helpfulness of the ILP program in each area of independent living. First, they were asked whether they participated in an ILP. Of those who were identified by county staff as ILP participants, only 59% confirmed their participation. Of the remaining, 32% stated that they did not participate in the program, and another 9% were not sure. It is not clear whether these youth received very limited ILP services or if they just did not identify services as ILP-related.

Respondents who reported ILP participation were asked the extent to which the ILP services were helpful to them in the four core areas of independent living. Figure 2 indicates that approximately half of self-identified participants found the ILP to be helpful to some extent in each of the four core areas. However, 27% to 35% of the participants reported that ILP participation was not at all helpful. Overall, 65% to 73% of the participants reported that participation in ILP was helpful, to at least some extent, in preparing them for independent living. Although no specific area of the ILP assistance stands out, employment, education, housing and financial self-sufficiency were ranked in that order.



Figure 2
Percent Distribution of ILP Participants Reporting the Program to be Helpful in the Four Core Areas

Discussion

This section will discuss the study findings and compare them with those from previous studies. Table 5 presents comparable data from North Carolina, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, and the national data from the Westat study. Qualitative findings gathered through interviews with ILP staff and youth involved in ILPs at the time of the study will be presented to provide additional contextual information and help explain the findings.

This study has several limitations that decrease the generalizability of its findings. The significant differences between the two groups on age mean that we cannot rule out the possibility that some of the favorable outcomes for ILP participants might be due to the fact that the ILP participants were slightly older than nonparticipants. However, the only other study to compare outcomes for ILP participants and nonparticipants found that age was not associated with significant differential outcomes for ILP and nonILP participants regarding educational and employment outcomes (Shippensburg University, 1993). Although older youth in that study were more likely to have independent living arrangements than were younger youth, that difference was not statistically significant.

The small sample size and the difficulty in locating study participants (ILP and nonILP alike) are other limitations of this study. There may be differences between former foster youth who remained in contact with the agency or for whom collateral contacts were willing to provide current information and those who

researchers were not able to locate and interview. Barth (1990) and Cook (1994) addressed this issue, acknowledging that it is possible that youth who are accessible to researchers may differ in some significant ways from youth who are not accessible. Given the highly mobile nature of this population, researchers may never be able to secure a sample that fully represents all youth that have left care.

Table 5
Comparable Findings from Previous and Current Studies.

Variable	Westat	Nebraska	Pennsylvania		North Carolina	
	N=810	N=58	ILP (n= 32)	NonILP (n=24)	ILP (n=44)	NonILP (n=32)
<i>Current employment</i>						
Employed (part or full time)	49%	64%	50%	37%	59%	44%
<i>Education</i>						
No H. S. degree	NR	15%	41%	21%	42%	82%
H. S. degree or GED	36%	30%	59% ¹	79% ¹	37%	18%
Some college or vocational training	18%	53%	NR	NR	21%	0%
<i>Housing</i>						
Living independently	62%	57%	50% ²	17% ²	68%	41%
Experienced homelessness since discharge	25%	NR	NR	NR	52%	53%
<i>Financial self-sufficiency</i>						
Completely self-sufficient	17%	NR	NR	NR	20%	16%
Receiving assistance from family or friends	76%	NR	NR	NR	49%	41%
Receiving public assistance ³	30%	18% ⁴	38%	29%	61%	72%

¹High school/GED/Vocational-technical program

² p = .01

³One or more forms of assistance

⁴Percent indicating public assistance other than former ward program as primary source of income.

NR signifies Not Reported.

Finally, there is concomitant variation among the four dimensions of independence we investigated. Youth who have higher levels of educational achievement are more likely to be successful in employment, and, thus, are likely to have greater housing stability and are less likely to rely on public or private financial assistance. Therefore, we cannot assert with confidence that favorable outcomes in one area are directly attributable to ILP participation. It may be that, youth with higher educational levels, regardless of ILP participation, would have more favorable outcomes in the other areas as well. Again, the small sample size precludes the type of statistical analysis that would confirm or refute such a hypothesis. However, the variables selected for this study are quite similar to those selected for other studies of foster youth, so this is a potential limitation of all the studies related to outcomes for former foster youth.

The above limitations are quite similar to those cited in other studies that have documented difficulties associated with studying outcomes for this population. These limitations are also typical of exploratory studies in general. Given the low level of knowledge about what happens to young people after leaving care and the lack of understanding of the effects of ILPs on young people, this study provides valuable information that can provide the basis for future research, despite its limitations.

Living Arrangements

In general, NC ILP participants were doing well in their ability to access and manage independent living arrangements, although the high rate of homeless episodes among participants and nonparticipants alike is disturbing. The incidence of homelessness reported by North Carolina youth is almost twice the national finding of 25% reported by Cook (1991) and the 29% reported for former foster youth in California (Barth, 1990). The average of 2.6 residences for participants is comparable to the Cook (1991) finding that 55% of ILP youth lived at 2 to 3 places after leaving foster care. Level of satisfaction indicated in this study is very favorable in comparison to the national data from Cook (1991) which found 57% of ILP participants were not satisfied with their current housing.

One possible reason for the high degree of homelessness and general lack of housing stability among NC youth may be related to the lack of financial support for these youth after they leave care. Federal ILP funds cannot be used to subsidize rent payments, even for those youth who remain in care after turning 18, despite research which has documented the effectiveness of such programs in helping youth successfully make the transition to independent living (Simonith & Anderson, 1979). Such programs must be funded by state, local, or private dollars. However, in North Carolina, no state funds are spent on ILPs. In one large county, county funds were used to subsidize apartments, but in general, local funds were not available for this type of program. The lack of financial assistance for setting up household may explain why so many youth experienced at least one episode of homelessness and why so many were dissatisfied with their current living arrangements. Provision of more transitional living assistance could provide incentives for youth to stay more involved with ILP staff and thus continue to receive counseling or help with aspects of their transition to independent living.

Education

North Carolina ILP participants appeared to be doing much better than nonparticipants in regard to educational achievement, and they were also achieving at a higher level than respondents in other studies. The 58% of ILP participants who had completed high school compared favorably with the 62% rate for former foster youth in California (Barth, 1990) and the other ILP studies (see Table 5). The NC ILP participants were also doing moderately better than nonparticipants in terms of postsecondary education.

Interviews with ILP staff and current participants offered explanations for these positive outcomes for ILP participants. All ILP staff reported that they strongly emphasized the importance of education to youths' future. Staff efforts were recognized by ILP survey respondents, 47% of who re-reported that the help they received from ILP staff regarding education was useful to them. In some counties staff went beyond verbally encouraging youth to do well in school: they actually used ILP funds to reward good school grades and attendance with cash incentives. Interviews with youth involved with the program at the time of the study indicated that these cash incentives were powerful motivators, which is not surprising, since, as wards of the state, these youth have little access to cash unless they are employed.

Employment

ILP participants were doing better than nonparticipants at the time of the study, with 59% working either part or full time, as compared with 44% of nonparticipants, although this difference was not statistically significant. Employment rates of NC ILP participants also compare favorably with findings from the other ILP studies (see Table 5).

The positive employment outcomes for NC ILP participants may be related to the fact that, in many counties, ILP staff encourage foster youth to work and use ILP funds to assist youth with work-related expenses such as uniforms and transportation expenses, even helping youth pay their car insurance. In some counties, foster parents are reimbursed for providing youth with transportation to work. Thus, for some youth the ILP program not only encourages employment, but also actually makes it possible through concrete assistance.

Financial Self-sufficiency

ILP participants tended to rely on certain forms of public assistance (AFDC, WIC, and Emergency Assistance) at somewhat higher rates than nonparticipants did. This finding may be a function of the slightly higher (although not statistically significant) percentage of females in the ILP group. Cook (1991) reported females were more likely to use community resources than males. However, interviews with ILP staff offered another possible explanation: some ILPs provide programs and information to help youth learn how to access available resources when necessary, and staff encourage them to do so. In some counties, youth are encouraged to stay in contact with their ILP worker and, even after leaving care, may continue to receive counseling and advice on services and benefits which may be available through other programs.

Given the fact that the youth in this study are an average of 18 or 19 years old, it is not surprising that they are not financially self-sufficient. Although some youth leaving care may receive support from relatives, many are

on their own, as was evidenced by the fact that only slightly more than one-fourth of all survey respondents indicated they had received financial assistance from relatives in the month preceding the survey. Access to public forms of assistance can help youth that do not have family supports through the transition to adulthood and, hopefully, a higher degree of self-sufficiency.

The overall pattern of utilization of public entitlements by the North Carolina ILP participants compares favorably with national patterns of utilization. Cook (1991) reported that 12% of youth had housing subsidies, 37% received food stamps, 21% received General Assistance, and 34% were on AFDC. Thus, NC ILP and nonILP youth appeared to be doing about as well as youth across the country who have left care in terms of their financial self-sufficiency.

Recommendations

As a result of this evaluation, a number of recommendations were made to the State Department of Social Services for improvement in independent living services in North Carolina. Some of the most salient recommendations and related results are summarized below.

1. The high levels of housing instability found in this study resulted in a recommendation that the agency pursue state funding for the development of transitional living programs to subsidize rent and provide for ongoing counseling and assistance by ILP staff. Result: An Aftercare Trust Fund was established to provide eligible youth with up to \$500 in assistance when they leave care. Access to the trust fund will be based on an individual EL plan and the approval of a staff member. This trust fund will be funded with 100% unspent federal funds that would normally revert to the federal government at the end of the fiscal year. The agency plans to continue to seek state appropriations for more extensive transitional programs.

2. Interviews with young people and DSS staff alike indicated large differences between counties in how ILP dollars were being spent, with little accountability. Many survey respondents identified by agency staff as ILP participants did not define themselves as such. We recommended a new procedure for allocation of ILP funds, based on the submission of proposals that specify how the funds would be used and provide a rationale for how programming is expected to be effective in preparing youth for self-sufficiency, including program evaluation measures. Results: Each county is required to submit a plan of services prior to accessing their base allocation of ILP funds and must provide an annual report of outcomes to the state office.

3. This study pointed out a gap in the agency's ability to evaluate its impact on former foster youth. This was the first evaluation of its kind undertaken by the agency, and it was apparent that there was great variability among counties in the extent to which they attempt to follow-up with youth after they leave care. We recommended that the state office develop a plan for evaluating the ILP on an ongoing basis, with special attention to following youth for a few years after they leave care to determine whether further services are needed and to collect information on program outcomes related to the four core areas of self-sufficiency. Results: A questionnaire has been designed to capture information on ILP participants and other older teens that leave agency custody. This information will be entered into the state's computerized information system and will thus be available for future program evaluations.

4. According to survey results and interviews with ILP participants and staff, ILPs seemed to have the most impact on youth in terms of educational and employment outcomes. Yet, because North Carolina has a decentralized child welfare system, with each county operating fairly autonomously, there is little cross-fertilization among ILP coordinators across the state regarding what works and what doesn't work. We recommended that the various strategies some ILPs use to help youth achieve in the areas of employment and education (e.g., financial incentives, assistance with work and education related expenses) should be publicized throughout the state. Results: The state office has increased the number of statewide training events that provide an opportunity for sharing of ideas among ILP staff.

5. Youth and staff who were interviewed believed that planned ILP group experiences significantly benefit

foster youth. We recommended that all county agencies strive to offer some type of group experience to ILP eligible youth to help them develop leadership skills as well as learn specific independent living skills through field trips, workshops, and other educational experiences. Results: The state office is encouraging development of Youth Councils in medium and larger sized counties and encouraging youth involvement in program development for all county ILP programs. The state office also began sponsoring a workshop on group work for ILP staff who conduct groups or are interested in doing so.

In general, North Carolina youth that participated in ILPs compare favorably with similar youth in others parts of the country. However, there are substantial numbers of North Carolina youth who leave care poorly equipped to be successful in one or more core areas of independent living. Future research will be needed to assess the extent to which implementation of the recommendations which emerged from this study will result in more positive outcomes for more youth after they leave care.

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