



“Couch surfing” of Latino foster care alumni: Reliance on peers as social capital

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Youth exiting foster care often experience difficulties transitioning into adulthood. This paper focuses on Latino foster care youth in a major southwestern U.S. city and addresses the importance of peer networks as a crucial form of social capital as youth leave foster care. Case studies illustrate experiences of foster care alumni ranging in age from 18 to 26. Findings suggest that lack of housing forces youth into residential mobility or “couch surfing” and episodes of homelessness. Familial connections continue to be important to Latino youth. When Latino youth are unsuccessful in re-establishing family relationships, survival is dependent upon peer social capital as youth move between extended family and friends, eventually relying upon peers for support. Recommendations are included.

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Introduction

For young adults leaving home for the first time, the transition into adulthood may be an exciting experience. Though the step is big, most young people know they have a safety net in their parents, family and friends that will follow them through their journey to adulthood. The support of a family and stable relationships are critical components for a smooth transition (Garrett et al., 2008; Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Gretchen, 2005) and often extends past young adulthood (Ammerman et al., 2004; Collins, 2001; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005). However, not all youth are awarded this support and stability. Youth leaving the foster care system lack critical components needed for a positive transition to adulthood (Ammerman et al., 2004; Collins, 2001; Geenen & Powers, 2007) as they face challenges including lack of positive family support (Iglehart & Becerra, 2002; Reilly, 2003; Stein, 2004; Texas Foster Care Transitions Project, 2001) and multiple foster care placements which contribute to an inability to build lasting relationships (Biehal, Clayden, Stein, & Wade, 1995; Perry, 2006; Stein, 2004). The most crucial challenge for foster care youth in transition is finding a place to live when they turn eighteen and state care ends. As youth leave the foster care system many will end up homeless, in shelters, or on the streets, while others begin episodes of “couch surfing” and residential mobility in order to maintain a roof over their heads (Choca et al., 2004), eventually relying upon peer networks as resources for survival.

According to estimates by the United States Department of Health and Human Services Adoption and Foster Care Report Statistics (2006), 26,517 youth in the United States aged out of foster care in 2006. Approximately 1500 of the youth aging out of care reside in Texas according to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services Data Book (2008). As shown in this study, many youth attempt to return to their biological families. Others distance themselves from the foster care system to “shake” the stigma of foster care by going out on their own. Youth leaving foster care with no place to go are more likely to experience negative outcomes, such as participation in criminal activities, poor health, substance abuse, unplanned

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pregnancy, and poverty (Avery & Freundlich, 2008; Reilly, 2003). For youth who are unable to re-establish family connections, programs that serve youth are important forms of social capital during the transition phase. Some youth may transfer into referral based independent and transitional living programs designed to assist independence. Despite existing programs, some youth may not utilize available assistance that could provide them a place to live and successful transition (Garrett et al., 2008; Reilly, 2003).

This study examines the post-foster care experiences of Latino youth in a major southwestern U.S. city with a majority Latino population. We highlight the experiences of a group of Latino foster care youth who did not rely on state or agency assistance and instead resorted to couch surfing with peers. The paper addresses the importance of peer networks as a crucial form of social capital. The analysis is framed within the social capital literature as a theoretical approach by employing definitions of social capital offered by Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) emphasizing the role of networks and relationships in securing resources. The paper notes current literature on homelessness among youth and the significance of peer networks. Few studies have examined the experiences of Latino youth in foster care placement (Ayón & Marcenko, 2008) and fewer studies address Latino youth aging out of care (Greeson & Bowen, 2008; Iglehart & Becerra, 2002). Moreover, studies addressing peer relationships among foster care youth have mostly examined experiences in foster care placements (Perry, 2003), while ignoring reliance on peer networks as youth age out of care. Additionally, current literature has failed to address the couch surfing experiences of youth.

Research within the U.K. and Australia have presented numerous qualitative studies of the experiences of foster care youth (Biehal et al., 1995; Cashmore & Paxman, 2007; Johnson et al., 2009; Stein & Munro, 2008), but within the United States, studies examining youth post-foster care experiences have been largely quantitative in scope; thus, few U.S. studies have included American youths' descriptive experiences and voices (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009) and even fewer have described the experiences of American Latino youth. This paper seeks to bridge this gap by qualitatively examining Latino youth post-care experiences and their reliance upon peers as social capital.

Research suggests an overrepresentation of minority children in the foster care system in the United States (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004; Wertheimer, 2002). Rousseau (2008) estimates one in five foster care youth in the United States are Latino. Latinos are the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States which has contributed to increases in the number of Latino children entering the foster care system, especially in high Latino populated regions (Ayón & Marcenko, 2008; Capello, 2006). For example, in the state of Texas, between years 2001 and 2004, the Latino foster care population increased and surpassed both African American and White children in placements (Capello, 2006). Others suggest an under representation of Latino children in foster care in the United States largely as a result of barriers to access to the U.S. child welfare system created by cultural and linguistic differences (Lu et al., 2004; Suleiman, 2003). Once in the system, Latino children and youth are likely to be placed in care more quickly and to stay longer than their non-Latino counterparts (Church, Grossb, & Baldwin, 2005; Rousseau, 2008). When Latino children are placed in foster care, they often are disconnected from familiar friends, neighborhoods, networks and culture, as only fifty percent are placed with Latino foster families (Rousseau, 2008). For some Latino youth, family reunification or adoption may never become a reality. Literature shows that Latino culture places emphasis on family, kinship and "compadrazgo" networks (Capello, 2006; Church, 2006), and youth failing to reconnect family relationships often try to recreate social support ties using peers as they attempt to secure housing during the transition into adulthood.

Social capital

For youth aging out of care, social networks as resources for sustainability become an important form of social capital. Though some studies suggest a social capital deficit within the foster care population, these studies refer mainly to a lack of long-lasting relationships with family and other significant adults (Avery & Freundlich, 2008). Other studies suggest that peer networks are important resources for survival among youth (Garrett et al., 2008; Toro, Fowler, Miles, Jozefowicz-Simbeni, & Hobden, 2006). The term social capital has often been defined as social support relationships that facilitate needed resources or knowledge for an individual or group (Portes, 1998). Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as the acquisition of resources that result from membership in certain social networks or access to resources and knowledge as a result of "who you know." In addition, one must "activate" the capital in order to utilize the accessible resources. Bourdieu further asserts that individuals intentionally build relationships based on the benefits they eventually receive.

Coleman (1988) defines social capital as a resource that facilitates action as a result of networks and relationships based on shared values and norms. For Coleman, shared values represent cohesion that is needed in order to develop functional resources and acquire stronger social capital. Though Coleman emphasized strong family ties which provide children with the appropriate norms and standards, network relationships of shared values may extend outside the family structure and provide a path to additional resources. Latino youth often develop supportive social relationships among friends, adults, and families that provide them with grounding, knowledge and motivation to navigate difficulties in society. According to Cammarota, Moll, Cannella, and Gonzalez (2008) culture is the meaningful practices people engage in everyday which lay the foundation for constructive relationships and support for Latino youth. Shared values among peers in similar situations may provide youth with important relationships as they transition into adulthood. Peers become a form of precarious support which may include couch surfing, or finding temporary housing on friends' sofas, if only for short periods at a time.

For example, peer networks and relationships provide crucial social capital in the event of episodes of homelessness. In an urban study addressing youth homelessness in the Midwestern United States, Toro et al. (2006) surveyed 264 foster care

alumni and found that two-thirds had couch surfed or doubled up with other families because of lack of affordable housing, eviction, lack of employment opportunities, or termination of public assistance. In an evaluation of independent living programs, *Georgiades (2005)* found that youth not participating in housing programs were more likely to rely upon friends and relatives for housing and other resources. Youth experiencing couch surfing or precarious housing may experience psychological distress and abuses similar to those experienced by homeless youth (*Toro et al., 2006*). Peer relationships provide important social capital and are key to survival among youth leaving care as many move between homelessness and housed peers (*Garrett et al., 2008*) often staying with peers experiencing difficult circumstances themselves (*Ammerman et al., 2004; Novello, 2004*). *Snow and Anderson (1993)* refer to these relationships as survival strategies providing a respite from street homelessness. *McNaughton (2008)* asserts that it is common for individuals to seek out relationships with others; however, social networks in which persons occupy the same low socioeconomic status may inhibit the ability of such networks to increase access to social capital resources and may, in fact, exacerbate negative living situations. *Bottrell (2009)* suggests that peer and extended networks, including families of peers, may provide disadvantaged youth the support needed to boost resilience when facing adverse circumstances. For youth exiting foster care, positive peer relationships compensate for social and emotional needs that are lacking when reconnecting with family is short lived or impossible (*Novello, 2004; Pippert, 2007*).

Method

Participants

To identify participants in this qualitative study, we collaborated with two social service agencies which manage foster care alumni and are located in a major urban area in Texas comprised of predominately Latino, low income residents. As youths came into the agency, the case workers explained our project and asked if they wanted to participate. In all, one of the authors of this paper and a research assistant interviewed thirty-two former foster care youth who had recently aged out of foster care.

The majority of participants interviewed were between the ages of 18–22. Fourteen (44%) of participants interviewed were male and eighteen (56%) were female. Twenty-five or (78%) of those interviewed were Latino and this paper focuses on these Latino youth, a group seldom addressed in the research literature about post-foster care experiences. We used an emerging research design in which the number of participants in a study is not established ahead of time. New participants were added as new dimensions of the research became apparent through earlier interviews (*Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 1995*). We interviewed sufficient subjects to reflect the range of participants (*Seidman, 2006*) and stopped at a point of saturation when we began to hear the same information reported and were no longer hearing anything new (*Douglas, 1976; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Weiss, 1994*). We addressed comparisons between Latino and non-Latino youth within the sample to explore how unique the “Latino experience” might be in reuniting with family and couch surfing with peers.

Interview development and protocol

Interview protocols were approved by the university Institutional Review Board and all youth signed consent forms detailing the project prior to being interviewed. The interviews took place over a period of four months, and interviews each lasted approximately an hour and a half. The researchers used a semi-structured interview guide developed with the assistance of a former foster care youth who worked as a research assistant on the project. We also conducted an extensive review of literature on foster care youth to help shape our interviews. Questions were broad and open-ended.

The interview topics covered experiences in foster care, transition out of care, and housing, work, and educational experiences after leaving care. For instance, questions addressed actions associated with transition, housing options, episodes of homelessness, housing concerns, fears as they aged out, whether they returned to biological family, and the results of attempted family reunification. Youth were asked how many times they had moved since leaving foster care and the role of housing decisions on education and employment options.

Procedures

The aim of the study was to explore and understand the experiences of foster care youth and their transitions into adulthood. The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed and coded for emergent themes. Four sociology graduate student researchers coded using consensus coding of interview content noting patterns and themes. Team meetings occurred regularly to discuss codes, analyze themes, and validate transcripts (*Kvale & Brinkman, 2009*). According to *Seidman (2006:55)* “the method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing applied to a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of a relatively few participants.” Finally, to cross check our fieldwork and interview data, we presented findings to agency personnel who work with foster care youth and particularly those who helped identify participants. We have incorporated their comments into the policy recommendations presented at the conclusion of the paper.

Results

Several themes emerging from the interviews are displayed in Table 1. The following narratives provide examples of the couch surfing experiences of emancipated youth and how family and peers become key in the process of avoiding homelessness.

Seeking social capital: reconnecting with family

As mentioned, the concepts of family and extended family responsibilities are very important among Latinos and a central aspect of the culture of that group (Keefe & Padilla, 1987; Sena-Rivera, 1979; Valenzuela, 1999; Williams, 1990). Although recent immigrant Latino families represent high proportions of two parent families, Latino families in general, along with other families in the United States, have undergone basic revisions over time, with increasing rates of divorce, single parenting, and a breakdown in family structure. A report by the National Council de la Raza by Calderón (2007) derived from current U.S. census data found that many Latino families are intact, with nearly two-thirds of young Latino children reared in homes with two parents and many residing in large households. Though it is known that youth leaving care desire family connections and some may attempt returns to the homes from which they were removed (Shirk & Strangler, 2005; Stein, 2008), family connections do not always translate into youth receiving or soliciting support (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Our research has shown that family remains an integral part of the cultural values of Latino youth placed in foster care. Many do attempt to reunite with family as they age out of care seeking family relationships and resources as a form of social capital before they pursue friends or shelters. The following examples from the transcribed interviews illustrate themes about family values that emerged from this study.

Importance of family

Marco, a nineteen-year-old alumnus of care, provides an example illustrating the centrality of family in Latino culture and desire for reconnection. Marco, at thirteen, was placed in care as a result of his mother's drug addiction. Prior to placement, Marco had lived in a steady home with his mother, his siblings and his step-father. Angry that the foster care system had pulled his family apart, he aged out of care rejecting available institutional assistance. His decision left him without housing options except to turn to peers for support when his biological family could not be located. He described his desire to reconnect with his biological family, "I was like 'I can't wait to get out of this place. I am going to go find my mom and dad and stuff.' I still haven't found them. I don't know where they're at or anything. I don't know where anybody's at." Marco sought assistance from his caseworker and a sister's caseworker to locate his family. He learned that his mother was still doing drugs, his grandfather was in a nursing home, and his grandmother had passed away. He explained,

It's been hard on me because I didn't get to go to my grandma's funeral. I didn't get to see her before she died. I didn't get to see her casket. I didn't get to see her period. When I was in care my other grandmother passed away and they told me three months later. So I didn't get to see both of my grandmas before they passed away.

Marco was angry that foster care had prevented him from maintaining extended family relations. After difficulties in locating his parents and siblings, he eventually located a sister. As noted in the reviewed literature, Latino culture places emphasis on the importance of extended family networks. This makes it difficult for Latino foster care children when they are isolated from family and extended family, such as grandparents. Marco was unable to reconcile his loss and remained in mourning, without formal closure on the deaths of his grandmothers while he was in foster care.

Throughout the interview Marco continued to emphasize the centrality of family. Having finally learned of his siblings' whereabouts, he described hope of reuniting with a younger brother and reconstructing family ties that included living together in their own home, "My little brother is fourteen and still in protective services. So, as soon as he gets out we are all going to get our little house so we can all be a family back together."

When asked about concerns as he aged out of care, Marco, again, placed emphasis on family, "I was always more concerned about my grandfather, if I was going to see him before he passed away and everything. From what I hear, he's still alive, but I don't know where he's at. I am worried more about my family than I am worried about myself."

Though Marcos' desire was to return "home," seeking family reconstruction as an initial source of social capital, his hopes had not materialized. Marco ultimately depended on a friend for housing, additionally relying upon the friend's brother-in-

Table 1

Emergent themes from participant discussions of housing options and social support.

Seeking social capital: reconnecting with family
Importance of family
Reconstructing family relationships
Couch surfing and relying on friends
Relying on boyfriends, friends, family of friends
Forming more permanent relationships
Peer networks as social capital

law, a person he knew only superficially. Peer networks established immediate housing, an important resource for Marco when he left foster care.

Reconstructing family relationships

Even if youth are able to recreate family ties or seek them out as an immediate housing resource, families may be unable to provide support due to economic circumstances or continued dysfunction. At other times, conflict with family members perpetuates continued residential mobility. Carmen, a 20-year-old alumna of foster care, tried returning to live with her mother after aging out, but her mother had only a small room with someone else staying with her. Next Carmen stayed with an aunt for less than a month before they had a disagreement and the aunt “kicked her out.” She went back to her mom’s place until the aunt apologized and told her she could come back. Carmen returned to the aunt’s house even though she did not think they could get along. From there she went to a “friend” whom she had met at the social service agency and stayed with that friend for about three months. Carmen explained:

I don’t know why, but I always end up with people that I don’t know. Then I just move in with them, and it never works out. You meet a person who offers you to stay with them and you’re like, ‘OK, I don’t have nowhere else to go, so might as well just go with you.’

The friend needed help with her rent and her small son, but she was not willing to incorporate Carmen into her personal life. Carmen complained, “I’m the kind of person where if I live with you I want to talk to you and say, ‘Hey, how are you doing? How was your day?’ and she was one of those people, ‘I don’t want to talk to you. I don’t know you and I’m going to shut you out.’” Carmen was disappointed that she was not acknowledged as a part of the family. Later, she got her own apartment with her sister, but stayed there only a month and decided to reconnect with extended family members in a nearby state. She explained her effort to stay with her extended family:

I hated it. I was there for about a month and I decided to come back. So we came back on the greyhound...and from there it was starting all over again. I’d always get mad, but I started over again and moved in with someone else. We moved in with a friend and he was a psycho. I don’t know what we were thinking (laughs). So from there we went with another friend and now we are currently living with another friend that we barely know.

Carmen’s example shows the difficulties when foster care youth attempt to reconnect with family and how they may ultimately end up moving from “friend” to “friend” living with persons they know only superficially. As Carmen talked about feeling left out in the first friend’s home, it is evident that she was trying to reconstruct family from relationships with acquaintances. Carmen’s social capital involved the building of relationships, or “who you know,” as Bourdieu suggests, for the purpose of eventual benefits. These benefits may include not only immediate housing, but reconstructed family relationships.

Gabriel, a nineteen-year-old alumna, also tried to reconnect with family and ended up on his own. He estimated that he had moved more than twenty times before he finally got his own place. He told his story:

I was with my grandma for at least three months. I was with my brother when I first aged out. I was there for two weeks, because I never would have time to spend with my brother. Me, my brother and my sister were in foster care with the first foster parents for three years. And everything broke down and everybody went different ways, to a different foster home. I moved around a lot.

Gabriel immediately tried to recreate his biological family as he aged out of foster care. He was disappointed that he was unable to spend quality time with his brother who seemed too busy to interact with him. The foster care system had attempted to keep the three siblings together, but was not able to do so. After he aged out of care he attempted to reconnect with his brother but he could not build a satisfying relationship.

Many families who gave up their children to foster care had not improved their own socioeconomic conditions. When youths aged out of care and tried to reconnect with parents and relatives, situations became even harsher. Irene, a nineteen-year-old alumna, explained the difficulties of trying to rejoin a struggling family and her problems when she tried to go out on her own:

I actually went to stay at my brother’s, at their apartment. They struggled too because they didn’t have food and stuff, so it was very hard to be there. And they got kicked out, so I went to live at my uncle’s house and there it’s just an environment of drug dealing and stuff. So then, I moved back to my stepmom’s. Then I sort of got my own place, but then stuff happened...then I went back to my stepmom’s again because I got pregnant.

Irene and her baby ended up on her brother’s door step where nine people were already living. Someone reported the family to protective services and social workers took the baby away after giving Irene the choice to go somewhere else with the baby and get her own place. She knew she could not rent her own apartment and had no other place to go, so she voluntarily gave her baby to her stepmom. By this time, Irene had a police record and no job, making it doubly difficult for her to lease an apartment on her own. She reasoned, “It’s just the struggle of going to a new environment, finding my own place, going place to place. I didn’t like that. So that’s basically what motivated me because I have my own daughter and I want to be someplace...where we don’t got to worry about being kicked out.”

These cases illustrate the difficult residential mobility experienced by youth as they initially seek social capital through biological and extended family networks. Mobile youth often end up in negative environments that further hinder transition

into adulthood. Support from peers, including those known only superficially, provided immediate housing resources. Though these networks and relationships may be temporary or sporadic, they nonetheless keep some youth off the streets.

“Couch surfing” and relying on friends

As illustrated in the cases above, many former foster care youth turn to peer social networks to meet needs biological family are unable to meet. Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) pointed out that networks of friends often helped Latino youths successfully cross socio-cultural and linguistic borders. One of the main themes emerging from these interviews with Latino foster care youth as they aged out of care was the importance of establishing friendship networks to help with finding a secure place to live. The social capital acquired through friend and peer networks is vital as youth navigate the many obstacles they face after leaving care.

Relying on boyfriends, friends, and family of friends

Angel, a twenty-three year-old, described anxious feeling as she exited care and realized that she would be on her own trying to find housing as she waited to report for military duty. She had resorted to enlisting in the military for a job and secure housing, but in the interim she wasn't sure where she would sleep and couch surfing was a strong possibility. She described her dilemma:

When you age out of care, if you don't talk to the right people or talk to the right people in time, then you never know where you're going to sleep, whose sofa you're going to sleep on, or where you're going to go to, what you're going to do. I didn't do it in the right time frame, but I did it. The couple of months between leaving the group home and actually getting stabilized somewhere, before I left for the military, it was really a struggle because I didn't know. I could have been sleeping on a park bench.

As she sat through her high school graduation the realization of becoming homeless confronted her, “You're sitting there through the ceremony, ‘Oh my God. I'm going to be on my own. I don't have any money. I need to get a job. I don't have a car. ...’ When I aged out, it was pretty scary. I didn't know from day to day where I was going to be sleeping or if I was going to eat.” The lack of preparation for transition to adulthood left Angel fearing the future. She did not have a place to go, any money, or a job. The two-month lag left Angel no choice but to move in with a boyfriend as she waited for her military training to begin. When she finished her three-year military duty she returned to her elderly grandmother who needed help. Conflict with her grandmother forced her to move in with an eighteen year-old friend who was living with her dad. She later moved in with the father of her daughter who lived with his parents. Angel's friends provided temporary housing resources between moves, both before and after her military service.

Another foster care alumna, Candy, spent some time in homeless shelters with her son. She stayed with friends when she didn't feel like being in shelters or when she was on waiting lists for housing programs. She lived a brief time with an abusive boyfriend and eventually moved to a battered women's shelter with her son. While attending community college she met a friend who offered a place to live. She described her situation:

I was homeless, but not really homeless. I was staying at friends' houses, so I was couch surfing, couch surfing (laughter). So I guess I was kind of homeless, but I wasn't in a homeless shelter. I stayed with a friend. She let me stay there for about a year. I met her going to school. I don't know why I felt the need to open up. I think we just happened to be talking...

Candy recognized her homeless condition, her reliance on peers for support and the couch surfing lifestyle. She was able to develop an important social capital relationship as she relied upon her friend from school who had been receiving housing assistance herself.

Candy and Angel are examples of the complexity of finding housing once young adults have a child. While they may qualify for housing programs as single mothers, these women tried living with boyfriends, fathers of their children, and friends before going on their own. Finding housing, employment, and transportation, along with childcare presents further complications. The social capital acquired through friend and peer networks provided supportive relationships and information enabling them to navigate difficult times.

Forming more permanent relationships

Friends often provide refuge until youth form more permanent relationships. Mickey described his couch surfing experiences:

Actually when I aged out I didn't have no one to bounce back on. I was already out of care about when I was eighteen and a half, nineteen years of age. I didn't have no concerns because I had friends that were taking me in. I was living from friend to friend, bouncing from house to house. I didn't really have no issues about it, until I ended up getting my last roommate. Then I end up saying, ‘I need to get someone else.’ ...I ended up finding my wife. That's who I ended up leaning on when I needed help.

Mickey had few concerns about housing when he left foster care. Sometimes that meant moving in with friends and their parents or moving into a friend's apartment and sharing the rent. But Mickey found this transient life to be difficult over time

and desired more lasting relationships. At this point, youth often enter into marriage or partner relationships and form families of their own. When youth have no biological or extended family to return to, friends fill an important social capital resource for sustainability.

Peer networks as social capital

Stanton-Salazar (1997) describes “network orientation” or the ways people perceive the value and purpose of social networks and the social capital those networks provide. These peer networks influence and inform choices that individual youth make that can either expand or constrain options. Many of the “friends” foster care youth depend on are older, or are young people who have shared similar hardship experiences and are willing to share what few resources they have. These social networks provide key economic and housing supports as well as meaningful relationships that may be missing in biological families. Peer networks provide emotional and cultural resources to counter the alienation and psychological distress that derive from being without family or institutional supports. These bonds facilitate mental and emotional resilience and enable foster care youth to develop constructive relationships or social capital needed to gain access to resources. Peer connections provide temporary stability in housing as well as sources of information about future housing and social services (Bottrell, 2009).

Latino vs. non-Latino youth

Table 2 depicts the comparisons of family and peer reliance for Latino and non-Latino youth interviewed in this project at transition out of foster care. Fourteen of the twenty-five Latino youth interviewed attempted to reunite with family members immediately after aging out of foster care. Those youths talked about trying to find family members and trying to bring together siblings or seeking to move back in with immediate family or extended family. Few of these efforts succeeded. Latino youth not relying upon family immediately after aging out were hindered either by the inability to make family connections after exiting care or the reality that family members were dysfunctional or deceased. Most stays with families were short-lived. The literature on Latino families in the United States emphasizes the values of familism, or the valuing of and reliance on immediate and extended family (Marquez & Romo, 2008; Romo & Falbo, 1996), and it seems that the Latino youths interviewed did highly value family relationships, even when they did not function well for them. The prevalence of Latinos reconnecting with family also may be the result of positive relationships with extended family members, such as a grandparents or aunts and uncles, prior to placement or as a result of continued contact during placement. Seeking out family could also be a result of factors such as age at placement, sibling relationships and connections maintained during foster care placement, as well as length of time in placement. This study suggests that there may be other factors to consider in addition to ethnicity in determining the importance of family for Latino foster care youths, but that reuniting with family was highly valued by Latino youth. The importance of family in Latino cultural values emphasizes strongly the cultural impact of broken family networks that can occur when there are numerous foster care placements.

Working with the sample of foster care youth in this research, the majority of whom are Latino, raised some interesting questions about the ethnic distinctiveness or similarities of Latinos in comparison with other ethnic groups in their social capital experiences. Only one of the seven non-Latino youth interviewed attempted to reunite with family as a first resort. Another non-Latino youth stated that he had neither family nor peers for support. Two non-Latino youth returned to biological families for a short time several months after emancipation, but not immediately upon emancipation. Both of these non-Latino individuals stated their returns were either to aid a sick family member or to stay for a short visit. Thus the concept of familism, or a closeness and cohesiveness with family, may be important across ethnic groups. In this study the behaviors of Latinos leaving foster care are not just a compendium of ethnic beliefs and behaviors, but are an interaction of individual circumstances, peer cultures, and structural conditions of foster care and homelessness.

The findings of Biehal et al. (1995) and Shirk and Strangler (2005) demonstrated a similar desire to reconnect with family among non-Latinos and a similar strategy to depend on peers and use couch surfing for subsistence, underscoring the need for transitional and affordable housing for all youth leaving foster care. In this study, non-Latinos interviewed relied on peers as the first option for transitional housing and for at least six of the Latinos interviewed peers provided the first transitional housing option. Both Latinos and non-Latinos eventually relied on peers or boyfriends or girlfriends upon aging out.

Table 2

Latino versus non-Latino youth—family and peer reliance upon transition from foster care.

	Latino	Non-Latino
Family reliance	14	1
Peers (boy/girlfriend or other)	6	3
Foster family	0	1
Transitional housing	1	1
Other housing (apartment)	1	0
Streets/homeless	0	1
Still in placement	3	0
Total number of youths	25	7

This sample is too small to make broad generalizations about the patterns of family reconnection of Latino and non-Latino emancipating youth. However, this study does suggest the need for future comparative studies of different ethnic group experiences in foster care and emancipation, and draws attention to the importance in future analyses in determining how race/ethnicity shapes youth outcomes and social network availability.

Few of the youth interviewed in this study relied on transitional housing or other housing options offered by the agencies serving foster care youth. This pattern of failure to transition into housing programs highlights the need to address how to move youth from placement to transitional housing programs immediately after aging out. Reliance on family and peers contributes to homelessness when youth are unable to find a “couch” between moves.

Discussion

This paper addresses an important and growing Latino foster care population and sheds light on the important role of couch surfing and peer social capital for Latino foster care youth as they age out of care. The practice of couch surfing among peers with similar levels of disadvantage emphasizes the lack of traditional housing and affordable housing available to foster care youth. Other researchers have confirmed that social networks and significant relationships play a key role in successful transitions into adulthood (Courtney, Pilivan, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Greeson & Bowen, 2008). Social support from positive peer relationships contributes to greater resilience when youth face life difficulties, such as the move to independence of the foster care system (Danning & De Panfilis, 2007).

Similar to the foster care youth studied by Toro et al. (2006), youth interviewed in this study had experienced or were currently experiencing couch surfing as a strategy to avoid homelessness. Additionally, some youth used couch surfing to avoid institutional housing supports and perceived institutional control. Others were couch surfing while they prepared to enter transitional or independent living facilities.

Latino networks, relationships, and social capital

For foster care youth, peer social networks become essential in establishing immediate sources of social capital, with housing as the most crucial need. The ability to survive for the youth interviewed in this study depended on episodes of couch surfing as they moved between extended family and friends, eventually relying upon peers for support. The social capital provided through peer networks created important ties necessary for housing sustainability and access to resources, while compensating for absent family relationships. These informal support systems remained crucial as foster care youth moved towards independence.

Research suggests that in the event of oncoming homelessness, Latino adults in the general homeless population rely upon family and other networks to remain out of traditional homeless shelters and are often referred to as the “hidden” homeless (Aviles, 2008). As a result, researchers know little about their lifestyle, experiences, and outcomes. Latino youth aging out of care experience these same phenomena. As we have emphasized, Latino youth age out of care and often attempt to re-establish family relationships, kinship and “compadrazgo,” or fictive kin cultural networks. Because families were fragile when youths were placed in foster care, attempts to reunite with biological family members long-term were often unsuccessful. Research has focused on the general foster care population with few studies addressing individuals of “color,” with the exception of work by Greeson and Bowen (2008) and White et al. (2008), that include a combination of various ethnic minority groups. This study highlights the importance of youth voices, specifically the voices of Latino youth. With the growth of the Latino population, the United States may continue to see increases in the number of Latino youth placed in foster care and increases in Latino youth emancipating from care. Understanding the experiences of Latino foster care youth may aid in developing mechanisms to enhance the transition process. With the growing Latino population, cultural competency and responsiveness in the delivery of services become even more important (Church et al., 2005). We and other scholars emphasize that when making comparisons across groups, historical, social, political and economic contexts as well as cultural differences should be considered (see for example Munro & Stein, 2008). Future research examining ethnic group differences in the foster care system may aid policy makers in developing culturally relevant programs to assist transitioning youth.

Recommendations

As shown in the interviews in this study the need for preparation and ongoing support for foster care youth beyond transition is essential. Based on the interviews and presentations of our study results to social agency personnel we make the following recommendations:

- The youth interviewed in this project reported that life skill trainings and transitional assistance occur too early or are inadequate. Thus, timing of transitional assistance is crucial, and assistance may have to be repeated at different times.
- This study shows that for Latinos in the United States, high quality and stable placements in foster care that minimize multiple placements and mobility could promote positive outcomes. Thus, careful selection of foster care families and stable placements are key to positive transitions.

- Cultural sensitivity in working with diverse youth is important. Agencies and social workers should acknowledge the value of families even if they are dysfunctional. Agencies should hire more social workers and case workers from culturally diverse backgrounds who understand different ethnic group values and more workers who are sensitive to cultural diversity.
- Attempts at family reunification described by the youth interviewed emphasize the importance of family relationships for Latino youth. Agencies should assist youth in re-establishing family contact when plausible and offer counseling to aid youth in dealing with disappointment when contact fails. Additionally, culturally responsive policies during placement should also be addressed to preserve extended family relationships.
- Couch surfing should be avoided by providing more stable housing options and housing support as well as encouraging youth to access available social service resources when they exit care. A one-stop drop in center could function as a social networking hub that could provide youth temporary “on-site” housing immediately upon aging out, medical and mental health evaluations, assistance with education and employment opportunities, and assistance with community resources. There has been discussion as to whether the age of emancipation should be extended from age 18–21. These case studies suggest that housing support is key to the transition to independence at any age.
- It is important to include youth views and involve them in formulating policies, procedures, and services in transitioning foster care youth into adulthood. To inform current practice it is necessary to understand the personal histories and experiences of youth leaving foster care (Broad, 2005).
- One factor noticeable in the interviews as well as in the Latino population in Texas, is the early age of partnerships and marriages or becoming parents. This suggests that the issue of cohabitation and pregnancy should be a focus of attention in transition readiness and preparation.
- Because of the difficulty in finding stable housing for youth leaving foster care, social capital provided through peer networks creates important and much needed ‘family-like’ social ties that may provide housing and access to immediate resources. This study suggests that programs must encourage positive peer networks and take better advantage of the peer networks that youth seem to be relying on to disseminate assistance and information.

We cannot fix the problem of foster care youth homelessness if we do not understand the housing situations youth face when they age out of foster care. We must recognize the immense complexity, fluidity, and individuation of emancipating youth (Wasserman & Clair, 2010) and work to incorporate these characteristics into agency transition programs, viable housing options, relationship building, and mentor programs to eliminate couch surfing as a strategy to avoid homelessness.

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