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Record numbers of foster kids leave program as adults

By Wendy Koch, USA TODAY

A record number of teens are leaving the foster care system without a family to help them, and many fail to make it on their own, says a report being released today.

The number who leave the system because they turn 18 increased 41% to 24,407 between 1998 and 2005. The spike occurred despite a drop in the number of children in foster care, according to government figures in the report.

"We have failed these children if they 'age out' of foster care without a safe, permanent family they can count on," says Jim O'Hara of The Pew Charitable Trusts. Pew funded the report as part of a campaign to reform foster care.

Government and private studies have found that such teens are less likely to finish high school, and more likely to go to prison or become homeless. Census data show that fewer than 3% earn college degrees, compared with 28% of the population.

The federal government launched an ad campaign last year encouraging adoption of teens in foster care.

"It was obviously too late for the kids aging out," says Barbara Holtan, project director of AdoptUSKids, which ran the campaign. "That makes me so sad." She says states are reporting an increase in families inquiring about adopting teens, but it takes a while for adoptions to finalize. She hopes the ads will make a difference for those who are now 13 to 15 years old.

About 20 states give former foster kids Medicaid health insurance until they are 21, but only a handful provide money for housing and food beyond age 18, says Gary Stangler of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, a foundation to help teens leaving foster care. It co-authored the report.

"We've seen much more success in getting younger kids reunited with their families, adopted or placed with relatives," Stangler says. "We haven't caught up with how to do that for older youth."

The report says teens aging out of foster care have spent nearly five years there, twice the average for all kids in the system. "Every child in foster care deserves a family, and the need doesn't end at age 18," Stangler says. "The desire for family is hard-wired in us."

Tyler Bacon, 22, knows. He says after his mother told a judge she didn't want him when he was 13, he lived in 12 foster homes. At 18, he moved to a homeless shelter.

"I was still struggling through high school," he says. He graduated in the top 5% of his class, got an apartment and began mentoring other foster youth. But when he tried to reconnect with his family, he says, he suffered abuse that landed him in the hospital and saddled with medical bills.

Bacon, who works at Blockbuster in Jacksonville, says he is homeless again, living in a hotel, but hopeful. He says, "I do want to go to college."

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