Key Issues Confronting Youths Transitioning Out of Foster Care

In the last two decades, there has been increased attention to the circumstances under which young adults leave the foster care system when they achieve age-defined adulthood. In the United States, this is often referred to as "aging out" of care. Typically, this means these young people did not benefit from reunification with their family or a permanent family situation with kin or through adoption. Often exiting after relatively long stays in the care system, they tend to lack the support, skills, and resources required for a healthy, productive, independent adulthood. Some particularly resilient youths make a successful transition to independent adulthood. But for a significant proportion of youths in foster care, the basic goals of a higher education, employment, and stable housing remain elusive. Sustained attention in practice, policy, and research is needed to increase the likelihood that such young people will be able to achieve and maintain a healthy and productive adulthood.

An increasing number of studies, articles, books, Web sites, and conferences have been devoted to understanding of the needs of these vulnerable youths. This body of work has documented the comparatively poor outcomes of youths aging out of care and has aimed to identify policy and program supports that can help them achieve better outcomes. Although we now know far more than we did 20 years ago, and this knowledge has improved policy and practice, much more remains to be done.

On September 30, 2013, there were 402,378 children in foster care in the United States; 16 percent were between the ages of 16 and 18 and another 2 percent were 19 or older (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2014). Of those who exited foster care during FY 2013 (N = 238,280), approximately 10 percent (23,090) exited through emancipation. Children and youths of color have been overrepresented in child welfare systems: According to federal data, 42 percent of the children and youths in foster care were white, 24 percent were African American, 22 percent were Hispanic (of any race), and 2 percent were American Indian or Alaskan Native. Thus, issues facing children

and youths in child welfare systems, such as the challenges of transitioning from care, have disproportionately affected children and youths who are African American, Hispanic, or American Indian or Alaskan Native.

Primary attention until now has focused on youths as the unit of analysis—understanding their backgrounds, needs, and outcomes. For example, the early (and still often dominant) approach to assisting youths has focused on the development of independent living skills, including preparing a resume, opening a bank account, and getting a driver's license. Although important, this approach focuses on the individual level and ignores potential interventions in larger systems.

Ecological models (Garbarino, 1982; Germain & Gitterman, 1996) are central to social work analysis and practice and may be used to reorient analyses to some of the larger systems that affect human behavior and outcomes, including society, policy, institutions, organizations, and community. Of course, the microsystem (the environment in which a young person directly participates, such as school and family) exerts a critical effect on individual development (Garbarino, 1982). Recently, W. B. Smith (2011) provided a comprehensive treatment of youth transitioning out of foster care through a developmental lens, primarily focused on microsystems. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1983) has been particularly valuable in understanding the impact on the development of youths in foster care when early family experiences lead to inconsistent and insecure attachments.

In regard to independent living policy, programming, and evaluation, Collins (2001) noted the limited theoretical basis of this work and suggested greater use of the sociological literature on life transition and the multidisciplinary literature on resilience, coping, and social support. M. Stein (2006) also identified a lack of theory in research on youths aging out of care and offered attachment theory, focal theory, and resilience as critical theoretical perspectives to inform research on this topic. More recently, Collins and Pinkerton (2008) brought attention to the need for more policy-oriented theoretical frameworks to guide planning of interventions.

Consistent with a social work perspective, this book emphasizes the larger macro systems of society, policy, organization, and community, in an attempt to balance microsystem-focused contributions. Outcomes of the transition from foster care depend heavily on the processes and structures that make up the external environment. Youths exiting from foster care may be especially influenced by the larger social context because they often lack the mediating advantages of a strong familial connection, which for other young people may buffer negative environmental effects and facilitate engagement with positive ones.

Theoretical frameworks that focus on larger systems must become a part of our thinking about young people's transition from state care. This could inform

questions such as: What are the barriers to developing and implementing effective approaches? How can we bring more social attention to these youths? How might communities better support them? To what extent should policy and program supports be designed specifically for this population, as opposed to a broader population of vulnerable youths (such as youths receiving child welfare services in their homes and youths involved in more than one service system), or more general supports for all youths? This chapter reviews the core issues, which are addressed in greater depth in later chapters.

The term "macro," used to identify the focus of this book, includes various perspectives at the larger systems level, focusing on policy, community, and organizations as well as the larger society and culture. Scholars have defined "macro" in various ways, which may or may not include all of these settings. Commonly, macro practice has meant "professionally directed intervention designed to bring planned change in organizations and communities" (Netting, Kettner, & McMurtry, 1993, p. 3). The locus of activity is usually the community or organization, although "macro-level activities engage the practitioner in organizational, community, and policy arenas" (p. 3). These arenas are highly interrelated.

Articulating the Problem

Youths aging out of foster care are of compelling interest to the general public—and consequently, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers—for a number of reasons. Some adults, remembering themselves at the age of 18, may be horrified at the prospect of having to navigate the complexities of young adulthood without a family's financial, instrumental, emotional, and social support. Others, who experienced challenges themselves during their early-adult years and remember the anxieties, elements of both hard work and luck that helped them get through, and long struggle to attain stability, may want to support young people experiencing similar circumstances. This generosity of spirit may be heightened toward young people who have spent long periods in foster care and who typically have fewer internal and external resources. The widespread belief that "18 is too young to be on your own" and a sense (sometimes stereotypical and erroneous) of the hazards of childhood in foster care make the general public fairly sympathetic to this population.

Yet until relatively recently, attention to the needs of this population was limited. Although they have now attained some attention in the policy and practice environments, levels of assistance generally are not of sufficient amount or duration to have strong impacts. Moreover, there are gaps in coverage; many eligible youths may not receive assistance due to limited resources at the local level.

There are several potential explanations as to why the needs of these young people have historically been ignored and are still minimally addressed. First, the foster care system, along with child welfare more generally, is chronically underfunded and overstressed. For the most part, a strong social commitment to put resources into systems serving vulnerable populations is lacking. A recent study (Leber & LeCroy, 2012) found that although there was some support for federal spending on the foster care system, a majority of respondents rated foster care as a less serious problem and less deserving of federal funds than education or health care. In addition to lukewarm public support, common characteristics of the public child welfare bureaucracy (for example, large caseloads and inflexible rules) can negatively affect agency workers' ability to use best practices (B. D. Smith & Donovan, 2003). Such agencies also operate within an often harsh media environment that can negatively affect practice (Gainsborough, 2010).

Second, policies have emphasized prevention, family interventions, and children more than adolescents. Preventive interventions are generally geared toward infants and children more than adolescents or young adults and are intended in part to divert families from the child welfare system. In-home, family-based, preventive interventions are considered the best way to prevent maltreatment and its damage and to avoid entry into foster care, which can result in further trauma. Community-based practice, in a more familiar and culturally appropriate setting, is presumed to be better at engaging families and consequently achieving positive outcomes.

Rather than reducing expenditures, attention to older adolescents and young adults in the child welfare system may suggest the need for continued or transitional services. Thus, rather than diverting families from the system, extending services could increase short-term costs. Enhanced intervention during transition might reduce long-term costs in other state government services (for example, mental health, welfare, and corrections). But even if this is the case (an empirical question that needs to be addressed), many states have agency-specific funding streams and thus may not be able to take such savings into account.

An additional issue is social ambivalence toward adolescents, in contrast to more positive attitudes toward young children. In the public mind, adolescents are often linked with problems, and prevention is targeted primarily toward preventing these problems. For example, an entire federal office, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, aims to prevent delinquency. Efforts to promote a more proactive, developmental approach under the label "positive youth development" have become part of the policy response. As will be shown, however, these efforts are not always well integrated into practice.

This conundrum—a highly compelling problem facing a sometimes stigmatized population generating a minimalist policy response—is of central interest

to understanding the policy status and prospects for youths aging out of care. Theories of social construction lend considerable insight on the policy treatment of vulnerable youths.

Arnett (2000, 2004) articulated the concept of "emerging adulthood," a period between adolescence and adulthood, which may bode well for a long-term strategy lodged within a developmental perspective. This period, lasting from the late teens through the 20s, is a time of slow progress to adulthood. It is exploratory, unstable, with intermittent progress and occasional regression, and fluid in regard to relationships, living situations, and employment. This perspective provides a more contemporary understanding of the process of attaining adult stability in industrialized nations, which can inform a more realistic policy response than the historic presumption of a sudden onset of adulthood at age 18.

Social problems are also constructions; the objective conditions that cause distress may or may not be identified as social problems requiring intervention. Issues of rhetoric are central; child advocates deliberately frame issues to achieve political traction (Gormley, 2012). Specific population groups can be socially constructed (Schneider & Ingram, 1993); these constructions and their implications for policy will be discussed later in this book. Social construction of problems and populations is a highly political process that frames them in ways that are most advantageous to the framer's policy goals. Numerous issues compete for attention on the policy agenda, and "the victors in this competition typically benefit from persuasive and compelling problem definition" (Portz, 1996, p. 371). Problem definition, therefore, is central to the political process.

Data are also important in providing the evidence that a problem exists or that a specific intervention is effective. At least two major areas of research have been central to providing the evidence to help establish aging out of foster care as a problem requiring policy attention. One identifies the poor outcomes experienced by youths after leaving care. Courtney and Heuring (2005) reported that research conducted as far back as 1924 demonstrated this concern. Most such studies, however, have been conducted since the 1980s. Initially, they were small in scale and local in scope (for example, Barth, 1990; Mallon, 1998), but larger statewide and multistate studies (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2009; Pecora et al., 2006) using rigorous research designs have been instrumental in providing the type of data needed to understand youth circumstances and inform policy and program development. The threat of homelessness for youths leaving foster care has been identified both in follow-up studies with foster care alumni (for example, Festinger, 1983) and in studies focusing on the larger homeless population (for example, Burt, Aron, & Lee, 2001).

Social thinking about youths leaving foster care has consistently focused on the individual level; there has been little recognition of the role of the social

networks (or lack thereof) and neighborhood settings in which they begin their independent adult lives. When young people's physical environment is healthy, safe, and dynamic, with opportunities for employment and socialization, their ability to attain a solid level of well-being is much enhanced. But the reality is that, given the limited economic resources at their disposal, their neighborhood settings often lack these advantages.

A new national data collection system, the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) (2012), authorized by federal legislation, has been developed to track the independent living services provided by states to youths and the outcomes attained by youths. States were required to begin collecting data in October 2010; the initial data from this effort have only recently become available. States identified 28,318 youths who turned age 17 during federal fiscal year (FFY) 2011 and were eligible to take the NYTD survey; of these, 60 percent completed the survey. Of these respondents, 28 percent reported at least one employment experience (full- or part-time job or paid or unpaid apprenticeship, internship, or other on-the-job training), 93 percent were currently enrolled in and attending some type of education programming, 93 percent reported having a positive connection to an adult, 16 percent reported having been homeless at some point, 27 percent reported having been referred for substance abuse assessment or counseling at some point, 35 percent reported being incarcerated at some point, 7 percent reported having given birth or fathered a child, 81 percent reported having Medicaid coverage, and 16 percent reported having some other type of medical insurance (NYTD, 2012).

These baseline data tell a limited story. Given the poor response rates in some jurisdictions, increased efforts will be required to reach youths in subsequent data collections. The establishment of a database is, however, a testament to the increased importance of this population on the national stage, and in years to come these data may prove vital to understanding and improving state efforts and the resulting outcomes.

Sociological and demographic research has also identified some of the larger social trends in the life circumstances and prospects of adolescents and young adults. Such research provides important comparative information about levels of support for adolescents and young adults, as well as a critical understanding of emerging adulthood in contemporary life. Intergenerational support can significantly influence life chances for the younger generation (Schoeni & Ross, 2005; Swartz, 2008). Furthermore, demographic data have identified trends that show that young people are leaving the family home at later ages and, after leaving, are returning to live with parents more frequently (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). The option to return home gives many young people a built-in safety net.

Youths transitioning from foster care usually lack access to such resources, and this exacerbates their risks and challenges. Many of them have experienced sustained trauma. Furthermore, given the known race and class issues associated with foster care (McRoy, 2014; Roberts, 2002), there are social justice issues related to the permanence of social stratification and the social and policy mechanisms that institutionalize this stratification.

Justification for increasing support for youths transitioning out of foster care comes from several of these sources. In removing a child from the home, the state is obligated to operate in loco parentis and thus mirror the parenting practices of the larger sociocultural environment. The term "corporate parent" is used in the United Kingdom (Bullock, Courtney, Parker, Sinclair, & Thoburn, 2006) to reflect this and thereby formulate strategies of local authorities in serving the needs of children in care, including during the process of leaving care. Situated within the emerging-adulthood framework, this provides normative guidance for policy perspectives. One example of system adaptation to the emerging-adulthood framework is the greater flexibility allowed for youths to return to care after leaving at age 18. Serving these youths is now an option left to states within provisions of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351) (hereinafter, Fostering Connections Act), discussed further in the next section.

Federal Policy Framework

Federal funding for child welfare services was first authorized under the Social Security Act in 1935, and Title IV of that act provides the overarching federal policy framework for foster care and subsequent transition services. A series of amendments expanded what child welfare services could be paid for by federal funds and instituted requirements that states provide matching funds to their share of federal child welfare funds.

Before 1985, there was no specific policy on transition-related services. As part of the Consolidated Ominibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985 (P.L. 99-272), funding for Independent Living Initiatives was authorized as part of Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to provide federal funds to states to help youths in foster care develop independent living skills. Services that could be funded included assistance in obtaining a high school diploma or GED, training in daily life skills, and individual and group counseling. At that time, use of federal funding for housing was not allowed.

A more expansive policy response was embodied in the Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) of 1999 (P.L. 106-169), which established the Chafee Foster

Care Independence Program (CFCIP). This legislation provided more funding, allowed the funding to be used for a wider variety of services, and expanded eligibility for receiving assistance. In 2001, the Chafee Education and Training Voucher Program was established to help states financially support postsecondary training and education for youths aging out of the foster care system and youths adopted from public foster care after age 16.

The most recent legislation relevant to the aging-out population is the Fostering Connections Act (P.L. 110-351). This federal legislation gives states the option of extending Title IV-E foster care to the age of 21. Before its passage, states bore the full cost of any foster care extension. It also amends the CFCIP to add the purpose of providing services to youths who leave foster care after age 16 for kinship guardianship or adoption, and it amends the Education and Training Voucher Program to permit vouchers for youths who, after reaching age 16, enter into kinship guardianship or are adopted from care. In addition, the law creates a new requirement that during the 90-day period prior to the youth's emancipation, the caseworker must develop a personalized transition plan as directed by the youth.

Since passage of the Fostering Connections Act, 15 states and Washington, DC, have opted to extend foster care past age 18 with federal support (Fostering-Connections.org Project, 2013). The Fostering Connections Act is at the critical stage of policy implementation by the states, and consequently, its full impact is not yet known. The Commission on Youth at Risk (2010) identified some of the challenges to implementation of this legislation for state policymakers and other community leaders. These include (1) identifying which sections of the law are mandatory and which are optional, (2) deciding whether to fund optional provisions, and (3) managing potential unintended consequences (for example, does extending foster care to age 21 create potential disincentives to permanency?).

Public child welfare agencies are complex organizations. In the implementation of policies, numerous issues arise related to collaboration with community agencies, contracting and monitoring procedures, workforce issues related to hiring and skill development, and use of evaluation and other information for program planning. The effective delivery of transition-related services will rely on skillful administration.

The Fostering Connections Act has provided considerable policy momentum toward expanded supports, but continued progress is not a certainty. State-level implementation has been uneven. In difficult fiscal times, some states do cut back on services for transition-age youths. Alternatively, they may support transition services for youths aging out of foster care but reduce spending for other populations of vulnerable youths. It is not clear to what extent crossover youths (those in more than one state service system) may be affected by the Fostering Connections Act. A critical question to be addressed in coming years

will be how to respond to young people who terminate from care at a later age (such as 21) but still face numerous challenges.

The policies identified earlier are specific to youths leaving care. These youths might also benefit from a variety of other federal policies, particularly in the areas of public assistance, housing, employment and training, education, and health care. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA) (P.L. 111-148) expands Medicaid coverage to former foster children up to age 26 as long as they were in foster care at age 18 (or older if the state's federal foster care assistance under Title IV-E continued beyond 18) and receiving Medicaid at that time. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (P.L. 113-128) authorizes job training programs for unemployed and underemployed individuals through the Department of Labor and includes specific programs for vulnerable youths. Low-income youths formerly in foster care may also apply for housing assistance (public housing units or rental vouchers), but the demand for such assistance is far greater than the supply.

In summary, federal legislation since 1985 has incrementally provided more resources for youths aging out of foster care. Coverage remains incomplete, and funding limitations ensure that not all youths who need services receive them. There is also significant variation between states in the assistance available; states must pass legislation consistent with federal legislation but have significant flexibility in designing their own support services. Finally, although youths are potentially eligible for a range of federal and state supports, few of these programs are entitlements. States are not required to offer all services to all eligible youths who are aging out of care. Consequently, access is limited, potential recipients may be unaware of their eligibility, and application procedures are often cumbersome. Equity among vulnerable youth populations may also need consideration. Providing more resources to one category of vulnerable youths (for example, youths aging out of foster care) at the expense of another category (for example, delinquent youths) is not a solution youth advocates envision.

Youths as an Interest Group

In other policy sectors, powerful interest groups influence the agenda and policy choices. Research has long been conducted on this, but little of it has focused on youths. It is often acknowledged that young people, especially vulnerable young people, lack political power. Children and adolescents cannot vote, rarely lobby, and do not have money to influence public and private authorities; their interests are articulated by others, who may have their own agendas (Minow & Weissbourd, 1993).

Historically, children were often analytically grouped with the elderly as dependent and deserving of assistance. In the United States, however, the political status of these two groups has clearly diverged (Grason & Guyer, 1995). The elderly have become a powerful political force in their own right, whereas children and youths must rely on others to advocate for them (Grason & Guyer, 1995; Minow & Weissbourd, 1993).

Schneider and Ingram (1993) articulated the "social construction of target populations" as "the cultural characterizations or popular images of the persons or groups whose behavior and well-being are affected by public policy" (p. 334). The social construction of a population is substantially linked with the types of policies enacted for it. Discussing social constructions of youths leaving care, Collins and Clay (2009) wrote, "Claims about these youths' vulnerabilities in childhood (for example, victims of abuse), data regarding poor outcomes after transition from care, and ideological perspectives that these are 'our children' and are owed something by the state attempt to portray this population as 'worthy' of intervention" (p. 750). Sometimes youths leaving care are also portrayed as at risk of becoming homeless, welfare-dependent, and criminal. While such portrayals are meant to support arguments for providing assistance, they may burden youths in foster care with a negative social construction that risks compounding their disadvantage in the policy process. At what point within their child-welfare history do "deserving vulnerable children" transform into "difficult, troubled, undeserving adolescents" in the public eye? What can youths themselves and their advocates and partners do to influence this construction?

Theoretical perspectives on the empowerment of youths have articulated the means to include them in service delivery and organizational decision making. There has recently been increased attention to youth participation in research and evaluation, public policy, and community development (Checkoway, Allison & Montoya, 2005; Christens & Dolan, 2011). The literature on consumer involvement and positive youth development approaches is broader than this and will be discussed further in later chapters. These are separate issues but have similar conceptual elements and could be fused in ways that may be useful to advancing young people's political interests.

Undoubtedly, organized youth initiatives have succeeded in focusing policymakers' attention on the issues facing youths formerly in foster care and developing youth-driven policy solutions. The potential for further developing these networks for policy impact is substantial. Particularly as youths aging out of care gain the right to vote, this may strengthen their political voice. But compared with other well-established, powerful, financially strong interest groups, vulnerable youths remain at a disadvantage in the political process. Further, different categories of vulnerable youths (such as aging-out youths, crossover youths,

and youths in the juvenile justice system) may have to compete for resources. The prospects for unifying youths (and emerging adults) for political purposes require further exploration.

Agency– and Community–Based Macro Practice

Macro-focused social work practitioners have a significant role to play in creating the institutions, organizations, agencies, programs, and community collaborations that are needed to support youths with the transition from care. Three critical areas are workforce development, program planning and evaluation, and developing community supports.

Workforce Development

Child welfare systems engage in extensive efforts to recruit and train professionals to meet the needs of children, youths, and families. Enhancing training, in response to new policy and practice initiatives, is a major mechanism for improving intervention. Although commonly conceptualized as a human resource issue, training in public agencies is also a key variable in policy implementation; agencies are expected to translate general policy guidelines into specific procedures, and line staff members are expected to translate specific procedures into interventions with clients. Thus, through mechanisms of training and workforce development, social workers are heavily involved in implementing policy through human services programming.

Effectively addressing issues of transitioning from care requires specialized training. A recent study evaluated nine federally funded projects focused on training workers to assist youths transitioning from foster care (Collins, Amodeo, & Clay, 2007). These training projects were funded through the Child Welfare Training Program (Section 426 of Title IV-B, of the Social Security Act) and focused on developing curricula and delivering training to public child welfare workers to strengthen their capacity to work with youths transitioning from care.

The training projects focused on improving services to youths aging out of foster care and were designed to emphasize a youth development philosophy, which supports active participation by youths in their case planning, a strengths-oriented focus, empowerment strategies, and attainment of positive outcomes (for example, education, employment, and healthy relationships) rather than the avoidance of negative outcomes (for example, drug use and pregnancy).

Evaluation of these efforts (Amodeo, Collins, & Clay, 2009; Clay, Amodeo, & Collins, 2010; Collins et al., 2007) identified numerous strengths and ongoing challenges to workforce development efforts in this area. Numerous lessons

were identified related to collaboration, engaging youths as partners, linking training to related organizational change efforts, and agency leadership, among other processes. These were also linked with important lessons related to sustainability of training initiatives (beyond the initial funding period), the required administrative supports for training, and the mechanisms of dissemination and institutionalization that build systems of workforce development. These lessons are not specific to the field of youths leaving care but are perennial challenges to large human services bureaucracies and the community-based partners with which they work. Greater understanding of the potential and limitations of workforce development initiatives, and their linkage with the implementation of new policies and practices, requires considerable attention to effective organizational change.

Program Planning and Evaluation

The increase in policy attention to youths leaving care has led to numerous programmatic strategies and initiatives targeting many different domains. Services listed by the FCIA as possibly being provided by states with federal funding included assistance in obtaining a high school diploma; career exploration, vocational training, and job placement and retention; training in daily living skills, budgeting, and financial management; substance abuse prevention; preventive health activities; education; preparation for postsecondary training and education; mentoring and other interactions with adults; and financial, housing, counseling, employment, and education support.

The state child welfare agency that administers the Title IV-E Foster Care Program engages in a planning process to determine specific needs and resources within the state, and then develops an application to HHS for independent living funds for a period of five years. The plan must detail the planned implementation of the program and certify that the application was developed in a collaborative process that included the input of youths in foster care and other key stakeholder groups such as relevant state agencies (for example, mental health and juvenile justice agencies) and service providers.

The NYTD provided the first national snapshot of service delivery efforts by state CFCIP agencies aimed at helping youths transition to adulthood. In FFY 2011, states reported that 98,561 youths and young adults received at least one independent living service (NYTD, 2012). The field is currently undergoing extensive program development, some of which is likely to be innovative and creative. There is, however, no catalog of the range of available program models.

Typically, evaluation of programming efforts is minimal, and thus no compelling body of research exists to identify programs that should be replicated on a larger scale. Neither research evidence nor institutionalized support exists

for many transition-focused programs. Many are locally developed and implemented with little opportunity for knowledge sharing. Although funders typically require evaluation of programs, many agencies lack the capacity to conduct evaluations on an ongoing basis and apply the results to program planning.

Developing Community Supports

Although federal and state legislation provides the policy parameters and some funding for a program response, much of the work takes place at the community level, some of it on an informal basis. The same community networks (neighborhoods, schools, religious congregations, athletic teams, and cultural institutions) that have always had a role in young people's socialization are needed to help youths transition from foster care. How might communities support these young people?

Many community-based efforts can be broadly grouped under the term "positive youth development." This incorporates several beliefs about the inherent strengths of youths and their need to engage in a variety of opportunities and supports to successfully move into adulthood. Existing within a range of settings and portrayed in various forms, these opportunities for youth development have long been part of the social fabric. In this conceptualization, youths are not problems to be managed or controlled but have a variety of skills, strengths, talents, and assets that they can contribute to the community. Through an interdependent and reciprocal relationship with the community, youths gradually and naturally move into adult roles.

Positive youth development is based on research suggesting that certain protective factors can help young people succeed. The Family and Youth Services Bureau (HHS, Administration for Children and Families [ACF], Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2015) noted that research has indicated that young people may have fewer behavioral problems and may be better prepared for a successful transition to adulthood if they have a variety of opportunities to learn and participate at home, at school, in community-based programs, and in their neighborhoods. Key elements that can protect young people and put them on the path to success include family support, caring adults, positive peer groups, a strong sense of self and self-esteem, and involvement at school and in the community. Leadership- and skill-building opportunities under the guidance of caring adults are critical.

Positive youth development has several similarities to the strengths perspective well known to social work. These include viewing individuals as having untapped abilities and as doing the best that they can even when struggling, partnering with individuals to foster self-efficacy, and focusing on empowerment and self-advocacy for individuals and groups who are often marginalized (Amodeo & Collins, 2007).

Community-based in origin, positive youth development approaches have been recognized in federal policy. As part of its mission to provide leadership on youth and family issues, the Family and Youth Services Bureau (part of HHS, ACF) promotes positive youth development among the federal agencies, within state and local governments, and with youth workers and the general public (HHS, Family and Youth Services Bureau, ACF, 2015).

Both supports and opportunities are essential to the practice of positive youth development. The literature on the importance of social support to various populations is extensive. Aging-out youths are often thought to be alone and isolated, but studies have shown they do have connections, including with family (Collins, Paris, & Ward, 2008). One study found that among youths formerly in foster care, those with the best outcomes had substantive relationships with birth parents and other parental figures (Cushing, Samuels, & Kerman, 2014); the authors suggested that these youths potentially had greater capacity to develop relationships than other youths, or that relating to multiple sources of support was a more comfortable way of managing relational needs within complicated family structures.

In the last few years, mentoring has received considerable attention as a potential mechanism to help transitioning youths in community settings. Various mentoring models exist, and others are being developed. These include special attention to youths in foster care through existing mentoring organizations, mentoring organizations designed specifically for youths in foster care, online mentoring, and peer mentoring, either in an independent living program or elsewhere (Spencer, Collins, Ward, & Smashnaya, 2010).

There is a minimal but growing amount of research on mentoring programs for youths in foster care. One study found a positive association between formal mentoring and good outcomes (Rhodes, Haight, & Briggs, 1999). Another study did not find positive effects, but did find an increase in delinquent behavior among those youths whose mentor matches terminated early (Britner & Kraimer-Rickaby, 2005). Given the vulnerability of youths in foster care, there is reason to proceed cautiously when developing mentoring relationships (Spencer et al., 2010).

Research has also examined the mentoring relationships that emerge informally from youths' existing social networks and identified some positive outcomes for youths (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008; Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Munson & McMillen, 2009). Through qualitative interviews, Ahrens et al. (2011) identified factors that helped and hindered relationships between youths in foster care and nonparental adults and suggested potential ways to use mentoring to support youths in foster care, such as incorporating these natural mentors more formally into planning for youth transition.

Although relationships of many types are critical in helping young people transition to independence, they also need concrete opportunities to gain experience in a variety of domains. Jobs, internships, training, and leadership opportunities help youths develop adult skills. Involvement in a wide range of cultural, educational, athletic, and social groups contributes to youths' interpersonal and emotional development. Social-capital concepts have been used to study these issues, particularly in Europe (for example, Holland, Reynolds, & Weller, 2007), where issues of social inclusion have been central to the discussion of youth transition.

Role of Social Work

For a number of reasons, social work is particularly well suited to influencing policy and other aspects of the social environment to enhance the life prospects of youths transitioning out of foster care. From its earliest days, social work has been involved in addressing the needs of vulnerable children and families, and it remains fundamentally committed to good practice in child welfare (National Association of Social Workers, 2013). Within child welfare systems, social workers are engaged at all levels—clinical practice, program development, administration, and policy—in both public agencies and community-based organizations. Long before policies existed to support youths transitioning out of care, social workers in the field would have noticed the limitations of the policy response and acted to link youths with whatever resources were available. Social work researchers were also instrumental in providing the evidence base to advance the interests of aging-out youths on state and national policy agendas.

Effective practice with youths leaving care will require additional attention to community-based youth work. This is an area in which social work has historic expertise (beginning with the settlements of the Progressive Era) but which is shared with various other professional groups, paraprofessionals, and community volunteers. Transition-oriented services are inherently community based and require the development, maintenance, and negotiation of community-based services, resources, and networks. Further tapping and expanding the community orientation of social work would be particularly applicable to serving young people leaving foster care.

Social work's ecological orientation includes a macro approach to intervention. There is a substantial amount of research and theory, in social work and related fields, that may be applied to better understanding the impact of larger systems on prospects for youths leaving care. Overall, our models of policy, program, and practice for this population are born of institutional mechanisms. For example, our approach to adolescents is often constrained by child welfare

systems more accustomed to working with children, and efforts to use youth development models conflict with norms of child protection. Better understanding of these contextual elements may facilitate development of more powerful interventions.

Social work is also committed to both empirical evidence and value-based perspectives in regard to social justice. Social workers have been instrumental in providing the evidence base to guide policy and practice regarding youths aging out of care. They continue to have this role. In addition, they are educated in and practice by an ethical code in which social justice is central. The difficult prospects of these youths have been so well documented that their moral claim to further resources fits squarely within a social justice framework.

How This Book Is Structured

The chapters that follow explore the issues raised in this introductory chapter in greater depth. Part I examines some foundational issues in research and theory. It reviews the research on youths aging out of foster care (chapter 2) and theoretical perspectives on the sociology and politics of youths and young adults, with attention to normative comparisons of youths leaving care with the larger population of youths (chapters 3 and 4).

Part II focuses on policy. Chapter 5 reviews the federal policy framework, early origins, related legislation, and the recent Fostering Connections Act, which has several provisions related to youths transitioning from care. The implementation of this legislation is still unfolding. Stages of the policy process are examined in chapters examining agenda-setting (chapter 6) and implementation (chapter 7). There are rich theoretical perspectives on these processes that are rarely applied to child welfare. These chapters are intended to further understanding of the best ways to use policy to promote success for youths.

Part III examines several core areas of macro practice relevant to youths leaving care: workforce development (chapter 8), building community supports (chapter 9), and programming and evaluation (chapter 10). These components are also central to the implementation of policy and often provide the context in which social workers practice. The final chapter synthesizes these policy and macro perspectives and proposes next steps for developing policy, programs, and practices to help youths leaving foster care enter adulthood with safety and well-being.