

**“SOME TYPE OF WAY”: AN ETHNOGRAPHY
OF YOUTH AGING OUT OF THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM**

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University of Pittsburgh, 2013

In the United States, the average 18-year-old is not expected to live without support and resources from his or her family. However, in many states, youth leave the child welfare system because at their age they are no longer eligible to receive services. In many states this is at age 18. These youth “aging out” of the system must negotiate the transition out of care simultaneously with the transition to adulthood. Unsurprisingly, youth aging out of the child welfare system experience poor outcomes compared to their age-mates across multiple domains including employment, education, housing, health, substance use, mental health, justice system involvement, and early parenting. While agencies offer services targeting youth aging out, hardships and poor outcomes persist. The difficulties these youth negotiate are complex and influenced by structural conditions. An understanding of how youth aging out negotiate the transition out of the child welfare system is lacking. This ethnography explores the experiences and struggles of youth aging out as they leave care. Additionally, the study examines and critiques services for youth aging out. Using a capital development perspective as a framework, this study offers unique insights about how policies and programs can assist youth transition out of the child welfare system more smoothly.

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DEDICATION

To Ann and Dave Schelbe

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

During our last conversation, Jake¹ was desperate for money and said, “If I could sell crack I would. If I could be a hooker, I’d be a hooker.” He explained that he arrived at the conclusion to be a prostitute because he knew that he would always have his body; therefore, he would always be able to make money. Previously in the conversation, after confirming several times that what he shared would be not be told to his case manager, Jake confessed that he was making ends meet by selling prescription drugs. He told me, “I don’t want to do this, but I am losing options.” For reasons he was never able to explain clearly to me, Jake had been fired from his job at a fast food restaurant several months prior. He had been unsuccessful in securing another job. Although he lived in subsidized housing and received food stamps, he still needed money for his other living expenses. Since selling Vicodin and Klonopin proved not to be lucrative, Jake determined prostitution was a logical alternative.

Jake wanted a job. Ideally, he wanted to work at one of the many stores within walking distance of his apartment and was willing to work a nearby mall. Each time I saw or talked with him, Jake updated me about the countless retail and fast food positions for which he applied. He was ecstatic about the single interview he got in the couple of months I knew him and was equally devastated that he did not get the position, which was selling hats at a store in the mall.

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout for the names of people, agencies, and places.

Jake told me it was hard getting a job, and the “bad economy” made the job search demoralizing. I am sure Jake’s limited work experience and having only a high school degree did not help his employability. In addition, his caseworker expressed concern several times that Jake’s attitude and demeanor were detrimental to being hired.

On more than one occasion, Jake admitted that he did not take himself very seriously. More often than not, he sported a comically large grin that exposed slightly yellowing misaligned teeth. He had an offbeat sense of humor and laughed at things that others around him did not always seem to find amusing. People sometimes seemed uncomfortable around him. Jake’s clothing and music style were outside of the mainstream as well. When I first met Jake, he had a black knit cap covering up most of his stringy chin-length brown hair. He typically wore a flannel shirt layered over a graphic t-shirt which hung on his lanky wiry frame and jeans that were cinched tight around his slender waist with a belt embellished with halves of bullets. The belt once prohibited his admittance into a secure building because of the bullets, and Jake found this story about his belt incredibly amusing and laughed loudly throughout his telling of the account. Case managers complained about Jake’s music on his cell phone. Jake seemed to take great pride in the fact his case managers did not like or understand his alternative metal and horror core hip hop music.

I never saw Jake when he did not have at least a couple scabs on his body from skateboarding. Scabbed elbows, forearms, heels of his hands, and occasionally his hips and knees were the norm. Often the abrasions and bruises, which he showed me each time I saw him, were from trying something new or exciting on his skateboard with his friends. Once they were from a crash that was the result of his trying to answer his cell phone while skating down a steep

hill. Jake displayed his injuries with pride and animatedly shared the stories of the latest bumps and scrapes.

If Jake had gotten seriously injured while skateboarding or needed to see a doctor, he had no health insurance to assist in his getting medical attention. Not having insurance became an issue after Jake got into a fight at a party where he was drunk and high. There was a scuffle, which Jake blamed in part on everyone being in “an altered state of mind,” that ended with Jake on the floor and someone kicking him in the face. I accompanied Jake to a free medical clinic the next day because he had a headache and his vision was becoming increasingly blurry. Multiple times while going to the clinic Jake reminded me that I was not allowed to tell his case manager about his needing a doctor because he did not want to get into trouble and get kicked out of the program which provided his apartment. When the receptionist told Jake that the doctor could not see him that day, he decided not to get medical treatment elsewhere because he could not afford it and did not want additional medical bills. He said he thought he would probably be okay and could still see out of his other eye.

Prior to getting subsidized housing, Jake had problems maintaining stable housing. He had lived with a roommate until he stabbed his roommate in self-defense during an argument. After that incident, he moved in with his sister until she kicked him out. Homeless for several months, Jake slept wherever he could, including wooded areas of the city, which he described as a peaceful place to sleep. He avoided sleeping at the bus station because police arrested people who slept there. Although Jake liked his subsidized apartment, he regretted no longer being on his own. He seemed to need and appreciate some of the help from his case manager, but he did not always like or abide by the rules of the program.

Once Jake talked about his decision to adopt Smokey, a six-month-old kitten, although it was a violation of the conditions of his subsidized housing and an expense that he could not afford. At the time he got Smokey, Jake was unable to pay his living expenses, including food and rent; however, the cost of cat litter, cat food, and vet bills did not concern him. It clearly upset Jake that the kitten's previous owners were getting rid of him and the kitten could have been euthanized at a shelter. He felt good about rescuing the kitten, and he enjoyed the company. Jake told me one of the main reasons he adopted Smokey was, "It's so nice not to be alone."

Jake frequently talked about being alone. He had an older sister and other family in the area, but his relationships with them were often strained. Although his sister lived nearby, he did not see her regularly. She had two young children, both of whom were involved in the child welfare system. This meant there were at least three generations of his family involved with the child welfare system since as children his mother and aunt were both in the child welfare system. Jake's aunt and uncle occasionally assisted him. When he moved into his apartment, his uncle gave him some discarded used furniture that he had found by the side of the road. Some of the assistance his family offered seemed to create challenges for Jake, and he did not always feel he could ask his family for help.

I never found out if Jake followed through with his plan to become a prostitute. Before hanging up during our last phone conversation, Jake and I had made plans to talk in the next couple of days. I called several times and was unable to reach him. First, his voicemail, which he had previously told me he did not know how to check, filled up. Eventually, his phone number was disconnected. I knew Jake had my phone number, and I hoped that he would reach out to me. He never did. I had only known Jake for four months when I lost contact with him.

A couple of months later, his former case manager told me Jake had abandoned his apartment and moved in with a friend. A fast food place within walking distance of the friend's home had hired him, and Jake had been excited to work again. Several more months passed before the case manager mentioned Jake again. She had heard from Jake that the living arrangements with his friend did not work out. The case manager expressed frustration with his lack of contingency plans and a safety net. Eventually, she too lost touch with Jake and did not know where he lived or if he continued working.

I had met Jake at an agency serving youth aging out of the child welfare system. Youth aging out by definition are in the process of leaving the child welfare system through emancipation instead reunification with family or adoption. A network of services throughout Keystone County, Pennsylvania, where he lived, serves these vulnerable youth. The program into which Jake was accepted provided him with case management and his own apartment where he paid one-third of his income for rent and utilities. The case manager worked with him to become self-sufficient and focused on helping him to apply for jobs as well as to access government assistance (e.g. food stamps and unemployment) and to pursue an educational goal. Unfortunately, programs designed to help did not always meet Jake's needs, and he often became confused by information that he was given that sometimes seemed to be conflicting and challenging to understand. Even his case manager experienced difficulty understanding the paperwork explaining how to file for unemployment. Without his case manager's help, Jake had not been able to apply for food stamps or file for unemployment. However, even with her assistance, he experienced difficulties filling out applications and producing the necessary documentation. Jake failed to follow through with deadlines which once resulted in his having to

restart the application process. He did not always seem to remember or understand the rules and requirements of programs. Jake struggled to live on his own.

Jake is similar to many of the former foster youth who aged out of the system whom I met during the two years I spent collecting data for this ethnography. Like others, he struggled with employment and housing and was undereducated for employment that paid a livable wage. Jake faced challenges of isolation and complicated relationships, as well as instability and violence. He sometimes appeared to fail to understand social norms and expectations for him as a young adult and as a potential employee. No longer in the system and ill-prepared to be on his own, Jake had to make the best decisions among limited undesirable ones. In the short time I knew him, I witnessed Jake making choices that had short-term benefits, but significant risks and long-term negative consequences. He often did not have contingency plans in the likelihood he encountered difficulties with his original plan; his case manager complained that Jake, like many other youth, planned poorly and failed to think through the consequences adequately. The options Jake had available were limited. Even though he wanted to work, he could not find a job. He had no stable form of income. Inevitably when Jake needed help, he had little support and few resources to help him. I saw him struggle and flounder, trying to negotiate the challenges of living on his own. There was significant instability in Jake's life, and an accomplishment, such as securing housing, was often short-lived. Soon after experiencing success, even with case managers and programs assisting him, his life unraveled.

It saddened me that life was so difficult for Jake, and I lost several nights of sleep after losing contact with him as I worried about what became of him. I wish I could say that Jake was the only youth I met that I lost sleep over and that he was somehow different from the other youth aging out I knew. Sadly, he was not. Over the course of the two years that I was in the

field collecting data, I met many youth like Jake who, even with programs attempting to assist them, struggled to make it on their own.

1.1 SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

In 2011, approximately 26,000 youth were emancipated from the child welfare system in the United States when they became too old to receive services (United States Department of Health and Human Services [US DHHS], 2012a). In Keystone County, Pennsylvania, the site of this study, approximately 200 youth are emancipated each year. Since aging out can best be understood as a process that extends from youth preparing to leave care to youth being out on their own, and not simply as the point at which youth are emancipated, these number hide the actual number of youth aging out. A total of 1,100 youth are eligible for independent living services and are in the process of aging out in Keystone County. These 1,100 youth are between the ages of 16 and 24 and were in an out of home placement in the child welfare system for at least 30 days since their 16th birthday. However, the significance of this issue lies not in the numbers of youth aging out, but rather in the poor outcomes these youth frequently experience. Research consistently has found that youth aging out fare poorer than their age- mates across multiple domains including employment, education, housing, health, mental health, substance use, justice system involvement, and early parenting (Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2006). Unfortunately, Jake's experience is not unique. Youth aging out often struggle to survive, and their successes and accomplishments can unravel quickly. Hardships frequently punctuate these youths' lives.

It should not be surprising that youth aging out struggle to negotiate the transition from the child welfare system to independence. Even under the best of circumstances—when a youth has a supportive family, adequate resources, and no troubled history—the transition from childhood to adulthood can be difficult; and vulnerable youth face more challenges (Osgood et al., 2005). Stripped of family support and without adequate resources, youth aging out transition to adulthood carrying past traumas of maltreatment and of being removed from their home and entering the child welfare system. Additionally, they are more likely to have educational deficits, justice system involvement, and problems with health, mental health, and substance use. Youth aging out also may be negotiating the transition as young parents; foster youth (Pecora et al., 2003) and youth aging out have higher pregnancy rates and births than others their age (Courtney et al., 2009; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010).

The disadvantages youth aging out face while transitioning out of care and into adulthood are great; however, the societal expectation of becoming a contributing member of society is the same as it is for all other youth. Actually, in many ways, expectations for youth aging out are greater than those for their age-mates since the same outcomes are desired with fewer resources and greater barriers. Mr. Wayne², a service provider working with youth aging out, explained his thoughts about youth aging out:

² When referring to a service provider, most youth added the honorific Mr. or Miss to the service provider's first name. To assist the reader with distinguishing service providers from youth, I maintain this convention. While some service providers told youth to refer to them by their first name, most service providers preferred and in some cases demanded youth to use honorifics. Service providers typically added the honorific when referring to other service providers while talking to youth or talking in front of youth. Some youth actively resisted using the honorifics, while other insisted on using them even after they were told that it was unnecessary. For most of my fieldwork youth referred to me as "Miss Lisa" even after I invited them to call me simply by my first name.

But I feel like they're starting from scratch...I feel like it's a race. And the foster care population has been set back a couple yards. You know what I mean? And it's like, "Go!" Who's gonna make it across the finish line first? And I feel that the foster care youth has already been set back even before the race begins, if that makes any sense.

The metaphor captures how youth aging out are starting behind their age-mates in an unequal race they are destined not to win. What is missing from this metaphor, that Mr. Wayne, other service providers, and sometimes the youth themselves were painfully aware of, is the consequences of not succeeding. Not winning or finishing a race may be disappointing, but becoming homeless, hungry, and unable to meet basic human needs—all of which youth aging out may face when they encounter hardships—can devastate and destroy a life.

The costs of hardships to youth aging out are great, and any one hardship can threaten any success and stability in a youth's life. Dropping out of school, losing a job, becoming homeless, experiencing health problems, suffering from mental health problems, being addicted to drugs, getting a criminal record, or becoming a young parent are major life events with the potential to have cascading effects and affects a youth's life trajectory. Youth aging out are vulnerable, and their successes are fragile. Jake was working, living in his own apartment, and paying his bills with the assistance of an agency. After losing his job, the stability in his life crumbled, and soon he was homeless, selling prescription drugs, and considering prostitution. While I do not know what happened to Jake, living on the streets, selling drugs, and becoming a prostitute pose great risks; he could experience consequences in terms of physical and mental health as well as being more likely to be victimized and exposed to violence. Additionally, being on the streets could lead to Jake being arrested and getting a criminal record which could impact future employment and housing opportunities. Simply not building an employment history and good credit may impact his future employment prospects. When youth aging out face hardships, their lives can unravel; and without resources and support, the troubles they experience can grow

exponentially and have long-lasting effects. Using a life course perspective, we can easily see how negative outcomes of a difficult transition out of the child welfare system can shape a youth's life trajectory.

The hardships youth aging out face also pose significant costs to society. Research has found youth aging out are likely to live in poverty after leaving care (Pecora et al., 2006). Even when youth are employed, they earn poverty level wages (Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Goerge et al., 2002). Due to their lack of skills and recent entry into the work force, during times of economic hardship they may be the last to be hired and first to be fired. When youth aging out are unable to provide for themselves, they may rely on public assistance and non-profits filling in the gaps. Studies have found that in the year after leaving care, youth aging out are at least five times more likely than the general population to rely upon Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and general assistance (Courtney et al., 2001; Dworsky, 2005; Pecora et al., 2006). Youth aging out may rely upon subsidized housing or shelters, food stamps and food banks, Medicaid and free medical clinics, and other programs to meet basic living needs.

Additionally, the involvement of youth aging out in systems can be expensive for society. In the cases of the youth who become young parents, the costs are not only to care for themselves, but also for their children. Another cost associated with early parenting is their children's child welfare system involvement, as youth aging out are not only more likely to be early parents (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Courtney et al., 2009), but also are at increased risk of being investigated by and involved with child protective services (Dworsky & DeCoursey, 2009). Costs associated with the child welfare system are expensive to taxpayers as are costs related to the justice systems. Youth aging out who try to make ends meet through illegal means

may end up involved in the juvenile justice and criminal justice systems, which translates to prosecution and incarceration costs.

It is important to note that many of these costs are not one-time inexpensive costs. Further, while these clearly are direct costs to taxpayers, there are more indirect and hidden costs. For example, research has documented poor educational outcomes of youth aging out. Over the course of a lifetime, a high school dropout earns \$300,000 less than a high school graduate and \$1.3 million less than someone with a bachelor's degree (Carnevale, Ross, & Chean, 2012). In addition to impacting the under and unemployed individual, this fact translates to a loss in tax revenue. Taking this into consideration, citizens pay twice: first by paying for services to assist youth aging out and second by not receiving taxes from the income generated by educated youth aging out. Additionally, considering lost productivity and creativity as well as increased suffering of youth aging out who may be unable to continue their education or get jobs, the less tangible costs to society are also substantial.

The cost-benefit analyses conducted on youth aging out consistently find that keeping youth in care after the age of 18 and providing service offers a substantial benefit. An analysis in California found that by extending foster care from 18 to 21 there was a return of \$2.40 for each dollar spent (Courtney, et al., 2009). A similar study found a benefit-cost ratio of 2.7 to 1 for providing cash benefits and services to youth aging out until their 23rd birthday (Packard, et al., 2008). Cost-benefit analyses conclude that the benefits of providing services to youth aging out of care clearly outweigh the costs. The child welfare system has already made a huge capital investment in the youth in care, and should continue providing for youth to avoid future expenses (Mallon, 1998). For purely financial reasons, providing care for youth as they age out is sound policy.

Considering the poor outcomes of youth aging out as well as the costs to society when youth fail to transition out of the child welfare system smoothly, in 1986, Congress passed federal legislation addressing the needs of youth aging out. In the next chapter, I provide additional background on policy and the programs the federal government funded through the various policies since then. Additionally, I discuss the current environment, where funds for social services are consistently being cut while funding specifically to assist youth aging out continues since assisting youth aging out is perceived to be a good investment.

The key point is that policy makers have identified youth aging out as a vulnerable population in need of assistance, and programs were funded to assist their transition out of care and into adulthood. Independent living (IL) programs provided to youth were designed to prepare them to be contributing members of society. Although the programs vary greatly, many focus on education and employment along with skills such as budgeting, cleaning, and managing a household. Evaluations of programs are limited, and evidence-based practices have not been established. A substantial gap in the research is related to the lack of understanding what helps youth aging out successfully transition out of care.

1.2 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Over approximately two years, I interviewed and observed youth aging out and service providers of youth aging out, whom I recruited primarily through three agencies serving youth aging out: a job readiness program, a scattered-site housing program, and a non-residential independent living program. I spoke with and observed hundreds of youth and service providers while

collecting data, always guided by my research question: how do youth aging out of the child welfare system negotiate the transition from the child welfare system to “independence?” I conducted 92 interviews with 44 study participants, a majority of whom were youth aging out.

I logged over 850 hours of observation. Observations frequently occurred at the agencies; however, I also observed youth in their daily lives. I spent time with youth in their apartments hanging out, doing laundry, cooking, cleaning, and packing for and unpacking from a move. Sometimes I accompanied youth shopping at Wal-Mart or at grocery stores. I attended events such as a hip-hop concert, a sentencing hearing at court, and a funeral. While in the field, whenever possible, I wrote jottings about what I saw and heard and details I wanted to make sure I remembered. I wrote extensive fieldnotes from these jottings.

Data analysis started as I entered the field to collect data. Following standard qualitative methods, the process was iterative and inductive. I wrote memos to expand upon my thoughts that were then taken back to the field and further explored. I learned through constantly comparing what I saw among the youth as well as among the service providers and also between the two groups. Information obtained through observations and interviews further developed my thinking. Speaking with youth and service providers about my thoughts continuously refined my understanding.

Although the research on youth aging out is largely atheoretical, promising theoretical frameworks that can be used to help understand the experience of youth aging out exist (Stein, 2006b). Theories useful for understanding youth aging out include developmental theories such as life course perspective (Collins, 2001). Developmental theories are often implicit in literature, practices, and policies pertaining to youth aging out. I ground the study within a life course perspective, noting the role hardships and interventions play in youths’ life trajectories. As

literature about youth aging out incorporates emerging adulthood theory, I address and critique the theory. Throughout the study, I use a critical perspective to explore the process of youth aging out of the child welfare system.

I adopted strategies from extended case method to improve the theoretical understandings of youth aging out. Extended case method does not develop new theory entirely from the data; it explores how developed theories fail to explain what is observed in the field (Burawoy, 1991a). Ultimately this method allows existing theory to be reconstructed and refined through constant comparison and focusing upon anomalies observed in the field.

Informed by extended case method, I build upon selected theories to fill gaps in theoretical understandings of youth aging out. I begin with a critical theory to highlight the social, economic, and political forces which contribute to the hardships that youth aging out face. I also include a capital development perspective, which includes four types of capital—human, social, cultural, and economic—to examine the experiences of youth aging out of the child welfare system as well as the relevant policies and practices.

In this study, I offer insights about what appears to assist youth aging out to achieve a smoother transition out of the child welfare system. Through sharing youths' stories and insights along with the service providers' perspectives and my own observations, I suggest that programs and policies may contribute to youths' successes. Likewise, I highlight unintentional consequences of policies and practices that may inadvertently create barriers for youth aging out and contribute to difficulties youth face as they are leaving care. I describe the chaotic and stressful work environment within which those serving youth aging out must function and place these policies and practices in the larger context of the community and service delivery system.

1.3 RELEVANCE TO SOCIAL WORK

As social workers, our professional mission, experiences, and theoretical backgrounds make us the ideal leaders for addressing the problem of youth aging out. From the profession's beginnings, social workers have served vulnerable populations, including youth aging out of care. The core values and principles of the profession outlined in the Code of Ethics call for social workers to advocate for social justice and the human dignity of all people, especially those oppressed and most vulnerable (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). Teetering upon the brink of adulthood and independence, completely vulnerable to severe hardships without resources and support, youth aging out clearly fall within a category that the Code of Ethics mandates social workers take action on their behalf.

At all levels of practice, social workers already are intimately involved with the issues and needs of youth aging out. Social workers serve on the front line providing support and resources through case management and therapy with youth aging out. Additionally, social workers play a significant role in the development and implementation of programs for youth aging out. Social workers are already involved with advocacy and policy for youth aging out, as well as evaluation and research.

The knowledge base and theoretical orientation that social workers have along with our practice experience make us exceptional advocates and visionaries for change. Social workers understand structural barriers such as poverty and the impact of trauma on youth development and how these and other constructs create a complex picture of youth aging out. It is necessary for social workers to continue our efforts working with and for youth aging out and to increase our involvement and assume leadership positions. Youth aging out need services and support as well as people to advocate for them. Social workers should continue to meet all of these needs.

This study contributes to social work by illustrating the challenges youth aging out face and describing how youth aging out negotiate the transition out of care. It also details the experiences of youth aging out with receiving services, and in addition to highlighting service provision, it critiques policies and practices which may contribute to the hardships of youth aging out. Understanding the realities of youth aging out of the child welfare system provides an important foundation for policy and practice. Social workers, both in direct practice and policy making positions, would benefit from better understanding the lives of youth aging out and how services can assist them transition more smoothly out of the child welfare system.

1.4 “SOME TYPE OF WAY”

I chose to use the phrase “some type of way” as the beginning of the dissertation title because it holds several meanings and represents some of the study’s key findings. The first time I heard a youth use the phrase “some type of way,” I did not know exactly what he meant. He had been talking about how he had given his mother money from a paycheck to save for him, but she had spent it. While he did not explicitly talk about feeling angry, upset, or disappointed, these emotions were evident in how he spoke about the incident. Later I inquired about the phrase “some type of way” and learned that it is used to describe strong complex feelings. As youth age out, they described having intense mixed feelings; they often felt “some type of way” about leaving the child welfare system and transitioning to life on their own.

Including the phrase “some type of way” not only captured the feelings of youth aging out in their own words, but also conveys the nature of their experiences leaving care and transitioning life on their own. Youth aging out lack many of the resources and supports that

their age-mates possess and face more obstacles; however, somehow they are surviving. Some type of way they are transitioning to adulthood.

The final reason I selected the title was related to the service providers. The issues youth aging out face are complex, and service providers have to be creative and tenacious to assist with some of the problems. Often service providers have demanding caseloads, limited resources, and constraints from funders and agency policies. In spite of all of this, they are helping youth. Some type of way service providers are assisting youth aging out.

1.5 OUTLINE OF DISSERTATION

This dissertation is organized into four parts: a literature review, a methods section, three findings chapters, and the conclusion. The literature review, the second chapter, situates youth aging out within the larger social context of the transition from adolescence to adulthood. I present how adolescence in the United States is a time of transition and development where familial support is the norm. I introduce a life course perspective as a framework used to understand the transition to adulthood and critique the use of emerging adulthood theory for the population of youth aging out. Then, I present an overview of youth aging out, and use a lens of a capital development perspective as a framework to understand the struggles of youth aging out. I detail the historical context of federal legislation addressing youth aging out starting in 1986 and review policy up to the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. I highlight how the policies funding independent living programs emphasize education and employment. I critique how this emphasis on youths' human capital does not necessarily

incorporate the development of the other types of capital which may be necessary for a smoother transition out of the child welfare system. I conclude the section with a review of the qualitative research on youth aging out and the research on providing services to youth aging out.

Chapter Three outlines the aims of the study and research question. I explain the rationale for ethnography and my analysis, and I describe the sample, research sites, data collection process, and data analysis. This chapter also includes details of the study procedures including recruitment, gaining informed consent/assent, interviews, and participant observation. The chapter concludes with a description of the limitations of the study.

I present my findings in the next three chapters. The first, Chapter Four, focuses on the realities of the lives of youth aging out. I examine youths' complicated lives and their struggles and experiences with employment. To a lesser extent education, housing and other domains where youth aging out often struggle are explored; however, I largely focus on employment and youths' desire to have jobs. I introduce a life course perspective to explain how the hardships faced both in the past and present impact the future of youth aging out. I also examine how emerging adulthood theory adds to the understanding of youth aging out.

In the second findings chapter, Chapter Five, I offer the framework of capital development perspective to understand the struggles of youth aging out. I argue that with underdeveloped capital, youth aging out are disadvantaged as they transition out of the child welfare system. Although a lack of capital may appear to reflect youths' deficits, I explain that capital should be understood as a function of youths' current and past surroundings. Giving details from different youths' lives, in this chapter I illustrate how youths' lack of human, social, cultural, and economic capital contribute to their struggles.

In the final findings chapter, Chapter Six, I outline how services are provided to youth aging out. I examine how service providers conceptualize the problem of youth aging out and highlight how emphasis is placed upon human capital development both by service providers as well as by federal legislation. I describe the problems service providers face as they work with youth aging out. Using a capital development perspective, I critique services for youth aging out, as well as the child welfare system. I end the chapter with examples of service providers who are making a difference in the lives of youth aging out

The concluding chapter begins with a series of policy and practice recommendations for youth aging out. Some of the recommendations I include are starting early and staying involved; recognizing the fluidity of success; developing all types of youths' capital instead of focusing entirely on human capital; helping youth build relationships; and addressing structural barriers. Additionally, in the conclusion, I outline limitations of the study and directions for future work.

1.6 SUMMARY

Youth aging out of the child welfare system experience poor outcomes compared to their age-mates across multiple domains including employment, education, housing, health, substance use, mental health, justice system involvement, and early parenting. While agencies offer services targeting these youth, hardships and poor outcomes persist. The difficulties youth aging out must negotiate are complex and influenced by structural conditions. An understanding about how youth aging out negotiate the transition out of the child welfare system is lacking. The contribution of this ethnography is twofold. First, it presents the daily lives and struggles of youth aging out as they leave care. Second, the study examines and critiques how services are

provided to youth aging out. The in-depth insider perspective this study offers gives unique insights about how policies and programs can assist youth aging out to transition out of care more smoothly.

This study addresses several gaps in the literature. While research has identified the extent of the poor outcomes youth aging out face, what is missing is an in-depth examination of the lives of youth aging out of the child welfare system. The numbers of youth who end up homeless, unemployed, incarcerated, and facing other hardships do not tell the whole story. We do not understand what daily life is like for youth as they negotiate the transition out of the child welfare system. Nor do we understand the role that services play in the lives of youth aging out. This ethnography contributes to understanding the daily lives and struggles of youth aging out, as well as the impact of services for youth aging out. Additionally, it offers youths' perspectives on the aging out process. Currently, no ethnographies of youth aging out exist.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

In the United States, the societal norm is that children depend upon their parents when they are young, but as they enter adolescence the expectation shifts. As adolescents age and transition into adulthood, they are expected to become independent from their families of origin. Although the ideal is to become self-sufficient adults, there is great variation in the expectations and the process across different classes and genders.

Children are viewed as dependents who have yet to achieve “full personhood” and receive all the rights and responsibilities of being a citizen (Sarri & Finn, 1992, p. 225). However, this view of dependence is historically and culturally bound. The adherence to the primacy of the value of independence has evolved within American culture (Fraser & Gordon, 1994). The concept of an independent adult is socially constructed and holds gender and racial biases and assumptions. While it may be touted as today’s ideal, independence rarely exists; interdependence with family and others is the foundation for survival and well-being (Fineman, 2000).

Though no one is truly independent, since social connection and reliance on others is necessary, independence remains a hallmark of adulthood in the United States. Individuals perceived as remaining dependent after leaving childhood are seen as deviants and failures (Sarri & Finn, 1992). Independence and adulthood are interlocked concepts with independence signifying adulthood.

2.1 ADULTHOOD

While the period of adolescence usually is defined from a biological perspective as starting with puberty, the end of adolescence as well as the beginning of adulthood is defined culturally (Arnett & Taber, 1994). Legally, the United States recognizes age 18 as the start of adulthood by affording a number of rights and responsibilities that promote independence. At age 18, youth are given rights including the right to enter a legal contract, vote, purchase cigarettes, and enlist in the military. However, becoming an adult involves more than simply celebrating a birthday; it can be thought of as a gradual process spanning years defined by an individual's acquisition of the skills and development of her or his independence and individuality (Furstenberg Jr, Kennedy, McCloyd, Rumbaut, & Settersteen Jr, 2003). At age 18, few individuals have the capacity to negotiate life and function independently from their family of origin.

Cultural norms in the United States have changed over the last several decades, as has the construction of adulthood and the process of becoming independent. In earlier times, the trajectory from adolescence to adulthood was clearly defined and more of a "rigid life-course schedule" (Goldscheider, Goldscheider, St. Clair, & Hodges, 1999, p. 716). During the last century, young men were expected to follow the completion of their education with employment, marriage, and fatherhood. Societal expectations differed for young women. White women were supposed to marry, have children, and stay at home to raise them. It is important to note that women of color have always been expected to work outside the home. Following these gendered expectations, the path to a "successful" adulthood was clearer and more direct with the basic

pattern of leaving the parents' home and care and establishing a life independent of the family of origin. Since this period of certainty, more ambiguity and options have appeared due to social, political, and economic forces (Goldscheider, Goldscheider, St. Clair, & Hodges, 1999; Mogelonsky, 1996; Settersteen Jr, 2006).

2.2 ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF BECOMING AN ADULT

In the late 20th century, changing economic and social forces altered the environment, thus challenging the adherence to a rigid life-course schedule and becoming independent. The late century recession with rising unemployment rates created a hostile job market for many, especially those new to the labor force. Concurrently, many employers decreased full-time positions that had health care benefits to cut costs. In addition to an increase in part-time employment, contractual work and outsourcing became more common. Individuals with less experience and fewer skills were less likely to obtain and maintain employment that paid livable wages. Accompanying the scarcity of jobs paying livable wages, housing costs, inflation, and increased costs of higher education resulted in many young people accruing significant debt through credit cards and loans, including student loans, to live. With these conditions, it became more difficult to become independent. The stark economic picture contributed to the need for many young adults to rely upon assistance from others as they negotiated the challenges on the path to independence.

The impact of economic conditions such as these on the transition to an independent adulthood may be offset by parental involvement and support, which often provide permanency and stability, allowing youth to enter adulthood gradually. Today, a period of extended

adolescence and intergenerational interdependence are the norm. Not having parental assistance or having family instability can negatively impact an adolescent's launch into adulthood (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1998). Parents assist their children during the transition to independence, with parental involvement often continuing until children are in their late 20s. The average age when children become self-sufficient is 26 years (Schoeni & Ross, 2005).

In the last several decades, the amount of both financial and emotional assistance from parents has increased for youth as they enter adulthood (Schoeni & Ross, 2005). One type of assistance that parents give that is both financial and emotional is providing housing to their children. Assistance parents provide also extends beyond providing a place to live. Financial support is common, with parents spending an average total of \$38,340 on their children between the ages of 18 and 34, which translates to about one quarter of the assistance parents provide to their children when they are under age 18 (Schoeni & Ross, 2005). Youth receiving financial assistance from their parents receive an average of \$3,410 each year (Schoeni & Ross, 2005). Support as youth negotiate the challenges of the transition extends beyond a place to live and money; it includes providing emotional support and sharing wisdom by giving advice and helping make decisions or to solve problems. Simply having the presence of a supportive family can be beneficial since knowing that the option of moving back home or borrowing money if a crisis occurs can provide youth with a sense of security.

2.3 THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS

2.3.1 Emerging Adulthood Theory

Emerging adulthood theory offers insight into the benefits derived from having support during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The theory posits that in western cultures, the transition from adolescence to adulthood is an extended process and adulthood is neither simply achieved at age 18, nor by way of a single social event such as marriage (Arnett & Taber, 1994). Emerging adulthood is the theoretically and empirically distinct time period between the ages of 18 to 25 when independence is explored and decisions are made about the future and when youth leave adolescence and enter adulthood (Arnett, 2000). During this time, young people may benefit from having the support of their families, as they continue to develop cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally.

Emerging adulthood is an unstable time during which youth explore and discover themselves. They develop adult reasoning and sense of responsibility, autonomy and ability to have intimate adult experiences, impulse control, ability to follow societal rules, and interdependence (Arnett & Taber, 1994). The main characteristics of emerging adulthood include identity exploration, instability, the most self-focused time of life, feeling in-between (adolescence and adulthood) and great possibilities to transform of life (Arnett, 2000). During this period of instability and transition, permanency and support are important and can make a tremendous contribution to a successful transition to adulthood.

The period of emerging adulthood is not universal. Class impacts individuals' transition to adulthood: individuals in lower socio-economic classes are disadvantaged by having less

support (Settersteen Jr, 2006). Having an extended amount of time to explore identity and adult roles is a privilege that members of working and lower classes may not have.

2.3.2 Life Course Perspective

Having difficulties during the transition to adulthood can set the stage for more challenges in the future. For example, youth convicted of drug related offenses may find they are not eligible for student loans and that future employers are unwilling to hire them due to their criminal record. These consequences can limit their future options and increase the likelihood of poverty. Falling into poverty during the transition disadvantages individuals, since once a person experiences poverty, he is more likely to experience subsequent bouts of poverty in the future (Rank & Hirschl, 2001).

How youth transition to adulthood matters. While not completely deterministic, what happens during the transition to adulthood can set the stage for the rest of a person's life. Likewise, what has happened previously in a youth's life will contribute to how smoothly and successfully a youth moves into adulthood. These statements rest squarely within the tenets of Life Course Perspective, which posits that societal forces shape individuals' life courses and development (Elder, 1994). Events and external circumstances have a lasting and cumulative effect and shape a person's life trajectory. Difficulties during the transition to adulthood can set an individual on a path that is fraught with more challenges throughout his life.

Unfortunately, smooth transitioning to adulthood is unlikely for all youth. This is captured in the words of Osgood and colleagues (2005):

An analogy might be that, if middle-class college-bound youth pass through the transition on relatively well-greased wheels, the transition is prone to be rough sledding for

working-class non-college bound youth, and it can be a minefield for the vulnerable populations (p. 2).

Many factors including class, race, ethnicity, gender, and geography shape pathways to adulthood (Goldscheider et al., 1999). Fewer resources and less support create additional challenges for youth to negotiate while entering adulthood, which may limit their life trajectories by removing opportunities.

2.3.3 Capital Development Perspective

The concept of capital can be used to understand individuals' positions in society as well as the available opportunities and probable outcomes. At its most basic level, capital is accumulated labor which under specific social rules a person can exchange for profits (Bourdieu, 1986). In Forms of Capital, Bourdieu (1986) divides capital into three categories: economic, social, and cultural. A person's economic capital is her economic assets which could be easily converted to money as well as her ability to control the economic assets. A millionaire has greater economic capital than a person living in poverty. Bourdieu (1986) argues that economic capital is the basis for all capital; all other types of capital can be derived from economic capital.

Social capital can be understood as a person's social network along with the opportunities and resources accessible due to the social connections. Bourdieu (1986) posits that social capital is a function of group membership. Social capital of a person is greater when his social networks have more access to information and resources. Literature focusing on at-risk youth increasingly is focusing on the importance of social capital in minimizing risk (Koball et al., 2011).

The third type of capital, cultural capital, is a person's understanding of social norms and her ability to practice the socially desirable skills and behaviors. Cultural capital is developed

through parenting, the educational systems, and everyday life (Bourdieu, 1986). Through mastering social norms, a person maintains her status in society. Related to cultural capital is the concept of habitus, the set of acceptable socially learned skills and behaviors which are largely invisible to those who understand them. The social norms that guide the way people think and act which can be understood as habitus are learned through social interactions with others and shift according to context and time.

Bourdieu's (1986) framework consists of three types of capital; however, the institutionalized state of cultural capital that he describes can be understood as a fourth type of capital, human capital. Bourdieu describes a person's academic qualifications, knowledge, and skills, as the institutional state of cultural capital; however, others define this as another a distinct type of capital, human capital (Heckman, 2000). Human capital describes a person's skill level that is most immediately evaluated by her level of education and employment, but also includes non-cognitive skills such as reliability and self-discipline.

Since the concept of human capital is used within youth development (Koball et al., 2011), and is within some of the discourse about youth aging out (Courtney & Heuring, 2005; Hook & Courtney, 2011), I will use four types of capital—human, economic, social, cultural—to make the capital development framework more accessible. However, I continue to incorporate Bourdieu's work which argues that an individual's position in society is largely determined by her economic, cultural and social capital and people at lower social classes are not likely to rise to higher levels. External social structures impact individuals' movement between classes as well as their development of capital which influences the outcomes likely for different social groups. For example, an individual from a lower socio-economic status whose parents did not attend

college is less likely to attend an Ivy League university and become a wealthy doctor than an individual from a high socio-economic status whose parents are both doctors.

2.4 YOUTH AGING OUT

Youth aging out of the child welfare system are a vulnerable population that often faces a rough transition to adulthood. On nearly every measured outcome in the domains of housing, education, employment, mental health, substance use, justice system involvement and early parenting, youth aging out fare more poorly than their age-mates. Stable housing is a challenge, with approximately 20% of youth aging out experiencing homelessness within the first years of leaving the child welfare system (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Pecora et al., 2006; Reilly, 2003). Multiple educational disparities between youth aging out and their age-mates include lower high school graduation rates, disproportionately higher number of GEDs, and lower enrollment in and completion of secondary education (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Pecora et al., 2006; Reilly, 2003). Youth aging out also fare more poorly than their age-mates in employment outcomes with lower levels of employment; those who are employed often earn low wages and frequently live below the poverty line (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). The prevalence rates of mental health and substance use problems are higher for youth aging out than their age-mates. In the Midwest Study, a longitudinal study of youth aging out in three midwestern states, one third of youth suffered from depression, dysthymia, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), social phobia, alcohol dependence, substance abuse, or substance dependence (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Studies of youth aging out have routinely discovered disproportionately high rates of substance

use and substance use disorders (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Kushel, Yen, Gee, & Courtney, 2007; Vaughn, Ollie, McMillen, Scott, & Munson, 2007).

Youth within the child welfare system are over-represented in the juvenile justice system (Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000). Studies have found that compared to the general population of youth, youth aging out have higher levels of offending (Cusick & Courtney, 2007), higher arrest rates (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Cusick & Courtney, 2007; Reilly, 2003), and higher levels of being incarcerated or in jail, prison, or juvenile detention (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Reilly, 2003). Youth aging out are more likely to be young parents; studies have found between 38% and 59% of youth having parented a child within the first years of leaving care (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Kushel et al., 2007; Reilly, 2003).

It is not surprising that the outcomes of youth aging out of the child welfare system starkly contrast with those of their age-mates. Youth aging out are disadvantaged and have faced the additional challenge of having an accelerated and compressed transition to independence. Unlike their age-mates whose parents assist with the transition, youth aging out often face this alone. Youth aging out would benefit from the support, stability, and permanency of family as they transition to adulthood; however, they are leaving the child welfare system that has been serving as their parent. Compounding the difficulty is that youth aging out often have had experiences in their lives that disadvantage them such as exposure to poverty and trauma, and lack of life skills. Emerging adulthood theory, a life course perspective, and a capital development perspective can help explain the poor outcomes of youth aging out during the transition. However, before entering a theoretical discussion of why youth aging out often have

poor outcomes, it is helpful to examine briefly the child welfare system for youth aging out and the backgrounds of youth to provide the necessary context.

2.5 FEDERAL LEGISLATION

It was not until the mid-1980s when federal legislation was passed that specifically addressed the issue of youth aging out of the child welfare system. The first federal legislation addressing youth aging out, the Independent Living Program Act, was passed in 1986. Considered ineffective due to its lack of funding, this landmark piece of legislation was replaced in 1999 by the Foster Care Independence Act, largely known as the Chafee Act. The Chafee Act doubled the amount of funding available to states for independent living programs (ILPs) to \$140 million annually with the requirement of a 20% state match. Funding could be used not only to assist youth in care in the process of aging out, but also to assist youth ages 18 to 21 who had left care and were living alone (Graf, 2002). The amount of funding available amounted to less than \$1,000 a year for each youth aging out between the ages of 18 to 21 (Shirk & Stangler, 2004). Key provisions in the legislation allow states to use 30% of their ILP budget to provide room and board to youth ages 18 to 21 living on their own and to extend Medicaid to youth over age 18 who are still in the system (Guinn, 2000).

Building upon the Chafee Act, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections Act) extended states the opportunity to use Title IV-E funding under the Social Security Act to provide services to youth aging out. Under this legislation, states may opt to allow youth to remain within the child welfare system until the age of 21, as long as the youth is engaged in high school or an equivalency program; post-secondary

or vocational school; employment preparation program; or employed 80 hours per month (Courtney, 2009). Youth who are medically unable to perform any of the mentioned requirements are exempt and may remain in care.

2.6 AGING OUT IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

When parents or guardians are deemed unsuitable for any number of reasons, the state may remove the child or youth from the home and assume parental responsibilities. Although the child welfare system is charged with protecting children and youth and assumes the role of the parent, it was not designed to help youth transition to adulthood. When youth turn 18 the state does not continue to act as a responsible parent and offer support and a safety net. Preparing youth leaving care for self-sufficiency and a successful adulthood has not been the primary goal of the child welfare system (Mallon, 1998).

The child welfare system and its programs may create barriers for youth to become independent adults. Programs within the system do not support youth to be personally responsible for planning their futures (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2006). Often the structured setting of out-of-home placement is too inflexible to allow youth the opportunity to make bad decisions from which they can learn. Ownership of their own mistakes is not possible for youth, especially those in group homes and institutional settings. Instead of focusing on natural consequences and problem solving skills, a litany of rules strictly govern the lives of youth in care (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2006). Program priorities and conditions within the system may not put youth in an optimal position to become self-sufficient (Ladew & Benedetto, 2003). When youth leave care, the child welfare system is not held accountable; there is no penalty to the child welfare system if

a youth leaves and goes to a homeless shelter nor a reward if the youth leaves and attends to a four year university (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2006).

2.6.1 Congregate Care

Congregate care encompasses various placement types including group homes and institutional settings and can be conceptualized as any placement that is not a family setting. In the child welfare system, older youth are more likely to be placed in congregate care, and the placement may contribute to how youth age out (Curtis, Alexander, & Lunghofer, 2001; Wulczyn & Hislop, 2001). Assigning causality and interpreting congregate care as creating the problem is not completely warranted since youth in congregate care may have been worse off before entering care (Barth, 2002). Youth in congregate care tend to have more difficulties than youth in foster home placements. Due to the highly structured rules dictating most aspects of youths' lives and not allowing youth to gain real life experience, congregate care programs contribute to the problem of youth aging out being ill-prepared for independence (Ladew & Benedetto, 2003). Youth may be given worksheets on how to create a budget and how to grocery shop, but they most likely will not have the experience of practicing these skills while in congregate care (Barth, 2002). Additionally, congregate care's emphasis on group living is not necessarily conducive to obtaining independent living skills (Stoner, 1999). The programs do not foster autonomy and may actually discourage youth from thinking on their own due to the parameters of the programs. Congregate care may also be detrimental to the development of relationships because youth in congregate care have fewer interpersonal experiences and opportunities to develop close and long-lasting relationships with adults, that can provide stability and a sense of permanency (Barth, 2002).

Since the late 1970s, permanency has been the goal for all children and youth within the child welfare system, although permanency with adolescents has been challenging (Barth, 2002). Permanency as an intervention with youth aging out is a relatively new practice. Permanency can best be viewed as providing connection and support as youth transition out of care and into adulthood through various means, including mentors, long term foster care, ongoing stable relationships, and lifelong connections (Charles & Nelson, 2000; Freundlich, Avery, Munson, & Gerstenzang, 2005). In practice, for youth aging out permanency can be a responsible adult committed to helping youth as long as needed by being supportive, giving advice, and helping find resources as necessary (Aldgate, 1994). Permanency planning seeks to replicate how responsible parents care for their children transitioning into adulthood (Packard, Delgado, Fellmeth, & McCready, 2008). Child welfare systems' practices and policies can promote permanency by limiting placement changes, decreasing case worker turnover, maintaining youth contact with their birth families, and reducing congregate care placement. There is evidence that permanency promotes a smoother transition out of the child welfare system (Avery, 2010). Permanency incorporates the interdependence that assists youth in successfully leaving the system and becoming adults (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006).

Independence and self-sufficiency for youth aging out may be “a myth at best and unhealthy at worst” (Propp, et al., 2003, p. 262). Some scholars argue that the concept of independence for youth aging out should be replaced with one of interdependence (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Propp et al., 2003). The term interdependence more accurately captures the reality for most people, including youth aging out. In the United States people depend upon others and are connected in ways that make the difficulties of life more manageable. However, the word independence is so much a part of the culture and

philosophy in the United States, including the child welfare system and the aging out process, that changing the term to interdependence may not be feasible. It is important to seek to expand the definition of independence and emphasize the importance of relationships and connections to be more realistic and accurate. Dismissing a philosophy of strict independence and embracing one of interdependence promotes the incorporation of the concept of permanency and ongoing support into the child welfare system.

2.6.2 Independent Living Programs

Since the 1980s, the primary mode of providing services to youth aging out has been through independent living programs (ILPs), which encompass a range of programs designed to prepare youth for life after leaving care. Some ILPs may simply offer classes that cover basic life skills like budgeting, paying bills, obtaining a job, finding housing, and interpersonal communication. Other ILPs place youth in their own apartments and assign caseworkers to assist them with learning adult responsibilities in the real world. These two examples lie on opposite ends of the spectrum with many other types between them. As states determine the offerings of ILPs, there is great variety in what services are available (Government Accountability Office, 2004). ILPs may provide services, support, and skills that youth aging out would otherwise not receive. They break down isolation and can provide skills such as financial education (McMillen, Rideout, Fisher, & Tucker, 1997). ILPs can serve as a protective factor and promote resiliency for youth aging out (Lemon, Hines, & Merdinger, 2005).

Due to their structure and programs offered, ILPs can also create obstacles to success for youth aging out (Junn & Rodriguez, 2001). Some ILPs have low standards for youth; instead of encouraging attendance at four year colleges, these programs steer youth into vocational training

programs (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2006). Rather than assisting youth in planning their careers, staff encourage youth to take entry-level minimum wage jobs, which many programs consider a success, but in reality are dead end jobs sentencing youth to near poverty existence. Life skills courses, the core of many ILPs, often take the form of lectures and worksheets without actual skill development; key areas in which youth may need skills, such as planning higher education and careers may not be addressed or addressed at a superficial level (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2006). Additionally, ILPs may not address housing, perhaps the greatest need of youth aging out (Junn & Rodriguez, 2001; Stoner, 1999). Although research has shown that employment increases for youth if they were employed prior to leaving care, programs may not incorporate employment while in care (Dworsky, 2005).

Independent living programs have other limitations. Long waiting lists and programs with inadequate funding are not unusual (Greenen & Powers, 2007); many ILPs do not serve all eligible youth due to lack of resources and poor coordination (Government Accountability Office, 2004). Perhaps an even more serious weakness is that there are not accepted standards of care and not all programs are evaluated and monitored (Junn & Rodriguez, 2001). One agency may provide intensive case management and real life experience for youth aging out, while another agency provides weekly classes for several weeks before having an expensive graduation party (Ladew & Benedetto, 2003). Both agencies have ILPs, but the effectiveness of each is unknown. ILPs often do not track outcomes of their youth and are unable to report how youth fare after the completion of the programs. Though ILP has been the standard way of providing services to youth aging out for decades, there is limited empirical evidence of their effectiveness.

2.6.3 Education

Education plays a central role in the successful transition to independence, but is not always a primary focus or even a high priority within the child welfare system. While in the system, children and youth experience educational discontinuities and deficiencies, and these continue as youth age out (Blome, 1997; Courtney et al., 2001; McMillen & Tucker, 1999). Youth often enter care with educational deficits, and the system not only fails to correct these problems, but also in some cases continues and worsens educational achievement. Youth sometimes leave care without completing high school or receiving their graduate equivalent degree (GED). One study found that only half of the youth left care with a high school diploma (Reilly, 2003). Youth aging out receive a GED rather than a high school diploma at a rate almost six times that of the general population (Pecora et al., 2006). Educational disparities continue past secondary education (Courtney et al., 2001; Pecora et al., 2006). In the year to 18 months after leaving care only almost 9% enrolled in college (Courtney, et al., 2001). For those ages 24 to 33 who aged out of care, the completion of bachelor's degree was 2.7% lower while the rate for the general population is 24.4% (Pecora, et al., 2006).

2.6.4 Employment

Youth aging out face difficulties with employment on several fronts. Studies using self-reports of youth aging out found that they are less likely than their age-mates to be employed (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007) and less likely to have full-time employment (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Using administrative data of unemployment insurance paid by youth aging out, one study found that one in five of youth aged out were not employed in the

first two years of leaving care, and only 15% had been employed the entire two years (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006).

Consistently scholars have found that youth aging out earn well below the poverty line (Courtney et al., 2001; Dworsky & Courtney, 2000; Goerge et al., 2002) and earn less than a full-time minimum wage earner (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Reilly, 2003). The Midwest Study found that 90% of youth who aged out 12 to 18 months prior earned less than \$10,000 annually (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). One study found that one third of youth who aged out at least six months prior were living in households at or below the poverty line; this is three times the national poverty rate (Pecora et al., 2006). Youth aging out make progress more slowly in the labor market than other youth (Goerge et al., 2002). Since the jobs that youth aging out hold are likely to be entry level positions, they are often the first positions cut in economically tough times.

2.7 HETEROGENEITY OF YOUTH AGING OUT

To better understand the transition to independence of youth aging out and the issues youth aging out face, it is necessary to examine the population of youth aging out. Though sometimes presented as monolithic, youth aging out are a heterogeneous group in terms of race, personal background, and experiences within the system. Historically researchers have often ignored or minimized the importance of the within-group differences; however, several recent studies have identified key characteristics within the population (for example, see Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007; Shook et al., 2011; Vaughn, Shook, & McMillian, 2008; and Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2010).

Understanding race for youth aging out is of the utmost importance due to the racial disparities that exist within the system. African American children are grossly overrepresented in the child welfare systems (Harris, Jackson, O'Brien, & Pecora, 2009; Hill, 2004; Roberts, 2007). Though only 15% of the children in the United States are African American, about 37% of children in foster care are African American (Perez, O'Neil, & Gesiriech, 2003). African American children are admitted at a rate 2.4 times that of white children into the child welfare system (Wulczyn & Lery, 2007), and African American children are four times more likely than white children to be in foster care (Roberts, 2007). African American youth in the child welfare system are more likely than white youth to enter the child welfare system earlier (Hill, 2004), to remain in the child welfare system longer (Harris & Courtney, 2003; Harris & Skyles, 2008), to be in kinship care placements (Barth, 2002; Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Harris & Skyles, 2008), and to be in congregate care facilities (Curtis et al., 2001; Wulczyn & Hislop, 2001).

Race is understudied among youth aging out, and the limited number of studies exploring race among youth aging out have mostly been in terms of African American versus white youth or youth of color versus white youth. Youth of color tend to leave care later than white youth, and outcomes for youth of color aging out are often worse than those of their white peers (McCoy, McMillen, & Spitznagel, 2008). White youth aging out earn more than youth of color aging out (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). African American youth aging out receive more TANF benefits than their white peers (Dworsky & Courtney, 2000).

The role of race in the experiences of youth aging out is not fully understood. Shook and colleagues (2011) used administrative data of individuals whose families were involved in the child welfare system to examine the involvement of youth who have aged out of the child welfare system in mental health, substance abuse, juvenile justice, and criminal justice systems.

Through a cluster analysis, they found that African American youth who aged out of the child welfare system were more likely to be in the group that had low involvement in systems, but more likely to be in the groups that had involvement with juvenile justice and jail. Additionally, if the African American youth had spent less time than white youth in placements and in out of home care, the likelihood of involvement in the low involvement group would be higher and the involvement in the juvenile justice and jail groups would be lower. This finding indicates that there is a need to examine contributing factors to the experiences of African American children and youth in care. The experiences and disparities may have long-term consequences. Future research should examine how different races experience aging out and if racial disparities continue as youth transition to adulthood.

Another area where differences exist is the “care careers” of youth aging out. The experiences and history of events along with the youth’s behavior and interactions with the system can be conceptualized as a youth’s “care career” (Little, Leitch, & Bullock, 1995; Wade & Dixon, 2006; Wulczyn, 1996). Care careers include experience within the child welfare system such as length of placement, placement types, and amount of time in congregate care. Although it is widely recognized that there is great variation in care careers and that the differences may impact aging out experiences, the differences in care careers are often ignored, and few empirical studies study the impact of these differences on aging out. Researchers have started investigating how specific experiences of being in the foster care system are detrimental to youth and adult outcomes (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007).

In addition to the care careers, differences across youth exist because the lives of youth aging out did not begin the moment they entered care. It is often unacknowledged that youth aging out did not typically grow up in care, but rather had lived in troubling home contexts

(Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Many youth within the child welfare system have family histories of maltreatment and neglect along with exposure to poverty (Courtney & Heuring, 2005). By definition, youth aging out have experienced trauma (Atkinson, 2008). Past trauma including exposure to chronic stress can impact functioning at all levels: emotional, behavioral, cognitive, social, and physical (Avery & Freundlich, 2009). These negatively impact youths' ability to become independent and have long-term consequences for their futures.

Not all youth aging out fail. Some groups of youth tend to fare better upon leaving the system (Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2010; Stein, 2006a). In a review of literature about youth aging out, Stein (2006a) categorizes youth aging out into three groups: moving on, survivors, and victims. Those in the moving on category experienced the most success and stability in their lives after leaving care, and notably their care careers and past experience were less troubling than those of survivors. As the name suggests, survivors have overcome difficulties during and prior to being in care, and they often encountered hardships after leaving care. The third group, victims, is those who have been the most disadvantaged and who have fared poorly upon leaving care. Stein's theoretical taxonomy is not dissimilar to the recent findings of Courtney and colleagues' (2010) latent class analysis of young adults ages 23 and 24 who previously aged out, which identified four groups: accelerated adults; struggling parents; emerging adults; and troubled and troubling. Those in the accelerated adults category are on their own and fairly stable with high levels of employment and some college education. The emerging adulthood category has similar characteristics, though those in this group live with friends and family, and unlike the accelerated adult category, which is largely female, the emerging adulthood category is predominately male. Almost all members of the third group, struggling parents, have children who live with them. Struggling parents have low rates of employment and completion of high

school and high rates of receiving government assistance. The final category, troubled and troubling, is composed mostly of young men who are experiencing significant problems and most likely to be incarcerated, homeless, and unemployed. The work of Stein (2006a) and Courtney and his colleagues (2010) illustrates that there are youth who fare well after leaving care. However, while there are young adults who were doing well after leaving care, even those succeeding were struggling and would benefit from assistance (Courtney et al., 2010). While knowledge about differences is evolving, there is still not an understanding of the mechanisms that cause the better life outcomes and how these youth actually succeed.

2.8 THEORIES ADDRESSING YOUTH AGING OUT

How youth fare after leaving care is influenced by what they experience before and while in care (Wade & Dixon, 2006). A life course perspective supports the notion that the decisions youth make prior to and while aging out influence their development and create their life trajectory. Current and future events in youths' lives are linked back to past experiences and transitions. A life course perspective has been used extensively by scholars studying youth during key events such as leaving home and becoming independent, and although it has not been used specifically to understand the process of youth aging out, it remains a promising construct (Collins, 2001). The perspective can accommodate both personal biographies and larger societal forces in shaping youths' future (Horrocks, 2002). The experiences of youth leaving care and transitioning to adulthood have lasting consequences and impact their future (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005). It is important to remember that youth experience hardships before entering care.

These hardships are in addition to the increasing number of stressors and challenges that all youth face as they move to adulthood and make the transition to independence more difficult.

While a life course perspective explains the importance of having a smooth and successful transition, emerging adulthood theory serves as the bedrock of the argument for why an abrupt and accelerated transition from the child welfare system to independence conflicts with developmental needs. Studies have found that youth who remain in care after age 18 fare better on different outcomes including education and employment (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). From a developmental perspective, youth aging out are at risk since they must transition to adulthood suddenly without continued support (Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007). Legally and physically youth aging out at age 18 may be adults, but emotionally and cognitively most, like others their age, remain immature and unprepared to live alone (Magyar, 2006). They have not mastered the skills necessary to function independently in society, yet youth aging out are expected to do so. The coming of age process requires mastery of tasks that youth aging out are pressured to complete in a compressed time with their discharge from care as the deadline (Land, 1990).

Unfortunately, many youth leave the child welfare system without stability and permanency, and subsequently they experience hardships. Permanency of an environment as well as of the people youth can rely upon, serve as protective factors and promote resiliency for youth aging out (Charles & Nelson, 2000; Stein, 2006b). Having a secure base allows youth to answer the important developmental identity questions of “Who am I? Do I belong? What can I do or be? and What do I believe in?” that occur during the transition to adulthood (Charles & Nelson, 2000, p.12). This individualization process requires an environment in which youth are supported as they define themselves. Having stable relationships can help youth develop their

sense of self (Stein, 2006b). Lacking stability and support places youth aging out at risk for difficulty in identity development and becoming secure in their autonomy (Land, 1990).

Developing an identity may be secondary to survival during the transition out of the child welfare system. Youth aging out are often ill-prepared to be on their own. In addition to lacking life skills, their housing is insecure and their employment limited. It is reasonable to assume that youth aging out therefore may have to expend an inordinate amount of time securing basic human needs of food, clothing, and shelter. Devoting time to identity development and exploring sense of self may be a luxury since the obstacles that youth aging out face as they become independent require so much attention.

Even if it were possible to provide an infinite amount of support to youth as they age out, some of the challenges would remain. Support is not a substitute for job readiness, education, affordable housing, and other types of human capital. Access to resources is necessary, and support and permanency alone cannot provide this. Youth aging out need to have safe, affordable housing and access to employment that pays livable wages. Though support can help combat some problems, structural barriers (e.g. poverty, racism, sexism) exist. It is overly optimistic to believe that support and permanency can solve all the problems youth aging out face because no amount of support can remove the structural barriers that youth aging out face.

While a life course perspective and emerging adulthood theory explain why youth aging out face difficulties and why there is a need for continued support during the aging out process, these theories alone are limiting. They do not outline a framework for how services can assist youth aging out; a capital development perspective can offer this framework.

2.8.1 Capital Development Perspective

A capital development perspective that incorporates the four types of capital—human, economic, social, and cultural—has not been used within the discourse of youth aging out. However, in a review of interventions and theoretical constructs used for youth development, Koball and colleagues (2011) described the entire framework. The absence of the framework within youth aging out literature should not be understood as scholars, policy makers, and practitioners rejecting the concepts of human, economic, social, and cultural. Parts of a capital development perspective can be found within the literature on youth aging out.

Within literature about youth aging out the scholars emphasizing permanency and stability are often using the principles of social capital, although social capital is not always explicitly named. Avery (2010) identifies social capital as central to the time of emerging adulthood and demonstrates how social capital can help a smoother transition into adulthood. Hook and Courtney (2011) explicitly discuss how increasing human and social capital can assist youth aging out with employment. They also use the concept of personal capital, which is in many regards similar to cultural capital.

Although a capital development perspective has not been used widely to explore the experiences of youth aging out, the framework can help explain why youth aging out struggle. Deficits in different types of capital, while not the fault of an individual youth, can influence her life. For example, not having strong social networks with people who are employed means that youth may not learn about good job openings. Dropping out of high school and not getting a GED, which translates to lower human capital, can mean certain jobs and training programs are not available to youth.

While there is an element of agency and youth make decisions, society's structure dictates rules that limit some of the options and resources available. As was discussed previously in the critique of the child welfare system placements, especially congregate care facilities, are not conducive for youth to develop skills which promote independence. Likewise in various placements, youth may not be exposed to cultural capital that increases the likelihood of success.

A capital development perspective can be useful not only in understanding youths' struggles, but also in demonstrating how policies and programs can serve youth aging out. Due to the interrelated nature of the types of capital, emphasizing only one, such as human capital in getting jobs and going to school, without also investing in developing the other ones makes success less likely. To be successful in a job, youth aging out need to have cultural capital and social capital as well.

2.9 CRITICAL THEORY

When youth leaving the child welfare system do not become self-sufficient and independent, it is often conceptualized as the individual's failure due to the individual's problems or shortcomings (Propp et al., 2003). Through the lens of critical theory, it is possible to move beyond simply understanding youth aging out from the individual perspective and to place the aging out process in the larger context. Using critical theory allows an examination of how youth aging out are socially excluded and denied access to mainstream social and economic systems and how this impacts their transition out of care (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006). Critical theory can be a tool to explore topics often overlooked such as how neoliberal policies do not prioritize helping struggling youth and how, without the government providing support and services for this

segment of marginalized citizens, youth aging out are nearly destined to fail (Klodawsky, Aubry, & Farrell, 2006).

Critical theory challenges inequalities of society by taking into consideration the larger social, political, and economic forces. One critical theory useful to explore the issues of youth aging out is structural social work. Structural social work challenges the notion that all difficulties that individuals face are due to their personal failures and posits that there are sociopolitical and economic forces that contribute to their problems (Moreau, 1990; Mullaly, 1997). Focusing on power imbalances, critical theory provides a framework to explore oppression and domination of people due to age, race, ethnicity, gender, class, health, religion, and/or sexual orientation. By employing structural social work theory, it is possible to look critically at the issues defined through the dominant neoliberal paradigm (Mullaly, 1997). Critical theory can be used to examine the assumptions underlying the social construction of adulthood and independence and to explore the implications of these assumptions on our understanding of the process of aging out of the child welfare system.

A critical examination of external social and economic forces challenges the importance of the previously discussed micro theories of emerging adult theory and life course perspective. It is doubtful that support and permanency will catapult youth over the numerous formidable barriers to success. Youth aging out cannot transition smoothly to an independent adulthood simply by having substantial scaffolding of support and permanency provided because the barriers to accessing resources remain. Additional services and programming alone cannot solve the problem because the structural barriers exist. Support and services may smooth the transition out of the child welfare system, but the path to independence may still remain difficult. With critical theory, individual difficulties experienced while aging out are not viewed as personal or

moral deficiencies, rather they are seen as symptomatic of large social forces and systemic failures.

2.10 QUALITATIVE STUDIES OF YOUTH AGING OUT

While it is not surprising that youth aging out struggle during the transition into adulthood and out of the system, it is not completely understood what the challenges are and how youth survive. Quantitative studies provide descriptive statistics about youth aging out, but few studies explore how youth exit the child welfare system. Qualitative studies are best able to answer this question, and to provide the groundwork for understanding mechanisms of aging out and for theory development. Ultimately it is qualitative research that will allow meaning to be made beyond the facts that have been presented in the research of the child welfare system (Goldstein, 1997). Unfortunately, qualitative research on the child welfare system and the children it serves is limited and nearly non-existent for youth aging out (Fox & Berrick, 2007).

Recent qualitative studies on aging out further the understanding of the transition out of care. In interviews and focus groups, youth aging out and former foster youth described not being prepared to leave care and discussed areas where they experienced challenges (Freundlich & Avery, 2006; McMillen et al., 1997). The literature on youth aging out identifies the themes of self-reliance and resiliency while facing adversity during the transition to adulthood and independence before youth were completely prepared (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) and identifies youths' frustration that they had little self-determination while in care and their desire for their opinions to be heard and respected (Greenen & Powers, 2007). Youth also described how confusion and frustration arose due to poor coordination and collaboration of services (Greenen

& Powers, 2007). In several studies, youth mention that the reasons they chose to leave care as soon as they could were the restrictive nature of the program and the fact that they had little control over their lives (Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011; McMillen et al., 1997; Stoner, 1999). Youth leaving congregate care expressed a range of feelings from excitement to fear about leaving care (Freundlich & Avery, 2006). Instability in foster care and its negative impact on relationships were also cited by youth (Greenen & Powers, 2007). Themes of isolation and stigma of being in care are evident in the literature on youth aging out (McMillen et al., 1997). Youth described how the child welfare system invades their lives and separates them from their age-mates.

By incorporating youth perspectives, qualitative studies enhance the understanding of the aging out process. However, much qualitative research remains to be done, since most studies are retrospective with data collected after youth have left care. The perspective of others involved with youth aging out is also missing from qualitative research. Two notable exceptions are Greenen and Power (2007) who interviewed youth aging out, foster parents and professionals about the experiences of aging out, and Goodkind and colleagues (2011) who interviewed youth aging out about their decisions to leave and their experiences transitioning out of care and into adulthood.

Within the growing body of knowledge about what youth aging out experience, there is a gap in the understanding of youths' daily lives and how they actually negotiate through the dual transition. Questions need to be asked about how youth experience obstacles, solve problems, and make decisions during their transition to adulthood and independence. There needs to be a better understanding about whether and how youth connect with various sources of support and create permanency. Qualitative studies can capture youths' views of ILPs, congregate care, and

other components of the system, which can be informative and have important implications for practice and policy. Ethnographic studies can contribute to a deeper understanding of youth aging out (Stein, 2006a). To date there are no ethnographies of youth aging out of the child welfare system. An ethnographic method is best suited for the question guiding this research study: how do youth aging out of the child welfare system negotiate the transition from the child welfare system to “independence”?

3.0 METHODS

Previous studies provide a broad picture about the life outcomes of youth aging out; we know that upon leaving care youth experience high rates of unemployment, homelessness, problems with criminal justice systems, and an assortment of other issues. However, we do not know why these things happen, how youth negotiate the challenges after leaving care, and how services are provided to assist youth aging out. Additionally, an in-depth understanding of the experience from the perspective of youth aging out is missing. While recent qualitative research fills some of these gaps, much remains unknown. The logical next step is an ethnography (Stein, 2006b), which extends beyond previous studies by capturing details and untold stories about the experiences of youth aging out. By focusing upon the youth perspective and examining their daily lives, an ethnography of youth aging out can provide insights currently absent in the literature that cannot be achieved by other means.

This chapter outlines the research study, an ethnography of youth aging out. It begins with a presentation of the research question and the rationale for using an ethnography. I outline the methods used and describe the sample, data collection, and analysis as well as details of the process of the study including recruitment, gaining informed consent, interviews, and observation. I include a discussion of my theoretical perspective, and I have a section on researcher reflexivity.

3.1 RESEARCH QUESTION

Ethnographies seek to answer the question “what’s going on here?” by examining various sources of data to understand a phenomenon from an insider perspective. When entering the field, I basically asked this question, albeit in a slightly more sophisticated way. The research question guiding the study was: How do youth aging out of the child welfare system negotiate the transition from the child welfare system to “independence?” As I spent time in the field, I repeatedly heard that youths’ greatest concern was employment. Similarly, service providers emphasized employment as a primary need of youth aging out, and county agencies and funders prioritized programs addressing employment. Following youths’ insights and service providers’ priorities, I focused my attention upon the employment of youth aging out and how agencies assist youth aging out with employment.

Based on this focus, two interconnected sub-questions guiding this study are 1. What are the experiences of youth aging out in obtaining and maintaining employment? and 2. How do service providers address the employment needs of youth aging out? The overarching aim of the study is to increase knowledge about experiences with employment of youth aging out by examining what employment challenges youth aging out face as they leave care, and how they negotiate these issues. By focusing upon youths’ perceptions and their struggles and successes, this study provides insights about what helps youth survive, as well as what unmet needs and gaps in services exist. An additional goal is to increase knowledge about how services are provided to youth aging out. I explore the ways service providers address the employment needs of youth aging out. I critically examine agencies’ staffing, programs, rules, requirements, and the context in which services are provided.

I place the study and youths' experiences within the context of the region's employment trends. Although the study focuses on employment, I examine other relevant interrelated domains such as education, housing, early parenting, and relationships. Throughout the study, I considered race, gender, and other differences among the youth, such as their care careers, which play a significant role in youths' experiences aging out.

3.2 ETHNOGRAPHY

In his ethnography of a Chicago gang in a public housing project, Sudhir Venkatesh (2008) shares an anecdote about how originally he approached his research question by taking a questionnaire into a high-rise apartment building. When he asked his survey question, "How does it feel to be black and poor?" that had a set responses of "very bad, somewhat bad, neither bad nor good, somewhat good, very good" (p. 14), the responses he received were laughter and profanity. He was told that if he wanted to understand what it was like to be black and poor, he needed to spend time with gang members and the people in the housing project. He quickly learned that ethnographic methods were more appropriate than a survey for his research question.

Similarly, the research question that I pose cannot be answered by asking youth, "What is it like to age out of the child welfare system and get a job?" and having them select a response from a Likert scale ranging from "very hard" to "very easy" or a set of multiple choice answers. Even nuanced survey questions would have limited use in understanding youths' experiences and perceptions because survey questions alone cannot capture youths' daily lives. Researchers, as outsiders from a background different from those who they study, may ask questions that neither

provide an appropriate range of answers nor get to the root of what they are interested in studying.

Qualitative methods permit researchers to study participants' stories and views. Open-ended questions provide an opportunity to explore the larger context and to examine constructs that the researcher initially does not understand or even know exist because study participants can provide answers not determined by the researcher. This flexibility gives participants a voice and a chance to express themselves in ways a researcher could not have predicted. In an interview, the researcher can probe deeper and focus on participants' greatest concerns.

As my research question examined the process of aging out and youths' experiences with employment, it was necessary to follow youth beyond a single interview, which would have provided only a snapshot of what was happening at a specific time. Even multiple interviews could not answer the proposed research question, since interviews fail to provide an opportunity for the researcher to observe how individuals live. An ethnographic design was the most appropriate for my research question because, through observation and in-depth interviews, I could understand of the experiences of youth aging out.

An ethnography is an ideal study design to capture the experiences and perceptions of a specific group, especially when the problems are complex and involve multiple systems and settings (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). By focusing on a defined group bound by a certain place and time, it is possible to gain great insight about a specific phenomenon from the insiders' perspective. Capturing the experiences of youth aging out cannot be done from the sidelines simply asking a set of predetermined questions or reviewing administrative data.

The best opportunity to learn about the experience of youth aging out is to develop relationships with them and to observe them in the natural settings where they spend their time.

Being in a naturalistic environment allows a thorough examination of the intricacies of their lives and provides an understanding of the larger context in which youth are transitioning out of the child welfare system and into independence. Throughout my study, observations occurred in the places where youth live, receive services, and spend their free time. Seeking a deeper level of understanding entails collecting data over an extended period of time instead of just observing what is visible at one moment.

Ethnography involves going deeper and becoming part of that which is studied. The depth necessary to answer my research question comes only by being part of the world of youth aging out. My personal characteristics and background prevent me from becoming a member of the group; however, over the extended period of time I spent in the field, I built relationships with youth aging out and achieved a position where I could better understand their transition from the child welfare system.

As experts on their own lives, youth aging out can explain their thoughts and behavior, as well as the background and larger context. The insider, or emic, perspective is valuable because youth aging out have knowledge to which an outsider is not privy. Ethnography allows the researcher to get close to insiders, to represent their perspectives, and to describe their experiences. An ethnography has the potential to deepen the understanding of the lives of youth aging out of care from the perspectives of youth aging out. I explored parts of youths' lives that I may not have thought to focus on prior to entering the field. As Venkatesh (2008) discovered after discarding his survey questions, some of what can be learned in the field cannot be conceived prior to entering the field. I explored participant driven issues that youth deemed relevant that I may have otherwise overlooked.

The purpose of this ethnography is not to generalize to all youth aging out. Rather it is to understand a specific phenomenon that is bound by a certain place and time. However, as I discuss below, ethnography can contribute to greater understanding of the world (Burawoy, 1991b). This ethnography extends beyond a descriptive study and seeks to contribute to the theoretical understanding of youth aging out.

3.3 SAMPLE

The sample of this study is youth aging out of the child welfare system and service providers who work with youth aging out. Over the two years I was collecting data, I interacted with hundreds of youth aging out and their service providers. Eligible criteria for youth to be in the study were they were between the ages of 16 and 23, were in the child welfare system on their 16th birthday, had been in an out-of-home placement, and were willing to participate in the study. The age range was determined after examining local policy and practice. In Keystone County, youth are eligible for IL services if they have been in care for 30 days after their 16th birthday. In Keystone County, youth automatically age out of the child welfare system at age 18 unless they sign an affidavit, which they can only do if they meet certain criteria such as being involved in an educational program. A majority of youth in Keystone County do not sign an affidavit; thus, they leave care at age 18. Local agencies provide services to youth up to age 21 or 24.

Youth were recruited to participate in the study by service providers who worked at the research sites. Service providers explained the study to youth who met the inclusion criteria, and

interested youth were given my contact information and told to contact me. Youth who contacted me and who met the criteria were included in the study and observed. I deliberately sampled youth to be interviewed and to be observed in settings outside of agencies.

I made an effort to have diversity in the demographics (e.g. race, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status) of the study. However, the youth sample is largely African American and from a lower socio-economic status. This is due to the overrepresentation of African American youth at the agencies providing services to youth aging out. Previous studies also have found an overrepresentation of youth of color aging out (McCoy et al., 2008; Shook et al., 2011). The sample of youth is evenly divided by gender and is overwhelmingly heterosexual. There is variation in the backgrounds of individuals' experiences within the child welfare system (e.g. reason for removal from home, length of time in placement, placement types, and time in congregate care). My sample of youth is mostly similar to, but slightly more African American the population of youth aging out receiving services in Keystone County.

I conducted 76 interviews with 38 youth. Approximately half (58.0%; N=22) were young women, and the vast majority (84.2%; N=32) were African American. Half (50.0%; N=19) of the youth I interviewed once. The sample of youth observed is similar to the youth that I interviewed.

Table 1. Race and gender of youth interviewed

Category	N (%)	Young Women	Young Men	Totals
African American		18 (56.3)	14 (43.8)	32 (84.2)
White		4 (66.7)	2 (33.3)	6 (15.8)
Totals		22 (57.9)	16 (42.1)	38

Service providers also participated in the study. In addition to observing and interviewing staff at each of the research sites, I interviewed DHS employees and contractors who served

youth aging out. Eligibility criteria for service providers were individuals who were over the age of 18, worked with youth aging out, and consented to be in the study. I interviewed 15 service providers who worked with the youth. Service providers ranged in age from mid-20s to early 60s. Approximately half (46.7%; N=7) were women. Almost two-thirds were African American (60.0%; N=9); the other service providers were white.

Table 2. Race and gender of service providers interviewed

Category N (%)	Women	Men	Totals
African American	2 (22.2)	7 (77.8)	9 (60.0)
White	5 (84.3)	1 (16.7)	6 (40.0)
Totals	7 (46.7)	8 (53.3)	15

The sample characteristics of service providers interviewed were similar to others who worked with youth aging out through IL programs; however, staff members of congregate care facilities were less educated and many did not have college degrees. There was a wide range of professional background and experiences among service providers. Of the service providers I interviewed, a third of the service providers (33.3%; N=5) had a Master of Social Work. Three of the service providers (20%) had a master’s degree in a discipline other than social work. With the exception of one, all other service providers had a bachelor’s degree. Some were new to working with youth aging out and did not have a professional background with the child welfare system. Others had extensive background in the child welfare system and had been working with youth aging out for years.

3.4 SITE SELECTION

This ethnography focuses specifically on youth aging out of the child welfare system in Keystone County. A single county was chosen due to the great variations in policies and procedures across counties' child welfare systems. I selected Keystone County because of convenience, accessibility, and familiarity. The director of Keystone County DHS endorsed this study.

3.4.1 Keystone County

Keystone County was the site of the study. While the geographic boundary I chose was the entire county, the majority of my fieldwork was within the city limits of the county's large city. Rarely did the youth aging out who I knew live outside of the city. Those who did often were just outside the city limits in areas that were urban rather than the suburban areas which ring the city. Occasionally, youth aging out worked outside of the city. The city was an important place for youth aging out. DHS services are provided at the county level, although programs are concentrated within the centrally located city. Agencies held their meetings downtown which was more accessible by public transportation than the suburbs where some of the administrative offices of agencies were located.

There are differences between the city and county. Some of the most notable differences are crime rates, poverty rates, and the racial composition. Crime rates are higher in the city compared to the county. Likewise, there is more concentrated poverty within the city and the median income is lower. The city is more racially diverse than the county. According to the 2010 Census, Keystone County was one of the most populous counties in the state. Its residents were

predominantly white. Of the population, over 80% were white, approximately 14% were African American, nearly 3% were Asian and less than 2% identified as Hispanic or Latino. The proportions of the races change within city limits. At the 2010 Census, of the population of the city, almost 65% were white, over a quarter were African American, almost 5% were Asian, and more than 2% were Hispanic or Latino.

The city is divided into neighborhoods. Youth in the study recognized the neighborhoods within the city as having separate identities and often there was great pride in being from a neighborhood. When youth told me where they lived, they frequently added where they were grew up and their family lived. Youth described ongoing tension between specific neighborhoods. For example, people from Mason Circle and people from Roosevelt were said to not get a long, yet in meetings where youth from the different neighborhoods were present there was little noticeable tension. Youth explained to me several times that it would not be safe for a young man from Roosevelt to walk the streets in Mason Circle and most likely he would get “jumped,” or beaten up by young men from Mason Circle. Some of the neighborhoods had colors associated with them, which were often the local high school’s colors, and youth said that in certain neighborhoods it would be dangerous to wear certain colors. Youth sometimes talked about gangs. Mr. Mac, who was only a couple of years older than youth in the study and had grown up in the same neighborhoods with some of the youth, explained that the gangs the youth talked about were mostly small groups of young men loosely organized by street blocks and not highly organized or affiliated with larger national gangs. Some of the neighborhoods were perceived as more dangerous, and the crime rates confirm that there was variability among the neighborhoods.

Many of the youth lived in the more dangerous and poorer neighborhoods in the city. Youth referred to these neighborhoods as “the ‘hood” and frequently talked about wanting to live someplace else. Public housing, which youth referred to as “the projects,” was located in some of these neighborhoods. Many youth expressed a strong desire not to live within “the projects.” When youth talked about where they wanted live, most of them mentioned the suburbs or wealthier parts of the city. Some African American youth stressed they wanted to live in the city because only white people lived in the suburbs. This type of thinking speaks to some of the racial divisions and tension within Keystone County.

In the last several decades, Keystone County has undergone a transformation. Previously known for industry, it experienced a renaissance in the mid-twentieth century. No longer smoggy from the industry, city leaders pride themselves for consistently being ranked as one of the country’s most livable cities. The city is known for having a low cost of living, cultural opportunities, and employment opportunities.

While the low cost of living is touted by many, the youth aging out I met through the study never discussed the low cost of living. Housing may be affordable by national standards, but not necessarily so for youth who were unemployed or under employed. The least expensive housing was in the poorer neighborhoods, and these same neighborhoods often had the least amount of resources. Youth living in these neighborhoods frequently did not have easy access to grocery stores or other shopping, and public transportation was sometimes limited. Additionally, these neighborhoods did not have many employment opportunities for youth, so sometimes youth had to take long bus rides to get to jobs.

In the 1980s, there was a shift from industry to a serviced base economy in Keystone County. Jobs increased in medicine, higher education, banking, tourism, high technology, and

other services. The city became home to multiple corporate headquarters. Recently, an employment initiative publicized that there were 30,000 unfilled jobs in the area. However, many of these jobs are chronically unfilled due to the requirements of the positions such as specific advanced degrees and training. Recently, the city identified six growing sectors of careers: advanced manufacturing; financial/business services; energy; information technology and communications technology; healthcare and life science; and retail and hospitality. The local colleges and universities are another major source of employment. Several of the schools are ranked nationally for the undergraduate and graduate programs. Within the area there are more than a dozen post-secondary education institutions.

There is an initiative in the city promoting post-secondary education. Students who graduate from the city schools with a minimum of 2.5 grade point average and meet residency and attendance requirements can receive up to \$40,000 in scholarship money over four years to attend any accredited post-secondary institution in the state. The purpose of this initiative is to increase the enrollment within the city public schools, improve the graduation rates, and prepare a workforce. Most of the youth aging out were ineligible for the scholarship initiative because it required a 90% attendance rate and a 2.5 grade point average. While youth aging out are eligible for a grant for post-secondary education because they were in the child welfare system, it is approximately a quarter of the scholarship of the initiative.

Many of the public schools within the city fail to make adequate yearly progress on the state's assessment exams. The grades assigned to the schools by the state for each of the high schools with the exception of one are Ds and Fs. The graduation rate from the city public schools is approximately 70%. There is a racial achievement gap with African American students behind

white students on most measurements. There are organized efforts to improve the city schools and address the racial disparities.

When children and youth in the child welfare system changed placements, they typically also changed schools. Many youth in the study had attended multiple high schools. Regardless of the school they attended, most of the youth complained about the school. One of the complaints was that there was no learning occurring in the classrooms because the students were disruptive. Another complaint was that the schools were dangerous and fights were frequent. Youth talked about how every time they changed schools, they often were tested and teased. One youth explained his strategy of dealing with the inevitable problems of changing schools. On the first day at a new school, he would try to fight the toughest guy so that people would leave him alone. Other youth said they just tried to keep to themselves until they were moved to a different school. Although DHS was making efforts to keep children and youth within the same schools when their placements changed and was trying to assist youth aging out in school through specific programs, youth in care continued to have problems in school.

DHS and non-profit agencies were often aware youth aging out faced problems and genuinely were concerned. While other segments of the social sector were experiencing cuts in their budgets, funding was increasing for youth aging out. There was a general consensus that more needed to be done to help youth aging out.

3.4.2 Department of Human Services

Services are provided to youth aging out through both DHS and one of its offices, the Office of Children Youth and Families (CYF). CYF, the county child welfare program, is legally

mandated to protect children from abuse and neglect and provides a wide range of programs including direct services to children and families through caseworkers and a network of contracted agencies. Five contracted independent living service programs in the county provide case management, life skills development workshops, and an assortment of other services to youth aging out. Additionally, several auxiliary programs provide specialized programs (e.g. housing, parenting classes, high school diploma recovery classes) to youth aging out. Over the last several years funding to provide services to youth aging out has expanded while there have been cuts in other social services.

Annually, approximately 200 youth age out and 1,100 youth are eligible to receive independent living (IL) services in Keystone County. These youth may receive services from DHS, CYF, and the countywide network of local programs to assist in their transition out of the child welfare system. Three local agencies, each of which had a contract and worked closely with DHS, agreed to be research sites and to assist in recruiting participants. I selected weWork, A Spot of My Own (ASOMO), and YouthFirst because of the diverse services they provide to youth aging out.

weWork is a job readiness program for 18 to 24-year-old youth aging out of the child welfare system. Started in 2010, it is a collaboration between two established non-profits in Keystone County. Approximately 90 youth complete the training each year. The centerpiece of weWork is a week-long job readiness training where youth learn about expectations in the workplace, create a resume, and practice applying and interviewing for jobs. Youth are compensated \$125 to attend this training. Additionally, weWork provides job search assistance, career counseling, and supplemental trainings on topics including financial literacy,

entrepreneurship, substance use, and self-esteem. Most of the trainings are incentivized financially, and bus passes or tickets are provided for youth to attend trainings.

A Spot of My Own (ASOMO), a program of a local housing agency, provides apartments for youth ages 18 to 24 who have left the child welfare system. ASOMO admitted its first participants in January 2010. In the first two years the program capacity was 20. In its third year, the capacity increased to 35 youth. The one-bedroom apartments are scattered throughout the city and the surrounding area. Youth pay 30% of their net income as a program fee for their apartment and the utilities. To receive an ASOMO apartment, youth are required to be employed and pursuing education goals such as completing the GED test, participating in vocational/trade school trainings, attending community college, or pursuing a bachelor's degree. Case management and life skills classes are provided to all youth in the program.

YouthFirst, one of the county's five IL programs funded by DHS, is a non-residential IL program that offers life skills training, educational assistance, and support to 16 to 21-year-olds in foster care and 18 to 21-year-olds who have aged out of the child welfare system. Approximately 70 youth receive services through YouthFirst annually. It is part of a larger local agency that provides services to children and youth in the child welfare system, including foster care, group homes, therapy, and educational services. In addition to its staff who provide the case management and trainings, YouthFirst employs a group of youth aging out to serve as peer mentors and provide outreach to youth in the child welfare system.

Many of the youth in the study were involved with more than one agency, and several were involved in all three of the agencies that served as research sites as well other agencies throughout the county. In addition to these agencies, other IL programs and specialized services were available to youth aging out. Agencies had programs providing emergency housing,

teaching parenting skills, assisting with taking the GED test, and helping obtain post-secondary education.

Within Keystone County, African American children and youth are overrepresented within the child welfare system, and the overrepresentation continues through the aging out process. The agencies where I conducted fieldwork predominately served youth aging out who were African American. Many of the other programs and agencies serving youth aging out in Keystone County had similar demographics for youth receiving services. I asked service providers within agencies and DHS employees about the noticeable absence of white youth. While several ideas were offered, no one felt they completely understood why white youth aging out were not receiving services at the same rates as African American youth aging out.

A contributing factor to the racial composition of youth accessing services that service providers identified was the location of services and availability of transportation. As previously mentioned, services mostly were provided in the city, where a larger proportion of African Americans lived. The public transportation infrastructure between the city and county was sometimes weak and taking a bus from certain places in the county to the downtown area could take over an hour. Service providers thought that youth in the county, who may be more likely to be white, would be less likely and uncomfortable with traveling to the city. Clearly the accessibility to the city was not the only reason because some agencies, like YouthFirst, picked up youth in cars and vans to attend meetings, yet white youth were still underrepresented.

There were other reasons offered to me to explain the overrepresentation of African Americans within the agencies. Since, in general, African American youth had been in the child welfare system longer, it was hypothesized they would need additional assistance transitioning out of care. Part of this thinking was by being in care longer weakened any relationships the

youth had with their families. Related to this, was the thought shared by service providers that white youth may have more resources available to them. One of the social workers at weWork thought that African American youth may need more assistance getting jobs because of discriminatory hiring practices.

At several agency meetings, youth aging out made comments about the racial composition of the group. I only heard African American youth making comments which were sometimes observational, but frequently commentary about the absence of white youth. At weWork, sometimes only African American youth were at a training, and frequently only one or two white youth were at the trainings, which could range in size from five to 15 youth. Some of the African American youth commented that they needed help more than white youth and indicated that white people had more money and resources. There were also comments made by African American youth that African Americans were more accustomed to getting help and were used to living in subsidized housing and receiving government assistance. weWork staff typically addressed these comments when they were made and conversations about racism typically followed.

3.5 DATA COLLECTION

In the fall of 2010, I started collecting data after I received approval from the University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board. Observation and in-depth interviews with youth aging out of care and their service providers are the primary sources of data for this study. All of the study participants are from Keystone County.

During the time I collected data, I spoke to and observed hundreds of youth aging out and service providers who worked with youth aging out. I completed more than 850 hours of observation and 92 interviews. Of the 92 interviews, 15 were with service providers. The remaining interviews were conducted with 38 different youth, half of whom were interviewed multiple times.

The process of entering the field took several months as I built relationships and gained the trust of youth and service providers. My social work background and familiarity with the area helped the process. Through my connections with DHS and social workers in the area, I had established relationships with the directors of three local programs which served youth aging out: weWork, ASOMO, and YouthFirst. After meeting with staff at the agencies to discuss the study and answer any questions, I shadowed individual service providers with their consent and started attending agency events such as orientations, meetings, trainings, and social gatherings. As service providers recruited youth into the study I started interviewing youth and observing them in various settings.

Although sometimes youth spoke with me the first time they met me, sometimes it took my seeing someone several times before they were interested in talking with me. When I first met one youth through his case manager he was quiet. Several weeks later, after I had seen him at ASOMO and YouthFirst agency events and trainings, he approached me. He told me he had decided to trust me, and he was going to give me an interview. When I interviewed him a couple of weeks later, he told me that he spent time watching me the first several times he met me to make sure that I was someone he could trust. He determined since I consistently showed up and seemed to genuinely care, I could be trusted. Building trust and entering the field took time. There were some youth who decided never to trust or talk with me.

I collected data for approximately two years to the point of saturation, the point at which no more new information is obtained. As I approached saturation, I started preparing youth and service providers that I was concluding the data collection. Leaving the field was a challenging process due to the close relationships I formed. Some of the youth expressed anger and disappointment that my data collection was ending and that I would not be spending time with them. While a few youth told me that they were going to miss spending time and talking with me, more often youth cancelled or did not show the last time that we were going to meet. Even after trying to reschedule multiple times, I sometimes was unable to get closure with youth. One youth, with who I had spent an extensive amount of time, called me on the phone and angrily told me that she never wanted to see me again after I had started talking about how I concluding my fieldwork. I had been direct with youth throughout the consent process, started discussing leaving more than four months before I left, and had gradually decreased my contact with youth. Nevertheless, I faced a lot of resistance around the time of the conclusion of my data collection.

3.5.1 Observation

Observation provides the foundation of this study. In ethnography, the technique of observation relies on the skill of the researcher to capture the details in natural settings. Being a distant observer using rigid behavior checklists or frequency counts cannot capture the complexity of people's lives. As an observer, I engaged with study participants to create a detailed picture of the daily lives and experiences of youth aging out.

Initially, observation occurred within agency settings as I attended meetings with caseworkers, workshops, and life skills trainings, as well as being there other times that youth

spent at the agencies. I interacted and talked with the youth to understand better their life experiences and the aging out process. As I developed rapport with youth, I started to observe youth outside of the confines of the agencies.

The youth whom I observed outside of agency settings understood the study and my goal of publishing a book detailing the experiences of youth aging out. They set the parameters of when and where I observed what their lives were like. For example, I accompanied a young man to a free medical clinic, but was never in his house. A young woman and I regularly spent several hours in her apartment, and occasionally I would tag along as she went grocery shopping. I accompanied a young man and his case manager as he applied for food stamps. I spent time with one young woman as she moved from one apartment to another. I helped some youth apply for financial aid for post-secondary education. I sat with youth who worked on their résumés both in and outside of agencies. I spent time with youth at their homes and as they went about their daily lives. The situations that I observed were relevant to the research question of how youth aging out negotiate the process of leaving care.

I also observed service providers as they worked with youth aging out. These observations revolved largely around the interactions that service providers had with the youth, and also included staff meetings and case consultations. These data allow me to understand how services are provided to youth aging out as well as what service providers see as the priorities of and obstacles to helping youth negotiate the transition out of care. Additionally, I used observation with service providers to triangulate with what youth told me about their experiences.

I wrote extensive fieldnotes documenting my observations and experiences in the field. Following best practices, the fieldnotes contain details about what I saw and heard as well as my

subjective thoughts (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). I took notes on youths' support systems, current concerns, hardships, problem solving techniques, life skills, involvement in programs, past experiences, and future plans. I documented what I witnessed as well as what individuals shared with me. When possible I made jottings in the field to capture direct quotes in conversations. To ensure confidentiality, fieldnotes contained codes and did not include any individuals' names.

3.5.2 In-depth interviews with youth

Using purposeful sampling, I selected individuals aging out of the child welfare system to interview. Since the study used an iterative and inductive approach, as the study progressed, I utilized theoretical sampling as outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and sampled individuals who confirm or challenge the themes I identified in the interviews and observations.

The in-depth semi-structured interviews contained questions about their experiences within the system, the process by which they left care, hardships and successes they faced upon leaving care, and their future plans (see Appendix A for interview questions). All youth provided written consent and permitted the interviews to be digitally recorded. Interviews lasted an average of approximately 80 minutes and occurred in rooms at agencies where youth received services or in settings the youth chose, including coffee shops, restaurants, or where they lived. Youth were compensated \$15 for each interview, and if the interview occurred in a restaurant or coffee shop, I would purchase their food and/or drink. Youth who seemed especially insightful or had experiences that I was interested in learning more about were interviewed more than once. Subsequent interviews were on topics raised in previous interviews and included updates about youths' lives.

All interviews with youth were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. Both the digital recordings and the electronic transcription files are stored on a secure computer drive. No names were transcribed, and participants were identified only by codes.

3.5.3 In-depth interviews with service providers

While service providers may not be able to speak from the youth perspective, they are intimately involved in the daily lives of youth aging out and have valuable insights from their work. Talking with the service providers about their experiences working with youth and their thoughts about the aging out process provides information from a different perspective.

Interviewing service providers served to triangulate with what youth aging out share. For example, sometimes youth talked about how group home staff treated residents differently, favoring some over others. One service provider confided that some youth are easier to work with, and she knew that her colleagues had favorites and treated youth differently. Another service provider shared that since different youth need different things, the observed differences are not about favoritism, but rather about providing tailored services to meet unique needs. These contradictions or inconsistencies among service providers' and youths' perspectives offered an opportunity to explore the sources of the incongruences. Having service providers share information that confirmed or challenged what youth shared strengthens the study.

The interview questions for the service providers focused on their experiences working with youth aging out, views of the transition of youth aging out, beliefs about the hardships youth face, and thoughts about what would make youths' transition out of care easier (see Appendix B for interview questions). Service providers were interviewed only once and were compensated \$15 for the interview if the agencies for which they work permitted it. While

service providers typically were enthusiastic about being interviewed, some expressed concern about their interviews being transcribed because of their criticism of the child welfare system and the local agencies. In the few cases where the service providers refused to have their interview digitally recorded, I took extensive notes as we spoke, often capturing direct quotes.

3.5.4 Consent process

In Pennsylvania, parents or guardians are the only parties who have the right to grant consent for anyone under age 18, including those in the child welfare system, to participate in research. Since most of the youth in this study were not currently in the direct care of their parents, it was not reasonable to assume that parents could provide adequate supervision for them during the course of their participation in the study. This study met the federal guidelines for a waiver of parental consent, which I sought due to the feasibility of locating and obtaining consent of the parents of the youth. The University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board granted the waiver of parental consent. Therefore, the 16 and 17-year-old youth could consent to be in the study without consent from their parents or guardians. Protocols were put in place to ensure that risk to all participants, especially those under age 18, remained minimal.

In addition to the waiver of parental consent, the University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board granted a waiver of documentation of participants' consent to be observed. Verbal consent to be observed was possible since the study presented no more than a minimal risk of harm to participants, and one of the only risks of this study was potential harm resulting from a breach of confidentiality. Data collected through observation included fieldnotes that protected confidentiality by not including individuals' names. Therefore, the only record linking the study participant to the study would be the signed consent document. In addition to the benefit of

decreasing the chance of a violation of confidentiality, having a waiver of documentation assisted with recruiting youth to be in the study. Obtaining youths' signatures might have inhibited building the trust necessary in an ethnographic study. Individuals might have been interested in participating in the study but felt uncomfortable and unwilling to sign a consent form due to negative beliefs or experiences with legal documents related to their child welfare system involvement.

Documentation of consent was required for the interviews. Study participants signed consent forms prior to being interviewed. With all the consent processes, participants were assured that their involvement was voluntary and would not impact their eligibility for services or employment. Participants were told that what they shared was confidential; however, if they disclosed plans to hurt themselves or others the authorities would be notified.

The study has an additional level of protection because of the appointment of a Child Advocate, David Herring, to ensure that all research participants were appropriately protected. Prof. Herring, a faculty member and former Dean at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law, was not affiliated in any way with any of the agencies, and his only role in the study was that of the Child Advocate. He had no vested interest in the research and was solely concerned with the well-being and protection of the child participants in the study. David Herring was chosen due to his background in advocacy for children and youth in the child welfare system. Each youth received the name and telephone number of the advocate who was available to answer questions about confidentiality and the youths' rights as research participants, to address concerns the youth may have about my conduct, and to file grievances about the study.

3.6 FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

This study moves beyond simply describing youth aging out of the child welfare system and develops a framework to explain the experiences of youth aging out within the larger societal context. Informed by the extended case method (Burawoy, 1991a), I studied youth in their environments and examined different cases to understand the youths' experience in a broader social context. Rather than building new theory, I built upon existing theories to explain the process of aging out of the child welfare system, the issues youth aging out face with employment, and the ways services are provided to youth aging out.

Extended case method does not develop new theory entirely from the data; rather it explores how developed theories fail to explain what is observed in the field (Burawoy, 1991a). This method allows theory to be reconstructed and improved through focusing on anomalies observed in the field. Observations that violate the researcher's expectations and assumptions about what is being studied provide opportunities to explore a theory's failure to explain what is observed (Burawoy, 1991a). This leads to the refinement of theory.

Rather than focusing entirely upon micro theories, extended case method links micro and macro theories by exploring the larger forces (e.g. power and discrimination) that influence specific situations at the individual level (Burawoy, 1991b). Consistent with extended case method, I show how the experiences of youth aging out demonstrate the influences of social and economic forces on the lives of individuals.

3.7 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Theory is often implicit within the understanding of youth aging out. Although the research on youth aging out is largely atheoretical, there are promising theoretical frameworks (Stein, 2006). Developmental theories can be traced throughout many of the policies, practices, and discourse on youth aging out. In my analysis, I address these theories and their key concepts. Using critical theories, I highlight structural barriers youth aging out face and critique the influence of neoliberal policies and the goal of independence. Additionally, I introduce a capital development perspective to understand better some of the hardships youth aging out face, as well as how programs serve youth.

I frame the study within the larger social context using the critical theory of structural social work. This macro theory posits that there are sociopolitical and economic forces that contribute to the difficulties people experience individually (Moreau, 1990; Mullaly, 1997). Focusing on an imbalance of power, the theory provides a framework to look at the oppression and domination of people due to their age, race, ethnicity, gender, class, health, religion, and sexual orientation. By incorporating critical theory, I am able to consider more than the individual experience of youth aging out through an examination and critique of society.

Policies for youth aging out at the federal, state, local, and program level emphasize independence and promote employment and education as instrumental to achieving independence. This intense focus on youths' employment and education, which can be conceptualized as human capital, prompted my decision to incorporate a capital development perspective to explain how services are provided to youth aging out, as well as why some youth struggle more than others. I integrate four types of capital—human, social, cultural, and

financial—within the macro theories to examine variations in the well-being of youth aging out as well as the gaps in services.

Within this study, I examine two specific developmental perspectives: emerging adulthood theory and life course perspective. Emerging adulthood theory appears in the literature about youth aging out, although some have questioned its applicability to youth aging out in part because they have more responsibilities and have less support and fewer resources than their peers who were not in the child welfare system (Goodkind et al., 2011). With emerging adulthood theory, I focus on the premise that there is an extended period of time that adolescents spend exploring their identity and assuming responsibilities of being an adult that lasts into their twenties (Arnett, 2000). I examine the theory's principle that during this time of extended adolescence, individuals benefit from ongoing support. The concepts of support and permanency are intricately interwoven within concepts of social capital and youths' struggles with relationships. I incorporate a life course perspective by examining youths' understanding of their personal histories and how past experiences shape their current position and future. Life course perspective's principles ground my argument for the need for interventions to help youth aging out avoid ensnarement in poverty or antisocial behavior and to promote optimal future trajectories.

3.8 DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis was an on-going, iterative, inductive process that started as I entered the field. Collecting and analyzing data concurrently allowed me to refine and test my understanding of what I was observing and hearing in the field. Informed by extended case method, I built upon

the framework of existing theories. Extended case method requires repeatedly reexamining the data, literature, and theory. As I developed insights, I discussed them with youth and service providers. I sought confirmation of my understanding of how youth negotiate and conceptualize the aging out process. Through constant comparison among youths' stories, I was able to develop a better picture of youths' experiences aging out. This process continued throughout my data collection. As I conducted interviews and wrote fieldnotes, I wrote memos about what I observed and how this informed my understanding of youth aging out. Upon leaving the field, data analysis continued.

I used qualitative data analysis software to assist with data management. All of the data are stored electronically and organized with NVivo9. Each interview transcript, field note, journal entry, and memo was imported as an internal source into NVivo9 and linked to study participants who were identified only by a code and a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. This allows data to be organized efficiently and be readily accessible.

My analysis focuses on employment because of how it was prioritized by youth and service providers. I selected this focus while I was still collecting data in the field, thus during my fieldwork I concentrated more on youths' experiences with employment, barriers to employment, and services' strategies to address employment needs. As employment became central to this study, I tailored my fieldwork to collect more in-depth information. I shifted my observation to settings that would help me better understand employment of youth aging out. Part of this was spending more time at weWork and talking more with youth about employment. Additionally, as I interviewed youth, I probed more about their employment needs and experiences and what barriers they encountered. When I spoke with service providers I asked

more about employment. The shift to focus on employment was slight, as obtaining and maintaining jobs already had been prevalent within my fieldwork.

Prior to my entering the field, I was involved with a qualitative study of youth aging out and was familiar with the literature on and federal legislation for youth aging out. Through this previous knowledge, I understood that youth aging out struggled. While in the field, I got an in-depth perspective of what are the daily ongoing struggles and how youth are negotiating them. Using employment as an analytic lens, I was able to understand the importance of jobs to youth aging out and see that jobs alone cannot solve all of the problems youth aging out face.

Over the course of my fieldwork I interacted with many youth aging out and service providers. In this study, I present the stories of individual youth which illustrate the experiences of youth aging out. I selected examples from youth who were representative of what I observed and heard in the field. I intentionally did not include youth whose struggles were at the extreme of what I observed. I knew a youth with mental health issues and substance abuse problems who in the course of several months became unemployed, homeless, arrested at least twice for assaults charges, and involuntarily committed for psychiatric treatment. She represented one end of the spectrum of what I observed, which I chose not to emphasize because it is an extreme case. While she is one extreme of what I observed, the spectrum was not equally balanced. I never met a youth aging out who was not struggling, although from outside appearances some youth had significant accomplishments and may appear to be doing well. All the youth aging out experienced hardships, including those who had jobs and were in school. I witnessed youth who were stable and doing well have their lives become unraveled quickly. This realization led to me conceptualize the fluidity of success. It also led me to use a capital development perspective as a framework to understand why youth aging out struggle and how services can address their needs.

I organize the findings in three chapters, each of which builds upon the previous and roughly follows the progression of my thinking that started during data collection. I begin with an examination of the struggles youth aging out. Then I present a capital development perspective that can be used a framework to understand the struggles. I conclude my findings with a discussion of services taking into consideration the capital development perspective. Throughout each of the chapters I focus on the stories of Jake, Jaden, Ta'Quayla, Maggie, Marcus, and others youth aging out I met during my fieldwork.

3.9 REFLEXIVITY

In ethnography, the researcher is the primary data collection tool. As my life experiences shape how I see the world and how I interpret data, I remained aware of my personal biography. I want to provide some brief information about myself, including background on my experiences with the child welfare system and youth aging out, as only I collected data for the study. My interactions with the child welfare system have been as a professional; I have never been in the system myself. Prior to conducting research with youth aging out, my experiences with the child welfare system include being an advocate for women experiencing domestic violence, some of whom had children involved in the child welfare system, and being a client services director of a supervised visitation center with various interactions with the child welfare system.

In my second year in a doctoral program, I started working on a qualitative research study of youth aging out. As an interviewer, I became acutely aware of the vast differences between the youth who I interviewed and me. It became hard not to think of myself as a foil to some of the youth, due to the many differences between us. In many ways, the 10 to 15 year age

difference between the youth and me seemed to be the smallest difference. I found the youths' stories of hardship tragic, and I was inspired by the youths' strength and resourcefulness. As I connected with the youth and reflected on the fact that my tax dollars helped to provide services to them, I felt a sense of responsibility to help these youth whose lives were foreign to me.

Largely the foreignness came from the differences in privilege and upbringing. I am privileged by having white skin and a high level of education as well as coming from an intact middle-class family. My parents raised my two sisters and me in a suburban house. Until I was a teenager, my mother was a stay at-home-mother. Several years after returning to the workforce she returned to school for her Master in Social Work and became a therapist. My father, who held a Master of Business Administration, worked in management in manufacturing. Education, which extended beyond what teachers taught in the classroom, was highly valued in the household. My parents exposed me to various cultural events, and we traveled extensively as I was growing up. I was not required to work while in high school, although in my senior year of high school I worked one evening a week at a restaurant to have some spending money. My parents encouraged me to focus on my studies and to participate in extra-curricular activities, which ultimately contributed to my acceptance into a prestigious private university. At age 18, I left the house where I had lived since the age of two to attend college. Although I no longer lived at home, my parents continued to support me both financially and emotionally. When I made important decisions in my late adolescence and early adulthood, it was done in consultation with my parents. Support from my parents and family continues, though I am now in my mid-thirties.

My childhood experiences contrast greatly with those of many of the youth I studied. My background, race, and education gave me a position of power. My personal history influenced how I observed their worlds and the understanding I assigned to what I saw and heard. It

influenced how youth relate to me. Throughout the study, I remained aware of these differences and power differentials and how they impacted the youth and my work.

Having a different background meant that I did not always have a common language and understanding of youths' social norms and values. Sometimes I was unaware of the different meanings youth and I ascribed to something. For example, a youth told me she was "talking to" a man, which I believed meant that she was having a conversation with another person. It was only after a couple of months that I realized that "talking to" was also used to describe having sex with someone. Throughout the fieldwork, I had relationships with youth of whom I was able to ask questions about what I was learning and get clarification to help improve my understanding. During the time in the field, I gained trust and credibility by listening without judgment, showing interest in youths' lives, being reliable, and doing what I said I was going to do. Some of the youth experience very little stability in their lives, and I was one of the few adults they knew who were a constant during the time I was in the field.

Over a year after I left the field, youth continue to occasionally call or text me to update me on their lives. Every few months, a few of the youth contact me, although the frequency has diminished. One youth texted me a picture of her engagement ring to announce her engagement, and then several weeks later shared that the engagement was called off by her boyfriend who returned to a former girlfriend. Another youth texted me that she dropped out of college and was working full-time for a cell phone company. Some of the updates are about crises. One youth facing jail time if a fine was not paid contacted me because he was desperate and did not know who else to call. I redirected him to weWork, the agency where I had met him. Like a few other youth, he had managed to keep my phone number, but had lost those of their case managers and agencies where he received services. The continued contact after I concluded my fieldwork

illustrates how youth aging out desired and needed social support and how they often lacked it in their lives. Additionally, the challenges of concluding my fieldwork speak to the depth of my relationships with the youth. I was part of their lives. The stories I share throughout this dissertation are from youth who were very much a part of my life during the fieldwork.

4.0 “IT’S JUST BEEN AN ONGOING STRUGGLE”: AGING OUT

Over the course of the afternoon, I probably heard Jaden say, “I need a job” a couple dozen times. I wish I had kept count. Sometimes there were variations like “I really need a job” or “I need this job” or the occasional hypothetical question like “what am I going to do without a job?” Still, the message was clear and consistent: Jaden felt she needed a job. Like other youth in the cramped weWork computer room, Jaden was preparing for next weeks’ interviews with recruiters from Johnny’s Groceries, a local chain of grocery stores. weWork, a job readiness program for youth aging out, which, in addition to helping youth find jobs and continuing their education, provides case management to assist with overcoming barriers to the workforce, had arranged for the recruiters from the local chain to interview youth for a variety of positions. This day, staff were helping youth prepare. Jaden, like all other youth working on their résumé, filling out online applications, and participating in mock interviews, felt desperate to get a job. Jaden said she was willing to do anything. She just needed a job.

At this point, Jaden and I had known one another for well over a year. She was one of the first youth I met during my fieldwork, and over the course of the study, I had seen and talked with her multiple times. Often when I connected with her, she was searching for work. She had a knack for getting jobs. The problem was they never lasted long. Sometimes this was because they were time limited paid internships, but most of the time it was because she quit or was fired.

I sometimes could not figure out which was the case even when I asked directly. It was complicated, like most of Jaden's life. Even when she had a job, she searched for a better job.

A sense of urgency surrounded Jaden needing a job. Over a year ago, during an interview with me, she ranted about how she had to take care of herself. Almost aggressively she hypothetically asked, "If I stop working, then what? I can't just sit, sit on my..." She trailed off, after catching herself from saying the word "ass." Although I have previously explained she can curse in front of me, she has clearly internalized the group home rule of not swearing in front of adults. Jaden started her thought over, "I would love to sit down and sleep in, but I can't. Because, who's going to pay? Who's gonna? That's the sad part." Jaden paused here, and I remained quiet. She really is not asking me these questions. She is angrily asking people who don't understand how hard her life is on her own. Jaden continued, "Who's going, whose going to be there? Nobody." Once again she paused, and I desperately wished that I could tell her she was wrong and that someone was going to be there for her, but I did not know who is going to be there. Jaden knew this. She picked back up her fast paced monologue, "Who's going to pay my rent? Nobody. Who's going to? Who's going to put food in there? Nobody. But me. And I'm just so tired of this job. I'm tired of the job. I'm tired of getting up. I'm tired. I'm tired." Jaden's rapid cadence slowed and she seemed to deflate as she talked about being tired. Her shoulders drooped. She was tired. Looking closely at Jaden, it was easy to see her makeup covered the signs of exhaustion around her eyes. The desperation and the stress clearly were taking a toll on her.

Jaden's desperation had a special quality to it as she was acutely aware that in a couple of months she would lose her ASOMO subsidized apartment because the program lasts only two years and she was at the end of the time period. Her frantic statements about needing a job make

sense because she will either have to take over the lease to her apartment and pay the approximately \$500 rent as well as the utilities, or she will have to move out and find another place to live. Without a job, her only financial responsibility for her ASOMO apartment was \$50 a month, and she was struggling to scrape it together. Even with a job, she would struggle to keep the apartment paying the full rent and utilities; without a job it would be next to impossible. Jaden is right. She needs a job.

Jaden's declaration of needing a job reflects more than a desire to be employed. A job offers some security. It not only provides income, but also it helps staves off the fear of having nothing. To Jaden having a job translates into knowing she is surviving and going to be okay. Having a job is a measure of success. Of course an entry-level minimum wage job alone cannot solve all of Jaden's problems. When she has had a job, her struggles did not disappear. Her needs were great and a job cannot address all of them. The significance of a job to Jaden was reinforced by the beliefs of service providers. The centrality of employment to youth aging out is evident throughout practices and policies. The service providers who work with Jaden have employment as a specific measurable outcome by which they measure both Jaden's and their success. Jaden was well aware that the case managers who work with her want and expect her to get a job. As previously discussed, policies for youth aging out at all levels emphasize employment and education as goals signifying independence. Jaden, like most of the youth I met, wanted, needed, and spent a lot of her time trying to get a job.

4.1 JADEN'S STORY

I tell Jaden's story to highlight the depths of the struggles she faces as she negotiates the transition out of care. Throughout my fieldwork, I knew many youth aging out. Their stories shared remarkable commonalities. Jaden's story reflects much of what I observed during my fieldwork. I intentionally chose to focus on a youth engaged with agencies who has a high school diploma, which is not the reality of all youth aging out. I did this to demonstrate that even a hard-working youth with some resources and support remains vulnerable. I witnessed those who, with fewer resources and less support struggled more and were more susceptible to hardships and the aftermath of crises. Still, Jaden's story tells us a lot about how youth aging out negotiate the transition out of the child welfare system.

Before I continue telling Jaden's story, I want to briefly describe her. She is African American and was 19 years old when I met her. Tall and thin, Jaden has an air of sophistication. Her high, thinly shaped eyebrows and applied make-up accent her large eyes and high cheekbones. She highlights her light-brown skin with a bronzer that made her skin glow. She typically wears her straightened long black hair down. Unlike her peers, who frequently wore hoodies with jeans or sweatpants, her style was more like what might be found in the pages of *Glamour* or *Vogue* magazines. I was not at all surprised when I learned she had modeled. Jaden talks quickly, often repeating phrases to emphasize her point. A case manager described her as "ditzy" and complained about her being forgetful, a characteristic Jaden ascribed to herself as well. However, he maintained that she was clearly not stupid. Jaden's education and intelligence are evident in the way she talks. Jaden is friendly and personable, and most of her peers and service providers genuinely seemed to like her. I always enjoyed spending time with her. She

was very open with me about her life and her struggles. In her words, she and her siblings, “A to Z, we’ve been through it all.”

Jaden grew up in the child welfare system. She entered the child welfare system as a five-year-old and left at age 19. As Jaden described it, she entered care because her parents “were just too young and they just couldn’t take care of us. They, they didn’t have their heads on right, you know, to have to take care of four kids.” Jaden’s father was largely absent, and her mother neglected the children. She described her early childhood with her mother as “a horrible lifestyle” where there was “total neglect.” She said, “We were hungry, starving kids, you know, who didn’t go to school.” As she explained this, she emphasized that she as well as her siblings all wanted to go to school, but her mother had diabetes and was sick. Jaden’s mother kept at least one of the older daughters home to care for her and the younger siblings. Until the child welfare system got involved, Jaden did not attend school consistently.

Originally, the child welfare system placed Jaden, her older sister, her younger sister, and her younger brother together in a foster home. The foster mother was one of Jaden’s father’s former girlfriends, and initially, she provided a stable home for the children. Over time, Jaden said her foster mother became cruel and unpredictable. As they got older, it grew “worse and worse.” Eventually, the system removed them from the foster home, and then they were “passed from different foster homes and we would get foster homes to foster homes and then shelters.” Eventually, during the bounces among multiple placements, the siblings were separated from one another. Being separated from her sisters and brother was difficult for Jaden. What was more difficult were the conditions of some of the placements, which in Jaden’s opinion were not always better than when she lived with her mother. Jaden’s final placement was a supervised

apartment where she and a roommate shared an apartment in a building where staff members were available 24 hours a day.

While Jaden lived in the supervised apartment, she enrolled at Keystone County Community College after graduating from high school. All of Jaden's future plans required her to have a college degree. Several different career paths she was considering when I first met her included becoming a sports broadcaster, an interpreter for the United Nations, or a pharmaceutical sales representative. Regardless of what career she chose, Jaden knew she needed a college degree. The first step was taking courses at community college. Jaden would wake up early and by 6 a.m. leave the building to walk to the bus stop. Getting to school required taking two different buses, and the buses were sometimes late. Since Jaden was still within the child welfare system at this time, she received a monthly bus pass. Buses remain Jaden's primary mode of transportation. Despite wanting to learn how to drive and to get a car, she has failed her permit test and did not have anyone to teach her to drive. A major motivator for getting a car was to allow her to get a job as a bartender or other jobs that are inaccessible because of buses. However, the cost of a car, even an inexpensive used one, along with insurance and gasoline may be outside of Jaden's budget. Still, a car would save Jaden many hours of travel.

While in community college, Jaden decided to get a job. She was unsuccessful everywhere she applied. To counter this, Jaden decided to get training to become a bartender. She spent her refund check from her student loans to attend classes for a bartending certificate. She explained how she initially saved her refund check, but then thought, "I can make this money back in like one night if I do bartending." She went online, found a bartending school, and called them. She explained, "I was afraid that it wasn't going to be legit legit," emphasizing that she was nervous that it would not be completely legitimate. However, she went there,

determined it was legitimate and explained, “When I went in there, I’m pretty much a good chance of getting hired anywhere in the world. Like if I went to that school.” She paid what she called “good money,” several hundred dollars, to attend the evening classes for a month.

From 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. on weeknights, Jaden attended the bartending classes in the “dead middle of winter” in addition to community college. She explained that after her classes at Keystone County Community College, “I had to walk all the way down to the bus stop in slush and rain and snow, like every day to go to bartending school on top of regular school.” Jaden said she would cry and ask herself, “Why did I do this?” In spite of the miserable cold, wet commute and the late hours, she completed the program in a month. Unfortunately, after two years, she had yet to get a job as a bartender. At one point, she was hired at Hooters as a waitress with the hopes she could become a bartender and get some experience. However, she worked there only one day before quitting because she felt uncomfortable in the skimpy shorts and around some of the male customers. The bartending certificate remains valid for three years and Jaden maintained that she still believes she could make good money bartending if she could start at a slow bar where there was not a lot of pressure. The other problem she said was that she did not have a car, and to make money she would want to work in a certain part of the city not easily accessible to her apartment by bus. Even if it were accessible, Jaden pointed out, she did not want to be on the buses at three o’clock in the morning. Then she corrected herself and reminded me that buses do not run at that time of day.

Balancing community college classes with her bartending classes exhausted Jaden. The long bus rides in the early mornings and late nights along with her time in class did not leave Jaden much time for her school work. Her grades in community college classes started to suffer. In the midst of Jaden having problems in school, her mother, with whom she had remained in

contact, passed away. Jaden talked about how “on top of everything else” having her mother die impacted her: “I had a breakdown. Like a meltdown. Like, I couldn’t do school. Like, I just couldn’t do it. I just couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t get out of bed. I couldn’t do any[thing]. I just couldn’t believe it. I just couldn’t, you know. It, it, when it’s your mom it’s a lot different.” Not getting out of bed and not going to school led to Jaden being placed on academic suspension.

To reenroll at Keystone County Community College required Jaden to file an appeal. She missed at least one of the deadlines. Since then, she had talked with someone in administration at the community college. However, she remained confused about what was needed. A case manager told me once that Jaden probably only needed to write the letter or fill out a form and then take one class at a time to be reenrolled. She did not think that Jaden actually owed money like other youth who withdrew from classes. However, Jaden did not seem to understand the process.

After Jaden left community college, she spent most of her energy looking for a job. Her older sister referred her for a front desk job at a hotel. When Jaden applied, the hotel forwarded her application to a different hotel that was further away. That hotel hired her for the front desk, although within weeks she was transferred to working in housekeeping. Jaden disliked the job immensely.

When I met her, she had been working there for a couple months and frequently talked about needing a different job. Her plans were to quit when it became cold because she was not prepared to work outside in cold snowy winters. Although she expressed ambivalence about quitting because of the uncertainty:

I don’t know what I’m going to do. I don’t know what I’m going to do. I don’t know where I’m going to be in a month. I don’t know what is going to happen to me. I don’t know if I can keep this up any longer. ‘Cause I hate this job. I don’t know what’s going

to happen if I don't get another job. I don't know if. I don't know. I just don't know. I'm just living every day and, and, kinda doing my best. Just get up and go to work every day.

She paused before continuing, "And I don't want to do that because I want to go to school. And my hours are going to get cut. Then I'm really going to be broke."

The housekeeping job was central to Jaden moving out on her own. She felt embarrassed that she was the oldest resident living in the supervised apartments and thought she needed to be on her own. Her older sister referred Jaden to ASOMO, a program for youth aging out that provided individual apartments, of which she was a part. One of the conditions of the program was having a job and pursuing educational goals. Jaden's housekeeping job allowed her to be eligible for the program. Soon after she got her job, she was accepted into the ASOMO program, and she signed herself out of the child welfare system, a condition of being in the program.

At age 19, she moved into her own subsidized apartment through ASOMO. Jaden was fortunate to be involved in programs that assist her and provide some sort of safety net; however, the safety net was not infallible. There are conditions to her living in the ASOMO apartment, and other youth failing to meet the rules and regulations, such as keeping a job and paying one-third of their income as a rent or program fee, have been kicked out of the program. Youth who did not get in the ASOMO program and have no family and friends to stay with are at risk of being homeless. Jaden and I both knew youth aging out who are homeless. James, a young man Jaden met at a weWork job readiness training, frequently was without a place to live. He sometimes stayed on the streets, earning money by having sex with men. Other times he spent the night at friends' homes. For several weeks, Jaden allowed James to stay at her ASOMO apartment, although this violated the program rules. Ultimately, she kicked James out because of his incessant complaining about not having a job and his resistance to looking for one. After he left Jaden's he went to a homeless shelter for youth.

Being homeless terrified Jaden even after she moved into her apartment. “That’s the scary part,” she said, talking about being afraid of not being able to care for herself and becoming homeless. “That’s what I think about all the time. I think about how am I not going to be homeless.” To avoid being on the streets, she continued, “I have to work these shitty jobs.” She concluded, “Like I can’t be under the bridge with ten bags of stuff that people can steal and sell.” Even if she remained in the program the entire time, at some point it would end. The ASOMO program is only two years long, and Jaden cannot live in her apartment for free. She accepted “shitty jobs” to pay her bills and stay afloat, but found the housekeeping job to be demeaning, dirty work.

Working as a hotel housekeeper was physically demanding. Regina, a young woman in my study who had worked in housekeeping in hospitals, offices, and hotels, once told me that cleaning hotels was the most demanding, confirming Jaden’s assertions that the work was tough. Jaden had to push a heavy cart laden with supplies through outdoor corridors. She worked alone cleaning rooms and changing bed linens. The physical efforts related to the job extended beyond what Jaden did at the hotel. To get to work required two bus rides that took well over an hour and half, assuming the transfer went smoothly and neither bus was late. By comparison, the commute would be a 20-minute car ride. However, Jaden did not have a car or even a driver’s license. Jaden hated the walk to the bus stop as much as the actual bus ride. From Jaden’s apartment to the bus stop was a several block walk that on the best of days was exhausting due to the steep hill she had to climb. In the city there are roads steep enough that the sidewalks have steps. I never understood why the sidewalk Jaden had to walk up did not have such steps, although I surmise it was because it was in an impoverished part of the city where the infrastructure was poorer.

Jaden was fortunate to have an ASOMO apartment. With more applicants than available apartments, the program was in high demand. Having a place to stay provided some security, yet the program was not without drawbacks. The location of Jaden's apartment contributed to some of her problems. The neighborhood was poor and had few resources. There were few places that Jaden could apply for jobs nearby or where Jaden could buy groceries or other necessities. Everything was a long walk up the hill and at least one bus ride away. Nothing except the bus stops was within walking distance. Mr. Sebastian, Jaden's case manager through ASOMO, candidly confessed that he thought the neighborhoods of some of the ASOMO apartments did a disservice to the youth because of their geographic isolation; however, the grant funding the program provided \$450 for an individual apartment and prohibits youth from having roommates. This is problematic because in this housing market, \$450 pays only for one-bedroom apartments in the poorer neighborhoods. Mr. Sebastian lamented that \$900 or even \$750 could easily secure a two-bedroom apartment in a decent neighborhood with more resources for youth. Mr. Sebastian was acutely aware that this would not only be beneficial to decreasing the geographic isolation youth experience, but also incredibly helpful to increase their social network and to help develop social skills. Jaden would fare better living with her sister, Mr. Sebastian felt, and although both young women were in the ASOMO program, a two-bedroom apartment for Jaden and her sister to share could not be funded. Realistically many of the youth are living with roommates, albeit sometimes incredibly temporary as was the case with Jaden and James, and after leaving ASOMO, many youth will have to live with others because they will not be able to afford their own apartment.

Having a job was a condition of being in the ASOMO program. Youth had 30 days to secure another job after one ended or they would be put on an action plan, the first step in

termination from the program. Jaden switched jobs frequently over the time I knew her. During a part of the time that I was out of touch with Jaden, I heard through Mr. Wayne at weWork that Jaden had a job at a law firm “making more of a livable wage.” A couple weeks later, I learned that while working at the law firm, Jaden was trying to attend a local training center to become an office assistant. There was a conflict in the scheduling at the law firm, and Jaden left.

I saw Jaden soon after she left the law firm. She told me that she was supposed to have taken the test at the training center the previous day, but she had not gone. It was unclear why, although later the issue of transportation came up as a problem in her life and that could have contributed to her not taking her scheduled placement exam. The office assistant training started in a couple of months and Jaden was eligible to take the course at no cost. The program has a high placement rate for its graduates within local business. Jaden also was considering taking the certified nursing assistant (CNA) training which was offered through a local nursing home. She needed a job and wanted something that “paid more than change.”

While talking with Mr. Sebastian at an ASOMO meeting, Jaden kept saying she needed a job that pays well. He disagreed and told her that she needs “a job that pays,” stressing that she needed an income and should not be too particular about what type of job. Jaden said fast food jobs were “out of the picture” and she would not accept one. Mr. Sebastian said that he could understand that now since she had only been unemployed for two weeks; however, at one point, she may have to consider a fast food job. Jaden’s demeanor showed she was not planning on considering a fast food job.

Without a job, Jaden went to the job readiness training at weWork. The first two days she arrived late, but she participated when she arrived. Some of the job leads, such as those at a local

hotel, were not helpful to Jaden as she had applied there several times in the past. She applied for several entry level jobs, but did not get them.

Several weeks later, I heard from Mr. Mac at weWork that Jaden was working for a promotion company and interviewing performance artists before their concerts. He and the rest of the weWork team were excited that she was doing well in a job related to her career goal of journalism. I asked how Jaden got the job and learned that Jaden started modeling for the promotion company, and they offered her a job which she accepted. The job did not last long. Jaden, once again, was applying for entry level positions including those in food services and at a local grocery store. The last I spoke with Jaden she had yet to find a job. I have little doubt that she found another job, although it probably did not last for more than a few months.

4.2 EMPLOYMENT IN CONTEXT

As Jaden aged out of the child welfare system, the country was in a recession. Jaden was not the only 19-year-old high school graduate struggling to get a job. She was looking for a job at a time when college graduates received their degrees, struggled to find employment, and had to move in with their parents. Undoubtedly, some of these college graduates were hired in positions for which Jaden was qualified. In addition to competing with college graduates for jobs, the older generations were competing for some of the same entry level positions like the grocery store cashiers because they needed income to supplement their social security which was insufficient for retirement.

Many people in Keystone County besides Jaden needed jobs. During this time, the state unemployment rate fluctuated slightly below the country's unemployment rate which was

between 9.1% and 7.8% (US Department of Labor, 2013). While those rates are high compared to recent history, it is important to remember that certain segments of the population are more likely to experience unemployment, including youth and African Americans. Nationwide, in July 2012, the youth (ages 16 to 24) unemployment rate was 17.1% with young men's rates higher at 17.9% than young women's at 16.2% (US Department of Labor, 2012). Youth unemployment differed by race as well. The jobless rate for whites (14.9%) was similar to that of Asians (14.4%), but lower than the rates for African Americans (28.6%), and Hispanics (18.5%). These rates are for all youth. It is important to remember, as previously discussed, that youth aging out consistently have been found to have lower rates of employment than their age-mates. During tough economic times, youth aging out are likely to be among the last hired and first fired (Goerge et al., 2002). Jaden, as an African American 19-year-old young woman who has aged out, fits into the story the statistics tell.

In addition to lower levels of employment and bouts of unemployment, youth aging out consistently have been found to earn well below the poverty line (Courtney et al., 2001; Dworsky & Courtney, 2000; Goerge et al., 2002). The Midwest study found 90% of youth who aged out 12 to 18 months prior earned less than \$10,000 annually (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Once again, Jaden's experience mirrors the research findings. Even if she had been employed consistently by any one of her jobs throughout the year, she would have earned below \$11,170, the poverty level for a household of one (US HHS, 2012b). It is not surprising that even when Jaden was working, she struggled to make ends meet.

4.3 JADEN'S APARTMENT

I first visited Jaden's apartment during a day of shadowing Mr. Sebastian, her ASOMO case manager. He called her as we were leaving his office to visit her in her new apartment and found her number was disconnected. On the drive over, he prepared me that she may have forgotten the appointment; he reminded me again after he knocked on the door and no one answered. Mr. Sebastian patiently waited and knocked again. A sleepy Jaden came to the door dressed in pajamas. Telling us she had just wakened up, she disappeared inside leaving the door open. After she appeared in a few moments later with her hair slightly less disheveled and wearing a tank top and her pajama bottoms, Mr. Sebastian and I followed her inside the small one bedroom apartment.

The living room was filled entirely with a large chocolate brown overstuffed couch, a sturdy round wooden coffee table, and a couple of lamps, all of which were given to her by ASOMO when she moved into the apartment. Jaden had placed some plastic flowers in a vase and a few elephant figurines with pierced ears dressed in traditional Indian clothing on the coffee table. She insisted the room felt like a "waiting room" because of the furniture, and with all of the furniture pushed up against the wall and the lamps in the corners, it felt like it could be a small waiting area to a therapist's office. Mr. Sebastian's comment that she could rearrange the furniture seemed to surprise her. This was the first time that I felt it was readily apparent that Jaden was new to living on her own. The next came quickly as Mr. Sebastian told her that he called her earlier, but her phone was disconnected. She explained she had a new number, but she did not know it because the person who sold the phone to her forgot to give her the charger. Her phone's battery was too low for her to turn it on and figure out what the number was. She demonstrated how she could not turn on her phone. Mr. Sebastian expressed a little disbelief, but

it was clear that he was not totally surprised. Jaden and Mr. Sebastian completed her goal plan and reviewed some of the rules of being in the ASOMO program. The brief visit concluded, and Mr. Sebastian and I left Jaden in her apartment to continue his full day of visiting other youth on his caseload.

Jaden felt afraid the first night she stayed in her apartment. She had never lived alone before, and being in her own apartment by herself was frightening. She described herself as being “a scaredy cat” at night and did not stay at the apartment the first couple nights after her belongings were moved into the apartment. I empathized with her feeling afraid. She did not live in the best of neighborhoods, and there was no dead bolt lock on the door. The door had a large pane of glass in it, and someone easily could knock out the glass, reach through to unlock the doorknob, and open the door because there was not a keyed dead bolt. Her apartment was in a house converted to a few apartments, and her door faced away from the street. To enter her apartment door, she had to walk down an uneven cement walkway along the side of the building and up a set of rickety stairs. It was not just the actual apartment that unsettled Jaden. After she had lived there a week, she still did not know how to turn on her gas range. Jaden was concerned that she could blow up her apartment by cooking on the gas stove. During the first week of her living there, a friend visited her and cooked her dinner at her apartment, showing her how to use her stove; however, she remained afraid of it. It was an old range and did not have a light to show when the oven had preheated. Mr. Sebastian had told her simply to wait for 10 minutes for it to preheat. However, in hearing Jaden talk about the stove, I got the feeling that she may not cook much.

4.4 LIFE SKILLS

Once when reflecting back on her time in group homes, Jaden said because of growing up in placement and living in congregate care, she did not know how to shop for, plan, or prepare nutritious meals. I heard and witnessed this frequently. Cooking and grocery shopping with Maggie, a 22-year-old with whom I frequently spent time, gave me great insights about how limited cooking skills were and how a lack of tools compounds the problem. While Maggie professed a love of cooking and being a good cook—pancakes were her specialty—she lived in her apartment for several months without turning on the oven. All of her cooking consisted of heating up food on the stovetop or in the microwave. Most of her cooking involved boxed or prepared food like breaded fish fillets, French fries, chicken wings, or macaroni and cheese. Even her pancakes were made with an instant baking mix. When Maggie grocery shopped she looked for inexpensive food that was easy to prepare. Sometimes when I accompanied her she asked me how to cook things. When I described how to cook a flank steak and showed her how there were directions on the packaging she said that it was too difficult and commented that it was also too expensive. Maggie then selected the cheapest ground beef available and put it along with multiple frozen meals into her grocery cart.

Around Thanksgiving one year, Maggie and I made a pumpkin pie. The typical mountain of dirty dishes on the kitchen counters was strangely missing, although later I realized this was because dishes with caked-on food were scattered elsewhere throughout the apartment. The sink remained basically unusable because it overflowed with dirty dishes, and Maggie apologized a couple of times that she had so many dirty dishes. I offered to help wash them, but she did not have any dish soap. While cooking, it became clear that Maggie not only lacked experience cooking, but the tools as well. Her can opener was barely functioning and together, with great

frustration, we had to wrestle it to open the can of pumpkin. Lacking a mixing bowl, we mixed ingredients in a large enameled soup pot. The recipe confused Maggie, and I had to clarify the simple directions. Our pie turned out fine, but most likely would not have without my assistance.

Maggie, like other youth I knew, possessed limited cleaning skills. The first time I was in Maggie's apartment, I walked into her kitchen while wearing clogs. After placing one foot in the kitchen my shoe stuck to the floor firmly enough that I tripped out of it. Every surface of the kitchen was sticky. When I helped her move a few weeks later, I helped clean her kitchen. I was assigned cleaning the stovetop and I asked how to do it. She gave me a roll of paper towels and a cleaning spray and showed me how she wanted me to wipe, speaking to me in a slightly patronizing way, seeming to believe that I had never cleaned because I asked how she wanted me to clean the stove. The paper towels did not withstand the scrubbing and practically disintegrated. An afternoon of cleaning left the kitchen smelling good, but still visibly dirty albeit considerably cleaner than previously. Maggie seemed pleased with the kitchen's cleanliness.

Cleaning was an important issue especially for youth aging out who were living in ASOMO apartments because one of the program's conditions was to keep the apartment clean. While some youths' apartments were tidy, many were not. Bathrooms and kitchens contained the worst filth in the apartments I saw, although other parts of the house were sometimes equally dirty. When one youth in the ASOMO complained about a clogged kitchen sink, Mr. Sebastian visited the apartment to assess the problem. There was standing water in the sink, and a rank odor permeating the apartment. After talking to the youth about the problem, Mr. Sebastian realized the clog was not in the pipes, but rather in the cover of the drain designed to capture food particles or other things from entering the pipes. With a wooden spoon Mr. Sebastian dislodged enough of what was blocking the water from draining. After the water drained and Mr.

Sebastian was able to dispose of the foul-smelling sludge that had blocked the drain, the sink worked again much to the surprise of the youth. Mr. Sebastian gave him cleaning supplies and reviewed how to clean both the kitchen and bathroom, which smelled horrific.

Clearly, Jaden, Maggie and the youth with the clogged drain were not completely prepared to be on their own. This is similar to what previous research has discovered. Studies have found that youth aging out often lack basic life skills including cooking, cleaning, and money management and feel unprepared for life on their own (McCoy et al, 2008; Goodkind et al., 2011). Previous research does not fully explore how being unprepared costs youth aging out. Inadequate cleaning skills create an environment that is not only unpleasant, but also likely unhealthy. Bacteria can thrive in the bathrooms and kitchens that have not been cleaned for months. Prepared food that only needs to be heated is both more expensive and less nutritious. Additionally, not knowing how to cook nutritious food certainly contributes to Maggie's and other youths' morbid obesity. The select stories I share about Jaden and other youth are to highlight the extent of their lack of skills and how the lack of resources compounds their struggles. By no means are these youth the exceptions nor are they the most extreme cases. Their stories are representative of what I observed during my fieldwork.

4.5 JADEN'S "MONEY PROBLEMS"

Of all the weaknesses with life skills, Jaden felt money management was her biggest problem. "I do have a money problem," Jaden told me. She explained, "I love to spend money. I mean I don't love money. I love to shop." She paused as if she had finished her sentence, but then continued her thought "for clothes. That's got me to some bad problems before with the bank

and, and, just stuff like that.” She supported her assertions with examples of her spending money on impulse buys or mismanagement of money. When ASOMO gave Jaden a \$100 Wal-Mart gift card to help her with household expenses, she spent \$80 of it on a red and black paisley comforter for her bed. Mr. Sebastian was annoyed that Jaden could not produce the receipts for her Wal-Mart purchases as he needed to turn them in with paperwork documenting she was given the gift card. Additionally, he was frustrated with her for spending the majority of the money on an item he deemed unnecessary in light of the fact that she needed many other things. He lectured her about needing to be responsible with her money. Without a doubt, purchasing a comforter—or some other want that is outside of their budget—is done by other 19-year-olds who have parents and family to help them if the expense causes a problem. However, spending the gift card on an impulse purchase placed Jaden in a position where some of her needs were not being met. Mr. Sebastian was concerned she would not have all that she needed now that she spent her money on a comforter. The margin for error in Jaden’s life is narrow. The reality is that \$100 was not going to purchase everything Jaden needed. Her spending \$80 of it left even less for her other needs.

At her current housekeeping job at a hotel, Jaden told me she earns approximately \$700 a month. Her portion of the rent, which was calculated as a third of her monthly paycheck, was \$208 a month. This means that Mr. Sebastian calculated that she earned closer to \$600 a month. In my probing about how much money she made, she got flustered about the amount of rent she had to pay. She explained,

And I only, this month, I only made three sixty something. I’m not, I’m not good at math, but what the hell [is] thirty percent of that? You know? And it’s just like, oh my God! It’s, it’s making me scared. I don’t know. Maybe I need to send Mr. Sebastian [a text] and let him know what my income was for this week, so for this month’s rent he can probably change it.

Her statement is confusing, and the confusion is not just in understanding what she means. Jaden herself was confused. The \$360 she said she earned this week was from the bi-weekly paycheck she received. Her paycheck fluctuates with her hours and Jaden did not have a grasp of her finances. In her panic about the rent she told me, “But I don’t know what thirty percent is. Let me tell you, when I say bad at math, I mean horrible at math. It’s the only thing I failed. It’s the only thing I always fail.” Jaden did not understand that if she earned another \$360 for the second paycheck in the month, she would earn closer to \$820, and her responsibility for the rent would rise to \$240. All she knew was that she owed \$208 today, the first of the month.

Whereas Jaden does not have a written budget, she knew her monthly fixed expenses. On top of her \$208 rent, she had a cell phone plan that costs her \$50. Additionally, she purchased a monthly bus pass for \$105 that provides unlimited access to the buses; however, she explained that this was largely a work expense because she buys the bus pass “Just to get to work. Just to get to a job I hate.” The variable expenses she listed are buying food at work and groceries. Jaden planned to file for food stamps “because food is expensive too...[and] for the time being would be the best choice.” Jaden questioned if she was eligible for food stamps and did not know how to apply. As she talked about how she was going to apply she said, “I have to go down there [to the department of public welfare office], wherever it is. Mason Circle, I think. I think I have to go and figure, figure out where the place is.” Jaden was wrong about going to the Mason Circle office location. While an office is located there, it does not serve the part of the city where she lives. Uncertain that she will research the application process before taking the hour long trek involving two buses to get there, I offered that I think the place is determined by zip code, suggesting that Mason Circle might not be the correct place for her to apply. She paused for a moment before replying, “Yeah. I don’t know. I don’t know where I should go. I don’t know

where I should do. That's what I'm saying. You need people to help you out." Of course Jaden needs help. She is 19 years old living on her own below the poverty level.

Not having money stressed Jaden. She frantically talked about this, "And, uh, I just don't know what to do. Then, like, winter's coming, and I need a winter coat." The winter coat is important because Jaden takes the bus and must walk to and wait at bus stops in the freezing weather. She was very concerned about having warm enough clothing to work in her housekeeping job, although she also was considering quitting it because of having to work outside in the winter. Jaden continued on with her list of needs, "I need winter coat, I need shoes, you know. I need. I don't have boots...I have all high heels...I own two pairs of tennis shoes." She paused and started blaming herself for not having the coat, boots, and shoes for work, "That's what I did. I, I dig myself holes." She paused and continued talking, but it was hard to follow her thinking. She was talking about how she did not have things she needs, but has spent money on things she did not really need. Perhaps she was talking about purchasing the \$80 comforter. I let her talk without asking for any clarification and eventually she concluded, "That's why I need money...That's why I'm saying. I need to take, I have to take, I have to take care of myself. Nobody's going to give me money. Nobody's going to give me money. That is why I get scared, if I quit, you know, or if I don't just do something, that I can't fall back on anything." She paused and then continued "but myself." She paused again and said, "Now" which made little sense until she paused and finished the sentence, "that I moved out of a shelter, you know." This conversation was just one of many that Jaden had about money during the time I knew her. Once she went on a tirade about needing to quit smoking because it was too expensive for her and she needed money on other things, like bus passes, which she always talked about being too expensive.

In addition to her living expenses, Jaden has debt. She had a Victoria's Secret credit card that went to a collection agency when she was unable to pay the minimum payment. While she regretted purchasing lingerie on credit, I find myself angered that she was able to get a credit card. Why was it possible for her to even get a credit card? She was a teenager in the child welfare system with a minimum wage entry level job. The damage to her credit will last seven years, which in all likelihood will last long after she no longer wears the items she purchased at Victoria's Secret. A lower credit score had the potential to cost her, as credit scores impact multiple things including future loan rates, and being able to get utilities turned on without a down payment. Being unable to pay the bill and not having someone bail her out, her unpaid credit card went to a collection agency.

The credit card in collection was not the only blemish to her credit. Jaden owed \$400.11 to her bank. In her words she got "all twisted up" with "overdraft fees and stuff that I do not understand." When she opened her account she knew that she was at risk for using her ATM card to make purchases and spend more money than she had. She explained how she went to the bank to open her account: "I went in there. And I said, 'I want overdraft protection.' 'Cause I want overdraft. I know me. I want overdraft protection. If I can't afford it, don't let it go through." What Jaden wanted—not being able to overdraw her account—was not actually overdraft protection. Overdraft protection on an account allows a person to write a check or use her debit card for more money than is in her account. This avoids the penalty of paying for bouncing a check; however, there can be a fee. According to a recent Pew Report (2012), the median fee is \$35 and a majority (75%) of people would prefer their purchase to be declined rather than have a check. The irony in this situation, is if Jaden had not had overdraft protection, then her purchase would have been denied, which was what she thought she was telling the banker when she said

“If I can’t afford it, don’t let it go through.” The banker gave her what she asked for by name, overdraft protection, but not what she actually explained that she wanted. Jaden overdrew her account and was charged fees that accumulated and gained interest because she did not pay them off. Her account quickly went into the negative, and she, assuming that her purchases would be denied if she did not have sufficient funds in her account, kept spending money. “And they were just F’ing me over,” referring to the banks’ adding on fees and charging her for overdrafts. Jaden soon was hundreds of dollars in debt.

Jaden explained how she handled the problem: “I went to the bank one day. And she was like, look at what you did to yourself. Look at this, blah blah blah, this is what you didn’t understand dah dah de dah and why didn’t you consult? And why didn’t you come here sooner?” Jaden described the banker helping her understand, but it is clear that she still does not understand how she owes \$400.11. She told me, “But I still owe XYZ Bank four hundred dollars.” She paused, “I still owe XYZ Bank four hundred dollars. And I can’t afford to pay them four hundred dollars.” She ranted on, repeating the dollar amount owed, “Four hundred dollars and eleven cents. They keep saying, ‘Four hundred dollars and eleven cents.’” Her voice rose in exasperation, “I don’t have four hundred dollars and eleven cents....[If I pay,] then what? Then I won’t have money for nothing else.” The amount owed was more than half of her monthly income. She is right. If she paid it all in one lump sum, she would not have money for anything else.

Overdrawn accounts are not unique to Jaden. A recent Pew Report (2012) on overdrafts found that young people and those of lower socioeconomic status were most likely to overdraw their accounts. Additionally they were more likely to accrue interest and penalties on the unpaid overdraft fees. Almost a third of people closed an account because of the overdraft fees. Having

a negative balance created a situation in which if a paycheck was deposited, the entire amount might be consumed by the bank. Therefore, with the bank no longer a viable option for cashing checks, youth may feel compelled to turn to expensive check cashing places. Check cashing places can charge large fees or a percentage of the check. However, it may be the only option available. Youths' weak money management skills are exacerbated by their limited options and the banking system.

4.6 TA'QUAYLA'S FUTURE

Jaden was only one of many youth aging out who struggled negotiating the transition out of care and who talked about needing help. Ta'Quayla's background was different than Jaden's, but her struggles were similar. When Ta'Quayla and I arranged to meet at a Burger King convenient to her, I arrived early and she was late. After I had sat there for 30 minutes, a smiling Burger King employee approached me. According to her nametag, her name was Wanda. She was a heavy-set African American woman who appeared to be in her 40s. Dressed in the Burger King uniform including a visor covering the top of her long red weave braids which flowed halfway down her back, she diligently had been wiping down other tables. As she approached me, I wondered what she was going to say. I was pretty sure that I was not going to be asked to leave although places like this had signs saying, "No loitering please. Time limit: 30 minutes while consuming food." It sounds presumptuous, but those signs were not directed at me. They were meant to keep people deemed undesirable by other customers from inhabiting the restaurant all day. I have witnessed management kicking out people who are "bad for business"—those wearing odorous,

dirty, old clothing who may have a garbage bag of belongings next to them or who may be talking to themselves. I have been in places for hours and never been asked to leave.

Wanda did not ask me to leave. She warmly greeted me, and engaged me in small talk about the weather. My lukewarm responses were enough to encourage Wanda to launch into talking about how God was always with her and how blessed she was to have a job, especially in this tough economy. I tried not being rude; but I was a little annoyed with Ta'Quayla being late and I did not feel like talking to Wanda. If I was honest, it was not just Ta'Quayla's tardiness that was bothering me. Ta'Quayla was tough to talk to, and I often felt stupid when we talk. She sighs and rolls her eyes, making it very clear that she finds it painful to talk to me. It annoys her when I seek clarification or ask her to elaborate and give examples. I was constantly surprised that she was willing to spend time with me because she did not seem to like me. I am convinced she liked the food and drinks I provided when we met, and the occasional \$15 for an interview does not hurt either. I was comforted by the fact that Ta'Quayla was also like this with others. Service providers found it challenging to work with her. Wanda seems to be somewhat of the antithesis of Ta'Quayla. She is personable, open, and absolutely wanted to talk with me.

Putting my pen and list aside, I gave up trying to discourage Wanda's chattering. Wanda shared that it is not only her faith and pleasant attitude that make her different from the other employees, but also her plans to open her own business. Wanda referenced God throughout the conversation and stressed she sees the good in all people. Without any prompting from me she mentions that she grew up in foster care because her parents did drugs. "Rough things" happened throughout her life, she explained, including being raped nine times. I was slightly aghast with how much Wanda was sharing with me, a complete stranger, in the middle of Burger King. Oddly it seemed somewhat normal. During my fieldwork, people I barely know regularly opened

up to me and later confessed they have never shared with anyone what they just told me. I have become accustomed to these types of interactions. The conversation had turned into somewhat of a monologue and my only contribution is the occasional “uh huh,” “wow,” and “I’m sorry that happened” to accompany my head nodding. Wanda concluded her life story saying she has been married for 16 years and her husband’s family is now her family. It is all part of God’s plan, she assured me. “Someday,” she told me, “I’m going to write a book.” Affirming her, I agreed that it sounds like her life has been amazing.

No one has entered the restaurant, and Wanda, seemingly uninterested in returning to work, asked about me. I decided to offer why I have been sitting here, so obviously out of place. I shared that I am a social work graduate student writing a book about youth getting out on their own. Wanda told me she knows a lot because of her experience and expressed excitement with the project. On a whim, I asked her if I could interview her. After she enthusiastically accepted, we scheduled to meet at 10:30 a.m. two days later. I gave her my business card and she gave me her phone number.

As Wanda shared her story with me, I could not help but think that she could be the future of a kinder, more personable Ta’Quayla. Twenty years from now, I could see any one of a number of youth aging out that I knew working at Burger King and maybe even disclosing a lot of personal information to a stranger willing to listen. Wanda returned to work, leaving me to muse about the future of youth I know. What will happen to them? What will happen to Ta’Quayla? Where will she be in twenty years? Five years? Next year?

What will happen to Ta’Quayla? What will happen to Jaden? To James? To Maggie? These questions profoundly disturb me. I genuinely care about the youth who have invited me into their lives. I want them to have a good life, whatever that means or looks like. As I think

more about Ta'Quayla's future, the more confused I become about what a "good life" would be like for her. I do not know what she wants, although I have asked her multiple times. Her vague answers about being a nurse lead me to believe she does not know what she wants. It is developmentally appropriate in one's late teens and early 20s not to have a well-defined long-term plan; however, I am troubled thinking that these youth also do not have many resources or much support. The consequences of failure are great. Many of the youth are already dangerously close to being homeless and hungry.

These questions about Ta'Quayla's and Jaden's futures connect to their present lives. How they negotiate the present can shape options available in the future. A life trajectory can be molded by any number of events and decisions. Getting a bachelor's degree or getting a felony charge would both change the likelihood of Ta'Quayla becoming a nurse. Countless things could increase the chances of either one happening, and either one happening had a multitude of long-term consequences.

4.7 LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

To explore these questions and to understand the importance of a youth's past, considering a life course perspective can be helpful. Scholars have used life course perspective extensively when studying youth during key milestones such as leaving home and becoming independent (Collins, 2001). How youth fare after leaving care is influenced by what they experience before and while in care (Wade & Dixon, 2006). This means youths' disadvantaged childhood experiences contribute to their transition into adulthood. A life course perspective helps explain why the past matters and the importance of the current situation in shaping life trajectories.

I want to return to Jaden, since I have described her story in-depth. How Jaden ended up in the child welfare system, her experiences in care, and the way she left care all impact her present circumstances. Neglect and abuse at a young age have had lasting impacts and have affected Jaden. Being moved among foster homes, group homes, and shelters have shaped Jaden's relationships and the way she connects with others. Not being allowed to have a job when she lived in different placements impacted her work history. Leaving care without the skills, tools, and behaviors necessary for a smooth transition to adulthood makes living on her own more challenging.

Jaden's personal biography is central to understanding what opportunities may be available; however, the larger context is equally important. As previously discussed, a life course perspective contends that societal forces shape individuals' life courses and development. There is a link between people's lives and historical times; when people were born impacts their lives (Elder, 1994). The individual, social, and historical contexts are interconnected and at play as youth leave care (Horrocks, 2002). The fact that Jaden aged out of the child welfare system during the great recession when youth unemployment rates were high has lasting impact. As Jaden transitions out of care, her age-mates are being supported during their transition into adulthood by their parents. The value of independence, evident throughout all of society, is explicit in the policies and practice for youth aging out which are designed to assist Jaden. She lives in a neoliberal society where the needs of businesses are prioritized over those of vulnerable people. No one is looking out for Jaden.

With Jaden's resourcefulness, I would like to think that everything will work out in the end for her. I want to think that the youth aging out whom I got a chance to know are going to be okay. Many of them will be okay. However, the hardships that youth experience as they are

transitioning out of the child welfare system and into adulthood can have real and lasting consequences. Adolescence is a time when youth can become ensnared in the consequences of their actions. Chimes, a young man Jaden met at a weWork training who provided the marijuana for a night of partying at Jaden's apartment, provides a perfect example of consequences of actions in adolescence having lasting results. His selling drugs and involvement in other illegal activities resulted in his getting a criminal record. With felonies on his record, including an assault charge, he may not be able to get certain jobs and he will no longer be eligible for certain types of financial aid if he ever decides to pursue a post-secondary education. While some of Chimes' decision to sell drugs was his desire to support his habit and make what he felt was easy money, also driving the decision were the limited opportunities for him to make money. Neither Jaden nor Chimes are destined to have a specific future; multiple trajectories are available to them.

As youth age out, their experiences and decisions impact their life trajectories and some opportunities become more or less probable. The domains of youths' lives are intricately interwoven. Not being employed impacts having housing. Not having an education impacts getting a job. Having health or mental health issues impacts parenting. Having a criminal record impacts getting a job. The life trajectories of these youth are a function of their past. This is not to be overly deterministic; yet what happened in youths' past contributes to the options available to them today. One of Jaden's career goals to work as an United Nations interpreter is greatly impacted by her not having taken foreign languages in school. Her only being able to speak English is not solely because of her decision not to take language classes in school. It is a function of the public education system which did not promote or require Jaden to learn another language, as well as of the culture which does not promote multilingualism. Jaden's poor credit

due to a unpaid credit card bill translates to multiple disadvantages including higher rates on cell phone plans, not being able to turn on utilities without a down payment, and higher rates on loans. Jaden's credit is impacted not only by her decision to buy on credit, but also by a society that allows credit to be given to those who will struggle to pay minimum balances. The strength of a life course perspective is that it accommodates both personal biographies and larger societal forces in shaping trajectory (Horrocks, 2002). Jaden's decisions alone do not determine her future.

Interventions may alter youths' life trajectories. Interventions designed to assist with a smooth transition with youth aging out are of utmost importance because they have the potential to assist youth in accessing more opportunities. For example, weWork assists youth aging out with increasing job readiness and employability, as well as helping place youth within internships and jobs. ASOMO provides up to two years of stable housing to ensure youth have a place to live so they can focus on their education. Both programs, which Jaden was involved with, promote education that can radically alter youths' lives. Staying in school, getting a job, and not living on the streets not only are beneficial in the short-term, but also have positive long-term consequences. Services can make a difference in youths' lives.

4.8 EMERGING ADULTHOOD THEORY

The transition out of the child welfare systems coincides with what scholars have labeled as emerging adulthood (Arnett & Taber, 1994; Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood is the time between leaving adolescence and entering adulthood, between the ages of 18 and 25, where there is a time of independent exploration and decision making about the future (Arnett, 2000). It is an

unstable time during which youth are exploring and discovering their lives. Scholars have incorporated emerging adulthood theory within the discourse on youth aging out (e.g. Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2010). Emerging adulthood can ground the argument of why an abrupt and accelerated transition out of adolescence and the child welfare system conflicts with youths' developmental needs. Youth aging out may benefit from a gradual transition after age 18, where they have support while they develop their identities and explore their options.

Emerging adulthood theory may not fully explain the experiences of youth aging out of the child welfare system and transitioning to adulthood, as these youth do not have the luxury of exploring their identity when their basic needs are not being met (Goodkind et al., 2011; Munson et al., 2013). With a safety net and support, those with high socio-economic status may experiment and discover themselves. The time of self-exploration is a luxury not necessarily afforded to youth aging out, as the financial cost is too high. Jaden has bills to pay and cannot afford extensive self-exploration. The consequences of her pursuing an interest that does not come to fruition, such as spending her savings on a bartending certificate that she does not use, may hinder her ability to make ends meet. In many ways emerging adulthood theory has limited utility in understanding Jaden's life and the lives of youth aging out. However, it may explain part of the hardships they experience. Trying on different roles and identify exploration seemed to be something that Jaden and her peers want to do, but they lack the resources and supports.

Jaden simultaneously was considering diverse careers, including broadcasting, interpreting, sales, and health care. Under the right circumstances, these could be attainable for Jaden. However, the closest she got to exploring one of these firsthand was journalism during her brief employment for a promoter when she interviewed performers prior to concerts. Her knowledge about the other careers was limited and came from sources that may not have

extensive information. A year after I met Jaden, she was considering less professional, lower-paying jobs such as becoming a certified nursing assistant (CNA) or an administrative assistant. A couple of her peers have completed CNA programs and work in nursing homes. Her belief about the career trajectory for CNA is slightly misguided, although it is technically possible to start as a CNA and get more education to become a registered nurse. Her interest in becoming a CNA seems to be fueled by her belief that her other career ideas are unobtainable. She had decided that she cannot invest in pursuing something like broadcasting not only because of its cost, but also because of the potential for it not to come to fruition. The cost of exploration can be great. Making mistakes or determining something is not feasible is part of learning and exploring, but youth aging out do not possess the resources for this. Costs prohibit Jaden and other youth from lengthy exploration or taking risks trying new things, as they do not have the privilege of support.

Youth aging out who have to work and take out loans to put themselves through college cannot afford to switch majors multiple times and take five or six years to complete a bachelor's degree. Jaden cannot take that much time or spend that much money to get an education. With the current regulations on student loans, money is not as readily available as it was previously. Youth may be forced to consider loans other than student loans to pay for education. Chantelle, another youth with whom I spent a lot of time, maxed out the federal loans available to her while getting an associate's degree at a proprietary college. To pay for her first year in a bachelor's program, the financial aid officer told her that she probably would have to have a parent co-sign for a traditional loan. The financial aid officer, who may have assumed that I was Chantelle's mother, looked mortified when Chantelle said that her parents had died and she had no one to cosign a loan. Wanting to go to medical school, Chantelle planned to finish school quickly to

avoid as much debt as possible. Unfortunately, she finished only one year at college and decided not to return. Her \$60,000 of debt was for an associate's degree and several college credits. The cost of her exploration was great and the debt she is now saddled with undoubtedly will impact her future. Chantelle and Jaden do not have anyone to help them if their self-exploration is costly and nonproductive.

4.9 ISOLATED AND ALONE

The first time I met Jaden, over a year prior to the story with which I began the chapter, was at the orientation to the ASOMO program; she confided in me as we left the meeting together, "If I didn't have my case worker, I'd have no one." When I explained that I was interested in hearing about what it was like to leave care, she said, "It's scary... There a lot of things I don't know how to do." Jaden, as researchers have documented for many youth aging out (McCoy et al., 2008; Goodkind et al., 2011), was ill-prepared to live on her own. Studies have shown youth aging out often leave care without a plan, and may lack basic necessities for a home (McMillian et al., 1997; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Consistently, studies conclude that aging out of the child welfare system is challenging. Jaden, like other youth aging out, struggled. Research has found that youth who remain in care longer fare better (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005). Jaden clearly was better off because of the support and assistance she receives.

Jaden was engaged in multiple services. She easily formed connections with multiple service providers, yet still struggled and felt alone. Mr. Sebastian served as her case manager through ASOMO. She also had a case manager through YouthFirst, a non-residential independent living program. Through weWork, there are two social workers and two other

service providers to assist her. Additionally, she remained in contact with a former case manager at the supervised apartments where she lived prior to her ASOMO apartment. Outside of these formal case management arrangements, Jaden's former math teacher helped her occasionally, although she described him as a little creepy and sometimes felt uncomfortable around him.

How does Jaden have a half-dozen adults in her life and still feel alone and afraid? It may seem absurd that she had this much support and still felt alone. Through talking with Jaden and other youth, I learned that feeling alone and unsupported is partially a function of the quality, length, and nature of the relationships. There is an explicit understanding that the relationships would and did end when case managers left jobs and or cases were closed. Case managers were not immediately embraced as support when they were assigned to youths' cases. Frankly, youth told me about testing the new case managers to determine how much they should trust them and how long the new case managers were going to stay. Constant turnover of service providers throughout the child welfare system was a frequent complaint of youth, although the turnover seemed less within the independent living programs and services for youth aging out. The boundaries that case managers kept sometimes made youth feel like only a number and that they were only there to do a job. I heard multiple times that the case managers were only in the youths' lives "for the money" and "as a job." Although many youth, like Jaden, could identify a specific service provider who cared for them and went to extraordinary lengths to help them, youth were quick to remind me that no one could replace a parent. Jaden talked about how for seven months her siblings and she were reunited and returned to their mother who still was unable to care for them, "Our mom was doing nothing, but we chose our mom over this [foster mother] lady." Jaden's devotion to her mother was profound, and the connections she formed with other adults were not nearly as deep.

At the end of the day, Jaden is alone. She is on her own and must support herself without assistance from parents or family. Her mother died a year ago, and her father, who Jaden describes as “goofy in the head,” barely can provide for himself and Jaden’s younger brother who she believes would be better off in the child welfare system. Other than her sister, who is a couple of years older than she, her younger sister who is a freshman in college, and her teenage brother, Jaden has no family involved in her life. The assistance her siblings provide is emotional, although her older sister has also referred her to different programs and tells her about job openings. The responsibility for her portion of rent, her phone, her bus pass, and food, squarely is Jaden’s. The number of people that she can call and ask for help at any hour of the day who can actually help her is very small. She can call her sisters and the couple of friends she has, but they are not in positions significantly better than hers. She does not have a parent or family member who can easily give or loan her the money to get the \$50 rent she owes to ASOMO and help pay her monthly bills. While the case managers care for her, they are not able to open their wallets and give her cash when she needs it. No one bailed her out when she got a Victoria’s Secret credit card and was unable to pay the bill. Similarly, when she overdrew her bank account, no one helped her resolve her banking issues. More importantly, she did not have parents educating her about credit cards and banking, and she did not learn about it prior to making her own mistakes. Jaden is truly alone.

Effectively, Jaden is a product of the child welfare system. Now, after the traumas of neglect that she experienced prior to entering care, of the abuse she experienced in foster homes, and the traumatic experience of being in the system, she is expected to survive on her own. Jaden is held to a higher standard—negotiating the transition to adulthood on your own—with fewer resources and supports than her age-mates who did not enter the child welfare system. Scholars

have contended that this expectation is unrealistic since in recent decades parents routinely help their children transition into adulthood and youth aging out are more vulnerable and disadvantaged than their age-mates (for example see Stein, 2006; Courtney & Heuring, 2005).

Parents usually provide assistance to their children during the transition to adulthood, and in the last several decades the amount of assistance has increased (Schoeni & Ross, 2005). The transition to independence is gradual, and often parental involvement continues until the children are in their late 20s. As previously discussed, this intergenerational interdependence is the norm. The average age when individuals become self-sufficient is 26 years (Schoeni & Ross, 2005), seven years older than Jaden was when she first moved into her apartment. Parents assist their children by providing financial assistance, emotional support, and housing. Youth and young adults increasingly are relying upon their parents and families as they transition into adulthood.

When Jaden was five years old, the state deemed her parents unworthy of caring for her siblings and her, and intervened by placing her in an out-of-home placement in the child welfare system. The state assumed the responsibility of parent. However, now that she is an adult and her biological parents remain absent, the system and local agencies are basically the only “family” to help her transition out of care and into adulthood. Jaden does not have a parent or family member to help her like her age-mates are being helped both financially and emotionally. She felt alone because of the absence of this help, and explained, “It’s hard not having anybody there [who] I feel really legitimately cares about me who doesn’t want anything in return, you know. Not anything. They don’t want sex or anything like that. I can do myself. I need to do this myself. But I really need help, you know.”

The isolation and overwhelming feelings of being alone form the basis of her ongoing fears of what could happen to her if she cannot provide for herself. Jaden feels alone as she

works hard to negotiate the transition, but feeling alone did not occur just as Jaden left the child welfare system. Being removed from her mom was necessary, Jaden knows, but she missed her mom and never formed the same relationship with anyone else. Her mother's death last year was devastating to Jaden and increased her sense of having no one. The disconnection from her siblings occurred when they were separated and placed in different foster homes. The isolation and feeling alone are somewhat indicative of the child welfare system due to children being removed from their families and moved among placements. Throughout her 14 years within the system, Jaden formed few relationships. She specifically talked about how she did not make friends because she did not want them to know that she lived with a foster family or in congregate care. Jaden left care without a created support system or a sense of permanency. She lacked both support and knowledge necessary for a smooth transition to adulthood.

Repeatedly, I met youth who echoed Jaden's sentiments of having no one to rely on and not being able to trust anyone because they felt people had ulterior motives or eventually everyone would leave them. At the conclusion of every interview, I gave youth an opportunity to share anything that they did not get a chance to talk about in the interview that they thought was important to know about what it is like to age out. I did this with Daja, a youth who was living in public housing with her two-year-old daughter. While we had talked about relationships throughout the interview, Daja's comment after I asked her if there was anything else she wanted to share emphasizes not trusting anyone. She said, "It's important to know not to trust anybody, regardless if they're trying to help you or not." She explained,

Because people, one minute, they'll be your friend, and the next minute, they'll stab you in your back and bring you down. That's just basically all it is. Like 'cause my family, if [my] family would do it, then imagine what the next person would do. See what I'm saying? Like if your own flesh and blood will try to bring you down, what makes you think that the next person won't? Everybody's out for self, so you gotta be out for self just as much as they is, and worry about you and don't trust nobody.

Although she has people she calls friends, Daja was adamant about not trusting anyone. She said one thing that she learned while in placement and aging out was, “Stay to myself, worry about me before anybody else. ’Cause other people will bring you down, especially when they see that you’re doing good.” Daja used being alone as a strategy for caring for herself, but she also expressed disliking being alone. It was especially difficult because she sometime needed help with her daughter. Daja seemed resolved that although she does not like being alone, it is what she has to do.

4.10 FLUIDITY OF SUCCESS

While Jaden’s story is not atypical, what is remarkable is how many strengths and the resources she has and still struggles. Jaden graduated from high school. She is intelligent, creative, outgoing, friendly, and personable. Jaden was engaged in services with multiple case managers at different agencies willing and able to assist her. She is hard working and determined. Yet, even with all of this she remains vulnerable. Jaden has accomplishments of which she is proud. She graduated from high school, enrolled in post-secondary education, and lived in her own apartment. At many moments since Jaden turned 18, she could be viewed as successful. However, at multiple points, she embodied the hardships and struggles youth aging out face. She dropped out of community college. Depression overwhelmed her. She was fired and quit jobs. She did not know where she will live in a couple months. She overdrew her bank account. She did not know how to clean or cook. She did not have a valid state ID. Her unpaid credit card went to a collection agency. She felt alone and scared.

This paradox of being both a poster child of success and an embodiment of the adversities which youth aging out face is characteristic of the fragility of their success. Simply getting a job, enrolling in school, or securing housing does not the end of the struggle. The struggles persist, albeit they are sometimes slightly different. In some ways, the hardships can become more amplified as the stakes are higher and interdependent. Transportation is a challenge most youth aging out face, yet once a youth gets a job, transportation becomes paramount. Not getting to work on time can cause a youth to lose a job. If the job was paying rent, now the lack of income threatens stable housing. The stress facing youth aging out, even those who are succeeding, is great.

Jaden's success is fluid. Today she may have a job, be in school, and have a place to live. Tomorrow her life may unravel and all of her successes dissolve. Her well-being is fragile which is understandable since youth aging out are incredibly vulnerable. Without support and resources, the fall from her success can be long and hard. While Jaden maintained a place to live and did not go hungry, she had friends who did end up homeless. There are youth aging out who live under bridges and in wooded areas near the city. Even when Jaden was living on her own and had her own apartment, she struggled and was terrified of what would happen if she needed something.

I once asked Jaden if she would ever consider moving back into a shelter. Quickly, she replied, "I can only move forward. That's what I want to do. I can only move forward. It's a lot. It's a lot. But I mean, other people do it too I am sure. Other people have the same problems as me and probably worse, if not. I never complain to anybody. I'm sure there's other people going through this with kids which make it double times harder." Jaden is right. Other youth had the

same problems, and some had problems that Jaden surely would have seen as worse. Some of the young parents' struggles were intensified by the added stress of raising children.

All the youth in the study who shared their lives with me experienced hardships on varying levels. Unlike many of her peers, over the course of the year and a half that I knew her, Jaden did not become homeless, get involved with the justice systems, become a victim of crime, or become a parent. Yet, she struggled to make ends meet and lived with constant fear of becoming homeless, which was the worst outcome she envisioned. Some type of way, she was able to survive and avoid being homeless during the time I knew her.

5.0 “LIFE’S A GAME”: CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

Due to a scheduling conflict, a speaker at a daylong weWork supplemental training had to leave early. With only a notice of a couple hours, the staff scrambled to find something to fill the afternoon. Mr. Solomon offered to share his story with the youth and talk about how he grew up in the same neighborhoods that they did and was able to escape the streets. “Any way you look at it,” he said to the staff, “a black man with a master’s degree is a success.” Standing in front of the 14 youth later in the afternoon, he reiterated and demonstrated that to the youth.

Mr. Solomon launched into his life story, reflecting on a previous training in which a weWork speaker had said, “Life’s a game.” Over the next hour, Mr. Solomon spoke passionately about the analogy of life being a game and through playing the game by “the rules” he has succeeded. At one point, Mr. Solomon asked who played Spades, a popular cards game, and everyone raised their hand or verbalized affirmation. He talked about the rules, which were familiar to everyone. Giving examples of people cheating, he argued that they were not playing Spades if they were not following the rules. He stressed if someone did not want to follow the rules, that was okay, but then they could not play Spades with the group.

“I didn’t make the rules,” Mr. Solomon said. Continuing, he asked hypothetically, “Who’s to say the sky is blue?” indicating that things were decided outside of the individual. I admired how Mr. Solomon creatively used this question, since it was one that I had heard youth use as a way to argue about their way being valid, even if it was not conventional. Mr. Solomon

explained that simply saying the sky is green or wanting it to be green, does not make it green. The sky is blue, and that is the rule. Other people made the rules, and while no one has to follow the rules, to play the game the rules must be followed. The group was quieter than they had been all day as they listened to Mr. Solomon.

“You have to go to college to make money,” Mr. Solomon said, “those are the rules.” He stressed, if you do not go that is fine, but you’re basically getting out of the game. Mr. Solomon said he disagrees with people who say that post-secondary education is not for everyone. He stressed the importance of higher education and felt it was obtainable for everyone. Mr. Solomon told the youth, “You can’t make your own rules; you have to follow the rules.” While some of the youth seemed to agree with Mr. Solomon’s position, there was some resistance to what he was saying. Titi, who consistently was disruptive and argumentative throughout the weWork training, argued with Mr. Solomon about education being necessary. Mr. Solomon insisted that in life there is “no easy way out.” A youth disagreed and said it is easy for rich people. Mr. Solomon maintained everyone has to “pound the payment” because there is not an easy way out around the rules.

Putting Titi on the spot, Mr. Solomon asked her if she were a CEO at a Fortune 500 company hiring someone who would run a company, would she hire someone with a bachelor’s degree, someone without a GED, someone with a GED, or someone with a high school diploma. He asked, who would you trust more? Titi reluctantly admitted she would hire the person with the bachelor’s degree, but argued that she could pay the person without the GED less. She did not seem to realize that her saying she could pay the person with the GED less further supported Mr. Solomon’s argument that following the rules was the way to succeed. Mr. Solomon was adamant that education was central to success.

Mr. Solomon gave youth a handout that outlines earnings for different degrees. While talking about establishing career goals, he instructed the youth to keep in mind the rules of the educational requirements and salary of the job. The handout explained that typically \$39,000 is required to meet basic living needs. I found this somewhat amusing since that dollar amount is more than the amount earned by many of the service providers working with youth aging out. Titi fiercely challenged the \$39,000 figure saying she could live on far less. She argued food stamps could pay for food, so there was not a need to spend the money on food. LIHEAP (Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program) will pay for electricity and gas. Housing could be received through Section 8. If it was warm enough, Titi argued, it was possible and free to live outside like she did when she was homeless living in the southwest. Titi rattled off the names of a few other programs that covered basic living expenses as evidence that it does not actually take almost \$40,000 to survive.

The room became loud as youth along with Mr. Solomon disagreed with Titi. Although many of the youth present received some assistance from the state, most typically food stamps, essentially there was agreement that help should be temporary. Most youth wanted to live without government support and tried to convince Titi it was better not to rely on welfare. One youth said that he heard yesterday the “welfare system was shutting down,” referencing the cuts in social spending. Concern, anger, and disbelief were summed up with one young woman’s comment that seemed to speak for most present, “They better not cut my food stamps.” After the room settled again, Mr. Solomon concluded his talk sharing his personal story. He had not been part of the child welfare system, but he had grown up in poverty and had to make some difficult decisions to focus in school and not be involved with selling drugs and living on the streets like some of his peers.

Throughout his talk, Mr. Solomon stressed that it was tough growing up poor and focusing on school when others around him were not. Seeing the others who had decided to sell drugs driving nice cars and having nice things while he was studying was difficult. However, he focused on his education. The cost of not following the rules and ending up in jail or dead, like many other black young men he knew, was too great for him. Mr. Solomon clearly related to the youth and his story seemed to resonate with them.

The youths' connection was related to Mr. Solomon's understanding of hardships they faced. Many lived in poverty and struggled to make ends meet. They showed up hungry to the training, and the breakfast and lunch weWork provided might be their only meals for the day. Some youth wore the same clothing several days because they did not have any other clothing to wear. Without the provided bus tickets, some youth would have had to walk to the training because they were unable to pay the \$5 to \$7 for the bus fare and did not have anyone to give or lend them the money or drive them to the training. The financial incentive of \$25 per day to attend the training brought some of the youth to the training, as the money was often desperately needed to pay bills. Youth related to Mr. Solomon's talking about the tough neighborhood and having friends and family shot and killed; they had their own stories of personal experience and of people they knew who had been victims of crime. Many of the youth lived in these neighborhoods and knew that living in them was dangerous.

Most of the characteristics Mr. Solomon discussed with which the youth connected were about poverty and race. Being poor and African American meant additional barriers because of prejudices and limited opportunities. However, their experiences and struggles extended beyond living in poverty and being African American. Aging out of the child welfare system brought an additional assortment of struggles and stresses related to having been in the child welfare system

and leaving care with the expectation of independence. As was highlighted with Jaden, although she was hard-working and resourceful, her successes sometimes unraveled. She was able to find entry level jobs, but quickly lost them. She enrolled in community college, but then was on academic probation after she stopped going to class. Jaden opened a bank account, but due to confusion she overspent and accumulated overdraft fees. Without a safety net of family and friends, Jaden felt alone and insecure. She often was unsure about how to navigate systems and do things such as reenroll in community college or apply for food stamps. Jaden lacked basic cooking, cleaning, and money management skills. Even when Jaden had a job and was able to pay her bills, she felt the tenuousness of her well-being. Jaden, in spite of her many strengths and of being engaged with service providers, remained fragile and vulnerable. This was also true for the youth listening to Mr. Solomon.

Education was the second area through which youth connected with Mr. Solomon's talk. While some disliked his assertion that education was completely necessary, when asked about their goals and plans, many youth mentioned getting more education. This could mean finishing high school, getting a GED, going to community college, or attending another post-secondary education program. Of the 14 youth present, only a few did not have their GED or high school diploma. A third of the youth was or had been involved in community college, and several others wanted to go to college. One youth had a certificate from a cosmetology school, and another youth was involved with a different trade school. While education may have resonated with the youth, it simultaneously was an area in which they struggled. The youth in the trade school did not finish his first semester. The youth in community college primarily were taking remedial classes which would not count towards the credits required for graduation.

At the end of the day after the youth had left, I approached Mr. Solomon. Previously he had told me that someday he wanted to be a motivational speaker and talk to youth about how they can achieve their dreams. I told Mr. Solomon that he had lied to me when he said he aspired to become a motivational speaker because clearly he already was one. He laughed and thanked me. We spoke for only a couple of minutes before Mr. Solomon excused himself to catch up on paperwork and make phone calls.

5.1 CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

I bristled the first time I heard the “life’s a game” and “you have to play by the rules” ideas that Mr. Solomon shared. Initially, I felt that it was rhetoric that blamed youth aging out for not succeeding. I assumed that it rationalized staying in poverty and not escaping the circumstances of the neighborhoods where young men get shot and killed as the decision of the individual who chose not to follow “the rules.” However, as I listened to what was being said, I realized it was a more nuanced argument that affirmed that there are structural barriers youth aging out must negotiate and youth are disadvantaged by having grown up in places where they did not learn the social expectations of higher socioeconomic statuses.

Far from being a rhetoric highlighting youths’ deficits, the “life’s a game” analogy views youths’ behaviors and underdeveloped skills as a function of their surroundings as well as the systems with which they engage. Deficits are not individual youth’s failures; rather the failure is that noone provided clear definitions of “the rules” and access to the tools to be successful. Upon closer examination, the analogy reveals a framework that can guide how we understand aging out of the child welfare system and how we can better assist youth transitioning out of care.

Mr. Solomon's lecture was powerful for me on multiple levels. First, it engaged and challenged the youth to whom he spoke. The positive message that successes are possible, but there are real barriers that can best be overcome by making certain choices and behaving certain ways offered realistic hope. Second, it balanced agency with structural barriers. He was not telling youth that they could be a rapper or NBA superstar; the odds were stacked against them, yet there were ways to succeed and have a life off of the streets. The "life's a game" analogy accounts for agency of the youth, but explains that "the rules" are various structures that can impede their successes if not followed. Third, the lecture connected what I observed during my fieldwork. Youth consistently did not know, understand, or follow "the rules" which Mr. Solomon talked about. The analogy can explain why youth aging out struggle and highlights ways that services may be able to mitigate the hardships. Using this view helps to explain why youth aging out do not fare as well as their age-mates across multiple outcomes. Finally, Mr. Solomon's lecture connects to the theoretical framework of capital development perspective, which can explain why youth aging out struggle and how they are disadvantaged as they transition out of the child welfare system and into adulthood. The framework organized what I learned in the field.

What Mr. Solomon explained to youth about rules is really a reduced colloquial interpretation of some of Pierre Bourdieu's work about capital. In Forms of Capital, Bourdieu (1986) posits that an individual's position in society is largely determined by his economic, cultural and social capital. His framework explains the external social structures impact on individuals and describes the difference in outcomes that groups of various social classes experience. Movement across the social classes is challenging, and people at lower levels are not likely to rise to higher levels.

Bourdieu divides capital into three categories: economic, cultural, and social. However, within cultural capital, he specifies the institutionalized state as the academic qualification or as the knowledge and skills that a person possesses. As it appears within other literature, this institutionalized state is human capital. Since the concept of human capital is used within youth development (Koball et al., 2011), and is within some of the discourse about youth aging out (Courtney & Heuring, 2005), I will use four types of capital—human, economic, social, cultural—to make the discussion more accessible.

Human capital is a person's skill level that is most immediately evaluated by her level of education and employment. Social capital extends beyond a person's social connections and includes the opportunities and resources she has access to due to her social connections. Bourdieu (1986) posits that social capital is a function of group membership. Cultural capital consists of a person's understanding and ability to practice social norms. Bourdieu (1986) explains that cultural capital is provided through parenting, the educational systems, and everyday life; and through mastering socially desirable skills and behaviors, a person maintains her status in society. Related to cultural capital is the concept of habitus, the set of acceptable socially learned skills and behaviors which largely are invisible to those who understand them. The social norms that guide the way people think and act which can be understood as habitus are learned through social interactions with others and shift according to context and time. Economic capital is a person's economic assets easily converted to money, as well as the person's ability to control the economic assets. Bourdieu (1986) argues that all types of capital can be derived from economic capital, which forms the root of all capital, and yet the conversion of types of capital are complicated and advantage those with higher social positions.

I started thinking about a capital development perspective as I repeatedly saw youth experiencing great hardships struggling to get a job and then to keep the job, and in spite of having a job, the hardships continued. Almost as frequently, I saw youth struggling with their education. Some were having problems in high school or completing their GED. Others, like Jaden, had enrolled in community college, but then encountered difficulties that forced them to leave and then they could not reenroll. Several had been involved with proprietary colleges and were taking out exorbitant student loans for a non-accredited certificate program. What bothered me about all of this is that the youth were doing what was expected of them—getting a job and going to school—yet again their hardships persisted. Clearly, employment and education alone, the hallmarks of human capital, cannot secure a smooth transition out of the child welfare system.

The approach of promoting employment and education as the solution for the issues youth aging out face seemed insufficient. Literature on youth aging out framed their needs often in terms of increasing permanency (Avery, 2010; Freudlich et al., 2005), or developing life skills (McCoy et al., 2008) along with employment and education. The former can be conceptualized as being part of social capital, and developing life skills can be viewed as part of cultural capital. However, to me what was missing with some of these prescriptions of how to address the issues of youth aging out was an overarching framework that took into consideration the larger social and economic context and could be used to understand youths' struggles and poor outcomes without holding the individual youth solely responsible. The process of aging out is complex, but capital development perspective can assist with understanding it.

Revisiting Mr. Solomon's talk with a capital development perspective framework, I am amazed how well it conveys using this perspective as a framework for youth aging out. When

Mr. Solomon lectured youth on needing to abide by “the rules,” he was basically arguing that youth needed to understand and abide by cultural norms, the basic principles of cultural capital. By talking about his childhood and how he studied and focused on school while others around him chased the “fast life” selling drugs and having nice cars, was basically Mr. Solomon’s discussion of habitus. In effect, he outlined the socially learned behaviors and norms of the poor community in which he was raised. With his emphasis on education as a means to an end, as well as an intrinsic benefit, he promoted increasing human capital. He saw the drug dealers as those who had less capital, as they were increasingly likely to experience the consequences of prison, violence, and death due to violence. While pointing out that many of the youth who dealt drugs may have had flashy cars and nice things, he also noted that they still had to live with their mothers or stay with friends because they did not have money to live on their own, showing the instability of economic capital associated with drug dealing. Social capital was not directly mentioned in Mr. Solomon’s lecture; however, he mentioned how he chose friends and associated with people who were not selling drugs. This could be interpreted as his endorsing building a pro-social social network to help youth succeed in pursuing an education instead of being on the streets. Mr. Solomon did not frame his lecture to demonstrate a capital development perspective, yet the framework reinforces his key points and extends his argument.

When I reflect upon a capital development perspective as it pertains to youth aging out, the struggles that I observed youth aging out wrestling with become easier to comprehend. Youth aging out often lack human, economic, social, and cultural capital. With underdeveloped capital, it makes sense that youth have fewer opportunities and resources and greater challenges in their daily lives. Some of youths’ behavior also can be better understood. Once, I called a youth who had given me his phone number because he was interested in being interviewed for the study. He

answered the phone, “Yo! Whaddup, my nigga?” After fumbling for a moment, I explained that I was calling to schedule an interview, and it became apparent to me that the youth had not known that I was the one calling him. While I was slightly appalled that someone who is applying for jobs and could be getting a call from a potential employer answered his phone that way, in considering his background and lack of access to cultural capital, it is more reasonable. Youths’ behaviors and decisions, as well as their struggles, became easier to understand using a capital development perspective and considering the context in which they live. These are not youth with extensive resources and options who are making bad decisions. These youth aging out have limited resources, have backgrounds that limit their opportunities, and are making the best decisions they can, often without having a single great option available to them. Additionally, the majority of these youth are African American and their care careers in the child welfare system were influenced by their race; African Americans are more likely to enter care, to be in congregate care, and to age out. These African American youth face increased disadvantages due to racism and their experience both in the system and aging out.

Using a capital development perspective made it is easier for me to understand how service providers worked with youth aging out. The emphasis on human capital in the forms of employment and education, and the exclusion of other forms of capital explains why some of the efforts were less effective. Considering that the types of capital are interrelated, having underdeveloped areas could impede success in developing human capital. In the next chapter I more fully examine service provision through the lens of a capital development perspective. I revisit federal policy which highlights education and employment and critique how services are provided.

5.2 TITI'S STORY

Titi provides an example of someone whose limited capital magnifies her struggles. I met 18-year-old Titi at a weWork's mandatory training which she attended with Galena, her best friend to whom she sometimes referred as her cousin. Titi grew up in poverty and was very vocal about her feelings that work was not necessary to survive. She boasted throughout the training that she had never held a job and had always been able to get by just fine. While she was not proud of the fact that she did not have a high school diploma or GED, she was not apologetic for her lack of formal education. Titi relied on government assistance, her sister, her cousins, and boyfriend for her living expenses, including during her several bouts of homelessness, during one of which she slept outside or in a tent with people she knew.

During the weWork trainings, Titi often interrupted with texting and answering phone calls on her Bluetooth headset as the trainers were talking. She frequently walked in and out of the room. When staff asked her to participate, pay attention, or stop the behavior that was disrupting the training, she would roll her eyes, talk back belligerently, and disregarded what they said. Titi insisted that she did not need a job to live, as she could find other ways to survive, combining money from family and boyfriends along with subsidized housing, food stamps and public assistance. She expressed little interest in getting a job. Titi's behaviors and attitude frustrated weWork staff, but they understood that Titi did not grow up in a family where parents or adults were modeling work behavior. weWork staff may have taken deep slow breaths to ensure they did not let their annoyance show prior to addressing Titi, but they never turned her away when she came to trainings with her cousin or asked for help.

I interviewed Mr. Solomon a few months after meeting Titi and was shocked when he used Titi as an example of one of weWork's success stories. She had gotten a housekeeping job

at a local hospital. He said she was doing well in the job and had told him that she was a little embarrassed about her previous negative attitude towards work and beliefs that she could get by without a job. Mr. Solomon talked proudly about her growth. Titi's transformation is impressive considering her past.

Before the age of four, Titi and her three siblings entered the child welfare system because her mother was addicted to crack cocaine and her elderly father was not around. She estimated that she was in at least 20 to 30 placements, several of which were group homes. Initially, she was placed with her siblings, but eventually they were separated. As she grew older, Titi was placed in group homes and occasionally spent time at a juvenile detention facility. She ran away from placement several times. Later, her sister who is eight years older than she became her foster parent and raised Titi and their other siblings along with her own four young children.

When I met up with Titi and her cousin, Galena, a couple of months after I heard from Mr. Solomon that she had a job, I was surprised when Titi arrived with a tiny baby in a baby carrier. For a moment, she led me to believe that it was her son before laughing and confessing she was watching her cousin's baby. I asked Titi how her job was. I had spoken with her a couple days previously and she had told me that she would tell me all about her job. Titi informed me that she had been fired from her job the previous day because her supervisor had said she was too slow. Defending her, Galena insisted that Titi was not too slow and it was only because there was so much work. Neither Titi nor Galena seemed to think the failure to follow the protocol of checking in as she completed a room was Titi's fault.

Throughout our conversation, it was clear that Titi's attitude towards work had changed since I last saw her. Her belief in not needing that much money had changed, and she confessed

she had not been prepared for how challenging life on her own would be. She took great pride in the fact that her first job had been at a hospital instead of fast food and that she had learned a lot. Titi exuded optimism about getting another job. She stressed that she had developed skills at her first job that would make her better prepared for future jobs. She talked about targeting housekeeping jobs both in hospitals as well as hotels. Titi explained about how she was already trained and emphasized how employers would look favorably on her experience. She said already knowing how to “v-tip” toilet paper, folding the edge of a roll of toilet paper that was on a holder into a neat little point to indicate the bathroom was clean, would save employers time in training her and assist her in getting the job.

As Titi talked about how she was well-prepared to be hired, she scrolled through her cell phone’s recent call history trying to remember which numbers were associated with the different places she had called. By checking what time and day she had made the call she thought she could differentiate between the different numbers in her phone, although she admitted she was not completely certain about the numbers. Her plan was to call the numbers again, inquire about a position and see if she could figure out which job, company, and location she had called. Galena was going to apply for jobs as well. She had been hired by McDonald’s recently, but because the restaurant that hired her was not near a bus line, she had been unable to go to work. Titi and Galena planned to spend the day putting in applications along with Titi’s brother, and did not see taking turns carrying the three-month old baby in the baby carrier while applying for jobs as problematic. I imagined weWork staff cringing over this, as they stress youth should be prepared for an on-the-spot interview when applying for jobs in person and recommend youth never apply for jobs with friends.

5.3 MAGGIE'S STORY

When Maggie got an internship at a local hospital through an Office of Vocational Rehabilitation initiative, she called me. Her call came as a surprise because it was rare for us to talk on the phone. Maggie and I texted to communicate. The cell phone plan she shared with her friend had unlimited texts and a limited number of minutes for phone calls. Her good news warranted a call, and she enthusiastically told me all about her internship. She would work 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday through Friday in one of the hospital's departments. After five months of the internship, she would be able apply for a job. She explained excitedly that typically four out of five interns are hired; it was practically guaranteed she would get a job there. Maggie loved children, especially babies, and was optimistic that she could be on the maternity floor and be around babies since the hospital specialized in women's health. I had never heard Maggie so excited. Just a few weeks ago she was complaining that she was never going to find a job.

Maggie briefly shared her plans to prepare for her internship, which started the following week. She was going to buy the pants and shoes she needed and go to the grocery store to buy granola bars, fruit, and other food that she could pack for her lunch. One of her case managers was going to drive her and help her prepare for the first day. We spoke for only a couple of minutes because Maggie wanted to share her good news. She promised to call me after she started and tell me all about the internship.

When Maggie called me Wednesday, the third day of the internship, I expected her to describe why the internship was not working out. I was pleasantly surprised by her breathless chatter about her "awesome" internship. Rarely, if ever, had Maggie displayed such enthusiasm. I smiled listening to her gush about the orientation and the fact she had a good chance to be hired at the conclusion of the internship. Perhaps Maggie's perpetual doom and gloom were actually a

response to the myriad difficulties in her life. I was amazed and pleased with her positive report of the internship.

Knowing Maggie was not a morning person and frequently did not wake before noon, I asked her how it was waking up early. With a note of disbelief in her voice, she told me it was going well. She said, “I thought it would be a lot harder.” At the time Maggie lived in a supervised independent living program where she and a roommate shared an apartment in a building staffed 24 hours a day. She described feeling proud of waking up on her own and not needing staff’s help. Maggie also was able to get to the internship by herself. In the past transportation had created a significant obstacle for Maggie, and she often relied upon staff for assistance. Her apartment was a five-minute walk from the bus stop, and her bad knees caused significant discomfort during the walk. Watching her walk almost stiff-legged, it was clear that the surgery she had a few years ago did not entirely fix her knee problem. All three days of the orientation Maggie managed to walk to the bus stop instead of having staff drive her. Maggie said she was also incredibly proud of herself for not giving up and listed programs that she previously had not completed, including the weWork job readiness training and a cosmetology program. Maggie reflected that she often gives up when facing obstacles, so she was proud of completing the basic orientation. After having Thursday and Friday off, she would find out her internship placement on Monday. Before getting off the phone, I encouraged her to celebrate how well she was doing, and we made plans to talk next week.

When I got her call the following Friday, I assumed I would hear more of Maggie’s excitement and news about her first week at her internship placement. Instead, Maggie dejectedly told me she had been fired. Crying, she repeatedly said, “I just feel like a failure.” She explained she was fired because she had two “no call, no shows” in the first week. Through her

sniffles, she explained that on Monday, on the bus to her internship she had an anxiety attack and turned around and went home. Before she had the chance to call and explain what happened, the supervisor called her. This was the first “no call, no show.” Tuesday, she attended the internship without incident. She arrived home at 7:00 p.m. Exhausted, she went to sleep at 8:30 p.m. without having eaten dinner and slept until 9:15 a.m., which was after when she was supposed to be at the hospital. Her supervisor called and fired her. This story came out slowly with my having to ask her to repeat what she said because she was crying. Maggie repeatedly said, “I messed up.” She had been fired two days ago and was only calling now because it took her a couple of days to be able to pick up the phone.

At one point in the conversation, Maggie’s tone became righteous. No longer weepy, she asserted it was very challenging to work at her internship and be gone from home so long. She returned home exhausted, yet the staff wanted her to “do things.” The things staff requested she do were basic housework tasks such as cleaning her dirty dishes in the sink, and other assigned chores listed on a bulletin board inside of her apartment, including things such as sweeping the floor or cleaning the bathroom. Maggie said she was too tired to do anything after getting home from her internship.

As Maggie continued to talk, it seemed like she was trying to convince both herself and me. Maggie said, “I’m not giving [my]self enough credit” because at least she received the internship and got to work some of the days. She framed it as a skill to get that far. As the conversation continued, Maggie expressed frustration with the staff and how their lack of support contributed to her failure at the internship. She angrily said the staff conveyed, “We don’t have time for you” through their actions and minimal support. Maggie felt she disappointed the staff and believed, “they are mad at me for [getting fired].” Maggie said the staff’s disappointment,

lack of understanding about how hard she had tried, and inability to see she actually accomplished something by going to the internship a few days is “making me hurt worse”.

Her monologue transitioned to how she was a failure at everything. She said, “I wasn’t ready for such a strong commitment” and elaborated that waking up at 4:00 a.m. to get to work by 8:00 a.m. and not getting done until 2:00 p.m. was too much. After the long day at the internship, Maggie complained she would have to stand up on the bus ride home at 5:00 p.m. because it was rush hour. As Maggie mentioned the times, I did some quick calculations in my head. Due to the bus schedule and allowing extra time to account for late buses or a missed connection, leaving her apartment at 6:00 a.m. would give an entire hour for walking and accounting for bus delays. The two buses she had to take are only an hour, including the time for transfers which during the times she travels are frequent. I can understand her needing the extra hour to walk. I was puzzled by her waking up two hours before she needs to leave, but I did not get a direct answer when I ask about this. The fact that she finished work at 2:00 p.m. and did not get on the bus until 5:00 p.m. seemed odd to me, but once again I did not get an answer when I asked what she did in those three hours. In spending time with Maggie, I know her slow gait and need to stop to catch her breath may make the walk from the hospital to the internship longer, but three hours seemed excessive. Regardless of how much extra time she added to her travel, the city’s public transportation is slow and sometimes unreliable. Driving a car and parking, the trip from her apartment to the hospital during the times of day that she was traveling would take only 30 minutes.

We have been talking for longer than we have ever talked on the phone and I am now running late to meet someone. I decide to invest more time with Maggie and plan to apologize for being late. Maggie started talking about how she really needed this internship. She said the

phrase I hear so frequently from youth, “I need a job.” Maggie was no longer crying, but she was also no longer speaking righteously about how she accomplished something the staff did not acknowledge. She sounded horrible. I was concerned about her because she has hurt herself in the past. I envisioned the scars on her arms as I asked if she was okay. She said she will be, but she needs a job. I directly asked her if she was going to cut herself and she said no. Her plans were to spend time with a friend and try not to think about the internship. Before getting off the phone, she said it made sense to look for a job while she still has the monthly bus pass which she received from the internship. She told me again, “I need a job.” I wished her luck and said goodbye after we made plans to hang out the following week.

5.4 CULTURAL CAPITAL

Maggie lost her internship because she had two “no call, no shows.” Not showing up for work without advance notice is cause for termination in many jobs. Maggie does not have work experience and may not have known the severity of the consequences for not showing up. This limited cultural capital, the lack of understanding and following of social norms is complicated by Maggie’s documented mental health problems. The anxiety on the bus ride that caused Maggie to decide not to go to work the first time was part of her mental health diagnosis. While she may not have made the best decision by not calling her supervisor immediately, it is understandable that Maggie may not have been thinking clearly in the midst of an anxiety attack. Even in the best circumstances, Maggie sometimes made decisions that were hard to understand, but that is expected during late adolescence. Having lived in group homes, Maggie did not always get the chance to practice making decisions and experience the natural consequences. She

did not manage her mental health issues while living at the supervised apartment, which became a problem when she moved out on her own a few months after losing her internship and mismanaged her medication. While in the supervised apartment, she received medication from staff twice daily, and once she was on her own several months later she frequently forgot to take her pills. Eventually, she stopped taking some of them. Without practice being responsible and learning to manage her mental health issues, she had problems when she was on her own. It makes sense that it will take her awhile to manage her mental health and practice making decisions and communicating with supervisors. This is new to Maggie.

Like Maggie, Titi provides an excellent example of how limited cultural capital is a function of the past and can impact current life circumstances. It is not surprising that at age 18 as she left care Titi did not see work as important. Most of her life she was in institutions where daily life differs from that in the home. Titi never had a stable household. She experienced abuse and neglect in several of the foster homes, and spent almost half of her time in placement in group homes. Cultural capital is developed through interactions and observations on a daily basis. The habitus Titi and other youth were exposed to in congregate care facilities was not the same as that of youth of high socio-economic statuses. To revisit Mr. Solomon's language, "the rules" of the "game" that will help a youth get a career and succeed in college are neither explicit nor are they practiced within the congregate care facilities or in the poor neighborhoods in which the youth often lived.

Titi learned to negotiate receiving help from agencies and relying on government assistance. Likewise, Titi's rough demeanor may have been protective while she was living in out-of-home placement with other youth on the streets and for the brief amount of time she was in jail for shoplifting. However, the brazen disrespect and attitude she displayed when I first met

her would be out of place elsewhere and definitely be off-putting to most employers. Without a high school diploma or GED, the jobs available to Titi were largely service based, and Titi did not display a customer-friendly personality. Nor did she seem to be aware of what was acceptable workplace behavior. This worked against her as she entered the workforce.

Considering life course perspective, Titi's opportunities as she entered the workforce were largely a function of her past experiences. With little background with the workplace, even tangentially through watching parents or foster parents, Titi was disadvantaged as she obtained and maintained a job. Her lack of following protocol and communicating with her supervisor were the reasons she was fired. Titi's lack of cultural capital, which is a function of her life circumstances and surroundings, served as an obstacle to her employment.

Limited understanding of the workplace was not unusual. One of the ways that it was most apparent was in youths' understanding of appropriate attire. At one YouthFirst monthly meeting, I was talking with Brandi, when Dani approached us with several shopping bags. She pulled out a pink and white patterned tank-top that had large wooden circles attaching the straps to the front of the shirt. Holding it up she asked if it was something that she could wear to church. She said she was interviewing for a youth of the year award at an afterschool program and had been told to wear "church clothes." The shirt was very revealing and probably inappropriate for most churches. Brandi suggested that putting a cardigan sweater over the tank-top would be great and then the cardigan could be worn with other things. Dani seemed a little skeptical. Brandi asked what pants she would be wearing with the shirt and suggested some white dress pants. Saying she did not have any, Dani insecurely pulled a pair of white jeans out of another bag. Brandi and I assured her the white jeans were acceptable. Dani then opened another bag and showed us the shoes she had bought for the interview outfit, crystal adorned

strappy black four inch stilettos. The heels were what I would expect to see at a club or at a formal event, and definitely not at an interview. Brandi also seemed to think they were inappropriate, but did not say so directly. She asked Dani how she was going to walk in the shoes. Dani admitted that she had not worn heels and said she walks on her tiptoes a lot, so it should not be a problem. Brandi suggested she practice walking in heels before wearing them out, and then asked Dani how she was doing her hair and makeup. After Dani gave a vague response, Brandi offered to do her hair to which Dani enthusiastically accepted.

Dani wanted to look good for her interview and was trying to follow the directions of wearing “church clothes.” She spent her own money to purchase the tank top, jeans, and stilettos. The clothing easily could have cost her most of her weekly pay. Living in group homes and unexposed to church or people wearing business casual or business professional clothes, Dani lacked a reference of what was suitable. Without guidance, Dani floundered in determining what she should wear. She was insecure about what to wear for the interview. Dani wanted to dress appropriately, but did not know how and had no one to guide her.

What to wear for job interviews was something that weWork as well as other agencies tried to stress to youth. Service providers addressed it through lectures and activities; however, regardless of how service providers tried to teach youth what was appropriate, there were struggles. Developmentally, this makes sense as youth are creating their identity during this time. Additionally, African American youth sometimes resisted, arguing that they were being told they had to “act white” and abandon the style that their idols embraced. Service providers instructing youth to conceal tattoos or urging young men to remove earrings or young women to wear smaller earrings inevitably led to debates that resulted in the service providers arguing for the youth to follow the social norms of professionals and the youth insisting they should be

respected for who they are. It is worth mentioning that occasionally, there were youth who said that they would wear and do whatever was necessary to get a job because whatever they wore did not determine who they really were. Also worthy of note is that youth who wanted to wear a business casual outfit to an interview sometimes did not have access to the clothing and shoes.

Youths' basic knowledge about what to wear was lacking in part due to exposure. Who was modeling what to wear? The service providers around them, some of the few professionals with whom the youth routinely had contact, were not always the best examples of business casual attire. The case managers often wore jeans and casual shirts due to the nature of their jobs. Once I was hanging with a youth at her apartment and sitting on her couch when a case manager stopped by to drop something off. The youth made fun of the case manager for wearing a tight skirt and heels to walk all the way up the broken walkway to the apartment and laughingly said she would break a leg walking in the heels. The nature of some of the service providers' jobs frequently made wearing professional clothes inappropriate. Service providers alone cannot be held responsible for helping youth learn professional attire. Who else in the youths' lives is showing youth what to wear?

With their limited experience, I question how youth are supposed to learn how to navigate the workplace. I discussed the example of clothing as it is an accessible way to address social norms, but it is only part of expectations in the workplace. How are youth supposed to learn about how to act at work? How are youth taught to function outside of the child welfare system? How can youth aging out be expected to be highly productive members of society, considering their backgrounds and experiences? Who is helping these youth? These are questions that that I explore more in the following chapter about services, and are important to consider when considering a capital development perspective.

5.5 TITI'S SUPPORT SYSTEM

Titi had a large family, most of whom struggled financially. Her 26-year-old sister, whom Titi credits with raising her, occasionally continued to assist Titi when she left the child welfare system. Titi reciprocated by watching her sister's four children and buying the children diapers and things they needed. Titi had a similar arrangement with her cousin, where she could stay at her home, but was expected to watch the children and buy necessities for them.

Titi and Galena often lived together. Galena frequently stayed with Titi when she had a place to stay, and likewise the two would stay with Galena's cousins or friends. Galena and Titi were inseparable and shared whatever they had. Galena explained how she and Titi help one another, "We're all just gonna pitch in on stuff. Anything that needs, we're gonna do." They looked out for one another and shared money when they earned it. They defended one another and supported each other. In many ways, Galena and Titi were sisters, even though they were not biological family. They had met at a group home where Titi lived between the ages of 13 and 16 and remained in contact since then.

For most of Titi's life, her mother and father were not around. Her father died in 2010 at the age of 103. However, recently her mother reentered her life. Titi's mother used to be addicted to crack and just recently was released from three years in prison for armed robbery, kidnapping, and drug charges. Titi explained, "I'm proud of her... [My mother] asks me, like, am I mad at her or like do I hate her for what she did to us." When talking about her mother, Titi was quick to defend her mother, "But I don't hate her for anything, 'cause everything that happened to me makes me the person that I am today, you know. So everything she did, like, she was sick, so I can't blame her for anything. I can blame her, but I can't just be like, 'Oh, I just hate you so much because of this and because of that.'" Titi continued,

Who knows...why she started thing this or why she started doing that. That's why like, like, like, if she ever needs anything – like whenever I got my check the other, the other, day from the school, I gave her my whole check. But just because – I don't know why I really gave her my check, but [laughs] I just gave it to her...But it was only like twenty-five dollars, you know... Sometimes I be feeling sorry for her sometimes. But I don't wanna, I don't wanna make myself feel sorry. I don't know why I gave her my check, but I just gave it to her.

Titi explained if her mother runs out of cigarettes, then she is “real on edge” so Titi buys her cigarettes frequently. She told her mother, “As long as you're not smoking crack, I'll buy you 80 packs of cigarettes if you want.”

I asked if Titi's mother supported her. Titi told me that her mother just purchased her a weekly bus pass and lets her stay at her apartment. Her mother does not stay at the apartment much because she typically stays at her boyfriend's house. Titi seemed sad when she told me, “It feels like I'm there by myself all the time. She's never there at all,” but then brightly added on, “But she's doing very well now.” She seemed anxious to defend her mother.

When I first met Titi, another one of her supports was her boyfriend, who she assured me was “a good man.” She explained, “If I call him and be like, ‘Well, I need my hair done,’ or, ‘My phone bill needs paid,’ or, ‘I need twenty dollars,’ or, ‘I need fifty dollars,’ he would just, he would just give it to me, like. Even if he didn't have money, it wouldn't even be about the money, but it's good to have somebody there that wants to be with you to support you.” She explained that he was different from a boyfriend who encouraged skipping school or who simply wanted to have fun even if it is not what was best for her or what she wanted. Her boyfriend supported her getting her GED. She offered an example,

Like yesterday, I was late for school. He called me like thirty-five thousand times. ‘Did you make it to school? Did you make it to school?’ I was like, ‘Yeah, I'm at school now. I made it.’...He was like, ‘I just really wanted to make sure you went to school.’ He was like, ‘You need a ride to school?’ I was like, ‘No. It's only across the bridge. [laughs] I can walk.’ He's like, ‘I just don't want you to be walking alone.’ And he talks to me the whole way.

Throughout sharing her story, Titi laughed, showing her pleasure and amusement in his attentiveness. The relationship with her boyfriend was not without problems, as there was tension with his “baby momma,” who called incessantly and harassed Titi. As good as the relationship was, it did not last; when I talked with Titi several months later they were no longer together.

Many of the relationships Titi has had throughout her life were transient or short-term. Her frequent moves among placements and lack of stability and permanency were not conducive to lifelong relationships. She did not maintain any relationships with foster parents or caseworkers with one exception. The first caseworker she had when she was four years old worked with her and her siblings for years, and even after she was no longer assigned to the case would occasionally call to check on Titi. Titi’s relationships with other service providers were sometimes stressed. On more than one occasion, she was asked to leave weWork’s premises for the day because she was yelling obscenities and threatening staff. Fortunately for Titi, weWork staff do not give up on youth and despite Titi’s behaviors, they continued to work with her. In many ways the weWork staff were probably the most consistent, stable, and helpful supports Titi had in her life.

5.6 SOCIAL CAPITAL

Titi’s social support system was fairly typical of the youth I met. Often, family members were both positive and negative influences on the youth. Romantic partners were often in the picture, as were an assortment of friends or “associates,” as some youth referred to their acquaintances. A

service provider or caring adult was occasionally involved in youths' lives, as was the caseworker who knew Titi when she first entered into care. However, Titi's exceptionally close relationship with Galena was somewhat unique; many youth do not have a person like Galena in their lives.

Maggie's support system, which is also fairly typical of the youth I met, can be summed up in a couple of sentences. All of her biological family lives out of state and rarely have contact with her. Her aunt who lives in California sometimes invited her to visit, but the promised ticket and money never materialized. Maggie sometimes had a boyfriend. Typically her boyfriends were older than she and did not date her exclusively. Frequently a boyfriend stayed at her apartment for free for a couple weeks until there was an explosive argument and he leaves. Within days or a couple of weeks, she usually had a new boyfriend who she met online. I sometimes felt uncomfortable around Maggie's boyfriends who seemed to be exploiting her. Maggie had a few close friends, but often they fight and go for weeks or months without talking. One friend shared a cell phone plan with her, but sometimes Maggie did not pay him money, and other times he did not pay the bill. The arrangement was fraught with tension. Maggie's involvement in multiple programs translated to having a handful of service providers who are available to her. The service providers, each from different programs, often gave Maggie conflicting information and often the program requirements did not align.

While Titi and Maggie have many contacts listed in their cell phones, there is not a guarantee that the numbers are going to be turned on or that any person is able to assist them if they need help. Their social networks do not have resources to help them in times of crisis. Additionally, people within their social networks contribute to their struggles. Titi's mother expected her daughter to give her money. Maggie's boyfriends stayed at her subsidized

apartment that has rules that prohibit others moving in with her. The support that Titi's boyfriend offered about school was positive; however, the relationship ended quickly and poorly.

Examining a specific incidence like Maggie's short-lived internship can highlight several points about social capital. First, it highlights how social connections can lead to a job. Maggie received the internship because a case manager connected her with another program. I am completely confident that Maggie would not have learned about the program on her own. Additionally, without the case manager driving her to the first interview, I am positive that Maggie would not have gone. Second, this story is a condensed and intensified example of the struggles youth face in keeping a job. Obtaining a job cannot be the entire focus of providing services, as maintaining a job—or in Maggie's case an internship—may require additional support. More social support may have changed the outcome for Maggie. I do not know for sure that if Maggie had shown up consistently she would have been successful. However, when an employee does not show up on time, a job is jeopardized. A lack of support contributed to Maggie not showing up for her internship.

Miss Brianna, a program administrator, talked with me about how youth aging out make decisions at the workplaces that they probably would not make if they could talk to someone like a case manager about what they were thinking. Miss Brianna said she wished that youth would be able to take their cell phone into the bathroom and call her or someone, share what happened, and have that person help problem solve. She was conflicted because she did not want youth to have their cell phones at work, but over the many years she had worked with youth, she knew many youth who walked off the job when a supervisor said something that was interpreted as being disrespectful, when in reality it could have been the supervisor having a bad day or giving feedback about poor work performance. Miss Brianna said that youth did not understand the

workplace, and they lacked people in their lives to help them figure out it. I constantly witnessed this lack of both cultural and social capital.

5.7 BRYAN'S STORY

On his left forearm, Bryan's first name is tattooed vertically. On his right forearm, his last name is similarly tattooed, and if he is wearing short sleeves when he sits with his elbows on the table and rests his chin on his hands, his name can be easily read. He admitted he was slightly embarrassed by the tattoos, but made no effort to cover them. Bryan was the only youth in my study who had a college degree from a four-year accredited university. When I met him, he had recently received his Bachelor of Arts in the humanities, was unemployed, and living in his grandmother's home. He was attending weWork's mandatory training and hoping to find a job.

The bleak economic climate Bryan faced post-graduation forces many college graduates to return to their parents and accept jobs for which they are overqualified. Fortunately, Bryan's grandmother allowed him to move into her home. Without her, he would not have had a place to live. While Bryan's grandmother served as a social support and resource to get into college, she was helping him navigate a system with which she had no experience. Bryan was the first person in his family to graduate from college. He prided himself on being a role model for his siblings and others in care. He explained his philosophy on what can be done to help children and youth in the child welfare system: "Making sure that they do have a better education because without education, you won't prosper in life, like. With education, you can still have the chance of becoming something no matter what you been through." Bryan quickly pointed out that education is sometimes impacted by what youth are experiencing:

If your emotional and psychological issues aren't worked out for school, then you're gonna come there and do nothing but distract others and express your feelings of anger and sadness towards them. That's what's gonna cause problems, and they're not gonna have to time to learn or anything.

Bryan spoke from personal experience. When he was younger, he misbehaved in schools and blamed his behaviors on his not knowing how to deal with being in the child welfare system. Bryan stressed that placing youth in school without other support does not set a youth up for success.

During Bryan's college career he worked occasionally for the school's sporting events or telemarketing fundraising. However, the money he made along with his stipend did not support his eating McDonald's and shoe-buying habits, he sheepishly admitted. He was approached by someone to sell marijuana to other students. Reflecting on his decision to sell drugs, he was conflicted about becoming the stereotypical African American urban male at a predominantly white liberal arts school in a rural community. However, he sold marijuana to make ends meet. In college Bryan felt that selling drugs was the only real way that he could make money, and he incorporated it into his studying schedule. Students would text him and he would meet them during study breaks or at parties. Considering his limited options, his decision seems logical. Bryan promptly stopped selling drugs when he returned to his grandmother's home, feeling the risks were too great to sell in the city.

Nine months after graduation, a grocery store hired Bryan to work the night shift stocking shelves. He reflected on his \$7.75 an hour job and said,

Seriously, I still need to mature more, because...I was still 21 when I graduated. I just turned 22. And I needed to slow down and figure out what I want more than just picking any old job, so that's what I was doing. In the meantime, I'm gonna just make a little money on the side while I think and feel what I see what I'm gonna do.

Bryan cited his maturity, but throughout our conversation, it was abundantly clear that he simply did not feel prepared for a career. This is the reality for many college graduates. Using the emerging adulthood perspective, which I previously discussed, the desire to explore options and take time to figure out the next steps is developmentally appropriate. Bryan was lucky that his grandmother was supportive, and he did not have to support himself on \$7.75 an hour. Many other youth aging out do not have similar support and may be more ill-prepared than Bryan. However, one thing that Bryan has that other youth do not is approximately \$22,500 in student loans. His current pay was not enough to pay his student loans and other bills in spite of his living rent-free at his grandmother's home.

5.8 ECONOMIC CAPITAL

The evidence of limited economic capital was not just that Maggie needed mixing bowls, a working can opener, cleaning supplies, furniture, and money. Giving her these household items would not instantly solve the problem. The poverty in which Maggie lived was a hardship and contributed to her struggles. Maggie's oversleeping the second day of her internship was due in part to exhaustion. Part of the exhaustion was related to her waking up early because of her long commute. Having a service job where she had to be on her feet for most of the day as an intern also exhausted her. Some of Maggie's exhaustion was also probably due to her being morbidly obese and easily tired because of her weight and typical inactivity. Undoubtedly, weight and her lack of energy are functions of Maggie's life in poverty. Food stamps pay for her entire food budget. She chose cheaper processed pre-prepared food over more expensive fresh food in part because of the cost and the preparation time, but also because she lacked the skills to prepare the

food and did not have easy transportation to a grocery store. To get to the grocery store required \$6 for bus fare and a several block walk unless she could find someone to drive her, which she rarely could. The realities of living in poverty contributed to her exhaustion. The inconveniences and additional costs wore on Maggie.

Limited economic capital was also evident in youths' limited knowledge about managing a household. I can use any one of the youth aging out I knew to discuss the limited economic capital youth aging out face. As was illustrated with Jaden who overdrew her account, Titi who initially thought work was not necessary, and Maggie who frequently had her phone turned off, youth aging out lack the skills to manage their limited assets. The challenges of making the limited money they have meet all their needs are incredibly great. The problem is not only that they cannot manage; it is also that they do not have enough assets to manage. Bryan felt compelled to sell drugs to make ends meet. It is well-documented in the literature that youth age out with limited resources and money management skills and earn below poverty level wages (Courtney et al., 2001; Dworsky & Courtney, 2000; Goerge et al., 2002).

Youth talked about wanting to save, and some did. Jaden saved her entire refund check from her student loans until she spent it to get a certificate in bartending. Other youth had savings accounts, or would save money in various ways such as in some hiding place or giving it to a trusted person. Some youth tried to save a portion of each paycheck. Often times the saving efforts did not work out. One youth was forced to save a portion of her paycheck when she was in a shelter. When she left the shelter to move into an ASOMO apartment, her refrigerator was broken. She spent several hundred dollars over a couple of weeks eating fast food and at restaurants because she could not keep food in her refrigerator. Several times I heard how youth

gave money to family members to hold, but instead of saving it for the youth, the family members spent it.

Youth had limited assets. In the course of my fieldwork, I knew only one youth who had a car. He had purchased it from a car dealership which financed loans with interest rates more than double what banks would offer. After he missed one payment, his car was repossessed. His credit score had prohibited him from obtaining a car loan through traditional means, and he had been vulnerable to the predatory practices of a disreputable car dealership. Many youth I knew fell into similar problems with rent-to-own businesses who charged high fees to rent furniture and electronics. By the end of the scheduled payments, youth could have paid more than three times what the item was worth, and missing one payment meant the item would be repossessed. Youth were unaware of the cost and risks of using rent-to-own.

The lack of knowledge about many things pertaining to finances can be traced to youths' upbringing both in and out of care. However, part of the lack of knowledge and skills simply are related to the age and inexperience of youth. The age-mates of youth aging out who have been raised by their parents probably are similar to youth aging out. The difference is their parents are assisting them. Maggie does not have family helping her. Titi's mother was actually working against her. Bryan's elderly grandmother wants to help, but there are limitations due to her assets and knowledge. Parents and family could have helped. The youth who purchased a car at a disreputable dealership could have been steered elsewhere by parents and perhaps they would have cosigned so he could have gotten a better loan. The youth who were using rent-to-own to furnish their apartments could have been given old furniture from their families. By not having parents and family assist them, the economic capital of youth aging out is reduced.

5.9 HUMAN CAPITAL

While many of the youth prioritize their greatest need as a job, education is often part of their plan. Bryan's story raises concerns about seeing a college education as "the answer" for youth aging out. Youth may not be prepared to pursue post-secondary education. Bryan's first semester was difficult as he adjusted to the workload and the college environment. Other youth lacked the academic skills and were unable to keep up with the classes. Also, a college education does not guarantee a decent job. This is not just a reflection on higher education, but rather a commentary on economic realities. That fact that Bryan graduated from college and was not able to find a decent paying job concerns me. It seems like there may have been a system failure or at least a breakdown somewhere in his higher education experience. Throughout his time at college, he received a stipend from DHS to support him while in college. When he graduated, he moved in with his grandmother because he had not found a job.

Getting a job was central to most of the youth I met. However, youth do not just need a job, they need a decent job. An entry-level minimum wage job alone cannot ensure a youth's smooth transition out of the child welfare system. Jaden had these jobs, and her struggles did not disappear. Titi held a job briefly and her life did not change during her employment. Bryan received a college education, but it took nine months to get a job paying only slightly above minimum wage. An education and a job did not suddenly stop his struggles. The needs of youth aging out are great, and more than a job is needed to address them. A job meant more than a paycheck. In many ways it represented a chance to feel secure. Having a job meant an opportunity to feel more stable. With a job, youth were able to find a more permanent place to stay. With an income, even if they were not able to get their own apartment, they might be able to pay to stay with family or friends and be less likely to be kicked out. A job could provide

some power and protection for the youth. Getting a job is also a tangible accomplishment and marker of adulthood.

At one weWork training, Ms. Sophie and Mr. Wayne facilitated an activity about the difference between a job and a career. One of the youth quipped that a job stood for “just over broke.” The comment was mentioned at future trainings and captured the realities of those working at minimum wage jobs. Youth quickly rotated through these jobs that left them just over broke. Sometimes youth lasted only a few days or weeks at a job. Titi was employed for only a couple of months before being fired for not following protocol. More frequently I heard of youth being fired for poor customer service or problems with their coworkers and supervisors. Most of this can be tied to youths’ limited cultural capital.

Ta’Quayla was fired from a cashiers’ position at a grocery store after an elderly woman complained about how Ta’Quayla treated her. Ta’Quayla was still in the probationary period of the job, when the customer had come through her line and Ta’Quayla disagreed with her. Ta’Quayla remained adamant that she did not do anything wrong and the customer was to blame. It was clear not only with Ta’Quayla, but also with other youth that the concept of “the customer is always right” was not something they embraced. Being treated rudely by customers and being expected to respond with politeness seemed to upset youth. It is understandable that Ta’Quayla was not used to customers being treated with respect. As customers, she, as an African American youth, and her friends undoubtedly face racism and ageism and are not always treated with the same respect that she is expected to give. Ta’Quayla experiences have not taught her proper workplace etiquette. The signs in the fast food restaurants saying “No loitering please. Time limit: 30 minutes while consuming food” were directed at her. She did not expect managers to treat her kindly as a customer.

Youths' human capital not only impacts their present circumstances, but also has long-term consequences as well. As previously discussed, using a life course perspective highlights how a youth's life trajectory is a function of past and historical events. Having limited capital in terms of employment history or education decreases the employment opportunities in the future. The fact that these youth are trying to get jobs during a recession makes it even more difficult. Youth are aware that having more education can open more possibilities. Although they were working, both Titi and Maggie mentioned wanting to pursue more education. Both felt college was necessary. Titi made progress in pursuing her GED. Maggie, a high school graduate, had started an accredited cosmetology school, but did not finish; she subsequently owed the program money. However, as is evident with Bryan, who has a college degree, education alone cannot solve all of the problems youth aging out face.

5.10 SUMMARY

In the introduction section, I presented Mr. Wayne's analogy to explain how in his decades of experience of working with youth employment that youth aging out fare worse than other youth. He told me, "I feel like it's a race. And the foster care population has been set back a couple yards...And it's like, "Go!" Who's gonna make it across the finish line first? And I feel that the foster care youth has already been set back even before the race begins, if that makes any sense." His analogy makes sense considering a capital development perspective. In each type of capital—human, economic, social, and cultural—youth aging out start behind their age-mates and are disadvantaged.

Starting from being born into poverty Jaden, Titi, Maggie, Bryan, and many of the other youth aging out were at a disadvantage. The abuse and neglect from their parents undoubtedly impacted their well-being. Entering the system and having multiple placements and changes in schools disadvantaged youth further. What seems almost invisible is that throughout all of this youths' capital development suffered. Slipping behind in education, as Titi did by falling behind amidst changes in school, human capital development is slowed. The lack of permanent relationships and disruption of familial relationships by being removed from placement weakens youths' social networks, their social capital. The group home environments that both Titi and Maggie experienced did not expose them to social norms that would assist them in the workplace. Those in foster care homes often did not fare any better. Jaden's placements were often in homes where the parents did not work. The cumulative effects of poverty and being in care compounded youths' struggles.

Bryan's story provides an excellent example of how types of capital are interrelated and simply focusing on developing one type of capital without addressing all types does not necessarily translate to success for youth. Having social capital, in his case a supportive grandmother, increased the likelihood of building human capital, in terms of going to college. Additionally his experiences illustrate that developing human capital may be less effective unless other forms of capital are also addressed. Not having enough money while in college placed Bryan in a situation where he felt he had to sell drugs if he was going to remain in school. Getting to college without the necessary support during and after can leave youth alone and saddled with students loans. Developing all types of capital and viewing youth holistically may increase their chance of success. Bryan graduated from college, but a year later was working the

nightshift earning \$7.50 stocking shelves. Employment and education do not solve all of the problems of youth aging out. Bryan continued to struggle.

Service providers like Mr. Wayne who are helping youth aging out may not be able to make it a fair race, to use Mr. Wayne's analogy; however, without their support the youth would be more disadvantaged. In the next chapter, I explore this in more detail and argue that to fully improve the lives of youth as they age out, a more holistic model that addresses all types of capital should be adopted. I also examine how through increasing social, cultural, and economic capital, youth aging out may experience more success getting and keeping jobs, thus increasing their human capital.

**6.0 “I NEED SOMEONE TO HELP ... I DON’T KNOW ALL THIS STUFF.”:
SERVICES FOR YOUTH AGING OUT**

“You’re still fresh into the world, and you still need guidance in some way,” 17-year-old Plato concluded as he reflected about the importance of receiving services and staying involved with DHS. He had been telling me, “Some people already got themselves set up to where they’ll be fine...when they turn 18. But I know the majority [of youth] would be better staying with DHS ’cause despite whether you have a job, despite whether you’re already in school, and you’re maintaining on your own, you’re still a new adult.” He continued that the little things that agencies provided, such as food at meetings and the occasional bus pass, made a big difference. Plato’s endorsement of services surprised me since I knew he had run away several times when he was in the system, and lived on his own at a very young age before coming back into care a couple years ago against his will. He had not had a positive experience in the system, yet was promoting services and staying involved with the system.

Services are needed for youth aging out because they are vulnerable, and the hardships faced while transitioning out of care and into adulthood can have lasting impacts on their lives. The futures of Jaden, Titi, Maggie, and other youth I met through the course of my study were shaped by things that happened during the time they were aging out, such as Jaden being put on academic probation, Titi reconnecting with her mother who got out of prison, and Maggie losing an internship. The struggles they faced cost them as well as society. As previously discussed,

cost benefit analyses have shown that extending care to youth aging out past age 18 is a sound investment with a large return. Providing services and assisting with the transition, as well as adequately preparing youth prior to their leaving care are important. Any one of the youth whom I knew through my study insisted that having services helped their transition.

Interventions designed to assist with a smooth transition with youth aging out are of utmost importance because they have the potential to assist youth access life trajectories with more opportunities. For example, programs that assist youth aging out with completing their education, building skills that increase their employability, and finding safe and affordable housing can radically alter youths' lives. Staying in school, getting a job, and not living on the streets not only are beneficial in the short-term, but also have positive long- term consequences.

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I observed how services were provided to youth aging out and identified both the strengths and weaknesses of the programs and policies. Keystone County's history of providing services to youth aging out is less than a decade old. During my time in the field, I witnessed how policies and programs expanded. Providing services to youth aging out is challenging, and I witnessed some of the problems service providers encountered. To understand the challenges, I examine service providers' framing of the issues of youth aging out and revisit the capital development perspective. Throughout all of my critiques of services, I remain confident that services are absolutely necessary and beneficial to youth aging out. Throughout my work, I heard inspiring stories of service providers who tirelessly worked to make a difference in the lives of youth aging out.

6.1 HISTORY OF KEYSTONE COUNTY SERVICES

In the United States, turning 18 does not signify the end of a child's relationship with her or his parents. However, in the child welfare system of Keystone County, like other counties, youth leave the system at age 18, unless they sign an affidavit to remain in care. The default is leaving; at 18, youth are alone. To stay in care requires paperwork and a meeting. While most youth made the decision to not sign the paper and to leave care, some youth either did not know about the option of completing the form and staying in care or failed to fill out the paperwork and go through the process. Regardless of the reason why, the youth who did not complete paperwork were out of the child welfare system, and once they were out, they were not able to re-enter. Until the last few years, Keystone County did not encourage youth to remain in the system past age 18. Since the policy change, more youth remain in care after their 18th birthday.

In 2006, Keystone County DHS started working to help youth aging out obtain post-secondary education. Two caseworkers were assigned the task of working with the transition aged youth to prepare them to get to college. This aligned with the federal legislation that emphasizes education and employment. In the first year, the caseworkers helped 30 youth get into college. After the youth started college, they kept calling the caseworkers for questions and problems that parents typically answer and help solve. As the caseworkers learned about the needs of the youth in post-secondary education and started documenting successes, the county invested in services for youth aging out. The program expanded beyond the two caseworkers and eventually, DHS created an entire program for youth aging out. Currently, there are over 130 youth enrolled in post-secondary education programs helped by the initiative.

The caseworkers' efforts alone did not cause all of the changes. The county was sued by a former foster youth who argued that the county neglected its responsibility to adequately care

for her as she aged out of the child welfare system. The result of this lawsuit created a reconciliation process which made it possible for youth to leave CYF and become involved with DHS, which would provide a daily stipend and other resources to support them as they were pursuing post-secondary education. Youth frequently cited the stipend and support as incentives to remain involved with the system, although they often slightly resented the rules and requirements.

In 2008, The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act was passed by the federal government. One of the key components of this legislation was expanding the conditions for youth to remain in care. This legislation passed after research had demonstrated the benefits of youth remaining in care after age 18. While the legislation was not adopted by the state until July 2012, Keystone County DHS continued to fund independent living programs and services for youth aging out, including some that focused entirely on employment and education.

In Keystone County, as well as other parts of the country, despite cutbacks across the social service sector, funding remains available for youth aging out. The lack of cutbacks with this population is logical because if youth aging out do not transition smoothly out of care and to adulthood, they are likely to be more costly to society in other ways. It is cost effective to provide services to youth aging out. In Keystone County, services for youth aging out are expanding. Since my fieldwork concluded, the Fostering Connections Act was passed in the state and now youth are permitted to reenter care.

The evolution of Keystone County's dedication and services to youth aging out over the last decade is significant. They have moved from a county that was actively promoting youth leaving the system on or prior to their 18th birthday, to a county that is a model within the state and across the country. The Keystone County leaders hope their extensive network of services,

variety of programs available, innovative initiatives, and ongoing evaluations of their efforts will position them as a leader in serving youth aging out.

6.2 SERVICES PROVIDED

YouthFirst and four other independent living (IL) programs are run by “private providers,” local non-profits who have a contract with DHS. These programs along with an additional program offered through DHS create the core of services for youth aging out in Keystone County. Youth who have been in the child welfare system for 30 days after their 16th birthday are assigned to one of these six programs. Within each program, youth are assigned a case manager to assist with a range of needs depending on the youth. Additionally, most IL programs hold regular meetings for teaching life skills, providing fun activities, and offering social gatherings. The life skills workshops cover a wide variety of topics such as budgeting, resume writing, communication skills, self-esteem, nutrition, and energy conservation. Sometimes outside speakers attend the meetings and give lectures. Once a month, DHS holds a meeting for all IL youth served by the different programs.

In addition to having a case manager through an IL program, youth are assigned an Educational Liaison. Contracted through the county to work with youth aging out to finish high school and continue in post-secondary education, Educational Liaisons assist youth with transitioning schools due to placement changes, applying to post-secondary education programs and applying for financial aid. They can refer youth to tutoring programs and GED programs that assist youth who have not completed high school. For those youth who attend college, Educational Liaisons continue to assist with issues as they arise, such as finding housing during

winter break when dorms are closed for students living on campus, helping with scholarship applications, and giving general support to college students.

Youth aging out also have an attorney through the Children and Youth Advocacy Center, since all children and youth in Keystone County are appointed an attorney as a guardian *ad litem* to advocate for their best interests. The Children and Youth Advocacy Center has attorneys and social workers who assist youth with the aging out process, and provide information to youth about their rights in care and as they age out. The Children and Youth Advocacy Center was instrumental in the lawsuit brought against the county which changed policies to better meet the needs of youth aging out.

The IL services and Educational Liaisons are automatically available to youth until the age of 18. As previously explained, at age 18 youth decide if they want to stay in care. Until age 18, youth are under CYF custody and among other things, are provided housing, stipends for clothing, and other resources as needed, such as bus passes. At age 18, youth have three options: they may sign an affidavit and continue to stay in CYF custody and receive everything they were receiving, they may leave care completely, or they may transfer their case to DHS if they meet certain criteria such as being in school. Regardless of the decision youth make, IL services are available to youth until age 21 through private providers and until age 24 from DHS.

Youth who chose to remain in CYF after age 18 do not experience any changes; however, those who transfer to DHS no longer receive all of the resources, such as clothing allotments and housing. They are not typically allowed to remain in group homes, although some supervised living facilities may be available to them. If youth were staying with foster families who receive payments for housing them, often they cannot remain there. Youth who had transferred to DHS

and who are pursuing post-secondary education can have a conciliation meeting to receive a daily stipend and financial assistance to offset the costs of their education.

For youth who leave the child welfare system, many resources are still available; however, there is no one caseworker designated to oversee a youth and coordinate services. If a youth starts faltering, there is no one there to ensure that little problems do not grow into larger ones. When a youth leaves care, a loose safety net remains, but that of the child welfare system largely disappears. There are larger holes in the safety net, and the situations that youth may encounter can deteriorate quickly into crises. Services are provided to youth who have left care after youth initiate contact.

In addition to the IL programs, several agencies provide programs targeting specific needs of youth aging out. Most of these programs specifically target youth ages 18 to 24 who have left care. ASOMO provides subsidized apartments for two years to youth who have left CYF who are working and pursuing an educational goal. weWork focuses on employment and education through trainings and individualized assistance for job searches. Both ASOMO and weWork have case managers and social workers that assist youth with problems they face as well as reducing the barriers to employment and educations. There are several other services in Keystone County for youth aging out, including a drop-in center that serves youth from age 16 to 24 where they can get a meal, take GED classes, and get paid \$3 per hour to attend trainings on different topics; a program that helps college-bound youth aging out prepare for school and gives them laptop computers; and a homeless shelter. In addition to the programs that require youth to have aged out of the child welfare system, there are extensive services available more broadly throughout Keystone County through government programs as well as non-profit agencies.

6.3 CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE PROBLEM

The way that the agencies provide services offers insights to how they conceptualize the problem and solutions. The emphasis on employment and education for youth highlights that the problem is conceptualized as an individual level issue that can be overcome by youth working hard at getting an education and getting a job. Using a capital development perspective, we can see service providers' focus is on building the human capital of youth. By helping youth improve their individual skills, service providers believe youth will be prepared for life on their own.

The emphasis on employment and education does not originate within Keystone County, nor is it unique to the county. Examining federal legislation, it is possible to trace the priority placed on human capital development back through the earliest legislation. While the Fostering Connections Act of 2008 promotes relationships and social connections, elements of social capital, legislation on youth aging out continues to focus on education and employment, as is evident in the educational and employment requirements to stay in care after age 18, as well as in the scholarships available for post-secondary education.

The focus on employment and education for youth aging out is understandable considering the greater societal context. One of the hallmarks of adulthood is employment. Income from a job allows a person to care for herself and perhaps her family and no longer be dependent like a child. Since it is widely acknowledged that currently better paying jobs are available to those with more education, encouraging post-secondary education for youth aging out is logical. With more education, more job opportunities are available, and youth aging out theoretically can better support themselves. They can be independent.

Independence has long been the goal of policies and programs for youth aging out. However, scholars are increasingly critiquing this goal and suggesting that a goal of

interdependency is more appropriate (for examples see Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Propp et al., 2003). Today, people are increasingly interconnected and reliant upon one another, and no one person is independent. The notion of interdependency was not one that I frequently observed service providers prioritizing. Self-sufficiency and independence were explicit principles for many of the programs.

Funders also held independence and self-sufficiency as ideals, and often wanted measureable outcomes related to employment and education. Even the funding for ASOMO, which provided apartments, focused upon youth who were employed and pursuing education. Developing human capital is prioritized by funders. Service providers occasionally mentioned that they wanted a broader focus but were restricted by grant guidelines.

The extent to which employment is emphasized in the programs for youth aging out in Keystone County indicates that getting a job is seen as the solution to the problems of youth aging out. However, this formula does not capture the experiences of the youth aging out I observed. Every youth I met continued to struggle after getting a job. Employment was not a panacea. Getting a better job may provide more stability and reduce the struggles; however, youth aging out are not prepared for these jobs. Post-secondary education does not necessarily solve all the problems, as was evident with Bryan who, like many college graduates during the recession, could not find a job. Employment may be an integral part of ensuring the success of youth aging out; however, the issues faced by youth aging out are complex without an easy answer.

6.4 EXTENDING BEYOND HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

Although employment and education—human capital development—were the explicit goals for programs serving youth aging out, other types of capital development were incorporated as tools to improve the likelihood of success in employment and education. Developing youths' economic, social, and cultural capital was done within the context of helping youth obtain and maintain employment and continue their education.

Problems with money were common for many youth aging out. Service providers talked about the need to build youths' life skills for budgeting and money management. This was largely done through workshops, although some of the residential programs required employed youth to save a portion of their paychecks. weWork offered a two-day supplemental training on financial literacy. The trainer covered topics including budgeting, credit, scams, predatory lending, basic banking, and insurance using easy to read worksheets and a flipchart. She engaged youth and shared resources for them on handouts. However, at the end of the day, the handouts were typically left behind or found in the trashcan. Often the blanks on the worksheets that youth were supposed to have filled in remained empty. Some of the information seemed to be helpful to the youth. One youth said that previous to the training he had not known that not paying his cell phone bill was hurting his credit. Another youth learned in the training that credit cards are not like gift cards, and if she would get one she would have to pay for all of her purchases as well as interest. The knowledge that youth had about finances was generally quite limited. The emphasis on economic capital is more at a surface level rather than an attempt to help youth build and learn how to manage financial assets.

Developing social networks or building social capital was not explicitly prioritized by service providers. There were exceptions, although they were not ongoing meaningful efforts.

YouthFirst had a workshop on healthy relationships and communication, but a majority of it was a superficial discussion of youth self-esteem and respect for their bodies. The occasional mentoring programs were often at a level which did not build the depth of a relationship where youth would be able to call upon the person for assistance. Some of the social events for youth definitely assist the youth in connecting with their peers, but while this builds some social capital, the relationships were not with others who were necessarily in a position to help them. Titi and Galena met in a placement together and their friendship continued after care. They supported one another, but with the exception of sharing a friend's couch to sleep on, a pack of cigarettes, a few dollars, or a job posting, neither one of them was in a position to help the other get ahead or in a crisis. The social networks youth formed with other youth in care may provide support, but also could come at a cost. Building youths' social capital with the potential to assist in getting ahead was not emphasized in programs.

Likewise, helping youth aging out understand and practice societal social norms was not a focus of the programs. Rarely was cultural capital emphasized by service providers. Some exceptions occurred, though; however, efforts were not completely integrated throughout the program. Miss Sophia, a career counselor at weWork, clearly attempted to teach social norms. Youth seemed genuinely surprised when Miss Sophia shared that she had raised her two children on her own in a tough neighborhood and did not go to college until she was in her 40s. To the youth, Miss Sophia, always dressed professionally, typically in a suit or a blazer over a blouse, did not look like she knew poverty or hardships. Miss Sophia openly admitted to the youth that filling out forms for her children's financial aid application for college was confusing to her. She talked about how she had worked hard and made mistakes and talked about her background working for a corporation before a career change precipitated by being fired.

Miss Sophia admitted she brought her auditor background into the job readiness trainings at weWork. She added more structure to the training through the incorporation of daily agendas and lists of tasks for youth to do during the time youth were to search and apply for jobs online. Miss Sophia stressed the need for youth to be on time and to return punctually after break. Youth resisted this, and often disregarded the reminders to come back on time and even did not come inside when staff went outside to tell them the training was starting. When youth arrived late and blamed a missed bus or the bus running late, Miss Sophia shared her own personal experience about her commute to weWork. She takes a bus that often is so crowded by the time it gets to her stop that it sometimes passes her up. She told youth she takes the frequent problems with buses into account and leaves much earlier than would be necessary if she always caught the first bus.

Miss Sophia and the weWork staff attempted to integrate appropriate workplace behaviors into the training by having youth sign a contract agreeing to specific rules that are basic to the workplace. The contract allowed weWork not only an opportunity to talk about expectations, but also the grounds to ask youth to leave the training if they do not abide by the contract. However, many times youths' disregarding of the rules went unaddressed. It was understandable that each behavior could not be corrected. While staff were working with youth on their résumés and applications, addressing another youth who was swearing on his phone which he had been told explicitly not to use in the training room would take time away from the youth who were trying to get a job. Staff often expressed feeling conflicted about ignoring those who were not conforming to workplace expectations.

All service providers were acutely aware that youth aging out struggled and that services were not meeting all of the youths' needs. Sometimes service providers blamed the youth for not working hard enough or for making bad decisions. One service provider exasperatedly shared

how some of the youth expect things to be done for them, “Like they’re entitled to [help].... So they think that they can go on business as usual, like they’ve done from age 12.” Her frustration was with youth who were not paying their portion of the subsidized rent and not attending required programs, and therefore they were in danger of being kicked out of the program. Frequently service providers complained when youth did not show up for job interviews, failed required drug tests for work, dropped out of school, or quit a job with no explanation.

The root of frustration and blaming youth seemed to be service providers not understanding the context in which youth lived. Failing to take into account poverty and the great recession, a person could easily blame youth entirely. Service providers sometimes ignored the youths’ past or focused entirely on the trauma of being removed from family or on the abuse and neglect they experienced prior to entering care. Even the service providers who contextualized youths’ experiences and saw how the needs of youth aging out were integrated struggled to see how to serve youth aging out. This is understandable. The problems youth aging out face are complicated without a simple solution.

The thoughts Miss Rina shared with me during an interview about what youth aging out need reflect the complexity of needs and the challenges of providing services:

It’s easy to say, “I think that they need a job,” and I think it’s easy to, like, send them to this place or have them fill out an application, but I think especially with this population, they lack such basic social skills and how to interact with people on an appropriate and professional level. So it makes it more complicated, and I don’t know. I don’t know. Maybe sometimes we focus too much on those hard, like, “To get a job, this is how you do a resume. This is how you fill out an application.” And we’re not spending enough time on social skills. Although, I don’t think it’s that easy, because, again, as a social worker and spending a lot of time learning about trauma and abuse and neglect, and even its impact on brain function, we have to start at the beginning sometimes with these kids. So it’s easier said than done, like, “Oh, we can have social skills groups and teach them all of these things,” but I don’t know that it’s such an easy solution. And they don’t have great role models, or they’re not in an environment where good social skills really always being modeled for them, you know?

Throughout the interview, Miss Rina stressed that she knew that youth needed jobs and weWork and other programs prioritized employment. However, she recognized there were other needs besides employment that were sometimes neglected. Miss Rina shared stories about specific youth who struggled, and talked about her work with them as a social worker at weWork. Marcus was one of the youth she tried to help as he moved into his own unfurnished apartment and struggled to provide for his family and himself.

6.5 MARCUS' STORY

Twenty-two-year-old Marcus articulated that being in placement in the child welfare system “crippled” him and did not help him “grow as a person.” When he aged out he felt “it’s over,” and no longer in care, without any support, he felt lost. Marcus’ main complaint was that he was “sheltered” and he did not really know how things worked because he had not been prepared. Service providers warned him that it would be challenging on his own, but Marcus maintained that no one really prepared him. He lacked concrete information and experience about what life on his own would be like. Marcus said he thought that people would still help him when he aged out. Life was harder than he expected. He commented, “I still haven’t recovered from the blow of bein’ in placement.” Some of what Marcus found hard was caring for a newborn son as well as providing for the baby’s mom. Marcus struggled making it on his own.

When he was 14, Marcus entered care because his parents abused him. One of the positive things in care was that he was able to focus on his grades and do well in school. However, housed at a congregate care facility he went to the program’s non-accredited “shelter

school” where all the students were taught in a single classroom by one teacher. Although he received “straight A’s,” when he left the program and tried to transfer into a public school, his records were lost and the credits did not transfer. As a 19-year-old, he found himself being placed in 9th grade, the grade he had started at the placement school. This was unacceptable to him, and he dropped out of school. At age 22, Marcus did not have a high school diploma. Although he has taken GED classes, he is not optimistic that he will get his GED soon.

Although Marcus is quick to smile and is often upbeat, he is resentful about his experience while in placement and the way he left care. He explained:

And as far as being prepared, it was like, we were sheltered. You know what I mean? We weren’t really given certain opportunities to see how things work. You know what I mean? Like in the work environment, and have conversations with different types of people. You know what I mean? Like when you come into a placement most of the time most of your counselors are nice. You never meet the mean people, or the blatant people who are just—you know what I mean—blatantly disrespectful, or blatantly ignorant. You don’t meet a lot of people like that, unless they’re kids. And you know how to deal with kids. You know what I mean? You brush them off, you have your problems. But then when it’s your boss, or it’s somebody you’re being interviewed by, or anything of that nature, your landlord. It’s like, wow, I never dealt with anyone like this before in my life, I don’t know how to deal with it. You know what I mean? And then sometimes you just want to quit, like, all right, I’ve tried, it’s hard, you know what I mean, I’ve been doing this for a while, I got two jobs, and now I don’t want to do it anymore, I quit. You know, no one told me I was going to have to do all this, basically. Like they tell you, but they don’t prepare you, that’s about it. They tell you, they warn you, you know what I mean, but that’s about it.

He continued, talking quickly:

I mean, when they described it being out on your own, they basically give generalizations. You know what I mean? Like, the world’s not an easy place. Or, nothing comes for free. Things like that. They don’t tell you, you know what I mean, you might work for a boss one day who might be a little prejudiced, or might be a little racist. They don’t tell you things like, you know, sometimes you might be looked over because of this, or because of that. Or they don’t, you know, they don’t tell you certain things like, when I first went out for a job, I thought you got paid at the end of every week. I didn’t know most jobs were bi-weekly. I didn’t know that, you know. There was just certain things that they didn’t tell you.

Marcus knew little about working prior to aging out, because he was not allowed to have a job while in placement. He said that unless the judge ordered a youth to work, the placement and the case managers often prohibited youth in the congregate care facilities from finding work.

Part of being sheltered and not exposed to “how things work” was the “point system,” according to Marcus. This system that Marcus referred to, which sometimes was called the “level system,” was a source of contention for many youth I met. The basis of it was that privileges such as watching TV, phone time, or going outside, were earned by following rules or by demonstrating certain behaviors. The complaint was that the rules were often perceived to be about control and not about identifiable life skills. For example, one rule was not talking unless granted permission by staff. Marcus and others complained that the point system did not provide any life experience. Youth who followed the rules and got higher points or levels were sometimes punished when their peers did not follow the rules because some rewards, such as outings or television, were not given unless the entire group was at a certain level.

At age 18, Marcus left care and immediately was confronted with problems. He explained:

I knew, I knew it was going to be rough, and I knew I was going to be doing a lot of things on my own...I thought I was still going to have a backbone, you know what I mean? Like, I couldn't make it to work this week. You know what I mean? Maybe you guys could help me, it's my first week getting to work. Or, you know what I mean? I just moved into a crib—a house; I have no bed, no furniture. You know what I mean? Things like that. Or I have no food.”

Marcus was disgusted by the little help he received from the child welfare system after leaving care:

I thought that maybe they would put me in contact with someone who could further help me with this route. But then it's like, ok, we'll help you, we'll give you the number to a shelter, or we'll give you the number to a food bank. How am I going to get this food?

To make sure I understand the question he seems to be asking rhetorically, I reframed and parrot his question, “And how are you going to carry it home?” Marcus responded emphatically, “Thank you! Thank you,” indicating that I understood and he felt validated. He continued, “Like that, I was kind of mad at [weWork] for that. You know I mean, I’m like, all right, I have no food in my house. [The social worker, Miss Rina]’s like, I’ll give you a number to some food banks. Ok, but they’re all like half, like three miles away, two miles away.” His voice rose with frustration, “How the hell am I supposed to get boxes? You know what I mean?” The phrase “you know what I mean” was not being used as filler as he talks, Marcus paused sometimes to make sure that I knew what he meant. It is clear he was not only trying to confirm my understanding, but also was asking me as a proxy for all who are helping him. He gestured as if he is holding a comically large box the width of his arms and continued, “Like this? You know what I mean? By myself, on the bus? You know what I mean? To my house, full of canned goods? You know what I mean?” Marcus was frustrated by the belief that giving him a phone number is enough to solve his problem with food. He continued as if he was talking to someone who gave him the numbers who clearly does not understand his situation, “It’s like, all right, whatever.” I asked if the numbers Miss Rina gave him were helpful. Marcus explained, “I told her they were, but they really weren’t, they really weren’t.”

His problems with not enough food increased exponentially when his girlfriend and their two-week old son moved into his apartment. Fortunately, the WIC application his girlfriend filed was quickly accepted and the food crisis for her and the baby was averted. However, their son developed “a touch of colic” and WIC did not pay for the more expensive special formula, which costs \$19 a case. They had to pay cash, although Marcus’ girlfriend found another solution and traded formula with a friend whose child could drink the formulas covered by WIC. Marcus

lamented, “Why do we have to do all that? Why is it this difficult? Why can’t he just take formula?” He ended his questions laughing ruefully. Later, since I had heard from another youth with a similar problem, I told Marcus that I believe that with a doctor’s prescription other types of formula may be covered by WIC. He was frustrated that he had not known that. He had been spending money they did not have. Even though WIC helped, problems of poverty and hunger did not disappear.

Just as Marcus’ girlfriend moved in, he accepted two jobs, and reflected on what that meant for his life:

I’m not going to get to see my son. But I got to, I got rent, I got bills, I got food, I want to live nice, I deserve cable. I deserve to look in my cabinet and have a choice of what I want to eat tonight. I deserve certain things, you know what I’m saying, and I guess if I got to bust myself to do it, then I’ll do it. But once again, you know what I mean, I’ve just been thinking about it, like, wow, I got to, I got to work two jobs just to make maybe about a thousand dollars a month, or, maybe a little bit over a month, you know what I mean. And, there’s people out there with their GEDs or degrees who get a job making thirteen or fourteen dollars an hour doing half my shift, making more than me.

Without his high school degree, Marcus knew his wages would be less. The one job was as a temporary laborer at a plant where he hoped he would have at least eight hour shifts, 40 hours a week. As he received the job through a temp agency, he did not know if it would be a “long term job.” The second job was at a local non-profit, and he believed he would work 40 hours a week there. I suspected he would not, since I knew other youth with internships at the same non-profit who worked only two hours a day Monday through Friday. He was optimistic that he would be doing “pretty decent” with the two jobs, but conceded, “But then I’m sacrificing my sleep and my son for this, but, you know, I don’t plan on doing it forever, it is just something to help me get a little ahead, you know what I mean.” The jobs did not end up being long term positions, and soon Marcus was looking for work again.

Marcus did not have much help or support. His mother could not help, Marcus explained, because his father's failing health required his mother to care for him 24 hours a day. His brother, Jona, who is a couple years older than he, was also in no position to help Marcus. Jona sometimes stayed with Marcus; Marcus was more likely to be able to help Jona than Jona help Marcus. Although Marcus does not have family to help him, he has Eddy. Marcus and Eddy met in placement. They became fast friends. The strength of their friendship grew as they left care. Eddy is a year or two younger than Marcus. They look out for one another. Sometimes when Marcus used the term "we" he was not referring to his girlfriend and him, but rather he was speaking of Eddy and him. Once Marcus and Eddy explained the arrangement to me as basically if one of them had \$20, then they both had \$20. Marcus was more of the leader of the two, but both are firmly invested in each other's well-being and they help each other. Eddy even assisted with Marcus' son at times.

Marcus shared his Section 8 apartment with his girlfriend and their infant son along with Eddy and sometimes his older brother. He explained:

We're making it. You know, we're a little damaged, but we're trying to make it. But at the same time, you know, money is a big issue. With anybody, especially when you're a new family and you both move in together, and, there's a lot of things. I didn't have pots and pans. You know what I mean? How you're going to cook with no pots and pans? I didn't have ice, I didn't have—it was just a bunch of stuff that I didn't have that I needed. I didn't have wash rags, laundry detergent, dish washing—it was just stuff, brooms, you know what I mean, it was just certain stuff I didn't have that I needed. And it was just, you know, it was just—money. But we'll get through it, you know, we'll get through it.

Marcus does not have furniture for the apartment. There are not enough beds or couches for everyone to sleep at night.

Now that he is over 21, Marcus is annoyed that he is too old to receive assistance from CYF, and he had not known when he was younger that he was eligible for assistance through independent living programs. Marcus explained ruefully that until the age of 21 he had health

insurance, but he had not known this and did not get medical care that would have been covered by the insurance. One day I saw Marcus, he had not been able to eat because of the pain of his wisdom teeth, which he thought were impacted. He believed he was supposed to have the wisdom teeth removed while still in care, but for some reason had not. Marcus was frustrated that he now needed medical and dental assistance and could not access it.

Despite his frustration with the child welfare system and feeling that he was disadvantaged because of being in care, Marcus was proud not to use his background as an excuse. When he did not have bus fare, he regularly walked a couple of miles to apply for a job, go to work, attend a meeting, or take a GED prep class. Between jobs, he picked up odd jobs doing painting, landscaping, or other handyman work for people who pay him cash. Marcus explained to me once, “And sometimes people see me try and then sometimes people don’t see me try. But I still, I feel like I get punished either way. Even when I do try. I even get even more disappointed because you’re actually trying, you know what I’m saying?” I do know what he is saying. The odds are stacked against Marcus, and it must be disappointing to work hard and not get ahead. However, Marcus kept on trying.

6.6 CRITIQUE OF THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Before continuing my discussion about how services are provided to youth aging out, I want to focus momentarily on the child welfare system. Marcus described being “crippled” by the system and has floundered since he left care. He felt not knowing the expectations of the “real world” place him and other youth aging out at a disadvantage. Basically Marcus is criticizing the lack of

cultural capital development that occurred while in care. He did not learn what was expected of him, nor did he get a chance to develop and practice social norms.

The child welfare system has been critiqued for reinforcing and creating dependency (Ladew & Benedetto, 2003) and for not promoting youth to be personally responsible for planning their futures (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2006)). After being forced to follow rigid rules within care, making decisions on their own may be challenging for youth aging out. Not being able to practice making decisions or face the natural consequences of their actions when there is a safety net is a disservice to youth aging out. Program restrictiveness has been criticized by youth who explain it takes away “normal” experience (Rauktis et al., 2011). The conditions within care where youth are not allowed to use a sharp knife or screwdriver can be seen as interfering with developing skills they will need after leaving care (Stott, 2012).

It is understandable that due to the lack of experience, youth aging out are not aware of all that they need to be prepared to live on their own. However, the system is responsible for making the decisions and helping youth prepare to leave care. The child welfare system’s lack of allocating adequate time and resources is less understandable since the decision makers and service providers are well aware of the time that the transition takes and have experience from working with other youth. It is the responsibility of the system, which has served as a parent, to make sure that youth become prepared and adequately designate enough time and resources for youth to prepare to leave care. To comply with federal legislation, case managers have to develop a transition plan with youth only 90 days prior to leaving care. Three months does not give enough time to explore all the options and create multiple contingency plans. It is system procrastination to wait 90 day prior to leaving care to prepare the transition plan.

Youth like Marcus left care feeling overwhelmed and often soon after felt like they made a mistake. Mateo signed himself out of care on his 18th birthday and went to his grandmother's home. He recounted her response as he walked into her home:

She was sitting on the couch. She looked at me. She was like, "What today is?" I was like, "Today's Wednesday." She was like, "Wednesday? Why the fuck is you home?" I was like, "I just signed myself out. Today's my birthday." She was like, "I don't give a damn if today's was Jesus' birthday. Why the hell you sign that place out? You know you don't got nowhere to stay."

Mateo had been expecting to stay at his grandmothers', but she did not allow him. He moved in with his mother, who was initially happy to see him, but tension and problems arose quickly. Mateo reflected on how he envisioned his grandmother's reaction to his walking in the door, "I was expecting a 'Happy birthday. Welcome home.' Like, 'Oh, you're finally you're out now? Yeah, let's party.' But it was nowhere like that. I actually didn't celebrate my actual birthday until about a month later." Mateo's plan of leaving care and moving in with his grandmother was never a feasible option for her. Without a contingency plan, he relied upon moving in with his mother with whom he had little relationship and ultimately it did not work.

Eventually Mateo moved in with his girlfriend, the mother of his child, who had a Section 8 apartment. After they broke up, he continued to sleep on the couch at her apartment. The time during which I knew Mateo was when he was sleeping on the couch and struggling to find a way to provide for his child. He did not have a high school diploma and made slow progress in GED classes because he rarely attended and focused on the work. Mateo applied for a few jobs and occasionally worked at fast food restaurants, a job he genuinely enjoyed. A year later, Mateo and Thomas, his best friend whom he met in placement years ago, were convicted of a felony for breaking and entering and sent to a half-way home for almost a year. Within a

couple of month of his release, Mateo was arrested for participating in an aggravated robbery during which one of the men robbed was shot.

Mateo did not plan to leave the child welfare system and be rejected by his family. Nor did he plan on getting involved with the justice system. However, his plan of leaving the system was inadequate, and he lacked a contingency plan. At the request of Thomas, I attended the sentencing hearing for the breaking and entering charges and saw that the only person with Mateo was a caseworker assigned to him because of his mental health issues. He basically had no one. While in the child welfare system, the relationships Mateo had with his family were not improved nor were new relationships with other adults cultivated. His social capital before and after care were similar. This seemed to be the story for most of the youth I met.

6.7 SERVICES FOR YOUTH AGING OUT

Many youth in care have faced significant barriers to education and employment, that is, human capital development. Marcus attending a program's school placed him behind in his education. Other youth moved multiple times among placements which led to different schools. A change in schools can cause youth to fall behind at least six months in their studies. Keystone County's Educational Liaisons are supposed to help the youth in care; however, they cannot access school records because they are not legal guardians of the youth. The group home policies that do not permit youth to get jobs while in care are not unique to Keystone County. Research found it to be a common practice, and also found that working prior to leaving care was a predictor of employment after care (Dworksy & Courtney, 2000). Marcus intuitively understood that being in care did not prepare him for life after he aged out.

Services for youth aging out overlap with those of the child welfare system, since in Keystone County youth in the child welfare system for at least 30 days after their 16th birthday are eligible for independent living services. However, the independent living services provided are separately, and in some ways compensate for the limitations of the child welfare system. The goal of services for youth aging out is to prepare them for life on their own.

When Marcus left the child welfare system at age 18, he explained he was not prepared to be on his own. One of his chief complaints was that as he left care, he did not receive help. It is unclear why he did not receive assistance. Referrals sometimes went missing, or youth sometimes had inadequate or outdated information. Sometimes a service provider could not connect with a youth who had moved and changed their phone number. Marcus' frustration with the child welfare system contributed to his not accessing independent living services as he left care to assist with the transition. A service provider once referred to this intense dislike of and desire to leave the child welfare system and not remain involved as "systemitis." Service providers readily admitted that they would not force someone to receive assistance and if a youth was resistant, they might close the case. However, youth are always able to access independent living services if they want up until the age of 21. Marcus, now over 21, no longer had the full range of services available to him, but he participated in weWork's programs and occasionally visited the drop in center for youth aging out.

Some youth who were engaged in services maintained that they were all alone and no one was helping them. Marcus felt that although he was being given phone numbers to get help with food, the logistics of picking up food from the food bank were prohibitive. Perhaps the most striking example of youth feeling that no one was helping them happened after the weeklong mandatory training at weWork. A youth who had attended every day of the weeklong training

met with me for an interview at the end of the week. Earlier in the day, I had seen him sitting next to Mr. Wayne who was typing his résumé. I asked the youth how his job search was going, and he said that it was rough and he had to do everything himself. Although he had been getting one-on-one attention from an experienced service provider, he felt alone. This was not unique. Another youth during a weWork training told Miss Rina that the apartment that she had moved into the previous day with her boyfriend and their toddler did not have the electricity turned on and due to the substantial security deposit that was required because of her poor credit, she did not know how to get it turned on. Instead of spending time allotted for looking for and applying for jobs online, the youth searched for agencies that could assist her. Miss Rina also provided some information and made multiple phone calls on the youth's behalf. Later in the day I spoke with the youth and she told me that she was doing everything herself. I knew this young woman not only had been receiving assistance from weWork throughout the day, but also she had a case manager through YouthFirst who was helping her. However, in spite of all of the assistance both youth received, they both felt alone.

In part this feeling of being alone speaks to the youths' isolation and lack of social capital. Without support and a safety net, at the end of the day, if they cannot pay for housing and do not have someone whose couch they can sleep on, the youth knows that they could be living on the streets or living in a shelter. This was what worried Jaden so much. Marcus had Eddy and his girlfriend, yet still felt that the burden of the struggles were his to bear. Part of feeling alone without anyone to help them is undoubtedly related to the extent of the hardships. No one was there with Marcus as he was trying to figure out how to pay for the \$19 formula for his baby and telling him that WIC could assist his family. Having a service provider help Marcus figure out some of these problems may make a difference.

The economic capital youth have is so very limited. Youth had to use creative solutions to make ends meet. Marcus allowed Eddy and Jona to live with him, his girlfriend and their child. All of them shared a smartphone so that they would be able to apply for jobs on it and get calls about jobs. Marcus would walk instead of spending bus fare and would go to agencies where there were free meals and attend trainings to get assistance as well as the financial incentive checks. Marcus was always broke and struggling, and he desperately wanted to be able to get out of the neighborhood he lived in, which was geographically isolated and offered few opportunities. He never let me visit his apartment because he felt it was unsafe. He confessed he was afraid there because he heard gunshots sometimes during the day and often in the night. I also think Marcus did not want me to see the condition of his apartment, which he said his “slumlord” neglected. It sounded like it could have been condemned. It would be helpful if a service provider helped Marcus and his family move into a better home; however, safe and affordable housing was limited.

Some of the youths’ lack of capital was directly tied to their experiences in care where the habitus of their environment differed greatly from their age-mates living with their parents and in higher socioeconomic status. As discussed previously, mastering the social norms of the group home does not necessarily translate to getting ahead in the real world. Following rigid rules, which may be necessary in a congregate care facility, does not necessarily translate to desirable skills of an employee in the service sector, where there needs to be some flexibility. Employees need to be able to communicate, think, and make decisions. Additionally, being part of a team and working with others is central to most of the jobs for which youth aging out are qualified. Agencies provide few opportunities for youth to develop cultural capital.

Although services for youth aging out are not adequately addressing all types of capital, they are assisting youth with the transition. Mistakes will happen as youth learn. When Jaden opened her bank account, she received overdraft protection that ended up costing her a lot of money. The young man who purchased a used car at a car dealership that would finance loans with interest rates more than double what banks would offer had his car repossessed when he missed one payment. Other predatory type services that youth became ensnared in included rent-to-own furniture and using cash checking facilities. Signing up for proprietary schools and being responsible to pay thousands of dollars of tuition for a program that issues a certificate instead of an associate's degree is another example. Youth aging out are vulnerable and easily can be preyed upon, especially since they have had limited exposure to the negative consequences of some of the predatory lending. Ideally, service providers can help youth so that mistakes can be avoided and the consequences minimized.

6.8 PROBLEMS SERVICE PROVIDERS FACE

Service providers work with complex issues and must find creative solutions, almost always with limited funds. As a social worker at weWork, Miss Rina's job was to help to reduce the barriers to getting and keeping a job. When a youth has a problem, such as facing eviction because of overdue rent, Miss Rina could not simply give a check to give to the landlord. However, Miss Rina could assist with advocating with landlords and working with other community agencies that have emergency funds available. Solutions are often not easy. The issue of the youth who did not have her heat turned on was increasingly complicated because to get the service turned on the next day required a credit card for the security deposit. While Miss Rina was able to find

funds available to help the youth through an agency's emergency fund, the agency was only able to provide a check, which would take time to process and submit. The rules of the agency, while completely understandable from an accounting perspective, could not accommodate the urgency of the need. In spite of the complex problems and the agency and funder regulations, some type of way Miss Rina and other service providers were able to find ways to assist youth.

Service providers often talked about feeling like their "hands are tied" by the funding under which they operated. They must operate within the confines of the grants they receive, which as I mentioned above may emphasize only specific outcomes which service providers find limiting. As I have previously mentioned, Mr. Sebastian was frustrated that he had to place youth in single apartments in poorer neighborhoods instead of placing them with a roommate in two bedroom apartments in better neighborhoods. Service providers sometimes confessed feeling uneasy that youth would be working part-time at minimum wage jobs that had no potential for advancement and still would be considered employed and a "success" of the program. When reporting the numbers to funders, a part-time fast food employee was still considered employed. With fast food jobs having an employee turnover rate of 300%, how is having a youth work at McDonald's part-time a success? I wondered similar questions with education. Youth who enrolled in proprietary post-secondary education programs were considered as being in college by service providers, despite the fact that the proprietary programs were increasingly under scrutiny by the federal government for fraudulent claims (Lewin, 2011). Youth were taking out tens of thousands of dollars in loans for certificate programs that were not accredited; however, service providers, who may have tried to discourage youth from attending such programs, still counted the youth enrolled in proprietary programs as enrolled in college.

Another issue with how services were provided to youth aging out is the lack of evaluation. When I approached agencies as potential sites to recruit youth into the study as well as places for observation, service providers repeatedly expressed interest in determining if what they were doing was working. They genuinely wanted to ensure they were helping youth. As they saw youth struggling, they questioned what else could be done and sometimes felt helpless that they could not do more. The complexity of the struggle was a concern for the service providers. How can youth without a stable place to live finish their education and get a job? How can youth find a place to live without a job? How can youth get a job without an education? How can these youth be effectively served? How can youth be assisted to transition smoothly out of care and into adulthood? Like the service providers, I wrestled with these questions.

These questions do not have any easy answers. Some of the struggles youth aging out face cannot be easily addressed by service providers because the obstacles are structural barriers. Service providers operate within the same constraints in which the youth live. The recession limits job opportunities for youth aging out, and as the educational requirements for jobs rise, youth aging out are disadvantaged. Service providers cannot help youth get jobs that do not exist or have requirements youth lack. Some of the obstacles, such as a lack of transportation or affordable housing, fall outside of what service providers currently address. Many of youths' struggles are directly tied to youth lacking capital and not having a safety net.

6.9 MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Although I am critical of services provided to youth aging out, there is substantial evidence that youth fare better with services than without. This is supported by research finding youth who

remain in care longer have more positive outcomes (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005). During my fieldwork, a few youth told me that they would probably be homeless or even dead if it was not for the help they received from agencies. While it may seem like an exaggeration, I knew youth who were homeless, and I heard about camps under bridges and in wooded areas where homeless youth, many of whom had aged out of the child welfare system, lived. During the two years I collected data, there were a few youth aging out who died from being shot.

I focused on youth who were engaged with services, but inevitably I met youth aging out who were disengaged. One youth, whom I met through weWork, introduced me to Victor. She and Victor dated a set of twins, and for a time stayed in the attic of the twins' mother's home. Previously, Victor had stayed with his cousin and aunt, but they were evicted. Victor had paid to stay there, but instead of using the money to pay the landlord, his aunt bought a car. Living with his girlfriend and their son was not ideal for Victor. They frequently fought, and several months prior, he ended up in the intensive care unit for a week because, during an argument, she stabbed him in the chest and punctured his lung. Victor described himself as having a "trigger" and sometimes would "go off" on someone. He talked about his background: "I've been with the wrong crowd my whole life. You know how your parents tell you, stay away from this kid? I was that kid you stayed away from." He laughed after he told me this, but he was not joking.

When we sat down to talk, Victor strategically selected a seat where his back was against the wall and he could see both entrances. He told me he did not want anyone to surprise him. Throughout the time we talked, his eyes scanned the doorways frequently. Victor had been in jail six times, and had been in the juvenile justice system as well. There were people who did not like him, he explained. There was a lot of violence in his life, and physical fighting was a regular occurrence. Victor drank and used drugs, saying he tried "everything but crack." The alcohol and

drugs were part of his nature, he explained, as addiction ran in his family. When Victor talked about his family, I got confused. At age five, he was abused so badly he was in a body cast for six months. He was adopted by a family, but reentered the child welfare system at age eight where he remained until age 17 when he ran away. Family includes his biological family, his adopted family, and people to whom he is close. None are closer to him—including his girlfriend—than his cousins, a couple of men who are not necessarily related to him biologically, with whom he worked and spent time.

Victor was not employed and has no plans to get a job that would issue a W-2. He knocks on doors in the neighborhood trying to get handyman jobs. He explained, “I go out. I work. I make my money. I come home from work, but I’m on the street, you know what I’m saying, doing my thing, and that could be anything from getting high, like I said, doing anything, making money other ways.” His involvement with “making money other ways” was strictly off-limits in the conversation, although he later told me “I’ve been gang-banging for years, for years.”

While he wanted a better future for his son, Victor did not see a better future for himself. He will continue being on the streets. He explained, “I’m stuck in it. I’ll go to the grave with it. But that’s just life. I made that choice at a young age being stupid, but now, there’s no taking that back.” He chuckled and then continued, “Which I’m not” before he trails off not finishing his thought. He ended the sentence with “you know what I mean?” Victor then concluded, “Really don’t bother me,” but paused before adding “too much.” Clearly, it somewhat bothered Victor that he was stuck. However, he did not see a way out of it.

Victor’s background was not considerably different from that of some of the youth I met. His level of involvement in “gang-banging” and the justice systems seemed somewhat more, but not substantially different from some of the youth receiving services. I heard similar stories from

other youth. The personal background and abuse were similar to other youth I met. The neighborhood that Victor lived in bordered on the one where Marcus lived, and most would consider Victor's neighborhood safer and better. The main thing that seemed different with Victor was his lack of connection to the services. Reflecting on my interactions with Victor and the handful of other youth who were disengaged from services and considering findings from previous research, I conclude services are making a difference.

6.10 SERVICE PROVIDERS

Before I share the stories of the service providers who are making huge sacrifices, working tirelessly, and making a difference in the lives of youth aging out, I want to briefly share that not all service providers are providing this quality of work. I lost several nights of sleep realizing that there desperate youth aging out relying upon service providers who are not fully invested in the work and in some cases, do not do their job. I shared the frustrations of the youth who were unable to reach their case managers by phone because voicemails were kept full and when the case manager clearly disdained youth, blaming them for their struggles. I heard some service providers comment, "I had it worse" and refer to the youth as "ungrateful," "spoiled," and "entitled." Some of the service providers shared similar backgrounds with the youth, but now more services were available to youth that had not been available to the service providers when they were aging out.

At first when I heard youth share outlandish stories of group home staff harshly restraining youth for no reason or paying youth to beat up another youth, I was appalled and could not believe that this would happen. However, other service providers validated the stories

and practices in some of the congregate care facilities. I witnessed inequalities and favoritism throughout my time in the field. Being in care and aging out were sometimes challenging simply because of the service providers. That being said, this type of service provider was in the minority.

Many of the service providers I met over the course of my research inspired me. When I first started my fieldwork, I shadowed service providers for the day to learn how the system worked and how services were provided. The range of activities and amount of work crammed into a single day were staggering. My entire professional life had been within non-profit agencies including shelters and crisis hotlines; however, the sheer volume of crises as well as preventative work that some of the service providers balanced astonished me.

Prior to this study, I worked on a study of youth aging out for which we interviewed youth aging out and service providers about the perceptions of youth aging out. Throughout the course of the interviews, multiple youth credited Miss Veronica, a service provider at YouthFirst, for being integral to their well-being. What was interesting to me was how frequently her name arose considering we had not recruited youth for the study at the agency where she worked. There were other service providers mentioned during this study whom youth revered, but clearly there was something special about Miss Veronica.

I met Miss Veronica during my fieldwork and witnessed what youth admired and respected about her. She was a compassionate, forthright veteran service provider who frankly told youth what she thought. She knew all the names of youth served by YouthFirst and remembered details about them. Youth she had not seen for months she greeted by name, sometimes with a hug, and inquired of details about their school, job, or where they were living. When one youth showed up at an agency meeting and shared that she was pregnant, Miss

Veronica said that she was concerned the baby would interfere with the young woman's education. When youth experienced success, like getting a new job or getting into school, Miss Veronica rained praise upon them. When youth got into trouble, Miss Veronica expressed her disappointment although she helped youth solve their problems and advocated on their behalf. Each time I observed the agency meetings that youth attended where Miss Veronica was present, I noticed that she pulled aside youth to talk to them. Sometimes she asked youth to stay afterwards and talked to them about what she was seeing. She explicitly told youth who were thinking of leaving care at age 18 rather than sign the affidavit to remain in care that she thought they were making a mistake and worked with youth to create pro/con lists to make that and other decisions.

Miss Veronica had worked extensively within YouthFirst with different programs serving youth aging out. She was definitely comfortable with talking with the youth and well-versed in the resources as well as the types of issues that youth aging out faced. Nothing youth mentioned or she learned about confounded Miss Veronica. Over the years she seemed to have become accustomed to the problems youth aging out encountered. Her compassion towards the youth was great and she seemed to genuinely understand youth aging out and the obstacles they had to negotiate. With her wealth of experience, Miss Veronica had developed a way of working with and relating to youth as well as the other service providers. She was well-respected and most youth seemed to connect with her. Some youth had known her for years and a couple even called her "Mom." Of course there were exceptions; some youth did not have a connection to Miss Veronica and a few actively disliked her. The youth who actively disliked her seemed to do so because they disagreed with her and did not like her straightforward approach. Miss Veronica was well aware of youth who disliked her and was not disturbed that. She seemed to be

comfortable knowing that what she was saying impacted the youth enough to feel angry towards her.

Mr. Paul, a service provider Miss Veronica supervised, credited Miss Veronica for helping him learn how to work with youth aging out: “Miss Veronica helped me a lot just you know, explaining to me, ‘You’re there for support, but, also, you have to educate them and explain to them as far as some of the direction they need to go in.’ ...And by their not going to school, the issues, the problems they’re gonna have in the future.” Mr. Paul talked about how one of the youth on his caseload who was living with her mother was in danger of failing school because of truancy. For almost three months, he drove her to school so she would not be late. School started at 7:30 a.m., and he would arrive at her mother’s house where one of her younger siblings would let him in while their mother slept. Mr. Paul literally would pull her out of bed some mornings to get her to school. The extraordinary lengths he went to help her get to school reflect his dedication to the youth he worked with. He explained his philosophy:

I’ve grown to understand to develop a relationship with them. You’re not just a worker that comes out to see ’em once a month or twice a month or whatever it is. Um, if I’m coming home from basketball practice or whatever, I’ll just call ’em. It might be 9:30, 10:00 at night, “What’s going on? What you doing? You know? What’s on TV? What you watching tonight?” You know? And it’s not always, “Okay. I need you to come to this. I need you to do this,” or, “We gotta do this.” It’s just having a conversation with them. I try to develop like a big brother you know, type of relationship with them.

The youth value their relationships with Mr. Paul. The youth whom he drove to school had a child who became sick, and Mr. Paul, not her mother or anyone else, was the first person she called. Mr. Paul received calls from youth who are no longer on his caseload who just want to say hello or sometimes have a questions when they start having trouble. Not all service providers were as involved as Mr. Paul; however, many exceptional service providers are making a difference with the youth they serve.

Although some youth complained that their care managers and other service providers were doing the work solely for a paycheck and did not really care about them, many had a special relationship with a service provider who made a difference in their life. Miss Veronica was not the only person about whom youth talked glowingly for having changed their lives. I heard repeatedly how Mr. Wayne, Miss Sophia, Miss Rina, Mr. Solomon and others had helped them. Youth talked about how they did not know where they would be if it was not for one of the service providers helping them. It was evident that the assistance that the service providers offered was only part of what made the difference to the youth. The caring relationships and being supportive were central to helping youth age out.

When policies and programs are created to assist youth aging out, the assumption cannot be made that there will be service providers who consistently go above and beyond, far exceeding any written job description. Many phenomenal service providers work hard with limited resources to make a difference in the lives of youth aging out. However, we cannot rely on the good fortune of having these amazing people alone. Policies and programs must be refined to better assist youth transitioning out of the child welfare system.

7.0 CONCLUSION

As I was completing this study, I presented preliminary findings to different agencies and to DHS. One group included a dozen service providers, half of whom I had interviewed and gotten to know fairly well during my fieldwork. I had talked extensively with these people sitting around the table with me about their experiences and thoughts about what youth aging out needed. The bulk of the conversations were my asking questions and their answering. Occasionally, I offered my thoughts and asked for feedback. I had sat around tables like this before with service providers during staff meetings where I listened to them review cases and brainstorm how to address an issue or help a certain youth. This time, sitting around the table with the service providers felt very different. Instead of my listening and asking questions, after spending hundreds of hours observing and talking to youth aging out, I was talking and answering questions. I had transitioned from my role of observer to expert. The service providers nodded their heads as I shared the data and findings that were very familiar to them, and they looked at me expectantly for answers.

After presenting my findings, including describing a capital development framework, I transitioned into recommendations for practice and policy. I spoke about intervening earlier, remaining involved longer, building relationships, developing all types of capital, and reconceptualizing principles of serving youth aging out. Service providers eagerly interrupted me, asking for more details and examples about how to better serve youth aging out.

The interest in my recommendations surely was linked to the service providers' deep knowledge about my key findings. Some of the veteran service providers knew better than I the extent to which youth aging out struggle. With large caseloads and years of experience, they knew youth like Jaden, Ta'Quayla, Maggie, Bryan, and Marcus. The service providers intimately understood the fragility of youth aging out and how the lives of the youth could quickly unravel. The consequences and depth of the struggles were clear in service providers' minds, as everyone in the room knew youth who were homeless and hungry, youth who were in jail, youth who were hustling to make ends meet, and at least a few youth who died in the past year.

The service providers were aware that they were making a difference for many youth aging out, but there was more that needed to be done. They knew some programs emphasizing employment counted it a successful outcome when youth worked at part-time minimum wage entry level positions that had no potential to turn into a career. Better jobs were not available to most of the youth, service providers knew, partially because of the recession and partially because of youths' education. The problems with education extended back years prior to aging out, yet the urgency of education was heightened because the time which youth age out coincides with high school graduation. While their age-mates who have not been in the child welfare system are graduating and starting post-secondary education, youth aging out are falling behind. When I mentioned problems youth aging out faced with Keystone County Community College, some of the service providers laughed ruefully and interjected that the community college had an extensive history of failing youth aging out.

Service providers nodded their heads in agreement when I shared the capital development perspective as a framework. My argument of needing to develop more than human capital was warmly received. The service providers saw the interconnections of youths' struggles with their

lack of capital, and there was no need to convince the service providers that the lack of capital was not reflective of individuals' deficits or weaknesses. They embraced the notion of changes to help youth aging out; they wanted to improve services for youth aging out. As I spoke about recommendations, they asked for more ways to help youth negotiate the transition out of care. The service providers' dedication and passion made me wish that I had more answers.

7.1 BEYOND EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION

Federal legislation for youth aging out emphasizes employment and education, and services focus on these areas, as do funders. Youth aging out prioritize getting a job, as was evident in Jaden's story and many of the other stories I shared. Getting a job and going to school are important to youths' survival, and there is evidence that those with jobs are faring better (Courtney, Hook, & Lee, 2010). However, being hired is only part of what is needed. Youth need the security of a decent job that pays enough to support a youth and provides health care benefits. Additionally, youth need to be able to maintain these jobs. As Maggie's short-lived internship demonstrated, simply getting the position is not enough. When examining youths' challenges of obtaining and maintaining a job, a capital development perspective can provide a useful framework.

Both employment and education are manifestations of human capital, an individual's personal skills and resources. Other forms of capital, social, cultural, and economic, play important roles in determining youths' employment and education. Maggie's lack of social and cultural capital contributed to her losing her internship. Lacking capital cannot be blamed on the youth, as was illustrated with the story of Marcus whose group home experience left him feeling

“crippled” and unprepared for the “real world.” Youth aging out lack capital largely due to their lack of exposure and opportunities; however, this impacts both their present lives and their futures. Although both are incredibly important, simply having a job and a degree are not enough to secure youths’ success and well-being. This is especially true in an economic climate in which unemployment rates are high with few good jobs available. The odds are increasingly against youth aging out, but services can assist youth in developing their capital. In order to develop human capital, service providers must help youth develop other types of capital.

7.1.1 Social Capital Development

Relationships matter. After listening to youth talk and seeing them struggle, the importance of relationships cannot be overstated. A supportive, healthy relationship has the potential to assist youth negotiate the transition out of the child welfare system. Likewise a non-supportive relationship can add additional obstacles to the transition and challenges to the lives of youth aging out. The social capital of many youth aging out is limited, and policies and programs should focus on developing it.

Family was important to many youth. Although the youth had been removed from their homes and sometimes spent years without contact with their biological parents and family, youth often spoke longingly of having relationships with their biological families and regretfully that relationships were not what the youth had envisioned or wanted. A number of youth, like Jaden, who had limited contact with their families while in care pursued relationships with them after leaving care. These youth often struggled to negotiate the relationships. Often they were vulnerable to the family members who could be manipulative and demanding. Ta’Quayla gave her mother her paycheck to ensure her mother could buy cigarettes and not start using crack

again. As service providers pointed out, sometimes as the justification for why youth should not have contact with their families, many of underlying reasons for why the youth originally had been removed from their parents remained unresolved. Considering this, along with the fact that youth desired relationships with family, an area where service providers and the child welfare system could help youth develop social capital is assistance in building relationships with family and maintaining healthy boundaries.

Peer relationships with friends and romantic partners were similar to familial relationships in that they could be both positive and negative forces for youth. Youth spent time with their peers, and were among those called when youth needed somewhere to live, money to borrow, or someone to help. Some peer relationships, like that of Marcus and Eddy or Titi and Galena, originated in placement and grew after leaving care. Sharing money, cell phones, and places to sleep was helpful. While peer relationships could be positive, some of them were detrimental to youth. Maggie's boyfriends sometime stayed with her rent-free as she provided for them while they continued to date other women and on a couple of occasions caused problems with her landlord.

Perhaps some of the most tenuous and stressful relationships youth aging out had were with their child(ren)'s other parent. This was especially the case when the couple was no longer romantically involved. Youth aging out are disproportionately more likely to become young parents (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Dworsky & DeCoursey, 2009) and may be inadequately prepared for negotiating parenthood—especially with limited resources. Youth who were parents expressed strong love for and commitment to their children; however, although young mothers and fathers desperately want to be good parents, they may not have the skills necessarily to raise

their children. This was evident in the number of youth whose children had been removed from their care by the child welfare system.

The relationships that youth have with their friends, romantic partners, and family members including their children, are not the only important ones that play a role in youths' transition out of care. The relationships with service providers are also valuable to youth aging out. While in care, the relationships youth have with service providers are more defined with the youth being in care and the service providers having responsibilities to youth. As the youth leave care, the relationships are not always as clearly defined as youth no longer access services at agencies. Ideally, we want youth to form lifelong connections with adults. Some of the service providers may be these adults. Some programs have policies that require service providers to terminate relationships with youth as soon as they turn a certain age; however, practice differs from the policies. Service providers talked about staying connected to youth after they left care. The relationships youth formed with service providers were meaningful. In some cases the relationships mirrored those of parents. Indeed, multiple youth referred to a service provider as "mom" or "dad." In some ways this is reciprocated by service providers who refer to those on their caseload as "my kids." The relationships are important, and each service provider has stories about youth with whom they connected and with whom they remained in contact over the years.

Youth aging out negotiate multiple relationships including those with family, friends, romantic partners, children, and service providers. However, these are not the only people with whom youth aging out interact and may need assistance negotiating. Youth have landlords, employers, co-workers, and customers with whom they must get along. Maintaining these relationships is only part of social capital. Another part is being able to expand social networks

and have youth be able to have more connections with people who have connections to resources and opportunities. These connections are not solely about being able to call upon someone when a crisis occurs. They are important so that youth have people in their lives who care about them, believe in them, and can give advice when needed. Youth need the wisdom and the support that others can provide.

Agencies can focus on developing youths' social capital in various ways. Workshops about relationships are perhaps the most obvious. However, simple worksheets are inadequate to build true social capital. Fostering relationships between youth and service providers as well as among youth in care is a practice that can assist youth in developing more social capital. Mentoring programs where youth are connected with adults in the community may be beneficial (Munson & McMillen, 2009), although some of the youth seemed to be somewhat cynical of the benefit of just seeing their mentor once a month and not knowing them very well. Placing youth in housing in neighborhoods where youth are more able to become engaged and know their neighbors would increase their social capital.

7.1.2 Cultural Capital Development

Understanding social norms and being able to act in an acceptable manner can assist in getting ahead. Not being able to serves as an obstacle to success. Every step of applying for a job provides opportunities for youth to demonstrate their competence or deficit of cultural capital. Youth calling to inquire about a job or picking up an application provides employers a chance to evaluate a youth's demeanor, communication skills, and their personality. When youth complete an application—either online or with pen and paper—their understanding of the position and how to apply for the job can be critiqued. Using the wrong terms for a position, summarizing

their work history poorly, or using poor grammar or incorrect spelling may disadvantage a youth. The interview may be the apex of cultural capital being evaluated. The way that the youth answers questions is only part of the interview. Everything about the youth can be considered by the interviewer including their posture, handshake, manners, small talk, and attire. Even though they may be qualified, youth may not perform at the level the person hiring needs them to be and therefore, may not get the job.

Agencies can assist with youth aging out by ensuring that the youth are explicitly made aware of the norms and are given the opportunity to practice. This may not be an easy task because the youth may have other people in their lives reinforcing social norms that are not conducive to getting a good job. Miss Sophia's efforts to start on time and have a professional environment were sometimes undermined by practices at other agencies where trainings would start late because the staff had not arrived on time. Additionally, some of the practices within congregate care which do not promote responsibility or facing natural consequences may be working against efforts to improve youths' cultural capital. Clothing and personal appearance was another area of cultural capital that youth aging out sometimes lacked that agencies tried to address. Resistance from the youth is understandable considering developmentally they are forming their identity at this time and clothing is one way to express this.

Being able to get a job requires some level of cultural capital. However, the expectations of the daily workplace must be met after being hired. Youth aging out must be prepared with workplace behaviors and understand how to interact with supervisors, co-workers, and customers. Ta'Quayla getting fired because of snapping at a customer is just one of many examples of poor customer service that resulted in a youth's job loss. Knowing that cursing and discussing certain topics are not acceptable will assist employees with maintaining their jobs and

with possibly being promoted in most places. At the weWork training, staff regularly corrected youth who cursed or said offensive things. Multiple youth said the cursing was so ingrained in their speech, they were not even aware that they had cursed.

Cultural capital not only helps youth aging out in the workplace, but also as they navigate their lives. Being able to effectively make a complaint or advocate for something requires an understanding of the social norms and the scripts that will assist in a successful outcome. The demanding of respect by youth within group homes and on the streets was necessary for their survival there, but in other environments different behaviors and attitudes are more appropriate. Understanding the different social norms and being able to effectively navigate different social settings is important for the long-term success and well-being of youth aging out.

7.1.3 Economic Capital Development

In addition to addressing youths' social and cultural capital, agencies should remain cognizant of economic capital development. While placing money within the hands of youth aging out will not solve all of their issues, giving youth opportunities to develop assets as well as skills to manage them is necessary. Agencies seem aware of the economic needs of youth, as is evident in their scheduling budgeting workshops and offering financial incentives to attend meetings. Some agencies that provide housing require youth to save part of their paycheck and give back when they complete the program.

Ensuring that youth aging out have real life experience budgeting money and making informed purchasing decisions is critical. Offering youth opportunities to get hands-on experience with daily money management and engaging in activities like grocery shopping, searching for an apartment, or looking at bills can teach valuable skills. Ideally, youth should

gain experience with money when the costs of failure are low. A couple of youth living at a group home were required to save money from their paychecks, and their entire savings was given to them as they left care. Within days all the money was spent on entertainment and wants rather than things the youth needed. Instead of buying necessities that were no longer being provided by the agency or saving for when money was needed, the money was spent. The youth lamented they had nothing to show for all the money. Tax refunds and refunds from student loans were often used quickly in the same way. Adding more structure and providing more information about asset development may be useful. Matched savings programs or Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) may assist youth to make financial decisions that have long-term benefits (Peters, Sherraden, & Kuchinski, 2012).

7.2 MAKING MEANINGFUL CHANGES

The depths of the needs of youth aging out require substantial efforts in policy and practices. Below I outline broad principles and suggestions for providing services to youth aging out, but before I do so I want to briefly comment on the child welfare system. Focus cannot solely be upon youth as they become eligible for independent living services and prepare to age out. Changes within the child welfare system, some of which are already priorities, have the potential to increase the likelihood of success as youth leave care.

Promoting permanency and stability should be continued to be prioritized in the child welfare system, as there is evidence that permanency promotes a smoother transition out of the child welfare system (Avery, 2010; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006). Reducing movements among placements, keeping sibling groups together, and ensuring appropriate visitations are all

parts of promoting permanency. Congregate care may discourage permanency because youth are less likely to develop relationships, due to fewer interpersonal experiences and opportunities to develop close and long-lasting relationships with adults (Barth, 2002). Finding alternatives to congregate care may make it more likely for youth aging out to remain in care past age 18 (Goodkind et al., 2011).

Congregate care is more frequently used for older youth, and there is evidence that youth aging out who spent more time in congregate care have poorer outcomes (Shook et al., 2011). Congregate care's emphasis on group living is not necessarily conducive to developing independent living skills (Stoner, 1999). The programs do not foster autonomy and actually may discourage youth from thinking on their own due to the parameters of the programs. Congregate care was one of the biggest complaints I heard while in the field. Youth blamed being in group homes and residential treatment facilities for the problems they faced while aging out.

The poor educational outcomes of youth aging out are problems which need to be addressed prior to their transitioning out of care. Calls have been made for the child welfare and educational systems to work more closely. Currently, in Keystone County, child welfare caseworkers are not able to access the educational records of children and youth on their caseloads. When youth move between schools, their school records sometimes do not follow them. Sometimes there are problems with attending school within congregate care facilities, like Marcus experienced, where the public schools will not recognize placement based education. Better coordination and a stronger commitment to fewer moves among schools would greatly assist the education of children and youth in care.

In general, a shift from solely one of protection of children and youth in the child welfare system to one that promotes their well-being encompasses many of these recommendations.

Promoting well-being means that efforts are made to ensure children and youth in care are cared for as good parents would care for their children and are given opportunities that their age-mates receive. The shift to promoting well-being is aligned with the new vision of Administration on Children Youth and Families (ACYF). ACYF Commissioner Bryan Samuels released a memorandum in April 2012 entitled, “Promoting Social and Emotional Well-Being for Children and Youth Receiving Child Welfare Services” which outlines ACYF’s priority of focusing on social and emotional well-being (US DHHS, 2012c). The goal is to not just keep children and youth safe, but to promote all aspects of their well-being. Instead of just protecting, the system can help the children and youth thrive. Making efforts simultaneously to improve the child welfare system and better serve youth aging out will place youth aging out in a better position to transition to adulthood.

7.3 START EARLIER

Independent living services can be provided to youth as young as age 14, according to federal legislation. However, within Keystone County, IL services are not provided until youth have been in out-of-home care within the child welfare system for 30 days after their 16th birthday. This is largely due to funding as well as the state regulations. To serve someone younger than age 16 requires an application for a waiver from the state.

Starting earlier and being more intentional about the various life skills needed for a smooth transition was a recommendation made by youth and service providers alike. Preparation for living on one’s own cannot happen without adequate planning and practice. Similar to

cramming for an exam or procrastinating until the last minute on a large project, learning the life skills and behaviors necessary to succeed as an adult cannot be rushed.

Youths' preparation for adulthood and life on their own cannot begin just prior to aging out. The many skills and behaviors that must be understood, and ideally mastered, are complex and require practice and integration into one's life in order to succeed. Youth aging out must be prepared across multiple domains for life on their own. In addition to handling their finances and households, negotiating relationships and possessing communication skills as well as decision making, evaluating options, and planning for the future are important areas in which youth should develop skills. Acquiring and cultivating these skills cannot happen overnight. Like most learning, simply having the skill presented to them will be insufficient to develop mastery. Completing a budgeting worksheet with a salary is not the same as getting a paycheck and making sure basic needs are met with the money before the wants and addressing other demands. The worksheets seldom list cigarettes, alcohol, or marijuana—real expenses for many of the youth—as line items, and youth rarely budget for the costs. While completing a worksheet at a training, youth are not talking with family members or friends who are asking to borrow money, passing storefronts with clothing and shoes that the youth want, walking through stores fighting the urge for impulse buys, or being asked to go out for the evening. These real challenges to maintaining a budget may be hard to understand simply through doing a worksheet. Even though the trainers and case managers may tell the youth that it will be hard budgeting and living on their own, the youth may not fully grasp how difficult it will be. Many youth, like Titi, explained they had not fully understood how hard it was going to be living on their own.

Hands-on practice where youth actually learn the life skills starting at an earlier age will benefit youth. As youth gain more skills and more responsibilities as they age, the transition out

of care will not be as abrupt. Practicing skills while still in care and having service providers provide feedback and assistance can help youth aging out. Youth desire fewer restrictions and developmentally appropriate rules (Rauktis et al., 2011), and this can help youth prepare for life on their own. A gradual weaning from the extensive services available while in the child welfare system and transitioning to the support services available as youth aging out can prepare youth to leave care.

The state requires that for each youth aging out of the child welfare system, a caseworker creates a detailed transition plan for youth 90 days prior to them leaving care. A simple worksheet outlining all that is necessary in a plan to transition out of care cannot be confused with adequately preparing a youth to age out. More effort is needed than developing a plan. Mateo's plan was to leave care and live with his grandmother; however, when he showed up unannounced on his 18th birthday, she did not allow him to live with her. This demonstrates the inadequacy of having one plan. What happens when a plan falls apart? Multiple contingency plans are needed (Rauktis et al., in press).

7.4 STAY INVOLVED

Having an "open door policy" where youth may return to access services even after their cases have been closed is important. Youth need to be given multiple chances as they are learning. They may walk away or be asked to leave, but still need assistance. weWork gives youth multiple chances. Galena was asked to leave the mandatory training because she had threatened one of the youth and had made other youth uncomfortable. While she still had an attitude and could become explosive, she was allowed to attend a subsequent mandatory training. Galena

started using weWork services, including the supplemental trainings and assistance as needed. When she enrolled in GED classes, weWork occasionally permitted her to sit in the back of the training room quietly and do her homework as there was a training. She is making progress because of the open door policy.

Support and services need to continue after youth leave care. Aging out is a process during which youth gain the skills necessary to live on their own after leaving care. Having a safety net ensures that in a crisis help is available, which means a youth may not slide quickly all the way to rock bottom. Agencies with case managers who can assist youth with problem solving and accessing resources can be lifelines for the youth. Miss Elaine shared that she sometimes received calls from youth over a year after she closed their case. She felt that part of the reasons the calls came was because she had established relationships with youth and when no one else was there for them, youth remembered how she had been supportive and helpful to them. Leaving the door open and encouraging youth to reach out after leaving care can make a difference.

7.5 RECOGNIZE FLUIDITY OF SUCCESS

Staying involved with youth aging out is critical in light of the fluidity of their success. I repeatedly saw the lives of youth unravel quickly, and often unexpectedly. I literally lost sleep over some of youths' stories because they were beyond my comprehension. Everything seemed to be going fine and then it was not. It confused me. Jake had a job and apartment one month and a couple months later was homeless, selling drugs, and considering prostitution as a way to make money. Chantelle was enrolled in school and unbeknownst to many, was failing all of her classes

and having problems with her roommates. Bryan graduated from college, but would have been homeless if his grandmother had not let him live at her home. Galena got a job, but could not start because she had no transportation.

Just because a youth has accomplished a goal and life is going smoothly for her does not mean that she is not in need of support and assistance. Even if by outward appearances everything is going smoothly, perhaps underneath the surface the youth is struggling. Countless times I heard from case managers about youth who were doing well, but I knew that the youth they spoke of were struggling. A case manager could report that a youth was living in an apartment, holding a job, and going back to school while I knew that the youth had been fired and was no longer attending classes. Sometimes it took months for the service providers to know about youth losing jobs, dropping out of school, or not having a place to live.

The fluidity of success was something that I really wrestled with during my fieldwork. I kept wondering, how are youth who are doing so well suddenly in crisis and having their life fall apart? The way I finally made sense of it was that youth aging out may be incredibly resourceful and strong, yet they remain fragile due to lack of resources and supports. Even after an important accomplishment, such as enrolling in school or getting a job, they are precipitously close to hardships. A small crisis or even something simply not going as planned can cause a youth's life to unravel. The margin for error is incredibly small. This is why it is very important for youth to have support and access to services, even when they are doing well. Agencies should attempt to allow youth to continue contact if the youth wants to initiate contact after terminating services. Having resources and supports available can make a difference.

7.6 RENTERING THE SYSTEM

I repeatedly heard from youth that they wished that they had not left, and if it was possible, they would like to return to care. During the time I collected my data, this was not possible. However, a couple of months after I ended data collection, the state adopted the Fostering Connections Act, permitting youth to reenter care. This meant that a youth who left the system could reenter care and receive housing and other services until the age of 21. This provides a safety net currently missing for many youth. After leaving care, some youth had nowhere to turn when they started floundering. Being able to reenter the child welfare system to get assistance until they are more ready for life on their own, means youth who leave care unprepared basically get a second chance. Upon the realization that they need help youth can reenter the system, receive the help they need immediately, and gain the skills and resources they will need when they leave the system again.

7.7 CONCLUSION

This study fills a significant gap in the literature on youth aging out by providing an in-depth examination of and incorporating youths' perspectives about the process of transitioning out of the child welfare system. It offers insight into the daily struggles of youth aging out as they negotiate leaving care. With few resources, they survived some type of way. One of the strengths of this work is that youth were followed over a period of time, so the data are not cross-sectional. Over the two years in the field, I witnessed how youths' lives changed over time, sometimes with drastic changes in short periods.

A strength of this study is that it provides detailed information about service provision for youth aging out. In addition to presenting and critiquing how agencies and programs serve youth aging out, I address gaps within the services. Incorporating youths' and service providers' perceptions and experiences, I outline policy and practice recommendations for youth aging out.

One contribution this study makes is providing a capital development perspective as a framework to understand the experience of youth aging out and to guide policy and practices designed to help them. Theory driven research with youth aging out has been limited (Stein, 2006), although promising constructs such as resiliency and life course perspective have been identified and are starting to be used. Emerging adulthood theory is present in the literature (Courtney et al., 2010; Munson et al., 2013). Incorporating capital development perspective can accommodate these other theories, and in fact supports and extends them. Capital development perspective adds clarity and strengthens the understanding of youth aging out.

7.8 STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study is not without limitations. Most of the limitations lie within the nature of the design and method. I alone collected the data for this study. This may be perceived as a limitation since there is no check for personal biases; some participants may not relate to the sole person collecting data, and some people and locations may be "off-limits" to the researcher because of age, gender, race or other personal characteristics (Estroff, 1981). Spending significant time in the field and being reflexive throughout the process reduced this limitation.

Another limitation of the study is youth were followed for only a relatively short period of time. The study focused only on the immediate transition period and does not follow youth

aging out long-term to see the outcomes for youth in the years after aging out. While the time I spent in the field was extensive, I do not know where youth will be in the future. A life course perspective posits that life histories shape life trajectories, and considering this, I suspect some youth may continue to struggle and face hardships later in life. As I followed youth as they were in the first years of negotiating the transition out of the child welfare system, I cannot speak to their lives and well-being in the future. I do not know if Jaden's future will be like Wanda's working at Burger King. I do not know how Marcus will raise his child. I do not know if youth who shared their hopes and dreams with will accomplish them. There were many challenges of staying connected to youth due to phones being turned off and frequent moves, and occasionally I completely lost track of the youth despite all of my efforts. This was the case with Jake, the youth I described in the introduction. Therefore, one of my limitations is that I do not know what happened to some of the youth.

This study focused on youth aging out within a single county, and due to recruitment strategy and emphasis, the youth largely were engaged with services. Participation in the study was voluntary, and the youth willing to be in the study may be different than other youth aging out. Youth aging out who are disconnected from agencies and not accessing services may be qualitatively different from service engaged youth. The handful of youth aging out who were not engaged in services appeared to be struggling more. Youth who are disengaged likely have different needs and experiences, and the practice recommendations I outline may need to be modified for these youth. The experiences of youth studied may be different than other youth due to the circumstances specific to Keystone County, including employment opportunities, services available, and the child welfare system. This limitation is only a limitation in name; due to the nature of ethnography, which studies people bound by a certain time and space, generalizations

cannot be made. Even youth who are now aging out of the child welfare system within Keystone County may have different experiences, as the state adopted the Fostering Connections Act and one of the provisions allows youth to reenter the child welfare system after leaving. This expansion of the safety net, which allows youth access to services available to them prior to leaving care, has the potential to greatly impact youth.

7.9 FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research needs to continue examining the experiences of youth aging out. This study raised a myriad of questions. What happens when youth do not get jobs? What are the experiences of youth aging out who are disengaged from services? What role does hustling—doing whatever it takes to make ends meet—play in the lives of youth aging out? How does housing assist youth aging out? What are the experiences of youth aging out who are parents? How do mental health issues impact youth aging out?

Due to the relationship between education and employment, future studies should examine the educational experiences of youth aging out. Through my fieldwork, I observed youth struggling to complete high school or their GED and to enroll and continue post-secondary education. Studies should focus on understanding factors that contribute to youth aging out enrolling and completing post-secondary education.

There is limited research on programs that serve youth aging out. Developing evidence-based practices and interventions that assist youth aging out in transitioning out of the child welfare system should be a priority. Although independent living services have been in existence for decades, best practices still need to be established. As this is done, the heterogeneity of youth

aging out should be remembered; a single approach will not work for everyone. While understanding how policies and practices can best serve youth aging out, it is important to consider and examine the experiences of youth disengaged from services.

7.10 FUTURE OF YOUTH AGING OUT

Youth aging out will continue to be a vulnerable population, and failure to assist them in transitioning out of care smoothly will be costly not only to them but also to society. A continued emphasis upon providing services to youth aging out, developing strong and supportive policies, as well as furthering the knowledge of the problems through research remains crucial. Investing in youth aging out simply makes sense; youth aging out have a lot to offer to society.

When child protective services removed Jake, Jaden, Titi, Maggie, Bryan, Marcus, and any other child from their homes because their parents were unable to keep them safe, the state assumes the role of their parent. The child welfare system must move beyond protection and address children's and youths' well-being as a good parent would. Promoting optimal development and investing in children and youth in care to prepare them to eventually leave care, through reunification with family or adoption, and also through aging out, better off than they were prior to entering care should be a priority. This is not to suggest that keeping children from harm is unimportant, but rather that safety should only be the sole goal of the child welfare system. Providing only the most basic level of services and focusing only on safety is shortsighted, as the welfare of the children in the child welfare system impacts more than the individual children and their families. Investing in services for children and youth in the child

welfare system is easily defensible. Not only are these youth aging out at-risk, but also these youth are having children who are vulnerable and may enter the child welfare system.

7.11 PLATO

I want to close with a story about Plato, who embodies much of what I presented in this study, and the wisdom he shared with me. His childhood had been a nightmare of abuse and neglect which did not end when he entered care and moved among placements. He had problems in the child welfare system. He struggled when he aged out at 18, yet some type of way he is making ends meet. Plato was 17 years old when I met him, and he told me he had known his whole life that he would die—most likely be shot on the street like other African American young men he knew—by the age of 18. As his 18th birthday approached, Plato told me that he was going to spend his birthday alone reflecting on the reality that he could have a future.

Prior to his 18th birthday, the turning point in Plato's life was the birth of his daughter. He had been moved to a different group home just before his child's birth, and he explained a service provider's response:

Before she knew anything about me, before she read my casebook, I told her I had a baby on the way and I wanted to be there, and she said, "I will not let you miss the birth of your child." She made that promise and she stuck to it. She said, "If I gotta come here, four o'clock in the morning, I will." And she got on me, man. Normally, I don't take no type of mouth from anybody, just 'cause I consider myself a grown man, but when she would tell me something, I would listen.

Plato's girlfriend went into labor in the middle of the night, and the staff fulfilled her promise and drove him to the hospital at 3am against the rules of the group home. At 9:31 a.m., the next

morning, Plato's daughter was born. She was 21 inches, 6 pounds 9 ounces. The baby girl and her mother, Plato's girlfriend, became his inspiration.

Plato graduated from high school, after attending four different high schools, and started working full time for \$7.25 an hour. He opened a bank account and helped pay for his daughter's and girlfriend's needs. His girlfriend remained in college and maintained excellent grades, a fact that Plato was proud of and that motivated him to work harder. He talked about something the child welfare system "unknowingly" taught him, "Even though they have a lot of benefits like these IL programs and whatnot, one thing they do teach you is, like, if you need something, you're gonna have to go for it pretty much yourself."

Plato told me once, "People care about what you went through, but people *really* don't care about what you went through." He lacked support except through his girlfriend, her parents, and a few service providers. Plato left care at age 18 and lived with his girlfriend for a while before finding his own housing. He was supposed to attend Keystone County Community College in the fall semester, but the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form was due at the time he was leaving care and he did not complete it. Without financial aid, he could not afford community college.

He looked for a job and picked up money by attending trainings through weWork where he could as he prepared to start in the spring semester. The \$25 for a day of training was spent on diapers for his daughter, food, and bus tickets. In talking about how he survived he told me, "So it's like, once again, the organizations like that play a huge role, a huge role." He pounded his hand as he emphasized huge role. He sighed as he talked about keeping in touch with Mr. Paul at YouthFirst, "They help a lot, man. And especially in this transition period."

My last interview for the study was with Plato. Over the two years that I had known him I always enjoyed hearing his insights. As I left the field, I sought closure and wanted to talk with Plato to hear his philosophical musings one more time. Our coffee cups had been empty for over an hour. Clearly, neither one of us really wanted to end the conversation and say goodbye. I had thanked Plato for his sharing his life so openly and told him I considered it a privilege to know and learn from him. Instead of saying goodbye then, our conversation drifted onto other topics. After talking about city development, corporate greed, and technology, I finally tried to draw the interview to an end. It was time to go. I commented, “So, maybe our paths will cross again.” Nodding he replied, “Hopefully.” He paused, but quickly continued,

I say “hopefully,” because I feel like you made a big difference in my life, that being able to listen. Like there’s a lotta stuff I didn’t get to say, or I wanted to say while I was in placement, or that I still want to say that I didn’t get to. And the fact that you listen, and you’re able to put in a book or in a paragraph that’s gonna help somebody else. That’s my ultimate mission, so you’re helping me. And like I said earlier, we’re helping each other. It’s beneficial.

I got choked up and tried to express my gratitude, “And, I mean, you’re giving me my Ph.D., so I’ll be Dr. Schelbe one day because you spent time on a Sunday afternoon to talk to me.” He beamed a smile and said, “And that’s what I mean. That’s the biggest idea, we can help each other. You know what I’m saying? That’s where it all starts. We can help each other.”

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR YOUTH AGING OUT

1. Tell me about yourself and what is happening in your life.
 2. What was your experience with the child welfare system?
- If individual has left care:*
3. When and how did you leave the child welfare system?
 4. What did you think life would be like when you left care?
 5. What is your life like now after leaving care?
 6. How is your life different than you thought it would be after leaving care?
 7. Has anything been hard or challenging since leaving care? Tell me about it.
 8. How did you deal with this challenge?

If individual is still in care and under age 18:

3. What information have you been given about staying in the system past age 18?
4. What are your plans for when you turn 18?
5. What are your plans for leaving care?
6. What do you think your life is going to be like when you leave the system?
7. What do you think will be hard or challenging after you leave care?
8. How will you deal with those challenges?

If individual is still in care and 18 or older:

3. How did you decide to stay in care?
4. What information have you been given about staying in the system past age 18?
5. What are your plans for leaving care?
6. What do you think your life is going to be like when you leave the system?
7. What do you think will be hard or challenging after you leave care?
8. How will you deal with those challenges?

For everyone:

9. What are your goals for the future?
10. How do you plan to achieve your goals?
11. Is there anything else that you want to share with me?

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS

1. Tell me about your experience working with individuals aging out of the child welfare system.
2. To what extent do you feel individuals are prepared to leave care?
3. Tell me about the process of individuals leaving care.
4. What role does the agency play in the transition?
5. Do you think individuals fully understand what it will be like after leaving care?
6. How is information about the option of remaining in care after age 18 given to individuals?
7. What information and resources do individuals aging out need to improve their chances of transitioning out of care successfully?
8. What would you consider a successful transition for someone aging out?
9. Tell me about an individual who aged out successfully.
10. Tell me about an individual who did not age out successfully.
11. What do you see as the greatest difficulty or challenge for individuals aging out?
12. What resources do individuals have to face these challenges?
13. Why do you think that so many individuals experience hardships when they leave care?
14. What would make life better for individuals aging out of care?
15. What do you see as gaps in services for individuals aging out?
16. Is there anything else that you want to share with me?

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