

Risk of homelessness or incarceration among foster youth varies by type of disability

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Ages 17-21 are important transitional years as young adults learn to become adults with more responsibilities. Many youth have family members who provide social and financial support to help them during

this critical time; however, many transitioning out of foster care lack these supports. Without social supports, they face a greater risk of homelessness, incarceration, and other socially isolating outcomes.

A new study shows that the likelihood of a foster youth with [disabilities](#) experiencing homelessness or incarceration during the transition to adulthood varies by type of disability. George Mason University associate professor of Social Work JoAnn Lee and associate professor of Health Administration and Policy Gilbert Gimm found that youth with emotional disabilities are more likely to experience homelessness and incarceration than those with other disabilities. However, after digging a little deeper, they found that there are other factors that explain the association between emotional disabilities and both homelessness and incarceration: "Our findings did not find [statistical significance](#) for an emotional disability when controlling for other variables, contrary to what we expected based on prior studies," said Lee. "This is especially notable since emotional disability is the disability type people tend to focus on, if they differentiate the type of disability diagnosis."

Previous studies either grouped everyone with a disability together or focused only on emotional disability. This study found that intellectual or developmental disability, visual/hearing disability, and [physical disabilities](#) are associated with a lower likelihood of homelessness and incarceration. Out of the disabilities analyzed, those with a physical disability reported the lowest rates of homelessness and incarceration and those with an emotional disability reported the highest rates.

"This study brought to light the need to tailor social supports and policies to the specific needs of [young adults](#) with disabilities, which can reduce barriers to services and improve community participation. In turn, improved access to services and [social engagement](#) can ultimately reduce the risk of homelessness and incarceration," said Lee.

Additionally, the research revealed that youth connections to school, employment, and extended [foster care](#) support were associated with lower likelihood of experiencing homelessness and incarceration. The study also identified a smaller group of youth who had not yet been evaluated and requires more study because they appear to have the worst overall outcomes.

In the study, nearly half (46%) of youth aging out of foster care were diagnosed with a disability. The majority had an emotional disability (36.8%) and a small percentage of youth aging out were diagnosed with an intellectual/developmental disability (4.3%), visual or hearing disability (6.3%), and a physical disability (1.1%). Nine percent of the study cohort had not been evaluated for a disability.

"We recommend two important policy implications based on our findings. First, transition services for high-risk youth should be bolstered. Second, extending transition services up to age 25 can help to reduce the risk of homelessness and incarceration," said Gimm.

The paper titled "Assessing Homelessness and Incarceration Among Youth Aging Out of Foster Care, by Type of Disability" was published online in the *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* in February 2022. Researchers did an analysis to identify associations between disability type and both homelessness and [incarceration](#) while controlling for other demographic and child welfare system characteristics.

The study merged the administrative data from the 2014 cohort of the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) and Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS). The NYTD outcomes database interviewed youth when they were 17 years old, with follow-up interviews when they reached 19 and 21 years of age, respectively, to find out how they were doing as they age out of care and transition to adulthood.

More information: JoAnn S. Lee et al, Assessing Homelessness and Incarceration Among Youth Aging Out of Foster Care, by Type of Disability, *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s10560-022-00817-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-022-00817-9)

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