SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS
FROM FOSTER CARE TO ADULTHOOD: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

The Hawai‘i Youth Opportunities Initiative (HYOI)* helps young people make successful transitions from foster care to adulthood. HYOI works with young people and community partners to improve outcomes relating to education, employment, health care, housing, social capital, permanent relationships, and financial capability. HYOI offers the Opportunity Passport,™ an asset building strategy that includes a matched savings account.

Social capital consists of the network of relationships we have with key people in our lives (family, friends, classmates, neighbors, co-workers, etc.) and the exchange of emotional, social, and material support that these relationships provide.1 People with high levels of social capital are happier, healthier, and more resilient to stress.2 Social capital is important for the healthy development of all young people and is especially critical for youth in foster care and those transitioning to young adulthood.3 While in care, youth may become disconnected from family members and social networks in their schools and communities due to multiple placements, school changes, or time spent in group settings. Many foster youth experience trauma and loss, which interferes with their ability to develop and maintain healthy relationships. However, young people who develop strong social networks and lasting relationships with a caring adult or mentor show many benefits when they exit care, including better mental and physical health, greater self-sufficiency, and reduced risk of arrest.4 Making sure that young people in and leaving care have the skills to establish and maintain stable and supportive relationships helps to promote their productive capabilities and improves their chances for success throughout the life course. As a result, recent practice and policy recommendations for transition planning call for a specific focus on building social capital.5

Using data from the April 2014 administration of the Opportunity Passport™ Participant Survey (OPPS)* in Hawai‘i, we explored whether social capital is associated with well-being in the areas of health, housing, education, work, and financial capability. Our sample included 221 emerging adults: 116 were 18 – 20 years of age, and 105 were 21 and older. To measure social capital, young people were asked about permanent relationships with caring adults; the availability of emotional and material support from family members, peers, and community adults; and the extent to which they provide support to others. Young people with low versus high social capital were compared. We found that those with higher social capital showed advantages in terms of housing, medical care, and finances (see the reverse side for details).

Policy and practice recommendations to help ensure that young people have healthy and supportive relationships include:

- placing siblings together and, if this is not possible, facilitating sibling connections for those in and exiting care;
- facilitating consistent and respectful connections with kin and biological family members;
- connecting young people with a range of mentors, caring adults and cultural networks;
- encouraging normal, developmentally appropriate activities, such as spending time with friends and participating in recreational and social activities;
- supporting youth in care and emerging adults to develop relational competencies; and,
- providing resource caregivers serving transition-aged youth with training and education around trauma, social capital and the need for healthy risk taking.6

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of young people, age 18 – 20, lived in 3 or more domiciles in the past year

72% of young people, 21 & older, have ever couch surfed

55% of young people, age 18 – 20, have safe, stable, affordable housing

34% of young people, 21 & older, did not seek medical care when needed

91% of young people, 21 & older, have a bank account

53% of young people, 21 & older, had enough money to cover expenses in previous month

24% of young people, age 18 – 20, lived in 3 or more domiciles in the past year

52% of young people, 21 & older, have ever couch surfed

74% of young people, age 18 – 20, have safe, stable, affordable housing

17% of young people, 21 & older, did not seek medical care when needed

100% of young people, 21 & older, have a bank account

75% of young people, 21 & older, had enough money to cover expenses in previous month

* HYOI is a co-investment site of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. OPPS is a data collection tool created by the Casey Initiative and used by all its partner sites in 18 states. For more information, visit the EPIC ‘Ohana, Inc. website at http://epicohana.org/. Suggested citation: DeBaryshe, B. D., & Stern, I. R. (2015). Successful transitions from foster care to adulthood: The role of social capital. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i, Center on the Family.