



# Maybe It's Time to Reinvent the Wheel: Re-Imagining Supportive Services for Youth Served by Public Systems in the Transition to Adulthood

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Over 43 million youth and young adults (YYA) ages 15–24 in the United States are currently navigating the developmental and social transition from adolescence to adulthood. Millions of these YYA interact with public social service systems designed to provide support in specific areas of need, with many served by multiple systems. Annually, more than 400,000 youth ages 14 to 21 receive special education services (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), over 6.4 million youth ages 12 to 17 have special healthcare needs (Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, n.d.), 4.2 million youth ages 13 to 25 experience homelessness (Morton et al., 2017), nearly 60,000 youth ages 16 to 20 experience foster care placement (Annie E Casey Foundation, 2022), over 300,000 youth ages 16 and older have juvenile delinquency cases (Sickmund et al., 2021), and almost 10% of young adults ages 18 to 25 experience a serious mental illness (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2021). During the transition to adulthood, YYA served by these myriad systems navigate what researchers have called a “service system obstacle course” (Davis et al., 2009) with supports shifting or ending as they move into adulthood. In spite of attempts by systems to support them, YYA who are involved with these service systems tend to have worse educational, employment, housing, and health outcomes than their non-system involved peers (Morton et al., 2017; Osgood et al., 2005). Our public systems of care have failed to ensure that all youth can thrive in the transition to adulthood.

The definition of a successful transition to adulthood has traditionally included key hallmarks of independence including securing employment or education, independent living, and family formation. Though the timing of developmental milestones has shifted in the past 25 years and there are diverse paths that a young person might take from adolescence into adulthood (Berlin et al., 2010), the transition remains rooted within an institutionalized structure grounded in societal values of independence. In particular, society expects that young people engage in school, training, or work activities that enable them to become economically self-sufficient. As such, youth and young adult (YYA) participation in the education, training, and employment systems has been a key focus of supports for youth in the transition for many years (Sum et al., 2014). Likewise, eligibility for social services is often different upon reaching the chronological age that legally signals adulthood, with supports increasing in restrictiveness. Within the United States, the family is the de facto system of support during the transition from adolescence into young adulthood. For example, in 2021, 58% of emerging adults ages 18 to 24 and 23% of those ages 25 to 29 co-resided with a parental figure (Brown, 2021). However, many youth rely on public systems to provide this support, raising questions about how our policies and service systems have responded to the changing nature of the transition to adulthood. Involvement in public systems affects this process of transitioning to adulthood and the outcomes that many YYA achieve.

Over the past two decades, scholars have increasingly recognized this transition as a stage of life that merits specific attention (Committee on Improving the Health, Safety, and Well-Being of Young Adults et al., 2015; Settersten Jr. et al., 2008). Some have focused specifically on the challenges of youth who experience marginalization, particularly those who have a disability, lack familial support, have involvement with public systems, have been convicted of a crime, and/or experience poverty during the transition (Osgood

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et al., 2005). Yet, our service systems remain fragmented with each system focused on providing services for a specific set of eligibility criteria while the young people served may qualify for and interact with multiple systems. There is no uniform policy intended to support YYA who experience marginalization; rather, there are various programs, focused in the areas of workforce development, social services, education, juvenile delinquency prevention and intervention, health care, and national and community service (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2020). These programs are administered by different federal agencies and delivered through varied partnerships with state and tribal governments as well as public and private agencies. The lack of integration and collaboration among youth service systems creates both gaps and overlap in the services for which YYA are eligible (Osgood et al., 2005; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2020). The coordination of services between child and adult-serving systems is also a challenge, due to both chronological age cut-offs and differing eligibility criteria and benefits. For example, most child and adolescent mental health services end at age 18 or 21 and YYA have identified a misalignment with the timing of this shift to adult mental health services along with a cultural difference in the delivery of care that can impact YYA's use of services (Broad et al., 2017). Further, public health insurance coverage for children and adolescents ends between the ages of 18 and 21, and the benefits and services covered by adult Medicaid are often less robust than children's Medicaid or SCHIP programs (Medicaid and CHIP Payment and Access Commission, 2023). Supplemental Security Income payments for youth who met criteria prior to turning 18 must be redetermined upon turning 18 years old (Social Security Administration, 2022). These are just a few examples of incongruencies that impact youth who are (or were) involved with public systems, creating significant barriers to healthy development and well-being.

We believe it is time to fundamentally re-think our approach to supporting this group of young people to thrive in adulthood. We designed the call for this special issue with the intent of bringing together scholars whose work might suggest new directions to support young adults who have been involved with systems to achieve healthy and productive lives. Given the important role that young people play in our society, both now and in the future, it is critical to ensure that those who have relied on public systems receive adequate support during the transition into adulthood. This special issue brings together research from scholars who study this population from the lens of multiple different systems, including foster care, mental health, education, the legal system, special education, and disability supports. As we read the papers submitted, we pushed scholars to go beyond the traditional approach to discussing the implications of their

findings and think one step further about how findings could suggest ways to reimagine better practices and policies. The result is a set of nine papers that provide both empirical data and conceptual work across a range of settings that provides a starting point for reimagining our approach to supporting YYA in the transition to adulthood.

Across the papers, we see evidence of potential targets for future intervention to support young adults navigating the transition as well as potential areas for policy and practice improvements. The special issue opens with a paper by Palmer and Connolly (2022) that frames the broad context of connection to school and work during the transition to adulthood using a large, longitudinal U.S. sample. Findings suggest that disconnection from school and work throughout the transition is not uncommon, with many different subgroups experiencing disconnection from these institutions at various points between the ages of 19 and 25. This pushes us to think in more sophisticated ways about how and when we deliver services and calls for extended and flexible supports that can respond to the variety of patterns of connection and disconnection from school and work over the span of the transition period.

Following from this broader context around school and work connections, we then feature three papers that suggest the need for embedding interventions to address employment and education within a broader relational context. Lea and colleagues (2022) identify this through a case study within the setting of an alternative school and recommend this as a site for reconnecting minoritized groups to employment and education. They also recognize the importance of ensuring the setting builds relationships, teaches social and emotional learning strategies, and removes barriers through financial assistance. Park and Courtney (2022) examine the impact of institutional and interpersonal bonds on risk for legal system involvement among youth exiting foster care in California, finding that connections to school and work (institutional bonds) were most predictive for decreased risks. They highlight the importance of targeting these factors while also attending to the unique relational context of those exiting care. Jaramillo et al. (2022) examined the association between youth-caseworker relationships and high school completion in a large sample of youth in the child welfare system. Their findings highlight the importance of these relationships, particularly for youth that have experienced trauma, and the need for new case management models that center the importance of relationships in addition to critical strategies to ensure connections to school and work.

The next two papers in the issue highlight specific processes that are triggered for youth as they reach the age of 18. Smith Hill and colleagues (2022) examine the issue of guardianship that arises for many youth with disabilities

as they shift to legal adulthood. Their paper raises important issues about youth self-determination and empowerment, highlighting the key role that social workers can and should play in providing robust consideration of options that include alternatives to guardianship. Davis and Gour-dine (2022) focus on Supplemental Security Income re-determination, specifically for Black youth, highlighting the intersectional issues that frame this specific event. They highlight the need for changing the age of re-determination to age 22 while also rethinking the systems and structures that produce a reliance on disability designation for needed services and supports.

The last three papers focus specifically on mental health and the systems that support young people in managing it. These papers call us to reimagine how we conceptualize mental health services and the interventions we deploy within them. Based on findings from their qualitative analysis of mental health service experiences in transition aged youth, McCormick et al. (2022) highlight the need to center relationships and de-emphasize diagnostic labels and prescriptive treatments in practice approaches and be more creative and flexible. Music based therapies may be one creative approach to employ and the systematic review by Rodwin and colleagues (2022) provides a detailed assessment of the evidence supporting these approaches both for treatment engagement and mental health outcomes. The paper also presents a typology that can assist providers in selecting interventions that fit for their context. In the last paper in the issue, Cox et al. (2022) examined youth and provider perspectives about factors affecting a successful transition among youth receiving services in a program for serious emotional disturbance using group concept mapping. They found that both youth and providers believed individual level targets such as life skills were both highly valued and seen as highly feasible. However, while youth highly valued a supportive environmental infrastructure that included benefits for childcare, transportation, and flexible educational opportunities this was seen as much lower on feasibility, highlighting a need for collective advocacy that can bring youth and providers together to advocate for systemic changes.

The changing context of navigating the transition to adulthood within the United States and the intersectional nature of system involvements call for paradigm shifts across policies that support YYA during this transition from adolescence to young adulthood. This special issue presents work that begins to advance our thinking and push beyond traditional approaches to supporting youth in this transition period. Across policies and systems, however, there is a need to re-examine the frameworks that create our current structures. As highlighted in several papers in this issue, we need to re-think the role of age as a driving force of policy

decisions and more broadly develop supports that take a life course perspective in meeting developmental needs. Second, we need to expand our conceptualization of the goals of this transition period to encompass healthy development that includes relationships and human capital rather than a sole focus on economic self-sufficiency. While we saw the importance of education and employment in the findings of several papers in this issue, we also consistently saw evidence that these need to be approached within a relational context that provides more holistic support.

As we take these incremental steps, we also encourage bolder re-imagining that fundamentally restructures our systems to move away from problem-based eligibility and service provision to a unified approach, with one institution that supports thriving in young adulthood across diverse support needs. Youth have been at the forefront of this work as evidenced in a current youth-led, youth-focused movement within the United States called A New Deal for Youth (ND4Y). ND4Y efforts reimagine life for young people by advocating for public investments that support thriving and liberation (A New Deal for Youth, 2022). According to these Changemakers, who have lived experience within public systems, a New Deal that supports youth must focus on issues of (1) Economic Justice and Opportunity, (2) Environmental Justice, (3) Healing and Wellbeing, (4) Justice and Safe Communities, (5) Democracy and Civic Engagement, and (6) Immigration Justice. We believe in this vision as it prioritizes relationships and thriving, positions YYA as experts in their own lives who know what they need, and, as a result, radically transforms the systems that are currently in place.

## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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