

Sexual health behaviors and outcomes among current and former foster youth: A review of the literature



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ABSTRACT

This review examines literature related to pregnancy, sexual health outcomes, and sexual risk behaviors for foster youth and youth who are aging/have aged out of foster care. Using the search terms foster youth, aging out, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, sexually transmitted infections, sexual risk, sexual behavior, and sexual health, 26,376 sources were initially identified. After removing duplicate sources and those that did not meet inclusion criteria and adding others identified through the references of identified sources, 53 sources were included in the review. Outcome measures were grouped into broad categories of pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and risky sexual behaviors, with each having several subparts. Implications for social work practice and policy are presented and directions for future research are highlighted.

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1. Introduction

In 2013, more than 23,000 youth in the United States aged out of the foster care system and into the realm of adulthood without ever being reunited with their families of origin or placed into permanent adoptive homes (Children's Rights, 2015; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, 2014). In addition to those who simply age out of care after becoming too old to qualify for services, approximately 19,000 foster youths per year apply to become emancipated, thereby exiting the system before aging out but also without permanent family support (Children's Rights, 2015; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, 2014). The number of youth exiting or aging out of care into adulthood without permanent family support has increased yearly since 2003 (Children's Rights, 2015; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, 2014). These youth enter a complex society without familial support and other assets that are typically available to youth who have not been in care.

Foster youth aging out of foster care often lack certain developmental assets, which are the skills adolescents need to transition into successful adults (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000; Search Institute, 2015), when compared to youth and young adults who were never in care. These asset deficits occur in many areas, including lack of

educational attainment; lack of adequate living skills, which often results in homelessness; and lack of appropriate social skills, which can lead to involvement with the criminal justice system (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Cusick, Havlicek, & Courtney, 2012; Dworsky, Ahrens, & Courtney, 2012). Youth aging out of care often lack the assets that help them make strong health decisions and engage in beneficial health decision making.

In particular, these youth often lack a solid base of knowledge related to making positive decisions regarding sexual health. These deficits may contribute to the higher risk of early pregnancy, and increased incidences of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including higher rates of HIV/AIDS, for these youth compared to their peers who were never in care (Ahrens, McCarty, Simoni, Dworsky, & Courtney, 2013). Many of the youth in the child welfare system have also suffered sexual abuse, which has been linked risky sexual behaviors and negative sexual health outcomes (Homma, Wang, Saewyc, & Kishor, 2012; Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2001; Van Roode, Dickson, Herbison, & Paul, 2009).

Given the vulnerabilities facing youth aging out of care, this population is of interest to social workers and other helping professionals. Knowledge of the literature regarding sexual health disparities for youth both currently in and aging out of foster care is particularly beneficial to social workers and other practitioners who may be working with any youth currently or previously involved with the child welfare system given that early sexual health risks can impact adulthood across the entire lifespan. Thus, the purpose of this paper was to conduct an

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empirical review of the existing literature related to sexual health and youth in care and youth aging out of care to provide a resource for practitioners and to make recommendations on potential interventions, policy, and directions for future research.

2. Methods

Following the systematic search and review methods outlined in Grant and Booth (2009), eleven databases (Academic Search Premier, Humanities Source, MEDLINE, ERIC, Family and Society Studies Worldwide, Health Source: Nursing and Academic Edition, PsychARTICLES, PsychINFO, Social Work Abstracts, and SocINDEX) were searched using Boolean/Phrase methods for the following key terms: foster youth, aging out, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, sexually transmitted infections, sexual risk, sexual behavior, and sexual health. Each of the outcome terms were searched using both of the population terms. The reference lists of identified studies were also reviewed to locate additional sources. To be included in this review, articles and reports must have addressed sexual health behaviors and/or sexual

health outcomes for foster youth, youth aging out of foster care, or youth that had aged out of foster care system in the United States. The definition of aging out of care varies by state. This study included any studies that included foster children or youth who aged out of care while still wards of the foster care system, as defined by the state in which they resided.

The initial search identified 26,376 possible articles and reports. After elimination of duplicate results, 9123 sources remained. The titles and abstract of each of these were reviewed to determine if they met the inclusion criteria. Sources were removed from the list due to not addressing the identified topics, samples from outside of the United States, and for being written in a language other than English. After these sources were removed, a total of 38 articles and reports remained. Searches of the reference lists of the identified sources yielded another 20 articles and reports. In order to keep this review focused on more recent sexual health outcomes, studies that utilized data collected more than 20 years ago were excluded. This eliminated one study published in 1989 (Polit, Morton, & White, 1989) and one study that utilized data from the original Kinsey studies (Sheppard, Schaffnit, Garcia, &

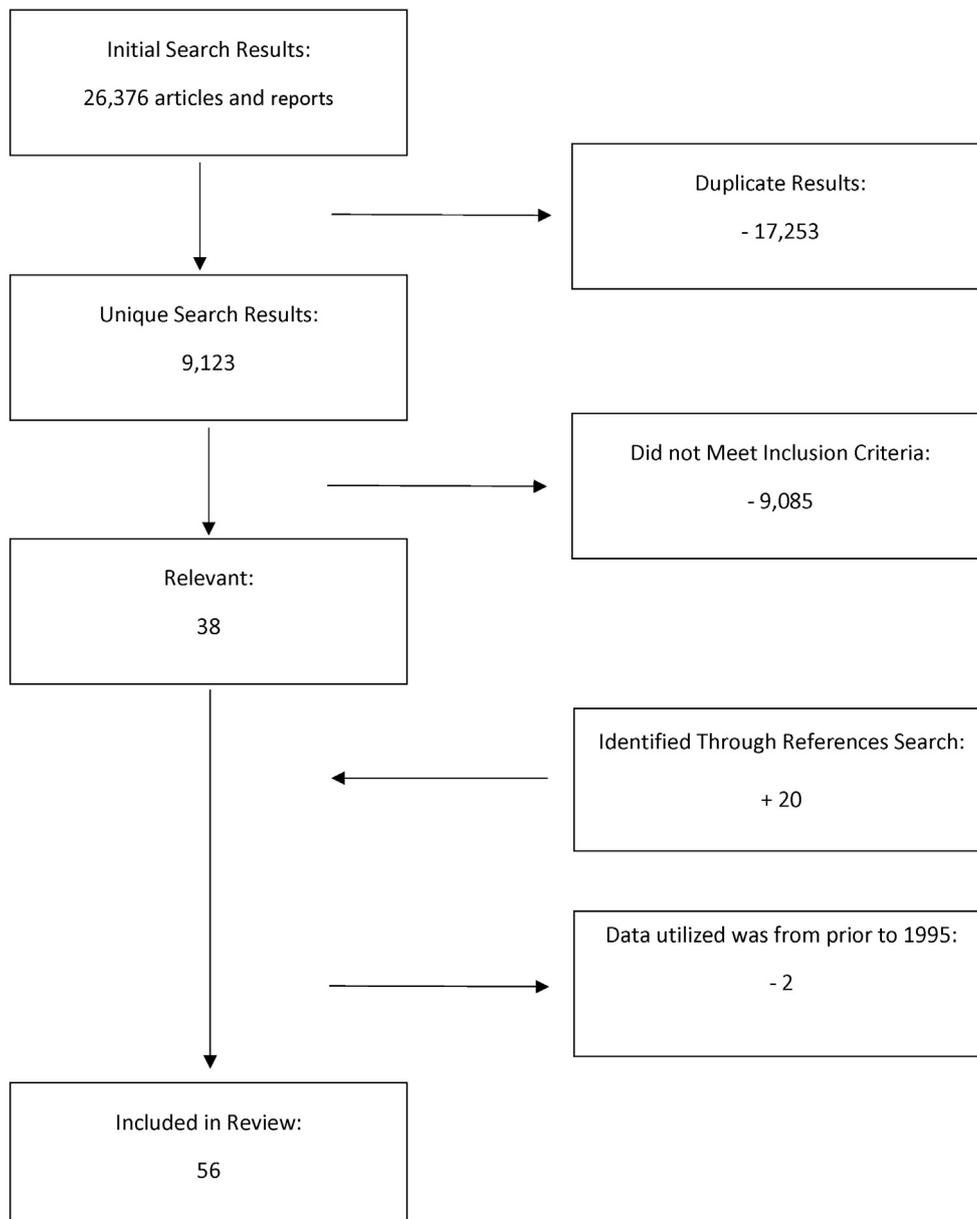


Fig. 1. Flow diagram of literature search.

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