

Resilience of Children in DCFS Care: Findings from 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study

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The 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study assessed the well-being of Illinois children in out-of-home care.¹ The study found that disproportionate percentages of children in out-of-home care had poor outcomes on child development, health, behavioral health, and education. Yet some children in out-of-home care are resilient and do well even if they have been placed out of home because they were maltreated.² Assessing the resilience of children in out-of-home care can tell us about the strengths and resources they have to thrive despite the difficulties in their lives. In this brief, we use data from the 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study to learn about the resilience of Illinois children in out-of-home care.

2017 Illinois Study of Child Well-Being

The 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study provides a snapshot of the well-being of children and youth in out-of-home care in Illinois in 2017. The Children and Family Research Center (CFRC) drew a stratified random sample of 700 children and youth from the population of children and youth in DCFS care in October 2017. The Survey Research Laboratory of the University of Illinois at Chicago conducted the interviews with caseworkers, foster care providers, and children themselves age seven and older between December 2017 and July 2018. For more information, see the full report of the study.

Supportive Relationships

Youth aged 11 to 17 were asked whether they had supportive adults in their life. Almost all youth said they had someone they could go to for help (95.8%) or if they had a problem (97.0%). Across a range of questions, 88.7% or more of youth reported that they had a parent, another relative, and/or a non-relative adult who was supportive. The proportion of youth who reported they could go to a non-relative adult with a problem was smaller but still high (77.6%), and almost all youth said they had a non-relative adult that encouraged them (95.3%).

¹ Cross, T.P., Tran, S., Hernandez, A., & Rhodes, E. (2019). *The 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study: Final Report*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

² Klika, J.B. & Herrenkohl, T.I. (2013). A review of developmental research on resilience in maltreated children. *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse, 14*, 222–234.

A large percentage of children and youth (89.9%) said the supportive adult they mentioned made a positive difference in their life.

Activities and Relationships

Youth aged 11 to 17 answered questions about their after-school activities and their peer relationships. About half of youth reported their involvement in sports was about average for their age and 30.9% reported above average involvement. About half said their involvement with hobbies was above average for their age and 39.5% said it was average. More than three-quarters of youth (78.7%) said that they had a job or chores. About a third of youth (37.9%) said they were in clubs, teams, or other organized groups.

Almost half of youth aged 11 to 17 (47.5%) reported they had between one to three close friends and almost half said they had four or more close friends. A little more than half (55.8%) reported doing things once a week or more times with friends outside of school. Over 90% of youth said they did average or better than average on getting along with siblings and with other kids, on behaving with their caregiver, and on doing things by themselves.

Independent Living Skills

The Ansell Casey Life Skills-Daily Living measure is an instrument that assessed whether youth aged 14 to 17 had different skills needed for independent living in today's society.³ Most youth reported that they had computer skills: finding what they need on the Internet and other technology (85.1%), using an email account (91.4%), and creating, saving, and sending documents (85.6%). They were also aware of the risks of meeting someone in person that they met online (96.5%), and would know what to do if someone sent them a message that made them feel bad or scared (89.9%). Additional skills included being able to call someone in case of an emergency (78.0%), making meals (63.8%), understanding how to read food labels (69.5%), doing laundry (93.3%), keeping their living space clean (73.5%), and knowing what products to use when cleaning the bathroom and kitchen (85.8%).

Life Satisfaction

Children and youth answered a series of question about their satisfaction with life, adapted from the National Institute of Health Emotion Measures Toolbox.⁴ The questions differed somewhat by child age, so we report results separately for children aged 8 to 12 and youth aged 13 to 17. Most children aged 8 to 12 reported considerable satisfaction with their life. Majorities gave an overall positive rating to their life (80.3%), felt their life was going well

³ Casey Family Programs (2017). *Here's your guide to Casey Life Skills*. Webpage. Retrieved from https://caseylife-skills.secure.force.com/clsa_learn_youth

⁴ Health Measures (2018). *Emotion measures: NIH Toolbox Emotion Batteries*. Webpage. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University. Retrieved from <http://www.healthmeasures.net/explore-measurement-systems/nih-toolbox/intro-to-nih-toolbox/emotion>

(76.5%), usually felt their life was just right (68.4%), and felt that they had most of or everything they wanted in life (67.1%). When asked if they if ever wished they had a different kind of life, most of the sample (64.2%) said that they rarely if ever felt that way, but some children and youth always wished that their life were different (16.7%).

Adolescents aged 13 to 17 were often positive about their life, but less so than the younger children. Just over half (53.0%) rated their life situation as good or excellent, but 31.5% rated it as fair and 15.5% as poor or very poor. Likewise 58.8% said they were very or extremely satisfied with their life, 25.8% somewhat satisfied, and 15.4% slightly satisfied or not satisfied at all.

Teenagers' answers tended to be more negative when the questions were about their life experience rather than their appraisal of their feelings about their current life. Almost half (47.1%) always or often wished they had a different kind of life and 23.6% sometimes wished that. A large percentage (42.6%) said that they would change most or all of their life if they could live it over again, and 27.0% said they would change some of it. Almost a third (30.1%) said that they had gotten few or none of the important things they wanted in life and 33.8% said they had only gotten some.

Future Expectations

Youth aged 10 and older answered a series of questions about their future expectations for their life. Over 90% of youth anticipated graduating from high school. About half of youth (48.1%) thought there was some chance to a 50-50 chance that they would marry by age 25, while 21.3% thought it pretty likely to definite. Large majorities thought they would have a good job by age 30 (84.1%) and would live to age 35 (84.6%). Over one-fifth of youth (13.7% of girls and 32.6% of boys) thought there was some chance or it was even likely that they would have a child before age 18.

Discussion

This brief provides positive news about children's resilience. Large percentages of the children reported that they had adults they could turn to. Most children reported involvement in sports, hobbies, and jobs or chores, and some in clubs and other organizations. Almost all children and youth said they had close friends. Large majorities reported having a range of daily living skills. Most children and adolescents reported satisfaction with their life, although meaningful proportions were dissatisfied or only marginally satisfied. Most children had positive expectations for their life, though it is somewhat concerning that so many youth thought they might have a child before age 18.

The satisfaction and optimism in most of these results may be surprising given the maltreatment and disconnection from their family these children have endured, and the frequent problems with health, mental health, and education found in other data from the 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study. Perhaps some children and youth were not entirely candid. On the other

hand, children and youth may provide an honest self-appraisal that is more positive than others' appraisals of them. Their history of living in a maltreating environment and being placed in foster care may lead them to have reduced expectations from others and from their environment. What they do have in potentially hostile environments is themselves and their belief in themselves. Having lower expectations from their environment and greater reliance on themselves may influence their report of their satisfaction with their life. Their ability to think well of their life and themselves in the face of their life challenges may be a strength.

If these data are valid, this suggests that many of these children and youth have strengths to count on to deal with their problems. Any policies and programs designed to enhance the well-being of children in care should build on these strengths. These results also suggest that their life in out-of-home care may support their resilience by facilitating their access to caring adults and to normal positive life experiences that could be out of reach if they lived in homes in which they were maltreated.

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