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SOCIAL SERVICES

Children of the System

New research supports a radical shift in child-welfare policy for the thousands of teens who 'age out' of foster care at age 18, only to face high rates of homelessness, unemployment and incarceration.

By [Daniel Heimpel](#) | Newsweek Web Exclusive
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Eighteen-year-old John Kyzer's blue eyes are bleary and the skin around them puffy as he paces a corner of Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles. Kyzer has been spending his nights on a bench in front of a Starbucks. And now, he is dangerously close to entering the ranks of dozens of other former foster youth who "cop a squat" (sit) on concrete stairwells and sleep in "abandos" (abandoned buildings) up and down the street.

Soon after his 18th birthday, the state of California "terminated" Kyzer's case and he was forced to leave his group home. He moved in with his girlfriend and their 4-month-old baby in the home she shared with three generations of her family. Wanting to help support his son, Kyzer got a job at Starbucks and worked as many hours as the boss would give him. For two months his confidence brimmed.

But then he did something many teenagers do. He blew off work and was fired. Now, the door to his girlfriend's house is shut. Kyzer is on his own.

For Kyzer and many of the more than 25,000 other foster youth in the United States who "age out" of the system every year, there is no family and no support network to pick you up when you fall. Within two years of emancipation, half of Los Angeles County's foster youth will be unemployed, one fifth will be homeless

and a quarter will have been to prison, according to the Children's Law Center. Similar fates can be expected across the country for many of the 500,000 children who call the state their parents.

But a law signed by President Bush in the waning days of his administration could radically change the futures of these children. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 offers states matching federal funds to extend care to age 21 for all foster youth who choose to stay in the system after their 18th birthday. What's meant by "care" would vary state by state, but could include extending Medicaid coverage to age 21 (which about 20 states now do), providing housing vouchers or access to group homes, vocational training, educational funding and psychological counseling services.

"We have known for a long time that kids don't suddenly become self-sufficient at the age of 18," says the federal bill's sponsor, Rep. Jim McDermott of Washington state. "The law we passed last year finally recognized the need to better provide the building blocks of success to these children."

Research released Monday suggests that the approach makes financial sense for a government weighed down by the costs of incarceration, welfare, Medicaid and homelessness incurred by former foster youth who struggle after emancipation. Conducted by the University of Washington School of Social Work, the study finds that caring for young adults until age 21 will represent a return of \$2.40 on every government dollar spent in California.

Experts hope the report will lead more states to implement the federal law. But adding anything to a state budget right now is a hard sell. Thus far only seven states have put forward such legislation, including California. And before the passage of the federal legislation, only two states had implemented comprehensive extended care for foster kids after age 18—Illinois and Vermont.

The study's leading researcher, Mark Courtney, director of Partners for Our Children, a public-private collaboration promoting child-welfare reform at the University of Washington, sees the federal legislation as the most radical shift in child-welfare policy in the last decade. "The government has been unwilling to help kids after 18 beyond teaching them independent-living skills," he says. "That is not what parents do. A parent is not happy to kick a kid out at 18 and say good luck."

Courtney's earlier work has shown significant long-term benefits for kids who get a few more year's care versus those who are pushed out of the system at 18. His hallmark "Midwest Study," published in 2005, was instrumental in shaping the current federal legislation. That report followed 732 foster youth through their 17th, 18th and 21st birthdays. It found that along with lower rates of incarceration, homelessness and unemployment, young people in a state like Illinois, which extends care until 21, were 3.5 times as likely to have completed a

year of college than peers in states like Iowa and Wisconsin, which routinely cut care at 18. (Census data show that less than 3 percent of foster kids earn college degrees, compared with 28 percent of the population as a whole.)

"The minute we kick them out they start looking for their families," says Karen Bass, speaker of the California Assembly and coauthor of The California Fostering Connections to Success Act. The legislation plans to increase spending to \$70 million in California for youths age 18 to 21, largely through the newly available federal funds. "When they can't find their families, they make families of their own on Hollywood Boulevard. In L.A., they are couch surfing; you have groups of young people living together and it is homelessness, just a different form." Bass and coauthor Jim Beall say that despite the budget wrangle and deficits that California faces, the bill bears the name of 26 Assembly members, has wide cross-aisle support and will likely pass.

In this latest study of foster care, Courtney narrowed his focus on higher education. As he had already shown, young people in extended care were better equipped to pursue a higher level of education and thus vastly increased their lifetime earning potential. For an expenditure of \$37,948 over the course of extended care, Courtney concludes that those foster youth will earn \$92,000 more in their working life. "We are talking about spending \$38,000 over one to three years versus what it costs to incarcerate somebody for 20 to 30 years," says Bass. In California, the Department of Corrections anticipates the annual cost of incarceration will jump to \$53,000 in fiscal year 2009-10.

But these undeniable statistics are running headlong into the cold reality of a national financial crisis. "Here is the most significant piece of [foster-care] legislation in a decade and it may be slowed down by these economic times," says Kathi Crowe, executive director of the Foster Care Coalition. "It's almost too bad it is optional." Nonetheless, Courtney believes that the evidence he has presented along with the National Youth in Transition Database, which will be implemented nationwide as of October 2010 and will track young people as they mature into adulthood, will force states to act. "At that point some states may be shamed into changing their laws if the outcomes of their former foster youth look much worse than the outcomes for youth in states that have extended care to 21."

But for Kyzer and the kids currently "copping a squat" on the streets, it may be too late. "I just wasn't ready," Kyzer says of being a father, holding a job and moving into his own place. Tonight he is couch surfing, but tomorrow, his only option may be an abando.