

The Scholar-Practitioner

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National Conference for Hidden Student Populations

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Current Hidden College Student Populations

May include those who have foster care histories, justice-involved experiences, who are survivors of sexual violence or sex workers, recovering substances addicts, who face housing insecurity, who have sought/seeking abortion care, or who have undergone or are in the process of gender reassignment.

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The Scholar-Practitioner is a monthly publication of research summaries that targets the research-to-practice-to-research gap for U.S. scholar and practitioner advocates for hidden college student populations.

This publication reinforces the work of the **National Conference for Hidden Student Populations (NCHP)** by providing a space to share research applications for practice. **NCHP** was the first research conference dedicated to this multidisciplinary area of study. The **6th NCHP** will be held on February 2026 at the University of Georgia.

A Systematic Review of Secondary and Postsecondary Educational Outcomes of Students with Experience in Foster Care

Okpych, N. J., Whitman, K., Lee, J., Neria-Piña, L., Jackson, L. A., & Day, M. (2025). Secondary and postsecondary education outcomes of students with experience in foster care: Systematic review of the literature from 2000-2023. *AERA Open*, 11(1), 1-23.

Students with experience in foster care (SEFC) face unique challenges such as frequent school moves, disrupted relationships, trauma, stigma, and economic hardship, which hinder their educational attainment (Clemens et al., 2016; Dye, 2018; Fawley-King et al., 2017; Okpych & Courtney, 2020). Three commonly reported statistics are that less than half of SEFC graduate from high school, about 20% enroll in college, and just 3% earn a college degree (Wolanin, 2005; Pecora et al., 2005). These statistics can be found on the websites of government agencies, college programs, and community-based organizations, as well as in many peer-reviewed articles. A problem is that these statistics come from regional studies that are more than two decades old and that have formidable methodological limitations (discussed below). Moreover, both studies include SEFC from a bygone era of child welfare policy. More recent research offers estimates from studies with stronger designs. However, at present, there is no definitive publication that reports secondary and postsecondary education rates for SEFC based on best available evidence.

The purpose of the systematic review was to locate and summarize the findings of those methodologically sound studies. Research questions are as follows:

1. What are the secondary completion rates, postsecondary education (PSE) enrollment rates, and PSE completion rates for SEFC?
2. How do the rates of SEFC compare with rates of young people in the U.S.?
3. What are the differences by race and ethnicity in secondary completion rates, PSE enrollment rates, and PSE completion rates for SEFC?

Methods. Using PRISMA-P guidelines (Moher et al., 2015), we reviewed quantitative studies in the U.S. that report educational outcomes for SEFC. Following is the inclusion criteria:

- The publication had a representative sample of youth who were in U.S. foster care on or after their 13th birthday
- Survey data response rate had to be at least 60%
- The study must have assessed at least one of three outcomes up to a certain age: rate of secondary completion (high school diploma/GED) when study participants were age 21 or older, rate of PSE enrollment when study participants were age 21 or older, and/or rate of PSE completion when participants were age 25 or older
- Study participants had to have been in U.S. foster care at some point in 2000 or later

- The study had to be published in 2000 or later

- The study was in English

Out of 3,527 publications, following two rounds of blind review by the study authors, 17 studies met all six criteria. Findings inform understanding of SEFC's secondary and postsecondary educational attainment.

Findings. Five major studies examining educational outcomes among SEFC were the bases of the 17 publications included in this review. The **Midwest Study** tracked a representative group of foster youth in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin from age 17 to 25/30. **NYTD** provides national estimates on high school/GED completion but not PSE outcomes due to limitations of question wording. The **CalYOUTH Study** assessed youth in California post-2010 policy changes extending foster care to age 21. The **Urban Institute Study** analyzed data from over 130,000 SEFC across 10 states, including young people who had been in foster care at age 16 or older. The **Illinois Study** focused on PSE enrollment among SEFC in Illinois foster care in the 2010s. Across all 17 publications, high school/GED completion rates ranged from **69–85%** (8 publications), postsecondary enrollment from **29–64%** (13 publications), and college degree completion from **8–12%** (5 publications). By comparison, estimates from the U.S. Census for young adults aged 25-29 report that 95% hold a high school diploma/GED and 49% earned a 2yr/4yr college degree. Few publications examined racial disparities, which is a notable gap in the literature. No study found

racial disparities for high school/GED completion, one study reported higher PSE enrollment rates for Asian/Pacific Islander SEFC, and a second study reported higher PSE completion rate for Asian/Pacific Islander SEFC.

Discussion. Based on best available evidence, this systematic review provided estimates of secondary and postsecondary education outcomes for SEFC. Contrary to common public perceptions that only about half finish high school, 20% enroll in college, and 3% earn a college degree, the review found higher rates: high school/GED completion ranges from 69% to 85%, postsecondary enrollment from 29% to 64%, and degree completion from 8% to 12%. Despite these improvements, SEFC still lag significantly behind their peers in the general population. Statistically significant racial disparities in secondary completion among SEFC were not found, but some differences appeared in postsecondary outcomes, particularly with Asian/Pacific Islander SEFC having higher PSE enrollment and degree completion rates than their peers.

Implications. Policy recommendations emphasize closing these educational gaps by increasing stable funding for campus support programs tailored to SEFC, similar to federal funding for independent living services. Material assistance, such as extended foster care, Education and Training Voucher (ETV), and state tuition waivers, may positively

influence postsecondary outcomes but some of these programs remain underfunded and insufficient relative to rising college costs. Practice implications include expanding pre-college readiness programs that accommodate SEFC unique needs, enhancing professional development for educators, and adapting college policies to support SEFC who may require longer than four years to graduate. Recommendations for research include extending national tracking beyond age 21, enhancing state data sharing agreements across departments, and developing systems that disaggregate outcomes by race and ethnicity to identify disparities and inform equitable policy.

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2026 NCHP

See you at

**University of Georgia
February, 2026**

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