



Courtesy Denis Felix/Getty Images

## BEYOND THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

THE FUTURE FOR TEENS

*Betsy Krebs and Paul Pitcoff*

Each year tens of thousands of teenagers are released from the foster care system in the United States without high school degrees or strong family relationships. Two to four years after discharge, half of these young people still do not have either a high school diploma or equivalency degree, and fewer than ten percent enter college. Nearly a third end up on public assistance within fifteen months, and eventually more than a third will be arrested or convicted of a crime.

In this richly detailed and often surprising exploration of the foster care system, Betsy Krebs and Paul Pitcoff argue that the existing structure

sets kids up to fail by inadequately preparing them for adult life. Foster care programs traditionally emphasize goals of reuniting children with family or placing children into adoptive homes. But neither of these outcomes is likely for adolescents. Krebs and Pitcoff contend that the primary goal of foster care for teenagers should be rigorous preparation for a fully productive adult life and that the standard life skills curriculum is woefully inadequate for this purpose.

The authors, who together cofounded the Youth Advocacy Center in New York City, draw on their fifteen years of experience working with teens and the foster care system to introduce new ways to teach teens to be responsible for themselves and to identify and develop their potential. They also explore what sorts of resources—legal, financial, and human—will need to come from inside and outside the system to more fully humanize the practice of foster care. Ultimately, Krebs and Pitcoff argue that change must involve the participation of caring communities of volunteers who want to see disadvantaged youth succeed as well as developing methods to empower teens to take control of their lives.

Bringing together a series of inspiring, real-life accounts, *Beyond the Foster Care System* introduces readers to a number of dynamic young people who have participated in the Youth Advocacy Center's programs and who have gone on to apply these lessons to other areas of life. Their stories demonstrate that more successful alternatives to the standard way of providing foster care are not only imaginable, but possible. With the practical improvements Krebs and Pitcoff outline, teens can learn the skills of effective self-advocacy, become better prepared for the transition to full independence, and avoid becoming the statistics that foster care has so often produced in the past.

**Betsy Krebs** is cofounder and director of the Youth Advocacy Center, Inc. She is the recipient of Open Society Institute and Ashoka fellowships, and serves on the advisory board to the commissioner of the New York City Administration for Children. She is a graduate of Harvard Law School and worked for four years as an attorney representing foster children in Manhattan Family Court. **Paul Pitcoff** was a documentary filmmaker and chair and professor of the department of communications at Adelphi University before he cofounded the Youth Advocacy Center, Inc. His film credits include the award-winning *The Way It Is*, which profiles parents who are forced to leave their children in foster care.

“This book offers brilliant insights into helping disadvantaged teenagers turn their lives around. It is gripping to read, offering very engaging stories of young people struggling to find a place in the adult world.”

—Francine Cournois, professor of clinical psychiatry, Columbia University

“*Beyond the Foster Care System* is a powerful tool to help youths in foster care move to fully engaged lives in our society. Through the stories of wonderful young people we learn how to build on their strengths, abilities, and ambition to help them succeed.”

—Marian Wright Edelman, President and Founder, Children’s Defense Fund

“Here is lively, knowing, socially alert scholarship—a way for us to understand what our country’s youth need, want, and desperately ought to have: the interested, compassionate attention of their fellow citizens.”

—Dr. Robert Coles, Pulitzer Prize winning author

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