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Among high school graduates, fewer than 2 percent earn a college degree.

Within two years of emancipation, 50 percent will find themselves homeless, in prison or on welfare.

The youngest of five children, Johnson says, her odyssey through the social services system began when her young mother got hooked on drugs. Her father lived in Ohio and was unable to care for Johnson and her siblings. Over the years she lived with her grandmother several times, with an uncle and his family and later with various foster families in communities in Oakland, Fremont and Los Angeles.

"I was very fortunate to get really good families," she says. "I didn't have any horror stories."

She can't say the same for her early academic record.

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