

**Residential Settings of
Young Adults in Extended
Foster Care: A Preliminary
Investigation**

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Introduction

After several years of advocacy and legislative decision making (Mosley & Courtney, 2012), California became the 15th state to extend foster care past the age of 18. On January 1, 2012,¹ young adults in California previously set to “age out” of the system at the age of 18 were given the option to remain in care. Based on the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2008, California’s Fostering Connections Act, often referred to by its initial enabling legislation, AB 12, allows the state to draw on federal money to provide support for young adults past the age of eighteen. Prior research indicated that young adults who left care at eighteen faced a host of challenges (Courtney, 2009). Additionally, the dramatic changes in the extended transition to adulthood for all young adults over the last several decades (Furstenberg, Kennedy, McLoyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2004) made this legislative action particularly important for youth in foster care.

A crucial aspect of this legislation at the state and federal level is the various requirements it places on these young people, who are legal adults but remain under the supervision of their respective state (Courtney, 2009). One of the primary requirements is the limitation of the residential settings young adults may reside in. To this point, little is known about young adults’ views on these living arrangements, the quality of these settings, and their impact on young adults. While this report cannot answer all of these questions, it is an early look at the residential settings provided to these young adults through extended foster care in California.

Implementation of extended foster care has now been in progress for two years. Earlier reports on the implementation of extended care across California found that this complicated legislation had produced some challenges for young people (Courtney, Dworsky, & Napolitano, 2012). In particular, focus groups conducted with young adults several months after the law was enacted found that young people were still

¹ Maine and North Dakota also implemented extended foster care on this date.

uncertain about many details of the law and struggled to gain accurate knowledge about it as the implementation was underway (Courtney, Dworsky, & Napolitano, 2012).

In this report, we check in with young adults a year after our initial research to ascertain their progress. We focus particular attention on young adult's experiences with residential settings in California. While the sample discussed in this report is not representative of all nonminor dependent young adults across the state, it does provide an important early glimpse into the residential experiences of young adults in extended foster care. It also suggests that future research should continue to qualitatively examine the unique residential experiences of these young adults. Qualitative work similar to the research conducted in this report can shed much needed light on the nuances of the residential settings young people find themselves in. This will likely provide keen insights into the outcomes found in the survey research.

Background

The transition to adulthood is a critical stage in the life course. It is generally during this time that young adults begin to establish independent lives. During this time, many young adults move towards educational and employment goals, transition out of the parental home, and establish their own families (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005). Young people transitioning into adulthood from the foster care system often face a unique set of challenges during this period. For one, many of these young people have hit these traditional markers of adulthood earlier in the life course. Additionally, young adults in foster care dealing with the normative transitions of this time must also negotiate the complicated transition out of state or county level supervision and into independence. Prior research has consistently shown that the transition out of state monitored care, and into adulthood, is particularly difficult for young adults in foster care. Young adults aging out of the foster care system suffer from a range of negative outcomes including lower educational attainment, higher rates of job instability, increased rates of homelessness, and various mental and physical health problems (see Courtney, 2009 for a more extensive review). There is evidence that extending foster care to age 21 can insulate young adults from some of these difficulties (Courtney, Dworsky, & Pollack, 2007; Courtney, Lee, & Perez, 2011; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Dworsky, & Courtney, 2010; Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Hook & Courtney, 2013, 2011; Lee, Courtney, & Hook, 2012; Peters, Dworsky, Courtney, & Pollack, 2009).

This evidence, and these challenges, has led to large changes in federal and state legislation. In California as of January 1, 2012, young adults in care at age 18 are eligible to participate in extended foster care if they follow one of several requirements. Young adults must be in school, working at least part-time, participating in a program to reduce employment barriers, or suffering from a medical condition that prohibits participation in the above activities to participate in extended foster care. In addition to fulfilling these requirements, young adults are also required to reside in specific types of residential settings. These settings are based on requirements established in the federal Fostering Connections Act. In California,

young adults must reside in an approved Supervised Independent Living Setting (SILP), THP-Plus Foster Care program, group home (under limited circumstances),² or in the home of an approved relative, nonrelated legal guardian, foster family, or foster family agency. As of April 1, 2013, shortly before this qualitative work began, the largest percentage of nonminor dependents³ lived in SILPs, followed by young adults living with kin and with foster family agencies (California Child Welfare Indicators Project, 2014). However, participation rates in the different settings vary significantly by county.

While the discussion surrounding these residential settings played a crucial role in the support and passage of the legislation (Mosley & Courtney, 2012), to this point relatively little is known about them. Prior research on residential settings for nonminor dependents in state care is mixed and fraught with complications (Collins, 2004; Courtney, 2009). In particular, little is known about the nature of settings young adults find themselves in, their feelings about these settings, and the challenges they have found within these settings. Characteristics of their living arrangements are likely to be some of the most important contributors to the well-being of young people in extended foster care, yet research is nascent in examining these places. This report is one of the first steps to understanding the residential settings of nonminor dependents in extended foster care in California.

² Young adults may live in group homes until age 19 in order to finish a high school degree or equivalent. Youth cannot remain in group care after their 19th birthday unless doing so is necessary for medical reasons.

³ This figure only refers to nonprobation, nonminor dependents.

Sample and Methods

To develop a preliminary understanding of the residential settings of young adults involved in extended foster care in California, we spoke with nonminor dependents across the state. In the spring and summer of 2013, young adults in six counties across California participated in focus groups and interviews. Four of these counties are located in the northern part of the state, and two are located in the southern part of the state.⁴ Sixty-one young people participated in seven focus groups. Thirty-five of these young adults additionally participated in extended in-depth qualitative interviews. To get further details about some residential settings, five individuals who were staff of agencies supervising the residential settings of nonminor dependents also participated in in-depth interviews.

The research team initially recruited young adults to participate in the study via focus groups. Focus group participants were identified in two distinct ways: either by county staff responsible for providing supervision of the care of nonminor dependents or by staff members in not-for-profit residential settings, most often transitional housing providers.⁵ County staff recruited focus group participants in two rural northern California counties and two southern urban counties. Focus group participants in two urban northern counties were recruited directly through different transitional housing program providers. Depending on method of recruitment, focus groups took place either in county buildings that were familiar to young adults or at their transitional housing program. Irrespective of location, focus groups took place within private rooms without staff or social workers present, were digitally recorded with consent of the participants, and lasted an average of 45 minutes. Focus groups ranged in size from six to ten participants.

⁴ To ensure confidentiality, the names of the counties young adults resided in are not provided.

⁵ Although THP+FC was not available in many areas during the period we conducted our research, the organizations that we did contact had THP+FC at the time of our visit. Staff at other organizations helped us to organize focus groups with young adults in the area who they knew to be in extended care.

Nearly 60 percent of the focus group participants were female. The young adults from the rural part of northern California were primarily Caucasian. Focus group participants from counties in urban areas of the state, both in the north and south, consisted primarily of Hispanic and African American young adults. Focus group discussions centered on young adults' experiences in the past year with extended foster care. In particular, focus group participants discussed their experiences under extended care, the types of places they had resided in, their relationships with caregivers, guardians, and/or caseworkers, and their views on ways to improve their experiences under the law. These groups also provided an opportunity to learn if the information young adults were receiving about extended care had improved since very early in the law's implementation (see Courtney, Dworsky, & Napolitano (2013) for a review of young adults' perspectives at that point in time).

Upon completion of the focus group, young adults learned that they could participate in an in-depth interview at a location chosen by them to further discuss any issues of interest in a more private setting. Over half of the young adults participated in this second phase of research. Over 80 percent of these interviews took place at the respondent's residence. Interviews took, on average, ninety minutes and were recorded with the participant's consent. Young adults signed consent forms at each research phase and were compensated for their time.

The interview sample was two-thirds female and similar to the racial and ethnic makeup of the focus groups. Young adults residing in all of the living arrangements available under extended foster care participated in these discussions. Given the necessity of utilizing specific service providers for focus groups in two urban counties, the majority of young adults in the interview sample lived in Transitional Housing Placement Plus-Foster Care (THP+FC) programs.⁶ The next largest group of young adults resided in Supervised Independent Living Settings, followed by those living with foster families.

This report focuses primarily on the interviews conducted with young adults, though the focus groups provide some analytic context for their experiences.

⁶ In this group, we include young adults in both officially designated THP+FC settings as well as those in organizations with THP+FC who had not yet moved to the program's specific THP+FC residences. Most often, these young people were not yet 19 and therefore were eligible to stay in their placements until more rooms opened in the THP+FC portion of their program. Given the delays in implementing THP+FC throughout the state, this seemed the most appropriate decision given the timing of our research.

Context of Residential Settings for Young Adults

We begin this report with a discussion of the various types of residential settings young adults resided in. The young people in THP+FC placements primarily lived in apartments rented out through their program. Staff at some THP+FC organizations reported difficulties in the local community convincing apartment complexes to rent units to their organizations. Generally, then, when organizations found apartment complexes that would take their young adults, they rented out several apartments within each complex. This benefited young people in that they were able to have peers in similar situations close by, but also served as a reminder to young adults of their participation in the program and that their independence was generally still limited.

Perhaps not surprisingly, variation between apartment complexes was quite high. We encountered some nice complexes and units. These complexes tended to have a wider distribution of residents by socioeconomic status; for example, in areas by universities there appeared to be a mixture of young professionals, students and even some young families. In these complexes, the landscaping was crisp and clean, signage led clearly to different areas of the complex, the pool area appeared well maintained and the exterior of the buildings demonstrated overall upkeep. Residents did not have garbage or other items placed on balconies and there was a sense of order in the vicinity.

Some young people were living in less ideal conditions. In these units, the upkeep in the complex was much less clear and bars were often located on unit windows. In one rural county, a young adult lived in a collection of low rises behind a dilapidated strip mall directly off a highway. There was garbage and other debris hanging off balconies and around windows and the apartments and grounds did not seem well maintained. While the young adult's own unit was quite spacious and in much better condition on the inside, the area itself did not seem inviting. Some young people also described safety concerns. Speaking

about his neighborhood, Joe,⁷ a young adult living⁸ in THP+FC in a rural county, reported that, “there was [like] a stabbing around the corner a few days ago. . . . There’s usually like a few stabbings around here” due to gang activity. Yasmin described her neighborhood in an urban county as “ghetto. It’s ghetto. Not the neighborhood I expected when I moved in. . . . Down the street over there there’s like gangsters and stuff.” In contrast, Barack, who lives in a THP+FC apartment, reported that “the whole neighborhood’s good. It’s a lot more like calm. Where I’m from. . . out here is way calmer.” He also mentions, however, that someone recently attempted to rob him in his neighborhood during daytime hours but “[the perpetrator] didn’t get away with it and he never tried again.”

Other young adults found that their new neighborhoods provided them some semblance of stability that their previous neighborhoods had not. Brandy, living in a SILP with friends, liked her new neighborhood because, “It’s just quiet. I can actually be free compared to the other apartments I’ve stayed in. . . . [They were] ghetto. It was lots of drama over there, so I like it here. I’m free. I feel free.” Nicole, living in THP+FC housing, replied that her neighborhood is

actually really nice. It’s quiet. And it’s really like, it’s the typical American neighborhood like we have kids who live next door and ride their bikes down the street and there’s never any like really big noise or there’s no police driving down the street or anything. So it’s a really, really nice neighborhood.

It will be crucial to keep in mind this dramatic variability in the location of young adult residences, at times even within the same county, when assessing young adult outcomes under extended foster care.

Young adults living in THP+FC placements often reported relatively little say in what type of neighborhood they would live in. Program coordinators discussed their own awareness of gang or other potentially inflammatory issues (such as neighborhood racial boundaries) that might preclude them from placing young people in certain neighborhoods, but young adults generally seemed to be placed where there was availability. Yasmin ended up in her THP+FC apartment because, “I got referred to it, and they offered me the placement, so I said yeah. I said yes to the placement before I know where it was what it looked like.” Young adults were generally grateful about having a place to stay and did not bring up much discontent over their limited options in choosing housing. Terrell, living in THP+FC housing, stated that when he was looking for a place to stay his request was fairly simple. He wanted, “Just a roof, something basic. I didn’t want anything extravagant. I just wanted to make sure I was comfortable and well fed.

⁷ All proper names in this report are pseudonyms chosen by the respondent. Some minor identifying characteristics have also been changed to ensure confidentiality.

⁸ Descriptions of youths’ living arrangements refer to their housing at the time of the interviews.

That's about it." Similarly, Barack reported that at 18 he was simply looking for, "a place to lay my head."

There was also quite a bit of variation in terms of unit quality. Joe, living in THP+FC in a rural county, reported regarding his apartment:

There's a lot of bad things to this place. . . . It's just like the stove is like 50 years old. The wood's like all tacky looking. There's a hole in my [bedroom] door and the window's like stuck and the AC sucks and the refrigerator sucks. It's just like the rail outside [over the balcony] is broken. . . . The landlord does not care. And the hot water only runs for like 20 minutes tops. You have to try to conserve.

Terrell reported that his apartment is about "the middle" in terms of quality his THP+FC program provides. However, there were several break-ins in his apartment complex and in his apartment, "we got roaches. I don't know where the hell they come from because we aren't dirty, you know."

Interestingly, in several apartment complexes where young adults resided, young adults' apartments were located at the very back of the complexes. These ranged from very large apartment complexes with well over one hundred units, to smaller ones with less than twenty. While none of the young adults mentioned this point in our discussions, their placement at the back of complexes was quite noticeable after visiting multiple complexes. Given landlords' concerns about taking in young adults from the foster care system, it is not surprising that these are the units that they would rent out to programs serving older youth in foster care. Further, with the limited amount of affordable housing in many counties, housing programs cannot be blamed for taking what they can get. However, it was quite striking that these young adults had been placed at the very back of complexes. Further research should consider how young people might interpret this situation.

While there was some variation in organization-provided settings, this was even more obvious for young adults living in SILP placements. Advocates have previously discussed concerns that SILPs would be the most challenging residential settings for young adults, with some particularly concerned that young people would be left to fend for themselves in untenable living situations. Within this sample, there was great variation of living arrangements for those living in SILPs. In the most dramatic case, a young woman's residence consisted of one room in a transient motel, wherein she had to share the bathroom with others in her hallway. When Diamond initially arrived in the building, the bathroom was co-ed but she successfully lobbied the management to make it single sex. However, the door to the bathroom still did not lock at the time of our conversation and so she had to worry about others entering while she was showering. She mentioned repeatedly that, although she did not feel unsafe in the building, there were several registered sex offenders in the building and she had set up a buddy system with another person in

the building to ensure her protection. Her room itself was approximately 10 by 13 feet and contained one window, which would not lock and opened to the fire escape. She was able to have one dresser and a small refrigerator in her room and many of her dresses were located on hangers that hung on pipes in the ceiling. She also had to put a sheet over her door to cover an opening that men previously used to look into her room. Some of the inspections in the building were not up to date at the time of our conversation and, overall “[The building] needs to be fixed up. Even though they’ve already fixed it up from the crap it was before, it still needs a lot more fixing up. [Management] say, ‘we can’t get rid of all the bugs that are in the place, so you just got to keep your stuff clean in order not to have bugs.’ When I see [the bugs], I’m like, ‘ooh, did I really just see that?’” Although her social worker was hesitant to have her live here, she ultimately acquiesced.

[My caseworker’s] the one who came and approved it, but she thought it was really tough. And I was like, “Well, living on the street is tough, too, so we’re going to have to, you know. I’m a pretty tall, big, girl. I’m pretty sure if someone really wanted to try to hassle me, it’d be a pretty good fight.” So she said, “okay.” Some stuff we didn’t really see or we weren’t sure, so we let it go.

Although she knew this was not an ideal living situation, Diamond was adamant that it was the best place for her because of its limited financial investment and close proximity to school and work.

Overall, then, young adults in this sample experienced a variety of contexts in their living arrangements. Although these residential settings generally provided adequate housing and met their basic needs, there were many differences among complexes and locations that are crucial for understanding young adults’ experiences under extended foster care. Neighborhood and apartment conditions varied dramatically between housing sites. While some young adults reported additional hostility from landlords who were aware of their foster care status, young adults generally did not report hostility from neighbors. However, further research should investigate the quality of young adults’ housing and assess the impact of the variability between types of placements on young adults.

Young Adults' Feelings about Residential Settings

Consistent with the opinions of young people at the beginning of extended foster care's implementation in 2012 (Courtney, Dworsky, & Napolitano, 2012), young adults in this study overwhelmingly supported the policy. They believed that the law gave them an opportunity to set themselves up for adulthood in a way that had not been previously available to those aging out of foster care. For example, Yasmin believed that, "[AB 12] is really good. I think it's really good how they came up with that, because a lot of young adults once they turned 18, they were out and then they ended up homeless, and so it just helps. It lifts a little bit of weight off our shoulders for when we turn 18." Terrell related, "I'm appreciative of AB12. I'm glad they passed the law, because I thought the cut off time of 18 wasn't a good cut off time. What are kids supposed to do, go check into the homeless shelter after they're 18? That makes no sense. AB12 is a hope." Before Tiffany found out about extended care, she had bouts of anxiety as she wondered about her next living arrangement.

before I found out about AB12, I was concerned that I was going to have to live in a shelter again and I was afraid...I felt like I was going to have to drop out of school or something, so that was what I was concerned about. So when they told us about AB12 and that [it] actually passed and I was actually qualified to stay, I was just like, oh, great. Yay. Sign me up. Where do I sign?

Similarly Rachel stated that, "when I was turning, almost turning 18, I was freaking out, because I didn't have a house, I don't really talk to my family. I was freaking out, because I didn't know how to do any of it. When I heard about this and I got in the [THP+FC] program, I felt relieved."

Some young adults left foster care at 18, or seriously considered it, but stayed or quickly returned once they realized their own needs. For example, Nicole did think about leaving care when she turned 18, "because I wanted to get out and just go do stuff on my own. But I knew I was not ready yet, I just need a

little bit more time. I didn't even know where I would go, because I didn't want to hang out with my family and stuff like that." Given this uncertainty, she chose to stay and was about to transition to a THP+FC residence within her organization. Princess had lived in several juvenile justice facilities and by the time she turned 18 she left the foster care system because "I didn't want to be in the system anymore." However she came back, and entered a THP+FC program, when she realized the help she still needed. She related, "They help me so much, I need[ed] to come back. So that's why [I did]." Brandy similarly conveyed an initial excitement about turning 18 and leaving foster care, and a relatively quick realization that the transition would be too much for her:

At first I was happy, I was like, yeah, I'm about to be out of the system when I turned 18. People were like "when are you getting out?" I said, 'I'm going to get out as soon as I turn 18.' And I was like, 'I can't wait till I turn 18 so I can get out of the system.' I said, 'I hate these people. They do nothing for me....'

Q: How come you changed your mind?

A: Because I said I'm going to need the extra help.

Responding to a question on whether he considered leaving foster care at 18, Terrell said, "Hell no. Not ready. . . I won't say I wasn't ready to take care of myself, because I can take care of myself. It was just like I just saw all the potential. All the money basically, you know, I'm just going to get it, why waste it?" While some young adults reported housing instability, including bouts of homelessness, before settling into their current arrangements under extended care, many young adults in the sample discussed moving immediately into extended care settings because they knew it would provide the best chance for their own advancement.

Many young adults we spoke with were excited about the change in their living situation that extended foster care entailed and, in particular, appreciated the relative freedom they now received as nonminor dependents in the system. For example, Tiffany, a 19-year-old woman living in THP+FC, responded to a question about what she likes best about the two bedroom apartment she shares with a roommate by stating, "Basically, just mostly the freedom and having keys in my pocket." Later in our discussion, Tiffany told an eloquent story about adjusting to her newfound freedom.

I mean, I can leave when I want to, go when I want to. Coming when I want to. I don't have to really check in with nobody. I can eat whenever I want. I don't have to ask anybody or anything. Like last night I came in [the kitchen], I was really thirsty and I got something to drink. For some reason I was looking around because it was like 3 o'clock in the morning and I was looking around, I was like, I feel like I'm not supposed to be doing this, so I walked slowly to my room, because I guess I felt like somebody was going to like tell me I couldn't do it.

Q: But nobody will.

A: Yeah. So then I went back in my room, drunk a little bit more of my juice and went back to sleep. Because I realized that nobody was here to tell me that I couldn't drink it or I had to not drink it in my room or something.

Tiffany turned 18 while living with her foster parents, but found an incompatibility between the newfound independence she believed she should have and the rules of her foster parent's household. Yasmin was also happy to be in extended foster care after leaving her last foster home because she "just wanted a peaceful home for my children and me. I didn't like living in my foster home. There was always stress and just drama. I wanted something just for us." While Johnny was happy living with his foster family, he chose to enter a THP+FC program upon turning 18 because "the program, they have stuff that I want to have, like you know, my own apartment and get my own food and stuff like that. Here, you know, I have my own TV, my own flat screen, game system, speakers, my own Wi-Fi in the house." He continued, saying that, "I really try to have my own stuff and be able to do stuff. And you know I'm happy having someone I guess watching my back. I mean, they come and they do checks and stuff, but you know, they're really just making sure everything is all right and stuff like that." Brandy stated that it was "exciting" to leave her group home and move into a SILP with friends because she just wanted to be on her own and, "[get] away from everybody." Similarly Rachel reported that it's "really cool" living in THP+FC because, "it's more freedom, just what I wanted. . . I was looking for more independence [when I turned 18], because I felt I was ready for more independence..." Later in our discussion she related that despite this readiness, "I was kind of scared in the beginning, because I thought it would be too much freedom. But it's not, it's just perfect."

Young adults were generally grateful for the support provided to them through extended foster care. This law has limited some of their anxiety about turning 18 and provided some stability as young people traverse this new period in the life course. Yet even with this positive outlook towards extended care and their new residential settings, there were still many challenges for young adults as they transitioned to their new status.

Challenges in Residential Settings

Despite the positive experiences many young people attached to their residential settings under extended foster care, many still faced challenges. For one, several young adults, particularly those living in counties without THP+FC placements at the time of our study, were frustrated by the lack of this option. As Cami stated, “I mean, one of the negatives is that we can’t, right now they don’t have like THP-Plus Foster Care yet. That’s my main negative, because I don’t have a plan yet. But outside of that I feel like it really is a huge benefit.”

Another challenge stemmed from the long commutes many young adults dealt with in their neighborhoods. Young adults in this sample frequently discussed having to travel some distance so that they could attend school and/or work. Only two of the thirty-five young adults we interviewed had access to their own vehicle, and consequently the vast majority of young adults relied on public transportation to get around. This often meant that young adults, even in urban areas, traveled upwards of one hour to get to school or work. While most young adults accepted these travel times and conditions as relatively normative, presumably because they were already used to long commutes, this was still a challenge these young adults dealt with daily. Natalie had to turn down a pay raise at the chain store where she was working because the two-hour plus commute was not financially justified. Instead, she transferred to a closer store that still takes her “a little less than an hour” via bus, without a pay increase. Similarly, Nicole commuted over an hour to school:

I have to take two buses to get to school. . . so [the first bus] takes like 30 to 45 minutes depending on which bus I take and how long the bus driver takes to drive the bus. And then I hop onto [another bus] and then take that to my school, which is probably about the same like 30 minutes, 30 to 15 minutes, and then I have to walk from the bus stop to my school, so it takes me awhile. . . like an hour and a half.

She was also frustrated by the hour and a half commute on public transit to get downtown where, “all the activities are.” Tiffany took two buses to get from her THP+FC setting to her high school, which took her an hour. While she commuted to school a similar distance from her previous placement, the program did take care to put her closer to her next school, a college she will be attending in the fall. However, this did not seem to be a possibility for many young adults dealing with formidable commutes.

Young adults also discussed financial challenges in their settings. These challenges generally took on two forms. The first type involved learning how to maintain and budget money themselves, whereas the second involved not allowing themselves to be extended too far by needy friends or relatives.

Regarding the former, many young adults indicated that their limited finances complicated their transition into new residential settings, particularly for those living in SILPs. Young adults discussed the challenges of gathering enough start-up funds to move into their apartments, as well as furnish them. Diamond had difficulty initially getting her monthly stipend, a not uncommon situation among young adults in this sample. This understandably caused her serious financial challenges when she moved into her new apartment:

I had to put \$400 for the deposit and then like my first two months of rent like a \$1,000 and something, but then I also had to buy stuff for the room. . . . That took up all the savings. . . then I had to pay my phone bill. And then I had to have like a little—I call it a fire fund when things don’t go great, which things didn’t, because, um, [the county] didn’t give me no money, and I had to purchase food.

Q: How long did it take for you to get your stipend?

A: A while. I didn’t get it the first month and I didn’t get it, I got it halfway through the second month.

Natalie had plans to leave her transitional housing program when she turned 18. Although she faced challenges in finding an apartment she could afford in her county, she eventually located an apartment she thought would work. However, “the apartment was \$800 utilities included, everything \$800. But it was only 200 square feet.” Although she wanted to be on her own because she, “just didn’t want to live in another program” she ultimately decided that the price was too high for the size she was getting and she should instead relocate to the THP+FC housing her program had recently started providing.

Many young adults also found the challenge of balancing independence with responsibility to be quite daunting in this relatively unsettled and demanding life stage. This was particularly the case regarding balancing finances with newfound independence. For example, Tiffany related that, “I noticed I’m running out of money faster than I normally would.” While Joe enjoyed the one bedroom apartment he had through a THP+FC program, he often found himself overwhelmed by the responsibility of caring for

himself. While discussing whether he cooked for himself most nights, he eventually admitted that he did not eat much, and was usually hungry, because of his own money mismanagement and adjustment issues.

Well, this last month, I kind of messed up my money in the first month. I blew like most of my food money, because I was partying a lot, because I was moving out and stuff. . . . I've been pretty starving, but at the same time, I can't really feel bad for myself, because I'm like, well, I blew the money. . . . Actually, one of my friends, he just like, he has the cans that, you know how most people just have cans of stuff that they've never eaten? He just brings it over. . . I've been getting like cans of rice and beans, almost like three-pound bags.

This was not exactly the life Joe was expecting:

I just expected like proportion, balanced meals and washing my dishes after I'm done and it just all kind of fell apart. . . I expected it to be way more like clean stuff, too. Like I've never wore clothes more than one time and now I have to. It's like I have to walk to Safeway to get clean clothes and then go do my laundry. . . I've been too freakin' broke to like be able to get 3 dollars in quarters from the store.

Joe also had trouble with the landlord in his apartment complex because his friends had migrated to his apartment for parties due to its lack of parental supervision. Although he acknowledged that "I've been told all the time don't let your friends take advantage of you, because they're just going to use you," he continued to let these experiences take place because he enjoyed them, and because he was the only one with the independent living situation that allowed for it.

Joe's experience, in particular, demonstrates a challenge many young people seemed to face. Young adults, finally feeling a bit more "free" and "independent" wanted to take this time to experience what they believed life at this stage has to offer: personal freedom, discovery and even parties. But they need to be very conscious in balancing this normative desire with the financial constraints of their position.

Similar to Joe, other young people also faced difficulties due to competing demands from family and friends. Brandy was living in a SILP with two roommates and one of their infant daughters in a two-bedroom apartment. When we arrived at her relatively well-kept apartment complex mid-morning one day during the week, there was an abundance of people in her apartment: an older man in what seemed to be pajamas, several young adults and 4 small children. Although she claimed that those individuals did not live with her, it seemed likely that Brandy was sharing the space with them. Diamond lent her brothers, who were facing homelessness, several hundred dollars when she first moved into her SILP, which further complicated the already tight finances she discussed earlier. Although she did not have the money to meet her own rental needs, she loaned them money because they were too old to be eligible for extended foster care (they too had been in foster care) and because "I'd rather help [them out], then have [them] go homeless." While her brothers promised they would pay her back, she did not expect that they

would and this was indeed the case. Given longstanding knowledge about the experiences of housing assistance among the poor (Stack, 1974), it is not surprising that some young adults in care provided living quarters or financial assistance to family members or friends who had even less stability in terms of housing.

In addition to financial concerns, young adults also consistently reported challenges regarding their living companions. Given that most of them had previous experience living in group quarters, the adjustment to living with others in and of itself was not unique. However the movement from homes where they lived with multiple peers, whether in group homes or foster homes, to apartments either by themselves or with only one roommate was quite daunting for some young adults. While young adults overwhelmingly mentioned that they preferred the freedom that the latter type of living entailed, they still faced several challenges adjusting to this experience.

For some young adults, the primary challenge was dealing with feelings of loneliness and isolation that living alone, or with only one other person, entailed. Diamond reported that moving into her own place had been incredibly “stressful.”

When I first moved out, I lost a lot of weight. I got down like 145. I weighed 160 when I moved in and then I dropped a lot of weight, because it was really stressful and stuff. You need a buddy system. Not just the people that live in your building, but people outside that know you, or somebody that could help. . . I think being by myself [was the biggest struggle]. . . no one’s telling you who to trust or whatever, you have to make your own decision or good judgment and you have to use it.

Sarah reported that she liked her foster care placement prior to her current situation better because in her new house, “It’s more, like sometimes you get lonely here when the girls leave you’re just home alone. It’s, like, sad.” Brandy expressed a similar sentiment when relating what she likes about living with her two roommates. She stated, “I live in a SILP. And like it’s pretty good. Like it’s better than like—I’m just roommates with friends from high school. It’s better than like [being] on your own. When you’re on your own, it’s really hard.”

Young adults living with multiple people, or in apartment complexes with other program participants, reported mixed feelings about these situations. Natalie, living in a THP+FC apartment, believed that the best part about living with others was that, “you’re not always alone. There’s always other people here.” Princess liked living with other people in her THP+FC house because, “I need to have somebody to talk to, so I feel good.” Terrell reported that one of the benefits of his housing complex is that, “a lot of people in the program live around here, so you’re never alone. . . . You [can] go downstairs, you got paper towels. You know what I’m saying, if you need something, you can borrow something.” Other young adults, however, wanted space from program peers. For example, Barack mentioned wanting space from

the program; he said, “These apartments suck because there's just a lot of people from our program here, which I don't get along with everyone from our program.”

Some organizations tried to pair young adults new to apartment living with older young adults to serve as “mentors,” a practice that led to mixed reviews by the young people we interviewed. For example, several young adults in these situations felt that, at least initially, they did not have much in common with their roommate and could not go to them for advice or help. When asked if her roommate was in the apartment during our meeting, Tiffany responded, “I have no clue. I'm to myself. I be in my room. When I have my guests over, they're in my room. She has her guests over. I mean, sometimes we all hang out in here, but the majority of the time, we're like in our own room doing whatever.”

Some young adults were interested in living with roommates, particularly to help defray costs. Todd, residing in a THP+FC setting, stated that he wanted to move out to his own place in a few months. However, he preferred to live with a roommate so he, “wouldn't have to pay the whole bill.” Often, however, young adults felt vulnerable having to rely on other people to maintain their residence. For example, several young adults feared that if they did not get along with their roommates or people associated with them they would be left to fend for themselves. Joe wanted to move out of his THP+FC apartment, but one issue that held him back was a lack of a dependable roommate: “I just need to find someone who I can depend on to get a room with. That's basically all.” Some young adults even chose to enter SILPs on their own initially, so they would not have to deal with an additional unknown regarding their housing. Diamond stated that although she wanted roommates, she was worried about people not paying their share of the rent and utilities. Therefore, she was living by herself for the time being. She related, “I want to do roommates, but I want, like I want someone who's going to pay their other half of the money. I don't want to have to worry about someone not paying their money, you know. I'd rather live small for now and know that I have something over my head than have someone not pay rent or go.” The uncertainties associated with roommates, including the potentially devastating aspects of a bad relationship, were mentioned by several young adults.

Overall, these challenges speak to the need for young adults to have continued support and guidance during this critical period, from programs such as THP+FC, foster or biological families or county caseworkers. Young adults often faced challenges balancing finances, their own newfound freedom and the demands of family and friends who were in even more vulnerable conditions. While those in positions to help young adults can and do provide some support, the challenges can still feel quite overwhelming for young adults, particularly when they are simultaneously adjusting to new living arrangements.

Conclusion

The young people we talked with see California's Fostering Connections Act as being hugely beneficial during their transition to adulthood. This law provides young people with a longer period of transition, including the opportunity to learn how to manage growing autonomy and responsibility, before being entirely disconnected from state care. In this report, we have examined one particular aspect of the law: the residential settings of young adults in care. While residential settings are a key component of extended foster care legislation, this is one of the first studies to qualitatively examine these settings.

Overwhelmingly, young adults remain confident that extended foster care will provide them the chance for a more stable adulthood than being forced to leave care at 18 would afford. Yet, the young people also paint a very complex picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the living arrangements supported by the law. Generally, these settings adequately provide young adults with the basic necessities. Although conditions varied by county and neighborhood, the apartments generally were monitored and adequately maintained. However, young people we visited often found themselves at the back of their apartment complexes. Other young people found themselves in less than optimal conditions, with problems both inside and outside of their apartment units that were often beyond their control. Often due to constraints in availability, either due to finances or landlords' unwillingness to rent to young people in state care, apartment complexes were not in ideal locations for young people, forcing them to spend a great deal of time commuting to school or relatively low-wage jobs.

Young people in this sample also dealt with other challenges regarding their living arrangements. Many struggled to find a balance between maintaining their new personal space and warding off feelings of isolation and loneliness. Others had difficulty balancing their newfound freedom with friends or family who, often in worse economic conditions, relied on them for money or housing in order to survive. Still others had to balance their own ideas, as well as those of their peers, about what life as an independent 18 or 19 year old should look like with the obligations they needed to meet in order to remain in state care.

In making sense of these observations about the experiences of young adults in extended foster care, it is important to keep in mind that the challenges and opportunities these young people encountered are common among the broader population of young people making the transition to adulthood. For example, many young adults struggle to make ends meet, to exercise their newfound freedom without paying too high a price for mistakes made along the way, to get to work and/or school, and to get along with roommates. Obtaining housing that is safe and comfortable is a particular challenge for young adults living in places like California that have relatively expensive rental housing markets. It is also important to note that THP+FC and SILPs are very much a work in progress in California, and that foster parents are just beginning to come to terms with what it means to foster young adults; these placement options will undoubtedly evolve as California gains experience providing extended foster care to young adults.

While this study has touched on several issues that are likely to impact many young adults in extended foster care in California, it also has several limitations. Importantly, the study sample is not representative of all nonminor dependents in California. Our purposive sampling allowed us to speak with a range of young adults living in different residential settings throughout California. However, we are not able to say how similar this sample is to the population of all nonminor dependents throughout the state. Therefore, while it seems likely that the issues identified here apply to many young people in extended care in California, we are not able to say how many with any degree of certainty. Additionally, due to recruitment challenges young people living in THP+FC settings are overrepresented in our sample while young adults living in SILPS and with foster parents are underrepresented, relative to where young adults in extended care in California are currently living. It is imperative to also talk with more young people in these other settings to see what their experiences are like under extended foster care. Ideally, these conversations would also involve foster parents and guardians to get a better sense of the challenges young adults, and those caring for them, are facing in these settings.

Given the centrality of their living situation to their overall well-being, future research should further investigate the residential settings of young adults who remain in the care of the state. By identifying how to improve these settings, policymakers, program developers, and practitioners can help maximize the impact of extended care on improving the transition to adulthood for young people leaving state care.

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