

**Findings from the
California Youth
Transitions to Adulthood
Study (CaYOUTH):
Executive Summary**

**Conditions of Foster
Youth at Age 17**

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The findings reported herein were performed with the permission of the California Department of Social Services. The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are solely those of the authors and should not be considered as representing the policy of the collaborating agency or any agency of the California government.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections Act) marks a fundamental shift to greater federal responsibility for supporting foster youth during the transition to adulthood. States can now claim federal reimbursement for foster care maintenance payments on behalf of Title IV-E eligible foster youth until they are 21 years old. Importantly, participation in the extended care provisions of the Fostering Connections Act is optional for states. Although some states have enacted legislation, most other states will take a wait-and-see approach, electing to delay changing state law until lessons are learned from states extending care. With the enactment of the California Fostering Connections to Success Act, California became one of the early adopters of extended foster care. As the state with the largest state foster care population in the US, and as a state with a county-administered child welfare system that resembles the organization of other child welfare systems around the nation, what happens in California's child welfare system is of national significance. Many other states considering extending foster care to young adults can learn much from how California implements extended foster care and how the new policy influences adult outcomes of foster youth making the transition to adulthood.

The California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH) evaluates the impact of the California Fostering Connections Act on outcomes during the transition to adulthood for foster youth. CalYOUTH includes collection and analysis of information from three sources: (1) transition-age youth, (2) child welfare workers, and (3) government program data. The study, directed by Dr. Mark Courtney at the University of Chicago and conducted in collaboration with the California Department of Social Services and County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA), is being carried out over a 5-year period, from 2012–17. The study addresses three research questions:

- Does extending foster care past age 18 influence youths' outcomes during the transition to adulthood (e.g., education, employment, health, housing, parenting, and general well-being)?
- What factors influence the types of support youth receive during the transition to adulthood in the context of extended foster care?
- How do living arrangements and other services that result from extending foster care influence the relationship between extending care and youth outcomes?

To help answer these questions, CalYOUTH is following foster care youth through age 21 and conducting in-person interviews with the youth at ages 16 and 17, 19, and 21 years old. This Executive Summary highlights key findings from the Baseline Youth Survey, the first wave of the longitudinal study of transition-age youth before they have reached the age of majority and become eligible for extended care.

Overview of the CalYOUTH Study

The Baseline Youth Survey was completed by a sample of older adolescents in foster care in California. Youth were eligible to participate in the study if they were between 16.75 and 17.75 years of age at the time of the sample draw and had been in the foster care system, under the supervision of county child welfare agencies, for at least six months.¹ Out of 763 eligible adolescents, 727 youth completed the baseline survey during the field period of April 15, 2013 to October 11, 2013. (The response rate was 95.3%). The interview was intended to last approximately 90 minutes, and the survey consists of standardized instruments, items from other scales and studies, and items created specifically for the Baseline Youth Survey. Survey weights were created to adjust for both the sampling design and nonresponders, and these weights allow Baseline Youth Survey responses to be representative of the population of California adolescents meeting the study criteria.

Individual and Family Background Prior to Care

Most of the respondents participating in the Baseline Youth Survey were 17 years old at the time of the interview (92.6%) and the majority were female (59.4%). About half identified as being mixed race (47.3%), while the remainder identified as being white (24.2%), black, (18.0%), American Indian/Alaskan Native (3.6%), or Asian/Pacific Islander (2.2%). Almost half of the sample indicated that they were Hispanic (46.7%). Most youth had a birth mother (83.7%) or birth father (71.5%) who was still alive. Over 90% of youth had a sibling or stepsibling, and about two-thirds of respondents' siblings were also in foster care. Common characteristics of their caregivers prior to their placement included having a criminal record (49.7%), inadequate parenting skills (48.8%), drug abuse (48.3%), or alcohol abuse

¹ See the full Baseline Youth Survey report for more details.

(45.4%). These were followed by domestic violence (33%) and mental illness (25.6%). In terms of ways youth were maltreated prior to entering foster care, females were more likely than males to report instances of a number of specific acts of physical abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse.

Experiences during Care

In addition to inquiring about youths' experiences prior to care, we also asked study participants about their experiences *during* care. Most youth were currently placed in a nonrelative foster home (44.3%), about a quarter were living in a group care or residential treatment facility (24.1%), one-fifth were residing in a foster home with an adult relative (18.2%), and the remaining youth lived in an adoptive home, with a legal guardian, in an independent living placement, or some other living arrangement (13.2%). About 80 percent of youth reported having lived in two or more foster homes and roughly 35 percent of youth said they had lived in two or more group homes, residential treatment centers, or child caring institutions while in foster care. Youth were generally in regular contact with their caseworker, but met with their attorney more infrequently. On average, youth reported meeting with their case worker about 1.4 times per month in the past year and being in touch with their attorney (face-to-face or over the phone) about once every three months in the past year. Most youth said that they attend their court proceedings (88.3%) and of those who attended, about three-quarters felt very or somewhat included in the courtroom discussion (73.2%). Most youth expressed the view that their attorney represented their wishes very well or fairly well (81.7%). Females tended to have more phone contacts with their social workers than males (1.1 vs. 0.83 calls per month) and a greater proportion of females attended their court proceedings than males (91% vs. 85%).

In terms of relations with family and care providers, the greatest number of youth said that they felt very close or somewhat close to their current care providers (77.5% among youth in group homes and 88.5% among youth living with foster parents, guardians, adoptive parents, or other adults). A majority of youth also expressed feeling very close or somewhat close to siblings (74.5%) and their biological mother (55.8%). Most youth reported that not enough was done to help them maintain or strengthen relationships with close family members since they entered care (60.4%). In terms of visits with specific relatives in the past year, youth most commonly visited with their siblings (73.5%), biological mother (60.8%), and grandparents (47.0%). Overall, youth reported that family members were in communication with their current care provider, with mothers, grandparents, and aunts or uncles being the most involved. Nearly all youth reported having at least one adult in their lives other than their caseworker who they could go to for emotional support or advice (92.4% overall; 95.4% of females and 88.1% of males). Most youth held positive views of their experience with the foster care system, with more than half agreeing that they were lucky to have been placed in care (56.9%), that they were satisfied with their foster care experience

(55.9%), and that their current caretakers have been a help to them (71.1% among youth living with foster parents and 65.0% among youth living in a group home, residential treatment center, or child caring institution). Nearly three-fifths of youth were very optimistic about their personal hopes and goals for the future (59.5%) and less than one in ten reported little or no optimism about their future (8.3%).

Socioeconomic Status

Most youth were enrolled in school at the time of the interview (89.8%) or in the past academic year (9.6%), and the majority of these youth were enrolled in high school (80.6%). A small proportion were also enrolled in college (4.0%). About 10 percent of youth had earned a high school diploma (9.4%) or GED or other equivalent credential (1.2%), and 15.2 percent held a vocational or job training certificate or license. When reflecting on their high school grades, the largest portion of youth reported earning mostly Cs (43.0%). A little over one-third said that they earned either mostly As or mostly Bs (36.0%), and 10.6 percent of youth said that their grades were mostly Ds or lower. When assessed on reading ability, about half of the young people had scores suggesting that they read below a high school level (51.3%). One-third of youth indicated ever being placed in special education, one-third had repeated a grade (33.3%), and just over one in ten said that they skipped a grade at some point (12.3%). Two-thirds of youth had ever received an out-of-school suspension (66.5%) and about one-quarter of youth had ever been expelled (27.5%). About 80 percent of respondents aspired to complete a college degree or higher, and a slightly lower proportion believed they would actually reach their educational goal (73.2%). A large majority of youth said that their education had been disrupted in some way because of a reason that related to foster care. Close to 90 percent of youth said they changed schools at least once due to a family move or foster care placement change, and 62.8 percent of youth missed school at least once in the past year due to reasons related to being in foster care (e.g., court hearing).

About 15 percent of youth were currently employed, and a larger share of working youth held a part-time job (13.0%) than a full-time job (1.7%). Other than earnings from employment, 6.9 percent of CalYOUTH participants indicated that they received social security payments; 6.9 percent received financial aid, scholarships, grants, vouchers, or other aid for education expenses; and 7.1 percent received periodic or significant financial resources from another source.

Health and Development

Overall, the youth in the survey reported being in good physical health but a sizable proportion were overweight. Most respondents rated their health to be excellent, very good, or good (88.2%) and 4.7 percent reported having difficulty using their hands, arms, legs, or feet because of an enduring physical condition. About four in ten youth had body mass index scores that classified them as either overweight

(22.1%) or obese (19.2%). In the past year, 86.7 percent of youth had had a physical exam and 89.9 percent had had a dental exam.

Similar to findings of prior research, many youth were either young parents or had experiences with pregnancy. About a quarter of female respondents had ever been pregnant (26.0%), and of these young women, 35.7 percent gave birth to a child. A smaller proportion of males had ever gotten a female pregnant (10.7%), and among these young men 36.6 percent fathered a child that was born. Just one-quarter of male and female participants who parented a child were using some form of birth control at the time of the pregnancy. Males and females differed in their level of desire to have a baby at the time of the pregnancy that led to a childbirth. About a quarter of females said that they definitely wanted or probably wanted to get pregnant at that time; only 12.7 percent of males expressed similar sentiments about wanting to get their partner pregnant. With regard to sexual orientation, three-quarters of the sample reported being 100% heterosexual or straight (89.1% of males and 64.6% of females), while the other quarter reported being in one of the following categories: mostly heterosexual, bisexual, mostly homosexual or gay, 100% homosexual or gay, or being not sexually attracted to others.

Many youth in the study grappled with mental health issues. Almost three in ten respondents met the criteria for a current major depressive episode (20.5%) or dysthymia (7.6%); 12.4 percent met the criteria for a current manic or hypomanic episode; 7.5 percent met the criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder; and 7.8 percent were indicated as having a psychotic disorder. Over one in ten met the criteria for a behavioral disorder (4.9% met the criteria for conduct disorder and 7.4% met the criteria for oppositional defiant disorder), one-fifth met the criteria for substance abuse or dependence (21.3%), and over one-tenth met the criteria for alcohol abuse or dependence (12.4%). Compared to males, females were more likely to experience major depression, dysthymia, past mania and hypomania, and PTSD. Fifty-three percent of CalYOUTH participants were found to have a positive diagnosis for one or more current mental and behavioral health disorders including major depression, bipolar disorder, social phobia and anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder, oppositional-defiant disorder, substance abuse or dependence, alcohol abuse or dependence, and psychotic disorder. Further, examination of differences by gender indicate that females were more likely than males to have a positive diagnosis for one of these disorders ($n = 255$, 57.5% and $n = 149$, 46.9%, respectively). Just under half of the youth said that a health or mental health condition caused them to miss a day of school in the past month (45.6%). In the previous year, 18.8 percent attended drug or alcohol abuse treatment, 54 percent received psychological or emotional counseling (60.3% of females and 44.8% of males), and 10.2 percent spent time in a psychiatric hospital.

About one-third (29.1%) of youth received medication in the past year to treat emotional problems, but youth had mixed feelings about the benefits of those medications.

Social Support and Community Connections

When youth were asked to estimate the size of their social support networks or name specific support individuals, youth reported having the largest networks in the area of emotional support, followed by individuals who provide advice or guidance and tangible support. On average, youth estimated their total support network size to consist of 8.7 individuals (the median was 5 individuals). Youth were generally satisfied with the support they received, though many also reported experiencing strain associated with their supportive relationships. Nearly half of all of the individuals who were nominated as supports were friends, siblings, or foster parents (47.4%). Youth were in contact with 85 percent of all supports at least once per week. When asked broadly about whether they had adequate social support in their lives, the majority of youth felt they had enough people they could turn to for each type of support. However, about 30 percent reported they did not have enough people to provide advice and guidance, about 35 percent indicated they did not have enough people to provide emotional support, and about 40 percent reported they did not have enough people to provide tangible support. Speaking broadly about all relationships, youth reported that there are some or too many relationships in their lives with disappointment (42.1%), intrusiveness (31.7%), criticism (21.6%), and conflict (21.5%). Females reported experiencing disappointment, intrusiveness, and conflict in their relationships more frequently than males.

Children, Parenting, and Romantic Partnerships

A total of 6.8 percent of youth had one or two living children (2.6% of males and 9.6% of females), and about a quarter of all children were dependents of the court (23.6%). Most youth reported living with their child (70.3%),² and less than 10 percent of parenting youth said that the child's other parent lives with them. About 80 percent of youth said that the other parent either did not see their child in the past year (54.1%) or saw their child less than once per month (27.0%). About two-fifths of study respondents reported being in a dating relationship with a partner (34.2% of males and 45.9% of females), and the bulk of these were dating relationships that were exclusive (72.2%). Among parents who were in a dating relationship, over half indicated that their romantic partner is the parent of their child. The vast majority of youth reported receiving a high level of support from their partner. Reports of coercion and control were very infrequent, and almost nine in ten youth in relationships agreed or strongly agreed that they trusted their partner to be faithful. About three-quarters of dating youth reported that they loved their

² If a respondent had more than one child, the question was asked about their first child.

partner a lot (76.5%) and that they were very happy in the relationship (70.9%), and about 90% reported being completely committed or very committed to the relationship.

Service Receipt and Knowledge of Extended Care

Out of twelve independent living and service domains we asked the youth about, the greatest proportions of respondents felt very prepared or prepared to deal with sexual health, family planning, and relationship skills (for each of these areas, over 90 percent of respondents felt very prepared or prepared). On the other hand, housing (46.4%), financial literacy (57.5%), and employment (65.4%) were the areas in which significantly smaller numbers of youth felt prepared or very prepared. In terms of services that youth had received while in care, over 40% of youth reported receiving little or no training in housing (e.g., tenant rights and responsibilities, signing a lease, etc.) and almost one-third of participants received little or no training in financial literacy and money management. Conversely, over 90 percent of youth reported receiving a lot or some training in the area of sexual health (90.7%). When respondents were asked to identify specific individuals who provided the most help in their preparation for independent living, foster parents were the most common individual identified across multiple life areas (e.g., employment, education, daily living skills, etc.). Independent Living Program (ILP) personnel were identified as providing the most help with housing, while other adult relatives were perceived to have most often helped youth with family planning and relationship skills. On average, CalYOUTH participants appear to be satisfied with their life skills preparation and support services or training across different life domains. The preparation and service areas receiving the lowest satisfaction scores were housing and financial literacy, but even these scores suggest some degree of satisfaction.

Over two-thirds of youth expressed a desire to remain in foster care after they turned 18 (67.4%). Of those who were amenable to remaining in extended care, 45.6 percent cited a desire to further their education and 37.1 percent wished to receive support in the form of material goods and housing. Youth who did not want to remain in care past age 18 most frequently indicated having more freedom (38.6%) and not wanting to have to deal with social workers (15.0%) as the reasons. Questions that assessed knowledge about California's extended foster care law indicated that the majority of CalYOUTH participants were clear on their basic responsibilities under the law (e.g., must meet with caseworker at least once per month), but many youth were not yet fully aware of their opportunities and obligations (e.g., many youth incorrectly believed that one had to be a full-time student to qualify for extended care). About three-fourths of respondents indicated that they received some or a lot of information about extended care in California (77.0%); the county child welfare agency (21.5%), other social service agencies (20.9%), and independent living program staff (20.0%) were the most commonly cited sources of information. Over

two-thirds (68.3%) of youth said that they received some or a lot of conflicting information about extended foster care. Most said they had a person they could turn to for correct information (84.4%).

Delinquency and Justice System Involvement

Compared to their peers, greater proportions of CalYOUTH participants reported engaging in delinquent behaviors in the past 12 months. Among adolescents in the CalYOUTH study, males generally reported more delinquent behavior than their female counterparts, particularly in terms of fighting, injuring someone else in a physical altercation, deliberately damaging others' property, and being loud and unruly in a public place. Four in ten CalYOUTH participants had ever been arrested, two in ten had been convicted of a crime, and one in four had been confined in a jail, prison, or other correctional or detention center for allegedly committing a crime. Young people in the CalYOUTH study reported higher rates of exposure to and perpetration of violence than their age peers. Males participating in CalYOUTH reported higher exposure to violence (e.g., someone pulled a knife or gun on you, you were jumped) than females, as well as higher rates of violence perpetration (e.g., you pulled a knife on someone, you shot or stabbed someone) and needing medical treatment after a fight.

Summary and Next Steps

The *CalYOUTH Baseline Youth Survey* provides the most comprehensive view to date of young people approaching the transition to adulthood from foster care in California. This information will be valuable to policymakers, program developers, advocates, and practitioners interested in better meeting the needs of transition-age youth in care. While the practical implications of findings from the *CalYOUTH Baseline Youth Survey* will become clearer as future analyses dig beneath the descriptive information provided here, certain themes are already apparent. First, the diversity of the CalYOUTH participants, in terms of both demographic composition and variation in many areas of functioning assessed in the study, clearly indicates the inappropriateness of a one-size-fits-all approach to extended foster care. Second, the *CalYOUTH Baseline Youth Survey* provides encouraging evidence of the resilience of older adolescents in foster care. Despite their histories of trauma and instability while in care, they remain overwhelmingly optimistic about their futures and have access to many adults who can provide advice and emotional and tangible support. Furthermore, many have close ties to members of their family of origin and a majority are in romantic relationships in which they feel supported. Third, most (but not all) youth see the benefits of the care they have received to date from government and wish to be able to continue to rely on government support as they make the transition to adulthood. The nontrivial minority of youth who are less convinced of the benefits of connection to the system may be more difficult to engage in transition planning and may benefit the most from extended care. Lastly, work remains to be done when it comes to preparing youth in care for the transition to adulthood, such as ensuring that they have an accurate

understanding of their rights and responsibilities under the new law and addressing service gaps in areas where youth felt less prepared, such as housing, employment, and financial literacy.

This report is descriptive in nature; moving forward we will be examining youths' responses in greater depth. This involves drilling down into more specific questions (e.g., examining whether youth in living in urban versus rural counties report differing amounts of particular kinds of services as being available to them). We will also compare and contrast youth responses in the *CalYOUTH Baseline Youth Survey* with caseworkers' responses in the *CalYOUTH Child Welfare Worker Survey*. By sharing the perceptions of the professionals involved in implementing California's Fostering Connections Act and the experiences of the young people the new law is intended to help, CalYOUTH promises to provide timely information over the next several years about California's ambitious implementation of extended foster care.

About Chapin Hall

Established in 1985, Chapin Hall is an independent policy research center whose mission is to build knowledge that improves policies and programs for children and youth, families, and their communities.

Chapin Hall's areas of research include child maltreatment prevention, child welfare systems and foster care, youth justice, schools and their connections with social services and community organizations, early childhood initiatives, community change initiatives, workforce development, out-of-school time initiatives, economic supports for families, and child well-being indicators.

