

A photograph of three young men standing outdoors on a paved path. The man in the center, who has dreadlocks, is holding a black skateboard over his shoulders and smiling. He is wearing a grey zip-up hoodie over a light blue t-shirt. The man on the left is wearing a maroon V-neck t-shirt and a black beanie, also smiling. The man on the right is wearing a green and white hooded jacket and is looking down. The background shows a blurred landscape with trees and a body of water.

# Alameda County's Youth Transitions Partnership Program

December 2022

## An Examination of the Relationship between Placement Stability and Program Engagement

*Analysis of placement stability points to periods during which youth need additional support.*

### Overview

This brief describes the relationship between placement stability and youth engagement in the Youth Transitions Partnership (YTP), a program developed and implemented by the Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA) for 14- to 20-year-olds in foster care who have multiple risk factors for experiencing homelessness. We used program data linked to child welfare administrative data to examine the proportion of YTP participants who experience placement instability while enrolled in the program. In particular, we explored how this varies by age at enrollment, when YTP participants are most likely to experience placement instability, whether placement instability is associated with lower overall engagement, whether type of instability matters, and whether engagement is lower after youth experience placement instability.

## Background

With funding from the Children's Bureau's Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH) grant program (see Box 1), the Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA) developed and implemented the Youth Transitions Partnership (YTP). YTP serves 14- to 20-year-olds in foster care with multiple risk factors for experiencing homelessness. The program blends service coordination, intensive case management (ICM), and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) to help transition-age youth in foster care develop skills, access services, and achieve self-directed goals.<sup>1</sup>

*For a brief overview of YTP, see ["Alameda County's Youth Transitions Partnership Program – A Promising Model for Supporting Transition-Age Youth in Foster Care."](#)*

SSA partners with First Place for Youth (FPFY), which trains and supervises YTP coaches, and with Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, which evaluates the program and manages a Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) process. Through a CQI process, the evaluation and program partners regularly monitor fidelity to the model and assess opportunities for program improvement.<sup>2,3</sup>

*For more details about the YTP CQI process, see ["Alameda County's Youth Transitions Partnership Program – A Practical Example of Using CQI to Support Successful Program Implementation."](#)*

### BOX 1: YOUTH AT-RISK OF HOMELESSNESS (YARH) GRANT PROGRAM



In September 2013, the Children's Bureau (CB), in the Administration for Children and Families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), funded 18 grantees for two years. Each grantee developed a plan to reduce homelessness in three specific populations of older youth that had been involved with the child welfare system. Over those two years, the projects conducted a detailed data analysis to determine which of these youth were at the greatest risk of homelessness. Based on the risk and protective factors of the populations, the grantees also reviewed the service array to identify gaps in services and supports and structured an approach to best meet the needs of each population. Grantees identified or developed comprehensive service models to address the gaps in services and supports. This work, known as Youth At-Risk of Homelessness Phase I (YARH-1), was the foundation for the next four years of effort on the project.

In September 2015, CB invited the 18 YARH-1 grantees to compete for a second phase of funding to refine and implement the models they had developed during the planning process. CB awarded funds to six grantees for the second phase of YARH (YARH-2). YARH-2 grantees refined their comprehensive service models and conducted usability tests and a formative evaluation to determine whether they could implement their model as intended and whether they had achieved progress toward desired outcomes. YARH-2 grantees also developed intervention manuals to support the continued implementation and possible replication or expansion of their service models.

[Click here for more information on YARH](#)


Since the program's inception, maintaining consistent youth engagement in YTP has been a challenge for YTP coaches. Only half of the youth who enroll in YTP stay in the program for more than 6 months; even fewer complete one full round of DBT, which takes about 10 months.<sup>4</sup> The project team hypothesized that this low rate of engagement might be due, at least in part, to placement instability. Placement instability is one of the risk factors that can make youth eligible for the program, and 45% of the youth who enrolled in YTP between February 2016 and September 2018 had experienced at least five placements or three runaway episodes prior to enrollment.<sup>5</sup>

For more details about YTP and its initial outcomes, see [“Alameda County’s Youth Transitions Partnership Program – A Promising Model for Supporting Transition-Age Youth in Foster Care.”](#)


As part of its YARH-3 work, the project team examined the relationship between placement instability and youth engagement in program. Specifically, we addressed four primary research questions:




**1** **WHAT PROPORTION OF YTP PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCE PLACEMENT INSTABILITY** while enrolled in the program and how does this vary by age at enrollment?



When are YTP participants most likely to **EXPERIENCE PLACEMENT INSTABILITY AFTER ENROLLING IN THE PROGRAM?**



**3** **IS PLACEMENT INSTABILITY ASSOCIATED WITH LOWER LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT** in YTP, and does the type of instability youth experience matter?



**4** **IS ENGAGEMENT IN YTP LOWER AFTER YOUTH EXPERIENCE PLACEMENT INSTABILITY**, as compared to before?

## Data

To answer these questions, we linked YTP program data to Child Welfare Information System (CWIS) placement data from the Center for State Child Welfare Data's Foster Care Data Archive, using each participant's unique CWIS identifier.<sup>6</sup> We focused on the 115 youth who first enrolled in YTP between March 1, 2016 and June 30, 2019. We used this time frame to ensure that we had at least 6 months of post-enrollment placement data (i.e., through December 31, 2019) for each youth. Of those 115 youth, six (5%) did not have a valid CWIS ID and were dropped from the analysis, leaving a sample of 109.

For the purpose of this analysis, we define placement instability as any move from one placement to another or any instance of running away. We include lateral moves (i.e., from one foster home to another), step-downs to a less restrictive placement (i.e., from a group home to a foster family), and step-ups to a more restrictive placement (i.e., from a foster family to a group home).

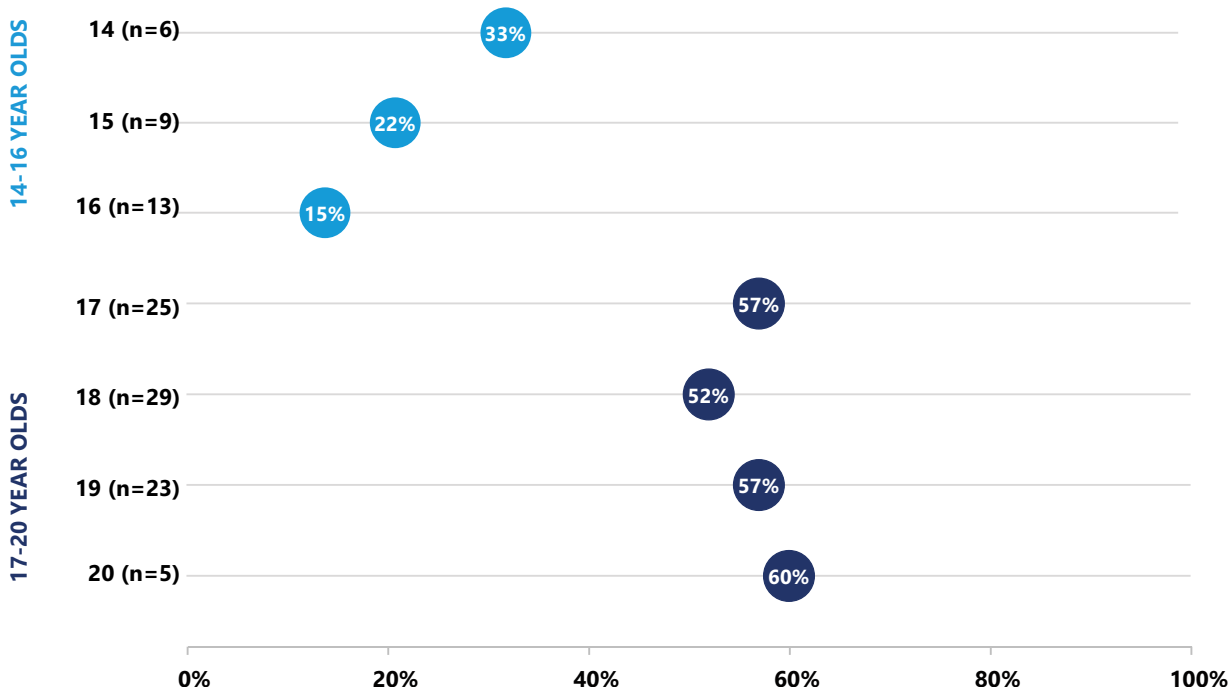
## Findings

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### WHAT PROPORTION OF YTP PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCED PLACEMENT INSTABILITY WHILE ENROLLED IN THE PROGRAM AND HOW DID THIS VARY BY AGE AT ENROLLMENT?

Forty-seven percent (n = 51) of the 109 youth in our sample experienced placement instability while enrolled in the program. We did not observe much variation in placement instability by gender or race/ethnicity. However, placement instability did vary by age. Twenty-one percent of the youth who were 14 to 16 years old at YTP enrollment experienced placement instability compared to 55% of youth who were 17 to 20 years old when they enrolled.<sup>7</sup>

**FIGURE 1. PROPORTION OF YTP PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCING PLACEMENT INSTABILITY BY AGE AT ENROLLMENT**

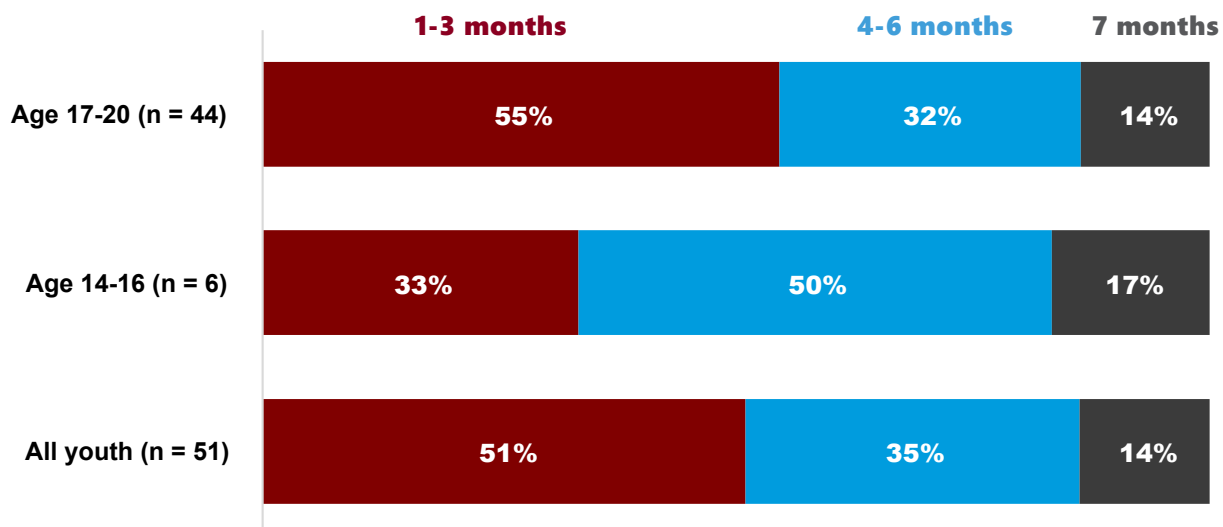


## WHEN ARE YTP PARTICIPANTS MOST LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE PLACEMENT INSTABILITY AFTER ENROLLING IN THE PROGRAM?

To answer this question, we looked at the timing of YTP participants' first episode of post-enrollment placement instability. We found that 51% (n = 26) of the 51 youth who experienced placement instability did so for the first time within 3 months of enrollment and 86% (n = 44) first experienced instability within 6 months. However, the timing of participants' first episode of post-enrollment placement instability varied by age. Among participants who experienced post-enrollment placement instability, those who were 17 to 20 years old at enrollment tended to experience instability earlier than those who were 14 to 16 years old at enrollment. However, the number of 14 to 16 year-olds who experienced post-enrollment placement instability is very small.

**FIGURE 2. POST-ENROLLMENT TIMING OF FIRST POST-ENROLLMENT PLACEMENT INSTABILITY EVENT, BY AGE AT ENROLLMENT**

**Among youth who experienced post-enrollment placement instability, those who were 17 to 20 years old at enrollment tended to experience instability earlier than those who were 14 to 16 years old at enrollment.**





## IS PLACEMENT INSTABILITY ASSOCIATED WITH LOWER LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT IN YTP AND DOES THE TYPE OF INSTABILITY YOUTH EXPERIENCE MATTER?

### Early instability

To understand the relationship between placement instability and youth engagement, we used various metrics to compare engagement among youth who experienced placement instability during their first 3 months in YTP to engagement among youth who did not experience placement instability during their first 3 months in YTP.<sup>8</sup> As shown in Table 1, we found no evidence that placement instability early in the program was associated with lower levels of engagement. If anything, youth who experienced placement instability during their first 3 months in YTP were slightly more engaged.

**TABLE 1. YTP ENGAGEMENT AND PLACEMENT INSTABILITY DURING THE 1ST 3 MONTHS IN YTP**

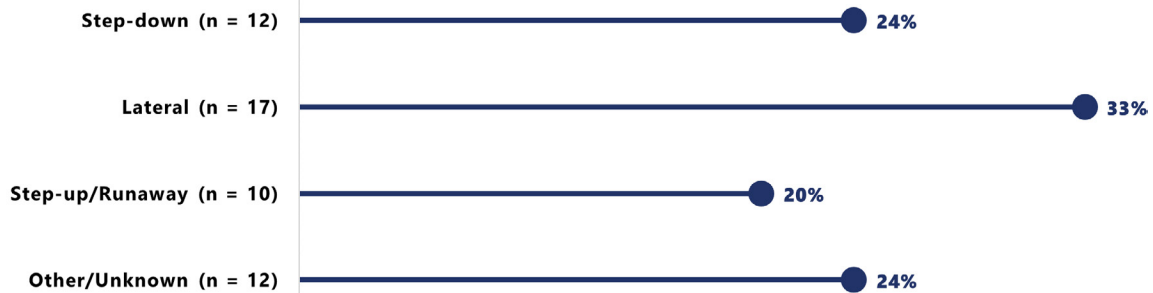
	Instability Within First 3 Months	
	Yes N=25	No N=71
<b>Average number of face-to-face meetings</b>	31.4	24.8
<b>Average number of DBT sessions</b>	14.4	12.5
<b>ICM intensity</b>		
Low ( $\leq 2$ face-to-face meetings)	8%	11%
Medium (3 to 23 face-to-face meetings)	32%	49%
High ( $\geq 24$ face-to-face meetings)	60%	39%
<b>DBT attendance</b>		
Low (0 sessions)	32%	35%
Medium (1 to 12 sessions)	28%	27%
High ( $\geq 13$ sessions)	40%	38%

### Instability type

Not all placement instability is undesirable; sometimes youth step-down from a more to a less restrictive setting. Consequently, we examined the relationship between placement instability and youth engagement by placement type. The most common type of instability YTP participants experienced was a lateral placement move, such as moving from one foster home to another. One-third of the youth who experienced any type of instability first experienced a lateral placement move.

One-quarter of the youth who experienced any type of instability first experienced a step-down to a less restrictive placement, while one in five first stepped up to a more restrictive placement or ran away. We could not determine the type of move experienced by a quarter of the youth (see Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3. INITIAL INSTABILITY TYPE AMONG YOUTH WHO EXPERIENCED INSTABILITY**



YTP engagement varied by the type of placement instability youth first experienced post-enrollment. Engagement in ICM and DBT was considerably lower among youth who experienced a step up in placement or a runaway episode than among any of the other groups. The biggest differences were between youth who stepped up or ran away and those who stepped down. None of those who stepped down had low engagement in ICM or DBT, and three-quarters or more had high engagement in both.

**TABLE 2. ENGAGEMENT METRICS BY INITIAL INSTABILITY TYPE**

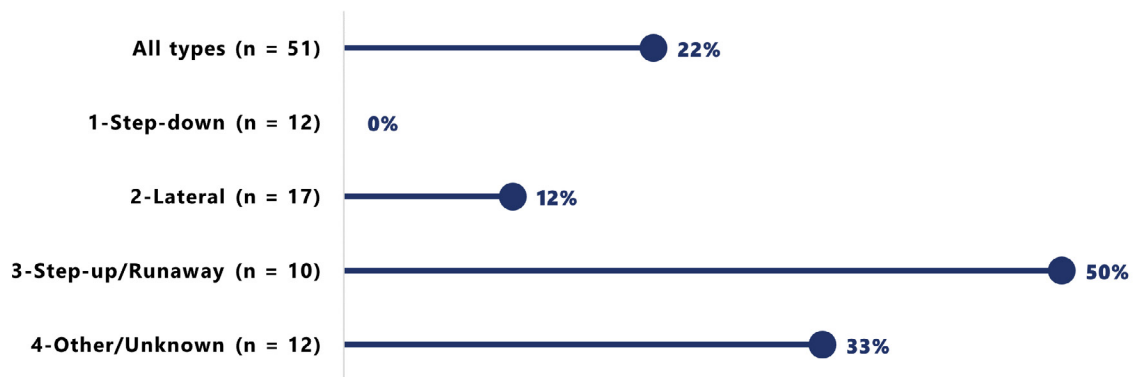
	Initial Instability Type			
	Step-down N=12	Lateral N=17	Step-up/ Runaway N=10	Unknown N=12
<b>Average number of face-to-face meetings</b>	49	40	16	27
<b>Average number of DBT sessions</b>	27	20	6	10
<b>ICM intensity</b>				
Low ( $\leq 2$ face-to-face meetings)	0%	6%	20%	0%
Medium (3 to 23 face-to-face meetings)	17%	29%	50%	33%
High ( $\geq 24$ face-to-face meetings)	83%	65%	30%	67%
<b>DBT attendance</b>				
Low (0 sessions)	0%	24%	60%	25%
Medium (1 to 12 sessions)	25%	12%	20%	42%
High ( $\geq 13$ sessions)	75%	65%	20%	33%

## IS ENGAGEMENT IN YTP LOWER AFTER, AS COMPARED TO BEFORE, YOUTH EXPERIENCE PLACEMENT INSTABILITY?

### Likelihood of exit

To understand the relationship between placement instability and short-term YTP engagement, we looked at the proportion of youth who exited the program within 2 months of their first post-enrollment experience with placement instability. Overall, 22 percent of the youth who experienced placement instability while in YTP exited the program within 2 months. However, this percentage varied widely by instability type. None of the youth who stepped down exited program within 2 months compared to 50 percent of the youth who stepped up or ran away.

**FIGURE 4. PROPORTION OF YOUTH WHO EXITED YTP WITHIN 2 MONTHS OF INITIAL INSTABILITY, BY INSTABILITY TYPE**



### Engagement two months post-instability

We also compared engagement in ICM and DBT during the 2 months before youth first experienced instability to engagement in ICM and DBT during the 2 months after using a paired t-test (see Box 2). The pre- and post-instability windows were each 60 days unless the youth had enrolled fewer than 60 days before or exited fewer than 60 days after. Engagement in both ICM and DBT was significantly lower after as compared to before youth first experienced post-enrollment placement instability. On average, ICM engagement was 30% lower (i.e., about 1 less face-to-face meeting per month) and the DBT attendance rate was 19% lower in the 2 months after youth first experienced placement instability compared to the 2 months before. Importantly, the engagement rate dropped regardless of the type of instability youth experienced, including step-downs. That said, the sample sizes for these analyses were quite small and the youth included in those samples were not necessarily representative of all YTP participants.

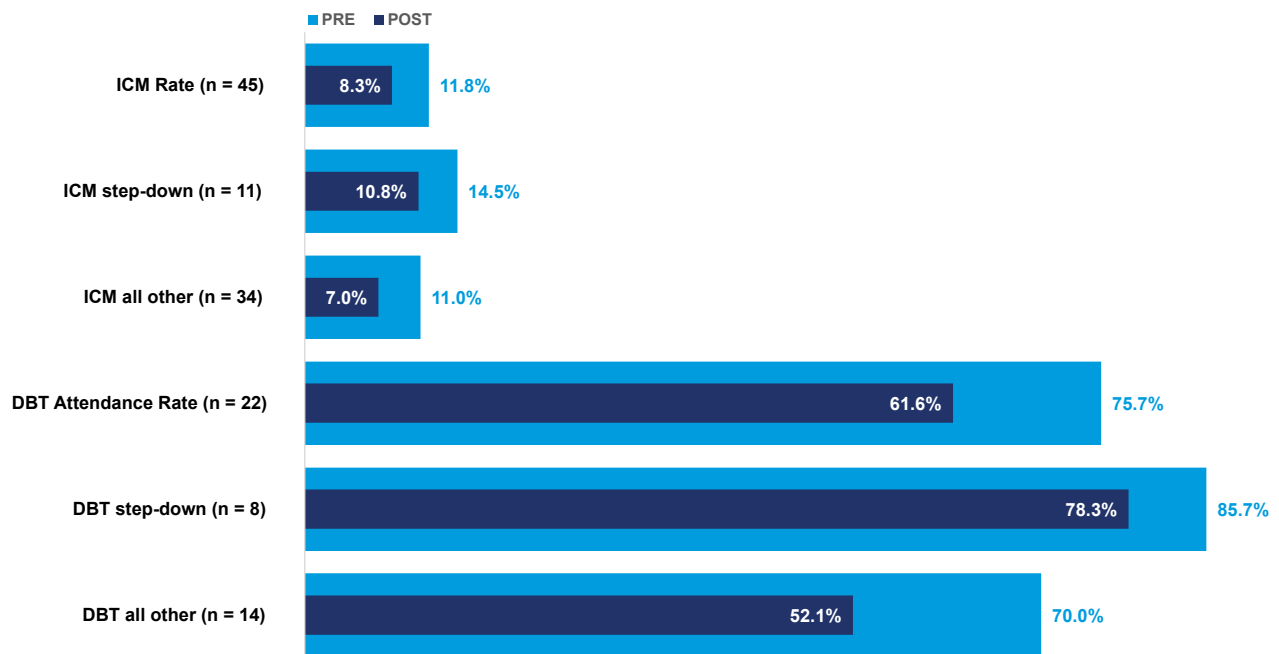


## BOX 2: ICM AND DBT ENGAGEMENT ANALYSES, 2 MONTHS PRE- AND 2 MONTHS POST-FIRST PLACEMENT

For the analysis of ICM engagement, we calculated a pre-instability ICM rate by dividing the number of face-to-face meetings youth had during the 60 days before their change in placement by 60 (or by the number of days they had been in the program to that point if it was less than 60 days). We calculated a post-instability ICM rate by dividing the number of face-to-face meetings youth had during the 60 days after their change in placement by 60 (or by the number of days they were in the program prior to exiting if they exited after less than 60 days) for the 45 youth who were in the program at least 30 days when they first experienced placement instability.<sup>1</sup>

For the analysis of DBT engagement, we calculated the DBT attendance rate for the 22 youth who experienced placement instability and were invited to at least two DBT sessions during the 60 days before they first experienced placement instability and to at least two DBT sessions during the 60 days after they first experienced placement instability.

**FIGURE 5. ICM AND DBT ENGAGEMENT RATES 2 MONTHS PRE- AND 2 MONTHS POST-FIRST PLACEMENT INSTABILITY**



**FIGURE 6. ICM AND DBT ENGAGEMENT ANALYSIS**



## Summary

We hypothesized that placement instability might explain the low level of engagement observed among YTP participants. We found mixed support for our hypothesis. Nearly half of youth who enrolled in YTP experienced placement instability while they were enrolled, although placement instability was more common among youth who enrolled in YTP at age 17 or older. Placement instability was most likely to occur during the first 3 months after youth enrolled. Those first experiences with placement instability do not lead to lower overall engagement, and in some cases, youth who experience instability during this period may be more engaged. However, engagement in both ICM and DBT was lower during the first 2 months post-instability.

YTP engagement does appear to vary by instability type. Youth who experienced a step-up or runaway episode were less engaged in ICM or DBT than those who experienced a lateral placement change or a step-down. Moreover, half of the youth whose initial experience with placement instability was a runaway episode or a step-up exited the program within the following 2 months, compared to none of the youth whose initial experience with placement instability was a step-down.

We cannot determine the direction of the relationship between placement instability and YTP engagement based on these analyses. Placement instability could be driving engagement or engagement could be driving instability. For example, youth may be able to step down to less restrictive placements because they are highly engaged in YTP. Conversely, youth may find it easier to engage in YTP if they are stepped down to a less restrictive placement. It is also possible that the same outside factors that facilitate step-downs promote more engagement.

We cannot determine the exact nature of the relationship between placement instability and program engagement. However, our analyses suggest that youth may benefit from additional supports during the first 6 months after enrollment, when their first experience with placement instability is most likely to occur. They may also benefit from additional supports during the 2 months immediately following their first experience with placement instability, when youth who have run away or stepped-up are most likely to leave the program.

## Acknowledgment and Disclaimer

The Youth Transitions Partnership was funded by the Children’s Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, under the Children’s Bureau grant number 90CA1839. The Children’s Bureau funded this multiphase grant program, referred to as Youth At-Risk of Homelessness, to build the evidence base on what works to prevent homelessness among youth and young adults who have been involved in the child welfare system.

This brief was prepared by Chapin Hall with funding from Mathematica, Inc. under contract to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Office of Planning, Research, & Evaluation under Contract Number HHSP233201500035I/75P00119F37041. The Mathematica project director is M.C. Bradley.

Special thanks to our partners at Alameda County Social Services Agency and First Place for Youth, without whom this work would not be possible. Additional thanks to the partners who devoted their time and attention to the YTP Leadership Team during the planning phase. Thanks also to the technical assistance team at Mathematica who provided guidance and assistance throughout the implementation process. Many thanks to the Center for State Child Welfare Data at Chapin Hall whose devotion to the rigorous study—and commitment to a common and accessible understanding—of evidence-based CQI helped form the foundation on which our YTP CQI practices were based. And finally, thanks to the multiple YTP partners, YTP coaches, child welfare workers, and youth who participated in focus groups and interviews during the formative evaluation.

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## Suggested Citation

Van Drunen, M., Packard Tucker, L., & Dworsky, A. (2022). *Alameda County’s Youth Transitions Partnership Program – An Examination of the Relationship between Placement Stability and Program Engagement*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

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<sup>1</sup> Packard Tucker, L., Dworsky, A., & Van Drunen, M. (2020). *Alameda County's Youth Transitions Partnership Program – A promising model for supporting transition-age youth in foster care*.

Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. [https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/PDF/Alameda-County-Brief\\_Final.pdf](https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/PDF/Alameda-County-Brief_Final.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Packard Tucker, L., Dworsky, A., & Van Drunen, M. (2019). *Formative evaluation lessons learned: Evaluating the implementation of the Youth Transitions Partnership in Alameda County*.

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<sup>3</sup> Packard Tucker, L., Van Drunen, M., & Dworsky, A. (2020). *Alameda County's Youth Transitions Partnership Program – A practical example of using CQI to support successful program implementation*.

Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Alameda-County-CQI-Brief.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> One full round of DBT consists of three modules; each module consists of eight 2-hour sessions. Youth are expected to complete two full rounds of DBT, which takes, on average, 14 months.

<sup>5</sup> Packard Tucker, L., Dworsky, A., & Van Drunen, M. (2019). *Formative evaluation lessons learned: Evaluating the implementation of the Youth Transitions Partnership in Alameda County*.

Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/PDF/YTP-FELL-report-2020.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> The Foster Care Data Archive is a longitudinal database developed and maintained by the Center for State Child Welfare Data at Chapin Hall. It contains decades of State data on millions of children in over two dozen states who have spent time in out-of-home placements.

<sup>7</sup> Age at enrollment was missing for one youth.

<sup>8</sup> This analysis excluded 13 youth who stayed in YTP for 1.5 months or less.

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