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October 2015

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Extended Foster Care in California: Youth and Caseworker Perspectives

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Introduction

Recently there has been a fundamental shift toward greater federal responsibility for supporting foster youth during the transition to adulthood. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (“Fostering Connections Act”) amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to allow states to claim federal reimbursement for the costs of providing foster care to Title IV-E-eligible foster youth until they are 21 years old. Crucially, states have the *option* to extend care under the new provisions of the Fostering Connections Act, but are not required to do so. California is an important early adopter of the new policy, having the largest state foster care population in the US. The California Fostering Connections to Success Act extends foster care to age 21 for eligible youth, making a wide range of changes in state law. The implementation of extended foster care involves many changes to the opportunities for youth in foster care in California nearing the age of majority.

This brief examines attitudes towards and knowledge about extended foster care in California, both from the viewpoint of young people themselves as well as caseworkers across the state. Three specific areas are examined in the brief: youths’ motivation to participate in extended foster care and caseworker perceptions of their motivation; youths’ knowledge of extended care and caseworker perceptions of their knowledge; and caseworker attitudes toward extended care.

CalYOUTH Study: Overview of the Youth and Caseworker Samples

The California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH) is an evaluation of the impact of the California Fostering Connections to Success Act on outcomes during the transition to adulthood for youth in foster care. CalYOUTH includes collection and analysis of information from three sources: (1) transition-age youth, (2) child welfare workers, and (3) government program data. This brief draws on data from two parts

of the larger CalYOUTH study: the baseline interview of adolescents transitioning out of foster care and the survey of caseworkers working with youth in extended foster care.¹

The *Baseline Youth Survey* was designed to provide a rich description of the characteristics and circumstances of older adolescents in California as they approach the age of majority and have to make the decision to participate in extended care or not. The response rate for the survey was 95.3 percent. The survey included 727 adolescents between 16.75 and 17.75 years of age who had been under the supervision of county child welfare agencies across California for at least six months. Three-fifths of the sample was female (59.4%) and nearly half identified themselves as mixed race. One-quarter identified themselves as white. The vast majority of youth were born in the United States. However, over one-third reported having at least one birth parent born outside the United States. At the time of the survey, most youth lived in a foster home without relatives (44.3%). The next largest group, one-fourth of respondents, lived in a group care setting (24.1%). Less than one-fifth of the respondents lived in a kinship foster care setting. The sample was stratified by county to maximize the ability to examine the relationship between county-level characteristics and youth outcomes. Sample weights were created to allow for generalizability of the findings to all California foster youth who met the study criteria.

The Child Welfare Caseworker Survey includes 235 California caseworkers who serve older youth in foster care. The overall response rate for the survey was 89.8 percent. The majority of the caseworkers were female (90.2%) and between 36 and 50 years old (59%). Over 60 percent of workers had completed a Master's degree, out of which nearly 42 percent had a Master of Social Work degree. The majority of

caseworkers identified as white (45%), followed by African American (23%). Sample weights were created to allow for generalizability of the findings to all California caseworkers who met the study criteria.

Caseworkers were asked to think of the most recent youth on their caseload who reached the age of majority and answer a series of questions about that youth when they were age 18. Nearly half of the caseworkers (46%) reported that the young person had been on their caseload less than one year, while 28 percent had carried the youth on their caseload for over two years. The number of times caseworkers met with the young person during the six-month period prior to their 18th birthday varied. Thirty-seven percent of caseworkers reported meeting with youth approximately once per month and 14 percent reported meeting two times per month or more. Approximately one-fifth of caseworkers met with the youth less than one time per month.

An important caveat when comparing the results of the youth and caseworker surveys is the age difference between the two samples. Youth in the *Baseline Youth Survey* were an average age of 17.5 years old. However, in the *Caseworker Survey*, workers are referring to youth who had recently turned 18. This age difference is important since youth at an older age should know more about extended care and their age might also impact their attitudes toward extended care. Also note that in all of the findings below, the response frequencies are unweighted and the response percentages are weighted.

Motivations to Remain in Care: Youth Desires and Caseworker Perceptions

We asked both youth and caseworkers about young people's desire to stay in care. Specifically, youth

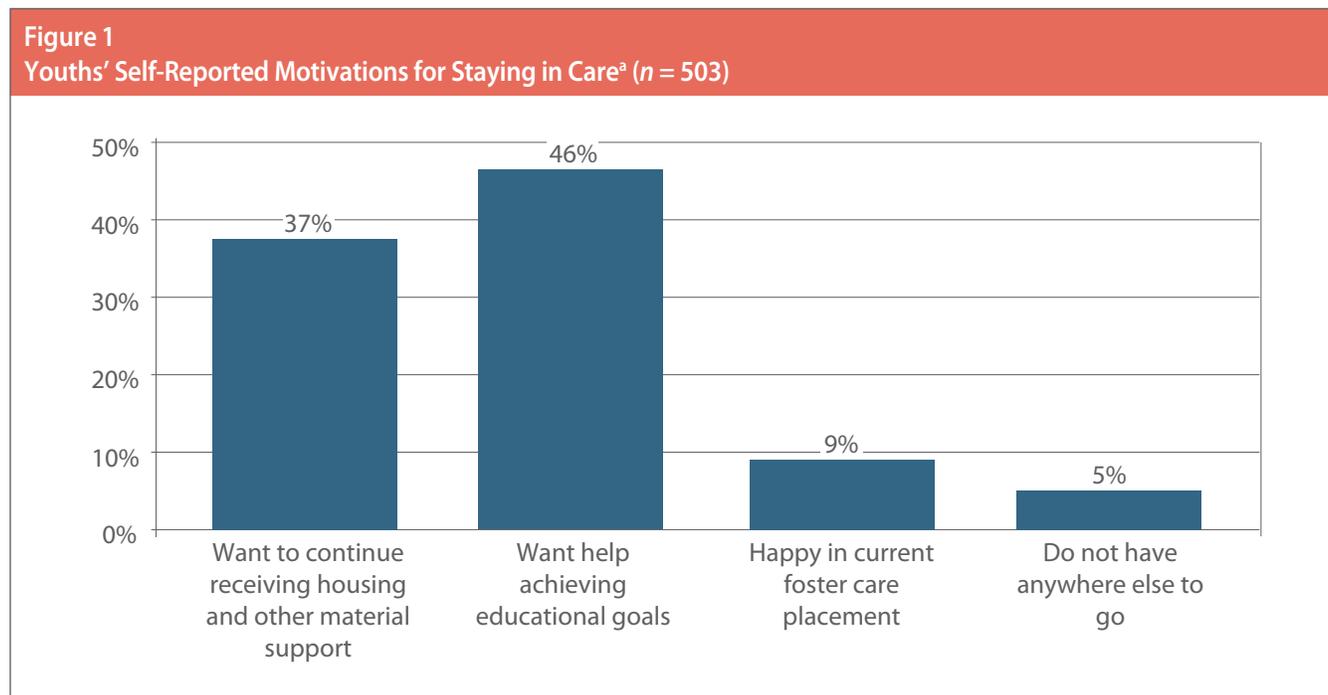
¹ For more information on the survey design, implementation, survey weights, and sample characteristics, refer to Courtney, Charles, Okpych, and Halsted (2014) for the caseworker survey and Courtney, Charles, Okpych, Napolitano, and Halsted (2014) for the youth survey.

were asked a yes or no question about whether they would want to stay in care after their 18th birthday. If they answered yes, they were then asked to choose from a list of options the most important reason they wished to remain in care. If they answered no, they were asked to choose from another list of options the most important reason they wished to leave foster care. In contrast, caseworkers were asked how favorably the selected youth who had reached age 18 on their caseload viewed remaining in extended care. Because youth may have a complex set of reasons for wanting to stay in care or not stay in care, workers were then asked a series of questions about reasons the youth may have wanted to stay in or leave care. Each item asked the worker to rate the importance of a specific motivating factor on a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 was “a strong motivation” and 1 was “not a motivation.”

Over two-thirds ($n = 475$; 67.4%) of youth reported that they wanted to stay in care after the age of 18. Caseworkers also believed that youth wanted to participate in extended care. Eighty-five percent of

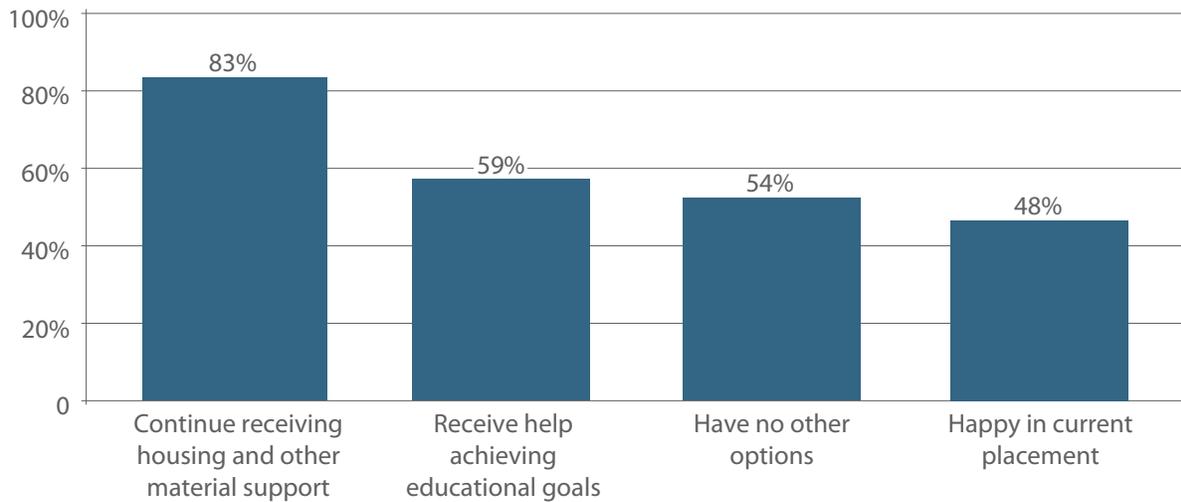
caseworkers ($n = 193$) reported that their youth had a somewhat favorable or very favorable attitude towards remaining in care.

The perspectives from youth and caseworkers diverged in some cases when it came to the motivations for youth to remain in extended foster care. Youth most commonly reported wanting to participate in extended foster care to further their education ($n = 217$; 46%) and receive support for material goods and housing ($n = 190$; 37%) (see Figure 1). Caseworkers also believed these were important motivations for youth (see Figure 2). However, caseworkers reported that housing and material needs were a stronger motivating factor than education for youth to remain in care. One reason for this discrepancy might be the age difference between the samples. It could be that since caseworkers were working with young adults at the age of majority, their housing and material needs were more obvious and urgent to caseworkers. It is also possible that caseworkers and youths have different interpretations of youths’ ability to achieve their educational goals. A



^a Note: Youth were asked to pick the main reason they would stay in care.

Figure 2
Caseworker Perceptions of Youths' Motivations to Stay in Care^b ($n = 235$)



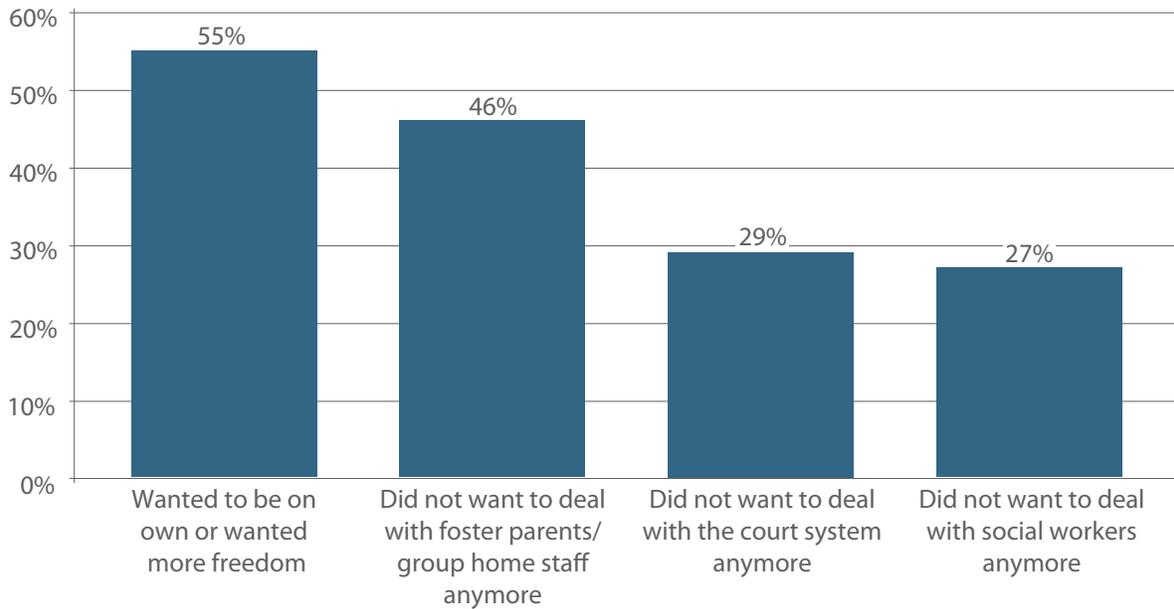
^b 5-point scale: 1=not a motivation, 5=strong motivation. Bars represent percentage of caseworkers responding 4 or 5.

majority of caseworkers ($n = 114$) also reported that youths' lack of other options was a strong motivating factor for youth to participate in extended foster care. However, only 5.1 percent ($n = 31$) of the youth reported this as their main motivation to stay in care. This difference might be because of differing perceptions of housing options for youth. For example, the vast majority of caseworkers ($n = 210$; 93%) reported that their counties have only *few* or *some* housing options for young adults in extended care. It is possible that youth are not aware of how limited their housing options are once they turn 18. Additionally, youth may be more likely than caseworkers to think about the homes of friends or family as potential housing options.

The perspectives of youth and caseworkers also diverged in some cases when it came to the motivations for youth to leave care. Caseworkers generally believed youth were motivated to leave care because of a desire to not be involved with the child welfare system anymore (see Figure 3). Over half of caseworkers

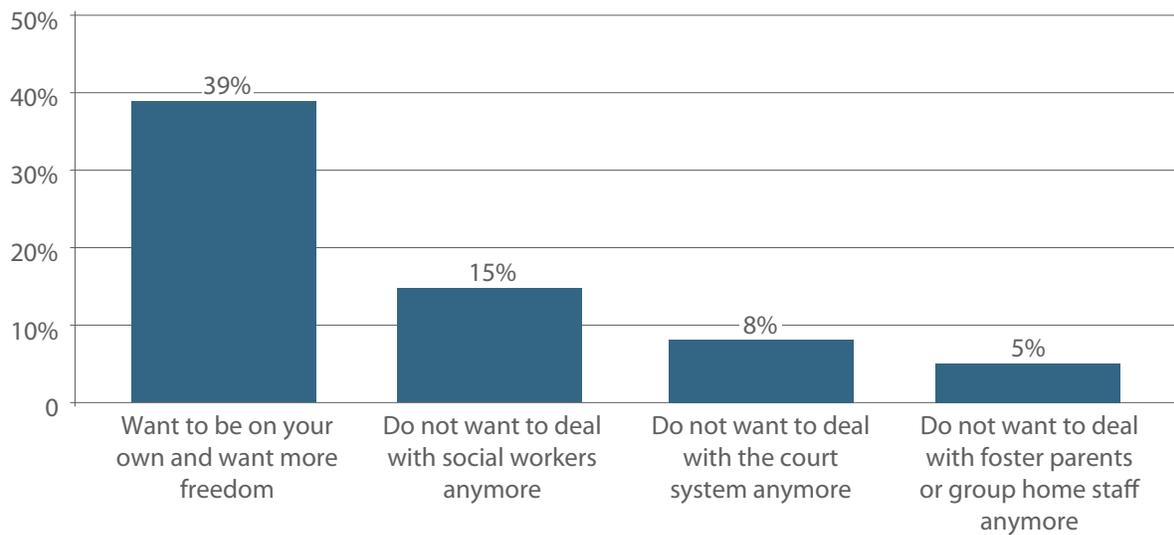
($n = 118$) reported that youth were strongly motivated to leave care because of a desire for more freedom or independence. Nearly half of caseworkers ($n = 95$) reported that youth were strongly motivated to leave care because they did not want to deal with foster parents or group home staff anymore. Less than one-third of caseworkers thought that youth were strongly motivated to leave care because they did not want to deal with the court system ($n = 65$) or social workers ($n = 55$). Turning to the youth who did not want to remain in care past age 18, over one-third of respondents ($n = 103$) reported a desire for more freedom as the main reason they would want to leave care (see Figure 4). About one-quarter of youth reported that the main reason they would want to leave care was either to avoid dealing with social workers ($n = 36$) or the court system ($n = 17$). Only 5 percent of young people ($n = 15$) reported that the main reason they would want to leave extended foster care was because they did not want to deal with foster parents or group home staff.

Figure 3
Caseworker Perceptions of Youths' Motivations to Leave Care^c (n = 235)



^c 5 point scale, 1=not a motivation, 5=strong motivation. Bars represent percentage of caseworkers responding 4 or 5.

Figure 4
Youths' Self-Reported Motivations for Leaving Care^d (n = 228)



^d Note: Youth were asked to pick the main reason they would leave care.

Extended Foster Care: Youth Knowledge and Caseworker Perceptions

Our earlier study of youth in extended care examined aspects of youths’ knowledge about extended foster care several months after implementation. Youth in several counties participated in focus groups and reported uncertainty about many aspects of the law (Courtney, Dworsky, & Napolitano, 2013). However, this research occurred relatively early in the implementation process and we also could not be certain that those who participated adequately represented youth across the state.

The *Baseline Youth Survey* addresses both of these earlier limitations. We asked youth a series of questions regarding their knowledge of extended foster care. In positive news, the vast majority of youth ($n = 705$; 97.3%) were aware that they would be eligible to stay in care past 18. Over two-thirds of youth ($n = 487$; 67.6%) correctly stated that they must exit foster care at 21. One-third of youth ($n = 246$) reported receiving “a lot”

of information about extended foster care. Nearly half of youth ($n = 325$; 44.6%) reported receiving “some” information about extended foster care, and slightly over one-fifth of youth ($n = 153$; 21.8%) reported receiving “none” or “a little” information on extended foster care. Over sixty percent of youth reported that either the county child welfare agency ($n = 168$; 21.5%), ILP staff ($n = 149$; 20%) or other social service agencies ($n = 144$; 20.9%) provided them with the most information about extended foster care. The remaining youth reported receiving the most information from a variety of sources, including foster parents ($n = 58$; 8%), group home staff ($n = 39$; 5.2%) or other adults ($n = 144$; 7%). Nearly 85 percent ($n = 613$) of young people reported that they have access to a person they are confident will always provide them with accurate information about extended foster care.

Baseline Youth Survey participants were generally familiar with their housing options (see Table 1). Over 80 percent of youth correctly identified that while in extended foster care they could live in a Supervised

Table 1
Youths’ Knowledge of Residential Options in Extended Care

Statement About Extended Care Options	Youth Answering Correctly	
	<i>n</i>	%
Youth in extended care can live in an approved home of a nonrelated legal guardian (for example, with foster parents). ^a	611	85.2
Youth in extended care can live in an approved home of a friend or relative. ^a	605	84.7
Youth in extended care can live in an independent living arrangement that has been approved by a social worker (SILP). ^a	599	82.2
Youth in extended care can live in a foster family home or foster family agency. ^a	591	80.5
Youth in extended care can live in transitional housing, like THP-Plus Foster Care. ^a	563	77.4
Youth in extended care can live in group homes after the age of 19. ^b	294	39.4
Youth in extended care can live with the person she/he was taken from when she/he entered care. ^b	295	37.5

^a Statement is true.

^b Statement is false.

Independent Living Placement (SILP), an approved home of a friend or relative, with a foster family or foster family agency, or in the approved home of a nonrelated legal guardian. Over three-quarters of the youth were aware that they could live in Transitional Housing Placement-Plus Foster Care (THP-Plus Foster Care). While this number is still quite high overall, it is possible that delays in implementing THP-Plus Foster Care across the state affected youths' knowledge of this housing option, since many providers were only licensed to provide the service after the field period for the youth survey. Youth were less certain, however, about their ability to live in group homes after the age of 19 or if they could return to the person they were initially removed from while in extended foster

care. While the group home provision does have some caveats that might complicate youths' understanding of their options, the uncertainty surrounding if youth can return to their original caretaker is one that should be addressed by future advocacy efforts.

Youth reported some confusion regarding some of extended care's more specific provisions (see Table 2). For example, most youth were aware that young people in extended care must check in with their social workers at least once a month. Slightly less than two-thirds of youth reported knowing that they need to check in with the courts twice a year. Over three-fifths of the youth were aware of their rights to re-enter extended care and that extended care is an opt-out, not opt-in, program.

Table 2 Youths' Knowledge of Specific Provisions of Extended Care		
Statement About Extended Care Provisions	Youth Answering Correctly	
	<i>n</i>	%
Youth in extended foster care have to see their social worker(s) at least once a month. ^a	585	79.9
Youth who are pregnant can be in extended foster care. ^a	531	71.3
Youth in care on their 18th birthday automatically stay in extended foster care unless they decide to leave. ^a	501	70
Youth in extended foster care have to check in with the court at least twice a year. ^a	455	63.7
Youth who exit care after 18 are allowed to re-enter the system up until the age of 21. ^a	466	63.4
Youth in extended foster care may get their foster care payment paid directly to them. ^a	466	62.7
Youth have to be working AND in school in order to qualify for extended foster care. ^b	424	58.8
Youth have to be working full time to qualify for extended foster care. ^b	369	52.7
Youth who are in a foster care placement and on probation at age 18 are not eligible for extended foster care. ^a	328	44.4
Youth cannot receive extended foster care benefits if they move out of their home county or the state. ^b	252	32.8
Youth have to be in school full time in order to qualify for extended foster care. ^b	221	30.2
Roommates of youth in extended foster care need to submit to criminal background checks. ^b	142	19.9

^a Statement is true.
^b Statement is false.

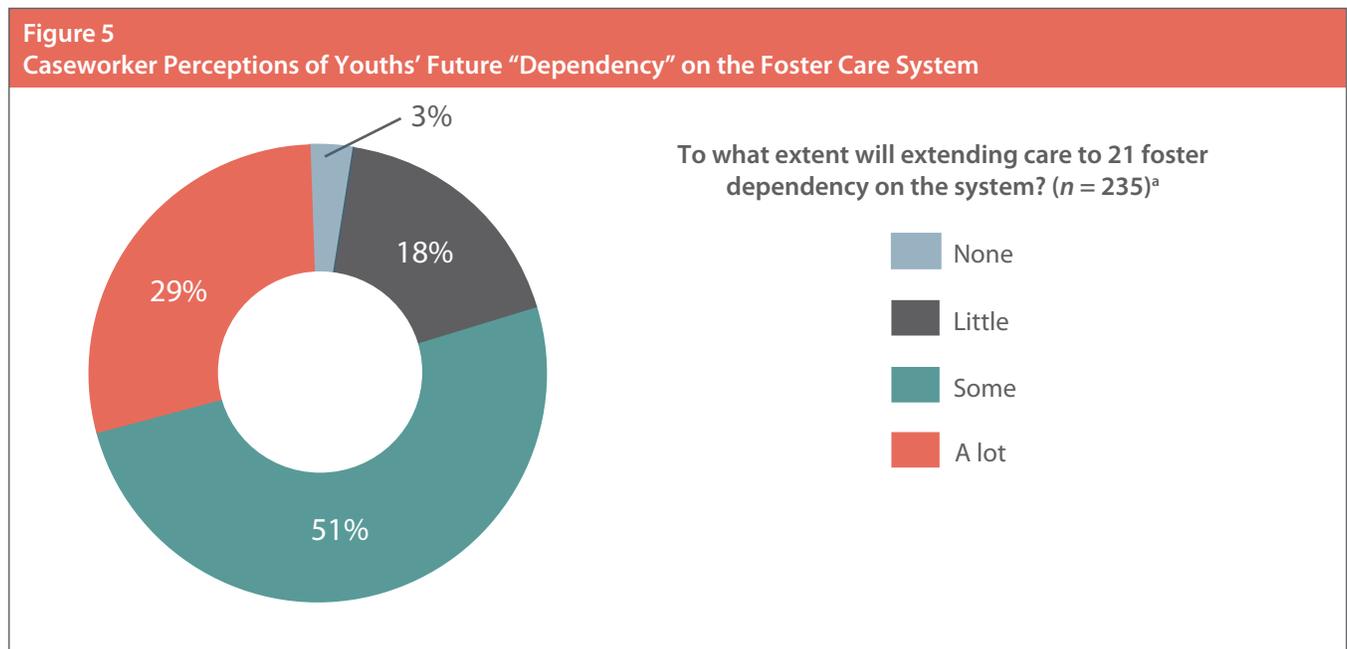
This should come as some comfort to caseworkers, since only about 45 percent ($n = 113$) of caseworkers reported that youth had good or very good knowledge of the process of remaining in care, while the rest (55%) felt that youth had had fair, poor, or very poor knowledge ($n = 117$). Most youth incorrectly believed that their roommates in extended care must submit to criminal background checks. Youth rights to move outside of their home county were also unclear to youth, with over one-third of youth reporting that they would not receive their benefits if they moved out of their county or the state and another one-third stating that they did not know if they would still get benefits.

The federal and state laws providing for extended care require that for youth to remain in care they must be in school, working at least 80 hours per month, engaged in activities preparing them for work, or have a medical condition that impedes their ability to engage in these activities. Although most of the youth seemed to understand that they would be required to engage in some kind of activity to stay in care, many were less clear about the specifics of those requirements. For example,

while a majority of youth was aware that they did not have to be working *and* in school to remain in extended care, and a slightly smaller number knew that they did not have to be working full time to stay in care, nearly three-fifths erroneously believed that they needed to be in school full time to remain in care or did not know.

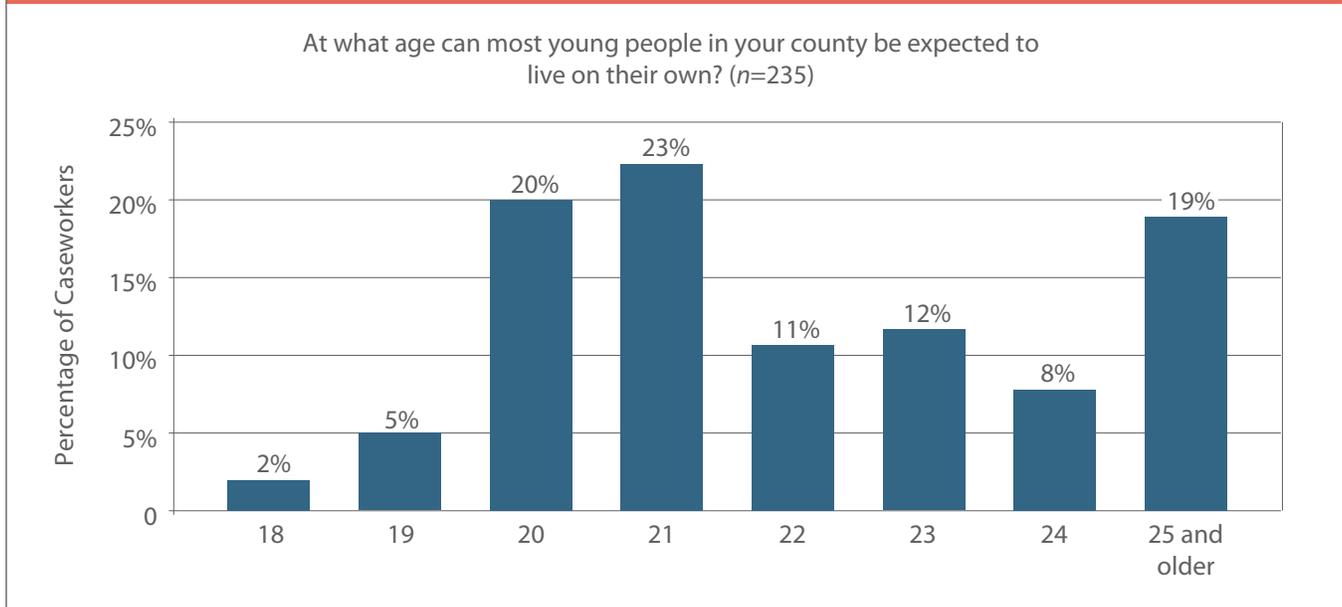
The mixed bag in terms of youth knowledge about extended care is not surprising, given that over one-quarter of the young people ($n = 199$; 27.7%) reported receiving “a lot” of conflicting information about extended care, while slightly more than 40 percent ($n = 284$) reported receiving “some” conflicting information. However, it is certainly good news that youth have a strong knowledge of their housing options under extended foster care as well as the process for entering extended care. Considering that youth in this sample are not yet 18, their knowledge of extended care overall should be seen as a positive sign.

Additionally, youth attitudes about and knowledge of extended care might be derived from their involvement in developing their transitional living plan. When asked about their involvement in developing their



^a Percentages sum to more than 100% due to rounding.

Figure 6
Caseworker Perceptions of Youths' Ability to Live on Own



^a Percentages sum to more than 100% due to rounding.

independent living plan, many of the young people reported being part of the process, either by being involved in the development of the independent living plan ($n = 309$; 41.9%) or by actually leading it ($n = 171$; 23.3%). Involving youth in the process early on can give them the opportunity to prepare and think ahead about their future options.

What are caseworkers' own attitudes toward extending care?

We were also interested in caseworkers' attitudes towards extended care. Caseworkers report some ambivalence about extended foster care. While a relatively high number of caseworkers believe that extending care fosters “some” ($n = 94$; 51%) or “a lot” ($n = 83$; 29%) of dependency on the system, only two percent of caseworkers ($n = 7$) believe that the young people can be expected to live on their own at the age of 18 (see Figure 5). Over 40 percent of caseworkers ($n = 101$) felt that youth are not ready to live on their

until they reach 20 or 21 years old and slightly under one-fifth ($n = 45$) believe youth are not ready to be fully independent until age 25 or later (see Figure 6). The overwhelming majority of caseworkers ($n = 220$; 89%) believe that older youth in foster care “need” or “absolutely need” help after turning 18. These findings seem to reflect the ambivalence caseworkers have toward extending care. While caseworkers are at least moderately concerned that extended foster care will encourage dependency on the child welfare system, they are also quite clear that the young people in their care are not ready to live on their own at the age of 18.

Summary

This brief examines both youth and caseworker attitudes towards and knowledge of extended foster care in California. As caseworkers believe, the vast majority of the youth desire to stay in care. Youth and caseworkers also both believe that furthering educational goals and gaining housing and material goods are the primary

motivations for youth to remain in care. Both groups also agreed that the main motivation to leave care is the desire to gain more freedom.

While many caseworkers are concerned that youth were not well versed in the process for remaining in care, the vast majority of youth reported being aware of their right to remain in foster care after turning 18, though they were less clear about the details of extended care and what would be required of them to remain in care as young adults. It is possible that knowledge of extended care among foster youth in California reaching the age of majority and their caseworkers has improved since we conducted the youth and caseworker surveys in 2013. However, the findings presented here likely provide important insights for caseworkers and foster care providers into the kinds of information that youth need in order to be fully informed of their rights, and their responsibilities, under extended care.

Caseworkers' own ambivalence about extended foster care is also noteworthy. Although there is some trepidation among caseworkers that the extension of care will lead to greater dependency among youth on the child welfare system, workers also have serious concerns about the ability of many youth to survive on their own without extended care. How well youth fare under extended care and the risk and protective factors associated with their progress will be a major focus of CalYOUTH going forward.

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Recommended Citation

Napolitano, L., Sulimani-Aidan, Y., & Courtney, M. E. (2015). *Extended foster care in California: Youth and caseworker perspectives*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Related Publications

Okpych, N. J., Courtney, M. E., & Charles, P. (2015). Youth and caseworker perspectives on older adolescents in California foster care: Youths' education status and services. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Napolitano, L., & Courtney, M. E. (2014). *Residential settings of young adults in extended foster care: A preliminary investigation*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Courtney, M. E., Charles, P., Okpych, N. J., Napolitano, L., & Halsted, K. (2014). *Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CALYOUTH): Conditions of foster youth at age 17*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

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