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Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago 1313 East 60th Street Chicago, IL 60637 T: 773.753.5900 F: 773.753.5940 [www.chapinhall.org](http://www.chapinhall.org)

## Memo from CalYOUTH: Factors Associated with Youth Remaining in Foster Care as Young Adults

Mark E. Courtney, Sunggeun (Ethan) Park, and Nathanael J. Okpych

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act enabled states to extend foster care provisions up to age 21. Since 2010, more than 20 states have enacted laws with a variety of policies and practices that could influence whether and for how long youth across the country remain in care after their 18th birthday. Prior research identified characteristics of youth associated with time in care after the 18th birthday (e.g., stability of care, satisfaction with care, desire for independence), but regional variation suggests that system-level factors play a larger role (Eastman, Putnam-Hornstein, Magruder, Mitchell, & Courtney, 2016; McCoy, McMillen, & Spitznagel, 2008; Peters, Dworsky, Courtney, & Pollack, 2009). For instance, Peters (2012) found that county-level characteristics (e.g., poverty rate and political affiliation) and court characteristics predicted youth's time in care among Illinois foster care youths.

California is one of the early adopters of extended foster care. The California Fostering Connections Act (AB12) was signed into law on September 30, 2010.

The law ensured that, starting January 1, 2012, eligible foster youth had the right to stay in care until their 21st birthday. In addition to having the largest state foster care population in the US, California's county-administered foster care system draws the attention of many other states to California's implementation of extended care (Courtney, Charles, Okpych, Napolitano, & Halsted, 2014).

Leveraging youth survey data and administrative data, this memo investigates youth- and system-level factors associated with the length of time that foster youth in California remain in out-of-home care after their 18th birthday. Understanding factors associated with youths' extended foster care (EFC) participation is important, not only for predicting future demands for the program, but also for identifying subgroups that may be excluded from extended care. We find that youth characteristics are associated with youths' stays in care past their 18th birthday, but the change in state policy that occurred in 2012 and between-county variation in participation in EFC play much larger roles.

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## Study Methods

The current memo employs two data sources: administrative data from California’s state child welfare agency and data collected from a longitudinal study of a sample of California foster youth. The administrative data allow us to view the impact of California’s Fostering Connections Act using a large sample of youth who reached the age of majority both before and after the implementation of the state’s extended care policy. This allows us to study how the law has impacted the length of stay past youths’ 18th birthday for older youths and to better understand how rates of EFC participation vary between counties. The youth survey provides much richer information on the individual characteristics of a subsample of the larger population. Youth survey participants turned 18 in 2013–14 (after the implementation of extended care) and are being interviewed three times between ages 17 and 21. The two data sources complement each other, offering an opportunity to better understand the nature of stays in extended care in California.

California Department of Social Services’ (CDSS) Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) is the state foster care administrative data system that captures information on youths’ demographic characteristics, foster care history, and history of maltreatment allegations. We use information on 26,901 youths who were in foster care after age 16.75 years of age and who turned 18 between 2008 and 2013, including: 5,831 youths who turned 18 in 2008; 5,549 in 2009; 5,134 in 2010; 4,829 in 2011; 4,530 in 2012; and 1,028 in 2013. To make the CWS/CMS sample comparable with the youth survey sample, we excluded youths who were characterized as having a developmental disability and those who had been in

care for less than 6 months between their 16th and 18th birthdays. Youths in this sample are referred to as the “administrative data sample” for the remainder of this memo.

Youth survey data include information gathered from 708 youths from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH Study) who granted us permission to access their administrative foster care history data from the CDSS. The initial study sample was selected from the population of foster care youth who had been in California foster care under the supervision of county child welfare agencies for at least six months. Surveyed youths were between 16.75 and 17.75 years of age in late 2012, and were physically and mentally able to participate in the interview (see Courtney et al., 2014 for more details about the sample procedures). Participants in this study are referred to as the “youth survey sample” for the remainder of the memo.

The main purposes of the memo are to (1) evaluate changes in youths’ length of stay beyond their 18th birthday that resulted from implementation of California’s extended foster care policy and (2) evaluate the role of youth- and county-level factors in predicting the amount of time that foster youth eligible for EFC spend in care beyond their 18th birthday. We first examine the relationship between the year in which youth turned 18 and how long they remained in care after their 18th birthday, focusing on the impact of the implementation of extended care using the administrative data sample. Then, we explore the relationships between youth- and system-level characteristics and the length of time youth remain in care after their 18th birthday, first using the youth survey sample and then turning to the administrative data sample.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All of our analyses rely on multivariable predictive statistical models that control for youth- and system-level variables that might reasonably be expected to influence how long youth remain in care. The youth survey sample has a much richer array of youth-level variables than does the administrative data sample, but the administrative data sample is larger and therefore better suited to identify relatively small effects of variables on length of stay in care. For the estimate of the impact of the implementation of extended care policy on youths’ length of time in care, we use the full administrative data sample for youth who turned 18 in care between 2008 and 2013 ( $n = 26,901$ ). For the estimates of youth- and system-level variables’ influence on youths’ length of stay in care after their 18th birthday in the extended care era that rely on the administrative data sample, we only use the information on the 5,558 youths who turned 18 after January 1, 2012 and were potentially eligible for extended foster care. More information on the methods used to conduct these analyses is available from the authors upon request.

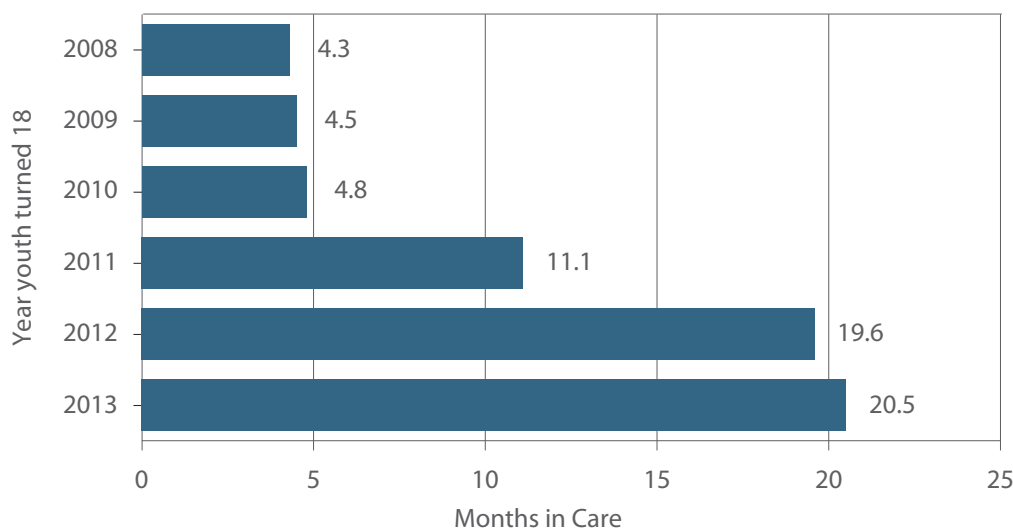
The primary outcome of interest in all of our analyses is the youth’s length of stay in care, calculated as the number of months (30-day periods) the youth remained in care after his or her 18th birthday.<sup>2</sup> Some youth left care before turning 18 and did not return. Because we are primarily interested in the time youth spend in care beyond their 18th birthday, youth who left care prior to their 18th birthday are treated as having spent zero days in extended care. It is important to note that youth survey participants’ length of stay could only be observed to between the ages of 19.75 and 20.75 years old, depending on their age at the time of our CWS/CMS data draw in March 2016. The foster care histories of all youths in the administrative data sample can be observed until age 21. Youth characteristics included in our analyses were demographic characteristics, foster care history characteristics, maltreatment history, and aspects of psychosocial functioning. The characteristic

of California’s foster care system that we focused on was the youths’ placing county, recognizing that counties exercise considerable discretion in operating their foster care program.

## Findings

Consistent with the intended impact of the new law, the average amount of time transition-age foster youth in California spent in care after their 18th birthday increased significantly with the implementation of extended foster care. Figure 1 shows the average number of months youths spent in care after their 18th birthday, by year in which the youths turned 18, after controlling for diverse youth- and county-level variables.<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 shows that there was virtually no difference in the average time in care between youths who turned 18 in 2008 and those who turned 18 in the following two years. It is worth noting that

**Figure 1.**  
**Effect of the Implementation of California’s Fostering Connections Act on Average Length of Time in Foster Care After 18th Birthday (n = 26,901)**



<sup>2</sup> Since the implementation of extended care, foster youth who are in care on their 18th birthdays are able to exit and re-enter care up to age 21. For youth who had multiple episodes in care after their 18th birthday, the outcomes variable is the total time they were in foster care after their 18th birthday summed across those episodes.

<sup>3</sup> The estimates of the impact of the implementation of extended care policy on youths’ length of stay in care statistically control for the following: gender, race/ethnicity, foster care system history (time in placement, number of placements, primary placement type), incarceration history, vision/hearing/other physical disability, behavioral disability (mental health and substance use disorder), maltreatment history, and placing county.

youths in these early cohorts remained in care for about 4.4 months after their 18th birthday, even before the implementation of the California Fostering Connections Act. The average time in care increased dramatically for the cohort who turned 18 in 2011. Youth who turned 18 between January 1, 2011 and December 31, 2011 are commonly known as “gap youth,” whose extended foster care stay was not initially fully funded by the state.<sup>4</sup> Despite this, some counties allowed these youths to stay in care, accounting for the seven-month increase in their estimated length of stay. The effect of the implementation of California’s extended care policy is clearly shown in Figure 1; youths who turned 18 in 2012 and 2013, after the California Fostering Connections Act was fully in effect, remained in care about 15 to 16 months longer than youths who turned 18 between 2008–10. On average, youths in the last two cohorts remained in care for about 20 months after their 18th birthday.

To examine youth- and system-level predictors of length of stay in care, we first used the youth survey sample, relying on its rich self-report data on the characteristics of youth approaching the age of majority while in care, and CWS/CMS data on the youth’s child welfare system and maltreatment histories linked to the youth survey data, including a variable indicating the youth’s placing county.<sup>5</sup> Our analysis shows that few youth characteristics were associated with the amount of time they stayed in care after their 18th birthday. Table 1 presents only statistically significant results from our predictive model, showing the effects of characteristics of youth and placing county on months in care past the 18th birthday. For example, as shown in Table 1, youth who reported having ever been incarcerated prior to the baseline interview at age 17 spent an estimated 1.97 months less in care after their 18th birthday than did youth who did not report a history of incarceration.

While youths’ incarceration history is associated with months in care past the age of 18, most demographic, maltreatment history, and psychosocial functioning variables did not significantly predict time in care past the 18th birthday. Instead, some aspects of youths’ foster care experiences, as well as the supervising county, were associated with how long they stayed in care past 18. Those who spent the majority of their foster care history in congregate care settings (i.e., group homes or residential treatment centers) exited care about two to four months earlier, on average, than did youths who spent the majority of their time in other placement settings. Youths with more foster care placements stayed in care for more months after age 18 than did youths with fewer placements. All else being equal, youths who expressed a desire to remain in care after their 18th birthday during the interview at age 17 remained in care nearly five months longer than did youths who indicated no desire to stay. Lastly, there was significant variation between counties in the average amount of time youths remained in care after 18. Using Los Angeles County for comparison, we found that after statistically controlling for youths’ characteristics, the estimated length of stay after the 18th birthday ranged from nearly five months less than to over six months more than the average in Los Angeles County. These results suggest that the county a youth happens to live in makes a big difference in how long they are likely to remain in care in California.

We also took advantage of the much larger sample of youth in the administrative data sample who had come of age after the implementation of extended care—youths who turned 18 in 2012 or 2013 ( $n = 5,558$ )—to further our understanding of youth- and system-level predictors of how long youth remain in care after their 18th birthday. This analysis relies on data entered into the CWS/CMS by county caseworkers, providing us with

<sup>4</sup> For more information on gap youth, please refer to Courtney, Dworsky, & Napolitano (2013).

<sup>5</sup> Youth characteristics included in our ordinary least squares regression model predicting time in care after the 18th birthday using the youth survey sample included: gender; race/ethnicity; sexual orientation; US nativity; total time in care before age 18; main placement type before age 18; number of total placements before age 18; substantiated sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, and other physical or emotional maltreatment; general health; measures of mental health and substance use disorders; being a parent; having been pregnant before baseline; measures of delinquency; receiving special education services; having repeated a grade in school; a score from an assessment of their reading ability; having ever worked for pay; having ever been incarcerated; and a measure of social support. We also included a variable indicating a youth’s placing county, with youth in the 26 counties with the smallest foster youth populations grouped into one category.

Table 1. Predictors of Length of Stay in Care after the 18th Birthday: Youth Survey Sample (n=708)	
	Coefficient (months in care)
<b>Individual-level predictors</b>	
<b>Psychosocial functioning</b>	
Ever incarcerated	-1.97*
<b>Foster care experiences</b>	
Main placement type before age 18 (reference: group care)	
Nonrelative foster home	2.60
Relative foster home	2.72*
Treatment foster care (FFA home) <sup>†</sup>	2.47*
Other placement <sup>€</sup>	4.30*
Total number of placement before age 18 (reference: 1–5 placements)	
6–10 placements	3.87***
More than 11 placements	5.57***
Desire to remain in care after age 18	4.70***
<b>System-level predictor</b>	
Supervising County (reference: LA; 32 county indicators not shown <sup>#</sup> )	4.91 to 6.47*

Notes: \*p < .05, \*\*\*p < .001

<sup>†</sup> California agencies, known as Foster Family Agencies (FFAs), are licensed to supervise foster homes that are intended to provide therapeutic foster care as an alternative to group care.

<sup>€</sup> Includes medical facility, guardian home, tribe-specified home, court-specified home, adoptive placement, small family home, Supervised Independent Living Placement (SILP), shelter/receiving home, and transitional housing placement.

<sup>#</sup> The smallest 26 counties, where only 44 youths in the survey sample were placed, are merged into one category.

a somewhat more limited set of youth characteristics than was available from the youth survey data. However, due to the larger sample size we are better able to detect more modest effects of these characteristics on youths' length of stay in care.<sup>6</sup> Despite the differing samples and sources of data, our findings here largely reaffirm those from our analysis of the youth survey data. Table 2 presents only statistically significant results from our predictive model, showing the effects of characteristics of youth and placing county on months in care past the

18th birthday. Controlling for other attributes, black and Hispanic youths remain in care longer than do white youths, and youths with disabilities recorded by their caseworker remain in care longer than youth without such disabilities. Consistent with the results from the analysis of youth survey data, some characteristics of youths' foster care histories also predicted length of stay: total number of placements and main placement type before 18 were significantly associated with length of stay. In addition, youths who had spent a longer time

<sup>6</sup> Youth characteristics in our ordinary least squares regression model predicting time in care after the 18th birthday using the administrative data sample included: gender; race/ethnicity; total time in care before age 18; main placement type before age 18; number of total placements before age 18; substantiated sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, and other physical or emotional maltreatment; having been a ward of a county probation agency in the past; vision/hearing/other physical disability; and behavioral health problem (mental health and substance use disorder). We also included a variable indicating a youth's placing county.

**Table 2.**  
**Predictors of Length of Stay in Care after the 18th Birthday: Administrative Data Sample (n = 5,558)**

	Coefficient (months)
<b>Individual-level predictors</b>	
<b>Demographics</b>	
Race/Ethnicity (reference: White)	
Black	3.06***
Hispanic	1.76**
Asian/Pacific Islander/Native American	1.32
Mixed race	0.11
<b>Psychosocial functioning</b>	
Vision, hearing, and other physical disability	2.25***
Other medical disabilities	1.42**
<b>Foster care experience</b>	
Total time in care before age 18 (reference: Less than 1 year)	
1-2 years	2.24*
2-5 years	3.29***
5-10 years	4.72***
10 or more years	5.15***
Number of total placement before age 18 (reference: 1-5 placements)	
6-10 placements	5.90***
More than 11 placements	6.39***
Main placement type before age 18 (reference: Group care)	
Nonrelative foster home	4.15***
Relative foster home	4.28***
Treatment foster care (FFA home) <sup>†</sup>	5.03***
Other placement <sup>€</sup>	0.76
<b>System-level predictors</b>	
Placing County (reference: LA; 57 county indicators not shown)	-18.84 to 8.28***

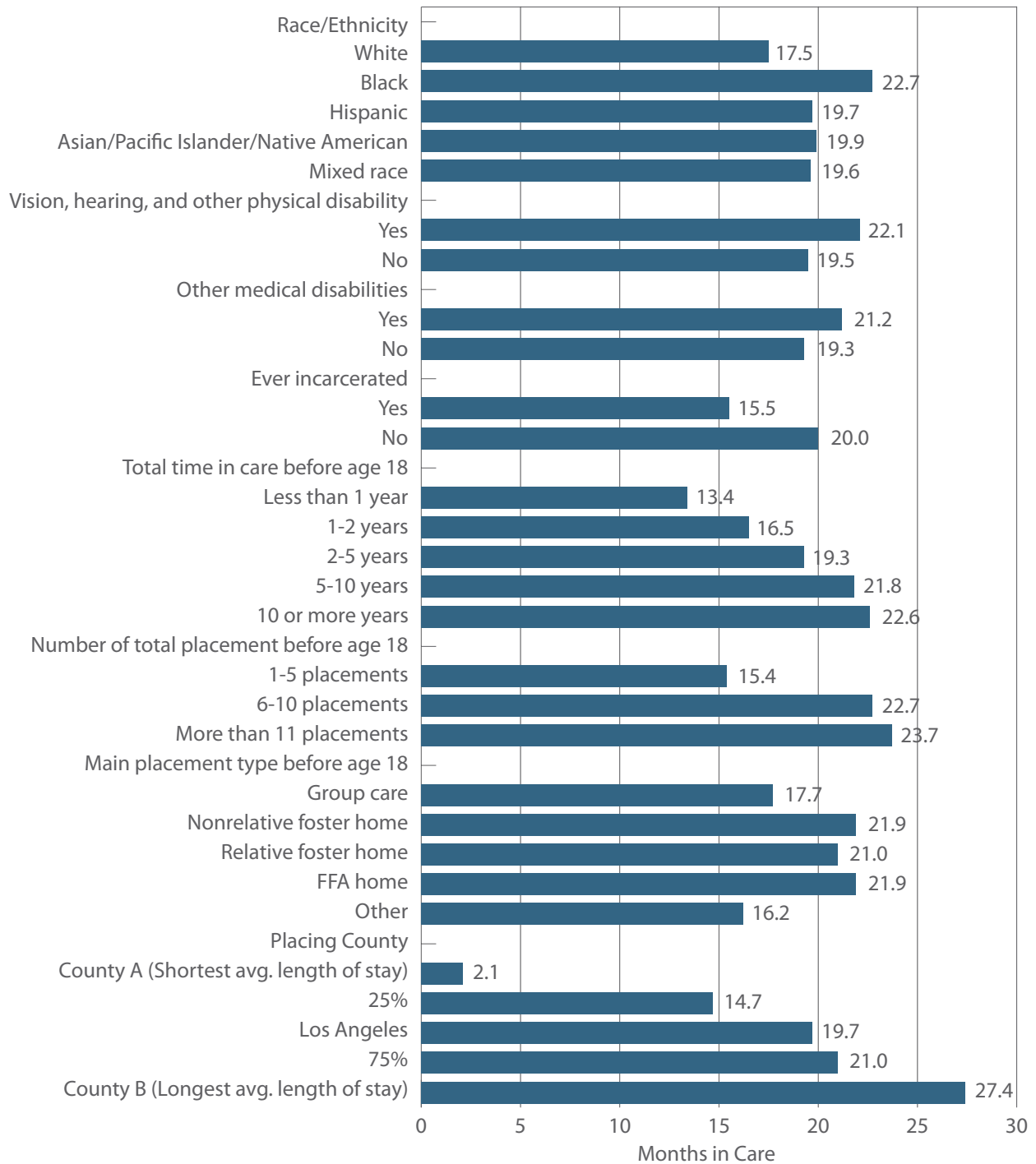
Notes: \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001

<sup>†</sup> California agencies, known as Foster Family Agencies (FFAs), are licensed to supervise foster homes that are intended to provide therapeutic foster care as an alternative to group care.

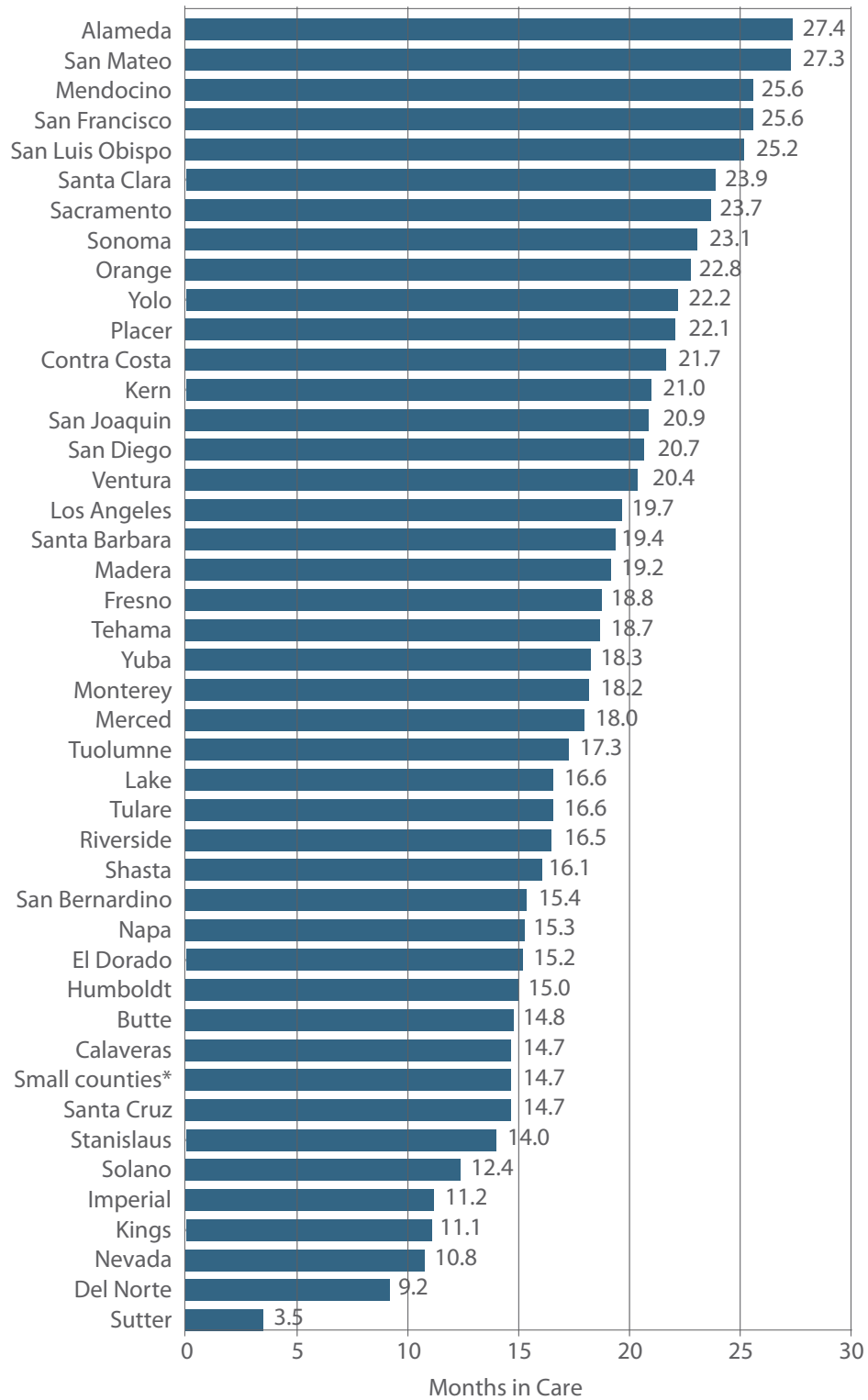
<sup>€</sup> Includes medical facility, guardian home, tribe-specified home, court-specified home, adoptive placement, small family home, SILP, shelter/receiving home, and transitional housing placement.



**Figure 2.**  
**Average Length of Stay after 18th Birthday by Youth- and System-Level Characteristics (n = 5,558)**



**Figure 3.**  
**Average Length of Stay after 18th Birthday by Last Placement County (n = 5,558)<sup>a</sup>**



<sup>a</sup> The following counties are not represented in the estimates in this figure due to having no youth who met the sampling criteria: Alpine, Inyo, Mono, and Sierra. County information was missing for 6 youths in the sample and they are not included in the estimates in this figure.  
<sup>\*</sup> Eleven counties with fewer than 10 youths were collapsed into the “Small counties” group. These counties include: Amador, Colusa, Glenn, Lassen, Marin, Mariposa, Modoc, Plumas, San Benito, Siskiyou, and Trinity.



in the foster care system prior to age 18 stayed longer in care after their 18th birthday than did youths who spent less time in foster care before age 18. In addition to youth-level attributes, our analysis confirmed that youths' length of extended care stay was strongly associated with the placing county.

To highlight the relative magnitudes of the effects of youth- and system-level factors on youths' average extended care stay, we illustrate those differences visually in Figure 2, relying on our analyses of the administrative data sample. The average length of stay among youth who turned 18 years old in 2012 and 2013 ( $n = 5,558$ ) was 19.9 months. There were small differences in the average time in care after the 18th birthday by youths' physical and medical disability status (less than 3 months). Relatively larger variations (up to 9.5 months) are observed for other youth-level factors, including race/ethnicity, probation record, main placement type, time in care before age 18, and total number of placements before age 18. However, even after controlling for youth-level predictors of length of stay, the county responsible for the youths' care remained strongly associated with how long these young people remained in extended care in California. Youths' estimated average length of time in care after their 18th birthday differed by more than two years between the county with the highest average length of stay and the county with the lowest average. The interquartile difference in average length of stay—the difference between the average for counties at the 25th percentile and those at the 75th percentile—was approximately 6 months. In other words, youth from counties in the top quartile could expect to spend at least 6 months longer in care after their 18th birthday than youth in counties in the bottom quartile. Figure 3 displays county differences in the average number of months that youth spent in care past age 18, just among youth who reached their 18th birthday in 2012 and 2013.

## Study Limitations

Several study limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings reported here. First, the only youths we were able to follow to their 21st birthday were those who reached the age of 18 while in care in

2012 and 2013, since youths who entered care later than that were only 20 years old or younger at the time we obtained the CWS/CMS data for this report. The implementation of California's Fostering Connections Act was arguably still a work in progress in 2012 and 2013. Second, despite the richness of the information collected directly from young people, the youth survey data lack the statistical power to identify relatively small impacts of youth characteristics on length of stay, and we may not have measured all youth characteristics that are associated with length of stay. Third, the administrative data do not contain particularly rich data on youth characteristics that might be associated with length of stay. Fourth, our analysis is not necessarily generalizable to youth beyond California. For example, the characteristics of other states' foster youth population, foster care arrangements, and implementation of extended foster care may be associated with youths' time in extended care in ways that differ from those reported here. Lastly, this study did not explore the reasons behind the observed between-county variation in youths' length of stay.

## Conclusion

Keeping in mind the study's limitations, this memo provides important insight into the factors associated with how long youth approaching the age of majority in California's foster care system remain in care after they reach their 18th birthday. Although youth-level attributes help explain some of the differences in how long youth stay in care after their 18th birthday, system-level factors, including the implementation of the extended care policy and the county responsible for the youth's placement, appear to have much greater effects on the likelihood that youth will remain in care. It may seem obvious that establishing a policy that allows youth to remain in care past their 18th birthday would result in significantly longer lengths of stay for transition-age foster youth, but it was not long ago that many child welfare agency administrators and youth advocates routinely claimed that youth disliked "the system" and would never choose to remain in care once they reached adulthood. California's implementation of extended care provides evidence that states can implement extended care policies that significantly increase the

likelihood that youth will choose to remain in care well after their 18th birthday.

However, the current study also provides guidance to those who are concerned about ensuring that all youth who might benefit from remaining in care are able to do so. Our findings do not provide strong evidence that only relatively advantaged youth are remaining in care. The magnitude of the effects of individual characteristics of youth on length of stay are not very large, for the most part, amounting to differences in length of stay of just a few months. Moreover, while some of the characteristics associated with length of stay after age 18 suggest that relatively disadvantaged youth are leaving earlier (e.g., those with a history of incarceration, group care placement, and placement instability), other indicators of disadvantage are associated with longer stays (e.g., having a disability and being a member of marginalized racial and ethnic groups). Given prior research on the potential benefits of remaining in care past age 18, child welfare administrators and practitioners should consider whether current policies and practices might discourage some harder-to-serve youth from remaining in care. Similarly, administrators and practitioners should strive to better understand what factors contribute to the substantial between-county variation in transition-age foster youths' length of stay in extended care. Our findings provide evidence of the potential effects of county-level discretion on youths' access to statutorily defined support during the transition to adulthood.

The CalYOUTH team will continue our exploration of factors associated with how long youth remain in extended care in California. For example, in the near future we plan to report on potential contributors to between-county variation in youths' length of stay. We are also launching the third round of interviews with CalYOUTH Study participants, to be conducted after they have reached their 21st birthdays, to learn more about how the young people are doing in their transition to adulthood. While we wait for the information we will glean from those interviews, we will continue to mine the CalYOUTH data already in hand to produce memos on topics such as youths' transitions to postsecondary education, predictors of homelessness, trends in

the social support foster youth receive as they move into adulthood, their experiences with psychotropic medications, and their involvement with dependency court decision making.

**Disclaimer:** 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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## Related Publications

Courtney, M. E., & Okpych, N. J. (2017). *Memo from CalYOUTH: Early findings on the relationship between extended foster care and youths' outcomes at age 19*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Courtney, M. E., & Okpych, N. (2015). *Memo from CalYOUTH: Early findings on extended care and legal permanency*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

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

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## Contact

### Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

1313 East 60th Street  
Chicago, IL 60637  
T: 773.753.5900  
F: 773.753.5940  
[www.chapinhall.org](http://www.chapinhall.org)