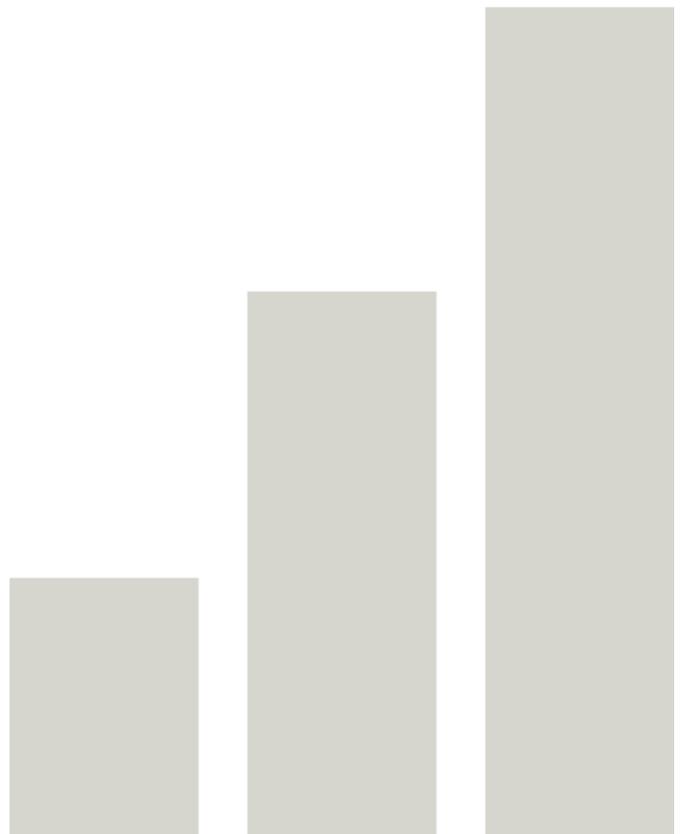


# Memo from CalYOUTH: Associations between County-level Factors and Youths' Extended Foster Care Participation

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## Related Publications

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## Introduction

A growing body of research has shown that extended foster care (EFC) is associated with outcomes of transition-age foster youth (Courtney, Okpych, & Park, 2018; Courtney & Hook, 2017; Courtney, Park, & Okpych, 2017; Lee, Courtney, & Tajima, 2014; Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Hook & Courtney, 2011). EFC has been found to benefit foster youth in several domains, including education, employment, housing, social support, pregnancy and parenting, and reduced criminal justice system involvement (Courtney et al., 2018). For example, a recent analysis of data collected by the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH) found that each additional year in EFC increased the probability of foster youth enrolling in college by 10 to 11% and increased the number of quarters that foster youth were employed between their 18th and 21st birthdays (Courtney et al., 2018).

California was one of the early adopters of the federal 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act that gave states the option to extend the foster care age limit to 21. Although EFC is adopted on a state level, studies have found significant variation between counties in EFC participation and amount of time spent in care past age 18 (Courtney et al., 2018; Courtney et al. 2017). As is the case in 11 other states, child welfare services in California are administered at the county level, with each of the 58 counties being

responsible for developing and executing procedures and practices that comply with state and federal policy.<sup>1</sup> As such, county-level discretion has the potential to influence foster youths' participation in EFC and how long they stay in EFC. For example, a previous CalYOUTH study found that youths' average length of time in EFC differed by over two years between the California county with the highest average length of time and the county with the lowest (Courtney et al., 2017). A study in Illinois discovered that county-level courts play a significant role in the variability of the proportion of foster youth who participate in extended care (Peters, 2012). Still, exploration of the role that county-level factors play in EFC participation is a relatively new and emerging area of research, and more work is needed.

Building on CalYOUTH's charge to evaluate contexts and consequences of extended foster care, this memo examines the associations between several county-level factors and youths' extended foster care participation. Data on two county-level factors come from administrative data, including the unemployment rate among youth and young adults and the proportion of Republicans among registered voters. Data on other county-level factors come from a survey of California child welfare workers who serve transition-age youth. The survey captures their perceptions of whether EFC fosters dependency, the age at which foster youth can live independently, the availability of training and services for foster youth, the quality of collaboration

<sup>1</sup> Nine states operate all child welfare services at the county level (California, Colorado, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia), while three states (Maryland, Nevada, and Wisconsin) are considered "hybrid" states where services are partially administered by the state and partially administered by counties (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018).

between child welfare and other service systems, and the supportiveness of court personnel. These county-level factors were used to predict youths' participation in extended foster care (i.e., in care on 18th birthday) and the number of months youth spent in care after age 18.

## Methods

### Data Sources

To explore the relationships between county-level factors and youth's EFC participation, this memo uses both data from administrative records and data collected from a survey of child welfare workers. We draw multiple youth- and county-level variables from several administrative data sources. Transition-age foster youths' basic demographic information, foster care history, and substantiated maltreatment history are drawn from the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) of the California Department of Social Services (CDSS). County-level information on unemployment rates and the proportion of Republican registered voters came from the American Community Survey and the California Secretary of State, respectively.

To capture various county-level characteristics of the child welfare system in California, we drew on data collected from an online survey of California child welfare workers conducted by CalYOUTH that was administered after AB12 was implemented (Courtney, Charles, Okpych, & Halsted, 2015). As frontline staff members, child welfare workers provided their perspectives

on important county-level contexts, such as resource availability, degree of collaboration with other health and human service systems, and support of the EFC program by courts.

### Sample

The sample for the current memo includes nearly 2,500 young people in California foster care who were selected as the population of interest in CalYOUTH's longitudinal study (see Courtney, Charles, Okpych, Napolitano, & Halsted, 2014). The original population for this study included 2,583 adolescents who were between the ages of 16.75 and 17.75 years old in December 2012, who had been in California foster care for at least 6 months, and who were under the supervision of the child welfare services department. The final sample for this memo includes 2,472 youths in 35 counties. A total of 111 youths from 23 counties were dropped from the original population due to insufficient data. To create caseworker perception variables for a county, we needed responses from at least three workers in the county. Counties that did not meet this threshold and counties that did not participate in the caseworker survey were excluded from the present analysis (Courtney et al., 2015).<sup>2</sup> The excluded counties tended to be rural and to have smaller caseloads of transition-age foster youth.

The original population of CalYOUTH's child welfare worker survey (Courtney et al., 2015) included 891 child welfare workers who had a youth on their caseload that was still in

<sup>2</sup> The following 14 counties participated in the caseworker survey, but had fewer than three respondents: Amador, Del Norte, Imperial, Lake, Lassen, Madera, Marin, Mono, Napa, Nevada, San Benito, Tehama, Trinity, and Tuolumne. The following 9 counties did not participate in the caseworker survey, and thus no caseworker information is available: Alpine, Colusa, Inyo, Mariposa, Modoc, Plumas, Sierra, Siskiyou, and Sutter.

care on their 18th birthday and had turned 18 in the last six months. The sample was drawn from CWS/CMS records in September 2013. Smaller counties were oversampled in order to maximize the number of counties that would be included in the study, and survey weights were used to correct for the sampling approach (for more details see Courtney et al., 2015). A sample of 296 workers was selected into the study, but 34 workers were deemed to be ineligible (e.g., were no longer employed by the county). Of the remaining 262 workers, a total of 235 caseworkers in 49 counties completed an online survey, yielding an 89.8% response rate (Courtney et al., 2015). In the present analysis, a single measure was calculated for each county-level factor by taking the average among workers in that county.

## Measures

This memo evaluates two youth outcomes. The first outcome is a measure of whether or not a youth was in foster care on their 18th birthday, which was created using information from the CWS/CMS database. This was a measure of youths' EFC participation (yes/no). The second outcome is a measure of the number of months youth spent in care after their 18th birthday, up to their 21st birthday (ranging from 0–36 months), which was also calculated from CWS/CMS data. This is a measure of the amount of time youth spent in EFC. Youths who exited care before their 18th birthday were assigned 0 months in EFC.

Several variables were created at the county level to capture contextual factors that may be associated with youth outcomes. Some of these variables were created from publicly available data sources. As an indicator for labor market conditions, we used American Community Survey's one-year estimates on each county's unemployment rate among youth and young adults between the ages of 16 and 24, which was obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau's American FactFinder (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). To measure each county's political climate, we obtained data on the proportion of Republicans among registered voters, using information from the California Secretary of State (California Secretary of State, 2018). Finally, we created a variable that assigns counties to one of four groups based on their urbanicity and population size: rural/mostly rural counties,<sup>3</sup> urban counties,<sup>4</sup> large urban counties,<sup>5</sup> and Los Angeles County.

In addition to publicly available data sources, we used CalYOUTH's child welfare worker survey (Courtney et al., 2015) to create five measures of county workers' perceptions and experiences. For all measures, we calculated the average among workers in a county. First, we estimated the child welfare workers' perceptions of whether EFC promotes dependency based on their answer to the following question: "In your opinion, to what extent will extending foster care beyond age 18 foster dependency on the system by youth?" Respondents chose the best answer on a

<sup>3</sup> Rural/mostly rural counties include: Calaveras, El Dorado, Glenn, Humboldt, Mendocino, San Luis Obispo, and Yuba.

<sup>4</sup> Urban counties include: Butte, Contra Costa, Kings, Merced, Monterey, Placer, San Bernardino, San Mateo, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, Shasta, Solano, Sonoma, Tulare, Ventura, and Yolo.

<sup>5</sup> Large urban counties include: Alameda, Fresno, Kern, Orange, Riverside, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, San Joaquin, Santa Clara, and Stanislaus.

four-point scale: 1 = none, 2 = a little, 3 = some, and 4 = a lot.

Second, workers' perceptions about the age at which youth can live independently were measured by the following question: "Young people's ability to live on their own is a function of their own maturity but also changes in the labor market, cost of living, and other factors that can vary from community to community. At what age do you think most young people in your county can expect to live on their own?" The response options included 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, and 25 or older. Forty-six workers selected "25 and older"; this response was coded as a value of 25 when calculating the average.

Third, we estimated the general availability of training and services for transition-age foster youth in the county. For this estimate, we used a set of questions that asked workers about their perceptions of service and training availability in several domains, including secondary education, postsecondary education, employment, housing, health, mental health, and substance use. An example question that assessed secondary education training/services read: "What is your perception about the availability of training and services in your county: to assist with finishing high school, completing a GED, or completing a certificate of completion." Response options for these questions were on a 4-point scale (1 = no trainings/services, 2 = few trainings/services, 3 = some trainings/services, 4 = a wide range of trainings/services). To calculate the county measure of service and training availability, we first estimated a county-level average for each domain and then calculated the

county-level overall mean that averaged scores across the seven domains.

Fourth, workers' satisfaction with collaboration between the county's child welfare department and other service systems is estimated using a set of questions asking workers to evaluate their experiences with seven service systems, which correspond to the seven domains in the measures of service/training availability (see preceding paragraph). Response options included a 5-point scale (1 = completely dissatisfied, 2 = dissatisfied, 3 = neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 4 = satisfied, 5 = completely satisfied). For each county, we estimated the average degree of satisfaction with collaboration within each service domain, then calculated an overall average across domains.

Lastly, we estimated workers' perceptions about support for extended foster care among court personnel. Using a 5-point scale (1 = very unsupportive, 2 = unsupportive, 3 = indifferent, 4 = supportive, 5 = very supportive), workers were asked to evaluate the level of supportiveness of three groups of court personnel: county judges, youths' attorneys, and county counsels. For each county, after calculating the average support level for each personnel group, we took the mean of the three personnel groups to arrive at an overall average of court supportiveness.

## Analyses

We first present descriptive statistics of the county-level characteristics and the youth outcomes. Next, we present findings from analyses that investigated the relationships between the county-level factors and the two EFC outcomes. We used a logistic regression model for the EFC participation

status and a linear regression model for the number of months spent in EFC.<sup>6</sup> In both of the regression models, we controlled for several youth characteristics, including demographics (gender, race/ethnicity), foster care history prior to age 18 (age of entry, main placement type, average number of placements per year, indicator of whether youth had ever been in probation-supervised foster care, and indicator of disability<sup>7</sup>), and substantiated maltreatment history prior to age 18 (variables indicating a history of each of the following: sexual abuse, physical abuse, severe neglect, neglect, emotional abuse, and other maltreatment).

## Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics on the two outcomes and the several county-level measures assessed in this memo. Most youths in the sample participated in EFC and youths stayed in care for just under two years, on average. Counties' average unemployment rate among youth and young adults was about 23%, but varied

significantly from a low of about 10% to a high of 47%. The average proportion of Republican registered voters was 29%, but this also ranged considerably from county to county. Turning to measures created from CalYOUTH's child welfare worker survey, on average, workers perceived that EFC fosters "some" dependency (a score of 3.1 out of 4) and that foster youth were prepared to live independently at about age 22, though there was considerable range in county averages. The average score for the amount of training and services available for transition-age foster youths in their counties was 2.8 out of 4, which was just under a score corresponding to "some" training and services (3 out of 4). The average score of 3.1 out of 5 was close to a score of 3 "neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" in terms of satisfaction with the collaboration they had with professionals from other service systems. Lastly, workers' perceptions of court personnel's supportiveness of EFC were generally favorable, averaging 4.1 out of 5, which roughly corresponded to a score of 4, "supportive."

<sup>6</sup> To improve the accuracy of the estimates, we ran a bootstrap procedure on both analyses 500 times with randomly drawn subsamples.

<sup>7</sup> Disability information was drawn from child welfare workers' notes on individual youth's conditions, available from CWS/CMS data. Youth were coded as having a disability if their worker noted a developmental disorder; vision, hearing, or other physical disability; mental health disorder; substance use disorder; or other medical issues. In total, 17.6% of the 2,472 youths in the sample were classified as having a disability.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Outcomes and County-level Characteristics**

	Mean/% (SD)	Range
<b>Dependent variables</b>		
In care on 18th birthday (%)	90.5 (29.3)	0–100
Months in care after age 18 (Mean/SD)	23.4 (14.8)	0–36
<b>County-level characteristics</b>		
Unemployment rate among youth and young adults (%)	23.2 (5.4)	9.5–47.3
Proportion of Republicans among registered voters (%)	28.5 (9.4)	8.5–47.0
Perception of EFC fostering dependency (Mean/SD)	3.1 (0.3)	2.3–3.7
Perception of age of independence (Mean/SD)	21.9 (0.7)	20.1–24.3
Training and service availability (Mean/SD)	2.8 (0.2)	2.3–3.2
Quality of collaboration with other service systems (Mean/SD)	3.1 (0.3)	2.1–3.5
Supportive court personnel (Mean/SD)	4.1 (0.3)	3.3–5.0

The regression analyses results show no statistically significant associations ( $p < .05$ ) between county-level attributes and youths' EFC participation, after controlling for other youth- and county-level factors (see Table 2). However, there were three county-level factors that were significantly associated with the number of months youth spent in extended foster care. First, each 10% increase in the proportion of registered Republicans in a county decreased the expected amount of time youth spent in EFC by about 2.4 months. Conversely, youth were expected to stay longer in EFC when

county caseworkers perceived better collaboration quality with other service systems and greater supportiveness of EFC by court personnel. For collaboration, each 1-point increase in the collaboration measure (e.g., from 4, "satisfied," to 5, "completely satisfied") is associated with an expected increase of about 4.4 months in EFC. For supportiveness, each 1-point increase in court personnel supportiveness of EFC (e.g., from 3, "supportive," to 4, "very supportive") was associated with a 3.6-month increase in number of months youth spent in care past age 18.

**Table 2. Regression analysis results (n = 2,472)**

	EFC participation		Months in care after age 18	
	Odds ratio	95% confidence interval	Estimated months	95% confidence interval
<b>County-level explanatory variables</b>				
10% increase in unemployment rate (youths and young adults)	1.17	(0.83, 1.66)	-0.57	(-1.83, 0.69)
10% additional proportion of Republicans among registered voters	0.77	(0.58, 1.01)	-2.43***	(-3.23, -1.64)
Perception of EFC fostering dependency	0.97	(0.43, 2.20)	-0.68	(-3.48, 2.12)
Perception of age of independence	1.26	(0.96, 1.66)	0.58	(-0.27, 1.44)
Training and service availability	2.19	(0.64, 7.53)	0.52	(-4.30, 5.33)
Collaboration with other service systems	0.71	(0.34, 1.49)	4.39**	(1.68, 7.10)
Supportive court personnel	1.42	(0.77, 2.59)	3.63**	(1.43, 5.84)

Table notes: \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . Controls not shown: gender, race/ethnicity, age of entry, main placement type before age 18, average number of placements per year before age 18, ever supervised by probation officer(s) before age 18, disability status, and substantiated maltreatment history (e.g., sexual abuse, physical abuse, severe neglect, neglect, emotional abuse, and other maltreatment) before age 18.

## Discussion

This memo examined the relationship between county-level factors and two measures of EFC participation among a sample of older adolescents in California foster care. On average, child welfare workers perceived that it was not until age 22 that young people in their county can be expected to live on their own. There were no serious concerns that participating in EFC fostered dependency. Workers reported that judges and personnel in child dependency courts were generally supportive of extended care. Workers' satisfaction with the quality of collaboration with other service systems was in the middle range,

conveying neither great dissatisfaction nor great satisfaction. Similarly, their perceptions about the availability of training and services for youth in EFC were in the middle range. It is important to keep in mind that the CalYOUTH survey was administered not long after AB12 had been implemented (about 1.75 years), and service coordination and service delivery systems were still in the works. For example, there was a delay in the implementation of the Transitional Housing Placement-Plus Foster Care (THP+FC) program, which meant that the number of these placements that were accredited and readily available was much lower in many counties at the time of the survey than is the case today.

In the results of the regression analyses, we found a few important ways that county-level characteristics were related to the amount of time youth spent in EFC, independent of youth characteristics accounted for in the models (i.e., demographics, foster care history, maltreatment). First, youth in counties with higher collaboration with other service systems spent significantly more time in extended care than did youth in counties with lower levels of collaboration.

Importantly, this analysis controls for differences between counties in the perceived amount of transition-age youth services in the county. Greater perceived collaboration may reflect a county's general willingness and readiness to incorporate the extension of foster care. This may be reflected in things like worker training and preparation, cultivation of worker culture that embraces extended care, and reorganization of child welfare services to accommodate the new task of serving adults in care. For example, some county child welfare departments have created special units to serve transition-age youth or child welfare workers designated to work exclusively with nonminor dependents. The results may also reflect a direct impact of better service coordination on youths' likelihood of staying in care. If it is clear to youths that the child welfare department is a hub well-connected to other services that will help meet their needs as they transition to adulthood, they may see greater reason for and benefit from remaining in EFC.

A second important finding pertains to the level of support from dependency court personnel. Youth spent longer in extended foster care in counties where workers perceived greater support from court personnel for EFC. This finding is consistent

with earlier work that illustrated the critical role that county judges played in the likelihood that young people remained in care past age 18 in Illinois (Peters, 2012). This makes sense given the influence that county dependency court personnel can have on whether youth remain in extended care. Their views, attitudes, and rulings can have a pervasive influence on the utilization and effectiveness of the extended care program.

We also found that the proportion of Republicans among registered voters was negatively associated with the length of time youths spent in EFC. This finding is all the more striking given that county-level urbanicity and availability of services were controlled for in our analyses; in other words, this finding does not appear to be a function of relatively sparse service availability in rural counties, which, in California, tend to be more politically conservative. Although the explanation for this association is not obvious, it may reflect principles traditionally associated with conservatism, such as fiscal thrift in provision of social services, diminishing the role of government, and greater emphasis on self-sufficiency. A willingness to invest in EFC may vary by county, and this could affect youths' opportunities to take advantage of the EFC program. It is also important to keep in mind that the proportion of Republicans among registered voters in a county may be associated with other aspects of the county context that influence EFC participation, but that we have not accounted for in our analyses. If that is so, then our measure of the political affiliation of registered voters may actually be serving as a proxy for something else that influences EFC

participation, but that we did not measure directly.

Interestingly, workers' perceptions of the age at which foster youth could live independently in their county was not significantly associated with the amount of time that youth spent in extended care. As was stated in the wording of the question, the finding may reflect differences between counties in things like the cost of living and the availability of housing, and not necessarily the views of the workers about the age at which young people are ready to be on their own. We also did not find any statistically significant associations between any of the county level-factors and the odds that youth would be in foster care on their 18th birthday. This may be due to limited variability between counties; overall, about 90% of youth were in care on their 18th birthday. At least for the sample of older adolescents included in this study, county-level differences appear to contribute more to variation in the amount of time youth spend in EFC rather than whether they are in care when they turn 18.

There are a few limitations that should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings reported in this memo. First, the sample for this analysis does not include all 58 California counties. It does include 35 of the counties where the overwhelming majority of foster youth are placed and living, but excludes many of the smaller and more rural counties. Second, our measures of county context almost certainly do not capture all of the characteristics of counties that might influence participation in EFC. Third, most of the county-level measures are based on child welfare workers' perceptions of the service and court context. Since they are the frontline staff who supervise extended foster

care services, their views of the service and court context are certainly important. Those views can influence their work with young people. However, other measures of county context (e.g., the number of contracted youth services agencies in the county) may also be predictive of youths' length of stay in EFC. Fourth, given the considerable weight that county judges play in EFC decisions, it would have been useful if we had information from the judges about their opinions of EFC. Finally, the child welfare survey was conducted in the fall of 2013, less than 2 years into AB12 implementation. The child welfare workers were responding to an EFC law and service landscape that was very much in the works.

Overall, the findings suggest that characteristics of the counties that youth are placed in significantly influence the amount of time they spend in extended care. This study was a first step in exploring county-level factors, but the findings call for further research. Additionally, the findings also call for more up-to-date information on workers' perceptions of the county service context and court system, as well as their views on EFC. Currently, 7 years have passed since AB12 was first implemented. There is a need to gauge the county context and the workers' perceptions now that implementation has evolved and to gauge how differences across counties contribute to youth outcomes.

**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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