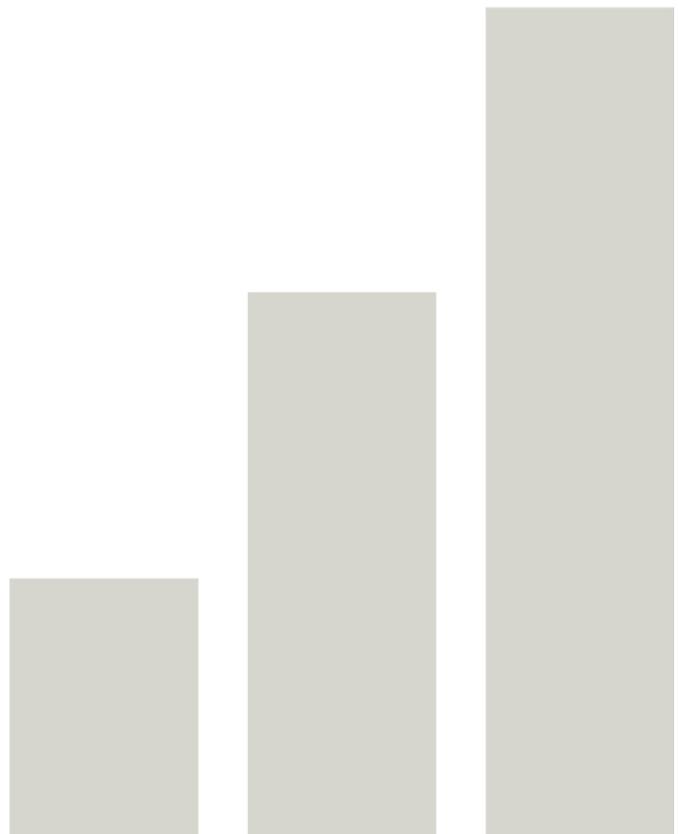


Extended Foster Care and Legal Permanency: An Update from CaYOUTH

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Disclaimer

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Introduction

An increasing number of states, including California, have extended foster care to age 21 for youth who are in care at the legal age of majority. However, there has been some concern that providing extended care may lead to a decrease in exits to legal permanency, which includes family reunification, adoption, and guardianship. For example, the availability of extended care may lessen the sense of urgency among caseworkers and juvenile court judges for achieving legal permanency. Alternatively, the resources and support associated with extended care may induce foster youth, foster care providers, and court personnel to view extended care more favorably than permanency.

The purpose of this issue brief is to build on the findings reported by Courtney and Okpych (2015), which examined changes in permanency rates during the years immediately before and after the implementation of the California Fostering Connections Act. The current issue brief seeks to extend their analyses in several ways. First, because additional time has elapsed since the California Fostering Connections Act was implemented in 2012, we can now examine a broader time frame. This will allow us to better disentangle changes associated with extended foster care from those associated with longer-term trends. Second, in addition to examining permanency prior to the age of majority, we also examine permanency among youth age 18 and older. Finally, we explore the relationship between the level of extended care utilization and permanency rates, which can provide an alternative—and potentially

more direct—assessment of how extended care may affect permanency rates.

Collectively, the findings in this brief suggest that there has been a sustained decrease over time in the rate of reunification and overall permanency for older youth in care. However, this decrease appears to be a reflection of a long-term decline in permanency rates for youth that began long before the implementation of the California Fostering Connections Act.

Methods

Using data from California's Child Welfare Services / Case Management System (CWS/CMS), we identified a sample of youth who had been in care between their 17th and 18th birthdays between January 1, 2008 and December 31, 2014 ($N = 26,727$). For each set of analyses, different subsamples and research methods were used. These are briefly described below.

Implementation of the California Fostering Connections Act and Exit to Permanency

The objective of this set of analyses was to compare the rate of permanency among youth in care during the years before and after the implementation of extended foster care. Because youth can experience permanency after the age of majority, we conducted separate analyses for youth age 17 and youth age 18 and older. In brief, among youth who were in care at age 17, we examined change over time in the percentage of youth who exited to different types of permanency (e.g., reunification, adoption, and subsidized

guardianship) within the following year (i.e., before the age of 18). Second, we conducted identical sets of analyses for youth who were in care at ages 18, 19, and 20. Based on this approach, we conducted descriptive and multivariate analyses. The latter entailed the use of multilevel logit models, which allowed us to control for youth characteristics and placement experiences as well as unmeasured county-level characteristics.

Post-California Fostering Connections Act Extended Care Utilization and Exit to Permanency

The objective of the second set of analyses was to examine the relationship between the extent to which counties implemented extended care and the likelihood that youth exited to permanency prior to the age of 18. The sample selection criteria replicate those used in the earlier analysis by Courtney and Okpych (2015) and was therefore limited to youth who were in care at age 17 sometime between January 1, 2012 and December 31, 2014 (n = 9,902). The county-level rates of extended care utilization were calculated based on the proportion of youth who remained in care 90 days after the latter of (a) their 18th birthday or (b) the end of June following their 18th birthday.¹ These proportions were based on the rates of extended care during calendar years 2012 through 2014. In addition to descriptive analyses, multivariate analyses using standard logit models were conducted.²

¹ The findings based on different specifications (e.g., percentage of youth in care at age 19) yielded substantively identical results as those described below.

² These models included control variables for youth characteristics and placement experiences as well as a statistical correction to account for the correlation caused by common unmeasured factors within each county.

Findings

Characteristics of Youth in Care at Age 17

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics and placement experiences of youth age 17 who were in care in 2008 and 2014, respectively. The right panel lists the changes in these characteristics between these two time points. As the table shows, there have been several significant population-level changes over time. First, the number of youth age 17 in care during 2014 (3,491) was considerably lower than the number in care during 2008 (5,184), which mirrors the substantial decrease in the overall foster care population in California during this period of time. Second, the demographic makeup of the foster youth population also changed in several important ways. For example, the racial/ethnic composition of youth shifted considerably. The proportion of Hispanic youth increased by 8.6%, whereas the proportions of black and white youth decreased by 5.8 and 3.0%, respectively. Youth in care in 2014 also appear to have entered care at a somewhat older age (14.6 years old) than youth in care in 2008 (13.1 years old).

There were also several important population-level changes in the placement experiences of youth that have been noted in prior research on recent changes in the characteristics of youth aging out of foster care in California (Eastman, Putnam-

Hornstein, Magruder, Mitchell, & Courtney, 2016). The proportions of youth whose primary reason for removal was neglect increased somewhat (5.7% increase), while there were decreases in proportions removed for physical abuse (2.1% decrease) and other reasons (3.5% decrease).

Although youth in care in 2014 had entered care at a later age than youth in 2008, they had experienced relatively the same number of placement changes before the age of 18. As a result, the rate of placement change for youth in 2014 (2.2 per year) was somewhat higher than among youth in 2008 (1.5 per

Table 1. Characteristics of Youth in Care: 2008 and 2014[†]

Youth Characteristic	Cohort		Diff.	Sig.
	2008	2014		
Number of youth in care [‡]	5,184	3,491	-1,693	—
Gender				
Female	56.3%	55.5%	-0.8%	
Male	43.7%	44.5%	0.8%	
Race/Ethnicity				
Hispanic	37.0%	45.6%	8.6%	***
Black	32.1%	26.4%	-5.8%	***
White	27.0%	23.9%	-3.0%	**
Asian	2.7%	2.9%	3.1%	
Native American	1.2%	1.2%	1.1%	
Age at entry to care (years) [‡]	13.14	14.57	1.43	***
Substitute Care History				
Removal Reason				
Neglect	75.3%	81.0%	5.7%	***
Physical abuse	10.5%	8.5%	-2.1%	**
Emotional abuse	2.5%	3.2%	0.7%	*
Sex abuse	5.3%	4.4%	-0.9%	*
Other	6.4%	2.9%	-3.5%	***
Number prior care spells	0.55	0.54	-0.02	
Prior placements				
Number [‡]	1.72	1.71	0.02	
Rate per year [‡]	1.48	2.23	0.75	**
Placement type				
Foster family home	18.1%	11.0%	-7.1%	***
Relative home	18.0%	17.7%	-0.2%	
Foster family agency home	27.9%	33.5%	5.6%	***
Group home	14.2%	19.4%	5.2%	***
Other	21.8%	18.2%	-3.6%	***

[†] Youth in care at age 17; [‡] median; *** p-value < .001; ** p-value < .01; * p-value < .05

year). Use of relative foster care remained low and unchanged—18.0% in 2008 and 17.7% in 2014. Finally, the distribution of placement types in which youth lived at age 17 also shifted. The percentages of youth placed in group homes and in homes supervised by Foster Family Agencies (FFAs)³ increased, respectively, 5.2 and 5.6%, while the percentages placed in foster family homes and other placement settings decreased, respectively, 7.1 and 6.3%.

Exit to Permanency Before and After the Implementation of the California Fostering Connections Act

Descriptive Analyses. Figure 1 plots the rates of exit to permanency within 1 year by

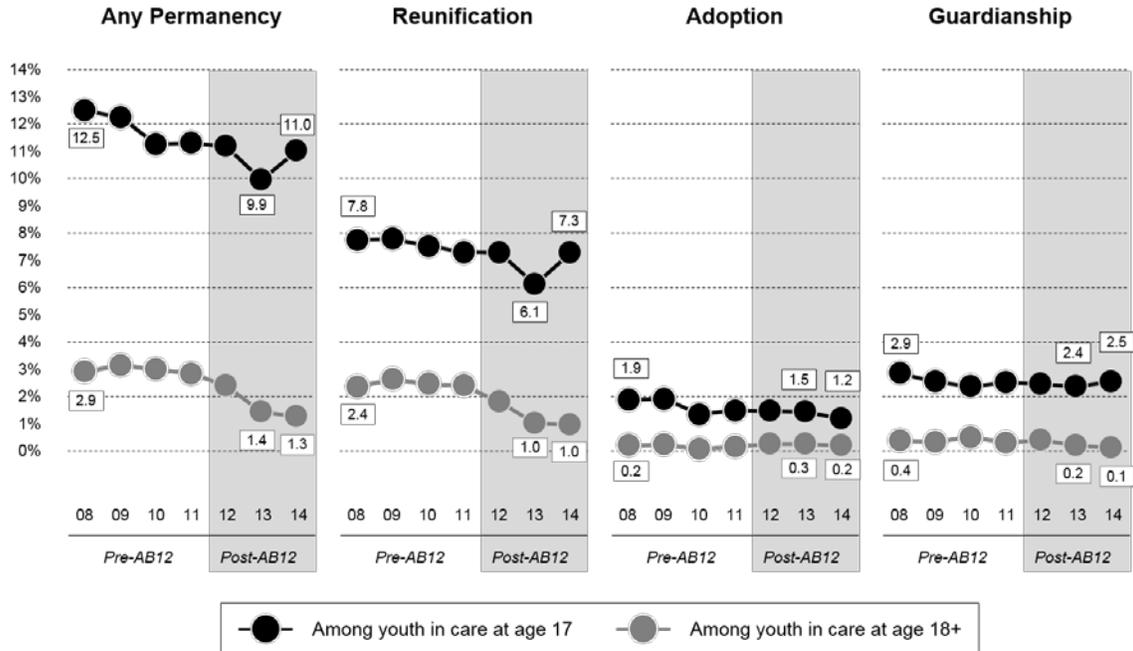
type, cohort, and age in care (i.e., 17 vs. 18 and older); the accompanying sample percentages and frequencies are listed in Table 2. Among youth age 17, 12.5% exited to permanency in 2008. This rate decreased to 9.9% in 2013, a relative decline of about 21%. Much of this decline reflects a decrease in the percentages of youth exiting to reunification. As Figure 1 shows, the decline in the rate of exit to permanency was gradual in nature. It appears to have begun well before the implementation of extended foster care. Interestingly, the rates of exit to reunification and guardianship increased somewhat between 2013 and 2014, which yielded an increase from 9.9 to 11.0% in the rate of exit to any type of permanency.

Table 2. Permanency Exit by Type, Care Cohort, and Age in Care

Year	Any Permanency		Reunification				Adoption				Guardianship					
	Age 17		Age 18+		Age 17		Age 18+		Age 17		Age 18+		Age 17		Age 18+	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
2008	648	12.5	180	2.9	402	7.8	146	2.4	98	1.9	13	0.2	148	2.9	21	0.4
2009	587	12.3	193	3.2	373	7.8	161	2.6	92	1.9	15	0.2	122	2.5	18	0.3
2010	506	11.3	172	3.0	338	7.5	141	2.5	61	1.4	4	0.1	107	2.4	26	0.5
2011	471	11.3	154	2.9	304	7.3	130	2.4	62	1.5	9	0.2	105	2.5	15	0.3
2012	428	11.2	145	2.4	278	7.3	109	1.8	56	1.5	15	0.2	94	2.5	21	0.4
2013	369	9.9	113	1.4	227	6.1	80	1.0	54	1.5	20	0.3	88	2.4	14	0.2
2014	385	11.0	113	1.3	254	7.3	86	1.0	42	1.2	18	0.2	89	2.5	9	0.1

³Foster Family Agency (FFA) homes are supervised by not-for-profit organizations licensed to provide therapeutic foster care as an alternative to group care in California.

Figure 1. Permanency Exit Within 1 Year by Type, Care Cohort, and Age in Care



Among youth age 18 and older, the rate of exit to permanency was also found to have decreased gradually over time. For example, the rate of exit to permanency within the following year was 2.9% in 2008 versus 1.3% in 2014. However, unlike the findings for younger youth, the decrease in the permanency rate among older youth appears to steepen after 2011. As was the case for younger youth, this decrease in permanency appears to be primarily a function of a decrease in the rate of reunification.

It should also be noted that only a small minority of youth in care at age 18 exited to permanency prior to age 21. For example, among youth age 18 who were in care between 2008 and 2011, only 3.1% exited to reunification before the age of 21, and fewer than 1% were adopted (0.2%) or exited to guardianship (0.4%).

Multivariate Analyses. The results of multivariate analyses (not shown) were

consistent with the descriptive findings described above. Specifically, after controlling for the characteristics listed in Table 1, the rates of reunification, and overall permanency, were found to decrease gradually over time. However, after accounting for this gradual decrease, the timing of the implementation of extended foster care was not found to be significantly associated with rate of permanency exit.

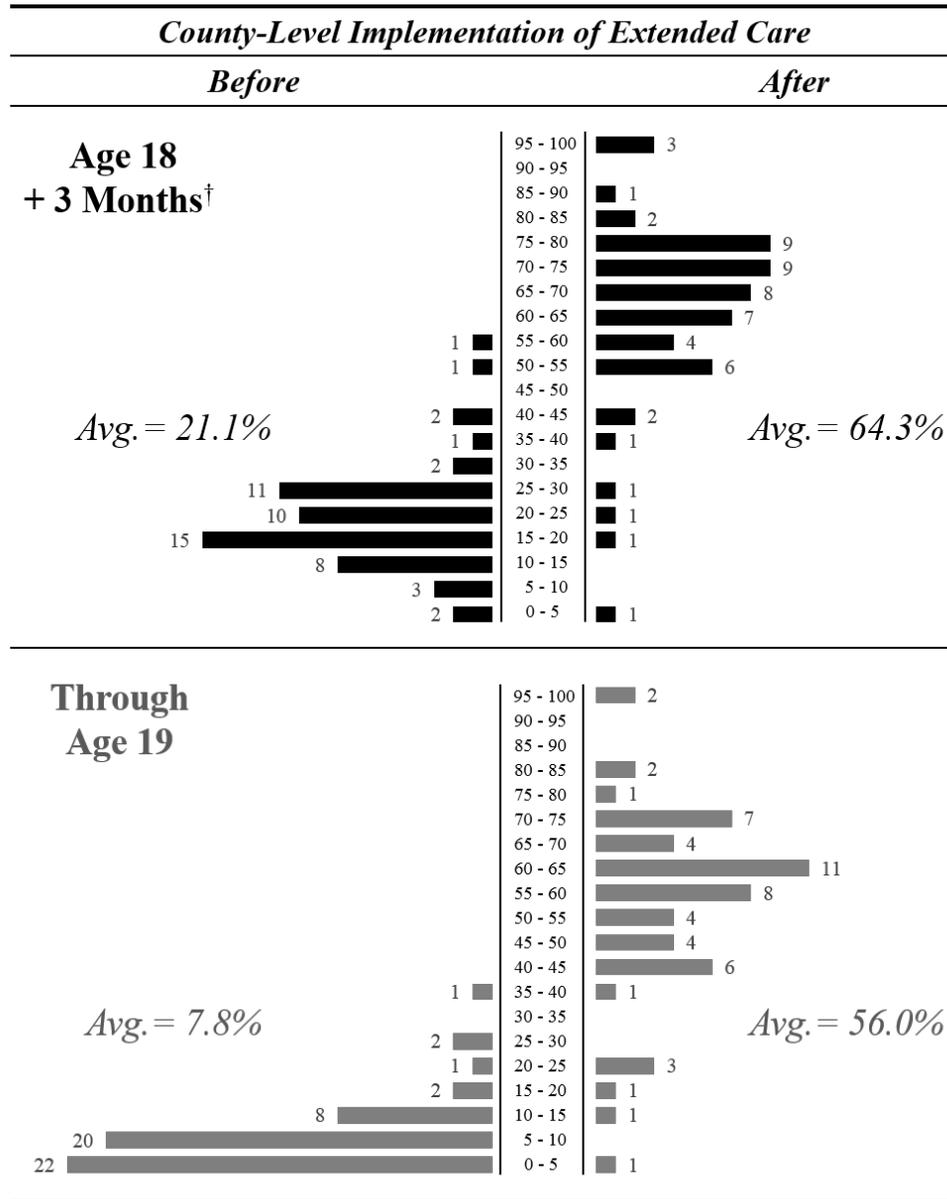
County-Level Rates of Extended Care Utilization

Figure 2 shows two measures of the rate of county-level extended care utilization before and after the implementation of the California Fostering Connections Act. The top panel of the figure shows the percentages of youth who remained in care 3 months after the end of the school year in which they turned 18. The bottom panel shows the percentages of youth who remained in care through their 19th

birthday. The left side of each panel contains the county-level percentages prior to the implementation of extended care; the

right side contains the percentages after the implementation.

Figure 2. County-Level Rates of Extended Care Utilization: Before and After Extended Foster Care



[†] - 3 months after the end of the school year in which youth turned 18.

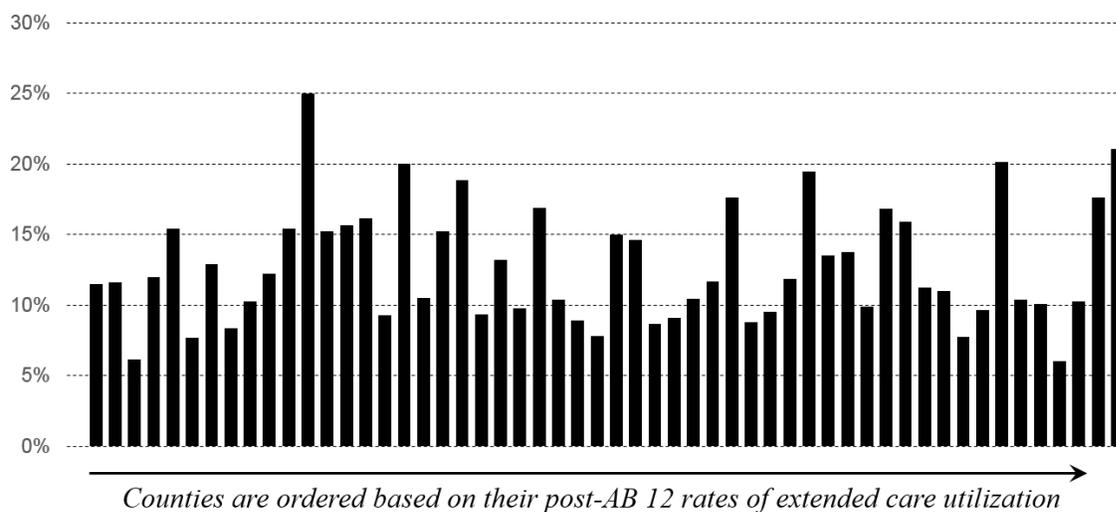
Permanency Exit by County-Level Rate of Extended Care Utilization

Predictably, county-level rates of extended care were higher during the period after implementation than they were prior to implementation. For example, the average county-level rate for remaining in care 3 months after the end of the school year in which youth turned 18 increased from 21.1 to 64.3%. Similarly, the average county-level rate for remaining in care past 19 increased from 7.8 to 56.0%. In spite of these increases, however, many youth continued to leave care soon after the age of majority. It should be noted that these average county-level rates of extended care utilization are somewhat lower than the statewide utilization rates. For example, between 2012 and 2014, the statewide percentage of youth remaining in care past 19 was 62.7%, which was several percentage points higher than the average county-level rate. This is because larger counties (e.g., Los Angeles) had somewhat higher rates of

extended care utilization than other counties, even after the implementation of extended foster care.

Figure 3 shows the county-level rates of permanency among youth age 17 during the period following implementation of the California Fostering Connections Act. Counties have been arranged based on their post-extended care rates of extended care utilization. Counties with lower rates of extended care are on the left side of the figure and counties with higher rates are on the right side. The findings presented in Figure 3 suggest that there is no clear relationship between the county-level rate of extended care utilization and the likelihood that youth exit to permanency. Indeed, several counties with relatively high rates of extended care (right side of Figure 3) also have relatively high rates of exit to permanency. The same general pattern was observed for each specific type of permanency exit: reunification, adoption, and subsidized guardianship.

Figure 3. Post-California Fostering Connections Act County-Level Permanency Rates Among Youth Age 17



The results of multivariate analyses were consistent with the findings described above. Specifically, county-level rates of extended care utilization after the implementation of extended care were not found to be statistically significantly associated with the likelihood of exiting to reunification, adoption, or subsidized guardianship.

Limitations

As described above, the analyses for this study were, in large part, intended to address limitations acknowledged in Courtney and Okpych (2015). Nevertheless, there are three remaining limitations that should be acknowledged before discussing the implications of the findings described above. First, the set of youth characteristics included in the administrative records used for these analyses is somewhat limited (such as child functional assessment data), and almost certainly excludes a number of characteristics that influence exit to permanency. If there were substantial population-level changes in these unobserved characteristics during the period in which the California Fostering Connections Act was implemented, then the validity of our results would be compromised. Second, there may have been substantial variation over time, and between counties, in the way that CWS/CMS data were entered, which could introduce error into our analyses. In particular, changes over time in how exits were coded in the CWS/CMS data as youth approached or reached the age of majority could influence our findings. Third, while it seems unlikely that the extension of foster care to young adults would influence exits to legal permanency for youth younger than 17 given the absence of an impact on older

youth, our findings cannot speak to that possibility.

Conclusion

As extended care has become more widely implemented, concerns have grown that providing extended care may lead to a decrease in exit to permanency. However, the findings described in this study suggest that the implementation of extended care in California has not been associated with a significant decrease in the percentages of youth exiting to permanency. As described above, there appears to have been no qualitative shift in the rate of permanency associated with the implementation of extended foster care. Further, county-level utilization of extended care was not found to be significantly associated with the likelihood that youth exited to permanency. Thus, although the implementation of extended care may have influenced the likelihood of permanency for some youth, the numbers of these youth appear to be very limited. That being said, the implementation of extended foster care in California remains a work in progress; for example, the California state legislature has enacted changes in policies affecting youth in extended care in every legislative session since the passage of the California Fostering Connections Act. Continuing attention should be paid to the relationship between the ongoing implementation of extended foster care and older youths' exits from care to legal permanency, in California and in the other states that are implementing extended care.

Regardless of whether extended care has influenced permanency, however, it seems clear that the number of foster youth exiting to permanency has been declining steadily

in recent years. Despite the observation that the permanency rate appears to have increased slightly during the last year of this study (2014), the persistent decline in exits to permanency for older youth evidenced in these data is cause for concern. The causes of this decline are not entirely clear and could very well be a manifestation of several different factors. For example, changes in the characteristics and experiences of foster youth (e.g., higher rates of placement change, larger percentages placed in group homes, an increase in the average age at which children enter care) between 2008 and 2014 suggest that the needs of foster youth may have become more complex over time, which could make permanency more difficult to achieve. Alternatively, the reduction in permanency rates could reflect changes in the attitudes and practices of caseworkers and juvenile court judges concerning the relative importance of achieving legal permanency prior to the age of majority. However, such changes must have occurred long before the extension of foster care to age 21. The low usage of relative foster care (17.7%) is a signal that more effort should be invested in family finding, removing barriers to licensing relatives, and other strategies.

The findings presented in this brief also underscore the fact that, once foster youth in California reach the age of 18, they are very unlikely to exit to legal permanency. Of course, in interpreting these findings it is important to keep in mind that young adults in care have more freedom than minors do to exert control over when and how they exit care. For example, they can choose at any time to leave extended care simply because they do not wish to engage with the child welfare system any longer, and they may choose to live with family at that

point without reestablishing a legally permanent relationship with their family. Nevertheless, the very low rate of exit to legal permanency by young adults in care is potentially concerning. Legal permanency can confer important benefits above and beyond those provided by relational bonds (e.g., inheritance, the right to advocate on behalf of family members, and the right of family members to advocate on one's behalf). The low rates of legal permanency among youth age 18 and older may reflect beliefs among child welfare and juvenile court staff about the feasibility and necessity of legal permanency for older foster youth. For example, child welfare caseworkers may be unaware that youth can be adopted, or that parental rights can be restored, after a youth turns 18. Similarly, juvenile court judges may not view the issue of legal permanency for older youth as being within their purview or have a full appreciation of the concrete and psychological benefits of permanency. Child welfare agencies and dependency courts have a very short history of providing support to nonminor dependents. The findings of this study call for greater attention by child welfare services professionals and dependency court personnel to the potential benefits of legal permanency for youth who remain in foster care as young adults.

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