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# California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study

(CalYOUTH)

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Policymakers have extended foster care to age 21 in the hopes of helping these young people overcome earlier adverse experiences and have a more successful transition to adulthood.

In 2008, the federal government passed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act marking a fundamental shift in supporting foster youth transitioning to adulthood. California was one of the first states to adopt the extension of foster care through age 21 with the passage of Assembly Bill 12, the California Fostering Connections to Success Act. California has the largest state foster care population in the U.S. and like many states runs a county-administered child welfare system. As such, California is uniquely positioned to provide lessons for other states implementing extended care.

**CalYOUTH is a five-year study, from 2012-17, designed to evaluate the impact of extended foster care on youths' outcomes.**

**CalYOUTH seeks to answer the following questions:**

- Does extending foster care past age 18 influence youths' outcomes during the transition to adulthood?*
- What factors influence the types of support youth receive during the transition to adulthood in the context of extended foster care?*
- How do living arrangements and other services that result from extending foster care influence the relationship between extending care and youth outcomes?*

To help answer these questions, the study is collecting and analyzing data from transition-age youth and child welfare workers providing services to foster youth, and analyzing government program data. Interviews are being conducted with the same youth at ages 17, 19 and 21.

**The study is the result of a public and private collaboration among:**

- California Department of Social Services
- County Welfare Directors Association of California
- University of Chicago
- Funding and input provided by: Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Stuart Foundation, Walter S. Johnson Foundation, Zellerbach Family Foundation, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

# Baseline Youth Survey:

## Conditions of Foster Youth at Age 17

While the transition to adulthood is an exciting and challenging time for all young people, youth transitioning from foster care have experiences that can make this period particularly difficult. They have been placed in care because of abuse and neglect they were subjected to by their families and they often suffer emotionally and behaviorally from the effects of that trauma. In addition, unlike their peers they often cannot rely on their families for support when they become young adults. In some cases they have also moved around while in the foster care system, further undermining their connections to supportive adults. Policymakers have extended foster care to 21 in the hopes of helping these young people overcome these earlier adverse experiences and have a more successful transition to adulthood.

The CalYOUTH Baseline Youth Survey report provides the most comprehensive view to date of young people approaching the transition to adulthood from foster care in California. The authors of the report from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago conducted interviews with 727 youth who were an average of 17 years old at the time. This first-of-its-kind study will be valuable to policymakers, program developers, advocates, and practitioners interested in better meeting the needs of transition-age youth in care.

### Eligibility for Study Participation

- Youth were eligible to participate in the study if they were between the ages of 16-years, 9-months and 17-years, 9-months and had been in care for at least six months.
- 95.3% of eligible youth completed the survey.

### Selected Demographic and Background Characteristics

- Gender: 59% female, 41% male
- Race: 47% mixed-race, 47% Hispanic, 24% White, 18% Black, 4% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 2% Asian/Pacific Islander
- Youth were asked about the characteristics of their caregivers (generally their parents) prior to their placement in foster care. They reported that at least one of the caregivers exhibited the following characteristics: criminal record (50%), inadequate parenting skills (49%), drug abuse (48%), alcohol abuse (45%), domestic violence (33%), and mental illness (26%)

- Placement type at the time of the interview: 44% in nonrelative foster home, 24% in group care or residential treatment facility, 18% in a foster home with an adult relative, and 13% in "other" living arrangement (e.g., adoptive home, legal guardianship, independent living arrangement)

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## Emerging Themes

1. **One Size Does Not Fit All.** The CalYOUTH participants were diverse with respect to demographic characteristics and their needs pertaining to the transition to adulthood.
2. **Optimistic In Spite of Challenges.** The study provided encouraging evidence of the resilience of older adolescents in foster care. Many participants reported feeling overwhelmingly optimistic about their futures and having access to adults to provide support.
3. **Services Provide Critical Support.** Most (but not all) youth saw the benefits of the care they have received to date from county child welfare agencies and wished to be able to continue to rely on support from the foster care system as they make the transition to adulthood.
4. **Room for Improvement.** Work remains to be done when it comes to preparing youth in care for the transition to adulthood. Ensuring that youth have an accurate understanding of their rights and responsibilities under the new law and addressing service gaps in areas such as housing, employment, and financial literacy where youth felt less prepared, are issues that may require additional attention moving forward.
5. **Interest in Engagement:** That over 95 percent of the young people asked to participate in CalYOUTH did so is evidence of their willingness to share their experiences in the interest of improving services for young people in state care.

# Key Baseline Findings

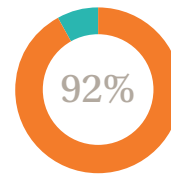
**The first of its kind, this study provides California with crucial information on the experiences of youth about to make the transition to adulthood from care, helping to inform the implementation of California's Fostering Connections to Success Act (AB 12).**

- The current report focuses on the perspectives of youth currently in foster care who are approaching the age of majority; the data are compiled from over 700 responses to an in-depth survey.
- The study is being carried out from 2012-17, which will allow researchers to track individual youth perspectives and outcomes over time through age 21.

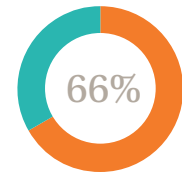
**Most youth approaching the transition to adulthood while in care felt satisfied with their foster care experience and acknowledged the help and support they received from social workers, counselors and foster parents. Most are also motivated to stay in foster care after age 18.**

- More than half of all foster youth surveyed stated that they were satisfied with their experience in the foster care system and felt lucky to have received this added support. More than 60% of youth agreed that social workers had been helpful to them. Of the one-quarter of all youth who had ever been in group care, three-fifths agreed that counselors and staff from group homes or residential treatment centers had been helpful to them. Further, over 70% agreed that foster parents had been of help to them.
- A vast majority (92%) of youth noted at least one adult in their lives they could go to for emotional support or advice. Youth reported feeling closest ("very close" or "somewhat close") most frequently with caregivers in their current foster care placement and with their own brothers or sisters.
- Two-thirds of youth surveyed stated they would want to stay in foster care after age 18, citing help achieving educational goals and the desire to continue to receive housing and other material support as the top reasons to stay in the system. Over 40% of youth reported receiving little to no training in the area of housing, and close to one-third of participants reported little to no training regarding financial literacy, despite the availability of training through county independent living programs.

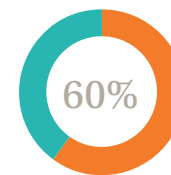
## Youth Survey Sample



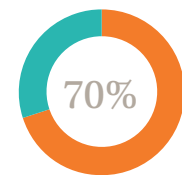
Have at least one adult they can turn to for emotional support.



Want to stay in foster care after age 18.



Agreed social workers had been helpful to them.

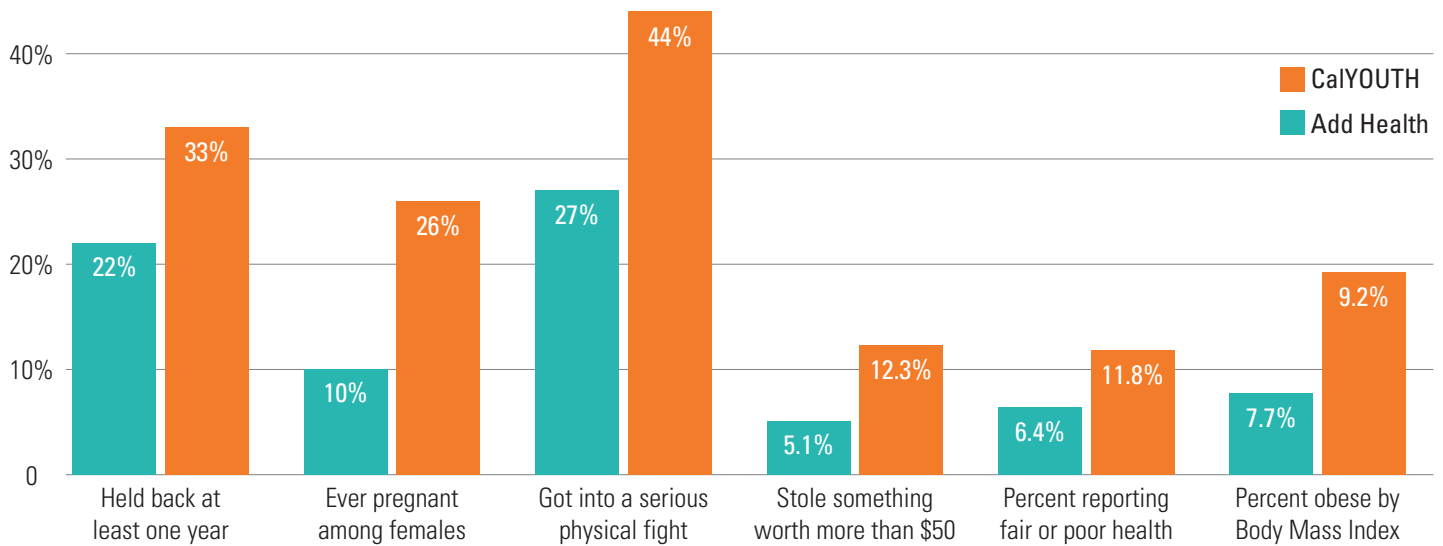


Agreed foster parents had been helpful to them.

**Not surprisingly, given the traumatic histories of many of these young people, the health of youth in foster care was worse than that of their non-foster care peers.**

- The majority of foster youth described their health as good to excellent, but compared to other youth they experienced significant health and mental health deficits. They reported more emergency room visits and hospitalizations than their peers, and they were more than twice as likely to have received psychological or emotional counseling and to have attended a substance abuse treatment program.
- The study points to the need for mental health services in the foster care system. Over half of youth were found to have a positive diagnosis for one or more mental and behavioral health disorders including major depression, bipolar disorder, social phobia and anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder, oppositional-defiant disorder, substance abuse or dependence, alcohol abuse or dependence, and psychotic disorders.
- Nearly one-quarter of the youth had ever attempted suicide.
- One-third of survey participants reported having received medication in the past year for emotional problems. Youths' experiences with medication were varied; half of the survey participants agreed that the medicine helped to improve their symptoms, but one-third of those surveyed stated that the bad things about medication outweighed the good.

## CalYOUTH Participants Compared to Same-Age Peers in Add Health Study



NOTE: Add Health (National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health) is a longitudinal study of a nationally representative cohort of adolescents that collected data on multiple social contexts and health and health-related behaviors.

### The involvement of youth in foster care with the criminal justice system further illustrates the behavior problems many of them bring to the transition to adulthood

- Not surprisingly, given the well-established relationship between child maltreatment and later criminal behavior, CalYOUTH participants were more likely than their peers to engage in a wide range of delinquent behaviors.
- Two-fifths of CalYOUTH participants had been arrested at least once, and one in five had been convicted of a crime.

### The experiences of females differed from those of males in a number of areas.

- Females reported more mental health problems than males. Compared to males, females had higher prevalence rates for major depression, dysthymia, past mania and hypomania, and PTSD.
- Females were also more likely than males to report both physical abuse and neglect from a parent or other custodial caregiver prior to entering foster care.
- Over 90% of respondents felt prepared to deal with sexual health, family planning, and relationships. However, 26% of females surveyed stated that they had been pregnant, and 36% of those youth gave birth to a child.

### Youth in foster care had high educational aspirations, but many faced challenges to achieving their goals.

- Four-fifths of youth surveyed reported that they wanted to graduate from college and nearly as many expected to do so.

- However, they also reported educational delays and behavior problems that, in the absence of additional assistance, are likely to get in the way of their future educational attainment: one-third had been held back at least one grade; one-third had been placed in special education; and two-thirds reported an out-of-school suspension.

## Next Steps

Moving forward, the study will seek to examine youth responses in greater depth, examining how needs vary between subgroups of youth and across California's counties. The study will also compare and contrast youths' and caseworkers' perspectives. Understanding both the caseworker and the youth perspectives on extended care will help California and the nation successfully implement extended foster care.

In the meantime, policy makers and service providers can look to these findings to begin to assess the needs and aspirations of youth approaching the transition to adulthood from foster care as they design approaches to providing extended foster care. The study shows that housing, employment, education, and physical and mental health are areas where youth are likely to require additional attention. Importantly, the study highlights that most youth view the extended foster care program as a critical support in their transition to adulthood.