

Employment and Youth with Foster Care Experience:

Understanding Barriers and Supporting Success

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Introduction

Employment is foundational to young people’s successful transition into adulthood, yet many youth with lived experience in the foster care system struggle to obtain employment that provides a living wage. Youth with foster care experience typically do not have the same contacts and connections to employment opportunities as youth who have not been in foster care and cannot rely on the economic support of their family. In addition, transition age youth currently or formerly in foster care are more likely to be unemployed than their peers, and when employed, they typically earn less than their peers. Therefore, transition age youth with foster care experience need additional supports and resources to secure and maintain employment during their transition into adulthood.

A **living wage** allows individuals or families to be able to afford typical expenses, such as food, housing, health care, and child care, without falling below the poverty line. It varies by community depending on the cost of living.

<https://livingwage.mit.edu/>

In this report, we highlight recent data on employment for youth with foster care experience. We identify ongoing challenges that youth with foster care experience face in participating in workforce readiness training, and finding and maintaining employment that pays a living wage. Additionally, we highlight a few existing supports for current and former foster youth. Finally, we provide policy recommendations and perspectives from youth to help their peers overcome these challenges and thrive in their careers.

Employment outcomes amongst youth with foster care experience

While research is scarce on the employment experiences of former foster youth who have not participated in extended foster care, studies do reflect that participation in extended foster care improves employment outcomes compared to youth who exit care at age 18. A recent CalYOUTH study found that each year that youth participated in extended foster care resulted in longer periods of employment and increased total earnings between the ages of 21 and 23.¹ Specifically, each year in extended care predicted that youth would be employed an additional 1.5 months, and would earn about \$2,300 extra between ages 21 and 23. In addition, a recent analysis of First Place for Youth’s Transitional Housing Program – Non-Minor Dependent (THP-NMD) program found that when youth received targeted services and supports to prepare them for employment, address employment barriers, and help them secure and maintain employment, their chances of earning a living wage increased from 20% to 80%.

Extended Foster Care allows youth to remain in or re-enter foster care after age 18 up to age 21.

THP-NMD is a transitional housing placement for non-minor dependents ages 18 to 21.

When youth received **targeted services and supports**, their chances of earning a living wage increased from

20%
to
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Despite these positive findings, youth who participate in extended foster care still experience poor employment outcomes compared to their peers who do not have foster care experience. A longitudinal study of youth formerly in California’s extended foster care program found that at age 23, two years after leaving the child welfare system, only 55% of respondents were currently employed working 10 or more hours per week compared to 75% of their non-foster peers. Additionally, nearly 60% of the young people in the study earned an annual income below the federal poverty level compared to 46% of their non-foster peers.²

Employment outcomes lag for youth with foster care experience

Youth formerly in California’s extended foster care program (at age 23)

55% employed
working 10 or more
hours per week

Youth without foster care experience

75% employed
working 10 or more
hours per week

Youth with foster care experience face barriers in securing and maintaining meaningful employment

The disparities in workforce participation and earnings can be attributed to the multiple barriers that youth with foster care experience face in finding and maintaining employment. First, poor high school and college graduation rates impact their prospects for jobs that pay a living wage.³ Youth in foster care face unique challenges in their lives that make it difficult to stay on track in school. Foster youth have experienced the trauma of child abuse or neglect and the additional trauma of being removed from their homes. They often experience multiple changes in placements during their time in care, often leading to multiple school transfers. As a result of these unique challenges, youth in foster care are far less likely to earn a high school diploma in four years (56%) than students overall (84%).⁴ In addition, although 93% of youth in foster care say they want to go to college, only 8% obtain an associate’s or bachelor’s degree by age 26.⁵ Due to their poor academic outcomes, youth with foster care experience have lower educational attainment than their peers when seeking employment.

For youth formerly in foster care, work experience before the age of 18 has been shown to have a significant impact on employment at the age of 24.⁶ Yet, many transition age youth currently or formerly in foster care have limited work history due to the challenges of working while they are in foster care. For instance, youth in foster care may not have a caring adult to teach them how to seek out and apply for employment, or they may have changed placements multiple times, making it difficult to maintain a job. As a result, they have fewer opportunities to build work and volunteer experience and to develop the soft skills that employers value. They also face barriers to accessing the documents and resources that are needed to facilitate employment. For example, when children are removed from their home, their biological family may retain their vital documents, such as birth certificates or Social Security cards, which may then be difficult for a young person to obtain.⁷

In addition, transition age youth with foster care experience face challenges in accessing and completing job readiness programs. While job training and placement programs are intended to provide young people with employment support and work readiness training, program staff are not typically trained in trauma-informed practices and may not understand the unique challenges that youth with foster care experience face.⁸ Due to these challenges, youth currently or formerly in foster care need more supports than their peers to prepare them to be successful in employment.



Even when services are targeted to youth with foster care experience, they are often underutilized. For example, federally funded transition services are designed to help youth with foster care experience transition to adulthood. However, only 20% of transition age youth in California with foster care experience received these services to connect them to employment programs or vocational training.⁹ Until recently, local workforce development boards were required to direct at least 75% of Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Youth Program funds toward “out-of-school youth.” However, participation in extended foster care requires youth to be employed or enrolled in school in order to access housing and services, creating an obstacle for many youth in extended foster care to accessing federal transition services (see sidebar for more information).

Out-of-school youth are youth 16 years of age or older who are not enrolled in a secondary or postsecondary school.

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Youth Program

The WIOA Youth Program is the primary federal funding stream that provides workforce development and career readiness supports for economically vulnerable youth, ages 14 to 24. Local workforce development boards can use these funds for employment services and supports, such as job training, skill development, vocation coaching, apprenticeships, and internships.

One barrier to accessing WIOA Youth Program funds is that, until recently, local workforce development boards were required to direct at least 75% of the funds toward “out-of-school youth.” However, participation in extended foster care requires youth to be employed or enrolled in school in order to access housing and services. This created an obstacle for many youth in extended foster care who were unable to access WIOA Youth Program services.

California recently received a waiver from the federal government that allows local workforce development boards to decrease the percentage of funds spent on supports for “out-of-school youth” from 75% to 50%, out of a total of approximately \$125 million in funding.¹⁰ This will allow local boards greater flexibility to provide more current and former foster youth with critical job training and career readiness skills to prepare them to thrive in their careers. However, as of March 2022, only 17 local workforce boards had opted in to use the waiver, meaning that too many young people will continue to face barriers to workforce development resources in many areas of the state.

In addition, programs such as THP-NMD and the Independent Living Program (ILP) are designed to provide transition age youth currently or formerly in foster care with life skills, housing assistance, and education and employment services that are critical to help them secure and maintain employment, yet these programs are underfunded and thus unable to serve all those who want to participate (see sidebar for more information).

The Independent Living Program (ILP)

The Independent Living Program (ILP), administered by county child welfare agencies, provides financial assistance and services to support housing, education, and employment to eligible current and former foster youth, ages 16 to 20. ILP training, services, and benefits are intended to assist current and former foster youth in achieving self-sufficiency prior to and after leaving the foster care system. In particular, ILPs can provide key employment supports such as daily living skills, money and time management, interviewing skills, workplace expectations, and professional communication.¹¹ However, ILPs are not consistent across all counties, so some counties provide more robust supports than others. Because ILPs are optional, many foster youth do not know about them or cannot access them.

Housing instability or a lack of reliable communications (i.e., cell phone), child care, or transportation can pose additional barriers in accessing work readiness training and getting to work consistently for youth who have spent time in foster care. Securing and maintaining employment depends on having stable housing, reliable communications, and transportation to get to work on time, yet many young people do not have access to these critical resources. Further, access to reliable and affordable child care is key to helping transition age youth with children find and maintain employment,¹² but can be elusive (see sidebar for more information).

The Emergency Child Care Bridge Program for Foster Children

Enacted in 2017, the Emergency Child Care Bridge Program for Foster Children (Bridge program) provides caregivers and parenting foster youth with vouchers to pay for up to 12 months of child care and connects them with navigators to help them access the subsidized child care system for long-term child care. The Bridge program also provides trauma-informed care training and coaching to child care providers to help them meet the unique needs of children who have experienced abuse and neglect.

While implementation of the Bridge program has been an incredible success, counties are not able to fully meet the needs of all foster families and parenting foster youth. Despite recent augmentations to the Bridge program, the existing funding will not cover vouchers for all the families who need them. Also, while navigators are available to help families secure long-term subsidized care, waitlists for openings in the subsidized care system are so long that 12 months is sometimes not enough time for some families to find long-term child care, especially for children with exceptional needs.

Finally, transition age youth currently or formerly in foster care may face mental health or substance use challenges due to the trauma they have experienced, which can make it difficult for them to secure or maintain employment. Current or past justice system involvement presents additional obstacles to young people securing and maintaining employment. Increased access to mental health supports, programs to address substance use, and legal services to seal or expunge their records improves the chances that transition age youth with foster care experience will secure and maintain employment.¹³



Recommendations

With proper supports and services, youth currently or formerly in foster care will be equipped to find and maintain the employment they need to be self-sufficient and achieve their career goals. Below, we highlight six key policy recommendations for ensuring youth have the resources and opportunities to receive the training and skills necessary to find and maintain employment and eventually thrive in their careers.

Recommendation 1: Ensure students in foster care receive targeted services and supports to help improve their academic engagement and achievement and aid their successful transition to postsecondary education and career. In addition, schools should provide greater supports to students in foster care specifically around preparing for employment, including securing work permits and vital documents.

Recommendation 2: Expand opportunities for transition age youth currently or formerly in foster care to participate in employment preparation and readiness programs. For example, policymakers should expand funding for programs that already provide employment services and supports to youth currently or formerly in foster care, such as THP-NMD and ILP, and strengthen program requirements around employment to ensure that all youth are receiving the employment supports they need to successfully launch their careers. In addition, the State should require stronger integration and collaboration between local workforce boards and THP-NMD and ILP programs to best serve the needs of transition age youth with foster care experience.

Recommendation 3: Increase opportunities for transition age youth currently or formerly in foster care to gain meaningful work experience by requiring all local workforce boards to opt into the recent federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) waiver in 2022 so they can serve more foster youth who may be in school yet continue to have complex needs related to establishing themselves in the workforce and maintaining employment. As noted, currently only 17 workforce boards across California have opted into the waiver. It will be critical to monitor California's implementation of the WIOA waiver to ensure that more current and former foster youth receive critical career readiness skills and job placement supports to prepare them to thrive in their careers. Moreover, work experience and placement programs must be trauma-sensitive and prepared to serve youth with foster care experience, including by understanding the challenges these youth may be facing and making an effort to meet them where they are.

More workshops on employment preparation and readiness should be provided to youth. For instance, workshops on resume building and how to find the right job are critical to helping youth find employment. Also, if we want youth to be successful, they should be talked to about employment and prepared for it at an earlier age, like 15.

- Interviewee

Recommendation 4: Allocate resources to expand opportunities for youth with foster care experience to engage in apprenticeships and internships and to develop the skills needed to build their careers beyond an entry-level job. While job training and placement programs provide skills and employment opportunities for entry-level jobs, they typically do not prepare youth with foster care experience for attaining higher-level positions. Apprenticeships and internships provide transition age youth who have spent time in foster care with opportunities to learn on the job and receive coaching and mentoring while they earn a wage. These opportunities are most effective when youth with foster care experience receive supportive services and case management during their apprenticeships and internships, to ensure these youth are best prepared to engage with these opportunities.

Recommendation 5: Ensure youth are connected to the range of resources they need in order to be able to work, including vital documents, reliable means of communication (i.e., cell phones), stable housing, access to public benefits such as CalFresh to obtain food, child care, and transportation, as well as the programs they may need to address substance use or possession of a criminal record. Legislators should create a dedicated state fund to address barriers that young people currently or formerly in foster care face in participating in workforce training programs, including assistance with transportation to work, access to child care, and equipment needed to participate in a vocational program.

Recommendation 6: Ensure that local workforce systems and county child welfare agencies are coordinated and streamlined to best serve transition age youth currently or formerly in foster care. For example, local workforce systems should streamline their processes to provide easy access to information about employment supports, automatically enroll youth into workforce training, and enhance their data collection to better support and meet the needs of youth currently or formerly in foster care. Further, county child welfare agencies should be required to create coordinated plans to effectively utilize various employment supports and funding streams and offer a continuum of options for youth currently or formerly in foster care. Their plans should include comprehensive information about all the employment training and opportunities available specifically for young people with foster care experience.

Policy Opportunity

A bill introduced in 2022 would provide greater opportunities for current and former foster youth to participate in apprenticeship programs.

[Senate Bill \(SB\) 1351 \(Durazo\)](#) would establish the California Youth Apprenticeship Program for the purpose of awarding grant funds to eligible applicants to develop new apprenticeship programs or expand existing apprenticeship programs to serve youth ages 16 to 24 who are furthest from opportunity, including youth in the child welfare system, youth experiencing homelessness, and those living in concentrated poverty, among others. Eligible applicants include county offices of education, regional consortia of community college districts, local intermediaries, regional local workforce development boards and apprenticeship program sponsors, who would then contract with employers, local educational agencies, community-based organizations, and other workforce development stakeholders to provide young people with apprenticeship opportunities.

Conclusion

Employment is foundational to young people’s successful transition into adulthood, yet transition age youth currently or formerly in foster care face barriers in securing and maintaining meaningful employment. Youth with foster care experience are more likely to be unemployed than their peers, and when they find employment, they typically earn less than their peers. Participation in extended foster care improves youth’s employment outcomes compared to youth who exit care at age 18, but their outcomes remain worse than their peers who have not been in foster care. By following the recommendations above, policymakers and systems serving youth with foster care experience can ensure that transition age youth have access to the supports and opportunities they need to secure and maintain meaningful employment and thrive in adulthood.

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Children Now is on a mission to build power for kids. The organization conducts non-partisan research, policy development, and advocacy reflecting a whole-child approach to improving the lives of kids, especially kids of color and kids living in poverty, from prenatal through age 26.

Learn more at www.childrennow.org.

Endnotes

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