

Exit Outcomes for Former Foster Youth Participating in California’s THP-Plus Transitional Supportive Housing Program

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Executive Summary

In California, approximately 4,500 young adults “age out” of foster care every year when they reach 18, the legal age of adulthood. Research shows that former foster youth often experience poor outcomes as young adults, including low levels of employment and educational achievement and high rates of homelessness, pregnancy, and criminal justice involvement. To address these issues, California’s legislature created the Transitional Housing Placement Plus program (THP-Plus) in 2001. THP-Plus provides subsidized housing coupled with comprehensive supportive services for aged-out foster youth ages 18 to 24.

This report includes findings from an analysis of data collected for a sample of over 500 former foster youth who participated in California’s THP-Plus program and exited the program during the first three quarters of fiscal year 2009-10. The analysis shows that many young people entered THP-Plus with major challenges to self-sufficiency, such as homelessness, zero income, and lack of high school credentials. At least half of participants had an immediate and urgent need for housing at program entrance. From entrance to exit, THP-Plus participants in aggregate experienced improvements in their incomes and educational status, and virtually all exited into stable housing. Income and education gains were modest, though not unexpectedly so given that many participants had relatively short program stays. The data suggest that some participants struggled to successfully engage with work, school, and THP-Plus program expectations during their stays. A large proportion exited involuntarily after failing to comply with program rules, contributing to shorter program stays. Though participants achieved important improvements in income and education between THP-Plus entrance and exit, and nearly all exited into stable housing, most young people continued to face self-sufficiency challenges at exit, including very low incomes, low levels of educational achievement, and housing that was not independent or not sustainably affordable. These findings suggest that THP-Plus serves an important role as a safety net for vulnerable former foster youth, and may facilitate improvements in income, education, and other areas of adult functioning. However, many former foster youth will require longer-term and more in-depth support, beyond the resources available through THP-Plus, to successfully maintain stability and achieve sustainable self-sufficiency as adults.

Overview of THP-Plus

The transition from adolescence to independent adulthood is a challenging period for many young people, but especially for abused and neglected youth in the foster care system, who often lack the support of family and other caring adults. Currently, youth in California may remain in foster care until age 18 (or in some cases age 19), at which point they “age out” or “emancipate” from care, meaning they must exit the foster care system due to age ineligibility. (Note that with the recent passage of Public Law 110-351, the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, and California’s pending Assembly Bill 12, the California Foster Connections to Success Act, foster youth in California may soon be able to elect to remain in care until age 21.) In recent years, the number of youth aging out of foster care has reached an historic high, both nationally and in California. In 2006, nearly 25,000 youth aged out of foster

care in the United States, up 41% since 1998.¹ In California, a total of 4,631 young people aged out of foster care in 2009, representing an increase of 56% since 1998.²

This rapid growth in the number of youth aging out of foster care is of particular concern given the challenges they face in their transition to adulthood. A study by researchers at the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children compared the outcomes of over 600 former foster youth to those of young adults in the general population. The study found that 19-year-olds in the study were nearly three times more likely than their peers in the general population to be out of work and school. They were twice as likely to be unable to pay their rent and were four times as likely to be evicted. Within less than two years of leaving foster care, significant numbers had been incarcerated and one in seven had experienced homelessness.³ Research specific to California has also found evidence of poor outcomes among former foster youth. A 2002 survey of California's county welfare directors estimated that 65% of youth aging out of foster care in California had an imminent need for safe and stable housing.⁴

These poor outcomes for recently aged-out foster youth are cause for serious concern, indicating a lack of preparation prior to their transition out of care and lack of economic and social support in early adulthood. Moreover, because the state serves as the legal parent for adolescents aging out of foster care, there is a special public responsibility to ensure that these youth are able to successfully transition to stable, productive adult lives.

California's Transitional Housing Placement Plus program (THP-Plus) was created by the State Legislature in 2001 to address this need, through the passage of Assembly Bill 427. Funded through the California Department of Social Services, THP-Plus provides up to 24 months of affordable housing, coupled with supportive services, for young adults ages 18 to 24 who have aged out of foster care.

THP-Plus offers three different service models. The scattered-site model consists of individual rental units that are leased within larger rental properties, where youth live either alone or with a roommate. This model can include housing in college dormitories. Some scattered-site programs allow participants to assume the lease for the unit at completion of the THP-Plus program, while others require participants to vacate the housing unit at program completion. The single-site model consists of a single property in which all of the housing units or bedrooms are owned or leased by the THP-Plus provider for the program. In the host family model, a former foster youth lives in a family setting with one or more adults with whom they have a long-term caring, committed relationship. The host family most resembles the continuation of a placement with a foster family or kinship placement, but with an emphasis on preparing for independent adult living.

THP-Plus programs subsidize the rental costs associated with these living arrangements and provide a range of specified supportive services, either directly or through referral. Services include case management, assistance in pursuing post-secondary education, job readiness training and support, mentoring and support for building permanent relationships with caring adults, and coordination with the county-administered Independent Living Program (ILP) to meet the goals outlined in the participant's Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP). In addition, THP-Plus programs assist participants with rent, utilities, furnishings, food, and other practical necessities.

Throughout California, the THP-Plus program has expanded rapidly in the past several years. In fiscal year 2003-04, THP-Plus served a total of 50 youth. This figure grew to over 1,500 in 2007-08, and to 2,314 in fiscal year 2008-09. After a budget reduction last fiscal year, the program served 2,245 youth in fiscal year 2009-10⁵. Much of the program's growth can be attributed to

changes in the program since its inception. In 2005, the upper age limit of THP-Plus was changed from 21 to 24, and in 2006, a provision requiring counties to pay a 60% share of cost was removed, which made it financially possible for many more counties to participate in the program. Also in 2006, the collaborative THP-Plus Statewide Implementation Project was launched by the John Burton Foundation, the California Department of Social Services, and the Corporation for Supportive Housing, in order to provide technical assistance to counties and service providers and advocacy to expand the number of former foster youth accessing THP-Plus statewide. The annual budget for THP-Plus in the 2009-10 fiscal year was \$35.8 million, a \$5 million reduction from the fiscal year 2008-09 budget of \$40.8 million.

Methodology

The recent rapid growth of the THP-Plus program created a need for a systematic approach to data collection, in order to identify the characteristics of the young people receiving services and evaluate the impact of the program. As a partner in the THP-Plus Statewide Implementation Project, the John Burton Foundation, in consultation with counties and their contracted nonprofit service providers, led the process of developing a statewide system to collect consistent data about the demographics and outcomes of THP-Plus participants. This data collection system was implemented during fiscal year 2008-09. Currently data from 36 of the 50 California counties participating in THP-Plus (including comprehensive data for 31 counties), representing approximately 80% of the total number of THP-Plus participants statewide, is included on an ongoing basis in the statewide data collection effort, making this system the most comprehensive current collection of data on former foster youth throughout California. Information collected through the THP-Plus data initiative includes demographics of program participants as well as outcomes related to housing, employment, education, criminal justice involvement, and assets, collected for each participant at program entrance, exit, 6-months post-exit, and 12-months post-exit, as well as snapshot data collected each quarter for all participants enrolled during the quarter.

The data used for the analyses in this report comprises the data collected about THP-Plus participants at program entrance and exit, for young adults who participated in the THP-Plus program and exited the program during the first three quarters of fiscal year 2009-10, and whose data was entered into the statewide data collection system. This analysis represents the first effort to systematically analyze changes in participants' housing, income, education, and self-sufficiency status between entrance to and exit from THP-Plus using a large, statewide sample of participants. The dataset used represents the most comprehensive data available on THP-Plus participation; however, because some counties and service providers are not currently participating in the system, this sample does not represent all young adults who participated in THP-Plus during the fiscal year. The total sample size is 552 individuals (fewer for some analyses due to missing data, noted as applicable). Overall, the sample is estimated to represent approximately 80% of the total population of former foster youth who exited from THP-Plus statewide during the first three quarters of the fiscal year.

The results described below were obtained primarily through descriptive and bivariate analyses. Only findings that are statistically significant are reported unless otherwise specified.

Results

Demographics of Former Foster Youth Participating in THP-Plus

The young adults who exited from THP-Plus during the first three quarters of fiscal year 2009-10 reflect the geographic and demographic diversity of California's former foster youth. The participants included in the sample were served by THP-Plus programs in 30 different California counties. The largest geographic concentrations of participants were in San Diego County (25%), the San Francisco Bay Area (20%), Los Angeles County (16%), and Sacramento County (8%). Overall, participants were evenly split between Northern California and Southern California. With respect to THP-Plus housing model, 65% of participants were in scattered-site THP-Plus programs, 32% were in single-site programs, and 3% were in host family programs.

In terms of gender, nearly three-fifths of the THP-Plus participants in the sample were female (62%) and nearly two-fifths were male (38%). The disproportionate representation of young women in THP-Plus may largely reflect the demographics of California's population of aging-out foster youth, which has historically been disproportionately female.⁶ The young adults exiting from THP-Plus came from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. The largest proportion were Black (42%), followed by White non-Hispanic (25%), Hispanic (15%), and Other (17%), including Native American, Asian, Pacific Islander, Multi-racial, or another race/ethnicity.

Other demographic characteristics of interest for the THP-Plus program include age, parenting status, and special needs. In terms of age, most of the participants exiting from THP-Plus (82%) were 18 to 20 years old at the time they entered the program, but 18% were older youth, aged 21 to 24 at program entrance. With respect to parenting status, nearly a quarter of the sample (24%) had given birth to or fathered a child prior to entering the THP-Plus program, and at least 15% of participants were custodial parents at program entrance. Special needs status of program participants was measured through questions about services that participants were receiving at program exit. A full 19% of participants reported receiving mental health services at exit; 6% were receiving services for developmental or learning disabilities; 4% were receiving substance abuse services; and 1% were receiving services for physical disabilities.

Participant Outcomes at Exit from THP-Plus

Income and Employment

At entrance to THP-Plus, program participants had severely inadequate incomes. A full 29% entered with zero income. The mean non-zero monthly income was only \$727 at entrance, for an annualized income of \$8,724, well below the federal poverty threshold of \$11,161 for a single adult.

Between entrance and exit, the income status of program participants improved in aggregate. There was a statistically significant decline in the proportion of participants with zero income, from 29% at entrance to 18% at exit ($\chi^2=24.60$, $p<0.001$). In addition, the mean non-zero income of program participants showed a significant increase, from \$727 per month at entrance to \$948 at exit ($t=6.31$, $p<0.001$). These aggregate figures mask substantial individual variation in income changes, as 55% of participants experienced increases in income from entrance to exit, while 26% of participants saw their incomes decline.

Participants' income gains were mostly not explained by changes in employment status. A similar proportion of participants was working at entrance (41%) and exit (43%); the difference was not statistically significant. At the individual level, a similar proportion of participants had increased (35%) and decreased (30%) work hours from entrance to exit. In fact, the only significant shifts in aggregate employment status were a decrease in the proportion of participants seeking employment (from 50% to 37%) and an increase in the proportion not working and not seeking employment (from 9% to 20%; $\chi^2=77.57$, $p<0.001$), suggesting that

many participants who were seeking jobs at program entrance had given up their job search by program exit.

Participants who were employed, however, saw a statistically significant increase in their mean hourly wage, from \$9.11 at entrance to \$9.74 at exit ($t=3.92$, $p<0.001$). At the individual level, substantially more working participants experienced wage increases (67%) than wage declines (18%).

For many participants, income gains from entrance to exit were due to increases in non-employment income. There was a statistically significant increase in the proportion of participants receiving any public benefits (Food Stamps, CalWORKS, SSI, etc.) at entrance (24%) versus exit (36%; $\chi^2=40.78$, $p<0.001$). In addition, the proportion receiving other financial support, such as educational grants or loans or support from family, increased from 22% to 30% ($\chi^2=24.68$, $p<0.001$).

Participants' income and employment outcomes must be considered within the larger economic context. During the first three quarters of fiscal year 2009-10, California was still experiencing the impact of the "Great Recession," with continuing high unemployment in many parts of the state. The job market was particularly difficult for transition-age youth, who typically have lower levels of job skills and work experience compared to other job applicants.

Education

Participants entered THP-Plus with very low levels of educational achievement. One third entered with no high school credential, two thirds had completed high school or a GED, and less than 1% had received a higher education degree.

In contrast to employment, enrollment in school would not be expected to be strongly dampened by the struggling economy. Thus it is somewhat surprising that THP-Plus program participants did not experience an aggregate increase in overall school enrollment from entrance to exit. In fact, there was a marginally significant decline in the proportion of individuals enrolled in any level of school at entrance (41%) versus exit (37%; $\chi^2=3.49$, $p=0.06$). However, this overall pattern masks differences in individual educational trajectories. More participants experienced an increase in educational status (39%) than a decrease (22%). An explanation for these apparently contradictory trends is that some individuals completed a level of schooling (e.g. received a high school diploma) during their THP-Plus stay and did not immediately pursue the next level of education (e.g. enrolling in college).

Program participants in aggregate showed some small but statistically significant improvements in educational status between program entrance and exit. The proportion whose highest educational achievement was a high school diploma increased from 57% to 63% ($\chi^2=7.78$, $p=0.01$). In addition, the small proportion that had completed a vocational training program increased from 4% at program entrance to 8% at exit ($\chi^2=14.10$, $p<0.001$). In terms of college, there was a marginally statistically significant increase in the proportion enrolled in a two-year college, from 20% to 23% ($\chi^2=2.81$, $p=0.09$), and a significant increase in the very small proportion enrolled in a four-year college, from 3% to 5% ($\chi^2=4.33$, $p=0.04$).

Some of the data on college attendance for THP-Plus program participants is more troubling, however. Between program entrance and exit, there was a significant increase in the proportion of individuals whose educational status was recorded as "dropped out of college," from 6% at entrance to 20% at exit ($\chi^2=179.37$, $p<0.001$). This finding suggests that many participants enrolled in college while participating in THP-Plus, but dropped out before THP-Plus exit. The high college drop-out rate parallels results from an earlier study of adult outcomes of former

foster youth in California, which found that a large proportion of former foster youth who enrolled in community college earned no credits, and very few ultimately earned associate's degrees or certificates or transferred to 4-year colleges.⁷

Self-Sufficiency Assets and Challenges

Besides income and education, other types of assets and liabilities may promote or inhibit the self-sufficiency of former foster youth participating in THP-Plus. Thus data was analyzed about changes in participants' banking and health insurance status, connections to caring adults, criminal justice involvement, and parenting status.

In terms of assets, the proportion of participants holding a bank account increased significantly between program entrance and exit, from 52% to 72% ($\chi^2=75.86$, $p<0.001$). The proportion of individuals with health insurance was high overall, though slightly smaller at exit (83%) than at entrance (86%). This marginally significant decline ($\chi^2=2.84$, $p=0.09$) might represent older youth who reached the end of their categorical eligibility for MediCal; state law allows continuing MediCal coverage for former foster youth until age 21. There was no significant change in the proportion of THP-Plus participants who reported having a permanent connection to a caring adult who could provide support, advice, and guidance. However, 94% reported an adult connection at entrance, so the continuity in this high level of connection to caring adults is a positive finding.

With respect to self-sufficiency challenges, a small but noteworthy proportion of THP-Plus participants were incarcerated (11%) or received an adult criminal conviction (7%) between program entrance and exit. These figures are similar to the proportions that entered THP-Plus with a history of incarceration (10%) or an adult conviction (8%).

Becoming a parent, particularly a custodial parent, can create significant challenges for transition-age youth in achieving and maintaining self-sufficiency. Parenting youth must secure adequate resources to meet the needs of a young child or children as well as their own needs, and even non-custodial parents may have child support obligations. Thus changes in parenting status for THP-Plus participants were examined.

Between entrance and exit, a new child was born to 11% of THP-Plus participants. This figure includes an unknown number of participants who were pregnant or expectant fathers at the time of program entrance. There was also a significant increase in the proportion of participants who were custodial parents, from 15% at entrance to 25% at exit ($\chi^2=40.23$, $p<0.001$), reflecting both participants with new children born, as well as parents that regained custody of children who were living in other arrangements prior to THP-Plus entrance. Increased custodial parenting represents a challenge to the self-sufficiency of THP-Plus participants. However, this change could represent a positive outcome for participants' young children, as it reflects living situations that are sufficiently stable to enable THP-Plus participants to maintain or gain custody of their children.

Housing

At entrance to THP-Plus, many participants were living in unstable or unsustainable housing situations. Half had a clearly urgent need for housing: nearly one sixth (16%) were homeless or staying in a shelter or other unstable housing, and one third entered THP-Plus directly from foster care as they aged out of the foster care system. The remaining half of participants were mostly staying in stable rent-free housing with relatives or friends (24%), renting their own or shared housing (15%), or living in supportive transitional housing (8%) (including 2% who were in another THP-Plus program). Regardless of their current housing situations, more than one third (36%) had experienced homelessness at some point prior to entering THP-Plus.

Thus one of the program's significant accomplishments was simply providing stable housing for former foster youth with immediate housing needs. Nearly all participants maintained stable housing at THP-Plus exit, though a very small proportion (3%) exited into homelessness, an emergency shelter, or other unstable housing. Over two fifths of participants (42%) exited into rental housing. Another two fifths exited into other forms of stable, but less self-sufficient and sustainable housing; 34% moved into rent-free housing with relatives or others, and 9% moved into another supportive transitional housing program (including 1% who moved into another THP-Plus program).

For those exiting THP-Plus into rental housing, the median rent paid was \$400 per month. Participants in rental housing paid a median of 43% of their monthly income toward rent, much higher than the 30% generally considered an affordable rent burden. The percentage is comparable to the rent-to-income ratio for many very low-income individuals and families in California, where housing costs are generally high. Nonetheless, such high rent burdens suggest precarious housing affordability for many former THP-Plus participants.

Program Dynamics: Length of Stay and Exit Patterns

Patterns in program participation were also analyzed. Former foster youth are eligible to receive up to 24 months of housing and support through THP-Plus, but the mean length of stay among program participants was only half as long, at 12 months. Only 42% of participants stayed in the program for more than one year, and 22% stayed for less than six months.

Relatively short program stays may or may not be appropriate, depending on participants' individual circumstances. More troubling, however, was the large proportion of participants – 41% – who exited THP-Plus involuntarily, which typically means they were asked to leave the program because they failed to comply with program rules or expectations. Only 2% of participants were legally evicted, however, which is a positive finding, since a record of a legal eviction can compromise an individual's long-term ability to secure rental housing.

Study Limitations

As noted above, the sample used for this analysis was a non-random sample of individuals participating in the THP-Plus program. The sample is drawn from the most comprehensive available dataset on THP-Plus program participation, and represents a substantial proportion of the total THP-Plus program population, but some counties and providers of THP-Plus services are not represented in the dataset. As a result, the sample may differ from the overall population of young adults in THP-Plus, and caution should be used in generalizing results. No other comprehensive data source exists for the THP-Plus program to allow for a detailed demographic comparison, though the aggregate participant and program characteristics parallel the statewide scope of the THP-Plus program in general.

The sample used for this analysis (n=552), comprising individuals who exited THP-Plus during the first three quarters of fiscal year 2009-10, was compared to the larger sample (n=1,337) of all individuals included in the data tracking system who participated in THP-Plus during the same time period (which includes those who had not yet exited), and the two samples were found to be substantively similar. There were minor differences in geographic distribution, THP-Plus program model, and race/ethnicity, but no significant differences in age, gender, parenting status, or housing status prior to program entrance. The differences between samples in terms of counties and program models represented may reflect the fact that some THP-Plus programs began operations and/or began participating in data entry more recently than others, and therefore may have had relatively fewer exiting participants during the time period examined.

It is also important to note that this analysis used a pre-experimental, pre-test/post-test design, with no comparison or control group of similar individuals who did not participate in the program. Consequently, the findings cannot provide strong evidence that participation in the THP-Plus program caused the changes observed in participants' income, education, or other outcomes; it is possible that similar changes might have occurred over time even if the individuals had not participated in THP-Plus. Nonetheless, some positive program effect is plausible at least for the substantial proportion of participants that entered THP-Plus with major self-sufficiency challenges, such as homelessness, zero income, lack of high school credentials, serious mental health needs, and/or imminent exit from foster care. Given these major barriers, forward progress on income, education, and other self-sufficiency measures would likely have been difficult in the absence of stable housing and support like the services provided by THP-Plus, and all of these housing, income, and education metrics showed statistically significant improvement in aggregate from entrance to exit.

Discussion: Implications for Practice and Policy

A number of key findings emerge from this analysis, many with potential implications for THP-Plus program staff, administrators, and policy advocates.

Challenges at THP-Plus Entrance

Participant characteristics at entrance are likely to affect their outcomes at exit.

- *Former foster youth entered THP-Plus with major challenges to self-sufficiency.* Nearly one in six was homeless at program entrance, 33% entered directly from foster care, 29% entered with zero income, and 33% lacked high school credentials. Nearly one fifth had mental health needs serious enough to require services at program exit. Participant outcomes at exit from THP-Plus need to be considered in the context of these challenging circumstances at entrance.
- *Many THP-Plus participants are parents.* Custodial parents represented 15% of program participants at entrance and 25% at exit. Achieving self-sufficiency is more challenging for parenting youth, and outcomes for these individuals affect not only the young adult participants, but also their children.
- *THP-Plus met an immediate and urgent housing need for many participants.* Half of participants entered the program directly from homelessness or foster care.

Practice implications: THP-Plus programs may need to focus on stabilizing participants' urgent housing, income, and other needs at program entrance. Programs also need to be prepared to address the special needs of many participants, including parenting youth and those with mental health issues.

Policy implications: THP-Plus serves as a critical safety net for vulnerable young adults with serious challenges to self-sufficiency and immediate needs for housing, income, and other support. The program should continue to receive public support in order to meet these urgent needs of former foster youth.

Positive Progress from Entrance to Exit

THP-Plus participants experienced some important positive changes in the domains of income, education, and housing between program entrance and exit.

- *Participants' incomes increased in aggregate between THP-Plus entrance and exit.* There was a significant decline in the proportion of individuals with zero income, and a significant increase in participants' mean income. Participants with jobs had a significant increase in their mean hourly wage. Larger proportions of individuals were receiving public benefits and other non-employment financial support at exit compared to entrance. These income and wage gains are particularly noteworthy given the difficult economy during the time period examined.
- *There were small gains in aggregate educational achievement between THP-Plus entrance and exit.* Small increases were observed in the proportion of individuals holding high school diplomas, completing job training, and enrolled in college.
- *Virtually all participants exited into stable housing.* Only 3% of participants exited THP-Plus into homelessness, an emergency shelter, or other unstable housing, while 97% exited into safe and stable housing.

Practice and policy implications: Overall gains in income, education, and housing suggest that THP-Plus may be facilitating improvements in important areas of functioning, offering some validation of the program as currently structured. It is important to note, though, that this study, which lacked a comparison or control group, cannot demonstrate whether changes in participant outcomes were caused by THP-Plus. Gains in all areas were modest, but not unexpectedly so, given the relatively short stays of many participants. Moreover, many individuals entered THP-Plus in a state of crisis (e.g. homeless or with zero income), so that even the modest change to a more stable situation (e.g. housed with a low income) is an important improvement.

Challenges During Program Participation

Findings suggest that program participants encountered some challenges in successfully engaging with work, school, and THP-Plus program expectations during their participation in the program.

- *There was no significant increase in the proportion of individuals working.* In fact, findings suggest many participants entered seeking jobs, but had given up their job searches by program exit. Though not a positive outcome, these results may largely reflect the very difficult economic climate during the time period examined. As California continued to experience high unemployment due to the "Great Recession," the job market was particularly challenging for transition-age youth with limited job skills and work experience. In this context, it is a positive finding that the proportion of participants with jobs did not decline from entrance to exit, and that the mean wage for working participants increased.
- *The data suggest that a substantial number of participants enrolled in college during THP-Plus, but dropped out before program exit.* Dropping out may negatively affect young people's academic records as well as their confidence in their ability to successfully engage in higher education. In addition, a substantial proportion of THP-Plus participants – 16% at program entrance – count educational grants and/or loans as sources of income. Individuals who drop out after spending financial aid resources on school and living expenses may end up with no educational benefit and substantial financial debt.
- *Many THP-Plus participants had relatively short program stays.* The mean length of stay was 12 months, only half of the 24-month maximum allowed. Though a short stay may be appropriate for some participants, the vast majority exited THP-Plus with continuing challenges to self-sufficiency, suggesting they might have benefited from a longer period of support. The relatively modest improvements seen between entrance and exit in participants'

income and education may be partly explained by short program stays, as only limited progress can be expected during a short period of program participation.

- *A large proportion of participants exited involuntarily.* A full 41% of participants were asked to leave the program for non-compliance with rules or expectations. Involuntary exits pre-emptively shorten program stays and disrupt participants' case plans and exit transitions, and therefore should be minimized. Some level of non-compliance may reflect developmentally expected behavior for youth transitioning into independent adulthood, particularly for young people who have recently left the highly controlled environment of foster care. Notably, one third of participants entered THP-Plus directly from foster care.

Practice implications: To facilitate successful engagement with higher education, THP-Plus programs need to identify specific barriers that lead to college drop-out and supports that are needed to maintain college progress. THP-Plus programs could benefit from partnerships with targeted programs that support former foster youth enrolled in higher education. The California College Pathways Project (www.cacollegepathways.org) serves as an information clearinghouse for these programs.

The high proportion of involuntary program exits suggests a challenge to develop program rules that promote development of adult accountability, including meeting basic tenant responsibilities, while successfully engaging participants in voluntary compliance. To minimize involuntary exits, and thereby minimize prematurely shortened program stays, THP-Plus programs may need to consider modifying participation requirements and/or sanction processes. Programs should also assess the effectiveness of current youth engagement and case management approaches. It is also important to acknowledge that some level of non-compliance may be developmentally expected for young people transitioning from highly structured foster care to independent adulthood. THP-Plus programs might be able to learn from housing programs serving other populations for whom program compliance can be especially challenging, such as permanent supportive housing programs serving chronically homeless adults.

Policy implications: Many THP-Plus participants exit the program within less than 24 months, often because they fail to comply with program rules and are asked to leave. Some level of noncompliance and premature exit may be developmentally expected behavior, and even those who exit voluntarily often leave with precarious self-sufficiency. Current THP-Plus policies allow young people to re-enter the same or another THP-Plus program if they have not exhausted their full 24 months of eligibility. Continuing this policy of cumulative time-based program eligibility would ensure that participants have a second chance to benefit from the support of THP-Plus if their first stay ends prematurely or if their living situation deteriorates after exiting the first time.

Challenges at THP-Plus Exit

At program exit, participants' income, education, and housing situations had improved in aggregate, but individuals still faced serious challenges to self-sufficiency.

- *Despite income gains, participants exited THP-Plus with extremely low incomes.* At exit, participants' mean income was \$948 per month, annualized to \$11,376 per year. This income barely exceeded the 2010 federal poverty threshold for a one-person household (\$11,161)⁸, and was substantially less than the poverty threshold for the two-person (\$14,787) or larger households represented by the 25% of THP-Plus participants who were custodial parents at program exit. The mean exit income is far less than the amount

considered adequate for economic self-sufficiency in California, ranging from \$19,000 to \$32,000 for a single adult and \$35,000 to \$57,000 for a single parent with one preschooler.⁹

- *Despite educational gains, participants exited THP-Plus with low levels of educational achievement.* At exit, 71% of individuals had a high school diploma or GED, while 26% still lacked a high school credential. Less than 3% had a college degree.
- *Though nearly all participants exited into stable housing, many exited into housing that was not self-sufficient or was not sustainably affordable.* Two-fifths exited into housing that was stable but not independent, such as living with relatives or a transitional housing program. More than two-fifths exited into independent rental housing, but rent burdens were high, with individuals paying a median of 43% of income towards rent.

Practice implications: Most THP-Plus participants exit into stable, but precariously sustainable living situations, with very low incomes as well as high rent burdens or housing that is not independent. In addition, the highest educational credential for most is a high school diploma at best, which limits their opportunities to secure living-wage jobs, at least for the short-term. Given these circumstances, most participants will need additional support after exit from THP-Plus in order to maintain adequate housing, income, and basic necessities. Many – particularly those who are custodial parents or have serious mental health issues – may need support for many years of their early adulthood.

Thus THP-Plus programs should proactively inform participants about and assist them in accessing mainstream adult social services and resources, such as Section 8 or public housing, means-tested MediCal, food stamps, CalWORKS, and SSI. Many THP-Plus programs assist eligible participants in enrolling in these types of benefits, but information about how to access such resources should be provided to all participants, including those who might need to access them only after exiting THP-Plus. Maintaining contact with THP-Plus alumni may also be important, in order to ensure that young people can be directed to needed supports if their precarious self-sufficiency deteriorates. Encouraging young people to access the public supports that many will need to maintain stability, without suppressing their confidence, motivation, and emerging identity as independent adults, requires sensitivity and careful program management.

Policy implications: THP-Plus serves an important role as a safety net and springboard from foster care to adulthood for many of California's former foster youth. This study found that between program entrance and exit, THP-Plus participants made important gains in income, education, and housing stability. However, given the major challenges that participants have at entrance to THP-Plus, this 24-month program cannot realistically provide the depth or length of support that many former foster youth will require in order to maintain long-term stability and achieve secure self-sufficiency as adults. Mainstream adult social services need to fill this need for longer-term support. Policies that provide categorical eligibility or priority for mainstream public benefits for former foster youth, such as priority for subsidized housing or automatic eligibility for MediCal, are thus important complements to targeted transitional programs like THP-Plus.

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TABLES

THP-Plus Programs Represented in Sample

	%	n
San Francisco Bay Area	20%	552
Sacramento County	8%	
Other Northern California	23%	
<i>Subtotal Northern California</i>	<i>50%</i>	
Los Angeles County	16%	
San Diego County	25%	
Other Southern California	9%	
<i>Subtotal Southern California</i>	<i>50%</i>	
THP-Plus housing model		
Scattered site	65%	457
Single site	32%	
Host family	3%	

Participant Demographics

	%	n
Female	62%	549
Male	38%	
Black	42%	546
White non-Hispanic	25%	
Hispanic	15%	
Native American, Asian, Pacific Islander, Multi-racial, or Other	17%	
Age 18 to 20 at entrance	82%	552
Age 21 to 23 at entrance	18%	
Parent at entrance	24%	453
Custodial parent at entrance	15%	552
Receiving special needs services at exit:		
Mental health	19%	521
Substance abuse	4%	520
Learning disability	4%	521
Developmental disability	2%	522
Physical disability	1%	522

Income and Employment

	At entrance		At exit		χ^2 or t (p-value)
	% or \bar{X}	n	% or \bar{X}	n	
Zero income	29%	366	18%	422	$\chi^2=24.60$ (p<0.001)
Mean non-zero income	\$727	260	\$948	346	t=6.31 (p<0.001)
Employed	41%	446	43%	506	n/s
Seeking employment	50%	446	37%	506	$\chi^2=34.15$ (p<0.001)
Not employed and not seeking employment	9%	446	20%	506	$\chi^2=77.57$ (p<0.001)
Mean hourly wage	\$9.11	170	\$9.74	199	t=3.92 (p<0.001)
Receiving any public benefits	24%	552	36%	552	$\chi^2=40.78$ (p<0.001)
Receiving other financial support (e.g. education grants or loans, support from family)	22%	552	30%	552	$\chi^2=24.68$ (p<0.001)

Educational Status

	At entrance		At exit		χ^2 (p-value)
	%	n	%	n	
In school	41%	445	37%	528	$\chi^2=3.49$ (p=0.06)
Attending high school or equivalent	18%	445	10%	528	$\chi^2=28.13$ (p<0.001)
Attending 2-year college	20%	445	23%	528	$\chi^2=2.81$ (p=0.09)
Attending 4-year college	3%	445	5%	528	$\chi^2=4.33$ (p=0.04)
Dropped out of college	6%	445	20%	528	$\chi^2=179.37$ (p<0.001)
Had completed vocational training	4%	410	8%	509	$\chi^2=14.10$ (p<0.001)
Highest educational achievement					
Some high school	33%	288	26%	514	$\chi^2=10.52$ (p=0.001)
GED or high school equivalent	9%	288	8%	514	n/s
High school diploma	57%	288	63%	514	$\chi^2=7.78$ (p=0.01)
Associate's degree	1%	288	2%	514	n/s
Bachelor's degree	0%	288	<1%	514	n/s

Self-Sufficiency Assets

	At entrance		At exit		χ^2 (p-value)
	%	n	%	n	
Bank account	52%	439	72%	519	$\chi^2=75.86$ (p<0.001)
Health insurance	86%	442	83%	523	$\chi^2=2.84$ (p=0.09)
Connection to caring adult	94%	441	94%	527	n/s

Self-Sufficiency Challenges

	%	n	χ^2 (p-value)
Incarcerated between entrance and exit	11%	517	n/a
Adult criminal conviction between entrance and exit	7%	497	n/a
New child born between entrance and exit	11%	532	n/a
Custodial parent at entrance	15%	552	$\chi^2=40.23$ (p<0.001)
Custodial parent at exit	25%	552	

Housing

	At entrance (n=448)	At exit (n=501)	χ^2 (p-value)
Homeless, emergency shelter, or other unstable housing	16%	3%	$\chi^2=60.17$ (p<0.001)
Foster care	33%	1%	
Renting own or shared housing (paying rent)	15%	42%	
Living with relative or others in stable housing (free rent)	24%	34%	
Supportive transitional housing program	8%	9%	
Other housing	5%	10%	
Experienced homelessness prior to entrance (n=402)	36%	n/a	

Rent Burden

	% or \bar{X}	n
Median non-zero rent at exit	\$400	223
Median percent of income represented by non-zero rent at exit	43%	186

Length of Stay and Exit Patterns

	% or \bar{X}	n
Mean length of stay	12 mo	552
Stayed <6 months	22%	
Stayed 6-12 months	36%	
Stayed >12 months	42%	
Voluntary exit (including timed out)	60%	536
Involuntary exit (asked to leave) but no legal eviction	39%	
Legal eviction	2%	

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