



John Burton Foundation for Children without Homes

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Policy Brief

Needs and Demographics of Former Foster Youth Entering California's THP-Plus Program: Findings from the Statewide Participant-Tracking System

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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 former foster youth age 18 to 24.

This report includes findings from an analysis of data collected about a sample of over 1,000 former foster youth who entered California's THP-Plus program during the first three quarters of fiscal year 2008-09. The analysis shows that a most youth do not enter THP-Plus directly after leaving foster care. Homelessness was a common experience among former foster youth entering the program. Many THP-Plus participants were not connected to work or school at program entrance, and they reported low levels of educational achievement and very low incomes. Positive findings included high rates of connections to caring adults and health-insurance coverage. Two subgroups of THP-Plus participants demonstrated greater needs at program entrance, namely older youth, age 21 to 24, and custodial parents, with parenting and financial responsibilities for a child as well as themselves.

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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 adoption of Assembly Bill 12, the California Foster Connections to Success Act, foster youth in California will 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 2005, nearly 25,000 youth aged out of foster care in the United States, up 41% since 1998. In California, a total of 4,493 young people aged out of foster care in 2007, representing an increase of 51% since 1998.

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 from Iowa, Illinois and Wisconsin to those of young adults in the general population. The study found that 19-year-old former foster youth 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. 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.

These poor outcomes for recently aged-out foster youth are cause for serious concern, as they indicate a lack of preparation prior to youths’ 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 through the passage of Assembly Bill 427 in 2001 to address these needs. 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 age 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. 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 the youth for independent 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 utilities, furnishings, food, and other practical necessities.

Throughout California, the THP-Plus program has expanded rapidly in the past five years. In fiscal year 2003-04, THP-Plus had a moment-in-time capacity of 50 youth. This figure grew to over 500 in 2007-08 and more than doubled to 1,300 in 2008-09. Much of this 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 THP-Plus State-wide Implementation Project was launched by a collaboration between the John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes (the John Burton Foundation), the California Depart-

ment of Social Services, and the Corporation for Supportive Housing. The project's goal was 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 2008-09 fiscal year was \$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 35 of the 41 California counties participating in THP-Plus, representing 90% of the total THP-Plus beds, 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, for young adults who participated in the THP-Plus program during the first three quarters of fiscal year 2008-09 and whose data was entered into the statewide data-collection system. Because the data system was implemented part-way through the fiscal year, and 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. In addition, due to the logistics of data-collection start-up, a substantial proportion of participant records were missing key data elements and had to be excluded from some of the analyses. Thus, the resulting sample size is a maximum of 1,049 and a minimum of 338 for different analyses, with a sample of more than 700 for over four-fifths of the calculations; specific sample sizes are noted below as applicable.

Overall, the maximum sample is estimated to represent over 60% of the total population of former foster youth participating in 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

Former Foster Youth at Entrance to THP-Plus

The young adults participating in THP-Plus reflect the geographic and demographic diversity of California's former foster youth. Data about their housing, employment, and school status at the time of enrollment in THP-Plus, as well as their assets and their involvement with the criminal justice system, demonstrate that these young people have substantial needs as they transition to independent adulthood

Demographics

The participants included in the sample were served by THP-Plus programs in 29 different California counties (n=1049). The largest geographic concentrations of participants were in San Diego County (24%), the San Francisco Bay Area (23%), Los Angeles County (13%), and Sacramento County (8%). Overall, participants were nearly evenly split between Northern California (52%) and Southern California (48%). Though not identical, the geographic distribution of counties providing THP-Plus services to the participants closely paralleled the distribution of counties of jurisdiction for these young people at the time that they aged out of foster care (n=968), indicating that most were accessing THP-Plus in or near the county where they were supervised as minors in foster care.

In terms of gender (n=1003), nearly two-thirds of the THP-Plus participants were female (65%) and just over one-third were male (35%). 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; in each of fiscal years 2002-03 through 2006-07, females represented 58 to 59% of all youth aging out of foster care in the state. Self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth represented a small but significant 6% of THP-Plus participants (n=770).

The young adults participating in THP-Plus came from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds (n=989). The largest proportion were Black (42%), followed by White non-Hispanic (23%), Hispanic (20%), and other (15%), including Native American, Asian, Pacific Islander, Multi-racial, or another race/ethnicity.

Two demographic categories of particular interest for the THP-Plus program, which will be explored in greater depth below, are age and parenting status. In terms of age (n=1049), most of the participants (82%) were 18 to 20 years old at the time they entered the program; a full 40% of participants were age 18. Older youth age 21 to 24 comprised 18% of the participants.

Finally, with respect to parenting status, a full quarter of the sample (25%) had given birth to or fathered a child prior to entering the THP-Plus program (n=746). Furthermore, at entrance to the program at least 12% of participants were custodial parents, living with and responsible for a child as well as themselves (n=1049).

THP-PLUS PROGRAMS REPRESENTED IN SAMPLE		
	%	<i>n</i>
San Francisco Bay Area	23%	1049
Sacramento County	8%	
Other Northern California	21%	
<i>Subtotal Northern California</i>	52%	
San Diego County	24%	
Los Angeles County	13%	
Other Southern California	11%	
<i>Subtotal Southern California</i>	48%	

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS AT PROGRAM ENTRANCE		
	%	<i>n</i>
Female	65%	1003
Male	35%	
Black	42%	989
White non-Hispanic	23%	
Hispanic	20%	
Native American, Asian, Pacific Islander, Multi-racial, or Other	15%	
Custodial parent	12%	1049
Self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender	6%	770
Experienced homelessness prior to THP-Plus	39%	690
Age 18 to 20	82%	1049
Age 21 to 24	18%	

Housing

Participants were living in a variety of housing types immediately prior to entry to THP-Plus (n=749). Nearly one-third (30%) entered the program directly from foster care. Of these, the most common placement youth lived in prior to THP-Plus was a group home (37%), followed by a county foster home (25%), an FFA foster home (21%), Transitional Housing Placement Program (11%) or a kinship placement (6%).

The vast majority of program entrants did not enter THP-Plus directly from foster care (70%). Of these, the greater percentage were living with relatives or others for free (23%), renting their own or shared housing (15%), or staying in a supportive housing program (9%). However, nearly one-fifth (19%) entered THP-Plus directly from homelessness, an emergency shelter, or other unstable housing. Moreover, nearly two-fifths (39%) had experienced homelessness at some point prior to entering THP-Plus (n=690).

In terms of the type of housing into which the THP-Plus participants moved, two-thirds of the participants (66%) entered scattered-site THP-Plus housing, nearly one-third (29%) entered single-site housing programs, and 5% entered host-family placements (n=752). Two-thirds of the participants (66%) had the option to remain in the same housing when they eventually exited THP-Plus (n=725).

HOUSING IMMEDIATELY PRIOR TO THP-PLUS		
	%	<i>n</i>
Foster care	30%	749
Living with relative or others with free rent	23%	
Renting own or shared housing	15%	
Supportive housing program	9%	
Other housing	4%	
Homeless, emergency shelter, or other unstable housing	19%	

In terms of education, nearly two-fifths (39%) of THP-Plus participants were enrolled in school at entrance to the program, with 15% of participants attending high school or a high-school equivalency program, 22% attending community college, and 2% attending a four-year college (n=737). The highest educational achievement to date was reported for a smaller sample of program entrants (n=338), of which 30% had completed some high school; 69% had received a high school diploma, GED, or equivalent; and 1% had received an AA or AS degree. In addition, a small proportion of participants (7%) were enrolled in vocational training (n=702).

An important concept in the research on youth transitioning to adulthood is “connectedness,” or whether young adults are working and/or in school. Former foster youth have been found to have higher levels of “disconnectedness,” meaning they are neither working nor in school, than young adults in the general population. Among the THP-Plus participants included in the sample, almost two-thirds (64%) were “connected” at program entrance, including 20% who were both working and in school. In contrast, over one-third (36%) were “disconnected,” neither working nor in school (n=741).

Work and School

Employment and education are two areas in which research shows that former foster youth tend to have extremely poor outcomes. Thus, the work and school statuses of young people entering THP-Plus are particularly relevant to identifying their needs as they transition to adulthood.

With respect to employment status (n=737), at program entrance less than half of participants were working (45%). An equal proportion were seeking employment (45%), and a smaller proportion were unemployed and not seeking employment (10%). (Note that participants who were SSI-eligible or otherwise unable to work were excluded from this analysis.) The median wage reported for employed participants was \$8.50 per hour (n=302). Other income sources besides employment included public benefits (such as Food Stamps, CalWORKS, WIC, General Assistance, or SSI) for at least 23% of participants, and other types of financial support (such as educational grants or loans, child support, or family contributions) for at least 19% of participants (n=1049). Overall, 27% of participants had no reported income at entrance (n=591). For those with a non-zero income, the median monthly income from all sources was \$700, equivalent to an annual income of \$8,400.

Criminal Justice Involvement

A significant proportion of THP-Plus participants in the sample had been involved with the criminal justice system prior to entering THP-Plus. Nearly one-fifths (at least 17%) had been involved with the probation system as juveniles (n=1049). A smaller proportion had been involved with the adult criminal justice system. Almost one in ten (9%) had been incarcerated for an adult offense prior to THP-Plus entry, and 7% had received adult criminal convictions, mostly misdemeanors (n=654).

Assets

At entrance to THP-Plus, only about half of participants in the sample (54%) had bank accounts (n=726). On a more positive note, however, the vast majority (85%) had health insurance (n=743). This high proportion with health coverage may reflect the result of the policy that former foster youth are eligible to continue receiving MediCal coverage through age 21 in California. Another positive finding was that a very large proportion of young adults in the sample – a full 93% – reported having a permanent connection to a caring adult who could provide support, advice, and guidance (n=728).

WORK AND SCHOOL STATUS AT PROGRAM ENTRANCE		
	%	<i>n</i>
Employed	45%	737
Attending school	39%	737
Working and attending school	20%	720
“Connected” (working and/or in school)	64%	741
“Disconnected” (neither working nor in school)	36%	

THP-Plus Populations with Special Needs: Older Youth and Parenting Youth

Two significant subgroups of THP-Plus participants—older youth and parenting youth – appear to enter the program with greater disadvantages than most of the former foster youth served by THP-Plus. The profiles of these subgroups at entrance to THP-Plus are explored below.

Challenges Faced by Participants Age 21 to 24

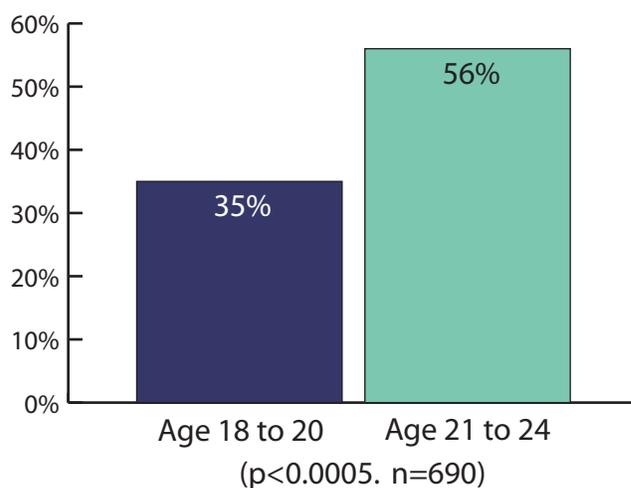
In 2005, the upper age limit for THP-Plus eligibility was increased from 21 to 24 years old. This extended age eligibility makes THP-Plus unusual among public services for former foster youth, as eligibility ends at age 21 for most such programs, including the Independent Living Program (ILP), extended MediCal coverage, and, soon, extended voluntary foster care.

Young adults age 21 to 24 comprise a relatively small proportion of THP-Plus participants, representing 18% of the sample analyzed (n=1049). However, county THP-Plus representatives and service providers have noted that the older young adults who access THP-Plus have a significant need for the program. Analysis of this sample confirms that THP-Plus participants age 21 to 24 faced greater challenges at program entrance than younger participants, age 18 to 20, particularly in the areas of parenting and homelessness.

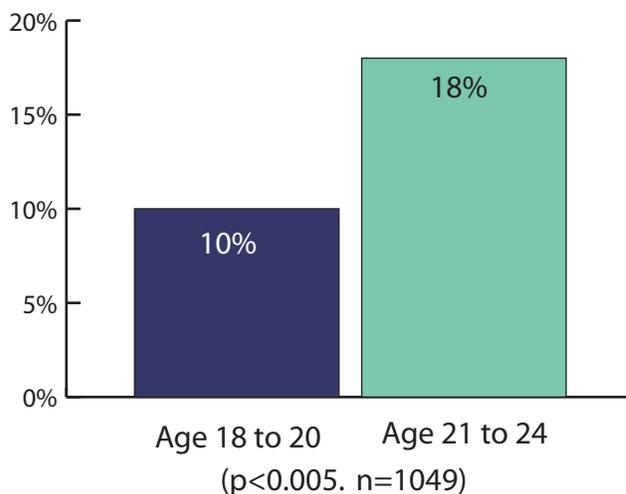
Compared to participants age 18 to 20, older participants were significantly more likely to have experienced homelessness prior to entering THP-Plus. Over half (56%) of participants age 21 to 24 had been homeless before, while only about one-third (35%) of participants age 18 to 20 had been homeless ($p<0.0005$, $n=690$). Greater prevalence of homelessness may indicate that older young adults had spent more time in unstable and unsafe living situations, with higher probability of risky lifestyles and potentially negative physical- and mental-health impacts.

Older youth entering THP-Plus were also significantly more likely to be custodial parents than younger participants. While 10% of participants age 18 to 20 were caring for a child, 18% of participants age 21 to 24 were custodial parents ($p<0.005$, $n=1049$). The financial and personal responsibilities of parenting may increase the challenges these young people face when attempting to establish self-sufficiency and invest in their long-term potential, as described right.

Experienced Homelessness Prior to THP-Plus



Custodial Parent at Entrance to THP-Plus

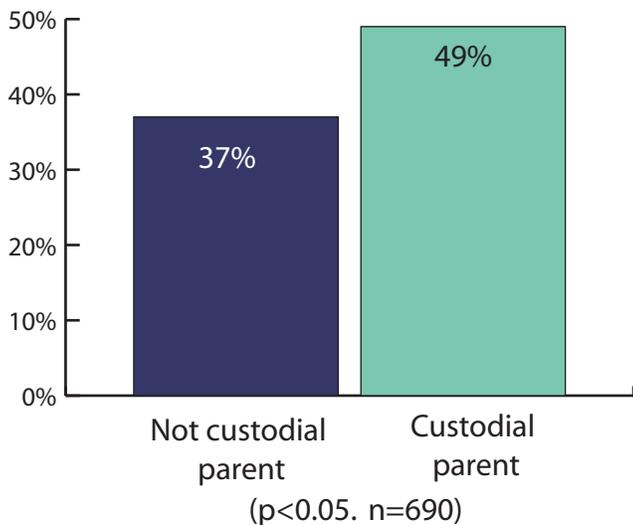


Challenges Faced by Custodial Parents

Of the THP-Plus participants included in the sample, 12% were custodial parents (n=1049), with responsibility for parenting and financially supporting a child as well as themselves. Though a relatively small proportion of the overall THP-Plus population, these individuals reported substantially greater needs in a variety of domains than participants who were not custodial parents.

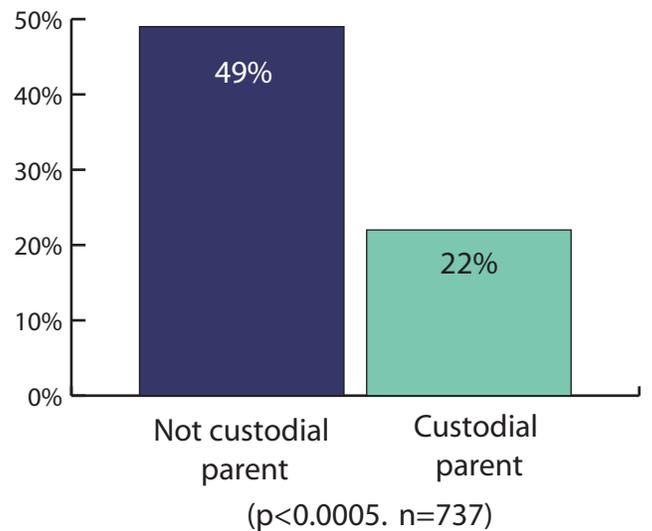
Like older youth, custodial parents in the sample were more likely to have experienced homelessness than non-parenting participants. Nearly half of custodial parents (49%) had been homeless at some point prior to entering THP-Plus, compared to 37% of participants who were not custodial parents ($p < 0.05$, $n = 690$).

Experienced Homelessness Prior to THP-Plus

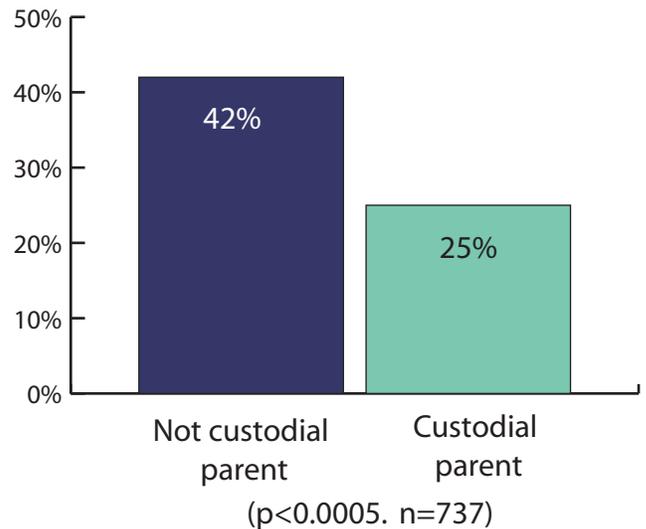


Parenting participants also reported much less participation in work and school than non-parenting participants. Only 22% of custodial parents were working at entrance to THP-Plus, compared to half (49%) of non-parenting participants ($p < 0.0005$, $n = 737$). Similarly, only 25% of custodial parents were in school at program entrance, versus over two-fifths (42%) of participants who were not custodial parents ($p < 0.0005$, $n = 737$). Not surprisingly, therefore, nearly twice as many custodial parents were “disconnected” from both work and school, 59% compared to 31% of non-parenting participants ($p < 0.0005$, $n = 741$). Lower rates of employment and school attendance for custodial parents are not surprising, as the financial and logistical constraints of child care may limit parents’ ability to participate in work and school. Nonetheless, this high rate of disconnectedness is of concern, as these young adults are not gaining the work experience and/or educational credentials that would enhance their future ability to adequately support themselves and their families.

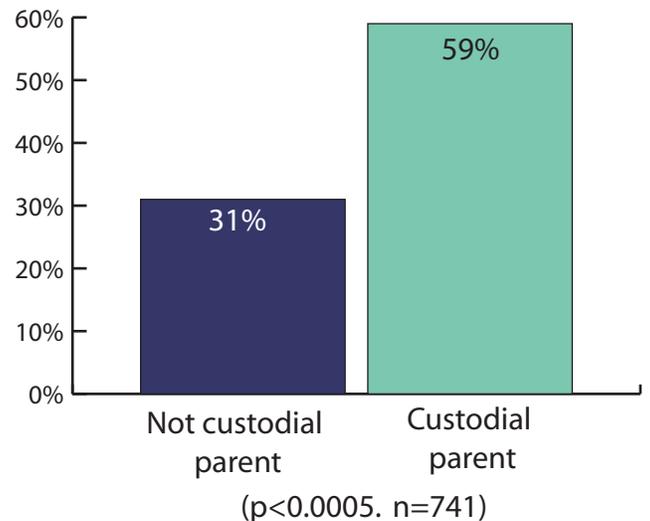
Employed at Entrance to THP-Plus



Attending School at Entrance to THP-Plus



“Disconnected” at Entrance to THP-Plus



Limitations

As noted above, the sample used for this analysis was a non-random sample of individuals entering the THP-Plus program. Though the sample represents a substantial proportion of the total THP-Plus program population, some counties and providers of THP-Plus services are not represented in the data set, and data entry into the system began part-way through the fiscal year. 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 general demographic comparison.

In addition, a substantial proportion of participant records were missing multiple data elements and had to be excluded from some analyses. Exploration of the demographics of participants with data missing on homelessness, employment, or education status showed that the records with missing data were largely similar to the records without missing data in terms of age and gender. Missing data was somewhat more common among Black and less common among White participants, with no substantial difference for Hispanic or Other Race participants. Individuals from THP-Plus programs in Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and San Francisco Counties were somewhat more likely to have data missing; otherwise the geographic distribution of records with missing data was similar to that of non-missing records. Participants with missing data were also less likely to be coded as custodial parents, but because of the way this question was structured, this finding may indicate that custodial parent status was actually unknown or not entered for many of the missing-data records. Also, due to the way responses were coded, the number of juvenile probation wards and individuals receiving public benefits or other non-employment income may be somewhat under-reported.

Finally, because the data for this analysis was drawn from administrative records for the THP-Plus program only, the results may not be generalizable to the overall population of former foster youth in California or nationally.

Implications

Most youth do not enter THP-Plus directly from foster care. Just one-third of participants lived in foster care immediately prior to entering THP-Plus. This relatively low percentage suggests a need for improved transition planning as well as ongoing concurrent planning as youth prepare for their legal discharge from foster care.

Homelessness was prevalent among THP-Plus participants at program entrance. Almost one-fifth of participants were homeless or living in an emergency shelter or other unstable housing immediately before entrance to THP-Plus, and nearly two-fifths had experienced homelessness at some point before entering the program. These high rates of homelessness indicate that a large proportion of THP-Plus participants have experienced highly unstable living situations with associated risks to their physical and mental health, and ability to establish safe and self-sufficient lifestyles.

Many THP-Plus participants were not connected to work or school at program entrance. Less than half of entering participants were working and only two-fifths were in school. Over one-third were “disconnected” from both work and school at entrance to THP-Plus. These figures are cause for concern, as connection to employment and/or education is the most effective path to long-term self-sufficiency for most transition-aged young adults.

Young adults entering THP-Plus demonstrated low levels of school achievement and very low incomes. Nearly one-third of participants had not completed a high-school credential before entering THP-Plus. Over one-quarter of participants with available data reported no income, and those with income had a median annualized income of \$8,400, below the federal poverty line. The median wage among those reporting wages was only \$8.50 per hour, below the living wage in California.

Participants entering THP-Plus showed high rates of permanent connections to adults and health insurance coverage. Over 90% of young adults reported that they had a connection to an adult who could provide support and guidance. A full 85% reported that they had health insurance. Both of these are positive findings, though it may be important to assess whether participants continue to enjoy high levels of health-insurance coverage after age 21, the upper age limit for automatic eligibility for MediCal among former foster youth in California.

Young people age 21 to 24, as well as custodial parents, entered THP-Plus with greater disadvantages than other participants. Older youth were 60% more likely to have experienced homelessness and 80% more likely to be custodial parents than participants age 18 to 20. More custodial parents had experienced homelessness and fewer were working or in school than participants who were not custodial parents. These findings indicate that older youth and custodial parents have high needs and may need to be targeted with more intensive services.

Further data analysis is needed. As THP-Plus data collection proceeds beyond this start-up year, the available sample will include valid data for a larger proportion of program participants, facilitating more complex and representative analyses of program participant characteristics and outcomes. There is a particular need for analysis of the possible impact of THP-Plus services, including assessment of changes in participant housing, employment, and education status from program entrance to exit. Comparison of the characteristics of THP-Plus program participants to research on former foster youth and youth in the general population would also enhance understanding of the population served and needs to be addressed by THP-Plus.

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