



TAY-Hub

Transition-Age Youth
Research & Evaluation Hub



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California Child Welfare
Indicators Project



PARENTS IN FOSTER CARE:

TRENDS OVER TIME FROM THE CaIYOUTH STUDY

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Disclaimer

The study was performed with the permission of the California Department of Social Services; however, the opinions and conclusions are solely those of the authors and do not represent the policy or opinions of the collaborating agencies or any California Department.

Project Overview

The Transition-Age Youth Research and Evaluation Hub (TAY-Hub) is a university-based research collaborative housed within the California Child Welfare Indicators Project at the University of California, Berkeley. The TAY-Hub specializes in research related to policies and practices affecting transition-age youth by monitoring outcomes and through applied research. This work is grounded in engagement with members of the child welfare services community, including those with lived experience of foster care.

Introduction

Although the rate of early parenting has continued to decline steadily through 2019 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020), a large proportion of young people making the transition from foster care to adulthood (i.e., transition-age youth; TAY) become parents during adolescence and early adulthood. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (e.g., Fostering Connections Act) amended Title IV-E to extend the age of eligibility for foster care from 18 to 21. Because of the extension of care to age 21, child protective services (CPS) provides services for a growing number of parents, and, consequently, their children.

Extended foster care does not cause the rates of parenthood to increase. In fact, an examination of the implementation of the extension of foster care through age 21 found that youth who spend more time in care as nonminors were less likely to become pregnant or impregnant a female than youth who exit care earlier (Courtney, 2018). However, the additional time in care means that more youth will become parents while in care. Research exploring the rates of early parenthood found that at age 21, a third of young women (Combs et al., 2018; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2016) and 22% of young men with a history in foster care experienced parenthood (Combs et al., 2018).

TAY who become parents are resilient and dedicated to their children (Aparicio, 2017; Schelbe & Geiger, 2017). Early parenthood also creates challenges and may yield two-generation stress. Young adults living in foster care tend to receive less familial support than their peers, and they face difficulties with unemployment and underemployment, finding safe, affordable housing, and avoiding hunger and homelessness (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Radey et al., 2016). These stressors are compounded when young people are parenting (Courtney & Hook, 2017; Dworsky & Gitlow, 2017).

The purpose of this brief is to provide a summary of data collected on parents transitioning to adulthood from care across all four waves of the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CaYOUTH) to inform the development of policies and programs for parenting TAY. CaYOUTH is an evaluation of the effect of California's implementation of the Fostering Connections Act on outcomes during the transition to adulthood for young people living in foster care.

The study followed youth through age 23 using in-person interviews at ages 16–17 (Wave 1), 19 (Wave 2), 21 (Wave 3), and 23 (Wave 4) and the report provides useful information for parties interested in improving youths’ transitions from foster care to adulthood. Data from California are essential for informing national efforts related to the extension of services for TAY given that a sizeable proportion of all young adults in care in the United States live in California (Courtney, forthcoming).

Methods

Youth were eligible to participate in Wave 1 of the CalYOUTH study if they were between ages 16.75 and 17.75 and had been placed in California child welfare supervised foster care for at least six months. Wave 1 interviews were conducted in 2013, after the extension of foster care had been enacted statewide. Of the 2,583 youth who were eligible a stratified sampling method yielded 880 youth for the study. However, 117 of these youth turned out to be ineligible (i.e., physically or mentally unable to participate, on runaway status for at least two months, incarcerated, out of state). From the sample of 763 eligible adolescents, a total of 727 youth completed the survey (95.3% response rate). Sample weights were created to adjust for the sampling strategy and nonresponse rates. This weighting procedure allows the participants’ responses to be representative of the population of eligible adolescents. The tables below provide both the unweighted number of respondents and weighted proportions that are representative of the population of transition-age youth in California foster care. Study approval was obtained from the University of Chicago Institutional Review Board and the California Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects. The survey was also approved by the Data Protection Committee of the California Department of Social Services.

Findings

Table 1 displays the proportion of parents among all youth in the CalYOUTH Study, the number of children born to parents in care, and the living situations for the parent and child(ren) across all ages. Wave 1 of the CalYOUTH survey, conducted in 2013, found that 6.8% of youth had a living child at age 17. The proportion steadily increased across ages. At age 23 just over two-in-five youth had one or more living children.

Table 1
Number of Parents and Living Arrangements

	AGE 17	AGE 19	AGE 21	AGE 23
	n=727	n=611	n=613	n=622
Has a living child	6.8%	20.1%	32.2%	41.7%
AMONG PARENTS, NUMBER WITH LIVING CHILDREN	n=47	n=121	n=193	n=248
1 child	93.4%	92.5%	69.6%	56.0%
2 children	4.0%	7.5%	24.7%	33.4%
3+ children	0.0%	0.0%	5.7%	10.6%
Percentage of youth with a child who is a dependent of the court	23.6%	15.3%	11.0%	9.9%
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN	n=49	n=133	n=261	n=390
Child currently lives with respondent	70.3%	80.6%	82.2%	81.0%
Child's other parent lives with respondent	8.4%	38.1%	40.1%	41.3%
Respondent has legal agreement regarding custody with other parent	20.6%	20.9%	17.4%	26.4%
NUMBER OF CHILDREN CURRENTLY LIVING WITH RESPONDENT	n=34	n=107	n=213	n=298
Other parent has a court requirement to pay child support	-	3.7%	15.9%	15.9%
NUMBER OF CHILDREN WHO DO NOT RESIDE WITH RESPONDENT	n=13	n=26	n=48	n=92
Current residence is with other biological parent	32.0%	42.8%	47.3%	53.3%

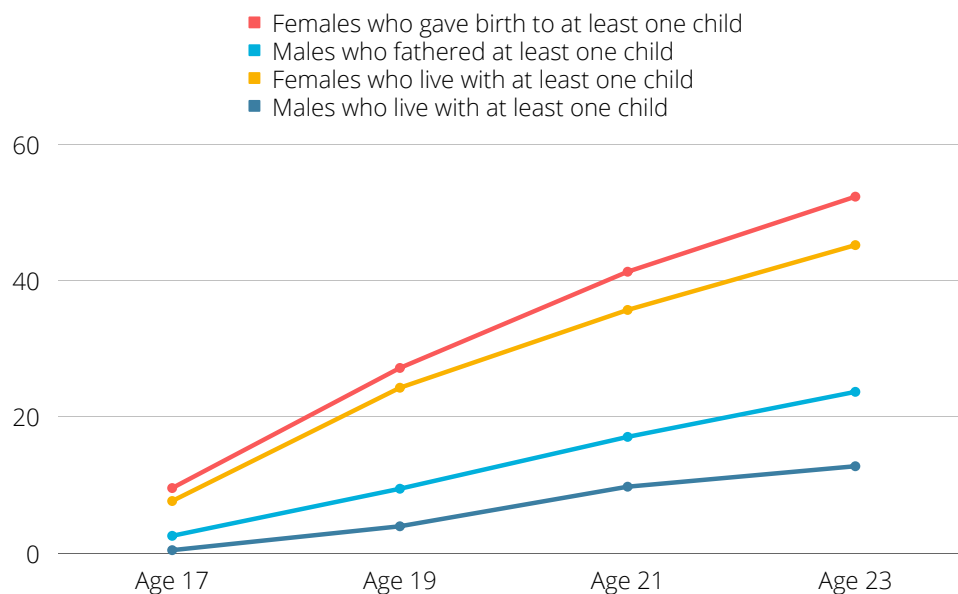
Unweighted frequencies and weighted percentages. Missing data at age 17 due to slight modification survey questions (e.g., this question was not asked in Wave 1 of the study). Not all columns sum to 100% due to missingness.

As shown in Figure 1 the increase in the number of parents was larger for mothers than fathers. Among females in the CalYOUTH study in Wave 1 (429 females), 9.6% gave birth to child at age 17 (39 mothers). Over half of the females had given birth by Wave 4, at age 23 (52.3%; 195 mothers out of 386 females). In contrast, 2.6% of males had fathered a child 17 (8 fathers out of 298 males) and about one-quarter had fathered a child at age 23 (53 fathers out of 236 males). At age 17 nearly all parents had only one child (93.4%) but at age 23 44.0% of CalYOUTH parents had more than one child (Table 1).

Figure 1 also shows the proportion of all CalYOUTH respondents who lived with at least one child. At age 17, 7.7% of females and less than one percent of males are living with at least one of their children compared to 45.2% of females and 12.8% of males, at age 23. Among youths who had a living child at age 23, 86.4% of females but only 54% of males were living with at least one of their children.

Figure 1

Parents and Living Arrangements by Gender



Across all years, a large majority of the children of CalYOUTH participants were living with their CalYOUTH participant parent. Table 1 shows that 70.3% of the children of CalYOUTH participants interviewed at age 17 lived with their parent who participated in CalYOUTH, and that was true for 81.0% of the children of those interviewed at age 23.

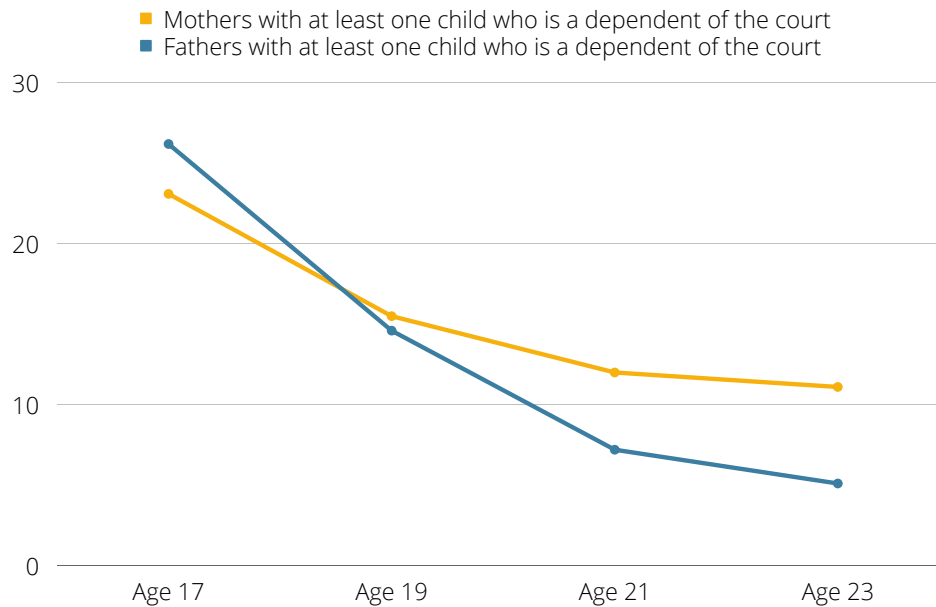
Less than 10% of children born to CalYOUTH parents interviewed at age 17 lived with both the CalYOUTH parent and the child's other parent compared with 38.1% of children born to CalYOUTH parents interviewed at age 19. The percentage of children living with both of their parents remained relatively stable from age 19 onward. The proportion of children not living with the CalYOUTH parent ranged between 18 and 27% across ages. Among children who did not live with the CalYOUTH parent the proportion of children who were living with the other biological parent steadily increased from a third at age 17 to half at age 23.

Across all waves, the proportion of children for which there was a legal custody agreement between the CalYOUTH parent and other biological parent ranged from just over one-in-six when the parents were 21 to over one-quarter when parents were 23. Child support orders were in place for fewer than one-in-twenty of the children who were living with their 19-year-old CalYOUTH parent but that increased to nearly one-sixth of the children living with a CalYOUTH parent when their parent was 21 or 23.

The likelihood that the child of a CalYOUTH parent was a dependent of the court declined over time. Nearly a quarter of youth who were parents at age 17 had at least one child who was a dependent of the court compared with a tenth of parents at age 23 (Table 1). As shown in Figure 2, the proportion of children who were dependents of the court was generally higher for mothers than fathers but the number was low across all waves. The number of mothers with at least one child who was a dependent of the court ranged from 8 mothers at age 17 to a high of 22 mothers at age 23. The number of fathers with at least one child who was a dependent of the court was very small, ranging from 2 fathers at age 17 to a maximum of 4 fathers at age 23.

Figure 2

Child Dependents of the Court for Mothers and Fathers



Limitations

The CalYOUTH study is likely an accurate representation of the state's child welfare involved TAY population because of the sampling strategy, high response rate, and weighting of survey responses (Courtney et al., 2014). However, there are limitations to the generalizability of the study. Although over 85% of youth who participated in the baseline interview also completed Wave 4 interviews, the extent to which their responses to survey items differ from those who did not participate is unknown. Participants and nonparticipants were similar across waves, but they did differ in terms of gender (participation rates were higher for females than males) and participation rates were higher for youth who were in care on their 21st birthday than for youth who had left care. Additionally, rates of parenthood may be undercounts if youth became parents during a survey wave in which they did not participate. Furthermore, information is likely to be more accurate for female parenting youth than for male parenting youth if males did not report unknown or disputed children. Statewide averages are provided, masking differences among counties. Finally, California is unique in the expansive implementation of the Fostering Connections Act and TAY in other states may be likely to access services as non-minor dependents (Courtney, forthcoming).

Summary and Implications

The current study documents the proportion of TAY that become parents in young adulthood. Key findings and implications are summarized as follows:

There was an increase in the number of parents, with females far more likely than males to become parents at each wave.

At age 17, less than one out of ten youth surveyed were parents, while at age 21 a third were parents. The proportion of youth becoming parents and the differences between males and females are consistent with previous research (Combs et al., 2018).



The large number of TAY becoming parents who may have contact with CPS means that this population may need specialized supports and should not be overlooked.

Although mothers make up the majority of parents, a non-trivial proportion of males in foster care become parents.

The CalYOUTH study is among the few to examine outcomes for fathers in foster care (Harty & Either, 2022). It is likely there are situations where parenting among young men in care goes unrecognized, such as in instances where fathers have unknown children, have disputed children, acknowledged children without paternity establishment, or do not report children in fear of child removal. Additional research is needed to understand situations where fatherhood among men in care is not identified and acknowledged.



Given the number of TAY fathers in care, it is also important to explore how existing parenting services (often geared towards mothers in care) support fathers in care, how these existing services may be tailored to be more father-friendly, or how new services can be created to be father-centered.

There was an increase in the number of children that parents had across waves.

At age 23 over a third of parents had two children and approximately a tenth had three or more children. This aligns with research showing mothers in foster care are more likely than peers to have repeat pregnancies that are closely spaced (Finigan-Carr et al., 2015; Putnam-Hornstein & King, 2014). CalYOUTH data do not provide information on whether TAY parents had planned and wanted to have children. Research suggests that some of the pregnancies were a result of sexual assault, abuse, or statutory rape (Eastman et al., 2019). Other research has previously identified that TAY wish to become parents and appreciate the opportunity to create a family like they did not experience as children (e.g., Pryce & Samuels, 2009). However, there is also evidence that while in foster care, not all youth receive sex education and may lack access to birth control or family planning services (Dworsky & DeCoursey, 2009; Finigan-Carr et al., 2018).



Considering this, efforts should be made to ensure that youth in foster care receive sex education and appropriate reproductive health services.

Parents typically live with their children.

Most CalYOUTH parents were living with their children across all waves of the study, showing that supports for parents may yield two-generation benefits—those for the parent and the child(ren). Females were far more likely to live with at least one child in comparison to males. At age 23, 86% of mothers lived with at least one child compared with 54% of fathers. Even at younger ages, TAY parents were living with their children.



This indicates there is a need to ensure that transitional housing programs provide housing and services that are appropriate for TAY parents and their children.

Among children born to CalYOUTH parents an increasing proportion live with both parents.

California law allows youth living in extended foster care to also live with the child's other parent (Senate Bill 612 of 2017). Prior research showed that mothers in foster care opted out of care once reaching adulthood in California because they wanted to live with the father of the child (Eastman et al., 2019), an option that was not available to the cohort studied. Being able to remain in foster care may increase stability and address well-documented concerns about TAY parents receiving inadequate support from family or friends and being unable to access parenting resources (Aparicio, 2017; Courtney et al., 2012; Radey et al., 2017; Schelbe & Geiger, 2017).



Young parents in the current study may have benefitted from being allowed to live with their partner while in care due to the passage of this law. Other states should also consider supporting families where one parent lives in foster care by adopting similar policies.

Given that less than half of children lived with both parents, a relatively small percentage of children living with the CalYOUTH parent received child support.

Both mothers and fathers received child support, but it was more common for fathers to pay child support than mothers. It is unknown how traditional fatherhood expectations, paternity establishment, aggressive child support enforcement, and payment of arrears may affect young fathers' ability to enroll in school and obtain employment-key requirements of extended foster care participation.



Research is needed to explore these questions and assess how nonresident fathers are involved in the lives of their children and support their children in nonfinancial ways.

The proportion of parents with at least one child who was a dependent of the court decreased across waves of the study.

While TAY parents may remain in extended foster care and receive services, their children do not necessarily become dependents of the courts. Nevertheless, when parents remain in extended foster care CPS may be indirectly involved in their children's lives due to their parents' foster care involvement. This creates a window of opportunity to address the children's needs.



Appropriate screening and referrals for parenting supports could benefit many of these young families. Home visiting programs that target TAY and youth in care may be beneficial for the parent and child (Dworsky et al., 2021).

This decline in second generation CPS involvement also aligns with research showing that among TAY parents, older parents tend to face less adversity than very young parents (Eastman & Putnam-Hornstein, 2019). Thus those who become parents at age 21 may have less second-generation CPS involvement in comparison to those who become parents when they are younger (e.g., minor parents).



These findings, once again, highlight the need for reproductive health services and sexual education to ideally delay parenting.

Conclusion

The extension of foster care through age 21 allows youth to remain in care for three additional years, and this extra time means that more young adults will become parents while in care. The findings of this report suggest that CPS should prioritize the needs of parents who remain in care as they transition to adulthood alongside the needs of their children, in the process supporting the healthy development of two generations. Investing in transition-age parents and their children has the potential to decrease second generation CPS involvement and increase well-being for the children and the parents.

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Related Publications

Courtney, M.E., Charles, P., Okpych, N. J., Napolitano, L., & Halsted, K. (2014). Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH): Conditions of foster youth at age 17. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

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