



TAY-Hub

Transition-Age Youth
Research & Evaluation Hub

FOOD INSECURITY AMONG TRANSITION-AGE YOUTH EXITING FOSTER CARE



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Significance

One in ten U.S. households experience food insecurity, which is linked to adverse health, behavioral, and social outcomes. Transition-age youth with foster care involvement (TAY) face greater risk of food insecurity in addition to other challenges during the transition to independent adulthood. Literature on food insecurity among TAY is limited and few

studies have examined TAY's food insecurity experience at different points in their lives. We also know little about the roles of public aid programs and policies (e.g., CalFresh, CalWORKS) in alleviating various resource insecurities experienced by TAY.

Study Methods

Using a representative sample of TAY from the CalYOUTH Study, the current brief answers the following questions:

- ✓ What is the prevalence of food insecurity among TAY at different ages as they transition to adulthood?
- ✓ What risk and protective factors impact the risk of experiencing food insecurity in early adulthood?

This brief summarizes relevant findings from [Park et al., 2024](#),¹ which relied on CalYOUTH survey data and administrative records. CalYOUTH is a longitudinal study that

investigated the effects of California's extended foster care (EFC) program on a range of TAY outcomes. CalYOUTH followed a representative sample of 727 young people over seven years as they exited foster care and entered early adulthood. Four interviews were conducted at ages 17, 19, 21, and 23 (see Courtney et al., 2014,² 2020³ for more information). Measures of CalYOUTH participants' food insecurity status at ages 19, 21, and 23 were created using the survey data and followed the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) classification of food

1 Peer-reviewed source article: Park, Sunggeun, Melanie Nadon, Nathanael J. Okpych, Justin S. Harty, and Mark Courtney. "Examining prevalence and predictors of food insecurity for transition-age youth transitioning out of foster care." *Journal of Public Child Welfare* (2024): 1-30. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15548732.2024.2332611>

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

3 Courtney, M. E., Okpych, N. J., Harty, J., Feng, H., Park, S., Powers, J., Nadon, M., Ditto, D. J., & Park, K. (2020). Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH): Conditions of youth at age 23. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Study Methods (cont'd.)

insecurity (Carlson, Andrews, & Bickel, 1999).⁴ Survey data were also used to measure youth characteristics identified by prior research as significant predictors of food insecurity and other related outcomes (e.g., race, gender, sexual preference, income, education, parenting status, housing payments, benefit receipt). Foster care history, such as the amount of time youth spent in Extended Foster Care (EFC) between ages 18 and 21, was captured from child welfare administrative data. Youths' earnings and the amounts of public aid received through the

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (i.e., SNAP or CalFresh) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF or CalWORKS) were captured from California's Employment Development Department (EDD) and the Electronic Benefits Transfer and Statewide Automated Reconciliation System (EBT/SARS) data. Statistical models were used to investigate associations between these predictors and the probability of being food insecure at three different ages: 19, 21, and 23.

4 Youths were classified as food insecure if they endorsed two or more of the following five items: (1) Anyone in a household skipped/cut the size of meals because of not enough money for food; (2) Did not eat for a whole day because of not enough money for food; (3) Ate less than you should because of not enough money for food; (4) Did not have enough money to buy food after food didn't last (sometimes or often), and; (5) Could not afford to eat balanced meals (sometimes or often). Carlson, S. J., Andrews, M. S., & Bickel, G. W. (1999). Measuring food insecurity and hunger in the United States: Development of a national benchmark measure and prevalence estimates. *The Journal of Nutrition*, 129(2), 510S–516S. doi:10.1093/jn/129.2.510S.



Findings

1

About 30% of study participants were food insecure at ages 19, 21, and 23.

Park and colleagues (2024) found that the prevalence of food insecurity remained steady over time, despite steady increases in youths' average annual earnings from age 19 (\$2,810) to 23 (\$8,726).

2

Staying in EFC and receiving greater amounts of public benefits reduced the risk of food insecurity during the transition into adulthood.

- a. Compared to youths who did not stay in EFC during the 12 months between ages 18 and 19, the probability of being food insecure was about 12 percentage points lower for TAY who stayed a full year (12 months) in EFC.
- b. Youths who received \$1,000 in CalFresh annual benefits were expected to have a food insecurity rate at age 19 that was three percentage points lower ($p < .05$) than did youths who did not receive CalFresh (i.e., SNAP) benefits.
- c. The probabilities of being food insecure at ages 21 and 23 were six percentage points and three percentage points lower, respectively, for each additional \$1,000 in CalWORKS (i.e., TANF) benefit.

3

Food insecurity was associated with several youth characteristics, and these associations varied based on the age of TAY.

- a. Park and colleagues (2024) found that young people who report having minority sexual preferences were more likely to report food insecurity at ages 19 (coef. = 0.20, $p < .001$) and 23 (coef. = 0.18, $p < .001$) than were their peers who identify as 100% heterosexual, but this was not the case at age 21.
- b. They also documented a significantly elevated risk of food insecurity for young people who had previously screened positive for a substance use disorder at age 19 (coef. = 0.10, $p < .05$), but this association was not statistically significant at age 21 or 23.
- c. Further, young people who had spent time in probation-supervised foster care were more likely than their peers to be food insecure at age 23 (coef. = 0.39, $p < .05$), but this was not a significant predictor of food insecurity at younger ages.

Implications

Additional research is needed to better understand food insecurity experiences among TAY.

- The persistence of food insecurity between ages 19 and 23, despite increases in youths' income, may be explained by increased housing costs paired with decreased rental assistance. Future research should include longitudinal and mixed-methods studies of systems designed to foster independence in adulthood and be conducted across an array of administrative settings.

Accessibility of public benefit programs and income support represents a promising policy lever for reducing the prevalence of food insecurity among TAY.

- Policymakers should be mindful that social service systems may be perceived and experienced by youth as paternalistic and discriminatory, particularly among those who have been directly or indirectly involved in the penal and child welfare systems.

Programs and services should reflect the ways TAY's basic needs evolve.

- Given that the predictors of food insecurity change throughout the transition into adulthood, TAY's resource and service needs may differ depending on how far along they are in their transition to adulthood. Welfare departments and practitioners should nurture collaborative relationships and networks with other service systems to address age- and developmental-stage-specific needs.

