

2021 REPORT

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and provider-level
evidence to drive
equitable education
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extended foster care

Authors: Erika Van Buren, Ph.D.,
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the 2010 passage of the California Fostering Connections to Success Act (AB 12), California extended the age limit on eligibility for foster care from 18 to 21 years, as allowed under the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008.

Subsequent research on the impact of the state's implementation of extended foster care has revealed overwhelmingly positive findings for youth self-sufficiency and well-being outcomes (Courtney, Okpych & Park, 2018), including increased employment and postsecondary enrollment rates. Nevertheless, findings have not shown a significant relationship between amount of time spent in extended foster care and youth's chances of completing two semesters in college, total number of semesters completed, or total earnings from employment.

These findings suggest there is still further to go in realizing the vision of extended care: to prepare transition-age foster youth for life-long self-sufficiency and independence. Lasting success cannot be achieved without the education and career development necessary for family-sustaining careers. Learnings from extant research suggest a need for child welfare to raise the bar in supporting transition-age foster youth to obtain meaningful success in education and employment pursuits; yet, there is still too little evidence of effective interventions and supports for this population (Courtney et. al., 2017).

First Place for Youth—a California-based service and advocacy organization providing housing, employment, education, and healthy-living services within the extended foster care system—has taken this gap in the evidence as a call to action. Through two innovative evidence-building partnerships, First Place targeted core questions to expand the existing body of knowledge

regarding the impacts of extended foster care in California:

- How do youth's characteristics correlate to the services they receive in extended foster care? AND
- Which services are most impactful in achieving key education and employment outcomes for all youth, based on particular youth characteristics and needs?

The first of these partnerships—a collaboration with Dr. Mark Courtney and Ms. Huiling Feng at the University of Chicago—leveraged administrative data from the CalYOUTH Study to explore the characteristics of foster youth who enter diverse types of extended care placements throughout California. The second partnership, with Peter York, MSSA of BCT Partners, utilized Precision Analytics to model several years of First Place's own administrative service and outcomes data to identify specific service pathways and milestones that increased youth's likelihood of exiting the organization's My First Place™ program with living-wage employment.

Overall, these investigations revealed that, at the systems level, the odds of youth's entry into each of the two most common placement types were differentiated by race, urbanicity, foster care history, disability, and parenting status. At the service-delivery level, age at foster care entry, number of foster

care placements prior to joining My First Place, and history of congregate care placement emerged as the most significant predictors of living wage attainment and determinants of individualized service pathways that supported success. Findings also highlight the importance of matching youth baseline and on-going needs to the right services and length of extended foster care stay, as well as the relevance of specific high-impact psychosocial, education, and employment goals in supporting youth success in achieving living-wage employment.

This research and policy brief provides a comprehensive picture of emergent learnings from these partnerships. It lifts up extended foster care practice and policy recommendations, making the case for renewed focus on education and employment achievement and for an individualized runway of services that responds to young people's needs and optimizes their chances for long-term success.





BACKGROUND

Young adults with histories in the foster care system face an intersection of barriers to economic self-sufficiency and well-being. Until very recently, all public responsibility for the well-being of these youth ended at age 18. While most young adults continue to rely heavily on family for emotional and material support beyond the age of majority, youth who “aged out” of foster care at 18 were thrust into adulthood with little preparation and often no support. Results of the landmark Midwest Evaluation (Courtney et al., 2007) revealed staggering disparities between former foster youth and their same age peers in the general population in housing stability, high school completion, four-year postsecondary education (PSE) enrollment, employment and earnings, and material well-being measures such as food security. In 2008, the groundbreaking federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, giving states the option of extending eligibility for federally funded foster care up to age 21. The goal of this Act was not just to prolong youth’s time in the existing foster care system, but to spur states’ innovation in designing services that reflect

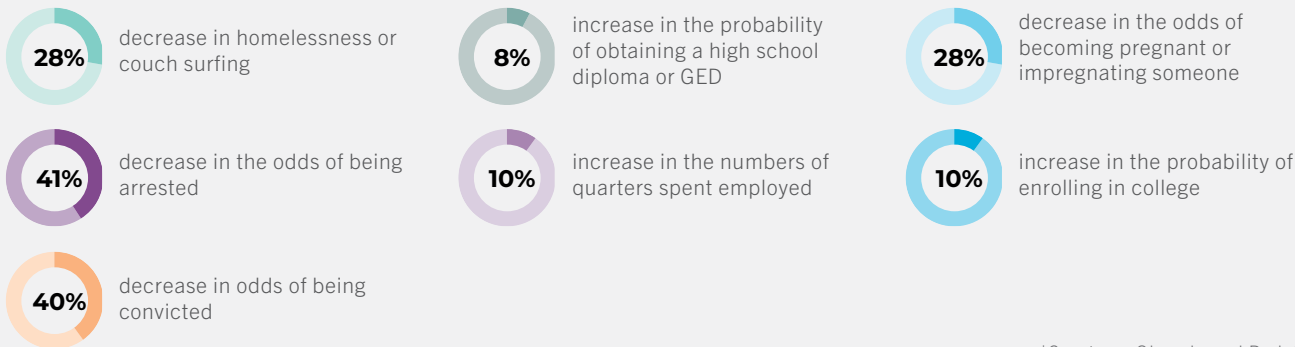
the unique needs of transition-age foster youth and prepare them for life-long self-sufficiency and independence.

California adopted federal extended foster care with the passage of the California Fostering Connections to Success Act (AB 12) in 2010 and has led the way among states by evaluating the legislation’s impact on outcomes for transition-age foster youth. The seminal CalYOUTH Study (Courtney et al., 2014; Courtney et al., 2016; Courtney et al., 2018)—the largest policy study of the impact of extended foster care in the United States—has leveraged both survey and state administrative data to investigate the longitudinal impact of extended foster care for California youth at ages 17, 19, and 21. Its findings reveal overwhelmingly positive effects on youth self-sufficiency and well-being outcomes (Courtney, Okpych & Park, 2018). Specifically, each additional year in foster care between ages 17 and 21 was associated with (See Figure 1):

FIGURE 1

EXTENDED FOSTER CARE AND YOUTH OUTCOMES

Report from CalYOUTH: Findings on the Relationship between Extended Foster Care and Youth’s Outcomes at Age 21*



*Courtney, Okpych, and Park (2018)

BACKGROUND

However, the study also revealed substantial room for growth in education and employment outcomes. While California's implementation of extended foster care led to increased rates of employment and PSE enrollment, the amount of time spent in the program was not significantly related to a youth's chances of persisting through two semesters in college, nor the total number of semesters youth completed. Likewise, they found no statistically significant relationship between time spent in extended care and total employment earnings.

The vision of extended care — to prepare transition-age foster youth for life-long self-sufficiency and independence — cannot be fulfilled without raising the bar to support transition-age foster youth success in the meaningful education and career development necessary for family-sustaining careers. Yet, there remains little evidence of the interventions and supports most effective in improving these outcomes among transition-age foster youth (Courtney et. al., 2017). First Place for Youth views this research gap as a call to action. To expand the existing body of knowledge on the impacts of extended foster care in California and to support meaningful, equitable economic self-sufficiency outcomes among its young people, First Place

entered into two innovative evidence-building partnerships targeting core questions at both the systems and service-delivery levels:

- How do youth's characteristics correlate to the services they receive in extended foster care? AND
- Which services are most impactful in achieving key education and employment outcomes for all youth, based on particular youth characteristics and needs?

Section one of this research brief summarizes emergent learnings from these partnerships. Section two provides practice and policy recommendations that support a renewed focus on education and employment achievement within extended foster care and an individualized runway of services that responds to young people's needs and optimizes their chances for long-term success.





EMERGENT LEARNINGS FROM THE CALYOUTH PARTNERSHIP

First Place partnered with Dr. Mark Courtney, Principal Investigator of the CalYOUTH Study, and Ms. Huiling Feng—both of the University of Chicago—to support the design and investigation of key policy questions regarding characteristics of youth entering various placement types within California’s extended foster care system. A resultant memo released by CalYOUTH/University of Chicago revealed that the great majority of youth spent most of their extended foster care time in either a Supervised Independent Living Placement (59%), or a Transitional Housing Placement (18%) (Feng, Courtney & Okpych, 2020).

Utilizing survey and state-level administrative data sources, Feng and colleagues investigated significant predictors of entry into these two predominant placement types (Feng, Courtney & Okpych, 2020). Their analysis revealed that African-American youth were significantly (88%) more likely to stay in a THP-NMD than White youth. In addition, youth residing in large urban counties were 58% less likely to reside in a THP-NMD compared to youth in rural counties—a disparity particularly pronounced in Los Angeles County, where youth were 80% less likely to stay in a THP-NMD placement.

Overall, findings suggested youth with a greater need for supportive services were more likely to be placed in a THP-NMD program. In particular, youth who had experienced congregate care (i.e., group home or residential treatment) by age 18 and youth who experienced a higher number of placement changes were more likely to stay in THP-NMD. These historical variables may serve as a proxy for youth with greater needs entering THP-NMD placements at higher rates. Additionally, the odds of residing in THP-NMDs compared to SILPs were found to be 26% higher for youth who had a vision or hearing disability and 44% higher for youth who had medical conditions requiring special care. Finally, youth who had children by age 17 were about 2.7 times more likely to reside in a THP-NMD than youth who had no children.

(Data Visualized in Figure 2).

EXTENDED FOSTER CARE PLACEMENT TYPES IN CALIFORNIA

When California opted into federal extended foster care via AB 12, it created two new placement options for foster youth ages 18–21: the Supervised Independent Living Placement (SILP) and the Transitional Housing Placement for Non-Minor Dependents (THP-NMD).

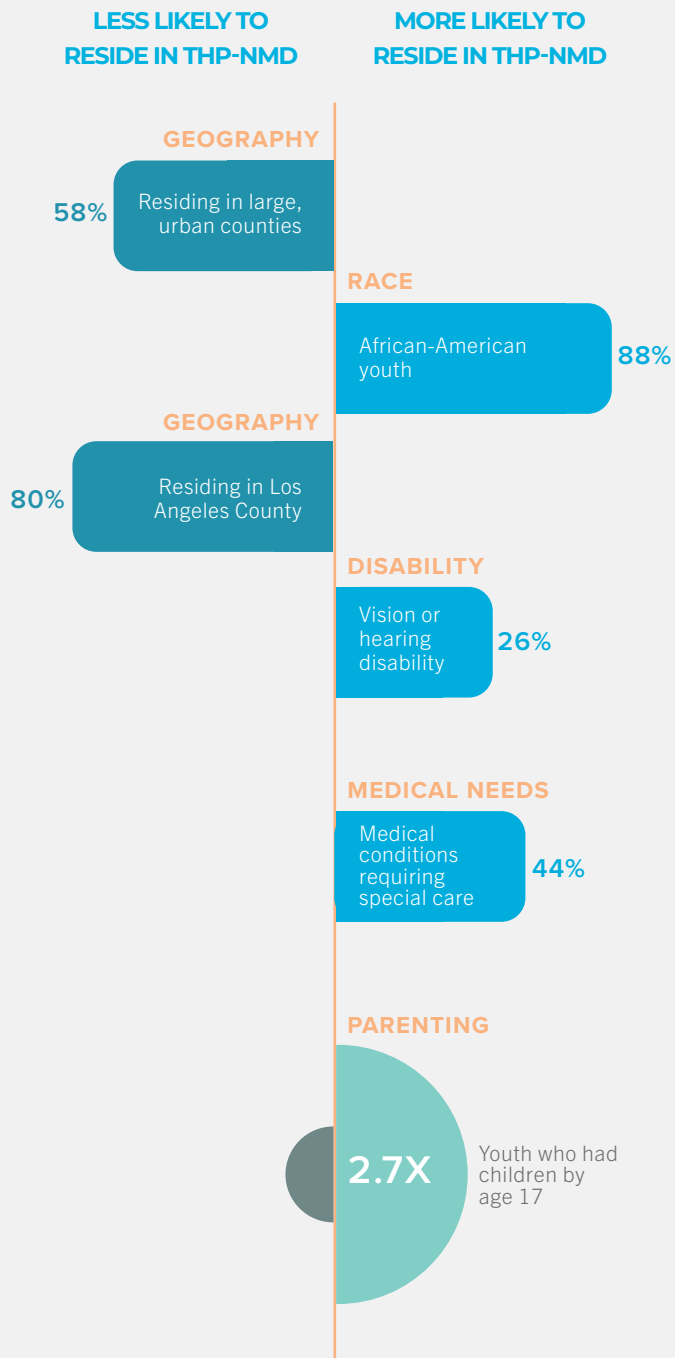
Intended for youth who are “high functioning” and able to live independently, SILPs provide youth a monthly stipend to supplement the costs of an approved rental unit or other housing situation, with minimal support or supervision. THP-NMD is designed to be a more service-intensive placement type that provides safety and support for youth with greater developmental or self-sufficiency needs. Operated by state-licensed social service agencies, THP-NMD allows youth the opportunity to live semi-independently, primarily in scattered-site housing, while receiving developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed services and supports to facilitate skill building and a successful transition to independence.

EMERGENT LEARNINGS FROM THE CALYOUTH PARTNERSHIP

FIGURE 2

CHARACTERISTIC-LINKED PLACEMENT DISCREPANCIES

Youth characteristics and predominant placement type between age 18 and 21



Feng, Courtney, and Okpych 2020

In summary, findings from the CalYOUTH investigation suggest that differences by race, urbanicity, foster care history, disability, and parenting status distinguished the odds of a youth entering a THP-NMD versus a SILP placement. Future exploration is needed to understand the underlying causes for disproportionate placement of African-American youth in THP-NMD and must explicitly consider the equity implications and possibility of disparate impacts based on race. Still, this research provides a critical first step in understanding whether the extended foster care system is appropriately matching young people to services within the continuum of placements. Overall, findings suggest placements are utilized as intended, with youth whose characteristics indicate greater need for services being placed in the more service-rich THP-NMD. Still, characteristics between youth in SILPs and THP-NMD were not found to differ starkly, suggesting a need to improve extended foster care placement decisions to better reflect individual youth characteristics, needs, and capacity for independent living.

Future analyses from this partnership will explore the impact of placement type on education and employment outcomes and undesirable program discharge. First Place will also work with CalYOUTH to provide “Outcome Snapshots,” provider-level data footprints that will enable extended foster care agencies to better understand the population they serve and their relative performance in helping youth achieve outcomes. The goal is to empower providers to use the data to drive program improvements and policy advocacy.



LEVERAGING DATA SCIENCE TO INDIVIDUALIZE EXTENDED FOSTER CARE SERVICES: THE YOUTH SUCCESS ROADMAP TOOL

The ultimate goal of First Place for Youth's partnership with CalYOUTH is to better understand which placement types drive education and employment outcomes across the extended foster care system. In a parallel process, First Place sought to understand which particular goals and services within the My First Place™ (MFP) program most impact youth's trajectory towards economic self-sufficiency, while accounting for the diverse histories, needs, and strengths of youth served. As an organization deeply committed to using data to drive results, First Place is uniquely poised to explore this question and elevate learnings statewide using its own data.

This innovative evidence-building partnership, undertaken with Peter York, MSSA and his team at BCT Partners, resulted in a decision-support tool called the Youth Success Roadmap Tool. The Roadmap Tool uses data science and quasi-experimental techniques called Precision Analytics to generate individualized, interactive roadmaps of recommended services and milestones for each youth participant. The Tool enables staff to work smarter, not harder, in directing their conversations, interventions, and areas of focus in collaboration with the young people they serve to optimize the likelihood of exiting MFP with living-wage employment. First Place's primary goal in developing the Roadmap Tool is to empower staff to individualize and adapt services in real time to meet youth where they are.

This process began from the premise that a one-size-fits-all approach to service delivery will perpetuate inequities for youth with diverse starting points, experiences, and needs. An equity framework was utilized to analyze factors that have differentially contributed to attainment of living-wage jobs for program participants. Longitudinal trends in employment and earnings were reviewed in the aggregate, as well as

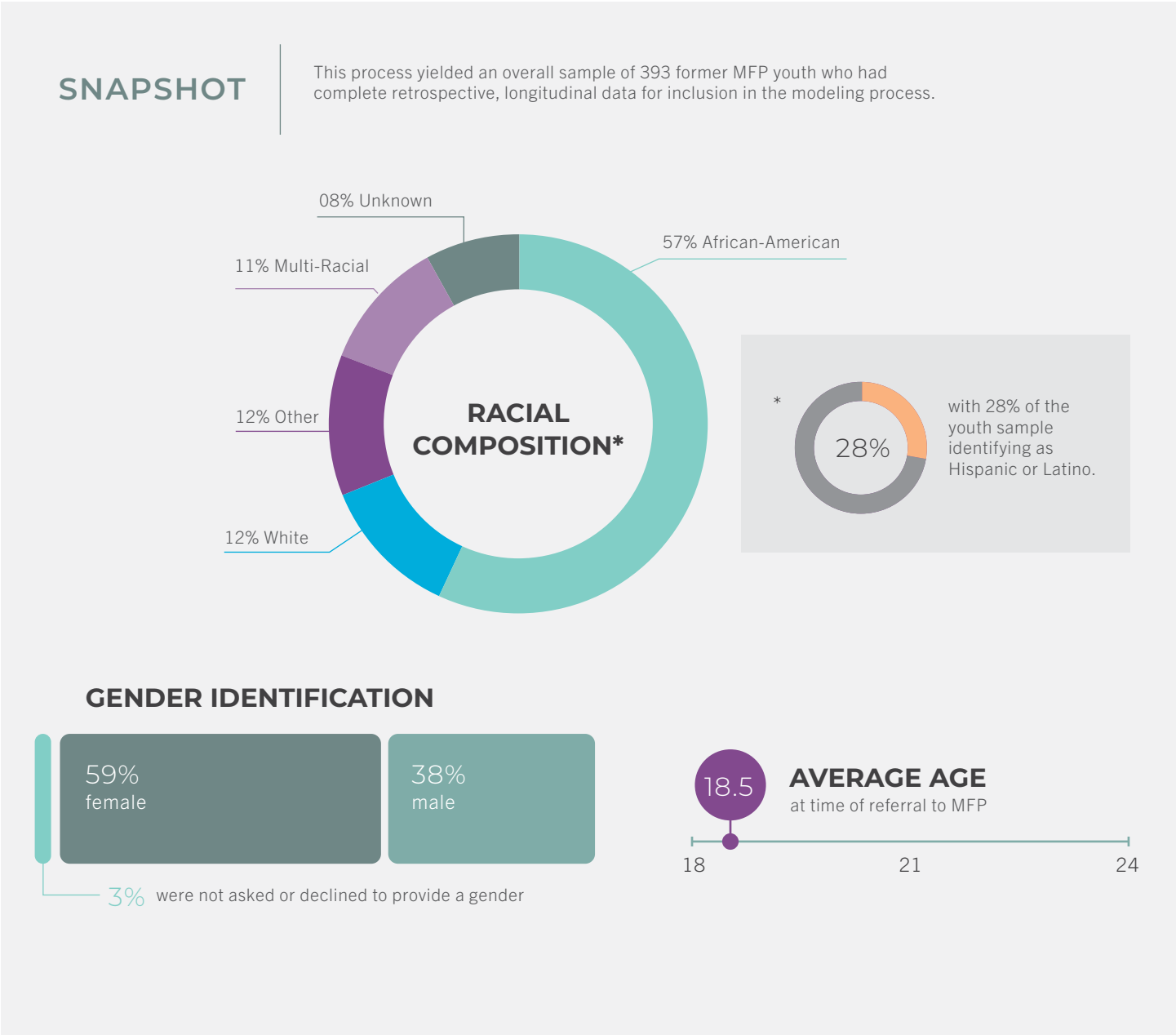
disaggregated by race. The work is centered in the belief that using evidence to appropriately match and adapt services to youth needs and preferences will result in more efficient use of time and resources within systems and organizations and, most importantly, greater rates of success in education and employment outcomes. By intentionally setting living-wage employment as the targeted result, First Place hopes to raise expectations for success across the extended foster care system while elevating knowledge about what is required to achieve meaningful education and employment outcomes.

The Precision Analytics method leverages subject-matter experts, existing data, and machine learning algorithms to build reliable assessment, evaluation, and decision-making tools. Machine learning algorithms are trained to conduct quasi-experimental observational studies using historical data and to build predictive, prescriptive, and evaluative models that determine which services and interventions contribute to a desired outcome for each segment of a target population.

LEVERAGING DATA SCIENCE TO INDIVIDUALIZE EXTENDED FOSTER CARE SERVICES: THE YOUTH SUCCESS ROADMAP TOOL

This particular study utilized four years of historical MFP administrative data. Subject-matter experts from First Place for Youth worked with BCT data scientists to train machine learning algorithms to find naturally occurring experiments¹ within the organization’s historical data and to determine what combination of services implemented with similar youth in the past (e.g., face-to-face care management, long-term

planning toward employment goals, etc.) were most successful in increasing a youth’s likelihood of exiting program with living-wage employment. Next, subject-matter experts and BCT researchers collaborated to produce automated reports and decision-support tools for staff. See Appendix A for a more detailed explanation of the modeling process.



1. Natural experiments are generally defined as empirical or observational studies that involve “events not under the control of a researcher that divides a population into exposed and unexposed groups” when studying the effectiveness of an intervention (Craig, Katikireddi, Leyland & Popham, 2017).



KEY STAGES TOWARDS LIVING WAGE EMPLOYMENT



STAGE 1

Services and goals help youth strengthen their assets and “get ready” to engage in activities that will lead to a living wage employment.



STAGE 2

Services and goals apply “what works” for each youth in achieving living wage jobs by program exit.

YOUTH EXIT WITH LIVING WAGE EMPLOYMENT



Findings garnered from the modeling process were consistent with results from the CalYOUTH partnership. Namely, foster care history matters a great deal in staging supports that position youth for success in extended foster care. The most significant variables in predicting a youth’s likelihood of earning 80% or greater of hourly living wage were: age at entry into foster care, number of foster care placements prior to entering MFP, and placement in one or more congregate care settings.

The Precision Analytics modeling process identified 10 distinct groups of MFP participants with different likelihoods of obtaining living-wage employment. In each group, young people progress through two stages on their way to the target of living wage.

Stage 1: Entry & Stabilization.

Program staff use services and goals that stabilize youth and prepare them for participation in the education and employment activities that increase their likelihood for success. These include strategies for engaging youth and their adult supporters, as well as activities and milestones that help meet basic and well-being related needs.

Stage 2: Pathway to Living Wage.

After significant progress is made in Stage 1, another set of individualized services and goals is provided to help each participant engage in what works on the trajectory to obtaining living-wage employment by program exit.

It is important to note that while two youth may fall within the same group based on their foster care history and other variables of significance, the recommended services and goals will differ based on stage and the youth’s individual rate of completion of services and goals.



EFFECTIVE SERVICES AND GOALS FOR YOUTH IN EXTENDED FOSTER CARE

The modeling process for the Youth Success Roadmap Tool revealed certain interdependent goals and instrumental services as high-impact levers of change across all young people served. The following goals and services highlight the interaction between economic self-sufficiency metrics and well-being measures, which can either enhance or derail progress for youth as they navigate transitions and milestones along the road to independence.

High-Impact Goals

High-impact goals reflect the in-program milestones most predictive of a youth's likelihood of achieving living-wage employment by program exit. These goals accounted for 70% of variability.

In other words, taken together, movement on these particular goals explained 70% of the positive or negative changes observed over time in living wage for youth in the sample.

Career progress and outcomes.

A youth's ability to identify and make progress toward completion of vocational training and ultimately obtain a lower level or industry recognized certificate in a selected career field was the biggest in-program predictor of living-wage employment across all youth.

Good tenancy and household and neighborhood safety.

The second biggest predictor of living wage was the extent to which a youth developed the skills to manage a household and practice good tenancy, including cleanliness, consistent payment of utilities, household safety practices, and positive roommate relations. This composite variable included whether the youth lived with someone exhibiting violent behavior or felt unsafe in the community. Commonly cited within First Place as a significant factor associated with program tenure, the ability to exhibit good tenancy skills, manage roommate relations, and experience a sense of personal safety facilitates program stability and engagement.

Intimate partner relationships.

The third biggest predictor of living wage was a set of variables related to a youth's skills and abilities in using and receiving positive communication strategies with intimate partners and negotiating conflict in a prosocial manner. It also includes whether a youth described themselves as being in an abusive or violent intimate relationship.

Public assistance support.

The receipt of public benefits (food stamps, SSI/SSDI, and CalWorks) was a highly significant predictor, contributing to a greater likelihood of earning living wage at exit. Note that the receipt of public assistance was assessed separately from earned income from employment.

Mental well-being and substance use.

This set of variables reflected self-reported frequency of use of drugs and alcohol; the experience of problems with work, school, or social settings due to mental health challenges and/or substance use; and the skill and will to access available resources and supports.

Employment preparation, readiness, and barriers.

This composite reflected the ability to address underlying causes of prior job disruption or loss and barriers to employment, including possession of a criminal record, lack of childcare or transportation, lack of work experience, and substance use. Quitting or being fired from a recent job reflected a significant need that, if addressed, helped young people progress toward living-wage employment.

EFFECTIVE SERVICES AND GOALS FOR YOUTH IN EXTENDED FOSTER CARE

Self-efficacy and grit.

This composite reflects the extent to which young people see themselves as capable of succeeding in their goals and having agency and control over their state of motivation, behavior, and environment. This includes the demonstration of passion and persistence in pursuit of long-term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007).

Long-term planning and goal setting for education and employment.

Not surprisingly, the ability to intentionally address education and employment goals in the action-planning and implementation process, and to ultimately complete these goals, accounted for significant predictive value within the model. In the realm of education, the level of attainment young people envisioned for themselves was also predictive.

LIVING EXAMPLE

The largest of the 10 participant groups served in My First Place, representing 35% of the total youth within the sample, entered foster care between 7 and 15 years of age, had a history of two to 11 foster home placements, and yet had never spent time in a congregate care setting.

AT STAGE ONE

THE THREE MOST IMPACTFUL GOALS POSITIONING FOR STAGE 2

- Making progress in securing transportation
- Increasing personal sense of grit [e.g. passion and perseverance toward long-term goals]
- Addressing mental health and substance use challenges

AT STAGE TWO

THE THREE MOST IMPACTFUL GOALS

- Continued focus on transportation issues
- Progress in physical health indicators
- Employment milestones (from placement in entry-level jobs to career-related jobs)

AT STAGE ONE

THE THREE MOST POWERFUL SERVICE TYPES THAT HELPED ACHIEVE GOALS

- Peer-to-peer activities
- Care coordination with other providers or supporters
- Front-loading more direct-service time with the Youth Advocate (care manager)

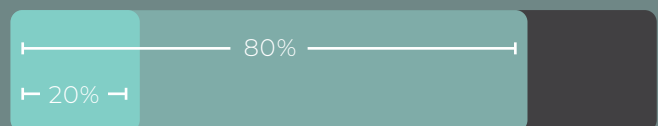
AT STAGE TWO

THE THREE MOST POWERFUL SERVICE TYPES

- Addressing mental health and well-being in the action plan
- Providing more regular meetings
- Increased overall contacts with both the Employment and Education Specialist and the Youth Advocate.

1. Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007

When these youth got what works, their chances of achieving 80% or more of the living wage standard for their county of residence increased from 20% to 80%.



EFFECTIVE SERVICES AND GOALS FOR YOUTH IN EXTENDED FOSTER CARE

High-Impact Services

High-impact services are those aspects of program delivery found to contribute most to a youth's ability to achieve high-impact goals and increase their chances of exiting My First Place with a living wage. While the modeling process identified 23 different areas of service delivery that were impactful for individual youth and participant groupings, the following areas emerged as the most predictive overall across these groups, accounting for 34% of variability in the prediction of goals attained in program.

Level of engagement and time spent with care manager.

The level of engagement participants had with their care manager on a monthly basis, as reported by the care manager, was the most impactful dimension of service delivery in predicting young people's ability to accomplish goals that would support achievement of living wage. Other highly impactful engagement predictors were actual time spent with the care manager and time invested with youth in a direct or indirect capacity by the care manager.

Length of stay.

MFP tenure was the second biggest service-level predictor of goal attainment. The modeling revealed that young people can spend too much time in program—resulting in diminishing returns—or too little time to gain effective traction. Getting the right amount of time for their needs was most important. The continuum of education and employment needs has implications for the construction of the runway of services for each youth. One youth may need more than two years of support based on their level of educational attainment, prior work experience, and psychosocial needs, while another may need only one year to achieve readiness for transition. The modeling process provided recommendations that reflect an individualized range of program time necessary to optimize a youth's ability to achieve living-wage employment. On average, the ideal length of stay was 67 weeks, while the upper range was about five and a half years (275 weeks).

Level of engagement with Employment and Education Specialist.

MFP is an employment and education program that provides housing as a stable foundation. Therefore, the model provides youth with dedicated staff assigned to ensure they are able to progress in education and pursue a career path of their choosing that fits within their interests and goals. Similar to the results discovered for care managers, the level of engagement with the assigned Employment and Education Specialist was significant in the prediction of goal attainment.

Prioritizing parenting goals in service planning and implementation.

Over the past four years, 21% of MFP participants have been parents. In *More Than Me* (Van Buren, Pearn, Leer, Jones, & Cobbs, 2015), First Place identified specific challenges that must be addressed to support young people in their role as parents and remove education and employment barriers unique to this group. This research also examined the intrinsic motivation and drive exhibited by parenting youth, who often view program success as a means of supporting their children. Likewise, the modeling process elevated the importance of systematically prioritizing parenting goals as an anchor for other goal attainment. This continuous prioritization in action planning accounted for significant variability in living wage attainment for parenting youth.

Prioritizing good tenancy and household management goals.

Just as good tenancy and household maintenance were found to be critical goals toward attainment of living wage, so too was the ability to (1) identify the need for intervention in these areas when housing was at risk and (2) address them in a timely way in service planning and implementation.



SUMMARY OF RESULTS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY REFORM

Development of the Youth Success Roadmap Tool revealed certain overarching lessons with broad applicability, including key drivers of self-sufficiency as measured by achievement of living-wage employment. These lessons have important implications for practice and policy-making that support youth to thrive in their lives after foster care.

RECOMMENDATION ONE

Renewed Education-to-Employment Focus and Investments in Extended Foster Care

Many of the top drivers of self-sufficiency as expressed by attainment of living wage are goals and services related to career exploration, preparedness, and progress, as well as the removal of common barriers to education and employment. To advance outcomes system-wide, the extended foster care system must renew its focus on education, employment, and earnings. Below is a suggested Policy & Practice Agenda to compel system focus on and investment in stronger self-sufficiency outcomes for transition-age foster youth:

POLICY

Provide system-wide access to education and employment data.

Development of the Youth Success Roadmap Tool demonstrates the value of using data to drive equitable program improvements. Creating better access to administrative data among system stakeholders, including providers, will (1) democratize data use at all levels to understand trends in economic self-sufficiency outcomes, (2) support continuous program improvement efforts, and (3) drive local advocacy.

Access to data can be enhanced by leveraging existing data collaboratives throughout the state and developing system interoperability capacity or data-sharing agreements among administrative data hubs—like the Education and

Employment Development Agency and the National Student Clearinghouse—enabling them to provide regular education and employment data back to system stakeholders.

POLICY

Address common legal and resource barriers to employment.

A key predictor of living wage is the absence or presence of certain common barriers to employment, suggesting a need for proactive policy interventions to address barriers disproportionately facing system-involved youth, including

- increasing access to childcare and transportation options;
- ensuring timely access to and attainment of identification documents necessary to enter the workforce (e.g., driver’s license or State ID);
- ending criminalization of foster youth by minimizing interaction with police and criminal justice systems;
- restricting public access to juvenile criminal records and increasing youth access to legal services that improve employment odds (e.g., record sealing and expungement); and
- removing unnecessary or onerous background check mandates for occupational licensing in key growth industries, such as healthcare.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY REFORM

POLICY

Strengthen and fund education and employment service requirements for THP-NMD programs.

THP-NMD programs must be responsible for supporting young people in systemic exploration and identification of a career path, long-term planning and goal setting, removal of individual barriers, ongoing support, and monitoring toward progress. More so than PSE enrollment and job placement, provider impact should be measured through outcomes that elevate (1) PSE persistence and progression and (2) job retention and growth.

Achieving lasting outcomes will require dedicated funding for education and employment services within extended foster care, including specialty staff. Over time, placement rates must account for the cost of these services. Providers should consider alternative funding, such as braiding WIOA funding with THP-NMD placements to deepen education-to-employment programming, or pursuing partnerships to increase linkages with local WIOA providers.

POLICY

Remove barriers to WIOA for foster youth.

As the primary funding source for career readiness for economically disadvantaged youth, WIOA supports workforce training, vocational coaching, skill development, and apprenticeship and internship programs designed to put vulnerable youth on a path to long-term career success. However, barriers in implementation and interpretation of its rules may prevent transition-age foster youth from accessing programming.

One prominent barrier is the “out-of-school youth” (OSY) requirement, which directs at least 75% of all WIOA Youth Program funds to youth who are entirely disconnected from the education system. This is at odds with extended foster care’s requirement that youth be employed or enrolled in school in order to access housing and services. Policy changes are needed to remedy this and other technical barriers that make WIOA programming incompatible with extended foster care participation.

POLICY

Remove barriers to financial aid for high-quality, short-term PSE programs.

In today’s economy, over half of all jobs are “middle-skill,” requiring more than a high school diploma but not a college degree. Most of these jobs are at or above living wage. Within the PSE system, students can access the training necessary to compete for and secure these jobs, including programs that award industry-recognized credentials, which may be earned in less time than a traditional degree.

As demand for non-traditional PSE grows, some financial aid programs remain effectively off limits for youth pursuing such tracks. For instance, most federal financial aid available through the Higher Education Act (HEA), including needs-based Pell Grants, is available only for programs requiring at least 600 hours of instruction over 15 weeks or more, thus excluding short-term occupational training. These restrictions create a disincentive for foster youth, who typically rely on financial aid due to a lack of outside financial support.

POLICY

Ensure that former foster youth are a target population in COVID-19 recovery.

Transition-age foster youth are particularly vulnerable to the detrimental impacts of the economic crisis brought on by COVID-19. Around half of all MFP youth who were working before the COVID-19 crisis hit were furloughed or had their hours cut significantly within the first three months of the pandemic. In a national poll of 613 young adults (ages 18-24) currently or formerly in foster care, nearly 65% of respondents who had been employed before the pandemic reported layoffs, lost gig work, or reductions in hours (Greenson, Jaffee, Wasch, & Gyourko, 2020). For youth without familial support to fall back on, unexpected loss of income can represent the razor’s edge of imminent homelessness and food insecurity. Transition-age foster youth must be a target population in any policies passed to mitigate impacts of COVID-19 or stimulate economic recovery.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY REFORM

PRACTICE

Well-being as a driver of education and employment goals.

Not all of the highest predictors of success in obtaining living-wage employment specifically relate to education and employment services. Modeling revealed that supports to help youth develop communication and conflict navigation skills, tap into their sense of self-efficacy, pursue parenting goals, and access mental health supports were all highly predictive of their likelihood of reaching living wage. These findings underscore the complex relationship between indicators of personal well-being and economic self-sufficiency.

There is little research exploring the on-ramp of supports that act as catalyst for foster youth's engagement in education- and employment-related pursuits. However, this modeling identified factors specific to well-being that stand out as key milestones on the road to education and employment success. Extended foster care programs should create an environment that is caring and supportive and offers youth the chance to develop positive relationships and connection with adults, peers, and the larger community. Programing should recognize, utilize, and enhance young people's strengths, with particular focus on the following well-being skills:

- Good tenancy and household management skills, including development of community safety practices and positive conflict resolution skills.
- Positive self-appraisals and cognitions, including engaging in activities that build internal assets and promote development of grit and self-efficacy.
- Development of social capital, including involving domestic partners and other natural supporters as team members and building youth networks through personal and professional mentoring.
- Systematic integration of mental health and substance use interventions through strategic partnerships or in-house services, including motivational interviewing and harm reduction practices.
- Quicker and clearer pathways to employment by helping youth remove common barriers (e.g. childcare, transportation, criminal records) at the front door and as part of short and long-term planning.

PRACTICE

Implement postsecondary education (PSE) readiness coaching.

In efforts to promote outcomes, extended foster care stakeholders have emphasized PSE enrollment, sometimes at the detriment of real youth progress. Wave 3 of the CalYOUTH Study found that while each additional year in extended care was associated with a 10-11% increase in the probability of enrolling in college, there was no significant impact on persistence or completion (Courtney, Okpych & Park, 2018). Youth who begin PSE before they have a clear understanding of the options, expectations, or their own motivations and goals face unintended negative consequences, like loss of financial aid eligibility, high dropout and incompleteness rates, and a sense of defeat that makes PSE seem undesirable or out of reach.

Organizations and agencies serving transition-age foster youth, including county child welfare agencies and THP-NMD programs, should adopt a program strategy that includes PSE readiness coaching to help youth navigate the full range of PSE options—including non-traditional tracks—and frames education as a pathway to family-sustaining careers. In addition, extended foster care practitioners should have a deep understanding of Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programs, which offer additional on-ramps to living-wage jobs, including vocational training, apprenticeships, and industry recognized certificates.



SUMMARY OF RESULTS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY REFORM

Together, the findings from the CalYOUTH partnership and the Youth Success Roadmap Tool modeling process highlight the need for youth to receive appropriate individualized supports along the extended foster care continuum, beginning with placement and leading to a stable exit and a living-wage career track. The recent CalYOUTH investigation suggests room to improve placement decisions within extended foster care to better reflect individual youth characteristics, needs, and capacity for independent living (Feng, Courtney & Okpych, 2020). Meanwhile, modeling of the Roadmap Tool revealed important data about the length of stay necessary to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Although youth need 67 weeks on average, the upper range of youth need is about five and a half years (275 weeks).

Extended foster care is time limited; youth have just three years

to benefit from its opportunities. Too often, young adults are approved for a SILP despite not yet possessing the life skills to succeed in this highly independent placement type. They then find themselves overwhelmed, unstably housed, or even homeless. Some of these youth may make their way to a THP-NMD program eventually, but they lose crucial time. Youth who enter THP-NMD with less than a year of eligibility remaining are deprived of accessing the full benefits of the program. Given what is now known about the length of time most advantageous to achieving self-sufficiency outcomes, it is imperative for the system to support youth in placement decisions that will allow them to use their limited time to its full effect. Below is a corresponding Policy and Practice agenda to further the efficacy of system-driven extended foster care placements:

RECOMMENDATION TWO

Individualize Placement Decisions and Prolong the Extended Foster Care Service Runway

POLICY

Increase THP-NMD capacity.

Extended foster care is an entitlement program, which means placement in THP-NMD should be available to all youth who need it. Yet, in the current system, youth often linger on waitlists due to capacity limits. As revealed in the CalYOUTH memo, access to THP-NMD is not equitable across geographies, with youth residing in urban counties 58% less likely to reside in THP-NMD compared to youth in rural counties. In Los Angeles, youth were 80% less likely to access THP-NMD (Feng, Courtney & Okpych, 2020), a disparity that may be attributable to the high cost of living and

rental housing in urban areas, which has not historically been accounted for in the THP-NMD rate.

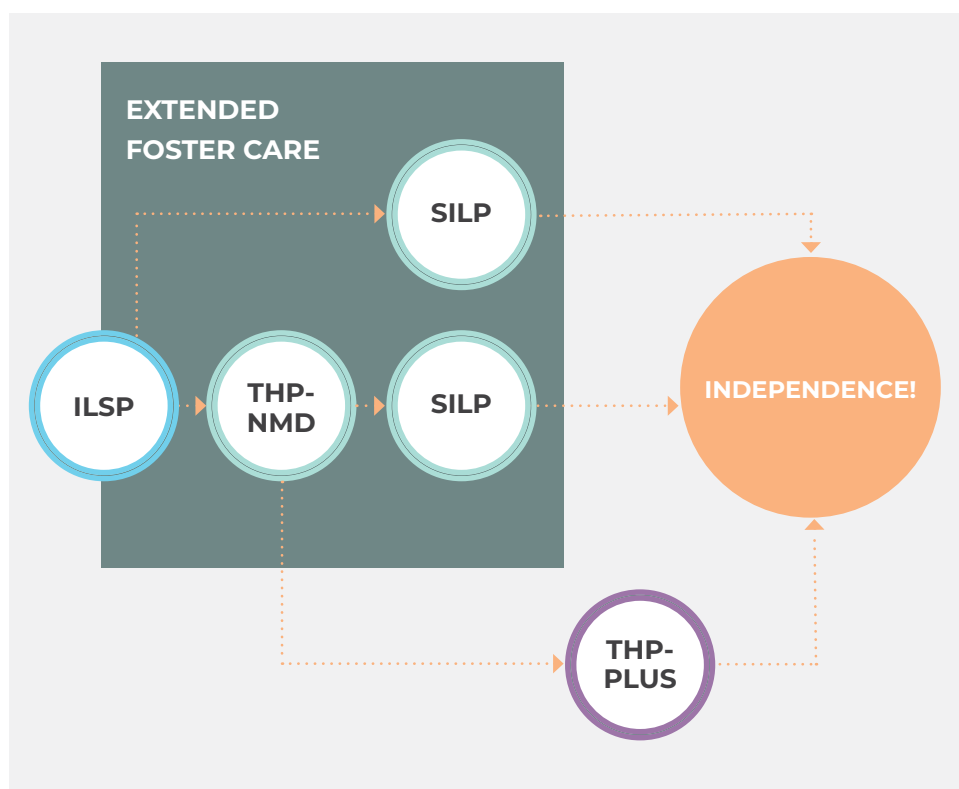
Any attempt to treat THP-NMD as a default placement could exacerbate existing capacity issues. Various methods must be pursued to ensure adequate housing supply in safe neighborhoods, as the Roadmap Tool modeling process revealed a youth’s sense of safety to be a significant driver of stability and success. Methods for increasing THP-NMD capacity and neighborhood safety include (1) adjusting the provider rate to reflect regional costs of housing and service delivery, (2) incentivizing landlords to rent units to THP-NMD providers, and (3) encouraging investment in real property for use as THP-NMD housing.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY REFORM

POLICY AND PRACTICE

Optimize the existing continuum of extended foster care placements and aftercare programs.

To promote equitable outcomes and ensure youth with the greatest need access available services, the system should move away from a “heads in beds” approach to placement and toward a holistic, system-level approach that ensures impactful utilization of existing resources to move youth toward greater levels of independence. This can be achieved through a combination of practice and policy efforts, including:



Leverage the Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) as a strategic part of the continuum of care.

ILSP is federally funded and available to current and former foster youth ages 16-21. In California, counties administer ILSP and have broad flexibility in program services and delivery. Discrepancies between counties have led many advocates to call for reform. In a well-functioning system, ILSP should act as an on-ramp to extended foster care placement by (1) building long-term relationships between youth and program staff, (2) educating youth on their options after traditional foster care, and (3) preparing youth for the appropriate placement setting by supporting independent living skills development and gains toward education and employment milestones.

Encourage youth toward greater levels of independence.

As they progress through extended foster care and make strides toward their education and employment goals, youth who have reached key milestones and who feel ready to leave THP-NMD should be encouraged and supported in transitioning safely into SILPs. This promotes positive youth development, while also freeing up resources for youth who need the deeper services offered by THP-NMD. THP-NMD programs should maintain an open-door policy for youth who voluntarily transition to SILP.

Prioritize THP-Plus slots for youth with highest need.

The upper bound for time needed to achieve living wage as identified by the Roadmap Tool is about five and a half years (275 weeks). For youth at the end of extended foster care eligibility who remain unprepared for full independence, THP-Plus can prolong the runway of services. The system must move toward an equitable placement process. Assessment of need should consider housing stability, well-being, and progress toward education and employment goals.

Transition to lighter-touch services as youth exit out of care.

Counties and providers should prolong the runway of care by leveraging public funding sources outside the child welfare system to provide lighter-touch services and supports to youth who are ready to leave THP-NMD or THP-Plus, but not yet ready for full independence.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY REFORM

POLICY AND PRACTICE

Ensure needs-based placement decisions.

Child welfare departments must improve their capacity to support youth in accessing placement settings that will best meet their needs. This may involve housing navigation services so older foster youth understand their placement options, as well as strengthening readiness assessments used to gauge a youth's capacity for independent living. As SILPs cover a wide range of living situations necessitating varying levels of independence, it is difficult to draw categorical conclusions about SILP readiness. Nevertheless, it is imperative that SILPs not be used as a "default" setting. While honoring youth choice, child welfare workers should operate from the perspective that a service-rich THP-NMD is the default placement, and SILPs should only be utilized when workers are confident in the youth's capacity to live independently. Where possible, departments should implement robust, data-driven tools to better understand youth needs and preparedness for various placement types.

POLICY

Increase THP-PLUS capacity.

Similar to THP-NMD, California's Transitional Housing Program Plus (THP-Plus) provides housing and comprehensive support services to former foster youth up to age 24 or 25. Prior to extended foster care, THP-Plus primarily served youth as they aged out of traditional foster care at age 18. Since passage of AB12, THP-Plus has been leveraged to prolong the runway of services for youth after exiting extended foster care, and it has proven to be a powerful tool in preventing youth homelessness and increasing self-sufficiency outcomes. Over the last decade, funding for THP-Plus has remained more or less stagnant despite increasing costs and demand, and availability of this county-optional, county-administered program varies drastically. As a result, hundreds of young adults sit on THP-Plus waitlists each year. Additional investments are necessary to expand THP-Plus programming at a rate that is sustainable for program operation.

PRACTICE

Use data to drive individualized and equitable service delivery.

As the COVID-19 public health crisis and its economic fallout exacerbate existing social and economic inequities and longstanding racial injustices come to the center of public awareness, the use of good data is more important than ever. Organizations engaged in social justice-related service work must examine inequities in access and utilization that may contribute to disproportionality in outcomes among subpopulations. Disaggregating and reporting data by key demographic variables, engaging constituents in the design and review of data metrics and tools, and developing education and employment measures that move beyond PSE enrollment and entry-level job placement are essential responses to racial inequity and foundational to a strategy that supports transition-age foster youth success in an increasingly competitive labor market.

First Place for Youth utilized its own data to develop a tool in partnership with staff and youth that supports and directs conversations, planning, and intervention strategies toward a more individualized, evidence-based, and efficient path to results. More robust education and employment interventions and incremental measures were developed to reflect progress toward longer-term success in life-long earning careers. Practitioners should consider adopting education and employment data collection and reporting practices that elevate visibility and accountability toward this larger goal, and that incorporate the exploration of subpopulations to support innovation and improvement efforts that position every youth for economic self-sufficiency.

APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

BCT Partners developed and applied the Precision Analytics modeling strategy in over 15 projects over the past nine years with government agencies and philanthropic and nonprofit organizations. These projects have resulted in peer-reviewed publications, as well as presentations, trainings, and workshops at professional associations, institutes, and conferences. Features of the methodology utilized for the current project are described below.

1. **Getting and preparing the data.**

This included: (1) developing a logic model representing the evaluation framework stating and documenting the desired impact (i.e., achieving a living wage), outcomes (e.g., career exploration, grit, employment, education, etc.), strategies/interventions (e.g., action planning, face-to-face contacts, meetings, etc.), and youth contextual factors that could affect services (e.g., age that a youth entered foster care, number of congregate care placements, etc.); (2) identifying the data tables that most adequately measure the logic model elements of impact, outcomes, strategies, contextual factors, and specific data elements that effectively capture the services and strategies employed by First Place; and (3) extracting and preparing the data for PA modeling (analysis).

2. **Training machine learning algorithms to find all the different services that have been tried by and with youth.**

These are naturally-occurring experiments analyzing complete services over the past several years and the progress made toward key measurable milestones for similar youth, that were grouped together based on their foster care placement history and received and/or engaged in different types and quantities of services. When it is not possible to conduct a true ‘experiment’ with the up-front random assignment of cases to treatment versus no treatment, the past ‘random’ differences in the probability of youth engaging in services and the amount of services received can serve as the next best experimental method—a ‘quasi-experimental’ method. These random differences in services are a real-world ‘random assignment’ experiment. Finding these variations in services provides a kind of experimental lens for making counterfac-

tual comparisons between youth within a similarly matched group of the population who received one or a combination of services (the treatment group), versus those who did not (the control group). Resultantly, this quasi-experimental PA approach served to determine which and what combination of My First Place services and youth goal attainment contributed to causing the achievement of a living wage.

3. Producing automated reports and tools. Precision Analytics automated the production of the following secure, web-based dashboards: (1) an evaluation report, presenting First Place for Youth attributable outcome (living wage) results for each of ten matched comparison groups/segments; (2) case-specific progress reports, including an assessment of whether an individual youth is engaging in the ideal set of services and goals that have proven to increase the odds of achieving a living wage; (3) a caseload dashboard that allows staff to compare progress and outcomes for a group of youth with whom they work; and (4) a regional report, sharing progress and outcome findings by site/region. Collectively, these dashboards represent the Youth Success Roadmap Tool. First Place has also developed an accompanying set of best practice guidelines linked to the dashboard tool, which provide a customizable toolkit of effective interventions, activities and approaches at practitioners’ fingertips that help them optimize impact with the specific youth they serve.



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