



TAY-Hub
Transition-Age Youth
Research & Evaluation Hub



COUNTIES MATTER

The Influence of County Context on Services and Outcomes for Transition-Age Youth in Care

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SEPTEMBER 2023



Introduction

The child welfare system in the United States varies across jurisdictions, with some states having centralized systems and others, including California, relying on state-supervised but county-administered systems. The type of administration affects the centralization of authority, fiscal responsibility, policy implementation, placement approval processes, and public agency workforce development. In California, the state government sets policies and provides funding for each of the 58 counties to administer child welfare services, investigate suspected maltreatment, provide in- and out-of-home services, and monitor the well-being of children and young people living in foster care. County-level factors, such as collaboration across social and health service sectors and characteristics of court processes, can affect the availability of services and related outcomes among transition-age youth (TAY). Influence notwithstanding, little research has examined

how county-level characteristics shape TAY outcomes. California, which has allowed young adults to remain in extended foster care (EFC) and receive supportive services until their 21st birthday since 2012, was well-positioned to serve as a site for this line of inquiry.

The CalYOUTH study, a 10-year evaluation that assessed the well-being and outcomes of young people in California who were eligible for EFC, measured between-county variation in its implementation. The resulting report [Counties Matter: Evidence of the Influence of County Context on Services and Outcomes for Transition-Age Youth in Care in California](#) summarizes CalYOUTH findings to date on between-county variation in EFC implementation and aspects of county context associated with the length of time youth remain in care, the services they receive, and a range of outcomes they experience.



Methods

The CalYOUTH study leveraged public and private data sources. TAY participated in surveys and shared information on well-being indicators such as education, employment, health, housing, and relationships. Caseworker surveys assessed caseworkers' perceptions of service availability, coordination, and the implementation of EFC as well as training and services, interagency collaborations, and EFC's impact on independence during early adulthood. Additionally, the study documented workforce specialization by calculating the proportion of

caseworkers focused on specialized services for older youth. Publicly available data sources were leveraged to investigate the socioeconomic and political contexts between counties and their impact on service delivery and outcomes for transition-age youth. Data sources included the American Community Survey for employment rates, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for fair market rent estimates, and the California Secretary of State Office for voter registration information.



Findings

Studies using CalYOUTH data have revealed various associations between county-level factors and outcomes for TAY in California. Caseworkers' perceptions of service availability and cross-system collaboration varied across counties, with education, employment, and independent living preparation services being considered most helpful. Caseworkers generally were in favor of services and support beyond age 18 but some expressed concern that EFC would foster dependence on systemic supports. The length of EFC stays varied by county and based on caseworkers' satisfaction with interagency collaboration and court personnel's support. Satisfaction with independent living transition planning differed by county, with higher unemployment rates and perceived service availability associated with greater youth participation. County factors (e.g., urbanicity, cost of living, interagency collaboration) also affected housing options, educational outcomes, mental health service utilization, and employment earnings. And youths' satisfaction with services they received was associated with their educational attainment and mental health. Findings across several studies emphasize that both youth and caseworkers are highly attuned to their local service context and its implications for TAY as they enter early adulthood.





Implications

Findings from CalYOUTH study emphasize the importance of county contexts in shaping outcomes for TAY. Factors such as the demographic characteristics of a county's population, (e.g., urbanicity and voters' political affiliation), and the availability of housing and supportive services are tied to youth outcomes during their transition to adulthood. Collaboration between child welfare and other agencies, as well as specialized case management for TAY, also play crucial roles. The perspectives of youth and caseworkers are essential in understanding the local service context and informing decision-making to improve practice and service delivery for all young people in foster care. Findings underscore the need to pay closer attention to county context and administrative decisions to better understand the experiences and outcomes of populations served by county government.

Federal policy entrusts states with the responsibility of overseeing child welfare services within counties, based on the principle of subsidiarity. This principle suggests that



central governments should focus on tasks that cannot be performed effectively at a more local level, allowing local governments to address the unique needs of their residents. Managing child welfare at the county level in a diverse state like California aligns with this principle and offers a chance to adopt innovative approaches developed by counties. The report emphasizes the significance of considering local variations when planning and providing services, as well as assessing results. The TAY-Hub aims to foster learning by enabling state and county collaboration, with the goal of enhancing outcomes and well-being for TAY individuals.



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The Transition-Age Youth Research & Evaluation Hub (TAY-Hub) seeks to improve policies and practices affecting TAY by monitoring outcomes and through applied research that is grounded in engagement with members of the child welfare services community, including those with lived experience of foster care.

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