



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



SEPTEMBER 2023

Project Overview

The Transition-Age Youth Research and Evaluation Hub (TAY-Hub) is a university-based research collaborative housed in 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.

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Disclaimer

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Introduction

Most jurisdictions in the United States have a centralized, state-administered child welfare system, but 1 in 6 states—including California—has state-supervised but county-administered child welfare systems (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). The type of administration affects the centralization of authority, responsibility for funding, implementation of policymaking, process for licensure, and public agency worker training. California's child welfare system, the largest in the United States, is state supervised and administered by each of its 58 counties. In California, the state creates a statewide policy and regulatory framework and provides some of the funding for child welfare services, but the 58 counties are responsible for much of the funding and provide the continuum of services, starting with child maltreatment investigations and continuing through postpermanency activities (California Department of Social Services, n.d.). County child welfare agencies collaborate and coordinate with public social and health services and court systems also administered at the county level, which affects the delivery of services to youths who live in foster care. Counties are also primarily responsible for contracting with nongovernmental service providers. Importantly, county-level factors may affect service availability and youth participation in extended foster care (EFC), which was implemented statewide in 2012 by allowing young adults to remain in care up to their 21st birthday. Research has begun to explore the effects of state-level factors in shaping transition-age youth (TAY) outcomes (Abrams et al., 2016; Prince et al., 2019); however, little research has examined how county-level characteristics shape TAY outcomes.



Between-county variation in EFC implementation was captured by the CalYOUTH study, a 10-year evaluation conducted to assess the well-being and outcomes of young people in California who were eligible for EFC. In addition to longitudinal surveys of youth in care that collected information on youth outcomes and their involvement in and satisfaction with transition planning, the CalYOUTH study also included child welfare worker surveys, administrative records capturing aspects of youths' experiences in care, and measures of county service contexts derived from publicly available sources to explore how county-level factors are associated with EFC implementation and youth outcomes. This report summarizes CalYOUTH findings to date on between-county variation in EFC implementation and aspects of county context associated with how long youth remain in care, the services they receive, and a wide range of outcomes they experience.



Methods

The following section provides a brief overview of the data sources, study populations, and key variables used across the studies.

Youth Surveys

A full description of the CalYOUTH youth surveys can be found in *Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH): Conditions of youth at age 23* Courtney et al. (2020). TAY were eligible to participate in the CalYOUTH baseline youth survey if they were between ages 16.75 and 17.75 years at the time of the baseline interview in 2013 and had lived in the California foster care system under the supervision of child welfare for at least 6 months. When the representative sample was drawn, California's 58 counties were divided into six strata based on the number of eligible young people per county, with smaller-population counties being oversampled to maximize the ability of the study to examine county-level contributors to youth outcomes. Seven counties did not have eligible youth, so participants were drawn from the 51 other counties. Participating youths were interviewed at ages 17, 19, 21, and 22. Of the 763 adolescents who were eligible to participate at Wave 1 (age 17), 727 youth completed the survey, representing a 95.3% response rate. Response rates for the following waves were generally high, with 84.0%, 84.7%, and 85.6% of original 727 participants responding to surveys at Waves 2 (age 19), 3 (age 21), and 4 (age 23), respectively. Surveys inquired about a wide array of indicators of general well-being, including education, employment, health, mental health, financial well-being, housing, criminal legal system involvement, parenting, and relationships.

Caseworker Surveys

Two online surveys were conducted as part of the CalYOUTH study to document caseworkers' perceptions of the following: (a) county-level availability of services and relevant youth service needs; (b) coordination of service delivery between the child welfare and other service systems; and (c) implementation of EFC. The first survey was conducted in 2013 and administered to a representative sample of 235 caseworkers from 49 counties serving youth who had recently turned 18 while in foster care (89.8% response rate; Courtney et al., 2015). Caseworkers were asked to provide information about themselves, a single youth in their caseload who turned 18 in the past 6 months, and their local service delivery context. Aspects of county context captured in the worker surveys included perceptions of the following: availability and helpfulness of services; court personnel's supportiveness of EFC; satisfaction with cross-disciplinary collaboration with other TAY-serving systems; challenges to effective implementation; and the success and utility of EFC.

The second survey was administered in 2015 with a similar structure and set of questions. The sample frame was one major difference between the first and the second caseworker surveys. For the second caseworker survey, CalYOUTH invited caseworkers serving young people who participated in the longitudinal youth survey and were in care as of June 1, 2015. Of 306 eligible workers in 47 counties, 295 completed the survey (96.4% response

rate) and provided their perspective on local service delivery context (e.g., service availability, coordination with other service systems, challenges to implementing EFC). The caseworkers also provided information on 493 of the 516 youths (95.5% of eligible youth) in their caseloads who participated in the longitudinal youth survey and were in care at ages 19 and 20 (Courtney et al., 2016).

Data from Publicly Available Sources

Several other sources of publicly available data were used to explore between-county variation in the socioeconomic and political context and how that variation was associated with TAY service receipt and outcomes: American Community Survey estimates of employment rates; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development fair market rent estimates; and California Secretary of State Office voter registration data on the political affiliation of voters.

Key County Context Variables

County is an important aspect of the context of service delivery to and outcomes experienced by TAY in California. As previously described, counties are important political and administrative entities in California. County elected officials influence the allocation of funding to county public social and health service agencies and nongovernmental service providers. Counties are responsible for administering most social and health services and developing and maintaining contractual relationships that ensure county residents receive services from nonprofit and for-profit service

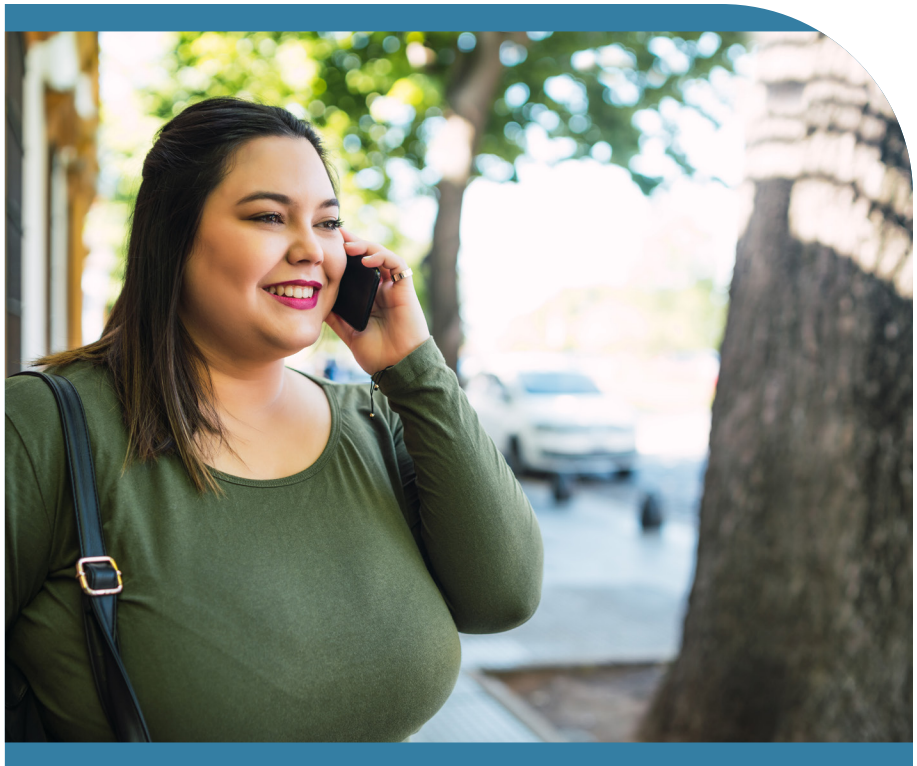
providers. And county courts oversee county child welfare agency supervision of the care of children and nonminor dependents in foster care.

Counties are also proxies for the overall socioeconomic context in which TAY receive services and experience outcomes. One potentially important aspect of this is the level of county urbanicity. For example, urban areas generally differ from rural areas in the cost of living, particularly the cost of housing, along with availability of public transportation and access to social and health services. In turn, those aspects of county context influence a wide range of outcomes during the transition to adulthood, including education, employment, and economic security (Courtney et al., 2016; Courtney et al., 2019; Okpych, et al., 2015; Okpych and Courtney, 2017, 2020; Park et al., 2022).

In the CalYOUTH study, county context was estimated using publicly available data and worker surveys. Publicly available data were also used to capture sociopolitical and economic factors that shape social service provision and basic need fulfillment. To calculate counties' labor market conditions, we used the American Community Survey's unemployment rate estimates among county residents aged 16 to 24. We used fair market rent for two-bedroom units from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's website to capture relative housing expenses in counties. As proxies of the county's political atmosphere, we used the proportions of registered voters identified as Republican, available from the California Secretary of State Office. In terms of urbanicity, counties were categorized as rural or mostly

rural,¹ urban,² large urban,³ and Los Angeles County, guided by the National Center for Health Statistics' (2019) urban–rural classification scheme.

In addition, caseworker surveys were used to calculate the county-level average of caseworkers' perceptions of the service landscape in their respective counties (Courtney et al., 2015, 2016). We estimated the general availability of training and services for transition-age foster youth in seven domains: secondary education, postsecondary education, employment, housing, health, mental health, and substance use. We also measured the caseworkers' satisfaction with collaboration between the county's child welfare department and other service systems in these seven domains. We estimated caseworkers' perspectives on court personnel's (including county judges, youth's attorneys, and county counsel) support for EFC. We also measured



average caseworkers' perceptions on whether “extending foster care beyond age 18 fosters dependency on the system by youth” and the age at which youth can live independently. Finally, we calculated the proportion of caseworkers only working on specialized services for older youth (e.g., independent living program, EFC) as a proxy for workforce specialization.

1 Rural and mostly rural counties included Calaveras, El Dorado, Glenn, Humboldt, Mendocino, San Luis Obispo, and Yuba.

2 Urban counties included Butte, Contra Costa, Kings, Merced, Monterey, Placer, San Bernardino, San Mateo, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, Shasta, Solano, Sonoma, Tulare, Ventura, and Yolo.

3 Large urban counties included Alameda, Fresno, Kern, Orange, Riverside, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, San Joaquin, Santa Clara, and Stanislaus.



Findings

Here we summarize findings across studies that have used CalYOUTH data to examine policy- and practice-relevant associations between aspects of county context and outcomes experienced by TAY populations in California. For the sake of brevity and to provide policymakers and practitioners with information on aspects of county context that can influence youth outcomes, we chose to focus primarily on reporting statistically significant findings rather than summarizing all findings on the relationship between county context and TAY outcomes. It is worth noting that analyses using administrative data on large samples of TAY are more likely than those relying on the CalYOUTH surveys of smaller samples of TAY to identify statistically significant county-level influences on youth outcomes.



Worker and Caseload Characteristics

Analyses of the CalYOUTH caseworker surveys have documented significant associations between county urbanicity and worker race, ethnicity, age, and educational attainment at the county level (Courtney et al., 2015, 2016). Further, caseload characteristics also differed with respect to child characteristics and the length of time workers had TAY in their caseloads. On average, rural counties had higher proportions of caseworkers who were White, aged 50 or older, and had not earned a master's degree or higher than those surveyed in large, urban counties. In general, the more urban the county, the less time caseworkers had been assigned to their respective TAY. Workers in urban counties tended to have a narrower age range of youth in their caseload, perhaps reflecting the greater ability of larger-population counties to create specialized caseloads for workers serving TAY. Reflecting regional differences in the racial and ethnic makeup of California counties, greater urbanicity was also associated with higher proportions of African American and other non-White TAY being served (Courtney et al., 2015, 2016). Publicly available child welfare data show that county utilization of transitional housing placement programs for nonminor dependents (THPP-NMD) vary widely, with the percentage of these youth placed there ranging from 2.2% to 66.7% (Webster et al., 2023). The proportion of youth placed in supportive independent living placements (SILPs) was higher among urban counties compared to rural counties. At the same time, a greater proportion of youth in rural counties were living in THPP-NMD (Courtney et al., 2016).

Perceptions of and Attitudes toward Service Contexts and Cross-System Collaboration

Both caseworker surveys asked respondents to report their perceptions of services and cross-system collaboration between the child welfare agency and other systems serving TAY.⁴ Perceptions of service availability across systems were fairly consistent across the two surveys, with 50% to 70% of caseworkers reporting “some” or “a wide range of” services related to education, employment, independent living preparation, mental health, financial literacy, reproductive health, and substance use (Courtney et al., 2015, 2016). In comparison, between 35% and 46% of caseworkers in both surveys indicated “some” or “a wide range of” services for interpersonal skill development and safety concerns. The proportions of caseworkers who reported “some” or “a wide range” of housing options (51% and 56%) that were “somewhat” or “very” appropriate (65% and 71%) for TAY were consistent across both surveys. Likewise, caseworkers across both surveys reported education, employment, and independent living preparation services to be the most helpful. In contrast, caseworkers perceived health education, substance use, safety, and pregnancy prevention services as the least helpful. In the first caseworker survey, caseworkers in large urban counties were more likely than those in other counties to perceive fewer trainings on financial literacy. Caseworkers in rural counties were more likely than caseworkers from other counties to report inadequate interpersonal skills training (Courtney et al., 2015). In the second

caseworker survey, caseworkers from rural and Los Angeles counties were less likely to report their county had “some” or “a wide range of” reproductive health services for TAY (Courtney et al., 2016).

Most caseworkers across both surveys reported being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with cross-system collaboration (Courtney et al., 2015, 2016). Caseworkers in both surveys reported higher satisfaction with housing and education system collaborations and lower satisfaction with substance abuse treatment collaboration. Interestingly, more than a third of caseworkers in the first survey were satisfied with mental health system collaborations, whereas 40% were dissatisfied with the same collaborations in the second caseworker survey. As it pertains to intercounty differences, researchers analyzing the first survey found caseworkers from large urban counties were more likely to be completely dissatisfied with collaborations with employment services, whereas those from rural and urban counties were more likely to be dissatisfied with collaborations with the mental health system. In the second survey, caseworkers from rural and Los Angeles counties tended to be less satisfied with collaborations with employment and housing systems. Caseworker surveys revealed both court personnel and caseworkers were largely supportive of extending foster care. More than 75% of caseworkers in both surveys perceived county judges, county counsel, youth attorneys, and court-appointed special advocates as supportive or very supportive of extending foster care beyond the age 18 (Courtney et al., 2015, 2016).

⁴ In both surveys, caseworkers were asked about their perceptions of the availability of trainings and services in their county across seven service area domains, selecting from four response categories (“none,” “few,” “some,” and “a wide range”). They were asked about the helpfulness of services in these domains on a scale ranging from 1 (not helpful) to 5 (very helpful). They were also asked about availability (“none,” “few,” “some,” and “a wide range”) and appropriateness (“mostly not appropriate,” “slightly appropriate,” “somewhat appropriate,” and “very appropriate”) of housing options in their county.

Attitudes toward EFC and Effective Implementation

Nearly 90% of caseworkers in both surveys perceived youth as needing or absolutely needing services and support beyond age 18. Although caseworkers reported extending foster care to age 21 would likely promote some or a lot of dependence on the system (89% and 78% in each survey), nearly 75% of caseworkers in both surveys reported youth could not be expected to live on their own before age 21. Researchers found some intercounty differences in the second caseworker survey. All caseworkers in rural counties indicated youth needed support and services beyond age 18, which was higher than the proportion of those in urban (92%) and large urban (96%) counties. A smaller proportion of Los Angeles County caseworkers saw support and services beyond age 18 as necessary (76%; Courtney et al., 2016).

Despite their general support for extending foster care, caseworkers perceived several barriers to effective EFC implementation. More than 70% of caseworkers in both surveys reported the lack of placement options for youth as a major barrier to implementation. It is important to note that the caseworker surveys were conducted in 2013 and 2015, and specialized placement options for TAY have since increased. More than half of the caseworkers in each survey also cited the scarcity of services and lack of coordination between child welfare agencies and other service systems. The most frequently cited challenges differed by county. In the first survey, caseworkers in large urban



counties were more likely to cite a lack of support from county caseworkers and a lack of interest from youth as challenges to implementation. Caseworkers from urban counties cited a lack of services as an implementation challenge more often than those from other counties. Although court personnel were perceived as generally supportive of EFC, in the second survey, more caseworkers in large urban counties (34.7%) and Los Angeles County (32.1%) cited the lack of support from court personnel as a problem than those in rural (18.2%) and urban (13.9%) counties (Courtney et al., 2016).

Participation in EFC

Several studies based on CalYOUTH data have found associations between county-level factors and TAY participation in EFC. Courtney and colleagues (2017) found that the length of EFC stays differed significantly by county, with youth's average time in EFC differing by more than 2 years between the county with the longest average EFC stay and the county with the shortest average EFC stay. The significant difference in the average length of EFC stays led to deeper explorations of county-level factors that might influence the length of time young people stay in EFC. Courtney and colleagues (2019) found (a) caseworkers' satisfaction with the county's collaboration between child welfare and other human service agencies and (b) caseworkers' perceptions of court personnel's support for EFC were both associated with longer EFC stays. These findings suggest collaborative, cross-system programs likely create a service landscape that is conducive to meeting TAY's multidimensional needs and therefore, incentivizes longer EFC stays.

Park et al. (2022) leveraged administrative data to document a positive relationship between the proportion of county caseworkers that specialized in working with TAY and the average time spent in EFC. The authors suggested this relationship might illustrate the benefit of having specialized case management for young adults in care, given these caseworkers may be more attuned to TAY's unique and often complex needs (Park et al., 2022). Conversely, the proportion of Republican voters in a county was negatively associated with the length of EFC stays, such that for each 10% increase in the proportion of Republican voters, average EFC stays decreased by 2.4 months. The authors suggested this may be emblematic of traditional

tenets of conservatism—namely, fiscal thrift in the provision of social services, diminished role of the government, and prioritization of self-sufficiency that might translate into a less robust landscape of social services targeting TAY's needs.

Transition Planning

Per state law, young people living in foster care are required to participate in the development of their transition to independent living plan (TILP). However, analyses of youth and caseworker surveys suggest that in practice, individual- and county-level characteristics are associated with youth's role in the development of their TILP (Park et al., 2020; Park et al., 2022; Powers et al., 2020). In an analysis of a sample of TAY at age 17, youth who resided in Los Angeles County were significantly more likely to be satisfied with the TILP process than youth residing in rural or suburban counties (Park et al., 2022; Powers et al., 2020). In a separate study with a sample of TAY who remained in care until age 19 and whose caseworkers participated in the worker survey, Park and colleagues (2022) found youths were more likely to participate in their TILP development in counties with higher unemployment rates among residents aged 16–24 and where caseworkers perceived greater service or training availability. The study also found TAY supervised by a caseworker who specialized in services for older youth were more likely to collaborate in the TILP development with other actors (e.g., caseworker and caregivers) rather than leading the process, which suggests specialized caseworkers may be better equipped to work alongside the youth collaboratively (Park et al., 2022).

Housing and Homelessness

Having safe and affordable housing is essential for optimally engaging in many developmentally appropriate tasks during the transition to adulthood (e.g., pursuing postsecondary education, maintaining employment, and parenting). CalYOUTH studies examined the relationship between county-level factors and housing and homelessness among TAY. Feng and colleagues (2020) found the urbanicity of the county in which youths resided was not significantly associated with the odds of experiencing homelessness. The authors suggested that county urbanicity may not adequately capture between-county variation in housing costs that could contribute to homelessness. In another study, the odds of experiencing homelessness between ages 17 and 19 were 62% lower among youths in counties where caseworkers perceived there to be a wide range or some available housing options, compared to youth living in counties where caseworkers perceived few or no services or housing options (Courtney et al., 2019). Findings suggest that county child welfare caseworkers' perceptions of county-level services and training resources may accurately reflect the availability and quality of housing-related services offered to TAY.



Researchers also have found evidence that county-level factors shape the kinds of living arrangements for youth. Specifically, compared to TAY in rural counties, youths in large urban counties and Los Angeles were more likely to stay in SILPs than THPP-NMD placements (Feng et al., 2020). Courtney et al. (2016) found that fewer than 30% of youth living in high-cost counties were living in THPP-NMD, whereas some counties housed more than half of all their TAY in SILPs (e.g., Los Angeles, San Diego, Orange, and Santa Clara) and other counties housed between 14% and 40% in SILPs (e.g., Alameda, San Francisco, Riverside). These findings suggest meaningful between-county variations in housing costs and availability of specialized placements for TAY.

Education

Academic participation is a key federal eligibility criterion for EFC, and secondary and postsecondary education participation represent two important human capital outcomes that have been studied in relation to EFC in the CalYOUTH study. Courtney et al. (2016) found significant variation in caseworker-perceived characteristics of youths' educational background and preparation. Caseworkers in Los Angeles County reported a lower proportion of youths were enrolled in special education compared to caseworkers in rural, urban, or other large urban counties. Additionally, researchers observed that slightly less than half of youths were considered prepared to pursue postsecondary education by caseworkers in Los Angeles, urban, and large urban counties, compared to less than a third of youth in rural counties.

Several CalYOUTH studies also reported county-level variation in youth educational outcomes. Okpych and Courtney (2015) found youth living in large urban counties were more likely to have missed at least 1 month of school due to a family move or placement change compared to youth living in rural counties. Missed school notwithstanding, academic aspirations were found to increase with county urbanicity. In a subsequent study of high school completion and college entry, Okpych and Courtney (2017) found youth in rural and suburban counties were significantly more likely than their urban counterparts to earn a high school diploma. Okpych et al. (2020) documented strong associations between cross-system collaboration at the county level and youth educational outcomes. After controlling for county-level political and economic differences, the researchers observed that in counties where young adult participants reported being satisfied



with the secondary education-related services and training they received, the estimated odds of earning a high school degree or general educational diploma between Waves 1 and 2 of the CalYOUTH study (when TAY were about 17 and 19 years old) were 4 times higher than those of youth in counties with low satisfaction levels. In addition, the odds of diploma or degree receipt were more than 2 times higher in counties where caseworkers reported being satisfied with collaboration between child welfare and educational systems as compared to those from counties where poor collaboration was reported. Park and colleagues (2022) tested the effects of county attributes on enrollment in a college, university, or vocational school before the age of 21 among 529 youths who participated in the CalYOUTH longitudinal survey and 2,392 EFC-eligible youth from 30 counties identified from administrative data. For both the administrative

data sample and the youth survey sample, caseworkers' satisfaction with collaboration with postsecondary education systems was positively associated with the probability of enrollment (Park et al., 2022).

A negative association was identified between youth and young adult unemployment rates at the county level and the probability of postsecondary education enrollment in the administrative data sample, which is at odds with prior findings that poor employment options prompt college enrollment (Barr & Turner, 2015). In the administrative data sample, youths supervised in counties with higher unemployment rates for young adults had a lower probability of enrolling in college by age 21. The authors hypothesized that these findings differ because financial and in-kind support (e.g., room and board) from families to pursue postsecondary education is less common among youths in foster care (Park et al., 2022).

Mental Health

Several CalYOUTH publications have explored associations between county-level factors and TAY mental health outcomes. Courtney and Charles (2015) found that, all else equal, county urbanicity was not associated with self-reported mental health service receipt (psychological counseling, psychotropic medication use, or psychiatric hospitalization in the last 12 months) or mental health problems. This finding was surprising given past evidence suggesting smaller counties tend to have smaller service provider pools and less robust public transit infrastructure that facilitate mental health service access (Courtney and Charles, 2015). Munson and colleagues (2020) similarly found that compared to youth in Los Angeles County, youth in rural counties were more likely to receive counseling in the last 12 months. The

authors explained that smaller provider pools characteristic of rural counties may streamline referral processes and increase access to mental health services (Munson et al., 2020). Further, researchers noted that Los Angeles County has more therapeutic foster care placements than other California counties. Therefore, youth in Los Angeles County may consider services received in their placement to be different from those typically received in outpatient or school-based mental health settings. Courtney and colleagues (2016) found that youth from Los Angeles County were significantly less likely to have a documented diagnosis of PTSD or bipolar disorder compared to youth from other counties. Whether this finding reflects differences in mental health service needs or variation in diagnosis documentation across counties is unknown.

Munson et al. (2020) also found the estimated odds of TAY reporting they felt prepared to manage their mental health symptoms as they transitioned into early adulthood were significantly associated with an increase in caseworker perception of the helpfulness of mental health services in their county. Similarly, Courtney et al. (2019) found that the estimated odds of youth reporting a mental health disorder were significantly lower among youth who were satisfied with the services and training offered by their county compared to those who were unsatisfied. These findings underscore the utility of using youth and caseworker perspectives to both monitor the effectiveness of TAY-focused services and predict mental health outcomes (Courtney et al., 2019).

Earnings and Employment

CalYOUTH also explored the associations between county-level factors and employment and earnings outcomes (Courtney et al., 2019; Park et al., 2022). Using the youth survey data (n = 423) on youths' employment and caseworker assessment of county-level service availability and quality of collaboration between county child welfare agencies and county employment services, Courtney et al. (2019) examined between-county variation in the number of quarters in which young people were employed between the first and second wave of CalYOUTH interviews (i.e., between ages 17 and 19). They found no association between months employed and caseworkers' perceptions of county-level employment service or training availability or the quality of county-level intersystem collaboration and training availability. However, 31% of caseworkers reported they were "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with the level of collaboration in their county between child welfare and employment service or training. Courtney and colleagues (2019) hypothesized the findings might reflect the relatively poor level of collaboration between county child welfare agencies and systems that provide employment-related supports and services. In contrast to these findings, Park and colleagues (2022), using data from a larger sample of CalYOUTH participants (n = 529) and covering a longer period (ages 18 to 21), studied associations between county-level factors and earnings. They found a positive relationship between average earnings and caseworkers' satisfaction with the county's level of collaboration between the child welfare and employment systems and the availability of employment training and services. Park and colleagues (2022) also found that a greater percentage of specialized caseworkers in a county working exclusively with TAY was associated with higher average earnings for youths in the study.





Implications

CalYOUTH findings to date provide compelling evidence that county contexts matter. Utilizing public data sources, the research has highlighted that the demographic characteristics of a county's population, such as urbanicity and voters' political affiliation, influence youth outcomes. Several aspects of county service context emerged as important predictors of youth participation in EFC and TILP development and a wide range of outcomes during the transition to adulthood.

Certain elements of the county service context, such as the availability of housing and various kinds of supportive services provided by other public systems, are arguably outside the control of public child welfare agencies. Others, such as the level of collaboration between child welfare agencies and other systems and the utilization of THPP-NMD, are influenced by the operation of the public child welfare agencies and their voluntary sector partners. Some are largely at the discretion of county agencies, including the decision to specialize in TAY case management, though that is likely much easier to do in urban counties with relatively large caseloads than in rural counties. Policymakers and administrators should consider how aspects of county context that influence youth outcomes can be considered in developing policies and programs for TAY.

Importantly, many county-level indicators most frequently associated with TAY's experiences in care and subsequent outcomes were derived from youth and caseworker perspectives. 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. Their voices provide critical insight and evidence to help policymakers

and program administrators make informed, impactful decisions that improve practice and service delivery for all young people in and leaving care.

CalYOUTH findings to date also suggest that researchers studying child welfare and other human services in county-administered states should pay more attention to the role of county context and county agencies' administrative decisions in influencing experiences and outcomes for populations served by county government.

Federal policy, which grants states the authority to administer child welfare services at the county level, is fundamentally rooted in the principle of subsidiarity. According to this principle, for government to be optimally responsive to the needs and aspirations of everyone, central governments should perform only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a more local level. This principle underscores the recognition that local governments possess a deep understanding of the needs of residents. The management of child welfare services by counties in a large and diverse state like California aligns with this value, and presents an opportunity for learning from innovations emerging at the county level. The TAY-Hub seeks to serve as a catalyst for this learning by supporting the ability of state and county governments to learn from one another and work collectively toward a shared goal of improved outcomes and well-being for TAY. The current report serves as a testament to the importance of accounting for county-level variability when designing and delivering services, as well as when evaluating outcomes.



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TAY-Hub
Transition-Age Youth
Research & Evaluation Hub

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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