



## UNDERSTANDING OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE

This issue of Insights provides data on outcomes as well as related policy implications for youth aging out of foster care in California. This first-ever available data includes what youth at age 18 experience and their plans for the future. The data is made available through a new collection process that will be continually monitored and updated to provide ongoing information about youth as they leave care.

In addition, Insights also includes information from two important new studies, including one in Los Angeles where approximately one-third of California's foster youth live. These studies have tracked foster youth after they leave care – and provide powerful insight into probable outcomes and potential solutions.

The data and research are especially relevant for policymakers and others given new federal and state emphasis on improving outcomes for this population, including the recently enacted federal Fostering Connections to Success and Improving Adoptions Act.

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### HOW ARE WE DOING?

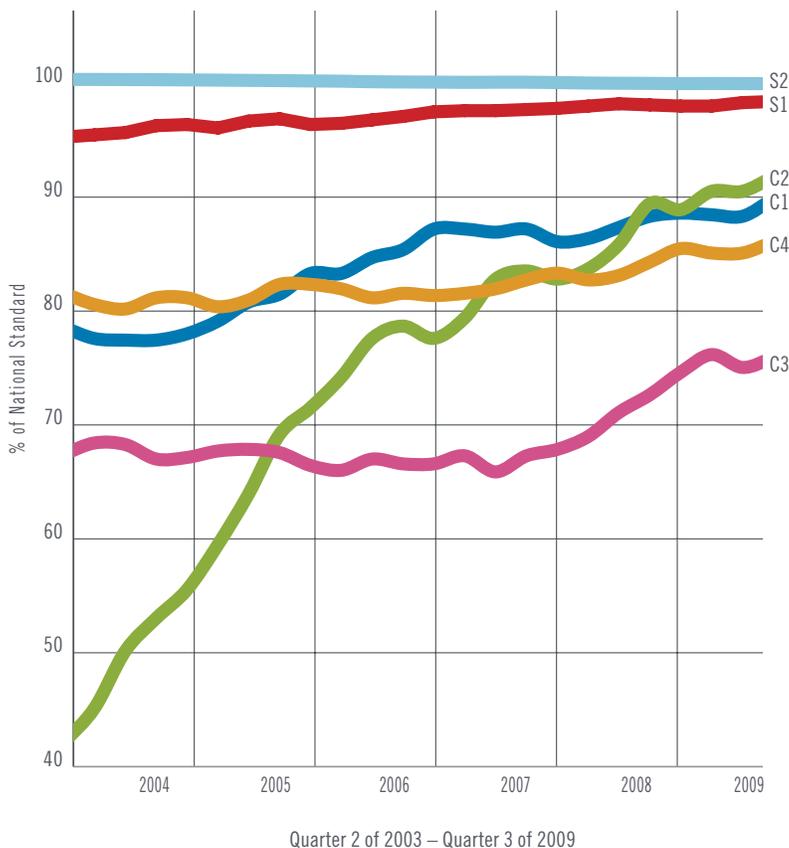
- **Poor outcomes in critical areas** – Overall, California's data indicates that outcomes for youth aging out of foster care are poor. Specifically, the data reflects deficiencies in education, employment and housing, all of which are key indicators for self-sufficiency.
- **Outcomes are inter-related** – Foster youth outcomes on education, employment, housing and permanency are all related. A youth's ability to secure an education impacts employment options and housing, and vice versa. Similarly, permanency supports are foundational and provide a crucial "safety net" when other supports are lacking.
- **Current outcomes signal future challenges** – California's data is consistent with other research on transitioning foster youth and suggests that this population will continue to face a myriad of serious challenges, including homelessness, unemployment and incarceration.
- **Studies and Successes Offer Solutions** – Child welfare professionals echo what research and proven practices show: youth aging out of foster care fare better with a lifelong commitment with a loving adult or family, a place to live, a high school diploma, health care, access to higher education and quality employment.

# Insights into Data

## California's Performance on National Child Welfare Standards

The chart below has been updated to include the most recent available data on California's performance on the National Child Welfare Standards. Although this issue of Insights focuses on the outcomes of foster youth aging out of care, it is always important to look at data in the context of the bigger picture.

California continues to improve on all six national standards. However, not all counties are improving in all areas, nor are all measures within a given composite score improving.



The federal government requires states to track performance focused on safety, permanency and well-being. It sets standards for safety and permanency. The six national standards include two safety standards with indicators that stand alone, and four composite standards that compress 15 separate measures of permanency and stability.

### Safety Indicator 1 (S1)

#### — No Recurrence of Child Maltreatment

California has always performed relatively well on this issue and has improved from 95.4% to 98.3% of the national standard.

### Safety Indicator 2 (S2)

#### — No Maltreatment in Foster Care

California's performance is currently at 99.9% of the national standard. The state has met or exceeded the standard for this measure in most years since AB 636\* was implemented.

### Composite Score 1 (C1)

#### — Family Reunification

California has improved from 78.8% of the standard to 89.7% of the standard – a 13.8% improvement.

### Composite Score 2 (C2)

#### — Adoption

California has improved from 42.7% to 93.3% of the standard – an improvement of well over 100%.

### Composite Score 3 (C3)

#### — Long-term Care and Permanent Connections

California has improved from 67.8% of the standard to 77.5% of the standard – a 14.4% improvement.

### Composite Score 4 (C4)

#### — Placement Stability

California has improved from 81.7% to 86.4% of the standard – a 5.7% improvement.

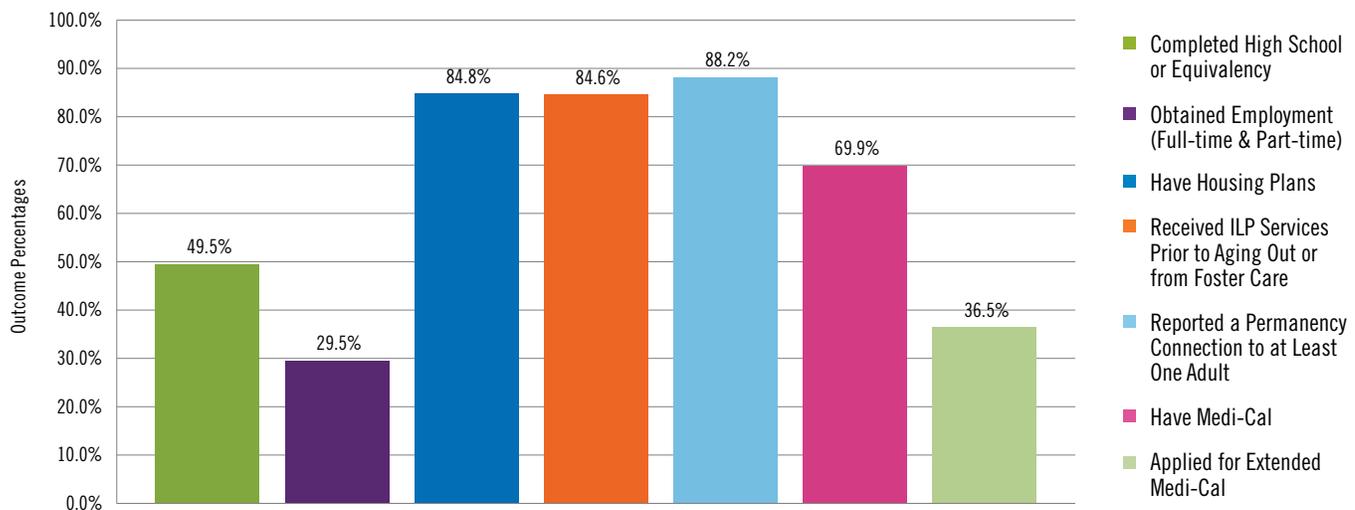
\* AB 636 (2003) is California's Child Welfare Outcomes and Accountability System. The system provides quarterly data on a range of issues in addition to the National Child Welfare Standards and enables the state to examine trends related to child safety, permanency and well-being.

The numbers reported in the above chart reflect data from California's Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS). Baseline data on some measures may change slightly over time due to data entry and clean-up efforts by counties. The data are publicly available at: [http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb\\_childwelfare](http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb_childwelfare)

## Exit Outcomes for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

California's data collection system on youth aging out of care is aligned with the state's broader data reporting requirements included in the Child Welfare Outcomes and Accountability System (AB636). While data collection will improve over time, it now provides useful baseline information.

Every year, approximately 5,500 youth age out of foster care. This chart illustrates the outcomes for the approximately 800 youth who exited care from October-December of 2009. The data represents 81% of the foster youth population and is drawn from all but four counties in the state.



### High School Education or Equivalency

- Less than half (49.5%) of foster youth leave care with a high school diploma or equivalency.
- Only 40% of youth actually have a diploma – the remaining 9.5% have high school equivalency or proficiency certificates.

### Employment

- Only 29% of youth report having obtained either part-time or full-time employment. Of those youth, nearly 80% are employed part-time.
- Almost 10% of youth have no means of financial support at all.

### Housing

- More than 84% of youth report having plans for housing at the time of emancipation. Anecdotal reports indicate that many plans are only temporary.
- Only 15% of youth live in some kind of supportive transitional housing, including the Transitional Housing Program.

### Independent Living Program

- More than 84% of youth report having received Independent Living Program (ILP) services.
- The survey question did not specify the level of ILP service provided, which range from a written plan to an array of services. Also, services generally begin at age 16, which is late in a youth's development to impact their education and employment outcomes.

### Permanency Connection

- More than 88% of youth report a permanency connection.
- The definition of permanency connection used in the survey ("knowing an adult to go to for support, advice and guidance") does not reflect the level of adult commitment that is known to adequately provide a safety net for youth aging out of care.

### Medi-Cal

- Data reflected in the two bars relating to Medi-Cal reveal that youth leaving foster care either have Medi-Cal or have applied for an extension for Medi-Cal coverage at the time of their exit from care.

## Using Data to Improve Foster Youth Outcomes

California's new data helps us understand what is happening to foster youth in the state and suggests troubling future challenges for this already vulnerable population. The data reveals areas where we are doing poorly, but also highlights some areas of success, notably the benefit of automatically enrolling foster youth in Medi-Cal as they transition out of care.

As we consider policies that will improve our ability to connect youth to housing, education, employment and other services, the lesson from Medi-Cal bears emphasis: automatically providing services for youth during this critical transition time can directly and immediately improve outcomes. Foster youth would benefit from this approach becoming foundational for all transition services.

### Better data leads to better decisions.

- California's new data on youth aging out of foster care provides crucial new information on how youth are doing as they leave care. Soon, a National Youth in Transition Database will allow us to track outcomes for youth *after* they leave care as well.
- Current data collection efforts are a step in the right direction, but the state's Child Welfare Services Case Management System needs to be enhanced to include more comprehensive data to allow for detailed and informed analysis.
- As we improve our data collection system, we should learn from Efforts to Outcomes, the data collection component of California Connected by 25, a county project currently underway in some counties to gather more comprehensive local data on youth aging out of care.

### When foster youth are supported, outcomes improve.

- Research studies tracking outcomes for youth after they leave care suggests that foster youth benefit when they receive additional supports.
- Without support, most youth face dismal outcomes. A study in three Midwestern states following foster youth over time revealed that most youth who exited care struggled in the areas of employment and education, and lacked committed relationships with reliable adults. When supports were provided, youth did reasonably well.\*
- A Los Angeles based study echoes the data in the Midwest study and reports additional findings on increased homelessness and teen parenting.\*\*

### Recent investments by public and private agencies have demonstrated improved outcomes and offer models and potential policy solutions for other transition supports:

- Policy changes to expand Medi-Cal and make it automatic have resulted in almost all foster youth having health care until age 21.
- Programs that expand education services at both the K-12 and post-secondary levels such as the Foster Youth Services Core District Program and College Pathways Program report improved outcomes in attendance and graduation rates.
- Programs that provide family-finding and other targeted permanency services have increased legal and relational permanency for more than 70% of the youth served.

### Foundational supports are critical for youth when aging out of foster care. Public policies must ensure that foster youth:

- Graduate from high school prepared for career and college.
- Receive a variety of services and employment experience while in foster care to help secure living-wage employment.
- Have stable housing options prior to and after leaving care.
- Receive Independent Living Program Services that provide early skill-building and supports at home, in school and in the community.
- Benefit from automatic eligibility for all available programs and services.
- Have committed families who can provide a critical safety net.

\* Courtney, M., Dworky, A., Lee, J. S., Ramp, M. *The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Ages 23 and 24*. Partners for Our Children at the University of Washington School of Social Work and Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. 2010

\*\* Pergamit, M.R. and Johnson, H. *Extending Foster Care to Age 21: Implications and Estimates from Youth Aging Out of Foster Care in Los Angeles*. The Urban Institute. December 2009

