

Employment and Youth with Foster Care Experience



Transition age youth currently and formerly in foster care are more likely to be unemployed, and when employed, they typically earn less than their peers.

Employment is foundational to youth's successful transition into adulthood, yet many youth with lived experience in the foster care system struggle to obtain employment that provides a living wage. While participation in extended foster care improves youth's employment outcomes, their outcomes are still poor compared to their peers who do not have foster care experience. A longitudinal study of youth formerly in California's extended foster care program found that, at age 23, two years after leaving the child welfare system, only 55% of respondents were currently employed working 10 or more hours per week, compared to 75% of their non-foster peers. Additionally, nearly 60% of the young people in the study earned an annual income below the federal poverty level, compared to 46% of their non-foster peers.ⁱ

Youth with foster care experience face multiple barriers in securing and maintaining meaningful employment.

These barriers include:

- *Poor high school and college graduation rates*, which impact their prospects for jobs that pay a living wage.ⁱⁱ
- *A dearth of job training and placement programs specific to youth with foster care experience.*ⁱⁱⁱ
- *Inadequate transition services*, which are intended to help youth with foster care experience transition to adulthood but may face challenges in connecting youth to needed employment, education or housing services.^{iv}
- *Missing vital documents needed for employment*, like a birth certificate or Social Security card, that can be difficult for a young person to obtain.^v
- *Lack of access to child care and transportation.*^{vi}
- *Current or past justice system involvement.*^{vii}
- *A history of and/or current substance use.*^{viii}
- *Limited work history.*^{ix}

With proper supports and services, youth currently and formerly in foster care will be equipped to find and maintain the employment they need to be self-sufficient and achieve their career goals.

Moving forward, it will be important to ensure:

1. Students in foster care receive targeted services and supports to help improve their academic engagement and achievement and aid their successful transition to postsecondary education and career;
2. Youth receive employment preparation and readiness supports that include meaningful work experience, as prior work experience is an important predictor of later success in employment. Additionally, it will be critical to monitor California's implementation of its recent federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) waiver;
3. Job training and placement programs are trauma-sensitive and prepared to serve youth with foster care experience, including by understanding the challenges these youth may be facing and making an effort to meet youth where they are;
4. Youth are connected with the resources they need in order to be able to work, including vital documents, child care, and transportation, as well as the programs they may need to address substance use or possession of a criminal record; and
5. Local workforce systems streamline their processes to provide easy access to information and referrals, and enhance their data collection to better support and meet the needs of youth currently or formerly in foster care.

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- ⁱ Courtney, M. E., Okpych, N. J., Harty, J. S., Feng, H., Park, S., Powers, J., Nadon, M., Ditto, D. J., & Park, K. (2020). *Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH): Conditions of youth at age 23*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.
- ⁱⁱ [cite CN FY Ed white paper for education outcomes?]; Okpych, N.J., & Courtney, M.E. (2014). "Does education pay for youth formerly in foster care?: Comparison of employment outcomes with a national sample." *Children and Youth Services Review*. Vol. 43, pp. 18–28. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.04.013>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Dworsky, A., and Havlicek, J. (2010). *An Employment Training and Job Placement Program for Foster Youth in Cook County, Illinois*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.
- ^{iv} Annie E. Casey Foundation. "2018 California Profile: Transition-Age Youth in Foster Care." *Foster Youth Transitions: Using Data to Drive Policy and Practice Decisions*. <https://assets.aecf.org/m/blogimg/california-fosteringyouthtransitions-2018.pdf>
- ^v L.A. Opportunity Youth Collaborative. (2021). *Improving Equitable Employment Outcomes for Transition-Age Foster Youth in L.A. County: Streamlining Access to Career Development Services*. https://d3n8a8pro7vnm.cloudfront.net/unitela/pages/5307/attachments/original/1626889779/OYC-Study_FINAL-Web.pdf
- ^{vi} Van Buren, E., Schroeder, J., & York, P. (2021). *Raising the Bar: Building system- and provider-level evidence to drive equitable education and employment outcomes for youth in extended foster care*. First Place for Youth. https://firstplaceforyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Research-Brief_V14.pdf
- ^{vii} Ibid.
- ^{viii} Ibid.
- ^{ix} Stewart, C.J., Kum, H.C., Barth, R.P., & Duncan, D.F. (2014). "Former foster youth: Employment outcomes up to age 30." *Children and Youth Services Review*. Vol. 36, pp. 220-229. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.11.024>