



John Burton Foundation for Children without Homes

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Policy Brief

Outcomes for Former Foster Youth in California's THP-Plus Program: Are Youth in THP-Plus Faring Better?

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Executive Summary

Every year, 25,000 youth "age out" of the foster care system in the United States when they reach legal adulthood, including 4,500 youth in California. Research has shown that these young adults are at risk for poor outcomes, including low educational attainment, poor health, unemployment, homelessness and criminal justice involvement. In 2001, California's legislature created the Transitional Housing Placement Program (THP-Plus) to prevent these negative outcomes by providing supportive housing to emancipated foster youth ages 18 to 24.

This policy brief includes findings from a cross-sectional survey of 458 youth in THP-Plus, conducted by the John Burton Foundation in the Spring of 2008. The analysis found that youth had made gains in several areas since entering THP-Plus: significantly more were working, their average hourly wage had increased substantially, more were enrolled in school, and a third fewer were "disconnected" from both work and school. Their involvement with the criminal justice system during their time in the program was very low. In addition, the majority of those who did not have a permanent connection with an adult at entry had established such a relationship by the time of the survey, a change that was especially strong for custodial mothers. Youth expressed a high level of satisfaction with THP-Plus, though many cite relationships with other youth in the program and a sense of community as areas of lower relative satisfaction.

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Overview of THP-Plus

The transition from adolescence to independent adulthood is a challenging period for many young people, but especially for abused and neglected youth in the foster care system, who often lack the support of family and other caring adults. Youth in California may remain in foster care until age 18, unless it can be demonstrated they will graduate by their 19th birthday, at which point they must exit the foster care system due to age ineligibility. This process is commonly called “aging out.” Currently, the number of youth who age out of foster care is at an historic high, both nationally and in California. In 2005, nearly 25,000 youth aged out of foster care in the United States, up 41 percent since 1998.¹ In California, a total of 4,493 young people aged out of foster care in 2007, representing an increase of 51 percent since 1998.²

This rapid growth in the number of youth aging out of foster care is of particular concern given the challenges they face in their transition to adulthood. A study by researchers at the University of Chicago’s Chapin Hall Center for Children compared the outcomes of over 600 former foster youth to those of young adults in the general population. The study found that 19-year-olds in the study were nearly three times more likely than their peers in the general population to be out of work and school. They were twice as likely to be unable to pay their rent and were four times as likely to be evicted. Within less than two years of leaving foster care, significant numbers had been incarcerated and one in seven had experienced homelessness.³ Research specific to California has also found evidence of poor outcomes among former foster youth. A 2002 survey of California’s county welfare directors estimated that 65 percent of youth aging out of foster care in California had an imminent need for safe and stable housing.⁴

These poor outcomes for recently aged-out foster youth are cause for serious concern, indicating a lack of preparation prior to their transition and lack of economic and social support in early adulthood. Moreover, because the state serves as the legal parent for adolescents aging out of foster care, there is a special public responsibility to ensure that these youth are able to successfully transition to stable, productive adult lives.

California’s Transitional Housing Placement Plus program (THP-Plus) was created by the State Legislature in 2001 to address this need, through the passage of Assembly Bill 427. Funded through the California Department of Social Services, THP-Plus provides up to 24 months of affordable housing, coupled with supportive services, for young adults ages 18 to 24 who have aged out of foster care.

THP-Plus offers three different service models. The scattered-site model consists of individual rental units that are leased within larger rental properties, where youth live either alone or with a roommate. This model can include housing in college dormitories. Some scattered-site programs allow participants to assume the lease for the unit at completion of the THP-Plus program, while others require participants to vacate the housing unit at program completion. The single-site model consists of a single property in which all of the housing units or bedrooms are owned or leased by the THP-Plus provider for the program. In the host family model, a former foster youth lives in a family setting with one or more adults with whom they have a long-term caring, committed relationship. The host family most resembles the continuation of a placement with a foster family or kinship placement, but with an emphasis on preparing for independent living.

THP-Plus programs subsidize the rental costs associated with these living arrangements and provide a range of specified supportive services, either directly or through referral. Services include case management, assistance in pursuing post-secondary education, job readiness training and support, mentoring and support for building permanent relationships with caring adults, and coordination with the county-administered Independent Living Program (ILP) to meet the goals outlined in the participant’s Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP). In addition, THP-Plus programs assist participants with rent, utilities, furnishings, food, and other necessities.

Throughout California, the THP-Plus program has expanded rapidly in the past three years. In 2003, THP-Plus had a moment-in-time capacity of 50 youth. This figure grew to over 500 in 2007 and doubled to 1,000 in 2008. Much of this growth can be attributed to changes in the program since its inception. In 2005, the upper age limit of THP-Plus was changed from 21 to 24. In 2006, a provision requiring counties to pay a 60 percent share of cost was removed, which made it financially possible for many more counties to participate in the program. The annual budget for THP-Plus in the 2007-08 fiscal year was \$35.5 million.

Methodology

The THP-Plus Participant Survey was conducted by the John Burton Foundation to evaluate the outcomes of youth enrolled in the THP-Plus program. The survey was distributed to youth enrolled in THP-Plus during March 2008. Surveys were sent to the 54 certified THP-Plus providers, which distributed the survey to youth participants. By the end of April 2008, 458 completed surveys had been returned by 34 THP-Plus providers, representing approximately half of the youth enrolled in THP-Plus statewide at that time. The survey requested information on work and educational status, hourly wages, permanent connection with an adult, and criminal justice system involvement, both at entry and currently, as well as the youths' satisfaction with various program elements.

The results described below were obtained primarily through descriptive and bivariate analyses, with limited use of multivariate linear and logistic regression models. For purposes of evaluating the changes experienced by youth in the program, only those who had been in the program for more than one month were included for analysis, a total of 398 youth. Those youth receiving SSI were eliminated from the analysis of work status because many were not expected to obtain work due to their disability. SSI recipients' school enrollment status was comparable to those who did not receive SSI, and thus the full sample was used in analyzing school enrollment and educational attainment. Only findings that are statistically significant are reported unless otherwise specified.

Description of Sample

The surveys received were from respondents in predominantly urban areas, with 43 percent from the San Francisco Bay Area, 18 percent from greater Los Angeles, and 39 percent from the remainder of California. Just over two-thirds of respondents were female. A substantial proportion of respondents were young parents, with 117 respondents, or 26 percent of the sample, being custodial mothers. Six percent of respondents were receiving the disability benefit Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Half of respondents lived in single-site housing, 35 percent lived in scattered-site housing, and 15 percent were living with host families. The average age of respondents was 19.6 years, with the majority, 75 percent, being between 18 and 20 years old. Due to an accidental omission on the survey instrument, youth were not asked for information on their race.

TABLE 1. DESCRIPTION OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

N = 458

Gender		Length of time in program	
Male	32%	<1 month	12%
Female	68%	1-6 months	50%
		7-12 months	24%
Custodial mothers	26%	13-18 months	9%
		19-24 months	5%
Age			
Average	19.6 yrs	SSI recipients	6%
18	19%		
19	31%	Housing model	
20	25%	Single site	48%
21	14%	Scattered site	37%
22	9%	Host family	15%
23	2%		

Housing immediately prior to THP-Plus	
Foster care placement	30%
Apartment leased by youth	13%
With friend or family member, no rent paid	30%
Emergency shelter or homeless	13%
Other	14%

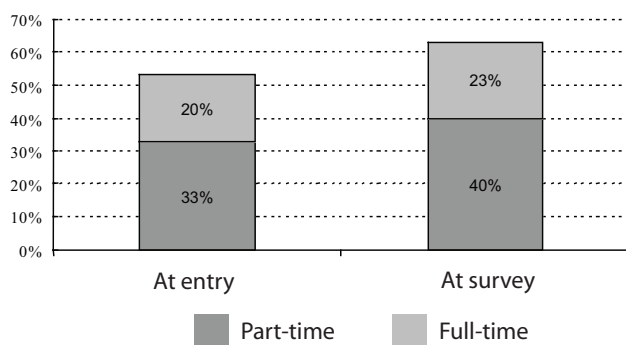
Most respondents were fairly new to the program, with 62 percent having been in the program for six months or less and only 14 percent for more than a year. This may be due in part to the recent implementation of the program in many counties. Participants came from a variety of previous housing situations: 30 percent came directly from foster care, 30 percent were previously living rent-free with relatives or friends, 13 percent were previously paying for their housing, 13 percent were previously homeless, and 14 percent reported other housing arrangements such as paying rent to a relative or friend. At the time of the survey, 25 percent of all respondents and 38 percent of custodial mothers believed they would be homeless without THP-Plus.

At entry into THP-Plus, 63 percent of survey respondents reported that high school or the equivalent was their highest educational level. A significantly smaller percentage of custodial mothers had finished high school at entry than non-parents, just 55 percent upon entry into THP-Plus.

Work and Wages

Survey respondents reported significant increases in work participation since entering THP-Plus. Over half of THP-Plus participants reported having a job at entry (53%), with 33 percent working part-time and 20 percent full-time. At the time of the survey, the total percentage of respondents working had increased 19 percent to 63 percent (40% were working part-time and 23% full-time). Neither age nor length of time in the program was correlated with previous or current work status, suggesting that the increase in work may be attributable primarily to entry into and participation in the program.

TABLE 2. CHANGE IN WORK STATUS SINCE ENTRY

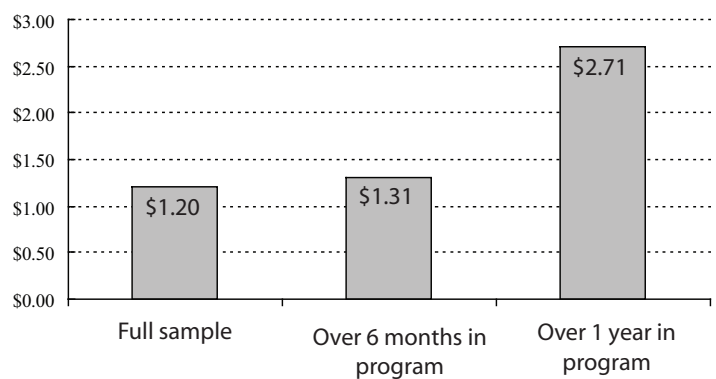


Youth in each of the three THP-Plus models reported increased rates of work participation. Youth living in each type of housing provided by THP-Plus experienced an increase in their work status. The biggest changes in work status were among youth in the single-site and host family models (increasing by 12% and 10% respectively). Although the increase in rate of employment was only 5 percent for those in scattered-site housing, far more of these youth were employed at entry (65%, compared to 51% of those in single-site housing and 44% of those in host families). At the time of the survey, the percentage of employed youth in scattered-site housing remained significantly higher, 70 percent, compared to 63 percent of those in single-site housing and 54 percent of those living with host families.

Survey respondents reported significant increases in hourly wage, particularly after one year of program participation. Respondents' hourly wage increased substantially since entry, from an average of \$9.05 for all those working at entry to \$10.25 per hour for all those working at the time of the survey, an increase of \$1.20 per hour, or 13 percent, a change that was not influenced by age.

The level of wage increase was related to the length of time the participant had been in THP-Plus. The average hourly wage increase since entry for those who had been in the program for more than six months was \$1.31 more per hour than the increase for those who had been in the program less than six months. The average wage increase since entry for those who had been in the program more than one year was substantially larger, \$2.71 more per hour, compared to those who had been in the program less than a year. Additionally, respondents who worked full-time earned a higher hourly wage. Those who were working full-time at the time of the survey earned an average of \$11.11 per hour compared to an average of \$9.71 per hour for part-time workers, a difference of \$1.40 per hour, or 14 percent.

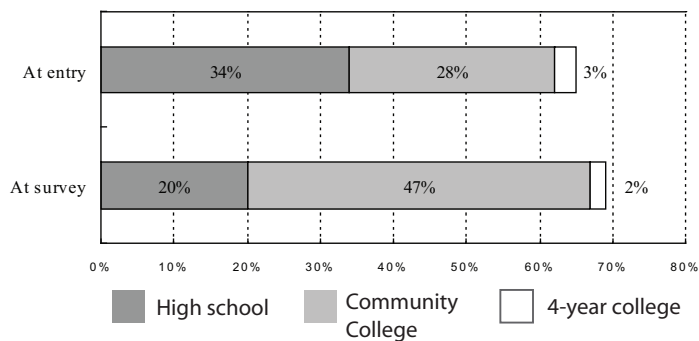
TABLE 3. CHANGE IN WAGE SINCE ENTRY



School Enrollment and Achievement

Significantly more respondents had enrolled in school since entering THP-Plus, particularly in community college. School enrollment increased after entry into THP-Plus; 68 percent were enrolled in any educational program at the time of the survey compared to 65 percent at entry. Of particular note is the great increase in the numbers of respondents enrolled in community college; while 28 percent were enrolled in community college at entry into THP-Plus, 47 percent were enrolled at the time of the survey, a 68 percent increase. Unlike hourly wage, school enrollment rates were not related to the length of time participants had been in THP-Plus.

FIGURE 4. CHANGE IN SCHOOL ENROLLMENT STATUS SINCE ENTRY



Academic achievement among participants was limited, likely due to the short average length of time in THP-Plus.

Thirty-four percent of all respondents and 45 percent of custodial mothers entered THP-Plus without a high school diploma. At the time of the survey, these figures had decreased (to 29% for all respondents and 39% for custodial mothers), however the differences were not statistically significant. This is likely due to the short period of time most respondents had been in the program. Well over half of respondents (62%) had been in the program less than six months and over three-quarters (82%) had been in the program less than a year, a length of time that is not sufficient to complete an additional year or more of education.

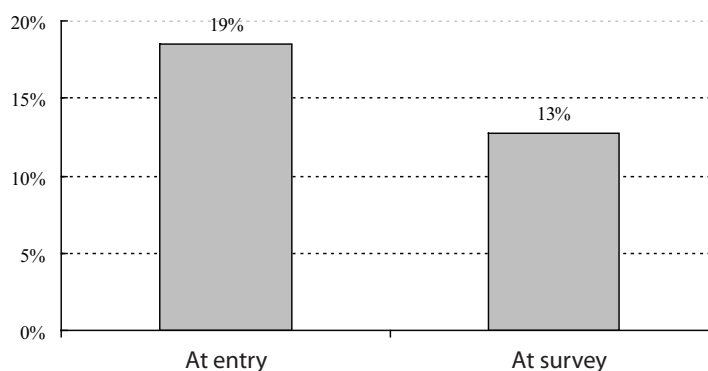
Work and School

Increases in work participation were associated with remaining in or returning to school. An unexpected finding of the study was that changes in work status were positively associated with changes in school enrollment. Fully 40 percent of the sample were both working and attending school at the time of the survey. Of those who increased work by moving from unemployment to employment or from part-time to full-time work, 69 percent either remained in school or returned to school. Of those who returned to school, 65 percent either maintained or increased their employment. These findings suggest that youth who increase their work participation tend to increase their school participation as well, rather than “trading off” school for work.

Respondents report decreased levels of “disconnectedness” since entering THP-Plus. Another important finding was a

decrease in the percentage of respondents who were neither attending school nor working. In the youth literature, this is commonly referred to as “disconnectedness.” At entry into THP-Plus, 19 percent of non-SSI respondents were “disconnected,” reporting that they were neither working nor attending school. Again, youth receiving SSI were excluded from this comparison because many were not expected to obtain work due to their disability. At the time of the survey, the percentage that were neither working nor attending school had decreased 38 percent, to 13 percent of the non-SSI respondents. This suggests that THP-Plus may well be accomplishing its goal of engaging youth in supportive services that result in work and/or school participation.

FIGURE 5. CHANGE IN “DISCONNECTED YOUTH” SINCE ENTRY



Criminal Justice Involvement

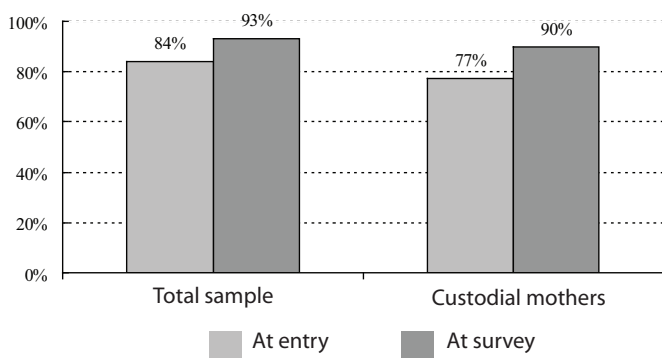
A sizable percentage of youth in THP-Plus had juvenile probation involvement. Many respondents had a history of involvement with the juvenile justice system. Twenty-one percent of survey respondents reported that they had been convicted of an offense as a juvenile: 17 percent of females and 30 percent of males.

Involvement in the criminal justice system since entering the program was very low for survey respondents. Youth participants reported a very low level of criminal justice involvement after entry into THP-Plus, with only 4 percent having had a criminal misdemeanor or felony conviction since entry. Criminal justice activity was concentrated among youth who had been convicted of an offense as a juvenile: only 1 percent of respondents who did not have a criminal offense at entry had subsequently been convicted of an offense.

Permanent Connection with an Adult

Significantly more respondents had established a permanent connection with an adult who could provide support, advice, and guidance since entering THP-Plus. At entry, 84 percent had a supportive connection with an adult, while by the time of the survey 93 percent reported such a connection; thus, the number of youth without a permanent relationship with a supportive adult decreased by more than 50 percent. This change was even more marked for custodial mothers; significantly fewer (77%) had a permanent connection at entry, but by the time of the survey 90 percent had a connection, making them comparable to the remainder of the sample. There was no statistical difference in the percentage of youth who had a permanent adult connection by model type of THP-Plus. Having a permanent connection with an adult did not have a significant effect on any of the other outcomes examined. However, having such a connection can be viewed as an outcome in itself designed to prepare youth for the future, as it is intended to establish an ongoing source of support and guidance for young persons after they exit the program.

FIGURE 6. CHANGE IN PERMANENT CONNECTION SINCE ENTRY



Program Satisfaction

Youth reported high levels of satisfaction with THP-Plus. Youth were asked to rate the program and its components as Excellent, Good, Fair, or Poor. Satisfaction with the program was very high, with 92 percent of respondents rating the program Excellent or Good. Participants in the host family model were significantly more satisfied than those in single-site or scattered site housing, with 98 percent rating the program Excellent or Good, compared to 92 percent of those in scattered site housing and 89 percent of those in single site. The respondents as a whole were also pleased with the safety and quality

of the housing, with 89 percent rating it Excellent or Good. Those in the host family program were again significantly more satisfied than those in other models, with 97 percent rating their housing Excellent or Good, compared to 88 percent of those in single-site and scattered-site housing.

Respondents also reported very high satisfaction with their case managers; 93 percent rated their case manager as Excellent or Good, with fully 73 percent rating their case manager as Excellent. The most potent predictor of program satisfaction was satisfaction with the case manager; 91 percent of those who rated their case manager Excellent also rated the program as Excellent, with 49 percent of the sample rating both their case manager and the overall program Excellent, and 87 percent of the sample rating both their case manager and the program as either Excellent or Good.

For most survey respondents, the single predictor of satisfaction with the case manager was frequency of contact with the case manager. Sixty-one percent of respondents reported seeing their case manager once a week or more, with only 5 percent seeing their case manager less than once a month. Despite the overall relationship between frequency of case manager visits and case manager satisfaction, 98 percent of respondents living in host families rated their case managers Excellent or Good, although they saw their case managers on average less than three times per month. This may be due to the supportive function served by their host families.

Survey respondents were less satisfied with other aspects of THP-Plus, including relationships with other youth in the program and the sense of community in their living situation. Only 68 percent of respondents described their relationships with other youth in the program as Excellent or Good, and 9 percent reported them as Poor. The second lowest rated aspect of THP-Plus was the sense of community in participants' living situations, which 78 percent rated as Excellent or Good, and 5 percent rated as Poor.

The majority of respondents, 56 percent, reported that they thought the 24-month length of the THP-Plus program was "just right," with 42 percent reporting that it is "too short" and 2 percent reporting that it is "too long." Those living in host families were particularly likely to be satisfied with the program length, with fully 70 percent believing the program length was "just right."

In response to open-ended questions at the end of the survey, 20 percent reiterated that they believed the program was too short. However, another 20 percent indicated that no improve-

ments to the program were needed. In addition, over 7 percent explicitly expressed thanks or gratitude for the program, while many more made appreciative comments or offered enthusiastic endorsements. Given the nature of these responses to open-ended questions, which respondents were not required to answer, these remarks indicate high praise.

Limitations

In the absence of a comparison or control group, it is not clear whether the achievements of youth in this survey represent different outcomes than for the population of former foster youth as a whole, nor is it clear whether those outcomes can be attributed to the THP-Plus program. The information gathered is also based on self-reports which may be influenced by what participants are willing to answer or to answer honestly. The study is also cross-sectional in nature, and since many respondents had been in the program a relatively short time, the study did not capture the overall effects of the program. In particular, only 14 percent of the respondents had been in the program for more than a year, in part due to the relatively recent implementation of the program in many counties; future surveys may provide a better understanding of how youth fare in the later stages of the intervention.

There is some evidence that the survey sample may not resemble the overall population of former foster youth. For example, compared to survey participants in a 2006 study of current and former foster youth at age 19 (the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth), at program entry more of the THP-Plus respondents were employed (53% of THP-Plus survey participants compared to 40% of survey participants in the Midwest Study) and more were enrolled in school (65% of THP-Plus survey participants compared to 39% of survey participants in the Midwest Study⁵). Far fewer in the survey sample were not working and not in school (19% compared to 32%). It is also likely that the proportion of young women is higher in the THP-Plus survey sample than the overall population of former foster youth (68% of THP-Plus survey participants compared to 54% of survey participants in the Midwest Study), although youth emancipating from foster care in California has historically been disproportionately female⁶, constituting 58 percent or 59 percent of the total number of emancipating foster youth in each of fiscal years 2002-2003 to 2006-2007, roughly 38 percent higher than the number of males.⁷ In addition, the sample most likely contains more custodial parents than the general population of former foster

youth (26% of THP THP-Plus survey participants compared to 17% of survey participants in the Midwest Study.⁸)

Finally, there is the question of how representative the survey sample is of the overall population of youth in THP-Plus. The sample represents approximately 50 percent of the youth in THP-Plus at the time of the survey. However, the sample was not randomly generated and factors may have influenced the distribution and collection of surveys. At the current time, there is not a comprehensive demographic profile of youth in THP-Plus, which would enable a general comparison of the sample and overall THP-Plus population.

Summary

In comparing the experiences of youth upon entry into THP-Plus with their experiences after participation in the program, we found:

Youth are not well prepared for discharge from foster care:

First, it is clear from the findings that many of the youth in THP-Plus were not well prepared for independence when they entered the program. A third had not finished high school or an equivalent and more than half were not employed; a sixth did not have a permanent connection with a supportive adult, and a quarter expected that they would be homeless without THP-Plus. Particularly troubling, 14 percent entered the program not as a result of a well-planned transition, but directly from homelessness. These findings strongly suggest that more assistance is required to better prepare youth exiting foster care.

Custodial mothers are particularly unprepared for discharge from foster care.

Custodial mothers were in an even more precarious position compared to non-parents when they entered THP-Plus, with a third fewer employed, one and a half times as many who had not finished high school, and more than a third anticipating homelessness without THP-Plus. In addition, at entrance into the program nearly a quarter of custodial mothers lacked a permanent connection to an adult who could provide support, advice, and guidance, leaving them without an important support as they face the challenge of parenting while building a successful adult life. Findings such as these suggest that parenting youth are particularly unprepared for their transition from foster care and highlight a need for improvements in transition planning on the part of the foster care system.

Youth in THP-Plus are reporting significant progress in the areas of work participation, increase in wages, educational enrollment, connectedness and permanency. The survey results suggest that transitional supportive housing programs may have the potential to alleviate the risks faced by these youth and prepare them for more productive, successful adult lives. A higher percentage of youth were employed since entering THP-Plus, their hourly wage had risen substantially, more were enrolled in school, fewer were disengaged with both work and school, and more had established a permanent supportive connection with an adult. Of these outcomes, the most notable were the significant increase in wage for youth after one year in THP-Plus and the significant increase in rates of enrollment into higher education.

THP-Plus is meeting an urgent housing need. As noted in the report, 14 percent of survey respondents moved into THP-Plus directly from homelessness. When asked where they would be living if not in their current housing program, 1 in 4 of all respondents and over 1 in 3 custodial mothers stated that they would be homeless. This information suggests that THP-Plus is not serving former foster youth who would otherwise be living in safe, stable housing. Instead, THP-Plus is being accessed by former foster youth with urgent housing needs, who would often otherwise be homeless.

Youth report high levels of satisfaction with THP-Plus and seek better relationships with other youth in the program and a sense of community. Overall, the level of satisfaction reported by youth in THP-Plus was very high, both generally and for the supportive services provided by the program. The two areas where youth appeared less satisfied were in their relationships with other youth in the program and a sense of community. These findings suggest that additional efforts be taken to address those areas in THP-Plus.

Systematic collection of data is needed. These findings begin to describe the experiences of youth in California's only housing program for former foster youth, THP-Plus. However, an ongoing analysis of the experiences of youth in THP-Plus is required to better understand questions left unanswered in this analysis. These questions include the average retention rate of youth in THP-Plus and whether or not there is a participation threshold, after which youth experience significantly improved outcomes, among others. Additionally, long term outcomes, such as educational attainment, require an ongoing commitment to data collection and analysis. Addressing these and other concerns will ensure that THP-Plus adapts to meet the needs of California's former foster youth.

Endnotes

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