

Supporting Successful Transitions into Adulthood for Youth in Foster Care:

Reforming California's Independent Living Program

March 2023



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Introduction

As of October 2022, over 53,000 children and youth are in foster care in California, including approximately 13,000 youth between the ages of 16 and 21.¹ The State has an obligation to offer services and supports to help these young people transition into adulthood. The Independent Living Program (ILP) helps transition age youth currently or formerly in foster care move forward on a path to successful adulthood by providing services and supports in the areas of education, employment, financial and independent living skills, and housing assistance. Funded by the federal John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood and local funding, California's ILP serves eligible youth ages 16 up to 21 years old.

Although ILP has helped many young people, transition age youth with foster care experience continue to face challenges in their lives, and improvements to the ILP program could help better address some of these challenges.

Transition services and supports are critical for youth with foster care experience because they face significant obstacles as they transition to adulthood. Youth with foster care experience face the long-term consequences of having experienced the trauma of child abuse or neglect and being removed from their homes. While youth are in foster care, they may have limited opportunities to gain real-world experience, develop stable relationships with supportive adults, and build the autonomy needed to be self-sufficient.² Compared to their peers in the general population, transition age youth currently or formerly in foster care experience greater school instability, housing instability, difficulty finding and maintaining employment, behavioral and physical health challenges, and difficulty establishing and maintaining relationships with people they can rely on.³

In this report, we highlight recent data on education, housing, and employment outcomes for transition age youth with foster care experience that demonstrate the barriers these youth face in the transition to adulthood. We draw on input from about 175 transition age youth who have participated in ILP in California to identify ongoing challenges that young people face to engage in ILP and build self-sufficiency.⁴ We highlight examples of services and supports being offered by California county ILPs. Finally, we provide policy and program recommendations informed by the perspectives of youth whom we surveyed to help improve and expand ILP and make it a better resource for transition age youth with foster care experience.

Education, housing, and employment outcomes amongst young people with foster care experience

Transition age youth currently or formerly in foster care face obstacles in the areas of education, housing, and employment that negatively impact their transition to adulthood. In education, youth in foster care face unique challenges in their lives that make it difficult to stay on track in school, such as multiple changes in placements during their time in care, often leading to multiple school transfers. With each school transfer, students in foster care experience considerable learning loss. Moreover, due to the trauma and instability they have experienced, youth in foster care may have trouble focusing in school. As a result of these unique challenges, **youth in foster care are far less likely to earn a high school**

diploma in four years (61%) than students overall (87%).⁵ In addition, although 93% of youth in foster care say they want to go to college, only 8% obtain an associate's or bachelor's degree by age 26.⁶ Due to their poor academic outcomes, youth with foster care experience have lower educational attainment than their peers when seeking employment, making it difficult to compete in the job market.

In terms of housing, far too many transition age youth currently or formerly in foster care experience housing instability and homelessness, which leads to further trauma, negatively impacts their well-being, and impedes their successful transition into adulthood. For instance, youth experiencing homelessness face worse physical and mental health, higher rates of substance use disorders, higher rates of being victims of crime or engaging in criminal activity, and greater barriers to education and employment than their peers who have not experienced homelessness.⁷ To address the poor outcomes and high rates of homelessness that youth often faced when they were forced to exit foster care at age 18, in 2010, California enacted legislation extending foster care up to age 21. Despite this extension, youth often continue to face homelessness and deep poverty, even while participating in extended foster care. According to a recent study, **over half of transition age youth in foster care experienced couch-surfing and/or homelessness between ages 17 and 21.**⁸ Long transitional housing program waitlists, barriers to housing program entry or retention, unaffordable housing, limited housing near education and employment opportunities, and a lack of youth-friendly housing options contribute to this problem.

In employment, studies reflect that participation in extended foster care improves employment outcomes compared to youth who exit care at age 18. A recent CalYOUTH study found that each year that youth participated in extended foster care resulted in longer periods of employment and increased total earnings between the ages of 21 and 23.⁹

Despite these positive findings, youth who participate in extended foster care still experience poor employment outcomes 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 peers in the general population.** Additionally, nearly 60% of the young people in the study earned an annual income below the federal poverty level compared to 46% of their peers in the general population.¹⁰ These poor employment outcomes negatively impact the ability of young people currently or formerly in foster care to afford to meet their basic needs as adults.

Furthermore, youth with foster care experience often lack stable connections with supportive adults who can help them navigate complex life events, such as finding employment or housing, compounding the challenges these youth face during the transition to adulthood. Youth with strong support systems tend to experience improved outcomes compared to those without strong support systems. For example, youth with a strong social support network are more likely to find a job and to earn higher wages than those without a strong support network.¹¹

Overall, these poorer outcomes in education, housing, and employment show the need for strengthened transition services and supports tailored to the unique needs of youth with foster care experience, including through the Independent Living Program.

Background on the Independent Living Program

Independent living programs were designed to help youth aging out of the foster care system in their transition to adulthood. In 1985, the federal Independent Living Initiative (Public Law 99-272) created the first program to provide states with funding under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to help transition age youth develop the skills needed for independent living. The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (Public Law 106-169) amended Title IV-E to create the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, giving states more funding and greater flexibility in providing services and supports for youth currently or formerly in foster care who are transitioning to adulthood.¹² In 2018, the Family First Prevention Services Act renamed the program to be the Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood.¹³

ILP Eligibility

Youth are eligible for ILP services from age 16 to the day before their 21st birthday, provided one of the following criteria is met:

- The youth was/is in foster care at any time from their 16th to their 19th birthday.
- The youth was placed in out-of-home care by a tribe or tribal organization between their 16th and 19th birthdays.
- The youth is a former dependent who entered into a kinship guardianship at any age and is receiving/received Kinship Guardianship Assistance Payments (Kin-GAP) between the ages of 16 and 18.
- The youth is a former dependent who has been appointed a Non-Related Legal Guardian (NRLG) after attaining age 8 and is receiving/received permanent placement services.¹⁴

Counties are required to serve eligible youth ages 16 to 20 (up to their 21st birthday), and they may serve younger or older youth if they choose to do so. In 2018, the Family First Prevention Services Act gave states the option to extend ILP services up to age 23, but California has not yet opted into this extension.¹⁵ Youth participation in ILP is voluntary.

In 2022-23, California received approximately \$16.3 million in a federal grant allocation for ILP, which the State allocates to each county to provide ILP services and supports to eligible youth.¹⁶ Federal funding fluctuates and has decreased over time. Counties also receive local funding for ILP under realignment, meaning that responsibility and resources have been shifted from the State to the counties, providing counties with greater flexibility over programs and services based on local needs.¹⁷

The State provides limited guidance around the services and supports that can be offered, and counties are largely provided with the flexibility to determine what supports and services will best meet the needs of the youth in their county. Counties are required to coordinate and collaborate with other state and federal agencies to ensure eligible youth are connected to other existing services and supports. Counties may use up to 20% of their ILP funding allocation on administrative costs, and they may use up to 30% of their allocation to provide housing (room and board) for youth ages 18 to 20, inclusive.

According to ILP regulations,¹⁸ “core services shall be provided based on identified individual needs and goals as documented in the Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP) including, but not limited to:

- Education, including: skill development, assistance and referrals to obtain literacy skills, high school diploma/GED, post-secondary education experiential learning and computer skills;
- Career development, including: assistance and referral to obtain career exploration, work readiness and responsibility skills, employment development, employment experience, vocational training, apprenticeship opportunities, job placement and retention;
- Assistance and referral to promote health (including mental health) and safety skills including, but not limited to: substance abuse prevention, smoking cessation, pregnancy prevention, and nutrition education;
- Referral to available mentors and mentoring programs;
- Daily living skills, including: information on and experiences and training in financial management and budgeting; personal responsibility skills; self-advocacy; household management; consumer and resource use; survival skills; and obtaining vital records;
- Financial resources, including: information and referrals regarding financial assistance if applicable, including, but not limited to, incentives, stipends, savings and trust fund accounts, educational/vocational grants, CAL-Grants, Employment Development Departments, registered in One-Stop Career Centers, Workforce Investment Act funding and programs, other employment programs and other forms of public assistance including, but not limited to, CalWORKs, Food Stamps, and Medi-Cal; and
- Housing information, including: training and referrals about transitional housing programs; federal, state and local housing programs; and landlord/tenant issues.”

What is a TILP?

Every youth in foster care is required to create a **Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP)** at age 14 or 15 with their social worker and anyone else they want to invite to support them in developing a TILP. The TILP outlines a youth's goals for the future and detailed plans for reaching them. TILPs must be updated at least every 6 months, or more frequently as youth's needs change. For youth who choose to participate in ILP, the TILP provides the basis for the services and supports, including financial benefits, they receive as part of ILP.^{19, 20, 21}

Due to the flexibility allowed in delivering ILP services, counties across California utilize different approaches to serving eligible youth. Some counties operate their ILPs through county agencies, and some subcontract part or all their services and supports to community organizations. In addition, some counties in California provide supports primarily through a workshop or class format; some primarily use one-on-one case management meetings with youth to develop their living skills and work on their goals; and some use a hybrid of the two.

Little research exists that evaluates the effectiveness of ILP in California.²² A national study of the ILP found that, controlling for other variables, transition age youth who received post-secondary education support, budget and financial management training, and education financial assistance were more likely

to achieve higher levels of educational attainment. Post-secondary education support was found to have the most positive impact on young people participating in ILP. Transition age youth who received post-secondary education support were more likely to secure employment and less likely to experience homelessness.²³

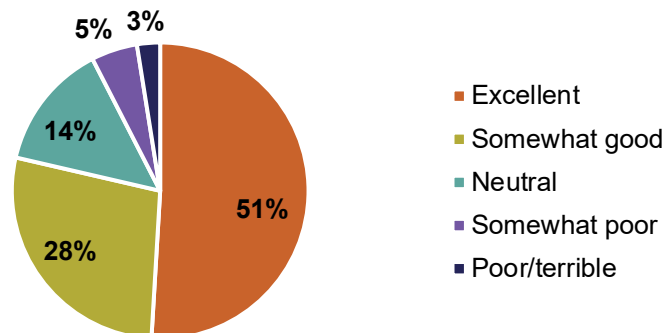
Youth's perspectives on ILP

To inform the recommendations highlighted in this paper, we conducted focus groups with youth and distributed a youth survey across the state to ask transition age youth who had participated in ILP for their perspectives on what is working and what could be better with ILP.

We received completed surveys from 159 youth ages 16-24 who were currently or formerly in foster care and had participated in ILP in California. See the Appendix for a summary of the findings of the survey.

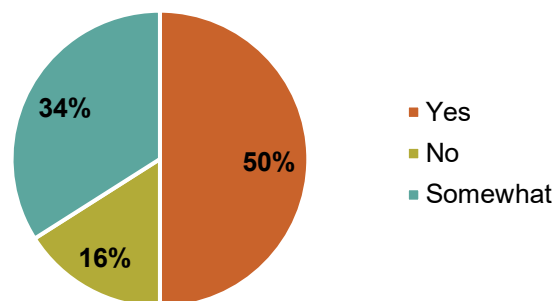
Youth respondents reported generally positive experiences with ILP. Half (51%) of youth respondents rated their ILP experience as "Excellent," and 28% said their experience was "Somewhat good." On the other hand, 8% rated their experience as "Somewhat poor" or "Poor/terrible," while the remaining 14% rated their experience as "Neutral" (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Overall, how would you rate your experience with ILP?



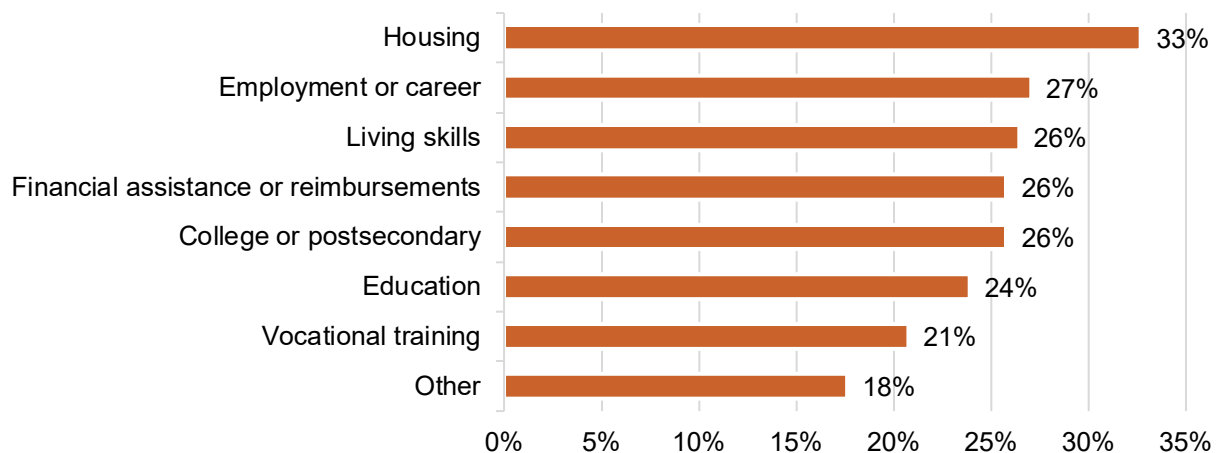
Half of youth respondents (50%) said that ILP did help them prepare for adulthood. One third (34%) said ILP "somewhat" helped them prepare for adulthood, and 16% said "No," ILP did not help (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Did ILP prepare you for adulthood?



Despite many youth having positive experiences with ILP, they also identified a range of services and supports they wish they had gotten through ILP along with ways they think that ILP could be improved to better serve transition age youth with foster care experience. When asked what they wish they had gotten from ILP that they didn't get or they wanted more of, youth respondents most often selected housing supports (33%), followed by employment or career preparation (27%) and living skills (26%). 18% of respondents selected Other (see Figure 3). Some of the other services they wanted to receive were: More encouragement and motivation; more resources for parenting youth; more LGBTQ+ events and services; "hard skills, not just information but tools"; connections to local advocacy organizations; and resources available after age 21.

Figure 3. What do you wish you had gotten from ILP that you didn't get or that you wanted more of?



These findings directly align with the purpose and goals of ILP. Therefore, by further improving ILP, county programs should be able to better meet these needs and better prepare youth with foster care experience to succeed in adulthood.

In their own words

What youth wish they had gotten through ILP:

- "I wish I got more hard skills, not just information but tools. There's not enough tangible help."
- "I wanted career training in my specific field. Having internships or a career coach would be great."
- "I wish that there were more resources for parenting youth. There isn't enough."
- "I believe the services were all helpful."

What youth feel would make ILP better:

- "More in-person workshops and less Zoom time. Ways to apply practical skills in a workshop."
- "More mentoring."
- "Getting people that have been through this or know where we come from."
- "More outreach so that young adults know."
- "More consistent communication with youth."
- "More resources for housing and career placement."
- "I think that ILP would be better if clients were given more direction and training towards employment goals."

- Youth



Youth face challenges to engaging in and benefiting from ILP

Despite the intent of ILP, many young people with foster care experience continue to struggle to achieve self-sufficiency as they transition into adulthood, including in those key areas targeted by the program. While youth respondents reported generally positive experiences with ILP, input provided by youth, county programs, and child welfare advocates for this report highlight multiple policy and programmatic challenges that prevent youth from fully engaging in ILP or benefiting as intended.

First, **the age limits for participation in ILP are too restrictive**. While ILP eligibility begins at age 16, this may be too late for some youth to access the assistance they need to get on track in preparing for post-secondary education and career. Starting services at age 14, as youth are entering high school, would encourage them to plan for their future earlier and get them connected to supports sooner. For example, programs could offer these younger youth supports such as assistance in successfully navigating and completing high school and early career exploration opportunities. Moreover, eligibility for ILP ends when a young person turns 21 years of age. However, since extended foster care is now available up to age 21, youth leaving care at age 21 currently experience a “cliff” as they abruptly lose access to multiple services and supports. These youth would benefit from access to ongoing supports at older ages, such as employment and housing assistance, to help them successfully navigate the transition to self-sufficiency. Although federal ILP policy allows states to extend ILP services up to age 23, and more than 30 other states have exercised this option, California has not yet opted into this age extension.²⁴ Notably, both youth respondents and county programs reported wanting to expand the age eligibility for ILP services and supports. Some counties already serve youth under age 16 or ages 21 and over, and it often requires significant collaboration within their communities to secure additional funding or partnerships that can provide the additional services beyond what is required to be provided through ILP.

Some counties provide extended supports to youth who are younger or older than the ILP age eligibility.

Placer County ILP serves youth ages 14 and 15 using supplemental funding. Youth are reassessed for ILP eligibility at age 16.

San Francisco County serves youth up to 22 years old using ILP funding.

Shasta County ILP partners with their county office of education to provide early services and supports for youth as young as 12. They also partner with a local community college to provide extended ILP services to youth 21 and older who attend the college.

Los Angeles County's employment programs serve youth ages 14-24, primarily using funding outside of ILP. In addition, Los Angeles County secures funding from outside ILP to provide college scholarships to youth 21 and over, with the understanding that most youth need additional support to complete college after age 21.

Additionally, existing **ILP supports and services may not reflect the current realities facing transition age youth with foster care experience**. ILP was originally designed to help youth aging out of foster care at age 18 in their transition to adulthood. Although extended foster care is now available in California until age 21, some county ILPs have not been updated to reflect this change and address the current challenges that transition age youth are facing. For example, youth respondents reported that housing is the top area in which they would like more support from ILP. They wanted more assistance with securing housing, such as identifying permanent housing options, accessing housing vouchers, or understanding how to get an apartment. In addition, youth respondents reported wanting greater access to alternative mental health therapies and holistic wellness supports, such as yoga and mindfulness programs. Counties could also be utilizing modern ways of reaching out to and engaging youth, including through texting, social media, and other forms of technology, and notifying them about the full array of services and supports that are offered through ILP.

Los Angeles County uses up to 30% of its funding allocation to assist ILP-eligible youth with housing, including housing/rental assistance, dorm assistance, and approximately 129 ILP-contracted transitional housing beds.

Most county programs do not use ILP funding to provide housing, largely due to a lack of funding, at a time when there is greater competition for scarce housing around the state.

Los Angeles County implemented an online system in 2022 to issue payments through bank cards that take 1 week to be issued rather than 4-6 weeks for paper checks.

When counties issue paper checks to youth for financial assistance or reimbursements, youth may face obstacles in waiting weeks for the paper check to be issued and then having to cash the check; instead, digital payments or bank cards can be a more effective way of paying youth.

In addition to some services and supports being outdated, **there is considerable inconsistency in the supports and services offered by ILPs across the state**. For example, in terms of service delivery, some counties provide supports primarily through a workshop or class format; some primarily use one-on-one case management to develop youth's living skills and work on their goals; and some use a hybrid of the two. Additionally, some, but not all, counties offer incentives or stipends for participation in available services; the incentives offered vary in amount depending on the county. Although these differences reflect the flexibility allowed by the State for counties to implement programs that best fit the needs of the young people in their county, more could be done to ensure that programs from county to county are delivered more consistently and in line with best practices. This is of particular concern for transition age youth with foster care experience who are highly mobile and may receive ILP services and supports from a new county after they move. Notably, county ILPs are required to complete an annual ILP Narrative

Report to the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), which CDSS uses to submit its annual report to the federal government. In the report, counties are asked to report on best practices they have implemented in their delivery of services and supports. Some county programs reported the desire to have those best practices compiled and distributed to all programs so they can better learn from each other.

Moreover, **the ILP is underfunded statewide**, and county allocations of federal ILP funding are based on an outdated methodology that does not consider the current numbers of youth who are eligible for ILP in each county. The lack of adequate funding directly impacts youth's overall experience with ILP and their ability to engage with its supports and services. For example, many youth respondents noted that communication with ILP staff was a challenge, due in part to large caseloads and high turnover. When ILP staff left their position, there was typically no transition plan and youth were unaware that their ILP social worker was no longer there. Youth reported that it was difficult to start over again with another staff person and have to share their stories with multiple people. An increase in funding would allow programs to lower staff caseloads and decrease staff turnover, offer consistently more robust services and supports, and be better positioned to provide housing support.

In their own words:

"My county's ILP is meeting and exceeding expectations. Something that is highly common and relevant in our area however is being understaffed with the high demand of youth in need of these resources."

- Youth

As a result of a lack of funding, young people in foster care who are **placed outside of the county** where their child welfare case originated may **have difficulty accessing ILP services** in the county where they have been placed. For youth placed out of county, the county of jurisdiction is financially responsible for the costs associated with serving their youth placed out of county. Counties of residence are required to provide core services to youth residing in their county but whose case originated in another county.²⁵ In practice, however, counties of residence may not be able to cover the costs of serving youth placed out of county so the services available to youth may be limited. For example, out-of-county youth may be able to participate in workshops in their county of residence, but they may not be able to access one-on-one case management or receive incentives for participation. Moreover, unless there is strong communication between counties, a county program may not know that a youth has been placed there from another county, so they cannot outreach to them about services and supports. Strengthening communication, increasing funding, and utilizing a funding methodology that accounts for the current number of ILP-eligible youth residing in each county would better ensure that young people placed out of county can receive the same services and supports as youth placed in the county.

In terms of youth participation, **lack of transportation, stigma, and inadequate information negatively impact transition age youth's engagement in ILP**. For example, transportation was the most common barrier to ILP participation that was identified by youth respondents and county programs, as youth often have difficulty finding reliable transportation to events and services. In addition, youth may choose not to participate in ILP services that are identified specifically for youth currently or formerly in foster care due to stigma. Moreover, some youth are unaware of the full breadth of opportunities offered through ILP, pointing to the need for increased outreach and marketing around ILP. For example, youth might know that ILP provides educational counseling and post-secondary educational support, but they may not know

that they can receive reimbursements for a number of things, such as graduation caps and gowns. In fact, youth respondents reported that a lack of communication was often a barrier to their engagement in ILP services, and they wanted more consistent communication from the program, more responsiveness from staff, and more information about the resources and events being offered through ILP. These barriers to engaging in ILP are reflected in data that show that, even when ILP services are offered to young people with foster care experience, they are often underutilized. For example, only 20% of transition age youth in California with foster care experience received services to connect them to employment programs or vocational training; only 11% received education finance assistance; and only 1% received room and board assistance.²⁶

Moreover, in some counties, **youth may have to seek out services from multiple agencies and systems** because there is not enough collaboration between county ILP programs and services available in the community. Youth respondents identified counties as successful in serving transition age youth when the programs have strong community collaborations and relationships. Greater community collaboration provides young people with opportunities in terms of expanded services and more seamless connections to community resources. Youth respondents reported wanting more help from ILP in the areas of housing and employment supports, two areas that require considerable collaboration with existing community resources and local programs.

San Francisco and Solano Counties subcontract their ILP programs to First Place for Youth, which connects participants to education and employment specialists in addition to the services and supports through ILP. First Place for Youth also operates their own housing programs to which youth can be referred.

San Joaquin County ILP collaborates closely with their county Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program (FYSCP) and the local community college's Guardian Scholars program to provide services and supports to youth.

Sacramento County ILP has embedded ILP staff in their local schools. The program subcontracts with four local school districts with large populations of students in foster care, and district foster youth liaisons provide ILP services to youth in their schools.

Butte County ILP operates a thrift store where youth participating in ILP can get clothes and household items that are donated by the community.

Los Angeles County works closely with the county's workforce investment boards to provide significant subsidized work experience for ILP participants. In 2020, Los Angeles County launched an auto-referral database that is linked to all America's Job Centers in the county.

Los Angeles County also provides youth who participate in ILP with the opportunity to work in paid internships in county departments.

Although the ILP aims to transition youth to independence, **the focus on self-sufficiency and independent living could be doing a disservice to transition age youth with foster care experience.** Youth formerly in foster care often struggle to attain total self-sufficiency once they age out of foster care because of the impacts of their involvement with the child welfare system, including the associated trauma and placement and education changes. Because of their time spent in foster care, they often have lost connections to caring adults in their lives and may not have people to turn to. A focus on fostering

interdependence instead of independence emphasizes the importance of establishing and maintaining permanent connections with trusted adults in their community who can help them navigate the transition to adulthood both during ILP and ongoing.²⁷

In addition, **youth respondents said they wanted more opportunities to provide their input to ILPs about what they need to be successful.** Youth identified county programs as effectively helping young people to transition to adulthood when they incorporate youth's perspectives and self-identified needs about what supports, services, and workshops they want to receive to be prepared for the future. Some county programs solicit youth input through a youth advisory board, regular surveys of youth, or by frequently asking youth what types of services and supports they want the most. Youth respondents stated they would be more engaged in ILP programming that they themselves help to shape and inform. In particular, youth respondents reported wanting more experiential learning opportunities and practical hands-on support, such as support in opening a bank account and building good credit, rather than simply being taught the definition of a credit score.

What do youth want from ILP?

Youth respondents noted that they want ILP to offer **more relevant classes and supports**, such as those addressing cooking, how to do their taxes, how to fill out housing applications and apply for Section 8 housing, how to get important documents such as social security cards or IDs, how to access alternative mental health therapies and holistic wellness supports, more services and supports for parenting youth, expanded driver's training supports, and more opportunities to connect with individuals with lived experience in the child welfare system.

Los Angeles, Napa, San Francisco, Shasta and Solano Counties have youth advisory boards or youth councils made up of ILP participants in order to get input from youth on what's working and to provide leadership opportunities for youth.

Finally, **youth respondents want ILPs to hire staff with lived experience or offer opportunities to engage in peer mentoring** with individuals with lived experience in the child welfare system. Youth respondents highlighted county ILPs as effective when they offered opportunities to connect with people who have lived experience in the child welfare system, either by hiring staff with lived experience, providing peer mentorship opportunities, or otherwise hearing the stories and experiences of other individuals with foster care experience.

Napa, Solano and Sonoma Counties' programs are primarily run by staff with lived experience in the child welfare system.

Napa, San Francisco, Solano, and Sonoma Counties run youth-led drop-in centers where youth can access a variety of resources in one place.

Contra Costa County Children & Family Services contracts with the Child Abuse Prevention Council to employ four former foster youth as Youth Partners who work with youth currently in foster care, mentoring and advocating for them, ensuring they know about the opportunities available through ILP, and assisting them in achieving their goals.

Los Angeles County hires youth formerly in foster care as ILP staff in their regional offices, working alongside their ILP coordinators.



Policy and program recommendations

With proper supports and services, transition age youth with foster care experience will be better equipped to successfully transition to adulthood. Below, we highlight eight key policy and program recommendations to ensure that ILP programs are robust and provide youth the resources and opportunities they need to navigate a successful path to adulthood.

Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Expand the age eligibility for ILP so that all counties serve eligible youth ages 14 up to 26. As a first step, California should join more than 30 other states and opt into the federal option to extend ILP services and supports up to age 23. This will provide transition age youth who have spent time in foster care with further opportunities to build self-sufficiency. Additionally, serving youth starting at age 14 allows ILPs to establish relationships with young people early on and provides greater opportunity for youth to access supports that will help them complete high school and prepare for post-secondary education or career.

Recommendation 2: Modernize and standardize the services and supports offered by ILP, while still retaining flexibility for county ILPs to meet the needs of the youth they serve. Making sure that programs reflect the current circumstances of transition age youth with foster care experience will better ensure that youth will engage in and benefit from the programming. In addition, policymakers should ensure greater standardization between county programs so that youth across the state can receive consistent services regardless of the county in which they are seeking ILP services. The ILP standard services should be informed by best practices and should contain a set of core services and supports that all county ILPs are required to offer. CDSS should facilitate the sharing of best practices among county programs by compiling and distributing the best practices that counties report in their annual ILP Narrative Reports and developing learning communities so that counties can learn from each other.

Recommendation 3: Increase ILP funding overall so that counties can provide more robust services and supports, lower staff caseloads and decrease staff turnover, and offer more housing support. In addition, counties should provide stipends to youth for their participation in certain ILP activities, such as workshops or classes. Further, the funding methodology used to allocate federal ILP funding to counties should be adjusted and updated so it accounts for the current numbers of youth eligible to be served in each county. Funding allocations should reflect that some counties serve large numbers of out-of-county youth, who should be able to receive the same services as those whose cases originated in the county.

Program Recommendations

Recommendation 4: Consider and address the barriers to transition age youth engaging in ILP. In particular, ensure that transportation options are available for youth to engage in ILP services and supports, and provide child care when needed for parenting youth. Additionally, provide greater outreach and communication, including through social media, to ensure that youth currently or formerly in foster care are aware of the full breadth of opportunities offered through ILP by telling them early and often about the array of services and supports available to them.

Recommendation 5: ILPs should focus on the importance of interdependence, making concerted efforts to help youth build and maintain relationships with trusted adults in their lives as they develop self-sufficiency. This will better ensure that young people have a permanent, natural support network they can rely on during their time in ILP and beyond.

Recommendation 6: Programs should prioritize building collaborations and relationships within their communities to maximize the services and connections that are available for youth, particularly in the areas of housing and employment resources, so youth can access services and supports in a more streamlined and centralized way.

Recommendation 7: Incorporate youth voice and choice into all ILPs so that the services offered are most relevant to the young people they serve. Youth-driven ILP programs encourage more young people to engage in ILP services and ensure programs are responsive to youth's needs and desires. Programs can gather authentic youth feedback by establishing a youth advisory board made up of ILP participants and/or through regular surveys of youth participants.

Recommendation 8: Programs should hire staff with lived experience in the child welfare system or provide other opportunities for young people to connect with individuals with foster care experience so they can benefit from peer mentorship.

Conclusion

Transition age youth currently or formerly in foster care face greater barriers in their transition to adulthood compared to their peers without foster care experience. The Independent Living Program is positioned to help young people with foster care experience during the critical time of transitioning to adulthood, yet young people face considerable challenges engaging in and benefiting from ILPs as intended. By following the recommendations above, policymakers and systems serving transition age youth with foster care experience can ensure that the Independent Living Program is more robust and better able to address the current circumstances of transition age youth currently or formerly in foster care to ensure they are equipped to become successful adults.

Appendix: Youth Survey of the Independent Living Program Summary of Findings

Children Now, in collaboration with California Youth Connection, distributed a youth survey of the Independent Living Program (ILP) across the state between December 2022 and January 2023. We received a total of 159 completed responses to the survey from youth who had participated in ILP, and 23 counties were represented among survey respondents.

Demographics

In terms of age, 38% of respondents were aged 18-19, one quarter (26%) were aged 20-21, one quarter (23%) were aged 22-24, and 13% were aged 16-17 (see Figure 1). In addition, 59% of respondents were currently in foster care, and 41% were previously in foster care (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Ages of Respondents

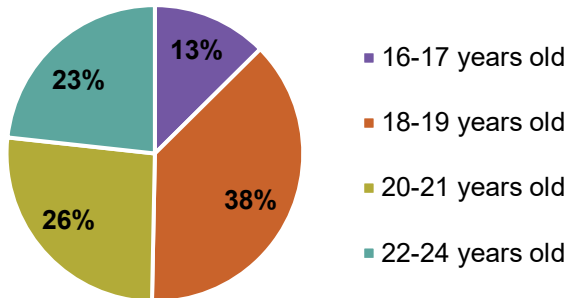
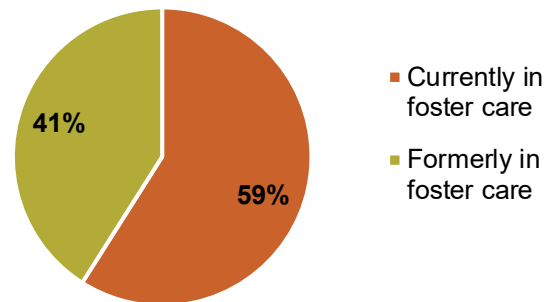


Figure 2. Respondents Currently or Formerly in Foster Care



Overall, how would you rate your experience with ILP?

When asked to rate their overall experience with ILP, respondents were generally positive about their experience. Half (51%) of surveyed respondents reported that their experience was “Excellent” and 28% said their experience was “Somewhat good.” 14% of respondents were Neutral, and only 8% reported their experience was “Somewhat poor” or “Poor/terrible” (see Figure 3).

Do you feel that ILP prepared you to transition to adulthood?

When asked if they felt that ILP helped prepare them to transition to adulthood, responses were generally positive. Half (50%) said “Yes,” and one third (34%) said ILP “somewhat” prepared them for adulthood. 16% said “No, ILP did not help” (see Figure 4).

Figure 3. Overall, how would you rate your experience with ILP?

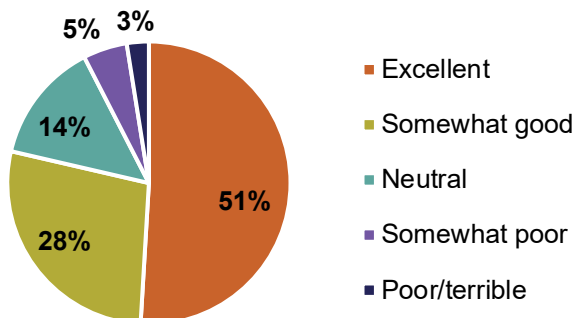
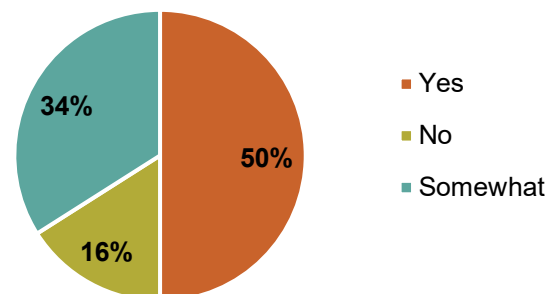


Figure 4. Did ILP prepare you for adulthood?



A note about the survey

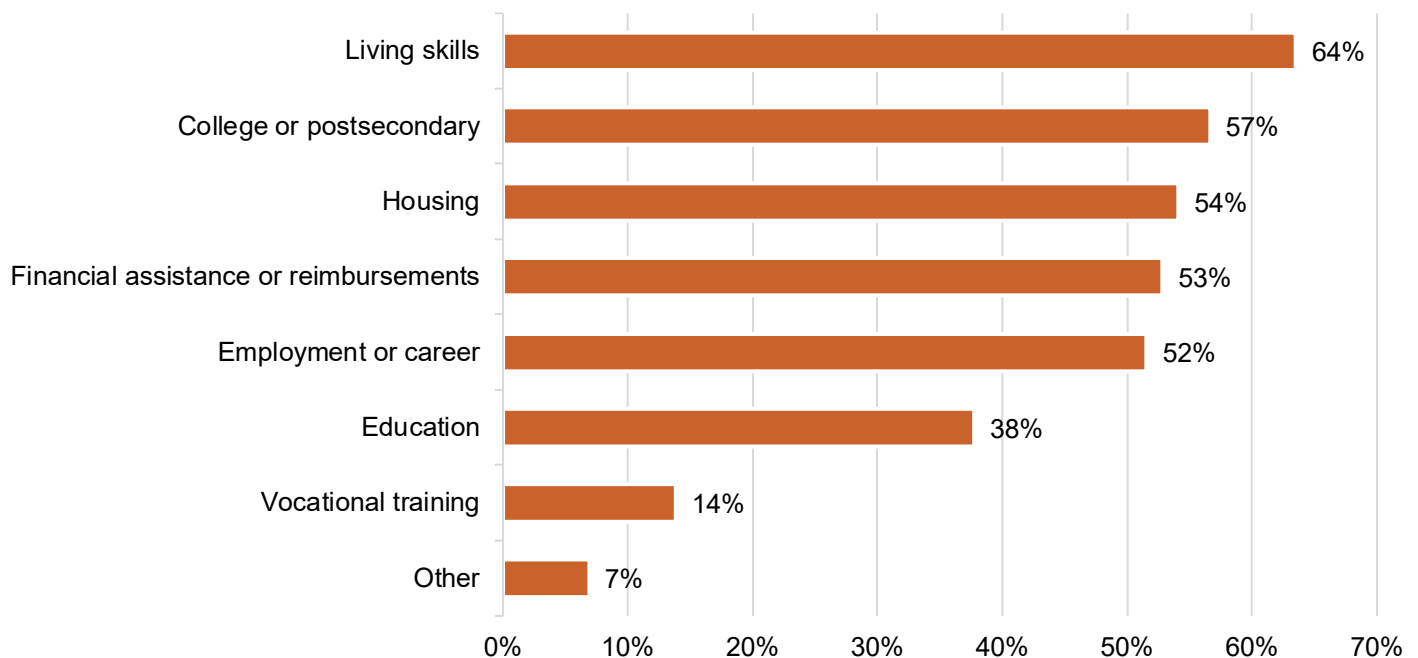
For the following four questions, respondents were provided with a list of services and supports from which to choose, as follows:

- Education, such as tutoring, counseling, study skills, help with homework
- College or postsecondary preparation, such as financial aid support, help completing college applications, test preparation, college counseling
- Employment or career preparation, such as writing resumes, developing interview skills, job placement, help finding a job
- Vocational training, such as vocational or trade programs, occupational classes
- Financial assistance or reimbursements for education or training, such as to purchase textbooks or other supplies, tuition assistance, payment for education tests
- Housing, such as access to housing resources or help finding housing
- Living skills, such as budgeting, time management, personal hygiene, decision-making, general self-efficacy
- Other (please specify)

What kinds of supports did you receive through ILP?

Youth respondents were asked what kinds of supports they received through ILP. The top three responses selected were: Living skills (64%), College or postsecondary (57%), and Housing (54%). Respondents were least likely to report that they received Vocational training (14%). 7% of respondents selected Other; their responses included: Bus passes; case management; gift cards/incentives; and six youth said they received “None” or “Not much” of these supports (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. What kinds of supports did you receive?



What do you think was most helpful about ILP?

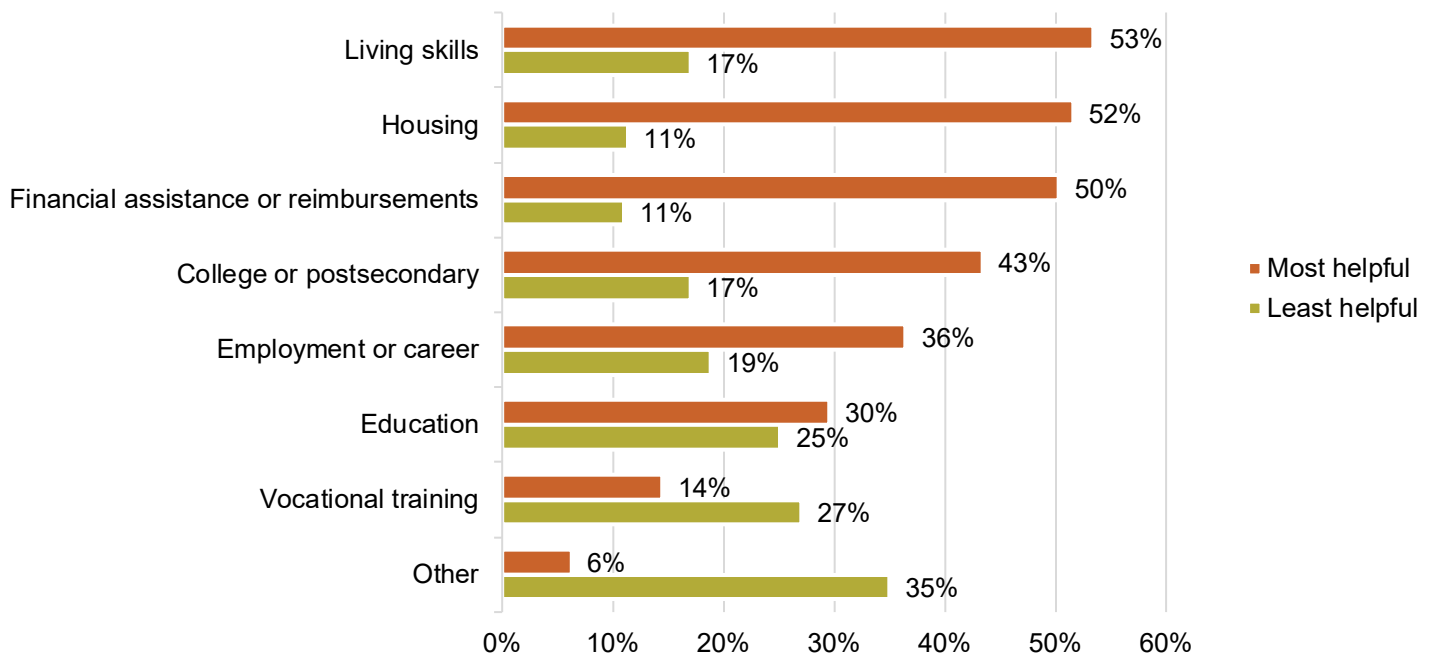
When asked what they thought was *most* helpful about ILP, youth selected the following top three responses: Living skills (53%), Housing (52%), and Financial assistance or reimbursements (50%). 6% of respondents selected Other; their responses included: 5 respondents said they received nothing that was helpful or that they have not received any help; and 3 respondents said they love ILP and all the resources (see Figure 6).

What do you think was least helpful about ILP?

When asked what they thought was *least* helpful about ILP, the top three responses were Vocational training (27%), Education (25%), and Employment or career (19%). Notably, these findings could represent either poor quality support or lack of sufficient support in these areas of ILP. Over one third of respondents selected Other (see Figure 6); their responses included:

- 13% of respondents said that everything was helpful or relevant, and 15% said “Nothing” or “N/A” was least helpful, suggesting all the services were helpful
- Not enough tangible help
- More information and choice about roommates
- Preparation for exiting the program
- “The information they provide is helpful for someone who never stepped foot outside of their house.”
- “Everything, because no one offered me these things that could help.”
- Program is understaffed and there’s a high demand for resources
- They don’t accommodate my disability in order to attend in-person events

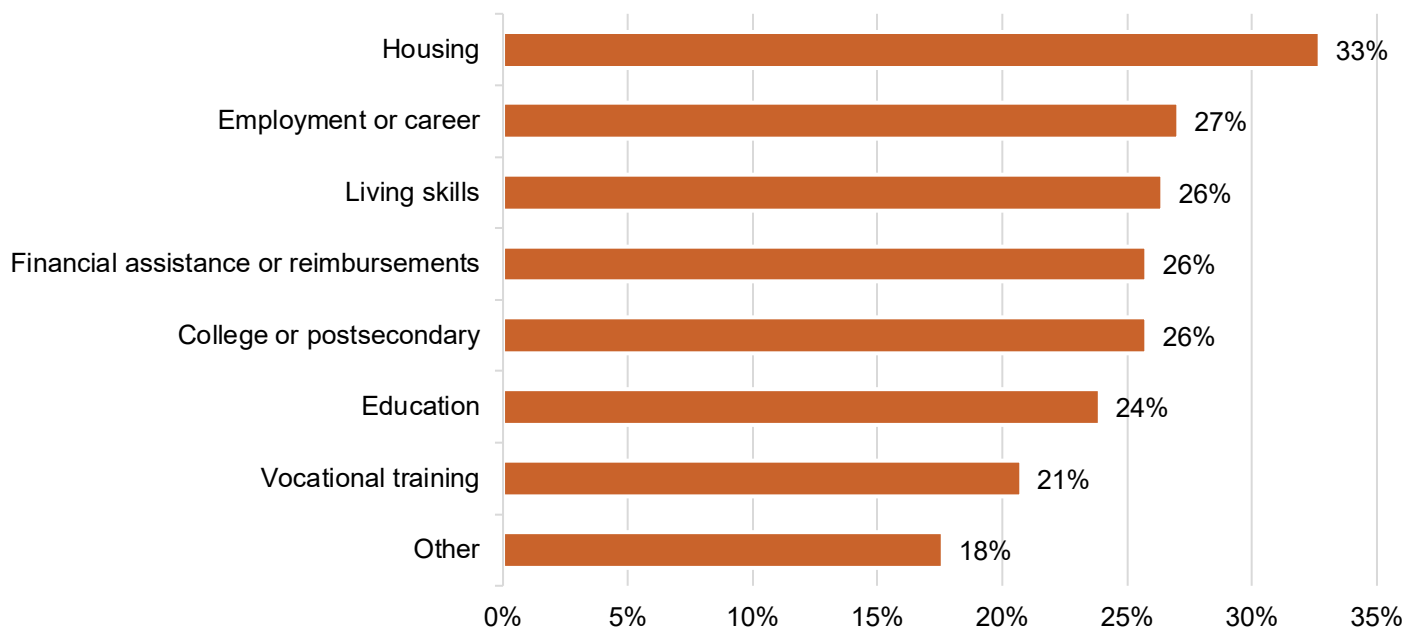
Figure 6. What was most and least helpful about ILP?



What do you wish you had gotten from ILP that you didn't get or that you wanted more of?

When asked what services and supports they wished they had gotten through ILP or what they wanted more of, the top response was Housing (33%), followed by Employment or career (27%), and Living skills (26%). 18% selected Other (see Figure 7). Some of the other services they wanted to receive were: More encouragement and motivation; more resources for parenting youth; more LGBTQ+ events and services; “hard skills, not just information but tools”; connections to local advocacy organizations; resources available after age 21; one youth said they were unaware of everything that ILP offered; six youth said that everything is great; and eight youth said “Nothing” or “N/A,” suggesting there was nothing else they wanted from ILP.

Figure 7. What do you wish you had gotten from ILP that you didn't get or that you wanted more of?



What would make the ILP program better?

Finally, when youth respondents were asked to identify what would make the ILP program better, some of the top responses include:

- 26% of respondents said that ILP is good as is or said “N/A”, suggesting that there is nothing to be improved.
- 22% of respondents reported wanting more supports and services in various areas of ILP, including:
 - More educational support
 - More help with employment, such as more direction and training toward their goals and how to secure stable jobs
 - More financial assistance and more direct funding to youth, such as through stipends
 - More support with college and college preparation, such as with financial aid and scholarships
 - More assistance with housing, such as permanent housing options, Section 8 or low-income housing, how to get an apartment
 - More relevant and practical help with things like opening a credit card and building credit

- 20% of respondents identified aspects of staffing that could be improved, including ILP staff providing more outreach and consistent check-ins with youth, staff being more responsive and attentive to youth’s specific needs, having more staff available overall to serve youth in the program, and staff being more understanding and meeting youth where they are at, including by hiring former foster youth
- 11% of respondents reported that communication could be improved, including more consistent communication, more responsiveness from staff, more information about resources and events available (e.g., website, newsletter or pamphlet), and telling more youth about the program
- 9% of respondents identified aspects of the classes/workshops that could be improved, including more options, more in-person workshops, and more interactive classes that provide ways to apply practical skills
- 7% of respondents reported wanting more stipends and more direct funding to youth

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