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Foster care policy and homelessness among youth transitioning to adulthood from foster care

Mark E. Courtney [a,*], Sunggeun Park ((Ethan))[b], Justin S. Harty [c]

[a] School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley, Haviland Hall, Berkeley, CA 94709, United States of America
[b] University of Michigan, School of Social Work, 1080 South University Avenue, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1106, United States of America
[c] School of Social Work, Arizona State University, University Center, 411 N Central Ave #800, Phoenix, AZ 85004, United States of America

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ABSTRACT

Background: Youth aging out of foster care experience troubling rates of homelessness.
Objective: This study examines whether policies directed towards youth transitioning to adulthood from foster care, Extended Foster Care (EFC) and Supervised Independent Living Placements (SILPs), reduce the risk of homelessness.
Participants and setting: Participants were 595 youths aging out of foster care in California.
Methods: Data from interviews conducted with the youths, and state child welfare administrative data on their involvement with the child welfare system, were used to examine predictors of homelessness between ages 17 and 19. Cox proportional hazard regression models, controlling for the characteristics of the youths, were used to identify associations between time in EFC, and in SILPs, and the hazard of homelessness.
Results: Approximately 18 % of the youth experienced homelessness during this period. Controlling for youth characteristics, youths who left care were at much higher risk of homelessness during the study period than were those who remained in care past their 19th birthday (Hazard ratio [HR] = 3; $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, youths living in transitional supportive housing (HR = 0.20; $p < 0.01$) and therapeutic foster care settings (HR = 0.19; $p < 0.05$) exhibited a lower hazard of homelessness than those who had left care.
Conclusions: Our findings suggest that EFC, and particularly the living arrangements offering extensive support in EFC, reduce the risk of homelessness for youth aging out of foster care.

1. Introduction

Homelessness is a serious problem in the United States, reflecting systemic failures, including inadequate access to affordable housing, insufficient mental health services, and persistent economic inequality (Giano et al., 2020). Approximately 653,000 individuals were homeless on any given night in 2023, among whom 34,703 were youth under age 25. In this paper, transition-age foster youth (TAY) refers to individuals aging out of the foster care system, which generally happens in the United States between 18 and 21 years of age. TAY face disproportionately high rates of homelessness in comparison to young adults nationally (Berzin et al., 2011; Kelly, 2020; Morton et al., 2018; Pecora et al., 2005; Reilly, 2003). Prior research identified a variety of contributors to their risk of homelessness (Feng, Harty, et al., 2020; Kelly, 2020; Prince et al., 2019). However, little attention has been paid to how policies and

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: markc1957@berkeley.edu (M.E. Courtney), sunggeun@umich.edu (S. Park), justinharty@asu.edu (J.S. Harty).

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practices focusing on young people transitioning to adulthood from care influence their likelihood of homelessness. Attention is warranted, given that most states now operate foster care systems that provide care and supervision to young adults (Government Accountability Office, 2019), but research indicates that many young adults who remain in care continue to experience homelessness (Courtney et al., 2020). Moreover, since TAY come largely from marginalized communities, and exhibit characteristics prior research has shown to be associated with homelessness, interventions that can reduce homelessness among TAY have promise to reduce homelessness among the broader population of young people (IOM & NRC, 2015).

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections; P.L. 110–351) allowed states to extend foster care support to age 21, beyond the historical age limit 18. EFC is intended to provide a crucial safety net during a vulnerable period, allowing for a more gradual and supported transition to living independently of the foster care system. In recognition of the need to afford TAY in EFC the ability to live in settings that provide more autonomy than foster homes and group care, the law allowed states to claim federal reimbursement for a new foster care licensing category, SILPs (Tuyishime et al., 2024). Many states offer SILPs to accommodate the developmentally-appropriate desire of many TAY to live independently in the community. SILPS include transitional living programs that provide youth housing in single-site or scattered sites, private residences such as a private or shared apartment, and other settings (e.g., dormitories) (Government Accountability Office, 2019). The supports provided to youth in SILPs ranges widely, from little more than monthly social worker visits for youth in subsidized private residences to on-site case management and a variety of supports to help youth build independent living skills in transitional housing programs.

This study examines how foster care policies focused on TAY influence their risk of homelessness. Specifically, we examine two policies many states have used in recent years to better support TAY's transition to adulthood: Extended Foster Care (EFC) and Supervised Independent Living Placements (SILPs). Using survey data from representative samples of TAY in California, and state child welfare administrative data, the current study examines the following questions: Does remaining in EFC influence the likelihood of homelessness among TAY between the ages of 17 and 19? Does the living arrangement type in which a youth resides while in EFC influence the likelihood of homelessness among TAY between the ages of 17 and 19?

Controlling for measures of youth characteristics we find that increased time spent in EFC is associated with a reduced risk of homelessness, and that placement in treatment-oriented settings accounts for much of the protective benefit of EFC. These findings have significant implications for policies directed towards reducing homelessness among TAY.

1.1. Homelessness among transition-aged foster youth

Research focusing on housing outcomes for youth who have aged out of foster care highlights homelessness (Kelly, 2020; Prince et al., 2019). Multiple studies find high rates of homelessness during the transition to adulthood from the foster care system. Rates of homelessness among this group vary considerably, ranging from 11 % to 38 % (Courtney et al., 2014, 2016, 2020; Berzin et al., 2011; Curry & Abrams, 2015; Dworsky et al., 2013; Pecora et al., 2005; Reilly, 2003; Shpiegel, 2016; Stott, 2013), while about 5 % of the U.S. youth population between 18 and 25 is estimated to experience homelessness (Morton et al., 2018). This variation across studies in reported homelessness rates is likely influenced by differences in study design, such as the age range of participants, regional focus, study timeframes, and definitions of homelessness. Still, the rates are much higher than those reported among the general population of young adults, which is about 5 % (Morton et al., 2018).

1.2. Risk and protective factors associated with TAY's homelessness

Research has long employed an ecological approach to theorizing the etiology of homelessness among youth, with contributors to the likelihood of homelessness at the individual, social, and structural levels of human ecology (Samuels et al., 2021). Research on predictors of homelessness among TAY has followed a similar course. Demographic characteristics found to be associated with homelessness include gender (Dworsky et al., 2013; Feng, Harty, et al., 2020), race (Shah et al., 2017; Shpiegel, 2016), and sexual orientation (Feng, Harty, et al., 2020). Other individual-level risk factors found to be associated with homelessness among TAY include delinquent behavior, juvenile justice system involvement, incarceration, mental health problems, and substance abuse (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006a; Dworsky et al., 2013; Fowler et al., 2017; Kelly, 2020; Prince et al., 2019). Foster care placement histories are also associated with homelessness for TAY. Running away from foster care, placement instability, and placement in group care settings have been found to increase the risk of homelessness (Dworsky et al., 2013; Fowler et al., 2009; Kelly, 2020; Prince et al., 2019). Adversities at the family and societal levels experienced prior to foster care, including severe childhood maltreatment, sexual abuse, family discord, inadequate or unstable housing, and poverty, compound the risk of TAY homelessness (Feng, Harty, et al., 2020; Bender et al., 2015; Kelly, 2020; Shah et al., 2017). Multiple protective factors at the individual, social, and structural levels have been found to decrease the likelihood of homelessness among TAY, including educational attainment and employment, closeness or connection to an adult, greater social support, remaining in foster care into adulthood, and residing in states with higher housing support spending under the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act (Feng, Harty, et al., 2020; Dworsky et al., 2013; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Kelly, 2020; Prince et al., 2019).

1.3. Policies and programs with the potential to reduce TAY homelessness

Courtney et al. (2017) developed a conceptual framework that describes the transition to adulthood for TAY. The framework acknowledges that TAY are subject to the same personal, social, and societal factors that influence the transition to adulthood for all young people, but it highlights the unique importance of the foster care system for TAY. The system is seen as having the potential to

support TAY through (1) provision of independent living and other services that the system provides directly, or facilitates connection to, and (2) influencing informal supports (foster parents, family members, and mentors). By increasing TAY access to services and informal supports, foster care is seen as having potential to increase TAY *developmental assets,* including independent living skills, social connections, human capital, psychosocial and relationship skills, and material resources. These assets in turn influence outcomes TAY experience as young adults, including homelessness.

In this study, we focus on foster care policies used by multiple states in the United States to improve outcomes for TAY, including preventing their experience of homelessness: EFC and SILPs. EFC extends the age limit for receiving foster care services and can provide a safety net that includes additional time, resources, and support for TAY as they transition to adulthood. The extension of care into early adulthood could reduce homelessness in several ways (Courtney, 2009). By offering an extended period of support, EFC aims to provide young adults with opportunities to develop knowledge, skills, and social connections that facilitate a successful transition to adulthood. EFC could also reduce homelessness among TAY directly by helping them obtain housing (e.g., by allowing them to remain in their foster home, by providing housing through transitional housing programs, or by subsidizing the costs of housing). And EFC could connect TAY to services that are intended to address risk factors associated with youth, either by providing them directly or through referrals to other health and social service systems.

While youth can remain in foster homes with kin or unrelated adults while in EFC, SILPs are a key mechanism through which EFC can potentially provide support to young adults (Dworsky & Dasgupta, 2017). In principle, SILPs recognize the normative desire of many TAY for increasing autonomy during the transition to adulthood by allowing them to live in the community without day-to-day supervision by foster parents or group care staff. The support available to TAY in SILPs varies widely depending on the nature of the setting, ranging from minimally supervised arrangements where TAY live in the community on their own and receive a subsidy to help cover the cost of basic necessities (including housing), to transitional supportive housing settings that provide housing directly in addition to a wide array of services and support to TAY (Dworsky & Dasgupta, 2017).

Other federal policies provide funding for housing and housing support services that can support TAY, but they vary widely in how focused they are on the TAY population, the amount of funding available, and the extent to which TAY have made use of those programs. Some TAY are eligible for support through the Department of Health and Human Services Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs and the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program, but those programs focus on all youth at risk of homelessness over a much wider age range than does EFC. The Chafee Foster Care Independence Program allows states to use up to 30 % of their allocation of Chafee funds for housing of young adults formerly in foster care, but few states use Chafee funds for that purpose, and even if more of them did that the amount of monthly support available to each youth would be very small (Pergamit et al., 2012). The most significant federal investments specifically targeting transition-age youth with foster care experience, the Family Unification Program and Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Program, which provide Section 8 housing vouchers to eligible youth, have been well received by some public housing authorities and child welfare agencies. But they remain unavailable in the majority of areas served by public housing authorities and have faced significant implementation challenges, with many vouchers made available through those programs going unused (Ault & Norwood, 2024). EFC, which can provide support for housing of TAY in a wide variety of living arrangements is now available with federal Title IV-E entitlement funding in over half the states and in the District of Columbia, making it a key policy that has potential to reduce TAY homelessness.

Prior studies have had mixed findings on the relationship between EFC and the risk of homelessness. Fowler et al. (2017), using data on youths (n = 350) who were at least 18 years old at the 18- or 36-month follow-up interview in the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW II), found that living in a state that had implemented a state-funded EFC program was not associated with the experience of homelessness. However, that study did not account for whether youth in the study remained in care as young adults (i.e., had experienced EFC). The small sample size of youth in the NSCAW II who lived in states with EFC (n = 44) meant that the study had little statistical power to identify the effects of EFC on homelessness. Other studies using much larger nationally representative samples (Kelly, 2020; Prince et al., 2019) and state-level samples (Feng, Harty, et al., 2020; Dworsky et al., 2013) have found that remaining in foster care past age 18 is associated with reduced risk of homelessness among TAY. However, the evidence supporting the ability of EFC to reduce homelessness remains limited, and we are aware of no prior studies on how living arrangement types available to young people who experience EFC are associated with the risk of homelessness.

1.4. California context

As we draw on data collected in California, we briefly discuss aspects of the state context relevant to the study. Califiornia has the largest population of youth in foster care in the nation, including about seven thousand TAY between 18 and 21 years old (California Child Welfare Indicators Project, 2024). It operates a state-supervised county-administered child welfare services system. California appears to have implemented a relatively inclusive and generous program of EFC. California was among the first states in the country to obtain an approved Title IV-E plan for EFC, beginning in 2012 with a phased implementation that gradually extended care, ultimately allowing youth to remain in care until their 21st birthday. The year-long planning process that informed the language of the EFC legislation in the state was heavily influenced by advocacy organizations led by attorneys for youth in care, and by the statewide foster youth advocacy organization (Mosley & Courtney, 2012). A youth who leaves the system after turning 18 has the option to re-enter foster care at any point until they reach their 21st birthday. Young adults in care are assigned an attorney who is charged with representing their expressed interests at case review court hearings the state employs in complying with Title IV-E requirements. Most youth attend court hearings and meet with their attorney at least annually while in EFC (Park et al., 2023; Courtney et al., 2018). Previous studies found that EFC is associated with reducing homelessness, food insecurity, economic hardships, and unemployment (Courtney & Okpych, 2017; Park et al., 2023; Courtney et al., 2018, 2021).

The state's implementation of EFC created two new placement options for TAY in EFC. The first, labeled SILP, is designed for TAY ready for independent living, allowing youth to live in the settings of their choice (e.g., college dormitory, apartment, home of a friend or relative) while still receiving a monthly stipend, monthly visits from their county social worker, and referrals to other sources of support. In contrast, THP is a housing option designed for TAY deemed unprepared for living in SILPs emphasizing life skills development. THP is a supervised, supportive housing program for young adults in EFC, operated by community-based organizations that are licensed by the state. The organizations are expected to provide safe housing, case management, life skills training, education & employment support, and assistance accessing medical, mental health, and other essential services, and community resources. THP includes three types of supervised housing: single-site housing; scattered-site housing; and a host family model, whereby TAY live with an adult mentor who provides support and guidance.

California also has among the highest levels of homelessness and shortages of affordable housing in the United States, which likely contribute to the risk of homelessness for TAY living in the state (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2023; Fonseca, 2024).

2. Methods

2.1. Data

The data sources include a longitudinal survey of a representative sample of TAY in California and state child welfare administrative data. Data on the study outcome (i.e., experience of homelessness) and various youth-level predictors come from the longitudinal youth survey. Youth were eligible for the survey if they were between 16.75 and 17.75 years old at the time of sample draw (i.e., December 2012), were in care, and had been in care for at least six months. From 880 youth initially sampled, 117 youth were found to be ineligible during the field period.[1] Out of the eligible 763 youths, 727 participated in the baseline interviews conducted when youths were about 17 years old (response rate ≈ 95 %). The second wave of interviews was conducted when youth were approximately 19 (n = 611; follow-up rate = 84 %). Both interviews gathered information in a wide range of areas (e.g., demographic characteristics, foster care experience, homelessness, economic hardships, physical and mental health, and social support). See Courtney et al. (2014, 2016) for more detailed information on the study.

The second data source is California's Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (MIS). The child welfare administrative data include youths' foster care system involvement history until 21 (e.g., placement types, age of first foster care entry, etc.) and maltreatment allegation records before entering foster care.

2.2. Sample

The study sample includes 595 youths (82 % of the baseline sample) who completed both the first and second youth survey waves, granted access to use of administrative data, and had complete placement records in MIS through the date that they completed the second youth survey, for those who stayed in care, or until they left foster care before the second youth survey. Thus, our study follows a group of young people approaching the age of majority in foster care through at least one year following the date of their eligibility for extended foster care. We focus on the sample interviewed at age 19 for two reasons. First, young people are confronted with the decision to remain in foster care into adulthood as they approach their 18th birthday, and they are typically only able to take advantage of extended foster care if they are in care on their 18th birthday,[2] making the period surrounding the 18th birthday a critical period for studying the influence of EFC on youth outcomes. Of the youth in this study, nearly one-third exited care between the baseline and follow-up interview, over half of the sample members who would ultimately leave care before their 21st birthday. Second, of the follow-up interviews conducted in this study, only the interview at age 19 asked about the date of a homelessness episode since the last interview. Since a major focus of this study is on the relationship between youths' living arrangements and homelessness, and youth can and do move between living arrangements in early adulthood, it was not possible to include data from later interviews.

2.3. Measures

We used two variables to measure youth's homelessness between the baseline (youth were about 17) and the follow-up survey (youth were about 19). The follow-up survey asked, *"Since we last talked with you have you ever been homeless for one night or longer - that is, have you slept in a homeless shelter or in a place where people weren't meant to sleep because you didn't have a place to stay?"* Using this question, we generated a binary variable measuring whether youth experienced homelessness between the two surveys (0 = No, 1 = Yes). We focused on homelessness among TAY rather than couch surfing to underscore the severe and enduring nature of housing instability for this population, and because the federal government's definition of homelessness does not include couch surfing. For youths who reported homelessness, the follow-up survey asked for the year and month they first experienced homelessness since baseline. Using the information on the month youth completed the baseline survey and first experienced homelessness, we calculated

[1] Physically or mentally unable to participate, youth who were on runaway status for at least two months, incarcerated, returned home for at least two months, and/or relocated out of state.

[2] Federal reimbursement for the costs of EFC is only available for youth who are in care on their 18th birthday, and California only allows youth who are in care on that date to take advantage of EFC.

the time-to-homelessness variable. For youths who did not report homelessness between interviews, we used the number of months between baseline and follow-up surveys to calculate the censoring date used in hazard analyses.

Our choice of variables to include in our analyses was informed by prior research and by the focus of our study. Individual-level variables available from our survey and administrative data were included in our initial analyses if they had been found in prior research to be associated with the risk of homelessness among the broader youth population or among youth with foster care experience. These variables were intended primarily as control variables for our analyses of the potential influence of EFC participation and EFC placement type on homelessness. Only variables found to be associated with homelessness in preliminary bivariate analyses were included in the regression models.

Several individual-level predictor variables were drawn from the baseline youth survey, including sex (Female = 0, Male = 1), race/ethnicity (1 = White, 2 = Black, 3 = Multiracial/ethnic, 4 = Hispanic, 5 = Other[3]), sexual orientation (0 = 100 % heterosexual, 1 = Not 100 % heterosexual), health status (1 = Poor, 2 = Fair, 3 = Good, 4 = Very good, 5 = Excellent), screened positive for mental health[4] or substance use disorder[5] (0 = No, 1 = Yes), ever placed in special education classroom (0 = No, 1 = Yes), a measure of delinquent behaviors,[6] ever physically assaulted in 12 months before the baseline interview (0 = No, 1 = Yes), ever had gun/knife pulled or used on them in the 12 months before the baseline interview (0 = No, 1 = Yes), ever spent a night in jail (0 = No, 1 = Yes).

We drew multiple control variables on youth's foster care experience from MIS, including whether youth were ever placed in kinship care (0 = No, 1 = Yes), ever placed in group care (0 = No, 1 = Yes), the number of placement changes per year in care, the number of types of screened-in maltreatment reports (i.e., substantiated, inconclusive, or unfounded) across all maltreatment allegation types (i.e., sexual abuse, physical abuse, severe/general neglect, emotional abuse, caretaker absence/incapacity).

Informed by prior research, we also considered a range of other youth-level predictors[7] (e.g., youth's employment status, high school/GED completion, having adequate social support networks, age of first foster care entry, etc.). However, those variables did not have statistically significant relationships ($p < 0.1$) with the binary homelessness variable in bivariate analyses with a log-rank test of equality on categorical predictors, and Cox proportional hazard models on continuous predictors. Recognizing that aspects of the broader social context can influence TAY outcomes (Park et al., 2023), we also included in preliminary analyses a set of county-level measures of social context. However, most of those measures did not influence the likelihood of homelessness among the study population in bivariate analyses, and none of them did so once youth-level characteristics were included in regression models, so we did not include those measures in our final models.[8]

Measures of our key policy and practice variables also came from MIS. EFC participation status between the youth surveys was measured using a categorical variable (1 = left care before 18, 2 = stayed in EFC until the follow-up interview, 3 = In care at 18 and left EFC before the follow-up interview, 4 = In care at 18, left EFC and re-entered EFC before the follow-up interview). We also captured the main living arrangement youth were in each month between the baseline survey and the follow-up survey (1 = Non-kinship foster home care, 2 = Kinship foster care, 3 = Foster Family Agency (FFA) home,[9] 4 = Group care, 5 = SILP, 6 = THP, 7 = Other, 8 = Not in care). For every youth in the study, a primary living arrangement was assigned to each month between interview waves based on the arrangement where they spent the most days during that month. Note that for youths who were not in EFC, our measure does not distinguish between different living arrangements in which those youths might have lived.

2.4. Analytic approach

Descriptive statistics were calculated using the youth survey weight.

Before answering the main research questions, we estimated the timing of homelessness using a Cox proportional hazard model with time-constant youth-level variables (Ruhe, 2016). The Cox proportional hazard model specifies the hazard function of the event time (i.e., timing of the first homelessness experience; t) for an individual youth (i) with time-constant covariates (x) as:

$$h(t|x_i) = h_0(t)^*\exp(\beta_1 x_{i1} + \cdots + \beta_k x_{ik}) \quad (1)$$

Here, $h_0(t)$ is the baseline hazard function, and β_1, $\cdots$, β_k are unknown regression coefficients. Using the individual hazard functions, we calculated the cumulative hazard function as follows:

$$H(t|x_i) = \int_0^t h(u|x_i)du = H_0(t)^*exp(\beta_1 x_{i1} + \cdots + \beta_k x_{ik}) \quad (2)$$

[3] Includes Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American.

[4] List of mental health disorders is available from the authors.

[5] Screened positive for any current alcohol/substance abuse and dependence

[6] List of delinquent behaviors is available from the authors.

[7] List of variables excluded due to absence of an association with homelessness is available from the authors.

[8] A description of the county-context measures used is available from the authors.

[9] The California Department of Social Services licenses nonprofit Foster Family Agencies (FFA) that find, certify, and supervise foster homes that are intended to serve children whose needs cannot be met by county-licensed foster homes and who otherwise would need to be placed in group care (i.e., therapeutic foster care homes), and homes for placement of a child pending the adoption of the child by that family (https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/foster-care/foster-family-agencies). Given the ages of the children in this study, it is likely that very few of the FFA homes in which youth in this study lived were pre-adoptive homes; they were foster homes intended for youth with significant physical and/or behavioral health problems.

To answer the first question, we added the youth's EFC participation status variable to the base model as a time-constant variable, resulting in the following cumulative hazard function:

$$H(t|x_i) = H_0(t)^*\exp(\beta_1 x_{i1} + \cdots + \beta_k x_{ik} + \beta_{EFC} x_{iEFC}) \quad (3)$$

To answer the second question, we added the youth's main living arrangement for each month in care to the first model as a time-varying covariate:

$$H(t|x_i) = H_0(t)^*\exp(\beta_1 x_{i1} + \cdots + \beta_k x_{ik} + \gamma z_i t) \quad (4)$$

In this equation, γ is an unknown regression parameter for time-varying variable (z). All analyses were conducted using the Stata/SE 18.0 and its *stcox* package. We used the *tvc* option to specify the living arrangement as a time-varying variable for the last model. We did not impute the missing values of covariates. About 9 % of the youth sample (n = 56) had at least one missing value on covariates. The variables with the most frequent missing values were the sexual minority status variable (24 observations missing), followed by ever spent a night in jail (19 observations missing) and ever had gun/knife pulled or used on them (17 observations missing). The analyses without these variables produced mostly identical results.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistics show that the study sample includes racially/ethnically diverse TAY (see Table 1). Two-thirds of the sample were female, and about a quarter of the youth identified as nonheterosexual. At baseline, most youths reported good to excellent health, while more than half of the youths screened positive for a mental health or substance use disorder. A little less than a third of the youths were ever placed in special education classrooms, and less than a quarter of them ever spent a night in jail before the baseline survey. Most youths were placed in kinship foster care and group care before 18 and averaged more than one placement per

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of study variables (N = 595 youths).

Outcome variables	Unweighted N	Weighted mean (S.D.)/%
Experienced homelessness between surveys	109	18.3 %
Number of months between the baseline survey and the first experience of homelessness or the follow-up survey		23.2 (5.1)

Youth-level variables	Unweighted N	Weighted mean (S.D.)/%
Demographic characteristics from baseline survey		
Assigned sex at birth (Male), %	235	39.6 %
Race/Ethnicity, %		
White	136	17.7 %
Black	88	17.5 %
Multiracial/ethnic	87	15.1 %
Hispanic	262	47.3 %
Other[1]	21	2.5 %
Not 100 % heterosexual, %	136	23.6 %
Youth's risk and protective factors from baseline survey		
Health condition		
Poor	11	1.8 %
Fair	52	9.5 %
Good	158	27.8 %
Very good	222	36.6 %
Excellent	152	24.4 %
Positive screening for mental health or substance use disorder, %	339	55.7 %
Ever placed in special education, %	200	32.5 %
Average delinquency score, Mean (SD)		0.3 (0.4)
Physically assaulted in the past 12 months, %	74	14.1 %
Had gun/knife pulled or used on in past 12 months, %	108	20.8 %
Ever spent a night in jail, %	132	23.7 %
Foster care history from MIS		
Ever placed in kinship foster care, %	362	63.9 %
Ever placed in congregate care, %	304	53.5 %
Number of placement changes per year in foster care before age 18, Mean (SD)		1.5 (1.1)
Number of screened-in-report maltreatment types, Mean (SD)		3.1 (1.1)
EFC participation status, %		
Left before 18	42	6.7 %
In care at 18 and until the follow-up interview	399	67.7 %
In care at 18 and left care before the follow-up interview	102	18.4 %
In care at 18, left care, and re-entered by the follow-up interview	50	7.2 %

year in care. On average, youths had records of three types of screened-in reported maltreatment. Most youths stayed in EFC after age 18th and stayed until the follow-up interview. About one-quarter of the youths left EFC after their 18th birthday, while about 7 % had left and re-entered care before the follow-up youth survey. About 18 % of youths in the sample had experienced homelessness at some time between the baseline and follow-up surveys.

The types of living arrangements the youths' experience changed dramatically between the two youth surveys (see Table 2). At baseline, the main placement types youths were in at about age 17 were kinship care, FFA home, and group care. However, in the month of the follow-up survey, when the youths were about 19 years old, SILP and THP were the main placement types among those who were still in care, and about 31 % were no longer in care.

3.2. Hazard analysis results

Table 3 presents three sets of multivariate hazard analysis results. Model 1 results show multiple youth-level characteristics to be associated with the hazard of homelessness between ages 17 and 19. Compared to Hispanic youths, the estimated hazard of homelessness between ages 17 and 19 was 83 % higher among multiracial/ethnic youths ($p = 0.042$). Identifying as nonheterosexual (Hazard ratio = 1.80, $p = 0.016$) and reporting a history of recent physical assault (Hazard ratio = 2.03, $p = 0.007$) also increased the estimated hazard of homelessness. Youths reporting poor health at baseline had an estimated three to five times higher hazard of homelessness than those reporting excellent (Hazard ratio = 3.70, $p = 0.014$), very good (Hazard ratio = 5.40, $p = 0.001$), good (Hazard ratio = 3.31, $p = 0.018$), and fair health (Hazard ratio = 3.58, $p = 0.032$).

Controlling for the measured characteristics of TAY in the study, the second model focuses on the first research question, whether remaining in EFC was associated with the risk of homelessness between ages 17 and 19. Youths who stayed in care after age 18 through the follow-up survey experienced the lowest estimated hazard of homelessness. The estimated hazard of homelessness was about three times higher ($p < 0.001$) for youths who were in care at age 18 but exited before the follow-up interview, compared to those who remained in care for the entire study period. Youths who left care after turning 18 but later re-entered before the follow-up interview had a similarly elevated estimated hazard of homelessness ($p = 0.001$) compared to those who remained in care until the follow-up interview. While the relationship only approached statistical significance, the estimated hazard of homelessness was over twice as high (Hazard ratio = 2.12; $p = 0.058$) for the relatively small number of youths who left care before age 18 than it was for those who stayed in care until the follow-up survey. Consistent with the previous analysis, youth identifying as nonheterosexual faced a higher risk of homelessness between 17 and 19 (Hazard ratio = 1.62, $p = 0.049$), and youth who had experienced physical assault had a higher estimated hazard of homelessness (Hazard ratio = 1.77, $p = 0.032$). Youths reported to have poor health conditions also faced a higher estimated hazard of homelessness compared to youth with excellent (Hazard ratio = 3.64, $p = 0.016$), very good (Hazard ratio = 4.99, $p = 0.002$), good (Hazard ratio = 3.32, $p = 0.018$), or fair health

The third model focuses on the relationship between the youths' main living arrangement each month and their hazard of homelessness during the study period. Model 3 provides two main takeaways. First, hazard ratios indicate that the estimated hazard of homelessness is lower for youths in every EFC placement type than for youths no longer in care (i.e., hazard ratios associated with every placement type were less than one), although some differences were not statistically significant at $p > 0.05$. These findings are consistent with the second model's finding that remaining in care reduces the risk of homelessness, regardless of placement type. Second, two treatment-oriented placement types available in EFC—THP and FFA homes—were associated with a significantly lower estimated risk of homelessness compared to being out of care. Youths placed in THP (Hazard ratio = 0.20, $p = 0.008$) had a substantially lower estimated hazard of experiencing homelessness than those who were not in care, after controlling other factors. Youth placed in FFA homes (Hazard ratio = 0.19, $p = 0.040$) also had a lower estimated hazard of homelessness compared to youth who were not in care. Only two characteristics of youth were associated with the hazard of homelessness when their primary living arrangements were taken into account. White youths had a higher estimated hazard of homelessness (Hazard ratio = 2.24; $p = 0.008$) than did Hispanic youths. A prior history of experiencing physical assault (Hazard ratio = 2.07, $p = 0.011$) was estimated to increase the hazard of homelessness. And the youth who identified as nonheterosexual experienced a higher risk of homelessness (Hazard ratio = 1.75, $p = 0.034$).

Table 2
Main living arrangements in the months between when youth completed the baseline and follow-up surveys.

	At baseline survey (N = 595)		At follow-up survey (N = 595)		First experience of homelessness (N = 109)	
	Unweighted N	Weighted %	Unweighted N	Weighted %	Unweighted N	Weighted %
Non-kinship foster home	39	6.3 %	4	0.6 %	2	3.2 %
Kinship foster home	153	27.6 %	23	3.9 %	4	1.9 %
FFA Home	205	32.3 %	44	7.3 %	7	7.0 %
Group care	132	23.9 %	6	1.3 %	12	14.9 %
SILP	4	0.8 %	228	40.5 %	29	24.2 %
THP	19	2.1 %	104	14.2 %	13	10.4 %
Other	12	2.0 %	9	1.2 %	1	2.0 %
Not in care	31	5.0 %	177	31.1 %	41	36.6 %

Table 3
Hazard analyses results.

	Model 1 (N = 541)		Model 2 (N = 541)		Model 3 (N = 500)	
	Hazard ratio	95 % CI	Hazard ratio	95 % CI	Hazard ratio	95 % CI
Youth's demographic characteristics						
Male	1.46	0.88, 2.42	1.32	0.79, 2.21	1.25	0.72, 2.16
Race/Ethnicity (ref. = Hispanic)						
White	1.68	0.99, 2.86	1.57	0.92, 2.69	2.24**	1.24, 4.07
Black	1.35	0.72, 2.54	1.30	0.68, 2.45	1.50	0.76, 2.98
Multiracial/ethnic	1.83*	1.02, 3.28	1.73	0.97, 3.10	1.85	0.95, 3.60
Other[1]	0.61	0.08, 4.54	0.68	0.09, 5.10	0.88	0.12, 6.67
Not 100 % heterosexual	1.80*	1.12, 2.91	1.62*	1.00, 2.62	1.75*	1.04, 2.95
Youth's risk and protective factors						
Health condition (ref. = Excellent)						
Poor	3.70*	1.31, 10.49	3.64*	1.28, 10.38	2.20	0.60, 8.15
Fair	1.10	0.52, 2.36	0.98	0.45, 2.13	1.14	0.46, 2.80
Good	1.12	0.63, 1.98	1.10	0.62, 1.94	1.27	0.69, 2.34
Very good	0.69	0.39, 1.22	0.73	0.41, 1.30	0.80	0.43, 1.50
Positive screening for mental health or substance use disorder	1.49	0.91, 2.43	1.36	0.83, 2.24	1.54	0.90, 2.68
Ever placed in special education	1.27	0.82, 1.95	1.14	0.73, 1.77	1.25	0.76, 2.04
Average delinquency score	1.17	0.69, 1.98	1.18	0.68, 2.05	1.41	0.79, 2.50
Physically assaulted	2.03**	1.21, 3.40	1.77*	1.05, 2.99	2.07*	1.18, 3.62
Had gun/knife pulled	1.08	0.64, 1.80	1.06	0.63, 1.79	1.03	0.58, 1.82
Ever spent a night in jail, %	1.01	0.62, 1.65	1.02	0.63, 1.67	1.05	0.61, 1.81
Foster care history						
Ever placed in kinship foster care, %	0.69	0.45, 1.04	0.71	0.46, 1.08	0.68	0.43, 1.09
Ever placed in congregate care, %	1.32	0.82, 2.14	1.26	0.77, 2.06	1.26	0.72, 2.19
Number of placement changes per year in foster care before age 18, Mean (SD)	1.15	0.97, 1.37	1.11	0.93, 1.32	1.06	0.87, 1.29
Number of screened-in-report maltreatment types, Mean (SD)	1.14	0.94, 1.38	1.10	0.91, 1.35	1.16	0.93, 1.44
EFC participation status (ref. = In care at 18 and until the follow-up interview)						
Left before 18			2.12	0.97, 4.63		
In care at 18 and left the care before the follow-up interview			3.00***	1.83, 4.90		
In care at 18, left the care, and re-entered by the follow-up interview			3.00**	1.58, 5.67		
Living arrangement (ref. = Not in care)						
Non-kinship foster home care					0.49	0.06, 3.64
Kinship foster home care					0.23	0.04, 1.36
FFA Home					0.19*	0.04, 0.93
Group care					0.42	0.11, 1.60
SILP					0.52	0.16, 1.64
THP					0.20**	0.06, 0.66
Other					0.35	0.04, 2.83
Chi-square	66.38***		90.36***		78.68***	

* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.
*** $p < 0.001$.

4. Discussion

Youth transitioning to adulthood from foster care are one of the groups particularly vulnerable to homelessness in the United States. Many transition from foster care to independent living with limited social support networks and essential life skills in addition to facing individual and systemic challenges shared by other groups (Curry & Abrams, 2015). While many studies have examined associations between TAY characteristics and homelessness, few explored whether the policies states have implemented to better address the needs of TAY influence homelessness among TAY. Our study helps fill these knowledge gaps by leveraging representative survey and administrative data.

Our results show that about 18 % of TAY in California experienced homelessness between 17 and 19, comparable to the findings of previous studies (Prince et al., 2019) but much higher than the rates observed for their peers in the general population (Morton et al., 2018). This finding suggests that the experience of homelessness remains a serious threat to the well-being of young people aging out of the foster care system in the United States, even in a state such as California that has implemented a relatively robust program of EFC. Our findings also indicate that in California the majority of TAY leave the placement types that have long dominated the living arrangements of minors in care (foster homes and group care settings) and move on to living arrangements that offer the developmentally-appropriate increased autonomy that young people often seek as they transition from childhood to adulthood; of the young people in this study living in the foster care system at age 17, about 95 % lived in some form of foster home or group care setting, whereas about 79 % of the young people living in EFC at age 19 were living in SILPs, including transitional housing programs. In other

states with EFC that have created the kinds of placements that California offers, most youths also leave traditional foster care for independent living arrangements by age 19 (see, e.g., Illinois; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006b).

In both of the regression models that compare remaining in care into early adulthood with leaving care, remaining in care was associated with a substantial reduction in the risk of homelessness, adding to the growing body of research showing the protective influence of EFC with respect to homelessness (Feng, Harty, et al., 2020; Dworsky et al., 2013; Kelly, 2020; Prince et al., 2019). That two-thirds of the young people chose to remain in EFC without interruption to age 19 also provides evidence of the ability of states to implement EFC programs that are attractive enough to encourage most young people approaching the age of majority in care to remain in care as young adults.

While our study does not clearly identify how EFC reduces the risk of homelessness, a couple of explanations seem particularly plausible. First, EFC provides direct financial support for housing during the transition from foster homes and group care into living arrangements that offer greater independence. That eliminates the abrupt loss of housing support during early adulthood seen in states that do not provide EFC or similar housing supports that could reasonably be expected to decrease the risk of homelessness. The most common placement in California for young adults in EFC, SILP, currently directly provides young adults with $1258 per month for food, clothing, shelter, school supplies, personal incidentals, and reasonable travel (John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2024). THP agencies receive over $4000 per month for providing youth with transitional supportive housing (California Department of Social Services, 2023). And FFA agencies receive over $2820 per month for each youth living in a home they supervise and support, $1388 of which goes to the foster home provider (California Department of Social Services, 2023). As of October 2024, of the 6751 youths 18–21 years old in EFC in California, 2840 (42 %) resided in SILPs, 2106 (30 %) in THP-supported living arrangements, and 358 (5.3 %) lived in homes supervised by FFAs (California Child Welfare Indicators Project, 2024). These programs represent considerable investment of federal, state, and local dollars in direct support for housing of youth in EFC in California.

Second, remaining in EFC can reduce the risks of homelessness by providing TAY directly with services and connecting them through referrals to services. Of particular importance in this regard in California is the ability of EFC to offer placements (transitional housing and therapeutic foster homes) that are intended to provide TAY with more intensive therapeutic support and other services than SILPs or traditional foster homes typically provide. Staying in two treatment-oriented living arrangement settings, THP and FFA homes, was associated with large and statistically-significant reductions in the estimated risk of homelessness compared to that of youths who had left EFC, even after controlling for the characteristics of the study population. The association between placement in treatment-oriented settings and reduction in the risk of homelessness highlights the importance of including in EFC placement options that allow TAY to gradually increase their ability to live independently, while also maintaining their engagement with professionals who are trained to work with TAY with complex needs and are familiar with adult-serving systems that TAY need to learn to navigate.

While this study did not focus on the relationship between the individual-level characteristics of TAY and their risk for homelessness, the associations between some of our covariates and the experience of homelessness warrants mention. After accounting for youth trajectories out of care and into EFC, and their living arrangement between interview waves, we found that TAY who identified as White were at increased risk of homelessness between 17 and 19 compared to TAY who identified as Hispanic. The reasons for this are not clear, but the large and statistically significant change in the coefficient for White versus Hispanic between Model 2 and Model 3 may be due to between-group differences in both participation in EFC and the distinct placement types available to youth in EFC. Regression Models 2 and 3 differ in how they treat youths' living arrangements between ages 17 and 19. Model 2 uses a categorical variable to distinguish between long- and short-stayers in care, disregarding changes in youths' living arrangements over time, whereas Model 3 takes into account the living arrangements youth are in at each month of the study period, distinguishing between being out of care and several distinct arrangements for youths in EFC. Prior research in California has found that race and ethnicity are associated both with length of stay in care after the 18th birthday and whether youths in EFC live in SILPs or THP settings. Specifically, using administrative data from California, a multivariate analysis of length of stay in EFC found that Black and Hispanic youth spent longer in care than did White youth (Park et al., 2020). And a multivariate analysis of predominant placement type of TAY in EFC in California found that Black youth were more likely than White youth to live in THP than in SILPs (Feng, Courtney, & Okpych, 2020). Identifying as anything other than 100 % heterosexual and having experienced physical assault were associated with increased risk of homelessness. The finding that queer youth are at increased risk of homelessness is consistent with research on homelessness among the general population of youth (Deal & Gonzales, 2023), and with some prior research on youth aging out of foster care (Feng, Harty, et al., 2020). This adds to evidence of the relatively poor outcomes for sexual minority youth aging out of foster care, and the need to better understand and address their needs (Shpiegel & Simmel, 2016). Our finding regarding the relationship between a history of recent physical assault and homelessness is consistent with prior research showing that a history of physical abuse increases the risk of homelessness for TAY (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009). Several factors that have been shown in some prior research to be associated with homelessness (placement instability, group care placement, involvement with the juvenile justice system, disabilities and health) were not found to be statistically significant predictors in this study.

4.1. Limitations

Our study comes with several limitations. First, we measured whether TAY experienced homelessness and timing of that experience based on their recollection, which could be vulnerable to recall bias. Second, our estimates of the timing of a youth's experience of homelessness, and of the living arrangement they were in at the time they became homeless, were imperfect. The youths in the study were asked about the month they first became homeless, not the day, and as a result we used the predominant living arrangement a youth was in each month. While in the vast majority of cases the modal living arrangement was the only one a youth experienced in a given month, that was not always the case. This likely led to some error in the specification of living arrangement a youth was in when

they became homeless, though that error is likely to be rare given the low level of residential mobility of TAY in EFC in California; a recent study in California found that TAY experience a median of 1.0 moves during their entire stay in EFC, with a median rate of 0.67 moves per year, or roughly one move every 18 months (Hammond et al., 2024). Third, our data only captured the information on TAY's first homelessness episode, which may have different characteristics and circumstances from subsequent episodes of homelessness. Fourth, the current analysis only includes youth who completed both the baseline and follow-up interviews. Youth who did not participate in the second round of interviews and were excluded from the analysis may have different risk and protective factors and rates of homelessness than those included in the study. Fifth, while the longitudinal nature of our study has helped us identify predictors of homelessness, our findings regarding the relationships between our predictor variables and homelessness should not be considered causal. In particular, while our predictive models control for a wide variety of potential contributors to homelessness among the study subjects, our study may nevertheless have omitted measures of variables that could bias our estimates of the relationships between our explanatory variables and homelessness. Sixth, our findings only pertain to the experience of homelessness between 17 and 19 years of age. While much of the movement in California out of foster care and from traditional foster care settings into settings only available in EFC happens during this period, studies examining the risk of homelessness at older ages might reach different conclusions. Finally, our findings may not apply to TAY in other jurisdictions due to differences in the demographic composition of the foster youth populations, characteristics of child welfare and health systems, and housing markets and government housing support policies. The findings reported here seem likely to be most relevant to states that operate inclusive EFC programs (i.e., participation is viewed more as a right of TAY than as a privilege) and have invested in treatment-oriented living arrangements that are equipped to support youth with relatively complex needs, or other services that provide such support outside of a placement setting.

5. Conclusion

Despite the limitations, our study provides important practice and research implications. First, the relatively high rate of homelessness for TAY early in the transition to adulthood calls into question the adequacy of supports and services available to help these young people remain stably housed during this important developmental period. The much higher risk of homelessness among those who leave care calls for renewed efforts by public and private child welfare agencies to identify ways to better engage TAY with EFC, and to connect TAY who leave care with formal and informal supports outside the child welfare system that can help them remain stably housed, including public housing agencies (Curry & Abrams, 2015).

Second, our findings regarding the reduction in the risk of homelessness associated with EFC adds to the growing evidence of the benefits of EFC for TAY across a wide range of outcomes (Courtney et al., 2021; Prince et al., 2019). States that have not yet done so should consider opting into claiming Title IV-E funding to enhance the services they currently provide to TAY. The ability to use Title IV-E to fund transitional housing programs should be particularly appealing to states that want to better serve TAY with complex needs. With that in mind, Congress should reconsider H.R.7010, the Increasing Access to Foster Care Through Age 21 Act, introduced in 2024.[10] The act would encourage States to extend foster care support and services for youth through age 21, and allow youth to re-enter foster care after attaining 18 years of age, by providing IV-E funding without regard to the AFDC eligibility of their parents or legal guardians. The limited number of youth whose foster care status still meets the 1996 income eligibility requirement under Title IV-E is a disincentive for states to continue to provide foster care to young adults.

Future research should examine the specific elements of EFC that most effectively prevent homelessness, with particular attention to the relative contributions to homelessness prevention of providing housing to TAY directly (e.g., through transitional housing and foster home payments), through housing subsidies (e.g., SILP payments), and through services that EFC provides TAY. Future research should also examine the longer-term protective effects of EFC, including whether benefits continue after TAY age out of EFC on their 21st birthday.

Third, our findings highlight the importance of designing EFC policies and programs in ways that ensure TAY with complex needs engage with services and supports that can reduce their risk of homelessness. California's state child welfare agency, its counties, and the federal government through Title IV-E reimbursement contribute over $100 million per year in payments to THP placements and another $12 million to FFA providers for TAY.[11] Our findings suggest that the availability of these EFC placement settings, particularly transitional housing, accounted for much of the reduction in homelessness associated with EFC in California. More research is needed on the characteristics and impact of the new living arrangements within the context of EFC and TAY outcomes.

The finding that THP and FFA living arrangements were associated with similar reductions in the risk of homelessness compared to being out of care might lead to the conclusion that states should focus on supporting foster homes for TAY in EFC rather than on transitional housing, given the much higher cost of the latter. However, the low rate of utilization by TAY of therapeutic foster homes in California calls into question the feasibility of that approach. Indeed, fewer than one-in-five young adults in care in California live in kinship foster care, nonrelative foster care, or therapeutic foster care.

Finally, our study highlights the need for additional support for subgroups of TAY, particularly sexual minority youth and those with a history of physical assault. Our quantitative analyses are not well suited to examining reasons why these groups of TAY are more vulnerable to homelessness. Future qualitative and mixed-methods studies should investigate ways to better support transitions to

[10] H.R.7010 - Increasing Access to Foster Care Through Age 21 Act: https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/7010/text.

[11] In October 2024, 2016 TAY lived in THP placements in California (California Child Welfare Indicators Project, 2024). At an average rate per month of $4192, for 12 months per year, a THP statewide caseload of that size would cost $101,412,864 per year. In that same month, 358 TAY lived in FFA homes, at an average cost of $2820 per month, for an annual cost of $12,114,720.

adulthood for TAY.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Mark E. Courtney: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Sunggeun Park:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Justin S. Harty:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

Disclaimer

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Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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