Focus on Youth
CFSR Findings: 2015-2017

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Administration for Children & Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau

Introduction

The federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) are an important tool that enables the Children's Bureau to (1) ensure conformity with federal child welfare requirements; (2) determine what is actually happening to children and families receiving child welfare services; and (3) assist states in enhancing their capacity to help children and families achieve positive outcomes related to safety, permanency, and well-being. Data and information collected during the CFSRs provide some insights into specific areas of child welfare practice. This report presents CFSR results related to older youth (aged 16–17) in foster care for the 38 states reviewed during the first 3 years of Round 3 (2015–2017).

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Addressing the Needs of Older Youth in Foster Care

Child welfare agencies promote the safety, permanency, and well-being of youth in foster care. For older youth, promoting positive well-being outcomes includes preparing them for adulthood. To support states' efforts in this area, the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 provides funding for the Independent Living Program and the services needed to help older youth who are exiting or have aged out of foster care in their transition to independence. These services include support for housing, developing and building skills needed for living independently, medical coverage, and financial assistance to pursue educational and employment opportunities.

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 amended parts B and E of Title IV of the Social Security Act to allow states the option of providing kinship guardianship assistance payments to support relative caregivers who may be caring for older youth, to provide states the option of extending eligibility for Title IV-E payments for youth up to age 21, and to establish requirements for educational stability for youth in foster care, health oversight and coordination, and transition planning for youth emancipating out of foster care. It also required Title IV-E agencies to make reasonable efforts to place brothers and sisters together in foster care, which is important to youth in foster care. Laws such as these support states in their work to achieve positive safety, permanency, and well-being

outcomes for older youth and to help them acquire the necessary skills to live independently when they age out of foster care.

This report presents results from case reviews conducted during the first 3 years of Round 3 of the CFSRs and focuses on how agencies work with older youth between the ages of 16 and 17 in foster care to build and strengthen a strong emotional and relational foundation to support their transition into adulthood. Specifically, the report addresses two questions using CFSR data: (1) How well do agencies meet the needs of older youth in foster care?, and (2) What are the perceptions and experiences of older youth in foster care? Answering questions such as these helps to identify agencies' strengths and challenges when working with older youth in foster care.

Methods

Data Collection

The CFSRs evaluate agency performance in ensuring safety, permanency, and well-being for children by reviewing at least 65 cases and interviewing stakeholders, such as youth, judges, Guardians Ad Litem (GALs), foster and adoptive parents, birth parents, and agency and parent attorneys, in each state.

A team of federal and state reviewers uses the federal Onsite Review Instrument and Instructions (OSRI) to rate cases. Reviewers look at cases of children served in their homes and cases of children in foster care. For foster care cases, a target child is identified, and the case ratings focus mainly on that specific child. For in-home cases, ratings focus on all of the relevant children. This report presents the OSRI ratings for items most relevant to older youth in foster care. The results show how well agencies:

- Assessed youth service needs and provided services, especially independent living services;
- Maintained connections for youth; and
- Engaged youth in case planning.

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To determine item ratings, reviewers looked at a practice during a specified recent time range, usually the most recent 12 to 18 months. They examined case records and interviewed case participants, such as caseworkers, parents, foster parents, and the youth themselves. The reviewers then rated each item as either a Strength or an Area Needing Improvement (ANI). Reviewers also wrote a Rationale Statement to explain the basis for each rating. This report presents CFSR results of the 203 foster care cases of youth aged 16 and 17 that were reviewed between 2015 and 2017.

To represent youth voices on how child welfare agencies are performing at a broader level, this report also presents results from the 42 stakeholder interviews and focus groups held directly with older youth currently in foster care or who recently aged out of foster care. At least one youth stakeholder interview was held in each of the 38 states participating in the first 3 years of Round 3 of the CFSR. It is important to note that while the case ratings reflect individual youth cases, the youth perspectives drawn from the focus groups may represent broader perspectives on child welfare practice and systemic issues, and therefore the qualitative results are not directly comparable to the item ratings.

Results

Results of the 2015–2017 CFSRs are below. These results represent performance from data collected in the first 3 years of Round 3 of the CFSR on a small sample of cases and stakeholder interviews from each state. In addition, the results do not imply that one data element had an effect on another.
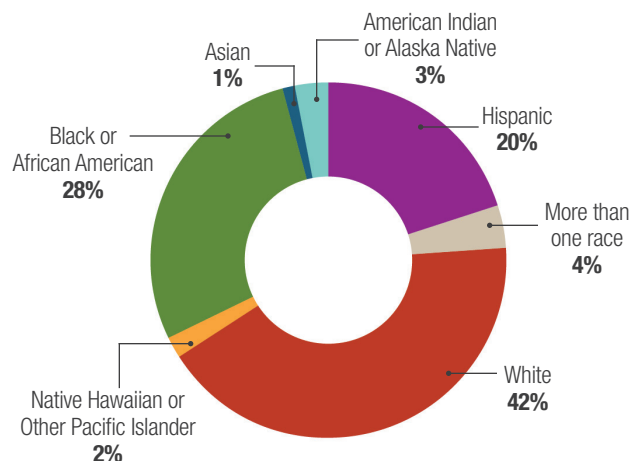
Older Youth in Foster Care

Of the cases reviewed during FYs 2015–2017, there were 203 cases in which youth were aged 16–17 and in foster care at some time during the review period. Of those older youth, 104 were female and 99 were male. Forty older youth were Hispanic (other youth were non-Hispanic), 85 older youth were White, 56 older youth were Black or African American, and 22

older youth belonged to other races. (*See Figure 1.*) The most common reasons older-youth cases were opened for services were neglect (96 older youth) and child behavior (61 older youth). Cases may have been opened for more than one reason and, therefore, the percentages add up to more than 100%. In some cases, "Other" was selected as the reason that the older-youth cases were opened for services. The most common "Other" reasons included that the parent was deceased, absent, or unwilling to be a caregiver; the youth was not being properly cared for or supervised by the parents and the youth became the subject of a dependency hearing; the youth was a minor refugee;

Figure 1. Race/Ethnicity of Older Youth

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or the youth was not consistently attending school. (*See Figure 2.*)

Time in Foster Care and Permanency Goals for Older Youth

On average, older youth had been in foster care 39 months prior to the start date of the period under review (PUR). The median was 28 months and the range was 1 to 186 months, indicating that many older youth have experienced lengthy stays in foster care.

> OLDER YOUTH WHOSE CASES WERE REVIEWED HAD BEEN IN FOSTER CARE AN AVERAGE OF **39 MONTHS** PRIOR TO THE START OF THE PUR.

The most common permanency goal[1] among older youth was "other planned permanent living arrangement" (OPPLA) (118 youth). With the permanency goal of OPPLA, the child welfare agency maintains care and custody of the youth and arranges a living situation in which the youth is expected to remain until adulthood. OPPLA should be a permanency option only when
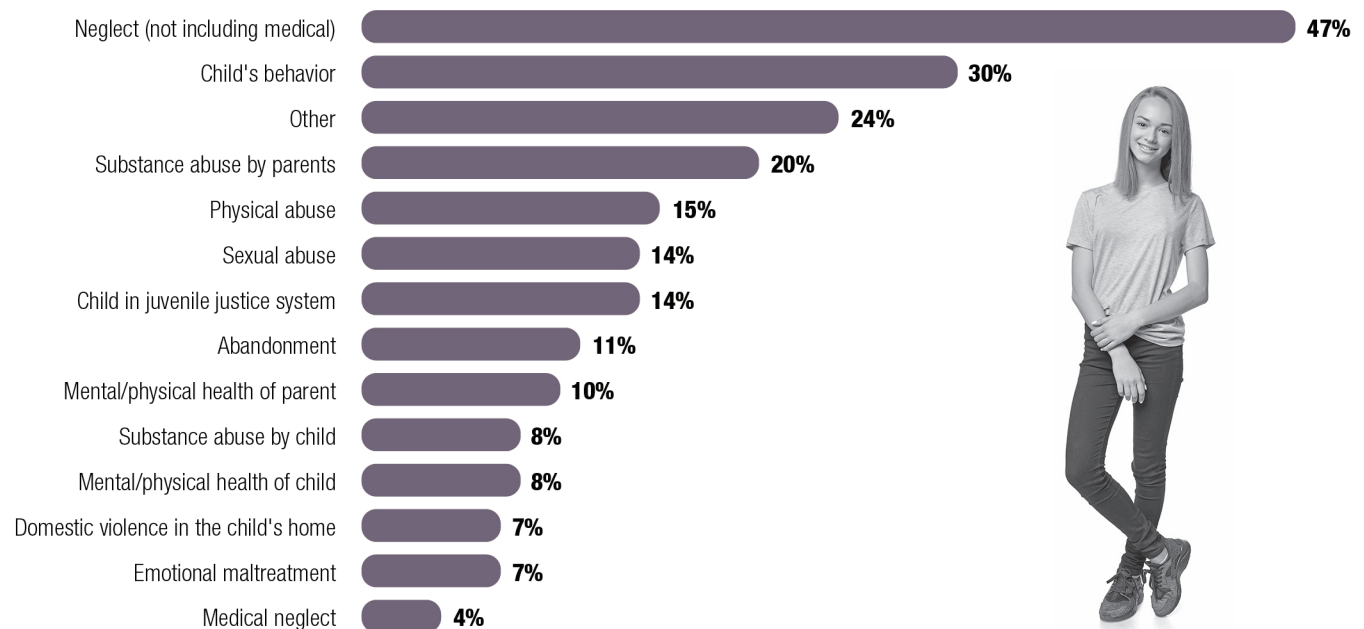
other options such as reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship have been ruled out. On average, youth were 16 years of age at the time the OPPLA goals were established. Agencies made concerted efforts to achieve the OPPLA permanency goal for 87 youth, meaning agencies took steps to ensure that placements were permanent, such as by asking foster parents or relatives to agree to and sign a long-term care commitment.

> **58%** OF OLDER YOUTH HAD A PERMANENCY GOAL OF OPPLA.

> **74%** OF CASES WITH OPPLA AS THE PERMANENCY GOAL WERE RATED AS A STRENGTH.

The second most common permanency goal for older youth was reunification (61 youth). Agencies made concerted efforts to achieve the goal of reunification for 25 youth. The third most common permanency goal for older youth was guardianship (41 youth).

**Figure 2.** Reasons for Case Opening for Older Youth

Reason	Percentage
Neglect (not including medical)	47%
Child's behavior	30%
Other	24%
Substance abuse by parents	20%
Physical abuse	15%
Sexual abuse	14%
Child in juvenile justice system	14%
Abandonment	11%
Mental/physical health of parent	10%
Substance abuse by child	8%
Mental/physical health of child	8%
Domestic violence in the child's home	7%
Emotional maltreatment	7%
Medical neglect	4%

[1] Permanency goals are not necessarily mutually exclusive, given that some youth have concurrent permanency goals.

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Agencies made concerted efforts to achieve the goal of guardianship for 10 youth. The fourth most common permanency goal for older youth was adoption (27 youth). Agencies made concerted efforts to achieve the goal of adoption for 6 youth. (*See Figure 3.*)

Figure 3. Permanency Goals for Older Youth
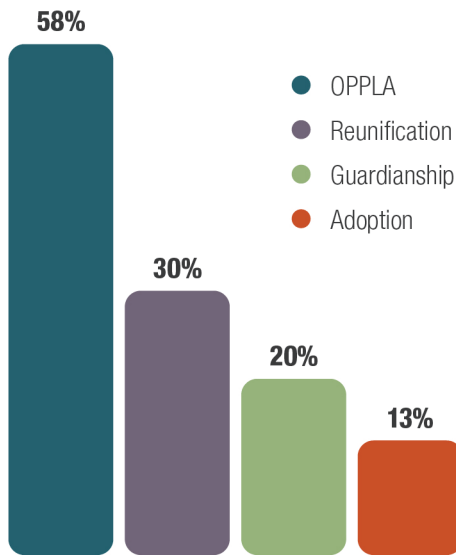
As Figure 4 illustrates, just under half of the cases with reunification as the permanency goal were rated as a Strength; approximately a quarter of cases involving a goal of guardianship or adoption were rated as a Strength. Cases involving older youth were less likely to be rated as a Strength for achieving reunification or guardianship than cases involving children aged 0–5. There were no other significant differences across other permanency goals or cases involving youth of other ages.

Based on these results, agencies and courts appear to be making concerted efforts to place youth in living arrangements (i.e., relatives, foster homes, group homes, or congregate care facilities) that could be considered permanent until they leave foster care. Comparatively, agencies and courts made fewer concerted efforts to achieve other permanency goals for older youth, suggesting that agencies and courts face greater challenges in achieving reunification, guardianship, or adoption for older youth.

AGENCIES AND COURTS **MADE FEWER CONCERTED EFFORTS** TO ACHIEVE PERMANENCY GOALS (REUNIFICATION, GUARDIANSHIP OR ADOPTION) OTHER THAN OPPLA FOR OLDER YOUTH.

Youths' perspectives on permanence. Overall, youth reported mixed experiences regarding their level of involvement in, and understanding of, permanency goals and decisions. Some older youth said they were not informed of their permanency goals, either initially or when the goals changed. Several youth discussed how their parents' parental rights had been terminated without the youths' knowledge. Moreover, some youth mentioned that they felt they had not been consulted during permanency decisions or hearings. As one interviewer noted:

> *One youth stated that she should have had a voice earlier in the life of her case, as it related to her permanency choices. She was adopted at age 8 or 9 and the adoption disrupted by the age of 13 and had someone talked to her, they would have known that she did not wish to be adopted by the parties that adopted her.*

Figure 4. Strength and ANI Ratings for Permanency Goals for Older Youth

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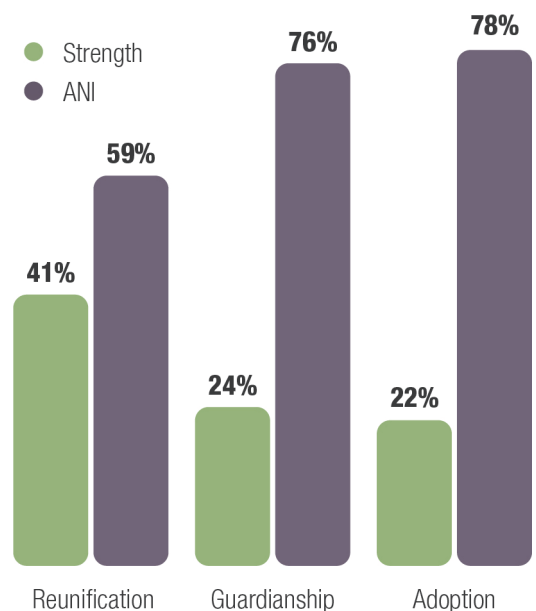
Not all older youth shared this viewpoint. Some youth reported that they regularly attended permanency hearings and perceived them to be valuable.

Although some remained hopeful about achieving permanency, such as through adoption, youth often understood permanency more in the context of becoming independent and aging out rather than being adopted. Youth said there was no discussion regarding the potential consequences of aging out without a permanent connection to a caregiver or family support. In the interviews, some youth stated vague independence goals, and it appeared that legal definitions of permanency, and youths' permanency goals, were generally not well understood. Dealing with a non-permanent situation for as long as possible to bide their time before aging out was not uncommon.

> YOUTH SAID THERE WAS NO DISCUSSION REGARDING THE POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES OF AGING OUT WITHOUT A PERMANENT CONNECTION TO A CAREGIVER OR FAMILY SUPPORT.

Permanency plan options often were not created and/or reviewed with the youth and some had to be more engaged in securing their own plans. As an interviewer noted:

> *One youth was instrumental in securing his own permanency plan. He is psyched about the option and the possibility of being adopted by his teacher. He did not think about adoption as an option until it was introduced to him by his teacher. His workers did not explore the option of adoption with him. He indicated that the workers were only interested in him being placed with relatives.*

These results underscore the importance of agencies working to ensure that youth understand all the ramifications of what it means to have permanency and that they are involved in their own permanency planning. Caseworkers should encourage older youth to ask questions about permanency and should address any

concerns older youth might have. Caseworkers also should balance the need to achieve permanency with the need for older youth to learn how to be independent. These efforts may help youth to feel more engaged and therefore contribute to better permanency outcomes.

> CASEWORKERS CAN **SUPPORT YOUTH INVOLVEMENT** IN PERMANENCY PLANNING BY ENCOURAGING THEM TO ASK QUESTIONS AND ADDRESSING THEIR CONCERNS.

Case Review Results for Older Youth and Youths' Perspectives

Youth Engagement

Including youth in case planning is essential to their success in foster care and achieving and maintaining permanency. When agencies and caseworkers engage with youth, they are demonstrating their commitment to ensuring that youth have a voice. Through these types of collaborations, youth learn to interact with people and systems, along with how to advocate for themselves. For older youth, it is especially important that agencies involve them in the case planning process, as they may be more likely to work toward their goals if they feel that they had a say in developing those goals. Older youth were involved in the case planning process in 83% (cases involving 166 older youth out of 199) of cases. Youth aged 16–17 were significantly more likely to be

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involved in case planning than those in the middle two age groups (6–12 and 13–15). (*See Figure 5.*) This suggests that involving older youth in the case planning process represents a strength for agencies. Moreover, agencies will be better equipped to support the needs of older youth by engaging them in the initial development of case plans and on an ongoing basis as case plans are updated.

> OLDER YOUTH WERE **SIGNIFICANTLY MORE LIKELY TO BE INVOLVED** IN CASE PLANNING COMPARED TO CHILDREN AGED 6–15.

> **INVOLVING** YOUTH IN CASE PLANNING PROVIDES THEM WITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO TAKE ON **DECISION-MAKING ROLES** AND SUPPORTS THEIR TRANSITION INTO ADULTHOOD.

Youths' perspectives on engagement. As a vital part of the team, youth said that having the ability to make decisions about their lives and their cases was critical in ensuring that they had positive experiences. To feel engaged, youth said they felt that they not only needed to have a voice, but that they needed their voice

Figure 5. Youth Involvement in Case Planning by Age
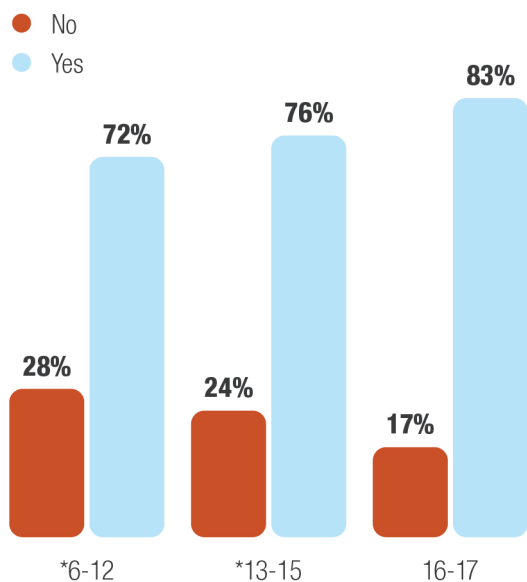
*Significantly different from 16-17

to be listened to. Youth emphasized the importance of caseworkers (and other team members, including GALs and judges) asking them what they want, especially when they are younger and have not yet gained self-advocacy skills. Youth noted that they felt valued when they were engaged in decision-making. One youth said that "it is important to have a supportive team around," which captured the sentiment of the majority of the interviews.

> YOUTH SAID THAT TO **FEEL ENGAGED**, THEY NEEDED THEIR OPINIONS TO BE **ASKED** AND **LISTENED TO**.

Involving youth in the case planning process can encourage youth engagement and help to develop rapport, which may influence youths' motivation to work toward their goals. However, while case review findings indicate that involvement of older youth in case planning is a strength for agencies, older youth said they were not involved in the case planning process or not involved to the degree they would have liked. This suggests that while the quantitative results support that older youth are involved in case planning, the collaboration could be further improved. As a youth noted:

> *It was written for me and they brought [it] to me. Sometimes what was in the reports or plan was an exaggeration—making things worse than what they were when they described the reasons I was removed.*

Further, some youth said there was not enough communication among team members (e.g., caseworkers, GALs, foster parents, judges, group home staff), and discussed how a lack of communication often caused misunderstandings about youths' needs, services, and appointments. Some youth also expressed concerns related to whose voices were elevated during decision-making. They were concerned that their own voices were given less weight than the voices of others (such as adults involved with their cases). For example, one youth said, "staff have these huge files on the youth, but it is all what others say about the youth, nothing is from the youth's perspective."

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Most youth who were involved in case planning saw the experience as positive. However, youth did not always fully understand their case plans. While some youth said they felt that their case plans were never updated, others believed that as they got older, the case plans got updated more frequently because the youth became more involved in the process as they aged or became more comfortable advocating for themselves. Several youth felt that the caseworker's attention—or lack thereof—affected the case planning process. When caseworkers had too large of a caseload or were not attentive for other reasons, youth felt less involved. Overall, the results suggest that youth want more involvement in their case plans, and that this type of involvement would enhance youth engagement and amplify the youth voice. One youth observed:

> *Mine was worked on with me. It helped; it gave me something to strive towards. Before my involvement with my case plan I did not have goals. If I had questions I could bring it up. I had no problems with my case plan; my caseworker made sure I understood everything and walked me through each step.*

The issue of having a voice, or being heard, arose numerous times in discussions and across many different topics. Some youth perceived that they were not heard, and therefore were not valued or respected. They said they felt that their voices were not heard during case planning, during meetings with their caseworkers, or when issues with services or placements arose. On the other hand, more youth reported feeling heard in court.

Some felt that the judge, specifically, listened to them. As a youth indicated:

> *I'm invited and talk to the judge about what's on my mind and what I have to say. I get a turn to speak after others on my case talk about my situation and how we're moving forward.*

Some youth also felt that they were heard more as they got older. This was not always the case, though; some reported being ignored because they were getting older and because they were not a "high needs child." Youth said not being heard put them at risk, such as when they felt a placement was a mismatch and therefore at risk of disrupting. Some said they felt that the only way to control the situation was to run away. Several youth perceived that caseworkers only listened to other adults and took youths' statements as being false. When youth did feel heard, they often said that peer support was an important facilitator of feeling that their input was received. Overall, the results suggest that youths' experiences while in foster care can be enhanced by better acknowledging that their voices are heard and valuable. As a youth noted:

> *We need social services to accept our calls when we want to talk to supervisors about how our social workers are treating us, or ignoring us; they should not hang up on us just because we are in foster care. Someone should listen to our complaints. That is not right. It is disheartening when we get to the right person on the phone and they just hang up on us as soon as they hear that we are in foster care. Who are we supposed to tell when no one listens?*

> YOUTHS' EXPERIENCES WHILE IN FOSTER CARE CAN BE **ENHANCED** BY LETTING THEM KNOW THAT THEIR **VOICES ARE HEARD AND VALUED**.

Self-advocacy is one of the most active ways in which a youth can be engaged while in foster care. Unfortunately, youth often only begin self-advocating because they are feeling ignored by members of their team. Most youth said that advocating for themselves was an important way

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to secure assistance and have their needs met. Others, however, did not feel that they were often successful in advocating for themselves. As an example, one youth reported that his abuse was not acknowledged until he asked another adult to report it. To some, youth self-advocacy meant asking for what they needed until they got it and for others it meant informing themselves about the issues and about their rights and approaching the appropriate person. Some youth advocated for themselves with respect to their case plans and placements, and several said that youth should have greater input into decisions about where they are placed. Most youth agreed that they should be taught and encouraged to self-advocate, and mentioned some of the positive effects that self-advocacy can have for them. As a youth noted:

> *A month after I spoke up I got to go to a public school where I took my GPA from l.9 to 3.6 at graduation.*

Youth noted mixed feelings toward their GALs, with some youth reporting positive experiences and others reporting having minimal contact with them. For youth who had consistent contact with their GALs, they perceived these relationships to be important because youth were able to learn more about their rights and how to advocate for themselves.

Some youth talked about self-advocacy groups and state-level groups that helped them to advocate for youth in foster care at the policy level. Overall, youth spoke positively of these groups and praised some of their efforts, such as creating a Foster Child's Bill of Rights in their states. However, some youth report that there is not an opportunity for involvement in policy or programs. As an interviewer noted:

> *Youth stated that they felt the new prudent parent and normalcy standards were something that they accomplished as a result of their voices being heard. The youth also spoke about their impact on state-level groups...when they are asked to speak and tell their stories.*

Overall, the results suggest that youth perceive self-advocacy to be critical, although it is important that

youth feel heard even if they are not advocating for something specific.

Caseworker visitation. When caseworkers have frequent and quality visits with youth, they can better ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of youth. Moreover, during these visits, caseworkers have the opportunity to promote the achievement of case goals. In 74% (cases involving 150 older youth out of 203) of the cases, caseworker visits were of sufficient frequency and quality to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of older youth and promote achievement of case goals. Sixty-nine percent (140 older youth) had at least monthly visits with their caseworkers. There were no significant differences in visitation frequency and quality between cases involving older youth and cases involving those of other ages.

Youths' perspectives on caseworker visitation and communication. Youth talked at length about their relationships with their caseworkers. Youth perceived caseworkers to be the people who made decisions on their behalf. Several youth indicated that having a supportive caseworker is pivotal to their survival and success in the system. Youth described having positive relationships with caseworkers who "try to put themselves in your shoes or they have gone through something that makes them able to relate to you," although youth also perceived these types of positive relationships to be the exception rather than the norm. Youth perceived frequent visits and/or communication with their caseworkers to be facilitators

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of their success, while "frequent switching of social workers makes it hard to attach and connect" and having to do so was perceived as a challenge to having good relationships with caseworkers. An interviewer noted about a youth stakeholder:

> *The turnover rate of workers has been difficult for her, as every time she changes workers she has to retell her life story and re-establish [a] relationship.*

YOUTH REPORTED THAT HAVING A **SUPPORTIVE CASEWORKER** WAS CRITICAL TO THEIR SUCCESS. HOWEVER, THEY NOTED THAT THE TURNOVER IN CASEWORKERS MADE IT DIFFICULT TO BUILD A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH THEM. THEY ALSO NOTED THAT HIGH CASELOADS MADE COMMUNICATION DIFFICULT.

Receiving information that youth perceive to be crucial and being able to communicate with caseworkers without challenges are likely to empower youth and facilitate engagement. Some youth perceived that caseworkers having high caseloads was a barrier to communication, while others believed that their caseworkers did not care about them. Youth often mentioned that they struggled to get timely responses from their caseworkers. Some youth resorted to contacting their caseworker's supervisor to prompt more frequent communication. Others said they had to be experiencing a crisis to receive attention from their caseworkers. As several youth noted:

> *Case manager will not return calls because she says "I am doing good." But, I need to talk to her about things going on in my life.*

> *We need to know what is going on with us, and we have questions, but no communication. We keep calling and leaving messages, but no one responds. The process is long; the worker should talk with us.*

Some youth said that their caseworkers did not inform them of their court dates or important meetings. They also consistently noted that their caseworkers did not tell them about services or respond when they wanted to discuss changing or terminating certain services. Further, youth felt that caseworkers failed to explain things to them about their cases. The lack of information negatively affected some of the youth. However, when they did receive communication and information, they reported that it positively affected their situation and, in some cases, their transitions. For example, some youth felt that good communication with their caseworkers was important because it meant they had someone in their lives to whom they could tell good news. Overall, the caseworkers' positive attitude and availability to older youth appeared to be key elements for guiding and helping youth in foster care. A youth observed:

> *Foster care is not a good experience but when you have caseworkers that like their job and want to help, it makes a difference.*

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Placement Stability

Research over the last 2 decades has demonstrated a strong association between frequent placement moves and poor outcomes.[2] Multiple placement moves disrupt the continuity of youth's relationships with caregivers and community, their education, and their medical and behavioral health care. The CFSRs, recognizing the importance of placement stability, consider whether a youth in foster care is in a stable placement and whether any changes in placement that occurred were consistent with supporting the youth, ensuring the youth's safety, and enhancing the child's well-being, consistent with achieving the youth's permanency goals.

For older youth, the most recent placements during the PUR included non-relative foster family homes (76 older youth), group homes (43 older youth), and relative foster family homes (36 older youth). Seven older youth were placed in supervised independent living. (*See Figure 6.*)

Figure 6. Most Recent Placements for Older Youth
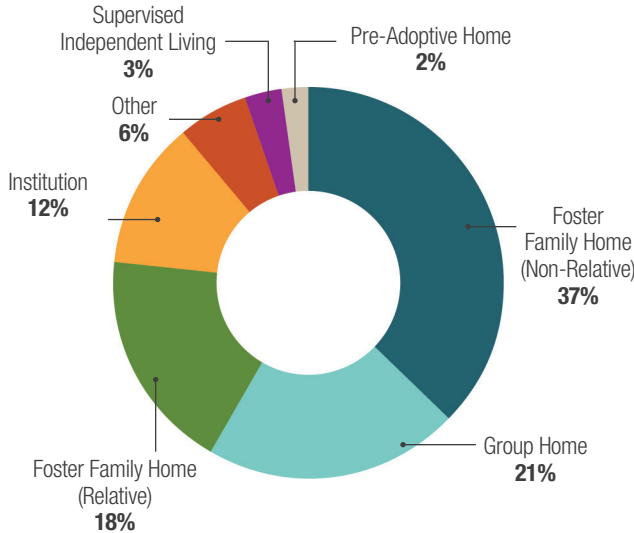
One hundred and thirty-six older youth were found to be in stable placements and any changes in placements were in the youth's best interests and consistent with achieving the youth's permanency goal(s). Placement stability is sometimes a struggle for older youth. Cases in which youth were aged 16–17 were significantly less likely to be rated as a Strength than cases involving younger children aged 0–5. (*See Figure 7.*) The difference between older youth and children aged 6–12 and 13–15 was not significant.

Figure 7. Strength and ANI Ratings for Placement Stability for Older Youth by Age

*Significantly different from 16-17
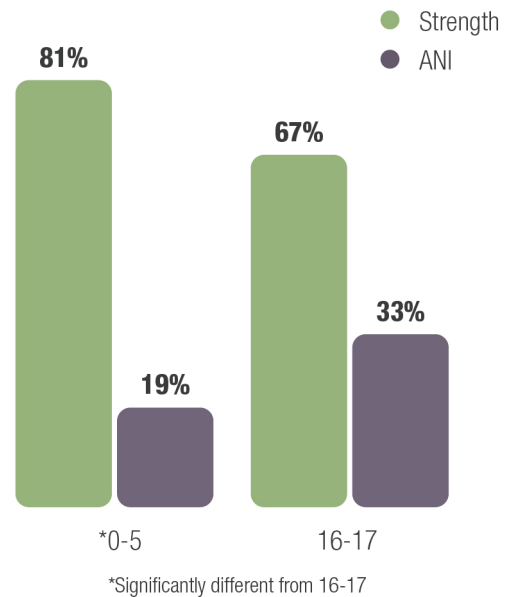
A review of the rating Rationale Statements in the cases of older youth that were rated ANI for placement stability revealed that running away (26 youth out of the 67 with ANI ratings), involvement with the criminal justice system (14 youth out of the 67 with ANI ratings), and illegal substance use (7 youth out of the 67 with ANI ratings) can contribute to placement instability.

Youths' perspectives on placement instability. Youth reported a number of contributors to placement instability, including the closing of foster and group homes, mismatches between placements and the needs of youth, and foster parents who were inadequately trained or "too inexperienced" to care for older youth with histories of trauma. One youth observed:

> *[I] didn't belong in [the] last foster home. The home was for kids with special needs, and [I] didn't fit there.*

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[2] Rubin, D. M., O'Reilly, A., Luan, X., & Localio, A. R. (2007). The impact of placement stability on behavioral well-being for children in foster care. *Pediatrics, 119*(2), 336–344. http://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2006-1995. Retrieved from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2693406/

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YOUTH REPORTED THAT THE CLOSING OF FOSTER AND GROUP HOMES, MISMATCH BETWEEN PLACEMENTS AND NEEDS OF YOUTH, AND INEXPERIENCED, INADEQUATELY TRAINED FOSTER PARENTS CONTRIBUTED TO **PLACEMENT INSTABILITY**.

Youth also described how placement instability resulted in the loss of services, friendships, extracurricular opportunities, family ties, and educational opportunities. Youth felt that these interruptions were worsened by a lack of transportation. Placement instability also negatively affected youths' emotional well-being. One youth noted:

> *[I've] been in foster care 5 years and had 8 placements. Not all foster parents fault, but they seem to give up on children quickly. This brings you down because you blame yourself for all of it.*

Sibling Placement and Sibling Visitation

Sibling relationships are critically important not only in childhood but over the course of a lifetime. Youth often spend more time with their brothers and sisters than anyone else. Sibling relationships can provide a significant source of continuity throughout a child's lifetime and are likely to be the longest that most people experience. Studies have found that sibling relationship quality can lead to better emotional and behavioral development, and sibling affection can be a protective factor against negative life events and other risk factors for problem behaviors. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 sends a clear message that sibling relationships are critically important to preserve.
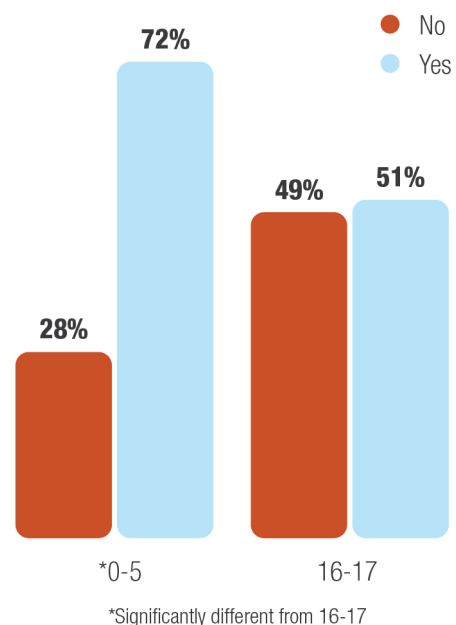
The CFSRs measure whether the agency made efforts to ensure that brothers and sisters in foster care were placed together unless a separation was necessary to meet the needs of one of the siblings. Fifty-three older youth had at least one brother or sister in foster care. Ninety-one percent (48 cases out of 53 involving older youth) were rated as a Strength. Specifically, 15 older youth out of 53 lived with their brothers and sisters. When siblings were separated (38 cases involving older

youth), there was a valid reason for the separation in 87% of the cases (33 older youth). There were no significant differences between older youth and youth of other ages for sibling placement.

28% OF OLDER YOUTH LIVED WITH THEIR BROTHERS AND SISTERS.

Regarding visiting with brothers and sisters, concerted efforts were made in 51% (cases involving 18 older youth out of 35) of applicable cases to ensure that visitation between older youth and their brothers and sisters in foster care was of sufficient frequency to maintain or promote the continuity of the relationship. Fifty-one percent (18 older youth out of 35) of older youth visited with their brothers and sisters at least once a month. Cases in which youth were aged 16–17 were significantly less likely to have sufficiently frequent visitation compared to cases involving younger children between the ages of 0–5. (*See Figure 8.*) The difference between older youth and children aged 6–12 and 13–15 with respect to sibling visitation was not significant.

Figure 8. Sufficient Frequency of Sibling Visitation for Older Youth by Age

Legend: ● No   ● Yes

*0-5: No 28%, Yes 72%
16-17: No 49%, Yes 51%

*Significantly different from 16-17

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51% OF OLDER YOUTH VISITED WITH THEIR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN FOSTER CARE AT LEAST ONCE A MONTH.

Concerted efforts were made in 59% (cases involving 19 older youth out of 32) of applicable cases to ensure that the quality of visitation between older youth and their brothers and sisters was sufficient to promote the continuity of their relationships. Cases in which youth were aged 16–17 were significantly less likely to have quality sibling visitation than cases involving younger children between the ages of 0–5 and 6–12. (*See Figure 9.*) The difference between older youth and children aged 13–15 with respect to the quality of sibling visitation was not significant.

CONCERTED EFFORTS WERE MADE TO ENSURE THE **QUALITY OF VISITATION** BETWEEN OLDER YOUTH AND BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN FOSTER CARE IN 59% OF CASES.

OLDER YOUTH WERE **SIGNIFICANTLY LESS LIKELY** TO HAVE QUALITY VISITATION WITH THEIR BROTHERS AND SISTERS THAN YOUNGER CHILDREN.

Figure 9. Sufficient Quality of Sibling Visitation for Older Youth by Age

*Significantly different from 16-17
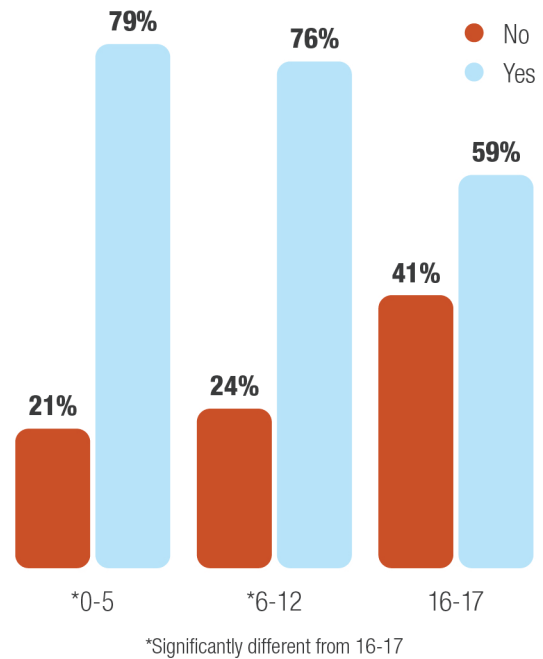
Youths' perspectives on sibling placement and visitation. In the stakeholder interviews, some youth reported being placed with their brothers and sisters and said that this played a key beneficial role in their transition into adulthood. As one interviewer observed:

> *Sibling need/support has proven to be the motivational factor for the youth to strive to do better in life.*

Maintaining contact and close relationships with their brothers and sisters is important to youth. One youth had begun working on a video about the importance of placing siblings together, and a group of youth stated that maintaining sibling relationships was a top topic of "legitimate issues" for discussion at a task force they had participated in.

In stakeholder interviews, when youth talked about living apart from their brothers and sisters, the reasons they provided varied. Some said they were placed separately when caseworkers or parents gave youth the choice of where they would like to live, and they chose to live apart from their siblings. Others talked about living separately because of behavioral problems;

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for example, some siblings were moved because of threatening or assaulting others. However, even when there were good reasons for the separations, a number of youth reported losing contact with their brothers and sisters and said that it was upsetting or frustrating for them. Some youth said that caseworkers and agencies should help youth who have lost contact with their brothers and sisters to find them and help them redevelop their relationships. One youth whose siblings were placed in another state noted:

> One thing that happened with me was that [the state] was not going to let me see my siblings. My [state] worker advocated for me so I could visit my siblings.

YOUTH FELT THAT CASEWORKERS SHOULD HELP THEM FIND AND RECONNECT WITH BROTHERS AND SISTERS.

One important way in which caseworkers supported sibling relationships was transporting youth to see their brothers and sisters. For those youth living separately from siblings, texting, email, and social media provided additional avenues by which they could stay in contact. When the caseworker did not assist with visits or help set up ways to keep in touch via social media or email, significant challenges occurred. For example, other adults could deny access to sibling relationships. An interviewer noted:

> One youth stated that she hadn't seen her sisters in 2 months. The social worker is not so good at following up with seeing that they get visitations. She reported that she had to threaten to take the issue to court. She went on to say that her aunt would not allow other types of visits with her sisters unless it was supervised by an adult. Because of this, they were not able to maintain contact through social media or on the phone or through email.

Family Relationships and Connections

Family relationships and connections are key protective factors that help to promote positive outcomes for youth in foster care. When agencies make concerted efforts to ensure that youth maintain connections to their neighborhood, community, faith, extended family, Tribe, school, and friends, they are strengthening the resources available to older youth as they become adults. In 68% of the cases (cases involving 138 older youth out of 202),[3] agencies made concerted efforts to maintain older youth's connections to these entities. There was no significant difference between cases involving older youth and those involving youth of other ages, suggesting that agencies successfully maintain connections at similar rates across age groups.


When appropriate, agencies also strive to have youth placed with relatives, as this means keeping youth with their families. In 62% of cases involving older youth (cases involving 108 older youth out of 175), concerted efforts were made to place the child with a relative, and 39 older youth out of 175 (22%) were living with a relative at the time of the case review. For 87% of the older youth placed with a relative (cases involving 34 older youth out of 39), the placement was found to be stable and appropriate. Concerted efforts to place older youth with relatives were significantly less likely to be made than such efforts to place those in the two youngest

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[3] Typically, preserving family relationships and connections is applicable to all youth. In this instance, it applied to 202 out of 203 older youth because in one case the older youth did not have existing relationships prior to coming into foster care.

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age groups (0–5 and 6–12) with relatives. (*See Figure 10.*) This suggests that increasing relative placements for older youth should be improved, since relatives who provide placements may be more likely to remain connected to older youth once they exit foster care.

Figure 10. Strength and ANI Ratings for Relative Placements for Older Youth by Age

*Significantly different from 16-17
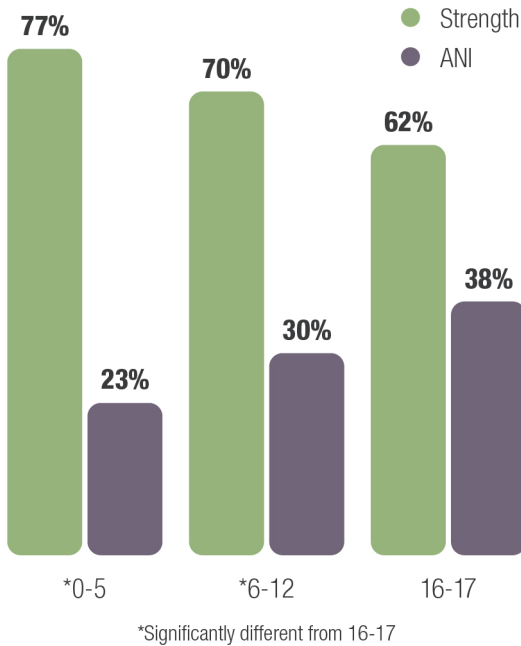
> AGENCIES WERE **LESS LIKELY** TO MAKE CONCERTED EFFORTS TO PLACE OLDER YOUTH WITH RELATIVES COMPARED TO YOUNGER CHILDREN.

It is also important for youth to have opportunities to support and maintain positive relationships with their parents or other primary caregivers outside of arranged visitation. Examples of opportunities may include encouraging the parent to participate in the youth's school activities, providing or arranging for transportation to support the parent's attending the youth's after-school or sports activities, providing therapeutic situations to help strengthen the parent-youth relationship, and facilitating contact with a parent not living close to the youth. In 54% of the older-youth cases (cases involving 54 older youth out of 100), concerted efforts were

made to promote, support, and/or maintain positive relationships between the youth and their biological parent(s) or other primary caregiver(s). There were no significant differences between older-youth cases and those involving youth or children of other ages.

Youths' perspectives on relationships and connections. Youth said that connections to their extended family, friends, and other caring adults were important facilitators of their transitions into adulthood. In interviews, some youth reported that agencies made concerted efforts to help them maintain connections, although this was inconsistent across the interviews. For some, placement instability led to severed connections, and often agencies did not help once a youth had moved. Sometimes, the placement itself, because of location or type of placement, caused the youth to lose connections. One youth indicated that "she was not allowed to participate in extracurricular activities or call/talk to friends while she was in a residential placement and that is frustrating."

Encouraging connections contributed to youth's well-being. As an interviewer noted, one youth "was very grateful to have opportunities to be part of [the youth's] Native American community such as camps." Additionally, for older youth, maintaining their connections as they transitioned out of care proved helpful. Another interviewer indicated that one youth "transitioned after his senior year to his own place of residence but he maintained the support of his worker and foster parents." Other youth noted that this support helped them stay in school.

Needs and Services

To support the well-being of youth in foster care, agencies must conduct a comprehensive assessment of each youth's needs and provide appropriate services to meet those needs. Completing a comprehensive and accurate assessment of the underlying needs of older youth and engaging them in tailored services to address their specific needs are essential to achieving positive and lasting outcomes. Through the assessments, agencies

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examine a youth's socio-emotional development, and educational, physical health, and mental and behavioral health needs, and strive to provide services to meet those needs. Older youth in foster care have a specific need to prepare for and successfully transition into adulthood. Services aimed at post-high-school planning, life skills classes, employment training, financial planning skills training, and other transitional services are particularly important for older youth. An independent living assessment and plan are required for all youth aged 14 or older to help ensure that they have a solid foundation of skills to support their transition into adulthood.

> OLDER YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE HAVE A **SPECIFIC NEED** TO PREPARE FOR AND SUCCESSFULLY TRANSITION INTO ADULTHOOD.

In 68% of the cases (cases involving 137 older youth out of 203), agencies made concerted efforts to assess the needs of youth both initially and on an ongoing basis, and provided appropriate services.[4] Cases in which youth were aged 16–17 were significantly less likely to be rated as a Strength than cases involving the youngest age group (0–5). (*See Figure 11.*)

Agencies conducted a formal or informal initial and/ or ongoing comprehensive assessment that accurately assessed the needs of older youth in 79% of cases

Figure 11. Strength and ANI Ratings for Needs and Services for Older Youth by Age

- Strength
- ANI

86%

68%

33%

14%

*0-5

16-17

*Significantly different from 16-17
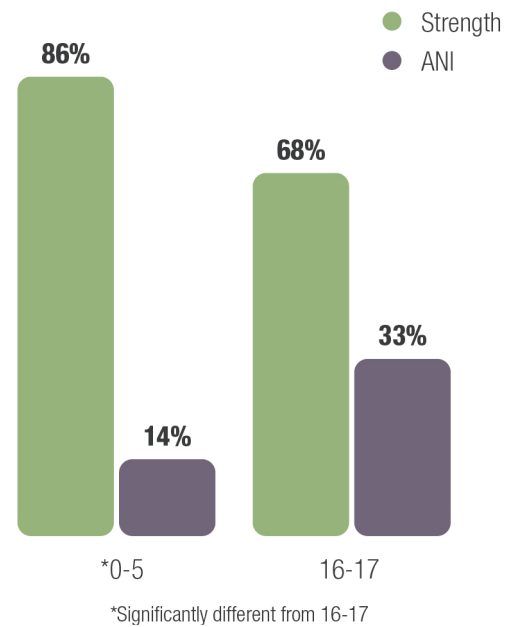
(cases involving 160 older youth out of 203). Agencies provided appropriate services to meet the identified needs of older youth in 69% of those cases (cases involving 135 older youth out of 196). A review of the ANI rating comments suggests that agencies should make greater efforts to ensure that older youth receive services to help prepare them for adulthood, especially by assessing and providing independent living services.

> SOME OF THE MOST-DISCUSSED AND WELL-LIKED SERVICES WERE **INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAMS** THAT ASSISTED WITH PROVIDING **FINANCIAL HELP** AND **LIFE SKILLS** LIKE GETTING A DRIVER'S LICENSE, OBTAINING A BIRTH CERTIFICATE, AND FINANCIAL LITERACY.

Youths' perspectives on services. Some of the most-discussed and well-liked services were Independent Living Programs. These programs provided financial help and assistance with life skills like getting a driver's license, obtaining a birth certificate, financial literacy

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[4] Ratings are based on Sub-Item 12A, which assesses needs other than those related to children's education, physical health, and mental/behavioral health (including substance abuse).

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(e.g., opening a bank account and paying bills), and credit counseling. Youth also said that housing programs, which helped subsidize rent, were helpful. A few youth noted that the services they received were individualized to meet their specific needs. Some services were very specific, such as a basketball camp, outdoor groups, or prom dress shopping. Overall, youth perceived such services as beneficial in preparing them for adulthood, and most of the youth spoke positively about their workers assisting with independent living.

Service provision was inconsistent, however, and some youth reported being left without services or not knowing about services they could access. Several suggested lists or a website listing the programs that are available to youth. Others mentioned needing assistance to purchase car insurance and wanting faster responses when obtaining their birth certificates or Social Security cards. Youth in rural areas also said that they lacked services. One youth noted:

> *I know that there were a lot of programs that kept getting promised to me but I never got [them]. Such as adult living program, I did not transfer into the adult living plan until a week before I aged out and my case closed. After I waited so long eventually I just gave up.*

Financial issues, such as not receiving payments for basic needs like housing and clothing, can leave youth feeling stressed and powerless. Youth who spoke about financial issues generally cited problems with securing financial help, even for basic needs. The most commonly mentioned concern was clothing vouchers. Youth said
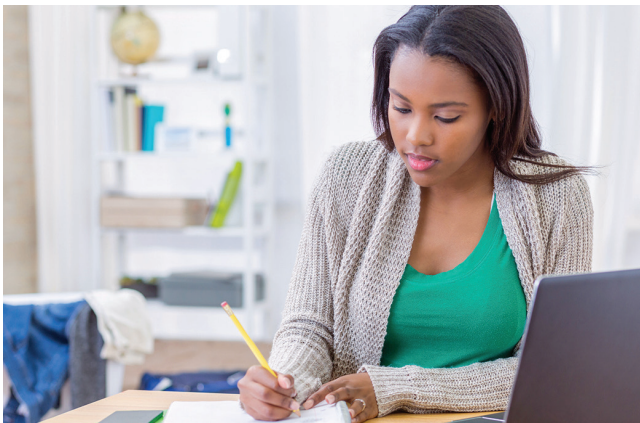
that they had trouble getting money or vouchers for clothing from the agency. Although some youth were able to obtain necessary funds through self-advocacy or programs, most said they did not get what they needed. They suggested that to facilitate successful transitions, providing adequate financial resources should be a priority.

Older youth who were placed in foster homes generally reported having positive experiences when foster parents helped them to learn independent life skills. For example, some youth reported that foster parents taught them how to complete paperwork and other life skills.

> **FINANCIAL ISSUES**, SUCH AS NOT RECEIVING PAYMENTS FOR BASIC NEEDS, CAN LEAVE YOUTH **FEELING STRESSED** AND **POWERLESS**.

Youths' perspectives on services and transitioning into adulthood. Older youth who perceived themselves as likely to "age out of foster care" discussed how stressful the transition into adulthood was for them, with one youth stating, "Aging out means everything ends and you end up on the street." Others agreed. One youth said:

> *There is a burden put on me. People expect me to get out of my box on my own and they're just waiting for me to do it. They threw me in the water and expect me to know whatever I need to do. I feel like I'm expected to do it all by myself. Just because I'm 17, I still don't feel prepared and I think someone should help me know where to start. I haven't had that kind of guidance.*

Another youth noted:

> *Youth in the system have been through a lot and are expected to be ready to go. People should still be there for you. It seems like no one is. If you need services, how will you get them? How will you know what's available? The agency should help set up things for us when youth are younger and there is a need for ongoing support after age out or turn 21.*

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Additionally, a number of youth said they were unaware of what services were available to help support them as they transitioned into adulthood, including those available during and after exiting foster care. Some older youth expressed anxiety over losing services, such as financial or mental health, when they exited from foster care. Youth were uncertain whether these services would still be available, and some said they would rather stay in foster care so they could continue receiving services that they needed and valued. Both youth who had exited foster care and youth who were preparing to exit foster care expressed worries over accessing services afterwards. As an interviewer observed:

> *Moving out of [the agency] is harder than coming into [agency] care. There were more services before aging out. There aren't a lot of supports as you age out. Can't get help with the baby. Don't know what the plan is when aging out. [The agency] hasn't offered services beyond graduating from high school….*

> *Another felt that he missed out on services because he was not aware of the various programs and services available to him. Youth should receive a list of programs and services available to them and information on how to obtain them so that [they] can sign up for the services [they] want.*

MANY YOUTH WERE UNAWARE OF THE SERVICES AND SUPPORTS THAT WERE AVAILABLE TO THEM TO HELP THEM TRANSITION INTO ADULTHOOD.

Overall, youth seemed to value financial assistance (both receiving money and learning how to manage it), employment, and medical services, in addition to services teaching them other important life skills and building relationships. A number reported that agencies could improve in their efforts to help establish new connections for youth. One youth stakeholder interviewer reported that "several of the youth indicated that a mentor is a critical service to ask for, but many

of them did not have a mentor and some were not aware of the ability to have one." Youth also perceived connections to other youth in foster care to be mutually beneficial for themselves and for the other youth. As a youth and an interviewer, respectively, indicated:

> *My parents are still running a foster home. Kids would come in, and I would try and help. I knew foster care sucked. I started to advocate and talk to the kids that were coming into my foster parent home.*

> *Another [youth] said that a positive [experience] was that older youth in care taught him a mindset of "tough it out and it'll always end better than you think." They would talk about their day together and it relieved them of their stress. They started a study group to help each other with school difficulties.*
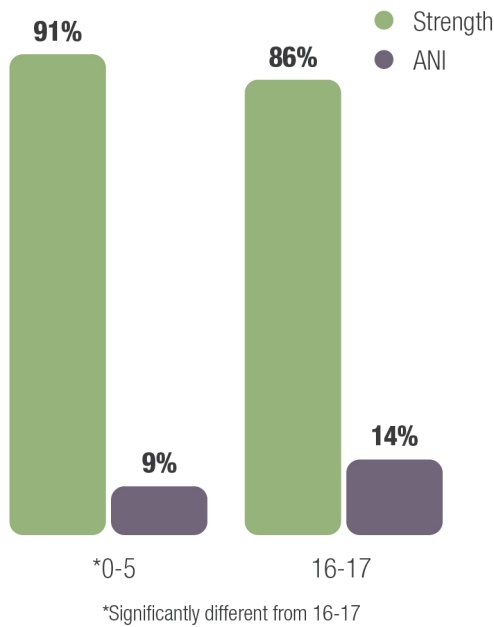

YOUTH SAID THAT NEW CONNECTIONS AND MENTORS WERE IMPORTANT IN TEACHING THEM LIFE SKILLS.

Educational needs. Agencies must make concerted efforts to assess youths' educational needs and to address their identified needs in case planning and case management activities. In 86% (cases involving 174 older youth out of 203) of the cases, the agency made concerted efforts to assess and address older youths' educational needs. Agencies were significantly less likely to make concerted efforts to assess and

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Figure 12. Strength and ANI Ratings for Educational Needs for Older Youth by Age

● Strength
● ANI

91%
86%
9%
14%

*0-5   16-17

*Significantly different from 16-17

address educational needs for older youth than for those in the youngest age group (aged 0–5). (*See Figure 12.*)

A review of the case-level data for older youth suggests that access to tutoring and alternative education (e.g., GED services) for older youth may be areas where agencies could consider potential opportunities for growth and casework improvement.

Youths' perspectives on educational services. Most youth reported receiving educational services and having support for their academic goals. For example, one youth attended a month-long summer educational

program, noting "it gives a full college experience. This is really [a] great program and it really helped to learn what college is like and how to manage being in college." Youth discussed services for navigating the college application and transition process with some frequency. Specific programs and IL workers were perceived as being responsible for most of the assistance. Youth also reported receiving financial assistance, such as Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) (a program that provides older youth leaving foster care with funding and support for post-secondary education) and help with securing scholarships. Still, sometimes services were delayed. According to one youth, tutoring services were not always provided when they were needed. Another youth mentioned delays in receiving tuition assistance payments, which put her in a difficult position with the school. A few youth reported not knowing about educational services and having trouble finding any help at all with college funds, especially after aging out of foster care. Overall, youth who received assistance for education or tuition appeared to be better able to transition out of foster care and more prepared to attend college. As one youth noted:

> *[The agency] put me in a program. They have helped me and it's a great program. They have all kinds of social and academic programs available. They bring in teachers who work in the field that they are teaching about. [The agency] and school split the cost for the program. The wilderness school is also a good program that is both therapeutic and social. It includes hiking and doing outside stuff.*

Physical health needs. In 74% of cases (cases involving 151 older youth out of 203), agencies addressed the physical health needs of older youth. There were no significant differences between cases involving older youth and cases involving youth of other ages, suggesting that agencies succeed in addressing the physical health needs at similar rates across the age groups of foster care youth and children.

MEETING OLDER YOUTHS' PHYSICAL, MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH NEEDS

IN **74%** OF CASES, AGENCIES ADDRESSED PHYSICAL HEALTH NEEDS.

IN **63%** OF CASES, MENTAL/BEHAVIORAL HEALTH NEEDS WERE MET.

AGENCIES PROVIDED APPROPRIATE OVERSIGHT OF PRESCRIPTION MEDICATIONS FOR MENTAL/BEHAVIORAL HEALTH NEEDS IN **73%** OF CASES.

Youths' perspectives on physical health services.
Generally, youth reported having their physical health needs met. In both foster care and group homes, they reported being able to access doctors and dentists. A few youth reported delays in getting approval to receive medical services. Others shared that they had experienced Medicaid issues, delays, poor record-keeping, and lapses in coverage. Generally, youth would like more assistance in accessing and understanding Medicaid. As an interviewer noted:

> *The youth's Medicaid was cut off when going to college but the therapist continued to work with her. Finally, Medicaid was back in place. This semester, went to a doctor and the Medicaid card was declined. The youth called the IL (Independent Living) worker and explained the situation. The Medicaid was cut from 9/16 until 4/17. The youth needed medical care and was told a doctor visit would cost $600 to be seen. She finally got fed up and had to nag everyone.*

Mental and behavioral health needs. In 63% of the cases (cases involving 119 older youth out of 188), agencies addressed the mental/behavioral health needs of older youth. There were no significant differences between older youth and those of other ages, suggesting that agencies do better in addressing the mental and behavioral health needs of youth in foster care at similar rates across age groups.

Agencies provided appropriate oversight of prescription medications for mental/behavioral health issues in 73% (cases involving 72 older youth out of 99) of applicable older-youth cases.

Youths' perceptions on mental health services.
Youth said that access to mental health services was inconsistent. Furthermore, youths' perspectives on service quality were mixed. One youth felt that she "had an excellent counselor and that she gained a lot from it and it enabled her to process what had happened to her to the point where she was able to transition from care successfully." However, most of the youth said there were challenges related to mental health services. Many perceived delays in getting a therapist to be common. An interviewer relayed about a youth stakeholder:

> *She can advocate for herself in asking about the services but has not been referred and [that] is a huge issue. It can be an issue of life or death. The youth said this needs to be addressed immediately as she feels mental health services should be provided at the time of the request.*

A few youth said they felt obligated to participate in therapy, which often made them think that there was something wrong with them. Youth also perceived overmedication, especially in group homes, to be a significant problem. More than 12 youth said they believed that they or siblings/foster siblings had been prescribed medication that they did not need. Some youth blamed their caseworkers for this and others blamed the psychiatrists and psychological evaluations for the over-prescription issue. Some youth felt

they were "offered" medications and had a say in making the decision, and a portion of youth said they were able to provide input to stop taking medications. One interviewer quoted a youth:

> *"They tried to put me on ADHD pills because I would rather go outside and play rather than playing video games." Some youth were able to advocate for themselves to get off the medication when they got older.*

Youth also perceived having to switch therapists due to changes in placement as a major challenge. Youth reported that it could be difficult to adjust to a new therapist because building trust with a new person can be difficult. Further, youth reported that after certain placement changes, especially a move to a more rural area, therapy was more difficult to access. Results indicate that youth felt that while services are available, they are not always individualized or comprehensive enough to give youth the help they need. When the services are poor or when providers are too quick to offer medication, this can be counterproductive. Youth observed that:

> *I am a real busy student going to armed forces in less than a month. I have training every week and a youth group every week. For some reason ... I have to do what they feel it seems I need. It feels like the counseling is more important to them, so I have to change my schedule for what works for them. Sometimes it would be nice if they acknowledged what was important to me.*

> *I think that services provided to me were appropriate, but I would not say they were tailored to me. I am part of a family drug court. Resources that come with that are pretty much the same for everyone. It was tailored to the main issue of substance abuse.*

YOUTH FELT THAT WHILE SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE, THEY ARE NOT ALWAYS **INDIVIDUALIZED** OR **COMPREHENSIVE** ENOUGH TO GIVE YOUTH THE HELP THEY NEED.

Results: Summary and Implications

In Round 3 (2015–2017), the CFSRs have provided important insight into older youth's experience in foster care, and the stakeholder interviews with youth have provided an important forum for the voices of young people in foster care to be heard.

Strength ratings for each of the areas assessed in the CFSRs for the older youth population across the states were below the standard of 90% for all but one item—placement with siblings—demonstrating the need to improve practice to better serve older youth and improve outcomes.

In stakeholder interviews, older youth described the various challenges they face as they transition into adulthood. Placement instability can be a challenge to well-being and successful transitions due to loss of services, friendships, family ties, and educational opportunities. Instability may undermine social connectedness and safety. Older youth described placement apart from brothers and sisters as a significant concern. Miscommunication and misunderstanding around permanence can be challenges in achieving positive well-being outcomes and transitioning into adulthood, especially when youth do not have a full understanding of and are not involved in setting permanency goals and making related decisions.

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Most youth who were interviewed said they felt unimportant to their caseworkers and were often unable to reach them. Youth often did not feel like they were part of their support team. Further, youth described challenges they faced in receiving the services they needed, particularly mental health services. These included delays in services received, changes in therapists, non-individualization, and overmedication. Often, youth perceived the lack of access to appropriate financial help as an important challenge.

On the other hand, youth described the resources, relationships, and services they have been able to access, and which have facilitated their successful transition to adulthood. Independent living services were among the most widely respected and used services among older youth. Therapy that was timely, wanted, and of a high quality, was a key resource for youth. Physical health services are generally perceived as meeting youths' needs. Educational services, especially for older youth, were good when youth procured them, although they were not always known about or understood. Good communication among team members can contribute to well-being, youth engagement, and successful transitions. Positive relationships with team members, especially caseworkers, judges, and independent living workers, are strong facilitators for youth, and youth generally made positive comments about judges. Connections to family, friends, community members, and especially mentors, were important and youth said agencies should continue to support and encourage those.

Finding strategies that address challenges and promote access to facilitating resources, relationships, and services will help agencies support older youth more effectively as they transition into adulthood. Based on the results of this analysis, it appears vital that agencies engage older youth as much as possible, consistently soliciting youths' input and ensuring that their voices have an impact on their own lives.

Additional Resources

Resources for Youth

1. National Foster Youth Advisory Council
http://66.227.70.18/programs/positiveyouth/nfyac.htm

2. Foster Club
https://www.fosterclub.com/

3. Know Before You Go
http://knowb4ugo.org/

4. Foster Care Transition Toolkit
https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/foster-care/youth-transition-toolkit.pdf

5. The Keys to Your Financial Future Curriculum
https://www.aecf.org/work/child-welfare/jim-casey-youth-opportunities-initiative/the-keys-to-your-financial-future-curriculum/

6. Child Welfare Information Gateway: Resources for Youth in Transition
https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/independent/resources/

Resources for Child Welfare Professionals

7. Engage Youth in Foster Care
https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/child-welfare-podcast-engaging-youth

8. Quality Matters: Improving Caseworker Contacts With Children, Youth, and Families
https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/foster-care-permanency/quality-matters/

9. Child Welfare Information Gateway: Working With Older Children and Youth
https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/preplacement/culturally-competent/older-children-youth/

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