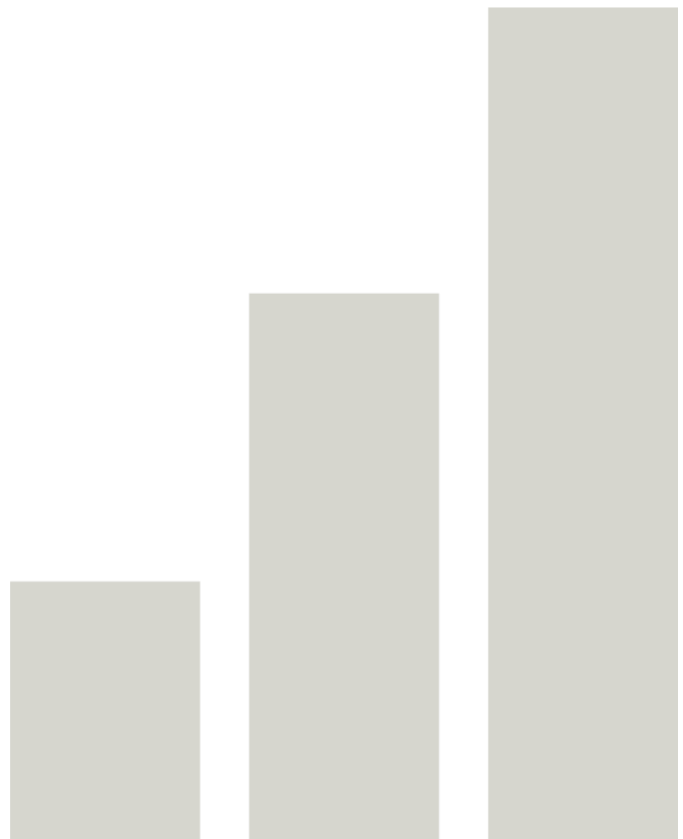


# Memo from CalYOUTH: Youths' and Child Welfare Workers' Perceptions of Youths' Educational Preparedness

February 2019

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## Recommended Citation

Torres-García, A., Okpych, N. J., & Courtney, M. E. (2019). *Memo from CalYOUTH: Youths' and child welfare workers' perceptions of youths' educational preparedness*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

## Related Publications

Okpych, N. J., Park, S., & Courtney, M. E. (2019). *Memo from CalYOUTH: Early findings on the impact of extended foster care on foster youths' postsecondary education enrollment and persistence*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Okpych, N. J., Courtney, M. E., & Charles, P. (2015). *Youth and caseworker perspectives on older adolescents in California foster care: Youths' education status and services*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

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## Introduction

Most foster youth have high hopes of enrolling in college and attaining a college degree (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010). Existing research suggests that there is a wide range of academic preparedness among transition age foster youth, but many will enter college underprepared (California College Pathways, 2015; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012). One study found that foster youth entering a Midwestern 4-year college had lower GPAs and ACT scores than other students admitted to the same university, but foster youth rated themselves higher than their peers on several measures of academic motivation, social motivation, and receptivity to student services (Unrau et al., 2012). Youths' perceptions of their own preparedness are important because they can impact their approach and reactions to difficulties they encounter in college, their readiness to seek help, and other factors that may influence their success in higher education. Professionals' perceptions of youths' preparedness are also important since they can affect the amount of time and effort professionals invest in the youth and the types of advice and encouragement they provide (Courtney & Okpych, 2017). Child welfare workers are in a particularly influential position to offer foster youth assistance in planning for the future; workers have ongoing relationships with the youth, know their history, and can be a bridge to important resources and supports. Moreover, comparing perceptions of foster youth and their child welfare workers can be beneficial because, in cases where youth

and workers' perceptions diverge, workers are in a good position to help youth form more realistic views about their academic preparedness. To date, we are not aware of any studies that have compared foster youths' perceptions of their academic preparedness with that of their child welfare worker.

A related issue faced by college-bound foster youth is the extent to which the college they ultimately enroll in matches their qualifications. Education researchers have found that low-income, minority, and first-generation college students tend to "undermatch" when enrolling in college, meaning they enroll in colleges that are below their academic qualifications as indicated by their high school grades, standardized test scores, and Advanced Placement course taking (Roderick et al., 2008; Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013; Dillon & Smith, 2017). This may also be a problem for youth in foster care, who commonly share characteristics and experiences of underrepresented college students. Scholars hypothesize that undermatched students may be less likely to graduate from college for a variety of reasons, such as lower campus expectations around graduating, fewer resources to support student success, and the negative influence of peers on study habits (Smith et al., 2013). Given the influence that college characteristics exert on student success, college match is an important issue to investigate for foster youth. This memo adds to the growing literature on the transition to college for young people in foster care, focusing specifically on issues of preparedness to enter higher education. First, we assess the extent to which youths'

perceptions of their own educational preparedness and their child welfare workers' perceptions of their educational preparedness each predict the likelihood that youth will enroll in college. Next, we compare youths' perceptions and their child welfare workers' perceptions, examining youth and worker agreement about how ready the youth is to pursue their educational goals. Finally, we investigate the extent to which foster youth enter colleges that align with their academic proficiency, identifying cases where foster youth may have attended colleges that did and did not align with their proficiency.

## Study Methods

### Data Sources

This memo draws on data collected from two parts of the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CaYOUTH; Courtney, Charles, Okpych, Napolitano, & Halsted, 2014). First, we draw on data from a longitudinal study of transition-age youth in California foster care. A total of 732 study participants were first interviewed in 2013, when they were 17 years old (Wave 1). About 84% of the Wave 1 participants were interviewed a second time in 2015, when they were 19 years old (Wave 2). This memo draws on data collected from the interviews at age 19. See Courtney et al., 2014 and Courtney et al., 2016 for more information on the Wave 1 and Wave 2 interviews, respectively.

Second, we use data collected from a survey of California child welfare workers who were assigned to the study participants. The workers' survey was conducted from July to October 2015, around the same time the Wave 2 youth interviews were conducted

(March to December 2015). Child welfare workers were eligible to complete an online survey if one or more youth participants assigned to their caseload were still in foster care in June 2015. A total of 516 study participants were still in care in June 2015, and they were served by 306 distinct child welfare workers. The workers completed online surveys during the fall of 2015 that asked them about services available to transition-age foster care youth in their county as well as questions that were specific to the youth study participant(s) whom they served. This memo draws on information about the youth study participant(s) working with the child welfare workers. Of the 306 eligible workers, 295 completed surveys, and these 295 workers served 492 youth study participants. See Courtney et al. (2016) for more information about the child welfare worker survey.

This memo addresses three sets of questions:

1. Do foster youths' perceptions of their educational preparedness at age 19 predict their likelihood of enrolling in college by age 20? Do child welfare workers' perceptions of youths' educational preparedness at age 19 predict youths' likelihood of enrolling in college by age 20? (Analysis 1)
2. To what extent do foster youth and child welfare workers agree on the youth's educational preparedness at age 19? (Analysis 2)
3. To what extent do foster youth enroll in colleges that align with their educational preparedness? (Analysis 3)

## Analysis 1: Perceptions of Youths' Educational Preparedness at Age 19 Predicting Their Likelihood of Entering College by Age 20

We first examined how well youths' perceptions of their own educational preparedness and their workers' perceptions of youths' educational preparedness predict the likelihood that youth enroll in college. To investigate these associations, we drew on information collected from the youth during their age 19 interview and information from their child welfare worker that was collected around the same time. The sample for these analyses included 492 youths who were in care as of June 2015 and whose child welfare worker had completed the worker survey. Most of these youths completed Wave 2 interviews, and information from child welfare workers was complete for the majority of the 492 youths.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this memo we will refer to this sample as the "youth preparedness sample."

The main predictor variable for this analysis was the perception of how prepared a youth was to continue their education goals. Perceptions of educational preparedness were assessed with questions and response options that were similar in the youth survey and the worker survey, ranging from 1, "not prepared" to 4, "very prepared."<sup>2</sup>

The outcome of the first analysis was a measure of whether the youth participant had enrolled in college. This information was obtained from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) in February 2016, when most youth participants were 20 years old. For the analysis, we used a binary measure indicating whether youth had enrolled in college (2-year or 4-year) or not by the time the NSC data were obtained. We then linked NSC data on youths' college enrollment to information on their level of preparedness collected from the youth and worker surveys. Logistic regression was used to assess whether perceptions of educational preparedness at age 19 were associated with the likelihood of college enrollment by age 20. We controlled for several background factors measured at age 17 in the regression analyses, including youths' demographic characteristics, their aspirations to attend college, measures of their educational history and achievement, and the amount of help they received with applying to college. Multiple imputation was used to account for missing data in the youth survey and the worker survey. One key limitation of the first analysis is that youths may have already enrolled in college by the time they and their worker were asked about educational preparedness. In these cases, college enrollment could have affected perceptions about the youths' educational preparedness.

<sup>1</sup> Of the 492 youths, 423 completed the age 19 interviews (86%). Of the 492 completed child welfare surveys, 15 workers reported "don't know" and 31 workers reported "youth does not plan on continuing their education" in response to the question about the youth's educational preparedness.

<sup>2</sup> The question asked to youth was, "How prepared do you feel to continue and achieve your education or job training goals? This may include goals like earning your high school diploma or GED, completing a vocational training program, or going to college." The question asked to child welfare workers was, "How prepared is this youth to continue his/her education goals?" The response options were the same for the youth question and worker question: 4, "very prepared"; 3, "prepared"; 2, "somewhat prepared"; 1, "not prepared"; and "don't know." The worker survey had an extra response option, "This youth does not plan on completing additional education," while the youth survey had an additional option of "refused."

## Analysis 2: Assessing Youth and Worker Agreement on Youth's Educational Preparedness

We next examined the extent to which a youth study participant and their child welfare worker agreed on the youth's preparedness to continue their education and achieve their educational goals. The youth preparedness sample ( $n = 492$ ) is also used for the second analysis. This provides a side-by-side comparison of the youth's perception and the worker's perception of how prepared the youth is to pursue their education goals.

We created a measure of youth-worker agreement on perceptions of the youths' educational preparedness. The agreement score was calculated by subtracting the worker's rating from the youth's rating. For example, if a worker rated the youth as 2, "somewhat prepared," and the youth reported that she was a 3, "prepared," that would result in a score of -1. The agreement score could range from -3 to +3. A score of 0 means that the youth and worker were in agreement about the youth's preparedness. Scores above zero indicate that the worker perceived the youth's educational preparedness to be higher than the youth did, while scores below zero indicate that the youths' perception of their preparedness was higher than their worker's perception. The greater the score (either positive or negative), the more disagreement was present between the youth and worker.

We were particularly interested in instances of large disagreements between youth and their workers. It was far more common for the youth to score themselves higher than their child welfare worker on their level of preparedness than the other way around.<sup>3</sup> We had two main reasons for wanting to investigate cases where youths' perceptions were demonstrably higher than their workers' perceptions. First, past research has found that foster youth tend to have higher perceptions than their peers of their academic readiness to succeed in college (Unrau et al., 2012). Second, youth who overestimate their readiness to achieve their academic goals might have unrealistic views of themselves and their current abilities in light of the challenges ahead of them, which could wind up hindering their chances of achieving their goals. To explore this type of discrepancy, we created a binary variable called "big disagreement." This variable identified youth who overestimated their education preparedness in relation to their worker's perceptions. Big disagreement was present for scores of -2 and -3. These capture instances where the youth's perception of their preparedness was 2 or more categories higher than their child welfare worker's perception. As displayed in Table 1, three youth-worker response combinations led to a big disagreement classification.

<sup>3</sup>As displayed in Figure 3, over 20% of youths rated themselves considerably higher than their worker. However, only 5% of youth rated themselves considerably lower than their worker.

**Table 1. Youth-Worker Responses Included in *Big Disagreement* Classification**

<b>Youth's perception</b>	<b>Child welfare worker's perception</b>	<b>Agreement score</b>
Very prepared	Not prepared	-3
Very prepared	Somewhat prepared	-2
Prepared	Not prepared	-2

[Analysis 3: Assessing Youth's Academic Proficiency and the Types of Colleges Youths Enrolled In](#)

The third analysis examines the extent to which foster youth enter a college that aligns with their academic proficiency. In this brief, "academic proficiency" was gauged by a measure of reading proficiency administered at age 17, which was assessed by the Wide Range Achievement Test: Fourth Edition (WRAT; Wilkinson & Robertson, 2006). The WRAT is a brief standardized measure used to assess basic academic skills that are needed for thinking, learning, and communication (Wilkinson & Robertson, 2006). The word-reading subtest of the WRAT was used to provide a brief assessment of the youths' reading ability. Raw scores were converted to percentile scores, normed by age. For example, a youth scoring in the 60th percentile indicates a reading proficiency greater than 60 percent of same-age adolescents. See Courtney and colleagues (2014) for more information about the WRAT.

Each participant was assigned to one of four groups based on their WRAT percentile scores. Youths in the bottom group were reading below the 25th percentile for their age, youths in the lower-middle group were reading between the 25th and 49th percentile for their age, youths in the upper-

middle group were reading between the 50th and 74th percentile for their age, and the top group was reading in the 75th to 100th percentile for their age. We then cross-walked youths in these four categories to the type of college they later enrolled in, which included no college, 2-year college, or 4-year college. As described above, data on college enrollment was gathered from the NSC in February 2016, when most participants were 20 years old. Our assumption is that youth in one of the top two reading categories would likely have been able to gain acceptance to a 4-year college. Youths in the top two categories who attended a 4-year college are considered a match, while youths in the top reading groups who attended a 2-year college are considered an undermatch. Likewise, we assumed that youths in the two lower reading categories would likely have had difficulty gaining acceptance to a 4-year college. Youths in the two bottom reading categories who attended a 4-year college are considered to be an overmatch, while youths in these categories who attended a 2-year college are considered to be a match. Unlike the previous two analyses, which only included youth who were in foster care at age 19, the third analysis includes all study participants. The only exceptions were youths who did not grant permission to access administrative data and youths who had become deceased before the NSC data



were drawn. The sample for the third analysis includes 711 participants.

## Findings

### Analysis 1: Youth and Worker Perceptions of Youth's Educational Preparedness at Age 19 Predicting Youths' Likelihood of Entering College by Age 20

Figure 1 breaks down youths' perceptions of their educational preparedness. Generally, youth had high perceptions of their preparedness. Only 21% reported that they were "not prepared" or "somewhat prepared" to pursue their education goals. Conversely, 79% indicated they were "prepared" or "very prepared." As displayed in Figure 2, child welfare workers tended to have lower ratings of youths' educational preparedness than did the youth. Only 45% of workers indicated that the youth they served were "very prepared" or "prepared," while 46% indicated the youth to be "somewhat prepared" or "not prepared." Additionally, a small percentage of workers indicated that they did not know their youth's educational goals (4%) or stated that the youth did not plan on completing additional education (6%).

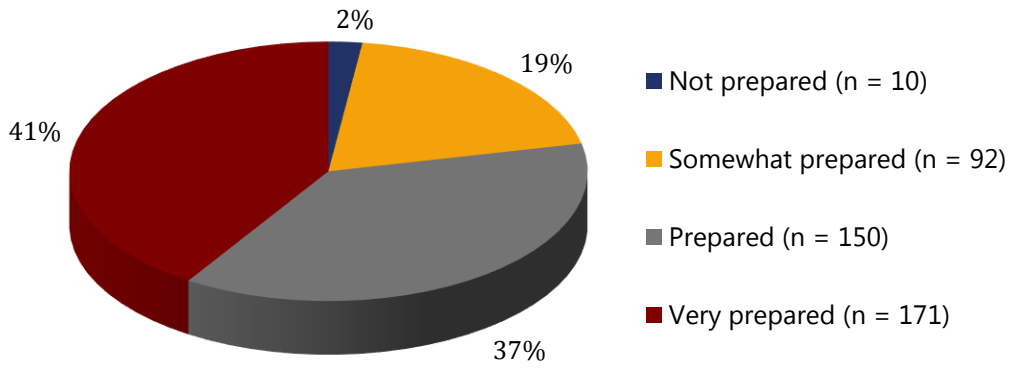
Overall, 63% of participants still in care at age 19 had enrolled in college by the time the NSC data were acquired, with greater proportions of youth enrolling in 2-year colleges (54%) than 4-year colleges (9%).

Table 2 presents abbreviated results from regression analyses, in which youths' perceptions (top half of the table) and workers' perceptions (bottom half of the table) of the youth's educational preparedness at age 19 were used to predict college entry around age 20. The reference group was "not prepared." Findings in the top of the table suggest that youth's perceptions were not significantly related to the odds of entering college. In contrast, there were significant associations between child welfare worker's perceptions and the expected likelihood that youth enrolled in college. Without controlling for any background factors, youth who were rated by their child welfare worker as being "prepared" or "very prepared" were significantly more likely to enroll in college than youth who were rated as being "not prepared." These associations changed little after controlling for youth's perceptions of their educational preparedness (see the rightmost column in the "No controls" section). After controlling for youth's background characteristics and educational history, only youth rated by their worker as being "very prepared" were significantly more likely than youth rated as "not prepared" to enroll in college. Specifically, the odds of enrolling in college for "very prepared" youths were about 7.3 times greater than the odds of enrolling for "not prepared" youths.<sup>4</sup>

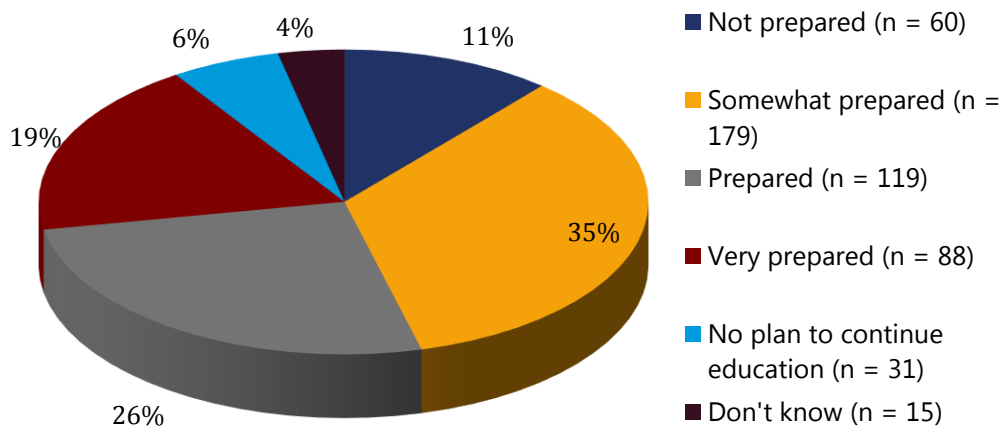
<sup>4</sup> Note that if the odds of enrollment for "not prepared" youth and "very prepared" youth were exactly the same, then the odds ratio in Table 2 would be 1.0. Thus, for the odds ratio of about 8.3 that is reported in Table 2, this means that the odds of "very prepared" youth was about 7.3 times greater than the odds of "not prepared" youth ( $8.3 - 1.0 = 7.3$ ).



**Figure 1. Youths' Perceptions of Their Educational Preparedness from Wave 2 Youth Survey (n = 423)**



**Figure 2. Workers' Perceptions of Youth's Educational Preparedness from Second Child Welfare Worker Survey (n = 492)**



**Table 2. Associations between Youth’s And Child Welfare Worker’s Perceptions of Youth’s Education Preparedness and College Enrollment (*n* = 461)<sup>a</sup>**

Predictors	No controls			Controls <sup>b</sup>
	Odds Ratio	Odds Ratio	Odds Ratio	Odds Ratio
Youth’s perceptions (ref: Not prepared)				
Somewhat prepared	1.06	--	1.10	0.82
Prepared	1.68	--	1.30	0.54
Very prepared	1.51	--	1.09	0.54
Child welfare worker’s perceptions (ref: Not prepared)				
Somewhat prepared	--	1.40	1.40	1.21
Prepared	--	2.56**	2.51*	2.05
Very prepared	--	14.5***	14.3***	8.24***

<sup>a</sup> Youths whose child welfare worker said “don’t know” or “his youth does not plan on completing additional education” (*n* = 31) were excluded from these analyses.

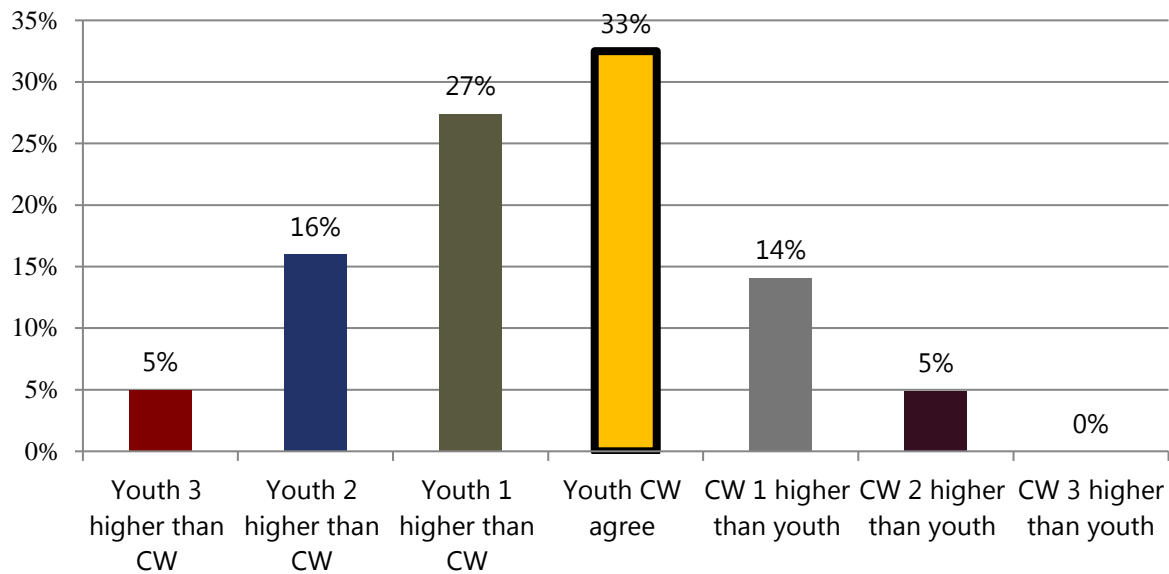
<sup>b</sup> Demographic and academic variables controlled for in analysis include: Sex, race/ethnicity, age at the time of the Wave 1 and 2 interviews, age at the time of NSC data draw in February of 2016, county size group, ever placed in a special education classroom, ever repeated a grade, ever expelled from school, educational aspirations at age 17 and 19, reading proficiency scores, ever dropped out of high school, number of school changes due to a family move or foster care placement change, ever arrested, amount of services received to pursue education or job goals (measured at Wave 2), total social network size, and amount of help received from others for going to college (measured at Wave 2).

### Analysis 2: Assessing Youth and Worker Agreement of Youth’s Educational Preparedness

Figure 3 displays the 7-point agreement measure. The orange bar in the middle indicates instances when the youth and their child welfare worker were in agreement, blue bars to the left indicate instances when youth rated their preparedness higher than their worker, and red bars to the right indicate instances when workers rated the youth’s preparedness higher than the youth. About one in three youth had the same perception as their worker. For about one in five youth (19%), the worker rated the youth’s preparedness higher than the youth.

Among these cases, most of the disagreement was slight (i.e., the worker’s rating was higher than the youth’s by just a 1-point difference in the preparedness ratings). Although it was fairly uncommon for a worker’s rating to be higher than the youth’s rating, it was much more common for youths to rate themselves higher than their workers did. About half of the youths (48%) rated themselves higher than did their child welfare worker. Among these cases, almost half (44%) involved medium-to-large disagreements between the youth and his or her worker (i.e., 2- or 3-point differences in the preparedness ratings).

**Figure 3. Youth and Child Welfare Worker Agreement on Perceptions of Educational Preparedness (n = 461)**



As discussed earlier, we were particularly interested in instances in which youth had markedly higher perceptions of their educational preparedness than their worker. In total, 21% of youth ranked themselves higher than their worker by two or more categories. To get a better picture of how big-disagreement youth differed from other youth, we compared these two groups along a number of demographic characteristics, risk and protective factors, and aspects of youths' educational history and foster care history. Statistically significant differences are reported in Table 3. Males were about 2.5 times as likely as females to rate their educational preparedness substantially higher than their worker (35% vs. 13%). Overall, big-disagreement youth had more school-related difficulties than other youth, including a history of special education, grade retention, and school expulsion. Big-

disagreement youth were also reading at a lower level than their counterparts. Generally, these differences in academic difficulties between big-disagreement and other youth were explained by gender. Males were more likely than females to have been in special education, to have been held back, and to have been expelled. After controlling for gender, differences in these three measures were no longer significantly different for big-disagreement and other youths. However, reading score was the exception; after controlling for gender, the association between reading proficiency and "big disagreement" became stronger. This indicates that reading proficiency is lower for big-disagreement youth than for other youth, even after accounting for gender differences between the big-disagreement youth and other youth.

**Table 3. Significant Differences in Youth Characteristics by Big Disagreement<sup>a</sup>**

	Big disagreement	No big disagreement	sig.
Male (%)	35.1	13.4	***
Ever in special education (%)	29.2	18.2	*
Ever held back a grade (%)	27.8	18.3	^
Ever expelled (%)	32.2	18.3	*
Average reading proficiency score (mean)	87.5	90.1	*

Note: ^  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

<sup>a</sup> Other factors that were examined, but were not statistically significantly related to big disagreement, include: sex, race/ethnicity, age at the time of Wave 1 and Wave 2 interviews, age at the time of NSC data draw in February of 2016, county size group, ever placed in a special education classroom, ever repeated a grade, ever expelled from school, educational aspirations at age 17 and 19, reading proficiency scores, self-reported high school grades, sexual abuse before age 18, physical abuse before age 18, neglect before age 18, emotional abuse before age 18, other abuse (exploitation, sibling abuse, substantial risk) before age 18, average number of foster care placements per year before age 18, current living placement at age 19, parental status, alcohol or substance use problems, depression, behavioral problem (ODD or CD), ever arrested, amount of services received to pursue education or job goals (measured at Wave 2), total social network size, amount of help from others for going to college (measured at Wave 2).

### Analysis 3: Assessing Youths' Academic Proficiency and the Types of Colleges Youths Enrolled In

Figure 4 displays the four reading percentile groups. If foster youth had read at the same level as their peers, we would expect about 25% of youth to fall in each group. However, about 80% of foster youths fell in the bottom two groups. These were youths who

were reading below the level of most of their same-age peers. The remaining one-fifth of youths were in the upper-middle or the top groups. These youths were reading in the third and fourth quartiles for their age. The distribution below suggests that the majority of foster youth are reading below age level, and just one in five are reading at or above age level.

**Figure 4. Reading Proficiency Quartiles at Age 17 (n = 711)**

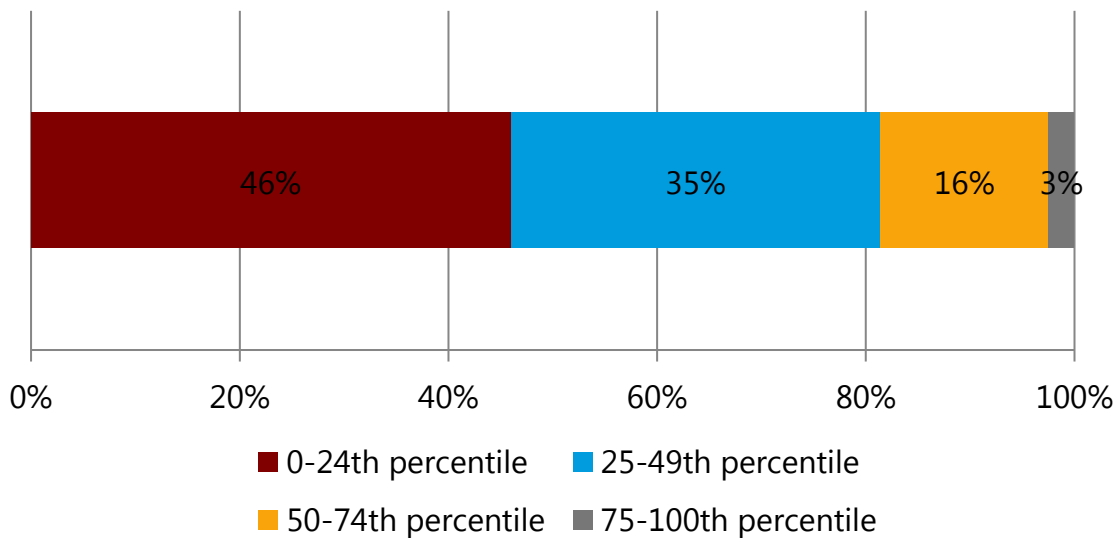


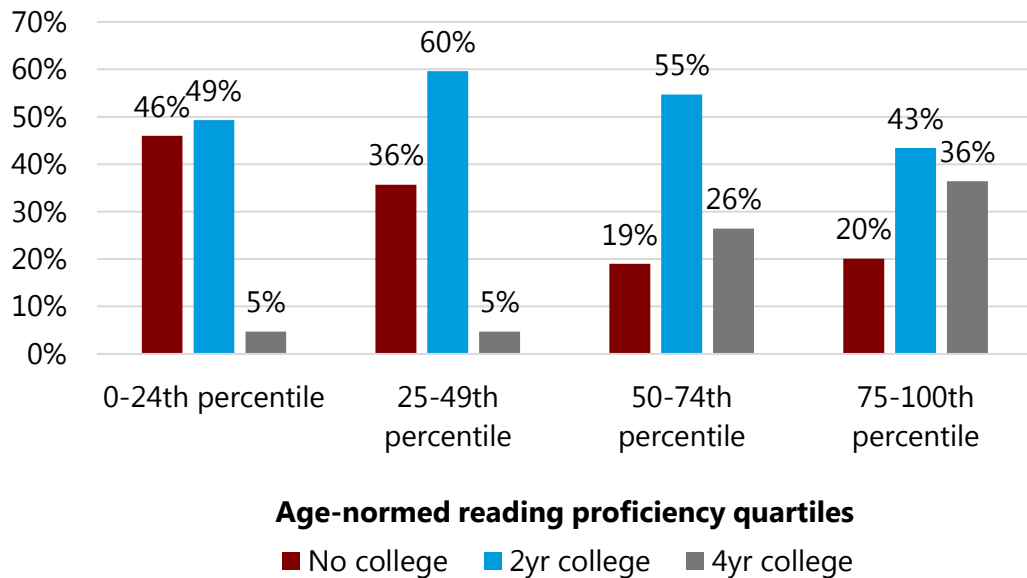
Figure 5 displays the college enrollment statuses around age 20 for youths in each of the four reading proficiency groups. Overall, reading proficiency was associated with enrollment in college. College enrollment rates were lowest for youths in the bottom group (54%), followed by youths in the lower-middle group (65%). About four-fifths of youths in each of the top two groups had enrolled in college. The lower-middle group had the highest proportion of youths who enrolled in 2-year colleges (60%). Given that these youths were below, but not very

below, reading proficiency at age 17, 2-year colleges may have been a good on-ramp to higher education. Rates of 4-year college enrollment were considerably higher among the top two quartiles, with more than a quarter of youths in the upper-middle quartile and more than a third in the top quartile attending 4-year colleges. Given that these youths were at or above the reading level for their age, they may have been a good match for 4-year colleges. However, in the upper-middle group and top group, enrollment in 2-year colleges

was more common than enrollment in 4-year colleges. Based on reading proficiency scores, these youths may have been able to attend 4-year colleges. Overall, about one in ten youth in the sample (9.9%), or about

one in six youth who went to college (15.8%), were youths in the upper-middle or top group who attended 2-year colleges. These are youth we considered undermatched.

**Figure 5. College Enrollment Status by Reading Proficiency at Age 17 (n = 711)**



## Limitations

Several key limitations are important to note when considering the findings and conclusions of this memo. The first two analyses included only youth who were still in foster care around age 19, and the findings cannot be generalized to youth who had exited foster care by that time. Second, the questions asked to the worker and the youth about the youth's educational preparedness were not exactly the same and did not explicitly focus on preparedness to enter college. Although the overwhelming majority of foster youth in this study aspired to enroll in college (Courtney et al., 2014; Courtney et al., 2016), responses to the preparedness question may have been capturing youths' preparedness to pursue

other types of education or professional or vocational training. A third limitation is that for the first analysis, some workers' appraisals of youths' educational preparedness could have been influenced by youths' college enrollment status. At the time child welfare workers were surveyed, some youth had already entered college, which could have influenced their worker's perceptions of their academic preparedness. Ideally, a child welfare worker's perceptions of the youth would have been gathered at an earlier age (e.g., 17 years old), before the youth had enrolled in college, but this information was not available.

Another limitation relates to the measures of academic proficiency that were used in the third analysis to determine the extent to which youth attended colleges that were on

par with their proficiency. Although reading proficiency is an important component of academic success, it captures just one facet of students' overall academic proficiency. To gauge the full breadth of participants' academic proficiency, we would have ideally had measures commonly used in "college match" studies, such as high school GPA from administrative records, standardized test scores, and number of honors and Advanced Placement courses that student completed (see, for example, Roderick et al., 2008). Thus, findings from our third analysis should be considered exploratory. Future studies should include more formal assessments. Another limitation of our third analysis is that we were not able to distinguish between different types of 4-year colleges (e.g., selective versus nonselective) because few participants attended 4-year colleges.

## Conclusion

This memo explored factors relating to foster youths' transition to college, focusing on their educational preparedness to pursue higher education. We examined the extent to which youth perceptions and worker perceptions each predicted the likelihood that youth enrolled in college, as well as agreement between foster youth and their workers. Using a measure of reading proficiency, we also assessed the extent to which foster youth enrolled in a college that aligned with their educational proficiency (2-year or 4-year colleges).

Overall, youth tended to rate their preparedness higher than their worker. About 80% of youth indicated they were "prepared" or "very prepared" to pursue their educational goals, while workers

viewed only 45% of youth to be "prepared" or "very prepared." In the regression analyses, we found that workers' perceptions of youths' preparedness, but not youths' own perceptions, were related to the likelihood of youth enrolling in college. Moreover, when examining the youth's rating and worker's rating side-by-side, youth and their worker agreed only one-third of the time. Most instances of disagreement involved youth rating themselves higher than their worker. Males were found to be more likely than females to disagree with their workers' perceptions of their preparedness; about 1 in 3 males had a substantially higher rating than their workers. Males were also more likely than females to have been in special education, to have been held back, and to have been expelled. Taken together, the findings suggest that youth (especially males) tended to overrate their preparedness compared to their worker, and workers' views were more reliable than youths' views in predicting whether youth went to college.

One of the implications of these findings is that workers' perception of youths' preparedness are important in anticipating college enrollment. A possible reason for this is that workers have attended college themselves. Having first-hand knowledge of the skills and abilities needed to succeed in college may put them in a better position to gauge whether youth on their caseload can realistically make it to and through college. Conversely, youth may have a more limited understanding of skills and practical steps needed to enroll in college, and may not "know what they don't know." Consequently, child welfare workers are in a key position in the lives of foster youth, and they could play a pivotal role in youths' educational decision-making process.



Workers' perceptions likely influence the amount of time, effort, and resources they invest in youth when it comes to higher education, including providing youth with encouragement and advice. These, in turn, could impact youths' feelings of competency and sense of being supported through an unfamiliar and difficult process.

One of the striking findings pertains to youth and worker alignment in their views of how prepared youth are to continue their education. The most common scenario involved cases where youth rated themselves higher than their workers, which occurred in nearly half of the cases. This may be due in part to foster youth holding unrealistic expectations of how prepared they think they are to pursue and achieve their educational goals. It may also be due to some workers lacking familiarity with the youths' educational goals, perhaps because they were newly assigned to the youth or had not explicitly talked about plans for higher education. We found that a nontrivial proportion of child welfare workers reported that they did not know what the youth's goals were<sup>5</sup> or they stated that the youth did not plan on continuing their education when, in fact, youth reported a desire to go to college.<sup>6</sup> In both cases of unrealistic goals and lack of familiarity with goals, the misalignment presents a good opportunity for workers to intervene. A simple but important step that workers could take is to initiate a conversation with the youth about how prepared they each feel the youth is to pursue higher education. For youth who hold unrealistic expectations, this dialogue could help them to recalibrate their goals so

that they are more feasible and attainable. Conversations about alignment of perceptions can be a springboard for an active planning process, where concrete steps that youth can take are identified (and workers can track and support) to achieve their educational goals. It is worth noting that child welfare workers are not necessarily experts in helping foster youth decide on which college to attend, but some additional training could help increase their confidence and proficiency in providing advice and guidance.

A finding which warrants additional attention is that about a third of males had markedly different views than their child welfare worker about their preparedness. One explanation for the discrepancies may be the elevated rates of academic and behavioral problems. On the one hand, academic difficulties may make it more difficult for males to accurately and realistically gauge their own preparedness. On the other hand, difficulties such as being held back, being expelled, and being in special education may lead workers to have lower expectations of the males' academic potential. Another explanation is that males may be more likely than females to want to pursue vocational training instead of college, which they might feel prepared for regardless of their difficulties in academic settings. Our data are limited in this sense, because the survey questions on preparedness did not ask respondents to specify if they intended on pursuing academic or vocational training. Whatever the reason, our findings can alert child welfare workers that "big disagreements" in

<sup>5</sup> Workers who reported "don't know" tended to have not worked with the youth for a long period of time at the time they took the survey.

<sup>6</sup> Of the 31 child welfare workers who reported that the foster youth they supervised did not plan on continuing their education, 11 said the youth reported that they aspired to go on to college.

perceptions of educational preparedness may be particularly prevalent for males.

It is important to underscore that the findings discussed thus far apply only to foster youth who remained in care past age 19. In the analyses that involved all study participants who permitted us to access their administrative records, we found that about 80% of participants in their late teens were reading below their peers. The proportion was only slightly higher among youth who had enrolled in college. Consistent with other studies of youth in foster care (e.g., Courtney et al., 2004; Frerer, Sosenko & Henke, 2013), this restates the finding that many foster youth will enter college academically underprepared and will require supplemental supports to catch up and stay on track to graduate. Keeping in mind that reading scores are a narrow gauge of academic proficiency, our analyses allowed us to examine the extent to which youth entered colleges that were on par with their proficiency. Among youth who enrolled in college by around the time they were 20 years old, about 1 in 6 were considered undermatched. These youth were reading at or above their age level, yet they enrolled in a 2-year college. Presumably, these youth could have gained acceptance to a 4-year college.

More research is needed to examine the reasons why some foster youth may undermatch. Findings from studies on low-income and underrepresented college students point to several factors that are likely relevant to foster youth. One of these factors is exposure; youth may come from families or communities where attending college is not the norm (Smith et al., 2013). This creates gaps in exposure to individuals equipped to provide concrete, first-hand

knowledge about college. In addition to gaps in college knowledge in their families and communities of origin, foster youth may have limited access to high-quality college advising (Dillon & Smith, 2017). The case could be made that foster youth, many of whom are behind academically in high school, can be overlooked by advisors to address their college goals. Foster youth may have also decided to enroll in colleges that are familiar and safe choices, such as colleges that are close to home, rather than colleges that may better align with their academic proficiency. Lastly, youth may have wanted to or been advised to enroll in 2-year colleges as a stepping-stone to attending a 4-year college in the future. Two-year colleges may have been perceived to be more affordable or less competitive to gain access to than four-year colleges.

These potential contributors to college undermatch among foster youth point to the need to link foster youth to high-quality advising to assist with selecting a college that matches their interests, abilities, and life circumstances. This presents a challenge, since child welfare workers with whom foster youth are in regular contact are not trained to fully take on this role, not to mention other responsibilities competing for their time. The guidance counseling departments in the high schools that foster youth attend may not have the capacity to provide ongoing, thorough advising. These circumstances may require child welfare departments to rely on youth-serving agencies that specialize in educational support, or to develop innovative responses. For example, child welfare departments could designate a specialized worker trained in college advising to counsel youth in the college selection, application, and enrollment process. The California

Department of Social Services' (CDSS) statewide training system could also incorporate training to their workers to better prepare them to assist youth on their caseload with selecting colleges. CDSS could also direct workers to resources that they can share with their youth pertaining to accessing college (e.g., the Youth Resources available on the John Burton Advocates for Youth webpage:

<https://www.jbaforyouth.org/youth-resources/>). Finally, agencies could recruit former foster youth who are enrolled in college to mentor foster youth in high school. It is also important to consider that access to high-quality advising is important for all foster youth who aspire to go to college, not just those who could potentially be undermatched.

For some foster youth pursuing higher education, enrolling in a 2-year college program is an appropriate onramp given their academic credentials and readiness for college. Nevertheless, it is important for youth to select colleges that have resources to support them, particularly if they have special needs or circumstances (e.g., parenting support for students with children). Currently, more research is needed to identify higher education institutions that are particularly successful at retaining and graduating foster youth. A

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report by the John Burton Foundation and Educational Results Partnership began investigating this topic through their "bright spot" analysis, in which they identified colleges that demonstrated practices believed to be helpful in increasing the number of foster youth who are prepared to succeed in college (California College Pathways, 2017). Their analysis also found that successful "bright spot" colleges used a wide range of approaches to support foster youth enrolled in colleges (e.g., using technology to provide social support, helping youth track their progress) and these supports were widely available (California College Pathways, 2017). Youth in foster care often lack access to multifaceted support that meets various needs and face obstacles to finishing college. This trend is being addressed in California, where all public 4-year colleges, and a growing number of 2-year colleges, have campus-based support programs for foster youth (California College Pathways, 2017). In tandem with these and other initiatives, this memo reflects the need for high-quality and widely available resources for youth who want to pursue higher education, as well as the valuable role that child welfare workers can play in this process.

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