Youth and Caseworker Perspectives on Older Adolescents in California Foster Care: Youths' Education Status and Services

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Introduction

A growing body of research has shed light on the educational status of older adolescents in foster care. Overall, this research shows that these young people have had several foster care-related school disruptions, many are behind academically, and many have experienced setbacks or have had trouble in school (e.g., being held back, suspensions) (Blome, 1997; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Frerer, Sosenko, & Henke, 2013). At the same time, these young people have high educational aspirations and the vast majority of them want to graduate from college (Courtney et al., 2004; Kirk, Lewis, Brown, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2012; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003; Reilly, 2003).

While there have been several changes to federal laws and an increase in local efforts in the past couple of decades to promote educational attainment (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Okpych, 2012), one of the most important legislative changes that has taken place is passage of the 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Fostering Connections). The law gives states the option to extend the age limit of foster care up to 21 years of age, and states receive federal reimbursement for the extended services. In terms of educational attainment, the extension of foster care delays the loss of formal support and services and gives youth extra time to complete high school and pursue postsecondary education or vocational training.

This paper examines the educational status of and services available to older adolescents in foster care in California, both from the viewpoint of the young people themselves and from the viewpoint of caseworkers who work with foster youth. Not only does California have the largest state foster care population in the nation, it also is one of the early adopters of the Fostering Connections law. Unlike most of the youth included in previous studies, these youth are subject to the new era of extended foster care. Three specific areas are examined in the paper: the educational history and status of older adolescents in care, the perception of how ready these youth are to pursue their educational goals, and the availability and helpfulness of education-related services. This is one of the first analyses that simultaneously considers these issues from the perspective of the youth and the child welfare professionals who oversee their care. Since California is a geographically diverse state, we examine whether urbanicity affects the educational experiences of youth and the educational systems and resources at their disposal.

We group counties into three categories (rural/mostly rural, urban, and large urban).[1]

Summary of the CalYOUTH Study

The California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH) is a multicomponent study that aims to understand the impact of extended foster care on the supports that youth receive and their outcomes in early adulthood. This paper draws on data from two parts of the larger CalYOUTH study: a survey of caseworkers and the baseline interview of a longitudinal study of adolescents transitioning out of foster care. The child welfare caseworker survey includes responses from 235 California caseworkers who serve older foster care youth. During part of the survey, workers were asked to think of the most recent youth on the caseload who reached age 18 and to answer a series of questions about that youth when they were age 18. Other survey questions asked workers to assess available services and collaboration with other service systems and professionals in the county where they worked. The youth survey includes responses from 727 adolescents in California foster care. Participants were asked questions on a wide range of topics. They will be interviewed again at ages 19 and 21, when some youth will remain in care through the extended foster care program. Taken together, the two surveys provide information on many aspects of education status and services from the perspectives of youth in foster care and from professionals who oversee the youths' care. Both the caseworker and youth surveys had excellent response rates (90% and 95%, respectively). Weights have been applied to expand responses to the general populations of CA foster care youth and caseworkers. Thus, this paper provides a statewide picture of older adolescents in foster care and caseworkers who serve this population.[2, 3]

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[1] The rural/mostly rural group includes counties (n = 18 in the youth survey and n = 17 in the caseworker survey) in which all of the municipalities within the county had fewer than 50,000 individuals. The urban group (n = 19 in both surveys) includes counties that had at least one municipality with a population of 50,000 to 250,000 individuals, but no municipalities with a population greater than 250,000. The large urban group (n = 12 in both surveys) includes counties that had at least one municipality with a population of more than 250,000 individuals.

[2] For more information on the survey design, implementation, and survey weights, refer to Courtney, Charles, Okpych, and Halsted (2014) for the caseworker survey and Courtney, Charles, Okpych, Napolitano, and Halsted (2014) for the youth survey.

[3] In the analyses reported here, less than 5 percent of responses were missing on any given variable. Statistics exclude missing data, and responses are weighted to populations of California youth in foster care and caseworkers meeting the study criteria. Unless otherwise noted, between-county differences reported here are statistically significant at p < .05.

Overview of the Youth and Caseworker Samples

We begin with a brief description of the adolescents participating in the youth survey and the youth described in the caseworker survey. Table 1 shows that the two groups were largely comparable in terms of gender and ethnicity.[4] One important difference between the two samples is age. Caseworkers were asked to think about the education and employment status when the youth turned 18, whereas participants in the youth survey were typically interviewed at a younger age (the average age of the youth participants was 17.5 years old).[5] This age difference is important to keep in mind

Table 1. Demographic and Background Characteristics of Youth		
	Youth Survey	Caseworker Survey
Age (approximate mean age, years)	17.5	18.0
Female (%)	59.4	56.7[a]
Race or ethnicity (%)		
White	17.8	16.3
African American	17.6	30.0
American Indian/Alaskan	0.5	3.3
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.0	1.2
Multiracial	15.5	1.1
Hispanic	46.7	47.8
Other	--	3.4
Current living arrangement (%)		
Nonrelative foster home	44.4	38.2[b]
Relative foster home	18.4	6.8
Group care or residential treatment	24.1	13.5
Legal guardianship	6.3	5.8
Adoptive home	1.9	0.5
Independent living arrangement	2.5	14.8
Other	2.5	20.4[c]
Parental status (%)	7.4	3.4
County group (%)		
Rural/mostly rural	4.7	6.2
Urban	20.7	18.2
Large urban	74.6	75.7

[a] One youth was identified as transgender by the worker.

[b] Foster Family Agencies (FFAs) was a separate category in original Caseworker survey, and 24.9 percent of youth were placed in an FFA. Since most of these placements will be in nonrelative foster homes, they were included in the Nonrelative Foster Home category.

[c] The "other" category includes court-specified placements, transitional housing, youth who had runaway status at age 18, and a general "other" category.

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[4] The race and ethnicity categories where the largest differences emerged between the two surveys were: African American, American Indian/Alaskan, and Multiracial. It may be that caseworkers were less familiar with their youths' mixed race status and thus selected what they believed to be the primary race.

[5] Most of the youth were 17 years old (92.6%), although some youth were 16 (6.1%) and a few of the youth were 18 (1.3%).

when considering the results from the two surveys. For example, current living arrangements differed in ways we expected: a greater proportion of youth in the caseworker survey reside in an independent living placement compared to youth survey respondents. This age difference is especially important when examining education outcomes. Having an age gap of several months can lead to differences in grade advancement, high school completion rates, and enrollment in post-secondary education.[6] In terms of county groups, the samples were basically comparable in terms of the types of counties where the youth resided, with most youth living in large urban counties.

Education Status and Background

Both the youth and the caseworkers report that the majority of youth were either in school or working at the time of data collection (see Table 2). About 14 percent of youth held a job, over 80 percent were going to school, and roughly 10 percent were both working and in school. About four times as many youth in the caseworker survey had earned a high school credential compared with respondents in the youth survey; again, this difference is likely explained by the differences in the age of the youth. One-third of youth reported having ever received special education services while half of caseworkers reported that their youth had been in special education. This dissimilarity may be due to sampling differences between the two surveys, stigma associated with special education placement leading the youth to underreport their status, or caseworkers' limited knowledge of youth's history of special education service receipt. Thus, the percentage of youth in special education may be higher than caseworkers report.

Table 2. Employment and Educational Enrollment Status: All Youth		
	Youth Survey	Caseworker Survey
Currently employed (%)	14.3	14.2
Full time (among employed)[a]	11.9	3.0
Part time (among employed)	88.1	91.2
Other employment arrangement	--	5.8
Currently enrolled (%)	89.9[b]	83.8
Completed high school, GED, or certificate (%)	10.6	40.4
Enrollment type (%)		
High school or GED	72.7	55.8
Vocational	0.4	1.1
2-year college	3.2	21.1
4-year college	0.3	3.4
Other	13.3	2.4
Not enrolled	10.2	16.2
Neither enrolled nor working (%)	8.5	10.9
Both enrolled and working (%)	12.7	9.0
Special education (%)	33.7	50.3

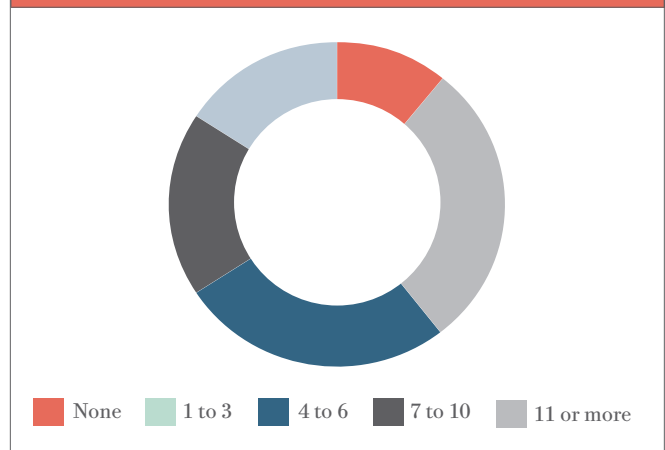[a] An additional 5.8% reported a different employment arrangement.

[b] This does not include youth who were enrolled sometime during the previous academic year.

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[6] Furthermore, not all participants in the youth survey will remain in care until age 18. However, our data do not yet shed light on the characteristics of those who remain in care.

We found differences by county group in the caseworker survey for three outcomes: enrollment type, disconnection from both school and work, and special education (see Table 3). At age 18, a larger proportion of youth in the urban counties were enrolled in school than in the rural/mostly rural county types. More than half of youth in urban and large urban counties were completing a high school credential. Greater proportions of youth in large urban and rural or mostly rural counties were attending college than youth in urban counties. Additionally, a greater proportion of youth in rural or mostly rural counties were receiving vocational and technical training than in the other two county categories, which may be partially explained by the higher percentages of youth in urban and large urban counties that are still in high school.

The youth survey went into greater depth about youths' education history, performance, and encouragement. Similar to findings in previous research, the outcomes reported in Tables 4 and 5 paint a mixed but worrisome picture of academic performance. Over half of respondents read below a high school reading level based on a brief standardized assessment, which mirrors findings from an earlier study in which 56 percent of youth were reading below a high school level (Courtney et al.,

Figure 1. Number of school changes due to family move or foster care placement change

Legend: None | 1 to 3 | 4 to 6 | 7 to 10 | 11 or more

2004). In terms of grades, the largest proportions of youth reported earning mostly C's or mostly B's in the last marking period. About one-third of youth said they repeated a grade, two-thirds had been suspended, and a little over one-quarter had been expelled. As documented in the full youth report (Courtney, Charles, Okpych, Napolitano, & Halsted, 2014), these rates are higher than rates in the general population.[7] We also asked three questions that gauged the extent to which foster care-related events caused school disruptions. Nearly nine out of ten respondents said they had to

Table 3. County Group Differences in the Caseworker Survey			
	Rural/ Mostly Rural	**Urban**	**Large Urban**
Enrollment type (%)*[a]			
High school or GED	37.0	57.6	56.9
Vocational	7.1	0.9	0.6
2-year college	24.7	12.7	22.8
4-year college	2.5	1.6	4.0
Other	2.8	0.0	2.9
Not enrolled	25.9	27.2	12.8
Neither enrolled nor employed (%)**	15.1	25.4	7.2
Special education (%)**	37.1	28.6	56.6

Note: *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

[a] A chi-square test was used to assess the relationship between enrollment type and county type. This tests the overall association between the distribution of enrollment types and the distribution of county types.

[7] Based on estimates from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 22% of same-aged peers across the US had been held back, 4.0% had been expelled, and 27.5% had been suspended.

change schools because of a family move[8] or foster care placement change and about one-third changed schools seven or more times (see Figure 1), approximately one-third of youth were out of school for one month or more because of a foster care placement change, and over three-fifths of youth missed one day of school or more in the past year because of court hearings, visitations, or other reasons related to being in foster care (see Table 4). Among youth who had missed at least one day of school, the average number of days missed was 4.6.

Despite the unfavorable circumstances reported above, most youth were hopeful about their academic future and reported receiving a good deal of support from others (see Table 5). The vast majority aspired to earn a college degree or higher, and most youth expected that they would reach their goals in the future. Over four-fifths of the youth reported that they received "a lot" or "some" encouragement to pursue their education
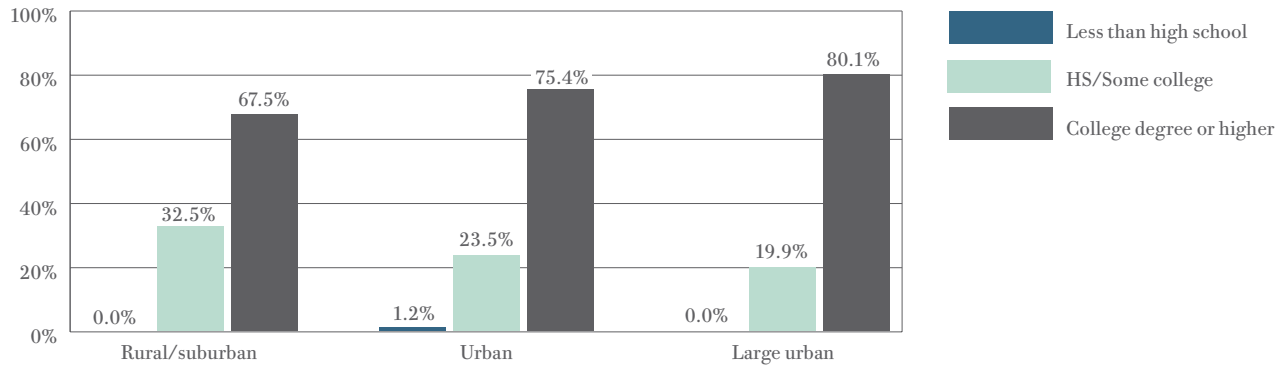
goals from each of the three sources we asked about: school staff (e.g., teachers, guidance counselors), family, and professionals in the foster care system (e.g., foster parents, group home staff, social workers).

Differences in expectations emerged between county types in one measure of school disruptions and in educational aspirations. With regard to missing school for at least one month because of a family move or placement change, youth in large urban counties (35.9%) were more likely to have experienced a disruption than youth in rural or mostly rural counties (24.1%) and urban counties (28.1%). Additionally, the expectations

Table 4. Youth Report of Education History and School Disruptions	
	%
High school grades	
Mostly As	13.8
Mostly Bs	32.3
Mostly Cs	43.2
Ds or lower	10.6
Reading level	
Below 6th grade	25.6
6th to 8th grade	27.8
High school	45.1
Above high school	1.5
Ever repeated a grade	33.5
Ever suspended	66.7
Ever expelled	27.7
Ever skipped a grade	12.4
Ever missed school for 1+ month because of placement change	33.8
Missed 1 day of school in past year for foster care-related reason	62.5

Table 5. Youth Aspirations, Expectations, and Encouragement	
	%
Educational aspirations	
Less than high school	0.9
High school credential or some college	16.1
College degree or higher	83.1
Educational expectations	
Less than high school	0.3
High school credential or some college	21.2
College degree or higher	78.6
Encouragement from school	
A lot	62.7
Some	25.1
A little	7.1
None	5.1
Encouragement from family	
A lot	60.9
Some	21.9
A little	9.2
None	7.9
Encouragement from foster care system	
A lot	68.7
Some	21.5
A little	6.9
None	2.9

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[8] The survey question asked generally about family moves, so the figures reported here could include moves that occurred when youth were residing with their biological family and/or foster care family.
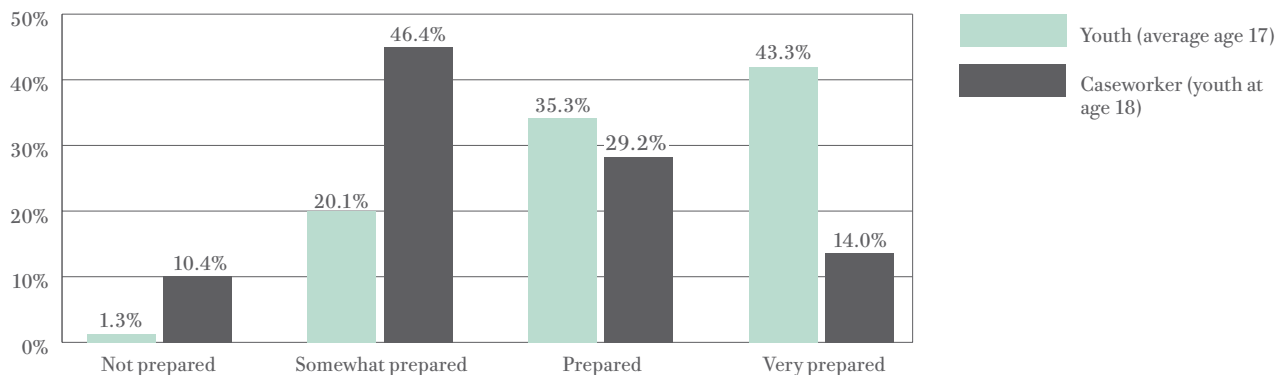
Figure 2. Educational Expectations by County Group

	Less than high school	HS/Some college	College degree or higher
Rural/suburban	0.0%	32.5%	67.5%
Urban	1.2%	23.5%	75.4%
Large urban	0.0%	19.9%	80.1%

that youth had about how far they would go with their education increased with urbanicity (see Figure 2).

Education Needs and Preparedness, and the Role of Extended Care

While the majority of youth aspire and expect to finish high school and go on to earn a postsecondary degree, how ready are they to reach their goals? Figure 3 contrasts the opinions of youth about their own readiness at age 17 with caseworkers' appraisal of the youth on their caseload at age 18. The adolescent respondents were generally very confident in their ability to continue their education and reach their education and job training goals. The most common response given by youth is that they felt very prepared to pursue their education,

whereas the most common response given by caseworkers was that their youth were somewhat prepared. Just under 80 percent of youth viewed themselves as being prepared or very prepared, which is almost double the proportion of caseworkers who felt the youth they worked with were prepared or very prepared. Only 1.3 percent of youth characterized themselves as not being prepared, while a full 10 percent of caseworkers rated their youth as not being prepared to pursue their education plans. The concerns raised by caseworkers were also reflected in their responses to two additional questions about youths' need for education services. About 91.2 percent of child welfare employees working with youth without a high school credential said that their youth had a moderate to high need for services to help them finish high school. Similarly, 89.7 percent of workers

Figure 3. Youth's Preparedness to Continue Education Goals

	Youth (average age 17)	Caseworker (youth at age 18)
Not prepared	1.3%	10.4%
Somewhat prepared	20.1%	46.4%
Prepared	35.3%	29.2%
Very prepared	43.3%	14.0%

with youth aspiring to go to college said that their youth had a moderate to high need of assistance to attain their education goals.[9]

One potential reason for the disagreement between youth and caseworkers' assessment of educational preparedness could be the age of the youth. Caseworkers considered youth at age 18, when it may be more normative for students to have finished high school than at age 17. Shortcomings in educational preparedness may have thus been more salient to the caseworkers. A second explanation is that youth may overestimate their educational preparedness while caseworkers may be in a better position to realistically assess youths' readiness in light of future educational demands. More than half of the youth who expect to graduate from college are reading below a ninth grade level at age 17 (50.3%), which suggests that some youth in foster care may underestimate the challenges that lie ahead if they are to achieve their educational goals. For example, a small pilot study compared 81 first time college students who were foster care alumni to a national sample of first time students who were also attending 4-year colleges (Unrau, Font, and Rawls, 2012). Although the foster care alumni had lower high school GPAs and standardized test scores than the national population, they had significantly higher scores in their expectations that they would finish college. However, at the end of the first semester, the foster care alumni were more likely to withdraw from a class, completed fewer credits, and earned lower GPAs than the national comparison group.

An area where there was more agreement between youth and caseworkers was the extent to which educational support played a role in a young person's decision to remain in care past 18. In the youth survey, respondents were asked to choose from several options the main reason they would stay in care. The most frequently selected reason was to continue receiving support to continue their education (45.8%). In the caseworker survey, workers rated whether continued educational support was a reason that motivated their youth to stay in care, ranging from 1 (not a reason) to 5 (strong reason). A

Table 6. Youth Perceptions of Education Services	
	%
Amount of preparation, services, or training received to prepare to complete education and job training goals	
A lot	33.1
Some	48.5
A little	13.1
None	5.3
Satisfaction with received services	
Very satisfied	26.5
Satisfied	63.0
Dissatisfied	8.9
Very dissatisfied	1.6
Who provided the most help with preparing for education goals	
Foster parent(s)/group home staff/ILP staff	41.8
Biological parents/siblings/relatives	18.7
CASA/wraparound/other SS worker	10.0
School staff/school program	7.6
Myself	6.7
Mentor	6.2
Other adult	4.7
County child welfare agency	4.3

total of 59.1 percent of workers rated remaining in care as a 4 or 5 for the youth, 25.3 percent gave the middle answer, and 15.6 percent said it was not a reason or a low priority for the youth. Thus, responses from both youth and caseworkers show that educational support is a primary reason for youth to participate in extended foster care.

Perceptions of Education Services

Given recent policy emphasis on promoting secondary and postsecondary educational attainment, hearing what youth and caseworkers think about the availability and quality of services provides an important perspective on the supports in place. About one-third

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[9] For the questions on secondary and postsecondary services, workers were asked to report their youths' need from a scale of 1, "low need" to 5, "high need." The percentages reported included caseworkers who selected response options of 3, 4, and 5, roughly corresponding to moderate to high need.

of youth reported that they received a lot of preparation, services, or training to help them complete their education and job training goals and about one-half said that they received some services (see Table 6). Just one-quarter of youth said that they were very satisfied with the education preparation services they received and more than half said they were satisfied. The people they lived with (e.g., foster parents, group home staff, or independent living staff) provided the most help with preparing the adolescents for their education and job training goals, followed by members of their biological family and then other professionals.

Fewer than one-third of caseworkers reported that there was a wide range of education services available to youth in foster care, either at the secondary or postsecondary level (see Table 7). When thinking about the helpfulness of the available services, about two-thirds of caseworkers had favorable views about services supporting secondary education and a similar proportion had favorable views of services supporting postsecondary education. Caseworkers also rated their satisfaction with the amount of collaboration they have with individuals working in the education systems in their county. About one-third of workers said that they were satisfied or completely satisfied with the amount of collaboration they had with both secondary and postsecondary education systems.

Conclusion

Youth were generally optimistic about their future educational attainment; nearly all of them expect to finish high school and over 80 percent expect to graduate from college. Findings from both the youth survey and caseworker survey indicate that most youth are connected to school, work, or both. However, about 1 in 10 are not connected to either. The young people we surveyed said they were encouraged to pursue their education by three important groups of adults in their lives: family members, school workers, and individuals working in the foster care system. Consistent encouragement is important both for motivating youth to finish school and for developing their educational aspirations. This encouragement is also important because the decision for these youth whether to remain in foster care past 18 years old is soon approaching. Indeed, about 45 percent of youth said that receiving support to continue their education was the biggest reason they would choose to stay in care. Similarly, about 60 percent of workers reported that youth saw extended care as an important way to pursue their educational goals.

Table 7. Caseworkers' Perceptions of Education Services in their County	
	%
Availability of services to complete secondary education credential	
Wide range	29.9
Some	39.2
Few	25.1
None	5.8
Helpfulness of secondary education services	
Helpful or very helpful	65.5
Neutral	20.5
Not at all helpful or unhelpful	14.0
Availability of services to complete postsecondary education credential	
Wide range	28.5
Some	42.0
Few	21.2
None	8.4
Helpfulness of postsecondary education services	
Helpful or very helpful	66.2
Neutral	21.9
Not at all helpful or Unhelpful	11.9
Satisfaction with collaboration with individuals and organizations in secondary education system to meet education goals	
Satisfied or completely satisfied	33.8
Neutral	50.7
Completely dissatisfied/dissatisfied	15.6
Satisfaction with collaboration with individuals and organizations in postsecondary education system to meet education goals	
Satisfied or completely satisfied	30.1
Neutral	49.9
Completely dissatisfied or dissatisfied	20.0

Although the majority of youth aspire to complete a college degree, more than half are reading below a high school level at age 18, which suggests that youth may underestimate the academic hurdles that lie ahead. Most youth said that their guardians or biological family are the people who provide the most help with their education, and only one-third of respondents said they received a lot of services intended to support them educationally. This may be due in part to a lack of available services that meet the needs or attract the interest of youth. Less than one-third of caseworkers reported that their county has a wide range of services. Moreover, only about one-third of workers are satisfied with coordination with individuals and organizations in the education system to work toward meeting youths' education goals. Training key individuals, expanding services, and improving coordination between systems are potential ways to better prepare youth to meet their educational goals.

Perhaps what was most salient in our comparison of county types is the lack of significant differences. Although a few differences emerged (e.g., in youths' educational expectations), there did not appear to be sweeping differences in academic background and performance, caseworkers' perceptions of youths' need for services, or availability or helpfulness of services that was a function of urbanicity. It may be that differences exist from county to county or that differences may emerge when examining outcomes at a later age, but these are topics for future analyses.

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