

1-page summary: Factors influencing college enrollment for youth formerly in foster care

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Research Questions

1. Which types of social capital (supports and resources embedded in relationships) affect the odds of college enrollment for youth with foster care histories?
2. What background characteristics (e.g., academic performance and aspirations, foster care history, physical and mental health, other risk and protective factors) affect the odds of enrolling in college?

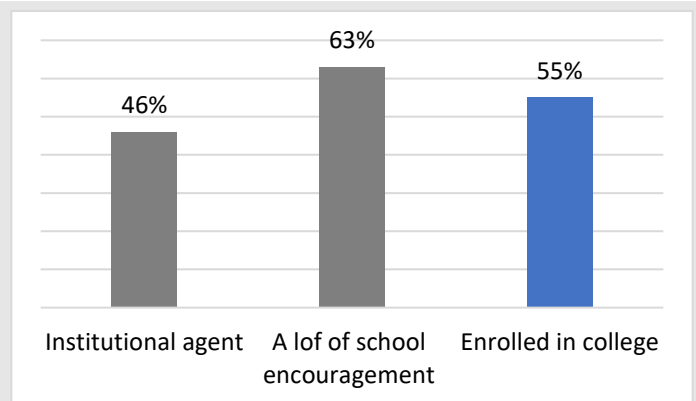
Data & Methods

Sample: 711 youths who participated in CalYOUTH and permitted administrative data access. Youth were eligible for CalYOUTH if they were between ages 16.75-17.75 in Dec. 2012 and had been in California foster care for at least six months. We linked CalYOUTH survey data collected at age 17 to National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data obtained in February 2016, when participants were 20.2 years old on average.

Analytic methods: The main outcome was whether or not youth had enrolled in college (2-year or 4-year) by the time of the NSC data draw. For social capital, we hypothesized that youth who nominated more institutional agents as people they turn to for advice or practical support would increase the odds of enrolling in college. *Institutional agents* (IAs) are nonfamily adults in positions of authority who act on youths' behalf to get them knowledge and resources, advocate, or serve as a cultural guide. We also hypothesized that youth who receive encouragement from high school professionals to pursue higher education would be more likely to enroll than youth who did not receive this encouragement. We tested several competing hypotheses about social capital (e.g., the size of youths' social support network). We used logistic regression to examine whether social capital, as well as several other youth characteristics, predict the odds of enrolling in college.

Main Findings

- 55% of CalYOUTH participants had enrolled in college by age 19/20. Of those who enrolled, the overwhelming majority attended 2-year colleges (85%)
- 46% nominated an IA, and 63% said they received "a lot" of encouragement from school personnel. IAs were nonfamily foster parents, caseworkers, mentors, teachers, and other professionals.
- Each additional IA a youth nominated increased their expected odds of enrolling in college by about 39%. The odds of enrolling in college was about 70% greater for youth who received "a lot" of encouragement (vs. youth who received "some", "a little", or "none").
- Youth with IAs were more likely to report at age 19 that they had more help with preparing for college. This helped to explain (i.e., mediate) why youth with IAs had increased odds of enrolling in college.
- Several other factors increased the odds of enrolling (e.g., reading ability, high school grades, educational aspirations, more time in foster care past age 18), while other factors decreased the odds of enrolling (e.g., repeating a grade, ever in special education, being a parent).



Implications

- Relationships matter. The likelihood of going to college increases when youth have supportive relationships with adults who can leverage their positional power and mobilize college-relevant knowledge and resources. **Efforts need to be made to increase accessibility and availability of institutional agents**, including addressing distrust youth may have of relationships due to past trauma.
- Simply receiving encouragement to go to college, even if it is genuine and well-intended, does not necessarily promote college enrollment. **School personnel were found to exert influence on youths' likelihood of pursuing higher education.** They stand as representatives of the education institution and who have intimate knowledge of students' capacities.