

1-page summary: Relationships that persist and protect

Article Title Okpych, N. J., Park, S., Powers, J., Harty, J. S., Courtney, M. E. (2023). Relationships that persist and protect: The role of enduring relationships on early-adult outcomes among youth transitioning out of foster care. *Social Service Review*, 97(4), 619-674. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/724736>

Purpose

There has been growing interest in child welfare around promoting relational permanence in the lives of older youth in foster care. This study seeks to answer three questions about long-lasting, supportive relationships, or what we call “enduring relationships”:

1. How prevalent are enduring relationships among 21-year-olds who recently exited foster care, and are there differences by gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation?
2. Do characteristics of enduring relationships differ from relationships that are more short-lived?
3. Does having an enduring relationship promote positive outcomes and stave off negative outcomes?

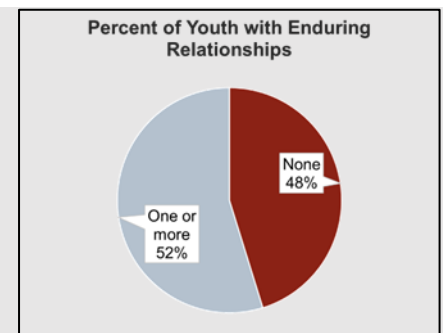
Data & Methods

Sample: Young people who participated in both the age-17 and age-21 CalYOUTH Study interviews and who were not missing information on social support. Youth were initially eligible for CalYOUTH if they had been in California foster care for at least 6 months and were between the ages of 16.75 and 17.75 in December 2012. We accessed state administrative data to create some of the outcomes (e.g., wages).

Analytic methods: During the age-17 and age-21 interviews, youth were asked to name people they could turn to for emotional support, tangible support, and advice/guidance (max of 9 people). In total, the 608 youths named 3,575 people. We classified a person as an “enduring relationship” if they were nominated at both ages 17 and 21, as a “faded relationship” if they were nominated at just age 17, and as a “emerged relationship” if they were nominated at just age 21. Importantly, enduring relationships were those that lasted through youths’ transition out of foster care. We first tested sociodemographic differences in the percentage of youth with an enduring relationship. Next, we examined whether there were differences in the characteristics of relationships (e.g., type(s) of support the people offered, who the person was, amount of strain) between enduring relationships vs. faded and emerged relationships. Finally, we used regression analyses to examine whether having an enduring relationship was associated with several outcomes after controlling for a range of factors. We investigated advancement outcomes (e.g., earnings, savings, educational completion) and hardships (e.g., homelessness, food insecurity, economic hardships). We also examined whether having an enduring relationship with specific types of people (e.g., peers, kin, etc.) was influential for certain outcomes.

Main Findings

- Slightly over half of youth had an enduring relationship.
- No statistically significant differences were found by gender or sexual orientation, but Black youth and Native American/AK Native youth were less likely to have enduring relationships than their peers. Latinx youth were more likely to have an enduring relationship than their non-Latinx peers.
- Consistent with social capital theory, enduring relationships reflected characteristics of “strong ties” – they tended to be with bio-family and family-like individuals, provided a lot of emotional and tangible support, and had more strain.
- Having an enduring relationship was found to reduce youth risk of several hardships (e.g., food insecurity, economic hardships, homelessness) and increase amount youth earned between ages 18-21
- Enduring relationships with specific types of people were associated with some outcomes (e.g., having a peer as an enduring relationship increased the odds of finishing some college vs. just a HS credential).



Implications

- Although the results are not causal, findings indicate that having an enduring relationship has real, material benefits in how youth fare when transitioning out of care (esp. preventing hardships)
- Findings align with calls to amplify relational permanence in child welfare services for transition-age youth in foster care, alongside strategies that support self-sufficiency and legal permanence.
- Prevalence of enduring relationships need to increase for all youth, but especially Native American/Alaskan Native and Black youth.