



# BUILDING EVIDENCE ON OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH EXITING FOSTER CARE

How First Place is Investing in  
Evidence for the Sector



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# Contents

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INTRODUCTION	<b>3</b>
HOW MANY YOUNG ADULTS DOES THE SYSTEM SERVE?	<b>6</b>
WHAT ARE THE YOUTH'S DEMOGRAPHICS?	<b>7</b>
HOW DO PROVIDER OUTCOMES COMPARE?	<b>8</b>
LESSONS AND NEXT STEPS	<b>10</b>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	<b>12</b>



## Introduction

With the historic passage of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, Congress granted states the option to support youth in foster care until their 21st birthday. Since then, California has led the way in implementing this groundbreaking policy, known as Extended Foster Care:

- 1. First, California created two new placement options designed to meet the needs of youth in foster care ages 18-21:** the Supervised Independent Living Placement (SILP), a flexible housing stipend paired with a minimal monthly touchpoint to a county social worker, and the Transitional Housing Placement for Non-Minor Dependents (THP-NMD), which combines provider-operated transitional housing with robust case management to support young people in achieving independence. First Place for Youth advocated for the creation of THP-NMD, and the program itself was modeled on its My First Place program.
- 2. Second, California has served as a testing ground for the impact of Extended Foster Care.** The state has generated evidence about this policy change through an innovative partnership with the CalYOUTH Study out of the University of Chicago, the largest policy study of the impact of Extended Foster Care in the country. CalYOUTH's findings reveal overwhelmingly positive effects on youth self-sufficiency and well-being outcomes for those participating in Extended Foster Care.<sup>1</sup>

While the field now has a strong understanding of the breadth and depth of positive outcomes resulting from participation in Extended Foster Care as a whole, less is known about the relative merits of various placement settings within Extended Foster Care, including the demographics of youth served, and the differential outcomes between providers.

Until today. This paper presents a new understanding of the impact of First Place relative to peer providers serving transition-age foster youth.

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1. Courtney, M. E., Okpych, N. J., Harty, J. S., Feng, H., Park, S., Powers, J., Nadon, M., Ditto, D. J., & Park, K. (2020). [Findings from the California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study \(CalYOUTH\): Conditions of youth at age 23](#). Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

First Place sought to address the knowledge gaps about Extended Foster Care through an innovative and unique research partnership with California’s Department of Social Services (CDSS) and the CalYOUTH team at the University of Chicago.

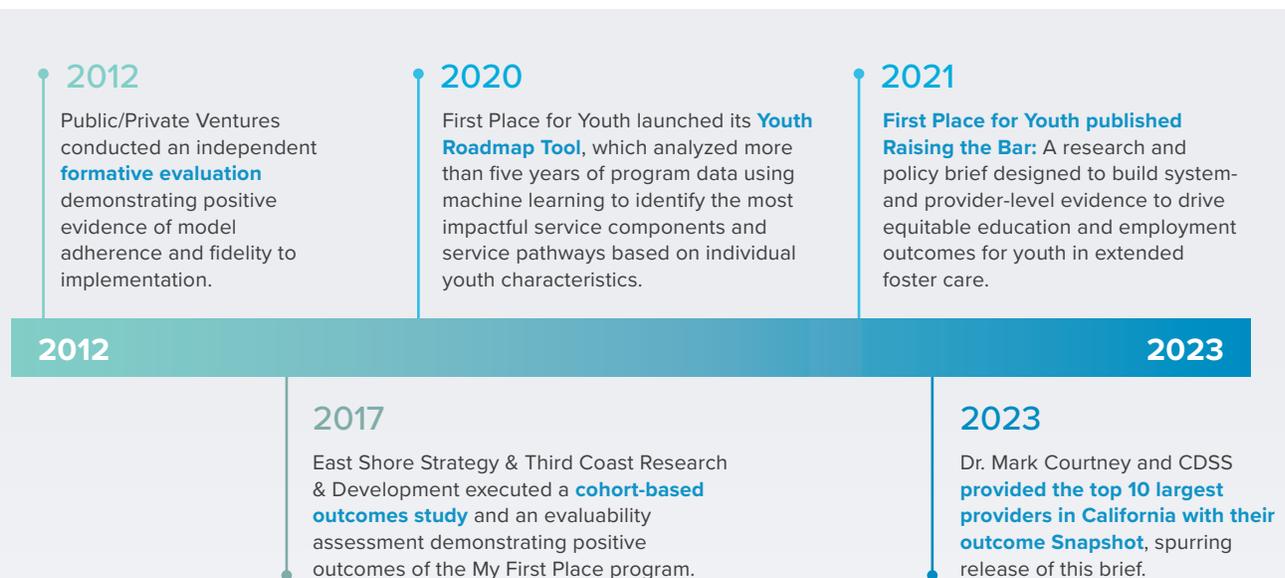
**The partnership aimed to address two key questions:**

1. What is the impact of the new foster care placement types (THP-NMD and Supervised Independent Living Placements) on post-secondary education and employment outcomes of participants throughout California?
2. How do THP-NMD providers throughout California compare across youth demographics and key education and employment outcomes? Although state regulations define the basic requirements of THP-NMD, independent providers have flexibility to design innovative and unique programs that address the diverse array of youth needs and strengths.

While the first question will be addressed in soon-to-be-released, peer-reviewed research from the University of Chicago,<sup>2</sup> this brief begins to answer a second question by showcasing First Place in the inaugural California Provider Outcomes Snapshot (hereafter referred to as the Snapshot). The Snapshot analyzed and compared youth served across demographics, placement utilization, and key outcomes of the 10 largest providers of THP-NMD. CDSS shared the Snapshot with providers earlier this year, allowing them to see how they compare to their peers. [See call-out box below for more detail on the methodology.]

The authors hope that this brief will motivate other service providers to share their findings, foster collaboration and learning, and lead to stronger outcomes for all youth exiting foster care in California.

**First Place has endeavored to build momentum for critical evaluation of programs and services by conducting the following:**



2. Park, S., Feng, H., Okpych, N. J., & Courtney, M. E. (under review). Effectiveness of public-nonprofit collaboration: Providing transitional housing placements for transition-age foster youth in California.

Throughout this evidence building journey, it became clear that for a variety of issues related to sample size and system and organizational readiness, as well as challenges with identifying a proper counterfactual or comparison group, First Place alone would not be able to conduct a randomized controlled trial in California. The organization was thus forced to pivot towards alternative plans for building credible evidence given these identified limitations.

## Key Metrics & Methodology

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For the first time, this Snapshot provided key provider- and state-level data points on demographics and placement utilization of youth from 2016 to 2018 (e.g., number served, average months served, and percentage of undesirable exits). Each of the 10 largest providers in the state received their own Snapshot. Demographic and utilization data was sourced from the CDSS Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS), and additional key outcomes from California's Employment Development Department's (EDD) Unemployment Insurance wage records, and the National Student Clearinghouse's (NSC) data on participation in postsecondary education.

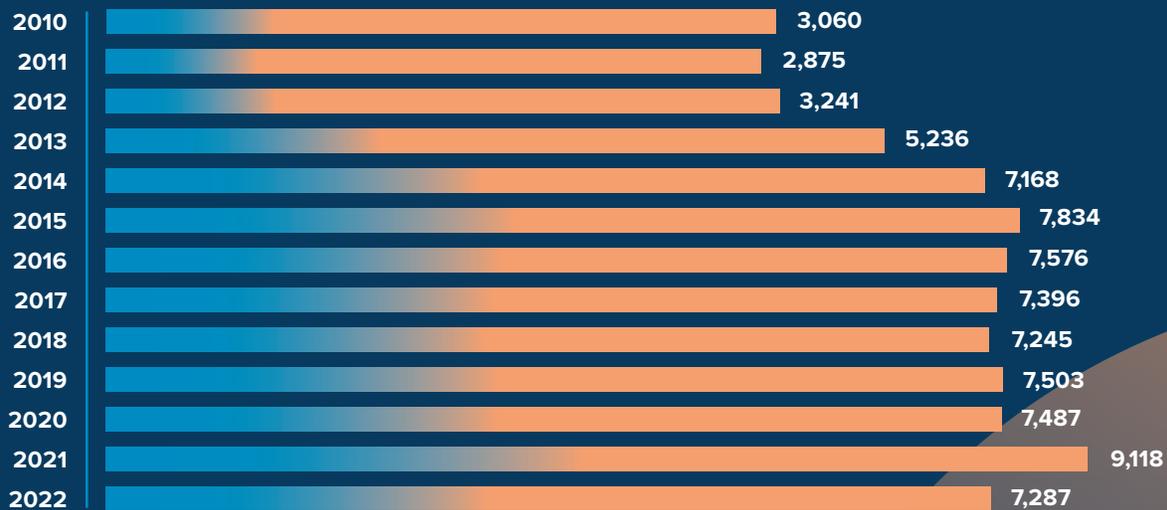
The University of Chicago utilized a variety of multivariate statistical models to investigate statistical differences in provider-level outcomes, comparing each provider to the grouped average of other THP-NMD providers who served at least 1% of the total NMD population. The analyses controlled for characteristics and risk factors of youth and the county responsible for that youth that were associated with the outcomes of interest. For the 10 largest providers, analyses also included a county-level case mix variable that measured the percentage of youth a THP-NMD provider served in each county that placed youth with that provider.<sup>3</sup>

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3. Control variables used to risk-adjust analyses to account for differences in the characteristics of youth served by a provider included: gender, age at the beginning of calendar year, and race/ethnicity; history of being neglected, history of physical abuse, history of sexual abuse, history of emotional abuse, and history of other forms of maltreatment; ever been placed in congregate care before age 18, placement change rate before age 18, ever ran away from a placement before age 18, and months in care during that year; having diagnosed physical disability, vision or hearing disability, having diagnosed mental retardation, and other medical condition requiring special care; and county size/urbanicity. Selected analyses also included some outcome-specific control variables: county fair-market rent for 2-bedroom apartment, county unemployment rate, and ever employed between age 17-18 for employment and earnings outcomes; ever experienced undesirable discharge before age 18 for the undesirable discharge outcome.

# How Many Young Adults Are Served and by Whom?

As of June 2021, nearly 2,300 of the 9118 California youth served by the state’s Extended Foster Care continuum were participating in THP-NMD placements operated by 60+ licensed providers, including First Place for Youth’s My First Place™.



**The Snapshot found that relatively few providers serve the majority of youth participating in THP-NMD services.** Between 2016 and 2018, a total of 63 providers served over 5,800 youth in California’s THP-NMD program. However, the vast majority of youth were served by a subsection of the state’s larger THP-NMD providers—the 10 largest providers served nearly 63% of the state’s THP-NMD youth, and the 24 largest organizations served 82% of youth. Operating in the Bay Area and Los Angeles, First Place was the third largest provider of THP-NMD services during this period, having served one-in-10 of all youth enrolled in the state.

2016-2018	Characteristics of THP-NMD Providers
5,895	Number of youth who ever stayed in THP-NMD
63	Number of THP-NMD providers
25	Number of THP-NMD providers that served more than 1% of total youth
82%	Proportion of youth served by the 24 largest THP-NMD providers
63%	Proportion of youth served by the 10 largest THP-NMD providers

4. John Burton Advocates for Youth. *Youth in THP-NMD & THP-Plus: a 2020-2021 Census*. December, 2021.

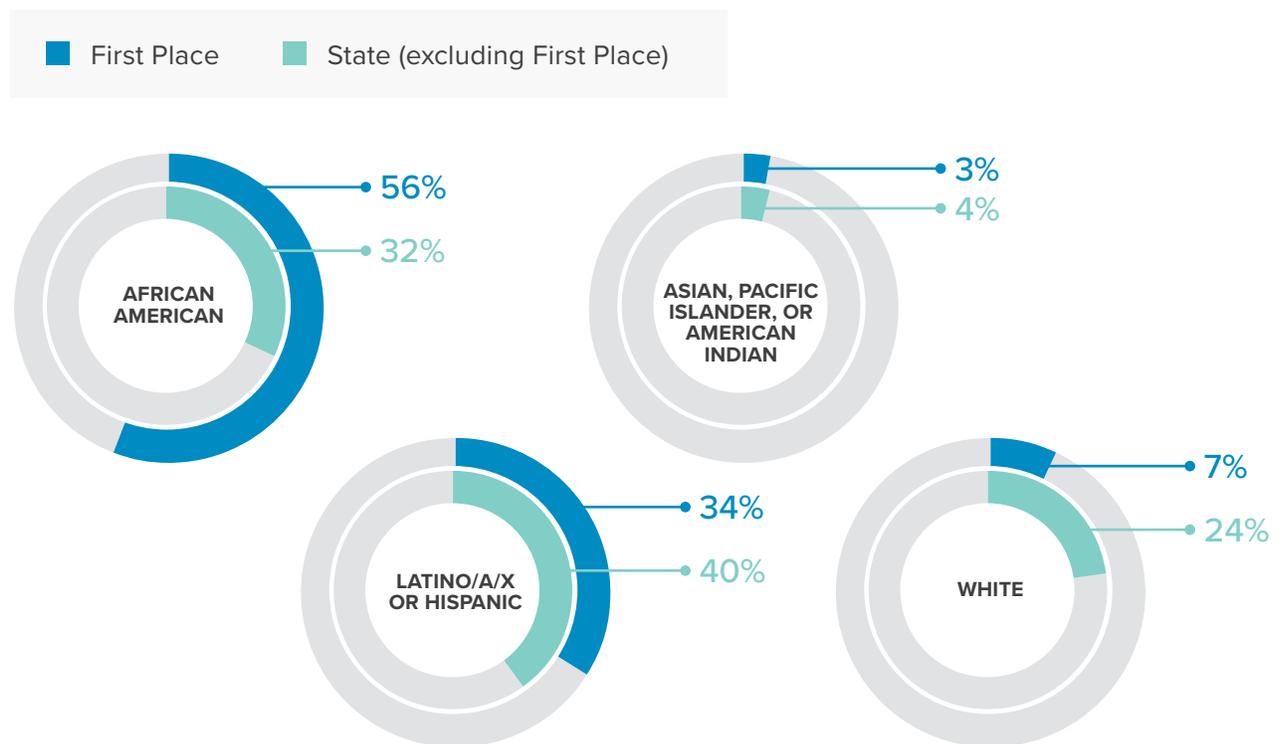
5. Courtney, M. E., Feng, H., and Park, S. (2021). *Outcomes of Youth Who Stayed in THP-NMD Placements*. Report to the California Department of Social Services. Chicago, IL: Author.

6. In total, there were 68 THP-NMD providers that provided services during 2016-2018. However, five providers were inactive (not operating) in 2018. These five providers are small providers that served less than 1% of the total youth and were excluded in the table.

# What Are the Demographics of Those Being Served?

The demographics of youth served by First Place vary by race but not gender, relative to those of its peer providers. African-American youth comprise a greater share of First Place’s youth relative to the rest of the state (56% vs. 32%). Conversely, White and Latino or Hispanic youth comprise smaller proportions of those served by First Place (7% vs. 24% and 34% vs. 40% respectively).<sup>7</sup> This may vary simply due to differences among counties served by First Place and the rest of the state. First Place’s distribution of youth by gender between 2016 and 2018 appears to reflect the general population of THP-NMD youth (55% identifying as female and 45% as male). It should be noted, however, that during that period CWS/CMS only captured gender on a binary male/female scale, which does not incorporate the full diversity of gender identities.

## Comparison of Demographics of Youth Served



7. Youth identifying as Asian/Pacific Islander or Native American were grouped together. They were not able to be reported on individually in order to safeguard youth confidentiality given the smaller numbers of youth in each group.



## How Do Provider Outcomes Compare on Education, Employment, and Undesirable Discharges?

**While youth enrollment rates in post-secondary education (PSE) were comparable between First Place and other providers, results suggest that First Place participants enrolled in PSE for a significantly longer period of time when compared to participants served by the other nine largest providers and accounting for differences in youth characteristics and county context.**

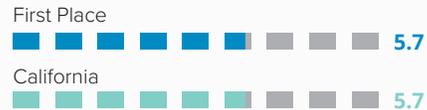
Specifically, the study found a highly statistically significant difference in PSE retention among all youth served in THP-NMD between 2016 and 2018 ( $p < .001$ ), and a statistically significant difference remained when the analysis included only youth who had ever enrolled at post-secondary education institutions ( $p < .05$ ). In other words, while the average months enrolled for youth at First Place is numerically similar, when accounting for the context of the counties in which it operates and the youth served relative to the nine other largest providers, youth served by First Place are likely to persist in school longer than youth served by peers, and this finding is statistically significant.



### PSE Enrollment



### Average Months Enrolled in PSE (out of nine)



### Obtained Employment



### Average Quarterly Earnings



### Average Quarters Employed



While First Place participants tend to fare better on average quarters employed and quarterly earnings, after controlling for other factors First Place is on par with other THP-NMD providers. Overall, 72% of First Place participants obtained employment in the 2016-2018 period, compared to 67% of youth enrolled with other service providers. Participants averaged 2.1 quarters of employment earning an average of \$1,555 with First Place and 1.8 quarters and \$1,337 with others. While participants tend to do better on average across employment outcomes with First Place, when tested against the statewide average and when controlling for youth and county characteristics, no statistically significant differences were observed.

The rates of undesirable discharge<sup>8</sup>, while not an outcome themselves, were of particular interest to providers and the state. These rates may be important markers of success in the provision of THP-NMD services, and are hypothesized to have a relationship to education- and employment-related outcomes. First Place had a slightly lower rate of undesirable discharges (15%) relative to other NMD providers (18%). This difference was statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), but after accounting for youth and county control variables was found to be comparable to the rates of other large providers.

8. Undesirable discharges were defined as the percentage of youth who were ever discharged from a THP-NMD placement due to incarceration, hospitalization, running away, or involuntary removal.

# Lessons and Next Steps for First Place for Youth

The Provider-Level Outcomes Snapshot looked at the THP-NMD placement setting to help providers understand their own relative impact within what has already been established as an effective and impactful placement setting. Despite the challenges in designing a study to compare aggregate statistics of youth served by a broad diversity of providers across so many counties and contexts in California, this study is a major step forward in evidence-building for the state and for First Place. Results depicted within First Place's Outcomes Snapshot have spotlighted some important areas of strength and improvement for the My First Place program:

**DEIB and Youth Voice.** First Place has historically served a population of predominately African-American and Latino/a/x or Hispanic youth, and the Outcomes Snapshot shows that First Place serves a significantly higher proportion of African-American youth than other providers throughout the state. This finding has bolstered First Place's longstanding recognition that the organization must structure services to be both culturally humble and responsive. In its most recent strategic plan, First Place centered the goal of becoming a multicultural and anti-racist institution as one of four key pillars of the plan. Several ongoing initiatives have supported this work, including the establishment of a staff-driven Core Equity Team and a Young Adult Leadership Council (comprised of former and in-program youth from across California), and hiring staff focused on the principles of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB).

## **Education Innovations Aiming to Support Youth with Higher Employment Earnings.**

When it comes to supporting youth with education outcomes, First Place, relative to the largest providers in the state, performs better at supporting youth with post-secondary education (PSE) persistence—measured by the amount of time a youth remains enrolled in PSE. Recognizing that education is one of the most powerful pathways to increasing wages, First Place has spent the past four years innovating and investing extensively to improve its education supports.

**Based on youth feedback and need, First Place launched a robust, multi-part PSE coaching intervention in 2019 and an apprenticeship program in 2020 to diversify and expand career pathway opportunities open to those we serve.** Preliminary analysis shows that youth who receive the PSE coaching intervention are twice as likely to make significant education progress<sup>9</sup> compared with peers who did not. First Place will actively monitor implementation and outcomes to better understand the extent these interventions are moving the needle and supporting youth with education attainment and higher wages.

**First Place performs similarly to other California providers on employment outcomes.** MIT estimates that a single individual living in Los Angeles County with no dependents would need to earn more than \$45,000 a year<sup>10</sup>, well above the average and median wages earned by those served across the THP-NMD system. As California becomes more expensive and this gap grows, it's crucial for the entire child welfare community to prioritize youth attainment of educational assets that lead to life-sustaining incomes and policy interventions that increase access to traditional and nontraditional career paths for former foster youth.

9. First Place defines education progress as 12+ units completed in a college setting, 50% of hours for an industry-recognized certificate program, or the completion of a lower-level certificate such as a Certified Nursing Assistant

10. Glasmeier, Amy K. Living Wage Calculator. 2020. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. [livingwage.mit.edu](https://livingwage.mit.edu)

For First Place, the Snapshot offered critical learnings about our impact relative to other THP-NMD providers. The authors of this brief encourage other providers to utilize their Snapshots, where available, to engage in similar self-reflection to promote shared learning and accountability.

Most of all, the authors hope that this project serves as a catalyst to apply administrative data sets to better understand placement- and provider-level differences and to drive change through policy, practice, and community learning. The Snapshot offered a one-time look at these findings. We propose that the state develop the capacity to provide this level of data to providers on an ongoing basis and to encourage use of outcomes and evidence-building for ongoing program improvement. A potential model for this is the California Child Welfare Indicators Project, a collaboration between the University of California at Berkeley and CDSS.

First Place is eager to champion such discussions around learning and impact so together we can better lift up the needs of transition-age foster youth and deliver promising and proven solutions to best serve them.





## Acknowledgments

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- Thank you to Christine Stoner-Mertz, CEO of the California Alliance of Child and Family Services (CACFS), and the membership of their Transition Age Youth Services Committee, whose participation, contributions, and insights helped guide this research.
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