

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On the Threshold of Change

Forces that could transform future conditions for youth in Extended Foster Care (EFC)

A foresight report by Institute for the Future (ITF)

In the United States today, over 600,000 children and youth pass through the foster care system over the course of a year, many of whom face uncertain futures. “On the Threshold of Change” addresses this critical issue, presenting a transformative vision for extended foster care. Our goal is to ensure that every young person transitioning from foster care to adulthood by 2035 is not merely surviving but thriving.

In 2008, Congress authorized the option for states to utilize federal funds to extend foster care to age 21. This seismic shift was intended to be a safety net for the most vulnerable youth exiting the foster care system. California was among the first states to opt into the federal funding in 2010—implementing extended foster care to age 21 beginning in January 2012. The advocates in California who rallied for successful passage, including the Youth Law Center and the California Youth Connection, intended extended foster care to be a transformative structure that met the needs of young adults in a very different way so that they would be provided the family and community relationships, concrete economic supports and other resources, and

connections to the supports and services that would ensure a successful transition out of foster care to adulthood. Unfortunately, ten years of quantitative and qualitative data reveal that many youth who have experienced extended foster care are still experiencing homelessness, incarceration, mental and physical health challenges, loneliness, and isolation while in care and when they age out. The extreme challenges faced by youth during the pandemic, in the changing economy, and during recent climate disasters have highlighted the immediate need to reimagine foster care to prepare youth for a future in a world that has dramatically changed over the past decade.

As we look out over the next decade, we envision an extended foster care approach that supports youth to not only survive but thrive by 2035. We must urgently consider changes like ongoing climate disasters, the rise of emerging technologies including Artificial Intelligence (AI) in daily life, and the shifting labor and housing markets, ensuring that our youth and young adult-serving systems are future-ready. While we fix our current systems and structures, we must also engage in the critically important work of co-creating radically new ones that are both informed by the drivers and trends shaping future conditions and responsive to the voices of young people impacted by these trends.

Using foresight, which is a set of tools, processes and research methodologies designed to bring discipline, creativity, and imagination to how we reinvent and plan for the long-term future, this report illuminates a path forward that centers youth voices in reimagining an approach to extended foster care that addresses both present and possible future conditions. This foresight report contains three sections:

Section 1: Harsh Realities of Today

Section 2: Transformational Future Forces of Tomorrow

Section 3: Key Insights



Harsh Realities of Today

Recognizing and addressing the challenging conditions youth exiting foster care and participating in extended foster care face today is only the first step in change. These current harsh realities include:

Family Inequity

State and federal policies and social work practices can undermine the goal of developing the interdependent relationships that extensive research shows are critical for youth development. Youth-serving systems should ensure that all young people have secure connections, including both family relationships and other caring adults and peers in their lives.

Racial Injustice

Racism is embedded in the structure of the child welfare system, including extended foster care programs. While the majority of youth in extended foster care (75%) are youth of color, extended foster care has not been designed with their unique needs in mind. Youth-serving systems should address systemic racial injustices and deploy targeted and tailored strategies to strengthen the factors that will help youth weather the racial and social inequities they may face as adults.

Economic Inequality

Eligibility for programs and services, along with the design of these services in extended foster care, tend to keep youth in poverty rather than building immediate and long-term economic stability and security. This includes critical aspects like housing, healthcare, education and training, and access to future job opportunities. Youth-serving systems should ensure that youth have the economic resources to both withstand crises and achieve security.

Climate Crises

The consequences of the climate crisis impact stability and well-being for youth in extended foster care, including the ability to access quality housing, education, transportation, employment, health care, and social connections. Youth in foster care stand to face the gravest risks of climate crisis—displacement, mental health impact, and disruption to stability. Systems should intentionally design responses to the climate crisis to address the unique needs of youth in extended foster care.

Digital Divide

Existing policies in foster care often lead youth in extended care to enter adulthood with limited knowledge and experiences. This not only prevents them from fully leveraging technological opportunities but also increases their vulnerability to the challenges posed by technological advances, particularly those involving AI. Systems should equip youth with the ability to access and understand digital tools so they can use them to communicate and connect. Systems should also utilize technology to better serve youth and empower them to easily access supports in their communities.

Social Volatility

Growing political divisions, social volatility, and cultural shifts have an impact on the safety and well-being of youth in extended foster care, particularly without the support and buffer of strong family and social connections. Youth-serving systems should actively take steps to ensure that the most vulnerable youth in foster care are protected in a country that is increasingly openly hostile to young people who identify as LGBTQ+, female, immigrants, or people of color.



Transformational Future Forces

Looking out ten years, there are future forces that *could, if we take action*, transform extended foster care so that young people enter adulthood with the support and resources they need to thrive. The four forces described in this report offer a reimagined extended foster care. However, to become reality, these forecasts will require changes in national, state, and local policy, resource allocation, and practice. Advocates and policymakers have the opportunity to take action today to shape the four transformational forces outlined in the report that could ensure youth are prepared to thrive in 2035.

These forces, which are supported by drivers and signals (indications of burgeoning trends), and are deepened by the ideas and insights of young people with experience in EFC, are:

Equitable Transition

By 2035, a reimagined extended foster care system will be universally available, shifting away from providing youth with limited and conditional benefits. Instead, it **will guarantee basic resources** such as stable short and long-term housing, financial security, quality education, and broad access to essential tools, skills, social connections, and know-how needed for flourishing in adulthood.

Restorative Care

By 2035, a new extended foster care system will be designed to fortify the mental and physical health of young people, moving away from crisis and diagnosis-based mental health toward **holistic healing and well-being**.

Relational Design

By 2035, **relational permanency** will be the most important goal of the extended foster care system and the program will shift from preparing youth for independence to creating nurturing family ties and deep social connections that allow a life of healthy interdependence.

Computational Advantage

By 2035, the broad impact of technology on society will be widely understood and accepted in extended foster care. To prepare the young people in extended foster care to navigate and take full advantage of this future technological reality, the system will shift from merely allowing technology or teaching specific technological skills toward **building digital dexterity**. Extended foster care will leverage technology to improve access to needed supports and resources for young people as AI becomes a core part of all of our daily lives.

Key Insights

Combining the harsh realities of today and transformational future forces, this report contains the historical information and future visions needed to collectively design a future extended foster care in which all youth can thrive. As we begin the hard but crucial work of building a more equitable future with young people, three critical insights upon which to focus our efforts are:

- 1.** Loving, enduring relationships are key to improving youth wellness and success as young people enter adulthood and over the duration of their lives. The primary focus of extended foster care should be on building and nurturing quality social and familial relationships. Outcomes must emphasize building and nurturing supportive, strong social and familial relationships, providing a foundation upon which youth can regularly rely for financial, housing, social networks, and emotional support as they navigate through adulthood.
- 2.** Financial security depends on guaranteed income, steady employment, stable housing, and optimizing the use of advancing technology. Extended foster care must focus on both short-term financial stability and long-term financial security. That security must also involve cultivating a sense of life purpose for youth, and investing in their abilities to work toward that purpose.
- 3.** The existing current extended foster care system views success as the avoidance of negative outcomes such as homelessness, reliance on public benefits, and involvement with the adult criminal legal system. Most parents of young adults would reject these goals as inadequate. They want their children to realize a comprehensive

sense of well-being, including achieving their life purposes and experiencing joy, happiness, optimism, and a sense of contribution to the world. Systems must have the same hopes and expectations for youth in extended foster care.

Shaping the four transformational future forces to ensure young people in extended care have the positive futures they deserve requires a commitment to a new vision and hard work to build a future that guarantees resources, proactively promotes holistic wellness and healing, prepares young people to use technology to flourish and, at its core, protects and promotes lasting and strong familial and social relationships. The future of extended foster care we aspire to build must be co-created with young people and those with lived experience in the foster care system. It must leverage partnerships and collaboration from all sectors, creating a network of support, resources, and relationships that are anchored in the communities where young people live instead of being confined to system-based solutions. Together, we have a unique opportunity to dramatically improve and transform the lives of young people who have already experienced or will be in the foster care system over the next decade as they make the difficult transition to adulthood.