

Youth in Foster Care: Assessment of Work Preparation

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Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs Brief Series

Becoming Adults

Do Youth in Foster Care Accurately Assess Their Preparation for Work?

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- Compared to youth in the general population, education and employment rates for youth in foster care are low.
- Approximately one in six youth were employed at age 17 compared to almost half at age 19. Also at 19, 25 percent were enrolled in higher education and 75 percent had worked in the previous year.
- For each outcome, youth with a very high sense of job preparedness and high reading ability fare best.
- The findings demonstrate that youth need continual support around employment, even if they feel highly prepared.

Each year, several thousand youth in foster care reach majority age, exit the foster care system, and face an uncertain adulthood (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2010). Young adults formerly in foster care are less likely to be employed or enrolled in college at age 19 than their same-age peers nationally (Courtney et al. 2005), contributing to greater economic instability in their early adult years. Social workers, educators, and policymakers question whether youth are adequately prepared for work but have difficulty assessing their job preparedness. This is because job

preparedness is often gauged from youths' perceptions, which may not align with actual employment outcomes, especially if youth are gauging their readiness before they have entered the work world as an adult. In this brief, we describe how youth in foster care who participated in the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs Life Skills Training Program rated their preparedness for work at age 17, and explore whether their assessments accurately predict employment two years later. We examine whether youth who feel more prepared for work actually are more prepared at age 19.

A high sense of job preparedness predicts more employment and college enrollment among young adults currently and formerly in foster care, but the relationship should be interpreted cautiously.

Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs

This brief uses the sample of youth studied in the evaluation of Los Angeles County's Life Skills Training (LST) program. The LST sample includes 467 youth age 17 when interviewed at baseline in 2003–2004. These youth were selected into the sample based on their age and foster care placement in Los Angeles County. Two annual follow-up interviews captured information from these youth at ages 18 and 19. Professional interviewers conducted 90-minute computer-assisted in-person interviews with each youth. This brief contains information on the 411 youth interviewed at the second follow-up, when approximately 82 percent of these youth had left foster care.

Sample Characteristics

Table 1, which presents characteristics of youth in the study,¹ shows the sample is 41 percent African American, 43 percent Hispanic, 9 percent non-Hispanic white, and 60 percent female. At age 17, 96 percent of the youth were in foster care compared to 18 percent at age 19. As expected, more youth were employed at age 19 than at age 17. Approximately one in six youth were employed at the time they were interviewed at age 17 compared to almost half at age 19. Youth were also more likely to have worked in the past year at age 19 than at age 17 (75 percent compared to 37 percent). At age 19, three-fifths of youth (60 percent) had earned a high school diploma or GED and two-thirds were either working or enrolled in school (either high school or college).

Compared to youth in the general population, education and employment rates for youth in this foster care sample are low. Estimates taken from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth in 1997² show that 41 percent of 19-year-olds were enrolled in college (including two- and four-year colleges) and 91 percent had worked between their 18th and 19th birthdays (Pergamit and Johnson 2009). In contrast, 25 percent of

Table 1. Foster Care Sample Characteristics at Ages 17 and 19, percent ($n=406$)

	Age 17	Age 19
Race		
African American	41	41
Hispanic	43	43
White, non-Hispanic	9	9
Gender		
Female	60	60
In foster care	96	18
Employment		
Currently employed	16	48
Employed ever in past year	37	75
School enrollment (current grade)		
Not enrolled	10	65
Less than high school	2	—
High school	85	9
Two-year college	<1	19
Four-year college	—	6
College (unknown type)	—	<1
Other (ungraded)	1	<1
High school diploma or GED	2	60
Currently in school or working	90	66

Source: Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs Life Skills Training program, 2007–2008.

youth in the LST sample were enrolled in a two- or four-year college and 75 percent had worked in the previous year.

How Prepared Do Youth Feel for Work?

The Multi-Site Evaluation measured foster care youth's sense of job preparedness using responses to the three following survey questions:

- How prepared do you feel to look for a job?
- How prepared do you feel to get a job?
- How prepared do you feel to keep a job?

We created a scale from these three questions. Youth rated their preparedness on a four-point scale with 1 indicating *not at all prepared* and 4 *very well prepared*. Possible scores ranged from 3 to 12, with higher scores reflecting a higher sense of job preparedness. Figure 1 shows the distribution of scores at age 17.

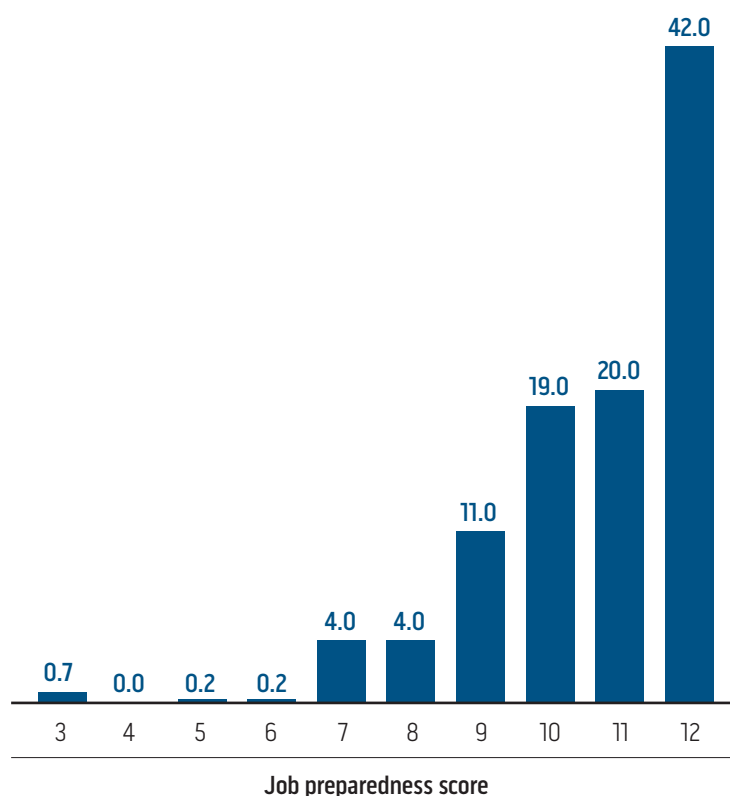
Youth generally reported a high sense of job preparedness. Although only 16 percent were currently working when they were interviewed at age 17, two-fifths (42 percent) gave

the highest possible rating (i.e., *very well prepared*) for finding, getting, and keeping a job. Nearly one-third (31 percent) of the 63 percent of youth who had not worked at all in the past year at age 17 gave the highest possible rating on job preparedness. In order to create categories for additional analyses, we defined the categories according to the pattern in the youth's responses. Since a large percentage of youth endorsed the maximum score for each question, we distinguish that group (the "highly prepared" group) from youth who endorsed a response less than "very well prepared" on one or more of the three items (the "less highly prepared" group).

The high proportion of *highly prepared* youth (42 percent) may reflect accurate estimates of work preparedness, overly confident assessments, or both. We used the youth's scores on a standardized reading ability test (the Woodcock-Johnson Letter-Word Identification Test) to examine an objective indicator of achievement. In the study sample, reading at a 9th-grade level or higher was correlated with working more months at age 19. According to the youth's scores, fewer than half (41 percent) read at the 9th-grade level or above at age 17. The majority read below the 9th-grade level (58 percent). To examine whether sense of job preparedness was related to employment and how it differed based on reading ability, we divided the youth into four categories according to their preparedness ratings and reading scores: *highly prepared and high reading*; *highly prepared and low reading*; *less highly prepared and high reading*; and *less highly prepared and low reading*.

Table 2 shows the percentage of youth in each category. Less than one-fifth (18 percent) reported feeling very highly prepared for work and read at the 9th-grade level or above (*highly prepared and high reading*). A little more than one-fifth (22 percent) felt very highly prepared for work and read below the 9th-grade level. Nearly one-fourth (23 percent) did not feel very highly prepared for work and read at the

Figure 1. Self-Assessed Job Preparedness at Age 17, percent (n=406)



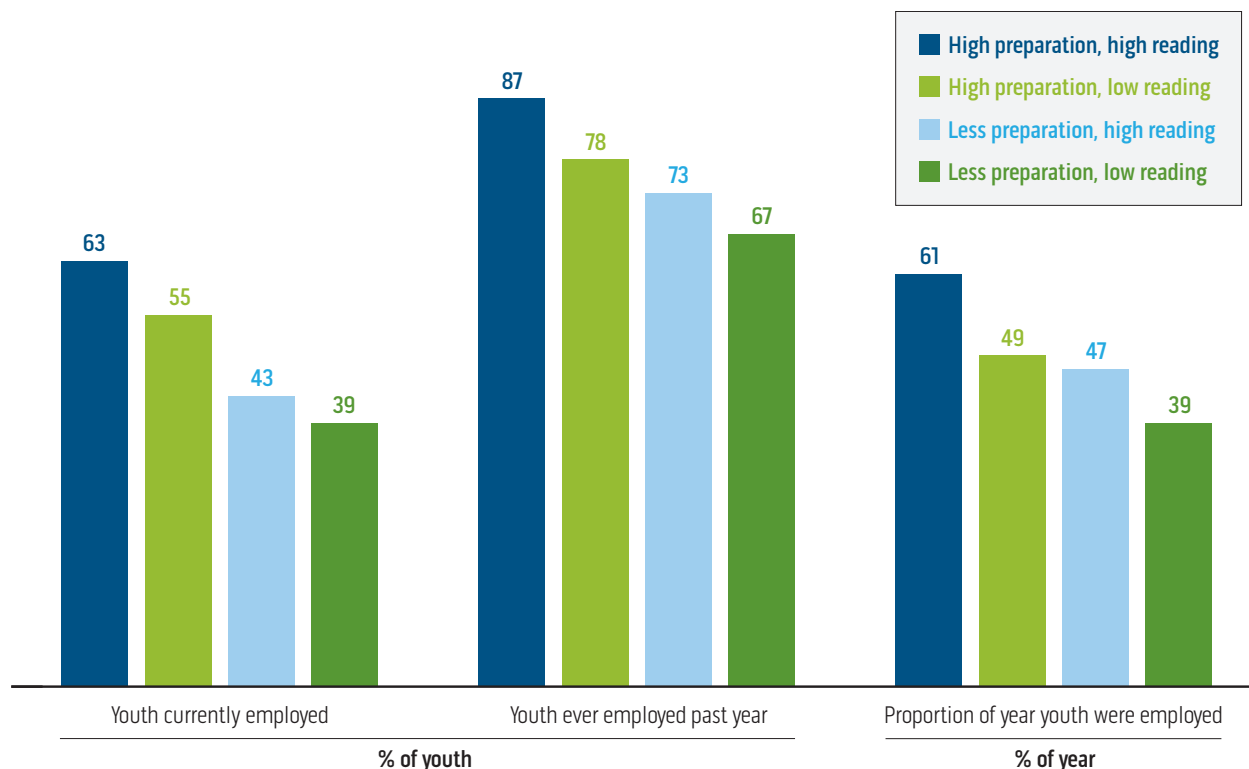
Source: Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs Life Skills Training program, 2007–2008.
Note: Job preparedness scores ranged from 3 to 12, with higher scores reflecting a higher sense of job preparedness.

Table 2. Sense of Job Preparedness by Reading Ability, percent

	High preparation (n=169)	Less preparation (n=237)	TOTAL
High reading (n=166)	18	23	41
Low reading (n=240)	22	36	58
TOTAL	41	58	99 ^a

Source: Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs Life Skills Training program, 2007–2008.
a. Total does not equal 100 percent due to rounding.

Figure 2. Foster Youth Employment at Age 19 by Job Preparedness and Reading Ability at Age 17



Source: Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs Life Skills Training program, 2007–2008.

9th-grade level or above, and 36 percent did not feel very highly prepared for work and read below the 9th-grade level.

Sense of Job Preparedness and Work

The Multi-Site Evaluation examined four employment outcomes at age 19. We calculated the proportion of youth who were working at the time they were interviewed and the proportion who had held a job in the past year. Among those who had worked in the past year, we reported the proportion of time they had worked that year.³ We also estimated the average monthly earnings for youth who had held a job in the past year. Employment outcomes are presented for each job preparedness and reading category to reveal a consistent pattern (see appendix, table A.1).

- For each outcome, youth with a very high sense of job preparedness and high reading ability fare best.
- Youth with a very high sense of job preparedness are more likely to work currently, are more likely to have worked in the past year, and have worked more months than youth with a lower sense of preparedness, regardless of reading ability.
- Youth with a very high sense of job preparedness and high reading ability have worked a greater proportion of the year than youth with a very high sense of preparedness but low reading ability.

- Youth with a very high sense of job preparedness and low reading ability are more likely to work currently, are more likely to have worked in the past year, and are more likely to have worked a greater proportion of the year than youth with similarly low reading ability who feel less highly prepared for work at age 17.

Figure 2 shows the pattern of employment according to categories of job preparedness and reading ability. Youth with very high preparedness and high reading ability have worked a greater proportion of the year than those with very high preparedness and low reading ability, but do not differ significantly from the *very highly prepared and low reading* group on other employment indicators.

Differences between youth with a very high sense of job preparedness and low reading ability and youth with a lower sense of job preparedness and high reading ability do not reach statistical significance at a 90-percent confidence level, but the trend suggests that a very high sense of job preparedness, not reading ability, is associated with better or similar employment outcomes at age 19 when compared to youth with high reading ability but lower sense of job preparedness.

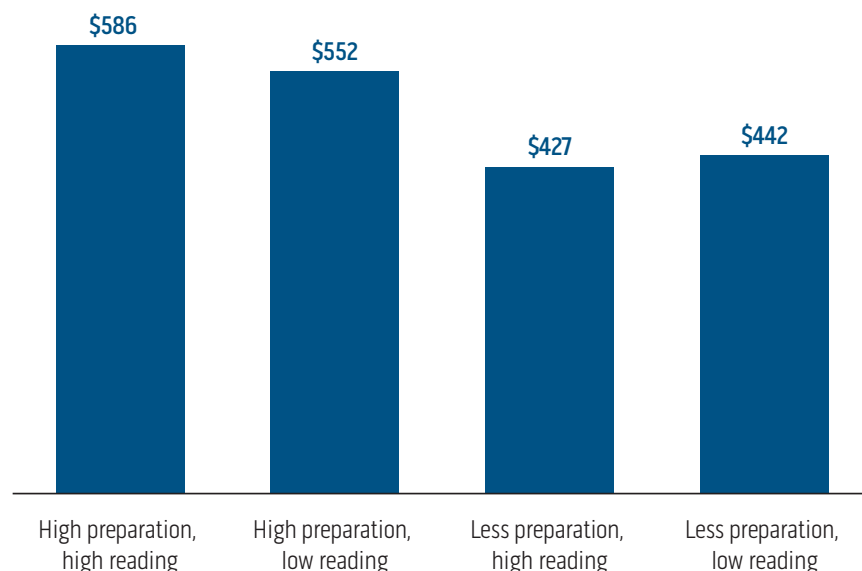
Figure 3 shows average monthly earnings at age 19 for youth in the study (see appendix).

- Youth with a very high sense of job preparedness and high reading ability have significantly higher monthly earnings than youth with less preparedness, regardless of reading ability. They earn \$586 each month on average compared to \$427 among youth with less job preparedness and high reading ability and \$442 among youth with less job preparedness and low reading ability.
- The average earnings for youth who feel less highly prepared for work are comparable, regardless of reading ability.

Youth with very high job preparedness and high reading ability worked more months in the year and had higher earnings on average than youth who felt less highly prepared. We examined hourly wages and found no significant differences across groups (analyses not shown). Median wage rates were \$7 per hour for all youth, suggesting the higher monthly earnings reflect more time working rather than higher wages on average.

Although the differences do not reach statistical significance, we see that youth with high job preparedness and low reading ability worked a comparable number of months as youth with less job preparedness and high reading ability. Yet, youth with high job preparedness and low reading ability appear to have earned more each month on average (\$552 com-

Figure 3. Average Monthly Earnings at Age 19, by Job Preparedness and Reading Ability at Age 17



Source: Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs Life Skills Training program, 2007–2008.

pared to \$427). This could reflect differences in the number of hours youth worked per week.

Sense of Job Preparedness and College Enrollment

Youth with a college education tend to fare better in the workforce than those without. As a result, the Multi-Site Evaluation wanted to know the relationship between sense of job preparedness and postsecondary education among youth in the sample. Figure 4 shows the distribution of college enrollment (which includes both two- and four-year colleges) by preparedness and reading category (see appendix).

- Youth with a very high sense of job preparedness and high reading ability are significantly more likely to be both working and in college than all other youth.
- Youth with a very high sense of job preparedness and high reading ability are

significantly less likely to be neither working nor in college than youth with a lower sense of preparedness, regardless of reading ability.

- Youth with a very high sense of job preparedness and low reading ability are significantly more likely to be both working and in college than youth with similarly low reading ability but a lower sense of preparedness (see appendix).
- Youth with a very high sense of job preparedness and low reading ability are significantly less likely to be neither working nor in college than youth with similarly low reading ability but a lower sense of preparedness.

A very high sense of job preparedness is associated with connection to both school and work. Youth with a very high sense of job preparedness in combination with high

reading ability are more likely than their peers who feel less highly prepared to be both in school and working. Similarly, youth with a very high sense of job preparedness and low reading ability are more likely to work while in school than youth who feel less highly prepared for work and have low reading ability. There were no significant differences across groups in the percentage of youth only working or in college only.

Do Youth Have an Accurate Sense of Preparedness for Work?

Based on the tables and figures presented above, the youth's self-assessed job prepared-

ness appears to have some validity. Those who feel very highly prepared to find, get, and keep a job at age 17 were more likely to be working at age 19 than those who felt less highly prepared.⁴

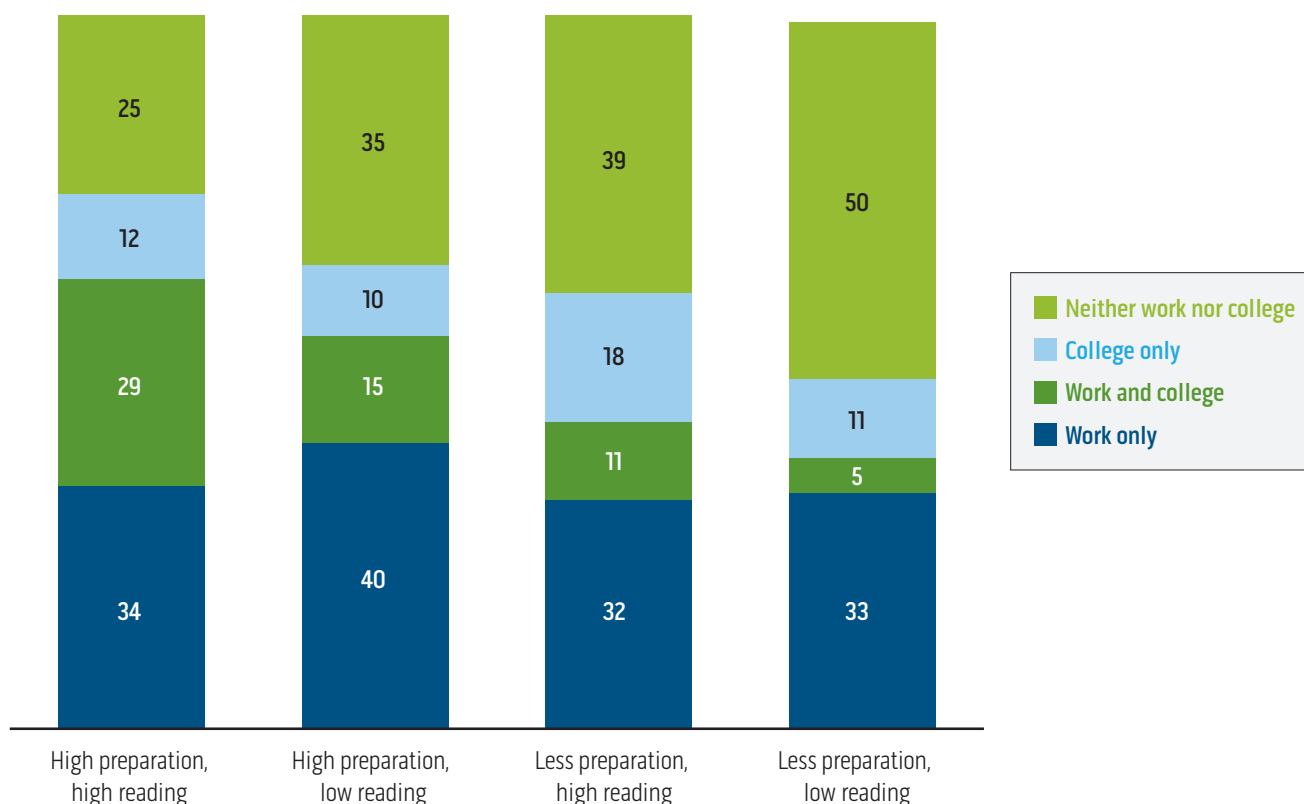
High reading ability appears to advantage youth who also feel very highly prepared for work. Youth with a very high sense of job preparedness and high reading ability at age 17 fared better on each employment measure at age 19. More youth in this category were currently working, had worked in the past year, and had worked longer in the past year than their peers in other categories. They also had higher average monthly earnings.

Just as youth with a high sense of preparedness and high reading ability tended to fare better than their peers, youth who reported feeling less highly prepared and who had lower reading ability tended to fare worse. A higher percentage of youth in this category were neither working nor employed at age 19.

National Comparisons on Work

Another way to think about whether youth job-preparedness self-assessments are accurate is to compare their outcomes to a national sample. Youth in foster care with very high job preparedness and high reading ability showed comparable employment and college

Figure 4. College Enrollment and Work Status at Age 19, by Job Preparedness and Reading Ability at Age 17 (percent)



Source: Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs Life Skills Training program, 2007–2008.

Notes: Includes two-year and four-year colleges. Youth who were not enrolled in college but were enrolled in high school and not working (n=39) are counted as neither working nor attending college. Those who were enrolled in high school and working are counted as working only.

enrollment as youth nationally, based on comparisons to a similarly aged cohort from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997. Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of youth in foster care with high job preparedness and high reading ability were employed at age 19 compared to 65 percent of 19-year-olds nationally. Similarly, 87 percent of 19-year-old youth in foster care with high job preparedness and high reading ability had worked in the past year compared to 91 percent of youth nationally between their 18th and 19th birthdays (Pergamit and Johnson 2009). The youth also have similar rates of college enrollment, both 41 percent at age 19. However, 74 percent of the young adults currently and formerly in foster care who are in college are in two-year institutions compared to only 31 percent of youth in college nationally (69 percent attend four-year institutions). This suggests future earnings and employment for young adults formerly in foster care may lag behind youth nationally.

Although the similarities to a national sample are striking, the young adults currently and formerly in foster care who appear to be faring the best are only faring as well as the national average. By extension, most youth formerly in foster care are faring well below average with respect to employment and postsecondary education, as prior research has shown.

Discussion and Implications

A high sense of job preparedness predicts more employment and college enrollment among young adults currently and formerly in foster care, but the relationship should be interpreted cautiously:

Actual preparedness rather than sense of preparedness is what matters. The relationships we highlight between sense of job preparedness and later employment are correlated. The analyses do not test whether or indicate that a high sense of preparedness increases employment. They show that youth who feel highly prepared for work at age 17 are also more

likely to be working at age 19 than youth who feel less prepared. However, they do not show what made the youth feel more prepared. Programs and caregivers should help youth become more competent at finding, getting, and keeping a job, which should in turn increase their sense of preparedness. Training that increases one's sense of preparedness without increasing relevant job skills may not produce better employment outcomes.

Reading ability paired with a high sense of job preparedness is associated with better outcomes. Programs preparing youth for adulthood should be attentive to reading and other indicators of ability, in addition to their employment preparation. From a practice standpoint, targeted interventions may be effective. It is worthwhile to ask youth how prepared they feel and to gauge reading capacity, which may help predict who fares better or worse. Youth who report feeling highly prepared are in fact best prepared when they are reading at least at the high school level. Efforts should be made to improve job skills for all youth, particularly those who do not feel *very prepared* to find, get, and keep a job. Those who do not feel prepared and have low reading ability will need extra supports.

In fact, high reading ability alone (without a high sense of job preparedness) does not predict better employment outcomes. Youth with high reading ability but less job preparedness worked less than youth with high reading ability and a high sense of job preparedness. Also, they were not significantly more likely to be in "college only" than other youth, and were less likely to be enrolled in college while working, than youth with high reading ability and a high sense of job preparedness. High reading ability alone does not predict greater employment at age 19; it is most beneficial for youth with a high sense of job preparedness.

Although a high sense of preparedness helps, youth in foster care need continued support as they become adults. While the findings of this

study may be encouraging, they also underscore the reality that youth still need substantial support as they become adults. Although youth in foster care with a high sense of job preparedness and high reading ability may fare somewhat better than their peers, only 18 percent of the study youth fell into this group and a sizeable share were neither working nor in college as they entered adulthood. One in four youth who felt highly prepared for work and had high reading ability were neither in school nor working at age 19 (see the appendix). This is a smaller portion than the 50 percent in the *less highly prepared and low reading ability* group who were neither working nor in college, but it is still a substantial number. So, too, is the percentage of time in the past year that youth were not working. Youth with a high sense of preparedness and high reading ability were not working during approximately 40 percent of the past year. The proportion is even higher for youth with less preparedness and low reading ability. On average, they were not working during approximately 60 percent of the past year.

Youth in foster care are able to gauge their preparedness to some degree, and their assessments should be taken seriously in designing the services they need. Future research should explore their perceptions further. For example, what makes some youth feel less highly prepared for work, and how are their experiences different from those who feel more prepared? What is the connection between a youth's sense of job preparedness and actual job preparedness? That is, what shapes actual job preparedness and what can increase a youth's preparation before he or she leaves foster care? While strengthening a youth's preparation is one goal, the findings also demonstrate that youth need continual support around employment, even if they feel highly prepared. ■

Table A.1. Employment and College Enrollment at Age 19

	High preparation, high reading (n=76)	High preparation, low reading (n=93)	Less preparation, high reading (n=93)	Less preparation, low reading (n=147)
Employment (%)				
Currently employed ^{b, c, d}	63	55	43	39
Ever employed in past year ^{b, c, d}	87	78	73	67
Portion of year employed ^{a, b, c, d}	61	49	47	39
Average monthly earnings (\$) ^{b, c}	545 (n=66)	514 (n=69)	398 (n=76)	465 (n=101)
College enrollment (%)				
Two-year college ^{a, c}	30	18	20	12
Four-year college ^c	11	6	8	3
Work only (%)	34	40	32	33
College only (two- or four-year) (%)	12	10	18	11
Work and college (%) ^{a, b, c, d}	29	10	11	5
Neither work nor college (%) ^{b, c, d}	25	10	39	50

Source: Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs Life Skills Training program, 2007–2008.

a. High sense of preparedness and high reading ability significantly different than high preparedness and low reading ($p < .10$).

b. High preparedness and high reading significantly different than less preparedness and high reading ($p < .10$).

c. High preparedness and high reading significantly different than less preparedness and low reading ($p < .10$).

d. High preparedness and low reading significantly different than less preparedness and low reading ($p < .10$).

Notes

1. Although the original sample included 411 youth, the final sample for the current analyses includes 406 youth who had complete information on a standardized reading ability test (the Woodcock-Johnson Letter-Word Identification Test).
2. The NLSY97 is a nationally representative cohort of youth born between 1980 and 1984 who were interviewed beginning in 1997 when they were 12–17 years old. The youth were 19 years old in 1999–2004. This makes them a few years older than youth who participated in the LST program, who were 19 in 2005–2006. (<http://www.bls.gov/nls/nlsy97.htm>, accessed November 13, 2012).
3. Youth reported the start and end dates for each job held in the past year. We totaled the average number of weeks worked for youth in each group, and calculated the percentage of time they worked in the year.
4. This holds true even among youth who were not working at age 17 (analyses not shown).

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