

From Care to Confinement: Assessing AB12 and Chafee ETV's Impact on California's Foster

Care-to-Prison Pipeline

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## **Section 1: Introduction**

As of September 30, 2021, approximately 392,000 children were in foster care in the United States, according to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021). In California, on any given day, there are over 60,000 children in the foster care system (California Department of Social Services, 2021). In California, former foster youth face a significantly higher risk of incarceration compared to their peers who were not in foster care. This disproportionate involvement with the criminal justice system is a direct consequence of systemic gaps in support during their transition to adulthood. While the foster care system aims to provide care and protection, many youth "age out" of the system without the skills or resources necessary to navigate life independently. This lack of preparation, coupled with challenges like homelessness, unemployment, and untreated trauma, makes former foster youth vulnerable to involvement with the criminal justice system (Courtney & Hook, 2017). Studies have shown that these youth are more likely to experience legal trouble, primarily due to a lack of stable housing, insufficient mental health support, and an abrupt, unprepared transition to adulthood (Fine, 2019). In California, these factors compound, creating a persistent cycle of disadvantage that increases the likelihood of incarceration among this population.

In California, former foster youth face a disproportionate risk of involvement in the criminal justice system, with many encountering incarceration as they transition to adulthood. The state's foster care system, while designed to protect and support vulnerable youth, often fails to provide the comprehensive and continuous support needed to help these individuals navigate adulthood successfully. According to research, former foster youth are significantly more likely

to become involved in the justice system compared to their peers, due in part to gaps in services such as housing, education, and mental health care (Courtney et al., 2001). These systemic shortcomings are exacerbated by the abrupt transition out of the foster care system, which typically occurs at age 18 or 21, depending on the youth's specific circumstances (Buehler et al., 2003). Policies like California's Extended Foster Care (AB12) have aimed to extend support, but many youth still face barriers that hinder their successful integration into society, including insufficient job training, unstable housing, and mental health challenges (Dewitt & Llorente, 2018).

The problem of incarceration among former foster youth is rooted in several factors, most notably the lack of consistent and adequate support as they transition to adulthood. Key elements such as the lack of stable housing, limited mental health support, and insufficient transition planning play significant roles in the heightened risk of incarceration for this group (Vera Institute of Justice, 2018). Moreover, discretionary decision-making within the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems often fails to account for the unique challenges faced by former foster youth, leading to punitive rather than rehabilitative measures. Studies have shown that administrative practices, such as the lack of coordination between child welfare and juvenile justice systems, also contribute to this issue (Crampton et al., 2009).

The issue of high incarceration rates among former foster youth is critically important for policymakers, communities, and the foster youth population, as it has far-reaching implications for both individuals and society. For policymakers, addressing the overrepresentation of former foster youth in the criminal justice system is essential for ensuring a more equitable and effective child welfare system. Studies show that former foster youth are more likely to become involved

in the justice system due to factors such as a lack of stable housing, mental health issues, and insufficient preparation for adulthood (Chau, 2018; Courtney et al., 2011). By focusing on reforms that provide continued support for this vulnerable group, policymakers can help break the cycle of disadvantage that perpetuates involvement with the justice system and improve outcomes for youth aging out of care.

From the perspective of communities, this issue is significant because it highlights broader concerns about social inequality, youth vulnerability, and the role of social systems in supporting at-risk populations. Communities often bear the costs associated with high incarceration rates, including the strain on local jails and prisons, as well as the social and economic costs of recidivism. Incarceration disrupts families, isolates individuals from supportive networks, and exacerbates the challenges of reintegration, creating a cycle that is difficult to break (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Communities that fail to support their foster youth through the critical transition to adulthood see long-term impacts, such as increased poverty, unemployment, and homelessness, which all contribute to systemic social instability (Greeson et al., 2014). Addressing the root causes of incarceration for former foster youth not only benefits the individuals involved but also strengthens community cohesion and reduces the broader social impact of criminal justice system involvement.

The foster youth population is the primary group affected by the policies surrounding their transition to adulthood. Without proper support systems in place, the lives of these young adults are at risk of being irreparably damaged. If these policy gaps are not addressed, foster youth are more likely to become entangled in the criminal justice system (Courtney et al., 2007). Their future prospects hinge on the effectiveness of state-level policies and interventions, making

them the most critical stakeholders in this issue. Failure to implement necessary reforms will not only jeopardize their ability to thrive but will perpetuate cycles of systemic disadvantage, leading to lasting consequences for their future (Wiebush et al., 2005). Therefore, the need for comprehensive and effective policies that prioritize their well-being is urgent.

The incarceration of former foster youth has significant social and economic costs. For instance, incarceration places a heavy burden on the criminal justice system, which is already overburdened. The financial costs of incarcerating young adults—combined with the loss of productivity and potential—can strain government resources and hinder economic growth (Tate et al., 2018). Furthermore, the long-term impact of criminal records can create barriers to employment, education, and housing, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage that affect both the individual and the economic growth of their community. By addressing the root causes of incarceration among former foster youth, society can reduce these costs, promote social justice, and ensure that all youth have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

This paper aims to critically analyze state-level policies and administrative practices in California, focusing on their effects on the likelihood of incarceration among adult former foster youth. The analysis will explore existing policies, such as Extended Foster Care (AB12) and the Chafee Foster Youth Education and Training Voucher Program, and examine their equitability, accessibility, and administrability in reducing recidivism. After analyzing these programs, this paper will identify the most feasible and effective approach to preventing foster youth from entering the justice system. The study will draw on data from multiple reports and research on foster youth, juvenile justice, and recidivism in California to assess the strengths and limitations of existing policies. By highlighting the gaps in current policies and administrative practices, this

paper will offer targeted policy recommendations designed to reduce incarceration rates among former foster youth. These recommendations aim not only to lower recidivism amongst foster youth but also to promote more stable, equitable, and prosperous communities.

## **Section 2: Literature Review**

The intersection of foster care experiences and incarceration represents a critical and complex issue that demands urgent attention, as former foster youth are disproportionately represented within the criminal justice system. Research shows this overrepresentation is connected to early-life adversities such as trauma, abuse, neglect, and instability, which directly impact a child's socioemotional development and behavioral outcomes. The question central to this literature review is: How do early-life adversities experienced by foster youth influence their likelihood of involvement in the criminal justice system in adulthood? Addressing this question is vital for understanding the complex pathways that lead former foster youth into the justice system, as well as for identifying effective interventions to reduce these risks. The importance of this research lies in its potential to uncover the underlying factors—such as placement instability, untreated trauma, and lack of adequate social support—that contribute to this overrepresentation. By synthesizing existing literature, this review aims to fill gaps in current knowledge, offering insights into how early interventions, system reforms, and more comprehensive support structures can disrupt the cycle of incarceration.

### ***Early-Life Adversities and Socioemotional Impact***

Several factors contribute to the disproportionate representation of former foster youth in the criminal justice system. The experiences of trauma, neglect, abuse, and instability during their time in foster care significantly impact their socioemotional well-being and behavioral outcomes. Research indicates that a significant proportion of incarcerated individuals have a history of



involvement with the child welfare system, highlighting the correlation between early-life adversities and criminal behavior (Turney & Wildeman, 2013). Placement instability further exacerbates this issue, with frequent placement changes contributing to behavioral problems and juvenile delinquency. Ryan and Testa (2005) emphasize that improving stability in foster placements is critical to preventing long-term negative outcomes.

### *Challenges During Transition to Adulthood*

The transition out of foster care poses significant challenges for former foster youth, including homelessness, unemployment, substance abuse, and mental health disorders. These issues increase their vulnerability to engaging in delinquent behaviors and, consequently, their risk of incarceration (Courtney et al., 2004). The developmental phase of emerging adulthood is particularly critical. Berzin, Singer, and Hokanson (2014) argue that without consistent guidance and support during this formative period, former foster youth face heightened risks of criminal justice involvement. The lack of a stable support system during this phase calls for the implementation of mentorship and transitional services to mitigate these risks.

The transition to adulthood for foster youth is a particularly challenging and critical period in their lives. Unlike their peers who grow up in stable family environments, many foster youth face the difficult reality of aging out of the foster care system without the necessary support networks in place. This transition can be a time of great uncertainty, marked by the abrupt shift from a structured care system to independence, often without the skills, resources, or emotional foundation needed to navigate adulthood successfully.

One of the key challenges during this transition is the lack of preparation for independent living. Foster youth often leave the system at 18, or 21 under certain conditions, but many are not adequately equipped to manage adult responsibilities such as maintaining stable housing,

securing employment, or managing their finances. Without access to these vital resources, many foster youth experience homelessness, unemployment, and poor mental health, all of which increase their vulnerability to involvement with the criminal justice system (Courtney et al., 2007).

California's Extended Foster Care (AB12), implemented in 2012, was specifically designed to address some of these challenges by extending foster care support to age 21 for eligible youth, offering them continued housing, educational, and financial support. This law was a significant step in acknowledging that many foster youth require additional time and resources to successfully transition into adulthood. However, despite these efforts, gaps remain in terms of the breadth and consistency of support, with some youth falling through the cracks due to insufficient resources or lack of adequate programming. The transitional period is particularly difficult for youth who lack stable family relationships or strong mentorship, which most non-foster youth can rely on. Foster youth, who may have faced abuse, neglect, or instability in their homes, often do not have the social capital needed to navigate the complex landscape of adult responsibilities. Research has shown that these youth face higher rates of homelessness and lower rates of educational and employment success, compounding the challenges of their transition (Wiebush et al., 2005).

Further, while AB12 has helped reduce some of the negative outcomes related to aging out of care, it does not automatically guarantee success. To ensure that foster youth are adequately prepared for adulthood, comprehensive support systems that go beyond housing and job training are necessary. These include mental health services, addiction treatment, and financial literacy education, which would help foster youth cope with past trauma and develop the resilience needed to thrive independently.

Ultimately, the transition to adulthood is a high-stakes moment for foster youth, where the right interventions can make the difference between success and failure. While policies like AB12 represent critical steps forward, they must be fully implemented with a focus on individualized support, addressing the full range of challenges that foster youth face as they move into adulthood. Failure to do so not only jeopardizes the well-being of these young adults but also contributes to broader social problems such as homelessness, unemployment, and incarceration (Courtney et al., 2007).

### *Systemic Failures in Child Welfare and Justice Systems*

The overrepresentation of former foster youth in the criminal justice system underscores systemic failures within both the child welfare and justice systems. Limited access to education, healthcare, stable housing, and employment opportunities perpetuate cycles of poverty and criminality among this population. Pecora et al. (2006) found that inadequate educational attainment significantly correlates with vulnerability to incarceration, highlighting the necessity of investment in education and job training programs. Moreover, punitive approaches in the justice system often fail to address the underlying traumas and unmet needs of this population, leading to recidivism and prolonged involvement in the justice system (Hacker & Marti, 2012).

A direct link between childhood maltreatment and juvenile incarceration highlight the critical role of early interventions within the child welfare system in disrupting this damaging trajectory. Research underscores the importance of addressing the underlying factors contributing to juvenile delinquency, such as abuse, neglect, and placement instability, before they escalate into more serious legal involvement (Jonson-Reid and Barth, 2000). Building on this, Cusick, Havlicek, and Courtney (2012) further explore the systemic factors that contribute to the foster

care-to-incarceration pipeline, identifying poverty, untreated trauma, and lack of adequate support as key drivers. They emphasize the need for integrated, collaborative approaches between the child welfare and criminal justice systems to effectively tackle these overlapping risk factors. Such collaboration is essential not only to prevent initial involvement in the justice system but also to provide long-term support that can break the cycle of reoffending. By addressing these systemic issues comprehensively, there is a greater potential to reduce the high rates of incarceration among former foster youth and promote their successful transition into adulthood.

Building on the existing body of research, several studies have highlighted the role of early trauma in shaping the likelihood of later involvement with the criminal justice system. Specifically, traumatic experiences such as physical and emotional abuse, neglect, and the instability of multiple foster care placements contribute to heightened levels of aggression, distrust, and poor impulse control—factors that increase the risk of delinquency and criminal behavior (Widom, 2000; Green et al., 2015). These adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) often result in untreated mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which further complicate the transition to adulthood and increase susceptibility to criminal activity (Ford et al., 2013). Additionally, studies have explored the impact of systemic issues such as inadequate educational support, lack of stable housing, and limited access to vocational training on the outcomes for former foster youth. Pecora et al. (2006) emphasize that fostering resilience through educational attainment and employment opportunities can act as protective factors against justice system involvement. However, many former foster youth face barriers in accessing these resources, exacerbating their vulnerability to legal issues. As a result, some scholars argue that the child welfare system's failure to provide

long-term support and stability, coupled with a lack of coordinated services between child welfare and juvenile justice systems, contributes to the perpetuation of cycles of trauma, criminality, and incarceration (Cusick et al., 2012). Understanding the depth of these interconnected challenges is essential for informing policy reforms that can better address the needs of this population.

### *AB12 and Chafee ETV as Comprehensive Diversion Strategies*

California's AB12 (Extended Foster Care) and the Chafee Foster Youth Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Program represent key policies designed to address the unique challenges faced by foster youth, particularly in terms of transitioning to adulthood. Both programs play significant roles in reducing the likelihood of foster youth involvement with the criminal justice system by providing essential support during critical life stages. As diversion programs, AB12 and Chafee ETV focus on preventing foster youth from falling into the criminal justice system by providing alternative opportunities for education, housing, and career development. By directly addressing the underlying issues that often lead foster youth into incarceration, these programs offer pathways to stability and success.

### *AB12 as a Diversion Program*

The AB12 legislation, passed in 2010 and implemented in 2012, allows youth in foster care to remain in care until the age of 21 if they meet certain eligibility requirements, such as attending school, working, or participating in a job training program (California Department of Social Services, 2020). AB12 helps foster youth avoid the pitfalls of aging out of the system, which is often associated with higher rates of homelessness, unemployment, and contact with the

criminal justice system. Before the implementation of AB12, foster youth were at risk of becoming homeless at 18, leading to significant negative outcomes, including higher rates of recidivism.

As a diversion program, AB12 provides a critical buffer against the dangers of early transition to adulthood without support. Foster youth who remain in the system longer can access essential services, such as housing assistance, mental health counseling, and vocational training, that are key to preventing criminal justice involvement (Courtney et al., 2011). By offering a more gradual transition into adulthood with continued oversight and resources, AB12 decreases the likelihood of foster youth engaging in criminal activities due to the absence of stability and opportunities. Research on AB12 has shown that youth who participate in extended foster care have better outcomes in terms of education, employment, and mental health compared to those who age out at 18 (Roby et al., 2015).

#### *Chafee Foster Youth Education and Training Voucher Program*

The Chafee Foster Youth Education and Training Voucher Program (Chafee ETV) provides up to \$5,000 per year in educational and vocational support for foster youth who are between the ages of 16 and 23 and are pursuing postsecondary education or training (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). The program is designed to help foster youth obtain the skills and credentials necessary to succeed in the workforce, addressing one of the primary barriers to success for youth who have experienced foster care: the lack of access to higher education and career training. As a diversion program, Chafee ETV offers a critical resource for youth who might otherwise be at risk of incarceration due to a lack of educational and employment opportunities. By encouraging and enabling foster youth to pursue higher

education or vocational training, the program helps prevent youth from engaging in criminal activities as a means of survival or out of desperation. A study by McMillen et al. (2011) found that foster youth who were able to access higher education were less likely to experience homelessness or become involved in the criminal justice system compared to their peers who did not have access to such opportunities.

The Chafee ETV program is particularly effective in its role as a diversion program by targeting both the educational and financial barriers that can push foster youth toward criminal justice involvement. By providing financial support for education, Chafee ETV enables youth to pursue career pathways that are sustainable and fulfilling, reducing the likelihood that they will turn to illegal means to support themselves. The program also offers mentorship and guidance, which helps foster youth develop the social and emotional skills needed to succeed in adulthood, further decreasing the risk of incarceration (Courtney et al., 2011).

### *Integration of AB12 and Chafee ETV as Comprehensive Diversion Strategies*

Both AB12 and Chafee ETV work together to provide a comprehensive approach to preventing foster youth from entering the criminal justice system. While AB12 extends foster care until age 21 and offers housing, education, and employment support, the Chafee ETV program specifically focuses on education and training as a means of long-term empowerment. Together, these programs create a supportive framework that helps foster youth transition from care to adulthood with the tools necessary for success, thereby minimizing their likelihood of criminal involvement.

### **Section 3: Method**

*(See Appendix 1 and 2 for Qualitative CAM Analysis)*

This study employs a qualitative Criteria-Alternatives Matrix (CAM) analysis to evaluate two state-level programs—California's Extended Foster Care (AB12) and the Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Program—based on three implementation dimensions: accessibility, equitability, and administrability. This framework was selected to explore how each program functions in practice and how they relate to broader systemic concerns, particularly the foster care-to-prison pipeline. The pipeline refers to the observed pattern in which many former foster youth become involved in the criminal justice system as they transition to adulthood, often shaped by early trauma, disrupted placements, and limited transitional support (Courtney & Hook, 2017; Chau, 2018). By assessing each policy according to these dimensions, the CAM allows for a structured interpretation of how each program may serve as a point of intervention within this systemic trajectory.

Accessibility was assessed by examining how readily former foster youth can engage with and benefit from each program. AB12 was found to be accessible to youth who meet certain eligibility criteria—such as participation in education, employment, or training—offering continued care until age 21 (California Department of Social Services, 2020). This structure enables access to a wide range of support services during a critical life stage. Chafee ETV, similarly, provides access to up to \$5,000 annually in financial assistance for eligible youth pursuing postsecondary education or training (Courtney et al., 2004). Its connection to educational institutions allows for relatively streamlined entry for youth already engaged in these systems, highlighting its role as an educational access point for foster youth. Both programs contribute to accessibility through different avenues—AB12 by extending transitional care, and Chafee by supporting academic and vocational advancement.



Equitability was considered in terms of how each program serves diverse populations within the foster youth demographic, including those with varied educational backgrounds, housing situations, and personal histories. AB12 supports a broad cross-section of youth through its emphasis on sustained engagement in productive activities and its provision of housing and case management services (Courtney & Hook, 2017). Its design reflects attention to a range of needs that may emerge in early adulthood, making it responsive to the multifaceted experiences of youth exiting care. Chafee ETV is tailored toward youth seeking postsecondary education, addressing specific financial barriers to academic progression. Both programs provide targeted resources that can promote more equitable outcomes depending on the youth's trajectory, highlighting different approaches to supporting self-sufficiency and reducing justice system involvement.

Administrability was examined through the lens of program design, oversight, and delivery mechanisms. AB12 involves coordination between child welfare agencies, courts, service providers, and housing programs, reflecting an integrated approach to case management and long-term support (California Department of Social Services, 2020). This multi-agency model is designed to reflect the complexity of foster youth experiences and provide a framework for individualized transition plans. Chafee ETV is administered through existing financial aid systems and postsecondary institutions, allowing for straightforward disbursement and alignment with broader educational infrastructures (Courtney et al., 2004; Pecora et al., 2006). Each program's administrative structure supports its core objectives: AB12 by sustaining broader life supports and oversight, and Chafee ETV by reinforcing access to educational and career-building resources.

The inclusion of the foster care-to-prison pipeline as a conceptual backdrop adds depth to the interpretation of the CAM results. Both AB12 and Chafee ETV function as diversionary supports that align with different phases of the transition to adulthood. AB12 supports housing stability, workforce engagement, and continued supervision—factors known to reduce risks associated with homelessness and legal system involvement (Greeson et al., 2014; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009). Chafee ETV promotes educational attainment, which is closely linked to long-term reductions in justice system contact (Pecora et al., 2006). By mapping these programs onto the dimensions of accessibility, equitability, and administrability, the CAM analysis clarifies how each policy contributes to interrupting the foster care-to-prison pipeline through distinct, complementary mechanisms.

#### **Section 4: Findings**

When compared through the lens of accessibility, both AB12 and the Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program demonstrate distinct avenues for supporting former foster youth during their transition to adulthood. AB12 offers extended foster care benefits until the age of 21 for those engaged in work, education, or training, creating continued access to stable housing, supportive adults, and public services (California Department of Social Services, 2020). This extended access to foundational life supports during the early years of adulthood makes AB12 a broad-based intervention. In contrast, Chafee ETV centers its accessibility on educational engagement, providing financial aid to youth between 16 and 23 who pursue postsecondary education or vocational training (Courtney et al., 2004). While AB12 accommodates a range of transitional pathways, Chafee ETV is more specifically accessible to youth already situated in academic or training environments. Both strategies provide meaningful

access, yet serve different subsets of the foster youth population, making them complementary in scope.

In terms of equitability, each program addresses different facets of what it means to support youth with diverse needs and experiences. AB12 incorporates flexibility by allowing various qualifying activities—such as school attendance, job training, or employment—to maintain eligibility, thereby accommodating youth with different strengths, challenges, and goals (Courtney & Hook, 2017). This flexibility supports a more inclusive range of circumstances, especially for those who may not immediately enter postsecondary pathways. Chafee ETV, while focused on youth pursuing education, plays a crucial role in promoting equitable outcomes for those who may otherwise be excluded from higher education due to financial barriers (Pecora et al., 2006). The program's design helps level the playing field for foster youth seeking academic advancement, addressing a key determinant in long-term well-being and justice system avoidance. Taken together, AB12 and Chafee ETV extend equitable support through different lenses—AB12 through inclusive eligibility criteria and transitional stability, and Chafee ETV through targeted academic investment.

Administrability reveals further contrast between the programs, largely shaped by their differing structures and intended outcomes. AB12 involves a multi-agency coordination model that spans child welfare services, courts, and community-based providers. This interconnected approach enables personalized transition planning and ongoing case management (California Department of Social Services, 2020). Its administrability reflects the need for comprehensive, real-time support for youth navigating complex life domains. In comparison, Chafee ETV integrates with existing higher education financial aid systems, simplifying administration and aligning with institutional norms that are familiar to both providers and youth (Courtney et al.,

2004). This streamlined structure supports efficient disbursement of funds and clarity in eligibility verification. Administratively, AB12's case-managed framework supports ongoing oversight and developmental planning, while Chafee ETV's integration into educational systems facilitates more autonomous, goal-specific support.

Viewed together, AB12 and Chafee ETV offer different, yet mutually reinforcing approaches to disrupting the foster care-to-prison pipeline. AB12 focuses on transitional stability by extending care and providing wraparound services that address immediate risks such as homelessness and disconnection, both of which are associated with criminal justice involvement (Greeson et al., 2014; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009). Chafee ETV, on the other hand, addresses longer-term protective factors by supporting educational and vocational attainment, reducing vulnerability to future system contact through the development of skills, credentials, and economic independence (Pecora et al., 2006).

### **Section 5: Discussion and Policy Recommendations**

The CAM analysis comparing AB12 and the Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program reveals that while both serve vital roles in supporting foster youth, AB12 offers a broader, more adaptable framework that more directly addresses the conditions contributing to the foster care-to-prison pipeline. AB12 demonstrates high accessibility by allowing youth to remain in care beyond age 18 through multiple qualifying pathways—including education, employment, or participation in a transitional program (California Department of Social Services, 2020). This flexibility accommodates the diverse experiences of foster youth and mitigates one of the most significant risk factors for incarceration: the sudden loss of support systems at the legal age of majority (Courtney & Hook, 2017; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009). Its case management structure further reinforces equitability by providing individualized oversight

and connections to essential services such as housing, mental health care, and vocational training.

While Chafee ETV is a critical tool for promoting long-term educational and economic stability, its eligibility requirements tied to postsecondary enrollment and narrower age window make it less accessible to youth who may not be immediately positioned to pursue higher education upon exiting care (Courtney et al., 2004). This program effectively enhances outcomes for a subset of the foster youth population, but does not offer the same immediate stabilizing functions as AB12 during the high-risk transition period. Therefore, this analysis recommends a policy focus on strengthening and expanding AB12 statewide, with attention to standardizing its administration across counties, investing in training for social workers and service providers, and reducing bureaucratic barriers that may prevent eligible youth from accessing extended care.

In addition to these practical reforms, this recommendation carries broader implications for disrupting the systemic cycle that places former foster youth at disproportionate risk of incarceration. The foster care-to-prison pipeline is not the result of individual failure but of institutional neglect—marked by under-resourced transitions, fragmented support systems, and the absence of sustained adult guidance (Fine, 2019; Courtney & Hook, 2017). Investing in AB12 acknowledges the developmental reality that foster youth require more time and structured support to achieve stability (Courtney et al., 2004; California Department of Social Services, 2020). More importantly, it reframes the state's role: not merely as a temporary guardian, but as a long-term partner in positive youth development (Greeson et al., 2014).

This recommendation supports a shift in policy priorities—from reactive justice interventions to proactive, equity-centered social supports. By bolstering AB12 and embedding its framework within a broader continuum of care that includes educational access programs like

Chafee ETV, California can move closer to breaking the intergenerational cycles of incarceration, homelessness, and poverty that continue to affect former foster youth (Chau, 2018; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009). The expansion of such programs is not only a moral imperative but a strategic investment in public safety, community health, and social justice (Cusick, Havlicek, & Courtney, 2012; Turney & Wildeman, 2013).

### **Section 6: Conclusion**

The intersection of the foster care and criminal justice systems reveals persistent systemic failures that have long-term consequences for youth aging out of care in California. As this paper has demonstrated, the transition from foster care to adulthood is a high-risk period marked by instability, which, if not adequately supported, can lead to homelessness, unemployment, mental health crises, and eventual justice system involvement (Courtney & Hook, 2017; Fine, 2019). This well-documented foster care-to-prison pipeline is not the result of individual failings but of systemic gaps in services and coordination across agencies.

Using a qualitative Criteria Alternative Matrix (CAM) grounded in accessibility, equitability, and administrability, this paper evaluated two key California support programs: Extended Foster Care (AB12) and the Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program. AB12 stands out for its ability to meet the immediate developmental and material needs of former foster youth. Its flexible eligibility, case management continuity, and housing supports significantly contribute to reducing risk factors for incarceration. However, AB12's implementation remains inconsistent across counties, and some youth face barriers to full participation due to bureaucratic hurdles or a lack of awareness (California Department of Social Services, 2020).

The Chafee ETV program, while crucial in supporting long-term educational and economic outcomes, remains less accessible due to academic eligibility requirements and limited outreach. Its benefits are often most accessible to youth who are already stable and capable of navigating complex financial aid systems—conditions that many former foster youth have not yet attained. As such, while Chafee is valuable, its impact is narrower and more conditional than that of AB12.

This analysis demonstrates that AB12 is better positioned to disrupt the foster care-to-prison pipeline by addressing the foundational needs that increase vulnerability to justice system involvement. As such, this paper recommends further investment in AB12's infrastructure, including increased funding for county-level implementation, better interagency coordination, and expansion of trauma-informed support services. Simultaneously, the Chafee ETV program should be preserved and strengthened as a complementary policy—one that supports long-term upward mobility once a youth's immediate needs are stabilized through programs like AB12.

Addressing incarceration among former foster youth requires more than reactive support; it requires a preventive framework that begins at the point of emancipation. By prioritizing comprehensive, equitable, and accessible services, California can move beyond crisis intervention and begin to dismantle the structural pipeline that too often leads foster youth from care into confinement.

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## Appendix

### *Appendix 1*

Criteria Alternative	(A) Equity	(B) Accessibility	(C) Administrability
AB12	Moderate	Moderate to Low	Moderate
Chafee ETV	Moderate	Moderate to Low	Moderate

### *Appendix 2*

Program	Accessibility(20) How easily can the program be accessed by foster youth?	Equity(50) How much of the program's effort goes towards decreasing foster youth's likelihood for being incarcerated?	Administrability (30) How easily are the program's services and benefits delivered to the clients?	Total Score
<b>AB12</b>	Rating = 3.2 Weight = .20 Total = .64	Rating = 3.5 Weight = .50 Total = 1.75	Rating = 3.5 Weight = .30 Total = 1.05	<b>3.44</b>

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<b>Chafee ETV</b>	Rating = 2.5 Weight = .20 Total = .5	Rating = 3 Weight = .50 Total = 1.5	Rating = 4 Weight = .30 Total = 1.2	<b>3.2</b>
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