

Transition Age Foster Care Youth and Homelessness



Integrated Data Report

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Acknowledgements

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Background:

This Integrated Data Report is produced by the Charlotte Urban Institute (Institute) with funding from Mecklenburg County Community Support Services (CSS). This report supports Mecklenburg County's research objectives through its cross-sector and intentional use of data to reveal populations in most need of support with housing. Data is provided by The Charlotte Regional Data Trust and its partners (Data Trust).

Definitions:

Child Protective Services Needed: Child protective services needed is an option following the conclusion of an investigation that was determined 'Substantiated' (other options include abuse and neglect). These cases often lead to the opening of a family in-home services or petitioning for custody.

Custody Episode: When the state legally takes custody of a child for a period of time.

Custody/Guardianship: This refers to a placement for a foster care child with a relative or parent who is not the parent they were removed from.

Emancipated: A youth experiencing foster care is emancipated (or aged out) when they reach the age of 18 and other types of placements, such as reunification, adoption or placed with a legal guardian, are not available.

Extended foster care: Programs that allow a young adult who is emancipated from foster care to remain in the system up to their 21st birthday to allow for stability and access to independent living services. North Carolina has offered two extended foster care programs – the Voluntary Placement Agreement (the current program) and the Contractual Agreement for Continuing Residential Support.

Homeless Management Information System (HMIS): HMIS is a federally-mandated local information technology database managed by Mecklenburg County Community Support Services. HMIS contains client-level and service-level data from over thirty local homeless services organizations regarding the provision of shelter, housing and services to individuals and families experiencing housing instability and homelessness.

Reunification: A permanent placement following a foster care episode that results in the youth returning to their family home.

Voluntary Placement Agreement (VPA): VPA is the current extended foster care program in North Carolina, which has been in place since the beginning of 2017. To be eligible, youth must have been in foster care at age 18 and be enrolled in an education program or a program or activity to remove barriers to employment, employed or have a medical condition/disability that limits employment. Young adults receive independent living services including funding for housing.

What is the purpose of the study?

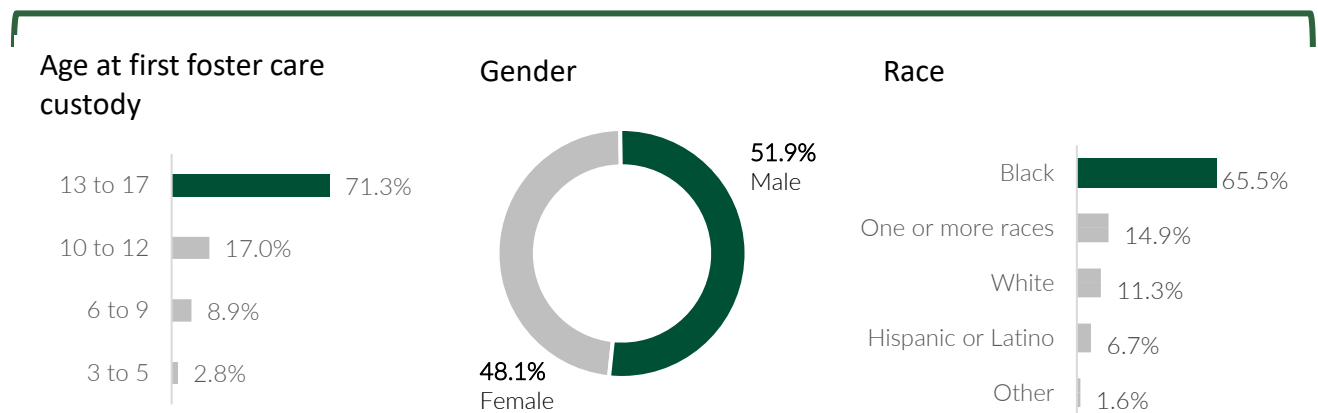
As Mecklenburg County seeks to provide housing opportunities for young adults who have exited the foster care system, there is a need to increase the understanding of who within this population is experiencing homelessness. Specifically, this report examines the demographics and child welfare experiences of older youth (ages 13 through 17) who have experienced foster care, as well as predictors of homelessness for these youth, now as young adults, following their transition out of foster care. The report focuses on older youth given the increased difficulty in finding permanent homes (i.e. through adoption) for older youth placed in foster care (Kemp & Bodonyi, 2002). The inclusion of longitudinal data provides earlier experiences with the child welfare system as well as interactions with the criminal justice and homeless systems as youth transition to young adults.

Who is in the study

This section describes the demographic characteristics of the sample, as well as their experiences with the child welfare system and criminal justice system prior to their 18th birthday. This study examines youth whose experience with the foster care system include a custody episode as an older youth (age 13 or older). Specifically, the population includes youth who exited a foster care custody episode in Mecklenburg County at ages 13-17 between January 1, 2009, and December 31, 2019. Six-hundred and seventy-three youth (673) met these criteria and are included in this study. The sample includes all custody episodes for youth in the sample from ages 0 through 21.

Demographics: Approximately two-thirds of the sample identified as Black (n=441, 65.5%). The next largest race category was youth who identified as one or more races (n=100, 14.9%). A little over half of the youth were male (n=349, 51.9%), and the vast majority were age 13 or older at the time of their first custody (n=477, 71.2%).¹ See Figure 1.

Figure 1: 673 youth
ages 13 to 17 who exited foster care between
1/1/2009 and 12/31/20



¹ Data includes all custody episodes starting with Jan 1, 2000.

Child welfare & foster care experiences: In terms of interactions with the foster care system, approximately 9% (n=64, 9.5%) of youth in the sample had two or more custody episodes before age 18 (excludes custody episodes that are part of extended foster care) (Figure 2). Almost 12% (n=80) of the youth with a custody episode had an investigation with the child welfare system that resulted in a finding of physical or sexual abuse. The two main reasons youth were removed from their home for their first custody episode were neglect (n=168, 33.7%) and child protective services needed (this is an option when an investigation was found to be substantiated that often leads to the opening of in home family services or a custody petition) (n=168, 33.7%).² When exiting their last custody episode, most youth were emancipated (n=238, 36%) or reunified with their parents or primary caregiver (n=220, 33.3%).³ See Figure 3.

Figure 2: Number of custody episodes

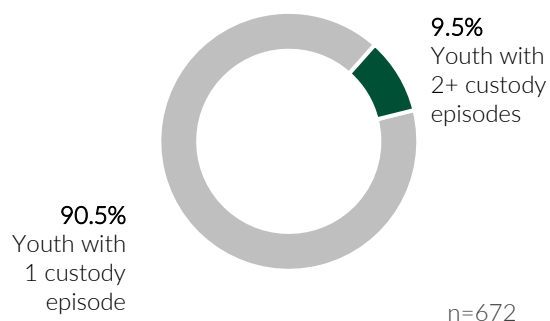
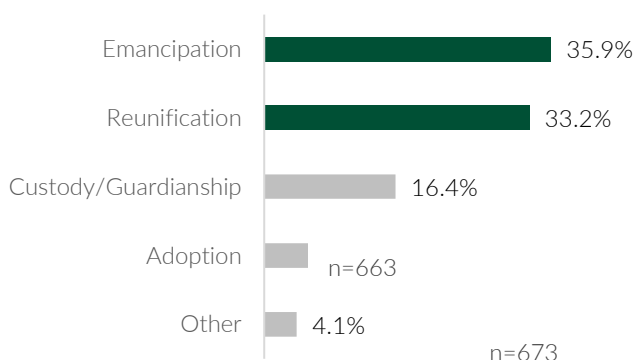


Figure 3: Most youth exit foster care are emancipated or reunified as their last exit.



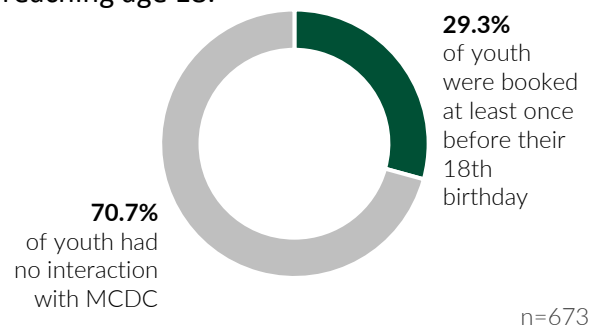
After aging out of foster care, 90 youth opted to sign a Voluntary Placement Agreement (VPA) which allowed youth to remain in the foster care system until age 21. North Carolina began offering VPA's to youth who emancipated from foster starting in January 2017. VPAs will be examined further in the second report of this series.

² In examining the reason for a custody episode, for 25% (n=167) of the sample we could not identify an investigation that matched the placement date and/or an appropriate reason for the removal. It is unclear how the missing would change the primary reasons for removal. If the missing were included the percentage of the sample that experienced abuse at some point could increase.

³ Excludes custodies related to extended foster care, and youth missing their last custody episode (n=10).

Criminal Justice system experiences: Almost a third of the youth were booked into jail in Mecklenburg County while under the age of 18 (n=197, 29.3%) (Figure 4). North Carolina implemented the 'Raise the Age' law on December 1, 2019, therefore youth in this study could still be charged and booked for nonviolent crimes as adults while aged 16 or 17 (NC Dept of Public Safety, N.D.). Bookings into Mecklenburg jails were examined to test whether the interaction with bookings was associated with homelessness for the study population.

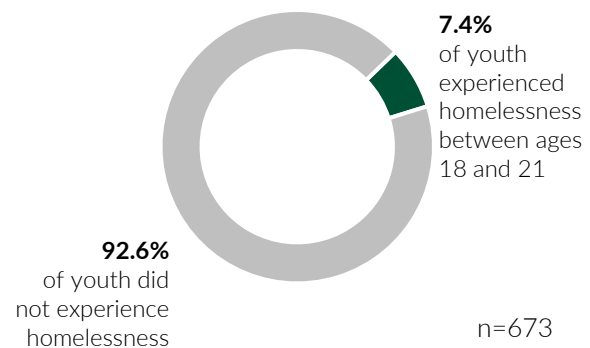
Figure 4: Almost a third of the youth had at least one detention center booking prior to reaching age 18.



What did this study find?

Limited episodes of homelessness: For this study, homelessness is defined as any interaction with local homelessness services as identified through the Homeless Management Information Services (HMIS). Only 7.4% of the sample was found to have accessed homeless services between age 18 through their 21st birthday (n=50). See Figure 5. Many young adults in the sample who experienced homelessness were staying with friends or family prior to accessing homeless services (n=21, 42%). ⁴

Figure 5: Very few youth experienced homelessness from age 18 through 21.



The rate of homelessness found in this study is lower than existing studies that found rates of homelessness for youth who experienced foster care ranging from 14% to 30% (Berzin et al., 2011; Crawford et al., 2015; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Huang et al., 2022; Kelly, 2020; Kushel et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2022; Liu, 2020; Park et al., 2004; Pecora et al., 2006; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). Based on the National Youth in Transitions database⁵ data from North Carolina, 21% to 23% of young adults who experienced foster care have experienced homelessness (Children's Bureau, 2022, 2024). Most of these studies use self-report and more inclusive definitions of homelessness that include staying with friends or living in a hotel/motel. One other study relied on HMIS for determining homelessness and found 3.7% of youth who experienced foster care accessed homeless services (Orsi-Hunt et al., 2024), but it only included a

⁴ Other categories were emergency shelter/place not meant for habitation, an institution, hotel/motel or rental, and missing/not collected. Numbers for all these categories are too small to report.

⁵ National Youth in Transitions Database collects data for each state from young adults who experienced foster care and participated in independent living services. Data is collected at ages 17, 19 and 21 (Children's Bureau, N.D.).

17-month time period (current study included 3 years following their 18th birthday) which ended during the beginning of COVID (a small portion of the current study would have reached aged 18 or older during COVID).

It is not surprising that when using HMIS as an indicator for homelessness that rates of homelessness for young adults are underestimated. Young adults are much more likely to rely on couch surfing than shelters when experiencing housing instability (Morton et al., 2018). However, studies have also found that young adults who experienced foster care who rely on couch surfing, or living with others, experienced longer durations of homelessness (Bender et al., 2015) and are at greater risk of being in an abusive relationship or exposed to violence in the home as compared to those who stay at shelters or transitional housing where young adults may get better access to services (Petry et al., 2022).

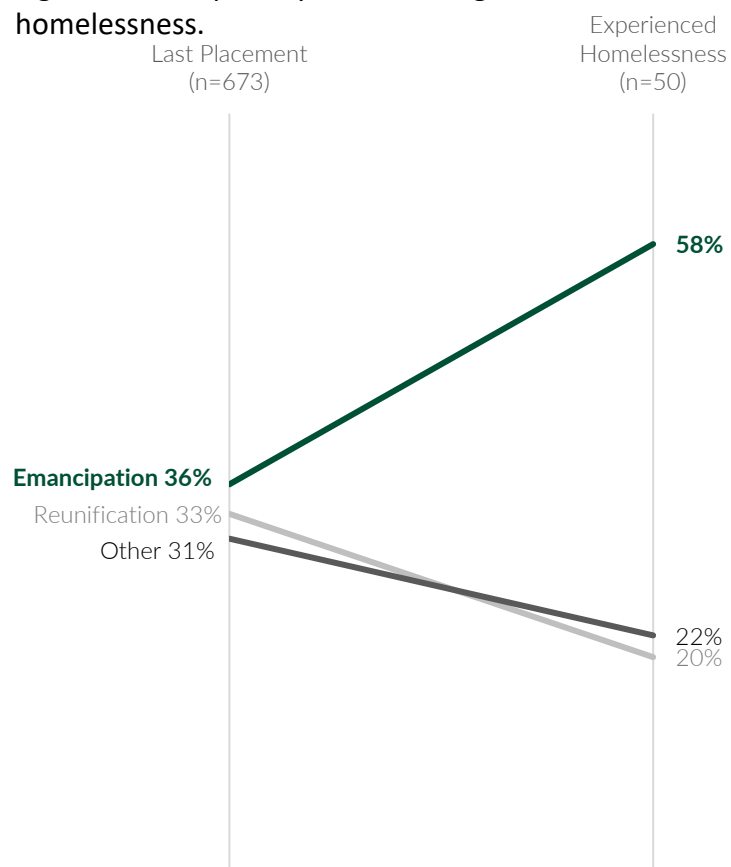
‘...accessing homeless services would be an absolute last resort for this population, as their experience with “the system” has already been traumatic, they will not have great trust in services available, [or] else won’t widely know of services available.’ *Community reviewer*

Emancipated youth have higher rates of homelessness as they transition to adults. Young adults between the ages of 18 and 21 who exited foster care through emancipation represented the largest number of young adults who experienced homelessness in the study (n=29, 58%) (Figure 6), reflecting the large portion of the sample who exited foster care through emancipation (n=238, 36%).

Young adults who exited foster care through reunification represented 20% (n=10) of those who experienced homelessness. Reunification, as well as other permanent placements (other consists of guardianship/custody by relative, adoption, runaway, and authority revoked) may not always provide the stability needed for youth who have experienced foster care. In terms of reunification, youth may feel unsafe returning to a home where they experience similar behaviors that resulted in the removal of the youth initially (Dworsky et al., 2019; Orsi-Hunt et al., 2024).

Last, young adults who exited to other forms of permanent placements represented 22% (n=11) of those who experienced homelessness. For young adults who experienced foster care, emancipation is not the only path to homelessness (Dworsky et al., 2019; Orsi-Hunt et al., 2024).

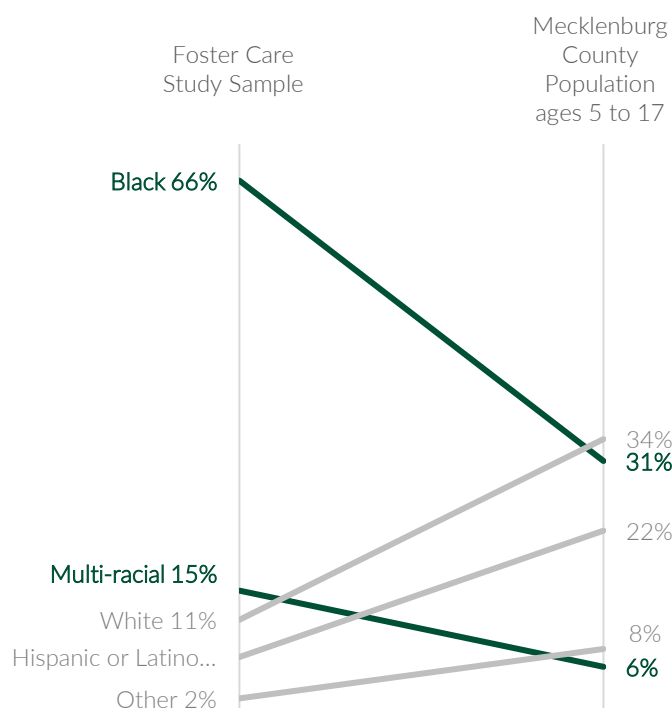
Figure 6: Emancipated youth have higher rates of later homelessness.



Youth who identified as Black or more than one race are over-represented among youth placed in foster care: In the sample for this study approximately 65% of the youth identified as Black alone and

15% identified with more than one race.⁶ This compares to 31% of youth ages 5 to 17 in Mecklenburg County who identify as Black and 5% who identify as more than one race (Figure 7) (US Census Bureau, 2023).⁷ The over-representation of Black and youth who identified as more than one race among foster care youth is consistent with findings for the nation as a whole and the state of North Carolina (DePasquale, 2020). While current studies are mixed on the role of racial bias in the foster care system (Maguire-Jack et al., 2020; Maloney et al., 2017; Wulczyn et al., 2023), historical and ongoing structural barriers external to the child welfare and foster care systems such as housing (Rothstein, 2018), criminal justice (Alexander, 2010) and economic mobility (Perry, 2020) contribute to Black families increased risk of exposure to the child welfare and foster care systems.

Figure 7: Youth identifying as only Black are over-represented in the foster care system.



Female young adults and Black young adults who have experienced foster care are more likely to be homeless: Based on chi-square analysis, female young adults who experienced foster care were more likely to experience homelessness in the three years following their 18th birthday as compared to males (foster care females who experienced homelessness: n=32, 64%; foster care males who have experienced homelessness: n=18; 36%). In addition, young adults who experienced foster care and identified as Black (either solely Black or along with other races) were more likely to have experienced homelessness than all other races combined (some cell sizes are too small to report). These findings are consistent with existing literature finding an increased risk of homelessness for female young adults (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Lee et al., 2022; Orsi-Hunt

⁶ 71% of the youth who identified as more than one race, identified as Black and another race.

⁷ The Mecklenburg County data is from 2020 while the study sample represents youth at various ages from 2001 through 2019. The 2010 census data do not provide county level data by age and race. Based on a local report showing the change in demographics from 2008 to 2017 for children from 0 to 17 the percent of Black youth and multi-racial youth is similar to the percent from the 2020 census (Tamilin, E., Covill, V., Behrendt-Mihalske, J., & Parker, L. (2019). *The state of our children: 2019 Mecklenburg County, North Carolina*. Council for Children's Rights. https://cischarlotte.org/wp-content/uploads/State-of-Meck_Single-Page_Bleeds_Full-Report-1.pdf

et al., 2024) and Black young adults who have experienced foster care (Orsi-Hunt et al., 2024; Park et al., 2004; Prince et al., 2019).⁸

Limitations with the Child Welfare data: During the research phase of the study, the research team uncovered some issues with the child welfare data. The issues related to foster care placements, custody episodes for youth with a VPA and identifying the reason for a custody episode for a portion of the data. See the [Transition Age Foster Care Youth and Homelessness: Methods](#) report for a detailed description. These issues limited the research team's ability to examine child welfare experiences with later outcomes. Documenting issues with data is an important part of working with administrative data and can assist internal and external researchers with understanding the limitations of the data. It also offers constructive feedback for those collecting and managing data systems.

What does this mean for Mecklenburg County?

While the current study found approximately 1 in 15 young adults experienced homelessness after exiting foster care in Mecklenburg County, a North Carolina state specific report found that the rate is likely closer to 1 in 5 (Children's Bureau, 2022, 2024). Additionally, other studies found higher rates of homelessness among young adults who had experienced foster care (Berzin et al., 2011; Crawford et al., 2015; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Huang et al., 2022; Kelly, 2020; Kushel et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2022; Liu, 2020; Park et al., 2004; Pecora et al., 2006; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018).

Although young adults who have exited foster care may prefer alternatives to shelter and other homeless services, they may also face challenges accessing information about housing resources (Coffey et al., 2021). A recent report detailing the landscape for young adults who experienced foster care in Mecklenburg County found that foster care youth had a hard time accessing information about resources that could support them (First Place for Youth, 2022). The landscape report as well as recent lawsuits speak to the high caseloads for child welfare case managers (Fernandez et al., 2024; First Place for Youth, 2022), which may make it difficult for case managers to adequately provide needed services to all clients.

North Carolina offers extended care through its VPA program to help support youth who have been emancipated from foster care. However, data included in this study indicate that youth who have exited to other permanent placements have also experienced homelessness after exiting the foster care system, supporting the need to offer housing services to all young adults who have experienced foster care as an older youth but may have exited to other types of permanent placements.

The study also found that female young adults and Black young adults who have exited foster care are more likely to have experienced homelessness in the three years following their exit. Young women who have recently exited foster care may be more likely to seek shelter and housing services if they have children which could make couch surfing and finding stable housing more difficult (Graetz et al., 2023). Separately, Black youth are overrepresented among all youth who

⁸ Given the small number of young adults who have experienced homelessness in our sample we were not able to investigate the interaction between gender and race and homelessness.

have experienced foster care. The same discriminatory policies that result in the overrepresentation of Black youth among foster care youth contribute to the increased risk of homelessness for Black young adults who have exited foster care.

Recommendations for reducing homelessness among young adults who experience foster care: The following recommendations are based on the study findings, existing literature and insights from local partners:

For service providers:

Develop alternative avenues for reaching young adults who experience foster care and may need housing services. Traditional models of service provision (or organizations not custom to working with young adults recently exiting foster care) can be perceived as being directive or leaving young adults feeling disaffected because of prior experiences (Altena et al., 2017; Garrett et al., 2008).

- **Recruit individuals with lived experience** for positions as peer advisors and/or housing navigators to help connect with young adults who have experienced foster care. Recent studies have found young adults to be receptive to working with peer support specialists who they perceive as being supportive of their needs (Erangay et al., 2020; Mollica et al., 2023).
- **Equip nonprofits** that work with young adults who have experienced foster care to be a reliable source for housing support services. Young adults may be more receptive to accessing services when they are connecting through organizations they are comfortable approaching (Erangay et al., 2020). This could include The Relatives, Crittenton, Time Out for Youth and other appropriate nonprofits or young adult-oriented gathering spaces.
- **Continue collaboration** across systems to help identify foster care youth who could be at risk of homelessness. Collaboration is ongoing between Mecklenburg County CSS and Mecklenburg County Child, Family and Adult Services, but could also be expanded to Mecklenburg County's criminal justice system and Charlotte Mecklenburg School system. Although this study did not find an association between criminal justice system involvement prior to age 18 among older youth with foster care involvement and homelessness, that may reflect the small number of young adults who were homeless in the current study. Furthermore, other studies have found a connection between dual system youth (youth involved in both the child welfare and criminal justice systems) and homelessness (Fowler et al., 2009; Herz & Dierkhising, 2019).

'...it is likely that county-placed children will be aware of or have contact with Foster Village and/or Congregation for Kids. Congregation for Kids has a mentor program for this same population and would be a good start since those are already trusted advisors...' *Community reviewer*

For advocates and policy makers:

Promote the expansion of eligibility requirements to housing programs for young adults who have experienced foster care.

- **Review eligibility requirements:** Consistent with existing research, this study found that young adults who were emancipated from foster care are not the only young adults who

experienced homelessness after exiting foster care (Dworsky et al., 2019; Orsi-Hunt et al., 2024). Both the VPA program and existing housing programs require young adults to be emancipated from foster care to gain access to specific housing subsidies. Efforts should be made to widen eligibility requirements for housing support, where possible, to include all young adults who experience foster care.

- **Incorporate practices that support longitudinal data:** Current data management practices focus on the primary use of the data, which is for the administration of Child, Family and Adult Services. However, stakeholders could think more creatively and expansively about data practices that would support the ability to examine more nuanced longitudinal trends. For example, in this study we were unable to identify the reason for a youth's removal from their home that then resulted in a custody episode in 25% of cases (see [Transition Age Foster Care Youth and Homelessness: Methods](#) report for detailed discussion of data issues). These types of limitations inhibit how local offices can understand their effectiveness and associated trends over time. Prioritizing more comprehensive longitudinal data can help support practices and policies that are in the best interest of youth and direct service providers.

For researchers:

- **Include placement information:** Foster care placements can indicate housing instability and has been found to be associated with homelessness as youth age out of the foster care system (Crawford et al., 2015; Dworsky, 2005; Farmer et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2022; Orsi-Hunt et al., 2024). Future research examining youth who experienced foster care and homelessness would benefit from the inclusion of placement information.
- **Future research:** This study was limited to administrative data which excludes the perspective of the young adults who are represented in this data. Future research should include a qualitative study to incorporate the voices of those with lived experiences.
 - Design a qualitative study targeting young adults with lived experiences that would include questions to help understand:
 - Existing barriers to accessing housing services.
 - How young adults with lived experience access or would like to access services.
 - How best to reach young adults who experience foster care.
 - Participants for this study could be recruited from The Relatives, Crittenton, Time Out for Youth, Coordinated Entry, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and references from Child, Family and Adult services staff.

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