

Transition Age Foster Care Youth - Voluntary Placement Agreements



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:

Contractual Agreement for Continuing Residential Support (CARS): The CARS program offered extended foster care to young adults who were in foster care when they turned 18 starting in November 2015. CARS was phased out when the Voluntary Placement Agreement began in 2017. The primary difference between the two programs is that CARS did not provide funding for independent living arrangements.

Custody episode: When the state legally takes custody of a child for a period of time. Custody episodes also include youth who opted into Extended Foster Care.

Emancipated: A youth experiencing foster care is emancipated (or aged out) from the foster care system 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 (EFC): 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.

Independent Living Services (ILS): Independent living services include education and support services around basic skills such as money management, educational opportunities, healthcare, meal planning, etc. ILS are provided to young adults in the VPA program as well as young adults who experienced foster care but did not opt into the VPA program.

Voluntary Placement Agreement (VPA): The Voluntary Placement Agreement 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 in addition to funding for housing.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study is the second of two studies examining homelessness amongst youth and young adults who have experienced the foster care system. In the initial study, [Transition Age Foster Care Youth and Homelessness](#), we took a wide perspective and examined all youth aged 13 and older who had experienced foster care and homelessness. This study seeks to understand how a relatively recent program in North Carolina, the Voluntary Placement Agreement (VPA) program, is supporting young adults who have experienced foster care and aged out of the system, a subset of the initial study.

In 2017, North Carolina began offering young adults who aged-out of foster care a VPA, which provided emancipated young adults who were aged 18 to 20 independent living services (ILS) and funding for independent housing if they met certain requirements. This report provides a descriptive overview of the following for young adults who were eligible for VPAs in Mecklenburg County:

- Demographic characteristics of the sample
- The proportion of eligible young adults who participated in the VPA program
- For youth who participated in the VPA program, descriptives of their involvement (i.e. amount of time in the program, did they stay until their 21st birthday, etc.)
- The proportion of all eligible youth and VPA youth who experience homelessness, accessed Economic Services or were involved in the Criminal Justice system from age 18 up to their 21st birthday.

The VPA program, or Extended Foster Care in general, is an important tool for Child Welfare systems to provide support for young adults transitioning out of foster care and move to independent living, as well as to address housing stability for this group. Given VPAs are a relatively recent program in North Carolina, it is helpful to understand who participated in the program within Mecklenburg County and how they participated in the program. In addition, whether the program is improving outcomes for this group. Findings are relevant for all stakeholders associated with the Child Welfare system and foster care in Mecklenburg County seeking to support young adults transitioning out of foster care.

Additional Information about VPAs

VPAs, included in programs referred to more generally as Extended Foster Care (EFC), evolved out of several federal policies beginning with the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, which aimed to support young adults who age out of foster care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, N.D.).¹ North Carolina offered EFC through a Contractual Agreement for Continuing Residential Support (CARS), starting in 2015. In 2017, CARS was replaced with VPAs. The primary difference is that VPAs allow young adults to live independently and not reside with a foster care family or other types of licensed placements.

¹ For more information about federal policies supporting Extended Care see Rosenberg, R., & Abbott, S. (2019). *Supporting older youth beyond age 18: Examining data and trends in extended foster care* <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/supporting-older-youth-beyond-age-18-examining-data-and-trends-in-extended-foster-care>

To enter into a VPA, young adults have to meet one of the following requirements:

- be enrolled in high school or a post-secondary institution or a vocational program
- employed or participating in a program designed to promote employment
- have a disability that prevents them from pursuing educational opportunities or participating in the workforce.

A young adult can enter into a VPA any time after they are emancipated up to their 21st birthday. If a young adult chooses to end their VPA, they can re-enter the program as long as they have not turned 21 and they meet the requirements. Young adults who aged out of foster care prior to 2017 were also eligible to enter into a VPA starting in 2017, if they were under 21 years old.

Lastly during the pandemic, eligibility requirements were temporarily relaxed (from January 1, 2021 through September 31, 2021) so young adults could stay in EFC past their 21st birthday and did not need to be employed or enrolled in an educational program (Congressional Research Service, 2021).

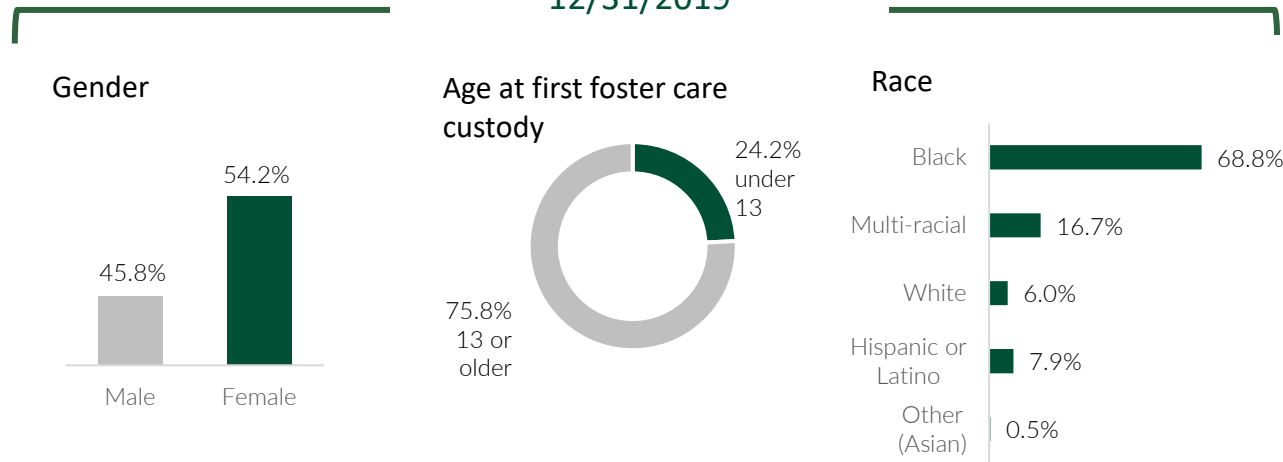
Who is in the study?

This section describes the demographics for the sample, as well as their experience in the foster care system. The sample consists of young adults who experienced foster care and were eligible to enter into a VPA when North Carolina began offering VPAs, January 1, 2017, through December 31, 2019. Specifically, the sample includes two hundred and fifteen (n=215) young adults who aged out of foster care from 2014 through 2019. All custody episodes from 2000 through 2022 for those that met the eligibility criteria were retained to provide all foster care experiences for each person in the sample. For a full description the methods used for the report, and tables associated with the figures, see the [Transition Age Foster Care Youth – Voluntary Placement Agreement: Methods](#) report.

Demographics: Most of the young adults eligible for a VPA first entered the foster care system as a teenager, or age 13 or older (n=163, 75.8%). Over half of the sample were female (n=115, 54.2%), and the majority of the sample identified as Black (n=148, 68.8%).

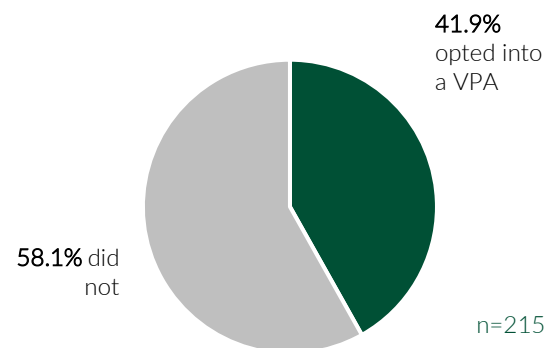
Similar to the prior report, [Transition Age Foster Care Youth and Homelessness](#), Black young adults comprised the majority of the sample, and are over-represented relative to their age group within Mecklenburg County (Statistical Atlas, 2018). It is unclear whether practices within the Child Welfare System contribute to the over-representation of Black youth and subsequently young adults in the Foster Care system (Maguire-Jack et al., 2020; Maloney et al., 2017; Wulczyn et al., 2023). However, historical and ongoing structural systems such as redlining, lending practices and criminal just practices (Alexander, 2010; Rothstein, 2018; Thomas, 2019) create barriers to economic mobility for Black families that increases the risk of exposure to the Child Welfare System.

**Figure 1: 215 young adults
who aged out of foster care
between 1/1/2014 and
12/31/2019**



Foster care experiences. Excluding custodies related to VPAs, most of the young adults in the sample who had aged out of foster care had only one foster care custody episode prior to turning 18 (n=185, 86.45). Over forty percent of the young adults in the sample opted into a VPA (n=90, 41.9%) at some point after age 18. In terms of demographics, there were no statistically significant differences between young adults who opted into a VPA and young adults who did not except for age at first custody. Young adults who experienced foster care and opted into a VPA were more likely to be older at their first custody episode than young adults who experienced foster care and did not opt into the VPA program (percentage of young adults who were 13 or older at first custody: VPA - 84.4%, No VPA - 69.6%).

Figure 2: Young adults with a VPA



In order to compare EFC involvement within Mecklenburg County with national data, we are also reporting the percentage of young adults who have experienced foster care and have opted into EFC at age 19 (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023a). For our sample the percentage of young adults that had a VPA or were involved with the preceding EFC program (CARS)² when they were 19 was 31.6%. This percentage is lower than the

² Young adults who opted into the CARS program are included here for consistency with national data.

41.9% reported above, since we are examining EFC involvement during a one-year interval instead of the three years that a young adult who experienced foster care would be eligible for EFC.

Young adults in the sample aged out of the foster care system between 2014 and 2019, with the first year (2014) having the largest number of young adults aging out (n=47, 20.4%) and the last year (2019) having the smallest number of young adults aging out (n=24, 11.4%). This reflects a general declining trend in North Carolina in the number of young adults who age out of foster care (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023b). Since VPAs were not offered until 2017, young adults who aged out in 2014 through 2016 did not have a full three years to participate in the VPA program. Young adults who were eligible for a VPA but did not have a full three years represent over half of the sample (n=124, 59%).

VPA involvement: Although not everyone in the sample was eligible for a VPA at age 18, most of the sample who opted into a VPA did so for the first time at age 18 (n=52, 57.8%). A small portion of the those with a VPA entered into more than one VPA prior to turning 21 (n=15, 16.7%).

Once a young adult entered into a VPA, sixty percent remained in the program until they reached age 21 (n=36). The average amount of time in the VPA program was approximately 14 months (Standard Deviation or SD: 12 months).

Figure 3: Most young adults opted into a VPA for the first time at age 18.

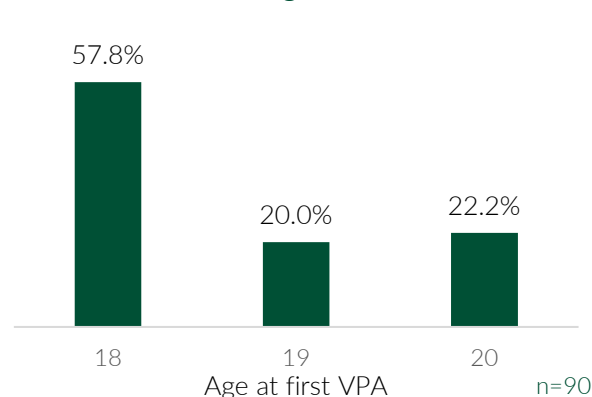
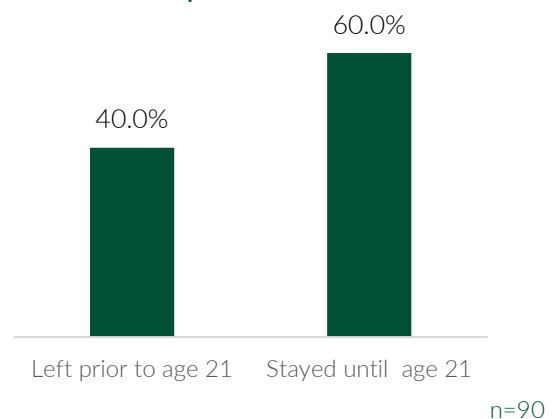


Figure 4: Young adults remaining in VPA until they were 21.



How do young adults who have aged out of foster care interact with local systems?

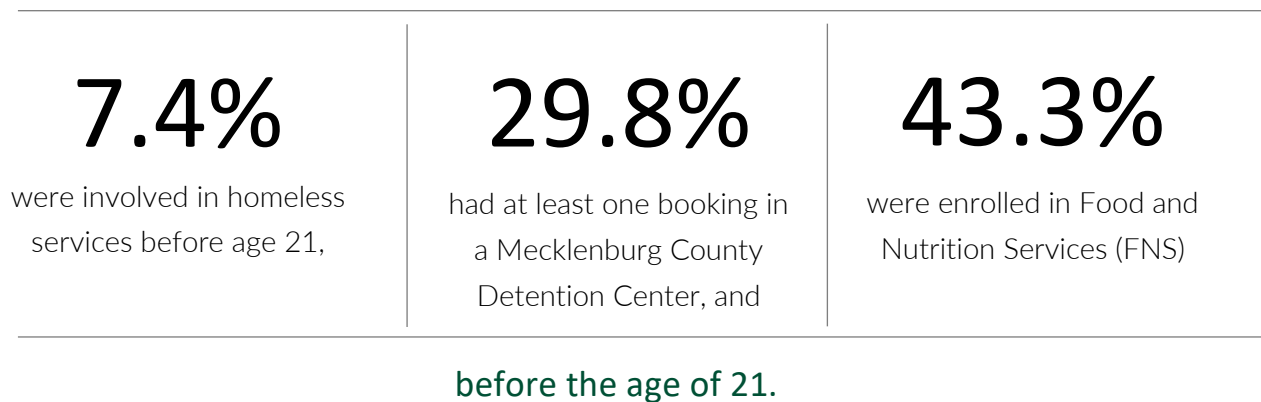
This section examined outcomes for all young adults in the sample from when they first became eligible for a VPA through their 21st birthday. In addition, the research team examined differences by outcome between young adults who opted into a VPA and those who did not. The outcomes include the following:

- **Homelessness:** defined as any interaction with homeless services as identified through the Housing Management Information System (HMIS)

- **Criminal Justice system:** defined as bookings identified through the Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office
- **Economic Assistance:** enrolled in Food & Nutrition Services (FNS) or cash assistance. Cash assistance is offered through North Carolina's version of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), known in the state as Work First.

Since young adults can opt into a VPA at any time once they are eligible through their 21st birthday, the analysis explores whether opting into a VPA at some point prior to their 21st birthday is associated with the three outcomes occurring at some point prior to their 21st birthday.

**Figure 5: Of the 215
young adults in the study,**



There were no statistically significant differences in system usage between those with a VPA and those without.

Homelessness services: The proportion of young adults eligible for a VPA accessing homeless services in Mecklenburg County from age 18 through 21 was 7.4% (n=16). This is lower than the proportion of emancipated youth in the initial report that interacted with homeless services (12.2%). Although the proportion of young adults accessing homeless services with a VPA was slightly higher than those without a VPA, there was no statistically significant difference in accessing homeless services between the two groups (numbers too small to report).

In general, the frequency of young adults aging out of foster care reported here and in the first report (Transition Age Foster Care Youth and Homelessness) are lower than frequencies of homelessness found for young adults in other studies (Berzin et al., 2011; Crawford et al., 2015; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Kelly, 2020; Liu, 2020; Park et al., 2004; Pecora et al., 2006). The current study defines homelessness as occurring if a young adult accesses homeless services such as emergency shelter, whereas other studies use broader definitions that include couch surfing

and places not meant for human habitation. The broader definitions may more accurately reflect young adults experiences when faced with housing instability (Morton et al., 2018).

Criminal Justice system: About one-third of young adults eligible for a VPA had at least one booking (n=64, 29.8%) prior to their 21st birthday. Young adults who opted for a VPA had a slightly lower proportion of bookings (n=26, 28.9%) as compared to those without a VPA (n=38, 30.4%), however, the difference was not statistically significant.

Young adults who were eligible for a VPA and had at least one booking (n=64) had a total of 200 bookings. For young adults in the sample who were booked at least once, the average number of bookings was 3.1 (SD: 2.45). Two-thirds of the bookings included a felony charge (n=132, 66.0%), with the balance consisting of either misdemeanor or traffic charges (n=68, 34.0%).³ There were no statistically significant differences in the average number of bookings, or the type of charges incurred, for young adults with at least one booking who opted into a VPA as compared to those without a VPA and at least one booking.

Economic Services: For both FNS and cash assistance, opting into a VPA, which includes ongoing support from case managers, may improve connections to these services. In terms of FNS, 43.3% of the young adults in the sample were enrolled in FNS services (n=93). The proportion of young adults who opted into a VPA and enrolled in FNS was 44.4% (n=40), slightly higher than those who did not opt into a VPA (n=53, 42.4%), but the difference was not statistically significant.

For cash assistance, only adults with children are eligible for this program (NC Dept of Health & Human Services, N.D.). While we do not have information on who in the sample has children, the numbers accessing cash assistance across the whole sample were minimal, and too small to report.

What did this study find?

The proportion of youth opting into VPA's in North Carolina is higher than the nation's: Nationwide, approximately 24% of young adults who aged out of foster care were enrolled in EFC at age 19 (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023a). For our sample, 31.6% of young adults who aged out of foster care were enrolled in EFC at age 19. In addition, the proportion enrolled in EFC for Mecklenburg County is higher than the statewide proportion (numbers too small to report).

Lack of differences for outcomes between young adults who opted into a VPA and those who did not: For all three outcomes that this report examined – homelessness, Criminal Justice system and Economic assistance – there were no statistically significant differences between young adults who opted into a VPA at some point prior to their 21st birthday and those who did not opt into a VPA. This indicates that there was no association between opting into a VPA and any of the three outcomes.

These findings are **inconsistent** with the predominate findings in existing literature on EFC which indicates that EFC is a protective factor against homelessness (Courtney et al., 2018; Kelly, 2020; Lee & Holmes, 2021; Liu, 2020; Nuñez et al., 2022; Prince et al., 2019; Rosenberg & Abbott, 2019), incarceration (Courtney et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2022; Nuñez et al., 2022; Prince et al.,

³ The number of traffic charges were too small to report separately.

2019) and use of food assistance (Courtney et al., 2018). When examining EFC, state level factors can contribute to variations in outcomes for young adults aging out of foster care. State level factors that could affect differences in outcomes could relate to state policies, differences in implementation of EFC and agency funding and morale (Liu, 2020).

Many young adults opting into a VPA, opt out in less than a year: Half of young adults aging out of foster care that opt into a VPA remained in the program for less than one year (n=45), although the average amount of time in the VPA program was 14 months (SD: 12 months). For our sample, some young adults were not eligible for the program for the full three years. If we restrict the sample to only those who were eligible for three years then the average amount time in the program is 16 months (SD: 13 months).

A few studies provide average time in care after their 18th birthday. In both California and Illinois, the average time in care after their 18th birthday was over two years (Courtney & Hook, 2017; Park et al., 2020). Longer time in EFC is associated with increased educational achievement (Courtney et al., 2018; Park et al., 2020) and reduced the odds of a being homeless or incarcerated (Courtney et al., 2018).

Once again, county level factors appear to play a strong role in how long young adults remain in EFC (Park et al., 2022; Peters, 2012). Specifically, a higher percentage of case workers specializing in working with transition-age youth, and their satisfaction with cross-collaboration with other county systems, can increase the time young adults spend in EFC (Park et al., 2022).

Implications/Recommendations

The intent of this report was to provide an initial spotlight on the VPA program in Mecklenburg County. Based on the results of this study, there are questions that need further investigation, in particular, why Mecklenburg County had a higher proportion of young adults opting into a VPA than the average for the nation but the County did not see the benefit from the implementation of EFC that other areas of the country have realized.

The following recommendations seek to offer avenues for increased understanding of the VPA program and those who are eligible for it, as well as opportunities for improvement in outcomes. Recommendations are based on the study findings and existing literature.

Add metrics to track trends in participation in the VPA program: The National Youth in Transition Database tracks participation in EFC across the nation for young adults that participate in Independent Living Services at age 19 and then again at age 21. Mecklenburg County could consider tracking participation for all young adults in the County who age out of foster care by year to understand trends in the VPA participation rate. For comparison purposes tracking metrics consistent with the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) would be helpful.

The tracking of participation in EFC would allow for understanding if there is a change in trends, as well as examining the association of changes in policies and practices on the VPA participation rate.

Future Research: Similar to the first report related to young adults who experienced the foster care system, this report is also limited to administrative data and does not include the voices of young

adults represented in the data. Future research could include these voices through a qualitative study.

- Design a qualitative study targeting young adults with lived experiences that would include questions to help understand:
 - How did you first learn about the VPA program?
 - What factors are important to young adults in deciding to enter into a VPA?
 - For young adults that participate in the VPA program, what are the factors that determine when it is time to leave the program?
- 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 and their Youth Advisory Board.

Provide case workers with additional skills and support: County level factors have been shown to affect the success of young adults aging out of foster care. In particular, having case workers that specialize in working with transition age youth as well as strong cross-collaboration with other county systems improves outcomes for these young adults (Park et al., 2022). The County could increase training specific to this age groups' unique needs for case workers who work with young adults who have aged out of the system.

Recent local headlines point to difficulties within the Child Welfare system across the state including lack of funds and overburdened case workers (Fernandez et al., 2024; Guinassi, 2024). These issues are likely intertwined with the outcomes found in this report. Ongoing improvements that provide more support for case workers could also benefit overall outcomes for all youth who experience foster care.

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