

# Transition Age Foster Care Youth - Voluntary Placement Agreement: Methods



## Methodology Brief

Released June 2025

This document summarizes research methods used for the [Transition Age Foster Care Youth: Voluntary Placement Agreement](#) integrated data report. This study used integrated data from the Charlotte Regional Data Trust (Data Trust). The Data Trust is a community-university partnership that links administrative data across service and organizational systems to provide the community with actionable information. The term “integrated data” is used to describe how individual-level data can be linked across these sources of knowledge. Integrated data can be used to illuminate service gaps as well as highlight connections across disparate groups, organizations, and/or systems.

## **Research Questions**

**RQ1.** What proportion of emancipated youth from 2017 to 2019 have signed VPAs?

**RQ2:** What proportion of youth with VPAs remain in the program until their 21st birthday, compared to those who exit the program prior to their 21st birthday? How long do participants remain in the program? Do participants re-enter the program after exiting?

**RQ3.** Are youth with a VPA less likely to experience homelessness, or incarceration as compared to youth who have not signed a VPA?

**RQ4:** Are youth with a VPA more likely to be connected to public benefits as compared to youth who have not signed a VPA?

## **Data Sources and Criteria**

The current study uses administrative data from the Mecklenburg County Department of Child, Family and Adult Services - Children in Custody (CiC), Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office (MCSO), Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) and Mecklenburg County Department of Community Resources – Economic Services (Economic Services). Table 1 provides descriptions of each dataset.

**Table 1: Administrative data used for the study**

Admin Data	Description	Years Included
CiC	CiC data is administrative data collected by Child, Family and Adult Services. Data includes client-level information about Mecklenburg County youth who have been placed by the state in foster care.	2000 thru 2022
MCSO	Administrative data from MCSO includes records of individuals who were booked in a Charlotte-Mecklenburg County detention center.	2017 thru 2022
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 twenty-five local homeless services organizations regarding the provision of shelter, housing and services to individuals and families experiencing housing instability and homelessness.	2017 thru 2022
Economic Services	The Economic Services data is collected by Economic Services staff at the County level and entered into a start-run system. Data for this study includes enrollment for Food and Nutrition Services (also known as SNAP) and cash assistance. Cash assistance is part of Work First services, which is North Carolina's form of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).	2017 thru 2022

For the sample for 'Transition Age Foster Care Youth: Voluntary Placement Agreements' we included any young adults who had experienced a foster care placement and would be eligible for a Voluntary Placement Agreement (VPA). This included any young adults who experienced a foster care episode and were aged 18 through 21 during the years 2017 through 2019. Therefore, we include young adults in the CiC dataset who met the following criteria:

- All young adults who exited foster care between 1/1/2014 and 12/31/2019
- The reason for their transfer out of foster care was listed as 'Aged out'
- Young adults aged 18 to 21 when they exited foster care.<sup>1</sup>

After filtering for the above criteria, 215 young adults who aged out of foster care for the specified time period were identified. All custody episodes starting in 2000 for those identified

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<sup>1</sup> Once a young adult signs a VPA they can remain in foster care through their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

were retained so that age at first custody and the number of custody episodes over a young adult's childhood could be determined. Furthermore, data through 2022 was retained to include any custody episodes related to a Voluntary Placement Agreement which occurred after young adults with foster care experience had aged out of foster care.

In addition to individual identifiers, age at the time of last exit and date of last exit, the data also included age and date at the time of the beginning of the custody episode, the description of where the youth exited to (i.e. emancipated, reunified, custody with another relative, etc.), and the reason for the exit (i.e. aged out, services no longer needed, etc.).

To determine outcomes related to interactions with community and county services the identified sample was matched to the MCSO, HMIS and Economic Services data. For all outcomes, the research team examined whether the young adult showed up in the MCSO, HMIS or Economic Services data once they were eligible for a Voluntary Placement Agreement. Therefore, we look at matches for the three databases that met the following requirements:

- Occurred between 1/1/2017 and 12/31/2022
- Age when service or interaction began was 18 through 20.

**Table 2: Outcomes examined**

Outcome	Description
Booking	Identified by whether the young adult is in the MCSO database
Homeless	Young adult accesses homeless services identified in the HMIS database
Economic Assistance	Young adult enrolled in FNS or Cash assistance identified through the Economic Services database.

## Analysis

The research team used descriptive statistics to answer research questions 1 and 2. The team used chi-square analysis to answer research questions 3 and 4. Chi-square analysis can indicate an association between two categorical variables.<sup>2</sup> Appendix A includes the results of the descriptive statistics, and the results of the chi-square analysis.

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<sup>2</sup> All chi-square analysis met the required assumptions – 1. variables are categorical; 2. variables are mutually exclusive; 2. all observations are independent; and 4. expected value of cells are 5 or greater in at least 80% of the cells.

## Limitations:

*Pandemic effect on VPA requirements and outcomes:* The consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 included a moratorium on young adults aging out of EFC, allowing young adults to stay beyond their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, and eliminated the eligibility requirements for employment or education through September 31, 2021 (Congressional Research Service, 2021). These temporary changes would have affected at least a third of the sample for this study (since birth dates were not included in the data, we cannot provide an exact number or percentage). This may have resulted in more young adults accessing a VPA since they did not need to meet the eligibility requirements and may have allowed young adults to stay in the program longer than if EFC had not been modified for the nine months period.

Furthermore, for young adults who experienced foster care, who often have limited family supports and financial resources, the pandemic likely added unique stressors. Studies indicated young adults who aged out of foster care experienced increases in housing instability, food insecurity, financial instability and decreases in connection to resources (Greeson et al., 2022). It is difficult to assess how factors related to the pandemic would have affected this study. It may have increased homelessness, but that increase may not have been visible in the measure used for this study if young adults, who prefer alternatives to standard homeless services (Morton et al., 2017), were able to couch surf or stay in a motel/hotel. Financial and food insecurity during this time could have led to increased reliance on FNS, but limited access to resources may have made applying for assistance more difficult.

*Not all young adults who had aged out of foster care had three full years of eligibility for a VPA:* The sample for this study included young adults who aged out of foster care from 2014 through 2019. However, if they aged out prior to 2017 they would not have a full three years to opt into a VPA. Almost 60% of the sample did not have the full three years of eligibility for a VPA (n=124, 59%). These young adults were also only included in the outcomes for the period they were eligible, so they have less time where they may become homeless, booked in the criminal justice system or enrolled in FNS. Therefore, young adults who have experienced foster care aged 19 to 20 are over-represented in the sample in terms of VPA experiences and the outcomes. If there are variations in outcomes for young adults who experience foster care between age 18 and 19 or 20 that could affect the findings of this study.

## References:

- Congressional Research Service. (2021). *Youth provision in the Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act*. (RA6770). Washington, D.C.
- Greeson, J. K. P., Gyourko, J. R., Jaffee, S. R., & Wasch, S. (2022). The experiences of older youth in and aged out of foster care during the COVID-19 pandemic: Material and financial well-being by foster care status, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and race. *Am J Orthopsychiatry*, 92(3), 334-348. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000615>
- Morton, M. H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G. M. (2017). *Missed opportunities: Youth homelessness in America*. Voices of Youth Count & Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.  
<https://voicesofyouthcount.org/brief/national-estimates-of-youth-homelessness/>
- US Census Bureau. (2023). *Exploring age groups in the 2020 census*.  
<https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/exploring-age-groups-in-the-2020-census.html>

## Appendix A – Data tables

**Table 1: Demographic information**

Characteristic	Category	Count	Frequency
Race/Ethnicity			n=215
	Black	148	68.8%
	One or more races	36	16.7%
	White	13	6.0%
	Hispanic/Other	18	8.4%
Sex			n=215
	Female	115	54.2
	Male	100	45.8
Age at first custody			n=215
	Under 13	52	24.2
	13 and older	163	75.8

**Table 2: Foster Care Experiences**

Characteristic	Category	Count	Frequency
Number of custody episodes per a youth			n=214*
	One episode	185	86.4%
	Two or more episodes	29	13.6%
Percentage of young adults opting into a VPA			n=215
	Young adults opting into a VPA	90	41.9%
	Young adults w/o a VPA	125	58.1%
Year Aged out of Foster Care			n=210**
	2014	47	22.4%
	2015	36	17.1%
	2016	41	19.5%
	2017	29	13.8%
	2018	33	15.7%
	2019	24	11.4%

\*Excludes one young adult who did not have any custody episodes listed prior to their VPA

\*\*Excludes young adults in the sample who are missing the custody episode prior to their VPA.

**Table 3: Demogaphics by VPA participation**

	No VPA (n=125)		VPA (n=90)		Chi-square
	Number	Frequency	Number	Frequency	
Black	103	82.4%	68	75.6%	0.2198
Female	64	51.2%	51	56.7%	0.4279
13 or older at first custody	87	69.6%	76	84.4%	0.0122*

\*indicates there is a statistically significant difference between those with a VPA and those without.

**Table 4: Experiences in the Voluntary Placement Program**

Characteristic	Category	Count	Frequency
Age at first VPA			n=90
	18	52	57.8%
	19	18	20.0%
	20	20	22.2%
Number of VPA program entries			n=90
	Young adults w/ 1 VPA	75	83.3%
	Young adults w/ more than 1 VPA	15	16.7%
Percentage of young adults who stay w/ a VPA until 21			n=90
	Leave prior to 21	36	40.0%
	Stay until 21	54	60.0%
Average amount of time in a VPA			n=107*
		Mean	Std. Dev
	Avg time in Mos.	14.2	11.9

\*Includes all VPA episodes for each young adult in the sample.

**Table 5: Young adults who accessed or had interactions with community services**

Characteristic	Category	Count	Frequency
Interaction or utilization of services			n=215
	Homelessness	16	7.4%
	Bookings	64	29.8%
	FNS	93	43.3%

**Table 6: Service utilization by VPA participation**

	Number	Frequency	Number	Frequency	Chi-square
Homelessness*	---	---	---	---	0.4927
Bookings	38	30.4%	26	28.9%	0.8111
FNS	53	42.4%	40	44.4%	0.7653

\*Numbers are too small to report

**Table 7: Number of bookings and charge type incurred**

Average number of bookings for young adults in the sample with a booking			n=64
		Mean	Std. Dev
	Average number of bookings	3.1	2.45

Type of charge by young adults who were booked and opted into a VPA versus had no VPA					n=200*
No VPA (n=119)*		VPA (n=81)*			
	Number	Frequency	Number	Frequency	Chi-square
Felony charges	74	62.2%	58	71.6%	0.1922
Misdemeanor/Traffic charge	45	37.8%	23	28.4%	

\*n represents the number of bookings incurred.