Tennessee Foster Care Youth Landscape Report

Comprehensive Analysis of Geographic Distribution and Vulnerability Patterns

Report Information

- **Report Date:** December 2024
- **Data Period:** FY23-25 (Fiscal Years 2023-2025)
- **Total Youth Analyzed:** 5,684 individuals
- **Geographic Coverage:** 96 counties across Tennessee
- **Prepared By:** Belmont Data & AI Collaborative (BDAIC)

Executive Summary

This report provides a comprehensive landscape analysis of Tennessee's foster care youth system, examining the geographic distribution and vulnerability patterns across three critical domains:

Housing Stability | Mental Health | Supportive Adult Relationships

Key Finding: The analysis reveals significant geographic disparities in vulnerability levels, with rural counties often showing higher composite vulnerability scores than urban areas. Understanding these patterns is crucial for informed resource allocation and service delivery optimization across the state.

1. Dataset Overview and Methodology

Data Structure

Metric	Value
Total Assessment Records	557,897 responses
Unique Youth	5,684 individuals
Assessment Types	CANS (514,657) + LIFESKILL (43,240)
Average Assessments per Youth	~98 assessments

Vulnerability Scoring Framework

The analysis uses a standardized 0-3 scoring system:

Score	Meaning
0	No current need (stable/healthy)
1	Mild problems requiring monitoring

Score	Meaning
2	Action required (interfering with functioning)
3	Dangerous/disabled requiring immediate action

Analytic Approach

- **Individual-level vulnerability scoring** for each domain
- **Geographic aggregation** at county and zip code levels
- **Cross-domain correlation analysis** to identify patterns
- **High-need area identification** for resource prioritization

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2. Statewide Vulnerability Landscape

Overall Vulnerability Profile

Based on the analysis of 5,684 youth across Tennessee:

Vulnerability Domain	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Youth Count
Housing Stability	**0.79**	0.68	5,684
Mental Health	**0.68**	0.38	5,684
Supportive Relationships	**1.19**	0.52	5,684
Composite Vulnerability	**0.89**	0.41	5,684

Key Findings

- **Supportive Adult Relationships** represents the **highest vulnerability area** statewide
- **Mental Health** shows the **lowest average vulnerability scores**
- **Housing Stability** falls in the **middle range** with moderate vulnerability
- **Composite vulnerability** indicates that most youth fall in the "mild problems requiring monitoring" range

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3. Geographic Distribution Analysis

County-Level Distribution

The analysis covers **96 counties** across Tennessee, with significant variation in youth populations and vulnerability levels.

Top 10 Counties by Youth Population

Rank	County	Youth Count	% of Total
1	**Shelby County**	666	11.7%

Rank	County	Youth Count	% of Total
2	**Davidson County**	419	7.4%
3	**Knox County**	317	5.6%
4	**Hamilton County**	258	4.5%
5	**Montgomery County**	218	3.8%
6	**Rutherford County**	216	3.8%
7	**Sevier County**	123	2.2%
8	**Wilson County**	122	2.1%
9	**Sullivan County**	184	3.2%
10	**Sumner County**	116	2.0%

Regional Vulnerability Patterns

East Tennessee Region

- **Counties:** Knox, Sevier, Sullivan, Carter, Washington, Greene, Hamblen
- **Characteristics:** Higher housing stability vulnerability, moderate mental health needs
- **Notable:** Knox County shows elevated composite vulnerability (1.106)

Middle Tennessee Region

- **Counties:** Davidson, Rutherford, Williamson, Sumner, Wilson, Montgomery
- **Characteristics:** Lower overall vulnerability, better resource access
- **Notable:** Davidson County has the lowest composite vulnerability (0.790)

West Tennessee Region

- **Counties:** Shelby, Madison, Fayette, Gibson, Hardeman, Haywood
- **Characteristics:** Mixed vulnerability patterns, urban-rural disparities
- **Notable:** Shelby County shows moderate vulnerability despite large population

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4. Focus Area Analysis

4.1 Housing Stability Landscape

Statewide Overview

- **Mean Score:** 0.79 (moderate vulnerability)
- **Range:** 0.0 - 3.0 across counties
- **High-Need Counties:** Lake (1.571), Marion (1.407), Crockett (1.405)

Geographic Patterns

- **Rural counties** generally show higher housing vulnerability
- **Urban counties** (Davidson, Shelby) show lower housing vulnerability
- **Border counties** often have elevated housing stability concerns

Key Housing Challenges

1. **Independent Living Skills:** Limited preparation for post-foster care transition
2. **Residential Stability:** Frequent placement changes
3. **Housing Plan Development:** Insufficient planning for adulthood
4. **Backup Housing Options:** Lack of emergency housing alternatives

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4.2 Mental Health Landscape

Statewide Overview

- **Mean Score:** 0.68 (lower vulnerability)
- **Range:** 0.0 - 1.5 across counties
- **High-Need Counties:** Lake (0.422), Hancock (0.452), Houston (0.857)

Geographic Patterns

- **Mental health vulnerability** shows less geographic variation than housing
- **Urban counties** generally have better mental health service access
- **Rural counties** may have service gaps despite lower reported needs

Key Mental Health Areas

1. **Depression and Anxiety:** Most common mental health concerns
2. **Trauma-Related Symptoms:** PTSD and adjustment disorders
3. **Substance Use:** Moderate prevalence across regions
4. **Developmental Challenges:** Intellectual and developmental disabilities

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4.3 Supportive Adult Relationships Landscape

Statewide Overview

- **Mean Score:** 1.19 (highest vulnerability domain)
- **Range:** 0.0 - 2.5 across counties
- **High-Need Counties:** Lake (1.595), Marion (1.593), Lincoln (1.576)

Geographic Patterns

- **Relationship vulnerability** is consistently high across all regions
- **Rural counties** show slightly higher relationship challenges
- **Urban counties** also face significant relationship stability issues

Key Relationship Challenges

1. **Family Functioning:** Intergenerational trauma and dysfunction
2. **Attachment Difficulties:** Insecure attachment patterns
3. **Social Connectedness:** Limited positive adult role models
4. **Relationship Permanence:** Unstable caregiver relationships

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5. High-Need Geographic Areas

5.1 Counties Requiring Immediate Attention

Critical Need Counties (Composite Vulnerability > 1.2)

County	Vulnerability Score	Youth Count	Priority Level
Lake County	1.196	7	Critical
Marion County	1.271	9	Critical
Crockett County	1.228	14	Critical
Benton County	1.196	13	Critical
Lincoln County	1.116	35	Critical

High-Need Counties (Composite Vulnerability 1.0 - 1.2)

County	Vulnerability Score	Youth Count	Priority Level
Knox County	1.106	317	High
Sevier County	1.137	123	High
Jefferson County	1.129	70	High
Maury County	1.084	49	High
Obion County	1.065	17	High

5.2 Geographic Clusters of Vulnerability

Rural Vulnerability Clusters

- **Upper Cumberland Region:** Fentress, Morgan, Cumberland, White
- **Southeast Tennessee:** Marion, Hamilton, Bradley, McMinn
- **West Tennessee Rural:** Gibson, Hardeman, Haywood, Crockett

Urban Vulnerability Patterns

- **Memphis Metro:** Shelby County shows moderate vulnerability despite resources
- **Nashville Metro:** Davidson County has lowest vulnerability statewide
- **Knoxville Metro:** Knox County shows elevated vulnerability in urban setting

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6. Demographic and Geographic Correlations

6.1 Age-Based Vulnerability Patterns

- **17-18 year olds:** Higher housing stability concerns
- **19-20 year olds:** Peak vulnerability across all domains
- **21+ year olds:** Slight improvement in housing and relationships

6.2 Gender-Based Patterns

- **Male youth:** Slightly higher housing stability vulnerability
- **Female youth:** Slightly higher mental health vulnerability
- **Overall:** Minimal gender differences in composite vulnerability

6.3 Geographic Mobility Patterns

- **Removal vs. Placement:** 85% of youth remain in same zip code
- **Cross-county placements:** 15% of youth placed outside commitment county
- **Urban-rural movement:** Limited geographic mobility between urban and rural areas

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7. Policy Implications and Recommendations

7.1 Resource Allocation Priorities

Immediate Intervention Required

1. **Lake, Marion, and Crockett Counties:** Critical housing and relationship support
2. **Rural counties with high vulnerability:** Enhanced service delivery infrastructure
3. **Border counties:** Cross-jurisdictional service coordination

Strategic Investment Areas

1. **East Tennessee:** Housing stability programs and mental health services
2. **West Tennessee:** Relationship building and family support programs
3. **Middle Tennessee:** Service delivery optimization and prevention programs

7.2 Service Delivery Optimization

Geographic Service Gaps

- **Rural counties:** Limited access to specialized services
- **Border counties:** Jurisdictional coordination challenges
- **High-vulnerability clusters:** Need for integrated service models

Recommended Service Models

1. **Mobile service teams** for rural counties
2. **Integrated case management** for high-vulnerability youth
3. **Regional service hubs** to reduce geographic barriers

7.3 Prevention and Early Intervention

High-Risk Populations

- **Youth approaching transition age** (17-18 years)
- **Geographic clusters** with elevated vulnerability
- **Youth with multiple domain vulnerabilities**

Prevention Strategies

1. **Early housing planning** for transition-age youth
2. **Mental health screening** and early intervention
3. **Family strengthening programs** in high-need areas

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8. Data Quality and Limitations

8.1 Data Strengths

- **Comprehensive coverage:** 96 counties represented
- **Standardized assessment:** CANS and LIFESKILL protocols
- **Geographic detail:** County and zip code level data
- **Temporal consistency:** FY23-25 data period

8.2 Data Limitations

- **Missing geographic data:** Some zip codes and counties incomplete
- **Assessment timing:** Varying assessment frequencies across youth
- **Service access:** Limited data on actual service utilization
- **Outcome measures:** Focus on needs rather than outcomes

8.3 Recommendations for Data Enhancement

1. **Geographic validation** of all location data
2. **Service utilization tracking** to measure intervention effectiveness
3. **Outcome measurement** beyond vulnerability assessment
4. **Longitudinal tracking** of youth progress over time

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9. Conclusion

The Tennessee foster care youth landscape reveals a complex picture of geographic disparities and vulnerability patterns across three critical domains. While the state shows moderate overall vulnerability levels, significant geographic variations exist that require targeted intervention strategies.

9.1 Key Insights

- **Supportive Adult Relationships** represents the highest vulnerability area statewide
- **Rural counties** face unique challenges with limited service access
- **Urban counties** show better resource utilization and lower vulnerability

- **Geographic clustering** of vulnerability suggests regional intervention opportunities

9.2 Strategic Priorities

1. **Immediate intervention** in high-need counties (Lake, Marion, Crockett)
2. **Enhanced service delivery** in rural and border counties
3. **Integrated case management** for youth with multiple vulnerabilities
4. **Prevention programs** targeting transition-age youth

9.3 Moving Forward

This landscape analysis provides a foundation for evidence-based policy development and resource allocation. Continued monitoring and analysis will be essential to track progress and identify emerging needs across Tennessee's diverse geographic regions.

The data demonstrates that while challenges exist across all three focus areas, targeted interventions based on geographic vulnerability patterns can significantly improve outcomes for Tennessee's foster care youth population.

Appendices

Appendix A: County Vulnerability Rankings

Complete county-level vulnerability data available in `county_vulnerability_summary.csv`

Appendix B: Youth-Level Vulnerability Profiles

Individual youth vulnerability data available in `youth_vulnerability_summary.csv`

Appendix C: Zip Code Analysis

Geographic vulnerability patterns at zip code level available in `zip_vulnerability_summary.csv`

Appendix D: Methodology Details

Complete analytic methodology available in `Analytic_Approach_Document.md`

Contact Information

Report Prepared By: Belmont Data & AI Collaborative (BDAIC)
Data Source: IL YOUTH DATASET FROM FY23-25.xlsx
Analysis Date: December 2024

For questions or additional analysis: Refer to the project documentation and implementation scripts.

This report provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding Tennessee's foster care youth landscape and informing evidence-based policy decisions.