

Youth Outcomes After Transitioning from Foster Care

A Pre-Post Analysis of Tennessee Foster Care Youth

Note on Navigating This Report

This report is interactive:

-  In **Executive Summary**, click 'wave 1' or 'wave 2 & wave 3' to understand more about what they mean
 -  Click on any finding in the **Key Findings at a Glance** section to jump directly to the detailed data table and analysis
 -  Within the data tables, click on any **Outcome** variable to view its definition in the appendix
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Executive Summary

This report analyzes **21 key outcomes** for Tennessee foster care youth, comparing their experiences while in care ([wave 1](#)) to their outcomes after transitioning to adulthood ([waves 2 & 3](#)), using data from the [National Youth in Transition Database \(NYTD\)](#).

Overall Summary Findings:

 **Key Insight:** After leaving foster care, youth face increased challenges with housing stability and economic security, including a significant rise in homelessness and greater reliance on public assistance.

 **Positive Outcomes:** Despite these challenges, there are notable improvements in employment and job training participation, and fewer youth become involved with the justice system after transition.

Key Findings at a Glance:

Finding	Quick Summary
 Housing instability increases after foster care	Significant rise in homelessness
 Employment and job training participation rise substantially	Supporting economic self-sufficiency
 Reliance on public and financial assistance increases	Highlighting ongoing economic vulnerability
 Educational attainment remains stable	Continued support needed for progress
 Social connections and supportive relationships grow	Important protective factors
 Justice system involvement declines	Fewer youth incarcerated after foster care



Methods

Dataset Acquisition

Primary Data Source:

National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN)

Cohort Structure:

Four longitudinal cohorts of Tennessee foster care youth were followed at three time points:

Age	Wave	Status
17	Wave 1	In care
19	Wave 2	Post-transition
21	Wave 3	Post-transition

Cohort Years:

2011–2015

2014–2018

2017–2021

2020–2024

Data Preparation & Integration

Sample Overview:

Wave	Youth Count
Wave 1	3,068
Wave 2	1,362
Wave 3	950
Final Analytic Sample	720 (with valid data across relevant waves)

Processing Steps:

- All four cohorts were merged into a single dataset.
- Only youth identified as foster children in Tennessee were included.
- Data were de-duplicated and organized by unique participant ID.

Wave Consolidation:

- To represent post-transition outcomes, responses from waves 2 and 3 were combined for each participant:
 - If a participant answered 'yes' in either wave 2 or wave 3, the combined value was set to 'yes'.
 - If a participant answered 'no' in both waves, the combined value was set to 'no'.
 - If data were missing for one wave but present for the other, the available response was used.
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Outcome Measurement & Analysis

- For each outcome, the count and percentage of 'yes' responses were calculated for:
 - **Baseline (Wave 1):** Youth in care at age 17
 - **Post-Transition (Waves 2 & 3 Combined):** Youth after leaving care (ages 19 and/or 21)
 - **Combined:** Total unique 'yes' responses across all waves
- Analyses focused on changes in outcome prevalence from baseline to post-transition, highlighting key shifts in youth experiences.

Key Outcomes: Before and After Transition

Housing Stability

What this domain measures: This domain evaluates whether youth have secure, consistent, and safe living arrangements. On the baseline survey, youth responded "yes" if they had experienced these conditions at any point from age 0 to 17.

Outcome	Baseline (age 17)	Post-Transition (ages 18-21)	Combined
 Experienced Homelessness	11.5%	29.3%	36.8%
 Receiving Public Housing Assistance	1.7%	7.6%	7.9%

Analysis:

 **Key Finding:** Overall, housing instability increases during post-transition.

- ⚠ The rate of homelessness increases by **17.8%** after foster care

Employment

What this domain measures: This domain assesses the extent to which youth are engaged in the workforce or preparing for employment. These outcomes reflect both the opportunities and challenges youth encounter as they work toward economic self-sufficiency and develop job-related skills.

Outcome	Baseline (age 17)	Post-Transition (ages 18-21)	Combined
 Full-time Employment	1.1%	31.5%	31.8%
 Part-time Employment	10.0%	23.6%	30.6%
 Employment Skills Training	16.8%	37.7%	46.5%

Analysis:

 **Key Finding:** By age 21, nearly one-third (**31.8%**) of youth have held full-time jobs, and almost half (**46.5%**) have completed employment skills training.

- Full-time employment rises by **30.4%** after foster care
- Employment skills training participation increases by **20.9%**, indicating many youth seek to build job skills during the transition to adulthood

Financial Independence

What this domain measures: This domain evaluates the extent to which youth are able to support themselves financially. These outcomes reflect the financial challenges and reliance on assistance that youth may experience as they move toward independent adulthood. At baseline, youth responses may include financial assistance received from parents or family members.

Outcome	Baseline (age 17)	Post-Transition (ages 18-21)	Combined
 Receiving Other Financial Assistance	3.5%	7.4%	10.6%
 Receiving Public Financial Assistance	4.1%	5.3%	6.0%
 Receiving Public Food Assistance	5.0%	36.6%	36.7%
 Receiving Social Security Benefits	7.1%	9.9%	14.9%

Analysis:

 **Key Finding:** A combined **68.2%** of youth receive financial assistance before and after transition, showing widespread reliance on multiple support sources.

- ⚠ The largest increase in assistance after transition is in **public food assistance**, which rises by **31.6%**
- ⚠ Before transition, **7.6%** receive financial assistance (both public and private); after, **12.7%** do

Education & Training

What this domain measures: This domain evaluates the educational progress and engagement of youth by tracking key educational milestones. These indicators reflect both ongoing participation in education and the attainment of credentials that support long-term self-sufficiency and career opportunities.

 **Note:** If a youth reports pursuing a bachelor's degree at baseline and begins pursuing a higher degree or stops pursuing the degree during post-transition, they will answer 'no' to bachelor's degree in the post-transition wave.

Outcome	Baseline (age 17)	Post-Transition (ages 18-21)	Combined
 Associate Degree	0.1%	1.9%	2.1%
 Bachelor Degree	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%
 Currently Enrolled in School/Training	95.4%	46.6%	96.5%
 Receiving Educational Aid	2.0%	17.2%	18.5%
 High School Diploma/GED	4.4%	59.0%	60.7%
 Higher Education Certification	100.0%	69.2%	60.9%
 Higher Degree	0.0%	0.3%	0.3%
 Vocational Certificate	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
 Vocational License	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Analysis:

Key Findings:

- High school diploma or GED attainment rises by **54.6%** from baseline to post-transition
- Educational aid receipt increases by **15.2%**
- School or training enrollment drops by **48.8%**
- Associate and higher degree attainment remains low, with only slight increases post-transition
- Vocational certificates and licenses are consistently **0.0%**, showing minimal engagement in these options

Family and Children

What this domain measures: This domain assesses the extent to which youth are beginning to form families of their own. These outcomes provide insight into early parenthood and family formation within this population, highlighting important aspects of their transition to adulthood and the support they may need as young parents.

Outcome	Baseline (age 17)	Post-Transition (ages 18-21)	Combined
 Has Children	5.9%	27.0%	28.8%
 Married at Child's Birth	0.0%	15.9%	14.7%

Analysis:

 **Key Finding:** By age 21, **28.8%** of youth in the sample have children, but only **14.7%** were married at the time of their child's birth.

-  Between ages 18 and 21, more than 1 in 4 youth (**27.0%**) became parents
-  Only **15.9%** of youth with children were married at the time of their child's birth post-transition, meaning that the vast majority (over **84%**) became parents outside of marriage
-  Among all youth post-transition, **27.0%** have children, but just **15.9%** were married at the time of their child's birth

Adult Support

What this domain measures: This domain evaluates whether youth have a stable and supportive relationship with at least one adult. This indicator reflects the presence of a caring adult who can offer guidance, emotional support, and practical assistance as youth navigate the challenges of adulthood. Maintaining such connections is considered a key protective factor for positive outcomes during and after the transition from foster care.

Outcome	Baseline (age 17)	Post-Transition (ages 18-21)	Combined
 Connection to Supportive Adult	95.3%	94.3%	99.2%

Analysis:

 **Key Finding:** The vast majority of individuals maintain a connection to a supportive adult between ages 17 and 21.

Justice System Involvement

What this domain measures: This domain shows how many youth have been incarcerated.

Outcome	Baseline (age 17)	Post-Transition (ages 18-21)	Combined
 Experienced Incarceration	44.7%	35.7%	57.1%

Analysis:

 **Key Finding:** Over half of youth in foster care (**57.1%**) have been incarcerated at some point in their lives.

- The proportion of youth incarcerated decreases by **9%** after leaving foster care, by age 21
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Appendix

NYTD Outcomes Codebook

See this appendix for Outcome variable names and definitions.

[!\[\]\(e10773081adcaeab632f9dd4c8931cd5_img.jpg\) NYTD Outcomes Codebook \(PDF\)](#)

Wave Variable Description

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Wave

Variable Label: Which of Three Outcomes Surveys for this Cohort

Definition:

Each cohort will have three outcomes surveys, one at age 17 when they are still in foster care, a followup at age 19, and a 2nd followup at age 21.

Data Type: TinyInt

NYTD Element: Derived

Value	Value Label
1	Age 17 Baseline Survey
2	Age 19 Followup
3	Age 21 Followup

Homeless Variable Description

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Homeless

Variable Label: #49: Homelessness

Definition:

A youth is considered to have experienced homelessness if the youth had no regular or adequate place to live. This definition includes situations where the youth is living in a car or on the street, or staying in a homeless or other temporary shelter.

- For a 17-year-old youth in the baseline population, the data element relates to a youth's lifetime experiences.
- For a 19- or 21-year-old youth in the followup population, the data element relates to the youth's experience in the past two years.

"Yes" means the youth has been homeless.

"Declined" means the youth did not answer this question.

Data Type: TinyInt

NYTD Element: #49

Value	Value Label
0	no
1	yes
2	declined
77	blank

 Public Housing Assistance Variable Description Back to table

PubHousAs

Variable Label: #44: Public Housing Assistance

Definition:

A youth is receiving public housing assistance if the youth is living in government-funded public housing, or receiving a government-funded housing voucher to pay for part of his/her housing costs as of the date of the outcome data collection. CFCIP room and board payments are not included in this definition.

"Yes" means the youth is not in foster care and is receiving public housing assistance.

"No" means the youth is not in foster care and is not receiving public housing assistance.

"Not Applicable" means the child is in foster care

"Declined" means the youth did not answer this question.

Data Type: TinyInt

NYTD Element: #44

Value	Value Label
0	no
1	yes
2	declined
77	blank
88	not applicable

✉ Full-time Employment Variable Description

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CurrFTE

Variable Label: #37: Current Full Time Employment

Definition:

A youth is employed full-time if employed at least 35 hours per week, in one or multiple jobs, as of the date of the outcome data collection.

"Yes" means the youth is employed fulltime.

"Declined" means the youth did not answer this question.

"Blank" means the youth did not participate in the survey.

Data Type: TinyInt

NYTD Element: #37

Value	Value Label
0	no
1	yes
2	declined
77	blank

⌚ Part-time Employment Variable Description

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CurrPTE

Variable Label: #38: Current Part-Time Employment

Definition:

A youth is employed part-time if employed between one and 34 hours per week, in one or multiple jobs, as of the date of the outcome data collection.

"Yes" means the youth is employed part-time.

"Declined" means the youth did not answer this question.

Data Type: TinyInt

NYTD Element: #38

Value	Value Label
0	no
1	yes
2	declined
77	blank

 Employment Skills Training Variable Description[!\[\]\(90164f74041f71b612f1c8605a7ede54_img.jpg\) BACK](#) Back to table

EmplSkills

Variable Label: #39: Employment Related Skills

Definition:

A youth has obtained employment-related skills if the youth completed an apprenticeship, internship, or other on-the-job training, either paid or unpaid, in the past year. The experience must help the youth acquire employment related skills, such as specific trade skills such as carpentry or auto mechanics, or office skills such as word processing or use of office equipment.

"Yes" means the youth has obtained employment-related skills.

"Declined" means the youth did not answer this question.

Data Type: TinyInt

NYTD Element: #39

Value	Value Label
0	no
1	yes
2	declined
77	blank

🔗 Connection to Supportive Adult Variable Description

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CnctAdult

Variable Label: #48: Connection To Adult

Definition:

A youth has a connection to an adult if, as of the date of the outcome data collection, the youth knows an adult who he or she can go to for advice or guidance when there is a decision to make or a problem solve, or for companionship when celebrating personal achievements. The adult must be easily accessible to the youth, either by telephone or in person. This can include, but is not limited to adult relatives, parents or foster parents. The definition excludes spouses, partners, boyfriends or girlfriends and current caseworkers.

"Yes" means the youth has such a connection with an adult.

"Declined" means the youth did not answer this question.

Data Type: TinyInt

NYTD Element: #48

Value	Value Label
0	no
1	yes
2	declined
77	blank

Experienced Incarceration Variable Description

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Incarc

Variable Label: #51: Incarceration

Definition:

A youth is considered to have been incarcerated if the youth was confined in a jail, prison, correctional facility, or juvenile or community detention facility in connection with allegedly committing a crime (misdemeanor or felony).

- For a 17-year-old youth in the baseline population, the data element relates to a youth's lifetime experience.
- For a 19- or 21-year-old youth in the followup population, the data element relates to the youth's experience in the past two years.

"Yes" means the youth was incarcerated with a "yes" or "no".

"Declined" means the youth did not answer this question.

Data Type: TinyInt

NYTD Element: #51

Value	Value Label
0	no
1	yes
2	declined
77	blank

⌚ Has Children Variable Description

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Children

Variable Label: #52: Children

Definition:

A youth is considered to have a child if the youth has given birth herself, or the youth has fathered any children who were born.

- For a 17-year-old youth in the baseline population, the data element relates to a youth's lifetime experience.
- For a 19- or 21-year-old youth in the followup population, the data element relates to the youth's experience in the past two years only.

This refers to biological parenthood.

"Yes" means the youth had a child.

"Declined" means the youth did not answer this question.

Data Type: TinyInt

NYTD Element: #52

Value	Value Label
0	no
1	yes
2	declined
77	blank

⌚ Marriage Variable Description

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Marriage

Variable Label: #53: Marriage At Child'S Birth

Definition:

A youth is married at the time of the child's birth if he or she was united in matrimony according to the laws of the State to the child's other parent. "Yes" means the youth was married to the child's other parent at the time of the birth of any child reported in the element described in Element 52.

If the youth does not answer this question, indicate "declined."

If the answer to the element described in Element 52 is "no," this question is "not applicable."

Data Type: TinyInt

NYTD Element: #53

Value	Value Label
0	no
1	yes
2	declined
77	blank
88	not applicable

Receiving Other Financial Assistance Variable Description

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OthrFinAs

Variable Label: #45: Other Financial Support

Definition:

A youth has other financial support if receiving periodic and/or significant financial resources or support from a source not listed in the elements 41 through 44 as of the date of outcome data collection. Such support can include:

- payments from a spouse or family member (biological, foster or adoptive),
- child support that the youth receives for him or herself, or
- funds from a legal settlement.

This definition does not include:

- occasional gifts, such as birthday or graduation checks or small donations of food or personal incidentals,
- child care subsidies,
- child support for a youth's child, or
- other financial support which does not benefit the youth directly in supporting himself or herself.

"Yes" means the youth is receiving other financial support.

"Declined" means the youth did not answer this question.

Data Type: TinyInt

NYTD Element: #45

Value	Value Label
0	no
1	yes
2	declined
77	blank

吏 Receiving Public Financial Assistance Variable Description

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PubFinAs

Variable Label: #42: Public Financial Assistance

Definition:

A youth is receiving public financial assistance if receiving ongoing cash welfare payments from the government to cover some of his or her basic needs, as of the date of the outcome data collection. Public financial assistance does not include government payments or subsidies for specific purposes, such as unemployment insurance, child care subsidies, education assistance, food stamps or housing assistance.

"Yes" means the youth is not in foster care and is receiving public financial assistance.

"No" means the youth is not in foster care and is not receiving public financial assistance.

"Not Applicable" means the child is in foster care

"Declined" means the youth did not answer this question.

Data Type: TinyInt

NYTD Element: #42

Value	Value Label
0	no
1	yes
2	declined
77	blank
88	not applicable

① Receiving Public Food Assistance Variable Description

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PubFoodAs

Variable Label: #43: Public Food Assistance

Definition:

A youth is receiving public food assistance if receiving food stamps in any (i.e. government-sponsored checks, coupons or debit cards) to buy eligible food at authorized stores as of the date of the outcome data collection. This definition includes receiving public food assistance through the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program.

“Yes” means the youth is not in foster care and is receiving public food assistance.

“No” means the youth is not in foster care and is not receiving public food assistance.

“Not Applicable” means the child is in foster care

“Declined” means the youth did not answer this question.

Data Type: TinyInt

NYTD Element: #43

Value	Value Label
0	no
1	yes
2	declined
77	blank
88	not applicable

⌚ Receiving Social Security Benefits Variable Description

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SocSecrty

Variable Label: #40: Social Security

Definition:

A youth is receiving Social Security if they are receiving SSI or SSDI payments, either directly or as a dependent beneficiary as of the date of the outcome data collection.

- Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments are made to eligible low-income persons with disabilities.
- Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) payments are made to persons with a certain amount of work history who become disabled. A youth may receive SSDI payments through a parent.

"Yes" means the youth is receiving Social Security payments.

"Declined" means the youth did not answer this question.

Data Type: TinyInt

NYTD Element: #40

Value	Value Label
0	no
1	yes
2	declined
77	blank

 Substance Abuse Referral Variable Description BACK [Back to table](#) Substance Abuse Referral Variable Description

Education Variable Description

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HighEdCert

Variable Label: #46: Highest Educational Certification Received

Definition:

A youth has received an education certificate if the youth has a high school diploma or general equivalency degree (GED), vocational certificate, vocational license, associate's degree (e.g., A.A.), bachelor's degree (e.g., B.A. or B.S.), or a higher degree as of the date of the outcome data collection. Indicate the highest degree that the youth has received. The valid responses options for this data element are described below:

- High school diploma/GED
- A vocational certificate is a document stating that a person has received education or training that qualifies him for a particular job, e.g. auto mechanics or cosmetology.
- A vocational license is a document that indicates that the State or Local government recognizes an individual as a qualified professional in a particular trade or business.
- An associate's degree is generally a two-year degree from a community college.
- A bachelor's degree is a four-year degree from a college or university.
- A higher degree indicates a graduate degree, such as a Master's Degree or a Jurist Doctor (J.D.).
- "None of the above" means that the youth has not received any of the above educational certifications.
- "Declined" means the youth did not answer the question.

Data Type: TinyInt

NYTD Element: #46

Value Value Label

1	high school or ged
2	vocational certificate
3	vocational license
4	associate degree
5	bachelor degree
6	higher degree
7	none of the above
8	declined
77	blank