
Highlights from the NYTD Survey: Outcomes reported by young people at ages 17, 19, and 21 (Cohort 3)

Background

To measure the outcomes of youth¹ transitioning out of foster care, states are required to administer the NYTD survey to cohorts of youth at ages 17, 19 and 21. With this third cohort of young people having completed all three waves of data collection², we better understand the experiences of current and former foster care youth as they age. Response rates for both baseline (age 17) and follow-up (ages 19 and 21) surveys varied widely by state. To account for the variation and to ensure that groups that differ in response behavior are represented by members of those groups who did respond, the Children’s Bureau employed a weighting methodology to the NYTD survey responses to identify and correct potential non-response bias in each of the three waves of data collection³. All outcome results were weighted to represent the third cohort of 17-year-olds eligible to take the NYTD survey in federal fiscal year (FFY) 2017. All outcomes percentages reported in this data brief are weighted estimates.

In this data brief:

We present findings from NYTD surveys completed by Cohort 3 youth at ages 17, 19, and 21 in Federal Fiscal Years 2017, 2019, and 2021.

For more information, please contact the Children’s Bureau at NYTDhelp@acf.hhs.gov



Findings

Response Rates and Reasons for Non-Participation

In FFY 2017, 24,474 youth were identified as eligible to take the survey at age 17. Of those, 16,254 completed the survey, resulting in a national response rate of 66%. In FFY 2019, 12,284 young adults were eligible for follow-up at age 19, and 8,912 (73%) completed the survey. In FFY 2021, 12,245 young adults were eligible for follow-up at age 21, and 7,780 (64%) responded. Please note these follow-up rates differ from the compliance participation rates reported in the NYTD Data Snapshots which report the adjusted number of young people eligible to take the survey at ages 19 and 21⁴.

Survey Response Rates and Reasons for Non-Participation, Cohort 3

Survey Status	Age 17 (n=24,474)	Age 19 (n=12,284)	Age 21 (n=12,245)
Participated	66%	73%	64%
Youth declined	11%	4%	6%
Parent declined	<1%	<1%	0%
Incapacitated	2%	1%	1%
Incarcerated	1%	2%	2%
Runaway or missing	5%	<1%	<1%
Unable to locate or invite	10%	20%	27%
Death	<1%	<1%	1%
Blank/Out-of-range*	5%	<1%	<1%

* 'Other' may include late surveys, Outcome Reporting Status of "participated" but no valid survey responses, or Outcomes Reporting Status had a value of blank or out-of-range.

Demographics of Survey Participants

Youth who participated in the survey at age 17 and young adults who participated again at age 19 and/or 21 were demographically similar. As seen in the prior two cohorts, this cohort is racially diverse and generally represented equally by both sexes, although by age 21, more females than males had completed the survey. All youth surveyed at age 17 were in foster care. By age 19, 61% of young adults surveyed were no longer in foster care, and by age 21 that percentage had increased to 79%.

Demographics of Survey Participants, Cohort 3

Race and Ethnicity**	Age 17 (n=16,254)	Age 19 (n=8,912)	Age 21 (n=7,780)
American Indian or Alaska Native	2%	2%	2%
Asian	1%	1%	1%
Black or African American	27%	26%	26%
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	22%	24%	24%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	<1%	<1%	<1%
White	42%	40%	39%
Two or More	6%	6%	
Unknown/Declined to Specify	1%	2%	1%

Sex	Age 17	Age 19	Age 21
Male	50%	46%	44%
Female	50%	54%	56%

** All races are mutually exclusive and exclude children of Hispanic origin. Children of Hispanic ethnicity may be any race.

Youth Outcomes at Ages 17, 19, and 21

As youth begin their transition to adulthood, they should have experiences that promote growth and independence. Youth who are or have been in foster care can face a number of challenges that may hinder a smooth transition to adulthood. The NYTD results from this cohort of young people can provide a national glimpse of how these young people are faring in certain outcome areas as they age.

Outcome 1: Financial Self-Sufficiency⁵

To better understand a youth's outcome experiences in the area of financial self-sufficiency, the NYTD survey poses questions to youth regarding their acquisition of skills necessary to enter the labor market and to access financial resources to help meet their living expenses. As youth age and make decisions about whether or not to remain in or return to foster care⁶, financial stability becomes a crucial indicator of a youth's readiness for a successful transition to adulthood.

- At age 17, one-third (33%) of respondents reported experiences in at least one employment-related category (full- or part-time employment; paid or unpaid apprenticeship, internship, or other on-the-job training). Over half (58%) at age 19 and 65% at age 21 reported that they were receiving some employment-related experience at the time they completed the survey.
- At age 19, 38% reported receiving at least one form of financial assistance (Social Security, educational aid, or some other form of significant, periodic financial support). At age 21, that percentage had declined to 33%.
- Pursuing either employment or educational programming can be an important marker of emerging financial self-sufficiency. At age 17, 34% of youth reported experiences in at least one employment-related category or receiving some type of educational financial aid. That percentage increased to 65% for 19-year-old and 70% for 21-year-old respondents.
- Only young adults not in care at ages 19 or 21 were asked about receiving public assistance. Of those not in care, 23% at age 19 and 31% at age 21 reported that at the time they completed the survey, they were receiving at least one type of public assistance (housing, food, or financial).

Financial Self-Sufficiency among Young People in Cohort 3

Outcome area	Age 17 (n=16,254)	Age 19 (n=8,912)	Age 21 (n=7,780)
Employed full- or part-time	18%	45%	55%
Receiving employment-related skills training	22%	29%	27%
Receiving Social Security	11%	10%	9%
Receiving education aid	2%	20%	17%
Receiving other financial support	10%	16%	12%
Receiving public assistance ⁷	N/A	23%	31%

Outcome 2: Educational Attainment

Achieving a high school diploma or General Equivalency Degree (GED)⁸ can be considered a minimal requirement for self-sufficiency and can assist in establishing a solid educational foundation that will prepare youth for future educational pursuits. The NYTD survey asks young people to report their current enrollment status in an educational program and the highest educational certification received.

- While most youth (92%) at age 17 had not yet received any educational certifications, the majority (93%) of them indicated they were enrolled in and attending some type of educational program.
- By age 19, over half (59%) had received at least a high school diploma/GED or higher degree. By age 21, that percentage had increased to 75%.

Educational Attainment

Outcome area	Age 17 (n=16,254)	Age 19 (n=8,912)	Age 21 (n=7,780)
Received high school diploma or GED	5%	58%	71%
Received vocational certificate/license, associate's or bachelor's degree, or higher	<1%	1%	4%
Enrolled and attending an educational program	93%	48%	26%

Outcome 3: Connections with Adults

Establishing or maintaining a positive, consistent and lasting relationship with at least one adult is a critical component in ensuring youth make a successful transition from foster care to adulthood. The NYTD survey asks young people whether there is currently at least one adult in their life to whom they can go for advice or emotional support.⁹

- At age 17, 93% of youth had reported having an adult in their lives.
- The vast majority of young adults continue to report having a positive connection as they age, including 89% of 19-year-olds and 87% of 21-year-olds.

Outcome 4: Experiences with Homelessness

Having a safe, stable, and affordable place to live can protect against a number of negative outcomes. Young people who leave foster care unprepared to live on their own are at risk for becoming homeless soon after discharge. In FFY 2017, youth were asked at age 17 if they had ever been homeless at some point in their lives. In FFYs 2019 and 2021, young adults at age 19 and 21 were asked if they had experienced homelessness within the past two years.

- At age 17, 21% had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives. At age 19, 21% had reported having been homeless at some point within the past two years, the majority

(79%) of whom were no longer in foster care. At age 21, 26% had experienced homelessness within the past two years. Of these young adults, 90% had left foster care.

- Of the 6,683 young people who completed all three waves of the NYTD survey, 44% reported having had a homeless experience by age 21 (based on survey responses at age 17, 19, and 21).
- Of the 1,344 youth who reported at age 17 having been homeless at some point, 49% reported another homeless episode at either age 19 or 21, and 18% reported a homeless experience at both ages 19 and 21.

Outcome 5: High-Risk Behaviors

Transition-age youth who engage in high-risk behaviors are at increased risk for a variety of negative outcomes. The NYTD survey collects information on three key outcomes that have been associated with hindering successful transitions to adulthood among youth in foster care.¹⁰ Results from the survey indicate that 31% of 19-year-olds and 37% of 21-year-olds reported experiencing at least one high-risk outcome within the past two years. At age 17, 43% had reported a history of high-risk behaviors.

- At age 17, close to one-quarter (24%) had, at some point during their lifetimes, been referred for substance abuse assessment or counseling. Twelve (12) percent at age 19 and 10% at age 21 reported having had a referral within the past two years.
- At age 17, 30% of the youth reported a history of incarceration for allegedly committing a crime. Nineteen (19) percent of 19-year-olds and 17% of 21-year-olds reported having been incarcerated for allegedly committing a crime within the past two years.
- The proportion of young people reporting having given birth to or fathered a child has steadily increased at each wave of the survey. At age 17, 5% of youth had a child. At ages 19 and 21, 10% and 20%, respectively, reported having given birth to or fathered a child within the past two years. The NYTD survey also asks youth if they were married at the time of the child's birth. Only 4% of the young adults at age 19 and 10% at age 21 who had children were married at the time of the child's birth.
- Among the 6,683 young people who completed all three waves of the NYTD survey, 26% reported having had a child by age 21. Of those, 76% were females.

High-Risk Behaviors among Young People in Cohort 3

Outcome Area	Age 17 (n=16,254)	Age 19 (n=8,912)	Age 21 (n=7,780)
Referred for substance abuse assessment or counseling	24% (in lifetime)	12% (in past two years)	10% (in past two years)
Incarcerated	30% (in lifetime)	19% (in past two years)	17% (in past two years)
Had children	5% (in lifetime)	10% (in past two years)	20% (in past two years)

Outcome 6: Access to Health Insurance

Access to health care can help ensure that youth receive the prevention and treatment services they need to remain healthy. Youth in title IV-E foster care are categorically eligible to receive Medicaid. In 2014, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act was enacted to allow for certain eligible young people to be covered by Medicaid up to age 26. Additionally, under the Substance Use-Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment for Patients and Communities (SUPPORT) Act, a state will now need to offer Medicaid coverage to young people (who turn age 18 on or after January 1, 2023) who exited foster care in another state, as well as those who transition from their own foster care.¹¹ The NYTD survey asks young people whether they are receiving Medicaid or some other type of health insurance coverage.

- The majority of youth at age 17 (83%) reported having Medicaid insurance coverage. An additional 9% of surveyed youth, however, reported not knowing if they had Medicaid coverage.
- The majority of 19-year-olds (76%) reported having Medicaid, and 13% also reported having some other type of health insurance.
- At age 21, 72% of young adults reported having Medicaid, and 17% reported having some other type of health insurance.

Conclusion

The baseline and follow-up survey information from Cohort 3 reveals that, generally, some young adults are faring well in many outcome areas but some youth are struggling. By age 21, young people reported positive gains in many protective factors, yet, in some cases there is evidence that current and former youth in foster care continue to face challenges that can be barriers to independence.

At age 17, the majority of youth in foster care were attending school, had positive connections to at least one adult, were receiving Medicaid, and had never been homeless. At ages 19 and 21, many of these positive indicators were still evident. From age 17 to age 21, the proportions of youth in each survey wave reporting having been incarcerated or having been referred to substance abuse

treatment or counseling decreased. By age 21, three-quarters (75%) had reported having earned at least a high school diploma or GED, and the vast majority had maintained a positive connection to an adult. There also are encouraging signs of financial self-sufficiency with the majority of 19 and 21-year-olds reporting being employed or receiving employment-related skills or some type of educational aid, as well as having Medicaid or some other type of health insurance.

Although these gains are promising, there are indications that there are some outcome areas where young adults may benefit from extra support or services. Close to one-quarter of young people at each survey wave (21% at ages 17 and 19 and 26% at age 21) had experienced homelessness, and of those who completed the survey in all three waves (6,683 youth), 44% of them reported having had more than one homelessness experience. As youth aged, more young adults reported having given birth to or fathered a child, and of those who completed all three survey waves about one-quarter (26%) reported having had a child by age 21.

These findings may help underscore the importance of providing supports to young people who may be particularly vulnerable to certain outcomes, including providing targeted independent living services or allowing youth to remain in foster care during this transition to adulthood. In many outcome areas, young adults who were in care past age 18 reported experiencing fewer challenges than their peers who had left care, suggesting that some young adults may have a more successful transition to adulthood by remaining connected to the child welfare system and to services available after the age of 18.

We hope states will see these results as one additional piece of information that may be used to help inform transition planning practices, service provision, extended foster care policies, and data collection procedures. In addition to federal resources (including reports, data briefs, national and state-specific data snapshots)¹², we encourage states to analyze their own NYTD data to guide continuous data quality improvements, and, if needed, identify areas where systems or practice changes may be needed to increase survey participation rates in order to ensure youth voices are increasingly represented in decision making. We also urge states to continue to engage young people as partners in data collection, data analysis, and dissemination of survey results.

Endnotes

¹ Generally, “youth” refers to age-17 respondents, “young adult” refers to ages 19- and 21-respondents, and “young people” refers to all three survey-wave ages. In some instances, these terms are used interchangeably to minimize repetition and improve readability.

² All 50 states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico are required to collect and report NYTD data. Data collection began in FFY 2011 with Cohort 1 (FFYs 2011, 2013, 2015). Cohort 2 youth were surveyed in FFYs 2014, 2016, and 2018. For Cohort 3, states were required to collect baseline outcomes information from youth who turned age 17 while in foster care in FFY 2017. At follow-up, states were required to survey young adults during the six-month reporting periods in which they turned age 19 (in FFY 19) and 21 (in FFY 21). Depending on when the state invited the youth’s participation, a young person may have been age 18 or 19 (in FFY 19) or age 20 or 21 (in FFY 21) when surveyed. Because the goal of the NYTD survey is to capture a young adult’s outcome experiences on or around the 19th and 21st birthdays, we refer to these youth as 19-year-olds and 21-year-olds in this brief. The NYTD survey questions are in Appendix B of the NYTD regulation, available at <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2008-02-26/pdf/E8-3050.pdf>.

³ Weighted results did not vary dramatically from unweighted results. Non-response bias corrections were small. For a description of the weighting methodology used, please see the NYTD User's Guide available at the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN): <https://www.ndacan.acf.hhs.gov>.

⁴ Participation rates reported in this brief are the numbers of young adults who participated in the NYTD survey divided by the numbers of youth eligible to take the NYTD survey in each survey wave. Fifteen states chose to follow a sample of young adults for participation in the survey at ages 19 and 21, thus reducing the number of follow-up youth eligible to take the survey. When determining participation rates to meet compliance standards, states are not required to survey young adults at age 19 or 21 if the youth was reported to be incarcerated, incapacitated, or deceased (see 45 CFR 1356.85). For information on survey results and compliance response rates see the NYTD State Data Snapshots at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/data-and-statistics-nytd>.

⁵ Financial self-sufficiency includes whether or not the youth reports (1) being employed full-time, (2) being employed part-time, (3) completing training for employment-related skills, and/or (3) receiving financial supports such as Social Security, educational aid, or some other type of financial assistance. See 45 CFR 1356.83(g) for complete definitions of NYTD data elements.

⁶ Some states have opted to extend title IV-E assistance to young people over age 18, permitting some youth to remain in foster care voluntarily.

⁷ The NYTD survey questions related to a young person's use of public assistance are only asked of youth who are no longer in foster care.

⁸ Note that some states use the High School Completion test/HiSET™

⁹ "Adult" is considered to be someone other than the youth's spouse/partner, boyfriend/girlfriend, or current caseworker.

¹⁰ High risk behaviors include histories of substance abuse assessment or counseling, incarceration, or having children. The NYTD survey also asks a youth if they were married at the time of the child's birth. Only 4% of the young adults at age 19 and 10% at age 21 who had children were married at the time of the child's birth.

¹¹ The Affordable Care Act, Section 1902(a)(10)(A)(i)(IX) of the Social Security Act, extends Medicaid assistance to former foster youth in certain circumstances. This provision became effective January 1, 2014. The Substance Use-Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment for Patients and Communities (SUPPORT) Act was enacted into law as P.L. 115-271 on October 14, 2018.

¹² Please visit the Children's Bureau website for NYTD data and statistics and additional resources: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/research-data-technology/reporting-systems/nytd>