

Locating and Engaging Youth After They Leave Foster Care

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Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs Brief Series

Locating and Engaging Youth after They Leave Foster Care

Experiences Fielding the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs

Michael R. Pergamit

- States are required to collect data on youth aging out of foster care and provide them to the National Youth in Transition Database.
- Youth aging out of foster care are difficult to trace, being highly mobile and even experiencing bouts of homelessness. Those most difficult to find are most likely in need of services.
- For states to successfully locate youth who have left foster care, they must plan ahead, employ a large set of tracking methods, establish rapport with the youth, and connect with youths' families.

Locating youth who have aged out of foster care has become a pressing policy concern. The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (FCIA) required the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to develop a data collection system to (1) track the independent living services states provide to youth in foster care and (2) collect outcome measures for young people currently and formerly in foster care in order to assess each state's performance in operating their independent living programs. Toward that end, ACF has established a rule under 45 CFR Part 1356 requiring states to collect and provide certain information to

create the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD). The NYTD requires states to collect information from youth currently and formerly in foster care at ages 17, 19, and 21. States began collecting data from 17-year-olds in October 2010.

Recent research efforts that have followed youth as they aged out of foster care have succeeded in finding and engaging youth. From these efforts, it is possible to consider some of the practices that will lead to high response rates in the NYTD. One such research effort is the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs, an evaluation of four programs funded under the

The Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs demonstrated that most youth can be found after aging out of foster care, with 94 percent of a sample of 19-year-olds being located one year after leaving care.

FCIA. This brief uses the sample of youths studied in the evaluation of Los Angeles’s Life Skills Training (LST) program.

This brief begins with an overview of the Multi-Site Evaluation and information on the successes of the locating effort undertaken during this evaluation. The brief also includes information on the process for locating youth, methods and tools that can be used to track youth, and locations where youth are frequently found. The discussion concludes by offering lessons learned that could be used by states as part of their NYTD data collection.

The sample used in this brief is composed of 17-year-olds who were in out-of-home care, not in the probation system, placed in Los Angeles County, and deemed appropriate for engaging in a classroom-based program.¹ The LST sample includes 467 youth who were age 17 when interviewed at baseline in 2003–2004. Two annual follow-up interviews captured information from these youth at ages 18 and 19. This brief contains information on the 411 youths interviewed at the second follow-up, when approximately 82 percent had left care.

Ninety-minute interviews were conducted in person by professional interviewers using computer-assisted interviewing. For the second follow-up interviews, eight local interviewers staffed the project for most of the field period, with five interviewers completing most of the interviews. A local field manager worked with the L.A. Department of Child and Family Services and other local agencies and service providers to locate sample youth. Interviewed youth received \$30 for completing the baseline interview and \$50 for each of the two follow-up interviews.

Locating Rate for the LST Second Follow-Up

The Multi-Site Evaluation was very successful at locating and engaging youth after they left foster care, as shown in table 1. At the second follow-up, we located 439 (94 percent) of the 467 youths interviewed at the

baseline. Of these, we interviewed 411, for a retention rate of 88 percent.

Reaching this level of response was a complex task. Below, we outline the reasons for the difficulty in locating youth and the methods we used to overcome these challenges.

Youth Formerly in Foster Care Are Very Mobile

While in foster care, youth are highly mobile with frequent placement changes. In addition, some may run away from their placements, particularly as they approach emancipation age. In the LST sample, more than one in eight youths (12.9 percent) ran away from their placement at some time during their last year in foster care (table 2).

After youth leave care, their mobility continues. Those who moved since age 18 did so on average 2.3 times during the year. In our sample, only 40.1 percent of youth who had left care were living in the same place at age 19 as they were at age 18, and only 14.8 percent were living in the same place at age 19 as when they were 17.²

On top of this mobility, these youth have periods when they live in places where they are difficult to trace, including bouts of homelessness. At the second follow-up, approximately one-third (34.4 percent) of the

Table 1. Located Rate at Second Follow-Up

Interviewed	411	88%
Located, but not interviewed	28	6%
Total located	439	94%
Not located	28	6%
TOTAL BASELINE SAMPLE	467	100%

youth who were out of care had spent some time in the previous 12 months in difficult-to-trace locations, including staying with friends, in an abandoned building or on the street, in a car, in a homeless shelter, or in a hotel, motel, or Single Room Occupancy facility. Still other youth end up in the military or prison where it may be difficult to establish their whereabouts or make contact.

In sum, youth formerly in foster care constitute a very difficult group to find, whether as part of a research study or to ensure service provision. They may not form strong connections to their foster caregivers and may be distanced from their original family. Being young, they typically have not established the type of “paper

Table 2. Mobility among Youth Formerly in Foster Care in LST Sample

	Youth formerly in foster care
Living in same place as at age 18	40.1%
Living in same place as at age 17	14.8%
Ran away from care, last year in care	12.9%
Average number of moves since age 18	2.3
Lived in difficult-to-find locations past year	34.4%

trail” one creates in adulthood by having a rental history, paid utilities, established credit, and an employment history. Although they may have cell phones, they are typically on pre-paid plans that are frequently inactive. They also are unlikely to answer the phone and use minutes for people they don’t know or care about (such as interviewers in a research study or workers in the child welfare agency). Unlocated youth are likely to be among the most in need. In unpublished analysis from the study, we found that the youth who took the longest time to locate were more likely to have been homeless, to have been incarcerated, and to have less social support, and were less likely to have health insurance.

Processes for Locating and Engaging Youth Leaving Foster Care

The Multi-Site Evaluation used a multi-pronged approach for locating youth after they left foster care. The following outlines the key steps in the process.

1. **Connecting with youth while they are still in care.** This is crucial and sets the stage for positive results. The development of our ability to track youth began during the initial interview. One of the most important things we stressed with interviewers was to develop a rapport with the youth. Young people need to feel they can trust the person interviewing them, think that the interview is worthwhile, and believe that the information they provide will be used appropriately. Many youth participate as a way of “giving back” and helping others who find themselves in foster care. This rapport is best established at the beginning. The initial rapport has a great impact on the likelihood of locating and gaining cooperation from the youth in the future. It is easier to find someone who is willing to be found.
2. **Collecting information on friends and family.** At the end of the interview, we collected information that would help us

locate the youth in the future. Interviewers tried to get the youth to think about who might always know where they are or how to reach them; however, youth—particularly youth in foster care—can be unrealistic about such things. Since they do not yet have a concept of what their lives will be like after leaving care, they do not recognize who they are likely to be in touch with. Thus, we guided them through a specific set of possible contacts. We asked youth for names, addresses, phone numbers, and other contact information for biological parents, siblings, and other relatives (we stress to interviewers to ask about grandparents and other female relatives such as aunts). We also asked about their three best friends (who would know their whereabouts), as well as whether they had any plans to move or join the military. Many times, they did not know addresses or phone numbers; interviewers are trained to get as much specific information as possible, particularly to contact people who may have common names.

3. **Collecting personal information.** We collected the youths’ driver’s license or state ID numbers and social security numbers. Part of the consent process included gaining their permission to use these for the purpose of locating them in the future. During the latter part of our study, MySpace and Facebook began to be in wide use by young people. We instructed our interviewers to start finding out if the youths had a MySpace or Facebook page and a screen name. Although this did not lead us to many youths at that time, a survey being fielded today should expect to make use of these social networking sites.³
4. **Maintaining contact with youth.** At the end of the interview, youth were given the field manager’s business card and asked to call the toll-free number if they moved. Approximately six months later,

a letter was sent to every young person reminding them that we would be returning to interview them and again providing the toll-free number. Finally, a letter was sent shortly before our interviewing period to alert the youth to our imminent return and again provide the toll-free number. As will be discussed later, many youth took advantage of the toll-free number and kept us informed of their status.

5. **Incentives for participation.** As noted, many youth participated in order to “give back.” However, the payment received for participating clearly attracted some who otherwise might not have participated. Both types of incentives are important for high completion rates. Most youth want to be helpful, but need to understand why it is worthwhile to participate. Some youth will be indifferent and the payment will sway them, while others may only participate with a payment.

Methods for Finding Youth after They Leave Care

Successfully locating youth after they leave foster care requires a large set of tracking methods. We used many techniques to locate and contact sample young people. These included postal searches; database searches; reviews of case files and court records; outreach to parents, relatives, and friends; accessing public systems; working with shelters and the criminal justice system; and use of social network Internet sites. The discussion below highlights these various techniques.

Our first method was relying on the contact information that youth provided during the interview. From this source, we located 101 youths (table 3). In addition, many youth took advantage of the toll-free number. We received calls from 149 youths (approximately one-third of the sample) providing us with current addresses. Although most of these callers (122 youths) informed us they

had not moved, knowing this saved considerable time and expense.

Another key source of information was the L.A. Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS). DCFS proved to be an important source of information, even for youths who had left care. We began by taking each youth's previous address and asking DCFS if they knew if there had been an address change. They were able to confirm the address was the same for 134 youths. DCFS staff next reviewed case files and provided information on relatives that led us to 62 more youths. Finally, they reviewed court records and discovered other information, such as relatives, that led to an additional 20 youths. In all, DCFS provided new or confirmed existing information on 236 youths or their relatives, although some of these are the same young people who provided accurate contact information during the interview or called the toll-free line.

Those youth who were not found through contact information or through DCFS proved to be the most difficult cases to follow. Through the many means described above, we found an additional 57 youths. Among these additional sources of information, the most useful was the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). When youth with driver's licenses move, they sometimes update their address with the DMV. Since they are not always timely about this update, we checked back with the DMV regularly. In all, we found 26 youths from updated DMV records. We found other youth through social service offices, the criminal justice system (including probation offices), homeless shelters, mentors, and social networking sites.

Youths' Locations

The 337 youths out of care we interviewed at the second follow-up were living in a variety of situations. (As noted, approximately 18 percent of the 411 interviewed were still in care.) Of those who were out of care, more than two in five (41.5 percent) were living with family, either their biological parents

Table 3. Sources of Information Leading to Finding Youth (not mutually exclusive)

Source	Number of youth found
From information provided by youth during interview	101
From youth calling toll-free number	149
Total from youth information	250
DCFS confirmed address	134
Case file information on relatives	62
Court record information on relatives	20
DCFS transitional housing	13
Independent living coordinators	7
Total from DCFS information	236
Other sources	57

or other relatives, thus demonstrating the importance of having contact information for relatives (table 4). Another two in five (37.1 percent) were living independently—that is on their own, with a spouse or boy/girlfriend, with other friends, or in a college dorm. Only 3.6 percent of those out of care were still living in a former foster home (not a relative).

Youth who are the most difficult to track are very important to our understanding of what happens to young people after leaving care. Roughly one-seventh (14 percent) of our second follow-up interviews were with youth in difficult to find or access locations (e.g., jail or prison, couch surfing or living with a friend's family, homeless, in Job Corps, or in adult residential care facilities). Through relatives and friends and by working with shelters, we were able to find and interview youth who were living with a friend's family, couch surfing, or homeless. Working with the criminal justice system, we interviewed six youths in jail or prison.

Lessons for Future Locating Efforts

Identifying how we found each youth is very informative. However, we can also examine information provided by the youth during the interview that gives us clues about how to design locating in the future. Table 5 summarizes characteristics of out-of-care youth at the second follow-up that could provide information on potential locating opportunities.

- Commercial databases.** Survey organizations typically use commercial databases to search for respondents. These databases are developed from a variety of sources, particularly from individuals' establishing credit or employment histories. Few of our respondents have established rental or utility payment histories by age 19. Approximately one-quarter (24.1 percent) of young people formerly in foster care had a credit card at age 19, and about one-half (51.0 percent) were employed at the time of the interview.⁴ Thus, there is

Table 4. Living Arrangements at Time of Second Follow-Up for Youth Out of Care (N = 337)

Living arrangement	Percent (%)
Independent	37.1
With family (bio parents or other relatives)	41.5
Former foster home	3.6
Friend's family/couch surfing/homeless	6.5
Transitional housing	3.9
Jail/prison	1.8
Job Corps	0.9
Facility	4.7
TOTAL	100.0

some potential for finding youth formerly in foster care through these databases, but not much. The youth who can be found this way are likely easy to find in other ways. As these youth age, it is likely that these databases become more useful for locating them.

Perhaps more important, though, is using these databases to locate relatives. The contact information provided by the youth may have been incomplete or out of date by the time we attempted to locate them. Database searches on relatives proved very helpful in finding the relatives who then knew the location of the youth. Because some names are quite common, it is essential to gather as much information as possible from the youth in order to find the relative if the relative moves.

2. Government databases. Government databases provide opportunities to locate youth formerly in foster care, especially since many will find themselves using

government services. Food stamps are a major source of support for youth after leaving care, with approximately one in five former LST youth (20.9 percent) having received food stamps. Youth also participated in SSI (8.5 percent), public housing (8.0 percent), and Section 8 housing (6.8 percent).⁵ Thus, databases for these programs may also lead to youth. TANF and WIC become important sources of support for youth who become parents.⁶ In each of these cases, the youth receives an ongoing benefit, which makes it more likely that the address information is current.

Other government databases can be useful, but may not have current information or may not provide easy access. For example, nearly two-thirds of out-of-care LST youth (63.7 percent) enrolled in Medicaid. Since Medicaid provides eligibility for health care but does not provide an ongoing benefit, contact information may not be up to date. As

more states adopt Medicaid coverage for youth after leaving care, this may become a more useful source of locating information.

3. Department of Motor Vehicles identification. We discussed earlier that the DMV was an important source of information about youths' locations. The Multi-Site Evaluation data indicate the potential value of the DMV as a source, as virtually our entire sample had either a driver's license (34.2 percent) or a state-issued identification card (54.5 percent) at age 19. However, the currency of the address depends on the youth updating the DMV after a move, something that many may not do.

4. Criminal justice system involvement. Unfortunately, many youth who have been in foster care come into contact with the criminal justice system. At age 19, one in ten (9.9 percent) of youth in the sample who were out of care had been charged with a crime in the past 12 months; 5.4 percent had been incarcerated in the past 12 months. These are likely underestimates, as some of the youth we did not locate may very well have been in jail or prison. Gaining access to criminal justice records as well as gaining access to a prisoner can be difficult, but it is important for locating youth after they leave care. Starting the process early is critical to have access arranged in a timely fashion.

5. Education systems. Some youth continue with their education after leaving foster care, although at rates much lower than the population as a whole. Most students can be located through school and college data sources, though access to these records may be limited. Three in ten youth in our sample (29.3 percent) who had left care were enrolled in school at the second follow-up. A small percentage (5.3 percent) was finishing high school.

Table 5. Characteristics of Youth Who've Exited Foster Care at Second Follow-Up, Indicating Potential Tracing Opportunities

	Percent (%)
Established credit or employment	
Have a credit card	24.1
Employed at interview date	50.1
Receipt of public assistance	
Food Stamps	20.9
SSI	8.5
Public housing	8.0
Section 8 housing	6.8
Medicaid	63.7
DMV identification	
License	34.2
State ID	54.5
Criminal justice involvement	
Charged by police past 12 months	9.9
Incarcerated past 12 months	5.4
Enrollment in education	
High school	5.3
Two-year college	16.9
Four-year college	7.1
Contact with relative at least once per month	
Bio mom	49.6
Bio dad	26.7
Grandparents	48.4
Other relatives	55.8
Siblings	75.4
Other characteristics	
Have a sibling in care	34.4
Stayed at a relative's past 12 months (may not be current)	59.8

One-sixth (16.9 percent) were enrolled in a two-year college and 7.1 percent were enrolled in a four-year college. Most students do not go far away for college and two-year colleges are in the local community, making these youth potentially easy to locate. The National Student Clearinghouse, as well as local sources, can be helpful in locating youth who have enrolled in postsecondary education since leaving foster care.

- 6. Family.** Perhaps the most important source of information for locating youth formerly in foster care is their families. Although some youth detach from family connections, a significant proportion have contact with one or more family members on a regular basis. As seen above, over 40 percent of the youth formerly in care whom we interviewed at age 19 were living with relatives. An additional one-fifth reported having stayed with a relative at some time in the previous 12 months. In total, about 60 percent were either living with relatives currently or had done so at some point in the past 12 months.

To get a sense of how useful relatives might be for locating youth, we find that for young people who had left care, half (49.6 percent) had been in contact with their biological mother at least once per month. A similar percentage (48.4 percent) had been in contact with a grandparent at least once per month. Approximately one-quarter (26.7 percent) had been in contact with their biological father at least once per month, and over half (55.8 percent) had been in contact with other relatives at least once per month. Siblings are also very important contacts for youth who leave foster care. Three-quarters (75.4 percent) of youth formerly in care had been in contact with a sibling at least once per month. One-third (34.4 percent) had a sibling still in foster care, making access to contact information quite easy.

Discussion

Locating and engaging youth after they leave foster care can prove quite challenging. However, the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs demonstrated that most can be found, with 94 percent of a sample of 19-year-olds being located one year after leaving care. The youth survey component of the evaluation indicates several important lessons for successfully finding and engaging youth after they leave care.

Plan the process up front: Once youth leave care, it can prove difficult to find them if a process has not been planned. Planning will help ensure you acquire useful information from the youth before they leave care, establish procedures for accessing files and records, obtain consent from the youth for accessing other administrative data, and arrange cooperative agreements with other agencies.

Establish rapport: Make future contact part of a process that begins before they leave care. Make the youth aware that you will be looking for them and make them interested in being found. This could be incorporated as part of the permanency planning process or the transition process. Collect contact information before the young people leave care. Although many youth won't know where they will be or who may know where to find them, and they likely have unrealistic expectations about their future, it is critical to gather whatever information they can provide and to guide them to think about people and places that don't occur to them. Collecting contact information on

family and friends of family dovetails well with ongoing permanency planning.

Obtain consent from the youth to contact others: In addition to collecting contact information from the youth and gaining their consent to use that information to locate them in the future, it is important to obtain their consent to contact other agencies and access records that might prove helpful in finding them.

Keep in touch with youth: Keeping in touch with these youth, even in such small ways as a newsletter or a birthday card, will make them feel that someone cares. Furthermore, mailings can provide indicators of movement from returned mail or forwarded addresses. Consider developing a means of contact through social networking sites. The use of these sites provides a more stable means of contact than either mail or phone for disadvantaged and itinerant youths.

Provide multiple means for youths to keep in touch: The evaluation demonstrated that many youths will call toll-free numbers. They are also likely to respond using other communication means if given the opportunity. It is important that toll-free lines, e-mail addresses, or social networking pages be monitored and timely responses provided. Failure to do so will create or exacerbate mistrust.

Make use of as many locating methods as possible: Although certain locating methods find significant numbers of youth, those youth most in need of help may require

considerable detective work. Begin by making use of information available in case files and court records. Over the years a youth is in care, numerous clues may accumulate in those files that indicate where a youth may be located, or provide a means to locate the youth.

Develop cooperative relationships with government agencies that may be in a position to provide information: Agencies that provide social services, cash payments, non-cash benefits, youth training programs (e.g., JobCorps), schools, and those in the criminal justice system can provide information or access to young adults involved with their programs or systems.

Reach out to parents and relatives: Many youth maintain contact with relatives, a high percentage at some point living with relatives. Relatives may be able to provide the youth's current location or may be a conduit to getting messages to the youth.

Provide an incentive for the youth to want to be found: In the Multi-Site Evaluation, we paid \$50 for follow-up interviews. Cash payments are very effective, but are not always allowable or affordable. Nor may they be the best option for agencies trying to offer services. In the absence of cash payments, it is imperative to identify some other benefit that will entice youth to want to be found. Multiple types of benefits may be necessary to appeal to different types of youths—for example, college students may respond to different benefits than will homeless youths. ■

Notes

1. L.A. Department of Child and Family Services policy deemed inappropriate those youth who were physically or mentally unable to benefit from classroom-based services.
2. Of those youth interviewed at both follow-up interviews.
3. Social networking sites were a new phenomenon when we conducted the study, with MySpace the dominant site for young people. Today, Facebook would provide much more opportunity for keeping in contact with youth.
4. A larger number of respondents had been employed at some point, but were not employed at the time of the interview. Only current employment provides current locating information.
5. However, the public housing or Section 8 housing may not be in the youth's name.
6. An error in the questionnaire caused an underestimate of the number of youth receiving TANF or WIC. What was captured indicates at least 6.5 percent of those formerly in foster care received TANF and 11.6 percent received WIC.

Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs

This brief uses data collected as part of the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs. Mandated by the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, the study evaluated the effectiveness of four programs aimed at preparing youth in foster care to live independently after leaving care. Youths were randomly assigned to either treatment or control conditions in each study site. In order to explore the challenges of locating and engaging youth who have left foster care, this brief draws on the entire group of young people at one evaluation site in Los Angeles, California.

For more information on the evaluation, please see

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse_neglect/chafee/index.html.

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