

Practical Strategies for Tracking and Locating Youth

Proposed National Youth in Transition Database*

* **PLEASE NOTE:** This is a DRAFT technical assistance document to accompany the proposed rule on the National Youth In Transition Database (NYTD). The Children's Bureau published the proposed rule on the NYTD in the *Federal Register* on July 14, 2006 (71 FR 40346). The proposed rule can be located on the Children's Bureau website or www.regulations.gov. This document is published now in draft form to provide commenters to the proposed rule with an understanding of the various methods that States can use to track youth and a sense of the effort that doing so entails. This document should not be used or reproduced for any other purpose than indicated in this note.

Introduction

Former foster youth can be particularly difficult to track when they are no longer involved with the child welfare system. Once they leave foster care, youth may experience frequent changes in their residence and employment, or they may leave the community to enroll in higher education or the military. Youth may become homeless or incarcerated or they may not be interested in maintaining contact with the child welfare agency.

There are many proven strategies for tracking youth who are no longer in the agency's care. The strategies outlined in this document have been used successfully in longitudinal studies that require long-term participation of research subjects in a study sample. They have been used and/or adapted by clinical and social science researchers who conduct field-based research with vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations, including homeless persons, substance abusers, and foster care youth (see Barth 1988; Cook 1994; Festinger 1983; Pollio, Thompson and North 2000 regarding youth). The State and/or the child welfare agency that sponsors the Independent Living program will need to conduct multiple tasks to track and locate those youth who have left foster care and are part of the follow-up population or sample for the proposed National Youth in Transition Database. This will include collecting contact information and implementing strategies for keeping in touch, tracking and locating youth, as presented below.

A. Obtaining contact information

Researchers stress the importance of gaining all possible contact and identifying information at the initial meeting (Cohen et al. 1993; Ribisl et al. 1996). Successful tracking depends on having detailed contact information. Researchers consistently find that the main reason for losing track of study participants is due to having inadequate contact information. However, homelessness, housing instability, substance abuse, poverty, seasonal employment, immigration status or incarceration may compound efforts to track and locate respondents for follow-up interviews. Therefore, it is best to have as much information as possible to work with at the outset and pass this on to authorized persons who will be responsible for tracking youth (Juntunen et al. 1999: 310; Kauff et al. 2002).¹

¹ Findings of the *National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients* indicate that 27 percent of homeless clients spent time in foster care, group homes or in another treatment facility before age 18 and half spent more than two years in such places (Burt et al. 1999: 10-1).

Strategies for obtaining contact information

Request just enough information and use discretion

Advise the interviewers or caseworkers that it is best to get at least five contacts for each youth, although it is sometimes difficult to get even one (Ziek et al. 2002: 72). Researchers typically request the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of parents and siblings, including mother's maiden name. They report that study participants are most often located through their mothers (Goldstein et al. 1997; Ribisl et al. 1996). However, foster care youth may or may not have immediate family members. If they do, they might not communicate with them. But there may be other relatives that could be contacted. Ask for the address and telephone number of the youth's closest relative, guardian or a former foster parent.² Keep in mind that identifying personal contacts may be emotionally difficult and the interviewer should handle this request with sensitivity and discretion.

Overcome youth reluctance about providing contact information

Youth can be reluctant to share contact information and wary about how it will be used. Sometimes they do not want to give others cause for concern. Sometimes they just don't want other people "in their business." The agency can create some procedures and tools that will help address youth misgivings:

- Let youth know what you plan to say when you speak to someone on the phone. Prepare a script and let them read it.
- Draft a letter to send to people on the contact list, asking for their assistance in locating the youth. Share it with the youth.

Keep in mind that wariness and protectiveness can work both ways. Friends, family, and others who are close to the youth may respond to a request to locate him or her with suspicion and distrust. Some researchers suggest that a study participant should tell the people named on the contact list that he or she is taking part in a research project (Desmond et al. 1996: 4). Other researchers use standard form letters to inform someone that he or she has been named as a contact person. In such cases, the participant signs the letters, and requests that the person named as a contact cooperate with the researchers, if called upon to do so (*ibid.*).

Keep contact information current

All contact information should be updated at each meeting with the youth and additional information recorded (e.g., new phone number, new address). The tracking form is confidential and should be kept with the client's records or file. It cannot be released without the client's consent (Ziek et al. 2002: 71). Destroy the tracking forms when no longer needed.

² Former foster parents tend to encourage and maintain contact with youth they have cared for and with whom they have developed relationships (Wozniak 2002).

***Advise youth of
Future contact efforts***

Remind youth that after they leave foster care they may be randomly selected to participate in the follow-up survey. Below is a script that an interviewer or caseworker can use to inform the young person of what to expect:

“In two years, we may contact you to participate in another interview/survey like today. When you are on your own, we will want to know how you are doing and if we can do anything to help you. Just as today, your participation will be voluntary and your answers will be confidential.

We think that it would be worthwhile for you to participate again because then we’ll know how you’re doing and what we can do to help. Also, with your feedback, you can help us improve programs for other young people leaving foster care.”

***Send a thank you
note after
completing the
interview***

Send a handwritten thank you note to youth immediately after the initial interview or survey. This not only demonstrates professional courtesy but it is also a good way to establish informal contact for future contacts, if necessary (Ziek et al. 20012: 75).

Researchers expect challenges in locating respondents for future waves of any longitudinal study. Therefore, the information collected is quite extensive. Locator forms can be adapted to meet the study needs and to collect information easily during an interview. All data from locator forms should be stored in a secure database or file cabinet. Exhibit 1 below presents a list of items commonly found on locator forms used by researchers who work with hard-to-reach or vulnerable populations (Anglin et al. 1996; Desmond et al.1995; Goldstein et al. 1997; Ribisl et al. 1996; Ziek et al. 2002).

Exhibit 1. Contact information to be collected on a Youth Locator form

Identification	Names	Numbers
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ First name, last name, and middle initial ▪ Original name if name has been legally changed ▪ Nicknames, maiden or birth names, and aliases 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social security number ▪ Driver's license or other identification number ▪ Public assistance ID number
	<i>Note: Have youth spell out name to interviewer to ensure accuracy. Misspellings can make database searches difficult!</i>	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "Green card" ID number (i.e., permanent resident alien status)
Vital Statistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Day, month, year, and place of birth ▪ A brief physical description and notation of any distinguishing features: Gender, racial or ethnic background, height, weight, eye/hair color, glasses, facial hair, accent, limp, scars, tattoos, and/or piercings. ▪ Languages spoken 	
Addresses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Current residence or last known address. <i>(Also indicate who lives there and their relationship to youth).</i> ▪ Best mailing address (if different from street address). <i>(Also indicate who lives there and their relationship to youth).</i> ▪ How long youth has lived in area and whether planning to move <i>(If yes, indicate where)</i> 	
Telephone numbers	Local home number, work number, cell phone number, beeper or pager. <i>(If not the youth's number, indicate whose it is).</i>	
Email address	Can be helpful but may change	
Employment	Name, address, and telephone number of employer. Name of supervisor. Date of employment. Type of work performed. <i>Note: This information should be used with discretion.</i>	
Education	Schools attended or currently attending	
Contacts	Full names, addresses, phone numbers, and relationship from at least five people. Contacts include: a friend, significant other, sibling or relative, legal guardian, foster parent (current or former), counselor, caseworker, teacher, doctor, minister, social worker, neighbor, coworker, etc. <i>Ask how best to approach these individuals. Ask when is the best time to call. Also note which individuals should not be contacted and "document and respect" the youth's preference (Desmond et al. 1996:4).</i>	
Social Services	If applicable, indicate if youth receives services and/or funds from another agency. Provide contact information for caseworker.	
Legal status	If applicable, indicate formal legal status (i.e., parole, probation, work release, or house arrest) and contact information for official.	
Other useful information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Places frequented (e.g., social clubs, community centers, where youth hangs out or meet friends) and times youth might be there; ▪ Name and location of church, synagogue, or religious institution youth attends; name and phone number of pastor, rabbi, minister; days when youth attends services; ▪ Future plans (e.g., planning to move, graduating, changing jobs, getting married, etc.); ▪ Best times to call or visit 	

B. Approaches for tracking and locating youth

When tracking youth, it is best to start with the simplest and least expensive methods first, then move on to more intensive and more expensive means (Ribisl et al. 1996). Typically, tracking begins with making informal and frequent telephone calls, followed by contact via letters and other forms of correspondence. More intensive efforts involve database searches and securing information from public sources, such as the Department of Motor Vehicles. Researchers often resort to “door-knocking” and search for study participants in their neighborhoods. Keep in mind that vulnerable populations often have had negative experiences with or are suspicious of social service agencies and institutions. Efforts to reach them and establish contact may be difficult. For example, official business letters from sponsor agencies may be ignored (Jutunen et al. 1999: 307). Calls may not be returned. It is important to design tracking strategies that are culturally-sensitive, non-invasive, yet efficient. Also, depending on the population, bilingual interviewers and trackers may be needed.

At the outset, an agency should provide sufficient resources to support “frequent and low demand contacts” with youth (Cohen et al. 1993: 349-350). Keep in mind that tracking efforts are typically customized for different study populations and multiple strategies are used simultaneously. Researchers who track substance abusers, HIV patients, mental health clients, homeless persons, high-risk adolescents, and welfare leavers advise making intensive efforts to locate study participants in the initial follow-up period (Ribisl et al. 1996). They suggest identifying obstacles before beginning follow-up activities with hard-to-reach populations. They also stress the importance of persistence and following all leads when contacting and tracking study participants (*ibid.*).

Given time and resource constraints, and the long interval between the initial interview/survey and subsequent participation, the agency should determine when it is reasonable to begin tracking youth. It will be fairly easy to reach some youth, yet other youth will require considerable effort to locate. There will be multiple challenges to overcome in tracking a youth and a fine line to observe in getting access to personal data while respecting the youth’s right to privacy.³ From a practical standpoint, protocols should be established early in the process so that “follow-up procedures can be incorporated into all aspects of program planning” (McAllister et al. 1973; Ziek et al. 20012: 66). While there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach, there are multiple methods to employ to get the job done. Two general approaches are provided below and specific strategies follow.

³ “Confidentiality of data is a barrier that the tracker must overcome to locate his subject. On the other hand, confidentiality of the data and the protection of subjects’ rights is a responsibility that the tracker must assume” (Goldstein et al. 1977: 29).

1. Use of Mail and Telephone Contact

Practitioners and researchers working with hard-to-reach populations recommend beginning tracking efforts at least one month before a scheduled follow-up interview (Cohen et al. 1993:338; Ziek et al. 2002: 74). Starting early and allowing enough time to elapse will pay off in the end. Dual contact by telephone and mail is considered the most cost-effective method for tracking and should be used first. In the initial attempt to contact a youth, standard practice is to send written correspondence and then follow-up with a telephone call a week or two afterwards. This allows for some lag time and gives the youth the opportunity to act immediately or consider participation. This approach should be thoroughly exhausted before moving onto more intensive, time-consuming, and perhaps expensive efforts.

2. Conducting Multiple Tracking Efforts Simultaneously

Researchers who have tracked chronic substance abusers for follow-up clinical studies suggest adopting a two-tiered approach that involves mail and/or telephone contact and use of institutional records (Anglin et al. 1996: 11). Researchers used multiple strategies to track and locate the study respondents. Specifically, they (1) mailed correspondence to all known addresses; (2) called all phone numbers listed for client and named contacts; (3) requested DMV, arrest, and other available official records; (4) searched phone books for telephone numbers of clients and all potential contacts; and (5) reviewed local jail inmate listings weekly and prison inmate listings monthly. If these efforts were unsuccessful, then researchers were advised to do the following: (1) obtain more detailed records from individuals or institutions; (2) review files from custody facilities to obtain a list of visitors to the client during periods of incarceration, then contact these people; and (3) submit credit report searches. Finally, if these techniques did not yield results, then researchers were advised to look for the respondent and “go door knocking.” All of these steps were repeated numerous times in order to ensure success.

As seen in this example, tracking methods were tailored to a population that (1) is extremely difficult to track; and (2) may have a propensity for illegal behavior. Note that trackers moved fairly quickly to pursuing criminal justice resources for tracking leads. Although this may not be applicable for tracking emancipated youth, this example is useful in demonstrating that (1) multiple methods can be used concurrently; and (2) that time and resources are needed to maximize the tracking effort. In developing a multi-tiered strategy for tracking youth, the agency may wish to begin with other sources of information, such as educational institutions or youth-oriented service providers. The bottom line, however, is that tracking is a challenging task. It requires persistence, patience, and a multi-pronged approach. Well-tested strategies for keeping in touch over time, tracking, and locating hard-to-reach populations follow.

Tracking and Locating Youth

1. Establish a system to track efforts to contact youth

Be systematic

Set up a filing system or computerized database to keep track of information and efforts to contact youth. All activities should be documented and the outcomes of both successful and unsuccessful efforts should be noted. Tracking files should include: (1) correspondence; (2) records of telephone calls and contacts; (3) attempts to locate; (4) incoming calls; (5) requests to other agencies for information (e.g., social service or government); and (6) miscellaneous information.

Develop a tracking “case file”

Contact youth on a regular basis so that changes in residence or telephone numbers can be learned in a timely manner. When contact information changes, transfer the youth’s new forwarding address or number to the locator form. Then send another letter or make a call.

If a letter is returned twice for the same reason, then consider the address invalid. In the “case file,” keep track of returned letters, provide the reason for return, the date of a new mailing, and other comments regarding efforts to locate youth (Ziek et al. 2002: 75). Over time, a case history will emerge and sometimes the fragments of information will prove invaluable in searching for a youth. The file will also be helpful if other agency workers or third parties are involved in tracking and interviewing youth (Anglin et al. 1996: 10-11).

Arrange files in the following categories to facilitate tracking of multiple youth:

- (1) contacted with appointment pending;
- (2) scheduled for interview;
- (3) no-show;
- (4) incarcerated;
- (5) out-of-area;
- (6) out-of-state;
- (7) in hospital/treatment/hospice;
- (8) difficult to locate;
- (9) passive refusal (try again later);
- (10) final refusal; and
- (11) deceased (*ibid.*).

2. Establish and maintain contact with youth: Ways to reach out and stay in touch

Keep in touch

Try to establish telephone and/or face-to-face contact with youth on an informal, friendly basis (Cohen et al. 1993: 341). Make calls during the holidays and on birthdays to see how youth are doing and to remind them about the follow-up interviews or surveys. If possible, maintain face-to-face contact and invite the youth to agency social functions.

Make youth come to you

Establish an activity to draw emancipated youth back to the agency. It is preferable to do so in a way that recognizes their success and potential for leadership, such as holding an annual reunion or forming a youth council that meets on a quarterly basis.

Establish and use email

Contact youth via email. If a youth does not have an e-mail account, encourage him or her to establish one. Accounts can be established for free and readily accessed wherever there is an internet connection. The most popular free accounts are: (1) <http://www.hotmail.com>; and (2) <http://www.yahoo.com>.

Establish dedicated telephone lines or a toll-free phone line and accept collect calls

Set up a dedicated phone line to enable youth or those on the contact list to call the agency. Install a message machine and indicate that collect calls will be accepted. Alternatively, set up a toll-free “800” number so that youth can stay in touch. If possible, include the agency acronym or create a name or “memorable phrase” to make the telephone number easy to remember (e.g., 1-800-ON MY OWN). As youth have limited resources, toll free numbers and collect calls will help defray the expense they incur in participating in the data collection. Note that if a youth is in prison, he or she cannot use a toll-free number but can make collect calls (Ziek et al. 20012: 74). Making communication easy and inexpensive will encourage youth to stay in touch.

Create a calendar card

Give youth a calendar card with the dates of future follow-up interviews. Include the local telephone number and address of the sponsor agency and the toll-free “800” number telephone (if applicable). The agency may also add information regarding community resources or services to meet youth needs (Wright et al. 1995: 269).

Send a reminder postcard

Send youth a reminder postcard. Use an acronym or logo that identifies the agency and establishes a project identity. Researchers recommend doing as a way to provide instant recognition. It also protects the privacy of youth if others have access to correspondence (Ribisl et al. 1999:6).

Think through the content of the message and make it friendly and neutral (e.g., reminders for dental appointments are typically cheerful and straightforward, taking into consideration that most people do not like going to the dentist). Do not provide any specifics about the client or the nature of the data collection (Ziek et al. 2002: 73).

Do special mailings

Send youth greeting cards during the holidays and on their birthdays. This not only helps to build a more personal connection, it will reveal whether a youth still resides at the most recent address given.

Follow-up on returned mail

Resend returned mail to the mailing address of one (or all) of the contacts provided on the tracking form (Juntunen et al. 1999: 307). In a study of former welfare recipients, a holiday mailing provided new contact information for one-third of the sample members because use of “Return Service Requested” gave forwarding information from the postal service (Kauff et al. 2002: A-4).

Insert a self-addressed, postage-paid envelope and change of address form or information card with each mailing. Also, any agency-sponsored mailings should inform youth about how to reach the agency or designated interviewers (preferably through a toll-free number or collect calls).

Send a newsletter

Consider creating a newsletter that would appeal to emancipated youth (e.g., regarding independent living issues). For example, researchers conducting a longitudinal study of more than 2,000 former AmeriCorps members (requiring baseline, one-year and three-year follow-up surveys) sent a newsletter to participants that highlighted the study findings, reminders about the follow-up interviews, and ways to keep in contact with the research staff (Abt Associates 2002).

Design the newsletter so that it appeals to a youth tastes and is prepared at an appropriate reading level. For example, public health messages for populations with low levels of literacy are often conveyed through comic books.

Establish a web site with an emancipated youth-only page

If the agency has a web-site, consider devoting a page to emancipated youth. Present issues and topics that are of interest to them. Provide links to other resources and service providers. Make it interactive and resourceful so that a youth can send an email to keep in touch or request information.

Create and distribute innovative reminder products

Consider creating a refrigerator magnet with a reminder about participating in the study and staying in contact. Include statements such as “You are important to us. Let us know when you move!” Include a toll-free number to call so that youth can leave new contact information. Use the logo or agency acronym for instant but neutral recognition.

3. Telephone the authorized contacts

Get hold of a contact person

Review the locator form regarding instructions about how to approach the youth and people on the contact list (i.e., who to ask for, how to identify the caller, what kind of message can be left). Be sure to respect the confidentiality agreement and be discreet when speaking with contacts. They may ask questions which would be inappropriate to answer. In general, be polite but provide as little information as possible. Also, be sensitive to cultural and gender differences when making calls (Anglin et al. 1996: 18).

Always ask a contact if they know how to reach the youth and if there is another phone number or address available. Record each phone call

in a phone log. If you are not successful reaching the contact during business hours, calling during “off-hours” will likely increase the chance of making contact. It can take as many as 15-20 phone calls to make contact with a youth.

Get past the answering machine

Leave a brief message, stating your name, organization, and that you wish to get in touch with the youth. Indicate whether there is an “800” number available or if the agency will accept collect calls. If you do not hear from anyone, try again, perhaps having someone else leave a message. Try calling at different times or on a different day, in the evenings or on the weekend (*ibid.*).

4. Make contact via correspondence

Make it official

Send a business letter reminding youth about the upcoming follow-up interviews. Ask him or her to contact the agency in person, by phone or email. (If applicable, remind youth that an incentive will be provided). If there is no response to the initial mailing within two weeks, then send letters to all the contacts, and then call the youth (Ziek et al. 20012: 74-75).

Make it personal

Send handwritten, personalized letters and cards rather than business letters with typed addresses. “Official” looking mail is sometimes ignored (Juntunen et al 1999: 307). However, some researchers send letters by priority or registered mail so that it receives more attention. They also offer increased incentives for study participants that are hard to reach or recalcitrant (Kauff et al. 2002: A-6).

5. Use community resources to update addresses and phone numbers

Call Directory Assistance

Turn to the telephone directory to get a new telephone and/or address for a youth. This can also help to verify whether a youth is still at the address or number, if he or she has not returned phone calls or responded to letters. You can also find out if a number is unlisted. If so, then you may consider going in-person to the youth’s residence, (Anglin et al. 1996: 18).

Use a Criss-Cross Directory

Use a reverse directory to find telephone numbers for youth or the people on the contact list. Street addresses are provided for a city or county, noting names and phone numbers of current residents. Using a Criss-Cross Directory (such as Haines) may also help to identify neighbors who may know the whereabouts of a youth (*ibid.*). Directories are available in local libraries.

6. Make in-person contact

Visit the address on the tracking form to find out if a youth resides at the address provided. Ask neighbors if they know of the youth's whereabouts. Skilled trackers start on the top floor of an apartment building and work down, as residents who live on the upper floors glean greater knowledge of other residents by riding the elevator or using the stairs together (Goldstein *et al.* 1977). Researchers also recommend taking precautions before venturing into unknown neighborhoods and using common sense (Anglin *et al.* 1996).

7. Obtain agency information

Review case records to find leads that are not available on the tracking form. Case records are confidential files, so only limited information may be authorized for release to outside parties.

8. Check community resources

Other community sources that may provide information include local utilities, schools, churches, voter registration records, community clinics and hospitals, court records, and the Salvation Army (which has a service to contact homeless people) (Anglin *et al.* 1996: 31-32).

9. Access public records

Use of official records from public agencies may involve a lengthy justification process, so it is best to begin early in the tracking process, as authorization is strictly limited in order to maintain privacy. A fee may be charged to obtain information (Anglin *et al.* 1996: 4). Sources to contact include:

- Department of Motor Vehicle provides address, driver's license number and date of expiration, whether a youth turned in tags in another state, or applied for a new license.
- Criminal Justice system sources include "rap sheets," arrest reports and FBI reports, county booking records, jail lists, state or federal prison system booking records, parole and probation records, and deportation records.
- Vital Statistics Records provide birth, marriage, divorce, and death records that may be helpful in supplying contact information. Searches can be conducted to determine if a youth is deceased or notice requested from the county coroner's or state registrar's office.
- Social Security Administration will forward a letter on the agency's behalf for a \$3 fee. This process is highly confidential and involves very strict guidelines.
- U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (formerly the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service) records are private. However, when an immigrant acquires citizenship, a notice is placed at the county office where naturalization took place.

The notice is a public record and may include the age, address, and occupation of the new citizen, along with date of arrival, naturalization, and former nationality (Anglin et al. 1996: 32)

These examples are abridged from the fieldwork manual *Staying in Touch*, which was developed to track and locate substance abusers for follow-up interventions and studies (Anglin et al. 1996: 21-30). It provides comprehensive information regarding access to public records for research purposes and sample request forms.

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