

Youth At-Risk of Homelessness: An Early Picture of Youth and Services

Examining a Coach-like Case Management Program for Youth and Young Adults with Foster Care Histories

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Menbere Shiferaw, Nickie Fung, Nuzhat Islam, and Kelsey Chesnut

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
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330 C Street, SW
Washington, DC 20201
Attention: Mary Mueggenborg
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Submitted by:

Mathematica
1100 First Street, NE, 12th Floor
Washington, DC 20002-4221
Phone: (202) 484-9220
Fax: (202) 863-1763
Project Director: M.C. Bradley

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Overview

A. Introduction

Preventing homelessness among youth and young adults involved in the child welfare system remains an urgent issue for child welfare policymakers and practitioners. To expand the evidence base on interventions designed to prevent homelessness among youth and young adults involved in the child welfare system, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) launched the Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH) multiphase grant program.

ACF contracted with Mathematica in the first two phases of YARH to conduct process studies, provide evaluation technical assistance to grantees, support grantees in articulating and refining the design of their service models, assess the evaluability of each service model, and disseminate the knowledge grantees developed. ACF is now in the third phase of YARH (2019 to 2028, known as YARH-3). This phase provides information to the field on how to better serve youth and young adults through a rigorous summative evaluation of a policy-relevant comprehensive service model, Pathways to Success (Pathways), developed by the state of Colorado. Pathways is an intensive, coach-like case management model for youth and young adults with foster care histories at age 14 or older.

Currently, 37 counties within Colorado participate in the summative evaluation. Some counties have a small number of youth and young adults who need services. In these cases, adjacent counties form a hub for service provision. Currently, 15 hubs, encompassing the 37 counties, are participating in the summative evaluation. Enrollment for the summative evaluation began in September 2021.

About a year into the enrollment period, this descriptive report takes stock of the services delivered through Pathways and comparison (business-as-usual) programs, the characteristics of the hubs in the evaluation, and the characteristics of the youth and young adults enrolled through August 2022. The report uses a mixed-methods approach to describe these services, hubs, and youth and young adults.

B. Purpose

To give context for the summative evaluation and understand the study sample, this descriptive report describes the services offered through Pathways and the comparison hubs, characteristics of the hubs, and baseline characteristics of the youth and young adults who enrolled in the study through the first year of enrollment.

C. Key findings and highlights

Colorado's child welfare system provides services to youth and young adults in a range of contexts and environments. The hubs currently participating in the summative evaluation vary notably on a number of key characteristics associated with homelessness and child welfare. For example, the average child welfare caseload ranges from one to 55 individuals, and between 4.3 and 14.1 percent of the total population lives in poverty. As of December 2022, the number of youth and young adults potentially eligible for the study ranged from one to 120 youth and young adults.

Youth and young adults in Pathways work with trained staff called Navigators. Navigators work with youth and young adults by engaging with them in a coach-like way to build a supportive relationship that encourages them to act as their own advocates. Exhibit O.1 lists the Pathways services offered to youth

and young adults. In the comparison hubs, workers support youth and young adults in multiple aspects of their lives to strengthen their independent living skills and through monthly meetings to help them define goals and complete an independent living plan. Exhibit O.1 lists the comparison services offered to youth and young adults.

Exhibit O.1. Pathways and comparison service components

Pathways	Comparison
Coach-like engagement	Developing and documenting goals
Establishing goals	Meeting regularly
Crisis stabilization	Meeting in groups
Housing supports	Providing financial support
Flexible funding	Crisis stabilization
Referrals	Finding and maintaining stable housing
Permanency or community roundtables	Connecting to community resources
Advance permanency	Engaging in roundtables
Identifying community connections	

Enrollment for the summative evaluation began in September 2021. About one year into enrollment (through August 2022), 116 youth and young adults are enrolled in the evaluation. These enrollees receive Pathways or comparison program services across the hubs participating in the summative evaluation through August 2022. The sample represents a diverse group of participants who have both protective and risk factors of homelessness. The average age of participants (18.9 years) has relevance for interventions like Pathways that want to support youth and young adults transitioning out of foster care. Characteristics of youth and young adults, such as high prevalence of homelessness or unstable housing, high unemployment rates, and high prevalence of depression, suggest there is an opportunity for Pathways to improve core outcomes among youth.

This report is the first of many that the YARH project will release that include findings from the summative evaluation. Please visit the OPRE [YARH project page](#) for future products.

D. Methods

This report uses a mixed-methods approach to describe the programs we are studying and the youth and young adults the programs are serving. We conducted a document review, qualitative interviews, and focus groups to understand the experiences of staff and youth and young adults throughout early implementation. We use descriptive statistics to describe the baseline characteristics of youth and young adults who completed a baseline youth survey through August 2022.

Executive Summary

A. Motivation and goals of the YARH-3 summative evaluation

Preventing homelessness among youth and young adults involved in the child welfare system remains an urgent issue for child welfare policymakers and practitioners. To expand the evidence base on interventions designed to prevent homelessness among youth and young adults involved in the child welfare system, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) launched the Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH) multiphase grant program.

In the first phase of the grant program (2013 to 2015, known as YARH-1), 18 grantees received two-year planning grants that they used to understand the characteristics of the three populations¹ for YARH, develop partnerships and teaming structures, and begin designing comprehensive service models to prevent homelessness. Under the second phase of YARH (2015 to 2019, known as YARH-2), 6 of the 18 YARH-1 grantees received four-year implementation grants to further specify their comprehensive service models, begin delivering services, complete usability testing of key components of their service models, and conduct formative evaluations to assess program implementation and early outcomes for the youth and young adults they served. ACF contracted with Mathematica in YARH-1 and YARH-2 to conduct process studies, provide evaluation technical assistance (TA) to grantees, support them in articulating and refining the design of their service models, assess the evaluability of each service model, and disseminate the knowledge they developed.

ACF is now in the third phase of YARH (2019 to 2028, known as YARH-3), which provides information to the field on how to better serve youth and young adults through a rigorous summative evaluation of a policy-relevant comprehensive service model, Pathways to Success (Pathways), developed by the state of Colorado. Pathways is an intensive, coach-like case management model for youth and young adults with foster care histories at age 14 or older (hereafter youth and young adults).

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee Program) is a federal program that provides funding to states to support youth and young adults in or formerly in foster care in their transition to adulthood. Colorado operates a county-administered Chafee Program across the state. For the summative evaluation, some Colorado counties have trained their staff to implement Pathways—these are the intervention counties. Other counties continue to provide business-as-usual Chafee Program services—these are the comparison counties.

Currently, 37 counties within Colorado participate in the summative evaluation. Some counties have a small number of youth and young adults who need services. In these cases, adjacent counties form a hub for service provision. Currently, 15 hubs, encompassing the 37 counties, are participating in the summative evaluation.

To provide context for the summative evaluation and understand the study sample, this descriptive report describes the services offered through Pathways and the comparison hubs, characteristics of the hubs, and baseline characteristics of the youth and young adults who enrolled in the study through the first year of

¹ These priority populations included adolescents who enter foster care between ages 14 and 17, young adults aging out of foster care, and homeless youth and young adults with foster care histories up to 21.

enrollment. Future reports will *compare and contrast* characteristics between intervention and comparison services, hubs, or youth and young adults, and implementation differences across the two conditions.

B. Enrollment in services

Pathways and comparison hubs follow similar processes to identify and screen youth and young adults for participation in the program and summative evaluation, with the exception of slight differences regarding time for enrollment and approach.

C. Description of programs

Youth and young adults in the summative evaluation hubs participate in either the intervention or comparison services. We conducted a document review, qualitative interviews, and focus groups to understand the experiences of staff and youth and young adults throughout early implementation of both types of services. Exhibit ES.1 lists the Pathways and comparison services offered. Exhibits III.7 and III.11, in Chapter III, present a more detailed description of youth and young adults' experiences in Pathways and comparison services.

1. Pathways

Youth and young adults in Pathways work with trained staff called Navigators. Following eligibility confirmation, Navigators work with youth and young adults by engaging with them in a coach-like way to build a supportive relationship that encourages them to act as their own advocates. Youth and young adults also develop at least two goals with their Navigators and meet with them weekly or biweekly to discuss progress toward goals. During their enrollment in Pathways, some youth and young adults experience a period of crisis; Navigators then pause work toward goals to help the youth or young adults address the crisis immediately. Navigators also help youth and young adults secure and maintain safe and stable housing by helping them acquire housing vouchers and understand necessary documentation, assisting with rent and deposits, and providing materials to help them settle into new housing. In addition to housing, Navigators connect youth and young adults with a variety of service agencies to address the many challenges they must conquer to be equipped for independence, including workforce centers, mental health centers, and parenting support and family services. Navigators engage youth and young adults in additional components as appropriate for their progress in Pathways, such as supporting relational permanency and identifying and transitioning them to other community supports in preparation for graduation from the program.

2. Comparison

Following eligibility confirmation, comparison program workers conduct assessments with the youth and young adults to gauge their needs and engage them in relationship building. Based on initial assessments, workers help youth and young adults define goals and develop an independent living plan. To track progress toward those goals, youth and young adults have monthly contact with their workers via a one-on-one meeting, group meeting, phone call, or text. In some cases, they also participate in optional group meetings to socialize with other youth and young adults in a safe environment. They receive financial support from workers on an as-needed basis to cover expenses, such as housing, car expenses, and food. Throughout service delivery, workers are the primary contacts for youth and young adults during emergency situations; workers help them manage crises and collaborate with other providers. Housing is the most critical need and goal for youth and young adults; workers help youth and young adults look for

housing, access vouchers, apply for housing, and provide education about how to afford housing. In addition, workers connect them with other community resources to support their needs and goals—for example, food banks, workforce centers, and health care providers. Finally, youth and young adults have multidisciplinary teams to support them, in which workers participate to ensure the voices and needs of youth and young adults are considered.

Exhibit ES.1. Pathways and comparison service components

Pathways	Comparison
Coach-like engagement	Developing and documenting goals
Establishing goals	Meeting regularly
Crisis stabilization	Meeting in groups
Housing supports	Providing financial support
Flexible funding	Crisis stabilization
Referrals	Finding and maintaining stable housing
Permanency or community roundtables	Connecting to community resources
Advance permanency	Engaging in roundtables
Identifying community connections	

Note: See Exhibits III.7 and III.11 for a detailed description of the service components.

D. The youth, young adults, and hubs participating in the summative evaluation

Colorado’s child welfare system provides services to youth and young adults in a range of contexts and environments. Currently, 15 hubs (encompassing 37 counties) participate in the summative evaluation. These hubs represent small and large metropolitan areas and nonmetropolitan areas. Hubs vary notably on a number of key characteristics associated with homelessness and child welfare. For example, the average child welfare caseload ranges from one to 55 individuals, and between 4.3 and 14.1 percent of the total population lives in poverty. As of December 2022, the number of youth and young adults enrolled in child welfare services ranged from one to 120 youth and young adults.

Enrollment for the summative evaluation began in September 2021. As of about one year into enrollment (through August 2022), 116 youth and young adults are enrolled in the evaluation. These enrollees receive Pathways or comparison program services across 14 of the 15 hubs participating in the summative evaluation; one hub is recruiting and has not yet enrolled youth and young adults in the evaluation. The sample represents a diverse group of participants who have both protective and risk factors of homelessness. The average age of participants (18.9 years) has relevance for interventions like Pathways that want to support youth and young adults transitioning out of foster care. Characteristics of youth and young adults, such as high prevalence of homelessness or unstable housing, high unemployment rates, and high prevalence of depression, suggest there is an opportunity for Pathways to improve core outcomes among youth and young adults.

I. Introduction

Preventing homelessness among youth and young adults involved in the child welfare system remains an urgent priority for child welfare policymakers and practitioners. Housing stability is essential for achieving self-sufficiency and promotes health and well-being, particularly during the transition to adulthood. Unstable housing can initiate a negative cycle of poor health, limited employment, and continued housing instability (Dion et al. 2014).

The National Youth Transition Database (NYTD) gathers information on youth currently or previously in foster care, providing one view into the prevalence of homelessness in this population. One in five of the 19-year-old respondents to the NYTD (20 percent) reported experiencing homelessness in the past two years (Children's Bureau 2019). By age 21, 27 percent of NYTD respondents had recent experiences of homelessness (Children's Bureau 2019). Previous, smaller studies have produced estimates of homelessness ranging from 11 to 37 percent for this population. An even larger proportion of youth who exit care—up to 50 percent—may experience other forms of housing instability, such as couch surfing or doubling up (Dion et al. 2014).

Researchers have found that housing stability, caring adults, and relational skills are key protective factors that can improve well-being and promote longer-term success among youth and young adults with a history of foster care (Development Services Group, Inc. 2013). Often, these protective factors can offset other, possibly coexisting risk factors such as experiences of trauma (Salazar et al. 2013) and barriers to economic independence that arise when youth and young adults lack the academic credentials, basic job skills, and social networks vital for finding and maintaining employment (Dworsky et al. 2012).

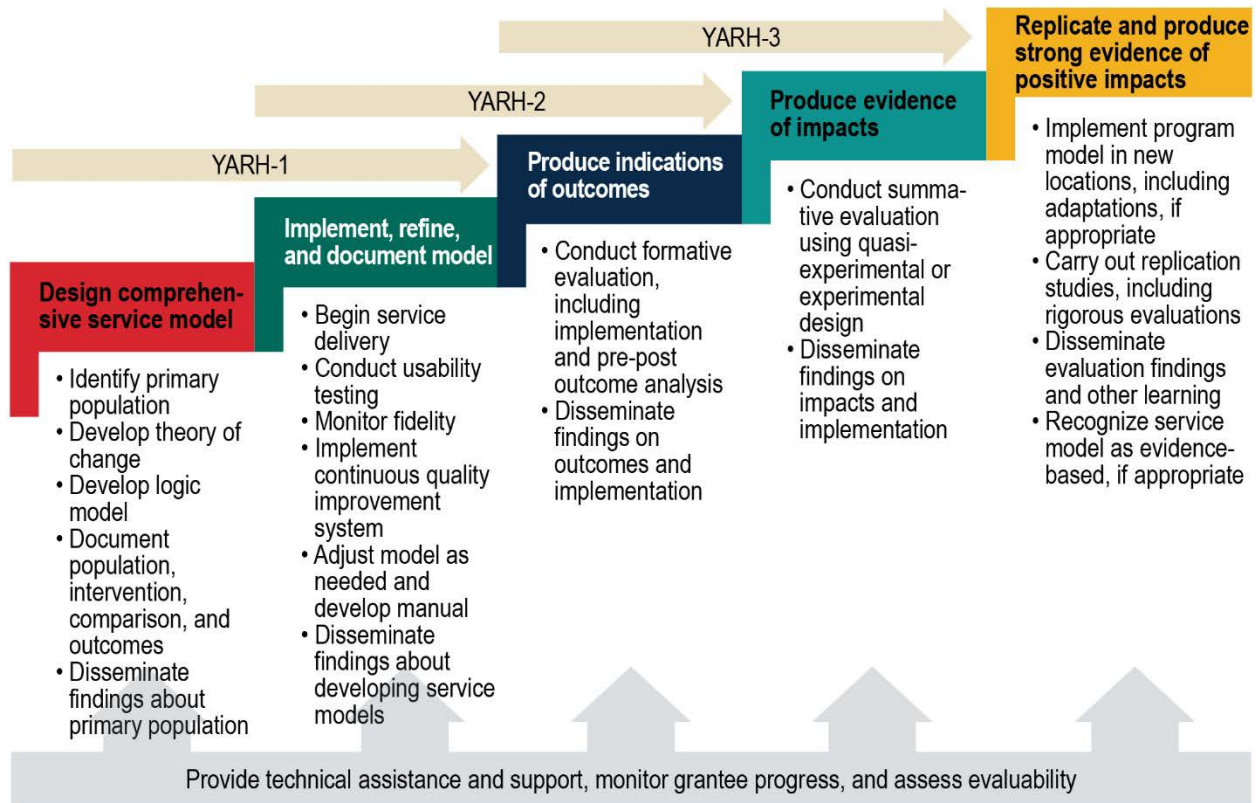
To expand the evidence base on interventions designed to prevent homelessness among youth and young adults involved in the child welfare system, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) launched the Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH) multiphase grant program. The design of YARH aligns closely with the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) Framework for Ending Youth Homelessness (USICH 2013). YARH mirrors the USICH framework's focus on achieving positive outcomes related to housing, permanent connections to caring adults, education, employment, and well-being. YARH also reflects the framework's emphasis on using data to specify risk and protective factors for youth and young adults, identifying and implementing strategies to mitigate risks and enhance protective factors, and using monitoring and evaluation to improve services. The grant program specifies three primary populations: (1) adolescents who enter foster care from age 14 to 17, (2) young adults aging out of foster care, and (3) homeless youth and young adults (up to age 21) with foster care histories.

A. History of YARH and current context

YARH seeks to guide grantees along an evidence-building path (Exhibit I.1). In the first phase of the grant program (2013 to 2015, known as YARH-1), 18 grantees received two-year planning grants that they used to understand the characteristics of the three primary populations for YARH, develop partnerships and teaming structures, and begin designing comprehensive service models to prevent homelessness. Under the second phase of YARH (2015 to 2019, known as YARH-2), 6 of the 18 YARH-1 grantees received four-year implementation grants to further specify their comprehensive service models, begin delivering services, complete usability testing of key components of their service models, and conduct formative evaluations to assess program implementation and early outcomes for the youth and young adults they served. ACF contracted with Mathematica in YARH-1 and YARH-2 to conduct

process studies, provide evaluation technical assistance (TA) to grantees, support them in articulating and refining the design of their service models, assess the evaluability of each service model, and disseminate the knowledge they developed.

Exhibit I.1. Evidence-building path in YARH



Adapted from: Langford, B.H., M. Flynn-Khan, and B. S. Lyght. *Investing in Evidence-Based Approaches for Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care*. n.d. Available at http://www.ytfg.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/FCWG_Funder_Guide_Investing.pdf

In 2019, ACF again contracted with Mathematica for the third phase of YARH (2019 – 2028, known as YARH-3), which provides information to the field on how to better serve youth and young adults through a rigorous summative evaluation. YARH-3 incorporates assessments of grantees’ readiness for summative evaluation, a federally-led evaluation of one comprehensive service model (conducted in partnership with the state of Colorado, a YARH-1 and YARH-2 grantee) including an implementation study and an impact study, and ongoing dissemination of knowledge gained through project activities.

1. Youth and young adult engagement: A key feature of YARH

Youth and young adult engagement has been a centerpiece of YARH to help ensure that the proposed interventions reflect the reality of the experiences youth and young adults have with the child welfare system. During YARH-1, grantees engaged youth and young adults in two main areas of YARH planning activities. First, grantees collected data from youth and young adults about their service needs and preferences through surveys, focus groups, and community events. Second, grantees included youth and young adults in the YARH decision making process by working with youth advisory boards to understand

what youth and young adults need, what they believed was missing in current services, and who should provide those services. ACF also encouraged grantees to include and engage youth and young adults in grantee conferences by having them participate in or lead presentations and activities.²

During YARH-2, grantees shared their experiences, challenges, and solutions related to engaging youth and young adults in services as part of a peer learning event in summer 2020. The process revealed several important steps for keeping youth and young adults engaged in services:

- Engaging youth and young adults from the point of intake and building rapport by creating an inclusive and mutually respectful partnership with shared power
- Working with youth and young adults to set realistic and meaningful goals
- Using a variety of methods to measure youth and young adult engagement, recognizing that appropriate levels of engagement can vary significantly based on age, developmental stage, the program and its expectations, and the youth and young adults' experience with the child welfare system.³

B. Selection of intervention for the summative evaluation

For the YARH-3 federally-led summative evaluation, ACF sought to select at least one YARH-2 intervention that was likely to produce useful evidence about preventing homelessness and improving key outcomes among youth and young adults who have been involved in the child welfare system. ACF and Mathematica convened two meetings in early 2020 with experts from the field to support selection of the summative evaluation intervention. During these meetings, four factors guided discussions for recommending a YARH-2 intervention for the summative evaluation:

1. **The field's level of interest in the intervention.** The policy relevance of the proposed comprehensive service model was a key consideration for the recommendation. The extent to which researchers and practitioners would be interested in the results and the likelihood that other communities would implement similar service models informed whether an intervention would make a useful contribution to the field.
2. **Readiness of the intervention for a summative evaluation.** The clarity of the comprehensive service model and the accompanying program manual were key considerations in determining whether an intervention was ready for summative evaluation. The following qualities also signaled readiness for the evaluation: preparedness of the site management team to participate in the study, robustness of the sites' continuous quality improvement and fidelity monitoring processes, availability of administrative data for use in the analysis, and emerging findings from the formative evaluation about the degree of fidelity in implementing the program and whether outcomes were improving.
3. **Rigor of evidence that would result from the proposed design for the summative evaluation.** The potential credibility of the evidence that would come from the proposed evaluation design was the third criterion. Only designs that would produce a credible, internally valid test of program effectiveness were considered for the summative evaluation.

² For more information on grantees' youth engagement strategies, see the [Youth Engagement in Child Welfare Service Planning](#) brief or Chapter III of the [YARH-1 process study](#).

³ For more on the lessons learned from youth engagement in YARH, see [Lessons from the Field: Youth Engagement: Lessons Learned](#).

- 4. Likelihood of detecting statistically significant favorable impacts.** The study’s statistical power and likelihood of detecting any favorable impacts was the fourth consideration. The combination of the sample size available, research design proposed, expected counterfactual condition, and expected magnitude of changes in outcomes based on the dosage and service contrast contributed to the assessment of an intervention’s readiness for a summative evaluation.

Given the information presented from each site and feedback from experts, Mathematica recommended and ACF concurred with conducting a summative evaluation of one YARH-2 intervention, the Colorado Pathways to Success (Pathways) comprehensive service model. The Pathways model offers intensive, coach-like case management for youth and young adults with foster care histories at age 14 or older (hereafter youth and young adults). The model emphasizes coaching practices to engage youth and young adults and a youth-driven approach to help identify their goals, connect them with existing services, and promote positive outcomes. (We describe the Pathways model in detail below.)

Meeting participants expressed strong interest in this intervention and its population served. The experts believed a summative evaluation that found statistically significant and favorable findings would create strong interest in expanding this intervention nationally. Notably, the proposed intervention could be used as a model for improving standard services provided through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee Program) in other states. The Chafee Program provides assistance to youth and young adults in or formerly in foster care in their transition to adulthood. The program defines eligibility as youth and young adults who experienced foster care at age 14 or older, aged out of foster care at ages 18 through 20, exited care to adoption or guardianship after age 16, or exited care for other reasons if they experienced an out-of-home placement at age 14 or older. Colorado uses these criteria to determine eligibility for its Chafee program. The primary eligibility criterion is out-of-home placement or being in custody of the child welfare or youth services systems for at least one day at age 14 or older. Colorado has opted in to provide services to young adults up to age 23.

Colorado’s use of standard Chafee services as the counterfactual condition also provides for strong external validity. Participants noted that Colorado’s well-documented comprehensive service model, with robust continuous quality improvement and fidelity-monitoring protocols, was a particular strength, and that its professional management team is well positioned to expand services in a summative evaluation. Finally, the evaluation design (described below) appeared well suited to produce credible and well-powered estimates of effectiveness.

A separate brief gives more details on the selection of the summative evaluation intervention ([McCormick et al. 2023](#)).

C. Overview of the summative evaluation

The YARH-3 federally led summative evaluation includes two related efforts: an implementation study to describe the implementation of Pathways and an impact study to assess its effectiveness.

The implementation study addresses two broad objectives—first, to support interpretation of Pathway’s impacts on outcomes for youth and young adults, and second, to generate information about factors that contributed to or inhibited implementation of its services in different settings to support replication or improvement of future service delivery. The implementation study is guided by research questions and two conceptual frameworks to assess different dimensions of Pathways to Success (Pathways) implementation. The Consolidated Framework of Implementation Research guides clear conceptualization and systematic assessment of the range of contextual factors that facilitate or hinder

implementation of the Pathways service model (Damschroder et al. 2009). We draw from a theoretical model of fidelity to ensure comprehensive measurement of the Pathways components based on the model's various dimensions of fidelity (Carroll et al. 2007). These frameworks support analysis of factors that facilitate or hinder Pathways implementation in different settings and the extent to which the intervention is delivered with fidelity to the service model. See the [implementation study design report](#) for more details (Keith et al. 2022).

The impact study will provide the first rigorous impact evaluation of Colorado's Pathways comprehensive service model. The goal of the impact study is to expand the evidence base for programs intended to prevent homelessness among youth and young adults with foster care histories at age 14 and older. It aims to provide evidence of program effectiveness on policy-relevant outcomes, including stable housing, education and employment, permanent connections to caring adults, and social-emotional well-being. It also aims to examine Pathways' effectiveness in short- and long-term follow-up periods and estimate the extent to which the program is more or less effective for key subgroups. Finally, the study originally proposed to explore linking features of program implementation (for example, dosage, quality, or adherence of the program delivery) to youth and young adult outcomes. However, this last analysis might no longer be feasible, given the limited variability in youth and young adult Pathways experiences and projections for the number of youth and young adults expected to enroll in Pathways by the end of the study. For more details, please see the [impact study design report](#) (Cole et al. 2022) and [foundational analytic plan](#) (Fung et al. 2023) on the [YARH project page](#).

D. This report

Currently, 37 counties within Colorado participate in the summative evaluation. Some counties in the state have a small number of youth and young adults who need child welfare services. In these cases, adjacent counties form a hub for service provision. Fifteen hubs, encompassing all 37 counties, are participating in the summative evaluation. One of the 15 hubs is still recruiting and has not enrolled youth and young adults in the study as of August 2022. A subset of the hubs is training their staff to implement Pathways and engage youth in a coach-like way—they are the intervention hubs (nine in total). Other hubs are continuing with business-as-usual program services and not training their case workers to implement Pathways—they are the comparison hubs (six in total).

Enrollment for the summative evaluation began in September 2021. Approximately a year into the enrollment period (through August 2022), this descriptive report takes stock of the services delivered through Pathways and comparison programs, the characteristics of the hubs in the evaluation, and the characteristics of the youth and young adults enrolled. Chapter II briefly summarizes the data and analytic approach we use to describe these characteristics, and Chapters III and IV describe the programs we are studying and the youth and young adults the programs are serving.

II. Methods

As of August 1, 2022, the study team uses five data sources (Exhibit II.1) to describe the youth and young adults and programs (Pathways and comparison) in the YARH-3 summative evaluation.

Exhibit II.1. Data sources



Program documents



Qualitative interviews from hub visits



Hub characteristics from a variety of administrative data sources



Youth survey



Administrative program from Colorado's Pathways Management Information System (PMIS)

We analyze these data using a combination of qualitative analysis and descriptive statistics. This chapter briefly summarizes the data and analytic approaches we used to produce the findings in Chapters III and IV. For more information on these approaches, please see the [Descriptive Report Analytic Plan](#) (Choe et al. 2023).

A. Data sources



Program documents, to understand Pathways and comparison services

Two months after enrollment for the summative evaluation began in September 2021, the YARH-3 study team reviewed the following documents describing the services included in Pathways and comparison programs. Members of our team also took notes during Colorado-hosted Chafee Program meetings.

1. The Pathways Intervention Manual
2. Pathways training materials
3. Chafee services description and frequently asked questions
4. Meeting notes from quarterly staff meetings with comparison program workers

Reviewing these documents informed our understanding of services provided in both intervention and comparison conditions and plans for start-up activities in hubs. These documents also provided

background information about the implementation of services for interviews conducted with hub staff and youth and young adults.



Interviews with hub staff, youth, and young adults, to understand early implementation experiences

Between May and August 2022, we conducted qualitative interviews and focus groups during 12 virtual hub visits.⁴ We interviewed child welfare agency leaders, supervisors, and the Navigators and comparison program workers working directly with youth and young adults. We also conducted small focus groups with youth and young adults receiving Pathways or comparison services. We assessed how Pathways hubs are supporting program implementation and initial service delivery, and identified factors that hindered or contributed to initial service delivery. We documented the interviews by collecting notes during each interview.

Interview analytic sample

63 respondents participated in interviews and focus groups.



Hub characteristics, to understand service and policy environment

We used hub-level data to document the populations in need, services, and policy environment. We analyzed the following:

- 2022 Colorado’s Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (Trails) data, to understand the populations that received child welfare services at each hub
- 2020 U.S. Census data, to understand the populations that potentially might receive services from each county, including county poverty levels and the proportion of the county population without health insurance
- 2013 National Center for Health Statistics Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties, to compare the various sizes (large, medium, or small) of counties⁵
- 2020 Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data, to calculate the proportion of students who are homeless by county



Youth survey, to understand the characteristics of youth and young adults enrolled in the evaluation

The primary data source we use to describe youth and young adults enrolled in the summative evaluation is a baseline survey administered to them when they enroll in the study. The survey examines characteristics of youth and young adults across demographic categories and outcome domains. Exhibit II.2 lists the eight outcome domains we use to describe youth and young adults in Chapter IV.

Exhibit II.2. Youth outcome survey domains in the descriptive report

- Stable housing
- Permanent connections with adults
- Connections with youth and peers
- Education and employment
- Social-emotional well-being
- Involvement in justice system
- Child welfare status and history
- Parenting

⁴ The YARH summative study includes 15 hubs in total. We selected 12 hubs (six Pathways and six comparison) to participate in the implementation study.

⁵ This version is the most current national classification scheme. An update is planned in 2023.

The baseline survey is administered to youth via the web. Mathematica train program staff to administer the survey to youth on site during their intake process.⁶ Enrollment for the summative evaluation began in September 2021.

For the summative evaluation, the target sample size for the baseline survey is 700 youth enrolled over approximately 30 months. About one year into enrollment (through August 31, 2022), 116 youth and young adults have completed the baseline survey across 14 of the 15 hubs participating in the evaluation. One hub is still recruiting youth and young adults and has not enrolled participants in the evaluation as of August 2022. This analytic sample is the one we use to describe the baseline characteristics of youth and young adults (Chapter IV).

Youth survey analytic sample

116 youth and young adults across 14 hubs who enrolled in the study between September 2021 through August 2022.



Pathways Management Information System, to supplement youth survey

The Pathways Management Information System (PMIS) is an online management system developed by the Center for Policy Research⁷ for the Pathways to Success intervention. PMIS contains the screening tool used to determine eligibility for enrollment and serves as the online case management system for Pathways Navigators and comparison program workers. In addition to case management data, PMIS contains demographic information on all intervention and comparison youth in the study, and their education and employment status. In this report, we use demographic, education, and employment data from PMIS to supplement the youth survey data by checking for inconsistencies across the data sources and borrowing from PMIS when survey data are missing.

PMIS analytic sample

112 youth and young adults across 14 hubs who enrolled in the study between September 2021 through August 2022 and have available data.

B. Analytic approaches used to describe programs and youth and young adults in the study

The analyses reported in this descriptive report use a mixed-methods approach to describe the programs we are studying and the youth and young adults the programs are serving.

1. Methods to understand study hubs and program services

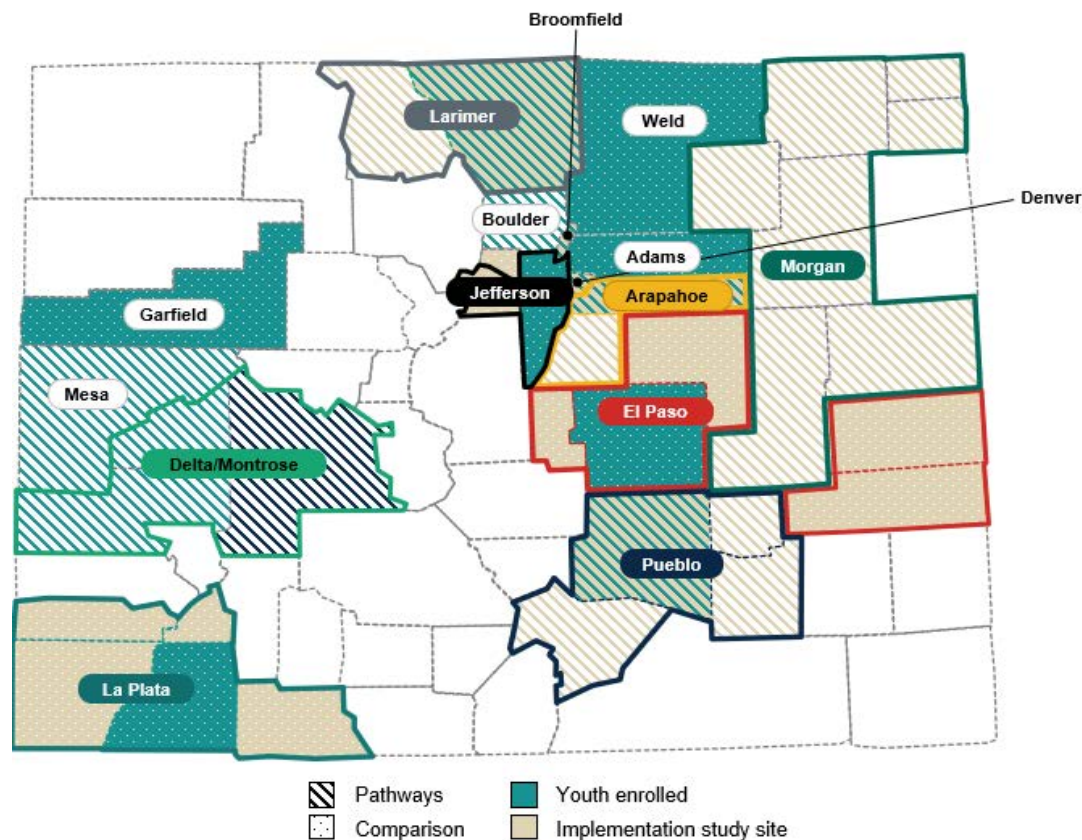
Interviews and focus groups during hub visits. Fifteen hubs are participating in the summative evaluation, and 14 have enrolled youth and young adults thus far (Exhibit II.3). We selected 12 hubs (six Pathways and six comparison) to participate in the implementation study to ensure the treatment and comparison samples were comparable, based on the child welfare population in each hub, the resources available in each hub, and a variety of descriptive characteristics. Hubs added after the start of the study in September 2021 are not included in the implementation study.⁸

⁶ Youth and young adults receive a \$40 gift card and a gift, such as a water bottle, for completing the baseline survey.

⁷ The Center for Policy Research is an independent external evaluator working with the Colorado Department of Health and Human Services to plan and support implementation of the Pathways intervention.

⁸ Gunnison county was added to an existing hub (the Delta/Montrose hub) in December 2022, but no new hubs were added as of August 2022.

Exhibit II.3. Map of summative evaluation hubs



All 12 hubs participated in virtual visits. For information about the visits and interview protocols, see the [YARH Implementation Study design report](#). We used a grounded coding approach to identify themes in implementation as they appeared in the data. We first systematically coded interview and focus group data, using the components of the Pathways service model and those of the comparison services provided. We developed codes connected to the components of the Pathways and comparison services based on the document review. Coding the individual service model components enabled us to describe the range of services offered to youth and young adults in the comparison hubs.

Hub characteristics. To understand the characteristics of study hubs, we analyzed hub-level means on measures such as caseload size, incidence of homelessness, and demographic characteristics. For more information about the analysis of these characteristics, see the [Descriptive Report Analytic Plan](#) (Choe et al. 2023).

2. Methods used to understand the characteristics of study youth and young adults

A total of 116 youth and young adults completed the baseline survey as of August 2022. We use descriptive statistics to describe the baseline characteristics of these participants. Specifically, we examine the means and frequencies for select demographics and outcomes measures in the domains listed in Exhibit II.2. Additional details on the measures and methods used in this report, such as variable construction and matching youth across data sources, are documented in the [Descriptive Report Analytic Plan](#) (Choe et al. 2023). Our analyses were conducted using Stata 16.1.

III. What Are We Studying? Description of Programs

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee Program) provides assistance to youth and young adults in or formerly in foster care in their transition to adulthood. The program defines eligibility as youth and young adults who experienced foster care at age 14 or older, aged out of foster care at ages 18 through 20, exited care to adoption or guardianship after age 16, or exited care for other reasons if they experienced an out-of-home placement at age 14 or older. Colorado uses these criteria to determine eligibility for its Chafee program. The primary eligibility criterion is out-of-home placement or being in custody of the child welfare or youth services systems for at least one day at age 14 or older. Colorado has opted in to provide Chafee services to young adults up to age 23.

Youth and young adults are eligible to participate in the YARH summative evaluation if they have former or current foster care placements or experience; are 14–23 years old; and have additional risk factors for homelessness, such as shelter use, having been trafficked, or formerly considered runaway. This chapter first describes the child welfare context for hubs participating in hub visits.⁹ It then describes the process for identifying, screening, and recruiting youth and young adults for services and the summative evaluation. Last, it describes the components of Pathways and comparison services. Data collected for this chapter reflect the experiences of staff and youth and young adults throughout early implementation of the study.

A. Characteristics of child welfare population and study hubs

Colorado’s child welfare system provides services to youth and young adults in a range of contexts and environments. Hubs reflect the diversity of populations in Colorado who have a history in child welfare services. In this section, we show the range of characteristics of the child welfare population in the 15 hubs participating in the implementation study.¹⁰ For example, hubs participating in the implementation study are large (one hub), medium (eight hubs), and small (three hubs) (Exhibit III.1).

Exhibit III.1. Urbanicity across the Pathways and comparison hubs



Source: 2013 NCHS Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties.

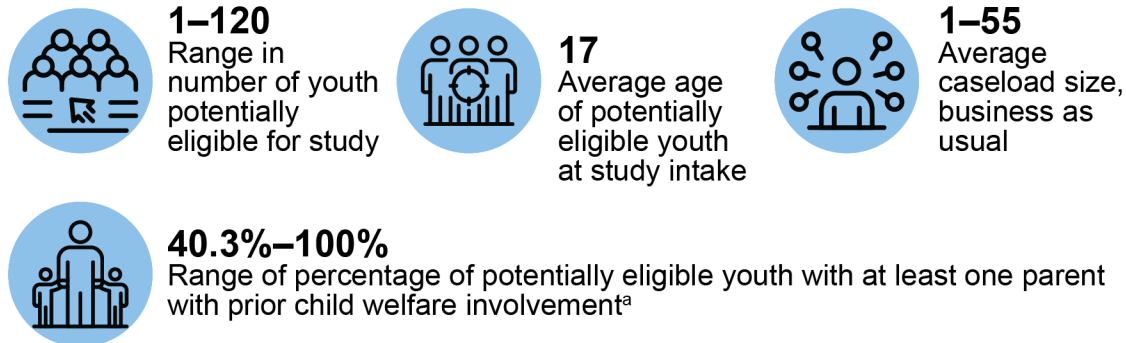
Note: Categories for urbanicity: small (nonmetropolitan areas with populations between 10,000–49,999), medium (metropolitan areas with populations less than 1 million and no less than 50,000), and large (metropolitan areas with populations of 1 million or more).

The average child welfare caseload ranges from one to 55 children or youth (Exhibit III.2). Between one and 120 youth across the hubs were potentially eligible for the study as of December 2022. Potentially eligible youth enter the study at age 17, on average. The [Descriptive Report Analytic Plan](#) (Choe et al. 2023) includes detailed information for each hub participating in the hub visits.

⁹ Some counties in Colorado have a small number of youth and young adults who need child welfare services. In these cases, adjacent counties form a hub for service provision.

¹⁰ As of August 2022, one county (Gunnison) was added to an existing hub (Delta/Montrose).

Exhibit III.2. Summary characteristics across the Pathways and comparison hubs



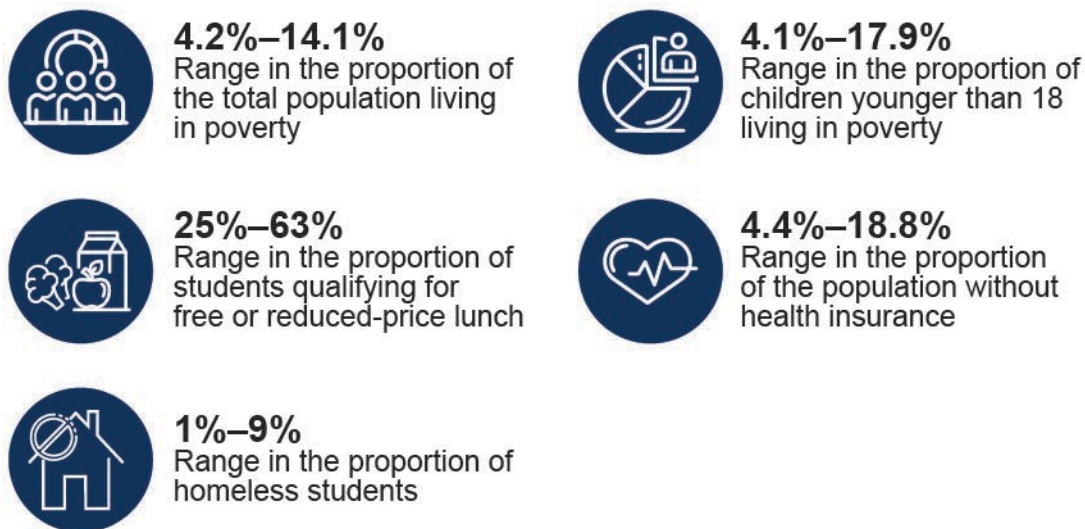
Source: 2022 Trails data for the state of Colorado.

Note: Trails data for the Morgan hub were not available.

^a Prior child welfare involvement for a parent includes involvement as a parent with an open case for another child or as a child themselves.

Hubs also vary on a number of key characteristics associated with homelessness and child welfare (Exhibit III.3). Between 4.2 and 14.1 percent of the total population lived in poverty as of the 2020 Census. The proportion of children under 18 living in poverty ranges from 4.1 to 17.9 percent. Between 25 and 63 percent of youth and young adults qualify for free and reduced-price lunch in their county.

Exhibit III.3. Summary characteristics across the Pathways and comparison hubs



Source: U.S. Census 2020 American Community Survey five-year estimates; Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center for most recent year.

B. Identification and screening for study services

Pathways and comparison hubs follow the same processes to identify and screen youth and young adults for services. State and county agencies and community service providers make referrals, as do child welfare caseworkers, case managers, foster parents, court-appointed special advocates, and guardians ad litem (Exhibit III.4). Comparison program workers could also refer youth who were eligible for comparison program services but not yet enrolled in comparison services. Youth and young adults who exit the child welfare system can also self-refer. Hubs review youth or young adults' history from Trails. Either a Pathways Navigator or comparison program worker completes a screening tool in PMIS to determine whether potentially eligible youth and young adults have at least one risk factor for homelessness (see Exhibit III.5). (For a copy of the assessment tool, see the [Pathways Intervention Manual](#), Davis and Matyas (2019)).¹¹ Following the determination of eligibility, the Navigator or comparison program worker begins working with the youth and young adults by explaining the services available, describing what participation in the study entails, and collecting consent (for participants above age 18) and assent (for participants under age 18). The explanation of services differs depending on whether the hub is a Pathways or comparison hub. Youth and young adults and workers complete multiple tools to inform services while beginning to develop their relationship. At this point, the experience for youth and young adults may begin to differ based on the study condition to which their service hub is assigned (Pathways or comparison).

Exhibit III.4. Identification and referral sources

- County agencies, such as a Department of Human Services or Department of Youth Services
- Community service providers, including schools, homeless shelters, emergency housing support, runaway and homeless youth providers, transitional living programs, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act programs, parole officers, youth and young adult shelters, courts, permanency roundtables, and group homes/centers
- Data from Trails

Exhibit III.5. Example risk factors in the screening tool

The assessment includes 10 yes-or-no questions that ask about risk factors, such as:

- Parental incarceration and foster care history
- Youth and young adults' involvement in the foster care system
- Use of marijuana
- Factors contributing to running away, such as conflict or abuse in the home
- Pregnancy
- Human trafficking

C. Pathways services

The Pathways comprehensive service model engages youth and young adults through intensive, coach-like case management. In Pathways, specially trained case managers (known as Navigators) use coaching strategies and a youth-driven approach to help youth and young adults identify their goals, connect them with existing services, and promote positive outcomes. Navigators help youth and young adults identify and work toward achieving at least two goals related to the five outcome areas of (1) housing,

¹¹ The screening assessment is an adaption of the research-based Transition-Age Youth triage tool used to identify youth and young adults most at risk of chronic homelessness; it is informed by Colorado-specific research on homelessness among foster youth. The screening assessment also incorporates trafficking questions from the Vera Institute of Human Trafficking.

(2) education, (3) employment, (4) permanent connections, and (5) health and well-being (Exhibit III.6). The next sections describe how youth and young adults are recruited and enrolled into Pathways before participating in services.

Identification through the enrollment process is summarized in the green boxes in Exhibit III.7.

1. Recruitment into Pathways

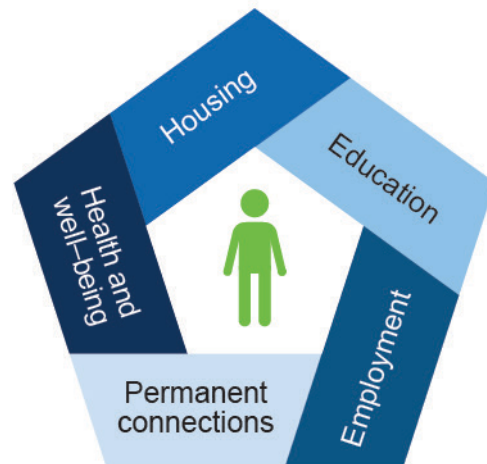
Once Pathways-eligible youth and young adults are identified through the screening, they are assigned to a Navigator. The Navigator then recruits eligible youth and young adults into Pathways by describing the program and the resources available, such as frequent contact with their Navigator and access to flexible funds.¹² During the hub visits, staff noted that framing participation in the evaluation as an opportunity for youth and young adults to advocate for themselves and others like them in foster care helps convince them to enroll. Navigators also make youth and young adults aware of the services they may receive and how their information, or information about their participation in the program, may be shared between partner organizations or used for program evaluation purposes.

2. Enrollment into Pathways

Youth and young adults can provide verbal or signed consent/assent to move forward and enroll in Pathways after discussing the program (for a copy of sample informed consent and assent forms, see the [Pathways Intervention Manual](#), Davis and Matyasac 2019). Staff across hubs often prioritize youth and young adults for enrollment into Pathways based on their risk factors, needs, and age, which can help moderate flow into the program and control caseload size. Hubs assign youth and young adults interested in Pathways to work with dedicated Navigators. Because Pathways hubs were in early implementation during hub visits, hubs had not yet reached capacity for providing Pathways, so youth and young adults did not need to wait to enroll in services at that time.

Navigators present youth and young adults interested in Pathways with the opportunity to enroll in the summative evaluation. A youth or young adult who declines participation in the evaluation can still receive Pathways services. Those who consent/assent to participate in the evaluation complete the baseline survey (described in Chapter II). Navigators typically meet with youth and young adults in person over the course of two or three meetings to complete the screening tool, explain the Pathways program and evaluation, gain consent/assent, complete the baseline survey, and begin setting goals. Navigators often complete other assessments with youth and young adults at intake, such as the Youth Connections Scale or independent living skills assessments, to inform goals.

Exhibit III.6. Pathways outcomes areas



¹² Each Pathways hub receives flexible funds, which Navigators can use to provide immediate assistance to youth or young adults when other resources have been tapped or they have an unmet need. Navigators use funds both to serve youth and young adults and secure buy-in to Pathways.

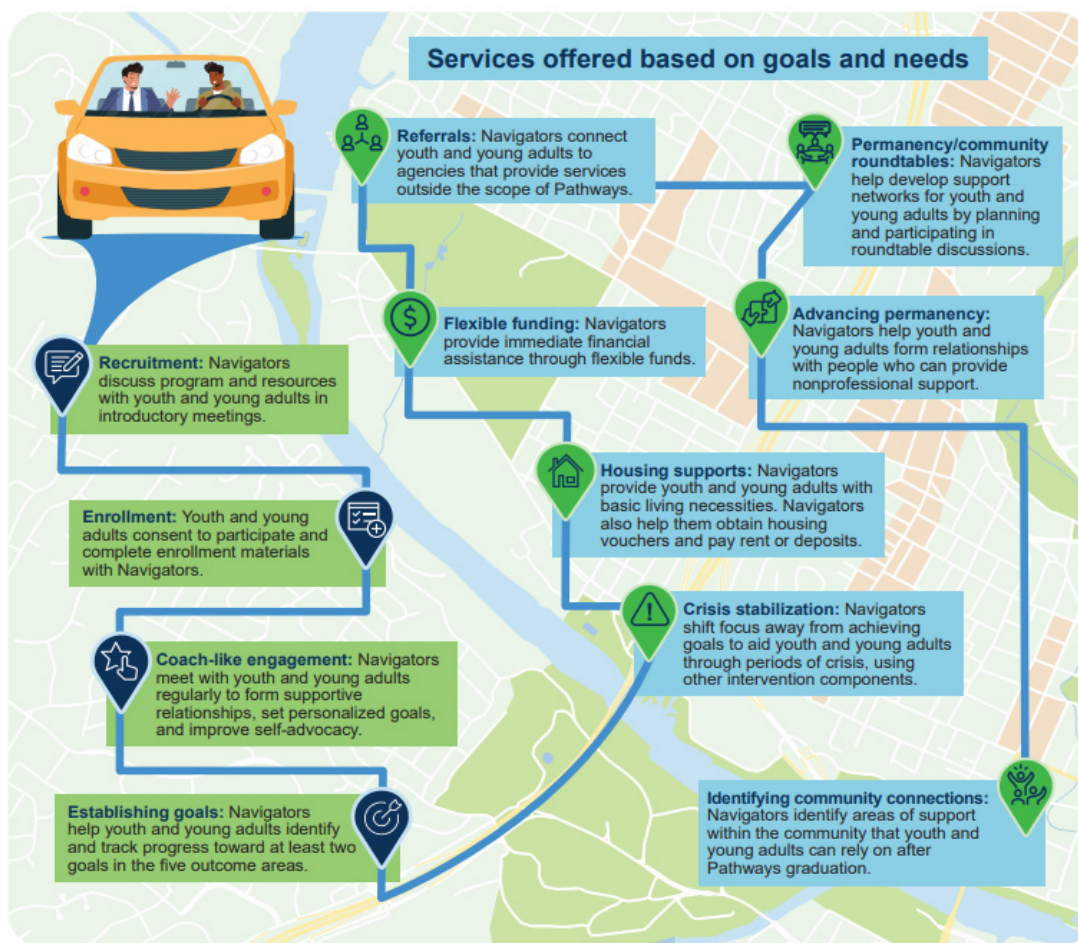
3. Pathways service components

Below we describe the service components in which youth and young adults participate. These components are summarized in the green and blue boxes in Exhibit III.7. We conducted hub visits during early implementation, so youth and young adults were not yet participating in all components. All services expected to be implemented are described below.

Exhibit III.7. Youth and young adults' experience with Pathways

In Pathways, specially trained child welfare workers (known as Navigators) use coaching strategies and a youth-driven approach to help youth and young adults identify their goals, connect them with existing services, and promote positive outcomes. Navigators help youth and young adults identify and work toward achieving at least two goals related to the five outcome areas of (1) housing, (2) education, (3) employment, (4) permanent connections, and (5) health and well-being.

Pathways defines **coach-like engagement** as an ongoing relationship in which child welfare workers, called Navigators, take action to help youth and young adults fulfill their visions, goals, or desires. Navigators are trained to regard youth and young adults as creative, resourceful, and whole individuals who are capable of identifying and advocating for their needs.



Coach-like engagement. Navigators engage with youth and young adults in a coach-like way, typically meeting with them weekly or biweekly to address needs and work on their goals. When Navigators engage as coaches with youth and young adults, they build a supportive relationship with them that encourages them to set personalized goals, create a plan to achieve the goals, and maintain

the pace for completing the plan (Exhibit III.8). Coach-like engagement also provides a framework of support through which Navigators administer other components of Pathways. For example, while providing referrals to services or supporting youth during crisis situations, Navigators prioritize hands-on learning and skills development.

Exhibit III.8. In the hub visits, staff said coach-like engagement involves the following:

- “Putting [their] goals as the number one thing. It’s youth- or young adult-driven. It’s not what I want to do. It’s how we can work together as a team.”
- “Approaching [youth and young adults], holding that space for them to figure out what it is that they want. Really explore more of what those goals are and having them do more of their own problem solving and leading them through that process by asking those questions.”
- “Allowing them to drive the bus and lead the conversation [. . .] allowing them to get the answer instead of giving it to them.”

Coach-like engagement empowers youth and young adults to act as their own advocates. For example, one participant asked to meet with her Navigator at the grocery store because she needed help carrying groceries and a ride home. The Navigator met her there and brainstormed with her regarding the resources she would need to get home by herself in the future, such as buying a personal shopping cart to transport groceries to her apartment or bringing extra bags for the bus. Obtaining these resources helped the youth and young adults become more independent and prepared her to resolve similar situations for herself in the future.

Youth and young adults describe the personal connections they developed with their Navigators. One participant said “I don’t feel like I can’t [reach out to my Navigator]. If I needed advice on anything, I would say ‘I’m going through this, what do you think about this?’ I like the fact that I can talk to her without her telling me what choice to make. She listens and she’s just there and I respect and appreciate that.” Youth and young adults stressed that Navigators’ coach-like support has improved their confidence and helped them navigate situations more easily. For example, one participant said that their Navigator “listens a lot and [is] very engaged. Whenever we’re in meetings or looking for apartments, she focuses on me and doesn’t worry about anything else going on.” Another participant said, “[My Navigator] talks about how you’re supposed to process and do these things. He makes it more simplified, so it’s easier to follow.”



Establishing goals. Youth and young adults work with a Navigator to develop at least two goals related to one or more of the five outcome areas

(Exhibit III.6). Navigators meet regularly with youth and young adults to track progress toward a wide range of goals. For example, youth and young adults set goals to graduate from high school or college, get a job, get an ID, complete a résumé, or change their legal name. One participant even set a goal of getting a gaming computer to stream for charity, and their Navigator helped them budget for the cost and find extra work to pay for the computer. Navigators often help youth and young adults work toward a set of goals in sequence, such as getting a driver’s license before getting a car, or graduating from college before going to law school.



“I feel like now I have a plan figured out. In the past few years, I’ve been kind of in limbo. I didn’t know much of what to do like resumes and what’s an ID. Now that I’ve started working with him, I have this plan that I can now use, so when I do get out of foster care, I have a solid foundation.”

-Youth/young adult

Navigators said establishing goals “goes with engaging in a coach-like way,” and stressed the importance of listening to help build relationships with youth and young adults. They emphasized that working with youth and young adults to set goals helps them feel empowered, keeps them accountable, and gives them “the freedom [. . .] to come up with what they want their life to look like.”



Crisis stabilization. Some youth and young adults experience a period of crisis while enrolled in Pathways, such as homelessness or involvement with the justice system. During these periods, Navigators pause plans to achieve goals and use all other components of the intervention to immediately help the youth or young adults address the crisis. For example, one participant discovered that their apartment was infested with bedbugs and had to leave it temporarily. The Navigator paid for a hotel room and worked with the participant’s housing superintendent to resolve the issue.

Navigators emphasized the importance of coach-like engagement in working with youth and young adults in crisis situations, which helped them leverage that established trust to communicate openly and quickly to address crises. One Navigator said, “It’s about just asking questions and giving them that ability to figure it out themselves.” For example, if a youth or young adult gets an eviction notice, a Navigator can ask them who they would call first and then work together with them to find the answer, rather than solve the problem for them.

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“Having the more intensive contact with youth is great for crisis situations, as I am constantly reaching out, involved, and am aware of youth needs. Because I am already reaching out regularly, it’s easier to address crisis situations.”

-Navigator



Housing supports. Many Navigators describe the need for safe and stable housing as the top issue for youth and young adults participating in Pathways. At the time of the hub visits, this component of the model took many forms, depending on a youth or young adult’s housing status. For those looking for housing, Navigators help youth and young adults acquire housing vouchers, help them understand necessary documentation, assist with rent and deposits, and tour apartments with them. For those already housed, they provide materials to help them settle into new housing, including towels, toiletries, and basic furniture.

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“[Partnerships with housing organizations] are essential because they understand our young people. Youth housing programs are different from adult ones, and these partners are very useful in terms of understanding the populations [. . .] Having [a] youth focus goes really far with these kids.”

-Navigator

Many staff describe strong connections with local housing authorities and temporary housing organizations, which Navigators leverage to secure housing and housing vouchers for youth and young adults. For example, the Denver hub partners with the Department of Housing and Urban Peak, a local nonprofit providing housing, temporary housing, support services, and case management services for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness. Partnerships with local housing authorities help youth and young adults secure housing vouchers. One Navigator said those relationships have eased the housing voucher process for youth and young adults and housing partners, emphasizing that “we’re involved in the whole process of when they get a voucher to getting the keys, walking alongside them, helping them figure out their income and what they qualify for.” For counties that have

not yet built up their housing supports for youth and young adults, the ability to help pay for deposits or rent has been “really helpful for youth, so [rent is] one less stressor.”



Flexible funding. Each Pathways hub receives flexible funds (“flex funds”), which are designed to be a real-time response to the financial needs of youth and young adults. Navigators can use flex funds to provide quick, immediate assistance to youth or young adults when other resources have been tapped or they have an unmet need. Navigators use available flex funds in a variety of ways. They help pay for transportation costs, such as bus passes or driver’s licenses; apartment security deposits; furniture and appliances; and necessities to set up youth and young adults in their apartments. Navigators also use flex funds in their regular meetings with youth and young adults for taking them to get something to eat or drink, which help meetings feel less formal.

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“[Pathways] paid for the security deposit which was super amazing, and they have these little buckets of toilet paper, hygiene products, paper towels, shower curtain, just general stuff for living in apartment for first night. And they build these tubs and they’re filled with stuff you would forget about on the first day, like toilet paper—that was a breath of fresh air. Now I’m in this great apartment and it’s not on the greatest end of town, but at least it’s a secure neighborhood.”

-Youth/young adult

Navigators stress that using flex funds offers “an opportunity to provide life-saving changes” for youth and young adults; often, they use funds to buy time and create safety and stability before addressing longer-term issues. For example, one Navigator emphasized the importance of money in managing crises, and said, “Having funding to be like ‘I can’t fix this mental health thing for you, but I can pay your rent and that’s something that I can take off your shoulders to alleviate some stress.’ Or ‘I can take your car to go get an oil change and you don’t have to worry about that.’ I think that’s like a big, positive way that we manage crisis.”



Referrals. No agency or organization is a one-stop shop for helping youth and young adults with a foster care history overcome the many challenges they must conquer to be equipped for independence. Thus, Pathways educates Navigators about the network of local partners and connects them so they can facilitate referrals of youth and young adults. When a youth or young adult has a particular problem or goal, a primary responsibility of the Navigator is to help find solutions and refer them to the appropriate service agencies. Navigators use referrals as opportunities to help youth and young adults practice self-advocacy skills with support by making warm handoffs and going to offices with youth and young adults. At the time of the hub visits, Navigators were referring youth and young adults to a wide range of service agencies. (See Exhibit III.9 for examples.) One Navigator says these partnerships “allow for a group effort” when serving youth and young adults, acknowledging that other providers may already be providing a particular service or have more resources to do so.

Exhibit III.9. Example agencies to which Navigators refer youth and young adults

- Workforce centers
- Public health departments
- Local housing organizations
- Mental health centers
- Local food banks
- Community colleges (English as a second language, High School Equivalency, and General Educational Development education)
- Experiential education
- Parenting support and family services
- Department of Human Services (food stamps, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and Medicaid)

Additional components of Pathways not yet implemented. At the time of the hub visits, Navigators were not yet using the full set of service components, given that youth and young adults were still early in their engagement with Pathways. Some of these components could include the following:



Permanency or community roundtables. Navigators may support youth and young adults during the processes of planning and participating in the county-led permanency and community roundtables (see this report on the [Permanency Roundtable Project](#)). A permanency roundtable includes meeting with internal and external experts, developing permanency goals, brainstorming barriers to permanency, and developing an action plan. A community roundtable is a YARH adaptation of the one convened by the Navigator as needed. Roundtables support the development of a support network for the youth and young adults.



Advance permanency. A key indicator of long-term stability is relational permanency—ensuring that youth and young adults have at least one supportive adult they can turn to for help when needed. The Pathways model defines a supportive adult as any adult that a youth or young adult identifies as a supportive connection but who is not providing professional support. Navigators can foster connections by encouraging youth and young adults to spend time building these connections or by providing a space for or hosting an event that facilitates relationship building.



Identifying community connections. The Pathways model is designed to be short term and intensive, allowing youth and young adults to graduate and transition to a less intensive case management model for the long term. To facilitate this design, Navigators must help the youth or young adult identify what areas of support exist within the community on which they can rely after graduation. This transition support could take the form of helping youth and young adults build supportive connections or finding other community assets (referral agencies) to help them after they are no longer eligible for Pathways.

D. Comparison services

Comparison hubs in Colorado do not train their workers to be Navigators. Instead, these hubs continue having comparison program workers provide services for youth and young adults with foster care histories at age 14 or older. The next sections describe how youth and young adults are recruited and enrolled into the comparison program before participating in services and the services they are offered (Exhibit III.11).

1. Recruitment for comparison services

Once youth and young adults are identified and screened, comparison program workers reach out to them and schedule an introductory meeting to discuss the program. They explain that the program is not just another mandatory program from social services. Rather, a youth or young adult's participation is voluntary, and the program focuses on achieving participants' independent living goals. Comparison program workers also discuss how youth's and young adults' information, or information about their participation in the program, may be shared between partner organizations or used for program evaluation purposes.

2. Enrollment into comparison services

After discussing the program, youth and young adults can consent/assent to participate in comparison services. In some hubs, program staff prioritize them for enrollment based on a participant's age, needs, risk factors, and status as a transfer case from other counties (Exhibit III.10). Limited staffing capacity in some hubs constrains program enrollment for eligible youth and young adults, resulting in waitlists for all new referrals and the need to prioritize cases for service delivery. However, other hubs do not have a waitlist because they are fully staffed or do not have many program-eligible youth and young adults. In the absence of a waitlist, comparison program workers are assigned to youth and young adults to begin services.

Exhibit III.10. Prioritizing youth and young adults in comparison hubs with a waitlist

Hubs often prioritize older youth and young adults for enrollment into comparison services because of their age and the time they have left in the child welfare system. Younger youth (15 and younger) often participate in group independent living services before working with a comparison program worker. For example, staff describe prioritizing a young adult age 18 or older over a younger youth because the latter often have fewer pressing needs or often receive services from their child welfare caseworkers. For those on the waitlist, some hubs provide group meetings, services, workshops, or a list of resources they can access.

To provide comparison program services to youth and young adults, workers must be certified as caseworkers by the state of Colorado. Some hubs have a single comparison program worker who provides services to all enrolled youth and young adults in their respective hubs. In hubs with multiple comparison program workers, staff use various criteria to determine case assignment, such as the worker's existing relationship with a placement provider and the youth and young adults who live there, caseload, and familiarity with a certain demographic (for example, teen mothers). Staff do not rigidly apply these criteria. All supervisors, comparison program workers, and case aides generally share knowledge and collaborate to support all cases. In some hubs, workers also partner with case aides who support youth and young adults across cases. For example, case aides individually meet with a youth or young adult if the comparison program worker is short on time; aides also can research cases and support group events. Case aides said they do not develop the youth and young adult's independent living plan or attend their meetings.

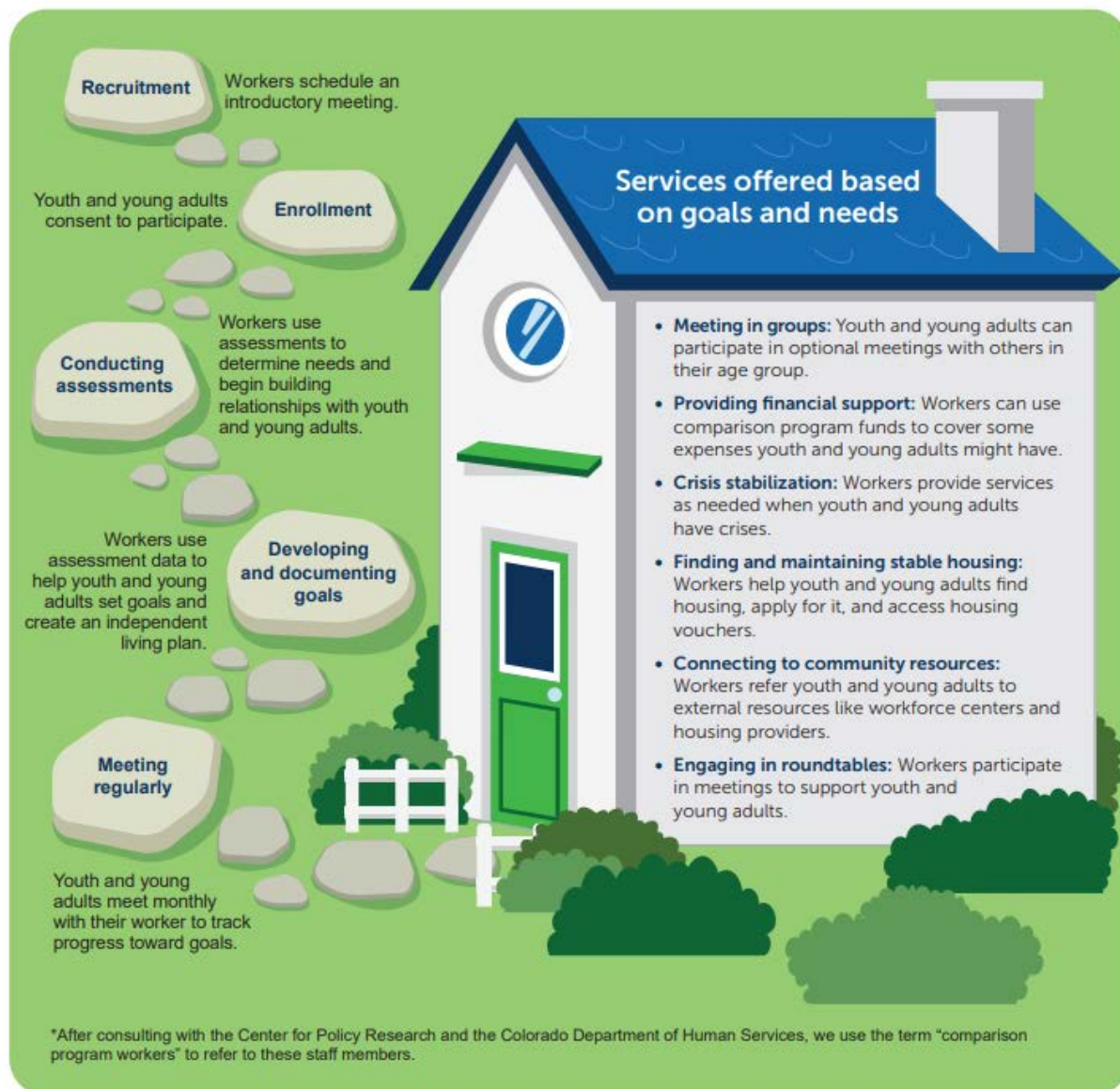
At the time of enrollment, the comparison program worker invites the youth or young adult to participate in the summative evaluation. Those who decline participation in the evaluation can still receive comparison program services. Those who do consent/assent then complete the baseline survey (described in Chapter II).

3. Comparison service components

The array of services available in the comparison condition varies across comparison hubs. Comparison workers support youth and young adults in almost all aspects of their lives to strengthen their independent living skills (Exhibit III.11).

Exhibit III.11. Youth and young adults' experiences in comparison services

Comparison program workers* provide business-as-usual (comparison) services to youth and young adults who have been in foster care at age 14 or older. After confirming the youth and young adults are eligible for the program, the workers assess them to gauge their needs and begin building a relationship with them. Based on initial assessments, workers help youth and young adults define goals and develop an independent living plan. To track progress toward those goals, youth and young adults have monthly contact with their workers via a one-on-one meeting, group meeting, phone call, or text.



Often, workers provide services that do not have a clear definition and can span different topics and components (Exhibit III.12). For example, youth and young adults commonly face emergencies and request support from their worker to find stable housing. Comparison workers support them in preparing their taxes, obtaining vital records, obtaining health care, dealing with relationship issues, locating services and resources for youth and young adult parents and their children, and facilitating peer and adult connections. In this section, we describe the components in which comparison program staff, including

administrative leadership and supervisors, and youth and young adults describe participating immediately after enrollment.

Exhibit III.12. In the hub visits, comparison program staff said case management involves the following:

- “[This is] the wrapping around—helping [youth] identify community and personal resources and encouraging them to reach out and helping them to reach out. There is definitely some crisis management that goes along with it. My workers—they’ll drop things. . .to help youth figure out what to do and coach them through it and not do it for them.”
- “[W]e try and do as much as we can with what’s available in our region. And so, I would say nothing’s really off limits. We don’t say ‘no’ often. . .if they’re interested, we’re, we’re going to explore it and sort of look through that with them.”



Conducting assessments. Once a youth or young adult agree to participate in the program, the comparison worker begins an initial assessment with them. Workers use this assessment as a tool to engage youth and young adults and begin building a relationship with them. Comparison program staff across hubs describe using a variety of assessments to help determine youth and young adults’ needs. Hubs decide which assessment to use because there is no requirement to use a standard assessment. Staff in some hubs use the “Chafee assessment,” which explores different topics around independent living. Colorado developed this standard 80-question assessment to determine a youth’s or young adult’s strengths, weaknesses, and areas of growth. The assessment focuses on eight key pieces of information or skills that youth and young adults need to grasp, including financial management, community resources, education, employment, household management, support system, personal relationships, and communication. During the assessment, youth and young adults must demonstrate their knowledge by describing how they would do certain things. For example, according to one comparison program worker, “They have to explain to us what each one [credit card and a debit card] is and show that they truly know it versus one is I spend my money and one is free money.” After completion, the worker scores the assessment and discusses the results with them.

Comparison program workers in some hubs also use the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment, which identifies the strengths and weaknesses of youth and young adults in life skills they will need, such as financial planning and management, completing employment applications, or resumé building. Similar to the Chafee assessment, this assessment measures youth and young adults’ knowledge about independent living. Staff in one hub discuss using the Youth Connection Scale, which describes connections youth and young adults have in their lives and helps workers remind them about other supports.



Developing and documenting goals in an independent living plan. Comparison program workers use the data from these assessments to help inform youth and young adults’ needs and help them develop the Roadmap to Success—the Colorado independent living plan. Comparison program workers use this tool to help youth and young adults define and establish goals (Exhibit III.13). They support youth and young adults with a range of goals, including education, career planning, employment, finances, housing, obtaining a driver’s license, and supportive connections. The

Exhibit III.13. Examples of probes comparison program workers use with youth and young adults to inform the independent living plan:

- What do you want to do after high school?
- What do you want to do to finish high school?
- What kind of job are you interested in?

Roadmap to Success includes different sections, such as education, employment, finances, vital records, and a list of services or activities that workers can engage youth or young adults to complete. The goals are youth driven and individualized according to youth and young adults' needs, which determine the services workers provide to support them in achieving their goals. Comparison program workers also obtain input from the youth and young adults' team to help inform the independent living plan. Team members who provide input include their caseworker, therapist, comparison worker, any service or placement provider, guardian ad litem, attorney, family, friend, household members, and anyone else in their life. With this varied input, the comparison program worker gains a wider understanding of the youth or young adults' needs and future goals, as well as their supportive connections. Together, workers and youth and young adults document the goals and plan steps to achieve the goals by breaking them into attainable tasks. Comparison program workers and youth and young adults engage continuously to discuss progress.



Meeting regularly. To track progress toward goals, youth and young adults meet monthly with their comparison program workers. The comparison services require these workers to contact youth and young adults at least once a month, which could be via a one-on-one meeting, group meeting, phone call, or text. Comparison workers usually meet with youth and young adults in person through one-on-one meetings, which allow them to build relationships with youth and young adults. The meeting includes activities such as job hunting, college preparation, goal setting, and resolving issues or crises. The intensity of youth and young adults' needs determines the number of contacts in a given month and duration of a meeting.

When contacting youth or young adults, comparison workers check in with them to see how they are doing, informally assess their needs, continue ongoing discussions about goals, and help them prioritize needs and goals. Because youth and young adults' needs often change, workers remain flexible in the services and supports they provide. To document progress, some hubs review and update youth or young adults' goals and accomplishments in the independent living plan every six months. As part of this process, workers and youth and young adults identify and document new goals for the next six months.



Meeting in groups. In some cases, youth and young adults also participate in optional group meetings with others in their age group (Exhibit III.14). The group meetings offer varied services around life skills. Some hubs offer weekly group meetings, whereas others conduct ad hoc workshops. Group meetings are another opportunity for comparison program workers and youth and young adults to build their relationship in addition to the one-on-one meetings, and offer an opportunity for youth and young adults to socialize in a safe environment.

Exhibit III.14. Examples of group meetings to enhance life skills

- Cooking classes
- Café social media usage
- Apartment searching
- Financial management
- Preparation for job interview
- Identity theft, health, and wellness
- Personal safety
- Problem solving and decision making
- Community resources tour
- Other independent living topics



Providing financial support. Across hubs, youth and young adults said that their comparison worker provided wide-ranging financial support to them. Comparison program workers said they can provide support on an as-needed basis to cover

expenses such as housing, car expenses, and food. For youth and young adults experiencing housing insecurity, hubs pay for hotels and motels, housing application fees, housing deposits, furniture, rent, utility bills, shopping for basic necessities for a new apartment, household necessities, and home repairs. To help youth and young adults with reliable transportation, particularly for employment, hubs provide funding for vehicle purchases and repairs, car payments and insurance, gas, and tow services. To supplement these direct financial supports, comparison workers also provide financial guidance to youth and young adults—for example, planning for future rent payments, speaking to their landlords, and managing finances. Hubs are more willing to provide financial support if a youth or young adult demonstrates effort toward helping themselves, or if they participate in their plan and make progress. For example, if a youth or young adult needs car repairs, the comparison worker asks them to get an estimate for the required service.

Over the last two years, Chafee programs received federal pandemic relief funding for use in supporting youth and young adults' needs. Most hubs have access to and provide flexible financial support to support their needs and goals. During hub visits, youth and young adults indicated that the financial support helped them; one said, "I think that's the biggest thing for me is financially being helped. She's [my worker] done really good with that. So I appreciate what she's been able to do and what she's been able to get me. I think it's really good and it helps me out, and it helps us plan as well."



Crisis stabilization. Throughout service delivery, workers respond to crises as part of their ongoing engagement with youth and young adults. Often workers are the primary contacts for those youth and young adults, who reach out to their workers during emergency situations or to help manage crises. During hub visits, staff said ". . . oftentimes we're kind of their only contact. They reach out to us. They say, I don't know if I'll be able to pay rent. I don't have gas money. How am I going to get to work? I don't have a way to get to work." If youth and young adults have an open child welfare case, comparison workers collaborate with their caseworkers to respond to emergencies (Exhibit III.15). Youth and young adults experience wide-ranging emergencies, such as lost IDs while traveling, domestic violence incidents, car issues, food insecurities, inadequate funds for rent or gas, eviction and immediate housing needs, a mental health crisis, or parenting support for their children. Understanding that youth and young adults need support at any time, comparison program workers in some hubs voluntarily respond to them outside of business hours to help individuals in a crisis. One comparison program worker said, "there's a lot of anxiety that comes up and when dealing with housing shortages and law enforcement in general. And so to be able to be there and hold space. . . I think it's the biggest thing in emergencies."

Exhibit III.15. Other financial support includes the following:

- Groceries
- Educational costs
- Gift cards
- Phone bills
- Clothes
- Supplies for youth or young adults' children
- Recreation passes
- Bus and airline tickets to visit family
- Medical issues
- Monetary incentives for specific activities



Finding and maintaining stable housing. Housing is the most critical need and goal for youth and young adults enrolled in the comparison program. In Colorado, there is limited affordable housing available. A comparison program worker said, “. . .we’re constantly. . .on the lookout for resources, for vouchers, for low-income apartments, affordable apartments that are in safe neighborhoods.” In addition to finding and applying for housing, comparison program workers support youth and young adults in working with local housing authorities to obtain housing vouchers, such as through the Family Unification Program and Foster Youth to Independence. These vouchers, which are available in some hubs, are intended for youth and young adults who are leaving or aging out of foster care. Comparison program workers also play a supportive role in navigating evictions, taking apartment tours, signing leases, providing education about being able to afford housing, and getting on housing community waitlists. Youth and young adults appreciated this support, one saying “We’ve been looking at apartments, and she told me that once we fill out the applications and get accepted that she can pay the deposit and kinda just help us move in.”

//////
“I’ve had a roundtable meeting about college. We all wanted to get on the same page and get me to [Albuquerque, New Mexico] this summer, and we were able to do that. We’ve had roundtables because my caseworker and the people on my team are never in sync with my. . . worker. Me and my. . .worker always make sure we have a roundtable so everyone is on the same page and nothing gets messed up.”

— Youth/young adult



Connecting to community resources. Workers help youth and young adults connect with community services and resources to support their needs and goals (Exhibit III.16). Resources in the community include furniture providers, food banks, housing partners, workforce centers and other vocational services, and health care providers. Depending on youth and young adult preferences and a referral source’s requirements, comparison program workers employ different methods to connect them to community services.

Exhibit III.16. In the hub visits, comparison program staff describe the different ways they help youth and young adults connect to resources:

- “We do a community resource tour every year, so we’ll go to different food banks, housing resources, shelters, [and] places to get interview clothes. We’ll organize meetings with them [and] show them how it works and have representatives come and talk with them.”
- “If we don’t have the money or resources, then what are those community resources we can point them towards?”
- “I have sat with the youth while they called. I find that they’re more comfortable with that.”



Engaging in roundtables. To support youth and young adults, comparison workers participate in various meetings, such as general staffing meetings, permanency roundtables, family engagement meetings, and individual education plan meetings. Each youth and young adult has a multidisciplinary team, which might consist of their caseworker, family or foster parents, guardian ad litem, Chafee program worker, court appointed special advocate, mentor, treatment providers, and other caregivers and connections. The caseworker generally conducts these meetings, which can range from monthly to quarterly, to discuss progress and set goals as a team to support the youth or young adult. Comparison

workers attend these meetings to advocate for their youth and young adults, ensuring their voices and needs are addressed and considered. These meetings allow all service providers to discuss and have a shared understanding of youth and young adults' needs and their future.

IV. Whom Are We Serving? Description of Youth and Young Adults

One year after enrollment began, 116 youth and young adults across 14 of the 15 hubs are enrolled in the YARH-3 summative evaluation (see Exhibit II.3 for a map of the summative evaluation hubs and those with youth and young adults currently enrolled). This chapter describes these youths' and young adults' background and baseline characteristics across select key outcome domains as described in Exhibit II.2. These characteristics help us understand the sample of youth and young adults served by Pathways and comparison programs as of August 2022; in future reports, these characteristics will provide context for the summative evaluation study. The primary data source for the characteristics of youth and young adults described in this chapter is the baseline youth survey discussed in Chapter II.

This chapter is organized into three sections: (1) background characteristics, (2) protective factors, and (3) risk factors. Background characteristics, such as age, gender identity, and sexual orientation, can help us understand the study sample. These characteristics could influence key youth and young adult outcomes, such as homelessness, but are not characteristics that Pathways can change. Our discussion of protective and risk factors includes baseline characteristics of youth and young adults that Pathways could influence, such as a youth's housing situation. Risk factors, such as substance abuse, are associated with higher rates of homelessness and other problem outcomes (USICH 2013). Protective factors could counteract the effects of risk, such as caring adults, a stable living situation, and relational skills (Development Services Group, Inc. 2013), and could be affected by Pathways as well. Using a lens of protective and risk factors reminds us that to impact youth homelessness in a meaningful way, a program must address more than housing alone (USICH 2013).

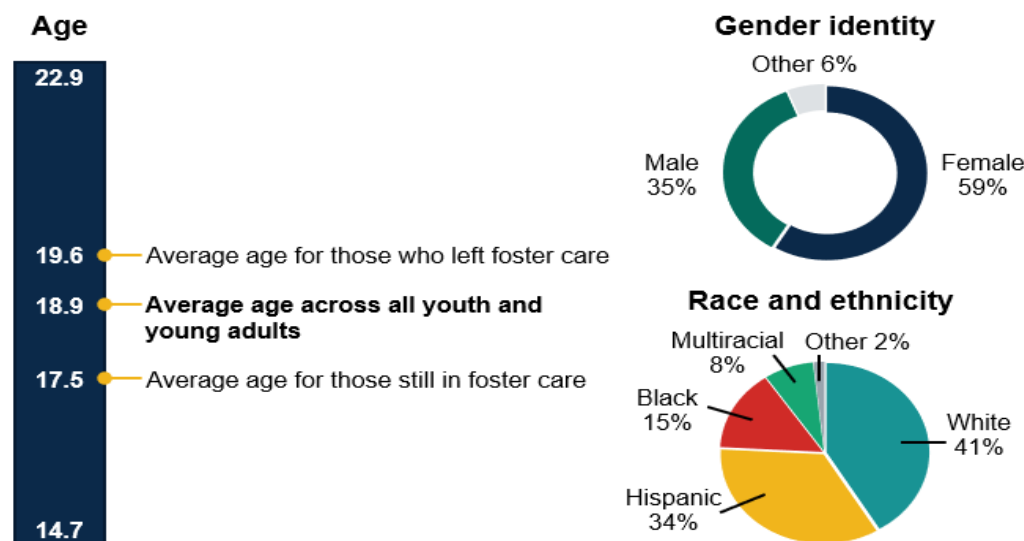
A. Background characteristics

Exhibit IV.1 presents a demographic snapshot of youth and young adults currently enrolled in the summative evaluation.

Across all 116 youth and young adults in the current study sample, ages range from 14.7 to 22.9, with an average age of 18.9. Most youth and young adults in the sample (65 percent) report they are not currently living in foster care. Youth still in foster care (35 percent) are, on average, younger (17.5 years)—similar to the average age of the population of youth and young adults in participating hubs from Colorado's Trails child welfare data (Exhibit III.2).

Most youth and young adults (59 percent) identify as female. Most identify as non-Hispanic and White (41 percent), about one-third as Hispanic (34 percent), and about one-fifth as either non-Hispanic and Black (15 percent) or non-Hispanic and multiracial (8 percent).

Exhibit IV.1. Demographic snapshot of youth and young adults enrolled in the summative evaluation

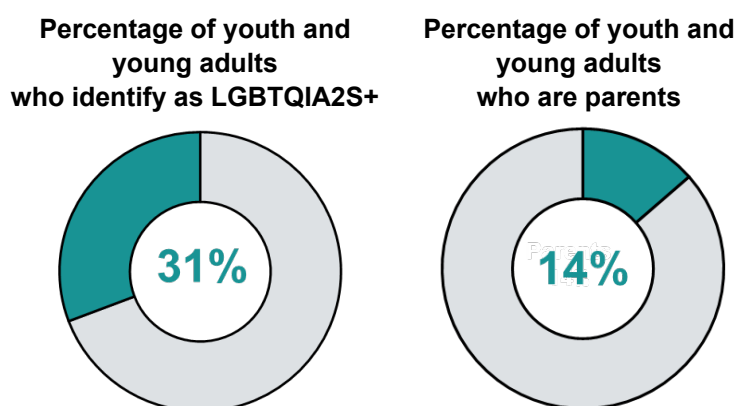


Source: Baseline youth survey administered by Mathematica.

Notes: The survey asks youth and young adults to indicate their ethnicity and race. The pie chart shows the percentage of youth and young adults who identify as non-Hispanic and Black, non-Hispanic and White, non-Hispanic and multiracial, non-Hispanic and other race, and Hispanic. Close to 40 percent of youth and young adults who identify as Hispanic did not report a racial category. Among Hispanic respondents who did indicate their race, one-third identify as White and one-fifth as multiracial. Sample: N = 116.

For practitioners designing and delivering interventions, understanding the youth and young adults they serve also means identifying the needs of vulnerable subpopulations who are overrepresented within youth homelessness. Research suggests that youth and young adults who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer, and others (LGBTQIA2S+) are disproportionately more likely to experience homelessness than those who identify as heterosexual (Morton et al. 2018). Exhibit IV.2 presents the percentage of youth and young adults in the sample for two vulnerable subpopulations—LGBTQIA2S+ youth and young adults, and parenting youth and young adults. Thirty-one percent of youth and young adults in the study sample identify as LGBTQIA2S+. Additionally, 14 percent are parents. Most of these parents have one child and, in most cases, these children live with their parents.

Exhibit IV.2. Vulnerable subpopulations



Source: Baseline youth survey administered by Mathematica.

Note: Sample: Sexual orientation (N = 104); parenting (N = 103). LGBTQIA2S+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, two-spirit, and others.

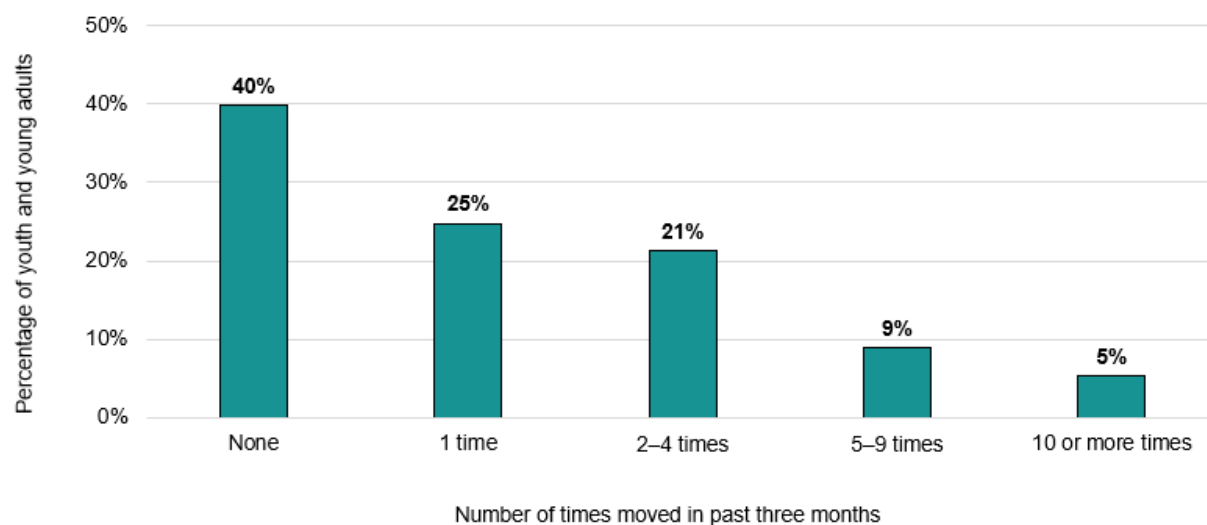
B. Protective factors

Research suggests that protective factors, such as housing stability and caring adults, can improve well-being and promote longer-term success among youth and young adults with a history of foster care (Development Services Group, Inc. 2013). Furthermore, protective factors can potentially offset some of the harmful impacts of coexisting risk factors, such as substance abuse or history of incarceration. This section discusses stable housing, education and employment, and positive connections with adults and peers—all factors that could protect against homelessness among youth and young adults involved in the foster care system (Kelly 2020).

1. Stable housing

Securing and maintaining safe and stable housing is one of the key goals of Pathways. A stable living situation supports a number of positive outcomes for youth and young adults, such as educational attainment, employment, and well-being (Johnson et al. 2010; Sommer et al. 2009; Wade and Dixon 2006). The baseline youth survey asks youth and young adults about their housing situation, including those in the 35 percent currently in foster care. Those in the sample experience various degrees of housing instability. At the time of enrollment, 40 percent had not moved in the last three months (Exhibit IV.3). The remaining 60 percent moved at least once, with the most (46 percent of movers) moving one to four times in the previous three months alone. This percentage includes youth and young adults in foster care who may have had to leave a placement. Moving more than twice a year is associated with negative health and well-being outcomes (Cutts et al. 2011; Busacker and Kasehagen 2012).

Exhibit IV.3. Number of times youth and young adults moved in the past three months



Source: Baseline youth survey administered by Mathematica.

A history of homelessness—housing instability in its most severe form—is prevalent among youth and young adults in the study. The baseline youth survey asks them if they have ever been homeless, including couch surfing, doubling up, living in a car, living in a homeless shelter, or any other place not meant to be a residence, because they did not have a regular place to sleep at night. At the time of study enrollment, 75 percent of youth and young adults had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives (Exhibit IV.4). About half of these individuals were homeless both before and after entering foster

care (49 percent), whereas about one-quarter were only homeless either before (27 percent) or after (24 percent) entering foster care.

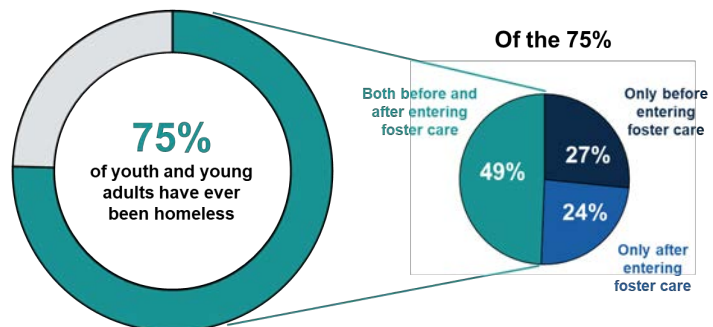
According to the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), 20 percent of the 19-year-old respondents experienced homelessness in the past two years, and, by age 21, 27 percent had experienced homelessness (Children’s Bureau 2019). Estimates for the prevalence of homelessness can vary based on its definition and the population of focus. As noted in Chapter I, smaller studies have produced estimates of homelessness ranging from 11 to 37 percent for

youth and young adults currently or previously in foster care. Some estimates go up to 50 percent if the definition includes situations such as couch surfing or doubling up (Dion et al. 2014). These statistics suggest that the youth and young adults currently enrolled in the summative evaluation represent a population at high risk of homelessness.

In addition to a history of homelessness, youth and young adults also reported on recent living situations. Exhibit IV.5 shows where youth and young adults slept on most nights over the past 30 days, by their current foster care status. About half of all youth and young adults were either at their foster parents’ home or in their own apartment (23 percent with a foster parent and 25 percent in their own, rented apartment). 19 of the 23 percent of youth and young adults who reported they slept most nights with foster parents are currently in foster care. Close to 20 percent stayed with other family members or friends, in some cases temporarily couch surfing. The remaining spent the night in transitional housing, cars, motels or hotels, or on the street.

Youth and young adults also were asked how safe they felt in each of these places (on a 6-point scale, from very safe to very unsafe). On average across all youth and young adults, about three-fourths reported feeling safe or very safe where they slept on most nights. Youth and young adults felt most safe with foster parents (96 percent of those who spent the night with foster parents reported feeling safe or very safe) and least safe on the street, in a car, or in a detention facility (none reported feeling safe or very safe).

Exhibit IV.4. Percentage of youth and young adults who were ever homeless

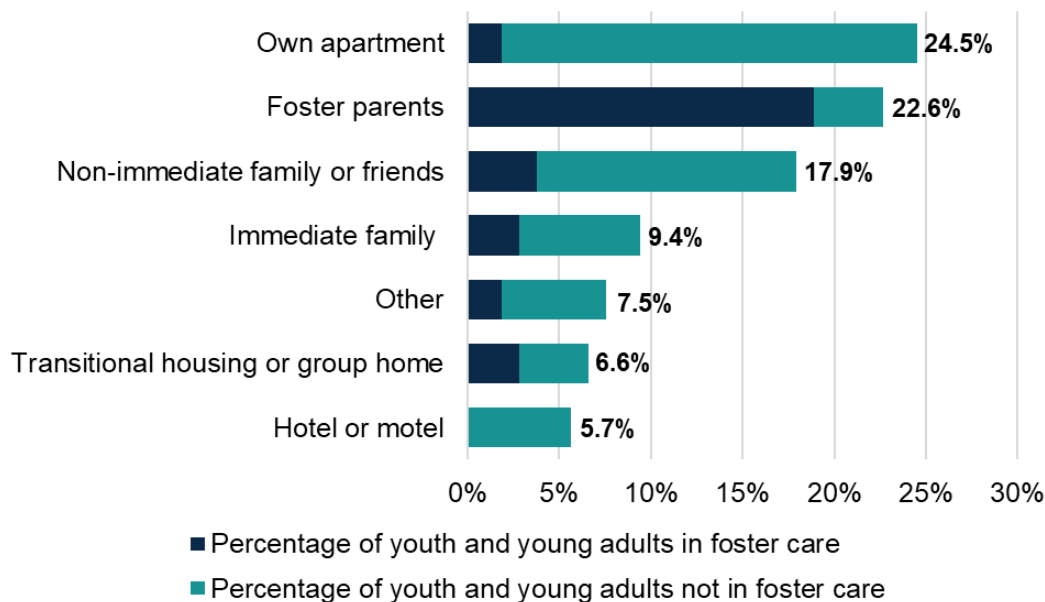


Note: Sample: N = 113.

Source: Baseline youth survey administered by Mathematica.

Note: Sample: N = 110.

Exhibit IV.5. Where youth and young adults slept on most nights over the past 30 days



Source: Baseline youth survey administered by Mathematica.

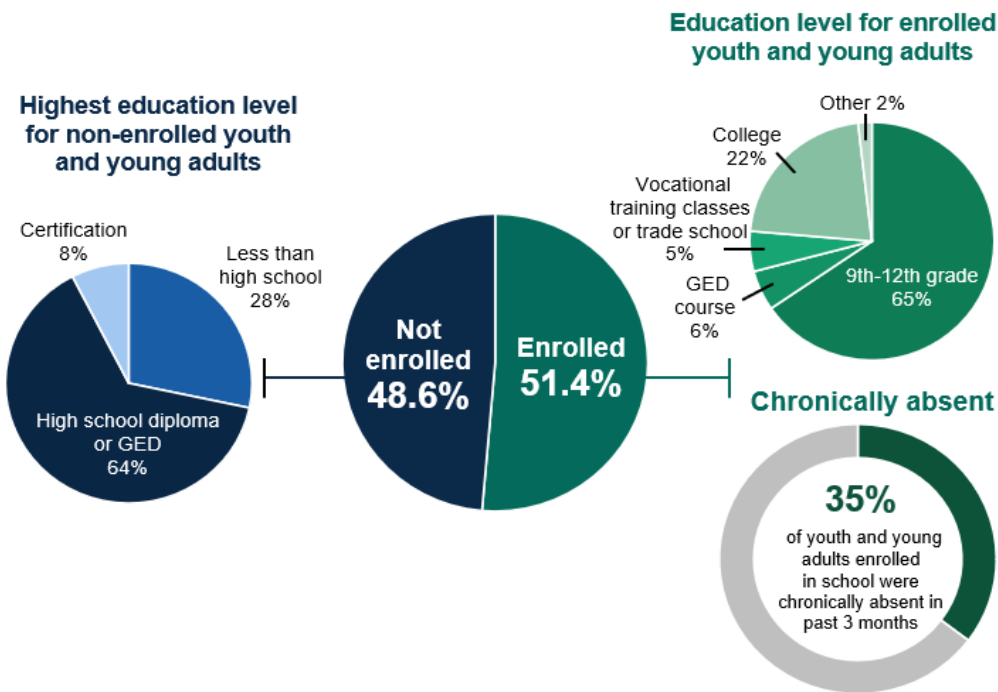
Note: Other category includes cars, abandoned buildings, on the street, detention facility, and other nonspecified category. Sample: N = 106.

2. Education and employment

Like stable housing, education and employment are key outcomes that Pathways targets and could influence a broad range of life outcomes for youth at risk of homelessness. Exhibit IV.6 provides a snapshot of youth and young adults' education status, attainment, and attendance at the time of study entry. About half (51.4 percent) of the youth and young adults in the current study sample are enrolled in school. Most of them (65.5 percent) are in high school, and about one-fifth are in college. Thirty-five percent of the enrolled youth and young adults reported being chronically absent the three months before taking the survey.¹³ This rate is the same as the average chronically absent rate across all grade levels in Colorado during school year 2021–2022 (35 percent) ([Colorado Department of Education](#) 2022). Among the 48.6 percent of youth and young adults not enrolled in school, 28.3 percent have less than a high school diploma but most (64.2 percent) have a high school diploma or GED.

¹³ Colorado defines chronic absenteeism as missing approximately 18 days a year (about 10 percent of total days), or about two days a month (Colorado Department of Education 2022).

Exhibit IV.6. Education of youth and young adults in study sample

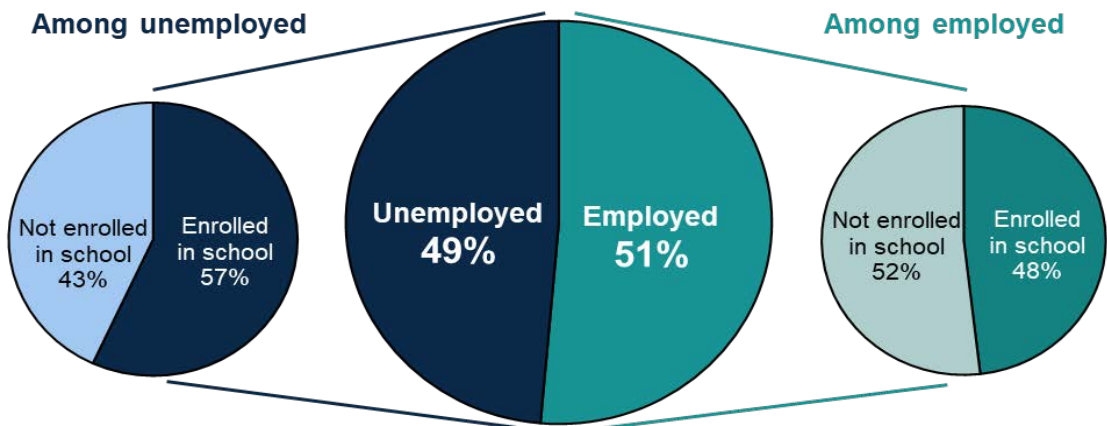


Source: Baseline youth survey administered by Mathematica.

Note: Youth and young adults currently not enrolled in school are on average one and a half years older than youth enrolled in school (19.6 versus 18). Sample: N = 113.

On average across all 116 youth and young adults enrolled in the summative evaluation, 78 percent are enrolled in school, employed, or both. About half of youth and young adults are employed (either full time or part time) (Exhibit IV.7). Most of the youth and young adults who are unemployed are seeking employment (79 percent). As expected, youth and young adults who are employed are less likely to be enrolled in school compared to those who are unemployed (48 versus 57 percent).

Exhibit IV.7. Employment among youth and young adults in study sample



Source: Baseline youth survey administered by Mathematica.

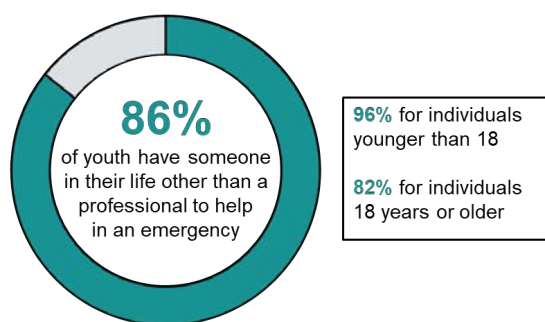
Notes: Sample: N = 109.

3. Positive connections with adults and peers

Research suggests that having a connection to an adult is one of the strongest protective factors against homelessness (Kelly 2020). The Pathways model defines a supportive adult as any adult who is not providing professional support that a youth or young adult identifies as a supportive connection. Youth and young adults are encouraged to foster connections with caring adults. These connections can help them access new opportunities and provide a social safety net to support them in coming out of homelessness or when at risk of homelessness.

The baseline survey asks youth and young adults if they have someone in their life other than a professional who can help them in an emergency. Eighty-six (86) percent of youth and young adults in the study sample report that they do (Exhibit IV.8). This percentage is comparable to a similar statistic reported in the NYTD survey (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2020).¹⁴ In that survey, youth were asked if they know an adult they can go to for advice or guidance when making a decision or solving a problem. Approximately 86 percent of youth in the NYTD reported that they do. Moreover, evidence in both the youth baseline and NYTD surveys suggests that, on average, younger youth are more likely to have these connections than older youth and young adults. In the baseline survey, 96 percent of youth under 18 have these connections, compared to 82 percent of youth and young adults 18 and older.

Exhibit IV.8. Youth and young adults with an adult connection



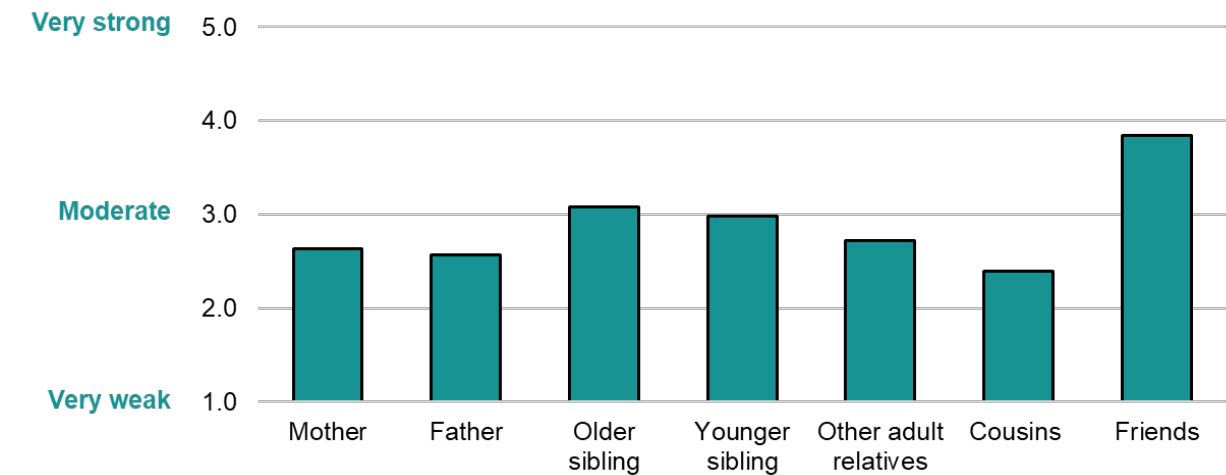
Source: Baseline youth survey administered by Mathematica.

Note: Sample: N = 112.

In addition to whether they have adult connections, youth and young adults reported on the strength of their relationships with family and friends (Exhibit IV.9). With the exception of friends, the strengths of the reported relationships are weak to moderate.

¹⁴ The NYTD is a survey that gathers information on youth currently or previously in foster care at ages 17, 19, and 21.

Exhibit IV.9. Strength of relationship with family and friends



Source: Baseline youth survey administered by Mathematica.

Note: Sample: N = 110.

C. Risk factors

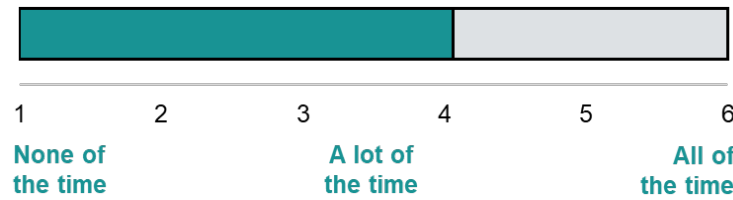
Risk factors are characteristics associated with a higher likelihood of problem outcomes, such as homelessness. In this section, we discuss three such factors that research has linked closely with homelessness—depression, substance abuse, and involvement in the criminal justice system (Dworsky et al. 2012; Bender et al. 2015; Fowler et al. 2009).

1. Depression and substance abuse

Well-being can influence key aspects of a young person’s life, including school, work, relationships, and community (USICH 2013). Two important risk factors for homelessness are depression and substance use.

On a 6-point frequency scale of 1 (all of the time) to 6 (none of the time), youth and young adults in the study sample responded to six questions about how they felt in the past 30 days (worthless, nervous, hopeless, restless, so depressed nothing could cheer them up, or everything was an effort). The study team averaged across these six items to capture the prevalence of depression at study enrollment (Exhibit IV.10). On average across the items, youth and young adults report having feelings of depression a lot of the time (4.1 on the 6-point scale).

Exhibit IV.10. Feelings of depression in the past 30 days



Source: Baseline youth survey administered by Mathematica.

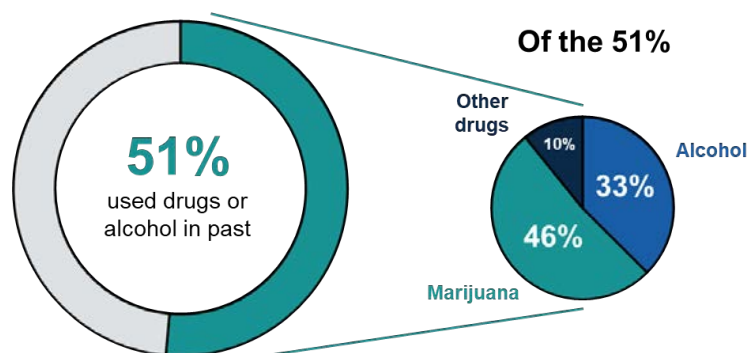
Note: Sample: N = 110.

At the time of study enrollment, about half of the sample (51.4 percent) drank alcohol, used marijuana, or used other drugs (such as opioids and amphetamines) at least once in the past 30 days (Exhibit IV.11). Thirty-three percent of the youth and young adults drank alcohol, 46 percent smoked marijuana,¹⁵ and 10 percent used other drugs. Most youth and young adults reported that using marijuana did not cause social problems or interfere with their day-to-day activities. However, 33 percent of youth and young adults who used other drugs (such as opioids and amphetamines) and 5 percent who drank alcohol reported that it caused problems.

2. Involvement in criminal or juvenile justice system

One of the strongest risk factors contributing to homelessness among foster care youth is incarceration (Kelly 2020). Having a history of incarceration can make it more difficult to secure housing, obtain further education, and gain employment, for example. Forty-five percent of youth and young adults in the study sample had ever been arrested (Exhibit IV.12), and 11 percent had been arrested recently (in the last three months). Among those who were ever arrested, a majority were convicted (68 percent). Of those convicted, most were convicted of a misdemeanor (38.6 percent), felony (4.5 percent), or both (25 percent).

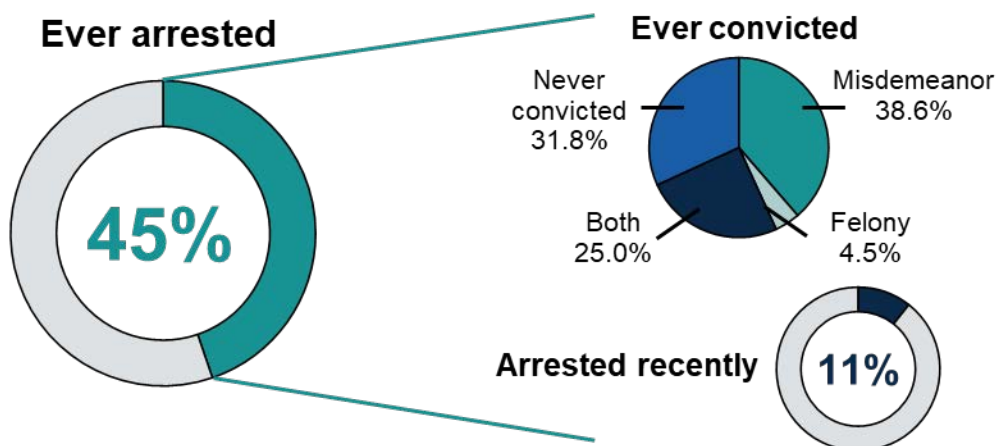
Exhibit IV.11. Substance use in the past 30 days



Source: Baseline youth survey administered by Mathematica.

Note: Sample: N = 107.

Exhibit IV.12. Incarceration and convictions among youth and young adults



Source: Baseline youth survey administered by Mathematica.

Note: Conviction data are available only for a subset of youth and young adults who were ever arrested.
Sample: N = 105.

¹⁵ Marijuana was legalized in Colorado in 2012.

V. Conclusion

This report describes the characteristics of the services, hubs, and youth participating in the YARH-3 summative evaluation as of August 2022. The evaluation focuses on Pathways to Success (Pathways), a comprehensive service model developed by the state of Colorado. Pathways is an intensive, coach-like case management program for youth and young adults in foster care at age 14 or older. This report draws on multiple data sources, including interviews, focus groups, and a baseline youth survey, to describe the components of Pathways and comparison programs, the process of enrolling youth and young adults into the programs, and the characteristics of youth currently enrolled in the summative evaluation. This description of the program and the youth and young adults provides context for the YARH-3 summative evaluation and helps us understand the baseline characteristics of the study sample through the first year of enrollment.

In Pathways, Navigators work with youth and young adults by engaging with them in a coach-like way to build a supportive relationship. They develop at least two goals, meet weekly or biweekly, and support youth and young adults with additional services. All aspects of the coach-like engagement are youth and young adult driven, such that they set the agenda and pace of the engagement with their Navigator. In the comparison condition (business-as-usual), workers support youth and young adults in multiple aspects of their lives to strengthen their independent living skills and through monthly meetings to help them define goals and complete an independent living plan.

Enrollment for the summative evaluation began in September 2021. About one year into enrollment (through August 2022), 116 youth and young adults are enrolled in the summative evaluation. These youth receive Pathways or comparison program services across the hubs currently participating in the summative evaluation. The sample represents a diverse group who have both protective and risk factors for homelessness. The average age of participants (18.9 years) has relevance for interventions that support youth transitioning out of foster care. Characteristics of the youth and young adults, such as a high prevalence of homelessness or unstable housing, high unemployment rates, and high prevalence of depression, suggest there is an opportunity for Pathways to improve core outcomes among them. The upcoming YARH-3 summative evaluation will examine the success of Pathways compared to services provided to the comparison group in reducing key risk factors and increasing protective factors.

This report is the first of many that the YARH project will release that include findings from the summative evaluation. Please visit the OPRE [YARH project page](#) for future products.

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