

Programs for Foster Youth Transitioning to Adulthood (FYTA) Evaluation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

At the request of the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office (DANY), Action Research, in partnership with the Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence and Child Trends, conducted an outcomes analysis of two programs serving youth with experience in foster care transitioning to adulthood (referred to as “FYTA” hereon). DANY funding for the programs started in 2018 as part of the office’s Criminal Justice Investment Initiative. This study is one of several papers and articles produced by the research team over the past five years.

Every year in New York City, hundreds of young adults exit foster care without legal permanency or “age out.”¹ Over 80 percent are youth of color. Almost all were found by the city’s child welfare agency to have been victims of substantiated maltreatment and experienced the trauma of removal from their families.² Historically, the public sector has provided a limited set of services to support foster youth transitioning to adulthood. Though many FYTA overcome challenges to lead independent and fulfilling lives, as a group they experience high rates of homelessness, unemployment, mental health challenges, and involvement with the justice system.

The programs studied in this report, Graham Windham’s “Graham SLAM (Support, Lead, Achieve, Model)” and The Door’s “Academy,” offer New York City FYTA personalized support through mentorship, coaching, and youth-driven services. The Door started offering specialized programming to foster youth in 2006, while the Graham SLAM program began in 2013. Though the service models in each program differ, experts describe Graham Windham and The Door as two of the leading providers in the field. To study the programs and the outcomes of the youth who participated, the research team conducted a mixed methods evaluation. The evaluation included interviews of staff and youth participants, reviews of program materials and data, and an analysis of outcomes reflected in New York City administrative data. The interviews and program data indicated that both providers succeeded in delivering a wide range of services as described in their program plan and logic models prior to the pandemic and made strong efforts to adapt and continue services after the onset of the pandemic.^{3,4}

Outcomes

This report focuses on participant outcomes. Researchers compared the outcomes of participants in the DANY-funded programs to a similar group of youth that did not participate in the programs. Outcomes included employment, receipt of cash assistance, homelessness, and justice system involvement. Several New York City agencies—the Administration for Children’s Services, the Human Resources Administration, the Department of Correction—as well as the New York State Department of Labor provided administrative data. Data from each agency were used to produce outcome measures for the one-year period following enrollment into one of the programs. The analysis found that participants at both providers had almost no involvement in the justice system during the follow up period, with less than two percent entering juvenile

¹ Legal permanency refers to formal reunification, adoptions, or New York’s subsidized guardianship program, KinGAP. Studies indicate that many of these youth live with family members after exiting foster care.

² Pang, Yuk C., Pond Ezra, Anna Stern, June Simon, and Timothy Ross. 2022. Programs for Foster Youth Transitioning to Adulthood (FYTA) Evaluation: Final Mid-evaluation Report. Brooklyn, NY: Action Research.

³ Pang Yuk C., Pond Ezra, Anna Stern, June Simon, and Timothy Ross. 2023. “COVID-19 and Servicing Youth in Foster Care Transitioning to Adulthood: Challenges and Opportunities.” *Child Welfare*. Vol. 100, No. 5.

⁴ Rodriguez, Emily, June Simon, and Tim Ross. (forthcoming). “Engaging and Servicing Youth in Foster Care Transitioning to Adulthood: Youth Views and Experiences with Transitional Planning.”

detention or jail. Similarly, less than eight percent entered a Department of Homeless Services shelter during that time. Most participants did not access cash assistance and few participated in the formal labor market during the follow-up period.

Random assignment of participants was not possible, so the team used propensity score matching to create two separate control groups (one for The Door, one for Graham SLAM) that had characteristics similar to program participants in terms of their foster care experiences, justice system involvement, homeless shelter usage, access to cash assistance, and employment history prior to enrolling in the two programs. Action Research compared outcomes using standard statistical tests of significance and effect sizes. The analysis found that the control group had similarly low levels of involvement in the justice, homeless, and cash assistance systems as program participants. The control groups also had similar labor market outcomes as program participant groups. There were no statistically significant differences in any of the outcome measures between the treatment groups and the control groups.

Discussion

Many factors help explain the findings. The COVID-19 pandemic overlapped with the enrollment period and the one-year follow-up period for the majority of the youth examined in the study. The pandemic reduced justice system involvement, evictions, and employment for all New Yorkers. In addition, the predominantly Black and LatinX neighborhoods in which many of the treatment and control group members and provider staff reside suffered from higher COVID-19 infection and fatality rates than other New York City neighborhoods. The pandemic also had a deleterious impact on the mental health of young people generally. The overlap of the COVID-19 pandemic and the follow-up period complicate interpretations of the findings, as each of the outcomes examined departed markedly from their pre-pandemic baselines.

The DANY funding started during a surge in public support for foster youth transitioning to adulthood. This increase in public support led to numerous initiatives and tens of millions of new dollars flowing into services for FYTA in the years after DANY's funding began. The highest profile initiative, Fair Futures, received \$70 million dollars in city funding during the period studied and provided foster youth the opportunity to participate in a program model like Graham SLAM's. The level of participation in these programs by youth in the control group is unknown, but the baseline set of services available to FYTA increased.

Finally, many of the outcome measures, especially those related to the justice system, were very low for both the control and treatment groups. None of the youth in the Graham SLAM control group, for example, went to jail in the follow up period. This meant that on that measure, the treatment group could not possibly outperform the control group. In addition, while the sample size is large for a study of youth transitioning to adulthood from foster care, the treatment and control groups were smaller than anticipated or preferred.

These factors - the pandemic's influences, the increase in the availability of services to all FYTA, the nature of the outcome measures, and the sample size - contributed to finding no statistically significant differences between the treatment and control groups.

Conclusion and recommendations

DANY funding supported programs that are a part of an expanding array of services available to FYTA. While the analysis did not find that program participants fared better or worse than similar youth who may have participated in other programs, the research shows that DANY funding enabled hundreds of young people to receive coaching, training, and many other

services. Qualitative components of the evaluation indicate that program staff provided social and emotional support that youth valued highly.^{5,6} This finding would be more robust had the pandemic not prevented the use of validated instruments aimed at measuring well-being and behavioral health as envisioned in the original study design.

Several recommendations for research and policy flow from this study and the evaluation as a whole. Child welfare stakeholders need to know more about the services that can enable youth transitioning to adulthood to lead independent and successful lives. A deeper analysis of employment and labor market data from the post-pandemic period would allow the field to learn more about the sectors where youth work, the wages they earn, their career trajectories, and the factors that support and impede success. Similarly, a stronger understanding of the context in which youth transition to adulthood, how they experience the transition, and the concrete services and supports youth themselves say they need would allow for more effective policy and programmatic responses. Evaluations of other programs, including Fair Futures and the YouthNPower direct cash transfer initiative, should help advance these recommendations.

The evaluation includes many encouraging findings that child welfare stakeholders can build upon. The qualitative findings of the evaluation showed the resilience and dedication of the staff working in this field. At the same time, these staff need higher salaries and better benefits if they are to continue and develop in this specialized career. The quantitative data indicates that youth transitioning to adulthood from foster care did not have high rates of incarceration and many demonstrated talent and perseverance in the face of numerous challenges. At the same time, there is an urgent need for culturally- and experientially-informed mental health services delivered by professionals who are connected to the communities with which young people identify. With the number of youth making this transition in New York City at an all-time low - 500 annually in the most recent data - delivering on these needs is within the city's capacity.

⁵ Pang et al 2023.

⁶ Rodriguez et al, forthcoming.

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