



## **Practical Strategies for Planning and Conducting the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) Youth Outcome Survey**

### **Background**

The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) requires States to engage in two data collection and reporting activities. First, States will collect and report basic demographic and characteristic data on each youth and the independent living (IL) services provided to them by the State in 14 broad categories. Second, States will conduct a baseline survey of youth in foster care at age 17 and will conduct a follow-up survey with these youth at ages 19 and 21 to collect and report information about the following youth outcomes:

- Increase youth financial self sufficiency;
- Improve youth educational attainment;
- Increase youth connections with adults;
- Reduce homelessness among youth;
- Reduce high-risk behavior among youth; and
- Improve youth access to health insurance

For further information on the requirements of NYTD, please see:  
<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/systems/index.htm#nytd>

This technical assistance document focuses on strategies for ensuring successful collection of outcomes data through the baseline and follow-up youth outcome survey. It is designed to help States start planning a successful and practical data collection effort to engage youth while they are still in foster care and to maintain contact with them once they leave foster care. In this way, States can work with youth to maximize their participation in the follow-up youth outcome surveys at ages 19 and 21.

### **Understanding Non-Response Bias: Why is it important to locate and interview as many eligible youth as possible?**

The NYTD regulation requires States to achieve a minimum level of participation in the youth outcome survey for youth in the follow-up population. But in addition to meeting the Federal requirements, it is important to understand how youth participation rates affect the quality of the data.

When information is not collected for a portion of the eligible youth for whom follow-up data are required, this creates the risk of *non-response bias* in the results. If the non-respondents differ systematically from those that do respond, then the final study results may not accurately reflect

the study population, especially if the number of non-respondents is large. Non-response bias is one type of error that can impact the quality of survey results and render study findings and conclusions less accurate. This risk applies to studies that seek to collect data directly from respondents via interviews or questionnaires as well as to those that collect data indirectly from caseworkers, case records or other information sources.

The risk of non-response bias is greatest when the response rate for the study is low and the differences between responding and non-responding cases are large. To use a simple example, assume that one study is designed to estimate the average height and weight of an agency's child welfare population. If the response rate is 50% and only male clients respond, then the final results will not reflect the height and weight of female clients. The final estimates will overstate the actual average height and weight of the service population due to the low overall response rate and the systematic difference between the respondents and non-respondents. On the other hand, if the response rate is higher (say, 80% or greater) and respondents are equally divided between males and females, the risk of non-response bias is much lower.

For the NYTD follow-up surveys, it is easy to imagine the types of non-response bias that might impact the results if large numbers of youth are not located. For example, if a much higher percentage of youth that are employed are contacted compared to those that are unemployed, then information about employment outcomes may be biased. If more youth who maintain family relationships are contacted than youth that do not maintain such relationships, then information about family outcomes may be biased. Similarly, if not all desired information is collected for all youth, there could be gaps in the data that will also bias the survey results.

There are generally two types of non-response risks, *unit level non-response* and *item level non-response*. Unit level non-response occurs when no information is collected for a given person or case. Item level non-response occurs when only part of the desired information is collected for each respondent. A situation in which large numbers of respondents leave certain questions blank or refuse to answer certain questions can lead to a high item non-response rate, which can be just as harmful to the final study quality as a high unit non-response rate. The major way to reduce the risk of non-response bias in a survey is to maximize both the unit and item response rates.

### **How to Maximize Response Rates**

The surest way to avoid non-response bias is to maximize the study's response rate. This can be accomplished in multiple ways, but the specific methods that will be most useful depend on the design and goals of each study. Those related to NYTD are explained below.

***Gather and maintain good locating information.*** One of the best ways to ensure that youth can be located is to have good information on how to contact them. Obtaining this information prior to the youth's transition from foster care increases the chances of their participation in any future survey.

While the NYTD regulation requires States to collect and report basic demographic information for youth, collecting additional information may be helpful in maintaining contact with youth after their transition from foster care. Thus, helping to ensure that the State can locate the youth at the time the follow-up survey must be administered.

Having as much information as possible about a youth's characteristics will help the State to understand the potential for non-response bias in the data collected. Because States may not be able to locate and interview all of the eligible youth at all of the required stages of NYTD data collection, States will want to know what, if any, differences there are between the youth they find and those they cannot find so they can engage certain groups of youth to ensure future participation.

One way to ensure that current and accurate information is obtained for youth is to ensure that staff complete an exit interview with them before their transition from foster care. In fact, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Public Law 110-351) included a provision requiring that a transition plan be completed with youth in foster care 90 days before their emancipation date. This new requirement offers one opportunity for States to gather and confirm information about where the young person can be located after their emancipation.

Some contact information may be available in your State information system and may only need to be confirmed by the youth. It may be helpful to develop a standardized "locating form" to capture this information, so that it can be easily checked for completeness and updated as necessary. Below are suggestions for information that States may want to collect to determine where a youth may be contacted to participate in the follow-up survey.

#### Identification, Contact Information and Vital Statistics

- Youth's first name, last name, and middle initial(s)
- Address for youth after leaving care: local address, permanent address, school address
- Home and cell phone numbers (collect all)
- E-mail addresses (collect all)
- Contact information for all persons with whom youth plans to live: name, address, home phone, cell phone, e-mail address
- Youth's nicknames, aliases, maiden or birth names
- Social security number
- Driver's license or other identification number
- Public assistance ID
- Permanent Resident Card ID
- Day, month, year, and place (city/state/county) of birth
- Names and addresses of siblings (biological, half, step, and foster) who the youth has a close relationship with

#### Characteristics

- Race/ethnicity
- Gender
- Height, weight, eye/hair color
- Distinguishing features (e.g., glasses, limp, scar, tattoo, piercings)

#### Social Network Memberships

- For example, user name for MySpace or Facebook.

#### Employer and Supervisor Contact Information

- Name and title
- Street address

- E-mail address
- Telephone number

#### Places the Youth Frequent

- Social clubs
- Community centers
- Churches and other religious institutions
- Schools
- Gyms
- “Hang outs” (restaurants, coffee shops, pool halls, etc.)

In addition to obtaining locating information from youth prior to their transition from foster care, it is important to continue to update locating information by keeping in touch with youth. States may want to have a procedure in place to update locating information when youth contact the agency. Strategies that States may want to consider include:

- Make locating information easily accessible to all staff that may be in contact with youth after transition. Good opportunities to update locating information are when youth contact the agency for aftercare services or when youth apply for and receive Education Training Vouchers.
- Prompt staff to ask youth to update their locating information whenever youth contact the agency. Consider questions such as:
  - Are you still at this address?
  - Is this still your phone number?
  - What is the best way to contact you (text message, Facebook, MySpace)?
  - If I have trouble getting in touch with you, who are the best people to call to help me find you? (Get names, phone numbers, email, and physical addresses of the people the youth lists).
- Have a procedure for staff to update any changes in a youth’s locating information.

***Continue direct contact with youth.*** In addition to collecting information from youth, States may want to consider methods to maintain direct contact with youth. Ongoing contact with youth will help maximize response rates and avoid non-response.

Suggestions for ways to engage youth and maintain contact with them are provided below. These suggestions range from simple to more extensive efforts. In selecting the best methods for your State, consider time, cost, and youth suggestions. States might want to review this list with an internal committee comprised of youth, staff, and foster parents to seek input on the best methods to use, as well as to develop other creative strategies for maintaining contact with youth:

- Send youth a reminder postcard or other special mailing (e.g., birthday cards, holiday cards). Use youth developed logo that identifies NYTD. Always specify “Return Service Requested” on mailings so that undelivered mail will be returned to the agency so it can note that the address is no longer current. Also, insert a self-addressed, postage-paid envelope and change of address form with each mailing.
- Consider holding a lottery for those youth that respond to special mailings.
- Create and send a newsletter that provides independent living tips for youth and also reminds them of NYTD follow-up surveys.
- Establish a website or add an alumni-only page to the agency website. The website could be interactive so youth can send e-mails to the agency.

- Create and distribute innovative reminder products with agency contact info. (e.g. pencils, mugs).
- Ask youth how they would prefer to take the NYTD youth outcome survey. If a youth prefers an in-person interview, ask where they would like to meet (a favorite coffee shop or restaurant would be good incentive for them to meet).
- Hire a youth as a “contact specialist” to maintain contact and check on services needed after exiting care. Hire youth to facilitate any of the activities that you select from this list.

***Select the right method for contacting youth to administer the NYTD youth outcome survey.***

How a State contacts and engages a youth may also impact whether and how youth participate. Some suggestions regarding contacting youth around the time of the interview include:

- Send a letter, email or text message to the youth letting them know that you will be contacting them. Send a reminder notice seven days prior to the planned time for interview. Notice should include information on how to contact the agency to participate in the interview.
- Use the last known telephone number, residence address or email address to contact the youth. The best way to contact young people today is by calling, texting, emailing, and sending messages to social networking accounts (e.g. MySpace, Facebook).
- Call contacts provided by youth.
- Use directory assistance or an online resource such as Google or whitepages.com.
- Use Criss-Cross Directory (reverse directory) to find telephone numbers for youth or the contacts listed. Street addresses are provided for a city or county, noting names and phone numbers of current residents. Using a criss-cross directory (such as Haines) may also help to identify neighbors who may know the whereabouts of a youth. Directories are available in local libraries.
- Call at different times of day. Ask youth what time of the day is best to call.
- Make in-person contact (visit) at location specified by youth. Ask neighbors if they know of the youth’s whereabouts. For example, if it is an apartment building, start on the top floor as residents who live on the upper floors glean greater knowledge of other residents by riding the elevator or using the stairs together.
- Review case-record to find leads that are not available on locating form. Include space on locating form for these additional leads for second round follow-up.

***Engage youth and others before the youth leaves foster care to ensure their participation.***

Involve youth in the NYTD process from the beginning. Since youth are the best resource to help States plan and implement all data collection activities, involving them in the planning will likely garner their “buy in” to future data collection.

The new requirement to develop a transition plan 90 days prior to youth emancipating from foster care may be an opportunity for some States to educate young people about the purpose of NYTD and why these data are important to collect. This year (2009) is the optimal time to begin the education process. Some strategies for educating youth, caregivers, and agency staff include:

- Develop informational material for youth, caregivers, and agency staff. Some of these materials already exist on the websites for the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Youth Development and the National Resource Center for Child Welfare Data and Technology.

- Provide information and workshops at teen conferences.
- Provide information and workshops at professional meetings and conferences.
- Provide information and workshops at caregiver conferences and meetings.
- Post materials on youth, caregiver, and professional web sites.
- Create “YouTube” style NYTD presentations for web sites.

It is important to keep youth involved in the education process by engaging them in the data collection tasks. From the beginning get their input on locating youth after transition from foster care, engage them in creating their transition plans and if possible, hire youth to help educate other youth in foster care about NYTD.

***Explain the importance of the study.*** Motivated respondents who understand the goals of the study and the potential benefits to themselves and people like them are more likely to respond. Youth should understand the importance of participating in the NYTD youth outcome survey before they leave foster care. Explanations should be brief and should include information about who is sponsoring the study, a summary of key goals and objectives, and expected benefits.

***Minimize the burden on respondents.*** In general, short, simple and thoughtfully designed questionnaires or other data collection forms will obtain better response rates than long, complicated forms. Survey questions should be pre-tested to determine average completion times and to identify any items that are confusing or hard to complete, which may need additional explanation. By identifying problems prior to actual administration of the survey, appropriate probes can be developed to help youth respond to questions and avoid item non-response. Ensure that the survey is being administered in a method that is reflective of the request of the young adult, if possible.

States are required to administer the outcome survey directly to each youth in the NYTD baseline and follow-up populations. While the survey must consist of the questions specified by ACF, States can ask additional questions. States can also choose the specific method it will use to administer the survey. For example, States can develop a self-administered survey format, either for paper and pencil or through a computerized survey. The methods you use will depend on the way in which you plan to conduct the interview. In selecting the best methodology for your State it is important to consider the number of youth to be interviewed, the timeframes in which the surveys must be completed, the State staff available to conduct the survey, and the effectiveness and efficiency of each method.

Also be sure to consider the need for translations for youth who may not be fluent in English. Providing appropriate translations is an important step for maximizing response rates and minimizing language barriers for respondents. Ideally, the survey forms should be translated in advance, rather than translated spontaneously by different interviewers. But if this is not possible, consider special training for the bilingual/multilingual staff who will conduct the interviews to ensure consistency in the way questions are asked and the way answers are recorded.

In many cases it may be necessary or helpful to use a mix of survey methods and procedures. For example, you might develop a web-based survey but also have a paper and pencil survey available to mail to youth without access to a computer. You might also arrange to have youth complete surveys at a foster care alumni gathering or similar setting. No matter what survey method is employed, it is important that survey questions be worded the same for all youth.

There are many options for conducting effective, high quality data collection efforts. Again, consider those options that appear to have the best chance of success for your State and those that are recommended by the youth themselves.

***Offer cash incentives or in-kind gifts for responding, if appropriate.*** Quite often, small amounts of money (e.g., \$1-\$5) included with a mailed letter of introduction or questionnaire can produce double-digit increases in response rates. Incentives convey the importance of the study to the respondent and communicate a sense of gratitude for the respondent's time and attention. In many cases, the cost of the incentives is outweighed by the savings in data collection costs generated by a higher response rate. If it takes less time and effort to achieve the desired response rate for a study, total research costs will be reduced as well.

***Make multiple attempts to locate and contact youth.*** States may consider using different contact modes or procedures, such as mailing a letter to the last known address, then following up by text messaging, phone or in-person, or both. Contact attempts should be made on different days of the week and different times of the day to increase the odds of finding the respondent.

Suggestions for contacting youth who are hard to locate are provided below. These suggestions are more labor intensive and costly. It might be helpful to work with neighboring States to pool your resources.

Access public records:

- Department of Motor Vehicles provides address, driver's license number and date of expiration, whether a youth turned in tags in another state, or applied for a new license
- Social Security Administration will forward a letter on the agency's behalf for a \$3 fee. This process is highly confidential and involves very strict guidelines
- Vital Statistics Records provide birth, marriage, divorce, and death records that may be helpful in supplying contact information. Searches can be conducted to determine if a youth is deceased or notice requested from the county coroner's or state registrar's office
- Other Public Agency Records (Health Department, Criminal Justice, Unemployment)
- Check community resources:
  - Local utilities
  - Schools
  - Churches
  - Voter Registration
  - Community clinics and hospitals
  - Courts
- Salvation Army (which has a service to contact homeless people)
- Use locating data bases:
  - For example, Lexus/Nexus, WhitePages.com

### **Non-Response Bias: Determining if there are any differences between respondents and non-respondents**

If a State is unable to locate a significant portion of its young adults to participate in the follow-up outcomes survey, the Federal Regulation provides for the Federal government to impose a penalty. In order to increase subsequent participation at the unit and item level, States may want

to review the data collected from participants using available information to determine what strategies can be used to increase participation. One method to determine the difference between respondents and non-respondents follows:

***Calculate response rates.*** Let's use the follow-up population at age 19 as an example of how to calculate response rates. The response rate numerator will be the number of 19-year-old foster youth who complete or partially complete the outcomes survey. The response rate denominator is the total number of 19-year-old youth (minus those who are not eligible to be interviewed because they are mentally or physically incapacitated, deceased, or incarcerated).

***Examine response rates.*** Once you have determined the overall response rate it is important to find out where non-response differences occur (e.g. youth who dropped out of school versus those who are still in school). This will help to adjust for non-response as well as help to decide which populations are harder to find so you can use the information to improve future data collection.

There are various ways to examine response rates. You can use statistical tests to determine whether the data are missing at random and the potential magnitude of non-response bias. Various methods can be used to compare respondents and non-respondents. Statistical tests include calculating the statistical significance of mean differences and formal multivariate modeling such as non-response propensity models. Also, data on respondents can be compared with external data sources to see if there are similarities in estimates. While there are limitations to this method it can help alert you to potential concerns and may uncover important issues. Other suggested surveys that may contain helpful information about ex include the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Foster Youth Outcomes at Age 19 and 21 (Courtney, M. et al) and Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Alumni Study (Pecora, P. et al). Finally, follow-up surveys of non-respondents can be attempted. Determining the difference between respondents and non-respondents is not required but will help you to understand if there are any differences.

***Adjust the data to compensate for missing cases or information.*** States will not be required to make non-response adjustments. However, for States interested in doing additional analysis of their data, some of the methods that could be used to adjust for unit and item non-response include weighting the data (i.e., statistically adjusting the responding sample to bring it into better alignment with the total sample characteristics) and ascription/imputation for missing data items (i.e., methods to create values to substitute for missing data). Having good information about the characteristics of youth found and not found is critical to making these adjustments. Suggested data elements to identify these differences are listed below. Some of these elements are already required NYTD data elements. Those that are not required NYTD data elements are provided only as suggestions, not as required data to collect.

- Birth date
- Race/ethnicity
- Last living arrangement prior to discharge (e.g. foster home, group home, independent living arrangement)
- Number of living arrangements while in foster care
- Ever runaway or on runaway status
- Trouble with the law
- Physical health problems
- Mental health problems
- Education level at time of discharge



- Employed while in foster care
- Maintains contact with parents/relatives
- Siblings

### **Additional sources for understanding how to locate youth**

- Anglin, M.D., Danils, B., Ryan, T., and Mantius, K. (1996). *Staying in touch: A fieldwork manual of tracking procedures for locating substance abusers for follow-up studies*. Fairfax, VA: National Evaluation Data and Technical Assistance Center
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- Pollio, D.E., Thompson, S.J., & North, C.S. (2000). Agency-based tracking of difficult-to-follow populations: runaway and homeless youth programs in St. Louis, Missouri. *Community Mental Health Journal* 36, pp. 247-58.
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