



Development of a Model Guiding Research for Promoting Work and Well-Being for Transitioning Foster Care Youth with Disabilities: An Exploration and Discovery Study

The RRTC on Employment Among Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities is conducting six studies to develop effective practices to improve employment outcomes for transition-aged youth. This plain language research brief provides an update on Research Study 6.

The goal of this study is to comprehensively understand the current status of foster care youth with disabilities as they prepare for work and adulthood, drawing on expertise in the employment of transition-age youth with disabilities and in child welfare. Thus, we aim to improve the transition to work for foster youth with disabilities (FYWD).

Study Update

We conducted a scoping review of interdisciplinary literature to explore employment outcomes and supports for FYWD who have exited from or are currently in foster care. Our search initially produced 873 unique records for screening and ultimately included 12 publications, including 7 peer-reviewed journal articles and 5 dissertation or thesis manuscripts. These publications met the following criteria, with more than 85% of screened publications not reporting disability or employment outcomes in a way that could be linked to samples of youth with disabilities:

- Were research studies published in 2000 or later
- Included or addressed transition-age FYWD
- Reported employment-related outcomes or implications in a way that could be linked to disability status
- Were conducted in the U.S.

The table below provides an initial summary of reviewed publications:

First author (year)	Purpose of the study (design)	Broad employment-related findings for FYWD
Ancil (2007)	To assess risk and protective factors for youth who have exited foster care and identify protective services that have hindered the impact of risk factors. (Administrative data analysis)	Overall, alumni FYWD had significantly lower economic outcomes, differing with disability associated with lower earnings among men but higher earnings for women; reported to having helpful foster parents were linked to higher annual earnings.
Cheatham (2020)	To investigate the prevalence of disability among older foster youth and its association with educational and employment outcomes in early adulthood, distinguishing between emotional disabilities and other disabilities. (Administrative data analysis)	The majority (66%) of FYWD were productively engaged at age 21, including: 23% enrolled in postsecondary education, 27% employed part-time, and 33% employed full-time; FYWD with emotional disabilities had lower employment rates than those with other disabilities.
*Davis (2011)	To assess the impact of an independent living program, transitional housing program, and/or workforce development services on the early adult outcomes of exiting foster youth. (Administrative data analysis)	Participation in the Independent Living Program, Transitional Housing Program, or employment services did not significantly improve employment outcomes for FYWD as hypothesized.
*Farkas (2024)	To understand the transition to adulthood among FYWD with a focus on support needs, resilience, and positive youth development (competence, confidence, character, connection, caring, contribution). (Mixed methods design)	Positive youth development indicators were largely absent or manifested differently for FYWD. Young adults reported vocational competencies: 55.8% had job training, 44.1% were currently employed, 8.8% were self-employed, and 5.8% volunteered; only 29.4% reported receiving pre-employment transition services, and 5.8% reported being satisfied with vocational rehabilitation.

First author (year)	Purpose of the study (design)	Broad employment-related findings for FYWD
Harwick (2020)	To qualitatively understand how FYWD experience the transition to adulthood, including the challenges they face and the supports that best address those challenges. (Qualitative design)	Participants faced challenges related to medical or mental health needs but lacked knowledge about their workplace rights, disability disclosure, and/or how to advocate for accommodations. Access to formal employment services was limited, and these barriers hindered employment success.
Kim (2019)	To evaluate the impact of independent living services' effects on educational attainment and employment of foster youth. (Administrative data analysis)	Participation in independent living services predicted improved employment outcomes for foster youth, but more so for those focused on education, rather than employment; post-school employment was more likely among youth without disabilities and those placed in non-relative foster homes than those in group homes or other settings.
Liu (2020)	To examine the effectiveness of independent living services in improving educational, employment, and housing outcomes for youth aging out of foster care. (Administrative data analysis)	Receiving special education services indicated lower odds of obtaining employment for foster youth.
McCauley (2023)	To examine the experiences of these groups regarding employment, education, disability, benefit receipt, and the role of support services in reducing transition-related risk. (Administrative data analysis)	As compared to foster youth without disabilities, foster youth with emotional or intellectual disability had 20% lower odds of full-time employment; those with both emotional and intellectual disability had 30% lower odds. Academic supports and postsecondary supports improved full-time employment outcomes by 30%.

First author (year)	Purpose of the study (design)	Broad employment-related findings for FYWD
*Olson (2019)	To assess the relationship between independent living services and educational and employment outcomes among foster youth aged 19. (Administrative data analysis)	Part-time and full-time employment was significantly lower for foster youth who reported receiving special education services.
*Phillips (2025)	To explore the transition experiences of former foster youth with learning disabilities, focusing on challenges related to determination, adaptability, endurance, recuperability, and adaptability. (Qualitative design)	Pressing challenges that emerged centered around FYWDs' perceptions of their learning disabilities, including fear about their employability and feelings of shame and embarrassment.
Powers (2018)	To evaluate the effectiveness of the 12 months of TAKE CHARGE self-determination intervention, which included weekly coaching sessions on application of self-determination skills in transition planning and quarterly workshops with alumni mentors, in improving transition outcomes (living, high school completion, employment) for FYWD being served by special education and child welfare systems. (Intervention study)	FYWD who received the intervention increased employment rates by more than double (34%), while those in the comparison group declined slightly (16%).
*Schmidt (2015)	To examine how transition preparation engagement differs for FYWD compared to their peers without disability with respect to readiness for adulthood, education, employment, daily living skills, transition planning, Independent Living Program participation, and self-determination. (Other type of secondary data analysis)	Youth with disabilities were significantly less engaged in transition preparation activities (e.g., less involved in career preparation engagement) than youth without disabilities, but disability status was not a significant predictor of employment.

*Denotes a dissertation or thesis manuscript.

What We Found So Far

Even after a comprehensive search of the literature across the fields of supported employment, rehabilitation, child welfare, social work, and education, only 12 publications in the past quarter-century explicitly discussed employment outcomes for FYWD. The minimal available literature tended to highlight barriers and challenges related to employment for this population, rather than investigating effective services or specific supports that help initiate or sustain employment.

More about the Research

These initial findings are based on a review of 12 publications collected from three database searches, hand searches of 31 peer-reviewed journals, and forward/backward searches. Four researchers with expertise across various fields screened and coded publications to increase the reliability and relevance of findings.

Next Steps

We are in the process of further analyzing the findings of the reviewed publications and identifying implications across the fields of rehabilitation, child welfare, and special education for future research, policy, and practice that center on this population. Additionally, we will conduct interviews with foster youth and young adults with disabilities, service providers, and caregivers to validate our findings with their lived experiences. Finally, we will develop a theoretical model for future research and interventions that can support the successful employment of FYWD.

Not only is future research on the employment outcomes and supports of FYWD sorely needed, but interagency collaboration among special education staff, vocational rehabilitation providers, and child welfare professionals who serve them is critical for coordinating services toward a collective understanding of disability and employment and shared supports.

Learn More

To learn more about this study or the other studies conducted under VCU's RRTC on Employment Among Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities, visit transition.vcurrtec.org.

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The contents of this document were developed under a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR grant number #90RTEM0014). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this document do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.