



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 of Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities is conducting six studies aimed at developing effective practices to improve employment outcomes of transition-aged youth. This plain language research brief provides an overview of Research Study #6.

The goal of this Exploration and Discovery study is to understand the current state of research regarding the transition of foster care youth with disabilities to work and adulthood. Our team includes expertise in the secondary transition of youth with disabilities, work and well-being, and the child welfare system. Ultimately, we hope to describe factors that impact transition-related outcomes for foster youth with disabilities and design a model that can guide future research, practice, and policy for addressing these factors.

Study Overview

Our study will examine the transition to work and well-being for foster care youth with disabilities, including factors related to the individual, family, and service systems. More specifically, we will investigate the access of this population to career development and transition services that prepare them for success in employment and other areas of adulthood.

In this study, we will:

- Use data from the Rehabilitation Services Administration to understand the current employment outcomes of foster youth with disabilities.
- Combine findings from previous research on key practices targeting the transition to work, noting how disabilities and other identities are addressed in this work.

- Conduct interviews and focus groups with foster care youth, service providers, and caregivers to capture their perspectives and experiences in relation to our findings around the transition to work.
- Develop a model to use for sharing employment guidance to foster care youth with disabilities and those who support them.
- Identify potential ideas for employment interventions based on the needs and experiences of foster care youth with disabilities.

Research Questions

1. What contextual factors (i.e., practice, service, agency, systems, state) shape the preparation for work and adulthood for foster care youth with disabilities?
2. What factors pose threats to work? What factors operate as facilitators?
3. What types of vocational services are offered to foster youth with disabilities to facilitate employment?
4. What contextual factors facilitate long-term career development and transition services for youth with disabilities in foster care that predict their employment?

Importance of the Study

Though the transition to employment is incredibly important for foster care youth to gain independence and financial well-being, it has received little attention in research, policy, and practice (Edelstein & Lowenstein, 2014; Lansing et al., 2021). Foster youth report receiving job supports at dismal rates and working at extremely low rates (Courtney et al., 2014). Even when connected to formal employment services, their earnings remain low (Courtney et al., 2018). Studies have identified numerous barriers to work and education for this population, such as unaddressed learning needs, untreated trauma, and limited work opportunities (Courtney et al., 2021; Okpych & Courtney, 2021).

In particular, research highlights disparate employment outcomes between foster youth with and without disabilities (Harwick et al., 2017). From a recent analysis of national data about youth with disabilities who received vocational rehabilitation services, Taylor and colleagues (2024) found that foster care itself is negatively associated with work. Nonetheless, in a recent study that synthesized related literature collectively, only two studies were identified to target foster youth with disabilities (Schutz & Carter, 2022). Minimal research has explored the transition to adulthood for foster youth with disabilities.

Given the intersectional needs of this population related to foster care status, disability, and other factors, a review of research from different disciplines (e.g., education, rehabilitation, social work) is needed to better understand why these gaps in outcomes exist. Further, it is important to validate the findings of these reviewed studies with the lived experiences and perspectives of youth with disabilities who are currently in or have recently exited foster care, as well as those who support them.

Learn More

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

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