

# After Foster Care and Juvenile Justice

## A PREVIEW OF THE YOUTH VILLAGES TRANSITIONAL LIVING EVALUATION

By Sara Muller-Ravett and Erin Jacobs

Each year in the United States, over 25,000 young people “age out” of the foster care system upon reaching adulthood, usually at the age of 18.<sup>1</sup> Even larger numbers of young people enter foster care as teenagers but exit the system before reaching the age of 18.<sup>2</sup> They may have entered foster care because they were abused or neglected, they did not have a living parent or relative to care for them, they were habitually truant from school, or for other reasons.<sup>3</sup> The juvenile justice system, which is responsible for minors who have committed offenses that would be considered crimes in the adult criminal justice system, is also far-reaching. According to the latest estimates, nearly 100,000 young people leave juvenile justice facilities each year.<sup>4</sup> Overlap between the foster care and juvenile justice systems is common, as young people who come from unstable or abusive family environments, poverty, and other harmful situations are at increased risk of entering both systems.<sup>5</sup>

Many young people leaving the foster care or juvenile justice system have a difficult

time making a successful transition to adulthood and independent living. Compared with others their age, they have relatively low levels of educational attainment and employment, and they are more likely to experience poverty and housing instability. Policymakers and practitioners are searching for ways to improve these outcomes. However, while a number of programs have been designed to help youth who were formerly in foster care or the juvenile justice system, or both, little rigorous evidence exists to identify which services are effective and for whom.

*The Youth Villages Transitional Living program provides intensive case management, support, and cognitive-behavioral therapy services to young people who are making the transition from state custody to independent adult living.*

The evaluation of the Youth Villages Transitional Living program that is

## WHAT IS YOUTH VILLAGES?

Established in 1986, Youth Villages operates a variety of programs — including the Transitional Living program, which has been launched in seven states — that provide social and mental health services for emotionally and behaviorally troubled children and their families. The organization’s objective is to develop a support system for young people through their families, communities, and schools that will continue to function even after they are no longer working with the organization. Youth Villages’ programs include intensive in-home services, residential treatment, transitional living services, foster care and adoption services, and mentoring and crisis intervention services. Currently, the organization serves 18,000 young people each year across 11 states.

*Despite the rise in spending on services for young adults who are no longer in state custody, there is little rigorous evidence about which approaches are effective in improving key outcomes for these young people.*

described in this brief is designed to help fill this knowledge gap. Youth Villages, a nonprofit service organization for troubled children and their families (see box above), operates the Transitional Living program in seven states, including Tennessee, where the evaluation is taking place. The program provides intensive case management, support, and cognitive-behavioral therapy services to young people who are making the transition from state custody to independent adult living. The evaluation will examine the difference that the Transitional Living program makes for this population — or its *impacts* on a range of outcomes, including education, employment, mental

health, and financial security. It is intended to provide important information for policymakers and practitioners who are interested in improving the lives of these vulnerable young people.

The evaluation is using a random assignment design, which is generally considered the most rigorous method of evaluating large-scale social service programs, as described in more detail later in this brief. MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization, is conducting the evaluation, along with Mark Courtney from the University of Chicago. The study is funded by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Tennessee’s Department of Children’s Services, which provides some of the funding for the Transitional Living program and is responsible for both the foster care and juvenile justice systems in the state,<sup>6</sup> is a partner in the evaluation.

## WHY IS THE YOUTH VILLAGES TRANSITIONAL LIVING EVALUATION IMPORTANT?

Many young people enter state custody after having spent years in difficult circumstances.<sup>7</sup> As observed above, when they leave the foster care or the juvenile justice system, they often struggle to make a successful transition to adulthood and independent living. They are less likely than others in their age group to earn a high school diploma or a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, and they are more likely to encounter mental health problems, substance abuse, criminal justice involvement, unemployment, poverty,

housing instability, and homelessness.<sup>8</sup> Youth Villages Transitional Living is a program that, compared with others of its kind that have been described in the literature,<sup>9</sup> offers very intensive services to help these young people — and it may be one of the most promising models now operating at scale. The next section and the box at right describe the key features of the program model in more detail.

The Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation aims to inform policymakers and practitioners who are searching for ways to improve outcomes for youth in the foster care and juvenile justice systems. Services for this population have received increasing support from the federal government in recent years. The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (FCIA), which created the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, expanded funding to states for “Independent Living” services for young adults who have left foster care but have not yet reached the age of 22. In 2008, Congress passed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which provides federal matching funds for states to support young people who are in foster care through age 21. A general focus on services for adults leaving prison and jail has also led to increasing support for those who are leaving juvenile justice placements (incarceration in a secure juvenile facility), though the continuation of this funding is not guaranteed.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the rise in spending on services for young adults who are no longer in state

## THE YOUTH VILLAGES TRANSITIONAL LIVING MODEL

The following are core features of the Youth Villages Transitional Living model:

**ASSESSMENTS.** Numerous assessments are used that are related to employment, education, parenting skills, transportation, community living, formal and informal supports, and sexual health.

**SAFETY PLANS.** Comprehensive safety plans are developed with each participant to address high-risk behaviors.

**YOUTH-DRIVEN APPROACH.** Participants are encouraged to take an active role in setting goals and they are held accountable for working toward those goals.

**POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS.** Forging permanent, healthy relationships with family is emphasized, based on whomever the youth identifies as family. Transitional Living Specialists work with the family to improve relationships and foster positive interactions. For program participants who are unable or have no desire to reconnect with their biological family, staff frequently turn to former foster families to explore their potential to serve as a permanent connection for these young people.

**HOUSING ASSISTANCE.** The program helps participants to learn the skills they will need to secure and maintain safe, affordable housing on their own. This assistance may include paying deposits and/or some portion of rent until the youth is capable of sustaining housing independently. Transitional Living Specialists often help to secure long-term housing options with friends or family as an alternative to independent living.

**HIGHLY STRUCTURED STAFF SUPERVISION AND CONSULTATION.** Teams of four to five Transitional Living Specialists meet with their supervisor on a weekly basis for team supervision and with a licensed clinical staff member for clinical consultation.

**SMALL CASELOADS.** Transitional Living Specialists work with small caseloads of eight or fewer youths each. These specialists are available to participants 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and they have at least one face-to-face contact per week with each participant in their caseload.

custody, there is little rigorous evidence about which approaches are effective in improving key outcomes for these young people, as noted earlier. A 2006 systematic review of independent living programs for youth who were formerly in foster care concluded that no rigorous evaluations of these programs had been conducted.<sup>11</sup> More recently, researchers began to build a body of rigorous evidence by evaluating four programs for foster youth as part of the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs.<sup>12</sup> One of these programs was similar to, though less intensive than, Transitional Living. It produced some impacts on educational attainment, though these

*Youth Villages Transitional Living Specialists work with small caseloads to provide individualized services that help participants identify concrete goals for housing, education, employment, and other elements that are needed to achieve independence, and then guide them toward those goals.*

impacts came largely through helping young adults stay in state custody past age 18 — which is not an option in many states.<sup>13</sup>

Given the poor outcomes for individuals who age out of foster care and the juvenile justice system, and the paucity of evidence about the efficacy of services for them, stronger knowledge in this area is needed. One of the largest and most rigorous evaluations of services for these youth, the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation is designed to make an important

contribution in this area. The objective of the evaluation is to provide reliable evidence to inform the design of policies and programs for these populations at the federal, state, and local levels.

## WHAT IS THE YOUTH VILLAGES TRANSITIONAL LIVING PROGRAM MODEL?

Through Transitional Living, young people who age out of state custody, generally at age 18, receive about nine months of intensive counseling and support. Youth Villages' "Transitional Living Specialists" work with small caseloads (eight or fewer cases per specialist) to provide individualized services that help participants identify concrete goals for housing, education, employment, and other elements that are needed to achieve independence, and then guide them toward those goals.

The Youth Villages Transitional Living model uses numerous assessments that drive service delivery and tailor it to these young people's individual needs. The Transitional Living model is also youth-driven, meaning that youth actively participate in setting goals and are held accountable for meeting those goals. Depending on the needs and goals that are identified, Transitional Living Specialists may address educational, employment, or housing needs, and if indicated, may implement various therapy models such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy, which address addiction, trauma, and mental health issues.

## HOW IS THE EVALUATION DESIGNED AND WHAT IS IT EXAMINING?

The evaluation is using a random assignment design, as noted earlier. About 1,300 young people from Tennessee who are eligible for Transitional Living services will be assigned, at random, to either a program group, who will be offered the Youth Villages

Transitional Living program services, or to a control group, who will not receive the program services but will be able to access other services in the community. (Eligibility criteria are described in the next section.) This design is feasible because the number of eligible and interested individuals is much larger than the number of available slots in the Transitional Living program.

A random assignment design can provide unusually reliable information about what difference — or impact — a program makes. Because the process ensures that the program and control groups are similar at the time they enter the study, differences that emerge between the two groups over time — for example, if, after entering the study, the program group is more likely to attend college or to find stable housing — are likely a result of the services provided by the Transitional Living program. Thus, by tracking the two groups over time using a survey and government records, the evaluation will be able to assess whether the Transitional Living program leads to impacts on key outcomes for the young people who are eligible for the program.

In addition to examining whether the Transitional Living program improves outcomes overall, the study will examine whether the program works better for some groups of youth than for others. For example, the impacts of Transitional Living may differ by gender or by juvenile justice history. This information may help policymakers and practitioners target services effectively and efficiently.

Finally, the evaluation will include an implementation analysis, which will provide detailed information about the services that the Transitional Living program offers. The implementation analysis will describe how the Transitional Living services are implemented, assess the fidelity of the services to the program model, and identify successes and challenges associated with implementation. This information will be critical to understanding how well the Transitional Living program is implemented and will help to guide policymakers and practitioners who wish to establish similar programs in other jurisdictions.

### WHO ARE THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE YOUTH VILLAGES TRANSITIONAL LIVING EVALUATION?

The Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation and program include individuals who are 18 to 24 years of age and have been in Department of Children’s Services custody in the state of Tennessee for at least 365 days (whether or not continuously) after age 14 or at least one day after age 17. Participants are from both the foster care and juvenile justice systems, including those who are “aging out” of state custody at the age of 18. Youth Villages staff conduct individual assessments to determine whether potential participants meet eligibility criteria, are interested in program services, and are

*The research team is currently tracking the program and control groups using data from state agencies to measure impacts on participants’ employment, educational attainment, public assistance receipt, criminal justice involvement, and other outcomes.*

appropriate for the program, meaning they are not involved in violent or criminal activities and they have the capacity to live independently with the appropriate supports. Youth Villages began enrolling individuals into the study in October 2010 and will continue to enroll them through September 2012. In the first year, 571 young people were enrolled.

Preliminary data show that the full study sample (that is, both program and control group members) comprises substantial numbers of youth from both the foster care and juvenile justice systems, with some who

had been in both systems. About two-thirds of the sample had ever been in foster care and close to half had ever been in juvenile justice custody. Most sample members have had multiple state custody placements — that is, they have been in more than one home or facility. About half had ever been placed in a group home, which is a licensed placement setting in which seven or more foster children may be placed at one time.<sup>14</sup>

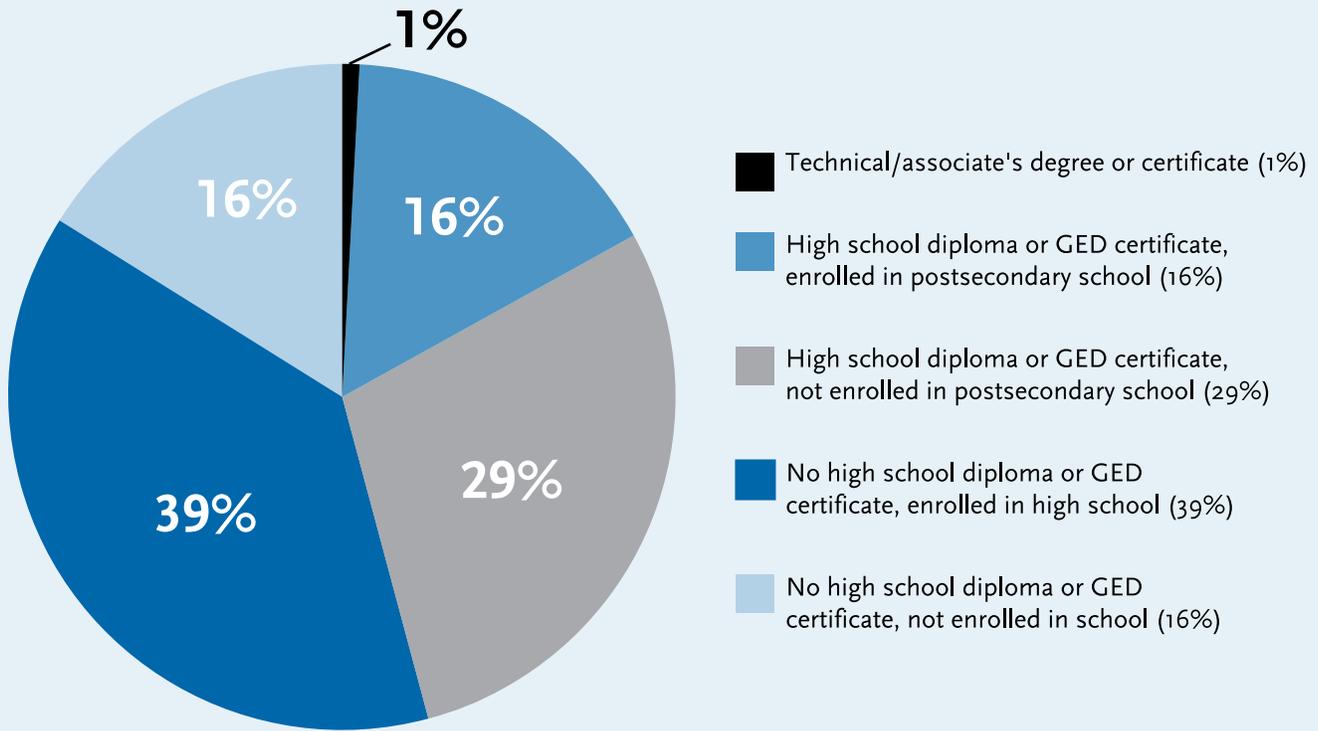
Table 1 shows some other characteristics of the individuals who enrolled in the study during the first year. As expected, most

**Table 1: Selected Characteristics of Study Participants at Baseline in the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation**

CHARACTERISTIC (%)	STUDY PARTICIPANTS
<b>AGE IN YEARS</b>	
18	68.8
19	21.5
20-24	9.6
<b>GENDER</b>	
Male	51.0
Female	49.0
<b>RACE/ETHNICITY</b>	
Hispanic	4.6
White, non-Hispanic	49.9
Black, non-Hispanic	39.4
Other, non-Hispanic	6.2
<b>HAS ANY CHILDREN</b>	15.5
<b>PREGNANT AT BASELINE</b>	4.6
<b>SAMPLE SIZE</b>	<b>571</b>

SOURCE: Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation Baseline Information Form.  
NOTE: This table includes data for participants enrolled from October 2010 through September 2011.

**Figure 1: Educational Attainment and School Enrollment in the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation**



SOURCE: Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation Baseline Information Form.  
 NOTES: This figure includes data for participants enrolled from October 2010 through September 2011.

sample members were 18 or 19 years of age when they enrolled. The sample is split almost evenly between males and females and includes a large number of both blacks and whites; about 50 percent are white and about 39 percent are black. Only about 5 percent are Hispanic. About 16 percent of the sample members had children of their own and about 5 percent (9 percent of the females) were pregnant when they entered the study.

Figure 1 shows sample members' levels of educational attainment and school

enrollment status. More than half had neither a high school diploma nor a GED certificate, though 39 percent of sample members were still enrolled in high school. About 16 percent of the sample did not have a diploma or a GED certificate and were no longer enrolled in high school. Some sample members, about 16 percent, were enrolled in postsecondary school.

Figure 2 shows some other experiences that sample members had had prior to study enrollment. Many sample members had gotten into trouble either in school or with

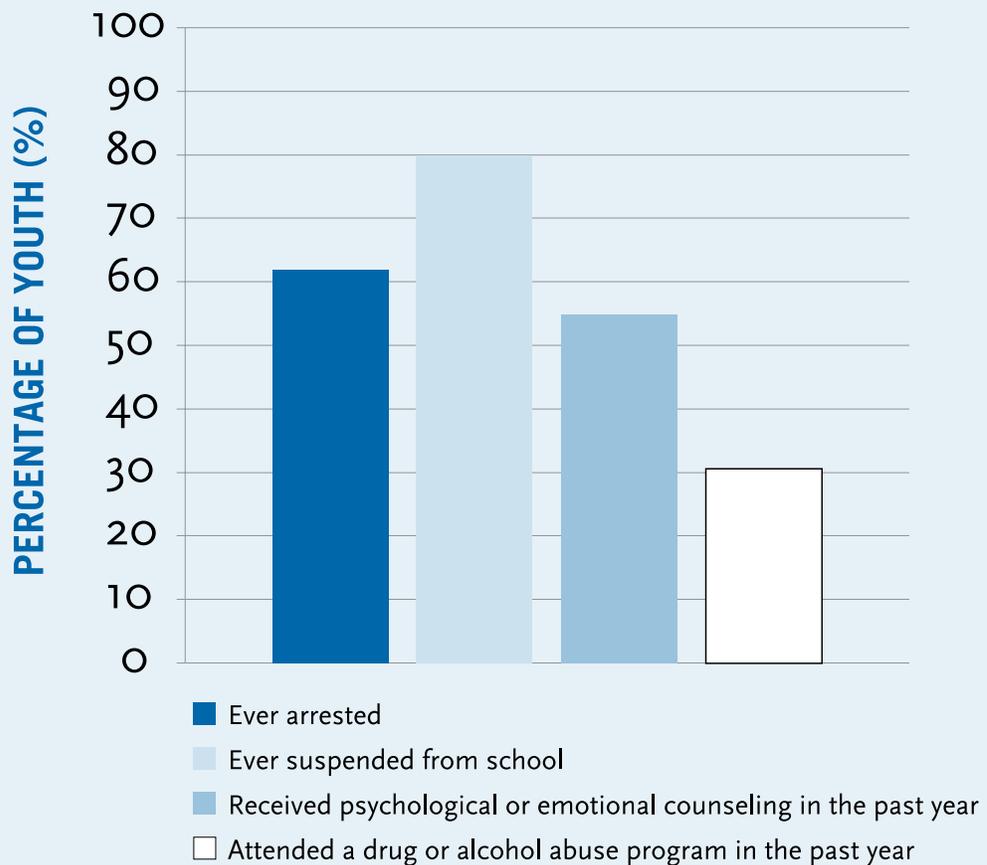
the justice system; about 80 percent had ever been suspended from school and about 62 percent had ever been arrested. More than half had recently received psychological or emotional counseling and about one-third had attended a drug or alcohol abuse program in the year before entering the study.

### WHAT HAS BEEN LEARNED SO FAR?

In mid-2011, the research team visited the Youth Villages program site to observe and

identify ways to improve the random assignment and intake process. The visit also provided an opportunity to assess the level and nature of early participation in program services. In addition, Youth Villages had implemented a number of operational changes to the program in order to broaden the pool of potentially eligible participants for the study, and the early assessment visit offered insight into some of those changes. For the purposes of the study, Youth Villages also developed a more

**Figure 2: Additional Selected Characteristics of Study Participants at Baseline in the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation**



SOURCE: Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation Baseline Information Form.

NOTES: This figure includes data for participants enrolled from October 2010 through September 2011.

comprehensive initial assessment, enabling staff to learn more about each participant at the outset of services and, in turn, to provide more effective services earlier in the program.

Once an individual is randomly assigned to the program group, Transitional Living staff begin to provide services immediately. The higher the engagement rate among those who are assigned to the program group (that is, the rate at which they actually participate in program services), the greater is the chance of detecting program impacts. Preliminary analysis of the Youth Villages' management information system data showed that participation in Transitional Living services was high, with 92 percent of program group members participating in at least one in-person service. The time from random assignment to a youth's first in-person service was fairly short, on average. Among those enrollees who received any service, eight days, on average, elapsed from the time of random assignment to the time when the first service was provided. Those who participated in services averaged nearly one in-person session per week (while they were still participating in program services). Approximately 82 percent were still participating in services by the third month following study enrollment.

## WHEN WILL THE RESULTS BE AVAILABLE AND WHAT IS COMING NEXT?

The research team is currently tracking the program and control groups using data from state agencies to measure impacts on participants' employment, educational attainment, public assistance receipt, criminal justice involvement, and other outcomes. In addition, the National Opinion Research Center is conducting a 12-month follow-up survey. This survey covers a range of outcomes, including program service receipt, housing, education, employment, mental health, risky behaviors, financial security, and social supports.

Enrollment into the study began in October 2010 and will continue for approximately two years. An interim report describing the results of the implementation analysis is scheduled for 2013. That report will draw on both quantitative and qualitative data to document how the intervention is being delivered. A second report, which will present findings on the impacts of the Transitional Living program through one year, is scheduled for 2015. The study findings will be important for both policymakers and practitioners who wish to improve outcomes for youth who were formerly in the foster care and juvenile justice systems.

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## NOTES

1. See [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats\\_research/index.htm#afcars](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm#afcars) (accessed November 16, 2011).
2. Courtney (2009).
3. In Tennessee, which is the focus of this brief, children may also enter foster care because they have run away from home, they were unruly to the point that their health and safety were at risk, or they have committed an offense that is applicable only to children. See Tennessee Department of Children's Services (2012).
4. Snyder (2004).
5. Chung, Little, and Steinberg (2005); Barbell and Freundlich (2001).
6. While in most states separate agencies are responsible for foster care and juvenile justice, combined systems such as the one in Tennessee exist in 14 states. The information on states' foster care and juvenile justice systems is based on data from State Profiles posted by the National Center for Juvenile Justice; see [www.ncjj.org/Research\\_Resources/State\\_Profiles.aspx](http://www.ncjj.org/Research_Resources/State_Profiles.aspx).
7. Courtney (2009); Uggen and Wakefield (2005).
8. Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, and Raap (2010); Courtney (2009); Uggen and Wakefield (2005).
9. For descriptions of programs similar to, but less intensive than, the Youth Villages Transitional Living program, see Courtney, Zinn, Johnson, and Malm (2011); Scannapieco, Schagrin, and Scannapieco (1995); Waldinger and Furman (1994).
10. Nellis and Wayman (2009).
11. Montgomery, Donkoh, and Underhill (2006).
12. See [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse\\_neglect/chafee/index.html](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse_neglect/chafee/index.html).
13. Courtney, Zinn, Johnson, and Malm (2011).
14. Tennessee Department of Children's Services (2012).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sara Muller-Ravett is a Research Analyst and Erin Jacobs is a Research Associate in MDRC's Health and Barriers to Employment policy area.

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### A Preview of the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation

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**Y**oung people who are leaving the foster care and juvenile justice systems often experience a difficult transition to adulthood that is characterized by a number of troubling outcomes, including poverty, low levels of education and employment, and housing instability. While some services are available for these populations, there is little evidence about which services work best and for whom. This brief provides an overview of the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation, one of the largest and most rigorous evaluations of services for youth who are leaving the foster care and juvenile justice systems. It summarizes the policy context for the evaluation, describes the characteristics of the early study sample, offers preliminary observations from the beginning of the study, and lays out a timeline for the next steps in the evaluation. The findings from this evaluation will be important for both policymakers and practitioners who wish to improve the future prospects of young people who are aging out of the foster care and juvenile justice systems.