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Texas Youth Permanency Study

FEELING CONNECTED AND EMPOWERED:

PROTECTIVE EXPERIENCES FOR YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

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INTERIM REPORT

TEXAS YOUTH PERMANENCY STUDY (TYPS)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Texas Youth Permanency Study follows a cohort of youth in foster care as they enter adulthood. By examining their experiences and trajectories over a five-year period we seek to find new ways of understanding the factors that allow youth in foster care to thrive in young adulthood.

The **present report** provides a first snapshot of quantitative and qualitative data collected in year one of the five-year longitudinal study. From June 2019 to March 2020, a first cohort of 197 youth was enrolled in the study. This report highlights our efforts to retain this first cohort of youth in the study, and provides preliminary findings about the youth's sense of connectedness at school and with their peers, their participation in case and permanency planning, and their understanding of healthy or unhealthy dating relationships.

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Our work in the first six months of this study demonstrated that we could successfully recruit a cohort of youth in foster care through participating child welfare courts. The resulting sample consisted primarily of youth who were attending court and received information about the study directly from a member of the research team. Although study

information was also distributed to adults involved with the legal case (e.g. caseworkers, Court Appointed Special Advocates [CASA], attorneys), this indirect method of recruitment did not yield as many participants.

As expected, there was significant attrition from enrollment (N=197) to the first quarterly follow up survey (N=115). While enrollment primarily occurred in person in court, contact for subsequent surveys was made via text, phone, email, social media, and mail. It appears that the shift from in-person contact for the enrollment survey to virtual contact for subsequent quarterly surveys contributed to the drop in participation. Once youth participated in a quarterly survey they tended to continue participation throughout the year.

CONNECTEDNESS AT SCHOOL AND WITH PEERS

We found that frequent placement and school changes were associated with less connection to school, especially to teachers and other support staff. In interviews, participants described times when they were struggling to catch up with their peers, socially and academically. While many developed supportive relationships with teachers when given the chance to stay in one place for a school year or more, it was notable that they struggled with peer relationships.

Having to change schools frequently, they expressed

sentiments of not fitting in, having to learn to let go of people, and not relating to people their own age. Not having supportive adults in their lives, they had to grow up quickly and strive for self-sufficiency, which meant they could not participate in typical teenage activities.

The COVID pandemic, social distancing measures, shift to online learning, and job losses increased the participants' struggles to stay engaged with school and compounded already existing social isolation and pervasive losses.

PARTICIPATION IN COURT HEARING AND IN PERMANENCY PLANNING

Our findings demonstrate the critical importance of youth voice in case planning, especially at the transition to adulthood. When youth felt like they had a voice and that judges, caseworkers, and other adults were genuinely listening to their questions, concerns, and ideas, they felt empowered to work in partnership with adults and chart a path forward. Active listening on the part of the adults involved in the legal case required patience and practice, and meant going beyond requiring youth attendance at court hearings or checking off boxes at required meetings.

UNDERSTANDING OF HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

We found that most youth participated in sexual health and healthy relationship programs, but these programs did not seem to be comprehensive. In addition to educational programs, ongoing conversations with caregivers can help youth process information, practice skills for healthy relationships, and learn to take care of their health. About two thirds of the participants reported talking to caregivers about relationships and sexual health and about a third reported talking with their birth parents, yet almost a third of participants reported not talking about these important issues with either caregivers or birth parents.

Placement stability and conversations with caregivers and birth parents were associated with increased ability to identify warning signs of physical and sexual dating violence suggesting that these conversations indeed provide important guidance for youth.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS

INTRODUCTION

The Texas Youth Permanency Study follows a cohort of youth in foster care as they enter adulthood. Participants in this five-year longitudinal study complete quarterly surveys and are invited to take part in yearly interviews that explore their emotional well-being; relationships with caregivers, birth family, peers, and dating partners; placement stability and feelings of connectedness; health, safety and educational achievement. By examining their experiences and trajectories over a five-year period we seek to find new ways of understanding the factors that allow youth in foster care to thrive in young adulthood.

Current practice in child welfare is permanency-driven, focusing on achieving **legal permanency** in a timely manner. When reunification is not possible, the assumption is that a new, "permanent," family will provide the nurturing and stable environment that allows the child to thrive. Data for children exiting foster care during Fiscal Year 2019 (Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2020) suggest that the majority of children indeed achieve legal permanency through reunification, adoption, or guardianship and only eight percent emancipate from care. However, the situation is dramatically different among children older than 12 at the time of entry into care. In this group of older children, over 80% emancipate from care (Children's

Bureau, 2018). Older children are less likely to be placed in kinship care (Jedwab, Xu, & Shaw, 2020), and an estimated 25% of adoptions disrupt before being finalized (Barth et al., 2001; Child Information Gateway, 2012; Coakley & Berrick, 2008; Festinger, 2014). Furthermore, various longitudinal studies show that 10-15% of children who have achieved adoption or guardianship may experience post-permanency discontinuity (Rolock et al., 2018) that sharply increases during the teenage years (Rolock & White, 2016). The mean age of children who experienced discontinuity was 13 years old. In addition, emerging research (Ball et al., 2020; Perez, 2017) suggests that some adoptions "dissolve" at age 18, leaving youth without support, security, and supportive relationships with caring adults.

The ultimate goal for children and youth in foster care is for them to transition to safe and legally permanent families.

-Children's Bureau

Physical permanency is often discussed in the context of placement changes. The reality of frequent placement moves and

resulting poor outcomes for youth has been well documented (Gypen et al., 2017; Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). Frequent moves can deepen a youth's trauma and sense of loss, abandonment, and rejection. Moreover, frequent moves can destabilize developmentally important relationships with peers, teachers, mentors, and birth family and engagement in activities at school and in the community. Strong connections at school, with peers, and supportive adults are crucial for healthy adolescent development (Steiner et al., 2019; Viner et al., 2012). Disruptions in a youth's physical environment may impede a sense of **normalcy** and social development (Simmons-Horton, 2017), undermine educational attainment, and hinder a youth's chances of success after leaving foster care (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010).

Relational permanency encompasses lasting relationships with parental figures and other caring adults that provide emotional connection, continuity, and ongoing support at the transition to adulthood (Ball et al., 2020; Freundlich et al., 2006; Frey et al., 2008; Jones & LaLiberte, 2013; Samuels, 2008; Sanchez, 2004;). Over the last decade, the field of child welfare has increasingly focused on promoting relational permanency, especially for youth who leave care without legal permanency (Jones & LaLiberte, 2013). However, youth in care do not always have the skills to build and nurture a relationship with an adult who might support them when they leave care (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Denby, Gomez, & Reeves, 2017). Samuels (2008) asked poignantly how we expect youth emancipating from care to form family-like connections and supports when we have failed to do so while these same young people were in care. Recent findings from a pilot study conducted for TYPS (Ball, et al., 2020) suggests that a youth's experiences in care are indeed critical. We found that youth who experienced relationships with foster caregivers and child welfare professionals as genuinely caring, validating and empowering, more easily forged lasting emotional connections and support networks that provided a secure foundation to navigate the world around them.

Figure 1: Types of Permanency

LEGAL PERMANENCY

is the **legal outcome** of the case, such as adoption, reunification, or another planned permanent living arrangement, known as "aging-out." The legal outcome is the point at which the child welfare system is no longer responsible for the child. That responsibility is assumed to be transferred to the caregivers who will provide **relational** and **physical** permanency.

PHYSICAL PERMANENCY

is **physical space** that an individual considers home and that provides **stability** for **building connections** with school, peers, and community**.**

RELATIONAL PERMANENCY

is the existence of one or more **strong**, **sustainable** and **supportive relationships** between a youth and caregivers, siblings and other individuals that a youth considers part of his or her **family**.

This longitudinal study seeks to address gaps in research and develop a better understanding how legal, physical, and relational permanency contribute to emotional wellbeing, social connectedness, and educational attainment in adulthood.

- We explore the quality of relationships youth form and maintain with their birth families, foster and adoptive parents, kin, and child welfare professionals and examine the role of relational permanency for long-term outcomes.

- We investigate the youth' experiences in school and relationships with peers and dating partners and examine

the impact of normalcy on long-term outcomes.

- We follow youth with varying legal permanency outcomes (adoption, reunification, permanent guardianship, emancipation from care) and investigate the impact on long-term outcomes. To date we know very little about how outcomes for youth emancipating from care compare to outcomes for youth who achieved legal permanency through to adoption, reunification, or permanent guardianship.

The present report provides a first snapshot of data collected in year

one of the five-year longitudinal study. From June 2019 to March 2020, a first cohort of 197 youth was enrolled in the study. This report highlights our efforts to retain this first cohort of youth in the study, and provides preliminary findings about the youth's sense of connectedness at school and with their peers, their understanding of healthy or unhealthy dating relationships, and their participation in case and permanency planning.

PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The Texas Youth Permanency Study follows a cohort of youth in foster care as they enter adulthood. By examining their experiences and trajectories over a five-year period we seek to find new ways of understanding the factors that allow youth in foster care to thrive in young adulthood. This project seeks to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do youth develop and maintain stable and nurturing connections with adults and how does relational permanency impact outcomes in adulthood?

2. How does normalcy, the participation in age-appropriate social, educational, and extra-curricular activities, impact outcomes in adulthood?

3. How does legal permanency (adoption, reunification, permanent legal guardianship, or emancipation from care) impact outcomes in adulthood?

LONGITUDINAL, MIXED METHOD DESIGN

This five-year longitudinal cohort study aims to recruit 500 youth in foster care, ages 14 and older. From June 2019 to March 2020, a first cohort of 197 youth was enrolled in the study. Participant recruitment and enrollment were disrupted by COVID-19, but are intended to continue with a second cohort in 2021.

The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services provided consent for youth to participate in the present study. The study protocol was approved by the IRB at the University of Texas at Austin.

Participants in this five-year longitudinal study complete quarterly surveys and are invited to take part in yearly interviews that explore their emotional well-being; relationships with caregivers, birth family, peers, and dating partners; placement stability and sense of connectedness; health, safety, and educational achievement. The mixed method design (Creswell & Clark, 2011) gives equal status to qualitative and quantitative data to develop a more complete understanding of the research problem. Listening to the voices of youth can provide deeper meaning

to the quantitative data and strengthen the validity of findings. Qualitative and quantitative data are collected concurrently and integrated in the analysis and discussion following the best practices for merging data outlined by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011).

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT AND ENROLLMENT

Youth in temporary or permanent managing conservatorship are eligible to enroll in the study if they are 14 years old or older; speak and read English or Spanish well-enough to complete a survey; and are not receiving emergency psychiatric treatment.

Participant recruitment for the first cohort occurred at child welfare courts that entered into a Research Agreement with the Texas Institute for Child & Family Wellbeing, at The University of Texas at Austin.

Figure 2 shows the 15 child welfare judges in Texas that permitted participant recruitment at their court. Four of the participating courts offered specialty dockets for older youth in permanent managing conservatorship that strongly encouraged youth presence at court hearings. Research team members provided study information for youth and adults in the courtroom and judge's chamber. Flyers were distributed to youth and to adults who might want to share the information with an eligible youth.

Figure 2: Recruitment for the Texas Youth Permanency Study

■ Research Agreement Complete

Judge Alice Bondurant

Judge Delia Gonzales

Judge Kara Darnell & Judge Kelley Tesch

Judge Yahara Gutierrez

Judge Betsy Lambeth & Judge Brandy Hallford

Judge Rob Hofmann

Judge Peter Sakai

Judge Selina Mireles

Judge Randy Shelton

Judge Katrina Griffith

Judge Darlene Byrne

Judge Auora Martinez-Jones

Judge Carlos Villalon
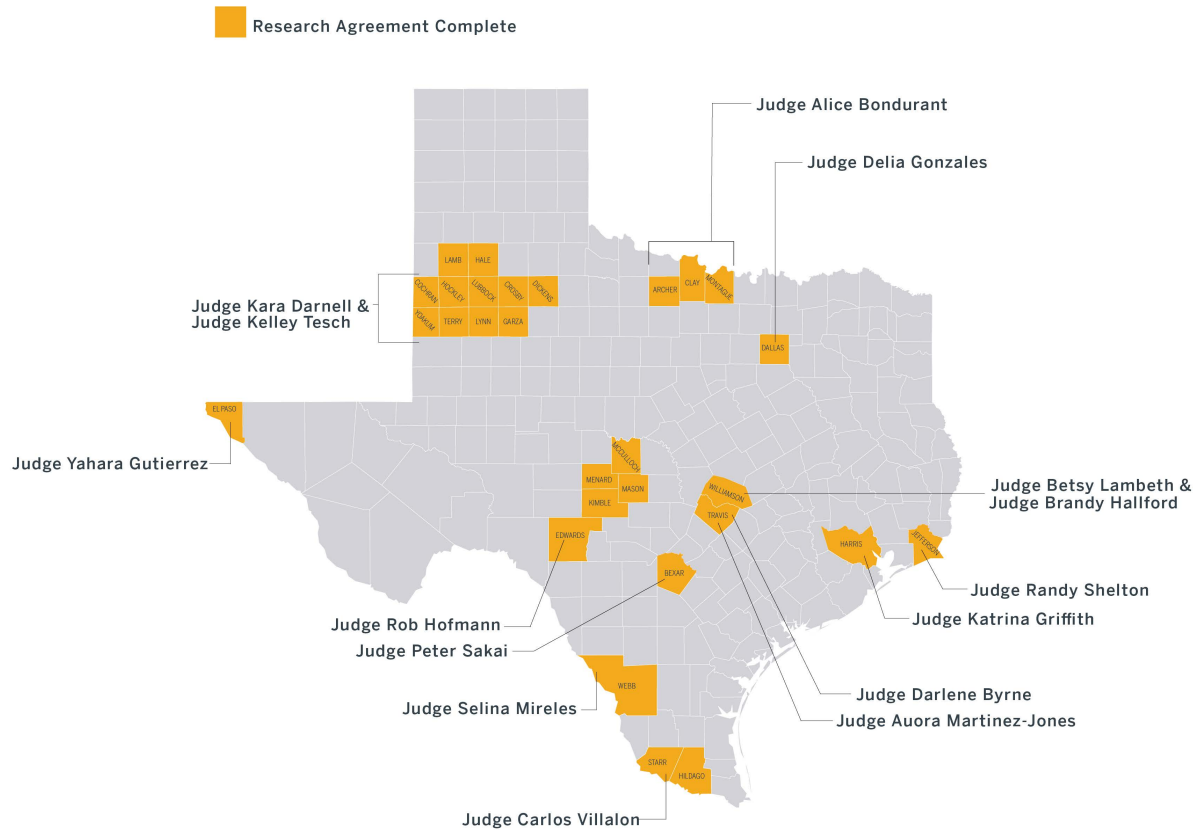
Youth who were attending court and were interested in participating were provided with a Participant ID number. They had the opportunity to access the survey electronically via an iPad provided by the research team for use within the courtroom. After opening the survey on the UT supplied iPad, a video explained the study. Youth had the ability to assent or to decline participation. They then completed the enrollment survey, which took about 20 – 30 minutes.

Youth who were NOT attending court or who did not have time to complete the survey during their court visit had the opportunity to

participate in the survey on their own time. They were provided with study information and a Participant ID number to access the survey with a mobile phone, tablet, or computer.

The research team met with 225 youth at court and provided them with information about the study. Out of this group, 24 declined participation, 10 did not start the survey, and 7 did not complete the survey due to not having enough time at court.

The research team also disseminated study information to 46 adults involved with the youth' legal case, for example CASA, case-workers, and attorneys. Thirteen

youths who were not present in court, enrolled on their own time and completed the survey.

Recruitment efforts from June 2019 through March 2020 resulted in a first cohort of 197 youth enrolled in the study.

DATA COLLECTION

When youth completed the **Enrollment Survey**, they were asked for their **contact information** including their name, email, social media handles, and mobile phone number. They were also asked if the research team had permission to ask their judge, attorney, or CASA how to contact them or if they may pass a message to them. They had the opportunity to provide collateral contacts such as family members, caseworkers, or anyone who generally knew where the youth was living. Relaying any of this information was optional and did not exclude any youth from enrolling in the study. Youth received $25 gift cards as an incentive after completing the Enrollment Survey.

Quarterly Surveys were designed to maintain contact with the youth and reduce attrition commonly associated with longitudinal studies. These brief surveys occurred approximately 90, 180, and 270 days after the enrollment survey. Survey invitation and link were mailed, emailed, texted or shared via Instagram direct messaging. Within a 4-week window, outreach was first conducted by attempting to reach the participant directly, and then by using collateral contacts when available. The research team varied method and time of outreach to maximize opportunities for youth to respond.

Each time youth opened a survey, they were asked for their assent. If the youth suggested that they had a new legal guardian, they were asked to provide that guardian's name and contact information. The youth was not able to continue with the survey until consent from the new legal guardian was obtained. Youth were then asked to update their contact information to maintain participation in the study. Incentives in the form of a $15 electronic gift card were provided for each quarterly survey completed by participants.

We conducted **phone interviews** with a subsample of participants who had completed at least two quarterly surveys. Youth were contacted and invited to participate in an interview 180 – 270 days after enrollment in the study. Interviews took place over the phone. Participants were asked for their assent and permission to have their interview audio-recorded. The researcher conducting these verbal interviews had lived experience in foster care, and feedback from participants suggested that they felt comfortable sharing their experiences with someone who had similar experience. Participant recruitment for interviews ended when the research team determined that saturation of data was achieved. Participants received a $25 electronic gift card.

Recruitment, follow-up tracking, surveys, and interviews will continue throughout the five years of the study.

MEASURES

This report provides a first snapshot of quantitative and qualitative data collected from the first cohort (*N*=197) within the first year of the study. The report focuses on data for Quarterly Surveys 1, 2, and 3, and the corresponding sections of the Annual Interview. An overview of the measures is provided below. Details for each survey and interview questions are described in the following chapters.

QUANTITATIVE MEASURES

Figure 2 provides an overview of TYPS Survey Measures for Year 1. Each survey began with questions about current living situation, placement changes, and permanency status,

The **Enrollment Survey**, to be repeated annually for the duration of the study, included a comprehensive set of questions to assess the quality of relationships with caregivers and birth family; emotional wellbeing and resilience; life skills and independent living preparation; educational attainment; and connectedness with caring adults. The Enrollment Survey took about 20 – 30 minutes to complete.

Quarterly Surveys, administered approximately 90, 180, and 270 days after enrollment, were designed to be brief and explore specific topics, including school connectedness and peer relationships, court attendance and engagement in placement decisions, and understanding of characteristics of healthy and unhealthy dating relationships.

Quarterly Surveys took about 5 – 10 minutes to complete.

All surveys were administered via Qualtrics, compliant with ADA requirements, and designed to be mobile friendly. Surveys were available in English and Spanish. Data were exported and analyzed with SPSS version 26.

QUALITATIVE MEASURES

Semi-structured interviews were conducted approximately 180 - 270 days after enrollment. Interviews provided qualitative information to complement the survey data. Interview questions explored the participants'

a) current living situation, relationship with caregivers and long-term plans;

b) experiences attending court and relationships with the adults involved in their legal case (judge, caseworker, attorney, CASA);

c) experiences at school and relationships with teachers, peers, and friends;

d) relationships with members of their birth family; and

e) hopes and plans for the future.

Phone interviews, ranging in length from 15 to 45 minutes, were recorded and transcribed. All identifying information was redacted from the transcripts. An initial coding system was developed based on the primary research questions and transcripts were coded with Dedoose. Following best practices in Consensual Qualitative Research (Hill, Knox, & Thompson, 2005; Hill,

2012) each transcript was read and coded by two trained Research Assistants. Coding was reviewed by one of the Principal Investigators for consistency. In the iterative process, codes were clarified and revised to account for the range of experiences reported by participants.

Themes for each code were formulated by distilling participants' words into concise and clear phrases. Themes were first discussed for each case, and then analyzed across cases.

Figure 3: Overview of TYPS Survey Measures for Year 1
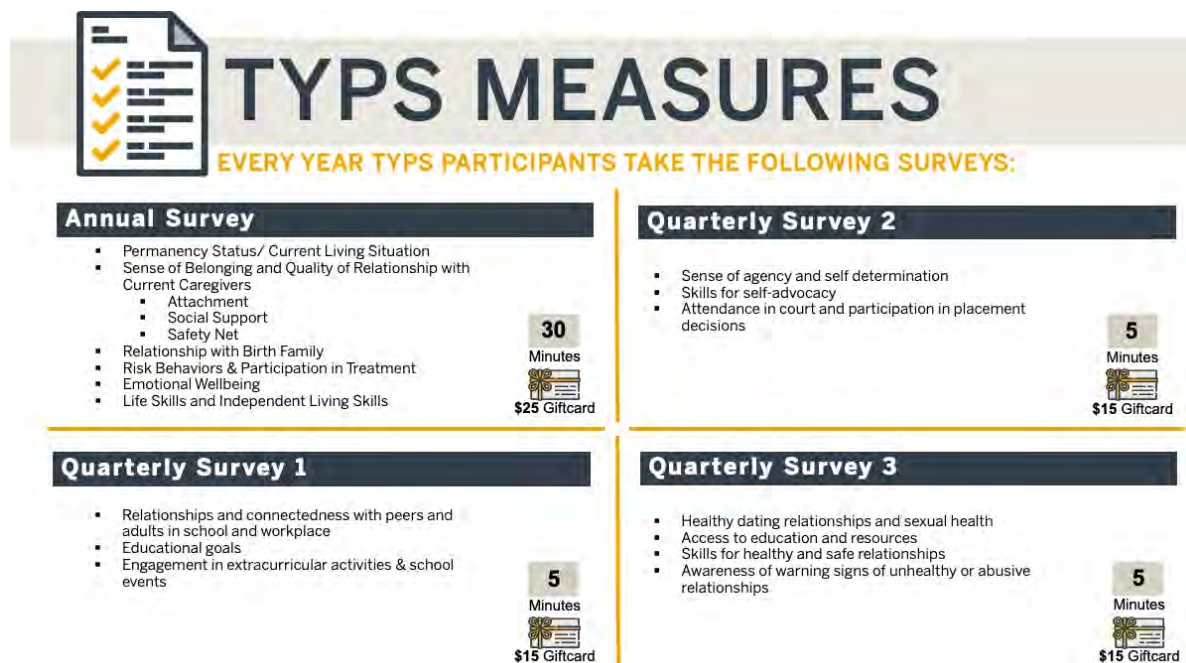
STUDY POPULATION

DEMOGRAPHICS, PLACEMENT HISTORY, AND RISK BEHAVIORS REPORTED AT ENROLLMENT

Demographics

Study participants were currently in foster care, either in temporary or permanent managing

conservatorship. Youth were between 14 and 20 years old (M= 16.5 years, SD=1.405). Table 1.1 provides an overview of demographic characteristics of the sample at enrollment and at subsequent quarterly surveys. In the enrollment sample,

- 57% were Female, 39% were Male, 1.5% were Transgender or Other Gender, and 2.5% preferred not to answer;

- 17% identified as LGBTQ;

- 67% were Hispanic;

- 44% identified as White, 17% identified as African American, 17% identified as Multi-racial, and 18% preferred not to answer.

The majority of participants (*n*=154; 78%) attended high school at the time of enrollment; 13% (*n*=26) had completed a high school diploma or GED and half of them (*n*=12) were currently enrolled in college.

Placement History

The participants' self-reported median age at first removal was 11 years old and the median number of placements was five. While 33% of participants reported three or fewer placements, 28% of participants reported having been in 10 or more placements. For this survey, the type of past placement was not further defined. Table 1.2 provides a detailed description of the placement history. At the time of enrollment,

- The majority of participants were in foster care (*n*=159; 80.7%) which included youth in extended foster care (*n*= 10).

- A small number of participants (*n*= 28; 13.7%) were in the process of attaining legal permanency at the time of enrollment: 5 youths were being adopted (2.5%), 7 youths were being reunified with a birth parent (3.6%), and 15 youths lived with a legal permanent caregiver (7.6%).

- Four percent (n=8) were about to emancipate and leave foster care.

While only a small number of participants was about to attain legal permanency at the time of the enrollment survey, a significantly higher number of participants (*n*=95; 48%) reported that they had ever been reunified and/or adopted. Out of these 95 youth, 87 (91.6%) reported post-permanency discontinuity. For a detailed analysis, see Table 1.3.

- Of the 77 youths who reported "having ever been reunified," only five listed their current permanency status as reunified: 51 were now in foster care (including 5 youths in extended care), 4 were now adopted, 11 had a legal, permanent caregiver, and 6 had emancipated from care.

- Of the 30 youths who reported "having ever been adopted," only four listed their current permanency status as adopted: 21 were now in foster care (including 1 youth in extended care), 2 had a legal permanent caregiver, 1 was reunified with birth parents, and 2 emancipated from care.

- Ever adopted and ever reunified were not mutually exclusive. Twelve participants responded they were "ever adopted" and also "ever reunified".

Current Placement

We further explored whether youth felt a sense of belonging in their current placement and whether they

wanted this placement to be permanent.

- 72.6% (*n*=143) of youth reported that they felt a sense of belonging in their current living situation;

- 41.6% (*n*=82) of youth wanted their current living situation to be permanent;

- 25.9% (*n*=51) of youth wanted their living situation to be different. It was notable that they preferred living with people their own age (siblings, partners, friends) rather than parental figures:

  o siblings (*n*=34)
  o partner/ boyfriend/ girlfriend (*n*=28)
  o friends (*n*=27)
  o birth mother (*n*=25)
  o other relatives (*n*=22)
  o aunt/uncle (*n*=20)
  o grand parents (*n*=18)
  o former foster parent (*n*=15)
  o birth father (*n*=12)
  o step parents (*n*=7).

Youth living in group homes, residential treatment centers, and shelters more often voiced that they wanted a different placement than youth living with foster families, family members, or in a SIL/TLP program.

- Among youth living in group homes, 46% wanted a different living situation; among youth in residential treatment centers, 55% wanted a different living situation; and among youth in shelter, 63% wanted a different living situation.

- In comparison, only 24% of youth living with a foster family and 20% of youth living with a family member said they would prefer a different living situation.

Risk Behaviors

We asked participants about a number of risk behaviors, including episodes of running away, juvenile justice involvement (ever been on probation), and substance use (ever been in substance use treatment). Table 1.4 provides a detailed overview.

- About half of the participants (*n*=77; 47%) reported none of the risk behaviors.

- Slightly less than half of the participants (*n*=86; 45.5 %) reported at least one episode of running away. Among reasons for running away, 42 youth reported running away to get away from caregivers, 29 reported having fights with caregivers, 22 reported running away for fun, 36 reported other reasons (categories were not mutually exclusive).

- One in five participants (*n*= 39; 19.8%) had ever been on probation, and

- One in six participants (*n*=33; 16.8%) had ever been in substance use treatment.

- Odds ratios (Table 1.5 and Table 1.6) suggested that participants who reported at least one episode of running away were 2.14 times more likely to have been on probation, and 8.14 times more likely to have been in

substance use treatment, than those participants who reported no episodes of running away.

- Additionally, one in ten participants (n=19; 9.6%) reported that they had either been pregnant or gotten a partner pregnant.

ATTRITION IN THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF THE STUDY

When designing this longitudinal study, we expected significant attrition over time due to the high mobility of participants and inconsistent access to phone and email. Out of the full sample of 197 participants that enrolled in the study, 126 (64%) completed at least one of the two quarterly surveys administered approximately 90 days and 180 days after enrollment.

While recruitment occurred in person, we relied on contacting participants via text, phone, email, social media, and mail to provide links to subsequent quarterly surveys. As would be expected, we lost a significant number of participants at the first quarterly survey, however the response rate stayed fairly consistent from Quarterly Survey 1 (N=115), to Quarterly Survey 2 (N=108).

When conducting outreach to youth and inviting them to participate in quarterly surveys, we observed the following factors (listed in descending order of frequency) that were related to attrition:

- Incomplete or incorrect contact information;
- Lack of collateral contact information (e.g. caseworker, family member, CASA, foster parent);
- Limited phone service or lack of personal phone;
- Placement changes without further contact information, including running away and emancipating from care;
- Placement restricting participant's access to phone, email, and social media;
- Youth being non-responsive after contact was made;
- Youth declining participation in follow up surveys.

Whenever significant attrition occurs, the main concern is that there is an attrition bias in the remaining sample. Table 1.1 and Table 1.2 display the demographics and placement history of the sample completing the Enrollment Survey, and Quarterly Surveys 1 and 2. We conducted a logistic regression to compare participants who completed at least one quarterly survey approximately 180 days after enrollment to participants who did not complete any quarterly surveys in that timeframe. Table 1.7 summarizes the results of three regression models. In the first model we entered demographic variables, in the second model we added placement variables, and in the third model we conducted a Backward

Logistic Regression that only retains statistically significant variables.

- Demographic variables (age, gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity) age at first removal, and legal permanency status (adoption, reunification, permanent legal guardianship versus foster care) were not associated with completion of quarterly surveys.

- Participants who reported a **high number of placements** (5 or more) over their lifetime were 2.2 times more likely to complete a quarterly survey than participants who reported fewer placements (OR: 2.2; 95% CI= 1.0, 4.7; $p<.05$) controlling for other factors.

- Participants who reported **no running away episodes** at enrollment were 2.2 times more likely to complete a quarterly survey than participants who reported at least one running away episode (OR: 2.2; 95% CI= 1.0, 4.7; $p<.05$) controlling for other factors.

- Participants who reported at enrollment that they **wanted to stay permanently** in their current living situation were 3.5 times more likely to complete a quarterly survey than youth who did not want to stay in their current living situation (OR: 3.5; 95% CI= 1.6; 7.3; $p=.001$) controlling for other factors.

Based on our observations and attrition analysis, it appears that youth who remained in the study had more consistent access to phone, text, email, and social media. As expected youth who experienced a higher degree of connection in their current placement and a desire to stay there permanently were more likely to remain in the study. In contrast, youth who had histories of running away, often an expression of distrust in adults and the foster care system, and youth who did not want to stay in their current placements were less likely to remain in the study. Interestingly, youth who experienced a higher number of placements in their lifetime were also more likely to stay in the study, which may be a result of our recruitment in child welfare courts that specialized in working with older youth in permanent managing conservatorship and required or encouraged regular attendance.

Since wanting to stay permanently in their current living situation appeared to be a significant predictor for participant retention, we examined whether participants who responded to Quarterly Survey 1 (n=115) reported placement changes. Indeed, 70% (n=81) of participants did not report any placement changes in this time period.

DISCUSSION

Our work in the first six months of this study demonstrated that we could successfully recruit a cohort of youth in foster care through participating child welfare courts. The resulting sample consisted primarily of youth who were attending court and received

information about the study directly from a member of the research team. Although study information was also distributed to adults involved with the legal case (e.g. caseworkers, CASA, attorneys), this indirect method of recruitment did not yield as many participants.

All youth in this sample had an open court case at time of enrollment and the majority reported being in foster care (81%). A small number of participants (14%) reported being in the process of attaining legal permanency through adoption, reunification, and legal guardianship. A further analysis of the self-reported placement history revealed that a significantly higher number of participants (48%) reported having ever been reunified or adopted, but the majority of them experienced post permanency discontinuity and returned into foster care.

As expected, there was significant attrition from enrollment to the first quarterly follow up survey. While enrollment primarily occurred in person in court, contact for subsequent surveys was made via text, phone, email, social media, and mail. In addition, COVID 19 temporarily halted our visits in court and precluded opportunities to meet participants in person and remind them about quarterly surveys. It appears that the shift from in-person contact for the enrollment survey to virtual contact for quarterly surveys contributed to the drop in participation. Once youth participated in a quarterly survey

they tended to continue participation throughout the year.

Demographic variables (age, gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity), age at first removal, and legal permanency status (adoption, reunification, permanent legal guardianship versus foster care) were not associated with completion of quarterly surveys. However, the remaining sample was biased toward youth who wanted their current placement to be permanent and who had no history of running away. Further analysis also showed that youth who had no history of running away were less likely to have been on probation or in substance use treatment. Interestingly, we also found that youth with a high number of placements over their lifetime were more likely to stay in the study, which may be a result of our recruitment at child welfare courts that offer specialty dockets for older youth and encourage or require regular attendance. Therefore, the subsample of youth that continued to participate in the study appeared to have more stability in their current placement, engage in less risky or rebellious behaviors, and maintain stronger connections with adults, biases that need to be taken into account in the analysis and interpretation of subsequent surveys.

Table 1.1: Demographics for Participants at Enrollment, Quarterly Survey 1, 2, and 3, and Interview

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS	Enrollment Survey (N=197)		Quarterly Survey 1 (90 days) (N=115)		Quarterly Survey 2 (180 days) (N=108)		Quarterly Survey 3 (270 days) (N=110)		Interview (180-270 days) (N=54)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Age										
14	21	10.7	9	7.8	8	7.4	10	9.1	2	3.7
15-16	67	34.1	44	38.2	42	38.9	40	36.3	22	40.7
17-18	95	48.4	52	45.2	50	46.3	49	44.6	25	46.3
19 +	13	6.7	9	7.8	8	7.5	9	8.1	5	9.3
Prefer not to answer	1	.5	1	.9			2	1.8		
Gender Identity										
Male	76	38.6	48	41.7	41	38	44	40	24	44.4
Female	113	57.4	63	54.8	64	59.3	61	55.5	30	55.6
Transgender	1	.5	1	.9	1	.9	1	.9		
Other gender	2	1	7	6.1						
Prefer not to answer		2.5	2	1.7	2	1.9	4	3.6		
Sexual Orientation										
Straight	152	77.2	88	76.5	82	75.9	85	77.3	42	79.2
Gay or lesbian	6	3	4	3.5	2	1.9	3	2.7	2	3.8
Bisexual	22	11.2	13	11.3	16	14.8	12	10.9	7	13
Other or undecided	6	3	3	2.8	4	3.7	4	3.6	2	3.7
Prefer not to answer	11	5.6	5	2.5	4	3.7	6	5.5	1	1.9
Education										
7th – 8th grade	12	6.1	4	3.5	5	4.6	4	3.6		
9th – 10th grade	64	32.5	36	31.3	51	31.4	38	34.5	13	24.1
11th- 12th grade	90	45.7	57	49.6	56	51.9	52	47.2	31	57.4
Dropped out	2	1	2	1.7	1	.9	1	.9	1	1.9
High school diploma/ GED	26	13.2	13	11.3	10	9.3	12	10.9	7	13.0
Enrolled in college	12		7		7		9		5	
Prefer not to answer	3	1.5	3	2.6			3	2.7	2	3.7
Ethnicity										
Hispanic	127	66.8	74	64.3	70	64.8	71	32.7	31	57.4
Non-Hispanic	63	33.2	39	33.9	37	34.3	36	64.5	23	42.6
Prefer not to answer			2	1.7	1	.9	3	2.7		
Race										
White/ Caucasian	87	44.2	55	47.8	50	46.3	51	46.4	30	55.6
Black/ African American	34	17.3	20	17.4	17	15.7	17	15.5	10	18.5
Multi-racial	33	16.8	19	16.5	20	18.5	20	18.2	4	7.4
Other	7	3.5	3	1.6	3	2.8	3	2.7	1	1.9
Prefer not to answer	36	18.3	18	15.7	18	16.7	19	17.3	9	16.7

Table 1.2: Placement History for Participants at Enrollment, Quarterly Survey 1, 2, and 3, and Interview

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS	Enrollment Survey		Quarterly Survey 1 (90 days)		Quarterly Survey 2 (180 days)		Quarterly Survey 3 (270 days)		Interview (180 – 270 days)	
	(N=197)		(N=115)		(N=108)		(N=110)		(N=54)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Age at first removal										
5 years old or younger	33	16.8	17	14.8	19	17.6	19	17.3	9	16.7
6 – 10 years old	50	25.5	35	30.4	31	28.7	28	25.4	14	26.0
11 – 15 years old	89	45.3	51	44.2	48	45.5	49	44.5	26	48.2
16 – 18 years old	19	9.7	10	8.7	9	8.4	10	9.1	4	7.5
Prefer not to answer	6	3	2	1.7	1	.9	4	3.6	1	1.9
Number of placements										
1	28	14.2	12	10.4	11	10.2	12	10.9	8	14.8
2 – 3	52	16.9	32	27.8	32	30.6	30	27.3	15	24.1
4 – 6	48	24.4	32	28.7	32	29.7	33	30.0	15	24.1
7 - 9	17	8.6	11	9.5	9	8.4	10	9.0	4	7.5
10 or more	43	21.8	25	21.8	23	21.3	22	20.0	14	25.9
Prefer not to answer	8	4.1	2	1.7			3	2.7		
Permanency History										
Ever reunified	77	45	49	42.6	48	44.4	48	43.6	20	37
Ever adopted	30	15.5	13	11.3	15	13.9	13	11.8	9	16.7
Current Permanency Status										
Adopted	5	2.5	1	.9	1	.9	1	.9	1	1.9
Reunified	7	3.6	1	.9	1	.9	1	.9	1	1.9
Legal Permanent Caregiver	15	7.6	7	6.1	6	5.6	8	7.3	3	5.6
In Foster Care	149	75.6	93	80.9	89	82.4	87	79.1	42	77.98
In Extended Foster Care	10	5.1	9	7.8	9	8.3	7	6.4	5	9.3
Aged out, Left Care	8	4.1	3	2.6	2	1.9	4	3.6	2	3.7
Prefer not to answer	3	1.5	1	.9			2	1.8		

CURRENT LIVING SITUATION OF YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE	(N=158)		(N=101)		(N=98)		(N=94)		(N=47)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Foster Family	83	52.5	54	53.5	50	51	45	40.9	26	48.1
Group Home	27	17.1	18	17.8	18	18.4	19	20.2	8	14.8
RTC	15	9.5	6	5.9	7	7.1	7	6.4	3	5.6
Shelter	9	5.7	4	4	3	3.1	4	3.6	3	5.6
Family Member	11	7	8	7.9	9	9.2	9	8.2	1	1.9
TLP/SIL	13	8.2	11	10.9	11	11.2	10	9.1	6	11.1

Table 1.3: Cross Tabulation of Permanency History and Permanency Status Reported at Enrollment

PERMANENCY HISTORY	Permanency Status at Enrollment						
	Adopted	Reunified	Legal Permanent Caregiver	Foster Care	Extended Care	Aged Out	Total Responses
Ever Reunified	4	5	11	46	5	6	77
% within Ever Reunified	5.2%	6.5%	14.3%	59.7%	6.5%	7.8%	100%
Ever Adopted	4	1	2	20	1	2	30
% within Ever Adopted	13.3%	3.3%	6.7%	66.7%	3.3%	6.7%	100%

Note: Ever adopted and ever reunified are not mutually exclusive categories. Twelve participants responded they were "ever adopted" and also "ever reunified".

Table 1.4: Risk Behaviors Reported in Enrollment Survey

RISK BEHAVIORS	(N=197)	
	n	%
Run- Away Episodes		
Ever Run-away	86	45.5%
Once	27	13.7%
Twice	16	8.1%
Three times	7	3.6%
Four times	5	2.4%
Five times	25	12.7%
Probation		
Probation ever	39	19.8%
Probation current	9	4.6%
Substance Use		
Substance use treatment ever	33	16.8%
Substance use treatment current	8	4.1%
Pregnancy		
Never/ Never gotten a partner pregnant	142	74.6%
One pregnancy/ Gotten a partner pregnant once	13	6.6%
More than one pregnancy/ Gotten a partner pregnant more than once	6	3%

Table 1.5 Contingency Table with Odds Ratios for Risk Behaviors: Running Away Ever and Having Been on Probation Ever

		Run Away Ever	Run Away Never	Totals
		n	n	
Probation	Ever	24	15	39
	Never	51	82	133
	Odds for having been on probation ever	24/51=.47	12/82=.22	.47/.22=2.14

$X^2(1)=6.59, p=.010$

Table 1.6 Contingency Table with Odds Ratios for Risk Behaviors: Running Away Ever and Having been in Substance Use Treatment Ever.

		Run Away Ever	Run Away Never	Totals
		n	n	
Substance Use Treatment	Ever	27	6	33
	Never	47	91	138
	Odds for having been in substance use treatment ever	27/47=.57	6/91=.07	.57/.07=8.14

$X^2(1)=24.75, p=.000$

Table 1.7: Regression Coefficients of Participant Characteristics Associated with Retention in the Study

Variable (Reference Category)	Model 1: Demographics		Model 2: All Variables		Model 3: Backward LR	
	Exp(B)	95% CI	Exp(B)	95% CI	Exp(B)	95% CI
Age	1.004	[0.778, 1.295]	0.981	[0.745, 1.292]		
Male or other gender (Female)	1.025	[0.504, 2.084]	1.025	[0.471, 2.233]		
Other Sex Orientation (Straight)	1.773	[0.699, 4.495]	2.115	[0.788, 5.681]		
Non-white (White)	0.838	[0.423, 1.662]	1.038	[0.490, 2.197]		
Hispanic (Non-Hispanic)	0.993	[0.479, 2.059]	1.224	[0.536, 2.794]		
≥11 yrs old at first removal (<11 yrs old at first removal)			0.971	[0.427, 2.208]		
≥5 placements (<5 placements)			2.127	[0.887, 5.102]	2.204*	[1.024, 4.740]
No legal permanency (legal permanency)			2.679	[0.834, 8.601]		
Never ran away (Ran away)			2.555*	[1.159, 5.632]	2.210*	[1.041, 4.692]
Want living situation to be permanent (Do not want)			3.712**	[1.722, 8.070]	3.453**	[1.637, 7.285]
Model Summary	-2LL=193.760 Cox & Snell R^2= 0.012 Nagelkerke R^2=0.016 Model Chi Sq=-1.821		-2LL=172.485 Cox & Snell R^2= 0.139 Nagelkerke R^2=0.194 Model Chi Sq=-23.096 Sig.=0.010		-2LL=177.993 Cox & Snell R^2= 0.108 Nagelkerke R^2=0.151 Model Chi Sq=-17.648 Sig.=.001	

* p <.05
** p =.001

SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS

BACKGROUND

School connectedness has long been shown to be a protective factor for youth, associated with reduced delinquency, substance use, and teen pregnancy (e.g. for a review Maddox & Prinz, 2003). School connectedness refers to the connections a student has with their school, school personnel and peers, their commitment to learning, and participation in school activities. Higher levels of school connectedness are associated with motivation to engage in learning and academic achievement.

A sense of school connectedness is especially important for vulnerable youth and it is important to examine this phenomenon for youth in foster care (Cage, Yoon, Barhart, Coles & McGinnis, 2019). Oshri, Topple and Carlson (2017) showed that youth with maltreatment histories who are more connected in school and have stronger peer relationships and social skills are more resilient. The authors suggested that in the context of supportive relationships at school, youth develop social skills and a sense of belonging that allow them to more effectively navigate challenges and stressors.

For youth in foster care, being in school provides opportunities to counter challenges related to trauma and loss, build competencies, achieve academic success, and start a successful transition to adulthood, yet placement moves and school changes can undermine this process (Strolin-Goltzman, Woodhouse, Suter, & Werrbach, 2016). Strolin-

Goltzman and colleagues (2016) found that school connectedness and specifically the strength of student-teacher relationships, predicted the likelihood that youth in foster care entered or intended to enter college.

> *Youth define normalcy as not being singled out from other teens and not having to go through extra obstacles to participate in the same activities as their peers.*
>
> *- Alliance for Children's Rights, 2016*

Moreover, for many youth school is the center of their social life that includes participation in clubs, athletics, and other extra-curricular activities. In order to participate in any of these social activities youth in foster care need placement stability. They also need to be allowed to participate in normal, age-appropriate activities, and socialize with friends. "Through these activities, youth learn their interests and talents, safely experiment and take risks, practice decision-making skills, and develop healthy peer and adult relationships" (Pokempner, et al., 2015).

However, youth in foster care often have difficulty participating in everyday social activities due to rules and regulations that may require background checks or

permission for school trips, and frequent placement changes. These barriers can hinder normal social emotional development, increase youth' unhappiness in placements, and further contribute to placement disruptions and changes. The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014, introduced the "reasonable and prudent parent standard," which means that foster parents (or a designated official if a child resides in congregate care) are now permitted to make day-to-day decisions about a child's participation in age-appropriate, extracurricular, cultural, and social activities. Social activities with friends, including unsupervised activities such as going to the movies, trips to the mall, dating, and visiting friends' houses are noted as regular and normal activities that youth in care may engage in. However, the implementation of the normalcy provisions in the Strengthening Families Act is still a work in progress (Alliance for Children's Rights, 2016) and requires balancing the needs of youth in care with the propensity for safety and control inherent in the foster care system.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this section of the Texas Youth Permanency Study, we sought to understand how youth in foster care participate in age-appropriate social, educational, and extra-curricular activities.

1. How connected do youth feel in school?

   a. Are youth engaged in extracurricular activities and events at school?

   b. How do placement and school changes impact school connectedness?

   c. How do youth describe their relationships to school personnel? How do these relationships impact school connectedness and academic success?

2. What is their level of commitment to school and their plan for continuing their education?

3. How do youth describe their relationships with peers?

   a. How do placement changes impact their relationships?

   b. What challenges or support do they experience for participating in age-appropriate social activities?

4. How does COVID 19 impact school connectedness and peer relationships?

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

As described in detail in Chapter 1, participants in the Texas Youth Permanency Study were recruited in court. Participant recruitment, participant tracking, and attrition

from enrollment to subsequent quarterly surveys are discussed in detail in Chapter 1.

The sample for this section of the Texas Youth Permanency Study was comprised of 115 youth who completed the first quarterly survey approximately 90 days after enrollment. The timeframe for survey data collection was October 2019 to August 2020; 30 of the 115 surveys were collected from April to August 2020, which includes the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this timeframe, social distancing measures and school closures varied across Texas communities and school districts and may have influenced some survey responses.

In addition, we conducted interviews with 54 youths who had completed the first and second quarterly survey, approximately 180 to 270 days after enrollment. Phone interviews were completed between May and July 2020. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences prior to COVID-related school closures and social distancing measures, as well as the specific impact of COVID.

Youth who completed the Quarterly Survey 1 (N=115) were between 14 and 20 years old (M= 16.5 years, SD=1.345). Table 1.1 provides detailed demographic characteristic of the sample.

- 55% were Female, 42% were Male, and 7% were Transgender or Other Gender;
- 17.6% identified as LGBTQ;

- 64% were Hispanic;
- 48% identified as White, 17% identified as African American, and 17% identified as Multi-racial.

Table 1.2 provides an overview of the placement history and current living situation of participants.

- 89% (n=102) of the youth were currently in foster care which included youth in extended foster care.
  - Among the youth who were currently in foster care, 54% lived with a foster family, 8% lived with a family member, 30% lived in a congregate care setting (group home, RTC, shelter), and 11% were in a TLP or SIL placement.
- 8% of the youth (n=9) had achieved legal permanency including adoption (1 youth), reunification (1 youth), and having a legal permanent caregiver (7 youths).
- 3% (n=3) of the youth had emancipated and left care.
- While 41% of participants reported three or fewer placements indicating relative placement stability, 22% of participants reported having been in 10 or more placements.

Demographics, placement history, and current living situation of youth who completed the interview (N=54) mirrored the characteristics of youth who completed the Quarterly

Survey. Details are reported in

SURVEY MEASURES

In this study, we assessed School Connectedness with three measures. School Belonging is a brief scale included in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, the Student Engagement Instrument is a validated instrument designed to measure engagement and relatedness in school, and School Commitment assesses the commitment to learning.

These measures were completed by all participants who reported being enrolled in middle or high school, college or technical school. School could therefore refer to middle and high school, or to college and technical school.

SCHOOL BELONGING

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) is a longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of over 20,000 adolescents who were in grades 7-12 during the 1994-95 school year, and have been followed for five waves to date, most recently in 2016-18. Add Health includes a short set of questions that ask about a general sense of belonging at school. Five questions selected for TYPS, included "I feel close to people at school. I am happy to be at this school. I feel like I am a part of this school. I feel safe at school. I feel like I fit in with other students at this school." Response options were *Never, Sometimes, Often, Always*,

scored from 0 – 3. The scale showed good reliability (α=.867).

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT INSTRUMENT

The Student Engagement Instrument (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006) is a validated self-report instrument designed to measure engagement and relatedness in school. The instrument was validated with a diverse population of ninth-graders in an urban school district. Factor analysis confirmed six factors that correlated with academic achievement: Adult Support, Peer Support, Future Aspirations and Goals, Family Support for Learning, and Extrinsic Motivation.

Items included in this study were derived from three subscales of the Student Engagement Instrument. Subscales were abbreviated and edited to conform to a 6th grade reading level and to avoid response fatigue.

Adult Support in School included 5 items, such as "Teachers are there for me when I need them. I enjoy talking to the teachers here. My teachers give me extra help when I need it." Response options were *Never, Sometimes, Often, Always*, scored from 0 – 3. The subscale showed good reliability (α=.829).

Peer Support in School included 9 items, such as "Other students at school care about me. Students here respect what I have to say. Other students like me the way I am. Students at my school are there for me when I need them." Response options were *Not at all, A little, A lot,*

A great deal, scored from 0 – 3. The subscale showed excellent reliability (α=.956).

Family Support for School was comprised of 3 items, such as "When I have problems at school my family/guardian(s) are willing to help me." Response options were *Never, Sometimes, Often, Always*, scored from 0 – 3. The subscale showed good reliability (α=.891).

SCHOOL COMMITMENT

School Commitment included 4 items derived from Hawkins et al. (2001). The original scale was developed in a study with a diverse group of fifth-graders, a substantial proportion of whom were from low-income households. Items included "Most mornings I look forward to going to school. I do extra school work on my own." Response options were *Strongly disagree, Somewhat disagree, Somewhat agree, and Strongly Agree*, scored from 0 – 3. The scale showed good reliability (α=.815).

SCHOOL INVOLVEMENT

School Involvement was comprised of 2 questions about participation in extracurricular activities at school and school sponsored events.

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Participants were asked about their grades for the last grading period. Response options were *Mostly A's; Mostly B's; Mostly C's; Mostly D's; Some A's, some B's and some C's.* In the analysis responses were dichotomized into Higher Academic Achievement (Mostly A's and B's) versus Lower Academic Achievement (Any C's and mostly C's and D's).

FUTURE EDUCATIONAL PLANS

This set of questions consisted of 4 items, including "Getting a high school diploma or GED is important to me. I plan to continue my education after high school." Response options were *Strongly disagree, Somewhat disagree, Somewhat agree, and Strongly Agree*, scored from 0 – 3.

SCHOOL CHANGES

Participants were asked about the number of school changes in middle school, respectively high school, with response options ranging from 0 changes to more than 3 changes. For further analysis, responses were dichotomized with a median split: Low Number of School Changes in middle school, respectively high school (1 or less), versus High Number of School Changes (2 or more).

PLACEMENT CHANGES

Participants reported on placement changes in the three months prior to the survey.

In addition, we utilized one item from the Enrollment Survey three months earlier where participants stated whether or not they wanted their current placement to be permanent.

Semi-structured interviews included one section that focused on the youths' experiences in school, relationships with teachers and other students. Questions were designed to complement the survey measures listed above, and further investigate the quality of peer relationships.

1. How do you feel about school and relationships with teachers and other students?

2. What do your relationships with people your age look like?

3. How do you manage friendships while in foster care?

4. How do your caregivers and caseworkers support or restrict your relationships with peers?

5. How do COVID related restrictions impact your experience at school and with people your age?

FINDINGS

PLACEMENT CHANGES, SCHOOL CHANGES, ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT, AND FUTURE EDUCATIONAL PLANS

At the time of the first quarterly survey, the majority of youth (n=90; 78.2%) were in high school; 3.5% (n=4) were still in middle school; 1.7% (n =2) had dropped out; 12% (n =14) had a high school diploma or GED and almost all of these students

(n =12) were enrolled in college or technical school (Table 2.1).

PLACEMENT CHANGES

In the first quarterly survey after enrollment, 70% of participants reported having stayed in the same placement, 22% had moved once, and 5% had moved two or more times.

SCHOOL CHANGES

The median number of school changes in middle school was two and in subsequent analyses the variable was dichotomized into one or no changes versus two or more changes. It should be noted that almost a quarter of our participants (23.5%) changed schools more than three times while in middle school (Table 2.1).

A similar picture emerged for high school. The median number of school changes in high school was two and in subsequent analyses the variable was dichotomized into one or no changes versus two or more changes. Over a quarter of our participants (27.8%) changed school more than three times while in high school (Table 2.1). This is especially notable since the majority of participants were still in high school at the time of the survey, which suggests that for some youth school changes were accelerating at the high school level.

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

A majority of participants (n=55; 53.4%) reported doing well in schools and receiving mostly A's and

B's. Among the other participants, some reported mixed grades (n=37; 35.9%) trailing behind in some classes, while a smaller number (n=11; 10.6%) appeared to be struggling academically earning mostly C's or D's ([Table 2.1](#)). In subsequent analyses, the variable was dichotomized into Higher Academic Achievement (Mostly A's and B's) and Lower Academic Achievement (Some C's and Mostly C's and D's).

FUTURE EDUCATIONAL PLANS

Participants strongly endorsed wanting to continue their education after high school. Although work experience seemed important to them, only 54.5% believed that getting a job after high school was more important than attending college ([Table 2.2](#)).

SCHOOL INVOLVEMENT

About half of the participants (52%) reported participating in extracurricular activities at school. Participants listed sports (27%); band, orchestra, choir, and dance (17%); clubs like debate and theatre (15%); and student council and student associations (6%).

Table 2.1: Descriptive Statistics for Grade Level, School Changes, and Academic Achievement

VARIABLES	N=115	
	n	%
Grade Level		
7th grade	1	.9
8th grade	3	2.6
9th grade	16	13.9
10th grade	16	13.9
11th grade	28	24.3
12th grade	30	26.1
Dropped out	2	1.7
High School Diploma or GED	14	12.2
Enrolled in College or Technical School	12	-
Prefer not to answer	5	4.3
School Changes in Middle School		
Stayed at same school	33	28.7
Changed schools once	19	16.5
Changed schools twice	14	12.2
Changed schools three times	14	12.2
Changed schools more than three times	27	23.5
Prefer not to answer	8	7.0
School Changes in High School		
Stayed at same school	40	34.8
Changed schools once	12	10.4
Changed schools twice	9	7.8
Changed schools three times	12	10.4
Changed schools more than three times	32	27.8
Prefer not to answer	10	8.7
Academic Achievement		
Mostly A's	24	23.3
Mostly B's	31	30.1
Mostly C's	9	8.7
Mostly D's	2	1.9
Some A's, some B's, some C's	37	35.9
Prefer not to answer	12	10.4

Table 2.2: Future Educational Plans

VARIABLES	N=115			
	% Disagree	% Somewhat Disagree	% Somewhat Agree	% Strongly Agree
I plan to continue my education after high school	1	1	16.3	81.7
Working while going to school will prepare me for the future	1	1	26.2	71.8
It is more important for me to get a job after high school than to go to college	15.8	29.7	23.8	30.7

SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS - SUPPORT FROM ADULTS, PEERS, AND FAMILY

The following section summarizes findings for the different measures of school connectedness. Table 2.3 provides an overview of the psychometric properties of the scales.

Table 2.3: Properties for School and Peer Connectedness Scales

Scale	School Belonging	Adult/ Teacher Support	Peer Support	Family Support for School	School Commitment
Psychometric Properties					
N	104	105	101	105	106
M	1.8425	2.1268	1.7243	2.3508	2.094
SD	.83499	.72021	.84521	.85232	.7108
Range	3.00	2.60	3.00	3.00	3.00
Minimum	.00	.40	.00	.00	.00
Maximum	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00
Cronbach's α	.867	.829	.956	.891	.815

Survey measures for School Belonging, Student Engagement (Adult Support, Peer Support, and Family Support) and School Commitment were skewed toward the top of the scale, indicating potential ceiling effects or social desirability. Interestingly, study participants endorsed adult support at school more strongly than support from peers, which was consistent across surveys and interviews. In the interviews we could further explore the quality of adult and peer relationships at school and come to a more nuanced understanding of the survey responses.

All measures for school connectedness were significantly correlated (Table 2.4), with the strongest correlation between School Belonging and Teacher/ Adult Support (r=.743) and between School Belonging and Peer Connectedness (r=.712)

IMPACT OF PLACEMENT AND SCHOOL CHANGES ON SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS

The association of placement and school changes with school connectedness was first explored with an analysis of bivariate correlations (Table 2.4).

- As noted above, the measures for school connectedness (school belonging, teacher/ adult support, peer support, and school commitment) were highly inter-correlated.

- As expected, placement changes in the past 3 months were significantly correlated with school changes, and negatively correlated with school belonging, teacher/ adult support and school commitment.

- We also found that school changes in middle school were positively correlated with school changes later in high school indicating that tendencies toward repeated placement and school changes persisted over time.

- School changes in middle school were negatively correlated with present school belonging, teacher/adult support, and school commitment, suggesting a lasting effect of instability in the middle school years.

- Interestingly, school changes in high school (which were the most recent changes for most participants) were not correlated with school connectedness variables.

- Academic achievement was positively correlated with school commitment, but not with the other variables.

Table 2.4: Bivariate Correlations between Placement Changes, School Changes, and School Connectedness

VARIABLES	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Placement Changes (past 3 months)	-							
2. School Changes in Middle School	.239*	-						
3. School Changes in High School	.296**	.307**	-					
4. School Belonging	-.214*	-.259**	-.123	-				
5. Teacher/ Adult Support	-.215*	-.210*	-.040	.743**	-			
6. Peer Support at School	-.156	-.054	.152	.712**	.515**	-		
7. School Commitment	-.201*	-.198*	.047	.535**	.593**	.521**	-	
8. Academic Achievement	-.044	-.183	.092	.063	.025	.024	.237*	-

Note ** $p \leq 0.01$ (2-tailed); * $p \leq 0.05$ (2-tailed).

In a next step, we conducted a linear regression with school belonging as the dependent variable. We controlled for demographic variables (gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity) that were entered in Block 1. Placement and school history variables (total number of placements reported at time of enrollment, placement changes in the 3 months since enrollment, school changes in middle school) were entered in Block 2. We added a variable from the Enrollment Survey (3 months prior to this quarterly survey) into the regression model. This question asked whether participants wanted their placement to be permanent. Previous analysis had demonstrated that wanting their placement to be permanent was strongly correlated with placement stability reported in the quarterly survey 3 months later. However, in addition to denoting placement stability, this variable suggested that participants felt a sense of belonging and were committed to staying in their placement. For the final model we selected the backward method removing the predictors from the model that did not make a statistically significant contribution.

Controlling for other factors we found that:

- Participants who wanted their placement to be permanent at enrollment reported higher school belonging in the quarterly survey 3 months later.

- Placement changes in the past three months had no significant effect on school belonging, although a negative association was noted.

- School changes in middle school significantly decreased school belonging at time of the survey when all but 3.5% of participants were in high school, respectively college/ technical school, suggesting that middle school was a formative time in the lives of these youth. [School changes in high school were not included in this regression model as they showed no significant correlations with school belonging. See Table 2.2.]

- The overall number of placements had no significant effect on school belonging.

- Participants who identified as female reported lower school belonging than participants who identified as male, transgender, or other gender

Table 2.5: Regression Coefficients of Participant Characteristics Associated with School Belonging

VARIABLE	Model 1: Demographics			Model 2: All Variables (Block-wise Entry)			Model 3: Backward LR		
	B (SE)	β	95% C.I.for B	B (SE)	β	95% C.I.for B	B (SE)	β	95% C.I.for B
Constant	1.718 (.253)		[1.215, 2.222]	1.522 (.316)	.032	[.893, 2.152]	1.520 (.180)		[1.16, 1.878]
Hispanic (Non-Hispanic)	.036 (.209)	.020	[-.381, .452]	.059 (.203)	-.016	[-.346 .463]			
Non-white (White)	-.037 (.194)	-.021	[-.423, .349]	-.028 (.184)	-.105	[-.395 .339]			
Other Sex Orientation (Straight)	-.365 (.259)	-.180	[-.882, .152]	-.212 (.250)	.186	[-.711 .286]			
Male or other gender (Female)	.368 (.221)	.209	[-.072, .808]	.327 (.213)	-.045	[-.097 .752]	.429* (.179)	.244*	[.073, .786]
≥5 placements (<5 placements)				.207 (.206)	.318	[-.203 .617]			
Want current living situation to be permanent (Do not want)				.556*** (.187)	.032***	[.183 .929]	.548*** (.176)	.314***	[.197, .899]
Placement Changes Past 3 Months (No changes)				-.089 (.225)	-.267	[-.538 .360]			
≥ 2 School Changes in Middle School (≤ 1 school changes)				-.464* (.201)	.118*	[-.865 -.063]	-.405* (.176)	-2.33*	[-.757, -.054]
R^2	.117			.268***			.243***		
fj R^2				.151**					
Model F-statistic	2.447			3.200***			8.008****		
Model Adjusted R^2	.069			.184			.212		

Note: * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .005$; **** $p \leq .001$

"CATCHING UP" AND DEALING WITH PLACEMENT AND SCHOOL CHANGES

Interview participants (*N*=54) reflected the demographic and placement characteristics of the larger sample that responded to Quarterly Survey 1. Additional information about the length of current placements was obtained in the interviews and served to contextualize findings about school experiences and relationships with adults and peers. In the interviews,

- 22% of participants (*n*=12) reported having lived in the current placement for less than 3 months,

- 24% of participants (*n*=13) reported having lived in their current placement for 3 – 9 months,

- 24% of participants (*n*=13) reported having lived in their current placement for 10 – 24 months,

- 30% of participants (*n*=16) reported having lived in their current placement for more than 24 months.

This information suggests that participants represented several subgroups of youth, including those who experienced very frequent placement changes, and those who experienced relative placement stability. Yet all of them described times when they were struggling to catch up with their peers, socially and academically.

In the following presentation of findings, pseudonyms were assigned to participants to protect their confidentiality. Identifying information was redacted.

"SCHOOL IS AMAZING" – "I LOVE INTERACTING AND MEETING NEW PEOPLE."

The majority of interview participants (*n*=32; 60%) reported feeling successful at school and having good relationships with teachers and peers alike. They were able to access resources and support at school, including help with catching up academically and solving social problems. Andy reflected, "I have good relationships with teachers and other students. Sometimes, I might struggle in a class, or me and another kid have a problem or something. But mostly, it's a good place. Let's say I had a problem or something. I would just talk to the counselor or talk to the teacher about it that I trust, and then they'll try to help work it out." For some participants, school was an important space where they could get away from their placement and meet new people. "I'm one of those people that school is amazing. I get to get away from here. So, I've got plenty of friends there," reported Terry.

Jose reflected that he used to be antisocial, but found a way to overcome his problems. "I enjoy school a lot. I love like interacting, like meeting new people, talking to teachers like if I ever need help or anything. I used to be very antisocial at one point, like sophomore year when like a lot of things were going on in my life, but ever since, I've been doing a lot better and seeing

things different. It's really good. I talk to my teachers good too. I have a really good relationship with my counselor as well trying to get me back on track from when I was missing a lot, when I wasn't in the system."

"ALL OF MY LIFE I PROBABLY MOVED SCHOOLS AT LEAST ONCE PER GRADE."

Another group of participants (n=13; 25%) related how frequent placement and school changes disrupted relationship with teachers and peers. For example, Mary stated, "So, I haven't really had that high school experience, where I can just sit down, make friends. And then, get to know all my teachers 'cause most of the time – like, at my previous schools, I'd be there for maybe a six-month period, not even six months, probably the first semester, then I'd move."

Others, like Alejandra, talked about feeling like they never belong due to being repeatedly uprooted. Under these circumstances, making connections took a conscious effort. "It's really, really difficult to build a relationship with someone – especially when you go to a school and you know that these people that have been in a relationship with each other since elementary school up until high school. It's kind of difficult to find a crowd that you fit in with. So, I kind of just stick to my own little groups. I try to talk to people in certain classes or certain clubs or certain extracurricular activities. I try to make my own little friends and then just stick to that."

Some of these youth appeared to disconnect from the school environment and stick to themselves. "I just go along in my day, learn what I need to learn. I don't have really any teachers that [I am close to]," said Randy. Jesse echoed, "I don't really talk to the teachers or other students really. I like to be by myself during school."

Joe described how the lack of strong relationships eventually led him to drop out. "I didn't really have a good relationship because near the very end – I'm being straight honest – I would try to stay awake. If it's boring and I sit there for too long, I naturally will fall asleep in that chair. That's why getting a job was a lot easier and I dropped out in senior year."

"I DIDN'T GET THE RIGHT EDUCATION."

Four interview participants talked at length about missing school due to frequent school changes or having run away. Elena described how frequent moves meant that she fell behind in her education and thought she was going to give up and drop out. A more stable placement over the last three years and the promise of free college helped her to pull through. "So, all of my life I probably moved schools at least once per grade. I didn't get the right education before, so I had to catch up and I was behind and it was very difficult. So, I thought I was gonna just dropout. I thought I was just gonna give up. I've always hated school for a minute, but I found out about the free college that I get and I decided to keep working. And junior

year was also really hard, but then I just ran right through it and got to senior year and now I'm so close I cannot stop."

Two interview participants had missed significant school time due to extended periods of running away and hiding from authorities. For Jasmine, this period lasted for several years and resulted in educational losses that she was not able to catch up with. She never completed at GED or high school diploma. While her experiences seemed to be at the extreme end of the spectrum, she was not the only one to miss extensive periods of school during placement turmoil, instability, and running away. Jasmine stated, "There's a lot of times I regret running away because maybe if I didn't maybe, I would have had a better education. I'm so behind on my education, and it does hurt a little bit. I mean, I don't have any major aspirations to go to college or anything, but at least it would have been nice to experience high school in some sort of way."

"MISSING OUT" ON NORMAL TEENAGE EXPERIENCES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Survey responses about adult and peer support at school suggested interesting differences. An overwhelming majority of participants reported high levels of support from adults, but experiences with peers seemed to be mixed. Survey responses suggested that the experience of peer support was an important aspect of feeling connected to school, but unlike adult

support, peer support was not associated with placement stability or the number of school changes. The interviews helped shed more light on the complex dynamics in peer relationships.

"JUST DOING THINGS KIDS MY AGE WOULD BE DOING"

Some youth (n= 23; 43%) described getting along well with others and doing normal teenage stuff – hanging out, listening to music, interacting on social media, dating, and having fun. The majority of these participants were currently in relatively stable living situations lasting at least 9 months and up to several years. Some were open about their foster care experience and shared it with peers, while others remained more guarded. Tony described being just a "normal" kid. "Just doing things kids my age would be doing, Just hanging out and just doing fun things. All the friends that I have now, they know my situation, and they're not judging. They know what I'm going through, but they don't treat me like there's anything out of the ordinary." For Tony and many other participants, being "normal" and not being seen differently because they were in foster care were important aspects of their social experience.

"IT'S EASIER FOR ME TO JUST LET GO OF PEOPLE"

You get used to leaving people. Some people give you their contact information and some don't, but it's also about if you can have your phone at your next placement or get on the internet at the next placement.

- Katrina

However, for about a quarter of interview participants (*n*=14; 26%), frequent placement and school changes had been the norm throughout their adolescence and disrupted friendships along the way. Vanessa expressed a common experience. "I don't keep in contact with very many people or like anybody. It's easier for me to just let go of people that I've had in my life because I've had to do that my entire life. I'd never see any of those people again. I have a lot of people tell me that I need to learn how to make friends. Unless I really do see somebody being a part of my life for years to come, I really just try to avoid it completely. So, I've never had any friends."

Having missed out on normal age-appropriate activities and social development, some participants described themselves as anti-social, socially awkward, and uncomfortable with interactions. Jasmine who had spent years running away and hiding from authorities, expressed, "I'm not really an interactive person, I'm pretty awkward at first when it comes to people, I don't really communicate with a lot of the people that I work with unless it's to communicate about work."

"PEOPLE MY OWN AGE ARE IMMATURE"

For other participants, relating to people their own age was difficult not only because of placement and school changes, but because of their traumatic experiences and a need to focus on survival and self-sufficiency.

I find my maturity level's a lot higher than people my age, and it's hard to bond with people or build relationships with people I think are just immature and childish, it puts me out of my comfort zone a lot. So, I find myself making friends with much older people than me.

- Nina

A common sentiment expressed by participants (*n*=15; 28%) was that they felt they had an "adult's mind" and their "peers were very immature." "I'm not one to talk to people my own age because I feel like they are very immature people," said Angela. And Kaylee echoed, "I just don't bond with people my age

that much." Some youth were so keenly focused on independence, self-sufficiency, and planning for the future that they felt out of step with what they saw as "childish and naïve" pursuits of their peers. Vanessa explained, "I've always hung out with an older crowd mostly because I find that everyone my age is very immature, and naïve, and just doesn't really understand how the world is, and they're not really thinking about their future. My peers still have to rely on other people, and their parents, or their caregivers, or whoever they're living with, just things like that because most kids my age are enjoying their life and are enjoying being a teenager. But since I never had that, it's really hard for me to now try to relax and to try to take things one day at a time. Being in CPS care, you don't have people to rely on and you have to be self-sufficient, and if you're not, it ends up taking a toll on you later in life because you find yourself having to rely on other people for the rest of your life. "

Some youth explained that they had to grow up at a young age and take care of themselves and younger siblings, thus missing out on their childhood. "I'm like one of those that likes to hang out with older, like more mature people. I guess because when I was little I was always taking care of the kids and stuff. So, I had to grow up. And so, I guess that's why," reflected Katie. Alejandra added, "I had to grow up and start taking care of my little brother and my cousins and I had to grow up really quickly to provide for my family. So, sometimes it's like I

missed out on the whole childhood thing, but I do sometimes just kind of relax and kind of do things my own age like go out to the movies or hang out with friends or do sleepovers or just stuff like that."

Another, related sentiment was that peers could not be trusted, created too much drama, and might get you into trouble. Trouble may result from negative peer pressure, substance use, delinquent activities, and other risk behaviors. Jolie summarized her thoughts, "I just prefer to keep to myself. I mean, I don't have time to be getting in trouble because people are being childish, like most people are in school these days." Adriana felt the drama among people her own age was simply too much to handle on top of her own problems. "I feel like it's too much drama. And they're hyper, their drama, plus my problems with life, it's too much. I would get in trouble with them. I would just be in trouble, because this teenage drama is too much. I like to keep my nose out of that.

Youth also appeared to be looking for people older than them to get advice and guidance, thus filling a void in their lives. "People my age can't tell me anything that's important. I hang out with people who are older than me because they can give me better advice because they've been through it," explained Randy.

LIVING WITH THE "PRUDENT PARENT STANDARD"

Aside from repeated losses of family and friends, and the disruptions of placements and school life,

participants also talked about limitations to normalcy that were inherent in their environment, ranging from limited access to phone and internet, to transportation barriers, and cumbersome placement rules.

"YOU DON'T GET TO HAVE A PHONE OR ANY OTHER WAY TO KEEP IN CONTACT WITH PEOPLE"

Monique's experience was typical of youth who experienced multiple placements in RTC's and psychiatric hospitals. Access to phone and internet was limited, sometimes tied to achieving higher permission levels and privileges based on behavior. As a consequence, youth lost the ability to stay in touch with peers and became more and more isolated. "A lot of my friends I've met either are in foster care or I've met at hospitals. So, keeping in contact with them has really been hard 'cause I wasn't allowed to have a phone. I wasn't allowed to get on social media and things like that 'cause I was in RTC. So, I was never really able to go and talk to my friends like I wanted to." Nina explained, "I went into foster care when I was 14 and literally – literally every three months– I moved every three months. So, anytime that I did make friends, it was gone. And in foster care you obviously don't get to have a phone or any other way to keep in contact with most people, so the relationships were completely gone after I moved."

"I HAVE TO TAKE ALL THESE EXTRA STEPS TO HANG OUT WITH FRIENDS."

Terry described how placement rules and regulations make it impossible for him to spontaneously meet with friends and participate in everyday activities. "Most of my relationships are very distant because of foster care. Before, I would be able to hang out with people, have sleepovers. On a whim, have a study group, or on a whim, hang out with someone after school. And now, it's like I barely ever get to see any of my friends or talk to them. Have to take all of this extra steps to be able to hang out with them. So, it's pretty frustrating in general. Having my caseworker approve them and have them on my contact list before I can call them. Never be able to be unsupervised with them. There always has to be an adult. It's really a lot, honestly." As a result of needing to get all of their contacts approved, participants reported withdrawing from social activities and losing friends.

Jose related how restrictions on his social activities are creating tension with his foster parents." So, if I ever wanted to maybe do something a different way like maybe just go out, then we'll talk about it, and I'm trying to tell them I'm already done with school. I already went to work. I cleaned everything, and it's just like no. They don't even give me an explanation. They just say no. It's really hard. [Once] I told them I'm just gonna go to the skate park, and then they were like we'll take you. And when they went, they were like so I want to meet all of them. I

wanna write down their names, their phone number, their address and I'm like what the hell. What do you mean? And I was like whoa, that's too much. You're not even like my parent. That's when I was like yeah, I can't do that."

Those youth who had more stable placements, lasting at least 9 months and in some cases several years, and lived with foster or kinship families typically reported more "normalcy." They described their caregivers as "prudent parents" who supported age appropriate social activities, set curfews, got to know their friends, and provided advice on how to navigate peer relationships. "She'll support me if I want to go see my friends. They'll introduce themselves to her and she'll be like, it's okay, I see them as good and kind so you can go – I trust them," said Gina. Evelyn explained that the relationship with her foster parent was built on honesty and trust. "She takes me to friend's house, picks me up from friend's house. She lets me go to games and go places with them. As long as I'm honest with her and I don't lie about what I'm doing." These examples show that strong and trusting relationships with caregivers, placement stability, a sense of normalcy, and age appropriate peer relationships reinforce each other.

IMPACT OF COVID ON SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS

The COVID 19 pandemic, social distancing, and shifting to online learning severely impacted youth across the country. For youth in care, it compounded already existing vulnerabilities: the tenuous sense of connectedness to school, struggles with catching up academically, and maintaining relationships with peers. These issues were exacerbated when youth changed placements during the pandemic.

SHIFTING TO ONLINE SCHOOL – FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS

While some youth were already enrolled in online school, such as credit recovery programs, for others switching to an online learning environment was difficult. As the previous data analysis demonstrated, support from teachers and counselors at school was an important stabilizing factor that helped them feel connected, catch up academically, and get the resources they needed. Switching to online learning not only made it harder to focus on school, but also to get the same level of one-on-one support. Jasmine spoke for many saying, "I can't learn from a video. It doesn't get my attention. I'll easily get distracted." Katrina explained how online learning compounded her struggles to catch up academically. "It's difficult – very, very difficult – because I'm a slow learner when it comes to certain subjects like math. I hate math. So, even in the classrooms I would always have to

ask questions and sometimes once or twice ask the same question. So, doing it online and no one's there to be like, 'Hey, get on your work' but I can't ask questions immediately too and immediately get an answer. And to try to figure it out, it became very difficult."

For some youth who moved placements, enrollment in a new school was difficult to coordinate, sometimes leading to gaps in attendance. Alejandra described how starting in a new school during the pandemic, she was unable to forge new connections. "I moved from another school over spring break. So, when I started school, I don't know any of my teachers or anything about the school really. So, I'm starting a new school, but it's weird because I don't know anybody and know nothing really about how the school is working."

Knowing how difficult it was for many youth in care to not only graduate from high school, but also to participate in the social life at school, the social distancing measures were especially painful. Angela described how hard she worked to overcome hurdles to participate in prom, trips, and the graduation ceremony and how COVID derailed her efforts. "I'm not a big person to socialize. But I expected a lot more from senior year. They did give me two prom dresses, and they are really beautiful, and I was actually looking forward to going. At first, they rescheduled our prom, then they ended up cancelling it. And I was a little upset about that. And I had a band trip and that was over $600.00

and then ended up getting cancelled as well. But we did get to graduate. We made the best of what we could have."

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SOCIAL DISTANCING – RESTRICTIONS AND LOSS OF CONNECTIONS

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As social distancing measures were implemented across the country, youth' social networks, typically centered around school and work, were severely disrupted. Strict safety measures were implemented in family-based and congregate foster care settings. Andy spoke for many participants when he described how COVID restrictions in the Transitional Living Program added another layer of staff supervision for all activities and a loss of normalcy and freedom. "We just have to wear our masks all the time, do six feet, do washing our hands. What impacted us as a house is that we can't really go places. We can't just go off somewhere and do whatever we want. We have to be with the staff pretty much at all times and make sure we're wearing our masks, gloves, stuff like that. When we go out, we can't talk to our friends in the neighborhood– well, they don't really want us to because they know that we're not likely to practice social distancing when we're not being watched, so that's understandable." All participants understood the need for safety measures, but they also expressed that these were rules and restrictions that were enforced on top of already existing placement rules and restrictions.

At the same time as schools shifted to online instruction, many youth also lost their jobs which meant losing social networks outside their placement. Kaylee described how she came to an agreement with her foster family to stop working. "I mean we just kinda stay home, and socially distance do what we need to do. It gets kind of boring at times. I can't work, that's the only issue that I have with it. It was just a mutual agreement between me and the people I'm living with that it's best, for now, to not be exposed at all, so we kinda just came to a common ground that right now is not the time to be going out and working, especially in fast food."

While some participants found limited opportunities to stay connected with friends, or found ways to cope by engaging in activities around the house, others struggled with "cabin fever" and felt increasingly isolated. Katrina said, "I guess not seeing my friends anymore became hard because I'm so used to, I guess laughing all the time with my friends and being goofy. I guess having to slow that down and just kind of stay at home and then nobody was on the streets no more, nobody was walking at the parks no more." Alejandra spoke to feelings of isolation, "It definitely has me more isolated. I don't talk to a lot of people now that I can't go out and do things. So, yeah, I'm kind of limited." Eva echoed the sense of isolation as not only contacts with friends but also family visitations were disrupted. "Well, we're isolated. We can't go out as much as we were able to. That's including my friends, and also my visitations are very limited. It's had a lot of negative impacts, I'm home all day. "

For the majority of participants, loss of social contacts due to the pandemic added another layer on top of the pervasive losses they had already been experiencing, and some cited feeling depressed. Monique said, "I just sit in the house all day and I get very, very depressed sometimes." As discussed in previous sections, many youth had already struggled with losing friends and social distancing measures only increased their pain. Hannah said, "I'm not gonna say I have a lot of friends. But the friends I do have I don't really talk to anymore." And Vanessa described the impact of moving during the pandemic. "As soon as I started living here, the whole city went on lockdown. So, I haven't really been out of the house very much. I'm not going to school, and I don't have a job. There really isn't a way for me to even have friends because I'm not in any settings where I would make friends."

DISCUSSION

In this section of the Texas Youth Permanency Study, we sought to understand how youth in foster care participate in age-appropriate social, educational, and extra-curricular activities.

Participants represented several subgroups of youth, including those who experienced very frequent placement changes, and those who experienced relative placement stability. As expected, placement

changes were associated with school changes, and negatively correlated with school belonging, teacher/adult support and school commitment. We also found that school changes in middle school were associated with school changes later in high school indicating that tendencies toward repeated placement and school changes persisted over time and led to cumulative disruption of age-appropriate social, educational, and extra-curricular activities.

In interviews participants described times when they were struggling to catch up with their peers, socially and academically. While many developed supportive relationships with teachers when given the chance to stay long enough in one place, it was notable that they struggled with peer relationships. Having to change schools frequently, some became social butterflies and others withdrew. They expressed sentiments of not fitting in, having had to learn to let go of people, not relating to people their own age, and needing to stay out of trouble in order to accomplish their goals of personal responsibility, independence, and self-sufficiency. Not having supportive adults in their lives, they had to grow up quickly, and felt like they could not participate in typical teenage activities. Several participants described seeking out older people to provide guidance, which may inadvertently increase their risk for exploitation.

Additional challenges for youth stemmed from the lack of normalcy in their lives, the need to obtain permission from caregivers and caseworkers to meet with friends and participate in age-appropriate social activities. Although the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014, introduced the "reasonable and prudent parent standard," which is intended to increase normalcy for youth in care, participants' experiences differed widely depending on the nature of the placement (congregate care, foster home, kinship placement) and caregivers' interpretation of the standard. Participants who experienced frequent placement changes and lived in congregate care settings encountered more restrictions and rules, which in turn increased tensions with caregivers. Inconsistent access to a personal phone or computer increased social isolation from family and peers.

The COVID pandemic, social distancing measures, shift to online learning, and job losses increased the participants' struggles to stay engaged with school and furthered already existing social isolation and pervasive losses.

Findings from this section of the Texas Youth Permanency Study demonstrate the enormous toll of placement changes and lack of normalcy on the educational achievement and social development of youth in care. Youth are incredibly resourceful, yet they are constantly catching up, academically and socially.

PARTICIPATION IN CASE PLANNING AND EMPOWERMENT

BACKGROUND

As a child or youth in foster care I have the right to:

Contact and speak privately to: my caseworker, attorneys, ad litems, probation officer, court appointed special advocate (CASA), and Disability Rights of Texas.

Go to court hearings and speak to the judge, including talking to the judge about where I am living and what I like to see happen to me and my family.

– Rights of Children and Youth in Foster Care, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services

Research on outcomes associated with youth participation in child welfare court shows mixed results (Gibbs et al., 2021). Some studies cite challenges associated with attending court, such as anxiety and stress experienced by the youth, transportation barriers, missed school, and privacy concerns. Other studies (for example Block et al., 2020) find benefits, including youth having a more favorable perception of the court system, and feeling more empowered and more knowledgeable about the court process. What appears to matter most is the quality of youth participation in court (Gibbs et al., 2021) ranging from merely attending, to speaking and participating, to having private conversations with the judge. The Washington State Center for Court Research (2010) found that youth attendance and in-chambers interviews with the judge not only improved the youth' perception of the court process, but also judicial decision-making. In this study, among youth who interviewed with a judge, the most common issues for discussion were "visits with biological parents or others" and "permanency."

Participation in court proceedings and placement decisions can be an empowering experience for youth in foster care. Conversely, a lack of information and participation can result in a sense of powerlessness and increased distrust of the foster care system (Ball et al., 2020). Empowerment is generally regarded as a process that facilitates increased influence over one's life circumstances and skills for negotiating the demands of one's environment (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995), which is especially salient for promoting positive outcomes for youth in care (Kaplan et al., 2009).

In Texas, children and youth in foster care have the right to attend court. The Texas Family Code (§ 263.501 (f) (Vernon 2008)) provides that children shall attend permanency

review hearings and permanency review hearings after final order

"unless the court specifically excuses the child's attendance. The court shall consult with the child in a developmentally appropriate manner regarding the child's permanency or transition plan, if the child is four years of age or older." Even though children and youth in Texas have the right to attend court hearings, in practice transportation barriers, conflicts with school and after school activities, and other concerns limit court attendance.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this section of the Texas Youth Permanency Study we sought to understand how judges, caseworkers and other adults involved in the legal case can increase youth participation in case planning and promote a sense of support and empowerment.

1. How frequently do youth attend court hearings?

2. How do youth characterize their relationships with the judge, their caseworker(s), and other adults involved in their legal case?

3. What practices encourage youth participation in court proceedings and case planning and enhance their sense of support and empowerment?

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

As described in detail in Chapter 1, participants in the Texas Youth

Permanency Study were recruited in court: Out of the 197 participants who enrolled in the study, only 13 were not present in court and received the information about the study through a caseworker, attorney, or CASA. Our sample over-represents youth who attend court hearings, and who participate in specialty dockets for youth in permanent managing conservatorship that highly encourage or require attendance.

Participants in this section of the Texas Youth Permanency Study were comprised of 108 youth who responded to the second quarterly survey that was administered approximately 180 days after enrollment. Survey data were collected between December 2019 and September 2020 which encompasses the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic. Social distancing rules and restrictions on in-person court hearings varied from county to county. In general, court hearings were conducted via zoom and judges reported good, or even increased youth attendance at hearings. In some cases, youth who experienced barriers to participating in in-person hearings were able to participate in zoom meetings. Similarly, caseworkers and CASA scheduled zoom meetings in lieu of in-person meetings.

Youth who completed the Quarterly Survey 1 (N=108) were between 14 and 20 years old (M= 16.5 years, SD=1.345). Table 1.1 provides detailed demographic characteristic of the sample.

- 59% were Female, 38% were Male, and 3% were Transgender or Other Gender;

- 20% identified as LGBTQ;

- 65% were Hispanic;

- 46% identified as White, 16% identified as African American, and 19% identified as Multi-racial.

In addition, we conducted 54 interviews with participants who had completed at least two quarterly surveys. Interviews were carried out approximately 180 to 270 days after enrollment. Recruitment for interviews ended when the research team determined that data saturation was reached. Interviews were intended to complement survey data. Phone interviews were conducted between May and July 2020. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences prior to COVID-related social distancing measures. Demographics, placement history, and current living situation of youth who completed the interview (*N*=54) mirrored the characteristics of youth who completed the Quarterly Survey. Details are reported in Tables 1.1 and 1.2.

SURVEY MEASURES

Survey measures were developed for this study and explored the following topics:

FREQUENCY OF ATTENDING COURT HEARINGS AND COMMUNICATION WITH THE JUDGE

Questions explored the frequency of youth attending court and speaking directly with the judge. Response options were *never, once a year, twice a year, three to four times a year*. Two additional questions probed the youth' perception of how often the judge was listening to what they had to say (*never, sometimes, often, always*) and whether they perceived talking to the judge as helpful (*not at all, a little, a lot, a great deal*).

UNDERSTANDING OF THE COURT PROCESS AND PARTICIPATION IN PLACEMENT DECISIONS

This set of items assessed the youth' understanding of their rights and the court process, as well as their active participation in placement decisions. Sample items included, "I know what is going on at court and how decisions are being made. I know my rights and resources available to me. I am able to participate in decisions about my placement." Response options were *definitely disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, definitely agree*.

FREQUENCY OF CONTACT WITH ADULTS INVOLVED WITH THE LEGAL CASE AND PERCEIVED SUPPORT

Questions asked about the frequency of contact youth had with their caseworker, CASA, and attorney. Response options were *never, every couple of months, once a month, more than once a month*.

Perceived support by adults involved with the legal case was assessed with a six-item scale that showed excellent reliability (α= .946). Sample items included, "How often do they support and encourage you? How often do they listen when you need to talk? How often do they show they care about you as a person?" Response options were *never, rarely, often, always*.

SELF-ADVOCACY IN MEETINGS WITH ADULTS INVOLVED IN LEGAL CASE

Additional questions probed whether youth felt they could advocate for themselves and practice decision making when meeting with their caseworker, CASA, or attorney. Sample questions included, "How often do you have a say in what happens? How often do you make decisions for yourself?" Response options were *never, rarely, often, always*.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Semi-structured interviews included one section that focused on the youths' relationships with the adults involved with their legal case. Questions were designed to complement the survey measures listed above. If the participant no longer had an open case, the interviewer asked about their most recent experiences.

1. How would you describe your relationship with your caseworker?
   - What are the things that make your relationship with your caseworker important?

Or what would need to change so your relationship with your caseworker would be a stronger part of your life?

2. How would you describe your relationship with your judge?
   - How often do you get to attend court?
   - How often do you get to speak directly to the judge? How much do you feel the judge listens to you?

3. How much do you feel supported in voicing your opinions and ideas for your life and your future (e.g. your living situation, your education, other things you'd like to do)?

4. How much do you trust that your caseworker, attorney, judge and advocate have your best interests in mind?

5. Are there other supportive adults in your life? (e.g. teachers, mentors, neighbors?)

FINDINGS

ATTENDING COURT HEARINGS AND COMMUNICATION WITH THE JUDGE

The frequency of scheduled court hearings can vary with the status of the legal case and the needs of the youth. For youth in permanent conservatorship, hearings after the final permanency order are scheduled at least every 6 months,

more frequently if needed. Yet 28% of study participants reported never attending court or only attending about once a year. In contrast, 59% of participants reported attending court twice a year or more, which suggests that they were present at most, or all of their hearings (Table 3.1).

Additionally, the frequency of attending court was strongly correlated with the frequency of speaking directly to the judge ($r=.670$). Thirty-seven percent of participants reported attending court 3 – 4 times a year, and 30% reported speaking directly to the judge 3 – 4 times a year. These findings suggested that the youth who attended court regularly, also had regular opportunities to interact with the judge. A majority of participants (n=63; 58%) reported that the judge listened to what they had to say, and found these direct conversations to be helpful (n=55; 51%).

A further analysis of correlations (Table 3.3) showed that the youths' feeling that the judge was listening to what they had to say was strongly correlated with the perception that these conversations are helpful ($r=.646$), however the mere frequency of these conversations was not ($r=.197$). Clearly, attending court provided an opportunity for the youth to interact with the judge, but it also appeared to take skills on the part of the judge to effectively listen and engage with the youth.

Table 3.1: Frequencies for Court Attendance Variables

VARIABLES	Never		About once a year		About twice a year		About three to four times a year		Prefer not to answer	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
How often do you attend court hearings?	15	13.9	15	13.9	24	22.2	40	37.0	14	13.0
How often do you speak directly to the judge?	12	11.1	16	14.8	23	21.3	32	29.6	25	23.1
	Never		Sometimes		Often		Always		Prefer not to answer	
How often do you feel the judge listens to what you have to say	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	2	1.9	11	10.2	12	11.1	63	58.3	20	18.5
	Not at all		A little		A lot		A great deal		Prefer not to answer	
How helpful is it to talk to the judge?	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	3	2.8	13	12.0	17	15.7	55	50.9	20	18.5

Additionally, we assessed the participants' understanding of their rights and the court process, as well as their participation in placement decisions (Table 3.2). We were particularly interested in understanding whether the frequency of court attendance, speaking directly to the judge, and feeling like the judge was listening were associated with an improved understanding of the court process and increased participation in placement decisions (Table 3.3).

Table 3.2: Youth Understanding of the Court Process and Participation in Placement Decisions

VARIABLES	Definitely disagree		Somewhat disagree		Somewhat agree		Definitely agree		Prefer not to answer	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
I understand why I was placed in foster care			6	5.6	18	16.7	82	75.9	2	1.9
I understand the important issues affecting my birth family	2	1.9	2	1.9	22	20.4	78	72.2	4	3.7
I know what's going on at court and how decisions are being made	5	4.6	6	5.6	19	17.6	76	70.4	2	1.9
I know my rights and resources available to me	2	1.9	2	1.9	19	17.6	84	77.8	1	.9
I feel prepared to advocate for myself	3	2.8	3	2.8	25	23.1	74	68.5	3	2.8
I am able to participate in decisions about my placement	5	4.6	3	2.8	25	23.1	75	69.4		

We found that the youths' perception that the judge was listening was strongly associated with knowing their rights and resources (r=.399), knowing what was going on in court and how decisions were made (r=.390), and being able to participate in placement decisions (r=.346) (Table 3.3). Again, merely attending court or speaking to the judge were not associated with being able to participate in placement decisions. Our findings suggest that the benefit of attending court is associated with the direct interaction with the judge, and more specifically with the perception that the judge is actively listening to the youth.

Table 3.3: Correlation of Court Attendance with Understanding of the Court Process and Participation in Placement Decisions

VARIABLES	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. How often do you attend court hearings?	-						
2. How often do you speak directly with the judge?	.685**	-					
3. How often do you feel the judge listens to you?	.268*	.376**	-				
4. I understand why I was placed in foster care.	-.108	-.087	.109	-			
5. I know my rights and resources available to me.	-.146	-.159	.399**	.258**	-		
6. I know what is going on at court and how decisions are being made.	.147	.102	.390**	.308**	.486**	-	
7. I am able to participate in decisions about my placement.	-.080	-.039	.346**	.357**	.510**	.632**	-

** p ≤ 0.01 (2-tailed); * p ≤ 0.05 (2-tailed

"WHEN I STARTED SITTING IN COURT, THINGS STARTED TO COME TOGETHER."

The following section presents themes from the semi-structured interviews with a subsample of 54 youth. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

ASKING TO PARTICIPATE IN COURT HEARINGS

Among our interview participants, about two thirds were attending court regularly. The majority of these youth described not only having strong relationships with their judges, but they were also aware of the importance of speaking up in court. For many youth, going to court was a way to get their voices heard and their needs met. Diana

stated, "I basically just spoke up for myself. I was like, 'Look, I don't know what you all are doing, I want to go sit in court.' So, when I did start sitting in court, things started to come together. Because everyone's pretty much on the same page, really."

GETTING THINGS DONE

In our interviews, both judges and the youth expressed how keenly aware they were of the power and influence of the judge's position. Monique reflected, "My first time in court, I was so nervous. When [the judge] talked to me, he made me feel comfortable like, 'I know I'm higher power; I know I'm a judge and all, but you don't have to fear me.'" It turned out that for many cases, it was precisely the judge's power to get things done that made this

relationship so important for the youth. Monique ultimately had a great experience with her judge. "He made me comfortable and I was excited to go to court every time," she shared. "If I wanted something done, he listened."

SHARING THEIR PERSPECTIVE

Many youth valued that the judge took different perspectives into consideration and helped negotiate difficult and conflictual situations. Mary stated, "[My judge] tries to vouch for me as much as she can. And if she feels like something is right or wrong for me, she'll say it. And she'll tell my caseworker how she feels about the situation. I feel like she listens to me a lot. If I ever told her anything that I needed or anything that I – would have to be done or something, she would always tell my caseworker, tell somebody that would be in charge of that to do it."

SPEAKING WITH THE JUDGE IN CHAMBERS

Over and over again, we heard from participants about the importance of speaking to the judge directly and privately, in chambers, and of the judge listening carefully. Isabelle and others found that once they got to talk to the judge, the judge "hears you out in everything that you need, and once [your case] comes to the court, she will direct anything that you said that you needed and otherwise." Andy described the process, "Let's say I need to talk to them privately, then I would tell my attorney, saying, 'Hey, do you think I

can speak to the judge privately about such and such?' Then they'll let the judge know. And that's how it kinda works. I feel like they're really wanting to listen and really wanna care for me because one time, I spoke to the judge, and I knew that she really wanted to care for me and she really wanted to help me try to see my brother."

APPRECIATING GUIDANCE AND CONTINUITY

For some youth, the judge ended up being a constant presence in their turbulent lives, and one of the few people who knew their full history. "I've known my judge for, oh, man, a good 10 years. She knew a lot about me," said Joe. Remembering the details about a person's history and situation matters. Ryan described a ritual that unfolded whenever he attended court. "I have a nice judge. So I have ADHD, right? So, she gives me this task every time I come, to try to remember my ADHD medicine.

> *The judge hears you out in everything that you need, and once [your case] comes to the court, she will direct anything that you said that you needed.*
>
> *- Isabelle*

So, she asks me. She kind of jokes around. Well not really jokes around, but just asking me. And I try to

remember, right off the bat, every time we go. Even though I've already remembered it now. "

Monique described the importance of the judge in this way. "He gave me good criticism and bad criticism. Someone like me who don't have adults in my life that much, for someone to be trying to give me guidance, I felt like it was a good person to have on my team."

REASONS FOR NOT ATTENDING COURT

Some participants reported not attending court, or only infrequently. Among the reasons for not attending were earlier negative experiences, especially during permanency hearings, and a lack of information about hearings. Joe said, "I think I went once when I first got put into care, but it was just upsetting because they allowed people to be there that I didn't want to be there. So, I didn't really pay much attention to what was going on, but it wasn't a good experience for me." Similarly, Katie described, "Someone made the choice for me [choice about attending court]. I didn't really know what they were doing. So, I just blew it off. Because I was young, I didn't really know."

Participants who attended court only infrequently, stated they did not know their judge, which also implied that they had little influence in the decision making process. Terry said, "I don't know my judge. So, I just kind of hope that she'll give me what I want when I ask for it."

Some youth, like Nina, thought the judge was not truly invested in their progress and not taking the time to get to know them. "I feel like he doesn't have much time and I don't feel like he's personally invested because I feel like he's a judge, not like a friend or anything." Without a personal connection with the judge, youth were also less motivated to attend court.

Our interviews demonstrated the importance of youth participation in court, whether it was in person or virtually. Judges who were willing to meet with youth privately, who were listening intently, considering the youth' perspective, explaining difficult decisions, and getting things done were important role models and positive authority figures. In turn, youth felt empowered, connected, and involved in the important decisions about their lives. These qualitative findings echo the results of the survey data.

MEETING WITH ADULTS INVOLVED WITH THE CASE, PERCEIVED QUALITY OF SUPPORT, AND SELF-ADVOCACY

For many youth in foster care, their caseworker is the most important person to help them navigate the system, access information and resources, and participate in placement decisions. Therefore, we asked youth how frequently they were meeting with caseworkers and the other adults involved with their legal case (CASA, attorney).
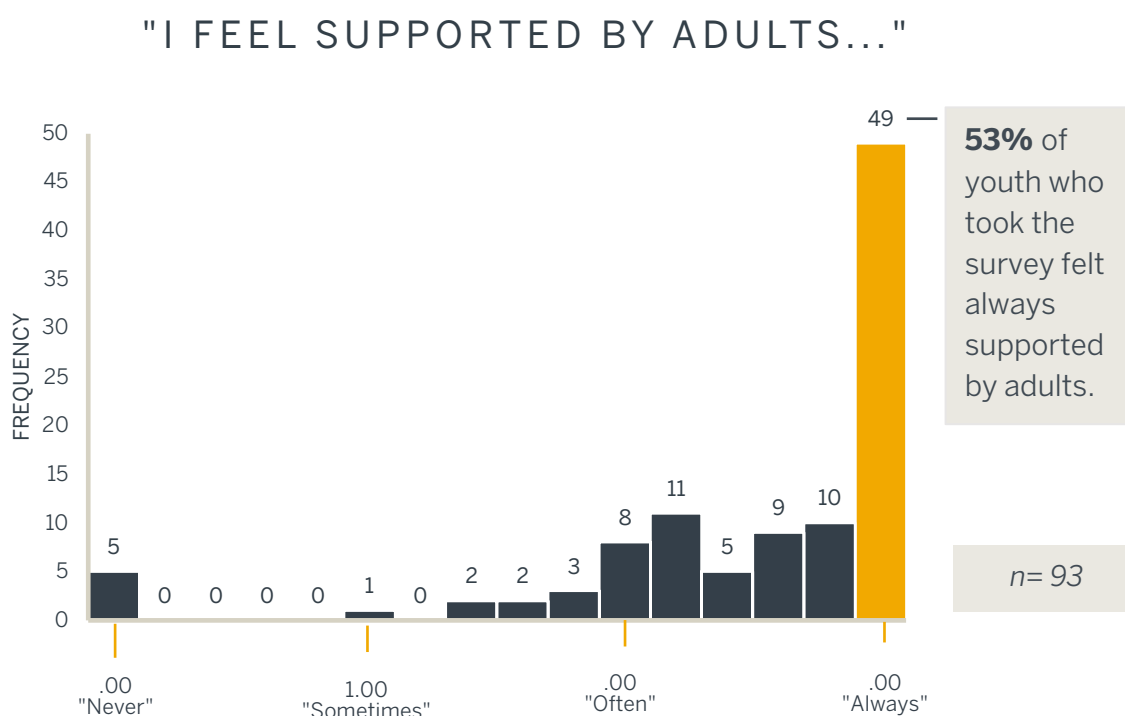
Survey responses ([Table 3.4](#)) demonstrated that the majority of participants (*n*= 77; 71%) met with their caseworkers once a month or even more frequently. Not all participants had a CASA assigned. .

Table 3.4: Frequency of Contact with Caseworker, CASA, and Attorney

FREQUENCY OF CONTACT	Never or n/a		Every couple of months		Once a month		More than once a month		Prefer not to answer	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Caseworker		9.3	20	18.5	57	52.8	20	18.5	1	.9
CASA	29	26.9	22	20.4	27	25	18	16.7	12	11.1
Attorney	25	23.1	53	49.1	15	13.9	6	5.6	9	8.3

Notably, the majority of participants only met with their attorney every couple of months, most likely associated with court dates. Overall, participants reported a high level of support by adults involved with their case. On a 4-point scale (scale points 0 – 3), the mean was 2.48 (*SD*=.76). Social desirability may have been a factor in the distribution of responses.

Figure 4: Support by Adults Involved with Their Legal Case

"I FEEL SUPPORTED BY ADULTS..."

53% of youth who took the survey felt always supported by adults.

n= 93

Youth also reported high levels of advocating for themselves in meetings with their caseworker, CASA, or attorney. We found interesting differences in the level and outcome of their self-advocacy. Table 3.5 shows that while more than 70% stated that they always spoke up for themselves, only 57% felt that they actually had a say in what happens.

Table 3.5: Frequency of Self-advocacy in Meetings with Adults Involved with Their Legal Case

How often do you …	Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Always		Prefer not to answer	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Speak up for yourself?	5	4.7			25	23.1	78	72.2		
Voice your opinion?	4	3.7	7	6.5	27	25	70	64.8		
Have a say in what happens?	4	3.7	11	10.2	30	27.8	62	57.4	1	.9
Make decisions for yourself?	3	2.8	10	9.3	26	24.1	69	63.9		

We examined correlations between the frequency of meetings with caseworkers, CASA and attorneys, the perceived support from adults, and self-advocacy (Table 3.6).

The frequency of meetings with the caseworker was significantly correlated with youth feeling like they had a say in what happens ($r=.253$) and that they could make decisions for themselves in meetings with these adults ($r=.226$). The correlations for CASA were less strong, and the correlations for attorneys were not significant.

There was a strong, significant correlation between perceived adult support and youth advocating for themselves, especially with "having a say in what happens"($r=.584$) and "making decisions" ($r=.471$). This finding suggests that from the youth' perspective, the opportunity to be heard and make decisions is an important aspect of supportive relationships with adults involved in their legal case.

Table 3.6: Bivariate Correlations Between Frequency of Meetings With Adults Involved With Their Legal Case, Sense of Support, and Self-Advocacy

VARIABLE		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
Frequency of meetings	1. Caseworker	-							
	2. CASA	.191	-						
	3. Attorney	.302**	.252*	-					
Support	4. Support from adults involved in legal case	.426**	.429**	.223*	-				
Self-advocacy	5. How often do you speak up for yourself?	.166	.096	.068	.331**	-			
	6. How often do you voice your opinion?	.151	.162	.121	.313**	.674**	-		
	7. How often do you have a say in what happens?	.253**	.249*	.155	.584**	.338**	.433**	-	
	8. How often do you make decisions for yourself?	.226*	.186	.134	.471**	.595**	.585**	.615**	-

** $p \leq 0.01$ (2-tailed); * $p \leq 0.05$ (2-tailed)

"I JUST WANT TO KNOW THAT I HAVE A VOICE AND MY VOICE WILL BE USED."

Findings from our interviews with 54 participants provide an additional perspective on the survey results presented above. In our interviews, we wanted to better understand how caseworkers can forge strong relationships with older youth in care. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Terry summed it up succinctly, "If you have a good relationship with your caseworker and you ask for something, you're a lot more likely to get it. It probably makes your life a lot easier to have a good relationship with your caseworker because she is making a lot of decisions for you." Nina added, "I think caseworkers are supposed to make decisions for you based on what you want." Therefore, a lack of connection or conflict with the caseworker can make case planning much harder, especially at the transition into adulthood.

RECEIVING TIMELY INFORMATION

We heard over and over again that youth valued knowing what was going on and having a sense of control. For example, Diana liked feeling prepared. "So, [my caseworker] always lets me know what she's doing on her side. So, I'm not just blindly just talking to her, seeing her once a month, but I just see her, and I know before court what she's working on." And Monique stated, "I was a person who did not like to not know where I was going, I did not like to not know stuff like that, and she always kept me up-to-date with my personal information. She was just very loving. "

HAVING A VOICE

Being fully informed about case planning, placement decisions, and permanency planning were critically important for the youth. They also wanted to have their voices heard and validated. Whenever youth encountered caseworkers who did not appear to listen and understand, they struggled with the relationship. Monique said of one of her former caseworkers, "That was my biggest thing. I just want to know that I have a voice and my voice will be used, but he never wanted to listen to anything, and I really didn't appreciate it." Feeling like they were not being heard was aggravating and upsetting, sometimes inducing a crisis. Sometimes, in situations such as these, youth like Nicole have had to learn to assert themselves because, "They start listening to me whenever I start getting really serious about it."

Older youth wanted to practice decision making and independence as they transitioned into adulthood. Jose described it like this: "She thinks I can handle it myself. So, I like that. I like that trust, like the ownership of myself, like doing what I need to get done without somebody kind of like bossing me or telling me what to do. I think I have a really good relationship with her, and when I'm leaving, I'm gonna have to leave my caseworker. That's gonna suck. She sees a lot in me and that's what kept me going like having someone believe in you and knowing you can do it on your own."

PLANNING FOR EMANCIPATION

Deciding whether to stay in extended care or emancipate at age 18 is a particularly important choice youth have to make and youth wanted to learn about their options early on. Tanya recognized that having the correct information and getting feedback from her caseworker were important factors for planning her future. "I told [my caseworker] that soon after I turn 17, I wanna start looking into, not applying yet, but learning about extended foster care. And she said that she could have a sit-down conversation with me about it and help me go over some of the things," shared Tanya.

Youth wanted to be able to make an informed choice, but sometimes felt that caseworkers were biased toward keeping them in care. "I think she kind of thinks I'm naïve that I wanna leave. Everybody thinks I'm in

a good placement. It's good, but mentally, I'm just tired of being here. I just feel like [she could have a point of view, and kind of like maybe try to put herself in my shoes." In this example, Yolanda's desire to leave the foster care system behind conflicted with her caseworker's concerns about leaving the system, especially during the COVID 19 pandemic. However, Yolanda was articulating her feelings and ideas openly and discussing her options with her caseworker.

Vanessa, on the other hand, felt strongly that her caseworker wanted her to stay in care, and she didn't have the heart to talk about her own plans. "My caseworker really wants me to stay in care. But I'm really just waiting to be 18 so that I can move out. I didn't tell her that. So, just the fact that she suggested that without knowing what I was gonna do, I guess she probably assumes that I intend to stay here for a long time even after I age out. But that's not really the case. I'm just waiting for the seasons to change."

DISCONNECTION AND DISTRUST

While many youth described close and trusting relationships with their caseworkers, some expressed that their caseworker were unresponsive, difficult to get a hold of, businesslike and unengaged, and didn't get things done. For example, Kaylee said, "She's difficult to get ahold of. When we ask her a certain question, she doesn't really respond with an answer. She doesn't really let me know anything." Not having a good relationship with the caseworker poses a dilemma. Joe put it

succinctly, "I think caseworkers are supposed to make decisions for you based on what you want, and I don't think she knows what I want."

These examples show the importance of transparency and information sharing necessary for caseworkers and youth to both experience more harmonious case planning. The transition to adulthood is an especially pivotal time for youth in care to know that they are surrounded by caseworkers who prioritize supporting youth voice, providing choices, and engaging genuinely with youth. Strong relationships with their caseworkers can promote a sense of continuity and relational permanency at the transition out of care.

DISCUSSION

In this section of the Texas Youth Permanency Study we sought to understand how judges, caseworkers and other adults involved in the legal case can increase youth participation in case planning and promote a sense of support and empowerment.

For many youth in foster care, their caseworker is the most important person to help them navigate the system, access information and resources, and participate in placement decisions. In interviews, youth emphasized the importance of transparency and information sharing necessary for caseworkers and youth to both experience more harmonious case planning. Survey data showed a strong, significant correlation between perceived adult support and youth advocating for

themselves, especially with "having a say in what happens" and "making decisions". This finding suggests that from the youth' perspective, the opportunity to be heard and make decisions is an important aspect of supportive relationships with the caseworker and other adults involved in their legal case. The transition to adulthood is an especially pivotal time for youth in care when they need to know that they are supported by caseworkers who prioritize youth voice, provide choices, and engage genuinely with youth.

Youth who attended court regularly, also had regular opportunities to interact with the judge. We found that the youths' perception that the judge was listening was strongly associated with knowing their rights and resources, knowing what was going on in court and how decisions were made, and being able to participate in placement decisions. These findings suggest that the benefit of attending court is associated with the direct interaction with the judge, and more specifically with the perception that the judge is actively listening to the youth. In interviews, youth spoke about the importance of participating in court and building strong relationships with judges. Judges who were willing to meet with youth privately, who were listening intently, considering the youth' perspective, explaining difficult decisions, and getting things done were important role models and positive authority figures. In turn, youth felt empowered, connected,

and involved in the important decisions about their lives.

Our findings demonstrate the critical importance of youth voice in case planning, especially at the transition to adulthood. When youth feel like they have a voice and that judges, caseworkers, and other adults are genuinely listening to their questions, concerns, and ideas, they feel empowered to work in partnership with adults and chart a path forward. Active listening on the part of the adults involved in the legal case requires patience and practice, and goes beyond requiring youth attendance at court hearings or checking off boxes at required meetings.

▲

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

BACKGROUND

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Vagi et al., 2015), a biannual national survey of high school students in the U.S., found that 1 in 5 female students and 1 in 10 male students were victims of serious physical and/or sexual dating violence in the past year. Sexual minority groups were disproportionately affected by all forms of dating violence. One in six gay, lesbian, and bisexual students experienced physical dating violence, and 1 in 5 experienced sexual dating violence (Kann et al., 2016). Cyber stalking, sexting, and digital abuse using mobile apps, social networks, texts, or other digital communication are areas of increasing concern.

Known risk factors for teen dating violence include (1) a childhood history of maltreatment and sexual abuse (Jonson-Reid, 2007; Tanaka & Wekerle, 2014), exposure to domestic violence, harsh and unskilled parenting, and negative parent-child interactions; (2) peer relationships characterized by low friendship quality and poor social skills; and (3) attitudes that justify and normalize violence in relationships, especially having peers that are involved with delinquent behaviors and dating violence (Vagi et al., 2013). Risk factors for teen dating violence are also cited as risk factors for sexual risk taking and teen pregnancy among child welfare involved youth (Garwood et al., 2015; Thompson et al, 2017).

Placement instability makes it difficult for young women to develop the kind of relationships with adults that have been shown to be critical to helping adolescents avoid teenage pregnancy as well as other risky behaviors.

-(Dworsky & Courtney, 2010)

Not surprisingly, youth in foster care experience elevated rates of dating and sexual violence, and unwanted pregnancies. Among youth in the child welfare system, 2 in 5 males and 3 in 5 females reported experiencing at least one form of dating violence (verbal/psychological, physical, and sexual) (Wekerle et al., 2009). In a comparison of young women aging out of foster care (Midwest Study) with the general population (National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health), 33% of young women with child welfare involvement had been pregnant at least once by age 17 or 18, compared with just 13.5% of the general population. The gap widened by age 19, when half of the young women with child welfare involvement had been pregnant, but only 20% of the general population had been pregnant. The risk of becoming pregnant was related to the total number of foster homes and group care settings in which a young woman had been placed. Other studies have shown that closeness

to a caregiver regardless of placement type (Potter & Font, 2019) and remaining in extended foster care until the age of 21 (Ahrens et al., 2013) are protective factors. Likewise, a stable placement for at least one year (Jonson-Reid et al., 2007) and social support (Taussig & Garrido, 2017) were associated with decreased risk for dating violence.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this section of the Texas Youth Permanency Study we aimed to explore in depth what youth learn about sexual health and healthy relationships, either through educational programs or conversations with caregivers, birth parents, and other trusted adults.

1. Are youth in foster care participating in sexual health education and which topics are typically addressed?

2. To which extent do youth in foster care engage in conversations with foster caregivers and birth family about relationships and sexual health?

3. To which extent do youth recognize warning signs of abuse and have the skills to build healthy dating relationships and take care of their sexual health?

    a. Do placement stability and conversations with foster caregivers and birth family impact the youth' ability to recognize warning signs of abuse and build skills?

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

Participants in the Texas Youth Permanency Study were comprised of youth in foster care, ages 14 and older, who were recruited in child welfare courts. Participant enrollment, tracking for quarterly surveys, and attrition from enrollment to subsequent quarterly surveys are discussed in detail in Chapter 1.

Participants in this section of the Texas Youth Permanency Study were comprised of 110 youth who responded to the third quarterly survey that was administered approximately 270 days after enrollment.

Youth who completed the Quarterly Survey 3 (N=110) were between 14 and 20 years old (M= 16.5 years, SD=1.431). Table 1.1 (see Chapter 1) provides detailed information about demographic characteristic of the sample:

- 55.5% were Female, 40% were Male, and 1% were Transgender or Other Gender;

- 17.2% identified as LGBTQ;

- 71% were Hispanic;

- 46% identified as White, 16% identified as African American, and 18% identified as Multi-racial.

Table 1.2 (see Chapter 1) provides an overview of the placement history and current living situation of participants.

- 85.5% (*n*=94) of the youth were currently in foster care which included 8% in extended foster care.

  o Among the youth who were currently in foster care, 41% lived with a foster family, 8% lived with a family member, 27% lived in a congregate care setting (group home, RTC, shelter), and 9% were in a TLP or SIL placement.

- 9% of the youth (n=10) had achieved legal permanency including adoption (1 youth), reunification (1 youth), and having a legal permanent caregiver (8 youths).

- 4% (n=4) of the youth had emancipated and left care.

- While 38% of participants reported three or fewer placements indicating relative placement stability, 20% of participants reported having been in 10 or more placements.

SURVEY MEASURES

PLACEMENT CHANGES

At each quarterly survey, we asked whether participants had experienced a placement change in the approximately 90 days since the last survey. Values ranged from *0=no placement change reported in quarterly surveys 1, 2, and 3* to *3=placement changes reported in all three quarterly surveys*.

SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION ASSESSED AT ENROLLMENT

In the Enrollment Survey, we asked participants whether or not they had participated in sexual health education and which topics were covered: abstinence only, pregnancy prevention/birth control methods, negotiating consent, healthy and respectful dating relationships.

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

We developed two questions to explore whether youth have conversations with family members, caregivers or other trusted adults about healthy and unhealthy relationships.

We asked participants whether they had had conversations with foster caregivers (foster and adoptive parents, caregivers, staff) and birth parents about any of the following relationship topics: bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault, healthy and unhealthy relationships, consent, sexual health, and family violence.

The next question explored who participants would go to for advice and support if they encountered a problem in their relationships with friends, dating partners, other youths or adults. We asked whether they would reach out to caregivers, friends, child welfare professionals (caseworker, CASA, mentor, judge), birth family (parents, siblings, other), school personnel (teacher, counselor, resource officer), health professionals (doctor, counselor/

therapist), or another trusted adult – or keep the problem to themselves.

The Casey Life Skills Assessment (CLSA) (Casey Family Programs, n.d.) includes question sets about self care (healthy physical and emotional development, taking care of one's health and pregnancy prevention), and relationships and communication. The CLSA is designed for youth in foster care, ages 14 – 21, and can be used as a tool to chart progress and set goals in conversations with the youth. We adapted 10 CLSA items that focused on dating and sexual relationships for inclusion in this survey. These included two items on sexual health knowledge ("I know how to protect myself from sexually transmitted diseases. I know how to prevent getting pregnant or getting someone else pregnant."), five items about dealing with hurtful or threatening relationships ("I know what to do if someone sends me messages online that make me feel bad or scared. I know the signs of a hurtful or abusive relationship."), and three items on assertive communication skills ("I am good at letting others know how I feel and what I need. I can deal with anger without hurting others or damaging things. I stand up for myself."). Participants were asked whether these statements were true for them; response options were *No, Mostly no, Somewhat, Mostly yes, and Yes.*

WARNING SIGNS OF DATING ABUSE

Participants' awareness of warning signs of abusive dating relationships was assessed with 15 items that included behaviors that suggest physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. We defined dating as having a boyfriend or a girlfriend, going out or hanging out in a romantic way, or hooking up with someone, and asked participants whether, in their opinion, "any of the behaviors count as warning signs of abuse". Sample items included "Pushing, grabbing or slapping a dating partner. Talking your partner into having sex (or sexual contact) even when they say they don't feel like it. Getting jealous when your partner "likes" another person's pictures or posts." Response options were *Definitely ABUSE, maybe abuse, Probably NOT abuse, and Definitely NOT abuse.*

DATING HISTORY

The last set of three questions explored the dating history of the participants. When did you first start dating? During the past 12 months, how many people have you dated? What has been your longest dating relationship? (*About 1 months, 3 months, 6 months, about 1 year, 2 years, 3 years, more than 3 years.*)

FINDINGS

PLACEMENT CHANGES

About half of participants (n=51; 53%) who completed this third quarterly survey reported no placement changes since enrollment

in the study, approximately 270 days earlier. However, the other half of study participants experienced significant placement instability:

- 20% (*n*=22) reported a placement change in one quarterly survey

- 11% (*n*=12) reported a placement change in two quarterly surveys, and9% (*n*=10) reported a placement change in all three quarterly surveys.

SEXUAL HEALTH AND HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION

The overwhelming majority (*n*=103; 84.5%) of study participants reported in the Enrollment Survey that they had participated in some form of sexual health and relationship education, yet information presented in these programs did not appear to be comprehensive. Participants reported which topics were covered in educational programs. The results are displayed in Table 4.1 in descending order of frequency.

- It is notable that almost two thirds of participants reported that programs provided general information about healthy and respectful relationships, however only a third of participants reported having learned about negotiating consent.

- About half of participants learned about pregnancy prevention, others participated in programs that were abstinence only.

- A small group of participants (*n*=17; 15.5%) reported not participating in any sexual health and healthy relationship education.

Table 4.1 Topics in Sexual Health and Healthy Relationship Education

	N=110	
TOPICS	n	%
Healthy & respectful relationships	68	61.8
Pregnancy prevention (birth control methods)	63	57.3
Saying no to sex (abstinence only)	53	48.2
Negotiating consent	40	36.4
No sexual health or healthy relationship education	17	15.5

CONVERSATIONS WITH CAREGIVERS AND BIRTH PARENTS

Youth in foster care need access to sexual health and healthy relationship education, but they also need ongoing conversations with trusted adults to process information, develop skills, and navigate the important and sensitive issues.

Table 4.2 shows that about two thirds of participants were talking with foster caregivers about healthy relationships, which mirrors the primary topic in educational programs noted above (Table 4.1).

- Only about half of participants had conversations with foster caregivers about specific topics such as sexual health, consent, or sexual

harassment. Conversations about consent occurred more frequently with foster caregivers than in educational programs.

- While not all participants have contact with their birth parent(s), about one third reported conversations with birth parents about these

topics suggesting that birth parents continue to be an important resource to them.

- More than a third of participants reported not talking with foster caregivers or birth parents about sexual health, sexual violence and family violence, and consent.

Table 4.2 Conversations with Foster Caregivers about Sexual Health and Relationships

	Conversations with Foster Caregivers (Adoptive & Foster Parents, Staff)		Conversations with Birth Parent(s)		No Conversations	
TOPIC	N=110					
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Healthy & Unhealthy Relationships	69	62.7	58	52.7	22	20.0
Sexual Health	60	54.5	32	29.1	45	40.9
Consent	59	53.6	36	32.7	42	38.2
Family Violence	53	48.2	38	34.5	43	39.1
Sexual Harassment & Sexual Assault	54	49.1	35	31.8	44	40.0

We further wanted to understand who youth turn to when they experience problems in their relationships with friends, dating partners, other youth, and adults. Not surprisingly, more than half of participants (59.1%) turned to friends. They found trusted adults among caregivers (adoptive and foster parents), caseworkers, health care providers, and at school. They also turned to their birth families for support, especially to their siblings (31.8%). However, nearly a quarter of participants (22.7%) reported keeping problems to themselves. These findings suggest that it is important that all the adults in the youth' environment be prepared and comfortable to have conversations about healthy and unhealthy relationship.

Participants overwhelmingly suggested that they felt confident that they had the knowledge and resources to protect their sexual health and to prevent STD's, unwanted pregnancies, and unhealthy or abusive relationships. In contrast, they expressed less confidence in being able to communicate assertively (Table 4.3). These findings suggest that there may be a gap between knowledge and skills needed to practice sexual health and healthy relationships.

Table 4.3 Knowledge and Skills for Healthy Relationships

	N=110									
	No		Mostly No		Somewhat		Mostly Yes		Yes	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Sexual health										
I know how to protect myself from STD's					3	2.8	9	8.3	97	89.0
I know how to prevent getting pregnant/ getting someone else pregnant	1	.9			2	1.8	12	11.0	94	86.2
Healthy relationships										
I know what to do if someone sends me a messages online that make me feel bad or scared	3	2.8	4	3.7	4	3.7	13	11.9	85	78.0
I know how to get help if I feel threatened or hurt by a dating or sexual partner	1	.9			5	4.6	10	9.2	93	85.3
I know how to end a relationship in a safe and respectful way	2	1.8	1	.9	7	6.4	19	17.4	80	73.4
I know the signs of a hurtful or abusive relationship	1	.9	2	1.8	3	2.8	16	14.7	87	79.8
I can say "no" when I am uncomfortable with a sexual advance	2	1.8	2	1.8	4	3.7	11	10.1	90	82.6
Assertive communication										
I am good at letting others know how I feel and what I need	4	3.7	7	6.4	17	15.6	17	15.6	64	58.7
I can deal with anger without hurting others or damaging things	2	1.8	2	1.8	10	9.2	20	18.3	75	68.8
I stand up for myself	2	1.8	3	2.8	11	10.1	21	19.3	72	66.1

In their responses to survey questions discussed above, participants reported that learning about healthy and unhealthy relationships was an important topic in both

educational programs and conversations with foster caregivers. They also expressed confidence that they knew the warning signs and were able to protect themselves. Therefore, we sought to explore in more detail what behaviors youth identify as warning signs of dating abuse. Table 4.4 summarizes the results.

- Participants overwhelmingly identified physically hurtful or threatening behaviors as abuse.

- Participants clearly recognized overt signs of sexual dating abuse, such as getting a partner drunk or high before hooking up sexually. In contrast, they were less sure in situations that involved pressuring a partner to have sex, and in situations that involved not respecting nonverbal and indirect communication that a partner did not want to participate in sexual activity. This finding confirms that they had fewer opportunities to learn about consent either in sexual health education or conversations with caregivers and that they were missing a more nuanced understanding of this complex concept.

- Participants were less clear whether emotionally hurtful behaviors should count as warning signs of abuse. Only about half of the participants identified jealous behaviors, such as giving a partner the silent treatment for looking at others, as warning signs of dating abuse.

- Participants were also unsure about warning signs of digital abuse, especially controlling behaviors such as constant texting when a partner is out with friends or checking a partner's phone and social media.

Table 4.4 Recognizing Warning Signs of Dating Abuse

VARIABLES	N=110							
	Definitely NOT Abuse		Probably Not Abuse		Maybe Abuse		Definitely Abuse	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Physical dating abuse								
Pushing, grabbing or slapping a dating partner	4	3.7	2	1.9	7	6.5	94	87.9
Throwing something during a fight (e.g. keys, a phone, a book)	7	6.5	4	3.7	18	16.8	78	72.9
Emotional dating abuse								
Spreading rumors about a dating partner or ex-dating partner	8	7.5	15	14	37	34.6	47	43.9
Giving your partner the silent treatment for looking at others	18	16.8	34	31.8	24	22.4	31	29.0
Getting jealous when your partner "likes" another person's pictures of posts	31	29.0	32	29.9	25	23.4	19	17.8
Making fun of your partner in front of their friends	8	7.5	8	7.5	37	34.6	54	50.5
Digital dating abuse								
Snooping through a partner's text messages, e-mail or cell phone call list	16	15	20	18.7	37	34.6	34	31.8
Constantly texting your partner when they are out with friends	27	25.2	33	30.8	35	32.7	12	11.2
Sexual dating abuse								
Talking your partner into having sex even when they say they don't feel like it	3	2.8	7	6.5	1	16.8	79	73.8
Trying to get a partner drunk or high before hooking up sexually	5	4.7			17	15.9	85	79.4
Kissing your partner when they cringe or pull away	10	9.3	16	15.0	37	34.6	44	41.1
Pressuring your partner to have sex after you have been dating for a while	10	9.3	7	6.5	28	26.2	62	57.9
Offering gifts or money in exchange for sex	7	6.5	6	5.6	19	17.8	75	70.1
Posting sexy pictures of your partner without telling them	8	7.5	6	5.6	26	24.3	67	62.6

ASSOCIATION OF PLACEMENT STABILITY AND CONVERSATIONS WITH CAREGIVERS WITH RECOGNITION OF WARNING SIGNS OF DATING ABUSE

As a final step, we investigated whether there were correlations between placement stability, conversations about healthy and unhealthy relationships with caregivers and birth family, and the participants' ability to recognize warning signs of abuse. For the presentation below, we selected warning signs of physical and sexual abuse that a majority of participants clearly identified as suggested in Table 4.4.

- Placement changes were negatively correlated with conversations with caregivers and birth family about healthy and unhealthy relationships.

- Placement changes were also negatively correlated with participants' ability to recognize signs of physical abuse and signs of sexual violence, specifically posting sexy pictures of partner without telling them and offering gifts or money in exchange for sex.

- Conversations with foster caregivers and birth family about healthy and unhealthy relationships were positively correlated with recognizing warning signs of physical abuse and sexual abuse, specifically related to consent (trying to get a dating partner drunk or high before hooking up sexually; pressuring partner to have sex after you've been dating for a while).

These findings suggested that youth who experienced frequent placement changes lacked ongoing conversations with trusted adults about relationships and sexual health and may be at increased risk for physical and sexual abuse, including sexual exploitation. They may not recognize warning signs of abusive relationships and normalize these behaviors.

Table 4.5: Bivariate Correlations of Placement Stability with Conversations about Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships and Recognition of Warning Signs of Dating Abuse

VARIABLES			1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
Conversations	1.	Conversations about healthy & unhealthy relationships	-							
Placement Changes	2.	Placement changes reported in Quarterly Surveys 1,2, and 3	-.264**	-						
Recognizing Warning Signs of Abuse	3.	Pushing, grabbing or slapping a dating partner	.323**	-.076	-					
	4.	Throwing something during a fight	.232*	-.259*	.369**	-				
	5.	Trying to get a dating partner drunk or high before hooking up sexually	.297**	-.162	.613**	.457**	-			
	6.	Pressuring your partner to have sex after you've been dating for a while	.217*	-.163	.455**	.317**	.636**	-		
	7.	Posting sexy pictures of your partner without telling them	.175	-.234*	.249**	.305**	.379**	.341**	-	
	8.	Offering gifts or money in exchange for sex	.185	-.273**	.325**	.448**	.530**	.552**	.610**	-

** p ≤ 0.01 (2-tailed); * p ≤ 0.05 (2-tailed).

DATING HISTORY

The majority of participants ($n = 60$; 55%) reported they had started dating by the time they were 14 years old, with some as early as 10 and 11 years of age. A small group of

10 participants (9.1%) reported having never dated.

Participants' responses showed a trend toward long-term relationships. 50% (*n*=45) of participants reported dating one person in the past 12 months, 24.4% were dating two people (*n*=22), 8.8% (*n*=8) were dating 3 or more people, and 16.7% were not dating at all

Of the participants who had been dating, a large majority (69%) reported that their longest relationship was one year or longer. In some of the interviews that focused on peer relationships and friendships (see Chapter 2), youth expressed their desire for long-term relationships. "So, in five years I guess I'm hoping that things work out with my boyfriend, and I'm hoping that I'm not alone or with somebody else at that point because then it kind of feels like a waste to go from relationship to relationship. You kind of start to feel like I'm never just gonna settle down and just find one person. It's always gonna be just kind casual and meaningless," said Rihanna.

And Jose stated, "My girlfriend's always there when I'm sad or when I need someone to talk to. Those are the people I count on most. My girlfriend I've been with for about two years. And that's the longest I've ever held any girlfriend, since I've always moved around from school to house, to house, to house."

Table 4.6 *Duration of Longest Dating Relationship*

N=88		
DURATION	n	%
About 1 month	3	3.4
About 3 months	5	5.7
About 6 months	19	21.6
About 1 year	29	33.0
About 2 years	14	15.9
About 3 years	5	5.7
More than 3 years	13	14.8
Total	88	100.0

DISCUSSION

Existing research documents both the increased risk for youth in foster care to experience abusive dating relationships and unwanted pregnancies, and protective factors that include placement stability, social support, and closeness with caregivers (Ahrens et al., 2013; Jonson-Reid et al., 2007; Potter & Font, 2019; Taussig & Garrido, 2017). In this section of the Texas Youth Permanency Study we aimed to explore in more depth what youth learn about sexual health and healthy relationships, either through educational programs or conversations with caregivers, birth parents, and other trusted adults.

We found that most youth participate in sexual health and healthy relationship programs, but these programs do not seem to be comprehensive and consistent. A majority participants reported hearing about healthy and respectful relationships. However, some programs were abstinence-focused

and did not cover important information about consent and birth control methods.

In addition to educational programs, ongoing conversations with caregivers, birth parents and other trusted adults can help youth process information, practice skills for healthy relationships, and learn to take care of their health. About two thirds of the participants reported talking to caregivers about relationships and sexual health and about a third reported talking with their birth parents, yet almost a third of participants reported not talking about these important issues with either caregivers or birth parents. When they experienced challenges and conflicts with friends, dating partners, and adults most participants turned to friends. They found trusted adults among their caregivers, child welfare professionals, school personnel, and health care providers and they also turned to their birth families for support and advice.

Placement stability and conversations with caregivers and birth parents were associated with increased ability to identify warning signs of physical and sexual dating violence. Participants who experienced frequent placement changes engaged in fewer conversations with caregivers and birth parents and appeared to normalize warning signs of dating violence. Overall, participants clearly identified the more severe warning signs of physical and sexual violence, but were less sure about signs of emotional abuse and coercive behaviors that demonstrated disregard of boundaries.

Our findings suggest that there is a need for comprehensive and consistent sexual health and healthy relationship education that addresses assertive communication and boundaries, consent, birth control options, and STI prevention. Youth are reaching out to adults to get support and advice; therefore training for caregivers, health care providers, child welfare professionals, and birth parents could help adults feel more confident in providing medically accurate and comprehensive information and resources. Birth parents are often neglected in these efforts, yet youth made clear that they are reaching out to their families as well. Lastly, educational programs and conversations with trusted adults need to provide space for youth to practice assertive communication skills, work through trauma, grief and loss, and translate information and knowledge into decisions for their relationships and health. Youth clearly articulate that they are looking for meaningful and lasting relationships that provide a counterpoint to the pervasive instability and loss in their lives.

CONCLUSIONS

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The Texas Youth Permanency Study follows a cohort of youth in foster care as they enter adulthood. By examining their experiences and trajectories over a five-year period we seek to find new ways of understanding the factors that allow youth in foster care to thrive in young adulthood.

The **present report** provides a first snapshot of quantitative and qualitative data collected in year one of the five-year longitudinal study. This report highlights our efforts to retain the first cohort of youth in the study, and provides preliminary findings about the youth's sense of connectedness at school and with their peers, their participation in case and permanency planning, and their understanding of healthy or unhealthy dating relationships.

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Our work in the first six months of this study demonstrated that we could successfully recruit a cohort of youth in foster care through participating child welfare courts. The resulting sample consisted primarily of youth who were attending court and received information about the study directly from a member of the research team. Although study information was also distributed to adults involved with the legal case (e.g. caseworkers, Court appointed special advocates [CASA], attorneys), this indirect method of recruitment did not yield as many participants.

As expected, there was significant attrition from enrollment (N=197) to the first quarterly follow up survey (N=115). While enrollment primarily occurred in person in court, contact for subsequent surveys was made via text, phone, email, social media, and mail. COVID-19 shut down court rooms and restricted the research team to working remotely. It appears that the shift from in-person contact for the enrollment survey to virtual contact for subsequent quarterly surveys contributed to the drop in participation. Once youth participated in a quarterly survey they tended to continue participation throughout the year.

CONNECTEDNESS AT SCHOOL AND WITH PEERS

We found that frequent placement and school changes were associated with less connection to school, especially to teachers and other support staff. In interviews, participants described times when they were struggling to catch up with their peers, socially and academically. While many developed supportive relationships with teachers when given the chance to stay long enough in one place (at least for one school year), it was notable that they struggled with peer relationships.

Having to change schools frequently, they expressed sentiments of not fitting in, having to learn to let go of people, and not relating to people

their own age. Not having supportive adults in their lives, they had to grow up quickly and strive for self-sufficiency, which meant they could not participate in typical teenage activities.

Although the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014, introduced the "reasonable and prudent parent standard," which is intended to increase normalcy for youth in care, participants' experiences differed widely depending on the nature of the placement (congregate care, foster home, kinship placement) and caregivers' interpretation of the standard.

The COVID pandemic, social distancing measures, shift to online learning, and job losses increased the participants' struggles to stay engaged with school and compounded already existing social isolation and pervasive losses.

PARTICIPATION IN COURT HEARINGS AND IN PERMANENCY PLANNING

Our findings demonstrate the critical importance of youth voice in case planning, especially at the transition to adulthood. When youth felt like they had a voice and that judges, caseworkers, and other adults were genuinely listening to their questions, concerns, and ideas, they felt empowered to work in partnership with adults and chart a path forward. Active listening on the part of the adults involved in the legal case required patience and practice, and meant going beyond requiring youth attendance at court

hearings or checking off boxes at required meetings.

When the COVID pandemic shut down court rooms, hearings were held via zoom to facilitate youth participation.

UNDERSTANDING OF HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

We found that most youth participated in sexual health and healthy relationship programs, but these programs did not seem to be comprehensive. In addition to educational programs, ongoing conversations with caregivers can help youth process information, practice skills for healthy relationships, and learn to take care of their health. About two thirds of the participants reported talking to caregivers about relationships and sexual health and about a third reported talking with their birth parents, yet almost a third of participants reported not talking about these important issues with either caregivers or birth parents.

Placement stability and conversations with caregivers and birth parents were associated with increased ability to identify warning signs of physical and sexual dating violence suggesting that these conversations indeed provide important guidance for youth.

LIMITATIONS

ATTRITION

As expected, there was significant attrition from enrollment to the first quarterly follow up survey. While

enrollment primarily occurred in person in court, contact for subsequent surveys was made via text, phone, email, social media, and mail. It appears that the shift from in-person contact for the enrollment survey to virtual contact for quarterly surveys contributed to the drop in participation.

Demographic variables (age, gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity), age at first removal, and legal permanency status (adoption, reunification, permanent legal guardianship versus foster care) were not associated with completion of quarterly surveys. However, the remaining sample was biased toward youth who wanted their current placement to be permanent and who had no history of running away. Youth who had no history of running away were also less likely to have been on probation or in substance use treatment. Interestingly, we also found that youth with a high number of placements over their lifetime were more likely to stay in the study, which may be a result of our recruitment at child welfare courts that offer specialty dockets for older youth and encourage or require regular attendance. Therefore, the subsample of youth that continued to participate in the study appeared to have more stability in their current placement, engage in less risky or rebellious behaviors, and maintain stronger connections with adults, biases that limit the generalizability of our findings.

MEASUREMENT BIAS

This study centers the experiences and voices of youth in care, which is both a strength and limitation. Listening to youth in foster care, who are often feeling stigmatized and powerless, is essential for ongoing improvement efforts in child welfare. However, we were not able to triangulate the youth' self-reports and perspectives with other data sources, such as case files or surveys and interviews with the adults that care for them.

TYPS, like other self-report studies, needs to take into account response biases.

- Social desirability may have played a role in participants' overwhelmingly positive responses on measures of support by adults at school and adults involved with their legal case.

- Response fatigue may also be clouding our findings. Although we adapted existing survey measures to match a 6th grade reading level, developed a mobile-friendly format, and designed short surveys taking no more than 5 – 10 minutes to complete, it is possible that participants' attention and motivation to answer questions dropped, especially because they were completing surveys online.

- We sought to address response biases in interviews. Interviews were conducted by a researcher with lived experience in foster care who was able to relate to the participants' experiences.

The researcher was attentive to creating a safe environment and probed for both positive and negative experiences youth may have had with caregivers, peers, at school, and in child welfare court.

A strength of our study is the mixed-methods design and our ability to explore participants' experiences in more depth through interviews following the survey.

COVID

COVID 19 temporarily halted our visits in court and precluded opportunities to meet participants in person and remind them about quarterly surveys. Outreach for quarterly surveys was limited to phone, text, email, and Instagram direct messaging. As a result, COVID may have increased the attrition we observed from enrollment to the first quarterly survey.

While survey data collection spanned the time before and during the pandemic, interviews were conducted in the first 6 months after the pandemic started and specifically asked participants to reflect on the impact of COVID-19. COVID-19 related lock-down, school closures and social distancing measures clearly impacted youth in foster care and are discussed in the summary of findings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Youth voice is critical for continuous improvement efforts in child welfare.

The Texas Youth Permanency Study showed that youth do want to tell their stories and participate in research. Gathering information and sharing it quickly with the field can help with continuous improvement efforts.

Achieving legal permanency does not mean that youth have permanent families. Among the participants who were in foster care at the time of enrollment, almost half reported having been reunified or adopted at one point in their lives. Yet they experienced post-permanency discontinuity. The child welfare system in Texas needs to focus on helping permanent families stay permanently connected through supports and services.

Participation in child welfare court and a positive relationship with the judge improve youth' understanding of the court process and participation in decision making. In this study, participants recognized the power that judges have in their cases. When given the opportunity to meet privately with the judge and getting to share their perspective and opinions, they developed trusting relationships and looked up to judges as positive authority figures. Texas should continue creating child welfare courts and specialized dockets that strongly encourage youth participation. Continued training and support for judges on eliciting youth voice, active listening, and working collaboratively with youth could strengthen judicial decision making and permanency planning.

School connectedness can be an important protective factor in the

lives of youth in foster care, yet frequent placement and school changes undermine connections with teachers, staff and peers and impact age-appropriate social development. Participants in this study struggled academically and socially due to frequent placement moves. Many of them reported isolation from peers and loss of friendships which created vulnerabilities for their social life. The child welfare system in Texas should continue efforts to minimize moves and promote normalcy in teen relationships. Heightened monitoring should not interfere with normalcy efforts.

Placement stability and conversations with caregivers and birth parents about sexual health and relationships are associated with increased ability to identify warning signs of physical and sexual dating violence. While participants in this study had some conversations and education about sexual health and healthy relationships, they were still confused about boundaries, consent, and coercion and lacked confidence in their communication skills. There is a need for comprehensive sexual health and healthy relationship education for youth. Simultaneously, caregivers, health care providers, child welfare professionals and birth parents also need support and training on how to engage with youth in conversations about sexual and reproductive health and practice skills for healthy relationships.

COVID has impacted youth by deepening isolation and decreasing school connectedness, opportunities for work and independence. Texas needs to utilize all available federal funds for programming supports and direct payments to youth.

Youth in foster care need relational permanency to connect with peers, schools, partners and families. They also need normal adolescent experiences. COVID, heightened monitoring, natural disasters and closure of group facilities appear to have destabilized Texas' child welfare systems. Texas should prioritize strategic planning that ensures youth in care can develop and maintain relational permanency and access normal experiences.

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