"You're Not Out Here Alone":

An Evaluation of a Program for Foster Youth

By

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Dedication

For the little loves of my life, Priscilla, Briley, Avery, and Quintin.

And, especially, for Payton. You are my sunshine.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

I. Introduction

One of the most vulnerable groups in society are youth who are aging out of the foster care system. The ultimate goal of the child welfare system is to reunite children with their families or to find new permanent homes for them. In some cases, however, youth reach the age of emancipation from foster care without having achieved either of these ideals. These youth must try to make it on their own.

In 2013, there were more than 400,000 children in foster care. During the course of that year, more than 23,000 children aged out of the foster care system. The percentage of youth that leave foster care strictly because they have reached the age of emancipation has increased from seven to ten percent a year - an increase of nearly 50 percent over the past decade (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015).

There are many short- and long-term negative consequences of youth leaving foster care without being reunited with their families of origin, or adopted into a new family. Researchers have found that youth who have aged out of the foster care system have higher rates of homelessness and incarceration compared to a sample representative of all youth in the US (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010). Parents who have a history of being in foster care themselves are almost twice as likely as parents with no such history to see their own children placed in foster care (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010). Youth who have aged out of care are less likely to have a high school degree or GED, and is much less likely to earn a college degree than those without a history of foster care (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010). This population is also less likely to be employed or to have health insurance, and those that are working earn lower wages (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010). In addition, they are more

likely experience food insecurity, and have higher rates of government benefit usage (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010).

The outcomes of these youth are important to the entire population, both because of our responsibility to them as wards of the state, but also because the negative experiences listed above compromise these young adults' abilities to lead independent, fulfilling, and productive lives. We have a vested interest, as a society, in supporting the wellbeing of these youth. By making the decision to remove children from the care of their biological parents, we have an obligation to be sure that the alternative, care from the child welfare system, sufficiently enables their future success. From an economic perspective, the expenses associated with the negative experiences these youth face represent a burden for the government. Along with the costs associated with supporting youth while they are in the child welfare system, lower rates of employment and lower wages when they leave care represent lower tax contributions. Lack of health care can lead to unpaid emergency room costs. Participation in government benefits lead to the obvious cost of supporting program beneficiaries. The cyclical nature of child welfare, which leads to former foster youths' children being in out-of-home care at higher rates, will lead to the cost of supporting their children as well. Although we are obligated to provide care for these youth, we have not done a sufficient job thus far of setting them up to be successful adults.

Despite the negative outcomes that this population faces, there is not yet clarity in the literature around the best practices for improving life outcomes for these youth. Evaluations of foster care programs can add to our understanding by examining unique approaches to preparing foster youth for the transition to adulthood.

This study aims to contribute to the literature about programs for this vulnerable population through an evaluation of the Youth Connections (YC) program[1], designed to benefit older youth in the child welfare system as they age out of care. While much of the previous literature evaluating programs designed for this population has examined Independent Living Programs (ILPs), which are primarily comprised of life skills training activities designed to promote independence in these youth following emancipation from the system (Courtney, Zinn, Koralek, & Bess, 2011; Montgomery, Donkoh, & Underhill, 2006), this study examines a program that takes a different approach. The goal of this program is to increase the number and quality of adult connections in participants' lives. The intention behind this approach is that these adult connections will act as social support networks, to help youth in achieving successful life outcomes once they leave foster care. The program specifically caters to youth who have had difficulty with finding permanency (a legal, permanent living situation) in the past. This includes teens, siblings, youth who have been in foster care for a long period of time, youth who have had multiple placements, or youth with failed previous permanent placements.

Thus far, no formal evaluation of the YC program exists. The results of this evaluation will shed light on program implementation as well the impacts of program participation. This study will utilize a mixed methods approach to evaluate this program and better understand its implementation. Below, I will review emerging adulthood theory, the theoretical framework informing this work. In particular, I explain the experiences of former foster youth during emerging adulthood, and how this differs from youth in the general population. I also present literature related to the poor outcomes that youth in this population face after they leave the child welfare system, and the program and policies designed to address these outcomes. Lastly, I will

[1] Program name changed to protect anonymity

explain the methods used in this study to investigate the YC program. Overall, this research will contribute to our understanding of how to help former foster youth avoid post care struggles.

II. Theoretical Framework

This dissertation will focus on the impact of the YC program on the ability of foster youth to successfully transition out of the child welfare system. The theoretical framework informing this work is the theory of emerging adulthood, which emphasizes the distinctive period during the late teens and early twenties when young people have left adolescence but are not yet in adulthood (Arnett, 2000). This transitional time period in the lives of all young people coincides with the period in which foster youth emancipate from the foster care system, and may help to explain why former foster youth fare so poorly into adulthood.

Emerging Adulthood Theory

Jeffrey Arnett introduced emerging adulthood theory in 2000. This theory argues that there is a distinct period of development that follows adolescence and precedes adulthood, between ages 18 and 25. Arnett explains that demographic shifts that have occurred in industrialized nations during the latter part of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century have led to an apparent extension of the time that it takes to transition to adulthood. These changes, discussed in detail below, are so widespread that the period from ages 18-25 has become distinguishable from both adolescence and adulthood and thus requires its own named developmental stage (Arnett, 2000, 2004, 2007, 2011).

Several behavioral patterns form the basis for the theory of emerging adulthood. First, emerging adults are now delaying marriage and childbearing, compared to young adults in the mid twentieth century. Instead of accomplishing these milestones in their early twenties, they are

now waiting until their late twenties or early thirties (Arnett, 2000, 2004). Another important change is that a much larger portion of youth attend higher education following high school and are, accordingly, not settling into permanent careers until later in life (Arnett, 2000, 2004). Marriage, childbearing, and career achievements come with the types of enduring responsibilities that are characteristic of adulthood. Because emergent adults do not reach these milestones directly out of high school, they enter a period of transition in which they are no longer experiencing the dependency of childhood and adolescence but are also not yet in adulthood. The identification of emerging adulthood also stemmed from the recognition that this period had become so long that it did not make sense to continue to think of it as just a transition between two stages, and should be recognized as its own stage of life (Arnett, 2000, 2004, 2007).

Instead of the stability and responsibility that characterizes adulthood, the time spent between the ages of 18 and 25 is now often characterized by fluidity, change, and exploration. During this period, more than any other stage of life, individuals are making a variety of life decisions in terms of their education, work, romantic relationships, and worldviews. In the course of making these decisions, emergent adults experience a high degree of instability and often uncertainty as to what the near future will look like (Arnett, 2004). Rather than being problematic, however, Arnett suggests that this instability is a result of the positive process of development and self-exploration during this life stage (Arnett, 2004).

In later works, Arnett further refineed his theory by proposing five distinct dimensions of emerging adulthood: (a) the age of identity explorations, (b) the age of feeling in-between, (c) the age of possibilities, (d) the self-focused age, and (e) the age of instability (Arnett, 2004). That is, during a period marked by instability and uncertainty, emerging adults explore who they are or who they want to be, tend to no longer feel like adolescents but do not yet consider themselves

as having reached adulthood, are extremely optimistic about their own life goals and opportunities, focus on their own needs and desires, and experiment with different life pathways.

Social Support during Emerging Adulthood

Much research has uncovered positive connections between the existence of social support and youth and adolescent wellbeing (Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Cooney & Kurz, 1996; Collishaw et.al., 2007; Nilsen et.al., 2013; etc.). The term social support has been conceptualized as actual and/or perceived psychological and material resources provided by others (Curry & Abrams, 2014; Chu, Saucier, & Hafner, 2010). The existence of social support networks are especially important during emerging adulthood. Research has shown that permanent relationships and social support networks are essential components of a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood (Aquilino, 2006; Bowers, Geldhof, Johnson, et al., 2014; Settersen & Ray, 2010). A large part of what allows emerging adults the opportunity engage in the self-identity and exploration is the continued support from parental figures and other important adults. This is especially clear when investigating the educational experiences and living arrangements of typical emerging adults. Although significant portions of emerging adults will attend college and live in dorms or apartments following high school, they will often still be at least semi-dependent on their parents. Arnett characterizes this partial dependency as "semi-autonomy" (Arnett, 2000). Of those who do live independently, almost half will move back into their parents' home at least once during this period (Arnett, 2000). In this way, parents act as a secure base from which emerging adults can engage in the potentially risky decisions associated with exploration and instability. These young adults know that their parents and families function as a safety net during this period, available to provide the types of support that researchers have

identified as key to a successful emerging adulthood (Schoeni & Ross, 2005). These supports include both physical support (financial support, housing support, etc.) as well as less tangible types of support (in particular, through the transmission of wisdom, guidance, and emotional support).

The Experience of Emerging Adulthood on Foster Youth

Compared to their peers in the general population, youth who are aging out of the foster care system seem to have an especially difficult time during the emerging adulthood period, as it presents a unique set of challenges to this population given the limited resources available to them. These youth have reached the age of emancipation from foster care without having been reunited with their families or finding new permanent homes. They have to leave foster care and try to make it on their own during this vulnerable period, despite cultural expectations that young people will have familial support during this time.

During this stage, while most youth that are not involved in the child welfare system are experiencing semi-autonomy and relying on familial support, foster youth are forced to leave the child welfare system and the institutionalized supports that they have been receiving while in care. Unfortunately, there are not any large-scale societal safety nets designed to fit the needs of vulnerable youth for whom a familial net does not exist. The lack of social support that many former foster youth face when they leave the foster system may be leading these youth to miss out on opportunities to explore their identities and focus on self-rowth and fulfillment, characteristics of a traditional emerging adulthood period. This difference in developmental trajectories may also be leading to the negative outcomes that these youth face. Research has reflected these conclusions. While this period of self-reflection and self-discovery typically leads to improved well-being among the general population, a number of studies highlight the fact that

emerging adults that are members of vulnerable populations will experience emerging adulthood differently, and have a more difficult time managing this period of transition, than their peers (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005; Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, & Herzog, 2011; Hendry & Kloep 2011; Osgood, Ruth, Eccles, Jacobs, & Barber 2005; Silva 2012; Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner 2011). In a society that has come to expect young adults to rely on support from their families and other social support networks during this transitional period, youth who are members of vulnerable populations often struggle. Researchers stress that both tangible support, such as housing, food, and educational expenses, and intangible support, such as advice, guidance, and encouragement, are important predictors of success during emerging adulthood (Schoeni and Ross, 2005). Youth from lower socioeconomic classes, however, may not be able to rely on parents for these areas of tangible support, which require access to extra finances (Settersten & Ray, 2010; Wightman, Schoeni, & Robinson, 2012). Foster youth, and those without parental influences, miss out on these, and the more socioemotional, forms of support as well (Munson, Lee, Miller, Cole, & Nedelcu, 2013).

Recent research has provided evidence that youth transitioning from care benefit when there are social support networks in place, via healthy relationships with caseworkers, foster families, mentors, etc. (Antle, Johnson, Barbee, & Sullivan, 2009; Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Singer, Berzin, & Hokanson, 2013). However, this support, in areas like social and emotional support, parent connections, housing, and stable work or school involvement, is not widely available (Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011; Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2011). In their work with emancipated youth, Courtney, Hook, and Lee (2010) identified four distinct categories into which former foster youth fell. Only one subgroup, or about one fifth of the sample, participated in an emerging adulthood period that had

characteristics and experiences similar to those described in Arnett's theory. Members of this subgroup were depending on someone else (friends, relatives, etc.) for their living situation and they were the least likely to have ever been homeless, for example. The remaining four-fifths of youth in the study did not experience this kind of support. Munson, Lee, Miller, Cole, and Nedelcu (2013) found that the experiences described by Arnett as typical of emerging adulthood represented an ideal that is difficult for this population to attain. Often, young people in this vulnerable population needed to take on adult roles (like caring for others) at young ages, out of necessity (Munson, et al, 2013). Additionally, Singer and Berzin (2014) found that emerging adults with foster care experience were much more likely to be parents and less likely to be enrolled in higher education. They were also more likely to rate themselves as feeling very independent (Singer & Berzin, 2014), which may signal a lack of support. Berzin et al. (2014) found that youth with foster care experience often conceptualize independence in adulthood as related to a lack of support. They identify as adults because the child welfare system or other adults in their lives no longer support them, rather than having reached adulthood through independence and achieving milestones, like their peers in the general population.

In an attempt to improve outcomes for foster youth who have aged out of the system, the YC program establishes connections with adults who can provide the support that these youth need in order to be able to have the emerging adulthood experiences that their non-foster system peers are having. This study examines the strengths and weaknesses of the YC program's efforts to reintroduce some of the key tenets of emerging adulthood for those otherwise lacking them.

III. Literature Review

Addressing Poor Outcomes

As research on this population has progressed, it has become increasingly evident that many short and long-term negative consequences of youth leaving foster care without reuniting with families of origin, or being adopted into a new family. Consequences that may result from leaving care without the types of support that family can provide during the transition to adulthood. This section is devoted to better understanding the policies and programs designed to improve these outcomes.

Federal Legislation Directed toward this Population

As society has become concerned with the negative outcomes facing youth transitioning from the foster system, the federal government has passed several pieces of legislation in attempt to better serve older youth in foster care. The John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA), which amended part E of title IV of the Social Security Act, was passed in 1999. It drastically increased federal funding for foster youth, much of which focused on Independent Living Programs (ILPs). The purpose of FCIA is to provide states with flexible funding to develop programs designed to enable children likely to age out of foster care at age 18 to find employment, continue their education, and prepare for the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The policy aims to help foster youth as they age out of foster care, while encouraging self-sufficiency and easing the transition to independence (Stott, 2013).

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, passed in 2008, encourages states to focus on increasing adoptions and reducing time spent in out-of-home care for children in the child welfare system, rather than promoting increased independence. One of the most crucial pieces of Fostering Connections for youth aging out of care is that it allows states to extend services to youth 19-21 years old, provided that the youth is in school, employed, receiving job training, or has a documented reason for being unable to do so (Stott, 2013). This

policy attempts to ease the transition to adulthood by increasing the focus on finding permanent homes for youth, or at least allowing them a few extra years in care so that they are closer to the age at which society expects most young adults to be independent.

The Youth Connections (YC) program evaluated through this research is reflective of the direction legislation has moved. Instead of focusing on building independent living skills, those who designed the YC program, like those who designed the most recent federal legislation, recognized a need to provide support and guidance to young adults as they transition from the foster care system. Accordingly, YC program workers work with youth to locate supportive adults and develop social support networks to help guide them through the transition to adulthood.

Programmatic Strategies to Improve Outcomes among this Population

Existent Strategies

The field of research on foster youth aging out of care has paid limited attention to evaluating programs targeting this population; it has typically focused on collecting information on youth outcomes over a number of domains (see, for example, Courtney, et al., 2010; Stott, 2013; Jones 2011). As such, we know much more about the struggles former foster youth are having then we do about efforts underway to improve their lives. However, there has been some investigation into the primary methods used to impact this population. Below, I discuss these methods.

One strategy used in several states to improve outcomes is extending care to young adults until age 21. Support for this strategy came from the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. Another strategy intended to improve the outcomes of former foster youth, called an Independent Living Program (ILP), is designed to ease the transition to

adulthood by providing both instruction on life skills, like managing finances or navigating public transportation, as well as access to helpful resources, like job training or affordable housing. This approach, with support from the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, has been around for several decades. Another type of program, which has become more popular in recent years, aims to increase "permanency" for these youth. Program workers do this by either seeking adoptive parents or by establishing ongoing connections with other supportive adults. This focus on permanency is also seen in the more recent Fostering Connections Act of 2008.

Evaluation of these Strategies

Research on the impacts of expanding care to 21, one approach to improving outcomes for foster youth, is still in the early stages. However, there is some evidence that extending the age of emancipation can have positive impacts on those who remain in care. Courtney et al (2010) followed a cohort of youth as they aged out of care through age 26. Those who remained in care until age 21 tended to have more positive outcomes than those who aged out at 18, particularly in reduced homelessness and increased educational attainment. Researchers have also found that staying in care seemed to reduce the likelihood of becoming pregnant (Dworsky & Courtney, 2012), increase the likelihood of attending and completing at least one year of college (Dworsky & Courtney, 2012), lower rates of government benefit usage and incarceration (Burley & Lee, 2010), and lead to better employment stability (Stewart, Kum, Barth, & Duncan, 2014) compared to those who left care at 18. However, former foster youth in those states that have extended care were still struggling well into adulthood, compared to a nationally representative sample of similarly aged adults (Courtney, et al, 2011).

Federally funded Independent Living Programs have focused on helping youth to build self-sufficiency in order to promote success after leaving foster care. They have done this by promoting the acquisition of life skills such as financial knowledge, employment experience, and educational attainment (Courtney, Zinn, Zielewski, Bess, Malm, et al., 2008). Though most states have implemented some variation of independent living skill development for foster youth, the evidence of success for this type of program is mixed. Montgomery, Donkoh, and Underhill (2006) reviewed the literature on Independent Living Programs to determine whether any scientific evidence exists to support their use; their review of quasi-experimental studies indicates that some ILPs may improve educational, employment, and housing outcomes for young people leaving the care system, though there was not much methodological consistency in any of the reviewed studies, so results should be interpreted cautiously.

More recently, the Children's Bureau in the Administration for Children and Families contracted an evaluation to determine whether a group of four federally funded ILPs were successful in achieving improved outcomes for youth. Indicators of improved outcomes measured by this evaluation included educational attainment and employment rates, interpersonal and relationship skills, reduced non-marital pregnancy and births, and reduced delinquency and crime rates (Office of Planning Research & Evaluation, 2001). The researchers did not find compelling evidence that any program had beneficial impacts on any of the outcomes they examined (Courtney, Zinn, Koralek, & Bess, 2011). It is not immediately clear why these programs failed to produce positive results in the participant groups compared to the control groups, though researchers suggest that control group members may have received services from other community organizations which produced similar program effects. There is

also the possibility that this type of program is not sufficient to improve outcomes for this population.

Perceptions of individuals involved in the child welfare world have shifted away from ILP's and toward an increased focus on finding and supporting permanent and long-term relationships with adults for youth in foster care. This shift is a result of the perceived failings of these types of programs, and supported by research linking positive development to positive relationships with families and kin (Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Cooney & Kurz, 1996). This was reflected in the 2008 Fostering Connections legislation, which promotes the reduction of time children spend in out-of-home care, in general, but also allows funds to be used toward permanency planning for youth as they near adulthood.

Stott and Gustavsson (2010) investigated the practice of permanency planning and found that the concept of permanency is a complicated one, with federal and state definitions of permanent relationships often not matching what youth themselves desire. The disconnection between these definitions of permanency may actually lead to instability because youth in this demographic may prefer less formal connections with adults who can provide support but who may be unwilling or unable to commit to legal permanency. Unfortunately, these programs often prioritize the search for legal permanency only. These extended searches can lead to placement instability, or experiencing many different foster care placements in a short period of time. This instability can result in additional negative impacts on these already vulnerable youth (Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 2007). Therefore, it may be important for legislative bodies and individual organizations to take a more flexible view, both of permanency and who is seen as a permanent connection.

Strategies for Foster Youth- Moving Forward

In order to improve the negative outcomes former foster youth face as they leave the foster care system, our society needs to create programs and services that offer these youth the best chance for success. As previously stated, emerging adulthood may be an important piece of the puzzle as former foster youth typically do not have a safety net that would enable them to accomplish the kinds of tasks typically associated with this period (Stott, 2013). Therefore, developing strategies to establish support during this transitional period may be our best strategy to help youth become successful adults. These programs should be mindful of the Stott and Gustavsson (2010) findings and incorporate a flexible outlook about what and who constitutes a permanent relationship.

Trauma-informed Services

Another important consideration with this population is a sensitivity to trauma. Researchers and service providers have concluded that the great majority of young people in foster care have experienced trauma in some form as a result of maltreatment and foster care placement (Dorsey, Burns, Southerland, Cox, Revillion, Wagner, Farmer, & Elizabeth, 2012; Stein, Zima, Elliott, Burnam, Shahinfar, Fox, et al., 2001). Trauma can lead to toxic levels of stress, which have several long-term impacts on development and health (Shonkoff, Garner, et al., 2012). In the short term, children can exhibit higher levels of externalizing and internalizing behaviors, and have trouble with trust and with forming long-term relationships (Griffin, McClelland, Holzberg, Stolbach, Maj, & Kisiel, 2011). Many child welfare organizations have begun moving to trauma-informed services, which help them to be conscious and proactive about the impact past trauma has on their clients (Michaels, 2011). Programs designed to improve the outcomes of foster youth may also find success in utilizing this method.

In child welfare, trauma-informed services prioritize the understanding of the trauma-based needs of foster youth, and commit to addressing those needs (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2012). According to the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, trauma-informed services should include the following elements: an understanding of trauma and its potential impacts on foster youth, as well as its prevalence among this population; a willingness to see the young people within the larger contexts of their families, communities, and other social networks, and develop treatment plans accordingly; a prioritization of trust and safety; a commitment to helping youth to cope with the overwhelming emotion often associated with past trauma; and the inclusion of strengths-based services, which take into consideration not just a young person's needs, but also their unique strengths and skills (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2012). Programs that incorporate trauma-informed care are different than previously mentioned models because they work to explore and address past experiences of these youth, which could be impacting their ability to be successful in adulthood, before transitioning them out of the system.

The Youth Connection Program's Use of these Strategies

The YC Program is designed to increase the number of adult connections in participants' lives and to develop these connections into strong and supportive relationships. In order to accomplish this, dedicated program workers work closely with youth on intensive Family Search and Engagement services (FSE) dedicated to discovering adults from the youth's background, like extended or estranged family members, former foster parents, teachers, or coaches, that could possibly act as a permanent support person for the youth once they leave the child welfare system. The program embraces flexible permanency by helping to make lasting, permanent connections between youth participants and adults they have identified, even if these are not

legal ties. Ideally, participants exit the program into a permanent living situation with a permanent legal caregiver, yet the program understands that other forms of relationship building can also be important and lead to success and hope for the future. This program also incorporates trauma-informed services by implementing the 3-5-7 model, which is intended to prepare youth for permanency through healing and resolving of prior issues associated with grief, loss, and trauma. More about the specifics of this program can be found in the sections below.

In keeping with a commitment to improving the life outcomes of youth who age out of the foster care system, it is important to evaluate promising programs to determine the best practices for achieving this goal. This evaluation will add to the literature on programs for youth aging out of care, as it offers a unique perspective on a program that incorporates both permanency planning and trauma-informed services, currently seen as possible best practices for this field. Examining these strategies in action provides important insight into the ways they might be used in future programming.

IV. Methods

Goals of the Study

In order to add to the research on programs for child welfare involved youth and to contribute to the understanding of the YC program, I completed a mixed methods program evaluation. The goals of this research were to gauge perceptions of the program by key stakeholders, to understand whether participants are meeting program goals, and to assess program implementation. Understanding the perceptions of stakeholders and participant outcomes can help us to understand the impact of this program, while the examination of program components and processes is essential to ensuring that the program is operating as intended and that all youth have access to and are receiving equal and adequate services.

As stated above, thus far, much of the research that we have on youth who age out of the child welfare system involves the collecting of information on their outcomes, while much less attention has been paid to producing and publishing research evaluating programs designed to improve these outcomes. This study will contribute to the literature by evaluating one such program. In particular, this evaluation will shed light on the use of permanency planning and trauma-informed services, two highly regarded practices in the child welfare field.

Program Description

The YC program is run by a larger organization located in the Midwestern United States. This organization provides various services to child welfare involved youth and families in order to improve their well-being and promote permanence. While in this program, youth involved in the child welfare system who have previously had difficulty finding or maintaining permanency, or who are at risk of losing their permanent placements, work with program workers to find and connect with adults from their pasts. The goal is that these adult connections will provide the support that these emerging adults need in order to achieve successful life outcomes once they leave foster care. The way that this program combines trauma healing with the search for adult relationships is unique. I was unable to find another program that combines these strategies.

Participants are introduced to this program through referrals from their Child Protective Services case managers. Upon entrance into the program, each youth is assigned to a trained program worker. Caseloads are kept low (an average of 8 per program worker) so that program workers can spend dedicated time with each youth on their caseload. Program workers engage in extensive search services in order to locate and connect with adults from youths' pasts. They are also tasked with facilitating the grief, loss, and trauma-healing program, using the 3-5-7 model (on which more detail is provided in chapter 2).

This program is implemented in two Midwestern states. The organization has contracts with each of the counties in which it operates, and funding comes from these individual counties. Youth are referred to this program for a variety of reasons, including a history of multiple placements, a failed adoption, or as an attempt to preserve an adoption or family placement, etc. Participation in this program is optional and youth are able to choose whether they participate or not.

The program model dictates that participants successfully complete the 3-5-7 model, and work on relationships with their adult connections. Completion of the model requires that the youth confront the trauma from their past and provides them with important tools to process and heal their emotional wounds. This healing prepares them for the development of future relationships.

Throughout the course of program participation, program workers work with a team of people involved in the youth's lives, in addition to the work they do with the youth themselves. This team could include county and/or agency child welfare case managers, therapists, and caregivers. Once the program has concluded, youth are encouraged to remain in touch with the organization, but program workers are hopeful that the need for their involvement will have ceased because youth will be getting support from their adult connections.

This program is primarily composed of two processes: Family Search and Engagement services (FSE) and grief, loss, and trauma healing via the 3-5-7 model. Upon its initial inception, the program only included the FSE services, however, program administrators realized that issues associated with prior grief, loss, and trauma were acting as a barrier to forming connections. To address these issues, the 3-5-7 model was incorporated into the program. Both the work on healing from trauma, via the 3-5-7 model, and the search for adults, via FSE, begin

immediately at the start of the program. However, progress toward healing is essential before youth interact with adults that have been located. Organization staff also work with the located adults to resolve any issues that exist from past relationship problems with the youth.

There are two primary goals of the program. The first goal is to increase both the number and the quality of relationships with supportive adults for each youth participant. Ideally, this would lead to the second goal, which is increased permanency for participants. This permanency can come in various forms. In the past, the focus for many child welfare permanency programs has been on legal permanency (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). This formal permanency is accomplished through reunification with biological family or legal guardians, through adoption, or through the transfer of legal guardianship. While these legal steps are certainly encouraged by program workers, other types of permanency are also recognized, namely, physical permanency and relational permanency. Physical permanency refers to a consistent and stable placement with one caregiver (which includes a physical place to live) (Jones & LaLiberte, 2013). Relational permanency has been defined as "youth having lifelong connections to caring adults, including at least one parent-like connection," though "relational permanence can also be understood as youth experiencing a sense of belonging and a deeper understanding of who they are and how they fit into the world (Jones and LaLiberte, 2013, p. 510)."

As previously stated, the social support components of the emerging adulthood period, or lack thereof, are especially important for foster youth transitioning to adulthood. Through their Family Search and Engagement services, this program aims to connect foster youth to adults who can serve to provide the social and emotional support that this population is lacking. In order to better the chances of successful, long-term relationships, participants engage with the 3-5-7 model and begin healing from past traumas, allowing them to form relationships with the

adults they locate. Ultimately, this program is designed to provide these youth with the opportunity to experience emerging adulthood more similarly to their peers who are not involved in the foster care system. This evaluation sheds light on the ways that this program attempts to assist youth with developing the support system that is needed to do so.

Study Design

This project made use of two separate data sources. Qualitative data came from semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. Quantitative data came from administrative information collected by program workers at the start of service and at regular intervals throughout the program process. I received approval from the University of Wisconsin-Madison Institutional Review Board before any participant recruitment or data analysis began.

Quantitative Data

a) Description of Data- Program administrators agreed to share information with me that was collected for all youth as part of intake and maintenance record keeping procedures. Data included demographic information, including age, gender, race, and ethnicity; days in the program; completion status; and permanency status. Data also included social service system involvement information, such as the child welfare system, juvenile justice system, special education, etc.; child welfare system placement history; and Adverse Childhood Experiences scores (ACEs). Lastly, I received the results of both the Youth Connections Scale measure, reported to be administered quarterly; and the Hope Scale, which is supposed to be administered at the start or the program and at program completion.

b) Data Use- Before I received this data, program administrators de-identified all data in order to maintain participant privacy. In total, data from thirty-five youth were examined for this

part of the study. Once I received data from the organization, it was categorized and organized into a dataset. I then used Microsoft Excel to calculate percentages, averages, and ranges.

Data from this source was primarily used for implementation evaluation purposes. Details were used to establish demographic details of program participants and to determine whether this program adhered to program design. This data also helped me to understand the background and experiences of youth participants via investigation of prior social service system involvement, history of child welfare placements, and ACE scores.

Qualitative Data

a) Participant Recruitment- Data for the qualitative portion of this evaluation was gathered through semi-structured one-on-one interviews with key organization stakeholders. These stakeholders included program workers, county caseworkers, and former youth participants. Prior to participant recruitment, organization administrators agreed to facilitate a connection between myself and potential study participants.

Initially, the organization provided me with contact information for all program workers. There were a total of five staff program workers facilitating the program. Program workers were sent a letter via email, inviting them to engage in a one-on-one telephone interview. All five program workers agreed to participate after receiving the first email (100% response rate).

Each youth that participates in the program has a caseworker assigned to them by their local child welfare agency. Caseworkers are not involved directly in program activities, but offer a unique perspective, having interacted with their clients before and after the program. Administrators agreed to provide me with contact information for caseworkers as well, but only after receiving approval to share this information from the caseworkers themselves. It is unclear how many caseworkers were contacted by the program, however I eventually received contact

information for eight county caseworkers. Caseworkers then received a letter via email, inviting them to participate in telephone interviews. Those who did not respond within 7 days received a follow-up email. Ultimately, six caseworkers agreed to participate (75% response rate).

I also sought to conduct interviews with current or former youth program participants; specifically older youth and young adults aged fourteen and older. Despite initial agreement to provide me with contact information for participants that fit this description, unforeseen complications related to privacy and permissions, both internally and with county partners, resulted in me receiving telephone contact information for only one former participant. I was able to reach out to this young adult via phone to invite him to participate in a telephone interview, and he agreed to participate. To incentivize participation, the youth was offered a $30 gift card. Results for this interview are included in this study, with the understanding that his responses provide an understanding of one person's experience and are not generalizable to other participants.

b) Qualitative Data Analysis Description- Data for this study was collected through intensive, one-on-one, semi-structured qualitative interviews. Interview guides can be found in Appendix 3. Questions were designed to be open-ended, allowing for a conversational atmosphere where interviewees are comfortable sharing their histories and stories. I conducted all interviews. All interviewees provided verbal consent to participate and to have their interviews recorded. Once interviews were completed, I transcribed and anonymized them.

During the interview process, I asked program workers questions related to their background, as well as their impressions of the program and their experiences related to the diverse and vulnerable population that it serves. They were also asked to remark on the programs impact on participants. Additional questions were designed as part of the implementation

evaluation. Program workers were asked to describe the program as it operates at their location, and whether they had faced unanticipated barriers as they attempted to facilitate all elements of the program.

As stated previously, caseworkers have a unique perspective, as they are not involved with the intricacies of the program itself. However, it is typically caseworkers who refer youth to the program, so they have detailed knowledge of the programs components and its purported benefits. Caseworkers were asked to describe any changes that they have seen in their client from the beginning of the program to the program's completion. They were also asked process related questions, including whether they would recommend the program to others, whether there is anything that the program should be doing differently, and whether there are any other programs in their country and state that are successful at helping this population.

The youth participant was asked questions about his background, including the length of time that he spent in foster care and his current living situation. In order to better understand his experiences related to the emerging adulthood period, he was asked questions about his support systems, including whether, and how, they changed during the course of his time in the program. He was also asked about whether he considers himself an adult. Lastly, he was asked questions that are directly related to his participation in the program. These questions were used to provide guidance on both the impacts and changes that occur as a result of program participation, as well as his impressions of the program itself, and the program worker(s) that facilitated it.

Interview questions centered around three primary topics; program operations, perceptions of the program, and program impacts. I used thematic framework analysis to study responses to these questions. This analysis strategy, as designed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994) and articulated by Srivastava and Thomson (2009), is well suited for research that uses specific

questions and a predetermined sample to address a priori issues. It has been used heavily in the health policy field (Niemasik, Letourneau, Dohan, Katz, Melisko, Rugo, & Rosen, 2012; McMahan, Knight, Fried, & Sudore, 2013; Ward, Furber, Tierney, & Swallow, 2013; etc.) but is useful for program/policy analysis in other fields as well. Here, I thoroughly familiarized myself with the transcribed data and examined it in order to recognize common themes and issues that arose from participant answers. Though themes may be influenced by the a priori issues used to formulate the interview guide, I allowed the data to guide the final themes that made up the framework. I then indexed the data according the themes and subthemes that arose during the analytic process (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009).

V. Summary

The primary aim of this research is to evaluate the Youth Connections program. This program uses a unique strategy in its attempt to improve the lives and long-term outcomes of youth who age out of the child welfare system. This strategy incorporates grief, loss, and trauma healing, though the 3-5-7 model, to help older, child welfare involved youth to acknowledge, confront, and process the trauma they have experienced. The intention behind this portion of the program is to help improve the mental and emotional health of youth participants. It is also to prepare them be able to trust and develop relationships with supportive adults. In the meantime, program workers work to identify adults as potential members of the youth's support network. They then facilitate meetings between youth and these adults, with the goal of establishing supportive, ongoing relationships. The guiding assumption for the design of this program is that youth who leave the child welfare system without having been adopted or reunited with their family of origin lack a social support network that peers not in the system have and utilize to

navigate the transition to adulthood. Therefore, the YC program's activities ultimately aim to help youth to develop these networks before they leave care.

More generally, this research will add to the literature on strategies used to impact older youth in the child welfare system. It will help us begin to understand whether permanency is the best strategy for helping youth make the transition to adulthood. It will also shed light on whether this trauma-informed approach helps youth to make more meaningful relationships.

Thus far, no formal evaluation of this program exists. As such, the current study seeks to understand not only the programs impacts, but also its implementation. The next chapter of this report contains the implementation portion of this evaluation. This part of the study will provide insight into program design, program processes, and fidelity to program model. Chapter three contains the summative evaluation of the YC program. In it, I assess the perceptions of key program stakeholders, including program workers, county caseworkers, and one former participant. These perceptions provide insight into program outcomes, and several strengths and weakness, which influence its ability to affect change. Finally, chapter four will provide a summary of findings, as well as program suggestions, study limitations, and future research directions.

Chapter 2: Implementation

I. Introduction

Program introduction

The overall aim of the Youth Connections (YC) program is to increase the likelihood of older youth in the child welfare system achieving successful life outcomes once they leave foster care. The YC program is primarily composed of two processes: Family Search and Engagement services (FSE) and grief, loss, and trauma healing via the 3-5-7 model. The way that this program combines trauma healing with the search for adult relationships is unique; I am not aware of another program that combines these strategies.

The YC program employs five dedicated staff members who each operate in their own geographic territory within two Midwestern states. These program workers engage with a team of people involved in the youths' lives, in addition to their work with the youth themselves. This team could include the youths' county child welfare caseworkers, therapists, and caregivers.

There are three primary goals of the YC program. The first goal is to help participants to heal from previous grief, loss, and trauma. The second goal is to increase both the number and the quality of relationships with supportive adults for each youth participant. Ideally, this would lead to the third goal, which is increased permanency for participants.

Implementation Justification

While the overarching goal of evaluating a program may be discovering its efficacy, a program's implementation can have a strong impact on its overall outcomes (Aarons et al. 2009, DuBois et al. 2002, Durlak and DuPre 2008). While perfectly implementing a program does not guarantee its success, partial or incorrect program implementation may lead to negative, null, or unanticipated results. Implementation evaluations should be a crucial part of any evaluation plan

as they shed light on how a program works and what aspects of the program contribute to the effect (Durlak and DuPre 2008). Conducting this type of evaluation allows the researcher to understand program design, program processes, and fidelity to program model, along with the impressions or experiences of those participating in and carrying out the day-to-day activities the program requires. Understanding program implementation can also help researchers to interpret, and provide context for, the results found by program outcome evaluations. These findings can, therefore, guide future replication efforts, in the event that the studied program is a success.

In the case of the YC program, no formal implementation evaluation exists. The Director of Healing Programs for this organization supervises program activities and participates in regular check-ins with program workers individually and as a group. Program workers also report working together to help with problem solving and decision-making. However, there is ample opportunity for variation from program model, as there are multiple program workers who work from different sites, with individual caseloads. The implementation portion of this evaluation aims to understand more thoroughly the YC program, its participants, and fidelity to program design. As the next chapter of this dissertation examines program outcomes and results, it is important to begin by completing an implementation evaluation in order to provide context for outcome evaluation results, and to inform future efforts at program improvement.

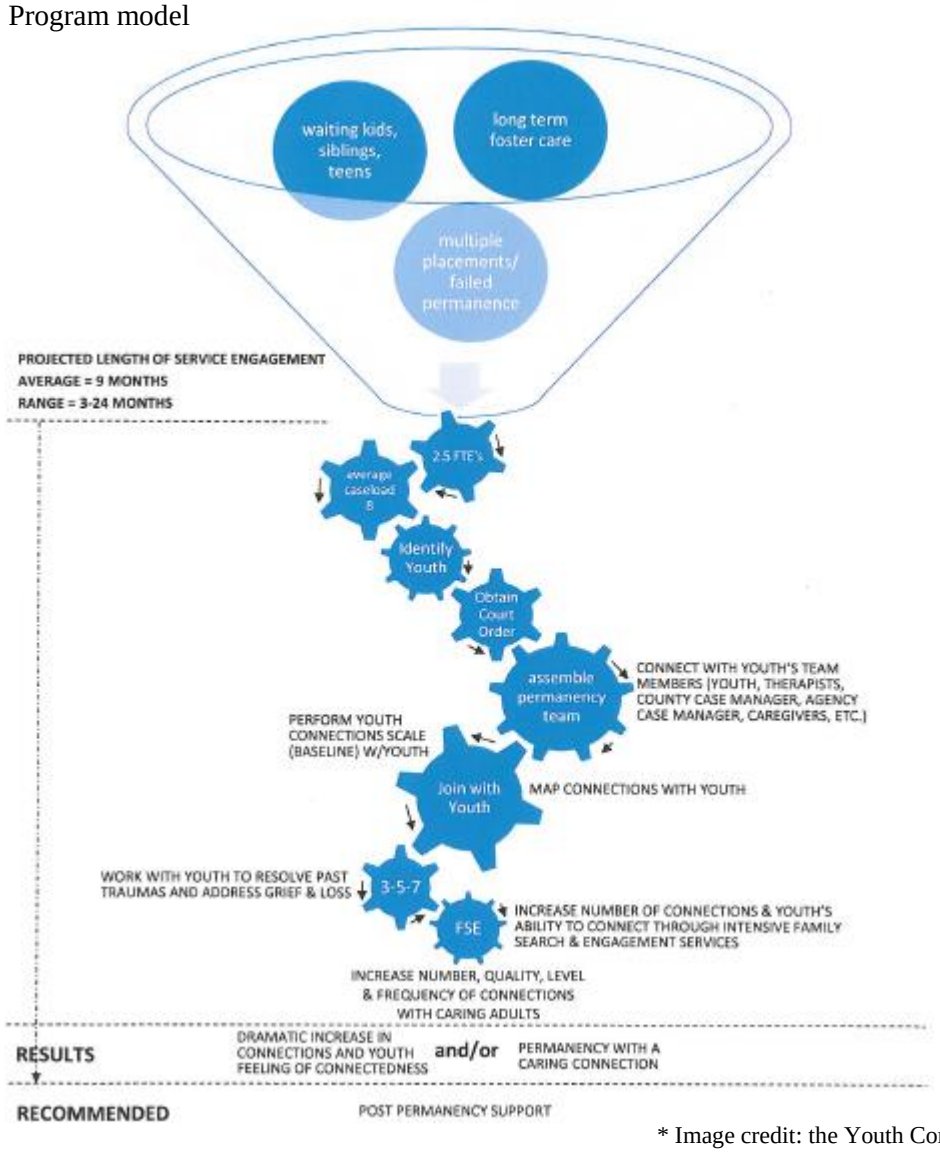
II. The Youth Connections Program

a. Program Model and Description

Leaders in this organization developed the model for the YC program in 2012 (see Figure 1). The program's design is informed by two primary beliefs. First, in order for at-risk youth to build the capacity to form long-term, meaningful relationships, they must heal from past trauma, grief,

and loss. Secondly, creating connections to supportive adults from youths' pasts is key to providing them support in the future. The program is, therefore, simultaneously backwards looking and focused on the future. The attention to trauma healing while performing searches for supportive adults is unique among programs designed for this population.

Fig. 1. Program model



* Image credit: the Youth Connections program

Department of Children and Families (DCF) caseworkers refer youth to the program. If youth are interested in learning about the YC program, involvement in the program should begin with a meeting between youth and their YC program worker in which program workers describe

program goals and responsibilities. These meetings will typically take place at or near the youth's place of residence. This program emphasizes a youth-driven participation structure, and therefore, the power to determine whether they will participate in the program lies in the hands of youth participants. Youth may decide not to participate in the program, although program staff report this happens only rarely. Once they are hired, program workers should meet with the youth again to enroll them in the program. In enrolling a youth, the program model dictates that the worker is making a commitment to remaining with the youth for the duration of program participation. This means that if, at any time, the youth moves, the program worker will travel to this new residence in order to continue working together. Throughout the program, staff members should maintain regular connection and communication with the team of service providers that work with each youth. This team may include county caseworkers, therapists, social workers, guardians ad litem, foster parents, and biological or adoptive parents (as are available for individual participants).

During the first few meetings, program workers are to assess and gather information about the youth using a variety of tools and measures. This will include the Youth Connections Scale, Hope Scale, Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire, and the collection of past placement and service system involvement histories. This information gathering establishes a baseline as program workers are meant to administer the Youth Connections Scale quarterly for the duration of the program, and they should administer the Hope Scale again at the conclusion of program activity.

Program workers should meet individually with each of the no more than eight youth on their caseload at least twice a month. In keeping with the youth-driven emphasis, youth can decline to meet with their program worker at any time without consequences. At the beginning of

the program, meetings focus on building trust between the youth and the program worker. Given the traumatic histories of many of the youth participants, the program designers believe that it is important that trust is established as the foundation of this relationship and before work on trauma healing can really begin. Program workers should use a variety of activities to build trust, including playing games, taking field trips, participating in favorite activities, developing life and relationship timelines, and putting together genograms (visual representations of a person's family relationships). During this phase, program workers will also begin collecting names of potential supportive adults with whom the youth could be connected in the future. The names come from timelines, genograms, intensive investigation and research of the youths' child welfare files, and following conversations with youth and their service teams.

Once trust is established, and youth are able to open up to their program workers, youth and program workers should move into the therapeutic healing phase of the program. In this phase, program workers will help youth to confront past trauma, address and grieve any losses they have experienced, and begin to think about their future. They are to use a variety of approaches, but they primarily employ Darla Henry's 3-5-7 model. At this point program workers also solicit suggestions from youth about adults with whom they would like to establish ongoing and supportive relationships. Program workers should contact these adults to determine whether there is a mutual interest in exploring these relationships, and then work with the youth and the adults separately to prepare them for a future meeting.

The final portion of the program is the connecting phase, which should focus on establishing, developing, and supporting ongoing relationships between program youth and supportive adults. Program workers will set up and facilitate meetings between youth and adults, and engage in crisis management for any problems or issues that arise as these relationships are

forming. Program workers should also assist relationship dyads in developing and committing to a permanency pact, a customizable, written document that the youth and adult develop in order to specify the types of support that the youth desires and the adult is willing and able to provide.

According to the program model (see Figure 1), the projected length of activity for this program is 3-24 months, with a projected average participation length of 9 months. However, based on their experience with youth participants, program workers and administrators now believe the program average is much closer to 18 months. Therefore, the funding that they seek from contracts with individual counties now typically stipulates 18 to 24 months of funding. Accordingly, the expectation is that during this 18-24 month period, youth with have completed all phases of the program, and will have established permanent, long-term relationships with supportive adults. The relationships between program workers and youth will end, as the newly established supportive relationships will take focus and priority. The intention is that this transfer of priority and support will happen as the program is ending, as the 18-24 month period is concluding.

b. The 3-5-7 and Family Search and Engagement Models

The 3-5-7 Model

Darla Henry designed the 3-5-7 Model as a tool for professionals who are working to prepare foster youth for permanency. Dr. Henry built this approach around the assumption that youth seeking permanency have suffered from loss and trauma, and that resolving these issues is crucial for a successful transition into new permanent relationships.

The 3-5-7 model incorporates three primary components: (1) The completion of three tasks: clarification (the understanding of what happened in their life), integration (understanding their place in their past family arrangements), and actualization (understanding where they fit in

their new or biological permanent family). (2) Answering five questions: Who am I?, What happened to me?, Where am I going?, How will I get there?, When will I know I belong? (3) Implementing seven critical elements: engage the child in the process; listen to the child's words; when you speak, tell the truth; validate the child and the child's life story; create a safe space for the child as he/she does this work; it is never too late to go back in time; pain is part of the process (Henry, 2005).

Overall, the goal of the model is for youth to be able to understand their life events, experience and process grief, and heal from trauma. By doing so, the program theory states, they can accept and integrate into a permanent family (Henry, 2005). Research showing that preparing a child to join a permanent family must involve a process for addressing issues of loss, identity, and attachment (Jarrett, 1978; Jewett, 1982); these form the basis of this model. Recent research on other trauma-informed therapies has also shown that this type of approach can lead to improvements in child functioning, emotional regulation, and behavioral regulation and can lead to increased placement stability (Murphy, Moore, Redd, & Malm, 2017). This last piece is especially important given that experiencing placement instability can impede youth from making meaningful attachments to caregivers (Leathers, 2006; Wulczyn et al., 2003).

While this model is evidence-informed, no empirical test for the model is available. Though recent research examining the impact of trauma-informed therapy on foster youth has shown promising results (Murphy, et al., 2017), further research is needed to understand the effectiveness of this particular model. The research here contributes to our understanding of its implementation and potential impact when it is used in combination with family search and connection practices.

Family Search and Engagement

The National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning at Hunter College and the California Permanency for Youth Project developed the model for the intensive Family Search and Engagement services portion of the YC program. It follows a six-step model to locate and connect youth to supportive adults from their lives. These adults may include extended family members, former foster parents, or family friends; the assumption is that the youth either cannot get the support they need from their parents or that their parents are no longer present in their lives. The six steps used during this process are: Setting the Stage, Discovery, Engagement, Exploration and Planning, Decision making and Evaluation, and Sustaining the Relationship(s) (Louisell, 2008).

Empirical date on this model is limited, and results are mixed. Results from several studies have shown support for extensive family search and engagement services. For example, Landsman and Boel-Studt (2011) found, in a randomized experiment, that family search specialists using this method were able to significantly increase contact between youth and family members or other supportive adults. In a follow-up randomized study, Landsman, Boel-Studt, and Malone (2014) found that this approach allowed specialists to connect with a larger number of family members and increased the likelihood that children in care had at least one supportive connection with an adult. The authors found that youth were less likely to age out of care without permanency plan, and the program increased the number of participants adopted by relatives.

However, recent studies have called into question the effectiveness of this program on long-term outcomes like permanency and youth wellbeing. A study by Leon, Saucedo, and Jachymiak (2016) showed that there were no differences between an intervention Family Finding

group and comparison group on “reunification rates, placement stability, or on longitudinal externalizing behavior and internalizing symptoms” (p. 163). Relatedly, in a recent study of older youth at risk of aging out of foster care (Vandivere, Malm, Allen, Williams, & McKlindon, 2017), researchers did not find evidence that this family finding process improves outcomes.

These negative findings would likely not discourage, or even surprise, designers of the Youth Connections program. At the YC program’s inception, it only included Family Search and Engagement activities. However, program staff and administrators noticed that participants were having difficulty making meaningful connections to the adults that were located through these activities. They made the decision to incorporate the 3-5-7 model into the program in order to help youth to heal from trauma and prepare them for future relationships.

Likewise, Leon et al. (2016) found that establishing adult connections was not a problem for the foster youth. In fact, the study showed that those working with the intervention group located close to 75% more relatives than the control group. Nonetheless, it failed to have an impact on permanency and wellbeing. The researchers suggested that the reason for this is that family finding activities may not do enough to address the psychosocial issues that contribute to these outcomes. They suggest that this type of intervention might work best when paired with psychosocial interventions designed to address these issues. The program investigated here, which combines Family Search and Engagement with the 3-5-7 model, is an example of the type of programming suggested by these researchers. This study contributes to the literature by beginning to explore whether this pairing leads to positive outcomes.

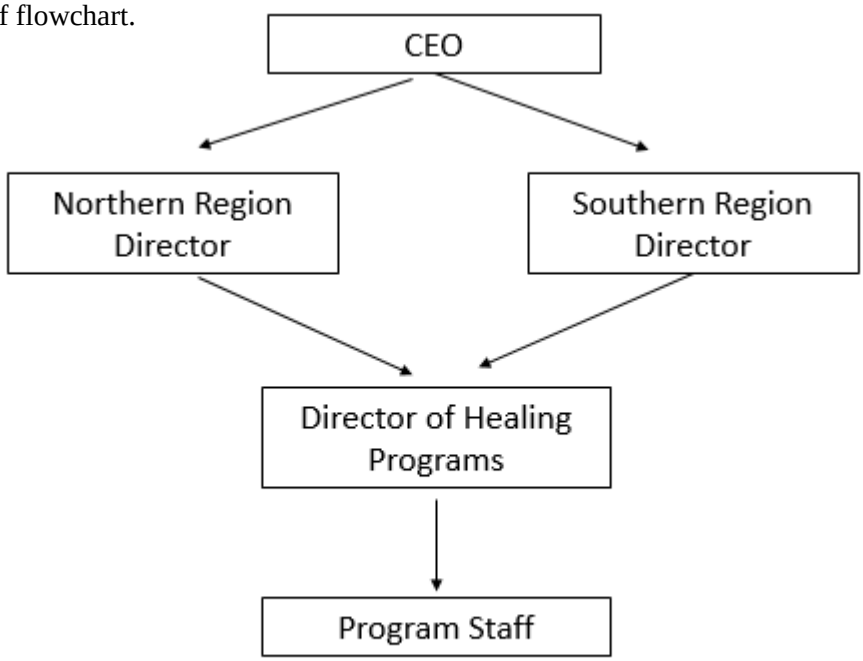
III. Findings

a. Staff and Participant Characteristics

Staff

The head of this organization is the CEO (see figure 2). She oversees all programs and organizational activities. A volunteer board of directors lend their time and expertise to counsel the leadership team on the optimal functioning of this organization.

Fig. 2. Staff flowchart.



All of the work done by this organization is divided into two sections, based on geography. The Northern and Southern Region Directors supervise the activities of various program directors, including the Director of Healing Programs.

The Director of Healing Programs provides administrative oversight over the activities of these staff members. She is involved in the training, advising, and supervising of staff members working on this and other healing focused program that YC's umbrella organization provides.

For the purposes of the program in question, the individuals working with youth program participants are the program staff. The program workers carry-out the everyday functions of the program and work with participants one-on-one. Each staff member has a caseload of no more than eight youth at a time, which is consistent with the program's intended design.

i. Staff Background

Table 1

Staff Background

Program Worker	Previous Work Experience
PW A	Worked in child protection for 17 years
PW B	Worked with a social service agency 2 years and then worked with a treatment foster care agency for 6.5 years
PW C	Started with this organization after college 16 years ago; came to this particular program after doing treatment and special needs foster care work
PW D	Worked in child welfare, providing wrap-around care and other care work, for 15 years
PW E	Worked for 3 years in the Dept. of Children and Family Services, and then for a non-profit organization providing treatment and therapeutic foster care for 2 years

The program staff members all come from social service backgrounds. Their experience in the field ranges from one staff member who started immediately after college to another who had worked in the child welfare system for 15 years before joining this organization.

There have been very low levels of staff turnover in this program, which is a crucial contributor to successful program functioning, as it relies on lengthy, ongoing relationships between program workers and youth. With higher levels of staff turnover, the process of program participation would likely need to start over for a youth each time a new program worker took over, as the process of trust building would have to begin again.

It is likely that workers' high levels of job satisfaction contribute to their low turnover rates. In our interviews, they described their work as "fun" and "enjoy[able]" (Program Workers 1 and 5, respectively). Program Worker 4 reflected on her own internal changes that occurred as a result of her two years of work with YC:

> "…I've grown more professionally in the last two years than I have in most of my career. Like, I feel like the learning that has happened, as far as what people or what families are experiencing…and in terms of their grief and loss and trauma, I feel like I kind of had an awareness before but I didn't really know. And I feel like I know more now and I'm doing better healing work now…. I'm really excited to keep growing here, I love it here. It's been good to me."

Prior to working at YC, PW4 worked in child protection in three different states, as well as at a private non-profit that served juvenile justice involved foster youth. Now, she intends to continue working with the YC program for a long time. Staff satisfaction, like that expressed by PW4, is key to keeping turnover low, which is crucial to program functioning. I anticipate that turnover rates will remain low for the foreseeable future.

ii. Staff Service Area

Youth participants in the YC program are scattered around two different Midwestern states. Staff members reside in different communities and serve youth who are geographically closest to them when they enter the program. The youth could live within a half hour, or as far as 6 hours away from their program staff member. There is not an even distribution of travel among staff members. Some staff report a small travel radius, while others report a large amount of

travel. This variation appears to be due to location of the staff member. For example, one staff member lives close to an urban area and primarily serves youth there, while another lives in a more rural area and therefore does much more traveling. A change in a youth's placement could add time and miles between the youth and their staff member, but because of the commitment that is made at the beginning of the program, the staff member will travel whatever distance is required to continue meeting with the youth and continue facilitating program participation.

Participant Characteristics

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Participants in the Youth Connections Program (n=35)

Characteristic	YC Youth n (%)	Nat'l Comparison Youth[2] (%)
Age at Intake		
Younger than 10	1 (2.9)	
10-12	10 (28.6)	
13-15	18 (51.4)	
16-18	6 (17.1)	
Average	*13.4*	*8.6*
Median	*14*	*7.8*
Range	*6-17*	*0-21*
Gender		
Male	21 (60.0)	(52)
Female	13 (37.1)	(48)
Unknown	1 (2.9)	
Race/Ethnicity		
White	21 (60.0)	(43)
Black	8 (22.9)	(24)
Native American	3 (8.6)	(2)
Hispanic	1 (2.9)	(21)
Multiracial	1 (2.9)	(7)
Unknown	1 (2.9)	(2)

This section provides a description of characteristics of program participants. Information contained in this section was collected by the program agency as part of intake and maintenance

[2] Information for the national comparison group comes from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System's FY 2015 data

record keeping procedures. Descriptive characteristics help us to understand whether this program is reaching its target audience. They also show us whether this program is attracting youth with similar characteristics as those in the wider state and national populations of foster youth. If there is a large discrepancy between program participants and other youth in this population, it would be worth further investigation to explain why this is occurring.

Participants in this program range in age from 6 to 17 years old. The majority fall in the 13-15 year old age range, with a median age of 14. This is older than the median population of youth in care nationwide. This result is not surprising, given the original focus of this program on preparing older youth for leaving care. Notably, nearly one third of participants are 12 or younger, which indicates that the program is serving a substantial number of youth who are not in the initial adolescent target population; they are not close to aging out of foster care, and they are less likely to do so than older youth (Ringeisen, Tueller, Testa, Dolan, & Smith, 2013).

There are more male participants in the YC program than female participants (60% vs. 37%). This is reflective of the total population in out-of-home care at the national level (52% vs. 48%) (AFCARS, 2016). In addition, the majority of program participants are white (60%), while a sizable minority are African American (22.9%). At the national level, of the children in out-of-home care, 43% were white and 24% were African American (AFCARS, 2016). It appears that this program has an overrepresentation of white youth compared to the racial makeup of youth in care nationally. This might mean that white youth are being recommended for the program for often, or that they are more inclined to participate. It also may be reflective of the geographical location of the counties who refer youth to the program. YC staff should review referral and participation data to ensure that this discrepancy is not a result of program recruitment and that the program is culturally competent.

Table 3

Youth Connections Participant History Characteristics (n=35)

Characteristic	n (%)
Social Service Systems	
None	0 (0.0)
1-3	23 (65.7)
4-6	12 (34.3)
Average	*2.9*
Child Welfare Placements	
None	1 (2.9)
1-5	22 (62.9)
6-10	8 (22.9)
11-15	1 (2.9)
16-20	0 (0.0)
21+	3 (8.6)
Average	*6.3*
Median	*4*
Range	*0-33*
ACEs Scores	
0	2 (5.7)
1-4	8 (22.9)
5-7	18 (51.4)
8-10	7 (20)
Average	*5.4*
Range	*0-10*

Prior to participation in the program, all participants had been involved in at least one social service system. Social service systems are programs and institutions designed to promote social well-being, such special education, juvenile justice, or child protective services. The fact that all participants have been involved with at least one system makes sense, given that child welfare involvement is a precondition of program participation. However, many youth in this study were involved with multiple social service systems, ranging from one to five systems.

Information collected about participants' child welfare placement history sheds light on the instability experienced by many participating youth. Youth had an average of 6.3 placements when they began YC, including 12 youth who had a history of more than five placements, three of whom had been placed over 20 times. While research on placement history is limited, Kim, Pears, and Fisher (2012) showed that foster youth in their sample experienced an average of seven transitions, with a range of 1-24. These figures are comparable to the youth in this study.

Youth in the child welfare system have been exposed to more violence than children in the general population (Stein et al., 2001). Studies of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) among former child welfare involved youth have shed light on the enormity of this issue; for example, Bruskas and Tessin (2013) found that, among women who had been in foster care, 97% reported experiencing at least one ACE; nearly 70% reported five or more, and 33% reported eight or more. In the present study, over 94%[3] of participants in this study reported experiencing at least one ACE, 71.4% reported experiencing 5 or more ACEs, and 20% reported experiencing eight or more, which is consistent with Bruskas and Tessin's findings. .

b. Understanding of Program Goals

As described above, the program's goals are helping youth heal from previous grief, loss, and trauma, increasing connections to supportive adults, and increased permanency for participants. It is also valuable to understand how key stakeholders conceptualize the program's goals because it helps us to understand whether their actions and activities are geared toward the accomplishment of these goals. It is useful to assess whether there is consistency or variation among the different stakeholder groups, which can help us to understand whether these groups

[3] All youth in this sample have been involved with the child welfare system. Therefore, it is impossible that a youth with this history would have an ACE score of zero, and therefore some kind of error likely led to records showing that two youth have a score of zero. YC staff should check their survey administration and data entry procedures to ensure that data is accurately collected and entered.

are aiming for the same things, and identifying program success by similar measures. Program workers and child welfare caseworkers each have a unique role in the implementation of this program; therefore, I discuss each group's understanding of the program goals.

Program workers

In my interviews with program workers, all of them described the goals of the YC program as focusing on healing and building connections. Program Worker 2 described their pursuit of grief, loss, and trauma healing as, "validating and helping [youth] heal from their grief, their loss and their trauma, from previous moves, traumatic events, and losses from being in the child protection, child welfare system." The other goal, as Program Worker 3 described it, was "to reunify children with lost connections." Three program workers also mentioned a third goal of establishing some measure of permanency. As Program Worker 4 explained, "the goal there is to help kids so that they can connect to other permanent options."

That all program workers mentioned the first two goals is important because it shows that they are all on the same page and working toward similar outcomes. It is also important to note that the goals articulated by program workers are very similar to those found in the program model. This tells us that all program workers are well versed in what the program is supposed to be doing and have an understanding of the program that is reflective of that of the program designers. The fact that the goal of achieving permanency came up less frequently may mean that this component of the program is less of a priority for some program workers.

Child welfare caseworkers

All of the caseworkers interviewed for this study mentioned at least one of three primary program goals. The first goal, touched on by four caseworkers, is grief and trauma healing. For example, Caseworker 6 described YC's focus this way: "They work on some of the grieving that

kids in foster care kind of go through. And that doesn't just pertain to just loss of the family member but just the reality of being in foster care." The second goal, articulated by four caseworkers, is establishing connections with supportive adults. Lastly, three caseworkers described establishing permanency as a goal of the YC program. Caseworker 1 explained, "[T]heir focus is on finding permanence for that child and then supporting *whatever that permanence is*" (emphasis added). We can hear from Caseworker 1, however, that caseworkers understood that the permanency of the connections established through YC may look different than the sort of permanent legal and physical placement child welfare workers are pursuing. Similarly, Caseworker 5 explained that "…for some youth it might actually be living with or finding other resources to move in with, or just even long term connection that are just going to be there as part of their family or their support system moving forward."

Interestingly, there was no consensus by all caseworkers on these goals. Only one caseworker mentioned all three of these program goals, with the remaining caseworkers mentioning one or two of the goals in various combinations. The goal that was most strongly emphasized by caseworkers was establishing permanency. Caseworkers saw this as essential to how youth would fare after leaving the child welfare system. Caseworker 6 said of the YC program, "[T]hey connect individuals to other connections that they could have for the rest of their life. And other adults that they could trust and go to to help them be more successful once they're independent." Permanency is likely a more common measure of success within the child welfare system. It would make sense, then, that caseworkers would prioritize this objective over the others.

Understanding the primary goals of this program from the perspective of caseworkers helps to determine how they might measure program success. Caseworkers will likely be looking

to see whether their clients were able to achieve these goals when considering whether they will recommend this program for further clients or other youth in the child welfare system in their county.

Comparison of program and caseworkers

All of the people interviewed for this project mentioned at least one, and often more, of the program's intended goals. All program workers mentioned grief, loss, and trauma healing, and establishing adult connections as the two primary goals of this work. Several also mentioned establishing permanency. There was less consensus among caseworkers, but all mentioned at least one of these three goals, with most mentioning at least two; and none of them described other goals for the program that did not align with the program's intentions. By and large, program and caseworkers seem to have a generally shared understanding of what YC is meant to accomplish. This makes sense, given that caseworkers learn about the program from program workers. It is interesting to note, however, that the goal that program workers mentioned least frequently is the goal that caseworkers mentioned most. This could have an impact when each group looks to determine the progression and success or failure of the program. If program workers are using grief, loss, and trauma healing and making connections as markers of success while some caseworkers are instead looking for permanency, this could cause confusion or disagreement about whether the program achieved its objectives.

c. Fidelity

In order to thoroughly understand the impact of a program or intervention on youth outcomes, it is prudent to measure program fidelity. Assessing fidelity involves exploring the extent to which a program, as implemented, adhered to the goals and activities set out by the

program model. Measuring fidelity can help to connect any program outcomes to the activities and processes undertaken by the program (Mowbray, Holter, Teague, & Bybee, 2003). Studies in the child welfare field have found there to be a relationship between adherence to the model and positive outcomes for children and families (Bruns, Suter, Force, & Burchard, 2005; Rast, Peterson, Earnest, & Mears, 2003). This type of evaluation can assist researchers and program designers in understanding null or negative outcomes as well. Using fidelity measures will reflect whether negative results are as a result of program administrators failing to implement the program correctly, or whether there is a flaw in the program theory (Century et al., 2010; Raudenbush, 2007). As such, program fidelity is one of the most common tools used by researchers to assess implementation (Proctor, Silmere, Raghavan et al., 2011).

Target audience

The current program model for this organization includes a focus on recruiting three groups of at-risk youth in the foster care system. These groups include youth in long-term foster care; kids, siblings, and teens waiting for adoption; and youth with multiple placements or failed adoptions. According to data collected by the organization, a large majority of participants in the YC program fit into at least one of these three target categories. Of the 35 youth for which complete information is available, only three have no history of involvement in the foster care system[4]. However, my interviews with program workers revealed that additional participants may not fit into these categories when they enroll in the program. Several program workers provided examples of youth who are living with parents or guardians while participating in the program. The next chapter will discuss whether and how the program serving a population for which it was not intended may alter its efficacy.

[4] There are a few participants in this program who are involved with the child welfare system, but who have never been in formal foster care.

Program worker caseload size

As intended, program workers maintain caseloads of no more than eight youth. Child welfare caseworkers made note of this crucial distinction shaping how they work with youth in comparison to the YC program workers. All caseworkers I interviewed reported having large caseloads, with one caseworker saying that her caseload is over 100 youth. These caseloads limit the amount of time that caseworkers are able to spend with each individual client. Therefore, they appreciate the fact that this program is structure to allow program workers individualized time with each of their clients. Caseworker 1 said, "I think [program workers are able to provide] intensity and focus that we don't have time for. Having someone who does have time and that's their focus, it just really works." Caseworker 3 explained that by maintaining the lower caseloads, as prescribed by the YC model, program workers "can be time intensive in searching out and hunting down these relatives and significant people that are out there. So that part of it has been great." As the caseworkers explain, it would be virtually impossible for anyone to devote the time that program workers spend on each client if they had to serve the large numbers of clients that county caseworkers have on their caseloads. This portion of the program has been implemented as intended, with program workers averaging a load of X clients at a time.

Coordination with provider team

One of the valued parts of the YC program, by both program staff and county caseworkers, is the regular connection and communication that program workers have with the team of service providers that work with each youth. In interviews, program staff report connecting with this team on a weekly basis and consulting with team members when making important program decisions, for example, when they decide to initiate a connection with an adult, or recognizing achieved milestones, like when they move from one program phase to

another. Program Worker 2 described these meetings as frequent and crucial. “We are meeting at least 15 minutes each week via phone so we are always in the know of what’s going on with everyone else’s goals so we can all work together…, [which is] pretty unique to our program.”

In our interviews, caseworkers brought up their participation in these meetings as a valuable component of the YC program. Most of the caseworkers had wonderful things to say about the individual program workers with whom they had interacted. In part, what made these relationships so positive is the clear, frequent communication between program workers and the other members of the child’s care team. We hear this in how Caseworker 1 describes her interactions with her client’s YC program workers. “I really liked her emails, all of her communication skills, but her weekly topic emails, that worked out really well where she would start out with a topic and then she would do the breakdown of her updates. I always felt in the loop. Which was really appreciated.” These findings indicate, first, that program workers are following this portion of the program model as intended, according to both their own and caseworker reports, and second, this process seems to both facilitate information sharing and relationship building across stakeholders.

However, though the program model requires that program workers be in regular communication with all members of the youth’s team, specific guidelines regarding the involvement, or “buy-in” of parents (biological, adoptive, foster, etc.) have not been articulated. In chapter three, I review some of the concerns that arise when parents resist program participation or activities. Developing a protocol for getting parents on board with this program may alleviate some of these issues.

Data Collection

According to the model for the YC program, during the first few meetings with any new clients, program workers are to assess and gather information about the youth using a variety of tools and measures, including the Youth Connections Scale, Hope Scale, Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire, and the past placement and service system involvement histories.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences score (ACEs) is an assessment tool that is commonly used by those working with at-risk populations. This questionnaire measures the number of occurrences of abuse, neglect, and/or household challenges that people face before the age of 18. Research has shown that the higher a person's ACE score, the more likely they are to experience negative health and well-being outcomes (Felitti, Anda, et al., 1998). The Youth Connection Scale is a tool developed by the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) at the University of Minnesota, in partnership with this program's parent organization. This tool is used to measure the number and strength of supportive adult connections in a youth's life (Jones & LaLiberte, 2013). Lastly, a team of researchers led by C. R. Snyder from the University of Kansas Lawrence developed the Hope Scale. It is a tool that is used to measure youth's feelings about hope, including their beliefs about themselves, their self-efficacy, and possibilities for future success (Snyder, et al., 1997).

This information gathering is intended to help staff better understand the clients' lived experiences. Further, it establishes a baseline, as the Youth Connections Scale is to be administered quarterly for the duration of the program, and the Hope Scale is to be administered again at the conclusion of program activity. The program's intention is that youth progress can then be tracked using this longitudinal data.

Based on data the organization provided to me, fidelity to these data collection procedures is mixed. There is consistency in the collection of placement histories and service

system involvement, as well as the Youth Connections Scale and ACEs, at the time of entrance to the program. Staff members' collection of Hope Scale data, however, is much less consistent. Of the 35 youth in this sample, 11 had Hope Scale intake results. In addition, of the 29 youth who had left the program, only three had had the Hope Scale measured at program exit.

This means that tracking changes in this outcome, as intended in the program design, is not possible. This may be particularly problematic for the program in terms of documenting its successes, given that, in our interviews, program workers described this as one of the most important changes that participants experience as a result of this program. For example, Program Worker 2 says, "You can see hope…like I don't know how you describe when you see a child all of the sudden have hope…, but they have it and it is undeniable to anyone who has worked with them, over a period of years." Were they consistently collecting data from the Hope Scale, program administrators could use quantitative data from this assessment tool to support this conclusion. Program administrators and workers should examine data collection procedures to discover why the administration of this particular inventory is so spotty. They need to decide whether this is an outcome they want to measure, whether this is the best measurement tool, and how data collection processes can be improved.

Program Activities

As previously stated, youth participation in the program should begin with a meeting between youth and their program worker in which program workers describe program goals and responsibilities to the youth. These initial meetings will typically take place at the youth's foster or group home. Youth have the power to determine whether they will participate in the program and it is their choice whether to accept or decline. If they are hired, program workers should meet with the youth to enroll them in the program.

Program staff report that these meetings take place with each potential client, in line with the program model, and that youth are making final decisions about the hiring process. During this initial meeting, staff may also decide that youth are incompatible with the program. In instances when this has occurred, staff described potential clients as unable to participate due to developmental inability to complete program activities and processes. This evaluation of client compatibility was not originally part of the program model, but has been added to program activities by program workers, following situations in which youth have been unable to participate based on these characteristics.

Program workers should meet individually with each youth on their caseloads, and meetings will focus on building trust between the youth and the program worker. Program workers should use a variety of activities to build trust. During this phase, program workers will also begin collecting names of potential future supportive adults.

The timeline for developing a list of names of potential future adults varies, and it does not always follow the timeline set out in the program model. Each staff member's process during this stage varies, based on her experience, comfort, and discretion. Some staff members report waiting until the healing phase to broach the topic of adults from the youth's past, especially if the youth's memories of these adults are painful.

Once trust is established, youth and program workers should move into the therapeutic healing phase of the program. In this section, program workers will use Darla Henry's 3-5-7 model help youth to confront past trauma, address and grieve any losses they have experienced, and begin to think about their future. Program workers describe these processes of facing and healing from past trauma and loss as occurring during this part of the program.

Youth will identify adults with whom they would like to establish ongoing and supportive relationships and program workers should contact these adults to gauge their interest, and then work with the youth and the adults separately to facilitate a future meeting.

Program workers report working with youth to understand how they might react to meeting or reuniting with adults. They help the youth to develop strategies for confronting complex emotions and building or rebuilding trust with these adults. Program workers also identified ways that they work with these adults, to prepare them for potential negative behaviors that youth may exhibit. They are carrying out the program as intended by ensuring that both youth and adults are prepared for the feelings and behaviors that may occurring during future meetings.

The final section of the program is the connecting phase, during which program workers will set up and facilitate meetings between youth and adults, and engage in crisis management for any problems or issues that arise as these relationships are forming. Program workers should also assist relationship dyads in developing and committing to a permanency pact, in which both the youth and adult commit to a long-term relationship and an ongoing level of support.

Program workers report facilitation of meetings and relationship development between adult youth dyads. They also report management of crises (arguments, disconnection, behavioral problems, etc.) as they arise. However, several of them also report concerns about the timeline at this point in the program. Often, the trust building and healing stage take longer to move through than is dictated in the program model, and as such, there is less time for the connecting phase. In the next section, I address concerns over whether the current timeframe allowed in the contracts between YC and county child welfare offices is adequate for youth to complete the full program.

Length/duration of the program

The organization has laid out estimated timelines for each phase of the program. The trusting phase should take place during the first nine months, the healing phase should take place at some point during months 6-18, and the connecting phase should take place at some point during months 12-18.

Based on interviews with program staff, this program is likely to take 18-24 months, which does not necessarily align with the program's timeline. If children experience additional loss or trauma while they are participating in the program, the program's length may increase. Program Worker 4 shared how with one current client, "she's been just actively in her grief" even though they are 18 months into the program. As a result, she says, "I don't see an end date with her." Contractually, however, YC is only compensated for serving youth typically for 18-24 months, so an "end date" comes whether youth are ready or not.

When I asked program workers whether it would be possible to complete the program in less than 18 months, all agreed that it would be extremely difficult for youth to move through at the pace needed to complete the program in this period. Program Worker 4 said that only a unique, and very trusting, youth would be able to pass through the trusting phase with enough speed to finish the program in this timeframe. Conversely, she explained, the more "relational trauma" youth have experienced, the more time it seemed to take for them to complete the program. "I think the more loss and the more disrupted connections that they've had, I think the time takes much longer than someone who has had less."

Another group of youth who tend to move through the program at a slower rate are children living in an institutional setting. Program workers observed that when youth are living with biological, foster, or preadoptive familes, they can call on the families to support youth, especially during the trusting and healing phases of the program. This is not an option for youth

in residential or other non-home setting. Program Worker 2 observed, “I’ve had youth where they’re in very secure residential or correctional placements where I’ve had to have a security guard in the room with me or I can’t take them off the grounds and so everything just moves much more slower. Until the treatment center trusts me to leave me alone, and maybe take them off grounds, everything just takes longer.”

Program Worker 5 explained that the organization has brainstormed ways to shorten the program, but they had yet to identify an adequate solution:

> “You know, because it is youth driven, we’ve come to learn that it is 18-24 months because that’s how long it takes for the youth to really do the healing work and for the connection work to occur. So we haven’t figured out a way to shorten it because then we would be pushing the youth to do something that they aren’t ready to do…. [S]o, trust me, if there was a way, we would do that. You can’t speed up healing work.”

In Program Worker 5’s description here, we see a tension between the pressure to move youth through the program swiftly and the program’s dedication to empowering youth and allowing their needs and wishes to direct its pacing. Further, as we hear from Program Worker 2, institutional structures, such as the children’s living arrangements, can also prolong their progression through the program. According to what the program workers are experiencing, therefore, the program model timeline of an 18-month maximum is not realistic.

Problems related to the disconnect between the stated length of the program, and the actual time it takes for participants to complete all of the steps have arisen for the YC program. These problems are particularly pressing when youth are unable to complete the program because they age out of the system or due to the end of a county contract period.

Youth may not be able to complete the program if they begin it less than 18 months before they reach the age of majority. Once youth in the foster care system reach the age of majority, at 18 to 21 depending on the state where they reside, they “age out” of the system and

are no longer eligible for services provided by state and county child welfare systems. This includes participation in programs like the YC program. If youth enter the program without adequate time to get through all of the program phases before they age out, they are unable to complete the program. Program Worker 3 has encountered this problem on a few occasions. She shared that, "[Youth may not complete the program] because their order has ended. Once they turn 18 they age out, so their [eligibility for services] ends. I wouldn't continue on because…once [my contract] ends I end." In these cases, youth are likely unable to emerge from the program with the secure relationships they need with supportive adults to ease their transition to adulthood.

Youth may also exit the program before completion if YC's contract with the child welfare agency ends. Sometimes, these contracts are written to only fund 18 months of YC services. However, program workers believe that many youth in this program need more than 18 months to move through all of the program's phases. In a few cases, this disconnect between expected program length and actual length has resulted in the cessation of funding, and therefore participation, before participants have been able to make or solidify sustainable connections.

The potential impact of premature program cessation cannot be overstated. As was discussed previously, one of the primary program goals mentioned by all program workers and several of the caseworkers is establishing connections with supportive adults. Given our knowledge about the emerging adulthood period and the importance of social support, this connection to supportive adults is crucial to future success (Aquilino, 2006; Bowers, Johnson, et al., 2014; Settersen & Ray, 2010). For the program to be implemented as intended, it is essential that program administrators prioritize the full completion of this portion of the program, and that counties understand the risks of ending the program early. Child welfare administrators and YC

staff need to all have realistic length of program participation in mind when they create contracts. This should include a discussion comparing the time needed to complete the program and the time youth have before aging out of the system, as well as the possibility that participants may take longer than anticipated to complete all program phases. Program administrators and staff need to also decide whether having youth complete the program in the allotted time or giving youth maximum flexibility in guiding the program's processes is most important, as these two program features can be in conflict.

d. Funding

The final program component reviewed here is its funding. Unlike many therapeutic programs available to children in the child welfare system, YC program activities do not qualify as therapy. Therefore, the program is not eligible for Medicaid reimbursement. As a result, the responsibility for funding participation in this program lies with individual counties. Moreover, due to the extensive, individualized work that happens between program workers and participants, the YC program is more expensive than some other programs serving foster youth.

This funding structure has created some barriers to expansion of the YC program. Counties workers report that they do not operate with large budgets and need to be strategic about what they spend money funding. Thus far, they have been unable, or unwilling, to spend the money required to allow large numbers of their clients to participate in this program. Program workers and administrators understood and acknowledged this barrier to growing the program. For example, Program Worker 5 specifically listed funding as one of the largest obstacles to having more youth participate in the program. "I wish we could have [this program] for every kid in out-of-home care…, but there [would have to be] a funding stream that never ends, and we know we will never have that."

Caseworkers also shared this sentiment, with several mentioning that funding was an ongoing concern, and stating that, if it were possible to secure funding from Medicaid or other sources, they would be able to have more of their clients participate. Caseworkers may be particularly reluctant to commit so much of their county dollars, given some of the features of the program. As Caseworker 3 explains, "[I]t's $1500 a month per child, even if a kid says 'Nope, don't want to see you today,' we're still paying $1500 a month per child for 18-24 months, so I wish there was a way to make it a little more affordable." Because youth may refuse participation on occasion, without any cost savings to the county, investment in the YC program can be a financially risky proposition for counties.

Concerns about funding may also impact decisions about who caseworkers recommend for this program. Caseworker 2 shared that her county has used the YC program only for youth who are, in many ways, out of options. When counties have exhausted all of their usual tools for helping these youth, then they turn to this program as a last-ditch effort. She said, "I think we've used it more for the kids that [we are asking ourselves] 'What else are we gonna do for this kid?' It kind of feels hopeless…." This is not because her county's child welfare office has decided the program is only suitable for these kids, however. "[I]f we could just use it for the run of the mill kids that really could possibly maybe benefit from it even more because they don't have many maybe initial road blocks to success, that would be great." However, the expense of the program makes it difficult to justify referrals of "run of the mill kids," who caseworkers think they may be able to adequately serve without YC services.

The target audience for the YC program is not specifically youth with the highest levels of trauma, according to the program model. However, it seems that counties are only recommending youth for this program when they have exhausted all other options, because of

concerns about funding. It is an empirical question whether youth with less extensive trauma histories may find more success than the youth who have participated to this point. They may also move through the program more quickly, improving the program's ability to keep to its stated timeline.

IV. Discussion

By and large, program workers are implementing the YC program as intended. Several factors contribute to its successful implementation. Primarily, staff commitment is high to the program model, their clients, and each other. Staff members maintain contact with each other on a regular basis. They have team retreats in which they support each other with regard to work as well as work/life balance. This allows them to trouble-shoot and share best practices. In addition, many mentioned the organization's attention to staff mental health, which is incredibly valued, given the difficult and emotional interactions they regularly have with youth[5].

Multiple staff members and county caseworkers also discussed the value of regular meetings of the social service provider team. Staff stressed the importance of consulting with team members throughout the program process, and collaborating to ensure that they make the best decisions for each youth. Caseworkers shared that this collaboration was crucial, and contributed to their positive feelings about the program.

Most importantly, staff members are committed to program participants. Despite the high levels of stress and relatively low compensation that comes with their jobs, there is low turnover, which is key to carrying out the program model. Program workers have the willingness, ability,

[5] Research has shown that social workers in the child protection field are disproportionately more likely to experience career stress and burnout, resulting in high staff turnover. See McFadden, Campbell, & Taylor, 2014, and McGowan, Auerbach, & Strolin-Goltzman, 2009, for example.

and motivation to travel as far as needed to meet with any youth on their caseload. They also tailor activities to meet the individual needs of each client. All staff members expressed sadness or concern over trauma that their clients had experienced and happiness or pride about positive progress, indicating their emotional investment in their work. One staff member even reported working pro bono to assist her former clients and supportive adults, with relationship maintenance and other issues, once official program participation ended. This commitment to the success and progress of the youth in the program cannot be undervalued.

Areas for improvement

There is a need for improvement in implementation of the YC program in a few areas. While data collection is generally being implemented as intended, this is not the case with the Children's Hope Scale. This is particularly problematic as "hope" is one of the main areas in which staff commented that they notice marked improvement among participants. However, staff members struggle to quantify what this idea means. Having a tool like the Hope Scale at their disposal could help to quantitatively measure the improvement that they are seeing over time. Program administrators and staff need to determine what current obstacles exist to collecting this data and seek to address them.

Currently, program workers struggle to get youth through the program within its prescribed timeframe, which has an 18-month maximum. All program staff interviewed for this project suggested that the program takes 18-24 months, with multiple workers mentioning occasions in which it has taken longer. This mismatch between the prescribed and actual length of the YC program is problematic for several reasons. Namely, if the funding organization has committed to fund the youth's participation for 18 months, and the youth has not finished all of the phases of the program in this amount of time, either the organization has to agree to continue

to fund beyond their initial commitment, or the youth must cease participation. Additionally, older youth in the program may reach the age of majority before completing the program. Once youth reach the age of majority, they are typically no longer eligible for child welfare services through states or counties. Therefore, again, youth may need to leave the program before completing it. Reevaluating and creating a timeline that more accurately reflects the experiences of youth participants in the YC program would help funding organizations to understand their financial commitment, help caseworkers to refer appropriate youth, and help to ensure that no youth are unable to complete the program due to factors beyond their control. As part of this reevaluation process, program administrators and staff need to decide whether they want to prioritize youth control, which can make its timeline more variable, or timely and predictable program completion.

Finally, the program is not being implemented as designed insofar as child welfare offices are, at times, referring youth who do not fit into the target audience for this program. This includes younger youth who have not reached late adolescence and youth who are not in the foster system. They also appear to largely be referring their most difficult cases.

Because some youth are participating in the program who have legal guardians or biological parents, program workers need to coordinate services with this additional set of stakeholders who are involved in the youths' treatment and have authority over their decision-making. This could become problematic if it limits the ability of the staff member or organization to act on behalf of the child to find and establish connections with others, one of the primary goals of the overall program; this issue will be explored further in the next chapter. Further consideration is necessary to decide whether youth who are not in the foster care system at the time of program enrollment are a good fit for this program. If the program continues to

enroll youth in this expanded population, the program model may need to be adjusted accordingly. Insofar as the program has been receiving the most difficult to serve youth, the program's impacts may be either magnified or blunted, compared to what we would see if it were serving a more representative cross-section of the foster youth population. In the next chapter, we must interpret results in line with this selection of youth into the program. Program administrators should determine whether they want to encourage counties to refer less challenging cases to YC.

Chapter 3: Summative

I. Introduction

Organizations and evaluators interested in understanding the outcomes or effects associated with a particular program will often conduct a summative evaluation. Conducting this type of evaluation helps us to better understand whether a program works, whether it accomplishes its goals, the ways that it impacts participants, and its strengths and weaknesses. One way to reach these conclusions is to investigate the experiences and impressions of key stakeholders, as I did here. Assessing the perceptions of key stakeholders will shed light on whether the program is meeting its goals, and the strengths and weakness that may impact the ability to do so. It will also explore stakeholders' observations of changes in participant mental health and behavior. In the case of the Youth Connections (YC) program, no comprehensive summative evaluation exists. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, YC program workers collect program data about youth participants, and administrators monitor this data. However, this is the first time an outside evaluator has collected qualitative data to assess the program. I provide a detailed description of this assessment below.

a. Analysis

The research design for this portion of the program evaluation involved the analysis of data from one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted with key stakeholders of the YC program. In total, I conducted twelve interviews, five with program workers, six with county caseworkers, and one with a former program participant. Interviews took place from October 2016 to February 2017. They averaged 30 minutes in length but ranged from 15 minutes to an hour and a half. Program worker interviews tended to last longer than caseworker interviews.

I conducted all interviews, transcription, and analysis. Following transcription, I thoroughly familiarized myself with the transcribed data by reading and re-reading interview responses. Following this process, I began by open-coding a smaller subset of the transcribed interviews and, upon recognizing common themes and issues that arose from participant answers, and I used thematic codes generated by this first round of open-coding to code the rest of the interviews. These themes were then organized into an overarching evaluation framework. As was discussed in Chapter 1, though the a priori issues used to formulate the interview guide likely influences the topics respondents discussed, I allowed the data to guide the final themes that made up the framework. This allowed me to let interview responses guide my conclusions, rather than being predisposed to certain findings and results.

b. Chapter Summary

Below, I begin by examining the themes within each interviewed program group. These groups are examined separately, initially, because their understanding and interactions with the program look very different. It is useful to explore these unique experiences individually, before drawing conclusions by looking at comparisons across both groups. Several themes related to program outcomes emerged from each set of interviews. Within the program worker and county caseworker groups, I review their respective perceptions of program outcomes and program strengths, as well as challenges faced by the program. I then compare the findings across these two groups. Finally, I review themes that emerged during my interview with Jonathan, a former program participant. Though themes from his interview are not generalizable across all participants, his views of his time in the program and his life since the program ended provide a valuable window into the experience of program participation. I also briefly examine his experiences in light of findings from the other two groups.

II. Within-Group Analysis: Program Workers

Overall, program workers felt very confident in the YC program. While most agreed that there are some youth for whom this program is not a good fit, generally they thought that the youth-centered, flexible nature of the YC program made it possible to positively impact the lives of many older youth in the child welfare system.

1) Program Impacts

All program workers interviewed for this study spoke very positively about the YC program. They all emphasized positive impacts of the program on their participants. Some also conveyed positive changes observed beyond youth participants, among other actors within the child welfare system. In particular, program workers spoke about how youth changed throughout the program, including: a) internal mental and/or emotional changes exhibited by youth in what they said and how they behaved, b) youths' growing willingness and ability to develop trust in relationships, and c) visible physical differences observed in youths' appearances and physical health. Beyond changes in the youth, program workers also discussed how they believe their interactions with the larger child welfare system have served to alter it for the better.

Youth mental and emotional changes. Youth come into this program having experienced trauma. Often this trauma has resulted in behavioral issues that can impede their future development and growth (Davies, Winter, & Cicchetti, 2006; Gilbert, Widom, Browne, Fergusson, Webb, & Janson, 2009; Widom, 1989; Currie & Tekin, 2012). Program workers emphasize the ability of the YC program to address these fundamental issues. As Program Worker 4 says, "I absolutely feel like the measures we take and the things that we do really get that healing, they get that healing for kids." Achieving this healing—with youth being able to

confront, process, and move on from trauma—is a key measure of success, in the program workers' assessment. For example, Program Worker 5 explains,

> "I believe whole heartedly in this program because I see the long term impact that it has on the success of these kids. For them to be able to get the healing messages that they need to be able to heal and get out of this place of shame that they are carrying with them because of what happened to them. And to help them understand, and their caregivers to understand, that it is about what happened to them, not what is wrong with them."

Program workers see one of the signs of their success at addressing this trauma in an increase in youths' resilience and excitement or hope for the future. Program Worker 1 discussed her observations of clients who were able to look beyond their immediate circumstances to plan for their futures. She saw youth who are now able to think about what they want out of life and out of relationships with other people. These youth also felt confident in their ability to develop relationships, and deserving of positive emotions, connections, and love. Program Worker 2 shared a story of a youth who was hypervigilant and focused on day-to-day survival when she first met him. As the program progressed, however, he began to start thinking and planning for his future, saying things like "I can't wait 'til I live here, I can't wait to go to school there, and I think I'm gonna do this when I grow up."

Youth Willingness to Develop Trust. Program workers also discussed changes they heard about from youth with regard to their willingness and ability to build relationships and develop trust with other adults in their lives. Program Worker 4 shared her observations that as they progressed through the program, her clients began to open up to other people, including, for example, their foster families. Before participation, clients had difficulty trusting others, and did not even feel comfortable opening up to their program workers, but as they move through the program they are "…better able to access relationships outside of themselves which is

wonderful." Program Worker 5 attributes this change to the specific work they do with youth in the program.

> "…they have the [language] to talk about their emotions and to feel like they have that connection and it's okay to be vulnerable. Because when we first start working with them they are not going to let their guard down, they are not going to allow their vulnerability to show… But by the end of the program, they're allowing themselves to be vulnerable, they're allowing themselves to say what it is that they need, because they have done that healing work, but also because we have done the work with the connection and the support to help them understand where the youth is coming from and so it just brings them all closer together."

Research has shown that permanent relationships and social support networks are essential components of a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood (Aquilino, 2006; Bowers, Johnson, et al., 2014; Settersen & Ray, 2010). Accessing this support requires youth to be able to feel comfortable being vulnerable around their support networks. It is important for youth to feel connected to program workers in order to move successfully through all of the program phases. However, it is even more important that they are able to build and remain connected to an outside support network on an ongoing basis, as these are the relationships that they will have to draw on once the program ends. The capacity of this program to open youth to the idea of seeking and receiving help and support could have long-term impacts on their ability to find success even when the program over and the connection to their program worker has ended.

Physical Changes. Program workers also noticed physical changes in youth participants from the beginning to the end of this program. Program workers attribute these transformations to youth becoming healthier physically and mentally. For example, Program Worker 3 shared a story about a youth who started off hopeless and small and frail. As he has progressed through the program, however, she has seen him become, "[T]his kid that, you know, [is] learning who he is, and he's eating good, and he's picked up weight and he talks more… in terms of progress I

do feel a big difference." Program workers also observe youth begin to look physically healthier as they increase in confidence, and hope, and happiness. Program Worker 5 stated that, "…they just, the best way I can describe it is, they have the childish glow that every child should have. That they're just enjoying being a kid, and that I think for us is the ultimate goal, for them to just enjoy being a kid."

These physical changes are so noticeable that the organization has begun taking photographs of youth before and after program participation. Program Worker 2 shared her observations about the differences between these photographs, saying,

> "…we take pictures at the beginning and then we take pictures at the end, and they typically look different. They typically look lighter and happier…. You can see hope…. I don't know how you describe when you see a child all of the sudden have hope, like I don't know how to describe it, but they have it, and it is undeniable to anyone who has worked with them, over a period of years…. Physically they look, just different ."

Researchers have long made the connection between adverse childhood experiences, foster care, and mental health concerns. More recently, they have also discovered connections between these experiences and physical health outcomes (see, for example, Rubin, Halfon, Raghavan, & Rosenbaum, 2005). Though this program is not targeting physical health, the finding that program workers are observing changes in this area is in line with what we would expect based on previous research, if the program is successfully addressing the trauma-related factors that negatively impact health. In addition to the short-term positive impact on health, these changes may have important implications for the long-term health outcomes of participants (Kessler, Pecora, Williams, et al., 2008).

There are also indications that the interactions between the program and the child welfare system workers could bring larger changes. Because program and caseworkers interact regularly as part of a care team for each youth, there is an opportunity not just for sharing information but

also for YC workers to share their trauma-informed approach to viewing youth's needs. Program Worker 2 observed county workers, CPS administrators, and treatment center guards developing a greater understanding for the impacts of trauma on youth and becoming more sensitive to the types of negative behaviors that may be associated with exposure to this trauma. In particular, she recalled changes she observed in county caseworkers:

> "…I have seen entire systems change. So I when I start with a new county and they don't really know what we do, and I start to show them the language that we use, like 'pain-based behaviors' and I start really talking about trauma, and why this kid is acting out, as part of a regular language. And I'm talking to them every single week, and I see a shift, and all of the sudden [case]workers get it. And so then they'll give me the next referral and we are already ahead of the game because now they have the language and they're looking at it through a trauma lens whereas they weren't [before]… I think they thought they were, but they really didn't get it…, so I see transformative change across the board."

She also described seeing a similar transformation with workers at a residential treatment center, where guards were in the room during her meetings with her client. While this set-up could have just had a chilling effect on her ability to develop a relationship with the youth, her experience was that in modeling a way of understanding "troubled" kids, the guards were able to see the youth in a different light.

> "[For one client] I had to go [to a treatment center] to meet with a kid. The guards that actually sat in the room with me after a couple of months, kind of looked and said, 'I never thought of it that way.' You know, I was explaining something to the youth about why he acts a certain way and when he left the guard said, 'I really never thought of it that way….' So I could see a shift in guards…. It was kind of fun to watch."

Program Worker 2 has observed that exposure to the YC program has lead to a greater understanding among actors in the child welfare system of how trauma impact youth and their behavior. While we do not know whether or how these changes will impact future interaction with trauma-exposed youth, but building knowledge may be the first step toward trauma-informed care.

In their discussions of program impacts on trauma healing and relationship formation, program workers are focusing on outcomes that closely align with the program's primary goals. If youth are healing from trauma and forming relationships with supportive adults, they may have a better time navigating the emerging adulthood period.

It is important to note, however, that there was not much mention of maintaining relationships between youth and adults, or thoughts on their long-term success. The program model for the YC program assumes that when the program has ended, program workers will be able to step away from youth participants, and that supportive connections established during the course of participation will remain. The maintenance of these relationships is crucial to the development of support networks, which can facilitate a successful transition to adulthood. If the program is focusing its energy on trauma healing and making connections, but not on strengthening or maintaining these connections, this could lead to continued trouble for youth during this period.

2) Program Strengths

Program workers identified a variety of strengths of the YC program, which they believe contribute to their ability to achieve desired outcomes. In particular, discussion centered on a) its flexible definition of permanency and b) the way it empowers youth to control the program process.

Flexible Definition of Permanency. In a previous chapter, I reported that one of the attributes of the YC program that program workers and caseworkers value is its flexible nature. One way that this malleability has contributed to program success is via the program's willingness to accept a flexible definition of permanency. In the child welfare field, finding permanency means finding a permanent family arrangement for a child in the system. This may

refer to reunification with family of origin, adoption or guardianship by a relative, or adoption or guardianship by a nonrelative. However, research has found that older teens have much more flexible definitions of what permanency should look like for them (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). Older youth may not wish to be formally adopted, and instead may just want to find stability, connections, and support from adults in their lives (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010).

The YC program has defined its goals in line with these more flexible versions of permanency but is still open to supporting youth in their pursuit of more "traditional" permanency. For example, Program Worker 2 says, "[A] seventeen year old is looking to be independently living, whereas [younger foster youth are] looking for permanency in a different way. With kids over the age of 15 …we are more focused on independence and who is going to be there for you. We don't want you just aging out of the system and being nowhere." This willingness to let youths' goals drive program goals is supported by research findings that failing to acknowledge youths' definitions of permanency can actually cause uncertainty and turmoil in their lives (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). The YC program has found a way to formalize permanency arrangements in ways that go beyond the legal processes available in the child welfare system. For instance, they utilize a permanency pact, which is signed by both the participant and an adult connection. It clearly defines the types of support that the youth needs moving forward (as identified by the youth themselves), and outlines the responsibilities that the adult is willing and able to take on. Rather than striving for adoption alone, the fact that this program facilitates the creation of this pact, which youth themselves have agency in creating, may help older youth to open up to the idea of forming long-term connections through this program, despite their hesitancy toward formal, legally defined relationships.

Allowing youth to be in the driver's seat when it comes to defining their own permanency needs and the nature of these needs is indicative of the program's youth-driven nature. From the start of the program, youth have the ability to hire and fire program workers, and their participation in meetings and activities throughout the program is voluntary. This has resulted in situations in which program workers have driven hours to meet with a client, just to have them cancel. In such situations, they are careful to ensure that there are no negative consequences for youth, and that youth understand they will not disappear just because of this rejection. This is because program workers understand that this behavior is often connected to the difficult emotional work that is happening in their meetings. This component of the program makes it uniquely able to cater to the youth's needs. Program Worker 3 explains, "And the unique thing about it is, in this program, youth can tell us I don't want to meet today. And that's fine with us, you know, we understand that…We don't force them into the program, so it makes them feel like they have a say so."

Given the youth-driven nature of the program, youth often move through the program phases at differing rates. In particular, there is substantial variation in how long it takes youth to begin to trust their program worker. Program workers stressed the importance of being patient during this period, and avoiding rushing through this work. Without trust established, program workers cannot get the youth to do the difficult and vulnerable work needed during the healing phase of the program. Program workers are committed to working with youth for as long as it takes to gain their trust. Program Worker 3 discussed what that commitment looks like:

> "Sometimes you might spend the first, let's say, one to maybe even four, five, six months just trying to get that youth to a point to trusting you to be able to talk to you more in depth. You might get them to talk a little bit and then they might fall back and then the social issues might come back again and they might hold back again. So that first six months is really just trying to work that youth up to getting over that hump of trust building and getting them into the healing phase…."

Program workers' commitment to achieving success in each of the 3-5-7 model's phases is expressed in their willingness to move at the pace set by youth.

The youth centered approach to the YC program also means that program workers commit to staying with the youth even if their placement changes and they move to another part of the state. In order to maintain consistency and to be able to continue progressing through each phase of the program, once trust is establish, program workers feel strongly that they must remain the worker for their clients. Program Worker 1 explains,

> "[A youth in my caseload] started about an hour and a half away and then he got moved up to a foster home that was 3 hours away…. That's one of the key components of [this program] is that the worker stays with the kid. That is one of the problems that we are trying to address, is these people that come in and out of their lives all the time. And we don't want to be another one of those people."

The fact that a program worker will continue to travel to meet with youth may signal to youth that their workers are committed to them and their success, and that they are reliable. If they had to change program workers every time their placement changed, like they do with many other service providers, program workers believe that progression through the program would stall, if not break down completely. Establishing consistency and commitment as norms of the relationship between program workers and youth participants likely increasing a youth's willingness to trust their program worker, and may open them up to relationships with other adults as well.

Lastly, the pace at which program workers work to establish connections between youth and supportive adults is dependent on the comfort level of each youth, along with the status of the prior relationship with each adult. As Program Worker 2 explained, "I personally find everybody… and then I wait for the youth to tell me who they are really wanting to connect with first, and that's where I start." In her description, we hear how she sets up a situation in which

the moment youth indicate they are ready to begin forging connections with other adults, she is prepared to take advantage of this moment by having those contacts on hand. That she does not try to build these relationships until the youth give the go-ahead is indicative of the power the program rests in the youths' hands. This program attribute helps to ensure that the youth is emotionally prepared to connect, and that the relationship does not start on insecure footing. The careful preparation for meeting and connecting youth to adults allowed by this program likely contributes to their ability to form stable and trusting relationships based on these connections.

The program is set up to empower both program workers, in adapting the program to the needs of youth, and the youth themselves, in controlling the pacing, process, and content of the program. Program workers believe that these features allow them to move successfully through each phase of the program. Successful completion of program phases seems to result in meeting the two primary goals of the program, helping youth to heal from trauma, and be willing and able to form connections with supportive adults.

3) Program Barriers

Program workers identified certain circumstances in which barriers to program success arose. These included a) parents' role in blocking youth from developing relationships with other adults and b) issues that arise when county child protective services staff are critical of the program or program activities.

Parent Concerns. Program Worker 4 highlighted several situations that she encountered in which biological or foster parents created barriers to youth creating connections with other significant adults in their lives. In one case, the state had not removed a youth from his mother's

custody, but had referred the youth to the program nevertheless[6]. The mother did not allow him to connect with extended family members on his father's side of the family, despite the youth's desire to do so. Her legal position as custodial parent allowed her to make decisions about who their child interacted with and who the worker connected with, so it became impossible for the program worker to continue working through the phases of the program with this child.

The goals of the YC program include working to build connections for youth so that they have a support network when they age out of eligibility for child welfare services. In the situation described above, this child already had a parental connection. However, the program worker was looking outside of this relationship to find other supportive adults for the child, so that he would have a larger network of support when he left the system. The parent's resistance to this program could have been due, in part, to her interpretation of the situation. She may have seen the program worker's decision to look beyond her and her family for support for this youth as a critique of her parenting abilities. The YC program was designed for youth who were in out-of-home placements; perhaps a program that works on healing and developing relationships that the youth already have, as with their parents, would better serve them in these circumstances. Cases like the one above may suggest that this program is best suited for youth who do not already have a parental connection established, or that the program model may need to be adapted for working with youth beyond the targeted clientele.

In addition to the relationship side of the program, the content of its work has also proven to be a challenge. Program Worker 1 described barriers to successful program completion arising due to parental concern over the difficult subject matter covered in the program:

[6] In this case, the youth's family was involved with the child welfare system but the situation was not severe enough that he had been removed from his mother's custody. Nevertheless, he had a county caseworker who believed he might benefit from the program so he was referred anyway

> "The foster parents were very worried about the work that I was doing with this kid, because they were afraid that this work was going to drum up all of this baggage, this emotional baggage with them. And it was going to result in intense behaviors and the foster parents didn't want to deal with that. They'd prefer to just ride it out and let him not experience those things and hope that he doesn't explode while he was in their house."

Despite the fact that foster parents cannot decline foster child participation, in this case, the county was worried that the foster placement would be in jeopardy if the child continued to participate, so they pulled the child from the program. Both of the cases discussed above emphasize the need for ongoing communication and understanding for all people on youths' service teams, including any biological parents, foster parents, or guardians. If there is a misunderstanding or lack of "buy-in" on the part of any of these key parties, interruption in service may occur, which could negatively affect the child. As stated in chapter two, a protocol for getting "buy-in" or commitments from parents may alleviate some of these issues. Program administrators are strong encouraged to develop mechanisms as a part of the program model for getting this commitment.

County Concerns. While program workers and administrators often have positive relationships with county administrators and caseworkers, as will be explored when we review findings from interviews with caseworkers, there have also been situations in which program workers believe that staff of county child welfare offices have created barriers to program success. Program workers primarily report this occurring in situations in which caseworkers and program workers do not trust one another, or when caseworkers worry that others will criticize their previous work with youth. In some cases, this has led counties to terminate contracts with the program organization, either just for individual clients or, in one instance, for all of the open cases that a county had with the organization.

Two program workers, shared cases in which problems with counties arose[7]. Program Worker 2 described a complicated situation that arose during the early days of the program, shortly after the program was created. She and another program worker caseworker were reviewing participants' files to look for potential adult connections, they discovered negligence[8] on the part of some county child welfare workers. After they raised concerns about these issues, the county decided to end its relationship with the program. According to Program Worker 2, they were not intending to, "shame and blame the county for things that they should have done or could have done." Nonetheless, this created mistrust between the two groups, which she believes is what led to the early termination of the program contract.

Program Worker 5 also shared experiences when counties have been critical of program activities, especially with regarding to the initial phase in the program when workers focus on building a trusting relationship with youth. During this phase, meetings between youth and program workers often involve fun outings or activities, designed to build a bond before the difficult healing work can begin. Some caseworkers and county administrators have viewed these activities with skepticism, not seeing them as important or worthwhile.

> "[W]e have to build the trust of the county…. [W]e have to be transparent especially in the trusting phase, because we can have people that are paying close attention. [People are] more critical because they're the one paying the money. They are like, 'Okay, so I am paying this amount of money for you to take the kids out for ice cream? Really? I could do that. Why are we paying you to do that?' We can absolutely and rightfully know the county should be asking those questions, so it's our job to be very transparent about what we do and why we do what we do."

[7] Program workers were not asked directly about their relationships with caseworkers and these two cases spontaneously arose during the interviews. I am unsure whether other program workers have also had these experiences.

[8] I was not given any specifics about this negligence, but PW2 said that there were things these child welfare workers could have done to help youth that they did not do, perhaps regarding family from the youths' files who were never contacted about placement or adoption.

It is notable that program workers saw it as part of their jobs to get buy-in from county workers. They did not seem to assume that county workers should just trust them or give them leeway automatically. As with their relationships with the youth, program workers seem to focus on trust development with other stakeholders as necessary to program success. However, because there can be turnover in the county child welfare staff, the program workers' investments in these relationships do not always pay off. They describe how confusion or miscommunication is especially prevalent when a youth gets a new caseworker while they are in the midst of program participation. Because new workers were not present for the start of the program, Program Worker 2 explains how they, therefore, do not always have the same level of buy-in that the original caseworker did:

> "I had a couple youth who were abruptly ended, and that was because of a worker switch. So I had different [case]workers on these youth when we're in connecting phase, which is usually a very tumultuous time for teens anyway because you are reintroducing people to past lives, so everyone is on high alert. Both of these youth, their [case]workers switched job roles and they were assigned a new worker…who did not have any buy-in into [the program]. Because I never had [the caseworker] in the trust phase she came in right at the connecting phase and was like 'Whoa whoa whoa whoa. What's this all about? What's going on?' and ended the contract."

These cases illustrate the importance of a close working relationship between the county and the program organization. Regular commination and updating on the part of program workers is an important part of the program model, and many county caseworkers praise this program attribute, as I will describe later. Close working relationships require that counties also maintain regular communication with program workers so that they are aware of any large changes that may disrupt progression through the program, like a change in placement status. In the event that a new caseworker enters the picture, it is important the program workers have the time to explain this program thoroughly, and help the new caseworker to understand program activities and potential resulting behaviors by youth participants.

There are other cases, though, in which caseworkers put up barriers for reasons other than mistrust or miscommunication. Rather, their assessment of the best interests of the youth can come into conflict with what the youth themselves would like. Program Worker 5 describes circumstances in which caseworkers prevented her from forging a connections between youth and certain family members because those family members had previously lost their parental rights.

> "[I]n a situation where we reconnected, not for placement, but we reconnected a youth with his father because dad needed to give him some healing messages, and the ultimate goal was for him to have ongoing contact with dad. But, the county had terminated that parental right. So there was a lot of fear, and a kind of a lot of barriers that the county put up…. You know, 'Well wait a minute, we terminated dad's rights because he was not fit and healthy, and now you want to reconnect him? What are you talking about? That is crazy! We already went down this road. Dad is not a viable option.'"

From the perspective of the program worker and the caseworker, each saw herself as pursuing a strategy that was in the best interest of the youth. The program worker was focused on what was necessary for healing, while the caseworker was fearful over the reintroduction of someone who likely contributed to the youth's trauma. Part of the difficulty of this situation may also stem from the caseworker not having clarity about the purpose of this type of reconnection in the program model. In general, the primary purpose of this program is to prepare youth to connect with supportive adults and to support these connections. In contrast, reintroducing this client's father was part of the healing, or preparation for connection, part of this program. However, this process of making a connection for these reasons, and not for developing support or permanency, is not a practice that is widely discussed. It is possible that clearer communication between program workers and caseworkers could forestall these sorts of difficulties.

Lastly, program workers have encountered individual caseworkers who disliked the program. Program workers describe scenarios in which they are able to connect with youth who

the caseworkers have been unable to engage with. Program workers tended to believe that negative opinions of the program by caseworkers originated in feelings of shame and inadequacy on the part of caseworkers because program workers are getting positive results in areas where they have not been successful.

The thoughts and impressions of YC program workers are quite valuable, as they have seen participants enter and exit the program, and are in the unique position of having observed changes in participants during this time. In general, program workers feel very positively about this program, and see improvements in participants' mental, emotional, and physical health resulting from program participation. They have also observed youth displaying a new willingness to make connections to supportive adults. Some of these results seem to be attributable to positive characteristics of the program, like their willingness to accept a flexible definition of permanency in older youth and the youth-driven nature of the program's design. They also raised concerns about barriers from families and caregivers as well as county partners, both of which are valid and deserve further consideration.

It is also important to acknowledge that biases exist with program workers with regard to the program they work for and believe in. They want this program to be good and impactful, and these intentions may be coloring some of their opinions. Keeping this potential for bias in mind is important, but it does not mean that we should completely discredit their perceptions. Instead, we should look to others who are involved with the organization to consider alternative perceptions. It is useful to compare the findings from these groups in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of this program. Below, I present the findings from my interviews with caseworkers. Following that, I discuss group comparisons.

III. Within-Group Analysis: County Caseworkers

In an attempt to measure the perceptions of key stakeholders of the YC program, I also interviewed child welfare caseworkers in two Midwestern states who have had clients participate in the program. I uncovered several themes during the analysis of these interviews: 1) Outcomes that resulted from program participation, 2) Program strengths which contribute to program outcomes, 3) Barriers to the program which may dampen program effects, and 4) perceptions of the ability of the YC program to meet the needs of older youth in the system. Despite some concerns over particular characteristics of this program, the general consensus about the YC program was beneficial and positive. Among caseworkers interviewed for this project, all who have had youth complete the program would recommend the program for other child welfare involved youth[9].

1) Program outcomes

All caseworkers interviewed for this project stated that they would recommend this program for other youth. This is likely due to the positive outcomes that they observed in youth participants. These outcomes included: a) mental and emotional improvements in their clients and b) connections that their clients made with supportive adults.

Mental and emotional improvements. Many of the changes that caseworkers observed in youth, and attributed to program participation, included mental and emotional improvements. Caseworker 2, for example, shared stories about several of her clients who started the program in a very dysregulated mental state, but who experienced vast improvements in their mental health during the course of program participation. She observed them becoming "…much more regulated, much more focused, much more confident." Caseworker 3 described drastic mental

[9] I interviewed one caseworker whose client was still quite new to the program so she was unable to comment on program recommendations

and emotional health changes in her client since joining the program. Her client is "…healthier today than he has been in probably the past three years that I have been working with him." It seems that mental and emotional changes may be the result of program activities that aim to help youth heal from prior trauma, one of the primary goals of the program.

Caseworkers often drew direct connections between improvements in their clients and the work done by individual program workers. Caseworker 1 specifies the changes she saw during her client's time in the program, which she attributes directly to her client's program worker.

> "I saw tons of benefits in [the YC worker's] one on one direct service with [my client]. I think she learned coping, I think she was more focused generally, and more focused on her own goals. The child was probably more regulated. She just really flourished from having [her program worker] because she thought of her like her person, and she just really flourished with them."

The YC program model strongly emphasizes the close and supportive nature of the relationship between program workers and their participants, which is reflected in Caseworker 1's client's experiences. In order to be effective, the program model dictates that program workers spend significant periods with youth, developing a relationship and building trust. Once trust is developed, program workers can help youth to confront and heal from past trauma and become healthier, mentally and emotionally. As Caseworker 1 explains, it was essential to improvements in her client's wellbeing that she felt like she had someone on her side.

Connections. Several caseworkers praised the work done by this program to connect youth with supportive adults. Caseworker 1 shared that, through the YC program, her client was united with her mom, which was "incredibly important for her." Caseworker 3 told me about the connection made by the program worker between her client and both sets of his grandparents. This client was also in the process of reconnecting with his father, who previously lost his parental rights. The program worker was helping to conduct supervised visits so that they could

reestablish their relationship in a safe and supported environment. The caseworker praised this effort because it allowed the youth to have a connection to her father, an arrangement that would be difficult for a caseworker to facilitate given their heavy caseloads.

Caseworker 2 had found a non-familial foster family for her client. In her view, the new ties that her client was building with this foster family were supported and strengthened by the YC program worker. She said, "[My client] would not have been able to make the connection he did if it were not for the work that he had done with his worker. …[T]he worker worked strongly with him and with the new family to make a smooth transition."

The program workers and caseworkers highlighted primary outcomes that parallel the main goals of this program. That is, they saw the program as being most effective in the areas in which it was intended to have an impact. As a result of program participation, caseworkers observe youth experiencing mental and emotional growth and making connections to supportive adults.

However, the longevity and permanency of these connections was sometimes in question. Importantly, though program participation often resulted in connections, caseworkers did not see all newly connected relationships as solid or reliable. In some cases, caseworkers were confident in the likelihood of relationship maintenance, "Yep, the child was adopted by that family (CW2)," and "I think the likelihood is great. Yeah, I think he will continue to have contact with them on an ongoing basis now (CW3)." Nevertheless, in others, caseworkers were less confident in the strength of these connections. Caseworker 5, for example, felt she could only be cautiously optimistic: "…just with the knowledge I have based on his family history I think that those connections could be there long term. But they could be rocky." Likewise, Caseworker 1 saw the long and troubled history that preceded the YC program's intervention in her client's relationship

with her mother as still looming large over this tie. “I am worried that she will turn 18 and mom will kick her out shortly after…due to each of their troubles. So it’s hard to say. She could stay there for the next five years. I really, kind of, [over] the next year, time will tell.”

Several issues could be causing this uncertainty and concern. It could be due to the fact that, as previously described, if the client’s participation in the program ends prematurely, it is the connecting phase that suffers, as these ties may not be solid enough to remain healthy without the scaffolding of the YC program. The cases mentioned above could be a result of this program issue. It could also be that, even when youth move fully through the program, there are not any formal mechanisms in place for stepping down, or phasing out, relationship support. Therefore, youth-adult pairs have not had the ability to practice successful relationship maintenance without the program workers. In these cases, relationships may have difficulty functioning without their support.

Lastly, it could be that the program is not taking into account the dyadic nature of the relationships. Program workers work with adult connections in order to prepare them for connecting or reconnecting with youth, but they do not have the ability to do the trauma healing that program youth are receiving. If adults have their own histories of trauma, and they do not experience healing, it may be difficult for youth to establish and maintain relationships with them. Recall that Caseworker 1 refers to “each of their troubles” in describing her worries about the longevity of her client’s renewed relationship with her mother, citing problems on both sides of the relationship equation. Research has shown that prior trauma has a negative impact on relationship development (Dorahy, Corry, Shannon, MacSherry, Hamilton, McRobert, Elder, & Hanna, 2009; Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1989; Schneider-Rosen & Cicchetti, 1984). This finding is the basis of the trauma-healing portion of the YC program. It stands to reason that

a history of trauma on the part of the adult may also be impeding the ability of the dyads to form healthy, successful relationships.

2) Program Strengths

In general, caseworkers spoke highly of the YC program and its impacts on their clients. They identified two characteristics that contributed to these impacts: a) program worker stability and b) their location "outside" of the system.

Stability. From the caseworkers' perspective, an important component of this program is that youth develop trusting relationships with their program workers over time. This is true even if the child moves and/or receives a different placement. Caseworkers appreciated the fact that program workers remained a stable relationship in their clients' lives despite other sources of instability. For example, Caseworker 3 explains,

> "…[O]ne thing I want to point out that is absolutely wonderful about this program, is that no matter where the child moves to or gets placed or whatever, during their 18-24 months of working with the child, they follow them wherever they go…. And so that's been wonderful because when kids move they get a new therapist, a new everybody. But with this program they stay with them no matter where they move to and that's been fantastic. Some of these [program workers] drive over 3 hours to get to these kids. That's pretty incredible."

As Caseworker 3 highlights, for many youth, time in the child welfare system is marked by change and relationship instability. For a child to experience a "new everybody" with every move is potentially deeply disruptive (Flower, McDonald, & Sumski, 2005; Pardeck, 1984; Strolin-Goltzman, Kollar, & Trinkle, 2010). In some cases, caseworkers know that if a client moves out of their county, they will no longer be able to work with the child either. It brings them comfort to know that the program worker will remain a stable, positive influence amidst the many life changes their clients' experience. Caseworker 6 specifically outlines what such stability can bring. "So making sure that a lot of these things are happening and that she's getting

the therapy. She lives with her foster family but they won't be involved either. So I'm really hoping that, and I have talked to their worker about this, hoping that they can continue to kind of be that person. Advocate for them, you know?"

Caseworkers either implicitly or explicitly outline limitations on the ability of the child welfare system to serve their clients' best interests in outlining the outstanding features of Youth Connections. In their view, the ability of the YC program to provide a responsible adult who remains consistent no matter the circumstances is an important and valued characteristic of this program.

Separation from Child Welfare System. The second positive characteristic caseworkers emphasized raises an important point about the location of the YC program "outside" of the system. Caseworker 3 perceived that, due to the fact that they were not affiliated with the county or child protective services, program workers appear more "non-threatening," and had more success approaching families who have had negative interactions with or misperceptions about the system in the past:

> "[P]eople don't trust the county after we do a termination of parental rights. I would never have gotten anywhere with these people because they blame the county for everything instead of taking responsibility. But you know [the program] worker can go in and say 'I'm not affiliated with the county, I just want to see if you have an interest in connecting with this guy,' and she was able to make it all happen because she is very, her position is very non-threatening. Whereas my position as his guardian/social worker/county worker is too threatening for people."

There may be an important relationship between the ability of program workers to approach family members or other adults from an organization that is distinct from the child welfare system and the success of the connection phase of this program. In families in which the child welfare system has removed parental rights and/or guardianship, animosity often exists which would likely create barriers to caseworkers and parents working together productively (Reich,

2005). Their position as an outside organization may make adults (extended family members, for example) more willing to hear about the program's goals and activities, and to consider participation.

This observation also raises an important point about the necessity of program activities taking place via an outside organization instead of within the child welfare system itself. As was discussed in the previous chapter, the large caseloads that county caseworkers carry make the work done by this program effectively impossible for caseworkers to do themselves. This issue of the YC workers' outsider status highlights another reason why the functions of the YC program might best be maintained separate from the child welfare system. From the caseworkers' perspective, the fact that the YC program takes place within a separate organization with the resources to commit to the time intensive tasks involved in program completion is a significant strength of this program.

3) Concerns about the program

When discussing the YC program, caseworkers described two concerning characteristics of the program that they saw as potentially limiting program success. These included a) the behavior of youth participants during the trusting phase of the program, and b) potential impacts of program workers ending contact with youth once the program is completed.

Youth Behavior. Caseworker 4 expressed that she initially had concerns about the program based on the behavior of her client during the first phase. While she understood that during the trusting phase, program workers and youth are getting to know each other and participating in fun activities in order to build trust, she saw her client exhibiting difficult behaviors during this time, which she attributed to the YC program. In fact, she saw the YC model of giving youth total control as actually undermining her own efforts.

> "[W]hat we were seeing was that [my client] just liked hanging out with this person because they would always buy things for her. This is a child who didn't have anything, and still doesn't have anything, so going to get your nails done or going out to eat was super cool. And when [the program] worker wouldn't do something she'd want she'd just be like 'Get out.' And I know that's part of the program that she's in control of it. But I think at first I hesitated a little bit because she felt very entitled to treat people however she wants to treat people [as a result of this control with her worker]. When on the other hand we are trying to teach her to respect other people as well."

This client has since moved into the healing stage of the program, and the caseworker has begun to see more progress. She has seen her be more willing to acknowledge her trauma, and to open up and confide in her program workers. Thus, she feels more positively about the program. In fact, she says, she would now actually recommend the program as a good option for other youth in the child welfare system Nonetheless, Caseworker 4's initial experience highlights an important consideration with regard to this program. This program typically lasts for 18-24 months and youth move through four different phases as they complete program activities. Program activities have an impact on the ways that participants are interacting with others during this period. For example, during the trust-building phase, youth may act out toward other people in their lives who are not participating in trust building activities or exercises, as was stated by Caseworker 4. The fact that youth can hire and fire program workers at will may also give them an incorrect understanding about the other relationships in their lives as well; for example, their relationships with their caseworkers in the child welfare system or their teachers at school are not similarly optional. During the healing phase, when youth are confronting and processing emotionally taxing topics, they may act-out, driven by the emotions surfacing from their work with their program worker. These behaviors may have a negative effect on a youth's relationships with others. It is especially important that, wherever possible, all members of the youth's service team, along with all care providers, are fully informed of their participation in the

program along with the potential side effects from participation so that they can view these challenges as part of a healing process rather than a show of disrespect or dysregulation.

End of Program Worker Participant Relationship. Another concern about this program conveyed by a caseworker was the potential for negative impacts or even further trauma of youth losing touch with their program workers after the program is finished. Ideally, there is a connection made between youth and other supportive adults, and they do not need the support of the program workers anymore. However, the caseworkers were often concerned about the permanence of these connections, as discussed above. Therefore, this worry about the impact of the youth-program worker relationship is valid, given the traumatic histories of so many of the program participants. As Caseworker 4 explains, the fact that the program builds and then ends an intense relationship for youth who lack other such ties is worrisome.

> "The one thing I am a little worried about with this particular client is…what happens when they get through this program and this person leaves her. And I know this could take a really long time, but this child has lost…, like she literally has not a single soul. … There's really no connections. So what happens when this one person [leaves]? And then it's one more trauma. I guess I'm a little worried about that. But hopefully by that point she'll have more skills to handle and understand that."

A caseworker who is very new to the program raised this concern. She has not had the opportunity to see the healing or connecting phases at work. This does not mean we should dismiss this concern, though. In the previous section, I presented questions about youths' ability to maintain long-term, supportive relationships; this is especially in those cases in which a finite program end date causes the last phases of the program to be shorter than ideal. There is certainly a possibility that the loss of a program worker in the lives of these youth people may cause additional trauma, and it is important to examine this possibility.

3) Interaction with older youth in the system

Program designers initially conceptualized the YC program as one for older youth in the child welfare system. As such, I asked caseworkers whether this population is a good fit for this program. In general, caseworkers agreed that they are. For example, Caseworker 1 said it was suited for what she termed "long time in care cases," and, similarly, Caseworker 3 saw it as best meeting the needs of the older youth among her clients. Caseworker 5 laid out how the program's features spoke to the needs she saw among youth who are aging out of foster care.

> "I think it is super appropriate for [this age group] because, of course, we have so many individuals who think, 'Oh gosh, I'm turning 18, I'm out of here, I've got it all figured out.' And as we know that doesn't always necessarily pan out that way, and so I think for a client that is approaching that time frame of going into adulthood, it is going to be just as important to have continued ongoing support moving forward. Because we know typically they aren't able to jump into the world and be financially stable or emotionally stable on their own without any of those additional supports."

Here, Caseworker 5 reflects the current thinking on the emerging adulthood period and, particularly, the importance of social support during this time. The view of the transition to adulthood reflected by both the program's setup and the caseworkers was one that emphasized a need for an array of support even after the legal age of majority. In this way, there was a match between the conceptions of emerging adulthood implicit in the views of both program and caseworkers.

Despite this fit in theory, working with older adolescents presented challenges. Caseworker 2 explained that one of her clients in this age group had started participating in the program but had chosen to leave without completing it. She attributed this to the youth's difficulty in understanding the need for connections. "I think that age is hard in the first place. You are trying to break away and yet, you're trying to connect. And you've done so many things on your own already what's the point of [finding permanency]." Given that the program is seeking to create connections to adults just when young people are trying to launch themselves

into independence, she saw the program as being far from the key to success for her clients. “I don’t think this program for that [age group] works, at least in my experience, it hasn’t worked any better than anything else has worked.” This highlights the tricky ground YC program workers tread in discussing connections and permanency with youth, potential adult ties, and caseworkers. Youth who have been hurt by adults in the past need to buy-in to the idea that permanent relationships can be beneficial, without threatening their independence.

On a related note, caseworkers raised issues around the definition of permanency, particularly as it applies to older youth in foster care. Research shows that maintaining rigid guidelines for what counts as a permanent connection can be detrimental to foster youth in this age group (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). Caseworker 2 saw an awareness of this issue in her client’s YC worker, but was nonetheless concerned about how this issue would be handled by a program that focuses so heavily on connections. “I know the worker that we have used is very respectful about trying not to scare kids with permanency and adoption, or using words that have a lot of weight. But I think kids, I think who have been that hurt are really scared of those words.” The willingness of this program to accept a flexible definition of permanency is seen by program workers as one of this program’s strengths. The concern raised by Caseworker 2 emphasizes the need for continuation of this policy. It also highlights how program workers have to help facilitate relationships that are relatively amorphous. While the roles and responsibilities of, say, a parent-child relationship are fairly well institutionalized, those of adult mentors are not. In helping youth and adults to develop supportive, ongoing relationships, we must attend to how program workers lay the groundwork for relationships that do not involve legal or culturally normative ties.

County caseworkers provided an outsider's perspective of this program. They have been able to observe the impacts of this program on their clients. Despite some concerns, all caseworkers interview for this research would recommend this program for other youth. Their support is largely due to the outcomes they have seen in their clients including mental health improvements and connections made with supportive adults. They discussed positive attributes of the program, including program worker stability and the location of the program outside of the system. They also raised concerns about the behavior of youth during participation and the potential trauma caused by program cessation and the end of the relationship between youth and their program worker. I highlighted the need for consistent communication as a way to combat some of their concerns, though program administrators need to consider further the implications of removing program workers from the lives of these youth.

IV. Across Group Discussion

Despite the fact that program workers and caseworkers both work with youth participants on a regular basis, their perspectives and relationship to the program are different. It is helpful to compare their impressions of the program to identify places where commonalities or differences exist. Assessment of program perspectives from groups situated in different places within the program gives us a broader insight into its effects.

One message that cuts across both groups is a positive overall impression of the YC program. The consistency of reports across these two groups gives us more confidence in them. Both groups similarly endorse the goals of the program, its implicit model of the needs of

emerging adulthood, and its ability to meet these needs. In general, it seems the program has been able to get the buy-in of the caseworkers with which it works.[10]

Through their interviews, each group highlighted different program strengths and concerns. These differences, however, are reflective of the ways that each group interacts with the program. For example, program workers highlighted as a strength the youth-driven nature of the program. This is of particular importance to program workers because it dictates when and how they interact with all of their participants, and it allows them to adjust the program according to the needs of their participants. On the other hand, caseworkers highlighted attributes of the program which set the work that program workers do apart from the work that they are able to do with clients. For example, they discussed the stability of the relationships between program workers and youth. What is unique about the YC program is program workers' ability to continue working with youth no matter where their placement is or how it changes during the course of program participation. Caseworkers recognized the value of this arrangement, especially because they are not able to provide such a consistent relationship should youth move.

Differences in perceptions of program weakness or barriers are also reflective of each group's position and relationship to the program. Program workers highlight issues that have arisen which make it difficult for them to carry out different program phases. For example, barriers created by parents may prevent workers from being able to make contact with certain family members, which may dampen the effectiveness of the connecting phase of the program. Caseworkers' concerns reflect their attention to potential unintended negative consequences of their clients' program participation, such as strained relationships between their clients and people outside of the program and loss of relationship between their client and their program

[10] Although there may be selection among caseworkers into having their clients participate in the YC program. Future research among caseworkers who have not interacted with the YC program or who have declined to do so is necessary to further explore these possibilities.

worker once the program ends. These are issues with which the caseworker has to manage both during and after program participation. While both groups should be aware of the other's concerns or barriers to success, it is especially important that program personnel recognize the concerns of caseworkers because they are able to affect change within the program accordingly.

One important area that both groups expressed consensus on is the need for a flexible definition of permanency for older youth in the child welfare system. This highlights the importance of this practice for all groups who work with this population. It is also supported by research on this population which, as previously discussed, stresses the importance of maintaining flexibility in what is considered a permanent relationship when dealing with youth who are approaching a transition out of the system and into the emerging adulthood period (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010).

It is also notable that neither group emphasized positive impacts related to long-term connections and support between youth and their adult connections. This may be because program workers' involvement with youth contractually ends after 18-24 months, and case workers' involvement ends at 18 or 21, when youth age out of the system. Therefore, they are potentially precluded from observing how these relationships play out over time. Therefore, further research will need to occur in order to determine whether these relationships are enduring. It is an open questions whether strategies like a step-down approach to supporting newly formed connections, or an extension of program participation are necessary to facilitate the ongoing nature of these relationships.

III. Jonathan

Despite my intention to interview a number of program participants, unforeseen complications with county partners and internal program organizational issues made recruitment of this population prohibitively difficult. Findings from the one interview that I conducted are illustrative of the program experience of this one participant only and are not generalizable to all youth participants. I explored this participant's perception of his experience, his relationship with his program worker, and any outcomes that he saw as resulting from program participation. I present his responses in more detail below to look for suggestions of where youth experiences may vary from the perceptions of program and caseworkers.

I interviewed Jonathan[11], a 22-year-old young man who participated in the program when he was 17. Jonathan was in foster care from 8-18, and he aged out of the system without being adopted. Jonathan now lives with friends in a rental house. He graduated high school and attended one semester of college. He seems dissatisfied with his job and expressed an interested in returning to school.

Jonathan looked back on his YC experiences very fondly, saying, "I love the program." He also spoke very highly of his program worker. "Talking through [my past] with [my worker] I felt so comfortable. I felt like I was talking to another family member who has known me my whole entire life." Overall, the features of the program that Jonathan highlighted as key to his positive experiences in the program correspond closely to its primary features of flexibility and youth empowerment, trauma healing, and creating connections.

[11] Name changed to protect privacy

1) Program flexibility

Jonathan repeatedly raised the fact that he could move at his own pace, and that his worker was respectful of his need to do so, as central to his experience. "[S]he wasn't forcing me to bring any of [my trauma] out, she wasn't doing none of that. She was like, 'Let me know when you're ready.' So she just gave me time." These comments emphasized the importance of the flexibility of this program for Jonathan. It was a strength of the program for him that his worker allowed him the space to progress through the program at a rate that was comfortable. For a young person who has been at the mercy of the child welfare system for a nearly a decade, feeling he had a substantial measure of control over his relationship with his program worker and his own healing process was core to his engagement with YC.

2) Trauma healing

Jonathan views the grief, loss, and trauma healing work he did during his time in the YC program as transformative for him. He shared that the work he did with his program worker helped him to identify his emotions and to understand where these emotions were coming from. She helped him to make the connection between his history of trauma and the things he was feeling in the present. As a result, he says, he was able to grieve and gain some closure. "She helped me know what my emotions are and help me confront my emotions. … I couldn't keep it in. I was like a volcano ready to erupt…. [I]t needed to be talked about. And I got to grieve better. I smile more. So it helped me a lot." This was not simply a matter of understanding the events of the past nor does it mean his past is no longer an issue. Rather, Jonathan's program worker helped him develop the skills to manage his emotions. "I'm better [now than before the program]! I can identify my emotions now. Like, I still have a little anger, but now I know how to control them better. I learned how to show my feelings in an appropriate way. Not lashing out

all the time, or just being in my own little shell." For Jonathan, the coping skills he gained may potentially allow him to develop important relationships, because he can find a balance between his previous extremes of pushing people away with his anger or his unwillingness to be vulnerable or emotionally connected.

3) Adult connections established

One of the adult connections that Jonathan made as part of the YC program was with his father. However, establishing ongoing support was not the focus of this connection. Instead, Jonathan's caseworker determined that he needed to reconnect with his father for therapeutic reasons. He shared the details of his interactions with his father with me during our conversation. Essentially, Jonathan blamed himself for his family's involvement in the child welfare system. He was the person who reported the maltreatment, and was therefore plagued with guilt because he perceived himself as responsible for he and his sibling being removed from their parents' care. When his program worker gave him the opportunity to speak with his father about the past, his father took responsibility for what happened, and shifted the blame off Jonathan and onto himself. Jonathan says that hearing this message from his father was incredibly healing. "[When] my dad was like, 'Son, it's not your fault,' it broke me down. For years, I thought it was, and… I would have had this guilt in my stomach if it wasn't for [my program worker]." In retrospect, this opportunity became especially meaningful for him because his biological father passed away a short time afterward.

Jonathan connected to quite a few extended family members through this program as well. He connected with six aunts and uncles, his oldest sister, and one of his grandmothers. He remains in touch with these family members, four years after program participation has ended, telling me, "I still go talk to them when I can. I still go visit them when I can." He attributes

these connections solely to the YC program, saying, “I would never [have connected with them]. I would have just stayed with my foster family, and talked to my immediate family, my sisters and brothers. I would never had reached out to anyone [else].”

Interestingly, however, when I asked about whom he turns to for support now, Jonathan did not mention any of these re-established connections. Instead, he talks about his former foster father as his primary supportive adult. This has potential implications for the ability of this program to prepare youth for the emerging adulthood period. As was previously stated, the existence of social support networks are especially important during the emerging adulthood period. Research has shown that permanent relationships and social support networks are essential components of a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood (Aquilino, 2006; Bowers, Johnson, et al., 2014; Settersen & Ray, 2010).

Like many young adults in his age group, Jonathan does not yet consider himself an adult (Arnett, 1997, 2000, 2001; Nelson, 2003). During our discussion, he described several characteristics that he feels are indicative of adulthood. These included educational and career success, stability, and responsible decision-making. Jonathan did not feel that he possessed these characteristics, and, on several occasions, he mentioned that he has not had anyone to help him reach adulthood, or to motivate him to work toward success. His biological father was not involved in his life, and recently passed away, and his mother died five years ago. His foster father, who has recently re-emerged as a supportive adult, was not available to him for several years after he aged out of the system.

One of the primary goals of the YC program is to establish supportive networks, intended to help youth succeed once they leave the care of the child welfare system. These networks are supposed to make strong and lasting connections between youth and supportive adults. In this

case, the connections made between Jonathan and his extended family members have fallen short of this goal. Further research is needed to determine whether other program participants share this experience, and whether the program is meeting this goal.

4) Continued reliance on program worker

As was stated in the previous section, Jonathan identifies very few adult figures who serve as emotional or social supports. In fact, Jonathan still relies on his program worker, and counts her among people he can turn to help him with future success. Notably, he is no longer a YC client, so his program worker is maintaining her relationship with him voluntarily and without compensation. He shared that: "[M]iraculously, she is still in my life. I already know that, if I needed anything, whether it's a place to crash or I needed to get away, I know that I could call [my worker], and say I'm really going through it right now, I really need help. I feel like she would just drop everything she is doing and drive all the way up from Wisconsin."

Program workers are supposed to step away from participants once they have connected with family members and their county contracts end. It is an unsustainable arrangement for a program worker to continue to maintain contact with all youth participants after their contracts have ended, and they are not receiving payment for this work; this would potentially eat up the time they have to serve the needs of current clients. Jonathan's program worker actually raised this concern, when she reported that she has taken on some ongoing work with former clients on a pro bono basis. Not only was this demanding of her, but she saw it as not a good outcome for youth like Jonathan either. "They need to be claimed and they need to have their own people." While she had successfully facilitated a variety of connections for Jonathan with his family, ultimately, his trusting relationship with her was where he wanted to turn when times got tough.

This outcome raises questions about the program's impacts. For example, is the amount of time Jonathan spent in the connection phase of the program insufficient? With more scaffolding, could his relationships with his extended family members taken the program worker's position as a primary support system? While further research is needed to determine whether this experience is shared by other youth, it is an essential issue to explore as it speaks to the long-term viability of the program.

Though it is not generalizable across youth, Jonathan's experience closely mirrors the impacts discussed by program workers and caseworkers. For Jonathan, the most valuable part of the program was the ability to talk to his program worker about his past trauma, to grieve the losses he had experienced, and to heal and move on from them. He credits this program completely with these experiences. While the child welfare system might have taken care of his physical needs, he sees the YC program as having attended to his emotional needs. As a consequence, Jonathan became willing and able to open up and form relationships with extended family members during the course of the program. Nonetheless, these ties are not serving as the intended support structure, leaving Jonathan feeling he is navigating much of his transition to adulthood with a safety net, beyond the ongoing good will of his YC program worker.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

I. Summary

The primary focus of this evaluation was to explore the Youth Connections (YC) program. I accomplished this through interviews with key stakeholders and by reviewing participant data collected by program workers. Program designers created this program to address poor life outcomes faced by youth aging out of the child welfare system. The guiding assumption for this design being that youth who leave the system without having been adopted or reunited with their family of origin lack a social support network that peers not in the system have and utilize to navigate the transition to adulthood.

The YC program uses a two-pronged approach to helping youth develop these networks. First, program workers guide youth through the 3-5-7 program, which is supposed to help youth heal from past trauma, and equip them to form new relationships. Program workers also use Family Search and Engagement to find adults from youths' pasts, or extended family or friend networks, who are willing to explore relationships with youth. Program workers then facilitate meetings between youth and adults, and work to establish positive, supportive, ongoing relationships.

Observations from program workers and county caseworkers show that implementation of this program has largely followed the program model. However, YC program workers and administrators are encouraged to review their data collection protocols, projected participation timeline, and target audience,

Program workers and caseworkers have also observed positive changes in the mental, emotional, and physical health of youth participants, which they attribute to program participation. This finding highlights the fact that, based on program worker observations, this

program is more heavily focused on the trauma healing work than the family search and engagement work.

Additionally, many participants have made connections to adults discovered through Family Search and Engagement activities. However, questions remain about whether these relationships endure once program participation has ended. Maintenance of these relationships is necessary if these adults are going act as social supports while youth navigate the emerging adulthood period. Further research is necessary to determine the extent to which adults connected to youth through the YC program are taking on a long-term social support role.

Several recommendations arose following the evaluation of this program. These recommendations include suggestions for internal program improvements, considerations for future program take-up at other locations, and larger policy implications. I present these recommendations below, along with a review of study limitations and future directions for research on this program and population.

II. Recommendations

Program Recommendations

The following recommendations aim to strengthen the YC program, in order to promote sustainability over time in serving vulnerable youth aging out of foster care. These recommendations reflect both the implementation and summative sections of this evaluation.

a) Improve Data Collection

While there appears to be consistency within the program in the collection of most data measures, some discrepancies were evident in the administration of both the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Questionnaire and the Hope Scale. According to program standards, program workers are supposed to administer both the ACE Questionnaire and the Hope Scale when a

participant enters the program and the Hope Scale again when program participation concludes. However, a review of organizational data showed ACE scores of zero for a few youth, which is extremely unlikely for youth in the child welfare system. It also showed missing Hope Scale data for youth at either the start or end of program participation. The ACE Questionnaire results provide important insight into the lived experiences of youth participants prior to program participation. The Hope Scale is a tool used to measure youth's feelings about hope, including their beliefs about themselves, their self-efficacy, and possibilities for future success. Reviewing this data is especially useful for measuring and tracking internal changes that result from activities associated with the grief, loss, and trauma healing.

As the program moves forward, program workers and administrators must pay careful attention to data collection standards and procedures. It is particularly important that they use the Hope Scale, as having a substantive measure that provides evidence of participant progress and growth is important for continued program success. Data showing client progression on the Hope Scale measure may be useful for program improvement, justification, and to secure continued funding. Thus, thorough data collection should be a priority of this organization.

b) Reevaluate Program Timeline

As noted in previous chapters of this evaluation, there are concerns about the accuracy of the projected timeline for program completion. Program documentation indicates that the projected length of service engagement for the program is 3-24 months, with an average of 9 months. However, by all indications, the average length of this program is much longer than 9 months. Program workers and caseworkers agreed that this program requires at least 18 months to progress through all four phases of the program, with many youth needing more time than that. This inconsistency requires that program administrators reevaluate the projected timeline of

the program to provide a more accurate understanding of the time required for program completion.

Premature program completion may be impacting the long term success of youth in the program, as well as the success rates of the organization. Adjusting the projected length of program participation will allow YC program administrators to clearly and accurately communicate expectations to counties and other funding organizations. This will likely alleviate issues that arise when youth exceed anticipated timelines and the discontinuation of funding forces youth to abruptly end program participation.

c) Measure Variation in Program Engagement and Completion

When asked about the ability of this program to serve the diverse needs of youth in the child welfare population, all program workers reported that the flexibility of this program allows for adjustments to program activities and timeline based on the individual needs of participants. In several instances, however, program workers called attention to groups of youth within the system for whom program participation may require more time working through the phases. These groups include; youth with higher ACE scores, younger youth, and youth living in institutionalized settings. Currently, there is no empirical evidence to support these assertions. Further investigation by the program may shed light on whether these and/or other characteristics act as predictors of program use. This information could help program workers to anticipate effective types and length of program activities and could help counties have a more accurate understanding of their funding commitments.

d) Reconsider Current Support Phase

One of the aims of this program is to establish long-lasting, supportive connections between youth participants and adults who will act as a crucial support system for child welfare

involved youth who likely do not have other means of (social?) support during this transitional period. As has been previously reported, this program succeeds in preparing youth for making connections by dealing with their histories of trauma, grief, and loss. Program workers are also successful in finding and facilitating connections between youth and adults from their extended families or other networks. The area in which this program may be falling short is in the preparation for ensuring these connections develop into sustainable, ongoing relationships. The relationship support and maintenance piece of this program is supposed to happen during the fourth phase of the program, the support phase. Given the findings presented above, I strongly advise program administrators to reconsider support phase activities and policies to improve overall success. In some cases, simply lengthening the program, so as to allow enough time during this phase for activities to be completed fully, would lead to more successful outcomes. In other cases, it may make sense to explore additional strategies, like role-playing scenarios in which youth may someday need to call on their support networks, or scaffolding the level of support that program workers provide, in order to better prepare dyads for post-program relationships.

e) Explore Outside Funding

The most common complaint I heard during my interviews, from both program workers and caseworkers, centered on the issue of continued funding of this program. The YC program is not technically therapeutic, so unlike some other healing-focused programs, this program is not reimbursable by federal Medicaid funding. The primary source of funding for this program is individual counties, who pay for youth in their care to participate. As a result, counties refer youth to the program only sparingly and often only when they have run out of other options. This is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, it means that cost, and not program success or failure,

is the primary determining factor of whether youth have the opportunity to participate. Secondly, it means that youth who take longer to complete the program may not be able to continue participation because their limited county funding has run out. Finally, if only the most high-risk youth are referred to this program, program success rates may be skewed, as these youth seem to have the most difficult time achieving positive results. These youth may also take longer to move through the program, contributing to higher costs of participation for the county, and ultimately leading to a cyclical problem of referral type, time, and expense.

Ideally, Medicaid or another federal agency, like the Department of Health and Human Services for example, would eventually fund this program. However, it is unadvisable to plan for this economic windfall. Instead, I suggest that this organization looks to other sources of funding, like philanthropic foundations, to sustain and/or grow this program. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation are examples of foundations that have supported programs and organizations benefitting transition-age foster youth in the recent past. Funding from an outside organization would benefit the YC program itself, its county partners, and the additional youth who would have access due to economic support.

Implementation of this Program in other Locations

Currently, one organization is responsible for the facilitation of the YC program, and it is operating through individual counties in two US states. Here I present several points to think through for those considering the implementation of this program in other locations.

One of most valued characteristics of this program is the relationship between program workers and their participants. This relationship builds over time, and continues despite other instability a youth may experience, like placement changes or new caseworker assignments.

Placement instability is common among foster youth and program workers represent stability during such transitions. One of the ways that the YC program ensures this stability is the commitment that program workers will travel whatever distances are required in order to continue meeting with their participants. This commitment ensures that youth will not need start the trust building process over if their geographical location changes, like they do with county caseworkers and most other members of their service teams. Therefore, this commitment is crucial in any other iterations of this program. Program workers must be willing and able to travel in order to continue meeting youth clients who have placement changes during the program. States with large geographical footprints should consider whether this arrangement is feasible.

Another highly valued program characteristic is its youth-driven nature. Accordingly, youth must retain the ability to hire and fire staff members. Youth participation is crucial to program success, so they must have control over whether they enroll in the program. Likewise, if they become unable or unwilling to continue participation, they must have the ability to take a break or end enrollment entirely. The content of meetings with program workers can be emotionally taxing for youth, especially during the healing phase when program workers ask them to confront difficult and often painful memories from their past. This program's focus on youths' individual needs assures that youth are able to process the emotions associated with this work without constraints or pressure.

The fact that this program could change, depending on each client, their previous experiences, and the phase of the program they are in means that program workers must have education, experience, and/or training in child welfare and trauma. This allows the program workers to use their knowledge to individualize program activities to the needs of each youth in

their caseload. It also helps them to understand and communicate with youth, as well as their potential supportive adults. Accordingly, program workers must also have the ability to maintain small caseloads, of less than 10 participants per program worker, in order to ensure proper attention to each client.

This program individualization also means that counties and other funding organizations should be prepared for youth to progress through the phases and timeline at different speeds. There is some indication that age, ACE scores, and living situation may predict length of time required for program completion, though empirical testing has not yet determined the validity of these characteristics as predictors. However, social service teams and funders must clearly understand the potential for variation in length of program participation, in order to avoid service interruption.

Lastly, future programs must adopt the flexible definition of permanency used by the YC program. As previously mentioned, older youth in the foster care system may be uninterested in traditional forms of permanency, i.e. adoption (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). Instead, they may prefer support to come in other ways. This program uses a permanency pact, signed by both the youth and their supportive adults, which allows for a youth led definition of what permanency and support will look like after the program has ended and they have left care. Adopting this pact, or something similar, will allow youth who are hesitant about formal definitions of permanent connections to feel comfortable participating in the program and establishing less rigid relationships.

Policy Recommendations

On a much larger scale, the results of this study have several implications for policies that impact youth transitioning out of foster care. First, the Fostering Connections to Success and

Increasing Adoptions Act, passed in 2008, includes a component that allows for states to extend services to foster youth 19-21 years old (Stott, 2013). According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 24 states have taken advantage of this policy and increased the age of majority beyond 18. This increase could have important implications for youth in this program. Extending services means that older youth, those who have already entered the emerging adulthood period, would be eligible for program participation. Accordingly, states that extend services should consider this program, especially for young adults who may be looking for sources of support without the full commitment of permanency.

Additionally, it is important to reconsider the current restrictions on funding for programs that provide therapeutic care, but that operate outside of traditional conceptualizations of therapy. There are several components of this program that may contribute to successful outcomes, but that do not work in a traditional therapy setting. This includes the opportunities that program workers have to build trust with youth in informal settings. All program workers report taking youth out of their living situations and into the community in order to build their initial relationships in more comfortable settings, which is not traditionally part of therapeutic relationships. Another component is the ability and willingness of the program worker to travel to meet with youth, regardless of placement. Unfortunately, most therapists are unable to do this. Therefore, when youth have placement changes, they have to find a new therapist, making the stability offered by YC unique for this population. This program also offers the combination of trauma-informed care with family search and engagement work. Again, this kind of activity is beyond the purview of traditional therapists. It would be useful to consider whether programs like this should meet eligibility requirements. Current 2018 budget proposals, however, include cuts to the Medicaid program, which is where much of the therapeutic care funding currently

comes from. It is unlikely that eligibility requirements would become more flexible in the face of reduced funding.

III. Limitations

Several study characteristics are important to keep in mind when considering the results of this study. First, despite my original intentions, I was only able to interview one former program participant. Therefore, any observations he shared are not generalizable to the experiences of other participants. Additionally, a lack of program participants in this study means that we are only able to measure other stakeholders' observations regarding program impacts, rather than impacts that youth might report.

Secondly, the YC program currently operates in two Midwestern US states, and findings may not be generalizable to foster youth in other states. This program is subject to state and local Child Protective Services policies, and therefore, may not operate the same way in other locations. Youth in these states may also have variable access to outside services, with both the type and availability of other services potentially influencing program impact. Additionally, the ability to travel to meet students regardless of where their placement is within the state is a highly valued characteristic of this program and relies heavily on the geographical makeup of the states involved with this study.

Study design

There are also several characteristics of the study design that are important to bear in mind when considering study results. First, this study is not longitudinal, which means that I am unable to follow participants over time to draw conclusions about the influence of this program

on long-term outcomes. In addition, this study does not utilize random assignment, so it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions about whether findings from this study resulted exclusively from program participation. Finally, data used for the implementation section of this project came directly from program administrators. I did not provide oversight on data collection and some data was incomplete.

IV. Future Research Directions

As was discussed in the first chapter of this project, much of the research that we have on older youth in foster care involves the collecting of information on their outcomes, with significantly less attention paid to producing and publishing research evaluating programs designed to improve these outcomes. The research presented here is an example of one such evaluation. Future research should continue to investigate the implementation and impacts of programs designed to positively impact this population that exist around the country.

In particular, the YC program is unique in its commitment to preparing youth to form supportive relationships, as well as locating supportive adults, and facilitating connections between them. The YC program and its program workers take a trauma-informed approach to building social support networks, the existence of which are especially important during the emerging adulthood period (Aquilino, 2006; Bowers, Johnson, et al., 2014; Settersen & Ray, 2010). This approach begins by acknowledging that all participants have some history of trauma. Beginning this way allows youth to heal from trauma associated with past relationships, before moving on to form new ones. This approach is what differentiates this program from other family search programs evaluated in the past. The evaluation done here is a first step to understanding whether this two-pronged approach is successful. Interviews with key stakeholders provided a window into the implementation of this program, as well as observed

changes in youth participants. Next steps for this program should involve a large scale, longitudinal evaluation of program impact.

Finally, one place where large gaps exist in this research are studies that create opportunities for foster youth to tell their own stories. Where they do exist, all perspectives come from foster care alumni. It is very important that research on this population create opportunities for older youth currently in the system to share their experiences.

V. Conclusion

This evaluation contributes to the literature in several ways. First, as previously argued, there is not yet clarity in the literature around the best practices for improving life outcomes for this vulnerable population of youth. Programs using Independent Living skills (ILP) training, for example, have found limited success, making the present examination particularly distinct in its observation of a program departing from the traditional ILP framework. This study also represents the first look at a program that combines grief, loss, and trauma healing, designed to prepare youth for future relationships, with family search and engagement services. Interviews conducted for this study find that key stakeholders observe improvements in the mental, emotional, and physical health of youth participants, and that most participants are able to make connections with adults that were previously unavailable to them. We will need more research to determine whether these changes result in long-term support networks and life outcome improvements. However, all key stakeholders interviewed for this project, including program workers, caseworkers, and one former program participant, spoke very positively about the program and were unanimously in favor of its continuation.

Appendix 1: Recruitment Materials

Recruitment Email Content

SUBJECT: YC PROGRAM STUDY REQUEST

Hi XXX!

My name is Lauren Lewis and I am a PhD student and researcher from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I am currently conducting a study on the Youth Connections (YC) program. The purpose of this research study is to learn more about youth in the child welfare system, including their experiences with the YC program.

I received your contact information because you have had a client participate in the program. I would very much appreciate your help with this study! If you do participate, your personal information would be kept completely confidential.

The study should take about a half an hour, and will take place over the phone. If you are interested in participating or learning more, please email me back so that we can set up a time to talk.

Thank you in advance for your time!
Lauren Lewis

Recruitment Letter

Dear [NAME],

I am writing to ask you to participate in the study I am conducting about the Youth Connections (YC) program. I received your contact information from YC program administrators.

The purpose of this research study is to learn more about older youth in the child welfare system, including their experiences with the YC program.

I would very much appreciate your help with this study. If you do participate, your personal information would be kept completely confidential and neither your casework nor the YC program will be informed of your participation. However, whether or not to sign up for this study is your decision. Your participation is voluntary and will have no effect on your relationship with the YC program.

Study participants will be compensated for their time with a $30 gift card.

If you are interested in learning more, please contact me at 608-262-0860 or lauren.lewis@wisc.edu. Please leave your name and contact information for the best way to reach you. You may also reach out to your parent/guardian or caseworker to discuss your decision.

You do not have to respond if you are not interested in this study. If you do not respond, you may receive a phone call which you can simply disregard.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Lauren Lewis

This study is being completed by a doctoral student from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. If you are not satisfied with response of research team, have more questions, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Education and Social/Behavioral Science IRB Office at 608-263-2320.

Initial Contact Script

"Hello (NAME), my name is Lauren Lewis and I am a researcher calling from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The reason I'm calling is that we are conducting a study to learn more about older youth in the child welfare system, including their experiences with the Youth Connections program. I am currently seeking volunteers as participants in this study and I am wondering if you would be interested in hearing more about it."

(IF NO) "Thank you, good-bye."

(IF YES) "This study involves a phone or in-person interview, in which I will ask you about your past experiences with the child welfare system and your participation in/impressions of the YC program."

"Participation in this study will take approximately 30-60 minutes of your time. In appreciation of your time commitment, you will receive a $30 gift card (*for youth participants only*)."

"I would very much appreciate your help with this study. If you do participate, your personal information would be kept completely confidential and neither your casework nor the YC program will be informed of your participation. However, whether or not to sign up for this study is your decision. Your participation is voluntary and will have no effect on your relationship with the YC program."

"Would you be interested in participating?"

(IF NO): "Thank you, good-bye."

(IF UNSURE): "You may also take some time to think through your decision. Feel free to reach out to your parent/guardian or caseworker to discuss your participation. I will reconnect with you on (DATE, TIME) to discuss your decision."

(IF YES): "Thank you; I appreciate your interest in my research."

"Would you prefer to meet in-person or over the phone?"

(SCHEDULE TIME AND PLACE)

"Great! The day before your session, I will contact you by phone or email as a reminder. However, in the meantime, if you discover you will be unable to make it, please call me at 608-262-0860 and leave a message if I am not available, or email me at or lauren.lewis@wisc.edu. Please try to provide at least 24 hours notice so that I can reschedule my trip (*if in-person*).

"I look forward to meeting you/speaking with you on (Insert Day and Time Again). Thank you very much again for helping me with my research."

Appendix 2: Consent Scripts

YC Participant Script

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
Title of the Study: Preparing Youth to Age-out of the Foster Care System: A Program Evaluation

Hello (NAME), my name is Lauren Lewis and I am a researcher from the University of Wisconsin-Madison

(Study Description) You are invited to participate in a research study about young people in the child welfare system. This study will focus on evaluating the Youth Connections (YC) program. You have been asked to participate because you have been a participant in the YC program.

(Interview Details) The interview will be done by me, a doctoral student in the Human Development and Family Studies Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The interview is expected to take about 1 hour, and will be done either over the phone or in-person. During the interview, you will be asked about your experiences as a child welfare involved youth and as a participant in the YC program. You will be asked for permission to audio record the interview.

(Risks and Benefits) The potential risks of participating are very small. However, there is a chance that we could accidentally reveal information that identifies you. Every effort will be made to protect your research study data, though. Additionally, difficult topics may be discussed which could cause you to feel psychologically or emotionally distressed. You may choose not to answer any interview questions and you may stop participating in the study at any time. There are no direct benefits to participants in this study. You will be compensated for your time with a $30 gift card.

(Confidentiality) Your participation in this study is voluntary and confidential to the extent allowed by law. Per Executive Order 54, if we become aware of abuse or neglect of a minor, that confidentiality may be broken. Your decision about whether or not to participate will not have any impact on your participation in the YC program. Neither the YC program, nor your caseworker, nor your parent/guardian will be given access to the interview recordings or data; The parent organization will only receive a report evaluating the program as a whole. Interviews will be audio recorded and all recordings will be erased after the information has been transcribed. Your responses will be combined with the responses of all other participants and will remain confidential in any reports. If we do include a direct quote from you in our reports, the quote will not be associated with your name or with any information that could be used to specifically identify you. We will store written data from this research for at least seven years after the conclusion of the study. Data may be used in future reports but your confidentiality will remain a priority.

Do you have any questions for me at this time?

(Contact Information) If you have any future questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by email at lauren.lewis@wisc.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Professor Sarah Halpern-Meekin, by email at sarah.halpernmeekin@wisc.edu.

If you are not satisfied with response of research team, have more questions, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Education and Social/Behavioral Science IRB Office at 608-263-2320.

Do I have your permission to begin this interview? Do I have your permission to record our conversation?

YC Staff Participant Oral Consent Script

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
Title of the Study: Preparing Youth to Age-out of the Foster Care System: A Program Evaluation

Hello (NAME), my name is Lauren Lewis and I am a researcher from the University of Wisconsin-Madison

(Study Description) You are invited to participate in a research study about young people in the child welfare system. This study will focus specifically on evaluating the Youth Connections (YC) program. You have been asked to participate because you have worked on the YC program.

(Interview Details) The interview will be conducted by me, a doctoral student in the Human Development and Family Studies Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The interview is expected to take about 30 minutes to 1 hour, and will be conducted via phone or in-person. During the interview, you will be asked about your experiences working on the YC program. You will be asked for permission to audio record the interview.

(Risks and Benefits) The potential risks of participating are minimal. However, there is a chance that we could accidentally reveal information that identifies you. Every effort will be made to protect your research study data, though. Additionally, you may choose not to answer any interview questions and you may stop participating in the study at any time. There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

(Confidentiality) Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and confidential to the extent allowed by law. Per Executive Order 54, if we become aware of abuse or neglect of a minor, that confidentiality may be broken. The YC program will not be informed of your participation, nor will they be given access to the interview recordings or data; they will only receive summary data evaluating the program as a whole. Interviews will be audio recorded and all recordings will be erased after the information has been transcribed. Your responses will be combined with the responses of all other participants and will remain confidential in any reports. If we do include a direct quote from you in our reports, the quotes will not be associated with your name or with any information that could be used to specifically identify you. We will store written data from this research for at least seven years after the conclusion of the study. Data may be used in future reports but your confidentiality will remain a priority.

Do you have any questions for me at this time?

(Contact Information) If you have any future questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by email at lauren.lewis@wisc.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Professor Sarah Halpern-Meekin, by email at sarah.halpernmeekin@wisc.edu.

If you are not satisfied with response of research team, have more questions, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Education and Social/Behavioral Science IRB Office at 608-263-2320.

Do I have your permission to begin this interview? Do I have your permission to record our conversation?

Caseworker Participant Oral Consent Script

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
Title of the Study: Preparing Youth to Age-out of the Foster Care System: A Program Evaluation

Hello (NAME), my name is Lauren Lewis and I am a researcher from the University of Wisconsin-Madison

(Study Description) You are invited to participate in a research study about young people in the child welfare system. This study will focus specifically on evaluating the Youth Connections (YC) program. You have been asked to participate because you are a caseworker with a client who has participated in the YC program.

(Interview Details) The interview will be conducted by me, a doctoral student in the Human Development and Family Studies Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The interview is expected to take about 30 minutes to 1 hour, and will be conducted via phone. During the interview, you will be asked about your experiences with the YC program. You will be asked for permission to audio record the interview.

(Risks and Benefits) The potential risks of participating are minimal. However, there is a chance that we could accidentally reveal information that identifies you. Every effort will be made to protect your research study data, though. Additionally, you may choose not to answer any interview questions and you may stop participating in the study at any time. There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

(Confidentiality) Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and confidential to the extent allowed by law. Per Executive Order 54, if we become aware of abuse or neglect of a minor, that confidentiality may be broken. Neither your employer nor the YC program will not be informed of your participation, nor will they be given access to the interview recordings or data; the YC program will only receive summary data evaluating the program as a whole. Interviews will be audio recorded and all recordings will be erased after the information has been transcribed. Your responses will be combined with the responses of all other participants and will remain confidential in any reports. If we do include a direct quote from you in our reports, the quotes will not be associated with your name or with any information that could be used to specifically identify you. We will store written data from this research for at least seven years after the conclusion of the study. Data may be used in future reports but your confidentiality will remain a priority.

Do you have any questions for me at this time?

(Contact Information) If you have any future questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by email at lauren.lewis@wisc.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Professor Sarah Halpern-Meekin, by email at sarah.halpernmeekin@wisc.edu.

If you are not satisfied with response of research team, have more questions, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Education and Social/Behavioral Science IRB Office at 608-263-2320.

Do I have your permission to begin this interview? Do I have your permission to record our conversation?

Appendix 3: Interview Guides

Foster Youth

1) How old are you?
2) How long have you been in foster care?
3) What are things like for you these days?
    a. Have you finished high school?
        i. If not, do you plan to?
    b. What is your current living situation?
        i. Did this change at all during the time you were in the program?
4) If you have a really bad day, or get a bad grade in school or something, who would you talk to?
5) How about if you have a great day or something good happens?
6) Do you consider yourself an adult?
    a. Why or why not? What makes someone an adult, do you think?
7) Tell me about YC. What was it like?
    a. What led you to be a part of this program?
    b. What are some of the things you did as part of the program? How did you feel about these things?
    c. Some people have told me that completing the program was hard, while others have told me it was pretty easy. What was it like for you?
8) Would you say that overall you liked the program or didn't like it or what?
    a. Did your feelings about the program change from when you started to when you were done?
    b. Do you feel like this program was worth doing?
        i. Why or why not?
        ii. Are you better or worse off now than you were before you completed it?
        iii. In what ways?
9) What did you know about the YC program before you started?
10) Before the program, if you had a really bad day, or got a bad grade in school or something, who would talk to?
11) How about if you had a great day or something good happened?
12) One of the goals of the YC program is to connect you with adults from your past. Did this happen with you? What was that like?
    a. How many adults did you meet with, because of this program?
    b. How many of those adults are you still in contact with?
    c. What is your current relationship with them like?
    d. How much longer do you think you'll be in touch with them?
    e. Without the program, what do you think are the chances that you would have connected with these adults?
13) What did you think about the program staff?
    a. I have been told that staff for this program are different than other programs. They are trained not to give up on you guys, and to continually show up when you need them. Do you think this is true? How do you feel about that?

   b. I have also been told that some people end up talking to staff members about things that are uncomfortable or difficult to talk about. Is this true? How do you feel about that?
   c. Did your opinions of program staff change at all during the time you were in the program?
14) What do you think of your caseworker?
   a. Did your relationship or feelings about your caseworker change during the time you were in the program? How, in what ways?
15) If I were to interview you again in 5 years, what do you think you'll be doing?
   a. Prompt for specifics: housing, job, family, etc.
   b. Is there anyone in your life who you think can help you get there?
16) Is there anything else I should know about this program?
17) If you were giving advice to people in the government who are in charge of deciding what programs are offered to foster youth and former foster youth, what would you tell them is most important to do to help young people like yourself?

<u>The parent organization Staff</u>

1) How long have you been a part of the YC program?
2) Did you complete any program-specific training? What was your training like?
3) What are the goals of this program?
4) Can you tell me more about YC from your perspective?
   a. How often are you meeting with participants?
   b. How long does the program last?
   c. What are the sorts of things you do for YC participants?
   d. Have you ever had a youth that did not complete the program?
   e. Do you have any interaction with parents or guardians?
5) What is it like to work with this diverse audience?
   a. Does the program change depending on a participant's age? In what ways?
   b. Does the program change depending on a participant's living arrangement? In what ways?
6) Did you have experience working with foster or child welfare-involved youth before working for the YC program?
   a. (Prompt for details)
7) How do your previous experiences compare to your experiences with the YC program?
8) What are your feelings about YC (in general)?
9) Do you notice any differences in participants between the time they start the program, and when they complete the program?
   a. (prompt for details)
10) Did you confront any challenges or barriers that were not anticipated?
11) Are there any youth for which this program is not a good fit, and why?
12) Can you think of anything that this program or other programs should be doing to help foster youth transition to adulthood?

<u>Caseworkers</u>

1) How long have you been a caseworker?
2) How many of your clients have participated in the YC program?

3) What did you know about the program before your client(s) began participating?
4) Can you explain the program to me in your own words? From your perspective?
5) Do you notice any differences in your client(s) between the time they start the program, and when they complete the program?
    a. (prompt for details)
6) Have your clients made any adult connections through this program?
7) Have they maintained these connections? What is your opinion on the likelihood of long term connections?
8) Do you think these connections could/would have been made without the YC program?
9) Do you have any predictions on the future outcomes of your client(s)?
10) Have these predictions changed at all since completion of the program?
    a. Why or why not.
11) Would you recommend this program for other foster youth?
12) Are there any other programs in your county or state that are successful at serving youth aging out of the foster care system?
13) Is there anything else I should know from your perspective?
14) Can you think of anything that this program or other programs should be doing to help foster youth transition to adulthood?

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