

# Transition to Adulthood: Washington State Foster Youth at Age 17

## Findings from the 2014 NYTD Survey

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**T**HIS REPORT EXAMINES self-reported life experiences and outcomes for foster youth, aged 17 years, who participated in the 2014 National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) Survey for Washington State. The NYTD survey collects information about current and former foster youth at 17, 19, and 21 years of age (1). The survey asks questions about youth's education, financial self-sufficiency, experience with homelessness, positive connections with adults, high-risk behavior, and access to health insurance. Of 418 eligible youth, 90 percent (378 youth) participated in the survey.

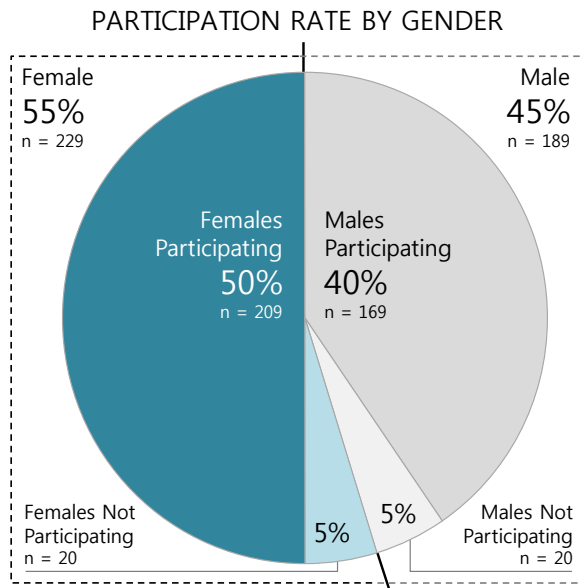
In this report we focus on the life experiences and risk factors for youth in foster care who turned 17 years old during federal fiscal year 2014, as well as differences between these youth and the previously reported 2011 cohort (2). Specifically, we examined factors associated with youth engagement in school or work and the role of relationships with close adults, including foster parents, in the youth's life. Complete survey results are available in the Technical Tables.

## Key Findings

- 1. Nine in ten youth attended school or had a job. These youth reported better life experiences and fewer risk factors than the disengaged youth.** Stable housing, reliable transportation to school or work, help with mental health, unconditional relationships with foster parents and connections to biological family substantially increased the likelihood of a youth's engagement in school or work. Teen parenthood and criminal justice system experience were the principal barriers to engagement.
- 2. Stronger, more supportive relationships with adults matter.** The youth with very supportive adults in their lives were significantly more likely to be in school or have a job, live in stable housing and have health insurance than the youth with less supportive adults. They also reported less involvement in the criminal justice system and fewer risky behaviors.
- 3. Close relationships with foster parents matter.** The youth who were very close to their foster parents were significantly more likely to attend school or have a job than the youth whose closest adult was someone other than a foster parent. They reported significantly fewer barriers and more stability in their lives and were significantly more likely to receive behavioral health treatment.
- 4. The 2014 cohort reported similar or better life experiences than the 2011 cohort.** The more recently transitioning youth were significantly more likely to attend regular high school, live in stable housing, and count on more help from the closest adult. They rated DSHS efforts to strengthen their relationship with their closest adults very positively.

# Respondent Characteristics

FIGURE 1.  
Demographic Profile of the 2014 Cohort



Of the 418 youth eligible for the survey, 90 percent (378 youth) participated.

The proportion of females and minority youth was slightly higher in the 2014 cohort than in the 2011 cohort.

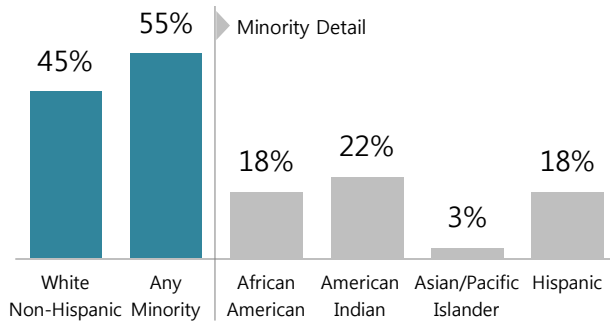
Female respondents made up about 55 percent of the survey sample, which did not differ from the female proportion in the eligible sample as a whole.

Fifty-five percent of respondents were from minority backgrounds, while 45 percent were non-Hispanic white.\*\* American Indian youth represented the largest minority group at 22 percent, followed by African-American youth and Hispanic youth (both at 18 percent). Asian/Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander youth comprised the smallest share (3 percent).\*\*\*

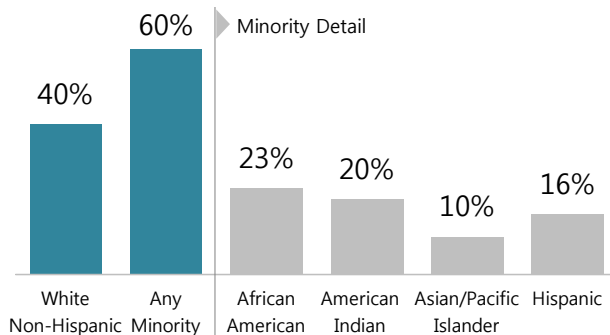
Minority youth comprised 60 percent of the youth eligible but not participating in the survey, a higher share than among the participants.

Just over one half of the youth participating in the survey resided in five largest urban counties (King, Pierce, Snohomish, Spokane or Clark): 53 percent.

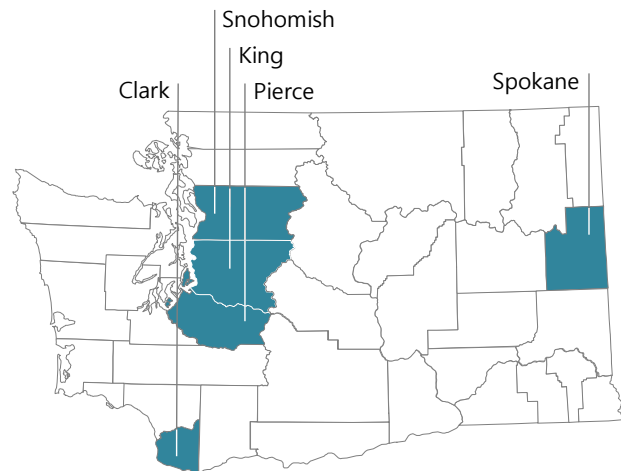
RACE/ETHNICITY\* OF PARTICIPANTS



RACE/ETHNICITY\* OF NON-PARTICIPANTS



ONE HALF OF PARTICIPANTS FROM FIVE COUNTIES



\* A client who self-identifies as a member of one or more minority groups is counted in each of those minority categories and is counted once in the "Minority" category.

\*\* This is consistent with the national data which shows that minority youth as a whole are more likely to experience maltreatment and be placed in foster care (3, 4).

\*\*\*Due to small numbers, the data for Asian youth and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander youth are analyzed together.

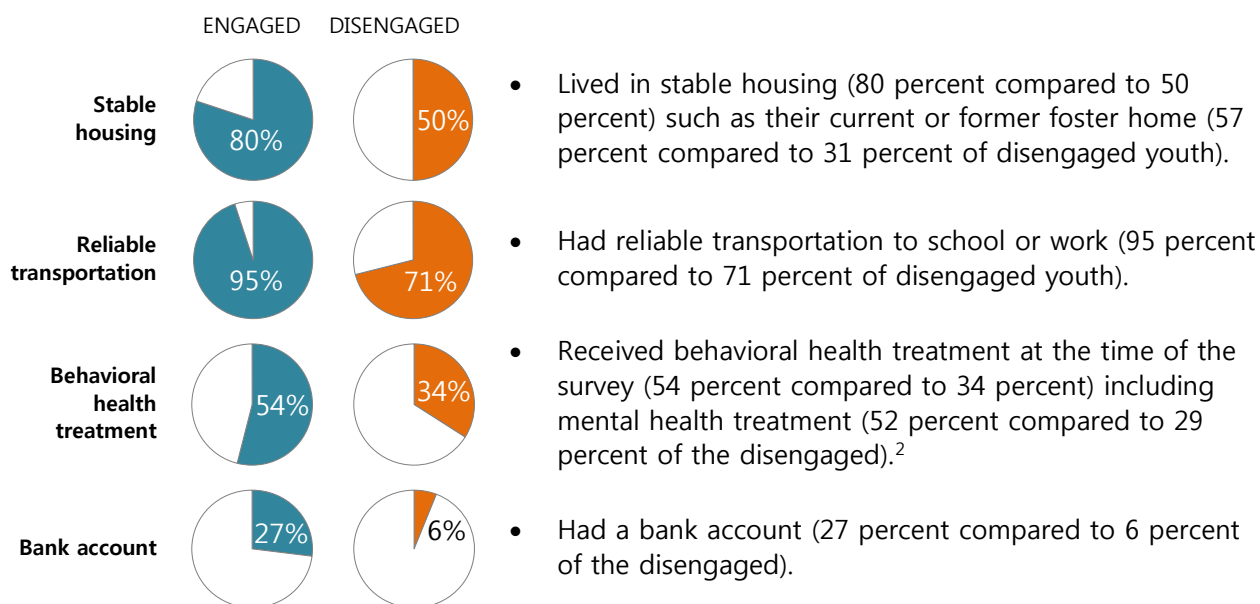
## School and Employment



**Nine in ten youth attended school or had a job. The youth engaged in school or work reported better life experiences and fewer risk factors.**

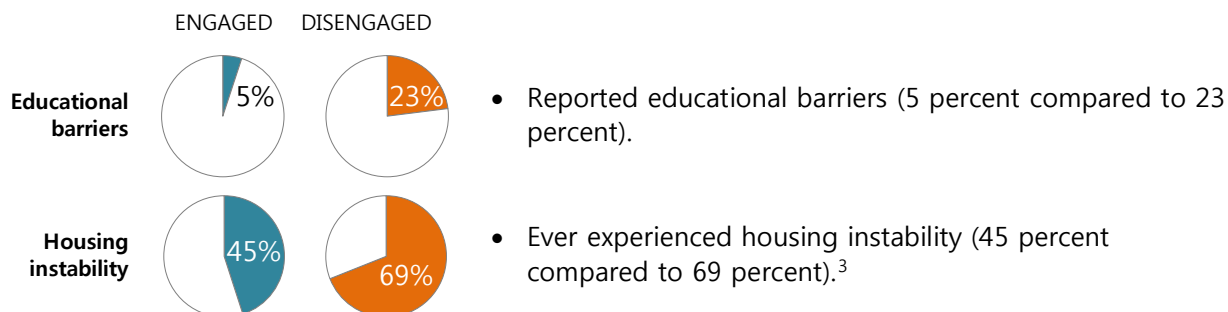
### Stability

At the time of the survey, 341 youth (90 percent of all respondents) were in school or held a part-time or full-time job. These youth were significantly<sup>1</sup> more likely than disengaged youth to have:



### Risk Factors

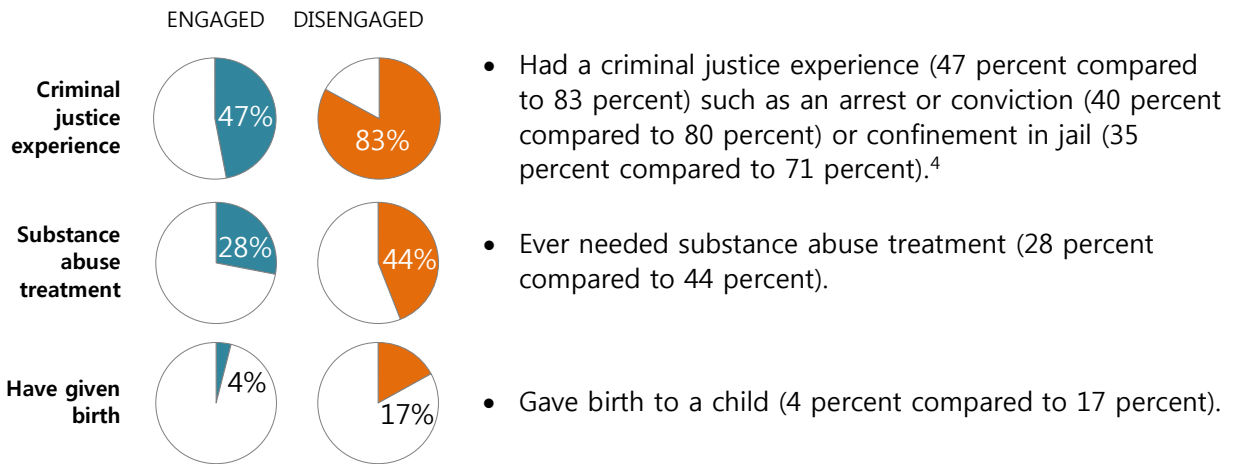
A significantly lower proportion of the youth who were in school or working, compared to the disengaged:



<sup>1</sup> Statistically significant differences at  $p \leq 0.05$  or better are noted here and throughout the report.

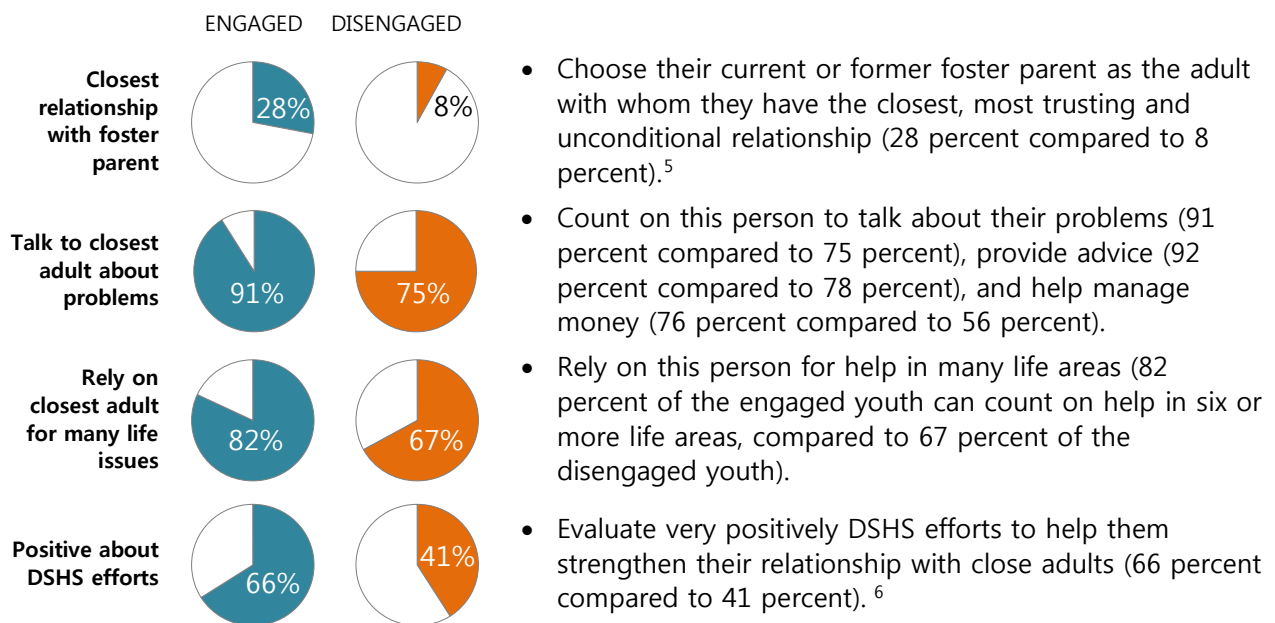
<sup>2</sup> Fewer engaged youth received substance abuse treatment than the disengaged youth (9 percent compared to 14 percent).

<sup>3</sup> A significantly higher proportion of American Indian youth were ever homeless than other youth (47 percent vs. 34 percent).



## Supportive Relationship with Adults

While nearly every youth had adults they are close to, there were some striking differences between youth who were in school or working compared to those who were not. Specifically, youth engaged in school or work were significantly more likely to:



<sup>4</sup> American Indian youth were significantly more likely to have had an arrest or conviction than other youth (54 percent vs. 41 percent). African American youth were significantly less likely to have had an arrest or conviction than other youth (31 percent vs. 47 percent). Hispanic youth were significantly less likely to experience confinement in jail than other youth (27 percent vs. 41 percent).

<sup>5</sup> The only statistically significant difference among 15 choices of the closest adult relationship.

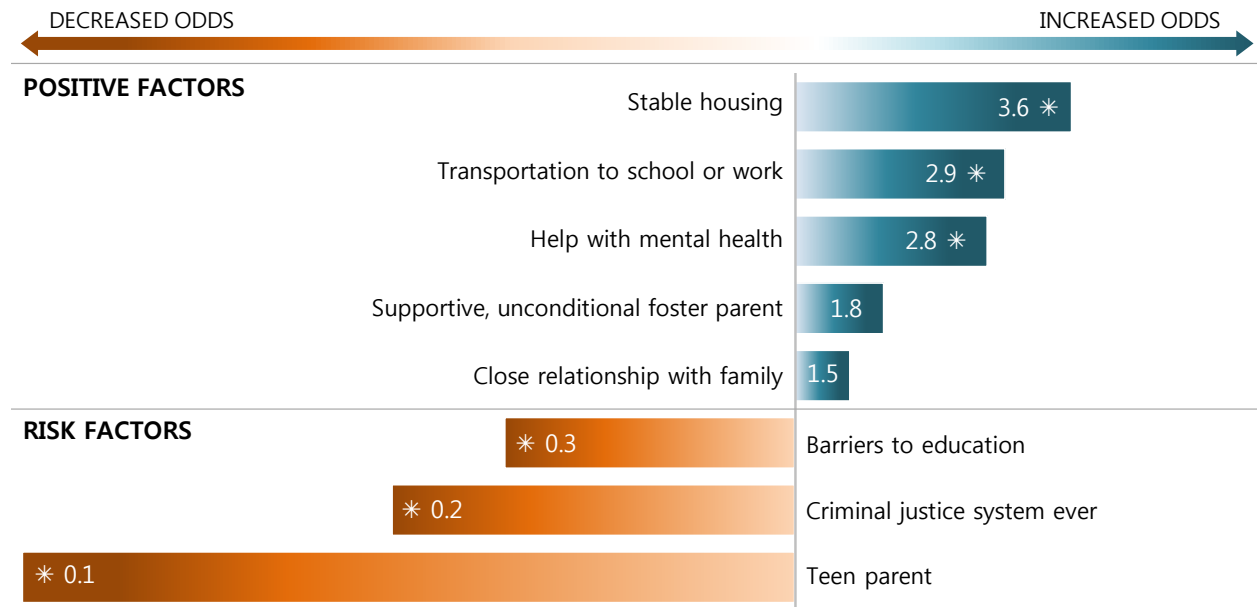
<sup>6</sup> This compares to 38 percent of the respondents in California Youth Transitions to Adulthood Study (CalYOUTH) conducted in 2013 (5). Youth were eligible to participate in the baseline CalYOUTH survey if they were between 16.75 and 17.75 years of age when the sample was selected and had been in the California foster care system for at least six months. (Courtney *et al*, p. 4).

## What Promotes or Impedes Engagement in School or Work?

Completing high school is the key step for foster youth on the way to postsecondary education and higher lifetime earnings (6). Having prior work experience helps youth and young adults gain employment after they leave foster care (7).

FIGURE 1.

### Factors Related to Youth's Engagement in School or Work



\* = Statistically significant at  $p \leq 0.05$ .

In a statistical model controlling for gender and minority status, five factors were associated with increased odds of the youth being in school or holding a job.<sup>7</sup> Significant factors are: the youth living in stable housing (Odds Ratio = 3.6), having reliable transportation to school or work (Odds Ratio = 2.9) and receiving help with mental health (Odds Ratio = 2.8). As an example, the odds ratio for "Receiving mental health services" means that youth receiving such help were nearly three times more likely to be engaged in school or work than the youth not receiving mental health services.

A supportive, unconditional relationship with a foster parent and a close relationship with a biological family's member was associated with increased odds of the youth's engagement in school or work (80 percent and 50 percent, respectively).

In contrast, reported barriers to education, criminal justice involvement, and teen parenthood were associated with significantly decreased the odds of engagement in school or work (70 percent, 80 percent, and 90 percent, respectively).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> More females were among engaged youth than among disengaged youth (56 percent vs. 50 percent). More racial/ethnic minority youth were among engaged youth than among disengaged youth (56 percent vs. 47 percent). African American youth were significantly more likely to be engaged in school or work than other youth (99 percent vs. 89 percent). Asian/Pacific Islander youth were significantly less likely to be enrolled in school than other youth (75 percent vs. 91 percent).

<sup>8</sup> Among reported barriers to education are academic difficulties, own problem behavior, problems with relationships with others, financial difficulties/homelessness, and multiple foster care placements ("bouncing from home to home").

# Supportive Relationships

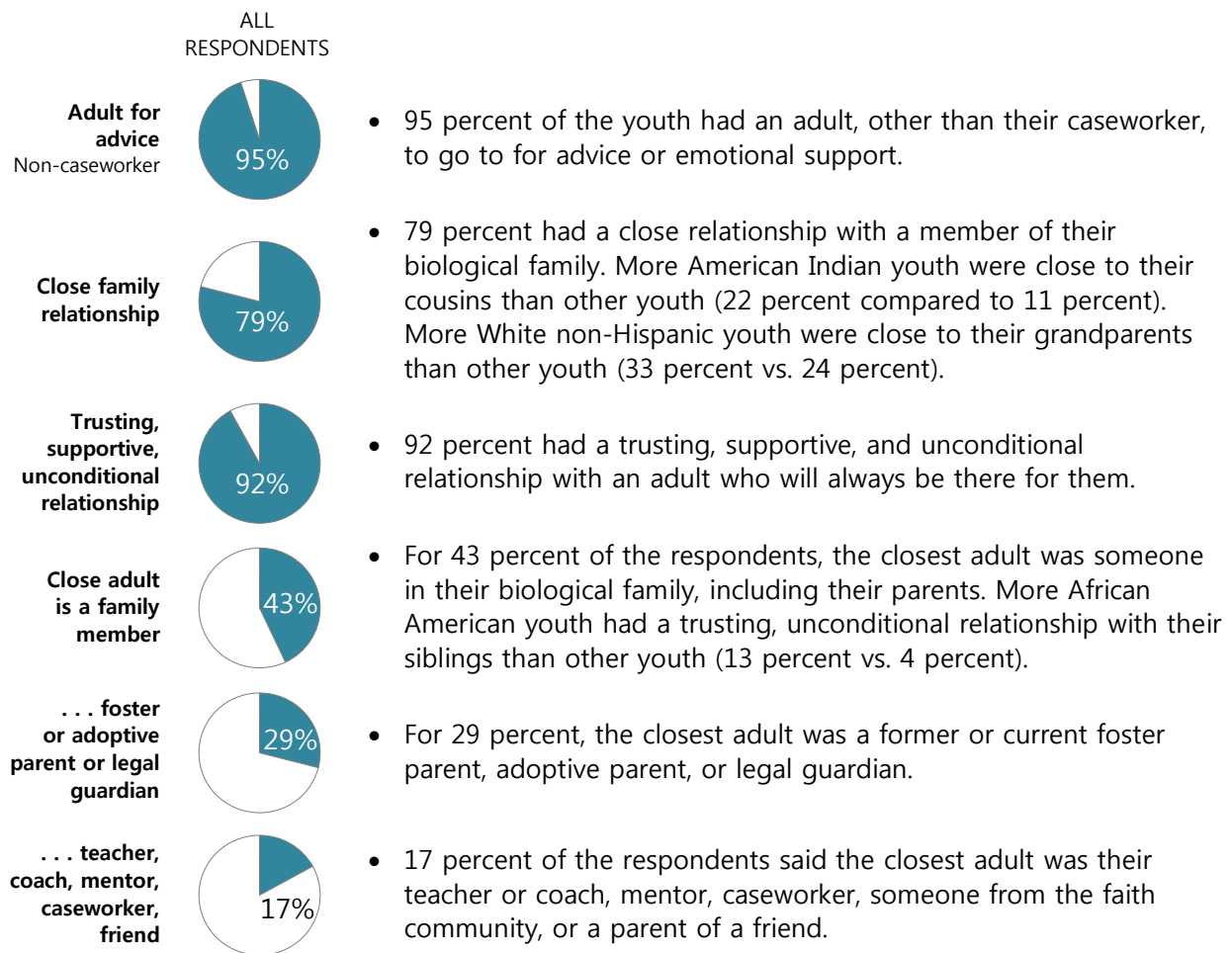


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Nearly every youth had a trusted adult they felt close to. Youth with stronger, more supportive relationships reported better life experiences and fewer risk factors.

## Supportive Adults

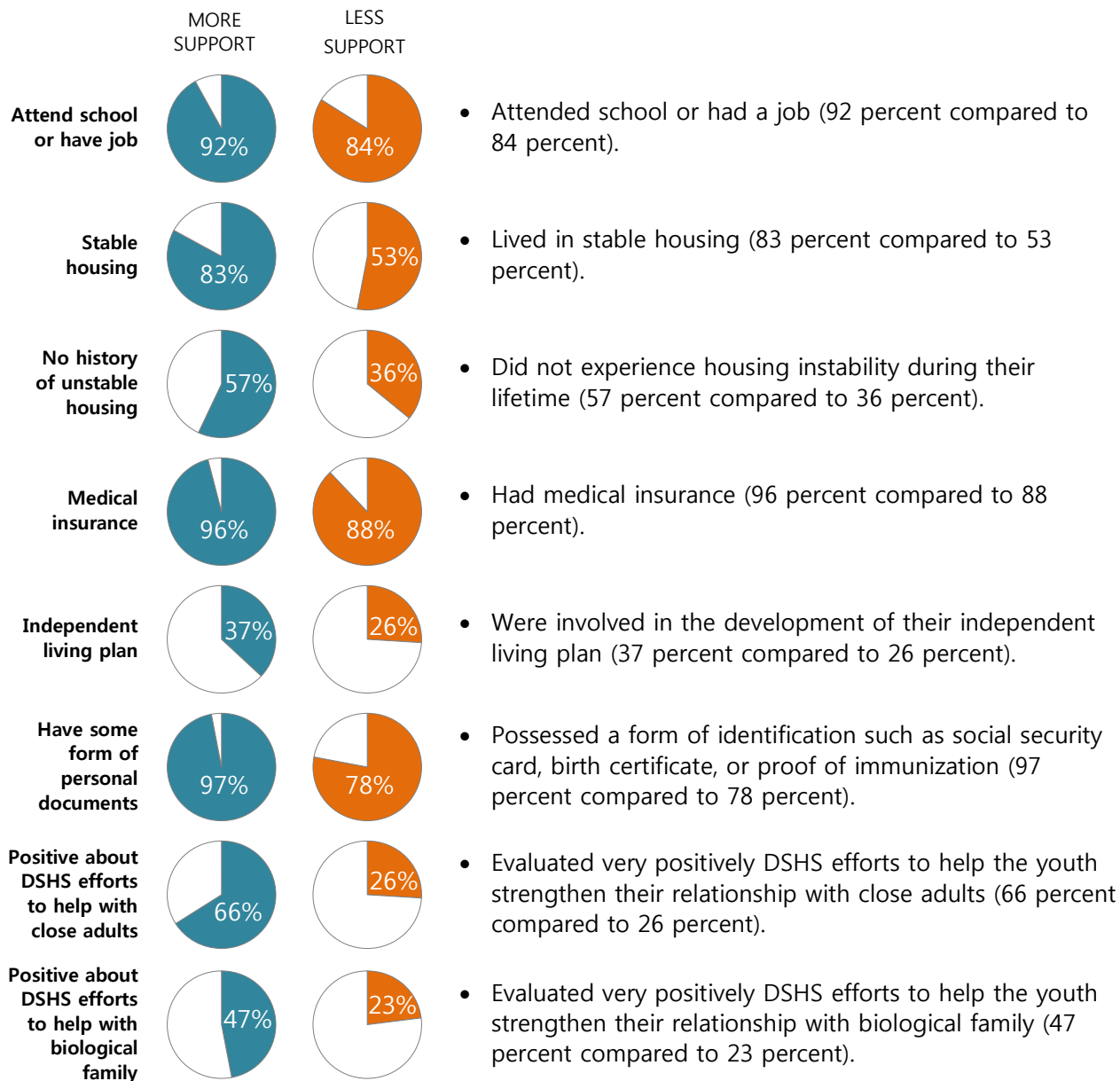
A total of 372 youth (99 percent of all respondents) answered affirmatively to one or more questions about supportive relationships with adults. The few significant differences that emerged by demographic group are noted below.



## More Support Matters

**Youth reported relying on adults closest to them in several key realms.** For example, youth could count on close adults to provide advice (90 percent), help with care for their children (63 percent), or help pay for their education (59 percent). 91 percent of the youth could count on help in at least one area, while 45 percent could rely on help in all nine life areas listed on the survey.<sup>9</sup> For 82 percent, the closest adult could be counted on to help in six or more life areas.

**The better-supported youth, who could count on help in 6 or more areas, reported more positive life experiences and fewer risk factors** compared to the youth who could count on help in five or fewer areas. A significantly higher proportion of the better-supported youth, compared to the less-supported youth:



<sup>9</sup> Fewer African American youth than other youth could count on the closest adult to help with care for their children (53 percent vs. 66 percent) or provide help in all nine areas listed on the survey (32 percent vs. 47 percent).

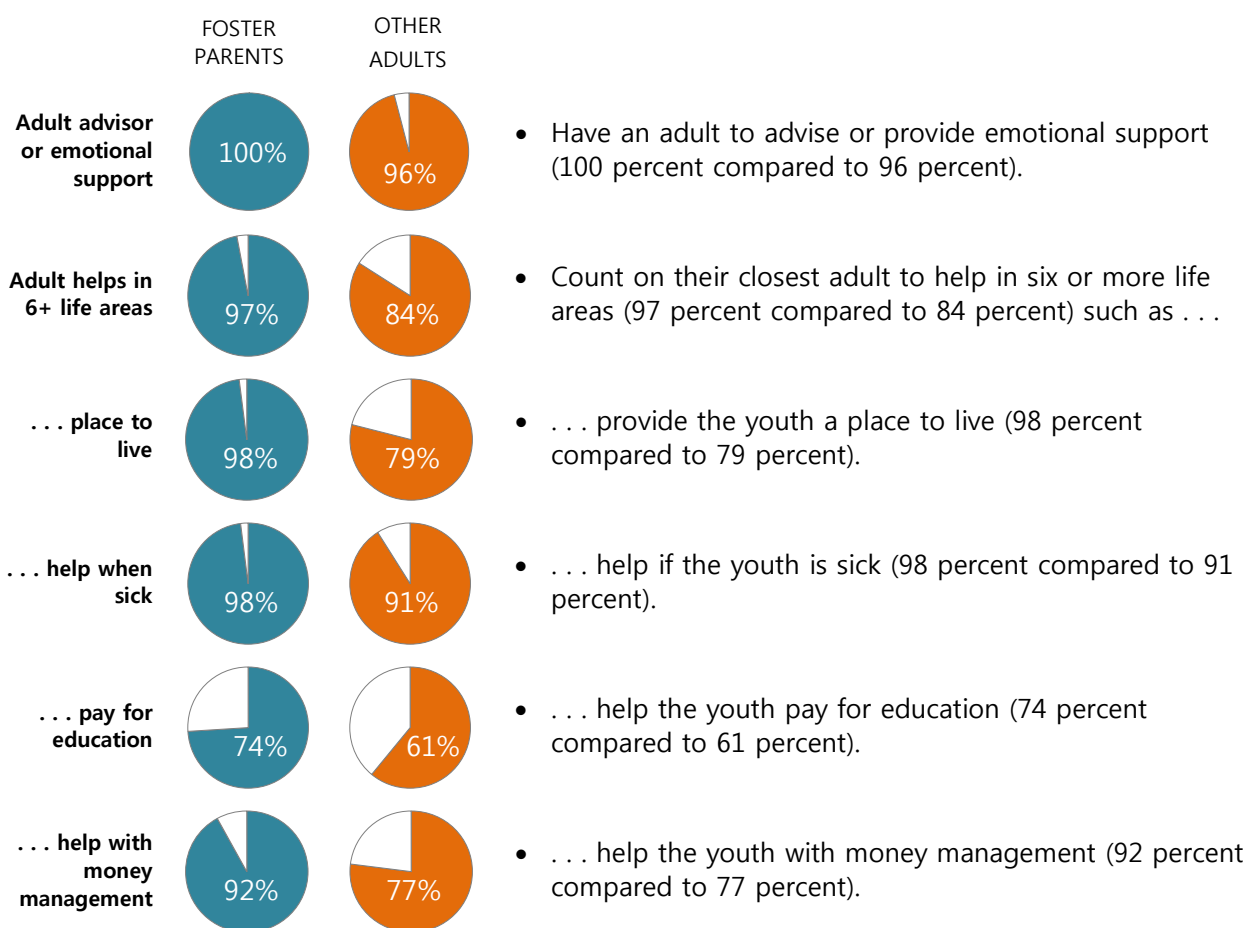
## Close Relationship with Foster Parents



**The 25 percent of youth who formed trusting, unconditional relationship with their foster parents reported better life experiences and fewer risk factors.**

### Special Bond with Foster Parents

A total of 100 youth (25 percent of all respondents) chose their foster parent as the adult with whom they had the closest trusting, supportive and unconditional relationship.<sup>10</sup> Typically, the youth and their closest adult-foster parent did not know each other before foster care; they had to develop their relationship from scratch.<sup>11</sup> Yet these youth reported receiving *more* help than the youth whose closest adult was not a foster parent. These youth were significantly more likely to:



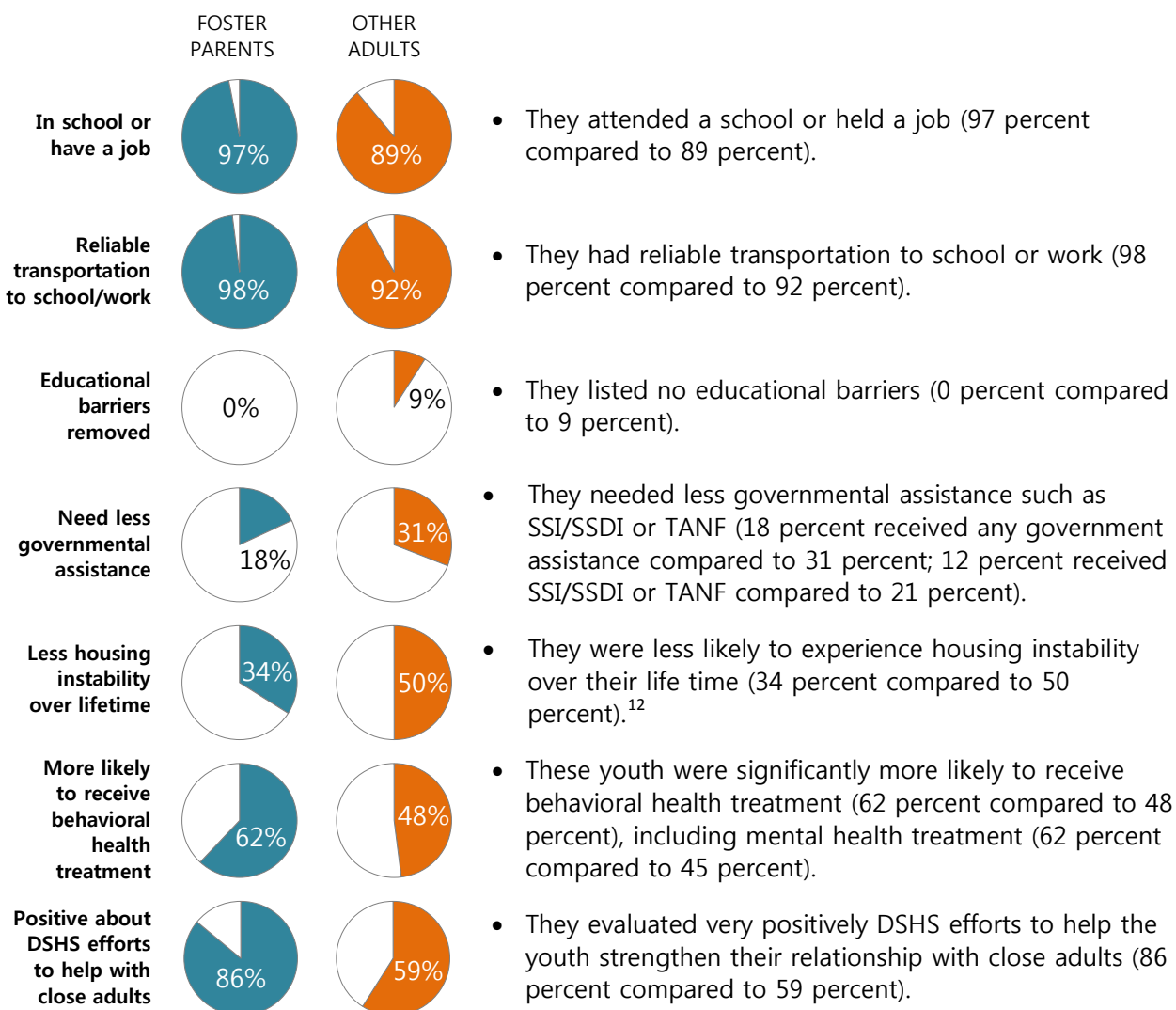
<sup>10</sup> We compare these youth to the youth whose closest, most trusted adult was someone other than their foster parent (245 youth). An additional 33 youth gave a negative answer or no answer to Question 28 (whether they have an unconditional relationship with an adult). Including the latter group into the analysis would increase the differences reported in this section.

<sup>11</sup> Only 15 percent knew their closest adult-foster parent before foster care, compared to 82 percent of the youth closest to other people.



## More Stability

The youth who were very close to their foster parents reported significantly more positive life experiences and significantly fewer risk factors compared to the youth who were closest to other adults.

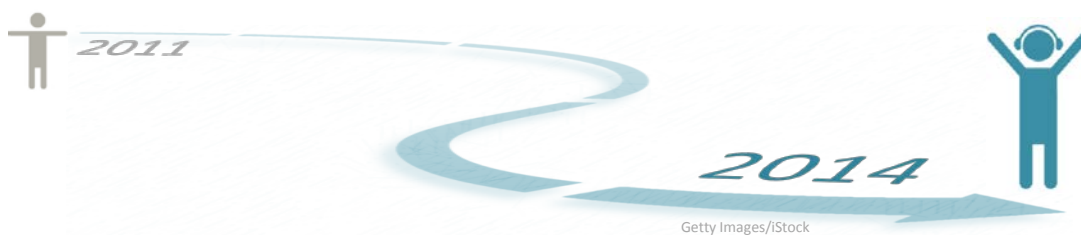


## Less Risk

The youth who were very close to their foster parents reported less involvement with the criminal justice system; the difference is statistically significant for drug crime conviction (0 compared to 5 percent).

<sup>12</sup> The youth who were very close to their foster parents reported living in stable housing more frequently: 86 percent compared to 77 percent, although the difference is not statistically significant.

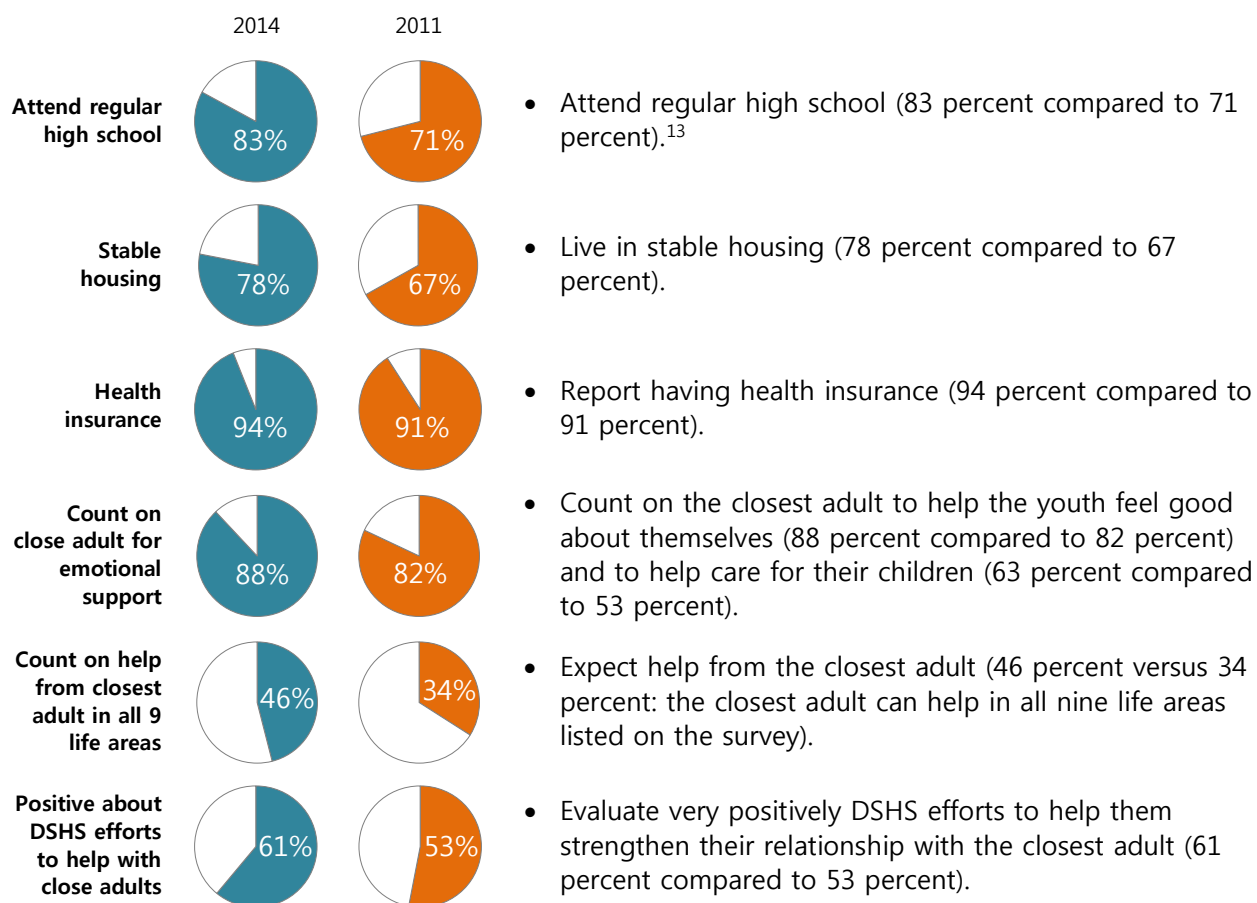
# Cohort Characteristics and Experiences: 2014 Compared to 2011



**The youth reported better life experiences and somewhat fewer risk factors in 2014 than did their peers in 2011.**

## More Stability

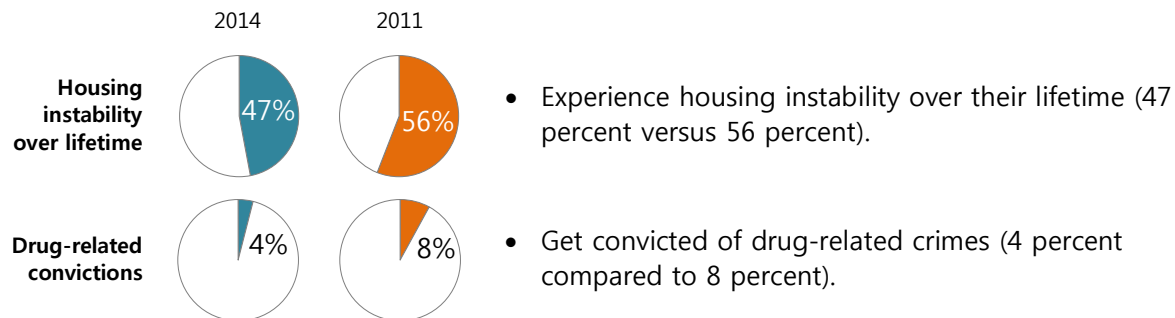
Overall, the second NYTD cohort of the 17-year olds is similar to the cohort we reported on in 2011 (2). Many relationships noted in the 2011 cohort report have held; for example, males and American Indians are significantly more likely than females and any other racial or ethnic group to have a criminal justice experience. However, a few statistically significant differences emerged. The youth surveyed in 2014 were significantly more likely than their peers in 2011 to:



<sup>13</sup> Youth in foster care who obtain a regular high school diploma and not just a GED are more likely to pursue and obtain post-secondary education (6).

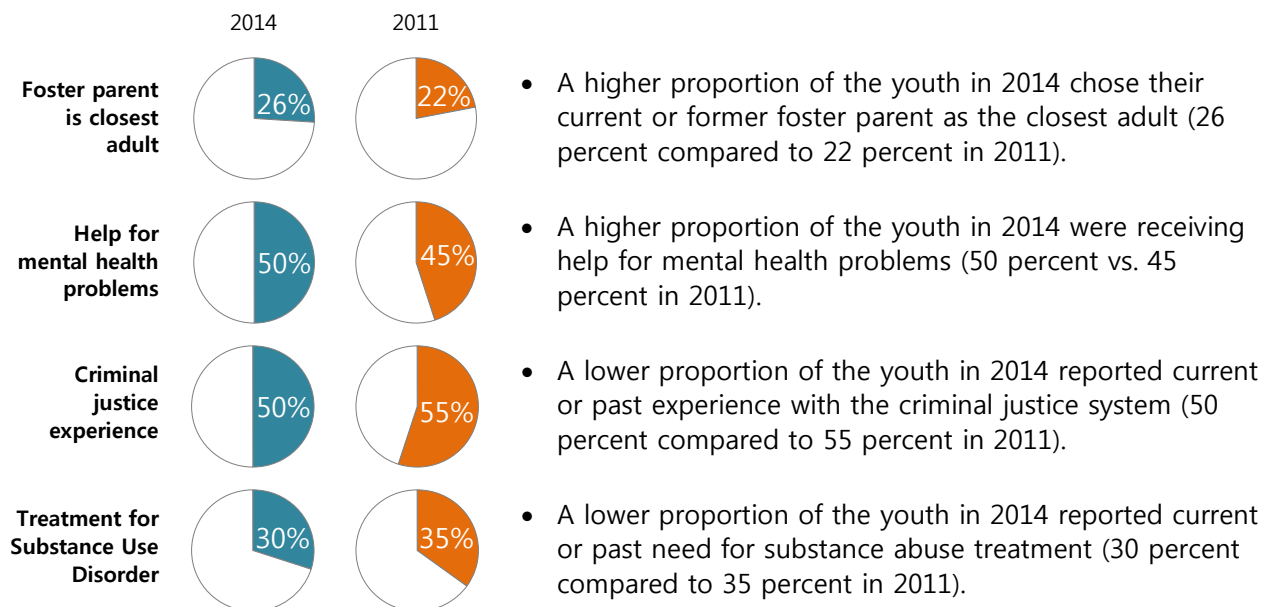
## Less Risk

The youth surveyed in 2014 were significantly less likely than their peers in 2011 to:



## Other Encouraging Signs

Several other encouraging differences are noteworthy even though not statistically significant:



However, a lower proportion of the youth have ever worked for pay (34 percent compared to 40 percent; not a significant difference).

Additionally, a lower proportion of the youth reported being involved in the development of their Independent Living Plan (35 percent compared to 47 percent, a significant difference).

## Discussion

This study takes a close look at key elements in the life of the 17-year old youth in foster care in Washington: the youth's participation in school or work and their relationships with supportive adults.

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### **Receiving mental health counseling substantially raises the odds of the youth's attending school or holding a job.**

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Stable housing, reliable transportation to school or work, and help with mental health issues are significant protective factors which are associated with increased engagement in school or work. Close relationships with foster parents and biological family members are also protective. Major risk factors associated with lower levels of youth engagement in school or work were teen parenthood, criminal justice involvement, academic difficulties, own problem behavior, and problems in relationships with others.

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### **The youth who were very close to their foster parents reported significantly better life experiences and fewer risks when compared to youth whose closest adult was someone else.**

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A crucial role of close, trusting relationships with foster parents comes to light in this study. Engagement in school or work, reliable transportation, stable housing, help with mental health issues, advice, emotional and material support were significantly more common among the youth whose closest adult was their foster parent rather than another adult. These youth also evaluated positively DSHS efforts to help them strengthen their relationship with the closest adult. This suggests that DSHS should continue its work to strengthen the foster child-foster parent bonds.

A few statistically significant differences by gender and race/ethnicity of the youth emerged. Males and American Indian youth were more likely than females and non-Native youth to have criminal justice involvement. Criminal justice experience was less common among African American and Hispanic youth than among other older youth in foster care. Females and White non-Hispanic youth were more likely to report becoming a teen parent than males and racial/ethnic minority youth.<sup>14</sup>

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### **Youth gender, race and ethnicity do not seem to be associated with how supportive foster parents or other close adults are and how much help they are willing to provide to the youth.**

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The 17-year olds reported more stability and fewer risk factors in 2014 than did their peers in 2011. Three in five youth evaluated very positively DSHS efforts to help them strengthen their relationship with the closest adult, a significant and welcome increase, given the importance of these relationships to the youth. Also encouraging are a higher proportion of the youth in 2014 who reported having health insurance and receiving help for mental health problems than in 2011, and a lower proportion of the youth who reported criminal justice experience and substance abuse treatment need.

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### **The proportion of the youth who evaluated very positively DSHS efforts to help them strengthen their relationship with the closest adult was significantly higher in 2014 than in 2011 (61 percent of the 2014 cohort compared to 53 percent of the 2011 cohort).**

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<sup>14</sup> Significant for white only versus minority youth and marginally significant for gender; the numbers are small. Nationally, 10 percent of females and 4 percent of males in the 2011 NYTD sample were parents at the time of the survey (8).

# APPENDIX | Supporting Tables

TABLE 1.  
Demographics, Life Experiences, and Outcomes  
For Foster Youth Surveyed in 2014 and 2011

	2014		2011	
	COUNT	PERCENT	COUNT	PERCENT
* = Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$ between 2011 and 2014				
<b>Demographics</b>	N = 378	100%	N = 419	100%
Female	209	55%	213	51%
Male	169	45%	206	49%
White only	169	45%	193	46%
Any minority	209	55%	226	54%
Hispanic	67	18%	73	18%
African American	68	18%	92	22%
American Indian/Alaska Native	83	22%	76	18%
Asian/Pacific Islander	20	5%	29	7%
<b>Education, Employment, Income, Assistance</b>				
In school or employed now	341	90%	387	92%
Employed full-time or part-time	32	8%	42	10%
Ever worked for pay	128	34%	164	40%
On the job training	45	12%	43	10%
In school now	339	90%	384	92%
*      Regular high school now	281	83%	272	71%
Education barriers	25	7%	37	9%
Transportation to school/work available	347	93%	391	94%
Receiving any assistance	122	32%	147	35%
Receiving any government assistance	103	27%	129	31%
On SSI, SSDI or TANF	70	19%	89	21%
Has a bank account	95	25%	123	29%
<b>Supportive Relationships</b>				
Any supportive relationships	372	99%	403	97%
Adult to advise	356	95%	386	94%
Close family	295	79%	326	79%
Close family (average count, 6 max)	1.6		1.7	
Close mother	119	31%	143	34%
Close father	62	16%	71	17%
Close sibling	196	52%	199	47%
Close aunt or uncle	87	23%	108	26%
Close grandparent	106	28%	120	29%
Close cousin	50	13%	52	12%
Unconditional relationship	345	92%	376	91%
Unconditional relationship with birth parent	63	17%	79	19%
... with adoptive parent, spouse, legal guardian	11	3%	21	5%
... with sibling or cousin	25	7%	32	8%
... with aunt/uncle	34	9%	40	10%
... with grandparent	39	10%	35	8%
... with foster parent	100	26%	94	22%
... case worker, teacher/coach, mentor, someone from church	21	6%	24	6%
... with parent of a friend	14	4%	15	4%
... with another adult	38	10%	34	8%
* Has help with major life areas (average count, out of 9 max)	7.0		6.6	
Help with 6+ areas	302	80%	320	76%

		2014		2011	
* = Statistically significant at p≤0.05 between 2011 and 2014		COUNT	PERCENT	COUNT	PERCENT
*	Help with all 9 areas	169	45%	144	34%
	Help talk	336	89%	361	86%
	Help with advice	341	90%	363	87%
	Help with place to live	292	77%	305	73%
	Help find a job	297	79%	312	74%
	Help if sick	320	85%	339	81%
	Help with paying for education	223	59%	230	55%
	Help with money management	280	74%	299	71%
*	Help care for my child(ren)	240	63%	222	53%
*	Help me feel good about myself	332	88%	344	82%
	A lot of DSHS help with either family or other adult relations	234	64%	230	58%
	A lot of DSHS help with family relations	126	43%	151	46%
*	A lot of DSHS help with adult relations	210	61%	200	53%
	Knew the closest adult before foster care	214	63%	248	66%
<b>Living Arrangements</b>					
*	Housing stable now	274	78%	253	67%
*	Housing instability now or ever	178	47%	232	56%
	Live in own apartment, with roommate, spouse, in dormitory	15	4%	12	3%
	Live with parents or other biological family	75	20%	88	21%
	Live in foster home, former foster home	205	54%	221	53%
	Live in group home, hospital	62	16%	59	14%
	In detention, jail	10	3%	11	3%
	Homeless or couch surfing	< 10	n/a	< 10	n/a
	Other living arrangements	< 10	n/a	18	4%
<b>High-risk Behaviors</b>					
	AOD (substance abuse) treatment now	36	10%	47	11%
	AOD (substance abuse) treatment now or ever	113	30%	145	35%
	Criminal justice ever	189	50%	228	55%
	Arrested ever	165	44%	197	48%
	Convicted ever	165	44%	197	48%
	In jail ever	145	39%	174	42%
	Convicted of crime (average count, out of 4 max)	0.36		0.44	
	Crime: violent	62	16%	73	17%
	Crime: property	56	15%	71	17%
*	Crime: drug-related	16	4%	34	8%
	Crime: other	< 10	n/a	< 10	n/a
	Participated in high risk behaviors (crime, substance abuse)	194	52%	236	57%
	Gave birth/fathered a child	18	4%	15	4%
	Any high risk behaviors (including birth of child)	223	59%	265	64%
<b>Medical Insurance, Behavioral Health</b>					
*	Any health coverage	356	94%	378	91%
	Receiving Mental Health treatment now	184	50%	183	45%
	Receiving Mental Health or AOD treatment now	195	52%	200	48%
<b>Personal Documents, Independent Living Plan</b>					
	Has any form of identification	300	94%	358	96%
	Has personal documents (average count, out of 6 max)	2.1		2.3	
	Social Security card	197	52%	246	59%
	Birth certificate	197	52%	235	56%
	Proof of legal residence	< 10	n/a	< 10	n/a
	Proof of immunization	199	53%	235	56%
	Driver's license	33	9%	45	11%
	Other documents	173	46%	186	44%
*	Involved in developing Independent Living Plan	128	35%	193	47%

## TECHNICAL NOTES

### STUDY DESIGN AND OVERVIEW

This study examines self-reported engagement in school or work, positive connections with foster parents and other adults, experience with homelessness, criminal justice system involvement, and other risk and protective factors among 17-year old youth in foster care in Washington State in 2014. It is the third in the series analyzing self-reported life experiences and outcomes of current and former foster youth (2, 9). We look at significant differences by gender and race/ethnicity as well as with the first cohort of 17-year olds surveyed 3 years ago.

**STUDY LIMITATIONS** | The cross-sectional design allows us to identify statistically significant *associations*, not *cause and effect relationships*. The low number of respondents in some categories may limit generalization beyond our sample. Additionally, self-reported data may be affected by bias in recollection, understanding, and social desirability. The youth who did not participate in the survey may have more serious risk factors than the participants (9), but the 90-percent participation rate is remarkable.

### STUDY POPULATION

This report concerns individuals who were in foster care and turned 17 years of age during Federal Fiscal Year 2014 (October 2013 through November 2014). For comparison, we look at individuals who were in foster care and turned 17 years of age during Federal Fiscal Year 2011 (October 2010 through November 2011).

### DATA SOURCES AND MEASURES

The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) survey was authorized by the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (10). The Research and Data Analysis Division Management Information and Survey Research staff conducted the survey from October 2013 through November 2014. All youth in foster care who turned 17 years of age during that time were identified and contacted by the survey team within 45 days of their 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. To be invited to participate, the youth had to be in foster care for at least one day during the 45-day period since their 17th birthday. The table below describes participation by youth in 2014.

<b>Total eligible youth turning 17 years old</b>	<b>418</b>
Unable to contact/invite	19
Youth or parent declined	8
Youth incapacitated or incarcerated	12
Other	1
<b>Youth participated</b>	<b>378</b>
<b>Survey Response Rate</b>	<b>90.4%</b>

**MEASURES** | The following additional measures were computed for this study:

- In school or employed now (“engaged youth”) – “Yes” to Q1 or Q2.
- Ever worked for pay – “Yes” to Q3 or Q5 or Q6.
- On SSI, SSDI or TANF – “Yes” to Q9 or Q12.
- Any government assistance – “Yes” to Q9 or Q10 or Q12 or Q13 or Q14.
- Any assistance – “Yes” to any question from Q9 through Q14.
- Any supportive relationships – “Yes” to Q24 or Q25 or Q28.
- Better-supported youth – “Yes” to 6 out of 9 response options in Q30.
- A lot of DSHS help with either family or other adult relations – “Yes” to Q27 or Q32.
- Housing instability now or ever – any of the following: “Yes” to Q36, “No” to Q37, “No” to Q38, or “Homeless or couch surfing” to Q33.
- High risk behaviors (crime and substance abuse) – “Yes” to Q40 or Q41 or Q43 or Q53.
- Any high risk behaviors (including birth of a child) – “Yes” to Q39 or Q40 or Q41 or Q43 or Q44 or Q53.

### GENDER AND RACE-ETHNICITY DATA

Individual youth responses were linked to information about client demographic characteristics (gender, race/ ethnicity) from DSHS Client Services Database (CSDB) maintained by RDA. CSDB race/ethnicity data is based on DSHS clients' self-report. Clients can report more than one race or ethnicity. The current set of reporting categories are Non-Hispanic White (one race only), Any Minority, African-American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, and Hispanic.

### TECHNICAL TABLES

A full set of tables providing responses to all NYTD survey questions tabulated by gender and race/ethnicity is provided as a technical appendix to this report.

## REFERENCES

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