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# Evaluation of United Friends of the Children's Pathways Housing Program

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TRENDS  
Child

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# Overview

In spring 2017, [United Friends of the Children](#) (United Friends), a Los Angeles-based nonprofit dedicated to empowering current and former youth with foster care experience on their journey to self-sufficiency, commissioned [Child Trends](#) to conduct an independent evaluation of United Friends' Scholars and Pathways Housing programs. The goal of this evaluation was to document the experiences and outcomes of the young people served by United Friends and explore how participation in its programs affects youth outcomes. A key focus of the evaluation was examining how United Friends' relationship model—its efforts to forge lasting, trusting relationships between youth and positive adult role models—contributes to positive outcomes.

The findings in this report on the Pathways Housing program show:

- United Friends counselors are successful in both developing strong, supportive, trusting relationships with the young people they work with and cultivating an environment where participants feel supported by and connected to other United Friends staff.
- On average, participants enter the Pathways program at age 21—the age in which many young people in California exit foster care.<sup>1</sup> With participants staying in the program more than a year and a half, on average, United Friends is able to provide young people with resources and a social support network during a critical period of their transition to self-sufficiency.
- Two thirds of participants expect to obtain a post-secondary degree or credential. However, nearly one fourth said they are unprepared to achieve their academic goals. Additionally, participants report financial barriers to reaching their academic goals, such as not having enough money for school and having to work while going to school. As such, a key focus of United Friends should be connecting youth to resources for financial aid.
- Pathways participants are confident about their future careers: Two thirds reported that they would have a good job by age 30 and two thirds reported they were prepared to achieve their employment goals. Participants cite unstable housing, transportation issues, and insufficient work experience as potential barriers to future employment.
- United Friends' relationship model appears to be a driver of the program's success. Positive participant-counselor relationships are associated with youth providing greater support to peers; stronger career planning and preparation; greater social competence; increased initiative-taking; and greater goal-setting. Feelings of connection and belonging at United Friends also is associated with young people exhibiting greater initiative and goal-setting; having more support from peers; increased civic engagement; more positive perceptions of physical health; and increased housing safety, stability, and affordability.
- Although participants feel well-supported by United Friends, they report a need for supports outside of the organization, indicating a need for United Friends to facilitate connections between young people and community supports—particularly those related to healthcare and work-based learning experiences.

A companion brief discusses findings related to the United Friends Scholars program.

# Background

Youth with foster care experience are less likely to achieve key developmental milestones (e.g., establishing financial independence, securing stable housing, finishing high school and post-secondary training or education, and starting their careers) than their peers who have not been placed in the foster care system.<sup>ii</sup> Young people with foster care experience often face multiple challenges—exposure to trauma, separation from family, frequent out-of-home placement and school changes, and a lack of social support or a “safety net”<sup>iii</sup>—which can inhibit their ability to accomplish these key developmental milestones.<sup>iv</sup>

United Friends of the Children (United Friends) seeks to empower youth with foster care experience on their journey to self-sufficiency through the Pathways and Scholars programs. The organization designed Pathways for youth who recently emancipated from foster care. The program is offered for 18 to 36 months to young adults ages 18 to 24. It provides participants with a full spectrum of opportunities, which includes housing, life skills training, educational mentoring and assistance, career/vocational counseling and development, and health education and mental health services, to help them successfully transition to adulthood.<sup>v</sup>

A key component of United Friends’ programs is its relationship model, which includes the organization’s efforts to forge lasting, trusting relationships between youth and positive adult role models.

## Evaluation Methods

Our evaluation was designed to answer the following questions:

- **How and to what extent does the Pathways program affect participants’:**
  - Educational attainment?
  - Socio-emotional well-being?
  - Relationships with others in and out of the program?
  - Self-sufficiency?
- **How and to what extent does United Friends’ relationship model affect participant outcomes?**

### Data Sources

This report provides United Friends with strategies for program improvement by drawing on the following sources of data:

#### Administrative data

Child Trends used Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) data, which includes details on program participants’ outcomes, program dosage, and participant characteristics.

#### Participant survey

The surveys help assess staff-participant relationship quality, United Friends’ relationship model, and youth outcomes.

#### Staff focus groups

Data collected were used to assess United Friend’s relationship model and program implementation quality.

#### Participant focus groups and interviews

Qualitative data gathered from participants were used to more deeply examine participant experiences and United Friend’s relationship model.

To answer these questions, we used 1) administrative data; 2) survey data; and 3) data from focus groups and interviews (see Data Sources text box for more information).

We administered the Pathways participant survey in spring 2018 and early 2019. A total of 86 young adults completed a survey during at least one of the data collection periods, with some participants completing a survey in both data collection periods (N=22). This represents a response rate of approximately 60 percent.<sup>1</sup> Although higher than typical response rates for online surveys,<sup>vi</sup> the participants who completed a survey may not represent all Pathways participants.

To understand the extent to which the survey sample was reflective of all Pathways participants, we used United Friends' administrative data on participant characteristics to compare the two groups. Table 1 displays the demographic and background characteristics of Pathways participants with and without survey data. As noted in Table 1, survey respondents were similar to the full population of Pathways participants.<sup>2</sup> As expected, however, survey respondents were more likely to be currently enrolled in Pathways than participants only represented in the administrative data.<sup>3</sup> In addition, respondents were significantly older at discharge (M=22.45)<sup>4</sup> and had participated in Pathways for more days (M=661.95) than participants without survey data (M=21.70; M=492.99, respectively).<sup>5</sup> Given these differences, the results of the Pathways participant survey should be interpreted with some caution, as they might not fully represent all program participants.

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<sup>1</sup> Response rates were calculated using United Friends' administrative data on participant enrollment and exit dates. Based on these data, a total of 142 young people were enrolled in the Pathways program at any time between November 15, 2017 (start of the first survey administration) and May 1, 2019 (end of the second survey administration).

<sup>2</sup> Results from Fisher's exact test indicate that there were no significant differences in race/ethnicity, gender, and age at enrollment for Pathways participants with and without survey data.

<sup>3</sup>  $\chi(1) = 37.29, p < .001$ ; Current participation was defined as any youth who had not exited the program by May 13, 2019.

<sup>4</sup>  $t(194.53) = -3.82, p < .001$

<sup>5</sup>  $t(194.53) = -4.86, p < .001$

# Pathways Participant Demographics

From January 2016 through May 2019 (41 months), a total of 251 young adults participated in Pathways.<sup>6</sup> Overall, just over 39 percent of participants are Latinx/Hispanic, half are Black/African American, and the remainder are Asian (2 percent), white (4 percent), or other (5 percent). The majority identify as female (58 percent). On average, participants were age 21 when they entered Pathways and 22 when they exited.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of program participants and survey respondents

	Participant demographic characteristics	Survey respondents (N=86)	Pathways participants without survey data (N=165)	All Pathways participants (N=251)
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	Latinx/Hispanic (Any Race)	48%	35%	39%
	Black/African American, non-Hispanic	44%	53%	50%
	Other, non-Hispanic	4%	6%	5%
	Asian, non-Hispanic	2%	2%	2%
	White, non-Hispanic	2%	4%	4%
<b>Gender</b>	Male	49%	39%	42%
	Female	51%	61%	58%
<b>Enrollment Status</b>	Current participant	70%	18%	65%
	Former participant	30%	82%	35%

Note: Table includes participants for whom data were available. Current participation was defined as any youth who had not exited the program by May 2019.

Source: United Friends administrative data, January 2016– May 2019.

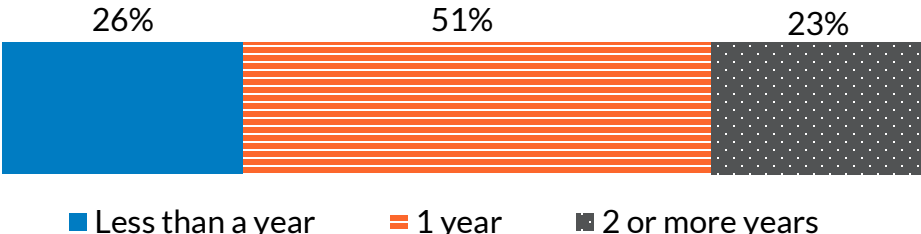
<sup>6</sup> Data are based on United Friends administrative data on participant demographic characteristics.

# Program Participation and Experiences

## Length of participation

For young people to achieve the maximum benefits in the Pathways program, they must participate for an extended period of time. Overall, youth participated an average of 1.5 years (551 days), ranging from one month to three years. Figure 1 shows the length of time participants have been enrolled in Pathways. Most participants (74 percent) were enrolled for more than one year. Notably, 23 percent were enrolled for two or more years.

Figure 1. Years enrolled in Pathways



Source: United Friends administrative data, January 2016 through May 2019.

To further explore program retention, we restricted our analysis to participants who had exited the program. Of participants who exited the program (N=162), just 25 percent had durations of less than a year. Notably, 19 percent of participants remained in the program for two or more years. Together, these findings indicate that Pathways successfully retains young people for multiple years.




## United Friends relationship model

One core United Friends principle is to build meaningful, lasting relationships with young people through commitment and consistency. By building strong relationships, United Friends counselors address participants' critical emotional needs.<sup>vii</sup>

To examine the strength of these relationships, we examined participants' responses to a series of questions related to their relationships with United Friends counselors. Each item included in these scales were based on a 5-point scale (1: *None of the time*; 5: *All of the time*). On average, Pathways participants expressed strong, positive relationships with their counselors (median = 4.7).<sup>7</sup>

To explore staff-participant relationships more deeply, Figure 2 presents participant responses for each item. It shows that, a vast majority (90 percent) of participants are happy with the way counselors treat them. Almost all participants report feeling comfortable with their counselor and said their counselor respected them and listened to what they had to say. Participants responded least positively to a question about whether they had a mentor at United Friends, with only 67 percent reporting they felt they had one most or all of the time.



I am so blessed and grateful that these young people are letting me into their lives...and asking for advice. Even youth who blow me off, a week later they are open to meeting again.

-Pathways counselor

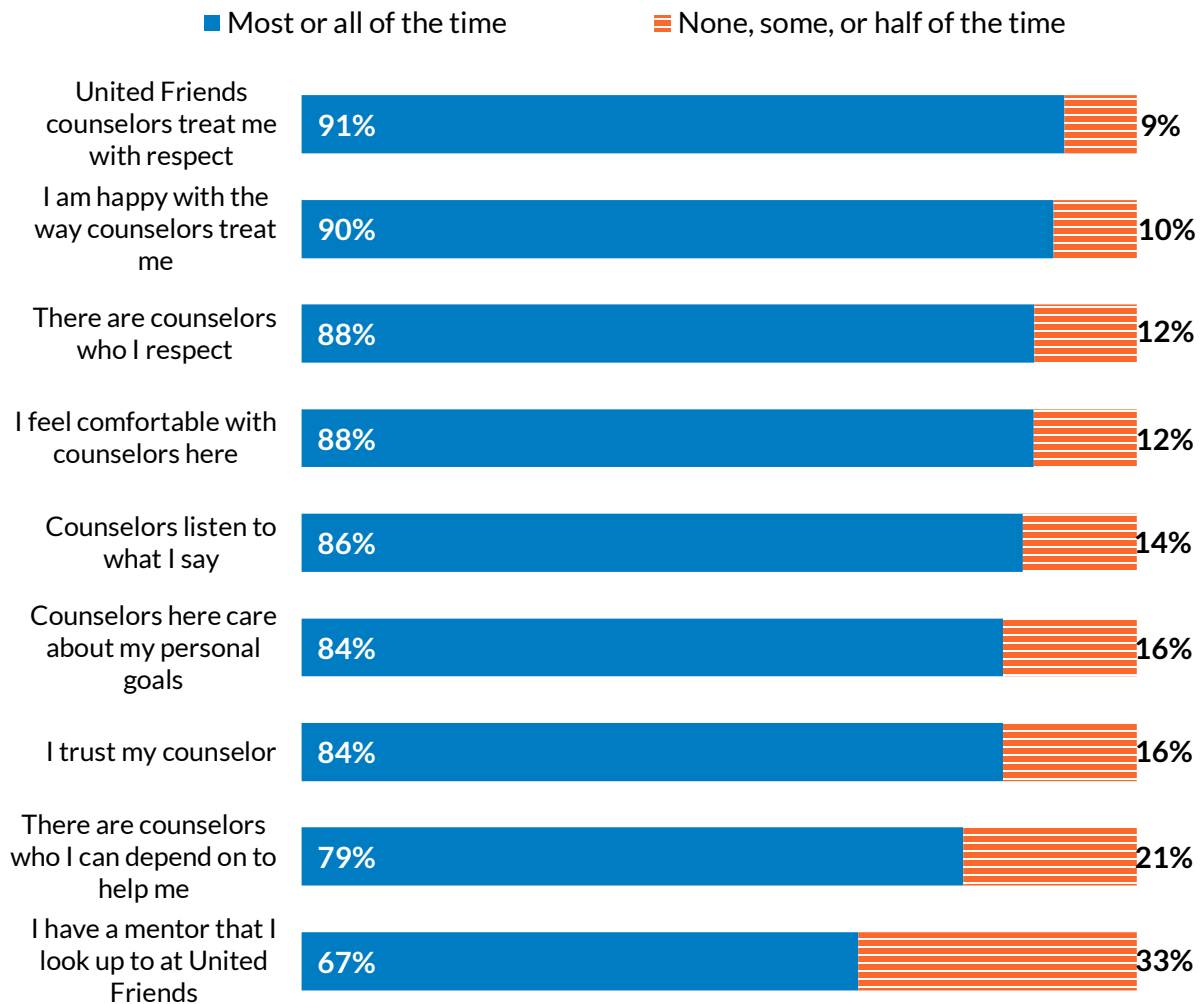
### Insights from Focus Groups and Interviews

Participants stated that they really appreciated, and in many cases needed, the frequent check-ins with their counselors. While the way counselors checked in with the youth varied across participants— by phone, text, or in-person—each participant stated that they were happy with the frequency and format. All youth reported that they felt supported by and appreciated the relationship that they had with their counselor. Most participants stated that they felt comfortable reaching out to any of the counselors on staff, even if that staff member was not their counselor.

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<sup>7</sup> All scales and indices exclude participants missing more 25 percent of the questions used to create that scale.

**Figure 2.** Participant responses to measures on relationships with United Friends counselors (N=81)



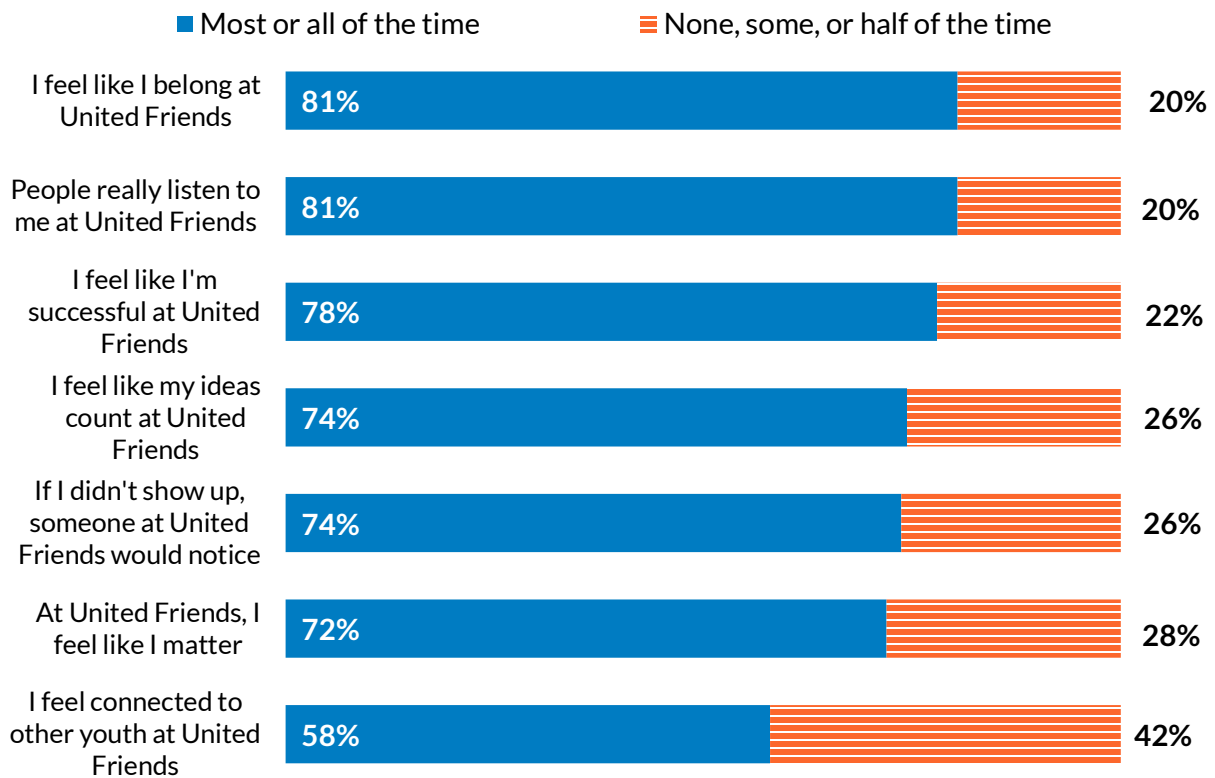
Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

## Connectedness and belonging at United Friends

Because young people also interact with other staff and fellow participants during their time in the program, we also asked them to report on their sense of connection and belonging at United Friends more broadly. Aligned with the findings on participant- counselor relationships, participants expressed a strong, positive sense of belonging with others at United Friends (median = 4.4). As seen in Figure 3, most participants felt they belonged and that they mattered at United Friends most or all of the time. Most also reported feeling successful at United Friends, that their ideas mattered, and that they were listened to.

Notably, over 40 percent of participants reported that they did not feel connected to other youth at United Friends, all, or most of the time. This finding aligns with the results of the participant focus groups and interviews (see callout box, below), which indicate that Pathways participants often “keep to themselves” rather than interact with fellow participants.

**Figure 3.** Participant responses to measures on sense of belonging at United Friends (N=81)



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

### Insights from Focus Groups and Interviews

Focus group and interview participants reported that their experiences with Pathways strengthened their relationships with others inside and outside of United Friends. However, unlike their peers in United Friends' Scholars program, Pathways participants who took part in focus groups and interviews reported they mostly kept to themselves and that fellow participants "do their own things."

Staff who took part in focus groups and interviews reported only minor disagreements between program participants. When roommates have conflict, a community approach is taken to try to resolve the issue. Neutral staff and management are brought in to listen to the problem and come up with a solution.

# Participant Outcomes

United Friends seeks to empower youth with foster care experience on their journey to self-sufficiency through their Scholars program, Pathways Housing program,<sup>viii</sup> and advocacy. Recognizing that the path to self-sufficiency is built upon a foundation of young people's social, emotional, and physical well-being,<sup>ix</sup> United Friends seeks to provide resources to support a successful transition to adulthood, better prepare young people to graduate high school, complete post-secondary education or training, and build meaningful, lasting relationships and social "safety nets."

This section describes the outcomes of the young people who participated in the Pathways program between spring 2018 and spring 2019. To assess the effect of Pathways on participants' outcomes we:

- Conducted descriptive analyses to describe how well participants are faring across the key developmental domains targeted by United Friends: self-sufficiency, education, and socio-emotional well-being.
- Used regression analyses to examine the association between participant outcomes and program participation or "dosage," participant-counselor relationships, and participants' sense of belonging and connectedness at United Friends.<sup>8x</sup>
- Thematically coded and analyzed transcripts from focus groups and interviews with young people who participate in Pathways and United Friends staff.

## Analysis Approach

Analyses were conducted in Stata, 13.1. A skew or kurtosis greater than +/- 2 was used to identify variables with non-normal distributions. Medians are reported in lieu of means for variables with non-normal distributions. To assess group differences, t-tests were used for variables with normal distributions and Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was used for variables with non-normal distributions. Similarly, Pearson's correlation was used for normally distributed variables and Spearman's rank-order correlation was used for variables with non-normal distributions.

Prior to the regression analysis, data were screened for outliers that have a large effect on the regression coefficients (e.g., assessment of studentized residuals, leverage, Cook's D, DFIT, and DFBETA). This resulted in six cases being dropped from the analysis. Given that many of the models had heteroscedasticity, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression and logistic regression models were run with robust standard errors. Robust regression was used for models that had issues with outliers and high leverage data points.

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<sup>8</sup> Each regression model included the outcome of interest (dependent variable), three measures of participation (days enrolled in the Pathways program, participant-counselor relationships, and perceptions of connection and belonging at United Friends), and two covariates (gender and age at enrollment). Race/ethnicity was not used as a covariate due to unbalanced sample sizes across racial and ethnic groups. Models are based on a sample of 96 participants who have data for each outcome variable.

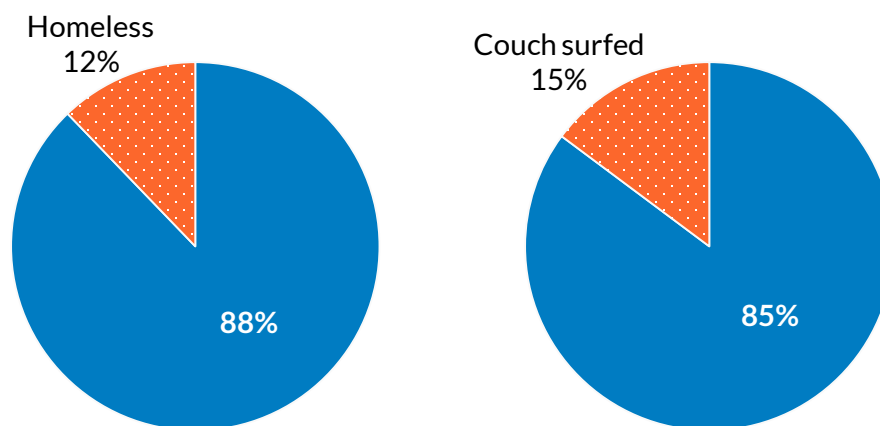
## Self-sufficiency

To assess United Friend’s ability to prepare young people to be self-sufficient and make successful transitions to adulthood, we asked participants to respond to questions about their housing, career and vocational expectations, their preparedness to achieve those goals, and barriers to employment.

### Housing

Participants provided information on their housing status. As Figure 4 shows, 12 percent of Pathways participants reported experiencing homelessness in the six months before completing the survey, and 15 percent reported “couch surfing.”

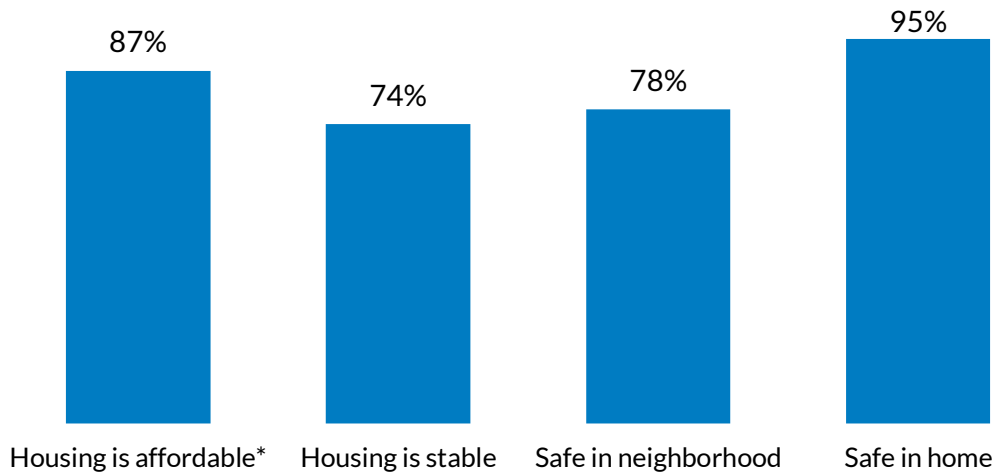
**Figure 4.** Homeless and couch surfing in the past six months for participants (N=82)



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018–2019.

We also asked young people about their perceptions of their housing. As seen in Figure 5, while almost all participants felt safe in their home, only 78 percent felt safe in their neighborhood. In addition to risks to youth’s physical safety, exposure to neighborhood violence has been documented as having a detrimental impact on young people’s mental health.<sup>xi</sup> Of those participants who reported they pay for their housing, 87 percent said their housing was affordable. Finally, aligned with the findings in Figure 4, about 26 percent of young people felt their housing was unstable.

**Figure 5.** Housing affordability, stability, and safety for participants (N=82)



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018–2019.

\* Only participants who reported they pay for their own housing responded to the question about housing affordability (N=63)

To further explore participants’ access to housing, we created a housing index based on the four items in Figure 5.<sup>9</sup> The four items were summed to create a scale with higher numbers indicating access to better housing. Figure 6 displays the proportion of young people who had positive responses on one or more of the metrics of housing quality. As seen in Figure 6, nearly 60 percent of participants report their housing was affordable and stable and that they felt safe both in their home and in their neighborhood.

**Figure 6.** Housing index (N=82)



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018–2019.

<sup>9</sup> Participants who reported that they did not pay for housing were coded as having affordable housing.

## Pathways participation and housing

Results from the regression analysis indicate that housing quality (as measured by the housing index) was significantly associated with participants' sense of belonging with other youth and staff at United Friends, but not the other predictor variables we examined: age at enrollment, gender, strength of participant-counselor relationship, and days enrolled in Pathways.<sup>10</sup> Participants who reported a strong sense of belonging reported higher scores on the index that measured housing affordability, safety, and stability.

Although more information is needed to determine why housing quality is associated with participants' sense of belonging, one reason may be that participants with stronger social networks have better access to high-quality housing. To explore this possibility, we used Spearman's rank-order correlation<sup>xii</sup> to examine associations between the housing index and participants' perceptions of their peer networks. Results from this analysis indicate that housing quality was positively associated with peer relationships (both support from peers<sup>11</sup> and support provided to peers<sup>12</sup>). However, it should be noted that high-quality housing could also create stronger social networks.

### Insights from Focus Groups and Interviews

Focus group and interview participants were asked if there was anything their counselor is not checking in with them about but should. Although most participants had a difficult time thinking of anything, one Pathways participant said they would like their counselor to check in about "homelessness and other fears that friends just don't understand."

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<sup>10</sup>  $B=0.46, SE=0.18, p<.05$

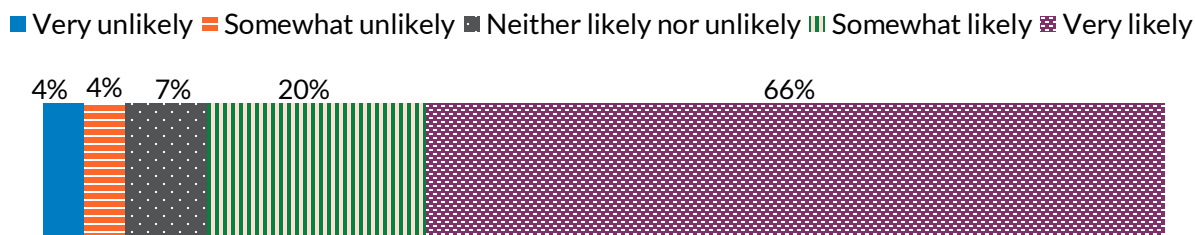
<sup>11</sup>  $r_s(81)=0.24, p<.05$

<sup>12</sup>  $r_s(81)=0.23, p<.05$

## Career aspirations and expectations

Participants were asked to rate the likelihood that they would have a good job by the age of 30.<sup>13</sup> About two thirds of participants (66 percent) reported that it was very likely (see Figure 7), suggesting that most participants have positive perceptions of their future careers.

**Figure 7.** Participant responses when asked about the likelihood of having a good job by age 30 (N=82)



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

## Knowledge of how to apply for jobs

To explore how well-prepared Pathways participants were to apply for jobs, we asked participants to rate the extent to which statements about having knowledge about the job application process was like them on a 5-point scale (1: *Not at all like me*, 5: *Exactly like me*). As seen in Figure 8, most participants felt that they knew how to fill out a job application, prepare for an interview, and develop a résumé. However, a third of participants report not knowing how to develop a résumé, indicating a need for Pathways counselors to work more closely with youth to ensure they know how to build a strong résumé.

**Figure 8.** Knowledge to apply for jobs (N=83)



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

## Barriers to employment

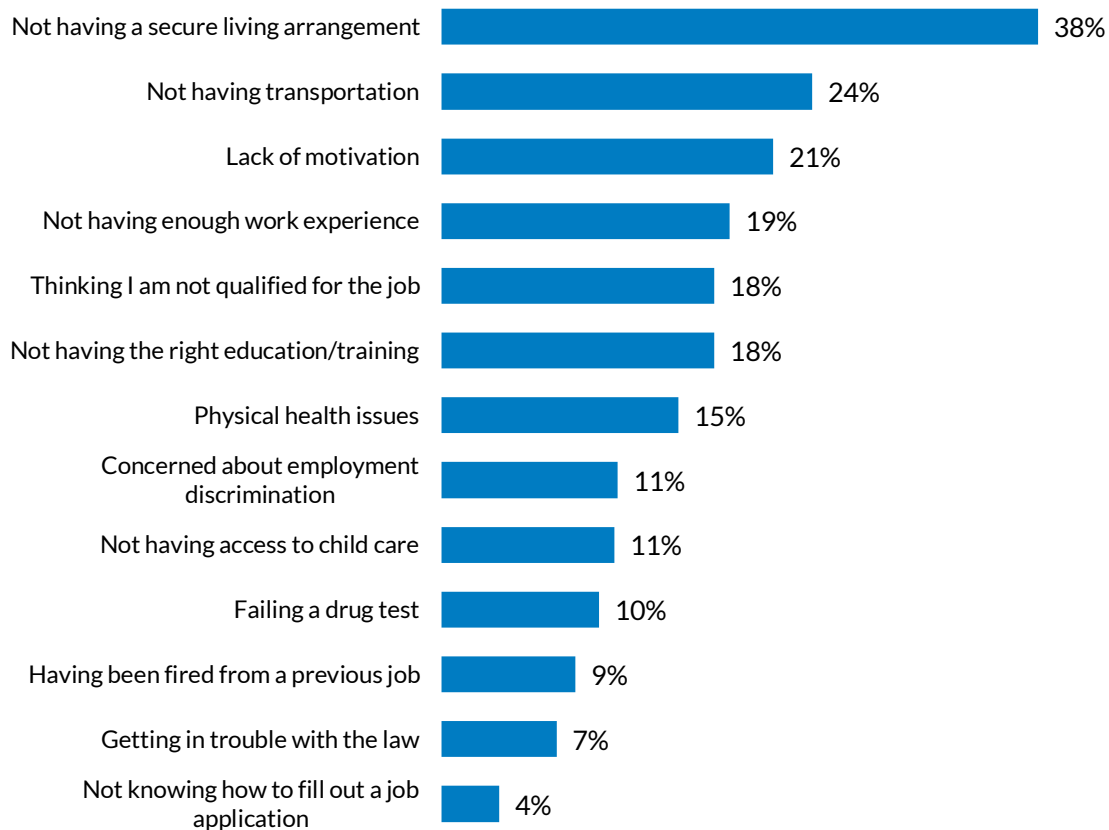
Participants were also asked to report on potential barriers they may face to getting a job (see Figure 9). Of a total of 13 barriers, most participants reported only one barrier they were either likely or very likely to face. The most common barriers participants anticipated were not having a secure living arrangement and not having transportation. Following lack of motivation, not having enough work experience and thinking they are not qualified for the job were barriers participants commonly reported. These barriers, combined

<sup>13</sup> The survey did not define what “good job” is (e.g., high salary or highly satisfying), so participants applied their own definitions when responding to this question.



with the large proportion of participants who do not know where to find internships (see Figure 17), suggest that participants would benefit from additional supports in connecting to work-based learning experiences, such as internships and apprenticeships.

**Figure 9.** Percent of participants who reported they will likely or very likely face this barrier while seeking employment (N=81)



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

### Pathways participation and employment barriers

Results from the regression model indicate that the number of days enrolled in Pathways was significantly associated with the number of employment barriers participants perceived.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, participants with longer tenures perceived fewer barriers to employment.

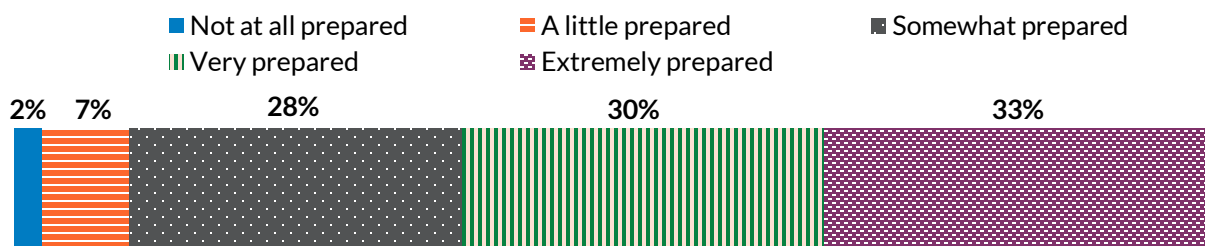
### Preparation for future career

Participants were also asked to rate how prepared they felt to meet their occupational goals (Figure 10). Overall, more than half of Pathways participants (63 percent) felt very or extremely prepared to meet their occupational goals. Notably, however, approximately 9 percent of participants felt that they were either not at all prepared or only a little prepared to meet their career and vocational goals and 28 percent felt that they were only somewhat prepared. Thus, counselors may want to work with youth to identify and target skills or competencies they feel would make them more prepared to achieve their occupational goals.

<sup>14</sup> B=-0.003, SE=0.001, p<.05

In an effort to identify opportunities for better preparing youth to meet their employment goals, we compared the number of perceived barriers to employment, educational expectations, number of perceived barriers to post-secondary education and training, and knowledge and resources for achieving educational and occupational goals (see Education Outcomes section for more information about these measures) between young people who felt (very or extremely) prepared and those who felt less prepared. Results from this follow-up analysis indicate that young people who reported feeling unprepared to meet their vocational goals reported significantly more barriers to employment<sup>15</sup> (median = 7) and education<sup>16</sup> (median = 2) than their peers who felt more prepared (median = 4; median = 1, respectively). Additionally, participants who felt less prepared for their future careers also reported having significantly fewer resources and less knowledge<sup>17</sup> about how to prepare for their educational and occupational goals (median = 4) than their peers who felt more prepared (median = 8). Interestingly, participants who felt unprepared were equally likely to report that they expect to obtain post-secondary education or training as those who felt prepared.

**Figure 10. Preparedness to meet career or vocational goals (N=83)**

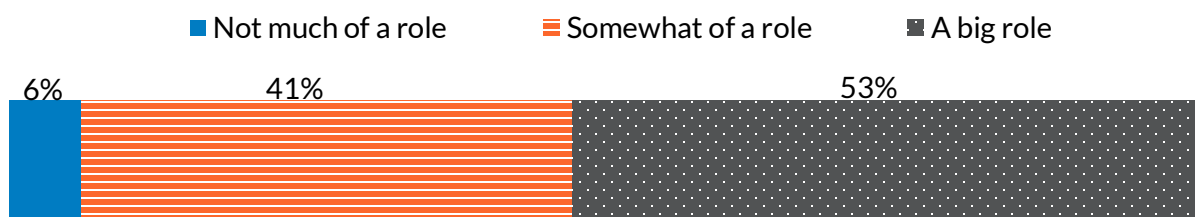


Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

### Pathways participation and preparation for adulthood

Participants were asked to think about how prepared they are for adulthood and to rate how much of a role their counselor played in preparing them. As noted in Figure 11, just over half of participants reported that their counselor played a big role in preparing them for adulthood. Only a minority of participants, reported that their counselor did not play a role in their preparation for adulthood.

**Figure 11. Counselor role in preparing participant for adulthood**



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

<sup>15</sup>Z=2.88, p<.01

<sup>16</sup>Z=2.97, p<.01

<sup>17</sup>Z=-5.64, p<.001

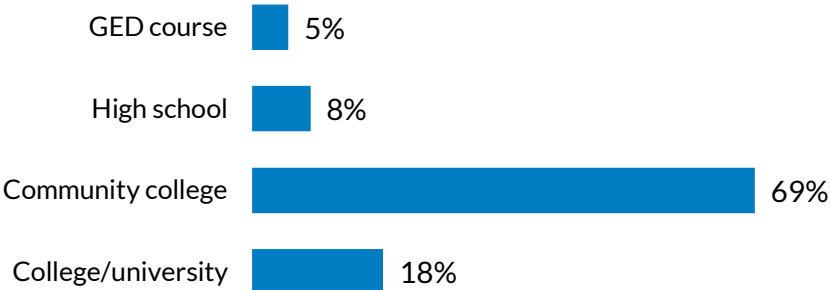
# Educational outcomes

Recognizing that education and work-based learning experiences (e.g., internship and mentoring) in adolescence and young adulthood can affect job quality (as measured by income, fringe benefits, hours worked, and job satisfaction) in adulthood,<sup>xiii</sup> United Friends Pathways program seeks to enhance youths' educational outcomes by providing young people with educational mentoring and assistance and career/vocational counseling and development. To assess United Friends' ability to facilitate young people's ability to meet their educational goals, we asked participants to respond to questions about their current educational attainment, educational goals, barriers they may face while trying to achieve those goals, and how prepared they feel to achieve their goals.

## School enrollment and academic aspirations

At the time the survey was conducted, 48 percent of Pathways participants were enrolled in school. Of the participants enrolled in school, most were in community college (69 percent) or a four-year college or university (18 percent; see Figure 12).

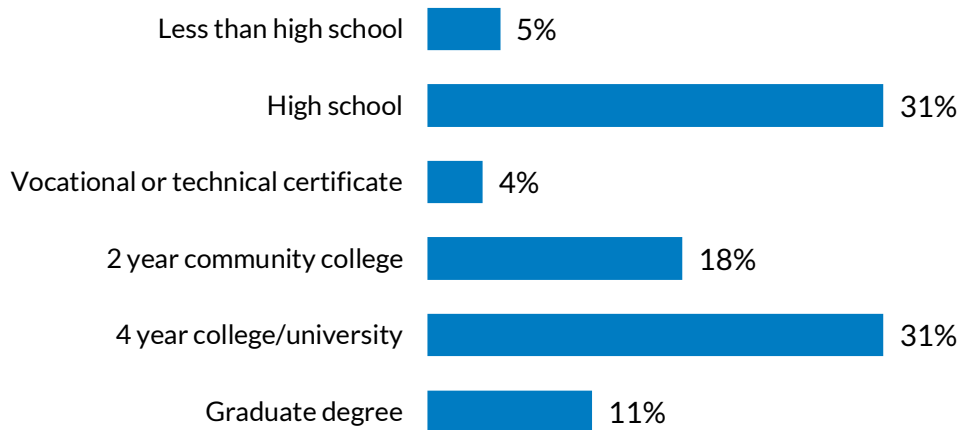
**Figure 12.** Type of school in which participants were enrolled (N=39)



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

In response to questions about their education goals, 64 percent said they expect to earn some type of post-secondary degree or certification (see Figure 13). Approximately 30 percent of participants reported expecting to earn a high school diploma and 5 percent said they did not expect to earn a high school diploma. Given that post-secondary education and training completed in early adulthood is associated with job quality at age 30,<sup>xiv</sup> United Friends counselors may want to work with youth to identify their career goals and the post-secondary training, education, or work-based learning experiences, such as mentoring or apprenticeship, that may help them reach their employment goals.

**Figure 13.** Highest level of schooling participants expected to complete (N=80)



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

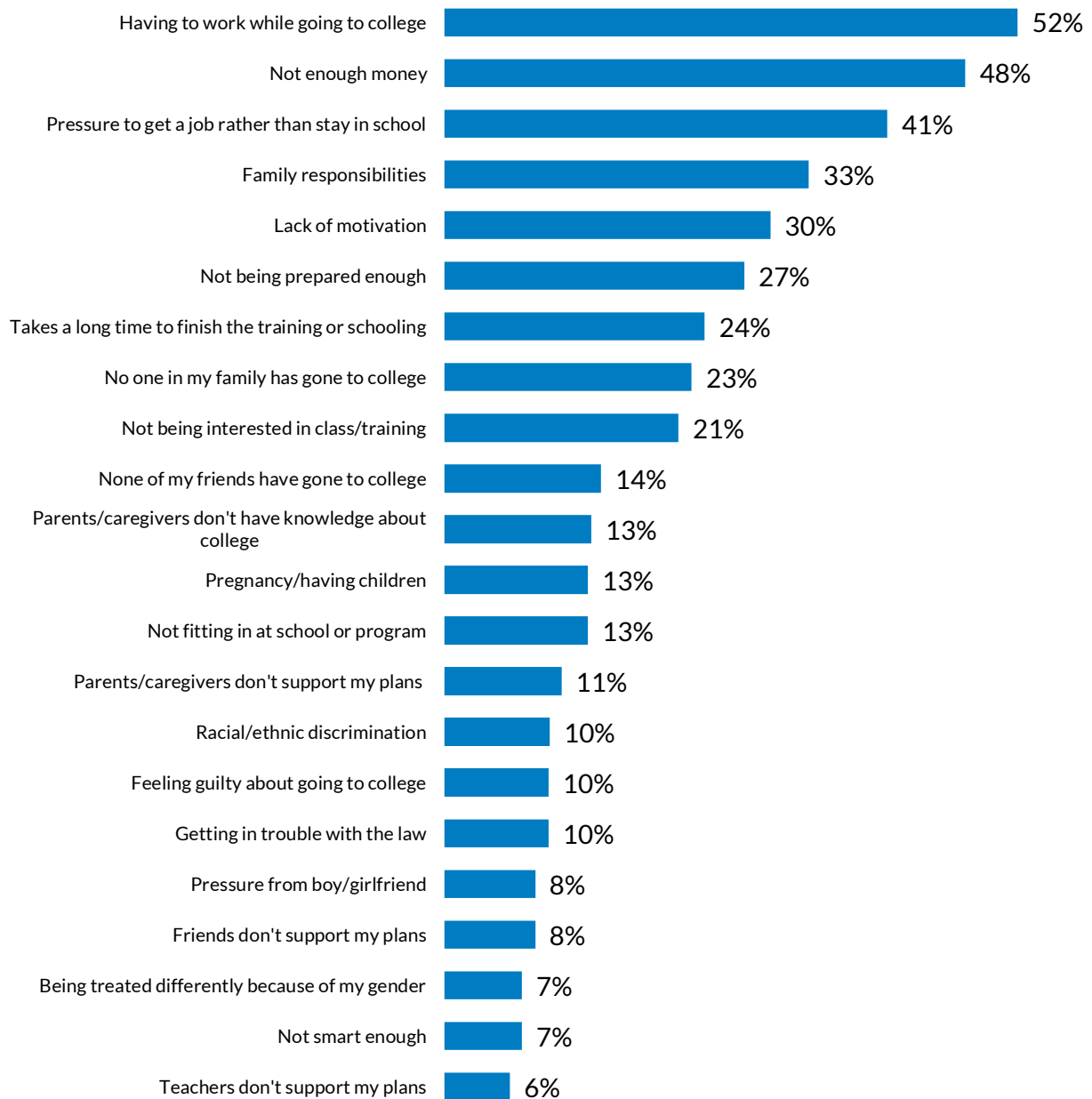
### Pathways participation and academic aspirations

Results from the regression analysis indicate that participants' academic aspirations were not related to any of the predictor variables we examined. None of these variables were significantly associated with whether the participant indicated he or she expected to complete some sort of post-secondary degree or certification.

### Barriers to post-secondary education or training

Participants were also asked about barriers they might face while completing a college degree or training credential. Of a total of 22 potential barriers, participants reported a median of five barriers they felt they were either likely or very likely to face. As seen in Figure 14, not having enough money was the most common barrier Pathways participants reported, followed by having to work while going to school.

**Figure 14.** Percent of participants who reported they will likely or very likely face this barrier while finishing a college degree or training credential(N=84)

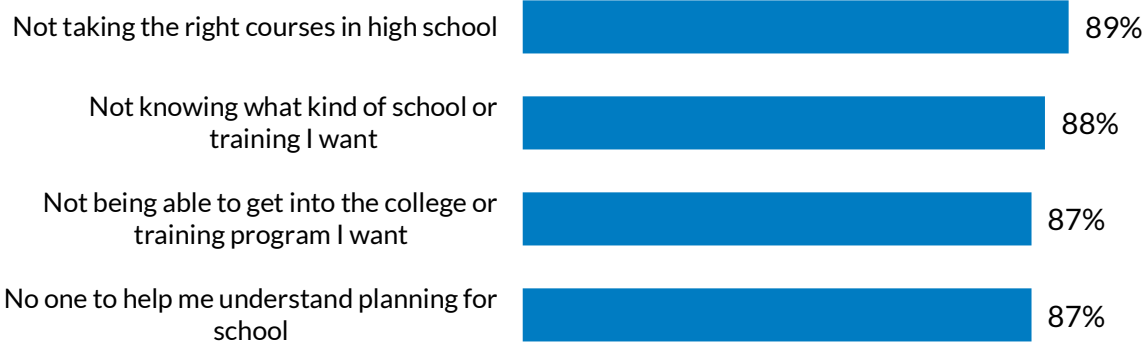


Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

Given that some participants are not enrolled in college or a training program, we asked those participants to rate the likeliness they would face barriers to getting into college or a training program. Figure 15 shows that most participants felt it was either likely or very likely they would encounter each of the four barriers. This suggests participants not enrolled in college or training could use additional supports in their attempts to enroll.

Results from the regression analysis indicate that none of the predictor variables we examined are associated with the number of barriers endorsed by participants.

**Figure 15.** Percent of participants who reported they will likely or very likely face this barrier (N=37)



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

### Insights from Focus Groups and Interviews

Focus group and interview participants reported that, as a result of help from their mentors and counselors, they care more about education after being involved with United Friends. Additionally, multiple participants from both the focus groups and interviews expressed their desire to gain an education that would allow them to inspire and influence future generations of youth with similar backgrounds to also achieve and value education.

## Preparation and resources to meet academic goals

We also asked participants to rate how prepared they felt to meet their educational goals. Overall, 46 percent said they felt very or extremely prepared to meet their educational goals (see Figure 16). Notably, 17 percent of participants said they felt that they were not at all or only a little prepared to meet their goals, suggesting that a sizable minority of Pathways participants could benefit from additional support in identifying and meeting educational goals.

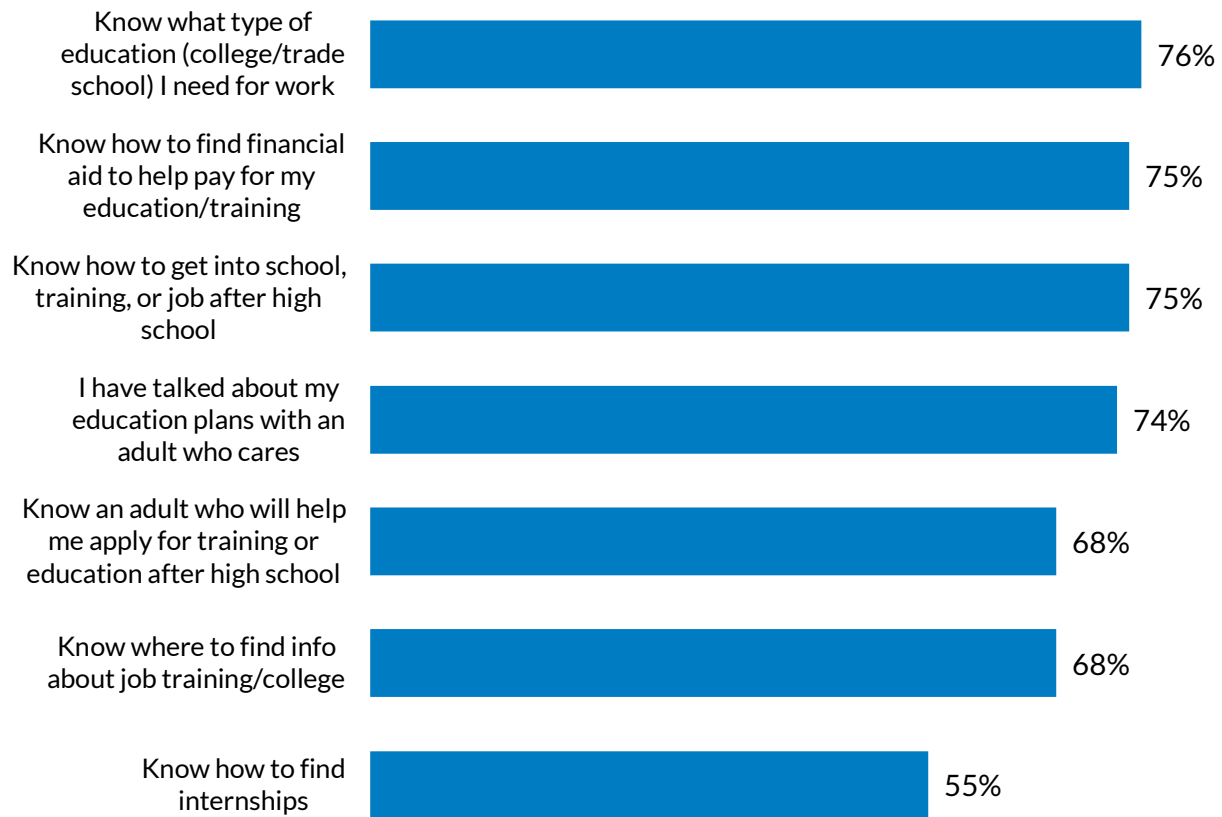
**Figure 16.** Preparedness to meet educational goals (N=83)



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

To further explore how well-prepared Pathways participants felt to meet their educational goals, we asked them to rate the extent to which they know how to access information to help them prepare for educational success on a 5-point scale (1: *Not at all like me*, 5: *Exactly like me*). As seen in Figure 17, overall, Pathways participants felt they had talked about their education plans with an adult who cares about them and that they know an adult who will help them apply for the education or training. The lowest-rated item was knowing how to find an internship.

**Figure 17.** Resources and knowledge to meet educational goals (N=83)



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

### Pathways participation and career planning/preparation

The number of items in Figure 8 and Figure 17 (above) that participants reported as being very much or exactly like them were summed to create an index (1 to 10) of their preparation for educational and occupational success, with higher scores indicating perceptions of greater preparation. The median score on this index was an 8, suggesting that on average, participants reported having the knowledge and resources needed for their future educational and occupational goals.

Results from the regression analysis suggest that the strength of participants' relationships with their counselors was significantly associated with the career planning and preparation index.<sup>18</sup> Participants with strong, positive relationships with their counselors had significantly higher scores on this index than their peers.

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<sup>18</sup> B=2.03, SE=0.55,  $p < .001$



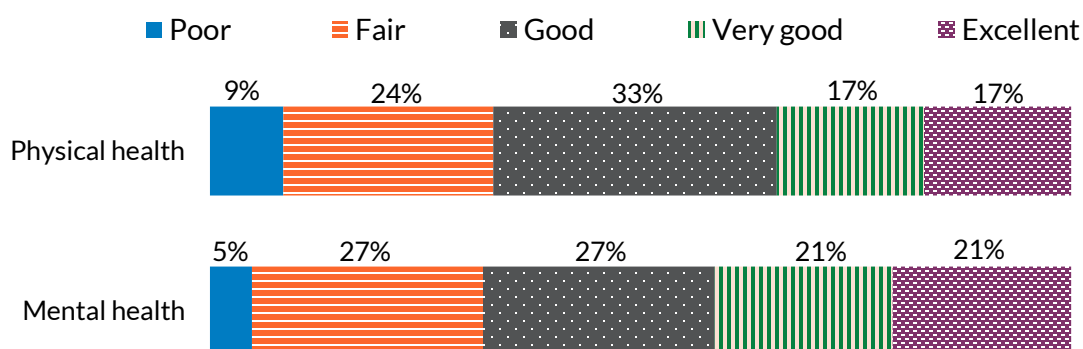
## Participant well-being

Recognizing that the path to self-sufficiency is built upon a foundation of young people’s social, emotional, and physical well-being,<sup>xv</sup> key focuses of United Friends are to connect young people to resources that can address their needs and to help young people develop the skills they need to build and sustain meaningful, lasting relationships and social safety nets. To better understand how successful United Friends was in achieving these goals, we asked respondents to report on their physical and mental health, initiative, goal-setting, social competence, civic engagement, and relationships with peers outside of United Friends.

### Health

As seen in Figure 18, most participants report having good, very good, or excellent physical and mental health. But more than one third of participants reported their physical or mental health were poor or fair.

**Figure 18.** Participant physical and mental health (N=82)



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

### Pathways participation and health

Pathways participants’ mental health was not significantly associated with any of the predictor variables. However, participants’ physical health was significantly associated with both gender<sup>19</sup> and a sense of belonging at United Friends.<sup>20</sup> Male participants were significantly more likely to report good physical health than female participants. Those who reported a strong sense of belonging with other youth and staff at United Friends were significantly more likely to report good physical health than their peers.

### Insights from Focus Groups and Interviews

Although most of the participants discussed appreciation for the counseling and therapy they were receiving, they also mentioned wanting additional mental health supports from both the Pathways program, in general, as well as their counselor.

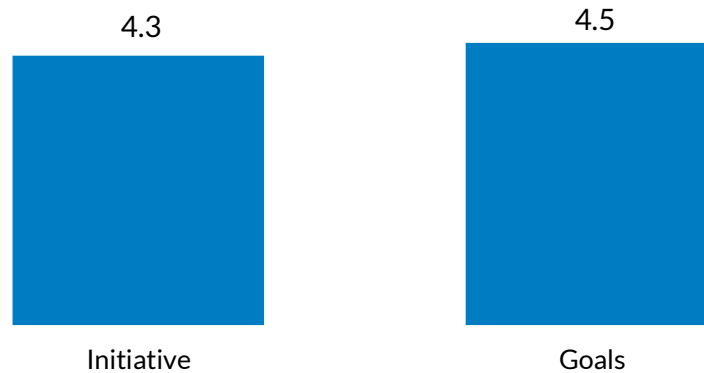
<sup>19</sup> B=0.67, SE=0.16,  $p < .01$

<sup>20</sup> B=0.55, SE=0.18,  $p < .01$

## Taking initiative and goal setting

Pathways program participants also responded to measures that assess their ability to take initiative and achieve goals. The initiative scale, which is based on a 5-point scale (1: *None of the time*; 5: *All of the time*), includes participant response to measures such as, “When I work in a group, I do my fair share.” The goal setting scale, which is based on the same 5-point scale, includes participant responses to items about setting goals *and* working toward achieving those goals. As seen in Figure 19, Pathways participants reported moderately high initiative (median = 4.3) and high goal-setting (median = 4.5).

**Figure 19.** Median scores for initiative-taking and being goal-oriented (N=81)



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

Results from the regression analysis indicate that initiative-taking is positively and significantly associated with a strong participant-counselor relationship<sup>21</sup> and sense of belonging at United Friends.<sup>22</sup> Setting and working to achieve goals is also positively associated with a participant-counselor relationship<sup>23</sup> and a strong sense of belonging at United Friends.<sup>24</sup>

## Social competence and civic engagement

Participants responded to a series of questions that measured social competence and civic engagement. Each measure was based on a 5-point scale (1: *none of the time*; 5: *all of the time*). The social competence scale includes items such as “I avoid making others look bad,” and the civic engagement scale includes questions about participants’ attachment to their communities and their dedication to making a difference within those communities. The median score for each scale is presented in Figure 20 and shows that participants reported high levels of social competence and moderate levels of civic engagement.

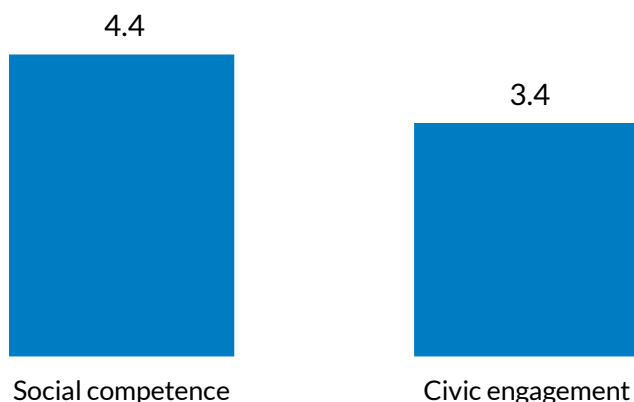
<sup>21</sup> B=0.43, SE=0.18,  $p < .05$

<sup>22</sup> B=0.28, SE=0.11,  $p < .05$

<sup>23</sup> B=0.29, SE=0.14,  $p < .05$

<sup>24</sup> B=0.40, SE=0.10,  $p < .001$

**Figure 20.** Median social competence and civic engagement (N=81)



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

Results from the regression model indicate participants' social competence was significantly associated with both gender<sup>25</sup> and strength of participant-counselor relationship.<sup>26</sup> Female participants and those who reported strong, positive relationships with their Pathways counselor reported significantly stronger social competence. A strong sense of belonging at United Friends was the only predictor variable positively and significantly associated with civic engagement.<sup>27</sup> Participants who reported a greater sense of belonging reported high levels of civic engagement.

## Relationships outside of United Friends

In addition to responding to questions about their relationships with counselors and other staff and youth at United Friends, participants responded to a series of questions that asked about their relationships with their peers (not only those at United Friends). The first scale, which measured the quality of participants peers, was based on a 5-point scale (1: *strongly disagree*; 5: *strongly agree*) and included items such as "I have a friend who helps me when I am down" and "I have a friend I can count on to be there for me. As seen in Figure 21, Pathways participants reported moderately high levels of support from peers (median = 4.4).

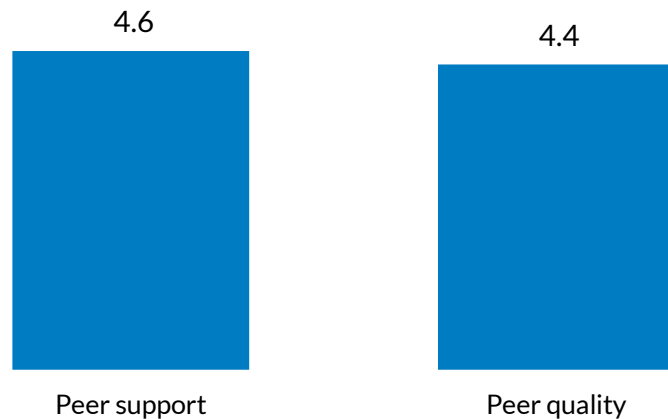
The second scale examined the level of support participants provide to peers. This measure was also based on a 5-point scale (1: *not at all like me*; 5: *exactly like me*) and includes items such as "I encourage my friends to be the best that they can be." As seen in Figure 21, on average, Pathways participants reported moderately high levels of support for peers (median = 4.6).

<sup>25</sup> B=-0.36, SE=0.16,  $p < .05$

<sup>26</sup> B=0.53, SE=0.21,  $p < .05$

<sup>27</sup> B=0.48, SE=0.19,  $p < .05$

**Figure 21.** Median scores for peer relationships (N=85)



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

### Pathways participation and healthy relationships

Results from the regression model indicate that participants' support of their peers was significantly associated with gender,<sup>28</sup> strength of participant-counselor relationship,<sup>29</sup> and participants' sense of belonging with their peers and others at United Friends.<sup>30</sup> Female participants reported stronger support for their peers than male participants. Additionally, participants who reported strong relationships with their counselor and a strong sense of belonging with other youth and staff at United Friends reported providing significantly stronger support to their peers. Sense of belonging was the only predictor variable associated with the amount of support participants reported receiving from their peers.<sup>31</sup> Participants who felt a strong sense of belonging with other youth and staff at United Friends reported significantly stronger support from their peers.

To further explore associations between Pathways participation and healthy relationships, participants responded to a series of questions about how participating in Pathways improved their knowledge and skills around building and maintaining healthy relationships.<sup>32</sup> As seen in Figure 22, most participants reported improving their knowledge of and skills for healthy relationships.

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<sup>28</sup>  $B=0.04$ ,  $SE=0.15$ ,  $p<.05$

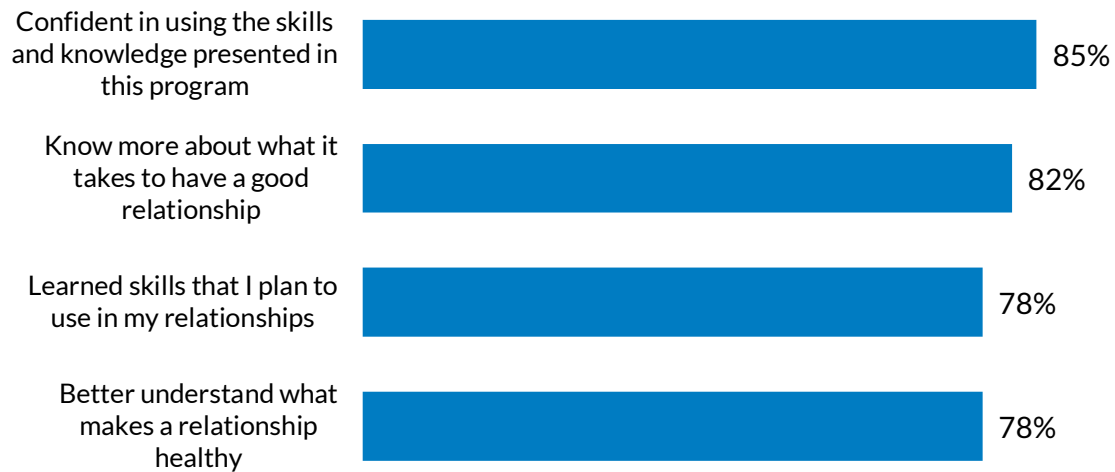
<sup>29</sup>  $B=0.38$ ,  $SE=0.16$ ,  $p<.05$

<sup>30</sup>  $B=0.25$ ,  $SE=0.11$ ,  $p<.05$

<sup>31</sup>  $B=0.79$ ,  $SE=0.18$ ,  $p<.001$

<sup>32</sup> The questions about relationship knowledge and improvement were added to the survey after the 2018 administration. Only participants who reported they had been enrolled in Pathways for a year or longer responded to these questions. As a result, the sample size for these measures is smaller than others presented in this report.

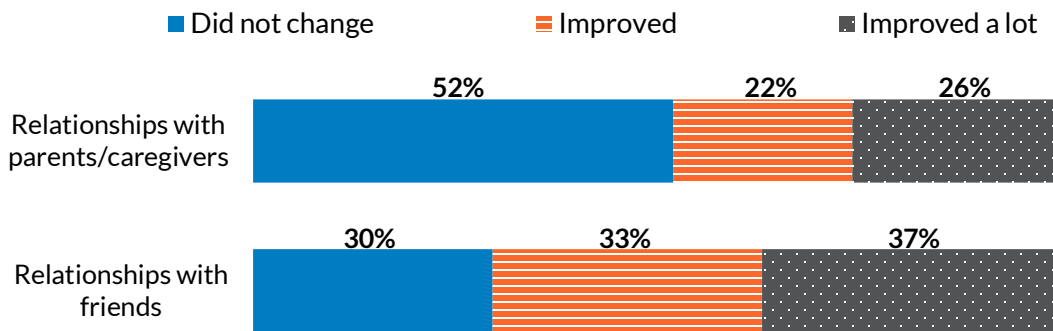
**Figure 22.** Relationship knowledge (N=27)



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

Participants also responded to questions about how their relationships with friends and parents or caregivers changed since they enrolled in Pathways. As Figure 22 shows, 48 percent of participants reported that their relationships with parents or caregivers had improved, and 70 percent reported their relationships with friends improved.

**Figure 23.** Changes in participant relationships (N=27)



Source: Child Trends survey of Pathways participants, 2018-2019.

## Insights from Focus Groups and Interviews

Most of the young people who participated in the focus groups and interviews reported not being very social and preferring not to socialize with other youth at United Friends. They did, however, report that their counselors have had positive effects on their social and emotional well-being.

# Discussion and Recommendations

Between 2016 and 2019, United Friends served more than 250 young people with foster care experience in their Pathways program. On average, participants entered Pathways at age 21—the age in which many young people in California exit foster care<sup>xvi</sup>—and remained in the program, on average, for around 18 months. This finding, coupled with the findings that 1) United Friends counselors were successful in developing positive, supportive, relationships with program participants; and 2) United Friends provides a supportive environment where young people feel connected to numerous staff, suggests that this organization is successful in providing young people with a consistent support network during a critical period of their transition to self-sufficiency.

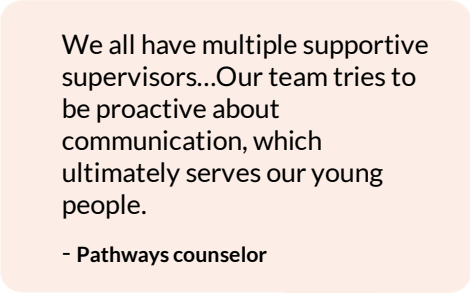
Data from the participant survey and the interviews and focus groups suggest that young people’s relationships with their counselor helped them improve their relationships with others and succeed in school and in the workplace. Notably, results from the regression analysis indicate that positive participant-counselor relationships were associated with positive relationships with peers; greater social competence; stronger initiative; increased goal-setting; and career planning and preparation. Additionally, feeling connected to United Friends more broadly was associated with young people exhibiting greater initiative and goal-setting; having more support from peers; increased civic engagement; more positive perceptions of physical health; and increased housing safety, stability, and affordability

These findings align with those from the field of positive youth development (PYD). PYD is an approach to developing the skills and competencies of young people through fostering positive relationships, providing opportunities for growth and giving back, and building upon their strengths.<sup>xvii</sup> Findings from other evaluations have demonstrated that integrating PYD principles into youth programs can positively affect youths’ academic<sup>xviii</sup> and employment<sup>xix</sup> outcomes and reduce teen pregnancy,<sup>xx</sup> substance use, and violence.<sup>xxi</sup> Together, the findings from the current evaluation and these other evaluations suggest that United Friends’ relationship model is a key driver of the program’s success in promoting positive outcomes.

Although counselors report that their relationships with Pathways participants are overwhelmingly positive and that United Friends is a supportive environment, several counselors reported feeling stretched too thin, which they fear interferes with their ability to connect with youth. Ensuring that counselors and staff feel supported and not overworked will help ensure that counselors are able to maintain positive, supportive relationships with participants, which are vital to the program’s success.

In addition to the positive findings regarding United Friends’ relationship model, findings from the evaluation indicate that length of participation in Pathways can contribute to young people’s well-being and career success. Results from the regression analysis indicate that longer durations in the program (as measured by days enrolled) were significantly associated with fewer perceived barriers to employment and greater perceived physical health.

Results from the evaluation suggest that many Pathways participants have high educational goals—with nearly two thirds expecting to obtain either a post-secondary degree or training credential. Although most participants also report feeling prepared to achieve their academic goals, nearly one fourth acknowledged being unprepared to achieve their academic goals. Additionally, more than 80 percent of participants said they are likely to experience at least one barrier to completing their academic goals. Most commonly, participants reported financial barriers to reaching their academic goals, such as not having enough money for school and having to work while attending school. Increased access to financial resources, such as



We all have multiple supportive supervisors...Our team tries to be proactive about communication, which ultimately serves our young people.

- Pathways counselor

scholarships, may reduce the likelihood of economic barriers preventing participants from completing their education.

Pathways participants are confident about their future careers: two thirds of participants predicted that they would have a good job by age 30, and the same amount said they were prepared to achieve their employment goals. Still, 60 percent of participants reported they were likely to experience at least one barrier to employment, most often citing unstable housing, transportation issues, and insufficient work experience as potential barriers to future employment.

Interestingly, participants who reported feeling unprepared to meet their career goals, were no less likely to expect to gain post-secondary training or education than those who felt prepared. They did, however, anticipate that they would experience more barriers to education and employment and have fewer resources to draw on to meet their goals.

Additionally, given that almost half of participants reported they did not know where to find internships and one fifth said they felt a lack of work experience would be a barrier to employment, participants should also be connected to work-based learning experiences, such as internships and apprenticeships. These experiences have been known to increase the likelihood that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds will have a good job in adulthood.<sup>xxii</sup> Connecting young people to these opportunities will not only help them develop their technical and soft skills, it will also build their professional networks, and increase their confidence in their ability to gain employment.

Most Pathways participants reported positive perceptions of their physical and mental health, but about one third said their physical and mental health is only fair or poor. Research has shown that youth, particularly those with mental health needs, have difficulty navigating adult-oriented health care systems.<sup>xxiii</sup> Moreover, a sizable minority of young people experienced housing instability, with some reporting that they either had to “couch surf” or were homeless in the past six months. While focus group and interview participants said the supports they receive from United Friends are helpful, youth expressed a need for additional supports outside of United Friends. As such, the organization may want to work to expand connections between young people and community supports—particularly those related to housing and healthcare (both behavioral and physical).

## Conclusion

Youth with foster care experience face the same challenges as other young adults but often do so with complex trauma histories and limited social support and monetary resources.<sup>xxiv</sup> Through their Pathways program, United Friends seeks to support young people with foster care experience during their transition to adulthood by providing them with a full spectrum of opportunities and supports—including housing, life skills training, educational mentoring and assistance, career/vocational counseling and development, and health education and mental health services.<sup>xxv</sup>

Helping young people develop and maintain meaningful, supportive relationships and social safety nets is another key component of the Pathways program. But more could be done, particularly in regard to strengthening ties between young people and community resources, particularly those related to housing, financial aid, work-based learning opportunities, and healthcare.

A recent report<sup>xxvi</sup> estimated daily savings of \$9.6 million if youth with foster care experience had a similar rate of homelessness as their peers in the general population. Given that the homelessness rate of youth



who participate in Pathways is lower than the national rate,<sup>33</sup> with an average annual expenditure of \$25,389 per Pathways participant,<sup>34</sup> the return on investment in the Pathways program may be significant.

## Study Limitations

Although the results from this evaluation are promising, it should be noted that the design of this evaluation was correlational, precluding us from making causal attributions regarding the program's impact on young people's outcomes. Moreover, although we worked with United Friends to develop an estimate of the annual expenditure per participant, we were unable to conduct a formal cost-analysis that includes factors such as resources provided at no cost (e.g., donations, participant time, and volunteer labor).<sup>xxvii</sup> Nevertheless, the results underscore the importance of United Friends' relationship model and suggest that participation in Pathways may contribute to the socio-emotional well-being and academic success of young people with experience in the foster care system. It may also contribute to the development of a foundation from which they can achieve occupational success and become self-sufficient, productive adults.

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<sup>33</sup>According to the *Future Savings* report, approximately 23 percent of young people who age out of foster care will experience homelessness by age 21.

<sup>34</sup>Represents average annual expenditure across last three fiscal years.

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