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## Exploring the Use of an Emancipation Checklist for Older Youth (18-21) Exiting Foster Care

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### Abstract

This paper examines the efforts of a court to improve outcomes for older youth who are exiting foster care by implementing an Emancipation Checklist (EC) to guide discussion around 12 stability indicators thought to improve youth transition to adulthood (e.g., education, employment). Over 90% of youth had medical insurance, all personal documents, a permanent connection, and could identify their core values. Less than half had employments or were engaged in educational or vocational training. Youth who exited when they were older and who attended more of their court hearings had more stability indicators. Implications and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: Emancipation, Foster Care, Judicial Checklist, Older youth

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Foster Care

Adolescence is a formative developmental stage, when youth are in the process of acquiring and coordinating educational, vocational, social, and behavioral skills (Cauffman & Steinberg, 2012). Development towards psychosocial maturity is influenced by environmental conditions such as a parents or guardians, prosocial peers, and participation in extracurricular, educational, and employment activities (Cauffman & Steinberg, 2012). For the majority of individuals this process of psychosocial development extends into early adulthood (Cauffman & Steinberg, 2012). Adolescent brains are not fully developed until the mid-twenties, when important changes in brain functioning take place such as a strengthening of activity in self-regulation brain systems, responses to rewards, and increased brain regions responding to arousing stimuli during late teens and early twenties (Steinberg, 2013). While many teens are capable of making mature decisions at this age, adolescents are less likely to make mature decisions when they are experiencing emotional arousal or subjected to peer pressure (Steinberg, 2013). Youth placed in the foster care system due to abuse or neglect by a parent are likely to be experiencing emotional arousal and may be at increased risk to make poor choices.

More than two decades of research has clearly documented the poor outcomes for youth who are emancipating from (“aging out”) or nearing emancipation from foster care (Courtney, Piliavan, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; English, Kouidou-Giles, & Plocke, 1994; Katz & Courtney, 2015; Pecora et al., 2005). These youth demonstrate poorer educational outcomes than the general population with lower rates of high school graduation and decreased likelihood of obtaining secondary education (Courtney et al., 2004). They are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system than their non-foster care peers

(Brandford & English, 2004; Pecora et al., 2005). They exhibit higher rates of mental health concerns, are less likely to have medical insurance (Pecora et al., 2005), and are more likely to need mental health services (Leslie et al., 2000) than the general population. Youth who exit foster care are also at increased risk of homelessness, with studies indicating that 25-39% of youth from foster care had experienced homelessness or sleeping on someone's couch after leaving care (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010a; Pecora et al., 2005). Further, a majority of youth exiting care struggle with finding and maintaining gainful employment, with nearly half reporting no earnings and majority reporting earnings within poverty range (Naccarato, Brophy, & Courtney, 2010). Research has also shown that, while the majority of the youth feel like they are ready for independent living, their caregivers are less likely to think so (English et al., 1994).

The federal government has recognized the need to support youth transitioning out of care. With the addition of the Independent Living Initiative, section 477 to title IV-E of the Social Security Act (Public Law 99-272), states are authorized to use funds to assist older youth in transitioning to independent living. These independent living services may include education services to help facilitate high school graduation, GED or vocational training, daily living skills, individual counseling, or other services designed to improve their transition. The type, frequency, and quality of independent living services youth receive vary significantly by state, with the most common types including skill teaching of money management, job readiness, and nutrition (United States General Accounting Office (USGAO), 1999). In one study of foster care alumni, the majority of youth reported some independent living services. The most commonly reported service was decision-making and problem-solving skills training at 89%, while the least common were legal skills (60%) and parenting skills (61% reporting receiving this training; Courtney et al., 2001).

The effectiveness of independent living services is still largely unknown (Montgomery, Donkoh & Underhill, 2006; USGAO, 1999). In a study of foster care alumni, approximately one third of youth did not feel prepared to live independently at 18 when they left the system despite having received multiple independent living services (Courtney et al., 2001). Specific to college preparedness, another study found no difference in foster youth who had received independent living services compared to those who did not in their perception of preparedness for college. The majority in both groups did not feel prepared for college (Lemon, Hines, & Merdinger, 2005). Youth who received independent living services report more concrete skills training related to opening a bank account, finding a job, budgeting money, and finding a place to live, and overall felt that they were more prepared for independent living than those who did not receive services (Lemon et al., 2005). A comprehensive review of independent living programs showed that they may have a protective effect for youth exiting care, but the studies lacked a robust methodology that would make them generalizable (Montgomery et al., 2006). In recent years, efforts have been underway to evaluate these independent living programs and identify ones that show promise for positive outcomes for youth. One program showed that youth were almost twice as likely to complete high school if they received independent living services (Pecora, 2012). A series of issue briefs from the Urban Institute illustrate promising practices that have shown positive outcomes of independent living services focused on education (Dworsky, Smithgall, & Courtney, 2014), financial literacy (Edelstein & Lowenstein, 2014a), and employment (Edelstein & Lowenstein 2014b). Overall these programs yield some positive outcomes for youth. Their effectiveness may depend on a variety of variables.

Research that identifies when youth are most effective at transitioning to adulthood has shown several consistent factors that support success. Placement stability seems to be a large

predictor of successful transitions, with youth who have multiple placement moves achieving poorer outcomes (Reilly, 2003; Scannapieco, Smith, & Blakeney-Strong, 2016). Youth who had ongoing academic and tangible support had better academic success (Pecora, 2012). Youth who were older while receiving independent living services showed better education and employment outcomes (Scannapieco, et al., 2016) as well as youth who were enrolled in programs for longer periods of time (Barnow et al., 2013). As youth seem to do better with ongoing supports and services, it is important to consider that extending services and foster care beyond 18 may be beneficial.

The most prominent study on youth in extended foster care (to 21) is the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (Midwest study). This longitudinal study follows a cohort of foster youth exiting care in three states through five waves of data collection. The study found some relationships to extended foster care. In comparing youth in Illinois (which has extended foster care) to youth in Iowa or Wisconsin (who typically discharge at 18), the foster youth in Illinois were more likely to have completed a year of college (Dworksy & Courtney, 2010b). In fact, youth in a state where foster care extends to 21 were almost four times more likely to have ever attended college (Courtney, Dworksy, and Pollock, 2007). However, these findings did not extend to an increased likelihood of completing a two or four-year degree. In a more robust analysis of the same data, it was found that each year that youth remained in care was related to increased likelihood of achieving the next level of education attainment, (e.g., graduating high school, entering college; Courtney & Hook, 2016). The findings related to homelessness and employment do not show the same relationships over time. Initially, youth from the states that do not extend their care to 21 were nearly three times as likely to be homeless. However, by age 23 or 24, youth were equally likely to have experienced

homelessness regardless of extended foster care (Dworksy & Pollock, 2010a). Employment status also showed no differences in the state with extended foster care, although youth with a high school diploma or GED were twice as likely to be employed (Hook & Courtney, 2010). This may indicate that extended foster care indirectly affects employment by increasing the likelihood of high school graduation or GED attainment. The length of time a youth has access to support and services may play an important role. Youth who entered into transition services at or after age 17 and who stayed longer in the program had the best educational and employment results (Barnow et al., 2013). These findings suggest that allowing youth to remain in care and providing ongoing services may be helpful in closing the gap between foster youth emancipating from foster care and their peers in the general population.

With the passing of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, often referred to as the “Fostering Connections Act”, which amended Title IV-E, states can extend the age of eligibility for foster care from age 18 to 21. As a result, states can now claim federal reimbursement for costs that result from Title IV-E eligible foster care placement and services for such youth. Although states are not required to extend foster care under the new provisions of the Fostering Connections Act, some states, including Maryland, have and have begun to examine what practice looks like for the courts working with older youth in efforts to ensure they have the services and supports needed to successfully transition to adulthood.

The data reported above suggest that extending foster care may be beneficial in some domains. However, the Midwest study also illustrated variation in outcomes even within states that extend foster care (Dworksy & Courtney, 2010a), suggesting that extension of time in care alone may be insufficient to assist foster youth’s successful emancipation. Courts play an important role in overseeing cases of older foster youth during this formative developmental



stage. Courts can support the creation and maintenance of positive environmental conditions such as presence of a parent or guardian, prosocial peers, and participation in extracurricular, educational, and employment activities. Additionally, courts can promote conversation with the youth on key life skills and understanding the importance of independent living needs and, through its supervisory role, help to ensure that youth receive necessary services.

### **Prince George's County's Emancipation Checklist**

Prince George's (PG) County, Maryland has been a Model Court since 2010 (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, n.d.). As a Model Court, PG works with the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) to implement best practices that could improve dependency court practice and thereby improve outcomes for children and families (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, n.d.). The PG County Model Court set five goals.<sup>1</sup> One of these was “[t]o achieve better outcomes for youth with APPLA (Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement) Plans and who may be emancipating out of the system.” More specifically, PG sought to ensure that APPLA youth would have a “meaningful, implementable, individualized” transition plan (Stewart-Jones, Fonville, & Boggess-de Bruin, 2015), which should include housing, employment, training, education, survival documents, and a support system. To this end, PG County Model Court began using of the Emancipation Checklist (EC) in 2013. Prior research has demonstrated that use of a checklist (or benchcard) with key topics helps guide practice by providing a reference to relevant laws and discussion points as well as providing effective due process and opportunities for party engagement (Russell & Summers, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> These quotes are from the PG County Model Court team's presentation to stakeholders at the 2015 PG County Annual Foster Youth Symposium.

The EC is designed to be used in court when the youth is in the process of emancipating out of care to provide guidance and accountability for all stakeholders, and to ensure that youth have a voice in making plans to better prepare them for successful emancipation. A committee of the Prince George's County Model Court team, including the lead judge, a magistrate, agency representatives, CASAs, and attorneys created a draft EC based on their understanding of unmet needs of youth aging out of foster care. They solicited and incorporated feedback from the larger model court team. The EC asks 12 yes or no questions about the youth, referred to as stability indicators, including whether the youth has housing, employment, medical insurance, permanent adult connections, connections to desired community activities, all identifying documents (e.g., social security card, driver's license), resolution of all delinquency cases, a bank account, completed a credit score check, whether the youth attended educational/vocational programming and graduated or received a GED, and whether the youth could identify their core values (e.g., things that were important to them). There were no written guidelines for implementation, although the Model Court team requested that judicial decisionmakers use the checklist at all in-person hearings with APPLA youth 18 and over (personal communication, Magistrate Althea Stewart-Jones). The Court directs the PG County Department of Social Services (DSS) to complete the EC and attach to the court report or address EC items in its court report as the youth approaches age 18. Questions regarding the checklist items are often addressed in the CASA reports. If the youth is present, s/he is provided a copy of the EC checklist and participates in the court's review; ideally the youth reviews the CS with his/her worker, attorney, or CASA prior to the hearing. When youth are not present, the Court reviews the checklist with the other parties. A new EC is completed and filed for each hearing until emancipation; hearings are required at least every 6 months for the duration of care. While youth do not come to court once they turn 21, the

Court conducts a paper review hearing to close out the case (i.e., no one physically present, just review of documents). DSS includes a completed EC with its final court report to be submitted no less than 10 days prior to the final paper review hearing. The Court inquires, usually via e-mail to the worker and legal counsel, about the pending information (such as a move to housing up the youth's 21st birthday or a pending SSI application). Upon completing the final order, the Court completes a final EC.

### **Study Overview**

The PG County Court stakeholders were interested in learning more about the outcomes for youth post implementation of the EC. They compiled court data on youth exiting care following implementation of the EC for a two-year period. The current study utilizes secondary analysis of available court data on youth exiting from foster care prior to and following the implementation of the EC into practice. In addition, the study examines supplemental information gained from discussion groups to add context to the findings. The study is exploratory in nature, and thus does not include hypotheses. However, we proposed several research questions, including:

1. What percentage of youth attained the 12 court-chosen stability indicators when exiting foster care?
2. Is there a difference in the number of stability indicators a youth possesses when exiting care after implementation of the EC?
3. Are there gender or age differences in the number of stability indicators a youth possesses when exiting foster care?
4. Does the number of hearings a youth attends relate to the number of stability indicators a youth possesses when exiting foster care?

5. What challenges exist for youth exiting care in ensuring their housing, employment, education, and mental health needs are sufficiently met?

### **Method**

Data for this study were comprised of the ECs compiled by the court for recently closed cases. The EC Checklist sample included ECs from all cases that closed between January 2013 and December 2014. In addition, court professionals examined all APPLA cases for older youth (aged 18-21) that closed in the 18 months prior to use of the EC (July 1, 2010 – December 31, 2011) to create a comparison sample. In these cases, as there was no checklist used, court professionals reviewed all the social work and court documents in the case files to determine whether the youth had the stability indicators on the checklist. These cases are considered a “baseline” sample prior to use of the checklist. It should be noted that the data collected may not accurately reflect the youth’s state at the time. For example, while many of the factors (e.g., education, employment, homelessness) are reported to court, factors such as being able to articulate values may not be captured in prior court documents. This may result in underestimation of the number of stability indicators a youth had.

Additional data, such as race and gender, were collected through a review of case files and available data in the court case management system for the EC group. The final baseline and EC dataset included case number, gender, race, judicial officer overseeing the case, age at entry into foster care, exit from foster care date, age at exit, number of hearings the youth attended, and a list of stability indicators drawn from the checklist. The stability indicators included 12 yes/no checklist items as described above. The final dataset was completed by the court and provided to the researchers for secondary analyses. Because the data were collected by the court and submitted to researchers, it was impossible to check code the reliability of the data (see

limitations section for further information). The court was interested in understanding the effectiveness of the checklist and any additional data that could be provided.

Quantitative administrative data were supplemented by written summaries produced from discussion groups held by PG County Model Court in May 2015 during its Foster Youth Symposium attended by 78 people, including foster youth and legislators. Four different discussion groups focused on each one of four core stability indicators that were flagged in the EC: housing, employment, mental health, and education. Respondents were asked to list challenges that emancipating youth faced in each of these domains, identify resources that assist them, and provide their top five recommendations. Comments were rarely attributed to particular stakeholders or groups but were provided in an aggregated list. Notes from the focus groups were also provided to the researchers. We conducted a thematic analysis of the written synopses of all discussion groups to look for patterns that might to supplement our quantitative findings (Maxwell, 2012).

## **Results**

The final quantitative dataset consisted of a baseline sample of 46 youth and a post-emancipation checklist sample of 127 youth. Of the emancipation checklist sample, 65.3% identified as African American, .6% as Bi-racial, 3.5% as Caucasian, and 4.0% as Unknown; race data were not available for the remainder of the sample. The checklist sample included 54% males and 46% females. Race and gender data were not provided for the baseline sample. The age of entry into the foster system ranged from 1 to 17 years old,  $M = 14.55$ ,  $SD = 2.91$ . The age of exit from the foster system ranged from 0 to 21 years old,  $M = 20.18$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ .

### **Quantitative Analysis of Pre and Post Intervention Data**

A series of chi-square tests were used to compare baseline to post-checklist samples on each stability indicator and demographic factor. There was a significant difference between the age when the post-emancipation checklist sample exited foster care ( $M = 20.38$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) and when the baseline sample did ( $M = 19.63$ ,  $SD = 3.13$ ),  $t(171) = -2.34$ ,  $p = 0.02$ . No other differences existed between the pre and post samples.

We examined the overall number of stability indicators, calculated as percentage of yeses out of the total number of potential yeses from 11 of the 12 stability indicators (range of 0 to 1.0; core values was not included because it could not be examined in the pre sample). Overall there was no significant difference of stability indicators between the post-emancipation checklist sample ( $M = .64$ ,  $SD = 0.26$ ) and the baseline sample ( $M = 0.57$ ,  $SD = 0.24$ ),  $t(170) = -1.40$ ,  $p = 0.16$ . However, there are differences on specific topics. A series of chi-square tests were used to examine whether there were differences documented for youth in the baseline sample compared to the EC sample on for each yes or no question. The chi-square goodness of fit test was significant for currently attending an educational or vocational program, ( $\chi^2(2) = 8.51$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ), possession of a GED or high school diploma, ( $\chi^2(4) = 110.18$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), currently having all identifying documents, ( $\chi^2(1) = 61.99$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), having all criminal or delinquency cases, if any, resolved, ( $\chi^2(1) = 5.38$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ), having a bank account, ( $\chi^2(1) = 23.86$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and completing a credit score, ( $\chi^2(1) = 21.49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These series of chi-square tests indicate that youth who received the emancipation checklist and those who did not had differences in percentage of stability indicators. Youth who received the EC had an increased percentage of having all identifying documents, having a bank account, and completing a credit score check. In the samples compared, the baseline sample had more youth with a GED or high school diploma, had more youth involved in an educational or vocational program and had more youth who had

successfully resolved their delinquency or criminal cases in comparison to the post-checklist sample (see Table 1).

Table 1.

*Stability indicator percentage in baseline and post EC samples.*

<b>Stability Indicator</b>	<b>Percentage of Yes</b>		$\chi^2$	<b>P value</b>
	<b>Baseline</b>	<b>Post-Checklist</b>		
Adequate housing	89%	86%	0.83	0.66
Employment or other income	48%	47%	0.77	0.68
Educational or vocational program	66%	40%	8.51*	0.01
GED or high school diploma	73%	56%	110.18*	0.00
Medical insurance	88%	93%	0.97	0.33
Permanent family or adult connection	91%	98%	3.52*	0.06
Connected to community activities	61%	60%	0.02	0.88
Have all identifying documents	33%	92%	61.99*	0.00
All criminal/delinquency cases resolved	91%	74%	5.38*	0.02
Have bank account	16%	59%	23.86*	0.00
Complete credit score check	14%	54%	21.49*	0.00

Can identify core values <sup>+</sup>	--	95%
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*Note.* \* indicates  $p < .10$ . + indicates data not available in the baseline sample.

An additional set of chi squares examined gender differences in stability indicators. Only one gender difference emerged. Females (89%) were more likely than males (61%) to have resolved all delinquency or criminal cases ( $\chi^2(1) = 11.1, p = 0.001, \phi = .32$ ).

A multiple regression analysis was run to predict the percentage of stability indicators from the number of hearings attended, gender, and age at exit from foster care. These variables significantly predicted percentage of stability indicators,  $F(3, 110) = 11.07, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.23$ .

Both age at exit from foster care,  $\beta = 0.26, t(113) = 2.40, p = .02$ , and hearings attended,  $\beta = 0.26, t(113) = 2.43, p = .02$ , were statistically significant predictors of the total percentage of indicators. Gender was not related to indicators. These results suggest that as the age at exit and hearings attended increase, the percentage of stability indicators also increases. These variables were significantly correlated  $r = .41, p < .001$ , making it challenging to tease apart their independent effects on stability indicators.

### **Qualitative Analysis of Discussion Group Data.**

Analysis of qualitative data from the discussion groups yielded three themes related to use of the EC: lack of detail elicited in the EC; a mismatch between EC items and programming designed to address them; and a lack of recourse upon discovering a concern raised during use of the EC. These shed some light that might help explain why the EC seemed to improve some stability indicators and not others. They also suggest what further steps might be taken in order to maximize the EC's potential to help stakeholders work toward better outcomes for older foster youth.



**Lack of detail elicited in the EC.** The brief, close-ended EC questions ask judicial decision-makers to note attainment of particular goals, but largely ignore processes and details related to each. In some cases, such as whether or not an emancipating youth has a driver's license, this may be sufficient. But more complicated needs, such as housing or employment training, may require elicitation of more detailed information and supervision. For example, the housing, mental health, and education discussion groups noted the need for stakeholders to be better trained in order to adequately meet the needs of emancipating youth. Examples included trauma training for mental health therapists, addressing societal prejudices against foster youth that limit housing opportunities, and the need for school counselors and foster parents to provide better advice and guidance for youth within educational settings. While the EC instructs judicial decision-makers to inquire whether or not students *have attained goals*, such as housing, it does not elicit information as to what hurdles youth face in attaining them. Lack of such information prevents the courts from trouble-shooting with youth and other stakeholders.

**Mismatch between EC items and programs designed to address them.** Lack of fit or mismatch between existing services and the needs of youth was raised in all discussion groups. For example, the checklist uses GED or High School diploma as its educational stability indicator. However, discussion groups indicated that these attainments might not translate into improved employment. Instead, the employment group sought more experiential opportunities. They called for volunteer, internship, and summer employment opportunities that would provide experience and networking opportunities while also making them more marketable. Similarly, stakeholders sought independent living opportunities before emancipation in which youth could be supervised and mentored might make them more desirable tenants and help them learn how to obtain and maintain housing more successfully. Youth and professionals also reported a

mismatch in timing of services. For example, the education discussion group indicated a need for earlier intervention in order to achieve the educational and vocational outcomes of interest. This may be because deadlines for applying for programs or starting programs may occur prior to the youth's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, making it challenging for the youth to enter programs if they do not receive timely assistance from social services.

**No recourse.** Finally, discussion groups suggest that for some of the goals that the PG County Model Court believes are crucial for successful emancipation, there is an insufficient array of programs to which youth can be referred in order to meet many of these goals fully. For example, underlying difficulties regarding housing such as “can’t afford market rate” and “lack of landlords willing to rent to young people, bias in housing communities” are factors beyond the control of youth, DSS, and the courts. Concerns regarding employment also implicated long term, structural problems, such as the “gap between skills and available jobs.” Due to the need for more systemic reform indicated by these comments, use of the EC as a motivator for youth and the department may be insufficient.

### **Discussion**

The study was not designed to be able to determine whether the implementation of the EC caused changes in stability indicators for youth. However, the results provide some insight into current outcomes and needs. The EC was implemented in PG County in hopes of increasing the number of stability indicators that youth have when they exit from foster care in hopes of improving their outcomes. Data indicate that some stability factors have increased since the baseline, including permanent family connections, the youth having all identifying documents, a bank account and a credit score, and the youth being able to identify their core values. On the other hand, having resolved all criminal cases, being involved in educational or vocational

programming, and having graduated from high school or obtaining a GED were all lower in the post-EC sample than at baseline.

It is unclear why there might be a difference in the baseline and checklist sample regarding having resolved all criminal cases. However, the contextual findings from the focus groups may shed some light on the education finding. It appears that youth feel that there may not be enough of the right type of opportunities to meet their educational and vocational needs and prepare them for their future. This can be frustrating for youth and may increase the number who do not have those services in place when they exit care. The need for earlier planning was raised in three of the four domains: housing, employment, and education. This theme may provide some insights on the lack of improvement in housing and employment stability indicators. Comments suggest that certain goals, such as “need to build credit,” should be addressed earlier in the process. These are processes that often involve agencies or services that are outside of the child welfare services and courts which need to be accessed and managed. Most also involve bureaucratic and documentary requirements that take time to satisfy.

In addition to the challenges identified in the discussion groups, research on adolescent brain development may offer explanations for why youth are less successful educational and vocational training. Adolescent brain development continues until well into the twenties. Most youth have parents or other support systems that help them until they are able to live independently. Youth in foster care often lack these supports. As the brain is not fully developed in the areas of self-regulation and rewards (Steinberg, 2013), it may be that youth do not fully understand the need for educational and vocational training which delay gratification for a time in the future. Employment or other ventures may yield more immediate rewards, making education less important as an immediate goal. Discussion group findings suggest that larger

structural, such as poverty and lack of resources, may also influence youth behaviors and outcomes. Foster youth may also need the money that employment provides, as their financial situations even with the partial economic support that they receive often remain precarious (George, Balivar, Joo Lee, Needell, Brookhart & Jackman, 2002; Hook & Courtney, 2010b). Youth who might otherwise want to take advantage of vocational and educational opportunities may be unable to sustain these commitments which incur expenses and coupled with loss of income due to reduced work hours.

Results from this exploratory study also found predictors of increased stability indicators for youth. Both the number of hearings attended and the age at exit from foster care significantly predicted percentage of stability indicators the youth had at exit. Youth who stayed in care longer and attended more of their hearings also had a higher percentage of stability indicators when they exited care. This is somewhat intuitive in the sense that the longer the youth stays in care, the more stability they might acquire. This could be because as youth mature they have more time to develop these opportunities; longer stays may also provide opportunities for support in a variety of domains, including housing, financial, and health-related. Findings suggests that staying in foster care longer can lead to more positive outcomes (as measured by increased stability indicators) for youth. This is an important distinction as policy makers consider the implications of foster care to 21 and whether to support or encourage extended foster care in their states. These preliminary findings suggest a need to increase foster care and encourage and support youth participation up to age 21.

It may also be that youth who participate in their hearings can increase attention to the stability indicators that are not present, thereby enlisting the problem-solving efforts of systems professionals to help the youth get the services they need to achieve desired outcomes. Youth can

provide additional information to the court and systems professionals about their concerns and the challenges they face in achieving education, employment and other outcomes. Without their participation, other stakeholders may not fully understand the barriers faced by youth. This supports the need to encourage foster youth to attend their court hearings and be active participants in their cases in order to achieve the best outcomes.

Relatedly, the aggregated knowledge and information provided by the checklists to courts and other stakeholders may be used to identify trends. Some of these might be common problems that the courts and other stakeholders can make efforts to mitigate or solve, such as by requiring a review of the EC prior to the hearing or creating partnerships with vocational programs. In other cases, such as housing and employment, this aggregated knowledge implicates systemic problems that may be beyond the scope of judicial authority. In such cases, courts can inform policymakers, agencies, and schools of insufficiencies and bureaucratic hurdles. Indeed, this was suggested by the housing discussion group which recommended that the courts “present findings to Prince George’s Delegation of the General Assembly [Maryland’s legislative body] at beginning of next session.”

### **Limitations**

The current study had several limitations. First and foremost, while it would be useful for the court to know the effectiveness of a checklist at improving outcomes for older youth, the study was not designed to determine causal links. It is impossible to determine with the study design whether the EC had any effect on improving outcomes. The data for this study were also limited in several ways. Although it did include all the eligible youth with APPLA goals who were 18 to 21 in the county, the sample size was still really small. The data from the baseline sample were captured by coders retroactively looking through court documents to determine

whether the youth had or did not these specific factors. While some of that information is likely available in social work reports and court orders, it may not be consistently in the files. For example, it was impossible from files to determine whether youth could articulate their core values in the baseline sample. It may be that the baseline data under represents how many stability indicators the youth actually had at exit from care. Untrained coders collected the data in an Excel document from the court's case management system and provided it to the researchers for analysis. As such, it is impossible to determine the quality and accuracy of the data. In addition, only limited items were collected, and other factors that may be of interest (e.g., more information about the youth such as mental health, substance abuse, allegations against family) were not available. These factors may have played an important role in predicting stability indicators.

A third limitation of the study was that it was impossible to determine the consistency of how the EC was implemented in practice. Court stakeholders who provided the data to researchers explained how the EC checklist was used in practice (theoretically), however, no fidelity measures were conducted to determine if every caseworker and every judge used the EC checklist in the same way. It was largely unclear to what extent the judges and other systems stakeholders were using the tool and whether it was being utilized in the most efficient and effective way to meet the youth's needs. Future research should explore how checklists such as this are integrated into practice, perceptions of their usefulness, and how use may affect outcomes on these cases.

A final consideration is that the data were limited to when the youth were in foster care. It is unclear how the stability indicators may be related to future success. For example, having housing while in foster care may not mean that youth have housing within a year of release. It

would be important for future studies to correlate the stability indicators while in care with outcomes for youth after they have exited care to determine which (if any) are the best predictors of positive social, well-being, and economic success of youth.

### **Conclusion**

This exploratory study examined data related to the use of an emancipation checklist for youth aged 18-21 who were in foster care past age 18. The primarily descriptive findings revealed positive increases in some stability indicators compared to the baseline (before implementation of the checklist). However, others showed a reduction. From this, it cannot be determined how successful the tool is achieving positive outcomes. Further research should explore the topic in more depth to determine how the checklist is integrated into practice, how it is perceived and its efficacy in improving outcomes. As the research on independent living services is severely limited (e.g., Montgomery, Donkoh & Underhill, 2006) and the court's oversight role in ensuring youth has received even less attention, there is a real opportunity to design a more robust study that can help identify causal linkages between extending foster care and independent living services and court discussion. Future researchers could fill these gaps by conducting a randomized control trial with older youth assigning them to a checklist or no checklist condition (although this would have to be with judges not familiar with the checklist to avoid spillover effects). Future research should also focus on the content and quality of the discussion that the checklist generates within hearings and also on any additions to or modifications of independent living services that result from that discussion. Further, future research should explore case records from a more qualitative perspective, examining transition plans for information on the quality, quantity and frequency of services that may be related to improved outcomes for youth.

The study yielded additional information useful to child abuse and neglect courts. Predictive models demonstrated that increased attendance by youth at court hearings and staying in foster care longer were both predictive of having more stability indicators on exit from care. The implications from these data include the need to encourage more youth to attend and participate in their hearings in a meaningful way and a way to ensure that youth stay in foster care long enough to ensure they have the supports and services they need to be successful. Data from the discussion groups also suggest the need for earlier use of mechanisms such as the EC. They also indicated the possibility that such tools can, together with additional means of input from youth, identify broader systemic hurdles and alert stakeholders to the extent to which existing services do (or do not) meet the needs of youth. Court efforts to improve outcomes for emancipated youth such as the EC can bring youth, courts, and other stakeholders together with qualitative feedback, to suggest improvements in preparing youth for emancipation.



Respondent' name:  
 CINA Case #:  
 Emancipation date or hearing date:  
 Was the youth present? \_\_\_Y \_\_\_N

**Emancipation Checklist**

Does the youth have adequate housing?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Is the youth employed or have other income?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Is the youth currently attending an educational or vocational program?	Yes	No
Does the youth have a GED or high school diploma?	Yes	No
Does the youth have medical insurance?	Yes	No
Does the youth have permanent family and/or adult connections?	Yes	No
Is the youth connected to desired community activities?	Yes	No
Does the youth have all identifying documents, i.e. birth certificate, social security card, driver's license or state ID?	Yes	No
Are there any outstanding criminal or delinquency cases for the youth?	Yes	No
Does the youth have a bank account?	Yes	No
Did the youth complete a credit score check?	Yes	No
Can the youth identify their core values?	Yes	No

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