

Issue Brief

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Maintaining Long-Term Study Engagement with Young People Experiencing Homelessness

This brief draws on experiences from the New York City (NYC) Pathways Study, conducted between March 2022 and October 2024. The brief shares methods the study’s data collection team implemented to sustain long-term engagement with study participants—young people experiencing homelessness. The Pathways Study population is frequently under-engaged in research due to their housing instability. Although the NYC Pathways Study focuses specifically on young people experiencing homelessness, we expect that the strategies highlighted in this brief can be applied more broadly to maintain retention for long-term study participants from other under-engaged populations.

Overview of study data collection

Six months before study enrollment, staff from shelters funded by the NYC Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and drop-in centers funded by the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) identified young people who may be eligible to participate in the NYC Pathways Study. These shelters and drop-in centers, also referred to as community-based organizations (CBOs), partnered with Chapin Hall to connect young people to the study and worked with the data collection team at Mathematica to follow up with young people who chose to participate throughout the study, as described later in the brief. CBO staff completed an eligibility screener with the young people they identified at each location to determine whether they met participation requirements for the study. Eligibility criteria are outlined in Box 1. Eligible young people were then invited to enroll in the study via a baseline enrollment interview conducted in person at DHS shelters and DYCS drop-in centers over a two-week period. Of the young people screened by CBOs (n = 138), 78 percent were eligible, and 57 percent were successfully enrolled into the

NYC Pathways Study. The Ali Forney Center, a DYCD drop-in center, was competitively selected to serve as the lead CBO partner on the study (see Box 2 for additional detail on organization roles).

Box 1. Study eligibility criteria

- Ages 18 to 24
- Experiencing homelessness based on the definition offered by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development—that is, lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence
- Spent at least one night in a shelter or place not fit for human habitation (such as a public place, transit, car) in the prior three months
- Not already approved for a permanent or long-term housing solution (voucher, permanent supportive housing, transitional independent living program) or have secured or expect to secure a lease or placement within a month
- Absence of severe, untreated substance abuse or mental health symptoms based on the Behavior and Symptom Identification Scale (Eisen et al. 2006)

Source: Griffin et al. (2024).

Box 2. Terms used in this brief

In this brief, we refer to NYC Pathways Study organizations and staff who collaborated on the study as follows:

- **Study team:** Refers to Mathematica and Chapin Hall staff who collaborated on the study.
- **Data collection team:** Refers to Mathematica staff responsible for survey data collection and outreach.
- **Field staff:** Refers to data collection staff who conducted outreach in the field.
- **Community-based organizations (CBOs):** Refers to the DHS-funded shelters and DYCD-funded drop-in centers where young people were first enrolled in the study.
- **Lead CBO partner:** Refers to the DYCD-funded drop-in center, the Ali Forney Center, selected to support the study.

Its staff provided the optional youth-directed supportive services for young people enrolled in TYI and assisted in recruitment and enrollment at every site. Before starting the baseline interview, Mathematica interviewers provided young people with information about the study and their participation. They then assessed each young person’s capacity to consent using an adapted version of the MacArthur Competence Assessment Tool for Treatment, ensuring enrollees understood the study before agreeing to participate (Grisso et al. 1997). All enrollees demonstrated an understanding of the study, and none were excluded from participation based on this assessment.

The baseline interview asked a broad range of questions about their prior life experiences, housing, health, and social and emotional well-being. Upon completing the one-hour baseline interview, young people received a reloadable debit card loaded with \$50. Following enrollment, young people were invited to complete monthly surveys for the remainder of the study. These surveys are described in Table 1.

 **Study payments**

This study used two different payment types: one to distribute survey incentives and the other to distribute the larger monthly direct cash transfers associated with the TYI intervention. All young people, regardless of enrollment in TYI, were given a physical, reloadable debit card, called a ClinCard, to receive incentives for completing surveys. This ClinCard was set up and provided to young people after they completed their baseline interview enrollment. When young people completed any survey throughout the study, a payment was added to their ClinCard, typically within minutes. This method provided young people with more flexibility in how they used their incentives. Young people could use the funds each month as they earned them or save up multiple months’ incentives for larger purchases. The ClinCards could be used as a standard credit or debit cards in physical stores, for online purchases, or to withdraw cash from a bank. If young people’s cards were lost or stolen, Chapin Hall covered the cost of replacing the card (\$4.00).

Table 1. Pathways study surveys

	Frequency	Mode	Incentive	Duration	Topics covered
Baseline enrollment	Once, at the start of the study	In-person, with an interviewer	\$50	60 minutes	Prior life experiences, housing, health, and social-emotional well-being
Brief surveys	Monthly (months 1–5, 7–11, 13–23, 25–29)	Online	\$20	≤15 minutes	Housing, food security, well-being, and updated contact information
Long surveys	6, 12, 24, and 30 months	Online, phone, in-person	\$50	45 minutes	Brief survey topics plus goals, education, employment, benefits, services, finances, health, social support, and independent living preparedness

In addition to the survey incentives distributed through ClinCards, young people enrolled in TYI received their monthly direct cash transfer payments on a separate platform run by UpTogether. UpTogether is a national nonprofit that invests in people experiencing financial hardship with the aim of supporting their financial freedom. Chapin Hall chose this platform because it allows young people enrolled in TYI to access funds through a physical card, virtual wallet, or transfer funds to their personal bank account. UpTogether was also chosen because it has a long history of using cash payments to invest in an individual's strengths to build power, reinforce their autonomy, and drive their own economic and social mobility.

Strategies for sustained engagement

Alongside study incentives for survey completion, the data collection team used a variety of strategies to keep young people enrolled in the study engaged throughout the 30-month survey data collection period (see Box 3).

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Box 3. Key engagement strategies

- Keeping young people's contact information current, including chosen and legal names
 - Maintaining consistent communication, including data collection periods, and incentives
 - Providing reliable support across multiple platforms and in person
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Keeping contact information current

To keep young people engaged in the study, it was vital the data collection team had up-to-date contact information so that the team could give young people access to the monthly surveys. With all longitudinal studies, there is a concern about the potential for attrition, and these concerns are particularly relevant to this population as they are highly mobile and frequently change their contact information, such as address and phone number. To address this, the data collection team provided regular opportunities for young people to update

their phone numbers and email addresses in each monthly survey. All surveys asked young people to confirm their most recent phone number and email address. If any of this information was no longer accurate, the survey requested that the young person update these details. In addition to the surveys, young people could update their contact information with the data collection team directly by calling the project's toll-free study helpline or emailing the project inbox. Young people could also update their contact details by sharing updated information with the staff from the lead CBO partner, who then relayed it to the study data collection team.

Updating legal and chosen names

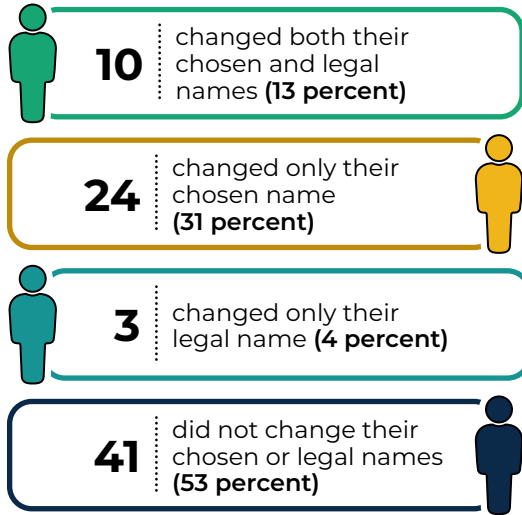
During the baseline enrollment interview, the data collection team collected young people's chosen names. These were the only names the data collection team used in outreach. To ensure the data collection team continued to use each young person's correct chosen name, young people were given the opportunity to confirm or update their chosen name in each monthly survey. If a young person provided a new name, the data collection team immediately began using that name in all communication with the young person and updated their name in all electronic systems, in line with best practices (University of California San Diego Center for AIDS Research 2022).

Many of the young people involved in this study held evolving identities, including their gender identities and chosen names. Ensuring data collection staff were using young people's chosen names was crucial in building relationships and establishing trust. Nearly half of all young people updated at least one of their names during the study (48 percent), underscoring the value of regularly confirming these names (see Box 4).

This monthly confirmation was a simple, noninvasive way for young people to provide regular updates to the data collection team and helped ensure that all communication reflected young people's most accurate identity markers.

Box 4. Almost half of all young people had a name change during the study

The importance of providing an opportunity for young people to update their name was evident over the course of the study. Of the 78 young people participating:



Note: Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.

Establishing a process to verify young people’s names decreased the potential for harm caused by using inaccurate names. The negative impacts of using incorrect names could erode trust in the study by making young people feel alienated or feel that the data collection team was invalidating their identities. Misaddressing young people could also potentially reveal their identity as a transgender or nonbinary individual in unsafe environments, increasing their risk of discrimination or violence. By establishing a process that regularly verified young people’s names, the data collection team was able to avoid these potential concerns and build a climate of respect with young people that encouraged their continued engagement.

Maintaining consistent communication

Another key component of the study engagement strategy was implementing a consistent and predictable data collection period and providing regular incentives for survey completion.

Outreach and data collection periods

The data collection periods for monthly brief surveys were three weeks long, with approximately one week between each survey to prepare for the following month’s data collection period. The long surveys had slightly longer data collection periods, up to four weeks long.

For all surveys, the data collection team sent an initial survey invitation to young people via email and text message if the young person consented to receive texts. Providing access to the survey across both contact methods helped ensure that young people could complete the survey even if they did not have access to their phone in case it was lost, stolen, or the service was suspended. Text messaging was a particularly important component of Mathematica’s outreach, with an average of 45 percent of young people who completed the survey accessing the survey via text.

In addition to this initial invitation, the data collection team sent four additional reminders via email and text message throughout the data collection period. During brief survey data collection periods staff from the lead CBO, Chapin Hall, and Mathematica conducted personalized outreach to young people who had not yet responded to the survey after the third reminder. This outreach reminded young people about the importance of completing the survey and consisted of calls, emails, and texts that included tailored information such as survey participation history, funds remaining on their ClinCard, and support addressing barriers related to completing the survey. Chapin Hall staff with lived expertise in housing instability and homelessness followed up with nonresponders receiving services as usual, and staff from the lead CBO partner followed up with young people enrolled in TYI. An example of a standard notification schedule is shown in Figure 1. The long survey data collection periods included additional phone outreach and in-person visits later in the fielding period.

Figure 1. A typical notification schedule for a brief survey

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
14	15 Survey invitation	16 Over 50% of completes	17 Over 50% of completes	18 Over 50% of completes	19 First reminder	20
21	22	23	24	25 Second reminder	26	27
28	29	30 Third reminder	31 Personalized outreach	1 Personalized outreach	2 Personalized outreach	3
4	5 Survey closes	6	7	8	9 Fourth reminder	10

For most of the study, each monthly survey invitation was sent to young people on or before the 15th of the month. In two of the first seven months of the study, the 15th of the month fell on a weekend or holiday, and the survey invitation was sent to young people the next business day. When access to the survey was delayed, young people reached out to the data collection team to ask when it would be sent. This demonstrated that young people were accustomed to receiving the surveys on the 15th and eager to complete them to receive their incentive. From the eighth survey on through the rest of the study, all survey invitations were sent out on or before the 15th of the month.

Young people’s expectations and willingness to complete the surveys were also evident in the pattern of **when** survey responses were received each month. Figure 2 shows survey response trends throughout the study, displaying the number of completes received over the course of each data collection period. The peaks in this figure indicate how many surveys were completed each month between when the initial survey invitation was sent to young people and before the first reminder notification was sent, generally a period of four to five days.

Each month, including brief and long surveys, young people submitted 45 to 71 percent of total possible completes during this period. For most surveys, 55 to 64 percent of total possible completes were submitted during this time, with 21 of the 30 months falling within this range. Across all surveys, young people completed an average of 60 percent

of total possible survey completes before the first reminder was sent.

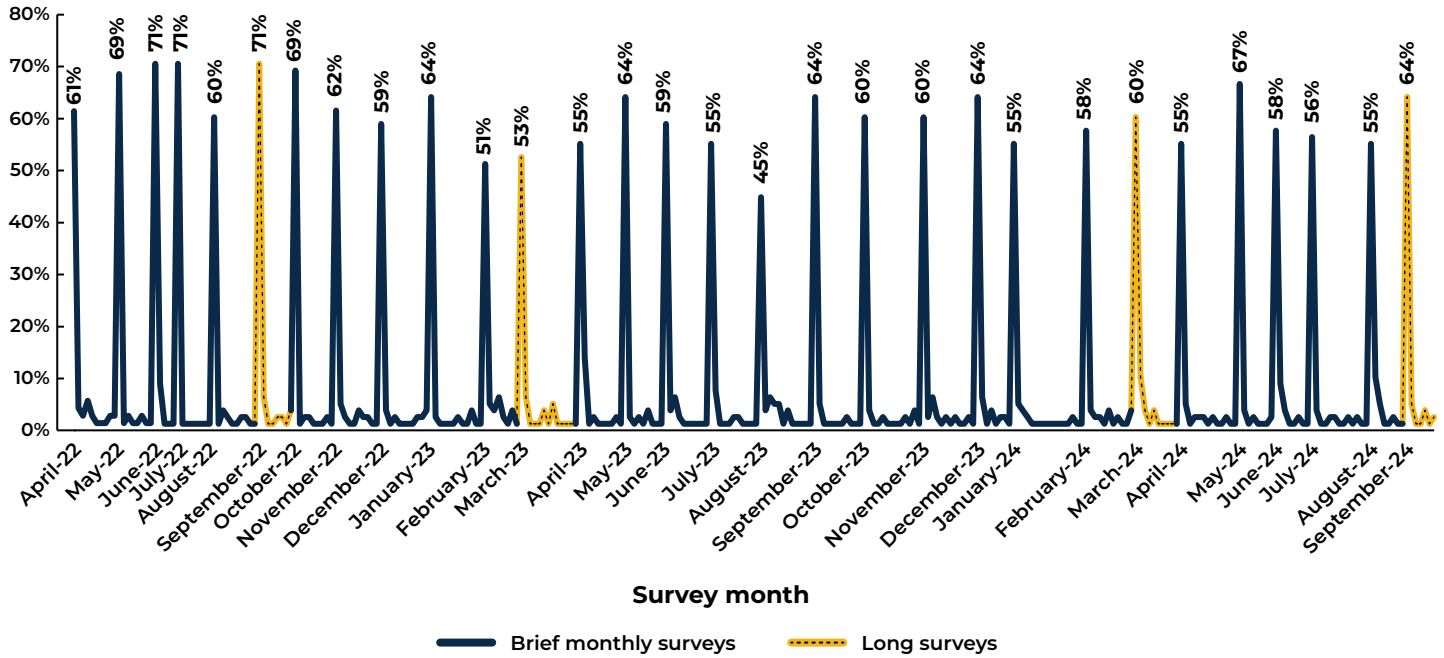
The five surveys with the highest percentages of completes during this period occurred within the first seven months of the study, suggesting that proximity to baseline enrollment may have influenced these elevated response rates. Other outlier survey months reflect the shifting availability and ability of young people to respond to the surveys based on their evolving circumstances each month. Young people shared that their responses were sometimes delayed due to having their belongings stolen, starting new jobs or educational programs, or moving. These situations reflect challenges that may be more prevalent among this population, contributing to greater variability in the immediate response rate month to month.

Regular incentives



In addition to regular outreach, the study team provided regular incentives to young people. As noted, all young people received \$20 after completing each brief survey and \$50 after completing each long survey. These funds were added to their ClinCard. These funds were typically accessible within minutes of completing the survey, which allowed young people to plan purchases around their survey completion. Outreach from young people indicated that the survey incentives were a vital component of the study to them, and they counted on receiving the funds each month to purchase necessities like food, diapers, pet supplies, and toiletries.

Figure 2. Survey responses over monthly data collection periods



Note: The figure's vertical axis represents the percentage of surveys completed during each monthly data collection period, as indicated on the horizontal axis. At the start of each new monthly data collection period, the percentage is reset to zero.



Providing reliable support across multiple platforms and in-person outreach

The data collection team built rapport and trust with young people by providing reliable support for survey- and incentive-related issues. Because the study team provided monthly incentives through ClinCard, Mathematica staff needed to be available to help with issues related to the cards, including replacing lost or stolen cards, failed transactions, and card deactivation due to fraud controls. Card replacements were particularly common, as retaining a physical card was often challenging due to the instability young people faced while experiencing homelessness.

Remote support



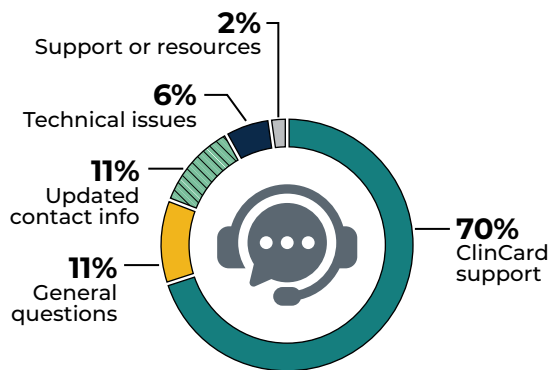
The data collection team provided ongoing support through a dedicated study telephone helpline, email, and text messaging. Offering multiple ways of contacting the data collection team helped ensure that young people would be able to reach staff, regardless of their access to a cell phone

or computer. This flexibility was important because young people's access to different contact methods changed or became limited throughout the study. Some young people temporarily or permanently lost access to their email addresses or had their phone service suspended, which hindered how they could communicate with the data collection team.

Young people's ability to reach out for support was also sometimes restricted due to how they accessed different forms of communication. Young people frequently used alternatives to traditional telephone services, such as Google Voice and TextNow. These applications could be used on a computer or phone and only required Wi-Fi and not an active phone plan. However, some young people primarily accessed the internet through libraries or drop-in centers and could only reliably connect with the data collection team when visiting these locations. Because visits to these locations could be intermittent and brief, providing a text messaging communication option was crucial for young people who required more flexible support.

The variety of support channels allowed young people to contact the data collection team at any time as their schedule allowed. The telephone helpline was staffed during regular business hours and received voicemails after hours. All voicemails, text messages, and emails were responded to within one business day. Seventy percent of all telephone helpline calls were related to the survey incentive payment cards (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Telephone helpline calls, by type (n = 208)



The data collection team established credibility with young people by serving as an intermediary between them and the ClinCard servicer, stepping in to resolve issues directly with the servicer whenever possible. This often helped de-escalate existing challenges young people may have had with receiving payments or accessing their account. The data collection team also worked to identify a solution to the challenge they were facing and made it a priority to quickly acknowledge and resolve requests.

One common request from young people was to replace a lost or stolen ClinCard. Fifty-three percent of young people replaced their ClinCard for this reason over the course of the study. If young people were unable to physically pick up a replacement card at the lead CBO partner or if they preferred to have a replacement card delivered to them, the data collection team shipped a new card to them overnight.

Responding to card issues quickly was particularly important for engagement, as the cards were required to access survey incentive payments. Because of this, some young people would not complete the survey until they had an active card from which to receive their incentive payment. When cards were swiftly replaced and receipt was confirmed, young people typically completed the current month’s survey and continued to submit surveys in the following months. Although less common (2 percent of all helpline calls), young people occasionally reached out to the data collection team with requests for additional support or resources beyond the survey, such as assistance securing housing or applying for housing vouchers. The data collection team connected these young people to the lead CBO partner, whose staff stepped in to provide additional support. By addressing these concerns efficiently, the team both resolved immediate issues and bolstered young people’s confidence and trust, leading to sustained engagement over time.

The helpline also facilitated rapport building between data collection team members and young people. A key component of the helpline was offering empathetic, respectful, and professional help to young people while maintaining a friendly and personable demeanor. This approach helped young people feel more comfortable reaching out to the data collection team for assistance, as they knew they would receive efficient, positive, and nonjudgmental support from the team. Feedback from young people in the study indicated that they felt that the data collection team was responsive to their requests and needs throughout the study. In their open-ended survey responses and through email, phone, and text communication, young people expressed their appreciation for the data collection team’s support with survey access, incentive issues, and connection to resources and service providers, such as the lead CBO partner.

“ I love how ya help people who need it with these surveys; you guys are great on my end.

–Young person participating in surveys

Increased support during long surveys



The data collection team implemented additional multimode strategies during long surveys to increase engagement with young people (see Box 5). During each long survey, the data collection team began calling young people approximately one week after sending the survey invitations. The team made these phone calls regularly throughout the remainder of the fielding period. Approximately two weeks after sending the long survey invitations, field staff began to visit addresses provided in previous surveys to reengage young people in the surveys.

Box 5. Multimode outreach goals

Phone and field efforts for the long survey had the following aims:

- Confirm young people had received the survey invitation
- Identify and resolve issues young people had accessing or completing surveys
- Provide an opportunity for young people to complete surveys over the phone
- Remind young people about the survey closing date and incentive

Along with providing the data collection team with additional opportunities to connect with young people, field staff visited the DHS shelters and DYCD drop-in centers where young people were first enrolled into the study during field outreach. The data collection team used these visits to build new and deepen existing relationships with shelter and drop-in center staff, which improved communication with CBOs. With this enhanced communication, CBOs were better equipped to support field efforts, keeping young people engaged with the study. During later long survey field outreach efforts, field staff used in-person visits to replace ClinCards for some young people who had not been reachable through previous email, phone, and text outreach.

Benefits of strategies

These strategies resulted in sustained long-term engagement with young people, leading to consistent high response rates, high-quality data, and positive impacts on young people (see Box 6).

Box 6. Benefits of strategies

- High response rates
- High-quality data
- Positive impacts on young people
- Balanced data collection costs
- Reengagement through multimode outreach

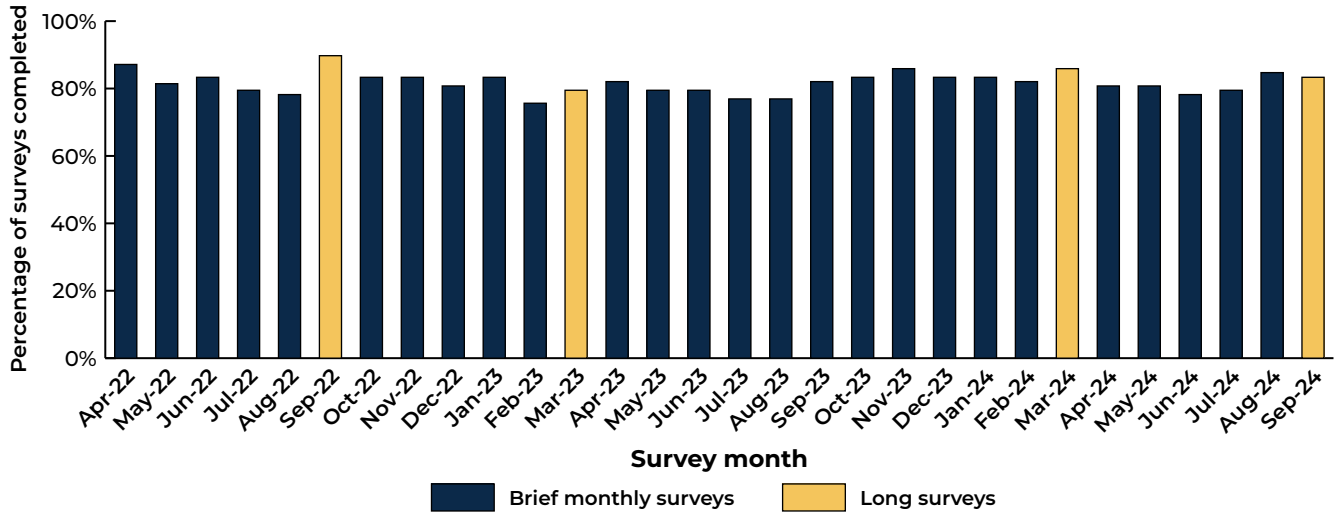


High response rates

The brief monthly and long surveys achieved consistently high response rates, illustrating the effectiveness of the engagement strategies. Throughout the data collection period, monthly survey response rates were consistently high, ranging from 76 percent to 90 percent each month (Figure 4). The overall response rate across all surveys was 82 percent, with a 72 percent response rate for young people receiving services as usual from NYC agencies and a 93 percent response rate for young people enrolled in TYI. Seventy-two percent of young people missed fewer than five surveys throughout the course of the study. Nonresponders were typically the same young people from month-to-month, with 15 percent of young people missing 15 or more surveys. Some nonresponders receiving services as usual had extenuating circumstances that prevented their ability to complete, such as a long period of incarceration.

These differences are likely in part due to the fact that young people receiving services as usual are more likely to experience negative outcomes associated with housing instability such as being incarcerated or staying in a mental health facility. Response rates were also consistent across survey types, with an average response rate of 85 percent across long surveys and 81 percent across brief surveys.

Figure 4. Survey response rates



High-quality data

Throughout the study, survey data quality was high. Overall, young people provided complete survey responses with low rates of missingness across survey items. They also answered questions consistently and logically and did not “straight-line” through the survey, that is, provide the same response to all questions. For example, young people’s responses to a multiple-choice question that asked them to select a location that described where they had most recently been living aligned with a later question that asked them to provide more detailed information on where they had slept for each of the past 14 nights.

Young people also provided high-quality responses to open-ended questions introduced in long surveys. These questions asked young people to reflect on their participation in the study, including how direct cash payments supported their housing and other goals, their experience with the monthly surveys, services provided by NYC CBOs, their well-being and housing journey throughout the study, and their current housing situation. Young people’s reflections on the study indicated that they felt the surveys were going well and made sense and that the

payments and TYI services were helpful. Reflections on other components of the study and their own personal development were thoughtful and detailed and provided meaningful context on how their lives developed over the course of the study.



A lot of times the \$20 incentives a month would help me grab a few items like a big bag of rice, a carton of eggs and cereal, or bread to hold me over for the month to have a few items like I listed in the fridge for food in the house.

–Young person participating in surveys



Positive impacts on young people

Open-ended survey responses and communication through email, phone, and text communication reflected that staying engaged in the study benefited the young people beyond the incentives provided for survey completion each month. Surveys provided a space for young people to share their perspectives and lived expertise to help inform and improve future policies and research.



[The study] makes me feel a little important when I feel bad.

—Young person participating in surveys

Young people appreciated the opportunity to make their voices heard and provide insights to improve experiences for others in the future. In completing the survey, young people shared in-depth responses to survey questions asking them to reflect on the study and service delivery structure. They offered suggestions for improving policies that affect young people experiencing homelessness, such as expanding housing navigation services to “offer more diverse options [outside of] government-sourced rental listings” and creating “more housing programs for adults above 24 [years old].”

Young people also expressed that the survey encouraged them to reflect on their personal development and journey throughout the study. One young person shared, “I love this study; it makes me think about my growth every month.”



You guys have been great, thank you for all the help!

—Young person participating in surveys



Balanced data collection costs

The strategies used to keep young people consistently engaged with the study over time shifted the expected costs of data collection. Providing regular support to young people during the monthly surveys led to higher costs associated with the web-only monthly surveys than initially expected. However, because most young people remained engaged with the study between the long surveys, costs associated with the multimode long surveys were lower than expected, balancing out the higher brief survey costs. This also meant that the data collection team maintained a regular, sustained effort throughout the study, as opposed to decreased work during brief survey months followed by significant increases in work during long surveys.

Maintaining a consistent level of work over the course of the study allowed the data collection team to develop routines that improved efficiency and kept costs stable. More frequent, less elaborate outreach that kept young people engaged also helped control costs. Reconnecting with young people after missing only one or two surveys, when the data collection team likely still had accurate contact information, required less time and resources compared to the level of effort needed to locate and reengage young people who had not participated in the study for several months.

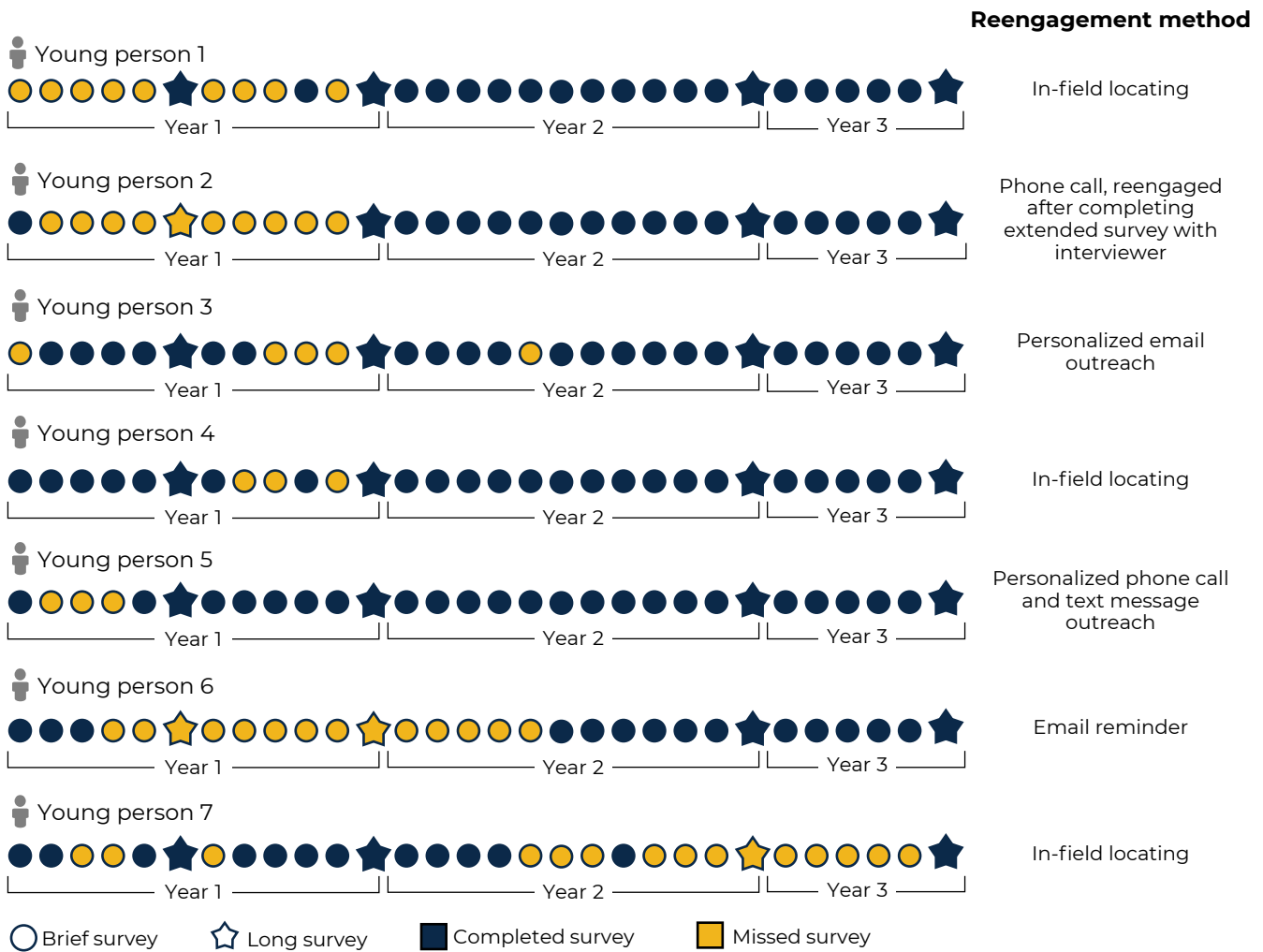


Reengagement through multimode outreach

The expanded multimode outreach implemented during long surveys successfully reconnected the data collection team with young people who had become disengaged from the study. This enhanced outreach led to an additional 12 to 15 percent of survey completions that could be directly attributed to the phone and field efforts conducted during the long survey periods. This contributed to the six-month and 24-month multimode long surveys having the highest response rates of all surveys conducted throughout the study, 90 percent and 86 percent, respectively.

During the first long survey field effort six months into data collection, the data collection team, with support from CBO staff, reconnected with two young people who had disengaged from the study and had not responded to any surveys since their baseline enrollment interview. Throughout the remaining long surveys, phone and field efforts continued to reengage young people. During the 12-month survey, these additional efforts reengaged four young people, two of whom had missed nine or more of the previous 11 surveys (young people 1 and 2 in Figure 5 and two of whom had missed three of the previous four surveys (young people 3 and 4 in Figure 5). After completing the 12-month survey, all four of these young people completely reengaged with the study, with three young people responding to all future surveys and one young person missing only a single survey for the remainder of the study.

Figure 5. Study reengagement



Note: The information in Figure 3 reflects real survey participation and reengagement of young people in the NYC Pathways Study.

Conclusion

The NYC Pathways Study was able to sustain long-term engagement with young people experiencing homelessness and housing instability by regularly confirming contact information, communicating consistently, providing monthly incentives, and providing reliable multimode support. Using these strategies, the data collection team fostered meaningful relationships with young people and ensured they did not disconnect from the study due to challenges associated with the surveys or incentive payments. These approaches led to high response rates and data quality, positive

experiences for young people enrolled in the study, steady study costs, and reconnection with young people who had disengaged from the study.

The success of these strategies provides valuable insights for future longitudinal studies that include under-engaged populations, especially those experiencing instability, that may present additional challenges to retention. The study highlights the importance of centering young people’s experience and being responsive to their needs throughout data collection and provides foundational concepts for future research.

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About this project

The NYC Pathways Study was developed by Chapin Hall following a comprehensive assessment of NYC's youth homelessness system (Morton et al. 2019). This assessment identified a lack of understanding of the pathways young adults were using to exit homelessness, including the services they were accessing. It also highlighted a lack of flexible, equitable, and cost-efficient interventions to support young people permanently exiting homelessness.

In response, Chapin Hall and the NYC Youth Action Board, which included young adults ages 18 to 24 with lived experiences of homelessness, co-designed the NYC Pathways Study. The study design prioritized youth agency, equity, trust, flexibility, and housing stability.

The longitudinal study enrolled 78 young people ages 18 to 24 experiencing homelessness at the time of enrollment. A subset of young people was randomly selected and invited to participate in the Trust Youth Initiative (TYI) (29 young people). The remaining 49 young people

continued to receive services as usual. Young people who chose to enroll in TYI received:

- \$29,400 in unconditional direct cash transfers (paid in \$550 increments twice per month for 24 months)
- A one-time "Enrichment Fund" payment of \$3,000 accessible at any time over the 24 months
- Optional youth-directed supportive services from an existing community-based organization

The study aims to better understand young people's pathways through and out of homelessness to build actionable evidence to help end youth homelessness and to serve as a feasibility pilot for future direct cash transfer projects.

For more information, please see [The Pathways Study & Evaluation of the Trust Youth Initiative](#) and [A Cash Plus Model for Youth Experiencing Homelessness: Making Homelessness Brief and Nonrecurring](#).