

1-page summary: Estimating National College Enrollment Rates with NYTD

Article Title Okpych, N. J. (2023). Estimating a national college enrollment rate for youth with foster care histories using the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD): Limitations of NYTD and a call to revise and relaunch. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2022.2153961>

Purpose

The launch of the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) in 2011 was a watershed moment in the history of studying older youth in foster care. For the first time, there was the prospect of generating national estimates of key policy-relevant outcomes, such as the rate youth enroll in postsecondary education (PSE). However, there are important flaws in NYTD's PSE measure. This study's aims are:

1. To analyze NYTD data to estimate the rate of current PSE enrollment at age 21 among youth with foster care backgrounds and compare it to the enrollment rate of youth in the general U.S. population.
2. To assess the extent to which NYTD's measure of PSE enrollment, which only captures *current* enrollment, undercounts how many youth in care enrolled in PSE (by looking at *current* and *recent* enrollment).
3. To examine whether the current PSE enrollment measure reaches different conclusions about racial and gender disparities than what would be found with a current/recent PSE enrollment measure.

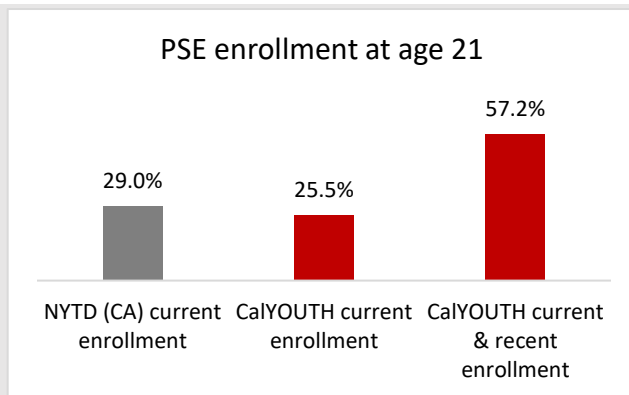
Data & Methods

Sample: Youth in the 2014 NYTD cohort (n=17,285). California is used as a case example (n=2,460), because another longitudinal study of 17-year-olds in foster care (CaYOUTH Study, n=727) was conducted around the same time that can be a useful comparison to NYTD. CaYOUTH asked about *current* and *recent* (since last interview) enrollment, so it yields a fuller and more accurate estimate of the percentage of youth who enrolled in PSE.

Analytic methods: We first compare the percentage of NYTD youth enrolled in PSE at age 21 against rate of current PSE enrollment in the general population from the U.S. Census. Next, we compare NYTD (California only) vs. CaYOUTH in terms of current enrollment rates to see if the two studies are comparable. Third, using CaYOUTH data, we see what the consequences would be of using current enrollment (like NYTD) vs. current/recent enrollment to estimate PSE rates and to check for racial and gender disparities.

Main Findings

- 22% of NYTD youth are currently enrolled in PSE at age 21 vs. 53% of 20/21-year-olds in the U.S.
- In California, 29.0% of NYTD youth are currently enrolled at age 21, which is similar to CaYOUTH's current enrollment rate (25.5%).
- However, CaYOUTH data shows that an additional 31.7% of youth had enrolled in PSE since their last interview, for a total of 57.2%. Thus, at age 21, NYTD fails to capture more than half of youth who had enrolled in PSE.
- What happens when we use current enrollment instead of current/recent enrollment to investigate disparities by gender and race? Using the current enrollment measure, we do not find a statistically significant ($p < .05$) gender difference, but using the current/recent measure, we do. That is, if we only had current enrollment data to work with (like what's available in NYTD), we would erroneously conclude that there is no gender difference in PSE enrollment.
- The opposite problem occurred when examining racial disparities. Looking only at current enrollment at age 21 yields statistically significant differences by race, but this is not present when using the more complete measure of current/recent PSE enrollment.



Implications

- This study highlights a major limitation of the NYTD education survey items: it only captures current enrollment. This leads to an undercount of PSE enrollment and incorrect conclusions about disparities by gender and race. Similar problems may arise when evaluating child welfare policies.
- The good news: the problem is fixable. The manuscript presents 4 NYTD questions that would provide much more useful education data that will enable researchers, policymakers, advocates, and child welfare administrators to accurately gauge PSE enrollment rates, disparities, and policy impacts.
- The paper calls for a broader revision of the NYTD questions. Millions of dollars and tens of thousands of hours are spent each year collecting NYTD data. It's time to make NYTD data more useful.