



The Relatives Impact Study Report  
Series

# Synthesis and Impact Report

January  
2023





## **Prepared for The Relatives**

The Relatives is a 501(c)3 organization that keeps kids safe, families together, and prepares youth and young people to be healthy, productive, engaged members of the community.

## **Prepared by The UNC Charlotte Urban Institute**

The UNC Charlotte Urban Institute is our region's applied research and community outreach center. We seek solutions to the complex social, economic and environmental challenges facing our communities. We engage expertise across a diverse set of disciplines and life experiences to curate data and conduct actionable research and policy analysis that helps us make better decisions.



# The Relatives Impact Study

## Report Series

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The Relatives Report Series describes who is served by The Relatives; how clients interact with other key community services before, during, and after their engagement with The Relatives; and the impact The Relatives has on the young people they serve. This report series offers important information about the experiences and outcomes of young people who have numerous adverse experiences such as involvement with the child welfare system, placement in foster care, experiences of homelessness, and interaction with the criminal justice system. The research also provides a deeper understanding of the young people who have dual system contact with both the child welfare and criminal justice systems. Together, the reports in this series help build greater local understanding of the experiences and outcomes of young people with adverse experiences and offers evidence-based recommendations for cross-system solutions to better meet the needs of young people in our community.

There are seven reports in the series, including a final synthesis report that describes key findings and overall recommendations for The Relatives and the broader Charlotte-Mecklenburg community. The report series includes:

1. **Survey Findings**
2. **Integrated Administrative Data Findings (5 Data Reports)**
3. **Synthesis and Impact**

CURRENT

The Relatives Impact Report Series used integrated administrative data from the Charlotte Regional Data Trust (Data Trust). The Data Trust is a community-university partnership that links administrative data across service and organizational silos in order to provide information our community can act on. The Data Trust, formerly named the Institute for Social Capital, is a 501(c)(3) governed by a board of community stakeholders and staffed by the Charlotte Urban Institute. The Board guides the strategic research priorities of the Institute.

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Special thanks to The Relatives staff and clients for their expertise and experiences.

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# Executive Summary

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The Synthesis and Impact Report brings together the information from The Relatives Impact Study Report Series (Report Series), including the Survey Report and Integrated Administrative Data Reports, to allow for a deeper understanding of who is served by The Relatives, how The Relatives are supporting youth in the community, and the impact of The Relatives. The Synthesis and Impact Report combines the findings from the survey, administrative integrated data, and comparison group and highlights three key areas of impact using the following format:

1. **What?** A description of the key takeaway and area of impact.
2. **So What?** Why the key takeaway is important to supporting The Relatives clients and the impact of The Relatives.
3. **Now What?** Recommendations and next steps for continuing and strengthening support and impact.

## Key Areas of Impact

Key Takeaway #1: The Relatives serves young people who have complex experiences of trauma and instability.

- **What?** The Report Series highlights the extensive barriers faced by the youth who are seeking services through The Relatives. These barriers, which show up as reported cases to the child welfare system, behavioral challenges at school, experiences of homelessness, and criminal justice interactions, often reflect ongoing inter-generational poverty and systemic racism that increases the difficulties for families in breaking that cycle.
- **So What?** Given the evidence of exposure to trauma and instability experienced by The Relatives clients, they have ongoing mental health needs and their education has been disrupted. These two factors can increase the risk of criminal justice involvement.
- **Now What?** The needs of The Relatives clients likely expand beyond immediate needs to include longer term social supports and mental health needs.

- Implement and grow the use of trauma-informed screening tools to better identify clients in need of these services and expanding access to mental health services.
- Increase education and awareness around mental health and trauma.
- Expand access to on-site mental health services.
- Collaborate with law enforcement agencies to reduce interaction with the criminal justice system.

## Key Takeaway #2: Clients of The Relatives demonstrate strength, empowerment, and personal growth.

- **What?** Clients demonstrate resiliency and pro-activeness through the action of seeking help and support from The Relatives. The survey results showed the strength and resilience The Relatives clients bring to the table as they work to overcome the barriers with the support of The Relatives case managers and staff. Clients felt empowered and were proud of the personal growth they saw in themselves while at The Relatives.
- **So What?** The use of an empowerment-based approach allows clients' strengths to be leveraged and supported. Clients come to The Relatives with a set of strengths that exist outside of the skills developed during program provided at The Relatives. Exploring and nurturing these strengths help clients set and reach goals, grow into adults, and feel in control of their decisions. Clients are more than the bad things they have experienced.
- **Now What?** The Relatives should continue working with client strengths and seek models that continue to support personal growth and empowerment.
  - Continue working in alliance and partnership with clients. This builds trust and relationships between clients and staff that are important for client success.
  - Implement pathways that allow clients to lead using their strengths. Work with the Youth Action Board to document strengths and discuss how to better support the things that are working for clients.

Key Takeaway #3: The Relatives reinforces stability, builds life skills, and supports transitions into adulthood. Case management helps drive this success.

- **What?** Given the immense instability clients have experienced prior to coming to The Relatives, providing a sense of stability is important for the success of clients. The Relatives shows clients that “stability is possible.” Case management helps to reinforce the stability through targeted and ongoing connections to community supports; building relationships and trust; and focused support for clients who need more support due to more complex risk factors. Additionally, The Relatives helps clients gain the life skills they need for a successful transition into adulthood.
- **So What?** In many ways, The Relatives serves as a surrogate family for the young people they serve. The Relatives also helps revive social networks, which are an important protective factor for young people. The Report Series demonstrates that clients who come to The Relatives are not experiencing issues that can be mitigated or “fixed” in the short term.
- **Now What?** Clients would likely benefit from more frequent and longer-term engagement with The Relatives. Given the complexity of the challenges clients face, deeper connections and longer-term engagement can make an even bigger difference in supporting the long-term stability of clients.
  - Consult with the existing Youth Action Board to determine pathways for effective engagement.
  - Expand case management or components of case management to more clients.
  - Develop other mechanisms to keep clients connected to staff, services, and social support such as peer support networks.



Key Takeaway #4: Clients are heavily involved with local systems, many of which are or reflect risk factors for instability. Our local systems can do more to work together to support the long-term stability of The Relatives clients and young people with similar experiences.

- **What?** The ways in which clients are showing up in one or more systems demonstrates the interconnected nature of system involvement and the ways in which involvement with multiple systems destabilize the young people involved.
- **So What?** The Relatives exists at the juncture of multi-system involvement. Clients of The Relatives provide a starting point where community-wide initiatives like economic mobility and violence prevention can begin to make an impact. There is an opportunity for more coordinated prevention efforts, action and collaboration to better support young people in our community. The trauma and long-term impacts that The Relatives clients and other young people experience are simply too complex for any one agency or system to effectively and sustainably tackle alone. Better collaboration across systems has important racial equity and justice implications, since the vast majority of clients at The Relatives identify as Black.
- **Now What?** Research and understanding related to the negative effectives of the child welfare system, criminal justice system, experiences of homelessness, and school challenges have been well-documented and widely accepted for many years. The question then must shift to: *what do we do with this information to better support young people in our community?*
  - Enhance collaboration across systems to strengthen and better coordinate prevention efforts to support young and young adults who are showing up in one or more systems.
  - Seek creative ways to help support the financial stability for clients, especially in the short term.
  - Enhance staff capacity to build relationships and trust across systems.
  - Connect to existing initiatives such as the Mecklenburg County Office of Violence Prevention, Leading on Opportunity, A Home for All, the City of Charlotte Corridors of Opportunity Program and the Mayor's Racial Equity Program.

# Introduction

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The Synthesis and Impact Report brings together the information from The Relatives Impact Study Report Series (Report Series), including the Survey Report and five Integrated Administrative Data Reports, to allow for a deeper understanding of who is served by The Relatives, how The Relatives are supporting youth in the community, and the impact of The Relatives. Specifically, the Report Series examined impact by gaining a better understanding of:

- 1. Client profile and areas of need.** A description of clients, the areas where clients needed support, and clients' experiences with services provided by The Relatives to help support the identified needs (Survey Report).
- 2. Client experiences and reflections.** A discussion of how clients felt The Relatives impacted their lives and the elements that made a difference for clients. Aspects related to quality of life, empowerment, relationships, employment, and personal growth, are explored (Survey Report).
- 3. A deep dive into each program and outcomes.** An independent examination of each program at The Relatives and the experiences and outcomes of clients who used each program (Survey Report and Integrated Data Reports #1-5).
- 4. Use of key community services.** An examination of the ways in which clients interacted with other systems and programs including child welfare, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Crisis Assistance Ministry, food and nutrition services, homeless services, and Mecklenburg County Sheriff's office before, during, and after their engagement with The Relatives (Integrated Data Reports #1-5).
- 5. A comparison of outcomes and experiences between young people who used The Relatives and those who did not.** An examination of key differences in educational outcomes and interactions with the criminal justice system between clients of The Relatives and a demographically similar group of peers who did not use services at The Relatives. Differences were examined in the time period after clients interacted with The Relatives (Integrated Data Report #5).

The Synthesis and Impact Report combines the findings from the survey, administrative integrated data, and comparison group and highlights three key areas of impact using the following format:

1. **What?** A description of the key takeaway and area of impact.
2. **So What?** Why the key takeaway is important to supporting The Relatives clients and the impact of The Relatives.
3. **Now What?** Recommendations and next steps for continuing and strengthening support and impact.

The Relatives clients included in this study include clients who began their involvement with The Relatives in 2011 and completed their involvement by 2019 (n= 3,525). The largest program based on number of clients was the Crisis Center (56.9%; n= 2,005), followed by On Ramp (43.8%; n=1,543). Most clients (86%; n=3,061) used only one service, and engaged with The Relatives for one year (exceeded 85% of clients for all programs except Journey Place – whose clients typically spent more than a year with The Relatives). See Integrated Data Report #1: Client Demographics and Program Use for more detail about program enrollment.

The research methods used in each report in the series are described in detail as an appendix to the corresponding reports.

Given clients of The Relatives touch so many of the systems in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, the report seeks to highlight opportunities for cross-system collaborations to better meet the needs of and enhance long term stability for youth and young adults in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Recommendations and next steps proposed here and elsewhere should be combined. **Interventions that only address one aspect of an individual's life will likely not effect broad or long-term change.** Given the complexity of the challenges clients at The Relatives face, this approach is important to promoting long term stability. **A comprehensive but non-exhaustive resource list is located in Appendix A.** The resources are referenced throughout the report.

# Complex Challenges

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The young people who come to The Relatives have a myriad of experiences such as housing instability, lack of familial support structure, and educational barriers that make success and long-term stability difficult to achieve. Clients have faced and continue to face a number of complex challenges. The Report Series allowed us to learn more about what these challenges look like, how the challenges may impact stability, and ways in which the community can work together to alleviate the complex challenges for the young people at The Relatives.

## **The use of integrated data elevated understanding of the complexity of barriers faced by clients of The Relatives and early childhood experiences.**

The integration of community data from the Data Trust was a significant contribution of the study and Report Series. Client data from The Relatives was matched with data from:

- Child Welfare Abuse and Neglect Investigations (Integrated Data Report #2)
- Child Welfare Children in Custody (foster care; Integrated Data Report #2)
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (Integrated Data Report #2)
- Food and Nutrition Services (Integrated Data Report #3)
- Homeless Management Information System (Integrated Data Report #3)
- Crisis Assistance Ministry (Integrated Data Report #3)
- Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office (Integrated Data Report #4)

The use of integrated data to examine the ways in which clients of The Relatives interact within, across, and between systems and supports, brought into focus the magnitude of the issues and barriers The Relatives clients face as they progress through their youth, adolescence and transition into young adulthood.

While some of this information may be apparent or surmised based on interactions with the clients, some youth, particularly those who have experienced out of home placements in foster care, can be resistant to sharing their histories and/or seeking help

in general (Ruff & Harrison, 2020; Youngbloom et al., 2022). This could limit staff, case manager, and community understanding of the full extent of clients' exposure to trauma and complexity of their experiences, which could also limit the opportunities and direction for services and support.

**The integrated data provides, in aggregate, a clear understanding of overall clients' interactions with the child welfare system, engagement with the criminal justice system, educational barriers, and use of safety net services.** The integrated data highlighted the immense complexity of challenges experienced by clients at The Relatives. By broadening the understanding of client experiences, especially early traumatic experiences, we are also able to expand opportunities to support the needs of clients in both the immediate and long term. Additionally, the findings in Integrated Data Report #5: Comparison Group indicate that clients at The Relatives have a greater risk of interaction with the criminal justice system and to withdrawal from school the year after engagement with The Relatives than their peers with similar experiences. This further points to the complexity of the barriers faced by the clients who come to The Relatives and the likely influence of poverty on educational challenges and criminal justice involvement.

## **Systemic racism and poverty contribute to the complexity of the challenges faced by The Relatives clients.**

**The vast majority of young people who are served by The Relatives identify as Black.**<sup>1</sup> Overall, 81% (n=2122) of clients identified as Black, representing an immense over-representation of Black individuals who seek assistance from The Relatives (see Figure 1). In comparison, approximately one-third of the Mecklenburg County residents identify as Black (US Census Bureau, 2022).

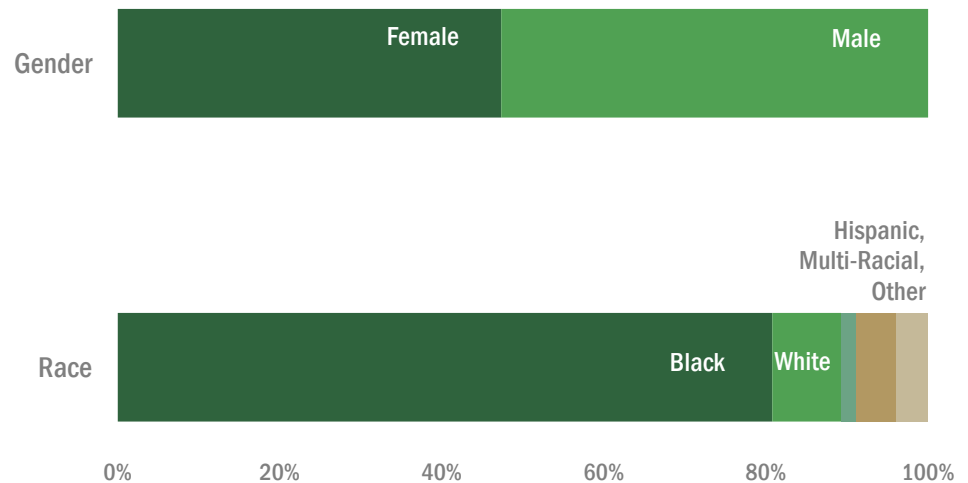
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<sup>1</sup> Demographic data was provided through CMS, which accounted for 74.5% of The Relatives clients in the study (n=2,627). Clients were fairly evenly divided between females (47%; n=1,243) and males (53%; n= 1,384).



Given the over-representation of clients who identify as Black, it is important to acknowledge and understand the ways in which systemic racism operates as a major risk factor for the stability and success of The Relatives clients.

**Figure 1. More than 80% of the clients served by The Relatives identify as Black.**



Note: Only includes clients who had a record with CMS. n=2,627. See Data Report 1: Client demographics and program use for more information.

Historical and current practices and policies

that are rooted in systemic racism, such as red-lining, predatory lending practices, and criminal justice practices (Alexander, 2010; Rothstein, 2018; Thomas et al., 2019) have contributed to limited economic mobility for and a lack of investment in communities of color (Perry, 2020). The effects of systemic racism and the resulting lack of resources are often compounded across generations; they create economic and other stressors on families as they raise and care for their children (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014), reinforcing the cycle of poverty.

**Although not discussed directly in the Report Series, poverty is an underlying complexity for The Relatives clients and their families.**

While no direct income measures were included in the study, many of the systems The Relatives data was matched with are proxies for living in poverty. Both Crisis Assistance Ministry and Food and Nutrition Services have direct links to poverty and low-to-moderate income due to income eligibility requirements for these programs and services.

- 35% percent of The Relatives clients (n=1,235) in the sample accessed services through Crisis Assistance (based on limited data from Crisis Assistance).
- Almost two-thirds (63.7%; n=2,247) of the clients received Food and Nutrition Services benefits at some point.
- Almost twenty percent of clients (19.4%; n=683), or households including the client, accessed homeless services during the study, which indicates the household likely has insufficient resources to maintain housing.

- Over half of the clients had at least one reported case with the child welfare system (52.4%; n=1,847). Children from low-income households are over-represented in CWS and experience higher rates of maltreatment (Sedlak et al., 2010).

While poverty is associated with many of the challenges facing these youth, poverty can also be the underlying cause for the same challenges. Poverty is associated with greater child welfare system involvement, but poverty, by increasing stress on the families, also places families at greater risk of abusive and neglecting behaviors (Freisthler, 2004; Jonson-Reid et al., 2009). In addition, poverty increases the risk of arrests for youth and young adults as direct (court costs, fines and fees) and indirect costs (i.e. transportation and time), which may limit parent's ability to advocate for their child, can lead to lower access to services that help to keep youth out of prison (Hunt & Nichol, 2021).

Furthermore, criminal justice involvement can contribute to debt and greater poverty as the inability to pay fees or show up can lead to additional costs levied on the parents (Hunt & Nichol, 2021). **The compounding factors of systemic racism and poverty on children creates ongoing negative physical and psychological consequences** (De France et al., 2022; Douglas et al., 2021) and can negatively impact the ability to achieve long term stability.

Although interventions to limit the effects of systemic poverty and racism are beyond the scope of this report, it is important to keep in the forefront of any discussion the detrimental impact of these factors, which are out of the control of youth and young adults, when examining specific outcomes and opportunities to address them for youth exposed to poverty and systemic racism.

# Key Areas of Impact

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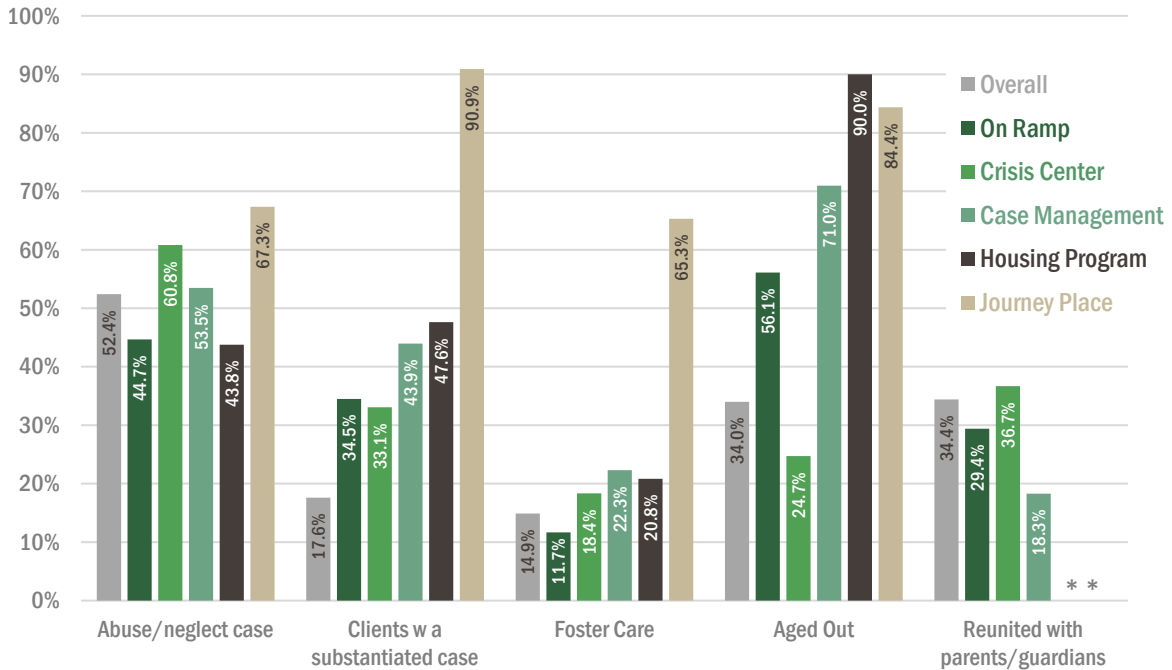
## Key Takeaway #1: The Relatives serves young people who have complex experiences of trauma and instability.

What?

The Report Series highlights the extensive barriers faced by the youth who are seeking services through The Relatives. These barriers, which show up as reported cases to the child welfare system, behavioral challenges at school, and criminal justice interactions, often reflect ongoing inter-generational poverty and systemic racism that increases the difficulties for families in breaking that cycle. These experiences are often a result of, and/or contribute to trauma and the effects of trauma. For example, disruptive behavior in schools can be a trauma reaction when a student feels their safety is threatened, or a young person with trauma may engage in risky or criminal behaviors as a survival mechanism (Cho et al., 2019; Culhane et al., 2011; Southerland et al., 2009).

The Integrated Data Reports revealed a difficult foundation for many of The Relatives clients during early childhood. **Youth and young adults who used services at The Relatives have been exposed to numerous traumatic events at an early age.** Figure 2 displays the early experiences in the child welfare system. Criminal justice involvement is also discussed.

**Figure 2. Across all programs, there were high rates of child welfare system involvement. Journey Place clients had the most substantiated cases of abuse or neglect. Crisis Center clients were the most likely to be reunited with parents/guardians.**



Note: Cannot report share reunited with family/guardians for Housing Program or Journey Place due to small sample sizes. Total n=3,525; On Ramp n=1,543; Crisis Center n=2,005; Case Management n=417; Housing Program n=48; Journey Place n=49. See Data Report #2: Formative years and early experiences for more information.

- The majority of clients had at least one abuse or neglect investigation prior to their engagement with The Relatives (ranged from 70.4% of Crisis Shelter clients to nearly 100% of Journey Place clients).
- Clients had multiple interactions with the child welfare system; an average of 4 different abuse or neglect investigations (SD=3.27).
- 15% of clients (n=524) were removed from their home and placed in foster care. The most frequent outcomes of foster care placement were either reunification with their families<sup>2</sup> (34%, n=180) or aging out of the system without a permanent placement (34%; n=178).

<sup>2</sup> Younger clients were more likely to be reunited with their families following a foster care placement than older clients, which aligns with national trends.

- A third of clients interacted with the criminal justice system and were booked into jail (34.2%; n=1,207).<sup>3</sup> About half of those clients (15%, n=530) had an interaction with the criminal justice system prior to their engagement with The Relatives.
- Nearly 1 in 7 clients (15%; n=516) had dual system contact with both the child welfare and criminal justice systems.

These experiences with the child welfare system and the criminal justice system are both indicative of and contribute to instability, particularly housing and financial instability, during childhood and young adulthood for clients. For example, clients experienced housing instability when removed from their home and placed in one or more foster care homes. Housing and financial instability can be a reason why someone commits a crime such as trespassing or theft. **The administrative data also showed more direct indicators of housing and financial instability experienced by clients:**

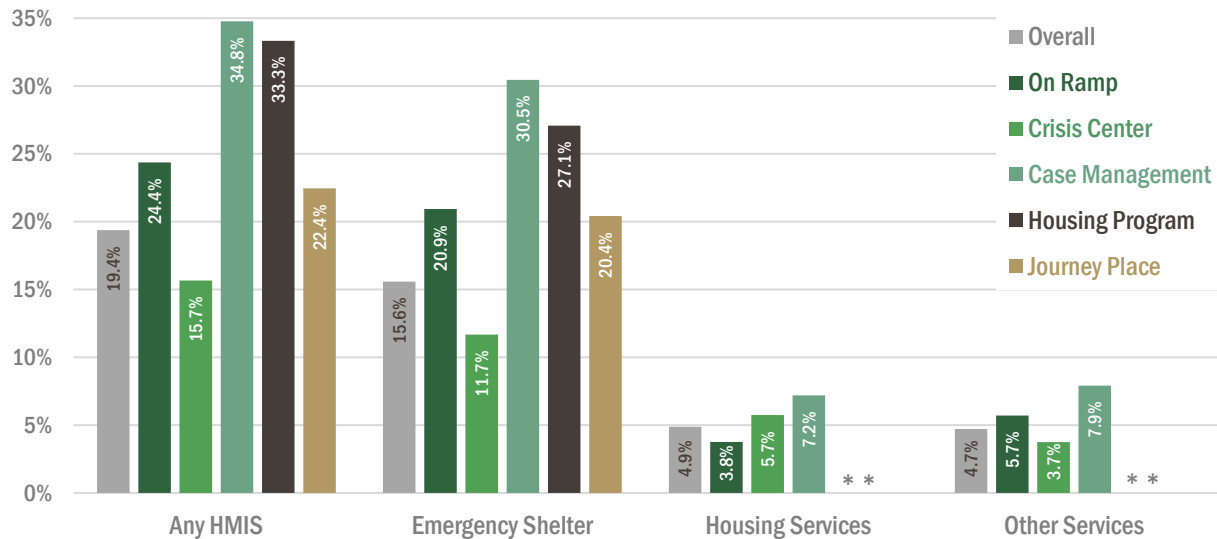
- 40% of clients (n=1,051) received McKinney Vento services while attending Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools due to unstable housing.
- Nearly 20% (19.4%; n=683) used homeless services (either individually or as part of a household). See Figure 3.
- 35% of clients (n=1,234) used assistance from Crisis Assistance Ministry (either individually or as part of a household).
- Property crimes made up the majority of charges given to clients when they interacted with the criminal justice system. Property crimes are often associated with housing instability (Ferguson et al., 2011).

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<sup>3</sup> The criminal justice data includes data for adults only. The reported involvement with the criminal justice system are underestimates given the lack of juvenile justice data.



**Figure 3. Client use of HMIS services. Overall, The Relatives case management clients had the highest use of all HMIS services.**



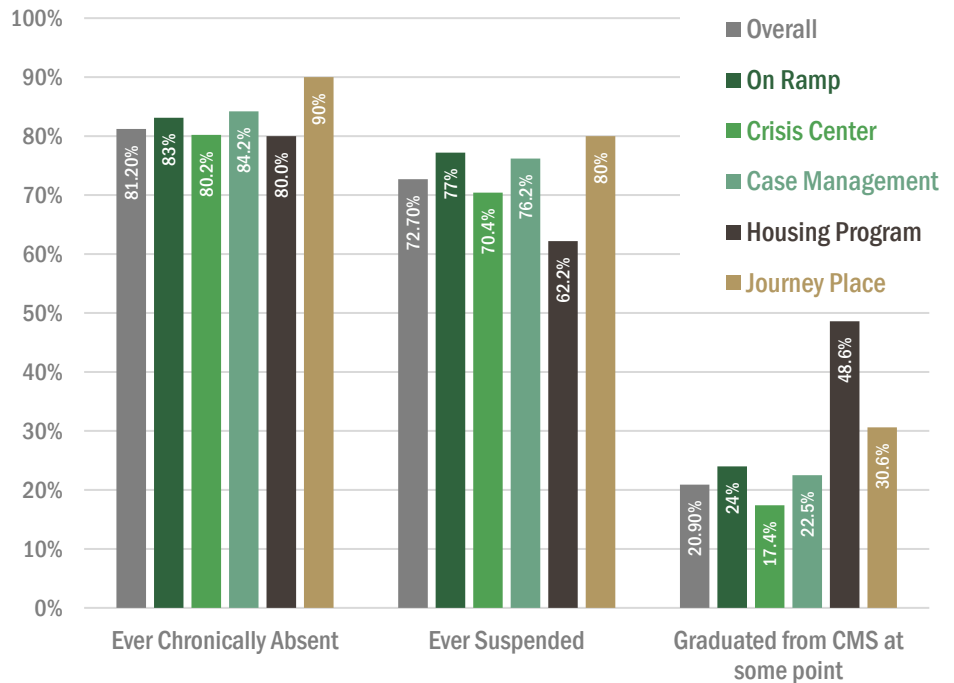
Note: Numbers for Housing Services and Other Services are too small to report for the Housing Program and Journey Place. Excludes services from The Relatives. See Data Report #3: Use of community benefits and services for more information. Overall n=3525; On Ramp n=1543; Crisis Center n=2005; Case Management n=417; Housing Program n=48; Journey Place n=49.

Furthermore, behavioral and learning challenges were apparent from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools data. **Many clients faced learning hurdles at various points during their enrollment at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.** See Figure 4. These hurdles are likely closely related to housing and financial instability and behavior as a result of response to trauma (i.e., becoming angry or disruptive if one’s safety is threatened).

- 43% of clients (n=1,139) were designated as having limited English proficiency (LEP).
- 40% of clients (n=1,057) had an Individualized Education Plan and were designated as a student with a disability.
- Nearly three-quarters (73%; n=1,911) of clients were suspended at least once.
- Over 80% of clients (81.2%; n=2,132) were chronically absent (i.e., missed more than 18 days of school) during at least one school year.
- The Relatives clients were more likely to withdraw from school during the year following their engagement with The Relatives than a control group.

Both suspensions and chronic absenteeism are linked to poorer academic performance and increased risk of dropping out of school (US Department of Education, 2019). Most clients were not enrolled in CMS during their engagement with The Relatives, but these findings provide a greater understanding of client experiences before they came to The Relatives that may be contributing to other immediate needs.

**Figure 4. There were high rates of chronic absenteeism and suspensions across all programs. Housing Program and Journey Place clients were most likely to have graduated from CMS at some point.**



Note: See Data Report #2: Formative years and early experiences for more information. Overall n=2627; On Ramp n=1097; Crisis Center n=1577; Case management n=323; Housing Program n=37; Journey Place n=36

### So What?

Given the evidence of exposure to trauma and instability experienced by The Relatives clients, **clients have ongoing mental health needs and their education has been disrupted.** These two factors can increase the risk of criminal justice involvement.

### Ongoing mental health needs

Involvement with the child welfare system highlights the adverse childhood experiences of clients of The Relatives. Studies have found that involvement with the child welfare system is associated with heightened mental health needs and behavioral challenges (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022; Southerland et al., 2009), and increased likelihood of criminal justice engagement and future offenses (Barth et al., 2020). Once youth are involved with the criminal justice system they have increased difficulties in attaining longer-term positive outcomes for education, future earnings and

physical and mental health (Aizer & Doyle, 2013; Allgood et al., 2007; Barnert et al., 2017).

Further, the burden of trauma and ongoing mental health needs is not carried equitably. There is strong evidence that suggests Black children are referred to the child welfare system at a much higher rate than White children (Hill, 2007; Ho & Burke, 2022), and that Black students are more likely to be suspended, which places Black students at higher risk of criminal justice involvement (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021; Fabelo et al., 2011; Losen, 2011).

For youth and young adults trying to establish themselves, **mental health needs and behavioral problems are often secondary to help with basic needs that are presented**, such as housing, transportation, and IDs (Martin, 2016; Winiarski et al., 2021). From the survey completed with current and past clients, housing and life skills were identified as the primary needs. While these basic needs are integral to client stability in terms of employment, housing, education, and access to benefits, **unaddressed mental health issues can also create barriers to the stability clients are seeking.**

In addition to competing priorities between immediate needs and ongoing mental health, studies have found many reasons why youth and young adults are hesitant to reach out for mental health support. Accessibility of services can be difficult as a result of limited transportation and locations of services with offices and places not typically used by youth and young adults (i.e., inpatient and outpatient medical facilities) (Winiarski et al., 2021). Also, homeless youth and young adults may be reluctant to access healthcare services in general due to perceived stigma by health care providers surrounding mental health challenges and homelessness (Edidin et al., 2012). Lastly youth and young adults may not recognize or know that they have mental health challenges that need to be addressed (Edidin et al., 2012).

### **Disrupted Education**

Mental health and trauma can complicate clients' pursuit of education. Children exposed to trauma are more likely to be chronically absent (Stempel et al., 2017). The loss of learning can lead to poorer academic outcomes and the potential of leaving school early (US Department of Education, 2019).

**Housing instability creates additional barriers to educational success due to multiple missed days of school.** Multiple and/or forced moves result in missed school days. Parents with limited resources may prioritize seeking housing over children attending school. Housing instability can also lead to the need to change schools and/or the inability to finish out a school year. Forced relocations (such as evictions) and repeated relocations are associated with higher rates of chronic absenteeism and suspensions, lower academic outcomes, and lower graduation rates (Cutuli et al., 2013; John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities, 2022; Kahlmeter, 2021; Metzger et al., 2015). Integrated Data Reports #2: Formative Years and Early Experiences and #5: Comparison Group make it clear that clients at **The Relatives are struggling to complete their secondary education.** In particular, Integrated Data Report #5: Comparison Report indicated The Relatives clients were more likely to withdraw from school in the year following their engagement with The Relatives than a control group.

In addition to loss of learning, which is difficult to regain, housing instability during adolescence disrupts peer supports and potential non-parental social supports (Boynton-Jarrett et al., 2013) often integral to young adults and especially for those that may be estranged from family. **These social supports, when maintained can act as protective factors for youth and young adults** (Bowers et al., 2014; Sheehan et al., 2022). Among other behaviors, health seeking behaviors are often influenced by having friends support, which can help reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues (Martin, 2016).

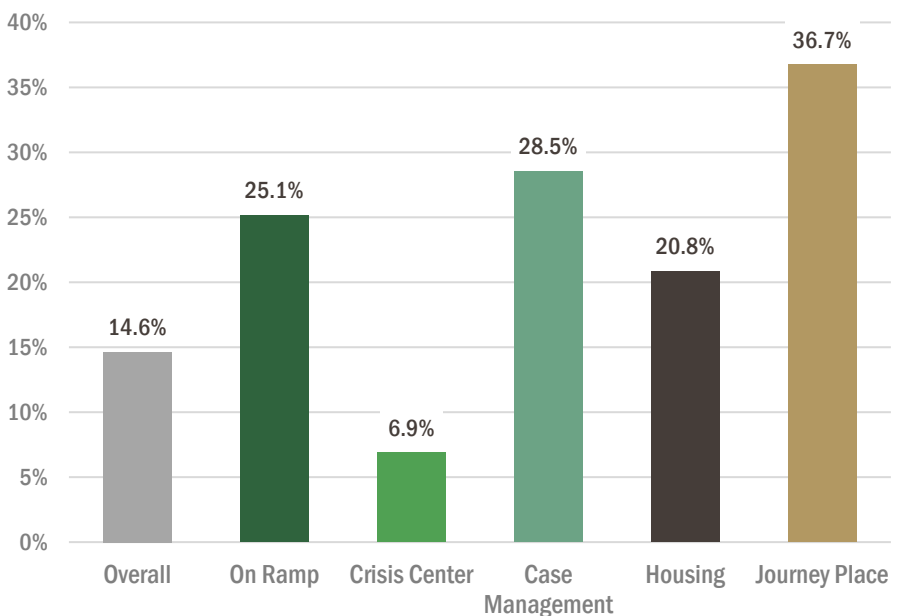
### **Criminal justice involvement and dual system youth:**

Both mental health and trauma, as well as instability can lead to behaviors that result in criminal justice system involvement directly, and as part of the school to prison pipeline. Unfortunately, **youth with mental health issues and trauma, such as youth who have interacted with the child welfare system are over-represented in the criminal justice system** (Baglivio et al., 2014; Dierkhising et al., 2013; Tepline et al., 2002). Given that the majority of the clients at The Relatives identify as Black and that Black young people are more likely to be referred to the child welfare system and interact with the criminal justice system, Black young people are more likely to face the challenges to stability associated with child welfare and criminal justice system involvement. Fifteen

percent of Relatives clients had dual system involvement with both the child welfare and criminal justice system (see Figure 5).

While certain mental health issues can increase the risk of aggressive behavior, this behavior is a greater risk when there are multiple mental health issues (i.e. anxiety and substance use) (Grisso, 2008). **Young people who live with trauma may behave in an aggressive or disruptive way when they feel their safety is threatened** (as a trauma and survival response). Trauma also impacts brain development (Stevens et al., 2018), so young people who live with trauma may not have the capability to manage their emotions. Aggressive or disruptive behavior as a response to trauma may be the reason that 'Resisting Public Officer' is one of the most common charge descriptions for clients of The Relatives involved with the criminal justice system (see Integrated Data Report #4: Criminal Justice and Dual System Youth). Aggressive or unruly behavior often leads to removal from the classroom via detention or suspension (Grisso, 2008).

**Figure 5. Every program at The Relatives serves dual system clients. Share of clients in each program who were involved with both child welfare and the criminal justice system during the study period.**



Note: See Data Report #4: Criminal Justice and Dual System Youth for more information. Total n=3525; On Ramp n=1543; Crisis Center n=2005; Case Management n=417; Housing Program n=48; Journey Place n=49

**Economic pressures also increase the likelihood that youth and young adults dealing with housing instability are caught up in the criminal justice system.** Young adults with minimal access to job opportunities, and faced with housing instability may turn to unconventional sources for income and/or survival strategies such as prostitution, panhandling, stealing, selling stolen goods etc. (Ferguson et al., 2011). Clients of The Relatives may be feeling these pressures and resorting to crimes categorized as 'Property Crimes' (includes burglary, robbery and shoplifting). Charges



for property related crimes were the most prevalent category of charges across clients of all of The Relatives programs (See Integrated Data Report #4: Criminal Justice and Dual System Youth). Furthermore, unaddressed mental health and instability can lead to externalizing and survival behaviors that result in criminal justice involvement (Baglivio et al., 2014; Dierkhising et al., 2013).

### Now What?

Clients are seeking out The Relatives for their basic needs to help create stability in their lives. This is a pro-active and constructive step, that highlights the persistence of these youth and young adults. However, the needs of The Relatives clients likely expand beyond immediate needs to include longer term social supports and mental health needs. In the last couple of years, the staff at The Relatives have added a part-time mental health provider to their staff to increase access to mental health services. Additional steps would include creating a mental health screening tool to better identify clients in need of these services. In addition, The Relatives should focus on enhancing education and awareness of mental health issues in order to normalize help seeking behaviors related to mental health, and expand partnerships to support clients at risk of criminal justice involvement.

### **Implement and grow the use of trauma informed screening tools.**

Trauma informed screening instruments are essential for supporting case managers in delivering appropriate care for youth exposed to adverse childhood experiences (Baglivio et al., 2014; Vidal et al., 2019). Given the high prevalence of involvement with the child welfare system among The Relatives clients, a screening tool would be useful for identifying clients with mental health needs. The Relatives staff could work with clients and/or their Youth Action Board to create or identify a screening tool to more comprehensively assess experiences of clients in a way that focuses on strengths and assets instead of a deep focus on risk. The screening tool could also help to identify possible longer term needs of clients, such as addressing trauma. See Appendix A for more information about technical assistance tools for screening youth and young adults with Adverse Childhood Experiences. Given evidence indicating the protective role of social supports for children and young adults (Bowers et al., 2014), any screening tool should include measures of clients' connections to caring adults and peers.

### **Expand access to on-site mental health services and increase education and awareness around mental health and trauma.**

By making a mental health professional accessible to clients at their On-Ramp facility The Relatives have already begun to increase the awareness of mental health issues. The therapist at The Relatives recently spoke about how he connects with the clients in any way possible (i.e. helping to change oil in a car), and his compensation has been shifted so he can be available to interact with clients as they come through On Ramp and don't necessarily have an appointment. As the therapist increases connections with the clients, clients will likely share their experiences with others. For young adults, peer referrals are one of the most effective methods for increasing help seeking behaviors (Martin, 2016). The Relatives should continue using the flexible payment model and explore avenues to employ more mental health professionals on-site. Access to on-site mental health services has been shown to be one of the most important factors for young people to use mental health services (Pedersen et al., 2018).

Efforts to continue to integrate mental health awareness into programming could further reinforce the acceptability of mental health issues. Such efforts could include:

- Daily mental health practices such as mindfulness.
- Age appropriate, trauma-informed, workshops for clients and case managers to discuss how to address mental health practices.
- Help clients build skills to take care of their mental health alongside the other life skills clients learn at The Relatives.

### **Collaborate with law enforcement agencies to reduce interaction with the criminal justice system.**

As demonstrated through the Report Series, clients of The Relatives are involved with the criminal justice system before, during and after they engaged with The Relatives. This involvement is under-estimated since it does not include juvenile justice data. Partnerships with Charlotte Mecklenburg Police Department, Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office, Mecklenburg County Criminal Justice Services, and Mecklenburg County Office of Violence Prevention could enhance collaboration between The Relatives and law enforcement to help support clients both before and after criminal justice involvement occurs. The Relatives could help support and promote youth prevention programs run by law enforcement entities.

Given the association of prior criminal justice activity to future criminal justice activity both in existing literature (Aizer & Doyle, 2013; Allgood et al., 2007; Barnert et al., 2017) and from Data Report #5: Comparison Group, data sharing between the organizations could help identify clients at risk of future criminal justice involvement. Fostering partnerships within the community as well as increased data sharing are both stated strategies as part of Mecklenburg County's Office of Violence Prevention '[The Way Forward](#)' plan, a strategic plan to reduce community violence (see Appendix A). Once youth are identified, additional supports such as mental and behavioral health supports, as well as mentoring opportunities could be provided (see Appendix A for additional information on mentoring programs).

A Way Forward is based on a public health framework that focuses on preventing and reducing weapons-related violence. While The Relatives clients as a whole are not possessing weapons or committing assaults at high rates, there is a small subset that are (15% or more of clients in each program had charges related to personal violence in the period after engagement with The Relatives, and over 5% of On Ramp and case management clients were arrested and booked with a weapons related charge after engaging with The Relatives). This makes The Relatives a natural partner for this initiative. The framework includes goals, strategies and indicators that align with the recommendations for The Relatives. For example, the initiative is seeking to adopt universal screening and referral process for trauma related to violence in youth and families (The Way Forward - Strategy 2.1), and expand access to behavioral and mental health services for individuals exposed to violence (The Way Forward - Strategy 2.2).

# Key Takeaway #2: Clients of The Relatives demonstrate strength, empowerment, and personal growth.

## What?

The Report Series provided insight about the strengths and resilience of The Relatives clients. The survey results showed **the strength and resilience The Relatives clients bring to the table as they work to overcome the barriers with the support of The Relatives case managers and staff.** These strengths are part of what clients bring with them when they come to The Relatives and are nurtured over the course of engagement with programming at The Relatives. Clients demonstrate resiliency and pro-activeness through the action of seeking help and support from The Relatives. This highlights the persistence of the young people at The Relatives.

Survey responses indicated that **clients felt empowered while at The Relatives.** Clients had strong scores for empowered decision making. For the 79 current clients and 21 past clients who completed the survey, empowered decision-making scores averaged 4.36, and 4.03 out of 5.00, respectively (see Figure 6). The statement 'At The Relatives, I feel empowered to make my own decisions and take action' was the highest or the second highest score for current and past clients, respectively, demonstrating both the support the clients receive at The Relatives as well as their desire to move forward.

Figure 6. Both past and clients felt empowered at The Relatives.



Additionally, in their survey responses, **clients were proud of the personal growth they saw in themselves while at The Relatives.** Survey responses indicated that their personal growth was closely tied to feeling empowered while at The Relatives. Several clients spoke to feeling proud of their self-confidence, increased sense of responsibility, and “being an adult, in general.” The immense personal growth that clients described means there were likely trusting relationships with staff and case managers that supported clients as they grew their self-confidence. In many ways, The Relatives provides support as clients “grow up” and transition into adulthood.

### So What?

**The empowerment-based approach used by staff at The Relatives is working.**

Empowerment is important to young people as they access services (Garrett et al., 2008). Feeling in control of their decisions and their futures is especially important for young people who have experienced trauma (Bulanda & Johnson, 2016). Promoting empowerment can also build trust, which opens doors for deeper connections. However, trust and relationships take time. Longer engagement with The Relatives allows clients to build relationships with staff. This may lead to more conversations (and time) to address longer term needs such as mental health and trauma that can continue to reinforce stability in the long run.

The use of an empowerment-based approach allows clients’ strengths to be leveraged and supported. Clients come to The Relatives with a set of strengths that exist outside of the skills developed during programs provided at The Relatives. Exploring and nurturing these strengths help clients set and reach goals, grow into adults, and feel in control of their decisions, which has positive implications for healing from and addressing trauma (Bulanda & Johnson, 2016).

The importance of working from a place where strengths are celebrated cannot be understated. **Clients are more than the bad things they have experienced.** Young people at The Relatives have hopes, dreams, interests, and goals. By focusing on strengths, The Relatives can help clients see their own potential and grow their self-confidence. Clients can begin to see themselves as more than the challenges they face.



## Now What?

As evidenced in this report, The Relatives already are effective in operating in ways that promote empowerment and trust. The Relatives should continue working with client strengths and explore models that continue to support personal growth and empowerment.

### **Continue working in alliance and partnership with clients.**

The Relatives staff are skilled in building relationships and trust with clients. Continue to support the strengths, dreams, interests, and goals of the young people who come to The Relatives. Consider finding methods to intentionally integrate a strengths-perspective into programming. This could include screening questions related to strengths, goals, and interests. This could also include a practice in case management and other services that begin with a question that explores strengths and successes (i.e., What are you really proud of today?). This helps keep the focus on what is working well while giving clients confidence to tackle other challenging goals.

### **Implement pathways that allow clients to lead using their strengths.**

Consider assigning the Youth Action Board a project to document the strengths, interests, and goals of clients at The Relatives. This could be a way to validate and visualize positive aspects clients have that help promote change and wellbeing. Find ways to enhance the focus on what clients feel like is working well and how they feel those things can receive more support and resources. The Report Series makes it evident that clients are going through a lot of personal growth before, during, and after they engage with The Relatives. Part of building skills for adulthood and success also includes celebrating strengths.

### Key Takeaway #3: The Relatives reinforces stability, builds life skills, and supports transitions into adulthood. Case management helps drive this success.

What?

**It is evident that clients are coming to The Relatives in a time of crisis.** In survey responses (Survey Findings report), clients described crisis situations such as staying in their car with their child and dangerous family conflict as reasons why they came to The Relatives. Integrated Data Report #3: Use of Benefits and Community Services shows that use of homeless services peaks during the year clients are engaged with The Relatives (as compared to before and after engagement with The Relatives; see Figure 7). The data suggest that The Relatives is addressing the immediate housing crises (and other related immediate needs) clients were experiencing and reinforcing stability for these clients; the use of

homeless services the year following engagement with The Relatives fell back to levels that were consistent with the use of homeless services before engagement with The Relatives.

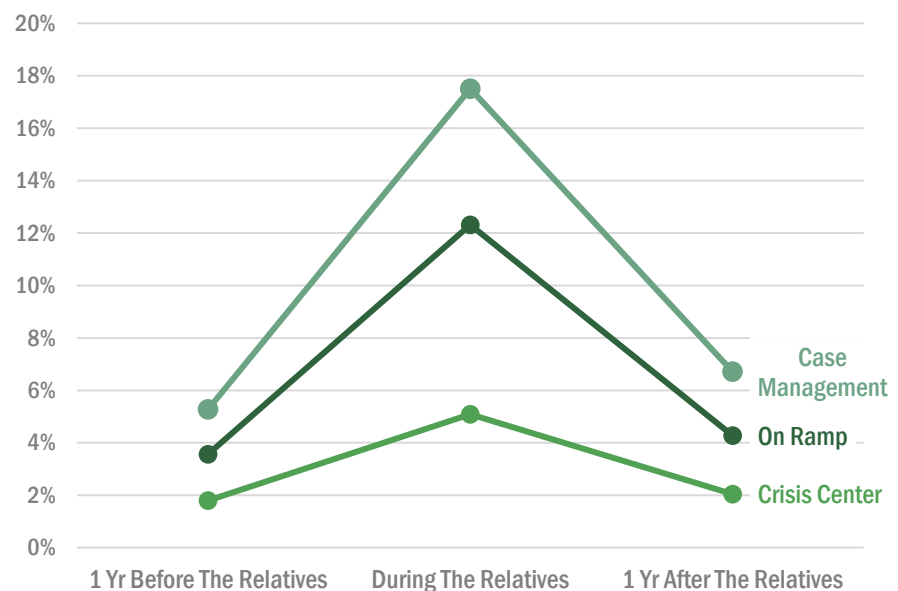
Importantly, **The Relatives reinforces stability by providing a safe place to go during times of crisis.**

The Survey Findings report highlighted that

clients felt The Relatives provided a safe place to go during and after a crisis.

Establishing a sense of safety, particularly since the young people who come to The Relatives likely have regularly been in danger and live with a great deal of trauma, can

**Figure 7. For all programs, the percentage of clients who used emergency shelter increased during engagement with The Relatives.**



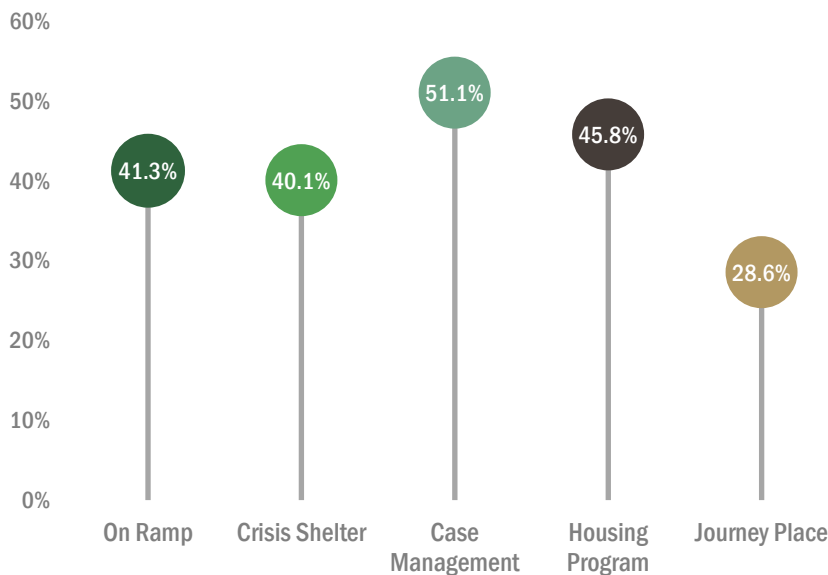
Note: Numbers for Housing Program and Journey Place are too small to report. On Ramp n=1543; Crisis Center n=2005;

help clients begin to heal. Having a place to go in a time of crisis and/or uncertainty can help young people feel they are not alone and quickly be connected to appropriate supports. A safe space (both physical and emotional) is critical for young people to address their trauma and continue to heal and grow (Bulanda & Johnson, 2016). Young people must feel safe to continue engaging with services (Garrett et al., 2008).

**The Relatives is also reinforcing stability through case management.** During the study period, case management served an average of 49 clients per year (SD=16.0) and overlapped with most other programs. There are three factors present in case management that work to reinforce stability for clients:

- 1. Targeted and ongoing connection to community supports.** Case management clients were the most likely of any program to use key community supports like Crisis Assistance Ministry, Food and Nutrition Services, and homeless services (Figure 8; see Data Report #3: Use of Benefits and Community Services). Case management clients were also more likely to remain enrolled in Food and Nutrition services after their engagement with The Relatives.

**Figure 8. During the year they were engaged with The Relatives, Case management clients had the highest enrollment in Food and Nutrition Services. Journey Place clients had the lowest.**



- 2. Relationships and trust between case managers and clients.** While difficult to measure using quantitative administrative data, in their survey responses clients indicated that case managers and staff made a difference. Case management clients likely engaged with The Relatives on a more regular basis than clients who didn't receive case management services. Clients felt empowered by case managers. One client stated they were proud that The Relatives "helped me with a future plan, and helped me accomplish those goals." By operating in a way that gives clients ownership and choice over their decisions, staff is supporting client empowerment and building trust. Case management seems to allow clients and staff to build a deeper relationship that is rooted in empowerment. This deeper relationship may encourage and support clients to remain more engaged with The Relatives, which provides opportunities to address additional needs, such as mental health and trauma, that are important for long term stability and success.
  
- 3. Focused support for clients who have a higher level of need and more complex risk factors.** Clients are referred to case management when they need more targeted support and have higher risk factors. For example, case management clients were the only program where involvement with the criminal justice system increased the year after engagement with The Relatives. This suggests that, due to multiple factors, case management clients are more at risk of criminal justice involvement and need a higher level of support to achieve long term stability. That higher level of support is provided through case management services.

In addition, the Survey Findings Report made it clear that **The Relatives is having an impact by helping clients gain the life skills needed for a safe and successful transition into adulthood.** Given the instability clients experienced during childhood and adolescence, clients likely did not have typical family supports to teach them what they need to know about being an adult that many people take for granted. These skills include things like home maintenance and cleanliness and the importance of being on time to work. As mentioned above, clients were very proud of the personal growth they experienced and the skills they learned while at The Relatives. The Report Series also showed how **The Relatives helps clients build the skills to gain a greater sense of independence and self-confidence.** The Relatives demonstrated to clients that there are other ways of living and allowed clients to experience some stability, possibly for the

first time. One client summed up the impact of The Relatives by stating, “they showed me that stability was possible.”

## So What?

The instability experienced by clients can mean that clients don’t have many of the familial supports that are necessary for healthy development and successful transitions to adulthood. In many ways, **The Relatives serves as a surrogate family for the young people they serve and help revive social networks.** This is likely most true for case managers who work closely with clients over time. Serving in this role, staff at The Relatives work with clients to help them build the skills and confidence they need to be successful adults and live independently. **Connections, especially long-term connections, with caring adults in a safe space have been shown to be an important factor in positive youth development** and help youth be healthy, succeed in school, and be financially stable in adulthood (Sheehan et al., 2022). Social supports and social connections play a positive role in mitigating the effects of childhood trauma and adversity (Boullier & Blair, 2018) and increase the likelihood that young people will reach out to trusted individuals when having a problem with their mental health (Mercado et al., 2021).

**The Relatives may be able to expand their impact by finding ways for clients to engage more frequently and for longer periods of time.** The Report Series demonstrates that clients who come to The Relatives are not experiencing issues that can be mitigated or “fixed” in the short term. Given that The Relatives temporarily fills a familial support role, clients would likely benefit from more frequent and longer-term engagement with The Relatives. Immediate needs are being addressed through programs like On Ramp and the Youth Crisis Center, however, case management may be better equipped to meet longer term needs to assist in the transition to adulthood. Additionally, connection with community services, a key element of case management, has been shown to improve mental health (Slesnick et al., 2017). Additionally, connection with community services, a key element of case management, has been shown to improve mental health (Slesnick et al., 2017). While the Report Series did not directly test the effectiveness of case management, findings suggest that case management services keep clients better connected with community services.

## Now What?

Building relationships and trust, as well as learning the skills and gaining the self-confidence needed to transition into adulthood is a process, and likely cannot be meaningfully accomplished after just one or two interactions with The Relatives. **By allowing more time to build practical skills and establish relationships, The Relatives could grow their impact** (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2013). Brief interventions have been shown to not be as effective with young people with complex needs (Baer et al., 2007). Integrated Data Report #5: Comparison Group makes it clear that just a single interaction with The Relatives does not significantly reduce contact with or the risk of contact with the criminal justice or reduce the likelihood of getting suspended or dropping out of school. More frequent and longer-term engagement with The Relatives may help address additional and complex needs, such as mental health and housing, that are essential for long term stability (Youngbloom et al., 2022).

The Relatives is set up to meet immediate needs of clients and respond to crisis situations, which is a challenge in and of itself. However, given the complexity of the trauma and experiences faced by the young people who come to The Relatives, research suggests that **deeper connections and longer-term engagement can make an even bigger difference in supporting the long-term stability of clients.**

### **Consult with the existing Youth Action Board to determine pathways for effective engagement.**

The Youth Action Board has the lived experience of participating in The Relatives and have the knowledge needed for ways to support current clients and improve outcomes. Raise the question to the existing Youth Action Board to get more information and guidance about ways to engage clients for a longer period of time. Ask questions related to necessary resources, what young people need to engage fully, and ideas for types of engagement activities and structures.

### **Expand case management or components of case management to more clients.**

Research has shown that interventions that aim to address youth homelessness are more effective when they are paired with case management services (Morton et al., 2019). Case management services overlap with every other program at The Relatives. On Ramp clients were the most likely to use case management services (66.9%; n=279), but other programs used case management at much lower rates, signaling there are



opportunities to expand the case management model to have deeper engagement and support the long-term success of clients. Long term outcomes and related stability may be more difficult to realize and address for clients who aren't frequently interacting with The Relatives and who may just be "passing though." Expanding case management or components of case management may allow The Relatives to both address immediate needs of clients and explore needs and goals that are more related to long term stability such as mental health (Slesnick et al., 2017).

### **Develop other mechanisms to keep clients connected to staff, services, and social support.**

Since social supports and connections are so important for youth development, The Relatives should consider providing a diverse set of engagement opportunities for current and former clients. This would include engagement in supportive services traditionally provided by The Relatives, and could also include other types of engagement activities such as:

- **Peer engagement networks and peer support.** Trust and word-of-mouth between peers are important factors to engaging young people. Peer support has been shown to be an effective tool to for engagement. Peer support specialists build relationships and trust with others who have similar experiences and help connect young people to services without a preset agenda (Erangey et al., 2020) Peer support specialists have also been used to help support mental health and substance use recovery (Erangey et al., 2020). The Relatives could create youth engagement networks based around different experiences, interests, identities, or goals. The Relatives could create paid positions for clients to serve as peer support specialists, where they help other clients navigate their short and long term needs and goals and enhance engagement. See Appendix A for more resources about peer support specialists.
- **Host or co-host events and workshops to build knowledge and skills.** Workshops and events provide alternatives to engagement and building relationships that go beyond the client – service provider engagement. These events and workshops could include helping clients enroll in and renew food and nutrition services, enroll in health insurance, create a resume, and other ideas raised by clients. These events could also be a space for clients to showcase their skills and successes as well as make connections with each other. By hosting

workshops and events, more clients could have the opportunity to receive the kinds of services provided via case management such as targeted support and building personal skills, as well as build social support networks that are important protective factors.

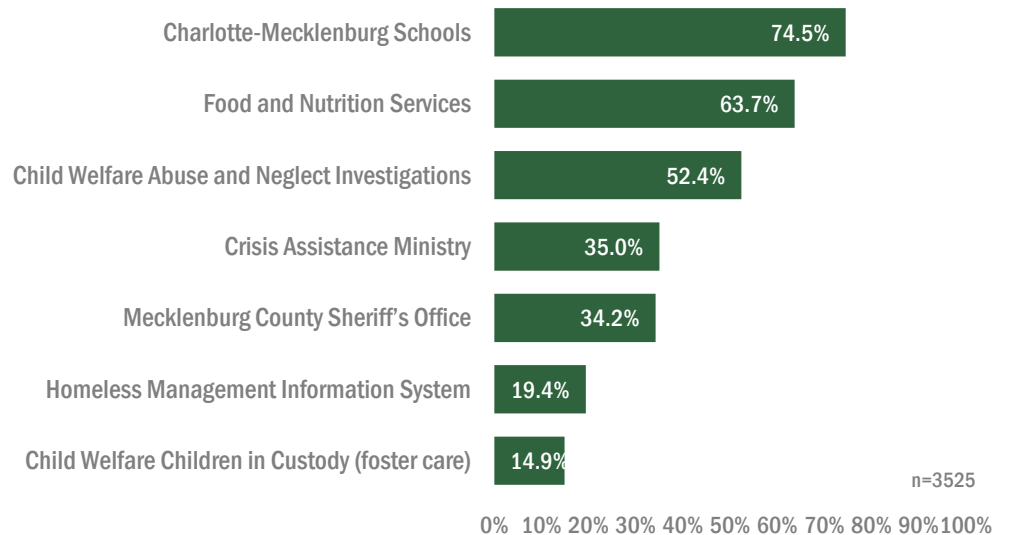
**Key Takeaway #4: Clients are heavily involved with local systems, many of which are or reflect risk factors for instability. Our local systems can do more to work together to support the long-term stability of The Relatives clients and young people with similar experiences.**

**What?**

The Relatives Impact Study Report Series re-emphasizes a lot of what is already well-known about the challenges experienced by young people who interact with one or more systems. The findings in the Report Series also demonstrate the compounding nature of system involvement; involvement with one system (i.e., child welfare) is a risk factor for and makes it more likely to interact with other systems (i.e., criminal justice).

The ways in which clients are showing up in one or more systems underscores the complexity of their situations and clearly demonstrates the interconnected nature of system involvement and the ways in which involvement with multiple systems destabilize the young people involved. Figure 9 displays the share of clients who interacted with one or more systems or programs during the study period.

**Figure 9. Clients at the Relatives showed up in multiple systems. About a three-quarters attended Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, more than half were involved with the child welfare system, and a third were booked into jail.**



**Child welfare involvement**

Integrated Data Report #2: Formative Years and Early Experiences provided a wealth of information about clients' early life experiences and involvement with the child welfare

system. We know that young people who are involved with the child welfare system and foster care have **high levels of trauma and associated mental health needs, lower rates of post-secondary education, and higher rates of homelessness** (Pecora et al., 2005), **poverty** (Doyle, 2007; Pecora et al., 2005), **criminal justice involvement** (Cutuli et al., 2016; Doyle, 2007), and homelessness. It is well documented that young people who have interacted with the child welfare system need a higher level of support to be successful.

### **Educational experiences**

Integrated Data Report #2: Formative Years and Early Experiences also provided insight about client experiences at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. We learned that **more than 70% of all Relatives clients were suspended at least once** and clients of The Relatives were suspended nearly seven times as much as Charlotte-Mecklenburg School students overall.<sup>4</sup> It is well documented that suspensions contribute to the 'school-to-prison pipeline' where **the likelihood of criminal justice-involvement, both as youth and in adulthood, is increased for students who receive a suspension** (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021; Southerland et al., 2009; Wolf & Kupchik, 2016). **Living in poverty and attending schools within communities of poverty and concentrated poverty plays a role in suspension outcomes.** Youth and young adults who live in poverty are more likely to miss school due to suspensions and miss out on learning as a result (Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010), highlighting the challenges to being successful in school that youth and young adults who live in poverty face;

**Additionally, more than 80% were chronically absent** for at least one year. Adverse childhood experiences, such as abuse and neglect, removal from the home, and other **exposure to the child welfare system are associated with chronic absenteeism**<sup>5</sup> (Stempel et al., 2017). School absenteeism, and particularly chronic absenteeism, can lead to **poorer academic performance and an increased likelihood of dropping out of school prior to graduating** (US Department of Education, 2019).

### **Homelessness and housing instability**

Integrated Data Report #3: Use of Benefits and Community Services showed us that clients reached out to The Relatives while experiencing a housing crisis, and that the

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<sup>4</sup> In the 2015/16 school year, 7.7% of all students and 11.1% of high school students were suspended at least once based on the State Board of Education Dept of Public Instruction. (2017). *Consolidated data Report, 2015-2016*.

<sup>5</sup> Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing more than 10% of the school year.

need for housing remains for some after engagement with The Relatives.<sup>6</sup> **Youth engaged with the child welfare system, especially those who have been placed in foster homes, are also more likely to experience homelessness** (Dworsky et al., 2019). Additionally, young adults who are homeless are less likely to have a high school diploma, more likely to be young parents, more likely to be from the LGBTQ community, and more likely to be Black or Latino (Morton et al., 2017). Exposure to housing instability as a child or adolescent is destabilizing and is associated with an increased **behavioral challenges, arrests, and depression** (Fowler et al., 2015; Fowler et al., 2014).

### **Criminal justice involvement**

Integrated Data Report #4: Criminal Justice and Dual System Youth highlighted that clients are interacting with the criminal justice system. **Given the risk factors described above – high rates of involvement with the child welfare system for maltreatment and foster care and high rates of school suspensions – clients of The Relatives are certainly at risk of criminal justice involvement** (Cutuli et al., 2016; Southerland et al., 2009; Wolf & Kupchik, 2016).

Fifteen percent of clients had interacted with the criminal justice system prior to their engagement with The Relatives. **It's widely cited that young people who interact with the criminal justice system once are more likely to do so again** (Aizer & Doyle, 2013; Allgood et al., 2007; Barnert et al., 2017). Criminal justice involvement also has implications for educational success. Integrated Data Report #5: Comparison Group found that **clients with a prior criminal justice interaction were more likely to withdraw from school** following service with The Relatives, and they are more likely to withdraw from school than a group of their peers, overall.

### **Dual system youth**

Integrated Data Report #4: Criminal Justice and Dual System Youth also highlighted the ways in which clients with child welfare involvement overlapped with other systems, referred to as dual system youth. For dual system youth, the risk for worse long-term outcomes is higher. **Nearly 40% of all clients were involved in the criminal justice system were involved with the child welfare system.** Of the clients who were booked into jail the year following engagement with The Relatives, roughly half were also involved in the child welfare system (see Figure 10). Additionally, 15% of clients who

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<sup>6</sup> The estimated need for ongoing housing assistance is likely an underestimate since we know that youth and young people are often overlooked in typical homeless counts because they are less likely to use traditional homeless services (Morton et al., 2017; Pergamit et al., 2013).

used emergency homeless shelter had a previous interaction with the child welfare system.

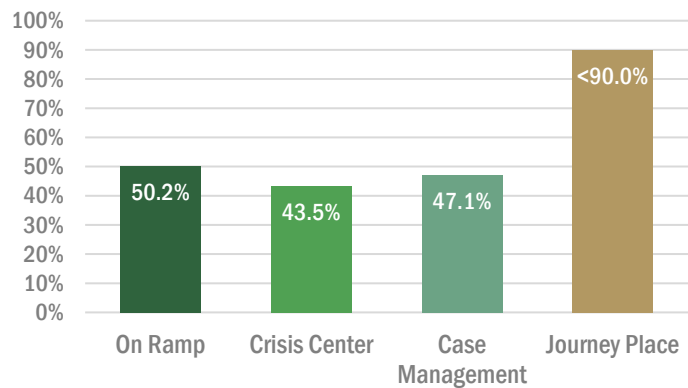
A wealth of research has been done about the long-term outcomes for dual system youth. Dual system youth have been exposed to traumatic events, been removed from their homes multiple times, have higher rates of mental health issues, and require greater system support than youth overall (Citizens for Juvenile Justice, 2015; Herz & Dierkhising, 2019). **Dual system youth have higher recidivism rates than youth without child welfare involvement** (Huang et al., 2012; Lee & Villagrana, 2015). **Dual system youth are also more likely to miss more days of school, display behaviors that result in suspension, and lower academic performance** (Gallegos & White, 2013; Hirsch et al., 2018).

### So What?

**The Relatives exists at the juncture of multi-system involvement.** Clients who have experience with multiple systems are coming to The Relatives and many of the interactions with systems are occurring before clients arrive at The Relatives.

Involvement in these systems and multiple systems have strong and negative implications for mental health and financial stability. **Every destabilizing event in a child's life - unstable housing, being removed from a family home, parent's loss of a job, and others - increases the risk for the child** (Merrick et al., 2018) and enhances the complexity of challenges clients face. This instability increases the risk of involvement in the child welfare system, which increases the likelihood of interactions with the criminal justice system (Southerland et al., 2009). These compounding factors mean it is difficult to break out of the cycle and make achieving success and stability challenging.

**Figure 10. Share clients who were booked into jail the year following engagement with The Relatives who were also involved in the child welfare system.**



Note: Housing Program excluded due to small sample sizes. See Data Report #4: Criminal Justice and Dual System Youth for more information. On Ramp n=329; Crisis Center n=168; Case Management n=102; Journey Place n=n excluded due to small sample size.

Due to the effects of historical and current systemic racism that have shaped policies that led to underinvestment in communities of color, Black children are more likely to grow up in households who live in poverty and have fewer resources (Perry, 2020). Poverty is also a strong force for involvement with one or more systems. Living in poverty creates numerous hurdles for parents such as unpredictable employment, barriers to child care and lack of reliable transportation. All of these hurdles place additional stress on parents and their children (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014).

Traumatic experiences at a young age, such as abuse and neglect, witnessing and/or experiencing violence, and loss of or a removal from a parent, have extremely negative implications for brain development. These traumatic experiences, often referred to as ACEs, contribute to heightened mental health needs and behavioral challenges, especially as young people transition into adulthood (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). **While involvement with one or more systems can negatively influence long term stability, it also provides opportunities for preventative interventions, action and collaboration to support young people in our community.** When young people are involved with systems or programs, they also have access to different supports. Connecting with young people as they engage with systems or programs creates important opportunities to focus on preventative interventions around education, housing, and health / mental health.

### **Racial equity and justice**

Better collaboration and more coordinated support for clients of The Relatives and other young people with similar experiences has **important implications for racial equity and racial justice.** More than 80% of The Relatives clients are Black or African American. That means that **Black young people disproportionately face the negative effects mentioned above related to involvement with one or more systems.** We know that the burden of trauma from child welfare system involvement is not carried equitably. There is strong evidence that suggests **Black children are referred to the child welfare system at a much higher rate than White children** (Hill, 2007; Ho & Burke, 2022). In North Carolina, as well as nationwide, Black children are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system. Although Black children make up 23% of all children in North Carolina, 28% of children involved with CWS are Black, and 26% of children in foster care are Black (DePasquale, 2020).

We also know that implicit bias, alone or combined with strict 'zero-tolerance' school policies, are also factors in school suspensions, which contributes to a disproportionate number of students of color, particularly Black males, receiving suspensions. This **racially disproportionate school discipline means that students of color are at a**



**higher risk of criminal justice involvement due to suspensions than other students** (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021; Fabelo et al., 2011; Losen, 2011).

### **Implications for meeting community-wide goals**

Addressing the needs of these clients and other young people with similar experiences has an impact on meeting larger community goals. Young people who come to The Relatives and young people with similar experiences make conversations about economic mobility, violence prevention, and other initiatives real. **The Relatives provides a starting point where these community-wide initiatives can begin to make an impact.** The Report Series makes it clear that The Relatives serves some of the most vulnerable young people in our community. Making progress on our community-wide goals is dependent on better supporting the young people who come to The Relatives and young people with similar experiences.

- 1. Economic mobility.** In 2014, Raj Chetty and his research team released a report that ranked Charlotte as dead last in economic mobility among large cities in the United States (Chetty et al., 2014). Since then, as a community, Charlotte-Mecklenburg has been focused on improving economic mobility. Given that involvement with the child welfare system, the criminal justice system, as well as experiences of poverty and barriers to education success (i.e., suspensions and absenteeism) have negative effects on financial stability, economic mobility efforts and investments should be targeted towards The Relatives clients and young people with similar experiences.
- 2. Violence prevention and crime reduction.** The Relatives Impact Report Series clearly shows that clients of The Relatives are at risk of involvement with the criminal justice system. Building stronger and better coordinated systems of support for young people at The Relatives and young people with similar experiences has immense implications for violence prevention and crime reduction. Young people who have experienced or witnessed violence, such as maltreatment, means they are more likely to perpetuate violence in the future (Aizer & Doyle, 2013). Better support for young people who have been victims of violence, may help prevent this cycle of violence. Additionally, stronger systems of support that help young people be financially stable can help reduce crimes, especially related to crimes of survival.
- 3. Improved educational outcomes and graduation rates.** Ensuring that young people at The Relatives and young people with similar experiences have the

support they need to get to school and remain in school, may have promising implications for improved educational outcomes. We know that a large share of clients were suspended and/or were chronically absent. Better collaboration between The Relatives and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools may help identify better avenues of support to help clients address trauma and be successful in school. Additionally, collaboration with [myFutureNC](#), who is working to improve statewide educational outcomes, may be another potential pathway.

## Now What?

Research and understanding related to the negative effects of the child welfare system, criminal justice system, experiences of homelessness, and school challenges have been well-documented and widely accepted for many years. The question then must shift to: **what do we do with this information to better support young people in our community?**

There are immense opportunities for stronger coordination, collaboration, and prevention across systems and initiatives. **Interventions that only address one aspect of an individual's life will likely not effect broad or long-term change.** Given the complexity of the challenges faced by clients at The Relatives, this approach is important to promoting long term stability. As mentioned previously, many of The Relatives clients experienced immense instability during childhood and did not have a familial support structure. This means that they need a surrogate system of support to be successful. Listed below are several broad suggestions for The Relatives to drive better collaboration and coordination across community systems.

**Enhance collaboration across systems to support youth and young adults who are showing up in one or more of these systems. Leverage opportunities to focus on prevention.**

Since multiple systems are involved in contributing to the negative outcomes discussed above, multiple systems also need to be involved in the solution. **The trauma and long-term impacts that The Relatives clients and other young people experience are simply too complex for any one agency or system to effectively and sustainably tackle alone.** The young people at The Relatives and other young people with similar experiences need a system of support to help them achieve long term stability and wellbeing. Just as clients need a system of support, staff at The Relatives need to have connections across systems to comprehensively support their clients and goals. Use the

information provided in this Report Series to (re)engage with partners within child welfare, criminal justice, homelessness, and education. Identify when and how collaboration may make the most sense to continue to build a network of care.

The Relatives can work with existing and new partners to enhance opportunities for preventative interventions across systems. Prevention is part of the system of support for clients. The Relatives already has a partnership with the Department of Social Services for referrals of young people aging out of foster care. Explore ways this partnership could be expanded to allow The Relatives to better understand early experiences of their clients and work to address trauma and promote wellbeing and stability. Connect with law enforcement partners to prevent interaction with the criminal justice system. Explore existing youth initiatives that are underway at law enforcement agencies and identify areas of collaborations. Work with Charlotte-Mecklenburg School partners to better understand how The Relatives may be a resource and how the agencies can work together to support student success.

### **Seek creative ways to help support financial stability for clients, especially in the short term.**

Since poverty is tied to interaction with one or more systems, The Relatives and other community partners could **explore mechanisms to provide cash assistance to clients to enhance their short- and medium-term financial stability**. Programs that provide cash assistance to young people and families who live in poverty are being piloted. Guaranteed minimum income for transition aged foster care youth was piloted in California's Santa Clara County in 2020, and then expanded statewide in 2021 (Dvorkin & Leed, 2022). New Orleans is testing a similar program where 125 young people will receive a monthly no-strings attached stipend of \$350 (Chavez, 2022). See Appendix A for more information on both initiatives. The Relatives could explore partnerships with financial institutions or other stipend-based programs to implement a guaranteed minimum income program. This would help alleviate some financial stress that clients are experiencing while following an empowerment model that allows clients to use the money as they see fit. Since poverty is so closely related to many of the adverse outcomes discussed here, providing a basic income would help stabilize clients in the short-term as they navigate barriers and work towards their goals. This is especially important since The Relatives clients don't necessarily have traditional families to turn to when in need of financial support. The Relatives could also explore other stipend-based

programs that allow clients to have a source of income as they navigate barriers and work towards their goals.

### **Enhance staff capacity to build relationships and trust across systems.**

Since The Relatives clients are involved with multiple systems, staff should also be engaged with partners within multiple systems. This is an investment in and of itself as building trust and relationships for effective partnerships takes time. The Relatives could consider hiring an additional staff member dedicated to cross-system partnerships to support clients. Alternatively, The Relatives could examine ways to focus current staff time to partnerships.

### **Connect to existing initiatives.**

There are many cross-system community initiatives that are underway to address economic mobility, violence prevention, and educational outcomes, among others. The Relatives could potentially expand their impact by connecting with these initiatives and the initiatives could be strengthened with the involvement of The Relatives. The Relatives has deep experience working with young people who live with trauma and is one of the only agencies serving young people experiencing homelessness and homelessness in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Relatives has a unique and important perspective to contribute to these initiatives. The Relatives clients serve as a starting point to pilot or target efforts related to economic mobility, violence prevention, racial equity, and other initiatives. The Relatives should consider making or deepening connections with the following initiatives and partners involved in the initiatives:

- Mecklenburg County Office of Violence Prevention. Get engaged with the Office of Violence Prevention Strategic plan aimed at preventing community violence in Mecklenburg County.
- Leading on Opportunity is the local organization working on economic mobility. In the short term, their work will be focused on improving educational outcomes. Tap into their efforts and knowledge base to explore ways to enhance economic mobility for clients.
- A Home For All is Charlotte-Mecklenburg's strategy to end and prevent homelessness. This report sets a strategic framework for homelessness prevention.
- City of Charlotte. The City of Charlotte has several ongoing mobility and investment initiatives. Explore potential pathways of collaboration and funding

through the Corridors of Opportunity Program and the Mayor's Racial Equity Program.

# Conclusion

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The Relatives Impact Study Report Series highlighted the immense complexity of the challenges and experiences of clients at The Relatives. We learned clients were involved in multiple systems that have negative effects on stability and wellbeing. As the wise phrase goes, “it takes a village to raise a child” and that is absolutely true in the case of The Relatives clients. The Report Series demonstrates that clients who come to The Relatives are not experiencing issues that can be mitigated or “fixed” in the short term. The Relatives is certainly demonstrating that stability is possible and we learned more about the strength, personal growth, and empowerment of clients. To have a larger impact on long-term stability, The Relatives needs to explore ways to keep clients engaged for longer and work with other systems and initiatives.

If the Charlotte-Mecklenburg community wants to make progress on the shared goals of economic mobility, violence prevention, racial equity, and others, efforts should be focused on creating a network of support for clients of The Relatives and other young people with similar experiences. Interventions that only address one aspect of an individual life will likely not effect broad or long-term change. Our systems must work together to create a strong network of care that promotes and supports long term stability.

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# Appendix A

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## Resource List

Interventions that only address one aspect of an individual life will likely not effect broad and long-term change. Given the complexity of the clients at The Relatives, this approach is important to promoting long term stability.

The Resource list includes best Practices around Dual System and Adverse Childhood Experiences, as well as interventions to support transition aged youth. Each item includes a link to a website or an article citation with further information.

### Dual System Youth

**Building a Brighter Future for Dual System Youth: A Policy Map Forward:** Provides best practices and policy recommendations to support dual system youth.

<https://rfknrcjj.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Building-a-Brighter-Future-For-Youth-with-Dual-Status-A-Policy-Roadmap.pdf>

**Juvenile Justice Information Exchange:** Website with resources about evidence-based best practices.

<https://jjie.org/hub/evidence-based-practices/resources/>

**Cross-over Youth Practice Model:** Information pertaining to the Cross-Over Youth Practice model designed by the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform.

<https://cjjr.georgetown.edu/our-work/crossover-youth-practice-model/>

**An evaluation of the Crossover Youth Practice Model (CYPM):** Recidivism outcomes for maltreated youth involved in the juvenile justice system: Peer reviewed article evaluating CYPM.

<https://reader.elsevier.com/reader/sd/pii/S0190740916300962?token=60DEDCE32382165A9A33C3AFD9E5EEC7E5E078CFBF7970B2D0F58AA685C0DE6D535253AA57BC7200CCC1FF0089780128&originRegion=us-east-1&originCreation=20220907143833>

**Credible Mentors and Transformative mentoring:** Provided by National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform describing mentoring programs directed at reducing violence and criminal justice system involvement using credible messengers.

<https://nicjr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/HWW-Report-2020.pdf>

### Trauma/Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

**The National Child Traumatic Stress Network:** Provides resources for assessing complex trauma and interventions for youth and young adults with complex trauma.  
<https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/complex-trauma>

**Preventing and Mitigating the Effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences:** Provides state-based strategies and policies for preventing and mitigating Adverse Childhood Experiences. This link brings you directly to the page listing interventions. Each intervention has a page with training materials and related research.

[https://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/HTML\\_LargeReports/ACEs\\_2018\\_32691.pdf](https://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/HTML_LargeReports/ACEs_2018_32691.pdf)

<https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/complex-trauma/interventions>

**Screening for Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma:** Provides best practices for screening for ACEs including an ACE Questionnaire and an Appendix with differing examples of how organizations screen and their post-screening process.

[https://www.chcs.org/media/TA-Tool-Screening-for-ACEs-and-Trauma\\_020619.pdf](https://www.chcs.org/media/TA-Tool-Screening-for-ACEs-and-Trauma_020619.pdf)

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - Adverse Childhood Experiences:**

Provides information about ACEs such as risk and protective factors, nationwide statistics and prevention strategies.

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/prevention.html>

## Local Resources

**Mecklenburg Keeping Families Together:** A program through Supportive Housing Communities that provides housing vouchers and support services to families experiencing homelessness that are involved with the Child Welfare System, or young adults that are aging out of foster care.

<https://www.mecknc.gov/CommunitySupportServices/HomelessServices/Pages/MeckKFT.aspx>

**The Way Forward:** Strategic plan from the Mecklenburg County Office of Violence Prevention to reduce community-based violence in Mecklenburg County.

<https://www.mecknc.gov/HealthDepartment/Documents/TheWayForward-0419single.pdf>

**A Home For All:** Strategic framework to end and prevention homelessness in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. This plan was developed collaboratively with stakeholders across the county.

<https://mecklenburghousingdata.org/char-meck-housing-homelessness-strategy/a-home-for-all-strategy/>

## Positive Youth Development

**Positive Youth Development (PYD):** A prevention-based initiative focused on developing assets that enable youth to thrive. PYD interventions aim to provide youth with education and life skills, opportunities to engage in diverse activities, and positive and sustained relationships with competent and caring adults and peers.

<https://youth.gov/youth-topics/key-principles-positive-youth-development>

**A recent longitudinal program evaluation of PYD:** Sheehan, K., Bhatti, P. K., Yousuf, A., Rosenow, W., Roehler, D. R., Hazekamp, C., Wu, H. W., Orbuch, R., Bartell, T., Quinlan, K., & DiCara, J. (2022). Long-term effects of a community-based positive youth development program for black youth: Health, education, and financial well-being in adulthood. *BMC Public Health*, 22(1), 1-17.

## Youth Peer Support

**Peer support workers for those in recovery.** Provided by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Discusses the role of peer workers in recovery.

<https://www.samhsa.gov/brss-tacs/recovery-support-tools/peers>

**Youth peer support.** Provided by Youth Move National. Includes resources for building a youth peer support program.

<https://youthmovenational.org/youth-peer-support/>

**Youth peer support.** Provided by Center of Innovation for Behavioral Health and Wellbeing. Offers access to certification program for youth peer support.

<https://centerofinnovationnm.org/youth-peer-support/#:~:text=Youth%20Peer%20Support%20Specialists%20connect,during%20the%20transition%20to%20adulthood.>



## Guaranteed Basic Income for young people exiting foster care and/or living in poverty

**Guaranteed Income for kids transitioning out of foster care:** by Data for Progress. Provides a description of guaranteed income for foster care and the rationale behind providing basic income.

<https://www.dataforprogress.org/memos/guaranteed-income-for-kids-transitioning-out-of-foster-care>

**Basic income for transition-age foster youth:** Adopting California's approach. Provided by Center for an Urban Future. The article highlights Santa Clara County's guaranteed income program for former foster youth as a model to be replicated in NY. The Santa Clara program was launched in 2020, and expanded statewide in 2021.

<https://nycfuture.org/research/basic-income-for-transition-age-foster-youth>

**Basic income for young people in poverty.** Article describing a guaranteed income program pilot in New Orleans that provides a monthly, no strings attached stipend of \$350 to 125 "opportunity youth" (young people disconnected from work or school despite graduating high school).

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/new-orleans-is-giving-youth-350-a-month-heres-why>