Devoicing of word final stops in African American English (AAE) appears to be one of the phonological features that is shared across regional contexts, likely connected through historical population movements and natural phonological processing. Word final /d/, the most common devoiced stop in AAE, is often replaced or reinforced with glottalization. Evidence for its transregional status comes from previous studies in a number of distinct regions in the United States (e.g. Wolfram 1969, Fasold 1972, Legum et al. 1972, Koops & Niedzielski 2009). Despite the prominence of this feature throughout the country, little sociophonetic attention has been paid to this non-socially stigmatized consonantal feature.

The Frank Porter Graham longitudinal study provides a unique opportunity to explore the development of speech from childhood through early adulthood. Beginning with 88 children in 1990, this project tracked 67 participants from infancy over 20 years, collecting a battery of academic, social, and demographic data across dispersed time points. A previous analysis (Farrington 2012) found that devoicing of word-final /d/ changes over real time from childhood through adolescence, but stabilizes by the end of high school toward a regional norm. This analysis focuses on the post-high school time point (about age 20) to examine more closely the social distribution of devoicing for a more representative sample.

This study uses instrumentally guided coding to analyze the use and distribution of word-final voiced stops for 40 working and poverty class young adults from the Piedmont region of North Carolina. Social variables in the model include a dialect density measure based on a selection of AAVE morphosyntactic features, the ethnic composition of the participant’s school, and gender. Initial results indicate that the realization of word final /d/ correlates with the dialect density measure, showing that more vernacular speakers realize /d/ differently than less vernacular speakers. In addition, the working class young adults from the FPG sample were compared to a sample of 15 AAE adult speakers from a middle class African American community in Southeast Raleigh in order to determine the effect of socioeconomic status and generation on the variable in this region. The results of this analysis suggest that within these two sample populations, devoicing of word final /d/ does not correlate with social class or generation, indicating that it is not socially stigmatized or changing over time. The analysis confirms the status of devoicing as one of the few segmental variables that marks AAE socioethnically with limited social stratification. It also underscores its status as an idiosyncratic feature in that some speakers use it extensively while others use it rarely.