

Away From Home Youth Experiences of Institutional Placements in Foster Care

Sarah Fathallah & Sarah Sullivan

A study by Think Of Us,
engaging 78 young
people with recent lived
experience in institutional
placements.

Dedication

Thank you to all 78 research participants who gracefully opened your hearts and shared your stories, art, and visions for transformative social change in this study. We dedicate this report to you and to all the other young people who have experienced institutional placements and might see their own stories reflected in these pages.

We are grateful for and celebrate your resilience, and we commit ourselves to calling out the systems that forced you to be resilient in the first place.

Lastly, we honor the life of Cornelius Fredericks and the strength of his family. May he rest in power, and may his death be a challenge to us to create a more just world for all foster youth, the world he deserved to live in.

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This research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Marina Nitze, Whitney Robertson, Torian Ugworji, Rafael Siqueiros, Phoenix Santiago, Kathleen Rivera, Denise Manthei, Jodie Austin, Liliana Hernandez, and Erick Godsey for providing inspiration and thoughtful comments and feedback throughout this project.

Thank you to our thorough, insightful peer reviewers: Allison Holmes and Jeffrey Poirier from the Annie E. Casey Foundation; Peter J. Pecora from Casey Family Programs; Sharon Vandivere Jan DeCoursey, Alaina Flannigan, Elizabeth Jordan, Karin Malm, Rachel Rosenberg, Kristina Rosinsky, Berenice Rushovich, and Kristin Sepulveda at Child Trends; our 44 participants for completing the Participant Review; and to Angelique Day, Eddy Vanderkwaak, Lexie Grüber-Pérez, Dameon Caldwell, and Justin Kidder who composed our Lived Expert Review Board.

Thanks to Alba N. Villamil, Danny Spitzberg, Rose Kue, and the other researchers who supported the team in thinking through the research justice considerations for this study.

Thank you also to A.D. Sean Lewis for their brilliant editing and to Emma Webb, Dominik Webb, and Roger Scott for their beautiful design. Thanks also to Lauren Carl, Audrey Garden, Emily Shaw, Karl Hanh, David Fouse, D.J. Jordan, and the full team at Pinkston for expertly leading our communications.

Our sincere gratitude goes to Sandra Gasca-Gonzalez, Gina Davis, Evette Jackson, Leslie Gross, Meha Desai, Doreen Chapman, and all those at the Annie E. Casey Foundation for your steadfast support and firm commitment to centering young people in this conversation. Thank you also to Crystal Williams and all of those at Casey Family Programs who have supported this project.

Thank you to the entire team at Think Of Us, including Jess Skylar who makes this project and everything else at Think Of Us possible.

Finally our deep thanks goes to the research team: to Anne Marie Ambrose and Rodney Brittingham for your willingness to go on this journey together and for your resolve to ensure child welfare does better by the youth it serves, to Alexandria Ware for being the compassionate, trusted face of this team to youth, to Bobbi Taylor for keeping us honest always and true to the voices of young people, and to Sixto Cancel for pushing us so urgently toward the more beautiful world you see in your dreams.

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Trigger and content warnings

This report contains descriptions of:

- Physical violence
- Sexual violence
- Emotional and verbal abuse
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Eating disorders
- Mental health and mental illness
- Suicide and self-harm
- Racism
- Ableism
- Homophobia and transphobia
- Islamophobia

Foreword

I don't have the language to fully explain the guilt I carry for my youngest brother.

The last time we lived together, I was seven years old, and he was five. We lived with our biological mother for only a year before we found ourselves in the foster care system, again. The system separated all five of us kids and placed us in different homes. I didn't reconnect with my brother again until I was 14—seven years of being disconnected, not knowing where he was.

His adoptive aunt and I rode for an hour into the deep woods of Connecticut. We arrived at a campus with several buildings. Fences reached high into the sky with barbed wires towering on top of them. A police car that read *Department of Children and Families* was parked at the entryway.

As I completed the paperwork to sign in, the security guard asked me to go through the metal detector. Then the guard pulled out his wand and patted me down. We went through the first set of doors. Those closed before we went through the second set. The security protocols made me feel hyper vigilant. All I could think was, "Damn, my little brother must be a very bad person to end up in a place like this." Who was this sibling I was about to visit?

Once I walked into the room, I could tell it was my brother. But there was something disturbingly different. I remembered my little brother as curious, energetic. He could never stop talking. But at that moment, he was hollow, empty. His words were slow paced and lacked inflection, making his voice almost unrecognizable. My brother felt soulless.



Sixto Cancel
Chief Executive Officer
Think Of Us

"Why haven't you ever called?" he asked. Immediately I was scared. Staff warned me that he was violent, that I had to be very careful not to trigger him. I couldn't bring myself to tell him that I hadn't called because I was couchsurfing at the time. I was too busy surviving. He changed the conversation to show me the scar on his chin from staff restraining him. "Look at what they did to me."

Despite both of us being desperate for sibling connection, for almost 10 years, I believed the story the system told me about my brother: that he deserved to live in institutions because he was violent, dangerous, and bad. The narrative the system told us about who we were was so loud that it drowned out the simple truth that was right in front of my eyes: my brother had experienced impossible loss, and was suffering as any of us in his situation would. It took a decade before I finally got to know who my brother is, before I realized how wrong the narrative the system told us was. The guilt I carry from failing to understand my little brother earlier is hard to shake or fully explain.

When my brother was nine, the system placed him in an institution after his adoptive mother died suddenly. He was deemed too emotional, so they placed him in a group home. He continued in group homes with the exception of one year until he aged out of foster care at 18.

Prior to group care, my brother, like so many of us in foster care, had foster parents repeatedly tell him, “I love you.” “You are family.” “You are safe with us.” But each move brought a new home, new rules, new people, betrayed trust, and a broken heart. There is something that fundamentally messes with the core of your being when you believe people love you, when they take you in, when they make you promises, and then they dispose of you. Then, the system moves you, and asks you to trust and love again.

Added to this is the heartbreak of losing your adoptive mother. Added is the heartbreak of being shipped away to a group home because your emotions are “too much” for those around you. Added is the heartbreak of being looked at differently by your own family.

During this study, it became clear to me that I judged my brother’s failure to comply with a point-based behavior system more than I cared to ask him what he needed or how he was doing. I couldn’t see the injustice of him being violently restrained because I couldn’t hear past the assessment that he was “bad.” I did not question the rationale of the system, which found it acceptable to take away his visits when he had a bad week. I expected him to thrive, to develop herculean personal resilience all the while stuck in an setting impossible to get out of.

I wish I could say that I am the only one who has accepted the false stories the system has told us. But I am not. I wish I could say that my failure to see my brother’s wholeness was due at the time to my young, adolescent brain. But it was not. So many people who work in the system have also failed to see the truth, failed to see youth in their full humanity. Too many have succumbed to the convenience of group homes and institutions, rather than commit to the work of placing youth and teenagers with family.

When we started the journey of *Away From Home* to explore youths’ experiences in institutional placements in foster care, I knew that group homes prevented important family relationships and friendships from happening. I knew they had problems. But I thought institutional placements had a purpose. Once this study began, what became clear was the weight of the nuances in the stories of young people we heard and believed, as well as the structural inequities, harm, and oppression institutions subject to those who live in them. After this study, it has become clear to me that institutions must be eliminated.

The system offered me the most dehumanizing lens through which to view my brother and other young people in institutions like him. Now I see, there was no attempt at healing in those placements. In fact, I was used as bait to try to get my brother to “behave.” I never got to see the real him.

Now that I see these truths, now that I have a different understanding, all I can say is, “I finally see you, and I am sorry, bro.”

I dedicate this work to my brother, and to every young person whose institutional placement experience widened the gap of feeling loved, made feeling cared for inconceivable, blocked the opportunity to go to college, to work, or to achieve their dreams. You have been wronged. Through this report, I want you to know: We see you, we hear you, and your feelings and experiences are valid. It is my deepest hope that the truth in this report will drive the rest of the world to see you, hear you, and do what they can to fight the oppressive structures you were forced to survive.



Sixto Cancel
July, 2021



Executive Summary

“Four plastic paneled white walls, small space. Bed is anchored to the floor. Bulletproof window that doesn’t open. A little window in your door so the staff can view whatever you’re doing whenever they want. A mattress about as thick as a pizza box. A blanket as stiff as cardboard.”

(MP-MT-MN-01)

Since the creation of the modern child welfare system, child welfare has sent a percentage of youth in foster care to live in institutional placements, not with relatives or foster families. Of the hundreds of thousands of young people in foster care systems each year, over 43,823 (AFCARS, 2020), or 10%, are in group homes or institutional placements, but in some states, that number is much higher, topping over 30% (Children’s Bureau, 2015).

Over the years, many reports, investigations, and assessments have shed light on the conditions that foster youth experience in institutional placements. For instance, a 2015 Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) report found that over 40% of children in institutions do not have a clinical reason for that acute of a setting (Children’s Bureau, 2015). A seminal study reported that residential treatment facilities lack oversight, and protective health and safety practices, and engage in substandard treatment, rights violations, and abuse (Behar et. al., 2007). Another study has shown how youth exposed to institutional care often suffer from “structural neglect” which may include minimum physical resources, unfavorable and unstable staffing patterns, and social-emotionally inadequate caregiver-child interactions” (Van IJzendoorn et al., 2011). Researchers have documented how institutions often fracture family relationships, rely on shift staff with often inadequate training and high turnover rates, expose youths to negative peer experiences (James, 2011), engage in restrictive placement policies, and mismatch placement decisions based on level of care needed (Lardner, 2015). A 2013 study by the National Disability Rights Network found that child welfare routinely placed youth with disabilities in institutions with “extremely restrictive settings” and “in settings that are not remotely designed for their needs” (National Disability Rights Network, 2013) which implicates the Americans with Disabilities Act (Juvenile Law Center, 2015). These and other reports have led to a growing movement calling for the reduction or elimination of institutional placements in foster care.

Despite this growing body of evidence, institutional placements persist. With little being done to overhaul the system, we believe that what is missing from the conversation is a deep, nuanced understanding of the lived experience and mental models of young people who have recently lived in institutional placements while in foster care, an understanding of institutional placements from youths’ perspectives. This study exists to fill that gap.

In September 2020, Think Of Us led a team of seven researchers who conducted a study to understand the perspectives, attitudes, and experiences of young people with recent histories in institutional placements, and to understand their beliefs around reforming or ending institutional placements. The goal of this report is to share the stories and insights of youth with lived experience that surfaced during the study.

This study used two qualitative social research methods: interviews and cultural probes. The individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews sought to get a full picture of young people's experiences before, during, and after institutional placements. These interviews also sought to elicit participants' perspectives on and attitudes towards institutional placements and their opinions about reform. Cultural probes are a research technique with open-ended activities given to participants to uncover the emotional and evocative thoughts young people associate with institutional placements.

Responses to cultural probes include poems, photographs, and visual art. In total, the study engaged 78 different participants who were between 18 and 25 years old: 22 young people in interviews alone, 41 in cultural probes alone, and 15 in both. The team ensured a wide representation of experiences in foster care among participants, including diversity among youth's perceived experience with their institutional placements.

In this study, institutional placements include all forms of live-in, out-of-home, non-family placements in foster care, such as:

- Group care placements (e.g., non-clinical residential homes, group homes, congregate care);
- Homes for pregnant and parenting teens;
- Therapeutic residential treatment placements;
- Transitional and emergency shelters; and
- Other out-of-home placements such as assessment centers, institutions, or any similar settings.

The Appendices contain a fuller description of the methodology and the terminology used throughout this report.

This report draws an important distinction between institutional placements, where youth live as a placement, and treatment facilities where youth stay to receive short-term treatment for acute experiences. Short-term treatment facilities, particularly for psychiatric interventions, are not included in this definition of institutional placements or in the scope of this study. This report also draws a distinction between institutional placements in foster care and placements for youth involved in the criminal legal system, including juvenile justice placements, jails, and prisons. While this research did include participants with lived experience in institutions in both foster care and juvenile justice settings, institutions outside of foster care are not included in the scope of this study.

That said, while short-term acute treatment facilities and institutional settings outside of child welfare like juvenile justice placements are out of scope for this study, youth who have experienced those settings may find commonalities with the experiences of participants in this study, especially as many youth intersect with multiple systems. Leaders working on addressing issues in those settings may find implications for their work in this study.

We begin this report with an Introduction that lays the foundation for why this conversation is urgent now and why we must center those with lived experience in it. Recently, institutional placements in foster care came under closer scrutiny: as the high cost of institutional placements becomes more apparent; as COVID-19 spread more rapidly in congregate settings of all kinds; as states prepare to implement the Family First Prevention Services Act which seeks to limit the use of congregate or group care for children and instead places a new emphasis on family foster homes; as the nation faces a deep reckoning with longstanding institutionalized racism; and as the child welfare system contends with the aftermath of the killing of Cornelius Fredericks, a 16-year old Black teenager, at the hands of staff in a Michigan group home. These events sparked leaders both within and outside of child welfare to take an urgent, critical look at institutional placements and their role in foster care, with many calling to dramatically reduce and eliminate them.

The report then presents the Detailed Findings of the study. The Detailed Findings are the insights we uncovered about participants' experiences in institutions. The Detailed Findings are supported by direct quotes from participants as well as their cultural probe artifacts including poems, art, and photographs. All direct quotes and cultural probes are identified with a participant code to preserve anonymity. For some of the cultural probes, participants wanted direct attribution for their art, and in those cases they are identified by their partial or full name. The Detailed Findings are structured around eleven themes. These themes range from the physical environment in institutional placements, the staff working in institutional placements, and the relationships that youth had before, during, and after these placements to youth's educational attainment, punishment and discipline in institutional placements, youth's access to basic necessities and services, and the perceived impact that their experience in institutional placements has had on their life. Our overall conclusion is that on the whole, young people reported very challenging experiences in institutional placements, and most found little to no long term value from them.

Following the Detailed Findings, the report offers Big Picture Conclusions, which bring attention to the overarching patterns that emerge from the specific themes in the findings.

For example, take the act of using the bathroom. Throughout the Detailed Findings, we cite several insights related to using the bathroom while in institutional placements. During the study, we heard story after story of youth only being allowed to go to the bathroom at specific times of the day and for only a few minutes. For many, the bathroom was the only opportunity for privacy or time alone.

We heard how youth with an afro, locs, or curly hair were unable to care for it in the time they were allotted in the bathroom, and how some did not have access to the hair and skin care products that best fit their needs. Youth shared how they got so used to having to ask for permission before going to the restroom, that—much to their embarrassment—they could not shake that behavior even long after they left institutional placements. In this one simple act that most of us take for granted lie many instances of unjust control and violence against youths' humanity, privacy, culture, autonomy, self-expression, and ability to make their own life choices.

This one example, albeit seemingly trivial, demonstrates the interconnectedness of the different findings. The Big Picture Conclusions are an invitation to take a step back and look at the overarching patterns that emerge across the Detailed Findings.

Lastly, the report provides Recommendations and Alternatives to Institutional Placements for leaders within and outside of child welfare. After hearing young people's experiences in these placements, Think Of Us cannot—in good conscience—recommend that institutional placements be upheld in any way. All possible benefits to institutions that we heard seemed negligible when compared to the overwhelming and obvious harm they caused the vast majority of participants. This section makes a bold call for eliminating institutional placements in foster care in the United States and replacing them with family-based alternatives, a claim that we hope the findings of this report will make urgent and imperative.

This call is not just about eliminating institutions, it's also about building up the world in which institutions are rendered obsolete. It's about providing the resources to communities to prevent entry into care in the first place. It's also about supporting care work in communities by expanding the system's definition of kin and strengthening kinship care, and it's about bettering foster home placements as well as centering lived experience in all policy decisions regarding institutions.

Summary of Findings

The table below enumerates the findings.

1. Being placed in institutional settings

Finding 1.1.

Foster youth often vividly remembered their entrance into institutional placements—even long after they were gone.

Finding 1.2.

Though institutional placements were perceived as a last resort, many experienced them as a first placement in foster care.

Finding 1.3.

Many youth ended up in institutional placements because case workers believed there were no other placement options for them, not because institutional placements would be best for them.

Finding 1.4.

Youth internalized blame for why they ended up in institutional placements, developing shame and feelings of unworthiness, and believing that they were being punished.

2. Meeting basic needs

Finding 2.1.

Institutional placements did provide shelter for youth, though the physical environments and the sleeping arrangements were not the most welcoming or comfortable.

Finding 2.2.

Youth were grateful to reliably receive meals at group homes, though many felt that the quality of the food that institutions served was subpar and lacking nutrition.

Finding 2.3.

The hygiene, hair, and skin care products and services youth had access to were neither reliably sufficient nor culturally sensitive.

Finding 2.4.

Youth were provided the bare minimum clothing necessities, which did not provide much room for self-expression.

Finding 2.5.

Some youth felt as though they had to work for the institution in order to have their needs met.

Finding 2.6.

Youth appreciated the predictable structure that their institutional placements provided, but their schedule was highly policed.

Finding 2.7.

Youth in institutional placements were in survival mode.

3. Interacting with staff and other youth

Finding 3.1.

While some youth experienced caring, meaningful relationships with staff, overall caring staff relationships were the exception to the rule. Youth often perceived staff as unkind, cruel, untrustworthy, and indifferent.

Finding 3.2.

Youth felt that staff lacked sufficient training, capacity, professionalism, and accountability, and that staff could abuse their power on the job.

Finding 3.3.

Youth experienced mental, physical, and sexual abuse at the hands of staff.

Finding 3.4.

Youth experienced discrimination by staff.

Finding 3.5.

Institutional placements created hyper competitive, cutthroat environments among youth where they felt that their survival was at the expense of the others.

4. Learning and achieving academically

Finding 4.1.

There were strong disparities between youth who were educated at their public school versus on-site at institutional placements, and many who were educated on-site lacked appropriate education.

Finding 4.2.

Regardless of where youth were educated, many youth reported a lack of educational stability, support, and resources.

Finding 4.3.

Some youth did not feel they got a strong education, which diminished their ability to succeed in adulthood.

Finding 4.4.

Youth often exited care without adequate life skills, and because they had been largely removed from society, many youth “didn’t know what they didn’t know.”

5. Developing socially and emotionally

Finding 5.1.

Youth lacked love.

Finding 5.2.

Without sufficient unconditional love, many youth blamed themselves and became emotionally shut down or detached.

Finding 5.3.

Youth often missed out on normal, age-appropriate activities, crucial to their social development and sense of normalcy.

6. Building and maintaining connections

Finding 6.1.

Youths’ relationships were highly restricted and surveilled in institutional placements.

Finding 6.2.

The instability and restrictions of institutional placements made it almost impossible to build and maintain friendships.

Finding 6.3.

Youth often felt isolated.

Finding 6.4.

Youth often felt too embarrassed to tell others they were in an institutional placement. This left their supportive network out of the loop and unable to step in to help.

Finding 6.5.

Youth lacked basic access to technology and the communication tools needed to stay in touch with the people in their lives.

7. Receiving punishment and discipline

Finding 7.1.

Youth in institutional settings were constantly assessed against one another.

Finding 7.2.

Youth frequently compared institutional placements to prison, as institutional placements have many functions of a carceral environment: confined, surveilling, punitive, restrictive, and degrading.

Finding 7.3.

Without sufficient alternative coping mechanisms, youth often attempted to escape institutional placements by running away resulting in increased interactions with law enforcement.

Finding 7.4.

Institutional placements relied on overly harsh and unproductive punishments to discipline youth instead of giving them the opportunities for positive disciplinary methods and healthy risk taking needed for their development.

Finding 7.5.

Youth were forcibly restrained.

8. Healing and dealing with trauma

Finding 8.1.

When youth entered institutional placements, they brought with them complex experiences with trauma.

Finding 8.2.

That original trauma was compounded by the trauma of institutionalization and then aggravated by the first or second-hand abuse that many experienced in those placements.

Finding 8.3.

For many youth, their trauma was pathologized, rather than addressed and tended to in a humane way.

Finding 8.4.

Medication was often the only coping mechanism offered to address trauma. Many youth felt they were wrongly diagnosed or overmedicated.

Finding 8.5.

Often without support, youth discovered and developed coping mechanisms to survive the system.

9. Nurturing a sense of self

Finding 9.1.

Many youth felt they were treated not as an individual, but instead, as a group or as a series of case numbers. For some youth, this felt dehumanizing.

Finding 9.2.

Youth had limited privacy.

Finding 9.3.

Youth had very little bodily autonomy and self-determination, making it difficult to experience any agency or autonomy.

10. Reflecting on institutional placements

Finding 10.1.

Institutional placements felt unsafe.

Finding 10.2.

For youth, institutional placements were places they needed to get out of.

Finding 10.3.

Youth held on to the idea that they were only in the institutional placements temporarily but that did not align with the financial incentives of institutional placements that benefited from increasing youth's length of time in their care.

Finding 10.4.

Building a life after institutional placements was even more challenging when youth were not equipped with the social, emotional, or life skills needed to thrive.

Finding 10.5.

Foster youth believe that their past made them the resilient people they are today.

11. Reforming or ending institutional placements

Finding 11.1.

During youths' most formative years, the system repeated to them that there was nowhere else for them to go. This killed youths' imaginative capacity to envision what could lie beyond institutional placements.

Finding 11.2.

Because a different world was hard to fathom, youth often suggested only modest reforms to institutional placements.

Finding 11.3.

Youth often felt that a world without institutions would lead to homelessness. For them, the options were either institutional placements or the streets.

Finding 11.4.

Youth felt that family placements would be better than institutions, but only with improvements to the foster family system. Such improvements could include removing barriers to kinship care, recruiting more loving families, ensuring families foster adolescents, supporting families in taking care of youth with higher needs, thwarting abuse in foster families.

Finding 11.5.

Almost no youth felt that an institutional placement was the best placement for them personally. When youth objected to the idea of ending institutional placements, their concern was for "other" youth.

Finding 11.6.

Once youth were invited to imagine a world with enough suitable, loving family placements—and they started to believe that that world might be possible—they preferred that world to one with institutional placements.



Introduction

“I hope people realize how important it is for youth to be treated like normal kids, and not like we did something wrong.”

(MP-ST-PA-01)

Why Now?

On April 29, 2020, Cornelius Fredericks, a 16-year old Black teenager in foster care, screamed, “I can’t breathe,” as several staff used a prone restraint on him for nearly 10 minutes for throwing a sandwich in a Michigan group care facility (Estate of Cornelius Fredericks vs. Lakeside for Children, 2021). He went into cardiac arrest and died on May 1 at the hospital. Doctors subsequently determined that he was COVID-19 positive. It was later discovered that close to forty other residents and nine staff members at the institution were also positive. Cornelius had lived in institutions in foster care for four years, and reports indicate he was placed there due to post-traumatic stress disorder following traumatic events, including the death of his mother when he was 10 (Moore, 2020).

Fallout from Cornelius’s death and the subsequent media coverage was swift. The staff members were charged with involuntary manslaughter, the facility was shut down, and the for-profit provider was banned from caring for children and youth in the state of Michigan. The Michigan Department of Health and Human Service now forbids any restraints that restrict breathing, including prone restraints in which a child is face down while being restrained, inside the child care institutions licensed in Michigan. However, this does not bring Cornelius back to life or bring justice to his family.

For child welfare, the death of Cornelius Fredericks sparked a moment of profound reflection about the use of institutional placements in foster care. To fully comprehend the pertinent timeliness of this moment, Cornelius’s story must be told in a broader context of policies, systems, and events. While many have scrutinized the appropriateness of institutional placements in foster care for years, recent events have brought well-deserved urgency in challenging and questioning the need for their existence.

The Use of Restraints and Harm in Institutional Placements

Cornelius Fredericks’s tragedy is not uncommon. Though statistics about how many young people in institutional settings encounter physical harm are hard to find, Cornelius’s story mirrors that of at least thousands of other foster youth who are punched, kicked, choked, and sexually assaulted while in institutional care (Palomino et. al., 2019). Cornelius’s story reveals the dark history of the use of mechanical and chemical restraints and seclusion practices that subject physical and psychological harm on youth institutionalized in foster care (Robert, 2020). Many have noted that these practices pose a myriad of potential and substantiated civil and human rights violations to foster youth. In 2020, a federal judge in Iowa ruled that the use of a particular restraining device at an institution for youth with disabilities was in violation of the United Nations Convention Against Torture (Clayworth, 2020).

The COVID-19 Pandemic

Throughout 2020, as COVID-19 spread more rapidly in congregate settings of all kinds such as nursing homes, prisons, and the group facility where Cornelius Fredericks lived, many leaders began considering and implementing ways to rapidly depopulate institutions. In child welfare, this meant looking at depopulating institutional placements in foster care, and many states and organizations began prioritizing finding alternative foster care placements for youth in group care during the pandemic. This raised now-evident questions: If child welfare can find suitable, safe, family-based placements for youth during the COVID-19 crisis, why can’t it continue to do so when the crisis is over? Are institutional placements really necessary if the system can find meaningful alternatives to them?

The Role of Relationships

Institutional placements persist, in part, because of the belief that there is nowhere else for youth to go. There is a common misconception within child welfare that foster youth—especially those in institutions—do not have supportive people in their lives. Previous research by Think Of Us found that foster youth do, in fact, have meaningful relationships with supportive people (Think Of Us, 2020). This was true for Cornelius Fredericks, who had an active relationship with his aunt Tenia Goshay. Reports indicate that Tenia spoke to her nephew weekly. Tenia had even adopted one of Cornelius's siblings, and she ensured that Cornelius spoke regularly to his brother. Staff were in conversation with Tenia about being a possible placement option for Cornelius. She was with Cornelius at the hospital where he died (Moore, 2020).

A growing body of research is proving the critical role that relationships play in overcoming trauma. Buffering relationships help young people who have experienced Adverse Childhood Events (ACEs) from developing the long-term consequences of ACEs (Burke Harris, 2018). Reports indicate that Cornelius was originally placed in institutions because of post-traumatic stress disorder following traumatic events, including the death of his mother (Moore, 2020). Yet, emerging research indicates that it is exactly those who have experienced ACEs who need relationships, such as those found in family-based settings, most urgently (Burke Harris, 2018). Supportive relationships also play other important roles such as building youth's social capital which bolsters their success in education and employment (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2012).

Institutionalized Racism in Child Welfare

The murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Jacob Blake, Nina Pop, Sean Reed, Tony McDade and others at the hands of police during 2020 sparked a renewed national conversation about institutionalized racism in the United States. Unfortunately, the child welfare system is no exception to institutionalized racism, and it inflicts disproportionate harm to Black, Brown, and Indigenous youth. Michigan's child welfare system was Cornelius's legal "parent" when he was killed.

Black youth and other youth of color are overrepresented in foster care and in group care. Black youth comprise 13% of the general U.S. population of youth under 18, but represent 23% of the total foster care population, and 30% of the total group care population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). 13 out of every 1,000 Native American/Alaska Native youth are in foster care. Black youth spend an average of 29 months in out-of-home placements and Latinx youth spend 23 months, while white children spend an average of 18 months in institutional placements (Raimon et. al., 2015). This number grows larger when looking at older children and adolescents. Black youth over age 10 are significantly less likely to be reunited with family than white youth (Raimon et. al., 2015).

Many may normalize and justify the existence of the foster care system and institutionalization as necessary to save children from "bad" families. While laudable, this justification ignores the troubling and long history of the state systematically and disproportionately removing children of color from their families. This history ranges from the practice of buying and selling children of slaves and "orphan trains" that shipped immigrant children to white families.

This history includes the forced removal and placement of Indigenous children in schools and with adoptive families in order to “civilize” them (Movement for Family Power, n.d.).

This justification of “bad” families also often regards the survival tactics families in poverty deploy to care for their children as a metonym for child neglect. This results in government practices that prioritize separating families rather than preserving them despite a strong body of research that supports the association between family preservation and child well being (Gupta, 2017).

Lastly, this justification also overlooks the structural forces that create conditions of poverty and marginalization that subject poor, immigrant, Black, Brown, Indigenous, single-parent, and non-traditional families to more policing. More policing leads to more involvement with child protective services and to unjust control over their children and parenting decisions. That story leaves out the “multi-billion-dollar government apparatus that regulates millions of marginalized people through intrusive investigations, monitoring and forcible removal of children from their homes” and destroys “Black, Brown and Indigenous families in the name of child protection” (Roberts, 2020), resulting in often irreversibly fractured family relationships. These conditions have led many to refer to child welfare as the “family regulation system” (Williams, 2020).

A New Law: The Family First Prevention Services Act

Signed into law in 2018, the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) represents historic reforms to federal child welfare policy. FFPSA restructures federal funding of child welfare with the goal of ensuring youth live with families. FFPSA does this by providing improved and expanded services for families, which will help prevent youth from entering foster care unnecessarily and allow more children to remain in their homes. In foster care, FFPSA prioritizes family-based placements by bolstering the established mandate that foster youth must be placed in the least restrictive home-like placement possible (Kelly, 2018), investing in kinship placements, and limiting funds for institutional placements.

Under FFPSA, federal funds via Title IV-E “will be available for the first two weeks of any placement in a non-family setting. After that initial period, a placement not with a family must meet new criteria to be eligible for Title IV-E foster care maintenance reimbursement” (Children’s Defense Fund, 2020). FFPSA also creates the designation of Quality Residential Treatment Program (QRTP) which sets higher standards for therapeutic treatment facilities and restricts federal reimbursements to ensure non-family settings are predominantly used for specific therapeutic purposes. For federal funds, states and tribes must implement the new requirements of QRTP by October 1, 2021. Generally speaking, FFPSA shifts resources in child welfare to prevention services and family-based foster care placements and broadly reduces federal support for institutional placements and non-family placements. We cannot know how Cornelius’s life would have been different, had this law been fully implemented and had these services been more readily available to his family prior to his death.

The Cost of Institutional Placements

Over the last year, many have pointed out the economic cost of institutions citing that institutional placements cost as much as ten times the cost of placing a child with a family. In some instances, when children receive additional mental health services or are placed into group settings out of their state of residence, the costs increase even further (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015). In 2019 the state of Michigan, where Cornelius Fredericks lived, spent over \$95 million to institutionalize youth (Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). A reduction or elimination of institutional placements would mean a dramatic cost savings for child welfare jurisdictions to reinvest in other, more effective services.

A Growing Movement Calling for an End to Institutions

There is a growing movement calling for a reduction or end to institutionalization in foster care. The federal government has redirected funds away from institutional placements through FFPSA. Leading foundations in child welfare including the Annie E. Casey Foundation have renewed efforts to dramatically reduce and eliminate group care (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015). The most recent research by The Lancet advocates for the deinstitutionalization of foster children and youth (Boyce, 2020). The disability justice community has spoken out against institutions for decades, calling on the government to create pathways for people with disabilities to stay in their homes by offering increased funding for home- and community-based services (Heumann, 2021).

Groups like the Abolition and Disability Justice Collective urges us to avoid reforms that “expand funding for mandatory services like psych hospitals or psychiatrization more broadly, or mandatory check-ups by medical professionals, Child Protective Services, etc.” (The Abolition and Disability Justice Collective, 2020).

Movements like upEND have sought to end group care placements and institutionalized settings including group homes, detention centers, and residential treatment centers and have called for developing “alternate solutions and community supports that allow children the opportunity to live in settings where they can be loved and nurtured by their families and communities” (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2020).

Why This Study?

While the above are important arguments, missing from the conversation is a deep, nuanced understanding of the current mental models of young people who have recently lived in institutional placements in foster care. The voices of those with lived experiences must be centered in this conversation, and child welfare leadership must incorporate these perspectives in the process of deciding what to do about institutional placements.

Initiated in September 2020, this study used qualitative social research methods that aimed at putting the foster youth experience front and center. The research team conducted in-depth research interviews and cultural probes in a mutualistic, trauma-informed, and participatory way in order to value current and former foster youth as the owners of their own stories. The research process itself was designed and facilitated to counter dominance behaviors in interactions between the research team and participants, to compensate and share resources with participants in a way that commits to improving their material conditions, and to give participants opportunities to make choices for themselves through transparency and increased opportunities for youth agenda.

Following the research, Think Of Us engaged in a robust and multifaceted peer review process. Researchers from the Annie E. Casey Foundation completed a critical review. Child Trends conducted an academic peer review, evaluating the methodology as well as the significance, content, and style of this report. Think Of Us invited all 78 research participants to conduct a participant review where they corrected, nuanced, and reacted to the research findings, artifacts, and recommendations. Of the total 78 participants, 44 participated in this participant review. Think Of Us also formed a Lived Expert Review Board, consisting of five subject matter experts in child welfare, who had personal lived experience in foster care, who had personal lived experience in foster care. The Lived Expert Review Board conducted a thorough peer review of the report, supported in the framing of conclusions and recommendations, and provided guidance on how to incorporate comments from research participants, as well as how to disseminate the study's findings in a way that would support advocacy or other objectives.

Throughout the report, readers will find many direct quotes, poems, and visual artifacts from the participants which highlight their voices, perspectives, and testimonies and center the people who have survived these placements in this work. All direct quotes and cultural probes are identified with a participant code to preserve anonymity. For some of the cultural probes, participants wanted direct attribution for their art, and in those cases they are identified by their partial or full name.

Rather than seeing these stories as one-off anecdotes, we urge the readers to consider this as an effort to understand the patterns of experiences that exist across young people, while giving each and everyone of their voices due recognition.

Acting on the pleas and recommendations of young people in this report is how we ensure their stories have not fallen on deaf ears. We hope this report will serve as a beginning—and not the end—of the radical act of centering lived experience and youth voices in the framing, design, and execution of the policies, campaigns, and actions meant to serve them. As child welfare leaders take action to reduce and eliminate institutional placements, we ask them to never again move forward without giving lived experts a seat at the table when making decisions and co-designing implementation.

As academics and others conduct further research, we hope you will choose to give real opportunities for participants to make choices for themselves in the research process and in the outcomes of that process, so participants can be empowered to advocate for their needs and remain in control of their own experience, and we ask you to include people with lived experience on research teams and in peer review processes.



Detailed Findings

“You are almost seen as someone not deemed to function out in society. Therefore normal societal privileges are taken and locked away for the remainder of your stay. This is very problematic because many youth age out of these facilities. How can someone be successful outside after being institutionalized for so long?”

(MP-MT-CO-01)

The Detailed Findings in this section are the insights we uncovered about participants' experiences in institutions and represent a synthesis of the perceptions participants shared with the research team. The Detailed Findings are grouped together by theme.

The Detailed Findings are substantiated by direct quotes from participants from both the individual interviews and participant reviews. Additionally, the findings are sometimes illustrated with artifacts from the cultural probes—poems, drawings, collages, or photographs—submitted by participants.

All direct quotes and artifacts are identified with a participant code, which allows us to protect the participant's anonymity while allowing the reader to understand the type of institutional placements the participant experienced, the combined duration of time they spent in said placements, and the state they lived in. For more information about the participant codes, please see the methodology in the Appendices.

For some of the cultural probes, participants wanted direct attribution for their art, and in those cases we have identified them by their initials, nickname, or full name, based on their own stated preference.

Where appropriate, the report provides additional context with citations to secondary sources.

1. Being placed in institutional settings

Finding 1.1.

Foster youth often vividly remembered their entrance into institutional placements—even long after they were gone.

For many youth, entering into a group home is a significant life event that is etched into their memories and lives forever. Youth often vividly remembered and reported the exact calendar day they were first placed in a group home—even when the event occurred many years ago.

“I came into custody on November 11, 2015.”

(MP-MT-GA-01)

After they exit a group home, youth will sometimes track their lives based on that event and track the anniversary of that date. While placing a youth in a group home might be a routine event for a social worker or staff, it is often a significant, life-changing moment in the life of a young person.

“I am now 25 years old, and I can still vividly remember riding in the back of a police car to a group care mental health facility that they deemed was best to meet my needs...I was only 13 years old, and that day arriving at that facility is still as clear as yesterday.”

(TF-ST-LA-01)

“Every year I still get a little weird around the time they sent me away. That memory is fresh as day. It never gets fuzzy. I’m never going to forget it.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

The creation of these strong memories may speak to the way these events have been encoded neurologically as traumatic events.



“It was January 4th, 2016 at around 2am in the morning when I received this blanket pictured in the photo. Today, it’s September 17th, 2020, and I still sleep with this same blanket every night. Back in the beginning of 2016, I was taken away and put into a temporary emergency shelter in downtown LA. When I got there, I was handed a matching grey sweatsuit that was in my mind equivalent to a prison jumpsuit. There were rows of cot beds and every single child that lay there wore the same thing. A middle aged African American woman handed me this blanket as a gift. She said it was one of the “extra” Christmas presents they had laying around for the kids who were going to be removed around the holidays. This blanket is a vivid memory of my past life living in shelters, group homes, my first dorm in college, and now my own apartment.”

— Jacqueline Robles



"This is a quilt that was custom made for me while I was at my group home. A knitting group knitted hand made quilts for each and everyone one of the kids at the group home but mine was the hardest since my suggestion as to what I wanted on my quilt (wolves) was very hard to find! I've probably had this quilt for 3-4 years now and I hope to keep it with me for the rest of my life."

— Carrie Thomas

Finding 1.2.

Though institutional placements were perceived as a last resort, many experienced them as a first placement in foster care.

Theoretically, institutional placements in foster care exist as a last resort (Holmes et. al., 2018). However, many participants in this study experienced institutions as their first placement in foster care.

"It was the first placement I ever experienced while being in foster care."

(TF-ST-LA-01)

When institutional placements are used, many believe they are only used temporarily or for emergencies (Sigrid et. al., 2018). However, many participants in this study lived in institutions for extended periods of time, including over many years or throughout their entire time in foster care. This research also did not support the common perception that institutional placements are only used after multiple failed family-based foster care placements as many experienced institutional settings before experiencing multiple family placements.

"The part that really weighs heavy on me, is that on the (institutional placement's) website it said the place is usually used after 12-13 failed placements. This was my first placement. That's the part that really fucks with me."

(TF-MT-IL-01)

Finding 1.3.

Many youth ended up in institutional placements because case workers believed there were no other placement options for them, not because institutional placements would be best for them.

Many youth reported being placed in an institution because their child welfare workers felt there was nowhere else for them to go. In these cases, the decision to go into an institutional placement was not based on what would best meet the needs of the child. When the system fails to keep a reliable inventory of foster homes for older youth, these youth often end up in institutional placements by default.

“My worker made me sign up to come here because she didn’t have anywhere to put me.”
(MP-MT-AK-01)

One participant expressed that placing a youth in an institutional setting without exhausting other options first can limit their ability to achieve permanency later. Permanency, of course, is one of the key mandates of child welfare.

“I think that many times caseworkers do not exhaust all placement or housing resources available to them before placing a youth in institutional or group care, and by doing this they further harm a youth, and lower their chances of thriving and achieving permanency with a foster family.”
(TF-ST-LA-01)

Nearly all the participants we spoke to held the belief that older youth are very difficult, if not impossible, to place with families. This is a deeply ingrained, shared belief across the young people we spoke to, and it reinforces the belief that institutional placements may be the only resort for older foster youth.

“The caseworker said once you turn 14 nobody wants you.”
(MP-LT-NJ-01)

Many foster youth believe that there is nowhere else for them to go after an institutional placement. This can generate a kind of fear while in group homes that makes youth scared of being kicked out as they believe that they would be on the street.

“I was always scared of being removed from those homes, at the time, group homes were the only option for me.”
(MP-LT-OH-01)

In fact, in one case, a youth was vehemently opposed to being placed in a group home. She said,

“If you put me in a group home, I will seriously kill myself.”
(ES-ST-CA-01).

The system claimed not to have anywhere else to take her besides a group home, so they placed her in a homeless shelter.

Some youth were even placed in institutional placements that they did not qualify for. For example, we heard stories of two young women who each were placed in a home for pregnant or parenting teens, when they were not pregnant or parenting. Similarly, we’ve heard stories of youth being placed in a similar therapeutic facility despite having vastly different therapeutic needs. One youth claimed they were placed in an institutional placement because of their disability.

“The other one was a group home that pregnant teens would go to, I don’t know why I stayed there because I didn’t have any children.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

Finding 1.4.

Youth internalized blame for why they ended up in institutional placements, developing shame and feelings of unworthiness, and believing that they were being punished.

One participant shared how these negative feelings can persist well into adulthood and after the time in institutional placement.

“They said I was in that facility because I was deemed to be a danger to myself or others... But yet I was the one being abused and locked in rooms. I still carry that feeling of blame with me today. What we do to children in the system now, lives on with them tomorrow and in the years to come.”

(TF-ST-LA-01)

When youth ended up in institutional placements, some youth felt as though they were being punished for not having family or for the circumstances that led to their removal.

“I felt that I was held responsible for my father abusing me.”

(MP-LT-NJ-01)

Institutions can feel restrictive and punitive to youth who felt they were being punished in ways the youth could not control. For many, this led to feelings of shame, unworthiness, and self-blame which were compounded by an existing perception from youth that “something was wrong” with them.

2. Meeting basic needs

Finding 2.1.

Institutional placements did provide shelter for youth, though the physical environments and the sleeping arrangements were not the most welcoming or comfortable.

Institutional placements reliably provided shelter for all participants. For youth who experienced a poor living situation prior to foster care, institutions were a reprieve from what they had experienced before.

However, most youth were quick to note that the accommodations at institutions looked more like hospitals or jails than homes. Some youth lamented the poor ventilation or bars on the windows, and wanted them to look and feel more like a home.

“Like a shelter for dogs. We have a clipboard with our info on the outside of the cage and staff members walking up and down the halls checking in and us youth in the kennels sad or mad.”

(MP-MT-ME-01)

“Make the homes better, not as run down... It’s bad enough that you’re on your own, but then you live somewhere in a crappy neighborhood and a place that you’re not proud of.”

(PP-MT-NE-01)

Several youth likened the institutions they were placed in to animal shelters where they were treated like animals.

“It really does feel like an animal shelter with the bare minimum.”

(MP-MT-NE-02)

“I felt like a dog in a cage.”

(MP-LT-AK-02)

We also heard a few reports of youth having no space to sleep when they first arrived at the institutional placement, which is paradoxical given that often the reason cited for placing youth in institutional placements is because those are supposedly the only placements that have space.

“Actually for the first few days, I was sleeping in offices and cars because there was really no place to put me.”

(MP-MT-KS-01)

“And even when I went to the group home, it was full. They had no space, I slept in the basement on a futon for like a week and a half.”

(GH-ST-NY-01)

In the majority of placements, youth shared rooms and sometimes beds with each other. Sometimes, rooms did not have a door. Very few youth reported having the privacy of their own room.

“I slept there on a bed with a roommate.”

(GH-MT-SC-01)

“For the guys it was two people per room.”

(ES-ST-AK-01)



“That is what congregate care looked like for me. In the sketch you can see from the outside it looks like a home, but the youth in the home are expressing different emotions when it comes to these type of placements.”

— D.B.

Finding 2.2.

Youth were grateful to reliably receive meals at group homes, though many felt that the quality of the food that institutions served was subpar and lacking nutrition.

Participants consistently reported having reliable access to three meals per day at institutional placements. Some participants came from food insecure backgrounds where they did not have access to three meals per day, would regularly miss meals, or had to rely on school, charity, or food drives for meals. These youth expressed gratitude for having food available to them every day at their institutional placement.

When asked what part of being in the group home they liked, one said:

“I liked the fact that I had three meals a day... I was just grateful for food.”

(GH-ST-CT-01)

However, in some instances, youth mentioned that the food institutions served was not culturally appropriate.

“When I had a visitation, my sister would bring us foods that we ate growing up. Snacks from the Mexican store. Meals that she would cook. Anytime I was at a placement, she would bring that.”

(MP-MT-GA-01)

While one youth shared that the quality of food at the institution was superior to what they had access to growing up, most youth reported that the food quality was poor, consisting of low nutrient density, processed, and generally unhealthy foods.

“Shelter food is pretty much just processed TV dinner food.”

(MP-LT-IA-01)

When asked about food and meals at the institutions, a few participants reported that they gained significant, undesired weight during their time living in the institution. They felt that the quality of the food caused the weight, and that it could have been avoided with different nutrition.

“The food wasn’t really healthy though. When I went in there I was around 130 lbs. and when I left I was around 150 and I gained a lot of weight in a short amount of time.”

(MP-ST-PA-01)

This participant went on to say:

“I gained a lot of weight in my placement, and honestly, I think it could have 100% avoided with some better food!”

(MP-ST-PA-01)

Another noted that poor food caused them—and others—to stop eating and lose undesired weight.

“The food was disgusting and plain. I’ve witnessed multiple people stop eating and lose a ton of (weight); me being one of them.”

(GH-LT-RI-03)

Proper nutrition can be critical to managing and reversing chronic illness, behavioral issues, and other symptoms caused by toxic stress from trauma (Burke Harris, 2018). Given the high rates of chronic illness, Adverse Childhood Events (ACEs), and other traumas foster youth face, proper nutrition may be even more essential for youth in foster care.

Additionally, some youth raised concerns about where the food that institutions served was sourced from.

“The food is disgusting, I remember going to pick up food from the local jail.”

(MP-LT-MI-02)

“I remember that the quality of the food wasn’t what I was used to, it was hot dogs from the One Dollar store.”

(MP-MT-CA-01)

Most youth expressed a general lack of freedom in making decisions around food such as what foods to eat and when they could eat. Outside of scheduled meal times, many youth reported not being allowed to be in the kitchen, get snacks, or access food or drinks on their own.

“I was not allowed to go into the kitchen nor drink anything.”

(MP-LT-NY-01)

“I was in a placement before where they had locks on the refrigerator.”

(MP-MT-NC-01)

Finding 2.3.

The hygiene, hair, and skin care products and services youth had access to were neither reliably sufficient nor culturally sensitive.

All youth reported access to the most basic aspects of hygiene including access to showers and privacy in the bathroom. However, most reported that institutions failed to sufficiently meet the range of their needs around hygiene and personal care.

Some youth reported having insufficient time in the shower and to complete their hygiene routine. Time limits were strictly enforced.

“We took showers, we were only allowed to take 10 minutes in the shower.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

“We only had 10 minutes to do our hygiene routine. And any minute over was an hour time-out (basically sitting at the table by yourself).”

(MP-LT-OH-01)

Youth often shared communal showers as well as hygiene tools and products. Some raised concerns around cleanliness.

“The communal shower... It was always filthy.”

(TF-MT-IL-01)

“We had to share hair products and the hair brush.”

(GH-ST-AZ-01)

Many youth mentioned that there was no standard process for getting their hair cut when they needed it. In some cases, staff gave makeshift haircuts rather than going to a professional.

“There was no process for getting hair cuts.”

(MP-LT-IA-01)

“I got one haircut the entire time I was there, because my hair got so long.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

Some youth did not have a say in the choice of the skin and hair care products that they needed, and often received the cheapest products on the market. Without the choice to pick their own personal care products, a few felt the products provided negatively impacted their skin and hair.

“As a teenage girl I guess, using the dive bar soap and the worst kind of deodorant, it was the cheapest of cheap.”

(PP-MT-NE-01)

“Some programs gave us the bare minimum for hygiene products... Some of us had sensitive skin and would break out bad. Others had different types of hair and the products would dry out and ruin their hair.”

(GH-LT-RI-03)

Some institutions viewed certain personal care products as a privilege. In these cases, youth had to earn the privilege to use these products. For others, certain personal care products were completely off limits.

“In order for me to wear makeup, or use the hair straightener, I had to get to the top tier.”

(MP-ST-PA-01)

“We weren’t allowed to have things (like) flat irons.”

(MP-LT-OH-02)

One participant shared that they did receive culturally appropriate hair care and support from staff.

“I am a Black woman and I asked them many times to get supplies for my hair. I also had Black staff members teach me how to care for my hair and even do my hair for me on occasion.”

(GH-MT-FL-01)

However, other participants, especially youth of color, shared that institutional placements displayed no cultural sensitivity when it came to the hair and skin care needs of the youth.

“I had an afro for the majority of my residential stay. I didn’t have access to hair lotion. I only had a comb. At times, I couldn’t even wash my hair because of time limits.”

(MP-LT-MI-01)

“As a Black person, I can’t just use \$1 Suave. I need the conditioners, etc. It’s expensive, I know.”

(ES-ST-CA-01)

Similarly to food, youth did not always have the ability to access hygiene items freely. These items were often locked away from youth or required staff assistance to access.

“The personal hygiene (items) were locked in a cabinet. I wanted to brush my teeth after lunch but I couldn’t because it was locked.”

(MP-LT-AK-02)

“It felt like we weren’t human. A lot of our basic needs: shaving, showering, period items were withheld because staff were busy and it was inconvenient to stop what they were doing.”

(MP-LT-AZ-01)

Finding 2.4.

Youth were provided the bare minimum clothing necessities, which did not provide much room for self-expression.

Some youth entered institutional placements with almost nothing. For youth who lacked basic needs coming into institutional placements, they were grateful to be clothed.

“I only came to the shelter with the clothes on my back when I was 15.”

(ES-ST-AK-01)

Youth expressed a range of experiences with regards to access to clothing. One enjoyed getting a stipend for new clothes at the start of each year. Others were given basic clothes and shoes, some only at the discretion of their caseworker. Others received no clothing items from the institution or felt they lacked the clothes they needed.

“The shelter didn’t give us anything.”

(ES-ST-AK-01)

“The clothes I came in were what I left with unless my caseworker provided some sort of money to buy these.”

(MP-MT-CO-01)

Often, institutional placements provided youth with clothing items that the community donated, and many youth mentioned that these clothes were not in style, or did not fit what they needed or wanted.

“The clothes were donated to the group home.”

(MP-LT-OH-01)

“The shoes only went up to size 10. But I wear a size 11 wide. So that kept me out of a lot of things.”

(ES-ST-CA-01)

Especially for teenagers who are undergoing the age-appropriate process of discovering their identity, the lack of freedom around selecting clothes can feel oppressive.

“They provided clothing. As I got older I was more conscious of what I was wearing. If you were in trouble, you wouldn’t do your own shopping, someone else did it for you. And that really sucked. They would buy you things that looked stupid. That wasn’t very helpful for self esteem.”

(MP-LT-IL-01)

In one case, lack of access to proper clothing hindered educational attainment.

“I was actually kept back from school because my pants were “distracting” once even though I met the dress code.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

Finding 2.5.

Some youth felt as though they had to work for the institution in order to have their needs met.

In some institutional placements, youth could earn money to buy their own things by performing chores. Many youth, however, felt that the intensity of the chores did not align with the amount of the allowance.

“I had to slave in order to get an allowance.”

(GH-ST-NY-01)

And in some instances, chores were performed without any monetary compensation.

“I did chores, whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, and I did it for free. Kind of like slave labor.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

“We had to do lots of chores and were rewarded with only drives.”

(GH-ST-AZ-01)

Finding 2.6.

Youth appreciated the predictable structure that their institutional placements provided, but their schedule was highly policed.

Many youth reported that institutions had a strict, regimented daily schedule. Some youth said that they thrived on the schedule and discipline of living in an institutional placement, as it gave them structure and a sense of stability.

“I still wake up every day at 8am and I make my bed every morning or before I go somewhere.”

(MP-LT-IA-01)

However, some institutional placements ultimately dictated every aspect of a youth’s day. These schedules determined when youth went to sleep, when they woke up, when they could eat, when they could go to the bathroom, and when they had to do their chores. One participant reported that every minute of the day was scheduled. This meant that some youth did not have enough time for self care in the shower or enough time to eat until they were full. This lack of freedom can also make it difficult for youth to learn basic, necessary time management skills.

“Staff didn’t care... They gave us 45 minutes to eat, clean up, and complete our chores.”

(MP-LT-OH-01)

Finding 2.7.

Youth in institutional placements were in survival mode.

Youth in institutional placements reported living in survival mode. They were concerned about getting their basic needs met while dealing with trauma, navigating complex relationships with staff and other youth, and knowing neither how long they would be in the institutional placement nor where they would live next.

“I felt like I didn’t have as much of a say and that I was trapped until I turned 18 and had to survive until then.”

(GH-ST-CA-01)

“My own focus was to do what I needed to do to survive.”

(MP-MT-KS-01)

This stressful context was the backdrop in which youth operated. In this survival state, getting an education or anything beyond getting basic needs met can feel like a luxury.

“We’re supposed to reach for the sky but I don’t have my basic needs.”

(MP-LT-CA-01)

“I didn’t really get the school experience. My focus was never on school. I never really even finished high school. I was constantly in survival mode, I wasn’t paying attention to math or anything like that. That’s something I’m really disappointed in.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

Being in a survival state likely caused a chronic stress response. The typical responses to stress are fight, flight, or freeze –all of which we heard examples of in this study (Van der Kolk, 2014). While the “fight” response is a stress response, it was often interpreted by staff as a behavioral issue, and youth ended up getting in trouble for what is a normal neurochemical response to the stress conditions they were under.

“For those two years, I nearly had to physically fight every day, and there was a lot of violent behavior among youth, it was like ‘Fight Club’.”

(MP-MT-KS-01)

“The second year I stopped being so passive, I started fighting back, and I got into a lot of trouble, I started being written up for a lot of things.”

(TF-MT-IL-01)

Participants also described a lot of “freeze” responses where youth just gave up because doing anything would be worse for them, or “flight” responses where youth reported feeling restless, fidgety, or tense.

“Having so many stressors in my life, so many unknown variables in my life...I couldn’t focus in school. ”

(MP-LT-IL-01)

“I was trying to survive. I would do things like hide food under my bed and forget about it because I wasn’t sure when I would be able to eat again.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

3. Interacting with staff and other youth

Finding 3.1.

While some youth experienced caring, meaningful relationships with staff, overall caring staff relationships were the exception to the rule. Youth often perceived staff as unkind, cruel, untrustworthy, and indifferent.

One participant had consistently strong relationships with multiple staff, and these positive relationships continue to this day. Another noted that they got along with most of the staff at their institution.

“I consider my group home foster parents to be more of my parents than my actual parents. They were the ones who helped me get my permit, who taught me how to drive and cook. If I have any car troubles or just want to complain in general, I know I can always go to my former foster dad. If I just want to relax or be emotional I know I can go to my former foster mom. Only just recently, my former foster parents gifted me with a washer and dryer for my apartment, something I’ve been wishing for dearly. Me and my brother still go to their house on the holidays, even though they no longer work at the group home. They can also rely on me if they need any help. If that’s not love and family, then I don’t know what is.”

(GH-MT-FL-01)

However, the vast majority of participants did not share this experience. Most felt that positive, caring connections with staff were rare exceptions to the rule. The youth we spoke to reported almost never developing a lasting relationship with staff at the institution.

“I felt loved and cared for by some staff but not all.”

(MP-MT-TN-01)

“I had a few staff that were amazing and caring but overall a lot of them did the bare minimum and didn’t show much kindness to me when I really needed it.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

Some felt that individual staff would have good intentions and want to support and care for youth. Yet youth observed that the limitations and structure of the system would ultimately get in the way of good people being able to care for youth.

“It’s hard because some of these folks mean good but they fall into the beliefs of this system.”

(MP-MT-CO-01)

“Some staff try to be nice and treat you like an individual, but most already have preconceived notions about you, or they base everything on their first impression of you, which is usually bad since coming to a group home isn’t a great experience. Some staff try, but rules win out.”

(MP-MT-TX-01)

Many youth felt that the staff didn't want to develop a relationship with them and didn't really see them beyond their pathologized symptoms.

"From what I saw, they didn't want to have relationships with us. They looked at us like patients."

(TF-ST-LA-01)

Many felt staff were unkind and displayed a lack of empathy towards youth who were clearly emotionally distressed or having a hard time.

"They let me sit and cry for 3 hours."

(TF-ST-LA-01)

"I would think, 'Why can't you be nicer to us? Be there for me when I got back home after school and you can see that I had a bad day?'"

(GH-ST-AZ-01)

Others revealed instances of staff being mean or cruel. Some staff were said to be provoking youth while others would make bets on which youth would fare better in the placements.

"The staff would bet on us (monetarily). They would bet on if we would make it through the program."

(MP-LT-NJ-01)

"For me personally, I think that (staff) were just mean to be mean."

(MP-MT-CA-02)

Ultimately, youth did not trust staff in their institutional placements and only went to them out of necessity. Some staff betrayed youth's confidentiality by discussing their issues with others without their consent. Youth learned the hard way not to trust the confidence of staff.

"They just tell your business... Sit around and talk about you."

(GH-LT-FL-01)

"I didn't really speak to them (the staff) unless I really needed something."

(ES-ST-TX-01)

Many youth felt that staff were just there to earn a paycheck and that staff were indifferent to their experience. Youth felt that staff were not there to make a positive difference in their lives.

"They don't care at all about anybody's feelings. They only care about the paycheck."

(GH-LT-RI-01)

"To them (staff) it was just a job, but to me it was my entire life."

(MP-MT-MN-01)

Finding 3.2.

Youth felt that staff lacked sufficient training, capacity, professionalism, and accountability, and that staff could abuse their power on the job.

When asked what could be improved about institutional settings, youth frequently spoke about improving staff acquisition and training. Youth felt that staff were not adequately trained to serve youths' needs and questioned their competence.

"I wouldn't say they were trained well."

(ES-ST-AK-01)

"I wish there were better people in charge of taking care of youth."

(MP-MT-CA-02)

In particular, some youth reported that staff in institutional placements are not equipped to handle the trauma and mental health symptoms that youth are experiencing. Many youth noted that staff's words, behaviors, and practices were not trauma-informed.

"If your staff is not trauma trained, you should not have a group home."

(MP-LT-OH-01)

"One of (the staff) interviewed me and asked me like 40 questions. Just did the check, check, check, no emotion and none of them wanted to hear why I was there or hear my stories."

(GH-ST-CA-01)

Additionally, youth often felt that institutions were understaffed and did not have the staff capacity or skills to serve and meet the needs of all youth in the placement.

(With regards to staff) "I definitely didn't feel like they were capable of handling everyone who was there."

(MP-ST-PA-01)

"They were understaffed. You didn't have to be a genius to see it."

(GH-MT-SC-01)

Many youth felt that staff turnover was high which makes staff seem undependable and that they can't serve as consistent adult figures.

"Please please please don't come into this field of work if you plan on leaving or making it worse. We are tired and need stability."

(MP-LT-AZ-01)

"I can't tell you how many times I've seen (staff) get fired."

(MP-MT-KS-01)

Some youth perceived that staff were unprofessional, operated on a power high, or frequently used their position to demean youth to feel powerful and in charge. One felt that staff could go unchecked or unchallenged, without sufficient oversight.

"It's like they are very much power tripping... They really did treat us like we were nothing."

(ES-ST-CA-01)

"The staff often seemed to have issues with power and control. Like they were given a supervisor role with no oversight, and they abused the position of power over us kids."

(MP-MT-MN-01)

Youth reported that staff were ultimately unaccountable. Youth should be able to voice complaints about staff, and those complaints should be taken seriously. Most youth we spoke to did report at least one grievance about a staff member—some of these grievances were serious. Unfortunately, not one participant we spoke to reported that the institution took their grievance against a staff member seriously.

"There was no way to complain (about staff)."

(GH-ST-CA-01)

Inversely, many youth reported never complaining about staff in fear of being retaliated against.

“I never complained because I knew it wouldn’t get me anywhere. It would backfire.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

“Letting everyone know that we kept quiet in fear of retaliation would definitely be good to (mention). The silence of our voices was one of the harshest things we endured.”

(MP-LT-AZ-01)

Finding 3.3.

Youth experienced mental, physical, and sexual abuse at the hands of staff.

While not all participants in this study experienced abuse, some reported abuse by staff during their time living in institutions. This abuse took several forms.

Some youth recounted staff mentally abusing or manipulating them. Youth talked about feeling “taken advantage of” and “brainwashed.” For instance, youth reported that some staff used fear to govern institutional placements in part to ensure that youth did not tell their families or caseworkers about what happens in the placements.

“They had it in me so bad that they told me I would never leave that place. I was so manipulated so I didn’t say anything (about the abuse) to my parents... They were so set to make sure that we were so afraid to leave. If I wasn’t so afraid, I would have been more open to take the steps and work on myself.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

One example of mental abuse is staff telling youth that they’re going to repeat the cycle and be abusive to their own children as a means to emotionally gaslight them into thinking that they are trapped in a cycle and never escape. Gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse that aims at making someone question their sanity or perception of reality.

“She would say, ‘That’s why your mom didn’t want to keep you. That’s why you’re in foster care.’”

(ES-ST-TX-01)

Some youth experienced physical abuse at the hands of staff. These accounts are consistent with recent journalistic reports outlining extensive mistreatment of youth in group care facilities (Curtis & Dake, 2020). This is also consistent with data which show that youth who have experienced trauma are at greater risk for further physical abuse when they are placed in group homes compared with their peers placed in families (Ryan et. al., 2008).

“I’ve seen staff members fight a kid, hit a kid.”

(MP-LT-MI-01)

“I was hit. I was punched in the face. One time I was knocked unconscious, one staff grabbed my arm, I was trying to get it out, he full on judo hit me and knocked me out. I had a bunch of staff restrain me.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

For one youth who lived at a “hands-off” facility, they reported that they did not experience physical abuse at that facility, however they would be sent to another facility for harsher punishment.

“I was originally placed in a hands off facility. However, when you would act up or be considered “not safe” I was shipped off to a sister house where it was locked down, with alarms, and very high restrictions.”

(MP-MT-CO-01)

Similarly, several youth shared instances of being sexually harassed, assaulted, or raped by staff. This comports with other reports of sexual abuse including in group facilities housing immigrant children (Grabell & Sanders, 2018). It is important to remember that these experiences—of being touched in a sexual way by an adult in the home or being sexually assaulted or raped by an adult in the home—are criminal and also defined as an Adverse Childhood Event (ACE).

“I think the number one thing I would change is the amount of sexual assault that happens...In residential facilities, staff are molesting female residents.”

(TF-MT-IL-01)

One participant described that they were able to recognize which young people were being sexually abused given the “special treatment” they received from staff as a consequence.

“There were girls that had special treatment. Those were the girls that were probably sexually abused (by staff)...The owner ended up getting arrested for rape charges, and two staff got arrested for abuse charges.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

Another participant in this study described being sex trafficked by a staffer while living at a group home. This account was comparable to a report of sex traffickers targeting youth in a group home in Kansas (Smith, 2020).

“The group home staff was my pimp.”

(MP-LT-CA-01)

“Growing up, I didn’t know how much things were wrong. I’ve been seeing a lot more of sex trafficking and kids being kidnapped and stuff.”

(MP-MT-AK-01)

Sadly, youth do not always report the abuse they experienced as it often ends up as their word against the adults’ accounts. Youth reported institutional staff covering their tracks and lying to their caseworkers about what truly happened.

“Abuse does happen, and social workers don’t listen sometimes. Please listen to us.”

(MP-MT-SC-01)

“(Staff) knew what they were doing was wrong and they went to great lengths to cover up what they did.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)



“The ugly truth of the system - raping your mind and your body,
killing you from the inside out.”

(MP-MT-SC-01)

Finding 3.4.
Youth experienced discrimination by staff.

While not all youth reported discrimination, many did report either personally experiencing discrimination by staff or witnessing staff discriminate against other youth.

Youth recounted incidences of discrimination based on race and ethnicity and recounted how staff displayed discriminatory behavior towards their peers. This was particularly the case of white participants. One mentioned,

“As a white person, I definitely had it better than some of my peers.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

“I feel like they are more discriminatory towards African Americans.”

(ES-ST-CA-01)

“I did see a lot of discrimination against Natives. They would get accused of things they did not do.”

(ES-ST-AK-01)

Youth reported discrimination from staff on the basis of their culture or religion. Discrimination included prohibiting youth from speaking their native language or expressing their religious beliefs.

“We weren’t allowed to use other languages, even though Spanish was my first language. Staff said we could be planning to escape, and they needed to know what was going on at all times.”

(MP-LT-NJ-01)

“When I was asked about getting head scarves, I was laughed at...Everything about my identity was questioned or opposed.”

(MP-LT-CA-01)

Queer youth reported being discriminated against by staff based on their sexual orientation.

“I was heavily discriminated against for being homosexual. Ridiculed by staff, told I was going to hell, banned from being friends with girls in other houses.”

(MP-LT-AL-01)

“(The staff) was religious. She made some remarks during pride month like, ‘Don’t go out there catching AIDS.’”

(MP-LT-NY-01)

Trans youth also reported staff not respecting their gender identity and failing to refer to them with the proper name and pronouns. Using names or pronouns that are different from the ones they use for themselves are commonly referred to as deadnaming and misgendering, respectively.

“Staff deadnamed me and misgendered me.”

(TF-MT-IL-01)

This is consistent with research which finds that 100% of LGBTQ youth in group homes report abuse. This suggests that abuse against LGBTQIA+ youth in group care is not just prevalent; it’s ubiquitous (Shepard & Costello, 2012). This is especially problematic because LGBTQIA+ youth are overrepresented in child welfare.

Finding 3.5.
Institutional placements created hyper competitive, cutthroat environments among youth where they felt that their survival was at the expense of the others.

In theory, youth who are placed together in the same institutional facility can build safe, meaningful relationships with one another that could potentially outlast the institutional placement. Instead, most youth, but not all, reported that institutions often become cutthroat environments that do not provide the optimal conditions for peer socialization.

“When multiple youth are placed together in group placements, and when supplies, and necessities are limited, it creates an environment where youth are forced to root against each other, pick sides, fight, rather than bonding with other youth in the facility with shared experiences.”

(TF-ST-LA-01)

This starts with the fact that most youth don't know how long they will remain in their placements. This makes it difficult to invest in relationships with their peers without the certainty of how much time they might have to develop and nurture those relationships.

“I was always uncertain about what was up next. I could wake up the next morning, and I could be moved.”

(MP-MT-CA-01)

“Everybody there was there because they were at such a low place. Nobody knew what their next move was.”

(PP-MT-NE-01)

Additionally, peer socialization becomes difficult when institutions place children and youth together from very different age groups. In these situations, many youth feel that older youth can easily manipulate or influence younger youth. This also happens when institutions place youth together who need vastly different therapeutic interventions.

“If there had to be (group) homes, I would definitely want them to be with people your age.”

(GH-ST-CT-01)

“Instead of separating by gender, it should be separated by age. Older kids can easily manipulate us.”

(ES-ST-AK-01)

Institutions place traumatized youth in a living setting with other traumatized youth. Then this trauma is compounded by harsh conditions, too few loving and supportive adults, and the fragile mental and physical health of youth.

“Everyone is in survival mode because of what we went through, and because of that, we just keep triggering and re-traumatizing each other.”

(MP-MT-TX-01)

All together, this creates an environment where abuse and violence between youth happens frequently. For many, the cruelty of other youth is one of the most difficult parts of institutionalized living.

“The girls in the group home were pretty cruel. If they were upset, they would break your things.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

“Yes, my roommate threatened to kill me... One girl threw bleach at another girl’s face.”
(MP-LT-NJ-01)

One participant reported that staff would sometimes initiate the tension between youth.

“Staff would instigate fights or staff would fight kids as well.”
(MP-LT-OH-02)

Many felt the scarcity of resources in the placement also drives youth to continuously vie for the staff’s attention and favors, and to compete for (and sometimes steal) money, food, clothes, shoes, or other items. Theft is only a symptom of the way institutional placements pin youth against one another. When asked what advice they would give to their younger self before entering their institutional placement, one youth said,

“Lock up your stuff and try to make friends.”
(GH-ST-CT-01).

“You could go buy a CD player, but there was an 85% chance it would get stolen.”
(MP-LT-OH-01)

“My roommates are stealing from me, and I’m not even upset because the stuff they’re stealing are toothbrushes, pots and pants, my clothes, my underwear, things they need to survive.”
(GH-ST-NY-01)

The confluence of staff favoritism, discrimination, and rules that require youth to earn basic privileges results in youth vying for survival and, in the process, potentially harming other youth.

“We were all split between 4 rooms. There was one room, one person would go there, whomever the staff favored. The rest would be split in the rest of the rooms, there would be one bed, and the rest would sleep on the floor, on makeshift beds”.
(MP-LT-OH-01)

“Because I got a job, I was able to get extra stuff. So I leveraged that and said, “Okay, you want this, this is what you have to do for me.” I had people working for me in the group home, so I was ahead of the game. The only reason I didn’t get in trouble is because I had other people do things for me. I’m not proud of it, but I was just trying to survive and outsmart everyone.”
(MP-MT-KS-01)

As a result, institutional placements were perceived as places that created competition among youth where “survival of the fittest” was normal life.

“(Institutional) placement is basically a whole bunch of youth in a home trying to prove themselves to the world and to other youth.”
(ES-LT-KY-01)

4. Learning and achieving academically

Finding 4.1.

There were strong disparities between youth who were educated at their public school versus on-site at institutional placements, and many who were educated on-site lacked appropriate education.

We spoke to a mix of youth in institutional placements who attended their zoned public school and others who attended an on-site school at the institution. This research found strong disparities between the experiences of youth who went to their public school and those who stayed on-site for education.

For youth who received their education on-site, many reported doing rudimentary work. In one instance, all of the youth at a group home—no matter their grade level or age—were taught in the same classroom with a single teacher. This made it difficult to teach the appropriate curriculum for all students.

“It’s not a real school. It’s like work for kindergarten.”

(MP-LT-IA-01)

“School was like three hours of very basic general education type stuff and everyone had their own kind of different worksheets or whatever.”

(MP-LT-OR-01)

Some youth reported doing schoolwork that they did not perceive as being on grade level. This was especially true once youth got into higher grades. As one participant mentioned,

“The school connected to the treatment center only went up to 10th grade. Almost assuming that youth placed there would only be at a 10th grade level.”

(MP-MT-CO-01).

“Before I went into my placement I was in College English 101. In my senior year of high school, when I went into placement, I was doing word scrambles as “english class.” The education is severely lacking.”

(MP-ST-PA-01)

“While they gave us work it was way lower grade level than what we should have been doing.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

Some who were educated on-site questioned the legitimacy and credentials of the teachers there.

“Not sure the people who were teaching us were actually teachers.”

(MP-ST-PA-01)

“Only 2–3 teachers actually knew what they were talking about.”

(MP-LT-MI-01)

Another youth shared that while the teachers on-site were qualified to teach, they had outdated textbooks and did not have the necessary resources to teach effectively.

“Teachers had the degree to teach but not the resources they need to teach.”

(MP-LT-IL-01)

One youth questioned if the on-site teachers were properly credentialed but felt concerned that asking questions would result in retaliation. The fact that youth both lived and were educated in the same place and/or taught by the same people created the potential for complex home-school dynamics where what happened at school could impact what happened at home.

“I felt like they used our group home staff to teach us, but I never felt safe enough to ask about credentials in fear of being retaliated against (no night snack or shorter shower times).”

(MP-LT-AZ-01)

A few participants reported that their grades or academic achievement declined after entering on-site education.

“Their “on site” school made me go from straight A’s in grade 6 (prior to placement) to C’s (school after I left the on site school) then eventually failing, specifically in math.”

(MP-MT-MN-01)

“I was expelled in 11th grade. Never had problems in school before (the institutional placement). When it came time for a tutor they took their sweet time.”

(GH-LT-RI-03)

This meant that, for some participants, the time spent in on-site education felt “wasted.” This is noteworthy given education is among the most strongly correlated variables with long term economic mobility and reducing intergenerational poverty (Gregg et. al., 2015).

“The reason is because their teachers are not qualified to teach, and everyone is given “modified” school work. So for the entire year, I learned NOTHING new, so it’s like I skipped grade 7.”

(MP-MT-MN-01)

“Now I’m trying to catch up for the years wasted.”

(ES-MT-MI-01)

This is particularly poignant as some youth reported loving being in school prior to their institutional placements and really wanting to do well academically. Despite not always being adequately supported, some youth expressed that they knew that school is important or at least could provide a respite from the circumstances they were in while living in those placements.

“I took care of my own academics because it was important to me.”

(MP-ST-KY-01)

Finding 4.2.

Regardless of where youth were educated, many youth reported a lack of educational stability, support, and resources.

Even for youth who attended their zoned public school, many experienced disruptions which made learning challenging. For example, some youth frequently moved schools. This lack of stability made it difficult to stay on track with their education.

“My placements never wanted to drive me to my school.”

(MP-MT-CA-01)

“I did move a lot which would put me behind at some schools but ahead at others.

(MP-LT-AL-01)

This was especially disruptive to one participant with a learning disability.

“I have a learning disability, and I didn’t get any help until college. I moved schools so much, and I guess no-one noticed?”

(MP-MT-TX-01)

Several participants cited issues with attaining their school transcripts and that this negatively impacted their education.

“Every time I would move schools, my transcripts were so messed up that they were like, ‘I don’t we don’t know what to do with this.’ So I had to take placement tests over and over.”

(MP-LT-OR-01)

“I remember when I would start at a new school my transcripts were all messed up. At the last high school I started they decided to just place me in 11th grade because of my age.”

(PP-LT-CA-01)

Others lacked access to basic educational resources that make learning possible, such as a bus pass to get to school (ES-ST-CA-01) or a calculator for homework (MP-LT-NJ-01).

“(A public school teacher) got on our case about getting a calculator. I didn’t have anyone to get it for me even though the school sent a list to the group home. He said ‘Well, ask your parents,’ and I said, ‘I don’t have parents.’”

(MP-LT-NJ-01)

Finding 4.3.

Some youth did not feel they got a strong education, which diminished their ability to succeed in adulthood.

Because of these limitations, some youth report that their time in institutional placements had a lasting, negative effect on their educational achievement and their lives today.

While this research did not ask participants about specific school subjects, many participants volunteered that their time in institutional placements impacted their ability to learn math specifically. Many reported that they still feel behind in math today as a result.

“To this day I still struggle with math. I couldn’t do it to save my life. If they weren’t so focused on having kids in DCFS and controlling my life, I would probably be able to do math. I wish they took time to educate kids the proper way. If they did, I don’t think I would have so many issues. On ASVAB, I scored so low in math it caused me to fail even though I did well in the other categories. It affects my everyday life.”

(MP-LT-IL-01)

“I struggle so much with math in college, and I wish someone would have gotten me help sooner, so that I wouldn’t be stuck at an eighth-grade math level at 20 years old.”

(MP-MT-TX-01)

Some participants indicated that the limitations on their education while in institutional care negatively impacted their ability to attend or succeed in college.

“College was extremely hard because those high school classes I could have taken was something I missed, and I could make no connection when our teachers attempted to explain this.”

(MP-MT-CO-01)

“My transcripts, diploma, and FAFSA are so wild. I cannot go to college because of it.”

(TF-MT-IL-01)

This is consistent with data showing that youth placed in group homes, rather than in family care, have poorer educational outcomes, including lower test scores in basic English and math. Additionally, youth in group care are also more likely to drop out of school and less likely to graduate high school (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015).

Finding 4.4.

Youth often exited care without adequate life skills, and because they had been largely removed from society, many youth “didn’t know what they didn’t know.”

Aside from ensuring educational attainment, foster care programs must also ensure youth have the life skills they need to be successful during and after care. Participants shared a range of experiences with attaining life skills while in institutional settings. While some participants reported learning life skills in the institution, many reported they did not.

“I didn’t leave with the skills I think I need.”

(TF-ST-AZ-01)

“Everyone there was missing different skills. None of us knew conflict resolution. Not many of us knew how to budget or register for classes at community college, do FAFSA, etc. The things I knew I went looking for the information because no one had taught me, and I knew I had to learn it somehow. It would have helped so much if someone had sat down with me and said, ‘This is how you decide what groceries you need. This is how to apply for health insurance. This is how to know when something is wrong with your car.’ I made so many avoidable mistakes.”

(MP-MT-TX-01)

Some felt that staff were more concerned with managing their behavior than teaching life skills.

“They were more concerned with my anti-social behavior than they were about me actually learning.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

“Most of the programming was around therapy or reunification. No independent living skills or preparation.”

(MP-MT-CA-01)

“Being off privileges and having to sit at a table not allowed to talk for days on end did nothing to teach me how to apply for an apartment. No one helped me apply for college. I did it on my own.”

(MP-LT-AL-01)

Attaining life skills is uniquely challenging for institutional placements since youth in these placements are predominantly removed from society and may not get as much one-on-one time to learn from adults organically. Since institutional settings are not typical living settings, many youth in institutional settings are not getting exposed to many normal, everyday activities that they can observe or learn spontaneously from. This can leave youth in a situation where they “don’t know what they don’t know,” and without a skill that they did not even know they were supposed to have.

“Transitioning into adulthood was hard, what was a necessity and what wasn’t? To me nothing was a necessity except the bare minimum.”

(MP-LT-AK-01)

“We weren’t taught essentials or even smaller things like food nutrition.”

(MP-LT-AZ-01)

As an example, one youth who lived in an apartment-based residential facility described her experiences getting food. The facility had a garage downstairs of donated food items. Youth were allowed to go to the garage to “shop” around and pick items for themselves.

“As a teenager you’re not used to shopping for yourself. They’re like, ‘Hey, take what you need,’ but there was no one who said, ‘This is a combination of food items or household items that are going to benefit you.’ I stocked up on noodles, but then didn’t get any meat or sauce to go with it. Nobody was there to coach you on what you need.”

(PP-MT-NE-01)

Ultimately, young adults who have left group care often remain less successful than their peers in foster care. This is because group care often fails to provide real life opportunities, like preparing or purchasing food, that youth need to prepare for independent living (Barth, 2002).

5. Developing socially and emotionally

Finding 5.1.

Youth lacked love.

It goes without saying that loving and feeling loved is critical for all people. This is especially true for children of all ages who require love in order to develop healthily. A few youth reported feeling loved and cared for by staff at the institution. One even said that staff treated her as if she was their daughter.

Unfortunately however, most young people we spoke to reported they did not feel cared for or loved during their time in institutional placements.

Of youth who participated in the cultural probes by submitting a photograph of something that reminded them of their time in institutional placements, many shared a photograph of a stuffed animal that they had—and still have—while in the institution. Along with the photo, all included a description that the stuffed animal played a key role in helping to manage the loneliness and lack of love they felt in group homes.

Many felt that group homes are not structured or designed to provide the love they need.

“I don’t believe that group homes can give you the love you need.”

(GH-ST-AZ-01)

“Love is what is needed. Not systematic, robotic, burnt out, ignorant and unsympathetic/unempathetic movement by those who are supposed to be better than those we were saved from.”

(GH-LT-CA-01)

With so many youth in the group homes, many staff are stretched thin, and no one individual is assigned to care for each child. This can leave youth feeling like it is never “their turn” to receive love because staff are always busy meeting the needs of other kids.

“(Staff) would say they can’t help you because they are helping someone else. How can you always be doing something for someone else but never me?”

(ES-ST-CA-01)

All of this can feel especially confusing to youth who feel like they were removed from their homes because their families were not providing enough love, only to enter an institution that also did not provide sufficient love.

“All youth in foster care want to feel genuinely loved, accepted and a part of a family unit. Group and residential care often just doesn’t provide that. A lot of times in group care youth experience treatment that is similar or worse than what they endured while in their home of origin. What type of message does it send to youth when they are removed from their biological families when DCFS states their family isn’t properly caring for them, only for them to be placed into state certified placements where they endure additional pain and trauma.

These are placements licensed by the state to protect and care for our young people. Without care, love and the ability to develop permanent connections, youths' development and growth is significantly halted which lowers the likelihood that they will be successful in the future. All placements should provide youth with a loving home where they can grow, thrive and develop into the person they are meant to be. This shouldn't be a privilege or an option. This should be the bare minimum."

(TF-ST-LA-01)

Literature in child psychology explains the important role that love and affection play in children's life (University of Michigan, 2020). That literature finds that a lack of love during key years can inhibit proper neurological, social, and emotional development. In landmark studies of orphanages abroad (Nelson et. al., 2014), a lack of love and nurturing due to institutionalization during key development years can cause brain damage including delays in cognitive function, motor development, and language; deficits in socio-emotional behaviors; increased rates of psychiatric disorders; and changes in electrical activity in the brain. Growing children need the safety and security of unconditional love to know that they will be cared for by someone—no matter what happens or changes.



"This is the Pooh bear my grandpa gave me when I was a baby. I love Pooh, because no matter the situation, he always stays positive and I want to be like that."

— Alexis O.



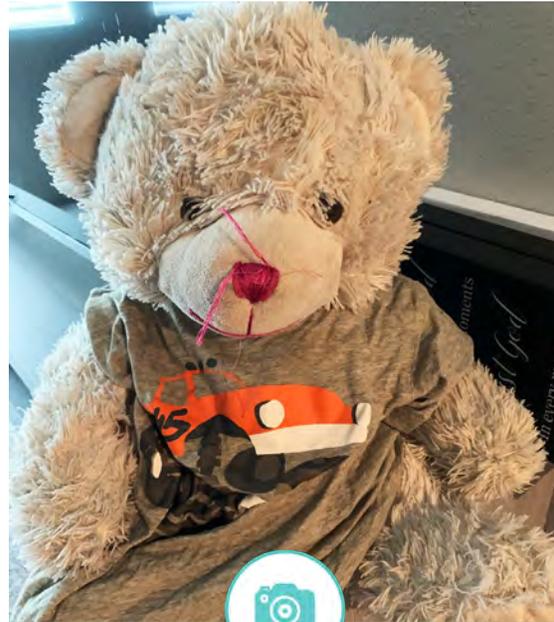
"This is a beanie baby cat that my social worker gave me while I was in care. I keep this because it is a reminder of where I came from. It keeps me grounded and humble."

— Tamara Vest



"This is a two faced plush toy. I received it the night I went into foster care (January 08, 2009). I named him "No-Face" because he had more than one face, I saw it fitting that just like my life, his face wasn't set. It was a long, anxiety ridden, lonely night on the twin mattress in the foster care shelter. It was cold, the mattress crinkled every time I moved since it had a plastic barrier under the fitted sheet (which I assumed was to ensure that if someone peed themselves it wouldn't soak on the mattress) and I could hear the staff talking. All I had was the plush toy, some extra clean underwear and the clothes I came in with. This plush toy was my anchor, something I could tangibly hold onto while I feared the rest of what was to come. To this day, I take that plush toy with me on every milestone and move I take. It has come to signify that I am not alone."

(GH-LT-CA-01)



"I went to foster care at the age of nine years old and two years prior I had received this teddy bear. The teddy bear's name is Kiki, and I kept her with me because she made me feel safe and she reminded me of home. This teddy bear had the scent from my mom's home, and it always gave me hope that I would eventually go back home. Even though I never returned home, I still value my teddy bear for being my crutch in my time of need."

(MP-MT-NE-04)



“This is Trunks, a stuffed elephant given to me by my sister on the day we were separated. She was the last family member I had left, so when we were put in separate placements, I was devastated. Trunks was one of the only things I was able to hold on to through all of it, and he gave me strength to keep going.”

(MP-MT-SC-01)



“Someone made this for my son while I was pregnant with him staying at (a group home) and felt alone.”

(MP-MT-NE-02)

Finding 5.2.

Without sufficient unconditional love, many youth blamed themselves and became emotionally shut down or detached.

Many participants expressed a lack of unconditional love, the feeling that they would be loved no matter what happened or how they behaved.

“I wanted to just be loved, that there was somebody to love me... Because I had people who said they loved me and then they disappeared.”

(GH-ST-NY-01)

Specifically, some youth acknowledged that the staff relationship is inherently conditional. Participants knew staff’s care was conditional on the staff working at the institution. The staff may not love or care for them after they leave their job.

“The staff can quit and leave whenever they want. You can’t.”

(MP-MT-TX-01)

Because foster youth were routinely moved from placement to placement based on their own behavior, many youth unfortunately came to believe that love is contingent on their behavior. Because of this, many youth became self-critical, self-blaming, and hard on themselves. For many youth, they believed that if they had behaved differently, perhaps they may have gotten the love they needed.

“Honestly, if I could go back and change something maybe I would have changed the way I acted as a child.”

(ES-LT-MI-01)

Some youth reported the emotional letdown that came with realizing they would not get the love in a group home that they desired. When they realize that no matter their behavior they would not attain the love that they crave, youth shut down emotionally.

“I was more emotionally locked away. I just wanted to leave.”

(MP-LT-OH-01)

“It’s such a crap realization when you think you’re going to be loved and then you realize that it’s not gonna happen for whatever reason. I had hoped that maybe I would find a family there even though I was much older, but it hit pretty quick that it was a fantasy. I cried so much.”

(MP-MT-TX-01)

Finding 5.3.

Youth often missed out on normal, age-appropriate activities, crucial to their social development and sense of normalcy.

A hallmark of adolescence is beginning to develop a peer social network and participate in social activities with peers. However, youth in this study almost uniformly expressed that they were unable to participate in most normal, age-appropriate activities.

“I could not go to dances or even the beach or hikes with any of the other youth (at school).”

(GH-ST-CA-01)

“I wanted to go trick-or-treating, but we weren’t allowed.”

(GH-ST-CT-01)

Activities that institutions prohibited them from attending included normal holiday activities like trick-or-treating, after school activities, social activities with friends, sleepovers, birthday parties, dating, having a boyfriend or girlfriend, and important milestone activities like going to prom.

Question: “Were there things that your non-foster care peers were able to do that you weren’t able to do?”

Answer: “Honestly, go to birthday parties, parties in general, learn to drive, make friends, have sleepovers, sports, an actual education, a cell phone, you know things, like that.”

(MP-ST-PA-01)

“If kids were found out to be dating, they were kicked out immediately.”

(GH-LT-TX-01)

Two normal activities that some, but not most, were allowed to participate in were afterschool sports and having a job.

Some youth were allowed to get jobs while in institutional placements. One even reported being required by the home to get a job. Others reported not being allowed to get a job or that getting a job was a privilege that could be taken away based on behavior.

One youth was allowed to run track in high school, and this made a world of difference for him. When he first entered care, the group home staff asked him what he liked to do. He got the impression that he should say something, so he said “I like to run,” which was not true. However, because he told them that he liked to run, and because he had very good behavior at the home, the staff accommodated him. They allowed him to try out for track, and allowed him to attend

practice and meets. Though they allowed him to stay after school for track, the staff was unwilling to pick him up after track practice from school, which was 15 minutes away. Some area foster moms decided to come together and take turns driving him home from track practice. One foster mom would drive him about two to three times per week. During those brief, weekly drives, the two of them bonded, and the woman asked him if he would like her to foster him. He left the group home, and today, he lives at her house, where he has had a successful placement with his foster mom for over two years.

“I don’t know how things would have worked out if I wasn’t running. Sometimes I would get so mad that I would run it out. If I hadn’t lied when I first got to the group home and said ‘I run every day’ when I didn’t, then I don’t know what would have happened. If I didn’t start running, then I wouldn’t have been so lucky. Running is how I met my foster mom. Running is what got me out of the group home.”

(GH-MT-SC-01)

Some youth reported that they could not participate in normal activities because of a lack of transportation and lack of money. For those youth who were able to identify someone who could give them a ride, the institution’s requirements for approval and vetting felt too stringent.

“They would provide transportation to and from school, but any other activities like football games or a dance, I wasn’t able to go.”

(ES-ST-AK-01)

“The group home required ID and so much extra stuff for anyone picking us up.”

(MP-LT-AL-01)

When the institution did provide transportation, several youth recounted how the institution used white vans which were embarrassing to be seen in.

“We had to ride around in huge white vans, which was embarrassing, we couldn’t catch a ride with a friend.”

(MP-MT-TX-01)

For some youth, staff claimed that there was no one who could authorize or provide parental permission for the activity, and therefore youth could not go. This raises an interesting dilemma: because the state is the custodian of a foster child and the group home staff oversee those responsibilities, who is legally allowed to permit the youth to participate in activities?

“I missed out on proms and school events because I didn’t have parents to give permission or give me money.”

(PP-MT-NE-01)

Many youth were also not allowed to participate in activities because the activity was against house rules or because the youth had not earned enough privileges at the house. At group home settings with a strict levels-based behavior and security system, youth had to be at certain levels to be granted specific, often basic, privileges. In some cases, other youths’ behavior and status determined the privileges for the whole house.

Staff sometimes listed safety concerns as the reason youth could not participate in some activities. However, youth were engaged in other behaviors that were far less safe and keeping youth in the house more sometimes exacerbated in-house conflict.

“We weren’t allowed to jump on the trampoline. I still remember it to this day. They labeled it as a safety risk, but there we were breaking each other’s arms in the hallways.”

(MP-MT-KS-01)

Some institutions did provide social activities for the youth in their care. One youth cited that the home provided events and activities that they would not have been able to access outside of foster care, for example, having a pizza party and going to an amusement park. Several others, however, noted that the social events that the institution provided were not age-appropriate, as they were often designed for younger youth and not for adolescents. One noted that these events were mandatory rather than optional.

“You have to go to all these events and don’t have a choice, and they’re usually made for much younger kids, so all the teens just smile awkwardly and stand around.”

(MP-MT-TX-01)

Although normalcy is essential for development, many youth felt that these limitations meant they could not live normal lives while in the institutional placements.

“Because my non-foster peers had ‘normal’ lives I often felt like I was being punished for not being able to have one myself.”

(MP-LT-AK-01)

“If I got invited to a birthday party or sleepover I couldn’t go. I wasn’t allowed to be a normal child.”

(MP-LT-AZ-01)

Now that they were out of institutions, some youth felt as though they still had to catch up socially with their peers.

“I missed out on a lot of activities my friends were able to participate in in high school. Now I’m a sophomore in college just trying to catch up.”

(MP-LT-AL-01)

Some reported that these social restrictions meant that they did not develop well socially, and that they lack healthy social skills today. Some felt that this lack of social skills can impact their personal and professional relationships, and diminish their overall capacity for success later in life.

“I never developed good social skills. I am still socially awkward to this day, and it affects my ability to have relationships, friendships, and my ability to function socially in a professional setting. I go to therapy three times a week to deal with pretty bad anxiety (especially social anxiety) and some pretty deeply entrenched imposter syndrome and self doubt.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

“You are almost seen as someone not deemed to function out in society. Therefore normal societal privileges are taken and locked away for the remainder of your stay. This is very problematic because many youth age out of these facilities. How can someone be successful outside after being institutionalized for so long?”

(MP-MT-CO-01)

Normal?

What is normal?
Is it a feeling?
Perhaps an emotion

Whatever it is
I will never know

Is it a prescription?
What aisle is it at the grocery store?
Is it something I can even afford
Wherever would I find it?

What does it smell like?
Can you touch it?
Perhaps it tastes good

But how would I know if I found it?
What is normal?



“I was an LGBTQ youth in placements that were not accepting. That’s why I wrote this poem.”

— Timothy Dennis

6. Building and maintaining connections

Finding 6.1.

Youths' relationships were highly restricted and surveilled in institutional placements.

Universally, youth expressed that institutions highly restricted the relationships they could maintain. Group care settings keep lists of approved contacts. Those lists determine who youth can interact with.

“In our paperwork, they listed who we could talk to. For some youth, you weren’t allowed to talk to certain people. They basically had a chart of who the youth can call and who the youth can receive calls from...They didn’t want us to share the phone and talk to people they didn’t want us to talk to.”

(ES-ST-TX-01)

“There were friends I was close with that wanted to come visit, and they had to be approved on my list.”

(MP-LT-NY-01)

Many youth were not able to see or communicate with family. One participant reported that calls with family could be taken away as punishment.

“I was barred from seeing any family.”

(MP-MT-CA-01)

“I wasn’t able to see my mom for a year.”

(ES-ST-AK-01)

Youth report that their communications were highly monitored. Institutional staff decided not only who the youth could see and speak to but also when, how they could speak, and for how long. In some cases, staff physically dialed the phone number for youth. Other times, youth were not allowed to have private conversations as staff would listen to the conversation by staying on the line, listening on speaker phone, or secretly listening in on another phone without permission from youth. A few participants mentioned that their phone calls were recorded. Many calls were limited to 10 or 15 minutes and restricted to certain times of the day.

“They recorded the phone calls, and I was required to take notes of those phone calls, so it turned into a chore. And there were things I wasn’t allowed to talk about.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

“I remember I had to keep the phone on speaker when I would get phone calls from my family”.

(PP-LT-CA-01)

Youths' letters were not always private, as some sites would read all incoming correspondence before youth read it.

“We were required to write (our bio family) once a week. (Staff) read the letters, everything in and out. The mail came in opened.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

One young person said that while their communications were restricted in institutions, their communications were also severely restricted in foster family settings. However, another relayed that communication in institutional placements was more restrictive than in a foster home. This participant shared that restrictions on communications in the institution weakened her ties to an extended family member in another state who was an important supportive person in her life.

“I wasn’t able to call her that much in the group homes. But I had more contact with her in the foster homes.”

(MP-LT-NJ-01)

Finding 6.2.

The instability and restrictions of institutional placements made it almost impossible to build and maintain friendships.

Many young people did not have many friends while in institutional placements.

Some young people reported not having friends at school because they were always moving schools and did not have enough time to make friends. Others reported not having friends outside of the group home because there was no way to interact.

“I didn’t have school friends because I moved schools so much.”

(ES-ST-AK-01)

Question: Did you have friends that were not foster youth?

Answer: “Is that a thing?”

(TF-MT-IL-01)

Many young people did have friends at school, but were not allowed to nurture those relationships so that they could grow. Some participants reported that restrictions at the institutions and the extra hassle involved with picking up a youth from an institution—such as a friend having to show an ID or be on an approved list—made it less likely for friends to invite institutionalized youth to hang out.

“We weren’t really allowed to have contact with kids outside of school.”

(GH-LT-TX-01)

For others, they may have been allowed to see friends but transportation would prevent it.

“If you didn’t have a vehicle, you didn’t have a social life.”

(MP-MT-KS-01)

One young person told us that when they would see a friend, they would not know when they would see them again.

“Every time I went I told (my friends) goodbye because I didn’t know how long I would be gone.”

(MP-LT-IA-01)

Others found it very difficult to maintain friendships over time.

“Sometimes, when I did make friends, I ended up losing touch with almost all of them as soon as I moved.”

(MP-MT-CA-01)

“I couldn’t stay in contact with (my only friend).”

(ES-ST-AK-01)

These factors made it difficult for youth to build strong friendships outside of the institutions. This is especially unfortunate as youth in foster care need strong relationships to be there for them after they exit care, especially if they age out of care.

“I never really had friends. I still don’t really have friends.”

(GH-MT-ID-01)

“I don’t have any friends.”

(MP-MT-GA-01)

Interestingly, many young people reported that still—years after exiting care—they do not have many or any friendships.

A few participants mentioned that the restrictions put on relationships in the institution made it difficult to form healthy relationships in adulthood. This is consistent with orthopsychiatric literature: without consistent, nurturing adults in their lives, youth cannot “form healthy attachments” and “develop positive socio-emotional skills” (Dozier et. al., 2014).

“I was always surveyed or watched and having no privacy... It causes a deep desire to just shut down, because you can never feel safe or open enough to truly vent. This impacts how we develop and maintain connections well into our adult lives. It’s hard to maintain connections when you always have to end the ones you’ve made as you move placements or relocate. It just doesn’t provide any sense of normalcy, especially when you can’t even speak freely about your feelings or will be punished for telling the truth. How can we expect our youth to develop meaningful long term connections when we are policing everything about how they

make or maintain those connections... I also experienced times in care where I wasn’t allowed to have a phone or my phone was taken away for making small mistakes, which makes it even harder to maintain regular communication with friends or family.”

(TF-ST-LA-01)

Finding 6.3.

Youth often felt isolated.

Many youth who participated in this study felt isolated and alone when they lived in institutional placements. For some, that meant feeling physically isolated and having no access to anyone outside of the home. For others, that meant feeling emotionally isolated and that they did not feel there was anyone inside the home who cared for them.

“I had pretty much no contact with the outside world.”

(MP-ST-PA-01)

“There have been a bunch of times I’ve sat in my room all day and nobody has checked on me. It kind of makes me feel lonely that nobody checks on me.”

(MP-MT-AK-01)

One participant felt like they could rely on their caseworker. But when the caseworker left, the youth was back to feeling alone.

“If my caseworker came and had to leave I felt like I didn’t have anyone or anyone to stay.”

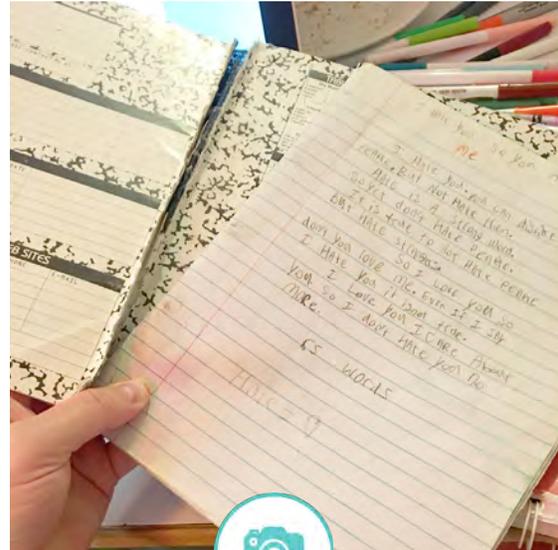
(MP-LT-NJ-01)

Even within institutional placements, the relationships that youth could form were controlled. For those youth who lived in institutions segregated by gender, boys reported that they could not talk to or have any contact with the other side of the building where girls lived, or vice versa. Other participants noted a lack of communal areas where they could talk with other youth, and reported they could barely make friends because if they weren't in class or during quiet or meal time, they were probably either sleeping or showering.

Just because a youth is in an institutional setting and interacts with lots of other staff and youth does not mean a youth cannot feel lonely. "Loneliness is the feeling of being alone, regardless of the amount of social contact" (CDC, 2020). Even people who have a lot of social contact can still feel deeply lonely. Loneliness is understood as lacking opportunities to be fully open and vulnerable with other people.

Feeling isolated and alone impacted youths' ability to build and strengthen relationships. It is also likely to negatively impact their health. While strong social support is widely known to be necessary for emotional health, doctors and researchers are paying increased attention to the way social connection supports physical health. Public health researchers have found that "greater social connection is associated with a 50% reduced risk of early death." And "lacking social connection carries a risk that is comparable, and in many cases, exceeds that of other well-accepted risk factors, including smoking up to 15 cigarettes per day, obesity, physical inactivity, and air pollution" (Holt-Lunstad, 2017).

As such, it is worth paying close attention to how loneliness and a lack of social connection may impact the physical health of former foster youth for years to come.



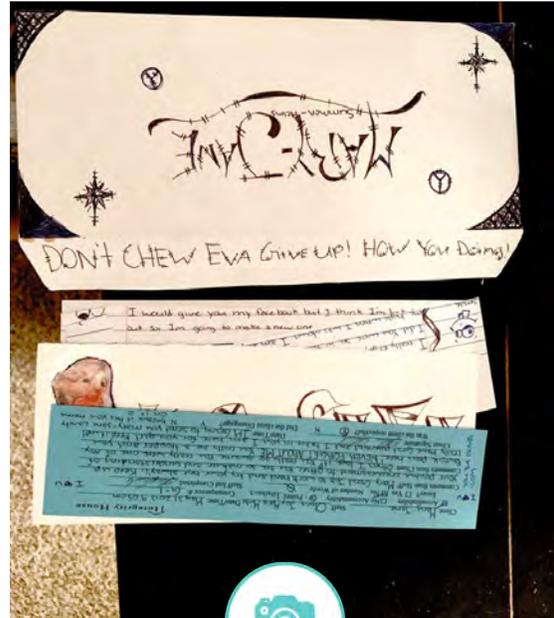
"I still have all my journals and sketchbooks from the time I spent in care. These things were used as a way to express my very complex emotions when I couldn't verbalize it, or didn't feel like talking it out. Art/poetry and writing in general helped me find a positive outlet to express my often very strong emotions. It became a way for me to slow down and stop self-harming. The creativity also taught me even though it was just the beginning to love myself. These items serve as a reminder of the beginning of my story and yet symbolize how amazingly far I have come."

(MP-MT-CO-02)



“This was ‘jail mail’ when I was in the group homes, jail, or treatment facilities. For a very long time I was the only one without mail coming in. It meant so much to other people to receive mail. I still have the mail to this day and reflect on written passages from time to time.”

(MP-MT-NE-02)



“In my last group home I made a really good friend, and she wrote me a letter when things were going really bad in the facility.”

— MaryJane Summers

Finding 6.4.

Youth often felt too embarrassed to tell others they were in an institutional placement. This left their supportive network out of the loop and unable to step in to help.

“I had friendships that I maintained throughout foster care. They didn’t know what I was going through because I wasn’t the type to open up to anybody. I was embarrassed. So it was kind of hard being open to my friends about what I was going through.”

(MP-MT-GA-01)

Most youth in this study reported that they did not tell people in their lives at the time that they were in foster care or living in an institutional setting.

Because youth are often too embarrassed to tell their supportive network that they are in foster care and institutional care, many supportive people in their lives literally do not know where the youth lives or that youth may be in need of help. This means that the people who are most equipped to help the youth—their network of friends and supportive adults—are unaware of the youth’s needs, and unable to volunteer support or step up to help. It also means that these supportive relationships are not able to provide the emotional support that youth need.

“I told nobody.”

(GH-MT-SC-01)

When asked why, youth almost universally said they were “embarrassed.” This speaks to how stigmatized foster care and institutional settings are. Living in an institutional setting, being in foster care, and not living with parents was so embarrassing that youth would keep their living situation private from even their closest friends. In many cases, youth went out of their way to hide this information.

“It’s also really hard to open up or vent to the friends you do have because the situations are embarrassing and they genuinely have no idea what it feels like.”

(TF-ST-LA-01)

“I never put my real name on social media, because I didn’t want people to know I was in foster care. I didn’t want them to judge me, because I didn’t have family.”

(GH-MT-ID-01)

The fact that youth are willing to keep the most basic facts about their lives private from close friends reveals how uncomfortable youth feel about living in institutional placements and what their life looks like.

This study and previous studies at Think Of Us have shown that if supportive people are aware of a youths’ needs, they often will step up to help—sometimes with a placement or permanency option (Think Of Us, 2020). The key is that supportive people have to know that the youth needs help. If youths’ supportive networks can learn that the youth is in an institutional placement and needing help, supportive adults may willingly step up to support the youth and may provide alternative family placements so the youth can exit institutional placements.

Finding 6.5.

Youth lacked basic access to technology and the communication tools needed to stay in touch with the people in their lives.

Inside institutional placements, most youth we spoke to did not have access to a cell phone or the Internet, which are essential in remaining in touch with the people in their lives. Many youth reported having their cell phone taken away from them when they entered a group home or that cell phones were against the rules.

“My phone was taken away from me when I entered the group home.”

(MP-MT-CA-01)

The first month you get there they take all your technology, and you can’t talk with anyone outside the group home for a month. I hated it because there was so much adjustment, and I felt like I had to do it alone.

(MP-MT-TX-01)

Others would break the rules, and keep a cell phone hidden so staff did not see.

“A lot of times I had a phone on me, and I kept it in my bra, so they couldn’t see.”

(MP-LT-IA-01)

For those who were allowed cell phones, some reported that institutions restricted the amount of time youth could use the phones and that they restricted the functionality of the phones, including by limiting the apps allowed.

“My phone was taken and when I finally got it back 3 years later it was heavily monitored. The apps we were allowed to have were slim.”

(MP-LT-AL-01)

At one site, all youth were given a standard cell phone to communicate with during their time in institutional placements.

“We were all given standard generic T9 cell phones back then to keep in touch.”

(MP-MT-KS-01)

Youth wanted access to cell phones in institutional placements, and some recommended that all youth should be allowed access.

“If a foster youth is going somewhere, provide them with a phone, it doesn’t have to be an iPhone, but just to be able to communicate with their case worker or the people in their lives.”

(ES-ST-AK-01)

For some, the restrictions on communications tools strained friendships, since friends had no way of being in touch and because youth were unable to keep up with cultural references important to peer socialization.

“Making friends was hard especially when everyone knew you didn’t have a cell phone so there was no point to even talk to you.”

(MP-LT-AK-01)

“The lack of access to media didn’t help my ability to socialize because a lot of the pop culture and references to shows and movies go right over my head.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

Most youth in this study were also not given routine access to a computer or the Internet. In some cases, there was a shared computer that youth could use for homework. And in one instance, youth could use a computer that was issued to them by their school for classwork (GH-MT-SC-01).

Using technology to talk with friends, keep in touch with family, learn, and complete homework are normal activities for teenagers. By limiting youth in institutional placements from accessing basic technology and communication tools, these settings prevent foster youth from having the normal experiences that their non-system peers have to grow academically and socially. And it makes it very difficult for youth to build and maintain relationships.

It is important to note that all participants had exited institutions prior to this study. Because technology usage and adoption changes very quickly, this finding may not completely reflect the experiences of current youth in institutionalized settings.

7. Receiving punishment and discipline

Finding 7.1.

Youth in institutional settings were constantly assessed against one another.

Many youth reported that institutional placements evaluated youth's behavior against a system of behavioral levels.

"We had levels, like behavior levels, and we had to earn things."

(MP-ST-PA-01)

"They had ladders, and you climb the ladders by doing good things. When I told (another youth) about this internship program, I got docked off the ladder, because I was told by my case manager that I was giving too much optimism. I am getting in trouble by giving them hope, like what the f*ck?"

(MP-LT-CA-01)

Levels dictated their ability to access clothing options or haircuts. At the lower levels, even the most basic needs can be taken away.

"I wore level 1 clothing like grey sweatpants"

(MP-MT-CA-02)

"For my sister, based on her level... She had to get permission from the court to get her hair cut."

(MP-MT-GA-01)

Having a system that constantly assesses youth against one another meant that some young people were punished for not being like the "good" kid that lived in the same placement.

Finding 7.2.

Youth frequently compared institutional placements to prison, as institutional placements have many functions of a carceral environment: confined, surveilling, punitive, restrictive, and degrading.

In interview after interview, youth compared the institutional placements that they lived in to prisons, jails, or juvenile detention. Youth did not always imply that institutions were worse than prisons, but they frequently used prison as the point of comparison.

"It almost feels like a jail. Too much structure and not enough freedom. It is not a normal life."

(MP-ST-KY-01)

"To me it seemed more like a juvenile center than a treatment facility... it's kind of the same model as jail."

(MP-MT-KS-01)

One participant described that youth would arrive at the institution in shackles. Others described being searched each time they re-entered the home.

"Some of the people in the group home came in with shackles on their ankles, and I was so scared I didn't even know they were really used until that point."

(MP-ST-PA-01)

"We were patted down every time we got back to the facility like we were criminals."

(MP-LT-AZ-01)

When asked how they would describe their institutional placements to people who are not familiar with them, youth focused on the caged, stark, and cold attributes of institutional environments.

“A cage with metal bars, a vulnerable child that wants to trust everyone and has hopeful yet sad eyes.”

(MP-MT-NE-01)

“Four plastic paneled white walls, small space. Bed is anchored to the floor. Bulletproof window that doesn’t open. A little window in your door so the staff can view whatever you’re doing whenever they want. A mattress about as thick as a pizza box. A blanket as stiff as cardboard.”

(MP-MT-MN-01)

Youth in institutional placements were often placed under constant surveillance, with staff on the premises at all times. Staff frequently searched youths’ spaces and through their belongings and called them “random checks.” As one participant put it,

“We weren’t allowed to close our doors at the group home I lived at and our windows were alarmed so they could never be opened.”

(MP-LT-AZ-01)

“They go through your stuff whenever they want, and if they find anything you’re screwed. At the shelter the staff had to look in on you every 30 minutes/hour? So it would be 3am and you’re trying to go to sleep, and you get woken up all over again by the door opening and someone staring at you. Plus there’s staff sitting outside your door and by the kitchen, so if you go get water in the middle of the night there’s someone staring at you the whole time while you’re half-awake. It always freaked me out because I startle easily.”

(MP-MT-TX-01)

To survive the surveillance of institutional placements, many youth said that they had to be careful. They believed they couldn’t be naive when it came to interacting with and trusting the staff and their peers.

“They would also check us when we come back to the home to see if we didn’t have any drugs on us...You have to be careful and be mindful of who they’re around and who they’re talking to.”

(ES-ST-AK-01)

Because youth perceived these placements as prison-like, many youth felt like they were in trouble just for being there, that they were there as punishment or to serve “time.”

“It kind of felt like a prison. It was super scary for me and I felt like I was in trouble for being there.”

(MP-ST-PA-01)

“I just had to do my time I guess because it felt like a mini prison.”

(MP-LT-MI-01)

Additionally, many youth reported that the institutional placements restricted their freedom of movement, and did not allow them to leave, unless to go to off-site school. One participant reported having to ask permission before entering a new room and to verbally announce themselves to staff when they entered a room. To ensure youth could not leave on their own, some youth described complex security systems.

“Basically, I was a hostage in that group home.”

(GH-MT-ID-01)

“It was a very secured, locked-down facility. A staff member has to waive a badge over a door to let you exit.”

(MP-LT-AK-02)

24

24 kids under one roof
Numbered like cattle and treated like a spooof
Clawing my way to the top of this hierarchy set in place
Because those in charge set it out to be a race
To be number one is all I wanted
To be number one was what they told us to be
“More outings, more privileges,” they would say
Crazy to think they pinned us against each other instead of letting us play
Alone I felt, with no friends in sight
On the swing set I would try to avoid any fight
Back and forth I’d rock, swinging too high
Hoping it was enough to let me fly
Over the fences, they placed us in
Being only nine, I could not win
They told us horror stories about those who ran away
So I clipped my wings and decided to stay
One phone call a week, I could hear my brother
So sad and alone, we needed each other
The call always ended in tears
Alone back I would be with my fears
24 kids, there was under this roof
24 kids, all searching for proof



“This is poem/spoken word is about my time in a group home of 24 boys at the age of 9, also referred to as the ‘boys ranch.’ I had many other experiences there but this is what came to my mind first and thought I would share.”

(GH-MT-CA-01)

Finding 7.3.

Without sufficient alternative coping mechanisms, youth often attempted to escape institutional placements by running away resulting in increased interactions with law enforcement.

Many foster youth have experienced multiple ACEs. A consequence of ACEs can be high levels of toxic stress (Burke Harris, 2018). Common responses to stress include: fight, flight, or freeze. Frequently, a young person's toxic stress response to the environment they're placed in is to flee—to run away (Litt, n.d.). Indeed, studies have found that youth in group care are more likely to run away than youth in foster homes (Morton et. al. 2018). This was true for many youth that we spoke to as part of this study who had experiences with running away.

“I had run away, and their only option was to put me back in the shelter.”

(ES-ST-AK-01)

“Running away became my coping mechanism. If I had a bad day at school, I would take a walk, run away, and wouldn't come back for a couple of months.”

(MP-LT-AK-01)

One participant shared that youth would run away because they didn't understand why they were there or what was going on.

“A lot of kids tried to run away because they got dropped off by someone and no one told them that this was their new home.”

(MP-MT-TX-01)

While these patterns of running away could be considered in the context of the normal, expected human responses to stress from trauma and could be met with care, youth in this study who ran away often found themselves interacting with law enforcement.

“When I ran away, they would have the police waiting for me at school, so I stopped going to school altogether.”

(MP-LT-AK-01)

“I've dealt with a lot of law enforcement, they filed reports. That's just a constant theme.”

(MP-LT-CA-01)

One youth lived at an institution with an “open-door” policy which allowed youth to leave when they wanted. However, when you returned to the institution after running away, staff would call the police. Some youth described their interactions with law enforcement as abusive and violent.

“I was abused by a cop in one of the group homes.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

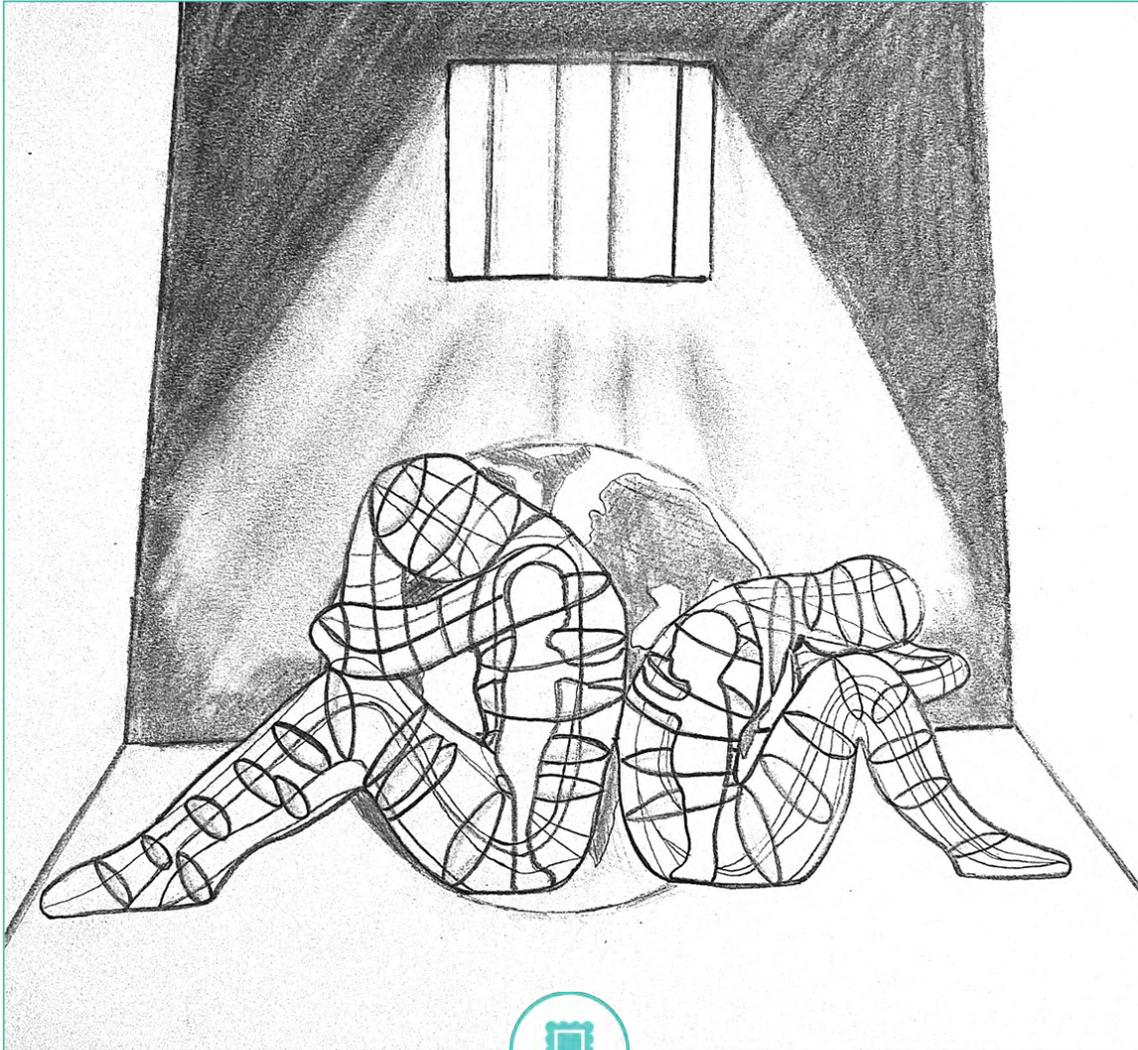
“It is almost similar to police brutality.”

(MP-LT-MI-01)

Some reported frequent interactions with police and that institutional placements routinely call the police on youth for transgressions that are often much more minor than what law enforcement would address for the general public. The research team heard reports of staff calling the police for a child who wanted more breakfast and a 12-year-old youth who asked that a staff hug her after being made to sign a contract saying she was not allowed to receive hugs.

“I had more interactions with the police than any child my age then.”

(MP-LT-AK-01)



"I think of what I drew as a piece that symbolizes us the kids in foster care feeling trapped. For me at least, my biggest fear is becoming my parents. I do not want to fail in my life and I feel trapped in the fear of getting old. I also think it shows how the adults are turned on one another but there is these children inside them trying to get out...I do not think a youth should be limited just because there is some unforeseen obstacle in the way. Lastly, you see an almost prisoner-like setting because being in the system can feel like a prison or life sentence. I think anyone who has not experienced congregate care does not know these emotions, but I hope someone can find my meaning within this drawing."

(TF-ST-AZ-01)

Finding 7.4.

Institutional placements relied on overly harsh and unproductive punishments to discipline youth, instead of giving them the opportunities for positive disciplinary methods and healthy risk taking needed for their development.

Common disciplinary methods used for non-system involved youth such as grounding and limiting technology usage are not available in the context of institutional placements since institutionalized youth are already barred from going out or using cell phones.

“They would ground us, but we were already not allowed to do anything, so it didn’t really matter.”

(MP-LT-AK-01)

As a result, institutions create other forms of punishment. Participants experienced a range of methods of punishment which they described as overly harsh for the issue at hand or ineffective at solving the problem. Punishment methods included removing doors, searching through youth’s belongings, taking away visits with family, taking away access to the gym, or requiring youth to perform unnecessary tasks.

“A regular consequence was to keep a pen on you at all time. If you dropped it or forgot it somewhere, you had to write 1,000 words. We would sit in the garage for hours without heating or AC, and they would have us write essays about what we did wrong.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

“I was told I wasn’t deserving of a seat (on the vehicle taking youth to and from school). They used that as punishment. For two weeks, I rode on the floor. Another thing was, if you spilled anything on the table, you had to clean it with a toothbrush.”

(MP-LT-OH-01)

One felt that punishment was unpredictable, random, and that they would experience punishment even when behaving well.

“It’s also hard to promote good behavior when youth feel that they’ll be treated the same whether they’re good or bad or when they feel like acting out is the only way they’ll be noticed.”

(TF-ST-LA-01)

Several participants experienced seclusion and isolation from other youth in the institution as punishment.

“I already felt secluded by having to be there, and the punishment would be to keep me away from even peers there.”

(MP-MT-NE-02)

“It is just a room with no windows except for on the door so staff could see you. It was a padded room and the door was locked with a magnet, so whenever they wanted to let you out is when they did. I feel like this contributed to my insanity!”

(MP-LT-AK-02)

Often, punishment came in the form of the removal of “points,” which determined what you were and were not allowed to do at the institution. One reflected that staff took more points than felt appropriate for the size of the “infraction.”

“Minor infractions would be punished with 10,000 negative points (which is so hard to work off). If you didn’t meet the required number of points for your level you would lose privileges. You could not participate in activities, talk to your other housemates, eat or drink anything with sugar in it, and you had to sit at the dining room table (could not nap). You would get one 15 minute break from the table a day.”

(MP-LT-AL-01)

One participant shared that staff would limit access to basic needs as punishment.

“Staff would restrict my basic needs from me, such as food, for misbehavior.”

(MP-ST-KY-01)

One participant shared that you could be forcibly medicated as punishment.

“They’d inject 1,000 milligrams of ibuprofen into girls if they didn’t listen or got out of control.”

(MP-MT-AK-01)

Another participant shared that they could be punished by having to stay in the institution longer. This reinforces the idea that living in an institution is itself a punishment.

“They act like they want to help you get better placement but then punish you by extending your time there.”

(PP-MT-NE-01)

These forms of punishment are fundamentally incompatible with what research tells us about adolescents’ neurodevelopment. Adolescents need the ability to continuously experience healthy risk taking opportunities to build independence. During that crucial time in youth’s

development, there is a need to successfully balance control and regulation with the developing need for autonomy. In addition, youth should be allowed to gradually assume “more control of (their) life with a safety net for errors in decision making.” As such, youth experience the consequences of good and bad decisions as either the expansion or limitation of their autonomy.” However, “an institutional setting with fixed rules and procedures that are not adapted to the individual is not conducive to the healthy development of autonomy” (Dozier et. al, 2014).

Finding 7.5.

Youth were forcibly restrained.

While it is important to note that some participants indicated that they did not experience physical punishment while in the institution, another commonly used form of punishment against youth was the use of force and restraints, which participants reported lasting ten to twenty minutes.

One youth reported that if they made so-called “excuses” during a restraint, such as, “I can’t breathe,” or “you’re hurting me”, then the restraint could “last hours” (MP-LT-IL-01). This is particularly noteworthy since Cornelius Fredericks said, “I can’t breathe,” during the restraint that killed him.

“If someone is being aggressive and fighting, they grab you by your arms and put you face down. One person grabs your legs and arms, and if you move a lot then they grab your stomach.”

(MP-LT-NY-01)

“It’s up to (the staff) how long the (restraining) hold lasts. If you are squirming, crying, or any saying, ‘I can’t breathe,’ or, ‘you’re hurting me...’ then it would last hours.”

(MP-LT-IL-01)

Others described restraints that are particularly violent, with some seeing youth getting “bit or their arms broken” (MP-LT-IL-01). One participant reported being sexually abused during a restraint.

“(I was) sexually abused by 3 male staff as they put me in a restraint.”

(MP-MT-CO-02)

“I have seen girls get tackled by grown men for refusing to give them what was in their hands. We have to do better about treating kids like just that. No grown adult should ever have to use that kind of force on a young person.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

When it comes to restraints, youth repeatedly questioned whether staff were appropriately trained to use them, or whether they were necessary to begin with.

**Question: Do you think staff are well trained?
Answer: “Not at all. Especially the restraints, if they were taught at all, they weren’t taught right.”**

(MP-MT-CA-02)

“All restraints are avoidable.”

(MP-LT-MI-01)

Youth reported that staff did not reserve restraints for the most extreme situations where the youth was a threat to themselves or someone else. Instead, at some institutions, restraints were a standard disciplinary tool.

“I know now that you are only allowed to use restraints if you are causing physical harm. But the amount of times I was restrained for just slamming my door or something like that was ridiculous and not helpful at all.”

(MP-LT-IL-01)

Restraints were not a rare occurrence in institutional living. One youth reported staff restraining him eight or nine times during a five-year placement. Which, he said, “for a person who isn’t aggressive, that is a lot” (MP-LT-IL-01). Another reported that each youth was restrained about once per month.

One youth felt that staff failed to understand why youth would act out. Without properly understanding the problem, the situation could escalate to a restraint.

“Staff would restrain us if we weren’t listening or acting out, but we act out because we are feeling abused or not listened to.”

(MP-LT-OH-02)

It’s important to remember that restraints by an adult in the home as well as the fear of restraints, qualify as two of the ten ACEs, which add to a youth’s trauma.

8. Healing and dealing with trauma

Finding 8.1.

When youth entered institutional placements, they brought with them complex experiences with trauma.

Foster youth are placed in the custody of the government's foster care system after they have been removed from their parents because youth are unsafe, abused, neglected, or their parents are unable or the government has deemed them unable to care for them in some way. In some cases, youth come to institutional settings because they have been abused by foster care families. In one case, a youth was placed into the group home because she was being sex trafficked, and when the trafficking ring was uncovered, she was sent into group care. As such, youth come into institutional placements with existing trauma from the removal from their families, and the previous situations they were in.

"They didn't help with any trauma a kid might have."

(GH-LT-TX-01)

Finding 8.2.

That original trauma was compounded by the trauma of institutionalization and then aggravated by the first or second-hand abuse that many experienced in those placements.

Foster care, including institutional placements, promises to be a reprieve from abuse, neglect, and further trauma. But this promised reprieve is not always realized. Instead, youth's initial trauma was often compounded by having to adjust to an

unfamiliar, often isolating and unsupportive setting, as well as experiencing or witnessing abuse.

"I was removed from my bio family because of abuse. Then at the first foster home I was sexually assaulted by the foster dad... Then, I was sent to a group home for sexually abused girls... I also tried to attempt suicide because I felt that I wasn't going to ever be safe or in a good placement."

(MP-LT-NJ-01)

"Then I was moved to another group home, with a lot of poverty, gun violence, etc., and I was there for a good 8 months, and it was traumatizing because I watched one of the kids being shot to the face. He died."

(GH-ST-NY-01)

Research around Adverse Childhood Events and trauma proves that trauma does not only impact a person's emotional and mental health, it also impacts physical health. We found this to be true in this study, too. Many youth reported that their physical health worsened during their time in institutional placements.

"I was down and putting a smile on my face so no one would notice how horrible the last 2.5 years had been for me. I lost so much weight and developed an eating disorder which took years to get better from. Some of these places were downright horrible to the point they didn't care that you didn't eat or that you were so weak. They just said it's for attention."

(MP-MT-MI-01)

"I left there with depression."

(MP-MT-KS-01)



"To me congregate care was rough. It was dark and desolate with bright white walls. I was surrounded by nothing but pain and trauma. Made to relive trauma that I already lived in day to day. When I was at (group home) I watched my best friend commit suicide. I remember running through the dorm hall up the cottage stairs to get help, by then it was too late. I ended up restrained because suddenly I couldn't handle my emotions, meanwhile other staff and emergency responders couldn't get past the barricade (my friend) put in front of her door. She was only 12 years old and I was 11."

(MP-MT-CO-02)

Finding 8.3.

For many youth, their trauma was pathologized, rather than addressed and tended to in a humane way.

Some youth in this study experienced nearly unimaginable trauma and suffering. Anyone in their shoes would have emotional responses to these circumstances. Instead of offering humane, caring support to these youth and really listening to them, institutions often pathologized youths' suffering. Institutions leave them with many diagnoses but scant support. This can leave youth feeling like something is wrong with them, that they have done something wrong, or that their emotions are wrong.

“When in treatment they diagnosed me with so many things, and all I could think was that I was a kid and, ‘How can they diagnose me with all of this?’”

(MP-LT-AK-02)

Foster teens are sometimes unfairly assessed against their non-system peers' mental health standards. Often, this is done in order for foster youth to qualify for placement in therapeutic facilities and other institutions. This practice is an unfair comparison as it does not take into full account the trauma that foster youth have experienced. As a result, youth often end up being diagnosed with a number of illnesses and disorders, leaving them to feel confused and to develop a negative self-image.

“I wasn’t understanding what they were saying about all the disorders. (The staff would) say, ‘Come on, do the treatment, you know what you need to do.’ No, I don’t know what all these disorders you are giving me. But in the treatment places, it’s called being defiant or argumentative. I was always the kid with questions and needed an explanation.”

(MP-LT-IL-01)

“Instead of treating me like a normal child who had gone through some things, I was immediately placed on a very high dosage of a psychotropic medication. This medicine still has messed up my sleeping patterns to this day.”

(ES-LT-TX-01)

Youths' trauma was rarely holistically treated or resolved as the mental health services institutions offered to youth didn't always help. Moreover, institutions rarely involved youth in the design of the healing plan. One institution assigned a talk therapist to all youth at that facility, though many participants in this research felt there were limitations to talk therapy, which is supported by emerging research on trauma (Van der Kolk, 2014).

“All they did was put me in therapy. But I don’t think it helped, even to this day. I didn’t like talking about my past. I didn’t feel like telling them about everything that happened. I didn’t like to repeat all the stuff that happened. I didn’t like it at all.”

(GH-MT-ID-01)

“I had 12 therapists in my life.”

(MP-ST-AK-02)

Additionally, the first step in healing is safety and stabilization (Herman, 1992). And living in institutional placements where you're waiting to be moved somewhere else means that youth are unable to send that signal of safety to their brain so they can begin their healing process. Often healing does not begin until after foster care.

"Healing from trauma is something you do after the trauma is done. They made sure to keep the trauma going until the day I left care for good."

(MP-MT-MN-01)

Finding 8.4.

Medication was often the only coping mechanism offered to address trauma. Many youth felt they were wrongly diagnosed or overmedicated.

Though youth experience multifaceted, diverse trauma, many are offered only one coping mechanism to address this complicated trauma: psychotropic medication. This comports with data confirming that the majority of youth in both therapeutic foster care and group homes receive psychotropic medications. Approximately one-half were taking multiple psychotropic medications. Surprisingly, previous research indicates that youth in group homes are nearly twice as likely as the youth in therapeutic foster care to receive medication (Breland-Noble et al., 2004). Participants in this research also reported an over-reliance on medication.

Question: What would you tell people institutional care looks like?

Answer: "I would do a piece of art of an adolescent brain picturing all of the medication put into the body, and all of the pieces of normalcy that is taken out like love, emotional support, social connection, technology, and education."

(MP-MT-NE-02)

Even when talk therapy is offered, sometimes it revolves only around medication.

"It wasn't really therapy, like a normal therapist where you talk about how you were doing, and how you can be doing better. It all evolved around my medication. I had to be on medication."

(MP-MT-CA-02)

"Every month we made our monthly trip to the psychiatrist who sucked. Every time: "You doing good?" "I'm good" and that was it. Unless staff was complaining about your behavior, then he would usually change your meds."

(MP-MT-TX-01)

Some youth expressed that they were coerced or forced into taking medication even if they did not want to. Rather than foster healing, institutional placements prioritized symptom control. Youth felt like they were being punished for their trauma when the system mandated they take medication. Some ended up suppressing their trauma responses rather than dealing with them.

"Youth are forced on medication and penalized if we don't take it."

(MP-LT-MI-02)

“I was on a whole petri dish of medications and I wasn’t allowed to go off of them or my levels would drop within the group home ranking which would affect my further placements, so I felt like I had to stay on them.”

(MP-LT-AZ-01)

In one instance, one young, new mother at a group care facility described feeling lonely and devoid of close relationships. Instead of alternatives, like surrounding the new mother with staff support or working with her to repair her broken social network during this highly vulnerable postpartum period, the facility chose to prescribe medication (MP-MT-AK-01).

Some youth described the negative physical and emotional side effects of medication which included greater depression and migraines.

“I was on medication for a long time and it just made me feel more depressed. It made me more sad.”

(MP-LT-IA-01)

“I was over-medicated and my depression that was often crippling to the point where I couldn’t get out of bed was seen as me being lazy or me trying to get out of things. The solution was to send me to review my meds. I suffer from severe migraines, ones that have stroke-like symptoms.

(MP-MT-CA-02)

Several reported that side effects of medication left them feeling lethargic, like a “zombie.” For some, these side effects impacted their relationships and even their educational attainment.

“I was definitely over-medicated and was sometimes on 3–4 different medications at once. When I went to school, the friends I did have would always ask me what was wrong with me. I felt like a zombie. At one point in high school I just stop socializing altogether.”

(TF-ST-LA-01)

“I had a really good therapist, however when it came to medications this was their primary approach to treatment. While I was going through a criminal trial, my medications were upped, and I was a zombie for months. I fell asleep in school, but because they were connected, the school would put me in the time out room and I would sleep my days away because they knew, ‘I was having side effects.’”

(MP-MT-CO-01)

Other youth described feeling misdiagnosed, especially as their diagnoses happened when they were very young children.

“I don’t think that I had the issues they said I did. Because they said I had these issues since I was 5, and I was just a kid.”

(MP-LT-IL-01)

“I think a lot of these psychiatrists are misdiagnosing these kids with ADD/ADHD when really they just have a lot of energy.”

(MP-LT-IA-01)

One shared the long term emotional toll that wrongful diagnosis can have.

“Youth really internalize wrongful diagnosis and carry the burden or self-loathing that something is always wrong with them. Having all those labels and stigmas thrown at you really scars you. Being over-medicated severely impacts the brain and develops chemical dependency and affects youth later in life.”

(TF-ST-LA-01)

One youth told the devastating story of entering foster care in the first place because of wrongly prescribed psychotropics. At 8 years old, this youth was living with his family and sisters, when he was placed on a cocktail of psychotropic drugs that was the wrong combination for him. That cocktail of drugs caused a psychotic break, which landed him in a psychiatric hospital. The psychiatric hospital was not a part of the foster care system. The hospital stay was a health care intervention, not a child welfare intervention.

From the psychiatric hospital, he was discharged, not home to his family, but into a group home in the foster care system. He did not enter foster care due to any family issues, just a psychiatrist's mistake. He believes he should have never entered foster care as there were no abuse or neglect issues with his mother--his sisters remained at home. Following the brief stint in the psychiatric hospital (which was outside of foster care), he feels he should have returned to live with his mother and sisters. Instead, he stayed in group care in foster care until 18, and never reunified.

“I was on a cocktail of medications that I guess didn’t work because they caused a psychological break. Because of that psychotic break, I had to go to the psych ward.”

(MP-LT-IL-01)

The Forgotten Ones

Inside, I still feel like this lost 9 year
old child
Corner of her room, hugging her
knees
Scared, lost and completely alone
Intimidated by the world going
around.

Institutional routine, staff switch day/
night,
“Sign above the dotted line...
Thank you, next!”

We are
Like zombies;
Highest dosages
The doctor can prescribe

Indestructible four walls
And a bulletproof window
Impossible to escape
This hell
Regardless, there’s nowhere to go!

Like prisoners,
Like dogs,
Accepted and excused
By the public eye
Loved and cared for
By none

We are the forgotten ones
That unwillingly surrendered our
souls
Wishing this nightmare could just be
done.

To the devil I sold my soul
A dozen heads roam ‘round slow
Hopeless, lost children
Institutionalised and hating
themselves
No clue what life could have been
like
If another human being
In this world, so large
Could have seen
The potential my eyes promised
Glowing green eyes, filled with
strength
Outshining, glistening, with hope
They screamed the need to be
loved!
But my destiny was already wrote.



Spoken words

– Sheila Mae Sommerfeldt

Finding 8.5.

Often without support, youth discovered and developed their own coping mechanisms to survive the system.

This research asked youth if institutional placements or staff taught them coping mechanisms, and most young people said they did not.

That said, nearly all youth reported developing their own coping mechanisms that they used to manage and heal from trauma.

“Honestly a lot of coping skills I found myself.”

(MP-LT-NY-01)

“I had to find a lot of my own coping skills because the ones they give you often don’t work for everyone.”

(MP-LT-AK-01)

Many of these coping mechanisms were positive, healthy outlets. While in institutional placements, some of the healthy coping mechanisms youth relied on included: running (exercise), taking long hot showers, using their imagination, writing, drawing, listening to music, and more. Others reported finding their coping mechanisms after they left institutional placements, where some relied on hiking, time in nature, and meditation to cope.

“Something that really helped me is a strong imagination. I could go really anywhere in my head, and that’s really important”.

(MP-MT-CA-02)

“Writing or drawing so that you’re not keeping stuff in.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

Others, however, reported reliance on less healthy tactics to cope with trauma.

“It definitely was a sink or swim environment. A lot of the coping skills that we found were along the way and most of them weren’t healthy.”

(MP-LT-AZ-01)

“The coping skills I also found were not healthy like smoking, partying, drugs, etc.”

(ES-ST-CA-01)

One participant shared that extreme independence and a hesitance to trust other people was their coping mechanism. While this coping mechanism may protect them from getting hurt in the short term, it may exacerbate social isolation and diminish social skills in the long term. This speaks to the need for relational healing among many youth.

“My over independence is my coping skill and my reaction to everything especially when it comes to trusting people around me.”

(MP-LT-AK-01)

9. Nurturing a sense of self

Finding 9.1.

Many youth felt they were treated not as an individual, but instead, as a group or as a series of case numbers. For some youth, this felt dehumanizing.

Institutional placements can feel to youth like cookie-cutter or one-size-fits-all placements. Throughout this study, young people repeatedly expressed that what was often hardest for them about group placements was not being treated or perceived as a full individual. Instead, many youth felt like they were treated as a group, without individualism or personalized care. One participant noted that if one person acted out, the whole group was punished.

“They didn’t think of you as an individual, they thought of you as more of a group.”

(MP-LT-IL-01)

“I feel like my primary problem in (that group home), is that it focuses on the kids’ situations rather than the kids themselves.”

(GH-LT-TX-01)

While every child is different, some participants felt that institutional settings often fail to recognize youth for their unique contributions, gifts, needs, backgrounds, and wishes. Some felt that institutions fail to adapt and shift their strategies to best serve the specific child or youth.

“In congregate care settings there are so many different children with so many different needs, but it can be really hard for adults to look at such a large group and figure out who needs what and whose needs are most important when they have limited resources to do so.”

(PP-MT-NE-01)

For many, there was a strong feeling that youth had to conform to the group culture in institutional placements. It was clear to them that institutional care would not adapt to meet youth where they were. Youth had to change to fit into institutional care.

“You will either change or you won’t be here.”

(GH-LT-TX-01)

Many youth felt that they were only seen, understood, or judged by the notes in their case file rather than being understood for who they actually were. Others felt that they were labeled or put into sub-groups, such as “good” or “bad,” and that many times those labels were unfair. Sometimes youth were labeled “bad” when really youth were trying to advocate for themselves.

“They have specific mental images of us, and they would do everything based on that. We were stereotypes to them.”

(MP-LT-CA-01)

“Sometimes a strong child isn’t a bad child. Maybe they’re voicing what they feel is best.”

(MP-MT-NE-03)

Some felt like they were thought of as patients rather than as individuals. Some felt that staff did not consider their behavior in the full context of the trauma and other experiences of their life. Others felt that their case files and case notes haunted them, damaged their reputation, and diminished their chances of success before they even arrived at a placement.

“(Youth) feel like a patient or statistics in that home.”

(MP-MT-CA-01)

“The reports cause issues when you move to another place, and the next place looks at them and they already know you. They talk about having a clean slate, but that slate is completely dirty by the time you get there. You’re already screwed once you step into the building from the reports.”

(MP-LT-IL-01)

This lack of being truly “seen” as an individual person felt dehumanizing for participants. It is difficult for someone to feel that they are standing in the full expression of their humanity when their existence is boiled down to a case number or merely one of many in a group home.

“A lot of kids in foster care, they’re put in boxes, and moved around like packages, and their case numbers are like their tracking numbers. Foster kids are made to feel like commercial products.”

(MP-LT-CA-01)

“Institutionalization is dehumanizing. Youth deserve a family and places of love and support where they can grow and prosper”

(MP-ST-KY-01)



Finding 9.2.

Youth had limited privacy.

Throughout this study, youth almost universally reported that they had only very basic privacy in institutional placements.

“Privacy was not really an option.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

“They even tell you that privacy is a privilege, not a right.”

(MP-MT-TX-01)

Many were not allowed to go freely into the bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens, backyard, or other rooms. Many reported that they could only enter certain rooms at certain times. One youth wanted to be able to go to their bedroom afterschool but reported that they were not allowed in the bedrooms until later in the day.

“There was a living room, but we weren’t allowed in it. There was a study room but not for kids. The only time we were allowed anywhere in the house that wasn’t the bedroom was when we were with the group home mom when we were eating dinner at the kitchen table.”

(MP-MT-CA-01)

For many people including youth outside of institutions, bedrooms are a private space. Yet some participants in this study reported not having privacy in the bedroom. In some cases, youth were not allowed to close the doors to their rooms, and others reported having their doors taken away as punishment.

“I got home, and my bedroom door was kicked in.”

(TF-MT-IL-01)

“My sister was slamming the door, so they took the door away from our room and our bathroom.”

(MP-LT-AK-01)

Additionally, youth routinely reported staff going through their belongings, often without notice or justification.

“They would go through our stuff to see what we were hiding. I felt like my privacy was invaded, like, ‘Why are you touching my stuff?’ I would come home, and they would just be rummaging through my things, so I’d just sit there and watch them.”

(MP-LT-AK-01)

When asked about privacy, most youth reported the bathroom as the only reliable place that they had privacy. Sometimes youth would go to the bathroom if they wanted to have a private moment or talk with someone freely.

“There would be certain times you would have free time and sneak into the bathroom and text (a friend) to say, ‘I’m okay’.”

(MP-LT-IA-01)

Even in the bathroom, privacy was monitored. For example, some youth shared that they were timed in the bathroom. Others had to ask permission before going to the bathroom or taking a shower. One youth shared that even when in the bathroom, staff would stand outside of the door.

“Only privacy was in the bathroom with a timer for a shower.”

(ES-ST-TX-01)

With almost no privacy, it is difficult for youth to feel autonomy, practice healthy boundaries, or begin to nurture a healthy sense of self.

Finding 9.3.

Youth had very little bodily autonomy and self-determination, making it difficult to experience agency or autonomy.

Youth in this study reported having very little bodily autonomy in institutional settings. Staff determined when youth could sleep and go to the bathroom, what youth can eat, when they can eat, which products they can use for their own health and hygiene (such as deodorants, menstrual products, etc.), what they can do in their free time, who they can hang out with, and when they can go outside, and more.

“You shouldn’t have to ask to go to the bathroom or your room.”

(MP-LT-IA-01)

“They would make us spend 8+ hours in a room where we couldn’t slump and take a nap. We had to sit straight.”

(MP-MT-KS-01)

Some homes had very specific rules related to bodily autonomy. For example, one youth reported that the home required them to wear socks at all times in the home except when showering.

“Something that has stuck with me 18 years later is the fact that I had to wear socks 24/7. The only time I was allowed to not have on socks was while I showered. 18 years later and I still do not like having my feet covered. I will walk around barefoot.”

(ES-LT-TX-01)

Youth also experienced very little self-determination. Many youth were not allowed to make even basic decisions about their life, were not always consulted about their wishes for placement or permanency, or informed about basic information about their life.

“They really just treat you like you’re nothing, you have no rights, you have to do whatever they want.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

“I got almost all my rights and everything taken from me. I couldn’t do anything I wanted to do, ever.”

(GH-LT-RI-01)

This extends to decisions regarding their own health. In one case, a young person was not told about a long-standing health issue. She would routinely get an electrocardiogram (EKG) when she went to the doctor’s office.

However, she was not told for many years that this was because she had a heart murmur.

“I used to get ultrasounds and EKGs and stuff, but no one told me (that I had a heart murmur), so I just assumed that it was a part of a normal visit. But I guess a heart murmur is when you have holes in your heart. But no one ever told me, or no one ever cared.”

(ES-ST-CA-01)

In many cases, youth are not aware that others are making important decisions on their behalf, or that they could have the opportunity to have a say in those decisions.

“I was completely unaware that other people were making decisions that would impact my life.”

(MP-LT-IL-01)

Without full bodily autonomy and self-determination, youth cannot experience agency, and can end up feeling like their voices don’t matter. This can leave youth feeling disempowered by the very people and systems that are designed to support them.

“No one really consulted me about what I wanted.”

(MP-MT-CA-01)

“It’s like being in a cage watching your life go by without having a say.”

(MP-MT-NE-01)

Without agency, it is difficult to cultivate a healthy sense of self (Hohwy, 2007).

10. Reflecting on institutional placements

Finding 10.1. **Institutional placements felt unsafe.**

Youth are placed in institutions because they are perceived to be safer than alternatives, but many youth experienced group homes that got shut down for not being safe.

“This placement got shut down.”
(MP-LT-NJ-01)

Additionally, while in institutional placements, some youth reported fearing for their safety.

“I was fearing for my life and my child’s life... It wasn’t very safe.”
(ES-ST-AK-01)

“The violence along with my disability were so pervasive that I was afraid for my life.”
(MP-LT-CA-01)

Finding 10.2. **For most youth, institutional placements were places they needed to get out of.**

Many youth perceived institutional placements in a negative, stigmatized way. Some could not think of a single positive trait to associate with them. As such, most youth do not think of institutional settings as a “home” or as a permanent placement.

“There were never any good situations with me. I can’t give you any positive reviews.”
(MP-MT-CA-02)

“I honestly would say it’s the worst place to be.”
(MP-LT-IA-01)

Instead, most youth perceived institutional placements as a temporary holding place that they want to “get out” of. Some youth believed that compliance with rules and restrictions means that they could finally earn the right to leave the placement. That’s the outcome they were hoping for.

“I thought: If I’m good, I can get out of here. I would do my best, but my best wasn’t enough.”
(MP-MT-GA-01)

“I was 17 and you know, my focus was getting out of there.”
(MP-ST-PA-01)

One notable exception to this finding was one participant who had opportunities in their institutional placement that they feel they would not have had otherwise, such as going to amusement parks, learning to drive, and getting a job.

“I was able to experience many (positive) things that I would have never experienced if I had stayed with my parents or with a traditional foster family.”
(GH-MT-FL-01)

Finding 10.3.

Youth held on to the idea that they were only in the institutional placements temporarily but that did not align with the financial incentives of institutional placements that benefited from increasing youths' length of time in their care.

Institutional placements are supposed to be temporary, only available for certain groups of youth, or for specific reasons. This means that youth are constantly in a transient state, waiting for the inevitable to happen when they need to move to another placement. Many youth felt that their placements could change at literally any time.

"They would load me and all of my stuff in a van then go to court. Then I would either leave and get all my stuff from the car, or go back to the home."

(MP-ST-PA-01)

"It was day to day, never knowing where I would sleep at night."

(MP-MT-KS-01)

But the opposite experience was often true. We heard several instances of youth staying longer than they were supposed to in their institutional placements. These practices may be inconsistent with federal law and requirements for permanency.

"A lot of the girls were there for 15 months, and the program was only supposed to be 6-12 months."

(MP-LT-NJ-01)

"I didn't really understand what was going on when I was put in the safe home. I thought that I was going to be there for a week but I ended up being there for a year."

(GH-ST-CT-01)

Youth were aware that the financial incentives of the institutional placements are not always aligned with the best outcomes for their well-being. Organizations and individuals alike benefit financially and professionally from institutional settings. Youth, however, do not experience similar benefits financially, professionally, or emotionally.

"When you're trying to make a profit, you don't care about the quality of standards. You just worry about filling a bed."

(MP-LT-MI-01)

In one case, a participant's placement was under investigation and eventually closed because the company extended youths' stays for profit.

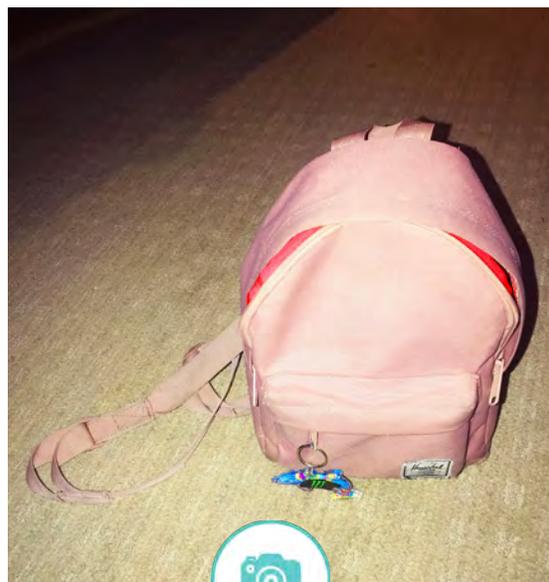
"My last home was shut down because there was tax fraud. They were antagonizing the kids. CPS came around and interviewed the kids. I was there for nine months and I was supposed to be there for four (months). They got shut down because they were prolonging kids' stays, so they could make more money."

(MP-MT-GA-01)



"I have this duffel bag that was given to me the very first time I ever went into care. I have kept it this long, and it just reminds me to never get comfortable anywhere until I finally reach my goals. This duffel bag has been with me since the beginning of my journey and even though it started out rocky, it's a part of my testimony."

(MP-LT-SC-01)



"I honestly have nothing from my childhood besides a backpack. (This) backpack was what I took with me to carry all my things."

(MP-MT-KY-01)

Finding 10.4.

Building a life after institutional placements was even more challenging when youth were not equipped with the social, emotional, or life skills needed to thrive.

Many youth noted that they transitioned into adulthood with a number of disadvantages stemming from their time in institutional placements.

“I wasn’t dealt the best hand of cards.”
(GH-LT-FL-01)

“Look into how we are today mentally, emotionally, and physically. How are we maintaining life when we weren’t given a great shot at it.”
(ES-LT-NC-01)

Many still struggle to this day to make connections and trust people around them.

“‘Normalcy who?’ Socialization is still a weird thing for me... It’s been a hard thing for me to measure, ‘Is this person a connection of mine? Is this a connection that I built on my own?’”
(TF-MT-IL-01)

“Coming out of that, it made me not want to trust anyone.”
(ES-ST-AK-01)

Some youth made the realization that their institutional placements failed in multiple ways. Institutional placements neither kept them off the streets after they aged out nor did it solve the deeper, fundamental problems like developing emotional security and fostering familial and social connections.

“I’m glad it gave me some place so that I wasn’t homeless, but I ended up being homeless afterward anyway.”
(MP-ST-PA-01)

“I didn’t get to learn about my heritage or the normal things your family would teach you.”
(MP-LT-MI-01)

One youth shared the powerful reflection that once they aged out and left group care, they did not have the will, skills, or capacity to manage their own life.

“I was kept in a group home until I aged out I wasn’t given the necessary things or resources to survive once I got out and I got kicked out of my program for not being productive because I lost the will to live because I didn’t know what to do with my life now that it was my own.”
(MP-LT-AZ-01)

One notable exception is a participant who reports that the financial support of foster care has allowed them to attend college. It is worth noting that this support is not tied to foster youth being placed in institutions.

“They help support me financially which is the only reason I’m able to be in college. If they didn’t I would probably drop out to make money.”
(MP-MT-TX-01)

Finding 10.5.
Foster youth believe that their past made them the resilient people they are today.

Foster youth we spoke to have lived through many of the worst situations imaginable. And yet, they survive with tremendous resilience, deep empathy, and thoughtful perspective.

During institutional placements and afterward, many young people developed strong resilience—a sense that they can come back from any challenge, and self-reliance—a sense that they can rely on themselves. These were among the most frequently cited benefits of institutional placements.

“It made me grittier and more capable.”
(MP-MT-KS-01)

“I’m very resourceful, I’m pretty used to doing things myself if I need something done... If I don’t have anybody, that’s fine, because I’ll be able to get it done however I can.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

Because institutional care was viewed as a difficult challenge to be survived and gotten through, many young adults felt strong, empowered, and that they could handle difficult things in the future.

“It allowed me the freedom, now as an adult, to be able to know that I can pave my own way, and survive anything that comes my way.”

(MP-MT-CA-01)

Many young people depended on the resilience and self-reliance they developed now in their adult lives. There was a shared belief among participants that surviving the difficult challenges they faced during their time in institutions made them who they are today.

“As awful as it was, it made me grow as a person.”

(ES-ST-AK-01)

“Every time I tell people about my experience, people are like “holy f*ck, how are you still here?” It was a lot, and it has made me a better person.

(TF-MT-IL-01)

Despite the ways the system and our society harmed them, foster youth in institutions hung firmly on to their basic humanity, chose to find meaning in their stories, and defied all odds to keep their spirits intact.

“My time in care was challenging to say the least. I had to learn to adapt, I had to learn resilience, and I had to learn trust. I faced many obstacles that most of my peers have never faced. Some situations weren’t the best, and some things could have been better. However, all of this made me into who I am today. And for that, I am grateful. I am grateful to be so uniquely molded into who I was supposed to be.”

(MP-ST-KY-01)

This finding is in line with those of psychologists at the University of North Carolina - Charlotte who have coined and researched Posttraumatic Growth. Posttraumatic Growth is “positive change experienced as a result of the struggle with a major life crisis or a traumatic event” (University of North Carolina at Charlotte, n.d.). Posttraumatic Growth does not imply that traumatic events are good. Instead, it recognizes that many people, when faced with extraordinary circumstances, will use these opportunities to learn and grow.

“While foster care was a really negative experience, I feel that foster care definitely shaped me into who I am today...Foster care is a huge part of my identity and my story, and that experience has everything to do with the resilient, capable, and fierce woman I am today. In foster care I learned to stand on my own two feet, and that if no one else was going to be there for me, I would be there for myself.”

(TF-ST-LA-01)

However, while many expressed that they have benefited from this positive resilience and self-reliance in adulthood, a few participants also noted that over-independence on the self can be a coping mechanism and weaken their relationships and ability to heal from trauma in a relational way.

11. Reforming or ending institutional placements

Finding 11.1.

During youths' most formative years, the system repeated to them that there was nowhere else for them to go. This killed youths' imaginative capacity to envision what could lie beyond institutional placements.

Repeatedly, youth recounted that the system told them that they were put into institutional care because there was nowhere else for them to go. This revealed a deep mental model shared by the overwhelming majority of participants. Youth believed that institutions exist as a last resort, when there are literally no other options or alternatives.

"My case worker put me in North Star hospital cuz I had nowhere else to go."

(MP-MT-AK-01)

This mental model posed a significant challenge for this study because in each interview, researchers asked youth if there was anything that would have made their experiences in institutional placements better. Researchers also asked what would make institutions better in an "ideal world." Despite often reporting harrowing personal stories in institutions, most youth had difficulty imagining a different world. It was hard to imagine that another world was possible.

Finding 11.2.

Because a different world was hard to fathom, youth often suggested only modest reforms to institutional placements.

When asked about improvements to institutions, most youth answered these questions with only very modest reforms. These reforms included minor solutions like "a better bed," "more outings," or "some privacy, any privacy."

"A better bed, a better closet...I wish they had helped me get a driver's license... And I wish they could have taken us on vacations where we had taken airplanes, like Disneyland or Six Flags."

(GH-ST-NY-01)

"I guess more outings...there weren't any outings. More outings like museums or zoo or to go see a movie as a group. something that is out of the shelter, besides school."

(ES-ST-TX-01)

While some of these improvements would make the environment more liveable, few of these changes would have meaningfully improved the material conditions and life outcomes of youth upon leaving those institutional placements or aging out of foster care.

"They don't need bars on all the windows."

(ES-ST-CA-01)

Rarely, others offered more substantial suggestions like dramatically improving staff quality and staff training. Though not all agreed that improved staff training would help improve outcomes.

"I would 100% support a home where we had 1-2 staff in a house with 3 or 4 16-21 year old women to live on their own but still have a safe place to learn about what it's like on their own while also learning to live with roommates while also having to mostly support them without the actual "real life" accountability."

(MP-ST-PA-01)

“I do not think training foster parents and social workers is necessarily effective. That is how the system in California at least will choose to implement said improvements. The problems won’t resolve until we do better about making sure foster parents and homes are not abusing the money and not caring for the youth.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

There was one important exception to this finding. One youth did have a bold vision for what a different world would look like. This is a world without foster care as we know it today. He would replace foster care with something he called “community care.” In community care, communities are supported to directly care for youth who are in need of support, without the youth needing to be removed from the community they are a part of and without the government stepping in as legal guardian to the youth.

“In community care, it would not be acceptable for someone to treat you as paperwork... Other countries don’t have foster care systems. Parents pass away, and the kids are just absorbed into the community. Ideally, that is what would happen here.”

(MP-MT-CA-01)

Finding 11.3.

Youth often felt that a world without institutions would lead to homelessness. For them, the options were either institutional placements or the streets.

Youth believed what the system told them: institutions exist when there is nowhere else to go. They’ve been told time and time again that the reason they’re in institutional placements is because there are no foster

homes or other placements for them. Because of this, most youth were concerned that a world without institutional placements in foster care would mean homelessness for foster youth.

“It’s so hard, because I don’t want to see any other kids homeless, because where would they go?”

(GH-ST-NY-01)

When the options were institutionalized care or homelessness, most resoundingly preferred institutionalized care.

“I would rather have a kid sleeping in the same room than be outside and unsafe.”

(GH-ST-AZ-01)

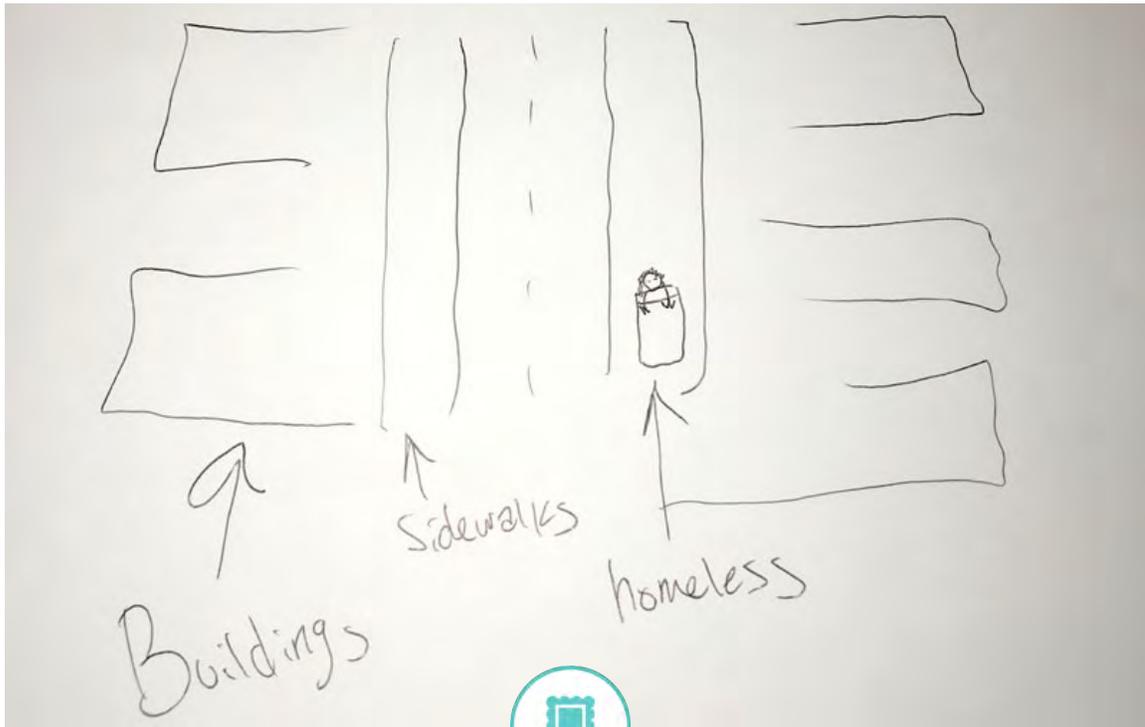
One notable exception was a woman who refused a group home, preferring a homeless shelter instead, which her social worker took her to (ES-ST-CA-01).

Many youth justified their experience in institutions because, feeling that they had no alternatives then, “it had to be this way.” For this reason, most did not initially call to eliminate institutional placements. In reflecting upon their answers, it was evident that the majority of youth could not fathom that abolishing institutional placements is possible. When researchers gave youth the opportunity to consider that alternatives to institutions might exist, youth often seemed to be considering this idea for the first time.

When given a second to think about it in the interviews, some youth embraced the idea.

“More family placements.”

(ES-ST-TX-01)



“Without them (institutional placements), kids who do absolutely need them would be homeless.”

— Jozlyn Kihlstadius

Finding 11.4.

Youth felt that family placements would be better than institutions, but only with improvements to the foster family system. Such improvements could include removing barriers to kinship care, recruiting more loving families, ensuring families foster adolescents, supporting families in taking care of youth with higher needs, thwarting abuse in foster families.

Most believed that family placements would be better than institutions—both for themselves and for others.

“We need more caring, loving foster parents.”

(TF-ST-LA-01)

But many believed that the system does not have enough foster families, and some were skeptical that the system could get enough foster families to serve all youth in care.

“I don’t believe they have enough foster parents.”

(MP-LT-CA-01)

“You’d have to increase the number of foster homes out there, increase the number of foster parents, training, funding... To me it’s not the most feasible thing.”

(MP-MT-KS-01)

Others believed that once you hit a certain age, you were “too old” for families.

“All I ever wanted was for a family but I was told I was too old so I was kept in a group home until I aged out.”

(MP-LT-AZ-01)

A few felt that the needs of some foster youth were too high to be cared for by a family.

Others lamented the failures of the foster family system. Several described the seemingly never ending cycle of moving from foster home to foster home in the foster family system. Others shared experiences of trauma in family homes, noting that foster family placements can also expose youth to abuse and neglect.

“I feel that I would thrive more in a family setting. But sometimes things are just as absurd in foster homes.”

(TF-MT-IL-01)

Some youth would have preferred being placed with a family member or kin.

“I would have loved to be able to live with my grandma or any of my other family members instead of taking the easy way out and placing me in a group home.”

(MP-LT-AZ-01)

Unfortunately, kinship placements were not possible due to various restrictions. One example that was cited was the inability to live with family out of state, as the child welfare agency would not allow it, even though some youth were placed in institutional settings out of state.

“I wanted to live with a couple of my aunties. But we couldn’t because their background check didn’t work out.”

(MP-LT-AK-01)

“My sister wanted to adopt me but her husband wasn’t ready. Is there a way to let my sister play a bigger role in my life, even without adoption? Did the choices have to be a group home or adoption by my sister?”

(ES-ST-AK-01)

Finding 11.5.

Almost no youth felt that an institutional placement was the best placement for them personally. When youth objected to the idea of ending institutional placements, their concern was for “other” youth.

Every interview asked participants if they had somewhere else they wanted to be living while they lived in institutional placements. Except for two participants, everyone said that they did have somewhere else they wanted to be living, such as a kinship placement or a foster family placement. Some believed they should have never been in foster care, and others felt that with the proper support their family could have taken care of them. Because nearly everyone had somewhere else that they wanted to live, most did not believe that an institution was the best placement for them, personally.

That said, most youth also expressed concerns for ending institutional placements. These concerns were not for themselves. Instead, hesitating to end institutions was a matter of concern for their peers—that “other” youth may become homeless, that “other” youth may need a break from the emotionally debilitating cycle of failed family placements, that “other” youth may have more needs than a foster family can handle, that “other” youth may not have some place else to go.

Finding 11.6.

Once youth were invited to imagine a world with enough suitable, loving family placements—and they started to believe that that world might be possible—they preferred that world to one with institutional placements.

As a part of this study, the research team asked each participant we interviewed about their opinions regarding the elimination of institutions in foster care. Almost universally, participants reported negative or harmful experiences in institutional placements. No one advocated for keeping institutions exactly as they are, with no changes.

Yet, when asked about the future of institutional placements, only a minority of participants wanted an unequivocal end to institutions.

“Destroy them and make more foster homes.”
(MP-MT-ME-01)

For the majority of participants, they hesitated to call for an end to institutions, fearing homelessness, incarceration, and other poor outcomes for youth in a world without institutions. They felt that there would be no alternatives to institutions, or that all the alternatives would be worse. Or they feared that they would be even more isolated, if they did not live with other youth in the same placement.

Interestingly, when researchers probed further, and asked participants to imagine a world with meaningful alternatives to institutions, a world where the alternatives were not worse, participants preferred that world of family placements. The insight was not that participants preferred institutions; it is that they did not believe in a world without them that could be positive.

Once participants had the opportunity to consider and begin to imagine a world with better alternatives to institutions, many shifted their opinions around ending institutions. Some shifted their perspective in the interview. The biggest shift came during the participant review, where 95% of those who completed the participant review supported the recommendations of this report, including the elimination of institutions.

“Without severely transforming group care facilities, or completely eradicating them altogether we are doing our youth a gross disservice, and sending the message that their trauma is their fault, that all they deserve is ‘last resort’ placements, and that they are not capable of developing long lasting connections in regular placements with loving families.”

(TF-ST-LA-01)



Big Picture Conclusions

“They said I was in that facility because I was deemed to be a danger to myself or others... But yet I was the one being abused and locked in rooms. I still carry that feeling of blame with me today. What we do to children in the system now, lives on with them tomorrow and in the years to come.”

(TF-ST-LA-01)

As the research team synthesized this study’s findings, several Big Picture Conclusions about institutional placements emerged. These conclusions are based on the accounts of participants in the Detailed Findings, and supported by secondary research where appropriate.

Institution placements failed to meet the mandate of child welfare

Perhaps the one task that all institutions do reliably is provide youth with a place to live. Institutions do provide youth with shelter. Homelessness, however, is not the issue that institutions are mandated to solve.

Institutions are a part of a larger foster care system that steps in when the child welfare system deems family or caregivers of children and young people unfit to raise them in a way that keeps the youth secure, stable, and healthy. The true mandate of child welfare—including institutional placements—is to ensure foster youth’s safety, permanency, and well-being (Children’s Bureau, 2014). In this study, it is evident that institutions failed to meet that mandate.

When it comes to safety, many youth in this study experienced harm and abuse while living in institutions—either at the hands of staff or other young people in the placement. Even more reported that they felt unsafe during the time that they lived in those institutions, including through facing discrimination based on race, sexual identity, or other identities.

When it comes to permanency, institutions did not play a meaningful role in restoring family and community relationships through reunification, or assisting in creating and nurturing new relationships with child welfare staff and other supportive adults. Institutions—as currently described by participants and staffed by people who come and go—were incapable of serving the parental role youth need, or providing meaningful, lasting relationships necessary for their social development and success in life. One young person put it best. When asked what they would have wanted to make their experience better, they answered,

“Parents. Because I don’t even have that... By law, I still don’t have parents and that is the hardest thing.”

(GH-MT-ID-01)

When it comes to well-being, youth in this study reported how their time in institutions negatively impacted their well-being, from being served meals that lacked proper nutrition and promoted undesired weight gain or loss, feeling over medicated or coerced into taking medication, being unable to feel a sense of normalcy or socialize with peers, lacking access to on-grade level school work which diminished their educational outcomes, being deterred from performing acts of freedom and self expression, practicing their religion, or speaking their native language.

Institutional placements were carceral

While researchers have previously highlighted the prison-like and carceral functions of institutional placements like group homes and therapeutic facilities (Ben-Moshe, 2020), what is evident from this study is that youth themselves are using carceral vernacular to describe their experience in institutional settings. Youth likened the physical environment and its practices to “prison,” “jail,” or “juvie,” calling their rooms “units,” the placement staff to “guards,” the items they’re not allowed to have in their possession as “contraband,” the letters they receive as “jail mail,” their case records as “rap sheets,” running away as “going AWOL,” and likened their stay in institutional placements as having “to do time.”

In addition to this language comes overwhelming evidence of controlling, restrictive, punitive, and surveilling practices. Youth described not having freedom of movement, including not being able to leave the premises, being locked inside high-security facilities with staff present 24/7. Youth were also subjected to extreme disciplinary measures, including being restrained, being forced into seclusion, or not being allowed to have visitations or see friends and family (or visitations being a privilege they needed to earn). Youth had their communications with the outside world controlled—their phone calls listened to and their letters opened and read. They often lacked basic bodily autonomy as their right to make bodily decisions was often unallowed. Many were forced or coerced to take medication, were served what they deemed prison-like food, didn’t have access to basic necessities that were locked up, and relied on people outside sending them money or specific items they needed. Lastly, youth recounted “working the system” by having their peers do the “dirty work” or having to fight in order to survive.

Institutional placements were punitive

Youth are placed in foster care when society fails them—not the other way around. Youth in foster care who are placed in institutional settings are failed again—by a child welfare system that could not provide a safe kinship or foster care family placement for them. Youth who age out of institutions are failed yet again by a child welfare system that did not meet its mandate of achieving permanency.

Yet, youth in this study expressed how they felt that they were being punished for others’ failures. Some noted that while they were removed from their home because of a family member’s abuse or neglect, they felt they were the one who got punished—not the family member. One said,

“I thought I was going to jail for calling on my own mom.”

(ES-ST-CA-01)

Thinking that youth's presence in institutional placements is due to their families'—and worse, their own—failure is untrue and unfair.

Others felt that by being sent to an institution, they were punished, treated as criminals, and made to bear the consequences of the failures of child welfare. These systemic failures include a lack of time and investments to identify fit and willing kinship placements, lack of training and recruitment of foster parents prepared to care for children and adolescents, and lack of post-care support for reunified and adopted adolescents that result in disrupted adoptions and subsequent reentry into care.

Making matters worse, the system often makes decisions with no justification to the youth about what is going on and why. This lack of agency can intensify the feeling that the system is punishing youth, who feel as though they don't even deserve an explanation.

Because being sent to an institution often feels like punishment, it is worth noting that youth who end up in institutional placements are not there because they have been arrested for, charged with, or convicted of a crime. Youth in institutions are placed there with the mandate to be cared for, not punished. That being said, it is our firm belief that there is nothing that youth can do to deserve to live in institutional placements, regardless of their behavior or their standing with the legal system.

Institutional placements were traumatic and unfit for healthy child and adolescent development

A growing body of research indicates that institutional placements are in direct contradiction with the kind of supportive environment children and youth need to be healthy, develop, and thrive (Boyce, 2020). Studies on the impact of these institutional placements on child and youth development have found delays and deviations in young people's physical growth, hormonal development, cognitive and emotional development, and attachment security (Van IJzendoorn et al., 2011). Research, conventional wisdom, and youth themselves state that children and adolescents need love and care, supportive and dependable relationships, autonomy and opportunities to fail healthily, safety and stabilization, and adequate opportunities for emotional and social learning. Yet, youth in this study indicated that institutional placements provide none of those elements reliably.

Participants in this study experienced a range of Adverse Childhood Events (ACEs). ACEs are ten known childhood traumatic events (Trauma Dissociation, n.d.). Of course, many foster youth, including youth in this study, experienced ACEs before they ever entered foster care. Shockingly, youth in this study also reported experiencing ACEs while living at institutional placements. In fact, across the 78 participants, participants' stories included these seven ACEs during their time in institutions:

- An adult swore at them, insulted them, put them down, or humiliated them, or acted in a way that made them afraid that they might be physically hurt;
- An adult pushed, grabbed, slapped, or threw something at them, or hit them so hard that they had marks or were injured;
- An adult touched or fondled them, had them touch their body in a sexual way, or attempted or actually had oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with them;
- They felt that no one in their family loved them or thought they were important or special, or their family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other;
- They didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, had no one to protect you, or their parents or other adults were too drunk or high to take care of them or take them to the doctor if you needed it;
- They lived with someone who was a problem drinker, alcoholic, or who used street drugs;
- A household member was depressed, mentally ill, or attempted suicide.

This reality that institutions contributed to a participant's ACE score is not only morally wrong, but also dangerous. A high ACE score can increase someone's likelihood of developing many chronic diseases and dramatically reduce life expectancy (Burke Harris, 2018). Research has found that "people with six or more ACEs died nearly 20 years earlier on average than those without ACEs" (Brown et. al., 2009).

Though foster care is meant to remove youth from traumatic situations, institutions in this study exposed many youth to new traumatic events and ACEs that they likely never would have otherwise experienced. This meant that institutions amplified the higher needs which is often the justification for institutional support. This can trap youth in a cycle where they may be even less likely to find a stable, family-based placement that is qualified to meet their needs, and become more reliant on institutional care as a result.

Institutional placements shielded youth from building relationships

Previous research by Think Of Us (Think Of Us, 2020) found that youth in foster care struggle to ask for help. This means that youth require supportive people to be the ones to initiate and offer help. However, many youth in this study specifically said that they did not want other people in their lives—classmates, teachers, friends, etc.—to know that they were in institutional placements because they were embarrassed for others to know where they lived, how they lived, and that they had “no family.” This meant that many supportive people in youths’ lives literally did not know that youth live in institutions. Added to this is the fact that institutional placements limited youths’ contact with the outside world, especially when education also happened on-site, and in some instances, instilled fear in their minds to prevent them from telling other people about the conditions inside those placements. This created a perfect storm where exactly the people who could help youth get out of institutions are literally unaware that youth might need their help. Institutions become a self-fulfilling prophecy where they take in youth with the least social support and then provide an environment that makes restoring or building the support that youth need to get out of institutions nearly impossible.

Institutional placements felt like they didn’t have a way out

Youth in institutional placements experienced a myriad of traumas—before and during their time in institutions. This trauma often went insufficiently addressed, with one participant sharing that institutions keep “youth contained rather than rehabilitating them or helping them heal” (TF-ST-LA-01). Without sufficient healing, youth formed adaptive survival responses while living in institutions.

However, when youth displayed the appropriate, expected behavioral responses to that stress, youth were written up by staff for acting out, being violent “problem children,” or diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder. All these incidents go into their records, which potential prospective foster families typically read before accepting any new placement. That, combined with the fact that older teens are less likely to be placed in a foster family home, means that youth end up trapped in a never ending cycle of institutional after institutional placement, perpetuating the untrue belief that there is something wrong with them.

The longer youth remain in institutional placements, the more they’re told time and time again that the reason they’re in said placements is because there are no foster homes for them, or that no foster home wants them because of their behavior. Having no alternatives to the institutional placements is how youth rationalize their presence in those settings, that “there was no other way” but ending up on the streets, homeless.

That Child

The “perfect foster child” everyone wanted in their home, but no one wanted to nurture.

That foster child,

Only good enough to show off,

But not worthy of love and care from those trusted with her care.

Fighting for full custody of her life,

fighting for respect, a privilege never before had,

this foster child is shunned, shushed, ignored and made a void.

Wondering what the “perfect foster child” did so wrong

she just followed the image the pedestal her foster parents and social workers had.

Hidden when inconvenient, lifted up when vital

Tokenized for funding, penalized for truth speaking.

May as well have been the same psychological warfare before care – different rules, same fool.

Learning to ride the ocean of the foster care system,

Surviving the same beach as what was home before care, just a different wave.

The pedestal always within reach, but the strings have restrictions

The prize was freedom – The restriction was life.



Written words

(GH-LT-CA-01)

Recommendations & Alternatives to Institutional Placements

**"I feel very strong in my belief that there is a
better way to handle things."**

(MP-LT-AK-02)

After hearing heart-wrenching story after heart-wrenching story, Think Of Us cannot—in good conscience—recommend that institutional placements be upheld in any way.

All possible benefits to institutions that we heard seemed negligible when compared to the overwhelming and obvious harm they caused the vast majority of participants. We feel that eliminating them is critical to ensuring the wellbeing of youth, reducing and healing their trauma, achieving equity and racial justice, and freeing young people from inappropriately restrictive settings. For those reasons, we believe that institutional placements must be eliminated.

After deep consideration of the Detailed Findings and Big Picture Conclusions of this study, the research team formed the strong recommendation that institutional placements must be eliminated and replaced with family-based alternatives.

As a part of the extensive peer review process, the team then gave the 78 participants the opportunity to react to and refine these recommendations and alternatives. Of the 78 original participants, 44 completed the participant review. Of those, 95% indicated that they support the recommendations and alternatives below, including the elimination of institutions.

1 Eliminate institutions

When initially asked their opinions about eliminating institutions, some participants—but not most—wanted an unequivocal end to institutions and believed them to be beyond repair. The majority of others initially did not. Though 95% of those who completed the participant study did later come to support the recommendations, including to eliminate institutional placements, it is worth pausing and understanding the important reasons many initially hesitated to call for an end to institutions.

Many youth in this study could not imagine a world without institutions in foster care. For most, this is because they had been told repeatedly that institutions exist because there is literally nowhere else to go. Participants assumed that alternatives would be worse. The alternatives to institutional care must be categorically better—and not worse—than the existing system.

Leaders must replace institutions with alternatives that will succeed where institutions have failed.

The most commonly cited concern was fearing that an end to institutions would lead to homelessness for foster youth. They feared that an end to institutions would put youth, with nowhere else to go, on the streets. This concern is astute. For instance, the mass closure of inhumane psychiatric hospitals beginning in the 1950s led to an increase in homelessness and incarceration in America [Raphelson, 2017]. However, it is worth noting that merely providing housing is not the mandate of child welfare. Child welfare is held to the higher standard of ensuring safety, permanency, and well-being for foster youth, and states will continue to be responsible for meeting this mandate, even in the absence of institutions. Additionally, a negligible number of youth enter foster care due to homelessness in the first place [AFCARS, 2020]. Inversely, “homelessness following foster care is not a rare occurrence.” Because of this, rather than preventing homelessness, some consider that “the back door of the foster care system is the front door of the homeless system.” This may be, in part, because the single most important factor in preventing this pipeline to homelessness is permanent adult relationships [Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiatives, 2014]. Institutional placements in this study did not meaningfully provide permanent adult relationships, an essential component of homelessness prevention for youth. For these reasons, the authors of this report look at institutional placements not as the solution to homelessness, but rather as a contributing factor to it.

Other participants did not want an end to group homes because they knew the emotionally taxing cycle of moving from foster home to foster home was exhausting and heartbreaking when youth were not met by the kind of supportive family environment that they so crave and deserve. Institutions, at least, provided a form of “anonymous” living situation where youth did not have to try to connect with or be liked by anyone—they knew that staff was not the same as family. This concern should give the system and its leaders pause, as it speaks volumes to the serious failures of the foster family system.

It also points to the heinous impact of institutionalization on youth's emotional development, as some youth would choose to shut down emotionally rather than risk opening their hearts yet again to a foster family.

Other participants perceived that the level of therapeutic interventions and treatment resources that some foster youth require would be far too burdensome for family placements. They felt it was unrealistic to expect a family to foster a child or adolescent with such high needs, but did not mind an institution to do so. This speaks to the need for greater support for family placements. However, this considerate worry does not take notice of the fact that institutional placements themselves create and amplify the needs of foster youth by failing to provide meaningful pathways to heal their existing trauma and exposing them to additional trauma that goes untreated.

After deep consideration of these concerns, Think Of Us calls for an end to institutional placements in foster care. The system must meaningfully address these very real concerns that youth have about the current alternatives to institutional placements to make sure that alternatives are indeed better, and not worse—that youth in institutions do not become unsheltered or incarcerated, that youth are given the opportunity to mend fractured familial and social relationships, and that the system recruits kin and foster families who are trained and equipped with the necessary support to take care of high needs youth. Think Of Us believes in a world where this is possible, in a world where the alternatives to institutions are better, and in a world where youth live with families.

The path to eliminating institutions will be a process. In the words of organizer Ejeris Dixon, “abolition is a journey and a destination.” Activist Mariame Kaba affirms that abolition is “not just a horizon we’ll arrive at some day. It’s constantly being made.” As such, we recognize that many things need to be put in place before institutions could be completely eliminated. But the most crucial guiding principle in our journey to abolishing institutions is that none of those recommendations should add to the legitimacy, resources, and power of institutional placements, by allocating more budget, hiring more staff, or providing more training to institutions. Only recommendations that chip away at institutional placements are the ones that would lead us to a future where institutions can ultimately be abolished.

We propose these recommendations and alternatives to achieve a world without institutional placements.

2 Ask youth where they want to live and do everything possible to make that a reality

A meaningful, often overlooked alternative to institutional care is this:

Ask youth where they want to live and if there is someone they want to be living, and then do everything possible to make that a reality.

As one participant put it: “Nothing about us without us.” This aligns with policy and research that shows when youth are engaged in permanency and case planning, they experience better outcomes (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.).

Except for two notable exceptions, youth shared repeatedly throughout this study that during their stay in institutional placements that they did, in fact, have someone in their life that they wanted to be living with. Youth felt these would have been safe, feasible placements. It was clear from these stories that during their time in care, youth had neither been meaningfully asked about where they wanted to be living, nor consulted or empowered in the process of deciding their placement.

Immediately, upon entry into care and repeatedly throughout care, the system must ask youth if there is someone in their life that they want to be living with. The system must also create a complete list of youths’ connections and a plan for how to maintain and strengthen each one—because a youth should not exit care with fewer relationships than they came in with, and a supportive adult relationship today could grow into a healthy, permanent option down the road.

The reality that the system often does not know about where youth want to live exists, in part, because foster youth often protect and conceal their private relationships from the system. In previous research (Think Of Us, 2020), Think Of Us uncovered that youth feel that exposing a personal relationship to the system will end badly. Often, youth feel it is not safe to tell the system the truth, especially about their private relationships.

The system must take on the challenge of designing meaningful, safe ways for youth to engage in a dialogue about their personal relationships. Only then when trust is restored, can the system truly know who might be available as a critical resource and potential placement in the child’s life.

Other times, it was the family members and supportive adults who do not feel safe engaging with the system, this was especially true for people of color. In one instance, a biological aunt was willing to take in her niece in foster care. However, the aunt had children of her own, and she was afraid that engaging with the system would jeopardize the safety of her own children. The aunt declined to take in the child. This story is a demonstration of the system’s inequitable policing of certain communities, especially communities of color.

The system must work to reconcile with its racist, inequitable practices, propose ways forward that reparate and rectify past misdeeds, and commit to less harmful practices.

In some cases, youth shared that they had someone they wanted to live with, but the system would not allow it for bureaucratic reasons. Examples of this included instances when youth wanted to be placed with a relative, but the relative lived out of state. In one of these cases, the system denied a youth moving out of state with the relative, but instead placed them in an out of state institution. Another example happened when a youth wanted to live with an extended family member, and the family member agreed. However, the system denied this placement because the family member was a single man. Another example happened to a youth in a foster home placement that she loved. Eventually, the foster mom's elderly mother (the foster grandmother) moved into the home. The elderly woman had a crime on her record from fifty years ago that she was not convicted of, but had never expunged. Because of this, the system removed the youth from the home, and placed her in a homeless shelter. Though the crime was formally expunged from the elderly woman's record two weeks later, the system still forbade the youth from returning, and the youth never had another family placement again.

In these cases, the system should do everything possible to break through the bureaucracy and system-created barriers to make the youths' preferred placement possible.

Other cases included times when the system denied a preferred placement for financial reasons, because the system deemed the placement not to have the financial resources to care for the child. Denying healthy placements for financial reasons is especially surprising given that family placements are dramatically cheaper than institutional placements (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015).

In these instances, instead of denying an otherwise healthy placement, the system should work to help ensure the family has the resources they need to be financially successful.

Sometimes, youth shared that they had someone they wanted to live with—usually a parent—but the system denied the placement because it deemed the parent unable to emotionally take care of the child because of mental health or substance abuse reasons. In all cases, the youth understood the system's position. However, in some of these cases, youth felt that therapeutic and family support resources would have helped their situation, and that with more support, the placement they wanted would have been safe.

In these cases, the system should do everything possible to provide the support and services needed to make the desired placement safe and possible.

Lastly, some of the youth in institutions shared that they wanted to return home. When the system deemed this unsafe, the youth's wish was, of course, denied. This would likely be true for some foster youth in family foster care. While this may seem reasonable, youth sometimes reported that they experienced the same abuse in foster care that they received in their original home. Some felt that they were being removed from their home for abuse or neglect, only to be placed with others who did the very same things.

In cases where child welfare is not providing a safer alternative and youth themselves want to return home, the system must provide an ironclad, scrutinized justification for keeping youth from home when they want to return.

3 Avoid entering foster care when possible by focusing on prevention

The first mandate of child welfare is to do whatever possible to keep young people safely at home, and avoid ever placing youth in care where possible (Adoption and Safe Families Act, 1997). The first step to developing meaningful alternatives to institutions is understanding how youth got into care to begin with and why.

The majority of child welfare cases are for neglect (AFCARS, 2020). By definition, neglect is “the failure of a parent or other person with responsibility for the child to provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision” when the family is deemed financially capable of doing so (Children’s Bureau, 2019). In reality, situations that the system deems “neglect” are sometimes cases where families need resources and help. Many times, youth claimed that families wanted to take care of them, but they needed resources and support.

The system should provide the resources and support necessary to help families live and thrive together safely at home.

Too often, the child welfare system does not assist parents in taking care of their children but punishes parents for their failures by threatening to take their children away (Roberts, 2003). Some communities, especially Black and Brown communities, poor communities, immigrant communities, and any families that diverge from the parenting ideal embodied in the white, middle-class model composed of married parents and their children, experience an inequitable presence of child protective services, cementing the quintessential stereotype that they are incapable of governing themselves and need state supervision [Movement for Family Power, n.d.]. This results in over-policing of these families which leads to greater involvement in their family and parenting choices by the child welfare system. Consequently, certain families are treated differently based on factors outside of their control—such as their race and ethnicity, immigration status, or class—and end up disproportionately experiencing system-involvement for things that families in other communities would not. The consequences of poverty, such as several siblings sharing a single room or lack of adequate heat, and certain parenting choices, such as co-sleeping with an infant or leaving an older child unattended at home, are used as evidence of child neglect and held against families in family court (Roberts & Sangoi, 2018).

The system must be reimagined and transformed into a radically different, life-affirming institution centered on the needs, dignity, and equal humanity of families.

As leaders work to abolish institutions, the first goal should be to reunite families when possible. As group settings become depopulated, the first alternative placement option should be home.

For youth who can safely return home and want to, home is the best alternative.

4 Expand the definition of kin and improve licensing and support for kinship placements

Should children and youth enter foster care, kinship placements often represent the best alternative to institutional placements (Epstein, 2017). Youth in this study often had someone they wanted to be living with and the people closest to the child are often in the best position to provide the social and emotional support that youth need.

States vary in their definition of kinship, which can have dramatic impacts on who can qualify to be a placement for a youth who must be removed from their home of origin. The best definition of kin is any adult who the youth already has a relationship with, whether that be biological or legal relatives, former relatives (e.g. former stepmother), informal aunts and uncles, teachers, godparents, neighbors, and/or friends' parents. But many states severely restrict the definition of kin to a third- or fifth-degree legal relative, which means the myriad of supportive adults in a youth's life may be blocked from being a placement until they complete the arduous and lengthy process of becoming a formal general licensed foster home.

Child welfare must adopt more expansive definitions of kin to open up more placement options for youth.

Placing youth with people they already know right at removal is a critical component of never needing foster care placements with strangers or institutional placements. Some states allow youth to be placed immediately with kin after minimal screening steps that can often be completed within hours—generally a name-based background check (and subsequent required fingerprint background check) and a brief walkthrough of the home for obvious safety issues. One state has a policy that a Director must approve any placement with non-kin (whether general foster care, or a group home), even if it's the middle of the night. Another state increased initial kinship placements from 3% to 40% in one year by shifting to practices that included requiring Director-level approval for non-kin placements (The Child Welfare Playbook, n.d.).

Every child welfare system should place youth with kin right away whenever possible.

While many systems can place youth with kin right away, their kin cannot access financial resources until and unless they complete a formal foster home licensing process. This is because the federal government will only reimburse states for these monthly stipends through IV-E dollars if the home is licensed, and most states cannot afford to foot the entire amount of a foster home stipend without this reimbursement. Most child welfare systems have very low kinship licensing rates, even those with relatively high kinship placement rates. Streamlining kinship licensing to the bare minimum requirements that truly represent safety—the initial background check and basic safety walkthrough—would eliminate the obstacles kinship families face to get the financial resources many desperately need in order to be able to take in these youth.

Systems also need to carefully review their disqualifying criminal history requirements for kin, acknowledging the historically disproportionate targeting of minority communities by the criminal justice system. FFPSA supports these efforts by calling on states to identify unnecessary barriers to licensure for kin (Children’s Defense Fund, 2020).

In short, the system must improve the kinship licensing processes to make them as efficient and accessible as possible. It must incentivize states to license relatives in the same way it incentivizes adoptions so that kinship placements become adequately prioritized.

In one instance in this study, a youth found a successful placement when a supportive person in her life “heard about my situation” and was able to quickly become a licensed foster care parent (GH-MT-ID-01). In this case, the efficient licensing process made this placement possible.

To meaningfully support kinship families, the system should take steps to help kinship placements understand the kind of trauma youth have experienced, how that trauma may manifest in physical, emotional, mental, relational, or social ways, and what it means to support and address youths’ trauma in a trauma-informed manner. Kinship placements should be prepared to address the specific needs of older youth, including the preparation they will need to transition into adulthood and independence.

Kinship providers should have access to the financial and emotional support they need to be healthy, loving, meaningful placements for foster youth.

5 Make foster family placements more stable and culturally appropriate

Institutionalized foster care placements exist today, in part, because of ways that foster family placements have fallen short. Eliminating institutionalized care will require the system to improve the failures of foster family placements.

One such shortcoming is the seemingly unending moves that youth experience from foster home to foster home. For many youth, this constant moving is exhausting and heartbreaking. It is easy to forget how terrifying and stressful it is for a child to move into a home full of strangers. The youth—desperate for love and belonging—is thrown into a novel situation where they have to learn the new rules and culture of the home. They don’t know if they will be liked, if they will fit in, if they will get their basic needs met. Many times, the change in family also brings a change in school, neighborhood, community, culture, language, religion, and more. Through all this uncertainty, youth feel they have to be on their best behavior because they have been made to believe that getting the love they need is conditional on others’ approval. This can leave many youth feeling like they have to perform to win love. Perpetually feeling like an outsider, it’s hard to relax and just be yourself. All the while youth are wondering: does anyone here really love me? Then, sometimes just as soon as the youth gets settled, they are moved, and they have to start all over again.

This kind of emotional instability is sustainable for no one, especially a child. One participant in this study found institutions to be a welcomed break from this exhausting cycle. It is not that institutions are better, it's that kids don't want to perpetually "go into a family that they don't feel a part of" (GH-MT-SC-01). Two participants also reported that unlike the foster family system, institutions provided a reliable, consistent placement for them. One indicated that a group home was the only place they lived in foster care for more than a year (GH-MT-FL-01), which echoes well-established research around placement instability in foster care (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020). Another participant who wanted to "get rid of institutional placements" said "that being said, foster homes are still a major issue and are not necessarily better just worse for other reasons" (MP-MT-CA-02). These stories speak not to the benefits of institutions, but to the instability of the foster family system.

The system must end the cruel practice of moving foster youth from home to home and improve the other shortcomings of unfit foster family placements.

Historically, foster parent recruitment efforts have also led to an inequitable proportion of white families providing services (Day et. al., 2020).

We need to incentivize licensing and recruitment of Black, Brown, and Indigenous families as a way to ensure youth can maintain cultural permanency.

Child welfare systems must also improve foster parent recruiting by using data about the needs of the youth in care to drive their recruitment of more general foster homes. Current recruiting practices—such as billboard ads—do not target the specific needs of individual youth. Youth are not widgets who fit interchangeably in beds, and they need specific foster care placements that fit their needs and backgrounds.

A youth's first placement should be in a home that is in their school district of origin, that fluently speaks their language, and ideally shares other demographic characteristics like religion. A lack of matching homes is a significant driver for placement desks to make the "easier" choice to select institutional care.

6 As institutional placements are being phased out, accommodate youths' preferences

If policy makers and child welfare leaders commit to eliminating institutional care, there will likely be a period of transition as these institutions are phased out. For youth living in institutional placements now, this period of system transition may bring about even more uncertainty and turmoil as their personal lives are caught in the balance.

During this period of transition, it is imperative that the system listen to youths' preferences and work to accommodate them. For example, some youth may be relieved and ready to exit institutional care. Others—especially older youth who already feel failed by the system and are getting ready to age out—may not want to be moved for yet another time.

The system should do whatever it can to accommodate the wishes of youth who are caught in the middle while the system changes.

7 Center lived experience in the research, design, and implementation of policy changes

As academics and jurisdictions continue their research and learning, it is important to include the voices of those with lived experience in the research process. Find ways to hire people with lived experience on research teams, recruit people with lived experience to participate in the research and compensate them for their time, and design and fund peer review processes that include people with lived experiences.

As jurisdictions and states design changes to their policies around institutional placements, include people with lived experience in all stages of the policy making process—from the initial scoping of the problem to the identification of solutions. Critical to eliminating institutional placements is implementing meaningful alternatives. Those with lived experiences will be essential in testing and iterating on solutions.

Researchers, frontline staff, and child welfare leadership must prioritize people with lived experience in the research, design, and implementation of policy changes.



Discussion Guide

“Something that really helped me is a strong imagination. I could go really anywhere in my head, and that’s really important.”

(MP-MT-CA-02)

This Discussion Guide is a companion to the *Away From Home: Youth Experiences of Institutional Placements in Foster Care* study. It provides guided reading and discussion questions for foster youth, child welfare professionals, academics and researchers, policy makers, and other curious minds to explore and reflect on the book a little deeper, either in individual or group settings.

Guided Reading and Discussion Questions

1. How did you feel when reading *Away From Home*? What emotions came up for you?
2. What finding, quote, story, or artifact stood out to you the most? Why?
3. What were some findings that surprised you? Why did they surprise you?
4. What were some findings that did not surprise you? Why were you unsurprised?
5. What was challenging or difficult for you to hear or to address? How do you intend on tending to or reconciling with the feelings it brought up for you?
6. Have you ever had an experience living in institutional placements in foster care? Do you feel your experience is reflected in this study? If yes, how? If no, why not?
7. Have you ever had an experience living in institutions of any kind, even outside of foster care? Are there similarities to your experience in this study? If yes, how? If no, what was different?
8. Have you ever worked in or closely with institutional placements in foster care? How does reading these findings make you feel?
9. How did child protective services interact with you and your childhood neighborhood growing up?
10. How do child protective services interact with you, your neighborhood, and your communities today? How does your identity impact your current proximity to and relationship with child protective services?
11. What do you know about the historic origins of child welfare and institutional placements in the United States? What patterns do you see in history that are still reflected today?
12. How are anti-Blackness and racism reproduced by child welfare in general, and institutional placements in foster care in particular? What are some of the invisible and ever-present harms that continue to impact young people of color?

13. What is the purpose of institutional placements as they currently operate in foster care? Do you agree that institutions have failed to meet the mandate of child welfare of providing safety, well-being, and permanency for youth? If so, how?
14. Reflecting on the stories shared by the participants of the study, how would you have wanted to make their experiences better?
15. Do you feel that institutional placements can adequately replace family?
16. Do you believe that it is possible to reform institutional placements? Why or why not? Have you seen any evidence that reform will address the harms of institutional placements?
17. The authors write, "After hearing heart-wrenching story after heart-wrenching story, Think Of Us cannot—in good conscience—recommend that institutional placements be upheld in any way." Do you agree with this statement? If so, why? If no, why not?
18. Have you ever believed that a world without institutions for youth is impossible? Why or why not? How can you practice imagining new solutions and possibilities for a world without institutions?
19. Do you believe that eliminating institutional placements requires creative and collaborative imagination and action to build alternatives? As you participate in this work, what are some ways that you would like to contribute as an individual? What are some ways that you would like to contribute with your organizations?
20. What kind of world would you like to live in and create for all children and youth? What will it require to create this world?

Appendices

**“The silence of our voices was one of the
harshest things we endured.”**

(MP-LT-AZ-01)

Appendix A. Terminology

Adoption	Potential foster care outcome, where children and youth taken under the state’s custody from their birth parents become legal members of another family. (See aging out and reunification)
Aging out	Potential foster care outcome, where youth taken under the state’s custody are still in the foster care system when they reach the age of majority or when they have graduated from high school. (See adoption and reunification)
Child welfare	Child welfare (also referred to as “family regulation” (Roberts, 2020), is a continuum of services designed to ensure that children are safe and that families have the necessary support to care for their children successfully. This typically includes child abuse and neglect prevention and investigation, arranging for children to live with kin or with foster families when safety cannot be ensured at home, and work with the children, youth, and families to achieve family reunification, adoption, or other permanent family connections for children and youth leaving foster care.
Cultural probes	Research method, formulated as evocative tasks, which are given to participants to allow them to asynchronously create or record specific artifacts, feelings, or interactions. (See interviews)
Foster care	Foster care is a one the child welfare services provided by the government for children who cannot live with their families. Children in foster care may live with relatives, live with unrelated foster parents, or be placed in institutional settings. (See child welfare)
Group care	Type of institutional placement (also referred to as “congregate care”), defined as a “placement setting of group home (a licensed or approved home providing 24-hour care in a small group setting of 7-12 children) or institution (a licensed or approved child care facility operated by a public or private agency and providing 24-hour care and/or treatment typically for 12 or more children who require separation from their own homes or a group living experience)” (Children’s Bureau, 2015). The most common form of group care are group homes. “Group homes provide the most restrictive out-of-home placement option for children in foster care... with significant emotional or behavioral problems... Group homes run the gamut from large institutional type environments... to small home environments which incorporate a “house parent” model” (California Department of Social Services, n.d.).

<p>Homes for pregnant and parenting teens</p>	<p>Type of institutional placement. Homes for pregnant and parenting teens are adult-supervised, transitional living arrangements for pregnant or parenting young people, typically between the ages of 16 and under 22, as well as their dependent children. (See institutional placements)</p>
<p>Institutional placements</p>	<p>Umbrella term for all types of live-in, out-of-home, non-family placements, including:</p> <p>Group care placements (e.g., group homes, non-clinical residential homes);</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homes for pregnant and parenting teens • Therapeutic residential treatment facilities; • Transitional and emergency shelters; • Other out-of-home placements such as assessment centers, institutions, or any similar settings.
<p>Interviews</p>	<p>Research method, in this study conducted as exploratory, semi-structured, conversations, where interviewers would cover topics outlined in an interview guide, but were also invited to explore additional lines of inquiry as they arise. (See cultural probes)</p>
<p>Permanency</p>	<p>One of the three goals of child welfare agencies as mandated by the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997. Permanency is defined as the stability in children and youth’s living arrangements as well as the continuity and preservation of their family relationships and connections. (See safety and well-being)</p>
<p>Reunification</p>	<p>Potential foster care outcome, where children and youth taken under the state’s custody return home to their families. (See adoption and aging out)</p>
<p>Safety</p>	<p>One of the three goals of child welfare agencies as mandated by the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997. Safety is defined as protecting children and youth from abuse and neglect, as well as safely maintaining them in their homes whenever possible and appropriate. (See permanency and well-being)</p>
<p>Shelters</p>	<p>Type of institutional placement. Homes for pregnant and parenting teens are adult-supervised, transitional living arrangements for pregnant or parenting young people, typically between the ages of 16 and under 22, as well as their dependent children. (See institutional placements)</p>

<p>Therapeutic residential facilities</p>	<p>Type of institutional placement (also referred to as “residential treatment centers”). Treatment centers are residential facilities that provide around-the-clock supervision and a variety of counseling, education, and therapy sessions for youth struggling with psychological, behavioral, and/or substance use issues.</p>
<p>Well-being</p>	<p>One of the three goals of child welfare agencies as mandated by the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997. Well-being is defined as appropriately and adequately meeting children and youth’s educational needs as well as their physical and mental health needs. (See permanency and safety)</p>
<p>Youth</p>	<p>In this report, youth is used as a shorthand for foster youth, both current and former. We understand youth as a broad term that includes children, adolescents, and young adults.</p>

Appendix B. Methodology

Research Team

The team behind this study was comprised of seven members from:

- Think Of Us, a systems change non-profit whose mission is to ensure that aging out foster youth are meeting if not exceeding the life outcomes of their non-foster youth peers;
- The Annie E. Casey Foundation, a philanthropy devoted to developing a brighter future for millions of children at risk of poor educational, economic, social and health outcomes; and
- Casey Family Programs, a foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families across America.

The team included a combination of individuals with lived experience in foster care and institutional placements, individuals with extensive technical and professional experience in child welfare, as well as individuals with process expertise in research in the public and social sectors.

Research Scope

The scope of this study was to understand the experiences, mental models, and opinions of young people with recent experience living in institutional placements in foster care in the U.S., and to understand their beliefs around the potential elimination of institutional placements in foster care.

Research focused on uncovering the perspective of foster youth on their experiences in institutional placements, namely:

- Group care placements (e.g., group homes, non-clinical residential);
- Homes for pregnant and parenting teens;
- Therapeutic residential treatment;
- Other out-of-home placements such as transitional and emergency shelters.

Note that psychiatric interventions were not part of this research scope. Additionally, juvenile justice facilities were also not considered in the scope of this study.

The initial lines of inquiry, as set by the research team and informed by the team members with lived experience in institutional placements in foster care, included the following: overall experience in institutional placements; the environment in those placements; staff in those

placements; the relationships foster youth had prior to being placed, while living in, and after leaving those placements; youth's educational attainment and participation in programming while living in those placements; discipline and punishment used in those placements; access to basic needs and ability to express youth's identities while living in those placements; the impact that being in those placements had on youth's lives; changes and alternatives to institutional placements.

Research Methods

The research was completed through a combination of two primary qualitative research methods: interviews and cultural probes. These two methods were chosen to satisfy the need to answer the lines of inquiry developed by the research team while simultaneously allowing the team to provide a research frame that was safe and trauma-informed for participants, given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed.

Prior to conducting the research, the research team was trained on building rapport with participants through recruiting, interview scheduling, and interviewing; seeking informed consent; conducting interviews and facilitating cultural probe; as well as mitigating potential risks and managing foreseeable scenarios such as participant drop-out or distress and discomfort that could arise during a participant interaction.

Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted individually with current youth in extended foster care and former foster youth and held remotely. Interviewers relied on techniques commonly used to research ethnography and culture (Spradley, 2016), and the interview guide questions drew from the work of Spradley (2003), Leech (2002), and Westby et al. (2003). Each interview lasted from 60 to 90 minutes, to get a full picture of the participant's experiences before, during, and after institutional placements, as well as their perspective on and attitudes towards these placements and their opinions about reform or alternatives. Interviews were semi-structured in that interviewers would cover topics outlined in the initial interview guide, but were also invited to explore additional lines of inquiry as they arose.

Cultural Probes

Cultural probes are prompts used to elicit subjective thoughts. The probes are formulated as evocative tasks, which are given to participants to allow them to asynchronously create or record specific artifacts, feelings, or interactions. Cultural probes are not designed to be analyzed or summarized (Gaver, Dunne & Pacenti, 1999). Rather, they aim to gather "fragmentary clues" about people's "lives and thoughts" which means they are tools to inspire and elicit empathetic data (Loi, 2007). In this study, the team gave five cultural probes to participants to respond to independently and asynchronously, using a variety of formats (visual, oral, written, and electronically mediated).

The five cultural probes were as follows:



A photo prompt where youth are invited to take a picture of an object in their possession that reminds them of their time in institutional placements.



A creative prompt where youth were tasked to imagine that they were invited to an open mic performance, and asked to say a poem, spoken words, rap, or short song about their time in institutional placements.



A network mapping activity where youth were invited to make a list of all the people in their life while they were in institutional placements, then identify those they could trust and/or ask for help.



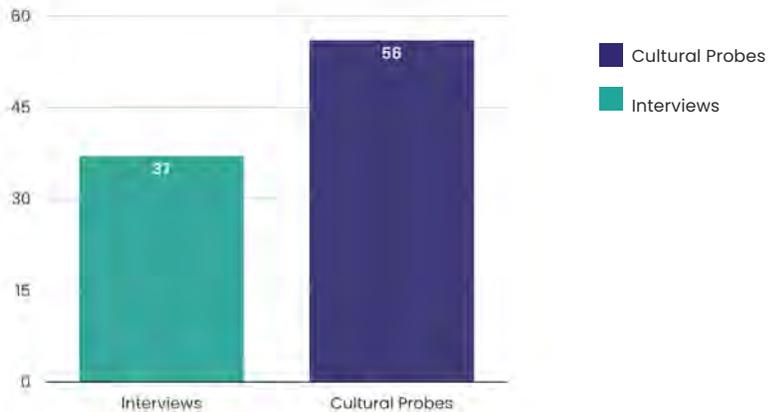
A creative prompt where youth contribute or describe a piece of art to a hypothetical museum exhibit about what life in institutional placements looks like.



A creative prompt where youth were invited to imagine and draw a world in which institutional placements no longer exist, and everyone in foster care could be placed with a family.

In total, the research team conducted 93 research sessions, facilitating 37 individual interviews and collecting cultural probe responses from 56 participants. In that process, the team engaged with 78 youth in total: 22 in interviews alone, 41 in cultural probes alone, and 15 in both.

Research Sessions



Participant Recruiting and Sampling

The research engaged current youth in extended foster care and former foster youth from across the United States, ages 18 to 25. This was to limit the group of participants to those who have attained the age for legal consent, ensuring minors did not take part of this study, but also to have not aged out of care for too long that their ability to recall their time in care becomes limited.

The research team organized an open call for participation through youth advisory boards and community partners. The team used the same call and screener to recruit participants for both interviews and cultural probes.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, a non-probability technique that selects subjects based on predetermined participant characteristics and the objective of the study. All characteristics were self-reported by the young people who expressed interest to participate in the study through the screener. Willingness to participate in the research was the primary inclusion criteria. Youth were selected along three main sampling criteria:

Type of institutional placement:

- Non-clinical group placements and group homes;
- Homes for pregnant and parenting teens;
- Therapeutic residential treatment facilities;
- Shelters and transitional placements;
- Multiple placements (experience with two or more of the above types of institutions).

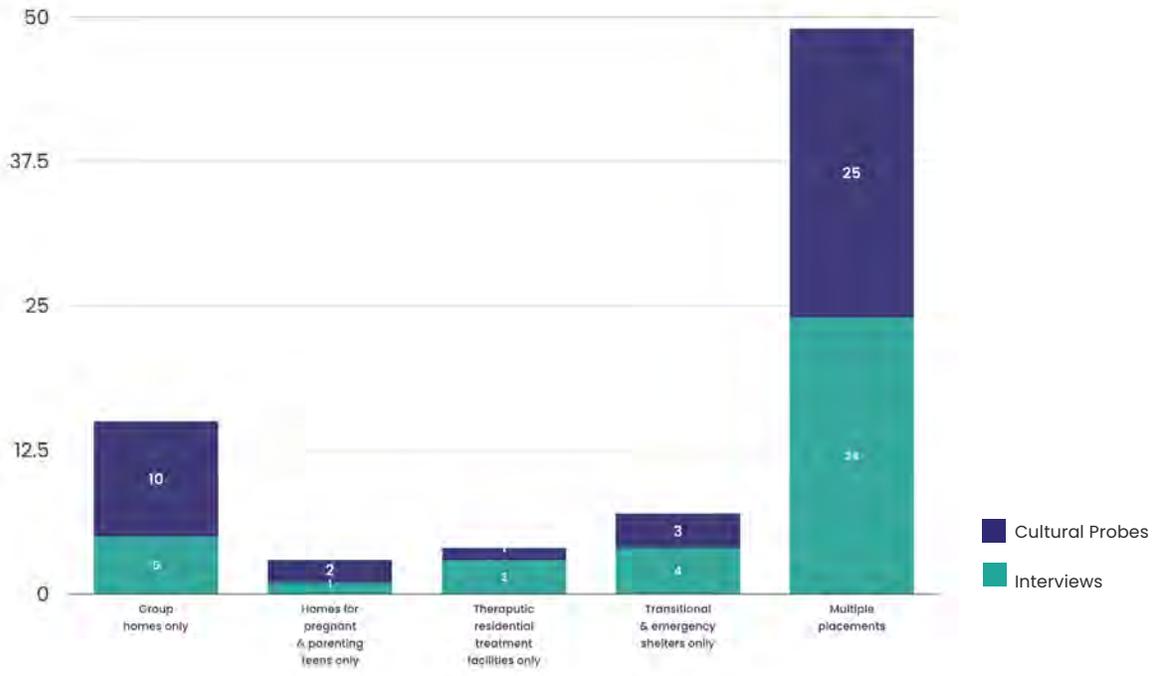
Combined duration of time in institutional placements:

- Brief time (less than 1 year);
- A few years (from 1 to 5 years);
- Most to all of their life (more than 5 years).

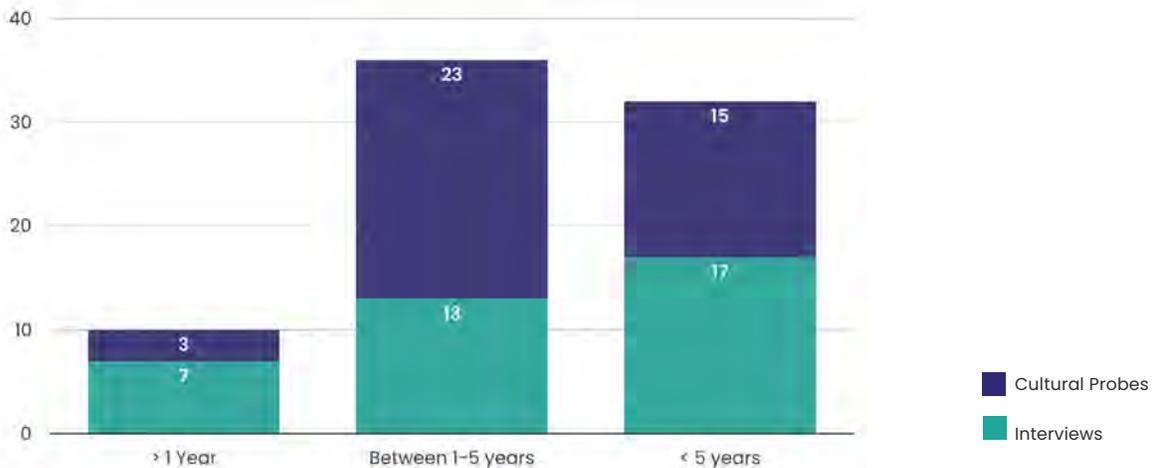
Number of different institutional placements:

- 1 to 3 placements;
- 4 to 9 placements;
- 10 or more placements.

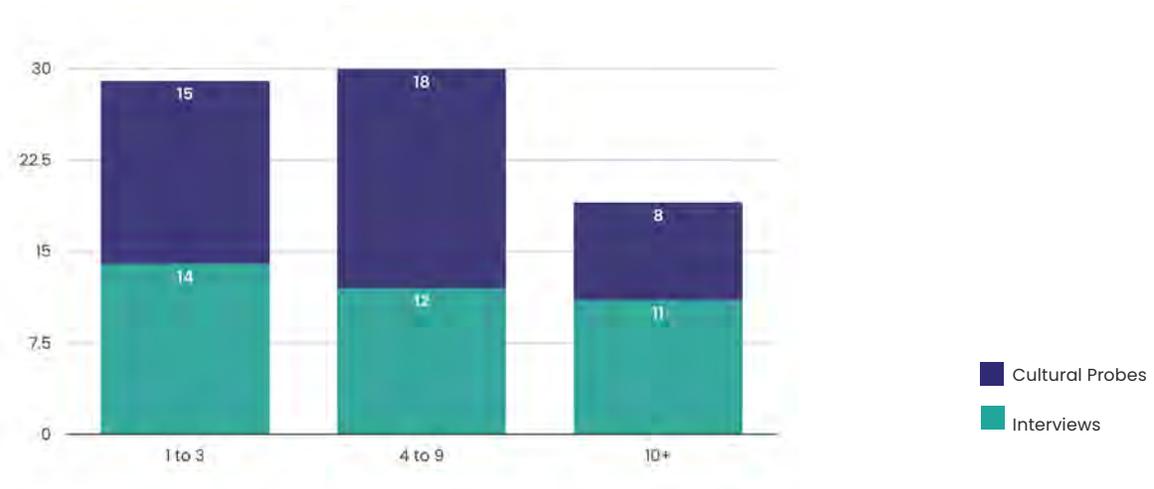
Types of Institutional Placements



Combined Time in Institutional Placements



Number of Institutional Placements



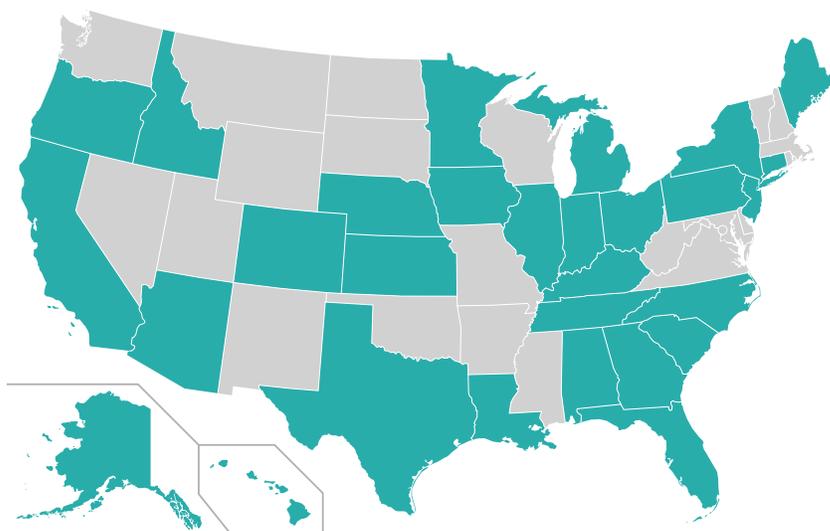
In addition, secondary sampling criteria aimed to ensure that the study included a wide range of varied backgrounds and experiences, including:

- Standing in foster care (whether participants were former foster youth or currently in extended foster care);
- Demographic background (age; gender identity; sexual orientation; race and ethnicity);
- Interaction with other systems (parental experience; juvenile justice interaction);
- Placement location (variety of states; urban, suburban, and rural locations; out-of-state placements as well as in-state placements);
- Perceived experience with their institutional placement(s).

Participants shared their demographic backgrounds in responses to open-ended questions, which allowed them to self identify. Regarding race and ethnicity, participants reported being Asian or Pacific Islander, Indigenous/Native, Black, Latinx/Hispanic, Middle Eastern or North African, multiracial, and/or white. Regarding sexual orientation, participants identified as bisexual, demisexual, gay, heterosexual, lesbian, pansexual, among others. Lastly, regarding gender identity, participants identified as transgender feminine and masculine, cisgender feminine and masculine, as well as non-binary and genderfluid.

Participants hailed from 30 states: Alaska, Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Iowa, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas.

Geographic Location



Informed Consent

“An agreement to participate in research constitutes a valid consent, only if voluntarily given” (The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). To seek such voluntary consent, prospective participants were informed of the goals of the study, as well as their rights and risks of participating in the study.

In addition to typical risks encountered in day-to-day life, such as lost time and boredom, prospective participants were informed that some questions might be uncomfortable, hard to answer, or distressing. Protocols were set in place for participants who would express emotional distress or disclose being currently in harm’s way, including through referral paths. Participants were also informed of the anonymization process that the research team would apply to their data, including their direct quotes, and were told that no quotes cited would be identified with their name, identifiable information, or photo.

Prior to conducting research, informed consent was sought from and given by all participants, verbally for interviews conducted remotely, and in writing from participants in cultural probes.

Personally Identifiable Information and Participant Codes

Personally identifiable information includes all data that could reveal the identity of any one participant in the study. To protect participants’ privacy, all research data that was collected was anonymized, and all identifying information, including photography showing youth’s faces or identifiable features, was removed. In the report, non-identifiable descriptors are sometimes used to provide context, but with care given not to trace any information back to the participants. Each participant was attributed a participant code, enabling the team to scrub sensitive and identifying information while being able to accurately reference research data and provide useful context to the reader.

Each code references the participant’s type of institutional placement, the amount of time spent in non-family placements, and the state where they were located. For example, a quote attributed to an interview with the fourth participant from Nebraska with short term experience in a group home is coded as GH-ST-NE-04. The full categories are shown in the table below.

Type of Institutional Placement	Time in Non-Family Placement	Geographic Location	
Group Homes: GH	Less than one year: ST	AK: Alaska	LA: Louisiana
Homes for Pregnant/ Parenting Teen: PP	Between one and five years: MT	AL: Alabama	ME: Maine
Therapeutic Facilities: TF	More than five years : LT	AZ: Arizona	MI: Michigan
Emergency Shelters: ES		CA: California	MN: Minnesota
Multiple Types of Placements: MP		CO: Colorado	NC: North Carolina
		CT: Connecticut	NE; Nebraska
		FL: Florida	NJ: New Jersey
		GA: Georgia	NY: New York
		HI: Hawaii	OH: Ohio
		IA: Iowa	OR: Oregon
		ID: Idaho	PA: Pennsylvania
		IL: Illinois	RI: Rhode Island
		IN: Indiana	SC: South Carolina
		KS: Kansas	TN: Tennessee
		KY: Kentucky	TX: Texas

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Throughout the data collection period, the research team conducted debriefs to surface and reflect on major learnings, as well as evaluate if there is a need to reframe the research questions or activities moving forward. After data collection, the team systematically reviewed all research notes to look for noteworthy data, quotes, and preliminary themes and patterns emerging from the collected data from interviews. Subsequently, more in-depth synthesis was conducted using a grounded theory approach, a social sciences inductive reasoning methodology where collected primary research data is analyzed for repeated themes (Chun Tie et. al. 2019). These themes were then grouped into categories which become the basis for constructing new insights.

Secondary Research

References to secondary literature are used throughout this report to substantiate, support, and nuance the primary research findings. Secondary data was not used to frame the lines of inquiry of the study or to guide the writing of this report.

Peer Reviews

Following the research, the authors wrote an initial draft of the report. This report underwent a layered peer review process which included the following activities:

- Researchers from the Annie E. Casey Foundation conducted a critical review of the draft report.
- Child Trends carried out an academic peer review, evaluating both the methodology and the significance, content, and style of the draft report. Child Trends critiqued the draft report against seven guidelines for peer reviewers developed by academic journal publishers (Sage, Taylor and Francis, Wiley, Elsevier, Springer, APA, and NCFR).
- The research team invited all 78 participants from the study to complete a Participant Review, which was comparable to a “member checking” process. Of the 78 original participants, 44 (or 56% of the total participants) completed the Participant Review. Participant reviewers received the initial synthesized Findings from the research, the Big Picture conclusions, and the Recommendations. They also received an abbreviated draft of the report and a 90-minute pre-recorded video walking through the full draft report. To complete the review, Participants Reviewers were asked to react to all of the Findings, Big Picture conclusions, and Recommendations, and invited to nuance and refine the claims. They were also invited to offer ideas for how to share the research findings. Of the Participant Reviewers, there was 89% agreement for the draft Findings, and 95% agreement for the draft Recommendations, including to eliminate institutional placements.

- The team formed a Lived Expert Review Board composed of five people who met the following selection criteria: people who are subject matter experts in child welfare, have personal lived experience in foster care, and are independent of this study. Of the five members of the Lived Expert Review Board, two specifically had lived experience in institutional placements in foster care. Each Lived Expert Review Board conducted an independent peer review of the draft report, and all five recommended that the team proceeds with publishing it. Following the independent peer review, the team hosted two virtual workshops with the Lived Experts to receive additional support on the framing of conclusions and recommendations from the study, guidance on how to incorporate comments from the Participant Review, and insight on how to disseminate the study's findings.

Following these activities, the team consolidated the feedback from all of these peer reviews. Generally speaking, there was not conflicting feedback between reviewers, as the feedback from the different reviewers ended up focusing on different elements of the draft report. For example, Child Trends offered considerable feedback on methodology whereas the Participant Reviews focused their feedback on nuancing the findings.

Participant Attribution

We use direct quotes to a great extent throughout this report. Quotes are used following the research tradition of testimonies—the narrative of witnessing (Beverley, 2004), as a means through which oral evidence carries “a formality” and “a notion that truth is being revealed under oath” (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Quotes used throughout the report came directly from study participants, either verbally through interviews or in writing through the Participant Review process. Quotes were edited for clarity, not substance. Each quote is attributed to the participant using the corresponding participant code.

In this report, cultural probe responses are used to illustrate, substantiate, and/or support the insights and findings that emerged from the synthesis of interview data. After the data collection phase ended, participants who submitted cultural probe poems, photographs, drawings or other visual art were given the opportunity to have their artifacts credited with their government name, nickname, initials, pen name, or other identifier of their choosing, after being urged to think of the potential risks of such public disclosure, should they fear retaliation or do not wish to be vulnerable in a public way.

Research Justice Considerations

From the onset, the research team drew from the work of anti-oppressive research, feminist research, Indigenous research, activist and militant research, and other research justice frameworks that offer critiques of the structural inequities typically reproduced in research. These inequities stem from the different positionalities of the researcher and the researched, and the distribution of benefits and harm during the research process, including through unequal exchange and exploitation (Naples, 2013). These inequities also extend to who holds the power to construct recommendations and conclusions (Potts & Brown, 2005), or to own the process and assign validity and value to findings (Chicago Beyond, 2019). These inequities show up in the ways that “vulnerable participants may experience (research) interviews therapeutically when they engage in reflexive activity about sensitive topics with researchers who employ psychotherapeutic techniques that encourage disclosure and reflection, (which presents) ethical concerns and (suggests) the need for trauma-informed research practices” (Hirsch, 2020). Lastly, these inequities point to the need for researchers to be in service of communities (Jolivéte, 2015).

In an attempt to undo or at least minimize these inequities, the team committed to the following practices:

Ways the team wanted to elevate and center lived experience

- The team centered lived experience in the project team. Of the project team of seven people, six teammates had experience in child welfare, three had experience being in foster care, and two had experienced living in institutional placements specifically.
- The team involved members of the research team in recruiting and scheduling to build a relationship with young people as early as possible.
- Team members with affinity to the young people we engaged with were holding relationships, leading interviews, and tracking participants’ affects, others were taking notes, manning tech, and managing compensation and other logistics.
- After synthesizing the data and writing the first draft of the report, the team invited the study participants to correct, nuance, and react to what we heard, as well as offer options for what we should do with that data next in a Participant Review.
- The team also formed a Lived Expert Review Board, a board of people independent of the research, with lived experience in foster care, and professional experience in child welfare to read and review the report, support in the framing of conclusions and recommendations from the study, provide guidance on how to incorporate comments from research participants, and decide on how to package and disseminate the study’s findings.

Ways the team compensated and shared resources with young people

- The team compensated young people on par with team members. The team compensated those with lived experience at a rate of ~\$130 per hour for interviews, at \$50 for completing the Participant Review, and \$350 for completing the Lived Expert Review Board process.
- The team had a dedicated person checking in with participants before, on the day of, during, and after the research to ensure young people felt comfortable and had the support they needed to share their story if they chose to do so.
- The team provided referral paths to life affirming services and additional resources, including for food and housing, through a resident clinical supervisor (MA, LCMHC, CRC).
- When relying on specific tech platforms (e.g., Miro) for participants to use during design research and/or the lived expert peer review, the team offered to skill up young people on how to use them (both live and during optional “office hours”).
- After writing the first draft of the research report, the team went back to each young person who contributed a digital cultural probe artifact (e.g., poem, drawing, photograph, etc.) to check in on whether or not they wanted to credit their work publicly.

Ways the team wanted to give young people opportunities to make choices for themselves

- The team made sure participant recruiting calls were open and transparent, and was clear in the recruitment language about expectations for how many young people would participate and on which basis they would be selected.
- The team created and published a [transparency memo](#) video around the participant recruiting process once participants were selected, to explain why some were selected and others were not by walking them through the study’s sampling process.
- The team used a “Bill of Rights” language and format, mimicking a document frequently used to inform foster children and youth of their rights within the child welfare system (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019).
- The team offered multiple ways for young people to conduct the interview, whichever felt more comfortable, private, and safe. If video conferencing was being used, participants were allowed to choose whether they want to have video on/off, both for them and for the research team.
- The team provided young people with opportunities for refusal throughout interviews, including by stating upfront which topics were to be discussed, and prefacing each transition to check in whether they wanted to talk about each topic or not.
- The team gave young people the option to choose between the five cultural probes (which we called “exercises”) and do as little or as many as they wanted.

Ways the team wanted to minimize trauma and center healing

- The above processes were all meant to provide safety to participants (in the self, in the environment, in the research frame), as well spell out their participation in the study as a partnership, so as to avoid any repetition of the loss of control in the trauma.
- The team conducted training for all team members to be able to recognize affect changes in participants, particularly given the remote nature of the interviews.
- The team established a protocol for when participants were distressed or uncomfortable, including:
 - Acknowledging and naming what is happening rather than ignoring it.
 - Only if participants are willing to share, validating the veracity of what they are feeling without interrogating, having doubts, or minimizing their emotions.
 - Offering participants some options for how to move forward, including switching topics, taking a break, ending the interview early (without repercussions on compensation), engaging in breathing, muscle relaxation, and/or grounding activities that can soothe and manage the participant's affect dysregulation in the moment, or other options.
 - Making sure participants knew they were in control, and most importantly, could decide on next steps.
- The team emphasized and affirmed participants' strengths during research sessions.
- The team discussed ways to follow up and check in with participants after the research session if they wanted to.

Research Limitations

While the team believes the data presented in this report is broadly representative of the experience of foster youth in institutional placements, limitations include:

- The nature of the study and channels of participant recruitment meant that the research team did not meaningfully engage youth with neurological disabilities or those with unreliable access to technology.
- Not engaging with minors meant that the research team relied on the participants' memories and recall of their experiences in institutional placements.
- Though initially decided to be out of scope for jurisdictional reasons, not engaging with youth with explicit experience in psychiatric facilities and juvenile justice facilities limited the team's view of institutional findings as a whole, especially considering the use in some states of juvenile detention centers [Wax-Thibodeaux, 2019] and psychiatric hospitals [National Disability Rights Network, 2013] to house foster youth when there are placement shortages.
- As this study focused its efforts on understanding the direct experiences of participants, the study did not begin with a landscape analysis of existing literature. Instead, secondary research was used to substantiate, support, and nuance the primary research findings.
- The majority of participants experienced multiple types of institutional placements. This makes it difficult to disaggregate and nuance which experiences relate more specifically to which type of placement.
- The research sampling prioritized participants from a diversity of states, rather than participants from the same state, in order to understand the experiences of youth across the nation. This means that no one state is deeply represented. States and jurisdictions wanting to understand more about the experiences of youth in institutional placements in their locations may want to conduct similar research activities with youth in a more localized way.

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Suggested Citation

Fathallah, Sarah, & Sullivan, Sarah (2021). "Away From Home: Youth Experiences of Institutional Placements in Foster Care", Think Of Us.

Keywords

Child welfare, congregate care, foster care, foster youth, group care, homes for pregnant and parenting teens, institutional placements, shelters, therapeutic residential facilities.

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Publication date - July 21, 2021

