

# “Becoming the Best Versions of Ourselves”: Supporting Foster Youth in Transition to Adult Life

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## **Abstract**

Because of the chronically poor outcomes among youth aging out of the foster care system, studies in this area often adapt a deficit model. However, research shows that emancipating youth also display significant strengths and strong desires for their futures. The goal of this study was to document those strengths using a semi-structured approach. Using Hedenstrom’s (2021) framework on successful aging out, we present results of in-depth interviews of 14 young adults in one state who recently aged out of foster care. Findings showed multiple strengths and needs in this population, including the ability to find support and a desire to serve others despite limited time and resources. Implications for those involved in the foster care system are presented.

## **Introduction**

The primary goal of the child welfare system as “ensuring the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and youth whose families are not meeting these needs or protecting them” (McCartt Hess, 2014, p. 1). In brief, foster care is the system set into place to protect children whose families are unable to do so. Foster care was designed to be a temporary placement, as research has shown consistently the long-term negative effects of placement instability on a child’s life outcomes. Creating and sustaining lifetime connections for youth whose lives have been disrupted in this manner is essential.

Unfortunately, despite the efforts of professionals, many youth never achieve permanency through this system, and end up living under what has been termed “long-term foster care” or “independent living” with accompanying services. Many states provide extensive transition services to youth who reach the age of 18 while in foster care, such as payment for living expenses, providing/paying for housing, and/or paying for schooling including higher education, but as with other support systems, their existence does not guarantee that all youth are able to access them or benefit from them equally (Courtney, 2009).

## **Outcomes for Youth**

Unfortunately, outcomes for youth involved in the foster care system at some point in their lives are notoriously poor along nearly all measures indicating life success. In 2009, Courtney (2009) reviewed the results of 22 studies examining outcomes of youth who had aged out of foster care. With respect to educational attainment, studies have shown low high school graduation rates. Results of multiple studies show a 20 to 30 percentage point difference between graduation rates of foster youth and that of their same age peers. The studies also show significantly low rates of college attendance, with an even more pronounced gap between foster youth and their peers.

## **Health**

Another important indicator of adult life is health, both mental and physical. Not surprisingly given their life circumstances, former foster youth have a much higher incidence of mental health challenges on a variety of measures, including rates of seeking assistance from mental health professionals, results of assessments intended to gauge mental health, and rates of admission to residential care facilities. There is mixed evidence comparing outcomes of physical health in former foster youth to same age peers. However, due

to strained economic circumstances, studies have shown that former foster youth are more likely than their peers to be uninsured and/or have more medical issues because such issues are left untreated (Collins, 2014; Courtney, 2009).

### ***Substance Use***

Studies focusing on substances use and abuse were also mixed, in that they generally show higher rates of drug and alcohol dependence among former foster youth than that seen in the general population. However, a clear picture of lifetime outcomes in terms of drug and alcohol use and abuse has yet to be determined. Unfortunately, former foster youth have much higher rates of involvement with the criminal justice system than their peers over their lifetime. They are more likely to be arrested, convicted of a crime, and incarcerated than the general population. Further, having a criminal record impacts other indicators that are addressed in these studies, such as educational and employment outcomes (Courtney, 2009).

### ***Income***

With respect to employment outcomes and economic independence, studies have shown much higher rates of use of public assistance by former foster youth than in the general population. Higher unemployment rates and lower earnings have been documented in multiple studies over the years, including ones using large state and national databases. In general, many struggle with income insecurity in multiple respects, including insufficient funds to pay rent or mortgage, or other monthly bills. Income insecurity naturally impacts stability in housing as well. Significant mobility and housing instability is common amongst former foster youth, with many residing in multiple places within just months of exiting care (Courtney, 2009).

### ***Family***

With respect to family formation, studies show mixed results in terms of comparison of marriage and divorce rates, childbearing, and parenting, to the general population. In general, former foster youth appear to have more children than the general population, and most studies show poorer parenting outcomes than their peers. Also of particular note is early parenting among former foster youth, including single parenting. Children of former foster youth are more likely to have health, educational, and/or behavioral challenges than children of those not involved with the foster care system, and sadly, those children are then in turn more likely to become involved in the system.

After existing foster care, youth are likely to have significant contact with their families of origin, despite the obvious challenges stemming from past abuse and/or neglect. Ongoing contact among former foster youth with birth mother, father, and siblings has been documented over time. Again, outcomes are mixed in terms of type and level of support provided. Contact with former foster families is also common and may serve as a source of support. Perhaps not surprisingly, studies have shown that family strife continues to be a challenge for these young people after emancipation, and many lack even one adult to turn to for assistance, either material or psychological (Courtney, 2009).

### ***Transition to Adult Life***

Collins (2014) points out multiple reasons for the poor outcomes outlined above, including instability in the family of origin, socioeconomic disadvantage, and inconsistency in living arrangements. However, she goes on to write, "Yet, despite the serious risk of poor outcomes facing this population, there is heterogeneity in both experiences and outcomes. Children and youth come into care for different reasons, have varying experiences in care, and bring a unique set of personal strengths and challenges in their individual development. Thus a focus on resiliency has also been critical to understanding and intervening with this population" (p. 470). She summarizes previous research that has specifically applied the concept of resilience to this population, identifying protective factors such as intelligence, "steady" personality, persistence, and involvement in positive community activities. Hedenstrom (2021) notes the importance of using resilience theory in studying positive outcomes among this population.

Collins (2014) emphasizes the importance of multiple and varied types of social support to positive transi-

tion, summarizing the positive impact of multiple support networks, such as biological relatives, foster families, counselors, caseworkers, and “natural mentors,” other adults who can offer advice and support such as neighbors, teachers, and extended “family” who may not be related by blood but still consider themselves family. Positive contributions of these support networks include lowered incidence of anxiety and depression. Further, youth who have had mentors in their lives for a long time show better outcomes than those who did not (Hedenstrom, 2021). It is important to note that “multiple networks,” or support from many different individuals, was found to be critical in order to have positive and lasting effects (Collins, 2014).

Additional studies have shed more light on protective factors and positive interventions that have assisted foster youth in making successful transitions from foster care into adult life. An understanding of the adolescent’s viewpoint with a focus on continuity and stability is essential (Rafaeli, Mangold, Zeira, & Kongeter, 2016; Singer & Berzin, 2015). Studies have shown that many foster youth return to their family of origin after leaving care. This move is associated with findings of greater resiliency in young adults, despite the continued strife within the family that is common. Therefore, attention to maintaining those relationships, as well as planning for that transition, is more important than is often emphasized in the child welfare system (Jones, 2013; Mitchell, 2010).

Skill development is another important piece of successful transition to adulthood. In a summary of research on life skills training provided to this population, Collins (2014) recommended standardizing life skills curriculum in consort with evidence-based practices, and ensuring that all interventions be tailored to specific, individual needs. Providing concrete resources and increasing intensity of the interventions also appear to have a positive effect on outcomes. Other studies showed a positive impact of provisions of in-depth training on financial management, helping youth make connections with agencies that can provide income support, job preparation skills, and training on employment and educational options (Barnow, Buck, O’Brien, Pecora, Ellis, & Steiner, 2013; Huizar & Lawrence, 2018). However, there are significant limitations in attempting to standardize curriculum and instruction, particularly with respect to the wide variability in youth needs and services offered in various communities, including job training, postsecondary options, mentorship programs, and mental and physical health services (Collins, 2014).

The Midwest Longitudinal Study found that those who stayed in foster care voluntarily showed significant improved outcomes on a variety of measures, than those who left care at the age of 19 (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2014). States offer a variety of incentives to youth and to foster families to encourage youth to stay in foster care during this crucial time in their life. However, when foster youth emancipate, they are solely responsible for their own choices, which include decisions about where to live, what services to access, and whether they continue with their education (Collins, 2014; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2014).

Again, connections appear to be a crucial factor in successful transition (Hedenstrom, 2021). Getting involved in positive activities in the community can provide continuity and stability (Jones L.P., 2014). Continued education can also provide these outcomes, despite common and significant barriers encountered by college students from diverse and/or disadvantaged backgrounds. Armstrong-Heismoth and colleagues (2021) conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 young adults who aged out of foster care. They expressed the need for selecting support personnel who genuinely cared about their futures and would treat them with respect. They also mentioned the need for person-centered supports and the selection / choice of relevant activities that would benefit them. Peer supports from those who had recently aged out and social skills development appeared to be valued by participants as well.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Given the negative outcomes described above, the goal of this study was to document strengths of this population, using a semi-structured approach. Interviews conducted for this study were based upon one of the few pieces of research dedicated to “what went right,” an article published in *Developmental Child Welfare* by Margot Hedenstrom (2021) entitled “Aging out of foster care: The experiences of former foster youth who successfully navigated this transition.” The goal of the study was to analyze the life experiences of youth who had successfully aged out of foster care, through semi-structured interviews. Hedenstrom interviewed nine young adults who had “successfully” aged out of foster care and were currently 20 to 25

years old. Participants must have lived in a foster home for at least six months before emancipation. “Success” was defined as having completed high school or a GED, currently living independently, and currently employed or attending school. They were recruited through caseworkers.

Using a phenomenological approach, participants were asked to walk the researcher through their aging out process. Results of the study uncovered four themes that represented participants’ experiences as they entered adult life from foster care (Hedenstrom, 2021). The first theme, facing a transition, is about how participants felt immediately after turning 18 and technically aging out of foster care (state law says they can remain in foster care until 21 if they so choose). They discussed experiencing abruptness and limited support. They expressed significant pain regarding the struggles they had faced during that time. Those who reported a smooth transition were in kinship care and supported by biological parents and other relatives.

The second theme, depending on adults, involved both asking for support from important adults in the lives of youth, as well as accepting support offered. Adults identified by participants as helpful included caseworkers, foster parents, and other community members. The presence of just a single caring adult appeared to make a significant difference in their lives. Third, “making a difference” helped participants find meaning by assisting others, primarily with respect to current foster youth. This finding was unusual in that it had not been reported in previous studies on resilience. Several reported participating in organizations that support this population or who had aged out of care. The final theme, moving forward, addressed the ways in which participants were envisioning their futures. The fact that they had completed their education appeared to be a significant positive note in their lives. They expressed the continuing desire for a better future in multiple respects, completing education, improving mindset and mental health, and setting goals. Although the first two themes were relatively common in the research literature, the author found few studies addressing/uncovering the last two themes, making a difference and moving forward. She recommended more research in these two areas in an effort to design interventions and programs that work (Hedenstrom, 2011).

As the goal of the present study is to document strengths in this population instead of using the deficit model found in much of the data, we selected the Hedenstrom model as the theoretical framework because it specifically focuses on the positive and attempts to uncover additional themes to explore in the effort to uncover “what works” in transition from foster care to adult life. In particular, we wished to explore the last two themes that have not been examined in previous research, and that appear promising in terms of life outcomes. For purposes of this study, we chose to look more broadly at youth who aged out of foster care, not just those who may qualify as “successful” along a continuum.

## Methods

Similar to methods employed in Hedenstrom (2011), participants for this study were recruited from each of the 88 counties in one state, through each county’s public child welfare agency’s Independent Living (IL) Coordinator. The IL Coordinators were listed on a publicly available website run by the state Job and Family Services agency. Each IL coordinator was asked to forward an invitation to participate in the book project to foster youth who met these inclusionary criteria; (1) they had aged out of foster care; (2) they were currently aged 18-25. This particular age range was selected to as to capture an accurate depiction of current practices in foster care. Some potential participants were later excluded because they did not fit the required age range. Additionally, social media posts were made on foster care support groups throughout the state in an effort to reach foster parents who might have connections with qualifying youth. Many of these support groups were attached to nonprofit agencies serving foster families. Because the techniques were the same as those used in the Hedenstrom study (2011), through contacts with caseworkers and snowballing, the number of individuals recruited is unknown.

Qualifying individuals were asked to provide an email address to make contact with the researcher. They were then asked to provide their phone number to the interviewer, and sent the interview questions ahead of time, also via email. In their first contact with the researcher, via email and during the interview, they were provided with the approved university IRB informed consent form, which discussed confidentiality, including



the use of pseudonyms and the changing of other identifying information that might be brought up inadvertently during the interview process. In order to gain a full understanding of helpful transition supports, two questions were asked in order to explicate each of the four themes identified by Hedenstrom in her study. The questions were designed to elicit information that would assist interested individuals in making decisions and designing programs that are perceived as supportive by youth with lived experiences in this area.

Data analysis was conducted using a deductive approach, as an extension of Hedenstrom's (2021) work. The first researcher conducted and transcribed the semi-structured interviews, using Hedenstrom's themes as anchors. After transcription, the second researcher replaced participants' names with initials (pseudonyms) to preserve confidentiality. Next, both researchers collaborated to sort responses to each theme, or group of two questions, into codes. Any disagreement about the codes, short phrases that encompassed multiple participants' responses to each theme, were resolved before coding continued. After the researchers agreed on each of the codes, the second researcher placed each of the participants' responses under the corresponding code. Direct quotations were preserved until write-up for the researchers' references.

## Results

Twenty-seven young adults responded to our initial query. After recruitment, two individuals were screened out because they were over the age of 25 and one because she was from out of state. Ten additional individuals were unable to participate for one or more of the following reasons: (1) they did not reply to the initial query asking when they were available for the interview; (2) they did not show up to scheduled video appointments up to three times; and/or (3) they did not respond to multiple prompts via text and email. Fourteen individuals participated in this study, four men and ten women. All were between the ages of 19 and 23. This means that the study had a response rate of 51.9%. Because of the need for confidentiality, demographics beyond age were not asked explicitly unless provided by participants during the interviews. Interviews took place online, and were videorecorded. Interviews lasted 15 to 45 minutes, and videorecordings were deleted after transcription.

### Facing a Transition

When facing transitions, participants provided multiple responses to describe that transition on a continuum, ranging from easier than expected to very challenging. The majority of participants used words such as "rough" and "stressful" to describe their transition. They communicated that the transition was never linear and was a rocky road. While emancipation typically occurs at age 18, several participants mentioned delaying emancipation until the age of 21. Quite a few noted a lack of resources and information provided to them before emancipation. However, they also mentioned that in retrospect, many more resources were available than they knew at the time.

Three of the participants indicated that the transition was actually easier than anticipated. Those who felt their transition was fairly easy mentioned the existence of strong supports. CF stated, "it was a pretty easy transition, was a little stressful [though]. But it was pretty easy. There's a lot of people that helped get me to where I needed to be and made sure stuff was done right." SG said, "It was a lot easier than expected. Because in the beginning of last year, and like, the ending of last year, I lost both my parents, so I thought it was gonna be really hard leaving, but I've had a lot of sports and everything, I've had a lot of my family here for me, and it's been pretty nice. Been easier than expected. I was terrified. Yeah." To KL, the transition appeared easy for a different reason. She explained, "I mean, to me, really, it wasn't nothing... I started off in middle school taking care of my sister. So it's like to me it was already adult-ish. But like, you go from taking care of so much. And then I don't know." So to KL, transition did not mean much because of she had been the adult for much of her life.

More common were responses such as BW's, "I'm making ends meet, but it takes a lot of work. So, financially, the transition was hard. It was very hard." AA explains, "I was homeless a lot. And I had to get help from the state and stuff just to pay my bills just to get an apartment and stuff like that. It was hard." Moving to multiple places even before transition was more than norm than the exception, and per CP: "my personal transition, what from foster care to adult life was rough, but with like all of the different like foster families and the group home I lived in and just like all the experiences I had, between like transitioning to now I feel

like it's you know, made me the adult that I am today. I'm like super independent and I advocate for myself and yeah." However, CP mentioned later that when she looks back she is able to see the positive long-term impact that this rough period made in her life.

KB addresses emotions undoubtedly felt by many: "I would say leading up until the day I emancipated out I was feeling it's a bunch of different emotions, anxious, nervous, just worried about where I would go next." MM also mentions all of the shuttling back and forth: "I'm gonna be honest, it was kind of rough.... Because the first two years, like being an independent living, I also had to like, go back and forth, checking on my siblings who were still in foster care as well. And had to deal with a lot of legal proceedings during that was well, for the reason why were in foster care." In contrast to those who felt the transition was easier than indicated, those who communicated that the process was challenging referred to a lack of assistance received. For example, RW mentioned "a big gap period where I didn't get any the resources I need or anything" and TW referred several times to completing the entire college application processes alone, including financial aid and scholarships.

As mentioned above, participants referred to shuttling back and forth among multiple living situations before their transition. Unfortunately, that trend continued after emancipation for most of the young people interviewed. FS explained, [it's] never linear in foster care. But my specific transition I technically aged out at 18.... And then at 21, I officially aged out, but during that time becoming an adult looked like paying my own bills at 18. ... and then the older I got, you know, I moved different places." She explained how rent kept increasing and living with fewer roommates as she got older meant her portion of the bills was higher.

Similarly, KB explained how the process of emancipation can be long: "I knew I had some money coming from... County Children Services for a stipend that I was going to receive, they already told me it's kind of a lengthy process, it can take anywhere from 30 days to 90 days, for even for me to get a court date for my emancipation.... Thankfully, it only took three weeks, but it took a total of four months for me to get the stipend, wow, four months, I really had to just kind of figure out where I was gonna go, what was gonna happen, I had a family friend that allowed me to stay with them." Many participants referred to timelines for receipt of multiple types of assistance being unclear in the first place as well as extended beyond expectations.

AA was forced to leave her current placement because of her baby: "I left my foster home and well I had a baby and my foster mom kept my baby because I was sexually assaulted. And that's how the baby to be. So I didn't really have any plans to keep her or anything like I wanted somebody else like that didn't have to go through that to have her so C kept her for a little bit and I went to live with my in laws that are proud of me, my ex in-laws, but they were my in laws at the time. And they gave me a place to stay. They said that they wanted the baby and stuff. And one of the term of them to have a baby was for me to move out. I couldn't live there anymore."

Another participant, MM, also found herself pregnant at 18 and dealing with both emancipation and pregnancy and parenthood simultaneously. But unlike FS, she found a refuge in family friend. MM also praised her transition program and her transition worker, saying "I really liked that program, you could participate in like contests and when to win scholarships toward school. And they would give out like free computers or laptops. And you get like a worker, and I've got like a worker and a supervisor or something like that."

MM was one of many participants who noted lack of information and/or transparency about the process of emancipation/transition and available resources, particularly financial resources to provide specifically for living expenses. Many times this lack of information appeared to cause significant stress in multiple respects. EO explained, "When I turned 18 I just aged out and I wasn't aware of any of the services that like you could get in foster care you know, like having them help pay for college or housing. So I moved back in with my parents and I paid my way through college by myself. EO expressed pride in having no debt or student loans despite this lack of support. Similarly, KL expressed, "I wish I would have known and understood about how many resources was out there to actually help me because there was enough resources, where I could have paid my rent and pay like I didn't even know how to run an apartment when I transitioned out."

Sometimes the information young adults reported lacking did not appear to stem from lack of knowledge about provided supports, but just from lack of adult guidance in their developing years. For example, BW explained, “I just wish I had more knowledge but I guess it’s like, experience. I guess I have to learn it by going through the experience.” How to fill out various forms of government paperwork was mentioned commonly in terms of what youth felt they missed.

KB discussed her process of applying for housing, which was particularly challenging with a child: KB’s caseworker sent her links to HUD resources, one of which was within walking distance. She writes, “thank God, I think it’s because I filled it out as and see, once again, that’s a trick question... the way they’re looking at it is Is your roof over your head? Or you just bought a couch kind of situation? So I you know, I asked the lady at the front desk, actually .... And they’re like, well, technically that’s considered homeless.... And they actually bumped me up on the list and I got a call in three months.”

Like KB, some participants reported getting that type of assistance to assist with transition. For example, CP stated, “In that time of transition with my independent living worker, I, we created like a way to [have a] really comfortable relationship like she was only like, a few years older than me, but she was still like, respectful. But she was ready, she was really helpful. And she taught me how to like, sign for leases, and stuff and look for apartments and like housing, she taught me about credit, taxes. I’m like cars... what’s better, like within renting or buying a car, or buying it.... Stuff you have to like, learn as you reach adulthood, I guess.”

### **Depending Upon Adults**

When going through challenging times in their transition out of foster care, participants reported relying on many different individuals to provide various types of supports. Some of these supports originated in foster care, while others were sought out as a result of experiences with foster care. Participants shared that their supports included birth parents and families, those considered family although not related by blood, foster parents, and caseworkers. They also spoke of spouses and important friends in their lives. A few participants also communicated that school personnel and mental health professionals provided that much-needed support.

In this particular Midwestern state, independent living services for emancipating foster youth are mandated from ages 18-21. Several participants specifically mentioned these services, including classes, financial and other material supports. For example, MM’s caseworker kept her updated about transition opportunities for which she qualified. MM and BW refer to the same organization. BW stated, “I’m thankful for the organization....they are my main support, they helped me with school. So [my caseworker] helps me with other things like helping get my car insurance paid.... And [another organization] which kind of helped support my housing while I’m in college, so those two are great support.”

Several mentioned previous caseworkers as primary supports. These results are not a surprise because many of the participants were referred to this book project by independent living caseworkers. KB also referred to a previous caseworker when asked about supports: “My caseworker that I ended up getting during my case plan or my time in foster care. Her name’s Hallie and we are still in contact after seven years. She’s still in my life because she was always there. She was my advocate. She spoke up for me in court vouch for me. She believed in me, even when I didn’t believe in myself. She always loved me as if I was her own child. I wasn’t I didn’t feel like I was just somebody on her case plan.... She took time to like get to know me and my son and helped me like, out of her own kindness.”

Similarly, TW explained “My caseworker is a very active support. In my life, she will answer like 12 [AM], if I’m calling her, she cares about me like I’m her own son.” Interestingly as one of most traditionally successful of the interviewees, in terms of completing college and identifying future goals, TW went on to mention nearly all of the supports identified above: “And I talk with my biological mother a little but I wouldn’t say she’s a main support. And then of course, the agency as well. And my best friend, I always say, and I’m trying to keep this outlook in life is that you want very quality support and friends in your life.”

A few participants expressed that they had been motivated to seek out various supports as a result of their

time in foster care. BW named a “homie mentor, she kind of supported me a little bit she even sometimes will financially support me.” Similarly, as a result of a residential placement during foster care, SB also mentioned her Big Sister with Big Brothers Big Sisters “where they bring in these people and they would, you know, interact with us. And so I still have contact with her. And she actually just came up here a couple of weeks ago to see me.”

CP mentioned the state Youth Empowerment Council as a support. She describes this council as consisting of “foster youth who have aged out or who are close to aging out of foster care advocate for other youth as well as themselves. So like the rest of our, you know, brothers and sisters in care. And so we have a say, in what laws, you know, are like created, and what should be done, what shouldn’t be done, what should be changed and stuff.” Interestingly FS mentioned bosses as supports during her transition.

Birth / biological families were mentioned consistently throughout participants’ responses when they were asked to identify major supports. Mothers, siblings, aunts, uncles, step aunts, step uncles, and others who are or are not biological relatives were identified. Interestingly, few referred to difficulties with biological relatives, although KL did state, “I mean my mom has always been there for supporting and though she is messed up so as like everybody else in a way....at the same time, moving around so much, I also feel like no one wanted me or cared for me.”

MM praised the woman she calls “aunt,” who is actually her half-brother’s mother: “she’s always been there for me, especially like during the year I emancipated and I was pregnant with my daughter. Like, she took me in, because after they emancipate you from independent living, like they’re not going to pay your bills anymore.” SB also referred to her birth mom for coming to her aid during a time of crisis, when she was able to move in during her pregnancy.

Apart from birth/biological families and those considered to be relatives, many of the participants mentioned obtaining support from spouses and close friends. For example, AA explained that her husband “was my best friend when we were teenagers. So he just kind of stayed there. But that’s the only person I still have. Honestly, I don’t really have anybody else. Besides our daughter... but she is not here yet.” TW spoke of a best friend who helped him stay positive during challenging times: “I’m trying to keep this outlook in life is that you want very quality support and friends in your life.” When asked about supports, participants appeared grateful for the friends they mentioned.

Several different types of professionals also made a difference in the lives of these young people, including teachers, guidance counselors, and mental health personnel. CP referred to a guidance counselor dedicated to assisting with the transition to college. She also mentioned receiving more support from school. “As in like, I see a therapist. I also like, school, like, there’s a health office, so I’m able to, like get doctor’s appointments done there.”

Others referred to therapists and mental health professionals as significant supports. EO stated, “My therapist [is my support] because not because I pay her but because yeah, it helps that she doesn’t want to go anywhere um, she’s very consistent like she has my trust. I don’t really trust super easily so you know, byproduct of that. FS’s therapist has also “been great. [I] recently went back to her and it’s just, you know, picking up like we never picking up right where we left off. And it helps because I don’t have to re-explain everything, she already knows my history. So it makes it that much more authentic and genuine.”

Teachers also played a part in support, both school and university. TW explained, “My best friend is a graduate assistant... He’s helped me not only like, change my life and like, what I want to be when I grow up who I am, but also has given me so many opportunities ... so super thankful for his part and kind of transitioning into becoming a full adult and knowing who I am, what I want, and also just cultural awareness.” EO describes a complicated relationship with a high school teacher who was instrumental in helping earlier on in his transition but was unable to continue later.

In sum, participants described multiple types of supports, appearing to lean heavily on those connected with foster care as well as birth families. Some supports came out of foster care and some from related



services. They appeared to be grateful for the people in their lives who supported them.

## **Making a Difference**

At first, many of the participants indicated they did not provide service to others, but once they were reminded that service does not have to be a grand gesture, they were able to think of supports they provided, such as helping out with housework. Participants gave some examples of giving back that included the jobs they hold, whether traditionally “helper” positions or not. They appeared to value the concept of giving back. Some were giving back to populations with which they identified, such as LGBTQ+ or homeless youth, as well as foster youth. Further, the questions led some participants to share their philosophies of life and/or what they had learned from being in foster care.

When prompted to think of service in a broader way, the emancipating youth provided several concrete examples as to how they felt they gave back to the community. AA mentioned working for DoorDash, Instacart, and Chipotle. CF mentioned giving friends rides, and DP referred to helping around the house: “I just tried to contribute, like, anything I can do if it’s like how little it can be like simple ways like picking up a few things or whatever.” Others also mentioned picking up around the house. Other examples include helping with a child’s Girl Scout troop, mowing a neighbor’s grass, picking up trash, and giving money to church or charity to benefit people and/or animals. For example, SB explained, “I don’t know it just makes me feel good to help other people because like it just it could make someone’s day maybe their weekend like holding the door for someone.”

Several indicated it was hard to find time to give back, as per MM’s comment “So I’m gonna be honest, I work a lot. And the most service is for my kid. Yeah. If not my time I do give my money. I like I have my account set up where I leave, donate 50 bucks to this church on a weekly basis that I attend to every so often. I don’t attend faithfully because I work night shift. And when I work, I can’t really sleep and go to church. So but what I donate to them every so often, and then I try, like every time I see like a donation option, like I try, I tried to donate because with my time, it’s kind of harder to give it away because you only have so much dedicated to my daughter and my work sometimes to my husband.” BW also mentioned helping out family: “I support my brother. I’ve always helped him out. Um, so yeah, my brother and my friend. And like, I tried to be there for her kids. They’re like, my god kids. So that’s pretty much the main the main people I tried to give back. Yeah.”

This question led several participants to reflect on their philosophy related to helping others, as reported below:

BW: That’s, that’s pretty much like my motto. You know, growing up, I didn’t have a lot. So I’ve always looked out for other people since I was really really young. You know, whether it’s giving snacks at school or a couple of dollars there. Um, like right now. I’m actually helping my best friend. I’m at the hospital right now. I have to take a bit emergency room. But she’s okay.... Um, I believe like the karma, you want to put good things out there are good things can happen to me, because I know that I don’t really have, I don’t have a big support system.

EO: I decided very early on that like, I wanted to be someone who gave back to other people and part of being like homeless the mentality is you give what you have to others because you need to do that to survive. And like, even though I’m not homeless, anymore, that mentality has stuck with me because I without that, like, I wouldn’t be here. So now for me, I’m like, I have resources, I have education, and I want to give it back.

KB: Yeah, my favorite saying is like, once I looked back on it is that once I opened one door, a million more doors were available to me, I just had to get the courage to open that one door. And nowadays, technology is so advanced, you can click on one site and end up on a billion different things.... You got to tell your story. You have to speak about it...It’s those good to let it out. It’s like I’ve been holding something in for so long and it just needs to be said so yeah, I’m really I’m really happy that I got to experience some of those things that happened that encouraged me to do what I’m doing today.

TW: People when they look at me, they don't, they don't see all of these stories, the adversities I had to face. They see a very white presenting gay, flamboyant, confident, sometimes annoying person and they don't really see behind the mask of how much emotional processing I had to do to get to this point, as well as the emotional processing that I'm still dealing with today.... During my transition, it really made me understand the value of how, like, honored I am to get these scholarships. I don't want to use the word privilege in the sense like, Yes, I am.

Several participants mentioned particular ways they help people like themselves. TW assists with independent living classes for foster youth. Two participants participate in state-level committees attempting to address foster care. CP is involved in the Youth Empowerment Council... [I got involved because of] all the experiences like I had in [foster care], and like, what I saw went wrong, and what I wanted changed for myself. I see that, you know, reflected into like other from other children, and care.”

Similarly, KB participates on the state Foster Youth Advocate Board, representing teen moms in her county: And right now I'm in the middle of making a teen mom video for the foster care page that we just finished last month... Honestly, I have my struggles I have my days. So just kind of telling my story and giving back to a teen mom like myself. That's really what I'm there for.” RW also participates in a state-level advisory board.

Other participants mentioned volunteering with church youth group and raising money for an LGBTQ+ emergency fund. EO named a variety of services: “So I'm actually doing kinship care right now. I work in domestic violence. Shelters, I run a couple of groups pro bono for self harm LGBTQ individuals. Anger management, I have an incest group. I do Midnight Run, we do clothing [and feminine hygiene drives]. And I've also been working with the CAC nearby to try to make that more inclusive in our area. Awesome.”

Finally, one participant also mentioned giving back to society through her career as a healthcare worker.

## **Moving Forward**

Looking forward, the participants were asked to share their future goals. Some indicated they did not have long-term goals, because they had learned to live day by day. The most common theme in terms of a long-term goal was to live in a stable home. Other shared goals were primarily financial, including owning a car and achieving financial stability. Furthering their education was also identified by several participants. Finally, getting help was a theme in multiple respects, either finding ways to improve their own health and/or assisting others in obtaining various types of assistance that they may need. Some shared multiple goals, such as EO: “I am hoping like, something can either change in some direction where like, that lessens itself a little bit. Whether that means like, they're more comfortable here or like, my parents get their shit together, I don't know, don't care, something works out. Want to get a partner? And I [get a] house; pretty typical developmental milestones.”

To begin, some participants declined to share goals, saying they did not have any and explaining why. For example, KL stated, “I never really had any goals. It's just I live day by day. A lot of I don't know, and from MM, “Like, what can I do now to make the next moment easier for myself? Like surviving, but with a bit more mystery.” She continued by detailing, “It's very general, like I just want my future to be peaceful and happy. And I know I can't make that happen without taking it a step at a time.”

By far the most common goal shared by participants was to live in a stable home, including each of the three participants who were also parents. For example, AA explains “Hopefully get an apartment. That's a big one. Because we don't have an apartment like we stay in extended stays....[another goal is] don't let my kid go to foster care... Because my kids not going to foster care, especially as a girl. No, that's not happening.”

Several expressed the desire to own a home instead of renting, as MM describes: “I want to move out of this house. I hate this house so much..... move to a nicer house, I kind of don't want to be in kinship care anymore.” KB situates this desire within larger goals and connects it to her experience in foster care: “But

meeting the people that I met crossing paths with different families and just seeing how I went through six different homes that's six different people's lives and all those people lived completely opposite lives. So just being able to stop in and experience that life. kind of gave me an idea of well what I want to do, who do I want to be when I'm in this position?"

The next most commonly expressed goal was financial stability overall, or the ability to make a specific large purchase such as a car. Several participants mentioned a goal of job promotion or "leveling up" at work. Some of those appeared quite satisfied with their current status in that respect. AA stated: "like keep my car up to date. I guess like not letting it break down. Keeping my job that I have right now. Like I'm kind of in a good spot." FS explained "I think if I want to just be bright eyed and bushy tailed, would love to be the director of the department one day...But um yeah, I just, I'm gonna be kind of chugging along and see where this takes me."

Each of the current college students expressed the explicit desire to graduate as a crucial goal. BW credits foster care with getting her into college in the first place: "If it wasn't for foster care, I feel like, if I never went in too far secure at the age of 16, I wouldn't be I wouldn't ever have went to college... I will probably be struggling. So I am grateful. We're, you know, to be able to take advantage of some of the things that comes along with it. But I probably wouldn't even know what I want to do with my life and have those experiences."

RW explained: "I've always been an artist, and I still am. I'm actually an art major.... If you don't want to go to college, you don't have to, of course, but honestly, I want to start a business for my art." TW, who expressed the most elaborate goals, described wanting to open his own nonprofit theater as well as become a lawyer and become involved in politics. "I want to also be a working lawyer and then run for public office, starting with Mayor then State House representatives, and then possibly governor, but I'll be skipping governor, because once we come working for the National House of Representatives, I do want to go to DC that's the goal."

Finally, the desire to get help and/or give help to others in in a similar situation was apparent throughout the expressed goals of several of the participants. For example, BW stated: "But knowing how like car my housing situation has been suffering out of the foster care system, I would like to eventually look into creating some type of housing for, for use, like after [foster youth] emancipate." CF explained that foster care "has helped me by [showing me] what I have to do in order to be successful, and what I have to do in order to be able to move up and my job and if I foster care just helped me or it's given me the opportunity to meet different people to help me along the way."

CP explicates how foster care influenced her to work harder and change society's expectations for youth in foster care: "My experience in foster care has influenced me to like where I am right now... as well as to like, break the... toxicity in my family. And that negative stigma that there is on the system, you know, because foster youth are portrayed, like, in the media, and seen in the system as, like, helpless and like that we're disadvantaged, which is like completely not true. We are fully capable, you know, of like doing things and like having jobs and having real relationships and conversations and having a real life, you know, and we're not like, poor, disadvantaged kids, like, we are fully capable of becoming like, the best versions of ourselves that we can be in the best people we can be. And so that, you know, has inspired me and influenced me to continue achieving my goals and continue to like, work hard."

Similarly, KB explained her journey and goals as one of growing strength: "I think foster care was meant to happen.... There was a song that crossed my mind a lot while I was in care, which was Carrie Underwood, Temporary Home. ... And so foster care for me, taught me how to be on my own, solely without any family without any support solely on my own. And it gave me a light opened my eyes and I also got to learn myself during that time I had so much time to myself. And a lot of time with my son that we established a relationship that I don't think ever could ever be broken."

## Discussion

Transitioning out of foster care appears to have been a winding journey for the participants in this study, including both strengths and hardships, and often multiple moves from place to place. With respect to the research aim to uncover what factors assisted with transition, people appeared to act as crucial supports, many of them serendipitously entering the lives of transitioning foster youth. Knowledge was also important at the right time, both knowledge specific to foster care, such as how to apply for transition supports, as well as general life knowledge, such as how to pay taxes. Finding stable housing that meets their needs was also viewed as pivotal to this population. Finally, expanding on Hedenstrom's (2021) previous work, giving to others also appeared to be important to this population, particularly in small ways. We as a society should consider how to provide opportunities for giving back to this particular population of youth.

The road that is transitioning out of foster care was not linear for the majority, if not all, of the participants. They described multiple hardships such as homelessness, lack of stable income, lack of knowledge about crucial resources, figuring out single parenting. However, many different types of people were crucial to assisting them in figuring out the solution to many of the challenges they faced. The crucial role of mentorship in the lives of youth emancipating from foster care has been well-documented in past research and is further supported in this study (Collins, 2014; Jones, 2013; Mitchell, 2010). Some of the mentors mentioned by participants were put into their lives by foster care, such as foster parents and caseworkers, but many were not. Support provided by birth families was significant, including extended family who might not be related by blood. Many of these supports could be seen initially as having a relatively small role in the youth's life, such as a guidance counselor, but this initial contact sparked a larger relationship. This serendipity in locating mentors should be explored further.

These mentors that were identified by these youth did not just provide stability in terms of housing or finances, but they were a source of knowledge, both specific to foster care and general. Many of these youth felt that they missed out on opportunities provided by the state to transitioning foster youth due to lack of knowledge about the system. Many also expressed confusion and frustration over procedures and paperwork they felt was general knowledge to young people who had a more stable support system. Again, the need for connection to support systems is well-documented in previous research, particularly research that calls for life skills training for emancipating youth (Collins, 2014; Barnow, Buck, O'Brien, Pecora, Ellis, & Steiner, 2013; Huizar & Lawrence, 2018).

Housing itself appeared to be of great significance to this population. It would be easy to draw the connection between their current desire for stable housing to lack of stability in their past. However, one element that might be overlooked in this discussion is the element of choice. They do not just desire stable housing, but housing that they chose, that feels like a home to them. This desire extends previous research, in that choice of housing is worth investigating in terms of its potential for being a protective factor for youth.

Hedenstrom (2021) urged future research to investigate further the new finding regarding the importance of "making a difference" as a strength factor for youth emancipating from foster care. The results of the current study extended this work. This population expressed the desire to give back to their communities with which they identified, both the foster care community and other communities with which they identified, such as teen moms or the LGBTQ+ community.

One unexpected finding of this study is that participants' responses to questions about "making a difference" included acts like helping a neighbor, washing dishes for a relative, babysitting, or providing services to the community like DoorDash. Their responses indicated the need to consider "making a difference" more expansively, which could potentially assist in identifying strengths more accurately. Many if not most participants expressed the lack of time to give back, although some were clearly giving back in major ways such as through statewide committees. More opportunities specifically designed for this population to use this strength to give back to the foster care and related communities in multiple ways should be considered.



## Implications

Finding individuals who are willing and able to make a long-term commitment to supporting a foster youth in transition is a crucial goal. Taking the extra step by delving into each aspect of the youth's life may uncover the one support that may make all the difference in the future in terms of stability and outlook on life. As discussed in previous research, birth families and extended birth families should not be overlooked in this process, as well as caseworkers who may no longer be officially involved in the youth's life (Collins, 2014; Jones, 2013; Mitchell, 2010).

Existing ways of providing general and specific knowledge to transitioning foster youth do not appear to be sufficient. State resources may be comprehensive, but they are not fulfilling their purpose if youth are not aware of those resources. Finding new ways of documenting what services are needed for transitioning youth and getting that information to this population in a way that meets their needs is crucial. Previous research has recommended standardizing a curriculum as a first step to meeting this need (e.g., Collins, 2014); however, the variety of needs of the youth combined with variability in community resources and personnel make this plan difficult to implement.

This study showed that choice in housing may be particularly important to this population. Supporting housing stability in this population should make sure to include the goals and desires of the youth involved (Collins, 2014).

State agencies and other organizations supporting foster care should consider developing ways to include young adults who have transitioned out of foster care in their work. The results of this study pointed to the importance of starting small, thinking creatively, and involving the potential volunteers themselves in designing opportunities to give back. Allowing busy youth with hectic lives the ability to participate in multiple ways that suit their needs and communication preferences could result in strengthening both populations. Giving back is seen as a positive in the lives of emancipating youth as well as allow young people to see that there is a way forward after foster care (Hedenstrom, 2021).

## Limitations and Conclusion

It is important to note that participants should not be considered a representative sample of young adults who aged out of foster care, partially because of the small sample size and the fact that youth were only included from one state. Further, the sample should be considered skewed because of how participants were recruited, through Independent Living coordinators and through former foster parents. Because participants were recruited through individuals employed in the foster care system, they were still connected in some way to these individuals, and those with fewer connections were less likely receive the invitation to participate in this project. We know that former foster youth with more connections tend to fare better in terms of life outcomes.

The research design further limits the strength of the results. The design was based on findings of a previous study focusing on protective factors of emancipating foster youth. Both studies were qualitative semi-structured interviews and lacking a quantitative component. Qualitative data coding by its nature can introduce bias, and particularly with the different researchers involved in these two studies, a direct comparison should be viewed with caution. Despite these limitations, participants provide insight into some of the strengths, challenges, and unique journeys of youth emancipating from foster care.

In conclusion, participants in this study described multiple ways in which their life paths differed from the traditional expected path of finish school, get a job, start a family. Their lives were uprooted by moves, changing family circumstances, and more. They showed strengths in making connections with a variety of people, adapting to changing circumstances, and expressed a desire to give back to communities with which they identify. Implications for policy include the need to identify how valuable information is provided to emancipating foster youth, and to provide for opportunities for choice for housing. Important implications for practice include looking expansively to identify and cultivate mentors, and creating pathways to partner with youth so they can "give back" in ways that meet their needs for agency.

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