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Away From Home Youth Experiences of Institutional Placements in Foster Care

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Summary
of findings &
recommendations

Introduction

Institutional placements in foster care are out-of-home, non-family placements where some foster youth are sent to live. Each year, of the hundreds of thousands of youth in foster care, over 43,000 live in institutional placements. These placements disproportionately impact Black youth, other youth of color, older youth, and pregnant and parenting teens.

Due to calls to reckon with longstanding institutionalized racism, the spread of COVID-19 through institutions, concern over the use of forceful restraints, emerging research on trauma, and the recent death of 16 year-old Cornelius Fredericks in a Michigan group home, there is a growing body of research and a movement calling for the **reduction or elimination of institutional placements in foster care.**

Missing from this conversation was a deep, nuanced understanding of the experiences and mental models of young people who have recently lived in these places.

This study exists to fill that gap.

In fall 2020, Think Of Us led a team of 7 researchers to understand the experiences of young people who had recently lived in institutional placements in foster care. The team engaged 78 people ages 18–25 with lived experiences through interviews and cultural probes.

The research team included teammates from Think Of Us, Annie E. Casey Foundation, and Casey Family Programs. Three of the researchers had lived experience in foster care, two of whom had experiences living specifically in institutional placements while in foster care.

The complete report of the Findings, Big Picture Conclusions, Recommendations, and Methodology is published in **Away From Home: Youth Experiences of Institutional Placements in Foster Care.**

This is a summary of those findings and recommendations.

Download the report for all 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)

Research Findings

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

”

“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)



“I received [this plush toy] the night I went into foster care (January 08, 2009). 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.”

(GH-LT-CA-01)

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

”

“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)

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.”**

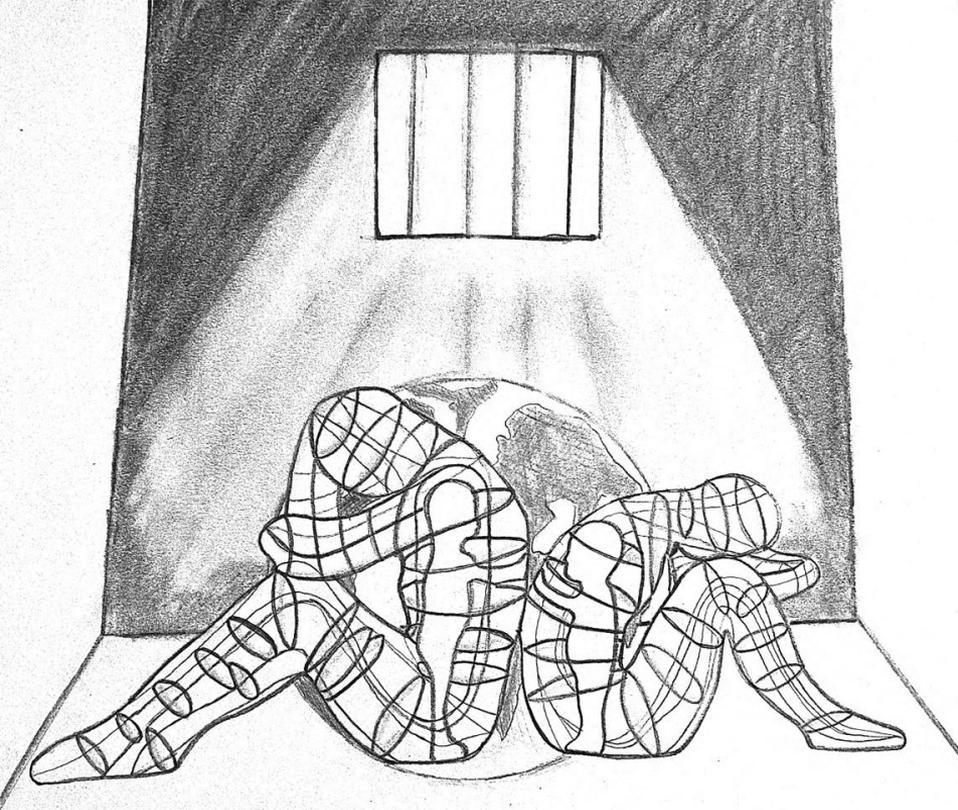
— Timothy Dennis

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

”

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

(MP-LT-MI-01)



“I think of what I drew as a piece that symbolizes us the kids in foster care feeling trapped. 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. You see a almost prisoner-like setting because being in the system can feel like a prison or life sentence.”

(TF-ST-AZ-01)

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

”

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

(GH-LT-CA-01)

Written words
(GH-LT-CA-01)

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,

his 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.

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

”

“Then I was moved to another group home, with a lot of poverty, gun violence, and it was traumatizing because I watched one of the kids being shot to the face. He died.”

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

(MP-MT-SC-01)



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

”

“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)

Spoken words
– Sheila Mae
Sommerfeldt

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.

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

”

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

(PP-LT-CA-01)



“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)

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.”

(MP-MT-GA-01)

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.”**

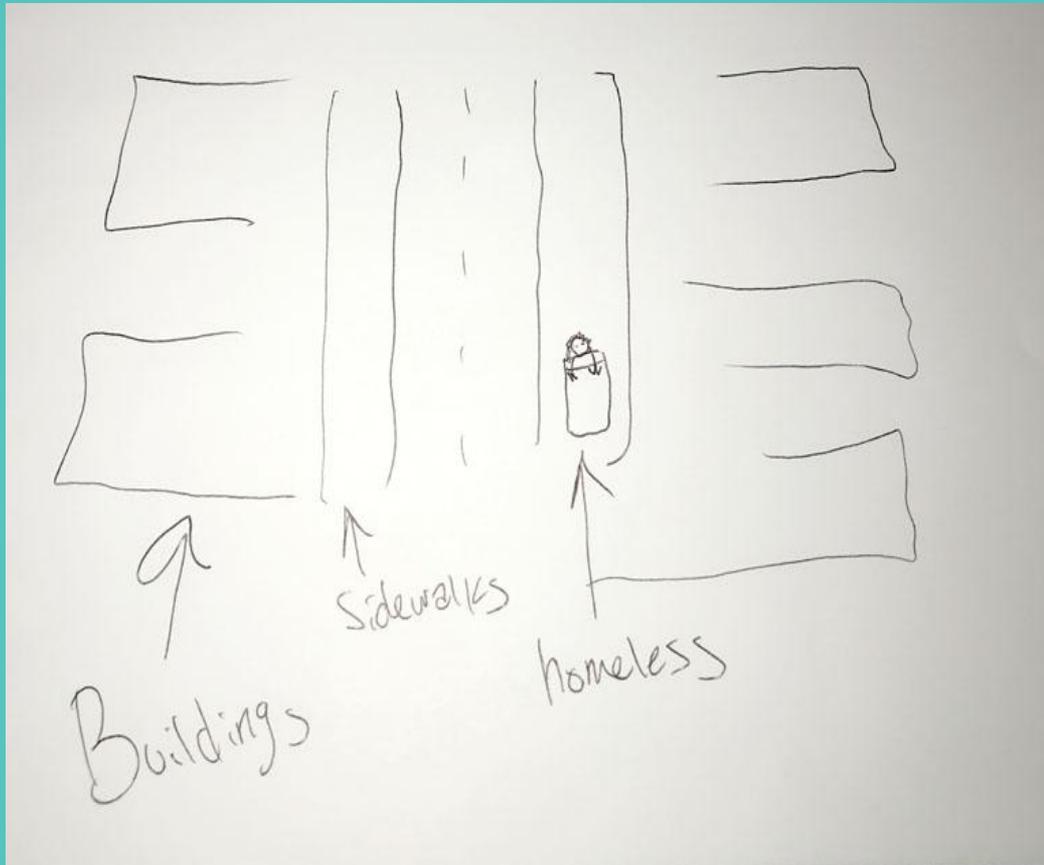
(GH-MT-CA-01)

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.

”

“It’s so hard, because I don’t want to see any other kids homeless, because where would they go?”

(GH-ST-NY-01)



“Without them (institutional placements), kids who do absolutely need them would be homeless.”

— Jozlyn Kihlstadius

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.

”
**Destroy them and make
more foster homes.**

(MP-MT-ME-01)



**“I feel very strong in my
belief that there is a better
way to handle things.”**

(MP-LT-AK-02)

Big Picture Conclusions

Institutional placements...

Failed to meet the
mandate of child
welfare

Were
carceral

Were
punitive

Were traumatic
and unfit for
healthy child and
adolescent
development

Shielded youth
from building
relationships

Felt like they didn't
have a way out

Recommendations

1

Eliminate institutions

2

Ask youth where they want to live & do everything possible to make that a reality

3

Avoid entering foster care when possible by focusing on prevention

4

Expand the definition of kin & improve licensing & support for kinship placements

5

Make foster family placements more stable & culturally appropriate

6

As institutional placements are being phased out, accommodate youths' preferences

7

Center lived experience in the research, design, & implementation of policy changes

Download the report for full recommendations





“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)

Calls to Action



Read *Away From Home*

Organize a screening of the National Readout with your organization

Use the Discussion Guide to have a conversation about the book

Screen a Table Talk

Screen the Methodology event

Share this work on social media

Acknowledgements



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