The Experiences of Foster Youth During COVID-19

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Introduction

This study examined the experiences of 18-23-year-old youth in foster care and aged out of foster care during the COVID-19 crisis in April 2020 (n=281) living in 32 states and Washington, DC. Youth aging out of foster care are a vulnerable population, and with the COVID-19 crisis sweeping across the nation, these young people are among those bearing the heaviest burden of its economic and social consequences. Our goal was to gain a clearer picture of these burdens by deploying a national online survey. We examined participants’ housing, food security, education, employment, finances, health, mental health, and personal connections over one month of the crisis. Findings include:

Housing and Basic Needs

- 43% reported COVID-19 having a negative impact on their living situation, including being forced to leave their living situation, fearing being forced to leave, or experiencing homelessness/housing instability.
- 7% reported couch-surfing or being homeless as a result of COVID-19.
- 55% reported being food insecure as a result of COVID-19, including only having access to “some” food, “very low” access to food, or being “unable” to access food.

“I am afraid that if the stay-at-home orders are still in place when I turn 21, then I will age out of the system and lose all of my support, especially financially.”
Finances and Employment

- 48% reported COVID-19 having a negative impact on their employment, including being laid off, no longer having reliable gig work, or having hours/income severely cut.
- 32% reported applying for some form of public assistance that they did not already have during COVID-19, including 14% applying for unemployment.
- 72% reported a money situation that would be stable for no more than one month, with 21% being in financial crisis.

“I was no longer able to get to work because the bus system isn’t running the same way and I can’t afford Lyft.”

Personal Connections

- For those in foster care, 14% reported that their caseworker has not done a good job communicating with them during the crisis.
- 33% reported wishing they had connections with more people to help them through the crisis or feeling they were on their own or almost entirely on their own.
- 59% reported having reliable access to a computer during the crisis.

“I haven’t been able to see my grandparents because I’m worried I could get them sick.”

Education

- 31% lost access to academic or post-secondary educational supports due to COVID-19.
- 67% report that COVID-19 is having a major impact on their educational progress or attainment.
- 21% disagree that they have access to personal support to ensure that their educational goals are not disrupted.
- 22% disagree that their school/institution has done a good job communicating with them during COVID-19.

“I have lost my on-campus counseling as well as other on-campus supports including housing, meals, friends, and professors who looked out for me.”

Physical and Mental Health

- 52% reported COVID-19 having a negative impact on their health/mental health care.
- 56% reported clinically significant levels of depression or anxiety.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that young people in foster care and aged out of care are experiencing substantial challenges during COVID-19, related to all aspects of their safety and well-being. This study is the first to take stock of the burden that this already highly marginalized population is bearing in light of the COVID-19 crisis. We offer the following initial recommendations:

1. Ensure that eligible youth are housed and connected to foster care services, including instituting a moratorium on discharging youth from care, suspending school and work requirements for extended care, and expediting processes for youth to re-enter care.
2. Professionals and other caring adults should check in on youth in foster care and young adults who have recently exited foster care as frequently as possible during this time, providing emotional support and reliable information.
3. Distribute concrete resources directly to youth to alleviate financial or interpersonal stressors, including gift cards, bags of groceries, laptops, or WiFi hotspots.
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