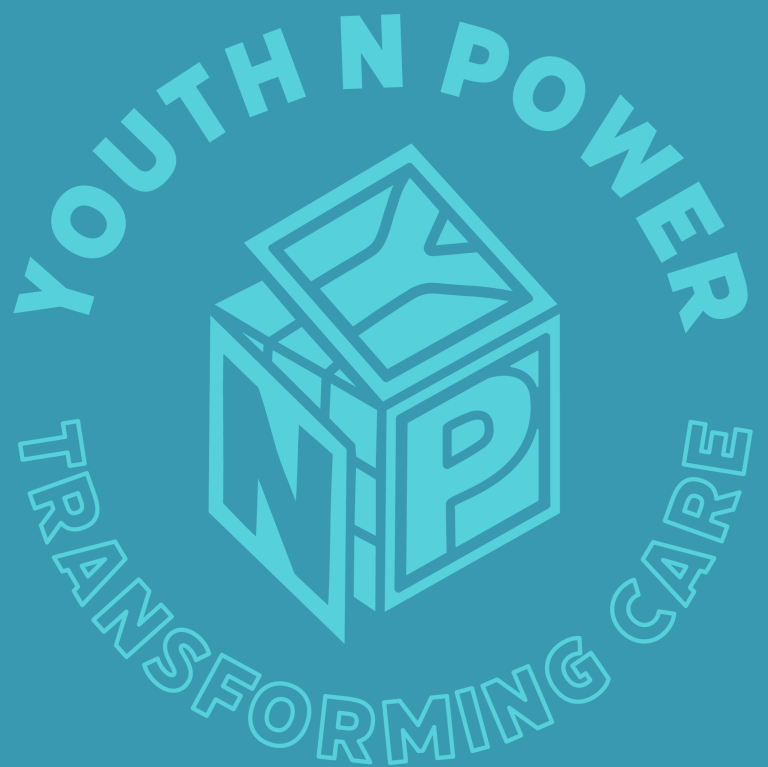




We Deserve Action, Not Just Words

Findings of a Survey of
Former Foster Youth in
New York City



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are deeply grateful to everyone who shared their experiences with us in the survey. We dedicate this report to you, and to all young people who are fighting for justice for youth and families everywhere.

The YouthNPower: Transforming Care collective has included: T'coy Adams, Mica Baum-Tuccillo, Shania Benjamin, Laetitia Brutus, Maria Caba, Julia Davis, Embraia Fraizer, Christine Joseph, Amal Kharoufi, Ellenie Liang, LaTroya Lovell, Mya Martinez, Jzymn Maxwell, Shauntay Mayfield, Justin Mercado, Susan Notkin, Chijindu Obiofuma, Denice Ocana, Jose Perez, Chidera Sibeudu, Chanel Smith, Grace Tatom, Maya Tellman and María Elena Torre.



Introduction

Welcome to the first report of the **YouthNPower: Transforming Care** collective!

In the summer of 2023 we launched **the first ever direct cash transfer pilot for youth transitioning from foster care, designed with young people who have experienced foster care**. This research brief is part of a larger participatory research and advocacy project designed to document the impact of direct cash support for young adults who have recently aged out of care. Our goal is to better understand the issues youth face as they navigate life after foster

care and to advocate for policy changes that will enrich their lives. The data presented in the following pages comes from a baseline survey of our 100 pilot participants who closely reflect their peers across New York City. The survey was taken in June 2023, just before the participants received the first of their 12 \$1000 monthly payments. We share these findings from the first phase of our research with the hope of informing current City and State policy making and movement building work aimed at improving the lives of youth after foster care.

Key Findings

1 Youth transitioning out of foster care prioritize economic stability and share their limited resources with family and friends.

2 Youth transitioning out of foster care want meaningful work and career opportunities.

3 Securing stable housing continues to be a problem for youth transitioning out of care, with few options available to young people in choosing where they live.

4 Youth transitioning out of foster care regularly experience negative contact with police.

5 Youth transitioning out of foster care experience high levels of emotional stress and structural barriers to healthcare.

6 Parenting brings joy and meaning to young parents transitioning out of foster care, amidst profound material challenges and fear of child welfare system involvement.

YouthNPower: Transforming Care

YouthNPower is an intergenerational collaboration determined to reimagine the child welfare system—to *transform care for young people and families in crisis*—by building knowledge and power with youth most impacted while working within a broader community of young people, advocates and organizers through collective research, action, and direct economic support. **YouthNPower brings together a range of expertise, including lived experience in the child welfare system, policy advocacy, research, storytelling and organizing.** Our collective includes youth organizers and activists, working with advocates and researchers from the Children’s Defense Fund-New York, the Public Science Project at the City University of New York, the Center for the Study of Social Policy, and New Yorkers For Children.¹ Our project includes an unconditional direct cash transfer pilot for youth who recently aged out of foster care, a participatory action research study on the experiences of transitioning from care, as well as advocacy and organizing activities in New York City and State. In all of our efforts, we are driven by a shared urgency to invest in resources that support young people to thrive and to shrink the punitive and coercive child welfare system.²

Unconditional cash support is an emergent policy that holds great promise for transition-aged youth.³ There is a growing body of work documenting the positive impacts of direct cash transfer pilots across the United States.⁴ We are building on these efforts, with a specific focus on unconditional cash support for emerging adults leaving foster care. However, as youth experiences demonstrate and our findings show, cash is not sufficient as a singular policy solution. Transition-aged youth need a holistic infrastructure of care that supports wellbeing.

Young people aging-out of foster care are among the most marginalized youth in our communities. As a young person transitions from state custody, they also navigate their own emerging adulthood, often without family connections or reliable community ties.⁵ Their experiences of struggle, including high rates of housing instability and homelessness, and limited access to employment, education and health care, reflect both the deep and sustained failure of our current social safety net to support youth as they age-out of care, and the ongoing impact of a punitive child welfare system that targets poor families, and Black and Brown families.⁶

“Unconditional cash support is an emergent policy that holds great promise for young people leaving foster care.”



Leaving the child welfare system, therefore, must be understood as a multi-system experience that is braided with the absence of quality affordable and stable housing,⁷ barriers to meaningful work and living wages⁸, an increasing crisis of mental health among marginalized young people⁹, aggressive policing and surveilling of poor communities and communities of color¹⁰, and an overly punitive criminal legal system¹¹. **Our research is designed to examine the impact of access to unconditional cash in this broader context of interwoven public systems and policies** to reflect the complexity of the transition out of foster care, and to speak to an expansive set of recommendations including, but not limited to, direct cash support. Our

findings offer important insight into the present context and challenges facing youth transitioning out of care and suggest immediate actions that the City and State should consider in a number of policy domains. We share six key findings from a multi-stage analysis that speak to the lived conditions, needs and desires of young New Yorkers who have recently aged-out of care, with respect to wellbeing, finances, housing, education and employment, policing, and parenting. The YouthNPower research collective will continue to document the direct cash transfer pilot and will present the impact of unconditional cash support in future reports.

OUR PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

Across our work, we are committed to building knowledge and power with the leadership of those who have had direct experience with the child welfare system. The YouthNPower: Transforming Care research is led by people with lived experience of the child welfare system at all levels of our team, as well as by those with decades of work in policy, advocacy, organizing and community research. This integrated participatory approach ensures that all aspects of our project, including the design of the direct cash transfer pilot, the survey of participants discussed in this report, and the writing in this brief, reflect our collective interests and expertise. We believe any inquiry into expanding access to unconditional cash and other policies for youth transitioning out of foster care must be developed with the keen analysis and insights of young people from the beginning. Our research is guided by the principles of a critical participatory action research (CPAR) framework that challenges and expands traditional notions of “expertise,” shifting conventional dynamics of power, and recognizing, valuing and centering the knowledge of lived experience.¹²

In solidarity with ActUp and the disability rights movements, we have adopted the call for “no research about us, without us”¹³ and youth with experience in the child welfare system serve as architects of our research process: shaping research questions, framing interpretations, and designing meaningful research products and actions. In this spirit, the purpose of our work is to not only deepen our collective understanding about the complex experiences of transitioning from care in New York City, but also to imagine bold new ways of supporting youth and families in crisis, and inspire our audiences to act.



RESEARCH METHODS

The findings shared in this report are derived from a baseline survey distributed to participants of YouthNPower’s unconditional direct cash transfer pilot prior to receiving their first payment. Applicants for the pilot were recruited through a broad network of social service agency contacts in New York City serving youth in foster care.¹⁴ The application was available online at the YouthNPower website. We received a total of 417 applications, 239 of which were deemed eligible for the pilot, 100 of which were selected. To be considered eligible for the pilot, an applicant had to fit within the following six criteria at the time of their application: (1) between the ages of 18- 22; (2) in foster care in New York City at age 18 or older; (3) no longer in foster care or Continuation of Care and Support (CCS21+)¹⁵; (4) exited foster care without having been reunified, adopted or entering into a legal guardian; (5) out of foster care or CCS21+ for at least six months; and (6) currently living in New York City.

The 100 participants in the pilot were selected using a stratified random sampling strategy determined in collaboration with an external evaluator¹⁶, based on three selection characteristics: gender, race, and LGBTQIA+ status. These characteristics were chosen so that the sample would approximate the greater population of young people who have aged-out of the New York City foster care system (based on publicly available data), and because they represent particular research interests regarding the impacts of the pilot on subpopulations who exhibit specific and/or heightened needs. The pilot participants closely mirror the population of young people who age-out of foster care.

Participants in the pilot receive \$1000 per month for 12 months (from June 2023 through May 2024). The funds are unconditional and all participants are invited to engage in research activities on a voluntary basis with additional compensation.

Direct Cash Transfer Sampling				
Strata	Categories	Direct Cash Transfer Pilot Participants (n=100)	Baseline Survey (n=97)	NYC Population Data on Transition Aged Youth
Race/ Ethnicity ¹⁷	African American	53% ¹⁸	52%	52%
	Latinx	39%	40%	39%
	White	3%	3%	3%
	Asian	2%	2%	2%
	Other/ Unkown ¹⁹	3%	3%	4%
Gender ²⁰	Female	60%	60%	57%
	Male	37%	37%	43%
	Non-Binary	3%	3%	N/A ²¹
LGBTQIA+		27% ²³	28%	34% ²²

Survey Methodology

The baseline survey was developed using a reflexive participatory design. Our collective used an iterative approach to reflect, theorize, and design the instrument, combining elements of organizing, arts, political and personal analysis, with conventional strategies for survey design and construction. The survey includes 12 in-depth sections that incorporate qualitative items, quantitative items and standardized scales.²⁴ Areas covered by the survey included finances and financial stability, educational attainment and goals, employment history, current and former housing conditions, community networks and social supports, experiences with police and the criminal legal system, concrete supports, and wellbeing. Participants who are parenting received an additional section, which included questions about contact with the child welfare system as parents. As it was important to our research team to document participants' complexity and not only hardship,²⁵ each section of the survey was designed to elicit responses that could speak to a combination of challenges, strengths, perspectives, and desires.

Most participants completed the survey on laptops in person in June 2023 over the course of three consecutive "Welcome Days." Four people completed the survey remotely outside of the in-person Welcome Days. Ninety-seven of the 100 participants completed the survey (see the

table on page 5 for demographics of the survey sample). Participation in the survey was voluntary and, as with all research activities, compensated separately from the monthly cash payments. A separate consent form was completed by participants who chose to take the survey. It took participants an average of about one hour to complete.

The Welcome Days served as an orientation to the direct cash transfer pilot and to the larger YouthNPower collective. Participants met the team and each other, engaged in community-building activities and were provided with background on the project, a community resource guide created by the YouthNPower team, as well as information about the two strands of our work: our research documenting the pilot and youth experiences transitioning out of foster care, and our plans for collective organizing. Participants reviewed and signed enrollment consent forms and, if they elected, signed separate consent forms for the participatory research and the independent evaluation. Consistent with a CPAR approach, participants were not engaged simply as "subjects" to be studied but were invited from the beginning to share their lived expertise and participate in the processes of knowledge-building and action that we hoped would emerge from our work.

Survey Analysis

The survey data was analyzed through a multi-stage participatory process. First, a subgroup of our collective cleaned the data and conducted a broad descriptive analysis. This analysis was shared with the full YouthNPower collective who, informed by their particular expertise and experiences, began to identify important areas for further analysis that would help us understand participants' baseline conditions and histories. In this second phase of analysis, qualitative data was coded, thematically organized and

paired with a more targeted descriptive analysis of relevant quantitative data, based on the themes identified in phase one. This refined analysis was then shared in a three-hour participatory analysis session (our "Data Blitz"), where pilot participants joined us in interpreting the data and identifying emerging findings. Participants were compensated for their time and expertise, separate from the monthly payments they receive.

Justice for Youth After Care: Visions of a ‘Good Life’

Honoring our commitment to remember that those who took our survey are more than the challenges of navigating the institutions that often fail them, we open this report with young people’s visions for their lives shared throughout the survey. Ranging from courageous resistance against the status quo, to calls for everyday actions that would create more care and community, we are led by the imagination and insight of the young people who took our survey.



Living in my own apartment and not worrying about being homeless.

I can focus more on my personal well-being.

I would be able to find stable housing and take care of myself.

I would be able to invest into my chosen career rather than work at jobs just to get by.

We would be able to actually access the resources we are entitled to.

Taking & creating as much space as you need in the world.

Providing a healthy home for my kid mentally and physically.

People would actually listen to the problems youth are voicing, instead of thinking you know everything.

Finishing school.

Safe and stable housing.

Opening a restaurant and music program for kids in care.

A fun institution for foster kids to be able to see black excellence at its peak.

People would actually accept housing vouchers.

Living my life to the fullest.

Having enough money for the things I need.

Being able to support my kids in every way.

Traveling the world and learning about other cultures.

Healing from trauma.

Being close to my kids.

Starting my own business.

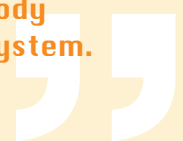
Having more free time – to relax, be able to travel more, taking time for myself and not be so focused on work or responsibilities.

Connecting more with others, meeting kindred spirits and improving my mental health.

More space for my existence, thoughts and ideas.

Accumulating generational wealth.

No more jails for kids. Treat all schools like home. Real food. No systems. Nobody belongs in a system.



FINDINGS

1. Youth transitioning out of foster care prioritize economic stability and share their limited resources with family and friends.

Financial stability emerged as a top priority across the survey, with 69% of youth reporting feeling financially unstable and another 69% reporting that they felt stressed about their finances more than half the days of the previous month. Over 70% report not having any savings. Of the 51% who have debt, 70% report feeling overwhelmed by it, and only 16% feel able to pay it off.

Youth who have recently left care have a clear sense of the positive material and psychological impact financial stability could have in their lives, including lower amounts of stress and depression, that would allow them to take better care of their families and children, pursue careers and education, engage in hobbies, start entrepreneurial projects, secure stable housing, and afford medical and mental health support.

When asked directly how being financially stable might impact their lives, youth offer a sobering range of images that reflect the most basic of human needs and desires:

40%

regularly give money to family members

25%

help friends financially

69%

report being financially unstable

“I feel like I wouldn’t be worried about the next day and just living day to day.”

“I would have more happiness and peace of mind.”

“I would be able to confidently go back to work and prepare for the birth of my son.”

“I would be in therapy. I would be able to afford my meds. I would be content.”

“I would be able to invest in my chosen career rather than work at jobs just to get by.”

“I would move out to a safe building.”

“I would be doing more things I love and stressing less about money.”

“I wouldn’t have to worry about looking for a job while I am in school.”

“I would be able to take care of my children and build a better situation for me and my family.”

Our data on experiences of financial insecurity among youth who have recently left care are consistent with research about young people nationally demonstrating that despite continued accumulation among America's most wealthy, economic opportunity has evaporated for Generation Z.²⁶ Nationally, over half of all young adults ages 18 to 24 have incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level. Poverty, like child welfare involvement, is racialized among emerging adults, with half of Black and Latinx youth living in very low-income households, compared to far fewer (a third) of white youth.²⁷ Young people who have aged-out of foster care, like youth marginalized by other discriminatory systems, face not only this generational economic disadvantage, but must also navigate additional, compounding experiences, including family dissolution, school disruption and barriers to educational completion, isolation within communities, and the difficulty of finding safe and stable housing.²⁸

In the face of this economic uncertainty, parental support of adult children has become increasingly normalized and critical in cushioning the path to stable adulthood.²⁹ Though higher-income families provide greater financial support to

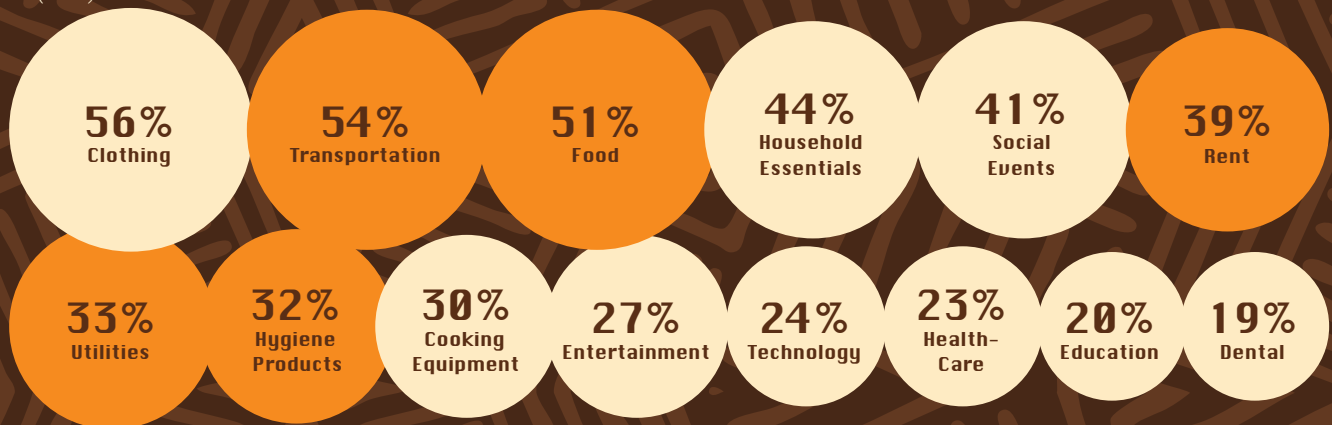
their young adult children, families across all social classes have been found to provide significant resources during this transition, such as co-residency and emotional support.³⁰ In contrast, young people aging-out of foster care are typically unable to depend on family in the same way as their peers, and face the transition into adulthood and self-sufficiency on their own.³¹ The collective result of this inequity can be seen across a number of data points reflecting our participants' economic conditions.

Large numbers of youth report struggling to afford basic necessities in the last six months that everyone should have. Fifty one percent report not having enough money to pay for food, 38% report not having enough money to pay rent, 32% report not having enough money to pay utilities, and 31% report not having enough money to pay for hygiene products. Eighty percent of young people say they could not afford one or more essential costs, including food, transportation, hygiene products, rent, or utilities in the last month. Almost two thirds (60%) say they could not afford two or more of these essentials in the same time period.

Despite these hardships, young people who aged-out of foster care are remarkably generous and resource-full,

In the last 30 days, youth did not have enough money to pay for...

(n=97)



Just considering essential costs*, in the last 30 days...



*essential costs: food, rent, utilities, hygiene products, transportation

finding ways to support their family and friends in the face of economic precarity and struggle. More than 40% report regularly giving money to family members, and nearly 25% help friends financially. These findings reveal some of the ways youth who leave custody without legal permanency

manage to remain connected with family members. Further it demonstrates how youth engage supportive social networks, share limited assets, and participate in mutual aid, all while navigating scarcity.

2. Youth transitioning out of foster care want meaningful work and career opportunities.

When asked about their priorities after leaving foster care, young people identified “finding work” as the top priority. A little under half (46%) of youth were employed at the start of the pilot. Both those who were employed and those who were not expressed frustration and desire for meaningful employment and educational opportunities that could lead to professional careers.

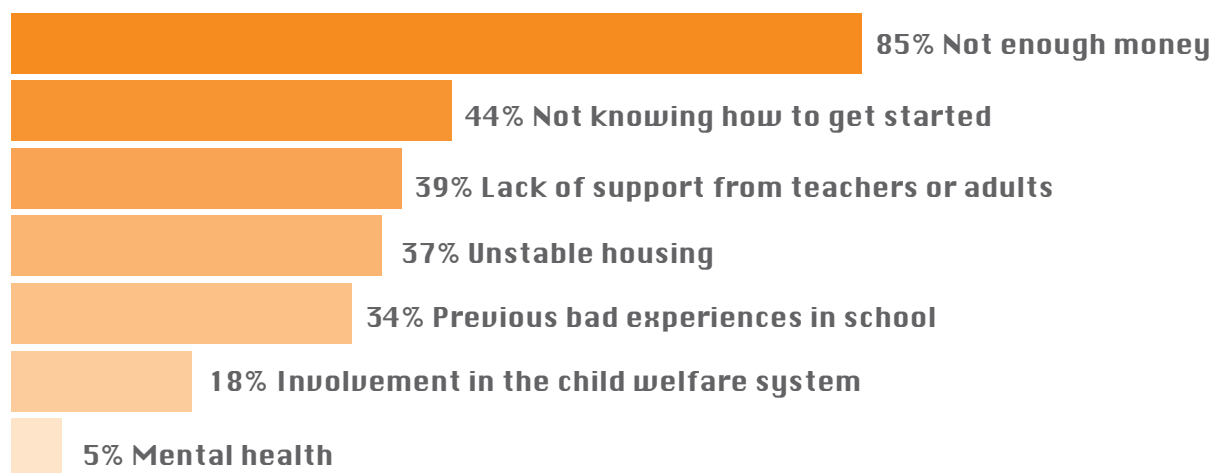
For youth who were working at the time of the survey, only one third report being fairly compensated, only half feel their work supports their future career goals, and over half would like to do something else for work. Most of the employment described by young people in the survey is low-wage and in the industries that are common pathways among economic support programs offered to system-involved youth: home health aides, security, low-end food services, and shopping and package delivery services. These jobs have limited potential for advancement and are insufficient, as demonstrated by the 35% of employed youth who reported working more than one job at the same time.

For youth who were not working at the time of the survey (n=52), a third had been unemployed for more than a year. Thirty-four percent of young people were neither in school

nor working at the time they took the survey. Given that planning for transition includes workforce development training and support for employment, the fact that so many youth transitioning out of state custody are struggling with attaining employment sheds a harsh light on the effectiveness of these efforts.

Despite the realities of their employment status, it is clear in our data that **many young people do not merely want jobs; they want fulfilling careers that allow them to contribute to their communities and draw on their expertise.** It was striking, for example, how many responses revealed desires to work in “helping professions” (like nurses, doctors, teachers, therapists) and how many young people mentioned wanting to support other youth through their work, especially those who had also been impacted by the child welfare system. Young people shared dreams of owning their own businesses, becoming computer engineers, lawyers, pediatricians, traveling nurses, barbers, music artists, psychiatrists, sous chefs, paramedics, family therapists, dancers, choreographers, and business owners, among other things. The disparities, however, between these desires and young people’s educational preparedness

Obstacles to Education Since Leaving Foster Care (n=97)



are staggering. At the time of the survey only 6% had completed a bachelor's or associate's degree, even though more than 85% were 21-22 years old. And while 23% are currently attending some kind of post-secondary school, 31% have not finished high school.

Financial stability is clearly a barrier. Seventy-eight percent of young people report that money was an obstacle to pursuing their education. Indeed 43% of youth who are in school reported that they are also working. Other obstacles identified by youth include not knowing how to get started in terms of continuing their education (43%), a lack of support from teachers and other adults (38%),

unstable housing (36%), and previous bad experiences in school (33%). On a disheartening note, almost 20% say that involvement in the child welfare system itself was an obstacle to their attaining the education they wanted.

Our results corroborate recent findings made by New York City's Disconnected Youth Task Force Report, that highlight the large number of young people in New York City who are unemployed, underemployed, and/or not going to school.³² The report further points out that, although youth technically may be in the workforce, they are often employed in work that is "part-time, low wage, or both" and "not on a career path."³³

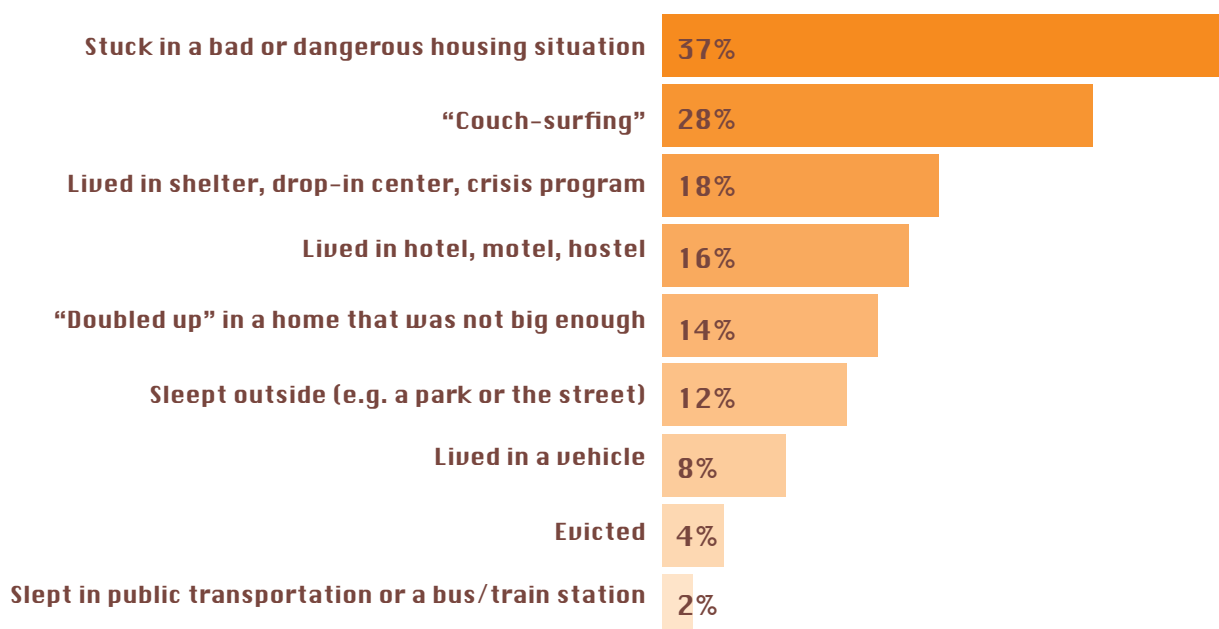
3. Securing safe and stable housing continues to be a problem with few opportunities for choice in where young people live.

After employment, securing affordable and stable housing was identified by survey respondents as the second most significant challenge. New York City, like most large U.S. cities, is suffering from a housing crisis, due to poor policy and woefully insufficient investment in permanent affordable housing.³⁴ The result has relegated tens of thousands of New Yorkers to homelessness and left the City ill-prepared to manage the recent influx of new arrivals to our communities.³⁵ While the stress of this is felt acutely among marginalized neighborhoods in New York City, we know that safe and stable housing is increasingly

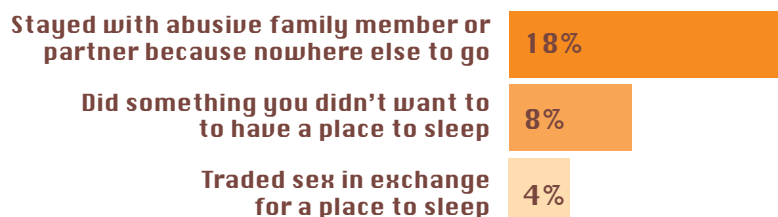
out of reach for young people and families across New York State.³⁶ Reflecting this broader context, youth in our survey describe a need for more quality affordable housing and for better support navigating the housing benefits and resources that already exist for young people transitioning out of care. Further, **youth indicate housing needs and desires that go beyond basic shelter, including more choice about where they live, increased safety, and a sense of connectedness to neighbors.**

For many young people who have recently aged-out of

Negative Housing Experiences Since Leaving Foster Care (n=97)



Experiences of Coercion to Secure Housing Since Leaving Foster Care (n=97)



75%

wished they could live somewhere else

60%

report at least one negative, dangerous or coercive housing experience since leaving care

foster care in New York City, finding secure, stable, and affordable housing remains difficult despite recent efforts to increase access to housing assistance vouchers and housing navigation.³⁷ This reality was confirmed by the youth who took our survey. Only half describe their current housing situation as “stable” even though a little more than two-thirds had lived in their current living situation for more than six months at the time of the survey. Seventeen percent of young people were living without any privacy; 37% said that they did not have their own bedroom where they currently live; 28% report that they “couch-surfed” since aging out; 18% have stayed in a shelter, drop-in center, or crisis program; and 12% have slept outside.

Housing instability entails more than not having a consistent place to live, it can also mean a heightened vulnerability and a lack of safety. Sixty percent of youth who took our survey report at least one negative, dangerous or coercive housing experience since leaving care.³⁸ A troubling 37% report that they felt “stuck in a bad or dangerous housing situation.” Even more alarming, 23%—nearly one in four—report being coerced into doing something they did not want, staying with an abusive family member, and/or having sex—to secure housing.

Given the untenable conditions that young people who have recently left care are negotiating, it is not surprising that youth identified a lack of housing choice as a pressing issue. A full 75% of survey-takers expressed that they wished they could live somewhere else.

Often, the way we think about housing for youth aging-out of foster care is reduced to the bare necessity of shelter. Youth describe being encouraged to take the first housing options available, frequently finding themselves in public housing units or using vouchers in buildings in communities far away from their social and family networks. Less than 40% of young people who took the survey say they feel connected to their neighbors, and nearly 20% report they do not feel safe in the neighborhood where they live.

These experiences underscore the well-documented inadequacy of current housing supports for young people in foster care and leaving New York State custody.³⁹ Inadequate housing is connected to a broad lack of quality affordable housing in New York City, and the housing crisis we are experiencing across the state. Our findings also highlight the relationship between housing challenges and financial insecurity: of the 58 survey respondents who say they had at least one negative, dangerous, or coercive housing experience since leaving foster care, nearly three quarters say they felt financially unstable at the time of the survey. It is in this context that young people in our survey identify housing security as a top priority, while at the same time their responses suggest a sense of housing justice that includes safety and choice. It is not about shelter alone, but also about what it means to have a home, to experience community support, and to have the financial security necessary to live in safe housing that they choose.

4. Youth transitioning out of foster care regularly experience negative contact with police.

Our survey revealed disturbing amounts of negative interactions with the police among youth who have transitioned out of care. Young people's negative experience is echoed in response to the question "Is there anything you feel people should know about the experiences of young people transitioning out of foster care and the police?"

"I feel like the NYPD sees young people transitioning out of care like they're inferior, like we're at the bottom."

"They don't care about us... they take advantage and mistreat us as if we're all criminals."

"It's terrible. It's never going to make headlines. But it's exhausting and stressful, and if you don't have the knowledge or the advocacy skills— you're left to struggle silently."

In the past year...

32%

were stopped and questioned by police

28%

were arrested

23%

were spoken to disrespectfully or harassed by a police officer

Approximately half of the young people who took our survey said they had at least one negative interaction with the police in the last 12 months; almost a third said they had two or more.⁴⁰ As we dug deeper, the data became increasingly unsettling. In the past year, 15% reported five or more negative interactions with police. Twenty-eight percent of youth report that they had been arrested.

This data confirms what has been reported nationally: that exposure to foster care puts young people at greater risk of involvement in the criminal legal system.⁴¹ This data is also consistent with what we know about the realities of discriminatory policing in New York City.⁴² Our data suggests that despite New York City's official discontinuation of the "Stop-and-Frisk" policy, young people who have aged-out of foster care—most of whom are Black and Brown—are disproportionately stopped by police. Among youth who took the survey, 32% reported being stopped and questioned by police in the last year, and 23% percent said they had been spoken to disrespectfully or harassed by a police officer. While some in our sample attribute this to their foster care history, 94% of the pilot participants are youth of color and these experiences closely match those of Black and Brown youth across the City.⁴³ Other external factors may also play a role, such living in neighborhoods with disproportionate amounts of police surveillance.

5. Youth transitioning out of foster care experience high levels of emotional stress and structural barriers to care.

New York City, like the rest of the nation, is experiencing a youth mental health crisis.⁴⁴ Mental health and wellbeing is important for healthy development across the lifespan, and particularly critical in emerging adulthood when youth are learning to navigate the world independently.⁴⁵ In this context, the heightened stress and emotional upheaval experienced by youth transitioning from care is particularly worrisome. Our survey found nearly 25% of youth feel nervous and stressed nearly every day in the last 30 days. More concerning, almost 30% report a clinically significant degree of emotional distress.⁴⁶

While alarming, these numbers are not surprising given the amount of trauma young people in care experience, whether as a result of family separation, the conditions that brought them into foster care, negative or abusive experiences in care, and/or the experience of having to navigate independence from the child welfare system. The levels of distress among our survey takers mirror the results of numerous studies demonstrating that youth with foster care experience have significantly higher rates of mental health disorders than the general population of youth.⁴⁷

It is clear from our survey that youth want mental health support but the pathways to care are too often blocked. Twenty-one percent report they are rarely or never able to access mental health care when they need it. Only 18% of the young people who took the survey currently see a therapist. More importantly, of those who do not currently see a therapist, nearly half (47%) were interested in seeing one but felt they were unable to do so. Youth report barriers such as difficulty finding a therapist they liked (62%), cost (41%), and/or difficulty finding a therapist that accepted their insurance (32%). This may be one of the unintended consequences of the high turnover

of agency-based support services, where too often providers are not adequately paid or supported.⁴⁸ As one young person describes, “Everytime I have a therapist I like, they end up quitting or something. I never have stability with therapy.” In addition, many young people transitioning out of care (and young people in general) describe a need for more access to culturally responsive therapeutic supports, and the experiences shared in the survey underscore the lack of enough high-quality, community-based mental health services in New York.⁴⁹

A striking current in the well-being data is the high levels of personal responsibility and sense of control for changing the conditions of their life that youth who have recently left care express. For example, 64% of youth agree or strongly agree with the statement “what happens to me in the future depends mostly on me,” and a similar number said they agree or strongly agree that “I can do just about anything I set my mind to.” While we celebrate this strong sense of agency and self-efficacy as key characteristics of successful independence, it must be recognized that much of **the precarity transitioning youth contend with is far from their personal control—it is produced, instead, by historic structural inequities and discrimination. Relatedly, the high levels of distress youth report are deeply interconnected with the conditions they are navigating**, including financial insecurity, limited housing and employment opportunities, discriminatory policing, and lingering impacts of having been in the child welfare system. In the face of such systemic harm, we must concern ourselves with the negative impact of high levels of pressure on mental health and well-being. This is crucial in light of the 66% percent of respondents who report they “felt difficulties were piling up so high that [they] could not overcome them” several days or more in the previous month.

30% **66%**

of youth report a clinically significant degree of emotional distress

of youth felt their “difficulties were piling up so high that [they] could not overcome them”

6. Parenting brings joy and meaning amidst profound material challenges and fear of child welfare system involvement.

In the beginning of our survey, we asked all participants to reflect on something they were currently excited about in their lives. Many of the participants who are parents (n=42) wrote responses related to their children and their lives as parents:

“I’m very excited to be a parent of 2 beautiful kids and makes me smile when my children scream “DADDDYYY!!!” every time they see me.”

“I’m excited that my children make me strong enough to stand where I am today.”

“I am excited that I am a single mother and I am doing everything in my power to fight for the safety of me and my son.”

“I am excited about being a Mother to an amazing 3 year old.”

While parenting can be difficult for many reasons, in our survey many more parents disagree than agree with the statements, “The major source of stress in my life is my child(ren)” and “Having child(ren) has meant having too few choices and too little control over my life.” When asked to reflect on their overall feelings and perceptions about the experience of parenting, parents taking our survey report, on average, low to moderate stress levels.⁵¹

Parenting is a profound experience that many young people in our survey describe as a source of joy, but that is often considered by child welfare system professionals to be a risk factor or negative “outcome”.⁵⁰ Across our survey, however, young people describe parenting as characterized by pride, affection, and strength. Indeed, many parent respondents reflect on how much their children mean to them and how central their role as a parent is in their lives and identity:

87% 86%

of parents said their children give them “a more certain and optimistic view for the future”

of parents agree or strongly agree that they “enjoy spending time with their children”

83% 86%

of parents “feel close to their children”

of parents said they are “happy in their role as a parent”

These findings challenge assumptions commonly made of transition-aged parents, specifically that they feel high levels of parent-related stress or reduced sense of self-efficacy.

That said, the sense of fulfillment and strength that young parents report does not diminish the simultaneous added challenge brought on by parenting. When we asked participants to state a worry at the beginning of the survey,

young parents often focused on basic necessities for their children and families, such as stable safe housing and economic security:

“I am worried about not being able to provide the best life I can for my daughter.”

“I am excited about showing my kid that life can be more than what the world is showing him. I am worried about my kid growing up and seeing things or going through things.”

“I feel worried because I believe time is running out and I haven’t created wealth for my entire family like the way I want to.”

The specific costs of financial insecurity for transition-aged parents often mean struggling to meet the material needs of their family. Seventy-one percent of parents report that they were financially unstable at the time of the survey. In the last 30 days, 1 in 4 found it difficult to afford basic items and necessities for their children, including food (31%), clothing (36%), day care (26%), transportation (33%), laundry (36%), and toys (43%).

A uniquely troubling concern expressed by many young parents in our survey is the acute worry of being separated from their children because of their material insecurity. As one young parent describes, “When you leave out of care, one of your major fears of being a parent is your child going through the exact same thing you went through.” This fear is not unfounded. Over half of parents (52%) who took the survey report that they had contact with child protective services (CPS) as a parent. Sixty-four

percent of those who had contact with child protective services as parents were threatened with having a child removed from their care, and 45% did indeed have a child removed. It is well documented that poverty and housing insecurity increases precarity and is predictive of increased contact with the child welfare system.⁵² In a recent national survey, approximately 75% of child welfare leaders believe that the inability to meet basic needs is frequently a primary reason for child maltreatment reports, and 100% identify it as a contributing reason.⁵³

This level of fear of CPS contact was echoed by parents in our YouthNPower research team who have histories of foster care involvement, and by parents in the pilot, who shared stories of reaching out when they were in need of support only to face CPS investigations in response. Our data illustrates the tensions young people who have recently aged-out navigate as they raise children: proud and excited, deeply rooted in their roles as caregivers, and profoundly worried about immediate and long term material insecurity and the threat of CPS involvement in their lives.



RECOMMENDATIONS

“**We deserve action, not just words.**” This demand was written by one of the pilot participants in response to the survey question, “What would you like to tell those in power in the child welfare system about the experience of transitioning out of care?” There is no question that bold action is required if our system of care for youth and families in crisis were to be truly transformed. Our findings call for urgent attention to the following critical domains for policy-making and collective action that recognize the need for concrete support and resources across young people’s lives as they navigate their emerging adulthood after foster care.

Our analysis makes clear that if young people are to thrive after leaving foster care, we must:

1. Build Real Pathways for Meaningful Work, Economic Mobility and Opportunity.

We must invest in more robust workforce development and apprenticeship programs that support youth transitioning out of care. Too often, job placement programs provide certification or training for entry-level and part-time work, but fail to prepare young people for longer-term growth and higher-level positions. Meaningful employment requires young people to have ongoing and flexible support, mentoring, and sustained attention to help navigate the world of work. This is especially important when experiences in foster care cut young people off from family and community networks that might be present for peers without foster care history.⁵⁴ Without this social capital and supportive web of regular community connections, young people aging-out of care are effectively denied opportunities to build work and volunteer experience, develop soft skills and workplace expectations, and

find employment that matches their interests and builds on their appetites.

In addition to calling for a focus on employment, **our findings point to the potential of unconditional cash support for establishing the overall wellbeing and stability of young people who have recently left care and for reducing the vulnerability of families who have contact with the child welfare system.** The data thus far from the YouthNPower direct cash transfer pilot identifies significant material need among young people who have recently left foster care. Unconditional cash support can address these immediate material needs and create the necessary conditions for young people to embrace work opportunities that suit their interests, and reduce future vulnerability to the child welfare system.⁵⁵

2. Expand Support for Education and Academic Success.

The disconnect between young people’s visions of themselves and their roles in the world, and the credentials necessary to realize those visions, is yet another powerful finding in this work. Deeply connected to the need for professional and experiential learning is support for education and academic progress. Our findings

support increasing financial resources for secondary and college programs, as well as trusted, community-based navigation, coaching and mentoring resources for transition-aged youth. Increasing state financing for such programs must be developed in tandem with employment and apprenticeship described above.

3. Increase Access to Safe Housing and Honor Young People's Choice.

Our findings reveal the need for significant increases in housing for young people transitioning out of foster care, specifically supporting policies to expand vouchers and financial support as well as the numbers of housing units. Young people leaving care also require effective navigation and professional resources to

respond to desires for safety, stability and neighborhood connection in communities. This is consistent with current City and State-wide efforts to address the housing crisis for low-income and marginalized communities so that young people transitioning from care can thrive wherever they live.

4. Build Resources for Wellbeing, Mental Health and Healing in Communities.

In the midst of a national youth mental health crisis, our data underscore the need for urgent action to improve access to culturally-responsive wellness opportunities specifically for young people transitioning from care, including mental health supports that build on young people's strengths and that do not pathologize their experiences of trauma. Responses to mental health struggles must center solidarity, peer support, material resources, and access to relational care that helps young people connect with trusted others and develop a deeper understanding of themselves.⁵⁶ Resources that focus on clinical

diagnoses and rely on medication-based therapeutic services should be supplements to an array of community-based investments and supports. Further, young people must have meaningful mechanisms for shaping what care looks like in their communities, including identifying the people and places they trust most as the source for that care.⁵⁷ This is necessary from both a reparative perspective—what young people who have survived foster care deserve—and from the perspective of how to move forward—what makes communities stronger.

5. Build Community Assets to Support Parenting Youth After Leaving Care.

The extraordinary amount of joy, connection and purpose that parenting creates cannot, and should not, be denied young parents transitioning from care. **We must commit to building resources in marginalized and over-surveilled communities (including economic and housing opportunities, early childhood care and education, and family support) and meet-**

ing the economic needs of young parents. Resources spent on child welfare investigation and surveillance could be better spent on aiding young families with material supports that respond to the documented relationship between poverty and increased rates of contact by child welfare system, and intergenerational family separation.⁵⁸

6. Reduce Contact Between Youth and Police and Mitigate the Impact of the Criminal Legal System on Youth.

In addition to investing in comprehensive community resources (employment, housing, health and well-being recommendations, as described above) to increase the safety of youth transitioning from care, as well as that of all New Yorkers, our data points to the urgent need for community-led alternatives to policing. Moreover, as contact

with the criminal legal system for all emerging adults exposes them to criminal records and adult incarceration, we must pursue policies that mitigate these risks by providing pathways for programs, material resources and alternatives to adult sentencing that do not create barriers to employment, housing and education.

7. Build Ongoing Structures that Support Young People's Expertise and Leadership in Policy-Making.

The powerful and urgent insights of the survey findings produced by our YouthNPower team's analysis affirms the principle guiding our project since its inception: **Nothing About Us Without Us**. Policy-makers and system adminis-

trators must create robust opportunities for young people with child welfare system experience to participate in and influence the policy and practice that impacts their lives.

Conclusion

These recommendations reflect the need for policies that remedy the failures of our child welfare and public safety-net systems. The experiences of young people emerging from foster care as young adults reflect back on the “children’s” system they have left behind and provide insights, looking forward, on the “adult” landscape they have recently entered. As such, the breadth of our recommendations require a holistic response to the complexity of their lives, and to the fact that once out of care, transition-aged youth enter other public systems (housing, public benefits, mental health, criminal legal) that too often fail them.

Our proposals explicitly recognize that if young people are to thrive in this next chapter of their lives, support targeted to meet the needs of individual youth is insufficient.

It is essential that we simultaneously make concentrated community-level investments, as our findings repeatedly suggest. **Dedicated policies responding to young people's experiences in the child welfare system cannot come at the expense—or in lieu of—broader efforts to remedy the material realities of marginalized communities.**

In the year ahead, YouthNPower: Transforming Care will continue to conduct research with young people who have aged-out of foster care in New York City, including both our broader inquiry into the experience of transition, and our targeted focus on the impact of unconditional financial support in the context of our 12-month direct cash transfer pilot.

To learn more about us or get involved, visit: youthnpower.org

Endnotes

¹To learn more about the YouthNPower: Transforming Care collective and the direct cash transfer pilot visit www.YouthNPower.org.

²Dettlaff, A. (2023). *Confronting the Racist Legacy of the American Child Welfare System: The Case for Abolition*. Oxford University Press; Roberts, D. (2022). *Torn Apart: How the Child Welfare System Destroys Black Families—and How Abolition Can Build a Safer World*, Basic Books; New York State Bar Association. (2022). *Report and Recommendations of the Committee on Families and the Law Racial Justice and Child Welfare*; New York City Narrowing the Front Door Work Group (2022). *Narrowing the Front Door to NYC's Child Welfare System*.

³We use the term “transition-aged youth” to mean youth who have exited the child welfare system as adults (age 18 or older) without being reunified with their parents, being adopted, or entering into another permanent legal relationship with a guardian.

⁴Morton, M. H., Chávez, R., Kull, M. A., Carreon, E. D, Bishop, J., Dafere, S., Wood, E., Cohen, L., & Barreyro, P. (2020). *Developing a direct cash transfer program for youth experiencing homelessness: Results of a mixed methods, multi stakeholder design process*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago; Berger Gonzalez, S, Morton, M., & Farrell, A. (2022). *Maximizing the impact of direct cash transfers to young people: A policy toolkit*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

⁵Center for the Study of Social Policy, (2023). *Understanding How Transition Age Youth Experience Their Communities*.

⁶See Note 2.

⁷Coalition for the Homeless, (2023). *State of the Homeless 2023: Compounding Crises, Failed Responses*.

⁸Coccia, A. “Supporting Young Adults through a Guaranteed Income.” Center for the Study of Social Policy, February 2023; Disconnected Youth Task Force (2021). *Connecting Our Future 2020 Disconnected Youth Task Force Report*.

⁹U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, (2023). *Child Welfare Gateway, May is National Foster Care Month*; New York State Office of Mental Health and Office of Children and Family Services, (2023). *Youth Mental Health Listening Tour Report*.

¹⁰Stolper, H. (2019). *New Neighbors and the Over-Policing of Communities of Color An Analysis of NYPD-Referred 311 Complaints in New York City*. Community Service Society.

¹¹Grawert, A.C., Kimble, C., Fielding, J. (2021). *Poverty and Mass Incarceration in New York*. Brennan Center for Justice.

¹²For a fuller discussion of Critical Participatory Action Research, see Fine, M., & Torre, M. E. (2019). Critical participatory action research: A feminist project for validity and solidarity. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 43(4), 433-444.

¹³Charlton, J. I. (1998). *Nothing about us without us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment*. University of California Press.

¹⁴Our team performed outreach with a range of organizations serving current and former foster youth, including legal services, organizing and advocacy groups, City University of New York (CUNY) programs that work with foster youth, direct service providers that work primarily with young people, as well as foster care agencies across all five boroughs. We delivered a series of presentations to interested groups who wanted to learn more about the direct cash transfer pilot, our application, eligibility criteria, participatory action research, and selection process. The application was also shared over social media among organizations working with young people with child welfare experience and distributed through lists of former foster youth maintained by our YouthNPower partner New Yorkers For Children.

¹⁵In New York City, young people can remain in foster care beyond the age of 21 with consent of the foster care agency, and is known as Continuation of Care and Support.

¹⁶YouthNPower partnered with Action Research on the sampling strategy, and is working with both Action Research and the Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence (CIDI) within the Mayor's Fund for the Advancement of New York City to conduct an independent evaluation of the direct cash transfer pilot.

¹⁷Youth of color, particularly Black youth, are overrepresented in New York City's population of youth who have aged-out of care. The “NYC Population Data on Transition-Aged Youth” in the table represents youth ages 18-21 who aged-out of care in 2021 (N=533) based on data contained in the Administration for Children's Services Local Law 145 Report (2021).

¹⁸The “Direct Cash Transfer Pilot Participants” in the table represent pilot participants who self-identify as African American only. A total of 79% of our participants identify as African American alone or as African American and Latinx. Though these categories are overlapping in our sample, we chose to separate them out to match how the city's child welfare agency categorizes racial identity in the Administration for Children's Services Local Law 145 Report.

¹⁹Three pilot participants were categorized as “Other/Unknown” to match how the New York City Administration for Children's Services categorizes racial identity in their Local Law 145 report. This category includes participants who self-identified as multiracial, Native American or American Indian, or Pacific Islander.

²⁰Young women consistently make up a majority of the population that ages-out of foster care in New York City each year. These figures in the table represent youth ages 18-21 who aged-out of care in 2021 (N=533) based on the Administration for Children's Services Local Law 145 Report (2021).

²¹New York City Administration for Children's Services does not report the proportion of their aged-out population that identifies as non-binary. Three percent of our total eligible applicants self-identified as non-binary or questioning/unsure. We let this inform our selection process, sampling for 3% non-binary in our ultimate sample of 100 participants

²²Though research indicates that approximately 34% of youth in New

York City foster care are LGBTQIA+, we sampled for a lower proportion to account for the fact that men report LGBTQIA+ status at a lower rate than women. See: Theo G. M. Sandfort. (2020). *Experiences and Well-Being of Sexual and Gender Diverse Youth in Foster Care in New York City*. New York City Administration for Children's Services.

²³ This figure in the table includes 22 participants who identified as LGBTQIA+ in their applications, as well as five participants who selected "prefer not to answer." When sampling for our 100 pilot participants, all "prefer not to answer" responses were re-coded as "LGBTQIA+."

²⁴ Scales included the following: 1) The Youth Thrive - Social Connection Construct; 2) Parental Stress Scale from Berry, JD, & Jones, W.H. (1995); 3) The Sense of Control Scale from the Midlife Development Inventory (MIDI); 4) Kessler Psychological Distress (K6); and 5) Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) from Cohen et al. (1983).

²⁵ For a discussion of how psychology and related social science disciplines have used a focus on hardship and trauma to pathologize youth of color and other marginalized youth, and critical methods and approaches to resist this, see Fine, M., & Cross, W. E., Jr. (2016). *Critical race, psychology, and social policy: Refusing damage, cataloging oppression, and documenting desire*. In A. N. Alvarez, C. T. H. Liang, & H. A. Neville (Eds.), *The cost of racism for people of color: Contextualizing experiences of discrimination* (pp. 273–294). American Psychological Association.

²⁶ See Note 8.

²⁷ According to the Center for the Study of Social Policy, "Among youth and young adults, 53 percent of Black, 49 percent of Hispanic or Latino, 39 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander, and 54 percent of Indigenous young people live in households below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (compared to 32 percent of White young people), see Note 8.

²⁸ Center for the Study of Social Policy, (2023). *Understanding How Transition Age Youth Experience Their Communities*.

²⁹ Swartz, T. T., Kim, M., Uno, M., Mortimer, J., & O'Brien, K. B. (2011). Safety nets and scaffolds: Parental support in the transition to adulthood. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 73(2), 414-429.

³⁰ Fingerman, Karen, Laura Miller, Kira Birditt, and Steven Zarit. (2009). Giving to the Good and the Needy: Parental Support of Grown Children. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 71(5):1220–33.

³¹ See the discussion in Youth Law Center (2024). *Extended Foster Care Summary*. "Most youth rely on parents for a significant amount of support as they make the transition to adulthood, amounting to, on average, \$38,000 between the time a young person is 18 and 34 and about 367 hours of family help per year."

³² As of 2018, more than one in eight New Yorkers between the ages of 16 and 24 were considered Out of School Out of Work (OSOW), see Disconnected Youth Task Force (2021). *Connecting Our Future 2020 Disconnected Youth Task Force Report*.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ NYU Furman Center, (2023). *Critical Land Use and Housing Issues for New York State in 2023*.

³⁵ Coalition for the Homeless, (2023). *State of the Homeless: Compounding Crisis, Failed Responses*.

³⁶ See Note 34.

³⁷ Fostering Youth Success Alliance, (2021). *Moving Forward: A Post-Pandemic Blueprint for New York's Foster Youth*. This research documented the challenges facing youth aging-out of foster care across New York State in 2021, though most responses (87%) came from youth affiliated with child welfare agencies located in NYC and downstate regions. The findings include recommendations that we must "Improve and increase direct assistance to help former foster youth secure and maintain supportive housing in New York City" and "Expand access to housing subsidies for all NYS youth with a foster care background."

³⁸ In our survey analysis, "negative housing experiences" include: feeling stuck in a bad or dangerous housing situation; sleeping at other people's apartments for short periods of time ("couch-surfing"); living in a hotel, motel, or hostel; living in a shelter, drop-in center, or crisis services program; staying with an abusive family member because you had nowhere else to go; "doubling up" in a home that was not big enough; sleeping outside, for example in a park or on the street; living in a vehicle; sleeping on public transportation or at a bus or train station; doing something you did not want to do in order to have a place to sleep; being evicted; being harassed or taken advantage of by a landlord; trading sex in exchange for a place to sleep. Also see chart: "Negative Housing Experiences Since Leaving Foster Care."

³⁹ See Note 37.

⁴⁰ In the YouthNPower survey, negative interactions were coded as: being stopped and questioned, being arrested, being spoken to disrespectfully/harassed, being held in jail, prison or detention, being stopped and patted down/searched, being threatened with violence/force by police, being the subject of police making a racial or ethnic slur, being physically hurt or injured by police, or reporting that police broke, took or damaged property. The data reflect respondents who had one or more of these experiences.

⁴¹ Juvenile Law Center, (2018). *What is the Foster Care to Prison Pipeline?*

⁴² In 2022, for example, Black and Latinx people were much more likely to be stopped by the New York City Police Department (NYPD), respectively constituting 59% and 30% of all recorded stops, than White and Asian people, who only constituted 7% and 2%, respectively. NYPD data confirms that these proportions are relatively consistent year over year. NYCLU, (2022). *Stop-And-Frisk-Data*.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ New York State Office of Mental Health and Office of Children and Family Services, (2023). *Youth Mental Health Listening Tour Report*.

⁴⁵ Arnett, J. J., Žukauskienė, R., & Sugimura, K. (2014). The new life stage of emerging adulthood at ages 18–29 years: Implications for mental health. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 1(7), 569-576.

⁴⁶ As determined by a score of 13 or higher on the Kessler 6 Psychological Distress Scale.

⁴⁷ Engler, Amy D., et al. (2022). A systematic review of mental health disorders of children in foster care. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 23(1): 255-264.

⁴⁸ New York City Council (2023). *New York City Mental Health Roadmap*. According to the City Council, “The deepening workforce shortage of mental health providers over the past several years has compounded the City’s current mental health emergency. The lack of recruitment and retention of mental health providers has reached a crisis level, with some sectors claiming 30 to 40 percent vacancy rates post-COVID. This workforce shortage is a direct result of decades of disinvestment in the mental healthcare system, which caused salaries that are non-competitive, insurance policies that do not adequately cover services, educational and training programs that fail to recruit and retain sufficient talent, and bureaucracies that prevent ease of practice for clinicians. An investment in the mental healthcare workforce is an essential component to the provision of culturally competent, high quality behavioral health services for all New Yorkers.”

⁴⁹ See Note 44.

⁵⁰ See, for example, how early parenting is treated as parallel to negative outcomes for youth like homelessness, economic hardship and criminal legal system contact. Courtney, M. E., Okpych, N. J., & Park, S. (2018). *Report from CalYOUTH: Findings on the relationship between extended foster care and youth’s outcomes at age 21*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

⁵¹ We included Berry and Jones (1995) 18-item Parental Stress Scale in our survey. Parents can score between 18 to 90 on the scale, with a low

score signifying a low level of stress and a high score signifying a high level of stress. Parents taking our survey (n=42) received an average score of 40.8.

⁵² Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago (2023). *Child and Family Wellbeing System: Economic & Concrete Supports as a Core Component*.

⁵³ Heaton, L., Cepuran, C., Grewal-Kök, Y., and Anderson, C. (2023). *The role of concrete and economic in prevention of maltreatment: Findings from a national study of child welfare leaders*. Chapin Hall and American Public Human Services Association. Chicago, IL, and Washington, DC.

⁵⁴ See for example, findings from the L.A. Opportunity Youth Collaborative. (2021). *Improving Equitable Employment Outcomes for Transition-Age Foster Youth in L.A. County: Streamlining Access to Career Development Services*.

⁵⁵ Berger Gonzalez, S., Morton, M., & Farrell, A. (2022). *Maximizing the impact of direct cash transfers to young people: A policy toolkit*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Kharoufi, A. (Feb. 13, 2023) It is Time to Prioritize Young People’s Mental Health, *The Imprint*.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ See Notes 52 and 53.



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