

# foster advocates

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## Foster Youth COVID-19 Impact Report Minnesota

## Executive Summary

This spring, as Minnesota and Foster Advocates continued to adjust to stay-at-home orders and the switch to virtual programming, we recognized the critical need to capture the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on foster youth across the state. Our team quickly mobilized to develop and distribute a survey in June-July, with responses from 156 current and former foster youth (age 14-26) across Minnesota. This survey assessed immediate coronavirus-related impacts, established basic-needs access, and gathered recommendations for the child welfare system.

This study indicates that COVID-19 is greatly amplifying the needs and barriers foster youth already face. Foster care is deeply difficult during normal circumstances. For an already highly at-risk population, where successful transitions to economic, physical, and emotional security are precarious at best, coronavirus burdens Fosters with challenges that are potentially insurmountable. This pandemic is exasperating previously existing harms as well as elevating new safety, stability, and well-being challenges for our most vulnerable youth—but targeted efforts can keep Fosters from falling off the cliff.

**“It is really tough being in the system and being isolated, especially when you’ve felt this way before COVID hit. I’ve been in the system for three years and I’ve always felt this way, and COVID just amplifies it.”**

-18 yo white, gay male; Northland

Critical areas of need Fosters identified across the survey are financial stress, employment concerns, housing security, mental health, and isolation. Older Fosters (over 18, both aged-out of care and those in extended foster care (EFC)<sup>o</sup>) reported doing worse than those under 18 across a range of measures, with less access to basic needs as well as higher concern about meeting basic needs in the immediate future. African American and American Indian<sup>oo</sup> respondents have faced more significant impacts and are more concerned about basic needs than their white counterparts, aligned with state disparities across the child welfare system and across Minnesota.

### Data highlights:



More than **80%** of Fosters were negatively impacted by COVID-19; older Fosters, African American, and American Indian respondents were most affected



**21%** of all respondents reported living situations impacted by the pandemic. For those over 21, this impact jumps to **38%**



For Fosters over 18, many were very concerned about paying for basic needs in August: housing: **43%**, food: **48%**, phone: **43%**



**33%** lost their job due to the pandemic



Over **40%** were concerned about exposure to coronavirus in their current living situation

Many respondents lack sufficient resources (masks, ability to disinfect commonly touched surfaces, etc.) for coronavirus prevention or mitigation. Fosters already faced a range of education disruptions; distance learning for Fosters was further impacted by lack of technology, internet, or workspace. For Fosters dependent on college housing, the pandemic created deep housing insecurity. Fosters experienced high rates of unemployment due to the pandemic, and a majority of those working in June were not able to work remotely.

### Our Foster Community:

Foster Advocates recognizes the experience of being in foster care creates a significant cultural identity. We have found **Foster and Fosters** encompasses this unique identity, akin to other immutable characteristics, and helps recognize the impact of the foster care system never ends, even if individuals are adopted or age out. We use this term throughout this report to name and claim this critical identity.

<sup>o</sup> In Minnesota, foster youth in out-of-home care on their 18th birthday are given the opportunity to opt into extended foster care (EFC) through age 21.

<sup>oo</sup> Respondents self-identified race/ethnicity, which Foster Advocates clustered into federal categories used by MN Department of Human Services.

These trends broadly mirror national data collected by Foster Club in March and May as well as the Field Center at the University of Pennsylvania in April. One of the biggest advocacy challenges in the child welfare space is the lack of state, regional, or national data related to outcomes for current and former Fosters. Foster Advocates is extremely proud of conducting a state-specific survey on COVID-19 foster youth impact. We cannot overstate how significant it is to not rely on speculating about the effect of coronavirus on our community or extrapolating data from other states or regions in order to advocate for county and state responses. This study is by no means exhaustive, but will be critical to illuminate the risks and challenges facing the Foster community in our state as well as highlight areas for future research. Because of this survey, we will not be stumbling in the dark in our efforts to support Fosters. It is critical we not let the lack of data enable neglect of the Foster community.

However, data for data's sake does very little good. This research shows it is critical that Fosters are intentionally included in pandemic responses. It also reveals recommendations from Fosters as well as underlying factors that our systems need to address during and beyond this crisis.

**“It has pretty much just shoved me into a world of struggle not knowing all I needed to know about living outside of foster care. I would want...more help from our leaders to make sure the kids that age out have resources and don't have to become homeless like I did.”**

-18 yo American Indian, bisexual female; Northwest



**Recognize the Struggle:** Fosters want their social workers to know that they are working hard, despite difficulties and struggle with increased stress, isolation and concern about basic needs. There is a high need to support Fosters' mental well-being and prevent isolation during the pandemic. Agencies must do as much as possible right now to facilitate cultural and family contact and find ways for youth to socialize. Isolation is life threatening--for some foster youth, mental illness may have a higher fatality rate than coronavirus.

**Support those Aging Out:** For youth aging out of foster care at 18 or extended foster care at 21, financial assistance is critical during the pandemic. While many young adults in our society have familial safety nets to fall back upon, this is not true for most Fosters, and many are left completely in the lurch on their age-out birthday. Older Fosters shouldn't have to depend on luck to make it through this crisis.



**Address Resource Gaps:** Many respondents were unaware of, or indicated lack of eligibility for, existing state assistance programs and foster-specific resources, like health insurance, transportation support and Education and Training Vouchers. Additionally, lack of communication between systems put Fosters at risk, especially around educational disruptions. Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) and county Social Services cannot assume Fosters know support programs available to them; the responsibilities lie on our systems to make sure Fosters are aware of their rights and resources.

This is a key moment for prevention to support stability for Fosters and ensure coronavirus doesn't lead to widening of outcome and opportunity gaps for our community. **Minnesota Counties, DHS, and foster care agencies have the chance now to address these needs and fulfill our communal responsibilities to foster youth.** There is a gap in practice, policies, and funding to ensure Fosters don't fall off a pandemic precipice. Minnesota can lead the charge in evidence-based efforts to proactively address the critical needs of Fosters amidst COVID-19 responses.

On a personal note, it is my sincerest hope that those of you in power or who are in a position to help use this data to reflect deeply on our moral responsibility and the cost of our continued indifference. We don't need to wait for landscape shifting policy or studies to do what is right. We just need to listen to Fosters—our very lives depend on it.

Hoang Murphy, *Founder & Executive Director*

# Survey Overview & Demographics

Current and former Fosters living in Minnesota age 14-26 years old were invited to fill out our anonymous mixed-methods survey from June 15 through July 12. The online survey was shared through Foster Advocates social media as well as over 50 partners and foster care providers across the state. We also invited all benefit recipients to a participatory data event in August, where we were able to collect additional perspectives (Foster reviewer commentary highlighted throughout this report) on survey trends and recommendations.

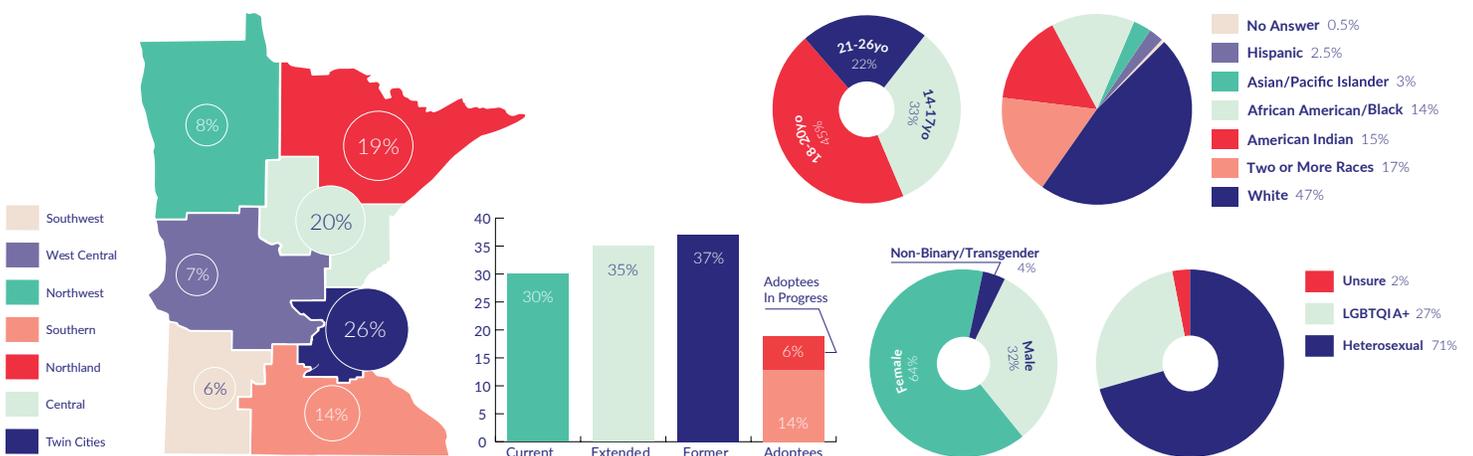
Due to non-random sampling, we anticipate that respondents were those with internet access and more connections to foster care agencies, services, and resources. We attempted to minimize selection bias due to individual response capacity through a \$20 survey stipend (to keep the survey anonymous, respondents were invited to a secondary form to provide personal information for the stipend). Given that Fosters with more stability and access to resources were more likely to encounter the survey, and have fewer obstacles in participating, we expect these data skew more positively.

Of 156 screened-in responses, 46 of 87 counties in Minnesota were represented, with a third of respondents from the Twin Cities region. Hennepin, St. Louis, and Stearns counties had the highest response numbers.<sup>1</sup> Demographically, respondents are representative of larger race/ethnicity trends in Minnesota<sup>2</sup> as well as sexual orientation<sup>i</sup> trends nationwide.<sup>3</sup> While differentiation between current, extended (EFC), and former<sup>ii</sup> Fosters primarily aligns with age brackets, foster care status categories are complicated by adoptions, those who didn't opt into EFC, and other situations. We included both breakdowns for analysis to get a clear picture of what was driven by age and what was driven by connection to foster care systems. Adoptees<sup>iii</sup> and those with adoptions-in-progress were pulled out for foster status comparison to see the impact of the additional stability from a more permanent placement.

Fosters in the 18-20 yo range and those in EFC are overrepresented as respondents compared to the numbers in care in Minnesota,<sup>4</sup> which is likely due to our primary recruitment partners. Older Fosters (22-26 yo) are likely underrepresented based on the number of former foster youth in our state, which was expected given the lack of system connection and tracking for these youth. Females are overrepresented, which is typical in research without gender-based target sampling.

## Foster Status:

We differentiate current Fosters as those in out-of-home foster care under age 18; extended as those who opted into extended foster care (EFC) age 18-21; and former as those who are no longer receiving foster care system services, due to family reunification, adoption, or aging out of care at 18 or 21. Upon aging out, Fosters are cut off from state resources and benefits except for health insurance.



i - Minnesota doesn't track sexual orientation or non-binary/transgender gender identity with publicly available data. Foster Advocates believes this is a missed opportunity at the state level to fully understand the diversity and meet culturally-specific needs of youth in the foster care system. Respondents self-identified gender identity and sexual orientation, which were then clustered into categories for analysis; sexual orientation n=137.

ii - Former Fosters (n=57) were 27% adoptees (separated to own category), 18% aged out at 18, 34% aged out at 21, and 18% experienced family reunification.

iii - Adoptees self-identified primarily as Former fosters (68%) before being split into their own category.

Statistical analysis was conducted as possible across survey domains. Independent t-tests were used to compare outcome variables by demographic groups while paired t-tests were used to compare outcome variables of January/February and June/July. Due to conditional questions, not all questions had a large enough response rate to disaggregate data by demographics. The following categories were too small to use in demographic comparisons: Northwest, West Central, and Southwest regions; non-binary/transgender gender identity; unsure sexual orientation; and Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and No Answer race/ethnicity. Unequal group sizes should be noted for statistical significance comparing females vs. males; LGBTQIA+ vs. heterosexual; and white vs. African American or American Indian respondents.

\*Statistically significant group differences are denoted throughout by asterisks.

## COVID-19 Impact

We assessed general well-being of respondents, as well as different aspects of well-being, future orientation, and social support to compare how Fosters were doing over time, comparing the time of the survey (June/July) retrospectively to January/February.

- General well-being trended down by age,\* and adoptees and current Fosters rate higher overall well-being than extended or former Fosters.\*
- Well-being subcategories (physical, mental/emotional, social, spiritual, and financial) trended down since January/February, with social and financial well-being having the strongest negative trend. Across well-being category averages, we continue to see downward trends as age increases,\* and women and LGBTQ+ respondents had lower well-being ratings than male and heterosexual peers.\* Fosters in the Central, Twin Cities, and Northland regions reported greater well-being than those in the Southern region in June/July.\*

**“The COVID-19 pandemic impacted my schooling, post-college job, and medical school applications, as I was told to leave campus with less than a week’s notice. I relied on my university for shelter and food. When COVID-19 emerged, those needs were abruptly taken away from me and I was forced to find shelter and food in other places. I moved four times during my last semester of college, as I have been a homeless foster child for the past four years... Instead of primarily focusing on medical school applications, I spent months finding a place to live and searching for other job opportunities. Now, I am facing even greater financial barriers than before and am relying on my small savings to support myself.”** -22 yo white, heterosexual male; Twin Cities

- For Fosters with higher well-being measures, comment themes highlighted being thankful for time with family (especially respondents with children), time to focus on physical health, positivity around being adopted, or being grateful that they have not yet experienced coronavirus or related employment impacts.

**Foster feedback:** One Foster reviewer noted surprise that older age groups weren't doing as well as younger fosters, since “in the foster system, emotions tend to be a lot higher, and when you're younger you're a lot more confused about what was going on.” This feedback emphasizes the precariousness and uncertainty felt by older Fosters during the pandemic.

### A note from our founder:

Fosters continue to be the most optimistic group I've ever met. Before we celebrate this, I want to note that this has made accurately measuring how Fosters are doing challenging, and also note that this optimism overall comes at a cost. Resilience develops in Fosters as a coping strategy to a world outside of their control, but it is not enough to overcome systemic barriers to resources and opportunities. Fosters have to have grit, but other kids get to have dreams.

**81% of Fosters reported that COVID-19 caused negative or major negative change in their lives.** Along the lines of known disparities in MN child welfare, respondents who identify as African-American, American-Indian, or Two or More Races reported more negative impact from COVID-19 than their white peers.

- Despite COVID challenges, future-orientation measures (excitement about the future, motivation & ability to meet goals) stayed relatively constant over time,\* except for a negative trend for “ability to meet goals.” Fosters in the Central region had higher future orientation than those in the Southern region in June/July.\*
- However, support systems measures overall trended down over time. Adoptees and Fosters age 14-17 had greater support systems than extended/former Fosters and Fosters over 18.\* White Fosters had greater support system access than African American Fosters.\* Nationally, about a fifth of Fosters wish they had more connections with people; between 14% -20% said they are on their own.<sup>5</sup>
- 42% of Fosters are somewhat or highly concerned about COVID-19 exposure in their current living situation, primarily because of living in residential centers or frontline job exposure within the household. Those in the Twin Cities and Southern regions, older Fosters, and former Fosters had greater concerns.\* Those unconcerned primarily reported not a lot of cases in their region or a sense of inevitability (“If I get it, I get it”).
  - While a majority of respondents reported access to information regarding COVID-19, a majority received news from media/ social media sources. A quarter (23%) reported public health officials as their source, and only 14% reported social workers or foster agencies as their source of information.
- While Fosters were overall following COVID-19 prevention practices, many reported they were unable to regularly wear a mask (47%) or disinfect commonly touched surfaces (38%). Comments show these behaviors are lower\* compared to other practices because they depend on resources and not just personal behavior. Fosters in the Twin Cities region reported greater ability to practice prevention than those living in the Southern and Central areas.\*

**“With my [8 yo] daughter in distance school, it’s given me so much more time to bond with her. It’s obviously not ideal, as my work hours are also decreased. Now I’m more physically present in her life than I have ever been able to be.”**

- 23 yo American Indian, heterosexual female; Southwest

Interestingly, 46% of Fosters overall said their general well-being was “okay”, and only 14% indicated “poor/very poor”. Details came out through qualitative responses. For example, one “good” respondent followed up with this comment:

*I feel like the whole world is falling apart...I am moving out [of group home] in a month...and feel like I am left out in the process, like all my workers are talking but I'm not there to understand and hear what's going on which is very frustrating.*

Well-being research must go below the surface. Foster youth experience a great deal of transition and lack of control, and may identify “okay” well-being differently than their peers.

## What do Fosters need to stay safe and take care of themselves and their family during the pandemic? The top needs<sup>iv</sup> were:



Financial Assistance (49%)

Food (40%) and Housing Support (23%)



Social Support (31%) and Mental Health Care (28%)

COVID-19 safety support (20%)



**Foster feedback:** One Foster reviewer noted “Everything has gone downhill since COVID-19. Fosters don’t have support or don’t know where to go for resources, it’s all contributing to the build up of financial and emotional stress. People are left to feel helpless.”

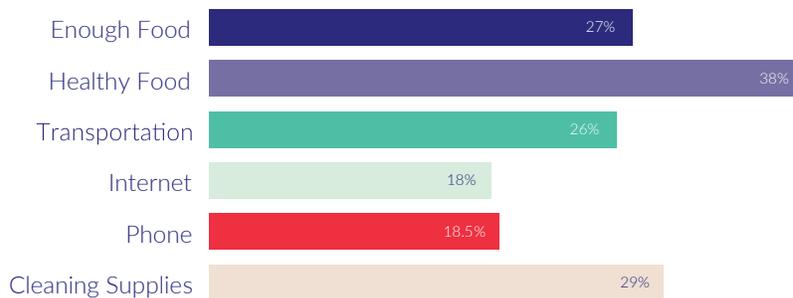
<sup>iv</sup> Percentages will add to more than 100%, as respondents identified up to three needs each.

In addition to assessing broad COVID-19 impact, our survey looked more closely at Foster needs and stability across living situations, basic needs, medical, educational, and employment domains.

## Living Situation and Basic Needs

Basic needs (safe living situation, enough food/healthy food, clean water, transportation, internet, phone, cleaning products, toiletries, and childcare) were assessed by current access as well as concern about access over the following month (mid-July through mid-August).

- Across the board, age correlated with less access\* to basic needs, and adoptees and current Fosters had more access than extended and former Fosters.\* White respondents had more access to basic needs than African American respondents\* and those in the Central Region have more access than those in the Twin Cities or Southern regions.\* Assessing concern about month-out access to basic needs, African American and American Indian respondents were more concerned about access than white peers.\*
- Qualitative responses overwhelmingly pointed to financial concerns and debt impacting basic needs.
  - 27% of all Fosters report not always having access to enough food, and 38% not having access to healthy food, in line with national trends.<sup>6</sup> Given that only 7% of Minnesota households reported food scarcity in August,<sup>7</sup> this report from Fosters indicates a deep and unmet need.
  - Of those who support children on a daily basis (n=40), 58% did not have access to childcare needs most of the time. While respondents indicated gratitude for the additional time at home with their siblings or children, many also pointed to lack of childcare as a barrier to jobs and housing.

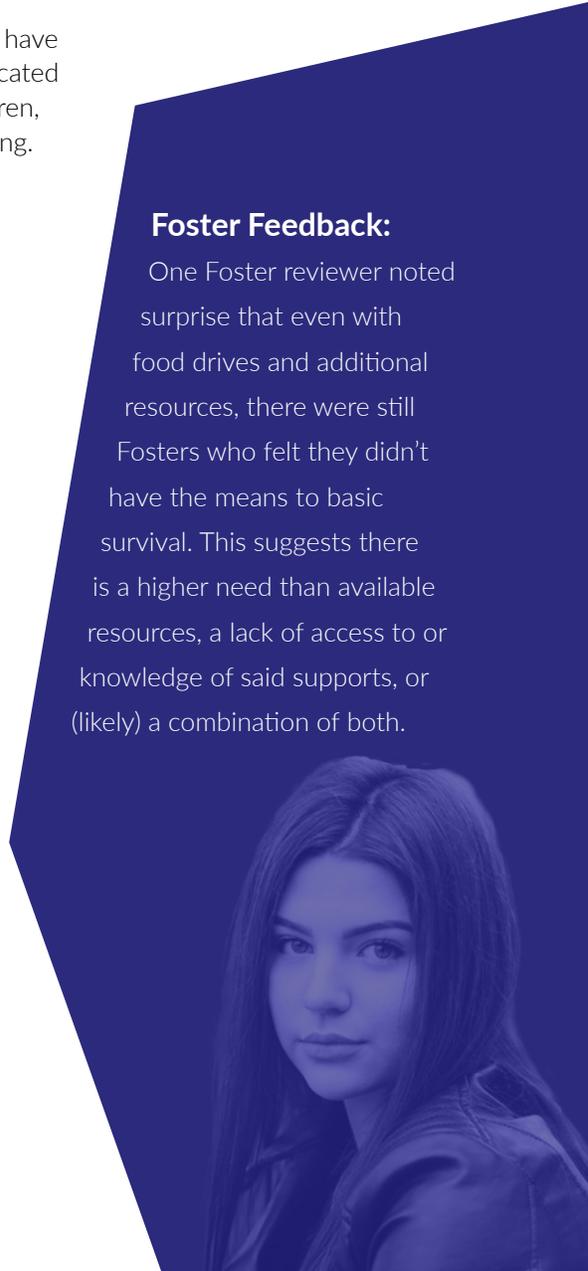


**“I’m thankful my social worker has been good at bringing me grocery shopping but it’s still scary to think of what the next month will bring. It’s like I’m in debt and can’t get out of it.”** -22 yo American Indian, heterosexual female; Southwest

- If respondents had access to any basic needs, they likely had access to all of them; similarly if Fosters were concerned about future access, they were concerned about access to all needs. This shows that Fosters are either doing well across the board or struggling across the board. This aligned with a theme seen in qualitative responses, that “I’m doing okay, but I know other Fosters are struggling.”

### Foster Feedback:

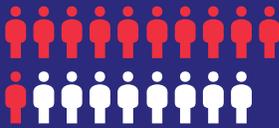
One Foster reviewer noted surprise that even with food drives and additional resources, there were still Fosters who felt they didn’t have the means to basic survival. This suggests there is a higher need than available resources, a lack of access to or knowledge of said supports, or (likely) a combination of both.



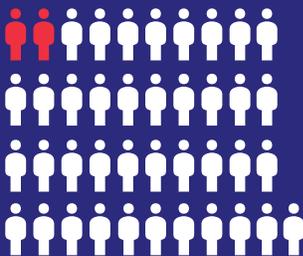
- **A fifth (21%) of all Fosters surveyed had living situations impacted by COVID.** However, for 21-26 year olds, the number jumps to 38%, and 18-20 year olds were most concerned about month-out access to safe living situations. Key themes reported were being unable to afford rent, being forced to move due to COVID, and experiencing a decline in living conditions.

Nationally, a majority of 18-29 year olds are living with a parent due to the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> However, this is not an option for most Fosters over 18. Adoptees were much more likely to be living with or able to return to live with relatives, while non-adoptees live with roommates, partners, or live alone. Some older Fosters were able to return to former foster homes, but like their peers nationally<sup>10</sup> do not see this as a long-term solution.

Adoptee's staying with relatives  
11 out of 19



Non-adoptees staying with relatives  
2 out of 41



**“I moved from my foster home because my foster dad has a compromised immune system.”**

- 21 yo multiracial, bisexual female; Twin Cities

**“I had no privacy in my last foster home and with having to stay home constantly with people who were racist/sexist/homophobic made it very stressful. Thankfully I’m in a new foster home.”**

- 16 yo multiracial female; Northland

- Former Fosters (over 18, n=60) face unique housing insecurity threats. 8% did not have secure housing (ie, crashing with friends) in June, following national trends<sup>8</sup>— however, additional respondents noted imminent eviction in their comments. Those with housing tied to education often became homeless when dorms closed this spring.

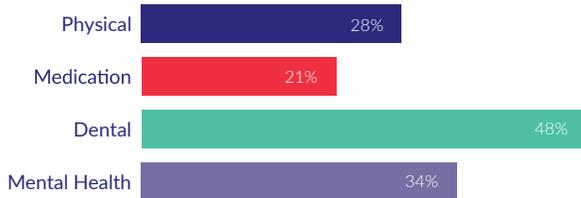
**“I had to move out of my dorm, then went back “home” to the people I was living with [before college]. Things got tense, so had to move again. I don’t want to keep moving and worrying about where I am going to be every day.”**

- 19 yo white, heterosexual female; Central

**Recommendation:** While there is a need for more data on foster housing insecurity (across EFC, aged-out fosters, and adoptees) in Minnesota, we do not need to wait on this data to act. Foster homelessness is highly predictable<sup>11</sup>—and also highly preventable. Despite life plans created as youth age out, shelters are our de facto long term plan for Fosters.<sup>12</sup> Everything starts with home: housing stability also predicts long-term jobs and ability to maintain a stable family life and overall well-being. It will cost much less to invest more in housing stability for Fosters now than it will cost for us to pay for homeless shelters, prison, and emergency healthcare later.

## Medical Needs

Fosters reported a variety of unmet medical needs due to COVID-19, with no significant group difference. Themes from qualitative answers show physical health was impacted by inability to travel to appointments and food insecurity; medication was impacted by inability to get to pharmacy and unaffordable co-pays; dental health was impacted by insurance; and mental health was impacted by lack of access to therapy or mental health medication.

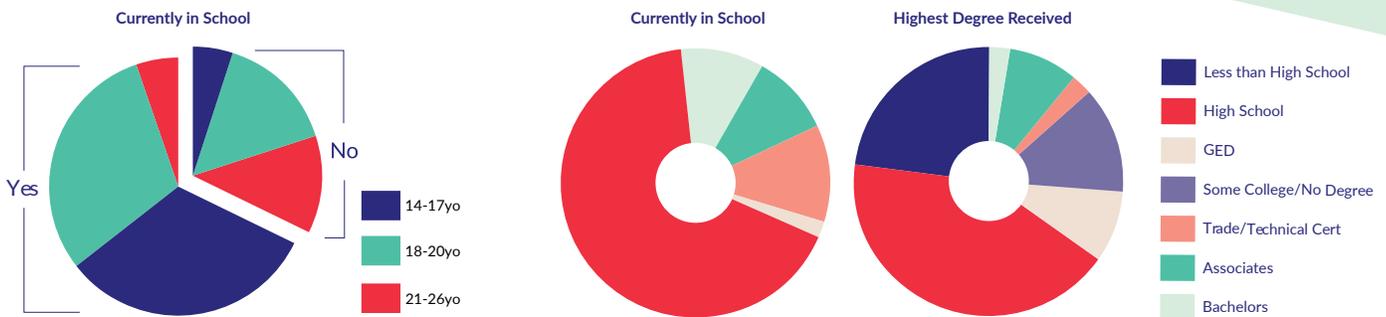


Of former Fosters, 14% didn't know if they have health insurance. This is concerning, given that all Minnesota Fosters are guaranteed Medical Assistance (MA) eligibility until the age of 26 under ACA requirements (matching ACA policies that allow children to stay on their parent's plan until 26). It is unacceptable that any Foster is unaware of this and forgoing medical treatment due to perceived lack of insurance.

**Recommendation:** Make MA insurance for Fosters opt-out instead of opt-in through age 26.

## Education Impacts

Most Fosters (67% overall) were in online school in the spring, through high school (65%), GED (2%), or post-secondary education programs (33%).<sup>14</sup> Current Fosters and adoptees age 14-17 years old were most likely to be in school,\* representing about half (46%) of education respondents.



- Across distance learning needs (technology, internet, working space, supplies, tutoring/academic assistance) current Fosters and adoptees had the most access. Distance learning was most impacted by no device or internet access, lack of workspace or inhospitable living environments for learning, and losing personal support (ie, paraeducators). Half of education respondents (47%) reported not enough access to tutoring/academic support.

Lack of transportation access or transportation affordability was a key limitation for meeting medical needs. It is clear, indicated both by survey data and our Foster reviewers, Minnesota Fosters are not aware they are guaranteed transportation for medical appointments under state mandate.

Within this topic area and across other question domains, qualitative data showed strong themes of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and/or feeling suicidal. While this is to be expected in line with national trends of mental health impacts of the pandemic on young adults,<sup>13</sup> the mental health risk of isolation to Fosters is of particular concern and warrants greater attention.

**Recommendation:** Responsible agencies must do as much as possible right now to facilitate cultural and family contact and find ways for youth to socialize. Isolation is life-threatening –for some foster youth, mental illness may have a higher fatality rate coronavirus. It is also critical for all Fosters to have guaranteed access to telehealth, continued through extended foster care (and beyond!).

- 18-20 yos were more likely to have their school credits impacted by COVID, and females were more likely to have 2020-21 school options impacted than males.

**Recommendations:** MOUs should be established between local educational agencies and county social services that outline agreements, responsibilities, and policy changes, particularly related to attendance in distance learning.

Fosters already face huge educational outcome gaps nationally.<sup>15</sup> Compared to other students, Fosters are twice as likely to experience high absenteeism or suspension and three times as likely to receive special education services and face expulsion. Most Fosters change schools when first entering care, often just the start of chronic disruption to their educational progress and support systems. Despite these barriers, a large majority of Fosters want to attend college, yet lack support to achieve this dream. Fosters are less than half as likely as their peers to enroll in college, and only 3% attain bachelor's degrees.<sup>16</sup>

Over a quarter of all respondents (28%) are pursuing post-secondary education through trade/technical, 2-year, or 4-year schools. No respondents were in advanced degree programs. While this number is greatly encouraging overall, 26% of those in EFC and 21% of former Fosters do not have their high school diploma or GED.

- Of those pursuing post-secondary education, 42% had student loans, primarily former Fosters versus those in EFC. Of those with loans, 63% were not aware of student loan forbearance.
  - 62% received Education and Training Voucher (ETV) funds. Of those without ETV, a majority (68%) had not heard of this foster-specific funding program—and an additional 1 in 5 applied but didn't receive funding.

**“My education was the most affected area of my life surrounding COVID. When the switch to online school happened I did not have any internet access and a very old computer that barely functioned for watching YouTube. I didn't really know how to explain this to my school or my social workers for fear of being dropped out of the [EFC program]. I felt very alone and lost, especially because school has always been somewhere that I have thrived no matter what. COVID ended up getting in the way of that.”** -19 yo white, queer, nonbinary youth; Southern

**Recommendation:** For educational districts and colleges across Minnesota, it is critical to ensure Fosters are not left out in planning around distance learning resources, needs assessment for in-person vs. distance learning supports, and supports such as housing.

### Foster Feedback:

Reviewers noted the challenge of housing insecurity for Fosters in college not just during distance learning, but outside of the pandemic during school breaks. They wonder what it would look like to have dorm units specifically for Fosters or housing options over breaks (similar to international students).

While the number of respondents with student loans may seem low, at Foster Advocates we believe Fosters deserve a guaranteed option to state education as part of our communal responsibility for foster youth. It is also deeply irresponsible that any Foster within Minnesota is not aware or doesn't receive federally-funded ETV. Only 1.9% of Fosters in the Midwest completed a two-year degree by age 21; the majority of Fosters who failed to graduate cited education costs and needing to work as the most significant reasons they could not complete their education.<sup>17</sup> Minnesota can do better.

**Recommendation:** Zero-debt post-secondary options should be provided for Minnesota Fosters to reduce barriers to long-term self-sufficiency.

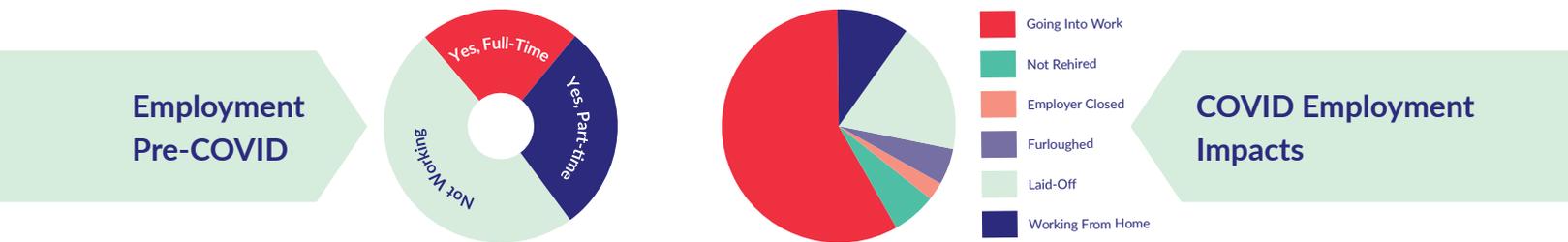
# Employment Impacts & Financial Stability

Half of respondents (n=80) were working before COVID-19, primarily Fosters age 21-26. Of those working, 44% were employed full-time, but only 12% earned more than \$20,000 a year<sup>18</sup> and only 5% have health insurance through an employer.

- Due to the pandemic, a third reported lost employment due to being laid off, employer shut down, or employer reopening but not rehiring.<sup>19</sup> This unemployment rate is in line with national Foster job losses, and is ~3 times higher than the general U.S. population, and ~4 times higher than Minnesota unemployment.<sup>20</sup> As Covid-related job losses become more permanent, Fosters will have an increasingly difficult time finding stable employment that would net a liveable wage.
  - Of those who lost employment (n=26), 38% applied for unemployment insurance. However, an additional 38% did not believe they were eligible to apply due to their work situation. Nationally, half of Fosters who applied for unemployment benefits did not receive insurance.<sup>21</sup>
- Of those not working pre-COVID, 20% had been looking for work, and 20% were unable to work due to living situation restrictions.
- Of Fosters with jobs pre-shutdown, 45% experienced reduced hours and 13% faced a wage decrease. Nationally, 29-40% of Fosters reported severely cut work hours or decrease in gig work.<sup>22</sup> Though a majority of survey respondents are frontline workers and were going into the workplace (58%), only 6% saw any wage increase from hazard pay. Half of those working at the time of the survey were not confident they would still have a job within a month.

**“Due to COVID, my employer stated I quit rather than I was discharged so I was denied for unemployment. My family and I are surviving just barely. This has been a tough time. Just trying to keep my head above water, for my family.”**

-22 yo African American, heterosexual female; Southern



We surveyed those over 18 about concern for paying for basic needs over the next month (mid-July through mid-August). Fosters age 21-16 were more concerned about their financial security than those age 18-20.

- The highest concerns were rent (43%), groceries (48%), phone (43%), and medical needs (15%), with wifi, transportation, and saving for college as additional themes from qualitative data.
  - State-wide, 3.3% of Minnesota adults were behind on rent/mortgage in August or had limited confidence about paying the next month's rent/mortgage on time;<sup>23</sup> 18.3% expressed likelihood of eviction/foreclosure in the next two months;<sup>24</sup> and 21.3% expressed difficulty in paying for usual household expenses.<sup>25</sup> Once again, Fosters face a steep precipice within the impacts of coronavirus, especially those who are no longer eligible for EFC resources upon aging out at 21.
- Nationally, more than half of Fosters reported they did not receive the stimulus check, because they did not know how to apply or whether they were eligible, they didn't file 2018 or 2019 taxes, or they had been claimed as a dependent the previous year.<sup>26</sup>

Fosters regularly called for additional financial assistance across a variety of question domains, specifically flexible stipends to support rent, food access, phone service, and accessible healthcare.

**“I’ve had a really hard time keeping bills balanced with the COVID -19 crisis happening. I fell 3 months behind on my car payment and 2 months behind on my car insurance and I got a month behind on my rent; I’ve been going to the food shelf. I was laid off and forced to move back to my hometown because it was a lot cheaper and I’m not getting further behind in debt anymore but I just can’t catch up. It’s hard”** - 21 yo multiracial, gay male; Southern

## Extended Foster Care & Transition Age Youth

Of particular concern to our Foster Advocates team is the ability of Fosters aging out of the system<sup>v</sup> to successfully transition to independence. Transition outcomes are bleak without the added challenge of a global pandemic.<sup>27</sup> Nationally, only 37% of transition-age youth report having family members to rely on.<sup>28</sup>

- For those (13.5%, n=19) aging out in the next six months, key concerns overwhelmingly were: financial security and ability to support themselves independently, housing access and homelessness, and lack of social support services and mental health access. This aligns with support requests from those who have recently aged out of care.

**“This pandemic has been harder for me and I’m sure for many other Foster youth than it may seem. I’ve felt isolated most of my life and coming right out of my foster home into independence with what feels like no support was incredibly hard.”**

-19 yo white, queer non-binary youth; Southern

v - In Minnesota, Fosters can age out at 18 or opt into extended foster care and age out at 21. Anecdotally, our team has heard that some Fosters in rural Minnesota do not fully understand what EFC is or feel like it is a viable option for them.

It is a failure of our communal responsibility that MN Fosters are losing their safety net during the pandemic. When Fosters age out, they deserve a runway, not a cliff. **Recommendation:** In line with nine states and Washington, D.C.,<sup>29</sup> Foster Advocates calls for a state moratorium on aging out of foster care through the end of the pandemic. Additionally, we call on counties to direct CARES Act funds towards direct financial support through cash assistance and rent support for those aging out this fall.<sup>30</sup>

### Profile of Aging-Out Experience

Shortly after aging out I lost a lot. I was in the hospital, and because I couldn’t work and didn’t have the EFC stipend, I was evicted and couldn’t make car payments. I felt like I was thrown out to the wolves. Just because of my birthday, I lost my support system. I believe youth should be put on a more successful path versus being just cut off.

I was working at Dollar Tree but got laid off during the pandemic. I found another job at a cleaning company, but it is not enough to cover bills. I will be evicted again as soon as the moratorium lifts; housing is so scarce I haven’t been able to find another option. I get by month to month but I haven’t been able to save anything.

It’s traumatising being a foster in general; I was taught to rely on the system to survive. But I wasn’t really given the opportunity to live. And now, when folks turn 21, then what? I wish I had a transition from the EFC stipend instead of a hard cut-off-more support around financial planning, and more coaching during the aging-out transition.

- 21 yo African American female; Twin Cities

# Recommendations

At Foster Advocates, we believe those closest to a problem are also closest to solutions. As part of our larger mission to organize with current and former Fosters around research, policy, and advocacy, we solicited recommendations on what they would want their social workers to know as well as how the child welfare system should respond to this pandemic or change overall. These are highlighted throughout the report and summarized here.

## Recognize the Struggle

Fosters want their social workers to know that they are working hard, despite difficulties, and struggle with increased stress, isolation and concern about basic needs.

### Mental Health Support: Expanded Access to Telehealth

Our Foster reviewers noted how emotional well-being overlaps across all the data: “Anything that has been impacted by COVID-19 has also impacted mental and emotional health.” Fosters elevated the critical drain on mental health they’ve experienced and want social workers to recognize the burden of strained relationships they are experiencing across a variety of living situations.

**“This time has really caused mental health problems to increase in me and in so many others that I have talked to during this time. The social isolation and lack of regular activities/events has really been hard on many of us.”**

- 19 yo white, queer non-binary youth; Southern

### Expanded Connections and Reduced Isolation

Overwhelmingly, Fosters called for expanded social connections with family, friends, and other Fosters as well as additional social worker contact, in order to “not feel so alone.” Fosters noted social worker contacts, in addition to checking-in more, should support mental health, education about COVID-19, and resource awareness. Additionally, Fosters want to make sure those who have aged-out are not left out of pandemic check-ins, and noted the possibility for mentors or case workers who just support older Fosters.

**“The foster care system should reach out to each previous foster child and make sure they have everything they need right now. Calling them and asking them these questions and giving them what they need would be the best.”**

-22 yo white, heterosexual male; Twin Cities

**“I understand that some youth may seem completely self-reliant, that we may seem resilient or strong due to the fact that we’ve been through so much. But even during this, we are still frightened by the future and still need assistance. I just wish my workers and the system didn’t bail out on me.”**

- 19 yo American Indian, bisexual trans male; Twin Cities

### Foster Feedback:

The need for connection stood out for our Foster Reviewers. One stated: “A big part of being in foster care for me was being away from and missing my family or support systems. Not only could I not see them, I was only able to use the phone at my placement at certain times so I couldn’t always call them.” She stated the importance of many methods and options for maintaining contact and named the system as ‘negligent’ in providing Fosters opportunities to stay connected and supported.

In response to this theme, Foster Advocates aims to build networks for Fosters over 18 to connect with each other informally and through our leadership and advocacy programs, and we encourage interested organizations to reach out for partnership.

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## Support those Aging Out

For youth aging out of foster care at 18 or extended foster care at 21, financial assistance is critical during the pandemic. While many young adults in our society have familial safety nets to fall back upon, this is not true for most Fosters, and many are left completely in the lurch on their age-out birthday. Older Fosters shouldn't have to depend on luck to make it through this crisis.

**Moratorium on aging out of foster care** and direct CARES funding towards cash assistance for those who have aged out.

**Invest in housing stability for Fosters now:**

This prevention will cost less than we are currently paying to support Fosters with shelters and emergency care.

**Expand EFC to age 24:** Foster Advocates supports the survey call for expanding extended foster care to age 24, in alignment with other states and as supported by research on cognitive development and maturity.<sup>31</sup>

**“I would love if I still got my stipend, because I feel like 18-21 is not long enough. I couldn't save, that was the only income I was getting. I wasn't smart using it because I didn't have parent guidance to show me. Now that I'm finna turn 21, I now can use the money for rent and I value the money. I think it would be nice to give stipends into 24.”**

- 20 yo African American female; Twin Cities

## Address Research Gaps

Many respondents were unaware of, or indicated lack of eligibility for, existing state assistance programs and Foster-specific resources such as health insurance, transportation support and Education and Training Vouchers. Additionally, lack of communication between systems put Fosters at risk, especially around educational disruptions. Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) and county Social Services cannot assume Fosters know resources available to them; the responsibilities lie on our systems to make sure Fosters are aware of their rights and resources.

**Youth-Friendly State-wide Foster Resource Guide:**

It will be hard to assess true resource needs if Fosters don't know about the resources available to them. Countering knowledge and access gaps is critical.

**“I lost my social worker during a really tough time, I was so close to securing an apartment before COVID got bad and now it's ten times trickier to get one”**

- 21 yo multiracial, bisexual female; Twin Cities

**“I think I would have appreciated my case worker checking in more. I understand case workers had their own adapting to do and they have other clients, but for myself, if I were a case worker, it would be of importance to check in with the youth I am overseeing. It's something that is supposed to be done once a month, but during a pandemic and knowing the anxiety it caused a lot of folks, I would be making sure my clients were okay and seeing if there was any way I could be of assistance.”**

- 20 yo white female; Northland

**“Providing support and resources to those in need. Foster children usually lack the necessary support that is provided in normal families, so times like this are extremely hard.”**

- 21 yo white, heterosexual female; Northland



**Foster MA insurance opt-out instead of opt-in:** It is critical that Fosters under 26 know about their guaranteed insurance and are able to access medical care through auto-renewal.

**Driver's Licenses and Insurance for Fosters:** In addition to ensuring Fosters know about guaranteed transportation for education and medical appointments, it is critical to reduce transportation as a barrier for self-sufficiency.

**District MOUs with Counties for Education Support:** Collaboration is needed to ensure the unique factors of foster care are accounted for related to distance learning and attendance.

**Foster-Specific College Housing:** Allowing Fosters to stay in dorms or other college housing year-round during their enrollment would create greater stability. Fosters in college shouldn't have to worry about being homeless over holidays or summer breaks.

**Zero-Debt Post-secondary Options:** Fosters should be guaranteed a zero-debt education at our trade schools, community colleges, and universities.

**“It would be great to help us get our licenses and cars and stuff, because most people I know got cars and license help from their parents. I can't get a job without transportation, but I can't afford transportation without a job. I've had my permit for like three years and it makes me feel really juvenile”**

- 18 yo multiracial, heterosexual female; Southern

## Future Research

This study is by no means exhaustive, but will be critical to shine light on the risks and challenges facing the Foster community in our state, as well as highlight areas for future research. If it's true that “we measure what we value,” it is hard to say we care about Fosters if we don't regularly ask how they are doing. It is critical we not let the lack of data enable neglect of Fosters.

### Key areas to note include:

- **Foster definition of well-being:** Given the mismatch between moderate quantitative and extreme qualitative responses to questions of well-being, we recognize the need for further assessment of how Fosters self-define well-being, how that may differ by age, and how that self-definition compares to non-foster involved peers.
- **Resources gaps:** Responses from Fosters (and our data Reviewers) revealed several key gaps in awareness and/or access to resources and services guaranteed to Fosters. More research is needed to fully understand when this gap is due to a lack of needed services/funding, lack of access to services, or a mismatch in resource/rights awareness. This research could include opportunities to engage Fosters in reflection around the services they received, what was useful, and what they wish they had received.
- **Regional trends:** This survey reveals some interesting regional trends, with the Central region doing better across a variety of measures, and the Twin Cities and Southern regions doing worse. It could be fruitful for future research to further explore what contributes to this regional difference, for example the impact of resources or social worker caseload by region, as well as compare those regional differences to county compliance with federal child welfare standards.
- **Adoptees:** Across a range of measures, adoptees do better than their peers. Given the increase in stability that often comes with adoption, this makes sense, though it is important to note that adoption doesn't guarantee stability. Two respondents experienced dissolved adoptions and were returned to foster care.

## Acknowledgements

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## Endnotes

1. To stay consistent with other state data comparisons, zip code responses were sorted by Minnesota Compass geographic regions (Minnesota Compass (2020). *Geographic Profiles*. <http://www.mncompass.org/profiles>).
2. Respondents self-identified race/ethnicity, which was then clustered into categories used by MN DHS. In Minnesota, African American and American Indian youth, as well as those who are Two or More Races, are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system, experiencing out-of-home care at rates of 2.9, 18.2, and 5.1 times more likely than expected based on 2017 population reports. See: Children and Family Services. (December 2019). *Minnesota's Out-of-Home Care and Permanency Report*, 2018. Minnesota Department of Human Services. <https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfs/Server/Public/DHS-5408Ka-ENG>
3. Of youth living in foster care, 30% identify as LGBTQ+, compared to 11% of their peers, and 5% identified as transgender, compared to 1.2% of their peers. See: Baams, L., Wilson, B., & Russell, S. (2019). LGBTQ Youth in Unstable Housing and Foster Care. *Pediatrics*, 143 (3). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-4211>
4. Children and Family Services. (2019), pg. 16 & 50
5. Ranges are fairly consistent between two national surveys; see Foster Club (13 May, 2020). *The Impact of COVID-19 on Youth from Foster Care: A National Poll*. [www.fosterclub.com/sites/default/files/docs/blogs/COVID%20Poll%20Results%20May%2010%202020.pdf](http://www.fosterclub.com/sites/default/files/docs/blogs/COVID%20Poll%20Results%20May%2010%202020.pdf) and Greeson, J., Jaffee, S., Wasch, S., & Gyourko, J. (September, 2020). *The Experiences of Older Youth In & Aged Out of Foster Care During COVID-19*. Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice, and Research, University of Pennsylvania. [https://fieldcenteratpenn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Foster-Youth-COVID-19-FINAL\\_Corrected.pdf](https://fieldcenteratpenn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Foster-Youth-COVID-19-FINAL_Corrected.pdf)
6. Nationally, 20-55% of Fosters ages 18-24 report being food insecure during the pandemic. See Foster Club (May 2020) and Greeson, Jaffee, Wasch, & Gyourko (September 2020).
7. United States Census Bureau. (14 September, 2020). *Household Pulse Survey, Food Scarcity, Week 13*. [https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/hhp/#/?measures=FIR&s\\_state=00027](https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/hhp/#/?measures=FIR&s_state=00027)
8. Greeson, Jaffee, Wasch, & Gyourko (September 2020).
9. Fry, R., Passel, J., & Cohn, D. (4 September, 2020). A majority of young adults in the U.S. live with their parents for the first time since the Great Depression. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/04/a-majority-of-young-adults-in-the-u-s-live-with-their-parents-for-the-first-time-since-the-great-depression/>
10. Foster Club (May 2020).
11. As shown across a range of studies, youth transitioning out of care are more likely than their peers to experience homelessness, with around 2/3rds experiencing homelessness within 6 months of aging out of care, and around 20% experiencing chronic homelessness. For examples see: Pecora, P., Kessler, R., Williams, J., O'Brien, K., Downs, A. C., English, D., White, J., Hiripi, E. White, C. R., Wiggins, T., & Holmes, K. (5 April, 2005). Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study. *Casey Family Programs*. <https://www.casey.org/northwest-alumni-study/>; and Dworsky, A., Napolitano, L., & Courtney, M. (2013). Homelessness During the Transition From Foster Care to Adulthood. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103(S2), S318-S323. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2013.301455; and Bender, K., Yang, J., Ferguson, K., & Thompson, S (2015). Experiences and needs of homeless youth with a history of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review* (55), p. 222-231. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2015.06.007>
12. In Hennepin County, 27% of homeless youth had experienced foster care, making homeless youth far more likely to have experienced foster care than their peers. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. (September, 2017). Youth homelessness in Hennepin County, Minnesota: Findings from the youth count, brief youth survey, and provider survey. Technical report from the *Voices of Youth Count Initiative*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.
13. Czeisler MÉ, Lane RI, Petrosky E, et al. (2020). Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic – United States, June 24–30, 2020. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* (69), 1049–1057. DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6932a1external icon](http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6932a1external%20icon)
14. Percentages that don't state "overall" are based on the responses of those in online school this spring (n=104). Percentages related to post-secondary education are based on the responses of those in a 2-year or 4-year program or technical/trade school (n=45).
15. We do not have state-level data on foster youth educational outcomes, as Minnesota has been out of compliance with ESSA reporting requirements since August 2019. Stringer, K. (February 20, 2019). "ESSA Says State Report Cards Must Track How Many Students in Foster care Are Passing Their Reading & Math Tests and Graduating High School. Only 16 Do." *The 74 Million*. <https://www.the74million.org/article/essa-says-state-report-cards-must-track-how-many-students-in-foster-care-are-passing-their-reading-math-tests-and-graduating-high-school-only-16-do/>
16. 21% of Fosters indicate they do not have access to personal support to attain educational goals (Foster Club, May 2020). Overview of data on variety of educational outcomes from: National Working Group on Foster Care and Education. (April, 2018). *Fostering Success in Education: National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care*. *Legal Center for Foster Care and Education*. <http://www.fostercareandeducation.org/OurWork/NationalWorkingGroup.aspx>

17. Study of youth in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois. By age 24, 6.2% had completed a 2-year or 4-year degree. Courtney, M.E., Terao, S., & Bost, N. (2007). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at Age 21*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.
18. Compared to median annual earnings of \$33,000 for Americans aged 20-24 years old in the second quarter of 2020. Bureau of Labor Statistics (September 23, 2020). Economic News Release: Table 3: Median Usual Weekly Earnings. *U.S. Department of Labor*. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/wkyeng.t03.htm>
19. While this subsection was too small to do full statistical analysis by race, trends align with racial disparities seen across MN employment data (Wolter, E. (August, 2020). Minnesota's workers of color and immigrants bear the brunt of COVID-19's impact. *Minnesota Compass*. [https://www.mncompass.org/trends/insights/2020-08-24-frontline-workers?utm\\_source=RS-newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=RS-September20](https://www.mncompass.org/trends/insights/2020-08-24-frontline-workers?utm_source=RS-newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=RS-September20)).
20. Nationally, Fosters report job loss rates ranging from 27% to 65%; see Foster Club (May 2020) and Greeson, Jaffee, Wasch, & Gyourko (September 2020). National unemployment was estimated at 10.2% nationally in July (Bureau of Labor Statistics (August 27, 2020). *The Economics Daily: Unemployment rate 16.1% in Massachusetts, 4.5% in Utah in July 2020*. *U.S. Department of Labor*. <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2020/unemployment-rate-16-point-1-percent-in-massachusetts-4-point-5-percent-in-utah-in-july-2020.htm>) and at 7.6% in Minnesota in July (Employment and Economic Development (Accessed September 20, 2020). State and National Employment and Unemployment Current Data. *MN DEED*. <https://mn.gov/deed/data/current-econ-highlights/state-national-employment.jsp>)
21. Foster Club (May 2020).
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23. United States Census Bureau. (14 September, 2020). Household Pulse Survey, Housing Insecurity, Week 13. [https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/hhp/#/?measures=HIR&s\\_state=00027](https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/hhp/#/?measures=HIR&s_state=00027)
24. United States Census Bureau. (14 September, 2020). Household Pulse Survey, Likelihood of Eviction and Foreclosure, Week 13. [https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/hhp/#/?measures=EVR&s\\_state=00027](https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/hhp/#/?measures=EVR&s_state=00027)
25. United States Census Bureau. (14 September, 2020). Household Pulse Survey, Difficulty Paying for Usual Household Expenses, Week 13. [https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/hhp/#/?measures=EXR&s\\_state=00027](https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/hhp/#/?measures=EXR&s_state=00027)
26. Foster Club (May 2020).
27. For examples on how foster youth aging out of care are faring poorly compared to their peers, see the Midwest Study research collection: Dworsky, A., et al (2011). *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth*. Chapin Hall <https://www.chapinhall.org/research/midwest-evaluation-of-the-adult-functioning-of-former-foster-youth/>
28. Foster Club (March 2020).
29. So far, Alaska, California, Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and Washington, D.C. have passed changes to prevent foster youth from aging out of care amidst the pandemic. See: Juvenile Law Center (May, 2020). Executive Orders and Administrative Policies Supporting Older Youth In and Leaving Foster Care In Response to COVID-19. [https://childwelfarecovid.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/EO-and-Admin-Summary\\_Older-Youth\\_-May-1-2020.pdf](https://childwelfarecovid.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/EO-and-Admin-Summary_Older-Youth_-May-1-2020.pdf)
30. Santa Clara County in California is piloting a one-year UBI program for 71 Fosters who recently aged out of care. See press release at: <https://www.sccgov.org/sites/opa/newsroom/Pages/universalbasicincomeprogram.aspx>
31. The study of adolescents and neuroscience has shown that brains do not fully mature until age 24 or 25 on average. While 15-16 year olds are as good at logical reasoning as adults, the "cognitive-control system" of self-regulation and risk management (especially in emotionally arousing situations and with peer pressure) is slower to mature. See for example: Albert, D., Chein, J., & Steinberg, L. (2013). The Teenage Brain: Peer Influences on Adolescent Decision Making. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22(2), 114-120. DOI: 10.1177/0963721412471347

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