Reinventing Foster Care

Introduction

In the United States, foster care is a state-run system that provides alternative living conditions for children and young people who caregivers are unable to provide adequate care. The goal of the foster care system is to ensure the safety, well-being, and permanent placement of these kids, while they wait for health, safety, stability and permanency. While intermittent care is important, the ultimate goal is to achieve permanency through reunification, adoption, or permanent guardianship (adoption, guardianship, or placement with relatives).

Problem

While there is a large amount of research youth experience during and after care, there is a lack of research on what happens to youth who are placed in care and what factors are important to their well-being. Foster care is a much higher risk for homelessness, incarceration, underemployment, and other negative outcomes. Research has shown that youth who age out of care are more likely than their peers to be homeless and that number starting to rise again in recent years after a slow decline in the 2000s.[1]

How might we improve exit outcomes for foster youth?

A snapshot of foster youth

Numbers
There are more than 450,000 youth in care, which is around the population of Kansas. 100 children in the US.

Entering Care
Youth enter care for many reasons, but the main ones are neglect, abuse, and parental substance use.

Types of Care
Youth may be placed in several different types of care, including kinship care, foster care, group homes, and residential treatment centers.

Length of Stay
The average stay in care is 2 years. However, 30% stay for 5.

Number of placements
Youth may on average 3 placements. However some may experience up to 30.

Exits
Over 20% of youth under have a primary goal to transition out of care, and the majority of youth that have a goal to be adopted.

Exiting Care
Youth who age out of care at 21. 18 can exit care prior to 21 if they choose to leave care, 18 is the age youth can be adopted and the age at which they can enter adulthood.

Outcomes[1]

the rate of PTSD is at 22% as high for youth aging out of foster care compared to veterans.

20% of youth are predicted to spend either a year of aging out, compared to only 6% of their peers. Nearly **21%** of all adult homeless were foster youth.

29% fewer foster care youths graduate high schools by 19 compared to their peers.

up to **42%** of youth aging out of foster care experience homelessness in the first few years. **30%** of youth in care are at risk of homelessness and incarceration and lack of stable housing.

up to **50%** of girls become pregnant a few years after aging out of care.

Why are the outcomes so poor?[1,2,3]

What quickly becomes clear is the research over the correlation between youth experiences in care and unfavorable outcomes for youth in care. Although it is important to understand what factors are important to youth well-being in care, the overall goal is to improve the quality of life for youth in care. There are many, many factors that contribute to the poor outcomes for youth in care, including the trauma of being in care, the lack of stability, and the disproportionate majority of children that need care. The reasons listed for why youth are in care are not the only reasons, but are some of the most common. Intersectionality, discrimination, and bias are also common combined with these burdens and zero regulations.

Reasons caregivers leave

Unequipped
Training offered by states, but a universal course for new and continuing caregivers, is not enough to prepare caregivers for the job. Caregivers are not provided the resources they need to be successful, due to not offer ongoing or specific training for specialized issues that caregivers face. Caregivers are not given the tools they need to be successful, such as information about the youth they are taking in, or information about the trauma the youth may have experienced.

Unsupported
Caregivers often not feel being appreciated or respected by their caseworkers, and experiencing a lack of lack of communicating with their caseworkers. Caregivers often feel like they are not a part of the team, and that their opinions are not valued. Caregivers often feel that their opinions are not valued because information is communicated.

Burnout and Grief
Youth youth often experiencing trauma and behavioral issues, and the process of being in care can be traumatic for caregivers. Caregivers often experience secondary trauma, and need support to deal with the trauma they are experiencing. Caregivers often need support to deal with the grief they may experience when youth leave.

Exhausted and overburdened
With multiple care worker meetings, home inspections, transportation issues, and other responsibilities, caregivers are overwhelmed. At every week, many caregivers struggle to keep up with the responsibilities of being a caregiver. Caregivers often need more support and resources to be able to provide the care youth need.

How might we increase retention and preparedness of foster caregivers in order to improve foster youth outcomes?

Caregiver Empathy Map

Says
"I signed up for this, but I feel like I am under a microscope."
"I'm overwhelmed and I don't know if I can keep doing it."

Thinks
"I want to provide a safe, stable and loving home for as many children as I can."
"I want to be a good foster parent, because I have to survive what happens."

Feels
Feels underwhelmed but overcrowded
Feels overwhelmed and underappreciated
Feels overwhelmed thinking their foster children.

Does
Spends own resources on foster children
Spends time and many c care for foster children
Spending such other training

Pain
Lack of sleep time
A hurts to say goodbye
Pain when foster children leaves
I cause some pain when I have to say goodbye
Pain in the heart and being my biological child

Gain
Gain a sense that they didn't want to see their succeed
Gain a sense that they feel proud
Learn to provide stability

*"When I find the CPS supervisor I was feeling overwhelmed and scared, and the kids heard me and other placements and said, shit's kind of a mess. Sometimes, as if I didn't have a choice in the matter, I'm just kind of, I'm just kind of, I'm just, I'm just, I'm just kind of, I'm just, I'm just, I'm just