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African American Youth Decline to Extend Foster Care Despite Their Needs

Rhonda Flowers-Corpening
Walden University

Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Rhonda Flowers-Corpening

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Review Committee
Dr. Debra Wilson, Committee Chairperson,
Social Work Faculty

Dr. Brittany Peters, Committee Member,
Social Work Faculty

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Abstract

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BSW, Livingstone College, 1996

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

In the United States, African American children are disproportionately placed in foster care and experience a myriad of problems, including physical and emotional abuse. As a result, negative post-discharge outcomes are revealed in existing literature, such as substance abuse, unemployment, homelessness, sexual promiscuity, and mental health issues. The purpose of this generic qualitative inquiry was to explore the foster care experience from the perspective of African American foster care alumni. The goal was to understand why the decision is made not to extend foster care services, despite their ongoing needs for support and lack of preparation for adulthood. Ecological Systems Theory, *person-in-environment*, was the theoretical framework that guided this research. Virtual interviews were conducted to collect data from the 10 study participants, ages 18 to 25, who made the decision not to continue in foster care, despite the option to do so. GoToMeet.me was used to transcribe the interviews and Nvivo 12 was used to analyze the data, identify themes and patterns, and code the data. The results provided seven themes, phrases, and patterns that described the attitude and emotional vulnerability of this group. The themes that emerged in this research tended to include youth perceptions of trust in the services provided such as lack of inclusion in decisions that affected their well being, inconsistency of foster care system interventions and misinformation as well as self-doubt and lack of confidence in providing for self-post foster care. The findings suggest an ongoing need for emotional support, financial preparation, and other transitional living skills to improve adulthood readiness.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the memory of my maternal grandparents, the late Verlon Matthew and Ocie Mae Dowdy Brown, my paternal grandmother and confidant, Mable Flowers Lowe, my beloved nephew and niece, Gregorie and Jordan Holmes, my mother-in-love, Patricia Lipford-Corpening, and my grandmother-in-love, Irene Moore Corpening. To say I miss you all is an understatement. Nevertheless, my grief has become my garment of inspiration in helping to abate the weight of your physical absence, and rather embrace the beauty of our cherished memories.

Acknowledgments

My priority is always to acknowledge my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who has given me the strength, energy, support, and knowledge to accomplish this endeavor of earning my PhD in Social Work, Clinical Expertise. Great is His faithfulness towards me, and His great mercy that is 'brand' new every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23, KJV).

Next, I must acknowledge my husband, James "Darryll" Corpening, 'always and forever.' Thank you for allowing me to pursue my goals and helping me to realize the depth of my inner strength. My parents, LJ and Vera Flowers, have believed in me from the beginning, setting expectations and providing the foundational underpinnings necessary for struggle and success. My siblings, Shonda (Greg) Holmes and Mark (Tina) Flowers, have proven to be my confidence and courage when doubt attempted to overstep established boundaries. My children, Erica/Jamar, JaColby, and KJ, are my greatest motivational assets, and the wind beneath my wings that pushes me to reach and soar, regardless. But, every organism has a heart string that makes it work and thrive, gently nudging and bringing joy that is simple, yet fulfilling. For me, my six absolutely wonderful grandchildren, Kamdyn, JaKaizen, Khloei, Kade, Kynedi, and Korynn, foster resilience, genuiness, empathy, and warmth in me.

My father-in-love, James Corpening, uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, cousins, brothers/sisters in-love, church family and friends. I want you to know that your love, support is priceless and powerful. My journey is realized in great worth and value because of the great people that God has placed in my life. I'm ever humbled by God's faithfulness to me, my family, and loved ones.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Transitioning into adulthood for most young adults is expected to be a challenging yet exciting undertaking. However, the same transition encountered by young people, particularly African American youth, who have been recipients of the child welfare foster care system is exacerbated by systemic and structural racism, perpetuating mental illness, racial inequality, racial discrimination, and racial injustice in the United States of America (Babbel, 2012; Bitton & Rajpurkar, 2015; Eenshuistra et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2018). Historically, the foster care system was established to protect White children, largely excluding African American children through the practice of open discrimination and warehousing black children until the end of the 19th century (Jimenez, 2006; Rosner & Markowitz, 2007; Simmons, 2020). "The 20th century resulted in efforts to end private child welfare through the establishment of the public child welfare system, proposing the responsibility for the safety of all children to be state mandated by court systems" (Jimenez, 2006; Simmons, 2020). However, public child welfare has resulted in disproportionality of out-of-home placements for African American children who comprise approximately 15% of the U.S. population, yet account for 42% of the foster care population (Jimenez, 2006; Simmons, 2020).

The literature indicates that, in 2017, African American youth represented approximately 14% of the overall population but was disproportionately placed in the foster care system at a rate of 23% (Cenat et al., 2021). The Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF, 2007) reported that, in 2004, 34% of the foster care population was African American children, which is approximately twice their proportionality in the general

population. Research reveals that homelessness, substance abuse, and socioeconomic problems are among the long-term misfortunes experienced by African American youth and their families, resulting from out-of-home placements (Goodkind et al., 2011; Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Yoshioka-Maxwell & Rice, 2020). Historically, Black children and their families received poor services from a system that almost exclusively served minority children, permitting racial politics to prescribe an alarming statistic that one in nine African American youth would be adversely impacted by the foster care system (Simmons, 2020).

The overrepresentation of African American youth in the foster care system, in comparison to Hispanic and White youth, provides evidence of systemic racism, breeding structural racism, criminalizing poverty, and dismantling African American families, as these youths often linger in foster care, minimizing the opportunity for reunification with their biological family when possible (Kim et al., 2017, Simmons, 2020). Nevertheless, this phenomenon has not been sufficiently studied across the specified diverse ethnic groups (Kim et al., 2017; Villegas & Pecora, 2012). Systemic racism and structural racism in the foster care system have been recognized for feeding the pipeline between foster care, juvenile justice, and prison, particularly for African American youth who face criminal charges for mental illness or behavioral challenges (AECF, 2007; U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2007). Studies have indicated that chances for African American youth to achieve permanency are significantly less than those for White and Hispanic children, affected by placement instability and the prevalence of race-related inequalities (Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Kemp & Bodonyi, 2002).

Current literature discusses the foster care system and the overarching disparities faced by foster care recipients, particularly the disproportionality of out-of-home placements of African American youth (Simmons, 2020; Villegas & Pecora, 2012). Williams-Butler et al. (2018) found that, historically, African American youths disproportionately exceed the number of White and Hispanic youths being served by the foster care system by more than two to one. However, there is minimal literature that addresses African American youth who decide not to extend foster care services beyond their 18th birthday, despite their lack of preparation for the autonomy of adulthood. The awareness of social injustices related to systemic and structural racism are potential factors that support this decision, but the research must be expanded upon from the point of view of the target population. Therefore, the intention of this research was to understand why African American youth decline to extend foster care services despite the potential benefits, such as health care, housing, and financial support. This study explored the factors that complicate the idea of fair treatment, such as disproportionality, abuse, neglect, and poverty, all of which are issues that the research identifies as being more prevalent among African American youth (Kim et al., 2017; Simmons, 2020).

Additional sections of this chapter will include background information, specifically related to the history of African American youth in out-of-home placements, racism as a factor, disproportionality, and maltreatment. Furthermore, a discussion of literature regarding the scope of this work, including the efforts to clearly answer the research question, address the identified research problem, and the required social change initiative that is necessary to begin the process of improving the likelihood of African

American youth accepting the opportunity to extend foster care, due to increasing the awareness of social service agencies that participate in the delicate services that adversely impact this phenomenon. In this chapter, I will explain the theoretical framework used as the underpinning of this work, the nature of this study, provide definitions of associated terms, limitations, assumptions, challenges, and summarize the significance of the work regarding study topic.

Background

The literature indicates that African American children continue to be disproportionately placed in child protection services, but the cause is poorly explained and even more poorly understood (Cenat et al., 2021). Simmons (2020) reports that race-related conflict within the child welfare system began with privatized foster care, transitioned into public care in the 20th century, and continues to manifest increased disparities compared to White and Hispanic youth. Categorically, two primary factors are evident in the contributing factors associated with this phenomenon, which are sociodemographic status and racial discrimination (Cenat et al., 2021). African American youth have been confronted with systemic racism and structural racism from the opening of The New York City Children's Aid Society by Reverend Charles Loring Brace in 1853 (GAO, 2007; Rosner & Markowitz, 1997; Simmons, 2020). Research has shown that protection of White youth was the original intent of foster care in the United States, resulting in African American children being deliberately segregated into overcrowded and understaffed all-Black institutions, referred to as warehouses (GAO, 2007; Rosner & Markowitz, 1997). Current research continues to show an overrepresentation of African

American youth placed in foster care and evidence of racial disparities that remain poorly

researched and poorly understood (Cenat et al., 2021; Children's Bureau, 2016).

The literature revealed a distinct connection between foster care and the juvenile

justice system as a standard pathway into criminalizing homelessness and out-of-home

placements known as the foster care to prison pipeline (Yamat, 2020). Law enforcement

is said to be more prevalent in African American communities, making a significant

impact on the number of child protective services referrals and investigations,

contributing to the overrepresentation of children of color being overly involved in foster

care and overlapping criminal justice complications (Edwards, 2019). As a result, studies

show a similar connection between racial disproportionality and racial disparities within

foster care (Children's Bureau, 2016).

Additional studies reveal that 53% of minority children are subjected to child

protective services investigation before their 18th birthday, often due to reports of poverty

(Schoenherr, 2016). African American children are removed from their families during

child protective services investigations more than White and Hispanic youth, and the

following factors are generally evident: longer stays out of the family home, which

decreases the likelihood for reunification; multiple foster care placements, which

minimizes the possibility of achieving permanency; and the likelihood of poor social,

behavioral, and educational outcomes (NCSL, 2018, 2021).

Rosenburg and Abbott (2019) submitted that adverse foster care experiences are

higher for African American youths than White and Hispanic near-age counterparts, both

in and out of the child welfare system. African American youths experience innumerable

hardships, such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, and limited kinship contact, often ending in abrupt and unfavorable emancipations at the age of majority (Iglehart et al., 2002; [Washington State Center for Court Research] WSCCR, 2018).

Research has shown that African American youth experience higher discharge disparities, relative to White and Hispanic youth, enduring adverse transitional outcomes related to more extended foster care placements, multiple care placements, maltreatment while in care, and the decreased chances of ever achieving permanency (AECF, 2018; Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018). The U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (2018) found that despite fewer African American children ever achieving permanency, such as adoption or kinship stability, they comprise a great majority of yearly emancipations.

The research reveals that multiple initiatives have been engaged to improve the foster care system. The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) was started in 1973 by Marian Wright Edelman to advocate for disadvantaged American children. The CDF adopted the primary slogan of "Leave No Child Behind," including youth in the child welfare system. The CDF reports that every 47 seconds, an American child is abused or neglected, costing approximately $80.3 billion, with African American youth disproportionately represented in the child welfare system. The financial provisions afforded by the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, which replaced the previous Independent Living Initiative of 1986, was designed with the intent of securing financial flexibility to support and prepare foster care participants for structured and organized independent living by extending the foster care services for all foster care recipients beyond the typical aging

out period (Simmel & Kelly, 2019). A Chapin Hall study explored foster care efforts to include care participants in creating their Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP), again with the option to extend foster care services, however, youth participation was low and lacked interest (Powers et al., 2020). Simmel and Kelly (2019) found that the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act (CFCIA) provided the expansion of services for foster care alumni up to age 21, including Medicaid coverage, housing assistance, and mental health services. In 2018, the Family First Prevention Services Act was implemented for $5 million to expand the option to use child welfare funding for preventative services and program improvement (CDC, 2018).

Nevertheless, the problem to be explored is that despite the availability of these options, African American youths rarely extend foster care. The CDF (2018) reported that more than 20,000 youth are discharged from foster care without a permanent family. Research studies reveal that foster care alumni do not extend care in general despite inadequate preparation for adulthood (Goodkind et al., 2011). Rosenburg and Abbott (2019) found that maltreatment, such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse, is higher in foster care for African American youths than for White and Hispanic near-age counterparts. Therefore, social workers must seek to understand this phenomenon by staying abreast of relevant research findings that address African American youths who are discharged from foster care. As a result, social workers can increase their knowledge base, thus improving best practice engagement through service delivery and advocacy (Babbie, 2017; Dudley, 2011).

Extant literature revealed that foster care recipients, in general, do not extend care. The reported reasons for leaving the system include simply being tired of being in care, wanting to "be out from under the thumb" of the child welfare system, or "to do for oneself," a history of maltreatment while in care, resulting in mistrust of the system, and a lack of knowledge regarding the option to extend care (Courtney et al., 2007; Jones, 2019). However, the gap in the literature is the limited knowledge on why African American youth do not extend foster care beyond their 18th birthday, despite their lack of preparation for adulthood and the minimal likelihood for reconnecting with kinship support systems (AFCARS, 2017; Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Simmel & Kelly, 2019). The literature describes the contentious history of African American youth in the private and public foster care systems, discussing race-related issues that could affect the decision to end care. However, the research has not clearly explained why African American youth decide to leave care without extending services, regardless of the option to do so (Courtney, 2010; Fowler 2018). Research has shown that after aging out of foster care, African American youths live on the streets, in homeless shelters, engage in premature parenting, struggle socioeconomically, and negate health care coverage (Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Rosenburg & Abbot, 2019). Therefore, why do African American youths not extend care, despite the overarching risk factors associated with the reported outcomes of homelessness, victimization, and socioeconomic troubles?

Problem Statement

The literature indicates that African American children continue to be disproportionately placed in child protection services, but the cause is poorly explained

and even more poorly understood (Cenat et al., 2021). Simmons (2020) reports that race-related conflict within the child welfare system began with privatized foster care, transitioned into public care in the 20th century, and continues to manifest increased disparities compared to White and Hispanic youth. Categorically, two primary factors are evident in the contributing factors associated with this phenomenon, which are sociodemographic status and racial discrimination (Cenat et al., 2021). African American youth have been confronted with systemic racism and structural racism from the opening of The New York City Children's Aid Society by Reverend Charles Loring Brace in 1853 (GAO, 2007; Rosner & Markowitz, 1997; Simmons, 2020).

The literature revealed that the child welfare system began as a modern era of government-sponsored care in 1962, transferring the disparate conditions experienced by African American youth, related to out of home placements (Children's Bureau, 2016). Disproportionality statistics support the overrepresentation of African American youth in foster care placements, enduring longer stays in care and worse maltreatment than their White or Hispanic counterparts (Cheng & Lo, 2012; Simmons, 2020). The Children's Bureau (2016) reports that African American children are 3.4 times more likely than White youth and 1.2 times as likely as Hispanic youth to spend extended time in the child welfare system (Cenat et al., 2021). The problem that is encountered is the challenges faced by African American youth in foster care result in poor outcomes, a lack of preparation for discharge, a lack of independent living skills, and the evidence of unmet needs (Gypen et al., 2017; Miller, 2017). In other words, African American youth who are discharged from foster care are at a greater disadvantage to succomming prey to drug

abuse, promiscuity, mental illness, homelessness, incarceration, and unemployment (AECF, 2018; Miller; 2017).

Additionally, treatment biases have historically impacted Black families at a higher rate when involved in supported services, such as foster care, as African American youth endure systemic bias and systemic racial injustice within the child welfare system when compared to White and Hispanic youth (Rosenburg & Abbot, 2019; Simmons, 2020). In the United States, institutional inequality is an ongoing problem of the child welfare system, due to cultural incompetence, cultural insensitivity, and limited culturally aware community-based programs to help mitigate the problems that result in African American youth being disproportionately placed in foster care (Edwards, 2019; Yamat, 2020). The child welfare system seems to discard the value of reunifying African American youth with their biological family, lacking adequate knowledge of how to build communities through the provision of community-based resources that promote safety and stability, while decreasing crime and neglect (Boyd, 2014; Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018). The voice and perceptions of African American parents are often ignored or not considered when complex decisions are made regarding the removal of their children, seemingly criminalizing socioeconomic barriers and minimizing personal worth due to poverty (Iglehart & Becerra, 2002; WSCCR, 2018). The literature was limited in revealing why African American youth do not extend foster care beyond the age of eighteen, including data regarding their lived experiences, perspectives, attitudes, and supportive needs. The research has shown that African American youth encounter more

difficulties during foster care placement than any other ethnic group, often at risk of experiencing more negative outcomes in adulthood (Miller Dyce, 2015).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this generic qualitative inquiry was to understand why African American foster care youth do not extend care beyond the age of majority, despite the evidence of multiple overarching environmental risk factors. The precise application of practice skills and practicality are the core tools necessary to effectively complete a generic qualitative inquiry designed to get to the nitty-gritty of this phenomenon. Open-ended questions and respondent observations were used to collect data from a real-world practice perspective, engaging a straightforward virtual qualitative in-depth interview approach to understand this phenomenon from the respondents' perspective (Patton, 2015). African American foster care youth are the target population of this study, which endeavors to inquire about their point-of-view regarding the ecological contributions that influenced their decision not to extend care—understanding their lived experiences. In contrast, in foster care, including maltreatment, racism, barriers and challenges, and the process of articulating discharge information is critical to answering the question of why African American youth make the decision not to extend foster care at the age of 18. Qualitative in-depth interviews were used to explore the feelings, thoughts, perceptions, perspectives, understandings, misunderstandings, notions, and assumptions experienced by African American foster care youth, consequently contributing to their decision to end care (Erickson, 2011; Howson, 2019; Patton, 2015). The social change initiative of this study is to positively improve the foster care experience for African American youth by

using the research findings to address child welfare systemic issues and improve the method by which discharge instructions are communicated. Primarily, the results of this study can benefit future foster care discharges for African American youth by improving the emotional, behavioral, race-related, and developmental experiences while in placement, thus improving lived experiences and discharge outcomes.

Research Question

RQ1: Why do African American youth decline to extend foster care services beyond their 18th birthday?

In order to effectively answer my research question, I used in-depth qualitative interview questions to prompt rich and detailed responses, elaborating beyond a simple yes or no. Open-ended questions provided the opportunity for the respondent to expand upon their answers, providing specific examples of experiences, and the chance to disagree or raise additional issue (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). For example, one of my interview questions asked, "Do you feel like your experience in foster care prepared you for independent living?" The second phase of the question, which was asking the respondent to explain their answer, probing further into their response to motivate the interviewee to describe the reasons why they feel the way they do. During the interviews the response to this question would often lead me to restructure or reorganize the order of the questions, in order to more effectively explore the intricate details of this phenomenon from the perspective of the respondent. The generic qualitative inquiry allows the flexibility of being strategic during the interview process when probing for more information that can be achieved through further elaboration by the respondent.

Theoretical Foundation

Bronfenbrenner's 1979 ecological systems theory is the most compelling theoretical concept in addressing the disadvantages experienced by African American youth in the foster care system who decide not to extend services beyond their 18th birthday. The underpinnings of ecological systems theory connect the person-in-environment and the intersecting persuasions of their social ecology on human development (Kirst-Ashman, 2015; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007). In other words, it is understanding the environmental factors that substantiate the lived experiences of a person and the effects of such experiences throughout one's life in every developmental milestone, including decision making (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Ecological systems theory addresses the person-in-environment based on the emergent themes embedded in the theory, such as economics, family, social, cultural, school, and the individual compared to societal factors (Flynn, 2020). As previously stated, compared to White and Hispanic near-aged counterparts, African American youth are disproportionately represented in the foster care system at a rate of two to one (Iglehart et al., 2002; WSCCR, 2018). Ecological systems theory focuses on the interface between the person in their environment, identifying their unmet needs and how every facet of life is affected by one's environment, which should lead to the provision of services and supports necessary to improve the potential for positive outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2015; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007; Rice, 1998).

Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979, 1987) considered the various social influences that extend beyond the person, yet placing the person at the core of sociocultural influences in the form of microsystems (family, school, church, peers), mesosystems (the overlaps in microsystems relationships), exo-systems (family friends, neighbors, legal services), and macro-systems (culturally specific attitudes and ideologies). In other words, to understand why African American youth do not extend foster care, despite the option to do so, consideration must be given to the persuasion of interfaces of immediate contacts and the reciprocal relationships of extended social value systems (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2015; Rice, 1998). The ecological systems theory defines the relational connections of a person-in-their environment and the power of environmental influences that affect outcomes, positively and negatively.

Theoretical Framework

The concepts provided in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory present the framework for understanding the experiences of African American foster care youth. Despite the need to do so, the decision not to extend foster care can only make transitioning into adulthood more challenging, making it necessary to connect the person and their environment (Williams & Sheehan, 2015). Through the lens of the ecological systems theory, a valuable framework for social work practice exists, providing a holistic approach to family and personal relationships inclusive of all systems (Flynn, 2020; Guy-Evans, 2020). Theoretically, the ecological systems approach makes the inevitable connection at the interface between people and their social environment, known as the person-in-environment (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2015). Ecologically, the junctures that

intersect include the social environment, transactions, energy, input, output, interface, adaptation, coping, and interdependence (Cho et al., 2012; Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2015). The theory strongly asserts that the environment is vitally important in the study and understanding human behavior, especially when analyzing a particular social phenomenon, such as the decision not to extend foster care services by African American youth despite their ongoing service needs. The ecological systems perspective is critical in conceptualizing and interpreting where the interface happens, as well as identifying transactions that can contribute to the overarching risk factors, such as homelessness, criminal activity, educational deficits, unemployment, poverty, and a lack of healthcare (Atkinson, 2008; Guy-Evans, 2020).

Cho et al. (2012) identified four levels that are assumed to be essential from the ecological theorist point of view: individual, interpersonal, societal, and cultural. Individuality opens the door for the personality and perspective of the respondent, from the perspective of what makes them authentic and distinct as a person. The interpersonal perspective adds extended relationship connections of family and friends that influence decision making, while societal experiences pull upon other group associations, such as employment, that broadens one's exposure and influence. Finally, cultural intellect is often at the core of personal belief systems, including traditional thought processes that exist despite environmental changes and challenges. Sociodemographic characteristics can range from age, gender, ethnicity, education level, income, and more, which are all individual features that could impact decision making (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Nature of the Study

A generic qualitative inquiry is the nature of this study, which was conducted through virtual in-depth interviews and observations with African American foster care alumni. The generic qualitative inquiry is a concrete, practical, and reasonable approach to studying a phenomenon, absent of the formal influence of traditional theoretical, epistemological, ontological, or philosophical framing (Patton, 2015; Percy et al., 2015). In other words, the opportunity to observe respondents' personalization of their actual lived experiences, including their thoughts, feelings, perspectives, beliefs, and interpretations, can help answer this phenomenon. For this generic qualitative inquiry, I asked open-ended questions to the respondents while making behavioral observations, in search of critical content necessary to answer the research question, particularly related to why the target population often chooses not to extend foster care and identify the contributing factors (McAdams, 2012; Patton, 2015). The generic qualitative approach utilizes real-world practice skills to reasonably understand what is happening in the foster care system and other attaching systems contributing to this phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The hope was to elucidate themes and patterns, which were helpful during the coding phase of the data analysis in examining the feelings, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of the target population (Patton, 2015; Percy et al., 2015; Saldana, 2016).

Definitions of Terms

The following terms and definitions have been provided to provide insight into the application of the term, as related to this study:

Aging out: When a teen in the foster care system turns 18 years old without finding permanency, and leaves the foster care system (Ahmann, 2017).

Age-of-majority: The age at which the child legally becomes an adult, aging out of foster care and other systems with the ability to make independent decisions.

Black youth/African American youth: Black people who are residents of the United States who came from, or whose ancestors came from, Africa (Barker, 2014). American citizens of African descent, the offspring of African slaves, an ethnic group of Americans with total or partial ancestry from any of the Black racial groups of Africa (U.S. Census Bureau [USCB], 2018). This study will not include Haitians.

White: Related to a group of people having European ancestry, generally classified by a light skinned pigmentation.

Child welfare: A continuum of services designed to protect children, strengthen families to care for their children, and promote permanency when children cannot remain with or return to their families. Services should be family-centered, strengths-based, and respectful of the family's culture, values, beliefs, and needs (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017).

Child welfare discharge: The exit out of foster care either due to aging out of care or transitioning into another placement level (Rosenberg & Abbott, 2019).

Discrimination: The prejudgment and harmful treatment of people based on identifiable characteristics such as race, gender, religion, or ethnicity (Barker, 2014).

Disparity: Unequal outcomes of one racial or ethnic group compared to another (NCSL, 2018, 2021).

Disproportionality/overrepresentation: Overrepresentation or underrepresentation of a racial or ethnic group compared to its percentage of the total population (NCSL, 2018, 2021).

Ecological systems theory: The theory that views people (youth) developmental process as a complex system of relationships within the context of one's environment, including family, schools, broader cultures, values, laws, and customs. The person-in-environment concept is best suited to describe the ecological systems theory (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2015).

Emancipation: Emancipation ages in the foster care system range between 16 and 21 years old and can either be generated by the youth or the child welfare system (Rosenberg & Abbott, 2017)

Extended care: The system design to help older youth successfully transition into adulthood by allowing them additional time in foster care to secure independent living or added family support (Rosenberg & Abbott, 2019).

Foster care: A 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom the state agency has placement and care responsibility. This includes, but is not limited to, placements in foster family homes, foster homes of relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, child care institutions, and pre-adoptive homes (Child Welfare Gateway, 2012; NCDHHS, 2018). Foster Care has moved from private management to public, state-mandated care. Respondents for this study will be drawn from the public foster care sphere.

Generic qualitative inquiry: A qualitative method of using in-depth interviews, natural settings, fieldwork, observations, and document analysis to answer the research inquiry. Generic qualitative inquiries do not subscribe to any particular theoretical, philosophical, ontological, or epistemological concept (Patton, 2015).

Hispanic: Persons who identify themselves as coming from or being descended from people from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central America, or South America.

Independent living: A program that assists youth who are transitioning from an out-of-home care placement in receiving services necessary to become independent. Programs provide youth with services such as stable, safe living accommodations, basic life-skill, and interpersonal skill-building techniques, educational opportunities, assistance in job preparation and attainment, trauma-informed mental health care, and physical health care (NCDHHS, 2018).

Maltreatment: In foster care, maltreatment is indicated when placement agencies do not ensure that children are shielded from abuse, neglect, and harm (NCDHHS, 2018).

Oppression: The notion that groups of people have unequal power, and the more dominant groups use their power to exert violence, exploit, marginalize, deny equal rights, and interiorizing lesser groups (Barker, 2014).

Permanency: A legally permanent, nurturing family for every child and youth. As defined in the Child and Family Services Reviews, a child in foster care is determined to have achieved permanency when any of the following occurs: (1) "The child is discharged from foster care to reunification with his or her family, either a parent or other

relative; (2) the child is discharged from foster care to a legally finalized adoption; or (3) the child is discharged from foster care to the care of a legal guardian" (NCDHHS, 2018).

Race equality: Equality, in contrast, aims to ensure that everyone gets the same things in order to enjoy whole, healthy lives. Like equity, equality aims to promote fairness and justice, but it can only work if everyone starts from the same place and needs the same things (NCSL, 2018, 2021).

Race equity: Equity involves trying to understand and give people what they need to enjoy full, healthy lives (NCSL, 2018, 2021).

Racism: The systematic discrimination directed against minorities or marginalized groups. Racism differs from prejudice, hatred, or episodic discrimination because it requires one racial group to have systemic power and superiority over other groups in society (USDHHS, 2018).

Structural racism/institutional racism: The historical, cultural, political, ideological, and economic practices have produced disparities and disproportionality between different racial groups. The focus is on systems that distribute power and resources based on race and ethnicity (GAO, 2007).

Systemic racism: "Systemic racism describes a dynamic system that produces and replicates racial ideologies, identities, and inequities. Systemic racism is the well-institutionalized pattern of discrimination that cuts across major political, economic and social organizations in a society" (AECF, 2018).

Transition: To change from one level to another within the foster care system or exit the foster care system at the age of majority (NCDHHS, 2018).

Assumptions

I assumed that the study participants would be willing to answer the survey

questions without reservation or fear of any sort of systematic retaliation. I assumed that

each participant would value the intent of this research study and feel comfortable telling

their story from their perspective, elaborating freely to the extent of thoroughly

answering each question. I assumed that each respondent would feel safe and trust that

their confidentiality will be protected and that their information would be accurately

reported. I also assumed that each interviewee would share a vested interest in the topic

of the decision not to extend foster care services by African American youth and would

be open to discussing their foster care history and experience. However, philosophically,

the following assumptions apply to this study:

Epistemological Assumptions

The epistemological assumptions connected with what is known about African

American youth who do not extend foster care beyond their 18th birthday (Gambrill,

2012; Garcia-Martin et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2015). African American youth who are

discharged from foster care are suspected to be at a higher risk of achieving adverse

outcomes than White or Hispanic youth (Garcia et al., 2015).

Axiological Assumptions

The axiological assumptions dealt with the potential of achieving permanency for

African American youth who discharge from the foster care system—understanding the

practices, pitfalls, challenges, experiences, and difficulties faced by this target group

related to the decision to decline the opportunity to extend foster care services (Gambrill, 2012).

Ontological Assumptions

The ontological assumptions addressed the connection between ecological factors and the lived realities that influence the long-term outcomes of African American youth who discharge from foster care at the age of 18, despite more effective options (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Gambrill, 2012).

Scope and Delimitations

The intent of this research was to explore the foster care experiences of African American youth who reach the age of majority and decline the option to extend care. The hope is to understand the lived experiences of this population, from their perspective, with hopes of learning about their ups and downs, struggles, pitfalls, and systematic communication. The goal is to use this information to help interpret their decision not to extend foster care services after the age of 18 and identify the contributing factors that adversely affect their outcomes. The scope of this study did not include foster care alumni who emancipated the system before age 18. Although the experience of youth who were legally emancipated prior to their 18th birthdate is valuable information and can affect my study analysis regarding answering the research question, they were not included in this work. The scope of this research included a small sample group of 10 African American foster care alumni who aged out of care at the age of 18 and declined to extend services. The sample size is most appropriate for completing a generic qualitative inquiry, as smaller sample size is most useful in qualitative research in

capturing the complexity, depth, variation, and context of a phenomenon, versus the larger sample size of a quantitative study, being most beneficial for statistical value (Gentles et al., 2015).

The target group of African American youth were between the ages of 18 and 25, having spent a minimum of 1 year or more in the foster care system. The scope of this research focused on youth who receive services from a nonprofit organization in North Carolina, and has the foundational concept of hope, opportunities, mentorship, and education for foster care recipients and foster care alumni. The organization was founded by a foster care alumnus who learned the inner workings of the foster care system from experience. As a result, her way of giving back was to start this nonprofit organization, providing housing and guidance to foster care youth who choose not to extend foster care services at the age of 18 or who emancipate themselves from the system prior to the age of 18. The belief that every foster child deserves a home and a steady connection that is consistent and reliable is at the core of this organization. Annually, multiple community-based events to support their budget and to provide ongoing resources for foster care alumni are engaged with the support of local and national stakeholders. The potential respondents for the research have daily, weekly, and random contact with the organization, making their accessibility reasonably available, especially during this pandemic.

In-depth virtual interviews were conducted with the 10 foster care alumni. The virtual interviews lasted approximately 1 hour to 1.25 hours. This study required 10 participants to volunteer to participate in this study. In-depth interviews were conducted

with this small sample of respondents, providing data-rich content valuable in addressing

the phenomena (Patton, 2015). Purposive and snowball sampling were used to locate the

10 respondents that I interviewed (Castillo, 2009).

Limitations

The limitations of this study were related to the nature of this research being a

generic qualitative inquiry, which does not rely on a specific theoretical or philosophical

framework to achieve validity. This research methodology has been criticized and

discounted by research skeptics, due to the absence of a theoretical lens and the primary

perspective being achieved from the target population, thus dually questioning validity

related to the respondents and recognizing the generic inquiry as an actual research

design (Bellamy et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the literature validates the qualitative inquiry

method to understanding this phenomenon and validating and supporting the value of the

personal perspective of the respondents (Bellamy et al., 2016). A valuable strength of the

qualitative research and interpretivist approach is gaining insight into the respondents'

attitude, behaviors, value systems, fears, needs, concerns, motivations, aspirations,

culture, goals, and lifestyle by collecting data, particularly in an unstructured, face-to-

face or virtual interview setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Howson, 2019).

The study included a small sample of 10 participants. The sample is not

generalizable, and transferability was not the focus of this study, but rather achieving

saturation of the data by ensuring that a thorough description of the foster care experience

of African American foster care alumni was achieved (Moustakas, 1994). African

American foster care alumni were the only participants, and the geographical location of

each participant was the same. The potential for the personal biases of the researcher

during the interview process, interpretive process, and transcription phase was a potential

limitation. The study did not include foster care alumni who exited the system through

emancipation prior to their 18th birthday and decided not to extend care.

The marginalized target population of African American foster care alumni

realistically faced many difficulties under normal circumstances, which I expected to be

exacerbated by the current worldwide pandemic, COVID-19. The barriers to services

have increased due to socioeconomic factors, which intensified some of the subjects'

willingness to participate in the study. Nevertheless, this exact strength was not

compromised by the virtual interview process. Furthermore, I ensured the validity,

trustworthiness, and control of potential biases of this study by creatively engaging the

interviewees through virtual rapport building, such as multiple verbal check-ins, starting

slow, initially engaging in casual conversations related to study topic, and the

attentiveness to facial expressions and squared shoulders, in order to achieve the "touchy-

feely/emotional" setting expected during the data collection phase (Babbie, 2017;

Prossack, 2020).

Significance

The significance of this research is that it is essential to improving the practice of

professional social work related to training, policies, and procedures that impact the way

social work professionals deliver services. Specifically, professional social workers are

primarily responsible for the disproportionality and placement instability of African

American youth, which can be improved by increasing awareness through improving

training, policies, and procedures. Furthermore, social sciences and behavioral-related

organizations can use these findings to improve their cultural competence, potentially

resulting in social change initiatives that improve services for African American foster

care participants and foster care participants in general by implementing critical solutions

to addressing premature discharges from foster care at the age of 18. I hope that the

perspectives on this phenomenon, as narrated by the respondents, are received as both

significant and equitable for future progress that improves discharge outcomes.

Policymakers, legislators, stakeholders, and communities must understand the

significance of their knowledge of the hardships experienced by African American youth

transitioning into the autonomy of adulthood who are not afforded equal opportunities as

their same age foster care recipients of White and Hispanic descent (Crawford et al.,

2015). It is a significant need for the lack of permanency being achieved and the

maltreatment of abuse, neglect, and violence for African American youth who are

prematurely discharged at the age of 18 often to continue, increasing the risk for

educational deficits, homelessness, sexual promiscuity, mental health issues, and

community-based complications related to substance abuse and unemployment (Affronti

et al., 2015).

Summary

In Chapter 1 I presented a thorough introduction into the research topic regarding

African American youth who decline to extend foster care services after age 18, despite

their ongoing service needs. Chapter 1 is organized into 13 different sections, beginning

with the introduction and concluding with this summary. The purpose of the study,

research question, theoretical framework, conceptual framework, nature of the study, and prominent related definitions are included to help establish the foundation of this study. This chapter also acknowledges the research design, assumptions, and delimitations.

In this qualitative dissertation study, I sought to address the research topic regarding the decision made by African American youth to decline the option to extend foster care services beyond their 18th birthday. The content of this study is organized based on the Walden University qualitative dissertation checklist, which provides detailed instructions and guidance for the successful completion of this study. The dissertation comprises five chapters that are specifically organized to thoroughly address the identified phenomenon, beginning with Chapter 1, which provides a brief, but in-depth insight into the topic. Chapter 1 also introduces the research question, which is continually referenced throughout this study.

The categories and subheadings provided in each section serve to solidify a straightforward foundation in establishing the blueprint and underpinning for this research study. Again, African American youth who are endeavoring to transition out of the child welfare system safely are often more vulnerable than other care recipients, mainly White and Hispanic youth, due to not having achieved permanency, as well as the serious destruction of biological connections, racism, and maltreatment in the form of abuse and neglect (Tyrell & Yates, 2017). This first chapter of this dissertation provided information and research findings that address racism, disproportionality, and systemic injustices that adversely impact the foster care experience, potentially persuading the decision to decline extending foster care services.

Chapter 2 will present the literature review of this work. In this chapter, I focus on answering the research question by identifying the gap in research that validates the need for this study. I expand upon the theoretical foundation and the nature of the study in the efforts to synthesize the primary concepts of this phenomenon. Also included is discussion of disproportionality, disparities, racial biases of child welfare workers, person-centered planning and discharge planning, and several social work initiatives set in place to improve outcomes for recipients of the child welfare system, particularly African American youth.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This qualitative dissertation study seeks to address the research topic regarding the decision made by African American youth to decline the option to extend foster care services beyond their 18th birthday. African American youth who are endeavoring to transition out of the child welfare system safely are often more vulnerable than other care recipients, mainly White and Hispanic youth, due to not having achieved permanency, and due to the serious destruction of biological connections, racism, and maltreatment in the form of abuse and neglect (Tyrell & Yates, 2017).

Chapter 2 presents the literature review of this work. In this chapter, I focus on answering the research question by identifying the gap in research that validates the need for this study. After describing the strategy used to find relevant literature, I expand on the theoretical foundation and the nature of the study in the efforts to synthesize the primary concepts of this phenomenon. Furthermore, I discuss the literature related to disproportionality, disparities, racial biases of child welfare workers, person-centered planning and discharge planning, and several social work initiatives set in place to improve outcomes for recipients of the child welfare system, particularly African American youth.

Literature Search Strategy

The Walden University Library was used to retrieve pertinent data regarding African American youth in the foster care system in the United States in comparison to White and Hispanic near-aged counterparts. The literature search expanded to explore why African American youth discontinue care, despite the option to extend care, and the

extensive risk factors they face as foster care alumni. Data were collected by searching

for additional online resources and reviewing peer-reviewed scholarly articles from

Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost, PsycArticles, PsychINFO, ERIC, Google

Scholar, Social Science Abstracts, SAGE Journals, and the American Psychological

Association. Published dissertations were reviewed from Walden University, Capella

University, and the University of Northern Colorado.

Keywords that were used to assist in the data search included *foster care*, *child*

welfare system, *United States*, *permanency planning*, *kinship connections*, *emancipation*,

discharge, *transition*, *disparities*, *extended care*, *challenges*, *maltreatment*, *homelessness*,

sex trafficking, *substance abuse*, *sexual abuse*, *suicidality*, *African American youth*, *Black*

youth, *White youth*, *Hispanic youth*, *millennials*, *housing*, *employment*, *ecological*

systems theory, *generic qualitative inquiry*, and *pragmatism*. Additionally, to solidify that

the identified gap in the literature exists, I expanded this research to other online sources

and other completed dissertations. The literature search was conducted to understand this

phenomenon from the perspective of African American foster care youth who do not take

advantage of the opportunity to continue foster care beyond the age of majority.

The literature search revealed an abundance of articles on the child welfare

system, primarily the foster care program and the allotted governance of local, state, and

federal policies and procedures in place to assure the health and safety of care recipients.

I reviewed literature surrounding the strategies used when placing African American

youth into the foster care program compared to the out-of-home removal procedures

engaged for White and Hispanic youth. Exploring the data revealed a plethora of

problems related to racial injustices as a significant factor regarding the myriad of complexities reported about African American youth in care. However, understanding how such difficulties influence the decision to end care at the age of 18 was a focal point of this literature review, but the findings are minimal and separated by age and gender. Furthermore, I used this opportunity to learn more about the communication process regarding discharge readiness and the method of information distribution provided to care recipients addressing discharge from care options.

Theoretical Foundation

Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was used as the theoretical framework for this research in understanding how the lived experiences of African American youth influence their decision not to extend foster care, despite the evidence of identified barriers and challenges that negatively impact their adulthood experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The underpinnings of ecological systems theory connect the person-in-environment and the intersecting relationship persuasions such as individual, interpersonal, societal, and cultural impressions affecting one's social ecology on human development (Cho et al.,, 2012; Kirst-Ashman & H, 2015; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007). In other words, understanding the environmental factors that substantiate the lived experiences of a person and the effects of such experiences throughout one's life, including developmental milestones and decision making, is critical in answering the research question (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As previously stated, compared to White and Hispanic near-aged counterparts, African American youth are disproportionately represented in the foster care system at a rate of two to one (Iglehart et al., 2002;

WSCCR, 2018). Ecological systems theory focuses on the interface between the person and their environment, magnifying unmet needs and how every facet of life is affected by one's environment, which should lead to the provision of services and supports necessary to improve the potential for positive outcomes for this marginalized group (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Kirst-Ashman, 2015; Rice, 1998; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007).

Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979, 1987) considers the various social influences that extend beyond the person, yet placing the person at the core of sociocultural influences such as family, school, church, peers, overlaps in relationships, neighbors, social service systems, legal services, and culturally specific attitudes and ideologies. Therefore, to understand why African American youth do not extend foster care, despite the option to do so, consideration must be given to the swaying of interfaces from immediate contacts and the reciprocal relationships of extended social value systems, such as churches (Kirst-Ashman, 2015; Rice, 1998). The ecological systems theory defines the relational connections of a person-in-their environment and the power of environmental influences that affect decisions and choices.

The ecology of human development, Bronfenbrenner (1979), explicates that the world is made up of five systems that affect the lived interactions of people. Bronfenbrenner identified five developmental systems that he attributes to impacting how people evolve in connection with their social influences. The developmental systems are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Each of these systems are described further in the following sections.

Microsystem

The microsystem, which is known as a child's most intimate learning setting, and the child's first venue for learning about the real-world. The development of trust and mutuality is the real power in the initial experience of interrelationships within the context of their family or microsystem. Microsystem interactions are considered personal and intimate. For example, a foster child who has experienced strong and healthy nurturing should display a positive attitude, while a foster child who has experienced a lack of affection may be distant and withdrawn (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Mesosystem

Mesosystems serve as the agents used to connect multiple systems necessary for the child, parent, and family to grow and expand beyond dyad relationships. The mesosystem's real power lies in encouraging the development of healthy and trusting relationships that extend beyond the family and familiarity, providing essential family balance while decreasing family dysfunction. For example, the interconnectivity of mesosystems, such as the biological family and the foster family, is crucial in either the positive or negative development of the child (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Exosystem

Exosystems maintain a familial connection through psychological bonds. The intimacy of this system is powerful in that it keeps the family members mentally present with each other, despite physicality. However, this same intimacy can be the basis for family stress and dysfunction due to the spillover of other extended settings that are not addressed. For example, foster care youth are consistently affected by systems that do not

involve them, such as an argument between the foster parent and their boss that puts the foster parent in a bad mood that negatively impacts the child (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Macrosystem

The macrosystem is the comprehensive system that is multifaceted in linking cultural beliefs, social values, political trends, and the community at large. This system is tasked with helping people weave the many threads that make life complete and whole. For example, the difference in children living in poverty being removed from their families, changing their socioeconomic status, geographic location, and overall life experience (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Chronosystem

Chronosystems acknowledge the value of historical family influences and relationship dynamics to understand the foundational framework that explains behavior and conduct responses to life situations, such as stress or joy. For example, normal life transitions that are affected, either positively or negatively, by major life events, such as divorce, death, out-of-home placement, or serious illness (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Application of the Five System Levels

Bronfenbrenner's five system levels were applied in this research to address the multidimensional social realities and contributing factors faced by African American foster care youth, thus encumbering their decision not to extend foster care. Again, the problem is the multiple overarching risk factors adversely impacting the efforts of this target population to be successful in adulthood, such as homelessness, substance abuse, victimization, unemployment, the lack of social support systems, and have never

achieved permanence. Williams-Butler et al. (2020) found that the risk is more significant

for systemic racial bias, discrimination, and maltreatment for African American youth

and their families in the foster care system. This dynamic is directly challenged by the

ecological variables that tend to draw negative attention to environmental norms related

to this group. The social biases that result from racial injustices seem to impact the

disproportionality of this marginalized group in the child welfare system and the juvenile

justice system.

In this research study, consideration was applied to the ecology of each

developmental level in terms of the attempt to understand the person-in-environment

dynamic that affected the respondents' decision to decline the option to extend foster

care. In this work, microsystem concepts were applied by the efforts to explore the

establishment or lack thereof of robust and easily accessible positive relationships with

reliable people who can be counted upon for genuine social and emotional support.

Understanding these relationships is imperative in expanding upon foundational

influences. These relationships were discussed to access the interpretive characteristics of

mutual trust, respect, support, and warm and consistent companionship expectations. The

concept of mesosystems was applied when attempting to identify the key players in each

case connected through the development of healthy and strong relationships that extend

beyond the family system but connect back to the family system for positive support and

the maintenance of historical foundations.

The exosystem is used to engage the family system in ongoing services that

strengthen the psychological connections within the family and connect the family to

extended connections such as employers, doctors, and educators, directly addressing many of the overarching risk factors faced by the target population. The macrosystem was utilized to understand advocacy initiatives for swift and severe social change within the context communities by assisting political resources on multiple levels, including state, local, and federal options for growth and progress within the child welfare system, specifically related to African American youth. The chronosystem was applied in exploring the thoughts of the provision of healthy outlets that allow African American families to deal with historical family events that have shaped life perceptions and concepts in an undesirable manner, thus requiring restructuring and cognitive reprogramming of thought processes and conceptualizations. As a social work researcher, I applied each aspect of the five system levels to build upon and help answer the research question and help fill the current research gap. The creation of interdependent variables that interact in a multidirectional manner can positively improve behavior, assuring that each system is well-informed of practice and service delivery needs for the target population.

Theoretical Framework

The ecological systems theory provides a valuable theoretical framework for professional social work in working with vulnerable populations and can be characterized as the foundational theory for social work practice, beginning at the generalist practitioner level (Zastro & Kirst-Ashman, 2007). The ecological perspective assumes that an interface exists between people and their social environment, generally stated as the person-in-environment. Ecologically, a holistic view of African American youth and

their environments is commanded, broadening the area of focus to include people,

organizations, services, service arrangements, ideas, thoughts, and systems in

understanding this phenomenon (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ecology has other applicable

terms such as social environment, transactions, energy, input, output, interface,

adaptation, coping, and interdependence, associated with ecological theory to understand

human behavior (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2015; Zastro & Kirst-Ashman, 2007). The theory

strongly asserts that the environment is vitally important in the study and understanding

of how people act, especially when analyzing a particular social phenomenon, such as

African American youth not extending care after the age of 18. The ecological

perspective is critical in conceptualizing and interpreting where the interface and overlap

impact decision-making.

Cho et al. (2012) have identified four levels that are assumed to be essential from

the ecological systems theorist point of view: individual, interpersonal, societal, and

cultural, serving as a set of interrelated elements that make a functional whole.

Individuality opens the door for the personality and perspective of the respondent, from

the perspective of what makes them authentic and distinct as a person. The interpersonal

perspective adds extended relationship connections of family and friends that influence

decision making, while societal experiences pull upon other group associations, such as

employment, that broadens one's exposure and influence. Finally, cultural intellect is

often at the core of personal belief systems, including traditional thought processes that

exist despite environmental changes and challenges. The individual is recognized as a

microsystem, entailing the biological, psychological, and social systems that impact how

life is lived, with each system overlapping with the others. The interpersonal aspects of the micro orientation extend to the interaction of the systems that compensate for meeting needs, solving problems, and identifying the person's strengths. Societal and cultural levels are recognized as messo systems, inclusive of various small groups, such as family, workgroups, and other social groups that inherently resemble many microsystem aspects.

The sociodemographic characteristics can range from age, gender, ethnicity, education level, income, and more, which are all individual factors that could foster untimely decisions to end foster care simply by the lack of knowledge. The previously mentioned demographics categories are expected to help bring understanding to the background characteristics of African American youth, which assisted in determining whether I have reached the target group, further clarifying whether or not the information I collect is effective in answering the research question (NCDHHS, 2016, 2017). Research must be conducted to improve and develop policies that positively affect social change in a way that challenges existing policy deficits that can exacerbate real-world experiences by ignoring the social ecologies negatively impacting the foster care experience for African American youth.

<div align="center">**Literature Review**</div>

Disparities and Disproportionality

The child welfare system is one of the most scrutinized systems in the United States of America. The foundational mission of this system is to provide safe and healthy care by protecting and improving the well-being of abused and neglected children (Cenat et al., 2020). Historically, race and religion have been the segregating factors for the

foster care system and the previous orphanage program founded by Reverend Charles

Brace (GAO, 2008; Rosner & Markowitz, 1997). In both provisions of systematic care,

private and public, maltreatment, including the denial of mental health treatment, is rated

high among the noted inequalities experienced by African American youth. The AECF

(2021) identifies the four primary services provided by the child welfare system: child

protection, family-centered support, foster care, and adoption.

Research revealed that in general, foster care youth are inadequately prepared for

adulthood (Goodkind et al., 2011). Annually, approximately 670,000 youth are confirmed

as victims of maltreatment, 75% have experienced abuse and neglect, 18% have

confirmed cases of physical abuse, 8% have confirmed cases of sexual abuse, 6% have

confirmed cases of medical neglect, and emotional abuse is reported at 6%, but is also

very difficult to measure (AECF, 2021). These percentages are alarming and concerning

for the general population. However, studies show that the rates of complications related

to maltreatment and maladaptive behaviors for African American youth are higher than

those of their near-age counterparts, such as homelessness, financial problems, substance

abuse, and incarceration (Goodkind et al., 2011; Rosenburg & Abbott, 2019).

African American youth are disproportionately removed from their biological

families by social workers without proper justification, discarding the guidance of

established judicial protocol that has been provided to persuade their judgment and

actions (Simon, 2017; Simmons, 2020). Indeed, these reported actions can negatively

impact the decision to decline to extend care for African American youth upon reaching

the age of majority and earning the opportunity to make independent decisions. As a

result, the goal is to understand if race is a factor in the overrepresentation of Black youth

in the foster care system and why less effective options, such as homelessness, lack of

health insurance, and financial insecurity, seem to be more appealing options than

extending foster care services. Also, exploring the discharge transition process in terms of

how information, planning, and preparation is disseminated to eligible care participants.

African American children have experienced a plethora of complications in both

the private and public foster care systems. The research shows that both the private and

public foster care systems yielded service injustices that were problematic for African

American youth, such as disproportionality, racial injustices, and poverty related biases

(Atkinson, 2008; Edwards, 2019; GAO, 2007; Simmons, 2020). Neither system appeared

to be prepared to protect and provide for people of color, seeming to ignore the

prevalence of blatant and open injustices, providing no healthy means of intervening

(Knott & Giwa, 2012). Racial consequences within the foster care system have been

prevalent in the governance of systematic deficiencies that provided ill-intended care for

African American youth in the former private system and now in the public system

(GAO, 2007). The solution seemed to be the establishment of a public foster care system

to help mitigate child welfare service delivery and improve positive outcomes.

Initially, public foster care seemed to be positively opposite of the private foster

care setting, in that the protective intent would be afforded to all children, thus improving

outcomes (GAO, 2007). However, the public child welfare system replicated the

inequalities of the private system, as evidenced by the disproportionality of African

American children in placements that continue to result in substantial risk with lifelong effects (Atkinson, 2008; Simmons, 2020).

Edwards (2019) attributes unwarranted police involvement in African American communities as responsible for approximately one-fifth of child abuse and neglect reports that seemingly criminalize poverty and separate families. Research shows that in 2015, over four hundred thousand reports alleging abuse and neglect were generated by police, exceeding nearly one-fifth of the national averages (Children's Bureau, 2017).

The research reveals that discharge from foster care involves two significant elements, the first transition is the process of exiting a system that provides financial, educational, shelter, and the second transition is the entrance into real-world experiences with real-world expectations, being declared as legal adults, primarily based on the age of majority (Osgood et al., 2010). In other words, the release of African American youth from the auspices of the child welfare system come with a considerable price, such as the expectation of achieving, succeeding, and surviving independently, absent of having ever reached permanency. Further research produces evidence of the practical reality of transitioning from an environment of dependence to independence as expected to be abrasive, traumatic, and challenging, warranting supportive assistance to achieve healthy outcomes (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Yates & Grey, 2012).

Disproportionality is defined as the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of a racial or ethnic group compared to its percentage of the total population (NCSL, 2018). The Child Welfare Report (2016) states the existence of an overrepresentation of African American youth in the child welfare system, compared to their total population

percentage, and such has been known for over four decades, without a resolution. The disproportionate representation of African American youth in the foster care system has historical footing linking back to the orphan trains and institutional warehousing of black children (GAO, 2008; Staller, 2020). Research reveals a historical focus on poverty, geographic location, racial assumptions, embedded discrimination, and social worker biases in the foster care system (Cenat et al., 2021). The research identifies a disparaging connection between the foster care system and the juvenile justice system as primary antecedents to systematic disproportionality of African American youth, with each system being highly fed by police involvement (Edwards, 2019; Yamat, 2020).

Racial disproportionality addresses explicitly this phenomenon by directly describing a condition that exists when the proportion of one group in the child welfare population (i.e., children in foster care) is proportionately larger (overrepresented) or smaller (underrepresented) than the proportion of the same group (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). The prevalence of racial disproportionality is demonstrated in the NSCL (2018) report, which shows race and poverty biases in the child welfare system as disproportionately affecting African American children, stating that this group is at an increased risk of experiencing multiple placements, limited likelihood of ever being reunited with their birth family, less likely to ever achieve permanency, increased likelihood of experiencing congregate care, and the likelihood of experiencing poor social, behavioral and educational outcomes.

In comparison to White and Hispanic youth, African American youth are twice as likely to be placed in foster care, facing harsh conditions that destroy their psyche,

reasonable expectation of support and hinder their potential for long-term success

(Yamat, 2020). Atkinson (2008) reports that 20,000 exits the foster care system yearly,

generally after reaching 18, and approximately 5,200 youth become runaways before

aging out of the system. "The lack of consensus on the causes of overrepresentation is

largely because there is great difficulty in disentangling whether this issue is due to

biased practices within child welfare systems, or whether it is due to structural factors

among Black families that make them more vulnerable to involvement with child welfare

agencies" (Cenat et al., 2021, p. 120). Nevertheless, disproportionality is well

documented in the foster care system and remains an ongoing problem, but this

phenomenon remains unanswered (Children's Bureau, 2016; Owen & Statham, 2009).

Racialized Biases of the Child Welfare Social Workers

Racial biases are among the leading reported factors associated with

disproportionality and maltreatment of African American youth in the child welfare

system (Hanna et al., 2017). Child welfare is a complex system established in the United

States in 1935 with the lofty goal of promoting the well-being and safety of all children

through the lens of professional social work practice (Pryce, 2019). Services vary from

state to state, but a few of the specific goals will always be the same, such as the use of

professional social workers for investigating reports of child abuse and neglect, providing

advocacy efforts to families who need help caring for their children. Arranging for

children to live with family members or in safe foster homes, and arranging for the

reunification, adoption, or other permanent placements promptly (Pryce, 2019).

Nevertheless, professional social workers have managed to create an overrepresentation

of African American children in the child welfare system, accounting for approximately 40% of foster care cases while representing only 12.3% of the entire population (MST Services, 2019). As a result, social workers are suspected of perpetuating racial injustices from deciding to substantiate a case to designate a child's availability for adoption (Ellis, 2019).

Stereotypical perceptions of African American families are pervasive in influencing internalized racist opinions of social workers, ultimately attributing to removing black children from their family and contributing to disproportionality (Smith, 2006). This category of racial bias is known as internalized racism and is heavily influenced by personal beliefs and cultural expectations (Cenat et al., 2021; Hanna et al., 2017). The proliferation of deeply ingrained stereotypical beliefs of social workers connects poverty with dysfunction, placing minimal value on the African American family units' functional status (Smith, 2006). African American mothers have been described as deviant and uncaring, and black fathers are presumed absent, based on stereotypical assumptions that overgeneralize such opinions (Smith, 2006). These biases can perpetuate further racial indifference when influenced by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 that has been accused of promoting the ideology of premature termination of parental rights, focusing on adoption instead of family reunification (Smith, 2006).

Indeed, race does not stand alone as the sole proprietor of disparate outcomes for marginalized populations in the child welfare system, but internalized racism is a significant contributing factor to the discriminatory practices of social workers (Dettlaff,

2014; Pryce, 2019). Ongoing proposals support radically transforming the child welfare

system, which continues to produce numerous poor outcomes for African American

youth, including maltreatment and the efficacy and acceptability of children of color

(Barth et al., 2020). The research shows that race is a significant factor in the four

primary elements for child protective services involvement (GAO, 2008). The elements

include the following, the source of referrals, the reason for the initial investigation,

poverty, and perceived risk-factors associated with caregivers, with the top three referral

sources being educational and school settings, law enforcement, and other social service

officials (Dettlaff, 2014; GAO, 2007).

The research indicates a lack of consensus on the causes of the overrepresentation

of Black youth in the child welfare system, mainly because there is great difficulty in

disentangling the related factors.

The potential causes range from issues connected with discriminatory practices

within child welfare systems or whether it is due to structural factors among Black

families that make them more vulnerable to involvement with child welfare agencies

(Dettlaff, 2014; Hanna et al., 2017). The Children's Rights (2020) coalition states that

systemic racism in the United States has destroyed the lives of many generations of

African American people, disputing the claim that structural factors within Black families

are to blame. In other words, structural factors exist but are not the weight bearer for the

overrepresentation of minority children within the child welfare system (Dettlaff, 2014;

Ryan et al., 2016).

Child Protective Social Workers (CPS) are the initial investigators for reports of abuse and neglect, serving as the decision-makers for the department of social service agencies. The primary responsibility of CPS investigators is to assure the safety and protection of children they assess and/or bring into DSS custody (Yamat, 2020). The USDHHS (2018) reports that CPS social workers place more African American youth in DSS custody than other minority children, more often resulting in foster care rather than the option of in-home services, despite similar issues and problems as White and Hispanic youth (Ellis, 2019). Research data finds that racial disproportionality among African American youth is an underlying factor in practically every CPS decision point (Knott & Giwa, 2012). The research reveals that social workers often conflate neglect with poverty based on particular state service definitions that define neglect as insufficient food, shelter, clothing, or care, as interpreted by the investigating social worker (Yamat, 2020). CPS workers appear to be trained to avoid less restrictive means of intervening in helping families excel, resorting to drastic disruptions in family dynamics that could have been handle in more productive ways, engaging in more aggressive practices when dealing with families of color (Dettlaff, 2014, Hanna et al., 2017).

Person-Centered Planning and the Discharge Transition Process

Scholarly literature reveals that in the United States, foster care youth are eligible for emancipation at the age of majority, despite past experiences or preparation (Dworsky et al., 2013; Rahman et al., 2015). The legal age of independence is 18, and such is a leading factor in determining the child welfare systems emancipation criterion (Ryan et

al., 2016). Exiting the child welfare system at the age of 18 is known as *aging-out* of care (Atkinson, 2008). At the point of aging-out, foster care youth are expected to enter into the autonomy of adulthood, despite little to no preparation, and worst of all, aging-out is irreversible in many states (Atkinson, 2008; Lehman, 2018). The court system has no other jurisdiction, the Department of Social Services is relieved of their duties, and the likelihood of familial reunification is less than 15% (Lehman, 2018, Curry & Abrams, 2015). As a result, these youths are vulnerable, suffering emotionally, psychologically, and behaviorally while struggling to transition into the unknown territory of adulthood, endeavoring to adapt to changes and challenges without the necessary readiness skills and knowledge (Xie et al., 2014). The research predicts that vulnerable foster care youth lack appropriate support for transitioning into adulthood, increasing the potential for poverty, deprivation, giving birth prematurely and replicating the cycle, and creating societal expenses at a significant cost to resources and services (Xie et al., 2014; Yates & Grey, 2012).

Annually, over 463,000 youth in the United States live in foster care, and at the age of 18, approximately 285,000 of age-out and decide to decline the option to extend care (Chaney & Spell, 2015). Chor (2015) reports that only between 4 to 8% of foster care youth will ever attain permanency through adoption, reunification, or kinship placements. The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS, 2017) report that Child Protective Services workers had placed 442,995 youth in foster care by September 30, 2017. AFCARS (2017) reports that 247,631 exited the foster care system, and only 4% of that total, being 17,147, had a case plan goal of emancipation.

The actual discharge rate for emancipation in 2017 was 8%, which calculates 19,945 young adults released from foster care. This literature proves that in the United States of America, many youths spend years in foster care, moving from one foster home to another (AFCARS, 2017). Research findings reveal that many former foster care young adults face poor prognosis during adulthood, including mental and physical health, limited education, criminal justice involvement, and homelessness (Barth, 1990; Courtney et al., 2007; Havileck, 2014).

The research reports that African American youth aging-out of foster care into adulthood face more challenges than White and Hispanic youth (Chaney & Spell, 2015). Studies show that the risk of homelessness and socioeconomic complexities are more persistent with African American foster care alumni, and this target population experiences a substantial lack of accessible support systems (Barman-Adhikari & Associates, 2016; Chaney & Spell, 2015). The foster care system has been accused of failing at adequately preparing youth for adulthood. Yates and Grey (2012) postulate that the child welfare system neglects to equip candidates for discharge with the proper skills, and there is no evidence supporting that discharge readiness is ever assessed. African American youth who age out of foster care often decline to extend care but struggle with achieving stability and thriving in adulthood (Ahmann, 2017). The foster care system has responded by initiating several pre-discharge programs to help mitigate the transition process. Nevertheless, the option to extend care is often refused, implying the existence of a systemic failure (Ahmann, 2017; Edidin et al., 2012). Programs such as the LINK's

program, the CAR's Act, and Families First have been established to support discharge planning.

Person-Centered Planning

The literature reveals that despite the intentions of the ongoing development of programs and services to improve the child welfare system, systemic biases continue to supersede the efforts to meet the needs of transitioning African American foster care recipients (DHHS Children's Bureau, 2003). Of grave concern is the lack of perspective and participation from care recipients in meeting their treatment needs, often due to the recipients not being included in decisions made regarding their life. In North Carolina, Person-Centered-Care (PCC) is endorsed by most health care providers, school systems, and social service agencies (NCDHHS, 2016). Nevertheless, the research shows that, in actuality, the concept of person-centeredness is easily displaced in the rhetoric of a sea of systemic and social worker biases (NCDHHS, 2016; Tondora et al., 2010). Meaningful and valuable care gives a voice to the person at the center of a service, such as foster care is prescribed as a remedy for client inclusion in the coordination and integration of care (SAMSHA, 2020). Person-Centered-Care is grounded in Person-Centered Planning (PCP), which is wrapped in the conceptual framework of self-determination (Jones, 2009; SAMSHA, 2020).

Person-Centered-Planning is a process that subscribes to understanding the viewpoint, thoughts, feelings, perspectives, and needs of a person, requiring treatment providers to support care recipients' right to self-directed decisions and advocating for positive self-control (NCDHHS, 2016; SAMSHA, 2020). In other words, collaborating

with foster care recipients is paramount in understanding how a person wants to live their life, including discharge from the foster care system. As a result, the research shows that the concept of Person-Centered-Thinking must be an ongoing component of training for social service agencies (DDS, 2010). The ability to think about a person when making plans for that person is a systematic adjustment from the previous methods of service delivery, which allowed workers to create treatment plans without any input from the person receiving services (DDS, 2010). life Upon reaching the age of majority, foster care recipients take charge of their life decision-making, seemingly to gain a voice in their life trajectory.

The research reveals that PCP requires an ongoing awareness of cultural competencies at the forefront of all behavioral health services (Tondora et al., 2010). Due to the significant health disparities and disproportionality that exist with African American foster care youth, providing positive, responsive client-based care is imperative in improving the discharge transition process (Barth et al., 2020; Tondora et al., 2010). The literature reports that a lack of cultural awareness and systemic biases causes services for African American youth not to be tailored to meet their needs, preferences, and cultural distinctions, resulting in the refusal of services (Tondora et al., 2010). Therefore, PCP should include a facilitative advocate for each foster care recipient to serve as an advocate, coach, or mentor, assisting care participants in clearly articulating their feelings (Haggman-Laitila et al., 2019; Jones, 2009; Tondora et al., 2010). Person-Centered-Planning is a good concept that requires ongoing studies on the actual application of this ideology of inclusion, which has the potential to positively improve

outcomes for African American youth who decline to extend foster care services at the age of majority.

LINKS Program

The NC LINKS program was established based on the 2007 and 2008 statistics that showed that 1,868 child welfare youth who reached the age of majority were between the ages of 18 to 21 (NCDHHS, 2015). LINKS is not an acronym, but rather a word that is believed to capture the purpose of the Chafee Act of implementing a strong, youth-focused, and youth-guided network of support and out-come based services (NCCFSP, 2019). The LINKS program directly responds to the literature that shows that foster care youth are at an increased risk of adverse consequences upon discharging from care (NCDHHS, 2009, 2015). Studies show a heightened potential for foster care alumni to become high school dropouts, unplanned pregnancies, untreated mental and medical illnesses, homelessness, criminal activity, depression, and suicide (Jones, 2009; NCDHHS 2009, 2015). The statistics have continually shown a decrease in the extension of foster care services by care recipients and the decision to participate in provisional services that are implemented to improve outcomes (Jones, 2009).

LINKS serves foster care youth between the ages of 13 to 21 to develop life skills, endeavoring to increase their self-sufficiency and independent living preparations (MeckNC, 2016). The research states that LINKS is designed to improve independent living outcomes for foster care recipients who agree to participate in the assessment, planning and services implementation, and comply with the rules and regulations of the LINKS program (NCDHHS, 2009, 2015, 2019). The NCCFSP (2019) states that North

Carolina Division of Social Services has oversight of the Chafee Foster Care Program, including the Education and Training Voucher Program (ETV), which helps with funding.

LINKS is stated to be North Carolina's Chafee Foster Care Program's answer to improving successful foster care transitions into adulthood. Positive Youth Development is the primary goal of the LINKS program, grounded in a concept that is designed to deliberately provide the chance for foster care youth to experience growth-enhancing interactions that prepare them for a successful transition into adulthood. The NC Session Law 2015-214 placed the responsibility on NC DSS agencies to create a plan for extending foster care services to the age of 21. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 is the federal law that mandated these changes, showing that participation in the Foster Care 18 to 21 Program is improving yearly, as of 2017. Nevertheless, as of February 2019, the NC foster care report continues to show that African American children are over-represented in the child welfare system, an ongoing display of racial inequity.

The literature discusses NC report that their goal for the child welfare system is to ensure safety and minimize risk, thus refraining from implicit or explicit biases negatively impacting the delivery of services to African American youth in comparison to White and Hispanic youth (NCDHHS, 2019). Miller et al. (2014) report that the LINKS program should consider African Americans and culture-related specificities in the Chafee Foster Care initiative program trajectory, rather than the one-size-fits-all process that is not all-inclusive. Minority youth start at a disadvantage that cannot be ignored or

masked by developing a well-transcribed program idea that avoids Person-Centered-Planning concepts.

Families First Prevention Services Act

The 2018 Families First Prevention Services Act results from the NC Division of Social Services review and analysis of the current NC LINKS funding, programming, and policy of the recommended Chafee service provisions (NCDHHS, 2019). A primary consideration is expanding foster care eligibility to age 23. Also, limiting funding streams in the provision of congregate care, which is more expensive, yielding adverse outcomes, such as higher levels of emotional and behavioral problems, poor educational outcomes than family-based care, and the fact that African American youth are at a higher risk of being placed in group settings (NCSL, 2021).

Testa and Kelly (2020) report that the intent of the Family First Act will promote the use of evidence-based interventions to prevent and control the unwarranted removal of children from their homes, decreasing foster care placements and considering less restrictive family-like settings. On October 1, 2019, the Family First Act became operative, rededicating Title IV of the Social Security Act to the original purpose of keeping families together by maintaining parent or kinship placements versus institutional or foster care (Testa & Kelly, 2020). Previously, the 1935 Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program, eventually renamed the 1962 Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), attempted to achieve a similar preventive strategy of providing financial support to disenfranchised groups.

Families First enforces the use of a reporting system that requires a detailed individualized prevention plan to maintain accountability in service delivery, which consistently tracks data for all service recipients (Testa & Kelly, 2020). Family First has the goal of limiting secondary harms that occur in foster care or institutionalized care by successfully ameliorating secondary sources of maltreatment and avoiding re-traumatization of the youth. Currently, the statute is working to clearly define the terms 'candidates for foster care' and 'imminent risk.' Defining these terms strengthened the criterion that is used to remove youth from their families by providing well-defined explanations for maintaining or removing children from their family homes. At the center of child removal and foster care placements are African American youth who are overrepresented in the child welfare system, primarily based on poverty, perpetuating racial disparities, including overextended stays in the foster care system (Testa & Kelly, 2020).

Summary and Conclusions

In the United States, the public child welfare system is managed by Department of Social Service (DSS) agencies, typically established with four primary purposes: child protection, family-centered support, foster care, and adoption (AECF, 2019; Yamat, 2020). Professional social workers are used to assure the health and well-being of youth who are suspected of child abuse, serving as the initial investigators of reported cases (Yamat, 2020). In 2017, over 442,000 children were placed in foster care, increasing annually since 2011. The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) (2017) report that Child Protective Services workers had placed 442,995

youth in foster care by September 30, 2017. AFCARS (2017) reports that 247,631 exited the foster care system, and only 4% of that total, being 17,147, had a case plan goal of emancipation. The actual discharge rate for emancipation in 2017 was 8%, which calculates to 19,945 young adults released from foster care without extending foster care services, despite the option to do so. The research shows an overrepresentation of African American youth in the child welfare system; therefore, understanding the percentage of the 19,945 that represents this target population is imperative to exploring why they decline to extend foster care services.

The literature reveals that in the United States, many youths spend years in foster care, moving from one foster home to another, never achieving permanency (AFCARS, 2017). Research findings reveal that many former foster care young adults face poor prognosis during adulthood, including mental and physical health, limited education, criminal justice involvement, and homelessness (Havileck, 2014; Barth, 1990; Courtney et al., 2007). Further research reports specific concerns related to African American youth compared to White and Hispanic near-aged peers, revealing that the prognosis is worse for Black youth in each category (NCSL, 2021). Disproportionality, disparities, racism, social worker biases, and poverty are the unequal outcomes faced by African American youth. Race and poverty biases increased in the 2019 equity report of the child welfare system, potentially affecting the decision made by African American youth to decline the option to extend foster care services.

The research reveals several federal actions and local initiatives that have been enacted to help mitigate child abuse and maltreatment. Nevertheless, the target group in

this study declined to extend foster care services. The Chafee Foster Care initiatives

include the LINKS program and the Families First Act, both of which have been

designed to prepare foster care youth for transition and provide the option to extend care

services (NCDHHS, 2009, 2020). Currently, care services are extended until age 21 in

North Carolina and are being reviewed to increase services to age 23. Other research

reveals efforts of client inclusion, such as the multifaceted components of person-

centered treatment, which gives service recipients the option to have a voice in their life

decisions by providing input in their treatment planning (NCDHHS, 2016; DDS, 2010).

The research suggests that transitioning from uncertainty and dependency to

uncertainty and independence for African American youth is challenging due to

maltreatment experiences in foster care and never achieving permanence (Mitchell et al.,

2015). The aging-out process relieves multiple organizations of their responsibilities,

leaving these ill-prepared youths to find their way alone. The ability to manage everyday

stress levels can be dysregulated by this target group, who is suspected of struggling with

dealing with daily self-care yet fearful of seeking help due to issues of mistrust (Dima &

Bucta, 2015). The literature consistently indicates the evidence of disparities and

disproportionality, yet African American youth are not eligible for any special care

initiatives upon emancipation from foster care (Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Miller et

al., 2017).

The purpose of this research is to explore the lived experiences of African

American youth within the foster care system. The primary focus is the aftercare results

of declining to extend foster care, including understanding the effects of being in the

child welfare system. The goal is to discover any contributing factors related to maltreatment or other care-related dynamics that influenced the youths' decision not to extend foster care services. Consequently, learning more about the experience from the respondent's perspective helped answer the research question and potentially improve in care services and after-care outcomes for African American youth who are emancipated from the foster care system. Upon the completion of this research this theoretical concept was applied to the data analysis, as applicable to the study results.

Chapter 2 includes the literature review for this study, which focuses on the child welfare foster care system in the United States, policies and procedures, and initiatives that have been enacted to improve the adverse outcomes of program recipients, particularly African American youth. The literature reveals disproportionality while in care and the youth who age out of foster care with ongoing needs that affect their ability to maneuver through the autonomy of adulthood safely. The literature reveals the evidence of challenges, unmet needs, and disparities in outcomes, high-risk potential, and the decision to decline the option to extend care, despite the need to do so.

Chapter 3 provides an introduction that continues to build upon the introductions in Chapters 1 and 2. This chapter will expand upon this research design and rationale related to this generic qualitative inquiry while explaining the role of the researcher. The role of the researcher is paramount in substantiating the trustworthiness of this. Identity, positionality, subjectivity, and objectivity must align with the theoretical framework, methodology, and participant selection while controlling any personal biases and

prejudices. Instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical

procedures will be addressed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this generic qualitative inquiry was used to understand why African American foster care youth do not extend care beyond the age of majority, despite the evidence of multiple overarching environmental risk factors. This study is designed to get to the core of this phenomenon by exploring the in-depth perspectives of the respondents. Open-ended questions and respondent observations were used to collect data from a real-world practice perspective, engaging a straightforward virtual qualitative in-depth interview approach to understand this phenomenon from the respondents' perspective (Patton, 2015). Numerous African American foster care alumni frequent the participating organization that partnered with me in recruiting study volunteers. Again, a qualitative inquiry was the most beneficial approach for establishing a safe setting in which the respondent can peacefully elaborate on their experiences, including satisfactory and unsatisfactory reports (Povee & Roberts, 2014).

The gap that this study is seeking to fill is understanding the lived experiences of African American youth while in the child welfare system that impact their decision to decline the option to extend foster care services at the age of 18. Disparate issues and disproportionality are common themes, as well as maltreatment, racism, social worker biases, and poverty that are reported in the review of the literature (Erickson, 2011). Furthermore, the process of articulating and disseminating discharge information to care recipients is critical to answering the question of why African American youth make the decision not to extend foster care at the age of majority. The perspective of the target population regarding this phenomenon can help to improve positive outcomes for the

current discharge transition process, thus refining the current deficits of the independent living process.

Despite the provision of multiple federal and state initiatives, African American youth continue to transition out of foster care under vulnerable circumstances with limited resources (Courtney et al., 2017; Dworsky, 2014). The generic qualitative inquiry allows the comfort of the naturalistic setting to be advantageous in the effort of probing for details of this human experience that could otherwise be perceived as uncomfortable or invasive (Daher et al., 2017). Using this research approach, I hoped to identify themes and patterns linked to the foster care experience that contributed to answering the research question, further expanding upon the emancipation process, the understanding of independent living options, the understanding of the option to extend care, the method by which discharge options are communicated, and the awareness of potential disparate circumstances post-discharge.

Research Design and Rationale

The nature of this study is a generic qualitative inquiry. The qualitative approach is flexible by design, allowing respondents to address real-world issues from their perspective in a naturalistic setting, intended to promote honest dialogue in a comfortable and familiar environment (Patton, 2015). The interviews were conducted virtually using the media platform called GoToMeet.Me (https://gotomeet.me). The generic qualitative inquiry is absent of the formal influence of traditional theoretical, epistemological, ontological, or philosophical framing that can sometimes limit engagement options (Patton, 2015; Percy et al., 2015). The use of this qualitative approach was to answer the

following research question: Why do African American youth decline to extend foster

care services beyond their 18ᵗʰ birthday?

The purpose of this generic qualitative inquiry was to understand the contributing

factors associated with African American foster care youth not extending foster care

beyond the age of majority, despite the evidence of multiple overarching environmental

risk factors associated with premature emancipations. The ecological systems theory

connected the person-in-environment concept to provide a holistic approach to the

multiple interfaces of the related social environments (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2015). This

research was aimed at understanding this phenomenon from the respondent's perspective,

including particular experiences that affected their perceptions and thoughts. Although

this work included predischarge experiences in the exploration of this phenomenon, the

primary focus was to understand postdischarge experiences and the contributing factors

that influence the decision not to extend services.

The examination of real-world experiences related to this phenomenon is the

underlying philosophical methodology of a generic qualitative inquiry design that uses a

small targeted sample, such as the 10 participants in this study, to explore the key factors

of a topic (Creswell, 2013). African American youth between the ages of 18 to 25 were

the target group that answered the interview questions, which were developed to

understand their point-of-view regarding their foster care experience. Each participant

was interviewed individually, answering the critical framework of this study regarding

the foster care systems policies and procedures, social worker training, discharge

planning, discharge transition, independent living, and the use of person-centered-planning/thinking to improve transitional outcomes for African American youth.

The interpretive approach to the generic qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to assume the role of an actor and conductor during the conversational interview, in order to provoke elaboration while being attentive to social cues and naturalistic language (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). The design of a generic qualitative inquiry encourages the researcher to maintain a commitment to the initial proposed argument, despite the surfacing of many other persuasions (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). The in-depth interviews lasted from 1 hour to 1.25 hours, using eight open-ended questions focusing on the decision made by African American youth not to extend foster care past their 18th birthday. Upon compilation of the gathered data, I transcribed the information both manually and using the Nvivo 12 system for further interpretation, coding, and monitoring of the developing themes and patterns.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher is vital in ensuring the integrity of any research study to minimize biases and eliminate ethical conflicts (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The meaningfulness of the research is contingent upon the researcher for the duration of the study, considering subjectivity, identity, positionality, and reflexivity (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In other words, the researcher is the primary study instrument. As a result, the researchers' identity and positionality are critical to the context and interpretation of the collected data. Therefore, qualitative researchers must discover, locate, and reckon the

subjectivities to protect the study's integrity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Reflexivity is a core component of the qualitative researcher's systematic assessment of one's identity, positionality, subjectivity, and objectivity regarding the research topic (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The integrity of the research study requires the researcher to go beyond their awareness and knowledge of their personal biases and prejudices to attentively controlling and monitoring subjective perceptions and how such persuades thoughts and feelings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The perceptions, interests, and opinions of the child welfare system are well rounded by familial and professional relationships and experiences. As a result, my awareness and data assessments must be ethically grounded. Babbie (2017) presented two ethical concerns that researchers should be aware of when collecting, analyzing, and reporting qualitative data. The first is the subjective nature of the qualitative inquiry and the imminent risk of finding exactly what one is seeking to know. The solution to addressing this dilemma is acknowledging the personal awareness of values and desires and intentionally minding the prescribed rules established for qualitative processes. The second area of qualitative concern is protecting the personal privacy of respondents by adhering to standards that conceal the identity of the participant or community by using of pseudonyms and potentially the suppression of specific details.

As the researcher of this study, I designed the research questions to promote elaboration, while protecting the integrity of the respondents by refraining from asking overly invasive questions. My role as the researcher was to focus on the topic while being

attentive to the interviewee's attitude, body language, silence, and disposition (Rubin &

Rubin, 2016). As the researcher, I reviewed all terms of the interview, follow-up

interview, and the option for the participant to withdraw a particular piece of information

without retaliation or pressure to do otherwise. Listening in the moment, listening

attentively and reflectively, and probing for further elaboration is the strategic approach I

used, while refraining from misleading or misrepresenting my intentions.

Constructing the interview questions (see Appendix C) provided considerable

opportunity for the interviewee to elaborate on their response thoroughly. The intent was

to avoid coercive tactics and used attentive and reflective listening skills, including body

language, to encourage the narrative. There were no existing relationships with any

member of the organization where the recruiting of volunteer participants was initiated.

The recruitment of study participants required the use the prescreening technique that is

recommended to reduce biases and other persuasions. Prescreening introduced the

precaution that was necessary to achieve alignment during the prescreening questions in

order to achieve alignment. Familiarity with the target population was crucial in

sustaining my ability as the researcher to assert this role competently and knowledgably,

reducing the possibility of any preconceived notions or biases. The trustworthiness of this

research is contingent upon my ability as the researcher to detach from my personal

thoughts and feelings, in order to interview, interpret and report accurate information

(Takyi, 2015). Therefore, the role of the researcher included my refraining from engaging

with the respondents on a personal level and avoiding becoming emotionally triggered by

any of the narratives to minimize my personal biases.

Methodology

The aim of this research study was to explore the interpretive point of view of the child welfare experience of African American foster care alumni between the ages of 18 to 25. Specifically, I sought to understand their perceptions, motivations, experiences, and behaviors that influenced the way they interpreted reality, constructed decision-making strategies, and the way they attributed meaning to their real-world experiences. Percy et al.'s (2015) generic qualitative inquiry design was used to understand how these participants' experiences impacted their decision not to extend foster care past their 18th birthday. Additionally, focusing on disproportionality, disparate factors, such as homelessness, socioeconomic struggles, and substance abuse, and systemic race-related complexities were beneficial factors in exploring this phenomenon.

The generic qualitative inquiry is the research methodology design for this study. I believe this design addressed the real-world challenges experienced by African American youth, allowing for flexibility in the interview process without the constraints of a particular theory, philosophy, epistemology, or ontological tradition (Patton, 2015; Percy et al., 2015). Furthermore, a thematic analysis was used to identify descriptive themes regarding the overarching themes and patterns that surface during the interview process (Chawla & Wood, 2021, Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Primarily, the decision to use this research methodology is due to the benefits of using the naturalistic setting, aiding in supporting the respondent's comfort level while exploring their opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences (Percy et al., 2015). The underpinning for the qualitative approach is the interpretive ideology that opens the opportunity to study real-

world experiences and the effect of such experiences in critical decision-making (Percy et al., 2015). The generic qualitative inquiry allowed me to conduct semi-structured virtual interviews, lasting approximately 1 hour. In order to effectively connect with the respondents, while being attentive details and time, open-ended questions were used. The goal was to refrain from being too invasive, yet providing the opportunity for participants to elaborate on their individual subjective views, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions on real world experiences (Kahlke, 2014; Patton, 2015; Percy et al., 2015).

The interview questions I used reflected the interpretive philosophy of the generic qualitative inquiry, which allowed me to use a small sample of 10 participants, exploring key themes and patterns. Questions related to African American youths' perspective on the effects of demographics and race in their foster care experience and discharge decision were used. For example, one of the research questions asked the respondents to describe how they felt that their race affected their foster care experience. African American youth between the ages of 18 to 25 who have reached the age of majority and declined to extend foster care are the group that the interview questions were developed to address. Understanding their foster care experience, discharge process, and independent living preparation is crucial in determining why the decision is made not to extend foster care services. Cresswell (2013) identified the researcher as the actor and conductor in the conversational interview, relying on interpretive skills while using social cues and related naturalistic language to promote further elaboration and details.

Kruth (2015) revealed five qualitative methodologies and five distinguishing features of each qualitative methodology. The qualitative methodologies are grounded

theory, ethnography, phenomenology, case study, and narrative or generic inquiry

(Cooper & Endacott, 2007; Kruth, 2015). Grounded theory seeks to build upon

theoretical concepts, whereas phenomenology, which subscribes to theory and

philosophy, and generic inquiries focus on the human responses to lived and real-world

experiences that can only be explored through interviews and observations; ethnography

explores the cultural related experiences of a phenomenon, and case studies explore

phenomena by using multiple data sources and lenses to expand upon the layers of a

research topic (Kruth, 2015; Rashid et al., 2019).

The generic qualitative inquiry design is recommended for studies like mine that

endeavor to understand a phenomenon based on the attitude and experiences of a person

and their real-world experiences (Kruth, 2015; Patton, 2015). The objective of this

research was to gain a better understanding of the real-world experiences of African

American foster care alumni between the ages of 18 to 25 who declined to extend child

welfare services, despite their ongoing needs for potential care benefits.

Participant Selection

Target Population

The participant selection included 10 respondents who were all participants of the

same post foster care organization. Purposive sampling was used to locate the attendees

and residents of a North Carolina nonprofit organization serving foster care alumni in the

same geographical location. The sample is not generalizable, and transferability was not

the focus of this study, but rather achieving saturation of the data by ensuring that a

thorough description of the foster care experience of African American foster care alumni

was achieved (Moustakas, 1994). The organization endeavors to address issues of homelessness, pregnancy, and poverty and provides services for foster care alumni who either age out of services or have been emancipated. The organization partners with DSS agencies, churches, schools, court systems, and other community-based entities with a mission of providing a preventative approach in helping foster care alumni to improve their quality of life expectations. Assisting in identifying systemic failures that largely impact African American youth, as well as other foster care recipients is an additional goal of the organization. The organization serves all races and socioeconomic status of youth in their service area. However, the majority of foster care alumni are disproportionately youth of color, primarily African American.

The organization serves foster care youth between the ages of 13–17 who are at risk of not achieving permanency and/or choose emancipation, and foster care young adults 18 and up. The organization seeks to support the eight dimensions of wellness, which are physical, intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, vocational, financial, and environmental, by partnering with community-based organizations. The organization has a growing referral base for counselling services, legal services, employment opportunities, and medical services that are offered to all service recipients through community-based supporters. Furthermore, the organization contracts with several local landlords to provide housing at minimal cost for their target population in their effort to decrease homelessness and increase life readiness skills and independent living skills. The organization has an open-door policy for all foster care alumni that allows for daily meals, access to their clothing closet, and a place of worship. The organization hosts a

number of programs throughout the year to help improve the quality of life for foster care alumni, and participates in multiple annual events to address the social determinants that affect health.

The respondents of this research study were African American foster care alumni between the ages of 18 to 25, having spent a minimum of one-year in the child welfare system. Demographic categories related to age, ethnicity, and foster care status was incorporated into the research questions to determine participant eligibility, such as criterion for inclusion or exclusion. The proceeding close-ended demographic questions were used to confirm eligibility, prior to the actual interview process.

Inclusion Criteria Screening

The inclusion criteria screening (see Appendix A) was used as the pre-screening tool for inclusion or exclusion of potential respondents. The participants must identify as African American, be between the ages of 18 to 25, having spent a minimum of one year in the child welfare system. Furthermore, the intent of the study explored the impact that race played in their foster care experience and how race impacted their decision not to extend foster care involvement at the age of majority.

Sample Size

The study size was 10 African American youth who declined to extend foster care services at the age of majority. The study size is specific to the interview questions' in-depth and purposeful content, which has been known to provide essential breakthroughs in understanding certain phenomena (Patton, 2015). Purposive and snowball sampling was used to locate and address the target group's difficult and sensitive attributes

(Valerio et al., 2016). Upon completing the informational sessions, I provided the interested volunteers with a participant qualification questionnaire, which I used to make the participant selection (see Appendix A).

Participant Recruitment

The study size was 10 African American youth who have discharged from the foster care system at the age of majority. The study size is specific to the interview questions' in-depth and purposeful content, which has been known to provide essential breakthroughs in understanding certain phenomena (Patton, 2015). Purposive and snowball sampling was used to locate and address the respondents difficult and sensitive attributes (Valerio et al., 2016). Upon completing the informational sessions, I provided the interested volunteers with a participant qualification questionnaire (see Appendix A), which I used to make the participant selection.

Instrumentation

The use of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and e-mail, coupled with virtual engagement through GoToMeet.Me, and smart phones were the essential instruments of this study, in terms of the researchers' ability to connect with every resource through video interviews, as no face-to-face contact was allowed, due to COVID-19. These resources are secondary only to the service organization, the respondents, and the researcher, which are general practice tools of the generic qualitative inquiry approach (Patton, 2015). A sample of the inclusion criterion screening and demographic screening is included in Appendices A and B, respectively. The interview protocol (see Appendix C) included in-depth open-ended questions based on the generic

qualitative inquiry concept, which allowed for flexibility and does not prescribe to the underpinnings of any particular theoretical framework.

The aforementioned instruments were used to improve the current understanding of the contributing factors that influence the decision made by African American youth not to extend foster care at the age of majority. The research questions seek to answer this question and identify specific factors that impact this decision, despite the disparate conditions revealed by the literature. This generic qualitative inquiry used open-ended questions, in a virtual media platform to explore the study topic from the perspective of African American foster care alumni between the ages of 18 to 25. The questions were designed to provoke free elaboration, and the potential to add another point-of-view on a particular question, as each question was presented to each respondent to understand their personal thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and concerns.

The researcher and the participants were the most vital instruments of this study, which is the methodological intent of the generic qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2015). The interview process consisted on in-depth, open-ended questions that are a significant component of the generic qualitative inquiry, aligning with the research topic to answer the research question (Percy et al., 2015). This researcher structured the study questions in such a manner as to provide a guide for the study participants to reflect and elaborate on their experiences from their perspective. The role of the researcher included facilitating the interviews with the study volunteers, building rapport, collecting data, organizing the data, interpreting data, and transcribing and coding the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015).

Interview Questions

The full interview schedule can be found in Appendix C. The questions were designed from the perspective of a generic qualitative inquiry. The goal of each question provided the opportunity for respondents to elaborate on their individual experience, while refraining from the use of insensitive or invasive tactics. The intent of the questions was to understand why African American youth declined to extend foster care services beyond their 18th birthday and explore their perspective of how race impacted their decision.

Data Collection

The data collection process for this generic qualitative inquiry began upon the approval of the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB), approval number 10-29-21-0984762. Data was collected from the virtual participant interviews, in compliance with the terms of the Walden University IRB and the Participant Selection section in Chapter 3. Each participant participated voluntarily without any coercive schemes or tactics to force participation against the persons' desire. Each participant was provided the opportunity for an individual question and answer forum with this researcher, as well as a designated time to thoroughly review the informed consent to obtain their generic signature. Further data collection information was provided upon the completion of the interviews.

Data Analysis Plan

The collected data was organized, analyzed, and transcribed to understand the decision made by the interviewed African American foster care alumni not to extend

foster care services after reaching the age of 18. Exploring the contributing factors as a component of the interview was vital to obtaining a holistic understanding of this phenomenon. Further data analysis details were provided upon the completion of each individual interviews, based on the generic qualitative inquiry approach and the thematic analysis of collected data.

The data analysis began with the first interview through the final interview of the respondents, and the review of the transcripts was an ongoing process throughout the coding phase of this study. I communicated directly with each participant, establishing a safe researcher and respondent connection, designed to protect the integrity and sincerity of the intentions of this study. The goal of using the generic qualitative inquiry is to allow the participants to freely elaborate and afford me the option, as the researcher, to individualize each respondent to meet their needs and establish trust. Each interview was conducted in a one-on-one setting to explore the phenomenon from the individual perspective of the participant, except in the event that a respondent requested the physical presence of a supportive person. However, such was not the case in this study. Understanding the independent ideology of the interviewee was essential to answering the research question of why African American youth decline to extend foster care services beyond their 18th birthday, despite not having achieved permanency and the option to do so (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Percy et al. (2015) prescribes the process for analyzing data to include data collection that is prepared for analysis by an open-minded research examiner, giving honest consideration to the study participants attitudes, opinions, and beliefs. A thematic

analysis was used to identify descriptive themes regarding the overarching themes and patterns that surface during the interview process (Chawla & Wood, 2021, Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Thematic analysis is a constant comparison of data, requiring the researcher to constantly analyze data during the collection phase and analyze each interview before moving on to the next one (Percy et al., 2015). This was process that used when analyzing the data that I collected and transcribed using the GoToMeet.Me media platform, Nvivo 12, and manual transcribing.

<div align="center">**Issues of Trustworthiness**</div>

Ravitch and Carl (2016) propose distinct interconnectivity between trustworthiness and validity as the threads that sustain the qualitative research approach. Babbie (2017) declares that valid data is the same as reliable data, asserting that accuracy in reporting the truth is critical in establishing research trustworthiness. The role of the researcher is a core component in assuring the validity of the studied phenomenon and can effectively be achieved by using measurable points of sound judgment when endeavoring to substantiate credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability of findings and analyses (Anney, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Credibility

Ravitch and Carl (2016) define credibility as a valuable component of qualitative research that is equally contrasted with the concept of internal validity as related to quantitative research. Qualitative researchers seek to achieve credibility by establishing validity strategies of triangulation, participant validation, discussing complex cases, an extended engagement in the natural settings, and the use of an external audience.

Credibility emphasizes the integrity of the research, assuring that the study is reliable and believable (Saldana, 2016).

Transferability

Transferability aligns with the quantitative concept of external validity regarding the generalization of case transference and the replication or repetition of the study content while maintaining the richness of the collected data (Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Transferability is not the focus of this qualitative study, which is not generalizable.

Dependability

Qualitative research earns the status of dependability by maintaining consistency and stability of the reported content over time (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Data maturation supports research dependability, similar to the quantitative concept of reliability, entailing that the researcher has a reasonable argument that is evident in the data collection process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Confirmability

Confirmability is juxtaposed with the quantitative concept of objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative researchers do not subscribe to objectivity when interpreting and qualifying respondents' thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and ideas (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The foundational premise of qualitative studies is the notion of subjectivity, which places the responsibility on the researcher to be self-aware and acknowledge personal biases and prejudices when analyzing and interpreting data.

Ethical Procedures

Professional social work is governed by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics, which serves to guide ethical conduct in service delivery (NASW, 2017). The NASW is ethically grounded in a set of core values, which are designed to guide professional social work practice in service delivery and integrity-based conduct. The core standards are service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2017). Walden University has established a set of ethical guidelines that regulate scholarly research integrity, particularly during the data collection phase. Walden University has an IRB that oversees each research study, and approval from this entity must be obtained prior to collecting data.

Ethical procedures must be adhered to during the entire research process to protect the integrity of the work while honoring and protecting the moral of the respondents. Ethically, there are multiple necessary facets in the healthy development of qualitative research. Ravitch and Carl (2016) address the concept of responsive research's ethical stance, which heavily focuses on the study participants, their realities from their perspective, and the context of their comments. Ethical qualitative research is grounded in trustworthiness, thus intentionally showing fidelity when searching and re-searching the phenomenon giving validity to the research design. This process forces the researcher to continually respond to the daily and overarching realities, contexts, issues, and needs of a given research setting, context, and participants.

Ethical guidelines must be maintained to ensure confidentiality and obtain informed consent from respondents who freely volunteer to participate. The information was provided in written form and verbally communicated for clarity. All information that was disseminated was approved by Walden University and the nonprofit agency that served as the participating organization. In working with the participating organization, I created flyers and send out e-mails to notify potential study volunteers, providing my contact information to my work-related cell phone and work-related e-mail. Participants were made aware of their right to withdraw their consent at any time, their option to review all collected data from them, and be made aware of the use of pseudonyms to protect their identity. Finally, the Walden University protocol is to maintain all completed research for a period of five years after the work has been defended, after which the existing data will be destroyed.

Summary

The purpose of Chapter 3 is to provide the study methodology for this research, including ethical procedures, issues of trustworthiness, research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, and the data analysis plan. The intent of this work is to use a generic qualitative inquiry to study the contributing factors that influence the decision of African American foster care participants to decline the option to extend care. The target age group is the ages of 18 to 25, having spent a minimum of one year in the child welfare system. Exploring this experience from the viewpoint of foster care alumni who declined to continue care,

despite their lack of preparation for adulthood and the absence of a stable plan, is the research goal.

The opportunity to observe respondents' personalization of their actual lived experiences, including their thoughts, feelings, perspectives, beliefs, and interpretations, can help answer this phenomenon. Generic qualitative inquiries asked open-ended questions to the respondents while making behavioral observations, in search of critical content necessary to answer the research question, particularly related to why the target population often chooses not to extend foster care and identify the contributing factors (Patton, 2015; McAdams, 2012). The generic qualitative approach used real-world practice skills to reasonably understand what is happening in the foster care system and other attaching systems that is contributing to this phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The hope is to elucidate themes and patterns, which was helpful during the coding phase of the data analysis in examining the feelings, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of the target population (Patton, 2015; Percy et al., 2015; Saldana, 2016).

Chapter 4 begins the data collection, data analyses, and coding portion of this study. Transcribing of the interviews, the identification of themes, analyses, patterns, phrases and additional collected data is presented. The role of the researcher is addressed in Chapter 4, as this role was used to build rapport with each respondent. Chapter 4 reflects on the use of the study design and the study's theoretical framework and concludes by presenting the results of the collected data.

Chapter 4: Results

The current chapter includes an introduction, the setting for the study, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, the findings, and a summary.

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the reasons why African American foster care alumni decide not to extend services beyond their 18th birthday. The literature describes aging out of foster care and transitioning into adulthood as a time of uncertainty and vulnerability for most care recipients (Curry & Abrams, 2015). However, African American youth find their circumstances exacerbated by multiple harsh realities that set them apart from White and Hispanic youth, such as disproportionality, systemic racism, and extended care placements (Ahmann, 2017; Curry & Abrams, 2015). The United States has over 463,000 recipients living in the child welfare system, expecting approximately 285,000 of this group to transition out of care annually at the age of majority (Chaney & Spell, 2015). Nevertheless, despite disproportionate statistics related to African American youth there is minimal literature that addresses the transition from care related to this target population and the overarching disparate conditions resulting from the decision not to extend foster care past their 18th birthday.

The research and the recruitment of participants occurred in North Carolina and yielded some respondents that inherited this area as home through unfortunate and less than desirable foster care experiences. The goal of this study was to understand the perspective of actual persons served by the child welfare system who met the

inclusionary criteria of being African American, being between the ages of 18 to 25, and having made the decision not to extend foster care services past their 18th birthday. The literature indicated that outcomes are worse for African American youth who have limited support systems and suffer the loss of severed biological relationships, finding themselves homeless, incarcerated, unemployed, and without health care benefits (Courtney et al., 2017; Miller, 2017; Zlotnick, 2012). As a result, adulthood presented many obstacles and barriers for African American youth to obtain the minimal essentials for reasonable living, such as finances, food, shelter, clothing, and health care coverage (Courtney et al., 2017; Miller, 2017). The stressors associated with the aforementioned dilemma's resulted in increased mental health and physical health difficulties, and further vulnerabilities that open the door for sexual, physical, and emotional abuse (Courtney et al., 2017; Fowler et al., 2017).

In this generic qualitative inquiry, I interviewed 10 African American foster care alumni between the ages of 18 to 25 through the GoToMeet.Me virtual site to understand their experience in the child welfare system and their decision not to extend care. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted, virtually, through purposive and snowball sampling, using open-ended questions in order to understand this phenomenon. In researching this topic, focusing on the subjective thoughts, opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and viewpoints of the respondents was crucial in the efforts to understand their experiences and discharge decisions (Percy et al., 2015). Rubin and Rubin (2012) posits that quality research should be both fresh and real, concluding balanced, thorough, credible, and accurate information that yields reports that are rich and thorough.

The literature indicates that, in 2017, African American youth represented approximately 14% of the overall population but were disproportionately placed in the foster care system at a rate of 23% (Cenat et al., 2021). The AECF (2007) reported that, in 2004, 34% of the foster care population was African American children, which is approximately twice their proportionality in the general population. Ahmann (2017) reported that disparate conditions are to be expected for African American youth who discharge from care, due to not achieving permanency. Therefore, to understand this phenomenon from the point-of-view of foster care alumni, I used the following research question: Why do African American youth decline to extend foster care services beyond their 18th birthday?

Setting

In-depth virtual interviews were conducted with each study volunteer. The physical location of the virtual connection was determined by each participant, and they were given the option to participate from a smart phone, laptop, tablet, or desktop computer. I verified that each volunteer was in a confidential space that was safe and private, providing a comfortable environment for them to answer the interview questions. Furthermore, I checked to make sure that all accommodations were absent of any conditions that could negatively influence the volunteer, regarding their experience, or their interpretation of their experience. I reminded each participant of the consent form to assure clarity, as well as their right to withdraw from the study without penalty. The interviews lasted from 60 to 75 minutes and were recorded and transcribed using the GoToMeet.Me media service. Each participant was given the opportunity to review their

interviews for accuracy, but only four of the participants responded to the reports, and no changes were recommended. I sent a thank-you email message to all participants.

Demographics

The research volunteers for this generic qualitative inquiry consisted of 10 African American foster care alumni, between the ages of 18 to 25 who aged out of foster care at the age of majority, and made the decision not to extend care. Each participant agreed to complete the demographic form (see Appendix B), and the results are displayed in Table 1. The participants included seven women and three men, with 9 of them identifying as African American or Black and one identifying as a Black White, stating that her mother is Black and her father is White. Currently, each participant lives in North Carolina, but North Carolina is not the home state of choice for one male and one female interviewee, but rather a source of contention related to a kinship placement that disrupted, resulting in a 13-year stay in the child welfare system and Level 3 group homes. Two participants were 19 years old, four participants were 21–23, and four participants were 24 to 25 years old. The participants had aged out of care as recent as 1 year, up to 2 to 7 years post discharge, having spent a minimum of 3 to 13 years in the foster care system. The study respondents were willing volunteers who met the inclusion criteria for this research.

The participant demographic summary is provided in Table 1. Each participant was African American, one high school dropout, one attending an alternative high school academy, four college students, four employed, and two unemployed. Three of the volunteers continue to experience homelessness and serious financial difficulties.

Table 1

Participant Demographic and Characteristic

Demographics	No. of participants ($N = 10$)
Current age	
19	2
21 to 23	4
24 to 25	4
Age entered into foster care	
Birth to 5	2
9 to 13	5
15 to 17	3
Gender	
Female	7
Male	3
Race	
African American	9
Black White	1
Years in foster care	
3 to 5	5
7 to 10	3
13	2
Siblings in foster care	
2 to 4	4
Number of placements	
1 to 3	4
5 to 11	6
Former care relationships continued	
Yes	4
No	6
Biological relationship sustained while in care	
Yes	5
No	5
Graduated high school	
Yes	8
No	2
Married	
Yes	2
No	8
Homeless	
Yes	2
No	8
Incarcerated	
Yes	3
No	7
Convicted of a crime	
Yes	3
No	7
Employed	
Yes	7
No	3
Mental Health Treatment	
Yes	8
No	2
Substance Abuse	
Yes	6
No	4

Data Collection

The Walden University IRB granted approval for me to conduct this generic

qualitative study, approval number 10-29-21-0984762. The recruitment process consisted

of purposive and snowball sampling, which rendered 14 possible participants, 10 of

whom were chosen to participate in this study. I emailed the informed consent form and

the required numerical identifier to every volunteer who agreed to participate in this

anonymous study, and they emailed them back to this researcher. At that point, virtual

interviews were scheduled, including date, time, and physical location that the participant

connected virtually with the researcher. Prior to conducting the interviews, participants

completed the demographic form (see Appendix B) to assure that inclusionary criteria

were met, and to confirm that no exclusionary criteria was missed. The scope of this

study includes African American foster care alumni, ages 18 to 25, who stayed in care a

minimum of 1 year. Excluded from this study are non-African Americans, individuals

aged 17 and younger or age 26 and older, and those with less than 1 year in the child

welfare system. The accuracy and truthfulness of the study is substantive to the validity

of this research, ensuring that the findings can adequately infer valuable meaning to the

collected data and the instruments used in the process (Creswell et al., 2017).

The interview questions were designed to explore the perspective of each

volunteer regarding their decision not to extend foster care beyond their 18th birthday.

The goal is to identify the contributing factors of that decision, including their knowledge

of the option to extend services. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and reviewed

for accuracy. The generic qualitative inquiry allowed me to conduct in-depth,

semistructured virtual interviews that lasted from 1 hour to 1.25 hours. Open-ended

questions were used to allow for elaboration and details of the life events that affected

their decision to end foster care at the age of majority. The approach to asking the

interview questions was noninvasive, while providing the opportunity for participants to

share their individual subjective views, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions on their real world

experiences in child welfare system, the discharge process, and their decision not to

extend care (Kahlke, 2014; Patton, 2015; Percy et al., 2015). Upon completion of the

virtual interviews, the data were transcribed using the GoToMeet.Me media site,

interpreted, and coded.

Data Analysis

The data analysis of the collected and transcribed information involved coding

through the organizational help of Nvivo 12 and further manual analysis of each

transcript. Percy et al. (2015) developed a data analysis guide for researchers, which I

used to help me remain open-minded and considerate of the attitudes, opinions, and

beliefs of the study participants' perspectives of their experiences, assisting in

establishing and maintaining the validity of this research. The audio recordings and the

transcripts were continually reviewed for clarity and accuracy. Chapter 3 addressed the

intent to analyze the data as they were collected, as well as prior to conducting the next

interview, which is the focus of the thematic analysis with constant comparison (Percy et

al., 2015). Table 2 provides a summary of the data collection sample.

Table 2

Data Collection Sample

Age	Foster care experience	Independent living preparation	Disparate conditions	Years in foster care
19	Confusing	Limited	Homeless	4
19	Hard, good	Partial	Unemployed	3
21	Blurred, sad	No	Rape	10
22	Good lesson	Limited	Physical abuse	2
23	Depressing	Dishonest	Mental illness	3
23	Lonely, hard	Dishonest	Sexual abuse	6
24	Good & bad	Partial	Financial	13
24	Unnecessary	No	Homeless	13
24	Horrible	No	Rape	4.5
25	It is what it is!	I taught myself	Abuse	2

The foster care experience, disparate conditions, discharge transition, and independent living are the themes used for the constant comparison necessary for guiding the interview questions. The transcribed text provided me the opportunity to thoroughly review the data on a continuum, interpreting the results for further clarity (Percy et al., 2015). To ensure the accuracy of the data analysis, I took the following steps:

1. The first step in analyzing the data was to manually review each audio recording and the transcript to familiarize myself with the collected data for accuracy and interpreting the information. Reevaluating the interview content was beneficial in allowing me to listen to the interview answers, uninterrupted, and recall specific highlights, expressions, and emotions that I documented as key ideas, significant points-of-view, and fundamental observations.

2. The second step included reviewing the Nvivo 12 software tutorial to refresh my understanding of how to import, file data, and code the collected data, including using the word frequency option to identify themes and patterns.

3. The third step involved organizing the data into groups by themes, patterns, and question categories in order to help with easily assessing and organizing the data.

4. The fourth step included separating individual themes and concepts by highlighting points of interest. Thematic analyses are the functional process that I used to confirm certain themes and patterns.

5. The fifth step consisted of clustering the data sets based on the identified patterns, while checking for reliability and validity, in terms of verifying the data for accuracy. Kihn and Ihantola (2015) postulated that in order for the data sets to be correct, both reliability and validity must be achieved.

6. Step six included comparing each interview to all data that had been analyzed, repeating the process until all collected data were analyzed and compared to confirm identified patterns and themes in the comparisons.

7. Step seven consisted of analyzing each pattern that emerged in order to determine whether a pattern has changed in the process of comparing the information, and then arranging the themes to support the identified patterns. (Percy et al., 2015).

8. Finally, I synthesized the data collectively to form a blend between my research question and the findings, specifically related to the research topic (Patton, 2015; Percy et al., 2015).

Coding

Individual virtual interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed using the gotomeet.me media. The transcripts were organized with the assistance of the NVivo 12 system, which was the software that I used to assist with coding the data, as well as manual coding. Coding the data helped to standardize the data by adding rigor to the analytical process, including organizing and sorting data to find themes, categories, phrases, and repetitions from the interviews (Patton, 2015). Therefore, I reviewed each interview transcript multiple times during this process, identifying and highlighting every theme that was significant in the decision made by African American young adults not to extend foster care services beyond their 18th birthday. The different phrases, themes, and patterns were color coded in order to strategically separate the different codes as relevant to the study topic. This process continued until all collected data were coded and no new themes emerged from the data, after which the coded data were collated into groups based on the codes. In order to present the findings in a productive manner, I organized the codes in a way that would display the noteworthy segments.

Generating Themes

Thematic data analysis is the concept that I used in conjunction with hand coding and NVivo 12 to aid in the emergence of themes and phrases from the interviews that demonstrates meaningful connections within the data. Generating themes is one of the six

categories of the thematic data analysis system, focusing on the relevance of recurring

themes and patterns that were not vague and provided substance related to the topic

(Braun & Clark, 2006). The respondents in this study were able to reflect and elaborate

on their experiences in the foster care system, identifying both patterns and themes in

sharing their story that allowed me to identify meaningful units, categorize themes, and

name the coding sections that was revealed by the collected data. Recurring patterns and

themes were evident in the ongoing review of the transcripts and audio recordings and

coded, accordingly, to achieve saturation (Tuffour, 2017).

Reviewing Themes/Defining and Naming Themes

The process of developing a detailed analysis of the themes, phrases, and patterns

to formulate the meaning of each category, in terms of how it affects the understanding of

the collected data is the purpose of this section (Braun & Clark, 2006; Tuffour, 2017). In

this critical stage of the analysis the interpretive skills of the researcher are crucial in their

ability to draw analytical conclusions in transitioning the codes into valid themes and

phrases. The primary research question of this study is: (1) Why do African American

youth decline to extend foster care services beyond their 18th birthday? Listed below are

the five code categories, themes, subthemes, and participant endorsing's that emerged

from the collected data:

Table 3

Code Categories, Themes, and Subthemes

The foster care experience	Independent living preparation	Disparate conditions post-discharge	Emotional trauma	Abuse history
-Confusing -Horrible -Good -It is, what it is	-I taught myself -Broken promises/lies -None -Unprepared/ No help	-Homeless -Financial -Incarcerated -High school dropout	-Trust issues -Easily frustrated -Skeptical -Highly sensitive	-Sexual abuse -No abuse -Physical abuse -Psychological abuse

Themes

The respondents of this research study were discharged from the foster care system without having achieved permanency and limited support systems in place. Reunification with their biological family's did not happen, and two of the participants' parents' rights had been terminated. The overarching attitude of frustration and contention regarding systemic injustices, related to racism and abuse sparked multiple negative emotions, including fear, anger, insecurity, uncertainty, and sadness. Two participants discussed their desire to file a lawsuit against the child welfare system for wrongful removal from their biological family and emotional distress. The interviews afforded each interviewee the opportunity to discuss good and bad experiences that impacted their current trajectory in life, including outcomes. The dialogue revealed their journeys, hardships, barriers, achievements, challenges post foster care and the co-occurring outcomes they have faced in adulthood. The seven themes that emerged from the data collection are why me, Trust, decision-making, emotions and feelings; worry, lack of patience, inability to seek help, and fear, second-guessing, and over-thinking. However, one participant reported having a good foster parent who took very good care

of them, but the social workers were horrible, including threatening to move her from the good placement because she was upset with the social worker for lying to her. In comparison to the other nine participants this experience was unique and positive, presenting a discrepancy.

Table 4 displays the direct quotes of the respondents from which the seven themes were derived. These seven themes revealed by the data summarized the shared experiences faced by the interviewees post discharge and ongoing throughout their adulthood.

Table 4

Themes and Interview Quotes

Theme	Interview Quotes
Theme 1: Why me?	• SV003: I was taken away from my family three times beginning at the age three. I really didn't understand why or what was wrong with my family. My grandmother lived next door and I had family across the street. My mom wasn't perfect, but she wasn't a bad person either. She would argue with the social workers because they were accusing her of things that were not true. I really believe that because my mom talked back and ask questions is the reason why the second removal included me and both of my brothers.
	• SV005: All I wanted was to live with my mother, but the social workers said no. No one ever gave me a real reason for why. Yes, my mom smoked marijuana and sometimes she would have parties on Saturday nights. But, when she had parties we stayed with my Aunt. But sometimes the police would be called and people would tell them that children were in the home and the social workers believed them. When they came to my school I told them that my mama had parties on Saturday nights but we were never there and yes her and her boyfriend would fight, but so did my foster mother and her boyfriend.
	• SV008: I have met so many new and strange people while in foster care that it is not funny, but sad. New foster parents, new social workers, new teachers, and new religions. I was set up for failure through the instability of the foster care system. Random things just happened all the time without any explanation. Why? Why me?
	• SV010: I was so young when all of this started. I didn't know what was going on. I didn't fit anywhere. I was always with strangers who seemed to let me in their family home that was always just a house to me. There were always times that would let you know that you are a visitor and not a family member.
Theme 2: Trust	• SV001: When I was discharged I was told that I could receive LINKS benefits as long as I did not return to my mother's home so I moved in with my sister. No one said anything about that so I thought I was alright. Then when I turned my request in to get my benefits I was told that I didn't qualify because I lived with my sister and she lives to close to our mom. I was so upset that the rules can be changed and they want show you the policy. I really want to sue the social services. I do not trust those people.
	• SV002: I don't trust anyone. I think that all social service places should be stopped. I do not know of one good DSS. My cousins were in DSS custody in another state and it was the same mess. I have three children now and I don't even drive by that building for any help. I make sure my kids are fine in school because I don't want that knock at the door that starts the foolishness of turning my life and my kid's world apart.
	• SV003: So many broken promises even about discharge. They make everything so hard and complicated and try to make it look like you are the problem. The car and house match programs for the LINKS program is such a joke. I did everything they told me to do and still ended up homeless, jobless, and car-less.
	• SV005: Foster care was traumatic for my family. I agree that my mother needed help, and yes the gas was off at our house, but that is not a reason to take someone's children. One time we discussed a bad situation that happened to us with our social worker and she didn't believe us. She told our foster mother and we were severely punished. I was nine years old and I never told any of the other abusive things that happened; I just struggle now as an adult.
Theme 3: Decision-making	• SV003: I am really smart and I need to go to college. I have two children and am pregnant. But, when I enrolled in college I didn't understand how to fill out the paperwork and ended up messing up my financial aid. I couldn't get any help.
	• SV006: From the time I started in foster care many, if not all decisions regarding my life and care were made for me. I don't remember be informed or asked for my thoughts, just that things would change, I wouldn't understand, and I learned not to ask any questions.
	• SV009: Person-centered-stuff is a bunch of mess. As for me and my siblings, the persons at the center of our dilemma was not consulted. We were told what our goals were and whether or not we had made progress without any input from us. Not to mention the fact that most of our goals were based on lies. Generally, I'm so confused.

Theme	Interview Quotes
Theme 4: Emotions and feelings; worry	• SV001: Foster care is not for helping children. Nobody cares! Why would you extend care? That would be like extending pain. Now, does that make sense? • SV004: I didn't know that I could stay in foster care. After over 10 social workers, multiple black eyes, a broken leg, and 5 psychiatric hospitalizations I would say that nobody cares. I literally had broken bones. I told the school counselor and she contacted DSS and the social worker came to my school and scared the pure crap out of me. She told me that if she reported this that she would have to move me to another family and it could possibly get worse. Then, she asks me what I wanted her to do. I just cried for a moment, and ask her if I could go back to live with my mother. She said no and didn't give me a reason. I walked out and went back to class. • SV010: I remember asking if I could mail a card to my family on their birthdays because I missed them so much. I was told no. So, every year I made homemade birthday cards and hid them in my suitcase until I could see my family when I got older and show them that I never forgot about them.
Theme 5: Lack of patience	• SV002: My grandmother, uncle, and cousin passed away while I was in foster care and no one told me. I found out by accident. I was angry and hurt and I went off. I was 16 years old at the time and they called the police and I was arrested. I cut up in jail just to get to stay there. • SV006: My money was taken. I didn't have good clothes to wear and I often had to walk most places even at a young age. I learned to speak up for myself even though it only got me into trouble. I just didn't care. • SV007: I would demand answers. While I was at school I would borrow my friends phone and call my family and my social worker to express my feelings and tell them what I needed. I would sneak out the back of the school and see my dad at lunchtime. Every time we had supervised meetings at the social services I would be so angry when it was time to leave. That was the shortest hour ever. • SV009: Being neglected and ignored has a way of bringing the worst out of you.
Theme 6: Inability to seek help	• SV005: The place that you go to get help is the place that destroyed my life. I will starve or eat out of the trash before I ask the Department of Social Services for help. I will graduate college and get a good job. Until then, I will wing it! • SV007: I'm employed, but sometimes I need a little help with food or supplying the needs of my children. But, I refuse to ask anyone for help. I struggle and fight my way through the most difficult and loneliest times. Many days and nights I cry, not knowing what to do but somehow God always makes a way. • SV009: The social service social workers told so many lies to prove their cases until it was unreal. Sometimes I thought I was crazy because of the way they changed words around to make stuff look like it was much worse than it was. I hate DSS. I will never go there for any help. It's sad, but true that I have sold my body to feed myself and my children, and I will do it again before going to that hellish place!
Theme 7: Fear, second-guessing, and overthinking	• SV002: I don't take anybody's word for anything. Most people tell me I think too much and ask to many questions. I don't even realize that I'm doing that. • SV003: Because of being lied to so much I overthink everything. I have lost two really good relationships because of my struggle with trust. I'm always doubting the other person, and I don't know how to just listen without trying to listen for bad information. • SV007: Sometimes I just don't know what to do, but I refuse to ask for help. I make up stuff in my head and I make assumptions about what people think, feel and say about me even if I have no proof.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Ravitch and Carl (2016) propose distinct interconnectivity between trustworthiness and validity as the threads that sustain the qualitative research approach. Babbie (2017) declares that valid data is the same as reliable data, asserting that accuracy in reporting the truth is critical in establishing research trustworthiness. The role of the researcher is a core component in assuring the validity of the studied phenomenon and can effectively be achieved by using measurable points of sound judgment when endeavoring to substantiate credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability of findings and analyses (Anney, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As the researcher of this study I intentionally used active listening skills to help me interpret the collected data with integrity and to refrain from attaching any false perceptions to the transcripts.

Credibility

Ravitch and Carl (2016) define credibility as a valuable component of qualitative research that is equally contrasted with the concept of internal validity as related to quantitative research. Credibility can only be achieved if readers are able to use the findings of the study to make informed decisions (Tracy, 2010). Qualitative researchers seek to achieve credibility by establishing validity strategies of triangulation, participant validation, discussing complex cases, an extended engagement in the natural settings, and the use of an external audience. Credibility emphasizes the integrity of the research, assuring that the study is reliable and believable (Saldana, 2016). At the opening of each interview, I shared with each respondent that I am a new researcher and reminded them of their right to review their transcripts for accuracy.

Transferability

Transferability aligns with the quantitative concept of external validity regarding the generalization of case transference and the replication or repetition of the study content while maintaining the richness of the collected data (Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The detail orientation of the study findings should provoke an emotional connection with the readers if transferability is achieved (Shenton, 2004). The goal of this study was to achieve saturation from the study sample through their valuable dialogue regarding their decision not to extend foster care, and their perspective of the contributing factors. Transferability was not a component of this research study and this study is not generalizable.

Dependability

Qualitative research earns the status of dependability by maintaining consistency and stability of the reported content over a period of time (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Data maturation supports research dependability, which is similar to the quantitative concept of reliability, entailing that the researcher has a reasonable argument that is evident in the data collection process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Dependability and credibility are the primary components of trustworthiness and must be maintained throughout the study in order for confirmability to be achieved. This researcher was consistent in collecting, transcribing, interpreting and presenting the collected data in a manner that accurately represented the perspective of the interviewee. This was achieved through active listening and the review of the transcripts by each participant.

Confirmability

Confirmability is juxtaposed with the quantitative concept of objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative researchers do not subscribe to objectivity when interpreting and qualifying respondents' thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and ideas (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The foundational premise of qualitative studies is the notion of subjectivity, which places the responsibility on the researcher to be self-aware and acknowledge personal biases and prejudices when analyzing and interpreting data. This researcher is self-aware of her personal biases, both personal and professional. Certainly, listening to some of these narratives was difficult, but my personal integrity kept me grounded and focused on listening to and understanding the point-of-view of the respondent, in order to answer the research question.

<div align="center">

Results

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The topic of this research study endeavored to answer the question of why African American youth make the decision not to extend foster care services beyond their 18th birthday. The respondents referred to their case workers as social workers. However, the actual profession of the case workers is unknown. Despite the themes and subthemes, the review of the transcripts revealed some doubt and uncertainty but hope and resilience was evident as well. The 10 African American foster care alumni represented in this study described themselves as being in the fight of their lives, crawling out of a hole that they define as a pit. Six of the 10 participants admit their ongoing struggles and fears, but also believe that their life will make a difference. Two of them are bitter and angry, feeling that they have been wronged in a horrific way by being robbed of their youth and

their families. The other two are struggling with mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, and feelings of helplessness, despite their desire to live.

The themes and subthemes that were generated from the data collection were beneficial in answering the central research question regarding the decision made by African American foster care alumni not to extend foster care services. The code categories, subthemes, and participant endorsement are listed in Table 3. The codes provided some insight into the primary meanings, which were recurring throughout the data. Some of the codes were unclear and eliminated, requiring me to continue searching for patterns, phrases, and themes manually and in Nvivo 12. Eventually, I was able to achieve saturation as no new patterns, phrases or themes emerged. At this point, I was able to identify significant phrases, themes, statements, codes, and patterns that were used for the final analysis and interpretation of the collected data. The generic qualitative inquiry was used to explore the point-of-view, perspective, attitude, and feelings of the target population regarding this phenomenon related to the decision made by African American foster care alumni not to extend foster care services beyond their 18th birthday. The following themes and phrases were significant in the data analysis in answering the research question.

Theme 1: Why me?

All 10 of the respondents ask the question why me? Most of them indicated a desire for this question to be answered even now that they have been discharged. The question of why me seemed to generate a theme of anger, fear and sadness, in which the participants continue to deal with throughout their life. The discussion regarding negative

feelings that are persistent even in the good times that existed while in care. The question still remained why me? The need to understand why, and the reality that they will never know the answer proved to be unsettling. Of the 10 participants not one of them believed that they needed to be in the foster care system, not that problems did not exist in their family's but not to the extent of being removed and forced to live with strangers.

Theme 2: Trust

Trust is a remarkable issue for each of the 10 respondents. Again, even amidst good days while in care each of them discuss incidents of being lied to and the many broken promises that seemed not to matter. For instance, the respondents discussed missing scheduled family appointments and scheduled family appointments cut short due to a particular need of the social worker or agency. The respondents report being told that their family changed the appointment, only to learn that the social worker requested to change the time and such was not convenient for the family; but, this is not the report given to the interviewee. Each of them speak of coming to the point where the only thing you look forward to is turning 18 so that you can exit the child welfare system, and even then trust is an issue due to more promises that remain unfulfilled and seemingly unimportant. Each interviewee made mention of their issues with trust that they project onto other relationships, blaming their placement in foster care for this level of insecurity. Statements such as 'I don't trust anyone' and 'I get nervous when my children are away from me,' are examples of the evidence of a lack of trust for the study respondents.

Theme 3: Decision-Making

The respondents report feeling that so many decisions were made for them, independent of their thoughts and feelings that it came to a point of just agreeing, and rarely achieving closure between issues. For example, "I would get anxiety each time I was told that I was not going to be a bus rider, but a car rider. Usually, this meant that I was changing foster homes and my stuff would either be in a trash bag or missing." "I felt like I had no voice about my life, and I quickly learned the dangers of speaking up." As a result, decision-making has proven to be a challenge for the study participants. Multiple placements occurred, without valid or any explanations regarding such a major decision that drastically affected the ability to ever expect stability, thus negatively impacting the ability to make decisions or just think for one's self. One respondent spoke of being confused about religion, as he was exposed to various religious beliefs during foster care, and forced to participate in each religion of the foster family that he was forced to live with, despite his lack of understanding. To this day, feeling confused about denominations and states that God is an issue.

Theme 4: Insecurity and Fear

Despite the program initiatives that were established to help assure the well-being of foster care youth, such as the CDF that was started in 1973 for disadvantaged American children, the 'Leave No Child Behind,' including youth in the child welfare system, or the Foster Care Independence Act/Independent Living Act of 1986, these respondents feel that nobody cared about their feelings while in care and the same is true now in many ways. The initiatives that are in place to secure financial flexibility by

supporting and preparing foster care participants for structured and organized

independent living by extending foster care services for all foster care is met with

disappointment by African American foster care alumni (Simmel & Kelly, 2019). The

participants report feeling unheard the same as while in care, stating that despite

following the rules they are often disappointed and maintain their unmet needs.

Consistently, each respondent reported feeling that "nobody cares about me."

Theme 5: Limited Patience and Quick Tempered

Post foster care respondents say that the rules change and set them up for failure.

The discharge transition process is reported to have served to exacerbate existing

problems. Limited anger management skills and the inability to resolve conflict is an

ongoing issue that has resulted in incarcerations for two of the respondents, and

hospitalizations for three respondents. The ability to self-regulate in the midst of life

stressors that one feels unprepared to address is proving challenging, yielding negative

results.

Theme 6: Doubt and Uncertainty

Independent living and adulthood has proven to be lonely, dark, and hard for 8 of

the ten respondents, who report living in and out of shelters and frequenting truck stops

just to survive, and to avoid asking for help from the Department of Social Services. "I

would rather eat out of the trash can than to ask for help," was reported by 8 of the

respondents. The need for the simple necessities of life, such as food and shelter being an

issue after spending so much time in the system is troubling. But, learning to fend for

oneself is the general consensus among respondents, stating this is the better option

versus seeking systematic assistance.

Theme 7: Second-Guessing and Overthinking

Fear is a common thread among the ten respondents, which makes it very difficult

to feel safe or trust their own judgement. For example, the respondents report that

"overthinking simple matters is a daily problem, as well as not being able to believe

anyone, thinking that everyone is out to get you or up to no good is tiring, and anxiety

producing." Feeling inadequate is stated to be at the core of second guessing and

overthinking matters, which happens without any forethought. The reality of a potentially

good situation has often subsided before the realization that the circumstances are not bad

sets in. Respondents report that "because of being lied to so much I overthink everything.

I have lost two really good relationships because of my struggle with trust. I simply

second-guess everything." SV006 reports that her children will never be allowed to spend

the night with their friends, due to her inability not to associate other parents with her

former foster parents. Relationships, employment, and medical needs are some of the

identified problems resulting from theme number 7.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

In this generic qualitative inquiry, the 10 study participants were instrumental in

helping to answer the research question of why African American youth decide not to

extend foster care services beyond their 18th birthday. The data collection phase of this

study was beneficial in the exploration of the impact of the foster care experience and

how it influenced the decision to end care. Sharing their experiences was individualized,

yet collaborative in the themes, phrases, and patterns that continued to manifest, as demonstrated in this chapter, and displayed in the results section. Unfortunately, the study participants have the common underlying theme of fear, lack of preparation, and confusion. All of them feel that their childhood was unnecessarily disrupted, providing their reasons for why removing them from their family home to live with strangers was not the best option. The reports states that they feel less prepared for independent living and adulthood, but would rather accept the challenge, despite the known disparities, rather than remain in the system that they blame for failing them. Person-centered thinking and planning, as well as LINKS programs and other initiatives are discounted by each respondent, stating that generally a systemic issue inhibits their ability to fully receive the services that were promised.

Sexual abuse, physical abuse, rejection, neglect, abandonment and many other negative outcomes did not deter this group of African American youth from engaging their current challenges. As previously stated, incarcerations and psychiatric admissions have become a recurring theme, but not a motivator to seek help and services from the child welfare system, including the option to reconnect with the foster care system. The participants were at different levels of progression in their post-foster care experience, learning daily the value of resilience and working to stop anger, fear, and depression from controlling their life and life decisions. Hope and resilience was discussed by eight of the ten participants who report being determined not to be a statistic, and to someday make a change in the current foster care system, shining the light on exact issues and problems that negatively impact African American foster care alumni in accepting the option to

extend care at the age of 18. Chapter 5 is the final chapter of this dissertation and it will address the interpretation of findings, limitation of the study, the recommendations for future research, and the implications for social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The intent of this generic qualitative inquiry was to understand why African American foster care youth do not extend care beyond the age of majority, despite the evidence of multiple negative overarching environmental risk factors. I explored the perspectives, thoughts, and feelings of African American youth who experienced foster care and declined to extend care at the age of 18. Understanding their foster care experience and the contributing factors associated with their decision to end care, despite the option to continue services was a critical component in helping this study to address systemic deficits of the child welfare system and the transitional process for independent living into adulthood. In general, foster care youth are at a high risk of experiencing many complexities throughout their lives and African American youth have fewer expectations of positive outcomes than their White and Hispanic counterparts (Courtney et al., 2017). Despite the foundational premise of the child welfare system being to protect the well-being of children, the current research reveals that once a child is placed in foster care, there are no guarantees of protection from further maltreatment, and that African American youth can expect a myriad of hardships while in care (Haggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Rosenburg & Abbot, 2019). Snowball sampling was achieved by the volunteers of the study deciding to share the study topic with other potential candidates.

The purpose of this study was to address the gap in the existing research, which fails to answer the following research question: Why do African American foster care youth make the decision not to extend foster care beyond their 18th birthday? African American youth in the child welfare system are a vulnerable population who are

overrepresented in the system and rarely achieve permanency. Therefore, the aim of this study was to understand their perspective regarding their insight into the child welfare foster care system and the outstanding factors that impact their decision to appear to choose homelessness, abuse, and incarceration over staying in a system that is said to be safe and for their well-being. The current literature indicated the need for further attention and research on this phenomenon for the target population. For example, there are minimal data on the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of actual African American foster care alumni. Consequently, most research focuses on larger organizations and reported program outcomes, which are often favorable, providing a contraindication to the report obtained from the respondents in this study.

This study revealed the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of 10 African American foster care alumni who decided not to stay in care, primarily citing systemic deficits. Therefore, understanding the foster care system, the discharge transition process, and postdischarge is imperative to improving the social change options for future generations. Individual interviews of these 10 study participants revealed an array of themes and patterns regarding their foster care experiences that do not align with positive health and well-being expectations. Therefore, the goal for this study was to gain an understanding and better insight into the experiences and outcomes that negatively impact the decision of African American youth not to remain in foster care. The results of this study are hoped to increase positive transitional outcomes for this target population.

The findings of this study revealed that the African American foster care alumni in this study, having discharged out of care into independent living and adulthood, find

themselves even more vulnerable and disadvantaged without support and guidance.

transitioning unassisted, without guidance or medical support. Maintaining self-

sufficiency and managing themselves, in terms of behavioral choices and decision

making, seems to be a significant challenge. The culprit in the matter seems to be ill

preparation for discharge, not having achieved permanency, a lack of resources, and

uncontrolled emotions. Discharge seems to be an extension of systemic failures for

participants, who are now dealing with physical abuse, mental abuse, emotional abuse,

psychological abuse, homelessness, unemployment, and toying with the idea of suicide.

Unfortunately, prior research on this vulnerable population reveals similar findings

(Dworsky et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2014).

Interpretation of Findings

This generic qualitative inquiry was devoted to including the perspectives,

thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of African American foster care alumni between the ages

of 18 to 25, who made the decision to end foster care at the age of 18 (Percy et al., 2015).

Understanding their experience, based on their report, is crucial to improving systemic

issues that seem to persuade care recipients to choose adverse conditions, such as

homelessness, financial difficulties, incarceration, and other abusive situations over

staying in care. Foster care experiences are reported to impact the quality of life of the

target population for the duration of their life, and the discharge transition process,

independent living, and adulthood are all significant components of positive and negative

outcomes (Greenson, 2013; Tyrell & Yates, 2017). The findings of this study can be

interpreted to support the current data regarding the urgent desire of most foster care

recipients to discharge from care, primarily due to multiple injustices that seem to be worse for African American youth (Tyrell & Yates, 2017). None of the 10 respondents ever considered extending foster care, and each one attributed the negative impact of systemic injustices as a major factor, including racism and severing biological relationships.

The current literature does not reveal specific percentages or statistics on African American youth who choose not to extend care. Nevertheless, the research does show that African American children are disproportionately placed in foster care and rarely achieve permanence. In Chapter 2 of this study, the research shows that, in general, foster care recipients are at risk of experiencing more abuse, neglect, instability, uncertainty, and trauma, as well as minimal preparation for independent living and adulthood, which is increased when applicable to African American youth (Haggman-Laitila, 2018; Havlicek, 2014). But, this study reveals that the noted disparities are not a deterrent in the decision not to extend foster care services for this target population.

The themes and subthemes were consistently significant in the ongoing review of the transcripts, both manually and through Nvivo for each respondent. The themes were (a) the foster care experience, with the co-occurring subthemes of confusing, horrible, good, and it is what it is; (b) independent living preparation, with the subthemes of "I taught myself," broken promises/lies, none, and unprepared/no help; (c) disparate postdischarge conditions, with the subthemes of homeless, financial, incarcerated, high school drop-out; (d) emotional trauma, with the subthemes of trust issues, easily

frustrated, skeptical, highly sensitive; and (e) abuse history, with the subthemes of sexual abuse, no abuse, physical abuse, and psychological abuse.

The subthemes related to this research seemed to foster the urgency of the 10 respondents' decision not to extend foster care, revealing feelings of ambivalence related to excitement, fear, emotional confusion, and basic readiness. Mitchell et al. (2015) reported that young people transitioning out of foster care at the age of majority are initially excited and desirous of moving on to the next chapter of their life. Nevertheless, due to their lack of preparation and readiness, transitioning out of care is often met by the reality of the responsibility of the autonomy of adulthood, leading to the disparate conditions faced by the target population (Kalinyak et al., 2016). Despite the initiatives that allow the extension of foster care, the research shows that 37% of foster care alumni experience homelessness (Tyrell & Yates, 2017).

The implications related to the themes that were generated, which were the foster care experience, independent living preparation, disparate conditions-post discharge, emotional trauma, and abuse history, revealed practical connections with the theoretical foundation of the ecological systems theory. The person-in-environment concept is the focal area of the ecological systems theory, which is the interface between the respondents in this study and the impact of the environment on their unmet needs and how every facet of their life was affected by their experience in the child welfare system (Flynn, 2020). The goal of this study is to improve the provision of services and supports that are necessary to improve the potential for positive outcomes for African American foster care youth pre and post foster care discharge. The respondents in this study

revealed a significant disconnect between their individual needs and environmental

injustices, based on systemic deficits, per their experience. The challenge of leaving the

system that presented ongoing problems included the protections that were earned within

the child welfare system, but not guaranteed post discharge. For example, college

education, finances, housing, and employment, which are vital necessities at the interface

of the person and their environment if success is expected.

The current scope of social work practice has evidence to support that youth

living in foster care do not want to stay in care, even when they are aware that the option

exists (Morton, 2018). Despite the knowledge of disparities, such as homelessness, sex

trafficking, multilayered abuse, and financial difficulties, gaps continue to exist in the

data related to successful discharge planning, independent living, and adulthood

experiences of African American foster care alumni (Ahmann, 2017; Curry & Petering,

2017). Additional studies have shown that African American youth are most impacted by

the previously mentioned disparities, experiencing adverse differential treatment while in

foster care at a higher rate than White and Hispanic youth, and worse post foster care

outcomes (Courtney et al., 2017; Fowler et at., 2017; Zlotnick, 2012). The participants in

this study significantly reference the coded themes and subthemes as the contributing

factors in their decision to end their foster care experience at the age of majority. Each

respondent is willing to acknowledge their lack of preparation and readiness for

adulthood, but such is not a deterrent for prematurely entering into adulthood. This

research points to multiple systemic failures that are identified in Chapter 4 in the themes,

subthemes, phrases, patterns, and codes that resulted from the interview transcripts.

The interpretation of the findings of this study reveals the differences and similarities of the individual interviews. The participants of the study acknowledge that their ability to succeed is possible, despite their difficult experience in the foster care system that was reported to be traumatic for six of the 10 participants. The interviewees discussed discharge transitional programs, such as LINKS, and program concepts of person-centered-thinking/planning that each of them discount as being merely a trap and a means to more frustration. The participants reported that the services and concepts are not user friendly and often have hidden qualifications and requirements that are not shared in the interim presentation of the information, failing to address their unmet needs. Certainly, the child welfare system should be required to show evidence of the completion specific common goals for independent living readiness to help mitigate the complexities and disparate conditions encountered during discharge. As a result, Congress initiated the Independent Living Act of 1986 to improve the opportunity for youth to live successfully post-foster care discharge (Chor, 2018). Nevertheless, the respondents in this study have continued to support their decision to end foster care, despite their ongoing hardships and adversities.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of a generic qualitative inquiry research study can be attributed to the nature of the research design from the perspective of qualitative research skeptics (Gentles et al., 2015; Bellamy et al., 2016). The qualitative research design has endured criticism related to the validity of a research design that regards subjective data, such as thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and perspectives as being valid (Bellamy et al., 2016; Patton,

2015). The generic qualitative inquiry does not rely on a specific theoretical or philosophical framework to achieve validity, but rather considers practicality from a qualitative approach to understanding real-world problems from people who have experienced the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). As a result, the generic qualitative inquiry faces the limitation of being discounted dually, questioning the validity related to respondent accuracy, coupled with the interpretive integrity of the researcher, and the absence of a theoretical or philosophical lens (Bellamy et al., 2016; Patton, 2015).

  The study participants were all from the participating agency, suggesting the need for further research by expanding the scope. The delimitations that were evident during this study, specifically the delimitation of the design of a generic qualitative inquiry's impact on the target population when answering the research question: Why do African American foster care youth decline to extend foster care beyond their 18th birthday? The potential answer to this question can be perceived as hypersensitive, persuaded by the confusion of current challenges or the influence of others. Furthermore, the limitations encountered by this study were reasonable as related to the design and methodology expectations, such as the format for questioning participants, the vulnerable status of the target population, the use of open-ended semistructured questions, and the homogeneity of participants' ethnicity and geographical location. The data collection of this study did not reveal any participants who were under the influence of any substance, such as alcohol or other drugs or treated for psychiatric needs believed to have resulted from the foster care experience. Consequently, this would be a more vulnerable group, but to further answer the research question completely this group must be considered. Finally,

this same question must be answered by foster care alumni of other ethnicities, per the revelation of the data that shows that foster care youth in general choose not to extend care (Erickson, 2011; Howson, 2019).

Limitations and Recommendations

In this generic qualitative inquiry, I attempted to answer the question of why African American foster care youth between the ages of 18 and 25 decide not to extend foster care services beyond their 18th birthday. However, I faced several dilemmas that restricted my ability to simplify the findings of the study, such as all of the respondents being from the same program and the limitations posed by the virtual interview format to my ability to observe the participants' body language beyond the shoulders and the inability to verify the validity of each self-report (Patton, 2015). Also, the participants for the study were recruited from one specific agency, all of them were of the same ethnicity, and all were dissatisfied with the systematic approach of the child welfare system. The respondents were dealing with unresolved issues that they described as hurtful, resulting in emotional dialogue and the potential of taking advantage of the opportunity to be heard without judgement and potential repercussions.

The results of this study validate racial disproportionality and disparate conditions related to African American youth who participate in the child welfare system. Social workers are at the forefront of the decision to remove African American children from their homes often criminalizing poverty and engaging personal biases in this decision (Children's Bureau, 2021; Dettlaff et al., 2020). Improving outcomes for African American youth who decide not to extend foster care could begin with social worker

accountability, improved social worker supervision, and improved oversight of the child welfare system. Social worker training, including casework strategies could improve the service continuum, such as prevention, accurate reporting of information, the screening and assessment process, service provision, and permanency achievement outcomes for African American youth (Children's Bureau, 2021).

Future research recommendations include interviewing child welfare workers to learn more about their credentials, work experience, and knowledge related to serving vulnerable populations. Also, reviewing job descriptions and hiring practices of social service agencies that serve the child welfare system to determine degree requirments, the difference between case workers and social workers, and clarifying the role of organizational assistants. Furthermore, addressing social worker training issues, racial disproportionality and disparities beyond the well-researched evidence that the problems exist. The institution of policies and procedures that are based on best practice methodologies to address antiracist and culturally specific issues should be mandatory and compliance should be regulated through broker programs that are independent of the child welfare system (Children's Bureau, 2021; Dettlaff et al., 2020). The recommendation for family advocates to support parents and children, in conjunction with similar concepts as blind removal meetings could be essential in improving the current problems addressed by this study. Blind removal meetings are established to address potential social worker biases and subjectivity in decisions regarding out-of-home placements (Children's Bureau, 2021). Cases are presented to committees without

any identifying personal or demographic information with the intent that removal

decisions be based solely on safety and risk factors of each case.

Furthermore, expanding this study to include various ethnicities, broaden the

geographical area, explore healthy foster care experiences, include foster care alumni

who were emancipated from the system prior to the age of 18, and improve the

recruitment criteria to participants suffering with substance abuse and mental illness.

Finally, the recommendation is made to contrast and compare gender differences related

to the decision made by African American youth and other ethnicities not to extend foster

care beyond their 18th birthday.

<div style="text-align:center">Implications</div>

The findings of this study present multiple practice implications for the profession

of social work and all human service-related professions. Specifically, related to this

study, the participants use the term social worker in a random manner when discussing

their case workers, implying that each worker holds a social work degree. However, in

the state of North Carolina multiple professional degree's are allowed to work as child

welfare case managers, including foster care (DHHS, 2018). Based on the findings of this

study, the significant implications are those related to social injustices and the lack of

regard for the needs, thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of African American youth

while placed in the foster care system. As a result, the findings of this study reveal that

the foster care alumni who participated in this research had no desire to extend their stay

in foster care, despite their awareness of not having achieved permanence, lack of

preparation, and the knowledge of the potential to be forced to make negative survival

decisions. Each respondent admitted that the impact of their post-discharge experience, despite the complexities and difficulties they encountered, would not discourage them from encouraging other African American aging out youth to end their foster care journey.

The respondents of this study consistently blamed their child welfare social workers for the majority of their negative in care experiences, including not having a voice in decisions made regarding their care, not feeling safe to report placement abuse, and being manipulated regarding maintaining contact with their families. U.S. District Court Judge Janis Jack, in her 2016 court ruling, scathingly rules in favor of reforming the Texas child welfare system (National Advocacy Council, 2016). Judge Jack shared that she was a former foster care recipient, declaring that over two decades the child welfare system has shuttled children through the system, band-aiding issues of rape, physical and emotional abuse, misusing psychotropic medications, and creating further harm and instability. California State University (2008) research study found that disproportionality among African American youth is a problem, recommending policy related changes to be enacted making mandatory social worker training in cultural competence a priority. Additional benefits would include supervisors, administrators, and stakeholders uniting to seek best practice solutions to specifically address African American children and other minority populations (California State University, 2008).

The results of this study seem to corroborate a need to improve training for child welfare social workers. The respondents of this study share stories of their social workers misreporting information in court reports, not taking proper actions to address reported

concerns, and abrupt placement changes without notifications or closure being achieved.

The following comments were shared by two of the respondents of this study, "my social

worker said that if I told the school counselor about my foster parents' son touching me

that I could be moved to a worse placement, so I didn't tell;" my social worker told me

that my parents tested positive for drugs, but she never tested them. The person that was

scheduled to do the test was unable to keep the appointment so they used previous results,

and no one would listen to my parents who were not positive and were following the

treatment plan." Social worker accountability is crucial in protecting African American

youth in foster care, only secondary to systematic and structural accountability of

Department of Social Service agencies at large (DHHS, 2018). Improving professional

policies and procedures regarding social worker training in cultural competence, while

clarifying the statutes regarding the criteria for removing children from their family

homes and better managing out-of-home placements is critical to improving discharge

outcomes.

The Person-Centered-Planning/Thinking concept has many important and

valuable resources in the conceptual framework. Nevertheless, African American youth

in this research study do not feel that their needs are at the center of planning or thinking

about their lives. Reporting that major life changing decisions are made regarding their

life and future without their input or involvement. Implications would be to activate the

intentions of Person-Center-Planning/Thinking which would give a voice to the person at

the core of this phenomenon. The young adults in this study believe that the opportunity

to be heard, regarding their life goals and wishes could have potentially affected their

urgency to end foster care at the age of 18. The implication is to be intentional about allowing African American youth a positive role in the decision-making process for their lives. The need for inclusion of the target population has multiple major benefits and is paramount in improving transitional outcomes that are successful and healthy. Finally, the primary implication for the social change initiative for this study is to increase social worker accountability and make mandatory supportive services to transitioning youth at least up to age 25.

Conclusions

This generic qualitative inquiry was conducted to understand the decision made by African American youth not to extend foster care services beyond their 18th birthday, despite the overarching and overwhelming negative outcomes. This study also focused on the contributing factors that influenced the decision to end care, in order to gain a meaningful and profitable understanding of how to improve the discharge transition process and constructive independent living for African American young adults. This study revealed the need to initiate services and programs that are designed, developed, and deployed to help African American youth succeed. Otherwise, the child welfare system will continue to see more and more young people opt to end their foster care experience, even if it means losing resources, either monetary or otherwise. The evidence of a lack the professional and technical competencies related to social workers, who are task with making life altering and life impacting decisions is a societal woe that cannot be ignored. The out-of-home placements made by social workers who are unchecked in making placement determinations is significantly contributing to the ongoing

disproportionate representation of African American children in the foster care system in the United States (Nielsen, 2020). Therefore, resources must be appropriately allocated, in such a manner as to help address the issues related to this phenomenon.

The problem addressed by this research revealed that despite the availability of the awareness of options to extend foster care services beyond age 18, African American youths rarely make the decision to do so, despite the lack of preparation, not having achieved permanency, and minimal supportive resources. The CDF (2018) reports that more than 20,000 youth are discharged from foster care without a permanent family. Current research studies reveal that foster care alumni do not extend care, in general, despite inadequate preparation for adulthood, which is a social dilemma (Goodkind et al., 2011). Rosenburg and Abbott (2019) found that maltreatment, such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse, is higher in foster care for African American youths than White and Hispanic near-age counterparts, which is supported by this study.

The data collected from this research study will build upon existing data related to improving transitional outcomes for African American foster care youth. The participants in this study were African American, between the ages of 18 to 25, and each of them describe their foster care experience as negatively influencing their decision to end care. Social workers, human service workers, therapist, schools, churches, and communities can improve their ability to help this target population and improve positive outcomes from the information reported in this study. The development of policies and procedures that are person-centered, including the person at the core of the plan in the planning and thinking phase of life changing and life altering decisions that have lasting effects that

extend far beyond the discharge and transition out of the child welfare system. Therefore,

positively increasing the systematic attention that is given to pre and post foster care

experiences of African American youth can help to slow down the decision to accelerate

the journey into adulthood and improve the preparation for healthy independent living.

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Appendix A: Inclusion Criteria Screening Survey

1. Do you identify as an African American person?

   a. _____

2. Are you between the ages of 18 to 25?

   a. _____ Age: _____

3. Have you spent a minimum of 1-year in the child welfare foster care system?

   a. [ ] Yes   [ ] No

4. Did you decline to extend foster care involvement at the age of eighteen?

   a. [ ] Yes   [ ] No

5. Did race play a part in your decision to end foster care?

6. What is your gender? (Optional)

   a. [ ] Male   [ ] Female   [ ] Other: _____

7. How old were you when you entered the foster care system?

   a. _____

8. How old were you when you exited the foster care system?

   a. _____

Appendix B: Demographic Information

Participant Code: _____

1. What is your age? _____   Gender:_____ (Optional)

2. What is your race: _____

3. What age did you enter foster care: _____; What age did you discharge:

   _____

4. How long were you in foster care: _____; Do you have siblings who were also

   in the foster care system? [ ] Yes   [ ] No; If yes, how many: _____

5. How many placements did you have while in care? _____

6. Do you maintain a relationship with any of your former foster care family's?

   a. [ ] Yes   [ ] No

7. Did you maintain a relationship with your biological family while in foster care?

   a. [ ] Yes   [ ] No

8. Did you graduate High School? [ ] Yes   [ ] No

9. Are you married? [ ] Yes   [ ] No   Do you have children? [ ] Yes   [ ] No

10. Have you been homeless after foster care? [ ] Yes   [ ] No

11. Have you been incarcerated after foster care? [ ] Yes   [ ] No

    a. Have you been convicted of a crime? [ ] Yes   [ ] No

12. Are you employed? [ ] Yes   [ ] No

13. Do you receive professional mental health counseling? [ ] Yes   [ ] No

14. Have you had any issues with substance abuse? [ ] Yes   [ ] No

Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. In your own words, tell me about your experience with the child welfare foster care system?

2. Can you describe how you feel that your race affected your foster care experience?

3. Do you feel like your experience in foster care prepared you for independent living?

4. Were you excited about turning 18 so that you could make your own decisions, independent of the influence of the child welfare system?

5. Do you feel like you had a voice in decisions made regarding your life while you were in foster care?

6. Did you participate in any pre-discharge services; such as LINKS prior to turning 18? If so, please elaborate on your experience. If not, was the service offered to you?

7. How did the discharge transition process work? How was the process communicated to you?

8. Why did you decide not to extend your foster care placement?