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# Understanding the Barriers of LGBTQ Youth Aging Out of the Foster Care System

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
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Abstract


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by

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Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Historically, there have been significant barriers experienced by youths aging out of the foster care system. A new area of focus highlights youths that identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ). In this study, the opinions of LGBTQ youths who have aged out of the foster care system in North Carolina were explored and the barriers these youths may encounter as they transition into adulthood were illuminated. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is the framework that was used to guide this study. A basic qualitative approach was used with semistructured interviews of 10 LGBTQ aged-out youths in North Carolina. The main topics for the interview questions were centered around how prepared the youths feel for transition, the barriers after the transition, and the utilization of resources. Data were analyzed through development of codes and themes. Three themes were identified: (a) perceived preparedness, (b) barriers, and (c) utilization of resources. The results of this study could benefit positive social change through the social work profession by increasing social workers' and foster care organizations' awareness of the barriers LGBTQ aged-out youths encounter, hopefully enabling the use of future resources and planning that are more culturally competent.

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Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral research to my family. Thank you for always believing in me and supporting me. My mother Chereka Mcilwaine, who instilled the value of hard work in me. Thank you for being my number one cheerleader and making countless sacrifices for me to reach this milestone. My grandmother Alice Winchester, my motivation for joining the social work field. Thank you for teaching me the importance of giving back to the community and helping others. I strive to make you proud. My father Anthony Mcilwaine for being there every step of the way to motivate me to keep going when I wanted to give up. Thank you for always being available to listen when I called. Thank you for always teaching me to "weigh my options" and try my best in everything I do. I love you. My aunt Johna Burch for supporting me throughout my entire collegiate studies and providing encouraging words when I needed them. My sister Kadesha Burch for believing in me even when I did not believe in myself. Thank you for always encouraging me to believe in myself and reminding me of my purpose in life. Lastly, for my nieces and nephew Sevyn, Heaven-Leigh, and Santana Isles I wanted to get this degree to show you that all things are possible and to make you all proud of me.

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First, I want to thank God for allowing me to reach this level in my educational pursuit. Thank you, God, for never leaving my side throughout this journey and continuing to use me as a vessel to help others. I would like to thank my committee Dr. Paula Moore, Dr. Yvonne Chase, Dr. Alice Yick, and program director Dr. Debora Rice for their encouragement, guidance, and ongoing support throughout this process. Lastly, my deepest gratitude goes to my partner Ashley Pender for supporting me every step of the way throughout this process. I appreciate all the sacrifices that you made. Most importantly, thank you for your love and understanding throughout the process.

Table of Contents

iii

List of Tables

Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

In the United States, 424,000 youths are taken into protective care on any given day, and 23,000 of them *age out* of the foster care system each year (Gunawardena & Stich, 2021). The term aging out refers to the process through which youths must leave the child welfare system and enter adulthood at the age of 18 (Gunawardena & Stich, 2021). This means foster youths no longer have access to the financial, educational, and social services offered by the child welfare system after they turn 18 or, in some jurisdictions, 21. Youths leaving the foster care system face several difficulties, increasing their chances of unemployment, involvement in the legal system, homelessness, substance addiction, lower educational ascent, and unexpected pregnancies (Grooms, 2020). Youths leaving the foster care system have drawn the attention of many scholars, but relatively few have explored the barriers the LGBTQ community faces.

In this qualitative study, I explored the barriers faced by LGBTQ youths in North Carolina who have aged out of the foster care system. Understanding the barriers LGBTQ youths encounter when they age out of the foster care system could result in foster care social workers and other professionals who are more aware of and culturally competent to strengthen agency collaboration to remove these identified barriers. I used semistructured interviews to collect the data in this study.

Section 1 includes the study's introduction, background, problem statement, purpose statement, research questions, important definitions, theoretical framework, nature, significance, values and ethics, and review of professional and academic literature. The professional and academic literature outlines the relevance of the societal

issue, its impacts, and LGBTQ youths' experiences leaving the foster care system. This section concludes with a summary of key points.

## Background

Research has indicated that the age of 18 years is a milestone and can be a difficult time in a teenager's life (Collins et al., 2018). This age is even more difficult for youths who do not have a safety net of support (Collins et al., 2018), such as youths transitioning out of the foster care system. These youths have been removed from the homes of their biological parents and placed into temporary foster homes. There are a variety of reasons youths may be removed from the home, including neglect, physical abuse, parents' drug abuse, child behavior problems, and housing instability (Collins et al., 2018). Once youths are removed from their home, they may experience several foster home placements, attend multiple schools, and have multiple caregivers (Collins et al., 2018). This causes a snowball effect, resulting in youths struggling to have their basic needs met once they are aged out. Historically, members of the LGBTQ population experience barriers daily that threaten their safety and well-being (Grooms, 2020). Because of the lack of reliable statistics addressing LGBTQ foster youths and their transition, it is more difficult for researchers to identify areas of need (Grooms, 2020).

## Problem Statement

According to Mountz et al. (2019), more than 19% of LGBTQ youths in foster care report being vulnerable to subpar treatment and worse results during transition than those that identify as heterosexual. LGBTQ foster youths often encounter professionals working in child welfare who are unknowledgeable, uninterested, or hostile toward them

because of their specific support needs (Paul, 2020). According to Paul (2020), there is a heightened need for additional support for LGBTQ youths aging out of the foster care system. These identified youths are at a higher risk of not successfully transitioning out of foster care, due to a lack of gender and sexuality-specific resources (Paul, 2020). Because of the disproportionate representation of LGBTQ foster youths, it can be challenging to pinpoint the precise resources required. Mountz et al. (2019) emphasized that LGBTQ youths are often overlooked and forced to assimilate with the resources of their counterparts when aging out of the foster care system. Additionally, these youths are at increased risk for homelessness and suicide (Nourie & Harris, 2018). Recent studies show a national sample of youths involved in child welfare and among youths who reported being placed outside of their homes, sexual minority youths were found to be overrepresented (Fish et al., 2019). Considering these data and the fact that sexual minority youths are overrepresented in out-of-home placements, these youth may have lower exit rates from child welfare care than their heterosexual peers (Fish et al., 2019). Although a vast amount of research has been conducted related to youths aging out of the foster care system, very little has been concentrated on the LGBTQ youth population.

**The Extent of the Problem in North Carolina**

Nearly 12,000 youths are in the foster care system in North Carolina, and more than 500 youths reach adulthood without finding a permanent adoptive family (PR Newswire, 2019). As more than 11,500 foster youths leave the foster care system at a 10% greater rate than in previous years, the North Carolina Community Child Protection Team (2019) revealed that the number of youths in North Carolina's foster care is

dramatically rising. Of the 2,786 youths waiting to be adopted in North Carolina in 2021, 1,317 were adopted, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). North Carolina was in the second bottom tier of U.S. states as it relates to LGBTQ protections in 2018, according to the Movement Advancement Project (MAP), which handles the following and evaluation of LGBTQ-related legislation. This is because the state has no protections for LGBTQ youth involved in the child welfare system including no statewide nondiscrimination laws and policies for LGBTQ youths (Smith-Millman et al., 2019). I conducted this necessary study to understand the perspectives of LGBTQ youths. I addressed the perceived preparedness of LGBTQ youths in North Carolina during their transition and any barriers they may encounter.

## Purpose Statement and Research Questions(s)

In this qualitative study, I used ecological systems theory to explore the barriers faced by LGBTQ aged out youths in North Carolina, ages 18 to 21 during the aging out process. The results of this study may be used to bring about social change by encouraging foster care social workers and other professionals to create and facilitate training, workshops, and agency partnerships that address the barriers faced by LGBTQ aged out youths in North Carolina. The study was guided by three research questions.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do LGBTQ aged-out foster youths describe their perceived preparedness prior to aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How do LGBTQ aged-out foster youths describe barriers

encountered after aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): In what ways do the barriers experienced by LGBTQ

aged-out foster youths influence their utilization of resources after aging out

of the foster care system in North Carolina?

## Definition of Terms

*Aging out:* the process through which youths must leave the child welfare system

and enter adulthood at the age of 18 (Gunawardena & Stich, 2021).

*The Child Welfare System (CWS)* is a "group of services designed to promote the

well-being of children by ensuring safety, achieving permanency, and strengthening

families (Álvarez et al., 2022).

*Foster Care:* commonly referred to as out-of-home care, by the States. Children

in foster care may reside with family members or with foster parents who are not related.

Placement settings like group homes, residential care facilities, shelters for the homeless,

and supervised independent living are also included in the definition of foster care (Child

Welfare Information Gateway, 2018).

*Foster Child:* a child who is in foster care if the child has been placed in the care

of a person who is not the biological parent of the child (Verulava et al., 2020).

*Permanency:* permanent living arrangements for children and youth in foster care,

including reunification, adoption, and guardianship, with foster care placement, assumed

to be a temporary intervention (Best & Blakeslee, 2020).

## Nature of the Doctoral Project

I used a qualitative approach to understand the phenomenon of LGBTQ youths aging out of the foster care system. The most prevalent type of qualitative research is basic interpretive research, sometimes known as qualitative basic research (Agazu et al., 2022). Finding and interpreting meaning is the main purpose of a basic qualitative study (Agazu et al., 2022). This design was aligned with the purpose statement and research questions in this study. The findings of this qualitative study can be used to fill the gaps in the body of knowledge and the dearth of research on this social issue.

I sought potential participants from an undisclosed organization in North Carolina that focuses on the LGBTQ population and provides services to the target population, such as groups, counseling, and safe housing. I contacted the director of the organization asking the agency to distribute flyers to recruit eligible participants. For interested individuals, the flyer included my email address as a method to contact me. Once receiving an email from the interested participants, I emailed the interested participants the consent form. Before consenting, the interested individuals were encouraged to carefully read the consent form and ask any questions. Individuals who were interested in participating in the study were asked to reply to the email with "I consent." In the email I sent as a follow-up, I made sure to mention that participants had the option of continuing the study as per the consent form the Institutional Review Board had approved or withdrawing from it.

I conducted 30 to 60-minute semistructured individual interviews with 10 LGBTQ youths, ages 18 to 21, who have aged out of the foster system in North Carolina.

Fourteen LGBTQ youths in all responded to my recruitment efforts. The final study sample consisted of 10 LGBTQ aged-out youths. The participants were given the option for face to face or virtual interviews. I conducted individual semistructured interviews virtually due to all participants selecting virtual interviews. The virtual interviews took place via Zoom platform. The responses provided by the participants during the semistructured individual interviews served as the study's informational source. I gathered data using audio recordings and transcribed using Temi, a fee-based application on my iPhone 11. I transcribed the information and conducted a thematic analysis to identify recurring themes. I used Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis to analyze the data. I then coded themes into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. I used purposive sampling and a basic qualitative design for this study.

## Significance of the Study

The project holds significance in social work practice because exploring the barriers that LGBTQ youths in North Carolina face once they age out of the foster care system can increase knowledge and awareness regarding the barriers these youth encounter. The study's findings could be used by social workers and foster care organizations to better address the barriers LGBTQ youths encounter as they transition. In this study, I emphasized the need for culturally competent training and workshops about the LGBTQ community. These training and workshops could cover LGBTQ terminology, pronouns, population-specific hurdles, and strategies for overcoming such barriers. The results of this study could be used to implement new policies, programs, and agency collaboration to raise awareness of this vulnerable demographic.

## Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework I used for this study was the ecological systems theory created by Bronfenbrenner (1986), as cited in Crawford (2020). The ecological systems theory promotes holistic evaluation and shows that environmental factors influence an individual's behaviors and outcomes (Crawford, 2020). In contrast to earlier models, Bronfenbrenner (1986, as cited in Crawford 2020) created a theory of human development that could explain change without considering personal deficiencies. Applying this concept will contribute to a more in-depth understanding of a person and their interactions over time.

According to Bronfenbrenner, an individual's environment has an impact on their development. Because I examined the positive supports or lack thereof in LGBTQ aged-out youths' environments when aging out of the foster care system (ex. preparedness, barriers, resources utilized), ecological system theory was in line with the problem statement, research questions, and the purpose of the study.

Ecological systems theory includes five main systems that are aligned within social work practice, including the microsystem, mesosystem, macrosystem, exosystem, and chronosystem. LGBTQ foster youths who have been in several different placements struggle to maintain consistency across these system levels, which may later affect their aging out process (Crawford, 2020).

### Microsystem

The microsystem refers to the immediate influences connected to an individual. According to Crawford (2020), family or other people residing in the home are examples

of people with whom the individual has regular face-to-face interaction (i.e., home, school, foster care placement). The interactions that take place within the microsystem entail close bonds with loved ones, friends, teachers, and caretakers. The interactions between these individuals or groups and the youth will have an impact on how they grow.

The individual may be impacted by the microsystem's structures both independently and jointly (Crawford, 2020). The significance of the microsystem is that it is influenced in both directions. The child has an impact on the parent's actions and beliefs, and the parents influence the child's actions and beliefs. When it comes to youths who have aged out of the foster care system, being removed from a home can be a devastating experience because the child loses its first and most reliable connections in the microsystem. As a result of insecure bonds and eventual impediments throughout the transition to adulthood, this might be even more challenging for young people who are grappling with their sexual identities.

**Mesosystem**

The interaction between the numerous microsystems in a person's life makes up the mesosystem (Crawford, 2020). The various systems might complement or conflict with one another. Additionally, the individual must be included in the mesosystem. For example, the school and home settings, although very different from one another, create a mesosystem for an individual. If a foster child experiences bullying or other abuse at school, it may influence the family environment. According to Crawford (2020), Bronfenbrenner believes that youths are socialized by their families, including the socioeconomic position of the household. The economic standing of the family is a

component that Bronfenbrenner used to determine how the micro-, meso-, and macrosystems functioned. Foster youths may suffer if a foster parent is experiencing financial difficulty or high levels of stress at work.

**Macrosystem**

Crawford (2020) emphasized how the interplay between and within the various micro-, meso-, and macrosystems is patterned by the macrosystem. The macrosystem has been conceptualized as a sociological model for a specific culture or subculture (Crawford, 2020). The LGBTQ community is a culture distinct from other cultures. Although these youths must adapt to dominant cultures in the context of the classroom, the home, and the community, they may have unique vocabulary, customs, ways of life, and clothing preferences. These forces are driven by the macrosystem. Many LGBTQ youths may not come out as LGBTQ while in foster care due to the disproportionate representation and lack of resources for LGBTQ foster youths, making it more difficult to identify as LGBTQ.

**Exosystem**

Exosystems are systems that affect one of these environments but exclude the individual (Crawford, 2020). The exosystem is composed of several microsystems that engage with each other; however, at least one of the microsystems cannot include the person central to this system (Crawford, 2020). Although the youth may not be actively involved in the stressor in this system, the stressor's effects have an impact on them. For example, if the foster parent has a change in work schedule, the new work schedule can cause stress to the home system. The exosystem offers a blueprint for how important it is

for LGBTQ youths to interact with resources and social supports outside of the home, as this could affect how they interact with their major parental figures. When it comes to LGBTQ youths moving to adulthood, the exosystem is crucial because it emphasizes how all the factors outside of the family system, over which the youths have little influence, affect their relationship positively or negatively.

**Chronosystem**

The chronosystem, which was later introduced as a concept of human development, refers to not only aging and maturation but also the period in which that person lives and develops (Crawford, 2020). For human ecology to develop, ecological shifts are crucial (Crawford, 2020). An ecological transition, according to Crawford (2020), is any movement inside a microsystem that modifies or modifies the composition of that microsystem. Throughout the life cycle, the chronosystem involves both stability and change, including changes in the economy, the environment, and history (Crawford, 2020). LGBTQ youths aging out of foster care may view the world differently than their heterosexual peers or youths who did not age out of the foster care system because of their experiences, which may have an impact on how LGBTQ youths transition into adulthood.

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**Values and Ethics**

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The foundation of social work is professional ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 2023). Social workers from all backgrounds must adhere to a set of beliefs, principles, and standards established by the National Association of Social Workers (National Association of Social Workers, 2023). The practice of social work is

governed by these beliefs, principles, and standards. The values of service, respect for human dignity and worth, the value of human relationships, and integrity were the code of ethics that I used to guide this study. Social work ethics require social workers to assist those in need and address social problems (National Association of Social Workers, 2023). By exploring the perspectives of LGBTQ aged-out youths, I highlighted the need for intense preparation before youth aging out of the foster care system. My goal for this study was to improve LGBTQ cultural competence training and workshops to stress the importance of gender and sexuality-specific resources during the transition. Competence requires that social workers continually increase their knowledge and skills and implement that knowledge and skills in practice (National Association of Social Workers, 2023).

Due to the study subjects' vulnerability, I took precautions to guarantee that the participants were safe and would not suffer any negative effects from taking part. Social work ethics require that social workers respect the dignity and worth of a person (National Association of Social Workers, 2023). During the interviews, I ensured that the participants had privacy and comfort. The value of social justice is the primary value related to this social problem. Social work ethics require that social workers seek to promote social change, particularly when it affects disadvantaged groups of people (National Association of Social Workers, 2023). Finally, the value of integrity states that social workers act in a trustworthy manner and constantly keep the code of ethics in mind (National Association of Social Workers, 2023). The integrity of the data collection,

presentation, and the project's adherence to the NASW Code of Ethics all contributed to the study's accuracy.

Section 2: Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

**Literature Search Strategy**

The databases that I used to locate the peer review articles included PubMed, Science Direct, Elsevier, SAGE, PsycNet (APA PsycNET), JSTOR, ERIC, IDEAS, JPHIP, and Google Scholar. The search terms used were *aging out, foster care/child welfare system, LGBTQ youth experiences, LGBTQ, AND social work, aging out AND foster care OR LGBTQ, social work AND interventions, barriers AND aging out of foster care.* The literature in this section is linked to the LGBTQ youths aging out of the foster care system, the barriers encountered by these youth as well as programs and interventions designed to assist with successful transitions.

**Literature Review**

Previous researchers have focused on foster youths and how they move through the foster care system. In most previous studies, researchers focused on identifying the risk factors that have accumulated concerning these aged-out youths and the issues that may arise as a result, particularly when they leave foster care (Jackson & Cesaroni, 2021). It is crucial to look at how each variable is related to the others because these barriers include several variables that correlate with one another. It was essential to investigate the concepts of employment, homelessness, education, incarceration, and mental and physical health to conduct a thorough assessment of the literature. I examined more research that was pertinent to the ideas in this study throughout the literature review. The research included youths that have aged out of the foster care system. It was

essential to focus on the barriers LGBTQ youths in North Carolina experience after aging out of the foster care system.

## Literature Review Related to Key Variables

### Aging Out of Foster Care

There are a variety of reasons that youth age out of the foster care system. Foster families are frequently underutilized and due to the behavior problems or diagnoses that demand their placement in repressive situations, more youths are sent to group homes (Baer & Diehl, 2019). There are more than 440,000 youths in foster care in the United States (Baer & Diehl, 2019). There has long been a lack of foster families prepared to accommodate the various requirements of some youths in care, including youths (Baer & Diehl, 2019). Foster care placement has traditionally been thought of as a temporary intervention, with permanent living solutions for youth in care including reunion, adoption, and guardianship (Best & Blakeslee, 2020).

Social support can have a positive impact on youths during their transition. Youths must have access to opportunities that can help them during this transition so they can manage it successfully (Verulava et al., 2020). Research revealed multiple strong network linkages as well as a variety of kind, understanding adults with whom relational stability has been more firmly established are present in the networks of young people who transition more successfully (Best & Blakeslee, 2020). Lack thereof may lead to significant barriers impacting these youths when aging out of the foster care system.

**Barriers LGBTQ Youths Face**

The various experiences that LGBTQ youths face are often overlooked in research and policy (Schofield et al., 2019). According to the research findings, youths who have aged out of foster care feel unprepared for life and have additional difficulties entering adulthood due to their financial, social, and psychological difficulties (Verulava et al., 2020). The study shows that social workers were only minimally involved in the process of transitioning out of foster care (Verulava et al., 2020). Earlier studies show that 18% of LGBTQ youths were homeless before incarceration, 71% of LGBTQ youths in prison had dropped out of school or been expelled, 58% had been jailed before the age of 18, and 15% had been denied participation in a program because of their gender (Trimble, 2019). Many youths who leave the foster care system face the realities of homelessness, unemployment, and food poverty (Trimble, 2019). Even for youths who take part in independent living programs before leaving foster care, these percentages are still high. These high rates of negative results indicate that many foster youths are not fully equipped to make the transition to adulthood (Barnett, 2020). Only half of the over 46,000 youths in foster care who are between the ages of 16 and 21 qualify for independent living programs and services (Best & Blakeslee, 2020). Independent living programs have strengths and weaknesses. For example, research revealed that foster youths who received ongoing financial aid and academic help between the ages of 17 and 19 were safeguarded from experiencing homelessness (Huang et al., 2022). Foster youths who stayed in foster care and continued to receive financial aid services from years 17 to 19 were spared from being locked up from ages 19 to 21 (Huang et al., 2022). However,

continuous housing education and home management training as well as health education and risk prevention training received between the ages of 17 and 19 were each linked to a higher risk of homelessness between the ages of 19 and 21 (Huang et al., 2022). Furthermore, there are limited independent living programs specifically for LGBTQ transitioning youths.

Various methods and designs have been used in previous research such as Verulava et al. (2020) which used a nonprobability sampling method in the form of snowball sampling and used semistructured questionnaires for this qualitative research. Rome and Raskin (2019) conducted a longitudinal study exploring barriers experienced by youths in the first 12 months of aging out. No matter the method and design, the results remain the same: Youths feel underprepared for the transition to adulthood and face many barriers (Verulava et al., 2020). Only 6% of youths continue their education beyond high school after leaving the foster care system, and only 50% earn a diploma (Verulava et al., 2020). The literature also shows that LGBTQ youths who are removed from abusive, rejecting, or neglectful situations and placed in foster care continue to face risks of abuse and discrimination because of their marginalized identity after being removed from these environments (Beck et al., 2018).

**Employment**

Poor academic performance and low educational attainment among youths leaving the foster care system are likely to result in lower employment rates after they leave (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). According to existing research, by their mid-20s, almost half of the former foster youths are either unemployed, underemployed, or in financial

trouble (Mihalec-Adkins et al., 2020). Within 4 years of leaving foster care, more than half of all former foster youths are unemployed (Children's Rights, 2023). Former foster youths who are unemployed make up 47% of the population, according to prior studies (Children's Rights, 2023). More than 71% of former foster youths report an annual income of less than $25,000, which means that even those who do have jobs may struggle to sustain themselves (Children's Rights, 2023). Low earning potential is problematic because it prevents these youths from being financially independent despite their efforts to work, and low earning potential increases their dependency on public support once they leave care and enter adulthood. Youths in foster care do worse on employment outcomes than their counterparts who are not in foster care (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018).

### *The Extent in North Carolina*

Former foster youths in North Carolina make a substantially lower amount of money than the typical worker their age (Children's Rights, 2023). This makes former foster youths included in the opportunity youth category. In North Carolina, opportunity youth is defined as youths ages 16 to 24 that are not working, this may be because of unemployment, incarceration, or not being in school (EdNC, 2021). This is a barrier because opportunity youth face consequences into adulthood that may affect earnings and self-sufficiency, physical and mental health, relationship quality, lack of work experience, lack of professional networks, and social exclusion. These consequences may also have an impact on family formation and relationship quality (EdNC, 2021). In 2019, North Carolina's opportunity youth rate was roughly the same as the national average: 11.0% of those aged 16 to 24 were unemployed or employed, compared to 10.8%

nationally (EdNC, 2021). Annually since 2006, a larger proportion of youths in North

Carolina between the ages of 16 and 24 have not been in school or the workforce than the

national average (EdNC, 2021).

**Homelessness**

Inadequate housing is a structural factor in health that has been linked to

infectious diseases, respiratory conditions, poor mental health, and mortality (Fliss et al.,

2022). LGBTQ youths who experience homelessness frequently have worse mental

health, increased substance use, and more victimization while on the streets when

compared homeless to their heterosexual counterparts (Ecker et al., 2019). Youths who

are homeless have greater rates of substance misuse, hopelessness, violence, and suicide.

These youths also struggle in school and at work. According to Forge et al. (2018), a

significant portion of LGBTQ youths had been expelled from their homes, had been

homeless for longer than 1 year, had reported having been abused as a child, had been

victimized while homeless, had shown signs of having a mental health issue, and had

named adult friends or a professional contact as their main supports (Forge et al., 2018).

According to recent studies, LGBTQ youths are more likely to live in insecure housing or

be homeless, compared to the youths who do not identify as LGBTQ (Gewirtz O'Brien et

al., 2020). According to earlier research, 20% to 45% of homeless youths and young

adults self-identify as LGBTQ (Romero et al., 2020). Members of the LGBTQ

community are more likely to experience discrimination and harassment, which prolongs

their homelessness (HUD Exchange, 2022). In the LGBTQ community, there are

between 20% and 40% of homeless youth (HUD Exchange, 2022). This is a barrier

because LGBTQ, maltreated, runaway, and homeless youths are at disproportionately high risk for depression, suicidal ideation and suicide, and self-harming behaviors, with high rates of attempted suicide (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2020). Gewirtz O' Brien et al. (2020) study revealed that when compared to their counterparts who were permanently housed, homeless youth experienced worse mental health results. Additionally, the findings imply that homeless and runaway youths have significant mental health needs and would benefit from specialized clinical and community interventions (Gewirtz O' Brien et al., 2020).

### *The Extent in North Carolina*

According to findings from earlier studies, law enforcement officials in North Carolina regularly harass, ticket, and arrest homeless individuals, using a wide range of legal provisions (Craven et al., 2022). In North Carolina, it can be hard for homeless individuals to find competent, reasonably priced legal representation when they need it for tickets or arrests (Craven et al., 2022). The various factors that lead to homeless living conditions among youth are considered risky and vulnerable (Anderson et al., 2023). The cycle of homelessness has been shown to lead to incarceration because individuals without housing are more likely to be arrested for crimes that would not happen if they had housing, according to the 2023 Integrated Data Report for Charlotte, NC homeless individuals are more likely to be arrested for quality-of-life crimes (Anderson et al., 2023). North Carolina offers the Contractual Agreement for Residential Services (CARS), which means that youths that age out of the foster care system can sign a CARS agreement to remain in foster care until they finish school or until their 21st birthday

(North Carolina Hoke County, 2023). This serves as an option for LGBTQ youths to maintain stability.

**Education**

A systemic review indicated that, compared to their non-LGBTQ peers, LGBTQ youths in foster care experience a higher rate of impermanence, which can weaken their resilience and hinder their progress in school (Beck et al., 2018). Research shows that experiences of abuse and neglect may undermine academic capacity (Flynn, 2020). LGBTQ youths frequently attend multiple schools in addition to having an unstable foster placement. For LGBTQ youths in foster care, moving to a new school might be especially risky because they do not know whether it will be safe or whether their identity will be accepted (Beck et al., 2018). Just 50% of foster youths graduate from high school or an equivalent program by the time they turn 18 and just 1% to 11% of current and former foster youths earn a college degree, illustrating the complexity of the educational barriers facing these youths (Mountz et al., 2019). Despite extensive studies on the educational outcomes of foster youths, little is known about the educational experiences of LGBTQ foster youth, who make up about 20% of all youth in care (Mountz et al., 2019). For some time, programming that excludes the contributions and perspectives of LGBTQ youths has been given precedence in school curricula (Every Child NC, 2022).

*The Extent in North Carolina*

North Carolina has lost its reputation for top-quality education between 2011 to now (North Carolina Justice System, 2018). Students in North Carolina struggle to benefit from the current efforts, especially because the state's low-income and minority

students' academic performance has decreased (North Carolina Justice System, 2018). In recent years, 25% of the school-aged youths in foster care in North Carolina underwent two school placement changes, 14% underwent three, and 23% underwent four or more during their placement episode. Research shows that foster youths face far more school instability than their peers and are more likely to struggle academically (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023). At age 17, foster youth have a much lower likelihood of finishing high school or enrolling in a postsecondary institution (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023). In a prior study, it was discovered that foster youths perform worse on tests and make less progress over time than their nonfoster youth counterparts (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023).

**Incarceration**

Compared to the general population, incarceration among LGBTQ people is 3 times higher. In addition, although making up only 5% to 7% of the population of the United States, LGBTQ youths make up 20% of the youths in juvenile correctional facilities (Prison Policy, 2019). Previous studies have shown that LGBTQ youths reported systematic prejudice against the jailed LGBTQ community and a lack of awareness of the need to provide care and treatment for some community members (Trimble, 2019). In the juvenile justice system, 13,500 youth offenders were sentenced for offenses that, in the previous system, would have been assessed by adult courts (North Carolina Policy Watch, 2022).

According to the Juvenile Law Center, youths of color, youths who identify as LGBTQ, and youth with mental illness are particularly affected by the foster care-to-

prison pipeline in North Carolina (2018). The selected youth already have a higher possibility of being placed in foster care, which increases the likelihood that they may interact with the criminal justice system (Juvenile Law Center, 2018). Almost 90% of foster youths who have undergone multiple placement changes, according to a recent study, will be involved in the juvenile court system (Juvenile Law Center, 2018). According to earlier studies, by the time they are 17 years old, more than half of foster youths—especially LGBTQ youths who were once in foster care—have been arrested, found guilty, or spent the night in jail or prison (Juvenile Law Center, 2018).

### *The Extent in North Carolina*

The number of people incarcerated in North Carolina has decreased from 347 per 100,000 people aged 13 and older in 2011 to 272/per 100,000 in 2019 (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). Due to COVID-19's influence on the courts, there will be an even bigger decline in 2020, when the overall incarceration rate in North Carolina jails will be 163/per 100,000 people (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). The age of juvenile jurisdiction for nonviolent crimes was raised to 18 in North Carolina in 2019 (North Carolina Policy Watch, 2022). As a result, many 16- and 17-year-old youths would avoid facing punishment in the adult criminal system (North Carolina Policy Watch, 2022).

### Mental/Physical Health

LGBTQ youths are more likely to have suicidal thoughts and engage in destructive conduct (Schofield et al., 2019). It has been demonstrated that transgender youths are more likely than cisgender youth to experience depression, trauma symptoms,

and mental health issues (Schofield et al., 2019). LGBTQ youths are more likely than the overall population to experience a variety of psychiatric and other health issues which include disordered eating, cigarette and substance use, suicidality, depression, anxiety, and anxiousness (Lothwell et al., 2020). The risk of physical and sexual abuse is significantly higher for LGBTQ and gender nonconforming youth, with the degree of gender nonconformity predicting a higher chance of multiple victimizations.

Research suggested that LGBTQ youths in foster care experience elevated levels of health-related disparities and are at risk for an added layer of trauma due to potential rejection from their homes of origin, discrimination within the foster placement environment, increased school instability, and other health and risk factors outside of the foster care system (Collins et al., 2018). LGBTQ youths are more likely than their counterparts to face stigma in the medical setting, thus, to properly treat and monitor their health, physicians must practice affirming and inclusive care (Stern, 2021). However, in the context of healthcare, Stern 2021 found that due to a lack of training and resources, only a small fraction of doctors who treat LGBTQ youths felt qualified to treat their patients who identify as sexual minorities.

### *The Extent in North Carolina*

In North Carolina, 1.4 million adults are affected by mental illness. Due to a lack of mental health care providers, many people do not receive therapy (Mwachofi et al., 2020). The prevalence of adult mental illness in North Carolina was 18.02%, with 1,387,000 adults affected, placing the state in 12th place nationally (Mwachofi et al., 2020). According to the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services

(2022), mental illness affects 18% of the general population. Both nationally and in North

Carolina, an estimated 0.6% of the population identifies as transgender. In North

Carolina, it is anticipated that there will be roughly 44,750 transgender adults and 4650

transgender youths, ages 13 to 17 in years to come (North Carolina Medical Journal,

2022). Youth who identify as transgender or nonbinary continue to attempt suicide at

alarmingly high rates. In a study conducted in 2021, more than half of transgender and

nonbinary youths admitted that they had given suicide serious thought the year before

(North Carolina Medical Journal, 2022). Access to physical and mental health services is

disproportionately limited for LGBTQ youths (everychildNC.org).

### *Limited Access and Availability to Needed North Carolina Resources*

A few resources in North Carolina are in place to assist LGBTQ youths with

overcoming barriers related to aging out of the foster care system. These resources in

North Carolina are described below:

The Carolina University Pride Place Residential Learning Program (RLP) is a

residential community devoted to the academic success and personal well-being of

students of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. Every

LGBTQ+ student should feel safe, included, and empowered in the housing community

we envisage. The community will be actively engaged by the residents as they learn

about the LGBTQ+ community and its numerous intersections. The UNC LGBTQ Center

and Carolina Housing have joined forces to promote this RLP (Pride Place, 2022). The

strengths of this residential learning program include having safe and inclusive housing

for members of the LGBTQ community. However, it is only for students at Carolina University and not specifically for youths aging out of the foster care system.

Tranzmission Prison Project (TPP), a prison abolition/advocacy organization with a base in Asheville, North Carolina, is one of an increasing number of such organizations in the US. TPP is a non-hierarchical, volunteer-run group that offers free books, zines, prisoner information, and other forms of assistance to prisoners across the country. TPP only provides services and support to women, prisoners jailed in women's facilities, and people who come under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. Numerous national groups and jail book initiatives help all those who are incarcerated (Tranzmission Prison Project, 2022). Tranzmission Prison Project is beneficial in supporting a key variable addressed in this study however, TPP is not solely focused on the LGBTQ population as it is specific to women and women's facilities as well.

Say So, Strong Able Youth Speaking Out is a youth-focused program offered in North Carolina. SaySo, or Strong Able Youth Speaking Out, is a statewide organization of youths in North Carolina who are or have been in the out-of-home care system and are between the ages of 14 and 24. All forms of replacement care, including foster care, group homes, and mental health placements, are included in this (Saysoinc.org). Sayso's goal is to transform the substitute care system by educating the public, advocating for necessary reforms, and supporting youths who are or have been in replacement care (Saysoinc.org). Say So is beneficial as it serves that aged-out population however, it provides more advocacy than direct work with LGBTQ aged-out youths.

The Family Unification Program (FUP) and Housing Urban Development (HUD) aid more than 25,000 youths who age out of foster care each year (huduser.gov). The Family Unification Program (FUP) is a HUD and Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV)-based initiative, only serving youths who have aged out of foster care are eligible for housing assistance (HUD Exchange, 2022). FUP helps North Carolina families that lack proper housing, are at an urgent risk of out-of-home placement, experience delays with out-of-home placement, or are at least 18 to 24 years old and aged out of the foster care system (Western Piedmont Council of Governments, 2022). Eligible youth and families can apply for the Family Unification Program through the county's Department of Social Services as it is a referral-based program (Western Piedmont Council of Governments, 2022).

NC Reach is for former foster youths who are North Carolina legal citizens, adopted before the age of 12, or who have reached adulthood at the age of 18, NC Reach is a state-funded initiative (NC Reach, 2023). This program is primarily offered to youths attending colleges and universities (NC Reach, 2023). The money from the NC Reach scholarship program is used to pay for childcare, rent, books, and school supplies (NC Reach, 2023). Users of NC Reach must continue to meet conditions such as better grades, submitting forms each term, and staying in touch with NC Reach to preserve funding (NC Reach, 2023).

NC LINKS program provides services and resources to youths ages 18-21 who are currently in foster care or have aged out of the foster care system through North Carolina's Independent living services (North Carolina Department of Health and Human

Services, 2022. The youth must be willing to participate in the assessment, planning, and service implementation of the program to utilize the housing assistance service (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

*Social Worker's Role*

Professionals who work with youths need to comprehend the experiences and particular barriers faced by the LGBTQ+ youths they support as well as the effects of organizational atmosphere, policies, and practices on their results (Youth.gov, 2022). Federal law mandates that the foster care agency work with the youths to build a unique transition plan during the 90 days before the youth turns 18 or is set to leave foster care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). The plan must include details on options for housing, education, job, health insurance, mentoring, and support services (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). This will occur by the social worker meeting with the youths to construct the plan and carry it out, along with other trusted adults of the youth's choosing (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). To prepare the youths for adulthood, foster care social workers' role is to support youths with various tasks including budgeting, transportation needs, health care needs, housing options, and establishing lifelong social bonds (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). With the assistance of their social worker, youths transitioning out of the foster care system must gain life skills (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018).

*Foster Parent's Role*

Foster parents can help youths to gather and organize personal papers such as birth certificates, Social Security cards, birth certificates, documentation of foster care,

photo identification, voter registration cards, and medical records (Child Welfare

Information Gateway, 2018). According to earlier research, former foster youths were not

given their vital identifying documents, such as birth certificates, social security cards,

and addresses at the time of their discharge (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018). The foster

parent's job is to assist with the youth's transition plan which can be accomplished by

promoting the youth's independence and secure exploration of experiences (Child

Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). Foster parents are essential in advocating,

coaching, networking, and promoting youth empowerment (Child Welfare Information

Gateway, 2018).

**Preparation in North Carolina**

North Carolina makes use of LINKS. LINKS was designed to assist youths with

learning life skills before they transition out of the foster care system and to encourage

self-sufficiency after they do (Mecknc.gov, 2023). LINKS introduces youths to goal

setting, self-esteem, career building, and leadership development. Youths are urged to

take part in Soft Skills programming from the ages of 13 to 15 (Mecknc.gov, 2023).

When the youths reach the age of 16, they are required to complete an independent living

assessment and continue with skill building (Mecknc.gov, 2023). Youths are involved in

a range of skill-building programs through LINKS, including soft skills groups, life skills

training, career week, college tours, educational planning, and Job Corps tours

(Mecknc.gov, 2023).

At least twice a year, soft skills groups occur, with a focus on decision-making,

sexuality, communication, and social skills (Mecknc.gov, 2023). The Life Skills group is

offered three to four times a year, life skills training is provided, with topics covered

including job, housing, budgeting, community resources, education, auto purchases, auto

insurance, health insurance, and a wide range of other services and opportunities

(Mecknc.gov, 2023). Youths visit several employers and colleges in North Carolina to

ask for details and requirements (Mecknc.gov, 2023). Educational planning includes

finding out what is needed to graduate, applying for college financial aid, and learning

about job corps opportunities (Mecknc.gov, 2023). Youths must remain in contact with

LINKS after aging out of the foster care system to monitor youth's progress

(Mecknc.gov, 2023).

## Literature Gaps

Numerous research gaps about LGBTQ youths aging out of the foster care system

came to light during the process of acquiring and assessing the literature for this study.

These gaps include a lack of cogent study results, a lack of participant involvement, and a

lack of resources, and their impact on this societal problem. The barriers that LGBTQ

youths face as they age out of the foster care system require more research because the

results of earlier studies have been patchy and inconsistent. The employment rate,

homelessness, educational outcomes, incarceration, and mental/physical health are only a

few of the significant indicators that Trimble (2019) cited as showing negative outcomes

for aging-out youth.

Due to the emancipated LGBTQ youth's transient nature, these variables make it

challenging to achieve adequate participant involvement. Youths who may not have

stable housing, are heavily involved in the criminal justice system, struggle to find jobs,

and have issues with their mental and physical health are challenging to recruit and keep in touch with. Furthermore, research has lacked emphasis, with most studies focusing on the difficulties youths leaving the foster care system face rather than on issues of race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. In North Carolina little research on services and their effectiveness for the target group is limited.

There are gaps in the literature about LGBTQ youths who are aging out of the foster care system. The barriers these youths experience as they enter adulthood have rarely been discussed in the literature. This might have occurred because of the overrepresentation of LGBTQ youths in the foster care system or the participants' reluctance to divulge their sexual orientation. The perceived barriers faced by this vulnerable demographic, according to much of the material reviewed, are connected to housing, work, education, and involvement in the criminal justice system. Additionally, there has been little to no study on the barriers LGBTQ youths in North Carolina encounter after leaving the foster care system. Another limitation could be the biases that could affect the study when the researcher is the main tool for data collecting and analysis (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

**Summary**

In this section, I reviewed existing literature related to the barriers that LGBTQ youths face when aging out of the foster care system. This review highlighted the primary barriers, which include homelessness, employment, education, mental/physical health, and incarceration. In addition, I mentioned services and programs that can help LGBTQ youths transition out of foster care. The literature review indicated gaps in the body of

knowledge. The research strategy and data collection techniques will be covered in

Section 2.

Section 3: Research Design and Data Collection

## Introduction

The LGBTQ population has made gains recently; however, this vulnerable population is still subject to abuse and violation (Álvarez et al., 2022). The likelihood of LGBTQ youths interacting with the child protection system is 2.5 times higher than their non-LGBTQ counterparts. LGBTQ youths continue to be ignored by the system despite this imbalance (Álvarez et al., 2022). In the current study, my goal was to understand the perceived barriers faced by LGBTQ youths leaving the foster care system in the state of North Carolina. The available literature does not adequately explain how these barriers affect these youths' transition to adulthood. The goal, nature of the study, and the most recent literature are discussed and reviewed in Section 1. In this section, I begin by going through the methodology of the study and how the data was gathered. I describe the research design together with the rationale for its selection for the study. I also discuss the methods that were used to recruit individuals for the study, the instrumentation, data procedures, and the ethical practices that were employed to ensure participant confidentiality.

## Research Design

The research design for this study was a basic qualitative approach. Qualitative research was appropriate for this study as it focuses on the subjective experiences of LGBTQ youths who have aged out of the foster care system. Researchers who use qualitative methods are interested in how people perceive and understand their surroundings in each situation (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The findings from this

qualitative study could fill a gap in the literature by elucidating how LGBTQ youths successful transition to adulthood is impacted by not being adequately prepared for the barriers of the aging out process. The study was guided by three research questions:

RQ1: How do LGBTQ aged-out foster youths describe their perceived preparedness prior to aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina?

RQ2: How do LGBTQ aged-out foster youths describe barriers encountered after aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina?

RQ3: In what ways do the barriers experienced by LGBTQ aged-out foster youths influence their utilization of resources after aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina?

## Methodology

Applying theory to facts to test the hypothesis is the essence of deductive, or a priori, analysis. This frequently entails giving the data predetermined codes in qualitative analysis. The codes may be generated as purely organizational tools, or they may be constructed using theories, concepts, or the researcher's own assertions (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). The purpose of the current study was to explore LGBTQ youths' experiences. This qualitative approach was suitable for a qualitative research design. I used purposive sampling because the participants were chosen according to the selection criteria. Small sample sizes are used for qualitative research since they allow for data saturation to be achieved, according to Hennink and Kaiser (2022), who gives a range of 9 to17 interviews. Participants who self-identify as LGBTQ, range in age from 18 to 21 years, reside in North Carolina, and has aged out of the foster care system in North

Carolina were eligible for the study. Each participant engaged in a semistructured individual interview that lasted between 30 to 60 minutes.

**Participants**

In this study, 14 LGBTQ youths in all responded to my recruitment efforts. The final study sample consisted of 10 LGBTQ aged-out youths. According to Hennink & Kaiser (2022), if no new data arose data saturation was reached. I recruited LGBTQ aged out youths to conduct semistructured individual interviews. In the recruitment process I sought potential participants from an undisclosed organization in North Carolina. The undisclosed organizations primary focus is on the LGBTQ population and provides services such as groups, counseling, and safe housing. I contacted the director of the organization asking the agency to distribute flyers to recruit eligible participants. For interested individuals, the flyer included my email address as a method to contact me. Once receiving an email from the interested participants, I emailed the interested participants the consent form. Before consenting, the interested individuals were encouraged to carefully read the consent form and ask any questions. Individuals who were interested in participating in the study were asked to reply to the email with "I consent." In the email I sent as a follow-up, I made sure to mention that participants had the option of continuing the study as per the consent form the Institutional Review Board had approved or withdrawing from it.

This study included 30 to 60-minute semistructured individual interviews with 10 LGBTQ youths in North Carolina, ages 18 to 21 who have aged out of the system in North Carolina. The participants were given the option to complete face-to-face or virtual

interviews. All participants selected virtual interviews. The virtual interviews took place via Zoom platform. The responses provided by the participants during the semistructured individual interviews served as the study's informational source. The data were gathered using audio recordings and transcribed using Temi, a fee-based application on my iPhone 11. I transcribed the information to identify recurring themes and then I conducted a thematic analysis. I used Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis to analyze the data. I then coded into a Microsoft Word excel spreadsheet.

I used purposive sampling for this study. Purposive sampling techniques are based on the idea that given the goals and objectives of the study, individuals who have significant and noteworthy perspectives on the study topic must be a part of the sample (Prior et al., 2020). Purposive sampling helped me to recruit participants who have aged out of the foster care system and who have common experiences in the LGBTQ community. The agency was sufficient to recruit the 10 participants needed. However, I did use a backup plan. Within the first 2 weeks, I was unable to receive all my participants and as a result, I asked the undisclosed partner organization to post the flyer to their social media. The partner organization agreed to post the flyer to their social media. 14 LGBTQ youths in all responded to my recruitment efforts. The final study sample consisted of 10 LGBTQ aged out youths.

**Instrumentation**

I gathered knowledge from others' experiences with this qualitative study's data collection method. Because a qualitative researcher seeks to understand the significance of a group's experiences, I acted as the instrument throughout the study. By conducting

one-on-one semistructured interviews with research participants to learn about their personal experiences aging out of the foster care system while identifying as LGBTQ, I served as the role of the study's main instrument. Each participant took part in semistructured interviews, which used open-ended questions and guided statements. I developed the questions on the interview guide centering on issues like perceived preparedness, barriers, and the utilization of resources on the micro-, meso-, and macrosystem levels. The micro-, meso-, and macrosystem levels have a set of interview questions developed for each of them. I conducted a mock interview with a colleague and had an outside expert who works with the LGBTQ population to review the interview questions to enhance the interview guide and support the study.

Each participant was given the opportunity to complete a face-to-face or virtual interview. All participants choose to complete a virtual interview. For the virtual interviews, safety, and security measures were put in place. The need for Internet access and a private, quiet area was emphasized during the recruitment process. In this study, the instrument that I used includes an interview guide and me as the researcher, which is counted as a data collection tool in qualitative research. I used the interview guide that is semistructured (see Appendix A), which included 15 questions and subquestions, to direct my interviews with LGBTQ aged out foster youths. I asked each participant the same questions.

**Data Analysis**

To analyze the data for this study, I ran a thematic analysis of the data. I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase theme analysis methodology. The six-step analytic

method consisted of familiarizing myself with the data, creating preliminary codes, searching for themes, examining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (as cited by Braun & Clarke, 2021). I used this method to explore and describe the lived experiences of participants regarding LGBTQ youths aging out of the foster care system. I gathered the data from the interviews, transcribed the audio recordings, coded the transcribed data, and determined common themes through a thematic analysis. The responses of the participants during the one-on-one interviews were the source for all the data presented. Throughout the interviews, I took notes that I used for transcription and post-interview analysis. I audiotaped the interviews to accurately transcribe the data. I also obtained consent to participate, consent for audio recording was also obtained.

Researchers have the option of manually coding papers, photographs, and transcriptions or using simple document software (Katz-Buonincontro, 2022). I manually hand coded to analyze the qualitative data. I used a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to organize the data. I managed the data and analysis throughout the process. I began the coding process as soon as I had the data. According to Bingham & Witkowsky (2022) a deductive coding strategy allows the codes to be pre-established in the data. Therefore, I employed a deductive coding strategy. As I reviewed each transcript, I searched for patterns in the codes and classified them according to my research questions. There are several important terms to mention as it relates to trustworthiness including dependability, confirmability, transferability, credibility, and trustworthiness to solve rigor-related difficulties. The most acceptable criteria to determine trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

The foundation of trustworthiness in qualitative research is dependent on whether the findings can be trusted (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I used manual coding to examine and present the study's trustworthiness. I ensured participant validation was used to ensure the research is credible and reliable. I ensured that the information/results were given back to the participants as a form of member checking. I gave a thorough explanation of the provided data to demonstrate how the study's transferability. I constructed the interview questions in such a way that they relate to the study's goal to guarantee validity and dependability. Finally, I addressed confirmability by making sure that the participant's experiences were accurately conveyed without prejudice.

### Ethical Procedures

I guaranteed that the study was carried out ethically and that each participant was treated with the utmost respect. I did not have a relationship with the local partner organization. Due to the vulnerability of this population, I took measures to ensure the rights and welfare of research participants. The IRB (approval # 05-12-23-1062259) made sure the participants were safe and protected and determined if I followed ethical procedures and guidelines. I obtained informed consent and explained the rights of participation to the participants. Through informed consent, I was able to ensure that each participant knew they could trust the study and that I would keep their information confidential throughout the study. Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Access to copies of all data amassed up until the date of study withdrawal were supplied upon request. I provided each participant with a written copy of the written consent. I refrained from using participants' names and demographic information to

ensure confidentiality. Participants had the option to skip over any questions that may have brought discomfort. Additionally, each participant had the opportunity to withdraw their responses after the interview if they changed their mind about participating. The data were password-protected and accessible only to me. Data were saved in a computer file. I stored any written information in cabinets with two key entry locks that are only accessible by me.

By introducing myself, outlining my credentials, describing my position as the researcher, and developing a connection with the participants, my hope was to make the participants feel at ease. I provided noncoercive incentives. Each study participant received a $10.00 Walmart gift card I sent to their email address.

## Summary

In this section, I described the study's design and the procedures that I used to provide the answers to the research questions. I explained the data analysis plan, and I also made clear what ethical precautions were being taken to safeguard the participants' information and data. I present the study's findings in the following section.

Section 4: Presentation of Findings

**Introduction**

In this qualitative study, the purpose was to explore the barriers faced by LGBTQ aged out youths in North Carolina, ages 18 to 21 regarding the aging out process. By illuminating and raising awareness of the identified barriers, the results of the study could help social workers with developing programs, training, and agency collaboration to lower the identified barriers. Finally, the outcomes could serve as a springboard for future research into the transition planning for LGBTQ youths in North Carolina who have reached adulthood. In this section includes a brief description of the purpose, the research questions, and how the data was collected, the codes, themes, and results. I describe the analysis techniques in the following section discussing the study's findings, validation techniques, limitations, and tables.

The study was guided by three research questions by this qualitative study using semistructured interview questions (Appendix A):

RQ1: How do LGBTQ aged-out foster youths describe their perceived preparedness prior to aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina?

RQ2: How do LGBTQ aged-out foster youths describe barriers encountered after aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina?

RQ3: In what ways do the barriers experienced by LGBTQ aged-out foster youths influence their utilization of resources after aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina?

**Data Analysis Techniques**

**Data Collection Timeframe**

This section includes a discussion of the study's data collection timeframe, recruitment and response rates, data analysis procedures, validation procedures and limitations. I described how participants were recruited as well as response rates. I discuss the methods used to analyze the data, detail the coding of the data, and check for researcher bias. After that, I examine the validation processes for member checking and dependability. I will conclude by assessing the study's limitations.

I used to recruit participants at the beginning of the data collection phase. I received IRB approval (#05-12-23-1062259) on May 12th, 2023. I started collecting data for my study after receiving IRB approval. On May 13th, 2023, I emailed the flyer to the director. The recruitment flyer included my email address as a method to contact me. Once receiving an email from the interested participants, I emailed the interested participants the consent form. Before consenting, the interested individuals were encouraged to carefully read the consent form and ask any questions. Individuals who were interested in participating in the study were asked to reply to the email with "I consent." In the email I sent as a follow-up, I made sure to mention that participants had the option of continuing the study as per the consent form the IRB had approved or withdrawing from it. I recruited and prescreened possible participants as it related to the selection criteria. Over the course of 22 days, I conducted interviews, data were gathered, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. I obtained participant consent; scheduled interviews on May 27th, 2023, through- June 2nd, 2023; audio-recorded the interviews;

and then supplied each participant with a copy of the transcripts within 48 hours for member checking. After 10 interviews with LGBTQ aged-out youths in North Carolina, I had completed my interviews and reached data saturation. According to Hennink & Kaiser (2022), if no new data arose data saturation was reached.  To maintain alignment and stability, I asked the same questions to all participants during the semistructured interviews. Occasionally, when clarification was required to provide sufficient study data, I posed probing questions. I conducted a member check to confirm participant responses after each interview was audio recorded, reviewed and transcribed. In that time frame, I conducted 10 virtual audio-recorded interviews using the Zoom platform and transcribed using Temi, a fee-based application on my iPhone 11. The participant interviews took between 30 to 60 minutes, and there were no changes to the purposed plan. Themes about preparedness, barriers, and utilization of resources surfaced throughout the interviews.

**Recruitment and Response Rates**

The recruitment process included me seeking potential participants from an undisclosed organization in North Carolina that focuses on the LGBTQ population and provides services to the target population, such as groups, counseling, and safe housing. I contacted the director of the organization asking the organization to distribute the flyer to recruit eligible participants. The director agreed to post the flyer in their weekly newsletter that is emailed to staff and youths served by the organization. The organization posted the flyer to their weekly newsletter on May 15, 2023. For interested individuals, the flyer included my email address as a method to contact me. Once receiving an email from the interested participants, I emailed the interested participants the consent form.

Before consenting, the interested individuals were encouraged to carefully read the consent form and ask any questions. Individuals who were interested in participating in the study were asked to reply to the email with "I consent." In the email I sent as a follow-up, I made sure to mention that participants had the option of continuing the study as per the consent form the IRB had approved or withdrawing from it.

LGBTQ-identifying youths who have aged out of the foster care system in North Carolina, reside in North Carolina, and range in age from 18 to 21 years old were participants in the study. All the participants who were chosen met all requirements. Each participant in the study was prompted to share details about their time spent in foster care as they were transitioning, preparation procedures, barriers they encountered and the utilization of resources.

Taking inclusion criteria and scheduling constraints into consideration, participants were accepted on a first come, first served basis. Within the first 2 weeks, I was unable to receive all my participants and as a result, I asked the director to post the flyer to their social media. On May 26, 2023, the director agreed to post the flyer to their social media. After the director posted the flyer to their social media, 14 LGBTQ aged out youths in all responded to my recruitment efforts. One youth reached out on the 26, two on the 27, one on the 28, three on the 29, One on June 1, three on June 2 and three on June 3. The final study sample consisted of 10 LGBTQ aged-out youths. Due to one interested LGBTQ youth not responding to arrange the interview and three additional interested youths reaching out after data saturation was met through the 10 prior interviews. I sent a follow-up email to the interested youth that did not respond to arrange

an interview asking whether the youth was still interested in speaking with me within 48 hours, but I received no response. Additionally, I sent an email to each of the three additional interested individuals informing them that data saturation is met.

## Participant Demographics

To preserve participant privacy, I assigned a number to each participant. The participants range in age from 18 to 21 years old. Eight of the participants were African American (AA) and two were European American (EA). The sexualities of the participants were four transgender participants, five gay participants, and one bisexual participant, which made up the final sample of 10 individuals. The length of time in foster care for each participant ranged from 2 years to 10 years. See Table 1 below, which thoroughly explains each participant's demographics. I used manual hand coding throughout this thematic analysis to find pertinent codes, which I then categorized into themes. Once the data was audio recorded, the information was transcribed to identify recurring themes by conducting a thematic analysis.

**Table 1**

*Participants' Demographic Information*

| Participant code | Age | Ethnicity | Sexuality | Total Number of years in Foster Care |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| P-1 | 19 | AA | Transgender | 4 |
| P-2 | 20 | AA | Bisexual | 3 |
| P-3 | 20 | EA | Gay | 9 |
| P-4 | 18 | AA | Transgender | 2 |
| P-5 | 21 | AA | Transgender | 10 |
| P-6 | 21 | AA | Transgender | 5 |
| P-7 | 21 | EA | Gay | 6 |
| P-8 | 18 | AA | Gay | 8 |
| P-9 | 19 | AA | Gay | 2 |
| P-10 | 21 | AA | Gay | 7 |

**Data Analysis Procedures**

In this study, I conducted semistructured interviews to gather qualitative data. The ecological systems theory guided 15 questions and subquestions that were part of the semistructured interviews (see Appendix A). I focused the interview questions in the interview guide on issues like perceived preparation, barriers, and utilization of resources. For each concept, I constructed interview questions. I conducted the interviews via Zoom, audio-recorded, and then transcribed using Temi, a fee-based service that took between 30 and 60 minutes. The interview times ranged from 33:11 to 38:42.

Thematic analysis and a deductive approach to coding is what I used in the data analysis process. As I conducted the literature review the preset themes came to light. These themes align with the research questions and the ecological systems theory framework, which served as the foundation for the entire analysis. According to Bingham & Witkowsky (2022), preset themes that develop from the literature it is appropriate to use deductive or a priori coding. As a result, I utilized a deductive approach due to preset themes developing from the literature and ecological systems theory. I entered the themes into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. I manually hand coded using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase step-by-step thematic analysis I used to analyze the interview responses. Manual hand coding was beneficial because a proper evaluation required human judgment (Katz-Buonincontro, 2022). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase step by step thematic analysis was used: (a) become familiar with the data, (b) generate initial codes, (c) search for themes, (d) review themes, (e) define and name themes, and (f) produce a scholarly report.

### *Step 1: Become Familiar with the Data*

After the interviews were conducted, the data analysis process began. The data was transcribed verbatim using Temi, a fee-based application on my iPhone 11. I downloaded copies of the transcripts to a safe, password-protected file on my computer. After downloading the transcripts, I read each transcript to familiarize myself with the data. Then, to improve accuracy, better understand the data, and gain the participants' experiences and mental processes, I listened to the audio-recorded interviews several times as I read the transcripts. My objective was to thoroughly review the interviews in

order to become more familiar with the data and to find important details that could support my research questions.

*Step 2: Generate Initial Codes*

After I became familiar with the data, I began the coding process. Initial codes were produced and entered a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. I assigned alphanumeric identification for each participant, and I entered into the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet as well. I coded the participants by the following: P-1, P-2, P-3, P-4, P-5, P-6, P-7, P-8, P-9, and P-10. Following that, I looked for phrases, sentences, and paragraphs the participants shared to help answer the research questions in the transcript excerpts. Finally, I manually hand coded to develop codes from the data collection. The codes that emerged were ineffective preparation, discrimination, and lack of resources.

*Step 3: Generating Themes*

Once each transcript had been coded based on the participants responses to the interviews, the data analysis process began. Using the relationships between the composed codes and how they represented the answers to the interview questions given by each participant, I created a list of arranged codes in Step 2 that were important to the key themes. The interview questions were based on three themes that emerged from the literature review.

*Step 4: Review Themes*

To make sure the themes were aligned with the research questions, I identified and examined them. This is when I began to review the themes in greater detail. I verified that the data backed up the themes. I looked at how often the various themes appeared in

the data. I started to make the themes more profound. I began to see how the codes, excerpts, and themes related to one another. I went over the codes once again to make sure it was clear how the themes and the data set related to one another.

### Step 5: Define and Name Themes

To develop the final edition of the themes, this process involved carefully evaluating each theme and its alignment with the participants' responses and theoretical framework. To examine the perspectives, I first identified some basic codes as part of the data analysis process. This allowed me to uncover patterns and categories of thoughts given, which in turn allowed me to further explore perceptions of the LGBTQ aged out youths. During this step, I also identified which items I would use from the data as excerpts in the write up. To show an array of expressions and meanings across the data, I ensured cohesion of the themes by further analyzing the data and emphasizing supported data. The finalized version of the themes was developed.

### Step 6: Produce a Scholarly Report

In this step, the presenting of results to answer the research questions was displayed. I made sure the themes appropriately guided the findings in the write-up. To capture participants' perspectives of the barriers LGBTQ aged-out youths in North Carolina face after aging out of the foster care system, I identified three themes. For me to give context to the participants experiences, I utilized those three themes.

**Table 2**

*Qualitative Research Questions, Themes and Interview Questions*

| Qualitative Research Question | Interview Questions |
|---|---|
| **RQ 1**<br>How do LGBTQ aged out foster youth describe their preparedness prior to aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina? | Theme 1: Perceived preparedness<br>1. How do you view your transition to adulthood?<br>2. Would you consider your transition to adulthood as successful?<br>3. Why or why not?<br>4. Tell me about the ways your foster care social worker prepared you for aging out of the foster care system?<br>5. How prepared did you feel for transition? |
| **RQ 2**<br>How do LGBTQ aged out foster youth describe barriers encountered after aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina? | Theme 2: Barriers<br>6. What barriers did you anticipate when aging out of foster care?<br>7. What are the differences between your expectations and reality?<br>8. Can you tell me more about the barriers you experienced during your transition to adulthood?<br>9. How would you say these barriers impacted your aging out process? |
| **RQ 3**<br>In what ways do the barriers experienced by LGBTQ aged out youth influence their utilization of resources after aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina? | Theme 3: Utilization of Resources<br>   Micro Level:<br>10. When aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina, what did you perceive as the largest barrier in your immediate environment?<br>11. How did these barriers impact how you used the resources available?<br>   Mezzo/Meso Level:<br>12. When aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina, what did you perceive as the largest barrier in the community?<br>13. How did these barriers impact how you used the resources available?<br>   Macro Level:<br>14. When aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina, what did you perceive as the largest barrier related to government agencies in North Carolina?<br>15. How did these barriers impact how you used the resources available? |

## Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are the most

acceptable trustworthiness evaluation criteria (Kortjens & Moser, 2018). The

reliability of the findings is the cornerstone of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Manual hand coding was utilized to assess and convey the study's reliability. To make sure the research is trustworthy and reliable, I made sure participant validation was used. I employed member checking to confirm that the study participants agreed with my interpretation of their answers given during the interview, which gave the study more creditability. I provided each participant with a copy of the transcribed interview within 48 hours of the interview and requested the participants review and verify the validity of the contents. By reading a copy of the transcripts, members can verify their answers through member checking (Candela, 2019). To show the transferability of the study, I provided a detailed explanation of the given data. In order to ensure validity and dependability, I designed the interview questions so that they were relevant to the objective of the study. Participants were informed that any information they provided during their interview will be kept private to acknowledge validity issues.

**Transferability**

Transferability was made clear by outlining the requirements for research participation, which helped to define a precise demographic for LGBTQ youths who age out of the North Carolina foster care system. The participation conditions for this study, however, can be changed in several ways, making them sufficiently transferable for future research. The specifications were broad enough for other researchers to use. This study can be applied to specific members of the LGBTQ

population, specific ethnicities that identify as LGBTQ, and even other geographical areas.

**Dependability**

I made sure that all references in the study were checked, the transcriptions were correct, and the notes were in order throughout the interviews. To make sure that each participant was able to respond fully to each question, probing statements were used. A pilot study was conducted to ensure the quality of the interview questions, and the reliability of the interview recording procedure has been evaluated using audio recordings of the interviews.

**Confirmability**

As the research instrument, it was my responsibility to ensure that the conclusions were accurate, unbiased, and based only on the participant's responses. Due to my data collecting, I kept creating the audit trail, which showed how I had come to my conclusions about the specific information. As a result, this basic qualitative study may be confirmed since I consistently exercised caution with regard to my biases, exploring and disputing them rather than obstructing the veracity of the results.

<div align="center">

**Limitations**

</div>

A total of nine out of the 10 participants confirmed the results were accurate. One participant reached out via email on May 30, 2023, inquiring about adding additional information to the interview. The researcher responded to the email within 24 hours agreeing to conduct an additional interview or allow the participant to redo the interview. The email encouraged the participant to reschedule the interview within 48 hours. The

participant did not respond to the email. During the research, there were minimal limitations presented. The response rate was initially low. This problem was resolved by requesting that the organization post the flyer on their social media. The absence of lesbian and queer gender identities in the study is another limitation. Furthermore, the target population was LGBTQ aged out youths specifically in North Carolina. More participants might have surfaced if the focus had not been limited to North Carolina.

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

**Characteristics of Participants**

A total of 10 participants were recruited, interviewed, and audio-recorded using the Zoom virtual platform. The participant's actual names and specific demographics such as city of residence, were not used for this study to protect confidentiality and reduce the possibility of the participants being identified. Yet, each of the 10 participants were assigned alphanumeric codes as identifiers such as P-1, P-2, P-3, P-4, P-5, P-6, P-7, P-8, P-9, P-10. Three themes were utilized to assist with directing the data analysis process using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step thematic analysis to create the data from the participant interviews. Three themes were utilized. Those themes were: Theme 1: Perceived Preparedness, Theme 2: Barriers, Theme 3: Utilization of Resources. These three themes addressed the research questions for this study. Additionally, this section displays tables emphasizing the themes and participant responses.

**Research Question Findings**

The purpose of the research questions was to examine how prepared LGBTQ foster youths felt for the transition, barriers faced, and resources used. Participants were questioned qualitatively about their planning, barriers, and resource use.

It is significant to stress that it is unclear whether the support provided to LGBTQ aged out youths, if any, is adequate to satisfy their needs (Paul, 2020). Although some public and private child welfare organizations have expressed a greater interest in providing better care for LGBTQ youth in foster care, inadequate and/or inappropriate supports and services may result from caregivers' and professionals' lack of knowledge about how to work with these youth (Paul, 2020).

This study employed qualitative interviewing methods and an ecological systems theory framework to examine LGBTQ youths' opinions on the support they received from professionals and other service providers associated with the foster care system. Additionally, the barrier encountered during their transition and utilization of resources were explored to start filling this gap. For those reasons, three themes emerged after manually coding the data to address the study questions. The three themes were (a) perceived preparedness, (b) barriers and (c) utilization of resources. The framework ecological systems theory aligned with the research questions and themes, which are listed below:

### RQ1

RQ1 was: How do LGBTQ aged-out foster youths describe their perceived preparedness prior to aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina?

**Theme 1: Perceived Preparedness.** The inability to identify specific preparations provided by foster care social workers contributed to the theme perceived preparedness that answered my first research question. The construct perceived preparedness, served as the foundation for the first set of interview questions. The theme indicates if foster care social workers effectively prepare LGBTQ youths aging out of the system, and if not, how did the youths prepare for the transition. The participants were questioned about how they felt about their transition to adulthood, whether they thought their transition was successful, how the foster care social worker had prepared them, and how prepared they thought they were for the transition. Several participants elaborated on their responses. During the interviews, participants gave diverse responses regarding their preparation.

Many foster youths exit the foster care system lacking the necessary tools to successfully transition to adulthood (Barnett, 2020). Each youth discussed their preparation for aging out of the foster care system, including their experiences and expectations. When questioned about how the foster care social worker had prepared them for transition and how prepared they felt for aging out, six out of the ten youths expressed shared experiences reporting not being adequately prepared for the transition. These youths expressed lack of preparation from their foster care social workers and not feeling prepared to transition.

For example, P-5 reported difficulty with transitioning to adulthood due to a lack of preparation from foster care social workers and expressed not knowing how to navigate after aging out. The remaining four expressed differences in experiences, such as two out of the ten youths reported an overall positive attitude towards the preparation they received and felt prepared for the transition to adulthood.

For example, P-8 reported,

> I would say neither yes or no… well mostly yes I felt prepared but there was still things I didn't know and insecurities I had. On a scale 1- 10 I'll go for like a 7 for how prepared I was. There are special services for foster care kids so they helped to sign me up for college. I went to college, but it was only to have security. It was graduation or go back homeless. I decided to graduate which made me more prepared for life. So, I would say it had a positive impact.

Additionally, the other two of the four expressed differences in experiences, such as receiving minimal preparation from their foster care social workers and felt minimally prepared for the transition. The LGBTQ aged out youths mentioned being prepared by their foster parents instead of social workers, feeling minimally prepared or not feeling prepared at all. Specifically,

P-7 reported,

> No, no, no, I didn't really, you know feel prepared by social worker. I often asked my teachers at school what I should expect after aging out. My

foster parents help prepare me the most. They sent me off to college, but I did not go through with it at all. I joined vocational training instead, but my foster parents helped me a lot. I will say I felt a 9 on a scale of 1-10 when I aged out of foster care.

In contrast,

P-5 expressed,

Aging out was really tough for me. I was scared, I wanted to run away and give up. I did not feel prepared by the social worker. I did not know what to do after leaving my foster home and being on my own. Everything changed when I was close to aging out. I felt alone. My foster parents prepared me by saying education is key and to take my education seriously. I had to take my education seriously because I knew I had nobody that would push me after I age out so I tried my best even though I wasn't good in school.

Many of the participants discussed not knowing what to anticipate after aging out as they had "been protected by the foster care system" reported P-10. All participants mentioned having to prepare themselves in some way, shape or form, and that it pushed them through adulthood.

Although there were similarities and differences in experiences between the aged-out youths, most of the youths agreed that further preparation and follow up is needed for LGBTQ youths aging out of the foster care system. For instance, Although P-8 stated that even with feeling prepared, further preparation is needed to assist with the unexpected.

Furthermore, P-3 expressed that the "foster care social workers did not check back to see how we are doing" after transition. Lastly, participant 4 and participant 6 expressed further preparation is needed as it relates to emotional support for LGBTQ youths aging out of the foster care system. For example, P-4 reported feeling "emotionally down and alone" as a transgender during the transition.

In addition, P-6 reported,

> You know, I think I would have needed more support emotionally because, you know, you need emotional support from the people you have around you like, you know, trying to impact you positively about the way you feel, so I didn't really have this emotional support from the people around me. Like, you know, once you get used to some certain kind of people and all of a sudden, you're left alone emotionally. I did not get the help I needed at the time or support I needed emotionally and psychologically.

According to Schofield et al., (2019), trans youths are more likely than their counterparts to have depression, trauma symptoms, and mental health problems.

LGBTQ youths who have aged out of the foster care system have a variety of experiences and preparation for adulthood, according to the findings described in this section. According to the themes' findings, LGBTQ youths are not appropriately prepared for the transition to adulthood, which is supported by the literature review. Paul 2020 asserts that there is a greater need for increased support for LGBTQ youths who are transitioning out of foster care system. Participants also had trouble pinpointing the

precise preparations made by the foster care agency and social workers before the youths aged out of foster care. For example,

P-9 reported,

> There was this nonprofit organization, which came, and you know taught classes on handwork like you know, they grouped us based on whatever you aspire to do so if you're into gardening. They actually teach you for just about two months. That was a great help to me. I don't know, because I felt they were just people who wanted to do good for our community and then volunteered to do that, but apart from that. You really don't see anything which was actually done like specifically to prepare us for the future. So, it kind of just seemed like we're just another burden and another job to just get over with.

Due to the unique support needs of LGBTQ youths, they often encounter child welfare professionals that are not knowledgeable about the LGBTQ population, uninterested in furthering their knowledge surrounding the LGBTQ population or how to appropriately assist the LGBTQ population (Paul, 2020). All participants mentioned having to prepare themselves for the transition for example, P-4 reported "becoming more responsible", P-6 expressed "researching LGBTQ resources to better prepare", and "mentally prepared themselves" to be out on their own as stated by P-10.

## *RQ2*

RQ2 was: How do LGBTQ aged-out foster youths describe barriers encountered after aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina?

**Theme 2: Barriers.** Research states that the barriers experienced by LGBTQ aged out youths often encounter financial, social, and psychological barriers, which results in the youths feeling unprepared for transition (Verulava et al., 2020). The relevance and significance of barriers experienced contributed to the theme barriers that answered the second research question. To further explore this within my study, barriers were the construct that guided my second set of interview questions. As it relates to transitioning out of foster care, I discussed the barriers experienced, their effects, and the environmental factors that influenced them. The theme implies that LGBTQ youths experience barriers when aging out of the foster care system. The participants were asked what barriers they anticipated when aging out of foster care, what are the differences between their expectations and their reality, more detail about the barriers they experienced during their transition and how those barriers impacted their aging out process. All participants reported experiencing barriers to a certain degree. The most common barriers identified by the participants were housing instability, unemployment, and education.

According to the themes' findings, LGBTQ youths experience significant barriers during the transition to adulthood, which is supported by the literature review. Out of ten youths, two youths agreed to having similar experiences and reported experiencing minimal barriers but view the barriers as a positive impact on their aging out process and who they have become. For instance, P-7 expressed "viewing the barriers in a positive way" and P-1 stated, "making the best of the barriers because they made me stronger."

Additionally, the findings indicated eight out of the 10 youths shared similarities in barriers experienced and reported experiencing significant barriers after aging out of foster care. These barriers included unstable housing, unemployment, educational and medical barriers. When youths age out of the foster care system, they encounter several barriers that increase their risk of unemployment, legal involvement, homelessness, drug addiction, poorer educational attainment, and unplanned births (Grooms, 2020). Three youths shared similar experiences during aging out of foster care and reported difficulty finding stable housing.

For example, P-10 reported,

> It took me a while to get a house. I was a squatter with my friends for a year and a half. As a squatter, I had to contribute, buy groceries, get the house the necessaries. Everybody was responsible in that house because we were all from foster care and we had to have each other's back and it was more of a challenge because now I had people of my kind around me and you know and it was difficult, you know, it was kind of like difficult, you know, now you are in a surrounding or you're in an environment where everyone is struggling. Everyone is hustling, running around, busting your house up and down and you know, just to get food on the table, just to pay the rent and just to be fine to meet societal demands and needs.

> P-5 stated "it took 6 months" to find stable housing. Additionally, P-9 reported losing an opportunity to gain housing because the apartment complex requested his

paperwork (social security card, birth certificate, identification card) and the social worker did not provide the paperwork on time. Fliss et al., 2022 supported the notion that if housing and other psychological needs are not met it leads to underlying factors in health that have been linked to infectious diseases, respiratory conditions, poor mental health, and mortality.

Three participants agreed to having similar experiences as it relates to difficulty gaining employment after aging out of the foster care system. Nearly half of the former foster youths are either unemployed, underemployed, or in financial trouble, according to Mihalec-Adkins et al.'s 2020 study. For example,

P-2 reported,

it was really hard to find a job. I experienced a lot of discrimination, and it was very awful. It was hard to create a resume without assistance from foster parents and social workers, so I tried to do it myself. I put Bisexual on my resume because I am proud of who I am. Once I tell the jobs about myself, they say no space or vacancies, tell me I can't work there or either not talk to me at all at work.

P-3 reported difficulty searching for work and states it was "really difficult due to not knowing how to write a resume or how to apply for a job". P-3 also reported the one job that he was able to find from a recommendation from a friend he was "exploited and often not paid".  Furthermore, P-1 expressed it taking "several months" before finding a job after aging out of the foster care system.

Two participants reported that their barriers included obtaining education after their transition to adulthood. For example,

P-4 reported,

> I was denied the college fund due to not meeting the requirements. It was after I got turned down from the college fund I actually had to give up and search for a job instead. So, I would say it actually impacted me negatively because my self-esteem was really down and in the process of having no one to go back and talk to at home, just you alone.

According to Mountz et al. (2019), just 1% to 11% of current and former foster youths have earned a college degree. This statistic highlights the intricacy of the educational barriers these youths face. Lastly, two participants agreed to having shared experiences related to difficulty receiving medications. For example,

P-6 reported,

> After aging out it was difficult to regain medical insurance for doctors' visits and expressed after aging out of foster care, I did not have insurance and I lacked, you know getting my hormonal drugs, it was kind of a barrier to me. It really gets bad when I get a reaction like, you know, my hormonal drugs will help reduce it so when I didn't have my hormonal drugs, you know, for a while I started getting my erection back, you know, just bad for me.

It is important to note that all youths reported experiencing barriers after their transition to adulthood. However, the severity of the barriers and how the barriers impacted each youth varied.

*RQ3*

RQ3 was: In what ways do the barriers experienced by LGBTQ aged-out foster youths influence their utilization of resources after aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina?

**Theme 3: Utilization of Resources.** The lack of availability and accessibility of resources contributed to the theme utilization of resources that answered this final research question. Participants all shared the lack of readily available resources as a barrier to not seeking and utilizing resources after their transition. The data also reflects the lack of availability and accessibility for resources to address the resource barriers that aged out youths experienced due to the inability access resources, out of pocket cost of treatment and resources, and knowledge of how to obtain resources. This was further explored on the micro, meso and macro levels as it relates to ecological system theory. Utilization of resources was the construct that guided my third set of interview questions. The theme implies that the utilization of resources is impacted by the barriers experienced by the LGBTQ youths when aging out of foster care. During the interview, the participants were asked what did they perceive as the largest barrier in their immediate environment when aging out of foster care, how those barriers impacted their utilization of resources, what did they perceive as their largest barrier in the community when aging out of foster care, how those barriers impacted their utilization of resources,

what did they perceive as the largest barrier related to government agencies, how did these barriers impact their utilization of resources.

Crawford, 2020 informs us that the microsystem refers to the immediate influences connected to an individual. On the micro level, participants 5, 6, and 7 agreed to have similar experiences related to lack of resources and support after coming out to their foster families about their sexuality during their transition. For example, P-5 stated, "really struggling and wanting to run away and give up" after coming out to his foster family because "their attitudes changed towards him". P-6 expressed feeling "lost and not having support" after coming out to their foster family. P-7 reported feeling "ashamed" and reported "hiding his identity from his foster family until transitioning out of their home". P-7 stated that due to waiting so long to come out to his foster family hindered him from receiving resources and support early on in his immediate environment. In fact, P-5, P-6, and P-7 all reported this barrier hindering their utilization of resources.

The mesosystem is where the various microsystems, such as the community and the school link, and impact one another (Crawford, 2020). On the meso level, P-9 identified lack of knowledge as a reason for not utilizing resources as it related to the community setting. For instance, P-9 stated, "I didn't know of any resources back then, so I was not able to use them". Additionally, P-5 reported,

> I didn't have the support I needed when aging out of foster care. I almost
>
> joined a bad gang due to not having community support. I did not have

support from community such as churches or LGBTQ centers. I had no

support or resources in any way.

P-2 and P-6 agreed to similar experiences such as being verbally and

physically abused in the community setting due to their sexuality. For example, P-

2 expressed memories of "getting beat up" several times due to his sexuality and

having to remain in those unsafe situations due to not having resources or

"anywhere to go". Additionally, P-6 revealed experiencing verbal and physical

abuse by others due to being transgender and reported having to remain in those

unsafe situations due to not having knowledge of how to access readily available

resources. Many of the youths reported having to "look up resources online" or

"find resources themselves" such as P-1, P-2, P-5, P-6, P-7 and P-8. However, all

participants mentioned scarcity in resources which impacted their utilization of

resources after aging out of foster care.

According to the themes' findings, LGBTQ youths experienced a lack of readily

available resources which impacted their utilization of those resources during the

transition to adulthood, which is supported by the literature review. The macrosystem

incorporates individual impacts on a larger scale, such as the economy, policies,

availability of resources for health care, and financial settings (Crawford, 2020). On the

macro level, seven out of the 10 participants reported not having access to resources once

they aged out of foster care and therefore were unable to use resources.

These seven participants reported not knowing how to access resources, not having health care workers that are LGBTQ affirming and not having the financial means to use resources. For example,

P-3 expressed,

> I didn't even know how to go about getting resources, so it was unfortunate that I didn't even know how to navigate towards getting resources. That's why I said I know most of those services were probably available, but how I would go about getting them I didn't know.

Additionally, P-1 reported,

> The resources were not actually available to me. I had no prior knowledge of the resources. I had to search for them online and go through them myself. I actually didn't know of organizations or people to talk to after aging out or how to go about telling my foster parents that I was even looking for LGBTQ resources. So, I would say, that is why I didn't use the resources.

Since LGBTQ youths are more likely than their counterparts to experience stigma in the medical setting, doctors must provide affirming and inclusive care to adequately treat and monitor their health (Stern, 2021). For instance, P-4 reported not having "transgender friendly" healthcare workers. P-4 stated, "I felt I wasn't safe at that practice, and I feel there should be need for health care workers who are actually just for the LGBTQ community". P-6 and P-4 expressed not being able to access their hormonal drugs as a result.

LGBTQ youths have significantly limited access to physical and mental health treatments (everychildNC.org). Participants revealed that after aging out of foster care they are stripped of their medical coverage, mental health coverage and even dental coverage which impacts how they use resources.

For example, P-10 reported,

> You are so scared of going to the hospital because you know you don't
> know how much it might cost and stuff like that. It's scary. Very scary and
> in my case, just like I said, I had to take responsibility, you know, save a
> little bit here, a little bit there and once my health is in question, you
> know, you go and treat yourself with the money you have tried to save.

P-5 reported having to access health insurance on their own and stated, "months at a time before going to the doctor because it was expensive out of pocket". P-1 and P-7 reported barriers with education on the macro levels including "not having funds" to further their education. P-2 reported his biggest barrier to finding employment on the macro level included "policies". The remaining three participants, P-3, P-8 and P-9 reported having a different experience than the rest of the seven as it relates to resources. P-3 reported "having very minimal resources available but preferred to isolate and not use resources" due to personal reasons. P-8 and P-9 reported access to resources due to foster parent showing them how to access resources on the macro level after their transition. P-3, P-8 and P-9 agreed to the scarcity of resources but reported having minimal knowledge and access to resources after aging out.

Based on the similarities in responses and experiences, the three themes all interact with one another to address the research questions. The research findings from the literature review and the current findings had a close link. There were some unexpected findings that came to light. The unexpected findings included the participants' accounts of feeling discriminated against and the significance of stereotypes as a barrier for LGBTQ aged out youths. For instance, being verbally and physically abused due to their sexuality, not having access or proper care for their hormonal drugs, and even being denied employment. It was unexpected at the start of the data collection phase that these aged out youths would repeatedly experience being ostracized to this extent because of their sexuality.

## Summary

The study's findings were covered in this section. Data collection, data analysis procedures, validation, limitations, and how the study findings addressed the research questions were all covered in Section 3. Three study topics led to the development of the summary of findings, which addressed resource use, barriers faced, and how prepared LGBTQ youths felt for the transition. Ten LGBTQ youths who were between the ages of 18 and 21 who had aged out of the North Carolina foster care system took part in this basic qualitative study through semistructured interviews. The study explored the perceived preparedness, barriers, and utilization of resources of LGBTQ aged out youths.

To analyze the findings of the data analysis, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) theme analysis. The responses from the ten participants yielded three themes. The themes that address the research questions are: (a) perceived preparedness, (b) barriers, and (c)

utilization of resources. The study's focus was to explore the barriers that LGBTQ aged

out youths must overcome. The study's results were summarized in Section 3 along with

some helpful tables. The applicability to professional practice, suggestions for social

work practice, and implications for social change are all summarized in Section 4.

Section 5: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

**Introduction**

The purpose of the qualitative study was to better understand the barriers LGBTQ youths experience when aging out of the foster care system. In this study, I explored the barriers LGBTQ youths in North Carolina face when transitioning out of the foster care system. I used purposive sampling and semistructured interviews to collect data from the ten participants. The research questions were related to perceived preparedness, barriers, and utilization of resources related to ecological systems theory at the micro-, meso-, and macrosystem levels. This serves as the basis for the interview questions and allows further exploration of barriers encountered as LGBTQ transition to adulthood.

The findings of the study can aid social workers in their practice by alleviating the barriers that LGBTQ youths face when they age out of the foster care system. The findings of this study could increase social workers' knowledge and abilities, raise their awareness, and promote agency collaboration. Furthermore, social workers and other professionals could increase their culturally competence surrounding LGBTQ aged out youths in North Carolina if they understand these barriers. Additionally, by raising social workers' and foster care organizations' awareness of the barriers identified by LGBTQ-aged-out youths, my hope is that more culturally competent future planning and resource use will occur. In section 5, application of professional ethics in social work practice, recommendations for social work practice and the implications of social change.

**Application for Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice**

When working with at-risk and marginalized communities, social workers are required to follow by the NASW code of ethics (NASW, 2023). To find principles pertinent to my clinical social work problem, I reviewed the NASW code of ethics. By reviewing the NASW code of ethics it provided a greater comprehension of the clinical social work problem and an explanation of how I used my research in social work practice. The importance of human relationships, social justice and competence are the values and principles that apply to this study. The first social work value is human relationships. The NASW ethical principle related to human relationships states that: A social worker recognizes the importance of human relationships (National Association of Social Workers, 2023). Applying this concept will contribute to a more in-depth understanding of a person and their interactions over time. The purpose of the study was to bridge ecological systems theory framework to explore the interaction between a person's environment and them. Additionally, by collaborating with an undisclosed LGBTQ organization that supports the importance of human connections by networking and encouraging agency collaboration to generate positive social change.

The second value is social justice. This ethical principle states that social workers challenge social injustice (National Association of Social Workers, 2023). This ethical principle shows relation between the study social justice to a vulnerable and oppressed group, as well as to ensure the group access to needed information, services, and resources (National Association of Social Workers, 2023). The final social work value is competence. The ethical principal competence states that social workers practice within

their area of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise (National Association of Social Workers, 2023). National Association of Social Workers (2023) states that social workers must aim to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession and must work within their scope of practice. In this study, I maintained competence by adding to the knowledge base of the profession and working within my scope of practice. By ensuring that LGBTQ aged-out youths are treated with respect and dignity, their overall well-being is prioritized, and developing human interactions through agency collaboration for necessary services and resources, this shows how the values and principles of the NASW, and the study align.

## Recommendations for Social Work Practice

### Action Steps

I established recommendations for social work practice based on the study's findings. To encourage cultural awareness and competency among social work practitioners, ongoing support should be provided. The first action step that is recommended is attending regular training, workshops and courses related to the LGBTQ population. This can be beneficial for learning key components of the LGBTQ culture such as terms, pronouns, and preferences. The knowledge gained would allow social workers that work with youth aging out of the foster care system to provide culturally competent practice. The second action step that is recommended is that social workers engage in more conversations and interactions with LGBTQ youths to better understand the barriers these youths encounter. As a result, both the social worker and the youth can benefit. The LGBTQ youths will experience support and feeling heard, which can foster

trust and positive outcomes. The social worker will gain awareness, knowledge acquisition, skill development, and trust.

The findings from this study can assist my practice as an advanced practitioner by allowing me to be mindful of my own biases and employ a culturally sensitive and culturally competent lens when providing therapeutic services, intake sessions, diagnosing, and completing documentation. As a mental health therapist, I encounter clients of various ages, backgrounds, and sexual preferences on a day-to-day basis. For me to be more effective in my work, the study's findings can help me to consider the individual and how they interact with their environment.

**Transferability and Usefulness**

For LGBTQ youths aging out of the foster care system and entering adulthood, the study's findings are important. In this study, I explored LGBTQ youths in North Carolina between the ages of 18 and 21. The findings of this study, however, can be extended to LGBTQ youths who are aging out in a variety of contexts, geographical regions, and at various ages. The findings might also apply to youths who are not members of the LGBTQ community who have aged out of the foster care system. Because youths who do not identify as LGBTQ also face comparable barriers when they age out of foster care, the findings are transferable. Finally, the findings of this study are useful for social workers because they help them engage with the LGBTQ population, build trust, and communicate with them in an authentic way. By attempting to alleviate barriers faced by youth who identify as LGBTQ during the aging out process, social workers can help to bring about positive social change.

**Limitations Impacting Usefulness**

My personal biases as the researcher is a limitation that could affect the study's usefulness. Due to having different experiences from the study participants, my biases as the researcher could affect how useful the results are. For example, I aimed the interview questions at LGBTQ youths in North Carolina who have aged out of the foster care system. By making sure that every question was asked in a nonjudgmental manner, the semistructured interviews that were created and approved before I utilized them gave me control over the flow of the interview. As a researcher with firsthand knowledge of youths aging out of the foster care system, I have some biases. It was important that I was careful to avoid projecting my biases. Before the interviews and in the consent form, there was a statement of transparency stating that if a participant felt uncomfortable in any way, they had the option to withdraw from the study, they could do so without being judged and that they would have the chance to see their transcripts and the results to confirm their responses. Additionally, because it lessens biases in selection, the use of purposive sampling improved the validity of this study (Prior et al., 2020).

**Recommendations for Further Research**

This project, to my knowledge, is the first qualitative study into the barriers LGBTQ youths in North Carolina face once they age out of the foster care system. Suggestions for future research include:

- Conduct a study exploring the barriers faced by LGBTQ youth who are aging out of foster care around the United States.

- Conduct a study with a wider range of gender identities. For instance, this study included LGBTQ participants, and the results may have been different if more lesbians and queers had participated.

- Explore the challenges faced by other diverse populations, such as people of different races and cultures, when they age out of foster care.

**Dissemination of Research Findings**

The following are some methods of disseminating the information generated by this project to promote awareness and understanding of the findings:

1. Lead workshops, conferences, and gatherings of professional associations; provide presentations.

2. Disseminate the findings to the study's participants and coworkers.

In the realm of social work, the distribution of this knowledge could be extremely important. Furthermore, through increasing knowledge and abilities related to cultural competency, sharing the findings within the social work community would encourage positive social change.

## Implications for Social Change

Barriers such as housing, employment, education, and access to resources that are LGBTQ-affirming were identified as a barrier by participants in this study. It is important to make sure youth have access to the care and resources needed without having to disclose their sexual and/or gender (Paul, 2020). This can support with creating positive social change and alleviating the barriers experienced by LGBTQ aged-out youths. On a micro-, and mesosystem levels, it could be helpful to facilitate

trainings for foster parents, caregivers, and other social work professionals to better support LGBTQ transitioning foster youths. On a macrosystem level, including research, and policy level, it could be encouraged that foster care agencies initiate more inclusive and affirming policies and make improvements to practices around matching a youth and a caregiver (Paul, 2020). Social workers can have an impact by incorporating the individual and their surroundings to guide their day-to-day practice while applying ecological systems theory. Overall, fostering trusting relationships and alleviating barriers faced by LGBTQ youths in the social work profession could result in positive social change.

## Summary

Social workers play an important part in the lives of LGBTQ foster youths. Compared to youths in the general community, foster youth had greater rates of high school dropouts, higher unemployment rates, and a higher likelihood of becoming parents at a young age (Grooms, 2020). The Bureau of Justice conducted a survey of current state jail inmates and discovered that 1.2 million, or 14.6%, had spent time in the foster care system as children (Grooms, 2020). Only a few studies have attempted to determine the size of the LGBTQ foster youth population, making this study relevant (Grooms, 2020).

Not only North Carolina's LGBTQ youths who are aging out, but LGBTQ youths across the world, may benefit from this study. This study highlights the barriers faced by LGBTQ youths transitioning out of the foster care system and how those barriers affect their transition to adulthood. A new focus has just begun to illuminate the

barriers facing this vulnerable population (Grooms, 2020). By further examining this social problem, the social work profession could benefit by increasing awareness, knowledge, and relationships with youths who not only identify as LGBTQ but have also aged out of the foster care system.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

**From an LGBTQ aged out youths perspective:**

1. How do you view your transition to adulthood?

2. Would you consider your transition to adulthood as successful?

3. Why or why not?

4. Tell me about the ways your foster care social worker prepared you for aging out of the foster care system?

5. How prepared did you feel for transition?

6. What barriers did you anticipate when aging out of foster care?

7. What are the differences between your expectations and reality?

8. Can you tell me more about the barriers you experienced during your transition to adulthood?

9. How would you say these barriers impacted your aging out process?

**Micro Level:**

10. When aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina, what did you perceive as the largest barrier in your immediate environment?

11. How did these barriers impact how you used the resources available?

**Meso/Mezzo Level:**

12. When aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina, what did you perceive as the largest barrier in the community?

13. How did these barriers impact how you used the resources available?

**Macro Level:**

14. When aging out of the foster care system in North Carolina, what did you perceive as the largest barrier related to government agencies in North Carolina?

15. How did these barriers impact how you used the resources available?