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The Perceptions of Foster Care Alumni Who Are Recipients of Pandemic Aid

Ashley Robinson
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Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

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Ashley Robinson

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

The Perceptions of Foster Care Alumni Who are Recipients of Pandemic Aid

by

Ashley Robinson

MSW, University of Oklahoma, 2008

BA, Oral Roberts University, 2006

Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy & Administration

Walden University

November 2025

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened challenges for young adults transitioning from foster care to independence. Research shows that foster care alumni faced barriers in education, employment, housing, and health due to limited support networks. Yet, little is known about how emergency policies, such as the Consolidated Appropriations Act (CAA) of 2021, affected them. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of foster care alumni who received financial aid through the Act. The research question: What were the experiences and perceptions of foster care alumni (aged 18-26) who received funds via the CAA of 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic? Guided by Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory, data from 13 semi-structured virtual interviews were coded and analyzed using Corbin and Strauss's (1990) open, axial, and selective coding methods. The findings showed that the CAA provided crucial short-term financial stability, supporting housing, transportation, education, and family needs. Participants valued this assistance but expressed a need for continued funding, stronger caseworker engagement, and better awareness of resources. The study confirmed existing literature on the vulnerabilities of foster care alumni and extended understanding of how targeted policy interventions can buffer economic hardship. Implications for social change include reducing homelessness, improving economic stability, and promoting equity and self-sufficiency among former foster youth through sustained, evidence-based policy reform.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my family. Thank you for believing in and supporting me throughout this journey.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank God for guiding me toward this academic endeavor. I commit to using the knowledge and skills I have acquired to impact Your Kingdom for Your Glory.

Thank you, Dr. Raj Sing and Dr. Nicole Hayes, for your time, patience, and expertise in serving on my dissertation committee.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As the world continues to navigate life after the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers have explored its impact on various people groups and aspects of life. Individuals in, and recently emancipated from, foster care were especially vulnerable.

Foster care is the temporary removal of minors from parents who have been accused of neglect or maltreatment. At its best, the foster care system is a means to provide support for those parents to remediate the issues that led to their children's removal so that the children can return to a safe and stable home environment (Children's Bureau, 2024). Unfortunately, COVID-19 restrictions overburdened the already strained foster care system. The remain-in-place orders implemented to stem the spread of the virus created barriers for families needing material support as social services agencies closed; resulted in unemployment for those already experiencing poverty; and meant more exposure to family violence as children, no longer able to attend school in-person, spent more hours at home; and more community violence as people protested, and police enforced, the government-mandated lockdowns (Wilke, 2021).

According to Wildeman and Emanuel (2014), one in 17 children in the United States will experience an out-of-home placement before age 18. The outcomes for young adults formerly in foster care are well-researched and abysmal (Adams et al., 2021; Administration for Children and Families, 2020; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney & Heuring, 2005; Courtney et al., 2010). As COVID-19 becomes endemic, restrictions have been lifted and life resumes; it is important to explore the impact of the policies enacted and services accessed by former youth in care.

To date, Greeson et al. (2022) has been the only other study published that describes how receiving financial assistance through the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 has shifted the experiences of young adults with a prior foster care history. As COVID-19 variants emerge and future pandemics loom on the horizon, service providers of this population and policymakers must understand how allocating funds to foster care alumni impacts their life experiences during public health crises.

Background

In the United States, approximately 23,000 youth age out of the foster care system yearly (Gaille, 2017). Young adults who age out of the foster care system face a daunting and often grim transition into adulthood. This vulnerable population, which lacks the stability and support networks inherent in typical families, encounters various challenges. For example, only 3% will complete college; half will struggle with substance dependence and abuse; 70% of females will become pregnant before age 21; 20% will face homelessness and housing instability; and only half will be employed by age 24 (National Foster Youth Institute, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic created additional layers of complexity to the lives of those receiving foster care services as stay-in-place orders resulted in a significant disruption in services like mental health counseling and academic support that shifted to virtual platforms, making it harder and at times impossible for youth in care to access these essential services. Pandemic restrictions also delayed court proceedings such as reunification hearings (held to determine if youth in care can return to their birth families) and other proceedings revolving around the placement, care, well-being, and permanency

of youth in care. Efforts were required to adapt services and aid to address the unique challenges created by the pandemic. One measure included the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, which provided direct funds to 18 to 26-year-olds in foster care and those who had recently exited.

Problem Statement

There is a problem with the disparate outcomes for young adults involved in and aging out of the foster care system. They often lack support and services that would help them successfully navigate the transition into adulthood. In comparison to their non-care peers, they perform poorly in various life domains that are essential for independent living. Remain-in-place orders and other COVID-19 restrictions increased hardships for former youth in care. For example, Greeson et al. (2022) noted that foster care alumni faced food and housing insecurity, unemployment, and financial instability. Amechi (2020) echoed these findings and called for a federal moratorium on youth aging out during the onset of the pandemic. Appleton (2020) highlighted the barriers to education, employment, social and economic resources, and limited transition planning that could have helped these young adults leave state care more stably. Blake et al. (2020) and Collins and Baldiga (2020) found that COVID-19 expanded the educational and learning gaps for youth in care as they often had less access to technology and high-speed internet to accommodate for distance and virtual learning mandated by school districts at that time. Respondents in Ruff and Linville (2021) reported negative impacts on their physical and psychological health due to COVID-19-related stressors. Youth in care who were parenting during the pandemic found it difficult to access material resources, and

public assistance (as many offices had closed), and lost access to childcare which often resulted in job loss (Shpiegel et al., 2022; Wilke, 2020).

To address these problems, the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 provided direct financial assistance to those in foster care and recently emancipated young adults ages 18-26 at the onset of the pandemic. While recent research has explored the COVID-19-related experiences of young adults with current and former foster care placement, none has been published that describes how receiving financial assistance through the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 has shifted the experiences of this population. As such, the impact of this legislation remains unknown. As public administrators and policy creators, assessing the outcomes of such policies and expenditures is ethically imperative and fiscally responsible. This study contributes to the body of knowledge needed to inform policymakers and service providers of how receiving pandemic-related funds from the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 impacted the experiences of these young adults.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the perceptions and experiences of foster care alumni (ages 18-26) who received federal pandemic-related financial assistance via the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. I gathered data to inform policymakers and administrators of public services on the impact of providing financial assistance to this vulnerable population, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Question

What were the experiences and perceptions of 18-26-year-old foster care alumni who received funds via the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Theoretical Framework

I used Glasser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory as the theoretical framework for this qualitative study. Grounded theory emphasizes generating theories from data in lieu of testing preexisting hypotheses (Creswell, 2007). This approach relies on the researcher's inductive analysis and the participants' perspectives. Data analysis in grounded theory includes the following iterative steps: data collection (typically via interviews, or document analysis), initial coding, axial coding (creating themes from the initial codes), selective coding (generating categories based on the themes), theoretical sampling (variation in data sources), constant comparison of data across and within categories, researcher memo writing to document reflections and clarify the analysis process, theoretical saturation (when no new insights or concepts emerge), and theory construction which is the final step that summarizes the relationship between concepts and explains the central phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Lather (1986) further validates this point by noting the "reciprocal relationship between data and theory" throughout the use of grounded theory in research (p.267).

I explored the experiences and perceptions of 18-26-year-old foster care alumni who received funds via the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic using grounded theory.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative research focuses on understanding phenomena from the perspectives of those involved. In contrast to quantitative research, this centers on exploring how people experience a particular phenomenon or situation rather than objectively measuring or quantifying it.

There is no agreed-upon sample size determined in qualitative designs using grounded theory (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Ultimately, data were gathered from 13 participants.

This study examined the perceptions and lived experiences of 18-26-year-olds with prior foster care involvement who received pandemic-related funds from the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. Data was derived from semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom videoconferencing software. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each participant received a copy of their transcript and its coding for verification and member-checking.

Definitions

Aging Out, aka Emancipation: Having to leave foster care because of the age eligibility requirements (18 or 21, depending on the state of residence). This means losing access to varying state-funded supports such as financial assistance, housing, and access to health care (Foster Club, n.d.a).

Foster Care: Out-of-home care for minors whose parents have been accused of abuse or neglect. The children enter state or tribal care and typically reside with

relatives, in foster homes, group homes, or residential facilities (Ruedas-Garcia et al., 2020).

Foster Care Alumni: Self-ascribed term for individuals formerly placed in foster care (Foster Care Alumni of America, n.d.).

Independent Living Programs: Services designed to prepare and assist youth in foster care to live independently as they exit state care and can no longer access the supports therein (Foster Club, n.d.b).

Youth and Young adult: People aged 18 to 26 that are entering a transitional period known as emerging adulthood where goals of independence, financial security, and often parenthood are sought. (Committee on Improving the Health, Safety, and Well-Being of Young Adults, 2015).

Assumptions

Two assumptions were made in this study. I assumed that each participant honestly and accurately reported their lived experiences and perceptions in response to questions. Secondly, it is presumed that using grounded theory and inductive data analysis were adequate means by which to frame and assess the data to extrapolate meaning from the experiences of foster care alumni who received financial assistance from the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021.

Scope and Delimitations

I examined the experiences and perceptions of foster care alumni who received money via the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Eligibility for these federal dollars was limited to individuals aged 18 to 26

who were either in or had recently emancipated from state care. As such, this study included the same age parameters but excluded those still in foster care. People in state care may be subject to institutional, deferential, or other vulnerabilities, which was avoided as it is unethical (Gordon, 2020). Minors and those without foster care involvement were also excluded as they were ineligible for these monies.

The goal of this research was to gather data to inform policymakers and administrators of public services on the impact of providing financial assistance to this vulnerable population, specifically during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study also gave voice to an at-risk group allowing for insights into their needs, the condition of their social determinants of health - which impact quality of life (Healthy People 2030, 2023), and ways they deem best to meet their self-identified needs.

Grounded theory was the theoretical framework used in this research. In this instance, the implementation of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, and its impact on foster care alumni (aged 18-26) were examined. Participants were recruited via emails from the Independent Living and Educational Training Voucher programs that disbursed the federal funds. The scope of the participants was limited to whoever responded, which may have impacted transferability. Transferability is the degree that the findings in one study can be generalized, within similar contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Researchers determine the transferability of qualitative data by examining the rich, thick participant descriptions and the details of the research process. This research consisted of foster care alumni who received financial assistance through the

Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. If other parameters are applied to this demographic, the results may not be transferable.

Limitations

This research did not delve into the subgroups of foster care alums, such as those who identify as LGBTQ+, Black, Indigenous, and other Persons of Color (BIPOC), those who remain in foster care, nor those concurrently involved with the criminal legal system (ex: juvenile detention, adult incarceration, etc.), or those who receive Special Education services. It should be noted that some proportions of these subcategories are likely represented in the data obtained from research participants as these groups were not explicitly screened out. These subgroups experience greater marginalization and unique barriers. For example, black youth and low-income families are disproportionately represented in the foster care system (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021). Additionally, BIPOC youth and families receive subpar foster care services in the form of fewer family visits, decreased worker engagement, fewer care plans, and psychosocial assessments (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021). The pandemic created a spotlight on the racial inequities that exist in many United States institutions (hospitals, schools, etc.) and increased rates of xenophobia against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders as the origin of the virus became widely known (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2022b). It is

recommended that future research focus on these specific subpopulations of foster care alumni.

Significance

This study describes the experiences and perceptions of young adults with former ties to the foster care system who received COVID-19-related financial assistance through the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. Filling this knowledge gap informs policymakers and programs serving this population. Participants' first-hand accounts provide insights into receiving financial assistance during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. A review of the literature, outlined in Chapter 2, details the myriad difficulties encountered by young adults with foster care histories. These challenges have far-reaching implications on their educational attainment, job opportunities, financial stability, safe housing, and other social determinants of health (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2020).

This research has the potential for positive social change by giving a voice to a marginalized group. The participants had the opportunity to share any challenges and successes resulting from receiving financial assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants' lived experiences could inform the creators of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 of the benefits and shortcomings of this policy, how it was implemented, its outcomes, and reasons to reinstate it or enact similar policy measures.

Data from this study could also prove useful for program administrators serving young adults who are preparing to exit or have been emancipated from foster care.

Summary

Foster care exists to prevent child maltreatment; redress issues in struggling families that lead thereto; and provide safe placement alternatives for youth when deemed necessary (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). Unfortunately, out-of-home placement due to abuse and/or neglect happens to nearly 6% of children in America (Dvalishvili et al., 2024). Oftentimes, the trauma experienced in the birth families is compounded by abuse and neglect while in the care of state-appointed foster families, group homes, or residential facilities. For youth in foster care, removal from the birth family results in stressors of placement instability, changes in schools, broken familial bonds, lost community ties (Bedarian-Gardner et al., 2018), and social and cultural erasure (Anderson & Linares, 2012). These hardships can lead to maladaptive behaviors, emotional distress, and mental health challenges for youth involved in the foster care system (Bedarian-Gardner et al., 2018; Anderson & Linares, 2012). Without substantive redress, the challenges can have long-lasting impacts, especially as these youth transition into young adults.

Emerging adulthood is a difficult transition for most young adults. This phase of life is additionally complex for the tens of thousands of people who age out of foster care each year. Foster care alumni who reach the age of majority (18 or 21 depending on their state of residency) no longer qualify for the supportive services inherent in state care. As such, they must navigate this developmental period without adequate support which is

especially difficult during a global pandemic. To offset some of these challenges, the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 provided financial aid to people aged 18-26 that were either in foster care at that time or who had recently aged-out.

In this study, I explored the perceptions and experiences of the foster care alumni who received these funds. It is my hope to provide these young adults with an opportunity to give voice to their circumstances and to provide data to the policymakers and the administrators of public programs who serve this population.

Chapter 2 includes a literature review, detailed insights on the hardships foster care alumni face throughout emerging adulthood, and the relevant public policies and programs that support them.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

More than 20,000 young adults exit foster care each year in the United States. This exodus leaves them without a safety net and other supports that are critical for success in early adulthood. Those exiting foster care do poorly in comparison to their peers who never experienced out-of-home placement. Foster care alum experience challenges in education, relationships, employment, housing, mental and physical health, have more legal issues, and become parents earlier in life. According to Hernandez and Lee (2019), of the young adults exiting foster care, only 45% were deemed resilient. Nuñez et al. (2022) identified four assets of resilient young adults exiting foster care as having higher educational aspirations, good reading acumen, high emotional intelligence, and sound academic performance. For young adults who were not found to be resilient, 18% were classified as troubled and struggling; 22% had become parents and relied on public assistance; and the final 18% were incarcerated by age 21 (Hernandez & Lee, 2019). Häggman-Laitila et al. (2019) identified the needs of this group as: better independent living transitional plans for exiting state care; extending foster care and physical health services beyond the age of majority; relationship guidance and financial management education. Even with the assistance of state and federal programs and extended foster care, the outcomes for these young adults are worse than their peers who were never in foster care (Fernandez-Alcantara, 2019).

The onset of COVID-19, and the subsequent restrictions and closures, increased the hardships of foster care alumni across these life domains. A portion of the

Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 created a buffer, in the form of direct financial assistance, for young adults who were in or had recently exited foster care. This study explored the experiences and perceptions of young adults who received that aid.

In this chapter, I reviewed the literature that describes the typical outcomes for young adults exiting foster care and how COVID-19 increased the difficulty of this transition. This review also highlighted the challenges of leaving foster care across the following life domains: relationships, education, employment, housing, mental and physical health, early parenting, and legal issues. Finally, Chapter 2 details the interventions that bolster successful outcomes for young adults exiting care such as social networks, material support, independent living programs, and the public policies that aid this population.

Literature Search Strategy

To complete this literature review, I accessed the following databases: EBSCO, Emerald Insight, Political Science Complete, ProQuest Central, SAGE Journals, and the Google Scholar search engine. Additional information was garnered from relevant child welfare and governmental agency websites such as Child Welfare Information Gateway, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, the US Government Accountability Office, and the Office of the Administration for Children and Families. Lastly, I implored citation chaining to locate additional pertinent sources of information. The following keywords and search terms were used in varying combinations: Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, foster care, aging out, COVID-19, pandemic relief, and young adult.

Theoretical Foundation

In this study, I gathered insights, perspectives, and the lived experiences of young adults emancipated from foster care who received direct financial assistance during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic via the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. Inductive analysis was used to investigate the data gathered in this generic qualitative research design.

Grounded Theory, developed by Glasser and Strauss, is the theoretical foundation for this research. Grounded Theory is a qualitative research methodology used to uncover meanings from individuals' and groups' descriptions of a phenomenon using personal narratives and experiences. Receiving funding from the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 is the phenomenon explored in this study.

Literature Review

Each year more than 200,000 youth exit foster care (Administration for Children and Families, 2021). While many are returned to their families of origin or adopted, more than 25,000 reach the age of majority (typically age 18) and are discharged from state care (Williams-Mbengue, & McCann, 2015). These young adults are left without the various state-sponsored supports they had while in care (Youth.gov, n.d.), such as housing, food, clothing, health care, and guidance on their journey toward independence (Human Rights Watch, 2010). This review explores the challenges emancipated youth encounter across these life domains and how the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic created additional hardships.

Young Adults Exiting Foster Care

Research on the outcomes of young adults who experienced out-of-home placement dates as far back as 1924 with Sophie Van Senden Theis' book "How Foster Children Turn Out." Theis, a social work researcher for the New York State Children's Aid Association, used social indicators of success such as academic achievement, independence, employment and other to determine the level of social adjustment at age 18 or older (Adoption History Project, 2012). Using statistical and narrative data, Theis determined that the key to success in young adulthood for those who were placed in out-of-home care, hinged on their having a positive relationship with their caregivers (Hockett, 1924). As research on this population continues to evolve, social determinants of health continue to serve as the baseline in determining the feats and misfortunes of foster care alumni.

Young adults exiting foster care and transitioning into adulthood face a variety of challenges in education, employment, housing, early parenting, mental and physical health, relationships, and legal issues when compared to their peers who have no history of foster care involvement (Avery, 2010; Courtney, 2009; Courtney et al., 2010; Courtney & Hook, 2017; Yates & Grey, 2012; Reilly, 2003). For emancipating youth, the COVID-19 pandemic was a disruptive element in the transition into adulthood (Amechi, 2020; Appleton, 2020; Bendeck & Moore, 2022; Brisson, Wilson, Medina, Hughey, Chassman & Calhoun, 2022; Whitt-Woosley, Spanger & Elsinger, 2022).

Challenges of Leaving Foster Care

The transition into adulthood is defined by identity development, seeking independence, and developing complex, intimate partner relationships (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2019). Emerging adulthood is characterized by changes in living arrangements (ex: from parents' homes to college dorms or moving in with roommates or partners), beginning secondary education, training, or employment, and parenthood (Wood et al., 2018). Arnett (2004) describes this time as the age of instability, possibility, identity exploration, intense self-focus, and feeling neither adolescent nor adult (p.8). Successfully navigating these changes is complex and requires support from family and other positive adults. For the more than 20,000 young adults who aged out of foster care in 2020 (KidsCount.org, 2022), these safety nets often do not exist or are tenuous at best. Without help, it is less likely that these young adults will fare well in the domains identified as essential for success in adulthood: education, employment, mental and physical health, and relationships (Benson et al., 2004; Courtney et al., 2017; Scales et al., 2016; Schorr & Marchand, 2007), housing (Bendeck & Moore, 2022; Bowen et al., 2020), legal issues (Brisson et al., 2022; Courtney & Hook, 2017; Georgiades, 2005; Hernandez & Lee, 2019; Kerman et al., 2002; Mares, 2010) and early parenting (Courtney & Hook, 2017; Georgiades, 2005; Hernandez & Lee, 2019; Kerman et al., 2002; Mares, 2010; Schorr & Marchand, 2007).

Relationships

Healthy relationships create the foundation for social support through human and social capital (Bendeck & Moore, 2022). Establishing and maintaining healthy

relationships is difficult for former foster youth due to parental maltreatment, mistrust of others resulting from broken attachments, and multiple out-of-home placements (Courtney et al., 2020). Regarding intimate partners, youth with foster care involvement experience higher rates of dating violence than their non-care peers (Jonson-Reid, Scott, McMillen & Edmond, 2007).

Helping youth overcome their trauma history and form healthy attachments to caring adults should be included in their service plans (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019) to help expand the youth's social network. Foster care alumni identify that their primary social supports are derived from relationships with friends, siblings, and romantic partners (Courtney et al., 2020). Given the likelihood of these relationships to be same-age peers, foster care alumni are often deficient in the number of positive relationships with adults who could share knowledge and impart wisdom and self-efficacy skills from lived experience.

Having at least one caring adult can positively impact the life trajectory of those with foster care histories (Ahrens et al., 2011; American Psychological Association, 2009). Support from actively engaged adults increases graduation rates and decreases emotional distress (Collins et al., 2010). Research shows that young adults who age out without the support of at least one positive adult are at greater risk for housing instability, underperform in education, are un/underemployed, experience mental and behavioral challenges, and have little or no access to health care (Courtney & Huring, 2005; Youth.gov, n.d.) the consequences of which will be detailed in subsequent sections.

Pandemic regulations strained the tenuous relationships between youth in care and their biological families. In-person visits were canceled, and families often lacked the technology or high-speed internet access to meet virtually. Court closures disrupted reunification hearings, delaying permanency efforts (Pisani-Jacques, 2020).

Education

Educational outcomes for young people in care are worse than those of their non-care peers. According to the National Youth in Transition Database, 21 % of foster care alumni have no ‘educational certification’ (ex: GED, high school diploma, etc.), none had completed a bachelor’s degree or higher, only 4% held a vocational certificate, and 70% had completed high school or a GED (KidsCount.org, 2018). They graduate high school and enroll in college or secondary educational programs at much lower rates than their non-care peers. Of those who enroll in college, only 3% of former foster youth complete a 4-year degree (Courtney et al., 2010). In stark contrast, non-care youth complete 4-year degrees at nine times the rate and are six times more likely to achieve postsecondary education than those with foster care histories (Courtney et al., 2011). Many factors contribute to their underperformance in education. For young adults with foster care histories, common barriers to attending college include lack of funding, needing to work, childcare, and transportation (Courtney et al., 2010). Individuals in foster care change schools at three times the rate of their non-care peers, which widens educational gaps and increases emotional distress due to placement instability (Somers et al., 2020). In-care youth have higher rates of challenges and mental health needs, likely stemming from the trauma experienced in their birth homes and/or during their time spent in foster care.

These factors may overshadow their ability to learn. For the few foster care alumni who defy the odds and complete postsecondary education, their salary and employment rates remain lower than their non-care peers (Geiger & Beltran, 2017).

While the pandemic has been disruptive for all students, its impact on youth in care is arguably broader and more enduring (Collins & Baldiga, 2020). In California, a study of 598 young adults who had experienced foster care found that 14% had dropped out of school due to the pandemic (John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2021). The shelter-in-place and virtual learning mandates issued because of COVID-19 created additional barriers for learners. Students in rural areas often lacked internet connectivity or had dial-up-modems incompatible with video telephony services (ex: Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, etc.) used by school districts to facilitate virtual learning in real-time. Beyond the internet, some even lacked computers, iPads, or other technology to engage in virtual learning (Alliance for Children's Rights, 2020). For those living in college dorms at the onset of the pandemic, locating housing was challenging when schools across the US closed campuses to slow the spread of the Coronavirus. In-care youth were found to participate in distance learning less frequently and for shorter periods than their non-care peers (Blake et al., 2020). These educational barriers lead to academic underperformance and limit future employment opportunities.

Employment

Foster care alums are unemployed and underemployed at higher rates when compared to youth without foster care involvement. Courtney et al. (2010) found that 52% of former foster youth were employed between ages 23-24 and earned \$4.00 less per

hour than same-age peers (of whom 76 % were employed) with no history of foster care involvement.

These employment barriers contribute to higher poverty rates and food insecurity and complicate other issues, such as obtaining stable and affordable housing. One youth described, “I had to give up my apartment due to lack of employment, so now I am staying with a friend’s family. I now have no source of income and no home” (Ruff & Linville, 2021). The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated these already abysmal outcomes. One in four young adults with foster care involvement noted pandemic-related job loss (John Button Advocates for Youth, 2021). A national poll of 18-24-year-old current and foster care alums found that 65 % lost employment or had their hours decreased due to the pandemic (Foster Club, 2020). For these young adults whose employment was terminated or significantly reduced due to the pandemic, 50 % did not receive unemployment benefits. Unemployment and underemployment create financial instability, leading to housing insecurity or homelessness.

Housing

Various studies have shown that 11% to 36% of foster care alumni experience homelessness at some point during their transition into adulthood (Courtney et al., 2010; Dion, 2015; Fryar et al., 2017). Dion et al. (2014) cite the following reasons for public housing authorities not serving youth: lack of referrals from foster care agencies (70%), preference for families, lack of supportive services youth would need to remain stably housed, and using alternative means to address the needs of youth.

There is a significant overlap between homelessness and youth who run away from their foster care placement. It is estimated that anywhere between 15% and 46% of youth in care have run away at least once, and many reported leaving on multiple occasions (Latzman et al., 2019). Runaway status increases the youth's vulnerability to labor trafficking, sexual exploitation (Latzman et al., 2019), delinquent behavior (Courtney et al., 2005), and truancy (Crosland & Dunlap, 2015).

COVID-19 restrictions increased housing instability for young adults with foster care histories. For foster care alumni, housing instability increased from 39% pre-pandemic to 68% (John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2021). Many of these individuals lost placements as foster families closed their homes or refused to accept new youth into their homes; community members became unwilling to allow for couch-surfing; and college campuses closed dormitories and other student housing (Ruedas-Garcia et al., 2020).

Mental and Physical Health

In addition to the typical stressors of transitioning towards independence and adulthood, these experiences are compounded for young adults with a history of foster care. They have higher occurrences of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (Liming et al., 2021; Rebbe et al., 2017). According to the Centers for Disease Control, ACEs are traumatic experiences in childhood, the effects of which are linked to long-term challenges such as substance abuse, mental health concerns, and chronic physical problems – all of which can negatively impact education and employability (2021). For young adults in and exiting foster care, the physical and sexual abuse and neglect

experienced in their birth families, which led to their placement into state care (Bendeck & Moore, 2020), are traumatic and often lead to higher ACEs scores for this population in comparison to their non-care peers. Foster care alumni have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at twice the rate of US war veterans (Pecora, Kessler, Williams, O'Brien, Downs, English, White, Hiripi, Roller White, Wiggins, & Holmes, 2005).

Stay-in-place orders issued during the pandemic lessened access to mental and physical health care services. For foster care alums, 52 % reported that COVID-19 negatively impacted their physical and psychological health, and 56 % reported experiencing anxiety and depression at clinically significant levels (Greeson et al., 2020). According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, those in the foster care system experienced loneliness and isolation at intensified rates during the pandemic due to increased uncertainty and disruptions (2022a). These young adults often worked jobs classified as “essential” during the pandemic and were subsequently more physically exposed to the public and the Coronavirus. At home, they often lacked masks and other resources to limit the spread of the virus to their families (Foster Advocates, 2020; Ruff et al., 2022)

Early Parenting

In comparison to their non-care peers, young adults with a history in foster care become parents at an earlier age, 61% of males and 77% of females experience multiple pregnancies, 37% and 66%, respectively, have difficulty navigating the world as parents (Courtney et al., 2010). New parents often rely on advice and support from their parents. Unfortunately, this is true for youth with a history of foster care. Research has established

that 90% of foster care alumni often reconnect with their birth families after exiting care (Collins et al., 2010). Nearly 73% of alumni report receiving parenting guidance from their birth parents, from whose care they were removed (Courtney et al., 2010). The irony of young adults receiving parenting information from the very parents whose care they were removed from cannot be overstated, and the deleterious impact should not be overlooked. COVID-19 created additional barriers for foster care alums who are parents. They experienced disruptions in receiving public services, increased mental health struggles, educational challenges, and un/underemployment, which increased financial hardships (Shpiegel et al., 2022).

Legal Issues

Youth with foster care involvement are incarcerated at earlier ages, for more extended periods, more chronically, and for more violent crimes than their non-care peers (Yang et al., 2021; Courtney et al., 2020). It is often assumed that youth enter the child welfare system because they exhibit delinquent behaviors. The harsh reality is that their mental and behavioral health needs stem from traumatic events in their family of origin. These adverse childhood experiences often go unaddressed, resulting in maladaptive behaviors and coping mechanisms that usually lead to involvement in the criminal legal system (Crawford et al., 2018). Criminal history complicates the transition into adulthood. Depending on the offense, one may be barred from receiving the financial aid often required to attend college or denied employment opportunities, which limits earning potential.

The literature review outlines a bleak outlook on the probability of success for those with foster care histories. Though these youth's hardships are widespread and varied, alumni are not without hope and support. Mitigating factors such as a healthy relationship with at least one positive adult, material support, independent living programs, and public policy initiatives all help bolster foster care alumni's chances of success.

Interventions

Although their individual needs vary, foster care alums identified three areas of support essential for their success in young adulthood: moral and ethical advice, material needs, and healthy relationships (Brisson et al., 2022). These needs are often met through social networks, independent living programs, and public policies.

Social Networks

Research has clearly established the importance of supportive social networks for young adults emancipating from foster care (Ahrens et al., 2011; Greeson et al., 2015; Amechi, 2020). Social networks are essential for young adults who have exited foster care because they often lack the family support networks that most young adults rely on during the transition to adulthood. Best & Blakeslee (2020) characterize strong relational ties as having trust, advocacy, honesty, common interests, and genuine care. Because of fraught familial relationships, foster care alumni often rely on mentors, coaches, case workers, and independent living coordinators in their decision-making process (shared deliberation) to establish goals and determine plans for exiting care (Appleton, 2020). Hung & Appleton (2016) found that foster care alumni often struggle with planning as

they a) have lacked opportunities for self-determination due to the state workers making decisions on their behalf and b) having experienced too many disappointments with changes beyond their control such as placement and school changes.

For emancipating youth, building and maintaining social connections is critical to achieving positive outcomes in employment, education, and mental health and decreases the likelihood of adverse outcomes during this life stage. Blakeslee and Keller (2018) demonstrate that social networks can be evaluated and how using this data could bolster deficits in social networks, curate plans for those with socio-emotional needs, improve service provision, and buffer the transition into adulthood for foster care alumni. This youth-centered approach is necessary given the diverse needs of emancipating youth (Adams et al., 2021). Those with broader networks can leverage that social support in various ways, such as navigating admission into college and finding campus-based support (Skobba et al., 2018), providing emotional support and encouragement, practical advice on finding and maintaining employment, assistance with transportation or housing, and companionship and social engagement. Social networks can also create opportunities for young adults to develop and achieve their goals. In addition to positively impacting areas of education, employment, and mental health, social networks often have the added benefit of providing necessary in-kind and material support.

Material Support

Material support is important for young adults exiting the foster care system because many of them lack the financial resources and material possessions that most young adults take for granted. Financial resources (Ruff et al., 2022) and material support

(Brisson et al., 2020), such as furniture, diapers, kitchenware, and a car or bus pass, were the youth's most frequently identified needs when exiting care. Without adequate material resources, foster care alumni may have difficulty meeting their basic needs. Beyond money, other tangible resource deficits included childcare, transportation, and technology for virtual instruction during the “shelter in place” orders issued to curb the spread of the Coronavirus (Ruff et al., 2022; Sciamanna, 2020).

Material support can make a significant difference in foster care alumni’s lives, providing them with the resources and opportunities to transition into adulthood. For example, cash assistance and housing vouchers can help cover living expenses, job training, and educational opportunities. Additionally, material support can help these emerging adults become more financially stable, reduce poverty-related stressors, aid their resilience, and lead to positive gains in other areas of their lives. Typical support sources for foster care alum include state care agencies, religious, non-profit, community organizations, and independent living programs.

Independent Living Programs

Independent living programs (ILPs), as the name suggests, exist to equip teens and young adults with the skills necessary to live independently once they age out of foster care. Career exploration, budgeting, family support, housing, higher education and employment support, mentorship, mental health and substance abuse treatment are just a few examples of programming offered by ILPs (Mares, 2010). Not all states have independent living programs, and not all ILPs provide all these services. The importance of these services lies in the fact that foster care alums often lack the support networks that

their non-care peers often rely on during this transitional stage of life. ILPs support these young adults to help them gain and maintain employment, housing, and broader social networks.

Regarding employment, ILPs can provide practice interviews, resume building, job training and placement assistance to help young adults develop skills employers value. ILPs can offer assistance with housing, which can be especially challenging considering the high cost of living and increased likelihood of homelessness for young adults exiting care. In addition to practical support, ILPs can provide participants with a sense of community for young adults who may otherwise struggle to build healthy relationships. Peer support, adult mentorship, and the social events offered by independent living programs provide crucial emotional support for these emerging adults. By supporting career development, stable housing, and community connections, ILPs can significantly impact the lives of youth transitioning into early adulthood.

As previously noted, not all US states operate ILPs, and each state agency decides its programming, which can limit the number and types of life skill training emancipating youth can access. Lack of access is not the only barrier to these programs. In a study of emancipated youth in Ohio, Mares (2010) found that only 1 in 5 young adults return to their state agency to receive ILP assistance citing a desire to be independent, unwillingness to be subject to the agency's rules, and being unaware of potential resources as reasons for not re-engaging. Georgiades (2005) found other reasons for nonparticipation in ILPs included lack of referral, disinterest, unspecified hardships, and incarceration. Despite the lack of accessibility and a general bias against ILP

participation, care leavers voiced optimism about successfully transitioning into emerging adulthood (Berzin et al., 2014). They felt equipped with skills necessary for daily living (Jones, 2014), adequate support networks, and sufficient coping skills to address life's stressors (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2019). In contrast to these young adults' hopeful inclination, research indicates increased opportunities for success with longer involvement in care programs and engagement in post-emancipation services (Courtney & Dworksy, 2006). Bowen et al. (2020) classify this cognitive dissonance as "dreaming," which they define as having educational or career goals with neither established plans nor knowledge of resources needed to accomplish them.

Youth who choose to engage in ILPs report satisfaction with the help they receive in education, information and referral services, and other basic needs (Jones, 2014). The benefits of independent living programs would not be seen were it not for their creation and funding via various federal public policies.

Public Policies

Several federal policies impact teens and young adults in foster care to improve their safety, well-being, and successful transition to adulthood. The four policies most relevant to this current study include the following:

1. Title IV-E of the Social Security Act of 1980 provided federal funding to state and tribal child welfare agencies caring for youth in foster care. This funding increased the number of children in care and expanded the range of available programs and services (Courtney, 2009). Children in foster care were also ensured medical and financial support through Title IV-E funding. This increase in

support helped to reduce some disparities within the foster care system by providing funds to support children of color and youth with disabilities and to recruit and retain foster parents. In 1986, the Independent Living Initiative mandated states to create ILPs to equip aging youth with practical daily life skills, such as budgeting, time management, cooking, housekeeping, and the like (Jones, 2014). After years of ineffectiveness, the Title IV-E IL Program was replaced by The Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) of 1999.

2. The Foster Care Independence Act provided various services and support to help young adults transition from state care into independent living. These programs included educational and employment training, housing assistance, mental health counseling, access to health care, and financial literacy skills. FCIA also established the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (Chafee Program), which provides states with federal grant money to support these transitional youth and provides incentives to remain in foster care until age 21 if they so choose (Mares, 2010; Hernandez & Lee, 2019). The Chafee Program funds multiple services, including employment and education assistance, counseling, and independent living skills. The program also encourages states to develop innovative approaches to helping young adults successfully transition into adulthood with supportive services such as mentoring and financial literacy. It should be noted that Chafee funds for college costs have gradually decreased since the 2001-2002 school year (Amechi, 2020). The Foster Care Independence Act was amended in 2002, which further expanded the Chafee Program by

creating Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) for eligible foster youth pursuing higher education or training (Fernandes-Alcantra, 2019; Okpych, 2015). Another component of the FCIA was establishing a standardized federal reporting protocol called The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) (Okpych, 2015). The NYTD was developed to track the national outcomes of foster care alumni and the effectiveness of state-run independent living programs (Administration for Children and Families, 2020; Fernandes-Alcantra, 2019).

3. The FCIA changed and became known as the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (FCSIA) in 2008. It amalgamates the Social Security Act Title IV parts B and E. It was intended to improve outcomes for foster care alumni (Courtney, 2009). FCSIA increased funding for adoption and guardianship; mandated the development of permanency plans for youth in care; required states to provide services for young adults aging out of foster care; and provided incentives for states to increase the number of foster care placements with relatives; and expanded the provision of post-adoption supports (Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, 2008). The FCSIA mandated states to provide medical services to emancipated youth through age 26 (Youth.gov, n.d.). It also funds research and training and provides technical assistance to child welfare organizations (Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, 2008).
4. Lastly, the federal policy that impacted young adults during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic is the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. The

bipartisan law contains the Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act (H.R.7947), which addresses the needs of youth and families involved in foster care and funds for the state agencies that exist to serve them (Children's Defense Fund, 2021). The Act increased funding for the Chafee Program (including the Education and Training Vouchers); expanded the provision of service to include those who had recently exited foster care if they wanted to re-enter; temporarily removed the employment and education requirements for those unable to attend due to pandemic restrictions and closures; raised the age of eligibility to 27 for that fiscal year; and, eliminated the 30% cap on housing assistance (Children's Defense Fund, 2021).

These four federal policies aim to provide former in-care youth with more support and resources as they mature as emerging adults. The societal cost of failing to do so is great. For example, Hamilton County, Ohio, estimated the expense of supporting aged-out youth through age 26 totaled \$17.7 million yearly (University of Cincinnati's Economic Center & Hamilton County Job and Family Services, 2017). These federal policies allow for support in crucial areas of education, housing, and employment which can help reduce negative outcomes in other areas. As the needs of those in foster care change, federal policies and state-level initiatives must also adapt to create a framework for supporting and improving the lives of teens and young adults as they transition into early adulthood.

Summary

Emerging adulthood is characterized by gaining independence, seeking long-term intimate partner relationships, pursuing vocational training and/or secondary education, and considering becoming parents. For young adults aging out of foster care, these goals are exponentially more difficult to achieve due to their varied adverse childhood experiences, trauma, mistrust of adults, and lack of a support network. These deficits result in few healthy relationships, lack of education, employment challenges, unstable housing, poor mental and physical health, early parenting, and criminal system involvement. The poor outcomes experienced by foster care alums have far-reaching consequences for others in society. Fortunately, having a broad social network replete with human capital, material and financial support, independent living programs, and various federal policies exist to bolster the likelihood of success for teens and young adults as they enter adulthood.

The following chapter outlines the research design and why it was selected, my role as a researcher, the methodology, and the data analysis plan. Ethical considerations and issues of trustworthiness will also be discussed.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

In this qualitative study, I explored the perceptions and lived experiences of foster care alums (ages 18-26) who received pandemic relief money from the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. The intent was to gather data to inform policymakers and administrators of public services on the impact of providing financial aid to this vulnerable population, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Foster care alumni encounter various barriers that complicate the transition into emerging adulthood. These young adults often underperform academically, are un/underemployed, experience housing instability, have a limited social-relational network on whom they can rely, become parents earlier, and face legal, mental, and physical health challenges at greater rates than their peers who have not experienced out-of-home placement. This study addressed the gap in the literature that focuses on the lived experiences and perceptions of 18-26-year-olds who received financial assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic from the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. In this chapter, I outline the research design and why it was selected, my role as a researcher, the methodology, and the data analysis plan. Ethical considerations and issues of trustworthiness will also be discussed.

Research Design and Rationale

This qualitative research focused on answering the following question:

What were the experiences and perceptions of 18-26-year-olds with foster care histories who received funds via the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Understanding the impacts of this legislation could inform its policymakers, service providers, and others invested in the outcomes of these emerging adults. I gathered via semi-structured, one-on-one, in-depth interviews conducted via Zoom videoconferencing software.

Role of the Researcher

As a researcher, I set aside my preconceptions, assumptions, and biases and self-assess my interest in the subject matter to approach the phenomenon with an open mind. My interest in this research stems from my professional experience as a licensed social worker in child welfare, a decade of serving youth as a foster parent, and as an adoptive parent of seven former foster youth. I used reflective journaling throughout this research to mitigate bias and document the data collection and analysis processes. Jasper (2005) notes that reflective journaling in qualitative research aids in critical thinking and creativity and logs the research process. A dissertation committee also oversaw this research. Walden University's Internal Review Board reviewed, assessed, and approved ethical considerations. To avoid any conflict of interest, I did not use participants I knew.

Methodology

I explored the perceptions and experiences of foster care alumni aged 18-26 who received financial aid via the Consolidated Appropriations Act (CAA) of 2021. I used criterion sampling to identify research participants. According to Patton (1995), criterion sampling is particularly useful in providing insights into systemic weaknesses and gathering in-depth information for qualitative analysis (p.117). The qualifications to receive the CAA funding were commensurate with this study, with one exception.

Although individuals still in foster care were eligible for the CAA funds, I excluded them from this research as they are a particularly vulnerable group. To garner participation, this researcher sent an Invitational Email (Appendix B) containing a Recruitment Flyer (Appendix A) and Consent Form (Appendix C) to each Independent Living Program (ILP) and Educational Training Voucher (ETV) Coordinator throughout the United States as they were responsible for issuing CAA funds to eligible individuals. Each ILP and ETV was asked to forward all information so interested individuals could contact this researcher directly.

While no predetermined number of participants is required for qualitative studies, gathering enough data to reach saturation is necessary. Data saturation exists when there is redundancy in the information (Vasilieou, et. al, 2018). Thirteen participants were interviewed, which resulted in data saturation.

Instrumentation

I created the Interview Guide/Questionnaire (Appendix E). It was validated using peer review. Data collection included semi-structured in-depth interviews held via Zoom software to gather information-rich responses from the young adults who received pandemic-related financial assistance via the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021.

Data Collection

Qualitative research aims to generate data-rich descriptions of participants' experiences and the meanings they attach to them. To gather this data, I held virtual semi-structured interviews with each participant. I audio-recorded, transcribed each interview.

Each participant received a copy of their transcript to review for accuracy, which allowed for member checking.

Data Analysis Plan

I used Cobin and Strauss' (1990) process and LiGre software to analyze the data. This entailed reading and reviewing audio recordings and transcriptions of the participant interviews line-by-line to identify codes, themes, and categories. Data description involved identifying essential elements and recurring themes. Organizing the data into meaningful categories preceded data interpretation. Interpreting and exploring the data's meaning and the categories' relationships was next. The final step in this process was data synthesis. This included developing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon by synthesizing the data, categories, and interpretations into a meaningful whole. I journaled throughout the data analysis process to identify preconceptions to avoid influencing the data. Other details of the data analysis process are discussed in depth in Chapter 4, Data Collection and Data Analysis sections.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Ensuring trustworthiness in research is essential. Trustworthiness refers to the reliability, validity, and authenticity of research findings, which includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. An explanation of these four traits of trustworthiness and how each was addressed in this study is detailed in this section.

Qualitative research involves collecting data from participants regarding their perceptions and subjective experiences. The credibility of the study then hinges on the authenticity of participant responses. To ensure credibility in this research, I provided

each participant with a transcription of their interview to double-check for accuracy, a process known as member checking (Creswell, 2009). I conducted a constant comparison between my research data and findings from the literature review, revealing similar results. To mitigate personal bias, the researcher engaged in reflexive journaling throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Transferability is another component of the trustworthiness of research. It refers to the ability to generalize findings from a specific context to similar situations. Qualitative research is context-specific, so the transferability of findings is not always guaranteed. Assessing the broader applicability of this study's findings requires consideration of the sampling strategy, research setting, theoretical framework, and the methods of data collection and analysis employed. This researcher provided a detailed description of the study's contextualization and information on the participants to help readers determine if the findings are transferable.

Thirdly, dependability refers to the stability and consistency of research findings over time. This can be attained by maintaining a detailed audit trail documenting the research process, using established data collection techniques, and adhering to research protocol. As previously mentioned, I employed the use of reflective journaling, in part as an audit trail, and Corbin and Strauss' (1990) data analysis protocols for qualitative research.

The fourth and final component of trustworthiness is confirmability. Confirmability refers to the objectivity of research findings that are free of researcher

bias. To help ensure the confirmability of this research, reflexive journaling, member checking, and constant comparison with similar data sources were employed.

Ethical Procedures

This researcher completed training on ethical principles of research with the Collaborative Institute Training Initiative in preparation for this study. Before contacting participants, this researcher obtained Internal Review Board (IRB) approval for the study. Participation in this study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained. No identifying information was collected or included in this study. For privacy during each interview, the researcher and each participant were in an isolated room. Participants' videos remained off for the sake of confidentiality. Each respondent was assigned an alphanumeric identifier in place of their name. All research data will be stored on a password-protected laptop, maintained for five years (then destroyed), and only shared with approved Walden Staff (IRB and committee chairs to this specific study).

Summary

I explored the perceptions and lived experiences of foster care alumni aged 18-26 who received financial assistance via the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. Chapter 3 has provided the rationale for research design, details of the methodology, and measures used to ensure the study was ethically conducted. I implemented qualitative methods with Corbin and Strauss' grounded theory and methodology for qualitative data collection and analysis in this research. Trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were discussed. Lastly, ethical considerations of voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality were mentioned.

Chapter 4 includes data collection and analysis processes and the research findings.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This chapter includes a comprehensive overview of the research process, including the setting, participants, data collection methods, analysis procedures, evidence of trustworthiness, and key findings. The purpose of this qualitative research was to understand how receiving financial assistance during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, via the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, impacted young adults with foster care histories. Using grounded theory, I gathered data from 13 semi-structured interviews (conducted via Zoom) with foster care alumni who had received funding from The Act. The participants provided first-hand accounts of the effect of these funds. Inductive and systematic analysis was used to interpret the data. To enhance credibility, I employed multiple strategies to establish trustworthiness, ultimately leading to meaningful and well-supported results that address the study's research question.

Setting

The Consolidated Appropriations Act (CAA) of 2021 provided financial assistance for youth in foster care from its enactment in January through September 30, 2021. Given that several years have passed and the tumultuousness of that time, some participants could not recall specifics of their experiences. Employee turnover and the transient nature of foster care alumni could have impacted the response rate and, therefore, the findings.

Demographics

I intentionally omitted most demographic information from this study for three reasons. Firstly, neither race, gender, ethnicity, income, nor location is essential in answering the research question. I included participant age as the only demographic information necessary to determine eligibility for pandemic relief. Those eligible to receive CAA funds were between 18 and 26 years of age and were in (or had recently left) foster care. As such, these were the parameters used to identify research participants, with one caveat. Due to perceived or actual coercion, those still in state care were excluded from participation. Secondly, I excluded demographic information to enhance participants' privacy and not compromise anonymity in this small sample size. Lastly, by excluding demographic information, I focused this study on generalizable themes rather than individual identifiers..

Data Collection

I conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews with participants who were aged 18 to 26 when they received assistance through the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020. Because participants were recruited from across the United States, all interviews were held via Zoom videoconference software. Doing so accommodated distance, privacy (as participants' video was turned off), recording, and audio transcription via closed captioning. I conducted all interviews using the Interview Guide/Questionnaire (Appendix E). Each lasted less than 45 minutes and was held at various dates and times from 7/10/2024 through 7/16/2024. There were no deviations in the collection process outlined in Chapter 3.

One potential volunteer had overlooked the pre-screening qualification prohibiting people in foster care from participating in this research. I noted this exclusion was on the Recruitment Flyer, Consent Form, and Zoom meeting invitation. I caught this possible oversight by adhering to the Interview Guide – the first three steps required a researcher introduction, confirmation that the participant received and understood the Consent Form, and was no longer in state care. Once that individual had admitted to ongoing receipt of foster care services, this researcher explained their ineligibility and ended the meeting. This individual would have been the 14th participant; however, I collected no data due to ethical considerations.

Data Analysis

To complete data analysis, I used LiGre software to store, organize, code, and analyze data. Each transcript was uploaded into the software. I implemented Strauss and Corbin's (1990) protocols for data collection and analysis (a largely simultaneous process). It began with line-by-line or open coding. This served the dual purpose of ensuring that the Zoom transcription matched the audio file and organizing the data into meaningful codes. My line-by-line coding highlighted 273 text fragments from the participants' transcripts. I organized these fragments into 51 initial codes (called "leaves" in LiGre software). While analyzing the initial codes, 12 themes (or "Branches") emerged. These themes included the impact in the following life domains: employment, education, housing, relationships, parenting, support, physical health, mental health, financial stability, feedback on the process of receiving financial assistance through the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, the amount received, and recommendations.

Finally, I used selective coding to the following categories (or Roots): Pandemic Challenges, Funding Impact, and Resilience Factors/Recommendations. The results of the data analysis will be discussed in detail below, but first, the trustworthiness of the findings will be explained.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Ensuring the trustworthiness of research is crucial, as it validates the findings. I established credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability for this study. Credibility refers to the accuracy of the research findings. I used a constant comparison of the data in this research to the outcomes of sources in the literature review, and the results were similar. I also used member checking. Each participant received a copy of their interview transcription and initial coding to review and affirm the findings. To combat personal bias, this researcher implemented reflexive journaling throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Transferability, or the application of findings to a general context, is not always attainable in qualitative studies because it is, by nature, context-specific. To determine if the findings in this study are more broadly applicable, one must consider the sampling strategy, setting, research theory and framework, data collection, and analysis methods used herein.

I ensured dependability by using standard qualitative research protocols and documenting my process to preserve the stability of findings over time. Glasser and Strauss' grounded theory was used to frame this study to ensure dependability. Strauss and Corbin's (1990) data collection and analysis protocols were implemented. I increased

the dependability of this study by conducting member checking, maintaining reflexive journaling, and continually comparing it to existing data.

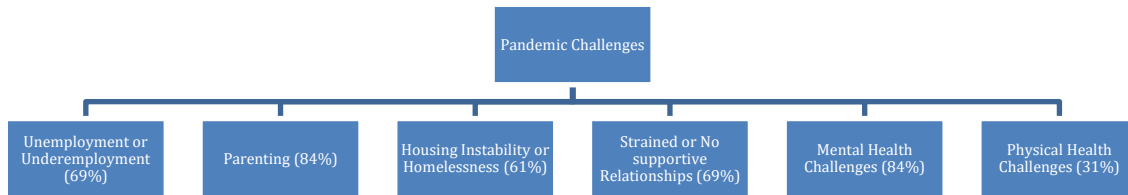
I sought to achieve confirmability by ensuring the results were free from bias by using reflexive journaling, member checking, and constant comparison to similar data sources. The next section outlines the research results.

Results

I explored the experiences and perceptions of young adults with foster care histories who received cash assistance via the Consolidated Appropriations Act (CAA) of 2021. I found that my data correlate with similar research on how the COVID-19 pandemic and related shelter-in-place orders affected various life domains for young adults. I describe in the following subsections the impact of COVID-19 and the subsequent mandates on youth in care in the areas of employment, parenting, housing instability, relationships, mental health, and physical health challenges. I created Figure 1 to outline the specific challenges affecting these young adults.

Figure 1

Pandemic Challenges



Pandemic Challenges

Participants reported difficulties in employment, education, living arrangements, relationships, parenting, mental, and physical health. During the 13 interviews, 69% reported decreased work hours or job loss. Every participant reported receiving education at the onset of the pandemic. While this is an uncommon outcome for foster care alumni, school enrollment or employment were stipulations for receiving CAA funding.

Their housing arrangements varied from placements in family foster homes, group care facilities, independent living placements, or non-government-funded homes or apartments. Housing instability (changes in placement) was a factor for 46.2% of participants. Evictions and homelessness were experienced by 15.4% of these young adults.

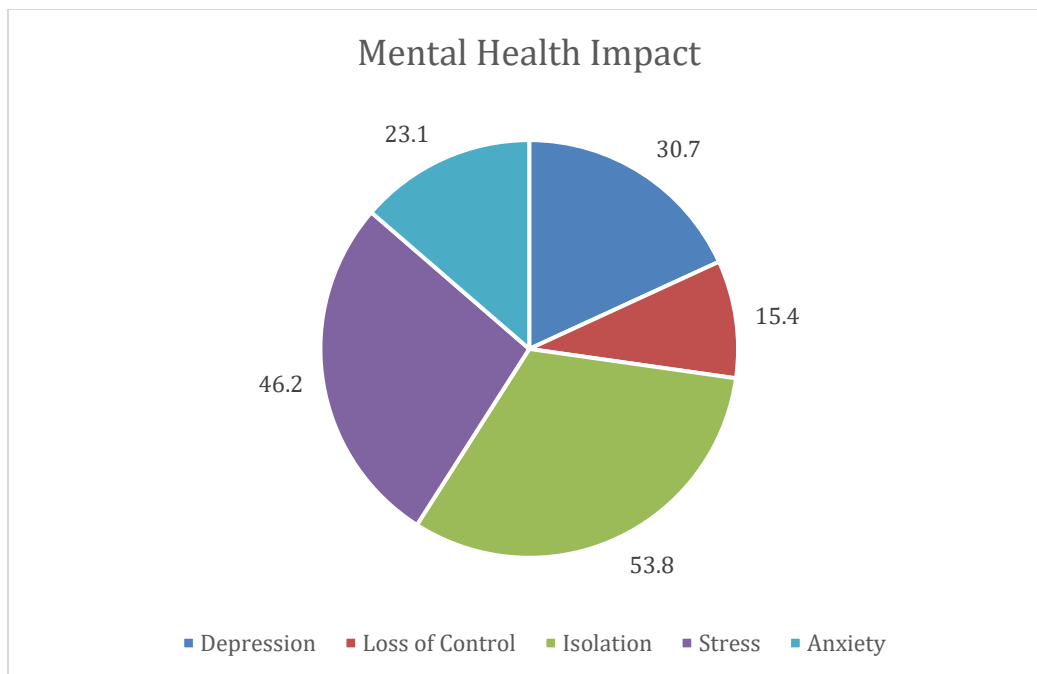
The outcomes of relationships varied: 23.1% were single or had strained intimate partner relationships, 23.1% reported being unable to identify a supportive relationship, and the remaining 53.8% found support through various combinations of their social worker, family (foster, adoptive, or biological), and spouse/partner. Parenting was a factor for all but two participants. Only 15.4% reported they did not have any children or dependents. Just under half of the young adults reported becoming first-time parents during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Obtaining childcare was a difficulty for 23.1% of these parents.

Three participants reported no mental health challenges throughout the pandemic. For those who did, their symptoms included: Anxiety (23.1%), Stress (46.2%), Isolation (53.8%), Loss of control (15.4%), and Depression (30.7%). These totals exceed 100%

because some participants reported experiencing multiple mental health complaints during that time.

Figure 2

Mental Health Impact



Health concerns were reported by 30.8 % (including pregnancies). Amid these challenges, youth were provided with financial assistance from the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. The results of this policy intervention are detailed below.

Funding Impact

Receiving financial assistance via the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 created temporary financial stability for these young adults. Each participant reported using the funds in a variety of ways such as paying bills (84.6%), transportation including

vehicle purchase, insurance, or repairs (53.8%), savings (46.2%), vacation (15.4%), housing (30.8%), education (53.8%), providing for others (61.5%), and vacation (15.4%).

In total, (86.4%) of participants found that the process of receiving the CAA funds was seamless, while (15.4%) reported it was cumbersome. Each participant received different funding amounts. Some could not recall the amount, while others reported receiving more than \$5,000.

Table 1

Funding Amount Received

Participants	Amount Received
P7 & P11	*Could not recall
P2	\$100 - \$999
P5, P6, P12, P13	\$1,000 - \$2,999
P3 & P9	\$3,000 - \$4,999
P1, P4, P8, P10	\$5,000+

Resilience Factors and Recommendations

Participants made several recommendations based on their self-reported benefits of services and the hardships they experienced. The top three suggestions included: remaining connected to case managers and other foster care alumni for information and support (79.9%); ongoing financial assistance for foster care alumni; and increased response and engagement from case workers (46.2% each). The following is a first-hand

account of why these three suggestions prove essential. According to Participant 9 (2024):

I just want case workers and like case managers and all that, to actually stand on what they say and really advocate for kids who exit. I even reached out to my case manager and never heard back from her, and I was contacting her for like, I think, like three months after the fact, because within the first month of me exiting foster care, I immediately became homeless.

Unfortunately, homelessness at an earlier age and for longer periods is common for those with a history of foster care involvement. The 13 participants made a total of 10 recommendations listed below, ranked by vote count, highest to lowest (also displayed in Table 2):

1. Remain connected.
2. Ongoing Financial Assistance.
3. Increased levels of case worker contact and engagement.
4. Better advertising of resources available to foster care alumni.
5. Increased access to mental health treatment.
6. Better preparation to live independently before being discharged from foster care.
7. Improved employment assistance.
8. More clarification on which services are available to foster care alumni.
9. Better public disaster relief preparedness and response.
10. Streamlined access to resources.

Table 2*Participant Recommendations*

Participant	Ongoing financial assistance	Remain Connected	Better Advertising for Resources	Eligibility Clarification	Employment Assistance	Therapy	Case Worker Engagement	Better Life Skill Preparation	Ease of Access to Resources	Better Disaster Relief Preparation
P1		X		X						
P2	X	X				X			X	X
P3	X	X	X							
P4										
P5		X	X				X			
P6	X	X				X	X	X		
P7		X			X					
P8		X					X			
P9	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
P10	X	X					X	X		
P11			X							
P12	X	X				X			X	X
P13							X			

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic and related closures negatively impacted young adults with foster care histories in the following areas: employment, education, housing, relationships, parenting, mental well-being, and physical health. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 served as a reprieve in that it allowed these young adults to pay their bills, maintain transportation, create or increase their savings, provide financial assistance to household members, family, and friends, cover tuition expenses, maintain housing, and even take vacations. The majority reported that the process of receiving these funds was relatively easy. Amounts received varied from \$100 - \$5,000 or more.

Participants shared that their relationships with case managers, family (however defined), and partners were the most impactful resilience factors. Several recommendations were made that policymakers and service providers should consider. Chief among them are remaining connected to service providers and other foster care alumni for information and support; enhancing caseworker engagement to include more follow-up and involvement; and, ongoing financial assistance. The next chapter will contain a discussion, conclusion, and recommendations based on the research findings.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

I used generic qualitative research with grounded theory to investigate the perceptions and lived experiences of foster care alums who received pandemic relief from the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. The aim was to gather data to inform policymakers and administrators of public services on the impact of providing financial aid to this vulnerable population, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. I found that the data revealed adverse effects on their employment, education, housing, relationships, parenting, mental, and physical health. The information highlighted the benefits and limitations of receiving financial assistance via the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. Lastly, considerations were noted for future pandemic response.

Interpretation of the Findings

As noted in Chapter 4, data describe the challenges faced by foster care alumni during the COVID-19 pandemic and how receiving financial assistance temporarily buffered some of the negative effects in the various life domains.

Employment

Unemployment or underemployment was a factor in each of the respondents' lives. "It was really hard to get a job during COVID." (Respondent 9, 2024). "I couldn't work or anything because of the COVID." (Respondent 7, 2024). "[My] hours ended up being cut at work. (Respondent 1, 2024). The inability to earn income could have resulted in homelessness for these individuals had the government funding not been available. In addition to housing instability, the loss of income can make it more difficult to afford

necessities like food, transportation costs, and healthcare. The stress of unemployment can negatively impact mental health due to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Unemployment and underemployment can strain relationships and cause social isolation. There is also an impact on the local economy through decreased purchasing power and higher demand for social services.

Education

While not all respondents were employed during the pandemic, 100% reported academic involvement. Participants were completing various academic milestones. Three noted high school graduation and going on to enroll in college. Along with these new college freshmen, there was a nursing major, a welding apprentice, and someone completing a master's program (others did not disclose these specifics). The foster care alumni in this study fared better than their peers. No one reported school closures that would have created the education gaps found by Somers et al. (2020). These young adults did not experience the 14% dropout rate (John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2021). As Blake et al. (2020) found, youth reported that distance learning was difficult. "But I did struggle for a bit, I'm not going to lie, to school because it went online. And I'm a person that [must] have hands-on. I like being hands-on (Respondent 10, 2024). Overall, the foster care alumni in this study were shielded from the adverse impact of educational interruptions that their cohorts underwent.

Housing

Placement changes and homelessness are common experiences for young adults with foster care histories (Dworsky et al., 2013). This study confirms these findings in

that 24% of respondents noted housing instability. “I was just settling into my apartment out of the shelter” (Respondent 12, 2024). “I ended up moving back in with my parents” (Respondent 11, 2024). “I was moved [between] two campuses” (Respondent 6, 2024). Even the protections provided in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 did not safeguard them from housing instability.

Relationships

Courtney et al. (2020) identified foster youths' primary social support as their partners, family, and friends (including other foster alumni). This study pinpointed the spouse/partner, case worker, and family as support. Even with the built-in protections of foster parents, teachers, and social workers, 23% of research participants in this study could not identify a supportive relationship. The lack of support as a young adult can have significant short and long-term consequences, including emotional and mental health challenges, housing instability, limited educational and career opportunities, financial hardship, difficulty forming and maintaining healthy relationships, and increased risk of criminality. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 created a social safety net for these young adults who may otherwise have had none.

Early Parenting

On average, 60% of foster care alumni become parents earlier than their non-care peers. Roughly 46% of the participants in this study had their first child during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Receiving funds via the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 provided financial stability, housing security, transportation, and continued

academic involvement for these first-time parents – an undeniable benefit to them and their young families.

Mental and Physical Health

At the height of the pandemic, many mental health clinics were closed or transitioned to virtual-only services. This created an access barrier because people were physically and socially isolated due to stay-in-place mandates. Packard and Benuto (2020) identified emotional support as a resilience factor for young adults transitioning out of foster care. Ten out of 13 participants in this study confirmed the necessity of emotional support by recommending continued relationships with case workers and other foster care alumni. Participants also identified familial and intimate partner relationships as sources of emotional support.

Regarding physical health, elective procedures were canceled, and many people were fearful of entering healthcare facilities, considering the high COVID-19 death tolls. Terms of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 centered around educational and employment outcomes for youth in foster care. There is no evidence that consideration was given to the mental and physical health impacts on young adults with foster care histories.

Limitations of the Study

No demographics were gathered for this research. As such, no information was collected that would have highlighted the hardships of subgroups of foster care alumni, including LGBTQ+, BIPOC, those still in foster care, those who have experienced criminality, and recipients of Special Education services. Individuals from these

subcategories are likely represented in the data as they were not explicitly screened out. It is recommended that future research centers on these specific subpopulations of foster care alumni, as they are especially vulnerable. This study also excluded participants still in receipt of foster care services, incarcerated individuals, those who have not reached the age of majority, and anyone older than 26 years. These people were prohibited from this study as they were classified as protected populations or were ineligible for funding supplied by the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. This study is limited to a sample size of 13 and provides a small snapshot of participant insights and experiences. The quantity and geographic location of participants were also limited by high caseworker turnover rates, the transient nature of foster care alumni, and agencies' unwillingness to forward the recruitment flyer.

Recommendations

Based on this study's limitations, future research should include a larger sample size and more demographic information. An increased participant pool would bolster the trustworthiness and generalizability of the findings. It could also identify location-specific resources and barriers. Gathering additional demographic data may identify subgroups of foster care alumni who are particularly vulnerable, such as racial minorities, those with physical disabilities, the incarcerated, LGBTQ+ individuals, people receiving Special Education services, and minors.

This study emphasized the benefits of receiving funding via the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 for young adults with foster care histories. This money offset the typical hardships they would have encountered during the difficult transition away

from state care into self-reliance and independence. This policy created a safety net in education, employment, housing stability, increased social support networks, and lessened the impact of early parenting. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 did not seem to buffer the impact on mental or physical health. As such, it is recommended that policymakers are made aware of the pitfalls and protections of the Act in consideration of future pandemics and current policies affecting young adults with histories in foster care. Administrators of public services and case managers assisting this population could use the data in this study to enhance their policies, adapt their programming, increase community engagement, and empower the youth they serve.

Implications

Using grounded theory to gather data-rich descriptions of firsthand experiences, this research confirms that foster care alumni encounter hardships as they transition into young adulthood. It highlights the adversity they faced in employment, education, housing, relationships, parenting, mental, and physical health during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The data illuminated the critical importance of their receipt of financial assistance at that time via the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. Without that aid, participants would not have been able to remain in college, sustain housing and transportation, create savings, and provide for themselves and other household members. That funding was only available from January through September of 2021. Afterward, participants found themselves still in need of financial help. Policymakers should consider participants' recommendations to extend financial support beyond when young adults leave care. This research showed that alumni wisely spent

money on necessities compared to nonessential comforts. States should consider increasing the availability and effectiveness of money management classes for young people as they prepare to live independently. The data also underscores the essential role of case managers working with this vulnerable population. Participants noted that their workers were the linchpin between being aware of and accessing available support. “I will say there is a lot of help out there, but they don't really inform us of it” (Respondent 5, 2024). Respondents noted different levels of engagement with and assistance from their assigned workers. Respondent 9 stated the following:

So even reached out to my case manager and never heard back from her, and I was contacting her for like. I think, like three months after the fact, because within the first month of me exiting foster care, I immediately became homeless.

On the other hand, Respondent 8 (2024) had a positive experience with their caseworker and noted the following: “So, even after being out of the program, they still reached out and asked if I needed help when they had those extra funds, which was just beneficial and helpful.” This study has positive implications for social impact. Given apt consideration, there is room for policy improvement, better legislation, enhanced programming that ensures adequate housing, education, employment opportunities, social and financial aid, increased public and governmental awareness of their needs, and other reforms tailored to the specific needs of this population.

Conclusion

The transition into young adulthood is a difficult one. The COVID-19 pandemic compounded these hardships for young adults with foster care histories as they

experienced disruptions in employment, education, housing, relationships, parenting, and mental and physical health.

In the words of former President Jimmy Carter:

We should dream of and plan for a day when fewer children require foster care.

But until that day comes, we have a moral responsibility to prepare young people leaving foster care for their journey into adulthood. Our communities must commit themselves to a common goal of helping these young people to become whole adults who can fulfill their potential and build bright and promising futures (Shirk & Stangler, 2004).

The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 represents a critical milestone in addressing the challenges faced by young adults aging out of foster care. As this population transitions from the child welfare system into independent adulthood, they often encounter significant barriers to employment, education, housing, relationships, parenting, and mental and physical health. The Act provided an unprecedented level of support, allocating emergency relief funds and extending critical services to mitigate the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. In examining its effects, this study underscores the importance of sustained policy interventions in cultivating long-term stability and success for former foster youth.

One of the most profound contributions of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 was the temporary expansion of financial assistance and housing support. The Act also allowed cash payments and waived education and employment requirements for certain benefits. These provisions helped mitigate immediate economic hardships,

prevented homelessness, and alleviated financial distress during an already vulnerable transition period. The research findings suggest that these measures not only provided short-term relief but also reinforced the importance of permanent financial and housing assistance programs essential to this population.

Additionally, this research highlights the necessity of continued healthcare access beyond the temporary provisions of the Act, emphasizing that stable healthcare coverage is fundamental to long-term success and self-sufficiency.

Beyond direct cash payments and healthcare, the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 provided educational and employment support by increasing eligibility for educational training vouchers and relaxing work requirements. These accommodations kept young adults in school and financially stable despite widespread unemployment during COVID-19. This type of backing can significantly improve long-term earning potential and career stability, reinforcing the argument for continued investments in education and employment programs for foster care alumni.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 serves as an example of how emergency relief legislation can address systemic inequalities faced by young adults exiting foster care. While the Act provided a reprieve, its impact demonstrates the necessity of comprehensive, permanent policies that support these young adults beyond pandemic-level crises. As policymakers consider future reforms and public administrators evaluate their services, this research serves as a call to action, advocating for sustained investment in housing, education, employment, healthcare, and financial assistance to safeguard the futures of young adults exiting the foster care system.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

We want to hear from you!

Looking for former foster care youth who received COVID-19 financial assistance from the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 to participate in a research study.

This study aims to explore your experiences and perceptions of receiving this funding.

More Information



Participation is confidential, and voluntary, and will include a 45–60-minute virtual interview that will be audio recorded. Participants must have exited the foster care system.

Appendix B: Invitational Email

Subject Line:

Interviewing foster care alumni who received pandemic aid (\$40 thank-you gift)

Email Message:

Hello _____,

I am a PhD student from Walden University studying Public Policy & Administration. I am hoping to connect with the young adults who received emergency relief during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically from the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021.

The Act created an age extension for those exiting state care, allowed re-entry for those who had recently exited care, and provided financial assistance for transportation, rent, food, and other basic household needs from January 1st – September 30th, 2021.

I am conducting a new study about The Perceptions of Foster Care Alumni Who are Recipients of Pandemic Aid that will provide information to the public programs serving this population and policymakers who enacted the Consolidated Appropriation Act of 2021, or those considering similar legislation.

As a Child Welfare Social Worker, I know that understanding the needs of and bolstering support for, foster care alumni improves their likelihood of success in young adulthood and reduces the societal cost of their failing to achieve the milestones needed for independence and self-sufficiency all of which results in positive social change.

Would you kindly forward this invitation to those who are currently 18 years and older who received resources through this act?

With care and kind regards,

Ashley Robinson, LMSW

Appendix C: Interview Guide/Questionnaire

Introduction:

- Introduce myself
- Confirm participants' receipt and understanding of the Consent Form.
- Confirm that the participant is no longer in foster care

Questions:

1. How would you describe your experiences prior to the federal funds via the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021?
2. How did you find out about your eligibility for the funding?
3. How would you describe the process of receiving the funding?
4. What were your thoughts and experiences regarding the amount you received?
5. How did you use the money you received? Describe this experience.
6. How did the funds you received impact your life?
7. Were there others who indirectly benefited from your disbursement (ex: family, friends)?
8. What things, if any, would you have changed about:
 - The advertising of the funding.
 - The process of receiving the funding.
 - Eligibility criteria used for the funding.
 - Amount of funding dispersed.

9. What types of assistance, if any, did you receive during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?
10. What other supports do you think would have been beneficial to you during the onset of the pandemic?
11. If you could convey anything to the creators of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, what would that be?

Closing:

12. Is there anything else I could have asked you to help me better understand your experiences?
 13. Are there any more insights or experiences related to receiving the funding that you would like to share?
- Once this interview is transcribed, I will send you a copy for you to review. This will be your opportunity to check it for accuracy. Thank you for sharing your time and experiences with me.