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# Foster Youth Perspectives: Self-Reported Strengths and Resilience

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# Foster Youth Perspectives: Self-Reported Strengths and Resilience

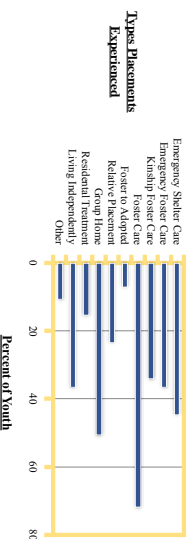
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## BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

- There are half a million children in the foster care system in the United States
- The majority of research on foster youth examines psychopathology and maladaptive behaviors and rarely examines strengths; many available studies use data from archival sources, such as juvenile justice and educational records
- The majority of research defines strengths as the absence of disorders or negative outcomes
- The voices of foster youth in research have not yet been well captured
- Using a community based participatory research framework, this study aims to understand the strengths of foster youth as they describe them and present the resilient and strong aspects of youth

## PARTICIPANTS

- 85 current and former foster youth ages 16 to 24 years (mean age = 21.06,  $SD = 2.12$ )
- 51.2% ( $n = 43$ ) identified as feminine/female
- Participants identified as African- American/Black (40.5%,  $n = 34$ ), Hispanic/Latinx (25%,  $n = 21$ ) and Multi-Ethnic (15.5%,  $n = 14$ )
- $M$  at entry into care = 10.7 years ( $SD = 5.3$ )
- Average duration in out of home care = 6.7 years ( $SD = 5.8$ )
- Mean number of out-of-home placements = 5.48 ( $SD = 5.66$ ), ( $n = 75$ )



## MEASURES

- The research team, including foster youth consultants, created a 35-item measure to assess youth's strengths, emotional self-efficacy, and resilience
- Open-ended questions focused on youth's strengths and what helped them overcome challenges
- Closed-ended questions measured demographics, where youth receive support, and history of mental health treatment

## METHODS

- Trained research assistants contacted and visited non profit organizations in the Bay Area serving foster youth
- Foster youth ages 16-24 were recruited and asked to complete a 20-minute paper-pencil survey; they were provided a \$20 gift-card as incentive to participate
- In order to ensure internal validity, responses to open ended questions were coded and recoded by researchers and by former foster youth
- Answers to open-ended questions were coded for type of strengths as well as by internal vs. external strengths
- A foster youth consultant reviewed the methods and data coding to increase reliability and generalizability
- In compliance with a community based participatory framework, a foster youth participated in data analysis and presentation and was compensated for this work

## RESULTS

- Youth described themselves and their strengths in positive terms
- Only one participant listed a controlled substance as a way to overcome challenges

| Category of Self-Described Strengths                      | Responses to "what strengths do you have that have helped you overcome challenging times in your life?"   |
|---|---|
| <b>Determination/Motivation/Future Oriented</b>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "My straightforward attitude to complete a goal"</li> <li>• "I don't give up"</li> <li>• "Surviving is part of life and it has made me strong"</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Relationships/Interpersonal</b>                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Utilizing resources around me, willingness to seek help from others, openness to receiving suggestions from others"</li> <li>• "I am an awesome mother and I put my kids first no matter what"</li> <li>• "Utilizing resources around me, willingness to seek help from others, openness to receiving suggestions from others"</li> </ul> |
| <b>Strength/Resilience/Bounce Back</b>                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I have a strong heart"</li> <li>• "Resilience; being able to put one foot in front of the other regardless of how hard it feels"</li> <li>• "I have a lot of resilience so I am able to overcome a lot"</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Positivity</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Optimistic. Motivated to be better. See the bigger picture to things."</li> <li>• "I try to always see the positive in things"</li> <li>• "Thinking about all the good times"</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Self-Sufficiency/Self-Love/Independence/Confidence</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Knowing who I am and that my past doesn't define me"</li> <li>• "Belief in myself, never stop dreaming"</li> <li>• "I am true to myself"</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Other</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Patience"</li> <li>• "Poetry and writing"</li> <li>• "My diploma and college"</li> </ul>  |

- 70% of participants listed internal strengths rather than external strengths

| Responses to "what strengths do you have that have helped you overcome challenging times in your life?" | Internal Strengths                 | External Strengths |
|---|------------------------------------|--------------------|
| "I am very compassionate"   | "Many supportive people around me" |                    |
| "My religious faith"  | "Really good with people"          |                    |
| "Insight, wisdom, keeping calm"   | "My family and friends"            |                    |
| "Seeing things in a real way"   | "Meditation, exercise, eating"     |                    |

## DISCUSSION

- When foster youth are asked to list their strengths, they show that they see themselves as possessing many strengths and skills to deal with life
- Despite entry into the foster care system during elementary school, an average of over six years in and out of care, and frequent placement changes, foster youth describe themselves as possessing many strengths
- Results suggest that many foster youth look inside themselves for strength in difficult times
- When asked, foster youth are able to clearly identify a number of personal strengths which shows they view themselves as strong and resilient, even while much research on their population projects negative outcomes
- Since sample population was composed of current and former foster youth in the Bay Area, sample is limited in its generalizability
- A limitation of this research is the lack of analysis on differences in gender, age, and ethnicity
- Participants were asked what strengths they had that helped them during difficult times in their lives; in future research it would be helpful to know what strengths they can self-identify in respect to other areas such as education, relationships, work, and family
- Longitudinal studies examining self-described strengths of these youth are needed to understand how those who experience foster care see themselves and their strengths as time progresses
- Further research is needed that focuses on the strengths of these youth so they are presented accurately and fully in research

## CONTACT INFORMATION

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