EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG PARENTS WITH FOSTER CARE BACKGROUNDS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: BRIEF REPORT

Principal Investigators

Svetlana Shpiegel
Montclair State University

Elizabeth M. Aparicio
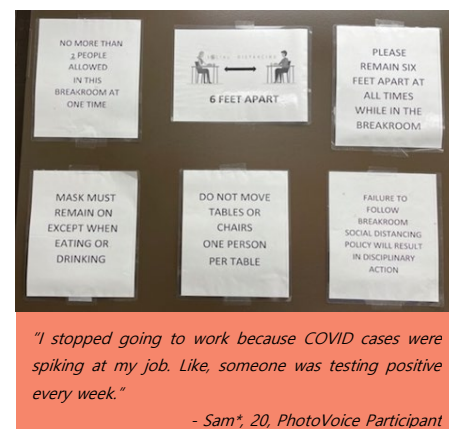University of Maryland, College Park

Research Team

Marissa Ventola

Michelle Jasczynski

Amara Channell Doig

Jennifer L. Robinson

Rhoda Smith

Genevieve Martinez-Garcia

Alexander Sanchez

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unique challenges to parents of young children due to the closure of schools and childcare centers and increased caregiver burden. These challenges may be especially pronounced for youth with foster care backgrounds, as they often lack family supports and other critical safety nets. This multi-method qualitative study aimed to explore the unique experiences of parenting foster care alumni during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study included 26 young parents ages 18-26, who participated in in-depth interviews or Photovoice sessions between January and March 2021. A structured thematic analysis approach was used to examine youths` accounts. Findings indicated that young parents with foster care backgrounds faced significant challenges due to COVID-19, and often struggled to access critical resources and supports. Implications for policy and practice are discussed below.

MAJOR FINDINGS

EMPLOYMENT DISRUPTIONS AND ECONOMIC HARDSHIP

Participants reported a range of employment-related challenges, such as abruptly losing their job during the early stages of the pandemic, barriers related to school closures and securing reliable childcare, and concerns regarding COVID-19 exposure and the risk to their young children. Disruption of employment often resulted in financial strain, limiting youths' ability to meet their families' basic needs, such as food, utilities, and other essentials.

"I stopped going to work because COVID cases were spiking at my job. Like, someone was testing positive every week."

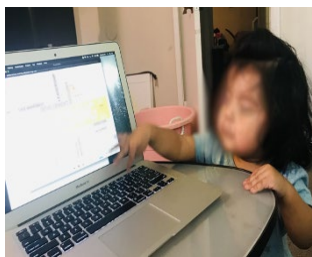*- Sam*, 20, PhotoVoice Participant*

"I was working with the county, and right when they got the okay to shut everything down, they let a lot of people go. So, like, I was providing on that income, and when my job just left, it was so hard because of my two [year old] – at the time [my son] was two - he needed diapers, and it was so hard to get diapers."

- Celina*, 23, Focus Group Participant

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ReSHAPING

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Parents who attended educational programs struggled with the transition to online learning and were concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on their educational progress. Many also reported that online schooling did not work well for their children, causing them emotional distress.

"While I try to work from home, my kids want to play. My kid doesn't like online school. He finds it hard to get up in the mornings and jump on the iPad."

- Asteria Sakari*, 25, PhotoVoice Participant

"So I have, like, one more test to get my GED, and I wasn't able to go do that because COVID happened and closed [the testing center]. And now that they opened it back up, I don't have childcare at all to do it. So it, kind of, like, stopped everything for me that I was, like, doing, um, all of the stuff that I was actually accomplishing finally, um, it, like, but it stopped all of it completely 'cause I don't have – I don't have childcare."

- Celina*, 23, Focus Group Participant

MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

The COVID-19 pandemic had a detrimental impact on participants' mental health, often exacerbating existing mental health challenges. Young parents reported feeling anxious, depressed, and lonely and had limited access to professional or informal supports. These challenges had a detrimental impact on their ability to parent effectively and engage in school and work-related activities.

INSUFFICIENT RESOURCES AND BARRIERS TO SERVICE RECEIPT

Young parents lacked critical resources during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially financial supports and other tangible forms of assistance. Some were unaware of important resources, such as pandemic relief funds, while others struggled with the application process and were unable to resolve technical difficulties without help from knowledgeable adults.

'SILVER LININGS'

Despite numerous, complex challenges described above, participants found positive aspects in the pandemic, such as spending more time with their children and families and learning new skills together.
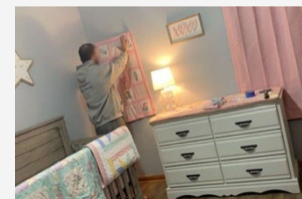
"Setting up the nursery with all the extra time I have."

- Athena*, 22, PhotoVoice Participant

"I guess, um, it has been also good 'cause I've gotten to spend a lot of time with, um, my kids and my newer baby. So, I didn't have a job to worry about, like, maternity leave and stuff like that, you know? So, I've gotten to kind of just soak in all the newborn baby stuff. So, that's been good."

- Hope*, 20, Focus Group Participant

POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. EARLY PLANNING FOR FUTURE EMERGENCIES

Youth aging out of foster care are a uniquely vulnerable population who may experience significant challenges during emergency times. Establishing clear and consistent procedures for supporting these young people during national emergencies should be prioritized at the federal and state levels.

2. REMOVING SERVICE UTILIZATION BARRIERS

Simplifying the application process for emergency assistance is of critical importance for foster care alumni, as complex applications can be difficult to navigate without significant assistance. Specialized case managers should be available to assist with the application process.

3. PROVIDING SPECIALIZED SUPPORTS TO YOUNG PARENTS

During emergency situations, parenting foster care alumni should be provided with targeted resources and supports, such as financial assistance, housing protections, and childcare.