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A Phenomenological Study: Foster Care Youth Aging Out of the System

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A Phenomenological Study: Foster Care Youth Aging Out of the System

by
Guy C. Thompson

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the
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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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Approval Page

This applied dissertation was submitted by Guy C. Thompson under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

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Abstract

A Phenomenological Study: Foster Care Youth Aging Out of the System.
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The purpose of this applied dissertation was to explore the lived experiences of teens aging out of foster care, in an effort to better understand their needs. While the child welfare system is geared towards family preservation, reunification, and adoption, most young adults transitioning from the foster care system are not reunited with family members or are only reunited as a last resort. Unfortunately, every year, thousands are leaving the support of the foster care system, unprepared. Youth departing the child welfare system are not gradually transitioned into becoming self-sufficient. They do not have an effective support system available if they fail or need help. Instead, when they leave foster care, they are simply released from the system they have become accustomed to and most struggle during this transition.

The researcher conducted three 60-minute interviews with nine former foster youth. Questions were based on a set of interview questions (Appendix C), developed and used by Dr. Lee (2010), to assist in understanding the lived experiences of former foster youth.

From an analysis of the data gathered from the young adults' interviews and the researcher's observations, four prevalent themes emerged: 1) Looking for the 'care' in foster care, 2) the threat of mental disability, 3) pick of the draw, and 4) navigating emotionally alone. This study will allow the state and foster care system to examine the highlighted issues and to consider appropriate corrections. Gaps have been identified in the system, as it currently operates, and there is a need to examine the current practices with internal and external lenses, in order to recommend possible changes.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Over 250,000 children in America are entered into the foster care system every year (Zlotnick, Tam, & Soman, 2012). Many young adults experience significant difficulties while attempting to transition into independent living after leaving the foster care system at age 18 (Scannapieco, Cornell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007). Unfortunately, in addition to being young and being left without guidance or a strong support system, many of these youth have mental health issues that tend to get worse, the older they get. These mental health issues are often displayed, in society, in the form of early pregnancy, drug abuse, and legal troubles (Carroll, 2002; Scannapieco et al., 2007). Compared to the rest of society, foster care youth have a high degree of mental health issues (Zlotnick et al., 2012).

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Children and Families (ACF; 2011), approximately 25,000 youth leave foster care, each year, when they turn 18 years old (Carroll, 2002). By the time they reach their 18th birthday, they are saddled with their childhood experiences of abuse, neglect, or abandonment; yet, have to leave the security of the foster care system, to make the transition into self-supporting adulthood, without the aid of a support system. Typically, their years in the foster care system have not satisfactorily equipped them to find gainful employment. In addition, many do not have access to health insurance, but have physical and mental disabilities that have not been fully treated (ACF, 2011).

Other challenges, faced by these youth, include finishing high school, finding a job, and locating adequate, but reasonable, housing (Mares, 2010). Some of the problems

faced by the youth in foster care are not the direct result of the youths' decisions (Yancey, 1992). Research shows that 60% of those in foster care have developmental delays, 57% have speech delays, 33% have cognitive problems, 31% have gross motor issues, and 10% have delays in growth (Leslie et al., 2004). It has been estimated that 25% to 40% of foster care youth, under the age of six, have some sort of mental issue (Leslie, 2004). If they had been brought up in a traditional household, with biological parents, they may not have experienced some of these problems.

The consequences of these young people being left on their own have been discussed in numerous studies. Past research suggests that former foster care youth do poorly once they leave the foster care system (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Not only do these young adults do poorly, in regards to managing their affairs and living on their own, but also, a high number eventually become involved in criminal activity (Scannapieco et al., 2007). The National Evaluation of Title IV-E Independent Living Programs for Youth in Foster Care stated that between two and a half to four years after transitioning out of the child welfare system, half of the youth became involved with illegal drugs and a quarter became negatively involved with the legal system (Geenen & Powers, 2007). As a group, they also have less education, with only 33% graduating from high school when it is time for them to leave the foster care system (Scannapieco et al., 2007). There are reports that as many as one in four youth become homeless after transitioning from the child welfare system into independence (Geenen & Powers, 2007).

History of Foster Care

The *parens patriae* doctrine was formulated in England during the 18th century. This doctrine is the precursor to the state being able to serve as parents for those without

parents. This doctrine is the foundational agreement that allows the government to become guardian of its citizens (Thomas, 2007). The United States followed suit and established this doctrine during the 19th century (Cook, 1995). Around this time, there was a large migration of Europeans to the United States. Many of these new immigrants were poor. This, in turn, created a situation where there were many children begging in the streets. Those children who were not healthy enough to survive on the streets were placed in institutions, now known as orphanages (Cook, 1995). The orphanages were usually run by religious and charitable organizations (Hacsi, 1995). As the numbers of orphanages increased, they were soon found to be unsuitable. This was due to the admission criteria, which were based on race and religion, lack of space, and relatively poor administrative practices (Cook, 1995).

Through the New York Children's Aid Society, Charles Loring Brace began the custom of taking youth from institutions and having them reside with temporary families (Cook, 1995). Brace's practice would eventually come to be, what is now known as, foster care (Thomas, 2007). He started the practice of having a child welfare worker do a preliminary visit, followed by follow-up visits, to a home a child has been placed in, which is still in effect today. Unfortunately, back then, workers did not follow-up with the families and children. As a result, children, from time to time, would be victimized by their temporary families, suffering abuse or neglect by the very ones that were there to protect them (Cook, 1995).

Despite the fact that workers often lost track of these children, by not maintaining contact, the New York Children's Aid Society still published statements of its astounding track record in finding safe homes for these youth. This led to large cities, such as

Brooklyn, Boston, and Philadelphia, starting their own programs, based on New York's reports (Gish, 1999). From 1854 to 1930, more than 150,000 children were taken from their homes and placed in other locations (Cook, 1995; Hacsi, 1995). Even though Brace's program had its ups and downs and did not have the intended overall effect he had hoped for, his program was still better than any that had been in place before it and is still the model that is most often used today (Cook, 1995).

Background and Justification

It was not until recently, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, that the problems associated with former foster children leaving the system without proper support began to come under scrutiny (NewHeart, Ortega, & Propp, 2003). During the 1980s, it was estimated that youth in foster care placement made up 40% to 50% of the caseloads. Out of that number, only 5% were likely to be adopted, and the odds of reunification with their own families were less than one in five (NewHeart et al., 2003). Despite this knowledge, thousands of young adults were still discharged, each year, without a plan to help them make the transition. As a result, many were completely unprepared for living on their own (NewHeart et al., 2003). As stated previously, every year, more than 20,000 young adults in foster care across the nation leave the system, as adults, when they reach their 18th birthday (Carroll, 2002). Approximately 280 young adults leave the Florida foster care system each year (Mather, Lager, & Harris, 2007).

The researcher for the current study became aware of this situation while working at a foster care group home for boys in the central Florida area. Comprising the central part of the state, as the name implies, central Florida encompasses the interior, including the Orlando metropolitan area, and coastal stretches, from Tampa, in the west, to Daytona

Beach and Flagler County, in the south, to Martin County, in the east (Lamme &

Oldakowski, 2007). At a staff meeting, one of the owners of the home informed the group

that usually when an assigned resident reaches the age of 18, one of their longtime staff

members would take the boy to the beach and leave him there. He would now be

independent. The owner said this happened often, was routine, and not a tragedy.

Landmark Policies of Child Welfare

By the 1920s, it had become common knowledge, among authorities in the

various states' child welfare systems, that placing children in alternative housing was not

the best system. As a result, the number of children being placed went down considerably

(Mather et al., 2007). Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) was included in the Social

Security Act of 1935, under Title VI. This new law mandated that each state would

formulate a formal child welfare system. In order for a family to qualify for the services,

it had to have one or more parents missing from the home (Mather et al., 2007). The

name was amended and called Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), in

1961, in part, because of the negative reputation ADC had obtained. The other reason the

name was changed was that the government wanted to ensure the public knew this

program and its services was for families, and not just for the mothers (Mather et al.,

2007). This new legislation also brought child abuse to the forefront, increasing

awareness nationwide. This, in turn, led Congress to establish the U.S. government's

foster care system. The federal system included compensation for foster parents and

provided incentives for the court system to remove abused children from abusive

households and have them placed in other homes or settings (Hacsi, 1995).

Mather and colleagues (2007) state that the Adoption Assistance and Child

Welfare Act of 1980 had as its mandate to reverse the trend of increased out-of-home placements and make the traditional family the primary caregiver. Despite the new legislation, the national trend persisted, with increasing amounts of children being taken from their primary home and being re-located elsewhere in the child welfare system. A number of factors contributed to this pattern, including, but not limited to, low funding and high turnover in the social service workforce (Mather et al., 2007). The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) became law in 1997. This law gave child welfare agencies the authority they needed to become more effective in their attempt to finally halt the high numbers of children being placed into foster care. According to Wulczyn, Chen, and Hislop (2006), the law, for once, was effective. Within the first five years of the law being passed, the number of adoptions rose from 37,088 in 1998 to 52,839 in 2002 (Wulczyn et al., 2006). Even though the number of adoptions increased, it was still a challenge to find homes for older children, those with special needs, and for minority or non-White children (Humphrey et al., 2006).

The Independent Living Initiative of 1986 amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. The amendments allowed federal funds to be provided to states, to help assist youth develop independent living skills while in foster care (Collins, 2004). The Independent Living Initiative was modified, after passage, to provide a more thorough and detailed approach to preparing youth for life as an adult. In order to resolve issues associated with former foster children attempting to transition to adult life, policymakers expanded the Independent Living Initiative when they voted for the Foster Care Independence Act (FICA). The Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) was also created with this new legislation (Collins, 2004; Wells & Zunz, 2009). The FICA

was designed to assist these youth in strengthening areas, previously identified as weak, such as building life skills, knowing how to find employment, having and maintaining a home, becoming financially responsible, and completing their education (Wells & Zunz, 2009). Unfortunately, low funding, permitted by the federal government, restricts and hinders the efforts of the states to run and maintain programs of any true substance. While FICA is better than what was there before, it still falls short of what is truly needed.

Deficiencies in the Evidence

The problems and issues associated with these youth attempting to live successful and independent lives persist. Unfortunately, it is still not clear exactly what is needed to improve these issues (Reilly, 2003). Despite numerous studies in this area (Geenen & Powers, 2007; NewHeart et al., 2003; Scannapieco et al., 2007), as well as the institution of both statewide and nationwide government programs, the problem still exists. Due to deficiencies and gaps in the literature, only a few studies focus on the problems these youth face once they leave foster care (NewHeart et al., 2003). In order to find a solution, it is important to understand the lived experiences of these youths as they attempt to live on their own, outside of the government-run welfare systems.

Previous research consistently shows that youth in foster care experience a number of mental health issues, such as apprehension, sadness, anxiety, confusion, and stress (Bruskas, 2008). A large amount of researchers have concluded that many of those in foster care will do poorly in the areas of development, mental health, and education (Bruskas, 2008; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Scannapieco et al., 2007). They are also likely to encounter homelessness, low academic achievement, criminal activity, early

pregnancies, and use of illegal drugs (Scannapieco et al., 2007). There is disagreement in

the literature regarding which is the best way to achieve a successful transition to

adulthood for these youth (Salem, 2008).

Audience

The audience for this proposed study includes state legislators and government

officials, as well as private funds, charities, and benefactors who may be able to help fund

any potential initiative. It also includes caseworkers and group home workers, child

welfare agencies, social workers, foster care parents, and policy makers. These people

will benefit from reading this proposed dissertation by developing greater insight into the

lived experiences of these former foster youths, as told from the youth's perspective.

They may also learn what the youth believe is lacking and/or necessary to help improve

their situation. The years and years of minimal support for these youths, attempting to

transition from dependence, on a state-run foster care system, to becoming an

independent, self-supporting adult, must end. The homelessness, drug use, and teen

pregnancies must be brought under control.

Definition of Terms

Aging out – Leaving the foster care system at the age of majority (typically 18

years old) (Carroll, 2002).

Challenges – Issues and difficulties one confronts when departing the foster care

system (Vacca, 2008).

Disability - A physical or mental infirmity that affects the individual's quality of

life (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990).

Emancipated youth – Youth who are 18 years of age or older that are considered

to be adults (Vacca, 2008).

Foster care – a federal or state-run program for children or young adults who have been removed from their primary place of residence and are relocated to a new environment and caregiver (Mather et al., 2007).

Independent living services – Barth and Ferguson (2004) explain that independent living services are "…programs to assist children in foster care 16 years and older in their transition to independence" (p. 19).

Structural violence – Any restrictions on a person's ability to thrive, as they choose, based on political and economic factors (Winter & Leighton, 2001).

Transition to adulthood – According to Lehman, Clark, Bullis, Rinkin, & Castellanos (2002), the transition to adulthood includes, "…Skills that society expects youth to achieve by the time they leave school. Among these are the ability to (a) live independently, (b) determine an initial career path, (c) find and maintain meaningful employment and/or post-secondary education, (d) establish fulfilling relationships with family and friends, and (e) choose leisure activities that enhance a rewarding adult life" (p. 128).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this proposed study is to explore the lived experiences of teens aging out of foster care, in an effort to better understand their needs. While the child welfare system is geared towards family preservation, reunification, and adoption, most young adults leaving, or transitioning from, the foster care system are not reunited with family members or are only reunited as a last resort. Unfortunately, thousands are leaving the support of the foster care system every year, unprepared for life without that support.

Youth departing the child welfare system are not granted a gradual transition into becoming self-sufficient. They often do not have an effective support system available if they fail or need help in their efforts to live independently. Instead, when they leave foster care, they are simply released from the system they have become accustomed to, without any support from the system; in most cases, they struggle or face difficulties in making the transition (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Over the past 20 years, the majority of the literature in this area repeatedly shows that children exposed to the foster care system usually end up suffering from poor academic performance and emotional and behavioral problems (Merdinger, Hine, Lemon, & Wyatt, 2005; Reilly, 2003). Therefore, it is important to study the lived experiences of the youth that are living on their own, to see what solutions are needed to improve their lives. The proposed study will focus on youth who are already emancipated, or out of the system, in the central Florida area.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Foster Care System

Foster care is a federal, or state-run, program designed to protect youth who have suffered harm at their primary residence, by removing them and placing them in a safer environment, as wards of the state (Carroll, 2002). The court makes the state the parent of the minors, giving this entity responsibility for their care and well-being. The state then, usually, transfers the day-to-day care to foster parents (Thoburn & Courtney, 2011). The foster parents receive compensation from the state for their services. Youth usually enter the foster care system because they have suffered from some sort of abuse within the home of their biological parent(s). Types of abuse typically include physical or emotional harm, child endangerment, or failure to provide food, clothing, housing, or medical treatment (Dickson, 1995). If suspected of abuse, it is possible the accused perpetrator could be brought before a civil or criminal hearing, or both. Civil and criminal proceedings are separate, with different courts, proceedings, degrees of proof, and consequences. In civil hearings, they determine whether the child is an abused child under the state child abuse statute and, if so, what the verdict should be. Possible outcomes include placing the victim in an out-of-home placement.

Theoretical Framework

Erikson's (1968) well-known and highly regarded Theory of Psychosocial Development is widely used to identify risk factors for child abuse. In his theory, Erikson outlined several stages of development. In each stage, he concluded that individuals usually experience a challenge, or obstacle, that is so significant that it affects their level of development (Erikson, 1968). Erikson (1968) believed that these challenges either

advance the individual's development or hinder it. When these challenges emerge, the opportunity for growth is either high or low, depending on the effect the challenge has on that individual. Erikson (1963) developed eight stages of personality development, of which the fifth stage centered on identity versus confusion.

During their early years, children begin to become aware of the feeling of being independent and start developing a sense of self (Erikson, 1968). Adolescents who are brought up in a supportive, caring environment and are allowed to explore, make mistakes, and discover, will leave this stage feeling self-assured and believing in themselves. Those who are not brought up in an encouraging and inviting environment will not feel confident in their ability to do things on their own. This may account for so many former foster youth falling into homelessness and other, less than desirable, outcomes. In the current study, Erikson's theory will be used as a lens with which to study this phenomenon.

Foster Care Process

Placing a minor into the foster care system is usually arranged through the state. The caregivers are paid by the state, or agency, for their assistance (Dickson, 1995). For the most part, children, or young adults, are placed into foster care as a temporary measure, until a full-time solution can be attained. Reunification with the parents has normally been seen as the best outcome for the child and is typically the primary goal of most child welfare programs, despite the fact that statistics show this usually results in failure. Another option, other than being placed into the child welfare system, is adoption. The preferable solution is for a family member to adopt or care for the youth on a permanent basis (Barnes, 2007). If no relative or family member is able to adopt the

child, the state then looks to the foster parents, or someone who plays an active role in the child's life, as potential candidates. They choose these placements as an attempt to provide a sense of normalcy for the youth, as much as possible, under the circumstances. If neither of these choices provide a suitable solution then adoption, by someone who the child does not know, becomes an option, as does entering other planned permanent living arrangements (OPPLA; Scannapieco et al., 2007). OPPLA allows the youth to stay in the custody of the state and offers a variety of options, as to where the child will reside. Foster care youth are considered part of a vulnerable population (Dickson, 1995).

Child maltreatment and problem behavior. Past research on the consequences of child abuse and mistreatment for a child include, but are not limited to, problem behavior, initially, leading to more serious bad behavior, including criminal activity (Bae, Solomon, Gelles, & White, 2010; Merdinger et al., 2005; Reilly, 2003). Studies also illustrate the relationship between a child's abnormal behavior and specific types of maltreatment. In particular, physical abuse has been linked with behavioral problems, such as aggressiveness, tantrums, fits, and other bad behavior (Jaffes, Caspi, Moffitt, & Taylor, 2004; Mahoney, Donnelly, Boxer, & Lewis, 2003). Sexual abuse has also been associated with various problematic behaviors. For example, compared to youth in the general population, those that have been sexually abused have been found to have higher incidences of substance abuse, behavioral problems, unusual sexual behavior, and aggressiveness toward others (Jaffes et al., 2004). In literature focused more narrowly on relationships between child neglect and problem behavior, neglect has been shown to be linked with violence and emotional withdrawal, and more extreme forms of parental neglect have shown to be associated with higher percentages of youth having behavior

problems (Fluke, Shusterman, Hollinshead, & Yuan, 2005). Finally, all types of child abuse, including emotional abuse, have been associated with substance abuse problems, with physical and sexual abuse being the most dominant (Mahoney et al., 2003).

Out-of-home care placement and child outcomes. Abused children placed into the child welfare system are at even greater risk for experiencing difficulty in life, due to the added stress of being separated from their parents and being placed in unfamiliar environments. Numerous studies show evidence of children having trouble adapting to new environments, people, and situations when they were removed from the homes of their parents or relatives. Research also suggests these children often exhibit problem behavior patterns (Hodges, Doucette-Gates, & Liao, 1999; Lawrence & Carlson, 2006).

Very few studies have examined how being taken out of their primary home and placed in the foster care system has effected the youth and, out of those few studies, findings are inconsistent. Widom (1991) found that youth, who had problems with the law in their past and were then selected for placement in residences, because of abuse or neglect in their primary home, had a high probability of continuing to display bad behavior. They were also three times more likely to have negative contact with law enforcement, both as a minor and in adulthood (Widom, 1991). Taussig (2002) indicated that a history of physical abuse was associated with a greater probability of offending behavior. In contrast, Jonson-Reid and Barth (2003) suggested that children placed in the child welfare system had no greater tendency to be involved with law enforcement for criminal activity than children receiving in-home care, child welfare services. Jonson-Reid and Barth (2003) also reported no differences in the rates of minors entering the juvenile corrections system, for children who initially were placed in the child welfare

system because of neglect, as opposed to those placed in the system because of physical abuse. Finally, two studies that focused on adolescent males showed that being suspended from school, or being moved to an unfamiliar area to reside, after leaving the foster care system, also contributed greatly, in regards to whether they would be involved in the criminal justice system in the future (Ryan, Hernandez, & Herz, 2007; Ryan, Testa, & Zhai, 2008).

Child protective services and maltreatment of youth. In 2008, 758,289 children were reported as having been victim of some form of abuse nationwide and approximately 36%, or 273,000, of them were taken from their abusive environments and placed into foster care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2010). With a few exceptions, removal of the child occurred after reports of a child protection investigation determined that the youth had been seriously mistreated and was still in danger, if the child were to remain at their present location. Because of the abuse that they have encountered, these children are at risk for various poor outcomes, including criminal legal problems (Yamposkaya, Armstrong, & McNeish, 2011).

The primary goal of child protective and investigative services is the identification and protection of those being mistreated, intentionally or unintentionally, by their primary caregivers or guardians (Bae et al., 2010). The focus of a child welfare investigation is to prevent and stop similar incidents from happening to that individual. Despite the efforts of child welfare agencies and workers, large numbers of children continue to experience repeated abuse (Bae et al., 2010). A study from the national child abuse and neglect data system points out that between 1998 and 2002, more than 350,000 children, in nine states, had been identified as repeat victims of abuse and this abuse had

been called in by concerned agencies or individuals more than once. It also showed that

approximately 17% of those victims had been victimized again, within five years of the

last reported incident (Fluke et al., 2005). These repeat rates mean that child welfare

agencies are trying to protect the same children, not once, but continuously. This

continuous cycle causes higher expenses on child welfare agency budgets and increases

the already heavy workload of child welfare workers. More importantly, these

unnecessary duplicate cases show that the system is flawed and is, in effect, failing those

it was designed to protect (Bae et al., 2010). Another huge failure exists within the child

welfare system. In the state of Florida, for instance, 40 children, in 2013, died within a

six month time frame while under the protection of the Department of Children and

Families, which is the formal name for Florida's child welfare system (Bright House

Network News, 2014).

The process for entering children into the system begins with screening and intake

of the children and adult family members (Shannon & Tappan, 2011). This stage helps

determine if child welfare will open an in-depth investigation, based on the allegations

(Shannon & Tappan, 2011). This first step is even more important when screening

children with disabilities, as they are less likely to report mistreatment by a caregiver

(Shannon & Tappan, 2011). As outlined earlier, a high number of children in foster care

have some sort of disability. According to Shannon and Tappan (2011), children with

disabilities frequently do not report abuse and are more likely to put off reporting, by at

least 1 month, if they do decide to report (Shannon & Tappan, 2011). The tendency to not

report is even more likely in cases of alleged sexual abuse. The reason children with

disabilities are less likely to report is often due to their heavy reliance on their caregivers

and, sometimes, their inability to comprehend that they are being mistreated (Shannon & Tappan, 2011). During the intake process, a caseworker must consider a wide variety of factors, least of which is the safety of the child in question. Not only must they identify whether or not there has been abuse or neglect, but they must also consider the safety of all the other children in the household and whether they are at risk in their present residence.

 Entering the foster care system. Schools and law enforcement agencies are considered mandatory reporters. That is, they are required to report any suspicion of child abuse to the proper authorities. These two agencies are more likely to notify the authorities about physical abuse than any other individual or agency. Those involved in the field of medicine tend to report the most incidents of sexual abuse. It is neighbors, friends, and associates that tend to report instances of neglect (Dickson, 1995). At the beginning of an investigation of child mistreatment, child welfare investigators will either call or visit the house where the child resides. The younger the child and the larger the family, the more contact child protective service (CPS) workers will likely have with the family (Connell et al., 2009). Since child neglect tends to be for long periods, CPS workers' continual contact with the family may give the worker the opportunity to personally witness or detect the occurrence of neglect or abuse. The number of CPS workers visits to a family affects the rates of recurrence. The more visits a CPS official makes to a family's home, the more likely CPS will be to detect the recurrence of abusive behavior by family members (Connell et al., 2009). This finding could be explained by the detection of other instances of abuse, or by the fact that abusive families are more likely to be reported again to CPS, following initial contact with the system (Connell et

al., 2009). However, the number of contacts or number of CPS workers have not been found to be a reliable indicator of whether there will be a recurrence of child maltreatment (Connell et al., 2009).

      Investigative process. Each case of suspected abuse that is logged into the child welfare agency is assigned a level of risk, ranging from low to high (Connell et al., 2009). As can be predicted, the lower the risk level, the lower the level of investigation and the higher the risk level, the higher the level of investigation. Sexual abuse cases are normally given a high-risk signature, compared to other types of mistreatment. Cases involving any significant injury is often seen as abuse and is investigated (Connell et al., 2009). Typically, notifications from law enforcement are prone to be given greater weight by child welfare officials and often include emergency calls for physical abuse and neglect. Reports from unknown or unidentified sources and school officials are more likely to involve instances of sexual abuse (Connell et al., 2009). The age of the child also helps determine the level of investigation at intake, with young children and high-risk families being more likely to receive higher levels of investigation. Usually, the intake investigative level is more focused and closely scrutinized during the second reporting, should that occur (Connell et al., 2009).

      Post investigative services. Post investigative services are a means to keep track of a particular case as well as to, hopefully, continue to prevent any further harm, should that be suspected. These services are provided voluntarily by child investigators, or they are performed at the direction of the courts. It is highly likely that investigators will place children under this program in response to what they consider to be an emergency situation or after an abuse investigation (Connell et al., 2009). Taking the children out of

the home is considered to be an extreme move. In these situations, the children are taken out of the home, placed under the care of the state, and placed in foster care, temporarily, until court-ordered custody can be established, at which time they will remain in foster care or be placed with responsible relatives. These actions are intended to decrease the risk of re-reporting because the children will have been removed from the source of the mistreatment, their families. Youth, who are placed in the care of a relative are at a lower risk of being reported again for maltreatment, compared to those who never received services (Connell et al., 2009). Foster care services significantly reduce the risk of re-reporting of neglect cases (Jonson-Reid, Drake, & Way, 2003).

      Aging out. Achieving independence as a young adult is a social norm in American society (Chen, 2010). The significance of independent living has a great impact on all adults. Transitioning from the parental home to living on one's own, as a young adult, holds great importance not only for the youth, but for their parents as well (Chen, 2010). For youth in foster care, the ages of 18 through 21, is known as the aging out period (Scannapieco et al., 2007). It is during this time that foster care youth face losing all, or most, of the support they have become accustomed to having, such as economic assistance, a social network, and guidance. Over the years, while under the care of the state, they have become used to others handling these matters for them (Williams, 2011).

      A major source of contention is that there is a lack of research on foster care, in regards to the services and programs available to the recipients while they are in the child welfare system. In fact, Kaplan, Skolank, and Turnbull (2009) state that a look at the available research shows that scholarly articles and studies on youth independence have not specifically focused on youth in foster care. Studies show that youths who are

residing in permanent housing or with a permanent parental figure have more positive outcomes including more housing stability, higher employment rates, less substance use/abuse, and less criminal justice contact than those with other living arrangements (Jones, 2011). Unfortunately, most youth exiting the system do not have permanent housing or permanent parental figures and the state, or the nation, for that matter, does not have a good system in place for this to happen; yet they are holding these former foster youth to a standard, as if they did have adequate support.

      Consequences of aging out. Adults that leave the foster care system have more than double the chances of getting money from social security due to their mental or physical impairments, hindering their ability to work (Zlotnick et al., 2012). Once they reach their 18th birthday, a domino effect hits these young adults. The young adult leaves the placement they have grown accustomed to, either on their 18th birthday or the next day, and is relocated or has to find their own new residence. At this time, they are also at increased risk for both mental and physical health problems (Zlotnick et al., 2012).

      At age 18, when these youth age out or leave the foster care system, they have very little support and suffer from higher than average rates of unemployment and homelessness. Mental health, and other issues, continue among children who have been involved in foster care as pre-teens and younger (Zlotnick et al., 2012).The concept that a child could have adulthood risks and ramifications as a result of trauma or other circumstances during their childhood is not new.

Effects of Foster Care and Students Transitioning Out of Foster Care

      Children who have left foster care suffer from higher rates of physical and mental disabilities than the rest of the population. They also are more likely not to trust others,

which can lead to them being unable to live with others, in a group or family setting. In one study examining adults who had been in foster care in Oregon and Washington State, Georgiades (2005) found 20% suffered from depression. The researchers also found a higher number of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among foster children than that of combat veterans, at 25% (Georgiades, 2005). Children in foster care are more prone to having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), as well as other developmental problems. More recent studies show that youth placed in foster care are likely to receive more harm in foster care than if they had stayed at the abusing parental home (Koch, 2007; Lawrence & Carlson, 2006). These are some of the issues that will be investigated in this proposed study.

Researchers studying homeless populations have found that those who were in foster care as a child were more likely to have mental disorders as an adult (Zlotnick et al., 2012). Homelessness, which is prevalent with former foster care youth, can have a serious impact on one's sense of identity (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). Riggs and Coyle (2002) consucted a study based on in-depth interviews with four young people who faced the experience of homelessness in early adulthood. The findings indicated that one's own sense of identity is lost, as other people impose their own set of views on that person's plight in being homeless. This process is so dominant that it can reach the point where one's identity appears to completely disappear (Riggs & Coyle, 2002). White, Gallegos, O'Brien, Weisberg, and Pecora (2011) delved into this subject in more depth and studied the correlation between having a history of homelessness and current mental health symptoms, connected with post-traumatic stress disorder, among 542 alumni of foster care. The researchers found that approximately one in five alumni of foster care

experienced homelessness since leaving care. They also discovered that foster care alumni had symptoms of psychological disorders, associated with PTSD, at rates greater than the general population (White et al., 2011).

The connection between institutional neglect and reactive attachment disorder has been noted in the literature (Smyte, Zeanah, Gleason, Drury, & Fox, 2012). There are two types of reactive attachment disorder: the emotionally withdrawn and those who are more social. These disorders have been described in young children who have been mistreated or were raised deprived or neglected (Smyte et al., 2012). Many children throughout the world end up in institutions, through no fault of their own, but as a result of abuse or neglect, abandonment, or family incapacity or death. Often, these institutions are composed of group settings with numerous caregivers with rotating schedules. Their infrequent interactions with the youth do not adequately support the development of a focused attachment relationship between a child and a specific caregiver. Significant numbers of children living in institutions show signs of attachment disorders (Smyte et al., 2012).

Independent Living Programs

The purpose of an independent living program (ILP) is to provide more successful outcomes for foster care youth in the areas of education, employment, income, housing, etc. The concept of being independent, or being in control of your daily affairs, is a social norm in American society. The emotional and mental significance of being able to live independently has great significance to most adults (Fang-pei, 2010). However, contrary to its intended purpose, youth that participate in ILPs typically have not been successful in those areas (Georgiades, 2005). In 1998, approximately 40,200 adolescents were listed

as receiving ILP services in the United States (Georgiades, 2005). Even more youth are now enrolled in ILP services, since recent ILP legislation now gives states the option of extending ILP services until the age of 21. In the past, in most states, these services stopped for these youth once they reached age 18 (Georgiades, 2005).

The federal ILP. Independent living programs have become the most commonly used method to prepare children in the foster care system, who are about to transition out of the child welfare system, for a life of living on their own (Naccarato & DeLorenzo, 2008). In 2005, 24,407 former foster youth transitioned into independent living. In an attempt to assist these transitioning young adults, ILPs were enacted through the Consolidated Omnibus Budget and Reconciliation Act and Title IV-E Social Security Act of 1985, which is federally funded. The purpose of the legislation was to assist transitioning foster youth into adulthood and successful independent living (Naccarato & DeLorenzo, 2008). Independent living programs were intended to better equip transitioning foster youth for the challenges associated with adulthood by arming them with the required skills needed to live alone. Despite the existence of legislation and policy directives addressing the needs of transitioning former foster youth, there is scant literature on whether the ILPs are effective (Naccarato & DeLorenzo, 2008). In 1986, a class action suit brought on for the benefit of former foster children in New York, sparked the initial ILP legislation (Naccarato & DeLorenzo, 2008). The plaintiffs were homeless people in New York who asserted that the New York City child welfare system did not prepare them adequately for independent living. Evidently, there was merit to their claim, as the court ruled in their favor and agreed that the New York child welfare department had not done an adequate job of preparing them for independent living. A few

of the areas that were rated poorly by the court included, but is not limited to, education, employment, and drug use (Georgiades, 2005). These are also the areas identified in the literature where many former foster youth experience poor outcomes.

ILPs are primarily for young adults who are not planning to reunite with their families and for whom adoption is not an option. For the most part, it is for the teenagers that will be in foster care until they age out (Georgiades, 2005). Because ILPs serve primarily to prepare youth in foster care for independent living, once they age out, their lesson plan consists of training in basic living, such as homemaking, food preparation, and financial management. ILPs should also assist these youth in completing their basic education before they leave the system and with any immediate future educational or employment goals (Georgiades, 2005).

State independent living (SIL) programs are designed to prepare transitioning youth in foster care for independent living. The program allows 16 to 21 year-olds to reside in a home or placement of their choice and receive a monthly stipend for living expenses, provided they are attending school or working (DCF, 2012). The most a former foster care youth can earn for their stipend is $1,256 a month. Those attending school must have at least a 2.0 GPA. Those working must be employed part-time, as a minimum, and must earn a minimum of $100 per month. They also must report to their caseworker on a monthly basis (DCF, 2012).

Aftercare program. The aftercare program in Florida is a part of their road to independence program and it provides funds to help the youth get started on their way to independence. It can also be used if they run into an emergency situation, like becoming homeless. It can only be used once, however (DCF, 2012). According to the State,

"Youth are given an aftercare individual assessment and attend a staffing with the ILP coordinator" (p. 2). After evaluating the assessment, an aftercare plan is developed if the services requested will extend beyond the youth's time in the program. Assistance from the aftercare program is provided by supplying funds to help with rent, mortgage payments, and utility deposits (Florida DCF, 2012).

Independent Living Services Policies

Again, there is very little information evaluating the effectiveness of the independent living programs on successfully assisting foster youth in leading a happy, independent life (Government Accounting Office, 1999). The few studies that have been done have methodological problems, small sample sizes, and are limited in scope and reach (Collins, 2001; Montgomery et al., 2006; Naccarato & DeLorenzo, 2008).

More recently, some light was shed on this subject, as two independent living service models were initiated in Los Angeles County, California. One evaluation was composed of a tutorial/mentoring model (ACF, 2008) and the other consisted of an independent living life-skills training model (ACF, 2008). Both evaluations were conducted as part of the Multi-Site Chafee Evaluation. The two evaluations did not demonstrate any significant differences between the participants, regardless of which model they had been trained under. The findings of these ILP studies are, at best, ambiguous. While there are some studies that have found that youth completing ILPs have poorer outcomes than other youth in adulthood, in areas such as academics, jobs, and financial management (Georgiades, 2005), other studies show that ILPs effectively assist in preparing foster youth for independent living, in those same areas (Georgiades, 2005).

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 was implemented to assist youth in the child welfare system, who are transitioning into independent living. Congress has also passed legislation, which funds the Education and Training Voucher Program. This program was developed to help former foster youth go to college or vocational school for free or at reduced costs (Mares, 2010). The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 is a relatively new law that focuses on the problems with the foster care system. This new law extends benefits and funding for former foster children between the ages of 18 and 21 (Mares, 2010). In the past, these services and funds were not available to them. The primary purpose of the foster care system, now, is the same as it was when it was first implemented, in the 19th century, and that is to ensure that all children are able to grow up in a safe environment, regardless of biological parents or circumstances (Mallon, 2012).

The passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 and the Fostering Connection to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Mallon, 2012) signaled the end of years of changes and reform in the foster care field. These significant legislative Acts reinforce and strengthen the purpose of the Child Welfare and Adoption Assistance Act (Mallon, 2012). This Act, which was passed into law in 1980, was the result of an increased concern that youth were falling through the cracks while in foster care (Mallon, 2012). This law was based on concrete evidence and an ever developing philosophy that if former foster youth were provided a structured curriculum of training, they would be more likely to experience safety, stability, and security (Mallon, 2012). AFSA and Fostering Connections take earlier laws and expand on the many new and various policies that were provided for the states to upgrade and improve their foster care systems

(Mallon, 2012).

Recent federal legislation has strengthened the rights of these youth and their families to be provided a structured program of independent living skills. Legislation has enabled this by increasing the authority of state child welfare agencies to identify and support children that have been identified to be taken from their home and placed somewhere else for their safety (Landsman & Boel-Studt, 2011). Past policies have given more weight to the biological parents and their rights to raise their children, so this is a major departure from past norms (Landsman & Boel-Studt, 2011). Reformed legislation for child welfare has served to ease these tensions while trying to implement a system in which children achieve a more permanent home, are able to be at their best, both physically and mentally, and are able to live safely (Landsman & Boel-Studt, 2011).

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 was established to provide for more permanent placements, as well as to attend to the care and safety of foster care youth (Landsman & Boel-Studt, 2011). The wording of the law holds remnants of the belief that relatives, if not the parents, should be given priority in making out-of-home placements and should be provided with support. It also allows these youth to remain in the foster care system longer (Landsman & Boel-Studt, 2011). The Act more clearly delineates children's rights to be protected and to have a healthy, structured environment. It favors placements with relatives rather than with strangers. The child's right to maintain connections to his or her primary family is balanced with the rights of parents and relatives to be involved in the child's life (Landsman & Boel-Studt, 2011). The Act also increases efforts, by the state, to find and contact family members. It requires the state to provide notice to family members of that child, within 30 days after a

child's removal, to explain their legal options to stay in the child's life, should they choose to do so (Landsman & Boel-Studt, 2011).

With the short history of ILPs and their consistent track record of not having enough funding, there are only a few studies that have been conducted to measure the effectiveness of ILPs (Georgiades, 2005). This researcher's proposed dissertation may add to the literature by exploring the lived experiences of foster care children that either have or have not participated in an ILP.

Youth with Disabilities

Youth with disabilities are at an especially high risk for an unsuccessful transition from foster care to independence. Research indicates that between 50% and 80% of foster care youth have some sort of disability (United Cerebral Palsy & Children's Rights, 2006). In response to these facts, The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (Chafee Act) increased and broadened programs and services for youth about to age out of the system, while the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) allowed for special needs education opportunities, at the federal level, for these youth (Hill, 2009).

There are large numbers of disabled youth in the child welfare system. Youth in special education and youth in foster care do poorly when transitioning into living on their own, successfully. It is even more difficult for a foster care youth with disabilities to attempt to achieve independence (Courtney et al., 2005). Research shows that in side-by-side comparisons with other youth their age, youth that fall under both categories are more likely to be unemployed or work for less money, have greater prospects for facing poverty and homelessness, and tend to be less likely to attend college or pursue

vocational courses (Courtney et al., 2005). These statistics and poor outcomes have prompted policymakers and lawmakers to pass legislation and provide funding to support the transition of these vulnerable youth. However, the policies are not clear, as far as the needs are concerned, for youth who are served by both systems (Hill, 2009).

Both the Chafee Act and the IDEA actually mandate specific services and support be provided for youth that are transitioning out of their particular systems. Both policies specifically call for a collaborative approach (Hill, 2009). However, poor outcomes still remain for youth receiving services through both the child welfare and the special education systems. This indicates that this collaboration is either not happening or is not being conducted properly (Hill, 2009).

 Although there is only limited research on this topic, many of the 25,000 youth who transition out of the foster care system every year in the United States (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2004), also receive special education services, as a result of academic and/or emotional problems (Farruggia, Greenberger, Chuansheug, & Heckhausen, 2006). A 2004 GAO report showed that 30% to 40% of foster care youth have chronic medical problems. The same report also indicated that nearly double the number of these youth, as compared with their peer group, not in foster care, have had significant educational challenges and failures (Hill, 2009).

According to Jones (2010), transitioning youth have consistently poor academic outcomes, including not being able to finish high school. Only 39% to 65% of foster care youth earn high school diplomas or GEDs before leaving the foster care system (Jones, 2010). The reverse is true concerning graduation rates in the general population, which are around 85% (Jones, 2010). Foster care youth also tend to drop out of school more

frequently than youth in the general population. This lack of achievement in education plays a factor in transitioning former foster care youth's higher rates of unemployment, homelessness, and antisocial behavior (Farruggia et al., 2006).

Existing policies. IDEA 2004 is the current reauthorization of the IDEA. Under the IDEA federal law, states are required to provide special education services for students with disabilities (Hill, 2009). IDEA also requires that special needs students have an individual education plan (IEP). An IEP is tailored to a student's unique needs as it pertains to their academic goals. It is reviewed and updated on an annual basis. The plan is completed by his or her teacher, guidance counselor, and family members. Once a student turns 16 years of age, the law dictates that transition goals and milestones be part of the plan; however, this is rarely done (Hill, 2009).

When the Chafee Act passed in 1999, it amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. The amendment granted states more funding for their independent living services, specifically for young adults transitioning out of foster care (Hill, 2009). The Act also includes help for young adults, ages 18-21, who have aged out of foster care. It makes it mandatory that states use a percentage of their Chafee funds to assist these youth. For example, states can authorize up to 30% of their ILP funds to be used for housing, for these older youth, or they may choose to bolster their Medicaid assistance to these young adults, age 18 and over, who have transitioned out of foster care (Hill, 2009). Geenen and Powers (2007) found that IEP plans of the foster youth, who received special education services, made little or no reference to Chafee independent living services or transition planning. This was despite the fact that all of the youth in their study would be eligible to receive these services, as they were all a part of the child welfare system (Hill,

2009).

According to Courtney and colleagues (2005), very little is known about how foster care youth are able to sustain themselves once they make the transition to independent living. Courtney and colleagues (2005) added that out of the 20,000 youths that aged out of the foster care system, many found themselves completely on their own. Today, this number has increased to 25,000 (Zlotnick et al., 2012). Hill (2009) conducted a review of the literature on former foster youth who are now living on their own. Hill (2009) concluded that the literature is limited and that there has been a drastic lack of research in this area over the past 30 years. In the proposed study, the researcher will take note of participants who may disclose a disability, in order to document their transiting experience.

Role of the State

When it comes to the well-being of children in the child welfare system, the question of whether the state can parent is constantly debated (Bullock, Courtney, Parker, Sinclair, & Thoburn, 2007). Some argue that although the state shares parenting duties with pre-screened foster care families, the state has the responsibility to care for these youth on a temporary basis (Bullock et al., 2007). The state needs assist foster care youth transitioning to adulthood in obtaining some form of permanent parenting. Studies indicate that there is an increase in the understanding of the effectiveness of long-term foster family relationships (Schofield & Beck, 2009). There are studies that show how to apply a stable and structured parenting model to foster care situations and how, after leaving foster care, children still need support into adulthood (Schofield & Beck, 2009).

New federal laws now provide expanded funding to assist states in securing

additional services for young adults transitioning out of foster care and into adulthood

(Collins, 2004). The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 and the Chafee Foster Care

Independence Program give states the ability to design advanced programming in the

areas of education, housing, life skills, and other necessary areas. Additionally, the

Education and Training Voucher Program specifically provides financial assistance to

former foster youth attending college or vocational training (Collins, 2004).

Despite this legislation, the states contend they have limited funds for the child

welfare system, in general, and that money must go to those most deserving, i.e., those

meeting the established requirements. This is not just a problem in the United States; it is

a problem worldwide. For example, in the UK, concerns about funding the foster care

system continue (Ravanis, 2006). In the United States, the state of Florida is unable to

fund the continuing needs of those that meet the requirements for help (Eckerd Family

Foundation, 2010). Despite admitting to faults in the system (Eckerd Family Foundation,

2010), the State currently cuts off funds if the youth do not meet the minimum

requirements: not having more than two unexcused absences during a quarter and

maintaining a 2.0 grade point average or higher (DCF, 2012). However, some states

decide not to petition for the federal money available through this legislation. The

concern is, with nearly 25,000 youth aging out of foster care annually, this problem will

persist in the foreseeable future (Williams, 2009).

In response to early reports of the challenges facing former foster youth,

Congress created the Title IV-E Independent Living Program in 1986, which provided

states with funds that they could use to prepare their foster youth for the transition to

adulthood. The Chafee Act, as part of the Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA), replaced

that program (Mares, 2010). The FCIA provides states with a maximum of $140 million each year that can be used to provide independent living services to foster youth still in the system. The money is for services for children under the age of 18 and post-aging out former foster youth (generally 18-21 years of age). In 2002, another $60 million in federal funding was added for a post-secondary education and training voucher (ETV) program (Mares, 2010).

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act was passed by Congress in 2008, as a result of the passage of the Chafee Act, lessons learned, and the increase in the scholarly literature on adolescent brain development. The Fostering Connections Act provides states with the option of extending foster care to age 21, improving requirements for educational stability, improving oversight of health care, extending and improving adoption incentives, and promoting adoption tax credits (Eckerd Family Foundation, 2010). According to the Eckerd Family Foundation (2010), it is the individual state's responsibility to ensure foster care youth are prepared to live independently by the time they reach the age of 18. The state admits that programs to prepare these youth are inadequate. Despite this fact, the state gives foster care youth adult responsibilities, in order to continue to receive their monthly stipend and education benefits, even though they know that most of these youth are alone and do not have any adult support.

Moral agency involves the ability to consider alternative courses of action, to choose one course, rather than another, and to justify the decision by appealing to appropriate standards of conduct (Brown, 2000, p. 25). "Can corporations or, in this case, governments and organizations do this? This question has been the subject of much

debate. One position is that only individuals are responsible for acts. The other side says

yes, while they are not moral persons, they are moral agents or agencies" (Miller, 2011,

p. 28). In effect, the argument is if an agency, organization, or corporation is considered

to be moral, then it can be assumed that they have the same sense of responsibility as

individuals do. They have the power to make good choices and take responsibility for

them (Miller, 2011).

Some hold the belief that society owes special consideration to its citizens

because of their relationship to each other (Miller, 2011). There are two common

accounts of the special rights one owes to its citizens theory, rejected by Author Vernon

(as cited in Miller, 2011). One represents the idea of give and take and presents a state as

a mutual-benefit society. It states that special duties are necessary to ensure fairness for

the benefits received through the state. Another account appeals to national identity and

states that we should all take care of each other because we are all part of one large

family (Miller, 2011). Another viewpoint, at the other end of the spectrum, states that

when people come together as a unified group, they impose certain risks on each other

(Miller, 2011). This creates cosmopolitan responsibilities that allow a state to put legal

precautionary measures in place to help their fellow man through humanitarian

intervention and a global harm principle (Miller, 2011).

There is an increased need among former foster care young adults who currently

remain eligible to receive independent living services from the state. The state of Florida

said that the FY 2010-2011 funding for this program would not stay at the same level of

funding as it had been in previous years (DCF, 2012). In 2010, to help compensate for

this shortage, the Florida state legislature amended the rules to allow reduced payments

and to implement rules regarding the control and administration of these payments, as they pertain to providing services to this population, as provided under Section 409.1451.F.S. (DCF, 2012). On June 2, 2000, S.409.141 (3) (a), Florida Statute was officially approved. This new law made it possible for young adults, still in school, to stay in the foster care system and to remain entitled to receive state benefits, up to age 23 (Florida DCF, 2001).

Foster Care in Florida

The volume of young adults leaving the foster care system in Florida is similar to the rest of the nation. In 2009, 1,475 youth exited the Florida child welfare system, compared to 1,255 in 2006 (Report of Independent Living Services for Florida' Foster Youth, 2009). The number of young adults who participated in Florida's Road to Independence Program has also increased, from 1,347 in 2006 to 2,045 in 2009 (Report, 2009). The Road to Independence Program is another name for the state's ILP. According to the state of Florida's Report (2009), "An alarming statistic, however, is the growing number of youth who are aging out of care and for most of them leaving without permanent families" (p. 20).

Current trends in Florida foster care. Legislation, allowing youth currently enrolled in the state's foster care system to stay until they become 21 years old, was passed in the spring of 2013 and signed into law by the governor. It also allows them to stay with their current care providers. This is significant because they were previously discharged from the system at age 18 (Wilkins, 2013). Known as the Nancy C. Detert Common Sense and Comparison Independent Living Act, the youth are now given more time to transition into adulthood. Unfortunately, it keeps them in the same system that did

not prepare them for independent living, previously (Wilkins, 2013). Although Florida just passed this law, the state has had the ability to do this for the past two years. In 2008, Congress passed a bill that allows states to receive federal reimbursements for the cost of caring for foster youth, until age 21. This program began in 2011 (McLaughlin, 2013). Since then, other states, and now Florida, have extended the age of foster youths to 21 (McLaughlin, 2013). Under the law, youth are free to leave the foster care system, any time after their 18th birthday, but now they have the option to return, if they change their minds or are unsuccessful on their own. Teens that choose to stay will remain at their current residential placement until their 21st birthday. No additional funds were approved for this new legislation, so the state will have to make it work with their current funding (McLaughlin, 2013).

Research Studies

Many experts in the foster care field agree that, since 1999, there has been an increase in addressing the challenges foster care youth face when trying to achieve independence. Despite this focus, these youth still are experiencing poor outcomes. It is still not clear what needs to be done to slow this trend (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Osterling & Hines, 2006; Scannapieco et al., 2007; Zlotnick et al., 2012). Scannapieco and colleagues (2007) suggested one way to improve the current flawed system is by focus on three themes: "youth focused practice, collaboration and communication with youth, and unmet needs, such as permanent connections" (p. 427).

A significant amount of literature shows how children in the child welfare system have poorer outcomes, in regards to physical and mental health and economic security, compared to the general population (Leve et al., 2009). Landsverk, Burns, Stambaugh,

and Reutz (2006) stated that "between one-half and three-fourths of children and youth in foster care experience behavior and social-emotional problems" (p. 1). Research also suggests that the transition from the foster care system to living on their own can place excess stress and pressure on these youth, which may contribute to their inability to handle the new challenges (Berzin, 2010; Shaw, 2010). Homelessness is a major concern for many youth in foster care who are forced to depart the system at age 18 and try to achieve independence (Berzin, 2010; Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2009).

Two studies have used focus groups to collect the opinions and actual experiences of foster youth, presently and formerly in the system, on transitioning out of foster care. McMillen et al. (1997) studies four focus groups of youth that had aged out, between the ages 18 and 23. Two of the focus groups took place in urban areas (St. Louis and Kansas City) and the other two took place in rural areas in the state of Missouri. The results indicated that well-run foster homes, with caring and supportive caregivers, were seen as helpful in preparing youth for independent living. Classes and money directed at helping youth achieve independent living were also reported as helpful (McMillen et al., 1997). Being involved in independent living activities was positive. Participants reported that it provided some clarity and understanding of what living on one's own was actually like. The young adults also appreciated the financial skills training. (McMillen et al., 1997).

A few years ago, Scannapieco and colleagues (2007) conducted a study consisting of six focus groups, which included former foster youth, in addition to traditional caseworkers, etc. Three prevalent themes emerged from the data: 1) a need for youth-focused practice, 2) a need for collaboration and better communication, and 3) unmet or missing needs, including more hands-on training. Having a more permanent relationship

with an adult mentor, or some sort of support system, after aging out was also identified as a critical missing need (Scannapieco et al., 2007). Interdependency or quasi-independence was viewed as necessary, rather than the young adult being left completely to his or her own accord. The concept of interdependence, rather than independence, may present itself in the current research study's interviews as a critical component that could be key to correcting the current and ongoing downfall of former foster care youth.

Gaps in the literature. According to Scannapieco et al. (2007), foster youth, leaving the system and experiencing poor outcomes when attempting to live independently, did not come into public awareness until 1884. Despite public awareness and some effort, much remains unchanged, regarding their well-being. These youth still face many obstacles, once discharged from the state foster care system. Even though there has been an increased interest in former foster youth, there is little research on the topic. A large amount of the published literature are reports and statistical data from public and private agencies, such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), and National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information (AFCARS, 2005; Casey Family Programs, 2003; 2005; Lee, 2010; National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, 2005). Few studies focus on the life experiences or determination of the few who set and achieve goals and, to the best of their abilities, rise above life's challenges and go on to lead successful lives (Davis, 2006; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Lee, 2010; Merdinger & Wyatt, 2005; Merdinger, Hines, Lemon & Wyatt, 2002; Wolanin, 2005). Instead, most of the literature is focused on the deficiencies and risks of being a foster youth, in the foster care system (Casey Family Programs, 2003; Courtney et al., 2005; Geenen &

Powers, 2007; Zlotnick et al., 2012).

Social support, which is often taken for granted in the general population, is critical for vulnerable groups, such as youth in foster care, especially when facing important crossroads in life (Collins, Spencer, & Ward., 2010). Although moving from foster care to independence is a vulnerable time for foster care youth, there is not a lot of information on programs that are available for to support this vulnerable group. There is also not a lot of information on how effective these programs are (Collins et al., 2010). Research on these transitioning adults usually does not take into account the psychological well-being of the individual, before evaluating how successful, or unsuccessful, they were in achieving independence (Farruggia et al., 2006). This leads to uncertainty regarding the effectiveness, of the system and programs, in preparing this population for adulthood and on how they compare, as a group, with their peers who were never in foster care. These factors need to be accounted for in order to address whether the youth are ill prepared before transitioning or if the support systems are not there, once they do transition (Farruggia et al., 2010). There have only been a handful of studies that have tried to evaluate this phenomenon (Kortakamp & Ehrle, 2002). The researcher will attempt to address the gaps in the literature in this proposed dissertation, with the intention of gaining more insight on these topics, from the perspective of former foster youth.

Research Questions

1) What are the lived experiences of youth transitioning from foster care into independent living?

2) What are the successes, challenges, and risks for young adults transitioning from

foster care?

Chapter 3: Methodology

The general aim of this phenomenological qualitative study was to understand the lived experiences of former foster care youth, living in the central Florida area. The researcher's intentions were to achieve an understanding of how young adults, who have been in foster homes at any point in their lives, *make sense* of their experiences in the foster care system. Making sense refers to their perceptions about their circumstances and how they view themselves, as a result of experiencing the system. In this study, the researcher conducted interviews with nine former foster care children, drawing questions from a previous, similar study (Lee, 2010) and following interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2012). This chapter presents a detailed account of the proposed research methodology and design, including the process for selecting participants. It also outlines the steps of the IPA process.

Research Design

The design of the study is a qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis, which is a "recently developed and rapidly growing approach to qualitative inquiry" (Smith et al., 2012, p. 1). Examining how people make sense of major events in their lives was the key basis for using this approach. IPA, as a qualitative approach, allows the researcher to explore experiences of the participants, based on the events themselves (Smith et al., 2012).

The research is dependent on the former foster children's conscious reflections of their lived experiences, based on a recollection of their past. As van Manen (1990) observed, "A person cannot reflect on lived experience while living through the

experience" (p. 10). Making meaning out of the lived experiences of participants is the basis of phenomenological research. The point of phenomenological research is to bring us closer to the world and eventually become the world. To "be" in the world requires us to "know" the world (van Manen, 1990, p. 1). To know requires the act of questioning the lived experience. "The more we know how people experience the world, the more connected we are to the world" (van Manen, 1990, p. 1).

This qualitative method has, at its root, is based on the desire to know and connect to the world. In other words, phenomenology research refers to a philosophy in which the experience of another person is made understandable to others (Moustakas, 1994). In his or her efforts to uncover or understand the experience of another, a phenomenological researcher must attempt to establish a credible relationship with the person, so that person can feel confident in providing insight into his or her life (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (as quoted in Creswell, 2009), stated that "Understanding the lived experiences marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method, and the procedure involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning" (p. 13).

Instrument

The study design included an instrument (see Appendix C) used by Dr. Dora Lee (2010) in her 2010 dissertation titled, "A Phenomenological Study: The Lived Experience of Former Foster Youth Attending a Four-Year College in Southern California." Dr. Lee has given this researcher permission to use the instrument for this proposed study. Dr. Lee's qualitative study examined the lived experiences of eight individuals, attending a four-year college, who were all part of a campus support program for former foster youth

(Lee, 2010). The purpose of her phenomenological study was to understand and explore the lived experiences of these unique college students who had gone through the foster care system. Dr. Lee explained the phenomenon of being a foster youth, through the students' narratives. The narratives conveyed stories about the students' experiences in foster care system, their journeys as foster youths, and how they came to be among the few who made it into college (Lee, 2010).

Participants

The study population consisted of nine former foster youth, between the ages of 18 and 23, in central Florida. Many shared common experiences, such as living in group homes, as wards of the state, and having a history of emotional and/or physical abuse from family members or caregivers. Besides their experience of being in foster care, this population was also chosen because of their efforts, since then, to live independently. The researcher recruited nine suitable participants, through independent living services agencies, referrals from other participants, and professional contacts, using snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). Snowball sampling assists researchers in identifying potential subjects for their studies when it is difficult to find participants. In snowball sampling, the researcher asks for referrals from his or her few study candidates (Patton, 2002).

Involvement and participation in the study was voluntary. Participants were given the choice to withdraw or discontinue their involvement in the study at any time. No form of compensation was offered for being in the study. The participants' privacy and personal information is strictly protected. Participants were asked where they would like the interview to take place. Interviews took place in comfortable and familiar settings. The settings were "safe (for all parties) and reasonably quiet, and free

from interruptions, such as reserved space at a library to ensure their privacy" (Smith et al., 2012, p. 62). The researcher interviewed participants, individually, behind closed doors, on three separate occasions.

Procedures

The researcher first obtained permission to conduct the study from the Institutional Review Board of Nova Southeastern University. Once a youth agreed to participate, this researcher scheduled an initial 60-minute interview with the youth. At the initial interview, the researcher went over the informed consent (Appendix A) and answered questions about the research before proceeding with the interview.

Three 60-minute interviews were scheduled with each student. The study is based on a set of interview questions (Appendix C) developed and used by Dr. Lee (2010) to assist in understanding the lived experiences of former foster youth. Each interview is separated by, at least, a one-week interval. The time in between each interview gave the researcher time to reflect.

Interview one. The initial 60-minute interview was centered on developing trust and comfort (Polkinghorne, 1983). At the start of the first interview, the researcher described the reason for the research and how the data will be used. To establish trust, the researcher asked each participant general demographic questions, as well as questions about his or her experience in the ILP. Once this researcher felt the participant had reached a level of comfort, he began exploring their lived experiences by asking the youth to explain and describe their past (Seidman, 2006). To keep the youths' stories in context, the researcher asked them to share memories of their childhood and how they came to be placed in the foster care system.

Interview two. The purpose of the second interview was to gather details of participants' experiences from the first interview (Seidman, 2006). The participants were asked to go into more detail about their pasts, describing their relationships with their biological and foster families and what it was like to be placed into foster care. Before the end of this interview, the researcher gave the participants the opportunity to include, or elaborate on, any experiences they may have left out.

Interview three. The researcher focused the last interview on getting the students to make meaning out of their life experiences (Seidman, 2006). The researcher pursued discovering how their experiences have shaped their lives and what it portends for the future. The researcher also explained to the youth the benefit in attempting to make meaning out of exploring their past while, also, looking at their present. Lastly, the final interview attempted to provide closure.

Interview protocol. Throughout the process, the researcher encouraged participants to reflect on their lived experiences. The researcher conducted an in-depth interview into their experiences, then reflected and identified themes, in preparation for the next interview (Lee, 2010).

The interview questions were open-ended and unstructured, allowing the participants to guide and elaborate on information that they felt was important and relevant to their experience (Lee, 2010). The questions were open-ended to allow for full exploration of specific events. Privacy of the participants was held in the utmost confidence and participants' responses to the interview questions will be kept confidential. No personal identifying information about any participant was sought, or obtained, by the researcher. The researcher recorded the interview data and had it

transcribed. IPA requires an exact record of the data collection and, for individual interviews, an audio recording is the norm (Smith et al., 2012). The researcher used audio recording for data collection purposes, and the researcher will be the only one to hear the interviews. The researcher is currently holding and safeguarding the results of the interviews and the information will be physically destroyed upon publication of the dissertation.

The interview protocol was loosely structured, to allow for flexibility. This gave the researcher and the participants the opportunity to fully explore and learn as much as possible about the phenomenon under question (Lee, 2010).The intention of the three question sets was to gradually acquire detailed accounts of the participants' lived experiences. Bracketing what the researcher previously knew about the youth, foster care, foster youth, and theories, the researcher did not go into the interviews with expected accounts or specific revelations about their experiences.

Analysis

This researcher's goal, in regards to the analysis, was to develop a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of former foster youth. For the general qualitative study, the researcher read the transcript several times, established codes, determined patterns, and created themes (Smith et al., 2012). The researcher based the analysis on the steps of IPA, which involves a six-step process for interpreting and analyzing in-depth phenomenological interviews: 1) Reading and re-reading, 2) initial noting, 3) developing emergent themes, 4) searching for connections across emergent themes, 5) moving to the next case, and 6) looking for patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2012, p. 82-101). The IPA process of data analysis and interpretation begins with a description of the process of

analysis, for a single case, followed by the detailed analysis of the first case, then moving to the second case and doing the same, then moving to the third case, and so on (Smith et al., 2012).

IPA step one. In the study, the researcher began the process of analysis by listening to all the interviews a minimum of two times. The first step of an IPA analysis involves becoming fully acquainted to and knowledgeable of the initial information. In order to do this, one needs to read the initial transcript multiple times, until one is fully knowledgeable of the data (Smith et al., 2012). In order to establish a professional relationship with the participant, it is important to become thoroughly familiar with the data. Re-reading the information helps the researcher understand how the information relates to each other and allows the researcher to start structuring the data, in a manner conducive for further analysis (Smith et al., 2012). The researcher used transcripts, took notes, and logged interpretations into a reflection journal. The researcher listened and re-listened to the audiotapes and read and re-read the journal notes, to get a full understanding of the participant's recollections.

IPA step two. The second step of the analysis is the most detailed and time consuming (Smith et al, 2012). This step involves examination of the language used and content on a very basic level (Smith et al., 2012). During this phase, the researcher becomes more familiar with the audiotapes and begins to learn and understand the ways in which the participant relates to his or her world. In the study, this researcher's aim was to have extensive and well-documented notes and observations on the information.

IPA step three. Step three involves developing emergent themes (Smith et al., 2012). In looking for emergent themes, the researcher has to sift through the data and

eliminate that which is not necessary, while at the same time, maintaining and documenting information of value to the study (Smith et al., 2012). This involves shifting from working primarily with the audiotapes, to working more exclusively with the notes (Smith et al., 2012).

Turning notes into themes involves producing a clear statement of what was important, as it relates to a specific piece of transcript (Smith et al., 2012). Themes are usually expressed as phrases and contain enough information to be precise, but are general enough to be conceptual. Themes represent the participant's original words and thoughts, as well as the interpretations of the researcher (Smith et al., 2012).

IPA step four. Step four consisted of searching for connections across emergent themes (Smith et al., 2012). Up to this point, a set of themes had been established, within the transcript, and themes were placed in the order they came up. The next step involved the "charting, or mapping, of how the analyst thinks the themes fit together" (Smith et al., 2012, p. 96).

IPA step five. Step five involved "moving to the next participant's audiotape and notes and repeating the process" (Smith et al., 2012, 100). It is important to prepare the next case and subsequent cases, as their own unique studies. This has to be done while simultaneously bracketing the ideas that emerged from the first case, while working on the second. This continues for each subsequent participant (Smith et al., 2012).

IPA step six. Step six involved coding and searching for patterns across cases**,** and then themes (Smith et al., 2012). In this step, the researcher attempts to find out how a theme in one case helps bring clarity to a different case, as well as which themes are the best representation of the data.

Potential Researcher Bias

I became intimately acquainted with the foster care system in 2008, by accident. The real estate market had substantially decreased in activity and I was looking for other forms of employment. I answered an internet ad for what I thought was a recreational assistant. It turned out to be a boys group home. Unfortunately, the owners of the group home would prove to be very unethical. Toxic people tend to possess one or more of the following traits: misusing funds intended for the boys, falsifying reports, or not properly caring for those they were in charge of caring for (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Since foster youth who have continued with adult support fare better, I created a prototype nonprofit organization to assist. This is a very small step, but hopefully others will join in and support this worthy cause.

This researcher managed any potential bias he may have through bracketing (Smith et al., 2012) and maintenance of a research journal. Phenomenological research, like all qualitative research, includes the understanding that the researcher is subjective and that the researcher needs to be aware of his or her biases. This researcher made efforts to manage his bias. In his research journal, this researcher penned a reflective and interpretive piece on the experience and insights gained from the data. He also wrote about what he learned, as well as commented on possible issues to follow-up on in the next interview (van Manen, 1997).

Ethical Considerations

Each participant was given a clear explanation about the nature of the study and was advised that they are free to exit from the study at any time. The anonymity of the participants is protected at all times, through the use of pseudonyms. Participants were

informed that the study is voluntary and that they are able to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions related to the study. All of the participants received the same set of questions. To ensure confidentiality, everyone involved in the study had their responses coded and were given pseudonyms.

Trustworthiness

The researcher established a sense of trust with participants by reading and rereading the transcripts to discern codes, patterns, categories, and themes that emerged from the data, thereby developing an understanding of the whole. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that the areas of validity and reliability are the crux of what establishes a research report as credible. Conducting member checks is at the core of establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 314). The researcher conducted member checks, which consisted of having the participants review the materials and data used for the study and getting their feedback, either positive or negative, as to how they were conveyed.

Limitations

This study involved former foster youth residing in central Florida. About 6,000 youths are receiving services from the Department of Children and Families in the central Florida area (Associated Press, 2013). Every reasonable effort was made to choose only those youth who were committed to complete the process.

Chapter 4: Findings

This phenomenological study captured the lived experiences of nine former foster care youth. While each participant's experiences are unique to them, common themes emerge between them. These experiences are presented in this chapter, to help the reader understand the entire scope of prevalent issues and challenges experienced by the young adults, as a result of being in, and aging out of, the foster care system. This chapter will begin by providing background stories on each participant. Next, four common themes will be described: 1) Looking for the 'care' in foster care, 2) the threat of a mental disability, 3) pick of the draw, and 4) navigating emotionally alone. This chapter will illustrate findings of the lived experiences, based on interviews, of former youth that were in the foster care system.

Participants' Backgrounds

The researcher interviewed nine former foster care youth, including seven males and two females. Of those nine former foster care youth, six identified as White, two identified as Black, and one identified as bi-racial, being Hispanic and Black. At the time of the interview, the youth ranged from ages 18 to 21. The time spent in foster care ranged from 4 to 17 years. A detailed chart is found in Appendix D. Their stories are different, but their results are mostly the same. The researcher discusses each participant's background below.

Tom. Tom first came into foster care when he was 14 years old. He came to the attention of child welfare services when neighbors reported him and his sister. They were going from trailer to trailer begging for food. Food appeared to have been an ongoing problem for him in his teens, even the foster care group home he was placed in was

buying outdated food products. He reported this to the child welfare authorities and, after several investigations, the home was placed on probation. It ended up closing several years later. After entering foster care, he remained stagnant educationally. Tom suffers from a mental disability that causes him to make extreme statements. For example, after a bad day in middle school, a teacher overheard him saying he was going to blow up the school with a bomb. He was subsequently removed from that school and Baker-acted. Being Baker-acted is a slang reference to a law, which allows one to be involuntarily committed to a mental institution, if his or her actions warrant it. Tom has been Baker-acted several times. When he aged out, at 18, he was still in the 10th grade and failing that grade, again. Fortunately, when he left his group home, he acquired a mentor who advised him to disenroll from high school and enroll in a GED program. Tom was able to pass the GED the first time he took it. He continued with school and graduated, with honors, from a local college, where he earned a vocational certificate. Despite having acquired skills to obtain a job, he has yet to work. He decided to stay in the foster care program and is currently attempting to earn another degree or certificate.

Rhiannon. Rhiannon has been in and out of foster care for 10 years. She remains adamant that she should not have been in foster care to begin with, but during the course of her interview, it becomes obvious why she was. Take this statement from her, for instance:

> We left Virginia to go to Florida; we had just gotten to Florida. Just got a hotel that we could stay in and we were there, literally, not even 24 hours. My little brother was three and a half, maybe four years old, and he thought he could go on an adventure; he didn't know where we were. There were three police officers who found him. Unfortunately, they took that as a good reason to take us from my mother.

Rhiannon is currently engaged to one of the participants of this study. They met at

a mental health facility. It is amazing how foster kids are able to find each other from among the large, diverse population that we all live in. Prior to meeting at the mental institution, their paths had never crossed. Rhiannon does not receive a stipend from child welfare services because she told them, in her intake meeting, that she was well taken care of. This is not quite true. Both she and her fiancée live with her mother, who lives with a friend. The friend has told both of them they can only stay for a finite period of approximately 90 days. Her fiancée does receive a stipend from child welfare services and, in Rhiannon's mind, this is enough for both of them. Another participant in this study, Jeeves, now lives with them. While he receives a stipend from the state, he spends all of his money within 24 hours and does not have money for the rest of the month. Rhiannon and her fiancée also end up supporting him.

Jeeves. Jeeves has been in foster care the longest. He was placed into the system two days after being born with fetal alcohol syndrome. Jeeves does not know who his parents are and he has no contact with them. At one point, early in his life, Jeeves was adopted. Unfortunately, a short time later, the adoptive parents changed their mind and gave Jeeves back to the foster care system. Jeeves suffers from a mental disability and a judge has ruled that he cannot manage his own money, because he is too irresponsible. Somehow, through system manipulation, Jeeves has managed to gain control of his monthly stipend. This has disastrous consequences, as he spends all his money, within 24 hours, and then has to scrounge or beg for the rest of the month, just so he can eat. After being rejected by a love interest, Jeeves attempted suicide, was released, and then attempted suicide again. He was Baker-acted by a police officer who had to control him by using a taser. He was released after a few days and continued living on his own.

Jeeves recently lost his Social Security benefits because he was considered no longer

disabled by a Social Security disabled. Jeeves did well on an IQ test. He is an outgoing

young man and easily attracts friends, but just as easily as he gains them, he loses them.

He has been in several fights and has moved more than 25 times in his life. During the

past six months, he was evicted from two apartment complexes and a friend's house.

Matt. Matt clearly has two personalities. He is a real life Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

He comes across as shy, timid, and very cerebral. However, there is a side to him that can

become violent. He hit a friend over the head with a wine bottle when he felt disrespected

by him. Matt has been determined to have a mental disability. He once received Social

Security benefits, but when he failed to submit the required paperwork, to continue his

benefits, he was considered no longer disabled. He currently owes Social Security

thousands of dollars for being overpaid. He did have a mentor, but then chose to ignore

him, in favor of listening to another foster youth who happened to be homeless when they

met. He, along with Jeeves, moved this homeless foster youth in with them. In about

three months, all three were homeless again, as Jeeves and Matt allowed their new friend

to turn their apartment into a drug den. Additionally, their new friend paid no rent and

when they were all asked to leave, by the apartment complex, their new friend strong-

armed them for $500. Even to this day, they hold no ill will toward this person. However,

they have both seen that the adult mentor they dismissed was correct and Jeeves has

called him for assistance. Matt currently lives with his aunt, whom he calls "Mom," as

she is the one who actually raised him.

Barry. Barry closely resembles the stoner character in the old cartoon television

series, "Scooby Doo." The word "stoner" is a street-term for someone who smokes a lot

of marijuana. Barry suffers from a severe learning disability and can barely read or write. He had lost his Social Security benefits, but with the assistance of a mentor, was able to have them restored. Of all the participants, Barry had the most extensive support network. He had the support of caseworkers, a guardian ad litem, and several other state workers. Additionally, he had his own apartment that the state paid for. The state also paid for his cable, water, and electricity. Once he finished high school, the state would have also paid his tuition for college and given him a living expense stipend. He threw it all away by refusing to finish high school, refusing to go to drug rehabilitation, and refusing periodic drug tests. He was within three months of receiving a special diploma, but skipped classes each day in favor of getting high. When the landlord went to do the final inspection on Barry's apartment, he discovered that Barry had allowed six of his friends to move in and live there for free. He now lives with his girlfriend and her mother and that relationship is a bit shaky. He did get a job as a landscaper.

Steve. Steve entered the foster care system because his parents kicked him out of his house. Before being thrown out, he says he would endure a verbal assault from his dad on a regular basis. "Every day I wake up, you ain't gonna amount to (expletive). You nothing but a (expletive) up. You get in trouble all the time. We don't like you. What you get from all that?" says Steve.

Steve says, although he received straight A's in school, in terms of his behavior, he was a "hellion." He says he became more of a hellion because his parents, not knowing how to deal with his extremely bad behavior, kept him locked up in his room when he was home. "I couldn't go nowhere. My parents never let me out. My bedtime when I was 16... you know what time it was? 8:00 o'clock. That was right before I got

thrown out of my house."

He was, literally, taken off the streets and placed into the system. Of all the participants interviewed, Steve is the only one who engages in criminal activity on a regular basis. Steve is a former foster care youth who just happened to live in the same apartment complex as Jeeves, Matt, and Barry. He does drugs on a regular basis and does not say more than two sentences without cursing. His specialty in the criminal world was robbery and burglary. Although he regrets doing it, he says he had to do it to survive, as shown in this statement:

> Every time I try to do good, it seems like the bad follows me. And it seems like the only life I have now is the life of robbing and stealing. But, I don't want to do that no more. I haven't done that in about a year. And I look back at that and I'm like, damn, it was so easy to make money then but I was doing (expletive) wrong. Now I just want to make money and do it the right way.

He tells of a story where he had just burglarized a house and just happened to see the occupants of the house coming back home as he was heading down the street with their stuff. He says he felt so bad that he turned around, handed the father his bag of their property and apologized to him.

Steve is currently not in one of the foster care independent living programs and is the only participant that is not trying to get into one. He feels let down by that system and says that when he was in the system, those who were in charge of taking care of him ignored him. "Foster care don't do what they say they're gonna do," he explains. "I told people what was going on but nobody ever acted so my patience was tried. Oh, I'm gonna do it, I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna get to it. I believe you. Two and a half weeks later, oh, are you still doing it? Oh, I'm still working on it."

Steve is a wanderer now. He goes from house to house looking for a temporary

place to stay. He is not trying to get into school, although that is a promise he made to his mother before she died, and he is not looking for work on a consistent basis. When asked what his biggest concern is, Steve answers, "Just the fact that I have nothing good going for me. I have no house, I have no income, I have nothing."

Javon. Javon is one of the few participants who do not do drugs. He also does not have a diagnosed mental illness. He was placed into foster care because his mother was not taking care of him properly. He says he felt abused on a daily basis and, because of that, he stopped listening to her. "Well, I started like rebelling because I felt like she was treating me the way no child should be treated. Hit me in the head; throw me against the bunk beds. Knock my head against the wall," he said. He adds that his mother was also doing drugs at the time.

At the age of 21, he already has two kids. Javon goes to school and has a job. He is also one of two participants that graduated from regular high school. He lives with his girlfriend, her mother, and their two young daughters. He has a car, is responsible, and receives his foster care benefits. This is quite a step up for a person who had once embraced what a teacher had predicted about his future. He remembers, "I was told in elementary school by a teacher that I was one of those kids that were never going to amount to nothing."

He has since changed his mindset. Becoming a father has given him a new motivation.

> I'll have to say it drove me more to wanting to have family. To like be something in life and do something for my children. If you can't do the right thing with your child, you shouldn't have them honestly. Cuz being a father now, I have to have a big future.

Zack. Zack is a fighter with a bad temper. He grew up in a bad neighborhood and had to fight to be respected in the neighborhood. Unfortunately, he brought his street

fighting into his home one day. He got into an argument with his mother and came close to physically assaulting her. That whole incident haunts him to this day, because he admits that he was so mad that he could have killed her that day. "I get aggravated over stuff and I want to fight. I knew fighting had gone way too far when I don't fight to win, I fight to kill," says Zack. He entered foster care shortly after that incident. Despite this fact, Zack offers a different view of why he was placed in foster care.

> People think you're in foster care because your parents don't want to take care of you or something and so they feel sorry for you. But that's not the case; my mom wanted to take care of me. She just knows she couldn't. She knew that if she would've kept me I would've been in prison or dead because of the stuff I was doing. So, putting me in foster care kind of was her way of giving me that chance to get away. And if it wasn't for that, I wouldn't be where I'm at today. I would probably be exactly as she thought. Because my dad was nowhere to be around.

While in foster care, Zack turned a new leaf and, in an abrupt change, decided to use his fighting skills to help defend the weaker kids from the bullies. He feels good about that and feels he made a positive impact on the lives of a few people who may have been vulnerable at that time.

During his three interviews, Zack was doing well. He had a job, looked sharp, spoke confidently, and seemed to have a lot of potential. A week after our last interview, Zack was homeless and had lost his job. Additionally, he admitted that he was not getting any money from foster care. Although he has a mental disability, he refused to file for Social Security benefits, not wanting the stigma of being mentally disabled. He was living with his girlfriend and her parents and the parents asked him to leave. A mentor eventually took Zack in and helped him get some funds from foster care. Zack then admits that he once had his own place, through foster care, but had lost it. He is currently working on completing his GED. His mentor helped him get a job doing landscaping, but

Zack came up with a number of excuses not to go to work and ended up being fired. Although he has not completed his high school education and does not have a job, Zack decided to get married. He is now living with his wife's parents, the same parents that threw him out of their house only a few short months ago.

Jamie. Jamie, at first glance, seems to be your typical teenager. She has a few tattoos and likes to party and have fun. Beneath the surface, she has been sexually molested and has experienced violence. She takes her frustrations out on herself by cutting herself, at times. Jamie was placed into foster care after enduring a horrendous night with her mother. Her mother had done a lot of drugs and became extremely paranoid. While Jamie was asleep in her bed, her mother started accusing her of everything from trying to attack her to running away and taking illegal pills. Her mother believed in her accusations so strongly that she called the police, not once, but three times, until they sent someone to her residence. Jamie explains what happened next:

> There was no food in my house at all. There was lot of already filed reports of abuse from her and they took me away for one night and said I was just going to be gone one night. My mother was going to jail. They said I would see her tomorrow. Court went, hit about 5:00 o'clock, no phone call from her, no nothing. Next day, nothing. And finally the next day after that, I believe it was... I got a phone call from her, after me calling her over and over again. She told me that I'm staying in foster care because I was a whore and I was a pill addict and I needed it. So I got left there because she didn't want me.

Jamie was crushed. "All I could do was cry," she says. She did not understand. Years later, her mother would regret her decision. By this time, the foster care system determined that it would not be good for Jamie to live with her mother, so they denied her requests. Jamie's mom would call Jamie and tell her that she was going to kidnap her. Now a bit older and wiser, her mother's threats to kidnap her actually scared her. She was in a safe place and realized, now, that she had not been in a safe place with her mother.

Jamie wanted to stay away from her mother, even if it meant staying in the foster care system. She is currently in an independent living program and lives with her boyfriend and his grandfather.

During these interviews, the following four emergent themes were identified: 1) Looking for the 'care' in foster Care, 2) the threat of a mental disability, 3) pick of the draw, and 4) navigating emotionally alone. These themes are outlined, in detail, below.

Looking for the 'Care' in Foster Care

The common theme that was brought up among these young adults is that foster care only provides shelter, as opposed to the expectations of a traditional home environment. The youth described their expectations of safety, overall well-being, guidance during their formative years, encouragement, support, and love. They were happy to be removed from their abusive biological home situations. They felt they would be safe in foster care. According to most of the youth, just feeling safe is the greatest benefit of the foster care system. As Tom states, "Foster care got me away from an abusive situation, in which I couldn't defend myself. It gave me something I didn't get with my home life."

Matt echoes these sentiments, saying, "I actually felt safer in foster care." He further states, "You have to look up at the bright side. I know some of the kids out there miss their own families and wish they had families of their own, but then you have to realize, what if the foster care system wasn't here. Where would kids go?" Javon also confirms this same eagerness to leave his home, for a better, safer place. He states,

> Yea because the fact that I felt like I was abused growing up that I didn't want to
> be there in the first place. So that's why I felt like going through the system was

better than where I was in the first place.

It is true that some of these youth were difficult to handle when younger. As a result, those family members may have gone too far in trying to contain them. Many felt they were caged, like an animal, when with family members. Unfortunately, not much seemed to change, as far as personal freedoms, when they entered the foster care system, as evidenced by this statement from Jeeves:

> They're not going to let you go off with one person, one place, like say you wanted to go to the movies, they're not going to leave you there for two hours. It's ridiculous. You know, it's funny. They say kids need normalcy in foster care but they don't get it. They talk about it all the time saying you'll be normal, you'll be able to do this, you'll be able to do that, but that they never get it. So, for the longest I didn't get to have relationships in the general area. I didn't get to go out and hang out. A lot of the stuff I had was online relationships. And they thought that was weird, you need to go out and get a girlfriend. I can't go and get a girlfriend if I can't go outside. You literally have to be by my side if I leave the driveway. You can't really have a normal life if you have to have a staff member by your side at all times. It's kind of weird, you're going on a date with your girlfriend and you've got a grown man tagging along behind you, saying, 'Remember, make good choices'.

While the participants appreciated their foster care homes for the safety they provided, the majority were not pleased with the uncaring attitude of many of the staff. The rigidness of their daily lives and the feeling that they were just a paycheck added to their disillusionment. This was their new home, but it did not feel like a home to them. It felt more like an institution. The youth described the feeling of not being trusted by the foster parents, for fear of getting into some type of trouble, or having the foster parent's fears placed upon them, as a result of a tragedy that occurred with their biological children. They youth believed that the lack of normalcy attributed to their already exacerbated problems, such as being bullied for not having social skills, being unable to participate in normal childhood activities, and their inability to cope in a world outside of

the foster system. This is illustrated in Jamie's statement:

> And, whenever I went…a lot of people didn't understand why I couldn't do the extracurricular activities or I couldn't go stay the night with them or I couldn't go hang out with them at the mall or anything. And nobody understood it. And it sucked to be able to tell people I can't. I don't have anybody to be like, you can do that, I'm in a group home, that's not what they let you do. You have to go through all sorts of approvals to have a normal childhood. I'm sorry, I'm gonna cry…If you're not in foster care you don't know what it's like.

Out of the nine youth interviewed, only two described the positive impact that being placed in the foster care system had on them. The majority of the youth had negative perceptions about their experiences in foster care. These families reported that they provided the basic needs for youth such as food, clothing, and shelter. Even though the youth reported being treated worse than other children in foster care or the foster families biological children, a few reported not having their daily living needs met. Tom explains,

> Things like we had expired food in the fridge and that we weren't getting proper clothing and it was just bad. There were other things too, like the house wasn't really suited to be like a home, it was more like…it felt more like it was run like a facility and I didn't like that.

When it comes to the supervision of the youth, the central theme discussed was normalcy. The youth reported the foster parents, or workers, attempted to provide as much normalcy for the youth, as possible. However, the youth believed, while this may have been their goal, their actions did not always match the goal. The youth interviewed perceived that a sense of normalcy was not provided by their foster families and staff members. The majority of the youth perceived that these families either did not care or were not helpful in their matriculation to adulthood. They report receiving little assistance and support. Another problem with the system is instability, or constantly being transferred from foster home to foster home. This had an effect on the education of

many of the participants. By the time most of the participants were ready to age out,

many had not completed high school, and most were not even close. Jamie regrets this

fact, stating,

> I wish I'd gone through high school. I wish I'd gotten to do the homecoming, the prom. I dropped out in my 8th grade year. But everybody doesn't believe me. How can you not have done high school? But my group homes made it to where I skipped around and I just couldn't do it anymore, I was too behind. Like, honestly, you think doing that wouldn't affect you but whenever you jump from home to home to home, if you move counties it's going to mess up your schooling because they have to transfer all your grades and you don't even know if your classes are gonna line up right with the county.

The youth also reported abuse and emotional neglect. It should be noted that three

of the youth reported that they experienced fair living conditions with families or group

homes. Although, these young adults also reported that things could have been worse,

given where they previously came from and/or the abuse they previously suffered.

The Threat of a Mental Disability

Out of the nine interviewed, eight have a diagnosed mental disability or addiction,

with six being both addicted to drugs and having a mental illness. Only two just have a

mental illness and only one is neither addicted nor has a mental illness. The fact that one

participant does not have a diagnosed mental illness is remarkable as, according to Javon,

"you can't go through the foster care system without at least having some PTSD (Post

Traumatic Stress Disorder)." Rhiannon echoes those comments when she says, "I have a

little PTSD, which comes from being in the system really."

Most of the participants with a mental disability have been prescribed medicine,

to help cope with their disability. Part of the problem is that none of them takes their

prescribed medication. The law states that once they turn 18, they no longer have to do

certain things, taking their medication is one of them. Jeeves describes,

In foster care I didn't have a choice whether I took my medicine or not. That was kind of a forced thing upon me, so I had to take it. And the medicine I was taking made me really doped up and, you know, move around slow and my mouth used to kind of hang down sometimes because I'd be out of it and at school, a lot of the kids in gym class would pick on me about it.

Zack states,

I suffer from depression and I was taking Zoloft, Abilify, and some other medications, like Trazadone and all they did was zombify me, make me not feel anything. So, no motivation at all. All I wanted to do was sleep all day. I didn't want to do nothing; there was no way to get me to do anything. I didn't want to do anything at all. No housework. No moving. I didn't really want to take a shower, like, nothing.

Unable to cope on their own and refusing to take their medication, most of those interviewed turned to using marijuana. Many said it helps them deal with their mental health issues. Unfortunately, they enjoy their self-medicating techniques so much; many of them have dropped out of school or quit jobs, so they have more time to smoke marijuana. Additionally, they use their state stipends and Social Security payments to help pay for this habit. Drug use, they agree, was also a way to fit in with their peers that were not in the foster care system or with those that did not have a mental disability. They want to be a part of the popular crowd and not be seen as a loser.

In school, some students were not understanding of those who require assistance or take special education classes. There seems to be a stigma of riding the short bus or being in a special class. This turns the participants off from school and, in some instances, leads to fights, as stated by Jeeves:

And there were these three specific kids that would come by and make like retard noises, as if to make fun of me. Even though I knew I was tons more intelligent than them and stronger than them, I got upset to the point where, because it was happening every day, every single day, I'd go to the gym. And it happens to the point where the kid came up into my face and made the noise in my face and I grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and lifted him up and slammed him onto the concrete. And then he tried to scramble away, I lifted him up again and slammed

up against the locker and then I was pretty much slamming him all over the locker room. And he couldn't really fight back because I was just like a rampaging elephant.

This stigma of being a loser is especially prevalent if one is known to ride the special education busses, popularly known as the short bus, as it is shorter than traditional yellow school busses, as described in this anecdotal narrative by Jeeves:

> The short bus would pull up in the apartment complex…it was the most embarrassing thing to have to get on the short bus in front of all my friends. Eventually it got to the point where the first time I got on, nobody was up so nobody saw. Then the bus tried to pull in to my apartment complex on the way back home. I asked them if they could stop at the corner because it was all a big place. But it had that and it had a group home in the back and then it had apartments for 18 to 21. I asked if they could stop the bus and let me off right here so I didn't have to be seen in the apartments. They were like no, we have to drop you off in the specific designated area. I got mad. The anger got the best of me because I didn't want to be seen like that. So as they were driving, I walked up to the front before they got to where my apartments were and I kicked open the bus doors and walked off the bus and walked to my apartment.

Pick of the draw

Independent living programs for youth in the foster care system are designed to assist the youth with essential daily living skills that will be needed as they transition from childhood to adulthood and ultimately age out of the foster care system. The transition plans for the youth are inconsistent. Only a few of those interviewed were part of a viable and effective ILP. The vast majority had little to no support. Based on the interviews from the youth, the program failed to prepare them for independent living. While one youth reported that he learned the essential skills by managing the family's food budget, no other youth reported having hands on financial experience. The youth detailed the lack of training, which did not prepare them for the financial responsibilities they face today. As stated by Barry:

> They didn't really help me too much with learning how to manage money. It was just like a meeting up in front of my old group home and they would talk about it a little bit and then we'd just go and not talk about it for another month or two.

An appropriate ILP for the youth is tailored to the youth's needs. While these plans are individualized and may vary, the foundation of an ILP includes receiving education, employment, independent living, medical, and mental health services. Additionally other essential life skills are sought, as they are identified. The youth in foster care are assigned a case manager, who is responsible for monitoring the needs of the youth and making referrals as appropriate. All services should be monitored closely for compliance and appropriateness and documented in the youth's file for continuity.

Of the youth interviewed, none reported being provided any on-the-job training or technical skills, to assist them in obtaining employment. Several of the youth described the training staff as lazy and not helpful. These youth went on to state they often sat behind a computer, while leaving the youth to work alone. Given the determination of the youth and experiences from the hardships faced, they taught themselves independent living skills that assisted them in their daily survival. However, these youth believe, if these skills were taught to them, it could have resulted in an easier transition, such as in the case of Zack. He states,

> They need to focus more on how to balance a checkbook. This is what you need to do to save, how to write a check out, how to pay your bills. The important stuff that's going to get you through life. Okay, insurance, how do I go about looking up the best insurance for me? How do I go about finding what would be the best way to get in school? What would be the cheapest way? You know, they need to focus more on financial states than anything. Because the financial state is what's going to get you through this world; if you don't have a financial state and you just blow your money, you're gonna get evicted. You're gonna lose everything you had.

It should be noted that one youth stated independent living skills, such as finance,

employment, and other daily living skills were provided to him. Because of his own behavior and unwillingness to learn, he missed the opportunity to learn those skills. Matt contends, when faced with those skills today, he is often reminded the foster care staff attempted to teach him those skills, but he refused. Matt states,

> I just wish I'd listened more. Maybe that would've prepared me a little bit more because there are some things actually out here it's like, okay, now they taught me how to do this. Do I remember, no, because that week I was being a boob.

Once a youth ages out of the foster care system, they automatically move to one of two, new, over 18 independent living programs. One is called the postsecondary education services and support program and the other one is called the extended foster care program (DCF, 2013). This is where the race against the clock begins because they have a relatively short time frame, of four years, to try to complete a degree or obtain a vocational certificate. The majority of the former foster children described the educational benefits of being placed in a foster system, as one of the premier benefits of being in the foster care system. The former foster care children seem to relish in the fact that they would be allowed to obtain a free college education. This opportunity has served as hope for many of them in their future endeavors. One of the students desires to obtain a graduate degree and states the foster care system will pay for it. Another of the former foster care children has a desire to complete medical school to become a doctor and is grateful to have it paid for by the state, as a result of being in the foster care system. While the former foster care children have faced many obstacles and hardships, they do feel that this priceless opportunity, of a free college education, can assist them as they age out of the foster care system. This is one of the state and federal programs they feel has had a positive impact on their lives.

Most of the participants in the study either participating in one of these programs or are trying to get back into one of these programs. This is because both programs offer free college tuition and a monthly stipend. Former foster youth also receive free medical and dental benefits under the federal Medicaid program. The participants do not like the extended foster care program as much as the PESS program, because it reminds them of when they were younger and living under someone else's roof. They prefer the PESS program because they can live on their own.

From a financial standpoint, most participants strive to be in the PESS program. Under the PESS program, one has to have completed a GED and be enrolled in a college or vocational course. They can only miss a certain number of days per month and must pass their courses. If they do not, they can be withdrawn from the PESS program. Other benefits of being in the PESS program are that the money is paid directly to the youth and the current rate is $1,256.00 per month. If the youth has a mental disability and is receives benefits from Social Security, the youth can receive an additional $733.00 per month. This is the optimum level they all strive to achieve. This may not sound like a lot of money, but to these young adults, it is like hitting the lottery. If they can stay with a friend, or a friend's parents, or get a subsidized apartment for $400.00, they feel they have accomplished a major achievement.

Only one of the participants is at this level, Tom. Jeeves was there, but lost his Social Security benefits. Matt was there also, but has since lost everything. He is currently staying with a relative and trying to get back into the PESS program. Barry has retained his Social Security benefits, but is no longer in the foster care system. While Tom has achieved the financial maximum; he lives with his fiancé's friend. Some have

been offered the support of well-qualified mentors, but choose not to use them. This results in many of the youth having to navigate emotionally alone, the next theme.

In regards to whether one meets or does not meet the prescribed requirements of the program and is allowed to stay in the program, it appears to be a pick of the draw. The nine participants are assigned to one, of four, foster care agencies throughout the state. Although their agency may be in a different part of the state, all nine participants actually live in central Florida. To be in the PESS program, one has to be enrolled in a state college, must take a minimum of nine credits each semester, and must pass those classes. To stay in the EFC program, a youth must be either attending school or working. If the youth do not maintain these standards, they are vulnerable to be terminated. If they are still age eligible, it is possible to request reinstatement, but some never make it back, once they are terminated. As Zack says, "At my agency they tell you plain and simple, if you're not going to do what you're supposed to do, don't waste our time because the money can be used for somebody else." On the other hand, some have not met any of the requirements for months and years, yet they still stay in the program and receive all the benefits of that program. Jeeves rarely meets the requirements of his program and yet remains in the program and shows no fear of possibly being removed in the future. Matt, on the other hand, did not pass his college classes. He was terminated from the program and lost his monthly stipend. It has been over a year and he is still trying to reenter the program and reclaim the benefits he had once received.

Navigating Emotionally Alone

Many of the former foster care children interviewed talked about the lack of a social support, while in the system. Unfortunately, the thought-process of the youth

interviewed is that they cannot trust adults. The PESS program does not offer adult assistance on a daily basis, but the EPC program does. Unfortunately, this mistrust of adults plays a big part in the participants not being able to manage their affairs, effectively. This widespread mistrust makes it hard for either program to work effectively and contradicts what the youth say about needing an adult mentor. Some of the participants in the PESS program had an adult mentor, but chose not to use them to help manage their money. Although those who do use a mentor have a high success rate, the youth will accuse the mentors of stealing their money or working only for the money, even if there is no evidence of wrongdoing or uncaring. In truth, the fact is that many of the youth have calculated that if they did not have the mentor, they could collect the small amount of money the mentor receives and spend it on themselves. The money a mentor may receive comes out of the youth's total apportionment of funds, with $1,256 being the maximum. These mentors average $400.00 a month for pay. This amount covers their gas for driving them to appointments, the hours they put in to stay on top of the foster care paperwork and Social Security, ensuring the youth's bills are paid, and planning for special purchases, events, etc. The youth that decide to keep the $400, and go it alone, usually end up homeless, such as Tom, Jeeves, Matt, Rhiannon, Zack, and Barry. Jamie tried to go it alone and found it too much to bear. She is in an EFC program that she custom-made for herself. She is living with her boyfriend and his grandfather, who supplies the adult guidance. She says she is both grateful and happy in her current situation. The other youth reported they would put their faith more in their friends, who may not have anything, rather than in an experienced adult. This is referred to as a "ride or die" mentality, in which the youth will bond together in all, even in death. Barry

reported, "My friends got my back, I got their back." They may have adopted this

mentality because they are used to people leaving them. Unfortunately, the participants'

friends have caused four of the participants to be evicted from their apartments. Of the

four that were evicted because of friends, all four had at least six other people living with

them, in a one or two bedroom apartment. Jamie paints a picture of what happened when

she got her first apartment.

> I lived at Jefferson Ave for my first place, when I first turned 18; I had literally
> been picked up from my group home, got to cash out my check and went over
> there and got my place. And the lady had let me know whenever we moved in that
> I couldn't be loud, I couldn't have a lot of people over and at that stage I wanted
> to party and hang out with everybody and do whatever I wanted to do. And I had
> so many people over at my place that she evicted me.

Additionally, according to the participants, none of their friends helped to pay the

rent, electricity, or other daily expenses. Ironically, the participants have fired mentors

who were helping them and would falsely accuse them of stealing their money, when, in

truth, their friends were the ones using them. When Jeeves was evicted from his second

apartment in ninety days, because of his friends, Jeeves states,

> One of my friends that had been living there wanted me to pay him $500 in order
> for him to move out. I had actually moved out already and the landlord was on my
> back. Then the friend started threatening me if I didn't pay him the money. I
> borrowed the money from a friend to pay him off.

Barry also says that he had moved out and when the landlord went to change the

locks, six of his friends were still living there. He states, "It was the middle of the day

and they were all asleep throughout the house. The landlord literally had to step over

them to move around the house." Matt admits that he lost his apartment because he let a

friend spend the weekend there and, while Matt was out with other friends, the friend

who had asked to spend the weekend tried to kill himself in Matt's apartment. Rescue

workers and state caseworkers arrived in time to save the friend's life, who also was in

foster care, but it was the end of Matt living alone in his own place.

This ride or die mentality may have some foundation in the fact that these

individuals felt that the social services system separated them from their friends and now

that they have found each other again, they promise to support each other. Trying to have

relationships was described as complicated and troubled, due to having to continuously

relocate. Most participants had to move from foster home to foster home an average of

five times. One participant moved at least 25 times. As a result, these young people are

used to people leaving them and, in turn, tend not to trust others, especially adults. This

continuous relocation does not allow individuals to be embedded within their

communities. Jamie felt frustrated by this and said that she found another way to make

friends once she aged out. She describes,

> Whenever I first got out, I was really bad. I didn't care. I was hanging out with
> whoever and I slept with four guys before I even got with my current boyfriend
> and we got together three months after I turned 18 and I felt horrible about it.

Moreover, two of those interviewed relocated out of state, leaving behind the social

support system they once acquired. Given the resources that were already described as

scarce, these former foster children struggled with acquiring meaningful relationships and

networking opportunities. Tom stated,

> I did have to grow up a little bit faster than most kids my age because I didn't…
> there was, even as a child before I ever got into foster care it was pretty terrible. I
> had to grow up really fast, it was just, it was really bad for a long time. And when
> I entered foster care it felt like that connection was broken and I, I didn't know
> what to do. I had never felt something like that before and it was very, very
> different.

This feeling of being left alone to figure things out lead Jeeves to say, "I'm just kind of

going on my own self-journey and figuring out who I am throughout, going through what

I've been going through."

This chapter provided the findings and themes mined from the interviews of the nine participants in the study. Fear of the unknown, homelessness, drug use, criminal involvement, and early pregnancies are all part of the challenges of these youth. Obtaining an education with their state and federal benefits, learning to pay bills, and just surviving are part of their successes. Chapter 5 will provide an interpretation of these findings and recommendations based on the findings.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Given there are over 250,000 children entering the foster care system annually (Zlotnick et al., 2012), it is not uncommon for young adults to experience difficulties during their matriculation through, and after exiting, the foster care system (Scannapieco et al., 2007). Of those 250,000 that enter, only 25,000 leave the system, annually. This imbalance in the statistics leaves a shortage of available placements and resources. This imbalance has been believed to contribute to the issues faced by foster care youth. These issues include, but are not limited to, substance abuse and mental health issues, abuse and neglect, and early drug use and pregnancy. Other issues faced by these youth include failure to graduate from high school, delinquency issues, finding supportive employment, and obtaining stable housing. The current system, described by the former youth previously in the foster care system, has glitches, such as scarce resources. Without the availability of resources to adequately assist the youth in placement, one can contend the youth may be lost in the system. Based on the interviews, the youth sought the security they believed they had prior to being removed from their homes. Given all of the issues faced in their previous living environment, it is concluded they were accustomed to the dysfunction of their daily lives. This was their normal. However, being removed from that environment, even with it being considered not conducive to their health, not only places them at a disadvantage, but also disrupts their normal.

The implication of this study is grounded in, what has been described as, a faulty foster care system. The research data and depiction from the youth, suggests that youth are being robbed of resources that should be made available to assist them in their matriculation from childhood to adulthood. Aging out of the system, without the essential

skills to live as a successful adult in society, places the individual at a disadvantage and impedes society's ability to grow. The implications are further rooted in the fact that the current identified limitations, within the foster care system, as it is today, precludes the system from improving. The shortage of foster care workers, homes, and resources limit the change that is needed. As stated before, there are 250,000 youth entering the system annually, but only 25,000 exiting. This uneven distribution makes it difficult to find placement for youth. This is especially true if they have physical or mental issues. Additionally, the services of this program are paid for by the state in which the youth reside. This means the limited funds allocated by the state are evenly distributed among the youth in the system, in addition to ensuring there is enough revenue to pay the foster care workers, operational expenses, foster care home providers, and miscellaneous needs. With all of the implications and problems highlighted within the foster care system, more youth are placed at a disadvantage than advantage, especially those with mental disabilities.

Researchers have estimated one in every two children in foster care has, or will have, a long-term mental illness (Pecora, Jensen, Romanelli, Jackson, & Ortiz, 2009). Research has also shown that foster youth have a "two times higher risk than combat servicemen to develop post-traumatic stress syndrome" (Palmer, 2014). Issues, such as failure to graduate from high school, delinquency, finding supportive employment, and obtaining stable housing, are exacerbated by the developmental and physical disabilities possessed by a majority of these youth. Some of the youth, within the foster care system, have cognitive behavioral disorders and learning issues as well. Having a mental disorder increases the chances of a young adult becoming homeless (Dworsky, Napolitano, &

Courtney, 2013). Foster youth are especially at high risk for becoming homeless during their transition from the system. Issues also prohibit individuals from being a part of the regular education system. These students are often placed in separate classrooms, such as self-contained and exceptional student education (ESE) learning environments. Coupled with behavioral issues, and intensified by being removed from their living environment, it places the youth at a disadvantage. While most of this study is consistent with existing literature, the results leave another question unanswered: what happens to those who will need help past the age of 23? Specifically, those with disabilities so severe they require continual supervision and assistance. Even then, there is no guarantee they will be adequately trained in independent living.

There appears to be two extremes in how agencies handle the PESS and EFC programs. There needs to be a happy medium. Either youth are terminated from the program for their first noncompliance of the rules or they are allowed to stay, indefinitely, while not meeting any of the standards. The new extended foster care system can be a viable tool. This is, by far, one of the most effective state and federal programs in the system. This new program allows youth, who have turned 18 and have yet to reach age 22, to stay under the roof of a caregiver. While many of the youth don't like this program, because it doesn't allow for full independence, those who enroll in this program do better than those who live on their own, as seen through the lived experiences of the participants. In addition, during the course of this study, the head of a central Florida independent living agency confided to the researcher that they have a zero success rate with youth who live on their own, but have seen success with those that live with an older adult, age 40 or more. As Tom says, "The benefits of the program are good, but there

needs to be better supervision or monitoring of the young adults to ensure they're in compliance, since most are irresponsible."

For those living on their own, some caregivers in Florida have contracted independent living coaches, or mentors, to assist the youth, who live alone, with their daily living challenges. The researcher initiated this new process in the central Florida area. This has been a popular program among the participants and hopefully this concept can be fine-tuned and implemented on a wider basis.

Despite the adversities faced by these former foster care children, they have proven to be resilient. They have moved on with their lives and some have even started families of their own. Others have enrolled in school to obtain a higher education degree. From the descriptions given, they loath their negative experiences living in foster care and group homes. This is evidenced by their continuous runaway histories and non-compliance. However, they have chosen not to become victims or captive by their experiences. Even with unresolved issues looming, that were a result of their experiences, they are managing their daily lives. Some detailed the ability to use those experiences to better their lives, with a desire not to place their children, and future children, in such a position. Others have vowed not to have children, due to living with the fear that they may, one day, experience the same failed system. The former foster children do not appear to hold resentment for individuals or their experiences, although they openly expressed their discontent.

Relevance of the Study

This study is necessary and timely, given the number of youth facing issues in the foster care system. Moreover, the importance and relevance lies in the fact that these

youth, who enter and exit the foster care system, will ultimately become adults who we live and work in society. This study will allow the state and foster care system to examine the highlighted issues and consider appropriate corrections, as necessary.

This study is of importance to the human services discipline, as the system is designed to assist children in need. Gaps have been identified in the system, as it currently operates. There is a need to examine the current practices, internally and externally, and recommended possible changes. The human services field is large and filled with complexities. The diverse continuum of services is often held up by bureaucracies and inefficient practices. There is a need to have grievances heard and resolved, in real time, to prevent bottlenecking and ineffectiveness.

The reports and accounts of the youth are supported by research. It is clear there are real issues facing the current foster care system. However, the prevalent issues faced by many youth, are not experienced by all youth in the system. Research shows that the foster care system has helped as many individuals, as it has harmed. The concept of such a complex system, designed to assist individuals, does not come without issues. This system has humanistic elements to it, which means that it is subject to flaws. However, the issues that have been identified, should be directed to the correct individuals and resolved, as soon as possible, given the fact that human lives are at stake.

In conclusion, state officials usually coordinate placing a minor in the foster care system. Additionally, those appointed to run the state operated foster care group homes are agents of, and paid for by, the state (Dickson, 1995). It is preferred that an immediate family assumes responsibility for the welfare of the child, as opposed to foster care services (Barnes, 2007). This allows siblings to remain together and some type of

normalcy to continue in the child's life. Since families often fail to take responsibility of displaced youth, they are often placed with individuals who are willing to care for them.

Foster care, a federal or state-run program, is designed to protect youth who have suffered harm at their primary residence or whose residence has been deemed inadequate (Carroll, 2002). The court system gives the parent of the minors' responsibility for their well-being. As a result, the foster parents are responsible for daily activities (Thoburn & Courtney, 2011). Compensation is provided to foster parents, for caring for the youth. Youth, who enter the foster care system, have often suffered abuse from their parents or caregivers. The abuse may include physical and emotional abuse, child endangerment, financial support, and medical treatment (Dickson, 1995). Individuals suspected of abuse may be mandated to appear in civil or criminal hearing.

Once a foster child reaches their 18th birthday, or adulthood, as determined by the state, a bevy of issues may present for the youth. This includes the youth immediately being released from foster care services or being transferred to a different home. It should be noted, this process could lead to relocation and leaving the state in which they were accustomed to living. A dramatic change in a person's environment can trigger the onset of mental and physical health issues (Zlotnick et al., 2012). As outlined by Scannapieco et al. (2007), the glooming issue of foster youth, aging out of the foster care system and entering into a world with little preparation, often leads to a dreary future. This issue has only been highlighted in the last century. Despite the recent awareness of this issue and the efforts made to eradicate this problem, a plethora of issues remain and negatively affect the well-being of the youth. While there are a mountain of obstacles still facing the system, youth are aging out daily, which makes developing a resolution, urgent.

Recommendations

The researcher strongly recommends a permanent mentor program be instituted. The mentors would be in addition to the case managers. The difference would be that the mentors would be there to assist the youth on a daily basis. The mentors would be required to submit a monthly report on the youths' progress in successfully attaining independent living skills. This would give the mentor more authority over the youth. The states should provide funds to the mentor, not the youth. The researcher recommends starting an educational program, while the youth are under the age of 18, that explains the mentor program and the usefulness of it. In one study, foster youth, who had mentors for more than a year, showed increasing trust in others, particularly adults, as well as improvements in self-worth, socialization, academics, relationships, and a decrease in substance use. (Johnson, Pryce, & Martinovich, 2011).

As previously noted, youth who transition from foster care, with limited or no support systems, usually do not succeed in achieving a productive, independent life. Successful mentoring programs are based on best practices (Scannapieco & Painter, 2014). Best practices include "screening out mentors who have little prior experience as helpers, ongoing training and supervision for mentors related to the unique needs of foster youth, defined expectations for frequency of contact between the mentor and foster youth, program-sponsored activities between the mentor and the youth" (Scannapieco & Painter, 2014, p. 165). Poor programs may actually do more harm than good to this already fragile population. In contrast, support from a caring adult may act as a security factor for them (Jackson, 2015). Unfortunately, foster youth are uniquely at risk of attachment disruption, which means that they may have a hard time trusting adults, as

adults may have proven more abusive than helpful to them in the past (Scannapieco & Painter, 2014). The good news is that mentor programs, for young adults aging out of the foster care system, have been growing in popularity (Spencer, 2010).

A majority of the participants in this study had mental health issues. The researcher believes this is representative of the population as a whole. It is recommended that measures be put in place, requiring youth to continue mental health treatment, or therapy, to remain in the program. Legislation may have to be passed to require them to take any prescribed medications, as well. Youth, formerly in foster care, have disproportionately high rates of emotional and behavioral disorders (Pecora et al., 2009). They represent a highly traumatized group (Salazar, Keller, Gouen, & Courtney, 2013). There is a lack of comprehensive mental health screening and a need for more thorough identification of youth with emotional and behavioral disorders (Pecora et al., 2009). There is not enough access, for these youth, to high-quality mental health services (Pecora et al., 2009).

This researcher recommends that internal and external advisory committees be erected, as well as accreditation mandates, to resolve the monumental challenges that face the foster care system. The internal committee would identify the challenges that are known, or made known, to the foster care administrators. The external advisory committees would be designed to provide external recommendations, from a community and customer service perspective. This lens would provide a unique prospective to officials, based on the customers lived experience in foster care. Lastly, it is recommended to accredit the services, as with other agencies, like healthcare and for profit. A body of professionals in the field could accomplish this by providing an annual

review of policies, procedures, and practices. External report of findings could be provided to internal and external stakeholders, with outlines of the daily operations of the foster care system, recommendations, and timelines for completing them. It is also recommended that outcome measures be established for foster care systems. This will allow all stakeholders to examine real time data and make recommendations for improvement, based on benchmarks that have fallen below the threshold.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Former Foster Youth Interview Protocol

Pseudonym: _____

Introduction: Thank you for participating in this study. In the next three weeks, you will have the opportunity to share with me your personal experiences as a foster youth. I want to remind you that your identity will remain confidential. So, I want you to feel free to speak openly about your experience. Will it be okay for me to record the interviews? Once I get these interviews completely transcribed, I would like to have you review them for accuracy. Would you be willing to do that for me? Before we begin, I want to give you the opportunity to ask me any questions pertaining to this study or information you would like to learn about me.

Interview One: Focused Life History (90 minutes)

Time of Start Interview:

Time of End Interview:

Date:

Location:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Location:

Demographical Questions:

1. Age:

2. Major:

3. Year in college:

4. Ethnicity:

5. Gender:

6. Number of years in foster care:

Open-ended Question:

Tell me as much as possible about your experience of being a foster youth. Starting at present day, trace your experience as far back as you can.

Specific Questions:

General Well-Being

How's it going?

How are you making ends meet?

What kinds of things do you worry about?

How are your relationships with your family?

Are you receiving services from the foster care system?

Identity

Identity is defined as how you see yourself as a person and who you believe you are (need a cite). Sometimes we get a sense of who we are through the experiences we have or the people in our lives.

Thinking about that definition of identity, how would you yourself identify you? Who are you? How did you come to that description of yourself?

Please complete the following sentences:

"I am…"

"I see myself as…"

"My family sees me as …"

"My friends see me as …"

Foster Care

How did you end up in foster care?

When did you first learn about foster care and what it meant to be in the system?

Tell me about a time when you have felt very aware of being in foster care

If a friend asked you what it was like to be in foster care, what would you tell him or her? Positive things? Negative things?

Can you tell me about some times that you felt people treated you differently because you are/were in foster care? Well? Bad?

Tell me about some times you have felt proud about being in foster care.

How has being in foster care defined who you are as person?

How has being in foster care influenced your future?

Relationships

How have your relationships with your family shaped the person you are today?

How have your relationships with your friends shaped the person you are today?

How have your relationships with your teachers shaped the person you are today?

How have your relationships with your social workers shaped the person you are today?

How have your relationships with ILP staff shaped the person you are today?

How has being in foster care affected your friendships?

How has being in foster care effected dating?

How has being in foster care affected ideas about marriage?

How has being in foster care affected ideas about having children?

School

Tell me about your experiences in school.

What has school been like for you?

When have you done well and when have you not done so well?

Did/Do your friends at school know you were in foster care? If so, what did/do they say about it?

How has your experiences at school defined who you think you are as a person?

How has being in foster care effected your education? Graduating high school? GED?

College?

Work

Tell me about your work experiences, if any.

When have you done well and when have you not done so well?

How have your experiences at work influenced who you think you are as a person?

How has being in foster care affected your work? Finding and getting jobs?

Future

Pretend you are looking in a crystal ball and can see things in the future. What do you see for yourself in the future?

What about 5 years from now?

What about 20 years from now?

What are your educational and career plans?

Do you know how to reach these goals? How?

Tell me about a time when you had different educational and career plans? Why?

Who or what is helping you reach these goals?

Is there anything that stands in the way? What?

How did you see your future when you were a child in elementary school?

Who or what has changed how you see your future from then to now?

ILP

How long were you in ILP?

How did you decide to participate?

What did you learn in ILP?

Have you been using what you learned?

How useful is what you learned?

What was most helpful? Least helpful?

What do you believe is the goal of ILP?

How has ILP affected your relationships with other people?

How has ILP affected your experiences in school?

How has ILP affected your work experiences?

How has ILP prepared you for the future?

How has ILP shaped who you are as a person?

How has ILP shaped how you see your future?

If you could change the program, how would you?

Global Questions

What does it mean to be an adult?

What does it mean to live independently?

What does it mean to emancipate from the foster care system?

What could have prepared you better for the future, if anything?

In your life, what has been most influential in shaping your ideas about the future?

In your life, what has been the most influential in shaping your ideas about who you are?

Note: Permission was granted in 2012 by the author, D. Lee, to use the instrument listed here from her dissertation, "A Phenomenological Study: The Lived Experience of Former Foster Youth Attending a Four-Year College in Southern California," Copyright 2010, ProQuest LLC, p. 249-250.

Appendix B

Interview Demographic Description

Interview Demographic Description

ALIAS	AGE	GENDER	RACE/ETHNICITY	YEARS IN FOSTER CARE
Tom	21	Male	White	7
Rhiannon	18	Female	White	9
Jeeves	19	Male	Biracial (Hispanic/Black)	17
Matt	20	Male	Black	15
Barry	18	Male	White	7
Steve	19	Male	White	5
Javon	21	Male	Black	6
Zack	19	Male	White	6
Jamie	19	Female	White	4