From Foster Care to the Streets:
A Call to Support Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ Youth in Foster Care

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ABSTRACT

The modern United States (U.S.) foster care system's history is steeped in racism, violence, and oppression. Today, Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented in the U.S. foster care system and have fallen victim to its oppressive practices. For many marginalized youths, running away from foster care is perceived to be a more viable option than continuing to endure discrimination within the system despite the high risks of homelessness, unstable housing, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and other dangers associated with elopement. For the purposes of this article the term elopement will be used to refer to runaway behavior. This article seeks to illustrate how the oppressive legacy of the foster care system preserves the status quo by disintegrating and retraumatizing Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ communities. The author explores the impacts of foster care on the micro and meso levels, critiques current policy practices, and offers alternative perspectives for social workers to create a more just and genuine child welfare system.

Keywords: foster care, child welfare, elopement, racism, Black youth, Indigenous youth, LGBTQ+ youth

There are presently more than 423,000 youth residing within the U.S. foster care system, which includes non-relative and relative foster homes, group homes, and other residential institutions (Children's Bureau, 2021). Youth may be placed in foster care arrangements for a variety of reasons, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and neglect on the part of the youth's caregivers. Few of these removals are warranted, and data from several states has shown that about half of all removals occur without prior judicial review (Inguanta & Sciolla, 2021; Simon, 2018). With the vulnerability of youth in mind, one might assume that foster care has been designed to create supportive, healthy, stable, and safe environments. Before we make this assumption, however, we must ask ourselves two guiding questions: (1) what are the most probable outcomes for youth placed in foster care, and (2) which groups does the U.S. child welfare system genuinely benefit?

Each year, approximately 1% of youth in foster care run away from their foster care arrangements (Children's Bureau, 2021). This leaves 5,000 children and adolescents formerly in foster care without stable housing, care, or resources every year. Youth in foster care constitute a large portion of all runaway youth and are more than twice as likely to elope as compared to same aged peers not living in foster care (Morewitz, 2016).

When considering the demographics of children in the welfare system, it is crucial to acknowledge the significant disparities faced by socially marginalized groups. Studies have shown that Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ youth are all disproportionately represented in the foster care system as compared to the general population (Figure 1. Ching-Hsuan, 2012; Harris & Hackett, 2008; McCormick et al., 2017). In order to understand why this is the case, it is imperative to analyze the historical functions of foster care and the current role that social workers play in maintaining its legacy.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW: THE STATE OF FOSTER CARE PAST AND PRESENT

The history of modern foster care extends back to colonial America and its practices of indentured servitude. The American indentured labor system was originally derived from the English Elizabethan Poor Law's concept of parens patriae, the idea that communities had some responsibility in protecting dependent, parentless children (Rymph, 2017). However, this protection was not free: these children were expected to learn and perform labor to fund their own care (Rymph, 2017).

By the mid-19th century, shifts in public perceptions of slavery and servitude, as well as rapid industrialization, gave way to increasingly urban populations of homeless youth. Orphanages began to replace workhouses and were thought, at the time, to be a more humane and nurturing alternative to indentured servitude. Orphanages set strict criteria for their selection processes and often denied children on the basis of religion, race, and ethnicity (Rymph, 2017).

In 1853, theologian Charles Loring Brace established the Children's Aid Society (CAS) in an intended effort to ameliorate the worsening conditions of urban life for unhoused youth. The organization began to send parentless and impoverished youth out west on what would notoriously be referred to as "orphan trains" in an effort to have them adopted by rural farmers and their families. The process was dehumanizing: children up were lined up like cattle to be selected by farmers based on their physique and apparent physical health. Because of an emphasis on placing children out of their biological families, Brace and CAS are often cited as the foundations of modern foster care. By the early 20th century, the Progressive Era led to an array of new federal agencies including the U.S. Children's Bureau, which remains involved in foster and adoption today (Rymph, 2017).

The racist praxis of the child welfare system has been documented for decades. Since the U.S.'s birth, Black youth were unable to benefit from child welfare services based on their race. Growing support for integration in the 1950s led to the child welfare system abruptly

adopting harsh, punitive rules in foster care as a new way to punish Black youth, families, and communities (Cooper, 2013). A similar legacy of state violence perpetrated by the child welfare system haunts Indigenous youth and communities today. For over a century Indigenous children were forcibly taken from their families and sent to boarding schools in a dual effort to assimilate the children to white American culture while continuing the genocide of Indigenous communities (Cooper, 2013).

Today, Black youth constitute nearly one third of the total population of foster care youth despite comprising only 13% of the general population (Census Bureau, 2020; Children's Bureau, 2021). Similarly, LGBTQ+ youth make up about 9.5% of the general population compared to 30% of the foster care population. With respect to Indigenous peoples, figures illustrate double the population of Indigenous youth in foster care in comparison to the general population (Figure 2). Given the violent and oppressive history of the child welfare system, we can begin to understand why children and adolescents with these social identifiers are more likely to run away from foster care compared to white, cisgender, heterosexual youth. In fact, Black youth, especially Black girls, in foster care are almost twice as likely to elope compared to their white, same aged peers (Wulczyn, 2020).

These statistics paint a concerning picture: the modern foster care system is a harmful entity that actively targets Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ youth and children. For decades, these communities have seen social workers unnecessarily remove Black and Indigenous youth with historical and generational trauma away from their families and place them in culturally incompetent foster care arrangements (Brave Heart et al., 2011; Crutchfield et al., 2020; Samuels & LaRossa, 2009). Likewise, social workers have removed LGBTQ+ youth who have been invalidated and disowned by their families, and subsequently placed them in care arrangements that perpetuate the very same invalidation and trauma (McCormick et al., 2017; Mooney, 2017).

For many youths, the abuse and neglect experienced before and during foster care are so unbearable that they choose to elope (McCormick et al., 2017; Ream & Forge, 2014). The detrimental effects that this

decision can have on youths' wellbeing are numerous. Youth who elope from foster care are more likely to experience homelessness, sexual exploitation, human trafficking, drug and alcohol abuse, involvement in criminal activity, and difficulty forming attachment to adults (Crossland & Dunlap, 2014; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2018; Latzman et al., 2019). It is imperative that social workers question the effectiveness of the foster care system when thousands of Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ youth are willing to endure so much trauma and violence simply to avoid being in foster care.

WHY YOUTH ELOPE

Youth in foster care may choose to run away for a myriad of reasons. Some may leave to escape abuse or identity conflict with caregivers and peers; others may choose to flee to gain independence or reunite with biological family and friends. For simplicity's sake, we can group these driving forces as push and pull factors, respectively (King et al., 2017; Latzman & Gibbs, 2020; Page, 2017). By definition, pull factors indicate the presence of some external force pulling the youth away from their care arrangement, such as the aforementioned desire to reunite with biological family members. In contrast, push factors allude to an internal force driving the youth away from their care arrangement—for example, abusive, authoritarian, homophobic, or racist foster parents and peers. While both factors play an important role in the decision to run away, Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ youth are often heavily influenced by push rather than pull factors (King et al., 2017; Latzman & Gibbs, 2020; Page, 2017).

Discrimination and abuse faced by LGBTQ+ youth in foster care have been well documented (McCormick et al., 2017). Prior to being placed, it is not uncommon for LGBTQ+ youth to encounter social workers who lack an appropriate degree of cultural humility. As such, even before entering the foster care system many LGBTQ+ youths are met with adults who fail to understand them and provide adequate support and resources. If that were not damaging enough, without incurring repercussions, foster parents may legally refuse to house LGBTQ+ youth (McCormick et al., 2017). Once in foster care, LGBTQ+ youth encounter

varied, usually deleterious, experiences. Isolation, harassment, physical and sexual abuse, forced conversion, double standards in rules for straight peers, and a lack of acceptance are all common experiences for LGBTQ+ youth living in foster care on the basis of their gender identities and sexualities (Harris & Hackett, 2008; McCormick et al., 2017; Rymph, 2017). In fact, a significant portion of LGBTQ+ youth have reported that they feel safer on the streets with their chosen family than in foster care (Ream & Forge, 2014).

Likewise, Black, and Indigenous youth have long reported traumatizing experiences with peers, caregivers, and social workers in foster care who lack an appropriate degree of cultural humility and/or are outwardly racist. For instance, research has shown that Indigenous youth in foster care are more likely to experience recurrent emotional, physical, sexual, and spiritual abuse when compared to their white peers, especially when they are assigned to white caregivers (Landers et al., 2021). Similar studies have revealed that Black youth in foster care placements are disproportionately exposed to maltreatment compared to their white peers (Scott et al., 2011). In fact, Black boys in foster care experience culturally incompetent social workers frequently enough that many of these individuals depart from the child welfare system as young men with an even deeper distrust of mental health care providers than when they entered the system (Scott et al., 2011). These trends suggest that the foster care system is failing Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ youth by contributing to, rather than ameliorating, the trauma inflicted upon these marginalized youth.

RISKS AND IMPACTS OF ELOPEMENT
THE MICRO LEVEL

According to Bowlby and Ainsworth's attachment theory, children rely on a caring, intimate, and undisrupted relationship with their adult caregivers in order to grow up mentally healthy (Bretherton, 1992). With this in mind, it is natural to surmise that Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ youth who run away from foster care are unlikely to have formed healthy attachments with either their biological parents or foster parents.

Coupled with the trauma that precedes and endures through the foster care experience, Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ youth are subjected to an assortment of dangers upon fleeing from the system. Runaway youth may struggle to find adequate housing and are more likely to engage in risky behaviors such as substance use and unprotected commercial sexual contact for survival (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2018). Additionally, youth who repeatedly run away face further risks of detachment from adult bonding, involvement in criminal and gang activity, and lack of education (Crossland & Dunlap, 2014). Arguably most concerning is the risk of human trafficking. Youth who run away from foster care have a heightened risk of being targeted by human traffickers and sold into sexual bondage (Latzman et al., 2019). In fact, studies have shown that as many as 75% of victims of sex-trafficking were in foster care at one point (Dank et al., 2017).

Because many of these behaviors are labeled as criminal by the state, these marginalized youth groups also face heightened risk of entering the juvenile legal system. Statistics show that the majority of youth who spend time in detention facilities will be arrested, convicted, and incarcerated within the first several years following release. One longitudinal study of 2,500 youth who were incarcerated in a juvenile detention facility showed that roughly 85% of participants were rearrested in the first five years following their release (Abrams, 2013).

In addition to setting youth up for adult incarceration, the juvenile legal system also contributes to the traumatization and re-traumatization of Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ youth. Reports of abuse, violence, and substandard care are common in juvenile detention facilities, particularly for Black and Indigenous youth who are both overrepresented in the juvenile legal system (Abrams, 2013). Moreover, studies have shown that, like foster care, spending time in the juvenile legal system further deteriorates youths' mental health and impedes opportunities for educational attainment (Abrams, 2013).

THE MESO LEVEL

Impacted communities also feel the reverberations of elopement in foster youth. Not only do juvenile detention facilities traumatize youth

and increase their likelihood of adult incarceration, but they also pose a tremendous financial impact to marginalized communities that are already underfunded and under-resourced. Juvenile incarceration costs an average of $200,000 per child per year, with some states spending more than half a million annually to incarcerate a single youth (Justice Policy Institute, 2020). With more than 50,000 youth incarcerated, the U.S. may be spending more than $10 billion annually on juvenile incarceration (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). In comparison, the federal budget proposal for fiscal year 2022 requests only $254 million for kinship guardianship assistance—a $17 million cut from the year prior (Congressional Research Service, 2021). Transferring even a fraction of juvenile incarceration spending to kinship assistance programs for Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ youth could massively improve outcomes for youth while keeping families, and thereby communities, connected.

It is also critical to consider the impacts that foster care and elopement have on the families of children who are in the system. In its current state, we have seen that the U.S. foster care system does little more than tear families apart. Biological parents of children in state custody experience disproportionate rates of mental illness, particularly complex post traumatic stress disorder (Suomi et al., 2021). Studies have shown that the removal of a child by state officials is one of the most traumatic life experiences that one can endure and is often compared to experiencing the death of a child (Askren & Bloom, 1999; Masson & Dickens, 2015). Following the removal, parents are often subjected to worsening symptoms of preexisting mental health conditions, which further heightens the risk of subsequent removals (Suomi et al., 2021). This cycle of violence illustrates how the racist foster care system impacts Black and Indigenous parents and communities just as much as their children. By removing new generations of Black and Indigenous youth from their cultures, the foster care system continues the nation's legacy of punishment and genocide, thus preserving the race, gender, and class-based hierarchies that have served the nation since its advent (Roberts, 2012). In order to further understand the experience of these families and communities, it is important to analyze the ways that child welfare legislation plays specific roles in keeping marginalized communities disjointed.

A BRIEF POLICY ANALYSIS
THE RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH ACT

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), originally titled the Runaway Youth Act, was enacted by Congress in 1974 in an effort to keep vulnerable youth off the streets amidst rising violent crime rates across the nation (Gurr, 1981). The RHYA authorized the Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) Program, which provides federal grant funding for the creation or bolstering of local public, non-profit centers dedicated to supporting runaway youth and their families. There are three main programs within the RHY Program: the Basic Center Program (BCP), the Transitional Living Program (TLP), and the Social Outreach Program (SOP). Additional programs include the Maternity Group Home Project and the 1-800-RUNAWAY hotline (Family & Youth Services Bureau, 2018).

Based on survey data collected from youth after service provision, each of the three main programs, in addition to the 1-800-RUNAWAY hotline, appear to be effective in supporting youth (Table 1). In 2015, 90% of youth who participated in the BCP successfully transitioned to a stable living arrangement, while 70% of youth were reunited with their families (Administration for Children and Families, 2015). In the same year, SOP staff and volunteers made over 460,000 contacts with street youth which resulted in 21,000 transitions to shelters for the evening. Additionally, self-report surveys illustrated that the 1-800-RUNAWAY hotline was highly effective in supporting youth who were contemplating running away. In 2015, 100% of youth reported that they would call again in the future for additional support (Administration for Children & Families, 2015).

CRITIQUE AND CONSIDERATIONS

Although the RHYA has provided support to thousands of youth since its conception, it is equally important to acknowledge the pitfalls of the legislation. Youth in foster care constitute a large portion of runaways, yet nowhere in the program legislation are these youth identified as being especially vulnerable and in need of support. More specifically, the legislation makes no mention of Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+

foster youth even though they are disproportionately impacted by foster care and more likely to run away. This lack of focus is reflected in data collected from the program. For example, virtually no data was collected on LGBTQ+ youth who received services from the program (Administration for Children & Families, 2015). Data collection accounted only for transgender youth, neglecting to assess for how many youths served were lesbian, gay, bisexual, nonbinary, gender non-conforming, etc., despite an estimated 40% of youth identifying as LGBTQ+ (Furguson & Maccio, 2015).

Another important consideration is the legislation's emphasis on education and job training. There is widespread acceptance that a continuous and quality education is essential for youth to grow up mentally healthy. Quality education and job training provide important educational, developmental, and social milestones for children and youth. It is especially important to consider the impacts of prioritizing a future-focused mentality surrounding job training over youths' immediate safety and wellbeing. Experiencing homelessness in youth is traumatizing, especially when it involves elopement from a caregiver. By providing youth with stable housing, we can help to halt the cyclical pattern of poverty and incarceration, improve mental health outcomes, and empower youth with a sense of agency (Naccarato et al., 2008). Access to consistent, quality individual counseling has also been proven to significantly improve mental health and decrease substance abuse in runaway and homeless youth (Slesnick et al., 2008). For these reasons, it could be more beneficial to shift resources away from job training and toward counseling and housing.

FOSTERING CONNECTIONS TO SUCCESS AND INCREASING ADOPTIONS ACT

More recently, in 2008, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Fostering Connections Act) was passed in an effort to modernize the foster care system by promoting kinship foster placements and adoptions, improving access to quality healthcare, and supporting educational consistency. The legislation consists of five sections that focus on connecting and supporting kinship caregivers, improving outcomes for youth in foster care, improving access to foster

care and adoption within Indigenous communities, improving incentives for adoption, and clarifying a uniform definition of the term "child," as well as other provisions (Fostering Connections Act, 2008). Some of the most prominent alterations in child welfare that have resulted from this legislation include extending child welfare benefits to youth up to the age of 21 as well as heightening the focus on transition planning for youth who are aging out. The logic is that by encouraging kinship foster care and providing welfare services until the age of 21, youth will have a more supportive and protracted transition into independent living (Day & Preston, 2013).

In terms of implementation, varying degrees of intervention success can be seen on a state-to-state basis. The majority of U.S. states, including the District of Columbia, have updated child welfare legislation to reflect elements of the Fostering Connections Act, specifically in terms of educational stability, services to support said stability, and transition coordination. Despite these successes, many jurisdictions have failed to adequately incorporate all components of the federal legislation equally, particularly elements such as educational services (Perfect et al., 2013).

CRITIQUE AND CONSIDERATIONS

Like the RHYA, the Fostering Connections Act places a strong emphasis on job training and readiness to enter the workforce. This focus within the legislation highlights the inherent neoliberalism within U.S. law, based as it is on the idea that youth are responsible for both their individual circumstances and finding a means out of those circumstances by becoming a productive member of the workforce (Schelbe, 2011). Again, like the RHYA, the Fostering Connections Act could benefit from taking a step away from these notions of personal responsibility and job training, and instead focus on housing procurement and consistent, quality counseling (Naccarato et al., 2008; Slesink et al., 2008). The legislation is also inconsistent with its promotion of kinship care. Although the core of the legislation is based on the idea that kinship care promotes improved outcomes, the legislation fails to require heightened benefits, support, and access to resources for kinship caregivers (Koh et al., 2021).

STRUCTURAL AND CULTURAL CHANGES

The Fostering Connections Act has brought about meaningful change by promoting kinship foster care. Yet social workers will play an important role in advocating for further amendments to current legislation which will be crucial to providing Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ runaway foster youth with the support that they so vitally need and deserve. It is also important to acknowledge that any legislation is inherently a band-aid solution. We cannot expect alterations in legislation to be effective until social workers collectively advocate for and implement large-scale shifts in the deeply rooted cultural norms and values within the U.S.

When moving toward large-scale, structural changes, it is important for social workers to reconsider how the American patriarchal nuclear family structure has contributed to the creation of such an oppressive foster care system. Decades of research suggest that the myth of the nuclear family is inappropriate, misleading, and detrimental to our understanding of family dynamics and appropriate therapeutic interventions (Uzoka, 1979). This model of family structure is inherently homophobic and misogynistic. It suggests that anything other than a cisgender, heterosexual marriage does not constitute a valid family unit, while reinforcing traditional gender roles: the husband as the provider, protector, and decision maker, and the wife as the domestic servant and childrearer (St. Vil et al., 2019). In contrast to the patriarchal nuclear family structure, Black and Indigenous communities have historically placed a strong emphasis on communal mastery to promote positive outcomes in child-rearing (Hobfoll et al., 2002). Even today it is common for childrearing to be a communal, family effort in these communities. This is primarily due to the mechanisms of mass incarceration which remove parents from their children's lives and heighten caregiver responsibilities for the co-parent and their relatives (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2016; St. Vil et al., 2019).

While the efficacy of collectivism has been proven, this style of caregiving is often classified as parental neglect within a Western conceptualization of child-rearing, thus leading to the disproportionate removal of Black and Indigenous children from their families (Hobfoll et al., 2002). For instance, studies have shown that youth placed in kinship

foster arrangements—most often with women of color—have similar physical, mental, and behavioral health outcomes to youth placed in non-kinship arrangements. This is true despite the fact that kinship foster parents are, on average, older, lower income, less healthy, and receive fewer services and lower payments from child welfare agencies compared to non-kinship foster parents (Berrick et al., 1994; Koh et al., 2021). In other words, women of color in a kinship foster parent role produce similar outcomes for youth compared to white, non-kinship foster parents even though they are given fewer resources by child welfare agencies. In applying a collectivist approach to child-rearing, we may be able to create better outcomes for youth and their families by keeping families united and supported.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Social workers have an important role in transforming the foster care system. With our code of ethics in mind, it is imperative that we continue to advocate for cultural changes that abandon the three pillars of capitalist oppression: white supremacy, colonialism, and hetero-patriarchy. While social workers should strive to eliminate the need for runaway, homeless, and foster care youth services through large-scale cultural shifts and advocacy, it is equally important to consider how we can help youth who are already navigating through these systems right now.

From a clinical perspective, it is crucial that social workers who serve Black, Indigenous, LGBTQ+, and otherwise marginalized youth both in and outside of the child welfare system begin to operate from cultural humility, trauma-informed, and social justice lenses. The patterns of racism and oppression in the child welfare system are deeply woven into the fabric of the U.S. and will require a great deal of effort to tear out. This cannot be done simply by working for marginalized communities, but rather working in tandem with them to provide resources and to encourage organization, unity, and empowerment among the nation's most historically oppressed and abused communities.

CONCLUSION

The integration of decades of research into the field of child welfare has elucidated that the current U.S. foster care system has not strayed far from its oppressive origins. The foster care experience is commonly not a positive one for Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ youth. Racism, homophobia, and transphobia inflicted by peers, foster parents, and even social workers are common experiences for youth with these social identifiers. The physical, emotional, and sexual abuse that these youth are subjected to are often so dehumanizing that they are willing to risk further abuse, exploitation, trauma, and homelessness just to avoid their caregivers. Instead of meeting the crucially important social and emotional needs of youth, foster care serves an entirely different function for Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ youth: to continue the U.S.'s legacy of punishment and genocide. Healing racial and cultural trauma in Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ communities is often done most effectively when it happens collectively (Ortega-Williams et al., 2021). By separating families and alienating LGBTQ+ youth, the U.S. continues to prevent collective healing, ultimately keeping these marginalized people within the confines of state oppression. Elopement from foster care may be a much deeper, more meaningful behavior than we think it is. Perhaps youth elope not just to escape the oppressive, traumatizing conditions of foster care, but to return back to the communities that birthed them and initiate collective healing. Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ communities are resilient, but they should not have to be. We cannot help to liberate these communities without first helping to free their future, the youth.

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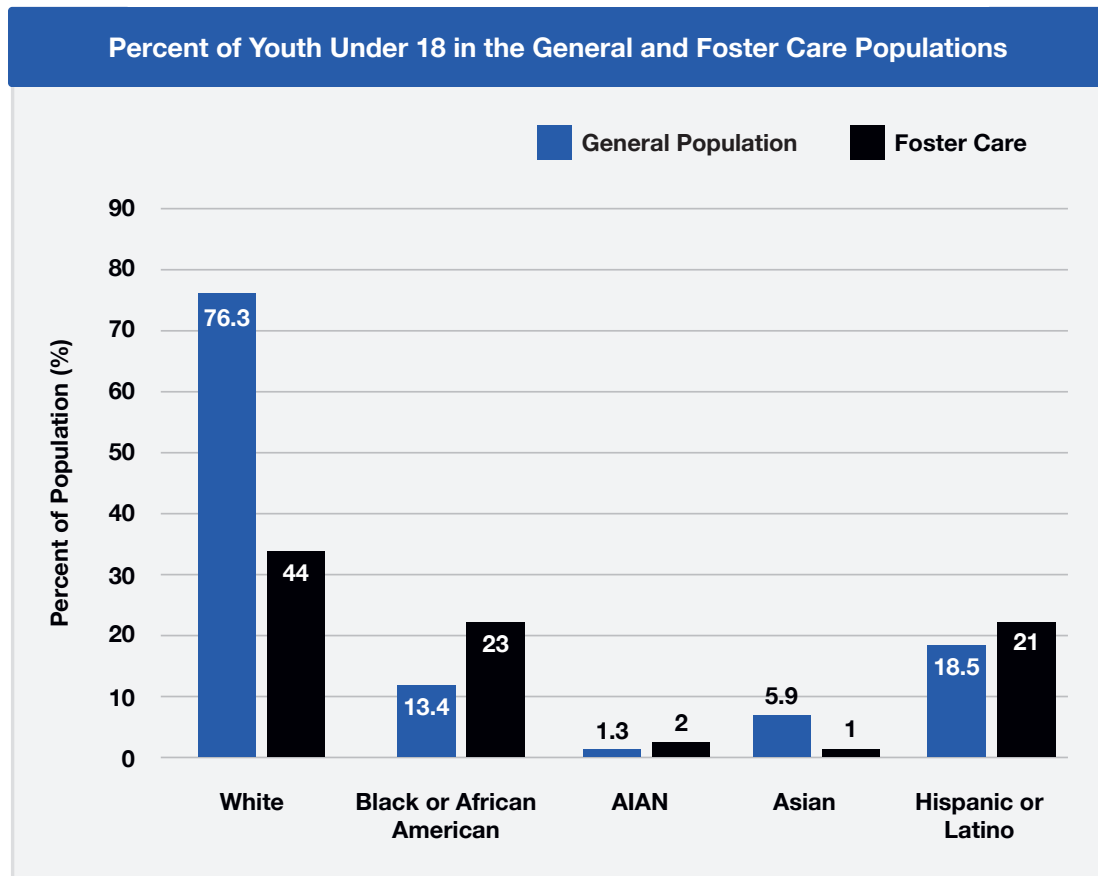
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FIGURE 1
FOSTER CARE AND GENERAL POPULATION DEMOGRAPHICS BY RACE

Percent of Youth Under 18 in the General and Foster Care Populations

Note. The percentage of youth under age 18 in the general and foster care populations are compared across race and ethnicity. Data collected on Indigenous Americans is labeled "AIAN," meaning American Indian and Alaskan Natives (Census Bureau, 2020; Children's Bureau, 2021).

FIGURE 2
LGBTQ+ YOUTH IN THE FOSTER CARE AND GENERAL POPULATIONS

Percentage of LGBT Youth in the General and Foster Care Populations
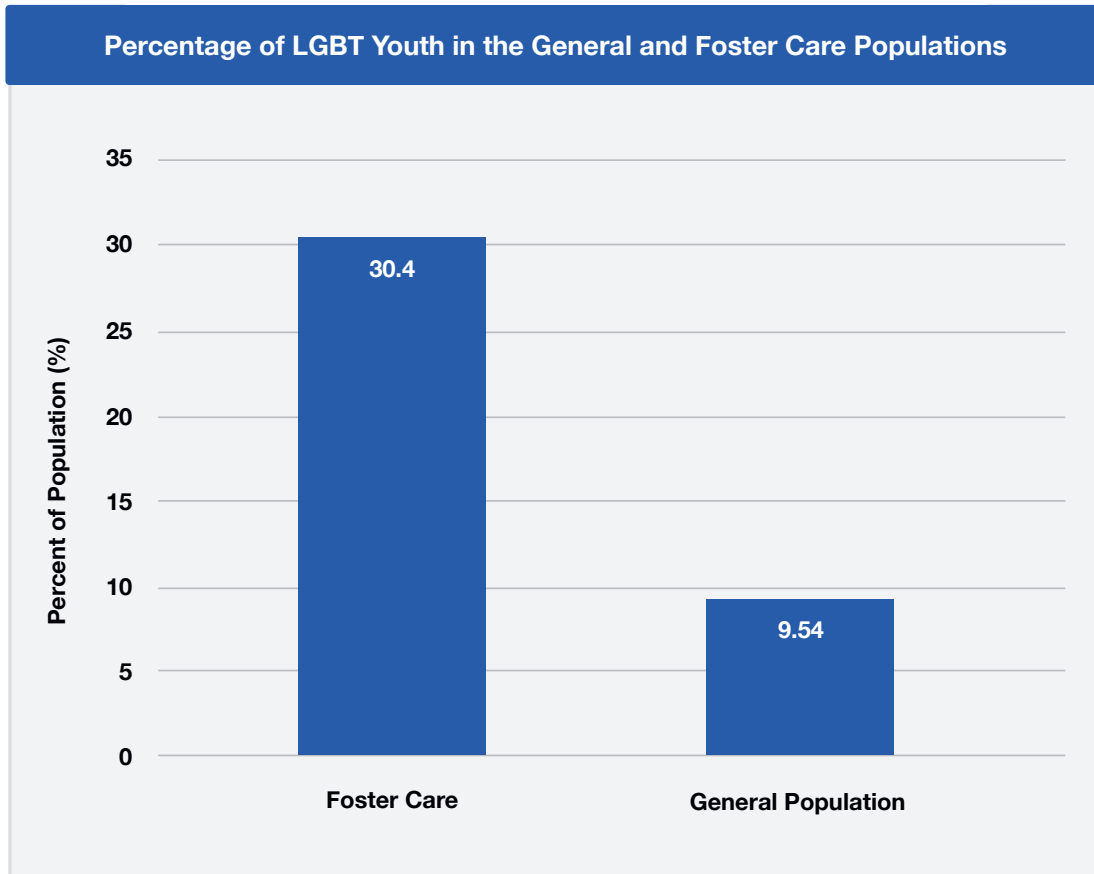
Note. The percentage of youth in the general and foster care populations are compared (Census Bureau, 2020; Children's Bureau 2021; Conron, 202).

	Funding ($)	Grantees	Females (%)	Males (%)	Black Youth (%)	Indigenous Youth (%)	LGBTQ+ Youth (%)
Table 1: Efficacy of RHYA Programming							
Basic Center Program	53 mil.	296	52	48	32	3	~<1
Transitional Living Program	44 mil.	200	60	39	39	5	~<1
Street Out-reach Program	17 mil.	101	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Note. Funding, number of grantees, and percentage of youth served relating to gender and race are compared across RHYA programming. In order to protect confidentiality, SOP advocates do not collect demographic data from youth served (Administration for Children & Families, 2015).