## Summary

Foster care alumni who have lived in group homes experience lower degrees of well-being and greater barriers to college access and completion of higher education programs. The needs of this population were made particularly clear during the instability of the pandemic, as foster care alumni who have previously lived in group homes enrolled in and left school at higher rates than those foster care alumni with no group home experience. Beyond educational outcomes, students with group home experience also reported less housing stability, more food insecurity, and more discrimination experienced while in foster care. Efforts should be made to bolster recruitment and retention of foster parents ready to care for teens as an alternative to group home placements. For foster care alumni who have previously lived in group homes, financial investments must be made to support their educational and other basic needs. Specifically, students in these programs need increased access to K-12 programming that can adequately prepare them to successfully apply and gain access to higher education, funding for financial assistance for school, greater access to experiential-based independent living trainings, and access to consistent, stable, and caring adults that can help them navigate the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

## Background

The term "foster care alumni" refers to people at least 18 years old who previously had experience in the foster care system. Foster care alumni often face numerous challenges that make the transition to adulthood more difficult in comparison to their peers. One subset of foster care alumni who face particular challenges during this transition are those who have spent time in a group home at some point during their time in care. A "group home" is a place of residence where a small number of unrelated individuals live under the care and supervision of a trained staff. Youth who have been placed in group homes face barriers to achieving permanency in relation to their peers placed in family-based settings.[1] These youth tend to have a greater number of placements, are less likely to be placed near their community of origin, less likely to be placed with siblings, and more likely to be re-abused than their peers in family-based foster care placements.[2] Group homes also tend to emphasize safety over the building of skills and experience, as youth in group homes have fewer opportunities to engage in independent living trainings that teach youth how to succeed in critical areas like education and employment.[3] Youth in group homes are left out of planning and decision-making in critical areas like

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[1] Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2012). Reducing congregate care: Worth the fight.

[2] Lee, B. R., Bright, C. L., Svoboda, D. V., Fakunmoju, S., & Barth, R. P. (2011). Outcomes of group care for youth: A review of comparative studies. Research on Social Work Practice, 21(2), 177-189.

[3] Kim, Y., Ju, E., Rosenberg, R., & Farmer, E. B. M. (2019). Estimating the effects of independent living services on educational attainment and employment of foster care youth. Children and Youth Services Review, 96, 294-301.

budgeting and cooking, leaving many feeling unprepared as adults to navigate important tasks related to managing finances and food preparation.[4,5]

Foster youth who have spent time in group homes as part of their time in care are a subset of individuals who have been found at particular educational risk.[6] Educational outcomes for children placed in group homes have also been shown to suffer, as they are more likely to drop out of high school and tend to have lower test scores in both math and English than those for youth placed in family-based settings.[7] People who have previously lived in a group home are especially likely to have experienced childhood adversity and trauma, and social support has been found to be particularly critical for ensuring their academic engagement and success.[8] Research has shown that additional and differentiated support can help students facing challenges related to prior trauma and group home experiences stay engaged and attain their educational goals.[9,10]

Many foster youth with experiences in groups homes are less prepared to deal with stress in times of crisis, such as during the COVID pandemic, and as a result, tend to experience greater adversity than foster youth who did not experience a residential placement.

## Research Overview

To provide support and understand this phenomenon better, Think of Us developed a microgrant program for foster care alumni facing economic challenges during the pandemic. Cross sectional data was collected over a three-week period in November 2020. 27,342 applicants between the ages of 18 and 29 applied, representing all 50 States. We analyzed data from all 27,342 foster care alumni who applied for the grant. The survey asked foster care alumni questions regarding their demographic information, educational status, and needs. The majority of respondents identified as female (60.7%) and male

[4] Freundlich, M., Avery, R. J., & Padgett, D. (2007). Preparation of youth in congregate care for independent living. Child & family social work, 12(1), 64-72.

[5] Salazar, A. M., Lopez, J. M., Spiers, S. S., Gutschmidt, S., & Monahan, K. C. (2021). Building financial capability in youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood. Child & Family Social Work.

[6] Weber, N. M., Somers, C. L., Day, A., & Baroni, B. A. (2016). Predictors and outcomes of school attachment and school involvement in a sample of girls in residential treatment. Residential Treatment for Children and Youth. DOI: 10.1080/0886571X.2016.1188034

[7] Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2015). Every kid needs a family: Giving children in the child welfare system the best chance for success.

[8] Somers, C., Day, A., Chambers, M., Wendler, K., Culp, H., & Baroni, B. (2016). Adolescents in residential treatment: Caregiver and peer predictors of risk behavior and academic performance. Current Psychology, 35 (1). 131-141. DOI: 10.1007/s12144-015-9371-5.

[9] Somers, C., Day, A., *Sepsey, A.M., *Allegoet, D., Baroni, B., & Hong, J.S. (2019). Understanding the academic environment within a residential treatment center school context: Perspectives from students and their teachers. Residential Treatment for Children & Youth. Doi:10.1080/0886571X.2019.1622167
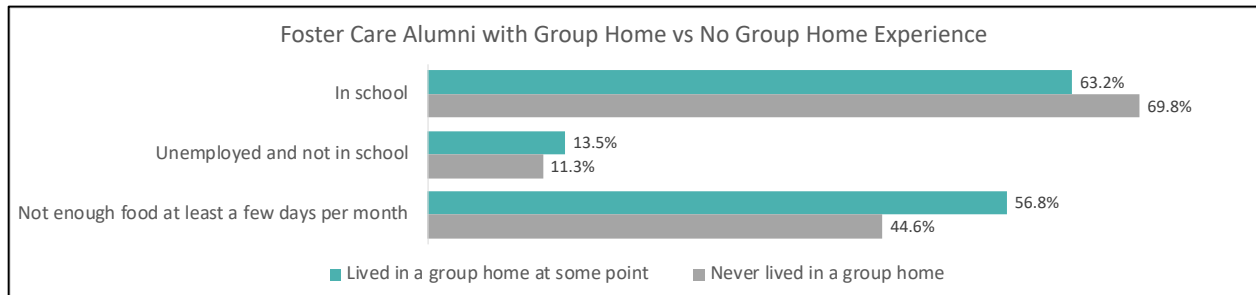
[10] Crosby, S.D., Somers, C., Day, A., Baroni, B. (2019). Examining Trauma-Informed Teaching and the Trauma Symptomatology of Court-Involved Girls. The Urban Review. Doi: 10.1007/s11256-019-00533-2

(31.0%). Regarding race and ethnicity, participants primarily identified as Black or African American (34.2%), white (22.3%), Hispanic (21.0%), and two or more races (16.5%).

The statistically significant findings related to group homes for foster care alumni are below:

- Foster care alumni who had previously lived in a group home were less likely to be in an educational program of any kind at the beginning of the pandemic (63.2%) than those who had never lived in a group home (69.8%).
- Foster care alumni who had previously lived in a group home were more likely to be both unemployed and not in school at the beginning of the pandemic (13.5%) than those who had never lived in a group home (11.3%).
- Foster care alumni who previously lived in a group home were more likely to report not having enough food to eat at least a few days each month (56.8%) than those who were never in a group home (44.6%).
- Controlling for self-reported identities of race, gender, and sexuality, foster care alumni who reported experiencing discrimination while in foster care were 2.8 times more likely to have lived in a group home at some point.



Foster Care Alumni with Group Home vs No Group Home Experience

| | Lived in a group home at some point | Never lived in a group home |
| --- | --- | --- |
| In school | 63.2% | 69.8% |
| Unemployed and not in school | 13.5% | 11.3% |
| Not enough food at least a few days per month | 56.8% | 44.6% |

We also analyzed data from the subset of 7,718 foster care alumni who applied for the grant that reported they were enrolled in post-secondary educational programs as of March 2020, right before the pandemic hit. The survey asked students questions regarding their demographic information, educational status, and needs. The majority of student respondents identified as female (65.3%) and male (25.6%). Regarding race and ethnicity, participants primarily identified as Black or African American (34.5%), Hispanic (22.8%), white (19.5%), and two or more races (17.5%).

The statistically significant findings related to group homes for foster care alumni who are students in post-secondary educational programs are summarized below:

- Students who had previously lived in a group home left school at a higher rate during the pandemic (24.4%) than those who had never lived in a group home (17.1%).
- Students who had previously lived in a group home were less likely to live on-campus (10.8%) than those who had never lived in a group home (16.4%), removing a protective factor for many

students. Of students who had previously lived in a group home, those that lived off-campus at the start of the pandemic left school at a higher rate (26.1%) than those who lived on-campus at the start of the pandemic (10.3%).

● When asked about their greatest educational need, students who had previously lived in a group home primarily requested academic assistance (14.6%), assistance with acquiring reliable technology and internet services (13.4%), and financial assistance (12.5%).

**Students with Group Home vs No Group Home Experience**

| | |
|---|---|
| Left school during pandemic | 24.4% (Lived in a group home) / 17.1% (Never lived in a group home) |
| Lived on-campus | 10.8% (Lived in a group home) / 16.4% (Never lived in a group home) |

■ Lived in a group home at some point   ■ Never lived in a group home
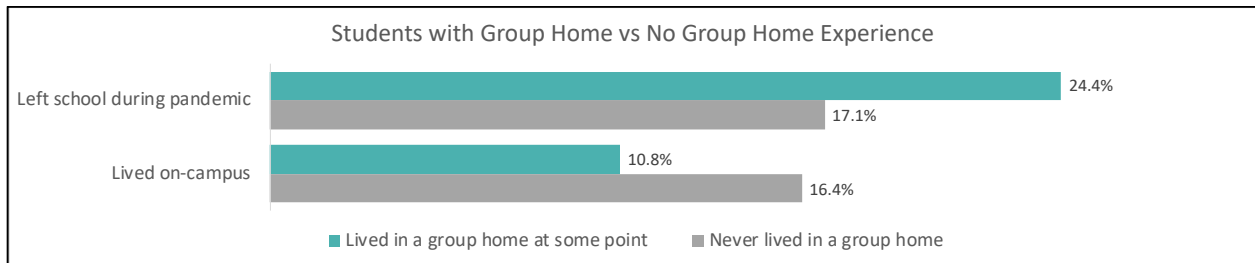
## Policy recommendations

The results from this survey reinforce findings from the literature that foster care alumni who have previously spent time in group homes are particularly at risk during economic instability. In order to reduce disparities in care for current foster youth associated with placement in a group home, we recommend the following:

● **Increase recruitment and retention of foster parents and kinship caregivers who are equipped to parent teens.** For youth in care today, the best way to mitigate the negative educational and basic health outcomes associated with having spent time in a group home is to place these youth in family-based settings. More personalized, differentiated care is critical to the wellbeing and educational success of foster care alumni with group home experience. Placing youth with trauma-informed foster parents and kinship caregivers as an alternative to group home placements is one way to improve quality of care, particularly for some of the most at-risk youth.[11,12] Family-based placements are also more likely to result in connections to permanent caring adults than residential settings, where instability of shifting and high turnover staff make it harder for youth to build meaningful relationships.[13] Having permanent caring adults to rely on in times of stress are critical to youth success in all aspects of well-being (including financial and educational).[14] Placing youth with kinship caregivers should be a particular priority, as placement

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[11] Lee, B. R., Bright, C. L., Svoboda, D. V., Fakunmoju, S., & Barth, R. P. (2011). Outcomes of group care for youth: A review of comparative studies. Research on Social Work Practice, 21(2), 177-189.

[12] Robst, J., Armstrong, M., & Dollard, N. (2011). Comparing outcomes for youth served in treatment foster care and treatment group care. Journal of Child and Family Studies, 20(5), 696-705.

[13] Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2012). Reducing congregate care: Worth the fight.

[14] Lockwood, K. K., Friedman, S., & Christian, C. W. (2015). Permanency and the foster care system. Current Problems in Pediatric and Adolescent Health Care, 45(10), 306-315.

with relatives is associated with better behavioral outcomes and increases the chances that foster youth of color are living in homes that are more in tune with a youth's cultural, as well as legal and relational, permanency needs.[15,16]

In order to address the barriers that foster care alumni who have previously lived in group homes face, we recommend the following:

- **Increase opportunities for foster care alumni who have lived in group homes to fully take part in full array of services offered through independent living training programs, including:**
  - **The ability to participate in the workforce.** Foster care alumni need to be provided the skills and experiences necessary to be successful when they exit foster care. Many group homes do not allow youth in residential care to participate in the workforce, including participation in experiential-based training initiatives (e.g. summer youth employment programs supported by the Workforce Investment Act) or other paid employment opportunities. These training experiences are critical to ensure foster youth can compete with their non-foster care peers for paid employment at foster care exit.
  - **Budget planning and money management.** Knowing how to spend and manage money responsibly is critical for ensuring foster care alumni consistently have enough money to support their basic needs. While in care, youth rarely have opportunities to manage family or personal expenses, with many youth lacking access to checking and savings accounts.[17,18] Group homes tend to have restrictive rules and requirements, even further limiting access to financial products for these individuals.[19] Often with little to no financial safety net from family, foster care alumni should be provided with independent living training that can teach them the skills and knowledge necessary to maintain sufficient funds for basic living expenses.[20]
  - **Cooking and meal preparation.** Foster care alumni need to be able to cook and prepare healthy meals on their own. The rigid structure of group homes often impedes the transfer of these sorts of important skills, as youth are often restricted from practicing

[15] Washington, T., Wrenn, A., Kaye, H., Priester, M. A., Colombo, G., Carter, K., ... & Coakley, T. (2018). Psychosocial factors and behavioral health outcomes among children in Foster and Kinship care: A systematic review. Children and Youth Services Review, 90, 118-133.

[16] Pinderhughes, E. E., Scott, J. C., & Matthews, J. A. (2019). Youth of Color in Care: Intersecting Identities and Vulnerabilities. In Handbook of Children and Prejudice (pp. 353-373). Springer, Cham.

[17] Batsche, C., Hart, S., Ort, R., Armstrong, M., Strozier, A., & Hummer, V. (2014). Post-secondary transitions of youth emancipated from foster care. Child & Family Social Work, 19(2), 174-184.

[18] Salazar, A. M., Lopez, J. M., Spiers, S. S., Gutschmidt, S., & Monahan, K. C. (2021). Building financial capability in youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood. Child & Family Social Work.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Batsche, C., Hart, S., Ort, R., Armstrong, M., Strozier, A., & Hummer, V. (2014). Post-secondary transitions of youth emancipated from foster care. Child & Family Social Work, 19(2), 174-184.

life skills like cooking meals.[21] Training programs can teach youth critical skills related to cooking and meal preparation. Youth should also be made aware of programs (e.g. SNAP and WIC) that support access to healthy food, and be taught how to access these programs prior to officially transitioning out of care.[22]

- o **Being able to enroll in educational programming designed to prepare them for post-secondary enrollment.** Moving to a group home often results in displacement from a youth's community and school of origin.[23] Changing schools delays time to high school graduation, as students often lose credits through the transfer process, and increases the likelihood of dropping out.[24] Many students eventually complete secondary education through GED programs, which are less rigorous and result in worse preparation for post-secondary educational success.[25] Whenever possible, students should remain in their school of origin, and tutoring or other academic assistance should be granted when a student changes schools. Students should have access to more rigorous high school alternatives when needed to best prepare them for post-secondary success.

- **Provide adequate financial aid supports that assist foster care alumni with group home experience in reaching their post-secondary education goals**. When foster care alumni enroll in college, they are more likely to require remedial courses, which delays time to graduation and, thus, increases the cost of obtaining a degree.[26] While federal policies (e.g. Education and Training Voucher, College Cost Reduction Act, Pell Grants) have increased college access for foster care alumni, they are often capped in the middle of a student's college journey (e.g. Pell Grants are capped at 12 semesters).[27] These sorts of financial supports should expand the amount of time they are available to foster care alumni in order to ensure that this critical financial support is not eliminated prior to graduation.

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[21] Schmidt, J., Cunningham, M., Dalton, L. D., Powers, L. E., Geenen, S., & Orozco, C. G. (2013). Assessing restrictiveness: A closer look at the foster care placements and perceptions of youth with and without disabilities aging out of care. Journal of Public Child Welfare, 7(5), 586-609.

[22] Bruno, N. C. (2019). Cooking Self-Efficacy, Knowledge, and Skills Among Foster Adolescents Participating in a Nutrition Cooking Class (Doctoral dissertation, Kent State University).

[23] Lee, B. R., Bright, C. L., Svoboda, D. V., Fakunmoju, S., & Barth, R. P. (2011). Outcomes of group care for youth: A review of comparative studies. Research on Social Work Practice, 21(2), 177-189.

[24] Clemens, E. V., Lalonde, T. L., & Sheesley, A. P. (2016). The relationship between school mobility and students in foster care earning a high school credential. Children and Youth Services Review, 68, 193-201.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Day, A. G., Smith, R. J., & Tajima, E. A. (2021). Stopping Out and its Impact on College Graduation Among a Sample of Foster Care Alumni: A Joint Scale-Change Accelerated Failure Time Analysis. Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research, 12(1), 11-39.

[27] Ibid.

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