

Should institutional placements be eliminated for youth in foster care?

THINK OF US. (2021). *AWAY FROM HOME: YOUTH EXPERIENCES OF INSTITUTIONAL PLACEMENTS IN FOSTER CARE*

What can we learn from this study?

Several research studies document negative outcomes and experiences for youth placed in institutional settings. Despite this, 1 out of every 10 children removed from their families and placed in foster care are in a residential or group placement. Missing from the current discourse on group placement are the voices of those with lived experience, which must be at the center of the conversation moving forward. This research report by [Think of Us](#) aims to fill that gap, providing insights about institutional placements from youth who experienced them.

Study details:

- **Population:** 78 youth from across the U.S., ages 18 to 25, who are either currently in extended foster care or former foster youth
- **Data source and methodologies:** Participatory qualitative research and lived expert peer review
- **Dates:** September 2020

What are the critical findings?

Young people had very challenging experiences in residential placement settings, **frequently feeling shame, unworthiness, and undeserving of a family or place in society as a result.** Youth reported that:

- Child welfare systems do not necessarily use institutional settings as placements of last resort, nor do they follow assessment of clinical treatment needs, resulting in youth being placed inappropriately. Staff lacked training, and youth sometimes perceived them as unkind, untrustworthy, and cruel.
- The physical facilities, meals, clothing, and hygiene products were insufficient and not culturally sensitive for meeting basic needs. Youth had little privacy or personal agency to make decisions, and often felt unsafe.
- They experienced a lack of academic stability, opportunities, and resources, which impacted their success in adulthood.
- They experienced a lack of love. Trauma was not always addressed or tended to in a humane way.
- They felt isolated and unable to access basic technology in order to stay in touch with friends/family; and confined, surveilled, restricted and degraded, as if in prison.
- Institutional placement was not the best option for them, and they welcomed an opportunity to reform the current system.

Why is this important for our work?

Any reform to the current child welfare system should be in partnership with those who have experienced it. This research report puts forth many recommendations for change, including eliminating institutional placements, involving youth and families in placement decisions, focusing on prevention, expanding the role of kin, making foster family placements more stable and culturally appropriate, accommodating the preferences of youth in all decision-making, and centering youth voice in the research, design, and implementation of any policy changes.

This summary synthesizes findings from a single research study. To learn more about institutional placements, please see: [Can we re-envision residential care?](#) and [What are the outcomes for youth placed in congregate care settings?](#)

For additional information, [access the research report directly](#), visit the Think of Us [Away from Home](#) webpage or email KMResources@casey.org.