

# Young People With Lived Experience in Foster Care Recommend Improvements to Mental Health Supports

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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The [Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Foster Youth Initiative](#) (Initiative) aims to promote the well-being and future success of young people who have experienced foster care in Atlanta, Los Angeles, New York City, and nationally. As the Initiative's evaluation partner, Child Trends assesses progress toward the Initiative's goals and disseminates learnings to inform the work of the Initiative and its partners. As part of the evaluation, Child Trends convenes an Evaluation Advisory Board (Board) comprised of young people with lived experience in foster care from Atlanta, Los Angeles, and New York City to play an important role in interpreting findings and developing recommendations for the Initiative.

The 2024 Evaluation Advisory Board members include Daniel Bisuano, Al-Yh Holland, Jamie Kelley, Nilsa Morales, Clarissa Peña, and Tonia Ramsey. The Board is facilitated by two Child Trends interns who also have lived experience in foster care: Lanitta Berry and Alex Guerrero. All Board members and the interns contributed perspectives and insights to this brief.<sup>2</sup> Members remain on the Evaluation Advisory Board for a minimum of one year, attending at least four meetings focused on building community with one another, being introduced to research, interpreting qualitative and quantitative data, and preparing to write briefs. Critically, the Board's members bring unique perspectives shaped by their personal experiences.

## About this brief

As members of the 2024 Evaluation Advisory Board, we identified mental health as our central concern and interest for 2024-2025. In this brief, we share our interpretation of the barriers to mental health and well-being among youth with foster care experience identified in Child Trends' evaluation activities, and we propose recommendations to address these challenges. Each section shares our individual voices and reflections on the challenges and opportunities uncovered through Child Trends' evaluation. Some Board members also chose to share creative contributions in the form of poetry and art, which we include throughout the brief to emphasize our observations. The brief concludes with our recommendations for the Initiative and its partners to ensure that all youth with foster care experience have access to—and choice of—mental health services to support their well-being.

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<sup>1</sup> This section is largely verbatim from the introductory sections of the brief authored by last year's Advisory Board: <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/transitioning-foster-care-lived-experts-recommendations>

<sup>2</sup> Alyssa Liehr and Amy McKlindon provided Child Trends staff support throughout the development of this brief.

# Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Services

Child Trends' evaluation identified several barriers to receiving mental health supports and services for youth with lived experience in foster care. Barriers included lack of access to high-quality mental health care, workforce challenges, limited access to services beyond traditional mental health care, and limited data available to identify challenges and solutions. In this section, we interpret these findings by drawing from our lived expertise.

## Lack of access to high-quality care

Youth navigating the foster care system often face difficulties receiving adequate, high-quality mental health care. Locating providers that accept Medicaid is a challenge that often disrupts services. Young people may struggle to receive high-quality mental health support due to gaps in service availability, improper institutionalization, overreliance on medication, and a lack of trauma-informed providers. When youth are unable to get the help they need in a timely manner, it can limit their daily function, worsen their conditions, and cause them to not pursue help in the future.



**"Success Beyond the Fence,"** by Lanitta Berry

## Workforce challenges

The systems that engage and care for youth and young adults can have their own internal challenges that youth can feel. Some challenges that came up in our discussion specific to mental health providers included an inadequate number of available providers, rapid turnover, lack of training and skill development, and lack of clinicians with diverse backgrounds who mirror young people's identities and experiences. Workforce shortages across youth- and family-serving systems also lead to a lack of communication across systems.

## Moving beyond traditional mental health care

Youth can take advantage of other therapeutic options beyond traditional talk therapy and medications. However, these supports are limited by how services are currently funded. Strengthening community-based support systems and exploring nontraditional mental health options (e.g., participation in art-based therapy and school-based mental health supports, especially for youth who may not engage with or respond well to traditional forms of therapy) can act as a safety net.

## Limited data

It can be difficult to identify what issues exist and how to solve them when data are not available. Currently, the Initiative and Child Trends have limited data on mental health outcomes for foster youth in Atlanta, Los Angeles, and New York City, making it hard to create high-quality, targeted interventions. Improvements within youth-serving systems heavily rely on stakeholders such as state agencies, clinical staff, nonprofit organizations, and youth advocates and their caregivers having access to a realistic picture of young people's experiences. Furthermore, if data collection is not executed properly, youth may not trust or want to participate in data collection efforts. For example, young people may be less willing to share their mental health experiences and needs freely if data are collected by the child welfare agency, as in New York City. It is important to consider how we can collect accurate data on young people's mental health in a way that prioritizes young people's buy-in and trust and compensates them, and that allows for disaggregation by different demographics.

## Evaluation Advisory Board Recommendations

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The Evaluation Advisory Board interpreted the data gathered by Child Trends in its role as evaluation partner to the Foster Youth Initiative, and we have identified four major areas where change is necessary to address the mental health needs of young people with foster care experience.

We offer these recommendations to the Initiative to inform its ongoing work, and to the broader child welfare field: (1) Expand access to nontraditional mental health services, (2) do not consider mental health in isolation, (3) invest in peer support, and (4) invest in high-quality data on mental health.

Each recommendation reflects a shared consensus among Evaluation Advisory Board members. Following each recommendation, individual members contribute their personal reflections to illustrate what the recommendation means to them based on their own experiences and insights. These reflections use first-person language to honor the individuality of their voices. While all members supported the overarching recommendations, the personal perspectives may not represent the views of the entire Evaluation Advisory Board.

### **“Growing Up,” by Daniel Bisuano**

Growing up I never thought that I'd find my place  
Didn't think I could relate  
Something in me changed  
Too many years it took to find my way  
Everything I did society told me was not okay  
All this pain  
How can you sit here say everything's okay  
Crazy how I sit here and live in this pain  
Stuck trying to change  
Pushing everyone away  
You trying to tell me it will all be okay  
Can't move on  
I can't seem to find my way  
Stuck trying to change but  
I just keep doing the same  
Everyone I love I push away  
Trust issues got me making all the same mistakes  
Feeling stuck  
Trying to relate  
All these thoughts inside  
I feel like pain messed up my brain  
Drive me insane  
Thoughts on thoughts still feeling the same  
Growing up I never thought I'd find my place  
Didn't think I could relate  
Something in me changed  
Growing up I never thought I'd find my place  
Can't relate  
Feel I've changed  
I don't wanna be the same  
Constantly dealing with my inner demons' games  
Feeling the weight from the day to day  
Trying to dig my family out of the gutter  
It all just feels the same  
Living from the day to day

# Expand access to nontraditional mental health services.

Traditionally, mental health can be viewed through a one-size-fits-all lens, but mental health looks different for everyone. Every person, especially youth, deserves to have an opportunity to explore what mental health looks like for them and move beyond traditional forms of therapy.

Mental health is often seen in one way—talk therapy. Young people with foster care experience can be reluctant to go to therapy because it represents trauma and a system that oftentimes oppresses them or their community. Traditional talk therapy is not the only answer. Art, expression, nature, physical fitness, and many other approaches have been tools to support mental health and address the effects of being system-impacted. Nontraditional mental health approaches are gaining traction though various organizations serving those in need by providing vital, art-focused opportunities.

Data suggest that the foster youth population continues to struggle despite access to traditional talk therapy. California, for example, was given a D+ by Children Now when it comes to overall support and ability to meet all children and youths' mental health needs.<sup>3</sup> I know as a student I would never want to bring home a D+ for any one of my classes.

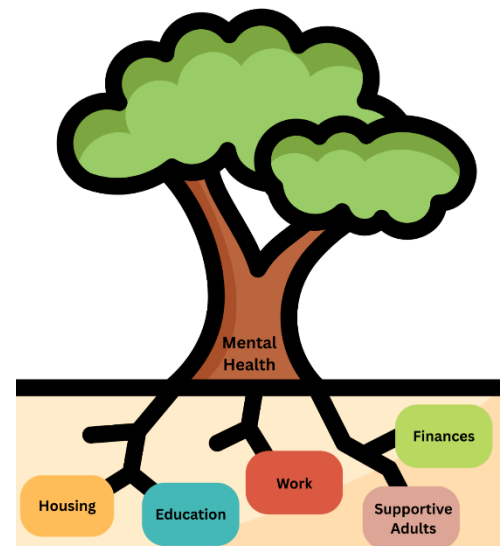
Improving access to nontraditional mental health supports and obtaining data related to these supports is vital to create better lives for youth across the country. Data drive funding, and it is essential to create systems where funding is easier to access for organizations to develop and expand nontraditional services. Other ways in which to gather feedback from foster youth on nontraditional services could include community listening sessions and films documenting youths' stories.

As a society, we must do better. Mental health should be treated as a vital need, like any other. Without a healthy mind we cannot function, write, pursue our dreams, or show up to work and give it our all. We believe this country can create a better mental health system with alternative supports that help us all thrive.

## Do not consider mental health in isolation.

Mental health does not exist in a vacuum. It is shaped every day by where we live, learn, work, and grow. If we truly want to support young people, we have to look at the full picture—we must support them holistically, in every area of their lives. Mental health is not just about access to therapy or crisis intervention; it is about ensuring that the conditions around a young person allow them to feel safe, stable, and seen.

We need to consider all the issues that directly impact youths' emotional and mental well-being—housing, education, employment, and family systems—and be intentional about providing support in those areas. I know it is difficult to ask a young person to focus on healing if they are unsure where they will sleep that night. It is hard to expect them to thrive



**"How Life Experiences and Our Roots Shape our Mental Well-being," by Alex Guerrero**

<sup>3</sup> Children Now (2024). California Children's Report Card. Retrieved from <https://www.childrennow.org/portfolio-posts/2024-california-childrens-report-card/>

while navigating under-resourced schools, unstable jobs, or the trauma of being separated from their family and placed in foster care.

These are not side issues—they are central to mental health. That is why the Evaluation Advisory Board recommends viewing mental health through a wider lens. Systemic challenges such as poverty, housing insecurity, lack of educational opportunity, and institutional neglect can create chronic stress that makes it difficult for young people to access or benefit from consistent, high-quality mental health care. By addressing these root causes, we shift the conversation from short-term interventions to long-term transformation. We begin creating the kind of environments in which wellness is possible—not just as a service offered during a crisis, but as a lived reality—supported by stable housing, high-quality education, meaningful employment, and a strong sense of belonging. When we invest in these interconnected areas, we are not just treating symptoms, we are building the foundation for young people to live healthy, whole lives outside of the foster care system.

## Invest in peer support.

Investing in peer support is a transformative step toward addressing gaps in mental health care for young people. The Evaluation Advisory Board recommends this investment because services provided by individuals with lived experience foster trust, understanding, and relatability in a way that traditional services often cannot. Many young adults, particularly those from marginalized communities, struggle with stigma, financial limitations, and a lack of culturally competent care. By integrating peer support into mental health initiatives, we can create safe spaces where young people can connect with others who have walked similar paths. This approach not only normalizes seeking help but also empowers individuals with the tools to navigate their challenges alongside someone who truly understands.

Expanding peer support will help make mental health care more accessible and less intimidating. When young people see themselves reflected in their support networks, they are more likely to engage in meaningful conversations and trust the process of healing. Peer support offers a humanized approach to care—one rooted in shared experience. It fosters resilience, promotes self-advocacy, and ensures that no one feels alone in their struggles. Investing in peer support models is an investment in a future where mental health care is not just a service but a community-driven movement of healing and empowerment.

### **“Hold My Story,” by Jamie Kelley**

I have walked where you walk,  
Felt the weight you carry,  
Not as a stranger looking in,  
But as a heart that understands.

No script, no clipboard,  
Just a voice that knows your silence,  
A hand reaching, steady and warm—  
Proof that healing is never walked alone.

## Invest in high-quality data on mental health.

Investing in high-quality data on the mental health of current and former foster youth is important for creating effective policies and support systems. Young people entering the foster care system often face high levels of trauma, which can lead to significant mental health challenges later in life if not addressed. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can have long-lasting effects that can influence a young person’s emotional regulation,



relationships, and overall well-being.<sup>4</sup> Understanding these effects requires comprehensive, reliable data that track both short-term and long-term outcomes. Without these data, it is difficult to identify gaps in services and determine where interventions are most needed.

Having access to high-quality mental health data can ensure that policies and programs are designed to meet the specific needs of foster youth and is essential for advocating for increased resources and creating a system that supports youth through their transitions into adulthood. Assessing the issues that surround youth in foster care is important to finding a way to create better outcomes for youth. For example, using data to create a map of providers who accept Medicaid would help identify and address service gaps. Another useful strategy would be to look at housing, employment, education, and other outcomes alongside mental health outcomes to understand young people's experiences and the interconnections between these experiences and their impacts on a young person's well-being.

Trust in the data collection process, fair compensation for participation, and the use of longitudinal methods will ensure that the information is reliable and collected in a manner that is truly reflective of youths' needs. With thoughtful, well-designed data collection, systems can create a more accurate picture of the mental health challenges faced by former foster youth and ultimately develop interventions that can help them thrive. Ultimately, investing in data is an investment in the future well-being and success of young people.

## Conclusion

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Mental health is an aspect of a young person's wellness that should not be ignored. A culture that prioritizes trust, transparency, and lived experience must be the standard that is set for all youth-serving systems. As we conclude this year's work, we are proud of the insights we have shared and the recommendations we have developed to improve mental health outcomes for youth with foster care experience. Mental health is a foundational need for all young people, but especially for youth who are impacted by the foster care system. We are deeply grateful to the Hilton Foundation and Child Trends for creating the space and support for youth voice to be heard and valued. This opportunity has allowed us not only to reflect on challenges to accessing mental health care, but also to envision a better future for young people like us. Our aim is to build momentum toward more inclusive, transparent, and responsive systems. As this work continues and as next year's Evaluation Advisory Board takes shape, we are excited to see how this work expands beyond mental health into new issue areas that matter to foster youth. The Evaluation Advisory Board is energized by what lies ahead and looks forward to seeing how this work will continue forward.

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<sup>4</sup> Meeker, E.C., O'Connor, B.C., Kelly, L.M., Hodgeman, D.D., Scheel-Jones, A.H., and Berbary, C. (2022). The impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences on adolescent health risk indicators in a community sample. *Psychological Trauma*, 13(3): 302-312. doi:10.1037/tra0001004.

To learn more about mental health resources for youth with foster care experience in Atlanta, Los Angeles, and New York City, please see the following resources from the local/state child welfare and health agencies:

**Atlanta:** Georgia Crisis and Access Line (GCAL): 1-800-715-4225;  
<https://dbhdd.georgia.gov/be-dbhdd/crisis-system-georgia>

**Los Angeles:** California Family Urgent Response System (FURS) Hotline: 1-833-939-FURS/1-833-939-3877; <https://cal-furs.org/>

**New York City:** Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services through NYC Health:  
<https://www.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/health-topics/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services.page>

The 988 Lifeline is available across the United States for support via call, text, or chat. For more information, see <https://988lifeline.org/> or call/text 988.

### **Suggested Citation**

Berry, L., Guerrero, A., Bisuano, D., and Kelley, J. (2025). Young people with lived experience in foster care recommend improvements to mental health supports. Child Trends.  
DOI: 10.56417/1127v403h