



It's Complicated:

A longitudinal exploration of young people's perceptions of placement in foster care and their reflections on changing children's social care

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A CALL TO ACTION

to CHANGE CHILD WELFARE



Research Questions

- How do children ages 9-11 feel about being placed in out-of-home care (OOHC)?
 - Was it helpful? Difficult? Both?
- If they had never been placed in OOHC, how would their lives be now?
- How do they feel about the amount of information they get from their caseworker?
- Do they get to have enough say about what happens to them when they are in OOHC?

- How do these same participants, now in young adulthood, answer these questions?

- How do their responses differ as a function of demographic, placement, & mental health characteristics?

- Most importantly, how do these young adults suggest changing the child welfare system?

Study Participants

- Recruited all 9-11-year-old children living in any type of out-of-home placement in participating counties over 10 summers (N=215 for current study)
- Placed in court-ordered out-of-home care following dependency and neglect petition filed in prior 12 months
- On average, they had been in out-of-home care for 6 months
- Conducted *confidential* 1:1 interviews with them when they were in pre-adolescence and young adulthood (an average of 9.4 years later; 89% retention rate)
- Youth continued to participate in the study even if they changed placements, reunified with parents, were adopted, or emancipated

Participant Characteristics

Average preadolescent age: 10.5 Years (Range 9-11)

Average young adult age: 20.0 years (Range 18-22)

Female: 48%

Hispanic: 51%

White: 49%

American Indian: 29%

African American: 27%

Asian or Pacific Islander: 6%

Neglect: >80%

Physical Abuse: 27%

Sexual Abuse: 11%

Out-of-Home Care Experiences

Preadolescent Interview (at time of interview):

Foster Care: 42%

Kinship Care: 54%

Congregate Care: 4%

Young Adult Interview (ever lived/experienced):

Kinship Care: 88%

Foster Care: 76%

Congregate Care: 53%

Reunified: 45%

Emancipated: 26%

Termination of parental rights (TPR): 35%

Adopted (according to records): 27% (78% of those with TPR)

Placed in adoptive home but adoption not finalized (self-report): 18% (40% of those with TPR)

Removed from adoptive home after adoption finalized (self-report): 7% (16% of those with TPR)

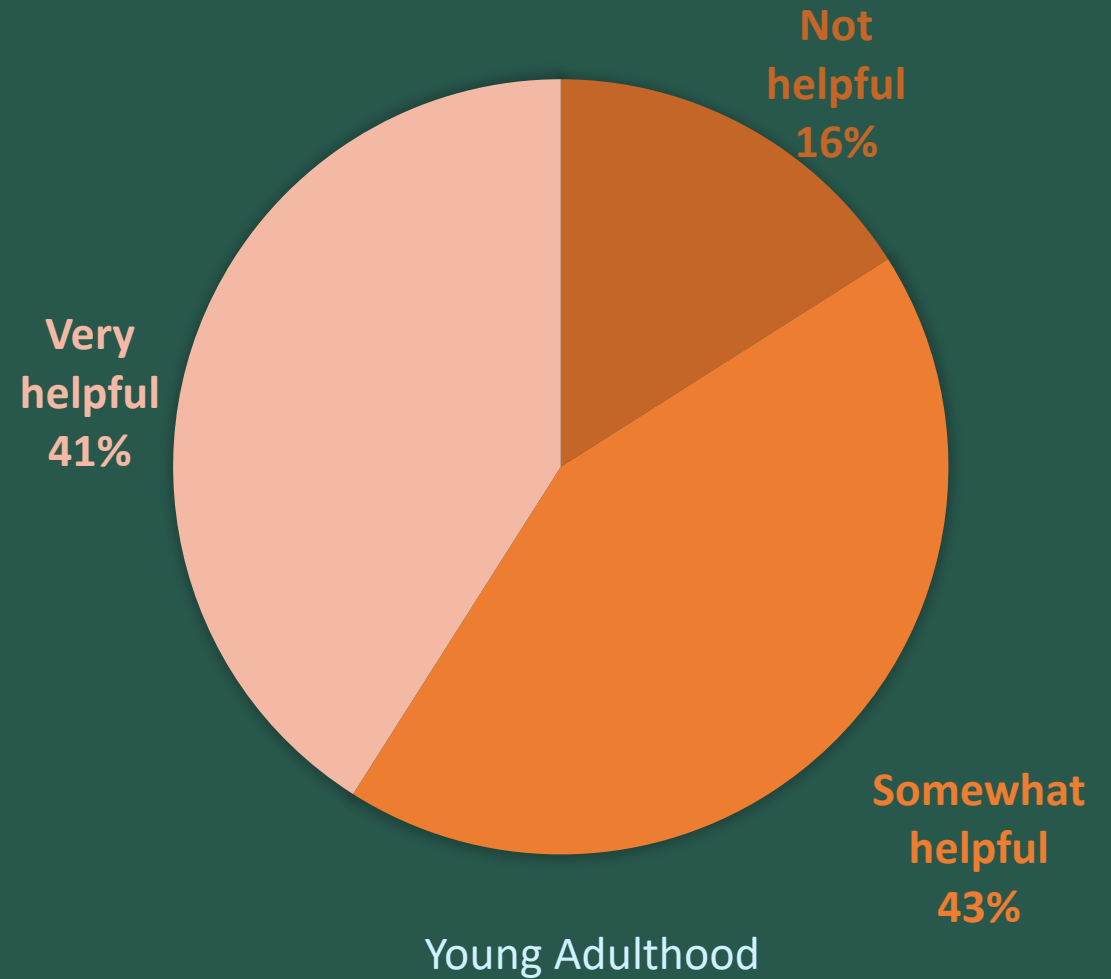
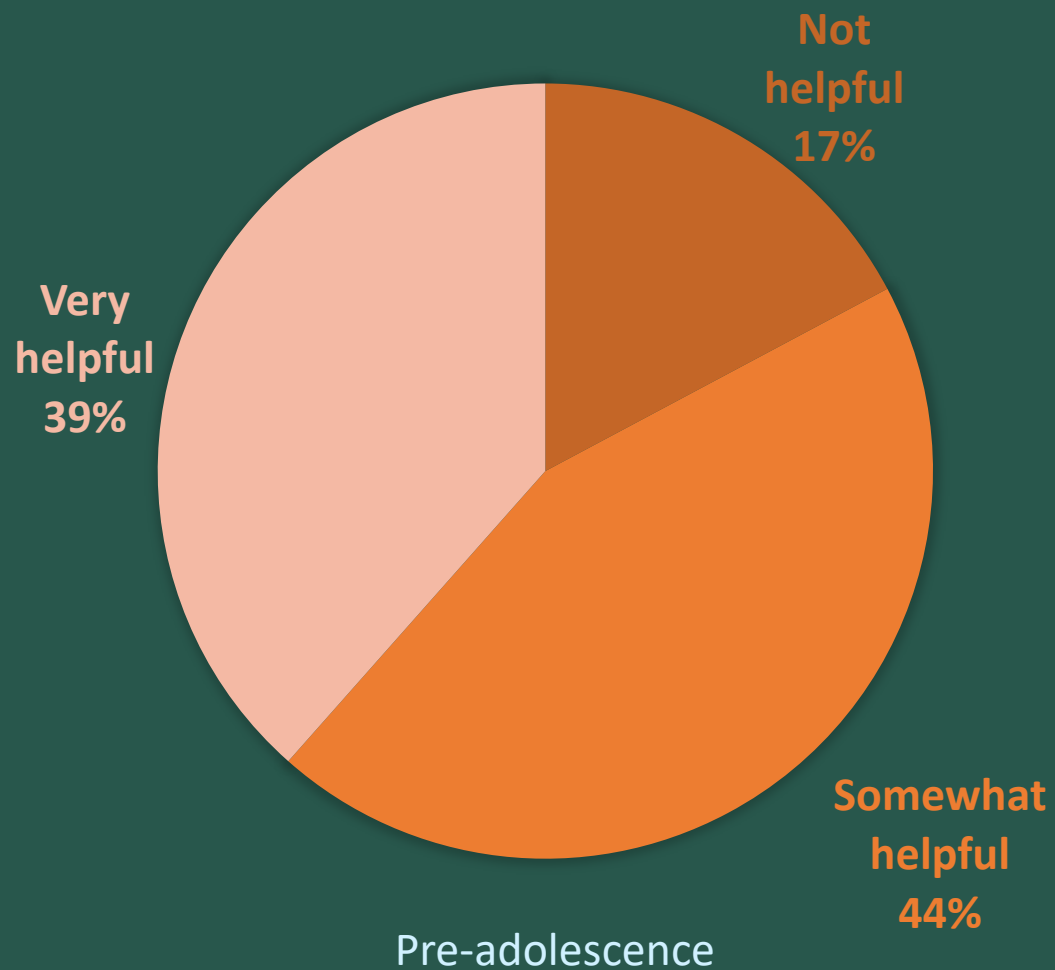
What do you think the results say?

- How do children ages 9-11 feel about being placed in out-of-home care (OOHC)?
- If they had never been placed in OOHC, how would their lives be now?

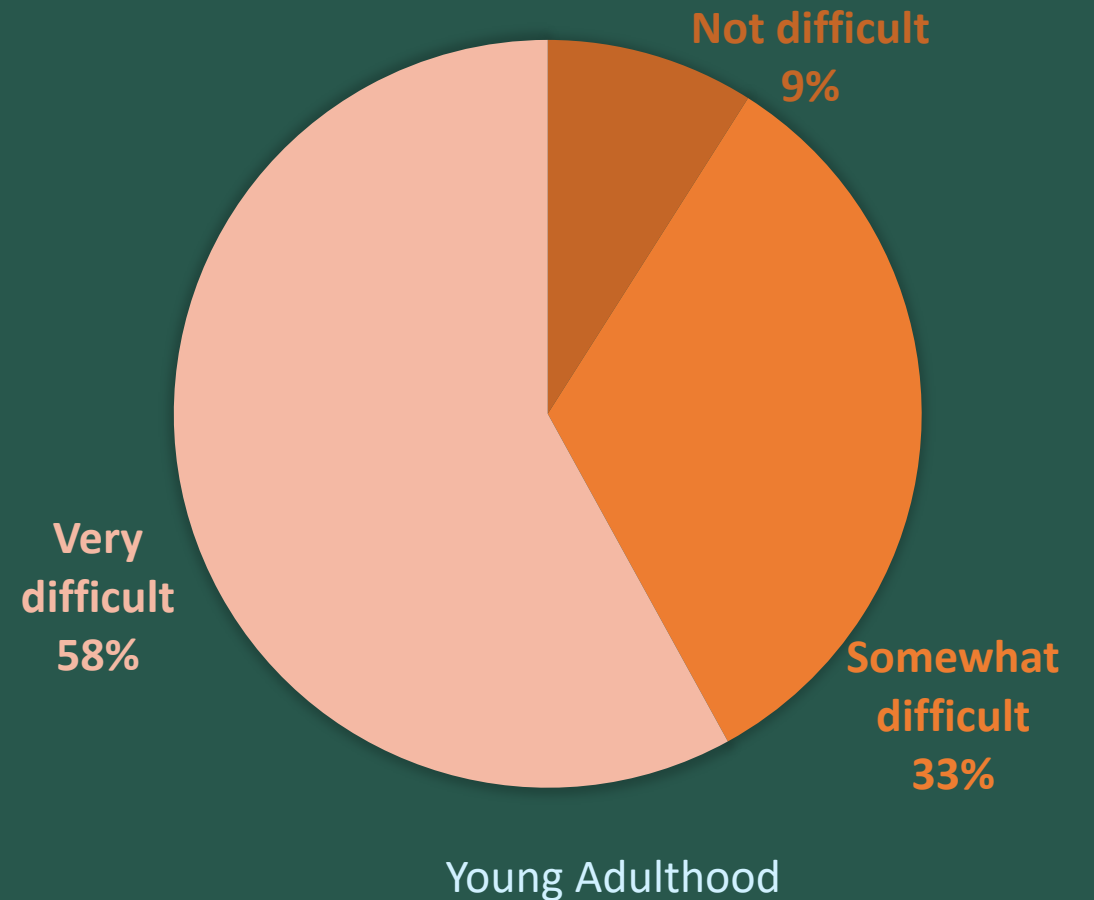
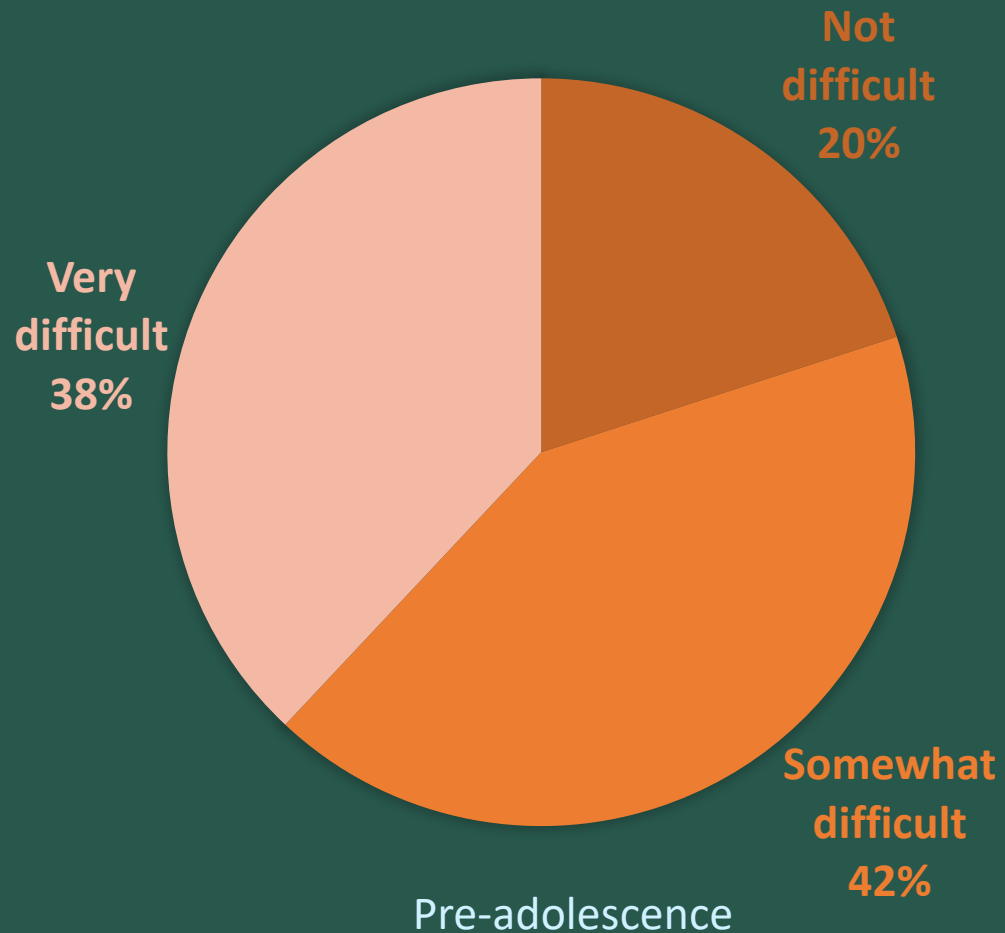
- How do children feel about the amount of information they get from their caseworker?
- Do they get to have enough say about what happens to them when they are in OOHC?

- How do these same participants, now in young adulthood, answer these questions?

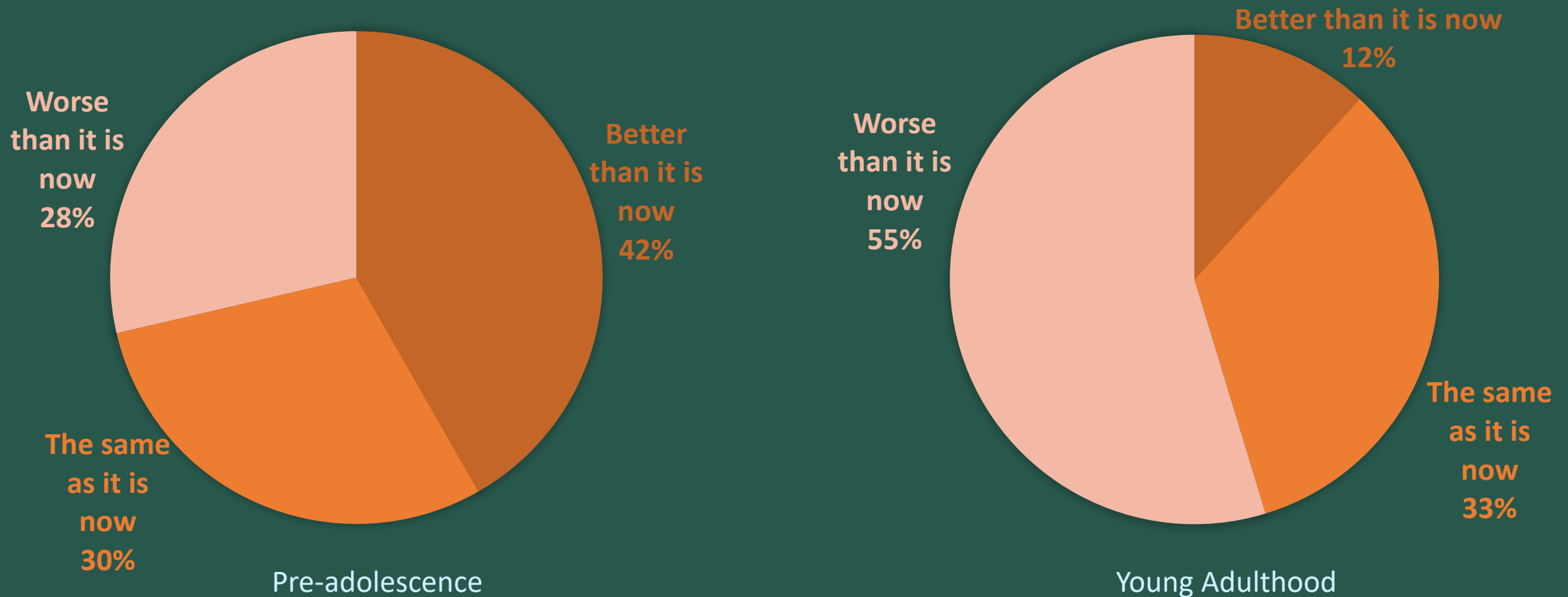
How helpful was it to be placed in out-of-home care?



How difficult was it to be placed in out-of-home care?



If you had never been placed in care, would your life be:



Summary of Findings

Over 80% of participants in both preadolescence and young adulthood reported that it was somewhat or very helpful to have been placed in out-of-home care

Although 1 in 5 pre-teens felt it was not difficult to have been placed in out-of-home care, that number dropped to 9% by young adulthood.

20% more young adults than pre-teens reported it was very difficult to have been placed in out-of-home care

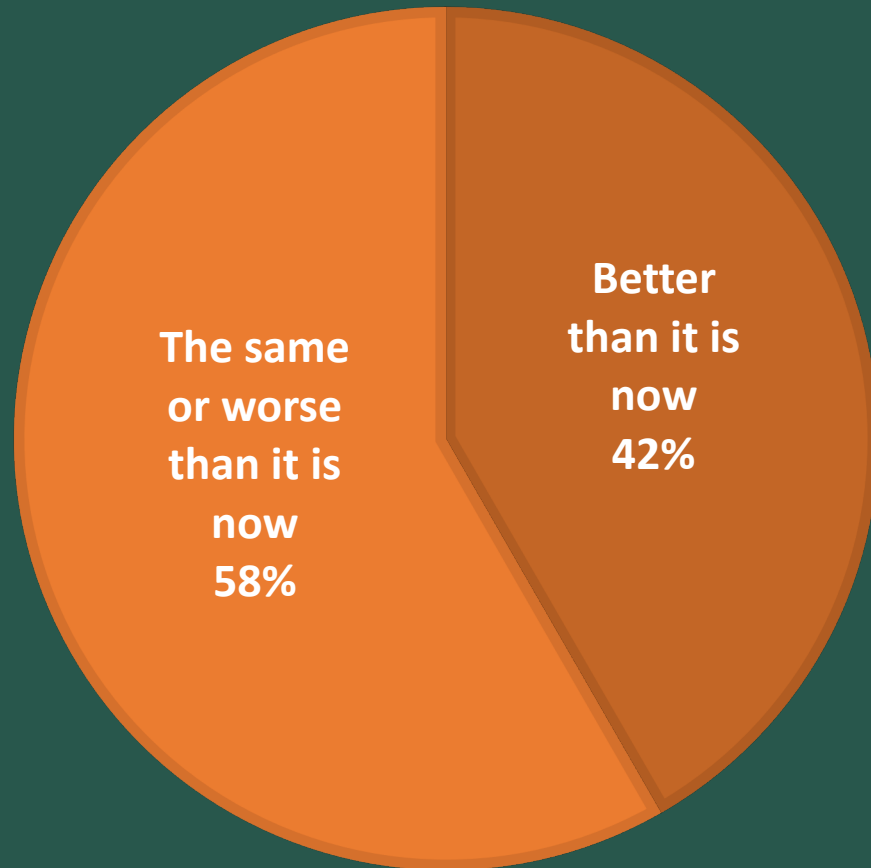
Although 42% of pre-teens felt that their lives would have been better if they had never been removed from their homes/families, only 11% of these same participants reported this as young adults

Thoughts on who might answer these questions differently?

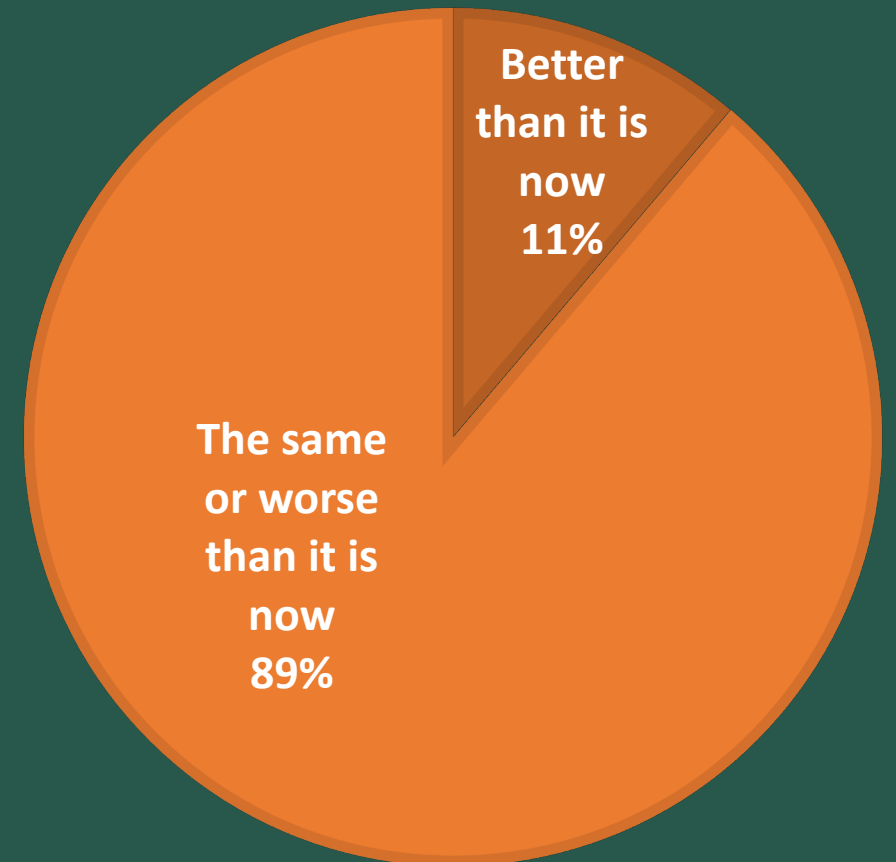
1. Gender
2. Race/ethnicity
3. Type of maltreatment experienced
4. Type of placement (when?)
5. Reunification, emancipation, or adoption
6. Mental health functioning
7. Based on responses at earlier interview time points
8. What else?

Recoded Responses

If you had never been placed in OOHC, would your life be:



Pre-adolescence



Young Adulthood

Better than it is now vs. same/worse than it is now

- In preadolescence, these appraisals of being placed were *unrelated* to:
 - Gender
 - Race/Ethnicity (Black, Hispanic, American Indian, White)
 - Racial/Ethnic identity
 - Type of maltreatment (physical or sexual abuse)
 - Type of placement at interview (kinship care, non-relative foster care)
 - Number of placement changes
 - Length of time in out-of-home care
 - Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
 - Trauma symptoms
 - Young adult mental health
 - Later emancipation/reunification

Better than it is now vs. same/worse than it is now

- In preadolescence, appraisals of being placed *were* related to:
 - Age (older youth were more likely to rate as same/worse)
 - Subsequent adoption (74% reported life would have been same/worse)

Better than it is now vs. same/worse than it is now

- In young adulthood, appraisals of being placed were *unrelated* to:
 - Gender
 - Race/Ethnicity (Black, Hispanic, White)
 - Racial/Ethnic identity (measured in young adulthood)
 - Type of maltreatment (physical, sexual, emotional abuse)
 - Emancipation/reunification/adoption
 - ACEs (measured in pre-adolescence)

Better than it is now vs. same/worse than it is now

- In young adulthood, appraisals of being placed *were* related to:
 - American Indian
 - 95% said life would have been same/worse
 - Trauma symptoms
 - those with more current symptoms more likely to say life would have been better
 - Depression
 - those with more symptoms more likely to say said life would have been better
 - Life satisfaction
 - those with lower quality of life more likely to say said life would have been life would have been better

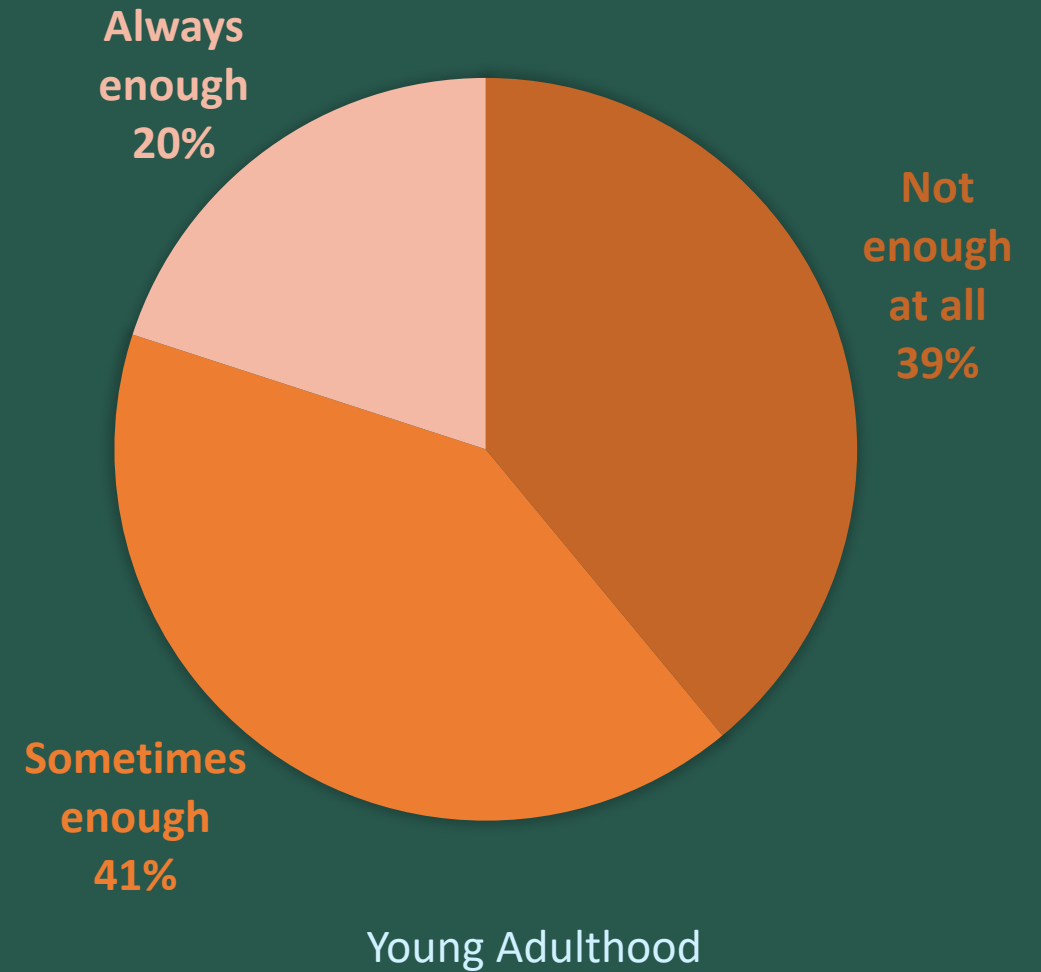
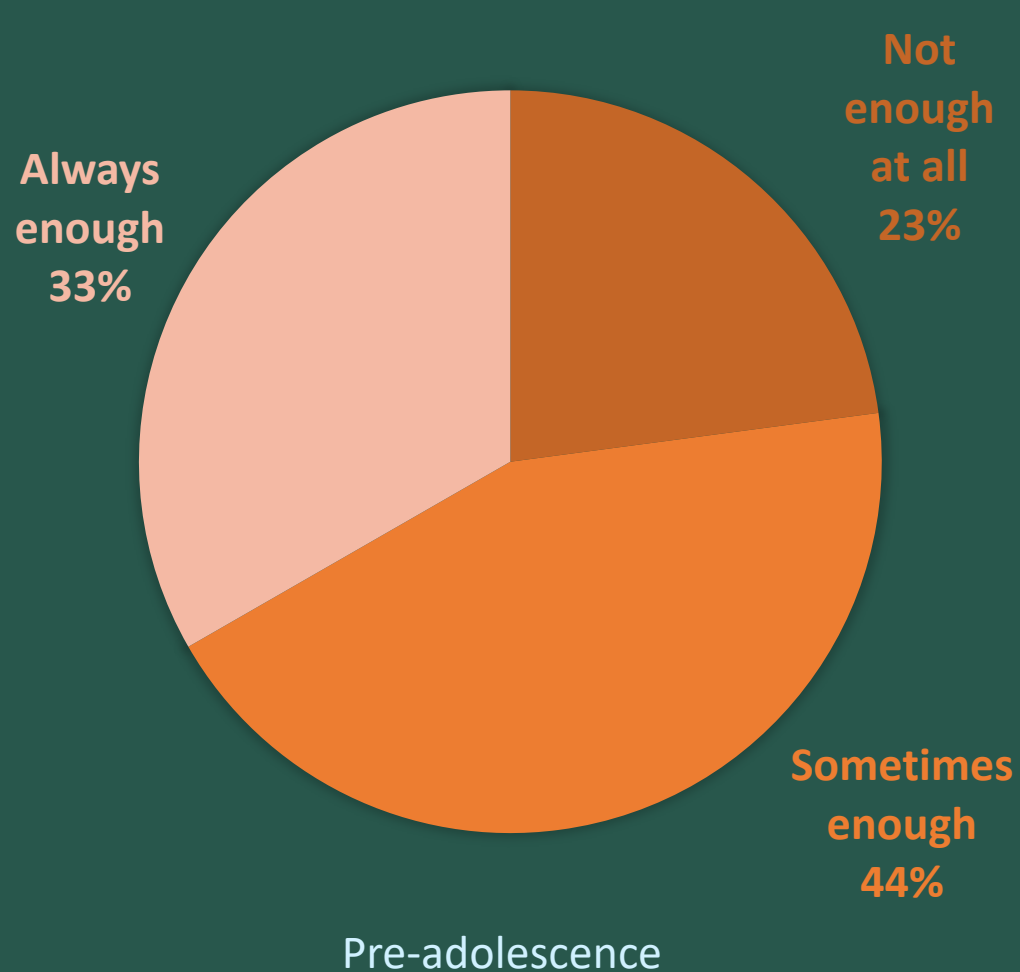
Reflections



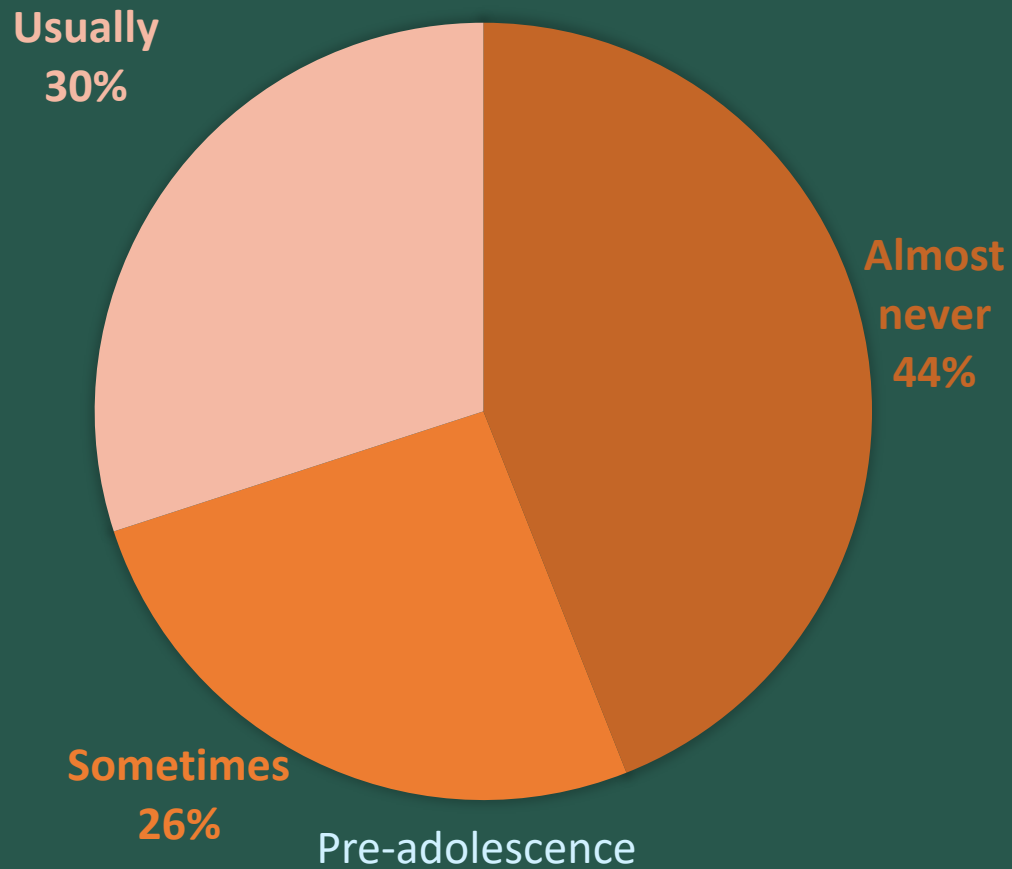
Agreement between ratings in preadolescence and young adulthood

- Early ratings predicted later ratings:
 - Better at both time points (7%, n = 13)
 - Better to Same/Worse (34%, n=67)
 - Same/Worse both time points (55%, n=107)
 - Same/Worse to Better (5%, n=9)
- None of the variables examined predicted group membership

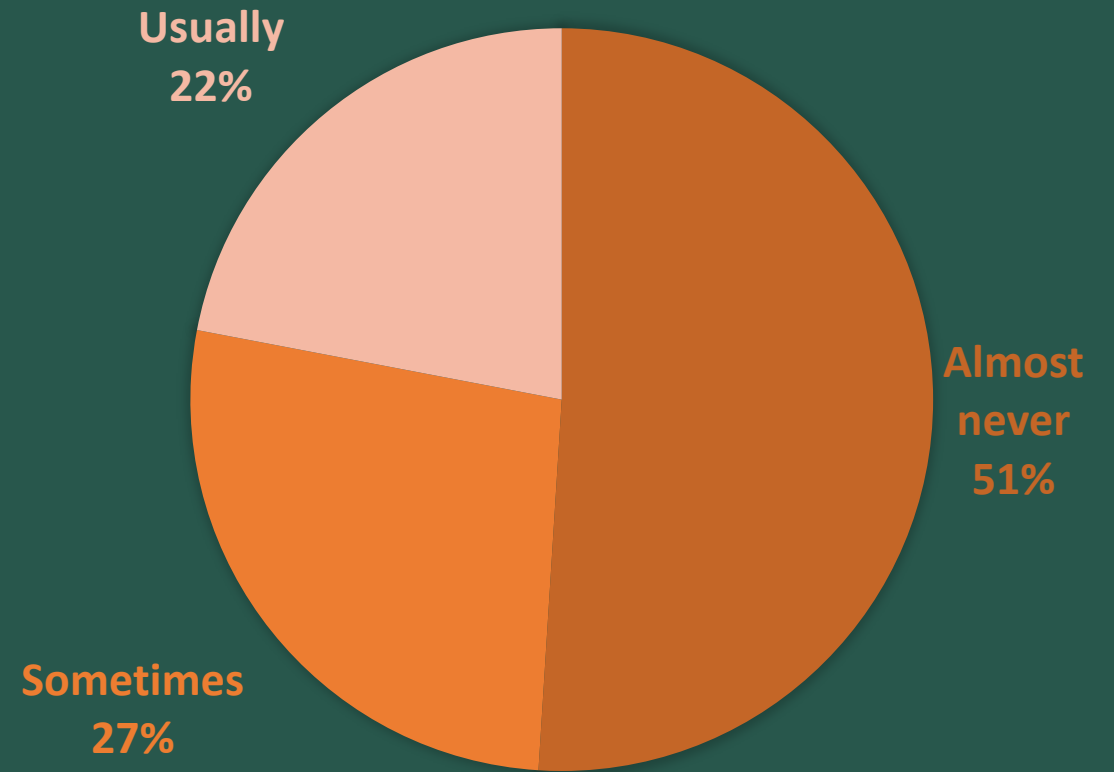
How do you feel about the amount of information you get/got from your caseworker?



Do/Did you get to have enough say about what happens/happened to you while you are/were in out-of-home care?



Pre-adolescence

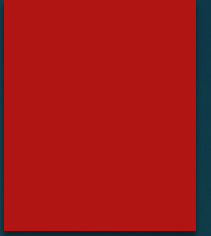


Young Adulthood

Qualitative Interviews in Young Adulthood

If you could change the child welfare system, what would you do?

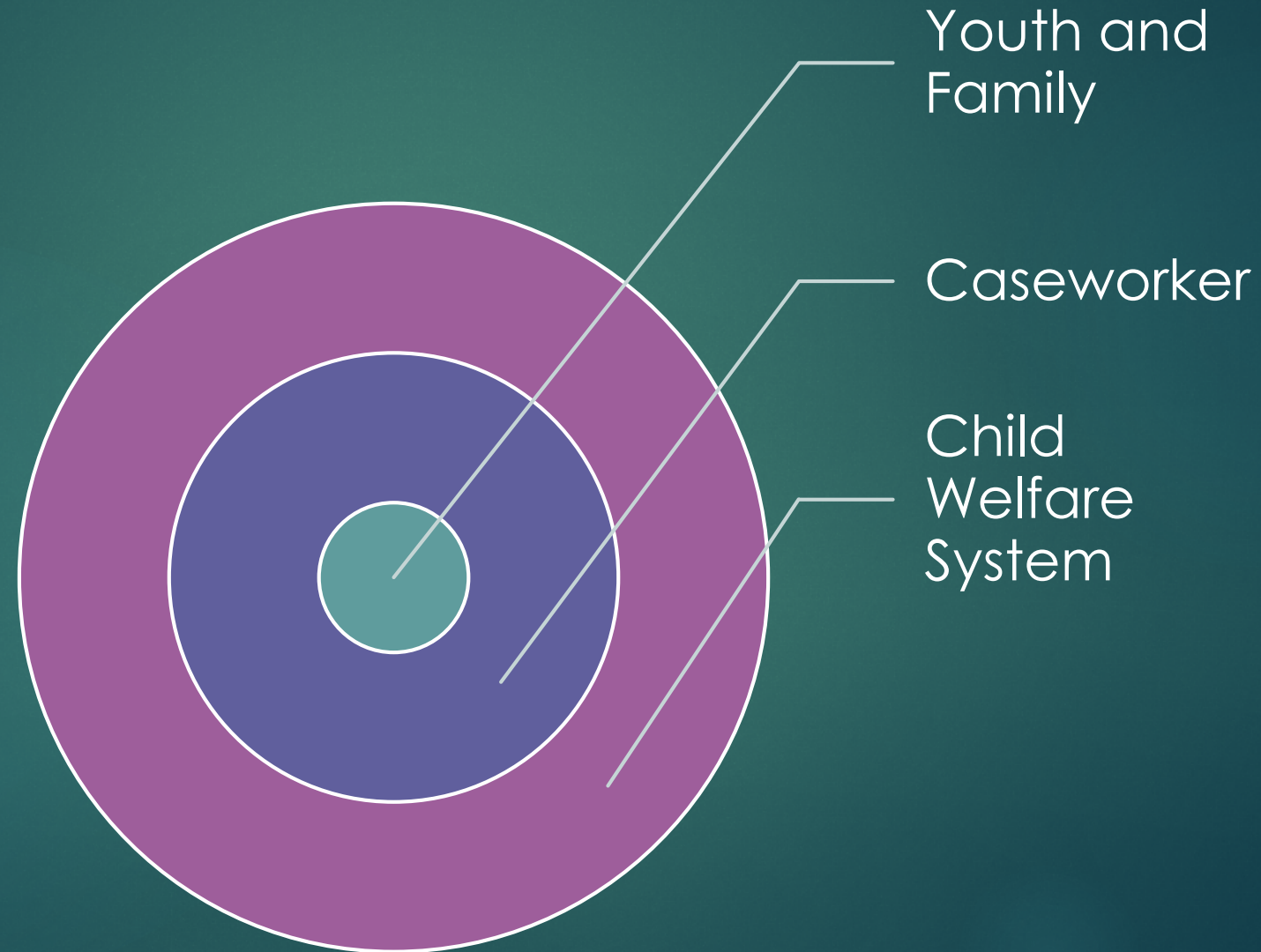
Continuum of Responses



Sample continuum responses

- ▶ I have no idea. I don't even begin to understand all the stuff that goes into it so I don't really have an answer to that one.
- ▶ I don't know...honestly I don't think that it needs changing much... I wouldn't do anything.
- ▶ I wouldn't change nothing about it. It was, nothing was wrong with it...
- ▶ Uh, I'd change it all.

Youth Voices on Changing Child Welfare: A Systems Perspective





Youth and Family

Caseworker

Child Welfare System

Youth and Family Themes

- ▶ Youth Voice
- ▶ Education and Support
- ▶ Maintain youth connection to family

Youth and Family: Youth Voice

“When I was growing up in foster care they always told me what was better for me...**but they never asked me what I think would be best.** So just pretty much asking the kids what they want instead of just thinking what they think is best for them. Because they're not always right at all you know.”

“I'd let them have a little bit more **control** ... in what happens”

“Give the kids like more **options**”

Youth and Family: Education and Support - Preparation

“...Teaching foster kids a lot more than what they’re taught right now, because I think that **I was really prepared when I left out-of-home care...but a lot of my friends or like, younger youth are not as prepared as I was.** And I think that if we had more hands-on as far as going to find a job and had more mentors and more support, then there wouldn’t be as many homeless youth as there is right now. And there would be more people in college and more people with good jobs... **more education and support, particularly ‘hands-on’ support”**

“**Better help kids set up for their future.** Like so that when as soon as they turn 18 they won’t just be thrown out to the world type thing.”

Youth and Family: Education and Support - Guidance

“I think part of it was that I had...small group of people who cared about me...so it was, it was nice to find someone who I could express myself with, and um, I think, for people who are still kind of adjusting to being in situations like mine **I think that would be important, finding kind of either a mother figure or a mentor that can kind of, um, encourage and guide them** from a life that's better than which they came from.”

Youth and Family:

Maintain connection to family

“I was completely cut off from my birth family and I didn't mind so much being cut off from my mom, I knew why I had to be, **but being cut of from my brother, my grandmother, when they weren't doing anything wrong, that was tough.** You know cause people can pass away, people can end up in the hospital, things can happen, it's at least nice to know if one of your family members is not doing well, or at least where they are at in life”

“**Make sure siblings stay together...**because being apart from them that's probably one of the hardest things”

Caseworker Themes



- Training: Personal connections
- Spend more time
- Help families/parents more: Address the root of the problem

Caseworker Themes:

Training - Personal connections

“The caseworkers and the social workers really don't make **personal connections** with the kids. I think it was my social worker. The only time she ever started to talk to us was when we started asking her how come you don't come around when you're supposed to. I thought she was supposed to get to know us and help us through this, and she was like, "okay" you know, I mean she eventually started coming around and taking us to McDonald's every once awhile, and talking to us about that, but that was towards the end when everything was going to shit.”

Caseworker Themes:

Spend more time communicating

“**Have more time** for...wait a second...make more time for each kid, for each foster kid. Make sure everyone has the attention they need and when they need it most. Just in general like, I don't know...give every kid the attention they need”

“I never even knew my caseworker or anything like that. She never questioned me, I never got any kind of, you know, you've been displaced, do you want therapy, do you want this, do you want anything, I never got any. It was just like, well, you know, here you go, so, that's, I would definitely change that. **There needs to be more communication overall.**”

Caseworker Themes:

Help families/parents more - Address the root of the problem

“I would change actually giving the parents you know more tools so they could get their kids back, and not just so quick to take them, over, say, missing a visit or something.

Actually work with them, don't, don't just try to just push them off to the side, cause that could damage the kid in the, the long run.”

“I mean I think they should **help the parents more** before they take the kids away...or at least try. Yeah like more resources...like you know how they have food stamps, well stuff like that for parents who are struggling with their kids.”

Child Welfare System Themes



- Chances and leniency
- Quality of care within system issues
- Importance of placing siblings together
- More visitation while in care

Child Welfare System Themes: Chances and leniency

“Let the parents have a **chance**. Even though parents mess up once in a while, they deserve another opportunity. My mom didn't get hers until she passed away.”

“Give the kids' parents another **chance** to like prove themselves to be a better person. That's what I would do. Give the families more chances before removal.”

“... I would have a little bit more **leniency on families**. Cause they took me from my parents, me and my sisters and my brothers...And it was all off of assumptions and false information that they were receiving from whoever they were receiving it from.”

Child Welfare System Themes:

Quality of Care - Screening, background checks

“I would change how we **interviewed our foster parents**. I would change that because we need to know if our foster parents are doing these kids that already been done wrong, right. We can't just move the kids that been done wrong back into something wrong. And sometimes that happens to the foster kids...**Making sure we have a thorough, stricter, background check on our foster parents.**”

“**Like better interviews for parents** and making the interview harder for foster parents to get in because a lot of people use foster care as just another paycheck and they don't give a damn about the kid that they're bringing in...”

Child Welfare System Themes:

More visitation

“Probably have them **give more visitations to the parents** like if when they're in a foster home or have them get more visitations with their family.”

“I feel like I would involve more visits. Because I feel like it wouldn't have been as bad as I experienced if I had been able to see my parents a little bit more because that was the main problem because every time I had left the system, I mean left the building where you visit your parents, I felt disconnected and alone afterward and I felt like that did cause a little bit of stress and sadness a lot that I felt like every time I'd be able to go home with my parents and I wasn't allowed to.”

Child Welfare System Themes:

Importance of placing siblings together

“The splitting up of siblings. I think that’s what I would change. That they could stay together, depending on if they get along or not. Cause if they don’t get along, you don’t want them together. But, if they’re like the only thing that each other has, I would keep them together.”

“I’d try to make it so when, like families ...or children get taken from their parents or whatever that the siblings stay together in the home. When removed that siblings stay together.”

Reflections



Strengths and Limitations of Study

Strengths:

- First known study to ask children about their perceptions of out-of-home care at multiple time points
- Included both closed- and open-ended questions, asked by those outside of child welfare
- Included perspectives of young people with diverse child welfare experiences – those who reunified, were adopted, had kin guardianship, etc.
- Included perspectives of those who might not typically have a voice (younger children, those who might not feel comfortable sharing their perspectives in a larger forum)

Strengths and Limitations of Study

Limitations:

- Started data collection in 2002; a lot has changed!
- US – based study; findings may not generalize to the UK
- In pre-adolescence, children may have felt concerned about sharing their thoughts and feelings; in young adulthood, retrospective reporting may have affected responses
- Qualitative questions came at end of lengthy interview protocol and responses to single question were coded without referencing responses to other 15 qualitative questions
- Many other potential predictors to examine (e.g., placement with siblings, attachment to caregiver; ACEs over time)

Summary and Implications

- It's important to ask young people (even as young as 8-9) about their thoughts and feelings regarding their and their family's child welfare involvement
- It's important to ask young people with diverse child welfare experiences about their thoughts and feelings regarding their and their family's child welfare involvement
- Don't presume to know what children think about placement in out-of-home care
- Don't presume that a child with certain characteristics or lived experiences will feel a certain way about child welfare involvement

Summary and Implications

- Young people's feelings may (and likely will!) change over time
- Young people may have complicated feelings; feeling both that CW intervention was helpful, but that it was also very difficult and that they did not have enough say in what happened
- Young adults with lived experience were able to identify tangible youth and family, caseworker behavior, and system changes that would have made the process of child welfare intervention better for them and their families.
- Their suggestions are in line with efforts to provide more upstream support to families

How do we
meaningfully
involve young
people of *diverse*
backgrounds and
experiences who
have *diverse*
opinions in our
efforts to change
the child welfare
system?





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