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# Seeking Safety, Finding Abuse: Stories from Foster Youth on Maltreatment and Its Impact on Academic Achievement

Brenda Morton

*George Fox University*, [bmorton@georgefox.edu](mailto:bmorton@georgefox.edu)

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**Dr. Brenda M. Morton**

**Abstract**

The safety of foster children and youth is the primary concern of the Department of Human Services. Yet, not all certified foster care homes offer the safety children need. This article reports the findings of a phenomenological study of foster youth reporting maltreatment occurring at the hands of foster parents. With a scarcity of studies on the abuse occurring at the hands of foster care providers, this study offers an important glimpse into the realities of life in care. Through in-depth interviews, this study reveals the harm perpetrated by foster care providers and the probable connection between maltreatment in care and barriers to academic achievement.

**Keywords:** Abuse, Maltreatment, Foster care

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The current study is a needed voice to highlight a serious problem occurring in foster care. This study not only raises the awareness of abuse, by sharing the experiences of victims, but also illuminates the probable connection between abuse in foster care and educational barriers for foster youth. This article presents findings from a sub-group of seven current and former foster youth in a western state. These seven were part of a larger study of 11 from the same population. The purpose of the study was to identify barriers to academic achievement. These seven were all abused in at least one foster care placement, and therefore a sub-group of the original 11. This article is an exploration of the barrier of abuse in care, and the impact of that abuse as seen by the youth, as one identified barrier to participation in higher education.

Children in out-of-home care have been identified as one of the most academically vulnerable populations of children in schools today (Zetlin, 2006; Zetlin, MacLeod & Kimm, 2013;). Barrat and Berliner (2013) classified foster children as a “separate at-risk student subgroup” (p. 3). There is a plethora of literature addressing academic vulnerability, primarily focused on three most often noted academic barriers: special education, mobility, and transition from foster care to independence. These barriers during their P-12 academic career begin to explain the bleak future for many foster youth. This includes 56.9% of foster youth alumni reported being prepared at some level for independence upon leaving care, but only 56.3% earned a high school diploma, 22.2% experienced homelessness versus 1% of the general population, 16.8% received Temporary Aid to Needy Families or General Assistance versus 3% of the general population, 33.2% living at or below the poverty line, 54.4% with mental health concerns, with 25.2% diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder versus 4.0% in the

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general population, and 62% with less than \$250 in cash (Pecora et al., 2005). It is clear that foster children face tremendous obstacles as they attempt to navigate their P-12 education and that these obstacles impact their future. Foster children and youth have a divided focus between survival (Rosen & Cowan, 2013), working through the challenges of state custody (Samuels & Pryce, 2008), and academics.

While academic barriers and poor outcomes leaving care have been the subject of many research studies, few have considered the quality of care foster children and youth are receiving while in out-of-home placements. This includes few studies on the subject of abuse occurring in care (Barter, 1999; Bromfield, Beyer & Higgins, 2006; McFadden & Ryan, 1991; Poertner, Bussey & Fluke, 1999); including child sexual abuse (Euser, Alink, Tharner, vanIjzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2013); all forms of which appear to contribute to academic vulnerability. Because trauma and abuse can lead to emotional and behavioral challenges, awareness of abuse occurring in foster care placements must be raised.

### **Literature Review**

The significance of a bachelor degree in U.S. society continues to be emphasized. Yet, for many children who have been in care, it appears to be out of reach (Salazar, 2013). Foster youth graduate from high school at lower rates than those of non-foster peers. Approximately 50% of all foster children will graduate from high school (Bruskas, 2008, Pecora et al., 2005). For those who do enroll in post-secondary education, 1.8% (Pecora et al.) to a high of 3-11% of foster alumni were found to complete a bachelor's degree (Casey Family Programs, 2011). While the literature documents barriers resulting in academic challenges, it neglects a significant and

disconcerting factor: the maltreatment or reabuse occurring in foster care.

The maltreatment occurring in foster care is prevalent and in all out-of-home settings within the child welfare system (Uliando & Mellor, 2012). Social service intervention is primarily due to abuse, neglect, or threat of harm. When deemed appropriate, children are removed from their home and placed in foster care. Foster care can include a number of different settings or models depending on the needs of the child. Once a child is removed from their home and placed in foster care, the assumption is that the threat of harm that was identified in their original home no longer exists. This assumption is due to the fact that the home had to be certified through the state and because the adults in the home were subject to training, certification, and background checks. However, studies have found that children are not as safe as they are believed to be in these new placements (Uliando & Mellor, 2012; Euser, Alink, Tharner, Ijzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2014). Spencer and Knudsen (1992) stated, “it is clear that children in out-of-home residences are not removed from the risk of abuse or neglect” (Spencer & Knudsen, 1992, p. 488). This same conclusion was shared by Hobbs, Hobbs, and Wynne (1999) who pointed out that children in foster care “form an at risk group for maltreatment” (p. 1239). Benedict, Zuravin, Brandt and Abbey (1994), found that in all categories of maltreatment, foster parents were more likely to be reported for maltreatment than families outside of foster care. Even more distressing is Nonno and Motz (1988) study, which found that fatalities occurring in foster care appeared to be occurring with two to three times the frequency of that in the general population.

The numbers, rates, and statistics of children maltreated in foster care begin to show the significance of this issue. National statistics report 0.00 – 2.33% of children in

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foster care reported maltreatment or were found to be maltreated (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau (2011)). In the Northwest Alumni Study, Pecora et al. (2005) found 32.8% of foster care alumni experienced some kind of child maltreatment. This included 5.6% physical abuse, 10.1% physical neglect, 9.4% for both physical neglect and abuse. Sexual abuse, while statistically low in the study was found to be the experience of 3.7% of alumni, and 4.0% for sexual abuse and other maltreatment occurring in the placement. Yet, these numbers appear to be significantly lower compared to previous studies conducted in single states such as those reported by Benedict, Zuravin, Somerfield and Brandt (1996), Poertner, Bussey, and Fluke (1999) Spencer and Knudsen (1992). In a study of Baltimore, Maryland, Benedict et al. found 48.7% of children in foster care for whom reports of maltreatment were substantiated, were sexually abused, and 24.4% were physically abused, and 26.9% neglected while in care. Poertner, Bussey, and Fluke (1999) analyzed data from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and reported children in foster care were maltreated at a rate of 25 per 1,000; slightly higher than the Indiana study by Spencer and Knudsen (1992) which reported 17 per 1,000. And finally, Rosenthal, Motz, Edmonson, and Groze (1991) analyzed 290 reported incidents of abuse in Colorado, which included 55% physical abuse, 24% sexual abuse, and 21% for neglect. It is important to point out that sexual abuse was twice as likely to be reported by those in out of home care, than the same abuse occurring in the general public. These findings by individual states are important to note in light of a shortage of research on maltreatment occurring in out-of-home placements stated earlier. Therefore, it can not be assumed that between the late

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1990's and 2011 the rates of maltreatment occurring in foster care has improved significantly.

Foster children were reabused in out-of-home placements in 53% of cases by other foster children in a variety of placement settings (Hobbs, Hobbs & Wynne, 1990). The maltreatment in group placement settings was found to be significantly greater than those occurring in single home foster care placements (Hobbs, Hobbs & Wynne, 1999; Poertner, Bussey & Fluke, 1999; Rosenthal, Motz, Edmonson & Groze, 1991;). Poertner, Bussey, and Fluke found 36.9% sexual abuse in family foster care versus 55.1% institutional and 60.4% in group homes. Euser et al. (2013) point to large groups of children with significant behavioral problems placed in group homes as one reason for the large percentage of abuse occurring between peers.

The abuse and neglect that many of these children have endured result in long-lasting consequences. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2000) identified difficulty with attachment, reduced physical development, unsociable behavior, and lack of stimulation as the most common consequences. Experiencing abuse in the early years can cause the brain to remain in a mode of heightened sensitivity, in which the child can respond to situations in an agitated manner (American Academy of Pediatrics). In a classroom setting, this begins to explain why 24% of foster children experienced either a school suspension or expulsion, compared to 7% of school children nationwide (Scherr, 2007). Children who have lived in a state of acute stress are often unable to shut down this stress when the threat has been removed. This heightened and prolonged state of acute stress can cause the brain to overdevelop in specific areas, including those which control the response to fear (Cole et al., 2005). The emotional and behavioral challenges

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that stem from abuse can also help explain grade retention and representation in special education at higher rates than non-foster peers (Zetlin, Weinberg & Luderer, 2004).

Finally, mental health concerns including depression are also reported as long-term challenges for foster youth. Benedict et al. (1996) found that children who suffered sexual abuse or neglect were found to experience mental health problems in greater numbers than those physically abused or those who experience no maltreatment. They also found that symptoms of depression were reported with more frequency in children who were sexually abused than any other maltreated group. Turner, Finklehor and Ormrod (2006) considered the combined effects of multiple forms of victimization. They concluded that a typical child who is victimized, will experience multiple victimizations over the course of a year. They went on to point out that “given that lifetime experiences of victimization are likely to be even more extensive, the potential impact over time of this form of stress may be substantial” (p. 14). These findings may begin to explain the 54.4% of foster alum reporting mental health problems in Pecora et al. (2005).

The findings from these studies bring further into question the safety of children placed in foster care. The difficulty in obtaining current data on rate of maltreatment in foster care, coupled with these independent studies showing high rates of maltreatment, clearly illuminate the need for better reporting on the abuse and neglect occurring when a child becomes the responsibility of the child welfare system (Poertner, Bussey & Fluke, 1999). Additionally, these statistics coupled with challenges inherent in the reporting of accurate data, support the need for re-evaluation of current policies, practices, and procedures in the foster care system (Hobbs, Hobbs & Wynne, 1999). Finally, the impact of abuse in foster care has significant, and long-term implications.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences among foster youth in a western state, on barriers they encountered during their P-12 education. Specifically, answers to the following research question were sought: What barriers to academic achievement did former foster youth experience during their P-12 education? It was during these interviews that abuse occurring in foster care was identified.

### **Methodology**

The study was conducted in a western state and focused on specific participants who were current or former foster youth pursuing post-secondary education. This population was purposefully chosen; they were over the age of 18, and were pursuing higher education. The participants were solicited from a statewide advocacy group formed of youth with experience in foster care. Information about the study and need for participants was publicized by the advocacy group to their members. From interested participants, 11 were purposely selected based on their enrollment in post-secondary education, foster care placement, qualification and application for the Chafee Education and Training Grant.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained to conduct this study. Once this approval was received, open-ended, in-depth interviews were held, in which each participant was asked the same questions with the average interview lasting 90 minutes. Participants were audio recorded, and field notes were used during the interviews after receiving their signed consent to participate.

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The interviews began with demographic questions, allowing each participant time to feel comfortable. They were able to share more details as the interviews progressed. Often, later in an interview, the participant would ask to go back to previous questions because they wanted to add more detail to their original answer. There were instances when this came as a result of sharing on a different topic which triggering the recollection of additional past events. This was expected. As van Manen (1990) explained, “phenomenological reflection is not introspective but retrospective. Reflection on lived experience is always re-collective; it is reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through” (p. 10). Therefore, it was not uncommon for participants to state, “I had not thought about that in years” (Roberto).

Following the completion of each interview, the audio recording was then transcribed. Using the field notes and the audio recording, a verbatim transcript was created for each of the interviews. While the quality of the recording was very good, the voice level of the participants would sometimes drop, making it difficult to clearly hear a word or two. In addition, voice inflections and word choice at times made understanding difficult. Therefore, during transcription, each audio recorded interview was played and then replayed while following along in the transcription created, making corrections where needed.

At the completion of each transcript, participants were contacted for follow-up questions or to clarify a statement made during the interview. This information was then added to the transcription document. This yielded 286 pages of transcribed data for analysis. Finally, once all legal names of participants, home town, individual schools, foster care providers, and residential treatment facilities, were replaced with a

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pseudonym, a final copy of the study was again sent to each participant for a second round of member checking.

### **Limitations**

The study was limited by excluded the following: former foster youth who exited the care system before they turned 16, and foster youth who were over the age of 16 but not in care for a minimum of six months after their 14<sup>th</sup> birthday, and current and former foster youth who chose vocational/technical schooling options. The participants selected all had a long history in foster care, which was not a selection criteria, and therefore unintentional. Finally, qualitative exploratory work is not meant to be generalizable. Instead, this is an exploration of one group of youth's experience and what their experience can sensitize us to when working with other youth and in the field of child welfare reform.

### **Data Analysis**

Once all data had been collected, transcribed, and organized, Creswell (2007) phenomenological analysis and representation steps were followed. These included the following six steps:

1. Describe personal experience with the phenomenon.
2. Develop a list of significant statements.
3. Take the significant statements and group them into larger units of information.
4. Write a description of "what" the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon. This is called a "textural description."
5. Write a description of "how" the experience happened. This is called "structural description."

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6. Write a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions (p. 159).

Each participant transcript was read and significant statements about the phenomenon were highlighted, yielding 181 significant statements. These were then sorted into topics of themes, following Creswell (2007). These were then organized into three main categories and sub-theme categories.

### **Results**

Each of the seven participants has a unique story. What they had in common was abuse at the hands of a foster parent(s). While the abuse experienced varied, the impact on each participant was evident. This study, therefore, is an exploration of maltreatment of a sub-group of seven participants at the hands of foster care providers in various settings and the impact of that maltreatment. What follows is a brief textural and structural description of each participant.

#### **Andrew**

Andrew was placed in care at the age of 10. By the time he was 17, he had been placed in 65 different homes and residential treatment facilities. When asked about the high number of placements, Andrew stated he struggled with anger management issues, inability to connect with foster parents, and physical abuse that occurred in a placement. While he was removed from the home where the abuse occurred, the abuse contributed to his anger management issues, ultimately landing him in a residential treatment facility.

#### **Byron**

Byron entered the foster care system at the age of 3, and remained in care for 15 years. In his first placement with his great aunt and uncle, he shared that his great uncle

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“used to beat me and molest me.” Moved from this home to another, he was physically and mentally abused by his new foster parents. He experienced multiple moves and new placements until he was arrested at age of 15. He completed his sentence at a juvenile delinquency center and moved into his last foster care home.

### **Dianna**

At the age of 5, Dianna entered foster care. Her first placement did not last long, as the Department of Human Services found evidence of physical abuse. At her next home, the grandsons of her foster mother physically and sexually abused Dianna. She was later removed from this placement and moved to a secure residential treatment center where she received counseling for the abuse she had endured.

### **Emily**

Emily exited the foster care system at the age of 18, after spending 11 years in care. For seven of those years, she lived with her aunt and uncle after her mother lost custody due to drug use. Emily was subjected to 18-months of physical abuse from her aunt. The abuse began in middle school and even though Emily was reporting the abuse to school counselors and school resource officer, no action was taken until she suffered a fractured cheekbone. She was then removed from the care of her aunt and uncle and moved into non-relative care. She then moved with regularity between foster homes over the next four years.

### **Jennifer**

The Department of Human Services became involved in Jennifer’s life when she was 12. Learning she was pregnant at the age of 12, she attempted suicide. The Department of Human Services found her home to be unsafe. An investigation found

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neglected by her mother abuse by her older brother. When she delivered her son, the newborn was immediately put into foster care. Jennifer entered care shortly after. After running away from multiple placements, she was placed in a home where she was physically abused and food was withheld as punishment. She eventually ended up in several lock-down facilities and residential treatment homes.

### **Roberto**

The incarceration of his mother landed Roberto in foster care from the moment he was born. Over the next 18 years, Roberto would experience 19 placements, ranging from relative foster care to lock-down facilities. At the age of four, his father father began repeatedly sexually abusing him. The abuse went undiscovered until he began acting out in kindergarten and first grade. After being moved from home to home, he was placed in another home, where he was sexually abused, and another home a few years later in which the same abuse occurred.

### **Tanya**

Tanya at the age of one and her older sister entered foster care together. They were removed from what Tanya characterized as a “hurtful situation.” where they were being sexually abused. The abuse she experienced had long-lasting implications for Tanya: “Until I was 6, I didn’t speak one word. I signed everything. They said it was because of trauma.” After a failed adoption, the two siblings were placed in separate foster care homes. Tanya experienced regular placement change over the next 12 years. During those 12 years, two were homes in which she was sexually abused by the foster parent.

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**Table 1. Participant demographics**

Participant	Gender	Years in care	Number of homes	Number of abusive homes	Type of abuse
Andrew	M	7	65	1	Physical
Byron	M	15	8-10	1	Physical & Sexual
Dianna	F	15	7	2	Physical & Sexual
Emily	F	11	6	1	Physical
Jennifer	F	5	13	1	Physical
Roberto	M	18	18-19	3	Sexual
Tanya	F	20	15	2	Sexual

### **Abuse in foster care homes**

This study revealed that abuse in the foster care home of those in the study was rampant. Of the eleven participants in this study, seven were abused physically, sexually, or both while in foster care. This abuse happened in the homes of relatives approved for care, non-relative foster care, residential treatment centers, and secure lock-down facilities. For three participants, the abuse was not limited to one foster care home, but occurred in multiple placements. In each case, the participant struggled to understand why they were victims of this abuse, and expressed frustration that the abuse occurred and no one knew until the abuse escalated. The abuse also triggered changes in placement, schools, communities, and left deep psychological scars.

### **Abuse in kinship care.**

Two participants recollected their experiences living with relatives. Byron was sexually abused by his great-uncle in front of his great-aunt, and physically abused by his

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brother, yet no one came to his aide. When talking about his great-uncle, Byron explained, “He used to beat me and molest me.” Byron’s brother also physically and sexually abused him while living with the great-aunt and uncle. Byron said, “I love my brother, but he stabbed me, he tried to drown me and then that stuff happened.” Tragically, no one believed Byron until finally, while attending an anger management counseling session at the age of six or seven, Byron found help. He said:

Like I freaked out one time and tore the room apart and chucked chairs around. And she was like what is going on at home? And I was like told her what was happening not really knowing it was wrong and that was how the whole process got started.

Byron was moved into non-relative foster care where he moved from placement to placement over the next 14 years.

A second participant, Emily, endured physical abuse from her aunt after being placed in her home. For a year and a half, Emily tried to get someone to notice and take action. She believed, however, that because the foster parents were relatives, no one checked out her allegations. She said:

Because they were relatives, no one checked. So, for a year and a half I tried to get removed. Every day I was in the counselor’s office telling them what was happening, taking pictures of bruises. They would send me to the school officer and he would call my Aunt [Camille] and say, “Emily is in here again saying that you beat her,” and then they would send me home. Eventually, when I had a fractured cheekbone, they actually took me away.

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### **Abuse in non-relative foster care.**

Four participants were abused or neglected by non-relative foster parents. The first, Tanya, explained her frustration with her experience. She was sexually abused in more than one placement. She said, “It was very difficult because I got taken away from a hurtful situation with my parents and got put into...foster homes [that] were hurtful. You were taken away to be protected and these people end up hurting you anyways.”

Reflecting on these placements, Tanya shared:

You were taken away to be protected and these people end up hurting you anyways, so that is kind of why I moved to so many placements. I kept saying, “This is happening, and this is happening. You need to do something.”

Tanya shared that it was particularly difficult to have her voice heard during these times when she was being abused because she was doing well at school. Tanya said:

I tended to flourish when things were happening that weren't supposed to be happening. So when I was being abused my grades tended to get better. Which is weird because you would think that you would take a step back.

The fact that Tanya shared that her grades increased during this abuse was a puzzling and unexpected finding. She shared that it created yet another barrier to accessing help as it appeared she was doing quite well in this placement and her caseworker did not have cause to question the quality of placement, which resulted in continued abuse.

Roberto also experienced long-term abuse. After being moved from the home of his aunt, Roberto shared that “The next few homes that I went through were abusive, through the first few years of my life.” After leaving the home of his aunt, he was placed

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with non-relative foster parents, which lasted four years. During the four years, his foster dad repeatedly sexually abused him. It wasn't until he was acting out sexually and behaving inappropriately at school that his foster mom confronted him. He said:

One day my foster mom sat me down on her knee and was like, "Who taught you to do this? and all of this stuff and I said "Daddy," and she was instantly like, "Oh My God." She had me go to my room and she was crying and she didn't understand. Then she talked to him and I don't know what happened, but within a week I was removed from the home. But nothing happened, so she didn't report it.

He was moved to a residential treatment home where he shared his experience. The staff was supportive and worked with him and also reported what had occurred. Roberto said, "We went through all this court stuff and as far as I know he actually died in prison because he was pretty much sentenced for 20 years there so he was there for awhile."

Tragically, this was not the only home in which Roberto experienced this kind of abuse. Roberto stated, "I had a lot more houses where that happened." He shared that he was placed in the care of an older foster mother, who also chose to sexually abuse him, and another home with the same outcome. Reflecting back on the abuse, Roberto found himself questioning why this happened to him, what role, if any, he played, and his struggle to deal with shame.

Dianna experienced both physical and sexual abuse in two homes. Both Dianna and her brother were removed from the first home because rope burns were found on their ankles after the foster parents had tied them up. Dianna and her brother were moved to a home where she was physically abused by the foster mom and grandsons, and

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sexually abused by the grandsons of the foster parents. Dianna said, “Those parents mistreated me and they mistreated the other girl. Her little grandson was nasty. He was like trying to have sex with us and touch on us.” Dianna also tried to protect her little brother who was placed in this home with her. She said, “I used to fight the lady’s grandson because he used to mess with my brother, teasing him and touching him and I was like “don’t touch my brother”. That is my brother. I protected that baby.” When Dianna would fight off the grandsons, they would tell their grandmother, Dianna’s foster mother, that she hit them. The foster mom would “hold my hands down and hit me and punch me. Her grandsons would punch me.”

After enduring sexual and physical abuse for several years, the abuse was revealed in school after Dianna drew a picture, which depicted a sexual scene. When asked about her picture, Dianna shared what was happening at home and it was immediately reported.

Jennifer was another participant with a story of abuse. Jennifer was in and out of a number of homes. She often ran away from these homes, searching for what she called “normalcy”. Wanting to have what she saw in the lives of her friends, she ran, hoping to find what they had and escape her living situation. She ran from one home after being maltreated by her foster mother. She shared her anger toward one foster mother who treated her poorly:

She seriously did neglect me. Like she would stick me in a corner for like five hours with no food, nothing. I couldn’t go to the bathroom. I got so, like, insane in my mind. I was like “Oh my God, I can’t deal with this. I have to leave.” So I ran away and I told my caseworker why I left so that she would move me. She

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just put me back and my foster mom did it again. I was like I am not doing this, so I ran away again and they sent me back with her again.

### **Impact of abuse**

The abuse and neglect foster children and youth experienced had serious implications. For some, this was not the first time they had experienced abuse and neglect. For others, it was a new form of abuse. Regardless of their experience, the actions of parents and foster parents had long-lasting consequences. For each participant, the abuse they endured impacted their lives in distinct ways. These included feelings of disempowerment and anger, resulting in high mobility, and difficulty transitioning out of residential and/or lock-down facilities.

### **Disempowerment**

Throughout the interviews, youth shared stories where they had been disempowered, marginalized, and silenced. The youth experienced trauma and abuse but no one was listening. You could hear the outrage in their voice as they shared their stories. Without a voice to speak into the decision making process that directly impacted their lives, they felt powerless. Andrew came to school with visible bruises, but his mother would convince the teachers there was no wrongdoing on her part. Byron had a placement in which the foster parents made him feel worthless. Disempowerment led to despair. In each situation, the foster youth were moved through the system without a voice. This loss of voice and their powerlessness contributed to their anger. This, in turn, led to high mobility.

Tanya was sexually abused in multiple placements, yet her caseworker did not act to protect her. Tanya was so traumatized by the abuse she experienced in the homes of

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foster parents that from her earliest memory until she was six, she did not speak one word. Rather, she developed her own form of sign language to communicate with her sister and foster parents. When she was older, and the abuse began again, Tanya said, “I kept saying this is happening, and this is happening. You need to do something. She said, “It was very difficult because I got taken away from a hurtful situation with my parents and got put into...foster homes [that] were hurtful. You were taken away to be protected and these people end up hurting you anyways.” She had a difficult time convincing people that the abuse was occurring because she said, “I tend to flourish when things were happening that weren’t supposed to be happening. So when I was being abused my grades tended to get better. Which is weird because you would think that you would take a step back.” My caseworker wouldn’t move me, or she wouldn’t be the one to initiate the move. It would be me telling other caseworkers that she worked with and they would tell her to move me.”

For Emily, even when the abuse was documented with photos, it still took a year and a half for her to be removed from the home of her aunt. She said, “They [the police] were at the house all the time for domestic violence. Like my uncle would run her over with the car and yell at her. The cops were always over there. There were like three different investigations going on at once, yet they still didn’t take me away.” Even with photos and a fractured cheekbone, there appeared to be no consequences for her aunt.

Emily said,

After I got taken away, no one told me how to press charges or anything and she never got in trouble for it. She still has her day care even after she had committed child abuse in front of the kids. It wasn’t until a few months ago that she went to

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jail for it. They told her that unless she got in trouble again, she wouldn't get in trouble for what she did. But then they found her with weed, so they decided to press charges on her for what she did to me, but only because she had weed. So, I am like, oh, weed is more important than children?

Many participants shared stories of desperation. They felt they had no voice, no advocate, and were at the mercy of the system and of their placement. Byron shared, "Moving, always having to pack my stuff up in trash bags, um, not knowing how long I am going to stay somewhere, not knowing if my stuff is safe, not knowing if I am necessarily safe, um, new rules, just made it really hard to gain trust. I don't know, things were just always changing, so there was no normality and I really like structure. Many of my foster parents made me feel worthless and I knew a lot of them just did not care and were in it for the money." Byron said this of his experience: "It is just really sick, I think, when you just rule over foster youth. It's not like we committed a crime or anything. We aren't in juvy. Damn. I mean that is one thing, but I ended up here because my family is white trash and didn't even give a shit about me."

In each situation, the foster youth were moved through the system without a voice. Dianna chose silence so that she would not be forced to leave her home and be placed with another family that would be a complete unknown. When kids were acting out sexually with Dianna, she said, "I told [Betty] when the kids at daycare tried to mess with me and stuff but I didn't want to tell DHS because I didn't want to deal with newness." Byron and his older brother were removed from the home and placed with their great aunt. During their time in this placement, both his great uncle and his older

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brother physically, and sexually abused Byron. When talking about his great uncle, he said, “He used to beat me and molest me.” Unfortunately, no one believed Byron.

### **Anger.**

The abuse that was occurring in the homes and feeling dismissed by the system, was identified as a catalyst for anger. The abuse had catastrophic effects on the victims. Roberto, who was sexually abused in several placements, described his personality transformation. He said, “I went from being a very rambunctious person to a very quiet person and then an angry person. I was angry and confrontational all the time.” All this stuff was happening to me and I didn’t know why. That is where my aggression clearly came out too because I was so angry, trying to figure out why this happened.”

After being abused in several homes, Roberto began self-mutilation through cutting, resulting in numerous moves.

Elements of Roberto’s story were echoed by Byron. After being abused at the hands of his uncle for several years his anger took over, resulting in counseling between the ages of six and seven. While attending a counseling session, Byron shared, “Like I freaked out one time and tore the room apart and chucked chairs around. And she was like what is going on at home? And I was like told her what was happening not really knowing it was wrong and that was how the whole process got started.” Byron was moved into non-relative foster care where he moved from placement to placement over the next 14 years, experiencing physical and mental abuse at the hands of foster care providers. At the age of 12, Byron was in another abusive foster home. After being physically and mentally abused, he was moved to another home. Byron said that this placement was “a high risk placement for kids who had stabbed someone or raped

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someone.” While at this placement, Byron began to run away, spend time with his friends and use drugs. At the age of 14, he was on the run from law enforcement. He said, “I was at like rock bottom. At that time I was going through so much. A lot of inner turmoil.” At 15, he was caught and sentenced to eight years for the manufacture, distribution and possession of marijuana and methamphetamines near a daycare. He spent close to two years in a juvenile delinquency center and was released a few weeks before his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday.

At one point, Dianna said she stomped on a girls face, and was sent to a residential treatment center. When asked why she did this, she said, “I really don’t remember.”

### **Academic Impact.**

For a few participants, their reflections would include doing well academically until a specific grade, or their middle school years as particularly difficult. After exploring the reasons for these difficulties, each participant concluded that the cause was anger. This anger resulted in three of the seven participants having an Individual Educational Plan for behavior. Additionally, many participants spoke of trips to the principal’s office on a routine basis, suspensions and school expulsions.

Andrew described himself as “an angry child.” He said, “School was kind of rough. Some of the teachers did not understand where I was at, you know, with my behaviors.” Byron said, “I was very angry. I hated the world.” His anger often resulted in disciplinary actions by the school. Jason shared, “My parents are complete deadbeats who left me to rot in foster care.” This anger, coupled with an IEP for emotional/behavioral issues resulted in a restrictive learning environment for Dianna.

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Dianna was placed in a restrictive special education classroom where she was not allowed to interact with peers in general education classes. Her day was spent with the same group of learners, with a different lunch and recess time than those in general education. Dianna voiced her frustration with her situation and with the education system that put her in that classroom. She said, “I was embarrassed to be in there. I did not need special ed. I wasn’t getting taught and I like to learn.” Once mainstreamed, she was often returned to a special education classroom due to her poor behavior in class. At one point, Dianna said she stomped on a girls face, and was sent to a residential treatment center. When asked why she did this, she said, “I really don’t remember.”

Over and over again, participants shared their experiences of abuse in foster care and the trauma and emotional fall-out that occurred as a result. It is not surprising, then, that these participants were filled with anger and rage. The abuse, coupled with anger resulted in high mobility.

### **High Mobility.**

For Roberto, his placements escalated in terms of security and treatment. He said, “I went to a program called the [Neighborhood Program], and then I had a really big issue that kept me from being able to stay at [Neighborhood Program].” As Roberto shared this, he touched his arms, where scars remain from the cutting he inflicted upon himself. He was moved to the [Kentwood Institute for Boys], a lock-down facility. He shared:

They decided to send me to a really intensive place that I really hated, because it was actually hell. [Kentwood] was like you couldn’t wear jeans, you couldn’t wear shoes unless you went hiking, it was like all the meals were two to a table

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and you had to sit one to each side. And you had to eat your meals within a certain amount of time. I felt like I was in prison.

Dianna also struggled to control her anger after enduring abuse. Her actions landed her in a secure residential treatment center where the staff pieced together, from Dianna's stories and pictures she drew, what had happened to her. Dianna was in and out of lock-down facilities and residential homes until she was placed with a solid foster parent, [Maybell], whom she calls "Mom." Even in this placement, her anger reared. Dianna was removed from this home for a period of time after assaulting a girl. She was moved to [Amanda's Care], a lock-down facility, until it was determined that she would be able to go home.

Jennifer experienced another reason for high mobility; she consistently ran away, resulting in multiple placements in various settings. When asked why Jennifer replied, "I just didn't feel normal staying in a foster home. I felt out of place. So when I stayed with my friends, I felt normal again. I just wanted to feel normal." Her placements continued to escalate in terms of security levels and treatment. She ended up in several lock-down facilities and residential treatment homes.

### **Transition.**

Andrew and Roberto faced a very different challenge; both struggled to acclimate to a public school after spending significant time in alternative, residential, group homes and treatment centers. Andrew shared, "I didn't know where to go or what classes to do." He continued to explain, "I hadn't been in school for like six months, so I was trying to get back in the flow of going to school." Roberto was struggling with transitioning into society. "I started off kind of shy because I hadn't been in public really because of the 1

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½ years in [Springfield]. We never went out in public. So, I was used to dealing with people who had serious issues and like beyond crazy issues.” He expressed feeling overwhelmed with the decisions he had to make regarding his course schedule and in learning to interact with other students, who were very different from those with whom he spent the last two years.

### **Discussion**

The foster care system has failed in three specific areas: abuse in foster care placements, lasting impact of that maltreatment, and poor academic achievement on the part of their clients. If foster care is not a safe environment for foster youth, educational improvement will be a difficult challenge, at best. After learning that seven of 11 participants in the larger study were abused in one or more foster care placements, it is clear that attention is warranted to those whom the Department of Human Services certifies as foster parents. Participants shared that the abuse had continued for a while, yet there was no visit by a caseworker that could have led to this discovery. In the majority of cases, it was someone outside the foster care system that uncovered the abuse and reported it. The case of Emily, who had to fight for 18 months before she was removed from the home of her aunt, even when the police and caseworker saw, and documented, her bruise, underscores the need for change. It wasn't until Emily suffered a broken cheekbone that something was done.

The stories of these participants begs the questions: What made them vulnerable to reabuse? What can be done to improve the monitoring of foster parents? What changes need to be made within the foster care system?

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### **Re-abuse**

In order to understand what makes foster youth particularly vulnerable to reabuse or maltreatment at the hands of people, we must first consider context. Foster children have been removed from a home deemed unsafe for a variety of reasons. For many, this was the only home they have ever known. For the participants, they lived with a parent or friend of a parent who abused them. They have lived with physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. They have lived in a home with very little food, a home with little to no supervision, being locked out was a common occurrence and in a house that was less than clean and tidy. Therefore, once placed in any type of out-of-home placement, the Department of Human Services must help educate the child on what a safe placement looks and feels like, and what healthy relationships between parent and child look like, because this has not been their experience; they have no context for what others may call normal. Take the experience of one participant as an example. Removed from her home for abuse and neglect, she was placed in a home where she was expected to stay in her bedroom in the basement and only join the others when the bell was rung for meals. When asked if she believed she was being maltreated, she responded, “No. I was being fed, I had a place to sleep and clothes. This was more than I had when I was with my parents.” However, once her caseworker learned what was going on, from another foster youth placed in the home, that placement was terminated. Other participants shared there was no food in the refrigerator, and not being given a key to the home, resulting in having to wait for hours outside a locked home until the foster parents arrived after work. Yet, he never reported this to his caseworker because he was not being physically abused and the experience was similar to his upbringing.

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### **Recommended changes to support children in care**

The role of the caseworker in the lives of children in care is critical. Their role must include training and education with their clients to redefine safety and acknowledge expectations of the placement. Recognize that this is a process and that when they visit the home and the child each month, they need to reinforce these concepts. Questions around these expectations should follow each month, recognizing that their context for what is being asked may not yet match the child's context. Therefore, caseworkers need to ask probing questions to get to the core of safety, watch for physical and psychological changes in the child, follow their academic progress, and make no assumptions that the child who entered care for maltreatment is understanding the terms and concepts in the same light as the caseworker. Connect with the child's teacher regularly and monitor social and academic progress as well as setbacks. Listening intently to what the child is saying and not saying as well as watching for psychological changes such as anger, or running away, could save a child from re-abuse in foster care. Lastly, drop-on visits would be recommended, not just a scheduled monthly meeting where foster parents have the opportunity to prepare for the meeting.

### **Conclusion**

The findings in this study illuminate the frequency with which maltreatment occurs in foster care placements. The previous research on barriers to academic achievement focused on the symptoms, not the underlying cause. The voices of the lived experiences of foster youth gave a unique look behind these topics and statistics, revealing the dark side of foster care. While the stories of abuse and neglect varied, the

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fact remains that they occurred. The frequency of the abuse in the sample size is shocking. When the decision to remove children from their home is made, a significant burden exists for state welfare agencies to ensure that children are being placed in a home that is free from potential abuse. Unfortunately, this was not the case for seven of 11 participants who were abused in one or more foster care placements, in the very homes they were told would be safe.

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