

Addressing Challenges and Support for Youth Formerly in Foster Care

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Introduction

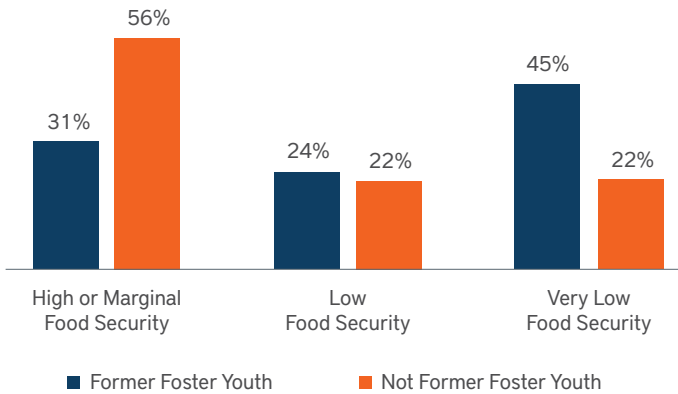
Youth formerly in foster care (YFFC) face unique challenges in higher education. They require additional support, as compared to their non-YFFC counterparts. Despite the documented additional need, there is a gap between effective support needed and the support provided. YFFC students often do not receive sufficient aid, and many do not receive aid altogether. This disparity stems from a lack of awareness on both the side of the institution and the student. This brief aims to highlight the key issues and policy recommendations to improve support for former foster youth students as they navigate higher education.

Additional Need

Former foster youth students demonstrate a higher need for support and assistance as compared to their peers. To begin, YFFC have lower rates of attending higher education institutions and receiving advanced degrees. While approximately 80 percent of YFFC report having interest in pursuing higher education,¹ only three percent earn a bachelor's degree.² Whereas, in comparison, 38 percent of the total nationwide population have a bachelor's degree or higher according to the Census Bureau. Without the educational support often provided by a stable family unit, foster youth are left with additional financial need. Among YFFC, financial difficulties are often widespread, with 83 percent of YFFC

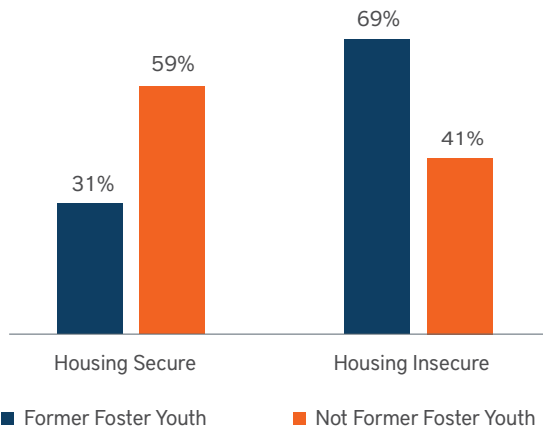
saying they faced financial difficulties or challenges while in college, compared to 71 percent of non-YFFC. Furthermore, a significant 62 percent of YFFC reported that these financial difficulties negatively impacted their ability to concentrate on schoolwork. Due to these challenges, YFFC students need more assistance to attend and complete postsecondary education, and they are proactive in seeking help. Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of YFFC students have reached out to an advisor or staff member for assistance with their financial struggles compared to 64 percent of non-YFFC students. These statistics highlight the need for enhanced support systems for YFFC in higher education.³

Q72-75: USDA Food Security Scale (30-Day)



Source: Trellis Strategies, Fall 2023 Student Financial Wellness Survey

Q86-91: Housing Security Scale



Source: Trellis Strategies, Fall 2023 Student Financial Wellness Survey

Basic Need Insecurity

In addition, former foster youth have higher rates of basic need insecurity. Ensuring that all students have access to necessities such as food and housing is fundamental to their success in higher education. However, former foster youth face significant challenges in this area, which impede their academic development. Sixty-nine percent of YFFC report as low or very low on the USDA Food Security Scale, as compared to just 44 percent of their non-YFFC peers. On top of that, Sixty-nine percent of YFFC report being housing insecure, while only 41 percent of non-YFFC respondents experienced this. Overall, the heightened need for support among former foster youth students underscores the importance of targeted aid to help bridge the gap in education and basic needs.⁴

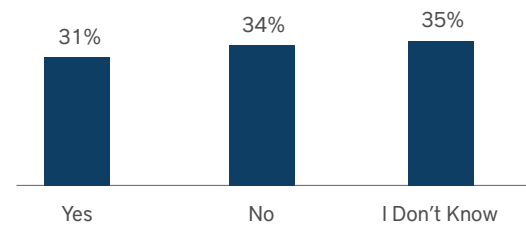
Lack of Awareness

A significant issue that continues to perpetuate financial and other basic need insecurities for former foster youth is the lack of awareness of available aid for YFFC students. Only 39 percent of YFFC students agreed that their institution was aware of their financial challenges. Furthermore, 71 percent of YFFC did not know if their institution had YFFC-specific aid programs, and 63 percent did not know if their state had YFFC-specific aid programs.⁵ Furthermore, institutions often lack awareness of their former foster youth students altogether. The current system gives institutions no means of identifying former foster youth, and instead relies on the students identifying themselves on the tuition and fee waiver. Despite the fact that self-identifying as former foster youth can increase the likelihood of graduation by 3.5%, 40% of eligible students don't apply for the waiver.⁶ This means that YFFC students do not know where to get help, and often institutions do not know how to provide support or have challenges promoting available support.

Insufficient Support

The support currently available to YFFC students is often not adequate to meet their needs. While 63 percent of YFFC who filled out the FAFSA indicated their status on the application, only 37 percent of those who indicated their status on the FAFSA reported receiving increased funding, whether it be federal, state or institutional funding. Among the 18 percent who said their institution offered YFFC-specific aid programs, only 63 percent participated. Of the 25 percent who reported knowing of YFFC-specific aid programs offered through their state, only 54 percent participated.⁷ This highlights the gap in available and effective support, as many eligible students who know that these programs are available don't take advantage. Despite the existence of these programs their limited effectiveness reveals the need for improved execution. Texas higher education institutions are mandated to have a designated former foster youth liaison.⁸ However, due to poor

Q121: Did you receive increased funding/support as a result of identifying yourself as a former foster youth on FAFSA?



Source: Trellis Strategies, Fall 2023 Student Financial Wellness Survey

implementation, these liaisons are often inaccessible and lack adequate resources, rendering this support largely ineffective. In fact, recent data shows that despite 88% of Texas foster care liaisons reporting wanting the role, only 7% reported a reduction in their other duties when taking on the additional responsibility. Beyond this only 49% of institutions had posted contact information for their liaisons,⁹ despite this being a requirement of the Texas mandate. Overall, the liaison position lacks effective implementation and resource allocation resulting in another ineffectual resource for students. Whether it be due to overwhelming bureaucratic complexity or lack of trust in aid programs, it is hard for students to engage with these services effectively.¹⁰ Despite significant need, students can often face challenges participating in these ineffective support programs.

Policy Recommendations

Higher education can provide YFFC students with opportunities to achieve their goals. However, their success is contingent on addressing the unique needs of former foster children with sufficient and effective assistance. Recognizing the distinct difficulties YFFC face is crucial for institutions to implement targeted support measures. In doing so, we can ensure that YFFC students have the resources they need to thrive academically and personally in higher education and beyond. We provide the following recommendations to support YFFC students:

- **Designate YFFC Campus Liaisons**
Every postsecondary institution should have a funded, full-time, and trained liaison position for YFFC students to provide tailored support and guidance.
- **Increase Awareness of Student Support**
Raise awareness within institutions about the unique challenges faced by YFFC students and available support programs and facilitate in identifying former foster youth students by creating lines of communication between foster programs and higher education institutions.
- **Accessible Campus Support and Retention Programs**
Create easy-to-access support programs offering free access to services starting with trauma informed counseling, tutoring, peer mentoring and dedicated support centers for YFFC students.
- **Housing and Meal Assistance**
Allocate specific housing spaces for YFFC with options for financial assistance for housing and meals to alleviate basic needs insecurity.



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- ¹ Dworsky, A. & Perez, A. (2009). Helping former foster youth graduate from college: Campus support programs in California and Washington State. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago
- ² Burt, S., Barnow, A.B., O'Brien, K., Pecora, P., Ellis, M.L., Steiner, E. (2013). Effective Services for Improving Outcomes for Education and Employment for Children and Alumni of Foster Care Service: Correlates and Employment Outcomes. *Child & Family Social Work*: 159
- ³ Fletcher, C., Cornett, A., and Ashton, B. (2024). Student Financial Wellness Survey report: Fall 2023. Trellis Strategies. <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/student-financial-wellness-survey-fall-2023-semester-results/>
- ⁴ Ibid
- ⁵ Ibid
- ⁶ Watt, T., Faulkner, M. (2020). The Texas Tuition and Fee Waiver Program for Youth Who Have Experienced Foster Care: An Assessment of Waiver Utilization and Impact. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 117, 105285.
- ⁷ Fletcher, C., Cornett, A., and Ashton, B. (2024). Student Financial Wellness Survey report: Fall 2023. Trellis Strategies. <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/student-financial-wellness-survey-fall-2023-semester-results/>
- ⁸ Texas Education Code §51.9356
- ⁹ Watt, T., Lord, K., Bustillos, S., Gavin-Williams, R., Greeson, J., Hail, T., & Hoffman-Cooper, A. (2023). Campus liaisons for students who have experienced foster care: Lessons learned from Texas legislation. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 153, 107094. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107094>
- ¹⁰ Okpych, N., & Courtney, M. (2023). When Foster Youth Go to College: Assessing Barriers and Supports to Degree Completion for College Students with Foster Care Histories. In *Institute for Research on Poverty*. Retrieved July 2024, from <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Focus-on-Poverty-39-1c.pdf>

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