

Mental Health and Well-being Among Youth Living in Kinship and Foster Care in Washington State



Mental Health & Well-being Among Youth Living Separated from their Parents

Mental health is essential to a young person's well-being.¹ In the United States, young people who live separated from their parents often experience unique challenges that can cause them to struggle with their mental health.² Mental health can be negatively affected by stress, trauma, and instability.³ Many young people's experiences of isolation and added stressors throughout the Covid-19 pandemic have concerned health professionals who foresee serious impacts on healthy functioning and mental health, such as the heightened risk for depression, anxiety, and suicidality.⁴ The uncertainty, isolation, and added anxiety associated with the pandemic have disrupted young people's ability to build healthy routines and limited their access to vital peer and community support.⁵ In the first months of the pandemic (between April and October of 2020) emergency room visits related to acute mental health symptoms among young people aged 5 to 17 increased by over 25% compared to the same time the previous year.⁴

Although many young people in the United States are facing significant mental health challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, young people involved in the foster care system are often disproportionately impacted by these mental health challenges.⁵ Youth living apart from their parents, particularly those living in foster care, have often experienced substantially more traumatic events than their community peers living at home with their parents.^{2,6,7,8} Experiencing maltreatment and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) has a strong impact on young people's mental health and development.⁹ As a result, youth involved in the foster care system tend to have more mental health-related problems than their community peers.^{2,7} Research suggests that mental health problems among young people living apart from their parents vary based on their placement type and placement stability. Although youth living in both foster care and kinship care experience significantly more challenges related to mental health than youth living with their parents, youth living in kinship care typically have better mental health outcomes than youth living in foster care.^{10,11} Compared to non-family foster care placements, living in a kinship care arrangement is a protective factor for youth mental health.^{11,12}

What is Kinship Care?

Kinship care refers to the full-time care of a minor by a relative or another adult who has a close relationship with the youth and their family.¹³ For youth who are unable to live with their parents, kinship care is preferred by many over foster care because it provides the least restrictive, home-like environment and helps maintain young people's family and community connections.^{14,15} Kinship care arrangements offer an important opportunity to maintain family relationships and culture and help foster a sense of belonging that promotes mental health.¹⁵ Kinship care also has been shown to minimize the trauma of being removed from parental care.¹⁶ Being placed with family members increases permanency, improves behavioral and mental health outcomes, preserves cultural identity, and supports the continuity of community connections.^{10,15,17,18,19} Ensuring that kinship caregivers have adequate supports and financial resources to care for youth during the COVID-19 pandemic is vital for supporting vulnerable young people's mental health.

Kinship care can take place with or without the involvement of the formal child welfare authority.¹⁶ Formal kinship care arrangements are organized by child welfare services (CWS). 137,000 youth (approximately 34% of children involved in CWS) live in formal relative placements nationwide.²⁰ Most kinship care arrangements, however, are informal and arranged without CWS involvement.^{21,22} Over 2.6 million (approximately 4% of US children) are living in relative households apart from their parents.²³ In Washington State, 40,000 youth, roughly 2% of all youth in the state, live in a kinship care arrangement.²⁴ Prioritizing kinship care placements increase the likelihood that young people will live permanently with a relative in their community of origin,^{18,25,26,27} which is crucial for strong mental health.^{28,29} Positive youth mental health and well-being outcomes are often associated with greater stability and community connectedness.²⁹

Mental Health Outcomes Among Youth Living in Kinship Care in Washington State

This fact sheet used data from the 2021 Washington State Healthy Youth Survey (HYS) to compare mental health and well-being among youth living in kinship care and youth living in foster care. The HYS is a biannual survey that includes 8th, 10th, and 12th grade public school students. The survey offers a representative sample of young people in Washington State and provides important details about their health and well-being.¹²

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Student Population Changes

From the academic year (AY) 2018-19 to AY 2021-22, there was a 2.4% increase in enrollment among all 8th, 10th, and 12th graders in Washington State. However, enrollment among students involved in the foster care system decreased by 31.7%.³⁰ School often functions as the primary site for mental and behavioral health services for youth experiencing housing and parental care instability,³¹ and disruptions to in-person school can limit access for many students involved in the foster care system.^{32,33} The COVID-19 pandemic intensified school disconnection among youth involved in the foster care system,^{34,35,36} and HYS participation among youth living in kinship care and foster care dropped dramatically with lower enrollment rates.¹² As a result, the findings from the 2021 HYS likely undercount health and wellness disparities among young people involved in foster care.

Living in Kinship Care

- 2.7% (3,469 Youth)
- 35.9% decrease in HYS participation from the 2018-19 academic year.

Living in Foster Care

- 0.4% (463 Youth)
- 41.7% decrease in HYS participation from the 2018-19 academic year.

Note: Sample size N=125,996.

Based upon the HYS Question: Who did you live with most of the time in the last 30 days? 95.8% (142,296 Youth) were living with their parents.

Among all students, there was a 15.2% decrease in HYS participation from the 2018-19 academic year to 2020-21. academic year.

Suicide Attempts

- Youth living in kinship care were significantly less likely to have attempted suicide in the past year. Compared to youth in kinship care, youth in foster care were **1.6** times more likely to say that they had attempted suicide in the past year.

Hope for the Future

- Youth living in kinship were more likely to say they had hope for the future. Compared to youth living in kinship care, youth in foster care were **1.1** times more likely to report low hope for the future.

Self-Efficacy

- Youth living in kinship care viewed themselves with more self-efficacy. In comparison to youth living in kinship care, youth living in foster care were **1.2** times more likely to say that they could not think of ways to achieve the things most important to them.

Problem Solving

- Youth living in kinship care were more likely to say that they have strong problem-solving skills. Youth in foster care were **1.1** times more likely than youth living in kinship care to say they couldn't come up with solutions to solve problems.

Dating Violence

- Youth living in kinship care were significantly less likely to report dating violence. Youth in foster care were **2.0** times more likely than youth living in kinship care to say they had been hurt on purpose by a romantic partner.

Harassment

- Youth living in kinship care were less likely to report experiencing harassment based on race or sexual orientation. Youth in foster care were **1.4** times more likely than youth living in kinship care to say they had been harassed due to race and **1.3** times more likely to say they had been harassed due to sexual orientation.

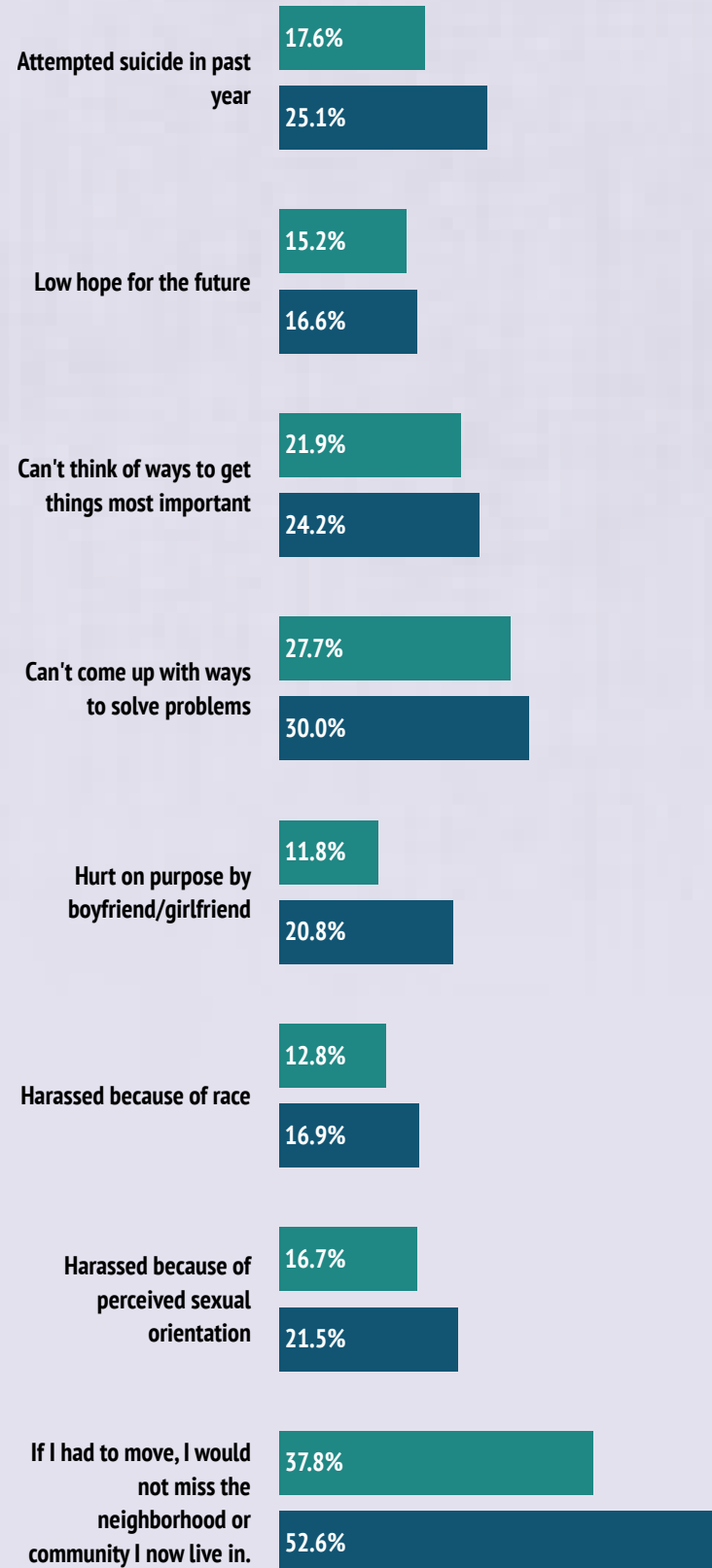
Sense of Belonging

- Youth living in kinship care were significantly less likely to report negative views of their neighborhood and community. Youth in foster care were **1.9** times more likely than youth living in kinship care to say that they would not miss the neighborhood or community they live in if they had to move.

Key Takeaways from the Washington Healthy Youth Survey

- Youth living in kinship care typically have better mental health and wellness outcomes than youth living in foster care.
- Kinship care can act as a protective factor for supporting youths' wellness and mental health needs and buffer youths' trauma experiences in ways that are significantly different from foster care.

● % Living in Kinship Care ● % Living in Foster Care



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