Global Social Welfare
https://doi.org/10.1007/s40609-024-00349-3

A Qualitative Investigation of the Relationships Between Foster Care Stakeholders and Research

Saralyn Ruff[1] · **Deanna Linville**[2] · **Quanice Hawkins**[3]

Accepted: 20 August 2024

Abstract

Research on foster care from the perspective of key stakeholders with lived and professional experience is necessary to inform programs, policy and practice. Numerous barriers exist to accessing these populations and ensuring inclusion and representation in research. This study interviewed twenty-two stakeholders with lived and/or professional experience in foster care to gain their recommendations on how to understand and conduct research on foster care and specifically and how to (a) increase stakeholders' participation in research and (b) capture a broader representation of those impacted. Findings offer observations of who does and does not participate in research and how this may affect public perception, as well as direct recommendations for future research.

Keywords Foster care · Child welfare · Foster youth · Community-based participatory action research · Child welfare research · Qualitative research

At any given time in the United States, there are approximately 500,000 youths in the foster care system (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), 2022). This number is a snapshot of substantiated child welfare cases open at any one point in time and is not reflective of the number of individuals who have been involved in foster care across their childhood. Since the number of individuals who are current or former foster youth in the United States is unknown, it is difficult to capture representative research. Consequently, foster youth are noted as "one of the hardest populations to study" (Jackson et al., 2012, p. 1212). For the present study, we recruited and interviewed twenty-two stakeholders who had lived and/or professional experiences with and in foster care to gain recommendations on how to understand and conduct research on foster care. The current study had two primary objectives: (a) to learn how to increase stakeholders' participation in research, in order to (b) capture a more inclusive representation of those impacted personally and/or professionally by foster care.

Research on Foster Care

Conducting research on stakeholders' experiences in child welfare can be challenging, requiring compromise alongside creative and innovative solutions (Jackson et al., 2012). Even considering who should participate and represent the experience of foster youth involves ethical and legal considerations. Foster youth "have often been excluded from participating in research because they are viewed as vulnerable children who lack agency and also due to an adult-centric perspective of protection" (Garcia-Quiroga & Salvo Agoglia, 2020, p. 1). By design, the identities of children and youth involved in the foster care system are confidential and protected. If able to be accessed, it is unknown who should and could consent to the minors' research participation and what information is developmentally appropriate to access or ask (Berrick et al., 2000; Greiner et al., 2018).

Among former foster youth, unique sets of challenges exist that hinder participation in research. While one may be of legal age to consent for one's own self, former foster youth may no longer have ties to the foster care system, either because of limited resources to support former foster youth and/or because they may wish to distance themselves from foster care affiliation altogether (Steenbakkers et al., 2016). Even if interested in participation, there are limited pathways to identify and access former foster youth. These

---

✉ Saralyn Ruff
sruff2@usfca.edu

[1] Psychology Department, University of San Francisco, 2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, CA 94117, USA

[2] Center for Transformative Healing, San Francisco, USA

[3] University of California, Berkeley, San Francisco, USA

protections are critical, but create a tension when working to conduct inclusive and representative research.

A common trend in child welfare research is the reliance on third parties to represent perspectives in child welfare, without firsthand and/or lived experience. These key stakeholders may be limited as to the accuracy of what they disclose, and/or due to existing and necessary legal, ethical, and professional regulations on confidentiality (Gilbertson & Barber, 2002; Jackson et al., 2012). Researchers may alternatively seek access to extant reports and legal documentation for secondary data analysis. However, these data may not have been intended or designed for research and may not align well with established research questions (Greiner et al., 2020). While researchers continue to utilize these accessible alternatives, limitations remain.

The transient nature of foster care leads to continued methodological challenges in research and, in particular, with participant retention. One example involves stakeholders' participation in longitudinal studies and both the high attrition rates in these studies and/or the reliance on cross-sectional research (Jackson et al., 2012). Following a sample of foster children, parents, or any other stakeholder status may prove difficult with staff turnover, foster family turnover, and both exits and entries into care (Leake et al., 2017). For example, longitudinal research utilizing a child welfare staff perspective may become nearly impossible when considering the high rate of staff turnover annually, attributed to high demand on their personal and professional resources (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Gopalan et al., 2019). It would be difficult to not only access a behavioral health workforce that has turnover rates estimated between 30% annually and 100% within a four-year period, but one that while working in child welfare is under-resourced in time and support (Beidas et al., 2016; Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

Initial and/or continued research participation may also be affected by stakeholders' perceptions of the merits of and motivation for the research. There may be mistrust that permeates disclosures of experience in foster care, particularly when such disclosures are often associated with system-level decision making. This may influence potential participants' perceptions of research, making them wonder whether or not to participate, how much to participate, and/or whether or not to maintain participation. Gilbertson and Barber (2002) found that in research studies with stakeholders, non-response rates ranged from 72.5 to 82% across questions, possibly reflecting participants' discomfort in answering certain questions and necessitating further clarification on appropriate scope and approach of inquiries.

As seen in the limited literature that is available on research with stakeholders in child welfare, the challenges to participation exist on many levels and may mirror the barriers that many stakeholders in child welfare routinely navigate already. There is a need for "flexible and responsive methodology" informed by stakeholders' experiences and recommendations to guide research-informed practice and policy (Jackson et al., 2012, p. 1212). We focused this study on learning more about how twenty-two key stakeholders in foster care perceive and experience research and what their recommendations might be to improve representation and the integrity of research.

Methods

Study Context

This study is part of the first phase of a larger evaluation of services offered through A Home Within, a national non-profit offering pro bono mental health services to current and former foster youth. Specifically, before conducting a randomized-controlled trial (RCT), we used community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) methods to conduct a needs assessment with key stakeholders in foster care to inform the methods and design of the RCT. CBPAR methodologies prioritize partnerships with the communities that are the focus of the research as co-investigators to ensure the relevance of research findings for those communities involved (Israel et al., 2005). CBPAR methods vary widely, but aim to ensure equitable decision making (Israel et al., 2005). We describe various CBPAR methods utilized in this study, below.

For this needs assessment, we worked with our community partner and identified qualitative methodologies as most appropriate for the research questions at hand. These included interviews and focus groups with stakeholders using semi-structured guides. We analyzed data from the twenty-two qualitative interviews as the follow-up focus groups did not collect data on the relevant research questions. While all qualitative methodologies have a similar goal of understanding a phenomenon from those that are experiencing it (Vaismoradi et al., 2013), we felt that using generic thematic analysis methods allowed us to provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As is expected for any research involving human participants, but particularly important when using CBPAR methodology, we sought and obtained institutional review board approval for the study protocol. Participants were informed about limits and risks to their confidentiality prior to the provision of their consent to participate.

Research Team

The research team consisted of two principal investigators, a project coordinator, five research assistants, and a research Community Advisory Board (CAB). There are three authors for this paper, two of whom were principal investigators and one who served on the CAB. The first author served as a co-principal investigator with sixteen years of clinical experience and eleven years of research experience in the child welfare system. The second author is also a co-principal investigator and has twenty years of experience conducting qualitative and mixed methods studies as well as twenty-five years of experience as a mental health professional and educator. Both the first and second authors volunteered with A Home Within at various points in their careers. They were able to maintain a boundary between A Home Within programming and the research by conducting the study through their affiliated educational institutions and taking the appropriate steps to mitigate potential research bias, including maintaining participant confidentiality. The third author served on the CAB and has worked as an advocate for foster youth. Specifically, she was a member of California Youth Connection, which impacted California state policy including Assembly Bill 5. She has also served as a consultant for the Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Independent living for former foster youth as well as an advocate through the Casey Family Programs' Bay Area office.

Utilizing the CBPAR research framework, the research CAB was conceptualized and developed during phase one of the needs assessment. Specifically, we identified potential CAB members who have lived personal and/or professional experiences in foster care, informed by initial interview findings. The composition of the CAB included five former foster youths living in California, Oregon, or Texas, all of whom have both personal and professional experiences with foster youth. Three CAB members were current or previous recipients of therapy services through A Home Within. Another member was a licensed mental health professional and a volunteer clinician for A Home Within. The CAB met monthly for approximately 90 min over a period of two years with the purpose of providing feedback and helping to shape research methods, interpreting study findings, and providing recommendations for implications to both the larger field and A Home Within services more specifically.

Procedures

The co-principal investigators used community mapping to identify key stakeholder groups in child welfare for participation in the study. Community mapping is an inquiry-based research method that situates learning within the context of the community in order to uncover the depth and diversity of community needs, resources, and assets (Ordoñez-Jasis & Myck-Wayne, 2012). We considered A Home Within staff not only as research partners but also as part of the community. We collaborated with A Home Within and CAB, gaining recruitment recommendations for both key stakeholder groups and individuals to invite for participation. All recruitment efforts occurred through email, paired with assurance that participation would be kept confidential and would not affect standing with A Home Within.

Participants

Twenty-two stakeholders in the foster care community participated in qualitative semi-structured interviews used for analysis in this study (see Table 1 for participant demographic information.) Participants lived across the United States with the majority (68%) residing on the West Coast. Over half (54.5%) of the participants identified as White; eight (36.3%) identified as persons of color, and two (9.1%) did not respond to the question about racial/ethnic identity.

Thirteen (59%) key stakeholder participants were affiliated with A Home Within. Specifically, they served either as a volunteer therapist, consultation group leader, clinical director, paid leadership role, and/or client. Of those ($n=9$, 41%) not affiliated with A Home Within, five were mental health therapists working with current and former foster youth; four were social workers and case managers working in child welfare and/or juvenile justice. Of the eight former foster youth (36%) who participated in the study, four

Table 1 Participant demographics

Age in years (mean, SD)	48.4	15.5
Current state you live in (*n*, %)		
California	9	40.9
Massachusetts	6	27.3
Oregon	5	22.7
Washington	1	4.5
New York	1	4.5
Race or ethnic identity (*n*, %)		
White or Caucasian	12	54.5
Hispanic or Latino	3	13.6
Black or African American	2	9.1
Native American	1	4.5
Mixed or some other race	2	9.1
Did not respond	2	9.1
Gender identity (*n*, %)		
Female	14	63.6
Male	5	22.7
Fluid	1	4.5
Other	1	4.5
Did not respond	1	4.5
Sexual orientation (*n*, %)		
Heterosexual	16	72.7
Queer	2	9.1
Bisexual	1	4.5
Gay	1	4.5
Did not respond	2	9.1

(18%) were current A Home Within clients. Three participants (14%) were foster parents, one (5%) was the biological parent of foster children, and two participants (9%) worked in juvenile justice.

Data Collection

The co-principal investigators conducted Zoom interviews with key stakeholders that ranged from 90 to 180 min in length. Several questions from the semi-structured interview guide focused on how to best include current and former foster youth in research. Interview questions pertaining to the current study were asked at the beginning and end of each interview to allow for an iterative process between data collection and analysis. The questions included the following:

(1) How did you hear about this project and why did you decide to participate?
(2) What are your perceptions of research on foster care?
(3) Do you have any thoughts or recommendations about how to get more people to participate in research with the foster care system, particularly those that are in care to prioritize the voices of the people that were trying to serve?
(4) Who else should we talk to in order to understand the experiences of current and former foster youth?
(5) Do you have any recommendations related to the research?

Often, we asked follow-up questions that differed based on the participants' context and experiences. At several points, we checked in with participants to ask about the general process of the study in progress and gained insights that are included in our findings. We did not have preconceived notions about the findings and allowed key stakeholders' voices to characterize the data. As such, the findings and ordering of themes are presented in the way that they flowed from the conversations with interview participants.

Participants consented and provided demographic data prior to the interview via a Qualtrics survey. Throughout the interview data collection process, the co-principal investigators kept field notes and debriefed after every interview. Consistent with content analysis qualitative methods, interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai. Following, a trained research assistant reviewed each video recording and cleaned the transcripts to ensure accuracy.

Data Analysis

Our primary objective of this qualitative inquiry was to provide a participant-informed description and meaning-making of how to engage and include foster youth in research. We used thematic analysis as an independent qualitative descriptive approach, which fit with our goal of gathering descriptions from the participants themselves and not from the research team's interpretations of them (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sandelowski, 2010). This approach does have a guiding philosophy, even though it does not follow an explicit set of theoretical assumptions (Caelli et al., 2003).

For the first step of the analysis and in order to familiarize ourselves with the data, the first and second authors independently read through all the qualitative answers to get an overall sense of the data before engaging in the initial coding process. Then, during the second review of the data, the authors generated initial codes with each person writing down initial concepts, phrases, or words that were important to create the coding scheme (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The team then searched for themes by clustering codes into themes and subthemes (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The final coding scheme consisted of four overarching themes and fourteen subthemes.

We took several steps to ensure the trustworthiness and dependability of our findings. Throughout the process, the team used peer debriefing and reaching intercoder agreement in order to bolster the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Curtin & Fossey, 2007; Saldaña, 2015). The authors conducted member checking, defined as taking back ideas from the research to the participants for their confirmation and clarification (Birt et al., 2016; Charmaz, 2006). Specifically, we sent findings out to nine participants, asking them to review the findings and respond to the following two questions:

1. Do you see your experience captured in the findings?
2. Is there anything you would add or change?

We gained feedback from six of the nine participants, and all members indicated that the interpretation of the data and the findings captured their perspectives. Four offered elaboration related to implications of the findings, reflected in the Discussion of this paper. Two participants shared an interest in member checking but had time conflicts and requested involvement at a different time.

Lastly, the research team elicited and received feedback from the research CAB on the study findings and its implications. A draft of the findings was sent to the CAB via email in preparation for a two-hour discussion. In the email and in the meeting, the CAB was asked:

1. Understanding that the findings needed to reflect the participants' experiences, do they resonate with experiences?
2. Based on your professional and personal experiences, what are some possible practice, research, policy, and/or service implications of the findings?

The CAB provided us with valuable feedback in writing and orally, included in our Discussion.

Findings

Interviews with twenty-two participants supported an increased understanding of reasons stakeholders may or may not participate in research and what could possibly be done to support representative and inclusive research. Specifically, four major themes emerged across the conversations with key stakeholders including (a) general barriers to participation in research; (b) who participates in research and who does not; (c) reasons for research participation; and (d) recommendations for future research in child welfare. Within each major theme, there were two to six subthemes, described and illustrated with participant quotes below.

General Barriers Towards Participation

Not surprisingly, the key stakeholders interviewed for this study reflected on the many barriers that they believed impacted involvement in child welfare research. These barriers clustered into two larger subthemes: (a) skepticism about the motivations of research and (b) concerns about meeting the expectations of the researchers. Across this theme, participants expressed that they themselves, or other stakeholders, held a general mistrust in telling one's story for the purpose of research. Participants frequently mentioned concerns about who research ultimately serves and how their individual stories might be used.

Skepticism About the Research Motivations

Participants held curiosity, if not skepticism, about how research questions and priorities were decided and how personal stories may then be filtered, analyzed, and shared in research. For some participants, this mistrust felt parallel, or at least related, to the experiences of not having a choice within the foster care system. One participant captured this concern, saying:

> Yeah, being a kid is hard. People are telling you what to do all the time. And being a foster kid is even harder. It's kind of amazing that people don't stop to ask what you want. And so, research that you have to do and be told what you have to do, I don't think it goes over very well because it's just more of the same. (A Home Within staff)

Another former foster youth expressed exhaustion with this sameness and a desire for boundaries around who and when to share their story. They mentioned "I don't want to always talk about me. And I think in general, foster kids don't want that. We don't want everything to be on us." The last part of this quote captured a sentiment shared by others with lived experience that foster youth should not have to carry the primary responsibility for change. Specifically, participants expressed concern about the emotional and psychological work required in discussing child welfare and their conflict in wondering who this ultimately benefited—the system/s, foster youth, and/or researchers.

While discussing a mistrust of research, several participants wondered what would be done with the research findings and what lens would be used to frame their story. Some shared that these intentions are often unclear in research studies with unclear study aims. One Home Within clinical consultant highlighted their distrust, not knowing what is done with the information collected in research, sharing:

> Mostly where it comes from is distrust of like, "Why? What are you going to do with this? Who are you? Why would you change anything? Like how does this change anything for me?" And it's not as selfish as it sounds. It's more like protecting their story because it takes a lot to walk in the world with the story they have.

Participants shared that it may be that underlying concerns and mistrust of research were, in part, related to past negative ramifications of having shared information with professionals. As one parent of a foster youth shared:

> If it's with somebody that will actually listen and not point the finger and not blame. … People want to share their stories. They're just afraid. People get looked at as crazy. No, that didn't happen, that doesn't happen, there are laws to protect you. There are laws to protect your child and not everybody gets the benefits – those benefits. Some people are … some agencies are opportunists.

Simply put by one A Home Within former staff member, "you have a population of folks who tend to be exploited in various ways and are rightfully wary, and who are also probably just exhausted, right?" Across these findings, research participation was described to feel like a risk, requiring caution and some sense of safety.

Meeting Expectations of the Researchers

A second subtheme that emerged as a possible barrier to research participation was a concern about meeting the expectations of the researcher. The lack of clarity about research language, intention, and overall goals left some participants feeling a bit unclear about what researchers wanted and hesitancy about matching these expectations. One clinician reflected on the many conversations that they had with former foster youth when referring them to research, and the common question they asked was whether or not they would “do a good job.” This participant elaborated that this concern is often shared by families, case managers, and other stakeholders, who hold a sense of responsibility about how the data they provide might impact their communities.

Concern about researcher expectations was also evident during many of the interviews with participants included in this study. Throughout the interview transcripts, participants inquired if they were answering questions how we wanted them to or meeting the goals of our study. This was evident in the interview process when clients would directly ask the researchers for this study, “Did that answer your question?” As will be discussed later, this finding was also reflected as a research recommendation under the subtheme “*Offer Feedback*.” There, participants recommended providing more structure and feedback to stakeholders to know whether the information they shared was in line with the research goals and, even more, was heard and held as an impactful, individual experience.

Differentiating Between Who Does and Does Not Participate

A second major theme was evident across the findings related to participants’ awareness of which key stakeholders in foster care participate and which do not. This theme was built on the previous theme that reflected stakeholders’ mistrust in research and led to conversations on how research results and findings are often not representative of the full breadth of lived and professional experiences. For example, when asked about participation in research, one clinician and A Home Within Clinical Director immediately responded, “But you won’t get the people who are the most disengaged, right? We’ll always have trouble with that.” Later, this same participant continued, reflecting on researchers’ reliance on specific individuals who may be more likely to participate that “the mentoring group that’s here, that works with young adults here, there’s a subset that really did want to be activists. And they were looking at ways to have an impact on the system, to change the system.” Another example of this theme was offered by a social worker who said, “There are pockets of folks we can always rely on, but that’s only 5–10 people, that’s not necessarily a scale of what we’re working with.”

Within this broader theme of who is included in research and who is not, two subthemes emerged: access to participants and timing of request for participation. These subthemes reflected possible assumptions about research procedures that influenced whose voices are heard and led to recommendations for increasing research access to and inclusion of a broader range of stakeholders.

Access to Participants

When asked the question whether participants had any thoughts or recommendations about how to get more people to participate in research, particularly those with lived and/or professional experience, the majority shared an immediate offer to help. Specifically, even though the intention of this question was not to ask for names for the study at hand, participants tended to brainstorm organizations and nonprofits and provide names with a willingness to help recruit. One former foster youth and social worker answered:

> Well, you know [name of nonprofit] might be a nice opportunity because it’s a contained community. And I think the onsite staff could certainly facilitate that. I mean, of course you’re going to get one very particular view because with these kids, youth. … Oh, and there is a program called ___, and I think that is a national program, and those are former foster youth who become involved because they’re interested in the bigger picture.

Participants also showed an inclination to rely on nonprofits and agencies as referral sources for research and, again, to understand that such recruitment methods may only offer access to a fraction of those with lived experience in foster care. Some participants emphasized the importance of utilizing nonprofits as a preferred network for research recruitment due to their extensive knowledge and understanding of child welfare. One participant commented:

> Organizations that work with young people very frequently, talking to line staff and folks that are supporting young people all the time, I think that those are people that are really important to talk to, because they just have a finger on the pulse of what’s happening in the world and how people are feeling about it. (Former Foster Youth and A Home Within client)

Several other individuals voiced concerns or challenges in the use of third parties to create connections with stakeholders. One A Home Within staff member and clinician said:

> Some of these other nonprofit organizations. … Sometimes that works and sometimes it’s not so easy because people become very proprietary. Why are you taking my kids to do your research? What do I get out of it? Or, we don’t use mental health; we do something else. People get very proprietary.”

A former foster parent and foster youth advocate working at a college expanded on hesitations in connecting stakeholders and researchers, based on their first-hand experience:

> I always feel a little bit protective of students when there’s an opportunity to tell your story, because I

> think it's super important to get people's voices out there. In order to raise support and funding, people want to hear people's stories. It can also be re-traumatizing or you can feel like your traumas are being used. When we have an opportunity, where we need some student voices, I like to just put it out there widely, and with no pressure. Some students will be really, really interested in that and feel really empowered by it. But it's definitely not all students who feel that way. I don't want to overuse it and ask people over and over again.

Later, this same participant explained how they tend to make decisions about when to connect researchers with potential foster youth participants:

> I'm always forming partnerships for people to refer to us. Right? So, for me to refer students to other programs and for them to refer to us. It's a relationship that takes time to build. Once I see that students connect with it, and report back that it's going well, and then another student does and another student does, and we kind of build that proof, then there's this confidence built. If there's someone that I don't know, and there's a random email, I'm not going to immediately send it on to students. Maybe we'll meet and see where the intersections are. Then, maybe there's a particular student who I think might be a good opportunity for them to try. They'll try and it'll go well, or not.

This general sense of protection of certain stakeholders was evident when talking with professionals in child welfare, yet of note, many stakeholders with lived experience shared concerns about professionals making these decisions and "gatekeeping" opportunities.

Timing of Participation

A second subtheme evident across the interviews about who participates in research and who does not, related to the timing of participation. This subtheme seemed to be particularly focused on current and former foster youth as stakeholders. Additionally, participants noted that not only does timing influence who participates, but it may also influence the data a researcher may receive from a current versus a former foster youth. To explain, one former foster youth and A Home Within client stated:

> I think that's a recommendation that I make too, folks like me, who are 34, [are] probably helpful to talk to you because I'm a bit removed from my own personal experience at this point in time [as they would be]. But I think that it's really important to also talk to young people who are in it. In the same way, not folks who are currently being traumatized by the system … that's not necessarily what I'm saying. But folks who are 19 or 20 [ages] struggling trying to figure it out. I think that they would have a very different perspective than somebody like me.

Other participants emphasized that a trauma lens should inform the timing of recruitment, so that researchers have an awareness that, many times, foster youth are not in a space to answer questions related to their experiences until they have a sense of safety, and that this sense of safety may come with time and distance from foster care.

> Now I have my support team, I have my confidence, you know, I have my voice established. I'm able to speak up. And that's a big part of why I'm at [child welfare nonprofit], is being able to advocate because I wasn't able to advocate for myself at that age, sitting at a table with all these grown-ups, and they have all these degrees, and they know what they're talking about. And sometimes it could still be intimidating. Now, because I don't have a college degree, I go off of my personal experience. But that's what makes me that much better. Because I do have that lived experience. And I do have that voice and I do know what works and what doesn't. So, I think my voice is being heard now. (Former Foster Youth and A Home Within Client)

Reasons Key Stakeholders May Participate

In learning why each participant agreed to an interview for this study, discussions broadened to examine why stakeholders may participate in research on child welfare. There were two subthemes that identified contribution and sharing success as possible reasons for research participation. Of note, the data supporting this theme, and quotes offered below, were either from former foster youth about their own participation, or about foster youth, and did not necessarily extend to discussions regarding the participation of other key stakeholders.

There were a few non-foster youth interviewees that participated in this study who conveyed the general idea that foster youth stakeholders would want to participate in research, assuming that the invitation, timing and conditions were correct. One clinician shared that "my sense has been that foster kids are really happy to be asked what's on their mind. So, I think it's getting to them. I would see that as a roadblock rather than giving them the opportunity to talk."

This quote highlights the importance of having access to recruitment and referral sources and builds on the previous subtheme of "*Timing of the Ask*." Specifically, the data suggested that it was more in the way one would be approached than whether they had an interest in participation.

To Contribute

When expanding on assumed interest in research, participants often reflected on the belief that many stakeholders held a strong desire to contribute. This finding was evident across stakeholder status, but particularly emphasized among current and former foster youth, and is exemplified in the quotes below.

> I think that one of the reasons why I wanted to participate was just because I'm just the kind of person who has always tried to give back and use my experience to help inform better policy practice, etc. Anything that I can do to help the experiences of other people going through it, is something that I'll always say yes to. (Former Foster Youth and A Home Within client)
>
> I'm pretty open about my experience in foster care and I know a lot of people aren't so like, I like to step up for those who aren't comfortable sharing things like what happened to them and stuff like that. (Former Foster Youth)
>
> I was super eager to jump in and tell you what I'm struggling with at my age now and with my mental health and the services that I'm having. So, I was really eager to be able to talk about now being a former foster youth, and how crazy it is, the way the systems are in place, and sometimes how difficult it can be not having the support and not having someone to advocate for you. I've really been thriving off of this, sharing my experience and talking about what I've gone through, how it's helped me and what I'm still going through today… like every day is a struggle. And I call it a beautiful struggle, because we choose to make it ugly, or we choose to make it beautiful. So, I'm actually starting to involve myself in doing a lot more community speaking … doing a lot more public speaking, things like that sharing my experience, and it's really something that since I did it with you guys [at a community event] that I've been wanting to do more and it's really exciting to me to be able to talk. (Former Foster Youth)

As seen through these quotes, contribution often overlapped with advocacy and a desire to ensure others did not feel alone in their experience. One former foster youth participant shared:

> It's really important for people like you to know, so that you know that there are people out here that have gone through these things and like what things you guys can do to stop certain things from happening, maybe giving more support, you know?

To Share Success

Several participants directly discussed participation as a means to share their successes and strengths. One former foster youth and A Home Within client shared pride in telling their story:

> It's beyond being open to sharing it. I want to wear it like a crown. I'm not kidding. Yeah. I'm a badass. … Like, no matter what it's like, I've survived multiple decades of domestic violence, motherfucker. What do you think, you know? You think you know, anything? Try to walk in my shoes for five minutes? You wouldn't make it half a block?

Other participants explained that sharing their successes were not only for others' benefit, but also for their own selves in supporting personal accountability and growth. One former foster youth explained:

> I feel like I am a huge success … not only for foster care, but for family, who are really well known here and not in a positive way. I'm the only one out of 10 that graduated in high school, that's been to college, that has my own home, that has custody of my child. Child welfare has been involved with my brothers and sisters in a really negative way. And it's like, I know, they see my name. So, it's really nice to be that success, and be able to empower it, you know?

This same participant then continued, "I can't be telling people that I am this and doing this and doing that when really, I'm not a good member of the community or something like that." This sentiment was also reflected in other interviews, suggesting that sharing success was sometimes intertwined with maintaining success. The following additional quotes further supports this point:

> The reason why I wanted to do it was because I think it's a good experience for me, and a stepping stone for me to talk about these things that affect me. It's still a big thing for me. I still have a problem with trusting people. Just maintaining relationships are a really big thing for me. I push people away. You know I have a problem with having them there and before they can do something to me, I push them [away]. So, it's a really big thing for me to do this and express myself and tell my story. I don't know if that makes sense. (Former Foster Youth)
>
> I'm actually looking into doing a lot of motivational speaking. So, something that has discouraged me, is not having that degree. So, a lot of people think that because I don't have a degree in motivational speaking or sharing my story, I didn't know how much of an impact it would be, until I did it that first time. And I

> didn't know how many people I could reach until I was pushed to do it that first time. I kind of feel like letting people know that you don't have to have a degree to share your story. It's more of what you went through and what you've experienced. ... I can tell you now when I first started here [foster youth advocacy organization], I could not do public speaking. I would shake, I'd be sick, I'd throw up…it's bad. So practice, having a support team, having somebody that's told me, I am the only one that knows what happened in my life. I'm the only one that knows what I'm going to say. You guys don't even know when I mess up or when I skip a line, because I am a professional on my life and my experience and being that confident and having that support is what has caused me to thrive and be more open to doing these things. Did that answer your question? (Former Foster Youth)

These quotes build on the importance of sharing success and the potential positive influence it can have on others and self.

Recommendations for Research on Foster Care

Many of the conversations with participants led to brainstorming and sometimes direct recommendations on how to support future research on child welfare. These conversations focused on involving current and former foster youth, more so than foster parents, case managers, or others with lived and/or professional experience, in research as stakeholders. The recommendations were generously offered, organized into six subthemes.

Incentivizing Participation

Consistent across the interviews, participants suggested that the bare minimum for supporting stakeholders' participation in research included offering compensation, not only for their time but for the psychological work required to share personal information. As one clinician and A Home Within staff member said, "I think the gift card helps." Or, as a former foster youth highlighted, "I mean I think incentivizing it is always a good thing. … I don't know to what scale. I always signed up for stuff where I was like, oh, I get pizza or oh you're gonna pay me or like those kinds of things." It was not always recommended that these incentives only be financial, but as one parent of a foster youth suggested:

> Have like a pamphlet full of resources full of you know advocates, and one of the key points here is to believe what's happening because if you dismiss what's occurring to each family, then people just go into the little cocoon and they don't want to talk anymore.

This participant continued to discuss how difficult it can be to tell one's story, and how resources or referrals felt like one way, of many, for researchers to show care about what they had heard and about them. Several participants recommended that researchers offer participants a choice of incentive, including them in the decision-making process; this recommendation will be further exemplified in the recommendation subcategories "*Join as Co-Creators of Research*."

Build Relationships

The data clearly indicated that individuals were more likely to participate in research, and to have a positive experience, thereby increasing future participation, in the context of a relationship with researchers. The acknowledgement of the tendency to lack a relationship was reflected here:

> Research when I have seen it done on foster youth, it is extractive, right? You know, you do not know the researchers from anybody and they show up, and they can be as nice as they damn well please, but you do not have any connection to them. (Social Worker)

Many suggested that nonprofits and agencies could help facilitate relationships, specifically with stakeholders with lived experience. Specifically, some participants emphasized the importance of building relationships with third parties to earn trust. One clinician offered the following:

> I tried to in big and small ways create a sense that we're all in this together. We're all doing different stuff. We're coming at it in different ways, but, you know there's a huge need. You're not going to meet all the needs through your organization. I'm not going to meet all of those through mine. But what can we do together? And this research will help you, will help your kids, the kids you're serving. Maybe not help you and your organization directly, but it should help the kids you want to help.

Several participants offered direct suggestions for navigating the process, building relationships with third party recruitment sources. One clinician and A Home Within Clinical Consultant shared:

> But I think the question of how you get their trust. Maybe there needs to be a pre-interview meeting, right, to get them interested and see what they think and to answer some questions. Or, I don't know, I think it's more about how the interviewer builds trust with people who don't trust and who feel like they've been misunderstood or their words have been taken away … or worry that if they say something it'd come back to haunt them.

Offer Feedback

As noted previously, the data showed some mistrust of research, combined with wants and desires to contribute and share successes. These conversations often segued to the recommendation for researchers to offer feedback to participants in real time during the process. Participants understood the need to not bias research and still offered this recommendation as a way to convey that the researchers heard the participants' stories and valued their willingness to share. For example, one college support professional for foster youth who also had been a foster parent offered:

> I think that there's this thing with the foster care experience, also where you have to support individuals' caseworkers, or whatever that comes into your life, and maybe a week later, they've moved on, and there's someone else. You just kind of never know. There are all these moving parts and so to share your voice, but have it just be this passing thing that you're never connected with the results [research] ... that can be hard. I guess, from that perspective, trying to incorporate it into agencies and people who are serving foster youth who have more of a long-term relationship model, so that it can be part of that longer term relationship rather than this like random opportunity where I share all my stuff, and then, where does it go? Or, what happens to it? Does that make sense?

For other participants, the request for feedback was evident within the interview process for the current study. For example, the ending of the previous quote ("does that make sense"), as well as similar endings of previously provided quotes (e.g., "Did that answer your question?") convey a general want for some possible confirmation. Or, when we checked in with a former foster youth participant half way through the interview and asked "how are things going," they said:

> Well, I like the way it's gone so far because you guys throw the question and I answer it. You haven't interrupted me. You haven't invalidated anything I said. You haven't given me the impression that you agree or disagree with what I'm saying, you're just taking it all in … You're not making me feel like I did something wrong or I'm saying something wrong. You are just taking it all in, which is kind of like … I can stay here. I can answer more questions. You're actually interested in what I have to say whether it makes a difference or not … that's what I'm getting.

Later, this participant concluded: "Yeah and kids want the same thing. They just want to let you know what's on their mind, even if you disagree."

Re-engagement (or Maintained Engagement)

In addition to offering feedback in vivo during research, participants recommended circling back with participants at a later point to let them know what the researchers heard, what was shared, and what may have happened as a result of the work. It was clear that many felt that participants were asked to tell their story or parts of their story, but rarely knew what happened *with* their stories, *how* researchers interpreted them, and *what* the impact may have been. One participant shared:

> Also making sure that you follow up with them afterwards, about anything that came up for them … if there is anything that you can do to support them, what the next steps are so they understand if they have a role moving past that interview and if you need to debrief or any of those kinds of things. (Former Foster Youth)

Participants expressed that it may increase their skepticism and reluctance to participate in research if researchers failed to maintain engagement post-data collection. Even more, some participants suggested that the experience of sharing one's story may linger, triggering unresolved feelings, and serve as another instance wherein someone heard their story, but did not care enough to follow up. One former foster youth and foster youth advocate shared:

> A lot of people would like to know what you're using your research for. Is it to present the data to … I don't know who funds counseling, but like whoever you're trying to get more financial resources for counseling for foster youth who need it. If you write a grant, and even when you write a grant, as you get your money, you're supposed to write a follow up of how you used your grant? That's what I would think that foster youth would need as a follow-up, not just do an interview and get all this emotional labor and never follow up. I'd like to know, how has your research improved mental health services, specifically. So, I think the investment into youth is important.

Join as Co-creators of Research

Building on the importance of valued time, feedback, and relationships, the data supported a subtheme and recommendation focused on working with stakeholders as co-creators of research. This finding was evident in numerous quotes, emphasizing how critical it can be for someone who has firsthand experience to sit at the decision-making table. One A Home Within Clinical Consultant directly asked:

> I mean, is there room for folks that were in the system to sit on the board in the construction of it and how are those faces present when these invitations are made? Right? Things like that I think can help. Again, it doesn't guarantee you anything, but it just shows that this isn't performative, you know?

Later this same participant returned to this idea, sharing:

> So, when I talked earlier about how mental health is constructed, even that in of itself is like, "How do we get the folks who do the research to integrate people they're researching" … seems very much like that gatekeeper thing, right? So, even that we struggle with that question, it puts people on the defensive, because then it's like I have to justify why I deserve to know and be a part of people reviewing *my* story. That's just a tough sell for folks. Yeah, and I don't think anybody who has an understanding of what it's like to not have control over their story and over their life, would willingly give up that easily? You know?

This quote captures how the question for researchers to even consider a decision of inclusion is inappropriate and off putting for many stakeholders in child welfare. Similarly, a former foster youth discussed both the importance of partnerships and the challenges they experienced with inclusion in process:

> And so being a youth and being at that table, we're kind of always told what's best for us, what we should do, you know, what our goal should be. And it's nice that I'm able to tell them. I'm able to share with them what works and what doesn't work, because I've been there. I've seen what I struggled with at that age when I wasn't able to vocalize it. (Former Foster Youth)

A former foster youth and child welfare professional shared how important the co-creation of research is at all stages of the research process, particularly when working to interpret the data and discuss the implications:

> We often see policies and laws, and all of these things have been created, but it's not like literally benefiting us, you know? They're not looking at us as victims, who were, you know, put through a pipeline and because of the traumatic experiences that we experienced along that pipeline, how that has affected us and led us to other horrible situations … i.e, you know, prison, juvenile detention centers from school, from foster care going into placement from group homes to juvenile detention centers.

Numerous participants also underscored how critical research collaboration and co-creation is in participant recruitment. One social worker emphasized the importance of having stakeholders conduct the interviews and gather the data, to increase the likelihood of a positive experience for participants in research. Specifically, they said:

> I think that is a big piece when foster parents can connect with … whoever it is trying to gather the information, for a lot of different reasons. I think it just kind of builds that rapport immediately when they know that they have some understanding of what they're going through. I think that is a big piece to it.

Some stakeholders noted that when collaborating and co-creating research, it may be of value to offer support during the process, while individuals in this role are asked to hold both their own experiences in foster care and those of others:

> It's really hard I think to– If you haven't dealt with your own trauma to support people in their own, and that piece I think is like one of the big lessons learned and youth engagement and youth development that I've kind of participated in is like you need to do a lot of pre work with people to get them up to speed on the why the how the purpose, you know, all those kinds of things that they get it and they understand the bigger picture and their role in that bigger picture. (Former Foster Youth and A Home Within Client)

Capture the Story, Not Just the Outcome

A final subtheme that emerged from the data was a request that the findings of a research study reflect a story, rather than a single outcome, or set of outcomes. The consensus was that it was important to avoid a reduction of their experience, and forgo critical context. One former foster youth emphasized the importance of not only hearing the context, but ensuring this was at the forefront of the findings:

> So, the way that we share out some of this information once the research is actually completely concluded is also really important, maybe just as important as the way that the research is collected. Because if you're not, if you're not catering to the audience that you're trying to reach and you're not connecting with them, you're not going to, you know, chances are that it's not going to have the impact that you're hoping to.

When considering how to capture the context in research, one participant shared:

> I mean, I know that you guys know this as researchers. ... I think that a lot of times it's very hard to use qualitative information to inform and persuade people because people love numbers and statistics and yada yada. I think that can be very hard but I think that the storytelling aspect of, of all of this, is also very

> important and I think that sharing perspective is also valuable … at the end of the day, to have an impact, whether that's on policy or whatever it is. I think that there is a unique kind of value added to having young people telling the story that the research has created. I think that's really impactful to have people who have lived experience, share that message about themselves and they can talk, instead of talking about this disassociated concept of what we took away from the survey. People can connect that back to their real life.

Later, the same participant continued:

> Just be able to say that and say, you know, we learned, we evolved, we thought it through, we tested it, we looked, experimented. And here's a better way we think of doing it. And people have to be comfortable with that kind of experimentation, rather than to assume that there's absolute truth that will be revealed by a randomized trial. (Researcher, Social Worker)

A clinician and A Home Within Clinical Consultant offered a similar perspective, challenging the focus in research on diagnosis and pathology:

> I think it starts by making it less detached. That's the fatal flaw. And I think in research, I understand the intention behind it, but when it becomes - when you make it so clinical, when you detach it from your own experience, you can't not look through your own experience. You can't not see things and interpret them. But if your model comes from one that's more normative, or at least we've diagnosed it as normative, how could you understand someone who does not live the same insurance, who hasn't lived the same insurance: the habits, the ways they create security looked totally different to you. And so when you look at it, yes it looks pathological. You're like, "Nobody I know has ever done this. And every book I've read is like, no this is normative." But when you're in a survival state, like what's normal?

Discussion

Research on foster care is complex and often requires a balance of both creativity and compromise, particularly when prioritizing the voices and perspectives of those with lived and/or professional experience (Garcia-Quiroga & Salvo Agoglia, 2020; Wilson & Conroy, 1999). Barriers exist that challenge what we know about those previously or currently in foster care, despite the consensus that this research knowledge is necessary to inform programs, policy, and practice. A clear theme across the summarized findings of this study is the need to establish relationships between stakeholders and researchers to (a) reduce barriers to participation and involvement, (b) increase inclusion and representation of stakeholder perspectives, and (c) support reciprocal learning.

Barriers to Research

A major finding of this study suggested that stakeholders may see parallels, or at least hold concerns about the similarities between their experiences in and/or with foster care and their participation in research on foster care. These concerns and hesitations among stakeholders pertained to both sharing personal content and information, as well as to the larger process of interacting with "others"—often unknown professionals—who hold perceived power in interpreting and influencing narratives about stakeholder experiences. These findings highlight the vulnerabilities that can come with disclosure, rooted in real and harmful experiences associated with foster care to both the participant and their community (Steenbakkers et al., 2016).

A second key finding of this study was an understanding by stakeholders that there is limited participation in research and that this impacts what is known and not known, as well as whose perspectives and experiences are represented in the literature. Participants expressed concern about an overreliance on specific partnerships in research, as well as a curiosity about whether participation may be confounded by individual affiliation or demographic identity. For example, participants noted a reliance on transition-age samples and wondered about whether retrospective experiences of past foster youth would inform current needs about experiences within a constantly changing system. Conversations centered on a critical need for increased ethnic and racial representation. Specifically, while child welfare disproportionately targets racially and ethnically minoritized individuals (Watt & Kim, 2019), participants consistently noted that those represented in research are more likely to identify with majority-status demographics. Across the interviews, questions arose about why this may be with conversations highlighting a compounding mistrust of research among minoritized stakeholders and the importance of anti-racist research that acknowledges and exposes the systemic and structural racism in foster care (Wilson, n.d).

When considering participation, findings reflected an awareness that some stakeholders do not participate in research, because they may need time and space from their involvement with and/or experiences in the foster care system. One specific subtheme that emerged from the data centered on the importance of timing and when one might be asked to participate, noting that there are numerous reasons for not disclosing personal information, including not wanting to hurt those in their personal lives, self-protection from memories, and/or feeling "angry, hurt, ashamed, or otherwise uncomfortable" (Steenbakkers et al., 2016, p. 5). Identifying and understanding these reasons require additional research to learn why these reasons can and do change over time and how they may affect research participation.

When stakeholders did share their experiences in research, findings suggested that their participation is often motivated by a desire to contribute, share success, and/or remain accountable to their success. Collectively, these motivations represent stakeholders' interests in positive representation in the literature and the importance of balanced research that allows for opportunities to evidence both individual and collective strengths and contributions and not simply risks and challenges (Cook-Cottone & Beck, 2007). This mirrors other research findings (e.g., Ruff & Harrison, 2020; Ruff et al., 2023), which highlights that those with a history of foster care involvement can experience concern about the skew towards negative narratives and representations in research. Additionally, findings emphasized the importance of these strengths-based, balanced narratives coming from various stakeholder status groups and not just foster youth, to reduce the pressure youth stakeholders routinely shared of feeling isolated in holding primary advocacy roles (e.g., "We don't want everything to be on us").

Recommendations for Research

Participants generously shared numerous recommendations for research. Consistent across all interviews, stakeholders clearly communicated: (1) a relationship between researchers and child welfare stakeholders is imperative to reciprocal learning, and 2) building this relationship requires awareness of context and intentional inclusion. As stated by a Community Advisory Board (CAB) member, the message to prioritize across the research process is: "Let them know their voice matters." To support relationships in research, participants highlighted the importance of inclusion at all steps of the research process and not simply data collection (Garcia-Quiroga & Salvo Agoglia, 2020). This perspective was clearly articulated by participants who noted that even having to justify or make a case to increase involvement was problematic, as inclusion at all stages, including the foundational moments, is the "right of rights," recognizing stakeholders' agency (Giorgi, 2010).

Recommendations for inclusion centered around the initiation and maintenance of relationships with stakeholders that support research integrity. Specifically, participants suggested inclusion in the co-creation of research questions, choice of incentive to signal respect and agency, reliance on stakeholders to collect data, co-authorships of findings, and sharing of any change or consequence to programs, policy, and practice. Participants also highlighted the value of ongoing communication during data collection that validated their experience, confirmed that their responses answered the research questions, and showed that the researchers were appropriately informed on foster care. Beyond data collection, participants noted that the experience of sharing one's story may linger, triggering unresolved feelings for stakeholder participants, and suggested appropriate follow up. Across all interactions, participants offered recommendations that mirrored previous research (e.g., Jackson et al., 2012; Steenbakkers et al., 2016), focused on the importance of taking time to capture context and balance and resisting transactional exchanges. Participants also recommended the use of qualitative methodologies to capture necessary context and balance, and support the establishment of trust. This finding also mirrors previous research encouraging the consideration of mixed methods (e.g., Aarons et al., 2012) and underscores the importance of working to ensure a sense of control and agency in research participation.

When increasing inclusion in research, stakeholders recommended that researchers recognize and find ways to offer protection to participants. In addition to risks associated with sharing personal experience, participants noted ramifications associated with an over reliance on specific stakeholder groups. Specifically, our findings suggested that participants with lived experience often feel burned out by research requests and, in some situations, tokenized. Both participants and CAB members how their experiences in research changed over time and how understanding this may be of importance in both recruiting participants and in supporting participants throughout the process. Participants reflected that, at first, they tended to feel nervous and/or concerned about research involvement, wondering how others were hearing and interpreting their experiences. However, these same participants noted that eventually they developed an ability to hold psychological distance from their stories while sharing that supported regular participation. This experience inevitably changed again, when participation began to feel formulaic, detached, and as if it served an audience looking for a specific narrative. Further exploration of these experiences may serve to help understand stakeholders' research participation as well as maybe even changes in one's comfort sharing experiences over time. Additional investigation may also learn whether those who do not participate may (a) feel that they do not fit the standard/token criteria aligned with research interest and/or (b) be utilizing necessary boundaries around how and to whom they offer their time, resources, and stories.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is not without limitations. As noted, participation may be confounded by participants' affiliation with mental health treatment and/or services, by their participation in the foster care system as a whole, as well as by their age (over 18) and stakeholder status. Additional research is needed to understand unique experiences of participation in research by stakeholder status, and varying identities and affiliations. Research is also recommended that clarifies assumptions about which stakeholders should be included and whether research ought to prioritize the experience of stakeholders with personal versus professional experience.

Conclusion

The design of foster care increases challenges in accessing individuals in research. These cautions are well intended and prudent in protecting the privacy of children and their families, and yet they also can increase difficulties in understanding the scope, severity and experiences of professionals, families, and individuals in the system. This research explored the perceptions, experiences, and recommendations among stakeholders in child welfare. Additional studies are needed to build upon current study findings, and to further understand how to execute a primary recommendation to facilitate reciprocal, non-transactional relationships with participants.

Acknowledgements The authors wish to thank A Home Within for their long-term, consistent support of current and former foster youth, and the University of San Francisco for funding compensation of the student researchers of the Foster Care Research Group.

Funding Open access funding provided by SCELC, Statewide California Electronic Library Consortium

Declarations

Ethical Approval The authors declare that all procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee.

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

References

Aarons, G. A., Fettes, D. L., Sommerfeld, D. H., & Palinkas, L. A. (2012). Mixed methods for implementation research: Application to evidence-based Practice implementation and staff turnover in community-based organizations providing child welfare services. *Child Maltreatment, 17*(1), 67–79. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559511426908

Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). (2022). The Administration for Children and Families. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/adoption-fostercare

Beidas, R. S., Marcus, S., Wolk, C. B., Powell, B., Aarons, G. A., Evans, A. C., Hurford, M. O., Hadley, T., Adams, D. R., Walsh, L. M., Babbar, S., Barg, F., & Mandell, D. S. (2016). A prospective examination of clinician and supervisor turnover within the context of implementation of evidence-based practices in a publicly-funded mental health system. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health, 43*(5), 640–649. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-015-0673-6

Berrick, J. D., Frasch, K., & Fox, A. (2000). Assessing children's experiences of out-of-home care: Methodological challenges and opportunities. *Social Work Research, 24*(2), 119–127.

Birt, L., Scott, S., Cavers, D., Campbell, C., & Walter, F. (2016). Member checking: A tool to enhance trustworthiness or merely a nod to validation? *Qualitative Health Research, 26*(13), 1802–1811. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316654870

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.

Caelli, K., Ray, L., & Mill, J. (2003). "Clear as Mud": Toward greater clarity in generic qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 2*(2), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690300200201

Charmaz, Kathy. (2006) Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis. Los Angeles, *SAGE.*

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2013). Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners. *ResearchGate*, www.researchgate.net/publication/256089360_Successful_Qualitative_Research_A_Practical_Guide_for_Beginners

Cook-Cottone, C., & Beck, M. (2007). A model for life-story work: Facilitating the construction of personal narrative for foster children. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 12*(4), 193–195. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-3588.2007.00446.x

Curtin, M., & Fossey, E. (2007). Appraising the trustworthiness of qualitative studies: Guidelines for occupational therapists. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal, 54*(2), 88–94. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1630.2007.00661.x

DePanfilis, D., & Zlotnik, J. L. (2008). Retention of front-line staff in child welfare: A systematic review of research. *Children and Youth Services Review, 30*(9), 995–1008.

Garcia-Quiroga, M., & Salvo Agoglia, I. (2020). Too vulnerable to participate? Challenges for meaningful participation in research with children in alternative care and adoption. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *19*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920958965

Gilbertson, R., & Barber, J. (2002). Obstacles to involving children and young people in foster care research. *Child and Family Social Work, 7*, 253–258. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2206.2002.00251.x

Giorgi, A. (2010). Phenomenology and the practice of science. *Existential Analysis, 21*(1), 3–22.

Gopalan, G., Hooley, C., Winters, A., & Stephens, T. (2019). Perceptions among child welfare staff when modifying a child mental health intervention to be implemented in child welfare services. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 63*(3–4), 366–377.

Greiner, M. V., Beal, S. J., Allen, A., Patel, V., Meinzen-Derr, J., & Antommaria, A. H. M. (2018). Who speaks for me? Addressing variability in informed consent practices for minimal risk research involving foster youth. *Journal of Health Disparities Research and Practice, 11*(4), 111–131.

Greiner, M. V., Beal, S. J., & Antommaria, A. H. M. (2020). Perspectives on informed consent practices for minimal-risk research involving foster youth. *Pediatrics, 145*(4), e20192845. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-2845

Israel, B. A., Eng, E., Schulz, A. J., & Parker, E. A. (2005). Introduction to methods in community-based participatory research for health. *Methods in Community-Based Participatory Research for Health, 3*, 26.

Jackson, Y., Gabrielli, J., Tunno, A. M., & Hambrick, E. P. (2012). Strategies for longitudinal research with youth in foster care: A demonstration of methods, barriers, and innovations. *Child Youth Services Review, 34*(7), 1208–1213. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.02.007

Leake, R., Rienks, S., & Obermann, A. (2017). A deeper look at burnout in the child welfare workforce. *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance, 41*(5), 492–502.

Ordoñez-Jasis, R., & Myck-Wayne, J. (2012). Community mapping in action: Uncovering resources and assets for young children and their families. *Young Exceptional Children, 15*(3), 31–45. https://doi.org/10.1177/1096250612451756

Ruff, S. C., Linville, D., & Vasquez, N. (2023). "Resilience," as defined by foster youth and key stakeholders. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2023.2222665

Ruff, S. C., & Harrison, K. (2020). "Ask me what I want": Community-based participatory research to explore transition-age foster Youth's use of support services. *Children and Youth Services Review, 108*(1), 104608.

Saldaña, J. M. (2015). The coding manual for qualitative researchers (3rd ed.). *SAGE Publications*.

Sandelowski, M. (2010). What's in a name? Qualitative description revisited. *Research in Nursing & Health, 33*(1), 77–84. https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.20362

Steenbakkers, A., van der Steen, S., & Grietens, H. (2016). 'To talk or not to talk?': Foster youth's experiences of sharing stories about their past and being in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 71*, 2–9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.10.008

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014). Results from the 2013 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Summary of National Findings, NSDUH Series H-48, HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14–4863. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Vaismoradi, M., Turunen, H., & Bondas, T. (2013). Content analysis and thematic analysis: Implications for conducting a qualitative descriptive study. *Nursing & Health Sciences, 15*(3), 398–405. https://doi.org/10.1111/nhs.12048

Watt, T., & Kim, S. (2019). Race/ethnicity and foster youth outcomes: An examination of disproportionality using the national youth in transition database. *Children and Youth Services Review, 102*, 251–258. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.05.017

Wilson, L., & Conroy, J. (1999). Satisfaction of children in out-of-home care. *Child Welfare, 78*(1), 53–69.

Wilson, V. (n.d.). Guiding principles for anti-racist research, the "bodycam" for racial economic injustice. Economic Policy Institute. https://www.epi.org/anti-racist-policy-research/guiding-principles-for-anti-racist-research-the-bodycam-for-racial-economic-injustice/