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Holding on by a Thread:

# **The Cumulative Impact of the Pandemic on Youth Who Have Been in Foster Care or Homeless**

## Introduction

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When the coronavirus outbreak first occurred, few could have imagined the impact it would have or how long it would last. A full year has passed and while increasing vaccine availability and decreasing case rates indicate the pandemic's end is within sight, the effect of the pandemic will be felt long after the public health emergency is over.

This is particularly true for young people who have been in foster care or homeless. Unlike other youth and young adults, many young people who have been in foster care or homeless have experienced the 12 long months of the pandemic without the economic or emotional support of an extended family, which has been crucial for so many.

The purpose of the current analysis is to understand the cumulative impact of the pandemic on these two groups of young people in California. They started the pandemic facing a steep uphill climb in their transition to adulthood, and over the last 12 months, the climb has gotten steeper as they have struggled to maintain access to housing, food, employment and education.

Both California and the federal government have taken important steps to protect young people who have been in foster care or homeless during the pandemic. This has included authorizing youth who turn age 21 to remain in foster care, making much-needed investments to address youth homelessness and providing direct financial relief to youth.

These wise policy choices have helped young people largely survive the worst of the pandemic. But as the current report findings demonstrate, they have suffered significant negative impacts which left unaddressed, have the potential to shape their lives for decades to come. Thoughtful, sustained public policy will be required to help these young people get back on track and continue their path to a healthy, successful young adulthood.

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## Overview

We surveyed 598 youth aged 18 to 24 from across California who have been in foster care or experienced homelessness. JBAY conducted outreach to campus support programs, youth housing programs, basic needs centers and to youth who participate in the Burton Book Fund. Our data collection period was March 9th to 26th, 2021. We analyzed the data to look for differences by geography, parenting status, race/ethnicity, homelessness status and length of time in foster care. In the report, only statistically significant differences are reported (p value less than .10). Following the completion of the survey, we interviewed six young people to gain additional insight into their experiences during the pandemic.

There are limitations to the current analysis. Youth self-selected to take the survey rather than being drawn from a representative sample of current and former foster youth. JBAY conducted extensive outreach to college campus support programs and transitional housing providers, which resulted in a high percentage of respondents being enrolled in both of these programs.

When possible, findings from the survey were compared with findings from the September 2020 study, *The Experiences of Older Youth In & Aged Out of Foster Care During COVID-19* conducted by researchers at the Field Center for Children's Policy Practice and Research at the University of Pennsylvania. The purpose of this is to compare the status of youth at the start of the pandemic with their status after 12 months. In addition to our own survey data, we reviewed secondary data sources on the impact of COVID-19 on youth who have experienced foster care or homelessness, including surveys by other research agencies, university studies, articles and relevant interviews.

# Methodology





Sampling Frame:  
Youth age 18–24 who are currently or formerly in foster care

**Methodology Overview**

Geographic  
Distribution

State of California

Completed  
Surveys

903 Completed  
598 Eligible and fully completed  
95 Eligible and not fully completed  
210 Non-eligible

Data Collection  
Period

March 9th–March 28th, 2021

Method of Data  
Collection

Online Survey



# Profile of Respondents — 598 Respondents

<b>Age</b>	
18	12%
19	16%
20	18%
21	17%
22	14%
23	9%
24	14%
Average Age	20.91 years

<b>Foster Care Status</b>	
Currently in foster care	35%
Formerly in foster care	65%

<b>Number of Years in Foster Care</b>	
1 to 5 years	57%
6 to 10 years	27%
11 to 15 years	10%
16 to 21 years	6%
Average	6.2 years

<b>Parenting Status</b>	
Parent	20%
Non-parent	80%

<b>Homelessness Status</b>	
Currently homeless or couch surfing	6%
Formerly homeless	66%
Have never experienced homelessness	28%

<b>Current Education Status</b>	
Attending college /university full-time	47%
Attending college /university part-time	27%
Attending GED classes	2%
Attending high school	6%
Attending vocational training	3%
Not a student or attending classes or training	15%

<b>Ethnic Group</b>	
Asian/API	8%
Black	16%
Latino	46%
Native American	4%
White	26%

<b>Region of State</b>	
Los Angeles	23%
Bay Area	14%
Southern California (w/o LA)	25%
San Joaquin Valley	12%
Central Coast	4%
Sacramento Area	5%
San Diego	11%
Balance of State	6%

The pandemic has  
**destabilized youths' housing**  
and it has worsened over  
time.



“

Right at the start  
(of the pandemic) I  
got kicked out with  
nowhere to go.”

-Current foster youth,  
age 19



The pandemic has had a major impact on the housing of youth with over 1 in 5 reporting that they have experienced homelessness since the pandemic began.

**22%** reported experiencing an episode of homelessness since the start of the pandemic

“ I don't really have family to stay with. I was always house jumping.”  
- Current Foster Youth, age 20

Experiencing homelessness negatively impacted their education and employment, with 1 in 7 dropping out of school and 1 in 4 unemployed.

Percentage of youth who dropped out of school

Youth who experienced homelessness

**14%**

Youth who did not experience homelessness

**9%**

Percentage of youth unemployed

Youth who experienced homelessness

**25%**

Youth who did not experience homelessness

**21%**

The pandemic has destabilized housing for youth. While some have been made homeless or been forced to move due to the pandemic, others worry that they will soon be forced to leave their current housing arrangement.

<b>Impact of COVID-19 on Housing</b>	
I fear being forced to leave my current living situation/housing	29%
I've been or am being forced to leave my current living situation/housing	12%
I'm experiencing homelessness or housing instability due to the loss of housing since COVID-19	14%
Other negative impact	13%
No impact	32%

“ I was homeless before the pandemic. It was hard finding stable housing during this difficult time.”  
- Former Foster Youth, age 20

**68%** reported that the pandemic had a direct impact on their housing, an increase from **39%** who reported that at the start of the pandemic.



When asked about the impact of the pandemic on their housing, most youth strongly agreed or agreed it has been significant.

<b>COVID-19 has had a major impact on my housing:</b>	
Strongly agree	27%
Somewhat agree	30%
Neither agree or disagree	20%
Somewhat disagree	9%
Strongly disagree	14%

} 57%

of foster youth strongly agree or somewhat agree that the pandemic has had a major impact on their housing, an increase from the 37% who strongly agreed or somewhat agreed to the statement back in April 2020.

With the loss of income experienced by many youth and young adults, access to food has been a cause for concern during the pandemic.

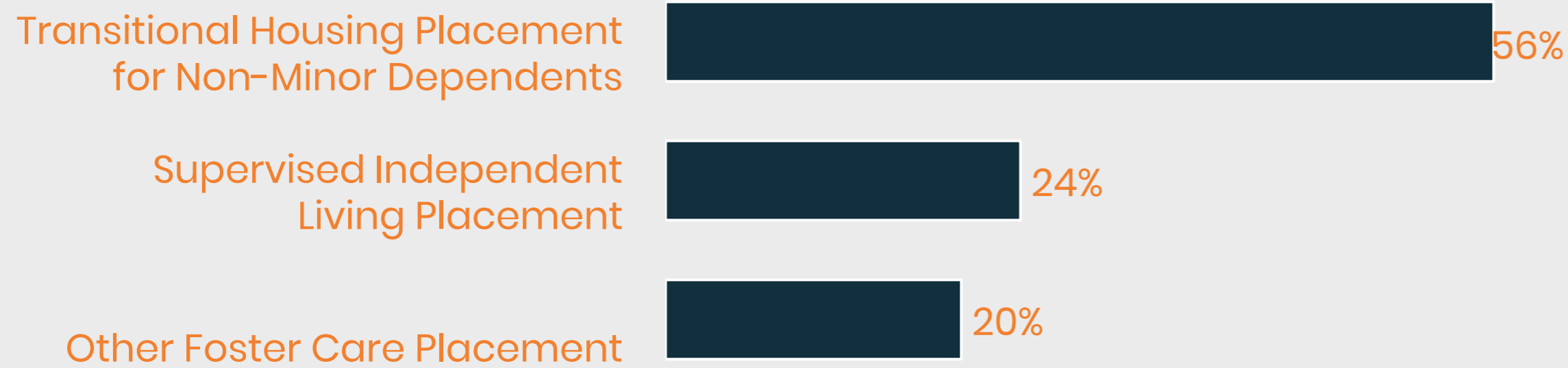
<b>COVID-19 has impacted youths' access to food</b>	
I have access to plenty of food	40%
I have access to some food	41%
My access to food is very limited	16%
I cannot access food-I'm in crisis	2%
Other	1%

Parents were more likely to have limited access to food or be in crisis:



The survey respondents included a subset of young people (50) who were in foster care and turned 21 during the pandemic and were authorized to remain in care after turning age 21 due to policy action taken by the Governor and California State Legislature. Of this total 16% (8) were custodial parents.

### Where do you currently live?



Access to foster care appears to have protected these young people and others who remained in foster care. When compared to former foster youth, current foster youth were much less likely to be homeless or couch surfing.

“ I am extremely behind on bills due to Covid because my work is closed down, with little EDD and no tips.”  
-Current foster youth, age 18

### Percentage of youth homeless or couch surfing in March 2021

Youth in Foster Care:

2%

Youth Formerly in Foster Care:

9%



Many youth have **lost their connection with school** during the pandemic and suffered negative educational impacts.



Education

“

My Wi-Fi shut down during finals and I failed and got dropped. We tried contacting PG&E and an electrician, but he didn't come until it was too late. I owed money for the classes I failed.”

-Current foster youth, age 18

Youth were asked about the impact of the pandemic on their education and their response was unequivocal:

**100%** of youth enrolled in school reported that it had at least one negative impact on their education.

In interviews and survey comments, frustration and dissatisfaction with distance learning was commonly noted. Of impacts indicated, youth most frequently indicated that the pandemic reduced their communication with instructors and student services.

“ I can't do online school. I just don't function that way. It just doesn't work for me.”  
–Current foster youth, age 20

**Percentage of youth enrolled in school who reported having experienced any of the following since the start of the pandemic**

Reduced communication with student services	54%
Reduced communication with instructor	53%
Received a low or failing grade	45%
Decreased the number of units taken	36%
Stopped attending classes	28%
Lost financial aid	17%
Dropped out of school	12%

The transition from high school to college is a challenging one, made even more so during the pandemic.

**1 in 7**  
Was attending high school at the start of the pandemic

One year later, most remained connected to school, primarily by transitioning to higher education or continuing in high school.

“Due to COVID, I had to start my senior year of high school over again.”  
–Former foster youth, age 20

**Current educational status of youth who were in high school at the start of the pandemic:**

Attending college/university full-time	32%
Attending college/university part-time	13%
Attending GED classes	2%
Attending high school	32%
Attending vocational training	5%
No longer a student or attending classes or training	16%

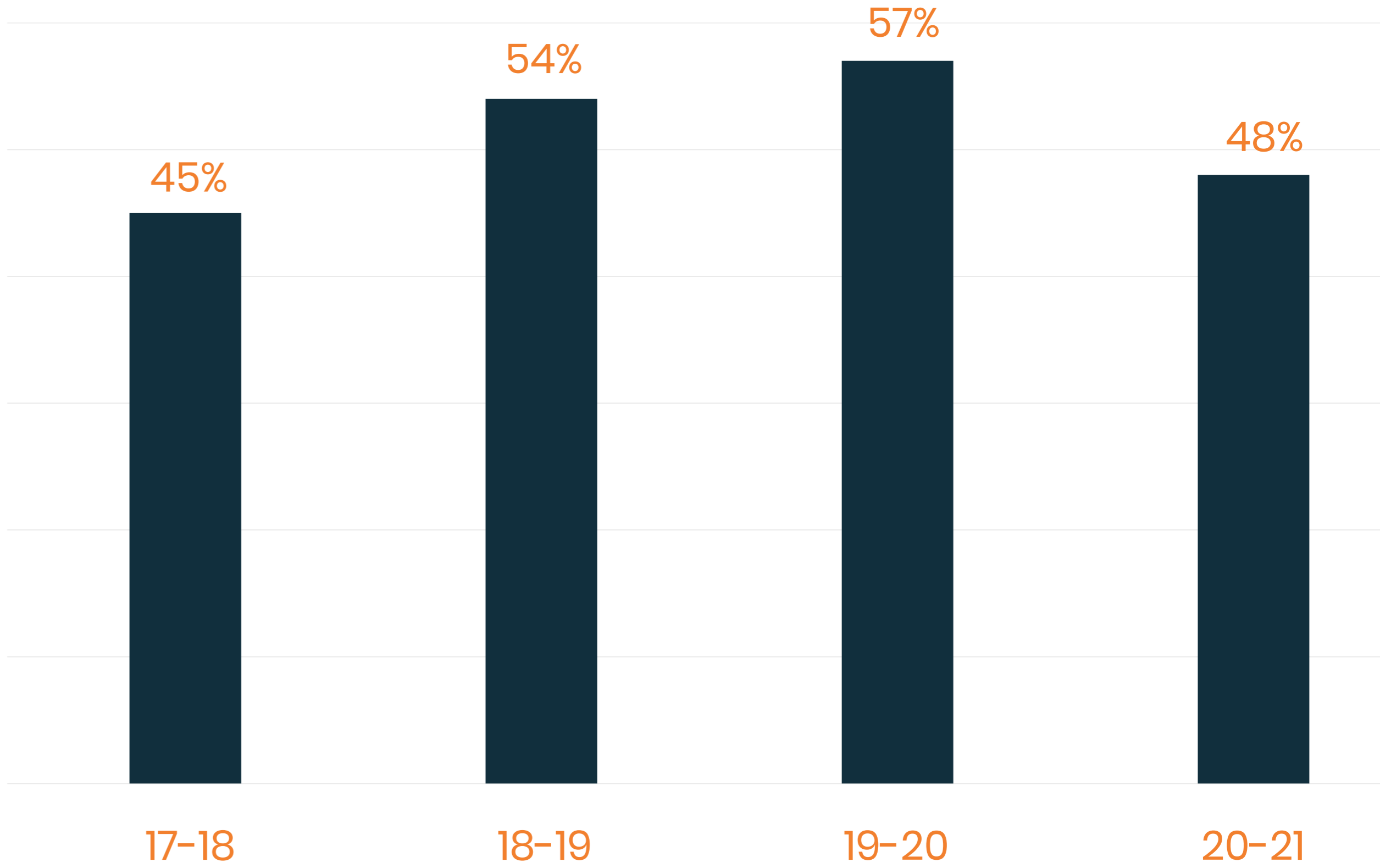


Education

There is strong evidence that the transition to post-secondary education for foster youth has been impacted by the pandemic. Since 2017-18, JBAY has conducted the California Foster Youth FAFSA Challenge, to increase rates of post-secondary enrollment among foster youth. After three straight years of increasing rates of FAFSA completion, the rate is down for foster youth in California.



Foster Youth FAFSA Completion Rate—Oct 1-Mar 2



For youth attending college, basic needs centers appear to have played a role in assisting them during the pandemic. Campus basic needs centers were created in response to growing homelessness and food insecurity experienced on college campuses.

While they take many forms and are not available at every campus, basic needs centers are generally a place on campus where students access services to meet their basic human needs such as food, housing, clothing, and transportation.

**57%** of youth attending college received assistance from their campus basic needs center and those who did largely reported that it was helpful.

“

(The basic needs center) has made my life easier because there are a lot of people living here and we run out of food quickly. The food has helped us a lot.”

–Current foster youth, age 18

**Accessing the basic needs center was helpful**

Very helpful	55%
Helpful	32%
Neither helpful nor unhelpful	6%
Somewhat unhelpful	5%
Very unhelpful	2%



The services provided by basic needs centers vary across campuses, but their core services include helping students access food and housing. Some have relationships with their regional Continuums of Care, which operate the local homeless response system.

Basic needs centers appear to have made an impact, as fewer youth who utilized basic needs centers reported an episode of homelessness during the pandemic than those who did not.

Since the start of the pandemic:

**22%** of students who utilized a basic needs center experienced homelessness

**24%** of students who did **not** utilize a basic needs center experienced homelessness

While the focus of basic needs centers is food, housing and other basic necessities, college students who accessed basic needs services remained enrolled at school at higher rates than those who did not.

In March 2021:

**95%** of students who reported accessing a basic needs center were enrolled in school

**85%** of students who reported **not** accessing a basic needs center were enrolled in school

“The basic needs center provided me food in a box. It was very well coordinated and safe: no contact, everyone was wearing a mask and gloves and it was very quick.”

—Current foster youth, age 18



Loss of income due to unemployment among youth has resulted in **mounting debt.**



## Employment

National studies have found that young workers have been most impacted by the pandemic. The survey findings support job loss among young workers, with employment falling across all categories, full-time, part-time and informal.

<b>Employment Rate</b>	<b>Before pandemic</b>	<b>March 2021</b>
Overall Employment	59%	49%
Full Time	22%	16%
Part-Time	32%	28%
Gig or Informal Work	5%	5%

Employment reduced from a rate of 59% prior to the pandemic to 49% in March of 2021.

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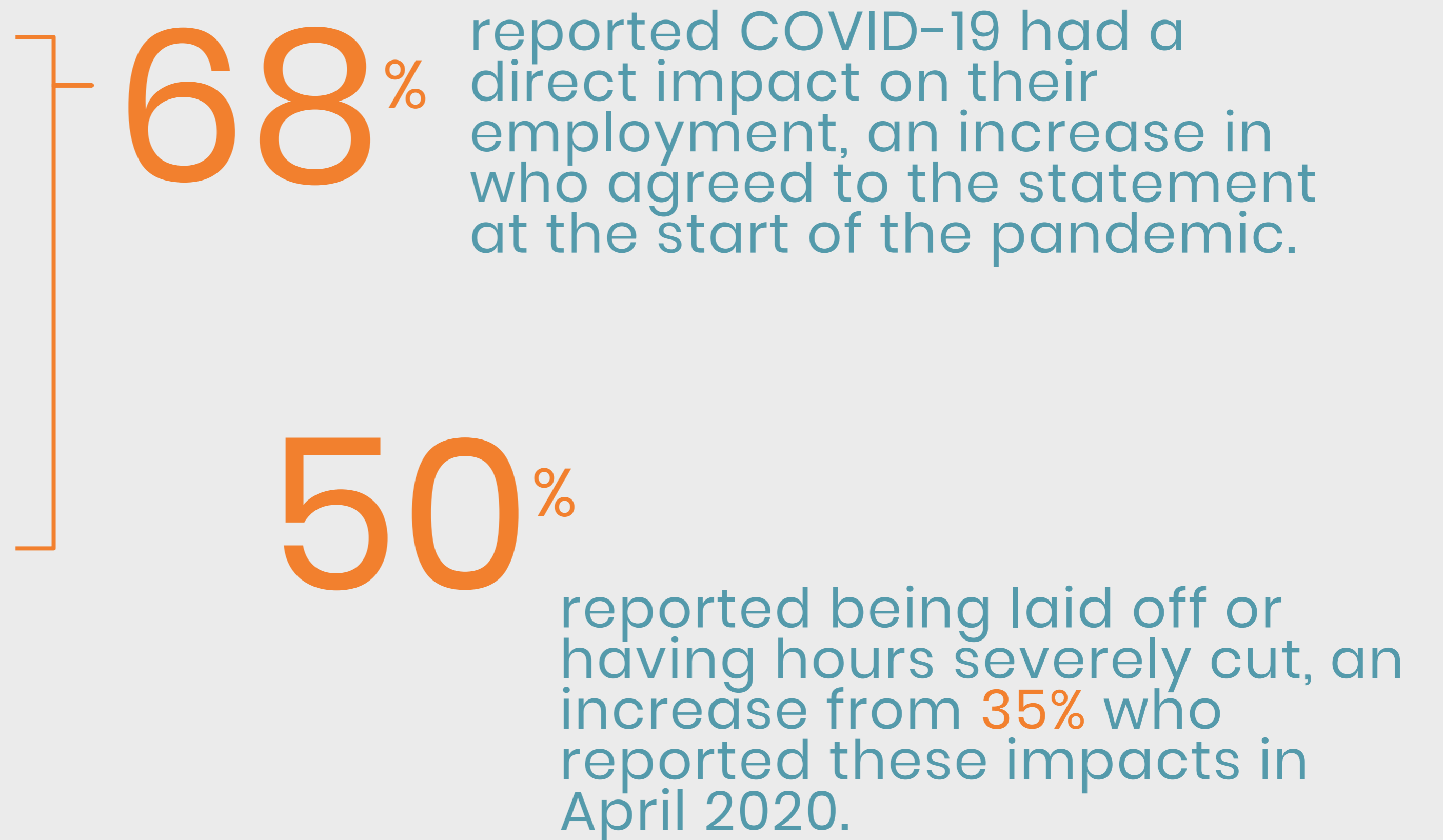
I lost my job. I stopped going to school because I didn't have a babysitter. I couldn't do online school because I didn't have wi-fi. So I basically had to drop out for a little bit.”

– Current Foster Youth, age 18

Two-thirds of youth who were working prior to the pandemic reported that it has had a direct impact on their employment. The most commonly-cited impacts were being laid off, followed by having their work hours reduced.

**Impact of COVID-19 on Employment**

My hours/income have been severely cut because of COVID-19	23%
I was laid off because of COVID-19	27%
I no longer have reliable gig work because of COVID-19	7%
Other negative impact	11%
I am unsure about the impact of COVID-19 on their employment or no impact	32%





Overall, youth felt strongly that the pandemic has had a major impact on their financial stability.

**COVID-19 has had a major impact on financial stability:**

Strongly Agree	41%
Somewhat agree	30%
Neither Agree or Disagree	17%
Somewhat Disagree	5%
Strongly Disagree	7%

“ I had bought my first car and then COVID happened. I lost my job and so I had a hard time making payments.”

- Current Foster Youth, age 20

In survey comments and interviews, concern about **debt** was frequently raised without any prompt. Youth reported that they have been able to put off financial obligations temporarily but worried about how they would eventually address them.

Some youth were able to access direct cash assistance to help them weather the financial hardships of the pandemic. In interviews and in their comments on the survey, youth reported that this direct cash assistance played a critical role in helping them pay for necessities, including rent and food.



**63%** of youth reported receiving a federal pandemic relief payment

**24%** reported receiving unemployment benefits

The impact of the pandemic on the mental health of youth is **pervasive.**



Mental Health





The isolation of the pandemic has been challenging for youth and young adults across the world. Youth who have been in foster care or experienced homelessness are no exception. In the survey, they reported high levels of loneliness and isolation, heightened by the fact that many are not living in the context of an extended family. More than 1 in 4 reported feeling “down, depressed or hopeless” nearly every day since the start of the pandemic.

**How many days have you felt down, depressed or hopeless?**

Nearly every day	27%
More than half the days	23%
Several days	39%
Not at all	11%

The stress of the pandemic appears to be growing over time. When compared to the start of the pandemic, the percentage of youth who reported feeling down, depressed or hopeless more than doubled.

**50%** reported feeling “down, depressed or hopeless” everyday or more than half the days, an increase from the **24%** who reported it back in April 2020.

“

I have become much more isolated which has made me more anxious than before. I am now working with a therapist to cope through this time.”

—Former foster youth, age 24

Youth strongly agreed that the pandemic has taken its toll on their mental health and wellness. When asked, their level of agreement with this statement was **greater** than their level of agreement when asked about other impacts of the pandemic, including the impact on housing, employment, education and food access.

A 21-year-old survey respondent from Santa Cruz County put it simply: **“I'm lonely.”**

“ I didn't shower, I didn't eat, I didn't talk to my boyfriend, I didn't talk to my grandparents, I didn't do schoolwork. I didn't do anything. I just stayed in bed, and I slept, and I just cried.”

-Current foster youth, age 20

**COVID-19 has had a major impact on my mental health and wellness:**

Strongly agree	49%
Somewhat agree	31%
Neither agree or disagree	12%
Somewhat disagree	3%
Strongly disagree	5%

Young parents are facing **greater challenges** than non-parents during the pandemic.

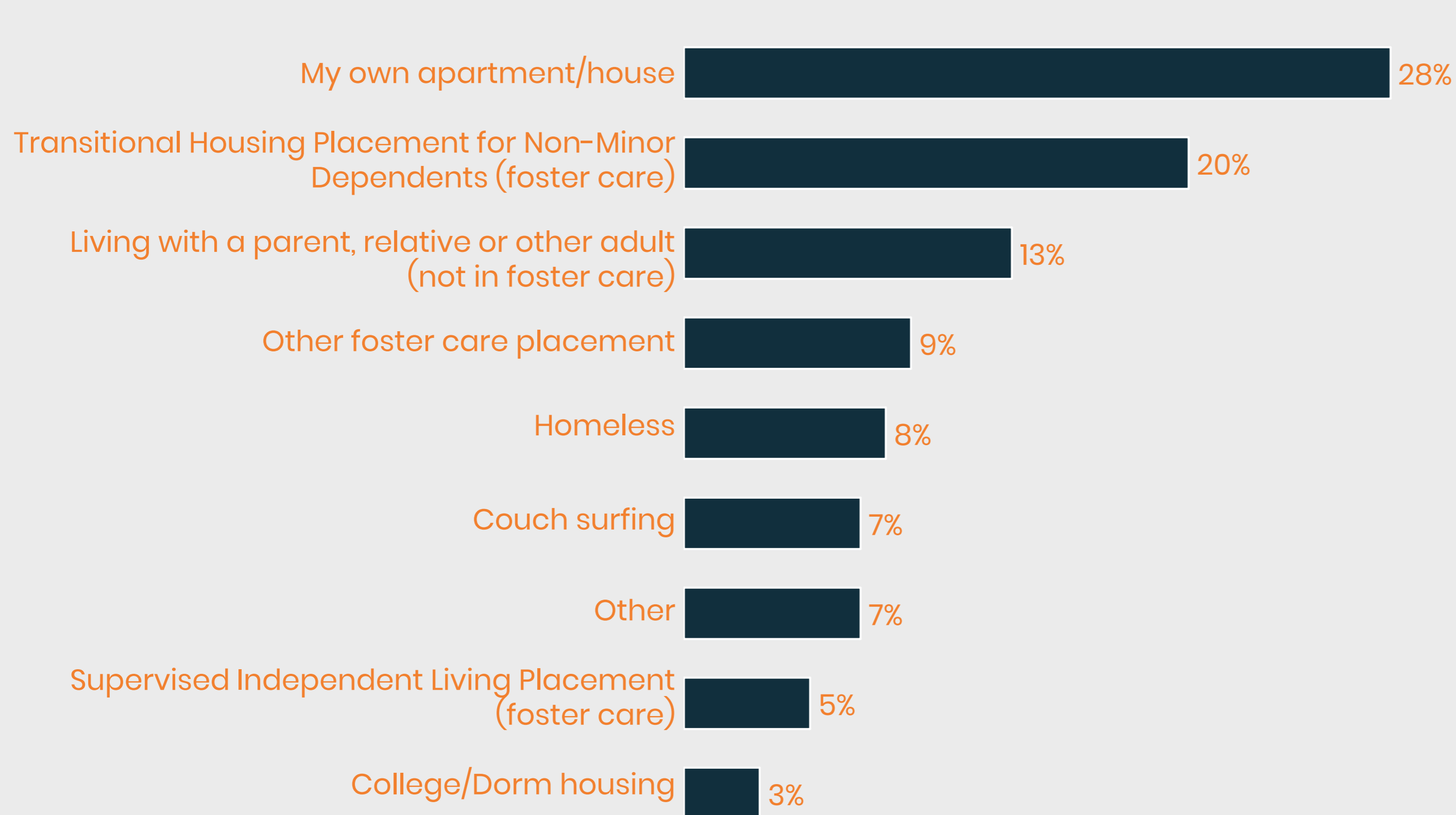


Parenting  
Youth





Of the 598 survey respondents, 119 (20%) were parents. These young adults have faced the economic, educational and emotional challenges of the pandemic while also being responsible for the care of one or more children. As a result of the pandemic, many young parents lost access to vital services, such as formal childcare, informal childcare available from friends and relatives, school and their job. Overall, they appear to be more deeply impacted by the pandemic than non-parents.



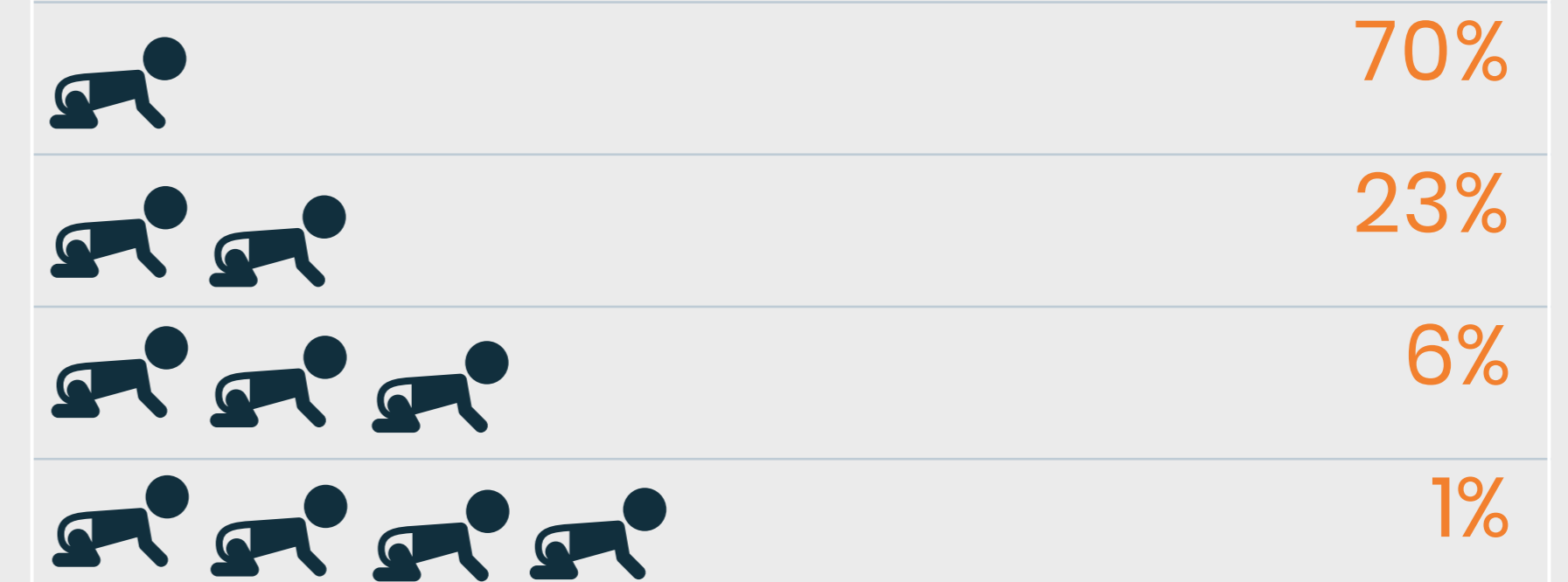
119

total number of parenting youth surveyed

21.5

average age of parenting youth

**Number of children**



In interviews and survey findings, parenting youth reported the multiple challenges they have faced during the pandemic. When compared to non-parents, parenting youth reported more severe housing impacts and less access to food.

More likely to have experienced an episode of homelessness since February 2020

**27%** compared to **21%**

Less likely to be employed either part-time, full-time, or have informal employment

**40%** compared to **54%**

Reported currently experiencing homelessness or housing instability

**31%** compared to **19%**

More likely to have very limited access to food or not have food access

**24%** compared to **17%**

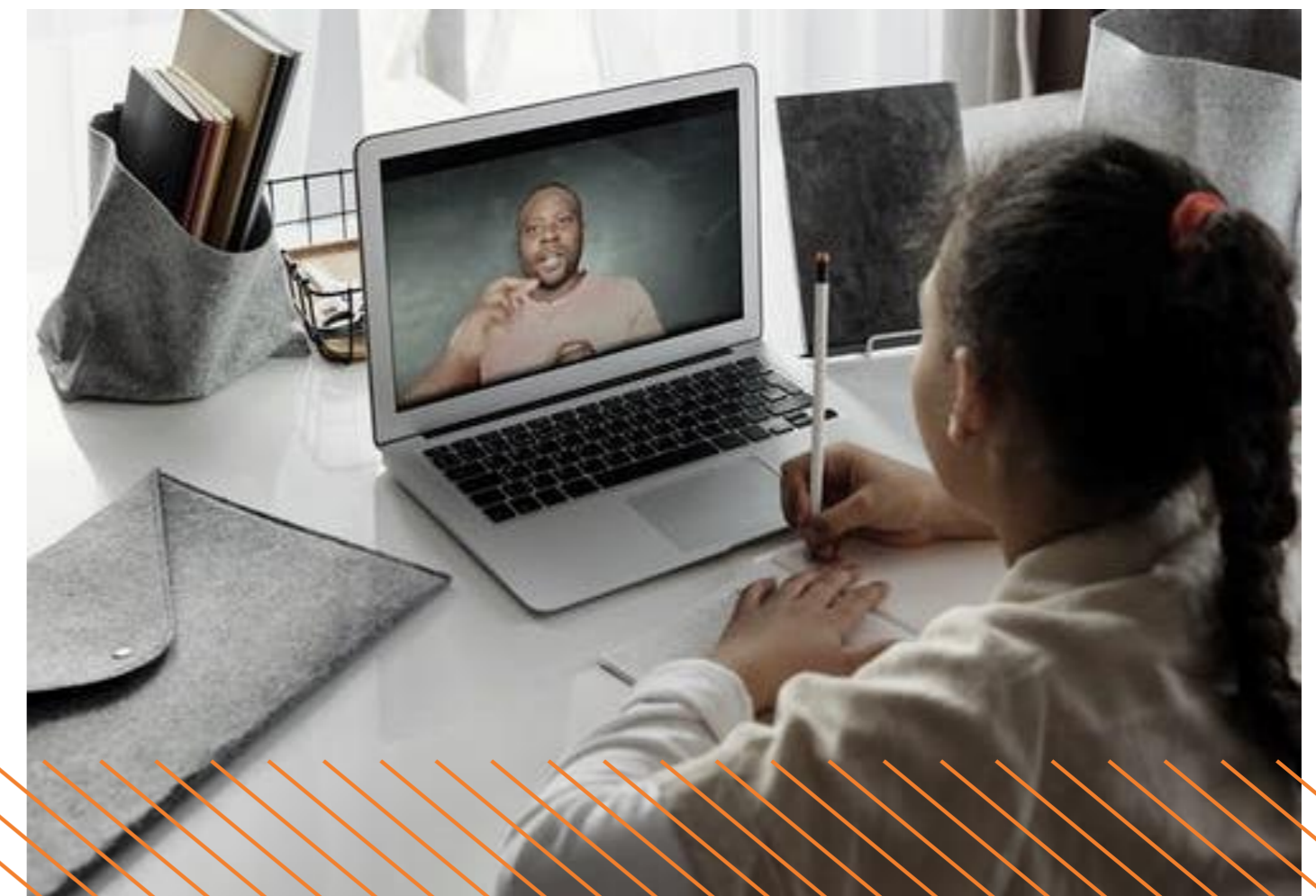
“ My baby was just a newborn when COVID started. I didn't know how to manage a lot of stuff, so I just kept canceling my appointments (and) rescheduling all of them.”

-Current foster youth, age 18

Black and Latino youth have been deeply impacted by the pandemic, particularly in **the area of housing.**



Racial  
Disparities





When youth responses were compared by race and ethnicity, youth who stated they were Black were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, particularly in the area of housing. This is consistent with other surveys of youth homelessness, namely the 2017 Voices of Youth survey, which found that Black youth were 83% more likely to experience homelessness.

Percentage of youth who experienced homelessness since February 2020

Black Youth:  
**35%**

Non-Black Youth:  
**20%**

Black and youth were also more likely to report that they were currently homeless or couch surfing.

Percentage of youth who reported being **currently** homeless or couch surfing

Black Youth:  
**16%**

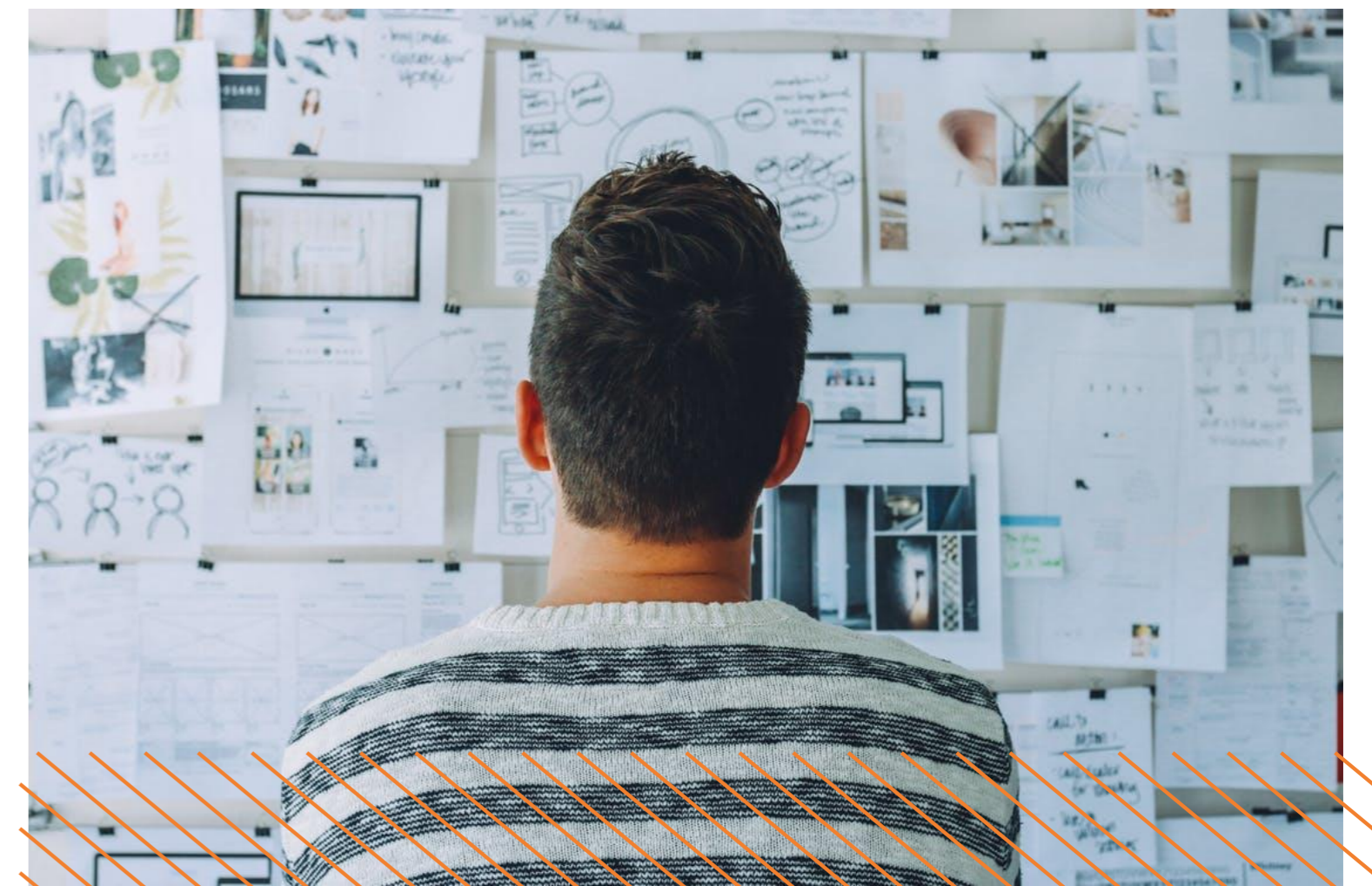
Non-Black Youth:  
**5%**

There were no statistically significant differences identified in employment and education outcomes across race and ethnicity.

# Recommendations



Recommendations



## Address the housing needs of youth during the pandemic.

The pandemic has destabilized housing for youth who have been in foster care or experienced homelessness, with over one in five having an episode of homelessness in the last year. Each episode of homelessness is traumatic, putting youth in physical jeopardy and destabilizing them educationally and economically.

The survey found that Black youth are particularly impacted, more likely to report having been homeless since February 2020.

To help youth get back on track, we must provide them safe, affordable housing. For over half of young adults in the United States, age 18 to 29, this is provided by their extended family. Youth who have been in foster care or homeless typically do not have the benefit of this and instead look to the public sector to help meet those housing needs.

There are several timely opportunities to do this for youth, including:

- Sustain investment in California's Transitional Housing Program
- Increase investment in the state's Housing Navigators Program
- Dedicate state homelessness funds to unaccompanied homeless youth
- Increase investment in transitional housing in counties with high cost of housing

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“

Before I got into transitional housing, I was homeless for two years and it was very difficult. It was rough, it was difficult because I wasn't able to have things or take a shower or be able to eat.

–Former foster youth, age 20



## Recommendation #2

# Invest in youth to get them back on track educationally.

In the last decade, youth who have been in foster care or experienced homelessness have made tremendous gains in accessing higher education. As the survey findings demonstrate, many of these gains are at risk due to the impact of the pandemic. Every youth who was enrolled in school reported that the pandemic had at least one negative impact on their education. No other survey finding was as conclusive.

In the survey and in interviews, youth explained how distance learning and social isolation stripped them of their motivation and left them adrift educationally. We need urgent action to ensure young people reconnect educationally.

There are several timely opportunities to do this for youth, including:

- Expanding access to campus support programs, commonly known as “Guardian Scholar programs” that provide a rich array of academic and social support, and
- Making a permanent investment in campus basic needs to ensure that campuses are equipped to meet the broad set of needs students will have when they return to campus.



### Recommendation #3

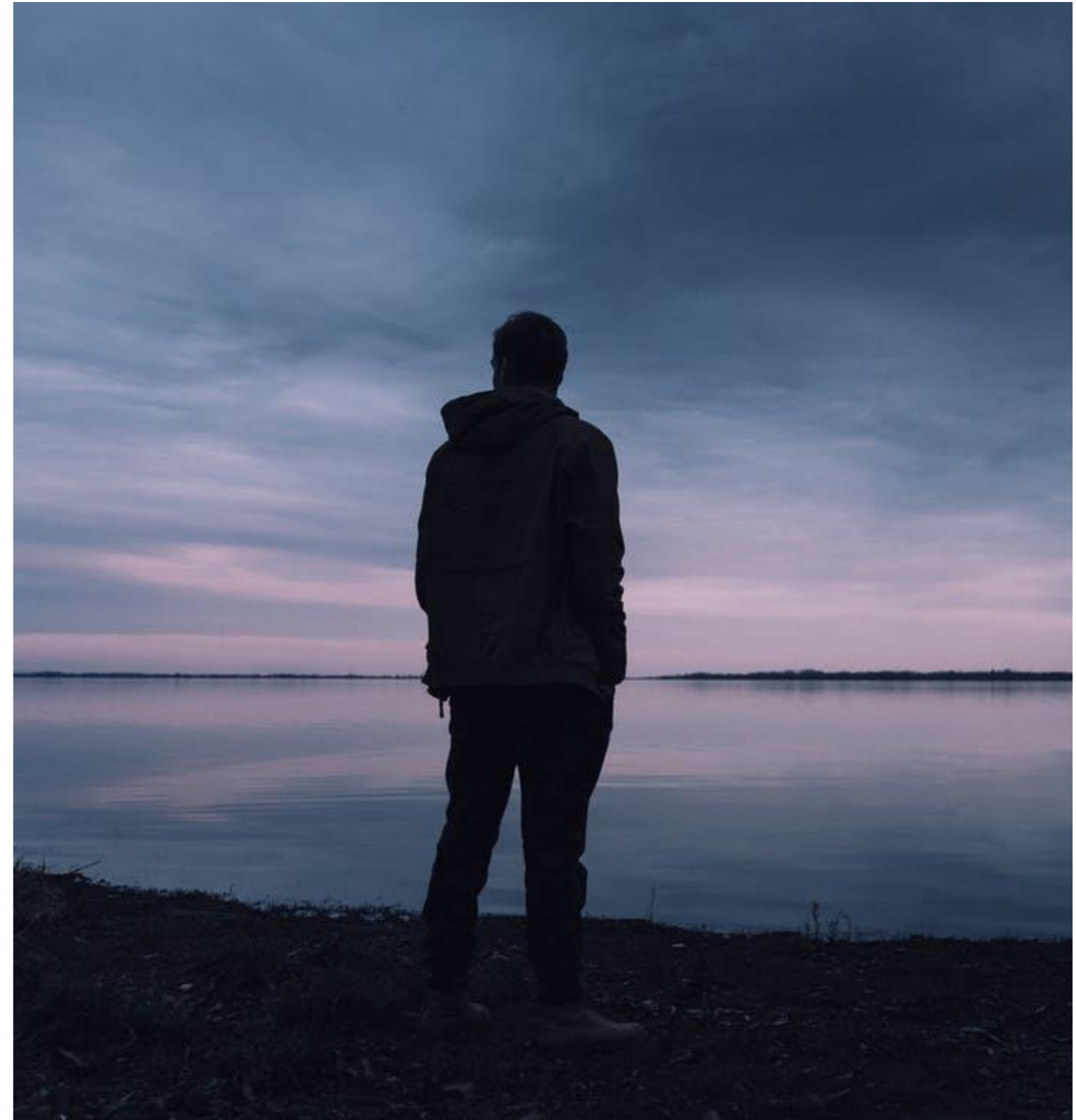
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## Provide immediate economic assistance to youth.

Young workers have always been vulnerable, and the pandemic was no exception; youth experienced the highest level of job loss of any category of worker. For many youth and young adults, job loss is mitigated by the direct and indirect financial assistance provided by their immediate and extended family. For youth who have been in foster care or homeless, this is rarely an option. Their rent remains due and bills accumulate. We heard this repeatedly from youth in their survey comments and in interviews: they are terrified of the mounting debt they have acquired during the pandemic and fear it will follow them for years to come.

Fortunately, many of the youth surveyed had received some federal pandemic relief. But it is not enough. Given their lack of resources and the impact of the pandemic, youth who have been in foster care or experienced homelessness need immediate financial relief to clear the debt they have accumulated and prevent them from accumulating more debt.

The federal government has provided California with an important opportunity to provide foster youth with direct financial assistance as part of a December 2020 appropriation bill. This \$47 million in funding should be issued immediately to all eligible youth, with \$1,100 provided to each eligible youth in foster care and \$1,750 to each eligible former foster youth.





#### Recommendation #4

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## Integrate supportive services into all aspects of serving youth who have been in foster care or experienced homelessness.

It's clear from survey findings and interviews that many youth feel alone and abandoned. For some, it has resurfaced deeply held trauma and for others, it has made their day-to-day effort to maintain their mental health that much harder. Many of the institutions that offered guidance and support were no longer accessible, such as schools, counselors, friends and extended family members.

Of all of the impacts evaluated, survey respondents most strongly agreed that the pandemic has had a major impact on their mental health and wellness. This is consistent with other survey findings. It is important that we recognize this and do not return to "business as usual" without addressing it.

“As a youth, it is hard for us. I feel like older people, they feel like, we want to relax and just not do anything. But we are working harder to do better during this. It is pretty hard.”

–Current foster youth, age 20

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“

Being a teen during the pandemic, I think adults expect us to know everything. I guess and they don't understand that we also have pressure. They should not expect a lot from us. We are trying.”

–Current foster youth, age 18



## Recommendation #5

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# Provide direct, immediate financial support to parenting youth.

Now, more than ever, young parents need help. Due to the pandemic, many lost their jobs and were also cut off from the network of support they rely on as parents, including childcare and extended family members.

Survey findings showed this had a serious impact: young parents experienced higher rates of homelessness, housing instability, unemployment and hunger than nonparents. For these impacts to not have a long-term effect on both the young parent and their child, it is critical that we take action. Counties and nonprofit agencies must identify these young families, make contact and connect them to critically needed housing, food and mental health resources.

Most immediately, young families require financial assistance to address their urgent housing and food needs. As California moves forward, we must better support young people in foster care who become parents by adopting policies, such as the early infant supplement and home visitation services.



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## Youth Profile

# Jamie M.

County: San Bernardino

Foster Care Status: Currently in care

Age: 20

Major: Culinary Arts and Business Management

Work: Home Chef

### About Jamie M.

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Jamie is a 20-year-old first-year college student who is studying culinary arts and business management. She also lives in transitional housing in San Bernardino but has struggled to do well in school since switching to online classes.

“ (School) is a struggle. My grades are a lot lower than I would want them to be. (I’m) still trying to work through that.”

“ I can't do online school. I just don't function that way. It just doesn't work for me. I miss being in the classroom. I'm trying to work through it and give it a try, but it is very hard.”

“ Before the pandemic I wasn't working. It was just school and then like during (the pandemic), I started applying for jobs. I finally just got hired by Home Chef, but being in that freezer for so long made me feel sick.”

“ I can always call (my THP-NMD program). They are really hands-on people, basically like a life coach, helping us go through life.”

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## Youth Profile

# Natalia M.

County: Napa

Foster Care Status: Currently in care

Age: 18

Education: High School

Work: Unemployed

### About Natalia M.

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Natalia is a high school senior who had a daughter right before the pandemic started. She has struggled finding a job and has failed some of her classes.

“ I had my daughter a couple months before COVID.”

“ Before COVID, I worked, I had a job. I was living with my grandma, and everything was going perfect. But then my grandma moved to Mexico. I had to leave my house and being a parent started getting hard. She needs diapers, she needs clothes.”

“ I lost my job. I was doing housekeeping and people didn't want housekeeping anymore because they didn't want anyone in their home. I stopped going to school because I didn't have a babysitter. I couldn't do online school because I didn't have Wi-Fi. I basically had to drop out.”

“ I want to be a veterinary tech in the future, but for right now I need money. I need a stable job.”



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## Youth Profile

# Cerina H.

County: Sonoma

Foster Care Status: Currently in care

Age: 20

Major: Biology and Anthropology

Work: Unemployed

## About Cerina H.

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Cerina is 20 years old and is about to graduate with three associate's degrees this semester. She lives with her grandparents and has been struggling financially since COVID began.

“

I got a job in early 2020 (at Panda Express) and then by April 2020, I lost it. They're cutting staff. There's just not people coming in. I was one of the new workers and other workers had kids and everything else. So I got cut from the job and I got laid off.

“

In November 2020 I got a job as a medical receptionist. They weren't following COVID guidelines. I live with my grandparents, and I just didn't feel comfortable with them not following the guidelines and putting my grandparents at risk.”

“

It came to a point where I lived on lettuce and some water and that's really what I had for a couple months was lettuce and water and when I could, buy a cucumber.”

“

All of the sudden, I lost my job and I had to ask: pick your car payment or eat? Pick your car payment or pick your school book? Pick your car payment or pick that uniform for class? Pick your car payment or a new laptop?”

# Acknowledgements

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John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY) would like to thank everyone who participated and/or supported the distribution of our survey to learn more about the impact of COVID-19 on youth who have been in the foster cares system or experienced homelessness. We have learned so much about the impact of COVID-19 and hope you discovered something too.

[www.jbay.org](http://www.jbay.org)

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