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The Evil You Know:
How Teenage Foster Youth in California Attempt to Reduce Placement Instability

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the experiences of former foster youth in California and the strategies they utilized to minimize their chances of placement instability. While the academic literature focuses extensively on placement instability, it treats foster youth as passive participants in this process. Having spent ten years in the foster care system in Southern California, I recall actively trying to manage the threat of placement instability. As such, I interviewed 37 former foster youth from four different counties in California to ascertain whether my experience was shared. In addition to highlighting a series of strategies that foster youth use to prevent placement instability, participants report that placement instability was "weaponized" against them and that they felt the system offered ineffective avenues to report their grievances. Policies that would address or reduce the salience of placement instability are suggested, as are recommendations on how to strengthen relationships for foster children.

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Introduction

"We might be your last family." During my ten years in the foster care system in Southern California, I've heard this line (or a variation of it) from each of my six placements and from virtually all of my social workers. The implication of this statement was that should my placement fail — for my own misbehavior or some other reason — I would be placed in a group home, which were placements that were generally understood to be repositories for older youth who were unwanted by traditional families. Alone, this was a rather poignant threat, but the mere possibility of me moving was sufficient enough to alter my behavior. I was particularly keen on wanting to maintain my placement during my teenage years, not because I had an affinity for any particular foster family but because I knew moving homes would likely entail moving schools and communities. As such, in order to preserve the social life I developed at school, I engaged in a variety of behaviors and deployed several strategies at home to reduce my chances of having my placement disrupted. One of the most prominent of these strategies was the most simple: I refrained from reporting instances of maltreatment. For example, instead of reporting that my foster parents were pocketing state funds designated for me, I chose silence and opted to remain with the "evil" I knew rather than the one I didn't. This is precisely what this research is about. **Specifically, by interviewing former foster youth in California, I hope to ascertain what behaviors or strategies, if any, they utilized to minimize their chances of placement instability.**

The implications of this research strike at the very heart of the child welfare system. Ostensibly, the out-of-home foster care system is meant to serve as a safe and stable alternative for children who are no longer able to remain with their birth family. Placement instability alone undermines this notion. However, if this very instability is "weaponized" by caregivers and case

workers, and if foster youth refrain from reporting instances of maltreatment for fear of having their domestic and social lives abruptly disrupted, then the child welfare system fails in one of its most essential functions: providing welfare to the children in its care. To understand whether my experiences were widespread, I interviewed experts on the child welfare system: former foster youth themselves.

The 37 former California foster youth I interviewed hailed from four different counties in the state, and their experiences have largely been neglected by researchers, policymakers, and caseworkers. Rather than being passive participants in the placement process, the former foster youth in this study attempt to manage it through a variety of strategies, including the tragic strategy of remaining silent while being mistreated. They all report having had placement instability weaponized against them by the very people charged with caring for them: foster parents, caseworkers, and occasionally, legal professionals. And, they expressed a belief that the foster care system was either incapable of or uninterested in securing their welfare. If the experiences of the former foster children in this study — as well as my own — are reflective of the California foster care system overall, then the system is not only failing the children in its care but actively harming them as well.

This paper begins by providing a brief background on the California child welfare system and introduces the four counties represented by the study participants. This will provide the context necessary to understand the experiences of the former foster youth in this study. Next, I will provide a brief overview of the literature, which is largely focused on the following areas: the reasons placements disrupt, the impact placement instability has on a child's outcomes and development, and which children are most impacted by placement instability. After briefly describing the methods I used for this research — specifically, semi-structured interviews — I

will discuss my theoretical contributions to this subject, which are organized under three distinct yet interrelated sections. These contributions will demonstrate the need for significant policy reforms, and I briefly discuss several policies that I believe can address the adverse conditions experienced by the participants in this study. Finally, I conclude by emphasizing the importance of including the often-neglected voices of former foster youth in policy, practice, and research.

Background and Context

California has the largest foster care system in the United States, with over 60,000 children in foster care as of 2021 (Child Trends, 2022). The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) is responsible for overseeing the state's foster care system. CDSS provides child services to children — from out-of-home placement to counseling and mental health resources — who have been abused, neglected, abandoned, or otherwise unable to live with their biological parents or guardians. Over the last few decades, California's child welfare system has undergone substantial changes as it sought to implement a variety of federal legislation, with the three most prominent being the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, and the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018. These laws — in conjunction with state legislation — sought to establish permanency for children in foster care (either by expediting adoption or by creating pathways to more stable placements, such as kinship care or legal guardianship) (Child Welfare Gateway, 2019). The Family First Act also sought to curtail the use of congregate care, otherwise known as group homes, which is often detrimental to a child's well-being and is associated with adverse outcomes (Ryan, et al., 2008; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015; Children's Rights, 2015; Think of Us, 2021). Given that each of the participants in this study (by definition) experienced

placement instability and a lack of permanency, it can be said that they fell through the proverbial cracks left by this legislation.

With that being said, placement instability in California has markedly improved over the last two decades. In 2020 (the latest in which data is available), 32% of children experienced three more placements after one year in the foster care system, a substantial reduction since 2001 when that figure was approximately 51% (KidsData.Org, 2023). For comparison, California was slightly below the national average, 35%, for that year (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). Given that California has long struggled with unstable placement histories for the children in its child welfare system (Courtney et al., 2001; Wilderman et al., 2014), this decades-long reduction is perhaps indicative of the positive impact of federal and state legislation.

Reliance on congregate care has also been reduced in California. A 2015 Children's Bureau Report highlighted that there was a 35.2% reduction (from 10,498 to 6,800) in the congregate care population in California from 2004 to 2013. By 2020, roughly 6% (or 2,999) of the children in the California child welfare system were in a group home or institution (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). This reduction, it should be noted, was accomplished before the Family First Prevention Services Act (which sought to curtail the unnecessary usage of congregate care) was implemented. The COVID-19 pandemic delayed the implementation of this legislation for many states, and as such, it is difficult to assess its impact. California was one of four states that did not respond to a March 2023 survey by the American Academy of Pediatrics (2023) that sought to track the progress of the implementation of Family First, specifically its congregate care provisions. Nevertheless, it is clear that reliance on congregate care has been reduced in California over the last twenty years.

Given the size of California and the dramatic differences between the various regions of the state, it is also essential to briefly overview the four counties discussed in this study: San Bernardino, Santa Clara, San Mateo, and Fresno. These counties, highlighted below, represent a diverse range of socioeconomic and demographic characteristics found across the state of California (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Map of California*

Below is a table of various socioeconomic and demographic statistics that illustrate the differences between these four counties:

Name	Population (2021)	Persons in Poverty, percent	Per Capita Income, (2021 dollars)	Largest Demographic

		(2021)		(2021)
California	39 million	12.3%	$84,097	Latino, 40.2%
San Bernardino	2.2 million	13.2%	$70,287	Latino, 55.8%
San Mateo	739,060	6.8%	$136,837	White, 37.4%
Santa Clara	1.9 million	6.9%	$140,258	Asian, 40.6%
Fresno	1 million	19.4%	$61,276	Latino, 54.7%

Table 1, *County Specific Information, US Census Data (2022)*

While I did not specifically choose these counties for the above characteristics, these four data points reveal that these counties differ from one another in substantial ways and thus strengthens this analysis. Poverty, for example, is a rather salient aspect given that it often serves as a proxy for neglect, which is frequently defined as the "failure of a parent or other person with responsibility for the child to provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2022) Neglect is the leading circumstance associated with a child's removal from their natal family (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System, 2022), so the different socioeconomic conditions within these counties contribute to different child welfare outcomes between them. Below is a table containing relevant data (at least as it pertains to this study) on the child welfare system for each of the counties in this study:

Name	Number of Children in Foster Care per 1000 (2017)	Number of Children with 3+ Placements (2017)	Median Number of Months in Foster Care (2017
California	5.4	32.2%	17.4
San Bernardino	9.3	30.2%	18.3
San Mateo	1.5	No Data	8.5

Santa Clara	2.1	36.3%	13.7
Fresno	6.4	41.5%	18.8

Table 2. *Child Welfare Statistics, KidsData.Org (2023)*

In addition, in order to contextualize the experiences of the children in this study, it is important to include general data about the child welfare system nationwide. The Fiscal Year 2021 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS) Report is a valuable resource in this regard, for it contains a host of information on the children in the foster care system. This study is specifically focused on teenagers in the foster care system, and according to AFCARS, this group represents approximately 32% of the children in the foster care system. Additionally, length of stay in the foster care system is vitally important when it comes to placement instability, as it is generally the case that the longer a child stays in the foster care system the likelier they are to experience placement instability (Vreeland et al., 2019). As such, the mean number of months a child stays in the foster care system is 21.7, but 33% of children are in the system longer than 24 months. For the participants in this study, the mean number of months they spent in the foster care system was 83.64 months (6.97 years), which is not representative of the majority of the children in foster care. Nevertheless, the experiences of those in long-term foster care are vitally important, given the outcomes associated with this experience.

Literature Review

Researchers, policymakers, and child welfare practitioners have long sought to understand placement instability and the factors that contribute to it. The reason is simple: studies have long shown that placement stability is both more conducive to child development and contributes to better outcomes for children involved in the child welfare system (O'Neill, et

al., 2012). Conversely, outcomes for children with unstable placement histories are devastating. Placement instability adversely impacts the physical development (Johnson et al., 2018), academic achievement (Clemens, et al., 2018), and self-esteem and notions of identity (Stott, 2002) of children. Children with multiple placements had between a 36 to 63 percent greater risk of developing behavioral challenges than children with stable placement histories (Rubin, et al., 2007). To cite another example of many, repeated placement disruptions can contribute to an increased feeling of rejection and an erosion in the ability to form meaningful relationships (Rutter and Sroufe, 200; Bederian-Gardner et al., 2018). For male foster youth, placement instability is associated with an increased rate of juvenile delinquency (Ryan and Testa, 2005). One can understand, then, why so much of the aforementioned legislation was aimed at permanence for former foster youth. In addition to the impact that placement instability has on outcomes and development, the academic literature focuses extensively on two other categories: why do placements disrupt, and who is most impacted. Decades of research have found that placement stability, or the lack thereof, is largely contingent on the following factors: a child's characteristics, the length of stay in the foster care system, the nature of the placement itself, foster family attributes, and institutional factors.

The circumstances of a child's entry into the child welfare system can influence whether that child will achieve permanence. Children who have been placed in the foster care system due to sexual or physical abuse, for example, are likelier to have a history of unstable placements than children who were removed as a result of neglect (Webster, Barth, and Needell, 2000). Older foster youth are more likely to experience multiple placements compared to younger children in the foster system (Hartnett, et al., 1999), and older children are 7 times more likely to initiate a placement disruption (either by running away or requesting a move) than their younger

counterparts (Sattler, Font, and Gershoff, 2018). In addition to age, a child's behavioral characteristics are often contributors to placement disruptions. For example, children with diagnosed emotional disorders are more likely to have three or more placements than children without a diagnosis (Courtney and Prophet, 2011). Furthermore, approximately 20% of placement changes can be linked to a child's behavioral issues (James, 2004).

The duration in which a child is in the foster care system and the types of placements the child experiences exert a considerable influence on placement stability. Compared to children who were in foster care for shorter durations, the percentage of children in foster care with over twelve months who experience three or more placement changes increases by 48% (Vreeland et al., 2019). In addition, two-thirds of children who "are in foster care for more than a year experience three or more placements." (Noonan et al., 2009). While the evidence on the correlation between race and placement instability is inconclusive, it should be noted that being a Black foster child is among the highest predictors for increased length of time in foster care, which likely results in an increased risk of placement instability for Black foster youth (Seaberg and Tolley, 1986). Evidence also suggests that the number of children living with a non-relative foster family can undermine placement stability, with those living with three or more children in a home being twice as likely to experience instability compared to those living with only one other child (Noonan et al., 2009). Sexual orientation and gender identity are also associated with multiple placement disruptions. Multiple studies have shown that LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience placement instability and involvement in group home facilities (Baams et al., 2004; University of Maryland, 2021). These factors — largely out of a child's control — can create a harmful cycle in which a placement disruption due to a longer stay in foster care is itself a risk factor for future disruption.

The characteristics of the foster family in which a child is placed are key determinants of whether that placement would be successful. In 2004, approximately 12.3% of placement changes were directly related to foster family behavior, such as increased stressors in a foster family's life (3.7%) or accusations of abuse against the foster family (4.3%) (James, 2004). In addition, the parenting styles of foster parents can facilitate placement instability. Crum (2010) finds that foster parents who established "rigid and firm rules were more likely to experience multiple placement disruptions…these foster parents may be more demanding and be less democratic." This strict limit setting, coupled with the amount of support that foster parents receive, explains approximately 15% of the total variance in placement stability (Crum, 2010). A foster parent's inability to respond to the emotional and developmental age of foster children can also contribute to placement disruption (Lipscombe, Farmer, and Moyers, 2003).

Institutional factors are also key contributors to placement stability. Frequent caseworker turnover can have an adverse impact on permanence and contribute to placement instability due to the promotion of unhealthy relationships that prevent children from forming strong emotional bonds (Ryan, et al., 2006). Along with caseworker turnover, a caseworker's presence, cultural competency, and familiarity with the child's needs can foster stability (Pelech, Badry, and D'Aoust, 2013). In addition, there exists a substantial array of policy-related changes in placements, such as opting to move a child to live with a sibling or to less restrictive settings (James, 2004). Kim (2022) also found that children who were placed with at least one other sibling were less likely to experience a move and specifically less likely to experience a "non-progress" move (moves due to problems or negative experiences in their foster home).

With all this being said, the literature is largely mute on how foster youth themselves navigate placement instability. While there have been qualitative studies on how foster alumni

perceive placement moves, this research largely focuses on the emotional impact placement instability has on children with frequent moves (Skoog, Khoo, and Nygren, 2014; Rostill-Brookes, et al., 2011; Unrau, Seita, and Putney 2008; Chambers, et al., 2018). Beyond simply running away or requesting a change in placement, children in foster care have agency and actively try to manage their placement process.

As such, this research addresses a significant gap in the academic literature regarding the role of foster youth in the placement process. **Specifically, the literature fails to acknowledge that foster youth are active participants in the process, utilizing various strategies and behaviors to reduce the likelihood of placement disruption**. While they have only varying degrees of success in doing so, behaviors that the participants in this study illustrate a previously unexplored dimension of placement instability. In a way, this research explores what happens when a placement does not disrupt. This gap in the literature undermines our understanding of the factors that contribute to successful foster care placements, reveals that cases of maltreatment might be higher than official reports, and highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the role foster youth play in the placement process.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were 37 former foster youth in the state of California who experienced placement instability during their teenage years. Participants were recruited through my personal, professional, and extended network, which consists of hundreds of former Californian foster youth. Specifically, I utilized a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods to recruit participants. The demographic makeup of the participants was

40.5% Latino, 24.3% White, 29.7% Black, and 5.7% Asian American/Pacific Islander. In addition, the study consisted of 56.8% men and 43.2% women. Four participants self-identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community during the interviews and stated that they identified as such during their time in the foster care system. While this study did not specifically screen for this information, the participants volunteered this information during the interviews. On average, participants spent 6.97 years in the foster care system and experienced 5.7 different placements (see Appendix B for a detailed table of participants).

The participants were from four different counties: San Bernardino (29.7%, San Mateo (21.6%), Santa Clara (24.3%), and Fresno (24.3%). By recruiting these participants from these counties, I sought to capture a range of experiences and perspectives among former foster youth in California.

Procedure

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted over Zoom, which lasted between 30-45 minutes. All interviews were conducted in English. I utilized a semi-structured interview guide consisting of the same seven questions, which ensured that all subjects were asked the same set of questions (provided in Appendix A). This approach allowed for follow-up questions and a discussion of topics that arose during the interviews. I developed this guide based on a review of the literature and an intimate understanding of how placement instability works.

Data Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded, but I concurrently took notes throughout. After completing the interviews, I transcribed them verbatim. I used a process of reading and re-reading the transcripts and identifying recurring themes, patterns, and keywords. This process

allowed me to identify the strategies and behaviors that former foster youth use to minimize their chances of having their placement disrupted. I was also sure to take note of deviant cases, or those that did not fit into the broader patterns, to ensure that I did not neglect any important perspectives or experiences.

Ethics

The study was approved by the University of Chicago's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Confidentiality was ensured by using pseudonyms to refer to participants in the transcripts and in any publications resulting from the study. The audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and only accessible to me.

Limitations

This study has a variety of limitations that must be considered when interpreting results. First, with only 37 participants, the sample size was relatively small. For a qualitative study, this sample size was sufficient, but the findings may not be generalizable to all former foster youth in California or other states.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data from the participants, which may be subjected to recall or social desirability bias. Specifically, participants may have forgotten certain details or events or may have been hesitant to disclose certain experiences or behaviors.

Third, there are inherent limitations with qualitative data. While it can provide nuanced insights into complex experiences, it is subjective and open to interpretation. Having experienced placement instability myself, my identification of specific themes and patterns in the data may be influenced by my biases and preconceptions.

Despite these limitations and others, this study's findings provide unique insights into the strategies and behaviors utilized by former foster youth in California to minimize their chances of placement disruption. Additional research is required to confirm and expand upon these findings, and to explore how placement instability impacts former foster youth in other states and contexts.

Theoretical Contributions and Findings

The interviews conducted with 37 former foster youth in California illustrate that teenage foster children deploy a variety of strategies and behaviors to minimize their chances of placement instability. Specifically, the former foster youth in this study utilized three strategies: **suffering in silence, strategic adaptation,** and **cautious back-channeling.** In addition, the majority of the subjects in this study report that their caregivers — and often their caseworker as well — frequently weaponized placement instability by invoking it as a disciplinary tool, or a means to compel good behavior. Finally, the majority of participants who retroactively reported instances of maltreatment (that is, after their placement had been disrupted for other reasons) describe a cycle of **reporting, resignation,** and **resolve.**

Choosing to Stick with The Evil You Know

The participants in this study describe three strategies they use to mitigate their risk of placement instability: **suffering in silence, strategic adaptation,** and **cautious back-channeling.** While other minor strategies were used (and will be briefly discussed), it was these three strategies that the former foster youth in this study frequently deployed to reduce their risk of placement instability. Time and time again, participants sought to "stick with the evil

they knew rather than the one they didn't." Below is a table containing each of the three major strategies and how many participants stated that they used them:

Strategy	Usage Frequency
Suffering in Silence	35/37
Strategic Adaptation	28/37
Cautious Back-Channeling	20/37

Table 3. *Summary of Strategies Used*

1. *Suffering in Silence*

Douglas H., of San Bernardino County, was placed in the foster care system over two decades ago. He was eleven years old at the time. At the time, the expectation was that he would be reunited with his mother upon the conclusion of her prison sentence. This would not be the case. Douglas would spend the next seven years in the foster care system, and when those seven years concluded, he would have lived with 9 different families.

He recalls liking his first family, and being liked by his first family. Liking, he emphasized, because he knew there "wasn't any love between them." Although he self-identified as Latino and the family was white, he felt as accepted as a child could be in his particular situation. He liked his school, played Little League baseball at the community park, made friends, and even enjoyed attending the Catholic Church his foster family went to. But, after two suspensions at school within a two-week span, these foster parents terminated his placement, citing his behavior as the reason why. Over the next four years, he would move four more times, each time for a different reason.

Thus far, Douglas's experience is well-represented in the literature. From his foster parents retiring to behavior issues, Douglas's placement disruptions neatly fit into the aforementioned research outlined above. However, Douglas was not simply a passive agent in this process, especially during his teenage years. He actively deployed strategies during these years designed to lessen his risk of placement disruption or at least slow it down. His most frequently used mechanism for maintaining his placement (as well as the most common across all of the subjects interviewed for this research) was a rather simple one: **suffering in silence.**

When Douglas arrived at his sixth foster home, he was fifteen years old. He immediately disliked his foster mother: "She had nothing but nasty s*** to say to me from the second I walked into her home." However, he loved his school. He joined the junior varsity football team, made friends, and even had a girlfriend. Given that this was his fifth school in as many years, he desperately wanted to maintain whatever fragile stability he could for as long as he could. To accomplish this, he fought to maintain a 2.0 GPA and kept out of trouble. He also allowed his foster mother to mistreat him.

Through his local foster care agency, Douglas was entitled to receive $50 a month in clothing allowance. For the first few months he was there, he received that money and immediately use it to upgrade his wardrobe (he says "you lose a lot of s*** when you bounce around so much"). He bought a new pair of cleats, he remembers, by accumulating a few months of this allowance. But soon his foster mother ceased giving him his allowance. He never broached the subject with his foster mother, not wanting to get into an argument. On more than one occasion, his social worker even inquired about what he was buying with his allowance, perhaps as a way to gauge his money management skills. He lied each time, choosing instead to be deprived of this money rather than risk the possibility of having his placement disrupted:

> "I was supposed to get $50 a month, but [foster mother] was taking that and pocketing it...But what the f*** was I gonna do? Couldn't say anything about it because if I did, I was for sure gonna move. New school, new friends, all that. **So I didn't say s***, because I wasn't about to lose my friends for a couple hundred dollars."**

Douglas was careful to emphasize that he didn't know, at the time, whether reporting this to his social worker would lead him to be moved. And though he suspected that his foster mother was intentionally stealing this money from him, he didn't know for sure since she never mentioned it. But, he wasn't willing to risk mentioning it at all: "You take no chances when it comes to this. All she has to say is one word and I'm packing." And so Douglas went without clothing allowance, even as he outgrew his wardrobe and even as his attire became increasingly shabby. This dynamic, he believes, created an incredibly permissive environment: "I felt that once she knew she could get away with one thing, she could get away with anything." Such an environment ensured that Douglas would continue to suffer in silence, even as his maltreatment persisted and in some instances, worsened.

Of the 37 former California foster youth who participated in this study, 35 reported suffering in silence. However, not all of them initially described this practice as an explicit strategy to reduce the likelihood of placement instability. Six participants cited the fear of reprisal as the primary reason for failing to report instances of maltreatment. Andrea R., of Fresno County, offers a representative statement that encapsulates these concerns:

> "The social worker ain't gotta live with the foster family. They get to go home, file some paperwork, and call it a day. I gotta live with it. It's awkward, especially if they know you snitched. But it could be scary too. One foster mom accused me of telling lies when I told the social worker she didn't feed me enough. **She wasn't ever nice to me after that."**

This fear of reprisal, however, is linked to a fear of placement disruption. Nicole C., of Santa Clara County, states that airing grievances to one's social worker was "at best a way to piss everybody off for a few days and at worst a way to get a new address."

Was there a threshold of maltreatment that, once crossed, automatically necessitated reporting? That is, were any of the participants mistreated severely or persistently enough that concerns about placement disruption were abandoned? For many of the participants in this study, the threshold was rather high. Ben W., of Fresno County, describes the physical abuse he endured at one of his foster homes:

> "**Look, you start rationalizing it.** My foster dad would pop me when I got outta line, and I was just like, 'yeah, so, that happens in regular families too.' Did it make me upset? Hell yeah it did, especially since it was against the rules for him to do that, and by doing it it was like he was telling me 'you ain't gonna say s***. And he was right, I didn't say s***."

As shall soon be discussed, children who ceased suffering in silence were largely disappointed that they did. But, when the choice is either moving to a potentially worse place (the evil one doesn't know) or choosing to remain mistreated (the evil one does know), many participants in this study opted for the latter.

2. *Strategic Adaptation*

A second strategy that the participants in this study utilized was **strategic adaptation**: in order to reduce the risk of placement disruption, these former foster youth adapted in both major and minor ways to the conditions, cultures, and circumstances of their foster home. Jared M., of San Bernardino County, discusses how extensively he adapted to his foster family.

Jared was placed in the child welfare system in 2007. His father and older brother were incarcerated at the time, and his mother's whereabouts were unknown. While Jared was agnostic about most of his placements, he was committed to maintaining his fifth one for one specific reason: it was three blocks away from his younger brother's placement. Though they were only authorized to visit each other once a week under the supervision of a social worker, Jared would

often sneak visitations with his brother on his way home from school. As such, he was particularly keen on maintaining this placement.

In addition to suffering in silence — he never told his social workers that his foster mother used to read the letters from his older brother and father, despite her not having a right to do so — Jared behaved in ways that he never did at his former placements: he began to call his foster mother and father "mom" and "dad": "I tried to do whatever they liked…if they preferred to be called mom, I called them mom…I even tried to talk like them, watch their shows, tell them that I loved them." He reasoned that if he could ingratiate himself into the family, it would weather the storms that had previously disrupted his placements (namely, school suspensions and bad behavior at home). While he didn't know whether such a strategy would be successful, he hoped that would buy him some time: "When you move six times in six years, the name of the game is to try and stick it out for another day if you could." Jared noted that he did not at all feel that this behavior was deceptive, for many of his placements began in the same fashion: "Most of my foster families told me that I was part of their family, that I was there to stay for the long term." He figured that he'd benefit by embracing "being part of their family."

The adaptations described by the participants of this study encompass a broad range of behaviors and activities. Nine participants describe participating in their foster family's religious practices in order to establish a bulwark against removal. Anissa P., of Fresno County, states that she even chose to be officially baptized into her foster family's religion to establish closer ties with her foster family: "I couldn't tell you the difference between being Mormon or Catholic to be honest…the church was nice people but I was just trying to stay in their good graces to be honest."

Cultural adaptation was another prominent theme. While many of the former foster youth in this study describe naturally (almost subconsciously) adopting the cultural practices and beliefs of their foster family, some were more strategic. For example, Jordan G., of San Bernardino County, describes how he embraced Filipino culture at his fourth foster family:

> "I know it sounds funny as f***, a Black kid talking Tagalog. But I took that s*** seriously, man. I'd be at school googling random facts about the Philippines, or words in Tagalog. **It made the extended family laugh and in a way, it did make me feel part of the family, which was dangerous, but it worked for a minute.**"

Jordan was forthright about his approach: "...and guess what, at the next home, I was with some Salvadorians, and I did the same damn thing." Though most participants in this study describe some degree of cultural adaptation, many couldn't say for certain whether this practice was overtly strategic, subconsciously necessary, or simply the result of being exposed to a particular culture for an extended period of time. As Eric S. of San Mateo County states: "Maybe I was just trying to go along to get along, or maybe I was secretly just trying to be accepted by the people who were functioning as my family."

Other forms of adaptation were more subtle and it involved participants' personalities. 22 participants describe suppressing elements of their personalities in order to reduce potential friction with their foster families. Michael A., of Santa Clara County, describes how he arrived at this particular strategy:

> "I remember my first or second foster family, one of them, the foster dad tells me I talk way too much. I was like, 12, but I never forgot it. I do love to talk though…So other foster homes, **I surveyed the field and figured that I'd be less annoying if I didn't talk too much**…I drive for Uber now, and I do the same when I pick someone up…my foster family would be legit flabbergasted when they'd hear that I was chatty at school, because at home I was like a monk."

Interestingly enough, other participants describe how they had to become more talkative for the same reason that Michael became less talkative: to ingratiate themselves with their foster

families, or at the very least not antagonize them with their respective personalities. The

participants in Chambers et al. 's (2018) study describe how placement instability equipped them

with a measure of adaptability, and this study serves as a logical extension of that adaptability:

foster youth must be adaptable if they seek to minimize placement disruptions.

Several participants also discussed identifying core members of their foster family and

strategically cultivating relationships with them. Melody H., of Santa Clara County, describes her

thought process, and it is worth including an extended quote as it illustrates the extent to which

foster children would go to acquire a measure of placement stability:

> "At my first family, I was 11 and we would go to these parties. **One time a foster cousin
> or something said they don't even bother to remember the names of [foster
> mother's] foster children until they've been around for at least a year, since there
> was so many of them that came and went.** I didn't think about it much, and you know,
> a few years later I was that moody teenager at the party who didn't talk to anyone…the
> foster parents don't understand, they expect you to just be cool with people immediately,
> like get in there and start hanging out…but you feel different. Anyways, I realized it was
> a cheat code to get in good with the *tias* and cousins, you know. I'd play Mario Kart with
> them or something like that, or I'd talk with my foster mom's sister, **and if they liked
> me, I felt it was harder for my foster parents to kick me out, even if I was being
> bad**…"

24 participants in this study discussed utilizing some form of the above tactic. Whether it

was embedding oneself in the extended family network or deepening ties to the foster family's

community (namely, church and the immediate neighbors), participants sought to raise the social

cost of having their placement disrupted. As Juan G., from San Bernardino County, states: "If I

was going to be moved, I wanted it to be at least a hard decision…like, I wanted my foster mom

to have to respond to 'what happened to Juan, we really liked him?' because that's awkward."

Though this study didn't specifically screen for this information, it is important to

highlight the experiences of the LGBTQ+ community. Four participants identified themselves as

members of this community, and said they did so while they were in the foster care system.

Three of the participants said they masked or hid elements of their identity at certain placements, even after they had previously come out. Philippe F., from Fresno County, states the following:

> "Nobody told me to keep it quiet…my social worker at the time, she was very supportive…**but if I was with a family that went to church or something like that, I didn't mention that I was gay**…I never denied it but I didn't want them to know, you know, because who knows…I feel like it was illegal for someone to kick me out just because of that but they could always make some stuff up like 'he's disrespectful' or something."

Philippe was correct: AB 458 (passed in 2003) makes it unlawful in the state of California to discriminate against youth based on their perceived or actual sexual orientation or gender identity (National Center for Lesbian Rights, 2006). However, Phillippe lived in eight homes during his eleven years in the foster care system (2002-2013) and felt that even if this was true, he wasn't "going to roll the die." As he states: "They might've stuck up for me, but I wasn't going to make that bet because betting that the system would do right by you was never a great bet." To an extent, it was correct for Phillippe to assume that his sexual orientation put him at a greater risk of placement instability, as LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience multiple placements relative to their non-LGBTQ+ peers (Baams et al., 2004; University of Maryland, 2021). This experience adds a new dimension to this subject, but since this was not the main focus of this study, further research is needed to fully understand this dynamic.

3. *Cautious back-channeling*

The final major strategy mentioned by subjects was the least used and least likely to be successful: **cautious back-channeling.** This strategy was so rarely used because it often only needed to fail once for foster youth to abandon it. Henry D., of San Bernardino County, provides an adequate illustration of this strategy.

At his third foster home and during his freshman year in high school, Henry hoped to try out for the high school baseball team. His foster mother forbade him from doing so, citing no reason why and issuing a stern warning whenever Henry brought up the subject. While at school, Henry googled whether she was within her rights to do so and read that California foster youth were entitled to certain rights, one of which was the ability to "participate in age-appropriate extracurricular, enrichment, and social activities." With tryouts fast approaching, Henry broached the subject with his social worker. Specifically, he wanted his social worker to intercede on his behalf. Fearing reprisal, Henry urged his social worker to exercise as much caution as possible when broaching the subject with his foster mother:

> "I told him to try to bring it up randomly, like pose it as a question, 'Does Henry want to participate in sports?', or something like that. Maybe even say it would be for my own good. **I told him I didn't want to make her upset or mad**, that we had this conversation before and she keeps saying no. I just wanted to play baseball or at least tryout. **I even begged him to not mention it at all that I was the one to put him up to this."**

Henry's hope was that his social worker could serve as his diplomat and exercise discretion. He was wrong. Right after the meeting, his social worker met with his foster mother and immediately stated that Henry would like to play baseball:

> "He just came out and said it. Literally everything we just talked about went right out the window…[Foster mother] locked eyes with me and said some stuff about 'we'll see.' I walked my social worker to the car and **he just seemed like he didn't understand what just happened, like I was being worried for no reason**."

Henry said that this exchange permanently damaged his already strained relationship with his foster mother. A few months later, his foster family terminated his placement, citing this bad relationship as the reason why, and he was moved to another home. He never ended up playing for the baseball team.

Other participants utilized this strategy as well. Some used it as a balancing mechanism, where they hoped that by back-channeling with a social worker they can address some

grievances without jeopardizing the placement. Douglas H. was candid about his approach to this strategy:

> "I doubt that s*** ever worked, but I would tell my social workers that my biggest priority was staying put. Like if I had an issue, I'd tell them that I cared more about not moving than about the issue. I'd even ask them what I can do to stay, like if they had any tips. **But I don't think they got it, or most of them at least**."

Citing everything from social worker turnover to a lack of follow-up, this strategy was often stymied. Nonetheless, participants utilized it frequently with the hopes social workers understood the urgency of their desire to remain in that placement. Social workers, however, were not the sole recipients of this cautious back-channeling. Participants in this study often engaged in this behavior with other members of the foster family.

Robin L. was placed in the foster care system when she was eight years old. In her nine years in foster care (2006-2015), Robin would live with five different families throughout Fresno County. Despite her mother struggling with substance abuse, she was always nearby and would intermittently have visitation rights with Robin and her siblings, who did not live with Robin. At Robin's fourth foster family (when she was 13), her foster father would frequently disparage Robin's mother: "He'd say stuff like 'she needs to get off the dope' or something like that, right in front of me." This, naturally, angered Robin, but she didn't want to bring it up. When these comments first began being made, Robin had been with the family for over two years, her longest stint at a single home up to that point. While she didn't know whether her foster father was breaking any rules with his comments, at the very least he was being rude. Fortunately, she had a relationship with her older foster sister, her foster parents' adult daughter:

> "[Older foster sister] was nice to me…she seemed to understand how weird foster care was, like living with strangers, and would always volunteer to pick me up from school and stuff…One day I just told her that it bothered me when her dad made those comments…**She said she'll say something, and she understood that I wanted to keep it on the down low that I said something**…"

From that point on, each time her foster father mentioned her mother, her older foster sister would chastise him: "she would say 'cut that out, that's not very nice' or something, and he eventually stopped." This was an instance in which cautious back-channeling succeeded. When asked to hypothesize what would happen if she broached the subject with her foster father herself, she stated the following: "it is hard to say…it likely would have pitted me against my foster father. My foster mom, who I liked, would have to choose between us…that's an easy choice for her." Robin was fortunate enough to have developed this relationship with her older foster sibling, for only 9 other participants in this study stated that they trusted a member of their foster family (aside from their foster parents) enough to divulge such sensitive information.

Six participants in this study — all located in either Santa Clara or San Mateo Counties — report having had a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) during their time in the foster care system. A CASA is a volunteer appointed by judges to advocate for the best interests of a child in the child welfare system (Court Appointed Special Advocates, 2023). These volunteers work alongside social service providers, teachers, and legal and child welfare professionals in order to make informed decisions for the child they are charged with advocating for. The participants in this study who had a CASA report that it was an overall positive experience. However, most had CASAs for only brief periods during their time in care. Of the six participants who had a CASA, only two reported utilizing cautious back-channeling as means to avoid placement disruption and Mattias Q. of Santa Clara County did so successfully.

Mattias entered the foster care system right before his freshman year of high school. He describes his first set of foster parents as "no-nonsense, strict disciplinarians." For the first time in his life, he was expected to follow a strict routine: "chores in the morning, make the bed, dinner together at the table…it was like one of those old sit-coms." This didn't bother him as

much as it was a welcome change of pace from his upbringing, when meals were eaten in the back of the minivan their family lived in. But, a few weeks before he was set to start high school, he and his foster family got into a heated argument: "They wanted me to join ROTC, I did not want to join ROTC, and things got very, very tense in the house. They hit me with the classic line, 'if you live here, you do as we say.'" Fortunately for Mattias, he had a CASA.

Mattias never developed a strong relationship with his first few social workers as they showed up infrequently and knew very little about him (he says that one was convinced that he was a sophomore in high school despite being told otherwise each time they met). But he was assigned a CASA within a few months of being in foster care. Mattias recalls that his CASA was very nice to him:

> "Her name was Shirley, I think, and she was like, 70 and white and I was Black and like 14. But we hit it off…I'll always remember the first thing she said to me, 'I ain't going anywhere anytime soon'...I didn't know how important that was at time but I would later appreciate that she stuck around without getting a paycheck, even though I had to be a headache for her…"

Mattias broached the ROTC subject with his CASA and explained that he didn't want to participate. He told her that he felt "this was the breaking point" for this home, and that if he refused to join, he might end up moving. Shirley (if that was her name, as Mattias cannot remember for sure) immediately got to work:

> "I ain't never seen somebody operate so smoothly as Shirley…She was a retired teacher or something, so she knew a thing or two. When I explained to her why I didn't want to do it, she understood. **She told me she'll find a way to bring it up and would pretend I didn't say anything about it when she did**…One day we all met with my foster parents, who said they want me in ROTC, and Shirley said something like 'Oh, I know about that program, it isn't a very good one, it has a bad reputation.' And that was that, my foster parents never mentioned it again."

While Mattias would eventually move a few months later to be reunited with his younger sister at another foster home, he was able to stay at the same high school, something he credits

his CASA with: "I think Shirley was pulling the strings behind the scenes, kept me at [his high school]." While the sample size is small, Mattias' experience with his CASA indicates that cautious back-channeling can yield positive results.

4. *Minor Strategies*

There were a variety of other minor strategies that foster youth utilized that didn't neatly fit under the three major ones outlined above. Of these minor strategies, only two were utilized by more than a handful of participants: running away and direct appeals.

Six participants in this study ran away from their placement in an explicit attempt to maintain a connection to their community. Running away, they believed, could serve as a bargaining chip of sorts. As Josh B., of Fresno County, explains:

> "They moved me away from my school, away from my brother and my friends, and put me in a group home across town. So I dipped...I'd crash in the park by my school and just hung out with my friends...**when I'd get caught, I'd say, 'you know where I want to be, make it happen.'**"

This strategy did not work; Josh would be moved again, but further away from his former community, which he thinks was on purpose: "they just made it hard for me to go back, since it was like a two-hour bus ride."

Others ran away preemptively before a placement could be disrupted. When Byron B., of San Bernardino County, learned that he'd be sent nearly two hours away via public from his current foster home (and more importantly, his girlfriend), he ran away: "I figured I'd send them a message, you know, maybe then they'd listen." They — his social workers — did not listen, as eventually Byron was apprehended and moved. Running away was a crude tool that these six participants utilized to exert some control over their placement process. While it never worked, this strategy eventually became an end of itself, as Damian E. of Santa Clara County states: "You

just learned that you had to look out for yourself, and so I bounced anytime s*** started going south."

Direct appeals were the other minor strategy. Only five participants report deploying this strategy, and all of them did so during their early teenage years, before they became aware of its futility. Nicole C. of Santa Clara County describes this strategy and its shortcomings:

> "I was thirteen, it was my second family, and they started yelling at me for something and **I just said 'please don't move me, I'd do anything to stay'**...I was real vulnerable, crying, and I meant it…but that was a mistake, man, like as soon as they figured that out, **they'd hold it over my head, telling me that I'll be moved if I didn't do this or that**…for minor stuff too, like not dusting my bedroom or something…"

As shall soon be seen in the next section, invoking placement disruption was commonly done by caregivers, according to the participants of this study. Nicole learned that this direct appeal to stay — being vulnerable, as she states — only made the threat of placement instability more potent, since her caregiver could use her vulnerability in conjunction with the threat.

The Weaponization of Placement Instability

Caregivers are, of course, active participants in the placement instability process. As Crum (2010) observed, the parenting style of a foster family could contribute to the stability of placements that foster children experience. With that said, in conjunction with other systemic factors, the mere phenomenon of placement instability erects profound power imbalances between foster children and foster parents. For virtually all participants in this study (33/37), placement instability was explicitly invoked by foster families — and occasionally caseworkers and legal professionals — as a disciplinary tool or as a means to encourage good behavior.

Daniel M., of San Bernardino County, experienced six placements during his six years in the child welfare system. His foster families shared very few qualities with each other — there

was a blend of races, ethnicities, religions, and family makeup. However, all of them had at least

one thing in common: "I can't even tell you how many times all of my foster moms told me that **I**

better not f*** up because this might be the last family that would take me." The implicit

warning about the possibility of being placed in a group home notwithstanding, Daniel simply

did not want to move, and so these warnings had a considerable effect on him:

> "And that got to me, you know?...I'd be at school and worried, and kids would pick on
> me but I couldn't do anything back because they might move me to another home if I
> fought back. Or I'd fall behind in class and s***, if I came home with bad grades, they
> could move me. **It was all I thought about.**"

As Daniel demonstrates, the weaponization of instability had a considerable impact on

his mental health. It also incentivized him to utilize the strategies described in the previous

section, particularly **suffering in silence**: "I wasn't going to rock the boat…you think that s***

would fly? Nah bro, I played it safe." Alone, these warnings exerted a substantial influence on

how foster youth behaved and thought. However, their potency was aided by a variety of

systematic factors.

As a teenage boy in foster care, Daniel felt that he should consider himself fortunate that

he was being placed with foster families. Luis G. echoed this sentiment, and said he would

receive the very same warning that Daniel received, but this time from his social workers (in a

more diplomatic tone): "They'd say something like 'there's not a ton of families out there that

want to take a teenage boy, you know you're lucky.' They'd say this on the drive to my new

foster family." For many foster youth, the alternative to family-based placements are group

homes, and every participant in this research either experienced placement in group homes or

knew someone that did. Either way, none had anything positive to say about them.

Luis's brother lived in a group home (and he too would live in one eventually). Having

been in multiple foster homes in his first few years in the child welfare system, Luis came to

intuitively understand that group homes were not ideal places to be raised. His visit to one only confirmed that experience:

> "We went to pick up my bro for court and man, there were holes in the walls, no furniture, tatted up teens…I think there were two kids boxing, like fighting, when we got there…**it seemed like such a s***ty place to live**…when we left, my social worker even told me that I was a 'good boy' **and should do whatever I could to stay away from this place**…"

This experience, and the general reputation that these homes have within the child welfare system, made the warnings about them so much more salient. Other participants took these warnings to heart, particularly Jared M.:

> "My other brother, he was in a group home and that s*** is rough and I wanted nothing to do with it. **Don't get me wrong, [foster mother's] place was terrible, but it was better than what [older brother] was dealing with."**

Judges, too, frequently mentioned placement instability as an implicit warning. Uriah V., of San Bernardino County, was in the foster care system for nine years (2011-2020), having voluntarily separated herself from her extended foster care right before the pandemic. During this span, she moved five times. While she was at her fourth foster family, when she was 17, she attended her routine, twice-a-year, court appointment. The majority of the time, these appointments were mundane affairs, especially since Uriah's mother was incarcerated and her father was absent, so she knew there'd be no change in her status. However, she had recently received an F in her Biology class, and got into a small argument with her foster mother about it. In her perspective, there was nothing more to the story, since even non-foster children occasionally do poorly in school or get into arguments with their caregivers. However, the judge apparently thought otherwise:

> "I was sitting there, waiting for it to be over, and this old white man gonna say '**do you really want to risk moving again, you're so close to graduating?'**...I was shook, like, it hadn't even crossed my mind at the time that I could get moved…**does he not realize that normal kids also do this, like am I not allowed to be a dumb teenager?"**

Uriah's experience — along with the other participants mentioned in this section — illustrates that placement instability becomes an ever-present reality for teenage foster youth in California. Even when it is unstated, foster youth perceive it as a pervasive disciplinary weapon that could be deployed at any time. As Lance M., of Fresno County, states: "Most foster parents told me about [placement instability], but even the ones that didn't knew that I knew what the deal was, that I could be moved at any time for f****** up."

The weaponization of placement instability is something generally understood by foster youth, or at least the participants in this research, but has not yet been explored in any depth by researchers. In conjunction with the phenomenon of placement instability itself, the invocation of it by caseworkers and caregivers undermines the notion that the child welfare system is a stable alternative to residing with a natal family.

The Vicious Cycle of Reporting, Resignation, and Resolve

What happens, then, when placement is disrupted? When the "evil you don't know" is no longer hanging over one's head? How do foster youth adjust their strategies in response to moving homes? Many subjects of this research report (both implicitly and explicitly) that a cycle develops upon the disruption of a placement: reporting, resignation, and resolve.

Like several other subjects, Rachel R. of San Bernardino County reports instances of her caregivers "pocketing" state or county money intended for her. Worse yet, in one particular placement, she recalled having her belongings stolen from her by the biological daughter of her foster parents. She didn't report the theft, knowing that by doing she would pit herself against the daughter of her foster parents. She also suspected that her foster mother may have even participated in or condoned the theft, or at least had knowledge that it was occurring. However,

when that placement was disrupted in order for her foster mother to take on a group of siblings,

Rachel informed her social worker as she was driven to her next placement:

> "The woman that dropped me off at the home wasn't the woman who picked me up and moved me to my next family. **I did not know a thing about her.** When I told her what my former foster mom did to me, you know what my social worker said? She said **'why didn't you say anything before?' I learned to stop opening my mouth."**

This one sentence contains two parts of the cycle described earlier: reporting and

resignation. Rachel reported her maltreatment after the placement had already been terminated,

hoping to have her belongings returned to her. Instead, her social worker — who, as it states

above, was new and knew little about Rachel — cast doubt on her claim. Rachel recounted a

feeling of frustration about the exchange: "It was as if she could not even imagine why a kid, a

teenager, would not want to report something like that." Resigned to the fact that her

after-the-fact reporting would yield her no results, she opted to "stop opening" her mouth.

Douglas is familiar with this feeling of resignation, particularly after reporting his foster

mother for not allocating the clothing he was entitled to. After getting into an argument with his

foster father, Douglas was removed from the home. A week into his new placement — a group

home — he decided to inform his social worker about what his former foster family did. He had

no expectations that he would be compensated for the stolen allowances, but he wanted to report

it as a matter of justice: "It was the principle, you know? She was stealing from kids and I

wanted that to stop." However, he had a similar experience as Rachel:

> "I told my [social worker] that she must've stolen a few hundred from me over the year I was there. **She thought I was making this s*** up as payback or something...**I lived right down the street from my old foster mom and she was still taking in kids left and right, and I guarantee you she's still doing the same to them. **Ain't s*** happened to her, no consequences.**

Not only was he not believed but Douglas also witnessed that even after making the

report, his former foster mother suffered no consequences for her actions. Observing this,

Douglas too was resigned to the fact that reporting instances of maltreatment either during a placement or after the placement was terminated yielded only negative consequences. Resignation, however, gave way to resolve: Douglas and Rachel both resolved that if their reports of maltreatment were not to be taken seriously, then they must place greater focus on maintaining placement stability at the expense of their mental and emotional well-being. Devon D. encapsulates this third aspect of the cycle.

Like other subjects, Devon of San Mateo County had experienced multiple placements during his time in the foster care system. When he was fourteen, he was placed in a home where both of his foster parents worked until late into the evening. However, he was not allowed to be home by himself, by law, and aside from encouraging him to participate in extracurricular activities, his foster parents did not arrange for him to stay with anyone else. As such, he spent many evenings sitting on the front porch or climbing the fence into the backyard. During inclement weather this experience was miserable: "When it got hot out there, or when it rained, you just had to chill for hours until one of them got home." Devon eventually moved from this placement, and like Douglas and Rachel, decided to inform his social worker about what his former foster parents had done. He never received a follow-up from this report, and as such, Devon resolved that he would no longer report similar instances of maltreatment:

> "Look, I get it. I know how it's supposed to work, how the rules are, but that isn't how it actually works. At the end of the day, you gotta try and get by and make things easier on you…all that other stuff, it just complicates things. You know what doesn't help? **Being vulnerable and telling people whose job it is to care, only to not have a damn thing happen. You learn to rely on yourself and only yourself.**"

With no recourse available to him, Devon decided that the best course of action was to do what he must to cease the constant churning of placements.

Reporting, resignation, and resolve is a cycle with waning relevance the more placement disruptions a child has. Like Rachel, many participants felt that it was much better to keep quiet and thus were less likely to report maltreatment after future placement disruptions. Tessa V. of San Mateo County became so disenchanted with reporting her maltreatment that she would often advise her younger foster siblings to refrain from doing so:

> "I regret doing it, but maybe I could save them the heartbreak and trouble of reporting things that nobody cares about but yourself…Of course if it was big, report it, but if you're getting picked on by the biological kids or getting your stuff stolen, **there's no point in reporting since nothing will be done about it.**"

It is important to mention that not all participants in this study experienced this cycle. Some of them achieved periodic successes when it came to reporting instances of maltreatment. For example, when Albert J. of Fresno County had his third placement disrupted in 2015, when he was 14, he told his social worker that the grandson of his foster parents was stealing from him:

> "I had this little watch that my pops bought me, a Sacramento Kings watch. It was cheap, probably like $10-15, but I loved that thing. Well when [foster parents' grandson] stole it from me, I didn't say anything about it because, like I said, you never pick a fight with the grandson. **But when I moved, I told the social worker about it, and she got pissed.** She dropped that watch off to me two weeks later at my new home."

Other participants reported similar successes, but when asked, only one stated that they reported being maltreated while at their current foster home rather than after the fact. For this participant, Richard D. of San Bernardino, his success was short-lived and bitter-sweet:

> "Yeah, [social worker] took care of business that time…but man did that piss off [foster mother]...**after that incident, she was just looking for an excuse to kick me out** and my dumb*** gave her one when a few weeks later I got caught ditching school to go grab Taco Bell with my friends…after that it was a wrap for me."

Richard's grievance was a rather simple one: he was in theater in his high school and had to do rehearsals in the evening, and his foster mother preferred that he quit so she didn't have to

pick him up. After reporting, she begrudgingly drove the fifteen minutes to pick him up after his rehearsals, at least for a few weeks. This pyrrhic victory only delayed Richard's realization of the cycle of reporting, resignation, and resolve: "After that, I learned that you better think long and hard before snitching, because you don't want to cash in on something minor and get double f***ed over."

Policy Implications and Recommendations

This study reveals that the foster care system in California is far from stable and safe. In addition to experiencing constant moves, the participants of this study report being flagrantly mistreated with impunity, having few meaningful relationships during their time in care, and being deeply cynical that the system is interested in or capable of securing their welfare. Addressing these issues not only involves more rigorous enforcement of existing policies and practices, but also substantial policy changes across several domains.

Alongside the existing focus to reduce placement instability, efforts must be made to reduce its salience. Policymakers must also strive to strengthen and expand the constellation of relationships available to foster children by reducing social worker turnover, partnership with nonprofits like Court Appointed Special Advocate associations, and prioritizing family and community connections during placement decisions. In addition, foster parent recruiting, support, and training must be rigorously expanded, as well as family preservation policies. The following policy recommendations are not meant to be siloed as they are all interrelated to some degree. For example, efforts to reduce social worker turnover can both strengthen relationships for foster children and reduce the risk of placement instability. This list is by no means

conclusive but rather a collection of policies that could establish a safer, stabler, and more just California child welfare system.

<u>Reducing the Occurrence and Salience of Placement Instability</u>

To address the harmful impact of placement instability, placement instability must be addressed. This is obvious, but given that approximately thirty percent of foster children in California experience three or more placements, accomplishing this is easier said than done. However, as previously mentioned, over the last two decades California has had remarkable success in doing so as it reduced the percentage of children experiencing three or more placements by 19% between 2001 and 2020. Without being said, additional efforts can be utilized to reduce placement instability.

Expanding kinship care, for example, can facilitate stable placements for children involved in the child welfare system (Casey Family Programs, 2018). Recognizing this, several counties in California participated in a process called Family Search and Engagement (FSE), which identified adults (either kin or close family friends, otherwise known as "fictive kin") who could serve as valuable connections for children involved in the child welfare system. FSE's ultimate goal is permanency, either through reunification, guardianship, or adoption Casey (Family Programs, 2018). Of the 46 youth participating in FSE, 76% (35) were able to finalize a "legal" connection or were on the path to doing so (Louisell, n.d.). FSE must be expanded to more counties and involve more foster youth, and even if these efforts fail to yield the 76% success fate, they could increase stability for a non-negligible number of foster youth.

Even if expanding kinship care — and a variety of other policies aimed at reducing placement instability — succeeds, there will always exist some measure of placement instability.

As such, the salience of placement instability must be reduced. All 37 participants in this study cited fear of switching schools and communities as a primary reason for wanting to maintain their placement. If youth could be assured that they could stay within their community and school, they may no longer opt to suffer in silence. To a degree, there are such assurances in place. For example, AB 490 (passed in 2003) is legislation that stipulates a foster child has the right to remain in their school of origin for the duration of the school year should their placement change (California Foster Youth Education Task Force, 2006). In addition, the California Foster Youth Bill of Rights gives foster children the rights to remain in their school of origin (provided that it has been deemed to be in their "best interests") and to transition from elementary school to middle school or from middle school to high school with their classmates (California Department of Education, 2023). Unfortunately, as evident by the participants of this survey, this right is rarely enforced. In fact, a 2014 study found that among students who had been in foster care for less than one year, 17 percent were enrolled in three or more schools during the academic year (Wiegmann et al., 2014). For students who were in the system for three or more years, 6 percent attended three or more schools during the school year. As such, this right requires more "teeth" to enforce.

In 2019, Assembly Sharon Quirk-Silva sponsored AB 337, which aimed to provide foster parents with reasonable travel reimbursements to transport foster youth to schools outside of the local district (Loudenback, 2019). This bill was not passed. Not only should this legislation be revived and subsequently passed, but foster youth should be given legal recourses to exercise their educational rights, such as expedited grievance processes when a child switches schools unlawfully. Finally, efforts to recruit more foster parents should be expanded in order to increase the supply of possible foster families located near a child's preferred school.

The participants in this study also cited their siblings as a major reason why they didn't want their placement disrupted. If they could not be in the same home as their siblings, they sought to maintain proximity to them. California law offers tepid support for placing siblings together:

> It is the intent of the Legislature to maintain the continuity of the family unit, and ensure the preservation and strengthening of the child's family ties by ensuring that when siblings have been removed from their home, either as a group on one occurrence or individually on separate occurrences, the siblings will be placed together, unless it has been determined that placement together is contrary to the safety or well-being of any sibling. **The Legislature recognizes that in order to ensure the placement of a sibling group in the same foster care placement, placement resources need to be expanded** (California Legislature,1990).

Unfortunately, siblings are split up far too often and far too swiftly, indicating that the "intent" of the legislature rarely manifests itself into action. To cite one personal example, I was separated immediately from my older brothers immediately upon being placed in the foster care system. Though data on this is difficult to acquire as caseworkers are given considerable discretion during the placement process, evidence suggests that it is a lack of resources that often necessitates the splitting of children: "Most agencies do not have many homes that can accommodate sibling groups, especially large ones." (Jordan Institute for Families, 1997) Similar to placement instability, there will always be instances in which siblings must be separated (such as when it is in the best interests of the children to do, or when one sibling has more advanced needs), but considerably more resources needed to be extended to prioritize the placement of sibling groups in the same home. This might involve (again) recruiting more foster parents willing to take on siblings, waiving regulations that cap the number of children that can be placed in a home, or offering financial incentives to families willing to foster sibling groups. Not only will prioritizing siblings address some of the aforementioned cynicism that foster youth have, but it can also help with placement instability: as previously mentioned, children who were

placed with at least one other sibling were less likely to experience a move than children who weren't (Kim, 2022). If youth can be reasonably assured that they'll remain with or close to siblings, the incentive to "suffer in silence" is reduced.

Strengthening Trusted Relationships

Caseworker turnover has long been an issue that plagued the child welfare system, and it has grown worse in recent years. Since 2002, annual "child welfare staff turnover rates have been estimated to be at 20-40 percent." (Case Family Programs, 2017) California, specifically, has a pernicious challenge with turnover, with a 61% annual turnover rate. This directly manifested itself in the experiences of those in the study, as well as myself. None of the former foster youth in this study could remember how many social workers they had during their time in care. Only a few could remember more than five. As a result, social workers were not perceived as resources. As Maya O. from San Mateo County states: "By the time my social worker got up to speed on me and my life, it was on to the next one." Aside from cautious back-channeling, the strategies that participants utilized to mitigate the impact of placement instability are the direct result of the child welfare system's failure to furnish them with long-term social workers. Again, it is easier said than done, but the state of California and its counties must expend the necessary resources to increase the supply of social workers. High caseloads — and the heavy workloads they entail — are associated with high turnover, and as such, more social workers are required to shoulder the burden (Casey Family Programs, 2017). Removing a child from their family of origin often shatters all the trusting relationships a child has, and the failure to address this has a variety of downstream consequences, as evidenced by the experiences of the participants in this study.

Only six participants in this study reported having a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), and all of them were from either San Mateo or Santa Clara Counties. These participants reported that their relationship with their CASA was an overall positive experience. Katie M., of Santa Clara County, states the following: "My CASA was the only one who remembered things about my life. Like if I had a test or something, she'd ask…my foster parents had no idea or didn't care." This experience is indicative of the potential impact that volunteer advocates can have, for research indicates that they generally improve the lives of children involved in the child welfare system (Stanley and Hellman, 2019). California — and counties — must work to partner with state and county CASA organizations. This partnership must involve financial support to expand the capacity of local CASA associations, which could facilitate an increased supply of volunteer advocates and thus ensure that more children could benefit from CASA in ways that Mattias and Katie did.

Supporting and Expanding the Supply of Families:

For children that do enter the out-of-home foster care system, they should be placed in the care of a stable and safe foster family. As such, efforts should be made to not only increase the supply of foster parents but to ensure that these foster parents are highly-trained and emotionally intelligent. Foster parent training should emphasize trauma-informed care and the sensitivity around placement instability. In addition, foster parents should be provided with additional support, especially during periods in which they are considering terminating the placement of the child in their care. By expanding the pool of highly-trained foster parents, children in foster care are both less likely to be moved and less likely to be placed in less-than-ideal settings, such as group homes. Finally, greater methods of accountability —

particularly when it comes to state funds meant for foster children — need to be implemented, for far too many subjects in this study recalled having money designated to them diverted to their foster parents.

Finally, policymakers should provide more resources to families in need, such as affordable housing, access to healthcare, and support services. Evidence shows that family preservation programs, such as home visiting, parenting classes, and counseling, can help families overcome the challenges that lead to foster care placement (LaBrenz, 2022). By investing in family preservation policies, policymakers can reduce the number of children who enter foster care in the first place and thus obviate the threat of placement instability. Instead of expending money on increasing the supply of foster parents and caseworkers, California can focus instead on reducing the supply of foster children through effective family preservation policies.

Conclusion

In many ways, the participants in this study are outliers. They were all in the foster care system longer far longer than average and experienced more placement disruptions than the majority of foster children. Though a litany of policies exists to prevent the tragic stories told throughout this study, it is clear that long-term foster youth are being failed by the California foster care system. Policymakers and practitioners cannot afford to ignore the outliers, however. As a matter of fact, the participants in this study are perhaps the strongest indictment that exists that the foster care system is failing to protect the children in its care.

As I reviewed the literature in preparation for this research, I was surprised to see that my experiences in the foster care system were either wholly neglected or only tangentially

examined. While there exists ample qualitative research that elevates the perspectives of former foster children, it does appear that there continues to exist significant blind spots in understanding how the foster care system truly functions on a day-to-day basis. A failure to understand how the foster care system operates renders purported policy solutions for its perceived challenges at best ineffective and at worst counterproductive. The experts on foster care are the ones that lived through it, and this is especially the case for outliers described in this study, for they are tragically familiar with the variety of failures embedded throughout the system. As such, further research, practice, and policy should be undergirded by the perspectives of those with lived-experiences. On this note, it is apt to conclude with a quote from Genesis P. of San Mateo County: "If they just let the foster kids pass some bills and talk about how inhumane it is, the foster care system will be fixed in a year."

Appendix A: Survey Questions

<u>The following seven questions were asked to each participant of the study</u>:

1. Have you experienced placement instability during your time in the foster care system?

2. How did placement instability impact you emotionally, socially, and/or academically?

3. Were you able to maintain connections with important people in your life, such as family members or friends, during times of placement instability?

4. Did you feel like you had any control over the placement instability you experienced?

5. What strategies, if any, did you use to reduce the possibility of placement instability?

6. Looking back, is there anything you wish had been done differently to prevent or address placement instability during your time in the foster care system?

7. Do you feel like social workers or caregivers understood the impact that moving placements had on you?

Appendix B: Participant Information

Name	Years	Placements	County	Race/Ethnicity
Douglas H.	2001-2008 (7)	9	San Bernardino	Latino
Jared M.	2007-2013 (6)	5	San Bernardino	Black
Daniel M.	2001-2007 (6)	6	San Bernardino	Latino
Rachel R.	2004-2012 (8)	8	San Bernardino	White
Henry D.	2010-2016 (6)	5	San Bernardino	Latino
Luis G.	2009-2016 (7)	5	San Bernardino	Latino
Devon D.	2008-200; 2012-2018 (7)	6	San Mateo	White
Joseph S.	2001-2005 (4)	5	Santa Clara	White
Mattias Q.	2010-2014 (4)	5	Santa Clara	Black
Keisha W.	2008-2016 (8)	7	Santa Clara	Black
Robin L.	2006-2015 (9)	5	Fresno	White
Tessa V.	2015-2019 (4)	5	San Mateo	White
Genesis P.	2010-2017 (7)	5	San Mateo	Latino
Dina L.	2002-2010 (8)	7	San Mateo	Latino
Vera A.	2004-2009 (5)	6	San Mateo	Black
Ben W.	1999-2002; 2008-2017 (10)	10	Fresno	White
Albert J.	2012-2018 (6)	5	Fresno	Latino
Richard D.	2005-2012 (7)	7	San Bernardino	White

Damian E.	2009-2019 (10)	7	Santa Clara	Black
Destiny P.	2005-2010 (5)	6	Santa Clara	Black
Ashley B.	2003-2010 (7)	5	San Mateo	AAPI
Andrea R.	2015-2020 (5)	6	Fresno	Latino
Michael A.	2001-2012 (11)	8	Santa Clara	Latino
Lance M.	2009-2015 (6)	4	Fresno	Black
Eric S.	2002-2007 (5)	6	San Mateo	AAPI
Nicole C.	2010-2018 (8)	7	Santa Clara	Latino
Peter M.	2012-2019 (7)	6	Fresno	White
Byron W.	2004-2013 (9)	6	San Bernardino	Black
Josh B.	2000-2008 (8)	7	Fresno	Latino
Melody H.	2006-2011 (4)	4	Santa Clara	Black
Phillipe F.	2002-2013 (11)	8	Fresno	Latino
Jordan G.	2011-2018 (7)	6	San Bernardino	Black
Maya O.	2005-2013 (8)	7	San Mateo	Latino
Juan G.	2007-2012 (5)	6	San Bernardino	Latino
Uriah V.	2011-2020 (9)	5	San Bernardino	Black
Anissa P.	2004-2011 (7)	4	Fresno	Latino
Katie M.	2010-2016 (6)	5	Santa Clara	White

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