

# Telling a New Coming-of-Age Story

Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public Understandings  
of Transition Age Youth

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A **FrameWorks** Map the Gaps Report

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# Introduction

From J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* to Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, coming-of-age novels and movies tell stories of individuals finding their rightful place in society by finding out who they, themselves, are.<sup>i</sup> While such tropes are well established in American culture, one version of this coming-of-age story is missing from the public psyche: the story of youth transitioning out of the foster care system. Their story, including the unique challenges and opportunities they face, is overlooked in public culture and discourse. Transition age youth, in other words, aren’t *misperceived* by the public; they are *imperceptible*.

The public *does* have ways of thinking about the foster care system and adolescence. And, when asked about coming of age in the foster care system, the public draws on these ways of thinking to understand—or “fill in the blanks”— what it means. This report explores these ways of thinking, presenting research findings from a project sponsored by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. This project ultimately aims to produce an effective strategy for reframing the issue of transition age youth—to create a new coming-of-age story about transition age youth that the public can hear, understand, and remember.

Communicating effectively about transition age youth—young people who are aging out of the foster care system as they reach their late teens and early twenties— first requires a clear sense of the core ideas the public must understand about transition age youth and what our society must do to support them. The report begins by distilling this “untranslated story,” which summarizes findings from interviews with experts. This story represents the content to be communicated to the public via a reframing strategy. It reflects experts’ understanding of what foster care is; who transition age youth are; what types of support they need; why it is important to support transition age youth; and how we can best support them.

We then describe the cultural models—shared assumptions and implicit ways of thinking across our culture—that underlie how Americans understand and reason about adolescence, foster care, and, ultimately, transition age youth. The first and most important finding from this research is that the very *concept* of transition age youth is missing in the public conscience. Americans don’t recognize transition age youth as a discrete population with specific challenges and lack established ways of thinking about this group.

However, Americans *do* have ways of thinking about foster care and foster youth more generally, and these ways of thinking shape how they understand and reason about transition age youth when this topic is introduced. Working from hundreds of pages of interview transcripts, we identify the different ways of thinking about foster care and foster youth that are available to the public. Some are productive and can be used to communicate key ideas about transition age youth. The public, for example, understands that foster youth are likely to experience very unstable living situations and that they need supportive relationships and opportunities to develop the skills they need to thrive in adulthood.

Other ways of thinking, however, are deeply unproductive. People lack even a basic understanding of how the foster care system works. In addition, people widely assume that the trauma experienced by foster youth permanently damages them and that little can be done to mitigate the effects of trauma and improve outcomes. Moreover, people often draw on toxic stereotypes of low-income people and communities of color to explain disparities in foster care. Together, these patterns make it difficult for people to understand problems within the foster care system and solutions to support young people who are transitioning out of it.

In the final section, we map the gaps between expert and public perspectives, examining points where understandings overlap and diverge. This map identifies the key challenges facing those who communicate about transition age youth in the United States. We conclude with a set of preliminary framing recommendations, listing communications “do’s” and “don’ts,” and outline tasks to be accomplished in future reframing research. Information about research methods and participant demographics is in the Appendix.

This report lays a path toward building a coming-of-age story about transition age youth that helps the public understand this issue. It frames children and families who come into contact with the foster care system as neither victims nor villains and holds the state and society responsible for ensuring that young people in the system are able to develop to their full potential. If communicators know how the public thinks about the transition age youth, they can tell a new story that has the power to help the public better understand and support this important group.

## The Expert Story of Transition Age Youth

This section describes the main themes that emerged from 14 one-hour interviews with researchers, advocates, practitioners, and policymakers who focus on young people transitioning out of the foster care system. These themes comprise the “untranslated story” of transition age youth that experts want to communicate to the public. The untranslated story is organized around five central questions:

1. What is foster care and how does it work?
2. Who are transition age youth?
3. What challenges do transition age youth experience?
4. Why is it important to support transition age youth?
5. How can we support transition age youth?

# 1. What is foster care and how does it work?

- **Foster care is the state guardianship and temporary out-of-home placement of children and youth.** Children in the foster care system are wards of the state, meaning that a court has taken legal responsibility for them. These children are placed in living situations outside of their homes of origin. Placements are with other family members (i.e., kinship providers), licensed foster homes, group homes, therapeutic group homes, and residential treatment facilities.
- **Children and young people enter foster care when the state deems it necessary to protect their safety.** Foster care is intended first and foremost to protect young people and maintain their physical safety. Abuse and neglect are the leading causes of referral to the child welfare system. State officials, such as judges and employees of the child welfare or foster care system, review cases to determine if a child’s safety is at risk and foster care is necessary.
- **The state is more likely to intervene in families with marginalized identities.** Children of color, in poverty, with disabilities, and who identify as LGBTQ+ are more likely to experience foster care, as are those whose parents have substance use or mental health problems. Families with limited access to resources that promote safety and stability, such as secure housing, mental health and substance use treatment, and child care have more difficulty meeting children’s basic needs.
- **Biases—especially among people who work in the foster care system—influence which children are placed in foster care.** Decisions about what constitutes appropriate or inappropriate parenting intersect with implicit and explicit biases. These biases include, for example, the perception that low-income people or people of color are more threatening than their white or more affluent peers. Foster care workers are not immune to bias, which influences a child’s likelihood of entering the system. These perceptions also influence ongoing case reporting (e.g., reporting on changes in the safety of a family’s home), which affects a child’s likelihood of remaining in foster care.
- **The foster care system’s ultimate goal is achieving wellbeing through reunification or permanent placements.** When possible, families with children in foster care are connected to resources or services intended to eliminate safety concerns and allow children to return to their families of origin. If this is not possible, the goal is permanent placement in a living situation with at least one adult with whom children have a continuous, reciprocal relationship, such as adoption. Experts noted that the goal of promoting wellbeing is still relatively new and often not reflected in the system’s policies.

## 2. Who are transition age youth?

- **Transition age youth are those who experience foster care during adolescence or reach adulthood while in foster care.** Transition age youth are either placed in foster care during adolescence or “age out” of the system when they become adults (between the ages of 16 and 24). Even when permanency or reunification is achieved, young people who have experienced foster care during adolescence are included in the definition of transition age youth. Experts agreed that the definition should be expanded to include young adulthood, noting that brain development continues through the mid-20s and that most young people who are not involved with foster care are not expected to be fully independent adults until this point.
- **Transition age youth comprise a small proportion of children in foster care.** The vast majority of children who experience foster care exit the system before they are considered transition age youth. Young people who reach adulthood while in foster care represent a small but important percentage—16 percent—of the foster care population.
- **Transition age is location-dependent.** Upper age limits vary widely. Many states consider youth fully transitioned at 18, while others use federal matching funds to extend the age to 21. Some states and localities extend the age further, to 26. This leads to variability in the services and resources available to young people as they transition out of foster care, including medical, financial, relational, educational, or employment supports that are sometimes provided by the state beyond age 18.

## 3. What challenges do transition age youth experience?

- **Transition age youth do not receive the same supports—tangible or intangible—that most other young people have.** Transition age youth need access to the same supports that other young people receive from parents, families, mentors, and communities. These supports are tangible, such as housing, tuition, or other financial supports, and intangible, such as emotional support and advocacy.
- **Transition age youth experience fluctuating and unstable living situations.** Transition age youth often experience multiple short-term placements, including kinship placements, group homes, residential care, and foster home placements with state-certified families. Compared with children and youth who have exited the foster care system and been placed in permanent homes, transition age youth are less likely to have a consistent living arrangement.
- **Transition age youth often lack supportive, continuous relationships.** Having someone to go to for advice and guidance, whether about romantic relationships, setting up doctor appointments, or planning vacations, helps young people learn to navigate these types of situations and tasks.

These relationships are key sources of emotional support and advocacy.

- **Opportunities to learn essential life skills are limited.** Transition age youth need knowledge and skills to function as adults, such as budgeting and financial literacy, the ability to navigate adult health care systems, knowing how to buy and prepare food, and skills to enter the job market. Transition age youth often lack opportunities to develop these skills.
- **Material supports are difficult to access and often restricted to certain settings.** Transition age youth lack the material supports that most youth receive from their families during early adulthood, such as housing, education, and financial assistance. For example, transition age youth in higher education may not have anywhere to go during university breaks. Financial supports that exist for transition age youth are limited and location-specific. For example, in some locations, help is available to transition age youth who are enrolled in higher education but not to youth entering the job market or vocational training programs. Transition age youth need concrete supports, such as stable housing options and support in educational and vocational endeavors, to improve their chances of success in adulthood.
- **Access to trauma-informed services and providers is not guaranteed.** In addition to standard supports for young people, transition age youth need access to trauma-informed care. Trauma may have occurred prior to or during involvement with foster care; indeed, the process of removing a child from home is itself traumatic. Because transition age youth are more likely to have had traumatic experiences, their educators, case workers, caregivers, health care providers, and others who work with them should be equipped to provide trauma-informed care. These services are currently inadequate; additional training and resources are needed to improve trauma-informed care.

#### 4. Why is it important to support transition age youth?

- **The state's intervention and legal guardianship of children creates a responsibility to ensure their wellbeing.** Because society recognizes the occasional need to protect children and youth by removing them from their homes and placing them in the care of the state, society has a social responsibility to make sure they have the support and services they need to become healthy, successful adults. Keeping young people physically safe until they reach adulthood is not enough. Assuming the role of legal guardian means taking on the responsibility of ensuring young people have the knowledge, skills, and emotional wellbeing to thrive as adults.
- **Providing proper support to transition age youth builds resiliency and improves educational, employment, health, and social outcomes.** Experts agreed that transition age youth who have the supports they need, including financial, material, educational, medical, vocational, and relational resources, are more likely to become successful adults. Well-supported transition age youth are

more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, be fully employed, and engage in positive relationships with others as adults.

- **Supporting transition age youth decreases the future cost of social programs.** Former foster youth experience higher rates of homelessness, under- or unemployment, involvement in the criminal justice system, and poor educational and health outcomes as adults. Consequently, they are more likely to have their children involved in foster care and/or use public assistance programs as adults. Society can avert these outcomes to a significant degree, which, in turn, decreases the future costs of these social programs.
- **Transition age youth who reach their full potential yield economic, social, and civic benefits.** In addition to lowering future costs, supporting young people as they transition out of foster care leads to societal gains. Foster youth who are properly supported are more likely to get well-paying jobs. They are also more likely to participate in their communities and engage in civic and democratic processes.

## 5. How can society support transition age youth?

- **Extend eligibility for transitional services through the mid-20s.** Assistance with medical, financial, vocational, educational, and/or housing needs beyond the age of 18 is essential for transition age youth as they enter adulthood. Transition age youth need support in early adulthood that is comparable to the support most youth receive from their families.
- **Expand housing, vocational, financial, and educational resources, and ensure they meet the needs of individuals and regions.** In addition to extending the age through which transition age youth are eligible to receive support, there is a need to increase available supports, such as on-campus advocacy centers in higher education settings, guaranteed housing, job training and placement, and unconditional financial assistance.<sup>ii</sup> Experts also explained that resources must be varied and flexible so they can meet the unique needs of all young people, allowing them to work toward their own goals.
- **Provide high-quality, trauma-informed services.** Transition age youth benefit from working with service providers who have skills and training in recognizing and responding to the effects of trauma. For example, educators who understand how traumatic experiences, such as being separated from one's family while in foster care, impact learning are better equipped to provide targeted supports that meet the unique needs of each student and family.
- **Promote collaboration between child- and adult-serving systems.** Transition age youth move between multiple social service systems, and the transition from childhood to adulthood multiplies the number of systems youth must deal with. Moving from child- to adult-serving

systems often requires young people to complete multiple applications and meetings, often delaying or discouraging services. Facilitating communication between foster care workers, families, service providers, and young people throughout the transitional period will make system transitions smoother. Additionally, improved data-sharing between health care, social security, housing, employment, and education systems improves the quality and consistency of services because it ensures that providers are aware of young people's unique strengths, interests, and current or ongoing needs.

- **Prioritize interventions that reduce the likelihood children will enter and remain in foster care.** Experts tended to view the existing needs of transition age youth as a failure of the system. Ideally, children would never enter the foster care system. Increasing support for families would reduce the need for foster care. When children do enter foster care, the system should either reunify children and youth with their families or find permanent placements for all children and youth before they become adults.
- **Increase families' access to services that promote wellbeing and safety in the home.** Families with children involved in the foster care system should be supported in working toward reunification. Foster care workers often refer families to services such as parenting classes and treatment programs for mental health and/or substance use disorders. They do so to improve the safety of their homes and, ultimately, to enable reunification. However, these services are often disconnected from the foster care system and have long waitlists and limited availability, creating barriers to family attendance and increasing the time children spend in foster care. Families involved in the foster care system should have priority access to needed services, such as programs focused on mental health, substance use, housing, corrections, home-based services, and employment assistance.
- **Increase financial supports to promote kinship and family-based foster care placements.** Children and youth who cannot safely return home should be placed with family members or in family-based foster care. Experts stressed the need to engage more kinship providers—family members who already have a relationship with the child or young person—through streamlined licensing procedures that ensure these providers receive financial support equal to the support given to non-kinship foster care providers. Additionally, family-based foster care settings should be prioritized over congregate care or group home settings. Both kinship and family-based foster care settings can provide youth with a sense of normalcy while in foster care and increase the likelihood that they will find permanency before they transition out of the system.

# The Untranslated Expert Story of Transition Age Youth

## What is foster care and how does it work?

- Foster care is the state guardianship and temporary out-of-home placement of children and youth.
- Children and young people enter foster care when the state deems it necessary to protect their safety.
- The state is more likely to intervene in families with marginalized identities.
- Biases—especially among people who work in the foster care system—influence which children are placed in foster care.
- The foster care system’s ultimate goal is achieving wellbeing through family reunification or permanent placements.

## Who are transition age youth?

- Transition age youth are those who experience foster care during adolescence or reach adulthood while in foster care.
- Transition age youth comprise a small proportion of children in foster care.
- Transition age is location-dependent.

## What challenges do transition age youth experience?

- Transition age youth do not receive the same supports—tangible or intangible—that most other young people have.
- Transition age youth experience fluctuating and unstable living situations.
- Transition age youth often lack supportive, continuous relationships.
- Opportunities to learn essential life skills are limited.
- Material supports are difficult to access and often restricted to certain settings.
- Access to trauma-informed services and providers is not guaranteed.

## Why is it important to support transition age youth?

- The state’s intervention and legal guardianship of children creates a responsibility to ensure their wellbeing.
- Providing proper support to transition age youth builds resiliency and improves educational, employment, health, and social outcomes.
- Supporting transition age youth decreases the future cost of social programs.
- Transition age youth who reach their full potential yield collective economic, social, and civic benefits.

## How can we support transition-age youth?

- Extend eligibility for transitional services through the mid-20s.
- Expand housing, vocational, financial, and educational resources, and ensure they meet the needs of individuals and regions.
- Provide high quality, trauma-informed services.
- Promote collaboration between child- and adult-serving systems.
- Prioritize interventions that reduce the likelihood children will enter and remain in foster care:
  - Increase families’ access to services that promote wellbeing and safety in the home.
  - Increase financial supports to promote kinship and family-based foster care placements.

# Public Understandings of Transition Age Youth

In this section, we present the cultural models—the implicit understandings, assumptions, and patterns of reasoning—that shape public thinking about adolescents in foster care and transition age youth. Cultural models are cognitive shortcuts to understanding: ways of interpreting, organizing, and making meaning of the world around us that are shaped through years of experience and expectations and by beliefs and values embedded in our national culture.<sup>iii</sup> These ways of thinking are available to all members of the public, although different models may be activated at different times.

In exploring cultural models, we are looking to identify *how* people think rather than *what* they think. Public opinion research, on the other hand, documents people’s surface-level responses to questions. Notably, people toggle between cultural models, thinking with different ones at different times, depending on context and conversational cues. For instance, in a recent, related research project on adolescent development, we found that Americans hold two competing models of adolescence in mind. The first views adolescence as a period of increasing independence and positive exploration of identity. The second assumes that it is a particularly dangerous period marked by rebellion against authority figures and risk-taking. These competing ways of thinking about adolescence exist simultaneously in our culture and in people’s minds.

## CULTURAL MODELS

Cultural models are deep-seated patterns of thinking about a topic that are shared across members of a culture. They are taken-for-granted, automatic assumptions that people rely on to interpret, organize, and make meaning of the world. Everyone holds multiple cultural models about any given social issue—some are more in the spotlight (*dominant* models) and some are more in the background (*recessive* models).

## COGNITIVE HOLES

Cognitive holes are areas where the public lacks cultural models; in other words, people simply lack ways of thinking about an issue or aspects of it. They are areas of public understanding that must be filled in by new communications strategies.

## BLACK BOXES

Black boxes are areas where the public is aware of the existence of an issue or a concept but does not understand *how* it exactly works. New explanatory strategies are needed to clarify this process and foster deeper public understanding.

In addition to cultural models, people have *cognitive holes* and *black boxes* around certain issues. Cognitive holes are areas where the public lacks ways of thinking about an issue. As noted in the introduction and explained below, the public does not think of transition age youth as a discrete group and lacks established ways of thinking about them. Black boxes exist when people are familiar with an issue or concept but lack ways of thinking about *how it works*. As discussed below, members of the public know that the foster care system exists and have some rough ways of thinking about it, but these ways of thinking are thin on explanatory detail. Both cognitive holes and black boxes are areas where understanding must be filled in.

Understanding the cultural models available to the public, as well as black boxes and cognitive holes, allows communicators to frame messages to activate productive models, background unproductive ones, and fill in understanding where needed. This analysis allows us to understand the pitfalls in the cultural landscape that prevent people from accessing the expert perspective described above. It also enables communicators to identify opportunities to help the public arrive at a fuller understanding of the issue. Mapping this cultural landscape provides communicators with a critical resource, allowing them to steer around unproductive ways of thinking and frame communications in ways that allow them to better get their message across.

Below, we describe the main cultural models the public uses to think about adolescence and youth development and explore public understandings of the foster care system. Together, these sets of models provide the broader context for thinking about transition age youth. We trace the implications of each set of models on public thinking about transition age youth, highlighting how they facilitate or impede understanding. We then outline public understandings of adolescents in foster care, which the public applies when thinking about transition age youth, and discuss how these ways of thinking enable or obstruct access to the key points distilled in the untranslated story. Finally, we explore public thinking about solutions—that is, what can be done to support transition age youth and adolescents in foster care in the United States—and explain how this thinking stems from cultural models.

## Cultural Models of Adolescence and Youth Development<sup>iv</sup>

### ► **Cognitive Hole: The Terms “Adolescence” and “Youth”**

Interview participants expressed uncertainty about the meaning of the terms “adolescence” and “youth,” offering widely divergent ideas about the ages that the terms refer to. In some cases, they understood either “adolescence” or “youth” to refer to the period of life preceding the teenage years, interpreting these words to refer to children over the age of five, or perhaps between the ages of 9 and 13. The term “youth” was especially confusing, as it was often not understood as a period of development but rather an attitude or outlook on life (e.g., a youthful disposition).

**Participant:** I think once you get into pre-preschool and preschool, you're starting to be in adolescence.

—

**Researcher:** What ages are you thinking of when you think of adolescence, the period of time?

**Participant:** When I think of adolescence I can, maybe, say 7 to 13. I don't know if that's too young. Yeah, that's what I think.

—

**Researcher:** What about the word "youth"?

**Participant:** That's a bigger age range. Youth could be in terms of years ... youth. In years it could be 12? 10? Ten or 11, up to what age? Let's see. ... More like 15, since we're putting all these labels. ... Youth could also mean youthful attitude. Could be not only age, but outlook. Could be outlook. It could be youthful health. Youth could refer to many things, not just age.

Importantly, confusion about or unfamiliarity with the *terms* “adolescence” and “youth” does not signal an absence of knowledge about these concepts. On the contrary, the public knows that there is a discrete stage of life between childhood and adulthood, which participants associated with the term “teenager” rather than “adolescent” or “youth.” The public has multiple ways of thinking about the teenage and adolescent years. These models emerged after we clarified that “adolescence” is the period between childhood and adulthood.

### ▶ The *Independence Is Key* Cultural Model

Members of the public assume that adolescence is the period when people become “their own person.” When thinking with this model, people focus on the fact that adolescents become progressively less materially dependent on their parents and more self-sufficient in the world (e.g., by hitting important milestones like high school graduation or getting a first job), while simultaneously building their own identity and values through exploration. In other words, adolescents are moving toward both material and intellectual independence.

**Researcher:** What comes to mind [when] specifically talking about adolescence as a time period in someone’s life?

**Participant:** It’s a time of growth and finding out how they fit into their world and the world around them. A time to test their own opinions about things, to give voice to them. It’s one of the *times of exploration*.

—

**Researcher:** What kind of things are adolescents experimenting with?

**Participant:** Authority figures in terms of where they fit in, what they’re allowed to do, what they’re not allowed to do, what happens if there are limits or restrictions—consequences for things they do; also, discovery in their path and career and things like that.

### ▶ The *Dangerous Times* Cultural Model

Members of the public consistently understand adolescence as a time of inherent risk and danger in which adolescents are particularly vulnerable to a variety of threats. This way of thinking relies on three distinct but complementary assumptions:

- (i) The world is inherently dangerous and poses a threat to adolescents’ physical and emotional wellbeing. Participants typically—though not exclusively—focused on risks related to drugs, alcohol, and sex.
- (ii) Adolescents make risky decisions as part of rebelling against their parents. Rebellious—and potentially dangerous—behavior is often part of becoming independent and building one’s own identity.

- (iii) Adolescents are fragile and easily corrupted by negative influences, even when initially set on a productive life trajectory. Participants typically focused on peer pressure as a key way in which adolescents can be thrown off course and go down the wrong path.

These assumptions lead people to think that risk inheres in adolescence and cannot be avoided.

**Participant:** I think adolescents are very impressionable; they are still building their philosophy in life and what their value system is.

—

**Participant:** A lot of [adolescents] start having sex and doing a lot of defying their parents, doing things they shouldn't be doing—those kind of things.

—

**Researcher:** How do their friends affect whether or not they do well?

**Participant:** If they are a follower, and they are doing well, and they might see a friend is going the opposite, they go, “Oh, I'm going to be like them.” So peer pressure is a big one.

**Researcher:** What sort of behaviors do you think that they sort of model?

**Participant:** Hanging out, ditching school. They may do some type of drugs or drinking. They may be involved in it. None of those are ever good.

### ▶ The *Moral Compass* Cultural Model

When thinking with the *Moral Compass* model, members of the public assume that because adolescents are going through a period of transition, their internal moral compass is not yet set, and they still need adults—and, most often, their parents—to steer them in the right direction. Three scenarios emerged in the interviews, assigning different—but complementary—roles to the adults in an adolescent's life. Adults:

- (i) Support adolescents with discipline and rules by setting boundaries for their exploration.
- (ii) Support adolescents by consistently modelling a good example.
- (iii) Help assess adolescents' behaviors and decisions when they cannot do so themselves and make sure they are “on the right track.”

**Researcher:** What kind of things cause a child to do well or poorly?

**Participant:** I think good structure at home—just being parents with good habits. And I also think a nice routine.

—

**Participant:** Adolescents generally [...] need their parents. They need some *good role models*, some good people to help *guide them into doing well*, because that's where you can really mess up. Because kids need to have guidance.

—

**Participant:** Turning 18 is a scary part of your life. Let's face it. At 18, you don't know the world yet. *You need somebody to fall back on for advice and just to talk to, and again, to tell you, "Yes, you're doing the right thing," or, "No, we don't think you're doing the right thing."*

—

**Participant:** Youth—they're inexperienced. They don't have good judgment yet. They try, but they may not have enough life skills or wisdom or the judgment that a wiser and older person who has more life experience.

### ▶ The *When It Starts to Really Matter* Cultural Model

Members of the public strongly believe that what happens during adolescence has considerable consequences for the rest of people's lives and that adolescence is the period when the foundations of adulthood are truly built and set. This model is grounded in assumptions about adolescents' internal lives as well as their place in the outside world.

According to this way of thinking, experiences and events only have a lasting effect if they can be *remembered*. When drawing on this model, people assume that younger children have a limited memory of what happens to them and reason, in turn, that experiences in adolescence leave a deeper impression on people's characters. Adolescents have a wider range of experiences and opportunities to engage with the outside world, through which they develop the skills and character they will need as adults. Together, these internal and external changes make adolescence a more formative phase than early childhood and one that has greater influence on life outcomes.

**Participant:** I think you don't remember much when you are younger. I think the older you get, the more memories you are able to have.

—

**Participant:** I think younger children definitely know what's going on but don't have the emotional maturity or [know] how to process what's going on around them. You know, sometimes young kids are happy; it's simpler when you are younger, and it becomes more complicated as you get into adolescence because you are finding yourself hormonal and your body is changing and your mind is changing and you are starting to form the foundation of who you are emotionally, physically, and all that stuff. So I think it's greatly different.

### Implications for Communicators

- **Communicators must give clear definitions of "adolescence" and "youth."** Because of the public's lack of clarity about the meaning of the *terms* "adolescence" and "youth," the term "transition age youth" is particularly difficult for members of the public to parse. When using these terms, communicators should explain that they are referring to the period between childhood and adulthood and clearly define the age range they have in mind.

- **The *Independence Is Key* model can help people think productively about the skills and capabilities that transition age youth need to ensure positive life outcomes.** Because this model fosters understanding of adolescents’ burgeoning independence in both the world and the mind, it can be used to explain how transition age youth must be supported. Communicators should highlight how transition age youth, like all adolescents, need support in becoming independent and explain how concrete services and supports can both cultivate the skills transition age youth need to thrive on their own and provide the resources they need to succeed on their own.
  
- **The *Dangerous Times* model is likely to undermine support for an asset-building approach toward transition age youth.** Because this model makes vulnerability a defining characteristic of *all* adolescents, it is likely to lead people to think that the main—if not only—responsibility of the foster care system is to protect adolescents against trauma and other threats posed by their environment or by themselves. As a result, this model makes it hard to see positive, asset-building supports, such as educational or vocational resources, as a priority. To avoid cuing this model, communicators should focus on the positive side of development—the cultivation of skills and capacities that enable independence—rather than on vulnerabilities and risks.
  
- **The *Moral Compass* and *When It Starts to Really Matter* models help the public understand the need to support foster and transition age youth.** By focusing attention on the adult supports all adolescents needs (*Moral Compass*) and framing adolescence as a period that significantly shapes individuals’ life outcomes (*When It Starts to Really Matter*), these models help communicators raise the profile of transition age youth and underscore the importance of providing strong supports for this group. Each, however, has unproductive aspects .
  - ***Moral Compass* contributes to stigmatizing and fatalistic thinking about foster and transition age youth.** By focusing on morality and behavior rather than on developmental processes, this model supports unproductive models of foster care and foster youth; for example, it leads the public to think that the lack of adult support in adolescence virtually condemns foster and transition age youth to poor life outcomes because they don’t have the opportunity to develop strong morals and good habits. Communicators who leverage this model should emphasize that adults support adolescents’ development rather than instill morality and model good behaviors.
  
  - **The *When It Starts to Really Matter* model can make it harder for people to see that policies and interventions in early childhood reduce the number of transition age youth.** Because it focuses the public’s attention on the key role of adolescence in shaping individuals’ life outcomes, this model also obscures the important developmental processes that happen earlier children’s lives. As a result, it undermines efforts to build public support for early childhood policies and interventions to prevent entry into the foster care system. Communications relying on the productive aspects of this model should always explain how adolescent development builds on the foundational developmental processes that take place during early childhood.

## Cultural Models of the Foster Care System

### ▶ **Black Box: The Foster Care System**

In interviews, we found that participants generally had little knowledge of the foster care system. While they could talk about social workers and foster families, the “system” itself, and how it works, was a black box. Participants were unsure how the it is run and who runs it. Some mentioned that government runs it but could not decide at which level (federal, state, or local); others thought that it might be run by charities or youth-serving nonprofit organizations; and many thought schools were involved in some undefined capacity.

**Researcher:** Are there any particular organizations that you know of that are involved in or in charge of foster care?

**Participant:** In charge of? There’s Big Brothers and Big Sisters, but they don’t have to do with foster care. I don’t know who’s in charge. It’d be some governmental system, I think.

—

**Participant:** I guess there are—I don’t know. But I guess there are some that are, Catholic-based maybe, who have nuns who live in the buildings. I’ve seen that on TV and stuff, but I don’t know if that’s a situation. I can’t really answer that adequately. I don’t really know.

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**Researcher:** What is foster care?

**Participant:** I’m not exactly sure of all the ins and outs of it, but I would imagine that... Well, a long time ago, it was usually nuns or the church or something. Now, it’s more of a state thing. There’s state-funded houses like this. So, I’m thinking that when they become too crowded, they start looking for foster homes for these children. That’s my guess.

While participants lacked an understanding of the basic details of how the foster care *system* works, they did have a set of established ways of thinking about foster *care*: its character, its purpose, and the motivations of actors involved. These models shape how people process new information—and messages—about foster care.

### ▶ **The *Levels of Care* Cultural Model**

When reasoning with this model, people think children require two different types of care. First, they have basic material needs (e.g., food, shelter, and safety) that must be met. Second, they have emotional needs (e.g., love and personal attention). These needs were understood as more complex but just as essential for positive development. In other words, members of the public firmly understand that children cannot survive and thrive if either their basic or emotional needs are not met.

Participants suggested that foster families and other care outside the home environment can provide for material needs at best and will not meet children’s or adolescents’ emotional needs. In other words, foster care is about subsistence and safety only. Biological parents, in contrast, were generally assumed to be invested in children and thus interested in and capable of providing both levels of care.

**Participant:** It's like [foster parents] could be putting a roof over their head, but they're not being that moral compass or that family unit.

—

**Participant:** [Parenting] is a really difficult job. It's all-encompassing. I think it's very hard to try to do it well. And to ask people who aren't even related to these kids, strangers, to do that... That's a hard thing to ask of people. I mean, biology makes you, bonds you, most cases. So, you're asking somebody who has no biology, no automatic bond, to do this.

## ▶ The *Limbo* Cultural Model

Members of the public assume that the foster care system is a transient place that children and adolescents enter for protection as they wait for a more permanent solution; placement in a foster family is seen as a temporary stop on the way to adoption or family reunification. Members of the public reason that children and adolescents need material and emotional stability to ensure positive development and that permanent placement is necessary to give them access to reliable relationships and resources.

**Researcher:** When I say the word foster care, what comes to mind?

**Participant:** I think of children who are being temporarily placed in a home because their own home situation is not viable.

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**Participant:** When they're in the foster care, it's more temporary. When you go into adoption, you get more permanent care. You know, you got parents, actual parents.

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**Participant:** From my understanding, here, there are temporary homes: people that take [foster children], like my friend. And where that child's staying, I think she's got three other kids. It's like a transition home. They'll pull them out. They've got their home. They might put them in my home for two or three months until they find a suitable place or a suitable adoption slot.

When children and adolescents stay in the foster care system for longer periods of time—when the temporary becomes permanent—people assume this involves moving from home to home in a way that is detrimental to positive development, either because it affects children's emotional wellbeing or because it prevents them from having the same opportunities as children in more stable environments.

**Participant:** Stability is much better for [foster children] to be open to learning and receiving and trusting and all of that. *Otherwise, the bouncing around obviously is going to shut somebody down* and not want to be open and learning and looking at the blessings and the positive things in their life.

—

**Participant:** [The foster care system should give] children a home and a stable environment. So, when they go to school they can feel comfortable and learn and have the same capacity for a life [as] people that have their biological parents, who have a stable environment. That would be the goal: to create an environment that levels the playing field, because it is a challenge. For some kids who go through the system, it's not a level playing field. They don't get the education that they need, they don't get

the support that some students have and the same opportunities. Financial opportunities, you know, seeing, experiencing the world in a sense that some kids who come from a stable environment have.

### ▶ **The *Standardized and Cold* Cultural Model**

Members of the public overwhelmingly think of the foster care system as impersonal and standardized to the point of dehumanization. Participants reasoned that it is incapable of providing children and adolescents with the individualized attention and care they need.<sup>v</sup> They painted the picture of a faceless system that functions as the exact negative of a loving home, treating children and adolescents as “numbers” rather than individuals, sometimes to the point of exposing them to cruelty and prison-like conditions.

This way of thinking likely derives from a more general model of government and public systems in which people understand government programs as impersonal, standardized, and generally inefficient. In the interviews, participants often attributed lack of adequate individualized attention to lack of funding. They explained that because social workers are overworked and underpaid, they simply cannot attend to foster children’s needs as they should, which means many “slip through the cracks.”

**Participant:** When you see a kid for 15 minutes, and you're moving on to the next one, how are you going to establish a relationship by a chart, you know, or a questionnaire? That's not who the kid really is.

—

**Participant:** A group facility is, to me, almost like, not prison, but you are on these bunk beds and all this environment where you don't get much attention, where it's easy to fall through the cracks. The institution, or the group home, I'm very leery of, even though I understand why they don't have as many homes or families that are willing to volunteer and do this type of work.

—

**Participant:** When I think of foster care, I think of the social workers overworked. There's not enough help. But I think that of a lot of governmental things. You're always standing in line. You're always waiting. And they're always understaffed and underpaid and under-acknowledged. And that's a very negative thing, too. So, the whole entire system is not a happy, wonderful, bouncy, joy-joy, happiness system. It is once somebody is placed in a wonderful and positive and nurturing environment, and they are eventually perhaps adopted. That's always a wonderful outcome. How many times that happens, unfortunately, is probably a smaller percentage than the times that it doesn't.

### ▶ **The *Bad Motives* Cultural Model**

Members of the public assume that the foster care system cannot consistently provide children and adolescents with adequate care because caregivers within the system have the wrong motivations. While participants believed that foster families can be loving, nurturing, and attentive to their foster children’s needs, they assumed that these families are the exception to the rule. On this line of thinking, the

occasional heroic foster parent has an innate desire to care for children, but most are motivated by financial gain; they do it for support payments, or worse, to prey on vulnerable children in the system.<sup>vi</sup> When drawing on this model, members of the public reason that a significant proportion of foster parents and caregivers cannot and do not care for foster children in the way that they should and that the foster care system is unable to protect children and adolescents from the harm caused by these “bad actors.”

**Participant:** I think there are different types of foster parents. There are foster parents who do it because they really want to make a difference. I think there are foster parents who do it for a check, because you get paid to be a foster parent. And in a system that pays foster parents it's hard to really weed out who's doing it for the love and who wants to help or just because they want the check. And I think there are even people who do foster care because they take advantage of the children who are in the system. They're already in the system because of being neglected, so they're easy to be victimized.

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**Participant:** Sometimes people just take [foster children] on as projects. It's like, “Okay, this kid is \$1,500, this kid is \$1,500.” Some people just see children as dollar signs. And that's not what they are. So, they can wind up in those dangerous situations, and that's what I believe happens. You see a lot of day care providers even abusing children. I don't believe within the foster care system they vet these people enough.

### Implications for Communicators

- **Because members of the public don't understand how the foster care system works, they have a hard time reasoning about how to improve it or comprehending when and how young people transition out of the system.** Lack of basic knowledge about the system makes it difficult for people to see the need for specific policies and interventions, including policies to better support transition age youth.
- **The *Levels of Care* model limits people's sense of what foster care can and should accomplish.** When drawing on this model, people recognize the importance of fulfilling children's and adolescents' social and emotional needs but assume that the foster system is inherently ill equipped to do so. As a result, this model makes it hard for people to think about how the system could provide for needs beyond safety and subsistence. When discussing the role of the foster care system, communicators must be careful not to overemphasize children's and youth's safety, as this is likely to reinforce the assumption that safety and survival are the system's *only* goals.
- **The *Limbo* model supports an accurate understanding of the basic principles of the foster care system but makes transition age youth hard to think about.** This model aligns with the expert understanding that foster care is supposed to be temporary and that all children and youth who enter it are meant to be either reunited with their birth families or offered permanent placements (e.g., via adoption). However, because people assume that the foster system is transitional, they have difficulty recognizing that youth can be in foster care until they reach

adulthood. Communicators must explain why some youth are in foster care when they reach adulthood and offer examples of specific cases; doing so will “create space” for people to think about transition age youth.

- **The *Standardized and Cold and Bad Motives* models fuel cynicism about the foster care system.** When people reason that the foster system is a one-size-fits-all machine (*Standardized and Cold*) or that it is filled with unsavory actors (*Bad Motives*), they likely think that the system cannot ensure good life outcomes for children in its care. The *Standardized and Cold* model also cues a general assumption that government and public services are inherently ineffective, which further reinforces a sense of fatalism—the belief that the system is destined to fall short. By locating the problem in individuals’ intentions, the *Bad Motives* model makes it hard to see how *systemic* reforms help; and, since people think there aren’t enough heroic caregivers, this model makes consistently good foster care seem impossible.

## Cultural Models of Why Adolescents Go into Foster Care

When asked to explain why children and adolescents go into foster care, participants drew on a range of different models, each of which relies on specific assumptions about these children’s families.

### ▶ The *Sensational Scenarios* Cultural Model

The dominant explanations for why children and adolescents go into foster care involve extreme, sensational scenarios: severe abuse, cruelty, parents involved in heavy drug use and a life of crime, etc. In this way of thinking, some of the worst-case scenarios (which comprise only a minority of actual cases) are understood as the norm in the foster care system.

**Researcher:** Who do you think of when you think of foster care?

**Participant:** Underprivileged children. That’s one. Abandoned kids. Abused. Neglect. [...] I would say that would be the main reason for foster care. I mean, abandonment, abuse, child abuse, abandonment, cruel punishment. Cruel punishment and abuse.

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**Researcher:** Why do adolescents end up in foster care?

**Participant:** [They are] taken from their parents because of an unsafe environment. Because the parents are involved in criminal activity and drugs.

### ▶ The *Community Values* Cultural Model

When reasoning about why the scenarios above happen, participants drew a short line between poverty and bad parenting. Members of the public assume that children and adolescents who live in poverty are

more likely to enter the foster care system at some point in their lives—not because of financial problems but because people in low-income communities have poor values; these values, they assume, lead to, and normalize, child abuse, neglect, addiction, and crime. This model is racialized; participants frequently equated (explicitly and implicitly) low-income communities with Black communities by referring to “ghettos,” “crack” consumption, and stereotypical “single mothers,”

**Participant:** I could imagine that people who are born into structures of lower development housing, ghettos, environments where it's very poor, would probably be more likely to end up in foster care. Because, generally, those areas where there's people that are poor is where a lot of times the drugs and crap is, you know. And those are the things that lead into negligent happenings, because parents, unfortunately enough, they're out there having sex for drugs. And they're neglecting themselves and their body. Then, they get pregnant. And they've just got this crack baby inside of them that they are just going to carry.

—  
**Researcher:** Are there particular families where adolescents tend to be in foster care do you think?

**Participant:** You do think lower income is African American. It'd be lower income. [...] Lower income, I think for sure, because there's more social issues there.

When thinking with the *Community Values* model, participants were more likely to favor permanently removing children and adolescents from their homes because they saw it as the only way to successfully “break the cycle” of poverty and poor moral values.

**Participant:** I think the goal of foster care is to stop the cycle. You are born into poverty, you live this life of in and out of jobs, maybe drugs, maybe not, maybe instability, maybe not, and then you have your own kid and you repeat the cycle.

—  
**Participant:** There's a movie about an adolescent teenager, and he's on his own. His mother's a crackhead. She's heavily on drugs. And he doesn't like the area he's at, at all. So, what ends up happening is a Caucasian family ends up seeing him. They stop their car and they ask him where he's going, because it's at night, and he says he's going to school. Well, they knew school was closed already at this time. So, they find out he's going there just to sleep, so he doesn't have to go back home. They end up taking him in, adopting him, and pretty much rehabilitating him to the point where now he went from poverty-stricken, drug-filled area to now he's in the upper-class area and about to be a college athlete.

### ► The *Bad Luck* Cultural Model

People appeal to fate—or bad luck—to explain cases where children and adolescents in foster care cannot be explained by horrific circumstances due to parents' dangerous behavior and poor values. Some children and adolescents are assumed to enter the foster care system simply because of misfortune and, typically, because their parents died or were too sick to care for them.

**Researcher:** Could an adolescent end up in foster care who didn't do anything wrong, who's really a good kid?

**Participant:** Oh, for sure. First thought that comes to mind, *they lose both their parents in an accident*, sure. And no family else to take care of them. What are you going to do with them? That would be the number one. They lost their parents. They had no other family.

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**Researcher:** Why would an adolescent be in foster care?

**Participant:** Typically maybe the parents died and there was nobody to take the kids.

The *Bad Luck* model indirectly reinforces the power of the *Sensational Scenarios* and the *Community Values* models by casting cases of misfortune as exceptions. It creates a stark divide between those few cases where no one could have done anything differently and thus no one is to blame and the majority of cases, where children and adolescents are in foster care because of parents' egregious behavior and bad values. These models work together to create a sharp dichotomy between two types of cases: one that blames awful parents and the other that blames no one.

### ► The *Financial Constraints Cultural Model*

When relying on this model, people are able to reason more expansively about the role played by financial resources in a family's ability to provide and care for a child. The absence of the necessary financial resources not only determines families' access to food, housing, and child care but also limits the amount of time that parents can spend caring for their children (because they might have to work long hours, for instance). According to this way of thinking, financial strain leads to more stress and tensions in the home, making it more likely that children and adolescents will enter the foster care system. In other words, people can see that a family's socioeconomic status affects its risk of coming into contact with the foster care system.

Like the *Community Values* model, the *Financial Constraints* model provides a way of thinking about the connection between people's financial status and their ability to care for children; the former focuses entirely on values and norms, while the latter focuses on societal structures. This model explains limitations on parents' ability to care for children not as the result of lack of parental concern but of external, circumstantial constraints on parents.

**Researcher:** What kinds of families are more likely to have an adolescent go into foster care?

**Participant:** Money is always a factor. The more strapped you are financially, that hurts an upbringing too. If you don't have the proper nutrition when you're young or.... There's all kinds of things that I think can affect your upbringing, but I think financial straits definitely hurt the family. There's more fighting in the home. There's no money. People are losing their homes. Unemployment, I think, affects all of that. You have parents that are unemployed. I think economics plays a big factor in raising kids.

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**Researcher:** Do you think there are particular communities in which adolescents are more likely to wind up in foster care than others?

**Participant:** The lower income definitely would, and that's sad to say but.... It may have nothing to do with the parents; it just may be they are working a lot and not overseeing, not supervising [their kids]. Say the parent don't have money for babysitting, so they're kind of like, "Okay, when you get home from school come in and lock the door, you don't let nobody in." And they open the door and let a couple of friends in and something happens, that child is going to get snatched [by Child Protective Services]. And that's not them being a bad parent; they *just can't afford* to pay all the bills and have babysitters.

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**Participant:** In this time of *economic challenge* in many places, families are unable to provide. They become homeless, or arguments about money, or relationship issues inspired by or spurred by a lack of money, you know all these societal issues.

### Implications for Communicators

- **The *Sensational Scenarios* model contributes to the public's stereotyping of the families of foster youth and transition age youth and makes systemic solutions "hard to think."** Because people tend to focus on tabloid-worthy, extreme situations of cruelty and abuse, they are likely to assume that foster children's birth parents are irredeemably bad parents. They are also likely to presume that all foster youth and transition age youth suffer from irremediable psychological "damage." This model also makes it hard for the public to see the importance of policies aimed at preventing standard cases of child neglect (e.g., mental health services, early intervention, poverty relief, etc.) and may block support for family reunification programs.
- **The *Community Values* model leads to stigmatization and fatalism.** This model reinforces toxic stereotypes of low-income, Black communities and makes foster care an issue about "them"— not "us." In other words, it is an issue that only concerns "those" communities that hold the "wrong" values rather than one for which society as a whole is responsible. This also makes certain foster youth's situations seem inevitable, as community values are perceived to be too deep and pervasive to ever change. For these reasons, communicators should be particularly wary of talking about community "values" to avoid activating the assumption that care involvement is the result of particular groups that simply have deficient values.
- **The *Bad Luck* model makes it hard to see the benefit of early intervention and prevention programs.** While this model does not stigmatize for youth, parents, and communities in the way as that the *Sensational Scenarios* and *Community Values* models do, it makes early intervention and prevention programs seem inappropriate. How, after all, can society prevent bad luck? Communicators should not overemphasize cases of parental death or sickness because they make it harder for people to see the value of preventive programs.
- **The *Financial Constraints* model is a productive starting point.** By helping people see how financial constraints can impede care, this model takes blame off of parents and makes it possible to see how prevention and early intervention stabilize families and reduce the need for foster care. Communicators and advocates can build upon the *Financial Constraints* model to combat toxic

stereotypes of families involved with the foster care system and to make the case for the types of solutions that can help foster youth in general and transition age youth in particular.

## Cultural Models of Adolescents in Foster Care

### ► Cognitive Hole: Transition Age Youth

Members of the public are, perhaps not surprisingly, unfamiliar with the term “transition age youth.” More importantly, the public doesn’t understand the *concept* of transition age youth. In other words, transition age youth are a cognitive hole. People do not think of these youth as a distinct population, nor do they have established ways of thinking about them. To the contrary, people’s models of the foster care system, in fact, make it *difficult* for people to think about transition age youth. Because people think of the foster system as temporary, the idea that children can “age out” of it is hard to grasp. If the system is temporary, then children who enter it should move out of it as a matter of course—as they move back to their families or to permanent placements.

At the same time, the public holds clear and deeply ingrained models of adolescents in the foster care system that influence how they think about transition age youth. These models generate the sense that adolescents in foster care are undesirable for most foster families and, as a result, often fail to find permanent placements. Participants sometimes compared adolescents to older dogs abandoned at the pound.

**Participant:** From what I’ve read, [older kids] age out of the system. And as I said, they get bounced around, that I know. I’ve read kids get bounced around from one home to the next, and it’s very, very hard, you know. And I see sometimes on TV, on the news they’ll have a kid that’s looking for a home, and they’ll say, “My name is....” It’s really sad that they have to advertise *almost like a pet like you see on these pet-of-the-day ads*, and it can be found at this shelter and they’ll tell you a little bit about them. I mean, how *sad*.

—

**Researcher:** Are there differences in the effects [of foster care] between younger children and adolescents?

**Participant:** I think the *younger ones have more luck at getting foster homes or permanent homes*. I just think it’s a numbers thing. I *think people want younger kids just like people want puppies and kittens*. It’s a *sad thing*.

Below, we describe the cultural models that members of the public use to think about adolescents in foster care and explain how they produce the perception that adolescents in foster care are undesirable for most foster families.

## ▶ The *Double Trouble* Cultural Model

The core assumption of this model is that parenting foster youth is at least twice as hard as parenting biological or adopted adolescents. Members of the public reason that all adolescents are inherently prone to poor decision-making, rebellion, and risky behaviors (see the *Dangerous Times* cultural model above), but adolescents in the foster care system are at least “double the trouble” because they haven’t had the stability and guidance needed to limit troublesome or risky behavior. In other words, foster youth act out, as all adolescents do, but their impulses are not checked by the same internal and external buffers that restrict other adolescents in stable family structures. As a result, participants often associated foster youth with the worst-case scenarios of adolescence.

**Researcher:** What comes to mind if I say adolescents in foster care, or teenagers in foster care?

**Participant:** *Trouble.*

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**Participant:** Once you get to a certain age, you want your parents to have less control. As long as you know that they have good heads on their shoulders, you can trust their decisions. But if they’re not from that environment, they may not make the best decisions. [...] If they were from a household where there was no real parent [or] parental figure, [they] may lack the guidance and structure. Some may rebel against it and say, “Well, I’ve been on my own. I can do what I want.”

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**Researcher:** What does being in foster care involve for an adolescent specifically, do you think?

**Participant:** Definitely supervision, because they [are the] age where they are trying different things, good or bad. They are at the age [where] sex may be involved, maybe smoking cigarettes or weed.

## ▶ The *Set Clay* Cultural Model

When thinking with the *Set Clay* model, members of the public think that older children and adolescents have reached an age when their character and identity is largely set for life—for better or worse. Whereas younger children can be molded to a new family’s ways and values, adolescents are who they are. Foster youth, in fact, are not only unlikely to change but can threaten a new household’s established values and identity, participants said.

**Participant:** That’s the unfortunate thing with the people who end up in foster care, even later on in their life. They had a structure, and something happens in their household; their mom gets on drugs or some circumstances that puts them in foster care. It’s so unfortunate, because it’s so much more difficult for older kids to get adopted, because who wants that? They *already have a certain mind state.*

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**Participant:** Adolescence in foster care could be negative because the child is in middle age-range and so they are *used to one thing.* They are used to what they do at home, whether good or bad, and it’s kind of hard to mold them into your household. You may have other kids in a household as well and you don’t want the foster care kids to corrupt your children, or vice versa, because your children might not be perfect as well. So you just want them to come as one, but you know it’s kind of hard to

do when you are an adolescent because, like I said, *they are kind of set in their own little ways of doing things*.

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**Researcher:** And why do you think those problem children would be less likely to get a permanent placement?

**Participant:** Because it's hard to teach an old dog new tricks. Even though they're not old dogs, that's what they know. You know? What you know is what you know.

## The *Indelible Trauma* Cultural Model

Participants assumed that older children and youth in foster care were likely to be permanently scarred, both emotionally and psychologically, as a result of trauma experienced *before* entering the foster care system, as well as from trauma *during* their time in the system. When drawing on this model, people assume that the older a child or an adolescent is, the deeper and more permanent an imprint traumatic experiences leave, because the older they are, the more likely they are to retain and remember experiences in a lasting way (see the *When It Starts to Really Matter* cultural model above). Participants reasoned that the logical next step for permanently damaged youth was a life of crime and drug use.

**Participant:** You know when you had chalkboards in school? Not whiteboards, chalkboards? And you'd erase something? You still could kind of see it. It was never clean again. That's kind of the way I think of it. It's not ever a clean slate. It's always imprinted. When you're an adolescent, things are imprinted, and they don't go away. You can erase them, and you can grow for them, but it's still imprinted there.

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**Researcher:** Who do you think of when you think of kids in foster care?

**Participant:** Poor. And *broken*, and lost, and abandoned.

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**Participant:** If they end up going to college or they end up getting a job and trying to make things work in life with what little they've been given, they probably blow all their money. They probably party a lot. They could get into drugs. They could get into the negative factors, because they've never been healed from their psychological and emotional trauma.

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**Participant:** [T]hese children had a bad upbringing, and [...] I think once you get to a certain point and had maybe abuse for all these years, how are you going to overcome that? [...] At a certain point, then it becomes society's burden, because maybe they're committing crimes. I don't know. Hopefully not, but yeah. Sometimes, you'll read [about] a criminal in the paper, and it's like, "Oh, he grew up in foster care, was shuffled around." That's a typical story sometimes you hear, unfortunately. So, it does affect society. If they were so damaged in their childhood that they just .— I mean, I don't think kids can totally recover if they damage themselves at a certain point.

## ▶ The *Normalized Trouble* Cultural Model

The *Normalized Trouble* model reinforces the idea that foster youth are generally more troubled—and troublesome—than average adolescents and provides a particular way of making sense of why this is. Its core assumption is that children and adolescents in foster care model their values and identity on the poor morals and behaviors of the adults in their lives. This model, which draws on the same stereotypes as the *Community Values* model discussed above, figures development as a process of normalization. In this way of thinking, foster children and adolescents come from dysfunctional homes and communities and see “bad” behavior as *normal* behavior. As a consequence, participants reasoned, foster youth make the same mistakes their parents did when they become adults, thereby perpetuating a generational cycle of poor behaviors and poor life outcomes due to lack of early exposure to “better” alternatives.

**Researcher:** Why does poverty have an effect on adolescents in foster care?

**Participant:** It’s almost like the child grew up getting abused, and so that’s all they know, and so they’re having kids and they’re abusing their kids because that’s all they knew. So, that’s what they’re repeating and recycling the same thing that they know. So, it could be generational even.

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**Participant:** Most of those foster homes have a lot of rules—especially if you’re an unruly child, and you don’t like to follow rules. Some of them have curfews. Now, a lot of them, when you have a child that’s unruly and don’t want to follow the rules, they run away. They go back to their old neighborhood that got them in trouble. They’ll go back to stuff that they was used to growing up as a child. And when it comes to that, most of the time when they go through that, *that’s all they know*. They’re at that age where they don’t know because they probably grew up around a lot of drug addicts, fighting, abuse, neglect, and that’s all they know. You know, versus a child that has been privileged.

## ▶ The *Identity Crisis* Cultural Model

The *Identity Crisis* model—contrary to the *Set Clay* model—leads members of the public to see adolescence as a dynamic period of life and development during which individuals’ identities are still in flux. According to this way of thinking, adolescents are still in the process of figuring out who they are and, as a result, are especially vulnerable and need adults in their lives to provide positive reinforcement. Other people’s love and desire—specifically parents’ or parental surrogates’—are necessary to build adolescents’ self-esteem. In knowing they are valued, adolescents come to value themselves, which gives them the confidence to act in the world and be successful.

When thinking about foster youth specifically, people reason that lack of stability (i.e., long-term placement or adoption) can easily be interpreted by adolescents as a lack of “desirability,” which erodes their self-esteem and sets them up for poor outcomes throughout their lives.

**Researcher:** What do you think are some effects [of foster care] on adolescents specifically?

**Participant:** I think it's especially a hard time because you are trying to figure out who you are and, when the people around you are so uncertain, you don't know who you are, *you don't have any self-worth.*

—

**Participant:** There's no security, and those kids feel abandoned, and then they feel like nobody wants them or *they're not good enough*, or they're lacking. They're lacking love—those six basic human needs like love and support and stability.

—

**Researcher:** Are there things that children in foster care especially need?

**Participant:** *Love.*

**Researcher:** Why is love important?

**Participant:** Because then you're comfortable in yourselves. You know, you're accepted. They know they can be who they are.

—

**Participant:** *If you don't have confidence in yourself*, you're definitely not gonna find a job or do things for yourself or try to make the world a better place. You just go around being depressed and you're just lying in bed watching TV, violent and depressed.

### ► The *Self-Makingness* Cultural Model

While the models above provide different ways of thinking about how foster youth's circumstances shape them, the public sometimes assumes that it is not circumstances but adolescents' own qualities that determine their outcomes. The *Self-Makingness* model leads members of the public to assume that individuals themselves—including adolescents<sup>vii</sup>—make their own fates and determine their own outcomes in life, and that everyone has the opportunity to develop successfully so long as they exercise the appropriate level of willpower, determination, and sound judgment.

When using this model to think about foster youth, and transition age youth specifically, participants ascribed successful outcomes in later life to “grit” and determination, which led them to become more responsible and independent than other adolescents, often at an earlier age. In such cases, the supports and resources that might have benefited such youth were absent from the conversation. On the contrary, this model led participants to reject the idea that adolescents' background and experiences could limit their opportunities for success or that foster youth need anything beyond their own determination to succeed.

**Participant:** Some kids can overcome or young adults can overcome being in that setting and be like, “Okay, I'm getting up and going to work. I'm doing what I need to do so I can get out of this.” *So it just kind of depends on each individual person how strong they are and their ability to want to change.*

—

**Participant:** From what I've experienced, as far as people I do know who were in foster care, they're some of the strongest people I know. I know one, she's 19 now, and she lives on her own. She has her own apartment, and she has her own job, and all that. And she pays for everything on her own.

—  
**Researcher:** Are there other circumstances you can think of where teens or, probably teens, would transition out of the system?

**Participant:** Maybe they kind of got it together. I mean, you transition out when you're 18. You start working at 16. You know? You can apply for really, really good jobs at 18. So maybe they have it together. They don't necessarily need the foster care system anymore. You know? They probably have found a place where they can exist that they can call home. And they have everything else in order for themselves. As well as the place where they're living. And it's not a group home.

### Implications for Communicators

- **The cognitive hole of transition age youth is a major challenge.** Because members of the public do not currently have access to the *concept* of transition age youth, they can't think about the distinct challenges they face. The first task for communicators is to get this term and concept on the public radar. Research is needed to determine the most effective ways of generating understanding of transition age youth as a discrete category of foster youth who require distinct supports and services.
- **The *Double Trouble* model threatens to stigmatize foster youth but may support thinking about the importance of stability.** This model tends to flatten out foster youth as "troubled" and "troublesome," so communicators must be careful not to reinforce uniform images of foster youth that focus on negative behaviors. However, it does, more productively, posit a dynamic relationship between behavior and environment, suggesting that foster youth need stable circumstances and relationships to equip them to deal with the challenges of adolescence. To take advantage of this more productive aspect of the model, communicators should focus on the positive ways in which reformed systems provide foster youth with stability and, in turn, improve outcomes.
- **The *Set Clay* model makes the dynamic process of adolescent development hard to understand and leads to unproductive thinking about foster and transition age youth.** The idea that youth's character and identity are largely set for life makes it difficult for people to understand that adolescent development is a dynamic and complex process and that youth's life outcomes can be significantly influenced by supportive environments. To avoid activating this model, communicators should stress the evolving and changing nature of development and explain how foster youth's identities and outcomes can be fundamentally changed for the better with the right services and systems.
- **The *Indelible Trauma* and *Normalized Trouble* models lead to stigmatizing and fatalistic thinking about foster and transition age youth.** Because these two models—which are often combined in people's thinking—position the effects of adversity as highly deterministic, they make it easy to label foster and transition age youth as "damaged goods," with little hope for success in later life. If the experiences that foster youth have before they enter the system or while they are in it have permanent effects, then they will be seen as "others,"—as outsiders who will be forever

different from the rest of society. Communicators must, of course, discuss the circumstances that lead youth to enter the foster system. But they must not *overemphasize* past experiences, as doing so will cue these models and prevent productive thinking about how to effectively support foster and transition age youth.

- **The *Identity Crisis* model may lead to fatalistic thinking but can potentially be leveraged to make the case for key supports.** Because this model casts longer stays in the foster care system as threats to adolescents' self-esteem and success, it may fuel fatalism about transition age youth's life prospects. As such, communicators must be careful about activating it. However, this model might be able to help people see the value of reforms to increase transition age youth's access to stable and supportive relationships by prioritizing and cultivating family placements and kinship providers. Further research is needed to ascertain whether and how communications can leverage this potentially productive aspect of the model without generating fatalism.
- **The *Self-Makingness* model makes it difficult to see that systems affect transition age youth.** This way of thinking predisposes people to think that outcomes for transition age youth—good or bad—are primarily determined by individuals' characters rather than context, systems, and resources. As a result, it makes it hard to see the value of programs and policies aimed at supporting transition age youth. To avoid cueing this model, communicators must avoid language that focuses on transition age youth's character, such as talking about "grit."

## Public Thinking about Solutions

When participants were asked how to better support foster and transition age youth, they came up with a limited set of vague solutions, likely because of their lack of knowledge about the foster system. Nonetheless, the patterns in participants' responses indicate the solutions the public can most easily understand and support.

### **Solution #1: Love and Support**

Participants often suggested that the best way to improve outcomes for more foster and transition age youth is to simply provide them with love because love can heal trauma and support good development. This solution arises out of models about the role family love plays in children's and adolescents' development (see the *Levels of Care*, *Sensational Scenarios*, and *Identity Crisis* models above).

Participants' explanations of what love entails were often vague and unclear. They were occasionally able to see beyond the general idea of love to other forms of guidance and emotional support, but even then they could not clearly describe what such support would involve or how exactly it would help.

Conversations about *who* should provide foster and transition age youth with love and emotional support were also vague. Participants understood that love, nurture, and care should ideally come from a foster family but can also come from other sources. However, people did not specify what those other sources might be.

**Participant:** The goal of foster care is definitely to act out guidance and teach them. Showing them love is a form of guidance. Showing them a kind of love that was missing from the beginning, or a later start in life. That's guidance, showing them love.

—

**Researcher:** Do [transition age youth] need a different level of support or a different type?

**Participant:** I think it's the same type of support. All young people need that love and nurturing and support from their friends, their family, their teachers. All of the people that can show them the way.

—

**Researcher:** Do you think there are any particular challenges that young people aging out of the foster system might face?

**Participant:** Emotional support, because they don't have it anymore, I'm presuming. I don't know. It's just that, because they aged out, and that says to me termination of some kindness [...].

**Researcher:** What type of emotional support?

**Participant:** I don't know. Can they go back to them and talk, and talk, and talk like you would to a parent? That you're supposed to be able to do to your parent. You know, emotional support, just call them up, or drop by.

## Solution #2: Building Life Skills

Members of the public reason that the best way to support foster and transition age youth is to provide them with the life skills they need to prosper as adults, including manners, basic financial skills, parenting skills, and personal hygiene. In the interviews, participants were not clear about who should be in charge of providing such training or what it would entail. While there was a sense that schools should teach these skills to all adolescents, participants' talk was general and abstract.

**Researcher:** How would this system that you're imagining handle adolescents aging out of the system?

**Participant:** They'd be better prepared to be on their own because they'd have to be on their own at 18 unless the laws are changed to 19 or something. Communication, relationship, financial— It would have to be interactive that would take them, not just read a book to prepare them for that transition, [but] what's going to happen, and teach them about parenting skills. I mean, these are things *we all need*. That we all need, but since they have to be on their own, then it would be nice for them to have these skills.

—

**Participant:** I think something schools should provide in general for *anybody*, not just people in foster care but probably especially for children and adolescents in foster care, is basic things to survive life, such as a checking account, how to write a check, how to have a bank account, how to get a job, how

to go for an interview, what to wear, how to groom yourself, how to get your teeth clean, how to get your health care, how to go to the doctor—basic things—how to sit at a table politely.

### **Solution #3: Government Should Pay Now so Society Doesn't Pay Later**

Members of the public generally agree that government has a role to play in supporting foster and transition age youth. When thinking about this responsibility, participants typically stressed that government has a responsibility *to society* rather than to the youth themselves. Participants highlighted the risks that foster and transition age youth present to society and said the government should take steps to ward off the potentially harmful consequences to society down the road if foster youth engage in destructive behavior or don't contribute to society when they get older. They reasoned that because foster youth are likely to be damaged and experience poor life outcomes (see the *Double Trouble*, *Indelible Trauma*, and *Normalized Trouble* models above), they pose a risk to society. As a result, participants often argued that government has a responsibility to ensure that foster and transition age youth do not become a lifelong burden on society as they exit the foster care system.

**Researcher:** Does government have a responsibility towards kids or young adults transitioning out of the foster care system?

**Participant:** Yeah, because if they don't, I think, societally, it would be worse overall. [...] It'll cost us more later anyway. [...] Obviously, the mind goes to crime rates or to destitution all over the place.

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**Participant:** They grow up, they may not be able to hold jobs. They don't have relationships. They're not a functioning portion of society. [...] I can't say all homeless have been through the foster system, but I'm sure there are some out there that have been through it, ran away and I think you wind up with dealing with a lot of drug abuse, incarcerations, and the associated costs with that. The legal costs gotta be pretty large. That all comes out of our tax dollars. So society is paying for it in the end. We're all paying for it in the end. It's a pay-me-now-or-pay-me-later kind of system. Why not help the kid when he's younger so he can become a functioning adult and keep him from going through a vicious cycle of going in and out of jail and just ruining his life.

## Implications for Communicators

- **Love and Support and Building Life Skills are useful starting points to discuss solutions, but they need to be strengthened in the public mind.** The vague solutions proposed by participants when asked about transition age youth show how invisible this issue is. To build the recognition that foster and transition age youth need emotional support and help with life skills, communicators need to explain how to provide them in a systemic way: they need to explain what policies and programs ensure that youth have the support they need. Without explanation, discussions of love or skill-building will likely backfire. Audiences will vilify biological parents rather than thinking about effective solutions; they will become fatalistic when they can't identify a clear path to "love and support;" or they will see building life skills as more of an individual responsibility than a collective one.
- **Public thinking about government responsibility highlights the need for systemic support but also reflects the stigmatization of adolescents in the foster system.** Participants' emphasis on government responsibility suggests that focusing on what society stands to lose if transition age youth are not better supported by the system might be a productive reframing strategy. However, this argument may also reinforce the existing stigmatization of foster and transition age youth because it suggests that these groups will likely experience negative outcomes. To avoid this perception, communicators must emphasize how specific policies and programs promote healthy development and good outcomes for transition age youth.

## Mapping the Gaps: Key Communications Challenges

In this report, we have reviewed how experts think about the foster system and transition age youth and described the patterns of thinking that shape how the American public understands these topics. Below, we identify the overlaps between expert and public perspectives and "map the gaps" between them to reveal communications opportunities and challenges.

### Overlaps in Understanding between Experts and the Public

There are important areas of overlap between expert and public understandings of the foster system and transition age youth. These overlaps represent promising areas to explore in future reframing research, as they have potential to raise the salience of these issues in public discourse and public thinking. However, some of these are superficial overlaps that, upon closer inspection, reveal deeper gaps in thinking.

Communicators need strategies to build on these overlaps to avoid accidentally triggering unproductive ways of thinking. Both experts and members of the public:

- Understand that foster care is **temporary out-of-home placement** of children and youth that aims first and foremost to **protect young people**.
- Know that **abuse and parental substance use** are important causes of referral to the child welfare system.
- Recognize that **children of color, who grow up in poverty, and whose parents have substance use problems**, are more likely to experience foster care.
- Agree that the foster care system’s ultimate goal is or should be **reunification or permanent placement**.
- See that the **fluctuating and unstable living situations** create practical and emotional challenges for transition age youth.
- Recognize that transition age youth often **lack supportive, continuous relationships, opportunities to develop life skills, and material supports**.
- Agree that **supporting transition age youth at a systemic level will decrease social costs**.
- Acknowledge that the **government has a responsibility** to provide at least **basic supports** for foster and transition age youth.

## Gaps in Understanding between Experts and the Public

In addition to the overlaps described above, there is a set of gaps between expert and public understandings of the foster care system and transition age youth. These are areas where effective framing is necessary to make the expert perspective accessible to public audiences.

1. **Transition Age Youth: Important Issue vs. Missing Concept.** Experts define transition age youth as those who are placed in foster care during adolescence as well as those who “age out” of the system and become adults before leaving foster care. According to experts, they represent a small—but significant—portion of the foster care population (16 percent). Experts stress that transition age youth face distinct challenges and must be considered as a discrete population. By contrast, members of the public do not know what the term “transition age youth” means and generally lack access to this concept. In other words, they do not think of these youth as a distinct group. In turn, they do not have established ideas about the challenges this group faces or the supports they need, a foundational gap that undergirds many of the gaps below.

2. **Responsibility of the Foster Care System: Provide Safety and Wellbeing vs. Safety Only.** Experts recognize that while the first goal of the foster care system is to maintain physical safety, they stress that the system also needs to ensure that young people have the knowledge, skills, and emotional wellbeing to thrive as adults. Members of the public, on the other hand, assume that children’s emotional needs can only be truly satisfied within a family setting, and that the foster system—and professionals within it—can only provide basic needs and physical safety.
3. **Entry Into the System: Need for Protection vs. Extreme Abuse and Bad Luck.** While experts and the public agree that children and young people enter foster care when they need protection, experts explain that removal from home can happen for a variety of reasons, including neglect due to financial insecurity or to parents’ mental health problems. The public, on the other hand, attribute entry into the system to tabloid-worthy cases of abuse or extreme scenarios, such as the sudden death of both parents. This gap stigmatizes families who come into contact with the foster care system and reinforces the belief that youth in care are irreparably damaged by experiences within and outside of the system.
4. **Foster Care System: Specific Institutions vs. Black Box.** Experts understand the complexities of the foster care system—how it works, how it varies across places, which organizations and people are involved in it, etc. The public, by contrast, knows little about how the system works beyond the vague sense that social workers play a role. Members of the public are often unsure about whether government is involved and, if so, how. This basic lack of understanding is a “black box” that makes it difficult for people to reason about the system and how it could or should be improved.
5. **Youth in Care and Transition Age Youth: Positive Potential vs. Forever Damaged.** Experts argue that foster and transition age youth have the same potential and aspirations as all other youth. Furthermore, they believe that, with the right supports and services, they have the potential to thrive as adults. Members of the public see foster and transition age youth as irreparably damaged due to family history and traumatic experiences in the foster care system itself, which means that they are not, nor will ever be, “normal.” This contributes to the stigmatization of youth in the foster care system and underlies the difficulty the public has in seeing how transition age youth can thrive even with effective supports.
6. **Disparities in Foster Care: Limited Access to Resources and Systemic Biases vs. Community Values.** Experts note that children of color, in poverty, with disabilities, who identify as LGBTQ+, and who have parents with substance use or mental health issues are more likely to experience foster care. They explain these disparities as the result of structural factors, arguing that limited access to resources like secure housing and child care makes it much harder for parents to provide for children’s basic needs. Experts add that workers in the foster care system hold biases against families with marginalized identities that increase children’s likelihood of entering—and remaining in—the system. In contrast, members of the public assume that children and adolescents who live in poverty are more likely to experience foster care because they live in low-income communities—and low-income Black communities, in particular—which have “bad” values. This, in turn, makes behaviors

like child abuse and drug addiction seem “normal,” which increases the likelihood that *their* children will be involved with the care system.

7. **Transitioning Out: Complex Process vs. ???** According to experts, transitioning out of the foster care system is a complex process that requires key supports and resources (e.g., medical, financial, vocational, educational, housing-related, etc.) that other youth receive from their families. Experts also note that just as brain development continues into a person’s mid-20s, access to resources and supports for transition age youth should be extended well beyond the age of 18. The public, on the other hand, lacks a clear idea about what it means to transition out of the foster care system—in large part because, as noted above, they do not understand how the system actually works.
8. **Good Outcomes for Transition Age Youth: Supports and Services vs. Individual Strength.** Experts argue that transition age youth are more likely to become successful adults when they are given the financial, material, educational, medical, vocational, and relational supports they need. In contrast, members of the public ascribe successful life outcomes for transition age youth primarily to individual character and willpower, not to the supports and resources they had access to.
9. **Societal Impact of Transition Age Youth: Cost *and* Opportunity vs. Cost *Only*.** Experts explain that providing transition age youth with the supports and resources they need will not only decrease the *costs* of social programs by decreasing rates of homelessness, unemployment, and/or involvement in the criminal justice system, but will also help individuals reach their full potential and produce societal *gains*, as they contribute to their communities economically and civically. Members of the public, on the other hand, focus almost exclusively on what society stands to lose if transition age youth are not better supported by society; they focus, in particular, on a perceived high risk for criminality and substance use. This focus on costs reinforces the stigmatizing perception of transition age youth as a heavy burden on society and taxpayers.

## Initial Recommendations and Future Research

For those communicating about transition age youth, the findings presented here are both promising and problematic. In some ways, public thinking is in step with that of researchers and advocates, which makes the communications process more direct and less complicated. Communicators can focus on activating productive models, which make messages accessible and applicable. The public generally understands that fluctuating and unstable living situations create practical and emotional challenges for transition age youth. People can also easily see that transition age youth need supportive, continuous relationships and opportunities to develop life skills in order to thrive as adults.

However, a deeper look reveals a more complicated cultural landscape—one that poses significant challenges to those working to make the issue of transition age youth more salient in public thinking and to build support for needed reforms. Most problematically, members of the public lack a basic understanding of how the foster care system works and do not recognize that transition age youth are a discrete population with unique challenges. Moreover, members of the assume that transition age youth are permanently damaged by the trauma they have experienced, a stigmatizing pattern of thinking that makes them stand out as conspicuous “others” in American society.

In addition, the public frequently draws on toxic stereotypes of people in poverty and low-income communities of color when thinking about the foster care system, which makes it hard for people to recognize the structural sources of disparities in foster care. These patterns in public thinking make it difficult for the public to identify problems with the foster care system and to support needed solutions. Building public understanding of transition age youth and their unique challenges and opportunities will help build support for needed solutions and seed a more fertile environment for policymaker action.

Further research is needed to identify the most effective ways of leveraging the productive aspects of public thinking while moving away from its unproductive aspects. However, the analysis presented in this report does point to a set of initial recommendations for those seeking to communicate about transition age youth with the public. These recommendations, drawn from the implications of the cultural models findings, give the field some preliminary “do’s” and “don’ts” that can help move public discourse on this issue in the right direction.

- **Offer clear definitions.** Because the public is likely to misunderstand terms like “youth” or “adolescent,” and unlikely to have heard of the term “transition age youth,” communicators should define terms early and often. Such definitions should establish clear parameters around the concept of adolescence, either by anchoring it to chronological age or by describing it as “a transitional period between childhood and adulthood.” When communicators discuss transition age youth, they must first establish that such a population exists and explain who they are. The term “transition age youth” is not intuitively understood, so communicators should introduce it with colloquial language (e.g., “youth who come of age within the foster care system”). Once this concept has been introduced, communicators can introduce the term “transition age youth,” but they should repeatedly explain the types of situations they have in mind.
- **Explain the basics of the foster care system.** Communicators cannot assume that their audience knows anything about the foster care system, so they should concisely but clearly explain the *who*, *what*, and *where* of the system. This background information is critical. People must know how the system works so they can think constructively about how to improve it.
- **Avoid crisis messaging.** Advocates for many social issues use crisis language in an attempt to boost people’s sense of urgency; people see the need to take immediate action to avert crises, the reasoning goes. While this makes intuitive sense, research in communications science, including

numerous FrameWorks' research projects, finds that crisis messages typically backfire by reinforcing people's sense of fatalism, resulting in *lower* support for solutions and rapid disengagement.<sup>viii</sup> For this reason, communicators should avoid characterizing the issue of transition age youth in the United States as a crisis, as this type of framing is likely to reinforce the public's sense that the problems of young people in the foster system are intractable and therefore not worth spending limited state resources on.

- **Lead with the potential, not the struggles, of adolescence.** The public knows and understands that adolescence and early adulthood are difficult times in general and for foster youth specifically. Communicators who start by recognizing the “struggles” associated with that time of life, in the hope of “meeting their audience where they are,” are likely to see their argument backfire, as it will reinforce the public's perception that foster youth are “double the trouble” of typical adolescents and that transition age youth are destined for poor outcomes in life because of the trauma they have endured. In contrast, arguments that focus on transition age youth's potential are more likely to cultivate a sense of efficacy about addressing their challenges. By focusing on how good programs and policies can *promote* healthy development and help transition age youth realize their potential—as the Hilton Foundation advocates—communicators stand a better chance of building public will for needed solutions.
- **Emphasize that transitioning out of the foster care system is a *process* that should extend over several years.** To steer the public away from the perception that youth are simply released from the system and return home with their suitcase on the day of their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, communicators should stress that adolescents need support for years after they move out of the foster care system. Communicators might, for instance, rely on the public's knowledge that many young people rely on their parents well into their mid-20s and explain that youth of the same age transitioning out of the foster care system need comparable supports.
- **Tell stories that place transition age youth in context.** Most stories about young people in foster care narrowly focus on one individual's circumstances. While there is an important role within stories for individuals and their emotions, agency, and trajectories, stories about transition age youth should always also include the systems, programs, and social factors that contribute to—or that challenge—positive life outcomes for this group in the United States. Social science research has found that stories that are narrowly and exclusively about individuals reinforce individualistic thinking and lead people to explain poor outcomes as the product of individuals' “character flaws”<sup>ix</sup> (see, e.g., the *Sensational Scenarios* and *Self-Makingness* models above). Instead, communicators and advocates should tell multi-dimensional stories that include systems and contextual factors as key characters alongside individuals. This way of telling stories will help counter the public's tendency to focus on individual families and youth rather than on the resources, systems, and structures that shape their actions.
- **Use concrete examples of effective interventions and policies.** By providing specific examples of interventions for transition age youth and explaining how they produce good outcomes,

communicators can deepen people’s understanding of how the foster care system can—and should—work. In particular, the field should develop a set of stories and case examples that show and, importantly, explain—how interventions can effectively address trauma. Reversing stigma and erasing negative stereotypes is less about arguing that they are not true, right, or fair, and more about altering the way the public thinks about individuals with foster care experience. A good part of doing this deeper work is providing people with concrete examples that show that trauma experience does not guarantee negative life outcomes. People need to see that such change is possible, but they also need to understand how it happens.

These recommendations serve as a preliminary strategy that can help advocates communicate more effectively about transition age youth and needed reforms. However, designing a full-fledged communications strategy that can be used over time to reframe this issue requires generating and testing new frames and strategies that can overcome the deeper gaps and challenges identified in this report. The following represents a list of key tasks for future reframing research:

- **Generate a clear understanding of transition age youth as a distinct group.** This is the precondition for **raising the salience** of the issue.
- **Deepen understanding of the foster care system as a whole.** People cannot properly understand the problems with the system without understanding more about it.
- **Increase understanding that coming of age in the foster care system is a *process*,** and deepen understanding of what this process looks like—and should look like.
- Develop ways to effectively **counter the assumption that foster and transition age youth who have experienced trauma are irreparably damaged.**
- **Find ways of talking about the special needs of transition age youth** that don’t reinforce stigmatizing and unproductive models.
- **Generate a structural understanding of the sources of disparities in foster care.** This is vital to inoculate against toxic discourse about low-income people and communities of color.
- **Increase public support for concrete policies and programs** aimed at ensuring better life outcomes for transition age youth.
- **Cultivate a sense of collective efficacy.** Communicators need strategies to address the fatalism stemming from dominant cultural models of the foster care system and of adolescents in foster care.

# Appendix: Research Methods and Demographics

## Expert Interviews

To explore experts' knowledge about the core principles of mental health, FrameWorks conducted 14 one-on-one, one-hour phone interviews with participants whose expertise included research, practice, and policy. Interviews were conducted in November and December 2017 and, with participants' permission, were recorded and transcribed for analysis. FrameWorks compiled the list of interviewees, who reflected a diversity of perspectives and areas of expertise, in collaboration with the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation.

Expert interviews consisted of a series of probing questions designed to capture expert understandings about what foster care is, who transition age youth are, what they need, why it is important to support transition age youth, and how best to support them. In each conversation, the researcher used a series of prompts and hypothetical scenarios to challenge experts to explain their research, experience, and perspectives; break down complicated relationships; and simplify complex concepts. Interviews were semi-structured in the sense that, in addition to pre-set questions, researchers repeatedly asked for elaboration and clarification and encouraged experts to expand upon concepts they identified as particularly important.

Analysis employed a basic grounded theory approach.<sup>x</sup> Researchers pulled common themes from each interview and categorized them. They also incorporated negative cases into the overall findings within each category. This procedure resulted in a refined set of themes, which researchers also supplemented with a review of materials from relevant literature.

## Cultural Models Interviews

The cultural models findings presented in this report are based on a set of interviews with members of the public. To understand the public's current thinking, FrameWorks conducted 30 in-person, in-depth interviews with members of the public in February and March 2018 in New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago.

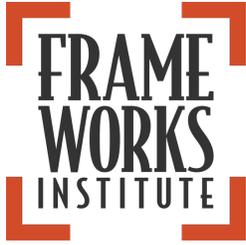
Cultural models interviews—one-on-one, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately two hours—allow researchers to capture the broad sets of assumptions, or “cultural models,” that participants use to make sense of a concept or topic area. These interviews are designed to elicit ways of thinking and talking about issues—in this case, issues related to transition age youth. Interviews covered thinking about

adolescence, the foster care system, and adolescents in foster care. The goal of these interviews was to examine the cultural models that participants use to make sense of foster care and transition age youth, so researchers gave them the freedom to follow topics in the directions they deemed relevant. Researchers approached each interview with a set of topics to cover but left the order in which these topics were addressed largely to participants. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with participants' written consent.

Including a range of people allowed researchers to identify cultural models that represent shared patterns of thinking among members of the public. These participants were recruited by a professional marketing firm and were selected to represent variation along the domains of ethnicity, gender, age, residential location, educational background (as a proxy for socioeconomic status), political views (as self-reported during the screening process), religious involvement, and family situation (married, single, with children, without children, age of children). The sample included 17 women and 13 men. Of the 30 participants, 17 self-identified as "white" or "Caucasian," eight as "Black" or "African American," two as "Hispanic," two as "Asian American" and one as another race or ethnicity. Eight participants described their political views as "liberal," seven as "conservative," and 15 as "middle of the road." Nine participants reported living in a suburban or rural area and 21 in an urban area. The mean age of the sample was 43 years old, with an age range of 20 to 65. Education was used as a proxy for socioeconomic status; six participants had finished high school, nine had completed some college, nine had graduated from college, and six had graduate degrees. Eighteen were married, and 22 were parents of at least one child.

Findings are based on an analysis of these 30 interviews. Researchers used analytical techniques from cognitive and linguistic anthropology to examine how participants understood issues related to transition age youth.<sup>xi</sup> First, researchers identified common ways of talking across the sample to reveal assumptions, relationships, logical steps, and connections that were commonly made, but taken for granted, throughout an individual's talk and across the set of interviews. In short, the analysis involved patterns discerned from both what was said (how things were related, explained, and understood) and what was not said (assumptions and implied relationships). In many cases, analysis revealed conflicting models that people brought to bear on the same issue. In such cases, one of the conflicting ways of understanding was typically found to be dominant over the other, in the sense that it more consistently and deeply shaped participants' thinking.

Analysis centered on ways of understanding that were shared across participants. Cultural models research is designed to identify common ways of thinking that can be identified across a sample. It is not designed to identify differences in the understandings of various demographic, ideological, or regional groups (which would be an inappropriate use of this method and its sampling frame).



## About the FrameWorks Institute

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## Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> On the German origins of the coming-of-age story as Bildungsroman, and its more contemporary American avatars, see, notably, “Why the Coming-of-Age Narrative Is a Conformist Lie – Cody Delistraty | Aeon Essays,” Aeon, accessed October 11, 2018, <https://aeon.co/essays/why-the-coming-of-age-narrative-is-a-conformist-lie>.
- <sup>ii</sup> See iFoster Solution as an example of a program that provides these integrated and individualized services and programs at <https://www.ifoster.org/ifoster-solution/>. iFoster Solutions also partners with a wide range of organizations that provide opportunities for youth, such as America’s Promise and AmeriCorps.
- <sup>iii</sup> Shore, B. (1998). *Culture in mind: Cognition, culture, and the problem of meaning*. Oxford University Press.
- <sup>iv</sup> In this section, we present the cultural models of adolescence and youth identified in the interviews that have direct implications for how members of the public understand and think about transition age youth. For a more detailed account of cultural models of adolescence, see Busso, D., Volmert, A., Kendall-Taylor, N. (2018). *Building opportunity into adolescence: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of adolescent development*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
- <sup>v</sup> On the unique characteristics of each individual child, see for instance Gerstein-Pineau, M., Kendall-Taylor, N., L’Hote, E. & Busso, D. (2018). *Seeing and shifting the roots of opinion: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of care experience and the care system in Scotland*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
- <sup>vi</sup> On the link between this cultural model and stories about foster care and foster parents in the media and popular culture, see Leber, C., and LeCroy, C.W. (2012, September 1). “Public perception of the foster care system: A national study.” *Children and Youth Services Review* 34, no. 9: 1633–38. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.04.027>; For a UK perspective on similar phenomena, see Capes, K. (2018, February 9). “Popular perceptions of disrupted childhoods: We need new stories about what happens to ‘looked-after’ children.” *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture* 67, no. 67: 90–102.
- <sup>vii</sup> See for instance Busso, D., Volmert, A., Kendall-Taylor, N. (2018). *Building opportunity into adolescence: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of adolescent development*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
- <sup>viii</sup> See for instance Simon, A., Volmert, A., Bunten, A., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2014). *The value of explanation: Using values and causal explanations to reframe climate and ocean change*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
- <sup>ix</sup> On thematic vs. episodic frames, see Iyengar, S. (1991). “Is anyone responsible? How television frames political issues.” Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- <sup>x</sup> See Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine; Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- <sup>xi</sup> See Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2005). *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.