TECHNICAL PAPER
I Pour Life | Springfield, Missouri, USA

TITLE
Foster youth experience unique setbacks due to COVID-19

SUBTITLE
Foster youth are at-risk of slipping through the cracks during the pandemic

ABSTRACT
The effects of COVID-19 will linger far beyond the three month (more or less) quarantine period that many people associate with the pandemic. This is especially true for youth in government care and aged-out foster youth, who will feel the impact of the pandemic for many months to come as they battle education, unemployment, mental health, and abrupt aging-out issues. In response to COVID-19, I Pour Life has deployed virtual LifeCoaching so LifeCoaches can connect with youth and provide assistance in these areas.

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INTRODUCTION
Foster youth are an especially vulnerable population due to COVID-19 because they experience the pandemic from a unique perspective. While uncertainty is common for many people during the pandemic, foster youth who are aging out of care in the middle of lockdown restrictions encounter problems regarding employment, housing, and food security.

When faced with financial need, many young people can turn to parents or family members and friends for assistance. These relationships are their “social capital,” which serve as primary sources of connection and opportunity. Having social capital also contributes to positive mental health, which is critically important during months of mandated quarantine when levels of depression and anxiety rise for foster youth and youth who have recently aged out (Greeson, Jaffee, and Wasch, 2020).

Social capital is vital for success in education, employment, mental health, and aging out of government care and into self-sufficiency. Older foster youth in non-home based settings report having only one positive adult relationship, if at all, that would provide social capital to them.
Many of these youth have no real network of social capital to lean on for support and guidance. Complications brought on by the pandemic, however, have restricted social capital development even further for many foster youth, which compounds their many challenges.

EDUCATION
Although many schools were able to pivot fairly seamlessly into virtual learning, lower income and/or rural schools faced a more difficult transition during the pandemic. Supplying all students with the technology for virtual learning is a massive undertaking, especially if schools had no previous technology trial run or had not used tablets, laptops, or iPads for learning purposes. Integrating technology quickly was an unrealistic adjustment for these schools given the short amount of time they had to meet the demands of COVID-19 restrictions. In most cases, however, this is only part of the challenge.

Even when students are supplied with the technology they need to learn from home, many students do not have the Internet access that virtual learning requires. This is especially true for foster youth who may experience technology/device limitations in a group home setting (Associated Press, 2018). In addition to this challenge, finding a suitable online learning platform and creating cohesion among faculty and students is also difficult. Schools reported experiencing difficulty streamlining online learning with a single platform and achieving compliance from all teachers and students. After surveying students to assess the outcomes of online learning, one higher education institution discovered that 27 different platforms were used to conduct class, ranging from video conferencing services such as Zoom and Google Hangouts to social media platforms such as Marco Polo.

Long before COVID-19, some schools, especially higher education institutions, frequently required students to submit assignments and take exams through online portals. However, transitioning all students to this method is a far more difficult task. Many students struggle with online learning and prefer face-to-face classes where they can ask questions and get one-on-one help. In a normal online class, faculty members have materials planned far in advance which include a mixture of assigned readings, pre-recorded video lectures, or powerpoint presentations with recorded audio. However, with an unexpected instant shift to an all-online education, faculty members found themselves overwhelmed.

A middle school social worker reported that being overwhelmed was experienced by faculty and staff across the board in various departments of education institutions. As an advocate for homeless and at-risk students, she said her primary concern was that students were slipping through the cracks, unable to get the help they needed. Although services were transitioned to an online portal, she worried whether students would feel their privacy was safeguarded enough in their homes to use the portals. Furthermore, if the students needed help, the advocate’s office was powerless while a lockdown was in place. Like social workers who work in a school, case workers are often connected to their foster youth through the education system, where they collaborate with counselors, teachers, and other support resources. Similarly, case workers
have expressed difficulty in keeping track of and in contact with their youth when schools are shut down.

Although virtual learning is challenging for all students, foster youth are at even more of a disadvantage. Other students can seek help from their parents or online tutors, and their parents can hold them accountable for learning. When transitioning from in class to an online setting, foster youth are lacking the social capital connections they have at school. The lack of accountability and “push” that students would normally receive from parents results in foster youth failing to complete their assignments, and they subsequently do poorly on exams.

Ample research shows that under pre-pandemic circumstances foster youth are far less likely to complete high school compared to their same-aged peers, including those who are homeless (“Fostering Success in Education,” 2018). Although the coronavirus has given every student an abnormal education experience, it presents a unique set of challenges for a population that already face a low graduation rate.

UNEMPLOYMENT
Of the youth currently being LifeCoached by I Pour Life, 32 percent lost their jobs due to COVID-19. An obvious consequence is the instant loss of income. However, many more ramifications are specific to this population.

Along with the loss of income, foster youth also lose the means to gain social capital through their jobs, similar to the loss they experience because of the school lockdown. For foster youth, the social aspect of a job does more for them than just making work more enjoyable. Social capital positively affects mental health and provides youth with connections to turn to in the future when they need help. Often, the social capital they build with coworkers and employers is one of the few sources they have besides their caseworkers or in educational institutions.

While many white-collar jobs transitioned to virtual operations, many youth are unable to secure employment due to a lack of resources or age restrictions. A foster youth in I Pour Life’s LifeStrengths program explained her struggle to find a job after her place of employment turned to virtual operations. In January, she moved to a rural city to start a job with a plan to save money so she could age out of care and be independent of government subsidies. However, when the company transitioned to online operations, she was unable to continue because employees working virtually had to be 18 years or older. Having just moved to a new city and having limited social capital, she found herself out of work despite having a high school degree and previous work experience as a manager of a high-end retail store. This caused her to rely on food stamps and ultimately set her back from reaching her goal of aging out and being independent of government subsidies.

This young woman is not the only one experiencing consequent setbacks in their pursuits toward independent lifestyles. Many who were on track to become self-sufficient before the pandemic are experiencing major delays, which can be extremely discouraging for them.
MENTAL HEALTH

Foster youth who reside in group homes experience lockdown differently from typical families or individuals. These youth are quarantined with 10 (more or less) other youth and have strict protocols on who can come and go. While these restrictions are required for public health reasons, they can take a toll on the mental health of these youth. Additionally, group homes that are filled to capacity may experience a prolonged lockdown for safety measures.

Because some group homes have a limited number of technology/devices, youth may not be able to communicate with peers, friends, or siblings, which can lead to increased worry and depression. According to a national study of 18-23 year olds who are either in foster care or have recently aged out, “56% of young adults reported clinically-significant levels of depression or anxiety during the pandemic” (Greeson, Jaffee, and Wasch, 2020).

One youth who has been volunteering as a firefighter during COVID-19 said that while the number of fires has decreased drastically, many of their calls have involved concern for a family member or roommate who was having suicidal thoughts or experiencing a panic attack. While some counseling and mental health services are available virtually, many foster youth are still having to cope with mental health issues alone.

AGING OUT

Foster youth who are aging out of care during the pandemic undergo an interesting transition as they learn to navigate an independent lifestyle without support previously provided to them by the State. They face an abrupt loss of benefits including case workers, attorneys, therapists, housing options, and sometimes stipends. While some states have extended these benefits through the pandemic, many youth still remain fearful that once they age out, they will be stripped of their resources in the midst of a lockdown. Even courts, which would normally hold hearings regarding the progress of youth preparing to age out, remain closed (Harper, 2020).

Even under normal circumstances, youth often struggle to become self-sufficient after aging out. Statistics show that many foster youth age out of care and into homelessness and increased food insecurity. In addition to challenges these youth normally face, the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 causes them to be in an especially frightening and peculiar position. Averi Harper of ABC News highlights the effect this has on them. “For older foster youth, eligibility for stipends and other benefits are dependent on the ability to work or attend school. During COVID-19-related shutdowns, meeting those basic requirements isn’t always possible, which could lead to a loss of funds and, in turn, housing security” (Harper 2020). Another example involves a common stipulation for youth aging out—obtaining a driver’s license. One youth described how thankful she was that she got her driver license in February, just a month before major shutdowns began. Without it, she was unsure what aging out of care would look like for her.
I POUR LIFE DEPLOYS VIRTUAL LIFECOACHING

In light of uncertainties that foster youth are experiencing due to the pandemic, I Pour Life has turned LifeCoaching into a virtual, accessible service to address shifts in employment, education, and mental health, along with assisting youth as they navigate aging out. Currently, LifeStrengths, a program of I Pour Life, is the only virtual coaching and curriculum available to older foster youth preparing to age out of State care. While facilities and State programs continue to focus on much needed relief and housing needs, I Pour Life is preparing foster youth who are in compromising circumstances to take critical steps toward future independence.

The decision to take precautionary measures to limit outside contact for older foster youth was important both for physical health and to flatten the coronavirus curve. However, foster youth in state care are now cut off from their community connection and support like I Pour Life, that has become the family they’ve never had. In response, I Pour Life has mobilized youth LifeCoaches to connect daily with the youth aged 15-24 to provide stability, hope, and a positive voice. LifeStrengths helps youth understand the past and learn from it while remaining forward thinking. Coaches want youth to be thinking, “How do I see myself at the end of the coronavirus season? What will I accomplish to ensure I have the skills and mindset to be successful after the state-mandated isolation?”

Due to numerous transfers during foster care, many youth fall behind in their academics because of being in new districts where credits don’t transfer, encountering bullying or isolation, or confronting other mental health issues. During spring 2020, 30 of the 120 foster youth being coached by I Pour Life have caught up on their educational requirements and were preparing for high school graduation prior to the coronavirus outbreak. Through virtual coaching, youth are given strategies and practices to ensure that their education stays on track while they prepare for further education or employment.

LifeCoaches from I Pour Life teach youth to have a future-focused mindset while working on measurable outcomes that include advancing education, relational and personal health, financial literacy, maintaining stable housing, and other critical areas that foster youth need to master to ensure a thriving, independent future.
REFERENCES