

The Scholar-Practitioner

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National Conference for Hidden Student Populations

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Current Hidden College Student Populations

May include those who have foster care histories, justice-involved experiences, who are survivors of sexual violence or sex workers, recovering substances addicts, who face housing insecurity, who have sought/seeking abortion care, or who have undergone or are in the process of gender reassignment.

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The Scholar-Practitioner is a monthly publication of research summaries that targets the research-to-practice-to-research gap for U.S. scholar and practitioner advocates for hidden college student populations.

This publication reinforces the work of the **National Conference for Hidden Student Populations (NCHP)** by providing a space to share research applications for practice. **NCHP** was the first research conference dedicated to this multidisciplinary area of study. The **6th NCHP** will be held on February 2026 at the University of Georgia.

Beyond Neglect: Addressing Public Health Failures for Foster Care Alumni Through a Multi-Faceted Approach

Best, S., & Wu, K. (in press). The Master's tools will never dismantle the house: Reflections on hope & equity in public health training. *American Public Health Association*.

Foster care alumni face severe health and socioeconomic disparities, yet public health interventions remain fragmented and insufficient. This paper examines systemic failures in financial literacy, housing, education, food security, and healthcare access for young adults aging out of foster care. While the social determinants of health (SDoH) approach acknowledges systemic inequities, it remains inadequate without targeted interventions. Structural reforms—including mandated financial literacy education, guaranteed housing, flexible higher education policies, and universal food and healthcare access—are essential. Academic institutions must shift from problem description to solution design to break cycles of neglect. What structural public health interventions can mitigate the socioeconomic disparities experienced by foster care alumni transitioning into adulthood?

This study employs a mixed methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative data to analyze systemic failures impacting foster care alumni. Autoethnography and testimonials provide lived experiences, illustrating financial instability, housing insecurity, and health disparities. Descriptive statistics offer empirical validation of these challenges. Policy analysis evaluates existing public health frameworks, highlighting gaps in financial literacy, education, and support services. Combining personal narratives with statistical evidence, this approach provides a starting point for understanding the barriers foster care alumni face and informs targeted, evidence-based policy recommendations.

For most young adults, transitioning into independence is challenging; for foster care alumni, it's a crisis. Unlike their peers, they lack financial safety nets, stable housing, and institutional support. As a foster care alum and public health scientist, I've lived this reality and analyzed the data confirming systemic neglect.

Nearly 400,000 children in U.S. foster care (Christian Alliance for Orphans, 2024) transition into underfunded, fragmented systems with little preparation for adulthood. Foster care alumni are disproportionately impoverished. While only 7.4% of the general U.S. population under 25 earns less than \$25,000 annually, 71% of foster care alumni fall below this threshold (National Council for Adoption, 2024; Hood et al., 2022). Yet, financial literacy remains an afterthought in transition programs, leaving them ill-equipped to manage credit, debt, or savings.

BIPOC females face additional financial barriers, including the racial wealth gap and

discriminatory lending (Shanks & Robinson, 2019). Many are targeted by predatory financial practices, limiting economic stability (Amine Ouazad et al., 2021). I know this struggle firsthand. Even with a graduate degree and strong credit, I've had less than \$20 in my bank account and no savings. I've skipped meals to protect my credit, knowing that one missed bill could undo years of effort.

Stable housing is a public health necessity, yet 76% of foster care alumni experience housing instability, and 38% experience homelessness within a year of aging out of the system (Children's Bureau, 2024). I've lived this—couch-surfing as a teen, living unhoused due to landlord exploitation, now residing in a converted shed classified as an illegal domicile. These conditions are not anomalies but systemic failures.

Education is marketed as a pathway out of poverty (Best & Wu, in press), yet only 56% of foster care alumni graduate high school, and just 3% obtain a bachelor's degree by age 25 (Lopez, 2019). Unlike their peers, they often lack financial aid, stable housing, and academic support. As an undergraduate, I worked three jobs while attending school full-time, sacrificing sleep and health. These challenges are rarely acknowledged in policy discussions.

For foster care alumni, food insecurity is chronic, affecting 81% compared to 22% of their peers (Park et al., 2024). Healthcare disparities are equally staggering, with alumni incurring annual healthcare costs nearly double the national average (\$14,372 vs. \$7,082; Nugent et al.,

2020). I've worked in food service just to ensure I had access to a meal and delayed necessary medical care due to cost—realities many alumni face daily.

Public Health Recommendations

Academia must abandon fragmented, one-size-fits-all approaches and develop interventions that address the full scope of challenges foster care alumni face. This requires:

1. **Financial Literacy as a Public Health Imperative** – Mandating financial literacy education in transition programs to cover credit, debt, and wealth-building strategies.
2. **Flexible Higher Education Support** – Restructuring financial aid policies to provide year-round housing, remove bureaucratic barriers, and extend support beyond age 25.
3. **Universal Food & Healthcare Access** – Extending food assistance and healthcare coverage until age 30 to mitigate long-term instability.

Year after year, studies confirm systemic failures, yet little changes. Academics continue to describe the problem without investing in long-term solutions. I've lived every statistic outlined here. Despite multiple degrees and nearly \$300,000 in student loan debt, I still struggle with employment, housing, and financial security. My experience is not unique—it is the norm.

How much longer will researchers, policymakers, and institutions ignore it?

Let's stop describing the problem and start designing solutions

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2026 NCHP

See you at

**University of Georgia
February, 2026**

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