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Navigating Relationships with Birth Family After Aging Out of Foster Care: Experiences  
of Young People

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### **Abstract**

As young people age out of foster care, many seek out their birth parents and extended families, but little is known about how these connections are navigated given past separations. Drawing from data previously collected from young people who aged out of foster care in a metropolitan area of one Western state, this study analyzed the responses from 53 young adults between the ages of 18 and 22 who answered two open ended questions about (1) re-connecting with birth families after foster care, and (2) the nature of their current relationships with their biological parents. A three-step analytic process searched for themes in the data and distilled three groups: (1) Reconnected & navigating a relationship (n=36; 68%), (2) Always connected & in a relationship (n=8; 15%), and (3) Not connected & not interested in a relationship (n=9; 17%). Implications for practice and recommendations for future research are offered.

*Keywords:* aging out, birth parents, transition to adulthood, young adults formerly in foster care, relationships.

## Introduction

Young people who age out of foster care fare poorly on measures of well-being in adulthood when compared with same age peers (Courtney et al., 2018). One factor contributing to disparities in adulthood may have to do with weakened connections to birth parents and/or extended family members following removal from the home for child maltreatment, placement in foster care, and impermanence (*e.g.*, not experiencing reunification, adoption or guardianship). Young adults in the general population receive vital assistance from their families while making the transition to adulthood, whereas young people who age out of foster care report relying on birth parents and extended family members far less than same aged peers in the general population (Jones & Kruk, 2005; Schoeni & Ross, 2005). The field of child welfare is expressing growing concern about the absence of relational permanence in the lives of young people who age out of foster care (Samuels, 2009). It is not entirely clear who, if anyone, provides this assistance to young people. Numerous studies find that relationships with birth parents and extended family affect the well-being of young people in the transition to adulthood, but these relationships are poorly understood (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Cusick et al., 2012). This suggests a need to understand in greater depth the relationships between young adults formerly in foster care, their birth parents, and extended family members.

Calls to account for the role of birth parents in young adults' plans for independent living in adulthood have been growing over the past two decades (Collins et al., 2008; Freudlich, 2009; Avery, 2011; Jones, 2014). One reason is that a high proportion of young people who age out of foster care report having contact with birth parents after their exit in adulthood (Havlicek, 2021). Interviews with caseworkers who serve this population suggest they are aware of the emotional pulls that young people feel to resume contact with birth parents regardless of how parents may

be doing (Partners for Our Children, 2023).<sup>1</sup> Research also finds that young people do best when they are able to access multiple parent-like relationships (Cushing, Samuels & Kerwin, 2014). These findings signal that birth parents and extended families figure prominently in many young people's plans for adult living after foster care. Yet, how to support young people and their birth parents to navigate past disconnections in relationships and caregiving—past separations in foster care as well as the problems that caused these separations—remains unclear.

This study seeks to explore this gap. It draws on data collected from a small group of young people who aged out of foster care and explores responses to open-ended questions about participants' experiences (re)connecting with birth parents and extended family after exiting foster care. The following research questions served as a guide for analysis: (1) How do young people who age out of foster care navigate relationships with their birth families? (2) What do young people say about their relationships with their birth parents? (3) What patterns in navigating relationships exist?

Okpych and colleagues (2023) point out the complex dilemmas presented by child welfare policy and practice in the United States. On the one hand, child welfare policy and practice predominantly emphasize preparation for independent living after foster care through concrete skill development for work and school and prioritize the significance of relationships less frequently (Propp et al., 1999; Samuels, 2009; Collins et al., 2010). Indeed, federal law prioritizes legal permanence through a narrow set of pathways, even as young people report that experiences in foster care often increase barriers to the maintenance of relationships with birth parents, relatives and other important people (Jones & Kruk, 2005; Unrau et al., 2006). That

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<sup>1</sup> In the words of a service provider quoted in a recent evaluation of extended foster care in Washington State, *“Well, let's face it – all of our kids are going to try and reconnect with their parents. They are gonna no matter how healthy or unhealthy their parents are and so I spend a lot of time talking with them about how to keep and maintain healthy boundaries...you know you have a right to tell your mom that you do not want to talk anymore,”* (Partners for Our Children, 2023, p.31).

many young people's relationships with birth parents endure despite past histories of adversity and legally mandated separations suggests the field of child welfare would benefit from understanding how to support young people and their birth families to navigate connections in young adulthood, including any impacts of custody loss experienced by individuals, family systems, and communities (Nixon et al., 2013; Kenny et al., 2015).

To place the findings of this study into a context of parenting of young adults in the general population, we first review what is known about the role of birth parents in the transition all young adults in the United States make to adulthood. Then, we review what is known about the relationships between young people aging out of care and their birth parents. Last, we review conceptions of relational permanence, which have been changing over time. We also place our explorations in a larger movement in the United States that is calling attention to the racial geography of child protective services, the disproportionate representation of families of color among families with contact with child protective services, and how the life trajectories of these families too often reflect a historical and enduring continuum of harmful family separation (Detlaff & Boyd, 2021; Roberts, 2022). In doing so, this study joins the growing calls to give more careful thought to relationships of power in child protection and a need to address the multiple contextual and social domains shaping families' lives (Drake, 1994; Haight et al., 2002; Dubrill, 2010; Stern et al., 2022).

## **Background**

*What is known about the assistance that birth parents offer young adults in the general population?*

Studies find that young adults in the general population receive substantial help from their parents (Schwartz et al., 2011; Harnett et al., 2013; Wightman et al., 2013). Panel data

spanning 30 years shows that American parents provide an average of \$38,000 in material assistance to their children from ages 18 to 34 (Schoeni & Ross, 2005). More recently, research suggests that this assistance has increased over time (Henretta et al., 2018). Such receipt is linked with a range of positive outcomes, including education and occupational attainment, economic outcomes, and well-being (Johnson 2013; Bea & Yi, 2019).

Different types of familial assistance make contributions to supporting successful transitions to adulthood. Swartz and colleagues (2011) conceptualize two types of support that young adults receive from parents including (1) scaffolding, in which parents support the development of human capital, and (2) a safety net, in which parents support adult children in difficult times. In the case of the former, financial aid to purchase a vehicle might assist a young adult in getting to work and working may lead to important experiences, skills, and connections. In the latter case, co-residence with parents may offer protection to young adults against financial trouble and/or housing loss, especially during periods of economic instability (Bell et al., 2007; Creamer, Shrider, & Edwards, 2020). In addition to these types of parental assistance, Hardie and Seltzer (2016) highlight research on the importance of perceived support from family. When young people feel supported by their parents and would turn to their parents for this advice, this is conceptualized as representing a type of latent safety net that may shape behavior even if a resource is not received (Henly, Danziger, & Offer, 2005).

Parental assistance may also include nonmaterial assistance, such as emotional guidance and social support (Fingerman et al., 2009). Studies find positive associations between emotional support from parents and positive outcomes for young adults, including emotional regulation (Cabral et al., 2012) and higher levels of self-esteem (Guan & Fuligni, 2015). Fingerman (2017) found that higher rates of parental support in the transition to adulthood affects coping and life

satisfaction in middle adulthood. Yet, complex factors may shape parents' ability to offer emotional support, including their socioeconomic, physical, and mental health status (Reising et al., 2013). As Stapley et al. (2021) acknowledge, factors such as societal, political, cultural, and historical context as well as government policies likewise also shape parental emotional resources and availability, but few studies have examined these factors.

*What is known about the assistance that young adults aging out of foster care receive from birth parents and extended families?*

A systematic review of U.S. studies reporting on relationships between birth parents and their children in foster care identified 10 studies published between 1980 and 2020 (Havlicek, 2021).<sup>2</sup> This review described the questions retrospectively asked and collected about birth parents from young people's lives (1) before, (2) during, and (3) after foster care. Before foster care, the information mainly collected from young people in foster care about their birth parents focused on identification of the custodial parent prior to foster care entry and any birth parents' problems with parenting that led to involvement with child protective services and ultimately foster care. During foster care, studies mainly asked youth about past year visits with a birth parent and knowledge of legal custodial status of birth parents. Questions for young people who had exited out of care have focused on post-exit contact with a birth parent, current living arrangements, some of which involved living with a birth parent or other birth relative, and knowledge about whether a birth parent was living. Types of assistance, such as scaffolding and safety nets, provided by birth parents or how young people or their families perceive support after legal separations have not been commonly explored.

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<sup>2</sup> The 10 studies include those published by: Barth, 1990; Collins et al., 2010; Cook et al., 1992; Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney et al., 2005; 2007; 2010; 2011); Courtney et al., 2016; 2018; Festinger, 1983; Reilly, 2003; Rest & Watson 1984; Samuels, 2008.

Findings from the studies included in the systematic review suggest that a majority of young people in or formerly in foster care reported residing with a birth mother prior to foster care (62% to 71%) but far fewer reported living with a birth father (11% to 25%). The review also reported that young people reported their birth parents struggled with serious and chronic problems with alcohol abuse (26% to 45%) and drug abuse (5% to 49%) prior to their entry to foster care. Moreover, half of a sample of young people in California reported having a birth parent in jail and one quarter reported having a parent with a serious mental illness (Courtney et al., 2014).

Despite these challenges, the studies reviewed suggested that many young people report seeking out their birth parents after exiting care. Across the studies, post-exit contact with a birth mother ranged from 37% to 55% of participants whereas post-exit contact with a birth father was lower but still significant, ranging from 30% to 35%. These studies also suggest that reported frequency of past contact increases for birth mothers and birth fathers over time. Fewer young people reported living with a birth parent, but it was hardly rare: 16% of 19 to 20-year-olds who aged out of care in California reported living with a birth parent, and 8% of 21-year-olds who aged out of foster care in Illinois, Wisconsin, or Iowa reported living with a birth parent (Courtney et al., 2016; Courtney et al., 2005). In two older studies, one drawing from administrative data in Missouri and the other gathering two waves of data from young people in Wisconsin at ages 17 and 19, McMillen and Tucker (1999) reported that 26% of 252 young people were discharged to relative caregivers whereas Courtney et al. (2001) reported that 31% of 131 young people 19-years of age reported residing with relatives after exiting care. These findings raise important questions pertaining to reunifications with birth families after foster care given that these family members were presumably deemed unsuitable before the age of 18.



There are two multiple wave survey studies in which researchers asked about emotional closeness to a birth parent at different ages (Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney et al., 2005; 2007; 2010; 2011). Half of the participants at ages 17 to 18 years reported being somewhat or very close to their birth mother (46 to 56%) whereas fewer reported being somewhat or very close to a birth father (25% to 30%). An in-depth qualitative study in which young adults formerly in foster care completed a social network diagram also found that most felt close to at least one birth parent. Samuels (2008) reported that 44% of the 17- to 26-year-old participants in a sample of 44 young people placed a birth parent in the innermost circle, which was reserved for people participants felt they could not live without, and 31% placed a birth parent in the middle circle indicating an important relationship.

A handful of studies suggest that young people who age out of foster care benefit from having a relationship with a birth parent, though these relationships are not well understood. Two studies found that having a close relationship with a birth parent or grandmother was associated with a decrease in the risk of homelessness at ages 19 (Courtney & Dworsky, 2009) and 20 (Dworsky et al., 2013). In another study analyzing the same data linked with arrest records, having a birth mother who was alive decreased the risk of arrest in adulthood (Cusick et al., 2013). The authors speculated that having a birth parent who was alive offers some protective benefit to young people compared with those without a living birth mother. Another study of young people with a history of foster care found that the availability of support from a family member was associated with better mental health and self-reported life satisfaction in young adulthood (Evans et al., 2022).

Fewer studies have explored the perspectives of birth parents and extended families of young people who age out of care. One notable exception is a study by Wright and colleagues

(2022) which applied an institutional analysis of focus group interviews with parents, foster parents and caseworkers and record reviews, and uncovered experiences of trauma, grief and loss by parents. Existing research in this area also suggests that some birth parents' lives, especially mothers', may worsen following the loss of custody of their children (Gilcrest & Taylor, 2009; Kenny et al., 2015; Wall-Wieler et al., 2018). The lack of attention to the consequences following legal family separations is surprising given that as many as 37% of children in the U.S. are estimated to be at risk of coming to the attention of child protective services, and this rate increases to 50% for Black children (Kim et al., 2017). While most children who are placed in out-of-home care will be reunified with a parent, one study using synthetic cohort tables from 2000 to 2016, estimated that 1 in 100 children in the United States will experience a termination of parental rights (TPR) by age 18 and the risks are highest for Black and Native American children (Wildeman et al., 2020). Yet, only a handful of studies have framed impacts stemming from child protective services involvement and/or custody loss as representing a unique type of trauma with far-reaching implications for parents and families' ties (Haight et al., 2002; Kenny et al., 2015; Nixon et al., 2003). Some research suggests that parents' chronic challenges may make relational conflicts with kin more common later (Inglehart & Becerra, 2002). This suggests a need to better understand the relationships between young people who age out of care, their birth parents, and/or extended family both across a longer time frame and within a context of factors which lead to family separation in the first place.

*What is relational permanence and how might interdependence between young people and family systems matter?*

Relational permanence is a concept in child welfare which posits that a young person's well-being is grounded in the social relationships and networks that follow from and endure past

foster care. These social relationships are conceptualized as representing members of birth families, such as birth parents, aunts, uncles, and/or siblings, as well as fictive kin and other supportive persons, such as caseworkers, foster parents, and peers. A recent study that followed 608 youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood in California reported that fewer than half, 48%, overall and 38% and 25% of Black and Native American youth, respectively, reported having at least one long-lasting relationship to any person (Okpych et al., 2023). Those who had long-lasting relationships typically had them with birth family or people with whom they related to like family. The authors noted positive associations between enduring relationships and well-being outcomes, including lower risk of financial insecurity, economic hardship, and homelessness.

While the findings from the above study point to the importance of attending to the complexity of young people's family relationships, less attention has been given to the context surrounding young people's interdependence with their birth parents and other family members. In a study on the interdependence of family members in kinship arrangements, Dolbin-MacNab & Keiley (2009) draw attention to the ways that in any family system, family members are comprised of interdependent individuals and sub-systems that are organized to form patterns of interaction that maintain equilibrium. Moreover, family systems theory suggests that the behavior of one family member would be expected to impact all other members of the family (Cox & Paley, 2003). Yet, information about how young people who age out of care experience themselves as interdependent with their birth parents or other family systems remains limited. Below we describe the current study, which sets out to address gaps in the research and explore how young people ages 18-22 who had aged out of foster care navigated relationships with birth parents and extended families after legally mandated separations.

## Methods

### *Data and Sample*

Participants were recruited for the baseline interview of the XX study if they were between 9- and 11-years-old and living in any type of out-of-home care. County child welfare agencies provided a list of all eligible children and then letters introducing the study were sent to families, followed by recruitment calls a week later. Participation was voluntary. Over 90 per cent of children and families agreed to participate. The young adult interview, which is the focus of the current study, occurred an average of 9.4 years after the baseline interview. All study participants who were aged 18–22 (N=243) during the follow-up study period were recruited and 215 were interviewed (88.5% retention rate). Of the 28 not interviewed, 13 were unable to be located or recruited, 7 declined participation, and 8 aged out of the eligibility criteria before they were able to be interviewed. There were no baseline differences between those who were retained for the follow-up interview and those who were not interviewed. The current study focuses on the responses of the 57 (26.5%) participants (out of the 215) who had aged out of care. At the follow-up study participants provided written consent for participation and were compensated \$100 for their time. IRB approval was received by the 3<sup>rd</sup> author's institution. The survey was administered by oral interview in a quiet, private place. At the time of the survey, XX had not taken up the option for title IV-E foster care, which means that the participants were categorically ineligible for foster care due to being aged 18 or older at the time of their interview. Table 1 provides the demographics of the sample.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

### *Survey Questions*

The three-hour interview was conducted between 2014 and 2017 and contained both closed- and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions addressed several domains, including demographics, household composition, education, employment, and birth family information. Two open-ended questions were worded as follows: (1) Since you turned 18, have you made any attempts to reconnect with any members of your biological family? If so, tell us about that; and (2) How would you describe your current relationship with your biological parents? There were four respondents with missing information for these questions, resulting in a sample size of 53 for analyses.

### *Analysis*

A three-step process for identifying themes in the qualitative data was applied (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, two separate reports of respondents' answers to the open-ended questions were read to identify themes. Second, the reports were combined in an excel spreadsheet in order to understand patterns in contact and relationships with family holistically. In this step, the participants were tentatively grouped into one of three categories: (1) Reconnected & navigating a relationship, (2) Always connected & in a relationship, and (3) Not connected & not interested in a relationship. The coding allowed for a participant to indicate that they reconnected with one parent and had no interest in reconnecting with the other. If the participant indicated that they had reconnected with at least one parent/family member they were placed in the 'Reconnected & navigating a relationship' group. To enhance the adequacy of the coding system in capturing patterns and themes, as well as its consistent application, all responses to the two questions were read and re-read by three coders (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> authors). Team members independently applied the coding system to all the text of responses. To remain reflexive, the authors met regularly to compare interpretations of the data and share experiences with the research process.

Discrepancies in coding were discussed in team meetings. In the third step, the survey data were used to crosscheck information about the groupings with respect to whether a birth parent was living. In this stage, peer debriefing through an advisory board comprised of former study participants was used to seek feedback broadly about relationships with birth parent and groupings (3<sup>rd</sup> author). Pseudonyms have been assigned to protect participants' confidentiality.

## **Findings**

The 57 young adult participants in the sample were between the ages of 18 and 22 at the time of the survey; their median age was 20-years. A majority identified as being male (65%) and heterosexual (95%). Over a third identified as being multi-racial (37%). Half of the sample identified as being Hispanic (51%). As can be seen in table 1, 81% reported having a living birth mother and 75% reporting having a living birth father.

Three patterns (as described above) emerged from the data pertaining to the 53 youth seeking out relationships with birth parents and extended family after foster care and descriptions of how this experience went. Being connected to birth families was common; two-thirds had reconnected and were navigating a relationship with birth parents or other birth relatives and the remaining third were fairly-evenly split between “always connected and in a relationship” and “not connected and not interested in a relationship”. Below we describe each group and subgroups in greater depth.

### *Reconnected & Navigating Relationships: “They are always going to be my parents”*

The 36 young adults (68%) who had sought out birth parents and extended family after exiting foster care provided varied reasons for reconnecting. Donald, a Hispanic and multiracial, 20-year-old male, shared that he simply wished to try to be on better terms with his birth father. He said, “Yeah, my dad...that’s about it, [I] just to try and get on good terms with him.” Several

others, like 19-year-old Alex, who was also Hispanic and multiracial, talked about wanting to help their birth mothers. Alex shared this: “Yeah. Just my mom. I try to help her.” For others, reconnecting after foster care had to do with their legal age as adults, their maturity, and the fact that no one could make decisions for them any longer. Serenity, an 18-year-old Hispanic and multiracial female, talked about being older and coming to the realization that she and her birth mother could have a healthier relationship. This was also the case for 20-year-old Justice, a Black female, who, like Serenity, talked about how becoming a mature adult made it easier to have conversations with her birth mother that were more difficult when she was a child. She talked about this discovery in the following way: “Yeah, I talk to my family all the time. I talk to my mom...and it's healthy now that I'm older. Me and my mom just realize things about our relationship that we didn't realize before.” The statements of Donald, Alex, Serenity, and Justice capture a few of the reasons offered by the young people in this group for reconnecting with their birth parents and families after mandated separations in foster care.

Among respondents who had reconnected with their birth families, the quality of the relationships they established varied widely. Some talked about forging a positive, healthy relationship, while others were unable to forge a relationship. Some described themselves as in the process of trying to understand whether it was possible for them to have a relationship with a birth parent. We describe these three types of variations within the *Reconnected & Navigating Relationships* group in greater detail below: (1) Reconnected & positive relationship, (2) Reconnected & negative relationship, and (3) Reconnected & unsure of having a relationship.

*Reconnected & Positive Relationship.* Just under half of the young people who had reconnected (n=17; 46%) described having a positive relationship with a birth parent or extended family member. While the question encompassed relationships with birth families more broadly,

all had connected with a birth parent, which meant this group had at least one living birth parent. When asked about this experience, they used words such as “good,” “very good,” “excellent,” “wonderful,” and “going really well” to describe their relationship with this parent. For Cynthia, a 22-year-old Native American female, her parents were always going to be her parents despite the past. She therefore concluded that their relationship was, “[u]m, good. Yeah. They’re just always gonna be my parent so [she laughed] they’re always there so, yeah.” The quotes below highlight the ways that others in this subgroup were able to form a positive relationship with one birth parent:

Well, me and my dad are good I guess, because I’m my dad’s only kid...so I’m the only child so I get kinda spoiled. My mom...we’re still working on things. Like it’s not the greatest but I don’t have any anger or hostility towards her like I used to when I was younger, so that’s gotten better.” – Justice, age 20, Black female

Good with my mother, nonexistent with my father. Me and my mom, we are growing a relationship. – Olivia, age 20, Hispanic, Multiracial female

What comes through in the above statements is that it was typical for respondents in this subgroup to talk about a changing relationship of some sort, as Justice and Olivia did.

Participants’ statements also suggest that some could forge a positive connection with one birth parent, but not always with the other. In the next subgroup, we describe those who reconnected and were unable to form a desired relationship.

*Reconnected & No Relationship.* There were 11 young people (30%) who reconnected with their birth families after exiting foster care as adults and described either (1) not having any current relationship with a birth parent or extended family or (2) having a negative relationship. Aaron, a 20-year-old Hispanic and White male, stated that he didn’t really have a relationship



with either of his birth parents. This was also the case for Arthur, a 21-year-old multiracial male, who had reached out to his birth parents after exiting care but found that no relationship had kindled. Arthur described the experience like this: “Yeah, there’s not really one...uh, I mean, my dad contacts me from here, here and there, but there’s not really a relationship at all.” Natasha, a 19-year-old Hispanic, multiracial female, had no opportunity to reconnect with her birth parents, as her mother was deceased, and she did not know who her father was. Though there was technically not an opportunity to connect with a birth parent, Natasha was able to connect with other family members, as she describes below:

I reconnected with my family on my mom’s side....my aunts and my cousins and everyone. When I was young, they didn’t really have a good relationship with my mom and like vice versa. So...when she was alive she didn’t really want us talking to them, but she can’t do anything about it now...I’ve started talking to them more, and now we all talk, like through Facebook, but we still talk.

Indeed, Natasha’s statement highlights the ways that family systems are interdependent and dynamics with one parent impacts a family system.

These connections could also be complex. Several participants experienced reconnecting as a mistake. Nicole, an 18-year-old Hispanic and White female, described the experience with her mother in a negative way: “And as far as my mom is concerned, it..our relationship...is shit. It’s not good at all.” Jessica, a 19-year-old multiracial female, said that she had reconnected with her birth mother and had also had negative experience: “I regret it. I really do. It basically had put me in multiple downward spirals that if it wasn’t for the friends that I have to support me I probably wouldn’t be on earth anymore.” Jessica reported that her mother’s circumstances had not changed much over the years, and she could be difficult to get along with. In other words,

failing to connect in a positive way could be a painful experience, but Jessica thankfully had a support system of friends as she navigated this.

Negative experiences with a birth parent were not always experienced as completely negative. A few could use the experience as a source of motivation to strive for a better adult life. This was the case for Jared, an 18-year-old Hispanic and White male, who had this to say:

My current relationship with them? I don't talk to my biological mom and I barely talk to my biological dad. He likes to say, you know, how 'he was always there, he's trying so hard' but we all know he wasn't. What's there to share? I have to try better, to be and do better than he did.

Given the way he felt, Jared, like Jessica, did not foresee much hope of a relationship with his birth parents. Instead, he focused on what he could control. For this subgroup, connecting with a birth parent only reinforced the understanding that relationships with birth parents may not always be possible or even positive. In some cases, when birth parents were deceased or unknown, this could prompt new relationships with other family members. In other cases, the experience motivated young people to try harder to “do better” than their parents at forging an independent adult life.

*Reconnected & Unsure.* A smaller subgroup of young people, six respondents or 16% with the *Reconnected & Navigating Relationships* group, who reconnected with one or both birth parents and/or extended family were unsure of what a relationship with a birth parent or family member could look like. The analysis suggests that they were in the process of figuring out if any type of relationship was possible. Angela, a 20-year-old Black female, explained: “Yes, me and my mom, we're still just as rocky as it was 10 years ago.” Angela attributed these challenges to there being a lot of “unresolved issues.” Angela's statement reminds us that just because parents

lose custody of their children, this does not always mean that the relationship between them has been adequately, or formally addressed, and unresolved issues do and can linger. It was also the case that not adequately addressing complex issues between young people and their birth parents and family systems meant that old patterns in parent-adult offspring relationships could be repeated.

This was the case for Curtis, a 20-year-old multiracial male, who talked about wanting to be a resource for his mother. As we read statements like Curtis's we wondered if past patterns of parentification were being repeated. Curtis also said that seeing his birth mother repeat the same patterns in her life made him want to be less involved. These young people told stories of being faced with decisions about how to alter old patterns with a birth parent. This experience could be complicated to navigate.

Connor, a 20-year-old multiracial male, was also undergoing a process of coming to terms with his birth mother's challenges. He said that he was starting to understand that he no longer trusted his birth mother, and he expressed discomfort over the fact that she always said that she was dying when, though she had serious health challenges, she clearly was not. He had heard this story too many times and was beginning to understand it only prevented his birth mother from attending to the needs of others, including her children. This experience could also hold true for family members when birth parents were no longer living. Jacob, an 18-year-old Hispanic, multiracial male whose birth parents were deceased, said that he was still trying to connect with extended family, but that doing so was a constant struggle. In other words, the young people who reconnected with their birth families experiences varying levels of connection.

*Always Connected & in a Relationship: "I never really lost connection with anybody"*

There were eight participants or 15% of all of the young people in the sample who had never lost contact with their birth family. This was true for Diana, a 20-year-old multiracial female, even though both of her birth parents were deceased. She maintained contact with her birth father while he was alive because she was placed with relatives while in foster care. For Diana, this meant that when she aged out of foster care, her relationships with a sister and other family members were a consistent presence in her life. She said that she therefore hadn't had to make "any attempts" to reconnect with birth family "because I still always saw my family members...it was just always... everybody was always around and supportive."

Tim, a 19-year-old multiracial male, had also been placed with relatives while in foster care. His birth father was alive, although his birth mother had died. His statement below describes the ways that living with relatives opened-up opportunities to be in a family system despite being placed in foster care. He described the experience in this way: "I never really lost connection with anybody just because I ended up living with my mother's parents. I still see my father and my father's parents and stuff, so I haven't really lost connection with anybody."

Others maintained a close relationship with a birth parent even if they were not placed with relatives. Participants talked about the value of phone calls and visits with one or both birth parents that supported a connection over time. For example, Danielle, a 19-year-old multiracial female, talked about the phone calls she had with her family and visits, which she felt were important for preserving lifelong connections: "Well, we never really like lost connection, you know... like even though we were taken away there was always still kind of some connections with my family, like a phone call or we'd see each other here or there, but we never really full lost connection." In other words, for participants in this group, ongoing contact with birth parents

and within relative placements could counter the effects of being “taken away” from family and instead forge life-long connections.

The analysis suggests that continued relationships with a birth parent were not always good. Only four of the eight participants said they had a “good” or “very good” relationship with a birth parent. These participants stated that their birth parents were “doing better” than they had been earlier in their lives. This was very much the case for Sarah, a 20-year-old Hispanic and White female, who said that her relationship with her birth mother was still growing seven years into her mother’s sobriety:

The relationship with my mom is really good now. She had came back from drugs like seven years ago, and she’s been clean. We have built a really strong bond within them seven years. She tried.... she’s trying to make up for everything that she did in the past. You know she really wants to be there for me, and I feel like she’s sorry for what she did. We’re still growing though. I’m still trying to build like a better relationship with her.”

When Sarah says her mother “tried” and is still “trying” to address past challenges, she suggests that this process of navigating a relationship can be long and require effort. When she adds that she too is “still trying” to build a relationship, she also suggests that this is a reciprocal process, one that requires effort by each individual.

There were other participants that had what they considered a positive relationship because although the birth parent had not changed all that much, they accepted their birth parent’s limitations and worked to create a different type of relationship in adulthood. For example, Shannon, a 22-year-old Hispanic and Native American female, said:

My mother is the same, as she’s always been. [She laughed.]. I mean, we get along.... We still have our arguments and stuff, but now it’s a little different because she doesn’t really

have the responsibility to take care of me so we talk...and you know I see her.... I mean we're not like the best of friends or anything like that but she is the grandmother of my kids and she visits them so it's OK."

This accepting attitude was by no means universal, but for those who forged a stance of acceptance, doing so could support them to make a shift in their assessment of the risks and benefits to maintaining a relationship as an adult.

*Not Connected & Not Interested in a Relationship: "I just don't see how they could fix anything"*

Not all of the participants in this study wished to reconnect with a birth parent or extended family. This was the case for Ken, a 19-year-old White male who shared that being related by blood was not enough to be considered as family: "I haven't tried to reconnect with my biological family...DNA is not enough for me to consider them as family. They have to be somebody who is by my side. They have to gain that relationship." Other participants in this group described having fleeting exchanges with lost siblings and/or with birth parents who contacted them, but these exchanges did not typically lead to a new or a lasting connection, at least not at the time of the survey. Consequently, this group of participants described their relationship with members of their birth families as "none" or "nonexistent."

This group also makes up a small proportion of all the young people in the sample, representing only 9 participants or 17% of the full sample. There were a few notable characteristics of this group. All but two were men, and six reported not knowing if one or both birth parents was alive. Three indicated that they had not had any contact since they were small children. This suggests that the young people in this group may not have had many opportunities to have a relationship with a birth parent or extended family.

This was very much the case for Kevin, a 19-year-old Asian male. He said that he had been informed that his mother had recently been released from jail, but he had not seen her or his father since he was 3-years-old, and thus he did not now see the point in reconnecting as an adult. In other words, his mother's long-term incarceration may have ruled her out as someone important enough to have a relationship with when he was a young child. Kevin's statement suggests that he did not have an opportunity to visit with his mother while she was in jail or see the impacts of her incarceration – whatever they might be. Due to the long-term impacts of parents' difficulties, this could be difficult for participants in this group to experience.

This was true for Terry, a 19-year-old Hispanic and Black male, who said that because of his birth mother's chronic history of drug use and the impact of drug use on her cognitive and emotional functioning, he could not form a relationship with her after foster care. He described his reasoning in the following way: "It's pretty iffy because my mother, she's not all there from all the drugs she's done. So there really isn't much there. I'll talk to her here and there, but I really prefer not to."

Terry's statement suggests that, like others in this group, a decision to detach from a relationship with a birth parent was made. That is, as adults the young people in this group, though not in the majority, may not have wanted to re-open wounds with birth parents or extended family members who did not have the capacity to work to change their circumstances. The sentiment that they could not go back and change the past, but only focus on their own future comes through in a statement from Ken:

I kind of decided early on that that's not a chapter of my life that I want to reopen or that I'm willing to reopen yet, just because a lot of my biological family is still doing the

same things they were doing when I was put into out-of-home care, and to regress, to go back into those situations, would be betraying myself and what I've worked for.

For these participants, the decision not to reconnect with birth or extended family members was a way to protect parts of themselves. Their statements suggest that the absence of family capable of having a relationship motivated them to move forward on their own, at least for the time being.

### **Discussion**

This study explored how young people navigate connections with birth parents and extended family while in and after aging out of foster care. The findings suggest that most of the sample sought to connect with birth parents and/or extended family after foster care, and that some had never disconnected. A small proportion had no contact. Further, the findings suggest that navigating relationships with birth families and extended families could be stressful. There are several takeaways, which are further described below.

The finding that reconnecting with birth parents and/or extended family after exiting foster care is common aligns with findings describing young people's self-reports from numerous studies (Barth, 1990; Courtney et al., 2001; Reilly, 2003; Collins et al., 2010). While the data from this study cannot be used to explain why so many young people seek a connection to birth parents and/or extended family members after foster care, a few speculations can be made.

First, Samuels (2009) suggests that it might be easy for child welfare professionals to misunderstand the psychological, emotional, and financial benefits of family for young people with weakened connections to a birth parent, especially when parents and family may be viewed in negative ways. Even though caseworkers report knowing that many young people who are aging out on their caseloads have plans to reconnect with families after leaving foster care, they



may view parents who lose custody of their children as being adversarial to their children's well-being (Haight & Bamba, 2009; Tobis, 2013; Partners for Our Children, 2023). They might also discount the long-term relevance of these relationships when separations are expected to be long, such as the case when parents are incarcerated. Samuels (2009) reminds the field that when young people are placed into foster care, never reunified, adopted, or placed with an alternative forever family, they may remain linked to other aspects of their family system, including membership and belonging – even if not legally. Since 2005, 28 states have passed statutes that facilitate restoration of parental rights following termination, however, these statutes vary considerably in the requirements for qualification and it's not altogether clear how often rights are restored (Mack & Barth, 2023). Recognizing that young people who age out of foster care are re-establishing ties with birth parents and family, these laws have been established to offer a mechanism for permanence. We cannot say with any certainty whether the parents in this study were in a position to resume legal custody at any point. What we can say is that a majority of young people in this study longed for reconnection.

Second, young people may seek out their birth parents and extended families for the sake of uncovering knowledge about themselves, their sense of self and identity, and their family history. It's unclear what young people in this study were told about their parents or the reasons for entry into foster care, but studies find that this is an area of need of greater attention. In fact, when young people were asked about their experiences in foster care, one study reported that 42% of the sample wished they knew more about their own family background (Courtney et al., 2001). This is also the case for other children placed in foster care who said that they were not provided with enough information generally from their caseworkers (Taussig & Munson, 2022). It stands to reason that seeking out birth families may serve as a crucial resource for connecting

the past to better understand the present and the future, all of which may be an important part of making the transition to adulthood.

Last and related, it could be that young people seek out birth families as part of a normative process of development. That is, as they continue to develop autonomy and explore life roles, they may seek out family for support and assistance. There is some evidence that former foster youth who parent may rely on their birth parents for parenting advice and guidance (Courtney et al., 2007; Courtney et al., 2010; Courtney et al., 2011). Future research should explore in further depth the perspectives of young people and their families. Using theoretical frames such as family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 2003) or ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) would support greater understanding of interdependence within family systems and proximal and distal environments that influence the ways that relationships may be navigated (Dolbin-MacNab & Keiley, 2009). Integrating a frame of intersectionality may importantly serve to better emphasize adverse experiences enacted in and by systems that have may have intergenerational, detrimental impacts on young people and family systems (Heberle et al., 2018). For example, little is known about how young people who identify as LGBTQ navigate relationships with birth family when there is conflict or how systems facilitate relationships in this context, if at all. Applying frameworks that have come from Black and Brown communities, especially ones emphasizing communal approaches to parenting, would additionally address increasing calls for addressing racial disproportionality/disparities in child welfare (Wright et al., 2022).

It is striking that only a few participants, eight out of 53 or 15%, reported being able to maintain a continuous relationship with one or both birth parents and/or extended families while in foster care. While the current study's sample is not representative of all young people who age

out of care, findings offer a preliminary understanding of this. It could be that residing with relatives and/or having constructive visitation or other contacts while in out-of-home care contributed to lifelong connections with birth parents in the face of other challenges. That is, rather than to cut off these relationships, placements with relatives (and adoptive parents) may serve to support some type of connection to birth family over time. Future research should explore those young people who are able to maintain lifelong connections to better understand aspects of their experiences in family and foster care that support parent-child attachments (Stern et al., 2022).

Finally, it could be that aspects of family systems or parents' circumstances contributed to connections or disconnections between birth parents and the young people in this study. Participants' statements reveal that many parents continued to struggle with substance abuse, mental illness, and their own independence, all of which likely made it a challenge to maintain a relationship. Though we cannot say with any certainty how many of the parents in this study had their parental rights terminated, future research ought to explore the impacts of child removal on family's well-being and how experiences having to do with loss of child custody and termination of parental rights shape later contact and attachments.

Many participants in this study found relationships with birth parents and extended family members stressful. This finding supports other research that theorizes relational connections of young people with experiences in foster care as a type of connective or interdependence complexity (Schwartz, 2008; Dolbin-MacNab & Keiley, 2009). The statements made by the participants in this study suggest that many experienced ongoing conflict with their birth parents and for some, their extended families. This is by no means a new finding. Courtney et al. (2001) reported that 41% of a sample of young people at age 19 wished they had been

adopted, a finding they attribute to their relationships with their parents or their parents' circumstances having remained "sufficiently problematic that they had little desire to live again with their families of origin" (p.696). A more recent study of adolescents in foster care reported that a majority felt their lives would have been worse had they not been placed in foster care, presumably because of the severity of their parents' challenges (Taussig & Munson, 2022). While many participants in our study talked about finding an accepting attitude towards their birth parents as young adults, their statements also suggest relationship building and rebuilding continued to be a work in progress which required mutual effort.

It is unclear what supports the young people received while in foster care to better understand their parents' circumstances and/or understand how to have a relationship with a parent facing serious and/or chronic challenges. Two decades ago, McMillen and Tucker (1999) asked what systems were doing to prepare young people for navigating dynamics in their families of origin. Inglehart and Becerra (2002) went further to ask whether independent living programs ought to address how young people navigate interdependence in their family systems. When it comes to relationships, Okpych and colleagues (2023) urge the field of child welfare to move away from using "either/or" approaches and to move towards using "both/and" strategies (p.662). Like McMillen and & Tucker (1999), they called for strategies that build lifelong connections to family and community during and after foster care. Less clear is how systems as institutions support young people to ask questions about their birth families, receive assistance to make meaning of membership to family and identity, and address past relationship dynamics, such as attachment, in ways that support them to leave care with new skills for creating and maintaining a wide and deep set of enduring bonds and connections. Supporting young people and their families to understand the history of family separation in the United States as well as

the factors in communities and society that increase the likelihood of child protective services involvement may also go a long way to support meaning making around intergenerational impacts of adversity on family relationships.

Relatedly, the findings from this study suggest a need for therapeutic services and supports that are specifically focused on past adversities in family and foster care, including the absence of a parent and legal separations. One study that examined types of coping strategies used by children in foster care facing parental loss because of termination of parental rights offers clues about strategies for supporting young people to cope with parental losses. Schneider and Phares (2005) examined the relationship between types of coping strategies of 60 foster children residing in residential care between the ages of 8 and 19 and their association with mental health symptoms. They found that emotion-focused strategies for coping with parental loss was associated with greater psychological distress reported by participants. The authors recommended that child welfare services (1) focus on answering young people's questions about their family systems, (2) use normalization, and (3) teach problem-solving and interpersonal skills. While we cannot say with any certainty what kinds of therapeutic support or services young people in this study received to navigate relationships with birth parents and extended family, the findings of this study extend calls to redouble efforts to engage young people's experience with family in ways that support them to make meaning of complex family dynamics that for a majority are likely to endure past foster care.

Finally, we are unaware of existing programs or services that are specifically designed to proactively support young people aging out of foster care to navigate relationships with birth families. One practice model for engaging families in foster care may hold promise. Family group conferences use group decision making processes to bring family and community

members together to make decisions about young people in foster care. The extent to which these practice models are used when young people are aging out of care is unknown, but as a family-focused intervention this model could potentially offer a way to bring family members together to discuss supports for young people exiting foster care without legal permanence. Connecting practice models for family group conferences/decision-making with transition planning may be one way to support young people and their families to navigate a history of family separations, impermanence, and attachments.

*V.a. Limitations*

This study's findings, and any implications that follow, must be understood from within the context of its limitations. The primary reason to use caution in interpreting this study's findings has to do with the sample. First, the sample is small and drawn from in and around XX. The small number of young people who aged out made it a challenge to use the demographic data in the larger study to distill meaningful characteristics about the qualitative groupings of relationships with birth parents. Second, although the study evidenced high rates of retention in a diverse sample, its sample of young adults who aged out of care all entered care between the ages of 9 and 11, which is not generalizable to all young people who age out (Wulczyn 2020). Third, this study focused predominantly on relationships with birth parents, yet participants' open-ended responses suggested that relationships with family members other than birth parents are likely just as important; future studies should explore this in greater depth than this study could do. The survey asked two open-ended questions and interviewers did not probe further to ascertain more information through follow up questions. Fourth, this study did not include birth parents' or other family members' perspectives on reconnecting after foster care and these perspectives are also missing from the extant research in this area. Any strategy for increasing

attention to relationships between young people who age out of foster care and their families would benefit from greater understanding of a range of birth families' experiences and perspectives. Finally, it is important to recognize that the data for this study were collected at a single point in time. It could be that young people's perspectives about relationships with parents and family change as they mature and potentially have children of their own. Future research that examines changes in relationships over time would make an important contribution to the field's understanding of how relationships in family systems may evolve over time. Despite these limitations, the data collected about birth families and reported in this study allow for a beginning exploration of an area in which there is currently limited information and growing calls for reforms to child welfare policy and practice.

#### *Questions & Implications for Practice and Policy*

In many ways, this study's findings point to more questions than answers with respect to practice and policy: What opportunities do young people have while in foster care to receive information about their birth families? What types of contact between young people and their families are facilitated when the case plan is no longer reunification? What types of assistance do young people receive from their birth family members? When is contact with birth family advised and when is it not, and why? What would it look like to teach young people skills for coping with family dynamics in foster care and independent living programs? How do other countries support young people in foster care to maintain lifelong connections with family? Answering these questions would build knowledge in a vital area of social work where there has been limited focus.

#### **Conclusion**

This study explored how young people who exited foster care through aging out navigated connections with birth parents and extended family members and what experiences were like for those who reconnected. It found that a majority sought out birth parents and/or extended family and about half reported having positive experiences. Fewer participants reported either being in a consistent relationship with their birth parents or extended family members or deciding not to reconnect. Overall, most participants described navigating relationships with birth parents and extended family that tended to be complex. It is unclear what support the participants received while in foster care to navigate this complexity, and such support would benefit them following their transition out of care.



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Table 1. Description of the Sample (N=57)

	#	%
<i>Age</i>		
18	5	8.8
19	22	38.6
20	18	31.6
21-22	12	21.1
<i>Sex</i>		
Female	20	35.1
Male	37	64.9
<i>Race</i>		
White	24	42.1
Black	22	38.6
Native American	17	29.8
Asian	7	9.7
Multiple (2 or more)	21	36.8
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Hispanic	29	50.9
<i>Sexual Identity</i>		
Heterosexual	54	94.7
Non-Heterosexual	3	5.3
<i>Ever Married</i>		
Yes	2	3.5
No	55	96.5
<i>Any Children</i>		
Yes	9	15.8
No	48	84.2
<i>Is Birth Mother Alive</i>		
Yes	46	80.7
No	8	14.0
Do not know	3	5.3
<i>Is Birth Father alive?</i>		
Yes	43	75.5
No	4	7.0
Do not know	10	17.5

