



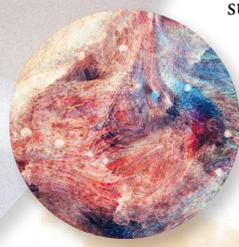
Foster Youth and Basic-Needs Insecurity

By Dra. Nidia Ruedas-Gracia, Chequita S. Brown, Dr. Mauriell Amechi, Dr. Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher, and Nathaniel M. Stewart

The impact of the global health pandemic is unprecedented as it has upended life with 43 states having stay-at-home orders to slow down the spread of coronavirus, also referred to as COVID-19 (Silverstein, 2020). Notwithstanding, COVID-19 has reached all sectors, leaving no industry unaffected with adverse impact to the medical field, hospitality, tourism, transportation, employment, and education.

The public health crisis has unleashed an accompanying economic crisis and has lifted the veil on educational disenfranchisement. Relative to who is marginalized and routinely underserved prior to the crisis have been Black and Latinx communities. In fact, the coronavirus crisis has worsened what has been historical and present-day racial inequality problems in the U.S., as African American/Black and Hispanic/Latinx families have been the most vulnerable due to systemic racialized inequities in health care/health conditions, employment, housing, education, food insecurities and other social factors (Nania, 2020; Tappe, 2020). Other special populations that have been adversely impacted have been former foster youth.

Foster Care and Racial Stratification



In the United States, approximately 443,000 children make up the foster care population. Foster care is defined as 24-hour substitute care for children and adolescents who have been taken away from their parents or guardian and for whom the state or tribal agency has placement and care responsibility. These young people may come to the attention of child welfare systems due to abuse, neglect, or other reasons such as child behavioral issues or the death of a parent.

COVID-19 has intensified the vulnerabilities of foster and former foster youth, many of whom are Black, Native American, Alaska Native, and multiracial kids who have a higher rate of placement into foster care than White youth (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2016).



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The racial overrepresentation of Black children in foster care is the most pronounced, with Black children comprising one-fourth of the foster care population nationally, though only representing 14% of all children in the United States (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).

As of July 2020, an estimated 18,320 children were present in the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) (2020)—a rate of 4.9 compared to the overall population at 5.8. In Illinois, neglect (87%), physical abuse (13%), and parental substance abuse (12%) are the three most common reasons children enter foster care. Consistent with national demographics for foster youth, young people in Illinois DCFS are racially and ethnically diverse (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 2019). In 2017, 53% were Black/African American, 35% were White, and 9% were Latinx.

In terms of gender, a little more than half of foster youth are male and 47% are female. Young people in Illinois DCFS commonly spend more time in foster care relative to their counterparts in the general nationwide foster care population (Amechi, 2016; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). Notably, across every racial group, half of all foster youth exited care without establishing a permanent, legal connection to family. This factor is a critical indicator of how well youth in the state fare in other areas of their life, such as educational attainment, employment, and housing insecurity.

Race intersects and exacerbates a myriad of barriers (e.g., attendance interruptions, enrollment delays, costs of attendance, unemployment, etc.), and COVID-19 has punctuated these difficulties even further. Other hurdles to higher education attainment faced by former foster youth are financial, housing insecurity, food insecurity, and homelessness. With respect to housing stability, data suggest that between 11% and 36% of emancipated youth become homeless within the first year of their transition to adulthood (Dion, 2015; Fryar et al., 2017). Unlike their non-foster peers, foster care youth often lack familial connections and supportive environments where they can cultivate independent living skills that are essential for successful college life and adulthood (Amechi, 2016; Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009; Wolanin, 2005).

College Student Hunger, Housing Insecurity, and Homelessness

Only about 10% of former foster youth attend postsecondary education, and those who do are half as likely as their peers to complete their studies (Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005). As a result of these personal and systematic barriers, foster care youth often fall short of accessing and attaining postsecondary credentials due to opportunity gaps. Extending support beyond covering tuition and fees is needed, particularly in lieu of the present multiplicity of crises. Hence, more colleges and nonprofit support programs need to amplify financial assistance for educational-related expenses beyond tuition such as books, transportation, housing, and food (Stoltzfus, 2017).

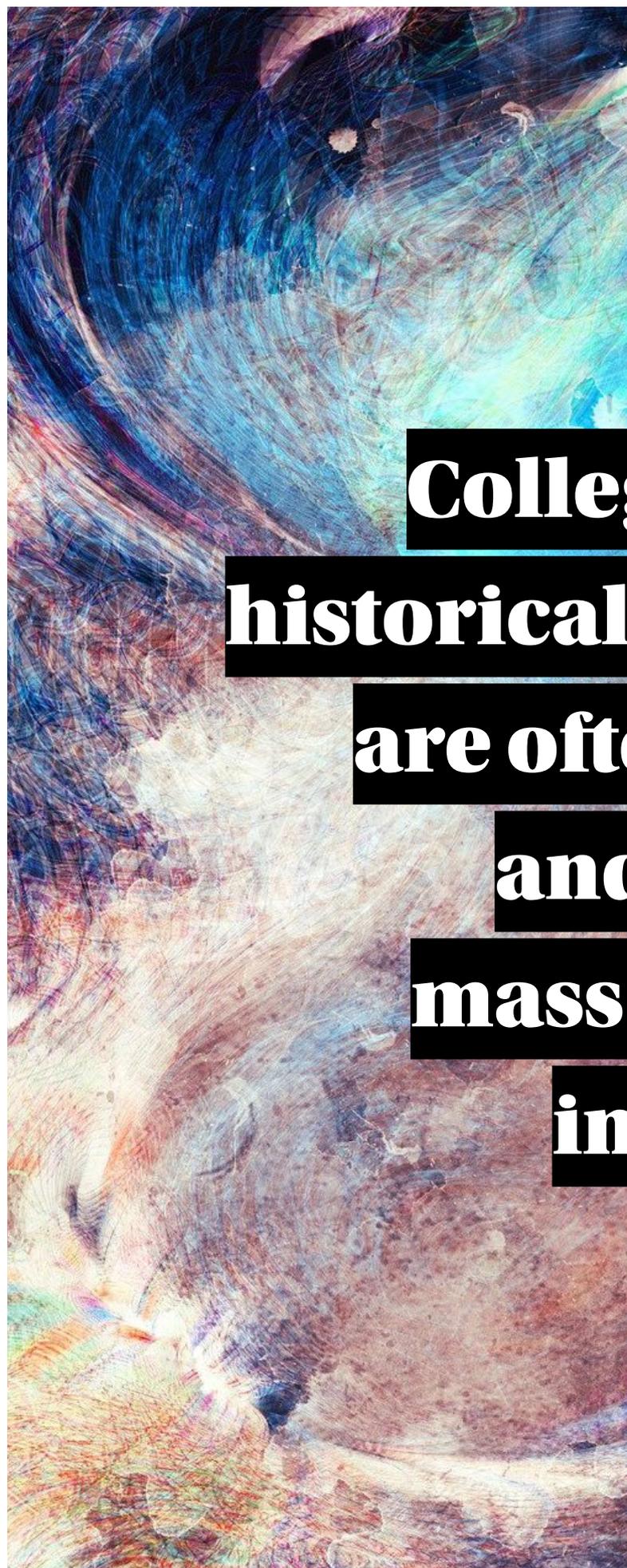
Much of the research on students who are experiencing hardships relative to basic needs such as food and housing highlight undergraduate students who are attending public research universities.

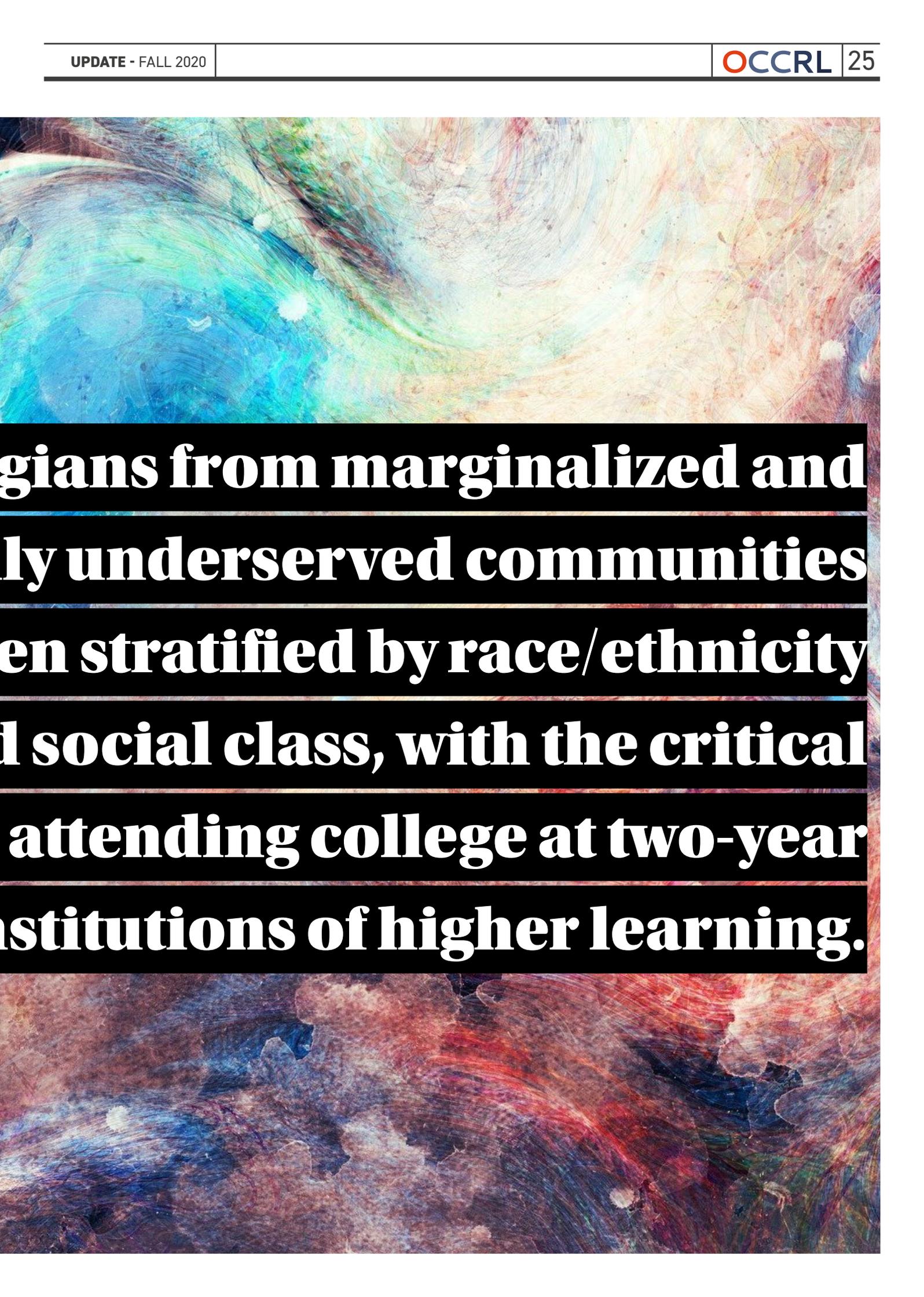
Collegians from marginalized and historically underserved communities are often stratified by race/ethnicity and social class, with the critical mass attending college at two-year institutions of higher learning (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018). The critical mass of former foster students are students of color whose postsecondary opportunities have been largely in community colleges (Fox & Zamani-Gallaher, 2018). Increasing on-ramps to higher education and degree attainment are critical factors in successfully transitioning former foster youth (Dworsky, 2018; Fryar, Jordan, & DeVoght, 2017; Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016).

Access to adequate food and stable housing are essential to cognitive development and academic success (Bassuk, Hart, & Donovan, 2020; Hallett, Crutchfield, & Maguire, 2019; Maslow, 1943). However, recent studies suggest that a growing demographic of college students with foster care experience suffer from unmet basic needs. For example, in 2017, researchers surveyed 33,000 undergraduates at community colleges regarding their unmet basic needs. The results show that 29% of former foster youth were homeless, and 72% faced housing insecurity. These rates are significantly higher than their peers who have no prior experience in foster care (13% and 49%, respectively) (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). Since there could be considerable overlap between homelessness and former foster youth status, exploration of the experience of homeless college students may also provide insights into their college experience.

Independent and conservative analyses of various national datasets suggest that approximately 2,000 community college students in Illinois are experiencing homelessness. Although this computation is a very conservative estimate, and there is no reliable information on how many community college students in Illinois are foster youth or homeless, data from a survey of students enrolled in City Colleges of Chicago (a consortium of seven community colleges) showed that—as of 2018—approximately 66% of respondents reported food and/or housing insecurity. Fifty-four% of students reported experiencing housing insecurity (e.g., not being able to pay rent or moving frequently), and 15% reported being homeless. Although informative, these data sources exclude key student demographics. For example, the survey on college students enrolled in City Colleges of Chicago does not include students enrolled at community colleges outside of the Chicagoland area in other parts of Illinois. Also, the number of students estimated to be enrolled in community colleges statewide does not include students coming from private K-12 systems.

Housing insecurity increasingly permeates many college students' experiences generally and more acutely for collegians who have foster care backgrounds. For example, in many residential colleges, students who live in the dormitories are required to find alternative housing during the winter break, which can range between two to six weeks in duration, depending on the institution's academic calendar. Traditional college students often use this time to take a winter-break trip or to visit family. College students with foster care experience, however, do not have such privileges. Additionally, when severe weather conditions result in the cancellation of classes, housing-insecure students who do not reside in dormitories are left to look for other sheltering alternatives.





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Despite the national prevalence of food insecurity among college students, data describing the scope and dimensions of this problem remain scarce. Research has noted how food insecurity contributes to heightened student anxiety, adversely impacts student wellness, and is a critical issue relative to student persistence and success as students learn to navigate hunger and work around having a lack of food (Stebbleton, Lee, & Diamond, 2020). Although nearly two million food-insecure students were potentially eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps), they did not report having received benefits in 2016 (Brotton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). Unsurprisingly, the growing food insecurity crisis has prompted recent legislative changes these past few years.

In 2018, Governor Bruce Rauner signed into law Senate Bill 351, which mandates that eligibility for SNAP benefits for low-income, career-technical-track community college students in Illinois. However, since the spring of 2020, there has been a substantial demand for food aid, with applications doubling in addition to high demand for charitable food services (e.g., food pantries, food banks, soup kitchens, food drives, etc.), all while the cost of food has increased (Leddy, Weiser, Palar, & Seligman, 2020).

Furthermore, studies suggest that homeless college students report access barriers to federal financial aid. For example, a national survey of community college students showed that only half of the students in the study who experienced food or housing insecurity received a Pell Grant for college. However, an alarming 40% of students in the sample who experienced food or housing insecurity did not receive any financial aid. It is important to note that community college students are not typically eligible for housing assistance programs (e.g., Section 8). In fact, less than 13% of students who experience housing insecurity receive any assistance with housing costs.

Student Voice

Students across the United States have begun raising awareness of the housing instability crisis in colleges. In response to their call to action, different universities, community colleges, and states have implemented short-term solutions. For example, California passed a bill that would require every community college in the state to provide a safe parking lot where homeless students can sleep in their cars. Tacoma Community in Tacoma, Washington, has released a voucher pilot program that provides community college students with vouchers to assist with rent. Massachusetts debuted a pilot program that provides campus housing at nearby four-year universities to homeless students enrolled in community colleges.

Considering the increased awareness of the housing instability crisis among community college students, the importance of food and housing stability for cognitive development, and the probable overlap between homeless and former foster community college students, research should develop more rigorous methods for not only the tracking of homeless college students but also an understanding of their experience. This vital information can jumpstart future efficacious interventions and programming for this prominent population and consequently improve academic outcomes among homeless and former foster youth in colleges and universities.

A New Norm but Familiar Challenges and Realities

Eighteen years old is when individuals are legally seen as adults and when states consider foster youth old enough to “age out” of the system, be emancipated, and live independently. What is paradoxical is the coming-of-age period when youth enter their college years—when a formal system of care designed to provide services is the most crucial. Therefore, continuity of wraparound support services and extending services through age 21 can improve former foster youth postsecondary access, experiences, and outcomes.

It is fair to say the coronavirus epidemic has highlighted a great deal of stratification and insecurities felt by individuals nationwide. Foster youth and former foster youth are special populations that are often invisible, overlooked segments of society. Additional wraparound supports are provided to foster care youth through the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. DCFS offers protective services to children and youth who have experienced abuse or neglect. The organization also provides an array of services to address the total well-being of youth in care, including educational attainment, independent living, and cultivating life skills. For example, the Life Skills Program, offered through the Office of Education and Transition Services at DCFS, serves as a resource for improving the independent living skills of foster youth while promoting economic and social self-sufficiency. Caseworkers are tasked with collaborating with foster youth and caregivers to create an individualized transition plan and establish time-sensitive goals for foster youth. Young people who complete the entire life-skills training will receive a \$150 stipend (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 2019). DCFS also requires an Annual High School Academic Plan meeting with foster youth, which is completed by the caseworker at the start of each school year between August and October. Additionally, the caseworker provides instruction and support that will assist the student in transitioning to the postsecondary institution (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 2019).

Pre-COVID-19, foster youth and wards of the state have a different reality than their non-foster peers. Nonprofit organizations such as Together We Rise, through its teddy bear scavenger hunt, is one example of the efforts to support foster youth during the pandemic, which also includes emergency help in the realms of housing, utilities, food, and laptop access.

In closing, more policies and programs are necessary to curb basic-needs insecurity and end hunger and homelessness for minoritized, underserved, and marginalized former foster care collegians who have marked financial instability, stress, and life interruptions. Research is needed to help society understand the lived experiences of former foster youth who are navigating schooling during the pandemic, with studies that explore how to improve high-touch, high-impact practices that offer evidence of interventions and practices that work for foster alumni to survive and thrive during and beyond COVID-19.

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¹National Center for Education Statistics ED Facts, American Community Survey (ACS) census data, and National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) data