



# Mental Health Outcomes Among Youth in Kinship Care & Foster Care in Washington State

## Mental Health Challenges of Youth in Out-of-Home Care

Mental health is essential to an individual's health and wellness.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, youth who live separated from their parents often experience unique challenges that can cause them to struggle with their mental health.<sup>2</sup> Mental health is also negatively affected by trauma and instability.<sup>3</sup> Youth living in foster care and kinship care have often experienced maltreatment and instability that poses risks to their mental health.<sup>2</sup> As a result, youth living in foster care and kinship care exhibit higher levels of mental health challenges than their community peers, living with their parents.<sup>2</sup> However, heightened levels of mental health challenges vary considerably based upon youths' living situations.<sup>2</sup> Compared to non-family foster care placements, living in a kinship care arrangement is a protective factor for youths' mental health, and youth in kinship care have better mental health outcomes and overall well-being.<sup>2,4</sup>

## What is Kinship Care?

There are two major types of out-of-home care: foster care and kinship care. Kinship care refers to the full-time care of a youth by a relative or another adult who has a close relationship with the youth and their family.<sup>5</sup> Kinship care can be either formal or informal, depending on the level of child welfare services involvement.<sup>5,6</sup> Formal kinship care is state-mandated, whereas informal kinship care can be state-mediated (e.g., kinship diversion) or state-independent (a private kinship care arrangement).<sup>6</sup> Over seven million youth in the United States live in households headed by kinship caregivers.<sup>7,8,9</sup> Most of these kinship placements are informal arrangements made without the involvement of the child welfare system.<sup>10,11</sup>

## Benefits of Kinship Care on Mental Health & Well-Being

Among out-of-home placement options, kinship care is preferred over foster care because it helps maintain youths' key attachments.<sup>12</sup> Kinship care has also been shown to minimize the trauma of being separated from parents. Being placed with family members improves youths' well-being, increases permanency, and preserves youths' cultural identity and community connections.<sup>8,13,14,15</sup> Youth in kinship care are also less likely to have unstable placements than youth in foster care, which is vital for strong mental health.<sup>16,17</sup> While youth living in both kinship care and foster care have poorer mental health than youth living with their parents, youth in kinship care have better overall well-being than youth in foster care.<sup>18</sup> These positive mental health outcomes are often associated with the greater stability and familiarity with their community that youth in kinship care experience when compared to their peers in foster care.<sup>17</sup> Many communities, in particular Indigenous<sup>18</sup> and African American<sup>19</sup> communities, have traditionally utilized kinship care practices to help support cultural continuity for youth living separate from their parents.<sup>18,19</sup> Positive cultural and identity development is crucial for strong mental health.<sup>20</sup> Kinship care arrangements are often beneficial for both caregivers and youth's mental health because kinship care buffers youths' experiences of trauma and strengthens their bonds to their communities of origin.<sup>4,18,19</sup>

While kinship care can act as a protective factor for youth mental health in comparison to foster care, many youth living in kinship care arrangements are still at high risk for mental health struggles due to prior experiences of trauma and instability. It is crucial that kinship caregivers have access to trauma-informed training and supports to help them support youth and better understand how instability and traumatic experiences impact mental health when youth are separated from their parents.

## Mental Health Outcomes Among Youth Living in Kinship Care in Washington State

This fact sheet compares the mental health outcomes of youth who live in kinship care and youth who live in foster care in Washington State. The data used in this fact sheet comes from the 2018 Washington State Healthy Youth Survey (HYS). The HYS is a biannual survey that includes 8th, 10th, and 12th-grade public school students.<sup>21</sup> The survey offers a representative sample of young people in Washington State and provides important details about their health and well-being and helps guide policies to support healthy youth and families.<sup>21</sup>



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## Living in Kinship Care

5,410 Youth

## Living in Foster Care

794 Youth

# Washington State Healthy Youth Survey

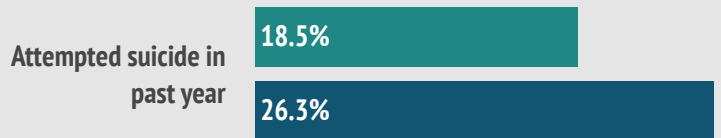
The 2018 Washington State Healthy Youth Survey (HYS) sample included 148,500 public high school students in 8th, 10th and 12th grade. Youths' living situations were determined based on the question: *Who did you live with most of the time in the last 30 days?*

**Note:** 142,296 youth lived with their parents.

### Suicide Attempts

Youth living in kinship care were significantly less likely to have attempted suicide in the past year.

- Compared to youth in kinship care, youth in foster care were **1.7** times more likely to say that they had attempted suicide in the past year.



### Hope for the Future

Youth living in kinship were significantly more likely to say they had hope for the future.

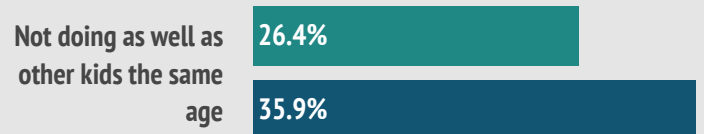
- Compared to youth living in kinship care, youth in foster care were **1.6** times more likely to report low hope for the future.



### Positive Self-Image

Youth living in kinship care viewed themselves more positively in comparison to their peers than youth living in foster care.

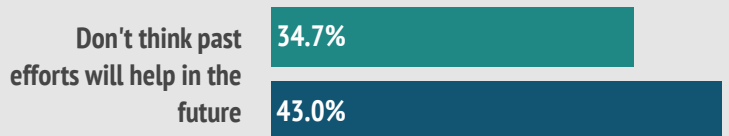
- Youth in foster care were **1.6** times more likely than youth living in kinship care to say they were not doing as well as their peers.



### Impact of Effort on Future Outcomes

Youth living in kinship care were more likely to feel as though their efforts were meaningful and would help them in the future.

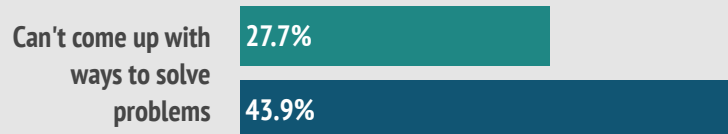
- Youth in foster care were **1.4** times more likely than youth living in kinship care to say do not think that their past efforts will help them in the future.



### Problem Solving

Youth living in kinship care were significantly more likely to say that they have strong problem-solving skills.

- Youth in foster care were **2.0** times more likely than youth living in kinship care to say they couldn't come up with solutions to solve problems



### Key Takeaways from the Healthy Youth Survey

- Youth living in kinship care have better mental health outcomes than youth living in foster care.
- Kinship care can act as a protective factor for supporting youths' mental health needs and buffer youths' trauma experiences in ways that are significantly different from foster care.



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