

# Youth in Research





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# Why Create This Zine?



This zine didn't appear out of nowhere: It was built through connection, conversation, and care. We held interviews, gathered advisory board input, and explored the many types of support available to foster youth. At every step, people with lived experience guided the process—not just as participants, but as collaborators.

Our team includes young people who've been part of this work for months or even years—whether serving on the advisory board, contributing as former interns, or leading as peer researchers. These aren't outside perspectives; they're voices from within.

Together, we created this guide to show what true engagement in research looks like when it reflects us. It's a roadmap. A toolkit. A call to action. A vision forward—made by us, for us.

## **A Note From the Research Team's Project Director:**

This zine was developed with support from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Foster Youth Initiative, for which Child Trends serves as evaluation partner. Since 2022, we have partnered with an Evaluation Advisory Board and three cohorts of interns, all comprised of young people with lived experience in foster care. This zine, authored by our Summer 2025 interns, reflects Advisory Board members' and interns' voices, perspectives, and advice for future youth researchers, and we are so grateful for their leadership.

# About Us



## Kelsie Minaya

Kelsie Minaya is a dedicated youth advocate, research consultant, and case manager with extensive experience in housing, social services, and civic engagement. She has contributed to initiatives across New York City through various research roles, using her lived experience to guide her. Passionate about empowering underserved communities, Kelsie integrates research, outreach, case management, and program coordination to amplify youth voices and drive systemic change.



## Alishba Sardar

Alishba Sardar is an MSW student focused on educational equity. Her work centers on bridging policy and practice to improve access to mental health and social support services for youth and families. She is passionate about building community spaces that foster belonging, healing, and collective care.



## Ogechi Ukaeje

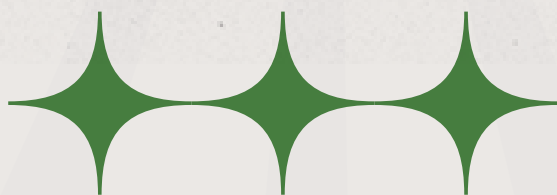
Ogechi Ukaeje is a graduate student majoring in Clinical Psychology with an emphasis in Marriage and Family Therapy and Counseling. She is passionate about mental health, foster youth empowerment, and community healing. Ogechi has contributed to foster youth research across Los Angeles and is an active member of Soluna, a mental health group focused on wellness and peer support. She uses her lived experience to uplift youth voices and create spaces where young people feel seen, valued, and able to thrive.



# Why Does Research Matter?

We all believe that research matters because it helps us better understand the world around us and the systems that shape our lives. It creates space to receive new information and challenge assumptions. Research offers diverse perspectives that are often left out and opens the door for change by making invisible experiences visible. When done right, research doesn't just study people; it listens to them, learns from them, and makes room for their stories to lead the way.

Research is a tool for equity and transformation. It acknowledges that knowledge is not only found in institutions, but in lived experience—in communities, in histories, and in everyday realities. It asks not only what is happening, but why, to whom, and what can be done. Good research fosters trust and challenges certain power dynamics that have been known to silence certain voices. In a world shaped by countless complexities, research remains one of our most powerful tools to shed light, ask questions, and ultimately build something better.



# Why It's Important to Involve Foster Youth in Research



We believe it is critical to have foster youth at the center of research about the child welfare system. Their lived experience captures insights that extend beyond textbooks and traditional qualitative or quantitative research, especially perspectives that researchers without foster care experience may overlook.

When foster youth are involved, the research becomes more accurate, more meaningful, and more likely to create real change. Hearing directly from those impacted helps ensure that programs, policies, and systems reflect the needs of youth.

Including foster youth also shifts power. It transforms research from something done to us into something created *with us*.

# Methods Used

**1 Conducting Youth Interviews:** We interviewed five foster youth about their experiences participating in research.

**2 Analysis:** We reviewed the interviews to identify shared themes, patterns, and key takeaways across youth experiences.



We interviewed five young people with experience in advisory boards, research projects, and youth advocacy. Each conversation lasted around 30 minutes and uncovered honest reflections on what youth-inclusive research should look like. These interviews were not just about collecting stories; rather, they shaped every page of this zine.

As youth researchers ourselves, we brought our own experiences into how we made sense of what was shared. We focused on honoring what was actually said, not just how professionals might interpret it. We also reviewed themes across the interview notes to identify quotes and common topics that surfaced throughout, pulling content into an Excel document to highlight the insights that stood out most. All three authors collaborated to identify the themes, quotations, and insights that were most important.

# Participant Backgrounds

The participants who informed this zine are youth with direct experience in the child welfare system who have also engaged in research in different capacities. We reached out to former interns and advisory board members of Child Trends who have drawn on their lived experience to better understand research and to advocate for improved services in housing, mental health, and employment.

Our intention was to gather the lessons they have gained through their involvement and create a space for them to share their insights. Lived experience is a vital source of knowledge, yet it is often overlooked in traditional research and service design.

We also wanted to create space for participants to reflect on what made them feel welcome in the research, and on what they would like organizations and allies to do differently. Their reflections not only highlight barriers that often exclude youth but also point toward practices that make research more inclusive, supportive, and transformative.



# Reflections & Moments of Pride

“

My experience at Child Trends was unlike any other ... I felt I had a lot of ownership of the work I did ... we were able to give big input on how we thought we should talk about youth experience with the Advisory Board and shape what we wanted the message to sound like. - Alexis

”

**Youth aren't just participants—they're co-creators.**

**When young people shape the message, the work becomes *real, relevant, and powerful.***



**When youth step into research spaces, it can feel intimidating—full of experts, data, and jargon.**

**But your lived experience is its own kind of expertise. By sharing your authentic story, *you bring knowledge that no textbook can provide.***

“

Being true to my experiences is what has helped me be more assertive and more confident in using my voice.  
- Clarissa

”

**Authenticity builds confidence, and that confidence makes your voice impossible to ignore. In research, this means *you're not just a participant—you're shaping how youth realities get understood, documented, and acted on.***



# Lived Experience & Knowledge Production

“

Compensation is so key to avoid tokenization.

- Clarissa

”



Paying youth for their time isn't just fair—it's about **respect**. **Lived experience is expertise**. If researchers want real stories and honest input, they need to value it the same way they would any other professional contribution.

Lived experience shows the daily reality—the struggles, the resilience, the whole story.

**Real research means valuing both the study + the lived experience.**

“

It's one thing for someone to go to school and learn about what it's like to be in foster care ... but it's another thing to actually experience it. - Clarissa

”





# Constructive Insights

## Advice to Adult Allies

“ True allyship looks like inclusion and diversity ... it is about valuing people and being intentional about the impact you make.

- Clarissa ”

Advisory boards give youth a platform, *but real impact happens when those voices turn into long-term roles, projects, and policy changes.* Too often, young people are invited to share their lived experience—but not to stay at the table when it's time to make decisions.

From our interviews, youth made it clear: Research often feels like it is done *about us* instead of *with us*. Sharing lived experience can be heavy, even painful, and too often researchers forget the human cost.

## Longevity

“ I think ... transitioning to more long-term opportunities should always be the goal of an Advisory Board, because we should be able to implement the advice we give ... we're just kind of educating and sharing our lived experience versus creating projects and implementing policies and things like that. - Daniel ”

# Why These Critiques Matter

Research isn't neutral. It can harm when it extracts stories without care. Youth with lived experience are not data points, they are leaders and knowledge holders. These critiques call for research that listens, collaborates, and creates real change.



# **Advice to Youth Who Want to Get Involved in Research**

# Advice to Youth: A Toolkit in Our Voices

To every young person stepping into research: **This space belongs to you.** You don't need a PhD or a fancy title to make an impact. Your lived experience is expertise. We know it can feel intimidating, even overwhelming, to bring your story into research. That's why we're sharing what helped **us**: the skills we built, the lessons we learned, and the reminders we still carry. Think of this as a guide written in our voices for youth, by youth. Take what you need, leave what you don't, and always remember: **You deserve to be here.**

## Build Your Skills

*"I took a public speaking class ... it helped me learn how to share my story and connect with the audience." - Daniel*

*"Public speaking ... vocabulary ... professional development. Nothing wrong with learning more." - Nilsa*

*"I would benefit from writing projects with feedback or access to a writing coach, because writing expectations can feel intimidating."  
- Clarissa*

## Accountability Matters

*"Show up on time, regardless of what's going on at your home ... the world really doesn't care." - Daniel*

*"We need to create an environment that reflects the real world and teaches us skills that aren't going to set us up for failure." - Daniel*

## Seek Long-Term Impact

*"Seek out opportunities to build your skills—public speaking, writing, music, whatever helps you express yourself and grow." - Daniel*

## Own Your Expertise

*"You might not have a PhD but you know your community, how to ask questions, and how to organize ... that's how you get more researchers." - Lanitta*

*"I think you need to know yourself and the way that you work would make you a better collaborator to connect with others and understand your strengths and weaknesses." - Daniel*

## Believe You Belong

*"You deserve to be here. Imposter syndrome is real, especially when you have lived experience ... Your lived experience is expert experience." - Lanitta*

*"People might see storytelling as its own thing and data and research as another, but I see them as the same thing, just different words. Because again, you have the qualitative and the quantitative pieces, and in order for the numbers to matter, you have to give them meaning, and that's literally storytelling. We should encourage people to use the tools they already have." — Lanitta*

# Toolkit for Foster Youth Getting Into Research and Policy

The resources and organizations below are ones we are familiar with through our networks. Explore them for more ways to get involved and learn new skills.

## Classes & Workshops

- Public speaking, research methods, statistics, etc.
- Policy advocacy workshops (e.g., through National Foster Youth Institute, Foster Club, California Youth Connection)
- Foster youth voice conferences (e.g., Foster Club All-Stars)
- Data literacy: Intro to Excel/Google Sheets, free tutorials on YouTube or Khan Academy

## Internships & Conferences

- **National Foster Care Youth & Alumni Policy Council**  
A national council of youth/alumni advising federal agencies and Congress on child welfare. Members help shape policies and national research priorities.
- **Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI)**  
Brings youth with foster care experience to Washington, DC each summer to intern in Congress, conduct research, and publish a policy report.
- **Foster Greatness**  
A platform uplifting systems-impacted voices through digital advocacy, resource-sharing, and leadership development.
- **Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) & Casey Family Programs**  
Both engage youth in national research, panels, and policy reports—important spaces to connect lived experience with systemic change.

# Dreaming Forward

Dreaming forward means building systems that honor youths' time, insight, and care: Where compensation matches contribution and participation is sustainable, not extractive. It's about turning critique into design and design into justice.

## Equity & Access

Meeting youth where we are—financially, logistically, and emotionally—is important for organizations to understand. Pay and transportation matter.

**If the basics aren't covered, youth can't show up fully.**

*"When it comes to transportation and pay equity, there are still major gaps. I've spent up to ninety-five dollars one way just to get to work, while others spend thirty dollars on gas ... I've also facilitated workshops where I was paid, but had to cover expensive travel myself. It's **not always equitable**, even if the numbers look the same on paper."*

## Skill-building

Skill-building is part of dreaming forward—learning how to speak, write, create, and organize. When we grow in our personal lives, we bring that strength into our communities.

*"Anything that could help the person elevate in their personal life will also allow them to elevate in their professional life."*





## To the Reader:



**This zine was made through care,  
conversation, and courage.**

**Every quote, every story, every insight  
came from lived experience, not theory.**

**We hope these pages remind you that  
youth are not just voices to be heard; we  
are partners, thinkers, and builders of the  
future we deserve.**

**Keep listening. Keep sharing. Keep creating  
spaces that trust us to lead.**

**Thank you for reading.**