HOW

RACISM

IN THE

OHIO
CHILD
SERVICES
SYSTEM

IMPACTS THE LIVES OF

INDIVIDUALS
INVOLVED

A 2020 ChiByDesign Project

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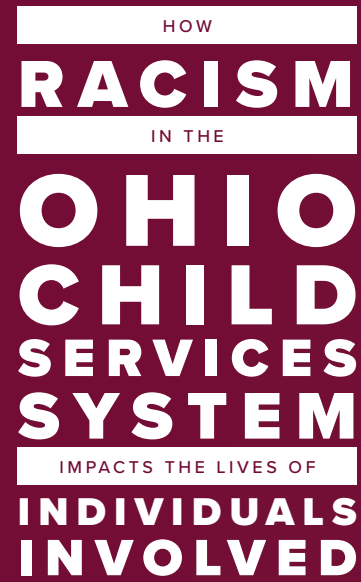
There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."

NELSON MANDELA
Former President of South Africa

TERMINOLOGY TO BE COGNIZANT OF

ANTI-RACIST
Antiracism is the active process of identifying and eliminating racism by changing systems, organizational structures, policies and practices and attitudes, so that power is redistributed and shared equitably.

DISPARITY
The unequal outcomes of one racial or ethnic group as compared to outcomes for another racial/ethnic group.

DISPROPORTIONALITY
The underrepresentation or overrepresentation of a racial or ethnic group compared to its percentage in the total population.

FAMILIES/CHILDREN OF COLOR
Families or children other than those who are non-Hispanic, White-only (e.g., Black, Hispanic, Native American).

RACIST
Any attitude, action or inaction, which subordinates a person or group because of her/his race/color/ethnicity.

The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services oversees the delivery of children services across the state. Ohio has a state-supervised, county-administered children services system.

The State of Ohio's Department of Job and Family Services engaged with the Columbus Foundation and ChiByDesign to better understand how racism and inequities are experienced in Ohio's children services system. This partnership builds on the work of the Columbus Foundation in measuring and improving community well-being by partnering with people who have lived experiences to help understand and address the toughest challenges our community faces.

This report is the result of an initial qualitative inquiry into the experiences and insights of both young people, parents, and state personnel of Ohio's children services system.

The design research team consisted of the ChiByDesign design research team, staff of the Columbus Foundation, and co-designers who had lived expertise with Ohio's children services system.

Design is a way of working to help humans connect, unlock our hidden creativity, and create the world best suited for humanity. The foundation of design is to build genuine understanding with and for those who need change. After developing a deep understanding and connection, we begin to design creative solutions to problems. This particular project focused on building deep understanding, but did not move into creating solutions. **Given the complexity of this topic, creative co-designed solutions will emerge in the next phase of this work.**

RESEARCH FRAME

How does racism in Ohio's children services system impact the lives of all individuals involved?

Research Approach and Methods

ChiByDesign utilized a co-design approach, which means designing 'with' and not 'for' people, and a human-centered methodology, which emphasizes putting the 'person' in the center to better understand the unique experiences and needs of target audiences to then identify operational and organizational strategies to improve racial equity. To better understand this area, we conducted secondary research on Ohio's children services system in terms of demographic breakdowns and the comparison of this to the rest of the country. We employed a series of in-depth qualitative interviews and several rounds of data analysis among the design research team.

THEMES

As a result of this research, we came across several themes and associated insights that highlight disparities and racism within Ohio's children services system. Ethnographic research revealed that:

1 **Black voices and experiences are not valued.** Black interviewees told us that they were consistently ignored when expressing concerns about their care or their needs for assistance.

2 **Disparities between kinship care and foster care reveal systematic differences in how families of color are supported to care for children.** We heard from interviewees about the reduced supports for kinship families, which tend to be Black, compared to the supports provided to foster families that tend to be white.

3 **Young people feel they have no voice or choice in the process of foster care.** Young people's voices do not figure into decisions that are made about their care. This is especially true for youth of color.

4 **Foster parents are ill-equipped to fully support their foster children.** Foster parents did not feel well-trained to raise children in their care. This was especially true for parents in transracial foster arrangements.

5 **Lack of race-equity standards for fostering exposes Black and mixed-race youth to racist foster experiences.** Black children shared traumatic, racist experiences with foster parents and families, which shows anti-racist requirements are not present.

6 **Gaps in support for youth navigating transition from foster care into positive adulthood.** Young people and systems employees shared how few children are positively prepared for adulthood after a lifetime in care. This is especially significant for Black children, since they are likely to be in the children services system longer and are more likely to emancipate from the system than their white peers.

Although some of the above themes can also be true for non-Black children in the Ohio's children services system, the outcomes that result for Black children are more dire. Black youth in Ohio's children services system will be emancipated into a racist society that makes it harder to find employment, puts them at increased risk for a fatal encounter with law enforcement, and limits their access to higher education.

In the remainder of this report, we discuss our research process, major insights, interconnected themes that arose from participant interviews, and propose a roadmap to further explore gap areas and the insights presented.

"It is wrong that Black and multi-racial children are disproportionately represented in the children services system. We need better solutions to this problem, and where better to start than with the young people, biological parents, and others who have experienced the system first hand."

— Mike DeWine, Governor of Ohio

These words by Ohio Governor Mike DeWine initiated ChiByDesign's involvement with the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) and the Office of Children Service Transformation to explore the connection between systemic racism and Ohio's children services system. In 2019, ODJFS and the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council began internal work to identify how systemic racism has been embedded in the policies, practices, and experiences of those involved with Ohio's children services system. Our research overlaps and validates some of the previous findings of how Ohio's children services system works or does not work. However, our research intentionally diverges from previous efforts, specifically looking to understand how racism in Ohio's children services system impacts the lives of all individuals involved.

The significance and size of this challenge are equally important and vast. Therefore, during this phase of the project, we sought to illuminate manifestations of racism in Ohio's children services system while not attempting to "solve" the problems that we discovered. We acknowledge the urgency felt by ODJFS to solve systemic racism and yet, the work to understand the comprehensiveness of what yields racist outcomes must be deliberate, thorough, and thus, is time-intensive.

Project Reframe

Governor DeWine's statement that "...Black and multi-racial children are disproportionately represented in the children services system," was a precursor to our research. In our exploration of the matter, we uncovered:

1
Racism exists in the current system because *disproportionate representation in a system and inequitable racial outcomes are the "smoking gun" of racism;* **and thus,**

2
We would have to use an anti-racist lens during our research.

Using an anti-racist lens requires that we investigate all policies and practices that produce racial inequities. The overrepresentation of Black and mixed-race children in the foster care system (Figure 1) clearly shows disproportionality within the system. But why? Based on this data we could position two design projects:

1. **What do Black families need to better raise their children and stay out of the Ohio's children services system? Or**

2. **Why does the Ohio's children services system disproportionately impact Black children and families producing inequitable outcomes?**

We chose to investigate the latter question. This question, unlike the former, assumes that racial disproportionality is the result of racist policies and practices within the system, not inherent differences among different racial groups.

The problem of racism is not unique to Ohio. Black children are overrepresented in the children services system nationally due to institutionalized racism across systems (education, juvenile justice, etc.) and the racial wealth gap. According to data from Healthy Northeast Ohio, "the white median household income is more than $64,000 per year, but the Black median household income is just slightly over $35,000." Black children represent 23% of children in foster care, while they represent 14% of children in the general population (KIDS Count, 2020; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2019).

United States Foster Care Population — White 42%, African American 28%, More than one race 5%. Ohio Foster Care Population — White 51%, African American 36%, More than one race 8%. Ohio General Population — White 75%, African American 14%, More than one race 4%.
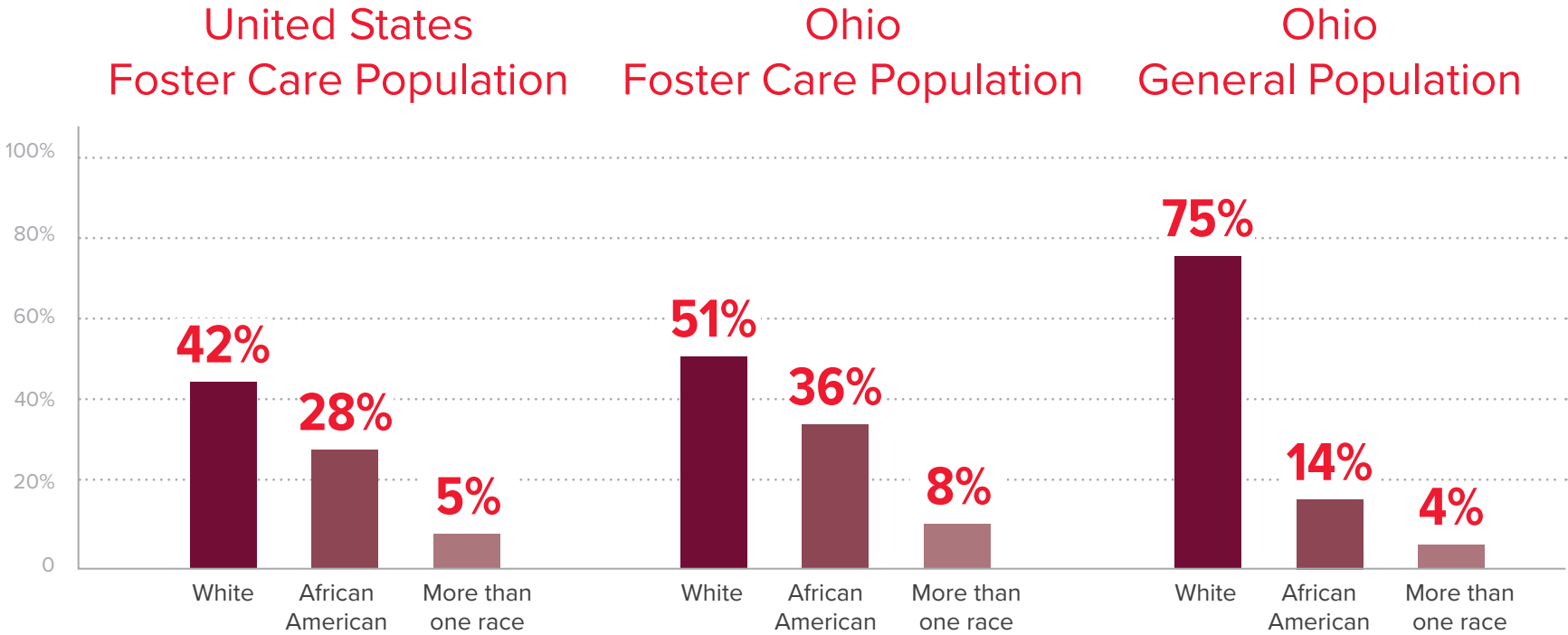
Racism is not just about negative feelings between people of so-called different races. It is more importantly, about the systemic mechanisms that create and reproduce disproportionately negative outcomes for particular groups. Racism also does not require intentionality. "Non-racists" and people of color can utilize the mechanisms created by systemic racism to reproduce racist outcomes. The racist mechanisms that have been created to oppress and subjugate one group can and oftentimes does harm other groups.

Racism is an adaptive system that changes as conditions change, which makes it extremely important to have a comprehensive, multi-level strategy to expel racism from Ohio's children services system.

The research was primarily conducted with Black stakeholders. This report seeks to uplift their lived experiences because we know the outputs of systemic racism are found in the experiences and outcomes of those who are targeted and impacted by it.

Background on Children Services in Ohio

As we review the quantitative data, we clearly see major disparities between the way people of different racial groups encounter the Ohio's children services system. These racialized differences show that racism is not only present but also a driver in the Ohio's children services system. **One of the clearest indicators that**

racism is active in child welfare is the racial disproportionality at the entry point of the system. Currently, Black youth make up 14% of Ohio's population, yet 36% of the Ohio foster care population. Youth of mixed-race households comprise 4% of Ohio's population, yet 8% of the Ohio foster care population.

> " The numbers also show that by age 21, young adults who experienced foster care have worse outcomes than their peers in maintaining relationships, attaining postsecondary education, securing permanent housing, and finding support if a young parent. This is particularly the case for youth of color, who are overrepresented in foster care."

Youth in Ohio foster care face more placements,
barriers to adulthood- Dayton Daily News 11/13/2018

Due to the pervasiveness of racism within the system, it is sometimes difficult for those affected by it to identify their experience as different because they believe this is just the way things are. However, those differences are highlighted by decades of data and testimony from the people most victimized by racism who have detailed their experiences with racism in the system. The data shows Black and mixed-race children enter and emancipate from the system at disproportionate rates. This is a clear indicator that racism is present throughout the system, impacting the experience of all involved and creating particularly negative experiences and outcomes for Black and mixed-race children.

Our Research Process

Our approach to exploring this research area was one of both in-depth qualitative inquiry and stakeholder participation. Stakeholders in this situation included youth and parents who were part of Ohio's children services system and professionals working in different parts of the system. Working alongside two liaisons from the Columbus Foundation, we developed an interview protocol that followed trauma-informed principles. This protocol was also iteratively revamped with emancipated youth to ensure we could adequately understand racial equity challenges that exist in the system. We also enlisted the help of two young people who were previously in foster care to work alongside the design team as co-designers and were able to conduct remote interviews.

Together, we explored the experiences of young people and parents engaged in Ohio's children services system, as well as perceptions and accounts from caseworkers and other county employees.

This research was conducted over the course of six weeks with 18 stakeholders; therefore provides a limited view of Ohio's children services system and no insight into the interconnectedness with other systems (education, juvenile justice, etc.). It is important to note that we can never research the entire system of users to determine what is happening. The goal of the practice is for the design team to deeply immerse itself in the lived experience of a number of users. This will allow unique insights to emerge that results in innovative ways to address these problems.

COMPLETED STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

Through an interactive round of affinity diagramming and thematic analysis, we identified patterns and themes that arose from these interviews. In our process of affinity diagramming, interview transcripts were reviewed and coded to extract data to be categorically organized and grouped into patterns seen across all transcripts. Thematic analysis allowed us to then take those groups of patterns and identify themes that matched our original research goals. Smaller groups of the design research team conducted multiple rounds of synthesis to derive major themes and insights to be discussed in the next section of this report.

* Here we attempted to schedule a stakeholder but this person
    was a no-show for the actual interview

7
Emancipated Youth

6
Parents (Foster)

0
Parents (Biological)*

4
Internal / External Program Administrators
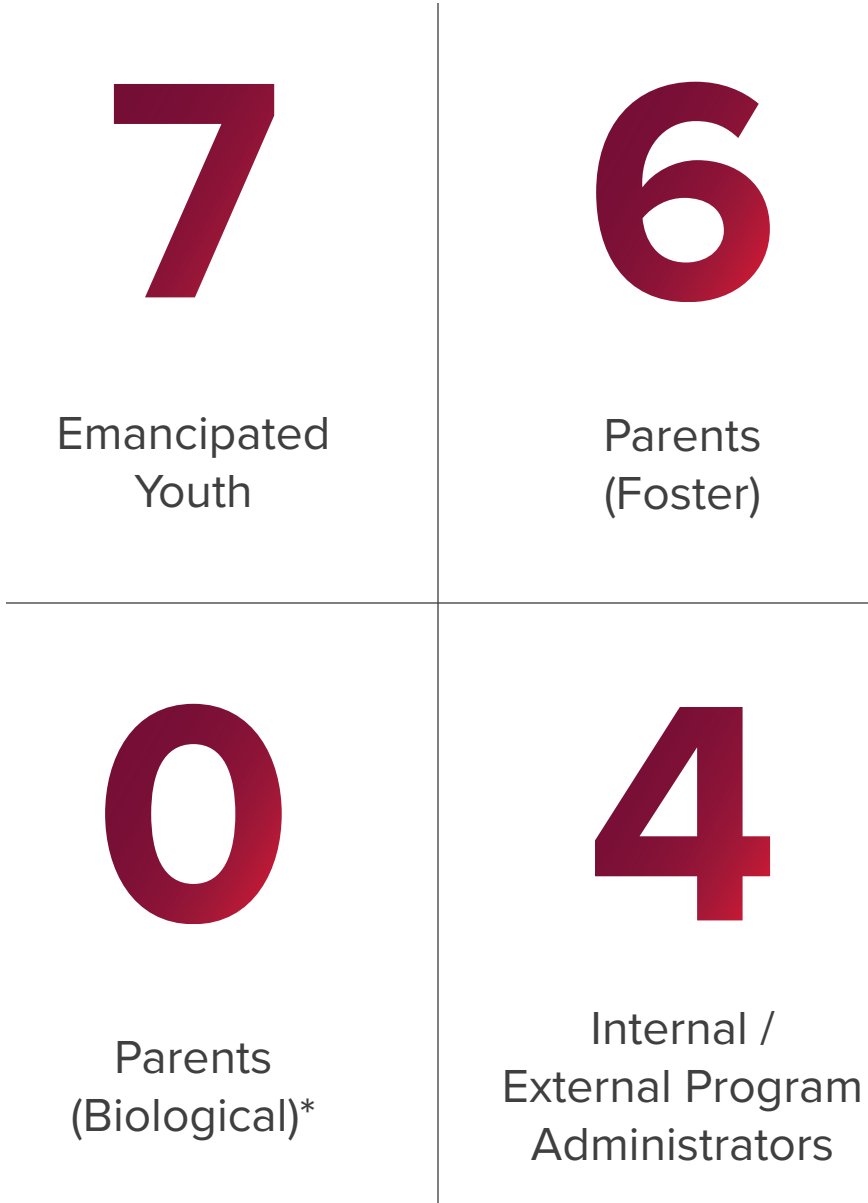
CO-DESIGNERS

Recently, emancipated young people who were previously in foster care, guided, corrected, and led the work throughout the project. This helped us to ensure our interview protocol was appropriate and sensitive to those we interviewed and led to the most relevant insights. The voices of these individuals were instrumental in developing and maintaining sensitivity within a trauma-informed research protocol, conducting interviews, reviewing interview transcripts, and translating insights. They were an integral part of conceptualizing insights and new recommendations for research directions.

DATA + SYNTHESIS

To develop an initial understanding of the challenge, we conducted 18 in-depth qualitative interviews. The variety of stakeholders we spoke with allowed us to develop an understanding of the ecosystem from the organizational, operational, and experiential perspectives. We believe that a more extensive project with a longer timeline and a broader pool of inputs is necessary to develop a deeper understanding of the system. We have provided a breakdown of the stakeholders engaged within this phase of the research.

FIGURE 2 | Synthesis of participant data

"
I think sometimes they go above and beyond for white kids in the system. My first kid was only here for a week and she had 4 siblings, they found a home for her and her siblings. But my child I'm about to adopt, there were 4 of them but they split all of them up."

— Frances, Black foster mother

FIGURE 3 | Racism in the system

RACISM IN ...
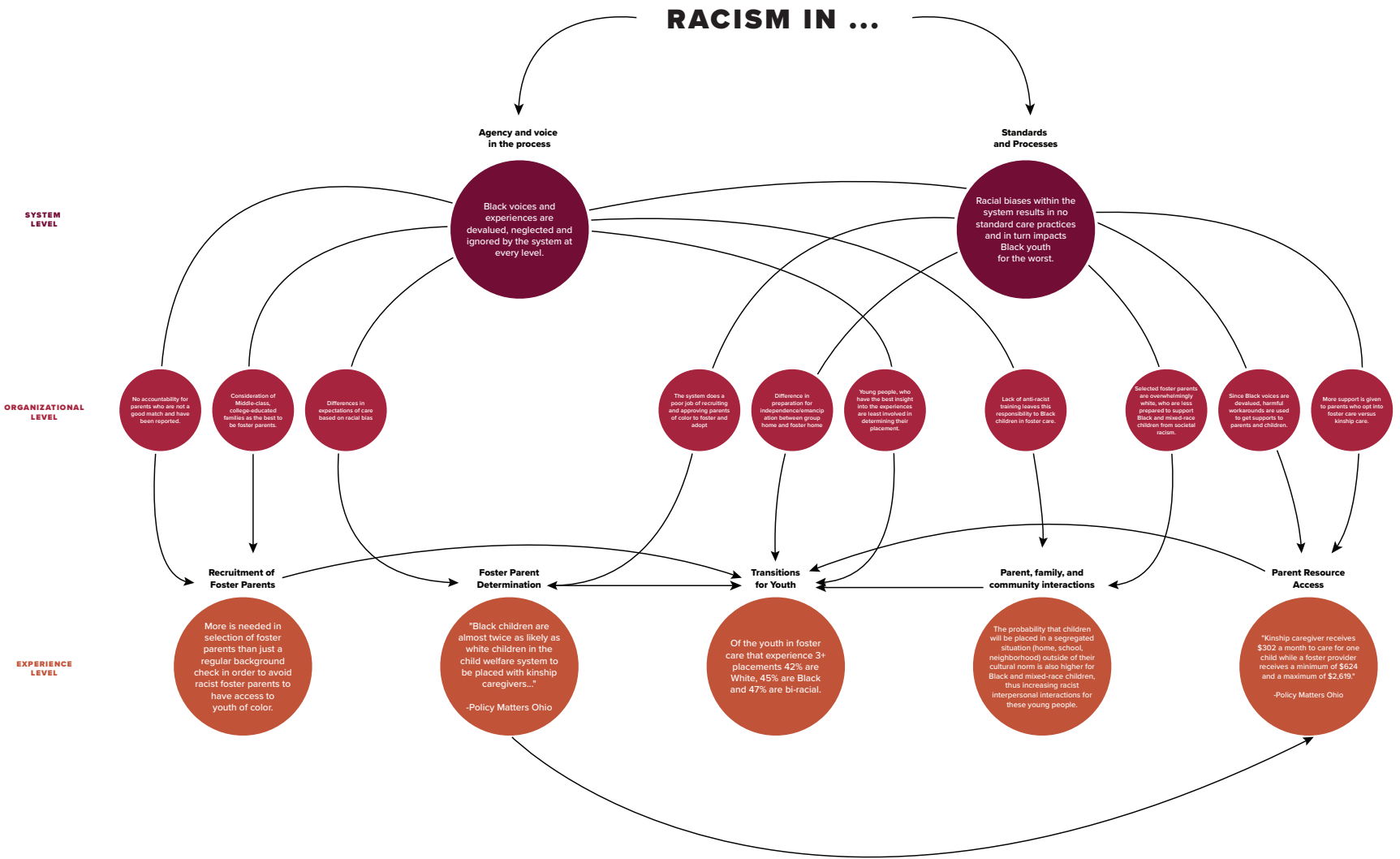
From the hours of interviews and conversations, we highlighted six major themes and will discuss the insights that arose from them. Although a number of the challenges highlighted may be true for all racial groups within Ohio's children services system, families of color experience them more acutely due to racism and disproportionate representation and outcomes.

We found racism to be a significant root cause woven through and manifesting in all the themes identified, impacting the experiences and organizational structures we examined (see Figure 3). We were able to see clear inconsistencies in the policies and procedures that lead to racial disparities for Black and mixed-race young people.

THEME ONE

Black voices and experiences are not valued.

An important theme that emerged among interview respondents is the devaluing, neglect, and ignoring of Black voices and experiences by the system at every level. This experience was expressed by a number of young people, parents, and employees within Ohio's children services system. In some instances, interview respondents felt they were only listened to if they engaged in risky or harmful activities. In the ways that respondents spoke about this concern, we found it to be a valuable theme to highlight as this speaks to a major contributor to racial inequity within the system.

"

"I don't think they [the foster care system] see me at all. Anything would have been okay to them until something [bad] happens...I was calling children's services every day myself, telling them I was tired, I don't know how much I can take, and I need help...but they have to decide if it's a case worth opening and..it wasn't worth it to them... I stay in a caucasian neighborhood and when she [young person in kinship care] ran to one of their houses and said I was beating her, children's services ate that up...they went over to that caucasian house and took their story but wouldn't even come out here and check on me."

— Imani, Kinship care guardian of teenagers

"I don't think I would have gone through the same things. My voice would have been heard more. I would have had more options. I'm still not listened to, my siblings are still with my mom even though she is not well."

— Nafisah, Black youth, formerly in the foster care system.

THEME TWO

Disparities in kinship care and foster care reveal systemic differences in how families of color are being supported to care for children.

In a recent report by Policy Matters Ohio (2020), the Center for the Study of Social Policy was cited as having found that Black children are almost twice as likely as white children in the children services system to be placed with kin. While the Annie E. Casey Foundation has found that children placed with family members or close family friends have better behavioral and mental health outcomes than children placed in foster care, kinship families are not supported at the same level as foster families, financially, or programmatically.

"

"Kinship families don't get support. That's why I had to go before a judge to get help. I needed the kids I was caring for to have mental health supports they could only get if Children Services got involved. They just expected me to do it on my own. I couldn't."

— Olivia, Black foster parent

INSIGHT ONE | Kinship care families who take responsibility for non-biological children need the same support afforded to foster parents, if not more, to address the additional financial strain of childcare, education, food, clothing, and other necessities.

"

We're asking families that are already strapped to take on more. There are no financial benefits for that. Adoption-- there's all kinds of subsidies-- kinship care providers are pushed through the hoops. They only get support for a short amount of time."

— Keith, a former foster youth and current children services advocate

"

This county is really big on kinship care. It's a money thing. If they can find anyone without a criminal record they will give them the kids. They don't give them a lot of assistance... We see a lot of failed kinship placements because of it. Bio parents also take advantage [of the kinship placement] because they don't have to work a case plan anymore. Kinship care providers can become foster providers, but it's very rare.... Most counties will push for legal custody because there is no financial support and it saves the county thousands of dollars."

— Alesia, social worker and longtime program administrator

"

In the black community, people say yes I'm going to do it [take kids on as kinship care], but they say I will take one kid and [the County] shows up with three... No one wants to see their family in the system... most families aren't set up to care for additional mouths though."

— Alesia, social worker and longtime program administrator

"

She needs help mentally. When the judge understood..he knew I was crying for help not to get rid of her. So many of our kids know once they start acting up they get put back in the system. I never wanted to push her back to the system."

— Imani, Black kinship caregiver

THEME TWO QUESTIONS

How could the children services system better support families and close family friends who take responsibility for the young people?

Young people feel they had no voice or choice in the process of foster care.

Young people feel that they do not have a voice, choice, or agency in the process of placement and transitions between foster homes or between their biological family and their system placement. Interview respondents stated that this includes the ability to reach out to the system when in need of its services, or to advocate on their own behalf when wanting to be removed from a foster parent that may be racist, neglectful, or harmful. This lack of agency was especially true for Black youth in the system.

INSIGHT ONE | Young people have the closest insight into their experiences in the home, yet are the least involved in the matching process or reassignments.

"

One time, we had to take the County children services all the way to court ...because they didn't want me to go to Maine. I wanted to go because it could be a better life for me...and I just couldn't understand."

— Beanna, Black young person formerly in the foster care system

"

Just because they're family doesn't mean they are the right place for the child. They were not really opportunities for my voice to be heard in the system. Not really. No."

— Monica, young Black woman emancipated from foster care

"

I just remember being dropped off in a stranger's house. I was four or five years old. No one gave me any context, they never did."

— Ella, young person, formerly in the foster care system

INSIGHT TWO | The system is biased in favor of the voice of the adults.

"
I know my family is not mentally stable enough to take care of kids. They have squeaky clean record, but everything is not good there. Mom had bipolar disorder. They listened to her, they thought she was good. It's a pattern. I know that my family is not mentally stable enough to take care of kids. I knew this was going to go bad. I knew my mom wasn't able to do this. They listened to her."

— Angela, Black youth emancipated from care

INSIGHT THREE | Caseworker notes offer a one-sided perspective of the child. Youth of color are more adversely affected by these records due to the dominant racist narratives assigned to youth of color, particularly Black youth.

"
Me being the only one out of my siblings [removed, means] not a lot of people listening to us. Yeah, [bio mom's] done the classes- but she's the same person. Foster care system hasn't listened to us. My brother has run away 3 times, but the foster care system still set on mom, mom mom."

— Nafisah, Black youth, formerly in the foster care system

"
I learned about the file because I was nosy. Each foster parent gets a file, I would read it and then put it back. WOW! I never knew that people write that stuff down and it follows you until you age out. I was like 'that's not me so it doesn't matter'."

— Ella, Black young person formerly in the foster care system

THEME FOUR

Foster parents are ill-equipped to fully support their foster children.

Foster parents work incredibly hard to provide loving home environments to young people in the system. However, many feel unprepared, despite training, to care for young people through situations unique to their foster care experience. Foster parents felt ill-equipped to handle significant transition events for young people, meet their mental health needs, and **parent Black and mixed-race children through cultural differences and societal racism.**

Black and mixed-race children also experience more placements (see Figure 4) during their time in Ohio's children services system, thus increasing the level of trauma experienced by these young people.

NUMBER OF PLACEMENTS DURING MOST RECENT FOSTER CARE EPISODE

OHIO 3+ FOSTER CARE PLACEMENTS

42% WHITE

45% AFRICAN AMERICAN

47% MORE THAN ONE RACE
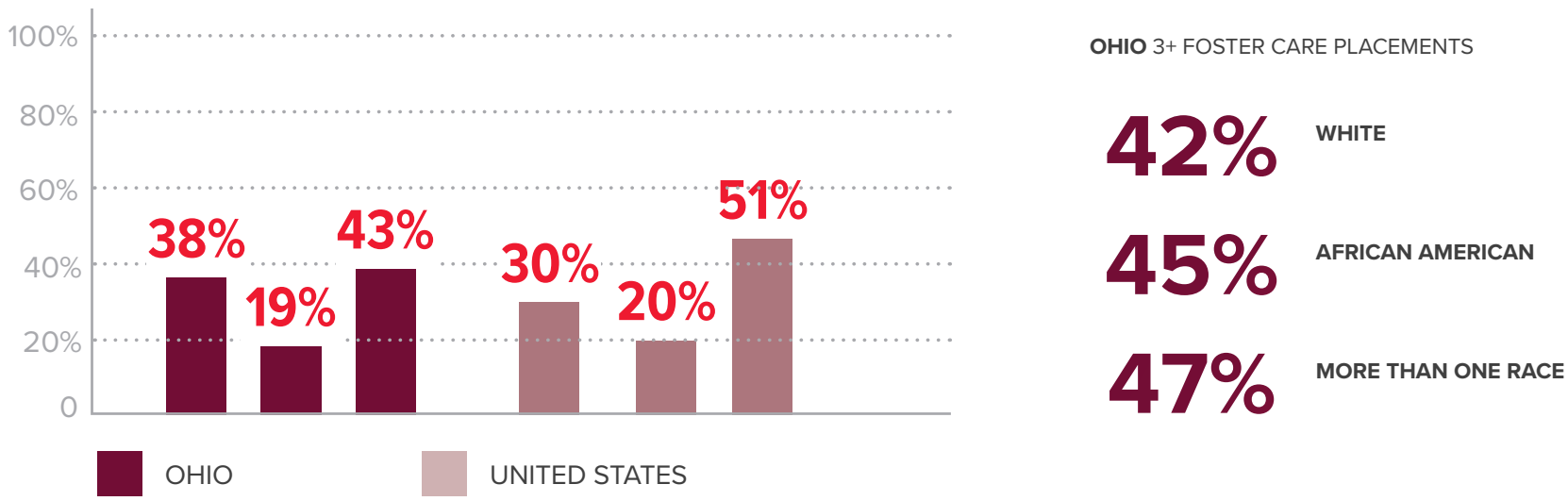
These additional traumatic experiences and societal racism means foster parents are less prepared to support Black and mixed-race children.

Since recruited and selected foster parents are overwhelmingly white and children in care are disproportionately Black and mixed-race, inevitably, more transracial placements occur (see Figure 5). **The probability that children will be placed in a segregated situation (home, school, neighborhood) outside of their cultural norm is also higher for Black and mixed-race children, thus increasing the opportunity for racist interpersonal interactions for these young people.**

INSIGHT ONE | Black and mixed-race young people in Ohio's children services system face attacks and trauma beyond the "normal" trauma endured by white youth specifically because of their skin tone.

"
I was confused about why I was being called a gorilla or a nigg**... Why was I in a home where it was obvious they couldn't love me like I'm their own kid? I've been in homes where...I was the only black person in the whole town and got called all types of names and the foster parents never did anything."

— Beanna, young Black person formerly in the foster care system

"
We have a large percentage of Caucasian foster homes in rural Ohio throughout the state. And we have African American children... and the communities that they live in are sometimes small towns of 1000 people. An all white family has an African American kid from Columbus, so I will go into the principal's office a lot [to address racist incidents]. A lot of people are just pure ignorant [and we need to address the incidents at school]. A lot of the foster parents may not quite understand that."

— County worker

FIGURE 5 | Adoption from Foster Care Federal Fiscal Year 2015

TRANSRACIAL ADOPTIONS IN THE UNITED STATES*

Adoption creates a permanent legal relationship between a child and their adoptive family. Children adopted from foster care were removed from their birth families because child protective services and the court determined it was not safe for them to return home and that adoption would be in the children's best interest. Not every child in foster care has a goal of adoption – most will reunify with their families or will live with relatives as their guardians. However, for children for whom reunification is not possible, adoption is a critically important path to a safe, permanent family. While there has been an increased focus on ensuring eligible children are adopted from foster care in the past decade, in 2015 there were over 100,000 U.S. children still waiting for adoptive families.

An adoption is considered transracial if the child has two adoptive parents and is not the same race as either parent or if the child has one adoptive parent and is not the same race as that parent.

Children adopted by parents of the same race	**66%**
Children of color adopted by white parents	**17%**
Children of color adopted by parents of color of a different race	**6%**
White children adopted by parents of color	**3%**
Child's and / or parent's race unknown	**8%**
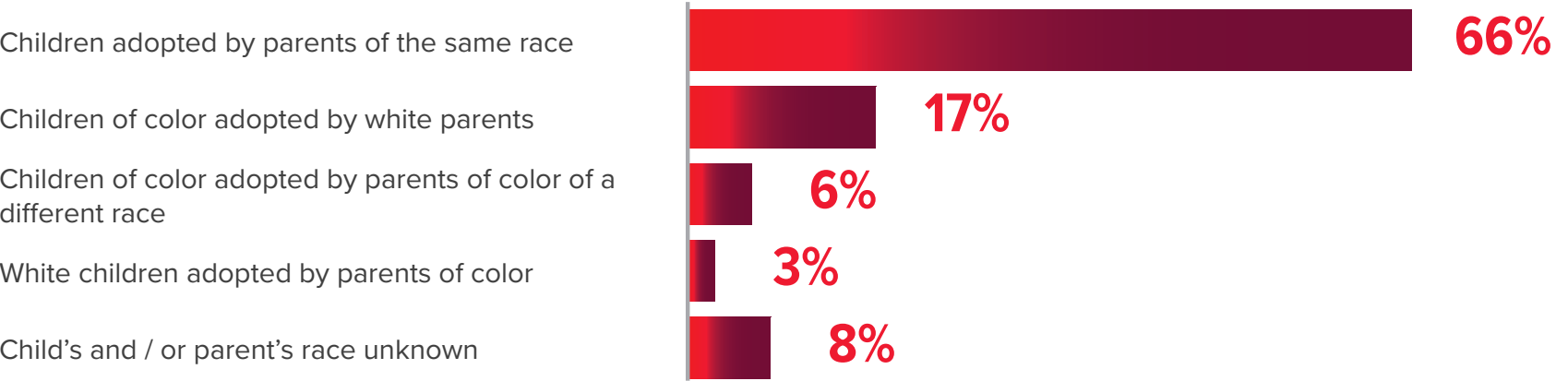
INSIGHT TWO | Foster parents are unprepared to navigate caring for children who they do not identify with racially.

> *To me, it's like I'm just a white person taking care of you, but to them [Black kids], their world has changed…I've learned a lot [about race] from my kids..I learned that I need to be more aware about my family and everything around my kids… My neighbor [a Black man} had to call my husband over to talk to him about Black Lives Matter."*

— Katherine, white foster parent to teenagers

> *[I went to] friends of ours who lived across the street…and the mom told me that if you get a little [Black] girl, I will help you with braids."*

— Hannah, white foster parent to young children.

INSIGHT THREE | Foster parents find it difficult to navigate caring for children through the impact of the trauma they experience entering foster care and during their care experience.

> *After 48 hours of classroom time and a home study, we were in no way prepared… During training they need to cover trauma more…[because] we don't expect that kids are going to be abusive, we don't expect that kids are going to self-harm as much as they do."*

— Katherine, white foster parent to teenagers

Young people in the foster care system experience the impact of under-resourced foster parents.

"

Not a lot of foster homes understand how mental health affects us. We need more of that to be attended to. Most of the kids in the foster care system go through trauma and it affects us and how we grow up."

— Monica, young person, formerly in the foster care system

"

Therapeutic homes-- they don't take classes for mental health/ mental illness. I'm trying to change it... Therapeutic foster homes are designated for just a couple of hours of training, but don't do anything with mental health."

— Nafisah, young Black woman emancipated from foster care

INSIGHT FOUR | When help is only provided during extreme circumstances, harmful workarounds are created by parents, youth, and the system.

"

*I was surrounded by people worse than me and that made me worse. I **had to go to extreme measures to make them let me leave.**"*

— Nafisah, Black youth, formerly in the foster care system

"

I had been calling children's services since 2011, telling them the difficulty I was going through...but they couldn't help me because I didn't have an open case with them...They [children's services] told me that if I'm not abusing or neglecting them, they can't help me...And the kids know that if they start acting up, you're going to push them back into the system."

— Imani, Kinship care guardian of teenagers

"

*I got into legal trouble and was involved in the juvenile justice system...and it was deemed by my judge and those involved in my case plan that I needed treatment for behavioral issues and ADD issues. **Because my mother could not afford the treatments that were deemed necessary by the justice system, custody was removed from her so that I would qualify for Medicaid and all of those different things that would pay for me to have this treatment.**"*

— Lyla, young person formerly in the foster care system

INSIGHT FIVE | Foster parents, despite coaching, feel unprepared to navigate the transition of children into their care and significant transition events (such as visitation with biological parents) during foster care.

"

I think there was a gap in communication [during training]...[What was not spoken about enough during training was]...that [the experience of entering foster care] was probably the most traumatic thing in life that a child has gone through...and how to handle that....this is not a sleepover, people."

[There was] not a lot of coaching on how visits with biological parents should go... which made it difficult to form a connection with the [biological] parents...they [biological parents] were literally ripping [the child] out of my arms...it was not a good feeling for anyone."

— Hannah, white foster parent to young children

THEME FOUR QUESTIONS

1. How could the children services system better prepare and consistently support foster parents and children in caring for children with whom they do not share a racial identity?

2. Are there meaningful ways to provide consistent support to foster parents, biological parents, and children in care navigating transition events?

3. What preparation and support should foster parents receive to handle the mental health needs of children in foster care? What additional support should be given to foster parents in order to handle and care for the mental health needs of children of color, particularly Black children?

THEME FIVE

Lack of race equity standards for fostering exposes Black and mixed-race youth to racist foster experiences.

Due to a lack of anti-racist standards and cultural competency training, young people of color in foster care are further traumatized by racist foster parents and/or family members. Among the challenges shared by both young people and parents is the lack of requirements, guidelines, training, and support attached to the process of parenting.

> *...being called a gorilla or a nigg**. Why was I placed in a home with people who couldn't treat me like I'm their own kid."*
>
> — Beanna, young person formerly in the foster care system

> *My foster uncle would say the n-word constantly... My foster mom's brother was in a white supremacist gang in prison."*
>
> — Nafisah, Black youth, formerly in the foster care system

THEME SIX

Gaps in support for young people navigating the transition from foster care into positive adulthood.

The transition out of the foster care system and into positive adulthood is difficult (see Figures 6 and 7) and is especially difficult for youth of color. Black youth also stay in Ohio's children services system longer than any other racial group (see Figure 8), exposing them to more traumatic experiences than their peers. The existence of systemic racism in the employment, healthcare, education, and legal systems compounded with the trauma inflicted on Black youth in Ohio's children services system creates additional barriers to successful emancipation.

FOSTERING YOUTH TRANSITIONS SERVICES

Transition services, such as vocational training and housing assistance, are designed to help young people with foster care experience transition to adulthood. Participation in federally funded transition services provides a window into how well young people are being equipped for employment, education, and housing.

Employment Programs /
Vocational Training
6%
23%

Educational Financial
Assistance
23%
23%

Room and Board
Assistance
39%
19%

0   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

☐ OHIO   ☐ UNITED STATES

"
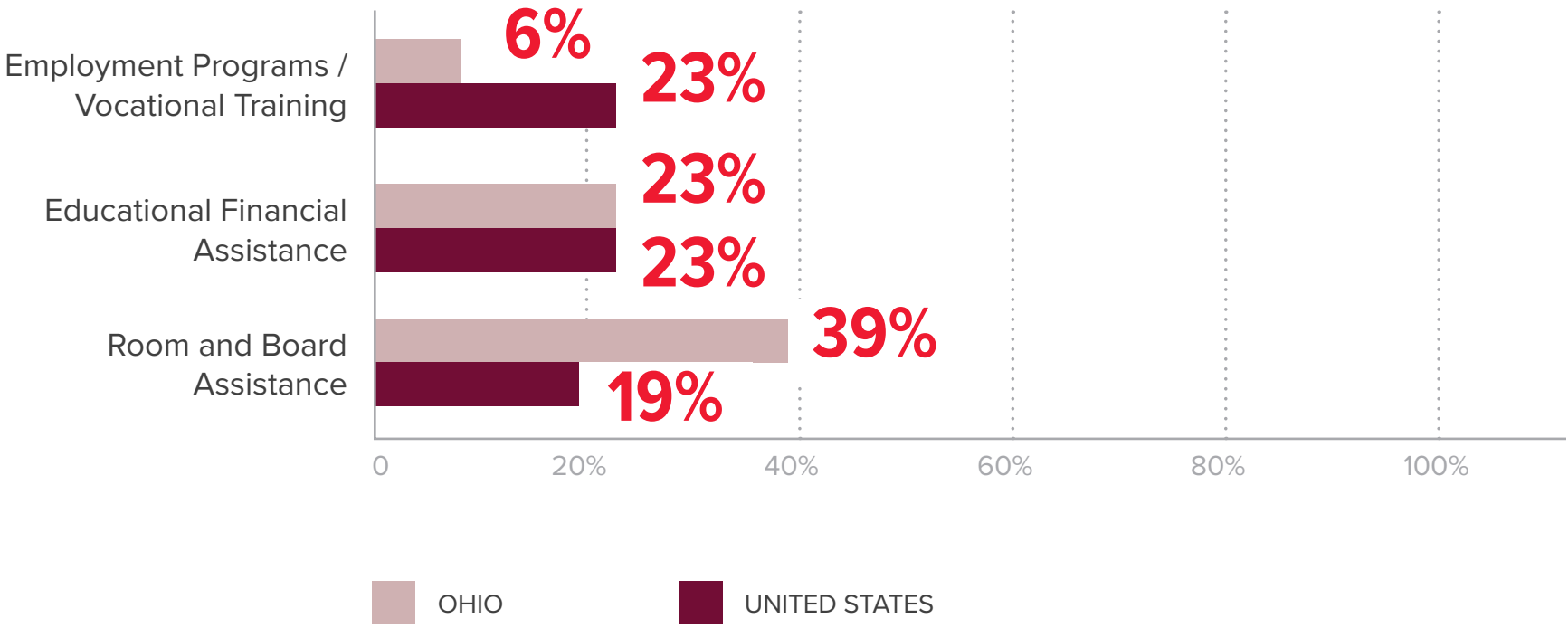
With respect to aging out of care, Black and Brown children are overwhelmingly represented in data around negative outcomes."

— *Attendee at Black and Brown Child Townhall Report, July 23, 2020*

"

On paper of course there was [a plan]...but how that was implemented...I had an independent living worker but I was homeless within weeks of aging out. No one taught me how to rent an apartment, or how to set up utility bills or how to drive..."

— *Lyla, white young person, formerly in the foster care system*

"

"Once I left, I left with a stipend...but it was kind of like 'Hey, we know that we ruined your life but now that you're aging out we're going to give you a little bit of money' --kind of like a bandaid over a cut, instead of facing the real trauma."

— *Beanna, young person formerly in the foster care system*

FOSTERING YOUTH TRANSITIONS // YOUNG ADULT OUTCOMES BY AGE 21

Research shows that young adults who experienced foster care have worse outcomes than their peers in the general population across a variety of spectrums — from education to employment to housing to early parenthood. Examining data on these outcomes in Ohio is important as we strive to improve the practices, programs, and policies that help ensure these young people have the relationships, resources, and opportunities they need for well-being and success.

STATE'S FOSTER CARE POPULATION

U.S. FOSTER CARE POPULATION

STATE'S GENERAL POPULATION
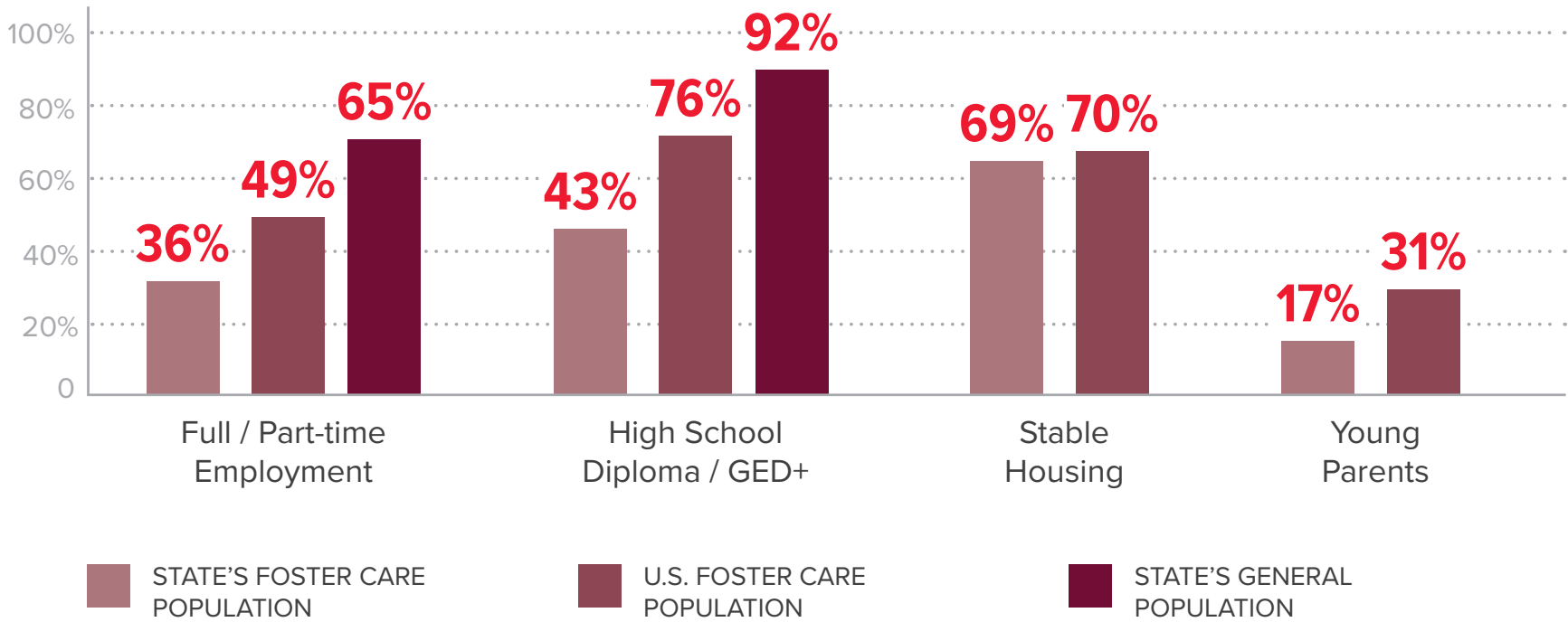
PERCENTAGE STILL IN CARE ON THEIR 19TH BIRTHDAY

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a pivotal developmental stage as young people learn the skills needed to be healthy and productive adults. This process can be complicated for youth with foster care experience. Here's what we know about the experiences of these youth in Ohio.

OHIO	WHITE	AFRICAN AMERICAN	MORE THAN ONE RACE
	N/A	3%	N/A

UNITED STATES	WHITE	AFRICAN AMERICAN	MORE THAN ONE RACE
	17%	29%	24%

INSIGHT ONE | Young people in the foster care system are not aware of all the resources and programs available to support their transition into independence.

"It would have been a benefit to me for my caseworker and my Independent Living worker to have been more aware of the resources that were available. It made me mad to come into the knowledge of all the resources that were available that nobody ever told me about. And that is a common issue --lack of awareness of resources."

— Lyla, young person formerly in the foster care system

INSIGHT TWO | For young people in the foster care system undergoing the process of transitioning out of foster care, while still experiencing the trauma of their foster care experience, programs for independence were perceived as extensions of the foster care system and were avoided.

There are a lot of misconceptions about [the Bridges program]... Some of my friends chose not to do it because they thought that you wouldn't be allowed to be an adult. They think it's set up like a group home."

— Nafisah, young person, formerly in the foster care system

It's no wonder why [young people] who've spent a life in care and have been shuffled around, not had a voice or a choice, that [they] come out and [they're] angry, pissed off, sad and don't know how to make decisions...It's no wonder why we're not more effective."

— Peter, an independent living program administrator

INSIGHT THREE | Some young people in the foster care system, who are aware of programs and willing to opt-in, have difficulty meeting or maintaining eligibility guidelines for independent living programs available by the time they emancipate. Program resources are therefore focused on maintaining eligibility for a significant portion of the program.

"The federal requirements for eligibility for extended foster care are fairly lofty...the difficulty is for young people to gain that eligibility quickly after emancipation."

A good part of the work our liaisons are doing is just to keep young people eligible... With a lot of the work on that level, we don't necessarily have the bandwidth [to move beyond housing and a job] to work on planning for the future and budgeting. That is the most difficult and frustrating piece. We want to get them involved in life skills and counseling and other resources, but oftentimes we're going back to the basics just so that they can remain eligible for the program."

— Peter, an independent living program administrator

INSIGHT FOUR | Some young people who exit the foster care system are unable to build community networks and support systems that can aid them in transitioning into positive adulthood.

"

You are used to all the people being there for you and doing stuff for you. Now you are just on your own."

— Monica, young person, formerly in the foster care system

"

All of a sudden you turn 18 and you fall off the cliff...not having a strong support system...Most of us who have grown up differently can count on our families to be that support. One of the things we try to do is find out who in their sphere can act as their support system. Oftentimes it's a previous foster parent...sometimes it's a group of friends they knew when they were younger and we try to foster those relationships. A lot of our young people don't have anybody, they've been so disjointed from family."

— Peter, an independent living program administrator
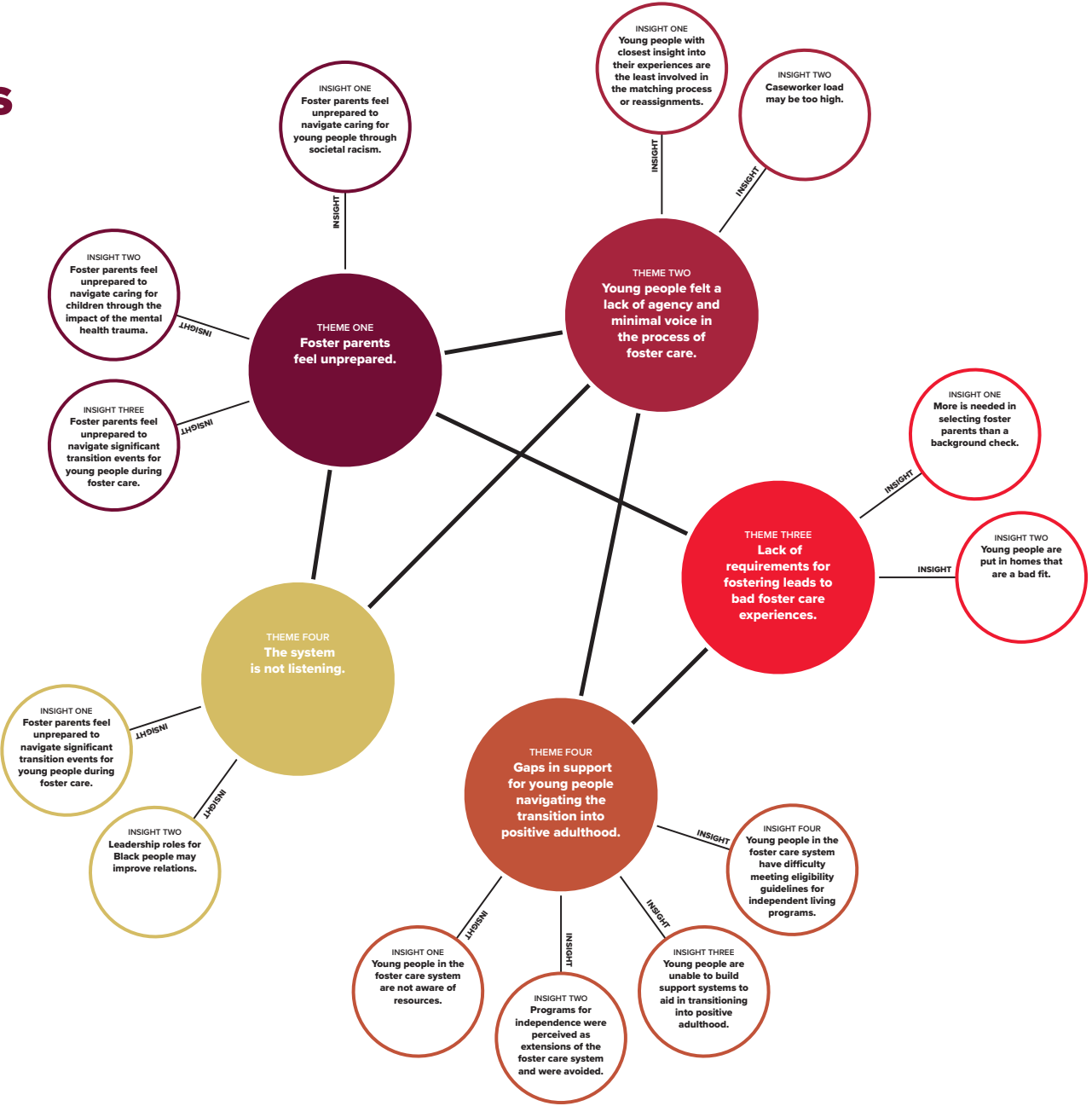
THEME SIX QUESTIONS

1. How could the children services system better prepare young people within the foster care system, specifically focusing on youth of color, transitioning out, and positive adulthood?

2. How could the children services system better assist young people in building positive permanent connections and support systems for life after exiting foster care?
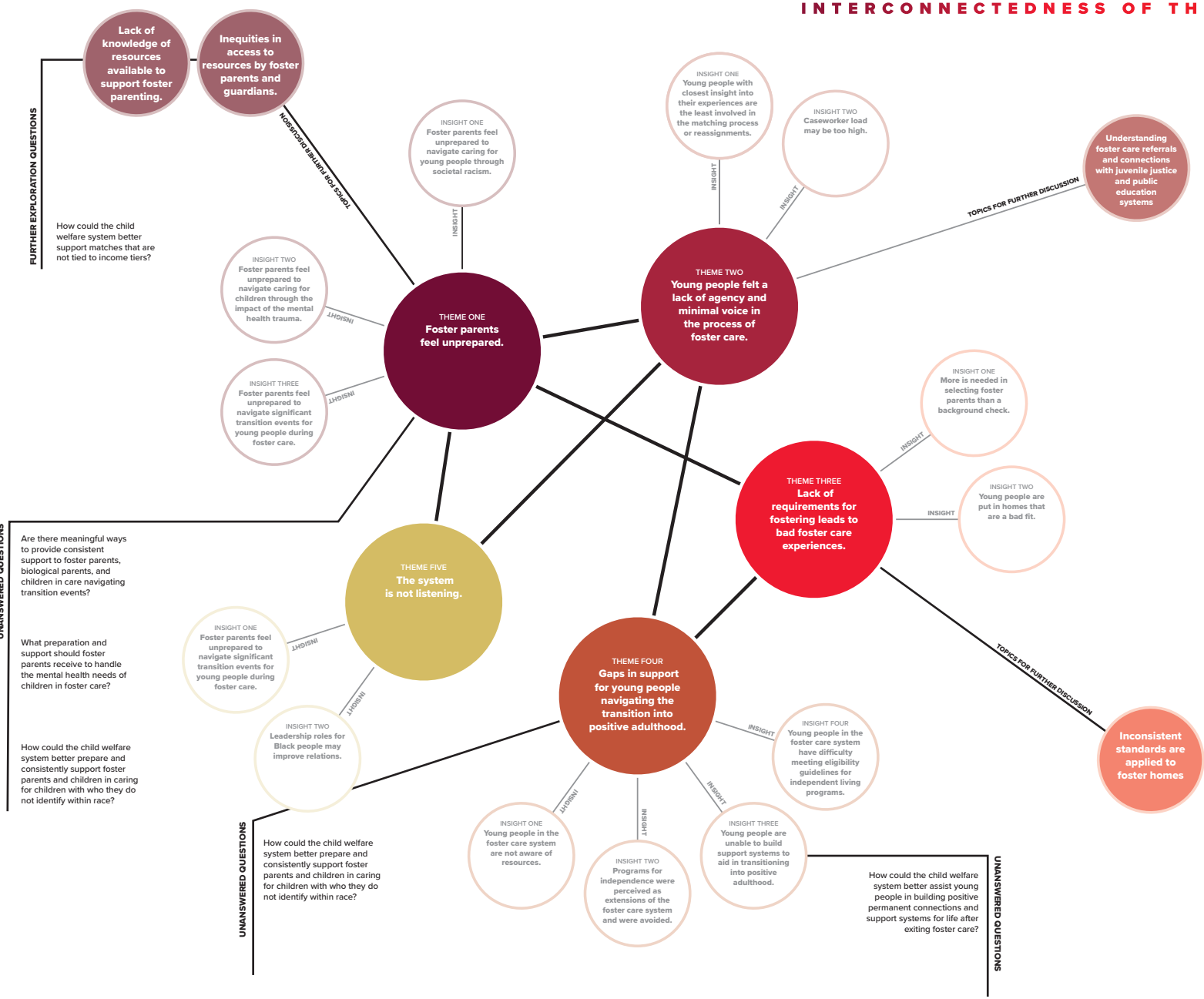
INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF THEMES

The following diagrams capture how the themes and insights previously shared are interconnected and do not exist in isolation. The diagram on the following page highlights unanswered questions and areas to further explore.

Figure 9 (left diagram)

INSIGHT ONE
Foster parents feel unprepared to navigate caring for young people through societal racism.

INSIGHT ONE
Young people with closest insight into their experiences are the least involved in the matching process or reassignments.

INSIGHT TWO
Caseworker load may be too high.

INSIGHT TWO
Foster parents feel unprepared to navigate caring for children through the impact of the mental health trauma.

THEME TWO
Young people felt a lack of agency and minimal voice in the process of foster care.

THEME ONE
Foster parents feel unprepared.

INSIGHT THREE
Foster parents feel unprepared to navigate significant transition events for young people during foster care.

INSIGHT ONE
More is needed in selecting foster parents than a background check.

THEME THREE
Lack of requirements for fostering leads to bad foster care experiences.

INSIGHT TWO
Young people are put in homes that are a bad fit.

THEME FOUR
The system is not listening.

INSIGHT ONE
Foster parents feel unprepared to navigate significant transition events for young people during foster care.

INSIGHT TWO
Leadership roles for Black people may improve relations.

THEME FOUR
Gaps in support for young people navigating the transition into positive adulthood.

INSIGHT FOUR
Young people in the foster care system have difficulty meeting eligibility guidelines for independent living programs.

INSIGHT ONE
Young people in the foster care system are not aware of resources.

INSIGHT TWO
Programs for independence were perceived as extensions of the foster care system and were avoided.

INSIGHT THREE
Young people are unable to build support systems to aid in transitioning into positive adulthood.

Figure 10 (right diagram)

Lack of knowledge of resources available to support foster parenting.

Inequities in access to resources by foster parents and guardians.

FURTHER EXPLORATION QUESTIONS

THOUGHTS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

How could the child welfare system better support matches that are not tied to income tiers?

INSIGHT ONE
Young people with closest insight into their experiences are the least involved in the matching process or reassignments.

INSIGHT TWO
Caseworker load may be too high.

INSIGHT ONE
Foster parents feel unprepared to navigate caring for young people through societal racism.

Understanding foster care referrals and connections with juvenile justice and public education systems

INSIGHT TWO
Foster parents feel unprepared to navigate caring for children through the impact of the mental health trauma.

THEME ONE
Foster parents feel unprepared.

THEME TWO
Young people felt a lack of agency and minimal voice in the process of foster care.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

INSIGHT THREE
Foster parents feel unprepared to navigate significant transition events for young people during foster care.

INSIGHT ONE
More is needed in selecting foster parents than a background check.

THEME THREE
Lack of requirements for fostering leads to bad foster care experiences.

INSIGHT TWO
Young people are put in homes that are a bad fit.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Are there meaningful ways to provide consistent support to foster parents, biological parents, and children in care navigating transition events?

What preparation and support should foster parents receive to handle the mental health needs of children in foster care?

How could the child welfare system better prepare and consistently support foster parents and children in caring for children with who they do not identify within race?

THEME FIVE
The system is not listening.

INSIGHT ONE
Foster parents feel unprepared to navigate significant transition events for young people during foster care.

INSIGHT TWO
Leadership roles for Black people may improve relations.

THEME FOUR
Gaps in support for young people navigating the transition into positive adulthood.

INSIGHT FOUR
Young people in the foster care system have difficulty meeting eligibility guidelines for independent living programs.

Inconsistent standards are applied to foster homes

TOPICS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

How could the child welfare system better prepare and consistently support foster parents and children in caring for children with who they do not identify within race?

INSIGHT ONE
Young people in the foster care system are not aware of resources.

INSIGHT TWO
Programs for independence were perceived as extensions of the foster care system and were avoided.

INSIGHT THREE
Young people are unable to build support systems to aid in transitioning into positive adulthood.

How could the child welfare system better assist young people in building positive permanent connections and support systems for life after exiting foster care?

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

KEY TOPICS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

TOPIC ONE

Foster care referrals

TOPIC TWO

Connections with other systems (e.g. juvenile justice and education)

Significant Topics for Further Research

The following quotes and anecdotes refer to topics that emerged during our interviews, but which require further research to corroborate or establish as themes. These topics point toward areas for further exploration and research.

One thing that emerged that we felt needed further exploration was the details of how young people are referred to the children's services system. Understanding this may identify points where young people can experience a more equitable process.

Our research was not able to investigate connections between the foster care system, the juvenile justice system, and the education system. However, through conversations, we noted a few key statements that lead us to hypothesize that some significant connections with the themes of this report exist and that further research may uncover significant insights around racial inequity.

Knowledge of resources available to support foster parenting and the decision-making process to utilize these resources.

Some parents relied on informal relationships to obtain information about the resources available to support foster parenting. In some cases, parents associated requesting these resources as exhibiting materialistic or financially-motivated intentions for fostering.

"

I had [my daughter] for three or four years and I got that [clothing] check one time. So I don't depend on that. I use the money I have to take care of my kids. I know they have some other programs out there, but I didn't really get any of it... I just used what I learned from my mom [also a foster parent]"

— Olivia, Black foster parent

Inconsistencies in standards for foster homes and incentives for foster parents to manipulate the system for additional resources.

A parent noted inconsistencies in the maintenance of standards for quality foster homes, citing the different experiences shared with her by young people in her home who had come from various other homes.

"

People get paid to care for the kids, but don't...we don't have checks on anything. Even when there are standards, our county doesn't care and overlooks the problems."

— Katherine, foster parent to teenagers

TOPIC FOUR

Foster care referrals and connections with juvenile justice and public education systems.

Our research did not investigate connections between the foster care system, the juvenile justice system, and the education system, although through conversations, we noted a few key statements that lead us to hypothesize that some significant connections with the themes of this report exist, and that further research may uncover significant insights around racial inequity.

"

I got into legal trouble and was involved in the juvenile justice system... Because my mother could not afford the treatments that were deemed necessary by the justice system, custody was removed from her."

— Lyla, young person formerly in the foster care system

"

We have reporters who put their own semantics on, based on their racial belief That's always going to be."

— Robert, county employee

CONCLUSION

"

"Don't let this moment pass without action and change."
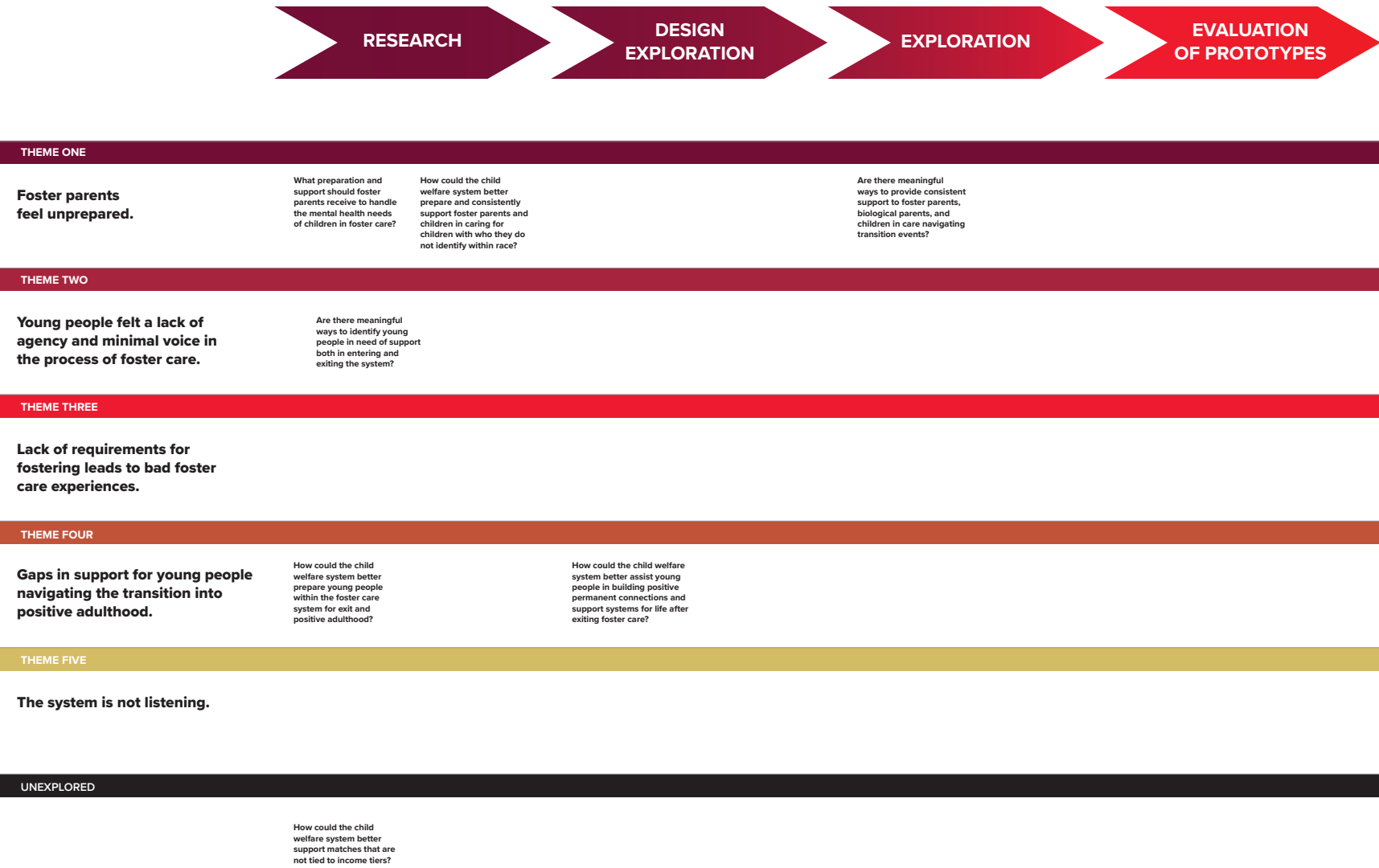
— Ohio Black & Brown Children Services Town Hall

These words from one of Ohio's Black & Brown Metro PCSA Child Welfare professionals sums up the task at hand. The combination of systemic racism and economic inequality have created a perfect storm that has continuously left fractured and traumatized Black families and children in its wake. Unfortunately, this storm is man-made. However, as this problem is man-made, we have the opportunity to course correct and create new outcomes. This is where design is perfectly situated to help. Our ability to imagine and design with those most affected by the storm gives us unprecedented power to create new systems and new outcomes.

Thus far we have conducted an in-depth participatory and human-centered exploration of Ohio's Children Services System to address systemic racism and bias that exists. Due to constraints of time, this report does not include a multi-level strategy or solutions to address the racism and inequity in the system. We have outlined high-level themes and insights, but there is still so much that we do not know.

As we start to understand the system, there are several potential directions for further research, design exploration, prototyping, and evaluation. Following is a summary of significant questions and areas for future design interventions.

ROADMAP FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

RESEARCH → DESIGN EXPLORATION → EXPLORATION → EVALUATION OF PROTOTYPES

THEME ONE

Foster parents feel unprepared.

What preparation and support should foster parents receive to handle the mental health needs of children in foster care?

How could the child welfare system better prepare and consistently support foster parents and children in caring for children with who they do not identify within race?

Are there meaningful ways to provide consistent support to foster parents, biological parents, and children in care navigating transition events?

THEME TWO

Young people felt a lack of agency and minimal voice in the process of foster care.

Are there meaningful ways to identify young people in need of support both in entering and exiting the system?

THEME THREE

Lack of requirements for fostering leads to bad foster care experiences.

THEME FOUR

Gaps in support for young people navigating the transition into positive adulthood.

How could the child welfare system better prepare young people within the foster care system for exit and positive adulthood?

How could the child welfare system better assist young people in building positive permanent connections and support systems for life after exiting foster care?

THEME FIVE

The system is not listening.

UNEXPLORED

How could the child welfare system better support matches that are not tied to income tiers?

As we begin to better understand the system from lived experts, we believe it is necessary to explore the questions below and to identify major touchpoints that could benefit from redesign interventions:

1. Are there meaningful ways to provide consistent support to foster parents, biological parents, and children in care navigating transition events?

2. What preparation and support should foster parents receive to handle mental health needs of children in foster care?

3. How could the children services system better prepare and support foster parents and children in care to navigate cultural shifts in the foster home and extended community?

4. How could the children services system better prepare young people within the foster care system for exit and independence?

5. How could the children services system better support matches that are not tied to income tiers?

6. Are there meaningful ways to identify young people in need of support both in entering and exiting the system?