

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

PERCEPTIONS OF YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

Phase 2 of a research project that surveys the public's perception of youth in foster and adoptive care

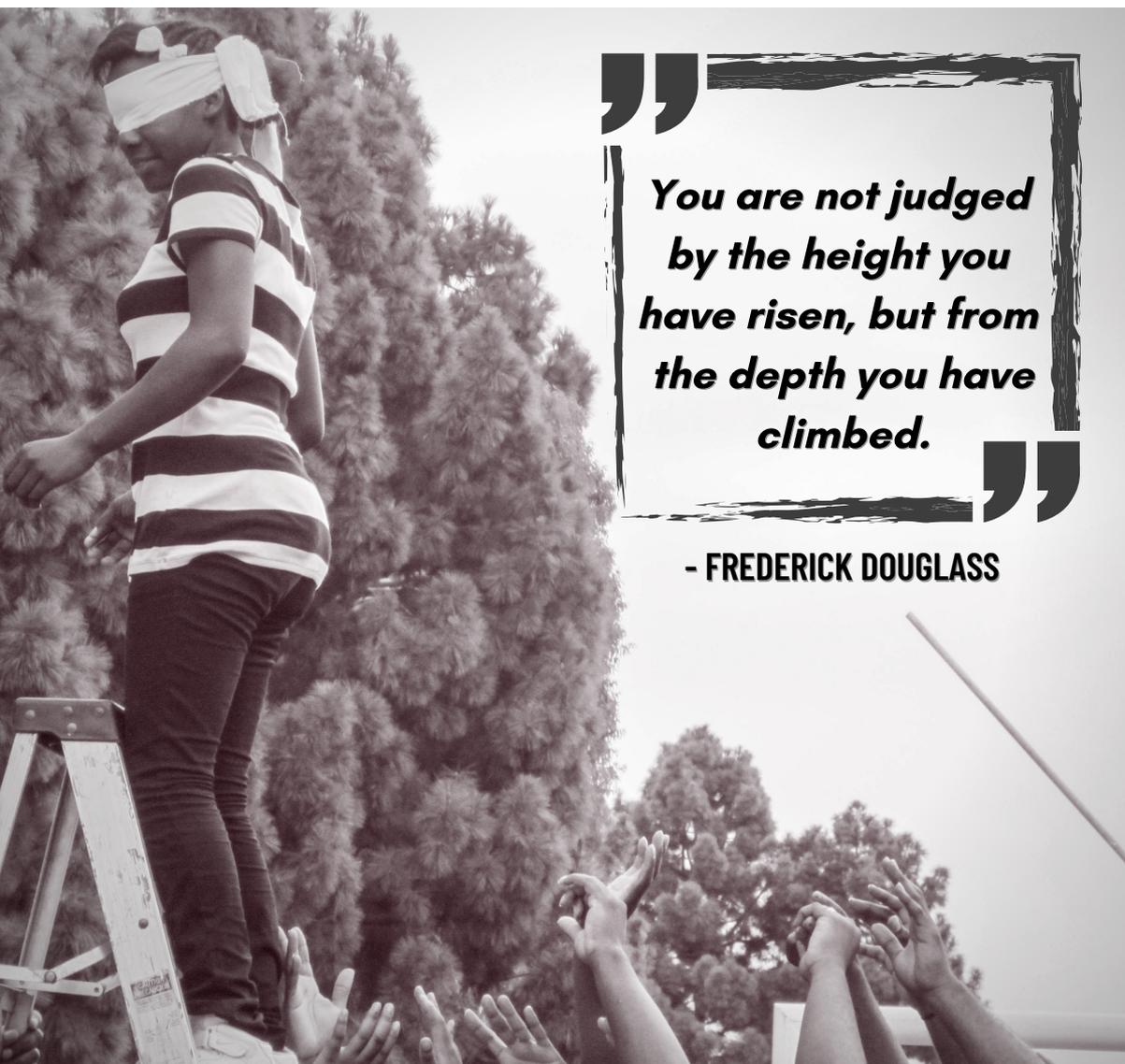
peace4kids
community as family.

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***You are not judged
by the height you
have risen, but from
the depth you have
climbed.***

- FREDERICK DOUGLASS

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The events of 2020 – including the pandemic and the national awakening on racial injustice – have shone a spotlight on disparities that disproportionately impact youth and adults with a lived experience in foster care (YAFC). As a result, I have been deeply struck by the overwhelming need to affect the systems that negatively impact our community. Witnessing our youth navigate this trying time reminds me that we must do more. This moment has only deepened our resolve to advance Changing the Narrative (CTN) to the next level.

CTN was born out of our youth leadership programming. Back in early 2018, Peace4Kids hosted a communal dinner event. During the dinner our youth shared their beliefs that the very people tasked to care for them also "think we are criminals." This was an unsettling conversation that led to a discussion about how the general public has a negative set of preconceived notions about their behaviors and outcomes. Not only are youth in foster care navigating an unfriendly world, they also feel demoralized by a system designed to protect them.

In late 2018, we created a research survey that, unfortunately, validated their assumptions. We published those findings in 2019, and our change-making is now grounded by this data-driven foundation. We have created and implemented a curriculum-based training program for key service providers (K-12, child welfare) to develop awareness and inform their interactions with YAFC. Trained participants can now positively influence their environments and recognize the strengths and assets of youth in foster care.

Our ongoing academic research through CTN continues to measure the extent of implicit biases toward YAFC and their negative impacts. This emerging part of our research is the impetus for this report. While the work before us is daunting, I believe that our new findings will inform and encourage systems to SEE our youth for who they truly are beyond these cliched perceptions. However, what I'm most inspired by is that our community of advocates is committed to lead a movement that will positively transform the outcomes of YAFC for generations to come.

Z A I D G A Y L E
Executive Director

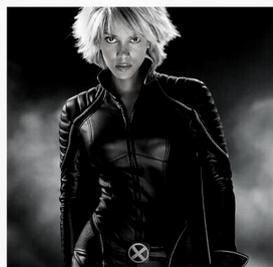
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fictional superheroes typically have an origin story in which strength and perseverance emerges from experiences of great loss and tragedy. From the chaos of the past, this heroic journey to a positive outcome resonates with youth in foster care who also often have experience with loss and tragedy. Heroic characters provide a blueprint of what's possible when you fully integrate the challenges of your past with your hopes for the future.

Unfortunately, the general public does not recognize this connection between a difficult past and an optimistic future for youth in foster care. Our research and our trainings have proven time and time again that the perceptions of youth in foster care are embedded in strong and very well hidden biases. Our first survey in 2018, conducted in Los Angeles, asked nearly 2,500 respondents to identify how youth in foster care are most likely to be portrayed in the media. The media portrayals of "criminal" and "drug addict" were selected by over 40% of respondents; however, "hero" was selected by only 5% of respondents. Importantly, these selections predicted negative perceptions about the real experiences and outcomes of youth in foster care. These disheartening results demanded our attention and triggered a new set of research questions.

First, we recognized that members of the public may not know the origin stories of superheroes and we decided to run a social experiment to explore this further. Second, we redesigned the survey and recruited respondents in all 50 States.

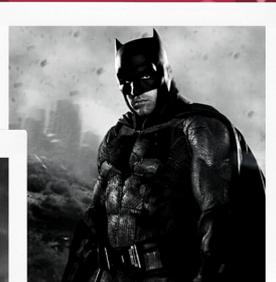
In this social experiment, we first primed the participants in the training session about our insights into the origin stories of fictional characters. We showed them slides displaying four iconic superheroes: Superman, Spiderman, Storm and Batman.



THE HERO'S WAY

WORD CLOUD

What are the first one or two words that come to mind when you see these superheroes?



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How do you think foster youth are most likely to be portrayed in the media? (Click all that apply)

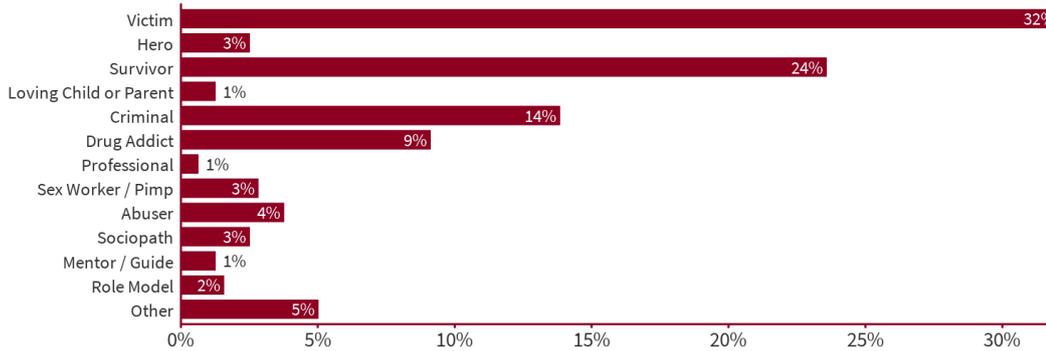


FIGURE 2.

This small sample survey collected 318 responses after priming respondents with details about superheroes with foster care experiences.

You guessed it! Regardless of their exposure to positive outcomes for heroes with a history of foster care, the results were nearly identical to those who completed the survey without priming. In comparison with the larger sample size of 2,500 respondents, "hero" was selected at about the same rate (figure 2). The top four media portrayal selections (victim, survivor, criminal, drug addict) were the same top four selected in the original 2018 survey.

So what's going on here? First, to be clear, the social experiment I described was not conducted scientifically. However, it points to a very scientifically explored phenomenon called implicit bias.

Before providing you with the top level results from our newest survey, it is important that we establish a baseline of understanding for this important term.

- **Implicit Biases** - are the attitudes and stereotypes that affect our understanding, behaviors, and decision making in an unconscious manner.

There are some important things to note about implicit bias and why it's nearly impossible to consciously dispel these deep seeded beliefs by just being told to **see it differently** (as we attempted in the social experiment).

1. Everyone possesses implicit biases that are formed by our upbringing, values and the media we consume.
2. Since these beliefs are unconscious, they do not always align with the explicit ideals we publicly endorse.
3. In general, implicit biases favor the "in-group" or the dominant cultural narratives and experiences.
4. Implicit biases can be gradually unlearned with thoughtful and intentional debiasing practices.

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"HOW DID YOU GET INTO FOSTER CARE?"

So why the backstory? Well any good character needs to have a clear motivation to drive the story. Here, it is implicit bias that keeps us on the edge of our seat as we follow the journey of CTN. Peace4Kids fundamentally believes that our research needs to have practical applications to improve the outcomes for YAFC. Implicit bias has very real-world implications. It affects the lives of youth in foster care in very dramatic ways that we believe contributes to negative life outcomes expected by the general public. Additionally, we recognized that the public is operating from a narrow definition of foster care as most people do not interact with this system.

So let's demystify the term "**foster care**." Simply put, foster care is when a child is temporarily taken out of their home because of parental neglect, abuse or exploitation. This "temporary" placement can last for weeks or years. Parental neglect is the primary reason why children are removed from their biological homes. Nationwide, about 75% of foster care cases are the result of neglect. This is an important distinction because neglect is often linked to conditions of poverty. If it is determined that a child cannot be returned to their biological parents or a relative, then parental rights are terminated, and the child can be adopted. In fact, about 60% of all US adoptions originate in foster care. This adoption statistic is relevant for understanding some important findings from our research.

To be sure, every removal of a child from their birth home is a traumatic experience. It is the loss of everything familiar in that child's life. They often not only lose their parents, but their siblings, friends, neighborhood, school and church community. At no fault of their own, their lives are uprooted for an indefinite amount of time with no ability to resolve it on their own. It is the epitome of being powerless for children in foster care and adoptions.

Now imagine, at every turn, you are reminded of your past by the people who are consistently in your world. Your teacher at school unconsciously reminds you of your foster care/adoptive care experience when she asks the class to take a field trip slip home to your parents to get it signed; your doctor asks you if you have a family history of seasonal allergies; your friends brag about their mom taking them to buy a prom dress. The inescapable reality is that you feel different and that others don't truly see you.

For a second, we want you to personally embrace the experience of being in foster care. Someone who you've just met has found out you are in foster care and they ask you the following question: "*How did you get into foster care?*" This question is the one that youth at Peace4Kids consistently experience and despise the most. While this question may be rooted in natural curiosity and an attempt to make a connection, it does great harm to the child. Would you ever ask this type of question to someone you just met who had been sexually assaulted? How about a survivor of an act of terrorism? While there might be a natural curiosity to learn more about these experiences, this could be a painful trigger and it is not socially acceptable to pry into a tragic moment in someone's past.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MEDIA PERCEPTIONS SURVEY TAKEAWAYS

The examples above are real triggers for youth in foster care that regularly occur by people who have no training about foster care (friends) and those that do (educator, doctor). This is how implicit bias impacts youth in foster care every day. The language and behaviors most of us exhibit do not acknowledge the possibility that someone in foster care is in our midst. Even worse, when we do come to understand that we are in the presence of someone with a foster care experience, our well-hidden implicit bias kicks into action and we begin treating them differently. And, although we may not be aware of the impact we are having on youth in foster care, they quickly realize the changes in our attitudes and beliefs about them.

To further exemplify this point, I want to share a story from a woman named Daisy. As a successful executive, she was making the rounds at a dinner party for high level professionals at her company. She happened to overhear a conversation about adoption. Having been adopted out of foster care as a child, she decided to join the conversation. One of the guests shared how heart-breaking it is that any child would have to live without a family. Since Daisy had a negative adoption experience, she explained that adoption is not always the panacea and that, in her experience, it made her childhood even more difficult. Shocked, the dinner party guest responded, "Really, I would have never guessed you were in foster care!" The statement reflects hidden beliefs that if Daisy was a youth in foster care, she should be broken and incapable of success and, yet, there she was at a dinner party because she was an important professional at her company. This is why CTN is necessary.

These stories led us to a second round of data collection. We wanted to take our research a step further and explore whether these negative associations were the same for youth in foster care as they were for youth who had been adopted. Our primary questions were:

- Does the amount, type, and genre of media consumption influence the negative perceptions of youth in foster care?
- Is there a difference in the perceptions of youth in foster care vs adoptive care?
- Do these perceptions / biases influence expectations for the life outcomes of youth in foster care and adoptive care?

Participant Summary:

We distributed a survey to approximately 2,500 individuals throughout the continental USA. Slightly more than half of participants reported as female (54% to 45% male). Participants predominantly reported as White (65%), followed by African American (14%), Hispanic (9%), Asian/Pacific Islander (6%) and Other (6%). Age was distributed with 11% between 18-24, 14% between 25-34, 16% between 35-44, 14% between 45-54, 15% between 55-64, and 31% 65 or older. The majority of participants reported no life experience as either a foster or adopted youth (84%); only 6% reported experience as a foster youth, 5% reported experience as an adopted youth, and 4% reported both foster and adoptive care experiences.

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MEDIA PERCEPTIONS SURVEY TAKEAWAYS

Tool Summary:

The survey was designed to collect basic information on the participants, their media consumption habits, and their perceptions of youth in foster and adoptive care. The goal of this work was to better understand how media portrayals impact the perceptions of youth in foster care and adoptive care.

Results Summary:

General Perceptions - Participants perceived youth in foster care as more likely to have negative life outcomes compared to youth in adoptive care.

Media Portrayals - Participants overwhelmingly reported that the media portrays youth in foster care in a negative light and youth in adoptive care in a positive light. This contrast is like two sides of a coin. Two of the most frequently selected and highest ranked media portrayals for youth in foster care were "criminal" and "drug addict." Conversely, these were among the four least likely media portrayals selected by participants for how the media portrays youth in adoptive care. Similarly, two of the top three most frequently selected and highest ranked media portrayals for youth in adoptive care were "loving child/parent" and "role model." However, these positive portrayals were among the least likely selections by participants for youth in foster care. These results show a stark difference in the way these two groups are uniquely perceived by the general public, even though their removal and placement experiences mirror each other.

Moreover, the majority of participants said they felt the media portrayals of youth in foster and adoptive care were at least somewhat accurate. This indicates that participants were likely to believe the portrayals that they see in the media.

OUR DATA IMPLIES THAT THE PUBLIC DETERMINES THEIR MENTAL MODELS OF YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE AND ADOPTIVE CARE PRIMARILY BASED ON MEDIA CONSUMPTION. FURTHERMORE, SOME TYPES AND GENRES OF MEDIA ARE MORE LIKELY TO MAGNIFY THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO CATEGORIES OF CARE.

What is driving these differences?:

Once we saw the stark contrast in perceptions about the portrayals of youth in foster care and adoptive care, we wanted to understand what could be driving these polarizing comparisons. We found that people whose source of content (media type) are news channels or newspapers, network channels, and streaming channels reported a larger gap between the negative perceptions of youth in foster care and the positive perceptions of youth in adoptive care. And, people who mostly consume news and dramas (media genre) also reported a larger gap in their perceptions of the two groups. Individual differences related to age, racial identity, gender identity, prior lived experience in foster or adoptive care, or geographic location were not predictive of perceptions of media portrayals. This implies that the public determines their mental models of youth in foster care and adoptive care primarily based on media consumption and that some types and genres of media are more likely to magnify the differences between the two categories of care.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MEDIA PERCEPTIONS SURVEY THE FINAL ACT

How does this impact youth?

The finding that media is a source of the polarizing mental models that people have about youth in foster and adoptive care was not entirely unexpected. This impacts youth because it verifies that those in foster care are perceived differently from those in adoptive care and may be treated differently as a result. The surprising finding was that this was true even for people who had personal experience in foster care and adoptive care. As youth in foster care consume media, they may think negatively about themselves based on negative media portrayals. If we reframe these negative mental models of youth in foster care as implicit biases, then they are surrounded by triggers in every environment of their lives – school, neighborhood, health care, and in all forms of media.

Survey Findings in Brief:

Verification of 1st survey – While the original survey was localized, the second phase of survey data validated that the perceptions held about youth in foster care are common across the United States by:

- Confirming the 4 most common media portrayals of youth in foster care
- Confirming that media portrayals are predictive of the perceptions that youth in foster care will have negative life outcomes

Difference in perception – Though youth in foster care and youth in adoptive care share many similarities, the public's perceptions of their experiences are drastically different. There are:

- Positive perceptions of youth in adoptive care
- Negative perceptions of youth in foster care
- Stark contrasts that hold up across many different statistical models

Media type and genre – Are the most consistent force driving the differences in perceptions. This factor remained the strongest influence in all statistical models.

- The types of media consumed (news, etc.) and the genre of media consumed (drama, etc.) are statistically associated with positive perceptions of adoptive care and negative perceptions of foster care

Self-reported individual differences – Did not influence perceptions of foster care or adoptive care.

- Geography, racial identity, age, or gender factors did not predict any meaningful patterns related to perceptions of foster care or adoptive care.
- A lived experience in foster care or adoptive care did not change the pattern of negative perceptions of youth in foster care and positive perceptions of youth in adoptive care.

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MEDIA PERCEPTIONS SURVEY THE FINAL ACT

Conclusion:

Through CTN, Peace4Kids is committed to advancing systems-change and movement-building. Our team of YAFC and professional staff have identified long-term goals and recommendations:

- Public education and child welfare systems embrace the need to mitigate implicit biases toward YAFC and children who have experienced chronic adversity.
- Our curriculum-based, youth-informed training becomes a national standard to influence behavior change within these systems.
- A movement built among YAFC to redefine public perception and eliminate negative biases perpetuated through the media.
- The issue of implicit bias toward YAFC gains traction nationally, giving voice to this movement.

Perhaps the most important outcome is that YAFC will find their voice and become self-actualized leaders. Our work through CTN supports the engagement and activation of YAFC who are typically marginalized or misrepresented. Being an informed advocate can be a formative experience. CTN provides a means for YAFC to anchor into their identity and embrace their lived experience as a strength.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Peace4Kids is deeply humbled to be entrusted by the foster care advocates in our community. It is only through their inquisitive spirit and transparency that these findings could ever come to light. Indeed, through actively challenging the injustices youth in child welfare face they have exemplified bravery while blazing trails of new possibilities. We also want to celebrate the champions in our extended community who deeply believed in the brilliance of our youth and invested time and resources to help make these findings public. This project would not have been possible without them.

Foundation Partners

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