The placement of youth in congregate settings over family homes is one of the most pernicious ways that the foster system inflicts violence on those it purports to protect. Yet, despite a compelling and growing body of evidence, congregate placements persist and thrive—including in New York State, where 13% of the foster population (nearly 2,000 children) lived in institutions or congregate settings in 2021. In this report, Children’s Rights and an Advisory Committee of lived experts and advocates chronicle the experiences of New Yorkers whose first-hand, vivid accounts illustrate that congregate settings are inherently harmful to young people.

Lived experts in New York report:
1. A carceral environment, including severe limitations on privacy, bathroom use, poor food quality, and inadequate medical care.
2. Threats to safety, such as severe punishments, feeling endangered by staff and other youth, and living in an environment rife with violence and bullying.
3. Loneliness, stemming from facing restrictions in communications and visits from family and friends, feeling disconnected from their relationships, and experiencing apathy from staff.
4. Lasting barriers to well-being and stability, specifically leaving the foster system feeling hopeless, traumatized, ill-equipped for future education and career opportunities, and unprepared for independent living.

Lived experts in New York call for:
1. Partnerships with lived experts to develop practices and policies that will lead to the elimination of congregate settings and ban the use of restraints and other punitive practices.
2. Preservation and support for families of origin by increasing community resources to help families stay together in the first place.
3. Increased transparency and accountability around congregate practices, including making facility data publicly available, independently evaluating staff conduct, and ensuring a process for youth to share maltreatment concerns occurring in the congregate setting.
STUDY PARTICIPANT HIGHLIGHTS

Feelings While in Congregate Settings

- UnSafe
- Traumatized
- Suicidal
- Disgusted
- Self-harming
- Angry
- Unhappy
- Lonely

“...they really don’t listen to the kid... if you listen a little bit harder... the kid will literally tell you exactly what’s going on, exactly where the problem is, and exactly what they want.”

“...a lot of my friends thought I like died or something. They didn’t know what the hell happened to me because I literally dropped off the face of the earth. I said, ‘See you later,’ I thought I was coming to school the next day.”

“Back then I dressed like a girl, but I started dressing like a boy—I’ve stopped dressing like a girl because staff kept on making fun of me and that’s why I used to get in fights and they used to call cops on me...I threw all my dresses out, all my makeup, all my wigs, like I got tired of it.”

“We had one classroom for the whole facility. And everybody got fourth-grade work no matter what grade you was in, they didn’t give a f*ck who was actually in fourth grade or 11th grade, you was getting fourth grade work.”

Experience with the Facility (by number of mentions)

- 73% negative
- 17% positive
- 10% neutral

Experience with Staff (by number of mentions)

- 85% negative
- 12% positive
- 3% neutral

Family Connectedness (by number of mentions)

- 52% weakened
- 37% maintained
- 11% strengthened

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