THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF SOCIAL WORK

RESEARCH BRIEF

USING SOCIAL MEDIA REDDIT DATA TO EXAMINE FOSTER FAMILIES' CONCERNS AND NEEDS DURING COVID-19

Foster families were faced with multiple challenges, including those related to caring for children in their care, during the early months of COVID-19 and turned to social media to express their concerns and needs.

KEY FINDINGS

- *There were significant increases in online conversations about becoming a foster parent after the onset of COVID-19, with foster parents expressing increased anxieties about delays in their licensing cases.*

- *There were significant decreases in online conversations about permanency for foster children after the onset of COVID-19. Of the relevant comments, foster families expressed concerns about delays in reunifications between foster children and their biological parents due to pandemic related barriers (e.g., courts shutting down).*

- *There were significant increases in online conversations about activities for foster children after the onset of COVID-19, with foster families discussing specific activities to keep foster children occupied during stay-at-home orders and lockdowns.*

About this Study

COVID-19 is likely to have negatively impacted foster families, but few data sources are available to confirm this. The current study used Reddit social media data to examine how foster families were faring in the early months of the pandemic. Online discussion topics were identified and examined for changes before and after the onset of COVID-19. Over 10,000 comments were collected from three Reddit online discussion boards dedicated to foster families. Machine learning combined with textual analysis were used to code Reddit comments. Results showed that three main topics had both significant quantitative and meaningful qualitative changes before and after the onset of COVID-19. There were significant increases in conversations about becoming a foster parent and activities for foster children, whereas there was a significant decrease in conversations about permanency before and after the onset of COVID-19. Qualitative coding showed that regarding the topic of becoming a parent, excitement over approval of foster care licenses before the onset of COVID-19 shifted to foster families' increased anxieties about delays in their licensing cases after the onset of COVID-19. For permanency, content changed from the best interest of the child and reunifications before the onset of COVID-19 to concerns over family separations and permanency challenges after the onset of COVID-19. Regarding activities for foster children, content related to everyday activities before the onset of COVID-19 changed to specific activities foster children and families could do during lockdowns. Other COVID-19 related topics emerged, including challenges with communicating with the child welfare system, managing children's behaviors, securing enough food, developing safety plans, and receiving stimulus checks.

Conclusion

These results suggest areas where child welfare professionals may need to intervene to support foster families during and in the aftermath of the pandemic.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This study is part of a larger project that aims to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on foster families, including foster children, former foster youth, and foster parents. Additional studies are underway to examine the social networks available to foster families (e.g., who foster parents and former foster youth most frequently turn to) during the pandemic. The goal is to inform current child welfare practices and policies so that they can be responsive to the specific COVID-19 needs of foster families and leverage foster families' strengths (i.e., social networks) to further support them during and after the pandemic.

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