

# National Research on the Impact of Lived Experience Across Systems

*"More and more, the voices of young adults who experienced foster care and the parents and families who overcame challenges and obstacles to stay connected to and raise their children are not only being heard in the discussion, they are being valued. They are moving into leadership positions to help other children and families draw on resilience, hope and support to heal and move forward toward a better future."*

## - Casey Family Programs

For leaders working to strengthen systems of care, national and peer-reviewed research consistently demonstrates that **partnering with individuals with lived experience improves outcomes**, system performance, and cross-system alignment. Lived experience includes the voices and perspectives of those directly impacted by child welfare and related systems. This includes young adults, parents and caregivers, birth parents, kinship families, and others whose lives have been shaped by these systems. Lived experience is not limited to one role or perspective. It reflects the full range of experiences across families and communities.

Across child welfare, mental health, education, health-care, and juvenile justice systems, lived experience is increasingly recognized not simply as an engagement strategy but as *essential to system reform, policy, practice, and evaluation*. This approach is grounded in a widely recognized principle: "**Nothing About Us Without Us**." Originating from disability rights movements and now adopted across human services systems, this phrase reflects a fundamental expectation that policies, programs, and decisions should not be made without the meaningful involvement of those most directly impacted by child welfare and adoption.

For systems leadership, integrating lived experience is a **high-impact, evidence-based approach** to improving service delivery, strengthening workforce capacity, and achieving sustainable systems change. Many States have demonstrated great success in engaging individuals with lived experience as shown in these exemplars.

## Improving Outcomes Across Systems

A robust body of research demonstrates that youth and family engagement improves outcomes while strengthening how systems function individually and together. In child welfare, youth participation in permanency planning is associated with improved permanency and transition outcomes, as well as a greater likelihood of leaving care with stable, supportive adult connections (*Salazar et al., 2020; Schwalbe, 2012; Salazar et al., 2018*). Beyond child welfare, peer-reviewed research shows that engagement is linked to improved student outcomes and school climate, stronger parental involvement and sustained treatment progress, and reductions in behavioral health and substance use concerns (*Smith et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2025; Zeldin, 2004; Webb et al., 2017*).

Integrating lived experience has measurable implications across systems: in mental health, it improves treatment adherence and continuity of care; in education, it supports academic success and school stability; in healthcare, it enhances patient satisfaction, responsiveness of services, and overall outcomes; and in child welfare, it strengthens collaboration and permanency planning. At the policy level, lived experience has also contributed to the development of more responsive and effective federal policies and practices. Because children and families navigate multiple systems simultaneously, lived experience provides a holistic perspective that helps agencies align efforts, reduce fragmentation, and deliver more consistent, connected care. Across sectors, this leads to better health outcomes, more responsive services, and improved experiences for children and families (*National Academies Press, 2024*).

## Strengthening Policy, Practice, & System Design

Federal and peer-reviewed research consistently shows that integrating lived experience strengthens system-level decision-making, policy design, and resource allocation. Individuals with lived experience offer critical insight into barriers, service gaps, and unintended consequences that are often not captured in administrative data alone.

Across federal and national initiatives, youth–adult partnerships are associated with **more informed and effective decision-making**, particularly in systems where youth and families have historically been excluded (*Annie E. Casey Foundation*). Initiatives such as the *Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative* demonstrate the tangible impact of lived experience, with youth driving a substantial proportion of policy and practice improvements that reshape systems at scale. Federal research further indicates that incorporating lived experience into advisory and planning processes results in:

- More responsive, accessible, and community-aligned services
- More effective training, technical assistance, and system supports
- Clearer identification of system needs and service gaps
- More strategic use of funding and resources
- Stronger program and policy design and implementation

(HHS ASPE; U.S. Children’s Bureau, PubMed ID 40153797)

For system leaders, this translates into a stronger system design that is both data- and experience-informed.

## Strengthening Workforce Capacity and Organizational Effectiveness

Lived experience not only improves outcomes for children and families but also strengthens the workforce and organizations that deliver services. Research indicates that professionals who engage with individuals with lived experience develop:

- Increased awareness of community strengths and needs
- Improved engagement and communication skills
- Greater capacity to deliver culturally responsive and trauma-informed care

Organizations that incorporate lived experience report improvements in:

- Organizational culture and mission alignment
- Staff morale and job satisfaction
- Collaboration across teams and partner systems

In juvenile justice settings, for example, increased youth and family engagement has been associated with improved relationships, greater trust in systems, and enhanced workforce satisfaction (*Krupa, 2020*).

## Cross-System Takeaway for Systems Leadership

Across states, Tribes, and territories, the evidence is consistent. Integrating lived experience leads to:

- **Improved outcomes** for children, youth, and families
- Stronger policies and more effective programs
- Better-informed decision-making and resource allocation
- Increased engagement, trust, and service utilization
- Enhanced cross-system coordination and alignment

Lived experience is not system-specific. It is a *cross-system strategy* that strengthens performance across child welfare, mental health, education, healthcare, and community systems.

## Lived Experience and Adoption Competence

Adoption competence is grounded in the lived experiences of adoptive families, who first identified the gaps in traditional mental health. Their insights shaped a framework that recognizes the lifelong impact of trauma, loss, identity, and relationships on all kinship, guardianship, and adoptive children and families, which is why adoption competence is often referred to as permanency competence. Providers trained in this approach use trauma-informed, family focused practices that support healing, stability, and belonging, all of which are essential to achieving and sustaining permanency. By centering lived experience, adoption and permanency competent care moves beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to provide more responsive, relevant, and effective support.

## The Bottom Line

For systems leadership, integrating lived experience is not optional. It is *essential*. The *research* demonstrates that systems that partner with individuals with lived experience are better equipped to deliver effective, equitable, and sustainable services.

At the National Center, this approach is central to our work. By supporting states, Tribes, and territories in embedding lived experience across systems, we are strengthening not only individual programs but the broader systems that children and families rely on every day.