

Institutionalization, Trauma, and Resilience: Preliminary Insights from Adults with Foster Care Histories and Implications for Social Work Practice

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Abstract

Childhood institutionalization represents a significant form of early-life adversity that can have lasting psychological and social consequences. This study explores the long-term effects of institutional care on adults who experienced childhood abandonment and placement in residential care settings. The research adopts a qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews with 30 adults who spent part of their childhood in institutional care and 10 educators who worked in residential centers. The aim is to better understand how early institutional experiences influence mental health, identity development, interpersonal relationships, and resilience in adulthood.

Preliminary findings highlight the complex and enduring impact of early separation from family, including experiences of emotional deprivation, difficulties in forming secure attachments, and persistent feelings of stigma and social exclusion. At the same time, many participants describe the development of coping strategies and forms of resilience, often supported by meaningful relationships with peers, educators, or later social networks. Educators' perspectives further emphasize structural challenges within institutional systems, including limited resources and difficulties in providing individualized emotional support.

These preliminary results underline the importance of trauma-informed and relationship-centered approaches in foster and residential care systems. The study contributes to ongoing discussions on foster care reform by emphasizing the need for systemic responses that address both the psychological consequences of institutionalization and the long-term support needs of care leavers in a rapidly changing social context.

Index Terms

Qualitative Research, Long-Term Implications, Social Work