

Voices of Alaskan Foster Care Alumni: A Study of What Happens After “Aging Out”

The Child Welfare Evaluation Program

A joint venture of:

Tribal-State Collaboration Group

Office of Children’s Services

University of Alaska Anchorage

Casey Family Programs





Research Questions:

- What happens to Alaskan youth after they age out of the foster care system?
- Where are they? What are they doing?
- How are they faring socially, economically, and emotionally?
- How did they perceive their experiences in foster care? What worked for them? What didn't?

Today's focus:



- Introduce study background, methods
- Present alumni perspectives
- Highlight outcomes found from interviews
- Focus on relationships
- Describe ways that alumni found adults to be helpful

Foster Care Alumni Study

Criteria:

- Between 19 and 29 years old
- At least 1 year (continuous) in out-of-home care in state protective custody
- 1 year must be between 15 and 18 years of age
- Left care on or after 16th birthday

Demographics

Case file-defined ethnicity and gender for the whole population (N=140)

	Alumni population	Current OCS youth	Alaska (2000)
American Indian or Alaska Native	50.0%	61.0%	15.6%
African American	7.1%	7.8%	3.5%
Hispanic/Latino	2.9%	1.8%	4.1%
Caucasian	37.9%	27.9%	67.6%
Other/unknown	2.1%	.2%	11.5%
Female	52.9%	49.3%	48.3%

Maltreatment

Reports of harm recorded in case files, overall and before and after first entering care (N=140)

Number of reports	Total	Before first placement	After first placement ^a
0	5.0%	13.7%	41.7%
1 to 2	39.6%	59.7%	30.2%
3 to 4	17.3%	11.5%	12.2%
5 to 6	15.1%	6.5%	7.2%
7 or more	23.0%	8.6%	8.6%
Average (S.D.)	4.4 (4.32)	2.1 (2.31)	2.1 (2.93)

^a Incidents after the first placement were not necessarily while the youth was in out-of-home placement. They may have occurred while the case was closed or during a trial home placement, etc.

Placement

The average alumnus in this population:

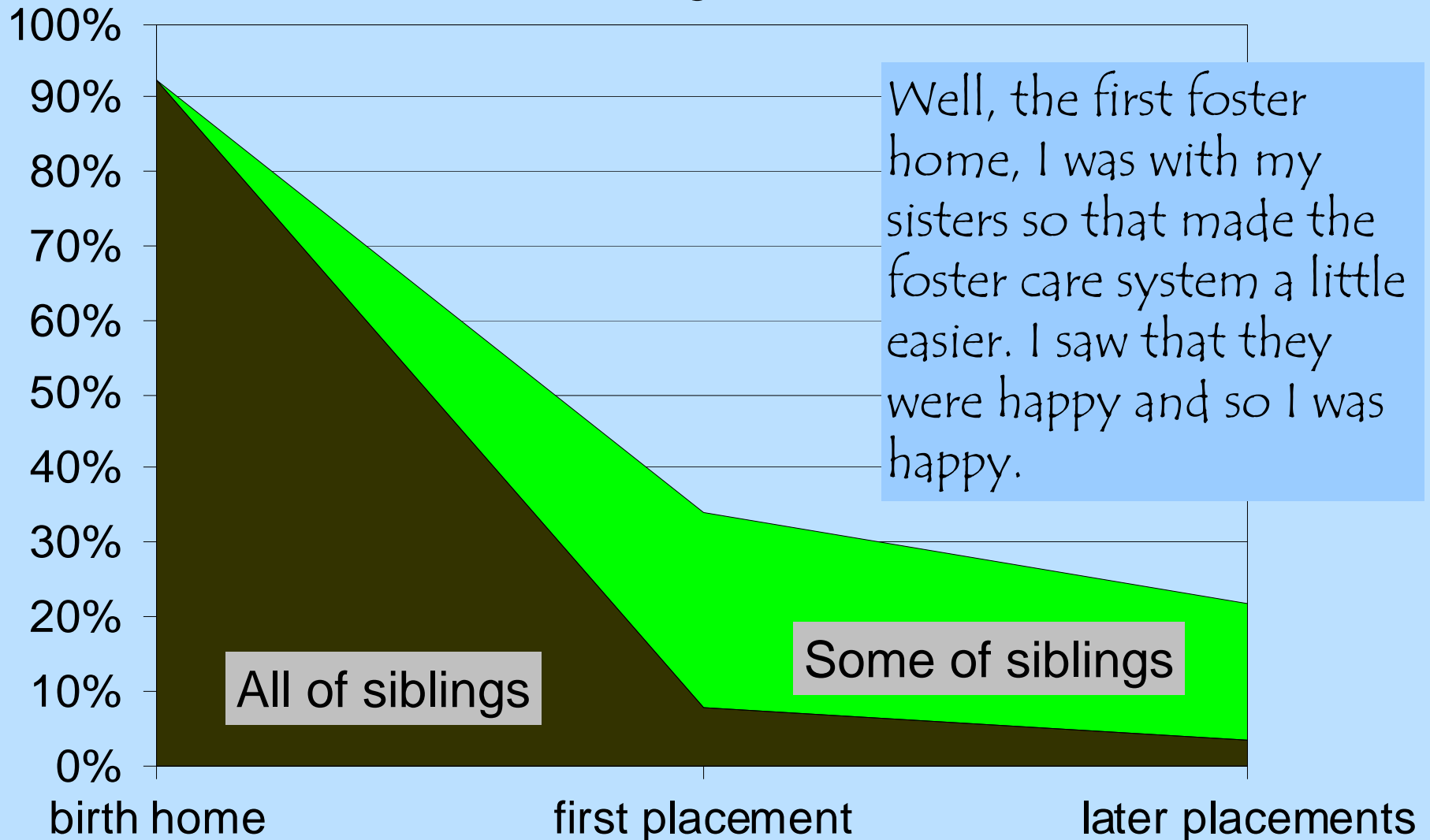
- entered their first out-of-home placement at about 10 and a half years of age
- left care less than 6 months after their 18th birthday
- spent 6.9 years in out-of-home care
- experienced about 13 placements

You have someone telling you that you will be here with these people and [you have to] get along even if you don't know them but you have to work with them. You don't have a choice—government makes it for you. The last set of foster parents are great and they want to adopt me, but you constantly had to wonder if this place would be it or were you going to move again.

-interviewed alumnus

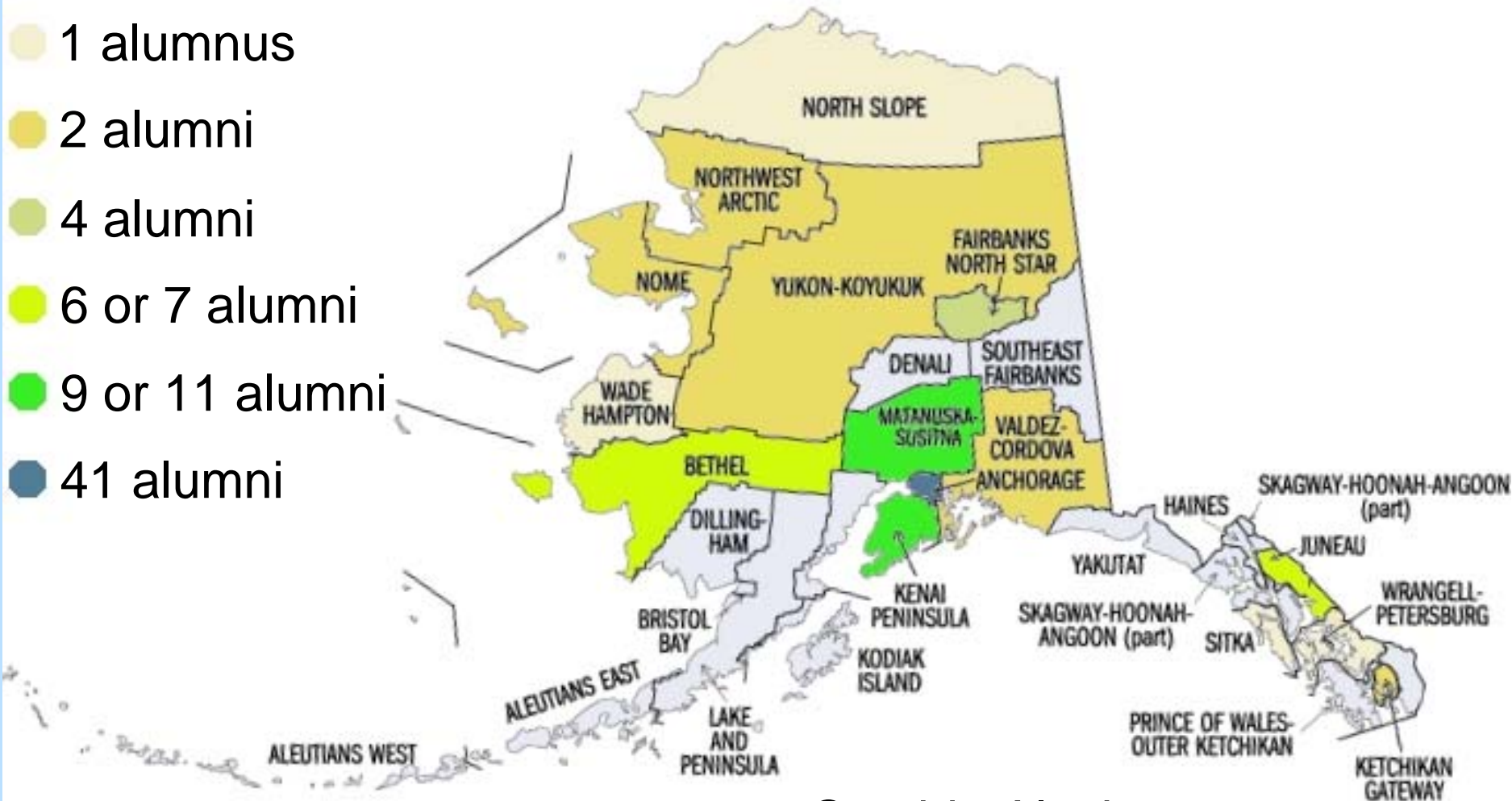
Socio-emotional outcomes

Very few alumni were able to live with all or even some of their siblings while in care

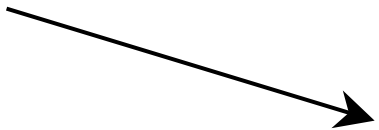


Geographic dispersion within Alaska

- 1 alumnus
- 2 alumni
- 4 alumni
- 6 or 7 alumni
- 9 or 11 alumni
- 41 alumni



Outside Alaska:
32 alumni
(22.9%)

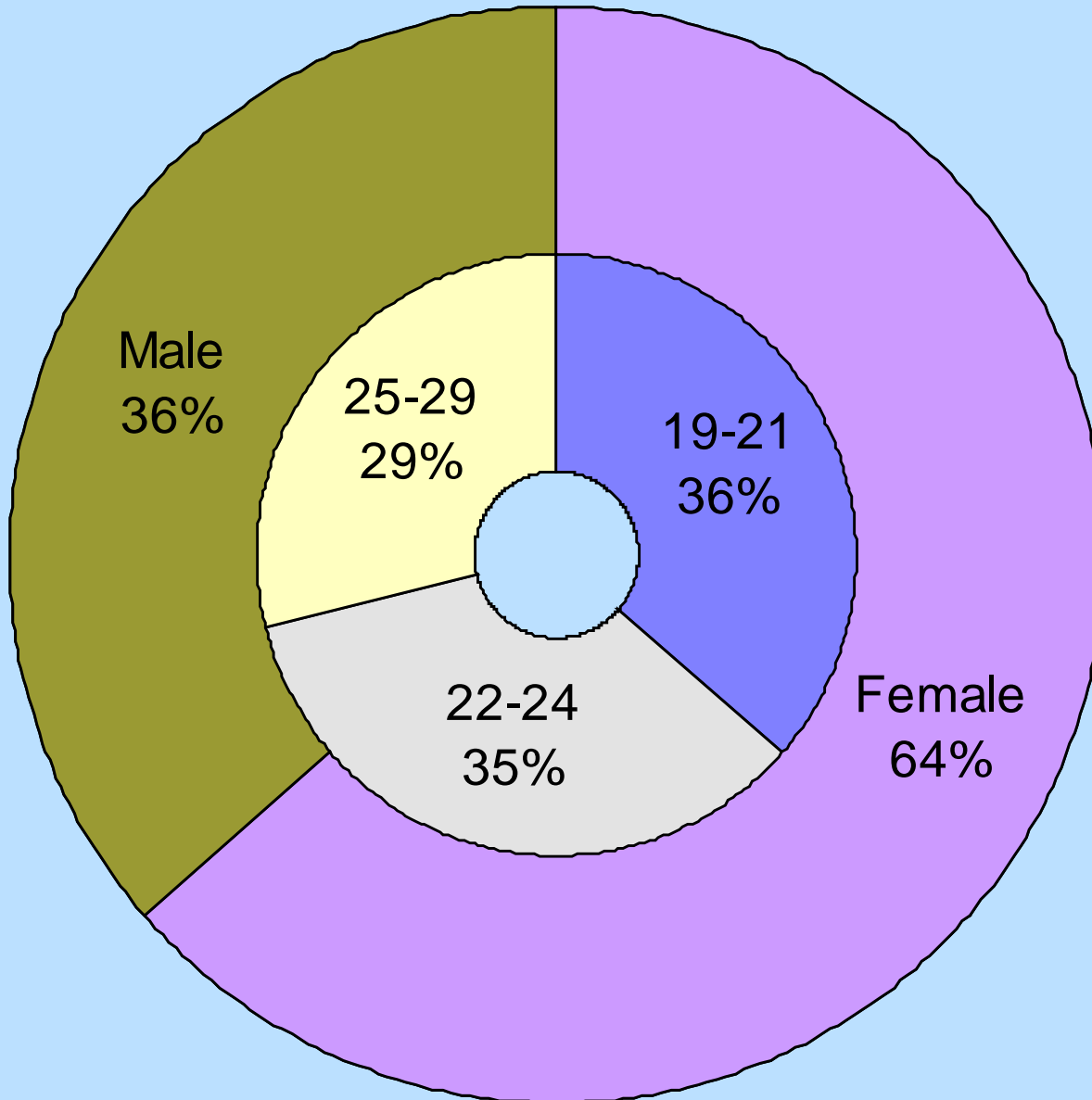


Who we found

Disposition	Frequency	Percent
Interviewed	66	47.1%
Refused	5	3.6%
Unable to reach during interview period	41	29.3%
Institutionalized, ill, or otherwise incapable of participating	11	7.9%
Incarcerated	15	10.7%
Deceased	2	1.4%
Total	140	100.0%
Adjusted response rate (excluding the deceased and those the project was not permitted to interview due to human subjects restrictions)		58.9%

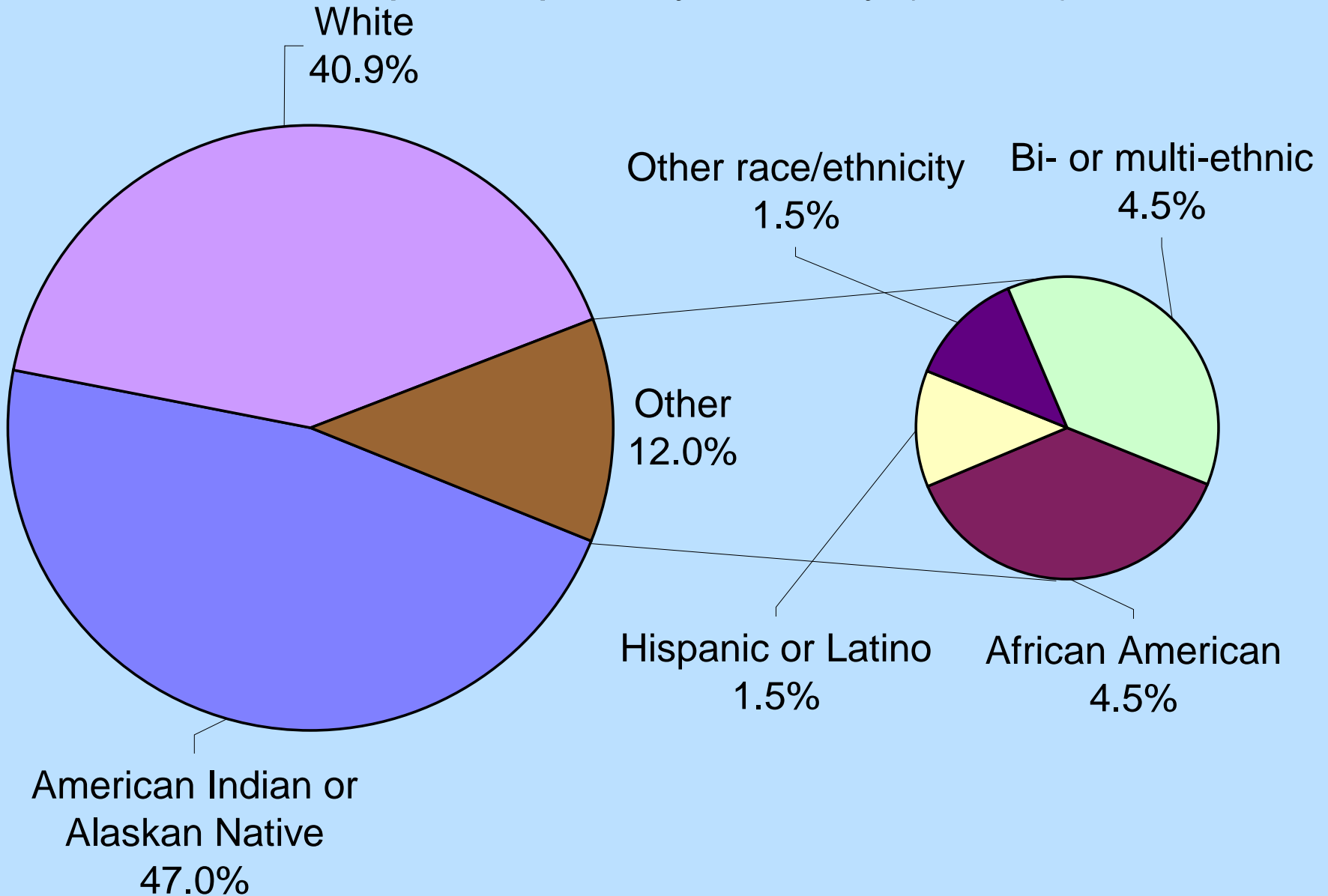
Who we interviewed

Age and gender of respondents (N = 66)



Who we interviewed

Self-reported primary ethnicity (N = 66)



Young adults formerly in foster care:



Some success stories--some poor outcomes:

- Positive relationships formed while in care tend to continue into adulthood
- Foster mom is mentioned most often as a key relationship
- On-going relationships with relatives important, particularly siblings

Young adults formerly in foster care:



Some success stories--some poor outcomes:

- Many had been jailed after leaving care
- High rate of homelessness since leaving care
- Unemployment rate about 4 times that of the rest of Alaska
- High rate of early parenthood

Young adults formerly in foster care:

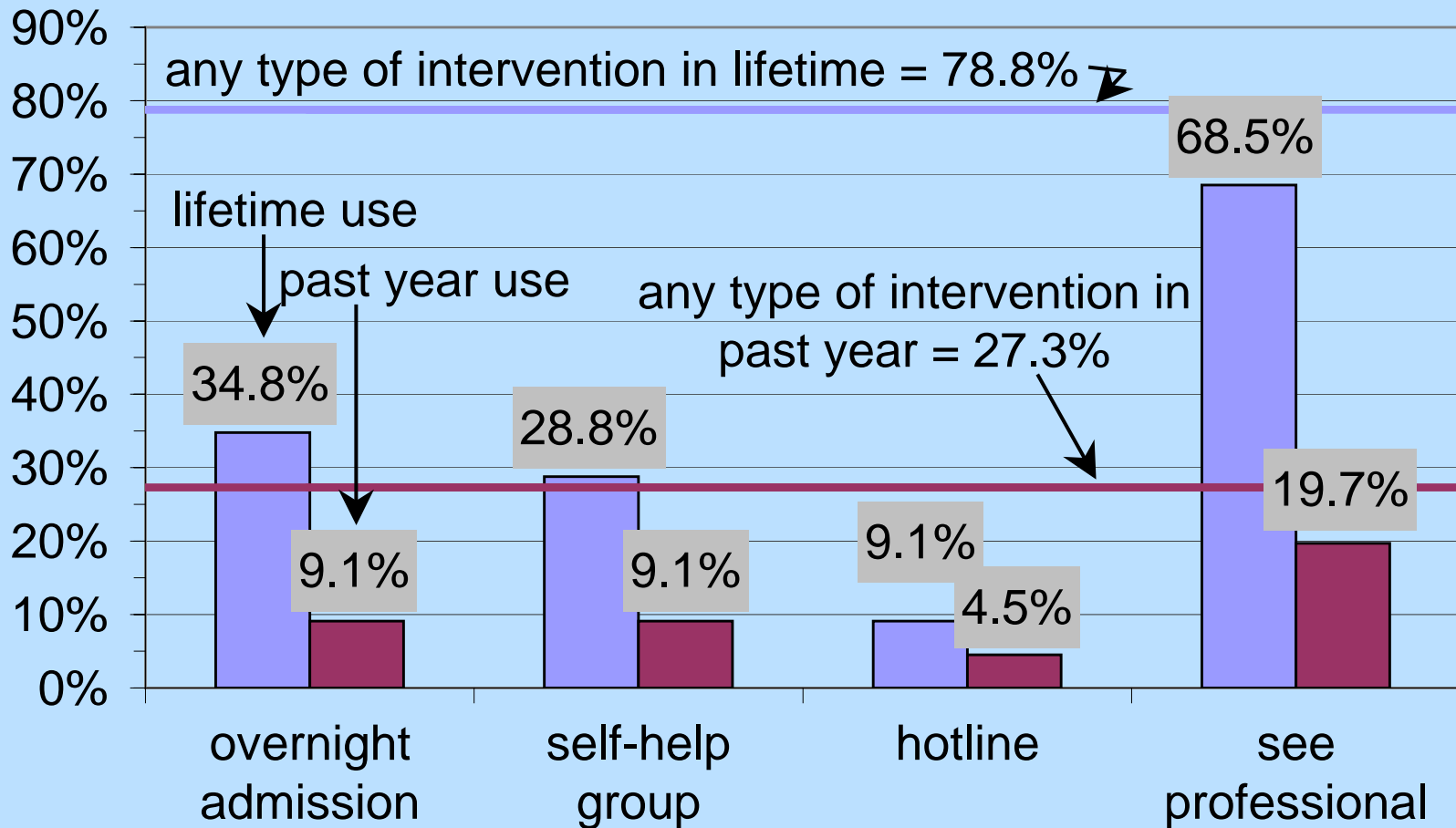


Some success stories--some poor outcomes

- **Low income & rate of health coverage**
- **High rates of mental & behavioral health difficulties**
- **Low rates of post-secondary education**
- **High school graduation rate slightly lower than the general population, higher among those 25 and older**

Physical and behavioral health outcomes

Mental health & alcohol or drug treatment usage,
lifetime and past year



The foster care experience helped me with stability, family environment, importance of family, traditions, etc. I had a daily schedule and chores and organizational-type skills.

-interviewed alumnus

Socio-emotional outcomes

Pregnancy and impregnation: Many alumni were biological parents, often beginning at a young age

Average (S.D.) or percent of sample	Females	Males	All
Ever pregnant or impregnated a partner:	73.8%	41.7%	62.1%*
Resulting in any births	61.9%	37.5%	53.0%
Age at first pregnancy/impregnation:	19.1 (2.72)	20.4 (1.65)	19.4 (2.55)
17 or under	9.5%	0	6.1%
19 or under	57.1%	12.5%	40.9%*
Number of births	1.5 (1.06)	.9 (.32)	1.4 (.97)
Ever had child removed from home by CPS (of those with live births)	7.7%	11.1%	8.6%

* Significant difference

Education, employment, and finances

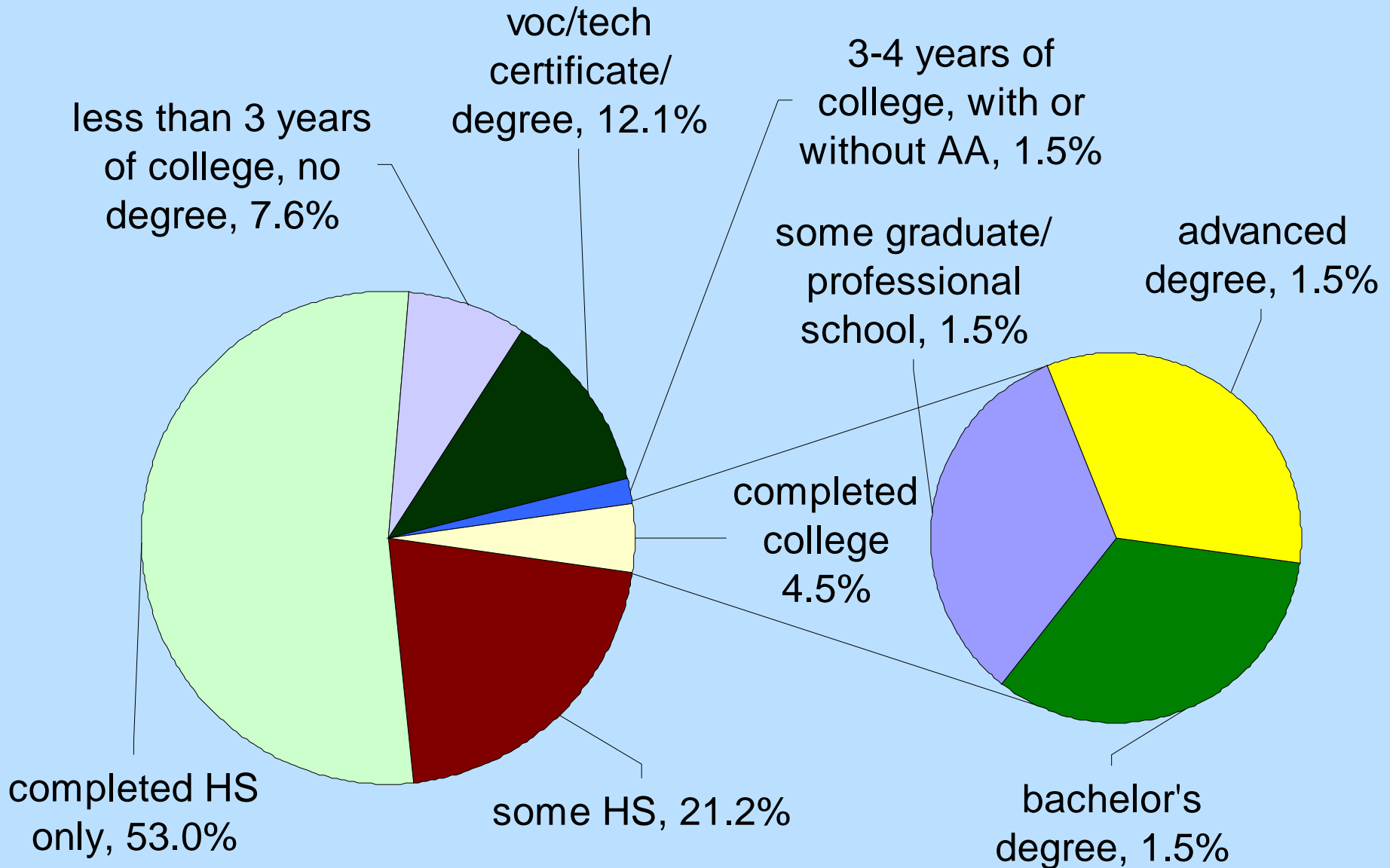
Homelessness after leaving foster care

	Average (S.D.) or percent of sample
Ever homeless since leaving care:	37.9%
Number of homeless episodes	4.0 (3.18)
Longest episode, in days	95.0 (127.35)
Homeless within one year of leaving care	30.3% of total

Probably just helped me through school and get a license, a car, and got me ready through the real world. Didn't just kick me to the curb and say, "Here, support yourself."

Education, employment, and finances

Highest level of education attained



Education, employment, and finances

Educational completion for those ages 25 and older

	Alaska alumni (n=19)	Alaska general population	US general population
Completed high school (including GED)	89.5%	91.2%	83.6%
BA or higher	10.5%	26.6%	26.5%

I was always told that I couldn't do things, but I did it just to prove them wrong, like getting my GED...

There were two foster homes, at least, that had stability and discipline. They always explained why they did the discipline. [So I knew] they [disciplined me] because they cared about me.

-interviewed alumnus

Education, employment, and finances

Employment status and hours worked

Employed	58.5%
Unemployed	24.6%
Not in workforce (students, homemakers, etc.)	16.9%
Workforce unemployment	29.6%
Hours worked in average week (among those working)	34.9 (SD 13.62; range 8 to 60)

[My] foster parents helped me to find work and get a job, learn to cook and be independent.

Lasting Connections

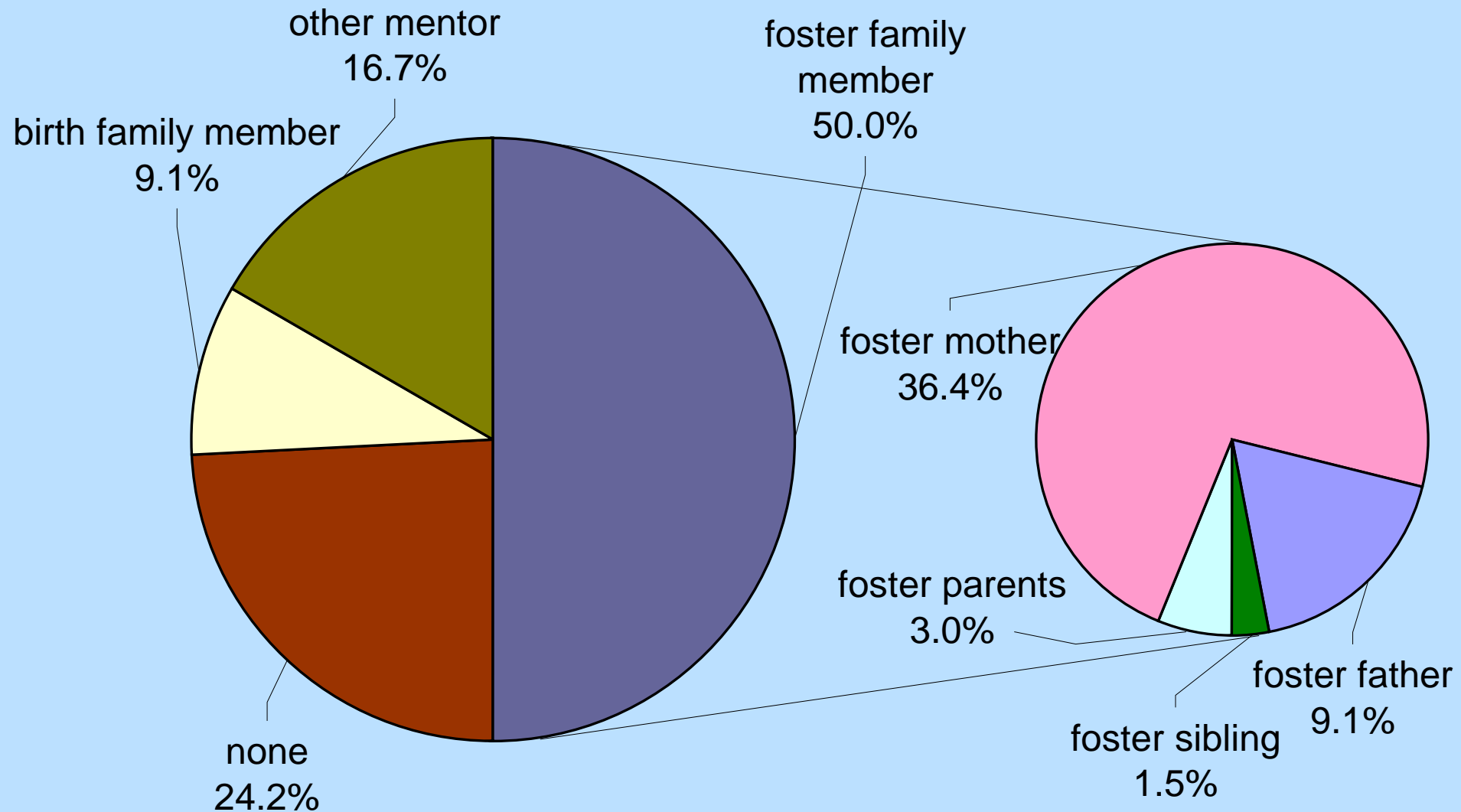


My Guardian Ad Litem was with me from the beginning to the end. He would go out of the way to stand up for me regardless of what the others thought. He would always choose what was best for me, against all odds. He came to visit me in the hospital and even if there was something I didn't agree with, he always did what he thought was best for me. He was awesome.

-interviewed alumnus

Socio-emotional outcomes

Close relationship with an adult while in care



Socio-emotional outcomes

Close relationship with an adult while in care

In describing why these relationships were important, respondents mentioned a variety of reasons:

The importance of setting and striving towards goals

My foster parents taught me to set goals and accomplish them. Even if you don't see a reward there is one at some point of time.

Socio-emotional outcomes

Close relationship with an adult while in care

In describing why these relationships were important, respondents mentioned a variety of reasons:

Emotional growth and support

She gave me hope. She was my teacher and she didn't have children of her own but she was willing to help me, so she became my foster mother.

Socio-emotional outcomes

Close relationship with an adult while in care

In describing why these relationships were important, respondents mentioned a variety of reasons:

Teaching life skills

He treated me like a son; taught me how to cook, to clean, to be a man.

Socio-emotional outcomes

Close relationship with an adult while in care

In describing why these relationships were important, respondents mentioned a variety of reasons:

Supporting educational achievement

They did a lot, like help me with school, homework, and encouraged me to finish. They loved me and were good role models.

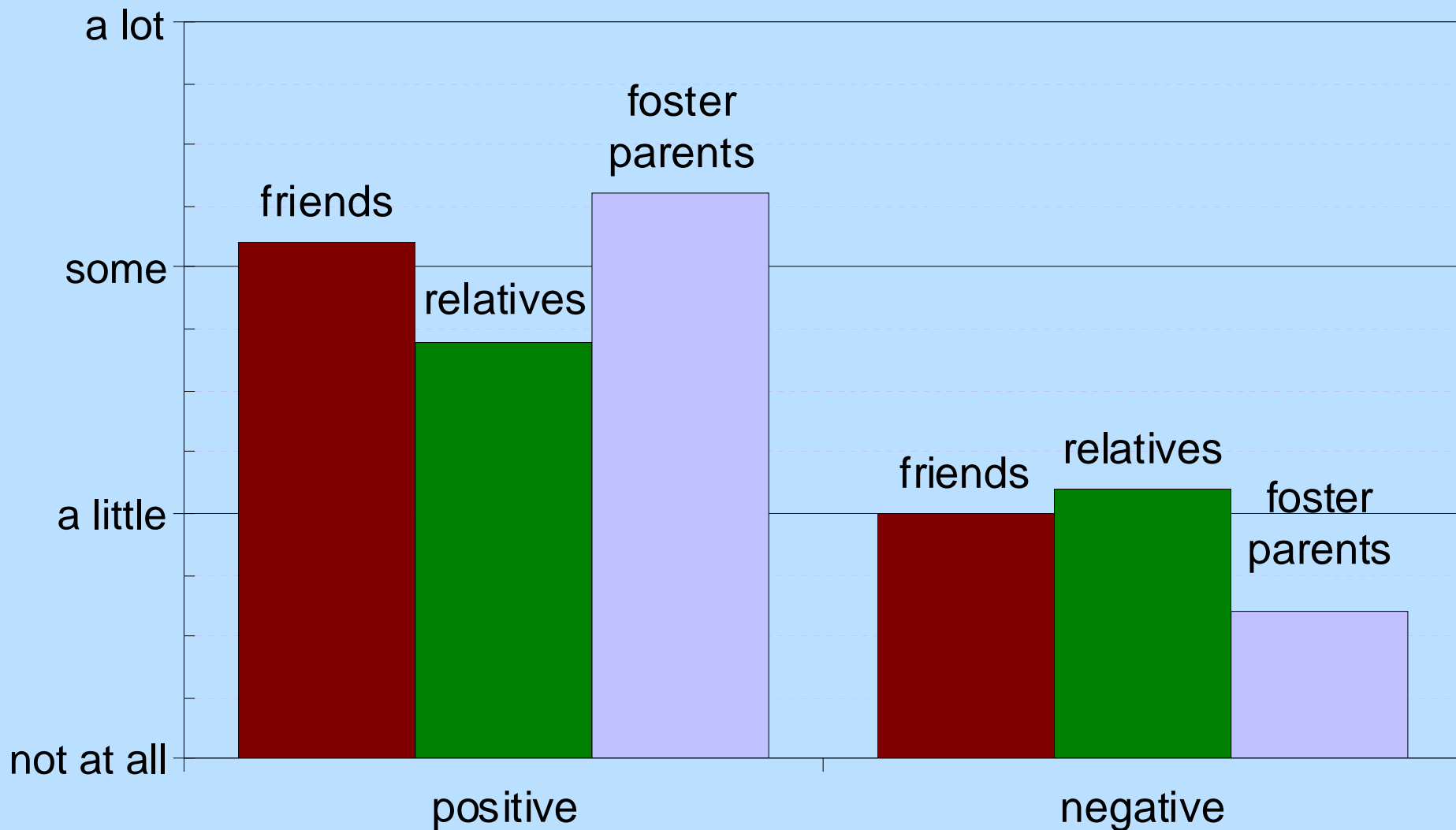
Positive Relationships Continue

Having a close relationship predicts future positive social support (having social contacts who are understanding, reliable, and listeners with whom the respondent can “open up”) in this sample.



Socio-emotional outcomes

Average frequency of positive and negative social interactions reported by the alumni



I wish that all the places that I had been in had forced school on me and made me go. There is still a lot of freedom in foster kids' lives, but they also need responsibility taught to them. I wish I had been more prepared for that. They never gave me examples of what would be hard. Like renting an apartment: I still don't even have my own apartment. I really think that the IL program focuses on relationships... and not enough on taxes and renting apartments and things like that.

-interviewed alumna

Recommendations:



- Encourage positive adult relationships
- Promote legal ties
- Support relationships with foster parents after youth reach 18
- Promote sibling contact

Recommendations:



- Provide sexuality education to foster youth
- Provide parenting support for youth who become parents
- Extend foster care services, including use of the Chafee Medicaid option
- Develop a detailed transition plan with each youth

In closing:



As one alumna said,

Basically as a whole society we need to make family a priority so that we don't have to depend on the foster care system as much. If we make family a priority, we'll see more successes.

Thank you