

On social media, foster families shared their pandemic worries

September 8 2021, by Jeff Grabmeier

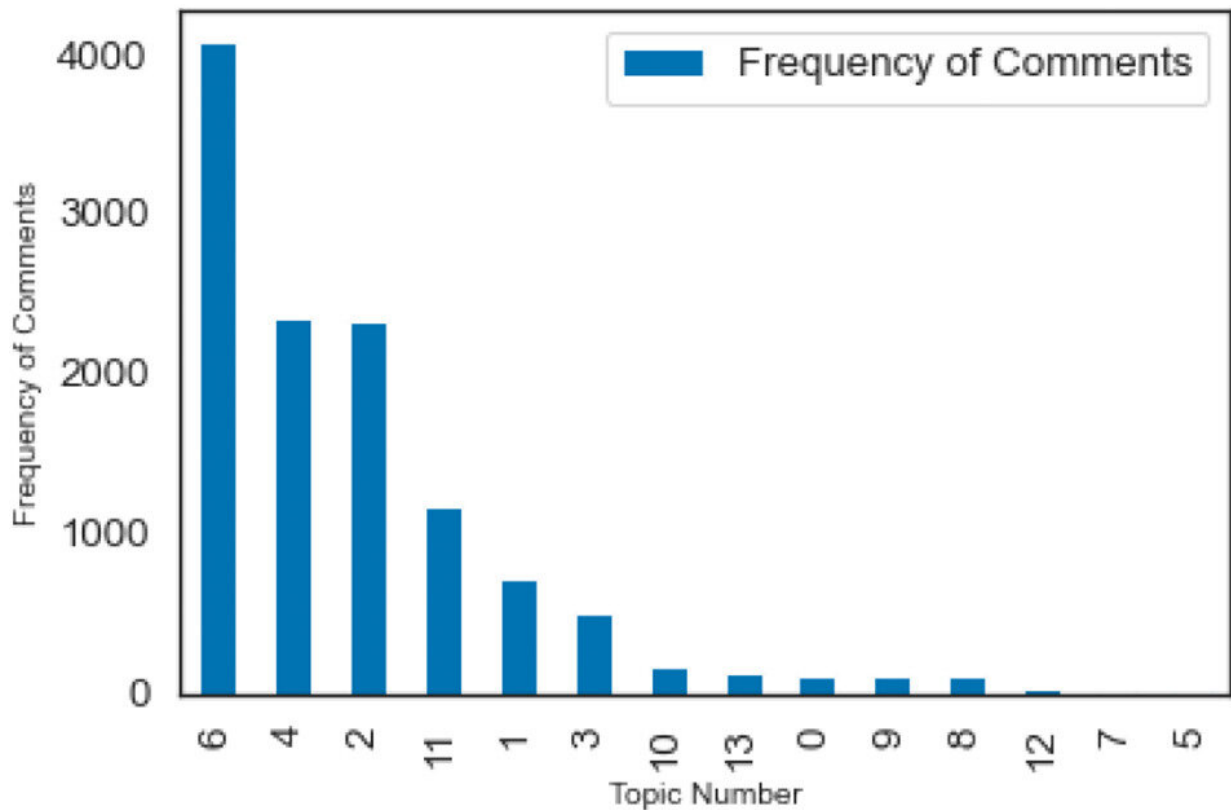


Fig. 1. Most frequent comments by topics. Topic 6: Permanency. Topic 4: Child behaviors. Topic 2: Needs of foster children. Topic 11: Discrimination. Topic 1: Communication with child welfare system. Topic 3: Becoming a foster parent. Topic 10: Food and nutrition. Topic 13: Money. Topic 0: Pets. Topic 9: Activities for foster children. Topic 8: Biological parents. Topic 12: Safety plan. Topic 7: Lice removal. Topic 5: Infant care. Credit: DOI: [10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.105262](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.105262)

An analysis of what foster families talk about on social media showed how the COVID-19 pandemic ramped up their anxieties and concerns about the children in their care.

Researchers compared what foster families talked about online in the months prior to the [pandemic](#) to their discussions immediately following lockdowns.

Findings showed that online discussions on some topics changed dramatically, said Joyce Lee, lead author of the study and assistant professor of social work at The Ohio State University.

"Foster families were faced with multiple challenges during the early months of COVID-19 and they turned to social media to express their concerns and needs," Lee said.

"They were especially worried about delays in their attempts to get licensed as [foster parents](#), the permanency plans for [children](#) in their care, and what kind of activities they could do to occupy their children during lockdown."

Lee, who did the work as a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Michigan, conducted the study with Olivia Chang of the University of Michigan and Tawfiq Ammari of Rutgers University. The study was published online recently in the journal *Child Abuse and Neglect*.

The researchers used a relatively new method to study the concerns of foster parents. They collected more than 11,000 comments that users of the [social media](#) platform Reddit made on three subreddits, or online discussion boards, dedicated to foster families.

They used machine learning techniques to analyze the text and help determine the topics and contexts of the conversations. The researchers

applied both [statistical methods](#) and read through random sample of comments to analyze how they changed over time.

They compared pre-pandemic discussions (Jan. 1 to March 11, 2020) to those that occurred after COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic (March 11 to May 23, 2020).

Results showed that three topics changed significantly for foster families after COVID-19.

One was a decrease and change in the nature of discussions about permanency, which had to do with where foster children would end up long-term and whether the foster parents would seek to adopt or become legal guardians, Lee said.

The researchers noted that discussions about permanency probably dropped off considerably after the pandemic because foster parents were unsure about what was going to happen and possibly due to limited contacts with the child welfare system.

The content of the permanency discussions also changed, as foster parents expressed more anxiety about some issues, such as delays in reuniting foster children with their biological parents.

"Foster parents were worried about the children in their care, and how COVID-19 was keeping them from visiting or reuniting with their biological parents," Lee said. "It added another level of stress to an already stressful situation."

There was also a significant increase in online conversations after the pandemic started about becoming a foster parent, the study found. More would-be foster parents were worried about delays in getting licensed by the state, for example, because classes were getting canceled or

postponed.

"I'm increasingly anxious," one parent wrote. "I know why we're taking precautions, but at the same time, a lot of kids are going to come into care as a result of the same pandemic that is stopping parents from moving forward with licensing."

Another topic that saw significant increases in discussion after the pandemic was finding activities for foster children who were stuck at home during the lockdowns.

"There was a lot of sharing of ideas about what to do and how to keep the children happy and occupied," Lee said.

One parent wrote, "We would have a much harder time surviving this (pandemic) without a small indoor exercise trampoline. It was only \$20!"

The findings of the study suggest that many state agencies involved in licensing and supporting foster parents need to be better prepared to deal with the next pandemic or similar emergency, Lee said.

"We saw that many foster parents were worried and frustrated about how to get the resources they needed to best support the children in their care during the pandemic," she said.

In terms of specific recommendations, Lee noted, "State agencies can be more nimble in figuring out how to deliver resources remotely and use technology effectively and creatively to support [parents](#) during emergencies like this."

More information: Joyce Y. Lee et al, Using social media Reddit data to examine foster families' concerns and needs during COVID-19, *Child Abuse & Neglect* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.105262](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.105262)

Provided by The Ohio State University

Citation: On social media, foster families shared their pandemic worries (2021, September 8)
retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2021-09-social-media-foster-families-pandemic.html>

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