

NATIONAL COALITION FOR CHILD PROTECTION REFORM

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INDEX REVEALS CAPRICIOUSNESS AND CRUELTY OF MICHIGAN CHILD WELFARE Children in Macomb, Grand Traverse, Ingham Counties among those most likely to be torn from parents *The index discussed in this press release is available online at* www.nccpr.org/reports/michiganinfo1976.html

Whether a Michigan child is torn from his or her family and thrown into foster care depends more on where that child happens to live than any objective determination of whether the child has been abused, according to a national child advocacy organization.

And instead of making children safer, what the group called a “take the child and run” mentality actually makes all children less safe.

“Whether or not one believes, as we do, that Michigan takes away far too many children, these data make one thing clear: Child welfare in Michigan is arbitrary, capricious and cruel,” said Richard Wexler, Executive Director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform.

The organization, which released a scathing, controversial report on Michigan child welfare last month, followed up today with a *Michigan Rate-of-Removal Index*, comparing the propensity of DHS offices across the state to take children from their parents.

“There is no logical reason for a child in Grand Traverse or Macomb Counties to be three times more likely to be taken from his or her parents than a child from Wayne or Bay Counties – but that’s what these data suggest is happening,” Wexler said.

“Although, in theory, Michigan has a state run system, these data reveal a collection of county fiefdoms, where the chance that a child will wind up serving time in the chaos of Michigan foster care has more to do with local whim and prejudice than on any coherent or comprehensible statewide policy.”

Wexler warned that Wayne County’s relatively good record is threatened by “a retreat from reform under the current DHS leadership, including limiting an innovative program which has safely reduced the destruction of Wayne County families. Even with these improvements, a child in metropolitan Detroit still is nearly twice as likely to be taken from his parents as a child in metropolitan Chicago,” Wexler said. “So a retreat from reform is especially harmful now.”

NCCPR obtained data from the Michigan Department of Human Services on the number of children taken from their families during the first ten months of 2008. NCCPR

then compared these data to the number of impoverished children in each county and projected each county's rate-of-removal.

The county with the highest rate of removal, Isabella, took children at a rate more than five times that of the county with the lowest rate, Sanilac.

But even among larger counties, there were stark differences. Children in Macomb and Ingham Counties were three times more likely to be torn from their homes than children in Wayne County. The Oakland County rate of removal was double the rate in Wayne.

"It seems unlikely that counties like Macomb, Oakland, Ingham and Grand Traverse are cesspools of depravity with vastly higher rates of child abuse than metropolitan Detroit," Wexler said. "Rather, these results suggest a culture of child removal and a profound hostility to poor families. But when DHS takes a swing at the parents in these families, the blow almost always lands on their children.

"That's why the knee-jerk response we always hear from DHS in counties that take so many children is flat wrong," Wexler said. "They will claim, falsely, that they have to tear apart families in order to keep children safe, and if there is any doubt they have to 'err on the side of the child.' In fact, there probably is no phrase in the child welfare lexicon that has done more harm to children than 'err on the side of the child.' It has inspired the current chaotic system that has left all vulnerable children *less* safe.

"When a child is needlessly thrown into foster care, he loses not only mom and dad but often brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents, teachers, friends and classmates. For a young enough child it can be an experience akin to a kidnapping. Other children feel they must have done something terribly wrong and now they are being punished. One recent study of foster care "alumni" found they had twice the rate of post-traumatic stress disorder of Gulf War veterans and only 20 percent could be said to be "doing well." How can throwing children into a system which churns out walking wounded four times out of five be "erring on the side of the child?"

"A second study, of 15,000 cases, is even more devastating. That study found that even maltreated children left in their own homes with little or no help fared better, on average, than *comparably-maltreated* children placed in foster care. So when those county DHS officials glibly claim that rushing to tear children from their parents is "erring on the side of the child" please remember the 15,000 children who would gladly tell you otherwise if they could," Wexler said.

"All that harm can occur even when the foster home is a good one. The majority are. But the rate of abuse in foster care is far higher than generally realized and far higher than in the general population. That same alumni study found that one-third of foster children said they'd been abused by a foster parent or another adult in a foster home. (The study didn't even ask about one of the most common forms of abuse in foster care, foster children abusing each other). Switching to orphanages won't help -- the record of institutions is even worse.

"Furthermore, the more a foster care system is overwhelmed with children who don't need to be there, the less safe it becomes, as agencies are tempted to overcrowd foster homes and lower standards for foster parents. If a child is taken from a perfectly safe home only to be beaten, raped or killed in foster care, how is that 'erring on the side of the child'?"

"Timothy Boss, Joshua Causey, Johnny Dragomir, Ricky Holland, Isaac Lethbridge and Allison Newman all were taken from their parents in the name of 'erring on the side of the child' only to die in the foster homes or group homes of strangers.

"But even that isn't the worst of it," Wexler said. "Everyone knows how badly caseworkers are overwhelmed. They often make bad decisions in both directions -- leaving

some children in dangerous homes, even as more children are taken from homes that are safe or could be made safe with the right kinds of services. The more that workers are overwhelmed with children who don't need to be in foster care, the less time they have to find children in real danger. So they make even more mistakes in both directions. That is almost always the real explanation for the horror-story cases that make headlines.

"And that's why states that have rebuilt their systems to emphasize family preservation consistently have improved child safety.

"It can be done because most parents who lose their children to foster care don't fit the stereotype – they're neither brutally abusive nor hopelessly addicted.

"None of this means no child ever should be taken from her or his parents," Wexler said. "Rather, it means that foster care is an extremely toxic intervention that must be used sparingly and in small doses. But the state as a whole, and especially counties like Isabella, Grand Traverse, St. Joseph, Ingham and Macomb have prescribed mega-doses of foster care."

Wexler said further evidence of needless removal comes from the landmark *Michigan Race Equity Review*. That study found not only widespread racial bias in Michigan child welfare, but also widespread confusion of family poverty with "neglect."

"That may help explain the high rates of removal in well-to-do counties like Grand Traverse and Macomb," Wexler said. "DHS workers and their bosses in counties that see relatively little poverty may be more likely to confuse the poverty they see with neglect."

But, Wexler said, the *Race Equity Review* found plenty of needless removal even in Wayne County, where the overall rate-of-removal is comparatively low. "One can only shudder to think of how many children are being penalized for family poverty in Macomb, Grand Traverse and similar counties."

And Wexler said Wayne County's gains are threatened. He said Wayne County has safely reduced entries into care in part by implementing the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family Initiative. (The Casey foundation is a longtime funder of NCCPR.) But while former DHS director Marianne Udow embraced the initiative, the current DHS leadership, has reduced the participation of Wayne and Macomb Counties.

"Unfortunately, this demotion of Family to Family is part of a pattern of deferring or reversing progressive initiatives begun by Udow," Wexler said.

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