

The Evidence is In:

Foster Care vs. Keeping Families Together: The Definitive Studies

NCCPR long argued that many children now trapped in foster care would be far better off if they had remained with their own families and those families had been given the right kinds of help. Turns out that's not quite right.

In fact, many children now trapped in foster care would be far better off if they remained with their own families even if those families got only the typical help (which tends to be little help, wrong help, or no help) commonly offered by family policing agencies – a more accurate term than “child welfare” agencies.

That's the message from the largest studies ever undertaken to compare the impact on children of foster care versus keeping comparably maltreated children with their own families – and **several more studies** published since. The first study was the subject of a **front-page story in USA Today**. The **full study is available here**.

That first study, published in 2007, looked at outcomes for more than 15,000 children. It compared foster children not to the general population but to *comparably-maltreated* children left in their own homes. The result: On measure after measure the children left in their own homes do better.

In fact, it's not even close.

Children left in their own homes are far less likely to become pregnant as teenagers, far less likely to wind up in the juvenile justice system and far more likely to hold a job for at least three months than comparably-maltreated children who were placed in foster care.

One year later, the same researcher **published another study**. This time the study included 23,000 cases. Again he compared foster children to comparably-maltreated children left in their own homes. This time he looked at which children were more likely to be arrested as adults. Once again, the children left in their own homes fared better than the foster children.

A third study by the same researcher found that, when it came to juvenile delinquency and the need for emergency medical care, once again, children left in their own homes did better.

Implications

- The studies use the term “foster care” generically; they include children placed in any form of substitute care. That's important because whenever information like this comes out, people who want to warehouse children in orphanages try to use it to justify their schemes. But these studies were not limited to family foster homes. And it takes three single-spaced pages just to list all the *other* studies documenting the harm of orphanages. (Those pages are available from NCCPR.)
- **This does not mean that no child ever should be placed in foster care. But it means many fewer children should be placed in foster care.**

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The studies excluded the most severe cases of maltreatment, a very small proportion of any child protective worker's caseload. That's precisely because, horror stories that make the front page notwithstanding, these are cases where everyone with time to investigate would agree that removal from the home was the only alternative.

Rather, the studies focused on, by far, the largest group of cases any worker sees, those that can best be called the "in-between cases;" cases where there might be real problems in the home but wide disagreement over what should be done. As the first study itself notes: "These are the cases most likely to be affected by policy changes that alter the threshold for placement." They also are, of course, the cases most likely to be affected by a **foster-care panic** – a huge, sudden upsurge in needless removals after the death of a child "known to the system" — which also alters the threshold for placement.

Even among these cases, the figures are averages. Certainly there are some individual cases among the thousands studied in which foster care was the less harmful alternative. But what the data make clear is that foster care is vastly overused, damaging large numbers of children who would do better in life had they remained in their own homes, even with the minimal – or no – help most family policing agencies offer to families.

This says less about how well family policing agencies do in helping families than it does about how enormously *toxic* a foster care intervention is. Anything that toxic must be used very sparingly and in very small doses.

- Child welfare agencies have a disingenuous response to all this: "Why yes, of course," they like to say. "This research just shows what we've always said ourselves: foster care only should be used as a last resort; of course we keep families together whenever possible." But this research shows that agency actions belie their words. **These studies found thousands of children already in foster care who would have done better had child protection agencies not taken them away in the first place.**
- The *USA Today* story quotes one deservedly well-respected expert as saying that the 2007 study was the first to produce such results. But that is an error. Actually it was at least the second since 2006. **A University of Minnesota study** used a different methodology and measured different outcomes, but came to very similar conclusions. And now, of course, **there have been many more, such as:**

A study of two groups of such children; one group was placed in foster care, another left with birth mothers able to care for them. After six months, the babies were tested using all the usual measures of infant development: rolling over, sitting up, reaching out. Typically, the children left with their birth mothers did better. For the foster children, the separation from their mothers was more toxic than the cocaine.

Another study in 2019 compared mental health outcomes for maltreated children placed in foster care compared to those left in their own homes. The foster children were nearly twice as likely to suffer from Reactive Attachment Disorder – not surprising, since one cause of RAD is "repeated changes of primary caregivers. ..."

Another study looked at outcomes for Canadian First Nations children. Published in one of **the world's leading journals, *The Lancet***, it found that "Being in [our-of-home care]

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worsened children's health and legal system outcomes ... out-of-home care [is] as risky (or more) as leaving a child requiring protection at home..."

There's also [this stunning finding from Sweden](#). Again, comparing a huge sample of comparably-maltreated young people: By age 20, those torn from their homes were more than four times more likely to die – most often by suicide. More than 8% of the foster children died, compared to under two percent of those left in their own homes. Among those who lived, those who had been placed in foster care were more likely to commit crimes.

And then there's this, from a review of studies concerning the impact of foster care on criminal behavior:

Many studies (82% of the eleven studies that addressed the first research question) showed higher rates of offending behavior for maltreated youth placed in foster care compared to those who remained at home, while some studies (27%) found no difference between the two groups of maltreated youth. One study showed higher risk of offending for maltreated youth who remained at home compared to maltreated youth placed in foster care only. Another study showed mixed findings ...

- Perhaps most intriguing, these studies suggest it actually may be possible to quantify the harm of a foster-care panic.

Thanks to these studies, we now have an estimate of how much worse foster children do on key outcomes compared with comparably-maltreated children left in their own homes. It's also usually possible to calculate how many more children are taken away during a foster-care panic. So it should be possible to estimate how many more children will wind up under arrest, how many more will become pregnant and how many more will be jobless as a result of a foster-care panic.

It also should be possible to estimate roughly how many children have been saved from these rotten outcomes in states and localities that have reformed their systems to emphasize safe, proven programs to keep families together.

These studies are in addition to the comprehensive study of foster care alumni showing that only one in five could be said to be doing well as a young adult – in other words, foster care churns out walking wounded four times out of five. (See NCCPR's publication, [80 Percent Failure](#) for more on this study) and the mass of evidence showing that simply in terms of physical safety, real family preservation programs have a far better track record than foster care. (See [NCCPR Issue Paper #1](#)).

The current buzzword in child welfare is "evidence-based." What that really means is: How dare proponents of any new, innovative approach to child welfare expect to get funding if they can't dot every i and cross every t on evaluations proving the innovation's efficacy beyond a shadow of a doubt? Old, non-innovative programs, however, are not held to this standard. If they were, child welfare would be turned upside down by the results of this research.

Because now, more than ever, the evidence is in.

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