

Foster Care

A PERIOD OF TIME WHERE A CHILD LIVES WITH GUARDIANS WHO ARE NOT THEIR PARENTS

Why It's Important

Children thrive in stable, nurturing, permanent homes surrounded by adults who care for them. Unfortunately, this is not always possible and sometimes children need to be removed from their home. Children who cannot safely remain in their familial home may be placed in foster care or a group residential facility. Children are placed in foster care when a child protective services worker and court have determined it is not safe for them to remain at home with their current caregivers.¹ In Minnesota, about 16,600 children and young adults experienced out-of-home care in 2017. Almost 7,500 children and young adults were in out-of-home placement for more than one reason. The three most common reasons for out-of-home placement include:²

- Parental drug abuse (29%)
- Allegations of neglect (23%)
- Allegations of physical abuse (9%)

The removal of children from homes due to parental drug abuse increased from 17 percent in 2003 to 29 percent in 2017. This is mainly due to the rise in opioid and methamphetamine addictions.²

Child maltreatment and out-of-home placement can have a lifelong impact.

Experiencing maltreatment can negatively affect children at any age, but the long-term effects of experiencing any form of maltreatment are especially severe in infants and toddlers. Abuse and neglect during early developmental stages can permanently alter brain functioning, which has lasting effects into adulthood. Today, the rate for foster care entries for infants and toddlers far exceeds the rate of older children and increases the overall foster care entry rates. This is why it is critical to establish effective prevention and intervention approaches that both prevent maltreatment from occurring and if it does occur, prevents children from entering out-of-home placement if at all possible.

“Every child needs their caregiver to be okay. This is a universal child need. Until we start investing in making sure that caregivers are okay, there is nothing we can give them.”– Needs Assessment Key Informant

Foster families provide a temporary yet critical role in nurturing and caring for children during a crisis. Since Minnesota consists of many diverse populations, it is important that parents and organizations are culturally-competent and able to respond to each child's unique needs while using culture as a resource or tool to assist with the intervention and meet their needs.⁴

“[Foster care] is not delivered in culturally appropriate ways.” – Needs Assessment Discovery Survey Respondent

The foster care system is a complex component of the child welfare system in the U.S. and its functioning (and lack of) significantly impacts a child’s well-being, their chances of being placed in out-of-home care, and lifelong outcomes for both the child and their family.

Focus on Health Equity

Younger children, children from rural counties, and children of African American and American Indian descent are disproportionately represented in the foster care system. In 2018, children age 3 and younger represented 31 percent of children in the foster care system but were only 22 percent of the child population of Minnesota. Sixty-one percent of kids involved in the foster care system were from Greater Minnesota, despite children outside of the seven-county metro only representing 44 percent of kids in the state.² **In 2018, American Indian children 17 times more likely to experience out-of-home care than white children in the state.**² Children who identify with two or more races and African American children were 5 times more likely and African American/black children were three times more likely to experience out-of-home care than white children in Minnesota.²

The number of black children in Minnesota involved in permanent or temporary out-of-home placement has been increasing significantly over time; with a 73 percent increase in the number of removal cases from 2013 to 2017, and a **130 percent increase** in Hennepin County during that same time period.⁶

It is important to understand that disproportionate out-of-home placement rates are not the result of parents of certain race/ethnicity groups being poorer quality parents, it is the outcome of multiple systems with long histories of discrimination and racist practices still being in play and enforcing policies unfairly, unjustly, and unethically, and not providing enough supports to parents and guardians.

Children who are older, are a racial or ethnic minority, have special needs, or suffer from a behavioral or mental disorder are more likely to experience multiple foster care placements and stay in care longer.³

According to the National Center for Health Research, teenage girls in the foster care system are twice as likely to get pregnant before turning 19 as girls who are not in foster care. Research also has found that youth in foster care report frequent pressure to engage in sexual activity and are more likely to receive inadequate information about pregnancy prevention and the benefits to having a child at a young age. Primary and secondary prevention of teen pregnancy within families and child protection systems is essential to meeting the needs of this vulnerable population.

Additional Considerations

Importance of Family-Centered Services

Removing children from the people they love and environments they are familiar with can cause traumatic emotional experiences and negatively impact a child’s attachment to adults and others in their lives. As part of an effort to preserve family connections, 49 percent of those in foster care spend time with relative caretakers. When children must leave their homes, placement with foster care relatives is considered first.

“Basically as we do what we are doing, every single measure (mental, physical, health, well-being) what we are doing is creating incredibly predictive intergenerational future harm. We

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need to get busy about deciding how we do this differently. [Our report of the foster care systems shows that] it would be better to do nothing at all. We can't do nothing at all though, morally, if a child is being abused and neglected, so we better figure out what else to do." – Needs Assessment Key Informant Interview

Children are also placed in emergency foster care, foster care homes licensed by counties, tribal or private agencies, and group residential settings. In 2018, most children (58%) in Minnesota were reunited with their birth parents or legal guardians after out-of-home placement, 18 percent were adopted, 11 percent achieved permanency with a relative or other caregiver, and others left foster care without benefits of a permanent family.²

"Family is the solution. Not the problem." –Needs Assessment Key Informant Interview

Family foster homes are urgently needed in Minnesota. The number of children in foster care systems on an average day increased by 12 percent from 2016 to 2017 (8,850 to almost 9,900). Over 90 percent of children in out-of-home placements are in foster care homes, but some are in group residential settings.²

Extended Foster Care

Minnesota allows youth in foster care to receive extended foster care services and payments beginning on their 18th birthdays to the age of 21. This means that rather than a foster family receiving financial support from the state, the youth themselves receive foster care maintenance payments. Youth in extended foster care may stay in traditional foster care settings or move to supervised independent living settings, like a dorm or apartment.

"Former foster youth appear to have a higher risk of multiple chronic health conditions, beyond that which is associated with economic insecurity. Findings may be relevant to policymakers and practitioners considering the implementation of extended insurance and foster care programs and interventions to reduce health disparities in young adulthood."⁸

Coordination of services for these transition-aged youth is incredibly important as they benefit from support with employment, housing, healthcare system navigation, and more.

"Housing is the biggest problem statewide. Vacancy rates are so low that when there is an opening for an apartment landlords are getting 30 applications; they don't want to rent to an 18 year old with no rental or employment history. We have to work with these landlords to understand the young adults we work with and why they deserve a chance." – Needs Assessment Key Informant Interview

The Quality and Effectiveness of the Foster Care System

There is much discussion around the effectiveness of foster care, and the functioning of the system as a whole. There have been many studies done on the cost-effectiveness of foster care, the results of which beg the question as to how restructuring the foster care system might result in a better use of public spending and more benefit to the children involved in the system. We also have anecdotal evidence of services being administered differently county to county, and know that this can contribute to the quality and effectiveness of services as well.

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"Counties administer the program differently. So you could have friends ten minutes away in the next town over, and one kid is stuck in a foster home because the county doesn't approve a supervised independent living setting while the other one is in their own apartment. Our young people talk. They advocate for themselves and for each other." –Needs Assessment Key Informant Interview

Important Note on Equity and Intersectionality

The Minnesota Department of Health's Title V Needs Assessment team acknowledges that structural (social, economic, political and environmental) inequities can result in poor health outcomes across generations. They have a greater influence on health outcomes than individual choices or a person's ability to access health care, and not all communities are impacted in the same way.

All people living in Minnesota benefit when we reduce health disparities.

We also acknowledge that the topic addressed in this data story does not exist in isolation– which is important to remember as we do needs assessments and as we start thinking about how we approach solutions. In addition to the needs themselves being intersectional, there are also intersecting processes and systems through which power and inequity are produced, reproduced, and actively resisted.

Citations

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