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The Foster Care System - Addressing Abuse and Risk Factors, Current Policies, and Recommendations

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Abstract - Currently, the foster care system is used worldwide, yet many people are still unaware of what foster care is and how to care for foster children properly. Foster children often face abuse in their temporary homes, which can be brought down to a few main risk factors. Current policies to address have worked effectively in reducing the number of children in foster care; however, many flaws and limitations are yet to be addressed. This paper researches the current policies related to foster care. After highlighting the stakeholders' perspective on these policies and the discourse toward countering the impacts on current foster children, this paper further suggests certain policy recommendations to ensure foster children's safety and quality care, hopefully raising awareness and convincing more parents to join the foster care system.

Keywords - Current foster care policies, Foster care, Foster child abuse, Policy recommendations, Risk factors.

1. Introduction

Foster care, introduced in the United Kingdom and the United States in 1853, is “an established duty to care for dependent children under the law” (Family Care (Group) Ltd. 2022). This process was initially introduced in early Christian churches and was funded by collections from the congregation; however, according to the Family Care Website, regulation for fostering only began in the mid-19th century after a series of baby farming scandals. The issues related to fostering originated at its inception, as untrained women would take care of children who were unable to be cared for by their natural parents, who in many cases were single mothers and in return, the women would be paid between £5 to £15 (a substantial sum of money then) in the hope the child could be reinstated back into their homes in the future. This income now has turned into an improper motive, through which new issues have arisen, such as improper care for these foster children. “A study of foster children in Oregon and Washington state found that nearly one-third reported being abused by a foster parent or another adult in a foster home” (Wexler 2018). As the number of children who required such foster care continued to rise, the issues became increasingly significant, with little look for a solution, resulting in various and continued detrimental effects on society. The number of children in foster care in the UK continues to rise, and has increased from 50,000 children to over 80,000 children from 1994 to 2022 respectively (Family Care (Group) Ltd. 2022).

This policy paper will discuss the causes of child abuse, the flaws and limitations of the current policies, and suggest alternative policies to help reduce some of the issues currently plaguing the foster care system in the US.

1.1. Child Abuse Risk Factors

Currently, the major issue seen with foster care globally is the mistreatment and abuse faced by the children residing in foster care. In order to tackle these issues, they must be recognised and stopped at the root of the problem. The following are some risk factors believed to be the main causes of child abuse in foster homes in the United States. Firstly, the caregivers' psychological well-being is recognised as a huge risk factor. This includes mental disabilities, and studies have been conducted which demonstrate that mental disorders are common among abusive parents.

Additionally, it may be due to the caregivers' background, and with proper background checks often being missed or omitted when new foster parents join the system, this issue is often ignored. Further, some caregivers have a possible history of maltreatment or lacked a positive role model as they were growing up, leading to repetition of the same cycle. This list of risk factors also includes people who indulge in substance abuse or people with an established history of alcoholism or addiction, leading to improper care for the foster child.

Finally, incomplete knowledge of child development leads foster parents to be unaware of the necessary actions to be taken when raising a child, resulting in parents being oblivious or ignorant to the clear issues and future problems they create for their foster child.

1.2. Importance of the Issue

The issues and challenges the foster children face impact not only them but society as a whole. Firstly, poor care may



quickly lead to an increase in poverty. This is due to foster children being unable to reintegrate back into their natural families, resulting in them aging out of the system. This means children are unable to or less likely to be able to transition from foster care to young adulthood and may be forced into homelessness. Notably, 20 percent of the approximately 20,000 youth leaving foster care nationally each year end up homeless (Sanchez-Gomez et al., 2012). This further reduces their quality of life and emotional well-being. In addition, abusive households may cause foster children to constantly move around different placements within the foster care system, which can be extremely harmful to society. According to Bruskas, “They will miss many school days while transitioning from home to home in addition to facing the challenges of new schools; this will affect their attendance and comfort level, which in turn can impact their school experience as well as long-term performance outcomes.” This may reduce the workforce’s overall ability and productivity, possibly leading to a lower literacy rate for the country. According to the Washington State’s Office of Children’s Administration Research, “only 50% of foster children in the study graduated from high school or earned a General Educational Development (GED) credential.”

1.3. Philosophical and Ethical Considerations

Due to the unavoidable impact on children’s lives, many ethical considerations must be taken in the case of foster care. As the children are unable to make these decisions on their own and are forced into foster care, the ethical issue is faced of how foster parents voluntarily decide to foster. Yet, children are still placed in households where they are mistreated, decreasing their quality of life and possibly increasing poverty.

Furthermore, it is unethical as foster parents often use money as an incentive, resulting in a poor motive behind fostering and the child being in a worse position than when they started. “While it may not be enough money, some only become foster parents for the money. The salary for foster parents ranges from \$400-\$800/month”.

2. Policy Mapping

2.1. Current Policies

Currently, many policies are trying to deal with abuse issues in the foster care system. “Developing a Robust Continuum of Care to Support Foster Youth in Family-Based Settings” (Alliance For Children’s Rights, 2016) discussed some of the current policies and their effectiveness.

In 2012, California launched the “Continuum of Care Reform (‘CCR’). This policy was created to help remodel ‘the state’s foster care rate-setting system to better support a continuum of programs, services, and placements’ in order to help increase the quality of care, improving the overall foster care system and hopefully encouraging longevity and increasing the effectiveness of placements in family settings.

This organisation has stated how hundreds of thousands continue to require some time in foster care and has worked to improve the quality of the foster care system in order to help reduce foster children numbers and help create adequate solutions to “meet needs of youth in family-based placements”. Over the past decade, child welfare centers around California have been focusing on switching their fostering system from long-term group care to more family-setting-based placements. “Group programs are an out-of-home care placement in which staff are trained to work with children and youth whose specific needs are best addressed in a highly structured environment” (Child Welfare Information Gateway n.d.). This has resulted in dramatic transformations as states have focused on finding alternatives; however, the solution still has room for improvement. Despite this, there have also been many benefits arising from these policies. As this transformation rises in popularity, along with an increased focus on supporting foster children in home-based settings, “the total number of children placed in congregate care settings decreased nationally by 37 percent from 2004 to 2013,” especially those under the age of 12 (Alliance For Children’s Rights 2016).

As these changes and adaptations have taken place, the increased “federal legislation and policy guidance have prompted improved collaboration” (Zlotnik et al. 2014). Children have had better outcomes when raised in family homes instead of in group settings, and states have successfully also helped to “shorten the lengths of stay” for foster children. CCR’s goal is to completely eliminate group-setting foster care and replace it with family care. They have worked towards this as “statewide implementation of CCR began in 2017 and has occurred in stages over multiple years”.

Although these policies have been working, they still have major flaws and limitations, as they don’t cover all the issues related to foster care. Many people, however, support these policies, including the US Congress. They believe working on this system reform proposal focused on incentivising family-based placements for foster youth is important as family-based care is significantly better for foster care and more effective. Additionally, other advocates and elected officials in California and Washington, DC, also support this policy as they “share a number of guiding policy priorities for the child welfare system” (Alliance for Children’s Rights 2016). The reasons for supporting this policy are due to prior testing and data indicating that “youth placed in congregate care settings have nearly twice the rate of clinical problems as youth in traditional foster care placements”, showing how it can impact their physical health. Furthermore, it can also impact them mentally as they are almost “three times more likely to have a mental health diagnosis” than those placed in family settings.

2.2. Shortcomings in the Existing Policies

As mentioned before, the current policies have many flaws and limitations. Though they work effectively in

reducing the number of children in foster care and working to change the system's structure, they still fail to consider many limitations. Some such examples are mentioned in the following paragraphs.

Many foster parents have been seen to quit fostering in the United States within the first year of starting. This is often due to a lack of financial support, a lack of agency, inadequate caseworker support, inability and difficulty handling the children's behavior (due to lack of training), as well as other provided reasons. Further, foster parents' overall lack of support and knowledge regarding the children and the process specific to family-based placements also negatively impacts states' ability to recruit foster families and their retention.

Furthermore, foster care payments often do not cover the total costs foster parents incur when responsible for the children, leading to foster families often being demotivated and possibly deciding to quit. It creates significant barriers for caregivers as they are less likely to access supportive services such as training and support groups, which can be quite difficult if it is a new experience. Especially in a field like foster care, where the knowledge gap can be quite significant (Rubin et al., 2008).

Other common challenges "include a lack of early identification and assessment of youth's emotional and behavioral issues", which may lead to improper care from the foster parents, especially in severe cases where the child may require professional help. However, they are instead deprived of this due to a lack of information and help from fostering organisations (Alliance For Children's Rights 2016). Additionally, even with early identification, these issues still exist due to the extreme "shortages in the availability of high-quality, child-centered behavioral and mental health services".

Furthermore, the current one-size-fits-all federal approach has many limitations, as it risks working against the state's current improvements in the foster care system and its efforts to transform the welfare system. This could be quite detrimental as it fails to acknowledge the diversity of experiences among different foster children, including their background and their foster and natural family's background, therefore risking worsening the lives of the current 415,000 children in the foster care system in the US.

Finally, though the US Congress passed the Adoption and Safe Families Act 1997 in order to protect child safety as well as try to increase the funds for family support and preservation, this, in turn, also "shortened the time parents have to regain custody before the state moves to terminate their parental rights and place the child for adoption" (Adoption in Child Time 2018). This addition not only makes it more difficult for parents to be able to reintegrate their children back into their own families but reduces the time the child has to heal with a safe family and also possibly increases

the number of children in poverty as they are forced away from their families and forced to live in orphanages.

2.3. Discourse Pertaining to the Field of Foster Care Initiatives

Currently, there are many organisations in favour of changing the policies. One of these is the United States Children's Bureau, a federal agency that "focuses on improving the lives of children and families through programs that reduce child abuse and neglect, increase the number of adoptions and strengthen foster care" (Children's Bureau 2019). They believe that strong collaboration is still required between child welfare systems and the health care systems, and more work needs to be done in "assessing and addressing the mental and behavioral health needs of foster children and youth". This is due to the results the bureau received from their first two rounds of review of state children's welfare systems, which presented that very few states and organisations received a rating of "Strength" for the ability to identify health issues in foster children.

Another stakeholder that believes changes need to be made to these policies is the state of Connecticut. Nationally, reports of "child abuse and neglect" are increasing and quality of life is falling, leading to an increase in the number of children being removed from their homes due to lack of care, demanding an increase in the quality of healthcare in Connecticut. The Government Accounting Office ("GAO") observed in a 1995 report on foster care that "current trends in the number and needs of foster children have led to a crisis in the child welfare system." (Connecticut General Assembly 1998). Though these trends are nearly 3 decades old, they still help to represent these major issues and demonstrate the problems with the foster care system. "Nationally, the number of abuse reports nearly doubled between 1983 and 1993, while the number of substantiated reports reached over one million children in 1993. By 1995, the Child Welfare League of America ("CWLA") reported that over 480,000 children were in foster care nationwide. This represented a 74% increase since 1983".

Finally, the Annie E. Casey Foundation has written a policy report outlining recommendations and improvements in current policies on fostering. This foundation is "a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children" (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 2015). They believe that to improve the system's quality, public agencies must improve how foster children are assigned to family homes and the available contact and support between the foster parents and the social workers. For example, they suggested "equipping policymakers, child welfare agencies, etc" to further develop the systems, creating a real and permanent change. Additionally, this foundation believes that providers should consider maintaining real-time data to help strengthen current foster families, retain them, and possibly help onboard families. One way of doing this is by maintaining

a “census of active foster parents, with an expectation that systems will maintain information on how the capacity of family foster homes compares with the needs of children requiring placement”. This ensures that foster children are getting adequate care, and the agencies are staying in touch with the foster parents and keeping track of the variety of fostering experiences. Finally, they recommended that judges should ensure that before making placements, a thorough analysis and assessment of a child’s clinical needs, as well as a family’s ability to care for the child, is conducted, along with ensuring top-quality matches and the least restrictive placements.

As shown, many organisations that work to support youth’s health and improve the care given to foster children believe that the current policies are insufficient in ensuring the children’s safety and well-being. Alternate solutions along with improvements to the current solutions must be implemented to increase the cohesiveness of these systems, allowing them to work together more efficiently, thereby providing all foster children and youth with the “mental and behavioral health services” they need to heal, develop, and grow in a family-based foster setting.

3. Alternative Solutions to Inadequate Foster Care

Due to the excessive flaws and limitations of the current foster system, along with the support from experts in the requirement to change the foster care system, alternate policies may need to be implemented to correct some of these problems. Higher quality systems have been implemented in some societies, such as Singapore and California, where fewer issues exist. This section below provides recommendations for addressing the situation arising from mistreated foster children, using examples from other countries to provide support for these solutions.

3.1. Helping CCR Achieve their Goal Worldwide

Firstly, one solution that can be implemented is to take the initiative in providing California’s CCR with the resources they require in order to completely eradicate group setting foster care due to the negative consequences listed before, and instead try implementing a higher quality family care system which can be utilised around the world. Since 2017, CCR has worked towards this and has seen many positive impacts, including the national decrease in the number of children in foster care and an overall shorter time period required before children can be reintegrated into their families. This has shown to be a solution that provides many positive outcomes and works effectively in reducing the need for foster care, considering the requirements of the children and what works best for them. However, this solution does not cover all the fostering issues; therefore, other solutions would also require implementation.

3.2. Increase Training and Support for Foster Parents

In the United States, many believe the lower quality of foster parents has resulted due to a lack of adequate knowledge related to caring for foster children, including caring for different stages of mental health the foster children may be at and being left to figure out solutions to these issues on their own. This can be highly ineffective and possibly cause more problems for the foster children. Caring for foster children is a unique skill set. Through the training of foster parents and continuous support provided in various forms, including financial support, can improve the system, making it easier for foster parents, and worthwhile for the foster children’s biological parents. Though the foster parents may be caring for them to the best of their ability, this may not be enough to understand how to care for children from different backgrounds, including trauma they may have faced growing up.

One example where this solution is being implemented is in Singapore. The Ministry of Social Affairs themselves states, “Our foster parents are never alone in their fostering journey”, possibly even encouraging more foster parents to participate in this system as they feel a strong foundation supporting them in case they face any trouble. In order to assist their foster parents, the Singapore foster care system provides financial support for the foster parents, inclusive of a “fostering allowance”, “childcare subsidies”, and “medical subsidies”. This can help further motivate foster parents to provide the best care for these children, as they recognise the government has made an effort to reduce the burden upon their own family, possibly even convincing those with comparatively lower incomes to look into supporting and providing for these children.

Additionally, many services are provided to support foster parents through any hardships they face, including “support from a foster care worker”. These social workers are paired with foster families to ensure they have all the required support, and can be easily contacted whenever it is required to answer the foster parents’ queries. They further help to support and ensure the children are safe through the use of “regular phone calls and home visits” and, in more extreme scenarios, may even help to bring other medical and educational professionals to the foster home to support the child, for example, “psychologists (and) counselors” (Ministry of Social and Family Development n.d.).

Access to a 24/7 “emergency hotline” has also been provided to “obtain immediate support”, showing urgency and support, which the foster parents may require at any time. In addition to these, the Ministry in Singapore has ensured the existence of “support groups” where foster parents can “share tips and offer encouragement”, thereby building a sense of community. There are two such systems in place: the “Foster Parent Buddy Programme” and the “Resource Foster Parents”, which provide support to new foster parents by pairing with

more experienced ones and pairing foster parents caring for children with similar profiles together, respectively.

Finally, in Singapore, upon becoming a foster parent, you are obligated to undergo specialised training courses and complete the foundation of being a foster parent, which helps “equip one with basic knowledge and skills” needed in order to take care of foster children and be prepared for whatever situation they may face. These training courses are crucial in developing an understanding of the trauma the foster children may have gone through and gaining the necessary skills in order to handle this trauma and develop a strong bond with the foster child, making them feel safe in your home, which they may not have experienced before. The mandatory courses include courses on diverse issues such as “Grief and Loss”, “Abuse and Trauma”, “Identity and Birth Family Contact”, “Bonding and Attachment”, and many more. These courses help equip foster parents with skills that foster parents in other nations across the world often do not have and can help reduce many of the problems caused by improper pairing of foster parents with foster children.

Without first developing alternative solutions and improving the foster parent’s skills in caring for the children, simply reducing the use of group care homes is not an effective solution to reducing the longevity and requirement of foster care for children. By enabling a larger group of foster parents to care for many of these youth who have faced these issues in the past ensures they will not be put in environments “where their caretakers may not have the skills, capacity, or training to meet their needs”. This solution would most likely result in long-term positive outcomes such as increasing the children’s trust and ability to bond, resulting in improvements in their behavior, and increased ease in integrating back into their families in the near future (Alliance For Children’s Rights 2016).

3.3. Proper Background Checks for both the Foster Children and the Foster Families

As stated previously, a widespread challenge faced in the foster care industry is the lack of background information on both the foster children and foster families, leading to improper pairing and inadequate care, which can be detrimental to the child’s physical and mental health. This is a critical problem in the fostering industry; however, proper background checks can reduce many of the other issues associated with foster care as well and ensure that the variety of different problems and experiences among the foster children are accounted for and acknowledged or known in advance by the foster parents. This can allow foster parents to be prepared and even to reject a case if they feel they are not adequately fit to parent a particular child.

Organisations such as the United States Children’s Bureau have also recognised the importance and requirement for this change. They believe that increasing the contact and

strengthening the relationship between healthcare and childcare systems can ensure that the needs of the children are met, mental and physical health issues are addressed and, therefore, properly cared for. Currently, even though it is stated to be mandatory for “background checks to be completed for all prospective foster and adoptive parents”, a few states have a good system in place to ensure all health issues are identified.

Currently, many child abuse risk factors can be prevented through the use of background checks. For the foster parents, this includes substance abuse, mental health problems, disabilities, history of physical abuse, criminal records, and any other factors that would make the carer unfit. Obtaining these checks ensures that any unfit applications are disqualified from consideration before ever being appointed a placement, stopping the problem from the root.

In the “District of Columbia, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands”, these checks are currently mandatory. They must even be completed periodically to ensure none have been violated within the foster care period. Additionally, in the case of violation, the candidates will not even be considered for approval until “10 years have elapsed since the date of conviction”, and in more serious cases, will not be considered at all.

Additionally, even people not directly responsible for the child’s care must undergo background checks before a family is approved. These people include the following: other people residing in the foster home, people responsible for the mentoring or teaching of the foster children, and any person residing with youth in independent living arrangements. The use of these checks helps to cover all bases before foster parents can be approved to foster (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2018).

These background checks should not only be mandatory for foster parents but also for the foster children themselves. This must be done to avoid a moral hazard, where one party withholds information from another, influencing their decisions. Conducting checks on foster children may involve detecting similar issues such as substance abuse, mental health problems, disabilities, history of physical abuse against them, criminal records, etc. This information, along with that of the foster parents, may then be stored in a system and utilised when making placements, ensuring they are the most effective and safe for both parties.

This information can be provided to foster families in advance before accepting a placement, ensuring they are capable of caring for any special cases that may involve any of the stated factors. As stated by the US Children’s Bureau, the maintenance of “real-time data” strengthens foster families and aids in the process of onboarding new families as well. Finally, the bureau recommends that an external group, such

as a judge or medical experts, help assess the children's clinical needs, ensure the family is equipped, and confirm each placement's reliability and success (Children's Bureau 2019).

This solution is highly implementable as it can easily be done by creating a system or database to keep track of all foster families and foster children and the variety of important information that must be stored when making placement decisions. Additionally, doing background checks and discovering this information can easily be done through the requirement of filling out an application form in advance with all medical history, inclusive of certificates, to prove the same in order to make the best pairing. However, the government may have to subsidise lower-income parents, as they may not have the funds to obtain medical checks for their biological children who are in the foster system, but this is required to ensure all children are fairly looked after.

3.4. Policy Recommendations

This paper suggests the following policy recommendations to ensure the safety and quality care of foster children:

1. Providing California with the resources it requires to advance the Continuum of Care Reform, spreading the outreach of this solution globally to be implemented in more foster care systems worldwide. Doing this by raising awareness of this movement, aiming to remodel the spread of foster care from group-care placements to family-based placements.
2. Increasing support for foster parents by implementing policies that require social workers to be well-equipped to support foster parents. Further, it should be made compulsory for these social workers to do routine checks through either phone calls or home visits, protecting the children and checking to ensure the family can cope with the requirements of the foster child, especially in more extreme cases. Also, being prepared with contacts of experts and other professionals who can help out when children face any issues, such as psychologists and counselors, or even general doctors if needed.
3. Strengthening the assistance by providing financial support for foster parents, including "fostering allowance", and provision of these subsidies to both childcare and medical services by the government, improving the quality of these resources. If required, this facility may include emergency contact information with the foster care organisation.
4. Creating, and therefore providing access to support groups for foster parents where they can connect with other foster parents going through a similar process, either

maintaining contact with highly experienced foster parents who can help throughout the process or other foster parents whose foster children face some of the similar, or even more severe issues, that may require additional support.

5. Compulsory provision of training courses and a foster care foundation that the new foster parents should be familiarised with before they are onboarded. These training courses specialise the foster parents in handling situations specific to the different experiences foster children may have come from and develop an understanding of what the foster parents may face if they choose to continue. This helps ensure all families who are fostering can care for a range of different scenarios and filters out the families who are not equipped for foster care.
6. Conduct proper, detailed background checks on each foster family and child before making placement decisions. This can be done by using a form that must be filled out while applying to be a foster parent, which would include all medical history and other records such as criminal records, history of substance abuse, etc. When applying for foster care for one's child, a variation of this application may be filled out, consisting of juvenile records, medical history, mental health issues, religious requirements, and any other information the biological parent requires consideration of before the placement is made. This information can then be stored in a nationwide system or database, accessible by other fostering agencies, ensuring the best matches are made that can be the most effective and safe for both foster parents and children.
7. Extra background checks may be conducted on people who may have some relationship with the foster parents or may be partially involved with the care of the child, ensuring the entire environment the child will be placed in is safe and non-triggering, most suitable for them to grow, recover, and finally reintegrate back to their families.

4. Conclusion

There are no alternatives to foster care; therefore, we as a society should work to create the best quality system available for those who need it the most. We must work to improve this system, ensuring the safety of all involved, including foster parents and foster children, improving the nature of this foster care system and spreading awareness. Fostering is still not a very well-known process, and by promoting this system, new families can be onboarded, spreading the positive impacts of fostering worldwide.

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