



Foster Care Fact Sheet

The Federal definition of foster care is 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom the State agency has placement and care responsibility. This includes, but is not limited to, placements in foster family homes, foster homes of relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, child care institutions, and pre-adoptive homes.

Foster care is an unfortunate but necessary experience for many children in the United States. Nearly 800,000 children received foster care in 2007, according to the most recent data that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has available.

According to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, the HHS data collection and analyses program, the majority of children placed into foster care in the United States are victims of neglect (69.2%); 8.6% have been physically abused; 3.2% have experienced sexual abuse; and 14.3% have experienced multiple types of maltreatment. The remaining 4.7% were placed due to the death of guardians or other reasons.

Typically, Federal and State resources have not been able to keep pace with the increasing critical needs of children in foster care. Although there has been a slight decrease in the numbers of children placed, foster care is a dangerous phenomenon resulting in unmet developmental, educational, psychiatric and medical needs of hundreds of thousands of children in the U.S.

Children in foster care have significantly higher rates of all types of health problems than their counterparts in the general population. These problems include “acute and chronic illness, growth and developmental problems, serious mental health problems, and difficulty accessing health services.”

Life in foster care can last years and encompass the remainder of an individual’s childhood until they “age out” at 18 years. During prolonged stays in the foster care system, many children experience multiple placements and settings. This transitory lifestyle often results in disrupted or incomplete access to education and comprehensive medical and psychological services. The result is often a lack of healthy development, entrenched behavioral problems, and difficulty functioning in society well into adulthood.

Despite concerted efforts to decrease the number of placements and length of stays for children in foster care, more than 50% of the children in the foster care system experience placement disruption and multiple placements. Having multiple caregivers is likely an inevitable outcome in the world of foster care. Recent research shows that children with multiple caregivers are more likely to display “insecure attachments and indiscriminate friendliness” throughout their lifetimes.

There is often a lack of communication and understanding between the mental health treatment and protective services systems. Mental health professionals are often as unaware of the processes and procedures of the foster care system as child protective workers are of mental health treatments and recovery models. This persistent systemic lack of communication poses many problems both for children requiring appropriate mental health care and for parents with psychiatric disabilities.

The statements in this fact sheet are taken from peer-reviewed research, scholarly articles, and official HHS data collection and analysis. They indicate a lack of systemic commitment to providing services to troubled families and in no way are meant as a criticism of the hard-working and crucial service providers who work diligently in the field of child and family welfare services.