

How Our Current Crises are Affecting Child Abuse in the Foster System

The foster care system undoubtedly faces many issues, including overcrowding, child abuse, and a lack of support for kids aging out of the system. Whenever the U.S. encounters a crisis, like the opioid crisis or the coronavirus pandemic, these problems are perpetuated, including the cycle of sexual abuse that many foster children experience.

Children going through the system are already especially vulnerable to pedophiles and abuse from other foster children. Although they are removed from homes that may be abusive, they are then exposed to a wide variety of people that may not have been screened properly in an overworked system. In fact, children in the foster system are at least [four times more likely to experience sexual abuse](#) than children in the general population. Children in group homes are 28 times more likely to experience sexual abuse than those living outside of these homes. This is because children in group homes are vulnerable to many perpetrators, including caseworkers, foster parents, employees of institutional group homes, and other foster children. Furthermore, child victims of sexual abuse [may demonstrate sexual aggression towards others](#).

To compound the problem, the foster system in many states have been flooded in recent years due to the opioid crisis. Parents are either addicted or overdosing, leaving many children without proper care. The [number of children in the system](#) during 2017 represented an 11% increase from 2012. The system has frequently been understaffed and the employees overworked, but with the influx of children in need of care, the problem is now much worse. Caseworkers often cannot attend to every child in the system with the amount of care they need, and signs of abuse in children or misconduct in adults often go overlooked.

With the coronavirus impacting families across the nation, the problems are again worsened. Family courts are shutting down, foster families are refusing children in fear of the virus, and reported cases of child abuse are increasing. Some of the stress and tension rampaging across the world is being taken out on children, and because of the quarantine, these trends are less likely to be identified. Dysfunctional families are in close quarters for days on end and children are not seen by outsiders who may identify signs of abuse. To exacerbate the problem, investigators of child abuse are evaluating from the front door or over a video chat for fear of spreading the virus from home to home.

If the opioid crisis and the coronavirus pandemic are any indication, national crises serve as an impetus for a cycle of abuse. When a crisis hits, more children enter the system, overworked caseworkers may consequently be inattentive, there is prevalent sexual abuse, and those sexually abused exhibit sexual aggression towards others. Unfortunately, this cycle ends with victims who carry their trauma with them throughout their lives and cannot function successfully

in society. To extinguish this cycle, the foster system needs to undergo structural change and there should be adequate support systems for survivors of abuse.

A possible solution to some of the problems the foster system faces is to focus more on family healing than displacement. A social worker's first instinct seems to be to remove a child from a home upon the merest reports of abuse. While this does save many a child from further maltreatment, the trauma induced from separation alone impacts most children if the parent-child attachment has already formed.

The foster system was created with the intention of temporary displacement and goals of reunification for the majority of children that enter. Reunification with parents seems to be effective in a child's overall developmental health, but reunification is not always done properly and sometimes the damage is already done. Instead of overcrowding the system with children, caseworkers could emphasize family healing in appropriate cases. In order to initiate this change, the foster system may need more caseworkers, the ability to provide personalized attention, and one-on-one parenting training and support.