

Revisiting Common Claims About Child Welfare

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Proliferation
of false or
misleading
claims:
Some select
examples

Neglect is “just poverty”

Foster care is worse than
doing nothing

Kinship care is always
better than “stranger care”

The Claim: Poverty and Neglect

“At its very inception, the [child welfare] system’s primary intervention became family separation, blaming parents for their poverty to obscure the need to dismantle the social structures responsible for poverty”

Source: UpEnd Movement, 2021

It’s Time to Stop Confusing Poverty With Neglect

BY JERRY MILNER AND DAVID KELLY

Rather than seeing these root causes with clear eyes, calling them out, and taking them on with intention, we remain stuck as a system and society that focuses on the harmful aftereffects, often casting blame on vulnerable families for their very vulnerability. Rather than trying to prevent poverty and the many challenges associated with poverty, such as social isolation and lack of meaningful opportunities and support, we search for increasingly sophisticated evidence-based interventions to treat the trauma or “fix” the symptoms arising from a family’s inability to meet their children’s fundamental needs.

Less than 20 percent of the nearly 424,000 children currently in foster care were separated from their families because their parents physically or sexually abused them. A much larger portion were removed due to neglect. Much of what is classified as child neglect, lacking adequate food, housing or other essentials, is symptomatic of family poverty.

Source: The Hill.

<https://thehill.com/opinion/judiciary/537188-reform-the-child-welfare-system-to-protect-vulnerable-children>

Understanding the Evidence (select citations)

- Child maltreatment – both abuse and neglect – are [more prevalent](#) in low-income families
- [Among low-income families](#), those involved with CPS are distinctive in terms of degree/nature of risks
- Significant [harmful effects](#) of neglect beyond those of poverty alone

Implications – connecting to policy and practice

- The “single cause’ and “root cause” fallacies
 - Misdirected focus away from responding to proximal and specific risks: drugs, unmanaged mental illness, violence, family breakdown, etc.
- Implications of failing to recognize neglect – higher downstream costs: teen parenthood, incarceration, high school dropout



The Claim: Foster care is a cure worse than the disease

- E.g., Foster care is “... the worst thing you can do to a child” (Plenary speaker at the U.S. Children’s Bureau conference in 2020)
- Subtle shift from “prevent maltreatment or maltreatment recurrence” to “prevent foster care (i.e., the Family First Prevention Services Act)
- Core assumptions:
 - Foster care is unnecessary/can be “prevented”
 - Foster care makes a bad situation worse
 - Foster care is the cause of the suboptimal outcomes observed among children in foster care

Key Points

- Foster care remains a necessary intervention to prevent recurrent and serious harm for some children
- How to optimize it?

Focus on *environment of placement* and *environment of exit*

Test your assumptions against actual data

Evaluation should be both systemic—assessing average system performance—and individual—assessing, for each child, whether the system is meeting their needs (Font & Gershoff, 2020)

<https://srcd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/sop2.10>

Big Picture on the Evidence

Foster care increases safety but is neither especially helpful nor especially harmful for (later) child wellbeing– why?

- Short-term experience for most
- Are post-reunification environments substantively different from pre-removal environments?
 - High re-entry and re-maltreatment rates
 - Poor social outcomes compared with most other foster care exit types

Select citations: Barth, R. P., Jonson-Reid, M., Greeson, J. K. P., Drake, B., Berrick, J. D., Garcia, A. R., Shaw, T. V., & Gyourko, J. R. (2020). Outcomes following child welfare services: What are they and do they differ for black children? *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 0(0), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2020.1814541>

Gross, M., & Baron, E. J. (2021). Temporary stays and persistent gains: The causal effects of foster care. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*. <https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20200204>

Schneiderman, J. U., Prindle, J., & Putnam-Hornstein, E. (2021). Infant Deaths From Medical Causes After a Maltreatment Report. *Pediatrics*, 148(3). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-048389>

Font, S. A., Berger, L. M., Cancian, M., & Noyes, J. L. (2018). Permanency and the educational and economic attainment of former foster children in early adulthood. *American Sociological Review*, 83(4), 716–743. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122418781791>

The Claim: Kinship care is the best choice

Why would kinship care be better for kids?

- *Probably*: familiarity/prior relationship lessens disruption of removal
- *Maybe*: kin more committed to child (due to biological connection or prior relationship)
- *Likely*: facilitates more regular contact with birth parents, kin more likely to accept full sibling group

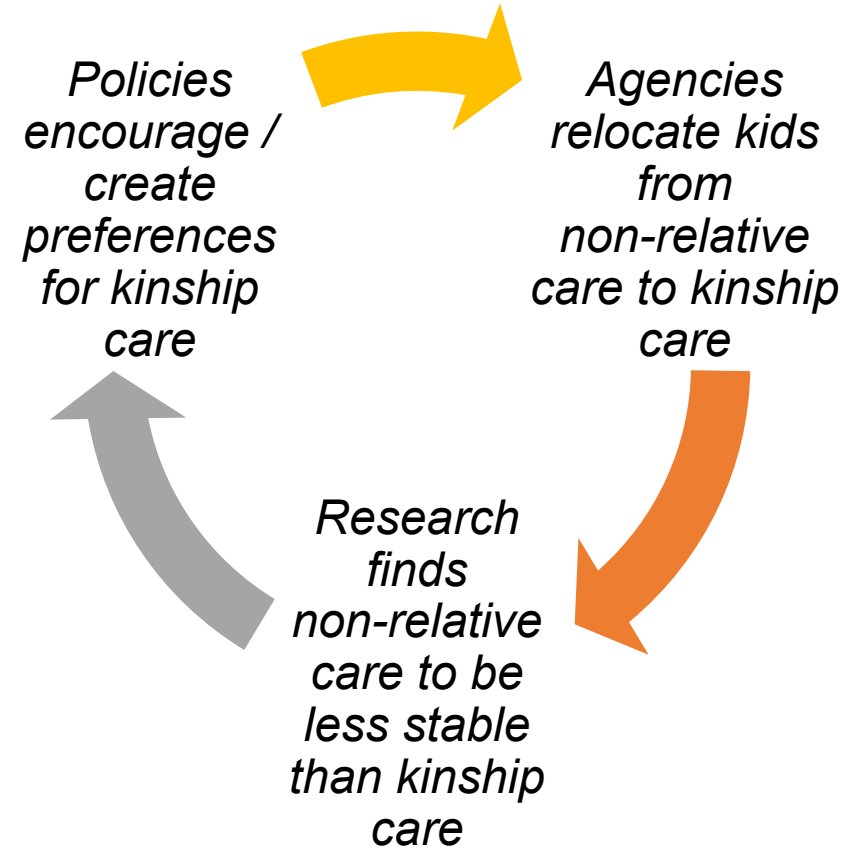
What are the expected benefits in the absence of these?

The problem:

- Placements made in the absence of these circumstances
- Placements made despite other concrete concerns (e.g., criminal/CPS history)
- (Well-conducted) research on effects of kinship care is not consistently positive

Relatedly: Kinship Care and Stability – By Virtue or Design?

Greater stability in KC at
least partly explained by
policy preferences



Sources:

Font, S. A. (2015). Is higher placement stability in kinship foster care by virtue or design? *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 42(4), 99–111. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6338419/pdf/nihms-978933.pdf>

Font, S. A., Sattler, K. M. P., & Gershoff, E. T. (2018). Measurement and correlates of foster care placement moves. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 91, 248–258. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.06.019>

Connecting to policy: Key points

1. Effects of kinship care where strict standards are applied provide no evidence on effects of kinship care in the absence of such standards

- i.e., existing evidence does not per se speak to the elimination/loosening of standards
- New [model standards](#) raise serious concerns

2. Studies of kinship care that fail to account for differential selection/treatment of kin placements will be biased/misleading

- differences in causes of moves, ASFA timelines, permanency options
- May fully or partially explain (account for) effects of kinship care

Considerations for States

Rely on your data to evaluate claims/assumptions

- What is true nationally or in the handful of states that frequently engage in child welfare research (CA, WI, IL) may not be true for your state
- Making sense of conflicting evidence
- Options to develop within-agency expertise with data or partner with external experts (often free)

Permanency as a **means** not an end

- Just as school attendance \neq learning, permanency \neq safety/wellbeing

Responding to the pressure to be all things for all kids

- Should CPS be doing prevention?
- Should CPS address poverty?

General considerations for evaluating competing claims

(adapted with modification from Rick Barth, Dean of UMBC SSW)

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1. Question whether studies from 10+ years ago apply to today
 2. Question whether research findings in other states or nationwide are true in your state—try to get a handle on this from your own data
 3. Do not accept stories from foster care alumni as fairly describing the current CWS.
 4. Do not readily trust claims from (some) Deans, High Order Administrators, Historians, Op-Ed writing clinicians, or Lawyers.
 5. Do not readily trust universal or sweeping claims
 6. When confronted with claims that contact with CWS, placement into foster care, and TPR harm children, ask *relative to what?*

Finding Information: Open-Source Resources

- [Improving Foster Care](#)
- [What Child Protection is For](#)
- [Child Welfare Monitor](#)

All National Institute of Health funded research is publicly available 12 months after initial release. Search at:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/>

Send me your child welfare questions:
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