

America's Foster Children: A Population At Risk

It is estimated that currently in the United States, half a million children live in foster care. To say that there are not sufficient resources to adequately support children in need of placement with foster families is an understatement. Furthermore, complicating a likely background of living in unstable home environments, foster children face the predicament of “aging out” of foster care upon turning eighteen.

Some foster children come to their new homes as orphans, others are termed post-abandonment, and as many as 60% enter state care due to abuse or neglect. No matter the reason for foster care or the child's diagnosis, however, research suggests that it is doubtful foster children can escape the serious psychological consequences or sequelae associated with moving to a new and possibly temporary home and family. All too many of these children will confront homelessness and poverty.

Not uncommon among foster children are problems in forming positive and enduring attachments to others. A child lacking a secure relationship with her parents often develops a sense of her own unworthiness, and an almost unchangeable expectation that all future relationships will be characterized by hostility and instability. The felt sense of insecurity resulting from abandonment and consequent feelings of low self-worth, have been shown to increase the risk for depression and mood disorders in adolescence and adulthood. Insecure attachments during childhood, furthermore, increase the risk of developing a generalized anxiety disorder or even a social phobia.

A child at risk for these types of psychopathology is only naturally at risk for further setbacks. The child insecurely attached to family members or guardians begins searching for ways to compensate for this relationship void with new relationships, most of them hardly beneficial. Substance abuse is common; fostered children are 30% more likely to engage in drug use than the overall population of homeless people. According to a National Association of Social Workers survey, children placed in foster care are at significantly higher risk for developing alcohol and drug problems. Researchers report that chronic levels of stress are also prevalent in this population, where the capacity for adjustment, cognitive functioning, and school performance typically are compromised.

The scenario continues as profound educational deficiencies too often lead to a life lived in poverty, an involvement in so-called deviant behavior, or crime, and an increased risk for incarceration. In California, approximately 25% of fostered children end up in jail or prison, and in the country at large, 70% of America's entire prison population has at one time or another been in foster care.

As many as one half of foster children are predicted to be homeless during their first two years post foster care; more than one out of five youths arrive at homeless shelters straight from foster homes. Interestingly, these young people are 50% more likely to have experienced a history of domestic violence than the general homeless population. Additionally, two-thirds of women will give birth to a child within four years of exiting care, a statistic supporting the notion that the social and psychological factors producing the need for foster care of children in one generation will be repeated in the succeeding generation. Compared to the overall homeless population, twice

as many heads of households coming from foster care backgrounds have lost at least one of their children to the childcare system.

The sheer act of moving from home to home makes the daily work of education extremely difficult. Each residential move typically implies a school change as well and still more experiences faced without proper support and encouragement. Which in turn puts foster children at risk for unstable attachments with peers, failing courses, incurring suspensions, and dropping out of school altogether. Among foster care alumni, 54% have earned a high school diploma, 2% a Bachelor's degree or higher; 51% presently are unemployed. By twenty-two, nearly half of foster alumni have not completed high school.

The dictionary offers these definitions of the word, foster: To provide a child with care and upbringing; encourage the development of something; keep a feeling or thought alive. The etymology actually provides a succinct conception of what we would hope adults might do for children. Nurturing, making children feel secure, and aiding them in feeling comfortable with their inner worlds turn out to be life sustaining gifts.

How does one not bless those who care for the children some of us are not able to properly parent? That's one question. A second question is how do we repair not the children, or their elders, but the circumstances generating the need for foster care in the first place? We are in agreement, one must assume, that ultimately we would prefer to look at foster children as children, and not statistics.

The authors of this paper are the members of a class entitled Children at Risk, and the People Who Serve Them, taught in the School of Education at Boston University.