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The Substance Abuse Crisis and Its Effects on the Foster Care System

The foster care system was once a place for children to enter if their homes were no longer a safe place for them to be, but the overcrowding of these facilities has created a harmful environment for the children. This overcrowding in the United States foster care system has left its children, and the parents of these children, in an even more vulnerable situation than they were before they entered. When these children are placed into the system they are supposed to be loved and cared for but instead they are being neglected and dismissed because of the drastic overcrowding. The most influential cause for this overcrowding is the substance abuse crisis that is currently ripping America apart. The substance abuse crisis that consumes America has led to a rise in the number of children within the foster care system, which leads to case workers being overloaded with the number of cases they have to oversee, which then leads to the neglect of these innocent children.

Evidently, Children are being placed into foster care because their families cannot provide a stable home for them due to their drug habits. According to C. J. Ciaramella, the author of the article titled “The Drug War’s Hidden Foster Care Crisis,” addiction to substances “is notoriously hard to kick, and relapses are common” (1). These addictions are not something that can be overcome in a short amount of time, and some may never overcome them. When these addictions take hold of a family the foster care system has to step in and take over the situation.

When they take over, the child enters the system and often times the parents will go to treatment to get a better grip on their addiction. Jennifer L. Matjasko writes, “many families cannot maintain stable employment, resulting in financial hardship and housing/food insecurity” (2). Due to the fact that these families are struggling to maintain the very means of survival, the children are removed from these destructive homes and placed within the foster care system. She also says “[p]arents can...be absent from their children's lives for long periods, either due to incapacity, incarceration, residential treatment, and even death due” (2). A parent needs to be a part of a child's life more than just checking in on them. When the state sees that the parents are absent from their child’s life for long periods of time they step in and remove the child from the home. Also, if the parent dies, which is quite often when a person suffers from a disease such as substance abuse, the state will place the child in its care in order to provide more stability than they would have received from the parent. When a child’s parent suffers from substance abuse, they cannot take care of the child sufficiently causing the child to be placed into the foster care system.

Subsequently, the substance abuse crisis that is consuming America is a direct cause of the rise in the number of children within the foster care system. In one study, they found that “[f]oster care entries attributed to parental substance use increased 147 percent between 2000 and 2017, while entries linked to other reasons for removal declined” (Atkins 1). The dramatic increase of 147 percent shows just how tragically the number of children entering the system due to substance abuse is. It also provides information that other causes for children being removed from their homes have declined, showing that the other causes are not a leading cause of the rise in number. Another study shows that “out of the nearly 269,000 children who entered foster care in fiscal year 2017, some 96,000 were removed from their homes due to parental substance

abuse” (Ciaramella 1). These numbers show how drastically the substance abuse crisis affected the number of children entering the foster care system in 2017. The fact almost 36% of cases were a direct result of substance abuse shows how extreme the substance abuse crisis is and it has only increased in recent years as the substance abuse crisis continues to progressively become stronger. The substantial amount of substance abuse crisis victims is in direct alliance with the drastic increase of children in foster care.

Consequently, the high number of children within the foster care system has led to social care caseworkers being overloaded with cases that they have to manage. According to Jennifer L. Matjasko, “the dramatic rise in opioid misuse and drug overdose deaths over the past several years has overwhelmed child welfare agencies with increasing caseloads” (2). When the number of children placed in foster care is so high, as it is now, the caseloads that the social workers see are way more than what one person can handle. This overwhelming amount of work can lead to caseworkers becoming disgruntled with the job that they have previously loved and leaving the job. If they leave that can only lead to more cases for the ones who stay who already have an all-consuming amount of work, which causes an unending cycle of overworking and exhaustion. According to Matthew DeFour, “[t]here are plenty of social workers out there but child protective services has always been an extremely stressful field.” This field is already a stressful field that requires individuals to experience high levels of traumatic events. Now that the number of cases they have to cover because of the extreme amount of substance abuse cases, they have to experience these traumatic events on an even greater scale. These amounts of cases can take a toll on these workers, which could eventually lead to neglect of their cases.

As a direct result of the overworked social workers, many cases are not being treated with the absolute and utmost care that they deserve leading to the children becoming neglected. One

report states that “[t]urnover [or burnout] also disrupts relationships with families...and may have deleterious effects on child well-being” (Kothari 1,2). When a caseworker becomes overwhelmed with the devastating number of cases they are given, they often do not focus on all the cases they have. This quote proves that the overwhelming number of cases that these employees face can lead to the downfall of the children placed within their care. According to Steven Hoffler, “because child welfare workers are often overburdened by the demands of work...they find it difficult to consistently provide empathic and caring behaviors for their clients.” This information that Hoffler provides successfully explains how the overwhelming number of cases that each social worker handles leads to most of the cases being neglected. Due to the amount of care and attention, each case needs and deserves, a social worker cannot possibly handle the drastic number of cases with that much care. Instead, most of them get put off if they are considered to be less dangerous situations and the child is left to suffer. A caseworker’s workload not only leads to the burnout of said worker but also the neglect of the children placed under their supervision.

Many people, however, believe that the substance abuse crisis causing the system to become overcrowded is not the ultimate reason for children being neglected within the foster care system. One alternate cause is children being placed in institutional placements instead of within their own families. According to one report, “As the...class action lawsuits against state foster care systems demonstrate, too many children in foster care are deprived of the safety, stability, and connectedness of family life” (Font, Gershoff 2). This study explains that the placements that the foster care system provides are not safe and welcoming places, instead, they are harmful and deteriorate a child when placed within them. It also shows that the child does not get the same love and care that they would receive from being placed with their family. Sixto

Cancel writes in his article, “I saw how workers [at the institutional group home] restrained [my brother], took away his visiting “privileges” when he misbehaved and how he ate cafeteria food for every meal.” Cancel’s personal story about how his brother was treated horribly inside these institutional placements also further explains how neglect is a direct result of institutional placement. However, the people who believe that these institutional placements are the major cause of neglect within the system fail to consider why the systems are failing. As I have previously stated, the overcrowding of these facilities due to substance abuse is the main reason why they do not run as they initially did. These systems were not created to house the drastic number of children that have flooded the system as of late, so they cannot successfully and sufficiently provide them the care they require. Even though the institutional placements for the children within the foster care system are not stable and oftentimes lead to neglect, the most significant cause of neglect is the overcrowding in the system due to substance abuse.

The best way for the number of children in the foster care system to decline is for new and improved substance abuse programs to be enacted. Parents will be able to receive the treatment they need to help finally fight back against their addictions. The children will have a safe and nurturing home to belong to. As a nation, there needs to be action taken to reform the programs that are offered to victims of substance abuse. More money needs to be allocated and more support needs to be shown to these programs. Without the change to these programs, the overcrowding and neglect within the foster care system will continue to rage and rip apart the lives of these innocent families.

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