

Article 31: Human Development and Foster Care and Foster Care Support Programs

Foster care support programs provide critical resources that can help shape a child’s trajectory from initial placement in the **foster care** system through their transition into adulthood. By offering targeted interventions and life-skills training, these programs mitigate the long-term developmental and psychological impacts often associated with childhood instability (Jones et al., 2024; Murugesan & Innes, 2025; Yoon et al., 2025). Furthermore, the support provided by such programs extends beyond the foster home, ensuring that aging-out youth possess the resources and community connections necessary for lifelong self-sufficiency. Ultimately, this robust support infrastructure can transform foster care from a temporary safety net into a foundation for healthy aging and permanent stability (Bai et al., 2025; Bennett et al., 2024; Salazar et al., 2023).

Causes and Scope of Foster Care in the United States

In recent years, the scope of foster care in the United States has remained extensive, though the total number of children in the system has seen a gradual decline. The primary drivers for entry include neglect and parental substance abuse, which continue to be one of the leading factors requiring state intervention. Other systemic causes, such as parental incarceration and economic instability, further contribute to the complexities of the population entering care. Despite shifting caseloads, the system continues to grapple with a persistent shortage of available homes and the ongoing challenge of supporting youth transitioning to independence (Jones et al., 2024; Murugesan & Innes, 2025; Yoon et al., 2025).

Following that lead, a study examined the U.S. foster care system in the broader context of child permanency and described who enters foster care and why. Using national administrative data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), the authors summarized key characteristics of children waiting to be adopted. The data showed that about 52% of those children were male and 37% were White. The most common reason children entered foster care is neglect, affecting roughly 64% of cases. Parental drug abuse was also common and reported in about 28% of placements, while physical abuse appeared in about 17%. Overall, the findings indicated that most foster care placements are linked to ongoing caregiving problems rather than single acts of violence. Moreover, such patterns were shown to illustrate the overall size of the foster care population and the main reasons children are removed from their homes. Together, the results offer a clear national picture of the scope of foster care and the key factors that lead children to enter the system in the United States (Murugesan & Innes, 2025).

On that same note, a study assessed how caregiver substance use is associated with the causes and scope of foster care involvement in the United States. Using metrics from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW-III), the researchers analyzed data collected between 2017 and 2021 through structured interviews with caregivers, children, and child welfare caseworkers involved in maltreatment investigations. The results indicated that approximately 8% of caregivers met criteria for alcohol dependence, 3% met criteria for drug dependence, and about 11% met criteria for either condition. The study reported higher prevalence rates among specific groups, including male caregivers, White caregivers, those experiencing depression or domestic violence, and caregivers of male children. The authors noted that caregiver substance dependence was frequently observed in

cases involving child maltreatment and was associated with an increased likelihood of foster care placement and repeated out-of-home care. They also emphasized that substance use commonly co-occurred with other family challenges rather than transpiring on its own. By relying on survey-based data rather than administrative records, the study provided national estimates of caregiver substance dependence within families involved in the child welfare system. Overall, the researchers concluded that caregiver alcohol and drug dependence represents a measurable and recurring factor in foster care involvement in the United States. Therefore, they highlighted the importance of addressing substance use alongside related family risk factors when responding to child welfare cases (Yoon et al., 2025).

Another study examined children's pathways through the U.S. foster care system and the extent of foster care involvement across childhood. The researchers used national administrative data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), which were collected through state reporting and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Thus, the authors followed children born in the fiscal year 2006 from birth through age 15. Furthermore, they tracked the participants' contact with child protective services and foster care. The findings showed that foster care involvement was relatively common, with about 4.5% of children investigated for maltreatment each year and roughly 5% entering foster care at least once by age 18. Rates of investigation and placement varied by race, with Black children experiencing higher cumulative involvement. The study identified different pathways into foster care, including early, temporary placements and later or longer stays. Foster care entry was closely tied to child maltreatment, particularly neglect and abuse. The authors concluded that foster care affected a substantial share of U.S. children. Therefore, they argued that understanding such patterns is essential for addressing the underlying causes and scale of child welfare involvement nationwide (Jones et al., 2024).

Effectiveness and Impact of Foster Care Support Programs

Foster care support programs in the United States play a pivotal role in stabilizing the lives of vulnerable children by providing the specialized resources necessary for healthy development. By offering trauma-informed training and mental health services, these initiatives significantly reduce the risk of placement disruptions and improve overall emotional well-being. Broad support networks also empower caregivers and biological families, fostering the safe environments required for successful reunification or permanent placement. Ultimately, these programs help mitigate the negative impacts of childhood instability, creating a vital foundation for long-term self-sufficiency and community resilience (Bai et al., 2025; Bennett et al., 2024; Salazar et al., 2023).

For instance, a systematic review study examined the effectiveness of foster care support programs designed to strengthen social support for youth involved in foster care in the United States. Thus, the authors reviewed peer-reviewed experimental intervention studies that explicitly took place in the U.S. and focused on improving supportive relationships through approaches such as mentoring, family-finding, peer support, and skills-building programs. Data were drawn from published studies that collected outcome measures on youth well-being, behavior, and stability to evaluate program impact. The findings showed that support-focused interventions were associated with positive outcomes, including improved emotional well-being, reduced behavioral difficulties, and lower risk of negative experiences such as homelessness. Although many studies focused on older youth in foster care, benefits were observed across developmental stages. The authors concluded that foster care support

programs that strengthen social connections can play an important role in mitigating challenges associated with foster care involvement, while also emphasizing the need to identify the most effective program models (Bennett et al., 2024).

On that account, a study evaluated the National Training and Development Curriculum for Foster and Adoptive Parents (NTDC)—a training program developed with support from the U.S. Children’s Bureau to improve skills and knowledge among foster, kinship, and adoptive caregivers in the United States. The researchers used baseline and six-month follow-up survey data from 540 resource parents who received NTDC training and 409 matched parents who received traditional training. Data were collected through structured questionnaires that measured caregiving knowledge, trauma-informed parenting skills, and attitudes related to supporting children in care. The findings showed that parents who completed NTDC showed greater trauma-informed parenting skills and a higher capacity to support positive child development compared with those receiving traditional training. Participants in the NTDC group also showed greater caregiving knowledge. Willingness to work with children’s biological parents improved but did not reach statistical significance. Overall, the results indicated that NTDC strengthened caregiver preparation beyond traditional training approaches. The authors concluded that structured, evidence-based foster parent training programs like NTDC can play a positive role in improving caregiver readiness and may help address persistent challenges within the U.S. foster care system (Salazar et al., 2023).

Lastly, a study examined the effectiveness of supportive housing assistance programs for families involved with the child welfare system in the United States. Following that lead, the researchers conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental studies. Particularly, they identified eligible research through searches of 11 academic databases and complementary sources. Data were drawn from 15 U.S.-based studies that collected information on foster care placement, family reunification, homelessness, and repeat child welfare involvement among families receiving housing support. The findings showed that supportive housing had limited impact on preventing initial foster care placements, homelessness, or new child welfare reports. However, families who received housing assistance had significantly higher odds of reunifying with their children compared with families who did not receive housing support. These results indicated that housing stability played an important role once families were already involved with the foster care system. The authors concluded that supportive housing assistance can positively contribute to addressing foster care challenges by improving reunification outcomes for housing-unstable families, even if it does not prevent initial system entry (Bai et al., 2025).

References

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