

Introduction

At any given point, there are an estimated 400,000 children in the United States' foster care system. These children are placed in the system for reasons including parental neglect, abuse, and/or unsafe living conditions. According to the Children's Bureau, 56 percent of the approximate 400,000 children in the foster care system had a case plan goal of reunification with their parents or primary caregiver (2018). In short, this means that a majority of the children in the foster care system will return to the care of their families or they will be adopted by a relative. Although reuniting children with their biological families may seem like a good idea in theory, LaBrenz et al. (2020) states that "research suggests that up to one-third of children who reunify re-enter care because of continued maltreatment (2020, p. 1). This constant re-entry into the system causes a lot of instability which leads to adverse effects on the development of these children. To foster a healthier development, the main goal of the foster care system should be shifted from reunification to stability in the lives of these children.

LaBrenz et al.

By placing reunification at the top of the priority list for the foster care system, a multitude of adverse situations may arise. A major concern regarding family reunification in the United States foster care system is timing of the process. The relatively high number of children who end up re-entering the system suggests that the process of reunification is often rushed. According to LaBrenz et al. (2020), reunification can be defined as "the process of returning children in temporary out-of-home care to their families of origin" (p. 2). Older children may be forced to re-enter the system because of their own behavioral issues, but "infants and young children primarily enter foster care when their biological parents or family have exposed them to abuse or neglect" (LaBrenz et al., 2020, p. 2). Exposure to trauma early on in life can have detrimental effects of a child's development and attachment formation. To assess the outcomes of reunification, LaBrenz et al. utilized data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) to gather samples of families with children between 0 and 5 years old who exited foster care to be reunited with at least one biological family member (2020). There were a total of 53,789 cases used in the study. The study examined factors such as family-level measures, removal cause, previous removals, state system-level measures, poverty rates, and other demographic factors. Results of the evaluation showed that factors such as paternal drug use and prior experience with the child welfare system are often strong predictors of whether or not there will be a successful reunification. For example, "families with a history of drug abuse had lower odds of achieving successful reunification" (LaBrenz et al., 2020, p. 10). Along with this, the more prior removals there was in a case, the less successful a reunion is likely to be. Female children are also more likely than male children to be successfully reunited with their biological families. Results of this study also supported the idea that the push for reunification is often rushed and that slowing it down may be healthier for the child's development (LaBrenz et al., 2020). The healthy development of foster children should be the ultimate concern of the system.

Sattler & Gershoff, 2018

Another important component to examine when considering reunification are the risk factors surrounding the family members and the family's environment. According to Sattler and Gershoff "parents' substance abuse and mental health problems (SAMH) have steadily increased as a reason for removal" (2018, p. 1334). In fact, in 2016, almost a third of foster care entries were due to parental substance abuse (Sattler & Gershoff, 2018). The issue of timing was also brought up again by this article as a cause for concern. Research has shown that "approximately two thirds of reunification occur in less than 12 months" (Sattler & Gershoff, 2018, p. 1334). This short time period of removal limits the amount of changes the biological family member can make to better themselves to promote successful reunification. To further examine the impacts of reunification, Sattler and Gershoff conducted a study to investigate "(a): To what extent are children reentering foster care for the same reasons as they previously entered care? (b) How is parental SAMH associated with reentry risk when compared with neglect not involving SAMH and to no neglect? (c) How does time to reunification affect risk to reentry, particularly for cases involving parental SAMH?" (Sattler & Gershoff, 2018, p. 1335). Results of this study showed that "more than 15% of all Texas children who were reunified before the age 16 reentered foster care within 5 years" (Sattler & Gershoff, 2018, p. 1340). They found that time to reunification is likely to be correlated with higher rates of reentry into the system. Researchers do not suggest that family reunification should be terminated, but instead child welfare agencies should not jump into reuniting families without careful consideration of the costs and benefits of doing so.

FOSTER CARE

Understand the incredible impact of the foster care system in the United States

IN THE UNITED STATES...

438K KIDS

hundreds of thousands of kids currently in the United States foster care system, as of 2018.



MEDIAN AGE 9



median age of children in the foster care system in the United States.

2-3 PLACEMENTS

37% of children in foster care find themselves in 2-3 different foster home placements.



NON-RELATIVE 46%



percent of children reside in a foster care home rather than a relative or grandparent.

Chartier & Blaiver, 2021

The question of reunification safety for foster children exists in places other than the United States. In a study examining the goals of the foster care system in Belgium, researchers Chartier and Blaiver (2021) question if reuniting children to their biological families should be the only goal of the child welfare system. The aim of their research was to identify the factors that may influence a parent's presence in the lives of their children and the outcomes of reunification. They indicated that previous research has shown that "children who return to live with their biological parents have more behavioural and emotional problems than children who remain in foster care" (Chartier & Blaiver, 2021, p. 2). These children have also been shown to have a greater risk of dropping out of school and having poor academic performance. To further test the results of previous research, Chartier and Blaiver conducted a study involving 568 children who were placed in the foster care system after June 2017. The case workers of these children were interviewed about the child's placement and time in care. Results of the interview data found a number of indicators that contributed to the success or failure of reunification. First, interviews with the case workers indicated that "maintaining the child's link with his family is one of the most important indicators of reunification possibilities" (Chartier & Blaiver, 2021, p. 4). The involvement of a father in the child's life is also a better indicator of reunification success. Results of the study found that parents with higher risk factors such as a history of substance abuse and mental illness are more likely to fail the reunification process. In addition, "children who are victims of maltreatment and who witnessed conjugal violence have fewer parents present in their lives and fewer prospects for reunification with their family" (Chartier & Blaiver, 2021, p. 5). Researchers suggest that the option of adoption be more openly discussed with biological families so that the best interest of the child is taken in consideration when finding them a permanent home.

Stephens et al., 2015

Despite the evidence indicating that a lot of reunification attempts are unsuccessful, Stephens et al. (2015) suggests that integrating certain support networks and resources into the reunification process can produce more positive results for both the child and family. For example, improving the services that are coordinated for families of lower income can help to eliminate the stress that poverty has on families; therefore, increasing the focus a parent can have on their newly reunified child. Along with this, "preparations for reunification should routinely include assessment of the developmental level at which the child is returning to the home, with open family therapy sessions about what life will look like upon their return" (Stephens et al., 2015, p. 31). The caseworker assigned to a child's case also can play a great role in the amount of support a parent receives after reunification. Research suggests that "helpful and dedicated CWS caseworkers become allies for families, providing accurate information about timely resources and helping parents feel confident about what they are entitled to" (Stephens et al., 2015, p. 31). With the proper support system and resources, the process of reunification can prove to be not only successful, but it also may be the best option for the child.

Conclusion

The prospect of reunification should be considered in the hopes of restoring the broken relationships that have formed due to the removal of a child from their biological families; however, it should not be the main goal of the foster care system. Focusing solely on reunification often leads to great instability in a foster child's life because of the great probability of re-entry. Constant re-entry into the foster care system can produce developmental delays and behavioral issues in the child. By focusing on providing foster children with a stable environment, these children can adjust to their environment that will allow them to grow and flourish at a healthy rate.

References

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