

One-third of foster kids returned to their family are abused again

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One in three children who have been reunified with their families after being placed in foster care will be maltreated again, according to a study into Quebec's youth protection system by Marie-Andrée Poirier and Sonia Hélie of the University of Montreal's School of Social Services. The study, the first of its kind in the world, was undertaken in the wake of a new law intended to improve the family stability of youth receiving child protection services.

The researchers, who are also affiliated with the Centre jeunesse de Montréal-Institut universitaire, looked at data collated in 2008 and 2009 by the province's 16 youth protection centres to identify why [children](#) were re-entering the system after having already been placed in a foster family, returned to their biological family, and had their case closed. In all, Poirier and Hélie were looking at what happened in the lives of 4,120 minors, between the ages of 0 and 17, during the five years following the closing of their initial episode of services.

The study found that 33% percent of these children subsequently required further assistance from youth protection services, and the researchers found that two factors were particularly influential as to whether or not a child would fall into this category. Firstly, age. "Children aged three to five were most at risk of being abused or neglected again. This is due to their vulnerability and the constant care that they need," Poirier said. The number of attempts that have been to reunite the child with his or her biological family is the second factor, at least amongst the youngest participants in the study. "It's not instability

with regards to the foster families with whom the child has been that plays a role, but rather the back-and-forth between the biological family and other settings. We believe that young children are more sensitive to the outcomes of failures to reunite the biological family and that this has an effect on their sense of attachment."

In 2007, Quebec's youth protection law changed, introducing what is known as the "Life Plan." "The 'Life Plan' was introduced out of consideration for the family ties and long-term wellbeing of children in [foster care](#)," Poirer said. "Before these changes were introduced, the system observed a worrying number of toing and froing. Today, the law requires that a permanent life plan must be arranged for the child within a set period – within 12 months if they're younger than 2,18 months for 2 to 5 year olds, and two years after that."

"Since the law was changed, fostering is indeed less frequent and the children are more often placed with a member of their extended family or a third party who is significant to them," Hélie explained. "We wanted to check if the characteristics of a foster care placement had an influence on the likelihood of further victimisation of the child."

Their analysis confirms that Quebec's child protection system generally prefers sending the child back to his or her family, as was the case for the majority of the children identified in the study. And for the majority of these children, [child protection](#) services have no reason to be involved again – their lives are stable and their family reunification long-lasting. But this isn't the case for a full third of them, who are once again abused or neglected and are brought back into the system.

For the researchers, this suggests that reunifications fail because families are perhaps not receiving enough help from government services, either youth protection itself or the agencies that are supposed to intervene afterwards. Poirier believes that the availability of family reunification

services is an issue that merits further study. "It's important to intervene within the family and to ensure there's a follow-up once the child has been returned."

Provided by University of Montreal

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