

Foster care damages the health of mothers

November 2 2017, by Elizabeth Wall-Wieler



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Spending time in foster care can have [serious consequences for the health](#) and [well-being of children](#). But what about their mothers?

The impact on women of being separated from their children is often overlooked because many of these moms have been accused of abuse

and neglect, and don't meet society's standards of good parenting.

As a researcher in community [health](#) sciences, I have been studying the outcomes for mothers whose children have been taken into care. In a recent study conducted with colleagues at the University of Manitoba, we examined [mental illness](#), treatment use ([health care interventions](#)) and social factors among 1,591 mothers who had a child taken into care.

This research, recently published in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, found that [having a child taken into care has detrimental effects on a mother's health](#) and well-being.

Contributing to depression, anxiety and substance use

The research was carried out in Manitoba. We used Child and Family Services case files to identify mothers who had a child placed in care. We then linked these data with medical claims, hospital discharge abstracts, prescriptions, Employment and Income Assistance case files and information from the Canadian census.

These data were used to define three mental illness diagnoses, along with treatment use and social stability. The mental illnesses we looked at were depression, anxiety and substance use. We measured treatment use by visits to doctors, hospital stays and prescribed-drug use. Whether a mother moved or received income assistance measured her social stability.

We found that among mothers who had a child taken into care, the number of mothers with depression, anxiety and substance use diagnoses was much higher in the years after their children were placed. After being separated from their children, these mothers also had more physician visits, hospitalizations and prescribed-drug use.

This fits with [findings from a previous study](#) where mothers were interviewed. One mother said: "Once they took her away... I went into a very deep, deep depression. I didn't talk to nobody... just wanted to be left alone."

When compared with 1,591 mothers who raised their own children, mothers who had a child taken into care had worse mental health, more treatment use and more social instability—both before and after they lost custody. For most of the outcomes, the differences were much bigger in the years after the child was taken into care.

This study provides convincing evidence that [foster care](#) has detrimental effects on a mother's health and well-being.

[Previous research](#) shows that [mental illness, substance use and poverty](#) are often the reasons why children in care are not returned to their families. The findings from this study show that the stress of having a child taken into care can contribute to these reasons, making it harder for families to be reunited.

Indigenous children in care

To fully understand what this research means, we must consider a few factors. One is that we defined mental health diagnoses using physician claims records and hospitalizations. But not all mothers who have a mental illness seek treatment. So we likely underestimated the number of mothers who have a mental illness.

Mothers who have a child taken into care may also be encouraged to seek treatment for an existing mental illness when trying to regain custody. This could mean that mothers who have existing [mental health](#) conditions contributing to their child being placed in care may only start seeking treatment after losing their child.

Most mothers in this study, however, did see a doctor in the two years before the child was taken into care. This makes it more likely that major mental illness would have been identified by the doctor beforehand.

We should also consider that this study was conducted in Manitoba, Canada, which has [one of the highest rates of children in care in the world](#). As in many other parts of Canada, there is also a significant [over-representation of Indigenous children in care](#) in Manitoba.

How a mother responds to having her child taken into care could in part be a result of the specific history and social policies of this province.

Support can prevent the need for foster care

This is the first population-based study to look at the outcomes for mothers who had a child taken into care. The findings that mothers' health and well-being deteriorate in the years after they lose custody of a child has important practice and policy implications.

[Strengthening resources](#) and [capabilities of mothers](#) who are at risk of having a child taken into care can result in [better outcomes for both mother and child](#), studies have found.

Mothers with mental illness and those with cognitive disabilities have much higher rates of their children being taken into care. [Providing these mothers with parenting training and programs](#) intended to improve social supports and psychological well-being often eliminates the requirement for [children](#) to be taken into care.

Early childhood home visiting programs have also proven effective in [reducing children being placed in care](#). Such programs involve trained professionals, such as public health nurses, visiting families in their

homes and providing support, education and information to prevent child maltreatment.

When a [child](#) is taken into care, services providers should make sure that [mothers](#) are well-supported to prevent their health and well-being from getting worse.

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