

# Losing children to foster care endangers mothers' lives

March 30 2018, by Elizabeth Wall-Wieler

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Credit: olia danilevich from Pexels

Mothers whose children are placed in foster care are at much higher risk of dying young, particularly due to avoidable causes like suicide.

When a [child](#) is placed in foster care, most of the resources are focused on the child, with little to no support for the mothers who are left behind.

I have been working with colleagues at the University of Manitoba to look at what happens to mothers after their [children](#) are placed in care.

The focus of two recent studies has been to look at mortality among this group of mothers.

## **Deaths by suicide and heart disease**

The [first study, published in the \*Canadian Journal of Psychiatry\*](#), looked at suicide attempts and suicide completions among mothers whose children were placed in care.

In this study, we compared rates of suicide attempts and suicides between 1,872 mothers who had a child placed in care with sisters whose children were not placed in care.

We found that the rate of [suicide attempts](#) was 2.82 times higher, and the rate of death by suicide was more than four times higher for mothers whose children were not in their custody.

In the second study, just [published in the \*American Journal of Epidemiology\*](#), we compared the rates of death from avoidable and unavoidable causes between 1,974 mothers who had a child placed in care, and their sisters whose children remained with them.

We found that mothers whose children were placed in care were 3.5 times more likely to die from avoidable causes (e.g. unintentional injury and [suicide](#)), and 2.9 times more likely to die from unavoidable causes (e.g. car accidents and [heart disease](#)).

## Losing a child is traumatic

So why is this happening?

Mothers whose children are taken into care often have underlying health conditions, such as mental illness and substance use. In both studies, we took pre-existing health conditions into account, so that was not the reason for the higher mortality rates we found.

In a recent study, [I found that when a child goes into foster care, their mother's physical and mental health gets much worse](#). Losing custody of a child can be very traumatic, and can [make life feel meaningless](#).

Most legislation pertaining to child protection services indicates that families should be supported, but the guidelines around what is expected of the child welfare system when it comes to the biological mothers are not clear.

The main role of [social workers](#) is to ensure that the child is doing well. Social workers are already so busy, so it is often hard for them to justify spending their limited time to help mothers resolve challenges and work with them to address their mental and physical health needs.

## Children end up motherless

The lack of supports for mothers when their children go into care means that many of them die premature deaths.

While this is a tragedy in its own right, this also means that many children in foster care end up motherless.

[A study in Sweden](#) found that by age 18, more than 16 per cent of

children who had been in foster care had lost at least one parent (compared to three per cent of children who had not been in foster care).

By age 25, one in four former foster children had lost at least one parent (compared to one in 14 in the general population). This means that many children in [foster care](#) don't get the chance to be reunited with their families.

## **A humanitarian crisis**

Canada has one of the highest rates of children in care and within the Canadian child welfare system, Indigenous children are over-represented.

Recently, [Jane Philpott, minister of Indigenous services, referred to the Indigenous child-welfare system as a humanitarian crisis.](#)

Providing adequate preventative supports would reduce the number of children in care, which would reduce the number of mothers who go through the trauma of being separated from their children.

Specific guidelines need to be put in place to make sure that mothers are supported when their child is taken into care. This would improve the chances of reunification.

And, by virtue of being a human worthy of treatment with dignity, [mothers](#) deserve support, even if it does not directly relate to how she interacts with her child(ren).

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