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Children in foster care face deeper jeopardy during the coronavirus pandemic

August 11 2020, by Lenette Azzi-Lessing

The stress and isolation caused by job losses, school closings and limited social interactions, along with the sharp economic downturn brought on by the coronavirus pandemic, have made life harder for everyone—especially people who already faced economic hardship. But the roughly 435,000 U.S. children in foster care have been hit especially hard.

The nation's foster care system, established to provide short-term care for kids whose families can't safely meet their needs, has struggled to fulfill its mission.

Based on my scholarship regarding foster care, I'm particularly concerned about how social distancing has delayed and reduced the number of family reunification hearings.

Those hearings play a pivotal role in determining whether and when children can be safely returned to their families or placed for adoption. Official numbers aren't available yet, but this disruption is surely causing kids to languish in foster care for longer periods of time, increasing their stress and uncertainty.

Many hazards

Social distancing is also disrupting visits between foster children and their biological families. In most situations, these visits are essential for

maintaining family connections and preparing children and their families to reunite successfully.

Sustaining close parent-child relationships is particularly critical for the babies and children under 3 who account for 30% of the children in foster care. Long stretches of time without being able to cuddle with the biological parent can disrupt these relationships and endanger children's emotional health.

Long before the pandemic struck, tens of thousands of children had already been languishing in foster care, with an average stay of about 20 months. Nearly three in 10 children who enter foster care remain in temporary homes for more than two years. In 2018, more than 32,000 children had been stuck in supposedly temporary care for three years or more.

Disrupted relationships

Those long stints harm children, straining family ties and creating uncertainty regarding if and when children will return home. They also increase the chances that children will get shuffled to multiple different foster families and endure the added trauma of repeatedly losing relationships critical to their emotional well-being.

For older children, this instability can undercut their education, as each move typically results in changing schools. And both long stays and frequent placement changes reduce a child's chances of ever returning home to their biological families or being adopted.

Due, in part, to a shortage of foster homes, more than 47,000 children live in group homes and other institutions. These institutions typically lack the stable, nurturing atmosphere and sense of belonging that families provide.

Moreover, at least 18,000 U.S. teens age out of the foster care system annually without ever becoming a part of a permanent family. After they move on, these young adults face higher risks than their peers for poverty, homelessness, too-early parenthood and even being swept into human trafficking.

Authorities place Black children into foster care at higher rates than other children, and Black children spend more time in the system. This occurs regardless of their family's circumstances and even though Black families are not more prone to child abuse or neglect.

In this way, foster care can layer additional risks upon children already facing disadvantages from growing up in a society ridden with racial inequities.

Reform efforts

Decades of state and federal policy changes have failed to transform foster care into the safe, supportive, short-term resource that some vulnerable children need.

The most recent federal legislation, the 2018 Family First Prevention Services Act, represents a step toward helping vulnerable families stay connected.

This law aims to help states improve services to troubled families and provide more support for relatives and family friends caring for children unable to remain safely at home. The latter could help separated children maintain family ties and avoid the trauma of being placed with strangers.

However, that law does not include any measures aimed at reducing family poverty – a primary cause of foster care placements. It also lacks provisions to remedy the disproportionate numbers of Black children

languishing in foster care or the system's chronic shortage of social workers.

Root causes

I believe that it's time for more comprehensive change.

A crucial first step is to address the factors that cause children to be removed from their families in the first place. Foremost among them is poverty. Some 21% of American children are poor, and more than 40% are low-income but not below the poverty line.

The majority of children entering foster care are from impoverished families whose problems include inadequate housing or being unable to put enough food on the table. Child protective authorities typically label the symptoms of family poverty as child neglect. A much smaller number of children end up in foster care due to physical or sexual abuse.

Moreover, stepping up efforts to eliminate the implicit racial bias that too often affects the decisions that social workers and judges make could reduce the number of Black children needlessly separated from their families.

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