

Foster Care Caseloads and Federal Child Welfare Policy



Background

One of the primary motivators of current federal child welfare policy development- both in the advocacy community and on the Hill- has been the assumption that children are frequently unnecessarily placed in foster care. Many reformers, driven by anecdote and/or ideology, seem to believe that today's foster children often could be kept at home safely if child welfare systems just did a better job of supporting their parents. Furthermore, many of these same advocates and policymakers deride foster care as a broken system and believe that placement in foster care is the worst possible outcome for children.

These assumptions have gone mostly unchallenged, despite the fact that they are largely unsupported, if not directly contradicted, by data. As a result, we have witnessed a proliferation of policies and proposals in the past decade that are explicitly based on significantly flawed premises - from experimentations with capped allocations through Title IV-E Waivers to suggestions that the federal

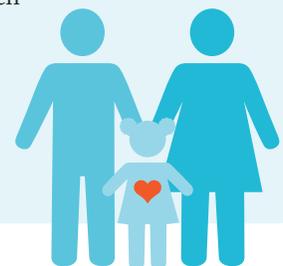
government should place arbitrary time limits or other restrictions on foster care funding.

Research and experience in California paints a very different picture. While imperfect and in need of improvement, we see a foster care system that not only enhances child safety but that also has made considerable progress in helping foster youth find permanency. We see no evidence that children are unnecessarily placed in foster care with any frequency. On the contrary, the system is frequently protecting children from serious endangerment. Input from foster youth themselves indicates that the system is doing much more good than harm.

We intend for this policy brief to help better align the federal policymaking process with the actual ground-level needs of the child welfare system, and hope that it helps illuminate the shortcomings inherent in policies reliant upon continued foster care caseload decline.

Key Points

- Foster care caseloads have already declined dramatically over the past 15+ years, both in California (40% reduction) and nationally (approximately a 30% reduction).
- Systems have been able to reduce caseloads primarily through progress in expediting permanency for foster youth, thus reducing the average length of time in care. Reports of maltreatment and foster care entries, however, have remained relatively stable.
- Further caseload reductions are likely unrealistic without compromising child safety unless we make progress in reducing the actual rate of maltreatment. Alarming, new research indicates it may in fact be higher than previously estimated.
- Ultimately, crafting federal policies or fiscal incentives that either seek or presume continued caseload decline threatens to jeopardize long-term funding for child welfare and risks undermining the protective role of the foster care system.



California Child Advocates for Change is a coalition of California's leading child welfare advocacy organizations that have united to inform conversations about federal foster care reform.



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