

Summary of “Is There a Foster Care-To-Prison Pipeline? Evidence from Quasi-Randomly Assigned Investigators”

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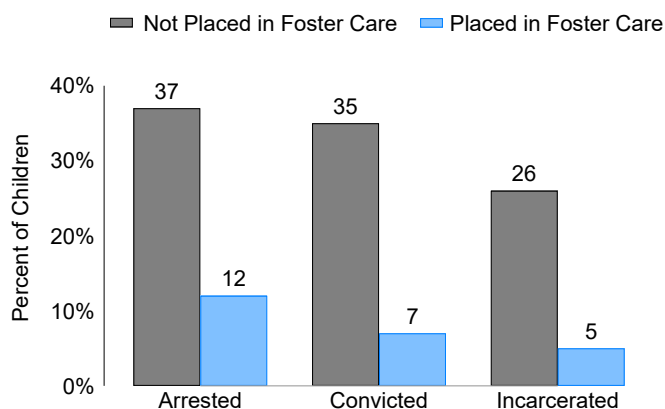
Why this study? About one in twenty children in the United States are placed in foster care during their childhood because government authorities found they were abused or neglected and determined it was not safe for them to continue living in their homes. This proportion is even larger for Black and Native American children, groups with long histories of forced family separation.² News outlets commonly refer to a foster care-to-prison pipeline, as close to one fifth of the prison population in the United States is people who were placed in foster care.³ However, there is little evidence on whether foster care *causes* later-in-life contact with the criminal justice system.

Data and outcome measures. We use detailed administrative data from the child welfare and criminal justice systems in Michigan. We study about 120,000 child welfare investigations of children ages 6 to 16 between 2008 and 2016. Using these data, we focus on three adult crime outcomes: arrested by age 19, convicted by age 19, and incarcerated by age 19.

Methods. We follow a similar process to the gold standard approach in clinical drug trials whereby some patients are randomly assigned to a group that receives the drug and others are assigned to a control group that does not. Of course, randomly assigning children to foster care would be highly unethical. Yet there is a feature of child welfare investigations that somewhat mirrors this type of process: investigators within a local field office are assigned to children’s cases based on who is next on a list. Investigators also have discretion over whether to recommend placement and some are more likely to recommend placement than others. We compare the outcomes of children who are assigned by chance to a “strict” investigator and thus are placed in foster care to those who are not placed because they were assigned to a “lenient” investigator.

Main findings. Exhibit 1 shows that foster care placement reduced later-in-life crime. More than one third of children who were not placed were arrested by age 19 (37 percent), compared to just 12 percent of children who were placed in foster care. Likewise, children who were placed in foster care were 28 percentage points less likely to be convicted by age 19 (35 percent compared to 7 percent) and 21 percentage points less likely to be incarcerated by age 19 (26 percent compared to 5 percent).

Exhibit 1. The Effects of Foster Care Placement on Crime by Age 19



Notes. The differences in outcomes are statistically significant at the 5 percent level.

We also explored whether foster care reduced adult crime more for certain groups of children. Foster care appeared to reduce adult crime more for male than female children, and for younger children (ages 6 to 11) than older youth (ages 12 to 16). We find similar effects for White, Black, and Hispanic children.

Who do these findings extend to? The vast majority of child welfare investigations involve children for whom no child welfare investigator would say that foster care placement is warranted. The findings in this study represent the effects of placement only for children who were candidates for foster care (that is, children for whom some investigators might have recommended placement while others would not have). Indeed, we estimate that just 5 percent of the close to 120,000 investigations we study involved such candidates for foster care. Among candidates who were placed, we find that nearly all were initially placed in a family home with relatives or an unrelated family as opposed to a group home, and most experienced relatively stable placements. They tended to have relatively short stays in foster care of about one to two years after which more than four in five reunified with their biological family.

Limitations. This study has three key limitations. First, this study focuses on outcomes that we can measure in administrative data and not on other important considerations related to foster care placement decisions, such as the potential for emotional trauma for children and parents or questions related to the morality of child removal. Second, we focus on children who were between 6 and 16 years old when they were subject to a child welfare investigation. This study does not show how foster care influences infants, toddlers, or preschoolers. Third, we study the foster care system in a single state. Although Michigan generally mirrors the nation along foster care performance metrics, further research is needed to show whether these findings extend to other settings.

Key takeaways for public policy. Recently, there has been a strong national push to reduce foster care caseloads. The Family First Prevention Services Act of 2019 (FFPSA) prioritizes keeping children with their families by for the first time allowing child welfare agencies to use federal dollars to fund programs and services that aim to prevent foster care placement. Our study finds that children who are candidates for foster care that are not placed have higher chances of criminal justice involvement than those who are placed. Thus, these findings highlight that improving the alternatives to foster care is important. Yet child welfare agencies need not shoulder the burden alone. Studies show that broader social policies, such as a strong social safety net, can also reduce child abuse and neglect.⁴ To meet the federal goal of safely reducing foster care caseloads, identifying what works to promote child wellbeing while keeping families intact is a crucial frontier for policy and research.

Notes

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²Yi, Youngmin, Frank R Edwards, and Christopher Wildeman. 2020. "Cumulative prevalence of confirmed maltreatment and foster care placement for US children by race/ethnicity, 2011–2016." *American journal of public health*, 110(5): 704–709.

³Amon, Elizabeth. 2021. "New Washington Laws Aim to Interrupt Foster Care-to-Prison Pipeline." The Imprint. Accessed at <https://imprintnews.org/> on 10-10-2021; Trivedi, Shanta. 2020. "Police feed the foster care-to-prison pipeline by reporting on Black parents." NBC News. Accessed at <https://www.nbcnews.com/> on 02-05-2021.

⁴Aizer, Anna, Shari Eli, Joseph Ferrie, and Adriana Lleras-Muney. 2016. "The long-run impact of cash transfers to poor families." *American Economic Review*, 106(4): 935–71; Berger, Lawrence M, Sarah A Font, Kristen S Slack, and Jane Waldfogel. 2017. "Income and child maltreatment in unmarried families: Evidence from the earned income tax credit." *Review of Economics of the Household*, 15(4): 1345–1372; Raissian, Kerri M, and Lindsey Rose Bullinger. 2017. "Money matters: Does the minimum wage affect child maltreatment rates?" *Children and youth services review*, 72: 60–70.