

## **THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM AND FOSTER CARE IN THE UNITED STATES**

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At any given point there are over 400,000 children in the American foster care system. Children enter the foster care system because they have been abused, neglected, or abandoned by their parents or guardians. Currently, many pieces of the child welfare system are broken, and foster children can suffer as a result.

For example, just recently a law was passed that allows states to not require financial payment when their children are in foster care. Imagine, your child is taken from you and then the State requires you to pay them to care for your child. Even if the child is taken because the parents do not have adequate financial resources, they then were required to pay the State, who took their child, additional monies to care for the child. Thankfully, they just eliminated this law.

### **Who are foster children?**

Foster care children vary in race, with children of color making up approximately 45% of the children in foster care in 2020. The average age they enter foster care is 7. LGBTQ youth are over-represented in foster care, where they are more likely to experience discrimination, abuse, and neglect. Some children exit the system quickly, while others languish in care for years (or decades).

64% enter the system because of “neglect” (as opposed to abuse, which is harsher). Neglect can vary from an unclean house to a failure to vaccinate. It is a loose standard, that frequently is more harshly used on parents of color. Foster care children may be placed with other family members, unrelated foster families, group homes, institutions or simply age out and be left on their own, and alone.

Foster care systems continue to be biased. Children of color are over-represented. Parents of color are more likely to have their children removed than white parents. Low income parents are more likely to have their children removed. These children, at times, will enter into the system and stay in the system until they age out. Parental rights will be terminated, without any adoptive parents waiting. Children will age out, and be on their own without resources. Imagine at 18 or 21 years old having no family, no support systems, and having to care for yourself financially, emotionally and physically?

### **Why should we care?**

As part of the Christian duty to care for our neighbors and God’s creation, it is critical that we focus our attention to care for some of the most vulnerable children in our communities, foster youth. Like everyone, the youth in the foster care system deserve the support of a loving family and community.

Our foster care system is broken, and foster care children are suffering because of this. We have stripped the foster care system of the resources it needs to function. Courts are overburdened with child protective cases, which languish from a lack of resources. Parents whose children are being taken by the state, have no right to an attorney in many areas. Caseworkers have hundreds of children to care for, and are unable to competently do it. Family resources are not being investigated before children are sent to unknown individuals. Families seeking to adopt are caught in lengthy review processes, which deny them the ability to adopt for arbitrary reasons.

Foster care children can be placed in private homes, but some, still, are placed in group homes or institutions. The older a child is, the harder it is for them to be placed in a home. Plus, some children are placed by child protective agencies with friends or families outside of foster care systems, thus depriving the families of any resources to assist in caring for the children. The agencies save money by not giving any resources to the families to assist with care, but the children suffer. Families take in their relations to care for them without assistance granted to other families. This shadow docket of foster care allows for agencies to save money, and lower their over numbers of children in care, but is that the goal? These families need financial help and are being denied this by an agencies desire to look better for their statistics.

Potential adoptive parents also need support. There are over 110,000 children waiting to be adopted in the United States. Many of them have waiting years, sometimes over five years. Children need to have permanency. Potential adoptive parents need to be assisted in the adoption process. They need vetting that is consistent, unbiased and is more child focused. Government support needs to be given to recruiting and supporting potential adoptive parents.

As Christians there are many ways in which we can support every individual involved in the foster system so that we can nurture the most vulnerable children. First, learn and understand the system. Consider becoming a foster parent. Consider adoption. Listen to parents who have lost their children to the system in an unjudgmental way. Support programs that help new parents, and young children.

Do not fall into the belief that every parent involved in the foster care system was not a good parent. Many parents who have children in foster care have tried to be good parents, and continue to try. They are trapped in a system that does little to help them solve the ills that brought the system into their lives. And some, have done nothing inappropriate except dare to challenge the system.