

Foster care and child well-being: Insights in the time of coronavirus

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Children placed in foster care in Michigan are less likely to be abused or

neglected in the future, have higher school attendance rates and perform better on standardized math tests than other vulnerable children who are not placed, a recent study found.

While encouraging in some respects, these findings suggest that current in-home prevention-focused efforts to protect [children](#) are falling short, according to researchers at the Youth Policy Lab and the Child and Adolescent Data Lab at the University of Michigan.

The study provides new results of how foster placement influences children's safety and educational outcomes. Using information from more than 240,000 child welfare investigations in Michigan from 2008 to 2016, the analysis follows public school students who enter [foster care](#) as well as those that do not and tracks children for up to nine years after their investigation. In particular, the analysis focuses on situations in which child welfare workers may be uncertain about whether to remove a child.

One of the many tragic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic is that it is now more difficult for child welfare systems to support struggling children and families. With widespread school and day care closures throughout the country, teachers—the primary reporters of child abuse and neglect—are no longer interacting with young people on a regular basis, said Max Gross, the study's author and a research affiliate at the Youth Policy Lab.

This, coupled with the sharp decline in reports reaching the state of Michigan, leads to concern about how families and children are faring during the pandemic and provides even greater urgency for state policymakers to identify effective strategies to keep [young people](#) safe at home, he said.

Recent federal legislation incentivizes states to reduce foster care

placements by funding in-home prevention-focused services. However, there is little credible evidence on the effectiveness of either foster care placement or in-home prevention services.

"Child welfare systems should think about both big and small changes to their prevention efforts," Gross said. "They should reconsider how they identify families in need of help, the design and delivery of prevention services, and the infrastructure in place to evaluate service effectiveness. Fortunately, the Family First Prevention Services Act offers federal support to start making these changes."

Brian Jacob, a study adviser and co-director of the Youth Policy Lab, said the key is to figure out which services can help keep children safe in their homes with their families.

"Spurred by this study, we are working with the Children's Services Agency in Michigan to evaluate several promising prevention programs," he said.

When children are victims of abuse or neglect, child welfare agencies must make a very challenging decision: work with families while keeping children in the home or place the children in foster care. This decision affects millions of families in the United States as 6% of all children enter the foster system by age 18, including more 1-in-10 black and Native American children, groups with long histories of forced [family](#) separation.

"There are more than 430,000 children in foster care in the United States and more than 17,000 children touch Michigan's foster care system in a single year. It is critical that we investigate and understand the potential benefits and limitations associated with foster care placements," said Joe Ryan, a study adviser and director of the Child and Adolescent Data Lab. "This study helps contribute to an evidence-based approach in child

welfare."

More information: Study: Foster care and children's well-being,
drive.google.com/file/d/13edpQ...FB0/view?ts=5ee22d1c

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