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NOT FOR POVERTY ALONE: FOSTER CARE POPULATION TRENDS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Trends in the size of the national foster care population from 1910 to 1983 are examined in the context of child welfare policy toward dependent and neglected children. Several major turning points in the child placement rate are identified, and the reasons for them are explored. The relationship between poverty and foster care placement is discussed, and it is concluded that the child placement rate is not related to the poverty rate, but rather, to how our society chooses to intervene with the children of families living in poverty.

One can hardly imagine a more profound intrusion of government or society into the lives of families than the separation of children from their parents. When such separation is effected through no fault of the children, the question arises as to what conditions of the family or faults of the parents might be defined by society as rightful or necessary cause for such extreme action.

At least since the early 1900s, a strongly stated commitment and policy toward maintaining children in their own families, whenever possible, has emerged in the United States. The 1909 White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children issued the following famous conclusions:

"Home life is the highest and finest product of civilization . . . Children should not be deprived of it except for urgent and compelling reasons. Children of parents of worthy character, suffering from temporary misfortune, and children of reasonably efficient and deserving mothers who are without support of the normal breadwinner, should as a rule be kept with their parents, such aid being given as may be

necessary to maintain suitable homes for the rearing of the children . . . Except in unusual circumstances, the home should not be broken up for reasons of poverty, but only for considerations of inefficiency or immorality . . ." (in Bremner, 1971, p. 365).

This was seemingly the dawn of a new era in child welfare, in which the emphasis, in policy at least, was clearly shifting toward maintaining children in their own homes. The expressed concern that children should not be removed from their parents for reasons of poverty seemed to contrast sharply with the "child-saving" philosophy which predominated through the nineteenth century and which emphasized the "rescuing" of children from pauper families (Leiby, 1978, p. 144).

As late as 1899, the first law to establish a juvenile court, in Illinois, lumped dependency and neglect together: "(T)he words dependent child and neglected child shall mean any child who for any reason is destitute or homeless or abandoned; or dependent upon the public for support; or has not proper parental care or guardianship; or who habitually begs or receives alms; or who is found living in any house of ill fame or with any vicious or disreputable person; or whose home, by reason of neglect, cruelty or depravity on the part of its parents . . . is an unfit place for such a child . . ." (in Bremner, 1971, pp. 506-507).

This law, considered a reform because it removed child welfare matters from the criminal court, went on to state that when any child was found to be dependent or neglected, the court may order the commitment of such a child to an institution or foster home. Thus dependent and neglected children were to be dealt with in like manner.

Such approaches to dependency and neglect in the late nineteenth century were the vestiges of longstanding theoretical beliefs about poverty, according to which the causes of poverty were seen as residing within the poor themselves. It is but a short step from this view to the notion that poor people are not "fit" to raise children, that their pauper characteristics are synonymous with neglect

where children are involved, and that children should be rescued from their pauper influence. Theoretically, there may never have been much opposition to the idea that poverty alone should not be grounds for breaking up families, or to the premise that parents of "worthy character" who are "efficient and deserving" should keep their children. It was just that poverty was thought to coincide with faulty parenthood and unworthiness of character.

There were some departures from this stance. As early as 1887, the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children stated in its Seventh Annual Report that "we never take neglected children by law from their parents, where the neglect arises from honest poverty alone" (in Bremner, 1971, p. 208). Leaving aside the issue of whether a child is removed "by law" or through other means, the questions raised are how much and whose poverty has been seen as "honest" and "alone," how much and whose behavior has been judged neglectful, and whether changing views of poverty and neglect and their relationship to each other have affected the issue of separation.

There can be no doubt that, in modern times, the verbal banner under which the organized forces of child welfare ride is "protect the child and preserve the family," "prevention" of child neglect and abuse as well as foster care placement itself, the foster care only as a "last resort." The by-word is prevention. The mere thought, moreover, of placing children for reasons of poverty would seem outrageous to many.

The New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services (1984), for example, proclaims its mission to be to "protect vulnerable children . . . support family preservation . . . prevent family violence and disruption." The federal Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-272) provides that "reasonable efforts will be made . . . to prevent or eliminate the need for removal of the child from his home, and . . . to make it possible for the child to return to his home . . ." Although this Act has been hailed as a reform, the modern rhetoric of prevention goes back at least as far as 1951, when the American Humane Association's

standards for child protective work proclaimed that "protective service . . . is directed not so much at rescuing the child from the home, as preserving, where possible, the home for the child" (in Bremner, 1974, p. 853).

If there has been any change at all in stated policies toward the separation of dependent and neglected children from their parents, from the 1909 White House Conference to the present, it is this: There has been an increasingly greater emphasis on prevention of child neglect and abuse and, beyond not wishing to separate children for reasons of poverty, on keeping families together even in which child maltreatment has occurred, by rehabilitating the parents. The undeniable policy thrust, however, over the course of three quarters of a century, has been to keep families together. This stated policy has, if anything, grown stronger and more unequivocal in its expressed intent of doing whatever may be necessary to prevent the separation of children from their parents.

In fact, however, from long before the turn of the century until present times, there has always been a considerable number of children in the United States living in foster care, who had been put there—in foster family homes, institutions, group homes, or other living arrangements with non-related individuals—through no fault or handicap of their own, by child welfare agencies. While the rationales and motives for separating children from parents have changed over time, a predominant characteristic of displaced children in this country has not changed: by and large they have continued to be poor children from impoverished families.¹

The purpose of this paper is to examine trends in the national foster care population through the twentieth century, to explore the possible causes of these trends, and to compare policy to reality.

THE RATE OF CHILD PLACEMENT, 1910–1983

Estimates of the nation's foster care population at various points in time between 1910 and 1983 are presented in

Table 1 and plotted in Figure 1. They all refer to one-day counts.

The figures for 1910, 1923, and 1933 are based on U.S. Census statistics.² The estimates presented for 1961, 1963, and 1965 are derived from a new state reporting system instituted by the U.S. Children's Bureau in 1960.³ It is known that the foster care population declined after the mid-1930s, and it is believed that the foster care population did not reach its 1933 numerical level again until 1961-1962 (Low, 1966; Boehm, 1970, p. 255). However, the turning point is in doubt, and the upward trend might have begun as early as 1957, and even as early as the late 1940s (as depicted hypothetically by the dashed curve in Figure 1).⁴ The estimates for 1975, 1977, 1979, and 1980, and the first estimate listed for 1982 are based on studies, employing varying methodologies, by the Children's Defense Fund, Westat, Inc., the U.S. Office of Civil Rights, the Child Welfare League of America, and Maximus, Inc., respectively. Finally, the 1981 estimate, the second and third estimates listed for 1982, and the 1983 estimate are derived from surveys by the American Public Welfare Association.⁵

It would be an understatement to say that the various estimates presented here are not strictly comparable. Not only are they derived from several different methodologies, but definitional differences (concerning the types of placement arrangements to be included) plague most comparisons.⁶ Moreover, certain implausible fluctuations, such as an apparent decline by 200,000 children in two years (from 1977 to 1979), further diminish our confidence in the precision and consistency of these figures.⁷

Nonetheless, if we were to suspend belief in the various estimates as precise point figures and regard each estimate as merely representing a *range* and having a margin of error of thousands or even tens of thousands, we have reason to have confidence in the *trends* that emerge. Thus, for example, we have reason to believe that the high point of the foster care population in this century occurred during 1975-77, based as it is on two independent estimates, although we

have little confidence in precisely what the population size was at that time. Indeed, in Figure 1, we observe that a small number of clear trends do emerge, and that at least from 1961 on, the beginning and end of each trend is backed up by estimates at no less than two points in time.

The trends we see are these: the foster care population increased from 1910 until 1933, declined until sometime before 1961, increased until its high point during 1975-77, and declined until 1982. There are indications, based on three estimates derived from consistent studies using the same methodology and procedures (the American Public Welfare Association surveys), that by 1983 the foster care population was on the rise again.⁸

Since the child population of the United States did not remain static over the course of this century, it is necessary to adjust our figures by calculating child placement rates. The U.S. Census statistics for the population of individuals under eighteen years of age are presented in Table 1 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975, p. 10, Series A29-42; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984, p. 29, No. 31). The child placement rates, also presented in Table 1, and plotted in Figure 2, indicate the number of children in foster care per every 1,000 children living in the United States at the time. We see that these estimated child placement rates indicate the same trends as do the absolute foster care population estimates.

INTERPRETING THE TRENDS: FACTORS RELATED TO CHANGES IN THE RATE OF CHILD PLACEMENT

The 1909 White House Conference, through its stand against breaking up families for reasons of poverty alone, and despite its leaders' distaste for public as opposed to private charity, paved the way, together with the emerging recognition in the early 1900s of the social origins of poverty, for mother's pension legislation (Lubove, 1968, pp. 98-99). The first statewide mother's pension law was enacted in Illinois in 1911, and within the next decade 40 states passed similar legislation (Axinn and Levin, 1982, p. 149).

The express intent of the mother's pension movement was to avert the break-up of families for reasons of poverty

Table 1. Child population in the United States, child population below the poverty level, foster care population, orphan population, child poverty rate, child placement rate, and poverty placement rate during the twentieth century.

Year	U.S. Population under Age 18	Population of related Children under Age 18 below Poverty Level	Foster Care Population**	Orphan Population	Poverty Rate for Related Children under Age 18 (per 100)	Placement Rate (per 1,000)	Poverty Placement Rate (per 100)
1910	35,061,000		151,441			4.3	
1920				750,000			
1923	41,486,000		218,523			5.3	
1930				450,000			
1933	42,186,000		242,929			5.8	
1954				60,000			
1960		17,288,000			26.5		
1961	65,791,000	16,708,000*	244,500			3.7	1.5
1963	68,420,000	15,548,000*	259,600			3.8	1.7
1965	69,731,000	14,388,000	283,300		20.7	4.1	2.0
1970		10,235,000			14.9		
1975	67,165,000	10,882,000	500,000		16.8	7.4	4.6
1977	65,772,000*	10,028,000	503,000		16.0	7.6	5.0
1979	64,379,000*	9,993,000	302,000		16.0	4.7	3.0
1980	63,682,000	11,114,000	274,000		17.9	4.3	2.5
1981	63,208,000	12,068,000	273,000		19.5	4.3	2.3
1982	62,811,000	13,139,000	243,000		21.3	3.9	1.8
—			262,000			4.2	2.0
—			263,000			4.2	
1983	62,374,000		269,000			4.3	

*Interpolated

**The reader is cautioned that methodological and definitional differences in the derivation of these estimates hinder precise comparison, and that the estimates are presented here (and utilized in Figures 1 and 2) to indicate general trends only.
(See text and Reference Notes 2-7.)

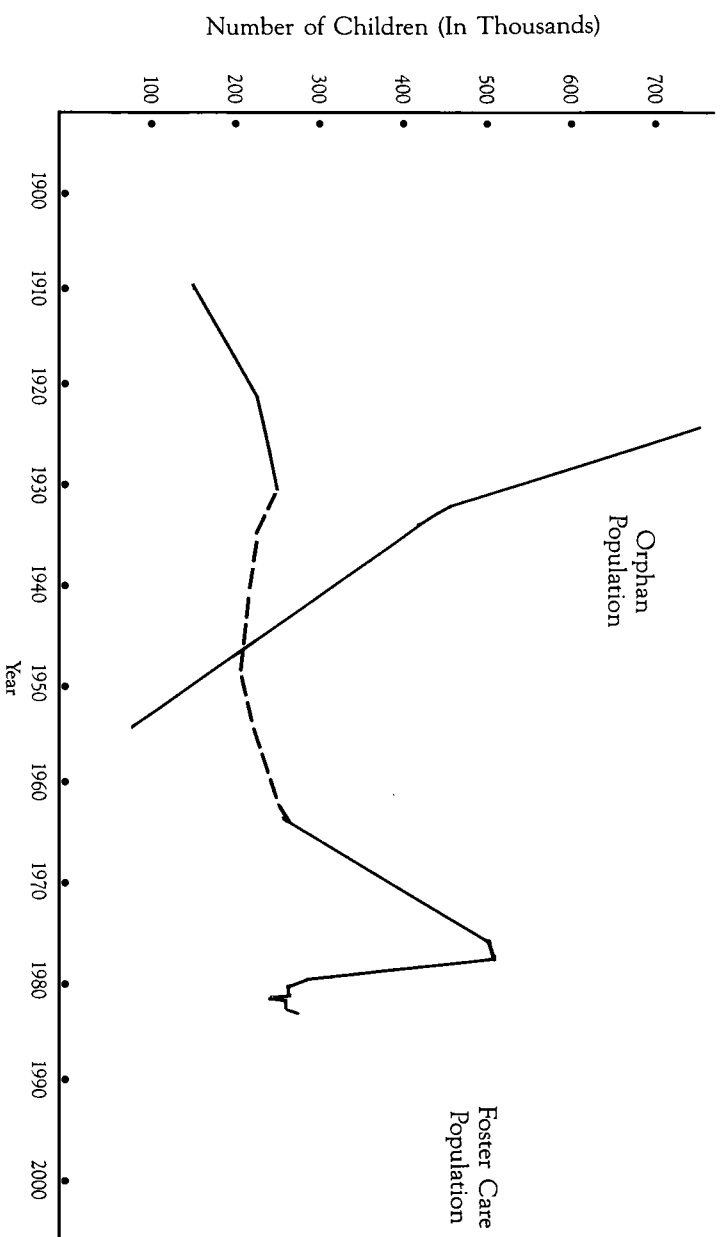


Figure 1. Foster care population and orphan population during the twentieth century.

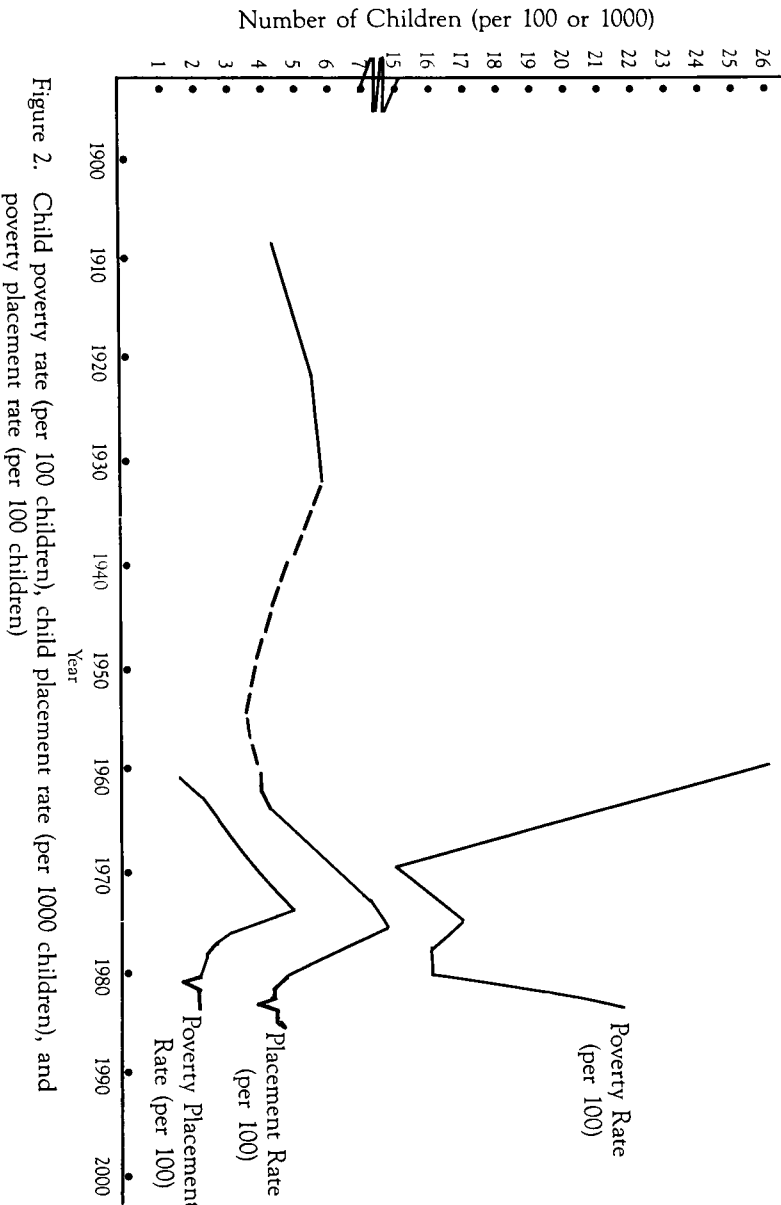


Figure 2. Child poverty rate (per 100 children), child placement rate (per 1000 children), and poverty placement rate (per 100 children)

alone, by giving financial aid, to "deserving" mothers at least, so as to allow them to keep their children (Thompson, 1919, p. 11). Juvenile court judges had been distressed over what they had been forced to do. Reflecting the new understanding of the social origins of poverty, Kansas City juvenile court judge E.E. Porterfield, in arguing for a mother's pension act before the Missouri state legislature, proclaimed: "If the poverty of the mother forces her to neglect her child the poverty should be removed and not the child" (Lubove, 1968, p. 100).

However, competing undercurrents and reservations undermined this intent. The misgivings that private charities had about public pensions, the enduring individualistic view that character deficiencies caused poverty and, beyond that, the fear that aid would promote a "spirit of dependency" and thereby undercut initiative and striving toward economic independence on the part of the mothers, no doubt contributed to the fact that the funds allocated for mothers' pensions were extremely meager and that the individual benefits failed to address the concrete needs created by poverty (Leiby, 1978, p. 151; Lubove, 1968, pp. 101-110; Thompson, 1919, p. 19).

Yet the inadequacy of funding under the mother's pension laws cannot explain, by itself at least, why the child placement rate actually *increased* between 1910 and 1933. This increase is made more remarkable by the fact that the orphan population in our country, once quite large, declined enormously during that time (see Table 1 and Figure 1) (Shudde and Epstein, 1955). It would be difficult to imagine that such "full" orphans, when they existed in large numbers, did not contribute substantially to the foster care population.⁹

The mother's pension laws provided for field investigators to judge which mothers were "inefficient" or "immoral," and which were deserving of aid (Lubove, 1968, p. 109; Thompson, 1919). As Lubove (1968, p. 108) states: "An uneasy balance of economic and vague moral criteria complicated the administration of this legislation." Moreover, relief was combined with "social treatment." Again as Lubove

(1968, p. 110) states: "Application for a pension was presumptive evidence of an inadequacy which differentiated the family from the community mainstream and justified intervention in the client's personal life."

It is possible that, in the absence of appreciable material assistance, increasing numbers of dependent children were redefined as neglected children, and that the mother's pension laws aided this development by sending out investigators to detect, according to their own lights, deficiencies in the conditions of the home and in the mother's moral character.

In 1910, Roswell McCrea wrote: "It is a practical experience . . . that the line between destitute and neglected children is a very shadowy one" (in Bremner, 1917, p. 214). This line would remain hazy so long as adequate financial aid would not be given to destitute families. The distinction between poverty and neglect would become even more difficult by the 1920s when, due to the strong influence of psychoanalytic theory on social work practice, casework came to be based upon a psychodynamic model, and the casework focus shifted further than in its recent past from the environment to the individual (Woodroffe, 1968, pp. 118-147; Lubove, 1965, pp. 80-117). Children would no longer be removed for reasons of poverty, thus in keeping with the 1909 White House Conference doctrine, but rather for psychological defects of the parents presumably resulting in neglect, and the child placement rate continued to increase.

The subsequent decline in the child placement rate, from the mid-1930s, has been attributed by child welfare experts to the Social Security Act of 1935, with its provision of federal funding for Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), and it would be difficult to deny such a causal link (Low, 1966; Boehm, 1970, pp. 224-225). While the financial benefits under this program were still inadequate, they were much better than before.

During the coming decades, many mothers would be denied financial assistance on the grounds of failing to meet

locally established "suitable home" criteria (Bell, 1965, pp. 93-110). But since, as previously noted, we cannot pinpoint how long the decline in the child placement rate lasted, it is difficult to determine whether the decline continued despite this phenomenon, or whether this phenomenon contributed to the subsequent upturn.

In any event, it appears that some semblance of material provision, however still inadequate, to address the concrete needs of poverty, had an impact on the rate of child placement by preventing the need of separating children from their parents in many instances. However, the steep decline of the orphan population during that time raises an unresolved question of just what proportion of the decrease in the child placement rate may be attributable to the financial aid itself under the Social Security Act.

We next face the question of why the child placement rate might have risen during the 1950s, and why it soared beginning with the early 1960s. During the 1950s and early 1960s, public spending for child welfare services in this country had increased to substantial levels. Such expenditures doubled from \$104.9 million in 1950 to \$211.5 million in 1960, and the federal share of these expenditures had grown from 4.0% to 6.3% (Bixby, 1981). Concurrently, the number of employees in public child welfare programs rose considerably (U.S. Children's Bureau, 1953; 1963, Table 21; 1964, Table 21; Low, 1957, Table A).

The major service of child welfare agencies traditionally has been foster care placement. In 1956, for example, 72 percent of total expenditures for child welfare services by state and local agencies went for foster care payments (Low, 1958, Table 1). Thus increased money available to hire more employees simply meant that more placements *could* be made.

Several important occurrences may account for the explosion in the child placement rate from the early 1960s until the 1975-77 period. In the early 1960s, C. Henry Kempe and his colleagues "discovered" child abuse. Focusing on extremely brutalized young children and infants, this team dramatically called attention to what it labeled the "Battered

Child Syndrome," and alluded to psychodynamic causes and "defect in character structure" as underlying this "syndrome" (Kempe, et al., 1962). This "discovery" drew an enormous amount of professional and media interest, and child abuse became a national issue (Pfohl, 1977; Antler, 1981; Nelson, 1984). The passage of reporting laws, requiring physicians, social workers, other professionals, and even all citizens, to report cases of suspected child abuse as well as neglect, developed as a major strategy in dealing with child abuse and neglect. By the end of 1963, thirteen states had already enacted such laws, and by 1973, every state had passed a mandatory reporting law (Antler, 1981). In 1973, the passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act established a National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect within the Children's Bureau, and served to draw further attention to the issue of child abuse.

This child abuse movement further encouraged intervention into the lives of families, based on psychodynamic conceptions of the faults of the parents. But this movement, which we will argue here was the driving force behind the increase in the child placement rate, would not have eventuated in this result if new resources had not become available.

As it happened, Title IV of the Social Security Act was amended in 1961 to make federal monies available to states for court-ordered placement of children from families receiving ADC (later AFDC) (Rosenthal and Louis, 1981). However, state child welfare agencies continued to circumvent the courts in the large majority of their placements (Mnookin, 1973; Gershenson, 1984). Thus if this AFDC-FC program functioned as an incentive to increased placement, it did so to a limited extent.

More importantly, the Public Welfare Amendments (to the Social Security Act) of 1962 provided grants-in-aid to the states for social services. These amendments compelled the federal government to match, by 75%, whatever state governments spent on "social services," a term that was left ill-defined, with no ceiling placed on the amount that could be

spent (Derthick, 1975, pp. 1-14). The amendments of 1967 further expanded the scope of spending. Under these amendments, federal spending for social services rose from \$194 million in 1963 to \$354 million in 1969, and then soared to \$1.7 billion by 1972, after which Congress enacted a \$2.5 billion ceiling (Derthick, 1975, pp. 1-14). Federal spending did reach \$2.5 billion by 1977 (Bixby, 1981). It is not known exactly how all of this money was spent, but there are indications that a large proportion did go for foster care (Derthick, 1975, p. 2; Mott, 1976, p. 25). Total expenditures (including federal, state, and local) for social services increased from \$712.6 million in 1970 to \$3.2 billion by 1977 (Bixby, 1981).

In addition, under these same amendments, fixed federal grants to states specifically earmarked for child welfare services rose from \$13.4 million in 1960 to \$56.5 million by 1977 (Bixby, 1981). These expenditures, however, continued to constitute only a small portion of total expenditures specifically designated as child welfare spending, which rose from \$211.5 million in 1960 to \$810 million by 1977, indicating that the states themselves contributed heavily to increased child welfare spending (Bixby, 1981).

Public child welfare agencies expanded enormously during this period, allowing these agencies to investigate more and more cases. In New Jersey, for example, the number of employees of the state child welfare agency rose from under 500 in 1965 (when it was the Bureau of Children's Services) to over 2,000 in 1975 (as the Division of Youth and Family Services) (*Governor's Budget Message*, 1966, 1977). The caseload more than doubled from 19,249 children in 1968 to 44,688 children in 1974 (New Jersey Bureau of Children's Services, 1968; New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services, 1974).

Ironically, although the intent of the amendments was to "strengthen family life," they served to provide the resources for a child abuse crusade whose thrust was to detect psychological defects in impoverished parents rather than to provide concrete services in the home. The crusade provided

the reports to be investigated and the rationale for child removal; the amendments provided the resources for more caseworkers to be hired who could investigate more reports and remove more children.

An increase in the number of caseworkers would not necessarily have led to more removals were it not for the fact that foster care was the primary resource that child welfare agencies possessed. If these agencies had used the social services monies to develop concrete supportive services for the home, then the increased number of workers could have provided more of these, rather than more foster care.

But of great significance was the fact that child neglect had been redefined, in a sense, as child abuse (Wolock and Horowitz, 1984). The image created in the public's mind through the media, often through vivid photographs, was of brutally battered children of the type that Kempe had seen in his Denver hospital. The large, often exaggerated numbers, however, cited by proponents of the movement in order to claim that child abuse had reached "epidemic proportions," referred mainly to cases of far milder abuse, and to the many more cases of marginal neglect seen by public agencies (Pelton, 1978). Aiding this conception of an epidemic was the psychodynamic medical model of child abuse introduced by Kempe and his associates which the social work profession, long enamored of psychodynamic explanations of behavior, embraced wholeheartedly, and the contention that child abuse and neglect "afflicted" families without regard to socioeconomic standing (Pelton, 1978).

Hence child neglect, together with abuse, was seen no longer as an aspect or result of poverty, but as a psychological problem, calling for psychological treatment. When the suspect parents did not respond to "treatment," the children were more likely to be shipped off to foster care, this removal aided by the new and more severe image of what neglect entailed. The fact that the children removed were, as such children have always been, among the poorest children in our society, did not disturb the removers, who held, and continue to hold, to a belief in the myth of classlessness (Pelton, 1978). Under the influence of the new model, even if

more money had been wrested from foster care, it more likely would have gone for more counseling and therapy than for concrete services. In any event, the psychodynamic medical model and the myth of classlessness have facilitated child removal by encouraging the already present inclinations to look for personal deficits in poor people and to overlook the socioeconomic factors involved.

So powerful was the combination of forces described above that it led to the increase in the child placement rate despite the fact that, at least from the late 1950s on, many studies and reports began to indicate to child welfare professionals that separation and the foster care system were doing considerable harm to children (e.g. Maas and Engler, 1959; Wald, 1976). However, due to eventual alarm over the large number of children in foster care and the fact that many children were remaining in foster care for very long periods of time, "permanency planning" became a broad and popular movement within the child welfare field during the late 1970s, and later became a major aspect of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980. The main thrust of this movement has been aimed at children already in foster care: to either get them returned home or freed for adoption. The decline in the child placement rate between 1977 and 1982 is attributable to conscious efforts on the part of public child welfare agencies to decrease the size of the foster care population.

As we have noted, there are indications that the child placement rate was on the rise again by 1983. Indeed, more children *entered* foster care in FY 1983 than in FY 1982 (Tatara and Pettiford, 1985, pp. 33-34). It is possible, then, that the rise is due to a continuing failure to deal with the "front end" of the foster care system, i.e., prevention of foster care placement in the first instance. The permanency planning philosophy, because it is largely directed at children already in foster care, and because it has spurred a push toward adoptions as well as toward returning children home, may lead to increasing numbers of displaced children remaining where they are, but now with adoption papers in hand and parental rights terminated. The child placement rate is on

the rise again despite this push toward adoption. It is as though the child welfare establishment wants to have it both ways: the child abuse crusade continues unabated so that children are placed in foster care almost as readily as before, and attempts are made to keep the foster care population down by getting children out of foster care more quickly. Prevention continues to take a back seat.

CONCLUSIONS

As stated before, it is largely poor children who populate the foster care system. In her 1967 paper on foster care, after reviewing some of the evidence on the high incidence of poverty among families whose children are placed in foster care, Bernice Boehm (1970, p. 222) wrote:

"It is more than half a century since the tenet was first enunciated that 'no child should be separated from his family for reasons of poverty alone.' It is unforgivable that in more than half a century this basic principle, to which there is such strong commitment, has not been implemented. It may be true that in many instances we do not place for poverty alone, because poverty seldom comes 'alone.' "

Now, three quarters of a century have elapsed, and Boehm's statement still holds true. It is as though some minimal quota of children from poor families is still being sent into foster care, but for different stated reasons. Before the turn of the century, poverty itself would suffice as the reason, although there was the implicit assumption that poverty itself was an indication of the unfitness and immorality of the parents. Later, when poverty was identified as a force outside of parents, and it was held that children should not be removed for reasons of "poverty alone," it was incumbent upon the child removers to make separate "findings" of the unfitness and immorality of impoverished parents. And in more recent times, the parents are not perceived as immoral, but as psychologically defective in some way. If poverty can no longer be located in the parents, then at least the effects of poverty on parents and children can be located there, and children would not be removed for "poverty

alone." The behavioral effects of poverty would now call forth the attribution of motives and personality characteristics indicative of psychological deficiencies. Thus the reasons would be couched in the modern benevolent language of psychology, but the results would be the same: the victims of poverty would be blamed, and the children would be removed.

The number of related children under age eighteen living in families below the poverty level, as well as the poverty rate for such children, for selected years from 1960 to 1982, are shown in Table 1 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983, p. 21). The poverty rates for children are also plotted in Figure 2. It can be seen that the child placement rates bears no apparent relationship to the poverty rate. For example, during the period 1960-75, the poverty rate declined and then rose, but the child placement rate rose throughout.

On the other hand, we must keep in mind that the children *in* foster care, by and large, come from families living in poverty. Indeed, it is somewhat misleading to calculate placement rates based on the total child population of the nation, since the "pool" from which foster children are drawn more closely corresponds to the smaller "pool" of children who live below the poverty level. Poverty placement rates (i.e., the number of children in foster care per every 100 children living with their own families below the poverty level) for selected years from 1961 to 1983 are presented in Table 1 and plotted in Figure 2. We see that trends in the poverty placement rate parallel those in the original placement rate, although at far higher levels. If foster care population estimates could be taken at face value, we would be able to say that in the 1980s, about two children reside in foster care for every 100 children residing with their own families below the poverty level.

When AFDC recipient families on the caseload of New Jersey's state child welfare agency for alleged abuse and neglect were compared with AFDC families not known to that agency, the former were found to be the poorest of the poor (Wolock and Horowitz, 1979). It is possible that the "pool" from which foster care children are drawn is even smaller

than the one we have just indicated: they may be drawn from an underclass of families most deeply submerged below the poverty level. This might explain why the fivefold increase in the number of children covered by AFDC benefits between 1955 and 1975 did not serve to stem the rise in the placement rate ("Current Operating Statistics," 1985, p. 74). That is, foster children might largely come from a harder-core subset of impoverished families who have always availed themselves of AFDC support.

We may conclude that the child placement rate is not related to the poverty rate, but rather to how our society has treated or dealt with the children of families living in poverty, and especially of those most deeply submerged in poverty. There has always been a sufficient "pool" of impoverished families available to supply large numbers of children to the foster care system. The crucial variable affecting child placement rates has been the nature of the social interventions engaged in by society, not the fluctuating size of the poverty population. One hesitates to say that the crucial factor has been "social policy" in regard to child welfare, for the stated policy through much of this century has been to strengthen and preserve families. Rather, we must look to the social programs implemented, sometimes in the name of that policy, and often misguidedly, that have reflected deep-rooted attitudes toward poor people, and toward approaches needed for the protection of children.

In recent years, perhaps a cyclical pattern has been set in motion in which periodic concerns over child abuse prevention will push up the foster care placement rate, until alarm is again expressed over the rising foster care population. The perception of the value of child abuse prevention as seemingly in conflict with the value of separating as few children as possible is, however, only a product of particular conceptions of child abuse, based on the psychodynamic medical model of child abuse originated by C. Henry Kempe and his colleagues back in the early 1960s. The abiding and prevalent inclination in our society to seek the causes of harm to poor children in the supposed personality deficits of their

parents, whether couched in terms of moralistic or psychological shortcomings, rather than in socioeconomic conditions and forces, will continue to create imagined conflicts between prevention and family preservation.

Under these dynamics, we may expect no sustained reduction in the child placement rate below recent levels. Child welfare officials will continue to respond merely to the immediacy of events, such as a rise in the foster care population, without any significant reform occurring. This pessimistic conclusion is premised on the belief that the social awareness of our society that does indeed find expression in many of its social policies is nonetheless underlain by a deep-seated suspicion of the poor, and that this suspicion will continue to guide the manner in which our programs are carried out and, in effect, the way we deal with the poor.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. See, for example, Jenkins and Norman (1972), Claburn and Magura (1977), Gruber (1978), and Levit (1979). Jenkins and Norman, in their study of foster children in New York City, found that just prior to placement, "most of the children in the study lived in impoverished households located in the poorest neighborhoods" of that city (p. 19). It is an interesting fact in itself that there have been no efforts to gather national statistics on the economic status of families from whence foster children come. However, many state and local research studies, such as Gruber's on foster children in Massachusetts, leave no doubt that most such children come from impoverished families.
2. Of the total of 151,441 children in foster care in 1910, 39,927 were outside of institutions (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1913, p. 28, Table 19). On February 1, 1923, there were 218,523 children in the care of institutions and child-placing societies primarily for the care of dependents (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1927, p. 18, Table 2). The figure for 1933 indicates the number of children in agencies' institutions and foster homes, representing institutions and agencies caring for dependent and neglected children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1935, p. 8, Table 4; p. 1).
3. The figure for 1961 represents children in institutions for the dependent and neglected, in foster family homes, and in group homes (U.S. Children's Bureau, 1962, p. 30, Table 25). The figures for 1963 and 1965 represent the same categories (U. S. Children's Bureau,

1964, p. 9, Table 6; 1966, p. 15, Table 2). We do not present the 1960 statistics here because of an apparent incomplete implementation of the system during its first year of operation (see Jeter, 1962; U. S. Children's Bureau, 1961).

4. See, for example, Jeter and Lajewski (1958). Before 1961, the estimates reported in the Children's Bureau Statistical Series did not include children served only by voluntary child welfare programs. This led to considerable undercounts of children in institutions. Considering all available information, our best guess is that it is not likely that the foster care population, after 1933, ever dipped below 200,000, nor the child placement rate (see text) below 3.5.
5. The estimate for 1975 is from a Children's Defense Fund study, based on a variety of statistical data (Knitzer, Allen, and McGowan, 1978). The 1977 estimate, from a Ewstat study, is based on a sample of almost 10,000 case records from a sample of 315 local public child welfare agencies (Shyne and Shroeder, 1978). The 1979 estimate is based on a survey by the U.S. Office of Civil Rights requesting all of the more than 2,400 public child welfare agencies in the country to provide statistical information (U.S. Office of Civil Rights, 1980). The 1980 estimate was derived from state statistical reports by the Child Welfare League of America (1983). The 243,000 figure for 1982 was due to a study by Maximus, Inc., based on a sampling of case records from a national sample of 167 local public child welfare agencies (Maximus, Inc., 1983). Finally, the American Public Welfare Association estimates for 1981, 1982, and 1983 were derived from state statistical reports (see Tatara and Pettiford, 1985, p. 32, Table III). The 1982 262,000 figure refers to the last day of FY 1982, the 263,000 figure to the first day of FY 1983, and the 269,000 figure to the last day of FY 1983.
6. For example, there has been variation in regard to the inclusion of children in pre-adoptive homes, emergency care, detention centers, runaway shelters, independent living arrangements, and those living with relatives and whose placements were arranged and/or paid for by public child welfare agencies. According to Dr. Charles Gershenson of the Children's Bureau, 10 different state definitions of foster care are currently in use (Gershenson, 1985). According to Dr. Toshio Tatara, who directs the American Public Welfare Association data collection effort, 34 states define children in pre-adoptive homes as part of the foster care population, while the remaining states consider such children to have left foster care (Tatara, 1985).
7. According to Dr. Charles Gershenson, it has been determined by Westat and the Children's Bureau that of the apparent decline of 200,000 children from the 1977 Westat estimate to the Office of Civil

Rights figure for 1979, 110,000 was due to definitional differences and therefore was not real.

8. At the time that this article went to press, the latest as yet unpublished statistics available from the American Public Welfare Association surveys indicated a continued rise in the foster care population to 276,000 at the end of FY 1984.
9. For example, according to a report by the State of New Jersey Pension Survey Commission (1932), there were 3,685 children under state supervision in foster homes and institutions in October 1931. Of these plus another 894 children placed with relatives, 557 were orphans.

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