An Inquiry into the Risk Factors Affecting Foster Care Children: A Literature Review

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Introduction
Throughout my journey as a Social Work student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, I have been particularly interested in working with Foster Care youth and families. Every child deserves to have a strong foundation to stand on as they work towards meeting the life goals they have set for themselves. However, the family that they are born into may not provide them with the structure or care they need to meet these selected milestones. Many families do not have access to the resources they need to take care of a child, or they engage in abusive and neglectful behaviors that have negative impacts on a child’s development. This is why the Foster Care System is such an important organization. Social Workers within the organization are tasked with assisting a child with transitioning from a harmful household into one that is conducive towards positive development and experiences. I want to be part of the team that allows a child to find the home that best fits them and allows them to explore their world in a productive, nurturing, and creative way.

However, not all Foster Care transitions are positive. Despite the system promoting the finding of safe homes for children to stay in, there have been many reports of children being continuously placed in abusive or neglectful households. This goes against everything the child welfare system and the National Association of Social Workers stand for and needs rectification. Still, many individuals may not put effort towards rectification if they do not have access to the proof and evidence of the abuse that takes place. This is the purpose of this literature review. I will be discussing peer-reviewed articles and information from news networks that reveal several concerning components about the Foster Care System. Some of these components include the prevalence of abuse within the system, the types of abuse that are most reported, potential discriminatory practices used by social workers, and potential ways that we can provide support to the victims of these tragedies. I will provide a summary of the information contained within the study or article, and then discuss the aspects that add to or take away from the validity of the
information provided. Please keep in mind that this review is not a comprehensive list of every academic journal or article related to abusive actions used within the system. Instead, it is supposed to show that this is a pressing issue that is affecting the lives of many innocent children. I hope that by reading this review, others will become inspired to act towards promoting the safety of foster children as they transition into new homes. Therefore, the research question that I ask is, “What are the risk factors associated with the Foster Care System that make it more likely for children to be placed within abusive households?”

Literature Review
The first article up for discussion was published by The University of Chicago Press Journal. In this study, researchers aimed to discover the reasons behind the instability of foster home placements. In other words, research was conducted to see which factors increased the chances of a child being separated or removed from a foster family they were placed into the care of. The factors they studied were behavioral characteristics of the child, uncontrollable events within the family unit, and any abusive actions taken by the parents. Case files were collected from 1,084 foster children aged 0-16 from the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency in the 1990s (James, 2004). Many of these case files involved the use of a Child Behavior Checklist, a tool provided to the children by their foster parents to keep track of any positive or negative behaviors the children expressed because of the placement. However, since many did not contain this information, the sample size was reduced to 580 participants. Then, researchers began combing through the information presented in the files, which included a general timeline of the adverse events and situations that were experienced by the foster children (James, 2004). Supervisors instructed researchers on how to go about reviewing the information, while also making sure that they gave an objective and true report of what they were reading. Finally, the various types of maltreatment experienced by these children were placed into an online program to determine which ones were the most prevalent in the lives of these children during the eighteen months of placements. Once the information was fully computed, it was discovered that about 70% of the children studied were removed from their homes due to changes within the Foster Care System’s policies, such as attempts to keep foster care siblings together, or due to a lack of departmental funding (James, 2004). 20% of the children expressed negative behaviors towards their new families, mainly due to a misunderstanding between children and foster parents about their needs and personalities (James, 2004). Finally, 10% of the children studied were removed from their households due to situations such as abuse, familial crises, and
biological parents attempting to integrate themselves back into the lives of their children (James, 2004).

There are many aspects of this study that solidify the validity of the findings. For example, reading of the case studies was only done under strict supervision by other researchers and social workers. The expectations for the gathering of information were reiterated several times throughout the study, and supervisors reviewed documentation completed by the researchers to make sure it reflected the exact wording of the files. This supervision allowed for the reassurance that future readers are provided with valid findings and information, which could then be used for further study. However, this study utilized data from the 1990s, rather than using case files from recent years. While 1990 isn’t too large of a gap from 2024, the world has still changed much since then, so the ability to utilize this information today comes into question. This study was also conducted solely using the foster children’s case files, instead of trying to speak to them directly. Researchers claimed that these files did not contain a complete history of the maltreatment the children were exposed to, so the factors for replacement may not be entirely accurate. Many cases of maltreatment go unreported, so it is possible a similar phenomenon happened here.

The second study utilized for this review was published in February 2017 in a book titled Child Abuse and Neglect: The Intellectual Journal. This study, published by researchers Kristin Turney and Christopher Wildeman, aimed to discover the rates at which Foster Children are exposed to unfortunate life circumstances compared to the rates of children not within the system (Turney and Wildeman, 2017). Incorporating various factors, such as race, age, and socioeconomic status, a sample of 91,261 participants was used for the study. These individuals were identified using the National Survey of Children’s Health results between the years of 2011 and 2012. This survey, completed prior to the research study, tasked individuals with conducting
interviews with foster care families and non-foster care families about the specified foster child. These interviews were completed over the phone, and families provided a wide array of adverse life events that the child had experienced (Turney and Wildeman, 2017). Some of these were abuse perpetrated by a previous or existing foster parent, familial divorce, mental health conditions experienced by parents or guardians, or the death of a guardian. Researchers also set out to find control samples for the studies, including children that had been experiencing a negative life event prior to being placed in foster care, or from the moment of their birth. Upon completion of information analysis, it was discovered that children exposed to the Foster Care system were more likely to experience negative life events. For example, about 34% of foster children experienced parental abuse; 45% experienced parental divorce; 33% observed mental health conditions in parental figures; and 11.5% experienced the death of a parental figure (Turney and Wildeman, 2017). Children not exposed to foster care experienced these at a lowered rate: 6.9% for parental abuse; 19% for parental divorce; 8.2% for mental illness in a family member; and 2.8% for death of a parental figure (Turney and Wildeman, 2017). Therefore, it was determined that Foster Care increased the risk for children to experience negative life events.

Unlike the previous study, this article utilizes information collected from a more recent time, between the years of 2011-2012. This means that the data observed could be more representative of the current population of foster care youth. This study also used control groups to determine if the unfortunate life events were directly correlated to Foster Care exposure rather than simple coincidences. These control groups were created using various factors, such as socioeconomic status, to provide other possible explanations for these experiences. For example, if a child experienced parental divorce, it may have been due to a lack of financial resources rather than being a part of a Foster Care family. However, one of the main problems presented by this study
is the fact that researchers gathered this information from a past survey of foster children rather than reaching out to existing families. This creates the possibility of outdated findings, but also room for potential biases within the researchers themselves.

The third study I would like to present was also published in *Child Abuse and Neglect: The Intellectual Journal*. Published in January 2017, this study assessed the potential racial biases within the Child Welfare System as it related to Indigenous foster care children. A study sample of 230 participants was created to discover the rates of maltreatment, and the recurrence of maltreatment, between Indigenous and White populations (Landers, et.al., n.d.). As a basis for this study, researchers referred to data collected during the Experiences of Adopted and Fostered Individuals conducted at the University of Minnesota. Questionnaires were provided to the participants, who were informed about the study through various media sources, asking them to provide descriptions of their time within the Foster Care System. Despite being made available to 336 individuals of various ethnicities and races, the number of surveys analyzed was reduced to 230 participants to specifically compare the responses between Indigenous and White people (Landers, et.al., n.d.). Participants were required to describe information such as their age, if they had experienced adoption or foster care, socioeconomic status, and the types of maltreatment they endured. They were also asked to report the number of times maltreatment occurred to see which group was at a higher risk. At the end of the study, it was discovered that Indigenous populations experienced physical, emotional, sexual, and spiritual abuse at a higher rate than White children. For example, about 63% of Indigenous cases contained some form of physical abuse, while 38% of White children experienced similar circumstances (Landers, et.al., n.d.).

This scientific study is different from the ones we have previously discussed because it was able to discover not only differences in the types of abuse experienced by these different groups, but
also some similarities. For example, while the instances of physical abuse were higher for Indigenous foster children, the percentages of emotional abuse were almost exactly the same. This may imply that emotional abuse is universally experienced by many foster care children instead of being separated by racial and ethnic categories. Therefore, it may prove useful to include emotional abuse in many future studies of foster care cases to create resources and solutions that address it. This, combined with the recent publication of the article itself, may be more representative of the issues faced by these populations in today’s world. However, one major flaw in this article is how the case files were selected. Like the previous studies, researchers used information from a previous survey instead of conducting their own. However, the previous studies didn’t remove case files from the sample but presented all the original data. This study was mainly focused on the unfortunate experiences of Indigenous and White foster children, so they had to remove the responses of other participants who did not fit within these categories. While the comparison of information may be similar, the results and analysis may be a little skewed. For example, other racial and ethnic groups may have experienced a higher percentage of maltreatment than Indigenous populations, which would bring the results of the study into question.

The fourth study I would like to discuss was published in May 2017 in an academic journal titled the *Children and Youth Services Review*. Authors Nicholas E. Kahn and Mary Eschelbach Hansen claim that Black and African American children made up about 22% of children living in the Texas Foster Care System during the year of 2014 (Kahn & Hansen, 2017). Since this minority is smaller in the United States, researchers began to wonder if they would experience Foster Care placement at a higher rate than White foster children. Therefore, they began looking into case files between the years of 2000 and 2013 to see if this claim was true, and to discover what the rates of maltreatment were for this group (Kahn & Hansen, 2017). These case files
were obtained from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, which delves into foster care placement decision-making. The reports themselves involve state-certified information about the types and dates of maltreatment experienced by the different groups, confirmed using an online program known as the Enhanced Validation and Analysis Application (Kahn & Hansen, 2017). This online program is operated by Social Workers assigned to a specific child’s case, and they ensure that their findings match those of a partner or supervisor who also has jurisdiction to view the case information. Upon completion of data collection, researcher discovered that it is about 2.5 times higher for Black children to be placed within Foster Care than White children (Kahn & Hansen, 2017). They were also discovered to have experienced a higher level of maltreatment from their biological and foster families that resulted in their placement.

The main success of this study comes from the willingness of the researchers to provide the original statistics discovered from the selected child welfare cases, and how those statistics had changed over time. For example, figures two and three in the study show that Black and Hispanic children had a higher rate of Foster Care placement between the years of 2002 and 2005 when compared to White children. However, researchers explain that in 2005, Texas implemented cultural competence training for social workers to reduce the overrepresentation of minority groups within Foster Care. The tables reflect this information, showing that the training allowed for similar rates of representation within the system. This may indicate a lowered chance of racial bias within the social workers themselves and instead reflect on the lack of recourses experienced by minority groups in the United States. However, despite the more even representation of these different groups, the rates of foster care placement for minority groups were still higher than the rates for White children. The study doesn’t offer a comprehensive explanation for this trend and uses complicated jargon and tables to describe the information they
do have. While the researchers explain that the case files themselves had missing information, this, combined with the confusing wording, may not be able to be interpreted by a diverse group of people. People view and interpret information in vastly different ways, so if a study is not written or presented in a universally understood format, the number of individuals who can use the information is severely limited.

The fifth and final article I bring up for review is a report provided by the Cable News Network, or CNN, describing the horrific experiences of the Turpin family at the hands of their biological parents, and the foster families they were placed into. While this article isn’t a scientific study containing statistics or data, I believed it is important to include in this literature review so we could see some of the maltreatment experienced by Foster Youth in action. The Turpin Family, after being removed from their biological household, were placed into the care of an unnamed couple in Riverside County, California (Casarez & Maxouris, 2022). Upon arriving in this placement, six Turpin children were subjected to various forms of neglect and abuse. Some of this abuse was physical, involving the parents using household objects as weapons against the children. Some of the abuse was emotional, with the foster parents telling their children that they should engage in self-harming behaviors due to the lack of love and nurture within the household (Casarez & Maxouris, 2022). While some foster children may be forced into silence out of fear of retaliation, the Turpin family took it upon themselves to report this behavior to the Social Workers assigned to their case. However, despite their many attempts to bring light to the situation, ChildNet Youth and Family Services refused to acknowledge the claims. Some employees of this agency responded to this saying that previous reports were created about the abuse experienced by these children in multiple Foster Care Placements, but no one thought anything of it (Casarez & Maxouris, 2022). Previous reports also indicated that the family had a long history of abusing foster children, but the agency still decided to place the children in their
Eventually, the family was arrested when the Turpin children sought legal action against their abusers, and their time of horror within this household had ended.

This article is crucial towards understanding the maltreatment and neglect foster children experience while in the care of their foster parents for two main reasons. The first reason is that this article uses specific language and quotes from Social Workers assigned to the case to describe the types of abuse the Turpin Children were subjected to. By describing the abuse experienced by these children in detail and including real-life quotes from professionals in the field, the article solidifies the validity of the story itself. The descriptions help to create a clear understanding and picture of the trend of abuse within foster families, and the quotes from individuals speaking out against their employers show the abuse that can be perpetrated by the system itself. In other words, the story provides a comprehensive overview of where maltreatment can originate from, which can assist researchers in providing specific solutions to address these exact problems. One potential flaw within this article is that it does not contain any quotes or testimonials from the foster family itself. These would allow researchers to view the story from the Turpin children's and the foster family they were placed with. However, due to legal reasons, obtaining this information could have been hard for the authors to execute. A second flaw comes from the potential bias of the author themselves when they were creating this article. Since this article is not peer-reviewed in the traditional sense of academic journalism, it is hard to tell if these quotes are exactly what the respondents said as they answered the questions posed to them. The author could be writing these quotes under the guise of validity to possibly overinflate the seriousness of the situation.
Conclusion

Prior to the completion of this literature review, I firmly believed that a large amount of child maltreatment cases within the United States Child Welfare system originated from the foster families themselves. I thought that no matter how hard the Social Workers and Supervisors worked to find foster children safe homes, the households they discovered had a high chance of becoming abusive and harmful. However, the knowledge that I have gained from this review tells me that abuse within the Foster Care System can come from a variety of sources, not just foster parents. Some of these sources include the Social Workers assigned to the cases or the
supervisors within the system. This abuse can stem from policy changes within the departments, or the potential biases held within the Social Workers themselves. For example, the higher rates of abuse and foster care placement among foster children from minority groups could be a result of racial prejudices that prevent these children from being placed in safe and nurturing homes. Or, as seen within the case of the Turpin children, some child welfare employees may be willing to avoid addressing abuse allegations to avoid going through the process multiple times to find them a different home. This, along with the accounts of abuse from within foster families themselves, solidifies in my mind that there is a trend of abuse within the Child Welfare System, and requires research into several different factors to create comprehensive and effective solutions. I am inspired to continue my research into the system itself, while also making sure to address societal structures and resource availability that can lead to abuse. However, as this review has taught me, not all sources will be completely reliable. I need to be patient and deliberate with selecting the sources for my research to secure a safe future for Foster Care youth.

Works Cited


