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A History of Child Welfare in the United States

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A History of Child Welfare in the United States

The United States child welfare system varies according to state, but a common objective everywhere is the goal to enhance families' abilities to care for their children. Additionally, the child welfare system encompasses foster care and adoption. Foster care is often meant to fill a gap in a child's life when parents are unable to care for them due to abuse or neglect (PAFamiliesinc, 2014). According to 2018 statistics, there are approximately 437,000 children waiting in the foster care system (Child Welfare Information Gateway [CWIG], 2020a). Many of those children enter adulthood without a family. Beam (2013) highlights the situation of over

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6,000 adolescents waiting in New York, and notes that only 6 percent are still asking for adoption at age 17. The majority of these youths expect to transition to independent living after giving up the hope of adoption (Beam, 2013).

Statistics regarding foster care outcomes are grim: Research suggests that between 11%-36% of children who “age out” of

Child welfare has continually revised what is normally the acceptable treatment of children.

foster care become homeless during the process, and those children are at greater risk of problems like mental illness and addiction (Dworsky et al., 2013). Despite over a century of organized child welfare, services for families and children still face the challenges of system failures and complex individual needs. The social work profession can benefit from casting a glance at the history of the child welfare system.

History

There has always been some form of care for children in the United States, but organized child welfare did not exist before 1875 (Meyers, 2008). Prior to the mid-1800s, many impoverished children were taken into apprenticeships, but most often they received institutional care (Trattner, 1999).^[1] According to Trattner (1999), an insurgence of immigrants and a rise in dangerous factory work in the mid-1800s created not only a class of poor children, but also one that was at risk of illness and injury in the factory industry. Children whose mothers worked long hours were also at a higher risk of delinquency. At that time, society was concerned

that the next generation ought to possess ideal character traits, and as such, a growing child welfare movement could function as a form of social control (Trattner, 1999).

Research clearly shows that foster children are at risk for a myriad of problems later in life.

Organized child welfare in the United States began with the New York Children's Aid Society, which was founded in 1853 by

Charles Loring Brace (Trattner, 1999). This "placing out" program, which matched children to families who were intended to meet their physical needs, as well as provide nurturance and the love of a family, is considered to be the beginning of foster care (Cook, 1995; Nelson, 2020). The Children's Aid Society is most remembered for its orphan trains, which moved poor children – with or without parents – from New York City to the countryside (Cook, 1995). The orphan train ran until 1929 (Kidder, 2003).

Throughout the mid- to late-1800s, the crux of the child welfare movement became child rescue, an emphasis shaped by Brace and his organization (Nelson, 2020). However, Brace's work often neglected screening or following up on the child's situation with their new family. Nevertheless, a mindset grew that children needed nurturing, a philosophy that is still widely accepted in the United States (Nelson, 2020).

In 1874, child abuse entered the national consciousness with the case of Mary Ellen Wilson, a young girl who was harshly abused by her guardians. Myers (2008) claims that at this point there was no such thing as child protective services, and Mary Ellen's rescuer relied on the American Society for the

Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and its influential founder, Henry Bergh, to form a case to save Mary Ellen. In response to this situation, in 1875 the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was formed, the first organization devoted solely to child protection. At this point, child welfare remained charitable, and was not connected to government (Myers, 2008).

In 1909, Theodore Roosevelt and child welfare leaders held the White House Conference in support of the Mother's Pension Movement, which was the predecessor of welfare as we know it. This movement advocated that children should not be removed from their homes solely due to poverty (Nelson, 2020). Indeed, the pensions resulting from this conference were only available to widowed and primarily white mothers; not to women of color, mothers with children born out of wedlock, divorced, or abandoned mothers (Nelson, 2020).

Despite over a century of organized child welfare, services for families and children still face the challenges of system failures and complex individual needs. The social work profession can benefit from casting a glance at the history of the child welfare system.

The early twentieth century saw the 1912 creation of the Federal Children's Bureau, which dealt with investigating matters related to child and maternal well-being, and in 1921 the Sheppard-Towner Act. This was the first major federal law in the United States focusing on infant and maternal health, and it provided money for health services for mothers and babies (Rodems et al., 2011). However, it was during the Great Depression and the New Deal that the federal government took on a new role in

welfare spending; for the first time, charity organizations were no longer the main sources of welfare, and the federal government provided financial relief for families in need (Myers, 2008).

The 1970s and beyond saw an abundance of policy changes which focused on the adoption process for families and safety.

Child welfare has continually revised what is normally the acceptable treatment of children. As Myers (2008) explains, in the middle of the 20th

century, child abuse factored more prominently in the national consciousness with the work of John Caffey, who revealed the abusive origins of some childhood injuries. In 1962 Henry Kempe coined the term “Battered Child Syndrome”, further drawing national attention to child abuse. Federal Children’s Bureau meetings were held in response, and this led to the formation of the first child abuse reporting laws. By 1967 all states had enacted such legislature (Myers, 2008).

The 1970s and beyond saw an abundance of policy changes which focused on the adoption process for families and safety. Shifts in fostering and adoption legislature included the 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (Gelles, 1998; Myers, 2008), the 1994 Multiethnic Placement Act (Curtis & Alexander, 1996), and the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (Gelles, 1998). Throughout the early 2000s, growth occurred in kinship adoptions and legally permanent kinship guardianships (Hegar & Scannapieco, 2017).

Importance Of The Problem

Between 2018 and 2021, the number of children trapped in the child welfare system totaled around 424,000-437,000 (CWIG, 2020a;

The early twentieth century saw the 1912 creation of the Federal Children's Bureau, which dealt with investigating matters related to child and maternal well-being.

Children's Rights, 2021). Meanwhile, the number of children waiting for adoption from the US foster care system has increased from 108,000 children in 2010 to 122,000 children in 2019 (CWIG, 2020b). Research clearly shows that foster children are at risk for a myriad of problems later in life. Of the 17,884 youths who aged out of the foster system in 2018, only about 58% graduated high school by age 19; and only one-fifth of these former foster children will have a high school diploma or GED by age 26 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020). Additionally, it is known that by age 26, 20% of youths who have aged out of foster care will have become homeless (Dworsky et al., 2013). Foster children are also much more likely to enter the criminal justice system later in life (Juvenile Law Center, 2018).

According to Shea (2018), the opioid epidemic has taken its toll on children and families. The number of children, especially infants and toddlers, being removed from their homes has grown exponentially during the opioid crisis. Indeed, one of the indirect costs of the opioid crisis is that parents are unable to care for their children (Shea, 2018). According to Feeding America (2021), potentially 13 million children (about twice the population of Arizona) experience daily hunger in the United States, and households with children are more likely to experience food insecurity (Feeding America, 2021). Considering the Covid-19 and opioid crises and related economic fallout, it seems timelier than ever

to invest in families and their ability to care for and nurture their children.

Policy Points Over History

Pertinent child welfare policies which have taken shape over the past 150 years have grappled with children's needs and their safety. Early child welfare activities were primarily devoted to the growth of organizations and found the basis of the system that we know today. The Sheppard-Towner Act established federal money for health services for mothers and babies. Out of this act came an incredibly well-organized informational campaign, the purpose of which was to improve the health of mothers and their babies (Rodems et al., 2011). Roosevelt's New Deal and its aid to dependent children was significant because it marked the shift away from charity welfare and established the beginning of federal welfare for children and families (Myers, 2008).

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In a major step, by 1967 all states had enacted child abuse laws, and throughout the 1970s the child protection system had begun to recognize the problem of sexual

abuse (Myers, 2008). In 1974, the Child Abuse and Treatment Act (CAPTA) authorized federal funds to improve state responses to child abuse claims, and it enabled workers to link children with early intervention services and to develop plans of care (Chasnoff et al., 2018; Myers, 2008). This was followed by the Indian Child Welfare Act, which prevented the removal of Native American children

from their homes (Myers, 2008). In 1980, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act was passed, which dealt with the theme Primordial Continuity vs. Bureaucratic Care. According to that law, families should be kept together whenever possible (Gelles, 1998). The 1994 Multiethnic Placement Act removed race as a factor in placement decisions, which was partly in response to the enormous need for adoptive families (Curtis & Alexander, 1996).

By 1997, the prevailing attitude about where children belong had shifted away from the importance of the birth family, as can be seen from the Adoption and Safe Families Act

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(Gelles, 1998). This piece of legislature focused on the safety of children primarily, easing the path to removing children from their natural families, setting stricter and faster timelines toward adoption, and creating financial incentives for states to increase their adoption numbers (Gelles, 1998). At the same time, this created difficulties for birth parents who wanted to keep their children but were serving long prison sentences or facing other custody challenges. Another criticism of the act was that it let irresponsible parents off too easily (Beam, 2013).

Since the early 2000s, several pieces of important legislature have passed, including the 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which offered states opportunities for federal funding to extend services to youth aging out of foster care (Shelbe, 2011). Additionally, the Patient

Protection and Affordable Care Act, a comprehensive health care reform law, marked an extraordinary change in health care (HealthCare.gov, 2010). Families who otherwise may not have had health coverage could now buy health insurance through a federal program.

Policy Debates

Various policy debates have held importance over the history of the child welfare movement. But at the heart of many policy issues resides the question: What does a proper society look like, and who is worthy of help? This can be identified when examining child welfare's beginnings, particularly Charles Loring Brace and his early organized foster care. Brace's orphan trains did not include children of color. Indeed, the children Brace helped were not always orphans, rather they were often delinquent children who Brace "rescued" off the streets and transplanted, thereby attempting to reform the "dangerous or depraved classes" (Trattner, 1999, p.100). Theodore Roosevelt's 1909 Mother's Pension Movement, which only supported widowed white mothers and excluded any other kind of single mother, including African Americans, revealed that era's idea of the "worthy poor mother" (Nelson 2020). We can observe changes in societal attitudes as later policies evolved to include more diverse and neglected groups.

An unresolved discussion of our time is the continued funding of an extremely faulty system instead of focusing more on giving

Over the past few decades, some policy debates have centered on foster care and adoption. Is it better for children to be with

families the support that they need.

birth families, which might be abusive but provide emotional

bonds and roots? Or do children belong in foster care, which inevitably leads to the trauma of separation no matter the foster family, and potentially represent more danger than society cares to think? Policy has swung back and forth with the 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, which advised states to keep families together (Gelles, 1998). By 1997, the tides had turned, and the Adoption and Safe Families Act went to the opposite extreme (Gelles, 1998).

An unresolved discussion of our time is the continued funding of an extremely faulty system instead of focusing more on giving families the support that they need. As changes unfold moving forward, some child welfare advocates stress that the biggest difference in a child's life comes from one reliable person who remains steadily in a child's life, and who is concerned for their well-being (Beam, 2013). However, what is certain is that the child welfare system is imperfect, and despite years of progress it still fails thousands of children each year (Beam, 2013).

Endnote

[1]The first permanent orphanage predates the American Revolution. Founded in Savannah, Georgia, by the Reverend George Whitefield, Bethesda is still in use today as a facility providing child care for emotionally disturbed children (Trattner, 1999).

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Appendix

Timeline

early 1800s and before There has always been some form of child welfare in the US, although organized child welfare did not exist before 1875 (Myers, 2008)

1853 Founding of Children's Aid Society by Charles Loring Brace, Orphan Train, and the concept of foster care (Cook, 1995; Nelson, 2020)

1875 New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which was the world's first organization devoted to the welfare of children, was founded after the 1874 case of Mary Ellen Wilson. Child welfare remained charitable and was not connected to government at this point (Myers, 2008)

1899 The world's first full-fledged juvenile court was established in Chicago (Trattner, 1999; Myers, 2008)

1909 Meeting with Theodore Roosevelt and child welfare leaders in support of the mother's pension movement, which stood for the idea that children should not be removed from their families for simple reasons of poverty. This conference resulted in pensions for widowed mothers only – not mothers single for other reasons (Nelson, 2020)

1912 Creation of the Federal Children's Bureau
(Myers, 2008)

1921-1929 Sheppard-Towner Act (federal money for health services for mothers and babies) (Rodems et al., 2011)

1929 End of the orphan train (Kidder, 2003)

1930s The Great Depression, F.D. Roosevelt's New Deal and the beginning of Social Security, which included Aid to Dependent Children (Myers, 2008)

1946 John Caffey's classic paper on hematoma and fractures in children, leading physicians to notice the abusive origins of some childhood injuries (Myers, 2008)

1962 Henry Kempe's Battered Child Syndrome article, which drew national attention to child abuse. Federal Children's Bureau meetings were first held to respond to child abuse, and these led to the formation of first child abuse reporting laws (Myers, 2008)

1967 All states had enacted child abuse reporting laws (Myers, 2008)

1970s Invisibility of sexual abuse changes, and the child protection system begins to recognize the prevalence of the problem (Myers, 2008)

1974 Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) authorized federal funds improve states' responses to child abuse claims, and establishing a way to link children with states' early intervention services and to develop plans of safe care (Chasnoff et al.; 2018, Myers, 2008)

1978 Indian Child Welfare Act which prevented removal of Native American children from their homes (Myers, 2008)

1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (AACWA) Themes: Primordial continuity vs. Bureaucratic care. States were to make a “reasonable effort” to keep families together (Gelles, 1998; Myers, 2008)

1994 Congress passes Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA), which removes race as a factor in placement decisions, partly in response to the great need for adoptive families (Curtis & Alexander, 1996)

1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) (Gelles, 1998)

1999 Foster Care Independence Act, which was the first federal policy focusing on youth aging out of foster care (Simmel & Kelly, 2019)

2000 Intercountry Adoption Act, which was the federal implementing of the Hague Convention (Pfund, 2002)

2003 Keeping Children and Families Safe Act (Congress.gov, 2003)

2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which offered states opportunities for federal funding to extend services to youth aging out of foster care (Shelbe, 2011)

2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, which was a comprehensive health care reform law (HealthCare.gov, 2010)

2014 Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, which was intended to promote normalcy for foster children by allowing foster parents the authority to enroll their foster children in “normal” activities, which were previously denied (Jacobson, 2016)

2015 Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act of 2015 made penalties for child trafficking more severe, and strengthened the definitions of child abuse and trafficking (Congress.gov, 2015)

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