

Introduction: How the War Against Child Abuse Became a War Against Children

Think of "child abuse" and what comes to mind? Probably a child brutally beaten, raped or tortured by a parent.

Think of "foster care" and what comes to mind? Probably a safe haven for a child of a hopeless addict whose mother just tried to sell him on the street for her next fix.

Think of your local agency responsible for dealing with child abuse, usually called Child Protective Services, and what comes to mind? Probably an agency that supposedly intervenes in only the most serious cases, removes children from their homes only as a last resort, and makes one big mistake: Returning children to dangerous homes because some fuzzy-minded law requires it.

That is the image of child abuse in America painted by much of the nation's child welfare establishment.

That image is false.

By portraying horror stories of brutally abused children as the norm, America's "child savers" (a term they gave themselves in the 19th Century) have persuaded us to cede to them unprecedented power over the lives of children. We have given untrained, inexperienced, sometimes incompetent workers the power to enter our homes, interrogate and strip-search our children and even remove them to foster care entirely on the workers' own authority.

The child savers say they need this near-absolute power in order to protect children. They portray any challenge to their authority as a clash between the rights of children and the rights of parents. **But the trouble with the child protective system in America is not that it hurts parents, though of course it does. The trouble with the system is that it hurts children.**

- It hurts children who have never been maltreated by disrupting their families, invading their privacy, and jeopardizing the bond of trust that is essential for healthy parent-child relationships. More than two million children are victimized by false allegations of child abuse every year.^[1]

- It hurts children by making it too easy to pull them from their homes and place them in the nation's chaotic system of foster care. "Foster care is the garbage dump," says a woman who survived it. "That's what they do with kids when they don't know what else to do with them -- throw 'em in foster care."^[2] The typical foster child was not taken from someone who is brutally abusive or hopelessly addicted. Far more common are

children taken from their parents because the family's poverty has been confused with neglect. (See [Family Preservation Issue Papers 5](#) and [6](#)) Often, these children bounce from home to home, emerging years later unable to love or trust anyone. Far from a last resort, foster care often is the first and only answer offered for every family problem.

And foster care is no guarantee of safety. Some children wind up sleeping in child welfare offices, others end up in institutions that would make Dickens cringe. And the rate of abuse in foster care is higher than the rate of abuse in the general population.

Many of the children now in foster care don't have to be there. Some never needed to be taken in the first place. Others could live safely in their own homes if proper services were provided.

- Perhaps worst of all, the system does terrible harm to the children who need help the most, those who have been severely abused. False and trivial reports flood the system, cascading down upon untrained, inexperienced workers who already have far more than they can handle, stealing their time and attention from children who really do need their intervention. And that is the real reason children "known to the system" sometimes die of abuse. Contrary to the claims of some child savers, there is no law requiring or pressuring for the return of any child to an unsafe home.

This is a system that destroys children in order to save them. But it doesn't have to be this way. The National Coalition for Child Protection Reform supports a series of measures to reform the child protective system from top to bottom. See our series of [Issue Papers on family preservation](#) and our publications, [Civil Liberties Without Exception](#) and [Doing Child Welfare Right](#). These measures would reduce intrusion into innocent families, curb the needless placement of children in foster care, and free up workers to help children who really have been abused and neglected. Contrary to the claims of the child savers, these goals are not contradictory, they are complimentary.

In the pages that follow and on this website we document each of these assertions. We explain how the child protective system has gone so wrong and suggest ways to set it right. We hope that this effort will help turn what too often is a monologue about child abuse into a dialogue.

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1. About 3.5 million children were subjected to child abuse investigations in 2013, and about 81 percent of the reports leading to those investigations were false. See [Supplemental Issue Papers 2 and 3](#) for details and citations.

2. Richard Wexler, *Wounded Innocents: The Real Victims of the War Against Child Abuse* (Prometheus Books: 1990), p.22.