

# NATIONAL COALITION FOR CHILD PROTECTION REFORM

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## **80 PERCENT FAILURE: A Brief Analysis of the Casey Family Programs *Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study***

By Richard Wexler, NCCPR Executive Director

Imagine for a moment that you went to a doctor and he told you the following:

- 80 percent of my patients don't get any better.
- A lot of the time, they get worse.
- One-third of the time, I commit malpractice.

But, the doctor continues, if you'll just pay me even more money than I already get and build me a fancy new hospital, I'm sure I can reduce my failure rate to only about 60 percent. Do we have a deal?

Odds are you'd look for another doctor.

But what if all the other doctors told you the same thing? And what if none of them let on that there were, in fact, better treatments with fewer side effects?

Odds are you'd be furious.

Now, consider a study released on April 7, 2005 by a large, Washington State-based foster-care provider, Casey Family Programs, and Harvard Medical School. The study used case records and interviews to assess the status of young adult "alumni" of foster care.

When compared to adults of the same age and ethnic background who did not endure foster care:

- Only 20 percent of the alumni could be said to be "doing well." Thus, foster care failed for 80 percent.
- They have double the rate of mental illness.
- Their rate of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was double the rate for Iraq War veterans.
- The former foster children were three times more likely to be living in poverty – and fifteen times *less* likely to have finished college.
- And nearly one-third of the alumni reported that they had been abused by a foster parent or another adult in a foster home.

The authors went on to design a complex mathematical formula to attempt to figure out how much they could improve these outcomes if every single problem besetting the foster care system were magically fixed. Their answer: 22.2 percent.

Even if one argues that foster care didn't cause all of these problems, clearly foster care didn't cure them. Yet the authors of the study recommend only more of the same: Pour even more money into foster care to "fix" it to the point that maybe the rotten outcomes could be reduced by 22.2 percent.

At a two-and-a-half-hour briefing for advocates, there was barely a word about keeping children out of foster care in the first place.

Why, then, do we continue to pour billions of dollars into a system which fails 80 percent of the time and actually abuses at least one-third of those forced into it?

We do it because, over 150 years, we've built up a huge, powerful network of foster-care "providers" – "a foster care-industrial complex" with an enormous vested interest in perpetuating the *status quo*. They feed us horror stories about foster children whose birth parents really were brutally abusive or hopelessly addicted. But such cases represent a tiny fraction of the foster-care population.

As is documented in NCCPR's Issue Papers, (<http://nccpr.info/issue-papers/>) far more common are cases in which a family's poverty is confused with child "neglect." Several studies have found, for example, that one-third of foster children could be back home right now if their parents simply had adequate housing. (See NCCPR Issue Paper 5, <http://www.nccpr.org/reports/05SYSTEM.pdf>)

Other cases fall on a broad continuum between the extremes, the parents neither all victim nor all villain. What these cases have in common is the fact that the children would be far better off if states and localities used safe, proven alternatives to foster care – alternatives that don't come with an 80 percent failure rate, and a 33 percent risk of child abuse. (See *Twelve Ways to do Child Welfare Right*, <http://nccpr.info/solutions-services/>).

Nearly as disturbing as the study's findings is how the study authors attempted to spin them.

The finding about the rate of abuse in foster care is not mentioned in the press release accompanying the study. It's not in the Executive Summary. It's not in any of the glossy material that accompanies the report. One must dig it out of the report itself, on page 30. (The full report is available here: <http://bit.ly/7fezK8>)

During the entire briefing for advocates, I waited in vain for the study authors to even mention the issue of abuse in foster care. When I finally asked about it, at the very end of the briefing, one of the researchers tried to blame birth parents, speculating, without a shred of evidence, that maybe the foster children had been abused during visits.

But that is contradicted by the study itself, which states:

"One third (32.8%) of the sample, however, reported some form of maltreatment *by a foster parent or other adult in the foster home* during their foster care experience, *as recorded in their case files*" [emphasis added].

If anything, this underestimates the true rate of abuse, since a major problem in foster care is foster children abusing each other (see NCCPR Issue Paper 1, <http://www.nccpr.org/reports/01SAFETY.pdf> and those cases apparently were not counted in the study.

Of course, some will rush to conclude that because family foster care has failed so badly, we should go back to orphanages. There's just one problem with that. Over a century of research is nearly unanimous: The outcomes for children warehoused in orphanages are even worse. (See NCCPR Issue Paper 15, <http://www.nccpr.org/reports/15Orphanage.pdf>)

Though the authors try desperately to ignore the obvious, their study is one more indication that the only way to fix foster care is to have less of it. Until we realize that, foster care systems will continue to churn out walking wounded – four times out of five. times.