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Changing the Foster Care System

Jacqueline Estrada

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I never thought a Netflix show like *The Fosters* could ever catch my attention towards a topic like the foster care system. Although I had heard of the words “foster care” I had very little knowledge of what the living conditions were and what happened to the children after they “age out”. This show did not only inform viewers of the changes that need to be made to the foster care system, but also how there is usually minimal or no media attention received on such a crucial topic. What changes are needed or could be done? Isn’t there enough government money being used on the foster care system? More than 25 billion dollars are being used a year to “support” this system and “reunite” these children, but is this money actually being used the right way? More people need to advocate for an appropriate policy change as well as positively support the legislative action within the foster care system. This issue is important because many young girls in the system are often given to families in which they are sexually harassed or abused. Ultimately, foster kids should have the same educational opportunities as others to have a form of bettering their future when “aging out” of the system.

When a parent is not able to protect and nurture their child(ren) the government is able to temporarily provide these children with a safer home by putting them in the foster care system in which children are able to stay until their parents can care for them again. In 2017, there were 427,762 children in the foster care system, California being one of the highest states with 51,537 children in the system (Fostering Success Foundation). Each year since 2010, the Fostering Success Foundation has been able to keep statistics of these children categorizing them based on years, states, and when a child exits the system. While only forty-nine percent of children are reunified with family, twenty-four percent are adopted, seventeen percent move in with a relative or guardian, eight percent age out and two percent of them are “other” (Fostering Success Foundation).

“Other” meaning that they are not in the following past categories of where they should be but sometimes homeless because they have nowhere to go. Most often after kids are taken away from their parents they are given trash bags to put their belongings and take with them, sometimes even being separated from their siblings. Kids usually around the age of 12 are able to stay in welcome centers, as kids get older they are usually kept in other places such as conference rooms. However, it is with great difficulty for foster parents to take in kids from ages eight and above or even when there are several siblings.

In the text “Public perception of the foster care system: A national study,” the authors Christina Leber and Craig Winston LeCroy state that their research was conducted to analyze the knowledge of Americans’ opinion towards the foster care system and parents. The respondents reported that they have little confidence in case workers, judges, and foster parents because of the little knowledge they have when making decisions about the care of these children. In addition, demographics showed that these kids in the foster care system saw that the motive for foster parents to foster was not for the good of the child but for financial purposes. Even though shows like *What Would You Do?*, talk about subjects like this and we see how many people react out in public standing up for these kids, more people should be advocating for them and in this case it is not happening.

The public eye and media hardly cover issues concerning the foster care system. We usually only hear about topics such as “economic hardship, environmental crisis, protracted wars, a broken healthcare system” (Leber and LeCroy 1633). This demonstrated how we only tend to focus on issues that benefit us rather than topics that advocate for the minority.

A quarter of the respondents, from the previously mentioned study, believe that their foster’s parents’ main concern was not them (the children) but the “financial gain” that they would receive for taking them in. Meaning that these foster parents often use the money they receive for these kids and spend it on themselves or their own biological children (Leber and LeCroy 1633). This is also known as “Kids for Cash” which was brought up in an episode of *What Would You Do?*, in which foster parents spent the money given to them for the care of these children and used it to their benefit. Only some foster kids are able to qualify for financial aid after being adopted by their foster parents, which is why only a low number of children get adopted by their foster parents.

In recent discussions of “Signs of Resilience in Sexually Abused Adolescent Girls in the Foster Care System”, author Tonya Edmond shares controversial

issues which should be advocated more to help foster children be placed in the right homes. A foster child should be able to feel safe and not neglected from members of their household. In addition to this, there should be stronger qualifications in order to be a foster parent, meaning more than just a criminal background check and being over the age of 25.

Fifty-four percent of girls in the foster care system were sexually abused in their foster care homes (Edmond 2). This left many girls with mental health and behavioral problems which could drastically affect their life paths. Edmond stated that both types of girls who were physically affected in a negative way use their catastrophic experience as a way to better themselves and advocate to help others. Despite having to experience difficult circumstances these girls are also trying to help and advocate for other young girls.

In the article "Foster Care and College: The Educational Aspirations and Expectations of Youth in the Foster Care System", the author Chris M. Kirk, states the demographics of students in the foster care system who actually go to college and how many earn a degree. The author also conducted a survey among 1,377 youths to analyze the educational aspirations and expectations a youth in the system had versus non-foster youth so they could analyze the differences. "Those in the foster care system are less likely to attend college" and statistics show that only 4% of kids in the foster care system obtain a four-year college degree (Kirk 308). They also have been reported with lower educational aspirations and expectations. Foster care money should be invested on the teens who want to get ready for their future when they age out. They should be able to go to a two-year or four-year college or university to better themselves or be able to have something in which they are able to depend and maintain themselves. Foster kids who do not go to college or university end up "extremely vulnerable to mental health needs, homelessness, unemployment, and other maladies"(Kirk 308).

However, the evidence cited also proves conclusively that in 1986 a study showed that out of the sixty-three women who had been sexually abused by a family member also reported a rape or attempted rape after the age of 14 (Watford). When also conducting similar studies in 2000, 2002, and 2005 the statistics came to be nearly the same. Although some might object that there are other more important things like "economic hardship, environmental crises, protracted wars, a broken healthcare system" (Leber and LeCroy 1633), I would reply that the issue is important too because these are American children who are separated from their families (siblings) and are forced to live with strangers

who at times take advantage of this system for financial purposes or other reasons that could be forced upon these children in a negative way. Reforming the foster care system should be advocated more and brought up within the media.

More people should advocate for an appropriate policy change, support positive, and legislative action within the foster care system to better the living qualities and opportunities for the future of these children/teenagers. This issue is important because young girls in the system should not be sexually harassed or abused by those who claim to want to be foster care parents, but have bad intentions. Ultimately, foster kids should have the same educational opportunities as others to have as a form of bettering their future when "aging out" of the system. They deserve to have an education just like everyone who isn't in the system. These children should be heard by the media more and should be able to ask for changes in their system but also be able to have an educational opportunity in which they can rely on, as not to end up homeless or unemployed if they age out of the system and have nowhere to go.

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