

Exploration of the Foster Care System: Challenges and Opportunities for Improvement to Safeguard the Safety and Well-being of Children and Youth

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Abstract

Child abuse and neglect continue to impact many children and families in the United States and across the world. Child welfare and foster care problems affect a wide range of populations, especially the most vulnerable groups. According to national statistics, Black children are 1.7 times more likely than White children to be neglected in the United States. Furthermore, Black children are 1.6 times more likely to be placed in foster care than White children. Most of the children in question disproportionately come from families with low earnings. 60% of foster children are in the system due to neglect, while others come into foster care due to abuse. Foster parents also struggle to offer secure environments and sufficient attention to the children in their care due to several factors. This paper aims to identify gaps in the foster care system and recommend data-driven solutions to improve the lives and future opportunities of children engaged in the foster care system by assessing the movement of children, their families, and foster caretakers, as well as existing policies. We propose the use of the ecological systems theory to evaluate the child welfare and foster care systems and contend that this approach aids in **recognizing** that the system is composed of numerous interconnected parts that affect each other, including foster care children and their families. We posit that there is a clear lack of coordination and communication between the system's multiple parts. Furthermore, we argue that such difficulties highlight the importance of comprehensive reforms aimed at cooperation,

mitigation, education, training, funding, and transitional assistance within the Child Welfare and Foster Care System to secure the safety, health, and well-being of children and youth. We contend that children are the future leaders of sustainable development in this world; hence, society needs to employ all necessary resources to secure the safety and well-being of children, as well as facilitate the efficiency and sustainability of the child welfare and foster care system.

Keywords: Child welfare; foster care, child neglect, racial disparities, ecological systems theory, systemic reform, vulnerable populations, policy coordination, child well-being

1. Introduction

Child abuse and neglect continue to affect so many children and families in the United States and globally. Child welfare and foster care problems impact a wide range of populations, especially the most vulnerable groups. Research shows racial bias in the foster care system (Cooper, 2013). National statistics show that Black children are 1.6 times more likely to be placed in foster care than White children. Most of these children disproportionately come from families with low earnings. 60% of foster children enter the system due to neglect, while others come into foster care due to abuse. Foster parents often struggle to offer secure environments and sufficient attention to the children in their care due to various factors.

This paper aims to identify gaps in the foster care system and recommend data-driven solutions to improve the lives and future opportunities of children involved in the foster care system by assessing the movement of children, their families, and foster caretakers, as well as existing policies and practices. We suggest the use of the ecological systems theory to evaluate the child welfare and foster care systems and argue that this approach helps in recognizing that the system is made up of numerous interrelated components that impact each other, including foster care children and their families. We posit that there is a clear lack of coordination and communication between the system's multiple components. Furthermore, we argue that such difficulties highlight the importance of comprehensive reforms aimed at increasing collaboration, mitigation, education, training, funding, and transitional assistance within the Child Welfare and Foster Care System to secure the safety, health, and well-being of children and youth.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The US Foster Care System

Foster care is a “system” in which state officials engage in family life (sometimes at the parents' request) to satisfy the public's obligation to safeguard children. The federal foster care financing rules came at a period when the concept of child-centered legislation was developing, and they were first overshadowed by the more immediate societal aims of ensuring civil freedoms for the poor and minorities. With this in mind, the success of federal foster care financing legislation should be evaluated in light of our country's imperfect understanding of children's developmental requirements, as well as the socioeconomic conditions that existed before each gradual alteration in the law. Indeed, federal rules addressing the needs of children in foster care first appeared in a 1961 welfare provision (the 1961 Act), which provided financing to state agencies to care for children whose parents were unable to do so and

permitted such children to enter foster care. This seemingly harmless rule from 1961 failed to develop a process for transferring children out of foster care, resulting in what became known as “foster care drift” (Rymph, 2017). Despite having many committed foster parents and social workers, the foster care system is frequently blamed for neglecting those it is supposed to aid. Headlines like “Statistics Suggest Bleak Futures For Children Who Grow Up In Foster Care” are prevalent. Research shows that compared to the general community, foster care recipients experience greater rates of physical and sexual abuse. Inmates under thirty years old who are homeless and those who have been in foster care make up about 20% of both groups. In the past, young people's opinions have not always been given enough weight when making decisions about their futures. This is particularly true for foster children, who are frequently left out of plans for permanent homes and other life decisions (Bell, 1995). The need for rules and regulations that guarantee youth involvement in child welfare and other youth-serving institutions has grown throughout the last ten years. Child welfare, often associated with trauma and helplessness, makes it difficult to include young people in protective procedures. Child welfare workers can encourage adolescent involvement by attending to their fundamental psychological needs, according to Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Furrer et al., 2023). According to Merkel-Holguin et al. (2020), recent legislative acts have attempted to guarantee that young people in the child protection system are involved in decisions that affect their lives. For example, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Children's Bureau released an Information Memorandum highlighting the moral obligation and developmental benefit of involving and empowering family and youth voices in all aspects of child welfare (ACF, 2019). Incorporating the perspectives of families and young people into child welfare is crucial, and the information memo urged courts and public agencies to give this top priority in their planning and development initiatives (ACF, 2019). The ACF highlighted tenets for boosting youth inclusion, including elevating young voices, resolving power disparities, and strengthening the workforce's capacity to respond to youth input. On the other hand, not much research has been done on how caseworkers might help young people participate in permanency planning (Dillon et al., 2015). According to Furrer et al. (2023), engaging children entails putting their needs front and center and providing supportive environments.

Lack of knowledge of foster care's detrimental long-term impacts on children and childhood development in general has impeded the establishment of clear national goals for the program. These days, the term “foster care system” refers to the system designed to assist dependent, abused, and neglected children who require temporary removal from their original families. A suitable foster family may not be available, or the foster child may have serious behavioral problems that force them into group homes or institutions. Most people associate foster care with family placements, a practice known as “foster family care,” according to specialists from the middle of the 20th century. Parents frequently lose custody of their children when they are destitute, sick, overburdened, negligent, or helpless (Rymph, 2017). Not all of the options have been very supportive. In the United States, foster family care was created as one strategy to address the issue of dependent children. In the United States, foster family care was created as one strategy to address the issue of dependent children. Foster care used to refer to a range of arrangements for dependent children that were out of the home: labor homes, where children worked in exchange for assistance; free homes, where receiving families got no board; and

boarding homes. Even though they were rarely utilized, indenture laws, which allowed minors to be bonded out for a certain period of time, remain in some states' legislation. In reality, many of these “foster” arrangements were requested by needy parents who had no other alternatives and no means of providing for their children, as opposed to being forced upon them (Rymph, 2017).

2.2 Challenges in the Child Welfare/Foster Care System

Numerous children are being looked into for possible mistreatment, according to data from different nations (McTavish et al., 2022). By the age of 18, over 25% of children in New Zealand and 37.4% of children in the US were reported to CPS (Roulund & Vaithianathan, 2018; Kim et al., 2017). Because of things like racism, prejudice, colonialism, and poverty, some groups have a greater rate of interaction with CPS (Falon et al., 2021; Lonne et al., 2020). Some families are more likely to become involved in child welfare than others due to systemic discrimination, which includes racism, colonialism, ableism, and poverty. According to data from throughout the world, more children are in foster care (Fernandez & Barth, 2011). As was previously said, children placed in foster care frequently have histories of abuse—physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, or otherwise. Every year, about one million incidents of abuse and neglect are verified in the United States (Horton & Cruise, 2001). Of these, half (50%) result in placement of the children in out-of-home care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). 2008 saw a much greater prescription rate for psychotropic drugs for foster children than for impoverished children who were not in foster care. African Americans are disproportionately represented in the foster kid population, and just 6% of foster youth finish their degree by the time they are twenty-four (Rymph, 2017).

Barnett et al. (2018) studied the needs of foster and adoptive parents and the children in their care. They revealed five key themes: communication and collaboration, agency culture, preparation for fostering/adoption, mental health services for children, and support for parents. Findings highlighted a shortage of mental health providers knowledgeable about foster care needs and attachment issues. Parents felt disrespected by agencies and courts, citing limited rights and lengthy court processes as stressors. High staff turnover was a barrier to consistent care. Poor communication among child welfare staff, families, and service providers was a major concern, often attributed to overworked staff. Recruiting and retaining foster parents remains challenging, with turnover rates of 20-40%, negatively affecting children's stability and well-being. Approximately half of foster children have mental health needs, mainly due to past trauma, with mental health concerns being a primary challenge for foster and adoptive parents. Approximately half of foster children have mental health needs, mainly due to past trauma, with mental health concerns being a primary challenge for foster and adoptive parents.

2.3 Areas of Risk and Vulnerability for Foster Children

Foster children frequently have vulnerabilities in their social interactions with classmates and parents, as well as in their emotional and behavioral development, brain, and neurobiological development (Leve et al., 2012). The National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (Burns et al., 2004) and other studies (Briggs-Gowan et al., 2000) have shown that almost half of foster children exhibit signs of mental health issues, such as major depression, conduct

disorder, and ADHD. Emotional and behavioral development is a primary concern. Placement disruptions may result from these problems (Chamberlain et al., 2006). According to Ford et al. (2007), children in foster care in Britain also had greater rates of mental health issues than children in affluent private homes. Despite the high need for mental health services, foster children, particularly those from ethnic minorities, are often underserved due to fragmented health and welfare services (Anyon, 2010; Vostanis et al., 2008).

Children in foster care are also vulnerable to abnormalities in brain development. Research has demonstrated a correlation between the history of maltreatment and deficiencies in neurocognitive abilities, including memory, IQ, language, and visuospatial processing (Pears & Fisher, 2005). According to Landsverk et al. (1996), over half of the children in welfare systems have cognitive delays, which have an impact on their academic achievement. At least two brain systems are impacted by early maltreatment: the prefrontal cortex's executive functioning regions and the neuroendocrine stress response system, which is especially linked to the HPA axis. These effects can lead to problems like impulsive behavior and poor decision-making (Dozier et al., 2006; Fisher & Stoolmiller, 2008; Fisher et al., 2006).

2.4 Foster Children's Social Relationships with Parents and Peers

The third obstacle faced by foster children is establishing positive social relationships with their caregivers and peers. These children usually have more behavioral problems, which can increase their caregivers' stress levels much higher (Chamberlain et al., 2006). In the absence of further assistance, this stress level tends to remain high, which over time makes parents more perceptive to their children's behavioral issues (Fisher and Stoolmiller, 2008). Moreover, while interacting with their caregivers, foster children who have experienced neglect or broken ties have greater physiological stress reactivity (Oosterman, de Schipper, Fisher, Dozier, and Schuengel, 2010). This shows that previous neglect may impair their capacity to regulate emotions and build strong relationships in their present environment. Foster children's emotional difficulties might carry over into their interactions with classmates, making it difficult for them to build and maintain meaningful connections. Girls in foster care, for example, have much less peer interaction when they begin school than their non-foster care peers (Leve, Fisher, & DeGarmo, 2007). Furthermore, research has indicated that children with backgrounds of institutionalization or foster care are more likely to be kind to everyone. They approach and communicate with people who are less socially cautious or reluctant (Bruce, Tarullo, & Gunnar, 2009).

2.5 Factors linked to increased Vulnerabilities of Foster Children

Not all children exposed to early adversity show negative outcomes; some demonstrate resilience, which refers to the ability to adapt to risk contexts like maltreatment and foster care. Understanding resilience is crucial for policies focused on mental health and developmental support. Identifying why some children are resilient can guide interventions by targeting adaptive mechanisms. Research highlights two key factors influencing foster children's outcomes: placement disruptions and prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol (Leve et al., 2012). Regarding placement disruptions, between one-third and two-thirds of non-kin foster placements fail within the first 1-2 years (Wulczyn et al., 2007). Nearly 30% of foster children

experience instability over 18 months (Gendron-Cloutier et al., 2024; Rubin et al., 2007). Disruptions have a detrimental effect on children's emotional and behavioral development and can result in externalizing behaviors like resistance and violence. These disruptions are frequently caused by breakdowns in caregiver relationships or administrative necessities (Konijn et al., 2019). The chance of a placement disruption rises by 17% for every extra behavior issue (Chamberlain et al., 2006). In addition to their prenatal exposure, foster children are susceptible to developmental difficulties as a result of their exposure to alcohol, drugs, and tobacco (Leve et al., 2012). Due to their complicated requirements, foster children frequently need secure, excellent homes and services; nevertheless, finding and keeping foster parents may be difficult, since 20–40% of them leave the program each year (Barnett et al., 2018). High turnover disrupts children's stability and services, which causes behavioral and attachment disorders. Due to trauma, over half of foster children have unmet mental health needs (Barnett et al., 2018). Foster and adoptive parents frequently encounter mental health providers who lack the necessary training to address the mental health concerns of their children effectively. They also include inadequate cooperation from child protection institutions, inadequate planning, and a lack of emotional support. Only one state effectively evaluated and supplied assistance for families in the child welfare system, according to the 2010 federal Child and Family Assistance Review (ACF-Administration for Children and Families, 2019).

2.6 Synthesis: Convergence, Divergence, and Gaps in the Literature

When combined, the aforementioned research shows a number of similarities as well as significant differences that call for further investigation beyond a brief summary. The conclusion that placement instability, unmet mental health needs, and racial disproportionality are enduring structural aspects of child welfare systems rather than isolated or fixed issues is widely shared across national contexts (McTavish et al., 2022; Rouland & Vaithianathan, 2018; Kim et al., 2017; Fallon et al., 2021). However, there is less agreement in the research regarding the causes of disproportionality and, consequently, how to address it. While some researchers identify systemic and institutional bias in child welfare decision-making as the primary driver (Cooper, 2013; Anyon, 2011), others stress that disproportionate exposure to poverty and its correlates significantly explains disproportionate contact with the system. As a result, interventions focused solely on caseworker bias may fail to address the larger structural drivers (Fernandez & Barth, 2011). Both mechanisms are regarded as plausible and non-exclusive, which in and of itself supports the multi-level changes suggested later in this work. This is not a settled empirical matter, and this paper does not seek to adjudicate it.

The evidence for interventions is a second area of difference. Positive effects on placement stability and attachment security have been reported by attachment-based programs such as ABC and MTFC-P (Dozier et al., 2008; Fisher et al., 2005; Fisher & Kim, 2007). However, these results are based on a small number of randomized trials with demographically limited, primarily U.S.-based samples, so the generalizability of effect sizes to other populations and systems is still unknown. Multidisciplinary team models, on the other hand, have a comparatively thinner and more mixed evidence base regarding their actual impact on child outcomes, despite being widely adopted in practice (Herbert & Bromfield, 2019). This shows

a discrepancy between the strength of the evidence supporting a practice model and its popularity.

3. Interventions

It is important to implement interventions that enhance the welfare of foster children and their families. Foster-care therapies are distinct because the children have experienced abuse or neglect at the hands of previous caregivers, leading to behavioral, neurological, and interpersonal issues that may not be addressed by traditional parenting programs (Leve et al., 2012). A few of the significant actions meant to enhance the security and welfare of foster children and their families are highlighted in the section below.

3.1 Key Interventions:

1. Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up (ABC): A 10-session program teaching caregivers to be responsive and nurturing, improving children's stress regulation and attachment security (Dozier et al., 2008).
2. Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care for Preschoolers (MTFC-P): Focuses on behavior management and positive support. It improved attachment behaviors and placement stability (Fisher & Kim, 2007; Fisher et al., 2005).
3. Bucharest Early Intervention Project (BEIP): Placed institutionalized children in foster care with ongoing support, focusing on attachment and behavior management, though findings may be less generalizable due to unique sample characteristics (Nelson et al., 2007).

It is prudent to note that despite these evidence-based interventions, implementation faces challenges such as diverse service populations, high caseloads, and staff turnover (Glisson & Green, 2006). Ethnic minority children in foster care face additional disparities. In the US, 45% of foster children are African American, yet they are less likely to receive mental health services and wait longer for adoption than White children (Anyon, 2010; Burns et al., 2004). Similarly, ethnic minority children in the UK also experience longer waits for permanence. Policies like the Multiethnic Placement Act aim to reduce these disparities and promote placement equality (Leve et al., 2012).

3.2 Screening Methods: Opportunities for Effective Service Implementation

Screening tools have been created to identify foster youth who would benefit most from enhanced behavioral and mental health intervention services. These tools assist practitioners in effectively allocating services, especially when resources and staffing are limited. The Ages and Stages Questionnaire: Social Emotional has proven to be more effective than general questionnaires or pediatric practitioner surveillance methods, increasing the detection of social-emotional problems in foster children by six times (Jee et al., 2010).

3.3 Child Welfare Workers' Knowledge and Utilization of Evidence-Based Practices

To support foster children effectively, practitioners need to know about available evidence-based treatment options that match the specific needs of a child or family. Project Focus, for instance, aims to improve outcomes for foster families by linking child welfare workers to

appropriate and effective mental health services, providing training on identifying mental health problems and available services (Kerns, Dorsey, Trupin, & Berliner, 2010)

3.4 Culturally Appropriate Services: System and Societal Level Mitigation

A comprehensive approach to child welfare involves evaluating program components and ensuring services are culturally appropriate. Herbert et al. (2011) emphasized the need for multidisciplinary teams to address child abuse effectively, advocating for services tailored to the diverse needs of children and families. This involves investment in culturally appropriate services and research that accounts for diversity in racial, ethnic, and cultural groups (Briggs & McBeath, 2010; Haight, 2018).

3.5 Comprehensive Assessments: Relationship-Level Mitigation

Children in child welfare need comprehensive initial and ongoing assessments that cover mental health, physical health, developmental needs, dental care, sexual health, substance use, and social-emotional well-being. These assessments should occur at various entry and exit points within the care system. Advocates recommend that healthcare and social service providers work together to ensure children receive the necessary support throughout and beyond their involvement with child welfare (Herbert et al., 2019).

3.6 Individual-Level Mitigation

Parents of foster children and foster/adoptive parents should take the initiative to learn about the foster care system, policies, procedures, practices, and problems, and their rights and responsibilities. They should ask necessary questions and seek answers and clarifications from the appropriate authorities, agencies, and parties involved in the process. This proactive initiative includes engaging with foster care social workers, the legal system/lawyers, community agencies, support systems, and resources. Being on top of the process will facilitate a much better experience, reduce anxiety, stress, complications, and hurdles. Addressing the occupational risk factors faced by child welfare workers, such as high workloads and exposure to trauma, is crucial. Agency supervisors and managers should critically evaluate the workloads of child welfare workers and reduce the workloads as efficiently as possible. Increased governmental funding for more workers and better training can help reduce caseloads and improve service delivery. A comprehensive workforce needs analysis, followed by a plan to address system and service user needs, is necessary for effective child welfare services (Blome et al., 2014).

3.7 Involving, Engaging, and Empowering Youths and Families in Decision Making

Engaging and empowering family and youth voices in child welfare is essential for case planning and system improvement. The Administration for Children and Families (2019) emphasizes the importance of integrating family and youth voices into child welfare practices to prevent maltreatment, enhance engagement, and support the well-being of children and families. This approach involves shared decision-making, recognizing families and youth as experts on their circumstances, and investing in their long-term protective capacities and community connections.

3.8 Requirements and Opportunities

Federal child welfare laws and regulations require states and tribes to involve families, children, and youth in planning and implementing services. Meaningful involvement should be ongoing and embedded in all aspects of child welfare work, from individual case planning to system-level improvement. This approach helps to reduce the need for formal interventions by promoting family integrity, self-sufficiency, and personal agency (ACF Administration for Children and Families, 2019).

4. Discussion

This article explored the historical facts surrounding the child welfare and foster care system, its policy relevance, purpose, process, and programs, as well as problems, strengths, and opportunities. Research analysis indicates that many persistent issues in child welfare have remained unchanged over the past few decades. Despite accumulating evidence-based research on services and support for children and families in the child welfare system, the leadership, governance, and political will to drive substantial reform are underdeveloped (McTavish et al., 2022). Future research and practice must move beyond identifying necessary actions and focus on how to implement and evaluate reform efforts effectively.

This review covered many important tactics, including multidisciplinary and multilevel partnerships, genuine communication with children and youth engaged with child welfare at all levels of decision-making, and comprehensive policy reform that addresses the fundamental inequalities and social determinants of health problems. There is no one right approach to carry out a child welfare reform process, as several scholars have pointed out. The formulation of legislative solutions that are most likely to enhance the security and health of abused children, as well as a thorough assessment of these solutions from the perspective of the well-being of the child and family, are crucial next steps (McTavish, McKee, Tanaka, and MacMillan, 2022).

The research literature examined in this paper shows that many foster children have experienced abuse or neglect, which has resulted in life-altering trauma. As a result, comprehensive trauma screening and assessment are essential for understanding a child's trauma experiences, symptoms, and overall needs, which helps provide adequate placement support (Conradi et al., 2011; Rosner et al., 2012; Kisiel et al., 2014). Historically, child welfare systems have focused on child safety and stability, often assuming well-being is addressed by mental health, developmental, and educational services. However, increasing recognition of child well-being is driving policy development in the U.S., potentially improving safety and program permanence. Research shows abuse and neglect leave lasting impacts on children, necessitating a focus on well-being for meaningful improvements (Samuels, 2011). Evidence suggests foster children are at high risk for negative outcomes, but supported foster families show better results (Leve et al., 2012). Effective foster care requires collaboration among public agencies, courts, and programs to prioritize family and youth voices in planning and improvements (ACF, 2019).

Children and families in the welfare system need well-qualified mental health professionals with expertise in treating complex trauma, attachment issues, and family functioning problems.

Specialized training programs and incentives for providers to treat this population can help build capacity. Additionally, innovative support systems for foster and adoptive parents, such as peer support networks and social technologies, can reduce parent turnover and improve the well-being of children in care (Barnett et al., 2018).

Given the complexity of the child welfare system, including various stakeholders and environmental and biological factors, the ecosystem theory is crucial for effective intervention. This theory posits that the environment plays a significant role in human behavior and functioning, and vice versa. Practitioners must consider contextual and environmental forces to fully understand and address individual social problems. Using the ecosystem approach ensures a comprehensive assessment and intervention strategy that considers the full transactional complexity of cases (Rogers, 2022; Mattaini, 2008). The racial bias reflected in the disproportionate representation of blacks and other minorities in the child welfare and foster care system must be tackled with comprehensive systemic reforms in policy, practice, program, and culture. It must be tackled at the governmental level through targeted policies and legislation that must be reflected in practice. This policy must be strictly enforced and monitored by the federal and state government monitoring and accountability agencies. Engaging youths' voices in decision-making about their lives in the child welfare system/foster care cases is imperative, and the most recent legislation ensuring this inclusion is a step in the right direction. The social, emotional, psychological, physical, and mental health needs of foster children and their families must be addressed with effective evidence-based therapeutic interventions, along with more rigorous research. Micro social issues and challenges cause, facilitate, or provide a breeding ground for problematic behaviors that eventually escalate into major macro societal issues. Conversely, sometimes societal macro issues cause the micro issues at the individual and family level. The social determinants of health and well-being are well documented. Therefore, it is necessary to rigorously provide the necessary resources and services to the most vulnerable populations to facilitate the meeting of their fundamental needs and elevate their empowerment, self-determination, productivity, resilience, and success.

5. Implications for Practice and Recommendations

In due consideration of the evidence that many foster children have experienced some form of maltreatment, which might have resulted in life-altering trauma and necessitated their removal from their primary caregiver's care and placement into foster care, social workers, mental health clinicians, and other practitioners in the helping profession must ensure that a comprehensive assessment of needs and strengths is conducted. This should include a comprehensive trauma screening and assessment to have a better understanding of a child's traumatic encounters and related symptoms, and determination of the appropriate treatment or intervention needs. It is also critical that the social worker works diligently to link the foster care client to appropriate resources, services, and programs, including adequate and stable placement and support. This effort demonstrates policy and practice-related endeavors to incorporate trauma-informed care and other critical services into child welfare. The stability of placement is important because it is linked to several positive outcomes, including social, emotional, psychological, mental, and physical well-being and permanency outcomes, while conversely, placement instability is connected to maladaptive effects and outcomes, including

psychosocial adjustment issues, as well as multiple mental health and behavioral problems. The work of organizations like The National Conference for Hidden Populations (NCHP) is notable, and partnering with foster care patrons, families, and agencies would be of great reciprocal and mutual benefit. NCHP creates a meaningful research context to identify and tackle key problems affecting students with foster care experiences and other social encounters that usually result in being hidden in the higher education system. The organization provides a space for networking and opportunities for presentations on emergent research, theory, and practices. Interventions for foster children and their families must be tailored to address the unique challenges these children face. By implementing evidence-based programs, improving screening methods, linking practitioners with appropriate services, and involving families and youth in decision-making, the child welfare system can better support the well-being and development of foster children.

Due to the complexity of the child welfare and foster care system involving multiple interrelated components that affect a client and their life experiences and problems, we propose that practitioners such as social workers and mental health clinicians use the ecological systems approach in assessing, developing, and delivering interventions with clients. This is imperative because the ecological systems approach (Rogers, 2022) provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for professionals such as social work practitioners, offering strategies for both micro and macro-level interventions. This approach helps social workers address client systems through policy, planning, psychotherapy, and other requisite methods. It recognizes the complex interplay of psychological, social, economic, political, and physical forces affecting human problems. Additionally, the ecological approach allows practitioners to effectively address issues at the individual, family, group, and community levels, seamlessly shifting between clinical and policy roles (Pardeck, 1988).

6. Limitations

The literature for this paper was not chosen or screened using a predetermined, repeatable search methodology (such as systematic database searches with inclusion/exclusion criteria and dual-reviewer screening), and it is a narrative review rather than a systematic review. Because of this, the review is prone to selection bias, and while the research covered is representative of important issues in the field, it is not possible to assume that they fully capture the range of available data. Second, the majority of the evidence used comes from the United States and other highly developed, English-speaking nations; foster care systems, financing arrangements, and legal frameworks differ significantly between national contexts, which restricts the extent to which the findings and suggestions can be applied globally. Lastly, more recent national data should be consulted to verify whether these patterns continue, as the paper heavily relies on secondary and government-report sources for prevalence statistics (e.g., racial disparity figures, neglect and abuse rates), some of which are now more than ten years old. These limitations would be addressed by future studies that use rigorous outcome evaluation, cross-national comparison, and systematic review techniques.

7. Conclusion

This paper explored the challenges and opportunities in the child welfare system broadly, and

the foster care system specifically and most especially. The reviewed literature reveals numerous challenges prevailing in the child welfare and foster care system. However, opportunities exist to improve and solidify these systems effectively. These include increased collaboration, involving and empowering voices of youth and their families using the strengths and empowerment approach, education and training, employing evidence-based intervention practices, and using the ecological systems approach to explore the needs, challenges, opportunities, resources, services, and strengths of foster care clients, and devise and deliver appropriate interventions to aid families to thrive against social and environmental stressors, disruptions, and adversities. Children and families are endowed with the capacity to excel under the appropriate conditions, guidance, assistance, services, and support systems. Executing the proposed interventions with children and families, including the reconstitution of the child welfare and foster care system, will secure the safety and well-being of children as well as facilitate the efficiency, resilience, and sustainability of youths and families.

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