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Foster Parents: Who Are They? *Reality v. Perception*

“...they were very great people... very caring people...
I knew some that constantly had one or two kids in their home,
and it was just that they loved taking care of children.”

Excerpt from Triad Research Group, *Pennsylvania Residents; Perceptions of Services for Children at Risk of Abuse and Neglect* (2000)¹

by Bill Grimm and Julian Darwall

This is the first of a two-part series that looks at foster parents – who they are, who the public thinks they are, and how the public’s perceptions of them is shaped by newspapers, magazines, and books, as well as movies and television.

PART I looks at the latest research and information about foster parents - their age, education, employment, length of service, and motivations. Since instances of foster parent abuse generate headlines in many newspapers, we conclude Part I with what we know about abuse in foster families.

PART II (to run in the next issue of YLN) explores how foster parents are portrayed in the media, and how that shapes the public’s perceptions of foster parents, both positive and negative. It includes the results of a study of newspaper coverage of foster parents across the country during a one-year period. It also includes a review of how foster parents are depicted in recent popular novels, Hollywood movies, and television.

In a nationwide survey on foster care conducted for the Pew Commission in 2003, people were asked what they thought motivated someone to become a foster parent.² They found that the public perception was mixed. Although 42 percent said most people do so out of concern for children, almost one-third (29 percent) believed that foster parents are primarily interested in financial gain. Another quarter of respondents believed that foster parents did it both out of good heartedness and for the monthly payments they received. The respondents who had negative impressions of foster care believed that children were abused or treated poorly while in care, that some foster parents do it for the money and don’t care about kids, and that agencies need to do a better job of screening foster parents.

These findings are echoed in a Pennsylvania study conducted in 2000.³ Just about all participants in the study agreed that “too many people become foster parents for the money,” even though respondents admitted they did not know how much money foster parents receive.⁴ Many participants

also voiced a concern that there are more “bad foster homes than good ones.”⁵ In contrast to these opinions, some participants who actually knew foster parents commented that “they were very great people...very caring people... I knew some that constantly had one or two kids in their home, and it was just that they loved taking care of children.”⁶

A little more than one-third of the respondents to the Pew Commission poll said they got most of their information about foster care from personal experiences or those of family and friends. More than half—56 percent—depended on the news and other media to draw their impressions.

With the results of the Pew Commission survey in mind, the National Center for Youth Law (NCYL) decided to find out why a significant portion of the general public has a negative image of foster parents.

This article explains what we know about foster parents from national databases, a federally mandated study of children in foster care, and the limited

¹ Triad Research Group, *Pennsylvania Residents; Perceptions of Services For Children at Risk of Abuse And Neglect*, (2000) (*PA Residents’ Perceptions*) at 17-18. Triad conducted a series of focus groups in 10 Pennsylvania counties in May 2000,

which were judged to be approximately representative of the state of Pennsylvania. Available at <http://www.pcsao.org/Pennsylvania/PA%20FG%20Report.htm> (last visited September 21, 2005)

² The study consisted of a random digital dial (RDD) sample of 812 registered voters nationwide (personal correspondence with Hart Research Associates, the polling group that conducted the study.) The study report is located at <http://pewfostercare.org/research/docs/survey050703.pdf> (last visited September 22, 2005)

³ *PA Residents’ Perceptions*

⁴ *Id.* at 4

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.* at 17-18

social science research available. Part II will examine newspapers, periodicals, movies, and television, and how they portray foster parents.

Our research confirms that the media often portrays foster parents, and foster care, in a negative light. Public opinion about foster care is shaped largely by the public perception of foster parents. Therefore, if reforms in child welfare are to be achieved, changing the way foster parents are portrayed is a critical step in gaining the needed support.

Foster Parents: Who Are They?

Although they are entrusted with the care of many of our nation's most vulnerable and needy children (Table 1), and are responsible for two-thirds of all foster child adoptions,⁷ relatively little is known about foster parents. All states are required to submit data to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS).⁸ However, AFCARS collects only the age, race, and marital status of foster parents.⁹ State child welfare reports also provide very little data—often limited to changes in the number of foster homes over time.¹⁰ Foster parent associations' membership roles usually include only a small percentage of licensed foster parents, and associations do not have the resources to gather detailed information.

The body of knowledge about foster parents, however, has been enhanced by information collected in the congressionally mandated National Study of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW).¹¹ Findings from the first phase of that study are summarized in the next section.

National Study of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW)

In 1996, as part of the welfare reform package enacted that year, Congress authorized a study of the characteristics, needs, experiences, and outcomes for children and families that come in contact with the child welfare system.¹² With funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Universities of North Carolina and California Berkeley, along with a private research institute in North Carolina, began the first national study of the nation's child welfare programs. NSCAW is gathering data on 6,200 children from public child welfare agencies in a random sample of 92 local areas around the country.

Part of the NSCAW study includes information on children in foster care. This sample of 700 was drawn from children who entered care between December 1998 and February 1999. Since the study was to be longitudinal—examining how foster children fared

over several years—the sample was further limited to children who were in care for a year. Other studies suggest that the vast majority of children who stay in care for one year remain in care for three years or more.¹³ Only children who entered care through an investigation of child abuse or neglect were included.¹⁴ Almost two-thirds of the children in the sample had at least one maltreatment report prior to the one leading to their placement in foster care.¹⁵ The sample included children who had been in foster care and reunited with their families prior to the current episode.¹⁶

Characteristics of each child's current caregiver and the kind of environment they lived in were two primary research areas included in the study. Where possible, researchers also compared caregivers' characteristics to those of parents in the general population.¹⁷

For information about foster parent characteristics, see box on page 3.

TABLE 1
Type of Placements for Children in Foster Care
in the United States Fiscal Year 2003

Type of Placement	Children in Placement	
	PERCENT OF FOSTER CHILDREN	NUMBER OF FOSTER CHILDREN
Foster Family Home (Non-Relative)	46 percent	239,810
Foster Family Home (Relative)	23 percent	121,030
Institution	10 percent	51,370
Group Home	9 percent	45,700
Pre-Adoptive Home	5 percent	24,650
Trial Home Visit	4 percent	19,700
Runaway	2 percent	10,560
Supervised Independent Living	1 percent	5,570

The AFCARS Report (*Preliminary FY 2003 Estimates as of April 2005*)

⁷ U.S. Dep't of Health & Human Servs. Children's Bureau, *The AFCARS Report; Preliminary FY 2003 Estimates* (April, 2005) <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/afcars/report10.htm> (last visited September 6, 2005).

⁸ 42 U.S.C. §§671 (a)(6), 679; 45 C.F.R. 1355.40. The statute requires that the database include national information on the demographic characteristics of adoptive and foster children and their biological and adoptive or foster parents

⁹ 45 C.F.R. 1355.40 Appendix A

¹⁰ Nevada Dep't of Human Resources Division of Child and Family Services, *2003-2004 Biennial Report* at 16-17 (No. of foster care licenses and beds. Foster homes closed vs. new homes opened); Washington State Dep't of Social and Health Services, *Children's Administration, 2004 Performance Report*, at 45-47 (2005)(No. of licensed homes, minority homes available, no. of licensing applications taking more than 90 days to complete).

¹¹ U.S. Dep't of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, *National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being: One Year in Foster Care Report* (2003) (hereinafter *OYFC Report*).

¹² Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, P.L. No. 104-193, §§503, 110 Stat. 2278 (codified in scattered sections of U.S.C.)

¹³ *OYFC Report* at 22, 25

¹⁴ *OYFC Report*, at 26

¹⁵ *OYFC Report* at 37

¹⁶ *OYFC Report* at 26

¹⁷ The data used for these comparisons were drawn from 2000 Census Bureau and the Urban Institute's 1999 National Survey of America's Families.

Some significant differences were observed between relative and non-relative foster parents.¹⁸ Caregivers in relatives' homes are older—more likely to be 60 years of age or older.¹⁹ They are less likely to be married (55 percent of relatives versus 73 percent of non-relatives).²⁰ Non-relative caregivers have a slightly higher educational attainment than relatives.²¹ However, researchers found that there was no significant difference in the race or employment status between the two groups.²² But more relative caregivers (41 percent) have incomes under \$25,000 versus non-relative foster parents, only 21 percent of whom have incomes below \$25,000.²³ There are also differences in the length of time they have been foster parents. More than half of all relative caregivers have been foster parents for a year or less, while more than a third of other foster parents have six or more years caring for foster children.²⁴ Non-relative foster families are also larger than relative homes by about one child.²⁵

Foster Parent Utilization Patterns

A few published studies question the value of simply using the number of licensed foster homes as a measure of the breadth of placements available for children in care. A particularly striking finding is that a small percentage of foster parents appear to provide the bulk of foster parenting services. One study reported that “the most active 20 percent of foster parents provided

between 60 and 72 percent of all foster care days,” and the most active 5 percent provided more than one-quarter of all days of foster parenting.²⁶ Another study found that 23 percent of foster parents in the sample cared for half of the children in care.²⁷ Possible reasons for the pattern include the geographic distribution of foster parents, foster parent preferences for specific types of children (including sibling groups), the influence of child welfare workers who match children with homes, and/or the superior quality or experience of these foster parents.

Two other social science researchers found that foster mothers between the ages of 41 and 60 years were more likely than any other age group to be actively providing care – 2.6 times more likely than women in the 18-25 age group.²⁸ In one study, Native American or black foster parents had more children in their homes on a given day than did white foster parents.²⁹ In general, homes with non-white foster parents, those in suburban or rural counties, and those with two parents cared for more children at a time and had higher rates of placement turnover.³⁰ All of this suggests that the total number of licensed homes reported by child welfare agencies gives a somewhat inflated view of the actual placements available. A state reporting 6,000 homes on its foster home rolls may actually have substantially fewer active, “useable” homes.

What is Known About Foster Parents

Findings from the National Study of Child and Adolescent Well-being¹:

- Foster caregivers (both relative and non-relatives) are substantially older than American parents in general. Most are middle-aged or older. Thirty percent are age 50 or older, and 11 percent are 60 or older.²
- There are almost as many single as married foster parents (45 percent single versus 53 percent married). Many of the single foster parents are divorced or separated, while an equal number have never been married.³
- Most caregivers are women (90 percent of relatives and 97 percent of non-relatives).⁴
- The majority of caregivers are African-American, at 42 percent. White/non-Hispanic parents make up 36 percent, and Hispanic parents, 15 percent. Generally, researchers found that the race of the caregiver matched the child. Eighty-eight percent of African-American foster parents cared for an African-American child, but only 68 percent of homes with white parents were caring for a white child. Other children in homes with white parents were: 15 percent African-American and 13 percent Hispanic.⁵
- Most caregivers have a high school education or less (56 percent). Almost a quarter (24 percent) have an associate's degree or have completed vocational/technical school, while only 14 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher.⁶
- Relative and non-relative foster parents have a significantly lower income than most U.S. households. While 50 percent of families in the U.S. earn \$50,000 or more per year, only one-third of foster families reach this income.⁷
- Foster households are larger than the homes in which most American children live. The high proportion of children living in foster care with five or more children in the household is striking and not previously reported.⁸ Most of those homes (90 percent) consist of married couples.⁹

¹⁸ See, Jennifer Ehrle, Rob Geen, & Regan Main, *Kinship Foster Care: Custody, Hardships, and Services*, (Urban Institute 2003) for other comparisons between kinship foster care and non-kin foster parents.

¹⁹ OYFC Report at 71, Figure 4-2

²⁰ OYFC Report at 144

²¹ OYFC Report at 74-75, 145

²² OYFC Report at 145

²³ OYFC Report at 78

²⁴ OYFC Report at 144

²⁵ OYFC Report at 80, Table 4-7

²⁶ Gibbs, Deborah A. *Understanding*

Foster Parenting: Using Administrative Data to Explore Retention, at 3-14 (2004)(hereinafter *Understanding Foster Parenting*). Report prepared by RTI International for U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

²⁷ Martin, E.D., Altemeier, W.A., Hickson, G.B, Davis, A., and Glascoe, F.P. *Improving Resources for Foster Care*. 31 *CLINICAL PEDIATRICS* 400 (1992).

²⁸ Campbell, C. & Downs, S. *The Impact of Economic Incentives on Foster Parents*. 61 *Social Service Review* 599,606-607 (1987)

²⁹ Id.

³⁰ *Understanding Foster Parenting*, at 3-7 Table 3-2

¹ U.S. Dep't of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, *National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being: One Year in Foster Care Report* (2003) (hereinafter OYFC Report).

² OYFC Report, at 70 Table 4-1, 144

³ OYFC Report at 73

⁴ OYFC Report at 144

⁵ OYFC Report at 72

⁶ OYFC Report at 74-76, 145

⁷ OYFC Report at 78, 145

⁸ OYFC Report at 145

⁹ OYFC Report at 81

Foster Parent Retention

“While foster parents leave the system for a variety of reasons, many leave because they are frustrated and exhausted. They are weary from navigating a foster care system that is difficult and inoperable.”

Janet Rehnquist, Inspector General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services³¹
Retention of foster parents is

Over a period of 18 months, Baltimore City’s foster home population dropped 32 percent, from 2,882 homes to 1,948.³³

The 2004 study referenced above used licensing data, information on foster parent characteristics, and placement records for children to assess retention rates. Foster parents licensed only for relative care were excluded. The period of time for which

more than 86 percent were white, only 8 percent black, and less than 5 percent Native American.³⁵

The 2004 study reported that in its three-state sample, “the typical length of service in foster parenting was less than many children’s stay in foster care”- eight months in Oregon and New Mexico and 14 months in Oklahoma.³⁶

Other research also revealed that older foster parents appeared more likely to continue foster parenting.³⁷ One 1999 study found that the age of foster fathers was associated with increased intention to continue foster parenting, and another study found that foster parents over 30 tended to have a greater length of service.³⁸ Other factors increasing the likelihood that foster parents would continue to provide care included reliance upon foster parenting as a major source of income³⁹ and living in a metropolitan area.⁴⁰

While HHS’ 1989 study found that higher-income foster parents were more likely to stop fostering, another study found that “in Oregon, higher income was associated with longer length of service”⁴¹ It also found that foster parent race was not associated with length of service,⁴² conflicting with some earlier research finding longer tenure among black foster parents.⁴³ Across all three states in that study, two-parent homes had longer lengths of service as did foster parents in urban or metropolitan areas.⁴⁴ Surprisingly, caring for children with high demands - infants, adolescents, and special needs - was not associated with foster parents exiting the system more quickly than others who cared for less demanding children.⁴⁵ (*List of factors affecting retention of foster parents, see box on this page*).

FOSTER PARENT RETENTION

The following factors affect foster parent retention, according to an Inspector General 2002 Retention Report¹ based on focus groups of child welfare staff and foster parents in five states, and a survey of foster care program managers:

- Failure to have a voice in decisions affecting children in their care, and both the courts and agencies ignoring their suggestions concerning the needs of their foster children.
- Caseworkers who are inaccessible and slow to respond to the needs of children and foster parents.
- An absence of health and behavioral services for the children and supportive services—e.g. respite care, childcare—for foster parents.
- False allegations of abuse and neglect.

According to the 2002 Retention Report, “most States have no systematic approach to determine why foster parents choose not to continue fostering.”²

¹ Dep’t of Health & Human Services Office of the Inspector General, *Retaining Foster Parents* (2002) (hereinafter *Retaining Foster Parents*)

² *Id.* at 10

a problem in many states. A 2004 study of foster homes in New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Oregon “showed consistently high rates of foster parent turnover.” [B]etween 47 and 62 percent of foster parents exited foster parenting within a year of the first placement in their home.³²

data was provided varied from state to state - New Mexico’s data covered 1998-2001, Oklahoma, 1996 to 2001 and Oregon, 1983 to 2002.³⁴ Among the states surveyed in one study, there were significant racial disparities. In Oklahoma, 75 percent of foster parents were white, 17 percent black, and 8 percent Native American. In Oregon,

³¹ U.S. Dep’t of Health & Human Services Office of the Inspector General, *Retaining Foster Parents* (2002).

³² *Understanding Foster Parenting*, at ES-3

³³ L.J. v. Massinga, Civ. Action No. JH-84-4409 U.S.D.C. Md. *Plaintiff’s Response to Defendants’ Thirty-Second Six Month Compliance Report*, at 3. Stakeholders attributed this substantial attrition to the cut off of day care, respite care and other supportive services. *Plaintiffs’ Response*, at 41-42

³⁴ *Understanding Foster Parents*, at 2-1.

³⁵ *Understanding Foster Parents*, Appendix A, A-3, A9. High levels of missing data in New Mexico prevented race and ethnicity analyses there.

³⁶ *Understanding Foster Parenting*, at 4-1

³⁷ Rhodes, K.W., Orme, J.G., and Buehler, C. *A Comparison of Family Foster Parents Who Quit, Consider Quitting, and Plan to Continue Fostering*. 75 *Social Service Review* 84 (2001)

³⁸ *Understanding Foster Parenting*

³⁹ Rindfleisch, Nolan, Bean, Gerald, Denby, Ramona, *Why Foster Parents Continue and Cease to Foster*. 25 *JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL WELFARE* 5, 15 (1998)

⁴⁰ *Understanding Foster Parenting*, at 4-2

⁴¹ *Understanding Foster Parenting*, at 4-5

⁴² *Understanding Foster Parenting*, at 5-2

⁴³ Rindfleisch, Nolan, Bean, Gerald, Denby, Ramona, *Why Foster Parents Continue and Cease to Foster*. 25 *JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL WELFARE* 5 (1998)

⁴⁴ *Understanding Foster Parenting*, at 4-2

⁴⁵ *Understanding Foster Parenting*, at ES-3, 4-4, 4-8

What Motivates Foster Parents?

Do foster parents, in fact, go through the onerous and invasive licensing process required to become a foster parent “just for the money”? In many states, such a concern would be absurd because foster parents receive so little. In Missouri, for example, foster parents receive between \$227 (for a child age 1 to 4) and \$307 (for a child 16 to 18) or at most, \$3,684 per child per year. Sharon L. Carlson, president of the Adoptive and Foster Parent Association of Georgia, claims that “most of our parents pay out-of-pocket for additional needs. . . the rate per diem is inadequate to meet the child’s necessary expenses for day-to-day living.”⁴⁶ Foster parents from the five states included in the Inspector General’s Retention Study “described incurring expenses exceeding their foster care reimbursements” when they paid for extracurricular activities such as sports fees and equipment, and transportation to numerous medical appointments.⁴⁷ Despite public beliefs to the contrary, Carlson says, “foster parents must be providing this care with other motivations [than money.]”⁴⁸

Data gathered by the Child Welfare League of America shows significant variations in foster care rates among the states.⁴⁹ This disparity exists even among counties in some of the states surveyed. In most states, the basic monthly payment is adjusted for the child’s age. The national minimum monthly rate is \$222 for a 2-year-old child, and up to \$307 for a teenager. The median rate ranges from \$400 to \$478. It is not unusual for years to go by with little adjustment in the foster care rate.

The National Foster Parent Association (NFPA) advocates for a national standard reimbursement rate, arguing that reimbursement for foster care is not sufficient to cover the cost of rearing a child. The NFPA supports making the basic foster care rate at least equal to the cost of child rearing “as determined by the USDA guideline to raise a child consistent with the median income of the respective geographic region.”⁵⁰ Not many states have responded to NFPA’s call for reform.⁵¹

If help with paying the mortgage or utilities is not the motivation, what does motivate people to become foster parents? A number of social science studies have sought to find the answer. One 1980 study found that the most frequent reasons were “love of children, desire to help someone, and interest in the child’s well being.”⁵² One study compiled previous research which identified motives of “companionship, love of children and community service,” and “among some parents, to supplement family income.”⁵³ A private Maryland research firm, Westat, did a 1980 mail survey of eight states that asked foster parents to cite reasons other than their general love of children. The responses included “knowing the foster child, religious beliefs, or wanting children of their own.”⁵⁴ In the near future, this body of research will be expanded to include a national study now being undertaken, “Foster Parent Motivations: a National Study,”⁵⁵ which promises to give a more comprehensive and contemporary scope to earlier findings.

Basic Monthly Foster Care Payment By Age of Child (2002) (No. of States Reporting = 42)

National Figures	Age 2	Age 9	Age 16
National Minimum	\$222	\$275	\$307
National Maximum	\$718	\$718	\$791
National Median	\$400	\$411	\$478
National Average	\$423	\$440	\$497

⁴⁶ Sharon L. Carlson, President AFPAG, Personal Correspondence June 8th, 2005. See also, DeJong, G., *Setting Foster Care Rates: Basic Considerations*, 33 PUBLIC WELFARE 37 (1975); Settles, B.H., Van Name, J.B., & Culley, J.D., *Estimating Costs in Foster Family Care*, 5 CHILDREN TODAY 19 (1976); Culley, J.D., *Public Payments for Foster Care*, 22 SOCIAL WORK 219 (1977)

⁴⁷ *Retaining Foster Parents*, at 6. Interestingly, neither caseworkers nor program managers perceived the expenses of fostering as an important element in retention.

⁴⁸ Sharon L. Carlson, President AFPAG, Personal Correspondence June 8th, 2005.

⁴⁹ This data was drawn from the 2002 “Foster Care Basic Monthly Maintenance Rates for Children Ages 2, 9, and 16” at http://ndas.cwla.org/data_stats/access/predefined/Report.asp?ReportID=93 (last visited September 16, 2005)

⁵⁰ National Foster Parent Association, NFPA Position Statement on A National Standard of Reimbursement Rate, <http://nfpa.org/aboutNFPA/positionStmnt.cfm#2-4m> (last visited October 5, 2005). For information on USDA methodology see Mark Lino, “Do Child Support Awards Cover the Cost of Raising Children,” 11 *Family Economics and Nutrition Review* (1998). Lino writes “Multivariate analysis is used to estimate household and child-specific expenditures. Income level, family size, and age of the younger child are controlled for so estimates can be made for families with these varying characteristics (regional estimates are also derived by controlling for region).”

⁵¹ A few public child welfare systems have substantially increased foster care rates. In Washington, D.C. and Connecticut, foster parents receive up to \$859 and \$773 for basic foster care maintenance payments, not including increased reimbursement rates for special needs children. Private agencies may compensate at a higher amount, particularly for therapeutic foster care and for the care of medically fragile or special needs children.

⁵² Hampson, R. B. et al *Individual vs. Group Training for Foster Parents: Efficiency/Effectiveness Evaluations*, 32 FAMILY RELATIONS 191 (1983)

⁵³ Taylor, Delores A. and Starr, Philip. *Foster Parenting: an Integrative Review of the Literature*. 46 CHILD WELFARE 375 (1967).

⁵⁴ Westat, Inc. *1980 Foster Parent Survey Unweighted Aggregate Marginals*, Rockville, MD (1981)(The Westat study included a random sample of approximately 200 licensed or approved foster homes from each state in the study. The states were Alabama, Arkansas, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Emergency and special needs homes were excluded).

⁵⁵ Rhodes, K. W., Cox, M. E., Coakley, T., & Orme, J. G. (under review). Motivation to foster: A national study.

Most decisions are based on many different and complex motivations often unknown even to the foster parents themselves. Economic incentives may be a factor in foster parent recruitment and retention. The fact that fostering might be a financial supplement to a foster parent should not rule out their participation in fostering.⁵⁶ Being motivated in part by the need to pay the bills by no means precludes also wanting to help children. As has been said about professional athletes, foster parents may simply be collecting reimbursement for doing what they love. Nonetheless, the public appears uneasy; the worry is that unless the love of children is the sole motivating factor, then “bad” people will enter the system.

Understandably, most foster parents resent this worry. The 2003 Texas Foster Care and Adoption Recruitment survey⁵⁷ found that the belief that foster parents are “in it to make money, not because they care about children” was the second most common response after “foster children are all ‘problem children.’”

In an article in the November 2001 *Fostering Perspectives*, a newsletter put out by the University of North Carolina,⁵⁸ the topic is given sensitive treatment. The article, “Understanding Your Motivation as a Foster Parent,” discusses a case in which a foster mother’s motive for fostering was not clear to her for some time. While the woman thought she was getting into fostering out of a desire to help children, she later came to understand that an equally powerful motivation was the fact that her youngest child was going away to college. The article points out that this is not necessarily a *bad*

motivation. Likewise, it cites the “desire to derive income” as not necessarily a *bad* motivation. The article said, “... parents may view foster parenting as providing child care, a service provided for a fee. Often, mothers who desire to stay home with their own children decide to foster so they can supplement their income.” What matters most, according to the author, is that people should carefully consider their motivation. However, in the end, the real issue is whether or not the child is provided with a beneficial foster care situation.⁵⁹

The Facts about Maltreatment in Foster Care

“Foster Home Infant Scalded to Death: Foster Parent Faces Felony Child-Neglect Charges”

A 14- month- old foster child found dead last month after being left alone with other young children was scalded to death, the Clark County coroner’s office said Thursday. A medical examiner determined the boy’s death was a homicide... Foster parent Sally Jones-Johnson faces six felony charges of child neglect because police allege she neglected the six foster children, ages 7 months to 6 years, living at her North Las Vegas home.

Las Vegas Sun, May 13, 2005

Despite some shocking reports like the one above, government data suggests that the incidence of abuse in foster care is very small. However, as we discuss later in this article, surveys of children in foster care and other research show that the incidence of

fostercare abuse appears to be higher than that stated by the government. HHS’s *Child Maltreatment 2003*⁶⁰ indicates that only 0.5 percent of all child abuse was perpetrated by foster parents.⁶¹ This is a rate substantially lower than the rate of 1.24 percent found in the general population.⁶²

The percentage of children in foster care who were reported victims of maltreatment by foster parents or facility staff ranged from 0.02 percent in Maryland to 1.58 percent in Rhode Island.⁶³ The national average for 2003 was 0.44 percent. Florida and New Jersey, states in which some of the most notorious and well-publicized abuses in foster care have occurred, report abuse incidence rates of 0.41 and 0.70.⁶⁴ In three out of the 38 states reporting - Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Hawaii - more than 1.0 percent of the children in foster care were victims of maltreatment by a foster care provider. In eight states - Arizona, Idaho, Maine, Maryland, Nebraska, Nevada, Vermont, and Wyoming - less than 0.15 percent of the children in foster care were confirmed victims of maltreatment by a foster parent or facility staff member.⁶⁵

Several years ago, the Children’s Bureau, the federal agency that oversees state child welfare programs, adopted a national standard related to abuse in foster care. The standard requires that:

of all children in foster care in the State during the period under review, the percentage of children who were the subject of substantiated or indicated maltreatment by a foster parent or facility staff is 0.57% or less.⁶⁶

⁵⁶ Joseph Doyle, Jr. and H. Elizabeth Peters: *The Market for Foster Care: An Empirical Study of the Impact of Foster Care Subsidies*, May 2004, Unpublished.

⁵⁷ October 2003, Texas Foster Care and Adoption Recruitment Survey, (Taken July 24th, 2005) http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Adoption_and_Foster_Care/Adoption_Family_Network/surveyResponse.asp

⁵⁸ Amy Ramirez, “Understanding Your Motivation as a Foster Parent.” *Fostering Perspectives*, Vol. 6., No. 1. (November 2001) available at http://ssw.unc.edu/fcrp/fp/fp_vol6no1/understanding_motivation_foster.htm (last visited 7/28/2005)

⁵⁹ In the British study *Foster Carers: Why They Stay and Why They Leave*, Ian Sinclair and colleagues explore a similar thesis. Ian Sinclair, Ian Gibbs, and Kate Wilson, *Foster Carers: Why They Stay and Why They Leave*, at 18-20 (2004). Tom Waldock also provides a compelling and insightful argument for the professionalization of foster care with the same idea in mind. Thomas Waldock, PhD, “Professionalizing Foster Care: The Welfare of Children,” unpublished. <http://home.ica.net/~sharyn/afpa1.htm> (August

4, 2005).

⁶⁰ U.S. Dep’t of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children on Children, Youth & Families, *Child Maltreatment 2003* (Washington, D.C. Government Printing Office, 2005)(hereinafter *Child Maltreatment 2003*)

⁶¹ *Child Maltreatment 2003*, at xviii Table S-6

⁶² *Child Maltreatment 2003*, p. xiv

⁶³ *Child Maltreatment 2003*, at 53 Table 3-15

⁶⁴ *Id.*

⁶⁵ U.S. Dep’t of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children on Children, Youth & Families, Children’s Bureau, *Background Paper on Child and Family Services Reviews National Standards* at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/hotissues/background.htm#two> (last visited October 5, 2005). The period under review is generally a calendar or fiscal year.

⁶⁶ *Child Maltreatment 2003*, at 53 Table 3-15

A significant majority of states - 29 of 38 states - met that standard in 2003.⁶⁷ Between 2000 and 2003, the number of states meeting the standard increased from 57 percent to 76 percent.⁶⁸

There is also some evidence that allegations against foster parents are confirmed less frequently than those against the general population.⁶⁹ Data from the Administration for Children's Services in New York City for 2003 shows that 20.3 percent of abuse reports involving relative and non-relative foster care were confirmed, while the rate in the general population was 33.6 percent for the same year.⁷⁰ Similarly, a 1994 Baltimore study found that "20% of foster care reports were substantiated as compared to 35% of non-foster reports."⁷¹ The National Foster Parent Association suggests that "it is not uncommon for [previously abused foster children] to make false reports of abuse or neglect in an effort to control adult behavior or to deal with fears of close relationships."⁷²

There is considerable evidence that official government statistics understate the actual incidence of maltreatment in foster care. The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and the state databases from which it is derived are often described as being of dubious quality. The National Working Group to Improve Child Welfare Data (2002) points out that maltreatment of children in foster care is not totally reflected by the *Child Maltreatment* calculations, because relative foster parents who abuse or neglect foster children were sometimes reflected in NCANDS as

"foster parent" and sometimes as "other relative" perpetrators; "many states noted that they did not have policies dictating how these should be recorded."⁷³ Other research says that the NCANDS data are not counted consistently and that some states count children, while others count simply the number of families involved in maltreatment reports.

A recent report from New Jersey found serious deficiencies in the investigation of institutional abuse, including foster homes. The findings cast considerable doubt on claims that substantiation rates in foster care are lower than those in other settings. In the first New Jersey study, researchers found "a routine failure to investigate allegations adequately."⁷⁴ A 2003 study also "determined that the New Jersey Institutional Abuse Investigations Unit (IAIU) findings were professionally unreasonable 25 percent of the time...thereby leaving children at risk of future harm in settings that remained open to DYFS placements."⁷⁵ That study found that the IAIU erred by failing to confirm maltreatment for which there was adequate evidence it had occurred.

Some of the social science literature also suggests that maltreatment in foster care may be officially underreported. A 1984-1990 sample⁷⁶ found a significantly lower rate of abuse reports (1.693 percent) for foster home settings, but one that was still higher than the rate for biological homes (1.159 percent) or temporary day care centers (0.26 percent). A 1984-1988

Baltimore sample found that the incidence of maltreatment reports against foster parents was three times as high as for the general population. While these were substantiated less often than general population reports, there was still a higher rate of substantiated abuse among foster parents than the average parent.⁷⁷ A study was undertaken by Trudy Festinger, professor at New York University School of Social Work, on behalf of plaintiffs in a class action lawsuit to reform Baltimore's foster care system (*L.J. v. Massinga*). She found that 42 of 149 (28 percent) random child case files indicated maltreatment in a foster home.⁷⁸

Researchers have found that incidence data are very difficult to gather, and tend to be skewed toward higher rates of reports among children who are better able to communicate with their child welfare worker or other mandated reporter.⁷⁹ There is a general bias against group settings as they hold a disproportionate number of children who are older and better able to report abuse, and it may be that foster children in other settings have higher rates of abuse than are reported.⁸⁰

Retrospective studies asking foster care alumni about their experiences in care also present some disturbing findings. In interviews with 106 adults who were in Casey Family Program foster homes between 1966 and 1984, 25 percent reported that they suffered severe physical punishment in

67 Of course, this could simply mean that only marginal improvement has occurred in a large number of states. This improvement figure is also somewhat misleading as the number of states reporting has also risen, so the group of states the sample represents is significantly different (1999, n=21, 2000, n=31, 2001, n=38, 2002, n=38.)

68 For more information on foster parent allegations see DePanfilis, D. Girvin, H. *Investigating child maltreatment in out-of-home care: Barriers to effective decision-making*, 27 CHILDREN AND YOUTH SERVICES REVIEW 353 (2005). For further discussion and protocol suggestions see: Marilyn Cavara and Carol Ogren, "Protocol to Investigate Child Abuse in Foster Care," 7 CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT 287 (1983).

69 Administration for Children's Services, *ACS Update Annual Report 2004, Five Year Trend*, at 1 (2004)

70 Mary I. Benedict, Susan Zuravin, Diane Brandt, and Helen Abbey, *Types and frequency of Child Maltreatment by Family Foster Care Providers in an Urban Population*, 18 CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT 577, 579-582 (1994).

71 National Foster Parent Association, *NFPA Position Statement On Child Abuse/Neglect Allegations In Foster/Adoptive Families* <http://www.nfpainc.org/aboutNFPA/positionStmnt.cfm?page=1#24t> (last visited October 6, 2005)

72 Child Maltreatment in Foster Care: Understanding The Data, *National Working Group to Improve Child Welfare Data, The Child Welfare League of America*, October 2002.

73 New Jersey Office of the Child Advocate, *Monitoring Report: The Department of Human Services Institutional Abuse Investigations Unit*, at 3 (2005) citing Diane DePanfilis, *Final Report: Review of Investigations of Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect in DYFS Out-of-Home Care Settings in New Jersey*, University of Maryland School of Social Work (2003).

74 *Id.*

75 J. William Spencer and Dean D. Knudson, "Out-of-Home Maltreatment: An Analysis of Risk in Various Settings for Children," 14 CHILDREN AND YOUTH SERVICES REVIEW, 485, 492 (1992)

76 Mary I. Benedict, Susan Zuravin, Diane Brandt, and Helen Abbey, *Types and frequency of Child Maltreatment by Family Foster Care Providers in an Urban Population*, 18 CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT 577, 579-582 (1994). Also see Benedict et al. *The Reported Health and Functioning of Children Maltreated While in Family Foster Care*, 7 CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT, 566 (1996).

77 *L.J. by and through Darr v. Massinga*, 699 F.Supp 508 (D. Md. 1988)

78 Barth, R.P. *Institutions vs. Foster Homes: The Empirical Base for the Second Century of Debate*. Chapel Hill, NC: UNC, School of Social Work, Jordan Institute for Families (2002).

79 Blatt, E., *Factors Associated with Child Abuse and Neglect in Residential Care*, 14 CHILDREN & YOUTH SERVICES REVIEW 493(1992).

80 D. Fanshel, S.J. Finch, & J.F. Grundy, *FOSTER CHILDREN IN A LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE* (1990). See also, R. Zimmerman, *FOSTER CARE IN RETROSPECT* (1982)

the foster home where they had stayed the longest.⁸¹ In response to the question “Did anyone in the foster home ever try to take advantage of you sexually, a small but significant proportion of the former foster youth answered ‘yes’—24 percent of females and 8 percent of males. Case record reviews and interviews of alumni in the more recent *Foster Care Alumni Studies*⁸² recorded a maltreatment incidence of almost one-third (32.8 percent) of the sample. The perpetrator was identified as either the foster parent or some other adult in the foster home. The types of maltreatment are set forth in Table 2.

While overall official numbers are small, there is a significant amount of anecdotal evidence that children in foster care are subjected to a wide range of abuses. Alameda County (CA) Superior Court Judge Leonard Edwards described his experiences presiding over cases in which children in foster care had been raped, beaten, starved, and badly neglected in foster homes.⁸³ While the majority of deaths in foster homes in California in 2000 (125 out

of 232) were due to pre-existing illness or disability, 25 were due to homicides. Five children committed suicide, and two died of medical care complications.⁸⁵

A review of cases in state and federal appellate courts reveals a disturbing list of abuses to which foster children have been subjected in foster care. For example, K.H. was in foster care and changed homes nine times between the ages of 2 and 6, except for a three-month trial visit back to her natural parents. She was beaten in at least two of those homes and sexually abused in another.⁸⁶ The federal district court in Wyoming described the “terrible and tragic abuse endured by minors T.M. and A.O. when they were placed in foster care.”⁸⁷ Their foster father was convicted on charges of sexual assault and sentenced to five concurrent life terms.

Some of the abuse suffered by children in foster care results from the inappropriate placement of vulnerable, often younger, children in homes with physically or sexually aggressive youth. Lawyers in *Braam v. State of Washington*⁸⁸ uncovered this problem in Washington State. In *Ward*

v. Feaver, a case filed in federal court in Broward County, Florida, a lawyer who represents children in the county filed a sworn affidavit stating over a period of just 18 months he was made personally aware of 50 instances of child-on-child sexual abuse involving more than 100 Broward County foster children. The official number during this same period: Seven – because until what the lawyer called ‘an epidemic of child-on-child sexual abuse’ was exposed, the child abuse hotline didn’t accept reports of such abuse.⁸⁹

All of this suggests that it is difficult to gauge the true level of maltreatment in foster situations.

Conclusion

From the limited information available about foster parents, some general conclusions can be drawn. Most foster caregivers are women. They tend to be substantially older than American parents in general. Most are not college educated, and tend to have an income significantly lower than most U.S. households. There are almost as many single as married foster parents, many of whom are divorced or separated. African-Americans comprise a slim majority (42 percent), while white/non-Hispanic parents make up 36 percent of foster parents.

However, there are many foster parents who do not fall into any of the above categories. They vary widely in terms of wealth, education, age, sex, and motivation. There is some evidence that foster parent characteristics may vary from one state to the next. While there are some foster parents who are abusive, many provide an environment in which children feel loved and that promote their healthy development.

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TABLE 2⁸⁴

Maltreatment Experiences While in Foster Care

Type of Maltreatment	Percent of Foster Children Affected
Some child maltreatment	32.8 percent
Physical neglect only	10.1 percent
Physical neglect and physical abuse	9.4 percent
Physical abuse only	5.6 percent
Sexual abuse and other maltreatment	4.0 percent
Sexual abuse only	3.7 percent

⁸¹ Peter J. Pecora, et al, *Improving Family Foster Care: Findings From the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study*, (2005)

⁸² *Id.*, Table 6.6

⁸³ Leonard Edwards, quoted in Hubner, J & Wolfson, J. (1996) *Somebody Else’s Children: The Courts, the Kids, and the Struggle to Save America’s Troubled Children*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers., pp. 72-73.

⁸⁴ “Mortality of California Children Placed by Child Welfare and Probation Agencies in Residential Out-of-Home Care,” Joseph Magruder and Arnita Paige, California Department of Social Services, Research and Development Division, Data Analysis and Publications Branch, Children’s Program Team, May 2003.

⁸⁵ *K.H. v. Morgan*, 914 F.2d 846 (7th Cir. 1990)

⁸⁶ *T.M. ex rel R.T. v. Carson*, 93 F.Supp.2d 1179 (WY. 2000)

⁸⁷ E.g., *Coker v. Henry*, 813 F. Supp. 567 (W.D. MI 1993)(Ten year old sodomized after being placed in same home as youth with record of sexually assaultive behavior)

⁸⁸ 81 P.3d 851 (Wash. 2003)

⁸⁹ National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, *Issue Paper #1: Foster Care Vs. Family Preservation: The Track Record on Safety*, (2005)