

Foster care crisis: More kids are entering, but fewer families are willing to take them in

Experts and state agencies say families are reluctant to take in foster children for fear of spreading Covid-19.

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By Char Adams

The nation's foster care system has been especially overwhelmed by the coronavirus pandemic, with experts and state agencies saying more children are entering the system, and fewer families are willing to take them in for fear of spreading Covid-19.

Chicago has seen a [33 percent increase](#) in the number of children in foster care. In Texas, children in foster care have [reportedly contracted Covid-19](#) at nearly double the rate of the general population. And, in Los Angeles, kids in foster care are [severely affected by learning loss](#).

"We've had kids that, during the pandemic, have been shuttled from foster placement to foster placement. Not for the child's fault, but because the caregivers are concerned about Covid," Lyndsey C. Wilson, CEO of [First Star](#), a national nonprofit that supports children in foster care, tells NBC.

"Young people in the foster system aren't there because they did something wrong," Wilson added. "They're there because of poverty sometimes. Because of their circumstances, young people can be put into the system. Foster youth are experiencing so many challenges."

The social, racial and economic fault lines are being highlighted and exacerbated by Covid-19 in the foster care system, placing already-vulnerable children at greater risk. There were estimated to be more than 430,000 children in foster care as of 2018, according to [a report](#) by the Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, with 23 percent of those children being Black. Existing criticisms of the nation's foster care system largely rest on racial disparities, as Black families are [more likely to be separated](#) than white ones and Black children swept into the foster system are more likely to enter juvenile detention.

Additionally, Black parents experiencing poverty are more likely to be accused of neglect and separated from their children. With courts shuttered and visitation suspended due to the pandemic, [parents have little recourse](#) against separations. And families hoping to reunite have to wait longer than usual.

"Courts are taking an unprecedented amount of time to process adoptions and other matters and that's keeping families apart longer," Wilson says. "With Covid-19, the requirements to reunify families has been really challenging. The transactional tasks that are required of families usually happen in a physical space, but that can't happen anymore. This means foster youth are so lonely, many have lost touch with their family members because of Covid. The only way to see someone now is through Zoom or video conferencing, and that's one of the biggest challenges."

In Rockland County, New York, agencies [have held recruiting events](#) to encourage people to become foster parents. Beatrice Prophete, with the Rockland County Department of Social Services Home Finding Unit, told [The Journal News](#) that Covid-19 has left some foster parents financially or even physically unable to take in new children.

"We have foster parents who are either immune compromised or have other health issues, and they worry about expanding their household now," Prophete said. She added that even biological parents are concerned about their children's stability at home amid Covid-19.

"Basically they wanted the agency to look for foster homes for their children because (the parent) tested positive and they didn't know where that would lead."

Leaders in some states have worried that the pandemic has led to [an increase in child abuse cases](#), but agencies are having a difficult time investigating due to safety regulations.

"A huge part of our standards as investigators is that you're supposed to lay eyes on, in person, what's going on with a child," Joy Bruce, who works with a child advocacy program in New Orleans, told [The Marshall Project](#). "We're now having to find proxies for that. With videochat, you can at least see them, but it's hard to know who else is in the room with them and thus if the child is able to speak freely about what's happening in the home."

One Heart Nola, a New Orleans nonprofit that helps young adults who have aged out of the foster care system, has struggled to meet the increasing needs of the group. But, its director Teri Hrabovsky says community members have stepped up to tackle these challenges.

"The community has risen up. A lot of people are hurting but they've been calling and asking what they can provide," Hrabovsky said. "As hard as it is, it's been an opportunity for us to come together and really care for one another in a deeper way and reach deeper into our hearts and our pocketbooks. This community has done that."

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