

DECEMBER 15, 2019



NEIL NAKAHODO

PART ONE OF SIX

THROWAWAY KIDS

Star investigation reveals stark outcomes
for America's foster care children

BY LAURA BAUER AND JUDY L. THOMAS

He still has the last name of a woman who adopted him in grade school — then gave him back. From the time he was 3 until he turned 14, Dominic Williamson was bounced to 80 different foster homes. When he turned 18, he found himself alone and homeless, and resorting to a life of crime.

Now, at 20, he has a home more permanent than any he's ever known.

The Hutchinson Correctional Facility in

Kansas.

"I had plans for the future and I kind of ruined it," he said from prison, where he's one year into an eight-year sentence. "But how could I be a good kid with all the horrible things happening?"

In the American foster care narrative, prison is where the story leads for many kids like Williamson.

For the past year, The Kansas City Star has examined what happens to kids who age out of foster care and found that, by nearly every mea-

sure, states are failing in their role as parents to America's most vulnerable children.

Roughly 23,000 kids across the country are churned out of the system every year, and their lives highlight a distinct path traveled by many:

Taken from an unstable home. Terrified by their first contact with the state. Emotionally and cognitively damaged in care as they are moved from home to home. Robbed of an education equal to their peers. Turned out to the streets unprepared to stand on their own. And changed for life.

"We are sending more foster kids to prison than college," said Brent Kent, who spent the past 3½ years helping Indiana foster children transition into adulthood. "And what do we lose as a result? Generations of young people.

"I think as a society we view foster children the same way that we might view offenders coming out of prison or addicts in recovery. We forget that they are just children, that they were put in foster care and removed from their families through no fault of their own."

As part of its investigation, The Star surveyed nearly 6,000 inmates in 12 states — representing every region of the country — to determine how many had been in foster care and what effect it had on their lives.

Of the inmates who took the survey, 1 in 4 said they were the product of foster care. Some spent the majority of their childhood in strangers' homes, racking up more placements than birthdays.

The Star's survey results "make it clear that fumbling foster care has dire consequences," said Kevin Smith, a district judge who handles family court cases in the Wichita, Kansas, area. "So many of society's problems are directly linked to foster care outcomes, it is shocking."

From Texas' death row to a south-central Missouri prison and communities nationwide, The Star found people numbed by their experiences and battling to overcome the trauma in-

flicted not only in their biological homes but also by the states that later raised them.

The investigation found:

■ Most states spend a fraction of their budget dollars on family preservation efforts, even though more kids are removed for neglect than abuse. Most of the \$30 billion spent on child welfare annually is funneled into foster care or adoption services, despite a 40-year-old federal mandate that prioritizes family preservation. More dollars are spent on investigating families than trying to keep them together.

■ Emerging science that suggests multiple foster care placements can actually harm a child's brain. Some kids are moved dozens of times — a few as many as 100 times — over several years. Foster children are diagnosed with PTSD at a rate greater than Iraq war veterans.

■ Foster children are failed in the classroom, the least successful of "special population groups" in high schools, including homeless students and those with disabilities. In Oregon alone, just 35 percent of foster kids earned a high school diploma in 2017 compared to more than 77 percent of their peers. As for college, fewer than 3 percent across the country will get a bachelor's degree.

■ More than 4,000 former foster care kids every year end up homeless after leaving the system, a conveyor belt that deposits some into sex trafficking and drug addiction. Within four years of aging out, the homeless number doubles in some parts of the country. One center for homeless youth in Indiana reported that nearly 70 percent of the young people it has served so far this year had spent time in foster care, a 36 percent increase over last year.

■ Completing the cycle, many come back into the state's care as adults, this time as inmates. Said one convicted murderer from Texas death row: "The state that neglected me as a kid and allowed me to age out of its support is the same state that wants to kill me."

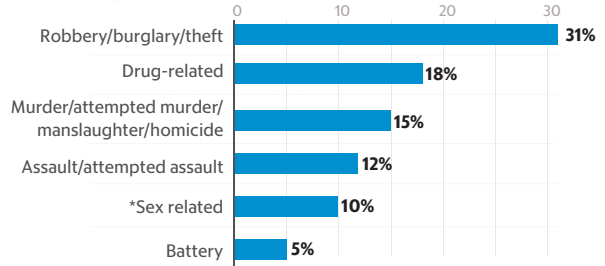
The dysfunction of America's foster care

From foster care to prison

The Kansas City Star surveyed inmates in 12 states to determine how many had been in foster care and what effect it had on their lives. Of the 5,889 inmates who participated in the survey, 1,446 inmates said they spent time in foster care.



What were you convicted of?

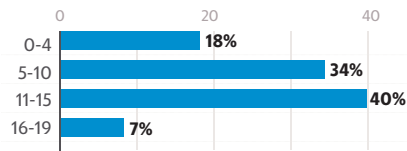


*Rape, molestation, criminal sexual conduct, incest, sodomy, indecent liberties, etc.

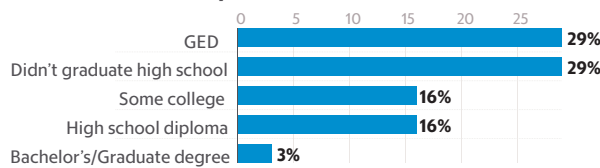
Note: It is important to note that many inmates were convicted of multiple crimes.

Of those inmates who answered yes to being in foster care, here are some of their responses.

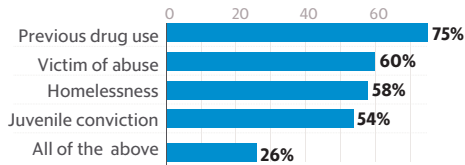
At what age did you go into foster care?



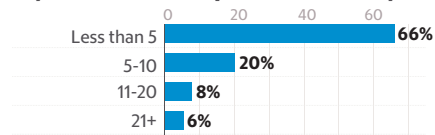
Which of the following best describes how much education you have had?



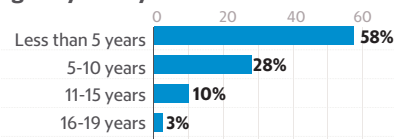
Which of the following have you experienced or apply to you?



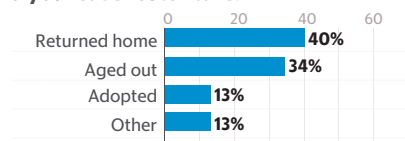
How many total foster care placements have you had?



How long did you stay in foster care?



How did you leave foster care?



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system goes back decades, but the situation has become more dire in recent years, The Star found. More states are under fire and facing lawsuits for how they treat foster children as the number of kids in care has grown. In 2017, 443,000 U.S. children were in foster care, a 12 percent increase

from 2012.

Several states — including Indiana and West Virginia — have seen significant surges, some blaming the rise of adult opioid addiction. The rate of kids in Kentucky foster care has hit an all-time high, according to a report released last



ELISE AMENDOLA

Democratic presidential candidate and former Housing Secretary Julián Castro has taken on foster care as one of his campaign issues. He is seen here last August during a discussion about homelessness at a transitional housing shelter in New Hampshire.

month. That has created a shortage of suitable foster homes.

“Forgotten and cast aside” is the way Julián Castro describes foster kids.

“Right now, our foster care system across the United States is in very sad shape,” Castro, former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, told The Star. “There are a lot of things in this country that we just don’t accept. We shouldn’t accept this, and we have it within our power to change it.

“These children have essentially never had a first chance in life,” he said, noting that their “outcomes are so, so bad compared to their peers, it cries out for urgent attention and resources.”

Jess McDonald took over Illinois’ child welfare system in the mid-1990s and was credited with turning around the troubled agency in his

nine-year tenure.

The state, however, has since returned to high-level dysfunction, including a recent case in which foster kids were being transported in handcuffs and leg shackles — a practice that has now been prohibited by the agency.

McDonald said the sheer number of children coming into a crowded system means workers must focus on kids’ immediate needs. Their top priority is to ensure the safety of those who have been reported for abuse and neglect.

But when he sees what happens to some foster children, “it’s devastating,” he said. “Because you look at them and say, ‘Could I have done something to make a difference?’”

No doubt, some kids do OK in foster care. Thrive even. But for many, the experience only adds to the trauma they have suffered.

The majority of inmates who wrote messages on their surveys, or who spoke with The Star, said being in the system, and aging out with few skills or support, changed them forever. Those changes made the transition to crime easy.

“I hated it and still feel like today I can never find a real family,” an Arizona inmate wrote. “I believe it directed me more towards the prison/jail system than setting me up for success. ... I would give absolutely anything to take a correct step in life, to get help, really anything to get my life right, but I’m still digging myself out of this state-raised pit that I am in.”

Another Arizona inmate was in foster care for 14 years. He was moved more than 100 times.

FROM FOSTER CARE TO PRISON

Texas lawmakers recognized the existence of a possible foster-care-to-prison pipeline several years ago.

That’s when they passed a law requiring that offenders be asked during the intake process whether they had ever been in foster care.

The bill’s sponsor said many children “have experienced significant trauma, including violence, neglect, abuse, threats, humiliation and deprivation.”

Not only do most states fail to track that information, many refused to allow The Star to distribute its survey in their prisons.

In the past year, The Star contacted every state requesting their participation in the survey.

The first to sign on was Kansas, a state whose child welfare agency has been under siege for years and where many young people like Williamson struggle in care then age out alone. Wardens in all eight prisons distributed the survey, and the state ended up having the largest number of inmates participate with nearly 1,200.

“I think it brings strong value,” said Laura Howard, secretary of Kansas’ Department for Children and Families, who has recently started programs to focus on older youth and keeping families together. “We can learn from this.”

Of the 1,174 responses in the Sunflower State, 382 inmates said they had been in foster care. That’s 1 in 3, which is among the highest percentages of the states that participated.

The results, for Kansas and the 12 states overall, show the trauma kids suffer when coming into care and the need to emphasize “trauma-informed services,” said Howard, DCF’s third leader in as many years.

“I don’t sit here and say, ‘Gosh, that’s a failure of the child welfare system,’” she said. “I think what that tells me is as a society, a state, community, we need to do a better job of wrapping services around vulnerable youth.”

Williamson was one of the Kansas inmates to complete a survey.

“I was thrown out into the world with nothing at 18 and was homeless,” he wrote. “So I did what I had to do to provide for myself and make do. Ended up with 6 felony charges at 18 years old.”

Overall, 5,889 inmates responded to The Star’s confidential survey. Of those, 1,446 said they had been in foster care.

While the results are not scientific, experts who reviewed them said they offered rare insight into the backgrounds and challenges of former foster children who end up behind bars.

Fifty-four percent of inmates who responded said they had been convicted of a juvenile crime when they were younger. Nearly 60 percent said they had experienced homelessness.

Only 16 percent said they earned a high school diploma, and another 29 percent said they had gotten their GED.

A female inmate in Kansas said she was in 21 different homes in her six years in foster care and was told “how worthless I was and no one would ever love me.”

“I moved homes every two weeks with hope the next home would be better and I would be loved just for who I was. But my hopes were always crushed.”

In Louisiana, where 709 offenders completed the survey, one said he felt he was “treat-



SHELLY YANG

The Topeka Correctional Facility is the only women's prison in Kansas.

ed as a subhuman” while in foster care and enlisted in the military after he aged out at 18.

An inmate from Pennsylvania said he had two sets of sisters who were allowed to stay together in foster care (two in each placement) until they emancipated. They are well-adjusted adults today with no substance abuse issues and no criminal history, he said.

“Makes me wonder how I’d of turned out if I was placed with a natural sibling,” he wrote. “I never felt as if I belonged.”

The Star’s survey prompted corrections officials in at least two states to consider implementing a process similar to Texas.

The Michigan Department of Corrections said it was participating in the survey “with the goal of better understanding the background of incarcerated offenders and utilizing that information to continuously improve our preparation of

prisoners for reentry into the community.”

Clark Peters, a professor of social work at the University of Missouri, said the survey results are alarming. And show that the country has to do better to help the kids it vowed to protect.

“We knew their parents failed them, and we didn’t do any better,” Peters said. “We have failed as parents.”

Kisa Van Dyne, 32, served five years at the Topeka Correctional Facility, Kansas’ only prison for women. She was one of the more than 400 inmates who completed the survey at that facility. Of that group, 39 percent said they had been in foster care.

In a prison interview, Van Dyne said her time in foster care changed her.

“I have always felt like a throwaway, like I am unworthy of the effort to be loved. I felt like just a number in the system and as if I was dispos-

able,” she said. “Due to that, I learned early on how to be completely indifferent to others. ... I learned how to not care.

“I learned how to make sure that the only person I ever needed to rely on was myself and that I could never trust anyone to care enough about me to take care of me.”

‘I’M NOT WANTED ANYMORE’

Dominic Williamson was just 3 when his older brother grabbed a broom in the middle of the night and jiggled the lock open on the front door of their Wichita home.

The preschooler wandered around in the dark while the rest of the family slept. A concerned neighbor called police.

Within hours, officers walked through the family’s home on a routine check and found a crack pipe and other evidence of drug use. The brothers were scooped up and taken into state care, according to what Williamson’s mother later told him.

She would never regain custody of her children.

Williamson’s memories from foster care, where he was moved around the state, are random: being in a treehouse with one family, riding on a jet ski during a vacation with another. That family wanted to adopt him, but in the end didn’t.

“They said that the family had gave me back because they had too much on their plate or something,” he said, almost shrugging it off.

Williamson’s life in the state system epitomizes

CONFIDENTIAL SURVEY

Hello. We are reporters with The Kansas City Star newspaper and hope you can help us. Over the years we’ve noticed that many adults who have ended up on hard times or in prison spent considerable time in foster care as children. In many cases, they aged out of the system and were on their own with little support. To get a better picture of what has happened, we want to survey inmates across the country. We’d like you to fill out this survey. Your answers will be anonymous. The survey shouldn’t take long and will help with our research. Thank you in advance.

- 1. How old are you? _____
- 2. How many years have you been in prison? _____
What were you convicted of? _____
- 3. Circle which of the following best describes how much education you have had.
A). Didn’t graduate High School
B). GED
C). High School diploma
D). Some college
E). Bachelor’s or Graduate degree
F). Other _____
- 4. Were you ever convicted of a juvenile crime? (Yes or No) If so, for what? _____
- 5. Where did you mainly grow up? Please provide city and state.

- 6. Which of the following have you experienced or apply to you? Circle all that apply.
A). Previous drug use
B). Juvenile conviction
C). Homelessness
D). Victim of abuse
E). None
- 7. Have you ever been in foster care? (Yes or No)
If yes, we have a few more questions for you.
- 8. Which state did you live in when you were in foster care? _____
- 9. At what age did you go into foster care? _____
- 10. How long did you stay in foster care? _____
- 11. Why were you removed from your biological home? _____

- 12. Circle how many total foster care placements you have had.
A). Less than five
B). 5-10
C). 11- 20
D). 21 or more
- 13. Circle which of the following apply to you.
A). I aged out of system at 18
B). I was adopted
C). I returned to my biological home
D). Other _____
- 14. While in foster care, were you ever abused? (Yes or No)
- 15. If yes, was the abuse sexual? (Yes or No)

Use the back of this survey if there is anything else you would like to add or tell us about your experience with foster care.

mizes the path so many foster kids are forced down before being turned out on their own: he was removed because of neglect, not abuse; moved between dozens of foster homes; struggled with school work; and only wanted to be back with his biological family.

From the time he was taken from his mother, Williamson acknowledges he was hard to handle. He says he had anger problems, mad because he never felt accepted.

“I would just act out to make them not want me there so they would call the social worker and basically tell them that they didn’t want me

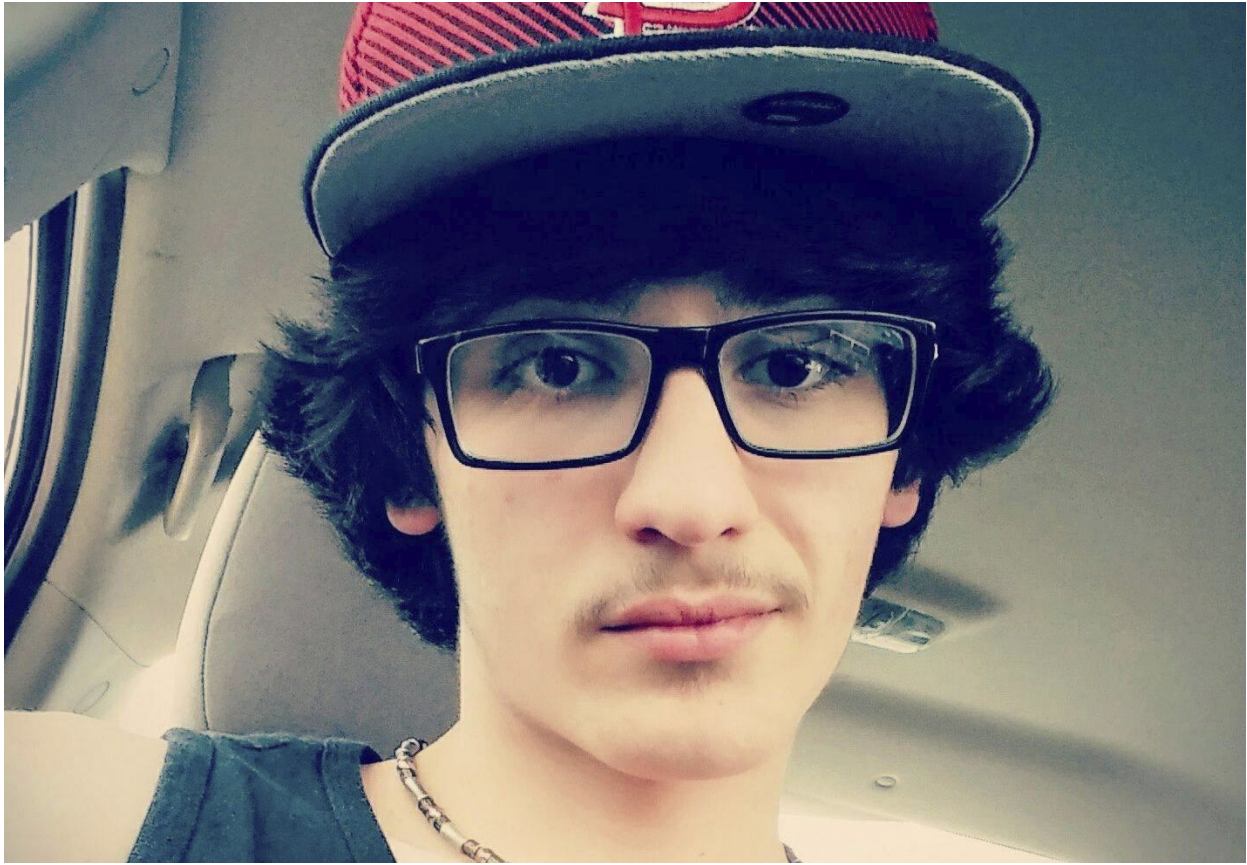


PHOTO COURTESY OF DOMINIC WILLIAMSON

Dominic Williamson said he was in 80 different foster homes from the time he was 3 until he turned 14.

and that they'd end up finding a new place for me," he said. "Somewhere where I'd be happy."

Williamson and his brother initially were put in the same homes for two or three years. Their mom told Dominic years later that before she signed over her parental rights she asked the state to keep the pair together.

But that didn't happen, and the two were split up when it became hard to find placements that would take them both. Then his brother was adopted.

Williamson, meanwhile, continued to move from home to home. Three families, he said, wanted to — or did — adopt him. But none ultimately worked out.

He has a constant reminder of that final failed adoption.

"I still have the last name of someone who

gave me back," Williamson said. "It doesn't feel very good. It makes me feel like I'm not wanted anymore."

When he was 14, he reconnected with his biological mother after finding her on Facebook. She was living in Florida.

"She ended up selling her car and buying a bus ticket and moving down here to the Salvation Army in Wichita," he said. "She got a job and she was doing real good and she was trying to get me back."

But she relapsed and turned back to crack cocaine. He ran away from foster care and moved with his mom to Massachusetts, where many of their relatives live.

Soon, however, he returned to Wichita to take care of his juvenile court cases. Before long, he stopped hearing from his mom and couldn't find

out where she was.

When Williamson started getting into trouble again, he said the state sent him to group homes in Topeka and Wichita.

“They only put me in like three or four until they pulled me out and they were like, ‘You know what? We can’t help you. We’re just going to let you go.’

“And they let me out of the juvenile facility right before my 18th birthday and said, ‘I hope the adult system picks you up, because we can’t help you.’”

LAWSUITS TARGET STATE SYSTEMS ACROSS U.S.

The extent of the foster care crisis can be measured in court records across the nation. Since the 1980s, nearly three dozen states have faced lawsuits asserting that they were further harming children they were supposed to protect.

“Once children enter government custody it is difficult for them to escape without being further damaged by their stay in state custody,” said a suit filed in Wisconsin more than 25 years ago.

In the past two years alone, at least five states have been sued.

The Star reviewed four decades of lawsuits and found some states are being sued today for the same issues that plagued other systems 15 to 20 years ago.

Lawsuits, and the combination of nonprofit legal child advocates and private law firms, are the only voices these foster children have.

“Look who the plaintiffs are — highly vulnerable kids in government custody,” said Ira Lustbader, an attorney who has traveled to more than

a dozen states in the past 20 years to represent children. “They are poor, they don’t vote, they don’t have all the powerful interest groups.

“I certainly didn’t realize how deep the structural problems were and how devastating they can be to both children and families. Once you see that, you can’t look away, you have to keep fighting it.”

This fall, a lawsuit filed on behalf of 12 West Virginia foster children said the state’s child welfare agency was in “a perpetual state of crisis” trying to find placements for kids. The suit detailed roughly a dozen systemic breakdowns, leading to kids like 12-year-old Ace L being abused, overmedicated and moved multiple times, including to institutional and hospital settings.

A Better Childhood, a watchdog organization based in New York that filed the suit, said on its website: “The result of these failures is that the West Virginia foster care system devastates and permanently damages the children in its care.”

At least eight suits, including one filed in Kansas last year, allege that multiple placements are causing children further harm.

A 10-year-old Kansas boy, known only as C.A. in court records, had been in DCF custody for six years. During that period, he was passed around 70 times between foster homes, group homes and agency offices, according to the suit.

In 2018 alone, C.A. suffered through three months of continuous night-to-night stays that contributed to the disruption of his treatment for Attention Deficit Disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the lawsuit alleged.

The litigation states that the plaintiff children have been moved 10 to more than 100 times while in state custody.

In their April 29 response to the original complaint, the defendants denied that they had caused injury to any of the plaintiffs.

“Plaintiffs have suffered no actual injury as a result of the actions or inactions of Defendants,” the document said. It added that “Plaintiffs’ own conduct was a contributing cause of injury alleged by Plaintiffs.”

“Look who the plaintiffs are — highly vulnerable kids in government custody. They are poor, they don’t vote, they don’t have all the powerful interest groups.”

Ira Lustbader, an attorney who has traveled to more than a dozen states in the past 20 years to represent children

In Rhode Island, two brothers were kept in institutions simply because the state had nowhere else to put them, according to a lawsuit filed in 2007. The brothers, ages 9 and 13, were among 10 children named in the suit filed against state officials and Rhode Island's child welfare agency.

"Abuse and neglect of children in foster care in Rhode Island has been so pervasive," the lawsuit said, "that children in Rhode Island are more likely to suffer abuse or neglect if they are in foster care than if they are not."

Lawsuits continue to be necessary, said Lustbader, because there's no accountability when the systems fail.

States have a "constitutional, statutory obligation" to provide a web of care for those they bring into the system, he said.

"If your system is literally re-victimizing them, reharmed them, you as a government are contributing to their negative outcomes," said Lustbader, litigation director for New York-based Children's Rights, a national advocacy organization that represented children in the Kansas and Rhode Island lawsuits.

"Being removed from the family you know and then being harmed by the system that was supposed to protect you certainly stacks the odds against anyone trying to make their way in the world."

ROUGH BEGINNINGS, UNHAPPY ENDINGS

Shortly after he aged out, Williamson met with a close friend of his mom's who had told him they needed to talk.

"Your aunt and uncle called me, and they want me to tell you that your mom passed away."

Williamson had just aged out of state care. His dad died when he was 3. And now his mom was gone, dying in her sleep, he said he was told.

He had no home. He'd never had a job or a driver's license. He had attended four high schools and accrued only six credits toward graduation.

"They wanted to know if I wanted to stay in custody, which means they would try to get me some independent living program or something like that," he said. "But after everything that I'd just been through with being in custody and the foster homes, I was just like, 'No, just leave me be.' I didn't want their help. Because their help so far hadn't gotten me anywhere."

When he left the system, he said, "I didn't have no plans."

"I had to make some money somehow. I had to find a place to stay somehow."

He tried to sleep, he said, "in hotels, motels, just wherever I could lay down."

"But I didn't really sleep because I would be high on meth. I was doing a lot of bad things at that time."

Two months after aging out, Williamson was charged with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon after he threatened someone he said owed him money.

And in April 2018, six weeks before he turned 19, he and a 17-year-old female friend were stopped by a loss prevention officer while trying to walk out of a Menards in Wichita with a home security system.

Williamson, high on meth and up for nearly three days straight, shot the guard in the stomach, wounding him, then escaped in a stolen car. The next night, police showed up at his place as Williamson was climbing into another stolen car. He took off with police in pursuit but shook them and headed west.

Several hours later, state troopers caught up with him on Interstate 70, more than 200 miles from Wichita.

Williamson was sentenced to eight years in prison for aggravated battery with a deadly weapon, theft and eluding law enforcement officers.

Now, he earns 60 cents a day as a rotunda porter in the main lobby of the Hutchinson Correctional Facility. The first job he ever had, he said, was in prison.

Since he's been there, Williamson said, he

has not been in contact with any of his relatives. Before prison, he said, he reached out on Facebook to the woman whose last name he still has, to apologize for any problems he may have caused as a child.

As for his brother, he's heard he tried college but ended up in the military. Williamson said he's made many attempts to get together with him.

"But it seems like every time we made like a plan or a date to meet up, he'd message me and ask for a rain check," he said. "At that time, my life was really bad. I was using drugs, I was selling drugs... I wanted to meet him, I wanted to have a relationship with him. But I didn't.

"I don't think he even knows I'm in prison."

Seventeen years after he was removed from his home, Williamson still has that need to be with his biological family.

"I wanted to be there with them because I felt like they were the people in my life who ac-



ELLIS COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Dominic Williamson was booked into the Ellis County, Kansas, jail in 2018.

tually truly even cared," he said.

"You'll never have a bond with anybody like you would with your own."

INSIDE OUR REPORTING

A longtime advocate in Kansas City once told a reporter that foster care was “just a breeding ground for prison.”

That comment stuck with us and eventually led to this project. The yearlong investigation began with prisons and branched out into a more comprehensive look at long-term outcomes for children who age out of the nation’s broken, overwhelmed foster care system.

To understand the entire scope of the issue, from end to beginning, The Star contacted every state to see if we could survey inmates. Ultimately, 12 states agreed.

Corrections departments in those states distributed the one-page questionnaires. The respondents were anonymous, but some chose to share more of their stories on the back of the survey.

Some inmates chose not to participate, so the results are not reflective of the entire inmate population. Surveys that were questionable or unclear were not used.

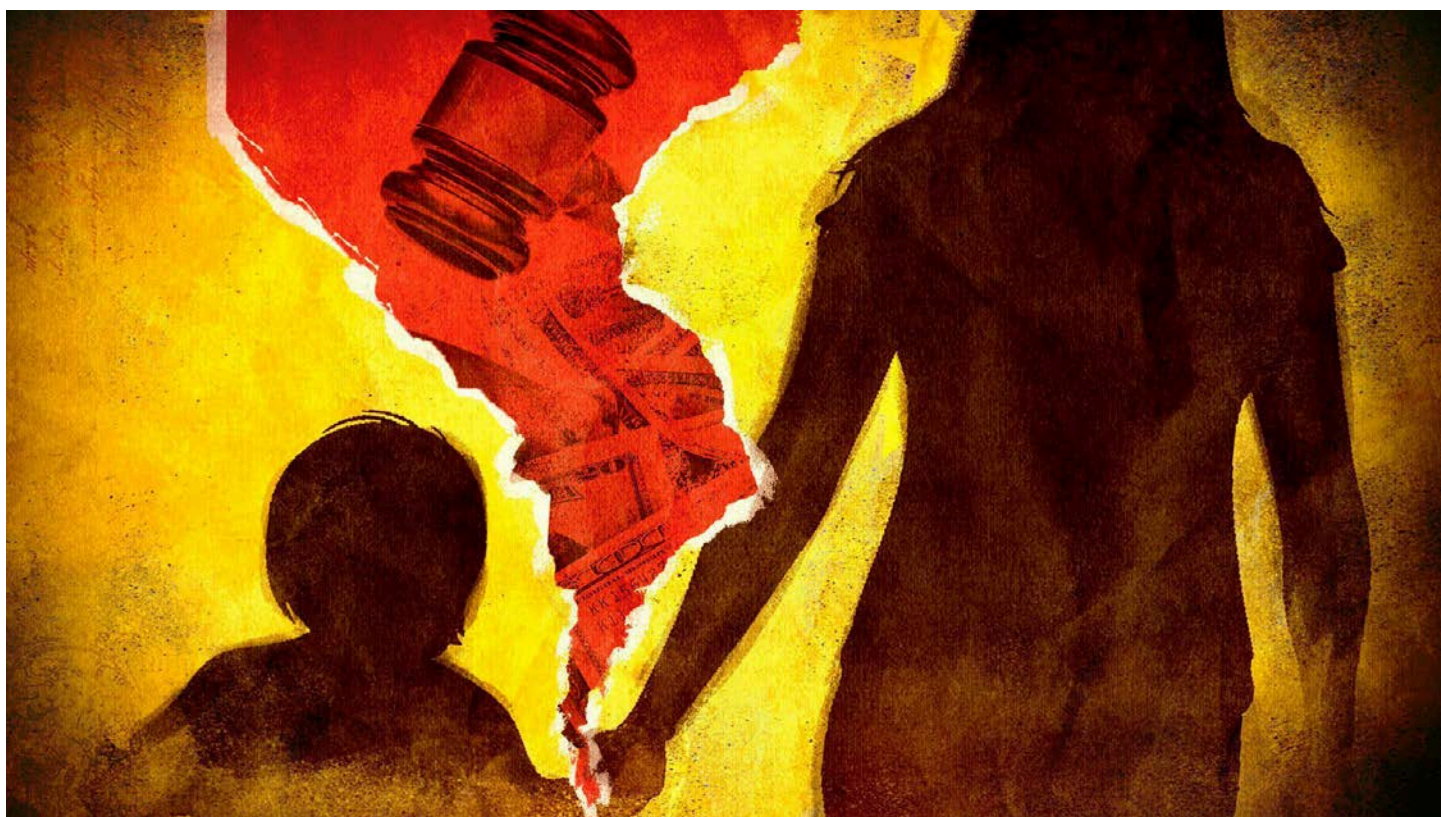
Researchers and child welfare experts said the results, while not scientific, were unparalleled for their reach. Hearing inmates’ personal stories across the country, they said, was invaluable.

Corrections officials in several states said the results would be helpful in their efforts to rehabilitate prisoners.

Reporters interviewed dozens of other sources: social workers, child welfare experts and advocates, law enforcement, judges, foster parents, doctors, scientists and lawyers. They spoke with many former foster children. They reviewed decades of class action lawsuits filed against state systems. They pored over years of child welfare budget statistics as well as numerous reports and studies. Reporters and videographers traveled more than 7,000 miles for these stories.

The survey results were compiled into a database by University of Missouri journalism students Marcelle Peters and Rachel Zalucki, with assistance from The Star’s Lisa Lopez and Jennifer Davis. Analysis was conducted by Zalucki and Peters; Mark Horvit, an associate professor at MU; Ben Wieder, data reporter for McClatchy; and Shirsho Dasgupta, data reporting fellow at McClatchy.

The series was reported and written by The Star’s Laura Bauer, Judy L. Thomas and Eric Adler. Videos and photos were by Shelly Yang, Tammy Ljungblad and James Wooldridge of the The Star and Reshma Kirpalani of McClatchy.



NEIL NAKAHODO

PART TWO OF SIX

As U.S. spends billions on foster care, families are pulled apart and forgotten

BY JUDY L. THOMAS AND LAURA BAUER

For more than a century, the federal government has laid out how states should deal with struggling families. In 1980, Congress passed a law strengthening that commitment, mandating that child welfare agencies make “reasonable efforts” to keep families together whenever possible.

Many states have lost sight of that edict.

The Star reviewed child welfare funding reports and found that, from Maryland to New

Mexico, they spend far less on keeping foster kids in their homes than on moving them into new ones.

In Fiscal Year 2016, Arizona spent just 1 percent of its state and local dollars on in-home prevention and 79 percent on out-of-home placements. For Wisconsin, it was 2 percent versus 58 percent, according to Child Trends, a national research organization.

And Kansas spent 3 percent on in-home

prevention compared to 60 percent on out-of-home placements. But the disparity didn't stop there.

“Over the last five years, Kansas increased foster care spending 100 times more than prevention spending — \$28 million versus \$264,000,” Linda Bass, president of a nonprofit child welfare agency, told legislators in 2018. “We must do both with a balanced approach.”

When state budgets get tight, funding that would be used on preventive services also gets cut.

The result of all this, The Star found, is a system that can, in effect, punish families for being poor or dysfunctional, particularly along racial lines. Black children enter foster care at a significantly higher rate than white children.

“Often, vulnerable poor families don't have the money or the power to push back against government intervention,” said Ira Lustbader, an attorney who has spent the past two decades representing children nationwide in class action lawsuits. “Families are ripped apart for poverty and not abuse.

“There are deep biases at play in government intervention. And judgments made that are based on perceptions of poverty and race play out horrifically for too many families.”

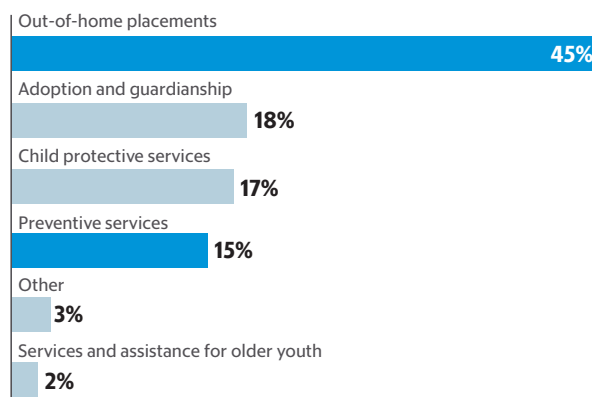
Collectively, in child welfare budgets across America, more money is spent on investigating families than on trying to keep them together — 17 percent for child protective services versus 15 percent for in-home preventive services.

The Star, in a yearlong investigation of the long-term outcomes for children who age out of foster care, surveyed nearly 6,000 inmates in a dozen states. Michelle Voorhees was one of them. She believes many former foster kids end up in worse condition than if they had been allowed to stay in their homes.

“Just because their family doesn't have the means to take care of them doesn't mean that you should just sever that bond,” said Voorhees, 28, who had two stints in foster care. “So many of these problems truly do stem from poverty.”

Spending on child welfare in 2016

Nearly half the total federal, state and local expenditures went toward out-of-home placements, while 15% was spent on preventive services.



Source: Child Trends

NEIL NAKAHODO | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Sitting inside the Topeka Correctional Facility in her prison-issued navy blue shirt and olive pants, Voorhees said the state could have done more to keep her with her mother.

“There's all this money to pay to foster homes and all this money for adoptions and what-not,” she said. “I don't understand how there is so much funding to rip us away, but no funding to keep us there.”

To be sure, some children need to be removed from their homes and placed in foster care for their own safety and well-being. Some inmates who responded to The Star's survey conceded that.

“I had good foster care parents, and my mother did a good job when she got us back,” wrote one inmate from Connecticut. “I chose to be with the wrong crowd and make the wrong decisions later in life.”

In recent years, as the number of kids in foster care increased, the dollars used to prevent them from entering foster care were significantly reduced.

From 2006 to 2016, Title IV-B funding — much of which goes toward in-home preventive programs — decreased nationwide by 29 percent, according to the Child Trends survey. Nebraska cut its expenditure by 71 percent, joining Hawaii (49 percent) and Georgia (43 percent).



SHELLY YANG

Tim Gay is founder and executive director of YouThrive, a nonprofit that aims to support youth as they age out of foster care and transition into adulthood.

Congress tried again to step in and send states a message. A new federal law went into effect in 2018 that, for the first time, allows states to use money on in-home prevention that was previously earmarked for foster care.

“Early intervention and family support are two primary areas where having better policies and resources in place would go a long way toward improving outcomes for adults who were in the foster care system,” said U.S. Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo.

But the majority of states didn’t sign on for the first year. Instead, many delayed implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act, which requires states to provide matching funds.

The cost of neglecting in-home preventive services is a clogged and crowded system.

Kids who could have stayed in their homes

take up beds in good foster homes that are needed for severely abused and neglected children whose safety is in jeopardy. Because of that, kids from Oregon to Florida and states in between are forced to sleep in child welfare offices or homeless shelters.

Tim Gay, founder of YouThrive, which helps Kansas foster kids transition into adulthood, said he’s worked with many older teens who “would have experienced less trauma if they would have stayed at home.”

“We have this Utopian view that we’re going to remove them from an unhealthy environment and we’re going to put them with this wonderful family that lives out in the suburbs. And they’re going to love them and care for them for the rest of their life,” Gay said.

“That’s the view — and that’s not what happens.”

REMOVED FOR NEGLECT, NOT ABUSE

The merits of removing kids from troubled homes versus trying to maintain families have been debated since 1909, when President Theodore Roosevelt convened the first White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children.

“Surely nothing ought to interest our people more than the care of the children who are destitute and neglected but not delinquent,” Roosevelt said at the time. “The widowed or deserted mother, if a good woman, willing to work and to do her best, should ordinarily be helped in such fashion as will enable her to bring up her children herself in their natural home.

“... Surely poverty alone should not disrupt the home.”

But often, it has.

Neglect — not physical or sexual abuse — was given as a reason for removal in 62 percent of the cases nationwide.

“If you lock a child in a closet and starve him, that’s neglect,” said Richard Wexler, of the Virginia-based National Coalition for Child Protection Reform. “If your food stamps run out at the end of the month, that’s neglect. Which do you think happens more often? ... There is hardly a poor child in America that couldn’t, at some point, be labeled neglected.

“The biggest single problem in American child welfare is the confusion of poverty with neglect, compounded by the racial bias.”

That confusion can play out when a case-worker makes a visit to a “dirty home,” Wexler said.

“She can see the mess and the chaos — she can’t see the love,” he said. “So you see what’s in front of you and the gut reaction is, ‘I just have to rescue this kid.’ You’re not thinking, what’s going to happen 10, 15, 20 years down the line?”

Government statistics show that black children are overrepresented in foster care compared to other races. According to an annual report published this year, black children account for 23 percent of the children in foster care across

the country. Fourteen percent of children in the U.S. are black.

Many prison inmates who completed The Star’s survey said they believed they were removed from their homes because of poverty. They said their families would have been stronger with a little support.

“This country has a hesitation for providing anything that looks like welfare to families,” said Clark Peters, a professor of social work at the University of Missouri. “So it is really the animus against poor families that drives this.

“We can all get behind saving the innocent kid with tears streaming down their cheeks. But when that kid becomes a 19-year-old who has a cigarette in his hand, a few tattoos that are far less appealing to many people but just as needy and deserving of love, it’s a harder sell.”

One inmate in the Upper Midwest said he went into foster care after being molested by a babysitter when he was 10.

“They did not have to take me out of my home,” he wrote on the survey. “We were poor and couldn’t afford a lawyer.”

An inmate from Hawaii said when she was moved into foster care, she felt like she lost her identity.

“I felt abandoned not just by my parents but by the same system that was created to protect,” she wrote. “The whole foster care system needs to be broken down, reconstructed on the principle of Children first Family is Everything.”

Lori Ross, a longtime advocate for children in Missouri, said foster care works well for some kids and “they end up in a good place.”

“But for way too many, it fails. I’ve said for decades, ‘If we can’t do better than the situation they are currently in, then why are we taking them away?’”

THE PAIN OF SEPARATION

All Michelle Voorhees ever wanted was to be home. Her home.

But the state decided in the mid-1990s that



SHELLY YANG

Michelle Voorhees keeps a photo of her and her younger sister as one of the possessions she's allowed to have in the Topeka Correctional Facility.

her 21-year-old single mother, with three children and another on the way, wasn't emotionally or mentally fit to care for them. The young mom was struggling. Eventually, all three daughters were put in foster care.

"And I just remember crying, crying for my mom and wondering where she was," Voorhees said. "I couldn't concentrate on anything else. I needed my mom."

Being taken away from her home at age 5 had a lifetime effect on her, Voorhees says now. She believes it shaped who she became — a woman behind bars who struggles with relationships and attachments — and fueled her distrust of people.

Even at such a young age, Voorhees realized she couldn't share her real feelings or fears.

"My foster mom wanted me to call her mom," she said. "I couldn't talk about my other family, I couldn't talk about how my mom was. I just felt that I did not belong there at all. Because I knew in my heart that I had a real family and that this is not where I'm supposed to be."

Voorhees soon became withdrawn. She started playing by herself, not wanting anyone to see her with her dolls or her stuffed animals.

"I remember having this whole kind of like secret inner self," she said, looking back now. "And I think that as I got older, that became a dangerous trait to have, because it affected my communication, it affected how I dealt with my emotions, how I expressed my concerns, my interpersonal relationships, my working relationships, all of that — it profoundly affected that."

Voorhees remained in foster care for 11 months the first time. She was released to her mother when she was 6. The state then sent her to live with her father, whom she had never met.

But when she was 14, while living again with her mom for a short time, Voorhees went back into the system.

After a couple of weeks in a foster home during her freshman year in high school, she bolted.

“And after that, there was just a series of me running away, me being placed in a different placement, running away, different placement,” she said. “And I really just kind of fell through the cracks.”

When she ran away, Voorhees would often find herself homeless.

“I really was just on the streets and was at the mercy of whatever weirdo decided that he wanted to pick up a 14-year-old girl walking down the street,” she said.

She quickly discovered that when a foster teen runs away, no one comes looking for them.

Eventually, when living on the run got to be too much, she would go back into state care.

“I was placed in 11 different state placements by the time I was 17,” she said. “I had two children during this time, developed a drug addiction, and sex trafficked. I spent a lot of my time in custody as a runaway. I did not graduate high school. I dropped out at 16 and got my GED. I am not sure if I aged out in the traditional sense.

“The state just stopped dealing with me at some point.”

ONE STATE'S DEEP CUTS

Families can be helped by programs that provide money for child care or other expenses. But when that pile of funds is reduced, for families it can be the difference between children staying in the home or being removed.

In Kansas, under former Gov. Sam Brownback, the state drastically cut the number of children served by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, which helps with food costs, housing

and other bills.

In 2010, more than 25,000 children received help from TANF. Seven years later, that number had plunged to 7,500, a 70 percent drop, according to a study conducted by Kansas Appleseed, a justice nonprofit that represents vulnerable Kansans.

Critics of that massive reduction cite research from the University of Kansas that found a connection between those cuts and an increase in the numbers of children in care. In 2010, Kansas had 5,979 children in care. By 2017, it had 7,753 — a 30 percent increase.

Quinn Ried, policy research analyst for Kansas Appleseed, said you could track the number of families getting aid and see the impact of the cuts.

“For families who were living right on the edge, this assistance was enough to allow them to keep their families together,” Ried said. “When that support got taken away from them, poverty prevented them from keeping their families together at that point. This was the tipping point.”

Gov. Laura Kelly, who was a state senator during the TANF reductions, saw the impact.

“I was on the front lines watching those funds get cut,” Kelly told The Star. “We saw the numbers in foster care just skyrocket.”

Now, she said, the state is taking a different approach.

Kansas was one of the first states to implement the Family First initiative. And it's now using Team Decision Making in a few counties and plans to roll it out statewide.

Social workers join relatives and others in a child's life to assess whether state services would help a family stay together.

The model began early last month and so far in Johnson and Wyandotte counties, there have been 17 team meetings regarding 36 children. Of those, the team was able to keep 22 children with their families and not involve foster care, a Department for Children and Families spokesman said.

“We hope to reduce the amount of money



JOHN HANNA, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Kansas Gov. Laura Kelly (left), with Kansas Department for Children and Families Secretary Laura Howard, at a news conference earlier this year.

that we're spending on foster care just by keeping kids out of the system," the governor said. "The biological family is our first priority. Helping them stay intact is what we want to do."

Officials and advocates know that TANF money and social safety nets had helped with that in the past. But since the cuts, there's been little movement to restore them.

Several bills were introduced in the last legislative session that attempted to address "the shredded safety net programs," but they went nowhere, according to a Kansas Appleseed report released earlier this month.

"More Kansans experiencing poverty or hardship will fall through the cracks," the report said, "and children will continue to be removed from their homes at dramatically heightened rates."

KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER COSTS LESS

In 2016, nearly half the \$30 billion in federal, state and local funds spent by child welfare agencies went toward out-of-home placements, according to the report by Child Trends, which conducts biennial national surveys of agency expenditures.

A relatively small number of states focus their prevention spending on substance abuse and mental health services, the report found.

"This finding is important given the need for these services among families involved in the child welfare system, as well as the ongoing opioid crisis that is straining many child welfare systems," the report said. In fiscal 2016, it noted, more than a third of child removals were associated with substance abuse.

Not only is in-home prevention preferred in

some cases, it's cost effective.

The total estimated cost for foster care per year is roughly \$25,000 per child, according to the National Council for Adoption. For three siblings, that would be \$75,000.

The cost for services to preserve a family could run between \$5,000 and \$10,000 on average per year.

Bass, president of KVC Kansas, the non-profit child welfare agency, told a legislative task force last year that by increasing funding for in-home prevention, "we can help additional families who are experiencing challenges."

"This would help reduce child welfare costs overall by preventing mental/behavioral health, substance use, or conduct situations from escalating to child removal and foster care."

She said efforts to keep families intact are almost always effective when they are willing participants.

"When they enter family preservation services," Bass said, "we are really successful at keeping them at home — about nine out of every 10 children."

SWING OF THE PENDULUM

Deciding whether to remove a child from a home is not easy, especially as overwhelmed and understaffed child welfare systems must ensure children's safety is not compromised.

Judgment calls are made, sometimes based on the philosophy of current agency leaders or the subjective perception of how bad the living conditions are in the home. Decisions can even be driven by headlines and public outcry over a tragedy.

In two instances, a decade apart, Missouri's foster care kids felt the impact of a mighty — but invisible — pendulum swing.

Often, when a child known to the system is critically injured or dies at home, more kids are taken. Then, when a child dies in foster care, and missteps in the system are revealed, the tendency is to keep more kids at home.

Ross, the longtime child advocate in Missouri, calls it a game. All involved are "pawns in a system that is way bigger than them. ... And it screws the whole system up."

In August 2002, 2-year-old Dominic James' foster father violently shook him inside the family's Greene County home. Dominic died in a local hospital.

Calls for change were loud after the public learned a state worker had decided to put him back in the foster home after a previous trip to the hospital.

Then-Gov. Bob Holden pushed to overhaul Missouri's system. More money and new legislation soon followed.

And immediately, fewer kids were taken into care. From FY 2002 to FY 2006, 19 percent fewer Missouri kids entered state custody, dropping from 7,568 to 6,130. And the next year, the number dropped further.

A decade after Dominic's death, a 10-year-old girl in Kansas City was rescued from a closet, weighing just 32 pounds. Her mom, who had been investigated for neglect by the state before, had taken her out of school five years before and then kept her hidden.

After that incident, the number of kids coming into state care went up again. From FY 2012 to FY 2016, the number of kids entering foster care increased by nearly 20 percent, from 6,273 to 7,505.

"The general public has no idea when a pendulum has swung," Ross said. "They have no idea."

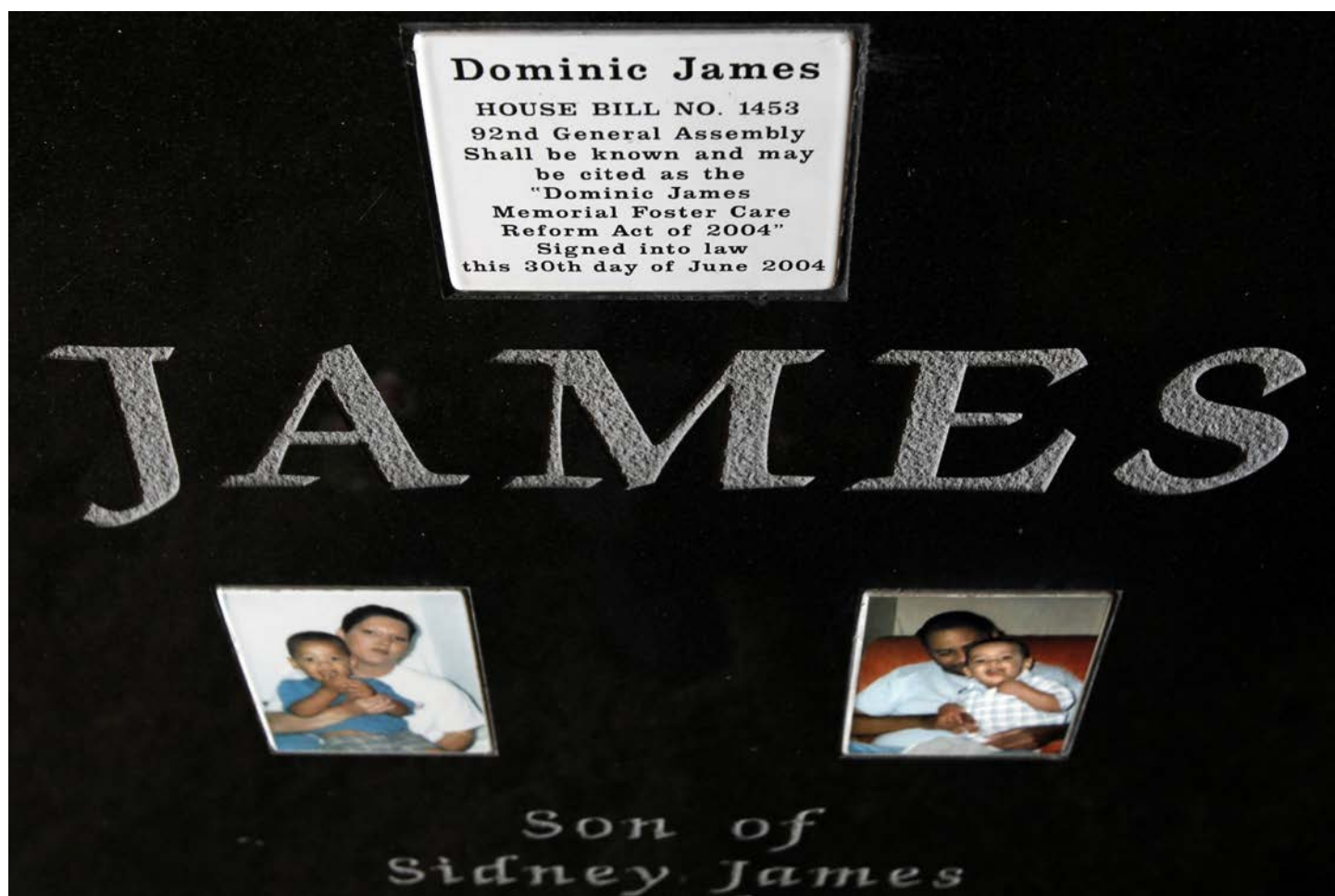
TRAUMA OF BEING REMOVED

Voorhees uses an analogy to describe what it's like when a child is removed from her home.

Imagine, she says, that you're at work one day. The morning starts out normal enough. You feed the dog, drink your coffee and tell your kids goodbye before you leave home.

Then, while at work, everything changes.

"The police show up at your job and they say,



THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Missouri overhauled its foster care system after 2-year-old Dominic James was shaken to death in 2002 while with a foster family. The back of his headstone shows the Dominic James Memorial Foster Care Reform Act that was signed into law in 2004.

‘OK, we’re moving you to a totally different city,’” she says. “And you don’t know anybody, and you can’t call your family and you can’t call any of your friends and you need to leave your phone here and you can’t take any of your stuff with you. We’ll figure that out later.”

The police then take you to a different location.

“And then tell you to ‘Just wait in this room for a little while, because we’re gonna figure things out,’” she says. “... And then they send you to these really well meaning people but you have no idea who they are.”

Everything there is different. All you want,

Voorhees says, is to contact the people you have a bond with — but you can’t.

“It’s a very disrupting experience,” she says. “And in a lot of ways, it’s a traumatic experience, because all of these things are unexpected. And suddenly, everything in your world that you felt was safe and secure and concrete is not.”

And, she says, “It starts to make you question, well, what can you believe? Who can you trust? You begin to stop valuing certain things. You stop valuing relationships, because they’re not concrete, and they’re not going to be there forever. And you stop investing yourself in certain things.

“And all of a sudden, stability isn’t really

important to you. Having goals isn't important to you. Doing a simple thing like taking a shower in a stranger's home is a very disconcerting experience. So the more that you get moved around, the more trauma that you endure."

Eventually, Voorhees stopped trusting people. That disconnection increased as she grew older.

"I had some really antisocial behavior," she said. "I also had a deep dislike for government agencies — for the police, for social workers. I did not believe that they were on my team."

In 2014, when she was just 22, she was convicted of aggravated arson, aggravated burglary and second-degree murder in the death of a southeast Kansas woman whose remains were found in the rubble of a burned-out home.

Prosecutors said Voorhees and a 26-year-old man went to the house to retrieve property that had been stolen from Voorhees, and the man put a pipe bomb on a mattress and lit the fuse. The pipe bomb did not explode, but set the house on

fire. Voorhees and the man said they thought the house was empty at the time.

Voorhees was sentenced to nearly 24 years in prison. The earliest she could be released is 2033. The man received a life sentence with a possibility of parole after 20 years.

Through it all, Voorhees and her mom have stayed connected.

She often thinks of how life could have been different if she were able to stay with her mother for all of her childhood. To know that she was always safe and loved.

"Had my mom just had a little bit of help, had she had enough money to buy her own vehicle, had she had enough money to relocate herself from an abusive situation, had she not had to have been dependent on men in the first place for any kind of financial stability, I don't believe that she would have made some of the decisions that she made," Voorhees says. "I don't believe that she would have struggled as a mother, because my mom is a good mom."

DECEMBER 15, 2019



NEIL NAKAHODO

PART THREE OF SIX

Frequent moves don't just harm foster kids' emotions — they hurt their brains

BY ERIC ADLER

Tulsa, Oklahoma
When she was in foster care — her clothes in bags, uprooted and shuttled from one strange home to the next — Desi Henderson thought next to nothing about the wrong it might be doing to her brain.

Now, at 19, and studying to be the kind of teacher who gave her hope, the Tulsa, Oklahoma, teen who “aged out” of foster care last year looks back and thinks, “Oh, yeah. Definitely.”

Twelve different families in 18 years, not counting abusive stints back and forth to a

mother who sold her child’s body for drug money: Kids don’t go through that much disruption, science is showing, without it inflicting a cognitive price.

“I remember as a kid wishing I could cement myself down so I didn’t have to go somewhere else with someone else,” Henderson said. “Most of these houses look relatively OK on the outside. . . . But you never know what goes on behind closed doors.

“I attempted suicide in two of these houses. I dealt with self harm in five. I had a gun held to



JAMES WOOLDRIDGE

Desi Henderson spent time in foster care in Oklahoma.

my head in one. I was sexually assaulted in two. But I was loved and cherished in six of them. I had a family in six of them.”

While Henderson wound her way through a chaotic life, vowing to prove wrong all those who predicted she would turn out like her mother, researchers across the country had been looking into both the behaviors and brain development of foster kids just like her.

What they are discovering in ever-emerging research is just how much damage is being done to foster kids forced to go from one to two to 10 to 30 to, as an investigation by The Star has found, up to 100 different placements in childhood.

Perhaps most intriguing is what researchers are seeing unfolding in their brains.

In an effort to stop child welfare agencies

from putting foster kids through multiple placements, attorneys in at least two class-action lawsuits — one in Kansas, another in Florida — seized on a 2013 paper published in *Child Welfare* on more than a decade’s worth of broad research.

In the paper, University of Oregon psychologist Philip Fisher, director of the university’s Stress Neurobiology and Prevention Lab, states directly:

“The available empirical evidence suggests that placement instability and other family chaos is associated with disrupted development of the brain’s prefrontal cortex.”

Located behind the forehead, the prefrontal cortex is the font of judgment and “executive functioning.” It takes the lead in focus, attention and planning, managing emotions, short-term

memory and controlling impulses, like acting rashly on a thought or emotion.

Scientists so far have not established a precise cause-and-effect relationship that says X number of placements alter the brain by X amount. Because abuse and neglect and foster care are inseparable, it is still debatable how much of the problems scientists are finding come from the placements and how much from the abuse, neglect and what collectively are known as adverse childhood experiences, or ACES.

For some 20 years, since the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente published the first major ACES study in 1998, it's become ever more clear that the higher one's ACES score (meaning the more adverse and traumatic experiences one has as a child), the worse they tend to do as an adult.

In 2005, researchers at Harvard Medical School, the University of Michigan and the Seattle-based Casey Family Programs interviewed close to 500 former foster kids and found 25 percent suffered post-traumatic stress disorder, outpacing the 20 percent suffered by veterans of the war in Iraq and more than double the 11 percent suffered by veterans of the war in Afghanistan.

The latest research on foster children takes foster care research steps further, showing that no matter what crisis thrust a child into foster care, forcing that child to endure multiple placements is with little doubt adding brain insult to injury.

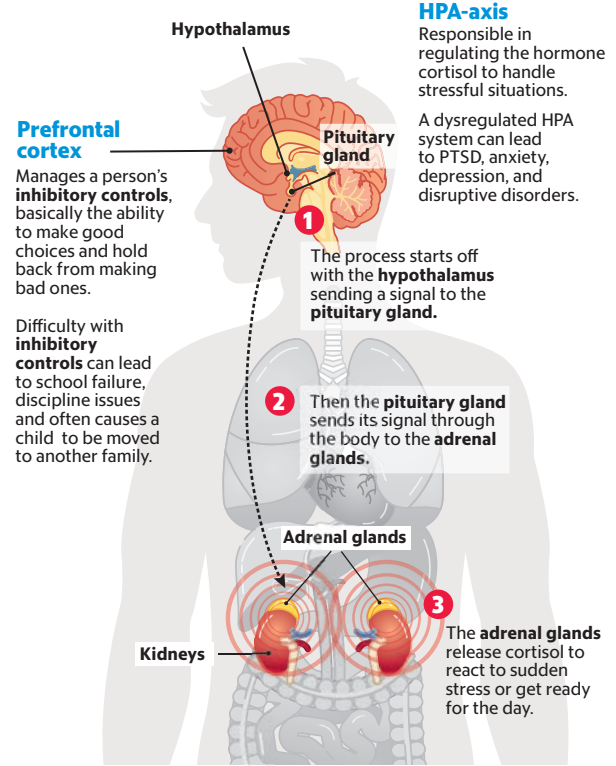
The implication already is that the repeated unpredictability and randomness of the lives of foster kids who are shuttled to a different place by the week, month or year is hurting the normal development and thus function of the prefrontal cortex.

The result, researchers suspect, is foster kids are put at greater risk of post-traumatic stress disorder, disruptive behaviors, drug and alcohol abuse and a range of psychiatric disorders from acting out to depression.

Henderson relates. She's been in therapy and

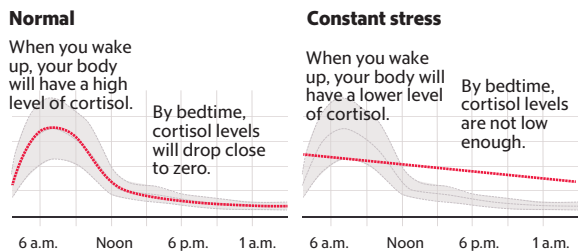
How foster care can affect your brain

Researchers say forcing children to endure multiple placements can disrupt the neural connections in their frontal lobes. Most affected, researchers say, are the brain's prefrontal cortex and the HPA-axis.



Cortisol levels

Foster kids who have endured repeated trauma have their HPA-axis thrown off kilter, often linked to mental disorders. Their bodies are in constant stress that push their HPA-axes too hard and too fast. Cortisol levels as a result become flat.



NEIL NAKAHODO | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

on medications since elementary school. She used to cut herself, etching ribbons into her skin in moments of turmoil. "I didn't want to feel the emotional pain, so why not make myself feel the physical pain?" she said.

In one foster home, she would literally shut herself off, hiding in closets.

"The mom would get angry with me a lot,"



CHARLIE LITCHFIELD, UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

University of Oregon psychologist Philip Fisher and other researchers have studied foster children and the effect multiple placements have on their brains.

Henderson said, “because I would get mad and I would yell at the other kids or I would freak out. If anything got too hard, I would like run away and hide. I would just go until somebody found me or until I calmed down or got hungry or hot.

“I think I always just wanted to go home and I never really knew what home was. But it was never where I was.”

A ‘STRUCTURAL PROBLEM’ IN THE BRAIN

What’s happening in the brains of passed-around children is, in some regards, literally as clear as day and night.

The “day-night task” is a psychological mea-

surement.

At the University of Delaware, researcher Mary Dozier and her colleagues in the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences used it to assess 102 kids ages 5 and 6. The kids were broken into three groups: children never placed in foster care, kids adopted after one foster care placement and kids adopted after experiencing multiple placements.

The day-night task measures “inhibitory control.” It is the crucial ability — one of the executive functions of the prefrontal cortex — to control your behavior, inhibit yourself from acting on impulse.

Society relies on inhibitory control. Instead of running a red light, expressing random thoughts,

gobbling all the buffet desserts, lashing out at a jerk in traffic, people learn to exercise self-control. They hold back.

In her lab, Dozier's team showed kids a stack of random cards: White cards bore the image of a yellow sun; black cards bore a white crescent moon and stars. The children were instructed:

"When you see this card (sun), I want you to say 'night.' And when you see this card (moon and stars) I want you to say 'day.'"

Instead of reflexively saying "day" at the sight of the sun and "night" at the image of the moon, the children needed to show restraint and, card after card, do the opposite.

Result: "Adopted children who had experienced placement instability performed worse . . . than both other groups," Dozier concluded.

Inhibitory control was compromised. Hers is hardly the only lab finding this result.

At the non-profit Oregon Social Learning Center, research scientist Jacqueline Bruce, along with Fisher and colleague Katherine Pears, tested 117 foster kids and also found that more placements equaled less inhibitory control.

"Kids who had more placements had a harder time," Bruce said. "They made more mistakes than kids who were in less placements."

The result may seem insignificant, but it's far from it.

"I mean, yes, it's like what do we care if a kid can say 'sun' or 'moon'?" Pears said. "But what we care about is that when you're a kindergartner and you go to school and somebody knocks your pencil off the table and you want to punch them — you don't! You inhibit that response and you do something that is socially acceptable.

"Or you're in a new foster home, and your new foster sibling knocks your favorite Matchbox car off the table. Again, if you hit that kid, you're out of there. It can get you in trouble again and again and again."

Such trouble easily leads to repeated school failures, discipline, children being booted from one placement to the next.

"What happens is that these kids get re-

jected," Pears said. "They get given up on. They tick off adults. People say, 'Oh, we can't do anything with that child. He just doesn't care.'

"What people need to understand is that what looks like, 'Oh, they're not listening. They don't care. They don't want to behave,' is that it's not a situation of won't do. It's a can't do.

"They don't have the skills. Their underlying architecture is compromised. It's a structural problem."

Pears, Bruce and Fisher know this because, in at least one small study, they have taken pictures, functional MRIs of the brains of 11 foster kids versus 11 non-foster kids between the ages of 9 and 11 while they were being tested for inhibitory control.

This time the test was the "Go/No-Go" task. Kids are supposed to tap a button — the "go" action — every time they see a letter pop up on a screen, except when they see the letter "X," the "no-go" action.

The experiment wasn't looking at the effect of multiple placements. The researchers simply wanted to record some of what was going on in the brains of abused and neglected kids versus kids who weren't abused or neglected.

Interestingly, the test results turned out even. Foster kids and non-foster kids performed essentially the same on the Go/No-Go task. But when the researchers looked at the brain MRIs, glowing in red and yellow, the differences became clear.

"The kids who have early adverse experiences show different patterns of brain activity than kids who don't," Bruce said. "There are different areas that are lighting up."

Both lit up in an area known as the anterior cingulate gyrus, a crescent of neurons that up front and up top has ties to the brain's cognitive prefrontal cortex. At the back and on the bottom it ties to the brain's more emotional limbic system.

Whereas the non-foster kids were lighting up near the thinking prefrontal cortex, the maltreated kids in foster care were lighting up closer to the more emotional regions. In short,

their brains were working differently.

'A LONELY, BROKEN KID'

Additional studies by Dozier, the Oregon researchers and others have probed and also found differences in the stress response in foster kids.

It, too, begins in the brain.

Stress involves the body's HPA-axis, so-called because it starts at the base of the brain in the hypothalamus. The hypothalamus, "H," sends hormones a short distance away to the brain's pea-sized pituitary gland, "P." That gland, in turn, rushes its own hormones through the body to the adrenal glands, "A," set atop the kidneys.

The adrenal glands spout the hormone cortisol, which is critical to a host of functions. Chief among them are two types of stress.

First, there's sudden fight-or-flight. "If you're gonna do public speaking," Dozier said, "you're going to have a high level of cortisol."

The second is cortisol's "diurnal" or daily function.

What researchers suspect is that repeated trauma has caused the kids' HPA axes to go on chronic high alert and become dysregulated.

In the morning, when people rise, cortisol shoots up, hitting a peak about

30 minutes after waking to provide energy to take on the day. It then drops sharply, tapering to near zero by bedtime to promote sleep.

"This is part of why jet lag is problematic," Dozier explained. It's the cortisol cycle. "It takes you a couple of days for your system — cortisol being part of that system — to adjust to the new daylight cycle."

But the problem in foster kids is hardly jet lag. What researchers suspect is that repeated trauma has caused the kids' HPA axes to go on chronic high alert and become dysregulated.

Researchers suspect that just as a transmission pushed to run too hard, too long and too fast

at high revolutions per minute needs to shift to a lower rpm, the daily cortisol cycles in many maltreated foster kids have likewise, by necessity, "down regulated." They've become what they call "blunted."

"I think it's where the HPA axis is sort of saying, 'OK, I just can't keep elevating like this,'" Bruce said.

So when foster kids wake, their cortisol levels are often not as high as other kids'. When they go to bed, they're not as low.

"It's just flatter," Dozier said. "The daily cycle has been thrown off."

The problem with a dysregulated HPA system is its link to a mass of cognitive and emotional problems: PTSD, anxiety, depression and disruptive disorders where kids act stubborn, difficult, disobedient, irritable. Others turn inward. They tend to internalize their loneliness and withdraw.

"I mean, absolutely, I think I'm still affected by it," said Katarina Sayally, 24, of Oakland, California. She was shuttled to 32 different foster placements, 28 of them before age 10. At age 11, she was sexually assaulted by one of her foster fathers.

Her first placement: 6 months old.

"I was born with drugs in my system," Sayally said.

Sayally is one of 36 California foster children who appear on a video for California Youth Connection as part of a campaign to pass a bill, signed into law last year, to assure greater stability for foster children.

Genesis Osuna, 23, is also on it. She had three foster care placements, but moved at least six or seven times between them and a violent, paranoid mother who once sliced her with a knife.

In one foster home, the parents locked away the foster kids' food. "There was one cabinet for the fosters and one cabinet for the bio kids," she said. In a second home, foster kids snorted lines of cocaine in their rooms.

"I remember being such a lonely kid, a broken kid," Osuna said.

Both have flourished, despite those experi-



PHOTO COURTESY OF KATARINA SAYALLY

Katarina Sayally posed for this photo outside the California governor's office in Sacramento.

ences, and are among a very small percentage of former foster kids to graduate college.

Sayally earned her master's degree in social work from the University of California, Berkeley. Osuna is on a full-ride scholarship to California State University, Fullerton. But neither thinks that multiple foster care placements improved their lives.

Sayally, with a bachelor's degree in child development, believes she spent the first 22 years of her life in fight-or-flight. The evolving science, showing foster kids' brains in a state of chronic stress, applied to her, she said.

"It started out, when I was younger, I called everyone mom. Every woman I met was 'mom,'" said Sayally, who desperately sought to attach to someone. "It was really sad actually."

Later: "I got angry. I would have angry outbursts. I would blow up and then I might throw stuff off the table. It wasn't violence against people, but destruction of property.

"To be honest, I was just really confused and I was lonely. I felt like I didn't belong to these random people or to these institutions." On at least one occasion, Sayally ended up in congregate care, like a foster group home.

"I know a big part of me was testing people," she said. "What are you going to do if I break something? Depending on how you react, maybe I can trust you. Will you love me if I do something bad?"

The question, of course, is whether there are ways to correct the effects and give foster children a better chance.

To that, foster care researchers insist, yes, they believe there are. Perhaps not surprisingly, many have to do with caring for children in safe, nurturing and permanent places.

ORPHANS, MONKEYS AND OTHER STUDIES

What scientists know even better is what does not work.

Current studies are a direct extension of nearly 80 years of research. Much of it regards languishing "institutionalized" children left to founder in orphanages.

In the 1940s, René Spitz, an Austro-Hungarian psychoanalyst who later emigrated to the United States, was among the first to show the damage done by a lack of human contact. Films of his work with emotionally deprived children are easily found on YouTube.

Around the same time, British psychiatrist John Bowlby began work that would eventually lead to his famed "attachment theory."

In a 1944 paper, "Forty-four juvenile thieves: their characters and home-life," Bowlby found that 17 of the 44 young thieves he studied had been separated from their main caregivers for at least six months before age 5. The more often or longer they were separated, the less affection they showed.

With colleague Mary Ainsworth, he worked for decades to highlight the importance of having a mutually satisfying attachment to a parent or parent substitute.

Then there are the monkeys.

By any modern ethical standard, the experiments conducted by psychologist Harry Harlow in the 1950s and '60s would be considered cruel and inhumane. They were also groundbreaking.

“He really started out with the parent/child relationship,” said Deborah Blum, director of the Knight Science Journalism program at MIT and author of “Love at Goon Park: Harry Harlow and the Science of Affection.” “I think the way Harlow put it is that no one develops healthy and normal without ‘a solid foundation of affection.’”

It raises the question of what happens to humans if that foundational relationship can never be repaired, or an attachment is never properly formed.

“So you have this first damaging relationship,” Blum said. “Your biological parents are terrible people. They may be damaged themselves. And they reject you. Or they abuse you. The state, to protect you, takes you away and puts you into foster care.

“Now you have this chance, essentially, of repairing that foundational relationship with your foster family. But then that relationship doesn’t work. So you go to another one and to another one. It’s the Bowlby thing. You’re never going to form that kind of attachment that allows you to plant your feet on solid ground and feel loved and feel cared for.”

Between then and now, numerous studies have found other neural effects of abuse and neglect, all of which potentially affect foster kids. Brain mass has shown to be smaller in several regions that include the corpus callosum, which helps the two sides of the brain communicate, and the regions that control emotion and memory.

Charles Zeanah has witnessed the effects first hand.

A psychiatrist at Tulane University in New Orleans, Zeanah is one of the three prime investigators in the Bucharest Early Intervention Project. In 2000, he along with researchers at Harvard University and the University of Maryland began tracking 136 pre-school children who were being raised in Romanian orphanages.

Half the kids stayed in the orphanages; half were placed in stable foster homes where the parents were trained as part of a specially-designed program. Those two groups were compared to a third group of 76 kids who had never been institutionalized.

The results were “profound,” Zeanah told *The Star*. The work, which has tracked the children into their late teens, is considered important because some 6 million to 8 million children worldwide are still being raised in orphanages. Foster care is a rarity in much of the world.

“We did a comprehensive assessment,” Zeanah said, looking at a range of measures. “Height, weight, head circumference, physical characteristics, emotional responsiveness, social responsiveness, cognition.”

MRI’s measured the brain’s gray matter and its deeper white matter, showing less volume in both.

Institutionalized kids showed multiple delays. None of the kids did as well as those who were never institutionalized. But, notably important, the children who were put in stable foster care did show improvement.

“The sooner you get the kid into an adequate care-giving environment,” Zeanah said, “the more likely they are to recover — and the fuller their recovery is likely to be.”

Adequate doesn’t mean moving from place to place. Zeanah, in New Orleans, is also director of a community-based intervention program. “I deal with foster kids on an almost daily basis,” he said.

“You know, as bad as these disruptions are for older kids,” he said of multiple placements, “they’re even worse for younger kids.”

Consistency and predictability, researchers

insist, is an important key to success.

“I try to talk to people in child welfare about this,” Zeneah said. “The young child has no way of understanding what is happening. Someone drives up in a white station wagon, straps them to the back seat and takes them over to someplace they’ve never been before. They have no way of understanding why that happened. And when that happens multiple times, they begin to think, ‘You know, this is the way the world works.’”

Zeanah recounted the story of a 5-year-old girl who had been through multiple placements, and had just been adopted by her new mom, an interior designer. Sensitive to the affect the disruptions might have had on the child, the adoptive mom took the child to work with her so they wouldn’t be separated.

They arrived at the client’s house.

“They walk in the home,” Zeanah said, “and the little girl goes to the woman’s living room, lies on the floor, takes her raincoat off and covers her head up with the raincoat.”

The adoptive mother is embarrassed, apologizes to the client.

“She gets out in the car with the little girl and says, ‘Hon, you know, that is that lady’s home,’” Zeanah recounted. “You can’t just go in and lie down on the floor and cover yourself up. Why did you do that?”

“The girl said, ‘I thought it was my new home.’”

Foster care advocates, testing new interventions, are trying to help bring greater stability to the lives of foster kids. Many take brain development into account.

One, the Quality Parenting Initiative, started in Florida in 2008, is being used in 70 jurisdictions in nine other states: California, Illinois, Louisiana, Minnesota, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsyl-

vania, Texas and Wisconsin.

Dozier, the researcher out of Delaware, has developed an approach, known as Attachment Behavioral Catch-Up (ABC), that has been shown to help normalize levels of the stress hormone, cortisol, in foster kids. Fisher and colleagues in Oregon have developed the Treatment Foster Care Oregon for Preschoolers, formerly the MTFC-P, which studies have shown also help normalize cortisol and reduce problem behaviors.

Henderson, in Tulsa, and the other former foster kids insist that their salvation had almost nothing to do with the system charged with protecting and raising

them.

“I just think there’s something deep inside of me that always wanted to be better,” Henderson said. “I mean, a lot of people were like, ‘You’re going to turn out like your mom. You’re never going to be better.’”

Research into resilience continually reinforces the importance of supportive relationships, often described as having at least one reliable person in life to count on.

Henderson said she learned what a better life was supposed to be by watching her friends. She observed her friends’ parents.

“Just watching the ways they interacted. I mean, it just taught me how to be a basic human,” she said.

Henderson currently lives in her own apartment, works a full-time job at Starbucks inside a Target, and attends community college three mornings a week. For her, school became a refuge. She felt lucky to remain in the same district through much of her time in foster care. Her teachers, whom she called her “solids,” offered the stability that multiple foster care placements

“The sooner you get the kid into an adequate care-giving environment, the more likely they are to recover — and the fuller their recovery is likely to be.”

Charles Zeanah, a psychiatrist at Tulane University

did not.

Osuna said that for her, it was her school counselor. “I call my school counselor my mom,” she said. “We talk every day, every day. I don’t know how I would have gotten through college without her. I don’t know how I would have survived without her.”

Sayally knows that because she has her master’s degree that some see her as a foster care success story. But she said she thinks that’s the wrong message to take away. She considers herself a survivor, an exception to the rule.

“What foster care did to me: I ended up living in a homeless shelter longer than I ever lived in a home,” Sayally said.

Four years in the same Humboldt County high school provided her the most stability she ever had. She is unsure how she would have survived were it not for an administration and some teachers who believed in her, encouraged her and showed her what she called “tough love.”

That hundreds of thousands of other foster children never reach safe harbor is evidence of a system that is not working, she said.

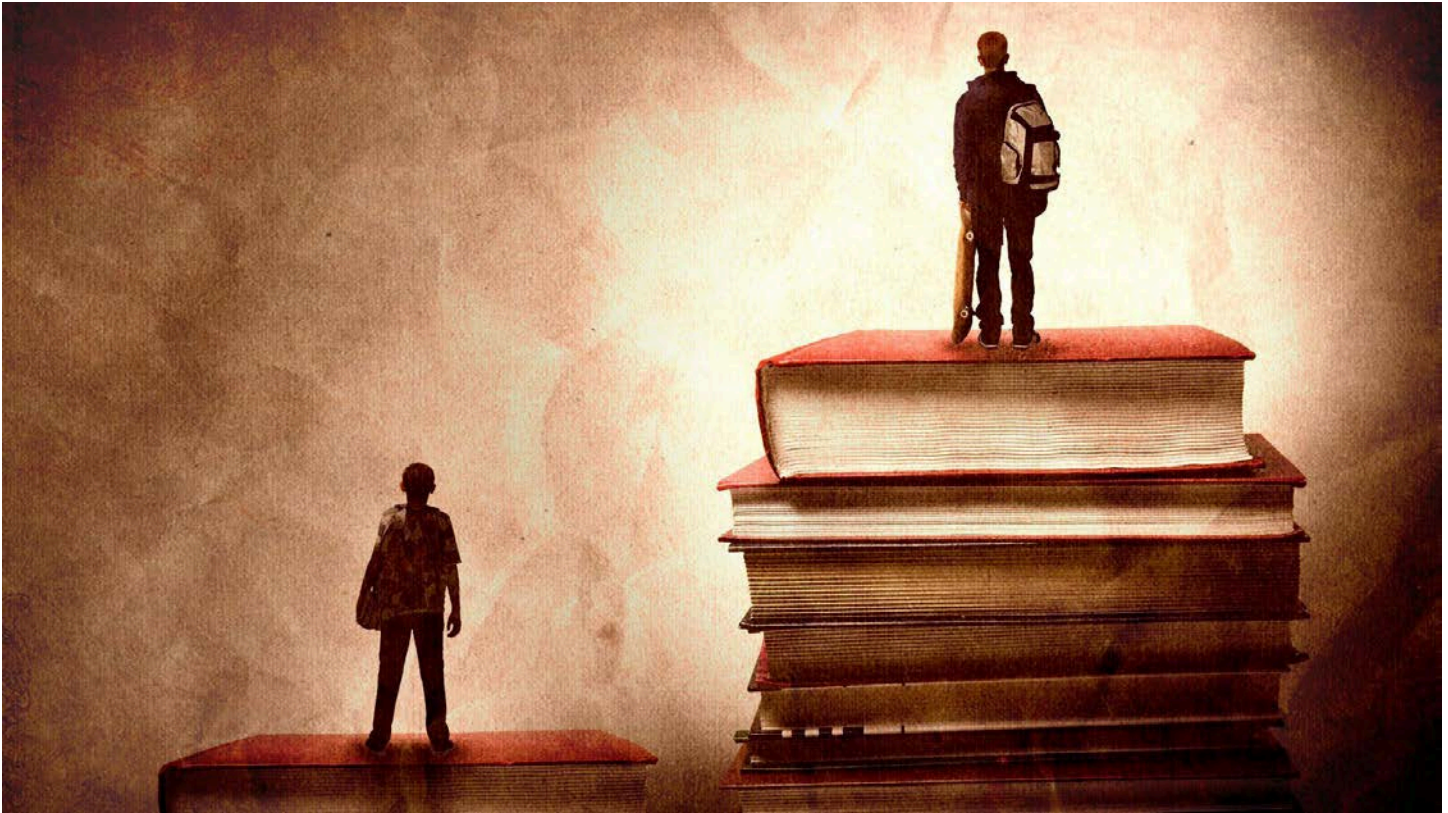
“I’m 24 and considered pseudo-successful because I have these letters behind my name,” Sayally said of her college degrees. “But my success is not a reflection of the system’s successes. It’s a reflection of a system that failed



PHOTO COURTESY OF GENESIS OSUNA

Genesis Osuna, with her emotional support dog Monito.

every other young person who had the potential to achieve their dreams and weren’t given the chance to do so.”



NEIL NAKAHODO

PART FOUR OF SIX

Graduation rate of 35 percent? Many foster children ‘robbed of a good education’

BY LAURA BAUER AND JUDY L. THOMAS

When Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, there were some struggling children it did leave behind.

And it would be another 14 years — when that landmark education measure was replaced — before lawmakers would notice the nation’s most at-risk students:

Foster children.

“It’s terribly ironic,” said Phillip Lovell, of the Washington, D.C.-based Alliance for Excel-

lent Education. “These are our children. They are legally our children. The least that we could do is report on their progress in school. We should know it and do something about it.”

Yet two years after the Every Student Succeeds Act required states to tally and report graduation rates of its foster children, the federal government has yet to make that information public.

Of the states that have reported, most are shockingly low. In Oregon, 35 percent of students in foster care graduated from high school in 2017,



SHELLY YANG

Maggie Stevens is CEO of Foster Success, a nonprofit that advocates for foster children in Indiana.

compared to 77 percent of the general population.

The Star spent the past year examining the long-term outcomes for kids who age out of foster care. It found that many will end up homeless, jobless and in prison because, in part, they were shortchanged on education. Shuffled from home to home, often sent outside their original school districts, they fall behind early and don't catch up.

In every pocket of the nation, the graduation rates for foster children are significantly lower than for all other "special population groups," including homeless students and those with disabilities.

Most years, a little more than half of the country's foster kids will graduate from high school.

"People just don't think about them — they are lost," said Lori Burns-Bucklew, a child welfare law expert who has been advocating and representing children for more than 30 years. "It is

neglect. Horrible neglect."

As part of its investigation, The Star surveyed nearly 6,000 inmates and found that 16 percent of those who said they had been in foster care got a high school diploma. Another 29 percent said they got a GED. Only 3 percent said they had a college degree, matching the national numbers in other studies.

"They bounced me everywhere and made me know I didn't belong anywhere," an Oklahoma inmate who received her GED wrote on her survey. "I got a horrible education due to always bouncing around."

Democratic presidential candidate Julián Castro of Texas, former secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, told The Star the low graduation rates are "a shame."

"I want these kids to be able to reach their dreams like anybody else in this country," Castro said. "This is something we don't hear about

in our national dialogue. I've never heard this discussed in a presidential debate.

"It's like we allow this to happen without reaching our conscience as a nation, but we need to understand it and we can do something about it."

Maggie Stevens, president and CEO of Foster Success, an Indiana nonprofit helping young people transition out of state care, said education often is not the state's top priority when foster kids are involved.

"I'm constantly reminded that child welfare is focused on the basic needs — you know, housing, food, basic security," she said. "But if we can't get these kids in quality education, they're just going to be stuck in a cycle of challenges."

In Kansas, education outcomes have been tracked for many years in the fully privatized system. The numbers vary widely, which has caused some to wonder if they are completely accurate.

For fiscal year 2019, only about 39 percent of Kansas kids in foster care graduated from high school — dropping from 68 percent the previous year. In 2012, just 20 percent graduated.

Zachary Lawrence, a special education teacher in south-central Kansas, told members of a legislative task force last year that many foster kids live such unstable and unpredictable lives that it's tough for them to be able to learn each day.

"They are literally packing a suitcase and moving every morning, after which they are transported, sometimes for an hour or more, to school and participate in learning activities," he told the task force. "They frequently have no idea where they will be sleeping that night, only that it will likely be in a different and more distant town from where they are asked to attend school."

Current research, Lawrence said, shows that each time children change foster homes, it sets them back academically four to six months.

Being an adolescent is hard enough, said Lovell, of the Alliance for Excellent Education.

"But when you add to that the trauma of

what's happening at home to cause them to be placed in care with new teachers, new school and new friends," he said, "it becomes this vortex that becomes hard for anyone to navigate.

"We've all let these kids down."

LOSING GROUND ACADEMICALLY

Taylor McClellan, of Oklahoma, wanted to walk across the stage to get her high school diploma 13 years ago. But when her dad died, she went into foster care right before she turned 15 and aged out when she was 18.

In that short time, she went through 13 placements. Not counting, she says, the short-term emergency placements. Between grieving her dad's death and going from strange home to strange home, never feeling wanted, she couldn't focus on school.

In the end, she didn't have the credits to graduate.

"I didn't feel like I had value," McClellan said. "I think it's traumatic every single time you are walking into a different placement. I felt like I was treated like a criminal."

School became an afterthought, like it does for so many foster youth. And it shows in the statistics.

The goal of No Child Left Behind was, in part, to boost the lagging performance of certain students, such as those in special education, English-language learners and poor and minority children. Its replacement, the Every Student Succeeds Act, added foster children as another subgroup in late 2015 — the first time that the tracking and reporting of foster kids was recognized in federal education law.

Early the next year, during a hearing to discuss how ESSA would be implemented, MaryLee Allen of the Children's Defense Fund urged the Department of Education to give kids in state care more attention to ensure they had "educational stability and success."

"They are often referred to, in fact, as invisible children," said Allen, who died of cancer



SHELLY YANG

Former foster child Natalie Zarate applied for jobs online while staying in her former foster sister's apartment.

earlier this year. “The benefits of school stability for foster children are clear, and we are eager to see the new protections fully implemented as quickly as possible.”

McClellan, after not having enough credits to get her high school diploma, made a promise to herself: I will walk across that stage in college.

And she did. Now, McClellan works at a university helping other young people.

“It’s constantly on my mind,” McClellan said, “how do we stop that pipeline to homelessness or prison or addiction? I don’t know exactly what it will take for things to change, for outcomes to be better.”

BEHIND IN CLASS, LOST FOR YEARS

Foster children who move often get lost in the classroom — especially in math, said Burns-

Bucklew, the Missouri lawyer.

“It’s almost impossible to catch up if you miss a piece,” she said. “Math is a subject that is foundational. If you miss some essential math concepts in second grade and go on to third grade, you can’t do third grade math, unless someone figures out what you missed in second grade.”

And teachers may not be able to spend enough time with the student to understand where the child is academically. If they are able to work with foster children for awhile, it’s often inevitable that the students will be moved again and have to start over.

Natalie Zarate was determined not to let that happen to her. The former Kansas foster youth said she attended more than six schools, three of them in a two-month period.

“It was hard keeping up because every time I got moved, every school was at a different les-

son,” she said. “But I knew I couldn’t give up. And so I just tried to focus on getting good grades and getting my education.”

Others aren’t as fortunate.

“So many foster kids lose track,” said Zarate, who got her high school diploma and started college but dropped out after a year. “They don’t know how many credits they have, they don’t know what they’re learning. I’ve just seen so many kids not go to school, so many kids fail or just because of moving around, they don’t understand anything.”

Leecia Welch is the director of legal advocacy at the National Center for Youth Law in California, a state that has led the nation in improving educational opportunities for foster children. Welch, who specializes in foster youth education, has studied legislative changes across the country and said states have to do more.

“We know that education is the key to having a future,” Welch said. “When you have a child moved, 10, 20, over 30, sometimes 100 times, there is no way their education is being thought about.”

Phillip Wrigley sees it in his Topeka, Kansas, high school classroom all the time.

“You get them caught up, you get them going, you start building a relationship and then one day they’re gone,” Wrigley said. “They just disappear, there’s no, ‘Oh, I’ll see you later.’ They just don’t show up anymore.”

“You ask, like, ‘So, what happened?’ Their one friend they made in the school is like, ‘Yeah, I think they got a new foster family.’”

A few years ago Wrigley had a student who went into foster care when he was 15. The teen had struggled in some classes, but Wrigley thought that with some work, he would make it to graduation.

Then the student was sent to a group home in southeast Kansas, where school became less of a priority.

“As I understand it from him, basically there was this decision that school just wasn’t for him,” Wrigley said. “They just didn’t want to go to the

trouble of pushing him a little bit. He eventually stopped going to school, stopped earning credits.”

Two years later, the teen was back with his mom and the two went to see Wrigley. The young man wanted to graduate. But because he was so far behind in credits, he wouldn’t be able to catch up in the allotted time.

The whole child welfare cycle becomes frustrating, Wrigley said. For both the student and the teacher.

“In an ideal world, it’s the state saying, ‘You’re not in a safe place and now we are going to take care of you,’” Wrigley said. “But we aren’t taking kids out of a bad situation and putting them in a good situation. Sometimes we do OK. And sometimes we’re just another abuser.”

HOLDING ONE STATE ACCOUNTABLE

In Indiana, child advocate Brent Kent has worked the past 3½ years to bring change for the thousands of kids in his state’s care.

First, he and others at Foster Success, the nonprofit that helps kids transition into adulthood, worked with lawmakers to make sure former foster youth had Medicaid until age 26. Then, under Kent’s leadership, the goal was to improve education.

“It’s really hard to fix problems at the terminal end of foster care,” Kent said. “You can only do so much when someone didn’t graduate high school and is reading at a seventh grade level.”

What he discovered, though, was that no one was truly seeing foster children’s struggles in the classroom, their dropout rate, lack of a high school diploma and the road to homelessness they get trapped on.

Kent and others didn’t think the Every Student Succeeds Act went far enough. More information was needed.

“You’re the state, you’re the parent and you have no idea what the graduation rate is for your kids,” he said. “You have no idea what the third grade reading rate is. You don’t know in real time where they are going to school, but you are re-



SHELLY YANG

Brent Kent is former CEO of Foster Success, a nonprofit that advocates for foster children in Indiana.

responsible for the educational decisions. You know nothing.”

No school or system was being held accountable when foster children fell through the academic cracks, Kent said. And legislators didn’t know what resources were needed to help these kids, mainly because no one knew the outcomes.

In 2018, Kent and his organization worked with lawmakers on legislation to require Indiana to track how foster kids are doing in the classroom. Once a year, a detailed report card must be published so the public is informed about how children in the state’s custody are doing relative to their peers.

The first report card was published last spring.

About 65 percent of Indiana foster kids graduated from high school compared to the state average of 88 percent. Nearly 21 percent of foster youth received a graduation waiver — mean-

ing some requirements for a diploma were waived — compared to 8.3 percent of all students. And only 9.1 percent of foster kids passed the 10th grade state math test and 28.7 percent passed the English exam.

People “couldn’t believe it,” Kent said. “I had mixed feelings about the response because we had been saying this for so long, that this is a problem, but you really need sort of accountability and transparency of a state report to make people realize the impact.”

The law also ordered Indiana’s Department of Education to create a “remediation plan” and present it to the state Board of Education over the summer to explain how it would work with communities and other state agencies to improve outcomes for children.

That came in July, but board members and advocates, including Kent, weren’t satisfied with

the plan, which in their minds didn't provide strong ideas or measures — just “bullet points.”

Still, a child advocate in Nebraska said Indiana's law could serve as a model for others.

“States have an obligation to make sure that children have access to their right to an education,” said Sarah Helvey, of Nebraska Appleseed, a justice nonprofit that represents vulnerable Nebraskans. “The state is the parent and the state should have a report card with that information.”

Kansas Sen. Molly Baumgardner, a Republican and chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee, said a report card sounds like a good idea for her state as well. Then everyone — from lawmakers to agencies to communities — can work together to improve education for foster kids, she said.

“If I were governor, I would make that an executive order,” Baumgardner said. “You're never going to achieve a goal if you don't know how far away it is.”

Stevens, who took over leadership of Foster Success in Indiana this fall, said her state still has work to do to provide equal education for foster children.

“I think the most important thing to remember is they are kids,” she said. “And it doesn't matter how you came into foster care. ... We owe it to them to give them opportunities and a chance to experience the same thing that all the kids in our neighborhoods are experiencing.”

‘I WAS ROBBED ...’

Morriah Bosco, 21, still keeps a list of some of the “emergency” places she stayed as a kid in Massachusetts' foster care system. Each one represents a night-to-night stay — beyond the regular, longer-term placements — when social workers couldn't find anywhere else for her to



PHOTO COURTESY OF MORRIAH BOSCO

Morriah Bosco spent time in foster care in Massachusetts.

go.

For Bosco, the list is a reminder of a past she's trying to move beyond.

“There's nine that I can remember,” she says.

In all, though, she says she had more than 40 placements since she was 3, when she was removed from her mom's care. And the number of schools she attended?

“Sixteen.”

Four of those schools were in seventh grade alone. With each move, she fell more behind.

“I would consider that educational abuse at that point,” Bosco said.

“You come to school, everyone has friends, they know what they are learning. You are just dropping in. I felt stupid because my grades were really poor.”

When she was close to turning 18, Bosco ran away from state care because she knew she was about to age out and wouldn't have any support during her senior year. She had to help herself.

Bosco began researching what assistance was available for foster youth who age out. With help from a local nonprofit, she bought a car and lived in it from July to mid-October of that year. That same nonprofit helped her get a place of her own.

She continued to work during the day and attended school at night, getting to the point where she graduated from high school a month ahead of her class. But she missed out on moments and memories other kids take for granted.

“I never got to learn Spanish,” she said. “Or play an instrument or be on a team.

“I feel like I was robbed of a normal childhood and a good education other kids get. In my dreams, I wish I had a stable upbringing where I went to school and was encouraged to get good grades. Where people helped me with my homework.”

She tried community college, but no matter how hard she worked, she struggled. Especially in math.

“I think I’m put at an incredible disadvantage,” she said. “It’s not like I’m not trying. It’s too late to learn the basic math skills I missed. Because of that I may not graduate from college.”

Friends she made while living in care, who

stayed with her in some homes, haven’t fared as well as Bosco.

Some are homeless and struggling to get by, she said. Others have been “sex trafficked and continue to live that lifestyle.”

“I know people who have died,” she said. “A lot of them have substance abuse issues and alcoholism ... Sometimes I have survivor’s guilt. I feel so guilty that they’re not able to advocate for themselves.”

Now she’s advocating for others.

Bosco recently testified at a Massachusetts legislative hearing on foster care. And she just became a member of the Massachusetts Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth.

Next fall, she plans to start cosmetology school. And she still has hopes to one day finish her degree.

She replays the words she heard in seventh grade, the year her teacher pulled her aside and gave her life-changing advice. It was a similar message to the one she received from her late grandmother, with whom she lived for a few years.

“Education is your only way out.”



RESHMA KIRPALANI

Shavannah Bryers is living with friends in Indianapolis.

PART FIVE OF SIX

Aging out: Thousands of foster youth graduate to the streets every year

BY LAURA BAUER AND JUDY L. THOMAS

INDIANAPOLIS
Sometimes at night, under the dark skies of Indiana’s capital city, Shavannah Bryers was all alone. Homeless at 19 and living on the streets.

Scared, she admits now, feeling abandoned after she aged out of California’s foster care system about a year earlier.

“I have stayed in alleys, even in the wintertime

when it snows,” says Bryers, now 21, her words spoken so softly you have to lean forward to hear them. “Unsafe, but it was somewhere to lay.

“I felt I had nowhere to go.”

Every year, roughly 20 percent of the young adults who age out of foster care in America — more than 4,000 — immediately become homeless, studies show.

And thousands more — rising to as much as

40 percent in some parts of the country — are homeless within four years of aging out.

“People don’t realize there are homeless former foster kids,” says Jason Chenoweth, CEO of Outreach Indiana, a nonprofit that helps homeless youth in Indianapolis. “They just don’t think it happens. You just don’t see them. They don’t stand out. If you don’t know them, they’re just another person on the street.

“They haven’t just fallen out the bottom of foster care, they’ve fallen out the bottom of everything.”

For too many, living on the streets starts them down a path of desperation that often includes sex trafficking and crime in order to eat or have enough money for a safe place to sleep.

In an investigation of the long-term outcomes of kids placed in the country’s broken foster care system, The Star found many kids once raised

by the state now on their own and struggling to survive.

The Star surveyed inmates in 12 states, and nearly 60 percent of those who said they had been in foster care also had been homeless at some point in their lives.

Some of the 23,000 youth who age out of state care each year between ages 18 and 21 have a plan mapped out and somewhere to go. Many don’t.

Bryers had studied hard in summer school for two years just to get her high school diploma on time. But that wouldn’t be enough to help her after she aged out.

Nearly every state offers some form of extended foster care for youth who turn 18 and don’t feel ready to live on their own. Twenty-seven of those states have qualified to use federal dollars to help pay for those services.



SHELLY YANG

Jason Chenoweth is CEO of Outreach Indiana, a youth social services organization in Indianapolis.

Extended foster care is crucial when supporting foster youth who are entering into adulthood, said Mark Courtney, one of the authors of the Midwest Study, a widely-cited body of research published in 2011. That study, which followed youth in three states after they transitioned out of state care, found that aged-out youth fared poorly when compared to their peers in numerous areas, including employment, education and housing.

Extended foster care “keeps you connected to responsible adults who will assist you,” said Courtney, who has traveled the country talking about the study. And, Courtney said, extended foster care reduces a young person’s chances of being involved in the criminal justice system.

The majority of states, including Missouri, also allow foster kids to age out but return to care if they later decide they can’t make it by themselves. Twelve states, including Kansas, do not allow re-entry into foster care.

But many former foster youth told The Star that they don’t seek out additional help and services because they’re tired of languishing in the system. They just want out.

“It’s not a system that is actually built on being a parent, as much as they try,” said Danielle Pierson, a manager at Outreach. “They don’t parent. They do what a system is meant to do, which is try to fix the issue. But really, you can’t fix parenting by building a system.”

Pierson knows. Before she started working at Outreach and before she became a child advocate, she was a foster child who aged out.

When she was ready to be on her own, Pierson was fortunate to have the support of friends and their families and a high school teacher. But so many former foster kids she sees don’t have those natural supports.

“After the judge says your case is closed, every support that they have had are people connected to their case,” Pierson said. “They come with a list of case managers, people who get paid to work with them. They really don’t have any natural relationships.”

That’s why, she said, so many end up homeless.

SHELTERS BECOME SAFETY NETS

Anthony Dumas sees it every day at Outreach. Many of the teens are struggling to get off the streets. They feel abandoned by a system that vowed to give them a safer and better life.

And they share stories that make Dumas fume.

A few years ago, an 18-year-old’s foster family dropped him off at a mall with only a few belongings. Then drove away.

Another young man recently showed up at Outreach the day after his 18th birthday. He had arrived home to find the door locked and his bags on the front porch.

A not-so-subtle message from his foster family: their job was done.

“It’s one of the things that ticks me off the most,” says Dumas, director of in-house programs for Outreach. “... They either show up or we’re called to go find them, to go grab them, with just a suitcase. Period.

“Just a suitcase,” he repeats, shaking his head.

So far this year, 68 percent of the homeless youth served by Outreach had been in foster care. Last year, 50 percent of the youth served had been in the state’s care.

Indiana has faced huge increases in the number of kids coming into care, much of it — advocates say — due to the opioid crisis and the state’s slow response to it. The state was hit with a class action lawsuit this year alleging that Indiana was failing in its duty to protect more than 22,000 kids in the child welfare system.

About 240 miles west of Indianapolis on Interstate 70 in St. Louis, Covenant House Missouri homeless shelter for youth routinely sees former foster children. In Fiscal Year 2019, 28 percent of the young people at Covenant House had been in state care at some point in their childhood. In the first two months of FY 2020, the figure was 39 percent.



SHELLY YANG

Anthony Dumas works with teens at Outreach Indiana.

Shelters on the East and West coasts see the same issues as the staff at Outreach on Indianapolis' east side.

At Outreach, former foster children get help finding housing and mental health services, obtaining birth certificates and other forms of identification, even nailing down a job.

For Dumas, it's all about showing love for the young people who have been deprived of it.

"It's a hopeless feeling, to be told that you're not really a part of this family and that when the time comes, you'll be leaving this family," he says. "It's tough to see, it's tough to watch.

"It's just knowing that there are young people out there not being loved properly, that are not cared for. That are thrown away, almost. I think knowing that... for me is the hardest thing."

LOOKING FOR FAMILY

When Bryers was 7, her mom dropped her off at a friend's house in San Diego and didn't come back.

Then began the little girl's string of foster homes, followed by mental health hospital stays as a teen. Intertwined in all of that would be about a dozen stints back with her mom, and eventu-

ally her dad, where they tried to make family work.

It never did.

The time she felt most at home in the years spent moving between her mom and foster care was living in a group home with other kids. There was structure, which she needed in order to grow. And there was discipline, which she needed to be able to learn.

"When you first walk in that group home door, it's like, 'Wow!'" she says, her eyes lighting up. She thought, "Can I call this home, or can I not?"

She remembers going through an exhaustive check-in

procedure. Immediately afterward, something happened that made her feel like she belonged. Something she never felt in the foster homes, or even back with her mom.

"They took me personally and bought me new clothes and hygiene stuff, new everything, so nothing was ever borrowed," she says, her eyes still wide. "Just to have new clothes every day. And so my closet was full. ... I never had that before."

After aging out of care, Bryers tried going back with family. But that didn't work. So when her boyfriend at the time asked her to go to Indiana with him, she packed up and left the West Coast.

"When I got out here, he wanted to change me," she says. "He was having me go out, be a prostitute at night, get weed for him at night. He would make me have sex with different guys at nighttime just so he could get weed."

The trajectory had begun: Homeless. No job. Sex trafficking.

Her voice grows quiet when she describes that period, the loneliness she felt.

"I needed support at that time. I didn't have it," she says. "I needed my mom at that time. I



RESHMA KIRPALANI

Shavannah Bryers (rear), visited Outreach, a nonprofit that helps homeless youth in Indianapolis.

didn't have it.”

When she wouldn't do as her boyfriend demanded, she says, he abused her. Eventually, she ran.

“I was like, ‘How much is a ticket to just anywhere, that's close to here, but far?’” she says.

Bryers took a bus to St. Louis, but before long returned to Indianapolis, homeless again and on her own, only a year out of foster care.

Sometimes, she'd hop on The 39 bus in Indianapolis and just ride. She felt safe there and if she was lucky, she'd get a couple of hours to rest.

“I would wake up between stops, but I would try and get as much sleep as possible,” she says. “Then I would hop on the next bus and do it again until the buses stopped running.”

As she describes her experience on the streets, it's almost as if she's detailing someone else's

life. No tears, no emotion.

“There were plenty of nights where I went hungry,” she says. “There would be plenty of nights where I would ask people for money. I would have to go steal from Kroger sometimes just to go get something to eat. I would have to ask McDonald's just for a cheeseburger. I would have to ask somebody for something.

“They'd ask me every time, ‘Where's your family?’”

Every time, she'd answer: “I don't have family.”

And she wondered if she ever would.

HELP FROM WASHINGTON

Desperate to address the critical housing need for former foster kids, a national advocacy group went to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in March. That meeting led

to an initiative last summer that allows local public housing agencies to offer housing vouchers for those aging out.

“No young person who grows up in foster care should experience homelessness once they set out on their own,” said HUD Secretary Ben Carson, in announcing the federal program. “The foundation of a stable life is stable housing.”

Some in Washington want to further increase the number of foster youth who can receive housing vouchers. Lawmakers of both parties have proposed legislation to expand HUD’s Family Unification Program that administers them.

Their proposal, which has already passed the House, would provide housing vouchers immediately to youth at risk of homelessness as they leave state care. Currently, recipients have to live in the jurisdiction of a public housing authority that has been awarded the vouchers. And only a fraction of the 4,000 public housing agencies in the country receive the vouchers.

“We need to help prepare them for aging out,” said Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, who co-sponsored the Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Act of 2019 with Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio.

Grassley told The Star that he’s heard stories about those who age out of foster care and were told to “get your belongings in a garbage bag and you’re out in the street.”

Brown said too many kids turn 18 and then “they no longer get money and then all of a sudden they’re on their own.”

“And most 18-year-olds aren’t prepared to be on their own at 18 without some safety net,” he said. “In the end, it’s good for our country to do this.”

Congress has made other attempts to help kids leaving state care, but those efforts have

been largely fruitless.

Like the housing vouchers that go to only a select few jurisdictions, another program fell short of hitting its targets directly, or delivering widespread relief to the thousands of former foster kids who need it.

In 2001, Congress created the Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program. Administered by the states, the program provides grants of up to \$5,000 per academic year to eligible current and former foster youth for higher education expenses including tuition, fees, books and supplies, housing and transportation.

But a high percentage of former foster youth don’t even graduate from high school, and crit-



CHARLIE NEIBERGALL, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, co-sponsored the Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Act of 2019 to help combat homelessness among foster youth who age out of the system.

ics say the application process to receive the assistance is complicated and, in many cases, those aging out of care aren’t even aware of the programs.

They also note that while tuition and other costs associated with college have risen dra-



RESHMA KIRPALANI

Shavannah Bryers watched a movie with her friend, Deondre Allen.

matically since the program was created 18 years ago, there's been no increase in the maximum annual award of \$5,000.

Lawmakers agree that more is needed to help these kids raised by the state.

"After the age of 18, they kind of just fall off the edge of the world," said Sen. Mazie Hirono, D-Hawaii. "We obviously have to do a lot more to prevent people from going into a situation where they can't support themselves and therefore turn to crime."

TRYING FOR A 'HAPPY LIFE'

Bryers goes to Outreach in Indianapolis nearly every day. She heard about it when she got off the Greyhound bus. The bus station is near

the police station, where she had gone in search of any kind of help they could give.

"They was like, 'We're gonna take you to this place called Outreach,'" she says. "... They've watched me for three years grow tremendously."

For Bryers, Dumas is like an uncle. So is caseworker Anthony Baker.

And group facilitator Devin Miller? He's like her dad.

"There's nothing but family here for me," she says, a hint of a smile crossing her face.

Other young people feel the same. Each day they gather in the front room, talking and charging phones and taking the opportunity to get in out of the heat or cold.

And like Bryers, they become close to the staff at the faith-based nonprofit.

When Garrett Goller — who was in foster care as a child before he was adopted — was homeless his senior year of high school, he'd hop the fence at night after Outreach had closed and sleep outside in his sleeping bag. He felt safe in the center's back yard.

In the morning, he'd go to school and end up at Outreach in the afternoon. Then, at nightfall, he'd repeat the same hop over the fence. The staff, he said, helped him stay focused to get his high school diploma.

"They help you with like a job, trying to get a phone, Social Security, all that," Goller said. "That's how I got housing."

The staff supported Bryers when she got a job at a local Dairy Queen, where she worked as

a cashier 30 to 40 hours a week. Now they're helping her find a place of her own so she no longer has to stay with a friend.

No more nights worrying about where she's going to sleep, or days hopping on The 39 bus just to get a little rest and be safe.

For the first time, she's able to think about the future with a little hope. And that includes a family of her own.

"I hope for at least two kids," she says.

She wants to give them what she says she hasn't had in her days growing up in foster care and aging out, homeless and afraid.

"A very happy life," she says. "My kids wouldn't want for nothing."



TAMMY LJUNGBLAD

Gerald Marshall is on death row at the Polunsky Unit in Livingston, Texas.

PART SIX OF SIX

‘The state that neglected me as a kid is the same state that wants to kill me’

BY JUDY L. THOMAS AND LAURA BAUER

Livingston, Texas
The man in the white short sleeve jumpsuit sat in a 3-by-3-foot cage-like booth, waiting patiently for the clock to start ticking on his time to talk.

Then he picked up the phone in cubicle 34 and began to tell his story.

“My name is Gerald Marshall. I’m 37 years old. I spent about 10 years of my childhood in foster care.”

He’s spending the remainder of his life on Texas death row.

“The state that neglected me as a kid and allowed me to age out of its support,” he said, “is the same state that wants to kill me.”

Marshall’s early life story is a familiar one. Removed from his home because of severe neglect, he entered a system that was supposed to, by the state’s own definition, protect and care for him.

Instead, Marshall’s chaotic journey through

foster care put him on a path leading to another state-run institution: prison.

The Star, as part of a yearlong investigation into the long-term outcomes of foster children, surveyed nearly 6,000 inmates in a dozen states. The surveys contained 15 questions that asked inmates about their criminal histories and childhoods.

Experts said the survey results provide a rare look at how early trauma and foster care have scarred some children for a lifetime.

Of those who responded, 1 in 4 offenders said they had been in state care. Fifteen percent said they had been convicted of murder or attempted murder.

Marshall, Inmate #999489 in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice system, is facing execution for killing an employee of a fast-food restaurant in Houston during an attempted robbery in 2003. He was 20 and out of foster care less than three years when he was charged with the murder of a mentally disabled man who worked at Whataburger.

And while he doesn't blame foster care for his incarceration, Marshall said growing up in an environment that lacked trust and compassion put him "on a path to destruction for myself and others."

"I did not love myself, so I was living a very reckless life," he said from the Polunsky Unit in Livingston, Texas, which houses the state's death row inmates. "I was drinking, doing drugs, committing crimes, just doing things that did not have a positive effect on my life."

"I think for a lot of us, we don't realize how we become dangerous to other humans because we do not care about ourselves, nor do we care about others."

'FOSTER CARE IS A RISK FACTOR'

They committed brutal acts. For that, they evoke little — if any — sympathy from the public.

But for foster kids, that lack of sympathy begins before the first crimes are committed.

"We think foster care ought to be a protective factor for children and it's not — foster care is a risk factor," said Sean O'Brien, a law professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City who has represented many former foster children.

"They take the kid in and then almost every adult beyond that point that touches this kid, they're like, 'What is the matter with you?' They treat them like little criminals."

Many go on to earn the title.

Joseph Nelson spent nearly a decade in and out of Missouri's beleaguered child welfare system. His first foster home was with Tammy and Tim Spears, a couple he soon called "Miss Tammy" and "Mr. Tim," then Mom and Dad.

Theirs was a home filled with structure, love and foster kids. In the past 23 years, Tammy Spears said she and her husband have fostered more than 300 kids and adopted 22.

Just as Nelson was getting comfortable, the state sent him back home at his mom's request, only to remove him again and again because she was unable to provide the structure he appeared to thrive on.

Nelson stayed with the Speares, on and off, between 8 and 14. Despite the Speares' desire to adopt the boy they called Joe, his mother refused to sever her rights.

"I guess I was mad at the Spears for letting me go," Nelson said. "Then I was mad at my mom. I was angry."

At 18, after living in residential treatment centers, Nelson aged out of foster care with little support or preparation. "They just drop you like their job is done," he said. "Once I got out of foster care, they just hang you out to dry."

On Sept. 8, 2015, a 22-year-old Nelson got into an argument with his ex-girlfriend in her south Kansas City home. After Bianca R. Fletcher allegedly threw a diaper box and hit him in the head, Nelson became enraged, according to news reports at the time.

He shot and killed her. Later, he would say "other things had to be done."

He then turned the gun on his ex-girlfriend's



SHELLY YANG

Joseph Nelson, convicted of three counts of second-degree murder, is serving a 33-year-sentence at the South Central Correctional Facility in Licking, Missouri.

1-year-old son and her new boyfriend, Shannon Rollins. The boy, Joseph, was believed to be Nelson's child but prosecutors never confirmed paternity.

Tammy Spears couldn't bring herself to go to any of the court hearings. But she insists she never stopped caring for the kid who was caught up in a tug-of-war with his foster family and his mom. Ultimately, no one won — and Nelson was on his own.

"The system is responsible for what happened to him," Spears said. "His life could have been so different than it is now."

Lori Ross, whose life's work has been raising and caring for foster kids and guiding the parents who take them in, posted an angry message on

Facebook after Nelson was charged four years ago. Another former foster child had also recently been arrested in a separate homicide.

"I am FURIOUS that we as a society fail to make the direct connection between the way we devalue children who are being abused and the adults that they become ...," Ross wrote. "Start asking the next time (today probably) that someone commits a heinous crime, whether that person was in Foster care or residential treatment. ... A few years ago he was an eight year old boy ... and WE HAD A CHANCE TO MAKE THIS STORY HAVE A DIFFERENT ENDING!!!!!! SHAME ON US!"

Nelson is serving a 33-year sentence in the South Central Correctional Facility in southern



SHELLY YANG

The South Central Correctional Facility in Licking, Missouri.

Missouri. He doesn't blame others for his crimes, but says he has made some wrong decisions in life because of "the influence of foster care."

He wonders what life would have been like if he had been adopted by the Spearses. So does Tammy, even though she knows her reach is limited.

"You can't make up for the hurt they have, but you can set them on the path to heal," she said. "I may not heal every child that comes through my home, but it is my fervent hope and prayer that we change the trajectory of their lives by being in it."

'A HORRIBLE WAY TO LIVE'

Marshall and his three siblings spent their Texas childhoods in squalor. Their mother was

addicted to crack cocaine, he said, and would disappear for days at a time.

"We didn't have any lights, we didn't have any food because my mother used to sell our food for crack," he said. "And we didn't have any utilities, water, anything like that. We used to burn candles. It was a horrible way to live."

When Marshall was nearly 6, he jumped unsupervised into an apartment swimming pool and almost drowned. Witnesses called police, and the children were removed from their home.

"I didn't fully understand what was happening," he said. "I mean, I saw my mom smoking crack, selling our food and stuff like that. I thought that was not right. Even still, I never thought I would be in foster care for the majority of my childhood."

Marshall said he didn't even know what

foster care was at the time. “All I knew is we were getting something to eat — three meals a day.”

After more than two years in foster care, Marshall and his older sister were sent to live with their father. They stayed with him for about three years but were removed because of severe abuse, Marshall said, and returned to foster care.

At that home, Marshall said, he related to the other kids because of what they all were going through. But it never lasted, and Marshall never established meaningful connections.

“And one day I would come home and the kids that I have a relationship with, they were gone,” he said.

Soon, he would have no home at all.

EXPERIENCES SHARED FROM ACROSS COUNTRY

Inmates responding to The Star’s survey shared various reasons for why they were removed from their homes.

Some said it was for neglect, poverty and parental drug addiction. For others, it was for abuse and family violence, or a parent going to jail.

“Because my relatives were poor, I was unable to live with them according to CYS (Children and Youth Services),” said a 38-year-old Pennsylvania inmate who was in foster care for nine years before he aged out. “I feel this is wrong. Being in the foster care system, I feel, made me into a monster. I craved to be with my family.”

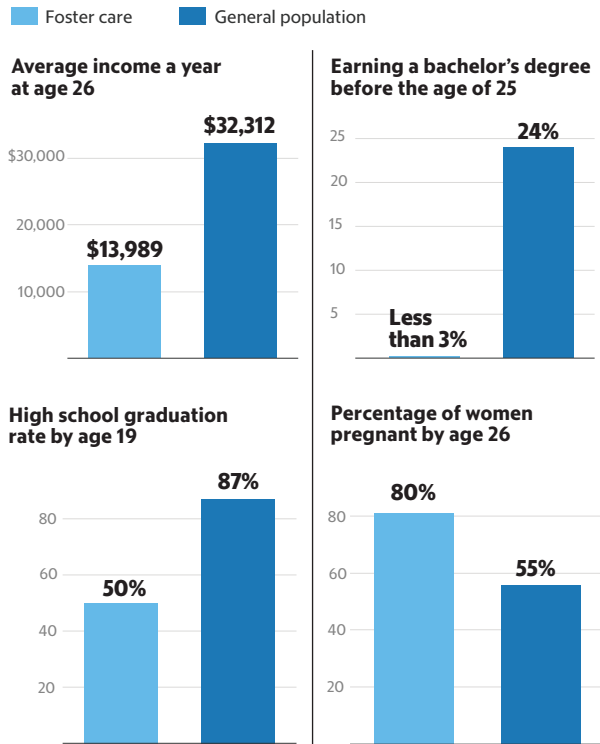
Of the survey respondents, 34 percent said they aged out of the foster care system without a permanent home.

A 39-year-old Kansas inmate who went into state care when she was 8 years old said she wasn’t given any preparation for the real world.

“I was never told I was going to be put out,” she said. “Nor was I helped with getting a place to live or told about any resources available to

The effects of foster care

Children who have been in foster care often have significantly different outcomes than their peers in the general population.



Young women in foster care are more than twice as likely as their peers not in foster care to become pregnant by age 19. Many will have two pregnancies before they reach age 19.

20% Percentage of foster youth who become instantly homeless after reaching the age of 18. (That’s more than 4,000 teens a year.)

Sources: National Conference of State Legislatures, National Foster Youth Institute, University of Chicago THE KANSAS CITY STAR

me. I did have a job but I was young and was not prepared to hold it properly so lost it quickly. I was never taught any skills to prepare me for adulthood.”

An inmate from Arizona shared a similar experience.

“I think that the foster care system should have more programs and help us be successful when we do get out of the system,” the 28-year-old said.

The largest percentage of inmates responding to The Star’s survey said they entered foster care between ages 11 and 15. Experts say the

older you are when entering foster care, especially if you are in your adolescent and teen years, the less likely you are to be adopted.

A 53-year-old inmate from Oklahoma, who spent two years in care when he was an older teenager, said too many foster children don't get

timony helped send the pedophile to prison.

Now 32, Van Dyne just finished serving a prison sentence of her own — released this month from the Topeka Correctional Facility after doing five years for aggravated robbery and kidnapping.

“My life before going into the foster care system could best be described as perfected chaos,” Van Dyne said.

Her parents divorced before she knew her father, and her mother married several times. When she was 7, gang members broke into their trailer and nearly beat her mom to death in front of her. The family went through a series of moves. By the time Van Dyne was 13, she'd attended 13 schools. She was having mental breakdowns, and her mom could no longer control her.

That same year, she went into foster care. And she kept moving.

Over the next several years, Van Dyne was in and out of psychiatric hospitals, foster homes, group homes, youth shelters and juvenile detention centers across Kansas. But her mental health needs were never met or the trauma addressed, she said.

“There was no talk about it with my foster parents, there was no talk about it even with my case managers,” she said. “It wasn't until I was here in prison, is where I've done the most healing.”

Constantly relocating, she said, “makes you feel like you're just a little ping pong ball.”

“You don't feel like you belong. You feel invisible even.”

Van Dyne was so desperate to get out of foster care that she talked a friend into marrying her and enlisted in the U.S. Army's delayed entry program at 17. But by the time her emancipation was finalized — five months before her 18th birthday — “I was so strung out that I really did



SHELLY YANG

Former foster child Kisa Van Dyne recently finished a prison sentence for aggravated robbery and kidnapping.

the therapy they need to overcome the trauma they faced.

“Children just fell through the cracks without any state organization giving any effort to protect or provide any real services to fix any damage these children suffered in their young lives. Anyone can be changed for the better with the proper amount of help.”

CALLS FOR HELP UNANSWERED

Kisa Van Dyne's introduction to the criminal justice system came at age 9.

Frightened, she sat in a Kansas courtroom and told how her babysitter's husband had sexually assaulted her when she was 6. Her tes-

not care.”

Over the next several years, her life spun out of control. And in 2013, Van Dyne was involved in a kidnapping and robbery stemming from a drug debt. Van Dyne and a 40-year-old man were charged, and she was sentenced to nearly seven years in prison.

Van Dyne said she didn't believe the state made her life any better when it became her parent. She said she realizes now that her mom was just trying to help when she made that first call to authorities nearly 20 years ago.

“The other people that I was in foster care with, we had kind of talked about, ‘Oh, we're just throwaways. We're the ones that no one wants.’ For a long time as a teenager, I felt like she threw me away, too. But that wasn't the case. She just didn't know what to do.

“A lot of us that are in here, our children have gone into foster care as well,” she said. “And so here we go, into a cycle.”

BELONGINGS IN A GARBAGE BAG

When Marshall was 17, his foster mom walked into the kitchen while he was washing dishes. She told him he would have to move out soon.

“So when I turned 18, I put everything I had in a garbage bag, and I walked out the door.”

Marshall's birth mother took him home, reuniting him with his siblings. But before long, he said, it was clear their mother was still addicted to crack. She was constantly demanding money for her drugs, he said, and when he stopped giving it to her, she kicked him out.

Homeless, he started stealing food from stores. To sleep, he rode the Metro buses for hours at a time. Occasionally, he'd get a cheap motel room for a night.

“During that time, I was suicidal,” he said. “I was alone. No place to go, no one cared. I was really, really at my lowest.”

He lived with relatives for a while and tried college, dropping out after 2½ semesters. He then moved in with a woman — a mother of six

who introduced him to cocaine, he said. He was arrested for selling drugs and was given probation. He couldn't keep a job, broke up with the woman and moved out. She was pregnant with his child.

“I had a baby on the way, my sister had two kids and was about to be evicted,” he said. “I felt as if I had to do something.”

He began stealing and breaking into businesses, doing whatever he could to support his worsening habit. One day, he and two other men were riding around looking for a place to steal from when they came across the manager of a Whataburger whom Marshall knew from a job at another restaurant a few years earlier. The manager came up with a plan, Marshall said — stage a robbery at the restaurant.

But the night it took place, the manager didn't show up. Christopher Dean, a longtime employee, was shot in the head while trying to comply with the robbers' demands for money. Buried in his Whataburger uniform, Dean was 38.

Marshall said he was keeping watch outside when it happened, and one of the other men shot Dean. A few days later, he was arrested for capital murder.

Marshall insists he didn't pull the trigger and has spent much of his 16 years in prison filing appeals.

His mom testified at his sentencing in 2004. Wearing a prison-issued jumpsuit and serving time for drug possession, she said she'd been addicted to crack for years and hadn't been able to take care of her son.

But prosecutor Vic Wisner said growing up in foster care and suffering physical abuse was not sufficient reason to spare Marshall's life.

“He was given a bad set of parents,” Wisner said. “I guess he's got a lifetime ‘I-can-commit-capital-murder-and-not-get-the-death-penalty’ card. That is what they'd have you believe.”

While in prison, Marshall wrote a book about his life: “999489: From Foster Care to Texas Death Row.” Dean's family and others pro-



TAMMY LJUNGBLAD

Former foster child Gerald Marshall's home is now on death row at the Polunsky Unit in Livingston, Texas.

tested the sale of the book, saying he should not profit from the crime he committed and the pain he caused.

Marshall said while he doesn't think foster care put him on death row, he does believe the system failed him.

"They came and took me out of a toxic environment and they were supposed to put me in a safe environment that nurtured me and allowed me to become a productive part of society," he said.

"But instead, they put me in the same environment. The only difference was that I had food to eat and we had electricity and water. But I was still emotionally neglected."

O'Brien, the university professor, has worked for 39 years as a criminal defense attorney. He's defended cases like Marshall's, even gotten some

clients exonerated. He said a "strong majority" of his defendants over the years spent time in foster care.

He believes foster kids are trying to signal what's wrong but no one is listening.

"We need to be looking at aberrant behavior in children as a warning sign not that there's something wrong with this child, but is there something dreadfully wrong in this child's environment?"

Foster care, he's concluded after four decades on the front lines, doesn't — and isn't designed to — give damaged kids the therapy they need.

"What is really essential in all of these cases," he said, "is that if we were to respond more therapeutically than we do, we could cut the Bureau of Prisons' budget in half or more."



PHOTO BY SHELLY YANG, ILLUSTRATION BY NEIL NAKAHODO

Crystal Smith recently was released from the Topeka Correctional Facility.

A daughter, a foster care child, an inmate: Crystal Smith's letter to her mom

BY JUDY L. THOMAS AND LAURA BAUER

Crystal Smith had just gotten news from her sister. Their mom had a new job. Crazy thing is, Mom's new job was working with kids in foster care. Sitting in prison, a former foster kid herself, Crystal found herself oddly happy. That would have seemed inconceivable a dozen years ago when she was taken from her mom at age 12.

"I remember just sitting in the back seat, just

staring out the window and watching as Mom got further and further away from me," Smith told The Star in a prison interview. "I knew I was going into foster care. Man, even just thinking about it, there's just like a pit in your stomach. There's no words to express the feeling of when you're looking out the back window at your mom and you know that you're leaving her."

Smith, now 26, would stay in about two dozen out-of-home placements over the next six

years, eventually aging out of foster care just before her 18th birthday. She describes a traumatic childhood that included several moves between Kansas and Washington state.

“And my mom, I was kind of just too much for her at the time,” she said. “I was really rebellious. I didn’t make it easy, that’s for sure.”

Now on good terms, she wonders how her life would have turned out if she had been allowed to stay with her mom.

“My whole life, that’s all I ever longed for,” she said. “That’s all I ever wanted was for my family, to belong, to be a part of them. It was always my mom and my sister, and I was way out here. And now, we’re all three on the same page. And it is the most remarkable feeling in the world.”

Smith had a lot of advice for her mom, and she put it in writing. This is her letter:

Momma,
Aye Beautiful!

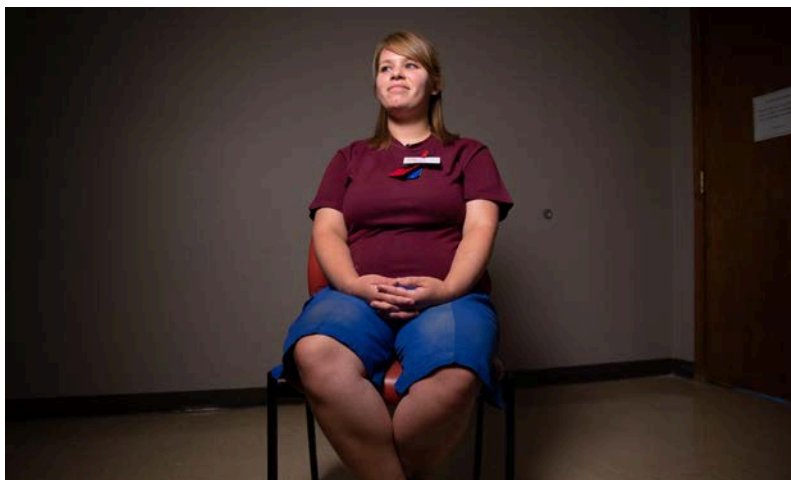
So, just wanted to let you know how very, very proud of you I am! I also wanted you to know that I’m really stoked about your new job as a social worker! When I got the email, I just sat there staring at the screen and let a tear roll down my face and took a second to thank the Good Lord. Because momma, I couldn’t think of a better job for you! He knew exactly what he was doing! I love you so much!

So with that, just want to offer you some words of advice and/or wisdom! One, I know there are rules you’ve got to follow, but when you go into a home, ask the parent what they think, feel, what’s going on. Offer help, ask what they feel is best, as well as the child! As you and I both know, 9 out of 10 times, they come in pull the kids out and ask no questions and 9 out of 10 times that’s the worst thing to do. For the parents and children.

Also, love each of those children like they

were your own! You’re more likely to get a more positive outcome if you do because you’re more aware and concerned about them and what’s the best for them! It’s not just ‘another messed up kid.’ It’s a child who deserves love, encouragement, discipline, happiness, joy, help, a child that matters! That’s what a lot of these ‘lost’ children need. Someone to trust, keep them safe, to love them. And Momma, I know you’ll do just that. And another thing, which I know you’re aware of. But a lot of the cases you’ll get are going to be heartbreaking. Don’t allow it to weigh you down too much. Do what you can and give it to God!

Lastly, I just want to say you’re not just my hero but my inspiration to become the best woman I can be. And I thank you for everything!



SHELLY YANG

Crystal Smith recently was released after serving a sentence for identity theft, fraud and drug possession.

I know you are about to do some amazing things to help children in foster care as well as parents and I’m so glad and proud I get to be here to support you.

I love you, your sweet pea
Sorry, I forgot some things.

■ If you can, once or twice a month, take your kid out to do something with them. Show them you truly care. That was a huge thing for

me. I just didn't feel like they truly cared! Be involved, not just in placing them, but active in their day-to-day life ya know! Create a bond with them!

■ Ask them how the placement or home environment is. What they like, don't like. What could be better?

■ And if possible, every chance there is, reintegration with the family, rebuilding what was once broke. Family is everything!

■ Encourage them to play sports, band,

cheerleading. It keeps them active and allows them to be a part of something.

■ And church I feel is very important. Always ask if they would like to be a part of a church family!

■ Lastly, these kids and parents need counseling. I feel that would've been very good for myself and you guys. A chance to work through all the 'stuff' and create something new. Build on trust, love, support, understanding!



KANSAS STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Children who rode the orphan train in 1900 posed for a photo.

A cruel social experiment, or savior for homeless kids? Foster care's unusual start

BY JUDY L. THOMAS AND LAURA BAUER

Concordia, Kansas
Huddled in the local opera house, the townsfolk anxiously awaited the train's arrival.

Some came out of curiosity, but many had been anticipating this moment for weeks. Advertising for the events looked like this:

WANTED: Homes for Children.

A company of homeless children from the East will arrive at TROY, MO., ON FRIDAY, FEB. 25th, 1910. ... The citizens of this community are asked to assist the agent in finding good homes for them...Distribution will take place at the Opera House Friday, Feb. 25, at 1:30 p.m.

Then the crowd fell silent. A group of abandoned and orphaned boys and girls, dressed in

their Sunday best and shipped halfway across the country on a rail car, appeared on stage.

Weary and bewildered, they lined up from shortest to tallest to be inspected. Some were poked and prodded, their teeth checked and muscles felt. Others sang, danced or recited poetry and Bible verses, told that doing so would make them more appealing to their potential new parents. And in many cases, the children held up a number that would match them to the family that had special-ordered them.

Then one by one, children were selected and whisked away to their new homes.

For more than seven decades, the scene played out in small towns across America. Formally called “placing out,” the program became known as the Orphan Train Movement — the largest migration of children in U.S. history.

Experts estimate that as many as one in six Americans alive today may have had a relative who rode one of the “orphan trains.”

From 1854 to 1929, a quarter of a million homeless and poverty-stricken children — thousands who had been living on the streets of New York City — were given a Bible and a new set of clothes, loaded on rail cars and transported west on the trains to be taken in by families who promised to care for them.

It was the beginning of documented foster care in the U.S. And though the program was credited with improving — even saving — the lives of many of the children by giving them a fighting chance, now it’s often seen as a cruel social experiment, a dark chapter in the nation’s past.

The Orphan Train Movement and contemporary foster care are talked about in similar terms, “where both programs are broken and both programs need desperate help,” said Shaley George, curator of the National Orphan Train Complex in Concordia, Kansas, which is dedicated to preserving the program’s history.

“There can always be improvements,” George said. “But that obviously doesn’t mean that the children within the system are bad or shouldn’t

be cared for.”

When the children were loaded on the orphan trains, most had no idea what was happening to them. Upon arriving in a town, they were often separated from their siblings, and sometimes those who weren’t chosen at one stop were put back on the train and sent west to the next one. The families who took the children were required to fill out papers saying they’d treat them as though they were their own until they turned 18.

“Back then, the communities were great about taking in children,” George said. “And communities unfortunately today can’t find enough foster care homes...I guess that’s what the orphan train did; it was better at putting it in front of your face.”

Many of the children ended up in Midwestern states, where they were put to work as laborers and servants, tending crops and livestock. They lost contact with their relatives back East and were told not to think about or speak of their families again.

The new parents could “try out” the children for 90 days and send them back if they turned out to be “unsatisfactory.”

Some orphan train children became success stories heralded years later — doctors, lawyers, judges and politicians. In 1859, Andrew Burke and John Green Brady were on the same train to Indiana. Burke later became the second governor of North Dakota, and Brady was elected governor of Alaska.

One train rider — Henry Lee Jost — became mayor of Kansas City in 1912 and later served in Congress. In his campaign for Congress in 1922, Jost used his orphan train past to his advantage, calling himself “The Orphan Boy Mayor.”

It’s true, researchers say, that the vast majority ended up living good lives and getting that family they needed. Yet there were some who, after getting off the orphan train, were severely abused, mistreated or ended up running away.

Like Charles Williams, sent to live with a farmer southwest of Holton, Kansas, in 1886.

The boy was forced to husk corn from dawn



SHELLY YANG

Shaley George, curator of the National Orphan Train Complex, sat inside a restored train car exhibit.

until dusk in frigid winter weather, according to a Jan. 12, 1887, article in *The Holton Signal* with the headline “Man’s Inhumanity to a Boy.” The boy’s hands and feet were frozen, “in a horrible condition and must have caused the boy intense suffering,” the article said. ... “It may be necessary to amputate some of his toes.”

Charles was removed from the home and placed at a poor farm until a new home could be found.

ONE MAN’S VISION TO HELP KIDS

As immigrants flooded into the U.S. in the 1800s, the East Coast cities were bursting at the seams.

“They were not prepared for that influx,” said Lori Halfhide, head researcher at the National Orphan Train Complex. “They just didn’t have the resources.”

Many families suffered from poverty and illness, and their children ended up homeless and abandoned because their parents had died or couldn’t take care of them.

By 1850, there were more than 30 orphanages in New York City. And even with that many facilities, there were still an estimated 10,000 to 30,000 children living on the streets.

The Rev. Charles Loring Brace knew there was a problem, Halfhide said. A graduate of Yale University and Union Theological Seminary, he ministered at Blackwell’s Island and Five Points Mission, two of the most crime-ridden areas of New York City. Brace saw first-hand the conditions the children were living in, she said, and vowed to do something about it.

In 1853, Brace founded the Children’s Aid Society. Its mission: to educate the children, give them religion and medical care and teach them

a trade.

Brace had supporters in high places, Halfhide said, including his best friend, Theodore Roosevelt Sr. Other friends were from New York City's upper crust—the Astors, Carnegies, Vanderbilts and Rockefellers. All became donors to the Children's Aid Society.

Brace and his backers soon decided to try to stem the child welfare crisis by moving the children out of the city and sending them to what they considered safer, rural settings where they could be molded into productive adults.

Under its "placing out" program, the Children's Aid Society would plot a route and select towns along the route where children could be sent. If town leaders agreed, an agent would visit, arrange for a newspaper article that provided the names of the children who were coming, put up posters around town and reserve the local opera house or other large venue for a meeting when the train arrived. The agent also would organize a "screening committee" of local leaders in towns where the children might be placed. Committee members would then select possible parents for the children.

Once everything was in place, the children were loaded on trains under the supervision of at least one agent.

"The agents were basically social workers of the time," George said.

In accepting a child, the guardians had to sign a contract agreeing to care for the child. A typical contract for boys contained the following language:

"Boys over 16 years of age must be retained as members of the family for one year, after which a mutual arrangement may be made. Parties taking boys agree to write to the Society at least once a year, or to have the boys do so. Removals of boys proving unsatisfactory can be arranged through the Local Committee or an Agent of the society..."

The first orphan train was sent by the Children's Aid Society in September 1854. It went to Dow-



ANNA LAURA HILL COLLECTION

Children who rode the orphan train posed for a photo with the adults who traveled with them to facilitate the adoptions.

agiatic, Michigan, with 46 children and one agent on board.

"Each child had one set of clothes," Halfhide said. "They went by boat from Manhattan to Albany, by train from Albany to Buffalo, by boat from Buffalo to Detroit, and by train from Detroit to Dowagiatic. Forty-six seasick children with one outfit."

After that, she said, the children were sent with two changes of clothes. One to travel in, and "a nice clean one to put on for the placement ceremony."

Yesterday was distribution day for the orphans brought here from New York...It was a scene to touch the heart of those who love their fellow man. There were good looking boys, handsome boys, and smart boys, all waiting for homes...After each and every



SHELLY YANG

Gary Nolan, from Aptos, California, choked up after he read a letter his uncle wrote to the New York Foundling Hospital in 1933.

one had gotten his home there were plenty of good people left who wanted boys to take home and feed, clothe and educate for further usefulness, whereas, had they been left to their fate in the great city of New York, they probably would have gone to the bad.

Newspaper article in Bonham, Texas. Nov. 19, 1898

UNLOCKING A FATHER'S MYSTERY

Gary Nolan's dad never talked much about his own childhood.

All the son really knew was that Michael Nolan was born in 1910 in New York City but was raised in foster care in Minnesota. So was his older brother, Gary's uncle Walter.

"So as a kid, it was always kind of a mystery to me," said Gary Nolan, of Aptos, California. "I

recall asking him one time, when I was maybe 8, 9 years old, if he ever tried to find his mother. And in a very sharp tone, he responded, 'Well, she never tried to find me.'

"That made it real clear it was not a safe subject to bring up with my dad."

So for decades, all he knew was that his dad was an orphan. And that something had happened in his childhood he didn't want to talk about. Whatever it was, could it be the reason for his anger at times? For the harsh way he'd occasionally treat him and his sister?

In the early 1990s, when Nolan was visiting his then-82-year-old dad in Hawaii, where his parents had gone to retire, the son began to learn a little more. A member of Michael Nolan's church had recently encouraged him to start writing his memoirs.

"We got to talking, and he handed me a copy



SHELLY YANG

Gary Nolan, whose father and uncle were both orphan train riders, spoke at the annual descendants reunion at the National Orphan Train Complex.

of the book, “The Orphan Train Rider,” Nolan said. “And he said, ‘This is my story. I was on that train, too.’”

Nolan had never heard of the orphan trains. But the revelation began to unlock some mysteries that surrounded his father’s childhood.

“It answered the question that I had as a child — how did my father as a young child get from New York to Minnesota?” Nolan said. “And I was like, ‘Now I finally know.’”

A few years ago, he wanted to know more. That’s when he learned there wasn’t just one orphan train, like his father thought, but thousands.

Nolan put his background as a military intelligence analyst to use and began digging deeper into his father’s and uncle’s records. He learned they had been placed in the New York Foundling Hospital, a Catholic organization that required

potential parents to apply through their priests.

The parents were allowed to “special order” a child, requesting specific characteristics, such as age, hair color and eye color. When such a child was located, the child was assigned a number and the parents were told to be at the meeting place in their town and look for the child with that number.

Nolan’s father and uncle stayed at the Foundling for about six years, then were sent to a foster home in the Bronx. They stayed there for six months before returning to the Foundling.

And six months after that, the brothers were loaded onto an orphan train at Grand Central Station, sent west and placed with a childless couple in Maple Lake, Minnesota, a small town northwest of Minneapolis.

They arrived on Thanksgiving Day 1916.



SHELLY YANG

The Orphan Train Museum is housed inside the former Union Pacific Depot in Concordia, Kansas.

But after about a year, Nolan found, the local agent for the Foundling Hospital removed the boys from the home upon discovering they'd been subjected to severe physical abuse.

Their foster father had used a horse whip on them.

So the agent took Michael and Walter Nolan to an orphan's asylum in St. Paul. After two months, the brothers were "re-indentured" to a family in Osseo, Minnesota, where they spent the remainder of their childhood.

Learning about the past has helped Nolan better understand his father's behavior.

"He was very angry," Nolan said. "He was not an easy man to live with. And I think part of the reason is the trauma that he endured as a child.

"That does not forgive his behavior toward me and my sister. But it's more understandable.

... I have to give a lot of credit to my father and mother. They were both orphans. They had no role modeling growing up for how to raise an intact family. But they figured it out."

Michael Nolan died in 1994, so Gary never got to tell his father what he'd discovered.

"But I have told him in spirit."

At the end of May, Gary Nolan and his wife traveled to Concordia to attend the Annual Orphan Train Riders Celebration and for the unveiling of a statue honoring his father and uncle. For Nolan, it was good to hear that most of the children who rode the orphan train had positive experiences.

"But the other side of the story is my father's and uncle's," he said. "And it's just as important for that experience to be known."



SHELLY YANG

The National Orphan Train Complex in Concordia, Kansas, includes the Orphan Train Museum, the Morgan-Dowell Research Center and a restored train car exhibit.

END OF THE LINE

The Orphan Train Movement started losing momentum in the late 1800s, as states began passing laws to restrict or ban the out-of-state placement of children. Michigan was the first to pass regulations in 1887. A 1901 Missouri law restricted orphan trains but was not enforced.

Kansas also passed a law that year, giving the State Board of Charities authority to scrutinize all organizations or institutions placing children. With the passage of that legislation, the board immediately ruled that no homeless children could be brought into Kansas without a certificate of good character and a \$5,000 security bond.

Said then-Gov. William Stanley: “We cannot afford to have the State made a dumping ground for the dependent children of other states, especially New York.”

The last orphan train went to Sulphur Springs, Texas, in 1929. By then, the Children’s Aid Society had “placed out” at least 150,000 children. Other organizations combined sent another 100,000. The biggest among those was the Foundling Hospital.

All 48 contiguous states received children, said George, the orphan train museum curator.

Though referred to as orphans, George said, many of the children were not. The records show about 46 percent were orphans, and 43 percent had one or both living parents. And like children in foster care today, some were placed in multiple homes before turning 18.

In the end, the movement led to child welfare reforms and more support to keep families intact.

During the last year of his presidency, Theodore Roosevelt convened a child welfare conference at the request of a friend who had lived in

an orphanage in Washington, D.C. Called the White House Conference on Dependent Children, the 1909 gathering brought together big names in child welfare.

The conference, George said, “was basically the first time they ever said we should not be separating people because of poverty.”

“It said they should try to keep families together.”

While only a handful of the orphan train riders are alive today, their imprint is everywhere.

“We know that there are at least 40 million descendants living today,” George said. “If we look at the largest end of that number, it could be 1 in 6 Americans, which is an astounding number.”

The impact of those who were part of the Orphan Train Movement, George said, is enormous.

“They built up societies, they built up their own towns, they were farm owners, they owned businesses,” she said. “They are the fabric of

America. And those children deserve a place in our history to be remembered.

“It really is an American story.”

THE NATIONAL ORPHAN TRAIN COMPLEX

The facility opened in 2007 in Concordia, Kansas. It includes a museum in the town’s old train depot, a learning center and a train car designed to look like those the orphans rode in. The complex houses the records of the Orphan Train Heritage Society of America, a Springdale, Arkansas, organization that originally gathered documents on the movement.

Concordia has embraced the complex, branding itself the Orphan Train Town. More than 30 statues have been placed throughout the community to recognize orphan train riders, and visitors come from around the country. To learn more, go to orphantraindepot.org



RESHMA KIRPALANI

Josh Christian met with fellow former foster youth at the Indiana State Capitol to discuss their advocacy work.

Two brothers survive foster care. Now one pushes for reform with the other in mind

BY LAURA BAUER AND JUDY L. THOMAS

Indianapolis

In a hallway inside Indiana's Capitol, the young man walks up to a state senator and gives her a quick hug.

"Hey, it's Josh Christian," he tells Sen. Erin Houchin, a member of the Senate's child welfare committee. "I went to Capitol Hill and I got published. It was crazy!"

The encounter would have seemed more than unlikely just a few years ago, when Christian was

one of the thousands of kids in Indiana's foster care system. In about 18 years, he was moved to 18 different places. The experiences were so deflating he had given up on ever finding his forever family.

Now, the 22-year-old senior at Marian University is using his life story to improve the system for the ones who will come after him.

Christian is part of a growing movement of former foster youth who have become advocates.

Young adults testifying at hearings and counseling lawmakers. Offering ideas on housing solutions, family preservation funding, education inequities and support for youth aging out.

“Somebody who has lived through that experience, sitting in front of you, is starkly different than someone like me in a suit just telling you the story,” said Mike Fonkert, campaign director at Kansas Appleseed, a nonprofit justice center that represents vulnerable Kansans and works with former foster children.

“We believe if you own your story and tell it on your terms, it can be a weapon for positive instead of negative. ... It has a lot of power for change and it gives those young people strength they may not have had before.”

From California to Kansas to Massachusetts, former foster children are working to improve outcomes for those who age out of the system.

Growing up in care was lonely, Christian said. But now he has connected with former foster kids across the country.

“I believe that we truly can make a change,” said Christian, who has strongly advocated for extending foster care beyond the age of 18. “These kids are in the system, not because they did anything wrong. It’s because they had wrong done to them.”

His way to help change foster care is to tell his story.

LIFE IN THE SYSTEM

Christian was 2—the youngest of six children—when he went into foster care.

The state of Indiana had removed all six kids from their home for severe neglect and their mother’s continued substance abuse. There were times, he said, when he and his siblings were given drugs themselves. That’s why, he figures, he has little memory of those early years with his biological family and first stays in foster care.

In first grade—after he had been in several placements—Christian and his older brother and sister were moved to a home that would be

their longest stay.

“It was also my worst,” said Christian, who by that time was already suffering from early trauma and was acting out and struggling to keep up in school.

From ages 7 to 11, he and his brother and sister lived in that home. In fact, the family was going to adopt all three. It seemed like a good fit.

But what social workers didn’t see—nor teachers or other adults in the kids’ lives—was the physical and mental abuse going on inside those walls.

Eleven days before the adoption would be final, a young Christian, eyes filled with tears, told his teacher about how he and his siblings were being treated. About the abuse. He knew his brother and sister didn’t want him to tell, especially with it being his brother’s birthday and the worry that he wouldn’t get his presents.

“I told my friend and they convinced me to tell the teacher,” he said. “I remember her being shocked. And then taking me to the principal and some investigator came in. ... I was the youngest. I did stand up. But I was extremely scared.”

That day, when they got off the bus at the foster home, police were there.

The trio ended up in a new placement, but after a while Christian and his sister were moved. His brother Kenneth stayed in that home and ended up getting adopted.

The sister was eventually adopted by another family and now lives elsewhere in the Midwest.

Josh and Kenneth were always close, even when they didn’t live together. They would call each other “Bubby.”

Kenneth was always protective of his brother. When he was around, Josh knew he didn’t have to worry about anything. Josh was 4 or 5 when someone stole his bike; his brother took a baseball bat and got it back.

When Christian was 13, he ended up in a juvenile detention center for about a week, only because there was nowhere else for him to go.

“My room was like these bricks around you and a window about yea big,” he said, motioning with his hands to describe a small space. “... It was very restrictive. I didn’t have any of my clothing, I didn’t have any of my stuff.”

Christian recently had begun attending church. It was a safe place for him. But now, he was mad at God.

“It was kind of a wake up moment for me,” he said.

Before long, he no longer wished for the same thing each birthday — to be reunited with his biological mother. That same year he went before his family court judge with a request.

I no longer want to be adopted.

He had written out what he wanted to say, though he’s sure there were plenty of misspellings because “my education was not that good.” The judge “said it was fine.”

Since he was 2, adoption had been the goal. But he had just been in his 13th home and “I was heartbroken when I left.”

So he wanted to change his plan and age out. That meant he stayed in placements that were strictly for fostering, not adopting.

“I did not think I was going to find my forever family,” Christian said. “I didn’t want to call people mom and dad again.

“I did not want to get my hopes up one last time. ... I really just wanted to have some consistency and peace in my life. I didn’t really get that from the system.”

SAYING ‘I’M SORRY’

When he was a teen, Christian saw a familiar face in high school. Kenneth.

“I saw him pretty much every day — gym, study hall,” he said. “We found the time, if time was not there. We grew extremely close.”

Even today, Christian lights up when he talks about him, the guy “who was the coolest kid in school,” the one everyone loved and who could make them laugh.

Both were athletic and competitive. Both

were team captains and broke track records — they could run a mile in under five minutes, Christian said. And they always wanted to race again some day, to see who was faster.

Christian said he struggled in high school, but was able to graduate and begin college. He followed the advice of a former foster parent who shared with him the services that were available to help kids once they aged out, such as money for tuition and housing.

But while a young student at St. Joseph’s College in Rensselaer, Indiana, Christian found himself angry and taken back to what had happened during all those years in foster homes. He knew what he needed to do.

“It was time for me to be OK with everything and let go of feelings that hadn’t been dealt with,” he said. “I decided I was going to go back to different homes and tell them ‘I’m sorry’ or ‘I forgive you,’ because I can’t weigh that on my shoulders anymore.”

Kenneth wasn’t so sure it was a good idea. But he supported him and would talk to him before and after the contacts with those past foster parents.

Christian worked the phones and found some addresses. He talked to families he had lived with.

“The ones I could find the addresses for, I would travel to those,” he said.

He even went back to that one placement — the worst one — where the abuse occurred.

“It was a scary drive for me,” he said. “But I needed to do what I needed to do.”

The foster mom was there. Christian was respectful.

“I apologized for some things that I had done, acting up,” he said. “But I let them know that I forgave them. She kind of ignored it or didn’t hear the ‘I forgive you,’ because she assumed she had done nothing wrong.

“I said what I needed to say and left.”

He had learned that he wasn’t always going to hear from others what he wanted.

“A lot of the time, the wrong that had been done to me, others did not recognize that.”



RESHMA KIRPALANI

Josh Christian spent time with members of his “forever family,” who are set to adopt him next year. His future brothers Jonathan (right), and Wesley played with blocks while his future mom, Linda Oswald, held onto his future sister Emily.

But he was growing stronger by the day. A couple years earlier, the week before his 18th birthday, Christian’s former case manager, Matthew Oswald — who had become his mentor — reached out to him with a question.

The two had become close during the time Christian was in care. And late one night, Christian got a call from him.

“He said, ‘Me and my wife have been thinking,’” Christian recalls him saying. “‘If you’re OK with it, we would like you to come live with us.’”

Josh called Kenneth, like he always did when he needed advice and guidance. They talked it over and the little brother decided that’s what he wanted.

“I moved in,” he said, “and about six months later, I sat them down and said, ‘I’ve got to talk to you about something.’”

“I said, ‘Hey, I would like to call you guys Mom and Dad.’ They were crying, I was crying. “I got my forever home.”

‘HEY BUBBY ...’

Soon after the visits with former foster families to reconcile with his past, Christian got a call about Kenneth.

It was early in the morning, and the words hit hard.

Your brother is in a coma.

Christian said his injuries were self-inflicted. He knew his brother had struggled with mental illness in his teen years and that it wasn’t properly addressed in foster care or after he was adopted.

Within hours, Christian was on his way to see him. His new dad went with him.

They traveled to a Texas hospital. Christian would go back and forth from Indiana for the next six weeks. He called several times a day.

During one visit, he left a radio with his brother. He tuned it to K-Love, a Christian radio station.

“I wanted to make sure if he had any unfinished business, just maybe he could take care of that,” Christian said. Medical personnel left the radio on.

On the third trip, doctors sat down with Christian and said it was time to let Kenneth go.

“I just kind of held him and talked to him,” Christian said of those last moments. “We were supposed to have one last race, him and I. Never got to do the mile. So I told him, ‘Run to Jesus.’ And I told him we’d have our race soon.”

Nearly a year later, Christian got a final note from his brother in the mail. He is not sure who sent it. It began, “Hey Bubby...”

His brother told him he understood how hard this would be and encouraged Christian to take care of himself.

Since he was younger, Christian knew he wanted to help other kids. But after Kenneth’s death, he knew he couldn’t wait until after college to get involved.

“I realized I was not promised another day,”

Christian said. “I realized I could make changes right now.”

He’s been involved in nearly a dozen state and national organizations helping foster kids. He’s spoken to Congress and many Indiana legislators.

Right now, he’s advocating for a better education system. Eventually, maybe, he will more widely share his brother’s story and the need for more mental health treatment for young people in the system.

“There were many folks like him who have a big smile on his face, perfect grades,” Christian said. “You just don’t know. If you don’t provide services to the kids that are thriving — it doesn’t mean they don’t need services — you could be doing a wrong to them. And I think my brother was done wrong to. I think our state could have helped him more.

“They could have given him services. It’s very wrong how our state or a lot of states thought mental health may not exist.”

He died before Christian became an outspoken advocate.

“I wish my Bubby could’ve known that,” he said. “It would have been the coolest thing for me. He’d have been proud of me; he’d do it with me. It’d be cool to have him by my side.”

Videos



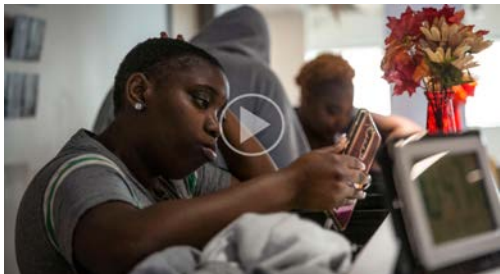
[Taken into foster care,
through the eyes of a child](https://www.kansascity.com/article238228079.html)

<https://www.kansascity.com/article238228079.html>



[How foster care placements
can harm a child's brain](https://www.kansascity.com/news/special-reports/article238316928.html)

<https://www.kansascity.com/news/special-reports/article238316928.html>



[Aged out, put out,
homeless and jobless.
Welcome to adulthood](https://www.kansascity.com/news/special-reports/article238320208.html)

<https://www.kansascity.com/news/special-reports/article238320208.html>



[State care of another kind](https://www.kansascity.com/news/special-reports/article238317943.html)

<https://www.kansascity.com/news/special-reports/article238317943.html>



Former foster child
overcomes challenges and
now advocates for others

<https://www.kansascity.com/news/special-reports/article238474383.html>

Podcast



[A Star investigation into our broken foster care system: Is there a solution?](#)

<https://megaphone.link/MCCLATCHY7732832692>

The Kansas City Star's Laura Bauer and Judy Thomas spent a year investigating the United States' foster care system. A quarter of those in our prisons started out as foster kids - and there are no easy solutions in sight. They discuss the problem with Dave Helling and Derek Donovan of the editorial board on today's Deep Background podcast.