

Preface

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Most developed countries worldwide have a foster care system that provides temporary care to children who cannot remain safely in their familial homes, due to abuse, neglect, abandonment, or other issues. In the US, approximately 4-6% of all children will experience foster care before reaching the age of majority (Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2021; Yi et al., 2020). Many of these children return to their families of origin, while others are adopted, live permanently with relatives, or remain in foster care until reaching adulthood (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020).

In the US and elsewhere, foster care is widely criticized as a failed intervention. Agencies tasked with administering foster care face challenges in recruiting and retaining safe, stable, foster families, providing appropriate health and education supports for children in care, and making appropriate decisions about how and to whom children exit care (Font & Gershoff, 2020). These problems are not new. Indeed, despite numerous federal and state policy reforms, the same concerns arise in decades of class-action lawsuits (Strassburger, 2018), federal evaluations (Administration for Children and Families, 2017), investigative reports (Braga et al., 2020), and state audits (DePasquale, 2017). Although states vary a great deal in how they use foster care and what that experience entails, no state consistently provides children with the quality of care and support that they need to thrive.

Despite these challenges, societies continue to encounter children for whom there are no appropriate alternatives to foster care. As such, improving the quality of foster care is an urgent and crucial responsibility. The Child Maltreatment Solutions Network at the Pennsylvania State University convened a conference in 2019 to revisit these longstanding challenges and discuss the best evidence on how to overcome them. In the ensuing chapters, experts define these challenges in greater detail and discuss the best practices in a range of areas. Our opening chapter by Dr. Fred Wulczyn, provides an overview of variability in state policy and practice, highlighting differences in the uses of foster care, racial disproportionality, and patterns of congregate (group-based) foster care. In Chapter 2, Drs. Pecora and Gabrielli provide an overview of case practices that help to track and promote child wellbeing in foster care. The remaining five chapters narrow their focus to specific topics of importance for foster care policy and practice: leveraging technology (Atwood and Cooley), mental health care (Leathers), integrated health services (Stone, Pollard, and Moore), foster parent training (Buchanan), and improving educational outcomes (Peeler and McGuire).

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