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Study: Troubled homes better than foster care

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FAMILY INFLUENCE

Children who stay in troubled families fare better than those put into foster care. Those who:

- Were arrested at least once:
- Stayed with family: 14%
- Went to foster care: 44%

- Became teen mothers:
- Stayed with family: 33%
- Went to foster care: 56%

- Held a job at least 3 months:
- Stayed with family: 33%
- Went to foster care: 20%

Source: Study by Joseph Doyle, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

By Wendy Koch, USA TODAY

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Children whose families are investigated for abuse or neglect are likely to do better in life if they stay with their families than if they go into foster care, according to a pioneering study.

The findings intensify a vigorous debate in child welfare: whether children are better served with their families or away from them.

RELATED: Record numbers of foster kids leave program as adults

Kids who stayed with their families were less likely to become juvenile delinquents or teen mothers and more likely to hold jobs as young adults, says the study by Joseph Doyle, an economics professor at MIT's Sloan School of Management who studies social policy.

"The size of the effects surprised me, because all the children come from tough families," Doyle says. The National Science Foundation funded the study.

Doyle says his research, which tracked at least 15,000 kids from 1990 to 2002, is the largest study to look at the effects of foster care. He studied kids in Illinois because of a database there that links abuse investigations to other government records.

To avoid results attributable to family background, he screened out extreme cases of abuse or neglect and studied kids whose cases could have gone either way.

Studies, including those by Mark Courtney while at the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children, show that the 500,000 children in U.S. foster care are more likely than other kids to drop out of school, commit crimes, abuse drugs and become teen parents.

His research has shown that this holds true even when foster kids are compared with other disadvantaged youth.

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Doyle's study, however, provides "the first viable, empirical evidence" of the benefits of keeping kids with their families, says Gary Stangler, executive director of the Jim Casey Youth

Opportunities Initiative, a foundation for foster teens. Stangler says it looked at kids over a longer period of time than had other studies.

"It confirms what experience and observation tell us: Kids who can remain in their homes do better than in foster care," says Stangler. He says some kids, for their own safety, need to be removed from their families, but in marginal cases of abuse, more should be done to keep them together.

Smaller studies have found kids from abusive families do better in foster care. "There are high rates of re-abuse" for those reunited with parents, says Heather Taussig, a pediatrics professor at the University of Colorado School of Medicine.

Taussig co-authored a study in 2001 that found kids reunited with families after a brief stay in foster care were more likely to abuse drugs, get arrested, drop out of school and have lower grades than those who stayed in foster care. She followed 149 youths in San Diego over a 6-year period.

Taussig says case workers shouldn't assume that keeping kids with relatives is better.

"We need more research," she says.

Doyle says foster care remains a needed safety net for some kids but he agrees that it merits further study.

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