

Surviving Childhood: The Effects of Removing a Child from Home

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Introduction

Studies show that 2–6 percent of all children will at some point be placed in foster homes and other forms of out-of-home care. These children face an increased risk of dying prematurely, using heavy drugs, attempting suicide, and being diagnosed with a range of physical and mental illnesses. However, we have limited knowledge regarding the impact of court-ordered out-of-home placement on these risks.

Children taken into care are on average more disadvantaged than other children even before the court orders out-of-home placement. This disadvantaged background likely impacts their future outcomes, which means that if we directly compare children in care with other children, we risk arriving at misleading results due to sampling bias.

Typically, researchers have tried to address this problem by ensuring that the groups are comparable in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, and other observable factors. However, since we cannot observe everything affecting children's future, these estimates will probably still be misleading. For example, it is difficult to measure the degree of maltreatment in the child's previous home.

The challenging task of creating comparable groups by using limited background information can be avoided if children are randomly taken into care. In such a case, the children would not differ from each other in any systematic way beyond their placement status (given a sufficiently large sample size).

Method & Data

The analysis in this study exploits cases in which children's placement status can be seen as random, a so-called natural experiment. Specifically, the method utilizes the fact that different judges differ in their inclination to make a certain decision, while chance determines which judge is assigned a particular court case. This method represents a type of instrumental variable analysis called “judge IV design” and has been used in several prominent studies across various fields of research.

In essence, the mortality rate for children taken into care as they were given a “strict” judge is compared to the mortality rate for children who were left at home as they were given a “lenient” judge, but who would have been taken into care in case of a stricter judge.

Using the design described above, the main research question to be answered in this study is: If fewer children are removed from their homes, do more or fewer children survive childhood?

To answer this question, I collected and processed more than 21,000 Swedish court cases between 2001 and 2019 and extracted relevant information, including the child’s personal identity number (a unique number given to all Swedish residents). Using these personal identity numbers, Statistics Sweden linked the children and their parents to extensive administrative data, including cause of death, patient, education, and crime registers.

Main Results

The results show that if fewer children are removed from their homes, more children survive childhood. Specifically, if a child facing the prospect of being taken into care is indeed removed from their home, the risk of dying by the year they turn 20 increases from 1.8 percent to a staggering 8.6 percent.

This effect is mainly driven by suicides that occur while the removed children are still placed in out-of-home care. There is a sharp and persistent increased risk of suicide already within nine months after the court’s decision.

The empirical evidence suggests that unfavorable care conditions and harmful exposure to peers serve as important explanations. High barriers to health care seem to be particularly important, including inadequate psychiatric care.

Placing children in out-of-home care also leads to:

- › a reduced number of outpatient specialist visits for mental illness and self-harm but an increased risk of hospitalization for mental illness and self-harm prior to the steep increase in suicide
- › an increased risk of children committing violent crimes and other crimes found in the Penal Code within one year of the court’s decision

Policy Implications

The findings of this report do not imply that society should stop intervening when children live in inadequate homes or exhibit destructive behaviors. Rather, the results should encourage quality improvements (e.g., increased supervision and increased collaboration with the health care system) and efforts to mitigate harmful effects from peers.

The results should also encourage decision-makers not only to evaluate whether there are legal reasons to take the child into care but also whether being placed outside the home is in the child’s best interest. In some cases, extensive efforts in the home may yield better results.

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