

Drug Abuse and Child Welfare

The effects of the opioid epidemic on the criminal justice and health systems have been well documented, while the relationship between substance use and child welfare caseloads has been largely anecdotal, until now. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Service released two reports this spring detailing research that shows a positive correlation between drug overdose deaths and drug hospitalizations and foster care caseloads.

Caseloads have been steadily increasing since 2011, including the number of babies entering the system who are less than a year old. In 2015, when the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System began reporting “drug abuse of a parent” separately from “alcohol abuse of a parent,” the impact of parental drug abuse on foster care caseloads became clearer.

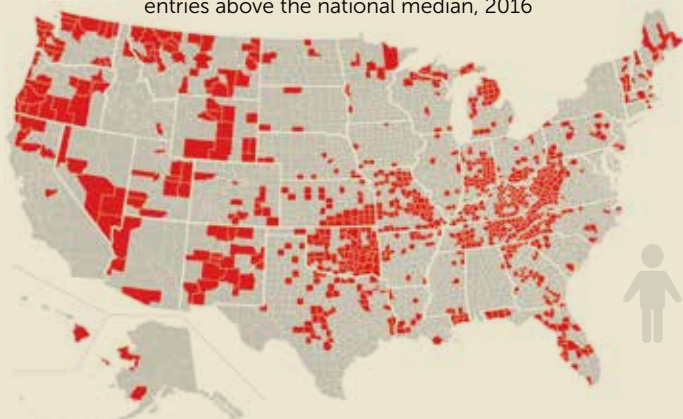
In FY 2016, drug abuse by a parent was the second leading reason for removal of a child. Also in the top 10 reasons for removal were neglect, caretaker inability to cope, parental alcohol abuse and parental death. It is important to note that the way data are collected across states, and even within each state, varies significantly, and may lead to an underreporting of these numbers.

The potential effect of drug hospitalizations and drug deaths on foster care caseloads was striking: A 10 percent increase in the overdose death rate corresponds with a 4.5 percent increase in foster care placement rates, and a 10 percent increase in the drug hospitalization rate corresponds with a 3.3 percent increase in foster care placement rates. For more information go to ncsl.org/magazine.

—Meghan McCann

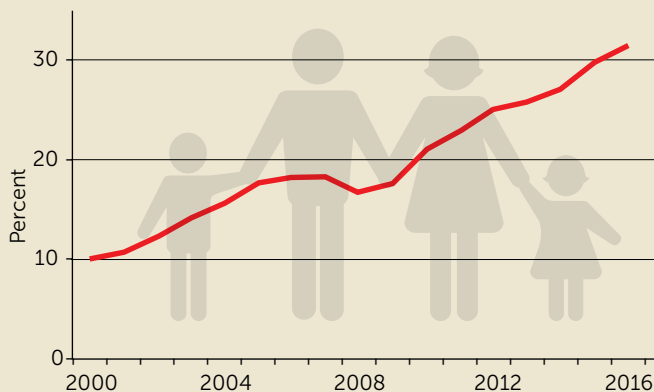
Where the Impact Is Greatest

Counties with rates of drug overdose deaths and foster care entries above the national median, 2016



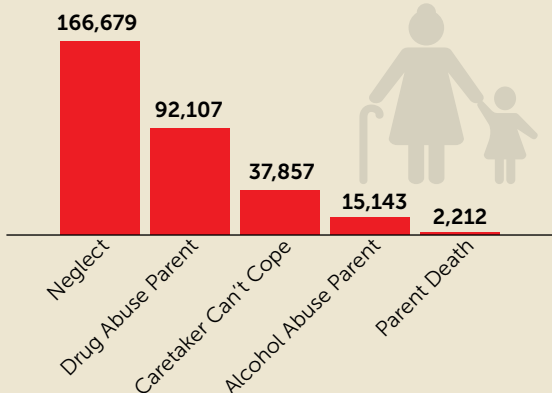
Substance Use Drives Foster Care Entries

Percent of removals tied to drug abuse by parents, national averages from 2000 to 2016



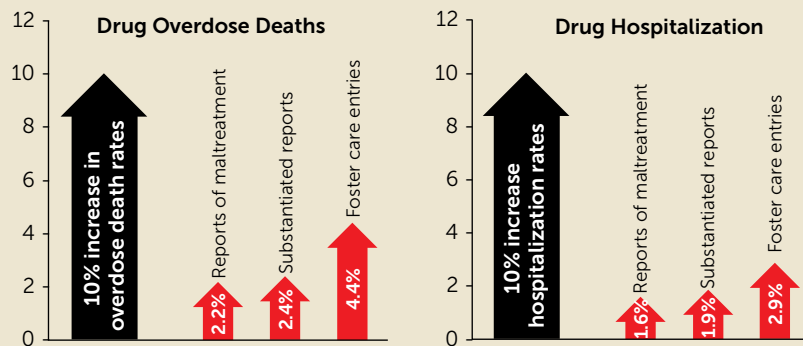
Reasons for Removing Children

At least five reasons for putting children in foster care relate to parental drug abuse.



Positive Correlations

The relationships between overdose deaths, drug hospitalizations and child welfare caseloads.



Sources: The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), Office of the Administration for Children & Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; CDC, NCHS, National Vital Statistics System, Mortality, accessed 2018.