

The Foster Parents Denial to be Foster Parents

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Abstract

Many children around the world do not have the chance to be raised with their birth families, for this reason, many forms of care are sought that ensure the full development of children. The report presents a study of a crisis in foster care and more specifically the withdrawal of foster parents and people's reluctance to become foster parents. Data is presented from several large countries, pioneers in foster care. It is best developed in the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Data is also presented from Bulgaria, a country that pretty recently completed the process of deinstitutionalization of childcare. Foster care is also a very common social service for children deprived of parental care.

Key Words: Foster Care Families, Children, Crisis

Introduction

All over the world there are around 2.7 million children who are living in institutional care (Petrowski et al., 2017) [1] Global child protection policy strives to protect children, to seek the best interests of the child, to have children live with their families, and when this is not possible, to provide care that is as close to the family environment as possible.

Foster care is known all over the world as a good alternative for children who, for one reason or another, cannot be raised by their birth families.

The deinstitutionalization processes, in addition to removing children from specialized institutions and ending placement in specialized institutions, also led to the placement of a large number of children in foster care.

After this "boom" of foster care, the last few years have seen a significant withdrawal of foster parents from this profession, as well as people's reluctance to become foster families for children.

According to data from the International Foster Care Organization, from 142 countries, 86 have data on children placed in residential and foster care, the remaining countries do not have information for both types of accommodation.

Below is data on the number of children in foster care in some countries, because due to lack of data, it's not possible to estimate the total number of children in foster families in the world.

For example, there is no data of the number of children who live with foster care parents in South Asia, Eastern and Southern Africa, West and Central Africa. However, statistics are available for these regions: industrialized countries – 799000, Central and Eastern Europe along with the Commonwealth of Independent States – 788000, Latin America and the Caribbean – 54000, and the Middle East and North Africa – 52000. In total, this amounts to over 1.5 million children globally. Among 197 countries, data on foster care exists for 88 of them. This information is up to date as of 2017, and no similar data has been released since that time by the International Foster Care Organization. [2]

Method

Examination of information from national-level published reports from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Bulgaria.

Foster care crisis

Foster care crisis in the United Kingdom

Foster care in its modern form began in the United Kingdom in 1853. When the Reverend John Armistead took children from a so-called workhouse in Cheshire and placed them in foster care families. [3]

According to data from The Fostering Network in the United Kingdom in 2023, about 70000 children live in over 53000 foster families across the UK.

In England, the shortage of foster families is high in certain geographical areas, foster care for teenagers, large sibling groups, and children with some disabilities, problem behavior and special needs.

In the United Kingdom, the need for around thousands of foster families was reported in May 2024, due to a shortage of 6500 foster families. There is a crisis in the recruitment of foster families, as the number of children in some form of care in the UK is over 100000 - the highest in history. According to The Fostering Network, the process of moving out of foster care begins in 2021. There are more adults that are giving up on foster parenting than people who would like to become foster parents. The number of foster families decreased by 2154,

while the number of children increased by 2855. At the same time, over a five-year period - since 2019 - the number of children in foster care has increased by 5690. [4]

Number of enquiries to foster remained high, the number of applications received in 2021-2022 is 21 % lower (which is 2240 less) than in 2017-2018. [5]

Foster care crisis in the United States of America

In 1853, Charles Loring Brace, a charitable figure, established the Children's Aid Society in New York City. Witnessing numerous immigrant children living on the streets, Brace initiated the Orphan Movement. As a result of his actions, over 150 000 children in New York were sent to farms across America. [6]

In the United States of America, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) released data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), in March 2024. According to the report, the number of children in foster care has declined for the fourth year.

The number of children in foster care families in 2022 decreased by nearly 6% compared to 2021, and the decrease from 2020 to 2021 was almost 4%. The number of children in foster care at the end of 2022 was 368 500, compared to 392 000 children in foster care at the end of 2021. (Figure 1)

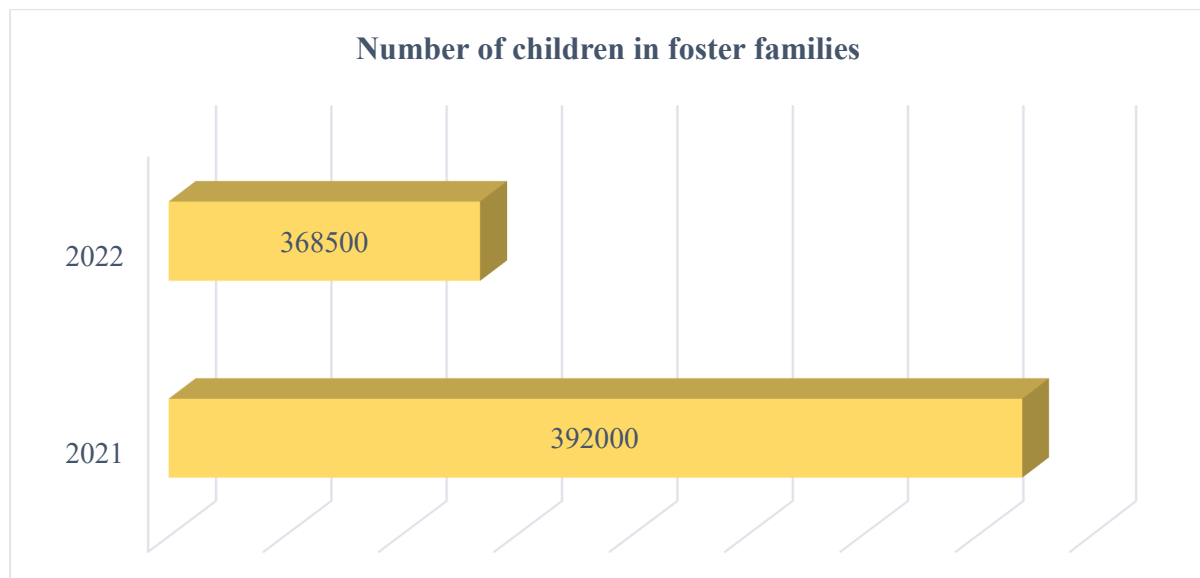


Figure 1 Number of children in foster care families for 2021 and 2022 year

Since 2020, the number of children leaving foster care has outpaced the number of children entering foster care.

The number of children leaving foster care also falls from 214 500 in 2021 to 201 400 in 2022.

At the same time, the number of children still deprived of parental care decreased by only 400 from 2021 to 2022. [7]

About 30-50% of foster care givers decide to give up foster care each year, as a result of the difficulties they face on a daily basis. These high levels of withdrawal negatively impact both all children, who are forced to be moved again to another foster family or placed in a new place which they do not know, with people with whom they haven't established attachment [8], as well as the foster parents who have built an emotional connection with the children.

Foster care crisis in Bulgaria

Foster care officially appeared in Bulgaria at the beginning of the XX century, was discontinued during the years of socialism (when institutional state care for children was established), and began a new stage of development as a social service in the last decade of XX century. [9]

The Social Assistance Agency in Bulgaria annually publishes reports that include the number of children placed in foster care, as well as the number of foster families at the national level.

The analysis in Bulgaria reveals similar trends as in the US and UK. In Bulgaria, a great number of children are still deprived of parental care and need foster care families.

As of the end of December 2023, 1515 children are being raised in foster care. [10] This is almost 1,000 fewer children in foster families than during the "heyday" of foster care in Bulgaria.

Figure 2 shows "Total number of foster families for period 2016 – 2023". A significant decrease is seen in the number of foster cares with 565 for seven years, which for a constant number of around 2000 represents a large value.

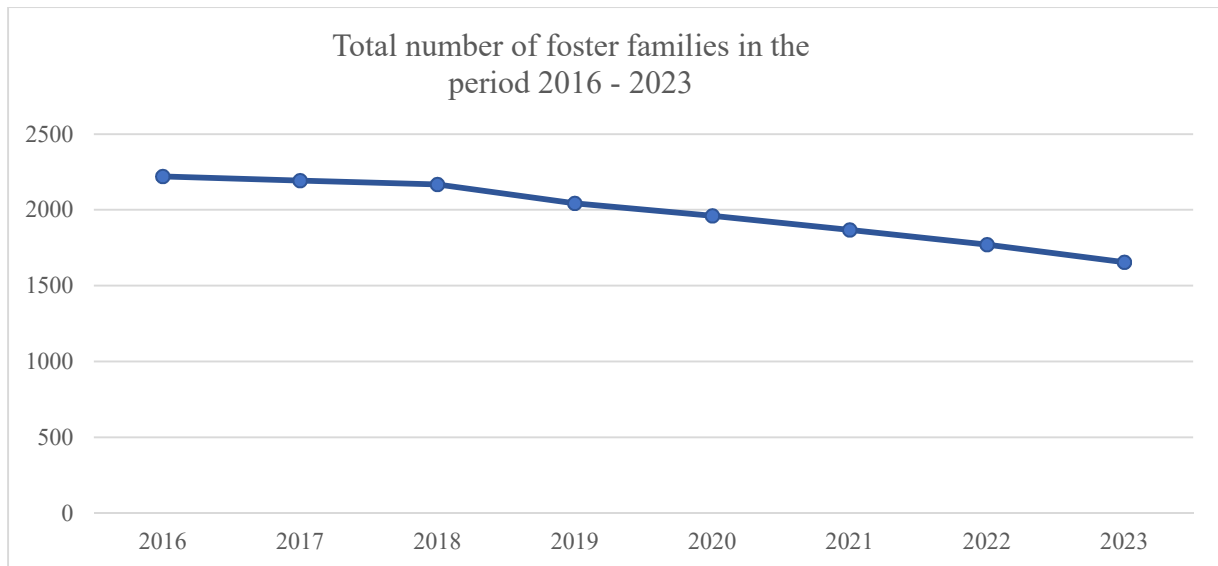


Figure 2 Total number of families in the period 2016 – 2023

The number of children in foster care families is also declining, and from 2020 to 2023, there is a notable reduction in the number of children entering foster care. During this timeframe, the overall number of children fell by 658. Meanwhile, the number of children in residential care or family-type placement centers still remains significant.

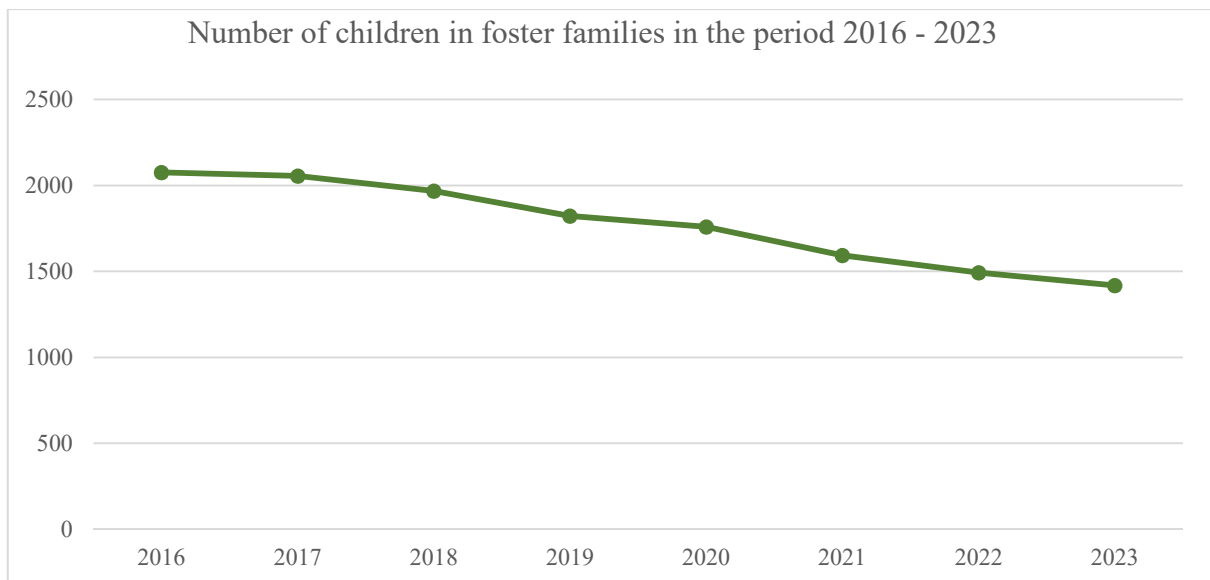


Figure 3 Number of children in foster families in the period 2016 – 2023

The number of foster families without placed children remained relatively close during the research period - between 400 and 500. These foster families most likely do not have any children in foster care, as the profile they desire does not effectively match the children who

need foster care. Our research, conducted in the period 2015 - 2017, shows that most often, foster parents wish to care for younger children or for children that are at least under the age of 10. They also find it important that they are in good health. Often, however, children who need foster care are over 10 years old, have special needs, health problems, or disabilities.

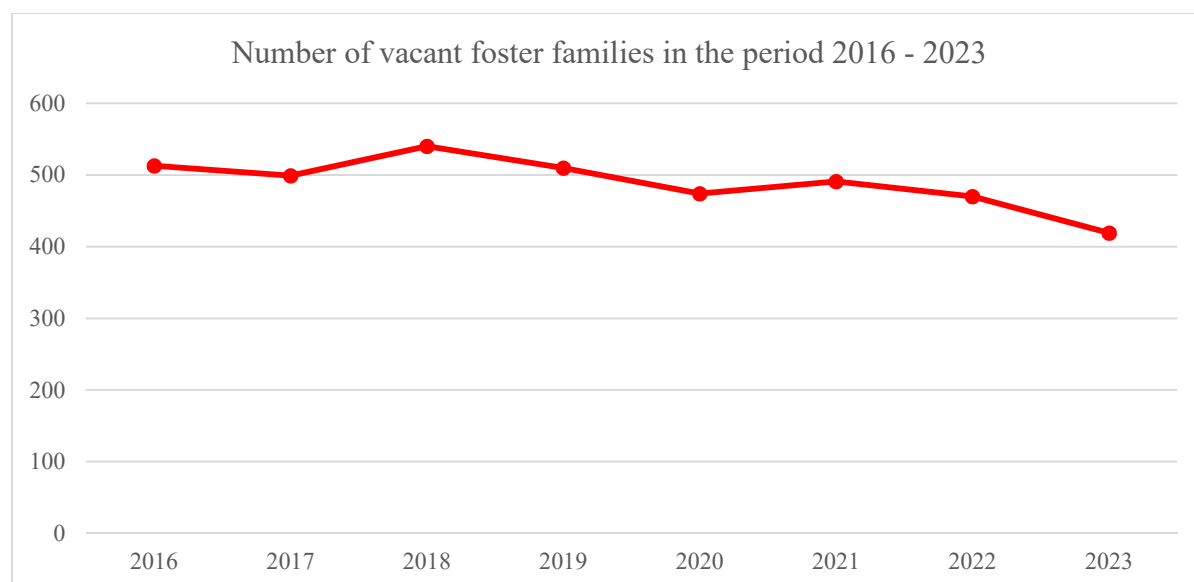


Figure 4 Number of vacant foster families in the period 2016 – 2023

Reasons for the outflow of foster families

Jakobsen (2013) [11] states that the withdrawal of foster parents is due to behavioral problems of the child, children who have experienced great instability caused by the child welfare system. Furthermore, withdrawal is often tied to the parenting skills of the foster families. Rock, Michelson, Thomson и Day (2015), have conducted a systematic review that reveals factors associated with the unwillingness of potential caregivers to be foster parents, such as older children, behavioral problems, length of placement, separation from siblings, and multiple staff involvement. [12] Lack of help, feeling of undervaluation, disrespect from social work teams, and inadequate financial support can be considered as some of the main reasons why foster parents withdraw from foster care. [13]

In our research, which includes focus groups with foster parents, conducted in the period 2015 - 2017 years in Bulgaria, foster parents share the following problems they face and needs they'd like to see met:

A significant proportion of the needs expressed by foster parents that would encourage them to remain in the field relate to the qualities of those in the child protection system, particularly social workers. They emphasize the need for social workers to have a positive

attitude towards clients and partners, to possess high professional expertise, to show a genuine interest in children's development and to be "broad-minded". Foster parents also believe that social workers should have a wealth of experience and knowledge, willingness to learn, competence in working with children and an understanding of the unique characteristics of children.

Regarding the organization of work, foster families state that it is necessary to treat them "not as "clients" but as "partners". It is necessary to change the way of controlling the funds provided, since foster families feel "obligated" for being granted funds to raise the child. They share that they cannot trust the person (meaning the social worker) to whom they report.

Foster parents focus much of their attention on the selection before entering the workforce, which should be "careful and precise". Foster families want to "be useful to children".

It is necessary for the foster parent to have knowledge about children with disabilities and children with developmental issues. It was stated that foster parents do not raise children with disabilities due to the lack of support and assistance. This also indicates the need to care for the child's development, and not only to provide for household and educational needs. The child needs to learn "love and forgiveness". According to foster parents, the criteria for practicing the profession should be increased and there should be standards for this type of profession. However, foster care should not be just a type of work, but should be done "from the heart". Those working and raising children should not have prejudices.

According to the foster parents, a person with the intention to adopt should not go through foster parenthood, the adjustment period between the child and his/her future adoptive parents should be longer and tailored to the needs of each child. The foster parents share that giving the child they have raised to the adoptive parents is always traumatic and they cope with it difficultly when they lack support, but nevertheless they state that you should "be able to part with the child".

Foster families feel the need for support and sharing, replacing foster care, as well as working with them towards adopting the child, and not being the last to understand that the child will have meetings with prospective adoptive parents. They feel worried about their own child, whether it is deprived of something. They admit that they have a hard time tolerating the interference of strangers in their personal lives, especially when the social worker changes frequently.

In terms of societal attitudes, foster families meet many problems, including a dismissive attitude towards the profession, a lack of support from the community, as well as from relatives and friends.

Society needs to understand and be empathetic towards children who are deprived of parental care.

Summary of reasons to denial

- The lack of children placed in approved foster families can be explained by the differences in the declared profile of children that foster parents wish to care for and the actual profile of children in need.

- Especially in Bulgaria, foster parents are employed on civil contracts, which in turn leads to lack of some types of social security and between the placement of two children, the foster parents are left without income.

- The lack of support or limited support in raising children with disabilities is one of the reasons for the lack of foster parents willing to care for a child with disabilities. For example, in 2020, according to data from the Social Assistance Agency in Bulgaria, out of 2,060 children placed in foster families in 2019, the largest share was those under the age of 7 – 1,096 children, or 53%. 33% of those placed were between the ages of 7 and 14, and only 14% were over the age of 14. [10] In the US, for 2022, more than half of children were under 10 years old and just 27% were teenagers, 7% of children in foster care were under one year old. [8]

- Foster parents tend to prefer looking after younger children, as the settings they grew up in (such as a specialized institution) have less enduring effects.

- Improved strategies for preventing abandonment, reuniting children with their biological families, or facilitating adoption.

Conclusions

The analysis, although in two large countries and one small European country, shows the same trends. The number of people who choose foster care as their profession is gradually decreasing. And the departure of people who are already foster parents is becoming more certain.

Recruiting new foster parents is one part of the solution, what should not be overlooked is retaining the foster parents who are currently performing the complex task of foster care. It

is clear to everyone that children need a safe home where they feel calm, and also close to their birth families, to ensure that they can maintain contact with them.

If people are not motivated to become foster parents, many children will end up in a place that does not meet their needs. Unfortunately, many children still live in residential care, even though they all need families. This is because there are often no foster parents available to take care of them.

The focus of policies should be on ensuring that current foster parents feel supported, respected, sufficiently rewarded and valued in order to continue foster care and to attract more quality foster families to this cause.

As the foster families surveyed say - let them, above all, be partners in the noble cause of ensuring that none child is left homeless.

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