“Five myths about the child welfare system”
misleads more than it corrects
April 27, 2022

The following was submitted as an Op-Ed to the Washington Post in an effort to ensure the public has the benefit of various viewpoints on this topic but, unfortunately, the Post chose not to publish it.

We were troubled to read Dorothy Roberts’ Five Myths about the Child Welfare System in the April 17th Outlook section of the Washington Post. Roberts’ version of reality does not agree with what we see every day as child advocates in the District of Columbia, nor with the research on child welfare.

“**Myth** No. 1: Child welfare workers mainly rescue children from abuse.” Roberts is correct that at most 17 percent of the children placed in foster care in FY 2020 were found to be victims of physical or sexual abuse. But she is wrong when she implies that most neglect findings reflect parents who are too poor to provide adequate housing, clothing and food to their children. Many of the neglectful parents we have seen have serious, chronic mental illness or substance use disorders that impact their parenting, and they are unwilling or unable to comply with a treatment plan. Meanwhile, the children in their care are often left to fend for themselves because their parents cannot feed and dress them, change their diapers, or get them to school. Many children neglected in this way develop cognitive and social deficits, attachment disorders, and emotional regulation problems. Most poor parents do not neglect their children. Even with scarce resources, they find a way to provide safe and consistent care.

“**Myth** No. 2: Homes are investigated only if children are at risk of harm.” The purpose of an investigation is to determine whether children are at risk of harm. Professionals who work with children are trained to report concerns about possible maltreatment, not to investigate on their own. The system is not perfect. Some reports are too minor to meet the definition of maltreatment, or even maliciously motivated. A surprisingly large number of children are reported every year and only a minority of these reports are substantiated—but that does not mean they are not true. But to propose that investigations should take place only if it is first determined that children are at risk puts the cart before the horse and disregards the safety of children.

“**Myth** No. 3: Foster children are usually placed with loving families.” Roberts’ statement that large numbers of children are placed in some form of congregate care — group homes, residential treatment centers and psychiatric hospitals—is misleading. Only eight percent of children in foster care were in a group home or institution at the end of September, 2020, though the percentage is higher for older youth. The problem is the lack of quality therapeutic placements for children who have been so damaged by long histories of abuse and neglect that they cannot function in a family home. It is true that many children bounce from one foster home to another, but these are often youths with acute behavior problems that make it difficult for them to function in a home. Roberts also fails to mention that 34 percent of foster children were
residing in the homes of relatives as of September 2020, and that they have more placement stability than children placed in non-kinship homes.

**Myth No. 4: Placing children in foster care improves their well-being.** Arguing that foster care is harmful is like arguing that treatment in a cancer ward increases the risk of dying of cancer. Foster youths are likely to have poor outcomes given their history of maltreatment, which foster care cannot erase. It is difficult to assess how foster care placement affects children, since we cannot do a controlled experiment in which some children are placed and a similar set of children are not. Roberts quotes only one study, from 2007, that shows harm from foster care—and that study included borderline cases only, leaving out children suffering severe and obvious maltreatment. She does not quote the same author’s brand-new paper, which finds both positive and negative effects for different contexts, subgroups, and study designs.

“**Myth**” No. 5: This system was founded after the case of Mary Ellen Wilson. This is an esoteric myth, as few people have heard of Wilson. Roberts is right that many histories trace the roots of today’s child welfare system to the case of that little girl. We appreciate Roberts’ clarifications but are not convinced of their significance. We believe other myths are much more relevant, such as that neglect is synonymous with poverty, or that all children are better off with their parents no matter how badly abused or neglected they are.

It is disappointing that the Post allowed Roberts to use this series to propagate new myths, rather than dispel old ones.

*Marie Cohen is a former foster care social worker, current member of the District of Columbia Child Fatality Review Committee, and author of the blog, Child Welfare Monitor. You can find her review of Dorothy Roberts’ new book here. Marla Spindel is the Executive Director of DC Kincare Alliance and a recipient of the 2020 Child Welfare League of America’s Champion for Children Award.*