

The Opioid Epidemic and the Child Welfare System: The Effects of Parental Opioid Misuse on the Child Welfare System

SOC/CRM 496: Public Sociology & Criminology Practicum (Spring 2018)

The Opioid Epidemic and the Child Welfare System: The Impact of Parental Opioid Use

Background

In recent years, there has been a substantial increase in the number of children entering foster care in the United States. From 2011-2015, the number of children in care has increased from 397,605 to 427,910 (AFCARS, 2016). One factor that has been known to contribute to increases of children in foster care is parental substance abuse (Swann et al, 2006). Parental substance abuse is the second leading reason for removal from the home and into foster care (AFCARS, 2016). This increase in parental substance abuse as a leading cause for entry brings into question whether the opioid epidemic that has gripped the nation is contributing to the increase of children in foster care. This study was designed to examine this association within Wilmington, North Carolina.

Methods

Research Question: How does parental opioid use effects Child Protective Services involvement and entry into foster care?

Data was collected from New Hanover Regional Medical Center and the New Hanover County Department of Social Services. Data from New Hanover Regional Medical Center included information regarding Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome Infants (N=238), mothers' drug screenings, mothers' treatment, infants' treatment, DSS referrals, and child placement. The Department of Social Services data included information regarding the number of children that entered foster care in a given year and the

number of children that entered care due to parental substance abuse and opioid use (N=1,373).

This study examined how parental opioid use effected entry into foster care by analyzing how being diagnosed with NAS and the mother testing positive determined whether there was a referral to DSS, as well as the change in the number of NAS births from year to year. The study examined increases in the number of children entering foster care from year to year, as well as how the reasons for removal fluctuated from year to year.

The data was analyzed using SPSS software with crosstabs and chi-square statistics.

Results

We received data from New Hanover Regional Medical Center (NHRMC) regarding Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) infants and the New Hanover County Department of Social Services (DSS) regarding the number of children entering foster care and why.

The data from NHRMC showed that from 2015-2016 there were 112 infants diagnosed with NAS (Table 1). Of the 112 infants diagnosed, 101 of the mothers tested positive for opioids. Only 54 (48.2%) of the infants were referred to DSS (Table 2). Of those 54 infants, 29 were returned to their parents, 14 were placed with kin, nine were place in foster care, and one was adopted (Table 3). For the 2016-2017 year, the number of infants diagnosed with NAS increased to 126 with 123 of the mothers testing positive for opioids (Table 1). From the infants diagnosed, 102 (80.95%) of the infants were referred to DSS (Table 2) with 65 being returned to their parents, 17 placed with kin, 16 placed in foster care, and four were adopted (Table 3). This data shows that

there was a statistically significant increase in the number of infants born with prenatal exposure to opioids, as well as a statistically significant increase in the number of infants referred to DSS. However, this in large part due to a new policy that was enforced starting in February of 2017 that required all infants of mothers that tested positive for opioids be referred to DSS.

Table 1. Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome Births in Past Two Years
Source: New Hanover Regional Medical Center

	<u>Year</u>	
	2015-2016	2016-2017
NAS Births	112	126

Table 2. Number of Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome Infants Receiving Department of Social Services Referrals
Source: New Hanover Regional Medical Center

<u>DSS Referral</u>	<u>Year</u>	
	2015-2016	2016-2017
No	52	23
Yes	54	102
Chi-square	29.696	
p-value	0.000	

Table 3. Referred Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome Infants Placement
Source: New Hanover Regional Medical Center

<u>Placement</u>	<u>Year</u>	
	2015-2016	2016-2017
Parents	30	65
Kin	14	17
Foster	9	16
Adoption	1	4
Chi-Square	30.304	
p-value	0.000	

Another piece of data from NHRMC showed that the increase in NAS babies over the years. From 2011-2017, the number of NAS babies born increased from 61 to 129, almost doubling (Table 4). The percentage of NAS births increased from 1.56% in 2011 to 3.18% in 2017, again, almost doubling.

Table 4. Number of Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome Births and Total Number of Births per Year

Source: New Hanover Regional Medical Center

<u>Infants Born</u>	<u>Year</u>						
	<u>FY11</u>	<u>FY12</u>	<u>FY13</u>	<u>FY14</u>	<u>FY15</u>	<u>FY16</u>	<u>FY17</u>
NAS Infants	61	84	90	83	140	110	129
<u>Total Infants</u>	<u>3,917</u>	<u>3,719</u>	<u>3,889</u>	<u>4,061</u>	<u>4,121</u>	<u>3,087</u>	<u>4,058</u>

Data from DSS showed a steady increase in the number of children entering foster care in the past seven years (Table 5). In the fiscal year 2011-2012, 160 children entered foster care with 31.3% of children entering due to parental substance abuse (Table 6). There was no information on opioid use for this year or the fiscal year 2012-2013. For fiscal year 2014-2015, the number of children that entered care increased to 211 with 35.5% entering due to substance abuse and 16.1% entering specifically due to opioid use (Tables 6 and 7). Crossover does exist between the percentages of children entering for substance abuse and those entering for opioid use. From 2016-2017, the number of children entering care jumped to 280 with 43.6% entering due to substance abuse and 21.4% entering due to opioid use (Tables 6 and 7). Again, the data shows a statistically significant increase in the number of children entering foster care, as well as an increase in the percentage of children entering care due to parental opioid use.

Table 5. Number of Children Entering Foster Care Per Year
 Source: New Hanover County Department of Social Services

	<u>Year</u>						
	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Number of Children	160	169	189	211	225	280	139

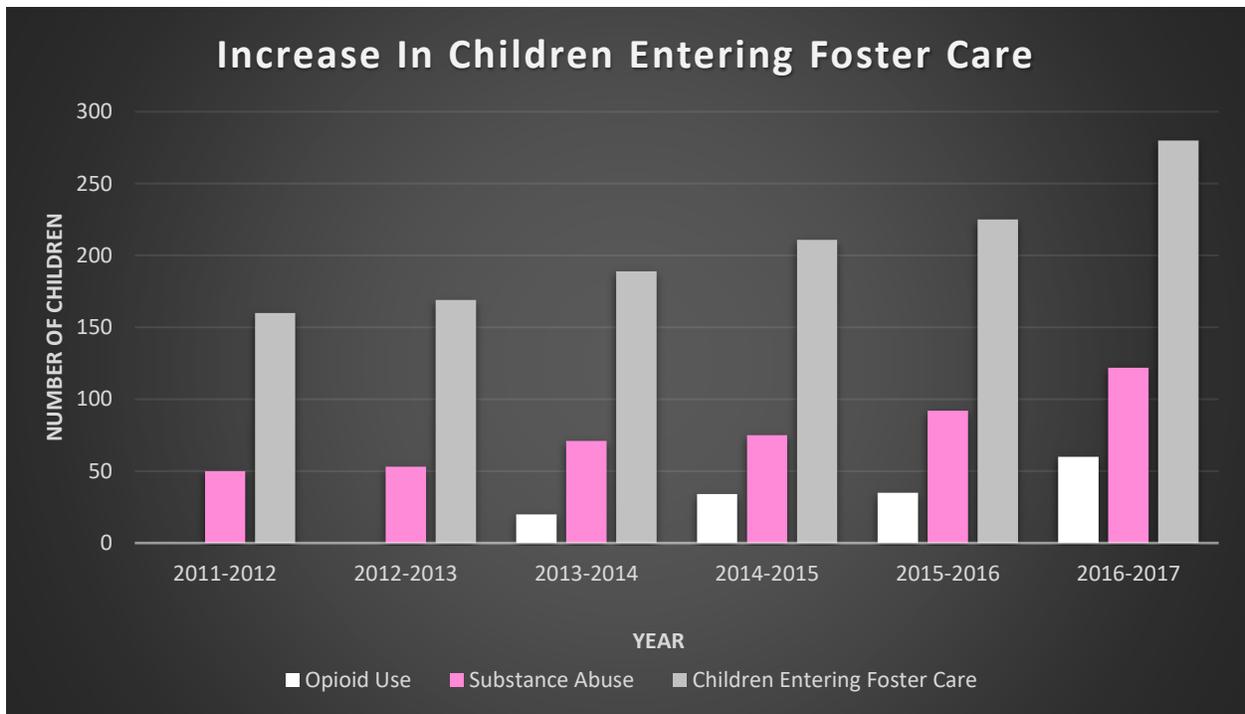
Table 6. Number of Children Entering Care Due to Substance Abuse
 Source: New Hanover County Department of Social Services

	<u>Year</u>						
<u>Substance Abuse</u>	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
No	110	116	118	136	133	158	78
Yes	50	53	71	75	92	122	61
Chi-square	13.302						
p-value	0.038						

Table 7. Number of Children Entering Care Due to Opioid Use
 Source: New Hanover County Department of Social Services

	<u>Year</u>						
<u>Opioid Use</u>	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
No	160	169	169	177	190	220	65
Yes			20	34	35	60	74
Chi-square	213.713						
p-value	0.000						

*Missing values indicate years where data was unavailable.



Discussion

From the data collected, there does appear to be a relationship between parental opioid use and children entering foster care. Over the years, the number of Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome infants being born has increased, which resulted in a new policy that mandated DSS referrals for these infants. The mandated DSS referrals resulted in a greater number of infants entering care. Also, information from the Department of Social Services shows a clear increase in the number of children entering foster care and the percentage of children entering due to parental opioid use continues to rise as well.

Limitations of the study include the sample size and generalizability. Information was not gathered from enough facilities to provide a thorough picture of how the opioid epidemic is impacting the child welfare system. Also, because the study is based on facilities in New Hanover County and the sample of sources is small, the information collected is not generalizable outside of this county.

References

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