

Children's Rights

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<https://www.childrensrights.org/our-campaigns/psychotropics/>

Policy Issue Resources

Children in foster care often exhibit behaviors related to the abuse and trauma they have endured. But rather than receiving therapeutic counseling and mental health support to treat underlying issues, kids are too frequently given powerful psychotropic medications to control their behavior. The drugs can have extreme side effects: drowsiness, hallucinations, tremors, weight gain, even suicidal thoughts. One former foster youth described his experience with psychotropic meds this way: I was like a walking zombie.

Kids in foster care are being prescribed these drugs at a higher rate than other children. In 2010, the Tufts Clinical and Translational Science Institute estimated that the rate of psychotropic medication use for youth in foster care is anywhere from 13 to 52 percent, compared to about 4 percent for youth in the general population. And a 2014 Government Accountability Office (GAO) [report](#) found that at least 18 percent of children in foster care were taking at least one psychotropic medication. Some of the medications have not even been approved as safe and effective for children by the FDA.

Many states lack oversight mechanisms to track the medical histories of kids in foster care and monitor crucial details like the number of drugs prescribed to each child, and their collective [impact](#). It is critical for states to maintain comprehensive, up-to-date medical records on each child; consistently provide mandated mental health screenings and follow-up treatments; ensure appropriate informed consent processes occur before children are prescribed medication; and establish red flags such as multiple drugs and dosages above recommendations that would trigger further review.

Childrens Rights knows that, in some cases, psychotropic medications can be warranted in combination with mental health services but child welfare systems have the responsibility to provide rigorous oversight to ensure kids are given the safest and most appropriate treatment for their conditions.

The roadmaps for foster care reform that Childrens Rights negotiated in New Jersey, Michigan and Tennessee prohibit child welfare officials from using psychotropic medications as a method of discipline or control for any child. Childrens Rights also ensured that these states are required by force of law to hire medical directors a position that didnt previously exist to monitor the usage of psychotropic drugs in foster care.

In 2021, Childrens Rights filed a case in Maine where psychotropic drugs are unnecessarily and unsafely administered without proper monitoring. The [complaint](#) and request for class action call on the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to account for a continued gap in the system between what the state believes to be important to keep children safe when using powerful psychotropic drugs, and what is actually happening to harm children.

Childrens Rights continues to raise awareness about the issue by speaking at conferences, writing papers, and amplifying the [voices](#) of young people who have been affected by psychotropic medications. Check out CRs [short video](#) to hear directly from young people themselves.

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