

Children's Rights

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<https://www.childrensrights.org/children-in-the-cross-hairs-the-opioid-epidemic-and-foster-care/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Panelists, left to right: Christina Parker; David Rosenthal; Emily Palmer; Sandy Santana; Jacquelyn Cutillo

The nation and its leaders have slowly woken up to the opioid blight that has reached epidemic proportions across the country, but too many people remain unaware of the collateral damage done to children when their parents are addicted.

On Tuesday, June 19, Childrens Rights hosted **Children of the Opioid Epidemic**, a briefing and panel discussion on the devastating impact the epidemic is having on an already overburdened foster care system. The event was sponsored by New York law firm McDermott Will & Emery and held at their offices in midtown Manhattan.

The panel was moderated by Boston Globe reporter Emily Palmer, who has written about the child welfare system and the impact of drug use on children. Panelists included child psychologist Jacquelyn Cutillo, public health expert and educator David Rosenthal, former foster youth and advocate for change Christina Parker, and Childrens Rights Executive Director Sandy Santana. Panelists shared their expertise and personal experiences in a passionate give and take that covered the root causes of drug addiction, the disproportionate harm done to families of color, and how to address the crisis in a way that will protect children while still giving families a fighting chance to stay together.

Opioid abuse is the deadliest drug epidemic in the countrys history, one that is killing tens of thousands of people every year and for every person directly affected, there are often even more children who find themselves in the crosshairs.

A recent [federal study](#) confirmed that substance abuse among parents has led to rising foster care caseloads. The study shows a correlation between a [10 percent rise in overdose deaths](#) and a similar increase in the rate of entry into the foster care system. This is a devastating reversal of a decades-long downward trend in the number of kids in foster care. The increase has brought the total number of children in foster care to nearly half a million.



Substance abuse has long tended to correlate with more severe cases of child neglect and maltreatment, including victims as young as three years old. In 2016 alone, 676,000 children were victims of abuse and neglect.

The uptick in the number of children requiring foster care services is putting a significant strain on child services staffing and other resources, especially in states hardest hit by the opioid epidemic. In West Virginia approximately 80 percent of children in foster care come from homes with substance abuse, while in Ohio a parents drug abuse was a factor in at least half of the states foster care placements, and Georgias foster care population has risen by 76 percent over the last five years.

Congress has taken a notable first step in addressing the impact of the opioid crisis on children, with the goal of protecting their health and wellbeing while whenever possible keeping families intact. The bipartisan [Family First Prevention Services Act](#), passed earlier this year, provides federal funds for preventive services including mental health and substance abuse programs, family counseling and parenting skills training.

Children Rights and fellow child welfare advocates have applauded the governments action as an essential first step in attacking the problem at its root and giving families and communities the tools to prevent the need for children to enter the foster care system in the first place. But, as Sandy Santana wrote recently in an [Op-Ed in USA Today](#), this is only the start we can and must do better.

We must continue to invest in evidence-based drug treatment, mental health and counseling programs that help keep families together. And for those kids who must depend on the state to meet their most basic needs for care, we have to re-engineer foster care systems so that they actually provide the therapeutic support and the stability young people need.



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