SAFE BABIES COURT TEAM EVALUATION: Changing the Trajectory of Young Children in Foster Care

The Problem
Every 2 minutes, a child enters foster care in the United States. Children in foster care are at risk for poor developmental outcomes. These challenges are exacerbated for infants and toddlers in foster care.

The Study
The American Institutes for Research (AIR) conducted a natural experiment to test the impact of SBCT on time to permanency and recurrence of abuse and neglect.1 https://www.air.org/project/changing-trajectories-children-foster-care-safe-babies-court-team-evaluation

The Findings
SBCT cases exit foster care sooner. Children in cases assigned to SBCT judges exited foster care (with legal case closure) 4 MONTHS SOONER than children in cases assigned to control judges. This was a statistically significant difference.

Recurrence of abuse and neglect was low for everyone. Children in cases exposed to the full SBCT approach were 5 TIMES LESS LIKELY to reenter foster care than control cases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>No recurrence</th>
<th>Recurrence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full SBCT</td>
<td>98.8%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBCT judge only</td>
<td>92.8%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control cases</td>
<td>95.2%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
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The Conclusion
This study provides the first experimental evidence that the SBCT approach had a positive impact on maltreated infants and toddlers and their families. SBCT reduced the time children spent in foster care. The 4-month difference was statistically significant.

Cases assigned to the full SBCT approach had very low rates of recurrence. In fact, only one child from a SBCT case reentered foster care. While the differences between the SBCT and control cases were not statistically significant, they are meaningful from a practical standpoint.

1 Researchers compared the time children spent in foster care and the likelihood of recurrence of abuse or neglect for three groups: 123 cases that had access to the entire SBCT approach, including the community coordinator, an SBCT-trained judge, the family team, and community-level supports; 598 cases that had access to an SBCT-trained judge but not to the community coordinator, the family team, or community-level supports; and 1,120 cases that moved through the child welfare system in the usual way. The courts randomly assigned cases to either an SBCT-trained judge or a judge who had no training in the SBCT approach. This study is a natural experiment because researchers did not interfere in the naturally occurring randomization process.

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