

10 INVESTIGATES

128 children across Ohio have died in custody of children services agencies since 2015

Nearly half of those deaths – 55 – occurred with children in the care of agencies in Ohio’s three largest counties: Cuyahoga, Hamilton and Franklin.



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COLUMBUS, Ohio — Since 2015, 128 children have died while in the custody of public children services agencies, [10 Investigates](#) learned.

Nearly half of those deaths – 55 – occurred with children in the care of agencies in Ohio’s three largest counties: Cuyahoga, Hamilton and Franklin, according to the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

Earlier this week, 10 Investigates revealed that since 2015, 20 of those deaths happened while in the care of Franklin County Children Services. Of those 20 – half died as a result of gun violence.

Here’s what our four-part investigation “Caught in the Cycle” found:

- More than 100 children in Ohio have died while in the care or custody of children services agencies since 2015
- Children in custody can hop-scotch between foster homes while committing crimes, endangering public safety
- Children services agencies still make referrals to privately-run behavioral treatment centers that we found have repeated incidents of violence and allegations of abuse.
- Those facilities rely on public dollars to state afloat
- Three we’ve investigated have billed the state’s Medicaid office for more than \$75 million since 2015

The public agencies and their allies tell 10 Investigates that in recent years county children services agencies have been met with increasing demand – especially with children with mental health or behavioral needs.

New research also suggests that Ohio is falling behind other states when it comes to children in the foster care system. According to an April report published by Child Defense Fund Ohio, children in our state are more likely than kids elsewhere to be placed in group homes or institutions when compared to the rest of the nation.

The research also found kids in Ohio are more likely to be mistreated while in foster care when compared to the national standard.

According to the [research from Child Trends](#), children in Ohio’s foster system are also less likely to be reunited with their families when compared to the national average.

Given those challenges and what we’ve uncovered, 10 Investigates wanted to know – is Franklin County Children Services keeping up with demand?

We spoke to Lara LaRoche, the intake director at FCCS.

"I'm not sure that I've seen a system nationally that is keeping up with the demand."

When 10 Investigates followed up with a question: "Is that a no?"

LaRoche replied: "Families need more help in our community than is available."

When pressed again, LaRoche and an FCCS spokeswoman asked to pause the interview and then asked Chief Investigative Reporter Bennett Haeberle to repeat the question about if the county was keeping up with demand.

"I think it's fair to say we don't have access to many resources that families need," LaRoche said.

LaRoche went on to say that children services have seen increasing referrals from juvenile courts and children needing mental or behavioral treatment in addition to the agency's caseload dealing with abuse or neglect cases.

Further complicating matters, she and others said, is that there is turnover among their workforce in children services and a need for foster parents to take in children of all ages – which can be challenging – especially with kids entering early adolescence or their teenage years.

"We really need to come together as a community and understand that our teens are suffering. So many teens are desperate, struggling with mental health. And don't have access to the services they need," LaRoche said.

10 Investigates also spoke with Scott Britton with the Public Children Services Association of Ohio, a non-profit advocacy that represents the public children services agencies across the state.

"We believe that our children services agencies do a very good job. And I think a lot of the numbers speak for themselves. We work with 100,000 investigations of abuse and neglect. There are more than 26,000 children who move through the foster care system at any time during the year. At any given day we have more than 15,000 children in foster care."

When asked by 10 Investigates about "shouldn't the number be zero? Shouldn't there be zero dead kids since 2015?"

Britton said: "I don't know of any child care system that hasn't had fatalities, unfortunately."

He said that part of the possible solutions is that Ohio:

- Needs more foster parents

- Needs more frontline caseworkers
- Needs better alternatives
- Early intervention
- Better access to mental health care

Britton pointed to OhioRISE, a specialized Medicaid managed care plan that begins July 1st that will offer families tailored services to like a mobile crisis unit to deal with children who have behavioral or mental health needs. The goal, he says, would be to get the child help before they would have to enter the custody of a public children services agency.

When asked by 10 Investigates if he was acknowledging that the current system isn't working, he said:

"We are behind some other states in terms of where we need to be."

If you have something you would like 10 Investigates to look into, please email the team at 10investigates@10tv.com.