



1 of 4 American Inmates Product of the Foster Care System According to Kansas City Star Investigation

Comments by Brian Shilhavy | December 28, 2019



SPECIAL REPORTS

'We are sending more foster kids to prison than college'

Star investigation reveals stark outcomes for America's foster care children.

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The Kansas City Star published a [6-part investigative report](#) on the U.S. Foster Care system this week.

[Part One of the series](#), **THROWAWAY KIDS: 'We are sending more foster kids to prison than college'**, is [found here](#).

They surveyed nearly 6,000 inmates in 12 states, and one of out four responded that they were products of the Foster Care system in the U.S.

For the past year, The Kansas City Star has examined what happens to kids who age out of foster care and found that, by nearly every measure, states are failing in their role as parents to America's most vulnerable children.

Roughly 23,000 kids across the country are churned out of the system every year, and their lives highlight a distinct path traveled by many:

Taken from an unstable home. Terrified by their first contact with the state. Emotionally and cognitively damaged in care as they are moved from home to home. Robbed of an education equal to their peers. Turned out to the streets unprepared to stand on their own. And changed for life.

"We are sending more foster kids to prison than college," said Brent Kent, who spent the past 3½ years helping Indiana foster children transition into adulthood. "And what do we lose as a result? Generations of young people.

"I think as a society we view foster children the same way that we might view offenders coming out of prison or addicts in recovery. We forget that they are just children, that they were put in foster care and removed from their families through no fault of their own."



Michelle Voorhees is a product of the Foster Care system, and an inmate in the Topeka Correctional Facility. She keeps a photo of her and her younger sister as one of the possessions she's allowed to have. Photo by Shelly Yang. [Source](#).

One of the many stories highlighted in the series is the story of Michelle Voorhees, who is currently an inmate in the Topeka Correctional Facility.

The Star, in a yearlong investigation of the long-term outcomes for children who age out of foster care, surveyed nearly 6,000 inmates in a dozen states. Michelle Voorhees was one of them. She believes many former foster kids end up in worse condition than if they had been allowed to stay in their homes.

“Just because their family doesn’t have the means to take care of them doesn’t mean that you should just sever that bond,” said Voorhees, 28, who had two stints in foster care. “So many of these problems truly do stem from poverty.”

Sitting inside the Topeka Correctional Facility in her prison-issued navy blue shirt and olive pants, Voorhees said the state could have done more to keep her with her mother.

“There’s all this money to pay to foster homes and all this money for adoptions and what-not,” she said. “I don’t understand how there is so much funding to rip us away, but no funding to keep us there.”

All Michelle Voorhees ever wanted was to be home. Her home.

But the state decided in the mid-1990s that her 21-year-old single mother, with three children and another on the way, wasn’t emotionally or mentally fit to care for them. The young mom was struggling. Eventually, all three daughters were put in foster care.

“And I just remember crying, crying for my mom and wondering where she was,” Voorhees said. “I couldn’t concentrate on anything else. I needed my mom.”

Being taken away from her home at age 5 had a lifetime effect on her, Voorhees says now. She believes it shaped who she became — a woman behind bars who struggles with relationships and attachments — and fueled her distrust of people.

Voorhees remained in foster care for 11 months the first time. She was released to her mother when she was 6. The state then sent her to live with her father, whom she had never met.

But when she was 14, while living again with her mom for a short time, Voorhees went back into the system.

After a couple of weeks in a foster home during her freshman year in high school, she bolted.

“And after that, there was just a series of me running away, me being placed in a different placement, running away, different placement,” she said. “And I really just kind of fell through the cracks.”

When she ran away, Voorhees would often find herself homeless.

“I really was just on the streets and was at the mercy of whatever weirdo decided that he wanted to pick up a 14-year-old girl walking down the street,” she said.

She quickly discovered that when a foster teen runs away, no one comes looking for them.

Eventually, when living on the run got to be too much, she would go back into state care.

“I was placed in 11 different state placements by the time I was 17,” she said. “I had two children during this time, developed a drug addiction, and sex trafficked. I spent a lot of my time in custody as a runaway. I did not graduate high school. I dropped out at 16 and got my GED. I am not sure if I aged out in the traditional sense.

“The state just stopped dealing with me at some point.”

Eventually, Voorhees stopped trusting people. That disconnection increased as she grew older.

“I had some really antisocial behavior,” she said. “I also had a deep dislike for government agencies — for the police, for social workers. I did not believe that they were on my team.”

In 2014, when she was just 22, she was convicted of aggravated arson, aggravated burglary and second-degree murder in the death of a southeast Kansas woman whose remains were found in the rubble of a burned-out home.

Prosecutors said Voorhees and a 26-year-old man went to the house to retrieve property that had been stolen from Voorhees, and the man put a pipe bomb on a mattress and lit the fuse. The pipe bomb did not explode, but set the house on fire. Voorhees and the man said they thought the house was empty at the time.

Voorhees was sentenced to nearly 24 years in prison. The earliest she could be released is 2033. The man received a life sentence with a possibility of parole after 20 years.

Through it all, Voorhees and her mom have stayed connected.

She often thinks of how life could have been different if she were able to stay with her mother for all of her childhood. To know that she was always safe and loved.

“Had my mom just had a little bit of help, had she had enough money to buy her own vehicle, had she had enough money to relocate herself from an abusive situation, had she not had to have been dependent on men in the first place for any kind of financial stability, I don’t believe that she would have made some of the decisions that she made,” Voorhees says. “I don’t believe that she would have struggled as a mother, because my mom is a good mom.”

She was also filmed for the interview:



Read the full series at [The Kansas City Star](#).