



Report of the State Comptroller of Israel | May 2023

Systemic Topics

Placement of At-Risk Children in Boarding Schools, Foster Care and Adoption



Placement of At-Risk Children in Boarding Schools, Foster Care and Adoption

Background

Children at risk and in need are children living in a family and in an environment that endanger them. In extreme situations of risk and neglect, the state intervenes and transfers children from their families to out-of-home-care, including foster care, boarding schools institutions of the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs (Ministry of Welfare), and adoption. In Boarding schools children receive education, care, and supervision services to provide them with a protected environment. Boarding schools are intended for children aged 8–18 and in some cases, up to the age of 21, who need comprehensive treatment. Foster care is when a child resides in a family other than his birth family that provides him a warm home and a family atmosphere. Adoption is a legal procedure that separates a child from his biological parents and gives another couple the legal status of the child's parents. In 2016–2021, an average of 7,621 children were in boarding schools, 3,789 children were in foster care, and an average of 80 children were adopted. The total annual budget allocated to boarding schools, foster care, and adoption in 2021 was about NIS 950 million, 78% of which was allocated to boarding schools, 21% to foster care, and 1% to adoption.

The Ministry of Welfare, entrusted with the placement of children in out-of-home-care, devised a policy for the treatment of children who have been removed from their homes and are staying in foster care or boarding schools, intended to find them a permanent and beneficial home (the Permanent Home Policy). The policy outlines two parallel actions channels: rehabilitation of the birth family so that the child may return to it while simultaneously promoting a solution of adoption in the event the rehabilitation is unsuccessful. According to the Permanent Home policy, the child's birth family or an adoptive family are considered a permanent home. Until a permanent home is found, it is preferred to place a child removed from his home in foster care, which is a family setting.



Key Figures

1,149

children under the age of 8 (of which 474 children under the age of 5) were placed in boarding schools instead of foster families in 2016–2021, not in accordance with the instructions of the Ministry of Welfare's CEO and the Social Work Regulations (SWR) setting the minimum age for boarding schools at 8 years old

only 10%

of the children removed from their home, return to it after the rehabilitation of the parents and the child

91%

of the mothers whose children were removed from their home in 2017 did not participate in rehabilitation programs of the Ministry of Welfare's

8-fold

increase in the chances of a boarding school graduate to be arrested or incarcerated in his adulthood compared to adults from the general population; And a 2.5-fold increase compared to a foster care graduate

5-fold

increase in the chances of a girl in boarding schools to give birth before the age of 17 compared to a girl from the general population, and a 1.5-fold increase compared to a girl in foster care

for 87%

of the children in foster care, treatment plans were not determined as required by the Foster Care Law and the Social Work Regulations (SWR)

27%


of the children in foster and boarding schools, moved between several settings

26 months

the average time of an adoption procedure, double the maximum time defined by law




Audit Actions

 From January to November 2022, the State Comptroller's Office examined the state's care of children at-risk who were removed from their homes and placed in foster care or given up for adoption. The audit examined the following subjects: The Ministry of Welfare's policy regarding the treatment of children removed from their homes; Adults who resided during their childhood in foster care and boarding schools; The rehabilitation of parents whose children were taken out of their home; And the implementation of the Ministry of Welfare's policy among unique populations. The audit was conducted in the Administration for Social and Personal Services at the Ministry of Welfare. Additional examinations were carried out in foster care organizations and local authorities.




The audit was carried out, among other things, by analyzing data on the placement of children in out-of-home-care of all those born in 2003–2021, processed to a data set of 44,065 children; A questionnaire was distributed among family social workers in 56 randomly selected local authorities, foster care social workers in the foster care organizations, foster care inspectors and adoption social workers; The treatment files of a representative sample of cases of children who were in foster care during 2016–2021; And a random sample of 459 mothers of children who were removed from their homes in 2017. Analysis of the data on all the population born in 1991–2002: whether they received during childhood boarding schools, foster care, welfare services in their home or did not receive welfare services; Details on the placements in out-of-home-care and in community care (length of placement, number of placements for each child); Education, employment and marital status at adulthood; Welfare services at adulthood; Involvement in crime at adulthood; Parents' income; And gender. All together the data included information on 1,598,030 children.

Key Findings




 **Implementation of the Permanent Home Policy** – the Ministry of Welfare's policy is not implemented, and the bodies entrusted with its implementation are not working in cooperation. Although the Permanent Home policy prioritizes the return of the child to his home after the rehabilitation of his parents or giving him up for adoption, followed by placement in foster care and placement in boarding schools, in practice, only a small percentage of children that were removed from their homes return to their parents' house (10%) or were given up for adoption (less than 1%). Most of the children remain in out-of-home-care – most of them in boarding schools (67%) and the rest in foster care (33%). The placement rates in foster care in Israel are lower than those in other



countries: 27%, compared to an average of 57% in European countries, the USA, and Australia. On the other hand, the placement rates in boarding schools in Israel are higher than in other countries – 73% compared to an average of 39% in the selected countries. Moreover, out of a budget of about NIS 970 million in 2021 for the treatment of children removed from their homes and for the rehabilitation of their parents, about NIS 20 million (about 2%) was allocated for the rehabilitation of the parents, about NIS 10 million (about 1%) was allocated for adoption services, about NIS 200 million (about 21%) was allocated to foster care services and about NIS 740 million (about 76%) was allocated to boarding schools services. Thus, most of the budget, 97%, was allocated to temporary care settings (foster care and boarding schools), and the remaining – 3% – was allocated to finding a permanent home for the children (return to their home or adoption). The cost of caring for a child who was removed from his home and placed in boarding schools is the highest: the monthly cost for a child placed in boarding schools (about NIS 11,900) is about three-fold the monthly cost for a child placed in foster care (about NIS 3,900), and six-fold the monthly cost for an adopted child (about NIS 2,000).

-  **Implementation of the Permanent Home Policy Among Professionals** – the policy was not implemented. The type of care setting for a child removed from his home, is often influenced by attitudes of different professionals more than by Ministry of Welfare policy. For example, 66% of foster care inspectors and 60% of foster care social workers considered foster care the most beneficial placement, 75% of adoption social workers considered adoption the most beneficial placement, and family social workers considered placement in foster care (31%) and boarding schools (33%) the most beneficial placement to a similar extent.
-  **Prioritizing Placement in Foster Care for Young Children** – young children are adversely affected four times: although boarding schools are not the appropriate placement for young children, 30% of the children under the age of eight (1,149 children) were placed in boarding schools, about 41% of them (474 children) were five years old or younger; 83% of them will continue to stay in boarding schools as long as they are in out-of-home-care; They remain in boarding schools and foster care for more than four years (five years and four and a half years, respectively); And their chances of moving between placements increase. Therefore, they are denied the right to live in a family and the right to stability and consistency in their lives, and they experience uncertainty and instability over time, an experience that is intensified at a young age, since a year in the life of a young child has a more significant impact than a year in an adult's life.
-  **Limiting the Length of Stay in Foster Care** – only about a third of the children (237 children) stay in emergency foster care for up to three months, and a significant part of them (44%, 320 children) stay in there for over the maximum time allowed by law – six months (emergency foster care is intended for children who require a living arrangement outside their parents' house immediately, due to concern for their safety). Some (12%, 89 children) stay there for a year or more. About 35% of the children placed in foster care remain in foster care longer than four years, and about half of them stay in foster

care for twice that time and even more, in contradiction to the Director General of the Ministry of Welfare's instructions from 2004 which set the maximum time for staying in foster care at four years. These findings do not reflect the notion that foster care is a temporary placement until a permanent and beneficial home is found. In practice, for those who have been in foster care for over four years, their chances of staying in foster care for eight years or more are about 43%.

-  **Placement in Foster Care and Emergency Foster Care in Arab and Ultra-Orthodox Communities** – the average rate of placement in foster care in 2016–2021 in the ultra-Orthodox sector was 18%, lower than that in the general society (31%); Only a quarter of children in the Arab sector stay in emergency foster care for up to three months, and over half of them (53%) remain in there for over the maximum time allowed in the Foster Care Law – six months, compared to 44% in the general society. Professionals in the field raised barriers to placement in foster care and adoption that are unique to Arab society, including: lack of Arabic-speaking professionals, Opposition to remove a child from his extended family, differences between removing boys and girls out of the home, and difficulty in adoption according to the Muslim religion. Barriers for placement in out-of-home-care among the ultra-Orthodox society were also raised, including: Lack of ultra-Orthodox foster families alongside a lack of boarding schools adapted to ultra-Orthodox society; Resistance to treatment; The decision on the identity of the foster family is made by the community leadership and not by the welfare authorities; And suspicion towards the authorities. The Ministry of Welfare has not developed guidelines for accompanying children from Arab and ultra-Orthodox societies who are placed in foster care and for the care of these children.
-  **The Stability of the Placement in Out-of-Home-Care** – transitions between out-of-home placements and instable placements may harm the child's development and his ability to develop secure attachment. It was found that after being placed in a foster family or boarding schools, over a quarter of the children – 27% – moved to at least one other placement: about 20% of the children moved from the first foster care or boarding school where they were placed to another foster care or boarding school, and about 7% moved between more placements. Furthermore, there is a difference between the stability of placement in foster care and the stability of placement in boarding schools: 25% of foster children stayed in over one setting, and 40% of boarding schools children stayed in over one setting.
-  **Caring for a Child Removed from His Home and Placed in Foster Care** – the placement of children at risk in foster families enables them to recover from the abuse or neglect they experienced and to develop a normative life in the future. Accordingly, the placement is accompanied by a treatment plan, intended to recover them while responding to their unique needs. The audit found that 80% of the children's case-files do not have an updated care plan as required by the Foster Care Law and the Ministry of Welfare's guidelines. It was also found that between January 2021 and April 2022, foster care inspectors reviewed about 119 case-fails of children who were in foster care during this period, out of 4,275 children who were in foster care – a low rate of about





3% of all case-files. Most inspectors chose to check the case-files of children for whom reports of unusual events have been received, children with complexities such as behavioral difficulties and a history of sexual abuse, or children placed at an older age. As a result, the treatment plans of children for whom reports of unusual events or exceptional complexity have not been received are seldom examined. Moreover, in about three-quarters of the children's case-files that were examined in the sample – 73% – report on foster care social worker visits does not meet the requirements of the law – a meeting once a month.

👉 The Effect of Out-of-Home-Care on Indicators of a Normal Life in Adulthood – the Ministry of Welfare did not examine the differences between children placed in foster care and children placed in boarding schools in their adulthood. The audit team systematically analyzed for the first time, comprehensive data of all those placed in the Ministry of Welfare's foster care and boarding schools, after age 18. The audit examined indicators of normal life in adulthood in areas such as education, employment, and family. To examine the consequences in adulthood of placing children in foster care and boarding schools, the examination was based on data received from the Ministry of Welfare, the National Insurance Institute, the Ministry of Education, the National Center for Examinations and Assessment, and the Israel Police, regarding all those born in 1991–2002, that is, people who, at the end of the audit, were 20–31 years old – a total of 1,598,030. The audit found that those placed in boarding schools were more in-need than those placed in foster care, which is reflected, among other things, in receiving more welfare services in their adulthood (25% of boarding schools graduates, 19% of foster care graduates and 2% of the general population), and receiving more income support benefit due to low incomes (13% of boarding schools graduates, 10% of foster care graduates and 3% of the general population). Boarding schools graduates also had less opportunities for successful integration in society than foster care graduates, as reflected, among other things, in a lower rate of eligibility for a matriculation certificate which is a threshold for entering universities (7% of boarding schools graduates, 20% of foster care graduates, and 40% of the general population), lower income (approximately NIS 36,000 per year for boarding schools graduates, NIS 37,000 per year for foster care graduates, and NIS 47,000 per year for the general population), and in a larger rate of detainees and prisoners (23% of boarding schools graduates, 9% of foster care graduates, and 3% of the general population). These findings indicate that the principles of the Permanent Home policy outlined by the Ministry of Welfare contribute to improving the future of children-at-risk who have been removed from their homes.

👉 Rehabilitation of Parents Whose Children Were Removed from Their Home – according to the Permanent Home policy, when a child is removed from his home, the parents must be rehabilitated so that the child can return to their home. The audit found that 91% of the mothers of children who were removed from their homes in 2017 did not participate in any rehabilitation program funded by the Ministry of Welfare, both

before and after the removal of their children from their home, despite the great importance attributed to the rehabilitation of parents. Low budget rates for these programs (NIS 20 million compared to NIS 940 million for out-of-home placements) and difficulties in treating these parents prevent them from receiving the treatment they are entitled to and their children from returning to their homes.

 **Post-Adoption Services for Adoptive Families** – in 2016–2021, the Ministry of Welfare used, on average, less than two-thirds (62%) of the budget intended for providing care and support services to adoptive families, an average of about NIS 1.2 million in these years. In 2018–2021, there was a gradual decrease in the budget, and the approved budget decreased by about 42% during this period. However, even under these circumstances where the budget is small, the rate of utilization was partial and reached about 70% in 2021. The number of families that used post-adoption services decreased by 52% between 2018 and 2021, from 91 families in 2018 to 44 families in 2021; thus, about 3%–5% of the adoptive families use these services. Furthermore, while adoptive families received an average of NIS 2,000 per month in 2021, foster families receive NIS 3,000–5,000 per month, 1.5 to 2.5-fold more than an adoptive family, although in many cases, these are the same children and the same families.

 **Adoption by Same-Sex Couples** – under the Attorney General's instruction, the policy of the Ministry of Welfare is to prioritize heterosexual couples in adopting a child and to hand over a child for adoption by same-sex couples in particular situations. In 2013–2021, seven children were adopted by same-sex couples out of the 835 adopted children, I.e., less than one percent. For comparison, in England, the percentage of children adopted by same-sex couples was 15% of all children adopted in 2021. It should be noted that all adopted children by same-sex couples in Israel are with special needs or children over the age of two.







The Permanent Home Policy – the principles of the Ministry of Welfare's Permanent Home policy improve the condition of at-risk children who were removed from their home and placed in out-of-home-care, and they highlight the importance of implementing them for the future well-being of at-risk children, in order to prevent, to the extent possible, the intergenerational cycle.

Programs for Rehabilitation of Families at Risk – the Ministry of Welfare runs programs for families whose risk status and parental functioning have not improved even after receiving the services available in the community. The purpose of these programs is to promote finding a permanent home for the children, returning to the home of the birth parents, or adoption. The State Comptroller's Office commends the Ministry of Welfare for the implementation of the pilot program "BaShvil Ha'Meitiv" for treatment of families whose child might be removed from home or those in which a child has already been removed from home, which led to an increase in the rate of children who found a




permanent home. However, this program operates in only 7% of all municipalities (18 out of 255). In addition, the program operates in a limited format and implemented on only 2% (172 children on average per year) of all children staying in out-of-home-care (11,459 on average per year).

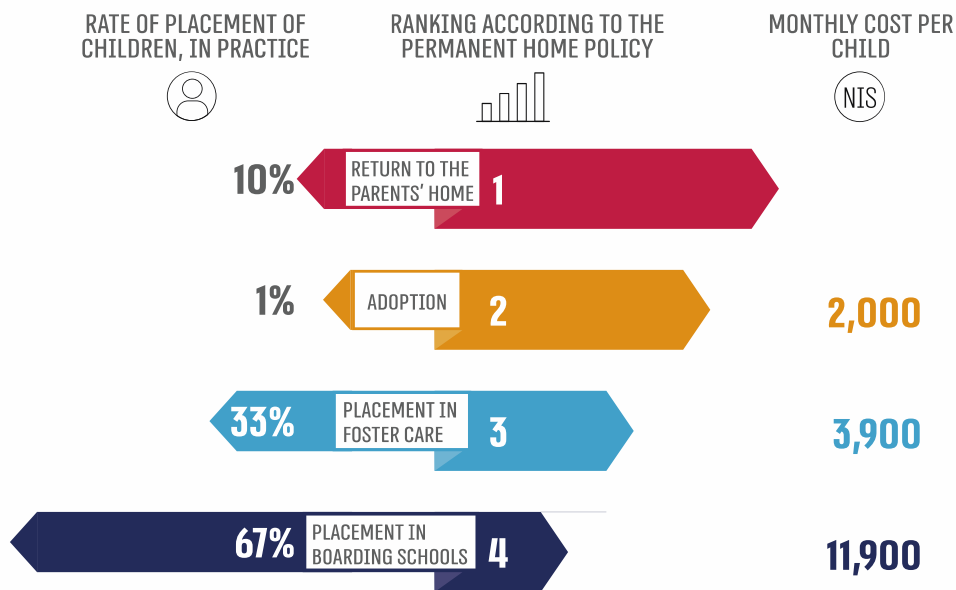
Key Recommendations

-  **Implementation of the Permanent Home Policy** – it is recommended that the Ministry of Welfare examine the policy for the care of children who have been removed from their homes, analyze the data on the extent of its implementation and the attitudes of the professionals entrusted with its implementation, and formulate an agreed upon response regarding the validation of the policy among the officials who care for children at risk, while involving the professionals in the field and based on in-depth data analysis. It is further recommended that the Ministry formulate a plan for the integration of the policy, identify the barriers to the implementation of its principles and remove them, provide training and tools to the professionals at the head office and in the field, set goals and measures for the policy, and monitor compliance therewith.
-  **The Effect of Out-of-Home-Care Placement on Indicators of Normal Life in Adulthood** – it is recommended that the Ministry of Welfare examine in depth the consequences in adulthood of out-of-home-care placements in childhood; examine the Permanent Home policy and the effects that its various principles have on the lives of adults who were removed at childhood from their homes and use additional indicators at its disposal, such as the profile of the children in the various out-of-home settings, the children's attachment style, the success of the child's return to his home and the functioning of the parents.
-  **The Care for Children Removed from Their Home** – it is recommended that the Ministry of Welfare, assisted by supervision and regulation department, will assimilate the importance of care plans for children and enforce the obligation to determine them. It is further recommended that the Ministry ensure that the care for children is fully documented and available in the children's case files, thereby preserving each child's history and enabling informed decision-making about his future. It is also recommended that the Ministry increase the supervision and control of the implementation of the treatment plans for children placed in foster families, among other things, by defining clear goals and indicators regarding the supervision topics in general and regarding the supervision of the treatment plans in particular, and by monitoring their achievement.
-  **Rehabilitation of Parents Whose Children Have Been Removed from Home** – it is recommended that the Ministry of Welfare examine the barriers to the rehabilitation of birth parents and the challenges facing the social services departments in treating families

whose children have been removed from home. Accordingly, it is recommended that the Ministry expand the rehabilitation and prevention programs, including analyzing the economic viability of these programs and comparing them to other alternatives, to increase the parents' chances of rehabilitation and the child's chances of returning home.

 **Post-Adoption Services for Adoptive Families** – it is recommended that the Ministry of Welfare act transparently and publish in all media outlets the information about the assistance it provides to adoptive families, the general public, and the adoption community in particular. It is also recommended that the Ministry examine the financial aid it offers to adoptive families, the deductible they are required to pay for the support services, and the availability of the services.

The Care Rank for a Child Removed from his Home According to the Permanent Home Policy, the Rates of Children's Placements and the Average Monthly Cost per Child in NIS, 2016–2021



According to the Ministry of Welfare data processed by the State Comptroller's Office.



Summary

The Ministry of Welfare bears increased responsibility for ensuring the safety of children who were removed from their homes under the state's decision due to severe risk and neglect situations. These children are placed, by the welfare system, in boarding schools and foster families to help them recover from the traumas they have experienced and allow them to develop properly and lead a normative life in the future. The audit found that the Ministry of Welfare does not fulfill basic care components under its responsibility for a child removed from home, does not manage the process of removing at-risk-children from home based on reliable and valid data while setting clear goals and standards and monitoring and controlling compliance therewith. For example, despite the Ministry's policy, 89% of the children do not find a permanent home and stay for many years in temporary placements (11% for eight years or more). In most cases (67%), these temporary placements are boarding schools facilities and not foster families that provide children with a family setting.

The Ministry of Welfare stated in its response that it seriously addresses the report's findings, disparities, and recommendations and will rectify the deficiencies immediately.

It is recommended that the Ministry of Welfare use data driven techniques to examine the implementation of its policy for placing and caring for children removed from their homes, and the implementation of the policy among the head office and the professionals working in the field, define clear goals and measure them, to help children rehabilitate and lead a normal life. An important aspect of implementing the policy is creating the conditions that will allow a child that was removed from his home to return to it as soon as possible, after the rehabilitation of the parents and making his home a beneficial place for him. Therefore, it is recommended that the Ministry of Welfare form rehabilitation plans for parents whose children have been removed from home, as well as expanding the existing treatment programs. To fulfill its responsibility, the Ministry of Welfare should ensure that children who have been removed from their homes are placed in settings appropriate for their age and receive the best treatment until they return home, thus giving them, and their children, a better chance of successful integration into society.