

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**.

A Solution

ZERO TO THREE developed the **Safe Babies Court Team™ (SBCT) approach**, which aims to reduce the time spent in foster care, prevent future abuse or neglect, and improve the long-term well-being of children and families in the child welfare system.

The court teams are led by a judge and community coordinator who partner with attorneys, the child welfare agency, and other stakeholders to limit the number of foster care placements, increase visitation with family, value birth parents, and provide a continuum of mental health services to families and infants and toddlers.

<https://www.zerotothree.org/our-work/safe-babies-court-team>

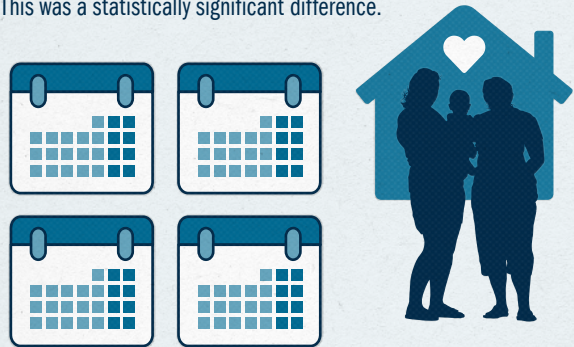
The Study The American Institutes for Research (AIR) conducted a natural experiment to test the impact of SBCT on **time to permanency** and **recurrence of abuse and neglect**.¹ <https://www.air.org/project/changing-trajectories-children-foster-care-safe-babies-court-team-evaluation>

The Findings

SBCT cases exit foster care sooner.

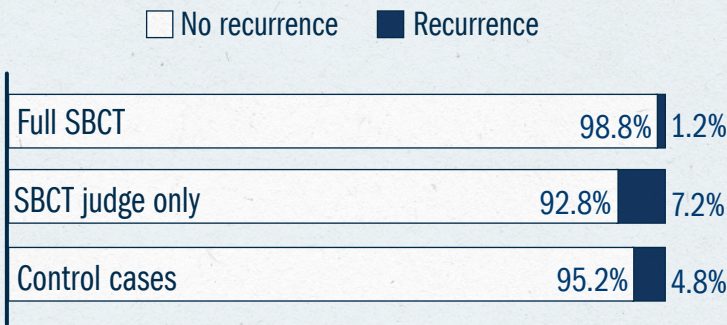
Children in cases assigned to SBCT judges exited foster care (with legal case closure) **4 MONTHS SOONER** than children in cases assigned to control judges.

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.



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.

This study is one of the nine projects funded through the AIR Fund. AIR invests resources to tackle seemingly intractable, long-standing problems that block citizens from having access to high-quality health care, education, and pathways to employment. For more information about AIR-funded projects see: <https://www.air.org/page/investing-air-resources-improve-lives>

For more information, contact Ann-Marie Faria, PhD at afaria@air.org or Jill Bowdon, PhD at jbowdon@air.org.