



Go Upstream

Diving Into Foster Care to
Heal **10** Social Wounds

By Brian Mavis

INTRODUCTION

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“When youth age out of foster care, we age out of one crisis and into another.”

–Annika Marek-Barta (former foster youth)

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THE RIVER AND THE WATERFALL

Imagine you’re standing on a riverbank, just downstream from a waterfall. Suddenly, you see a young man plunge over the falls, crashing into the river below. His cries for help are desperate. You see him struggling, the icy current pulling him under.

Without hesitation, you dive in. You fight the current, pushing against the cold, and reach him just in time. Clinging to him tightly, you pull him back to safety. You revive him, and somehow you know this young man has been homeless.

But before you can catch your breath, it happens again.

You see a young woman swept over the falls. Her arms flail. Her voice cuts through the noise, screaming for help. You jump back in, swimming harder this time. You pull her to shore.

She breathes, but you can tell that this woman has been trafficked.

But the cries for help don’t stop. Another. And another. And then another.

Exhausted but undaunted, you jump back in the water, pulling person after person to safety, and with each person, you sense they are battling addiction, incarceration, poverty, or another social wound.

That’s when it hits you.

You’re so busy saving people downstream, you’ve never stopped to look upstream.

What's happening above the waterfall? Why are so many falling in?

When you finally go upstream, the cause is clear. Many of those you've rescued share a history: foster care. They aged out of the system without a family, without anyone to catch them before they fell. The waterfall? It's the risky transition out of foster care. The river below? It's the social wounds they face: homelessness, addiction, incarceration, and more.

My friend and former foster youth, Annika Marek-Barta, said it best: "When youth age out of foster care, we age out of one crisis and into another."

The analogy of the river and waterfall reflects my experience. As a pastor working to transform my community, I saw the same pattern. We addressed homelessness, addiction, trafficking, and poverty. But we were always reacting. We weren't preventing. And when we got to know those we were helping, we realized many shared the same story. They had come from "a hard place" in childhood. Often, that place was the child welfare system.

After years working alongside child welfare organizations, including as a foster parent, I've seen the connections. I've identified ten massive social wounds linked to kids who age out* of foster care without a meaningful connection to family.

*"age out" (v.)

1. to reach an age (usually at 18 or 21) without a permanent family.
2. to exceed the age limit for foster care services, such as living with a foster family or receiving health care.

Each year, 23,000 to 26,000 youth between 18 and 21 "age out" of foster care without finding a forever family.

THE 10 SOCIAL WOUNDS

With so many worthy causes, why prioritize foster care? Here's why: Kids who age out of foster care without being connected to a family are far more at risk for the following:^{1*}

1. **Trauma** – One in four children in foster care will develop PTSD—almost twice the rate of US veterans of war.⁴
2. **Physical Illness** – About 50% of former foster youth suffer from chronic physical problems.⁵
3. **Suicide** – Adolescents who had been in foster care were nearly four times more likely to have attempted suicide than other youth.⁶
4. **Sex Trafficking** – Although statistics vary, a majority of child sex-trafficking victims, ranging from 50% to 90%, have been in foster care.^{7, 8, 9}
5. **Addiction** – One-third of those who age out report current struggles with drug or alcohol, with half admitting to illegal drugs use post-foster care.^{10, 11}
6. **Poverty** – One-third of foster alumni live at or below the poverty line.¹²
7. **Homelessness** – 20% of foster youth will become homeless the day they age out.¹³
8. **Incarceration** – 43% of women and 74% of men who were in foster care have been incarcerated at least once.¹⁴

^{1*} I'm not saying foster care itself is the reason kids in care have a higher chance of suffering social wounds, as if these kids would be fine if we abolished foster care. Good foster care is family care, and it can lead to a healthy reunification or to a healthy new family situation. And don't think for a second that kids in foster care are all problem children destined to spend their lives in trouble. That's just not true.

What I am saying is these kids start with big obstacles. Whether it's anyone's fault or not, they're almost always going to slip through the cracks in some way. And it's so sad to see that we aren't doing enough to help them out in the early stages. This isn't just their problem; it's our problem too. And until we step up and take responsibility for these vulnerable kids, we're going to keep seeing these tough statistics.

9. Teen Pregnancy – For girls who have been in foster care, the rate of pregnancy before age 19 is three times higher than the national average.¹⁵

10. Generational Foster Care – The strongest predictor of a child entering foster care is the mother’s own history with the child welfare system.¹⁶

If you care about trauma, physical illness, suicide, sex trafficking, addiction, poverty, homelessness, incarceration, teen pregnancy, or generational foster care, you care about foster care and the crisis of aging out of care disconnected from any family. I am sincerely thankful for organizations that help people who are going through these struggles. However, in a few years, a lot fewer kids will need those organizations, thanks to you and people like you who help them find a family instead.

Or, as I like to say it: ***A good family is better than a great program.***

In part 1 of this book, we will explore the correlation between these ten social wounds and foster care. In part 2, we’ll dive into how you can start helping, whether that means becoming a foster or adoptive parent, supporting foster families, or mobilizing your community.

Together, we’ll work toward a future where no child navigates these treacherous waters alone, and in doing so, we will impact a multitude of social issues downstream. Together, we can go upstream. Together, we can stop the fall.