



Protecting At-Risk Homeschooled Children

A White Paper by the Coalition for Responsible Home Education

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Introduction

In 2008, eleven-year-old [Cheyenne Wolf](#), a disabled girl in rural Oklahoma, was beaten to death by her parents; her body was concealed in storage bags and her death did not come to light for over a year. In 2011, ten-year-old [Marcus Holloway](#) was locked in a room and starved to death by his parents in Fort Sill, Oklahoma. In a similar case in Georgia in 2013, the emaciated body of ten-year-old [Emani Moss](#) was found in a trashcan in her home. In 2015, seven-year-old [Adrian Jones](#)' Kansas parents attempted to cover up his death at their hands by feeding his body to their pigs. All four of these children were homeschooled.

That abusive parents sometimes use the cover of homeschooling to hide from detection is well known. In [a 2014 study of child torture](#), Barbara Knox of the University of Wisconsin found that 47% of the school-aged child torture cases she examined involved children who had been enrolled in school and were later removed to be homeschooled. According to Knox, this homeschooling “appears to have been designed to further isolate the child” and “typically occurred after closure of a previously opened CPS case.” Knox added that this isolation “was accompanied by an escalation of physically abusive events.”

The Coalition for Responsible Home Education (CRHE) operates the [Homeschooling's Invisible Children](#) database, working to draw attention to the problem of child abuse in homeschool settings and to identify themes that contribute to such abuse. In February 2015, CRHE [analysed the cases in this database](#) and found that 84 homeschooled children had died of abuse or neglect from 2000 to 2012, a rate higher than what would be expected based on the proportion of children homeschooled during those years.

While there is to date no evidence that homeschooled children are abused at a higher overall rate than other children, there is reason to believe that [when abuse does occur in these settings](#) it is exacerbated by children's relative isolation and the control homeschooling offers parents. This likely explains the high rate of homeschooling in the child torture cases examined by Knox, as well as the high number of child fatalities identified by CRHE. Lawmakers and other officials should take steps to enact protections for homeschooled children and to ensure that homeschooling is used to educate children and not to abuse.

Recommendations

Background checks: In many cases, parents who use homeschooling as a cover for abuse have previously been convicted of violent crimes or crimes against children. For this reason, we recommend preventing parents who have committed offenses that would disqualify them from teaching in a public school from homeschooling. Pennsylvania is the only state to have this provision (see [24 P.S. § 13-1327.1\(b\)\(1\)](#)), while Arkansas prohibits homeschooling when there

is a registered sex offender in the home (see [Ark. § Code 6-15-508](#)); neither state currently enforces these provisions in a meaningful way.

A flagging system: Parents who use homeschooling as a cover for abuse frequently have concerning histories of involvement with child protective services. We recommend barring homeschooling in households where one or more individuals have previously had a child removed from the home due to substantiated abuse allegations. We further recommend creating a system for monitoring homeschooling families who have previously had multiple concerning abuse reports or open child protective cases. This recommendation will require communication between local school districts and child protective services.

Annual assessments w/ contact: Parents who use homeschooling as a cover for abuse often do not educate their children; requiring an academic assessment at the end of each year may identify some of these situations. We recommend requiring that this assessment be carried out by a neutral third party and that it involve contact between the child and a mandatory reporter. This will provide accountability for the assessment and will ensure that the child has at least annual contact with an individual in a position to recognize and report signs of child abuse or neglect.

Legislation

Over the past several years bills designed to protect at-risk children have been introduced in a variety of state legislatures. To date, none of these bills have been enacted into law, although legislation in Virgin Islands was positively amended in response to testimony from CRHE about the need for protecting at-risk homeschooled children.

Pennsylvania: Acting on recommendations made by the [November 2012 Task Force on Child Protection](#), state senator Andrew Dinniman introduced [Senate Bill 32](#) into the Pennsylvania legislature in March 2013. This bill required school districts to notify the county if a parent removed a child from school to homeschool them within 18 months of a founded child abuse or neglect report. The county children and youth social service agency would then carry out a six month risk assessment. The bill died in committee.

Ohio: Ohio state senator Capri Cafaro introduced [Senate Bill 248](#) in December 2013; the previous January, a child had been beaten to death following his removal from school to avoid an investigation triggered by a child abuse report. Cafaro's bill would have required a public children services agency to conduct interviews with all homeschooling parents and homeschooled students, and would have allowed this agency to recommend against homeschooling based on either these interviews or past investigations. The bill also provided for intervention programs for cases on the margins. The bill died in the house.

Michigan: In March 2015, deputies carrying out an eviction found the bodies of two children in a freezer. Both had been homeschooled; neither had been seen in almost two years. Acting in an effort to prevent future such cases, Michigan representative Stephanie Chang introduced [House Bill 4498](#); this bill required parents to have their children meet twice a year with a mandatory reporter such as a teacher, doctor, or member of the clergy, and to keep documentation of this meeting. The bill died in committee.

Florida: When the body of a girl [was discovered in a freezer](#) in October 2015, local lawmakers considered introducing new legislation and the local school board engaged in talks over what could be done to ensure that the situation did not happen again. While a lawmaker asked CRHE to create draft legislation, this legislation was ultimately not introduced.

Virgin Islands: In October 2016, CRHE was invited to testify at a hearing regarding [Bill 31-0391](#), which promised to update the territory's homeschool laws. In her testimony, CRHE's legislative analyst, Kathryn Brightbill, drew attention to the need for protections for at-risk children. The legislation was revised in committee in an effort to meet these concerns; the final version requires parents to submit annual an portfolio of their students' work and allows the commissioner of education to meet with the children in person as part of this process.

Conclusion

Without protections for at-risk homeschooled children, we will continue to see a tragic pattern of severe child abuse and child fatalities in homeschool settings. While most homeschooling parents are not abusive and many homeschooled children have positive, child-centered experiences, the consequences to those who do experience abuse are catastrophic. We urge lawmakers and other officials to create protections in an effort to prevent more children from suffering the fate of Cheyenne, Marcus, Emani, or Adrian.

Testimony and Draft Legislation:

[At-Risk Children Draft Legislation \(Florida\)](#)

[Written Testimony and Proposed Amendments \(Virgin Islands\)](#)