

Florida Sheriff's Office, "should stop taking away so many children," National Child Advocacy Group Says

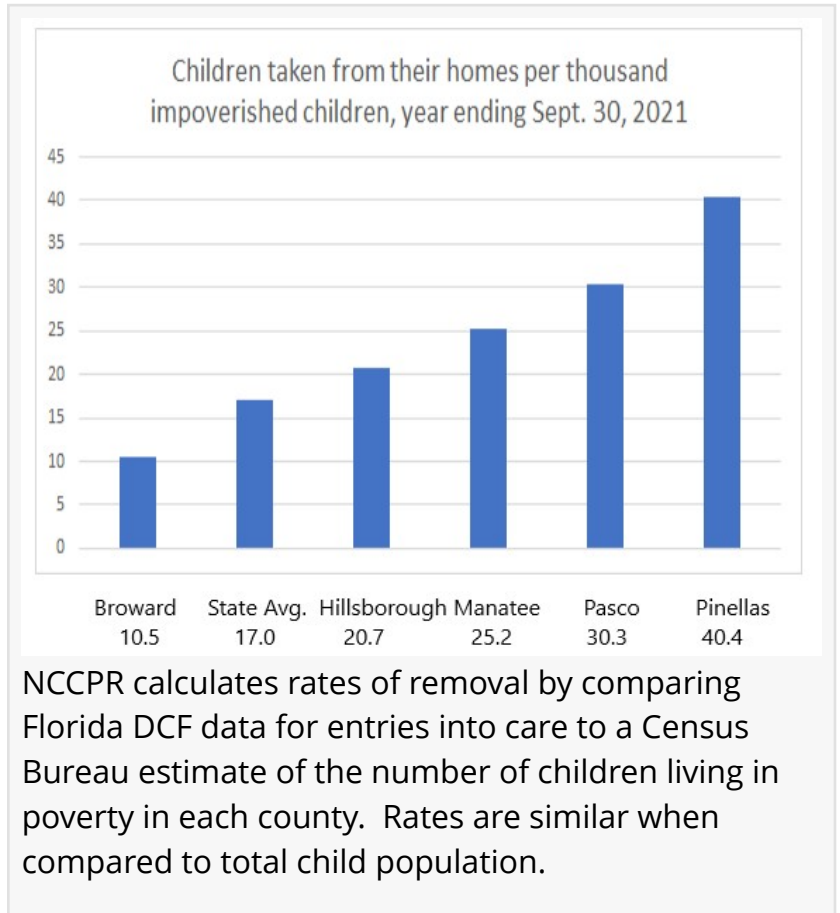
The Pinellas County Sheriff is right to criticize a private foster care agency. But the high rate of child removal is part of the problem.

ALEXANDRIA, VA, UNITED STATES, November 9, 2021 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Pinellas County, Florida, Sheriff Bob Gualtieri is right to be upset about the appalling way a private foster care agency in his county has treated children – but he also needs to put his own house in order, a national child advocacy organization said Tuesday.

Declaring that Eckerd Connects, the “lead agency” for foster care in Pinellas and neighboring counties under Florida’s semi-privatized child welfare system warehouses children in “disgusting and deplorable” conditions, Gualtieri says he will launch a criminal investigation into Eckerd. (Eckerd will not be the lead agency much longer – whether they quit or were fired by the Florida Department of Children and Families is a point of dispute.)

"Eckerd absolutely deserves to be investigated," said Richard Wexler, Executive Director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform. But, Wexler said, the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office has been part of the problem, not part of the solution. Pinellas County tears apart families at one of the highest rates in Florida – yet is among the worst in a key measure of child safety. He elaborated in a post to NCCPR's Florida Child Welfare Blog Tuesday.

In most parts of Florida, the initial decision to tear a child from everyone s/he knows and loves is made by workers from DCF. But in a handful of counties, sheriff's offices have that job. Those



counties tend to be concentrated in the Tampa Bay area, including Pinellas, Pasco, Hillsborough and Manatee. These offices often, though not always, take away children at higher rates than DCF. But even among these counties, Pinellas is an extreme outlier.

Using data from DCF and the Census Bureau NCCPR found that a child in Pinellas County is 33 percent more likely to be taken from her or his parents than a child in neighboring Pasco County. That Pinellas County child is 60 percent more likely to be taken than a child in Manatee County, twice as likely to be taken as a child in Hillsborough County, nearly two-and-a-half times more likely to be taken away than the state average – and more than four times more likely to be taken away than a child in Broward County, another place where the sheriff's office does the taking.

In fact, Wexler said, "were Pinellas County, Florida, a state, its rate of removal would be the seventh highest in the entire nation."

"Sheriff Gualtieri doesn't do this because he wants to hurt kids," Wexler said. "We're confident he has only the best of intentions. But child removal doesn't equal child safety. On the contrary, the more that child welfare systems are overloaded with false allegations, trivial cases and cases in which [family poverty is confused with "neglect,"](#) the less time they have to find the few children in real danger."

Wexler said that may explain Pinellas County's "dismal performance" on a key standard measure of child safety: Of all the children caseworkers or sheriff's deputies deem to have been abused or neglected, what percent are abused or neglected again in the next 12 months?

Here are the [most recent available results](#) for those same counties:

Broward: □ 5.28%

State average: 6.79%

Manatee: □ 6.51%

Hillsborough: 7.07%

Pasco: □ 7.27%

Pinellas: □ 10.37%

"Still another measure of what happens to children can be found in Sheriff Gualtieri's own statement announcing his investigation," Wexler said. "The Sheriff said that, under the care and supervision of Eckerd, 'The conditions are as bad or worse than the living conditions from which the children were removed.'"

"That begs the question," Wexler said. "If you know they're going to be as bad or worse off, why are you taking them away in the first place?"

Wexler said the statement about "as bad or worse" is misleading in one way: "It plays to public stereotypes about families caught in the system. It conjures up images of horror-story cases

that are very serious, very real, and very, very rare. Far more common are cases in which family poverty is confused with 'neglect.'

"Stop taking away so many children needlessly and there will be plenty of room in good, safe foster homes for the few children who really need them," Wexler said. "But that means the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office needs to break free of the take-the-child-and-run mentality that grips so much of Florida child welfare."

Wexler added that "None of this should let Eckerd off the hook. The fact that Sheriff Gualtieri (and his counterparts in Pasco and Hillsborough Counties) kept dumping kids on Eckerd's doorstep doesn't mean Eckerd had to tolerate it. Had they spoken out loudly and clearly about wrongful removal right from the beginning, they could have curbed it. As the 'lead agency' for the region, Eckerd had the most influence in the system. Eckerd could have educated deputies about the harm of needless removal and pressed Gualtieri and his counterparts not to take so many children needlessly. They also could have pressed the courts to return children they thought the sheriff's deputies had removed needlessly."

But Wexler said that on two points, Sheriff Gualtieri is right. "It would be wrong to target low-level Eckerd employees and make them scapegoats; to his credit he has pledged not to do this. And there should be an investigation of Eckerd. But, good intentions notwithstanding, Sheriff Gualtieri shouldn't be the one doing it."

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