

## **The Sunday Times**

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**Maurice Chittenden and Claire Newell**

A JUDGE has revealed that 14 children born to the same mother have been put into care because of her addiction to crack cocaine and other drugs.

Apart from the human cost of the damage to the children's upbringing, the bill to taxpayers to look after the children is likely to exceed £2m. It also costs an average of £25,000 to hear each court case of care proceedings.

The judge, Nick Crichton, who removed the 14th child from the mother in London, spoke about the case to highlight the growing problem of children whose parents are addicted to drugs and alcohol.

He has identified a hitherto unreported phenomenon of women who respond to the emotional void of having their children removed or taken into care by embarking on a stream of replacement pregnancies.

Crichton said last week: "It is a human tragedy. I have had mothers say to me, 'If you take away my child I will have another and I will go on having children until you stop taking them away'. It is perfectly common to be dealing with child four, five or six from the same mother."

Among other cases are:

— A heroin addict in Yorkshire who had her first three children taken away when the problem was spotted, but had seven more by at least three different fathers. One by one they were taken away until she had lost all 10. The woman had a tragic childhood herself: when she was six her mother committed suicide in front of her by taking an overdose and slashing her wrists.

— A woman in the Midlands who has 15 children in the care of her extended family and local authority foster homes after becoming a drug addict.

— Nine children who were removed from a woman in London, one by one. Many were taken directly from the maternity unit because of the drug and alcohol problems of the mother, who had her first child at 15.

Crichton is pioneering Britain's first family drug and alcohol court to identify families at risk to improve the chances of keeping them together.

"Parents see social workers as wanting to take their children away, but neither the courts or the social workers want to do that," Crichton said.

"The point of this project is to identify families with a drug and/or alcohol problem and try to address it so the children can stay with their parents."

Under the scheme parents have to agree to cooperate with the court and attend detoxification clinics or self-help groups. They also have to report to the court every fortnight for checks on their progress.

Parent "mentors" who have overcome their own dependency on drugs or drink will be employed to help them. It is hoped that by keeping families together, the £1.6m three-year pilot will help to reduce Britain's £1.6 billion annual cost of keeping children in care.

The scheme is based on the success of drug dependency courts in the United States, of which there are now more than 300. Those in California claim an 80% success rate in keeping families together.

Experts say crack cocaine has worsened the problem in Britain. The number of children in care has risen from 50,000 to 60,000 in the past 15 years.

Researchers at Brunel University who studied care cases in four London boroughs found that 34% were caused by drug or alcohol abuse by parents, the biggest single factor. Of 186 children taken from 100 families because of this dependency, 67 had one or both parents addicted to crack cocaine.

“Parents tell us they give up,” said Judith Harwin, a professor of social work, who coordinated the research.

Mary Ryan is a freelance consultant who helped to create the new court, which will sit at Wells Street in central London. “Everybody is alert to the problem of pregnant women and serious drug misuse,” Ryan said.

“A mother who is a drug user will have her baby taken away almost immediately but they get pregnant again and it is not unusual to have the seventh, eighth, ninth or even tenth child taken away.”

Anthony Douglas, chief executive of the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, which represents children in court, said: “It is hugely costly to keep these children in care. In the case the judge mentions, another cost is the difficult outcome for many of the 14 children in the care system, not just the fact that they are removed.

“The real cost is in the long term for damaged children. When they are beyond eight or nine years of age we have to manage very disturbed behaviour.”

Jenny Beck, a lawyer who represents a woman in her late fifties who has had all seven of her children taken into care, said: “I have never seen a parent who does not love their child. The children have got many deficiencies of care and perhaps danger, but they are rarely lacking love. Going into care where they are safe but not with their parents any more is difficult.”

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article1909803.ece>