

# Historical Perspectives on Foster Care Payments: Changing Practices During the 20th Century

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## Abstract

Payment of foster carers has long been a controversial issue, reflecting the question of whether fostering is a voluntary or professional activity. This article explores explanations for the change that took place during the twentieth century concerning economic compensation to foster parents for caring for other people's children in their homes. The study is based on document analysis of the child welfare discourse and practice in Sweden. The data consists of documents selected from a municipal child welfare board, documents from the child welfare agent and child welfare assistant at the county level, and documents from national-level sources, such as legislation and leading social work journals. Foster parents who took care of other people's children in their homes often received some economic compensation for the care from the municipal child welfare board. In the early twentieth century, this compensation was usually greatest when caring for younger children and lower for older children. Radical changes took place during the century, however, that affected the payment system. In the 1970s, the boards instead paid the greatest compensation to foster parents who took care of teenagers. Starting in 1974, the boards also began paying a subsidy to foster parents. The article analyses explanations for these changes. In summary, the following explanatory factors are discussed: changing perceptions of childhood, changes in circumstances in which children were placed in care, urbanization, and women's transition to paid employment.

## Keywords

foster care; foster children; foster parents; historical perspective; payment; social work; Sweden

## 1. Introduction

In all times and in all societies, there have been children who, for various reasons, have not been able to grow up with their birth parents. Families have informally or formally taken care of other people's children in their homes. The organization of the care has varied over time and across different cultures (Askeland, 2006; Colton & Williams, 2006). In Sweden, most of these children have been placed in foster care. Placement of children in private homes has been prioritized over placement in institutions, as life in a home with a family has been regarded as a natural solution, while life in an institution has been considered more artificial (Bergman, 2011). Previous international research has also shown that one incentive for placing children in foster homes has been that it is less expensive than group care for children in institutions (Briggs & Hunt, 2015).

In the early twentieth century, to protect children, family foster care began to be regulated in Sweden, as the previous care of foster children in society had been criticized. Some problems with the care were that children in rural areas could be placed with the person who made the lowest bid, rather than the person who could offer the best care, and that a foster child industry existed in the cities, meaning that foster parents were described as taking care of many children for money (Isberg, 1959; Sköld, 2006; Wawrinsky, 1892). In the early twentieth century, new legislation was introduced, according to which those who wanted to take care of other people's children in their homes had to be assessed and deemed suitable. Starting in 1926, child welfare boards became compulsory in the municipalities. These boards were responsible for placing children and supervising foster homes (The Swedish Code of Statutes, 1924).

In many cases, the contracted foster parents received some economic compensation for the care of their foster children. If the birth parents could not pay, it was the child welfare board's responsibility to provide economic compensation to the foster parents. In the early twentieth century, this compensation was usually greatest for the care of younger children and lower for the care of older children. Radical changes took place in the foster care practice in the 1970s. The payment system shifted. From then on, the child welfare board generally paid the lowest compensation to foster parents who took care of younger children, while the greatest compensation went to foster parents looking after teenagers.

The present article explores explanations for the change that took place during the twentieth century concerning economic compensation to foster parents for caring for other people's children in their homes. Historical research has shown that economic resources have played an important role in foster parents' ability to take care of a foster child (Bergman, 2011). Current research has revealed that practical support, including economic resources, is essential for foster parents' health, well-being, and retention (Blythe et al., 2014). Previous research has demonstrated that foster carers are often inadequately reimbursed for the expenses they incur. An Australian and a British study found that foster carers reported insufficient funding to cover the costs of the care provided (Briggs & Hunt, 2015; Kirton et al., 2007). A Swedish and a British study showed low satisfaction with payment among foster carers (Höjer, 2001; Kirton et al., 2007). Support for foster children and their foster parents is an important issue in different countries, as the problem of recruitment and retention of foster carers has recurred in the debate over the years (Bergman, 2011; Briggs & Hunt, 2015; Colton et al., 2008; Hanlon et al., 2021). Payment of foster carers has long been a controversial issue, reflecting the question of whether fostering is a voluntary or professional activity (Briggs & Hunt, 2015; Colton et al., 2008; Kirton et al., 2007).

## 2. Relevant Historical Changes

To understand the changes in economic compensation to foster parents who took care of foster children, some contextualization is required. This section presents the changes in society that occurred during the twentieth century, such as changes in the perception of childhood, reasons for placing children in foster care, the labor market, and urbanization. Major changes took place in the perception of childhood and parenthood (Cunningham, 2021). These changes are linked to the emergence of a modern welfare state. In the late 1800s, many countries had enacted laws that banned or restricted children's work. Sweden introduced laws against child labor in 1881 and 1900 (Sjöberg, 1996), and the regulation of child labor in agriculture began in 1949 (Sjöberg, 2004). The reduction in child labor and the gradual increase in school attendance among children resulted in an extended childhood. A proper childhood was to be kept separate from the adult world. Children came to be dependent on their parents and caregivers for a longer period than they had been before. This time was to be devoted to play, education, and gradual preparation for life as an adult. Childhood was supposed to be a protected and happy time. Good parenting consisted in large measure of preserving and prolonging children's childhood. The perceptions of children's value changed; from being considered a labor resource in the household, there was a shift toward a greater emphasis on children's emotional value for parents (Zelizer, 1994).

The circumstances surrounding child placements have changed throughout history. During the twentieth century, changes took place regarding which children were placed in foster care and the reasons they were placed in care. Caring for foster children has become a societal concern in situations where children have been orphaned, where they have been abandoned for some reason, or when their parents have been ill. Children have been left temporarily in foster care during periods when parents, often single mothers, have had difficulty combining work and caring for young children. Leaving the child in foster care has been a strategy used to cope with difficult stages in the life cycle. Institutions for children and foster homes have sometimes served as a complement, as a form of daycare, and when the parents' situation improved, they were able to take care of their children again (Clement, 1979; Creagh, 2006; Nyberg, 2000). Placements of children have also been considered when the birth parents have been deemed inappropriate to take care of children, such as when they have been assessed as neglecting them (Hendrick, 2003). In Sweden, there were shifts in the stated explanations for children's placements in out-of-home care in the latter part of the twentieth century. Reasons accounting for a greater proportion than previously were children's and teenagers' own emotional and behavioral problems, parents' problems with addiction, and problems in the relationship between children and parents. However, even if children were not explicitly moved from their parental home due to problems associated with poverty, poverty could still underlie the stated grounds for placement. During the century, there was also a shift from placing younger children to placing older children in care (Bergman, 2011).

The changing levels of economic compensation in foster care practice can also be understood in the context of increasing numbers of Swedish women entering the labor market from the 1960s onwards. As a result of economic growth in society and an increased need for workers, new attention was focused on women as an unexploited available workforce. Mothers and housewives were encouraged to engage in occupational work. During the 1960s and 1970s, married women with children worked outside their homes in paid employment to a greater extent than they had during the earlier decades of the century (Axelsson, 1992; Lundqvist, 2007). The tax policy changed in 1971 when joint taxation for married couples was abolished. This meant

that women, who were often the lower earner within a marriage, no longer suffered the disadvantage of having their income taxed at their husband's tax rate when they entered the formal labor market. At the same time, the process of urbanization was going on in Sweden. Many families left the countryside and settled in urban areas. Traditionally, most of the Swedish foster homes have been located in the countryside (Bergman, 2011). Therefore, it became increasingly difficult for the child welfare authorities to find new homes for children in need of care.

### 3. Method and Sources

The present study is based on document analysis of the child welfare discourse and practices. When the State Child Welfare Act came into force in 1926, child welfare boards became compulsory in Swedish municipalities. These boards were responsible for placing foster children in suitable homes and for supervision of foster homes. At the county level, child welfare agents (*barnavårdsombud*) were introduced starting in the 1930s. The child welfare agents were initially employed by voluntary child welfare associations in the counties. They were responsible for assisting the child welfare boards with tasks such as recruiting foster parents and conducting inspections. In 1945, child welfare assistants (*barnavårdsassistenter*) were employed at the County Administrative Boards (*Länsstyrelserna*). The child welfare assistants served to oversee family foster care at the county level (The Swedish Code of Statutes, 1945).

The source material for the study consists of documents selected from the child welfare board in the Municipality of Växjö, the child welfare agent, and from the child welfare assistant in the County of Kronoberg, located in southern Sweden. Växjö is a municipality of medium size. Other documents for the study were collected from national-level sources, such as laws and leading social work journals. During the work on my PhD thesis, which focused on suitability assessments of foster parents during the twentieth century, I found data on child welfare practices concerning economic compensation to foster parents. In parallel with the work on my PhD thesis, I collected anonymized data for the present article. The data collected has been subsequently supplemented. Data on the personal circumstances of individuals are subject to a 70-year period of confidentiality, according to The Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act (The Swedish Code of Statutes, 2009). The article is based only on data that is publicly available. Three different periods during the twentieth century are presented, each period covering ten years:

1. The regulation of child welfare, 1926–1935: During this period, the placement of foster children and supervision of foster homes began to be regulated. According to the State Child Welfare Act, which came into force in 1926, child welfare boards were required in the municipalities. A large number of foster children lived in foster homes in Sweden. In the early twentieth century, there were around 30,000 foster children in the country (Statistics Sweden, 1934).
2. The expansion of the welfare state, 1946–1955: During the postwar period, after the first and second world wars, the groundwork was laid for building a modern welfare state in Sweden, with increased ambitions, reforms, new institutions, and new actors in the area of social welfare. In the counties, child welfare agents and child welfare assistants were employed for tasks such as supervision of the care of foster children. During this period, the number of foster children declined (Swedish Government Official Reports, 1974).
3. The peak of the welfare state, 1966–1975: During this period, most Swedish families lived with material standards higher than those existing in the earlier decades of the century. Social policy reforms were

implemented aimed at families with children. Married women worked outside the home to a greater extent than before. Daycare centers for younger children were established. The number of children in family foster care decreased significantly compared with earlier periods. In the early 1970s, there were just over 16,000 foster children in the country. The placements declined most during the 1950s and 1960s (Swedish Government Official Reports, 1974).

Data on economic compensation to foster carers, during the three periods, have been collected, and a structured template was used to record information from protocols, records of children under supervision, and the foster child inspector's documentation. The collected data is based on the authorities' documentation of monetary compensation. There were also examples of compensation in the form of clothing for children. Such form of compensation may have occurred even in cases where it was not documented. The data consist of decisions about payment to foster parents in practice as well as recommendations from authorities like the Social Welfare Association (*Svenska Socialvårdsförbundet*). The source material was analyzed both inductively and deductively with a focus on factors relevant to the payment to foster carers during different periods. The following factors were revealed to be relevant: the age and gender of the children, the reasons for their placement, and access to foster families. The analysis is focused on continuity and change over time. The results are placed in the context of relevant historical changes that took place during the period studied. One strength of this study is its long-term perspective, which allows for comparisons over time. However, the design has a limitation in that it does not reveal changes that occurred between the selected time periods.

## 4. Payment for Family Foster Care During the Twentieth Century

When a child was placed in family foster care, several parties were involved: the children, their birth parents, the foster parents and the municipal Child Welfare Board. When the board had decided about a child's placement, it also took responsibility for the child's maintenance and payment to the foster parents, although the board in turn could demand some financial compensation from the child's birth parents. The results of the analysis are presented below according to the three selected periods during the twentieth century.

### 4.1. *The Period 1926–1935: When Payment Was Reduced With the Increasing Age of the Child*

During this period, the foster parents received the greatest reimbursement for taking care of a young child, and the payment was reduced with a child's increasing age. Payment of 200–300 Swedish crowns (SEK) a year was common. According to the child welfare board's written contracts with foster parents from the years 1926 and 1929, the following reimbursement rates were applied: 300 SEK a year until the child was five years old; 240 SEK until the child was ten years old; and then 180 SEK until the child reached 16 years of age (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1926, 1929a). At age 16, the children were no longer foster children; they were expected to support themselves. There are also examples showing that the economic compensation to foster parents could be reduced when the foster child was 14 years of age. A comparison between the Swedish municipalities in the late 1920s found that payments to foster parents could vary a great deal, but seemed to have been consistently reduced with the children's increasing age (Barkman, 1929). Previous research on family foster care in the 1800s has revealed similar results. The economic compensation paid to foster parents was greatest for younger children and was then reduced with age, as it was assumed that older children could be of some use to foster parents in their households (Kertzer, 2000; Lundberg, 2000; Skoglund, 1992). In the

early 1900s, most foster families lived in the countryside and could count on some help with the farm work from the older children (Bergman, 2011). The youngest foster children could not be expected to contribute to the household. Instead, they needed more time, care, and resources.

When the birth parents had placed their children themselves, they often paid a fee of 10–40 SEK a month to the foster parents. This could be a great deal of money for a single mother supporting her child in this way. In 1929, one foster child's mother earned 15 SEK a month (plus food and shelter) for her work as a housekeeper. In 1930, another mother earned 50 SEK a month as a housekeeper and paid 20 SEK to the foster parents who took care of her child in their home. It was difficult for a single mother to combine work, maintenance, and care of younger children. At this time, it sometimes happened that the birth parents paid a single payment, "once and for all," to the foster parents, a sum intended to cover support during the child's entire childhood. In 1927, one mother paid 2,000 SEK "once and for all," and in 1935 another mother paid 3,000 SEK "once and for all," while one father paid 3,500 SEK—amounts that were intended for their children's support. Divided over 16 years, this means 125, 187, and 219 SEK each year, respectively, slightly lower than the common compensation rate. During this period, there are also examples showing that birth parents contributed to their children's maintenance in kind instead of in cash: "the mother sends clothes to the child." Sometimes, foster parents could even take care of foster children without receiving any economic compensation at all: "no maintenance," "no compensation is paid" (Bergman, 2011). Table 1 shows data on economic compensation to foster parents in 1926 and 1935 and on the range of compensation.

**Table 1.** Average economic compensation to foster parents and the range of compensation.

Year	Yearly compensation to foster parents in SEK	Range of yearly compensation to foster parents in SEK
1926	220 (N = 65)	100–448
1935	239 (N = 62)	120–480

At the child welfare board, there was a quest to find foster parents who agreed to take care of children without requiring any financial compensation. When the child welfare board in the 1920s advertised for a foster home for a younger child, the board received as many as 40 responses and then decided to choose the foster parents who required no economic compensation: "The child welfare board would obviously to the greatest extent search for good foster homes that take care of children without reimbursement" (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1929b). The board regarded foster care as a voluntary task rather than as paid work (cf. Briggs & Hunt, 2015; Kirton et al., 2007).

#### 4.2. The Period 1946–1955: When Age, Gender, and Reason for Placement Affected Payment

For the children who were placed in foster care during this period, the economic compensation could vary significantly. In Växjö in 1946, the compensation for children 0–16 years of age was on average 335 SEK a year. There was a large spread, between 180 and 800 SEK. The relatives who took care of a foster child and received economic compensation for this generally received slightly lower compensation. It was not unusual for relatives to take care of the children without any economic compensation at all. Taking care of a child without economic compensation was also common among foster parents when there was a plan for adoption of the child. In Sweden, it became possible to adopt children when the first Adoption Act came into force in 1918 (The Swedish Code of Statutes, 1917). The aim of the act was that children who lacked

economic and social support would be looked after by childless couples with good economic circumstances, thus ensuring care and support (Lindgren, 2006). Typically, before the adoption was completed, these foster parents did not receive any economic compensation during the period they were foster parents. After adoption, the adoptive parents had a legal obligation to support the child. The maintenance responsibility was shifted from the municipality to the adoptive parents.

During this period, in the middle of the century, there were also foster parents who took care of children from countries affected by the Second World War; there were children from Finland, Norway, Germany, and the Netherlands. These foster parents could likewise take care of children without receiving any financial compensation. Table 2 presents data on economic compensation to foster parents in 1946 and 1955 and on the range of compensation.

**Table 2.** Average economic compensation to foster parents and the range of compensation.

Year	Yearly compensation to foster parents in SEK	Range of yearly compensation to foster parents in SEK
1946	335 (N = 90)	180–800
1955	675 (N = 42)	240–1,260

In the mid-1940s, there were national-level discussions about the low compensation paid to foster parents and the great variation in compensation rates between different parts of the country. In many cases, the payment did not cover the costs for the child, according to debaters in the Swedish *Journal of Child Welfare and Youth Protection*, who argued for increased economic compensation as part of an effort to gain access to a sufficient number of foster homes (Grönlund, 1947; Malmroth, 1945). During the same period, the child welfare board of Stockholm sent an official letter to the child welfare board of Växjö, as the board found it necessary to increase payments to make acquiring a sufficient number of foster homes possible (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1948a). The board distinguished between foster homes in Stockholm and foster homes in the provinces. Foster parents in Stockholm received greater economic compensation than foster parents in other parts of the country owing to the higher housing costs in the city. The child welfare board of Stockholm also distinguished between foster parents who took care of boys and girls, as well as boys of various ages. The highest payment went to foster parents in Stockholm who took care of boys, while the lowest payment went to foster parents in the countryside who took care of girls and younger boys: foster carers in Stockholm received 900 SEK a year for boys and 840 SEK for girls. Foster carers in the countryside received 840 SEK a year for school-age boys and 720 SEK for girls and pre-school age boys (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1948a). One explanation for the higher compensation paid to foster parents who cared for boys was that the board found it more difficult to find foster homes for boys, as many foster parents preferred to care for girls (cf. Creagh, 2006).

Another categorization that existed in parallel was different payment depending on whether the placement could be considered permanent or temporary. In 1947, the child welfare agent in the County of Kronoberg wrote to her colleague in the neighboring County of Kalmar regarding the payments generally applied for child placements: “for children up to two years where the foster parents were allowed to keep the child” 30–35 SEK a month; “for children up to two years with only temporary placement” 50–60 SEK a month; “for older children, without remarkable faults and shortcomings” 35–40 SEK a month; and “for difficult children” 50–75 SEK a month (The Child Welfare Assistant in the County of Kronoberg, 1947). Previous historical research has likewise shown that greater compensation was sometimes paid to foster parents who took care



of children who were ill or difficult to manage (Kertzer, 2000; Lundberg, 2000; Skoglund, 1992). The reason for this is probably that it was difficult to find foster homes for these children. In the present study, we can see that the payments also varied depending on whether the placements were expected to be temporary or permanent. One explanation for the higher reimbursement for temporary placements is that it could be more challenging to recruit foster homes in these cases, as many prospective foster parents wanted to care for children whom they were allowed to keep in their homes permanently (Bergman, 2011). Many wished for “good children and children to keep” (Carlsson, 1949). From 1948 onwards, foster parents could sometimes also receive a child allowance (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1948b). The child allowance was, and still is, a universal public benefit for all children in Sweden, paid for the first time in 1948 (The Swedish Code of Statutes, 1947).

As we have seen, the economic compensation during this period could be somewhat greater for older children. One explanation for this change in relation to the previous period is that the children were not expected to work in the foster homes to the same extent as previously. Children were supposed to go to school. Childhood was to be a time of education, play, and gradual preparation for life as an adult (Cunningham, 2021). Children should be allowed to be children (Hacsi, 1995). However, in the 1950s, some foster parents might still have benefited from their foster children engaging in agricultural work, which can be illustrated by the following example. The foster parents of one boy contacted the child welfare board to ask for greater economic compensation for caring for the boy due to the situation that they had sold their farm and no longer had “any work” for their foster child (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1952).

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Social Welfare Association (*Svenska Socialvårdsförbundet*) sought to standardize compensation rates for family foster care, with a view to avoiding disputes between municipalities. In 1952, 70 SEK a month was recommended for the care of “healthy normal children” in foster care (The Swedish Social Welfare Association, 1952). Starting in 1955, 80 SEK a month was recommended as compensation for caring for “healthy normal children” (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1954a). These new, more standardized regulations could result in a substantial economic lift for some foster parents. There were foster parents who received increases from 45 to 70 SEK, from 30 to 60 SEK, and from 25 to 70 SEK (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1953a, 1953b, 1954b, 1955). Still, there could be great local variation in the payments made in the same municipality. In Växjö in 1955, there was a large spread between 240 and 1,260 SEK a year (see Table 2).

Despite more standardized regulations, the child welfare assistant reacted to low payments in several cases in the county: “The payments to the foster parents are generally very low” (The Child Welfare Assistant in the County of Kronoberg, 1953). Foster parents taking care of one girl received only 15 SEK a month, which was “far too little” according to the child welfare assistant, as at least 60 SEK was typically paid at that time (The Child Welfare Assistant in the County of Kronoberg, 1953). The child welfare assistant also questioned why some foster parents did not receive any payment at all and demanded an answer from the child welfare board: “For a couple of the children it has been reported that no compensation is paid. What are the reasons for this?” (The Child Welfare Assistant in the County of Kronoberg, 1953). In the studied documents, there are examples of foster parents who, according to the child welfare assistant, resigned because they had not received any economic compensation at all after taking care of a child for a period of one and a half years (The Child Welfare Assistant in the County of Kronoberg, 1948). As a consequence, the child lost his foster home and was relocated. Adequate support, including financial support, and a feeling of being respected



were relevant factors influencing whether foster parents would remain or leave the system (cf. Briggs & Hunt, 2015).

#### 4.3. The Period 1966–1975: Higher Payment for Teenagers With Psychosocial Problems

During this period, most Swedish families enjoyed increased material standards, in comparison to the earlier decades of the century. Social policy reforms were implemented that were aimed at families with children. Married women worked outside the home in paid employment to a greater extent than before (Axelsson, 1992; Lundqvist, 2007). Daycare centers for younger children were built. The number of children in family foster care decreased significantly compared with the earlier periods (Bergman, 2011).

For foster children who were placed in Växjö during 1966, the payments to foster parents were on average 4,448 SEK a year. This was roughly in line with the levels that had been recommended on a national level by the Association of Local Authorities (*Kommunförbundet*). According to the child welfare assistant in the County of Kronoberg, payments of 150–350 SEK a month were common in the year 1967 (The Child Welfare Assistant in the County of Kronoberg, 1967). However, as previously, there was a large spread during this period, from 1,320 up to 8,700 SEK a year. There were also foster parents who did not receive any economic compensation at all. As previously, lower reimbursements were paid to foster parents who were the children's relatives and in cases where there were adoption plans. Table 3 presents data on economic compensation to foster parents in 1966 and 1975, including the range of compensation.

**Table 3.** Average economic compensation to foster parents and the range of compensation.

Year	Yearly compensation to foster parents in SEK	Range of yearly compensation to foster parents in SEK
1966	4,448 (N = 50)	1,320–8,700
1975	13,593 (N = 36)	5,340–22,980

From the mid-1960s onwards, the Association of Local Authorities' recommendations concerning economic compensation to foster parents were stated as a percentage of the basic amount (*basbeloppet*). The basic amount was and still is used to calculate various benefits and payments in the community. It is changed annually so as to reflect and adjust for inflation. In 1971, the lowest compensation for the care of younger children was to be 75 percent of the basic amount, which meant 4,800 SEK a year or 400 SEK a month (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1971). In 1972, the lowest compensation was set at 90 percent of the basic amount, which meant 6,390 SEK a year or 532 SEK a month (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1972). The compensation was greater for older children and for children for whom it was hard to find homes for some reason. The board argued that in some cases it was justified and even necessary to pay more, for example, in the following situations:

When physical defects are present, such as blindness, severely impaired vision, deafness, or severely impaired hearing and disability affecting mobility. Other special reasons are long-term troublesome illness, such as asthma, diabetes, heart disease, or eczema. Special conditions may be considered to exist in the case of children whose mental problems place particularly great demands on the foster carers. Special reasons may also be considered if the child is placed in temporary care. (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1966).

In the mid-1970s, the payments in Växjö were on average 13,593 SEK a year. Still, there was a large spread from 5,340 to 22,980 SEK a year, and there were still foster parents who did not receive any economic compensation at all. Greater compensation was paid to foster parents who took care of older children and children who were “hard to place.” In 1971, the child welfare board established the following reimbursements: children 0–10 years, maximum 650 SEK a month; children 11–14 years, up to 750 SEK; and children 15 years and older, up to 850 SEK (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1971). This result, that higher compensation was paid to foster parents who cared for older children and children with disabilities, is consistent with the findings of the Foster Child Investigation survey carried out in 1970 (Swedish Government Official Reports, 1974).

The reimbursements could sometimes be higher. Foster parents who took care of teenagers with psychosocial problems such as crime, truancy, or abuse could receive greater compensation (Bergman, 2011). During this period, children could be placed in family foster care for reasons that had previously resulted in institutional care (The Swedish Code of Statutes, 1960). Swedish society at the time was experiencing ongoing deinstitutionalization. Many institutions for children and youth were being closed down, and at the same time, the size of the remaining institutions was being reduced, resulting in fewer institutional places for the care of children and young people (Sallnäs, 2000).

Starting in 1974, the child welfare board began paying subsidies to the foster parents, which were considered compensation for the foster parents’ work of caring for the children (cf. Swedish Government Official Reports, 1974). The economic compensation was divided into a subsidy for their work and an allocation for expenses in accordance with recommendations from the Association of Local Authorities (The Child Welfare Board of Växjö, 1974). In 1975, the subsidies could vary from 375 up to 975 SEK a month. The higher subsidies went to foster parents who took care of teenagers. Some foster parents only received compensation for expenses and did not receive subsidies. At this time, Swedish women were working outside the home to a greater extent than during the previous decades (Axelsson, 1992; Lundqvist, 2007). It became more difficult than before to find new foster homes. During this period, many children who needed new foster homes were older. There were also changes in the reasons for foster home placement. Fewer infants and toddlers were placed in care (Bergman, 2011). Single mothers had greater opportunities than previously to care for their youngest children because daycare centers were established (Nyberg, 2000). At the same time, there were fewer unwanted children, as women had access to contraception and legal abortions (Lennerhed, 2008).

#### **4.4. Summary of Economic Compensations**

This section contains a comparison of the economic compensation to foster parents during the periods studied, specifically the following selected years with available data: 1926, 1935, 1946, 1955, 1966, and 1975. The comparisons in Table 4 below show data on the compensation to foster parents in relation to the consumer price index (CPI) and the average salary for female and male industrial workers. A description of the basis for the calculation can be found in the Supplementary File.

The table shows that over time, the compensation for taking care of foster children increased significantly. Over the same period, the CPI also increased significantly but not as much. The comparison also reveals a large increase in the economic compensation to foster parents in relation to CPI. Foster parents generally received increased monetary resources to take care of their foster children. The comparison also reveals an increase in

**Table 4.** Economic compensation to foster parents in relation to CPI and average salary for workers (female/male).

Year	CPI (percentage change)	Yearly compensation in SEK (percentage change in relation to base year)	Compensation in relation to CPI (percentage change)	Compensation as a percentage of workers' salary, women in Sweden	Compensation as a percentage of workers' salary, men in Sweden
1926	100 (base year)	220	—	12.2%	7.4%
1935	91 (–9%)	239 (9%)	+ 19%	13.3%	8.0%
1946	137 (37%)	335 (52%)	+ 11%	9.8%	6.5%
1955	198 (98%)	675 (207%)	+ 55%	8.4%	5.8%
1966	304 (204%)	4,448 (1922%)	+ 565%	24.2%	18.5%
1975	519 (419%)	13,593 (6079%)	+ 1090%	30.9%	26.2%

Source: Data on CPI from Statistics Sweden (2025); data on salaries from Statistics Sweden (2020).

relation to the average salary for industrial workers during the period as a whole, but a decrease during the middle of the century. The lowest economic compensation to foster parents in relation to workers' salaries was in 1955; this coincides with the era of housewives in Sweden, which reached its peak during the 1950s. The largest increase was at the end of the period studied, when at this time, many women had entered the labor market. In the 1960s and 1970s, a great many housewives shifted to paid employment (Axelsson, 1992), and thus, it could be difficult to find foster parents during this period. The increased financial compensation at this time can be interpreted as a recognition of foster parents' care work for vulnerable children.

## 5. Analysis and Discussion

The present article analyzes change and continuity in paid family foster care during the previous century. In the early twentieth century, economic compensation to foster parents was usually greatest when caring for younger children and lower for older children. Radical changes took place in practice when the payment system shifted around the 1970s. From then on, the child welfare board generally paid the lowest compensation to foster parents who took care of younger children, while the highest compensation instead went to foster parents who looked after teenagers. In this section, the results are discussed in relation to the following explanatory factors: (a) changes during the century in the perception of childhood and how children were valued; (b) changes in the reasons why children were placed in family foster care; (c) changed gender roles as an increasing number of married women entered the labor market; and (d) the consequences of urbanization for the foster care system.

### 5.1. Changed Perception of Childhood

During the twentieth century, major changes took place in the perception of childhood. Children's schooling was prolonged, and there were expectations that their leisure time should be stimulating. Children were dependent on their caregivers for a longer time than before, and this extended time was to be devoted to play, education, and gradual preparation for adult life (Cunningham, 2021). This changed perception of childhood is reflected in the foster care payment system. There is obvious continuity regarding the association between economic compensation and the children's age. In the early 1900s, foster parents

received higher payments when they took care of younger children, while the compensation declined with the child's increasing age. Young children were considered the most demanding in terms of time and effort. Later during the century, the payment system shifted. Starting in the middle of the century, foster parents could receive greater compensation when they took care of older children. During the latter part of the twentieth century, it is obvious that looking after older children generated the highest level of reimbursement. This can be interpreted as meaning that older children were perceived to be more demanding in terms of costs and effort. Older children were no longer considered a labor resource in the foster homes, at least not to the same extent as in the early decades of the century.

### ***5.2. Changed Reasons Why Children Were Placed in Foster Care***

During the latter part of the century, there were changes in the type of children placed in family foster care, with shifts from younger to older children. There were also changes in the reasons for children's placement in out-of-home care, from younger children with poor parents to older children with their own problems. Due to the economic development and the emergence of a welfare state during the postwar period, with various forms of support for families, poverty alone was usually not a reason for separating children from their parents. The foster children could be teenagers with psychosocial problems who needed a new home. Because of the ongoing deinstitutionalization in society, children could be placed in family foster care for grounds that previously resulted in placement in an institution. Family foster care was initially described in terms of treatment, and foster parents were considered experts of some kind (Bergman, 2011). One explanation for the higher reimbursement levels for older children in the latter part of the century is that finding foster homes for these children, who could have their own problems, was difficult. Many foster parents wanted to take care of younger children. When the reasons for children's placement changed, greater economic compensation was paid to foster parents who cared for older children who were difficult to manage or difficult to find homes for.

### ***5.3. Changed Gender Roles as Women Entered the Labor Market***

One shift in the payment system occurred when municipalities, starting in 1974, began paying subsidies to the foster parents and not only compensation for the costs of care, as they had previously. This coincides with major changes in gender roles in Swedish society. During the 1960s and 1970s, there was economic growth and the need for labor increased. Mothers and housewives were encouraged to do occupational work. Welfare services were transferred from the family sphere to the state. Expanded childcare services, individual taxation, and the linking of social security benefits to individual income were incentives for women to seek paid employment. A great many mothers and married women entered the labor market. Women's exit from the home was particularly widespread during the 1970s (Axelsson, 1992). During the 1960s and 1970s, there was an intense gender debate in society, including criticism of the established roles of men and women, and visions of change that would result in economic support of the family and care of children being shared responsibilities between men and women. In this context, when many women entered the labor market, the increased economic compensation and subsidies given to foster parents (mothers) can be interpreted as a kind of recognition for their care work.

#### 5.4. The Consequences of Urbanization

The period under study was one of gradual urbanization in Sweden. Many families left the countryside and settled in urban areas. In the early 1900s, 30 percent of the population lived in urban areas. In 1935, about half, in 1950, about 66 percent, and in 1970, about 81 percent of the Swedish population lived in urban areas (*Nationalencyklopedin*). Historically, most of the foster homes in Sweden have been located in the countryside (Bergman, 2011). This made it increasingly hard for the municipal child welfare boards to find new foster homes for children in need. The type of family preferred as a foster family became increasingly rare, according to Vesta Almqvist, director of the Children's Welfare Foundation (*Allmänna barnhuset*):

In purely rural areas, the families who are of appropriate age are decreasing. In the cities, families are generally not so interested in taking care of foster children, many households are overcrowded and the housewife usually has paid employment. (Almqvist, 1968)

Almqvist highlighted four reasons for the lack of foster homes: (a) People of appropriate ages left the countryside and moved to the cities; (b) urban families often had smaller homes, which left no room for foster children; (c) urban families were less interested in taking care of foster children; and (d) in the cities, many women worked outside the home and therefore the families were not suitable for foster care. The highly valued kind of foster home had a stay-at-home foster mother who provided care, and a foster father who worked outside the home as the family's breadwinner (Bergman, 2011). As foster parents became more difficult to recruit, their position was sometimes strengthened in the sense that they could receive increased financial compensation to provide for the children, especially when they took care of older children, who could be "hard to place."

### 6. Conclusion

In summary, the following factors were relevant to explaining the changed practice in economic compensation to foster parents during the twentieth century: the changing perceptions of childhood; the changes in circumstances in which children were placed in care; urbanization; and, last but not least, women's transition to paid employment outside the home. Different levels of economic compensation to foster parents have also been dependent on factors such as the child's age, gender, and whether the placement was expected to be permanent or temporary. In the middle of the century, the payment could be greater when foster parents took care of boys and children in temporary placements. During the whole period under study, children's age has been of relevance to payment levels. There is continuity in the large spread of economic compensation to foster parents, and some foster parents did not receive any payment at all for the care provided. Paying foster parents has long been a controversial issue. Should foster care be regarded as a voluntary or professional activity? Foster carers are often women of working-class or lower-middle-class background. Many foster mothers face dilemmas when trying to coordinate work and family (Haysom et al., 2025; Roman, 2016). Foster parents themselves express a need for compensation for the expenses they incur while caring for children, as well as for the care work they provide (Brown & Calder, 2000). The material realities of care work need to be recognized (Swartz, 2004). The present article provides examples of foster parents who, according to the child welfare assistant, resigned because they had not received any economic compensation at all. Therefore, one consequence of losing foster parents is that

children lose their home, thereby indicating that support, including economic support, is important to maintaining stability in foster care (cf. Semanchin Jones & LaLiberte, 2013).

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

The research data on which this article is based can be found at the National Archives in Vadstena and the Municipal Archives in Växjö.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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