

DATA AT A GLANCE: FACTS ABOUT EDUCATION AND FOSTER CARE

When supported by strong practices and policies, positive school experiences can counteract the negative effects of abuse, neglect, separation, and lack of permanency experienced by the more than 400,000 U.S. children and youth in foster care. Education provides opportunities for improved well-being in physical, intellectual, social and emotional domains during critical developmental periods and supports economic success in adult life. While there is no comprehensive source of national data on education performance of students in foster care, much can be learned from the national, regional and local data presented below to guide policy and practice reforms.

National Demographic Data of Youth in Foster Care*	
Number of children and youth in foster care on September 30, 2016	437,465
Number of children age 0-4	155,632
Number of children age 5-17 (typical school age)	268,517
Number of young adults age 18-21	13,316
Percentage with more than one living placement while in foster care	65%

*These data come from the most recent report from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) released November 30, 2017.

National Education Data and Regional Data Based on Special Studies

The table below presents outcome data on educational experiences and achievements of youth in foster care, with some comparisons with the general population. Where available, we have used national estimates, but there are many gaps in national data in this area, so multi-state studies are included.¹

Educational Experience or Outcome	Findings
% of youth in foster care who change schools when first entering care	31% - 75% ²
% of 17- to 18-year-olds who experienced 5 or more school changes	34.2% ³
Likelihood of being absent from school	About twice that of other students ⁴
Likelihood of 17- to 18-year-old youth in foster care having out-of-school suspension	About twice that of other students ⁵ (In one study the rate was 24% vs. national general population rate of 7%) ⁶
Likelihood of 17- to 18-year-old youth in foster care being expelled	About 3 times that of other students ⁷
Reading level of 17- to 18-year-olds in foster care	Average level 7 th grade 44% at high school level or higher ⁸
% of youth in foster care receiving special education services	35.6% ⁹ - 47.3% ¹⁰
% of 17- to 18-year-old youth in foster care who want to go to college	70% ¹¹ - 84% ¹²
% of youth in foster care who complete high school by age 18 (via a diploma or GED)	Colorado: 41.8% ¹³ Midwest Study (age 19): 63% ¹⁴
% of youth in foster care who complete high school by age 21	65% by age 21 ¹⁵ (National data) (Compared with 86% among all youth ages 18-24 ¹⁶)
% of youth in foster care who graduated from high school who enrolled in college at some level	31.8% ¹⁷ - 45.3% ¹⁸ (Compared with national college enrollment rate of 69.2% in 2015, which is slightly below national record high of 70.2% in 2009) ¹⁹
% of foster care alumni who attain a bachelor's degree	3 - 10.8% ²⁰ (Compared with national college completion rate of a BA or higher of 32.5%) ²¹

- ¹ When comparing youth in foster care with other groups, it is important to note that most studies do not control for other factors like age, race and gender. The Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study, when comparing emotional and behavioral health conditions, used propensity score matching to align the foster care alumni sample and the “general population” sample by age, race and gender. See Pecora, P. J., Kessler, R. C., Williams, J., Downs, A. C., English, D.J., & White, J. & O’Brien, K. (2010). *What works in family foster care? Key components of success from the Northwest foster care alumni study*. New York and Oxford, England: Oxford University Press. The Midwest study used a sample from the Adolescent Health national study that was of the same age range as the comparison group. See Courtney, M.E., Terao, S., & Bost, N. (2004). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Conditions of youth preparing to leave state care*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. Even fewer studies control for key variables such as family income, housing instability or insecurity, food insecurity, English language proficiency, child maltreatment that did not result in out-of-home placement, and other Adverse Childhood Experiences like parent divorce, substance abuse, emotional/behavioral health issues and incarceration. These factors can outweigh the negative or positive effects of placement and enrollment in a poor or high-quality school. Pecora, P.J., Whittaker, J.K., Barth, R.P., Borja, S., & Vesneski, W. (In press). *The child welfare challenge*. (Fourth Edition.) New York City: Taylor and Francis, Chapter 5.
- ² In Colorado the rate was 31%. See Clemens, E.V., Klopfenstein, K., Tis, M. & Lalonde, T.L. (2017). Educational stability policy and the interplay between child welfare placement changes and school moves. *Children and Youth Services Review*. But the rate in one California study was 75%. See Frerer, K., Sosenko, L.D., Pellegrin, N., Manchik, V., Horowitz, J. (2013). *Foster youth stability: A study of California foster youths’ school and residential changes in relation to educational outcomes*. Retrieved from http://www.iebcnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/pub_foster_youth_stability_2013.pdf.
- ³ Courtney, Terao, & Bost (2004), p. 42.
- ⁴ Sample drawn from a cohort of youth entering out-of-home care from 2006 to 2008 in a large mid-Atlantic city. See Zorc, C.S., O’Reilly, A.L.R., Matone, M., Long, J., Watts, C.L. & Rubin, D. (2013). The relationship of placement experience to school absenteeism and changing schools in young, school-aged children in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35, 826-833. In California, the absentee rate for youth in care for the 2016-2017 school year was more than double the overall student population (25.1% vs. 10.1%). See California Department of Education. (2017). *Report: A quarter of California’s foster students are chronically absent from school*. Sacramento: Author, p. 1. Retrieved from <https://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr17/yr17rel88.asp>.
- ⁵ Courtney, Terao & Bost (2004), p. 42.
- ⁶ Scherr, T. (2006). Best practices in working children living in foster care. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology V* (pp. 1547–1563). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.
- ⁷ When interviewed at age 23 or 24, 16.5% of the foster care alumni in the Midwest study had been expelled, compared with 4.6% of youth in the national Adolescent Health study (Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004, p. 42).
- ⁸ Courtney, Terao & Bost (2004), p. 45.
- ⁹ Over one-third (35.6%) of the youth in the Northwest Alumni Study were in special education classes for students needing extra help. See Pecora, Kessler, Williams, Downs, English, White & O’Brien (2010). p. 120.
- ¹⁰ Courtney, Terao & Bost (2004), p. 40.
- ¹¹ McMillen, C., Auslander, W., Elze, D., White, T., & Thompson, R. (2003). Educational experiences and aspirations of older youth in foster care. *Child Welfare*, 82(4), 475-495.
- ¹² Courtney, Terao & Bost (2004), p. 39.
- ¹³ Parra, J., & Martinez, J. (2015). *2013-2014 state policy report: Dropout prevention and student engagement*. Denver, CO: Colorado Department of Education, p. 20. Retrieved from <http://www.cde.state.co.us/dropoutprevention/2014statepolicyreport31215>.
- ¹⁴ Courtney, M.E., Dworsky, A., Ruth, G., Keller, T., Havlicek, J. & Bost, N. (2005). *Midwest Evaluation of Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 19*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, Chapin Hall Center for Children, p. 21.
- ¹⁵ National Youth in Transition Database as cited on page 3 of U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2016). *Non-Regulatory Guidance: Ensuring Educational Stability for Children in Foster Care*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/edhhsfostercarenonregulatorguide.pdf>.
- ¹⁶ National Center for Education Statistics (2014). Digest of education statistics, 2014 - table 104.40. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_104.40.asp?current=yes.
- ¹⁷ Courtney, M.E., Dworsky, A., & Lee, J. & Raap, M. (2010). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 23 and 24*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, p. 24.
- ¹⁸ The proportion of alumni aged 25 and older in the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study that has completed any postsecondary education (45.3%) is substantially lower than that (57%) of the general population in the same age group who completed some college coursework (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). (Note that the alumni group statistic includes vocational training, while the general population statistic does not. Therefore, the difference between the two groups is underestimated.) See Pecora et al. (2010), p. 125; and U.S. Census Bureau. (2000h). Profile of selected social characteristics—2000 (Table DP-2.). Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved March 10, 2005, from http://factfinder.census.gov/bf/_lang=en_vt_name+DEC_2000_SF3_U_DP2_geo_id=01000US.html.
- ¹⁹ See Bureau of Labor Statistics data at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgec.nr0.htm> for 2015 data and National Center for Education Statistics data for 2009 at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgec.nr0.htm>.
- ²⁰ Note the college completion rates vary by study, in part because of variations in how long youth are followed out of foster care and the states that are included in the study. For example, the college completion rate for the alumni in the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study was 2.7% (mean age: 24.2), while the rate for the Midwest Study at ages 23-24 was 3%. But the Casey National Foster Care Alumni study that involved youth served first by the public agency and then by Casey found a rate of 10.8% for alumni who were on average 30.5 years old. See Pecora, P.J., Williams, J., Kessler, R.J., Downs, A.C., O’Brien, K. Hiripi, E., & Morello, S. (2003). *Assessing the effects of foster care: early results from the Casey national alumni study*. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs. Website: <http://www.casey.org>, p. 28.
- ²¹ See the U.S. Census Bureau data for 2015 at Ryan, C.L. & Bauman, K. (2016) *Educational attainment in the United States: 2105*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/p20-578.pdf>.