

Fast Facts

Foster Care & Education Data At A Glance

ABA Center on Children and the Law

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Educational Experiences & Outcomes of Youth in Foster Care

Strong policies and practices are needed to create positive school experiences and counteract the negative effects of abuse, neglect, separation, and lack of permanency, often experienced by children and youth in foster care. A strong education can improve the well-being of students in physical, intellectual, social, and emotional domains while in school and in adulthood. This table presents outcome data on educational experiences and achievements of youth in foster care, with some comparisons with the general student population. Where available, national estimates are provided, but there are gaps in the national data so statewide or multistate studies are included.

Educational Experience or Outcome		Findings
		National/Multistate
School Stability	% of youth in foster care who change schools when first entering care	31%-75% ¹
	% of 17-18 year-olds who experienced 5 or more school changes	25%-34.2% ²
School Engagement	% chronically absent from school	About twice the rate of non-foster students ³
	% of 17-to-18 year-old youth in foster care having out-of-school suspensions	12%-23% (compared to 5-7% of all students) ⁴
	% of 17-to-18 year-old youth in foster care being expelled	3-4 times that of non-foster students ⁵
Reading Attainment	Reading level of 17-to-18 year-old youth in foster care	29% -33% (meet state standards) ⁶
Special Education	% of youth in foster care receiving special education services	30%-50% ⁷ (compared to 14% for all students ⁸)
High School Graduation	% of youth in foster care who complete high school by age 18 (via a diploma or GED)	64% of foster youth compared to 87.3% for non-foster youth ⁹
Postsecondary Education	% of 17-to-18-year-old youth in foster care who want to go to college	70% ¹⁰ - 84% ¹¹
	% of youth in foster care who graduated high school who enrolled in postsecondary education at some level	13%-38% ¹²
	% of foster care alumni who attain a bachelor's degree	2% ¹³ -10.8% ¹⁴

Demographic Data of Youth in Foster Care

The following national child welfare data provides an overview of key data indicators on children and youth in foster care across the United States. These data summarize some important demographics (e.g., age ranges, race) and details about the experiences children and youth have while in foster care (e.g., number of moves, length of stay in foster care, and living placement types). All data shared below is from the AFCARS Report #28: FY2020 Estimates as of October 4, 2021, unless otherwise specified.

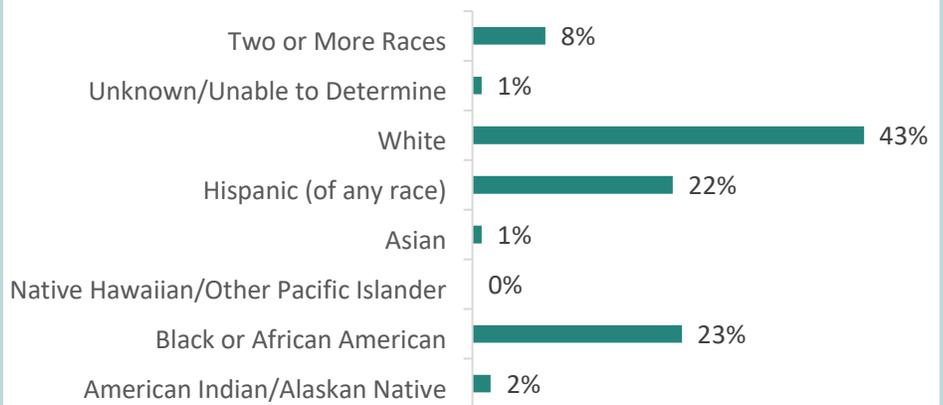
- Approximately 61% of all youth in foster care are ages 5 through 17 (typical K-12 school age).

Number of Youth in Foster Care	National Data
Number of children and youth in foster care on September 30, 2020	407,493
Number of children aged 0-4	147,018
Number of children aged 5-17 (typical school age)	247,586
Number of young adults aged 18-20	12,779

Missing data are excluded from the count of children by age range in the table. As a result, the sum of each age group will not equal the total number of foster children in care on September 30, 2020.

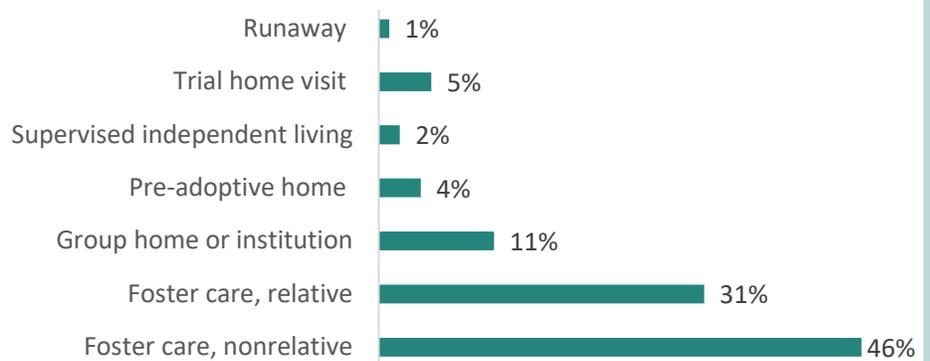
- The race and ethnicity of children and youth in foster care reflects disproportionality of involvement in the foster care system of children and families of color (e.g., African American children represented 23% of children in foster care in 2020, compared to 12.4% in the general population according to 2020 census data).

Race/Ethnicity of Children in Foster Care on September 30, 2020 [N=407,493]



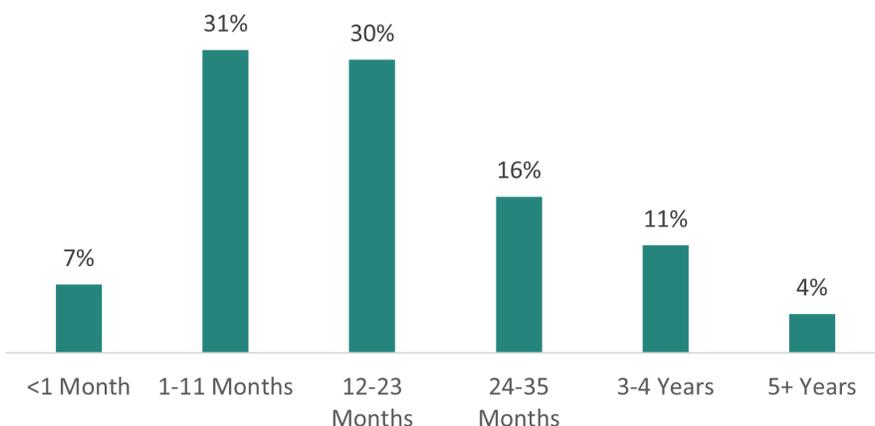
- While a majority of children and youth in foster care live in nonrelative foster homes and relative foster homes, there are many youth who live in congregate care or in an institutional setting.

Percentage of Children and Youth in Foster Care on September 30, 2020 by Most Recent Placement Setting [N=407,493]



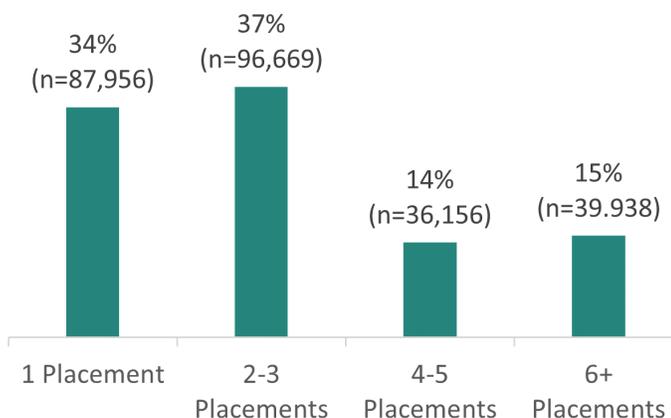
➤ Of the estimated 224,396 children who exited foster care during FFY 2020 for whom data were available, the median amount of time spent in care was 15.9 months.

Length of Stay for Children Exiting Foster Care in FY 2020 [N=224,396]



➤ 66% of children ages 5-17 experience more than one living placement while in foster care.

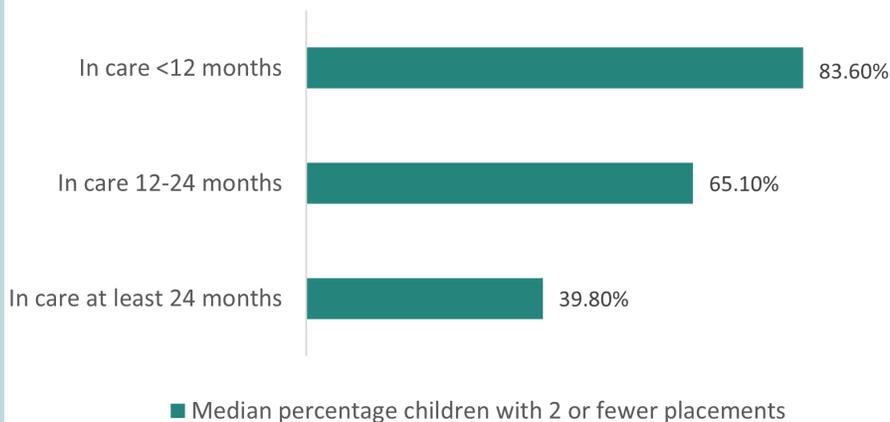
School-Aged Children and Youth in Foster Care (ages 5-17), FY2019: Number and Percentages of Children by Number of Living Placements



National data from AFCARS obtained from NCANDS; data is point-in-time count of children in care on 9/30/2019. Produced by Data Advocacy, Casey Family Programs.

➤ Data indicate that children with longer times in care have experienced more placement changes.

Children With Two or Fewer Living Placements in a Single Foster Care Episode



Endnotes

For full citations to references mentioned below, see [Exploring Education Outcomes: What Research Tells Us](#).

1. In CO the rate was 31% (Clemens, Kopfenstein, Tis & LaLonde, 2017). In one California study the rate was 75% (Frerer, Sosenko, Pellegrin, Manchik & Horowitz, 2013).
2. In MA, 25% of foster youth attended two or more schools during the academic year (Massachusetts Court Improvement Program, 2019); In CO, foster care students changed schools an average of 3.46 times (Clemens, LaLonde & Sheesley, 2016; see also Courtney, Terao, Bost, 2004, p.42).
3. Zorc, O'Reilly, Matone, Long, Watts, & Rubin, 2013; In MA, 33% of foster care students were chronically absent (Massachusetts Court Improvement Program, 2019).
4. All students: National Center for Education Statistics (for 2013-2014 school year). In IN, 23.3% or 2.5 times higher than other students (Indiana Department of Education and Department of Child Services Foster Care Data Report 2018-2019 School Year, April 1, 2020). In MA, 12% (Massachusetts Court Improvement Program, 2019); In WA, 14.3% of all school age foster youth or about 3.5 times that of other students (includes expulsions) (Source: WA Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), 2020, retrieved from <https://washingtonstatereportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/ReportCard/ViewSchoolOrDistrict/103300>
5. IN: 1.08%, 4 times higher than other students (Indiana Department of Education and Department of Child Services Foster Care Data Report 2018-2019 School Year, April 1, 2020); In WA, all school age foster youth, about 3.5 times that of other students (includes suspensions) (Source: OSPI (2020), retrieved from <https://washingtonstatereportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/ReportCard/ViewSchoolOrDistrict/103300>
6. IN: English Language Pass Rate 29.2% (Grade 10) (Indiana Department of Education and Department of Child Services, 2020); WA: 32.7% meet grade level and also meet state standards at less than ½ the rate of same grade peers (Crume, 2020; Chen, Pyle & Aldrich, 2019).
7. McLeskey, Rosenberg & Westing, 2010; Zeitlin, 2006; Pecora, Kessler, Williams, Downs, English, White & O'Brien, 2010; Courtney, Terao, Bost, 2004; Nationally, 2.7 times more likely than non-foster youth (Gee, 2020; Casaneuva, Smith, Dolan & Ringeisen, 2011; OR: 30% of 16-18 year-olds (Lee, Powers, Geenen, Schmidt, Blakeslee & Hwang, 2018).
8. From U.S. Department of Education - In 2019-20, the number of students ages 3-21 who received special education services under the IDEA was 7.3 million or 14% of all public school students. Among those students receiving special education services, the most common category of disability (33%) was specific learning disabilities. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) database, retrieved October 31, 2021, from <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/osepidea/618-data/state-level-data-files/index.html#bc>

9. Foster and non-foster youth graduation rates in 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).
10. McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003.
11. Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004.
12. CO: 13.4% (Clemens, 2014); WA: 13.4% (4-year college) and 37.6% (any post-secondary) (Crume, 2020; Chen, Pyle & Aldrich, 2019).
13. Casey Family Programs, 2018.
14. Pecora et al., 2003.



This document was developed by the Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, a project of the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, Washington, DC. To learn more about legal education issues for children in the foster care system, visit <https://www.fostercareandeducation.org/>. Special thanks to the Los Angeles County Office of Education for research support to contribute to these materials.

