

State-level Data for Understanding Child Welfare in the United States

Companion Guide

Introduction

Child Trends' [updated comprehensive resource](#) of state-level data for understanding child welfare provides state and national data on child maltreatment, foster care, kinship caregiving, permanency, and transition-age youth. This resource compiles critical data from a variety of sources on children, youth, and families who came in contact with the child welfare system.

This Companion Guide for Child Welfare Data provides (1) information on how the state profiles can be used, (2) descriptions of each data source, (3) an overview of the current state of child welfare in the United States, and (4) contextual information necessary to interpret the data. As stakeholders use these data in their decision making, they should consider the long history of the child welfare field and the nuances of child welfare data, as well as how the intersection of the two impact the data's meaning.

Using the state profiles

The state profiles are valuable resources for policymakers, advocates, researchers, and reporters. The following list outlines some ways in which stakeholders can use the data.

- Policymakers
 - Promote and inform data-driven decision making
 - Allocate funding and resources
 - Make course corrections
 - Monitor child and family outcomes
- Advocates
 - Illustrate need
 - Assist with planning policy agendas
 - Inform policy recommendations
 - Demonstrate scope of problems
 - Motivate stakeholders to act
- Researchers
 - Evaluate effectiveness of policies and programs
 - Examine disparities and disproportionalities
 - Forecast trends
- Reporters
 - Inform reporting with current data
 - Support or refute anecdotal reports
 - Inform public opinion
 - Hold public officials accountable

Data Source Descriptions

NCANDS

The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) collects data from states, on a voluntary basis, on reports of child maltreatment, as well as subsequent agency responses and case outcomes. Examples of data reported in NCANDS include characteristics of the children involved, the types of and circumstances surrounding maltreatment, the findings on the case, and services provided.

AFCARS

The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) collects data on children in foster care from state and Tribal Title IV-E agencies, as well as on children adopted with Title IV-E agency involvement. States are required to submit data on the demographics of children, foster parents, and adoptive parents; removal episodes; placements; and exits from foster care.

Child Welfare Financing Survey

Conducted by Child Trends, the Child Welfare Financing Survey is a biennial national survey of child welfare agencies and serves as a comprehensive guide on agency expenditures. It provides information about federal, state, and local expenditures on child welfare services, including a breakdown of the sources used and types of services funded.

United States Census data

The Census is a count of the number of people living in the United States. In addition to providing data to researchers on the general U.S. population (such as gender, race/ethnicity, and age), the Census is used to determine the distribution of federal and state funds.

American Community Survey

The American Community Survey (ACS) is an annual survey conducted by the United States Census Bureau that collects information on demographics, educational attainment, employment, and housing. It is different than the decennial Census in that it is administered more frequently and collects more detailed information.

State of Child Welfare in the United States in FY 2021

Maltreatment*

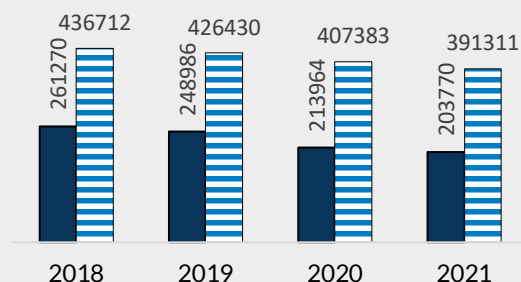
There were **3.3 million** maltreatment referrals in FY 2021

18% of children who received an investigation were found to be **victims of maltreatment**

Which is **586,554** maltreatment victims

Foster care entries and caseload

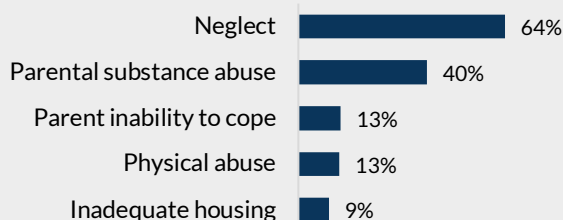
■ Number of children ages 0 to 17 entering care in each FY
 ■ Number of children ages 0 to 20 in care at end of each FY



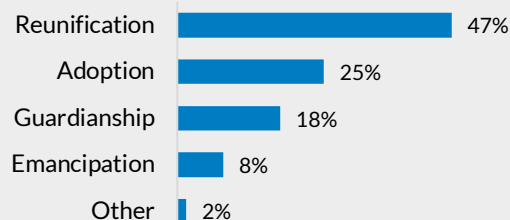
Foster care caseload by race/ethnicity



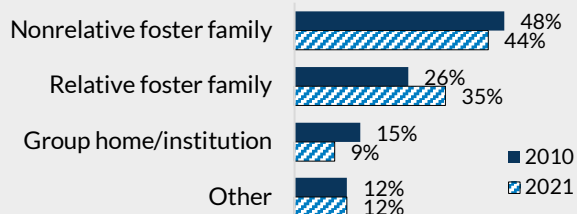
Most common foster care entry reasons



Outcomes of children exiting foster care



Placement type



Living with grandparents in 2021**



4.5 million

U.S. households include a grandparent living with a grandchild

Source, unless specified otherwise: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) for FY2020.

* National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) for FY2021.

** American Community Survey for calendar year 2021.

Contextual Information to Interpret Data

Many factors contribute to the number and experiences of children involved with the child welfare system in a given state, including state- and community-level factors; systemic racism, discrimination, and bias in the child welfare system; agency policies, practices, and legal definitions; variation in services available to support children and families, and variations in thresholds for entering and exiting care; and changing policies and practices in child welfare. We encourage stakeholders to consider these factors (described in further detail below) when interpreting and using child welfare data. State-level data can help stakeholders answer important questions about policy, programmatic, and practice differences that do exist, and how they can be altered to improve services and outcomes for children and families.

State- and community-level factors

As stakeholders review state-level data, they should investigate factors at the state and community levels that might provide insight into the underlying circumstances of families that contribute to child welfare involvement. These factors could include high-profile child deaths and/or child welfare lawsuits, neighborhood characteristics, rates of drug and alcohol abuse, lack of affordable housing and/or job opportunities, and availability of economic supports. For example, living in or experiencing poverty is a predictor for child welfare involvement.¹ One potential resource for families with low incomes is Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which can provide cash assistance to eligible families during times of need.² Restricting access to TANF has been shown to increase child welfare involvement, including the number of foster care placements.³ However, states operate their own TANF programs with different income eligibility thresholds, benefit levels, and other implementation policies, leading to vast differences in the utilization of TANF across states. All of these circumstances within a state or community have a potential influence on the number and characteristics of children in foster care, as well as the services they receive.

Systemic racism, discrimination, and bias

Children and families of color—especially Black or African American and Indigenous families—have historically been, and continue to be, disproportionately involved in the child welfare system. This means that the proportion of children of color involved in the system is larger than their proportion in the general population. Disproportionalities and disparities are present at every stage in the child protective process: Black children are more likely to be reported and identified as victims of maltreatment, and to enter foster care, and are less likely than White children to exit foster care in a timely manner or be adopted.^{4,5} Given differences in demographics across the country, the extent of disproportionality varies greatly at the state and local levels.⁶ These disproportionalities exist because of systemic racism (current and historical),^{7,8} individual racism and bias of mandated reporters and child welfare caseworkers,⁹ and experiences of poverty and oppression that are linked to child welfare involvement.¹⁰ Solutions intended to address disproportionality have, in many cases, perpetuated the problem rather than improved it. For example, standardized decision-making tools are meant to increase objectivity but are based on the White middle-class standard that is prevalent in the child welfare system. Advocates across the country have focused on dismantling and re-envisioning racist systems, including child welfare. For example, recognizing maltreatment as a societal rather than a personal failing could begin to replace the need for child protection intervention in the first place, as could providing families with meaningful social or economic supports. These state profiles can help stakeholders begin to understand disparities in the child welfare population, as well as the outcomes of these disparities, as they develop anti-racist strategies to reform the child welfare system.

Policies and practices for identifying families in need

Child welfare agency policies and practices for identifying children in need of protection, or families in need of assistance, differ from state to state. For example, states differ in the use of centralized reporting or

referral hotlines, the introduction of standardized decision-making tools within agencies, the use of predictive analytics, community-based maltreatment prevention efforts, and more. Another example can be seen in mandated reporter policies, including policies on who is required to report maltreatment, which trainings are required for mandated reporters, and penalties for failure to report maltreatment. These policies have evolved over time, often in response to high-profile cases of abuse and neglect¹¹ that most often occur in White communities.¹² Changes to mandated reporting policies are made under the presumption that expanding the definition of mandated reporters or adding training requirements result in more people making more accurate reports of maltreatment. However, little is known about whether this presumption is correct. As with state- and community-level issues, stakeholders should consider these types of policy and practice nuances as they discuss or use data, which ensures a better understanding of the complete picture of how families come to be involved with and experience the child welfare system.

Varying definitions and thresholds for entering and exiting care

Individual states and child welfare agencies are responsible for specifying and applying definitions of maltreatment and the threshold at which a child is removed from their home or exits foster care. This results in variation among, and sometimes within, states (e.g., county- vs. state-administered child welfare systems). For example, according to the [State Child Abuse and Neglect Policies database](#), medical neglect is considered maltreatment in all states but educational neglect is considered maltreatment in only 38 states.¹³ The level of evidence required to substantiate an allegation of maltreatment also varies by state. Most states require the lowest level of evidence (e.g., preponderance of the evidence, in which the evidence shows that something is more likely than not to be true), whereas others require higher levels of evidence (e.g., credible evidence or probable cause) that the child was a victim of maltreatment. In other words, it is harder to substantiate allegations of maltreatment in some states than others. Additionally, in some states, a positive drug screen at birth could mean an automatic referral to child protective services, even if the mother is using a controlled substance under the prescription and monitoring of a doctor (e.g., medication-assisted treatment such as Suboxone®). When stakeholders fully understand the definitions of maltreatment and removal/exit thresholds, they can better make sense of variations in child welfare data between states.

Varying availability of services to support reunification

In addition to varying definitions and thresholds, states also vary in terms of which services they make available to support family reunification. Safely reuniting children and families is the first priority of child welfare agencies, but this cannot happen without appropriate supports and services. Reunification support strategies include regular parent/child/sibling visitation, short-term intensive reunification services, family group decision making, comprehensive family assessments, parent support systems (e.g., peer mentors, education and training programs), or post-reunification services.¹⁴ However, many localities lack the resources to provide appropriate addiction treatment for parents and struggle with a shortage in foster homes to care for children while their parents are in treatment. Even when addiction treatment is available, federal reunification timelines are often at odds with recovery timelines, meaning that parents are not always able to meet case plan requirements of attaining and sustaining sobriety according to the court's timeline. Our state profiles can help stakeholders promote timely reunification and appropriate service delivery by shedding light on current reunification rates.

The changing landscape of child welfare

Our final consideration is that of broad, large-scale changes and shifts currently underway in the child welfare field. More attention is now given to preventing children from entering foster care to begin with. In 2018, Congress passed the Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First Act). Before passage of the Family First Act, Title IV-E funding—the largest federal funding source of child welfare services—could only be used to support children and families already involved with the child welfare system. Now, states with an approved prevention plan can use Title IV-E funds for qualifying evidence-based services: in-home, parent

skill-based services; mental health treatment; and substance abuse prevention and treatment services to help families whose children are at risk of being removed.¹⁵ The Family First Act also extends additional support to youth transitioning out of foster care and promotes the use of family-based foster care settings by restricting federal funds for congregate or group care settings. While the Family First Act is a step in the right direction, it is not without criticism, including that it does not go far enough “upstream” in preventing maltreatment from occurring in the first place and for its lack of culturally appropriate evidence-based services approved for use under the Act. As of January 2023, 40 out of 64 Title IV-E agencies have approved Title IV-E Prevention Plans and 10 more are awaiting approval of their Prevention Plans.¹⁶ As more jurisdictions submit and implement Prevention Plans, we will likely see changes in child welfare caseloads, use of congregate care settings, and outcomes.

Additionally, in future years, stakeholders should consider the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the child welfare system, and how that impact is reflected in data. Agencies had to quickly adapt to implementing policies and providing services virtually, or limiting some services all together, such as limited parental or sibling visitation. When looking at the third and fourth quarters of FY 2020 (April – September 2020)—considered the peak of the “lockdown” period—the number of screened-in referrals decreased by 23 percent compared to the same timeframe in 2019.¹⁷ Additionally, fewer children were subject to investigations of maltreatment and subsequently found to be victims of maltreatment. Therefore, when examining trends in data over time, it is important to acknowledge this anomaly in the data. Furthermore, we must also recognize that the actual effect of COVID-19 on maltreatment incidence remains unclear.

Conclusion

Each year, hundreds of thousands of children are separated from their families and enter foster care. While that number is beginning to trend downward, stakeholders must continue to examine why these removals happen and how the child welfare system can best respond to child maltreatment and serve vulnerable children and families. Data are an important decision-making tool; when paired with an understanding of the nuances of child welfare systems, they are an effective tool for systemic change. The child welfare system in the United States is complex, ever-changing, and evolving. We hope that all stakeholders, from advocates to researchers, will use these state-level data and the contextual information provided here to improve outcomes for children and families.

¹ Conrad-Hiebner, A. & Byram, E. (2018). The temporal impact of economic insecurity on child maltreatment: A systematic review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 21(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838018756122>

² Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (2022). Policy basics: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Retrieved from: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/temporary-assistance-for-needy-families>

³ Johnson-Motoyama, M., & Ginther, D. (2018). Do changes to the social safety net affect child maltreatment? A preliminary study of TANF. Retrieved from:

http://kslegislature.org/li_2018/b2017_18/committees/ctte_h_children_and_seniors_1/documents/testimony/20180130_01.pdf

⁴ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2016). Racial disproportionality and disparity in child welfare. Washington, DC: U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau. Retrieved from:

https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/racial_disproportionality.pdf

⁵ Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2011). Disparities and disproportionality in child welfare: Analysis of the research. Retrieved from:

<https://www.aecf.org/resources/disparities-and-disproportionality-in-child-welfare/>

⁶ https://www.ncjfcj.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/NCJFCJ-Disproportionality-TAB-2015_0.pdf

⁷ Roberts, D. (2002). *Shattered bonds: The color of child welfare*. Basic Civitas Books.

⁸ Arnaud, M., Best, C., Jihad, M., Jones, R., & Ogbazghi, B. (2020, July 15). *A conversation about the manifestation of white supremacy in the institution of child welfare, Level 1*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUBuOCVhUZI&feature=youtu.be>

⁹ Minoff, E. (2018). Entangled roots: The role of race in policies that separate families. Center for the Study of Social Policy. Retrieved from: <https://cssp.org/resource/entangled-roots>

¹⁰ Fluke, J., Harden, B. J., Jenkins, M., & Ruehrdanz, A. (2010). Research synthesis on child welfare disproportionality and disparities. Annie E. Casey Foundation. Retrieved from:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285631551_Research_synthesis_on_child_welfare_Disproportionality_and_disparities

¹¹ Wolfe, D. S. (2012). Revisiting Child Abuse Reporting Laws. *Social Work Today* 12(2), 14. Retrieved from:

<https://www.socialworktoday.com/archive/031912p14.shtml>

¹² Itzkowitz, M. & Olson, K. (2022). Closing the front door of child protection: Rethinking mandated reporting. *Child Welfare*. 100(2), 77-98.

¹³ Weigensberg, E., Islam, N., Knab, J. Grider, M., Page, J., & Larson A. (2022). *State Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) Policies Database Codebook 2021*. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

¹⁴ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2017). Supporting successful reunifications. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. Retrieved from: https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/supporting_reunification.pdf

¹⁵ Family First Prevention Services Act of 2017, Pub. L. 115-123, codified as amended at 42 U.S.C. §671.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2023). *Status of Submitted Title IV-E Prevention Program Five-Year Plans*. Retrieved from: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data/status-submitted-title-iv-e-prevention-program-five-year-plans>.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2022). *Child Maltreatment 2020*. Available from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/child-maltreatment>.