State-level Data for Understanding Child Welfare in the United States | *Companion Guide*

Child Trends®

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

Primary 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.

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.

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.

Family Ties Kinship Policy Survey
Conducted by Child Trends in 2022, this comprehensive survey of kinship care policies identified efforts by child welfare agencies to promote kinship care and support kinship caregivers of children and youth who are known to the child welfare system. The survey covers licensure of kinship foster parents, supports for unlicensed kinship caregivers, kinship diversion practices, and more.

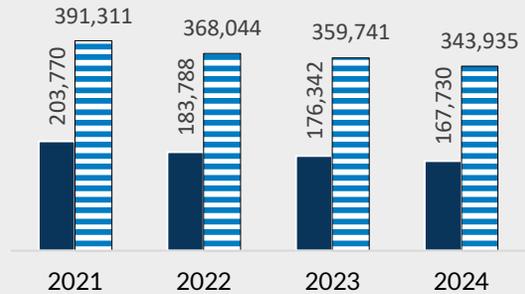# State of Child Welfare in the United States in FY 2024

Maltreatment*

There were
3.8 million
maltreatment referrals
in FY 2024

16% of children who received an investigation were found to be **victims of maltreatment**

Which is
530,622
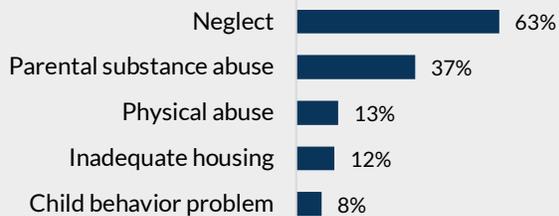**maltreatment victims**

Foster care entries and caseload

- ■ Number of children entering care in each FY
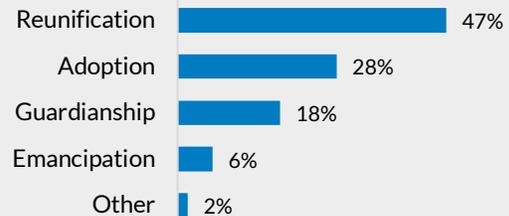- ▤ Number of children in care at end of each FY

	2021	2022	2023	2024
Number of children in care at end of each FY	391,311	368,044	359,741	343,935
Number of children entering care in each FY	203,770	183,788	176,342	167,730

Foster care caseload by race/ethnicity

Foster care population

Race/ethnicity	Foster care population
White	42%
Black or African American	25%
Hispanic or Latino	22%
Multiple races	8%
American Indian/Alaska Native	2%
Asian	1%
Pacific Islander	<1%

General child population

Race/ethnicity	General child population
White	48%
Black or African American	14%
Hispanic or Latino	27%
Multiple races	5%
American Indian/Alaska Native	1%
Asian	6%
Pacific Islander	<1%

Most common foster care entry reasons

Reason	Percent
Neglect	63%
Parental substance abuse	37%
Physical abuse	13%
Inadequate housing	12%
Child behavior problem	8%

Outcomes of children exiting foster care

Outcome	Percent
Reunification	47%
Adoption	28%
Guardianship	18%
Emancipation	6%
Other	2%

Placement type

Placement	2014	2024
Nonrelative foster family	46%	43%
Relative foster family	29%	30%
Group home/institution	14%	12%
Other	11%	15%
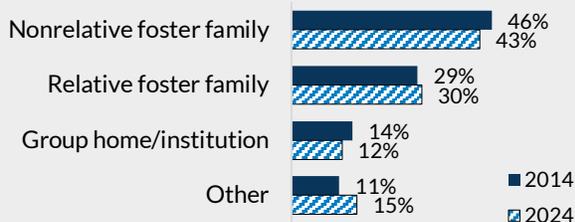
Living with grandparents in 2024**

4.8 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 FY2024.
* National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) for FY2024.
**American Community Survey for calendar year 2024.

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.

Recent changes to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS)

When interpreting data across years, users should understand differences in data structure and reporting requirements. Starting in FY2022, the AFCARS data were submitted to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in a new format that includes additional data elements such as placement type. While states were required to submit the additional data elements and the new file structure, the data made publicly available do not contain that new information. Additionally, starting with data from FY2022, files released by the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN) are now referred to as "AB" files as opposed to annual files. The new AB file format produces slightly different estimates than the old annual file format (used for and prior to FY2021), which limits comparability across years. Furthermore, the data presented here will not match the ACF Dashboards because the Dashboards use files that are different than the AB files.

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.

Persistent disparities in experiences with the child welfare system

Children and families of color—especially Black or African American and Indigenous families—are disproportionately involved in the child welfare system. This means that the proportion of Black and Indigenous families involved in the child welfare system is larger than their share of the general population would suggest. These differences in experiences are present during all phases of the child welfare process: when maltreatment is reported and investigated, during decisions to remove a child from their home, and in the length of time children spend in foster care.[4,5] Disproportionate exposure to the child welfare system comes at a steep cost: Black children with foster care experience are more likely to be incarcerated and less likely to be employed or have substantial financial earnings than their White peers. Hispanic children with foster care experience are less likely than their non-Hispanic peers to have stable housing.[6,7] Research

documents multiple factors that contribute to racial and ethnic disparities in child welfare, including but not limited to racial bias among mandated reporters and child welfare staff[8,9]; community exposure to poverty, combined with definitions of maltreatment that conflate neglect with poverty[10,11,12]; and insufficient and often mismatched services provided to families.[13]

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 polices 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 neglect[14] that most often occur in White communities.[15] 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.[16] 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.[17] 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.[18] 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 2025, 48 out of 64 Title IV-E agencies have approved Title IV-E Prevention Plans and 5 more are awaiting approval of their Prevention Plans.[19] 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, stakeholders should continue to 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.[20] 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.

More changes are coming to the child welfare field in the coming years as a result of the reauthorization of Title IV-B of the Social Security Act, one of the largest sources of flexible spending for child welfare agencies.[21] Signed into law in January 2025, the Supporting America's Children and Families Act increases child welfare funding by $75 million annually starting in FY2026; this includes increased funding for Court Improvement Programs, the promotion of engaging youth voices in policy and planning, the expansion of services for young adults (up to age 26) with foster care experience, short-term financial assistance to families to prevent unnecessary child removals due to poverty, and more. These changes will directly influence what services are offered and who is eligible for support, which will likely be reflected in child welfare data through child and family outcomes.

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.

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