



Foster Care Statistics

This factsheet provides the most recent national statistical estimates for children and youth in foster care from fiscal year (FY) 2006 and also provides earlier data from FY 2000 to allow for some estimate of trends over time. Data were obtained from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). AFCARS collects information on all children in foster care for whom State child welfare agencies have responsibility for placement, care, or supervision and on children who are adopted with public child welfare agency involvement.

Key Findings

- On September 30, 2006, there were an estimated 510,000 children in foster care. (See Exhibit 1.)
- Almost a quarter (24 percent) were in relative homes, and nearly half (46 percent) were in nonrelative foster family homes. (See Exhibit 2.)
- Almost half (49 percent) had a case goal of reunification with their families.
- The percentage of children who left the system to be reunited with their families or placed with relatives remained about the same from 2000 to 2006 (70 percent and 69 percent, respectively). (See Exhibit 3.)
- Almost half of the children (49 percent) who left foster care in FY 2006 were in care for less than 1 year. (See Exhibit 4.)



Introduction

AFCARS uses the definition of foster care found in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), where it is defined as “24-hour substitute care for children outside their own homes.”¹ Foster care settings include, but are not limited to, nonrelative foster family homes, relative foster homes (whether payments are being made or not), group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, and preadoptive homes.

The data presented for FY 2006 were current on September 30, 2006, and are from *The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2006 Estimates as of January 2008 (14)* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). The data presented for FY 2000 are from *The AFCARS Report: Final Estimate for FY 1998 Through FY 2002 (12)* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006).²

Within each section of this report, appropriate data estimates are presented for three timeframes detailed below:

- **Point in Time** refers to information about the population of children in foster care on a given day: September 30, the end of the Federal fiscal year.
- **Entries** refer to information about children entering foster care during a given timeframe: October 1 through September 30 of the Federal fiscal year.
- **Exits** refer to information about children exiting foster care during a given timeframe: October 1 through September 30 of the Federal fiscal year.

Children who exit and reenter multiple times in a year are counted only once. Some percentages do not add up to 100 percent or the estimated numbers do not add up to the total number in the category due to rounding of the original AFCARS source data and to missing data.

¹ Title 45, Volume 4, Part 1355, Section 57. The CFR citation can be accessed online: <http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/get-cfr.cgi?YEAR=1996&TITLE=45&PART=1355&SECTION=57&SUBPART=&TYPE=TEXT>

² Beginning in FY 1998, the majority of States/jurisdictions provided extensive, reliable data to AFCARS. Two major changes were made to AFCARS in FY 2000 to make it consistent with data collected for Census 2000. The categories for reporting race were revised, and multiple race designations were permitted. For these reasons, the comparison year used here is FY 2000.

Children In, Entering, and Exiting Care

These numbers give a broad picture of the number of children in the foster care system during a specific fiscal year.

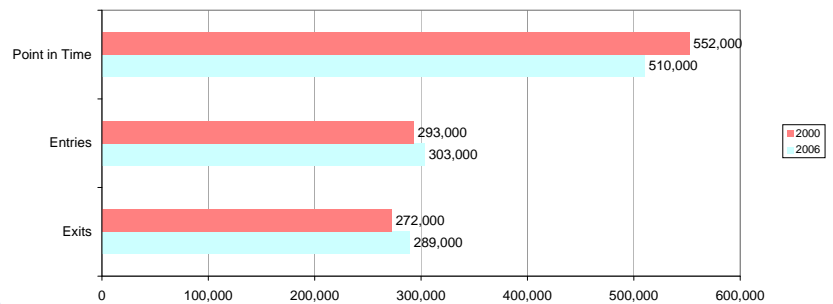
Point in Time. On September 30, 2006, there were an estimated 510,000 children in foster care.

Entries. During FY 2006, 303,000 children entered foster care.

Exits. During FY 2006, 289,000 children exited foster care.

Trends. Between FY 2000 and FY 2006, the number of children in care on September 30 dropped, while entries into and exits from foster care during those years increased. (See Exhibit 1.)

**Exhibit 1: Numbers of Children In, Entering, and Exiting Foster Care
FY 2000 and FY 2006**



Placement Settings

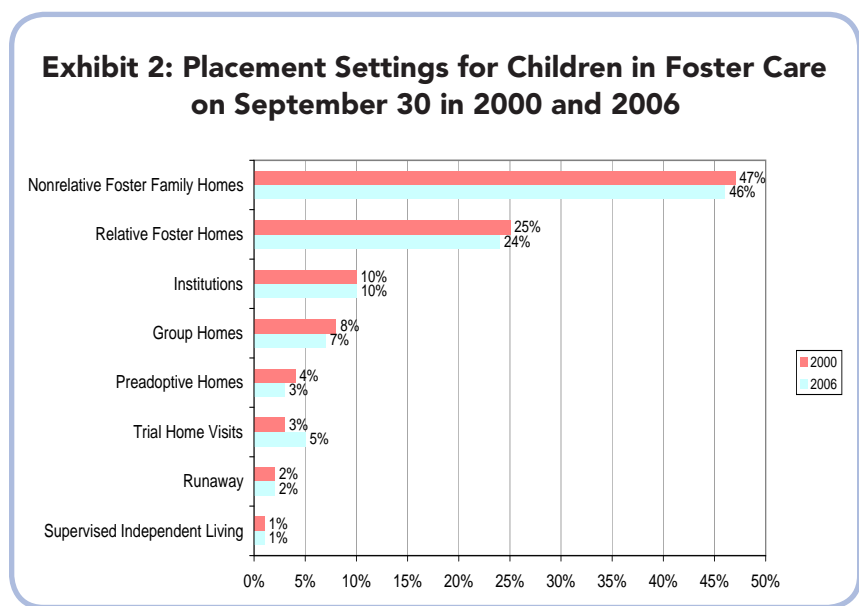
Children in foster care live in a variety of placement settings and may move among or between settings while in care. For example, a child may move from a group home to a relative foster home.

Point in Time. The estimated 510,000 children in foster care on September 30, 2006, were in the following types of placements:

- 46 percent in nonrelative foster family homes
- 24 percent in relative foster homes
- 10 percent in institutions
- 7 percent in group homes
- 3 percent in preadoptive homes

- 5 percent on trial home visits (Situations in which the State retains supervision of a child and the child returns home on a trial basis, for an unspecified period of time, are considered a discharge from foster care after 6 months.)
- 2 percent had run away
- 1 percent in supervised independent living

Trends. Placement type on September 30 remained relatively unchanged between FY 2000 and FY 2006. (See Exhibit 2.)



Permanency Goals

The preferred goal for children in care is permanency with caring parents. Permanency goals refer to the goals for permanent placement that are reported to AFCARS.³

Point in Time. Of the estimated 510,000 children in foster care on September 30, 2006:

- 49 percent had a goal of reunification with parent(s) or primary caregiver(s)

³ For more information about State requirements for children's permanency goals, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's *Case Planning for Families Involved With Child Welfare Agencies*: www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/caseplanning.cfm

- 23 percent had a goal of adoption
- 8 percent had a goal of living with a relative or guardian
- 9 percent had a goal of long-term foster care
- 6 percent had a goal of emancipation⁴
- 6 percent had not yet had a permanency goal established

Trends. Due to a significant improvement in the quality of data on permanency goals since 2000, a comparison between the two years is not provided.

Outcomes

The outcome statistics for children leaving foster care are somewhat reflective of the percentages for the permanency goals (see above), especially for reunification and adoption.

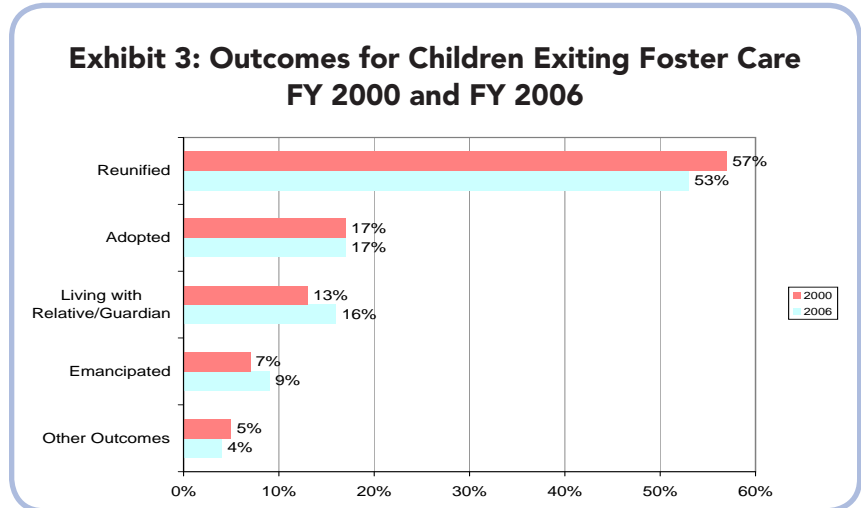
Exits. Of the estimated 289,000 children who exited foster care during FY 2006:

- 53 percent were reunited with parent(s) or primary caregiver(s)
- 17 percent were adopted
- 16 percent went to live with a relative or guardian
- 9 percent were emancipated
- 4 percent had other outcomes⁵

Trends. The percentage of children who left the system for adoption stayed the same from FY 2000 to FY 2006 (17 percent), as did the percentage of children who left the system to be reunited with their families or placed with relatives (70 percent in FY 2000 and 69 percent in FY 2006). (See Exhibit 3.)

⁴ Emancipation refers to both the emancipation of minors (i.e., youth below the age of majority) and youth who age out of foster care between 18 and 21, depending on State policy.

⁵ Other outcomes include being transferred to another agency, running away, and death.



Length of Stay

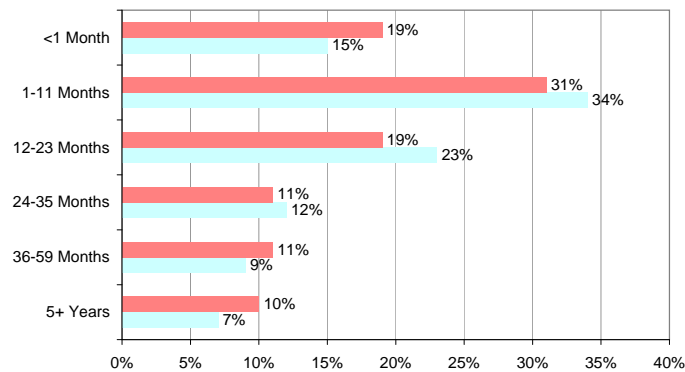
Length of stay in foster care refers to the amount of time between entering and exiting foster care.

Exits. Of the estimated 289,000 children who exited foster care during FY 2006:

- 15 percent had been in care less than 1 month
- 34 percent had been in care for 1 to 11 months
- 23 percent had been in care for 12 to 23 months
- 12 percent had been in care for 24 to 35 months
- 9 percent had been in care for 36 to 59 months
- 7 percent had been in care for 5 or more years

Trends. The median amount of time children spent in foster care remained relatively stable between FY 2000 (12.0 months) and FY 2006 (12.2 months). However, when the time periods are broken down, it becomes apparent that fewer children were in foster care less than 1 month or longer than 3 years and more children were in foster care from 1 to 35 months in FY 2006, compared to FY 2000. (See Exhibit 4.)

**Exhibit 4: Length of Stay for Children Exiting Foster Care
FY 2000 and FY 2006**



Age

Children can enter foster care at any age, from infancy up to age 18 years, and most exit by the time they are 18 years old.⁶

Point in Time. The median age of the children in foster care on September 30, 2006, was 10.2 years.⁷

Entries. The median age of children entering foster care during FY 2006 was 7.5 years.

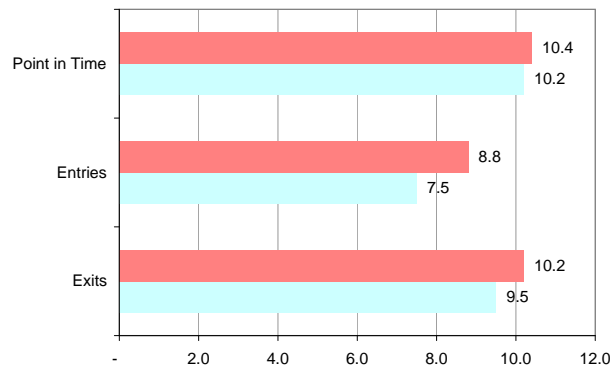
Exits. The median age of children exiting foster care during FY 2006 was 9.5 years.

Trends. The median age at entry and exit decreased between FY 2000 and FY 2006. The largest decrease was among the entries (from 8.8 to 7.5 years of age). There was a slightly smaller decrease among the exits (from 10.2 to 9.5 years of age). (See Exhibit 5.)

⁶ In some States, youth can remain in care past age 18 under special circumstances (for example, if they are in an educational program). In some States, youth who exit care at age 18 can sign themselves back into care to receive certain benefits, such as college tuition assistance available through Federal or State programs. Find information about foster care services for youth over age 18 on the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Youth Development website: www.nrcys.ou.edu/yd/state_pages.html. Information about college tuition assistance for foster youth is available on the Information Gateway website: www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postadoption/assistance/college.cfm.

⁷ The median refers to the number in the middle when all numbers are placed in order. In this case, it means that an equal number of children are older and younger than this age.

Exhibit 5: Median Age in Years of Children In, Entering, and Exiting Foster Care FY 2000 and FY 2006



Race and Ethnicity

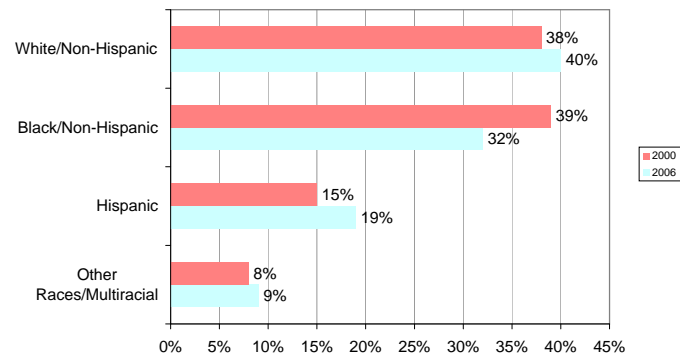
AFCARS tracks children's race or ethnicity. Using U.S. Bureau of Census standards, children of Hispanic origin may be of any race. Beginning in FY 2000, children could be identified with more than one race designation.

Point in Time. Of the estimated 510,000 children in foster care on September 30, 2006:

- 40 percent were White/Non-Hispanic
- 32 percent were Black/Non-Hispanic
- 19 percent were Hispanic
- 9 percent were other races or multiracial

Trends. The percentage of Black/Non-Hispanic children in care on September 30 dropped 7 percentage points (from 39 to 32 percent) between FY 2000 and FY 2006, while the percentage of White/Non-Hispanic children rose 2 points and the percentage of Hispanic children rose 4 points. (See Exhibit 6.)

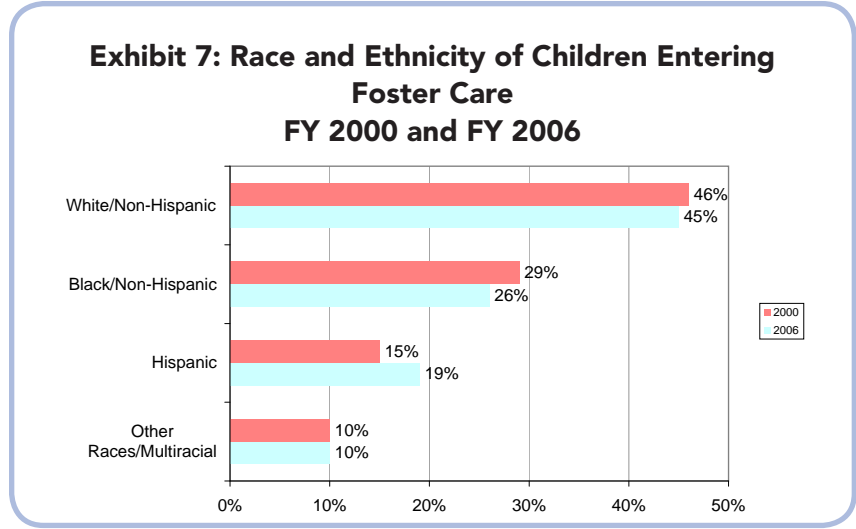
Exhibit 6: Race and Ethnicity of Children in Foster Care on September 30 in 2000 and 2006



Entries. Of the estimated 303,000 children who entered foster care during FY 2006:

- 45 percent were White/Non-Hispanic
- 26 percent were Black/Non-Hispanic
- 19 percent were Hispanic
- 10 percent were other races or multiracial

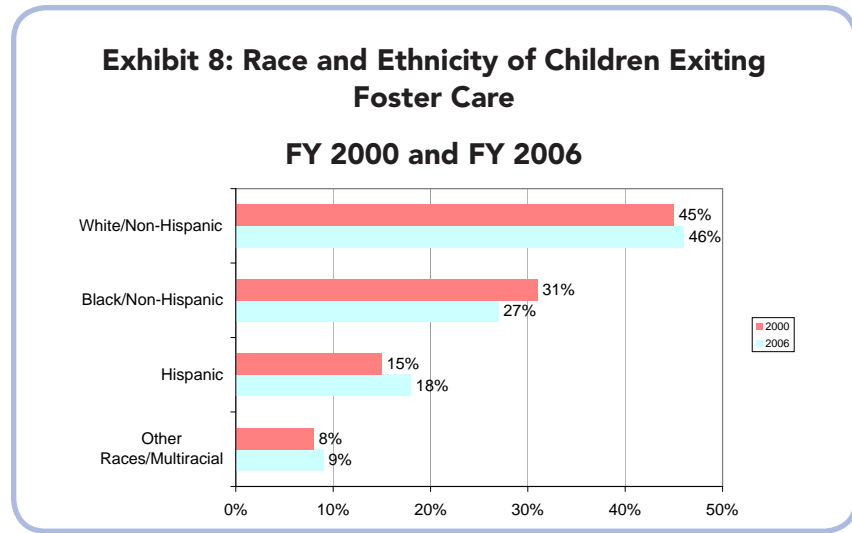
Trends. The percentages of White/Non-Hispanic and Black/Non-Hispanic children entering foster care decreased, and the percentages of Hispanic children increased. Other races remained the same between FY 2000 and FY 2006. (See Exhibit 7.)



Exits. Of the estimated 289,000 children who exited foster care during FY 2006:

- 46 percent were White/Non-Hispanic
- 27 percent were Black/Non-Hispanic
- 18 percent were Hispanic
- 9 percent were other races or multiracial

Trends. Changes in the racial composition of children exiting foster care between FY 2000 and FY 2006 included a 4-point decrease in the percentage of Black/Non-Hispanic children and an increase in the percentage of White/Non-Hispanic children, Hispanic children, and multiracial children or children of other races. (See Exhibit 8.)



Gender

AFCARS numbers have consistently shown a slightly greater percentage of boys than girls in foster care.

Point in Time. Of the estimated 510,000 children in foster care on September 30, 2006, 52 percent were male and 48 percent were female.

Trends. The same ratio of male to female children (52 percent to 48 percent, respectively) was found in both FY 2000 and FY 2006.

Additional Information

For more detailed information on AFCARS, visit the Children's Bureau website:

www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/systems/afcars/about.htm

AFCARS Reports are available online:

www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm#afcars

Some additional resources for information about children in the child welfare system include the following:

- To find out more about the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in foster care in your State, refer to *Child Welfare Outcomes*, an annual report published by the Children's Bureau. The most recent version of this report is available online from the Children's Bureau: www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm#cw

- To find out more about child maltreatment, including information about victims and perpetrators, read *Child Maltreatment*, an annual report based on States' reports to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System. Access the report through the Children's Bureau website: www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm#can

References

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2006). *The AFCARS Report: Final Estimate for FY 1998 Through FY 2002 (12)*. Retrieved October 30, 2008, from www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report12.htm

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2008). *The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2006 Estimates as of January 2008 (14)*. Retrieved October 30, 2008, from www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report14.htm