

Foster Care Statistics 2019

This factsheet provides the most recent national statistical estimates for children and youth in foster care from Federal fiscal year (FFY) 2019 and provides data from FFY 2009 to allow for an examination of trends over an 11-year period. Data are based on State reports to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), which collects information on (1) all children in foster care for whom State child welfare agencies have responsibility for placement, care, or supervision and (2) all children who are adopted with public child welfare agency involvement. The data for FFY 2019 are from [The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FFY 2019 Estimates as of June 23, 2019 \(No. 27\)](#) (Children's Bureau, 2020), and the data for FFY 2009 are from [The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FFY 2009 Estimates as of July 2010 \(No. 17\)](#) (Children's Bureau 2010).

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AFCARS uses the definition of foster care found in the [Code of Federal Regulations](#) (title 45, volume 4, part 1355, section 57), where it is defined as "24-hour substitute care for children outside their own homes." 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.

Within each section of this report, data estimates are presented for the 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 FFY.
- **Entries** refers to information about children entering foster care during a given timeframe: October 1 through September 30 (i.e., the FFY).
- **Exits** refers to information about children exiting foster care during a given timeframe: October 1 through September 30 (i.e., the FFY).

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

Key Findings

The following are key findings from this report:

- On September 30, 2019, there were an estimated 423,997 children in foster care (see exhibit 1).
- On September 30, 2019, nearly one-third of these children (32 percent) were in relative homes, and nearly half (46 percent) were in nonrelative foster family homes (see exhibit 2).
- On September 30, 2019, more than half (55 percent) had a case goal of reunification with their parents or primary caretakers (see exhibit 3).
- About half (47 percent) of the children who left foster care in FFY 2019 were discharged to be reunited with their parents or primary caretakers (see exhibit 4).
- Two-fifths (40 percent) of the children who left foster care in FFY 2019 were in care for less than 1 year (see exhibit 5).

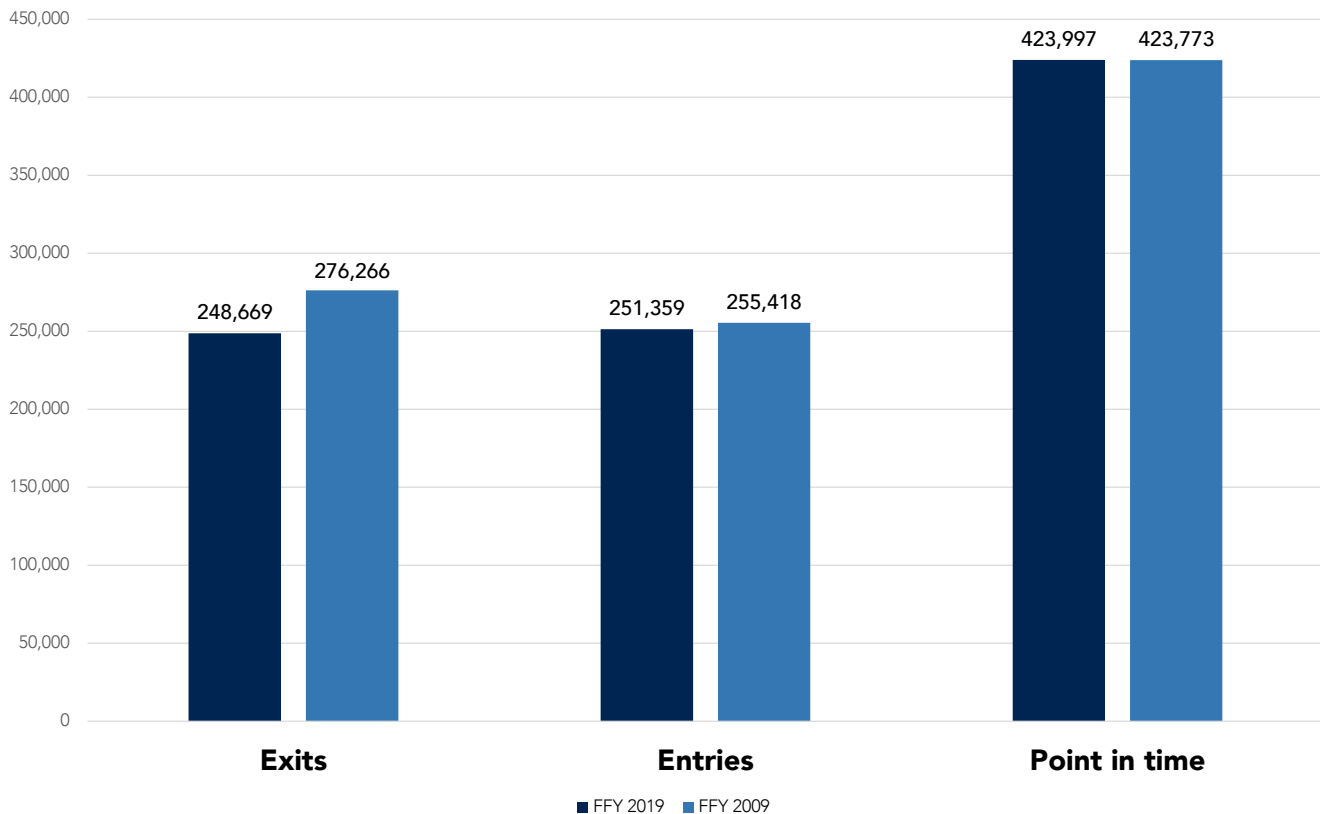
CHILDREN IN, ENTERING, AND EXITING CARE

These numbers give a broad picture of the number of children in foster care during FFY 2019:

- **Point in time.** On September 30, 2019, there were an estimated 423,997 children in foster care.
- **Entries.** During FFY 2019, 251,359 children entered foster care.
- **Exits.** During FFY 2019, 248,669 children exited foster care.

- **Trends.** The number of children in foster care on September 30, 2019, (423,997) is almost equal to those in care on the same day in 2009 (423,773) (see exhibit 1). Additionally, there was a decrease in these numbers from FFY 2018 (435,031) to FFY 2019 (423,997).

EXHIBIT 1: NUMBERS OF CHILDREN IN, ENTERING, AND EXITING FOSTER CARE IN FFY 2009 AND FFY 2019



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.

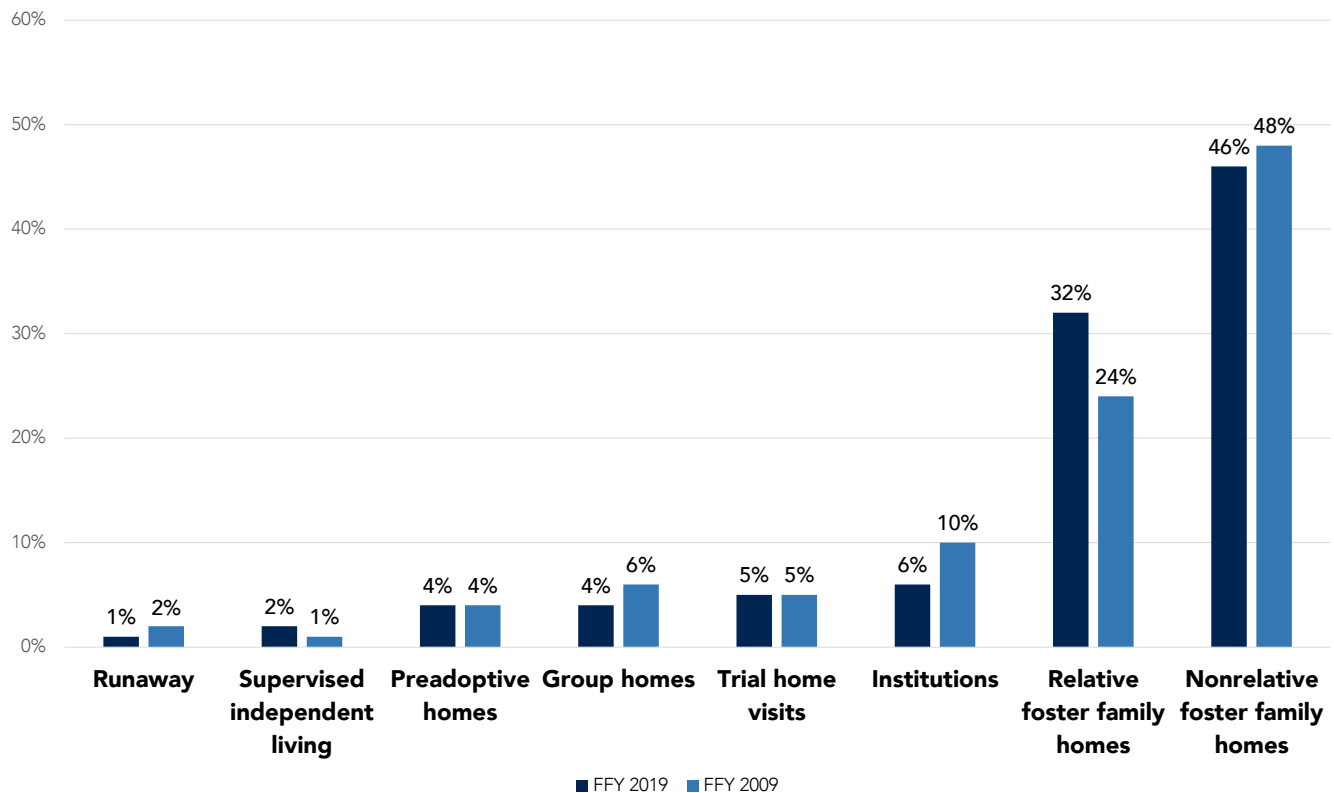
Point in time. The estimated 423,997 children in foster care on September 30, 2019, were in the following types of placements:

- 46 percent in nonrelative foster family homes
- 32 percent in relative foster family homes
- 6 percent in institutions

- 5 percent on trial home visits (situations in which the State retains supervision of a child, the child returns home on a trial basis for an unspecified period of time, and the child is considered discharged from foster care after 6 months)
- 4 percent in group homes
- 4 percent in preadoptive homes
- 2 percent in supervised independent living
- 1 percent had run away

Trends. Percentages for the types of placement settings on September 30 changed slightly between FFY 2009 and FFY 2019, with a notable increase in the use of placements with relatives and a decrease in placements in group homes and institutions (see exhibit 2).

EXHIBIT 2: PLACEMENT SETTINGS FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE ON SEPTEMBER 30 IN 2009 AND 2019



CASE PLAN GOALS

The preferred goal for children in care is permanency with caring parents. Case plan goals refer to the goals for permanent placement that are reported to AFCARS.¹

Point in time. The estimated 423,997 children in foster care on September 30, 2019, had the following case plan goals:

- 55 percent had a goal of reunification with parent(s) or principal caretaker(s).
- 28 percent had a goal of adoption.
- 4 percent had not yet had a case plan goal established.
- 4 percent had a goal of emancipation.²
- 4 percent had a goal of guardianship.

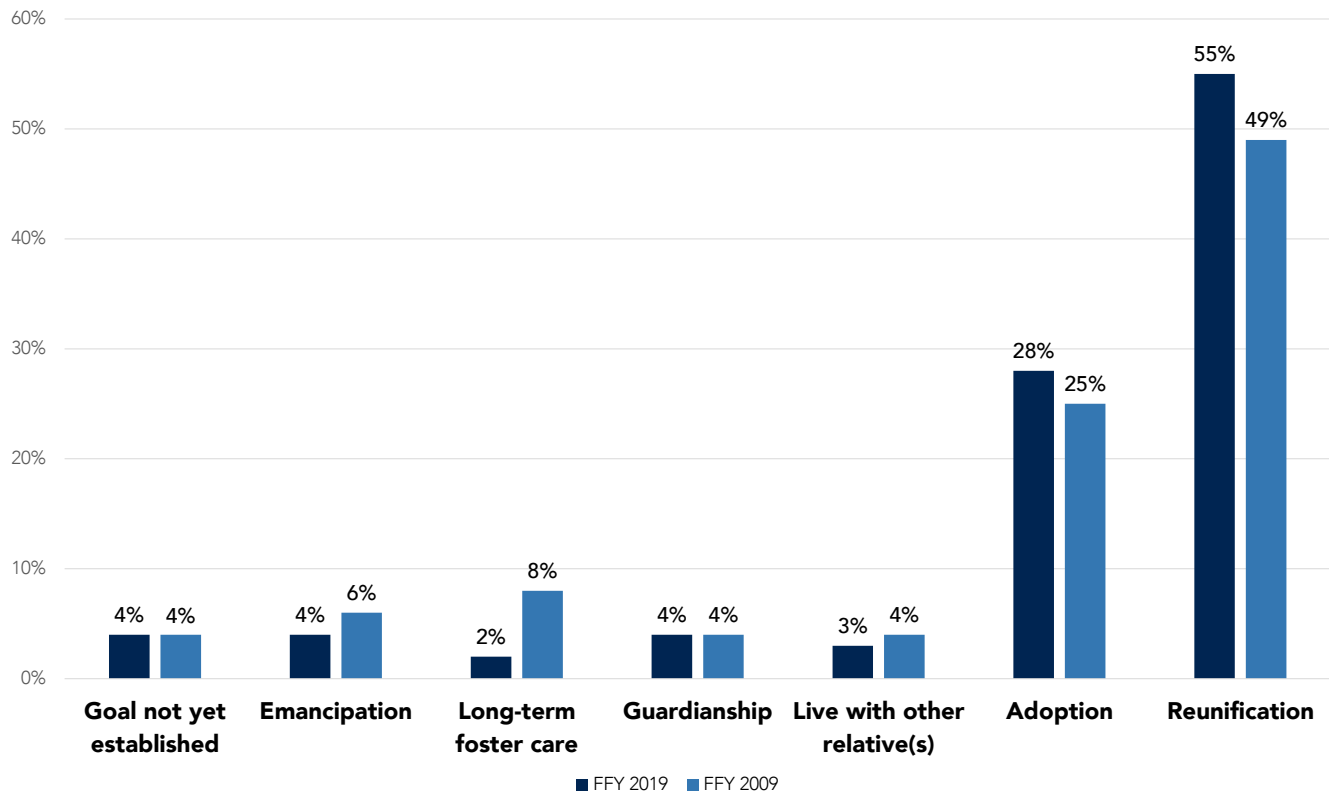
- 3 percent had a goal of living with other relatives.
- 2 percent had a goal of long-term foster care.

Trends. From FFY 2009 to FFY 2019, the percentage of children with case plans of reunification experienced the largest increase, while the largest decrease was in the percentage of children with case plans of long-term foster care (see exhibit 3).

¹ 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](#).

² 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.

EXHIBIT 3: PERMANENCY GOALS FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE ON SEPTEMBER 30 IN 2009 AND 2019



OUTCOMES

The outcome statistics for children leaving foster care largely reflect the percentages for the permanency goals, especially for reunification and adoption.

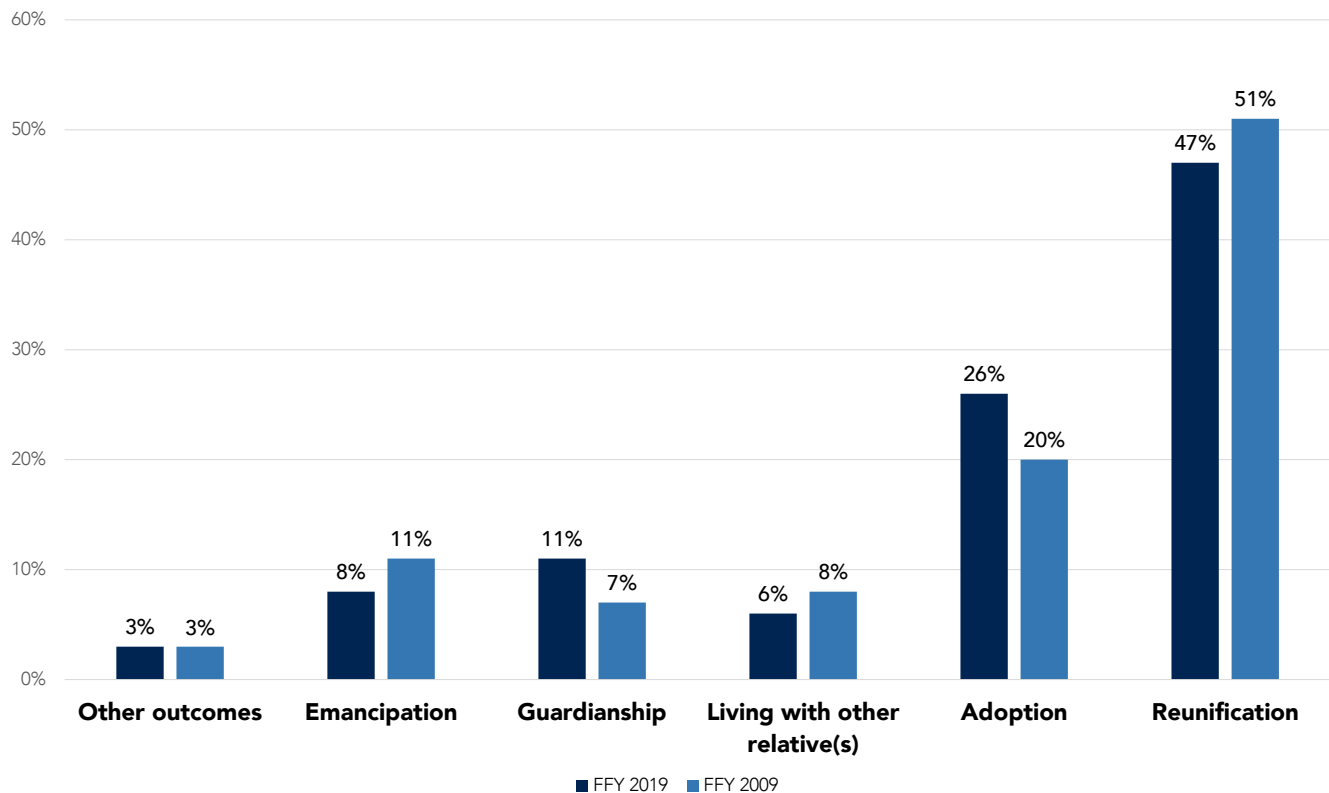
Exits. The following were the outcomes for the estimated 248,669 children who exited foster care during FFY 2019:

- 47 percent were reunited with parent(s) or primary caretaker(s).
- 26 percent were adopted.
- 11 percent went to live with a guardian.
- 8 percent were emancipated.
- 6 percent went to live with another relative.
- 1 percent had other outcomes.³

Trends. From FFY 2009 to FFY 2019, there were increases in the percentages of children who left the system for adoption and guardianship. There were decreases in the percentages of children who left the system to reunite with their parents or primary caregivers or live with other relatives or who had other outcomes. There was also a decrease in the percentage of those who emancipated (see exhibit 4).

³ Other outcomes included being transferred to another agency, running away, and death. The majority of these children were transferred.

EXHIBIT 4: OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN EXITING FOSTER CARE IN FFY 2009 AND FFY 2019



LENGTH OF STAY

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

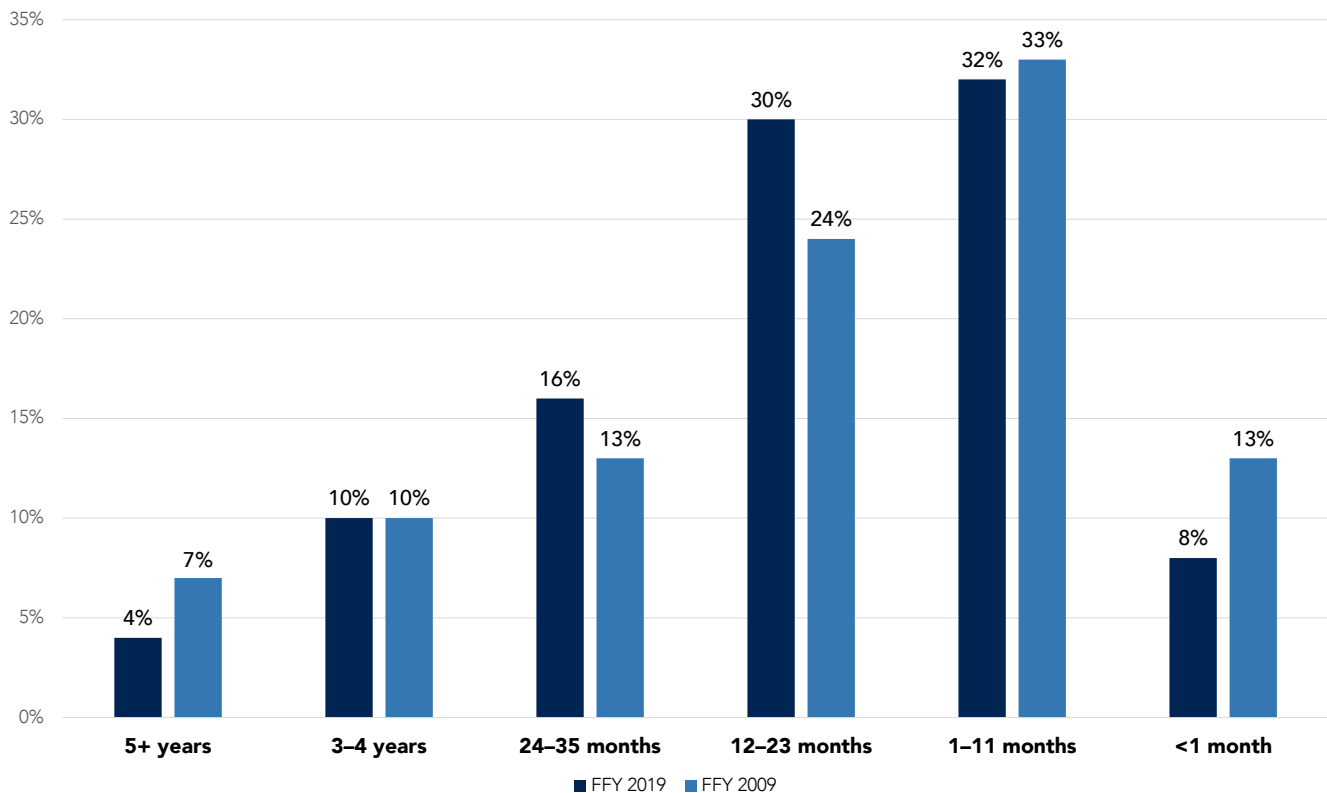
Exits. Of the estimated 251,359 children who exited foster care during FFY 2019, the median amount of time spent in care was 15.5 months.⁴ The following were the lengths of time in care:

- 8 percent in care less than 1 month
- 32 percent in care for 1 to 11 months
- 30 percent in care for 12 to 23 months
- 16 percent in care for 24 to 35 months
- 10 percent in care for 3 to 4 years
- 4 percent in care for 5 or more years

Trends. For children exiting foster care, the median amount of time spent in care increased from FFY 2009 (13.7 months) to FFY 2019 (15.5 months). Additionally, when comparing those two periods, the largest increase was for children in care for 12 to 23 months. The largest decreases in percentage were for children in care for less than 1 month and children in care for 5 or more years (see exhibit 5).

⁴ Other outcomes included being transferred to another agency, running away, and death. The majority of these children were transferred.

EXHIBIT 5: LENGTH OF STAY FOR CHILDREN EXITING FOSTER CARE IN FFY 2009 AND FFY 2019



AGE

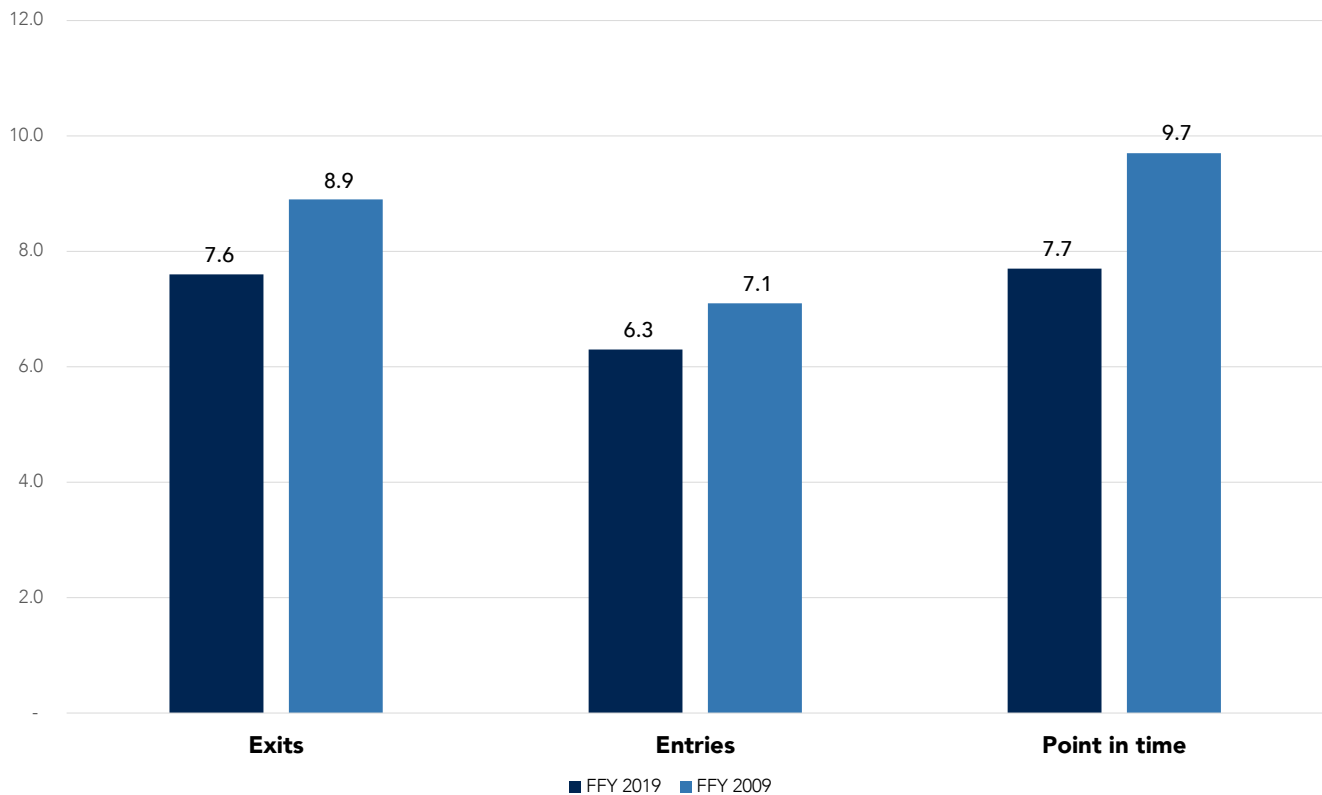
Children can enter foster care from infancy up to age 18 years (and sometimes older).⁵ The following are the median ages of children in, entering, and exiting foster care:

- **Point in time.** The median age of the children in foster care on September 30, 2019, was 7.7 years.
- **Entries.** The median age of children entering foster care during FFY 2019 was 6.3 years.

- **Exits.** The median age of children exiting foster care during FFY 2018 was 7.6 years.
- **Trends.** From FFY 2009 to FFY 2019, the median age decreased for each of the three timeframes (see exhibit 6).

⁵ Some States allow children to remain in foster care to age 19, 20, or 21. The [Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008](#) gave States the option to extend title IV-E assistance to youth ages 18 to 21, with certain stipulations.

EXHIBIT 6: MEDIAN AGE IN YEARS OF CHILDREN IN, ENTERING, AND EXITING FOSTER CARE IN FFY 2009 AND FFY 2019



RACE AND ETHNICITY

AFCARS tracks children's race or ethnicity.

Point in time. The following are the races and ethnicities of the estimated 423,997 children in foster care on September 30, 2019:

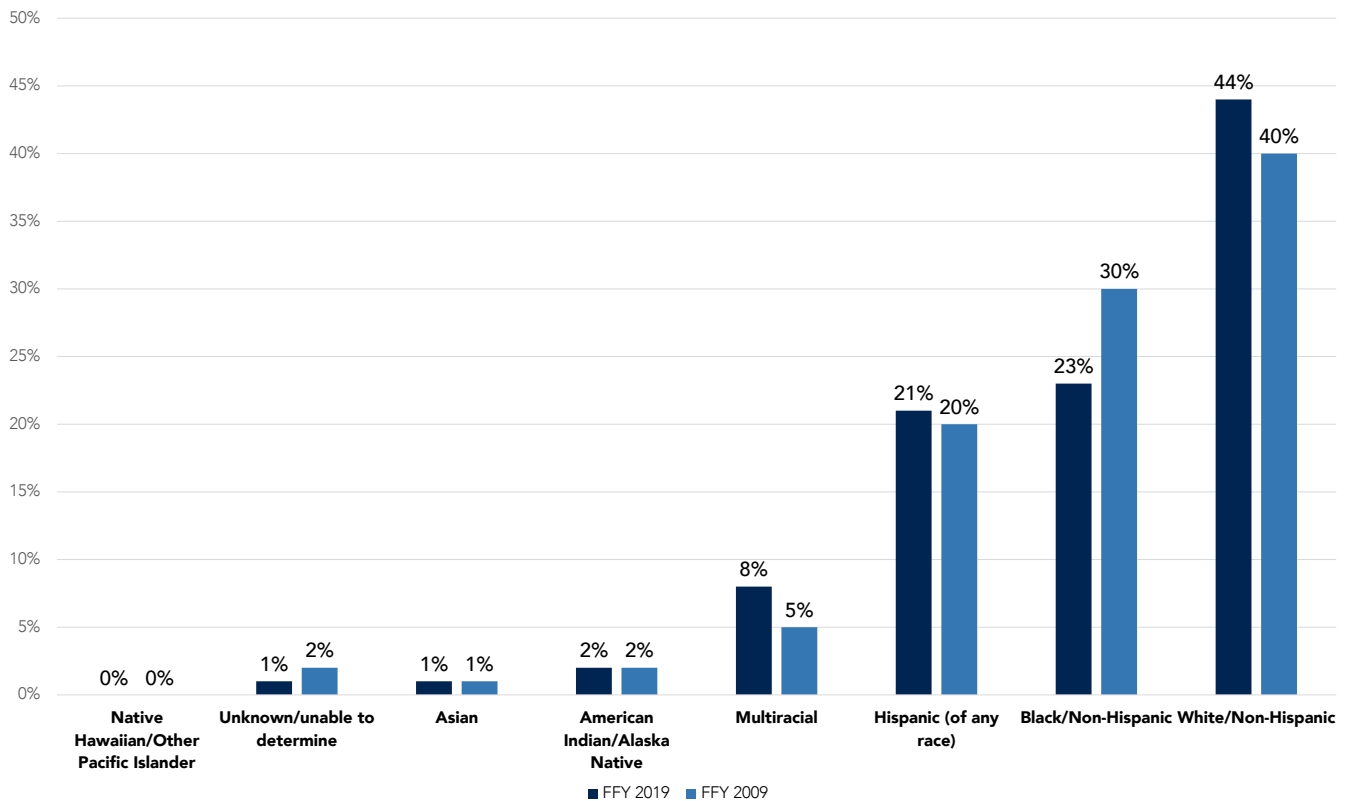
- 44 percent were White.
- 23 percent were Black or African American.
- 21 percent were Hispanic (of any race).
- 8 percent were multiracial.
- 2 percent were American Indian/Alaska Native.

- 1 percent were Asian.
- 1 percent were unknown or unable to be determined.
- 0 percent were Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander.⁶

Trends. The percentage of Black or African-American children in care on September 30 decreased between FFY 2009 and FFY 2019, while the percentages of White, Hispanic, and multiracial children increased (see exhibit 7).

⁶ The number of Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander children in foster care is small enough that the percentage is rounded to zero.

EXHIBIT 7: RACE AND ETHNICITY OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE ON SEPTEMBER 30 IN 2009 AND 2019



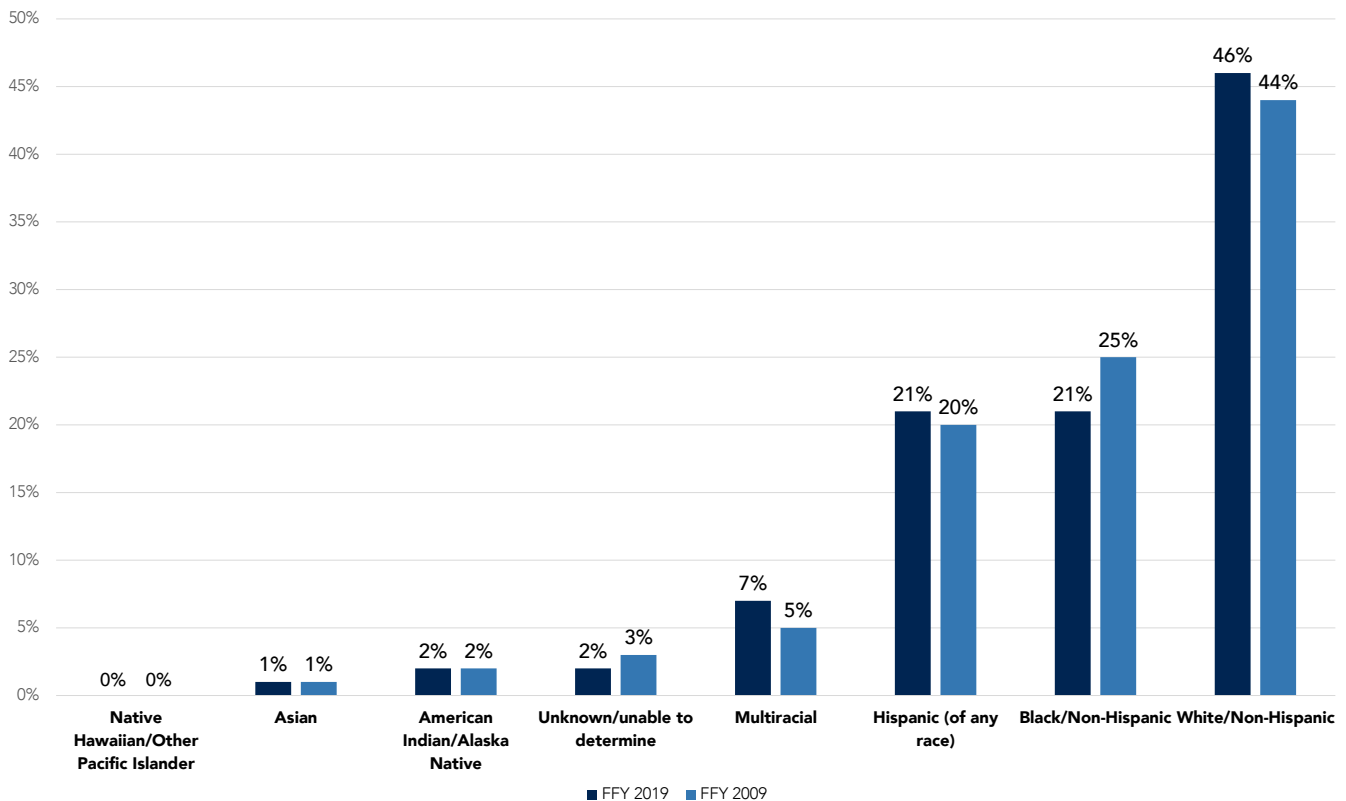
Entries. The following are the races and ethnicities of the estimated 251,359 children who entered foster care during FFY 2019:

- 46 percent were White.
- 21 percent were Black or African American.
- 21 percent were Hispanic (of any race).
- 7 percent were multiracial.
- 2 percent were unknown or unable to be determined.
- 2 percent were American Indian/Alaska Native.

- 1 percent were Asian.
- 0 percent were Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander.

Trends. From FFY 2009 to FFY 2019, the percentages of Black or African-American children entering foster care—as well as for those whose race or ethnicity was unknown or unable to be determined—decreased, while the percentages of White, Hispanic, and multiracial children entering foster care increased (see exhibit 8).

EXHIBIT 8: RACE AND ETHNICITY OF CHILDREN ENTERING FOSTER CARE IN FFY 2009 AND FFY 2019

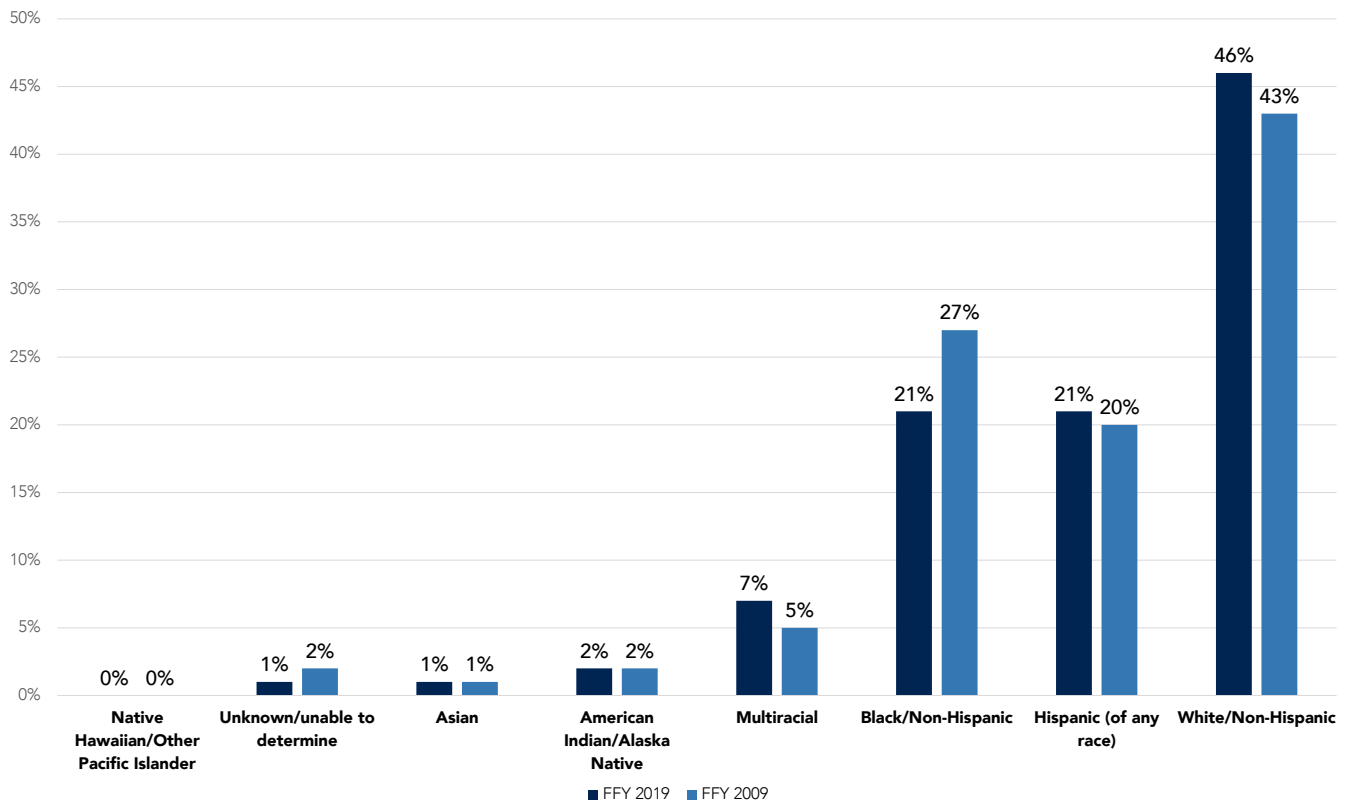


Exits. The following are the races and ethnicities of the estimated 248,669 children who exited foster care during FFY 2019:

- 46 percent were White.
- 21 percent were Black or African American.
- 21 percent were Hispanic (of any race).
- 7 percent were multiracial.
- 2 percent were American Indian/Alaska Native.
- 1 percent were Asian.
- 1 percent were unknown or unable to be determined.
- 0 percent were Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander.

Trends. From FFY 2009 to FFY 2019, the percentages of Black or African-American children and children of unknown race or whose race was unable to be determined who exited foster care decreased, while the percentages of White, Hispanic, and multiracial children exiting foster care increased (see exhibit 9).

EXHIBIT 9: RACE AND ETHNICITY OF CHILDREN EXITING FOSTER CARE IN FFY 2009 AND FFY 2019



GENDER

AFCARS data have consistently shown a slightly greater percentage of boys than girls in foster care:

- **Point in time.** Of the estimated 423,997 children in foster care on September 30, 2019, 52 percent were male and 48 percent were female.
- **Trends.** The proportions of males to females in foster care on September 30 in 2009 and 2019 were slightly different, changing from 53 percent male and 47 percent female in FFY 2009 to 52 percent male and 48 percent female FFY 2019.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

To view AFCARS reports, visit the Children's Bureau's [Adoption & Foster Care Statistics](#) webpage.

For additional information on AFCARS, visit the Children's Bureau's [About AFCARS](#) webpage.

The following are additional resources for information about children in the child welfare system:

- To find out more about the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in foster care in your State, refer to the Children's Bureau's annual Child Welfare Outcomes reports and data site.

- To find out more about child maltreatment, including information about victims and perpetrators, read the annual Child Maltreatment reports, which are based on States' reports to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System.

REFERENCES

Children's Bureau. (2010). *The AFCARS report: Preliminary FFY 2009 estimates as of July 2010 (17)*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/afcars-report-17>

Children's Bureau. (2020). *The AFCARS report: Preliminary FFY 2019 estimates as of June 23, 2020 (27)*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/afcars-report-27>

SUGGESTED CITATION

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