Demographics of Children in Foster Care

By Alfred Pérez, Kasia O'Neil, and Sarah Gesiriech

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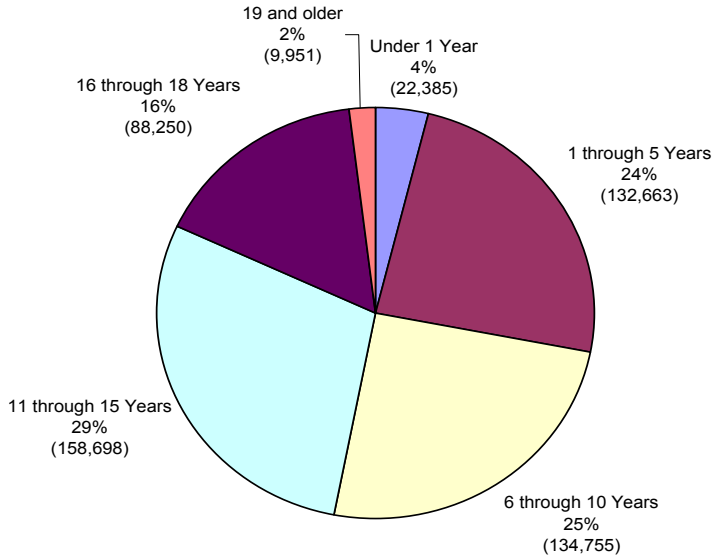
This briefing paper highlights some basic data on children in foster care. The data provide a snapshot of the foster care population on September 30, 2000 (the close of federal fiscal year (FFY) 2000).

The numbers presented are based on the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data collected for FFY 2000. Other materials on this site use FFY 2001 data, which are more recent, but are preliminary.[1] AFCARS data include all children in foster care, regardless of their eligibility for Title IV-E reimbursement.

Population. On September 30, 2000, 547,415 children were in publicly supported foster care in the United States. While the gender distribution was virtually equal, the largest share of children in care were ages 11-15 (29%), followed closely by children ages 6-10 (25%) and ages 1-5 (24%). Figure 1 shows the distribution of children in foster care by age.

Figure 1
Children in Foster Care By Age



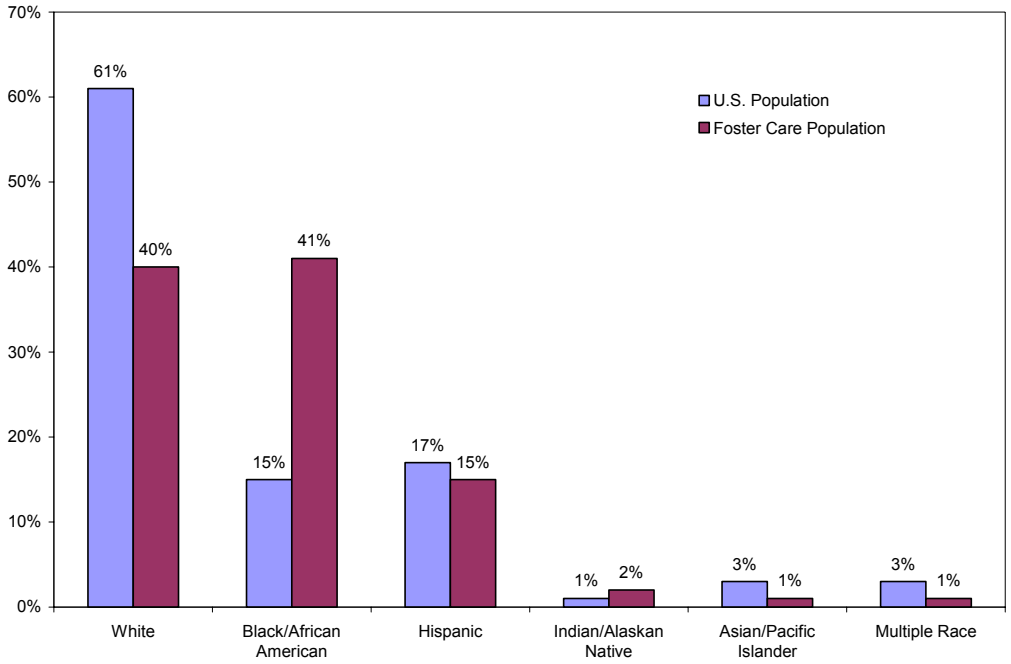
[1] Please see the text box at the end of this paper for an explanation of the FY 2000 & FY 2001 foster care data.

Race and Ethnicity. In FY 2000 African American children represented the largest share of children in foster care (41%), as shown in Figure 2. White children accounted for the second largest share (40%), followed by Hispanic children (15%).

Disproportionality. African American and Native American (Indian/Alaskan Native) children are overrepresented in foster care when compared to their representation in the total U.S. child population.[2] Specifically, African American children constitute 15% of the U.S. child population, but 41% of the foster care population. Native American children make up 1% of the U.S. population, but comprise 2% of the foster care population.

In contrast, Hispanic, Asian, and multiple-race children are underrepresented in foster care compared to their representation in the U.S. child population. This is particularly pronounced for white children, who make up 61% of the U.S. population, but 40% of the foster care population. Figure 2 presents the proportion of children in foster care compared to their share of the total U.S. child population by race and ethnicity.

Figure 2
Percentage of Children in Foster Care and in U.S. Child Population by Race/Ethnicity



[2] Population Reference Bureau, analysis of data from U.S. Census Bureau. *2000 Census Summary File 1*. As cited in: Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2002). *Kids Count Data Book.* AECF: Baltimore, MD.

Length of Stay. As shown in Figure 3, in FY 2000 more than one-fourth (28%) of children in foster care had been in care for at least two years but less than five years. Another 17% (91,828) of children had been in foster care for more than five years.

Figure 3
Children in Foster Care by Length of Stay

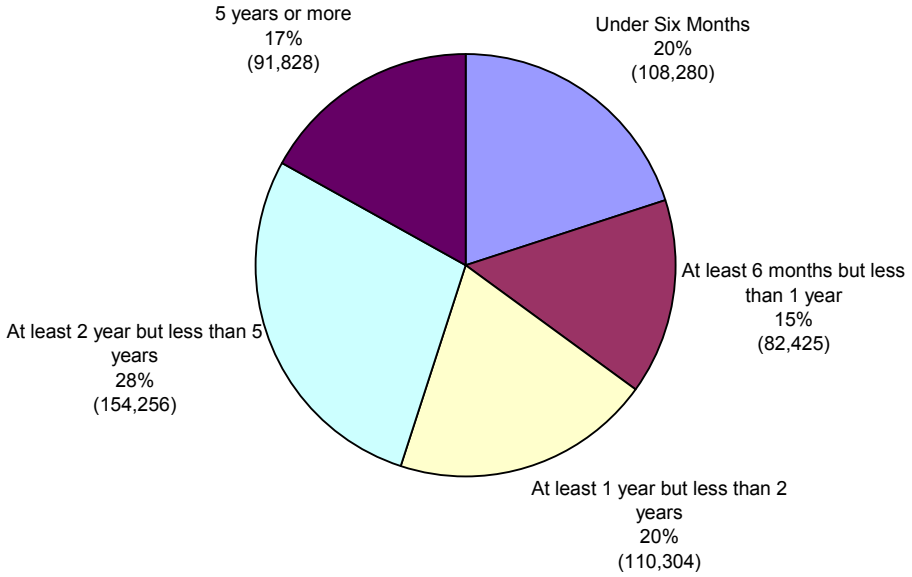


Table 1 on the next page presents the distribution of children in foster care by age and length of stay. As the table shows, nearly one-third (32%) of children ages 6-10 had been in care for at least two years but less than five years. Another 18 percent of children in this age group had been in care for at least five years. About one-fourth of children ages 11-15 (24%) and 16-18 (25%) had been in care for at least five years, while 51 percent of children ages 19 and older had been in care for at least five years.

Table 1 Children in Foster Care by Age and Length of Stay						
Age	Length of Stay					
	Under six months	At least 6 months but less than 12 months	At least 12 months but less than 24 months	At least 24 months but less than 60 months	Sixty or more months	Total
Total	**20%**	**15%**	**20%**	**28%**	**17%**	**100.0%**
Under 1 Year	64%	36%	0%	0%	0%	100.0%
1 through 5 Years	21%	18%	30%	29%	2%	100.0%
6 through 10 Years	17%	14%	20%	32%	18%	100.0%
11 through 15 Years	19%	14%	17%	26%	24%	100.0%
16 through 18 Years	14%	13%	18%	30%	25%	100.0%
19 and older	1%	1%	6%	41%	51%	100.0%

Permanency Goal. Federal law requires that children in foster care have a case plan with a clear and definitive permanency goal, such as reunification or adoption. As shown in Figure 4, in FY 2000 the most common permanency goal for children in foster care was reunification with a parent or principal caretaker (43%), followed by adoption (20%). Nine percent of children had long-term foster care as their permanency goal. Fifteen percent of children did not have a permanency goal established.

Figure 4
Children in Foster Care by Most Recent Permanency Goal

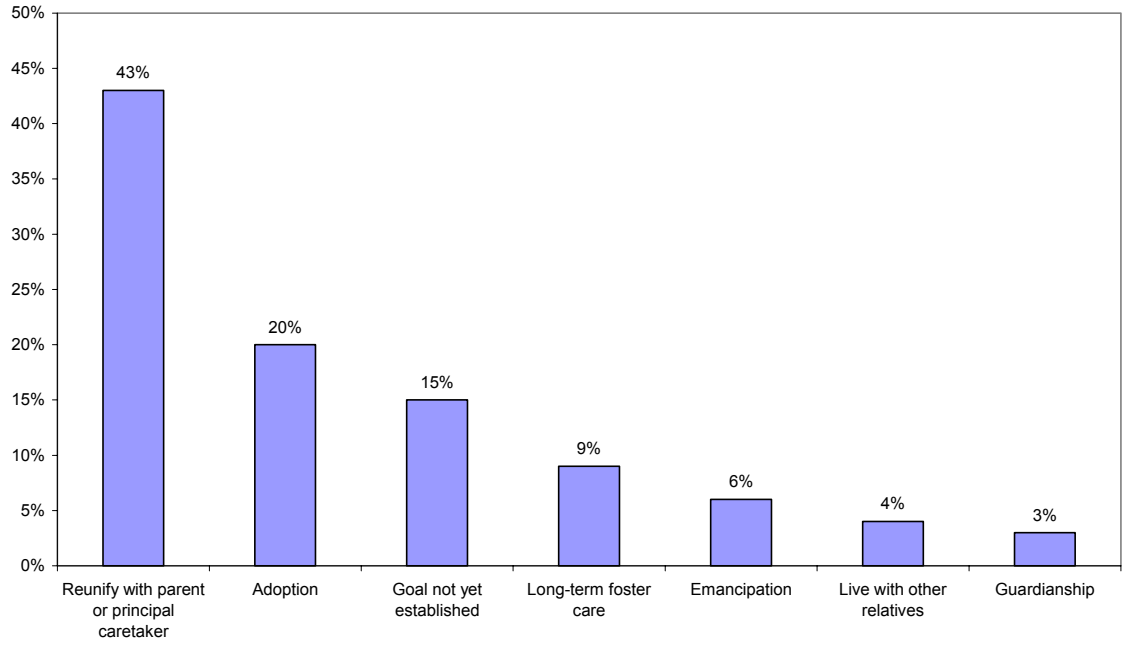


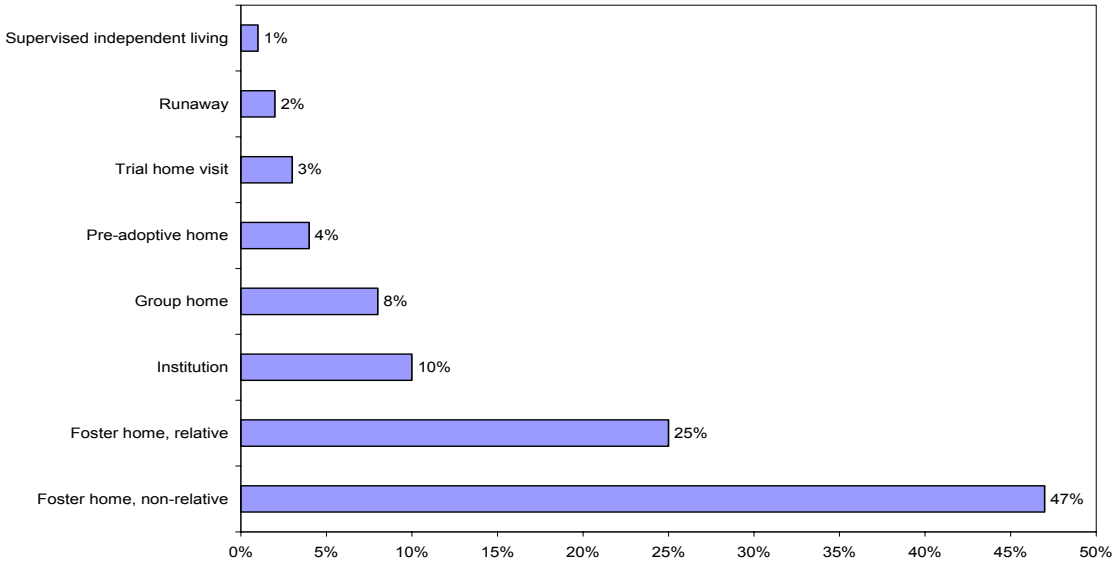
Table 2 shows the distribution of children in foster care by age and their most recent permanency goal. As shown, for both children ages 6-10 and children ages 11-15, over 40 percent (43% and 42%, respectively) had reunification as their permanency goal. Adoption was the second most common goal for both groups (29% and 16%, respectively). However, for children ages 11-15, an almost equal percentage had long-term foster care as their permanency goal (14% compared to 16%).

Table 2
Children in Foster Care by Age and Most Recent Permanency Goal

Age	Permanency Goal							
	Reunify with parent or principal caretaker	Live with other relative(s)	Adoption	Long-term foster care	Eman-cipation	Guardian-ship	Permanency goal not yet established	Total
Total	**43 %**	**4%**	**20%**	**9%**	**6%**	**3%**	**15%**	**100%**
Under 1Year	63%	2%	15%	2%	0%	0%	18%	100%
1 through 5 Years	51%	3%	28%	3%	0%	1%	14%	100%
6 through 10 Years	43 %	5%	29%	6%	0%	3%	14%	100%
11 through 15 Years	42%	6%	16%	14%	4%	4%	14%	100%
16 through 18 Years	32%	4 %	4%	15%	24 %	3%	18%	100%
19 and older	8%	2%	1%	12%	55%	2%	20%	100%

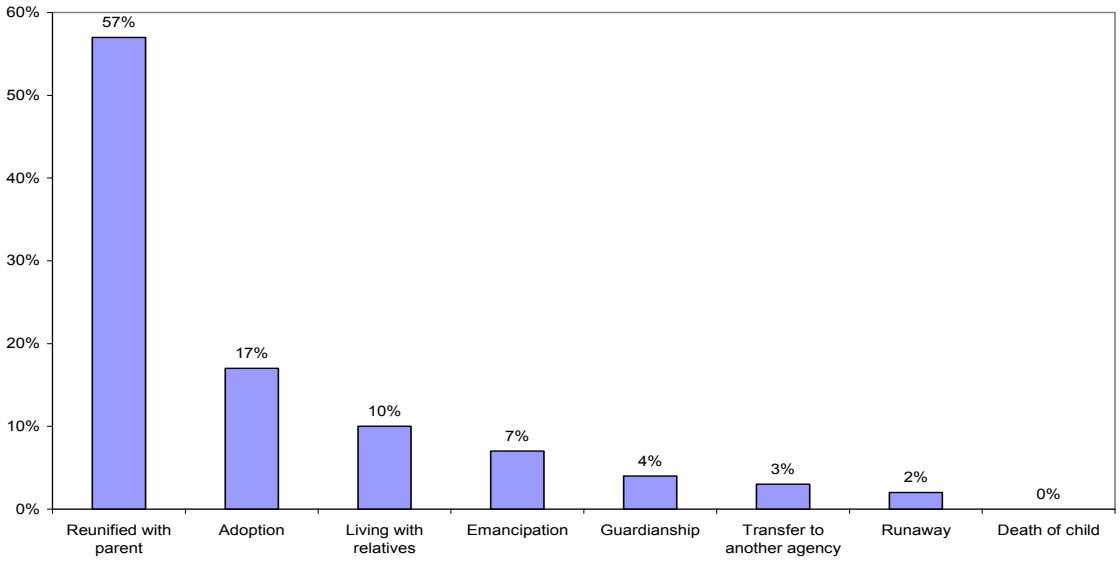
Placement Settings. As shown in Figure 5, in FY 2000 the largest percentage of children in foster care lived in a non-relative foster home (47%), followed by children living in a relative foster home (25%). Ten percent of children in foster care lived in an institution.

Figure 5
Children in Foster Care by Placement Setting



Exits From Foster Care. As shown in Figure 6, 57% of children who left foster care in FY 2000 reunified with their parent(s) or a primary caretaker.[3] Seventeen percent left foster care through adoption, while 10 percent left to live with a non-parent relative.

Figure 6
Exits From Foster Care



[3] Some studies indicate that approximately one-third of children who reunify with their parents re-enter foster care within three years. (Foster Care: Recent Legislation Helps States Focus on Finding Permanent Homes for Children, but Long-Standing Barriers Remain, GAO02-585, July 28, 2002).

An Important Note Regarding Foster Care Data

States are expected to submit data every 6 months on their foster care population to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which compiles the data in a national database known as the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS).

Once data are reported, states have the ability to revise their original submissions. These revisions generally either address coding problems, or update the original data as more complete case information becomes available. Because AFCARS includes over 800,000 records (reflecting the number of children who were in the foster care system at some point during the year), the revisions rarely affect the overall statistical portrait of the foster care population.

HHS posts key findings from the preliminary data on its website very soon after it is submitted by the states. It also updates the AFCARS database as states submit revisions. The revised data are not posted on the website, but they are available to researchers and policy analysts who would like to conduct more detailed analyses than are available on the HHS website.

The Commission staff purchased the revised data for FFY 2000 (the most recent year for which data are available) so that we could analyze key measures by (1) the age of children in care, and (2) the length of time they have spent in care. These data were made available by the *National Data Archives on Children Abused and Neglected* at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, and have been used with permission.

Other papers in this reference book use preliminary data for FFY 2001 from the HHS website. While FFY 2001 data give us more recent numbers, the FFY 2000 data allow us to conduct our own analyses as described above.