

Child Welfare Outcomes 2015: Report to Congress

Executive Summary



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Child Welfare Outcomes 2015 includes:

- ❖ Performance on the seven national outcome categories:
 - National performance in 2015
 - National and state performance over time
 - Outcome-based data visualizations
 - State comments (if provided)
- ❖ A discussion of data issues and key findings of the data analyses across states

The Child Welfare Outcomes Report is created by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to meet requirements of Section 203(a) of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA).¹ ASFA created Section 479A of the Social Security Act (the Act) to require HHS to issue an annual report that assesses state performance in operating child protection and child welfare programs under Titles IV-B and IV-E of the Act.² *Child Welfare Outcomes 1998* was the first Report created in the Child Welfare Outcomes series of Reports. The present Report, *Child Welfare Outcomes 2015*, is the 16th Report since the series' inception.

The Child Welfare Outcomes Report provides information on national performance as well as the performance of individual states in seven outcome categories.³ Prior to the first Report, the Children's Bureau, within the HHS' Administration for Children and Families, identified these outcomes in close consultation with state and local child welfare agency administrators, child advocacy organizations, child welfare researchers, state legislators, and other experts in the child welfare field. The outcomes reflect a consensus of these groups regarding important performance objectives for child welfare practice. The following are the seven national outcomes established by HHS through this consultation process:

SAFETY
PERMANENCY
WELL-BEING



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau



Outcome 1: Reduce recurrence of child abuse and/or neglect

Outcome 2: Reduce the incidence of child abuse and/or neglect in foster care

Outcome 3: Increase permanency for children in foster care

Outcome 4: Reduce time in foster care to reunification without increasing reentry

Outcome 5: Reduce time in foster care to adoption

Outcome 6: Increase placement stability

Outcome 7: Reduce placements of young children in group homes or institutions

In addition to reporting on state performance in these outcome categories, this Report also includes findings of analyses conducted across states and across time. Data for most of the measures in this Report come from two national child welfare-related data systems—the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS).

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

The Child Welfare Outcomes Report presents data on child welfare-related contextual factors relevant to understanding and interpreting state performance on the outcome measures. The following is a summary of 2015 data for these contextual factors.⁴

Characteristics of child victims⁵

- During 2015, approximately 683,000 children were confirmed to be victims of maltreatment.⁶ The overall national child victim rate was 9.2 child victims per 1,000 children in the population.⁷ State child victim rates varied dramatically, ranging from 1.4 child victims per 1,000 children to 22.4 child victims per 1,000 children.⁸

Foster care information overview

- Nationally, there were approximately 428,000 children in foster care on the last day of 2015. During that year, an estimated 270,000 children entered foster care, and 243,000 children exited foster care. Among the states, the foster care entry rate ranged from 1.5 children per 1,000

in a state's population to 10.4 children per 1,000 in a state's population.⁹

- Between 2006 and 2015, the number of children in care on the last day of the fiscal year (FY) decreased by 15.2 percent, from 505,000 to 428,000.¹⁰ The number of children in foster care approximated 400,000 from 2010 through 2013 but increased to 428,000 in 2015.
- Nationally, 243,000 children exited foster care in 2015. Of these children, 214,000 (88 percent) were discharged to a permanent home (i.e., they were discharged to reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship).

Additional child welfare-related context data is presented on the Child Welfare Outcomes data site, which is available at <https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/>.

STATE PERFORMANCE ON OUTCOME MEASURES

This Report includes a synopsis of key findings on the 12 measures established to assess performance on the 7 national outcomes identified above. These measures are displayed in table 1 at the end of this executive summary. These measures are described in detail in appendix B. For all measures, national performance is determined by median performance across states that meet data-quality thresholds.

State performances in 2015 for outcome measures referenced in this executive summary include only those states for which adequate data are available for 2015. National performances over time include only those states for which adequate data are available for 2011–2015; table 1 displays these medians.¹¹

Change in state performance over time is assessed by calculating a percent change in performance on the measures.¹² Consistent with HHS's historical approach to the analyses in these Reports, a percent change of 5.0 or greater in either direction (i.e., positive or negative) is used as a general indicator that meaningful change in performance on the outcome measures occurred. Therefore, for the purposes of the analyses presented in this Report, if the percent change in

Between 2006 and 2015, the number of children in care on the last day of the FY decreased by 15.2 percent, from 505,000 to 428,000.

performance from 2011 to 2015 was less than 5.0 in either direction, the determination is that there was “no change” in performance.

Outcome 1: Reduce recurrence of child abuse and/or neglect

- In 2015, state performance varied considerably with regard to the percentage of child victims experiencing a recurrence of child maltreatment within a six-month period (measure 1.1, range=0.8 percent to 13.2 percent; median=5.0 percent).
- States with higher victim rates tended to have higher maltreatment recurrence rates within a six-month period (Pearson’s $r=.64$).¹³ In addition, consistent with previous Reports, states with a relatively high percentage of children who were victims of neglect (as opposed to other forms of maltreatment) also had some tendency to have a moderately high percentage of maltreatment recurrence within a six-month period (Pearson’s $r=.47$).
- Performance with regard to recurrence of child maltreatment (measure 1.1) showed no change between 2011 and 2015. The median went from 5.2 percent in 2011 to 5.0 percent in 2015, a 3.8-percent decrease (note that a lower percentage is desirable for this measure). A larger number of states (23 states) demonstrated an improvement in performance on this measure than showed a decline in performance (21 states).

States with higher child victim rates also tend to have higher maltreatment recurrence rates.

In 2015, 82.0 percent of children entering foster care were new entries.

Outcome 2: Reduce the incidence of child abuse and/or neglect in foster care

- During 2015, state performance regarding the maltreatment of children in foster care (measure 2.1) ranged from 0.00 percent to 1.58 percent, with a median of 0.28 percent.
- Between 2011 and 2015, national performance with regard to the maltreatment of children in foster care (measure 2.1) improved. Twenty-two states improved in performance between 2011 and 2015, while 18 declined in performance. The national median declined from 0.30 percent in 2011 to 0.26 percent in 2015, a decline of 13.3 percent (note that a lower percentage is desirable for this measure).

Outcome 3: Increase permanency for children in foster care

- In 2015, states were fairly successful in achieving a permanent home for all children exiting foster care (measure 3.1, median=89.4 percent). However, states were less successful in achieving permanent homes for children exiting foster care who had a diagnosed disability (measure 3.2, median=79.2 percent), and even less successful in finding permanent homes for children exiting foster care who entered care when they were older than age 12 (measure 3.3, median=66.2 percent).
- In about one-half of states, 20.0 percent or more of the children who emancipated from foster care were age 12 or younger when they entered foster care (measure 3.4).

Outcome 4: Reduce time in foster care to reunification without increasing reentry

- The 2015 data suggest that, in many states, a majority of children discharged to reunification were reunified in a timely manner. Across states, the median percentage of reunifications occurring in less than 12 months was 67.8 percent (measure 4.1).
- Between 2011 and 2015, more states declined in their performance related to achieving timely reunifications (17 states) than improved (9 states).
- In 2015, a median of 7.3 percent of children reentered foster care within 12 months of a prior foster care episode (measure 4.2), and 9.9 percent of children reentered foster care more than 12 months after a prior foster care episode.

Outcome 5: Reduce time in foster care to adoption

- In 2015, all but a few states struggled to achieve timely adoptions within 12 months of children entering foster care. Across states, the median percentage of adoptions occurring within 12 months of children entering care was 3.3 percent (measure 5.1a). Moreover, 65 percent of states (32 states) demonstrated a decline in performance between 2011 and 2015, while only 24 percent of states (12 states) improved.

- The median percentage of adoptions occurring at least 12 months but less than 24 months from children entering care (measure 5.1b) was much higher in 2015 (30.8 percent) than in 2011 (28.8 percent). Fifty-three percent of states (26 states) demonstrated improved performance in this indicator from 2011 to 2015.

Outcome 6: Increase placement stability

- In this Report, adequate placement stability is defined as limiting the number of placement settings for a child to no more than two for a single foster care episode. Among children with less than 12 months of time spent in foster care, the majority remained in stable placements during that time (measure 6.1a, median=84.8 percent in 2015).
- The percentage of children with adequate placement stability decreased with more time spent in foster care. The median across states in 2015 was 63.2 percent for children who had been in foster care between 12 and 24 months (measure 6.1b) and 35.9 percent for children who had been in foster care for 24 months or longer (measure 6.1c).
- There was little change in the median percentage of children in care between 12 and 24 months experiencing two or fewer placement settings (measure 6.1b) from 2011 to 2015 (62.6 percent to 63.2 percent, a 1.0-percent increase). For this measure, 14 states improved in performance, while 8 declined.
- There was improvement in performance on measure 6.1c, the percentage of children in care for 24 months or longer who experienced two or fewer placement settings. For this measure, the median increased from 32.3 percent in 2011 to 35.8 percent in 2015, a 10.8-percent increase. Furthermore, 36 states (75 percent) demonstrated improvement on this measure, while only 7 states declined in performance.

Outcome 7: Reduce placements of young children in group homes or institutions

- For over half of the states, 4.0 percent or less of children entering foster care under the age of

12 were placed in group homes or institutions in 2015. Data also indicate that there were only five states where the percentage of young children placed in group homes or institutions was above 10 percent.¹⁴

- Previous Reports have shown significant improvements over time on measure 7.1, and this trend continued between 2011 and 2015 when the median decreased from 4.3 to 3.8 percent, an 11.6 percent decrease (note that a lower percentage is desirable for this measure). During the five-year span, 25 states showed improved performance on this measure, and 19 declined in performance.

More than half of states showed improved performance between 2011 and 2015 in the percentage of adoptions occurring at least 12 months, but less than 24 months, from the date of entry into foster care.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

In reviewing the key findings in all seven outcome areas, it is clear there are both areas of strength and areas in need of improvement with regard to achieving positive outcomes for children who come into contact with state child welfare systems. While AFCARS and NCANDS data provide some limited initial insight into many of these issues, all of these areas deserve additional investigation in order to gain further understanding and move the child welfare field forward. Areas needing additional attention include the following:

- States continue to be less successful in finding permanent homes for children with disabilities and for children who entered foster care when they were older than age 12, as compared to the general foster care population. Agencies should review their data and current practices to consider what additional barriers may be preventing children with disabilities and older youth from being placed into permanent homes.
- Between 2011 and 2015, there was a decline in performance on the measure related to timeliness of reunification without increasing reentry. It is important to note that there may be a variety of factors that contribute to lower performance on this measure, and these factors may vary considerably between states. However, for those states that struggle in this area, a careful review of specific barriers would be beneficial.

- Overall, national performance on timeliness of adoptions has remained relatively stable since 2011, and it continues to be a challenge for most states. States should continue to monitor performance on measures related to the timeliness of adoption and work to improve upon their efforts to ensure that children are placed quickly in secure, caring, and safe environments.
- Between 2011 and 2015, there was little change in the national performance on placement stability for children in care for less than 12 months or for more than 12 months but less than 24 months. Although national performance on placement stability for children in care for more than 24 months has improved, the national median remains low (35.8 percent). States should strive to continue to improve placement stability

for children in care, particularly for children in care more than 24 months. The percentage of young children placed in group homes or institutions has continued to decline, but there are a several states that still struggle in this area. It would be useful to determine which specific strategies may have contributed to these improvements so that these practices can be shared with those states looking for additional assistance.

Data and analysis presented throughout the Child Welfare Outcomes Report offer additional details regarding overall national performance. New outcome-based visuals in the Report display both single-year performance and performance over time from 2011 to 2015.

¹ See appendix A for the current specifications of Section 479A of the Social Security Act, as created by ASFA and amended by Pub. L. 112–34 and Pub. L. 113–183.

² Federal Title IV-E funds support foster care, adoption assistance, and kinship guardianship assistance. Title IV-E has been amended on several occasions. For a more detailed understanding of the history and changes over time, please see <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/title-iv-e-legislation-policy>. Title IV-B provides preventative and protective services for children.

³ In this Report, the designation of “state” includes the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Therefore, the Report provides information on a total of 52 states, depending on the number of states that submitted adequate data for a particular measure.

⁴ Unless otherwise specified, the data used in this Report are for federal fiscal years (October 1–September 30). Additionally, unless otherwise specified, the data used in this Report are for 2015.

⁵ This Report uses a unique count for child victims, which tallies a child only once regardless of the number of times the child was found to be a victim during the reporting year.

⁶ For the purposes of this Report, a “victim of child maltreatment” is defined as a child for whom an incident of abuse or neglect has been substantiated or indicated by an investigation or assessment. This includes a child who died of child abuse or neglect. This is a change from prior years when children with dispositions of “alternative response victim” were also included as victims. It is important to note that the Child Welfare Outcomes Report uses the total reported number of child victims as opposed to a national estimate of child victims, which often is reported in Child Maltreatment. The total number of child victims reported in this Report is rounded to the nearest 1,000.

⁷ The national child victim rate is calculated by dividing the total number of child victims (683,487) by the child population for all states that submitted NCANDS data (74,382,502) and multiplying the resulting number by 1,000. This calculation includes children under the age of 18.

⁸ A state’s rate of child victims is defined as the number of child victims reported to NCANDS per 1,000 children in the state’s population.

⁹ The foster care entry rate is calculated by dividing the total number of children entering foster care in a state by the total child population in that state and multiplying the resulting number by 1,000.

¹⁰ For more information, see *Trends in Foster Care and Adoption: FY 2006–FY 2015* on the Children’s Bureau website at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/trends-in-foster-care-and-adoption>. The data used in that report were updated as of July 2016.

¹¹ In the Child Welfare Outcomes Report, two separate national medians were computed for each measure for 2015. In the 2015 Range of State Performance tables, national medians are calculated using data from all states that met the relevant data-quality thresholds in 2015 only. However, in the Median State Performance and Change in Performance Over Time tables, national medians are calculated for 2015 and only include data from the states that met the relevant data-quality thresholds for all the relevant FYs (2011–2015). This is done to provide a more accurate calculation of change over time. Therefore, the number of states (N) included in each of these calculations may vary, and these two medians may vary slightly.

¹² Percent change is calculated by subtracting “old” data from “new” data, dividing that result by old data, and multiplying it by 100. For example, maltreatment recurrence was 5.2 percent in 2011 and 5.0 percent in 2015, and so the resulting decrease is 3.8 percent $\{[(5.0-5.2)/5.2] \times 100 = 3.8\}$.

¹³ The strength of relationships in the Child Welfare Outcomes Reports is assessed using correlation coefficients, specifically Pearson’s r, which can range in value from –1 to +1.

¹⁴ The five States were Arizona, Arkansas, Nevada, Oregon, and South Carolina.

TABLE 1. OUTCOME MEASURES' MEDIAN STATE PERFORMANCE, 2011–2015

Outcome Measures ¹⁵	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Measure 1.1: Of all children who were victims of substantiated or indicated child abuse and/or neglect during the first 6 months of the year, what percentage had another substantiated or indicated report within a 6-month period? (N=51 states)*	5.2%	5.1%	5.3%	4.9%	5.0%
Measure 2.1: Of all children who were in foster care during the year, what percentage were the subject of substantiated or indicated maltreatment by a foster parent or facility staff? (N=45 states)*	0.30%	0.30%	0.34%	0.25%	0.26%
Measure 3.1: Of all children who exited foster care during the year, what percentage left to either reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship (i.e., were discharged to a permanent home)? (N=49 states)	87.3%	87.5%	89.4%	89.4%	89.6%
Measure 3.2: Of all children who exited foster care during the year and were identified as having a diagnosed disability, what percentage left to either reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship (i.e., were discharged to a permanent home)? (N=45 states)	77.7%	77.9%	78.5%	78.8%	80.1%
Measure 3.3: Of all children who exited foster care during the year and were older than age 12 at the time of their most recent entry into care, what percentage left either to reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship (i.e., were discharged to a permanent home)? (N=49 states)	65.4%	65.8%	65.6%	64.2%	66.2%
Measure 3.4: Of all children exiting foster care during the year to emancipation, what percentage were age 12 or younger at the time of entry into care? (N=49 states)*	26.3%	23.6%	22.5%	20.0%	18.6%
Measure 4.1: Of all children reunified with their parents or caretakers at the time of discharge from foster care during the year, what percentage were reunified in less than 12 months from the time of entry into foster care? (N=49 states)	67.2%	65.5%	67.4%	66.4%	67.8%
Measure 4.2: Of all children who entered foster care during the year, what percentage reentered care within 12 months of a prior foster care episode? (N=49 states)*	8.0%	8.0%	8.3%	7.1%	7.3%
Measure 5.1a: Of all children discharged from foster care during the year to a finalized adoption, what percentage exited care in less than 12 months from the date of the latest removal from home? (N=49 states)	3.6%	4.4%	3.2%	4.1%	3.3%
Measure 5.1b: Of all children discharged from care during the year to a finalized adoption, what percentage exited care at least 12 months but less than 24 months from the date the latest removal from home? (N=49 states)	28.8%	30.2%	31.3%	29.8%	30.8%
Measure 6.1a: Of all children served in foster care during the year who were in care for less than 12 months, what percentage had no more than two placement settings? (N=48 states)	85.9%	85.1%	85.7%	85.7%	84.2%
Measure 6.1b: Of all children served in foster care during the year who were in care for at least 12 months but less than 24 months, what percentage had no more than two placement settings? (N=48 states)	62.6%	63.6%	64.5%	64.9%	63.2%
Measure 6.1c: Of all children served in foster care during the year who were in care for at least 24 months, what percentage had no more than two placement settings? (N=48 states)	32.3%	33.9%	34.0%	34.9%	35.8%
Measure 7.1: Of all children who entered foster care during the year and were age 12 or younger at the time of their most recent placement, what percentage were placed in a group home or an institution? (N=47 states)*	4.3%	4.2%	3.9%	4.2%	3.8%

*For these measures, a lower number indicates better performance.

¹⁵ Data for this table include all states that met the relevant data-quality criteria for all years.

CHILD WELFARE OUTCOMES DATA SITE

The Child Welfare Outcomes data site provides users with the ability to view and manipulate the state data in the Child Welfare Outcomes Reports and allows for significantly faster release of these data than is possible via the publication of the full Report. The site features AFCARS and NCANDS data that have been reviewed and approved by the states for inclusion in the Report. Data updates to the site occur annually.

In 2016, the Child Welfare Outcomes data site underwent a series of updates to improve users' experiences on the site, including the ease of searching and displaying data.

With the data site, users have the ability to conduct the following activities:

- View one state's data or simultaneously compare data for multiple states, including by Administration for Children and Families region.
- Compare data for a single state across years or view data for one or multiple states from a single year.
- View state context, demographic, and outcome data in tables grouped by type of data.
- View additional context and demographic data for states not included in the Report, including two distinct breakdowns of race and ethnicity data.
- Choose to view data in a table or graph.
- Export the data into a variety of formats, including copying or printing customized data directly from the site, exporting data into Excel, and saving data as a PDF or CSV file.
- Search for data by topic of interest and view the pages where the specific data are located.
- View static state data pages, including state comments previously included in the full Reports.

The Child Welfare Outcomes Report data site can be accessed at <https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/>.

For questions or more information about the Child Welfare Outcomes data site, please contact the Children's Bureau at CBDataTeam@acf.hhs.gov.

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VISIT THE CHILD WELFARE OUTCOMES DATA SITE

The Child Welfare Outcomes Report data site provides users with the latest data from the state data pages of the Child Welfare Outcomes Reports. Data for 2011 through 2015 are currently available. Features of the site include:

- The latest AFCARS and NCANDS data
- A custom report builder
- *Quick Links* to important indicators
- Flexible data output formats

Visit the data website: <https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/>

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