

Child Welfare Outcomes 2016: Report to Congress Executive Summary



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Child Welfare Outcomes 2016 includes:

- ❖ Performance on the seven national outcome categories:
 - National performance in 2016
 - 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 2016*, is the 17th Report since the series' inception.

The Child Welfare Outcomes Reports provide 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 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.

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



The following are the seven national outcomes established by HHS through this consultation process:

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 collections—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 the 2016 data for these contextual factors.⁴

Foster care information overview

- Nationally, there were approximately 437,000 children in foster care on the last day of 2016. During that year, an estimated 274,000 children entered foster care, and 250,000 children exited foster care. Among the states, the foster care entry rate ranged from 0.5 children per 1,000 in a state's population to 12.3 children per 1,000 in a state's population.⁵
- Between 2007 and 2016, the approximate number of children in care on the last day of the fiscal year (FY) decreased by 10.5 percent, from 488,000 to

AFCARS data show that, between 2007 and 2016, the number of children in care on the last day of the fiscal year (FY) decreased by 10.5 percent, from 488,000 to 437,000.

437,000. However, the short-term trend shows a 10.1-percent increase from 397,000 in 2012 to 437,000 in 2016.⁶

- Of the children that exited foster care in 2016, approximately 222,000 (88.9 percent) were discharged to a permanent home (i.e., they were discharged to reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship).

Characteristics of child victims

- During 2016, approximately 672,000 children were confirmed to be victims of maltreatment.⁷⁸ The overall national child victim rate was 9.1 child victims per 1,000 children in the population.⁹ State child victim rates varied dramatically, ranging from 1.6 child victims per 1,000 children to 23.3 child victims per 1,000 children.¹⁰

STATE PERFORMANCE ON OUTCOME MEASURES

This Report includes a synopsis of key findings on the 12 measures established to assess performance on the seven national outcomes identified above. 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. Table 1 at the end of the executive summary displays these measures and their medians.¹¹

State performances in 2016 for outcome measures referenced in this executive summary include only those states for which adequate data are available for 2016. National performance over time includes only those states for which adequate data are available for 2012–2016. Change in state performance over time is assessed by calculating a percent change in performance on the measures.¹² Consistent with HHS' 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 performance from 2012 to 2016 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 2016, state performance varied considerably with regard to the percentage of child victims experiencing a recurrence of child maltreatment within a 6-month period (measure 1.1, range=0.8 percent to 13.1 percent; median=5.1 percent).
- States with higher child victim rates tended to have higher maltreatment recurrence rates within a 6-month period (Pearson's $r=0.60$).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 6-month period (Pearson's $r=0.45$).
- National performance with regard to the recurrence of child maltreatment (measure 1.1) did not change in 2016 (median=5.1 percent) compared to 2012 (median=5.1 percent) and remained fairly stagnant in the years in between, fluctuating no more than 0.2 percent from this median.

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

- In 2016, the national median performance with regard to the maltreatment of children in foster care (measure 2.1) was 0.22 percent but ranged from 0.00 percent to 3.07 percent.¹⁴
- Since 2012, the percentage of children that experienced maltreatment while in foster care (measure 2.1) decreased 35.3 percent, from 0.34 percent to 0.22 percent, with nearly half of states (46 percent) demonstrating an improvement in performance.

The percentage of all children in foster care that experienced maltreatment while in care has decreased 35.3 percent since 2012.

Outcome 3: Increase permanency for children in foster care

- In 2016, states were mostly successful in achieving permanency (i.e., discharged to reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship) for all children exiting foster care (measure 3.1), with a median performance of 89.5 percent.

- States were less successful in achieving permanent homes for children exiting foster care who had a diagnosed disability (measure 3.2, median=82.2 percent), but national performance has improved each year since 2012, increasing 5.5 percent overall.¹⁵
- States continue to struggle in achieving permanency for children exiting foster care who entered care when they were older than age 12 (measure 3.3, median=65.3 percent).
- The median percentage of children who emancipated from foster care who were age 12 or younger when they entered care (measure 3.4) has declined 28.4 percent since 2012, with 84 percent of states demonstrating improved performance on this measure.

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

- The 2016 data indicate that, in many states, a majority of children discharged to reunification were reunified in a timely manner. The median percentage across states for reunifications occurring in less than 12 months (measure 4.1) was 66.0 percent.
- National performance with regard to achieving timely reunifications remained fairly static between 2012 and 2016, but more states showed a decline in performance (21 states) than an improvement (11 states).
- States continued to improve on minimizing reentry into foster care (measure 4.2). Of all children who entered foster care during 2016, a median of 6.8 percent reentered care within 12 months of a prior foster care episode. A majority of states (59 percent) showed improvement on this measure from 2012–2016, and the national median decreased 13.8 percent during the same time period.

Outcome 5: Reduce time in foster care to adoption

- States continued to struggle with achieving timely adoptions, with a median of 3.6 percent of children discharged to a finalized adoption within 12 months of the latest removal (measure 5.1a). Additionally, the majority of states (63 percent) declined in performance between 2012 and 2016.
- For adoptions occurring at least 12 months but less than 24 months from entry into foster care (measure 5.1b), national performance remained stable between 2012 (30.2 percent) and 2016 (29.1 percent).

Outcome 6: Increase placement stability

- This Report defines placement setting stability as a child having had two or fewer placement settings in a single foster care episode. In 2016, for children in foster care for less than 12 months, the majority experienced no more than two placement settings (measure 6.1a, median=84.3 percent).
- States were less successful in achieving placement stability the longer a child spent in foster care. The median across states for children who were in care between 12 and 24 months was 65.4 percent, and it was 39.3 percent for children in care at least 24 months.
- Between 2012 and 2016, states showed significant improvement in achieving placement stability for children in foster care for at least 24 months (measure 6.1c), increasing 15.0 percent from 33.9 percent to 39.0 percent. Additionally, the majority (71 percent) of states demonstrated improvement on this measure.

Thirty-six states showed improvement in placement stability from 2012 to 2016 for children who have been in care for 24 months or longer.

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

- For half the states, 3.3 percent or less of children entering foster care under the age of 12 were placed in group homes or institutions in 2016 (measure 7.1). Only four states reported more than 10.0 percent of these young children being placed in group homes or institutions.

- Overall, states continued to demonstrate improvement on this measure, decreasing from 4.4 percent in 2012 to 3.3 percent in 2016—a 25.0-percent decline. During this 5-year span, 29 states (57 percent) showed an improvement in performance, compared to 18 states (35 percent) that showed a decline.

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:

- The number of children in foster care has increased for the fourth consecutive year. States should review the effectiveness of current programs and policies directed toward safely reducing the number of children in care.
- States continued to be less successful in finding permanent homes for children who entered foster care when they were older than age 12 compared to those in the general foster care population. Additionally, the median state performance has shown minimal change since 2012. Agencies should review their data to consider what additional barriers may be preventing older youth from being placed in permanent homes.
- Between 2012 and 2016, state performance on the measure related to achieving timely reunifications remained mostly unchanged. However, nearly twice as many states demonstrated a decline in performance as opposed to an improvement. For states that continue to struggle in this area, a careful review of specific barriers would be beneficial.

- States continue to struggle with achieving timely adoptions. For children in care less than 12 months, the majority of states declined in achieving timely adoptions between 2012 and 2016, as reflected in the national median decreasing 15.9 percent during that period. Additionally, for children in care between 12 and 24 months, there was no significant change in performance over the 5-year span.
- The national percentage of young children placed in group homes or institutions has significantly declined since 2012. However, over a third of states showed a decline in performance. It would be useful to determine what specific strategies may assist states that continue to struggle in this area.

Data and analyses presented throughout this Report offer additional details regarding the foster care population and overall national performance on the seven outcomes measures. Outcomes-based visuals in the Report display both single-year performance and state performance over time from 2012 to 2016.

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, Pub. L. 113–183, and Pub. L. 115–123. Pub. L. 113–183 required the reporting of data on children placed in a child care institution or other home setting outside of a foster family home to begin in FY 2016. Pub. L. 115–123 further amended these requirements, adding some elements not collected in AFCARS. *Child Welfare Outcomes 2016* was completed before the enactment of Pub. L. 115–123 and therefore, this information is not included in this Report. Beginning with *Child Welfare Outcomes 2017*, future Reports will include the limited information available in AFCARS related to children placed in a group home or institution.

² Title IV-E has been amended on several occasions. Its funds support foster care, adoption assistance, and kinship guardianship assistance. Title IV-B provides preventative and protective services for children. For more information on policies and guidance provided to states, see <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/laws-policies/policy-program-issuances>.

³ For the purposes of this Report, the designation of “state” in the Report 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 federal fiscal year 2016.

⁵ 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.

⁶ For more information, see *Trends in Foster Care and Adoption: FY 2007–FY 2016* on the Children’s Bureau website at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/trends-in-foster-care-and-adoption>. The data used in that report were updated as of October 2017.

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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. Prior to 2015, children with dispositions of “alternative response victim” were also included as victims. It is important to note that the Child Welfare Outcomes Reports use the total reported number of child victims as opposed to a national estimate of child victims, which often is reported in the Child Maltreatment reports. The total number of child victims reported in this Report is rounded to the nearest 1,000.

⁹ The national child victim rate is calculated by dividing the total number of child victims (671,622) by the child population for all states that submitted NCANDS data (73,642,285) and multiplying the resulting number by 1,000. This calculation includes children under the age of 18.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ In this Report, two separate national medians were computed for each measure. In the 2016 Range of State Performance tables, national medians are calculated using data from all states that met the relevant data-quality thresholds in 2016 only. However, in the Median State Performance and Change in Performance Over Time tables, national medians are calculated only using data from the states that met the relevant data-quality thresholds for all the relevant FYs (2012–2016). This is done to provide a more accurate calculation of change over time. Unless stated otherwise, comparisons of medians between years use the latter calculation. 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 the “old” data from the “new” data, dividing that result by the old data, and multiplying it by 100. For example, median performance on measure 3.1 was 87.5 percent in 2012 and 89.6 percent in 2016, and so the resulting increase is 2.4 percent $\{[(89.6-87.5)/87.5] \times 100 = 2.4\}$.

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 Due to the relatively few cases of child maltreatment in foster care, performance on this measure is presented using two decimal places to improve comparability.

¹⁵ For the purpose of AFCARS, a diagnosed disability includes mental retardation, visual or hearing impairment, physical disability, emotional disturbance, or other medically diagnosed conditions requiring special care. For more information on the definitions and requirements for a disability, see *AFCARS Technical Bulletin #2: Disability Information*, revised in February 2012, at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/afcars-tb2>.

Table 1. Outcome Measures' Median State Performance, 2012–2016

Outcome Measures ¹⁶	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
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)*	5.1%	5.3%	4.9%	5.0%	5.1%
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=48)*	0.34%	0.33%	0.27%	0.27%	0.22%
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=51)	87.5%	89.3%	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=47)	77.9%	78.5%	79.0%	80.1%	82.2%
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=51)	65.8%	65.6%	64.3%	66.2%	65.2%
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=51)*	23.6%	22.5%	20.0%	18.9%	16.9%
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=51)	65.5%	67.4%	66.4%	67.8%	66.1%
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=51)*	8.0%	8.5%	7.3%	7.2%	6.9%
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=51)	4.4%	3.2%	4.1%	3.3%	3.7%
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=51)	30.2%	31.3%	29.8%	30.8%	29.1%
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=51)	85.1%	86.2%	86.2%	85.7%	84.0%
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=51)	64.1%	64.5%	65.4%	63.7%	65.0%
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=51)	33.9%	33.9%	35.1%	35.9%	39.0%
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=51)*	4.4%	3.9%	4.1%	3.8%	3.3%

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

¹⁶ 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 2012 through 2016 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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