

Child Welfare Outcomes 2017: Report to Congress Executive Summary



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Child Welfare Outcomes 2017 includes:

- ❖ Performance on the seven national outcome categories:
 - National performance in 2017
 - 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 2017*, is the 18th 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's 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.

SAFETY
PERMANENCY
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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

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 2017 data for these contextual factors.⁴

Foster care information overview

- Nationally, there were approximately 443,000 children in foster care on the last day of 2017. During that year, an estimated 270,000 children entered foster care, and 248,000 children exited foster care. Among the states, the foster care entry rate ranged from 0.6 children per 1,000 in a state's population to 13.3 children per 1,000 in a state's population.⁵
- Between 2008 and 2017, the approximate number of children in care on the last day of the year decreased by 4.3 percent, from 463,000 to 443,000. In the short term, the number of children in care has increased each year since 2012. However, there is evidence that the rate of increase may be slowing.⁶

AFCARS data show that between 2012 and 2017, the number of children in care on the last day of the FY increased by 11.9 percent, from 396,000 to 443,000.

- Of the children that exited foster care in 2017, approximately 221,000 (89.1 percent) were discharged to a permanent home (i.e., they were discharged to reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship).

Characteristics of child victims

- During 2017, approximately 674,000 children were confirmed to be victims of maltreatment.^{7,8} 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 1.7 child victims per 1,000 children to 22.2 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 previously identified. 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 for 2013–2017.¹¹ Change in state performance over time is assessed by calculating a percentage change in performance on the measures.¹² Consistent with HHS's historical approach to the analyses in these Reports, a percentage 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 percentage change in performance from 2013 to 2017 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 2017, state performance with regard to the percentage of child victims experiencing a recurrence of child maltreatment within a 6-month period (measure 1.1) was 5.2 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 Similarly, the percentage of children who were victims of neglect was moderately correlated with the percentage of maltreatment recurrence within a 6-month period (Pearson's $r=0.43$).
- National performance over time on the recurrence of child maltreatment did not meaningfully change between 2013 (median=5.3 percent) and 2017 (median=5.2 percent), with nearly as many states reporting an improvement in performance as a decline in performance.

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

- In 2017, the national median performance with regard to the maltreatment of children in foster care (measure 2.1) was 0.27 percent and ranged from 0.00 percent to 3.16 percent.¹⁴
- Since 2013, the percentage of children who experienced maltreatment while in foster care decreased 18.2 percent, from 0.33 percent to 0.27 percent.

The percentage of all children in foster care who experienced maltreatment while in care has decreased 18.2 percent since 2013.

Outcome 3: Increase permanency for children in foster care

- In 2017, 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 90.1 percent.
- States were less successful in achieving permanent homes for children exiting foster care who had a diagnosed disability (measure 3.2,

median=80.4 percent) and for children who had entered care when they were older than age 12 (measure 3.3, median=64.0 percent).¹⁵

- The median percentage of children who emancipated from foster care and who also were age 12 or younger when they entered care (measure 3.4) has declined 24.9 percent since 2013, with 78 percent of states demonstrating improved performance on this measure.

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

- In over 90 percent of states, at least half of reunifications occurred within 12 months from the time of entry into foster care (measure 4.1). The median performance was 64.5 percent. However, national performance over time has been inconsistent, exhibiting an overall decline in performance by 4.2 percent since 2013.
- States continued to improve on minimizing reentry into foster care (measure 4.2). Of all children who entered foster care during 2017, a median of 7.1 percent reentered care within 12 months of a prior foster care episode. The national median declined 14.1 percent between 2013 and 2017.

Outcome 5: Reduce time in foster care to adoption

- States continued to struggle with achieving timely adoptions in 2017, with a median of 3.4 percent of children discharged to a finalized adoption within 12 months of the latest removal (measure 5.1a). Additionally, the majority of states (67 percent) declined in performance between 2013 and 2017.
- For adoptions occurring at least 12 months but less than 24 months from entry into foster care (measure 5.1b), national performance declined by 6.1 percent between 2013 and 2017 with more than half (51 percent) of states demonstrating a decline in performance.

Outcome 6: Increase placement stability

- In 2017, the majority of children in foster care for less than 12 months achieved placement stability (i.e., having had two or fewer placement settings in a single foster care episode), with a median performance of 84.5 percent (measure 6.1a).
- 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 (measure 6.1b) was 65.8 percent, and for children in care at least 24 months (measure 6.1c), it was 41.3 percent.
- Between 2013 and 2017, states showed little change in achieving placement stability for children in care under 24 months. However, for children in care at least 24 months, the national median increased by 21.2 percent—from 33.9 percent to 41.1 percent—with nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of states demonstrating an improvement in performance.

National performance on achieving placement stability for children who have been in care for 24 months or longer improved by 21.2 percent between 2013 and 2017.

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

- For half the states (50 percent), 3.0 percent or less of children entering foster care under the age of 12 were placed in group homes or institutions in 2017 (measure 7.1). Only one state 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 3.8 percent in 2013 to 2.9 percent in 2017—a 23.7-percent decline—with nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of states demonstrating an improvement in performance.

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 for the child welfare field to gain further understanding and move forward. Areas needing additional attention include the following:

- The number of children in foster care has increased for the fifth consecutive year. States should review the effectiveness of current programs and policies directed toward safely reducing the number of children in care. States should also consider increasing their efforts to prevent abuse and neglect from occurring in the first place.
- While the national median performance in achieving permanency for all children and for children with a diagnosed disability has increased every year since 2013, state performance on finding permanent homes for older children has been inconsistent. Agencies should review their data to consider what additional barriers may be preventing older youth from being placed in permanent homes.
- Despite reunifications constituting more than half of all exits from foster care, the national performance has mostly declined over the last 5 years, with over twice as many states demonstrating a decline in performance as opposed to an improvement. It may be beneficial for states to identify and review specific barriers to achieving timely reunifications.

- States continued to struggle with achieving timely adoptions. For children in care less than 12 months, the majority of states declined in performance between 2013 and 2017. Similarly, over half of states reported a decline in performance for children in care between 12 and 24 months.
- States have been mostly successful in achieving stable placement settings for children in foster care less than 12 months and have shown strong improvement on this measure for children in care at least 24 months. States may want to examine the population of children in care between 12 and 24 months to identify possible barriers to improved performance specific to this population.
- The national percentage of young children placed in group homes or institutions has significantly declined since 2013. However, over a quarter 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 2013 to 2017.

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.

² Title IV-E has been amended on several occasions. Its funds support foster care; adoption assistance; kinship guardianship assistance; and, at the option of a state, kinship navigator programs and/or time-limited prevention services for candidates of foster care, pregnant/parenting foster youth, and the parent/kin caregivers of those children and youth. Title IV-B funds support 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” 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 2017.

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 2008–FY 2017* 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 August 2018.

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 (673,830) by the child population for all states that submitted NCANDS data (74,312,174) 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 2017 Range of State Performance tables, national medians are calculated using data from all states that met the relevant data-quality thresholds in 2017 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 (2013–2017). 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 Percentage 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 88.8 percent in 2013 and 90.3 percent in 2017, and so the resulting increase is 1.7 percent $\{[(90.3-88.8)/88.8] \times 100=1.7\}$.

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, 2013–2017

Outcome Measures ¹⁶	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
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)*	5.3%	4.9%	5.0%	5.1%	5.2%
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=47)*	0.33%	0.26%	0.28%	0.20%	0.27%
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)	88.8%	89.0%	89.4%	89.6%	90.3%
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)	78.5%	78.8%	80.1%	82.2%	81.2%
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)	65.6%	64.3%	66.2%	65.2%	64.0%
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)*	22.5%	20.0%	18.9%	17.2%	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)	67.4%	69.0%	67.8%	66.1%	64.6%
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)*	8.5%	7.3%	7.2%	6.9%	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=51)	3.2%	4.1%	3.3%	3.7%	3.4%
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 of the latest removal from home? (N=51)	31.3%	29.8%	30.8%	29.1%	29.4%
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)	86.2%	86.2%	85.7%	84.0%	84.4%
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)	64.5%	65.4%	63.7%	65.0%	65.8%
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%	35.1%	35.9%	39.0%	41.1%
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=50)*	3.8%	4.0%	3.7%	3.2%	2.9%

*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

Additional child welfare-related context data and state data regarding the seven national outcome measures are available on the Child Welfare Outcomes data site, which is available at <https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/>. The Child Welfare Outcomes data site allows for significantly faster release of these data than is possible via the publication of the full Report. The data site features AFCARS and NCANDS data that have been reviewed and approved by the states for inclusion in the Report and that are updated annually.

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 multiple years
- 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
- View static state data pages 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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