



## Trends in Foster Care and Adoption: FY 2010 - FY 2019

(Based on data submitted by States as of June 23, 2020<sup>1</sup>)

Source: AFCARS data, U.S. Children's Bureau,  
Administration for Children, Youth and Families



This chart includes data submitted to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) by States and the District of Columbia by June 23, 2020.

<sup>1</sup>The Department has requested Puerto Rico resubmit their AFCARS data; therefore, PR data are excluded from this "Trends" discussion document.

Please note that, for all of the years shown, some of the data may differ from that shown in earlier versions of this chart. This is due to the fact that some States have resubmitted their AFCARS data after addressing data quality issues.

FY = Federal Fiscal Year (October 1 through September 30)



## Discussion of Trends

**Numbers of Children in Foster Care:** Since FY 2012, the numbers of children in care on the last day of each fiscal year through FY 2017 have increased. FY 2017's 437,000 children represent an 11 percent increase over FY 2012's 392,000. The numbers of children in care on the last day of FY 2018 as compared to FY 2017 was virtually unchanged representing a decrease of slightly less than 1 percent. FY 2019's count of 424,000 represents a 2.5 percent decrease from FY 2018's 435,000.

**Entries into and Exits from Foster Care:** The entries and exits over the period from 2010 through 2019 reflect the fact that the numbers of children in foster care dropped and then rose again. FY 2011 and 2012's 250,000 entries into care represented the lowest level of entries during the decade, 2010 through 2019. Entries into care peaked with FY 2016's 273,000, and FY 2019's entries of 251,000 represents a decrease of 22,000 or 8 percent from FY 2016. This is nearly equal to lowest level of the decade. The number of exits during the decade FY 2010 through FY 2019 peaked during FY 2010 to a high of 257,000. Exits then declined to 235,000 in FY 2014 before increasing to 249,000 in FY 2019. Despite the decrease and increase in the earlier years, the last four years of exits, FY 2016 through FY 2019 have remained relatively flat.

**Children Waiting to be Adopted:** The numbers of children waiting to be adopted are a subset of those in care on the last day. As might be anticipated, as numbers of children in care were declining, the numbers waiting for adoption also declined. As the year-end count of children in care began to increase during the period FY 2013 through FY 2018, the numbers of children waiting for adoption also grew, going from a low in FY 2013 of 102,000 up to 125,000 in FY 2018. It then decreased slightly to 122,000 for FY 2019. However, the percentage of children who are defined as waiting to be adopted has remained relatively stable over the last decade, averaging between 26 and 29 percent of children in care on the last day. For the last two years, the percentage has remained virtually unchanged at 28.7 and 28.8 percent, respectively.

**Children Waiting to be Adopted Whose Parents' Rights Were Terminated:** The percentage of children waiting to be adopted whose parents' rights had been terminated declined from 61 percent in FY 2010 to 56 percent in FY 2016. Nonetheless, the percentage has increased slightly each year since then to 58 percent for FY 2019. Because the population of children waiting to be adopted has grown since FY 2012, in each year since then there has been an increase in the absolute numbers of children whose parent's rights were terminated, increasing from 58,400 in FY 2012 to 71,300 in FY 2019.

**Children Adopted:** The number of adoptions that are finalized each year remained relatively flat during the FYs 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014. However, FY 2015's 53,500 adoptions represented a nearly 6 percent increase over FY 2014's 50,700. Since FY 2014, adoptions have increased each year to a historic high of 66,000 in FY 2019. As a proportion of the exits, during the FYs between 2010 and 2015, adoptions have remained very stable, making up on average 21 percent of the discharges each year. Beginning with FY 2016, there has been at least a percentage point increase in adoptions as a percentage of discharges to a high of nearly 27 percent during FY 2019.

## Technical Discussion

### Discussion of Trends

In this report, each child is counted only once, using the report representing the child's most recent foster care episode. There are some children who exit foster care and re-enter during the year one or more times. These children would be counted as entries, but not as exits, if they remained in care through the last day of the fiscal year (September 30). In



these circumstances, the prior exit is not counted, even though it occurred during the fiscal year. We estimate the number of these uncounted exits to be approximately 6,000 per year.

There is also a data quality issue that has had an impact on the number of exits, particularly for earlier years. AFCARS data are submitted every six months and cover a six-month period. Sometimes a child who is reported during one six-month period does not appear in the next period, and there is no record that the child exited. Case reviews have shown that the majority are situations in which the child actually exited, but the exit was not reported to AFCARS. However, because the exact number of these “dropped” exits cannot be determined, it was impossible to account for them in the exit count. The number of dropped cases ranges between 4,000 and 5,000 cases per period in the most recent years, but the numbers may drop over time as States correct and resubmit their data. These dropped cases range from about half of one percent to one percent of the total population served in the year. Please note that dropped cases are excluded from all of the estimates shown in the table.

## Definitions

- 1. In Care 9/30:** This is an estimated count of all the children in foster care **on the last day** of the FFY. An individual child is included in the count for each year for which he or she is in foster care on the last day.
- 2. Entries:** This is an estimated count of all children who entered foster care **during** the FFY. An individual child is counted only once for each year, even if the child entered, exited and reentered care during the year. The most recent date of removal from home is used to determine whether the child entered foster care during the period. If an individual child entered in one year and then exits and re-enters in a subsequent year, he or she is included in the count of entries for both years.
- 3. Exits:** This is an estimated count of all children who exited foster care during the FFY **at the end of their most recent foster care episode**. An individual child is counted only once for each year, even if the child exited, re-entered and exited again during the year. The most recent date of discharge (from foster care) is the one counted. If an individual child exited care in one year and then re-enters and exits again in a subsequent year, he or she is included in the count of exits for both years.
- 4. Waiting:** There is no Federal definition for children waiting to be adopted. For the purposes of this analysis, children waiting to be adopted include children with a goal of adoption and/or whose parental rights have been terminated. The “waiting” population excludes children whose parents' rights have been terminated, who are 16 years old and older, and who have a goal of emancipation. An individual child is included in the count for each year that he or she has these characteristics on the last day of the year. This trends table shows an estimated count of all children who are waiting to be adopted **on the last day** of the FFY. An individual child is included in the count for each year in which he or she is waiting to be adopted on the last day.
- 5. Parental Rights Terminated:** This is an estimated count of all children in care **on the last day** of the FFY whose parental rights have been terminated and who are waiting for adoption. An individual child who has these characteristics on the last day of the year is counted only once for that year.
- 6. Adopted:** This is an estimated count of all children adopted with public child welfare agency involvement **during the FFY**. An individual child is counted only once for each year, even if (in rare cases) the child was adopted multiple times during the year. In the unusual cases when an individual child is adopted in one year and then adopted again in a subsequent year, he or she is included in the count of adoptions for both years.
- 7. Served:** This is an estimated count of all children who were in the public foster care system **during the FFY**. This number is the sum of two mutually exclusive groups of children: the children who are already in care on the first day of the



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Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb>

fiscal year (as of October 1) and the children who enter foster care during the year. An individual child is counted only once for each year.