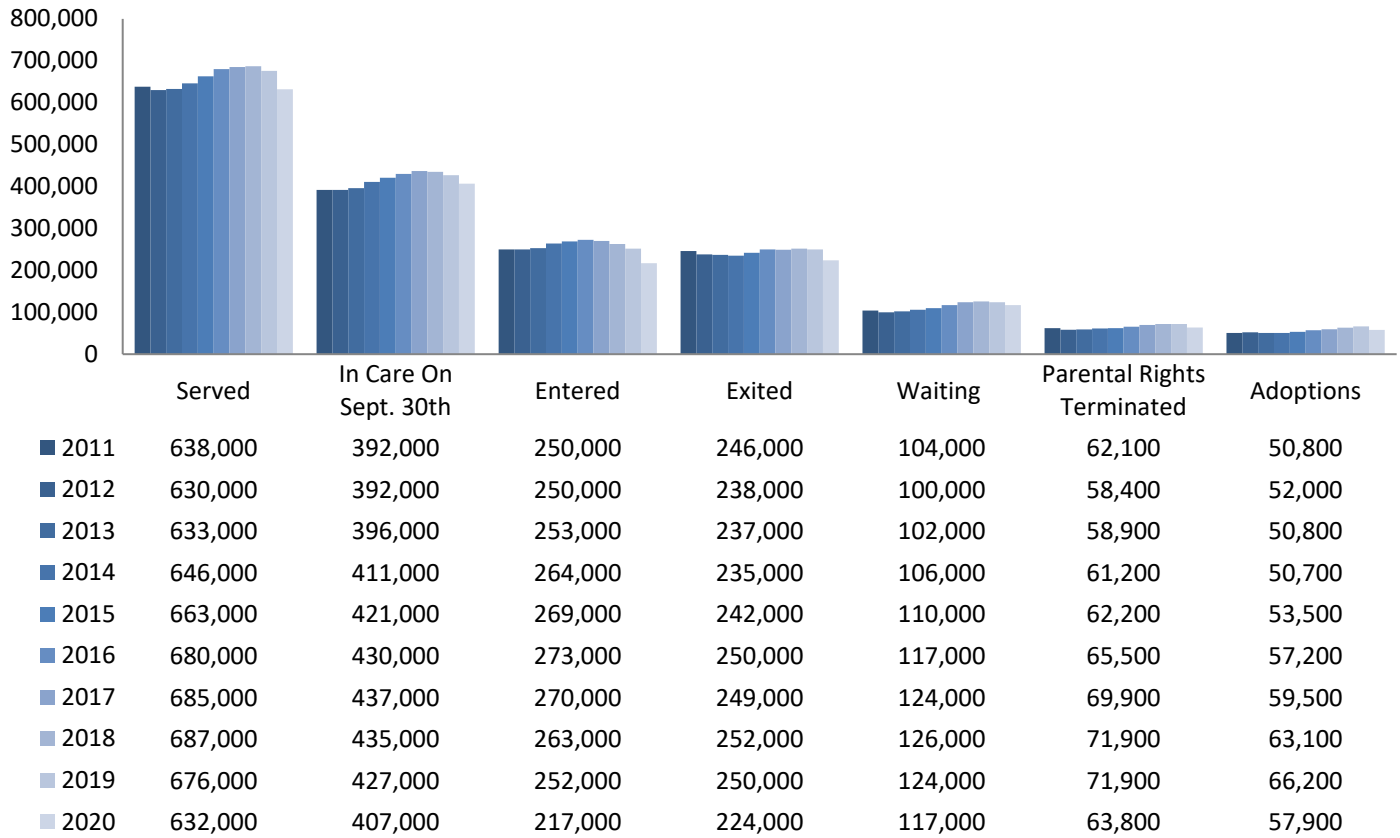




Trends in Foster Care and Adoption: FY 2011 -FY 2020

(Based on data submitted by States as of October 04, 2021¹)

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



This chart and other data in this document include data submitted to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) by states and the District of Columbia by October 04, 2021.

¹ Due to data quality concerns, many of which are associated with the lingering effects of Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico's data are only included for the years 2019 and 2020 (foster care), and 2018 through 2020 (adoption). PR is in the process of addressing the quality of their excluded data.

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: Between FY 2012 and FY 2017, the numbers of children in care on the last day of each fiscal year increased. FY 2017's 437,000 children represents a nearly 11.5 percent increase over FY 2012's 392,000. While the in-care count of 435,000 for FY 2018 represented a very small decrease compared to FY 2017, the FY 2018 count was 11 percent higher than the count for FY 2012. Moving forward, FY 2019's count of 427,000 represents a nearly 2 percent decrease compared to FY 2018 and FY 2020's count of 407,000 represents more than a 4.7 percent decrease from FY 2019. This is notably the fewest numbers of children in care since FY 2014. The 4.7 percent decrease is the largest single year decrease in the last decade.

Entries into and Exits from Foster Care: FY 2011 and 2012's 250,000 entries into care represented the lowest level of entries during the *first nine years* of the decade this report covers, 2011 through 2020. Entries into care reached their highest level of the decade with FY 2016's 273,000. FY 2019's entries of 252,000 represents a decrease of 21,000, or nearly 8 percent from FY 2016, and FY 2020's entries of 217,000 is a 14 percent decrease over FY 2019—the lowest number of entries since the collection of AFCARS data began more than two decades ago. The number of exits from FY 2011 through FY2019 fluctuated between 235,000 and 252,000; however, FY 2020's exits of 224,000 is a 10 percent decrease over FY 2019 and is the fewest number of exits since the collection of AFCARS data began more than two decades ago.

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 logically be anticipated, as numbers of children in care were declining, the numbers waiting for adoption also declined. When 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 126,000 in FY 2018. It then decreased slightly to 124,000 for FY 2019 and has decreased further to 117,000 for FY 2020. However, notably, 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 three years, the percentage has remained virtually unchanged at 28.9, 29.0 and 28.7 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 nearly 60 percent in FY 2011 to 56 percent in FY 2016. Since then, the percentage increased slightly each year 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 parents' rights were terminated, increasing from 58,400 in FY 2012 to 71,900 in FY 2018 and 2019. FY 2020's number of children whose parents' rights were terminated fell to 63,800 representing 54.5 percent of the waiting children, the lowest percentage in the decade 2011 through 2020.

Children Adopted: The number of adoptions that were finalized each year remained relatively flat during the FYs 2011 through 2014. However, FY 2015's 53,500 adoptions represented a 5.5 percent increase over FY 2014's 50,700. Since FY 2014, adoptions have increased each year to a historic high of 66,200 in FY 2019. However, as a proportion of the exits, during the FYs between 2011 and 2015, adoptions have remained very stable, making up on average 21.5 percent of the foster care 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 more than 26.5 percent during FY 2019. FY 2020's adoptions of 57,900 represents a decrease of 12.5 percent compared FY 2019's adoptions, although they still approximately 26 percent of the 2020 exits.



COVID-19 Pandemic: FY 2020-2021

Note that this document uses the term Covid-19, which is in common usage in ordinary publications such as newspapers. This is intended to be equivalent to the CDC's more technical term, SARS-COV-2.

The numbers of foster care entries and exits during FY 2020 fell to historic lows. At no time since FY 1999, the first year in which nearly all states submitted AFCARS data, has the number of entries and exits fallen to the levels of FY 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic and one of our country's first tangible steps in addressing it began in March 2020 by states' instituting "Stay-at-Home" orders. According to research by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Georgia Tech Research Institute, which analyzed changes in population movement during the period March 1 thru May 31, 2020 of issued stay-at-home orders, found that the mandatory stay-at-home orders were associated with reduced population movement in most counties during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic and the removal or relaxation of the orders was associated with increased movement.* It is reasonable to believe that a reduction in population movement led to a slowing down of processes associated with child welfare activity, thus influencing the changes in FY 2020's entries into and exits from foster care. The counts in the tables below are rounded to 100 to more clearly present the monthly comparisons.

Table 1: Foster Care Entries By Month For The FFYs 2019 And 2020

	Entered	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	March, April and May Totals
	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum
FY 2019	252,400	22,100	18,600	17,600	21,800	19,700	21,500	21,900	22,800	19,700	20,800	23,600	22,200	66,200
2020	216,800	21,800	17,800	17,500	20,700	19,700	18,500	13,600	15,500	16,400	18,100	18,300	19,100	47,600
Change	-35,500	-300	-800	-100	-1,100	0	-3,000	-8,300	-7,300	-3,300	-2,700	-5,300	-3,100	-18,600

As presented in Table 1, there was an estimated 35,500 fewer entries during FY 2020 compared to FY 2019. Slightly more than 52 percent of this decrease was accounted for by decreases in entries limited to the months of March, April and May of 2020. In particular, the 13,600 who entered care during April 2020 represented a decrease of 8,300 when compared to April 2019's 21,900 entries. April's one month decrease, alone, represents slightly more than 23 percent of the entire year of decreases in foster care entries for FY 2020. Therefore, the events of that particular month appeared to have an unusually large impact on the year, as a whole.

Table 2: Foster Care Exits By Month For The FFYs 2019 And 2020

	Exited	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	March, April and May Totals
	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum	Sum
FY 2019	249,700	20,500	23,000	20,300	19,000	18,000	19,900	20,200	22,100	21,700	21,300	23,600	20,000	62,200
2020	224,400	20,100	22,200	20,400	18,900	18,300	15,800	13,200	15,900	20,400	19,600	19,500	20,000	44,900
Change	-25,300	-400	-800	100	-100	300	-4,100	-7,000	-6,200	-1,300	-1,700	-4,100	-100	-17,300

There were an estimated 25,300 fewer exits during FY 2020 compared to FY 2019, as seen in Table 2. Approximately 68 percent of this decrease was accounted for by decreases in exits during March, April and May of 2020. The 13,200 who exited care during April 2020 represent a decrease of 7,000 when compared to April 2019's 20,200 and accounts for nearly 28 percent of the overall decrease in FY 2020 exits when compared to FY 2019.



It is notable that, in both Tables 1 and 2, the comparison of August 2020 counts to August 2019 counts also shows a large decrease. Historically, monthly entry and exit counts climbed notably (on average by about 3000) between July and August (2011 thru 2019). This increase is likely influenced by the number of schools that typically open in August. However, the pandemic forced an overwhelming majority of schools into remote learning, which could very well have accounted for the lack of a July to August increase in FY 2020. Although 2020 monthly counts remained relative flat between July and August, August 2020 counts compared to August 2019 as previously mentioned represents a marked decrease. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC)*, as of March 22, 2020 only four states had instituted mandatory stay-at-home orders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. By March 27 the number had grown to nineteen states and, as of April 11, thirty-eight states had done so. As of May 16, 2020, eleven states were still under mandatory stay-at-home orders.* While few states had stay-at-home orders in place after May 2020, the number of foster care entries and exits for the remainder of FY 2020 was significantly below the monthly counts in FY 2019.

* Moreland A, Herlihy C, Tynan MA, et al. Timing of State and Territorial COVID-19 Stay-at-Home Orders and Changes in Population Movement — United States, March 1–May 31, 2020. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2020;69:1198–1203.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6935a2>

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 if they remained in care through the last day of the fiscal year (September 30), not as exits. In these circumstances, the prior exit is not counted, even though it occurred during the fiscal year. The Children's Bureau estimates 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 FY. 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 FY. 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 FY **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 FY. 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 FY whose parents had their parental rights 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 FY**. 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 FY**. 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 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.