

## KEEPING KIDS IN FAMILIES:

### Trends in U.S. Foster Care Placement



When it comes to finding a home for children and young people who have been separated from their parents, child welfare systems across the country are making progress in putting family first. New data show that, over the past 10 years, states have consistently placed more of the young people who enter their systems with relatives and foster families. Overall, fewer of these children and young people are placed in group settings and institutions. While research shows group placements are sometimes critical for a limited time, when unnecessary these settings often compound the trauma children experience when separated from their parents in the first place. They may also fail to provide the individualized care and support that all children need to thrive.

States across the country are driving the trend of placing a higher percentage of children in families. Eighty-six percent, or 375,297, of these children were placed in families in 2017, compared with 81 percent in 2007.

These broad improvements, however, mask troubling news for specific groups of young people. Nationwide, instead of growing up in families, more than a third of young people who are 13 and older in child welfare systems lived in group placements in 2017 — the same proportion as 10 years ago. While systems placed a greater percentage of children from all racial and ethnic groups in families compared with 2007, they made more progress in doing

## data snapshot

### KIDS COUNT

so for white children. Systems were least likely to place African-American children in a family.

Being part of a family is a basic human need and essential to well-being, especially for children, teenagers and young adults who are developing rapidly and transitioning to independence, as documented in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2015 report, *Every Kid Needs a Family*. The new data reflect a growing consensus among practitioners and policymakers that young people in the child welfare system should live in families. When a group placement is required to address specific issues such as mental health needs, the child should stay only as long as it takes to address those needs. Group placements should be designed to help children return to a family as soon as possible.

The Family First Prevention Services Act, signed into law in 2018, seeks to accelerate movement toward this vision, emphasizing prevention services, prioritizing family placement and incentivizing high-quality, residential treatment. The law follows a long tradition of federal legislation designed to ensure children and teens grow up in a family. It recognizes that too many children are unnecessarily separated from parents who could provide safe and loving care if given access to needed mental health services, substance abuse treatment or guidance for improving their parenting skills.



States have made progress in finding more families for young people who cannot live with their parents — especially relatives and close friends, known as kin, who are best able to provide continuity with a child's school, friends, community and cultural identity. But they can do better, and they must, with a focus on finding families for older youth and achieving racial equity in their approaches and decision making.

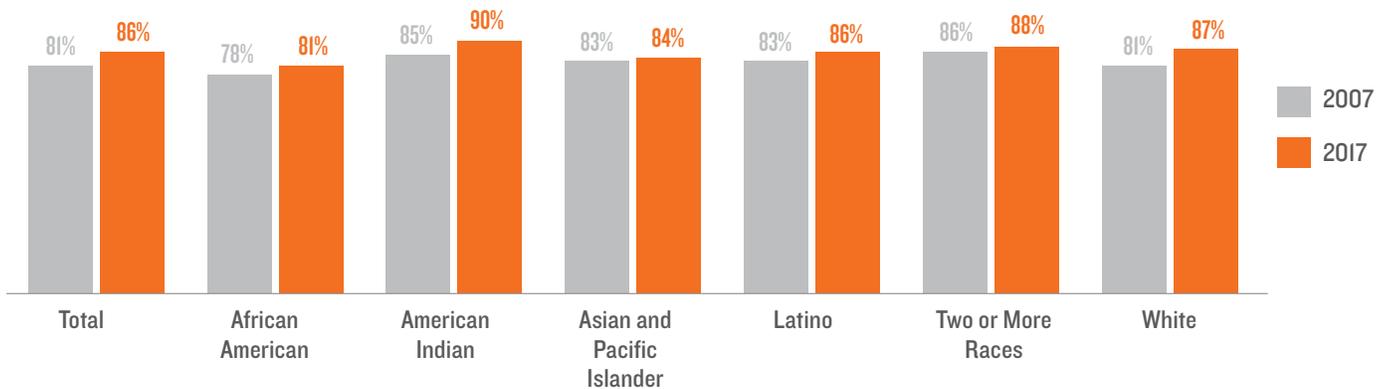
Those making the most progress have adopted strategies to support kin and foster families as key partners with the child welfare system in helping children heal, prioritizing child well-being in decision making and investing in a continuum of community-based services available to support young people and their families.

### Children in Foster Care More Likely to Live in Families

The 2017 data reveal welcome improvements driven by an increased focus on kinship care. While the greatest portion of children in child welfare are sent to foster families they are not related to, kin family placement increased by seven percentage points, from 25 percent to 32 percent, over the 10-year period. Placement in foster families to whom children were not related dipped slightly, from 46 percent to 45 percent.

## Child Welfare Systems Least Likely to Place Black Children in Family Settings

Percentage of Children in Foster Care Placed in Family Settings by Race and Ethnicity: 2007 and 2017



SOURCE: Child Trends' analysis of 2007 and 2017 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System data.

DEFINITION: Children in families include kids in relative and nonrelative foster homes, children in pre-adoptive homes and children in trial home visits.

NOTE: Race and Hispanic origin are mutually exclusive categories. Includes data for children whose race is known. Counts include children in care at the end of the fiscal year.

Research shows that placing children with relatives or close friends when they cannot live with their own families helps minimize the trauma of removal, maintaining vital connections and often keeping sibling groups together. Children in kin placements generally are less likely to run away, and relatives are less likely to request that children be removed if their behavior becomes difficult. Family members are also more likely to maintain a nurturing relationship with children they have cared for as those children grow into adulthood.

### Progress Slower for Older Youth and Children of Color

While the percentage of older youth placed with kin has risen, from 14 percent in 2007 to 18 percent in 2017, only 58 percent of older youth in child welfare systems lived in families in 2017, compared with 95 percent of children 12 and under. The percentage of teenagers in child welfare systems declined markedly over the 10-year period, and because teenagers are more likely than younger children to be sent to group placements, this decline has contributed to lower use of group placements overall.

Young people who spend most of their time in child welfare in group placement, or whose last placement was in a group setting, are least likely to ever become part of a permanent family, research shows. This lack of support leads to a greater likelihood of arrest, homelessness, unemployment and early parenthood.

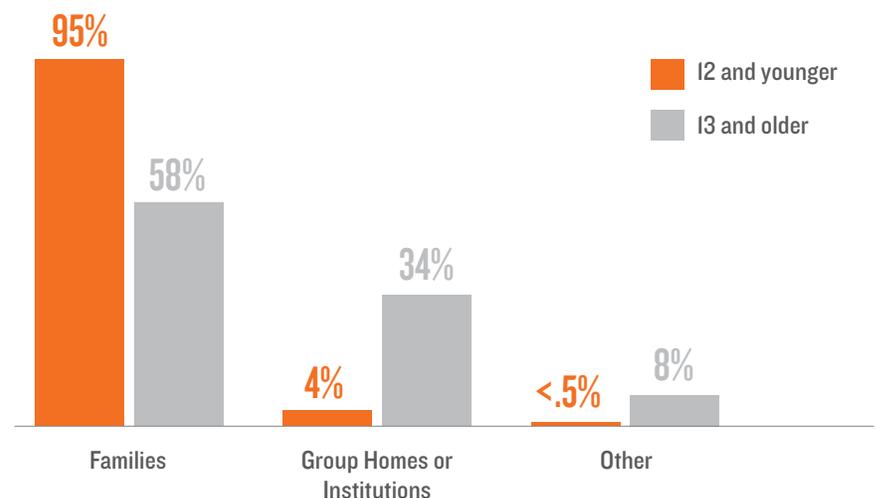
Historically, child welfare agencies are least likely to place African-American children with a family, and while they placed a greater portion in families during the last decade, this trend persisted. Systems increased the proportion of white children placed in families from 81 percent to 87 percent — six percentage points — while increasing the share of African-American and Latino children in families by only three percentage points and by one percentage point for Asian-American children. Systems, however, placed American Indian children in families at the highest rates, with improvement from 85 percent in 2007 to 90 percent in 2017.

### What States Can Do

The increase in family placements for children and young people over the last decade has not occurred consistently across states. That means there are significant opportunities for improvement if lagging states employ the proven strategies demonstrated by others. Sixteen states plus the District of Columbia now place 90 percent or more of children in their child welfare systems in families, suggesting that others can do the same. Four states — Maine, Mississippi, Nevada and New Jersey — placed at least 73 percent or more of teenagers and older youth in families and up to 20 percent in group placements in 2017, improving significantly on both measures over the 10-year period.

### Systems Less Likely to Place Older Youth in Families

Percentage of Children in Foster Care by Placement Type and Age: 2017



SOURCE: Child Trends' analysis of 2017 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System data.

DEFINITION: Children in families include children in relative and nonrelative foster homes, children in pre-adoptive homes and children in trial home visits.

Other includes children who have run away or are in supervised independent living arrangements.

NOTE: Counts include children in care at the end of the fiscal year. Children missing date of birth are excluded.

Due to rounding, percentages might total 100 percent.

TABLE I

## Children in the Child Welfare System: 2007 and 2017

	Children in Foster Care Total 2017	Children Placed in Families 2007	Children Placed in Families 2017	Percentage-Point Difference Between 2007 and 2017
<b>United States</b>	<b>442,995</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>86%</b>	<b>5</b>
Alabama	5,631	78%	79%	1
Alaska	2,766	88%	95%	7
Arizona	15,031	80%	83%	3
Arkansas	4,776	80%	82%	2
California	51,869	83%	87%	4
Colorado	5,704	66%	69%	3
Connecticut	4,135	73%	87%	14
Delaware	787	78%	85%	7
District of Columbia	751	73%	90%	17
Florida	24,641	86%	89%	3
Georgia	13,146	80%	87%	7
Hawaii	1,607	91%	88%	-3
Idaho	1,593	89%	92%	3
Illinois	15,930	81%	85%	4
Indiana	20,904	81%	93%	12
Iowa	5,952	78%	88%	10
Kansas	7,753	89%	92%	3
Kentucky	8,089	80%	81%	1
Louisiana	4,460	83%	90%	7
Maine	1,584	80%	94%	14
Maryland	3,923	80%	85%	5
Massachusetts	10,919	78%	83%	5
Michigan	11,918	80%	89%	9
Minnesota	9,651	73%	87%	14
Mississippi	5,440	80%	93%	13
Missouri	12,390	78%	91%	13
Montana	3,853	85%	92%	7
Nebraska	4,195	76%	93%	17
Nevada	4,408	89%	94%	5
New Hampshire	1,486	75%	78%	3
New Jersey	5,946	80%	94%	14
New Mexico	2,657	90%	92%	2
New York	UR	77%	UR	UR
North Carolina	10,706	86%	87%	1
North Dakota	1,495	74%	87%	13
Ohio	14,961	84%	85%	1
Oklahoma	9,312	91%	94%	3
Oregon	7,972	91%	94%	3
Pennsylvania	16,891	73%	84%	11
Puerto Rico	4,539	86%	76%	-10
Rhode Island	1,846	60%	80%	20
South Carolina	4,041	74%	79%	5
South Dakota	1,603	79%	83%	4
Tennessee	8,558	79%	77%	-2
Texas	32,150	78%	87%	9
Utah	2,954	79%	88%	9
Vermont	1,270	78%	86%	8
Virginia	4,795	71%	81%	10
Washington	11,355	94%	91%	-3
West Virginia	6,633	70%	81%	11
Wisconsin	7,721	84%	89%	5
Wyoming	1,085	64%	81%	17

SOURCE: Child Trends' analysis of 2007 and 2017 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System data.

DEFINITION: Children in families include kids in relative and nonrelative foster homes, children in pre-adoptive homes and children in trial home visits.

NOTE: Counts include children in care at the end of the fiscal year.

UR: Under review. 2017 AFCARS data for New York are being reviewed. Report data includes New York in totals and will be updated once data are finalized. 2016 AFCARS data show that 82% of children in the child welfare system in New York live in families.

While practitioners have long known that children do best when placed with families, the federal Family First law now provides additional resources and incentives to help preserve families and increase family placement. One of its most important features is that it shifts federal funding away from group placements that have not proven themselves to be high quality and geared to specific clinical needs. The law also requires states to use innovative methods to find families more quickly, especially for older youth and youth of color, and to support those families through difficult times. In implementing this new law, child welfare systems should focus on the following approaches:

- **Increase available services to stabilize families.** States should take advantage of federally reimbursed services under the Family First law designed to maintain child and family connections when children enter foster care or require short-term residential treatment.
- **Prioritize and remove barriers from recruiting and retaining kin and foster families, especially for older youth and youth of color.** This summer, states are required to submit recruitment plans, and as part of Family First, they are also required to assess their foster home licensing requirements against model standards developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. These are critical opportunities to ensure states use data to improve efforts to support and retain families for kids of color, particularly African-American and Latino children.

- **Engage families in decision making.** Kin and foster parents should be treated as important members of a child's team by systems and agencies. Their input should be considered seriously both in how the child's care will be managed and in the development of broader policies and procedures. Given that more than half of children in foster care will ultimately return to their birth families, foster parents should be connected as a resource to birth parents. Systems should consider incorporating Team Decision Making (TDM™), a practice that allows family members to participate in real-time decisions about how best to keep a child safe when placement is considered. Use of TDM has resulted in more children remaining home with family or placed with kin.
- **Require approval for non-kin placements.** The state of Connecticut more than doubled the rate of kin placements and slashed its group placement rate from 26 percent to 10 percent over the 10-year period — and from 46 percent to 23 percent for teens — in part by requiring approval from the child welfare director for any placement of a young person outside a family.

The Family First Act offers a momentous opportunity for state leaders to reimagine their systems to focus on families and benefit young people. Doing so will clear the path for generations of children to grow into successful adults.

## About the Data

The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) collects case-level information on all children in foster care and those who have been adopted with Title IV-E agency involvement. It provides useful information about children in the foster care system at the national and state levels and serves as an important tool to advocate for permanent family connections for children and adolescents. Updated data from AFCARS can be found in the KIDS COUNT Data Center at [datacenter.kidscount.org](http://datacenter.kidscount.org).

## Resources

Learn more about how states can support and prioritize family placement through these resources:

- Learn about the Family First law: [familyfirstact.org](http://familyfirstact.org)
- Find more data on child welfare placement by state in the KIDS COUNT Data Center: <https://bit.ly/2V2zabA>
- The Children Need Amazing Parents campaign offers model policies and practices for supporting foster parents, along with tools for recruitment plans: <http://fosteringchamps.org>
- American Bar Association, *Kinship Care Is Better for Children and Families*: <https://bit.ly/2N5TGoX>
- The Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Every Kid Needs a Family: Giving Children in the Child Welfare System the Best Chance for Success*: <https://bit.ly/2S5h06X>
- The Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Team Decision Making: Engaging Families in Placement Decisions*: <https://bit.ly/2Tk7QYU>
- The Annie E. Casey Foundation, *The Connecticut Turnaround*: <https://bit.ly/2X2Vpji>
- The Annie E. Casey Foundation, *A Movement to Transform Foster Parenting*: <https://bit.ly/2SEju1q>
- The Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Fostering Youth Transitions*: <https://bit.ly/2RSfzZY>
- The Center for State Child Welfare Data, *Understanding the Differences in How Adolescents Leave Foster Care*: <https://bit.ly/2F0vy6n>



### THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT® is a national and state effort to track the status of children in the United States. By providing policymakers and citizens with benchmarks of child well-being, KIDS COUNT seeks to enrich local, state and national discussions concerning ways to secure a better future for all children.

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