



THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

# FOSTERING YOUTH TRANSITIONS 2023

## STATE AND NATIONAL DATA TO DRIVE FOSTER CARE ADVOCACY

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#### ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children and youth 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. For more information, visit the Foundation's website at [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org).



## INTRODUCTION

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is always a time of great change. For young people who have experienced the trauma of being removed from their families and entering foster care, states become responsible for providing the support and learning opportunities that help teenagers and young adults keep pace with their peers and grow into productive, healthy adults.

In more than two decades of working with child welfare leaders, policymakers and young people across the country, the Foundation's Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative® has been guided by research that shows young people in foster care need permanent and meaningful relationships with supportive adults, reliable resources to meet basic needs and accessible opportunities for education and work.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past 20 years, data reported by states show important gains toward these ends: Use of group placements is down; placement of young people with relatives and close friends has increased; and the overall population of young people entering foster care has fallen. Slightly more youth with foster care experience are employed at age 21, and fewer become parents by that age.

But the data also show that child welfare systems must do more to meet the needs of many young people in their custody who need help navigating the journey to adulthood. Nationally, systems fail to find permanent families for more than half of older youth in foster care. Many young people in foster care lose connections with their birth families and are unable to access safe and stable housing, connect to postsecondary education and training and join the workforce. Although federally funded independent living services are available, fewer than half of eligible youth receive them.

"Neglect" has become the most frequently cited reason for removing teens from their home — a designation that is on the rise, often closely related to poverty and a signal that with the right support and resources, a family might be able to stay together. Too many young people continue to be placed in institutional group settings that hinder their connections to caring adults who can support their healthy development.

### Data used in this report

The experiences and outcomes of young people ages 14 to 21 vary widely by state, the level of government that typically implements foster care services. Along with variations in demographics, data reflect choices states have made about investments in youth well-being and child welfare policies and practices, illuminating areas of successful innovation as well as major obstacles. *Fostering Youth Transitions 2023* state and national profiles use the following data sources:

- **The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS)** collects information on children who have spent at least one day in foster care during the federal fiscal year. AFCARS administrative data are collected and reported by the states. These data include information on how many children are in foster care, their demographic characteristics, why they enter, where they are placed and when and why they exit. For this analysis, the foster care files used are from fiscal years 2006, 2015, 2016, 2019, 2020 and 2021.
- **The National Youth in Transitions Database (NYTD) Services File** collects information on children in foster care who have received independent living services under the federal John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee program). NYTD Services administrative data are collected and reported by the states. States report annually on all youth who receive at least one federally funded independent living service, such as career preparation, tuition aid or financial literacy training. The files used are from fiscal years 2016, 2018 and 2021.
- **The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) Outcomes File** collects information on young adult outcomes — for example, high school graduation, postsecondary enrollment, employment, pregnancy and incarceration. The NYTD Outcomes File receives data from a cohort study: States survey young people who are 17 years old and in foster care during the baseline year and conduct follow-up surveys at ages 19 and 21. A new cohort starts every three years. The files used are for the group that reached age 21 in 2015, the group that reached age 21 in 2018 and the group that reached age 21 in 2021.

See *Fostering Youth Transitions 2023: Source Notes* for more information about data used in the state profiles. *Fostering Youth Transitions 2023: Data Tables*, also provided, contain data disaggregated by race for each state.

These negative trends have persisted, even as fewer young people across the nation are entering foster care. That means leaders have an enormous opportunity to use their resources more effectively and with greater focus to design a support system that will get better results for the teenagers and young adults who depend on it to get a good start in life.

*Fostering Youth Transitions 2023: State and National Data to Drive Foster Care Advocacy* is a unique compilation of data designed to inform federal and state policy efforts aimed at making a difference for young people in foster care. This overview brief and detailed profiles of the latest available data from all 50 states, along with the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, expand on the Annie E. Casey Foundation's first *Fostering Youth Transitions* brief, published in 2018.<sup>2</sup> The expanded data report for 2023 offers state data profiles that trace the experiences of young people ages 14 to 21 who were in foster care between 2006 and 2021. These publications can help advocates, policymakers and practitioners raise national awareness of the unmet needs of young people who experience foster care and spur data-driven systems and policy change to help youth succeed in adulthood.

## WHAT THE NATIONAL DATA SHOW: AN OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD ON PROGRESS TO DO BETTER

*Fostering Youth Transitions 2023* national data show that despite some gains, systems still are not connecting enough young people to relationships, resources and opportunities — the critical building blocks for successful adulthood. Advocates and policymakers should use the state profiles to compare their state's performance with these national trends.

### There are fewer teenagers and young adults in foster care.

The number of youth in foster care has declined steadily since 2006 — a drop accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in fewer reports of abuse and neglect and fewer child welfare placements. More than 271,000 young people ages 14 to 21 were in foster care in 2006 (a rate of 8 per 1,000 teens in the general population); by 2021, that number had dropped to 147,143 (a rate of 4 per 1,000). Young people in this age group made up 34% of the total foster care population in 2006 and only 24% in 2021, AFCARS data show.

Fluctuations in the foster care population varied across racial and ethnic groups. For example, the national decline in the number of Black young people in foster care since 2006 outpaced the overall decline for youth ages 14 to 21. Even with this decrease, Black youth and families continue to be overrepresented in foster care. Latino teenagers and young adults did not decline as much, while their overall representation in foster care rose, as did the number and percentage of young people identifying as mixed race.

More research is needed to understand what is driving the drop in the foster care population, what preventive services may be most effective in accelerating it and how different groups are affected. But this reduced population offers an opportunity for government agencies to focus on fundamentally redesigning systems, which have historically focused on younger children, to better meet the needs of older youth.<sup>3</sup>

### Cases classified as “neglect” — often related to poverty — are on the rise.

Reasons for entering foster care shed light on the types of services and support families need to prevent removal of their children or to quickly reunify. Cases reported as neglect increased from 29% of total cases in 2006 to 48% in 2021.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, caseworkers identified fewer young people as entering care due to child behavior problems: 49% in 2006 compared with 30% in 2021.

Advocates, researchers and young people and families with foster care experience have been sounding the alarm about the complex relationship between poverty and neglect, including how poverty and neglect can be conflated in child welfare policy and practice. Because neglect is the most frequent reason young people enter foster care, state and federal leaders must examine the role of underlying issues of poverty in these cases and focus on strengthening families and communities to reduce the need for child removals.

### Group care placements are declining as kin care increases.

Research shows that young people develop best when they live in families.<sup>5</sup> Since 2006, placements in group settings have decreased by 13% across the country — but 1 in 4 teenagers and young adults in foster care still lived in a group setting in 2021. Although group placements have declined, kinship care placements with relatives and close friends have increased from 14% in 2006 to 22% in 2021. Use of group placements varies by racial and ethnic groups: A recent study found Black children were more likely to be placed in a group care setting than their Latino and white peers.<sup>6</sup>

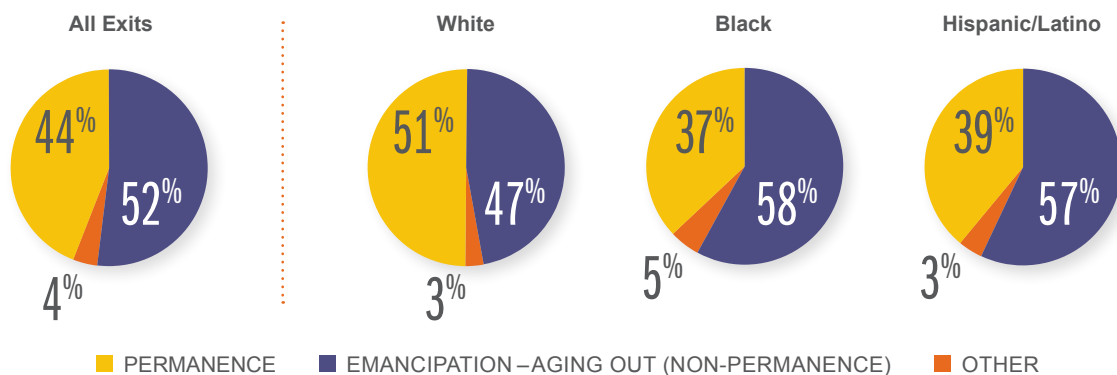
Young people living in institutions are less likely to have strong relationships with supportive adults and access to typical adolescent activities,<sup>7</sup> while young people placed with kin experience stronger relationships with caring adults and better outcomes as they approach adulthood, including housing stability.<sup>8</sup> Increasingly, state and federal child welfare policy prioritizes placement with kin over placement in non-relative foster care to keep young people connected to their communities and cultural identities and to the supportive adults in their lives.

### Systems are finding permanent families for fewer young people.

Child welfare systems are responsible for helping young people achieve permanence, which is associated with better young adult outcomes, including housing stability, higher educational attainment and employment.<sup>9</sup> Even though the overall number of young people in foster care has declined, teenagers and young adults ages 16 to 21 are less likely to leave foster care with permanent families in 2021 than they were in 2016. Fewer than half leave foster care to live with adoptive families or guardians or return to their birth families.

#### PERMANENCE VS. EMANCIPATION (AGING OUT) IN THE UNITED STATES, 2021

Foster care exit reason, by race



Permanence includes adoption, reunification with birth families, living with a relative and guardianship. The above charts represent young people ages 16+ who exited foster care in federal fiscal year 2021. Due to rounding, some charts may not equal 100 percent.

SOURCE: Child Trends’ analysis of data from 2021 AFCARS

## Although extended foster care options have increased, participation is low.

At the time of this report, 33 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and nine tribes provided federally reimbursable extended foster care, which allows young people to continue to receive placement and support services until age 21. Many other states offer their own plans or related services to help young people in foster care beyond age 18. Research shows extended foster care can improve educational attainment, employment and housing for participating young people, especially young people of color.<sup>10</sup>

Although increasingly available, extended foster care is an underutilized resource. Nationally, only about 22% of those in care on their 18th birthday remained in care on their 19th birthday in 2021 — a slight decrease from 2016, despite state and national moratoriums on aging out during the pandemic. These data show the need for state leaders to collaborate with young people to raise awareness and design effective, community-based, extended care services and programs that youth find useful.

As more becomes known about young people's experiences during the pandemic and about the rate at which they reentered care after age 18 or stayed in care to age 21, data on the use of extended foster care may change. However, due to variations in state reporting practices, it is unlikely that data for this population of young people will be captured in AFCARS.

## YOUNG PEOPLE NEED RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITIES THAT FOSTER SUCCESS

In 2018, *Fostering Youth Transitions* raised awareness about the low percentages of older youth in foster care receiving necessary services to prepare for living on their own. Data collected in subsequent years can help states and advocates identify emerging trends and shift priorities, policies and practices to produce better outcomes for older youth. The updated data reveal gaps in service delivery, persistently low outcomes on important measures and opportunities to build a brighter future for teenagers and young adults in foster care.

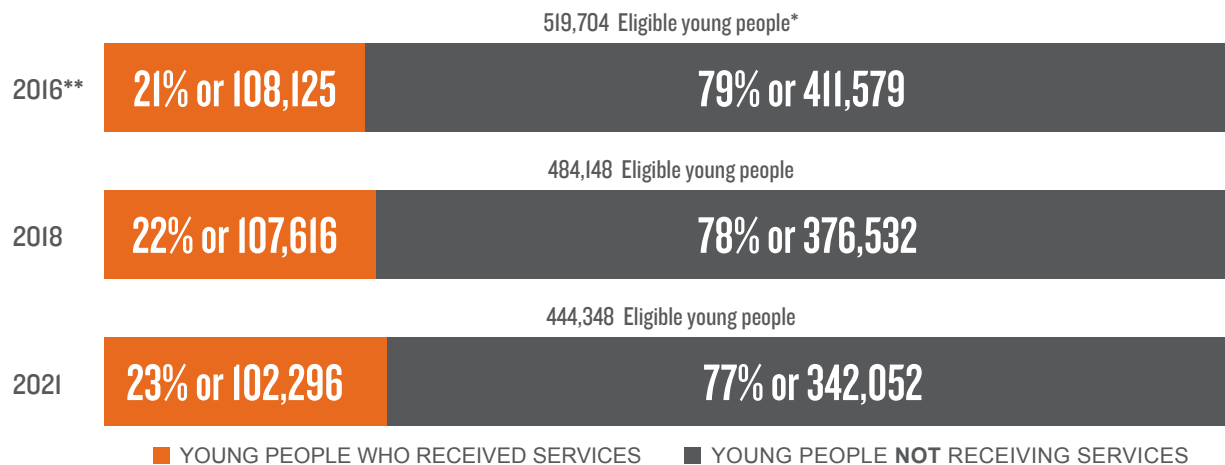
## Federally funded services to help youth transition from foster care are underused.

Federal law requires states to ensure all young people who have been in foster care have safe and stable housing, access to school or employment and resources to support their reproductive health and parenting needs.

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood provides dedicated federal funding and guidance to states to help young people transition successfully to adulthood, while maintaining a focus on family connections and permanency planning. The Chafee program can provide financial assistance for basic needs such as housing and completion of high school, college or vocational training. It also includes mentoring programs, financial education, life skills training and programs providing information about tenants' rights, meal planning and nutrition. In addition to prioritizing prevention of entry into foster care, the 2018 Family First Prevention Services Act recognized the importance of these vital services by lowering the age at which young people can receive Chafee services to 14, raising the upper age to 23 and allowing states to provide education and training vouchers to young adults up to age 26, among other improvements.<sup>11</sup> The 2018 act did not, however, provide any additional funding for states to serve the expanded eligible population.

For youth in foster care — and especially for those exiting foster care without connections to a permanent family — these resources can make the difference between surviving and thriving, between instability and stability. But less than a quarter (23%) of eligible youth were served by their child welfare systems in 2021, and just under half (47%) were ever served across all the years they were eligible for the programming between ages 14 and 21.

## TRANSITION SERVICES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN FOSTER CARE



\*The number of eligible young people in each year is calculated using multiple years of AFCARS data. For example, for 2016 estimates, AFCARS data from 2008-2016 is used to capture the number of young people who were 14-21 years old during these years or the total number of young people eligible between the ages of 14-21 at any point while in foster care.

\*\*The percent and number of young people receiving services each year is calculated using NYTD services data. For example, for 2016 estimates, young people who received at least one Chafee-related service in 2016 are counted.

SOURCE: Child Trends' analysis of data from AFCARS and NYTD

Furthermore, of those who received at least one service, the proportion receiving each of the major services has steadily decreased since 2016. During the pandemic, many Chafee service providers closed or struggled to deliver their services virtually. However, data show that the decline in service delivery preceded the pandemic and has continued its downward trend since at least 2016.

More than 880,000 young people ages 14 to 26 were temporarily eligible for expanded Chafee services enacted by Congress as part of pandemic relief.<sup>12</sup> Of those young people, however, 85% were no longer in foster care, which made it difficult for states to reach many of those eligible. While several states faced challenges in providing services, others were able to provide additional cash assistance directly to young people, as well as other support — for example, supplements to educational training vouchers and increases in independent living services.

### Systems are falling short at providing services needed to improve youth outcomes.

Understanding the outcomes of young adults who have been in foster care is critical to shaping the services and support they need. Although national data show some conditions for 21-year-olds with foster care experience improving slightly from 2016 to 2021, young people who have been in foster care continue to be far less likely than their peers in the general population to be enrolled in education or training after high school, stably housed or employed — and are more likely to become parents or experience incarceration.

Among 21-year-olds with foster care experience in 2021:

- 79% had earned a high school diploma or GED credential, NYTD data show. This compares to 92% of their peers in the general population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey<sup>13</sup> estimates;
- 24% had been enrolled in postsecondary education or training, compared to 50% of 21-year-olds in the general population; and
- 55% were employed full time or part time, while 64% of their peers in the general population had jobs.

# USING *FOSTERING YOUTH TRANSITIONS 2023* STATE DATA PROFILES TO MAKE CHANGE

The data analyzed in *Fostering Youth Transitions 2023* point to the urgent need to ensure young people emerging from foster care have the full benefit of the relationships, resources and opportunities that will enable them not only to thrive, but also to contribute to their communities and a strong future for all of us. Each profile highlights a state's key demographic data about young people in foster care that can be used to help pinpoint disparities across racial and ethnic lines and compare outcomes over time. The profiles also show whether and how young people are accessing available resources, which can help leaders determine whether changes are needed to ensure greater awareness of and accessibility to resources such as extended foster care.

By reviewing the data and including young people who have foster care experience when designing solutions, advocates, policymakers and practitioners can take action to make improvements. Through the [Jim Casey Initiative](#) and [Journey to Success](#), a policy advocacy campaign that seeks to improve opportunities and outcomes for youth and young adults with foster care experience, young people have been identifying resources they need and what works to help them achieve their aspirations.

In partnership with young people in their state, readers should digest the data and ask the questions below to spark conversations about how young people in foster care are faring and what more can be done to help ensure lifelong well-being and success.

**RELATIONSHIPS:** How well is your state doing at ensuring young people are connected to permanent families before they leave foster care? Can more be done to ensure their connections to mentors and other supportive, caring adults? As the reported reasons for entry to foster care shift, how well are systems responding with solutions addressing the level of need?

**RESOURCES:** Are workforce shortages hampering the ability of agencies to help eligible young people? What more can be done to prevent homelessness among young people emerging from foster care without a family? Which communities have designed replicable solutions with their young leaders to deliver support to those who most need it and where and when they need it?

**OPPORTUNITIES:** How well is your state doing at ensuring young people have access to education, employment and other opportunities to learn and grow during a key developmental phase in their lives? Are the young people most in need of extended foster care disconnected from or distrustful of agencies' ability to help them gain access to services designed for them? Are the available transition services programs keeping up with technology and the needs of today's young people?

## CONCLUSION

While in recent years the Chafee program and the Family First Prevention Services Act have made positive changes to promote kinship care and align foster care policy with healthy adolescent and young adult development, the data show that our government systems must do better. And the solutions are within our grasp. Practitioners and policymakers must work on two fronts: support families to prevent older youth from entering foster care; and redesign systems to meet the needs of youth and young adults in foster care today, enabling them to become thriving adults tomorrow. As the number of young people entering foster care declines, policymakers, practitioners and advocates must seize the opportunity to engage these youth; understand what is, and is not, working in states; and make strategic investments in the future.



## ENDNOTES

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