

National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being

No. 1: Who Are the Children in Foster Care?

According to most recent estimates, over 530,000 children are in foster care in the United States. These children live in a variety of settings, including non-relative foster homes, the homes of relatives, and group homes. Currently, information on the characteristics of these children is mostly drawn from small studies of children in select localities. Other studies provide only a limited amount of information, though for a broader population of children. This research brief expands the existing literature by describing the demographic characteristics and well-being of a national sample of children who had been in foster care for 1 year.

This research brief answers the following questions:

- What are the characteristics of children in foster care for 1 year?
- What experiences of abuse or neglect have brought these children into the child welfare system?
- Where do these children reside?
- How are children in foster care for 1 year faring?

Research Methodology

The National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) is a national longitudinal study of the well-being of more than 6,200 children who had contact with the child welfare system within a 15-month period starting in October 1999. These children—ages 14 and younger—were selected from two groups: 5,501 from among those entering the child protective system in that period, and 727 from among children who had been in out-of-home placement for about 12 months. Out-of-home placement includes conventional foster care, kinship foster care, group care, residential treatment, and other settings. Throughout this brief we refer generally to these out-of-home placements as foster care.

This research brief focuses on the 727 children who had been in foster care for 12 months at the time the study began. The data were drawn from interviews with the children, their current caregivers, and their caseworkers a few months after the study began in 1999. It is important to note that the findings from this study may not generalize to all children in foster care, since many children leave foster care after only a few months. Further, the sample includes only a small number of children in group care, so findings related to this particular group of children should be interpreted with caution. However, this study provides important information on those children who have remained in foster care for a year.

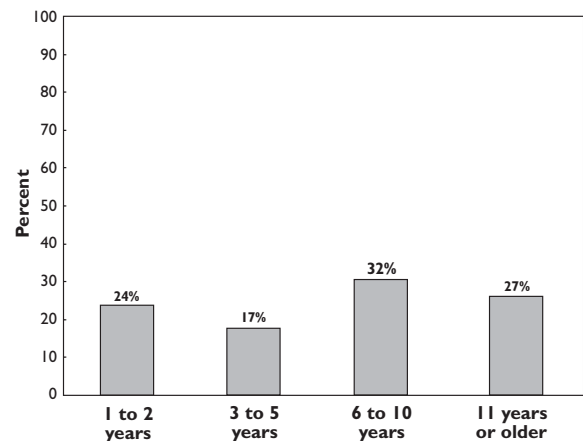
Characteristics of the Children

Information on the characteristics of children in foster care can provide important data for determining whether the services currently available through child welfare agencies are appropriate to meet the needs of the children in the system. Since other data provide this information (e.g., AFCARS), this discussion is limited to the age and race/ethnicity of children in this study as well as how these characteristics differ for children in different foster settings.

Age

Children in this study varied in age, ranging from about 1 year to just over 15 years, with an average age of 7 years (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Age of children in foster care.



The average age of children varied by the type of setting in which they were being cared. The average age of children in non-kin foster homes was 6 years, and it was 7 for children in kin-care settings. In contrast, the average age of children in group homes was 10 years.

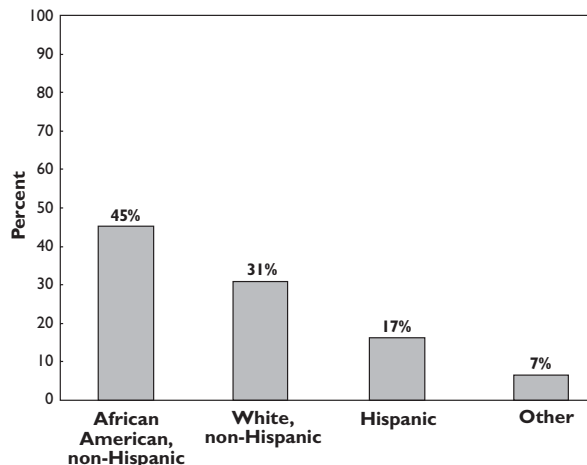
Race and ethnicity

The children also hailed from a wide range of ethnic and racial backgrounds (see Figure 2). About half of the Hispanic children were white; the remaining Hispanic children were African American, American Indian, or of another race.

The Children's Experiences with Abuse and Neglect

One of the most important questions about the experiences of children in foster care for 1 year is what types of abuse or neglect led to their current placement in foster care. When they investigated, child welfare workers identified the most serious type of abuse, as well as any other types of abuse the child was experiencing.

Figure 2. Race and ethnicity of children in foster care.



Most serious type of maltreatment

Focusing on the most serious of the forms of maltreatment children experienced, neglect was the primary cause for placement for 60% of the children in this study. Of these children, equal percentages had experienced failure to provide and failure to supervise. Ten percent of the children experienced physical abuse, and 8% suffered sexual abuse.

Eight percent of the children were not referred to child welfare for reasons of abuse or neglect. For instance, some of these children were referred for mental health or domestic violence services. These children were originally classified in the CPS records as having experienced abuse or neglect, but their child welfare workers noted that these other factors explained why they were placed in foster care. The remaining children experienced another form of abuse or neglect, such as emotional abuse or abandonment.

Maltreatment experiences varied for children of different ages (see Figure 3). Specifically, children 2 years and younger were the most likely to experience failure to provide and the least likely to experience sexual abuse as their most serious maltreatment. The most serious maltreatment children experienced also differed according to their race and ethnicity (see Figure 4). Hispanic children were the most likely of the children to experience physical abuse, while they were the least likely to experience failure to provide. African American

Figure 3. Most serious type of maltreatment by age.

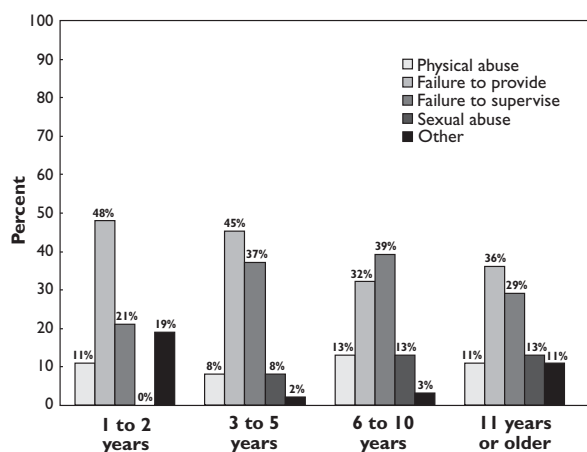
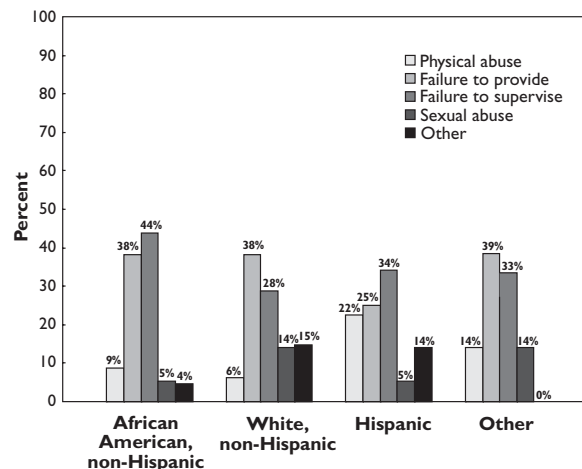


Figure 4. Most serious type of maltreatment by race/ethnicity.



children were the most likely to experience failure to supervise, and white children and children of other races were the most likely to experience sexual abuse.

The experience of multiple types of maltreatment

While the numbers presented above refer to the most serious types of maltreatment only, most children experienced more than one type of maltreatment. In fact, among the four “main” (most common) types of maltreatment—physical abuse, sexual abuse, failure to provide, and failure to supervise—41% of children experienced more than one type of maltreatment.

The children experienced many forms of maltreatment. Of those who only experienced a single “main” type of maltreatment, failure to supervise was most common, with over a quarter of the entire sample experiencing this form of maltreatment alone. The next most common was failure to provide, which was the only form of maltreatment for 17% of the sample. Physical and sexual abuse were less commonly found in isolation, with only 6% and 3%, respectively, of the sample experiencing these forms of maltreatment alone.

Those who experienced sexual abuse were the most likely to also experience other forms of maltreatment. Nearly two-thirds of those experiencing sexual abuse were not adequately supervised, one-third were also physically abused, and over one-fifth were not adequately provided for.

The Children’s Placements

Two important questions about the living situations of children in foster care relate to where these children have been placed and whether those with different characteristics and experiences are placed in different settings.

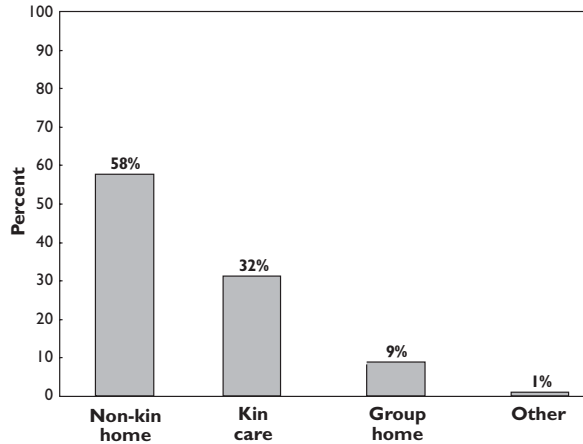
Where are the children living?

A quarter of the children had returned home between the time the sample was drawn and when the interviews took place. Among the remaining children, however, the majority of children were living in a non-kin foster home (see Figure 5).

Children’s placements by age and race/ethnicity

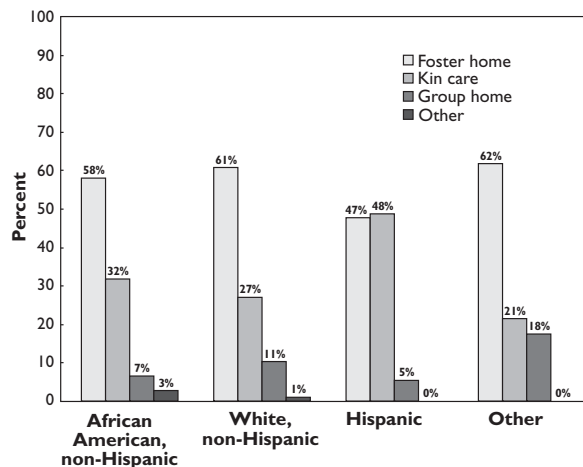
Among all age groups, non-kin foster homes were the most common setting and kin care was the second most common. However, smaller proportions of younger children than older children were in group home settings.

Figure 5. Placement types.



Placement settings varied by race and ethnicity (see Figure 6). Among Hispanics, children were equally likely to be in non-kin foster homes and kin care, whereas among other groups, non-kin foster homes were most common. Further, African American, non-Hispanic children and Hispanic children were less likely to be in group care than white, non-Hispanic children and children of other races/ethnicities.

Figure 6. Placement type by race/ethnicity.



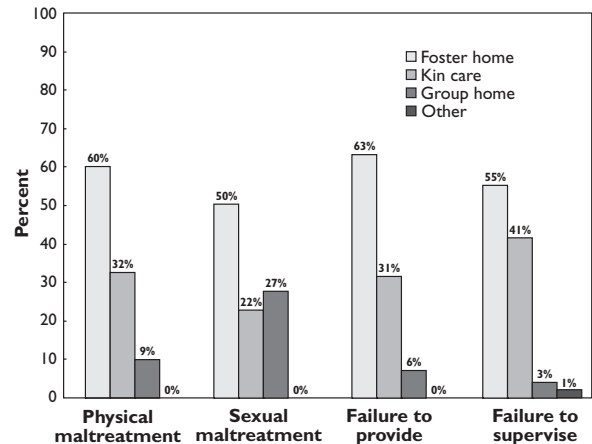
Children’s placements by the most serious type of maltreatment they experienced

Among all children—regardless of the most serious type of maltreatment experienced—non-kin foster homes were the most common placement. Even so, those who experienced sexual maltreatment were more likely than those experiencing other forms of maltreatment to be in group homes (see Figure 7). Over a quarter of children experiencing sexual maltreatment as their most serious form of maltreatment lived in a group home, compared to less than 10% of those experiencing one of the other “main” types of maltreatment.

The Children’s Well-Being

One of the most important—and least frequently answered—questions pertains to the well-being of children in foster care. How is their health? How are they faring cognitively, behaviorally, and socially? The NSCAW foster care sample provides a rare glimpse into the development and functioning of a national sample of children living in foster care for 1 year.

Figure 7. Placement type by most serious type of abuse.



Health

According to current caregivers, about 27% of children in this study had some lasting or recurring health problem. The most common problem was asthma (occurring in 8% of the children). Four percent of the children were also reported to have severe allergies. In addition, almost 4% of the children had difficulties that began at or before birth (e.g., fetal alcohol syndrome, cerebral palsy) and 2% had a neurological, endocrine, or blood disorder.

Most children were receiving the health care they needed, according to their caregivers. Nearly all children had up-to-date immunizations, and over three-quarters had had a dental appointment in the last 12 months. Nearly three-quarters had had recent vision and hearing tests. Over 90% of the children were insured by Medicaid or other state-funded health programs, and another 7% were privately insured. Just under 1% of the children had no health insurance at all.

Cognitive and social development

Cognitive and social development are important domains of children’s well-being, and NSCAW collected data on a number of developmental measures. Yet these measures are among some of the hardest to describe; measures vary for children of different ages, and average scores are rarely intuitive.

In order to address these issues, NSCAW researchers used two different methods of identifying how the children in this sample are faring cognitively and socially. First, they calculated average scores. In addition, they computed the percentage of children who fell into a “clinical” range on the various cognitive and social development measures (from here on referred to as having a “clinical” score). Both types of scores were then compared to scores for normative samples (samples representative of all children nationally). These comparisons indicate how foster children in this study compare to their peers nationally.¹

Overall, foster children in this sample tended to fall below levels found in national samples on nearly every measure of cognitive and social development examined. Children in this sample seemed particularly at-risk with regard to their low levels of social and life skills.

- The neurodevelopment of young children was less advanced than children in nonclinical samples. Over three-quarters of

foster children between 1 and 2 years of age were categorized as medium to high risk in their neurodevelopment, compared to less than half of children in a non-clinical sample.

- On a measure of verbal and non-verbal intelligence for children ages four and over, scores for foster children were below the national mean, though not far below.
- A test of reading and math skills, administered to foster children ages 6 and older, revealed test scores that were just slightly below the national average.
- Based on reports from their caregivers, children ages 2 and older showed more behavioral problems than children in a normative sample. Between one-quarter and one-half of children fell within the clinical/borderline range for behavioral problems. In contrast, only 17% of children in the normative sample had behavior problems falling in the clinical/borderline range.
- Over half of the children ages 11 and older reported committing at least one delinquent act, ranging from running away to theft or violent acts. Nonviolent acts were more common than violent acts.
- Children ages 3 and older were reported by their caregivers to have lower social skills than was found for a national sample. Nearly 40% of foster children had social skills categorized as “low,” compared to only 16% of children in the national sample.
- Caregivers reported that at least half of the children ages 10 and younger had adequate to high daily living skills for their age, such as being able to dress oneself or use the telephone.

The total number of clinical scores for foster children across these various measures was also examined, revealing that nearly two-thirds of the children had a clinical score on at least one measure.

Differences in social and cognitive development by age, placement setting, and maltreatment experiences

Children who are older, those in group homes, and children who experienced sexual abuse appear to be most at-risk for low levels of well-being. Yet, although these groups showed the highest levels of risk, high risk levels were found among all groups examined.

A separate analysis revealed that children in kin care appear less at-risk than other children on these measures.

¹ The clinical scores were determined in one of two ways. If a score indicating clinical significance had already been determined for the scale, that score was used. If no such score was available, a score was created to indicate whether the child fell a certain degree (two standard deviations) below the national average. This latter indicator represents serious developmental difficulties; only 2.5% of children nationally would be expected to have a clinical score on a particular measure.

Summary

This brief offers a national portrait of children who had been in foster care for 1 year. It is unique in providing not only information on the demographic characteristics of these children and information on their maltreatment and placement experiences, but also carefully gathered data on their well-being.

The findings presented here show that children who have been in foster care for 1 year vary in age and race. They are most likely to have experienced some form of neglect as their most serious maltreatment, and a significant number had experienced multiple types of maltreatment. Most of these children are residing in non-kin foster care settings.

In addition, the data on well-being indicate the higher levels of risk experienced by these children compared to their peers not in foster care. A quarter of the children have health problems, and their overall cognitive and social development lags slightly behind their peers. They are particularly at risk in terms of their social skills. Moreover, those who are older, live in group homes, or have been sexually abused are most at risk (though these findings shed no light on cause and effect). A sizeable majority of the children fall substantially behind what might be expected for someone their age in at least one of the areas of well-being measured.

These findings indicate the multiple needs of this critical population of children. The multiple difficulties experienced by children in foster care suggest that these children require substantial resources that are likely to go beyond the service capacity of most child welfare agencies. Increasing the awareness of service providers across a broad array of child-serving agencies of the needs of children in foster care, and close collaborations between child welfare and other child-serving agencies, will be critical in building a service system that is responsive to this vulnerable population. □

National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being Research Brief

Available at:

National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN)

Surge 1 – FDLC

Cornell University

Ithaca, NY 14853

ndacan@cornell.edu

A copy of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being: Baseline Report for One Year in Foster Care Sample, which discusses these findings in more detail, can be obtained from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/core/ongoing_research/afc/wellbeing_reports.html. The report was prepared for the Administration for Children, Youth and Families by the NSCAW Research Group, a collaborative effort of Research Triangle Institute (RTI), the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), Caliber Associates, the University of California at Berkeley (UCB), and the Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF, DHHS). This is the first in a series of NSCAW research briefs, developed by Caliber Associates from the Baseline Report, focused on children in foster care who come into contact with the Child Protective System. Additional research briefs focus on the caregivers of foster children, the provision of services to children and their families, and changes in child well-being over time.