

Foster Care

Headline

510,000 children were in foster care in 2006, a figure that has declined from a 1999 peak of 567,000. ([Figure 1](#))

Importance

Children are placed in foster care when a child protective services worker and a court have determined that it is not safe for the child to remain at home, because of a risk of maltreatment, including neglect and physical or sexual abuse.

Because of their history, children in foster care are more likely than other children to exhibit high levels of behavioral and emotional problems. They are also more likely to be suspended or expelled from school and to exhibit low levels of school engagement and involvement with extracurricular activities. Children in foster care are also more likely to have received mental health services in the past year, to have a limiting physical, learning, or mental health condition, or to be in poor or fair health.¹ One study found that almost 60 percent of young children (ages 2 months to two years) in foster care were at a high risk for a developmental delay or neurological impairment.²

Youth who “age out” of foster care instead of returning home may face challenges to making a successful transition to adulthood. According to the only national study of youth aging out of foster care, 38 percent had emotional problems, 50 percent had used illegal drugs, and 25 percent were involved with the legal system. Preparation for further education and career was also a problem for these young people. Only 48 percent of foster youth who had “aged out” of the system had graduated from high school at the time of discharge, and only 54 percent had graduated from high school two to four years after discharge. As adults, children who spent long periods of time in multiple foster care homes were more likely than other children to encounter problems such as unemployment, homelessness, and incarceration, as well as to experience early pregnancy.^{3,4}

Trends

The number of children in foster care increased during the 1990s from 400,000 in 1990 to 567,000 in 1999 before dropping to 510,000 by 2006 (preliminary estimate). ([Figure 1](#)) Similarly, the rate of children living in foster care increased from 6.2 per 1,000 children in 1990 to 8.1 per 1,000 children in 1999, before decreasing to 6.9 per 1,000 in 2006.

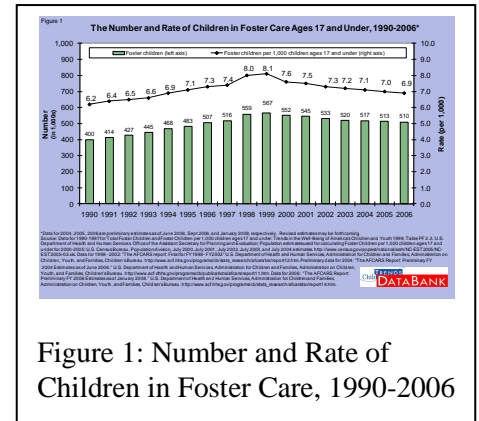


Figure 1: Number and Rate of Children in Foster Care, 1990-2006

Differences by Type of Placement

In 2006, nearly half (46 percent) of all foster children lived in homes of non-relatives. (Table 1) Nearly a quarter (24 percent) lived in foster homes with relatives—often known as “kinship care.” Seventeen percent of foster children lived in group homes or institutions, three percent lived in pre-adoptive families, and the rest lived in other types of facilities (based on preliminary estimates).

Differences by Length of Stay in Foster Care

Almost one-third (31 percent) of all children who exited foster care in 2006 lived in foster care for less than six months, and another 18 percent spent six to eleven months in care (preliminary estimates). Thirty-five percent spent one to three years in care, and 16 percent spent more than three years in care (preliminary estimates). (Table 1)

Differences by Race and Hispanic Origin

Non-Hispanic white children, who made up about 58 percent of American children under age 18,* accounted for 40 percent of foster children in 2006. Black children, who made up around 15 percent of all children, accounted for 32 percent of foster children in 2006 (preliminary estimate). (Figure 2) Hispanic children (who can be of any race), who made up 20 percent of U.S. children,⁵ accounted for 19 percent of foster children in 2006.

*Note: All child population percentages are for 2006.

State and Local Estimates

State-level estimates on the number of children in foster care are available from the U.S. Health and Human Services Children’s Bureau at:

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/adopt_child06.pdf

International Estimates

None available

Table 1: Percentage of Children in Foster Care, 1990-2006

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Total Foster Children	49,900	51,600	57,700	64,500	68,800	63,600	67,000	74,600	79,000
Foster Children per 1,000 children ages 0-17 and under (Rate per 1,000)	6.2	6.4	6.5	6.6	6.9	7.1	7.3	7.4	8.0
Age (% of total)									
Less than 1 year	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	15
1 through 2 years	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	25
3 through 5 years	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	20
6 through 10 years	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	27
11 through 15 years	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	13
16 years or more	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Total	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	100
Gender (% of total)									
Male	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	52
Female	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	48
Race/Ethnicity (% of total)									
White Non-Hispanic	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	40
Black Non-Hispanic	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	32
Hispanic	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	19
Asian Non-Hispanic	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
American Indian or Alaska Native Non-Hispanic	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Unknown	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
Total	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	99
Placement Type (% of total)									
Private Family Home	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
Foster Family Home (non-relative)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	26
Foster Family Home (non-relative)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	48
Group Home	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9
Institution	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9
Other	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5
Total	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	100
Length of Stay (% of children who exited foster care during the year)									
Less than 1 month	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	20
1 to 3 months	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	17
4 to 11 months	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	14
1 to less than 2 years	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	18
2 to less than 3 years	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9
3 to 4 years	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	11
5 years or more	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	16
Total	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	100

Table 1: Percentage of Children in Foster Care, 1990-2006

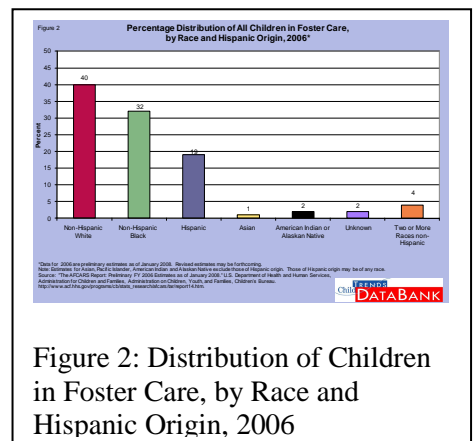


Figure 2: Distribution of Children in Foster Care, by Race and Hispanic Origin, 2006

National Goals

The Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care. "Fostering the Future: Safety, Permanence, and Well-Being for Children in Foster Care":

<http://pewfostercare.org/docs/index.php?DocID=47>

Related Indicators

Child maltreatment: www.childtrendsdatbank.org/indicators/?q=node/69

Definition

Foster care is a living arrangement for children who a child protective services worker or a court has decided cannot live safely at home. Foster care arrangements include non-relative foster homes, relative foster homes (also known as "kinship care"), group homes, institutions, and pre-adoptive homes.

Data Sources

Preliminary data for 2006: "The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2006 Estimates as of January 2006." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report14.htm

Preliminary data for 2005: "The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2005 Estimates as of September 2006." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report13.htm

Preliminary data for 2004: "The AFCARS report: Preliminary FY2004 Estimates as of June 2006" U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report11.pdf

Data for 2003: "The AFCARS Report: Interim FY 2003 Estimates as of June 2006." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report10.htm

Data for 1998 - 2002: "The AFCARS report: Final for FY1998 - FY2002" U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report12.htm

Population estimates used for calculating Foster Children per 1,000 children ages 17 and under for 2000-2005: U.S. Census Bureau, Population division, July 2000, July 2001, July 2002, July 2003, July 2004, and July 2005 estimates.

<http://www.census.gov/popest/national/asrh/NC-EST2005/NC-EST2005-02.xls>.

Population estimates by race for 2000 and 2001: Original analysis by Child Trends of *Bridged Race 2000 and 2001 Population Estimates for Calculating Vital Rates*, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2003.

<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/about/major/dvs/popbridge/popbridge.htm>

Population estimates used for calculating Foster Children per 1,000 children ages 17 and under for 1998-1999: Population Estimates Program, Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau. Internet release date: April 11, 2000.

<http://www.census.gov/popest/archives/EST90INTERCENSAL/US-EST90INT-datasets.html>

Data for 1990-1997 for Total Foster Children and Foster Children per 1,000 children ages 17 and under: *Trends in the Well-Being of America's Children and Youth 1999*. Table PF 2.3. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. Available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/99trends/>

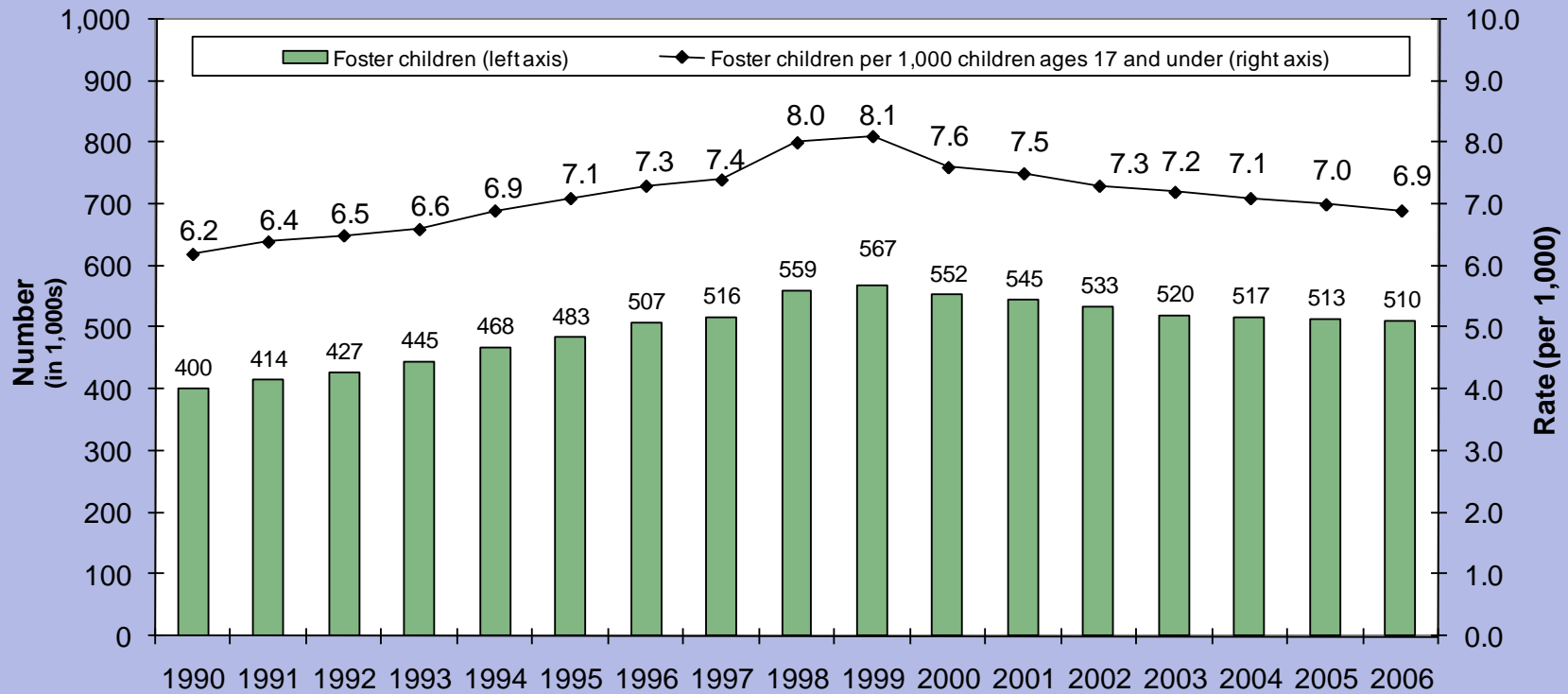
Raw Data Source

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS).

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/systems/index.htm>

Figure 1

The Number and Rate of Children in Foster Care Ages 17 and Under, 1990-2006*



*Data for 2004, 2005, 2006 are preliminary estimates as of June 2006, Sept 2006, and January 2008, respectively. Revised estimates may be forthcoming.
 Source: Data for 1990-1997 for Total Foster Children and Foster Children per 1,000 children ages 17 and under: Trends in the Well-Being of America's Children and Youth 1999. Table PF 2.3. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation; Population estimates used for calculating Foster Children per 1,000 children ages 17 and under for 2000-2005: U.S. Census Bureau, Population division, July 2000, July 2001, July 2002, July 2003, and July 2004 estimates. <http://www.census.gov/popest/national/asrh/NC-EST2005/NC-EST2005-02.xls>. Data for 1998 - 2002: "The AFCARS report: Final for FY 1998 - FY2002" U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report12.htm. Preliminary data for 2004: "The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2004 Estimates as of June 2006." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau. <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/afcars/report11.htm>. Data for 2006: "The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2006 Estimates as of January 2008." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report14.htm.



Table 1

Percentage of Children in Foster Care, 1990-2006*

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004*	2005*	2006*
Total Foster Children	400,000	414,000	427,000	445,000	468,000	483,000	507,000	516,000	559,000	567,000	552,000	545,000	533,000	520,000	517,000	513,000	510,000
Foster Children per 1,000 children ages 17 and under (Rate per 1,000)	6.2	6.4	6.5	6.6	6.9	7.1	7.3	7.4	8.0	8.1	7.6	7.5	7.3	7.2	7.1	7.0	6.9
Age (% of total)																	
Less than 1 year	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	4	4	4	5	5	5	6	6
1 through 5 years	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	25	25	25	24	24	25	26	26	28
6 through 10 years	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	27	25	25	24	22	20	20	20	20
11 through 15 years	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	27	28	29	29	30	30	30	28	27
16 through 18 years	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	13	16	16	16	18	18	18	19	19
19 years or more	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Total	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	100	100	100	100	100	100	101	101	102
Gender (% of total)																	
Male									52	52	52	52	53	53	53	52	52
Female									48	48	48	48	47	47	47	48	48
Race/Ethnicity (% of Total)																	
White Non-Hispanic									35	35	38	38	39	39	40	41	40
Black Non-Hispanic									43	38	39	38	37	35	34	32	32
Asian Non-Hispanic									N/A	N/A	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
American Indian or Alaskan Native Non-Hispanic									2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Hispanic									15	17	15	17	17	17	18	18	19
Unknown									4	7	4	3	3	3	2	2	2
Two or More Races Non-Hispanic									N/A	N/A	1	2	2	3	3	3	4
Total									99	99	100	101	101	100	100	99	100
Placement Type (% of Total)																	
Pre-adoptive Home									3	3	4	4	5	5	4	4	3
Foster Family Home (relative)									28	26	25	24	24	23	24	24	24
Foster Family Home (non-relative)									48	47	47	47	46	46	46	46	46
Group Home									7	8	8	8	9	9	9	8	7
Institution									9	11	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Other									5	5	6	7	7	7	7	7	8
Total									100	100	100	100	100	100	100	99	98
Length of Stay (% of children who exited foster care during the year)																	
Less than 1 month									20	20	19	20	19	18	18	17	15
1 to 5 months									17	17	17	17	17	16	16	16	16
6 to 11 months									14	14	14	14	16	16	16	17	18
1 to less than 2 years									18	19	19	19	20	20	21	22	23
2 to less than 3 years									9	10	11	11	10	11	11	11	12
3 to 4 years									11	11	11	11	10	10	10	9	9
5 years or more									10	10	10	9	9	9	8	8	7
Total									100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

*Data for 2004, 2005, and 2006 are preliminary estimates as of June 2006, September 2006, and January 2008, respectively. Revised estimates may be forthcoming.

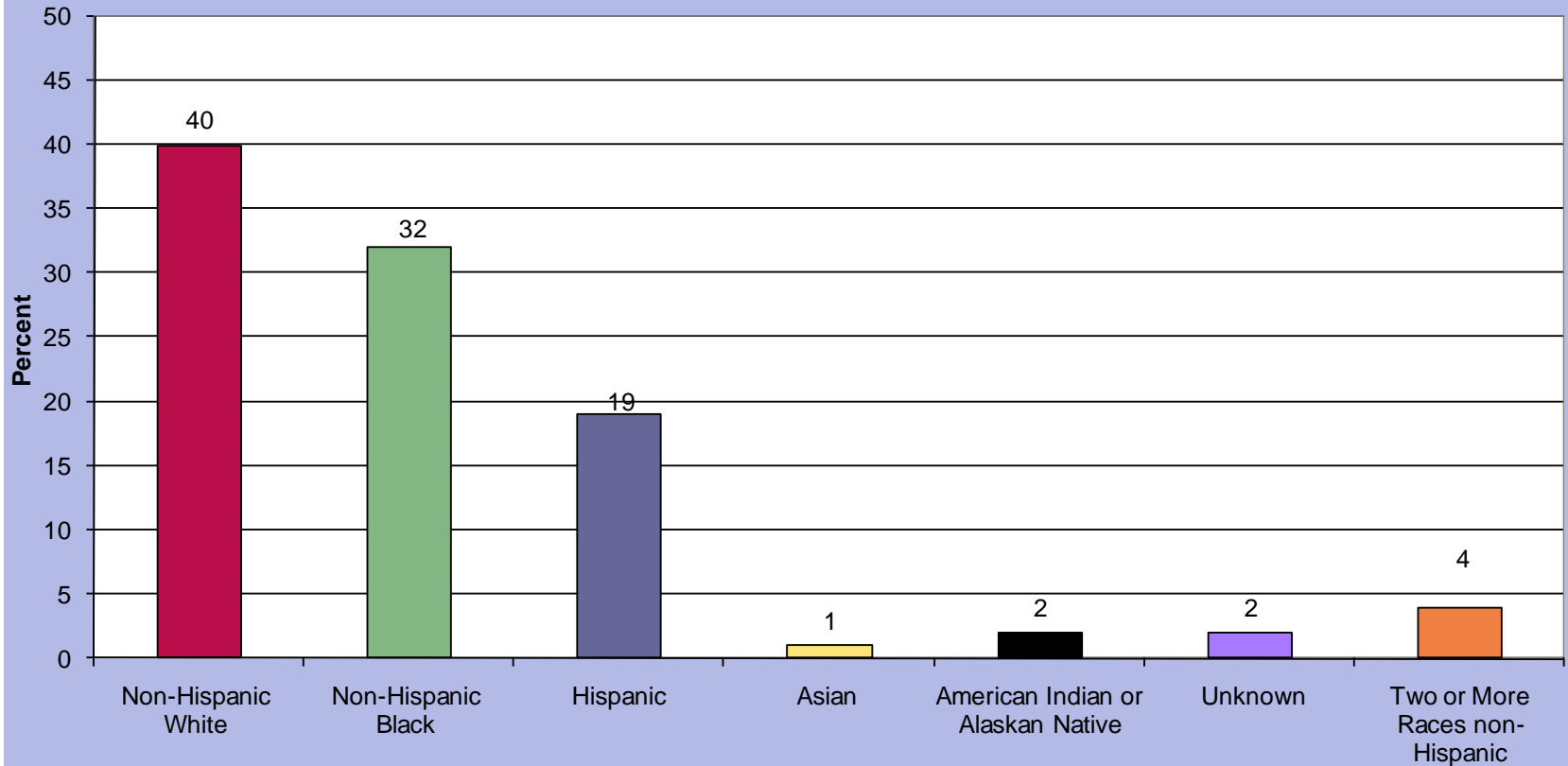
Note: Estimate of total is the number of children in foster care on the last day of the fiscal year. 1996 is the last year in which data on foster care are collected through the Voluntary Cooperative Information System (VCIS). The Administration on Children and Families (ACF) has implemented the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) as a replacement for VCIS. While VCIS was a voluntary reporting system, states are required to participate in AFCARS and must use uniform definitions. Most importantly, AFCARS collects case-level foster care data. Some percentages do not total 100% due to rounding. Estimates for Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian and Alaskan Native exclude those of Hispanic origin. Those of Hispanic origin may be of any race.

Source: Data for 1990-1997 for Total Foster Children and Foster Children per 1,000 children ages 17 and under: Trends in the Well-Being of America's Children and Youth 1999. Table PF 2.3. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation; Population estimates used for calculating Foster Children per 1,000 children ages 17 and under for 2000-2005: U.S. Census Bureau, Population division, July 2000, July 2001, July 2002, July 2003, and July 2004 estimates. <http://www.census.gov/popest/national/asrh/NC-EST2005/NC-EST2005-02.xls>. Data for 1998 - 2002: "The AFCARS report: Final for FY1998 - FY2002" U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report12.htm. Data for 2004: "The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2004 Estimates as of June 2006."

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau. <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/afcars/report11.htm>. Data for 2005: "The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2005 Estimates as of September 2006." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report13.htm. Data for 2006: "The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2006 Estimates as of January 2008." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report14.htm.

Figure 2

Percentage Distribution of All Children in Foster Care, by Race and Hispanic Origin, 2006*



*Data for 2006 are preliminary estimates as of January 2008. Revised estimates may be forthcoming.

Note: Estimates for Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian and Alaskan Native exclude those of Hispanic origin. Those of Hispanic origin may be of any race.

Source: "The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2006 Estimates as of January 2008." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau.
http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report14.htm



¹ Kortenkamp, Katherine, and Jennifer Ehrle, "The Well-being of Children Involved with the Child Welfare System: A National Overview," *New Federalism*, Series B, No. B-43. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, January 2002. http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/310413_anf_b43.pdf

² Vandivere, S., Chalk, R., and Moore, K.A. (2003). "Children in foster homes: How are they faring?" Research Brief, Publication # 2003-23. Washington, DC: Child Trends. <http://www.childtrends.org/files/FosterHomesRB.pdf>

³ Courtney, M.E., and Piliavin, I. "Foster Youths Transitions to Adulthood: Outcomes 12 to 18 Months After Leaving Out-Of-Home Care." Madison: WI, School of Social Work, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1998, cited in Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care. "Fostering the Future: Safety, Permanence, and Well-Being for Children In Foster Care." 2004. <http://pewfostercare.org/>

⁴ Reilly, Thom. (2003). "Transition from Care: Status and Outcomes of Youth Who Age Out of Foster Care." *Child Welfare*, 82(6): 727-746.

⁵ Child population percentages are available at Kids Count State Level Data Online. http://www.aecf.org/kidscount/sld/compare_results.jsp?i=710