

STATS SHOW OUR NATION'S FOSTER CARE SYSTEM IS IN TROUBLE

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The U.S. Children's Bureau has released their [FY2016 foster care statistics](#), the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), which show that the number of children in foster has continued to rise. **Below are three critical takeaways from the report.**

First, let's get on the same page.

Foster care is a temporary living situation for children whose parents are unable, unwilling, or unfit to care for them and whose need for care has come to the attention of child welfare agency staff. It is meant to be a temporary out-of-home care, though the length of time children spend in care can vary drastically. Many children in foster care live in a family setting, such as with a relative, foster parents, or pre-adoptive parents.

Adoption is not the plan for *every* child in foster care. A network of professionals—which includes social workers, therapists, judges, guardians ad litem, and more—will work together with a child and his or her family to determine an appropriate case plan goal. For 58% of the children in care, that case plan goal is to reunify them with their biological parents or place them in the care of a relative. But for 26% of cases, parental rights have been terminated for one reason or another and the end goal is for the child to be adopted by a new family.

FY2016 Trends in Foster Care

Takeaway #1: The number of children in foster care continues to increase.

The number of children in foster care increased 2.3% this year to 437,465—a figure that has risen *every year* since 2012.

Of the 273,539 children who entered foster care this year, just under 47% were Caucasian, 21% were African American, and 20% were Hispanic. The number of Caucasian children entering care rose by 4% since FY2015, while the number of African American children entering care *fell* by 4%. The median age of children entering care this year is 6.3 years old.

Children in Foster Care



Takeaway #2: The opioid crisis is continuing to affect foster care.

In FY2016, 92,107 children were removed from their home due to parental drug abuse, a 7% growth over last year. 166,679 children—61% of those entering care—were placed in foster care due to neglect, which often is exacerbated by parental drug use. Neglect and *child* drug abuse cases have both grown by 3% in the past year. Many state officials say the surge of children entering foster care is a direct result of the ever-increasing drug epidemic. Among the states with the biggest one-year increases in their foster care population were Indiana, Georgia, and Minnesota. Each of these states has reported extensive substance abuse problems that have continued to climb in the past few years. Indiana reported serving 29,315 children in its foster care system in FY2016—18% more than the previous year, which is the highest growth by percentage in the country. New federal laws¹ and subsequent state laws require that hospitals notify child protective services of any infants affected by prenatal substance exposure, which may have contributed to the 4% increase in infants (less than a year old) entering care. In FY2016, infants comprised 18% of all children entering foster care.



Many states are struggling to keep up with the recent influx of children into the state system, issuing pleas for more foster families and a bigger budget to help with the larger caseloads. In some states, like Ohio where almost 14,000 children are in care, case workers are even having a difficult time placing children with relatives, as many of the adults in the child's extended family are drug users.

The AFCARS report does not specifically detail which type(s) of drugs led to a child's removal from their home, but investigative reports by [NPR](#), [The New York Times](#), and [NBC News](#) link the rise in foster care cases to our nation's opioid epidemic. The White House and six individual states have declared a state of emergency over the crisis, with an estimated 11.5 million Americans misusing prescription opioids in 2016.² While many states are taking active approaches to combat the opioid epidemic, more families are needed immediately to help with the influx of children.

Takeaway #3: There's good news, too.

Despite several discouraging trends, there is hope. 3,652 more children were adopted out of foster care than the previous year, bringing the total number of adopted children to 57,208 in FY2016. Adoptions

have grown by 13% in just two years. For the many children whose parental rights have been terminated and are waiting for a family, that is great news! Most of that increase is attributed to the 52% of FY2016 adoptions that were by foster parents. NCFA gratefully acknowledges the growing number of partnerships between public and private agencies which has led to more families for more waiting children.

Children waiting to be adopted have spent an average of 31.2 months in care, a number which has *dropped* every year since 2009. This steady progress has been slow, though, and two and a half years waiting for a family is still way too long. These children *need* families.

The number of children who “aged out” of foster care without a family dropped for the *ninth straight year*. In FY2016, just 20,532 youths were emancipated from care, which is a 45% decrease over the past decade. That means more teens entering adulthood with a supportive network in place and significantly lower chances of homelessness, incarceration, and even death. Of the 250,248 children who exited the foster care system during FY2016, 89% were adopted or reunited with biological parents, other relatives, or a legal guardian.



NCFA's goal? More children in families.

While we applaud the efforts that have been made the past year, we believe that just one child having to wait for a family is one too many. This year, our foster care system failed nearly 118,000 children who were stuck waiting for an adoptive family. We want to make it so that *every* child in foster care finds a loving, permanent home where they can thrive.

As part of our *Families For All* initiative, NCFA is focusing on foster and adoptive parent recruitment and retention. How can states better recruit and train prospective parents to meet the unique needs of children who have experienced trauma and loss and better support parents during the process? NCFA and Northeastern University's Dr. Elise Dallimore are leading a multi-state, longitudinal study to examine the attitudes of hundreds of foster and adoptive parents in order to:

- Identify barriers to successful outcomes,
- Inform policy and programming at the state and local level,
- Improve the recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive parents, and
- Create a blueprint for national foster care success.

Of the estimated 200,000 licensed foster homes, between 30–60% of foster parents drop out of foster parenting each year. This high turnover rate has led to a revolving door of recruiting and educating new foster parents and puts a strain on states. With more than 437,000 children in foster care—and growing—our nation has a critical shortage of homes. NCFA aims to make a difference for these kids.

We are piloting our study with the foster care systems in Mississippi and Missouri to track prospective foster and adoptive families as they begin their process, complete the trainings, accept placement, and seek to adopt through foster care. With the findings from this study, we aim to make changes that will result in fewer disruptions and more permanent homes for children.

¹ The Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act (CAPTA) and Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2016 (CARA)

² Department of Health and Human Services <https://www.hhs.gov/opioids/about-the-epidemic/index.html#response>

CATEGORY Research