

Foster Care Statistics 2017

This factsheet provides the most recent national statistical estimates for children and youth in foster care from Federal fiscal year (FY) 2017 and provides earlier data from FY 2007 to allow for some estimate of trends over time. Data were obtained from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), which collects information on (1) all children in foster care for whom State child welfare agencies have responsibility for placement, care, or supervision and (2) all children who are adopted with public child welfare agency involvement. The data presented for FY 2017 are from *The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2017 Estimates as of August 10, 2018 (25)* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2018), available at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/afcars-report-25>. Data presented for FY 2007 are from *The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2007 Estimates as of October 2009 (15)* (HHS, 2009), allowing for an examination of trends over a period of 11 years. The 2007 report is available at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/afcars-report-15>.

WHAT'S INSIDE

Children in, entering,
and exiting care

Placement settings

Case plan goals

Outcomes

Length of stay

Age

Race and ethnicity

Gender

Additional information

References

AFCARS uses the definition of foster care found in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), where it is defined as “24-hour substitute care for children outside their own homes.”¹ Foster care settings include, but are not limited to, nonrelative foster family homes, relative foster homes (whether payments are being made or not), group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, and preadoptive homes.

Within each section of this report, data estimates are presented for the three timeframes detailed below:

- **Point in Time** refers to information about the population of children in foster care on a given day: September 30, the end of the Federal FY.
- **Entries** refers to information about children entering foster care during a given timeframe: October 1 through September 30 (i.e., the Federal FY).
- **Exits** refers to information about children exiting foster care during a given timeframe: October 1 through September 30 (i.e., the Federal FY).

Children who exit and reenter multiple times in a year are counted only once. Due to rounding of the original AFCARS source data and to missing data, some percentages do not add up to 100 percent, or the estimated numbers do not add up to the total number in the category.

Key Findings

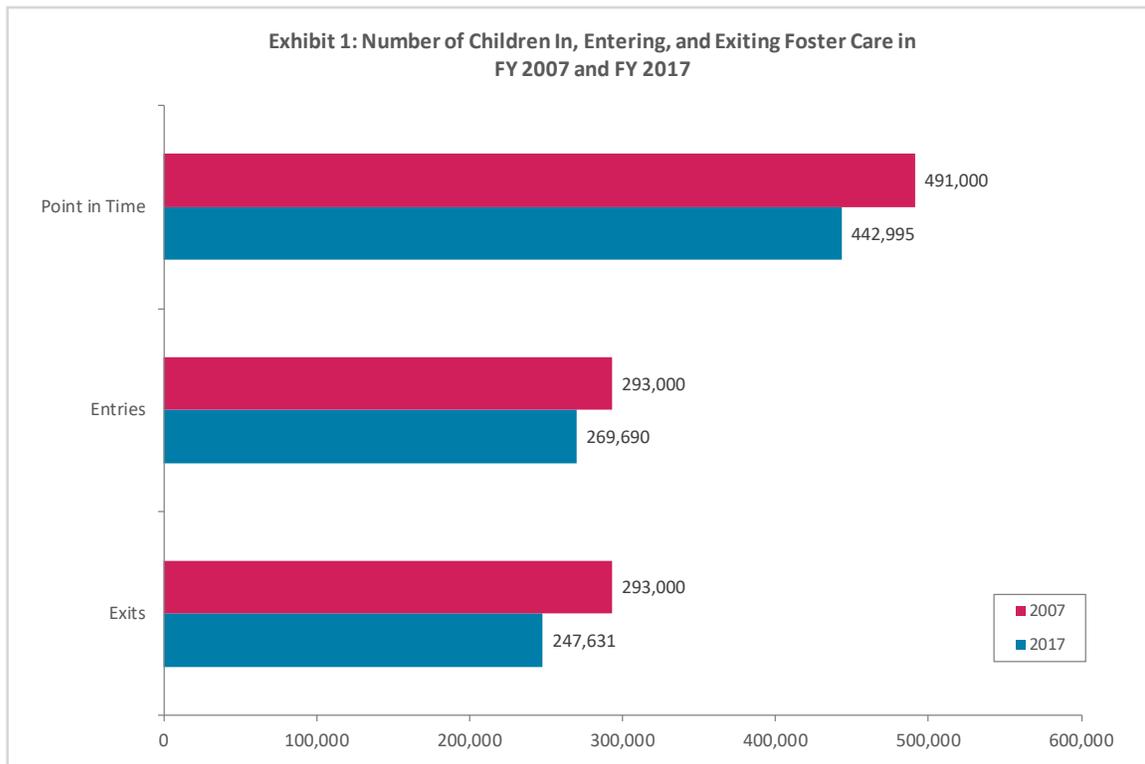
- On September 30, 2017, there were an estimated 442,995 children in foster care (exhibit 1).
- On September 30, 2017, nearly one-third of these children (32 percent) were in relative homes, and nearly half (45 percent) were in nonrelative foster family homes (exhibit 2).
- On September 30, 2017, about half (56 percent) had a case goal of reunification with their parents or primary caretakers (exhibit 3).
- About half (49 percent) of the children who left foster care in FY 2017 were discharged to be reunited with their parents or primary caretakers (exhibit 4).
- Close to half of the children (43 percent) who left foster care in FY 2017 were in care for less than 1 year (exhibit 5).

¹ Title 45, volume 4, part 1355, section 57. The CFR citation can be accessed online at <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2012-title45-vol4/pdf/CFR-2012-title45-vol4-part1355.pdf>.

Children In, Entering, and Exiting Care

These numbers give a broad picture of the number of children in foster care during FY 2017.

- **Point in Time.** On September 30, 2017, there were an estimated 442,995 children in foster care.
- **Entries.** During FY 2017, 269,690 children entered foster care.
- **Exits.** During FY 2017, 247,631 children exited foster care.
- **Trends.** The number of children in foster care on September 30, 2017, (442,995) remains lower than those in care on the same day in 2007 (491,000). However, compared with FY 2016, FY 2017 saw an increase in these numbers from 437,465 in 2016 to 442,995 in 2017.



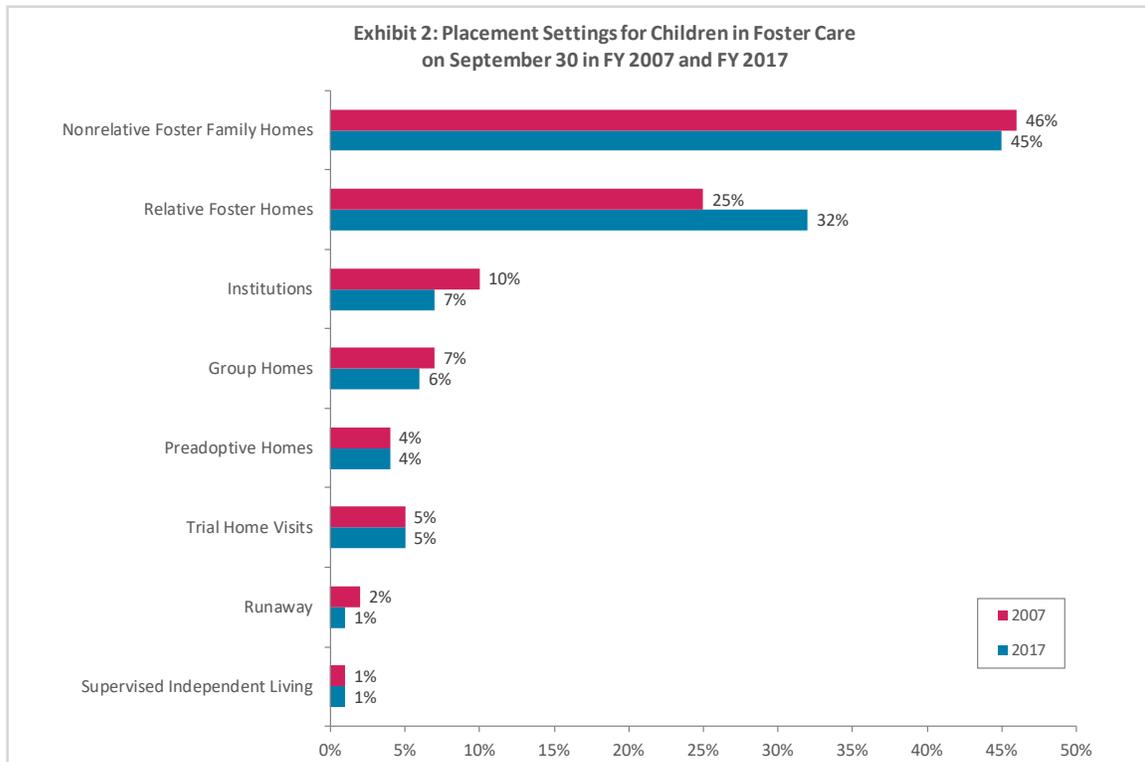
Placement Settings

Children in foster care live in a variety of placement settings and may move among or between settings while in care. For example, a child may move from a group home to a relative foster home.

Point in Time. The estimated 442,995 children in foster care on September 30, 2017, were in the following types of placements:

- 45 percent in nonrelative foster family homes
- 32 percent in relative foster family homes
- 7 percent in institutions
- 6 percent in group homes
- 5 percent on trial home visits (situations in which the State retains supervision of a child, the child returns home on a trial basis for an unspecified period of time, and after 6 months the child is considered discharged from foster care)
- 4 percent in preadoptive homes
- 1 percent had run away
- 1 percent in supervised independent living

Trends. Percentages for placement settings on September 30 changed slightly between FY 2007 and FY 2017, with a notable increase in the use of placements with relatives and a decrease in placements in group homes and institutions (see exhibit 2).



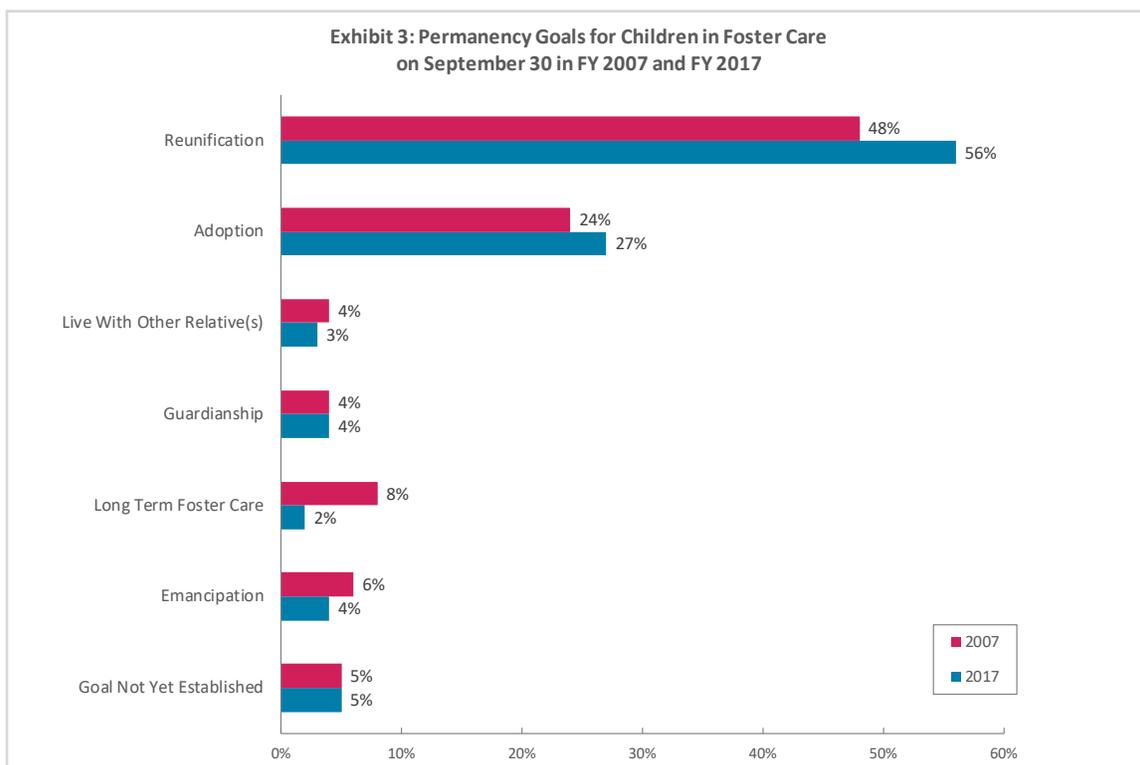
Case Plan Goals

The preferred goal for children in care is permanency with caring parents. Case plan goals refer to the goals for permanent placement that are reported to AFCARS.²

Point in Time. The estimated 442,995 children in foster care on September 30, 2017, had the following case plan goals:

- 56 percent had a goal of reunification with parent(s) or principal caretaker(s).
- 27 percent had a goal of adoption.
- 5 percent had not yet had a case plan goal established.
- 4 percent had a goal of emancipation.³
- 2 percent had a goal of long-term foster care.
- 4 percent had a goal of guardianship.
- 3 percent had a goal of living with other relative(s).

Trends. From FY 2007 to FY 2017, the percentage of children with case plans of reunification experienced the largest increase, while the largest decrease was in the percentage of children with case plans of long-term foster care (see exhibit 3).



² For more information about State requirements for children's permanency goals, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's *Case Planning for Families Involved With Child Welfare Agencies* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/caseplanning>.

³ Emancipation refers to both the emancipation of minors (i.e., youth below the age of majority) and youth who age out of foster care between 18 and 21, depending on State policy.

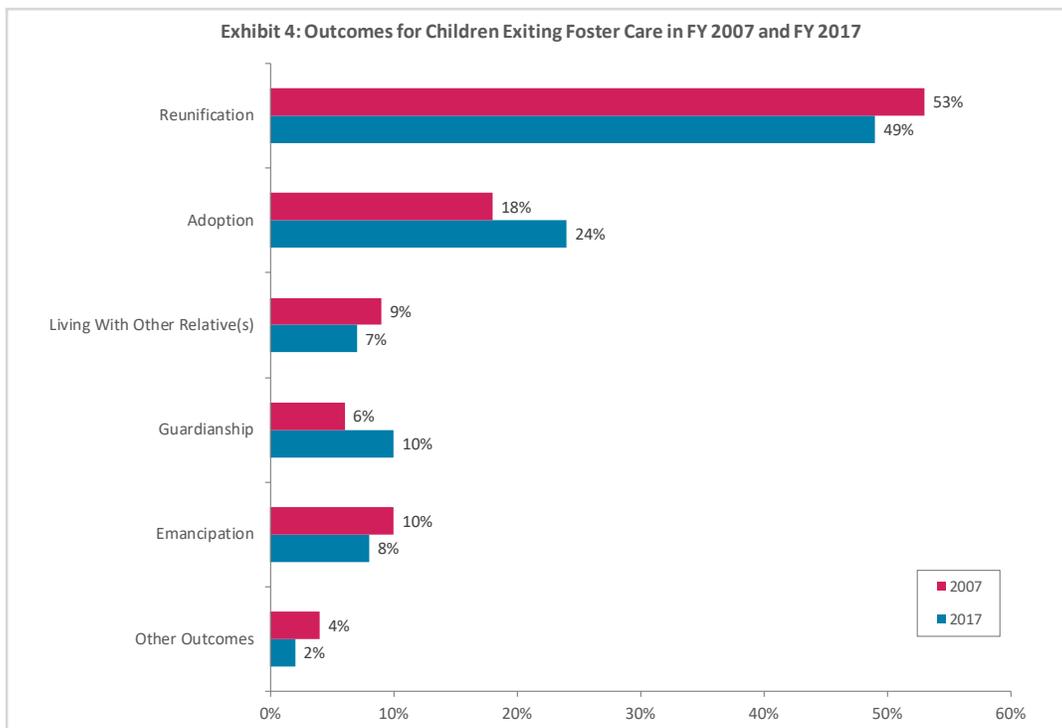
Outcomes

The outcome statistics for children leaving foster care largely reflect the percentages for the permanency goals, especially for reunification and adoption.

Exits. Of the estimated 247,631 children who exited foster care during FY 2017:

- 49 percent were reunited with parent(s) or primary caretaker(s).
- 24 percent were adopted.
- 8 percent were emancipated.
- 10 percent went to live with a guardian.
- 7 percent went to live with another relative.
- 2 percent had other outcomes.⁴

Trends. From FY 2007 to FY 2017, there were increases in the percentages of children who left the system for adoption and guardianship. There were decreases in the percentages of children who left the system to reunite with their parents or primary caregivers or live with other relatives or who left with other outcomes (see exhibit 4).



⁴ Other outcomes include being transferred to another agency, running away, and death. The majority of these children were transferred.

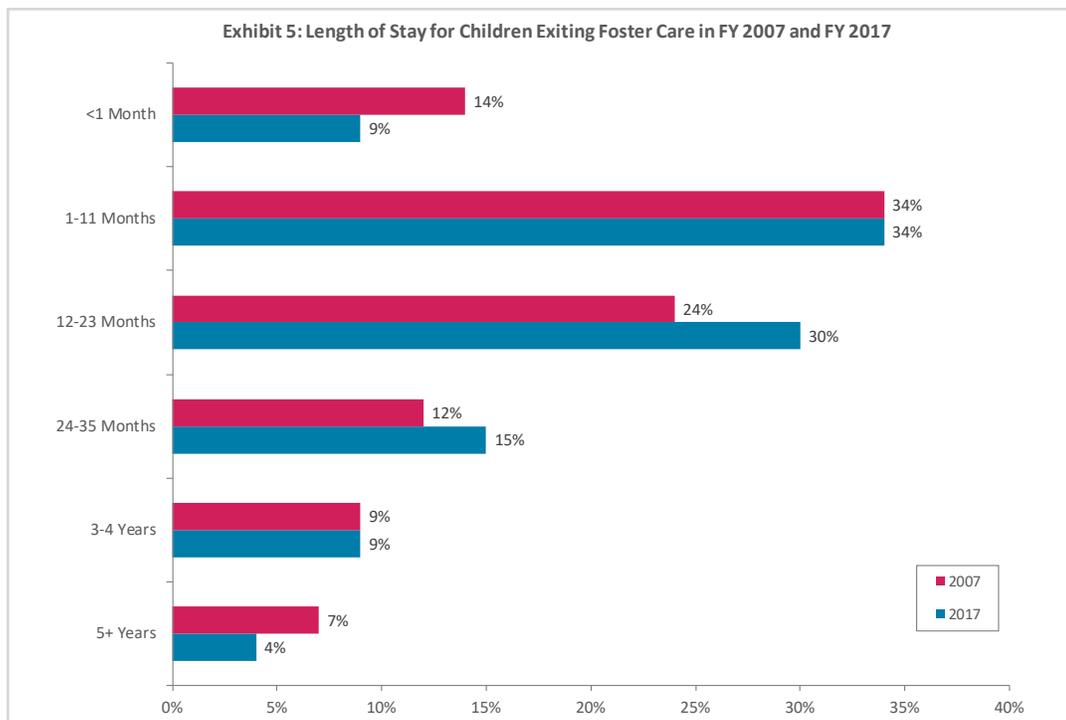
Length of Stay

Length of stay in foster care refers to the amount of time between entering and exiting foster care.

Exits. Of the estimated 247,631 children who exited foster care during FY 2017, the median amount of time spent in care was 14.3 months.⁵ The following are the lengths of time in care:

- 9 percent in care less than 1 month
- 34 percent in care for 1 to 11 months
- 30 percent in care for 12 to 23 months
- 15 percent in care for 24 to 35 months
- 9 percent in care for 3 to 4 years
- 4 percent in care for 5 or more years

Trends. For children exiting foster care, the median amount of time spent in care increased from FY 2007 (12.6 months) to FY 2017 (14.3 months). Additionally, when comparing those two periods, the largest increase in percentages were for children in care for 12 to 23 months. The largest decreases in percentage were for children in care for less than 1 month and children in care for 5 or more years (see exhibit 5).

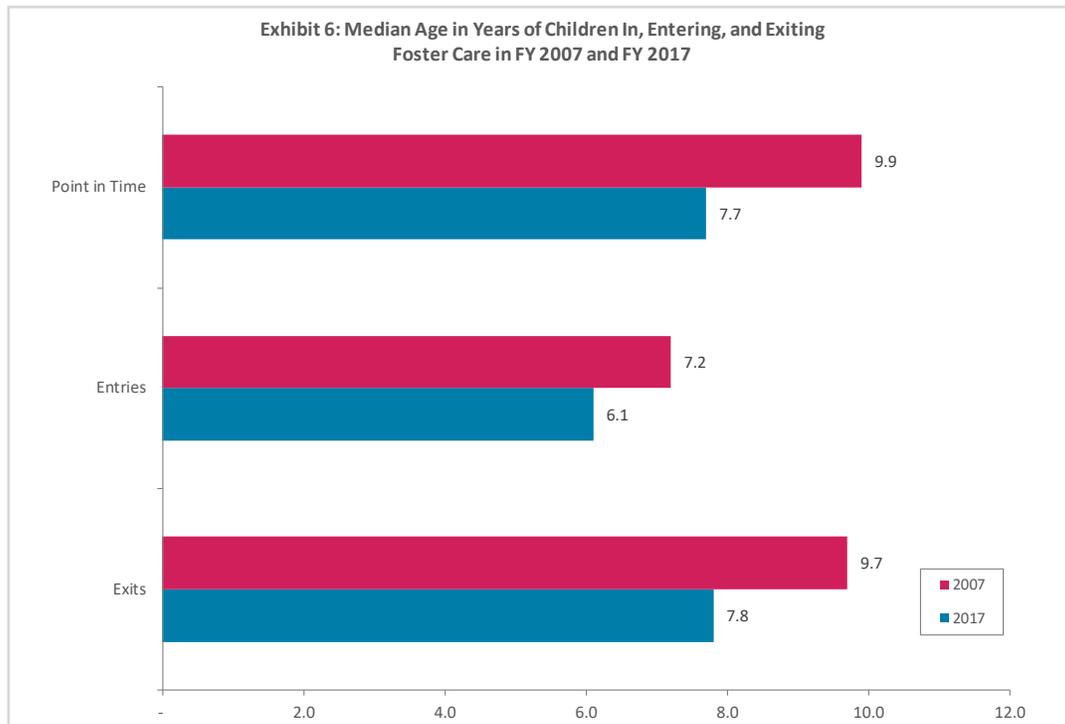


⁵ The median refers to the number in the middle when all numbers are placed in order. In this case, it means that an equal number of children were in care for durations shorter and longer than 14.3 months.

Age

Children can enter foster care from infancy up to age 18 years (and sometimes older).⁶

- **Point in Time.** The median age of the children in foster care on September 30, 2017, was 7.7 years.
- **Entries.** The median age of children entering foster care during FY 2017 was 6.1 years.
- **Exits.** The median age of children exiting foster care during FY 2017 was 7.8 years.
- **Trends.** From FY 2007 to FY 2017, the median age decreased for each of the three timeframes (see exhibit 6).



Race and Ethnicity

AFCARS tracks children's race or ethnicity.

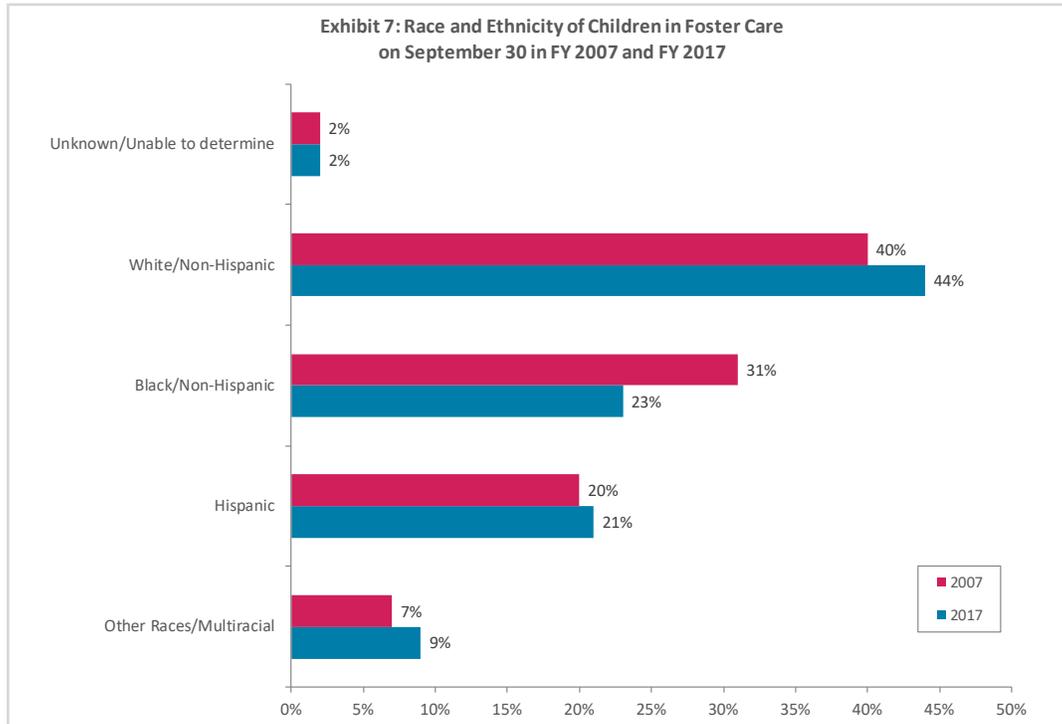
Point in Time. The following are the races and ethnicities of the estimated 437,465 children in foster care on September 30, 2016:

- 44 percent were White.
- 23 percent were Black or African-American.
- 21 percent were Hispanic (of any race).
- 9 percent were other races or multiracial.⁷
- 2 percent were unknown or unable to be determined.

⁶ Some States allow children to remain in foster care to age 19, 20, or 21. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 gave States the option to extend title IV-E assistance to youth ages 18 to 21, with certain stipulations. For more information, visit Information Gateway at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/federal/fosteringconnections>.

⁷ "Other races or multiracial" includes American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and two or more races.

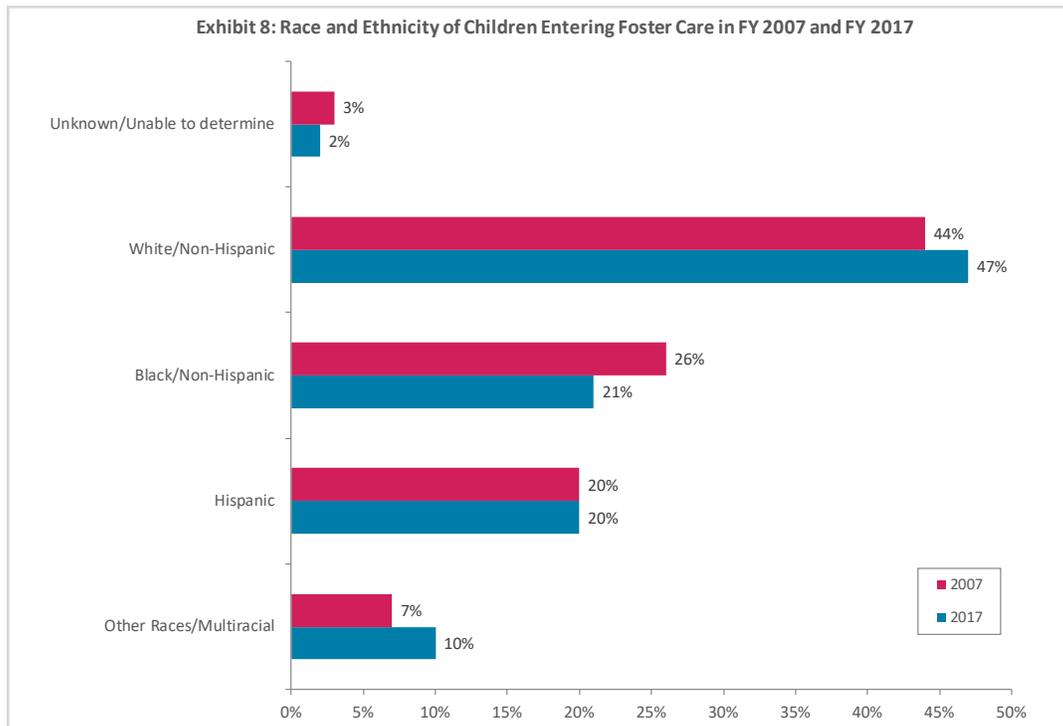
Trends. The percentage of Black or African-American children in care on September 30 decreased between FY 2007 and FY 2017, while the percentages of White children, Hispanic children, and children of other races or multiracial children increased (see exhibit 7).



Entries. The following are the races and ethnicities of the estimated 269,690 children who entered foster care during FY 2017:

- 47 percent were White.
- 21 percent were Black or African-American.
- 20 percent were Hispanic.
- 10 percent were other races or multiracial.
- 2 percent were unknown or unable to be determined.

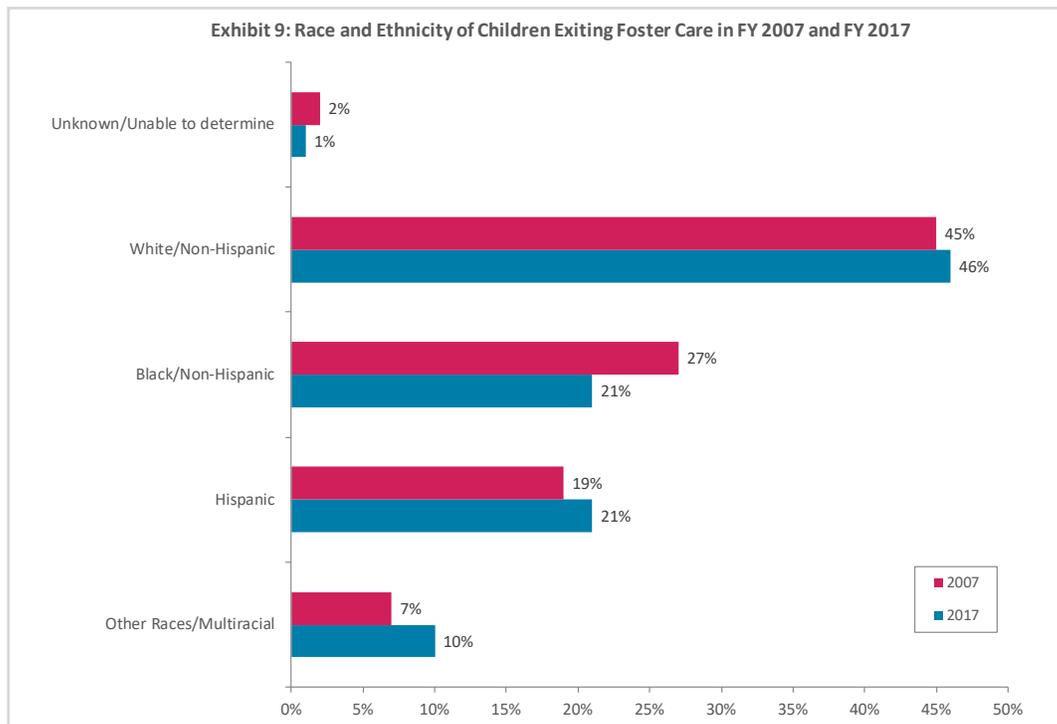
Trends. From FY 2007 to FY 2017, the percentages of Black or African-American children entering foster care as well as for those whose race or ethnicity was unknown or unable to be determined decreased, while the percentages of White children and children of other races or multiracial children entering foster care increased. The percentage of Hispanic children remained the same (see exhibit 8).



Exits. The following are the races and ethnicities of the estimated 247,631 children who exited foster care during FY 2017:

- 46 percent were White.
- 21 percent were Black or African-American.
- 21 percent were Hispanic (of any race).
- 10 percent were other races or multiracial.
- 1 percent were unknown or unable to be determined.

Trends. From FY 2007 to FY 2017, the percentages of Black or African-American children and children of unknown race or whose race was unable to be determined who exited foster care decreased, while the percentages of White children, Hispanic children, and children of other races or multiracial children exiting foster care increased (see exhibit 9).



Gender

AFCARS numbers have consistently shown a slightly greater percentage of boys than girls in foster care.

- **Point in Time.** Of the estimated 442,995 children in foster care on September 30, 2017, 52 percent were male, and 48 percent were female.
- **Trends.** The proportion of males to females in foster care on September 30 remained the same from FY 2007 to FY 2017.

Additional Information

For more detailed information on AFCARS, visit the Children's Bureau's website at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/about-afcars>.

AFCARS reports are available online at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/afcars>.

The following are additional resources for information about children in the child welfare system:

- To find out more about the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in foster care in your State, refer to Child Welfare Outcomes (CWO), an annual report published by the Children's Bureau. These reports, as well as the CWO data site, are available from the Children's Bureau website at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/cwo>.
- To find out more about child maltreatment, including information about victims and perpetrators, read Child Maltreatment, an annual report based on States' reports to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System. Access the reports through the Children's Bureau website at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/child-maltreatment>.

References

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2009). *The AFCARS report: Preliminary FY 2007 estimates as of October 2009* (15). Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/afcars-report-15>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2018). *The AFCARS report: Preliminary FY 2017 estimates as of August 10, 2018* (25). Retrieved from at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/afcars-report-25>

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau

