

# ASPE RESEARCH BRIEF

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR PLANNING AND EVALUATION  
OFFICE OF HUMAN SERVICES POLICY - U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

## A TEMPORARY HAVEN: CHILDREN AND YOUTH ARE SPENDING LESS TIME IN FOSTER CARE

*This research brief highlights the gains the foster care system has made in safely discharging youth from foster care in a timely manner, particularly for those youth entering foster care for the first time.*

For nearly two decades federal policies have emphasized the importance of reducing the lengths of stay in foster care and avoiding what is known as “foster care drift.” This has been done both by mandating timelines for permanency decisions as well as promoting family-centered practice and expanding federally funded permanency options.<sup>1</sup> Practice innovations at the state and local levels – such as differential response programs, improved risk assessments, and family team meetings – have similarly sought to ensure that children enter foster care only when necessary and that, once in care, efforts are made to resolve the issues in the family promptly so that children may return home or to other permanent placements quickly and safely. The data presented in this brief, which cover all children in foster care whether or not they receive federal support, indicate that progress is being made in most states, but work remains to be done. Compared with a decade ago, fewer children are entering foster care, and those who do enter care make the subsequent transition to permanence more quickly and are less likely to return to foster care. These trends may suggest a positive shift toward emphasizing the use of foster care as a safe, *temporary* haven for children and youth who must be removed from their homes due to compromised safety. This issue brief highlights the gains the foster care system has made in safely discharging youth from care in a timely manner, particularly for those youth entering foster care for the very first time.

### Trends in the Number of Children in Foster Care

Over the past 11 years, the total number of children in foster care has declined markedly, as has the number of children entering the

#### ABOUT THIS RESEARCH BRIEF

*This ASPE Research Brief on children’s length of stay in foster care was produced by staff of the Administration for Children and Families and ASPE based on data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). The brief includes cross sectional analyses as well as longitudinal analyses of three cohorts of children whose exit and re-entry patterns are examined over a period that extends five years from their date of entry into foster care.*

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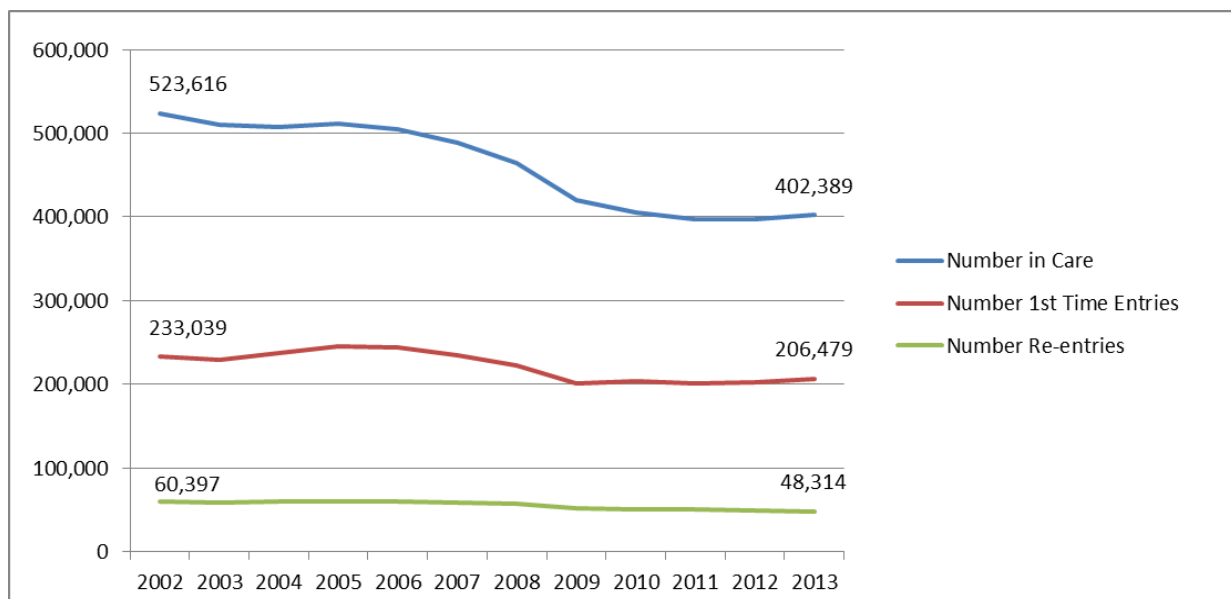
*This brief was prepared in collaboration with the Children’s Bureau and the Office of Data, Analysis, Research, and Evaluation (ODARE), within HHS’s Administration for Children and Families.*

 **Children’s Bureau**

<sup>1</sup> Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89); The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P. L. 110-351).

system (either for the first time or re-entering). From 2002 to 2013, the number of children in foster care on September 30<sup>th</sup> declined from an estimated 524,000 to approximately 402,000, a decrease of 23 percent. The number of children entering care *for the first time* decreased by 11 percent (from 233,039 to 206,479), and the number of children who re-entered care decreased by 20 percent (from 60,397 to 48,314). Additionally, over 200,000 children have exited care every year (with 239,000 exiting in 2013) since 2002. The combination of large numbers of children exiting and fewer numbers entering have enabled states to better shift resources to efforts that will ensure that those who do enter are reunified or discharged to a permanent placement within a reasonable timeframe.

**Figure 1. Number of Children in Care on the Last Day of the Federal Fiscal Year and Numbers Entering Care, FY 2002-FY 2013**



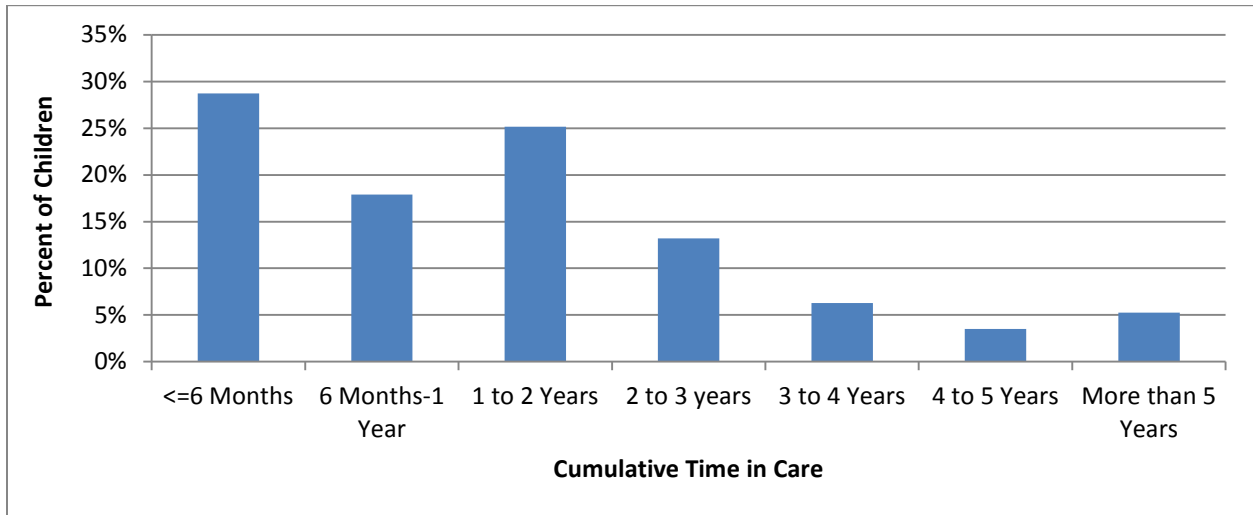
## Length of Time Spent in Foster Care

Data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS) for fiscal years 2006 to 2013 were combined to create an eight-year longitudinal file, out of which three first-time entry cohorts (2006, 2007 and 2008) were identified. Each was followed for five years to identify how much cumulative time a child spent in the foster care system.<sup>2</sup>

Results indicate that there were few differences between the three cohorts and that, on average, the majority of children had spent less than a total of two years in care since the day they entered. Over one-quarter spent six months or less in care, and almost half (47 percent) spent less than one year in care. By the end of two years, slightly more than 7 out of 10 of them had been discharged and had not returned by the end of five years from their entry dates. After three years, gains were more modest, but the downward trend continued. On average, by the end of five years, only 5 percent of each of the cohorts were still in care (Figure 2).

<sup>2</sup>Preliminary analyses and other empirical studies indicate that the vast majority of children exit in less than three years, and of those few that remain, less than 10 percent are in care longer than five years. As a result, analyses were limited to a five-year window to allow for all three cohorts to be observed in the data for the same number of years. Because the more recent data are more reflective of recent policies and practices (and when the rate of first-time entries began to notably decrease), the 2006 cohort is the earliest cohort used and followed through FY 2011. Consequently, the 2007 cohort is followed through FY 2012, and the 2008 cohort through FY 2013.

**Figure 2. Average Percent of Three Entry Cohorts of Children by Categories of Cumulative Time Spent in Care**



Additionally, 12 percent of the children entered and exited care more than once over the course of five years. There were some differences in total time spent in care between those who accumulated time in care from one continuous episode (the “single-episode” group) and those whose time was totaled cumulatively over the five-year follow-up period (the “multi-episode” group). Although both groups had an average time in care of two years or less (24 months for the multi-episode group compared to 17 months for the single-episode group), a higher proportion of the single-episode group (75 percent) than the multi-episode group (55 percent) spent two years or less in care.

### Time in Care: National Trends and State Differences

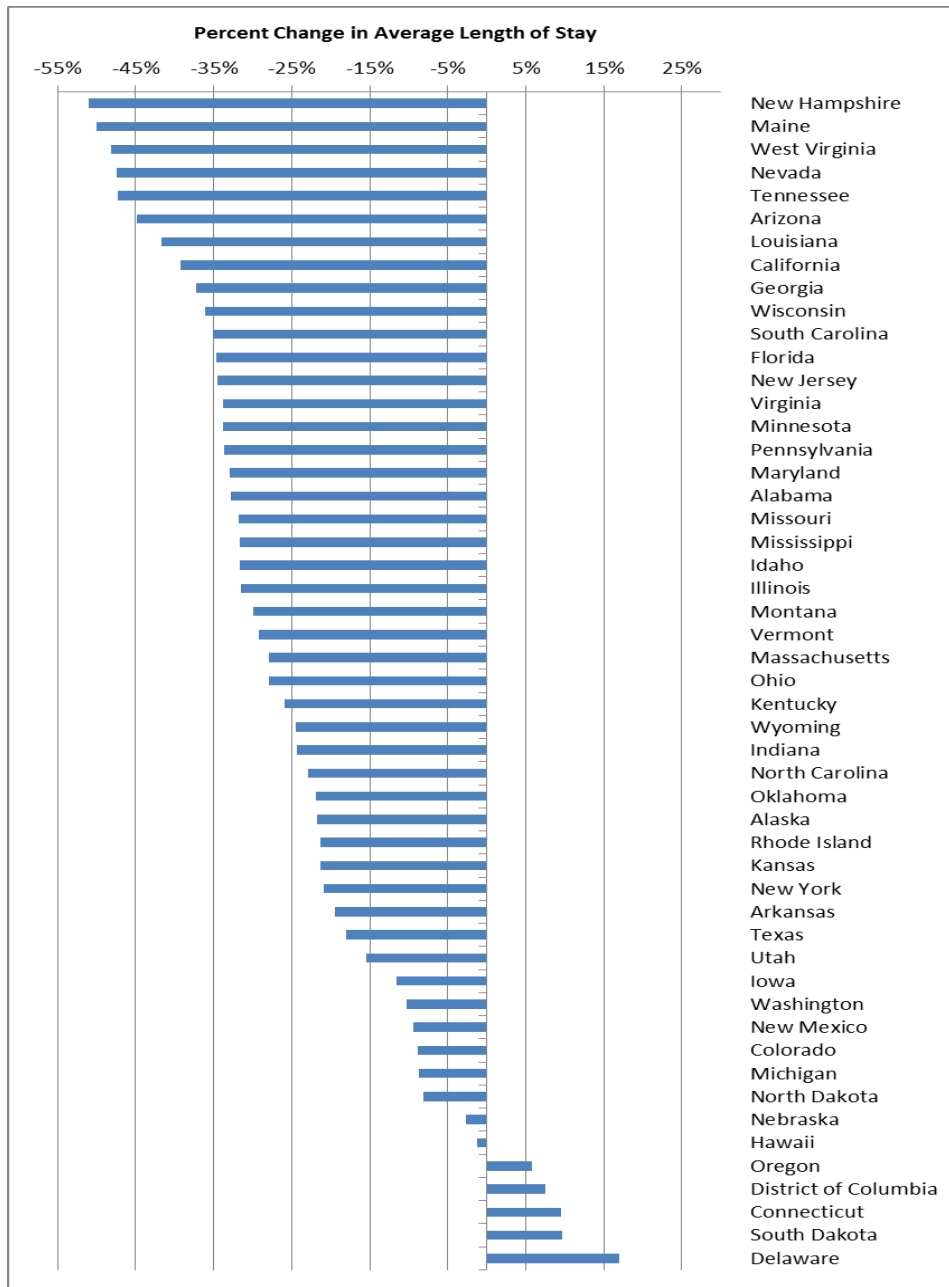
While the entry cohort analyses presented above reflect the total amount of time children spend in the foster care system, point-in-time (PIT) data are a snapshot reflecting the amount of time children had been in the system as of a particular date. PIT measures are useful for trend analyses as they provide a picture of what a “typical” caseload is on a given day every year and also allow for more up-to-date measures than the cohort measure, which lags by five years. Both approaches, when used together, provide a comprehensive understanding of foster care caseloads and highlight the gains the foster care system has made with fewer children entering the system and decreases in the time children spend in care. Results from the examination of the lengths of stay in foster care for children as of the last day of any given federal fiscal year (September 30<sup>th</sup>) indicate that children are spending less time in foster care. From 2002 to 2013, the proportion of children on the last day of the fiscal year who had spent more than two years in foster care decreased from 42 percent to 28 percent (Figure 3). Additionally, during that same time period the average length of time spent in foster care declined sharply from more than 2.5 years (31.8 months) to less than 2 years (21.9 months), a 31 percent decrease.

**Figure 3. Percent of Children in Care on Sept 30<sup>th</sup> by Length of Time in Care**

	FY 2002	FY 2013
6 Months to 1 Year	16.0%	19.7%
2 Years Or More	41.8%	28.2%

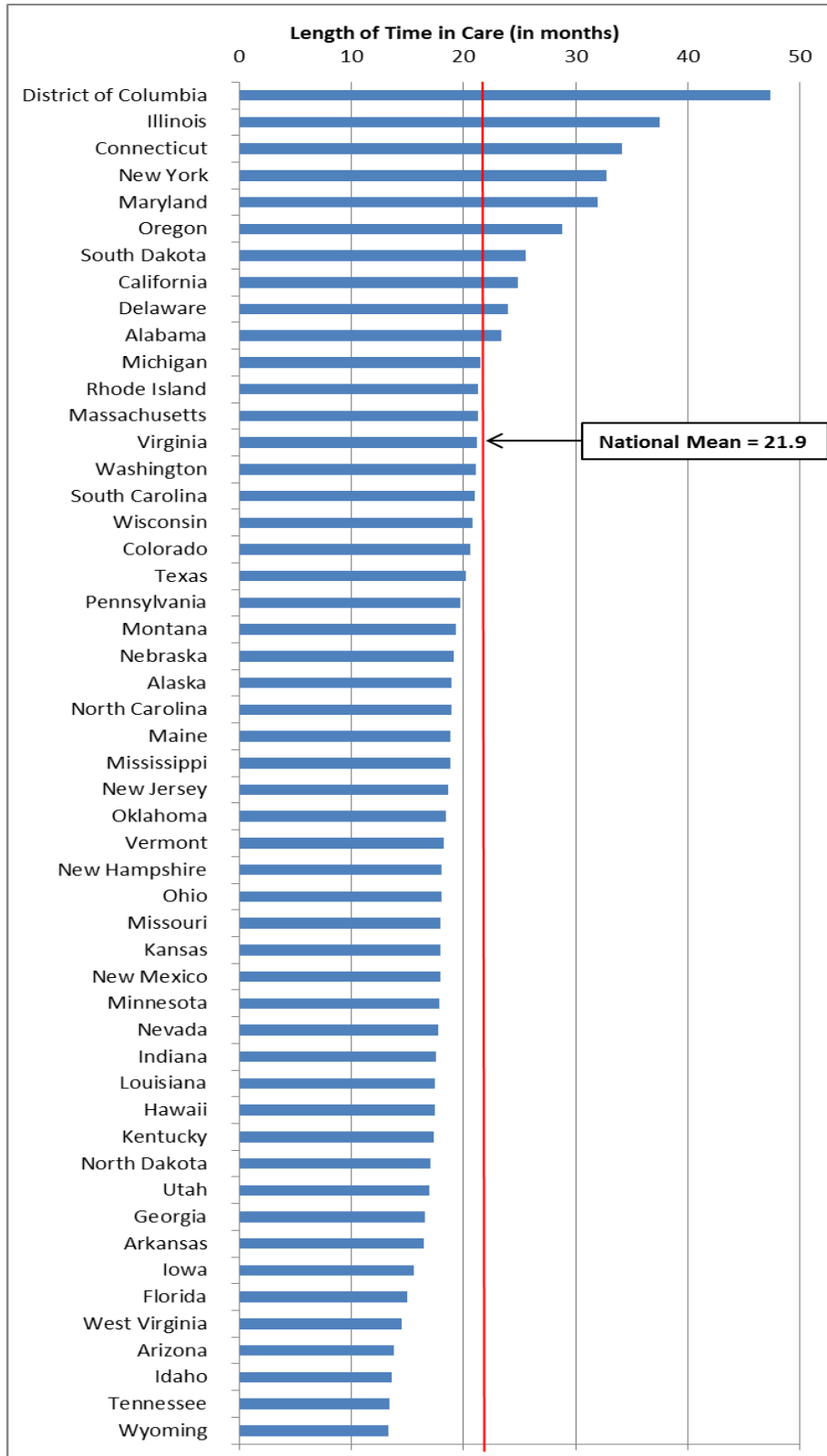
These national figures reveal an overall improvement in reducing lengths of stay in care, and states continue to make progress. Over the past decade, 46 states have decreased the average length of time children stay in foster care. In fact, 27 of those states decreased their average length of time in foster care by 25 percent or more from 2002 to 2013 (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Percent Change from FY 2002 to FY 2013 in Average Lengths of Time in Care by State**



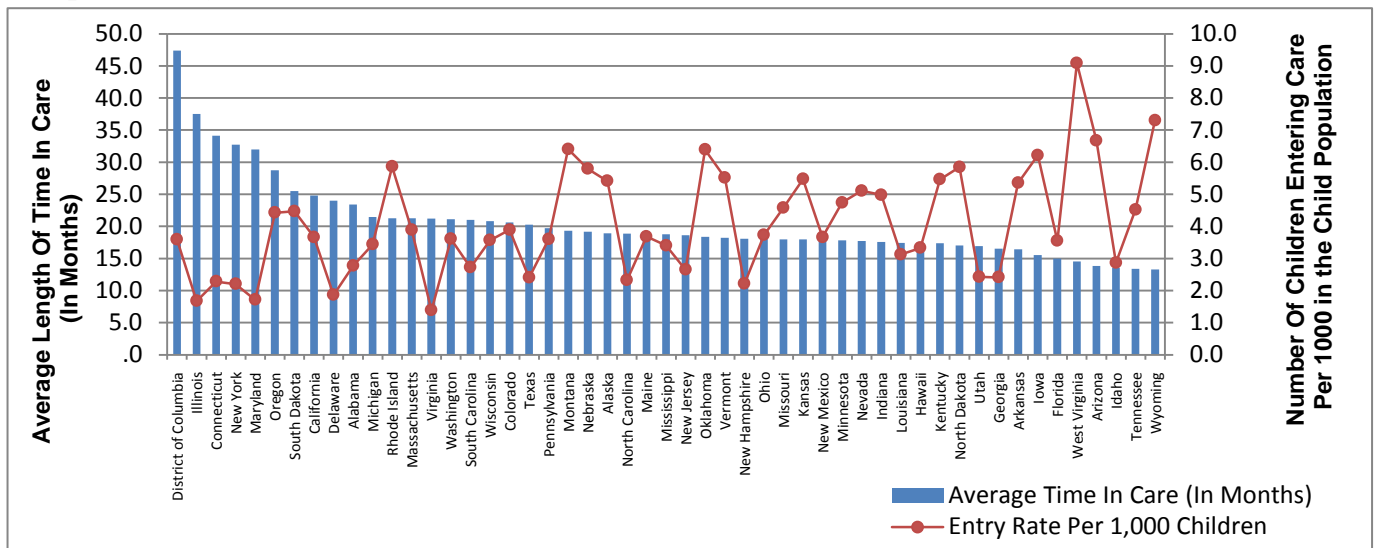
In 2013, the average lengths of stay in foster care ranged from 47.4 months to 13.3 months across the states. About one in five states had mean lengths of stay that were above the national average of 21.9 months. Six of those were above the mean by six months, and only two of those states (Connecticut and Illinois) and the District of Columbia were above the mean by more than 12 months (Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Average Lengths of Stay in Care of Children in Care on September 30, 2013 by State**



A closer look at the distribution of states reveals that most states with longer lengths of stay also have lower rates of children entering the foster care system. Average lengths of stay are significantly ( $p < .01$ ) and negatively correlated with the rate at which foster children enter care. In other words, where lengths of time in care are high, there tend to be fewer children entering the system (Figure 6). This may indicate that those children who are removed from their homes are those with greater needs for services, and therefore they may tend to stay in care for longer lengths of time.

**Figure 6. Average Lengths of Stay in Care and Rate of Children Entering Care (per 1000 Child Population) by State, FY 2013**



## Discussion

This brief highlights the downward trend in the number of children entering the foster care system and the increasing proportion of children who leave care in a timely manner. This is likely due to changes in both federal and state policy as well as a shift in resources to upfront services. With time in care decreasing for the majority of children who are in the foster care system, states have an opportunity to better target resources to those who remain in care longer than two years. States should also seek to better understand what practices and/or policies are effective in reducing caseloads and time in care. There may be opportunities for states that have children with significantly lower lengths of stay in care to provide peer-to-peer networking and technical assistance to those states that may be struggling with reducing the time their children spend in care.

At the federal level, national and state-by-state analyses can better inform policy and can also identify areas where technical assistance may be helpful to states. Using administrative data from federal reporting systems, additional longitudinal analyses can explore both child and state-level characteristics that may or may not contribute to long lengths of stay. Future research from the Children’s Bureau, in partnership with other federal agencies, will involve examining the relationships between foster care experiences, child characteristics, and length of time spent in care as well as policy and fiscal implications. We encourage researchers to explore these data also.<sup>3</sup> Service delivery and policies will need to respond to the changing foster care system landscape, and increasing our knowledge base with solid research will help inform best practices and drive decision making

<sup>3</sup> Publicly available federal data sets, including AFCARS, are available to researchers through the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect ([www.ndacan.cornell.edu](http://www.ndacan.cornell.edu)).