The Multiethnic Placement Act 25 Years Later: Trends in Adoption and Transracial Adoption

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Summary of key findings

The Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA), originally enacted in 1994, was intended to improve the likelihood that children were adopted and ensure that minority children did not wait in foster care longer than their White peers. This report examines recent trends in adoption and transracial adoption, including the extent to which children of color wait disproportionately in foster care and whether wait times are uniform across age groups and other demographic factors.

We find that, overall, the percentage of children achieving timely permanency (permanency within two years) has remained constant since 2005, and the percentage of children achieving adoption within two years has increased. Findings show that despite fewer children in foster care, the number of adoptions increased, and the median time children spend in care before being adopted decreased.

Although notable differences still exist, racial and ethnic disparities in permanency and adoption became less pronounced over time, and transracial adoptions for Black children grew. The percentage of Black children who achieve permanency within two years is smaller than those of their White and Hispanic peers, and the number of adoptions of Black children decreased while the number of adoptions increased for children of other racial and ethnic groups. Black children comprise a smaller proportion of children adopted when compared with the percentage of Black children in foster care. In addition, the percentage of exits to permanency because of reunification increased for Black children, as did the use of kinship care among Black children. Finally, the rise in rates of transracial adoption for Black children suggest that states might be more willing to place Black children with parents of a different race or ethnicity, consistent with the intent of MEPA.

The following are additional data highlights:

Background context

- From 2005 to 2019, the number of children in foster care declined by 14 percent. Additionally, the number of children entering foster care decreased from roughly 320,000 to 275,000.
- The number of Black children in foster care reduced over time and this reduction was much greater than the reduction for White children.
- Overall, the number of exits to adoption and guardianship increased, while the number of exits to reunification and living with relatives decreased. This overall trend was the same for White and Hispanic children, but for Black children, the only permanency exits that increased were exits to guardianship.

Adoption trends
- Overall, adoptions of foster children in the United States increased 22 percent from 2005–2007 to 2017–2019.
- Although adoptions for White and Hispanic children increased from 2005–2007 to 2017–2019, adoptions for Black children decreased. This decline is in part the result of fewer Black children in foster care, fewer Black children waiting for adoption, and additional permanency trends that we describe later.

Transracial adoption trends
- As adoptions increased in the United States during this time, the proportion of adoptions that were transracial also increased, often at a rate that exceeded the increase in the rate of adoption overall. The proportion of children adopted transracially increased from 23 percent to 28 percent overall and from 21 percent to 33 percent for Black children.
- Fewer than one-third (28 percent) of all adoptions in 2017–2019 were transracial. Of these transracial adoptions, 90 percent involved children of color adopted by parents of a different race.

- Although adoptions and transracial adoptions increased since MEPA, racial disparities persist.

Time spent in care before adoption
- From 2017 to 2019, half of all children adopted from foster care in the United States spent less than 28 months in foster care from entry to discharge, though many of those still waiting have spent longer periods in care.
- The youngest children (younger than one year old) spent the least amount of time in care (median of 25 months) compared with adopted children from all older age groups.
- A child's race was also associated with time spent in care before adoption. Black children who were adopted spent the longest time in foster care, with a median of 33 months. White children who were adopted spent a median of 27 months in care, and Hispanic children who were adopted spent a median of 28 months in care.
- Racial differences in time spent in care before adoption existed regardless of the child's age at entry.

Percentage of children achieving timely permanency and timely adoption
- In all, 61 percent of children who entered foster care in 2017 achieved an exit to permanency[1] within two years, a rate that has been fairly consistent since 2005.
- The percentage of children who exit to adoption within two years has increased over time, from five percent of the 2005-2007 entry cohort to eight percent of the 2017 entry cohort
- White children who entered foster care in 2017 were adopted within two years at a higher rate (10 percent) than Black children (five percent). The rate for Hispanic children was similar to the rate for White children (nine percent).

Trends in type of permanency
- A higher percentage of children in care exited to permanency over time, and the increase has been highest for Black children. This has contributed to the decline in the number of Black children in foster care over time.
- Comparing permanency discharges in 2017-2019 to 2005-2007, adoptions were relied on more among each racial/ethnic group, but significantly more so for White and Hispanic children than for Black children.
- For Black children, adoptions grew three points from 21 percent to 24 percent of all permanent exits, whereas for White children adoptions grew nine points (from 20 percent to 29 percent), and seven points for Hispanic children (from 21 percent to 28 percent).
- The percent of exits to reunification dropped only one point for Black children (from 57 percent to 56 percent), while it dropped nine points for White children (61 percent to 52 percent) and Hispanic children (65 percent to 56 percent).

Introduction

Finding adoptive homes that ensure long-term connections and support for all children, but particularly for children of color, is a long-standing issue for child welfare agencies. The Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) of 1994 (as amended by the Interethnic Adoption Provisions in Placement Act of 1996), aimed to reduce the time that children spent in foster care awaiting placement in adoptive homes. The law affected child welfare policy and practice by prohibiting or requiring the following:

1. Prohibiting agencies from refusing or delaying foster or adoptive placements because of a child's, foster parent's, or adoptive parent's race, color, or national origin
2. Prohibiting agencies from considering race, color, or national origin as a basis for denying approval as a foster or adoptive parent

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[1] Permanency includes the following AFCARS discharge reasons: reunified with parent or primary caretaker; adoption; living with other relative; and guardianship.

3. Requiring agencies to diligently recruit a diverse base of foster and adoptive parents to better reflect the racial and ethnic makeup of children in out-of-home care

Concern about reducing the number of children who linger in foster care continues today. A 2020 Executive Order issued a national challenge to find permanent homes for all children and youth waiting to be adopted.[2] To advance the goals of MEPA, the Executive Order calls for (1) a study of the implementation of MEPA requirements nationwide; (2) updated guidance on implementation of MEPA; and (3) published guidance on the rights of parents, prospective parents, and children with disabilities. This report, together with two companion reports, addresses the first directive: to study the implementation of MEPA requirements nationwide.[3]

This report seeks to describe a preliminary understanding of adoption trends as they relate to MEPA implementation by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the recent trends in adoption and transracial adoption?
2. To what extent do children of color continue to wait disproportionately in foster care?
3. Are wait times uniform across age groups and other demographic factors or is any disproportionality concentrated among specific subpopulations?

Methods

Data source. Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data from the National Data Archive for Child Abuse and Neglect was used to examine trends in transracial adoption and patterns of exiting from 2005 to 2019. AFCARS variables used for analysis included child's age and child's and adoptive parent's race and ethnicity. The National Data Archive for Child Abuse and Neglect variables included whether adoptions were made to transracial families and whether children were waiting for adoption at the end of the time period of interest. We included all public adoptions from foster care in the analysis, except in cases with a high level of missing information about the agency placing the child. The AFCARS Child File provides demographic and case-level data on all children in foster care in the United States, and the Adoption File provides demographic and other adoption-related data for child adoptions.[4]

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[2] Exec. Order. No. 13,930, *Federal Register* (2020). https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-06-29/pdf/2020-14077.pdf
[3] Kalisher, A., Spielfogel, J., Eduoard, K., & Shenk, M. (2020). *The Multiethnic Placement Act 25 years later: Key informant interviews.* Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.
Kalisher, A., Spielfogel, J., Shenk, M., & Eduoard, K. (2020). *The Multiethnic Placement Act 25 years later: Diligent recruitment plans.* Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.
[4] For analysis of data from the Foster Care file and from the Adoption File, data are classified by federal fiscal year.

Analysis

We conducted an analysis to understand background context regarding the population of children in care as well as the trends in adoption and transracial adoption overall and by race and ethnicity. Our analysis included the following steps:

1. First, for background context, we calculated the number of children in foster care and the number of children entering and exiting foster care during the study period in three-year bands from 2005 to 2019. This enabled us to determine the flow of children into and out of care and to understand reasons that the foster care population was decreasing.
2. Also for background context, we examined the type of permanency outcomes to which children exited care.
3. Next, we examined numbers of adoptions and transracial adoptions over time and by race.
4. We used exit cohort analysis to compare how long children were in foster care before adoption by both race and age.
5. We then conducted a disproportionality analysis by comparing the group of children who was adopted in a given year to the group of children waiting in foster care for adoption in the same year to determine whether there was any racial disproportionality among these groups of children.
6. In addition, we used entry cohort analysis to understand trends in the percentage of children who entered care and achieved permanency within two years. We also compared exits to the number of children in foster care by race in order to understand trends in permanency independent of the number of children in foster care.
7. Finally, because of our interest in understanding trends in adoption, it was also important to consider adoption in the context of other permanency outcomes. Because adoption rates can vary based on states' efforts to improve other permanency outcomes, such as reunification or relative placements, and some states might make greater efforts to promote guardianship over adoption, we were interested in knowing whether changes in adoption rates came at the expense of other permanency outcomes and whether there were differences in permanency outcomes for children of different races and ethnicities.

Findings

This section shows the background context for understanding trends in adoption, transracial adoption, and it explores trends in adoption, transracial adoption, and median time to adoption. It reviews disproportionality in who is adopted versus who is most likely to wait in care and shows increased reliance on adoption as a permanency outcome for the overall population. Finally, we show that for Black children, there is an increase in guardianship as a permanency outcome, and that all children who remain in care are more likely than in the past to be placed with a relative two years after entering care.

Background context

The number of children in foster care decreased as did the number of children who entered care

From 2005 to 2019, the number of children in foster care declined by 14 percent. The number of children in foster care was highest in 2006, with about 490,000 children in care on October 1, and was the lowest in 2012, with 380,000 children (Figure 1). Since 2012, the number of children in foster care increased by 11 percent to roughly 420,000 children in foster care in 2019. In addition, the number of children entering foster care each year varied but decreased over time. From 2005 to 2017, the number of children entering foster care decreased from roughly 320,000 to 275,000 (Figure 1). Fluctuations can be seen, however, as the number of children in foster care and the number of children entering care both increased slightly since 2011. The Appendix (Figures A.1, A.2, and A.3) show this analysis broken down by race.

Figure 1. Number of children in foster care in each federal fiscal year[5]
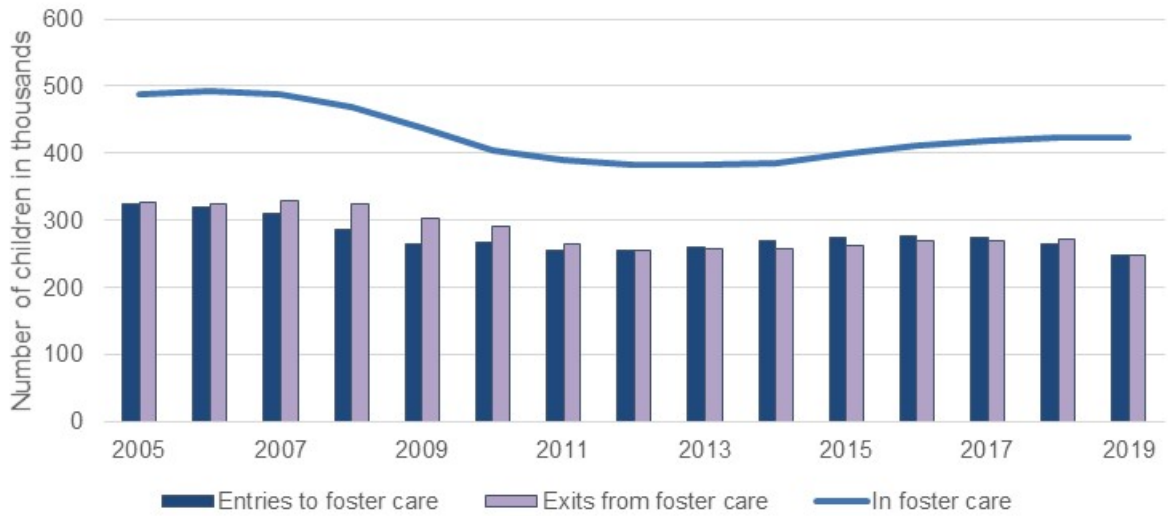
The population of Black children has dropped more than any other racial and ethnic group

Although the foster care population declined overall, this trend differed by racial and ethnic groups. Figure 2 shows a steeper and consistent decline in the number of Black children in foster care compared to children of other racial and ethnic groups. The number of White children declined overall, and the number of Hispanic children in foster care has remained relatively stable over time.

Figure 2. Number of children in foster care in each federal fiscal year by race and ethnicity
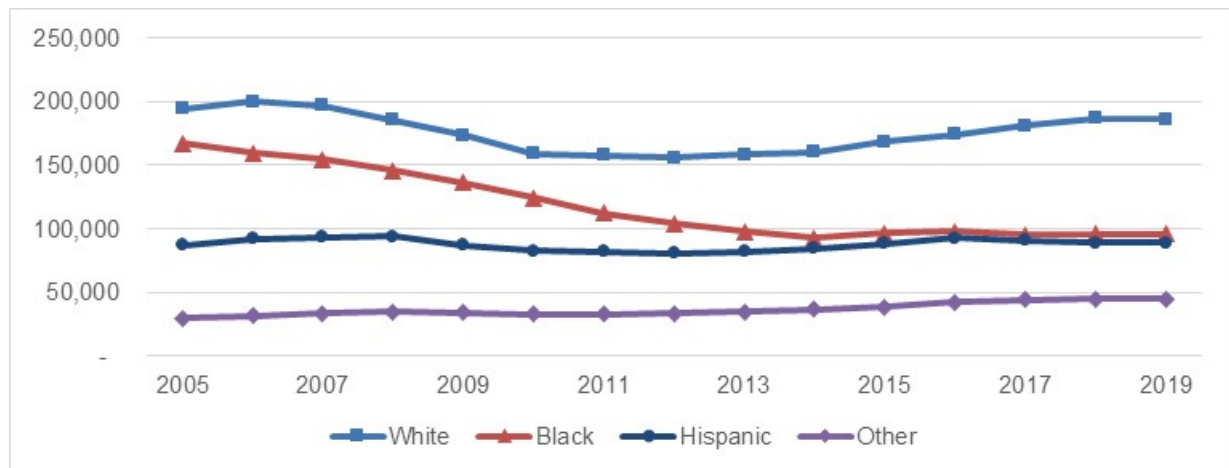
Similarly, Figure 3 shows that from 2005 to 2019, the proportion of Black children in foster care decreased more than any racial or ethnic group. In 2005, Black children comprised 35 percent of all children in foster care, but they only comprised 23 percent in 2019. In the same time period,

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[5] We calculated the number of children in foster care as the number of children in foster care on October 1 of each fiscal year. The number of discharges include dropped discharges for episodes that do not have a discharge date in the fiscal year file and for which there is no record of that episode in the subsequent fiscal year file. For these episodes, we imputed the discharge date as the end of the fiscal year corresponding to the file in which the record appears.

the proportion of White children and the proportion of Hispanic children in foster care increased slightly, by four and three percentage points, respectively.[6] "Other" races and ethnicities include more than one race, American Indian, Asian, and Hawaiian Pacific Islander.

Figure 3. Percent of racial makeup of foster care population from 2005-2009
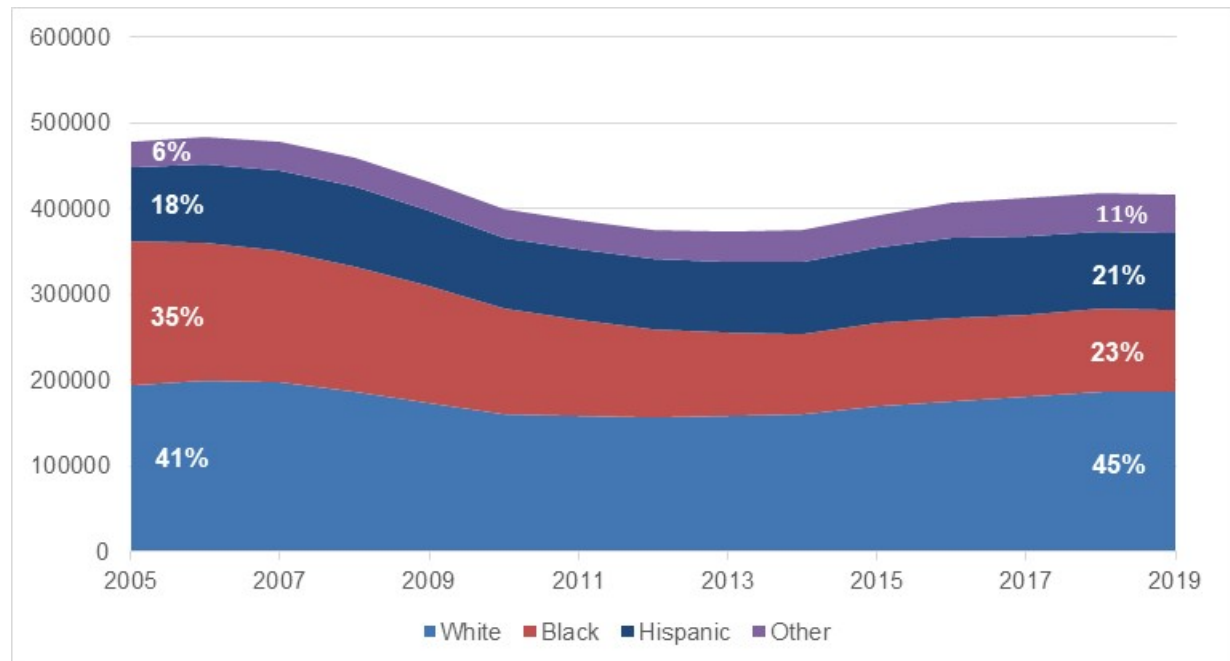
Foster Care Exit Trends

Overall, the number of exits from care to reunification and living with relatives decreased, and exits to adoption and guardianship increased

Using exit cohort analysis, we analyzed all permanency exits to understand how adoption outcomes compared with other permanency outcomes (reunification, guardianship, and living with other relatives) (Table 1). From 2005–2007 to 2017–2019, the number of exits to permanency outcomes decreased by 10 percent (738,831 to 668,520). The decrease was not distributed evenly, however, across different permanency outcomes. The number of exits to reunification and living with relatives decreased and exits to adoption and guardianship increased. The decreases in the number of exits to reunification, living with relatives, and overall permanency exits was not surprising given the 14 percent reduction in the number of children in foster care across this period. However, the increase in number of exits to adoption and guardianship is still notable. The share of exits to adoption increased modestly (from 21 percent of all exits to permanency in 2005–2007 to 27 percent in 2017–2019). The share of exits to guardianship also increased by nearly six percentage points. The share of exits to reunification and living with relatives both decreased.

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[6] The calculation of these percentages did not include children in foster care with insufficient information on race and ethnicity.

Table 1. Discharges for all children from 2005–2007 and 2017–2019

Permanency outcomes	Number of discharges in		Number of discharges in	
	2005–2007	%	2017–2019	%
Reunified with parent, primary caretaker	451,807	61%	359,277	54%
Adoption	152,196	21%	183,677	27%
Living with other relative(s)	87,305	12%	48,421	7%
Guardianship	47,523	6%	77,145	12%
Total permanency	738,831	100%	668,520	100%

For Black children, all types of permanency outcomes other than guardianship declined

The number of Black children who exited foster care to permanency declined from 2005–2007 to 2017–2019 (Table 2). Black children experienced a decrease in the number of reunifications, adoptions, and exits to live with relatives. The number of children exiting with guardianship increased by 14 percent. It is important to remember that the declining number of foster care entries factor into the declining number of Black children achieving permanency. Nevertheless, the data do suggest a small shift toward reliance on guardianship. We present additional tables with similar data for Black, White, and Hispanic children in the Appendix (Tables A.1, A.2, and A.3).

Table 2. Discharge outcomes for Black children from 2005–2007 and 2017–2019

Permanency outcomes	Number of discharges in		Number of discharges in	
	2005–2007	%	2017–2019	%
Reunified with parent, primary caretaker	110,858	57%	75,555	56%
Adoption	41,672	21%	32,096	24%
Living with other relative(s)	28,834	15%	11,229	8%
Guardianship	14,307	7%	16,374	12%
Total permanency	195,671	100%	135,254	100%

This background context provides important information for the trends we examine next related to adoption and transracial adoption.

Trends in adoption and transracial adoption

The number of adoptions increased over time for the total population but declined for Black children

Although adoptions for White, Hispanic, and other race children from 2005–2007 to 2017–2019 increased, adoptions for Black children decreased (Table 3). In addition to the decline in the population of Black children, the decrease in adoptions of Black children between 2005-2007 and 2017-2019 is partially explained by an increase in adoptions of children who are Black and more than one race (multiracial) or Black and of Hispanic origin (counted as Hispanic). Relatedly, the 101 percent increase in the percent of adoptions in the 'other' category consisted mostly of children recorded as multiracial. In 2005-2007, 7,220 multiracial children were adopted, and that number grew to 16,418 in 2017-2019 (an increase of 127 percent). Additional analysis showed that over the same period, the gap between the number of White and non-White adoptions decreased (from a difference of roughly 15,000 adoptions to 250 adoptions).

Table 3. Change in number of adoptions by race and ethnicity

Race and ethnicity	Adoptions in 2005–2007	Adoptions in 2017–2019	Percentage change in number of adoptions
White	64,626	91,185	41%
Black	41,471	32,342	-22%
Hispanic	28,400	38,755	36%
Other	10,125	20,329	101%
Total[a]	152,088	185,267	22%

Source: AFCARS Adoption Files (2005 through 2019).
[a] Total includes children with missing or insufficient information on race and ethnicity.

The proportion of transracial adoptions increased over time, especially for Black children

Overall, less than one-third (28 percent) of all adoptions in 2017–2019 were transracial. Figure 4 shows that, of these adoptions, most involved children of color adopted by parents of a different race (90 percent). Black children alone comprised 21 percent, and Hispanic children comprised 35 percent, of transracial adoptions.

Figure 4. Transracial adoptions in 2017–2019 by race and ethnicity of the child
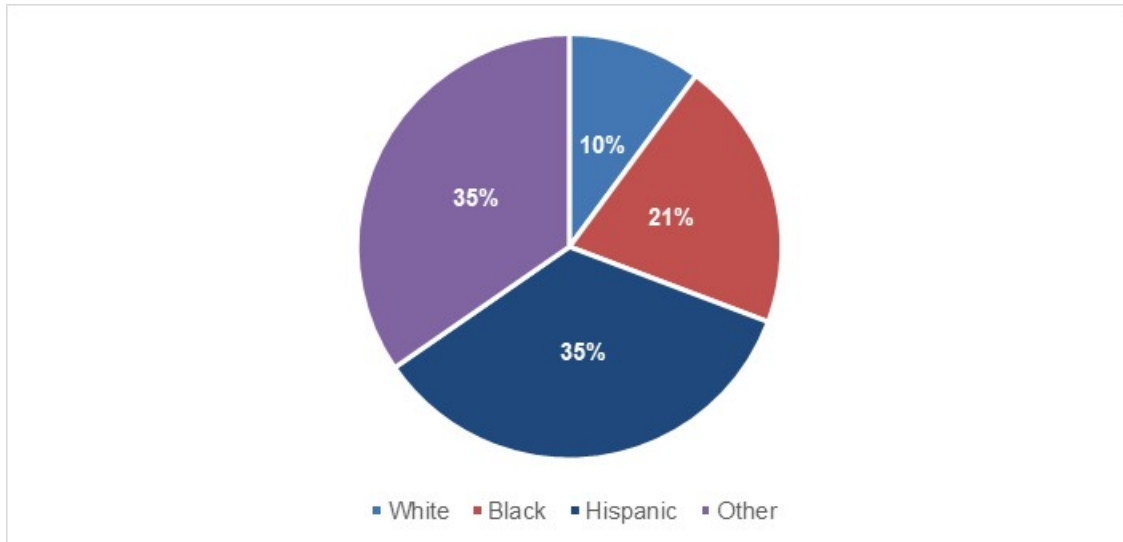
Additionally, Figure 5 shows the proportion of transracial adoptions by race and ethnicity. Within subgroups of children who were adopted, Hispanic children had the highest percentage of adoptions that were transracial (46 percent). Among adoptions of Black children, 33 percent were to transracial adoptive homes.

Figure 5. Percentage of adoptions that were transracial by race and ethnicity from 2005-2019
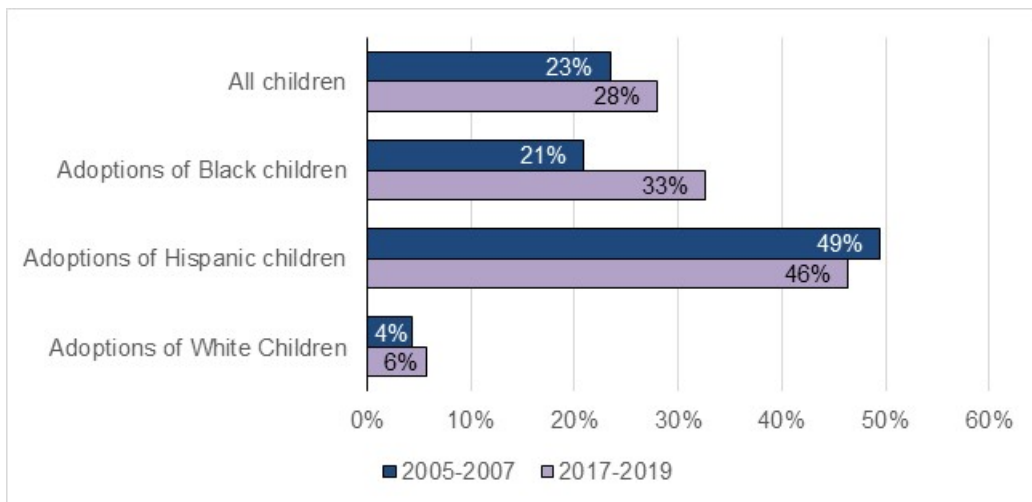
Source: AFCARS Adoption Files (2005 through 2019).
Note: The calculation of these percentages did not include adoptions with insufficient information on race and ethnicity.

Comparing trends over time, we see that the percentage of transracial adoptions among all adoptions of Black children increased 12 percentage points from 2005–2007 to 2017-2019, from 21 percent to 33 percent. From 2005–2007 to 2017–2019, the percentage of transracial adoptions among Hispanic and White children fluctuated by a few percentage points. Thus, Black children experienced the greatest increases in transracial adoption. This increase is especially remarkable given that there was also an increase in the raw number of transracial adoptions, while the total number of adoptions for Black children decreased substantially.

Next, we examine how long children spent in foster care before being adopted and compare trends by race.

Time spent in care before adoption

Infants and White children exit to adoption most quickly

In 2017–2019, half of all children adopted from foster care in the United States spent less than 28 months in foster care from entry to exit.[7] This was three months less than the median for children adopted in 2005–2007. In 2017–2019, the median number of months by state ranged from 16 months to 42 months.

Figure 6 shows that the youngest children (younger than one year) and the oldest children (older than age 13) at entry to foster care typically spent the least amount of time in care. Children adopted in 2017–2019 who were younger than age one at entry spent the lowest median number of months in foster care (24.7 months) compared with adopted children from all older age groups. Children who were older than 13 years old at entry also spent less time in care (24.9 months), but this cohort also had a much lower rate of adoption when compared with children of younger ages. For example, two percent of children entering care in 2017 ages 13 to 17 exited to adoption compared with 22 percent of children younger than age one entering care in 2017. Therefore, this finding partly reflects that adolescents have a lower potential amount of time in care before they age out of the foster care system and adoption is no longer possible.

Figure 6. Median number of months in foster care for adopted children, by age at entry and by race in 2017–2019
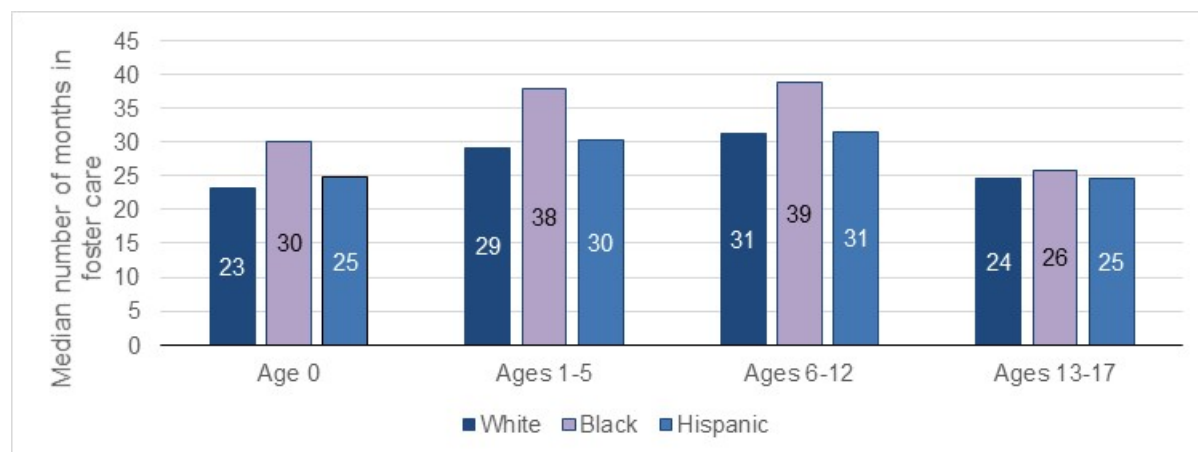
A child's race was also associated with time spent in care before adoption. Black children who were adopted spent the longest time in foster care with a median of 33 months. White children who were adopted spent a median of 27 months in care, and Hispanic children who were adopted spent a median of 28 months in care.

Racial differences existed in number of months in foster care for children who were adopted regardless of the child's age at entry

For children adopted in 2017–2019, the differences in the median number of months in foster care for Black, Hispanic, and White children were consistent across age groups for children younger than age 12. Figure 6 shows the median number of months that children spent in foster care before being adopted by age and race. Black children who were adopted were in care five to seven months longer than White children and four to six months longer than Hispanic children.

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[7] This excluded foster care records with a discharge date that occurred before the entry date.

The differences in the median number of months in foster care between White, Black, and Hispanic children decreased among children who entered care at age 13 or older.

## Comparison of waiting population versus adopted population

Black children are more likely to be waiting for adoption than to be adopted, and White children are overrepresented in the adopted population

Figure 7 compares the adopted population with those children who were still waiting in care at the end of the study period, revealing that a greater percentage of White children were adopted than Black children. A total of 54 percent of children who entered foster care in 2017 and were adopted within two years were White, and 50 percent of all children adopted in 2019 were White. Yet only 45 percent of the waiting population at the end of 2019 was White (a difference of 10 percentage points).

In contrast, 13 percent of children adopted within two years of entering foster care in 2017 were Black, 18 percent of all adoptions in 2019 were of Black children, and 22 percent of the population waiting for adoption at the end of 2019 was Black. There were small differences in the percentage of children who were Hispanic among children waiting in foster care in 2019 (22 percent) compared with children adopted within two years of entering foster care in 2017 (23 percent) and adoptions in 2019 (21 percent). Overall, the waiting population and the adoption populations are racially disproportionate, with White children more represented in adoption populations and Black children more represented in the waiting population.

In the Appendix, Table A.3 compares timely permanency for the 2005-2007 entry cohort to 2017 entry cohort as well as the disparity index for both cohorts, and indicates reduced disparity over time.

Figure 7. Demographics of the foster care and adoption populations in the most recent time period
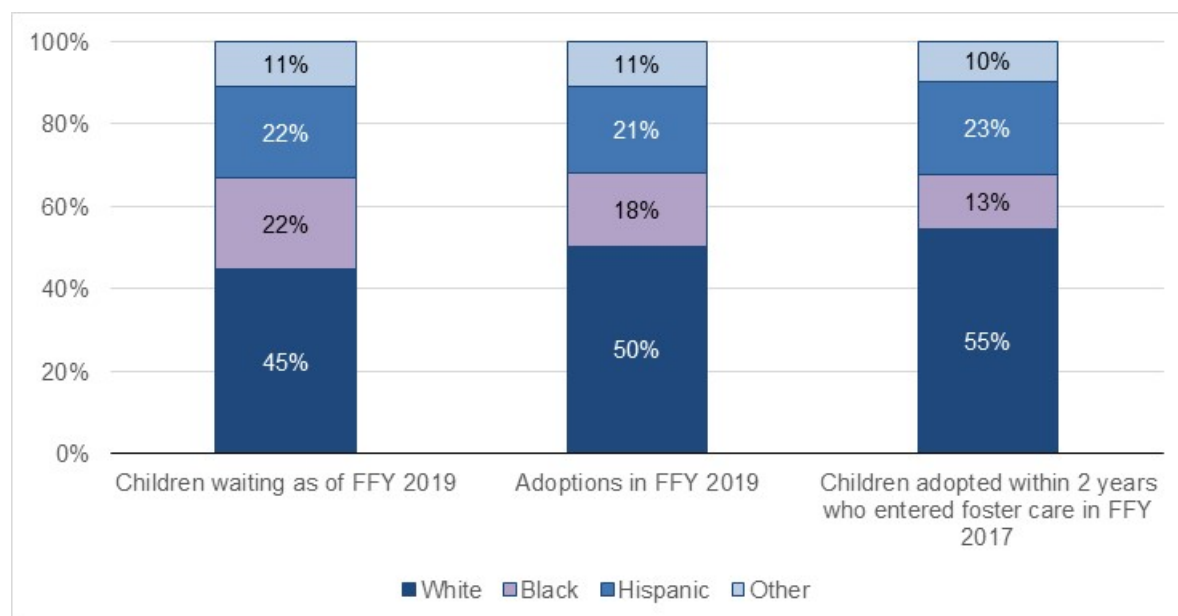
Trends in permanency outcomes

Although the percentage of children achieving timely permanency remained the same, Black children are still less likely to achieve permanency within two years

Among entries in 2017, 61 percent of children exited foster care to permanency within two years. The percentage of children who achieved timely permanency fluctuated slightly over time but did not change from 2005–2007 to 2017–2019 (Table 4). For all children who entered care between 2005 and 2017, 62 percent achieved permanency within two years. Among children who did not achieve permanency within two years, 17 percent went on to achieve permanency later, seven percent aged out of care, two percent were discharged for other reasons, nine percent were discharged for unknown reasons, and three percent were still in care at the end of 2019.[8]

While the percent of children achieving timely permanency (including reunification, adoption, guardianship and exits to relatives) was similar among 2005-2007 entrants compared to 2017 entrants, there was some change for racial/ethnic subgroups. Over time, permanency rates for White and Hispanic children were similar, with slightly lower rates for Hispanic children compared with White children. Among entries from 2005 to 2007, however, 64 percent of White children achieved permanency within two years, and only 54 percent of Black children achieved permanency within two years. Therefore, the difference in permanency rates for Black children compared with those of White children decreased from 10 percentage points to six percentage points from 2005–2007 to 2017–2019.

Table 4. Number and percentage of children exiting to permanency within two years, by year of entry

| Race and ethnicity	Number and percentage of children achieving timely permanency by entry year				
	Entries in 2005–2007	Entries in 2008–2010	Entries in 2011–2013	Entries in 2014–2016	Entries in 2017
White	275,379 (64%)	233,920 (66%)	224,415 (65%)	234,571 (63%)	80,309 (63%)
Hispanic	108,671 (62%)	105,395 (65%)	101,573 (63%)	106,434 (62%)	35,000 (62%)
Black	138,441 (54%)	120,668 (56%)	101,718 (58%)	102,820 (57%)	32,928 (57%)
All	578,770 (61%)	513,523 (63%)	483,341 (63%)	501,247 (61%)	168,177 (61%)

Source: Child removal episodes in AFCARS Child Files (2005 to 2019).

Thus, there appears to be less disparity over time, as timely permanency improved slightly among Black children and declined slightly for White and Hispanic children. Table A.1 in the appendix includes a disparity index that shows how disparities in timely permanency between White children and Black children have decreased over time.

Figure 8 breaks down the type of permanency achieved for each racial subgroup and shows that timely reunification improved for Black children whereas it decreased for Hispanic and White children. Meanwhile, timely adoption increased for all groups, but more for Hispanic and White children than Black children.

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[8] Other reasons include death, transfer to another agency, or runaway.

Figure 8. Permanency outcomes within two years for children entering in 2005–2007 and in 2017, by race
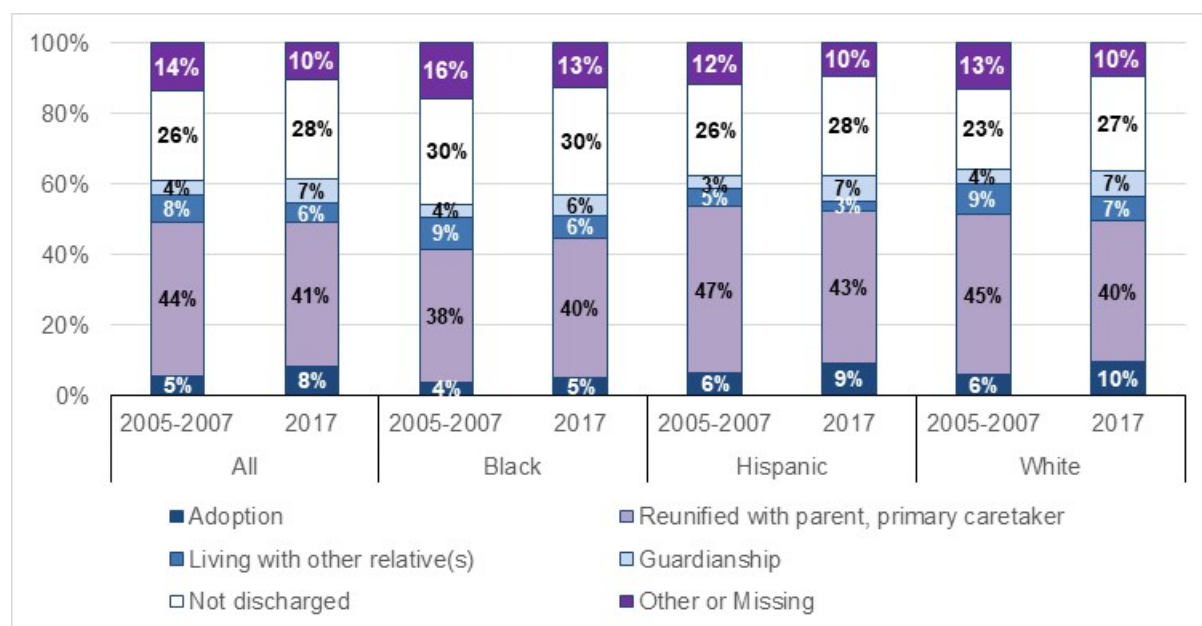
However, Figure 8 only captures those who achieved permanency within two years. To better understand the likelihood of achieving permanency more generally, and to understand how trends in permanency have shifted, we examine the percentage of children in care who end up achieving permanency by the end of each three-year period. In our next analysis, we compare outcomes across three-year bands, to reveal more detail about changes in permanency outcomes.

For children in foster care, the likelihood of achieving permanency increased for all races and ethnicities, with Black children experiencing the greatest increases in permanency outcomes

Table 5 shows the percentage of children in care who exited to different types of permanency outcomes by race over time. This analysis reveals how likely it was for children in care during the period to achieve a specific type of permanency and how that likelihood changed over time. The denominator includes the number of children of a specific race in care during that three-year band, and the numerator is the number that achieved a specific permanency outcome during that time. Exits to reunification among Black children increased from 26 percent to 30 percent, whereas exits to reunification decreased for White and Hispanic children. Exits to adoption among Black children increased from 10 percent of all Black children in care to 13 percent. The net effect of the increases from reunification, adoption, and guardianship, along with a small decrease for living with relatives, shows that Black children had the highest increase in permanency relative to the number of Black children in care. Permanency for Black children increased seven percentage points, from 47 to 54 percent. For White children, it increased only three percent, and for Hispanic children, it increased five percent. The finding that rates of exits to permanency are increasing for Black children contributes to an understanding of why the number of Black children in foster care may have declined.

Table 5. The percentage of children in foster care who exited to permanency, by race and ethnicity from 2005–2019

	Exit percentage of the number of Black children in foster care		Exit percentage of the number of White children in foster care		Exit percentage of the number of Hispanic children in foster care	
	2005–2007	2017–2019	2005–2007	2017–2019	2005–2007	2017–2019
Reunified with parent, primary caretaker	26	30	35	31	35	32
Living with other relative(s)	7	4	7	5	4	2
Adoption	10	13	11	17	11	16
Guardianship	3	6	3	7	3	7
Total	47	54	57	60	53	58

For children who did not exit to permanency, there was greater reliance on relative placements for children of all races and ethnicities

One-quarter (25 percent) of all children in foster care in 2007 who had not yet exited care at the end of the year were in placement settings with relatives. Among children in foster care in 2019 who had not left care by the end of the year, the percentage in placement settings with relatives increased to 32 percent. The increase over this period suggests greater support and advocacy for kinship care and, among the children that do not return home, a greater likelihood to be living with kin when they do exit care. In states that do not pursue adoptions as often when children are living with kin, the children would be less likely to exit to adoption.

The increases in children in foster care who were living with kin were most pronounced for White children. Table 6 shows that at the end of 2019, 31 percent of undischarged White children were in foster placement settings with relatives, an eight-percentage point increase from 2007. In contrast, there was only a 3.6 percentage point increase for Black children between the same two periods, from 26.7 percent to 30.3 percent.

Table 6. Percentage of children in foster care who were placed with relatives 2007 and 2019

	Percentage of undischarged children in relative foster homes	
	2007	2019
Black	27	30
Hispanic	28	35
White	23	31
Total	25	32

Conclusion

The MEPA, which was enacted to improve adoption rates for children who were languishing in foster care, was particularly concerned with the extent to which minority children were at a disadvantage in achieving adoption. This analysis highlighted several key points about the current state of adoption and transracial adoption.

Although the percentage of children achieving permanency over time remained relatively constant, reliance on adoption to achieve permanency for foster children increased, and a greater proportion of children entering care achieved timely adoption (within two years). The number of adoptions increased even as the number of children in foster care decreased. The growth of transracial adoptions exceeded the rate of adoption overall, suggesting that states were more successful achieving adoptions in part due to their success in finalizing transracial adoptions.

Examination of adoption trends by race and ethnicity show that the disparity between White, Hispanic, and Black children decreased over time. However, disparate adoption outcomes for children of color remain apparent, particularly for Black children. Black children are less likely to be adopted and a smaller portion of Black children achieve timely adoption than White children. In addition, Black children spend the most time in care before being adopted, regardless of their age at entry. Black children are also overrepresented in the foster care population and among those waiting for adoption compared with those who were adopted.

Despite these findings, we also observed smaller differences over time among racial subgroups when we examined outcomes longitudinally for entry cohorts and for children in-care. Thus, although Black children are still disproportionately represented in foster care as compared to their composition in the United States population, analyses shown here suggest reduced disparity over time in permanency outcomes between Black children and their peers in foster care.

Our analysis also revealed noteworthy dynamics related to the Black foster care population that offer important context for these findings. For example, the number of Black children in foster care shrank more than any other group, and the percentage of permanency exits that were reunifications increased over time for Black children (whereas it decreased for White and Hispanic children). These dynamics may help to explain why adoptions decreased for Black children.

Although we attempt to account for the tension that exists between different permanency outcomes, we do not account for state practices, which can vary widely. For example, some states may allow more time for reunification or may pursue transfers of guardianship if children are living with relatives. (Our analysis revealed a significant increase in the percent of foster children living with relatives.) In addition, this analysis did not account for adoption disruption, which can result if states move too quickly into adoptive placements.[9] Future research could, therefore, consider these factors in analyses of adoption trends.

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[9] Palacios, J., Rolock, N., Selwyn, J., & Barbosa-Ducharne, M. (2019). Adoption breakdown: Concept, research, and implications. *Research on Social Work Practice, 29*(2): 130–42

Appendix: Additional Tables and Figures

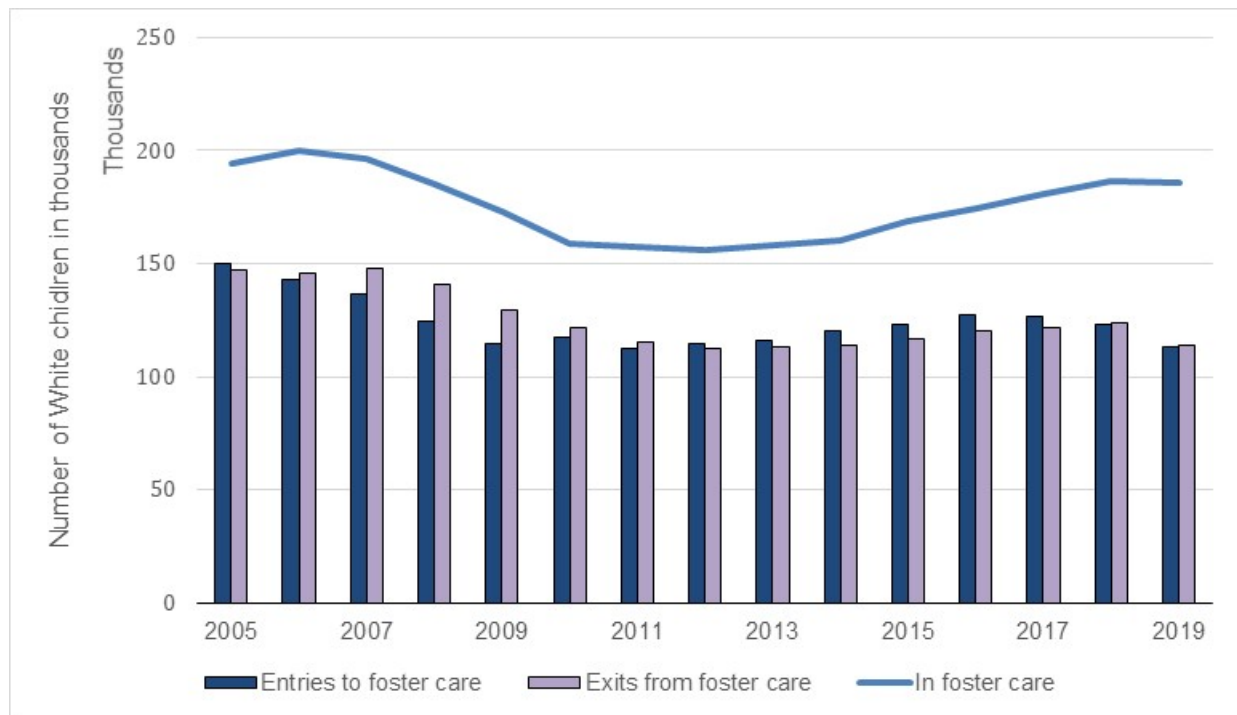**Figure A.1 Entry and exit numbers for White children in foster care from 2005 to 2019**
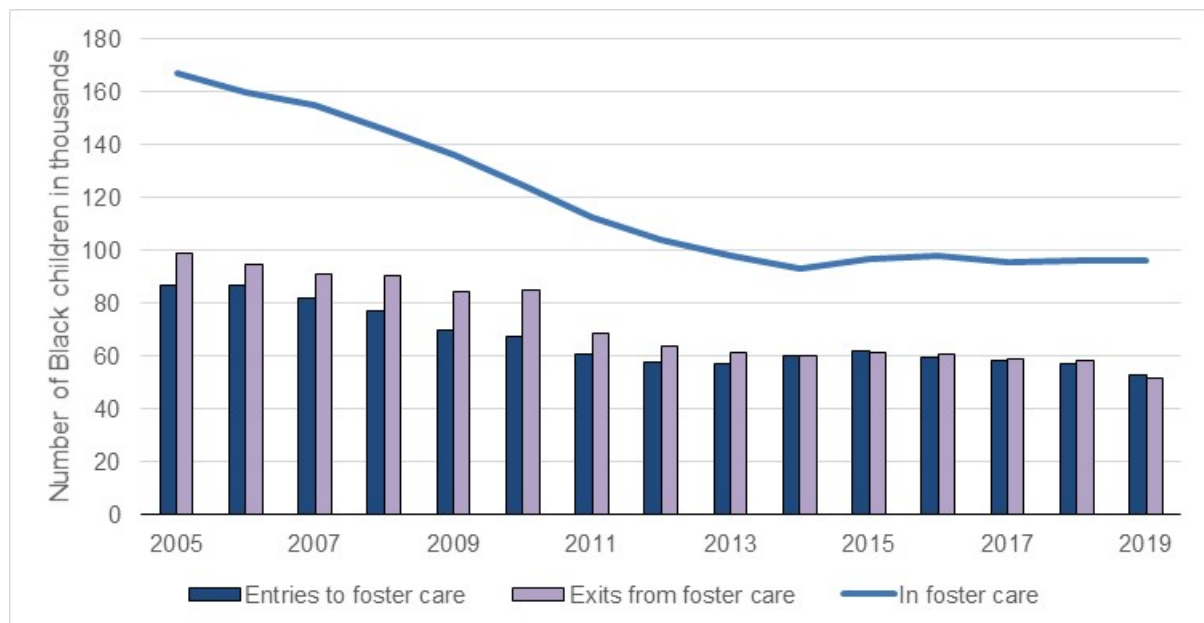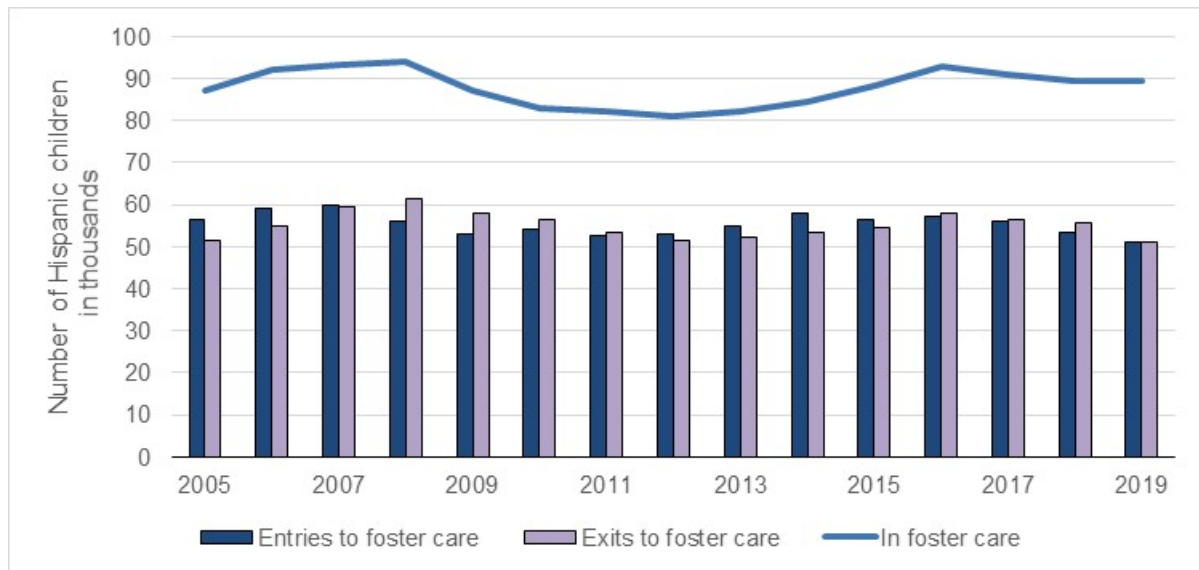

Figure A.2 Entry and exit numbers for Black children in foster care from 2005 to 2019

Figure A.3 Entry and exit numbers for Hispanic children in foster care from 2005 to 2019

*The number of children in foster care is calculated as the number of children in foster care on October 1st of each fiscal year. The number of discharges include "dropped" discharges for episodes that do not have a discharge date in the fiscal year file, and where there is no record of that episode in the subsequent fiscal year file. For these episodes, the discharge date is imputed as the end of the fiscal year corresponding to the file in which the record appears.

Table A.1. Discharges involving White children from 2005–2007 and 2017–2019

Permanency outcomes	Number of discharges in 2005–2007	%	Number of discharges in 2017–2019	%	Change in the number of discharges
Reunified with parent, primary caretaker	210,330	61%	161,680	52%	-23%
Adoption	67,653	20%	89,871	29%	33%
Living with other relative(s)	43,025	13%	27,371	9%	-36%
Guardianship	20,998	6%	34,135	11%	63%
Total permanency	342,006	100%	313,057	100%	-8%

Table A.2. Discharges involving Hispanic children from 2005–2007 and 2017–2019

Permanency outcomes	Number of discharges in 2005–2007	%	Number of discharges in 2017–2019	%	Change in the number of discharges
Reunified with parent, primary caretaker	85,849	65%	78,144	56%	-9%
Adoption	28,146	21%	39,063	28%	39%
Living with other relative(s)	9,995	8%	4,706	3%	-53%
Guardianship	7,150	5%	17,417	13%	144%
Total permanency	131,140	100%	139,330	100%	6%

Table A.3. Permanency within two years and the disparity index for White and Black children: entry cohorts from 2005–2007 to 2017

Permanency within two years	White children		Black children		Disparity index of White children compared with Black children	
	Entries in 2005–2007	Entries in 2017	Entries in 2005–2007	Entries in 2017	Entries in 2005–2007	Entries in 2017
Reunified with parent, primary caretaker	45%	40%	38%	40%	0.18	0
Living with other relative(s)	9%	7%	9%	6%	0	0.17
Adoption	6%	10%	4%	5%	0.5	1.0
Guardianship	4%	7%	4%	6%	0	0.17
Total permanency	64%	63%	54%	57%	0.19	0.11

Note: The disparity index is calculated as the rate for White children divided by the rate for Black children in each time period. If the index is positive, more White children achieved permanency within two years than Black children. If the index is negative, more Black children achieved permanency within two years than White children. For instance, an index of 1.25 means that White children were 1.25 times more likely than Black children to achieve the permanency outcome. Note when percentages are small, a slight change has a much larger effect on the disparity index. Because the percentages of adoption within two years are already small, a slight increase or decrease has a much larger effect on the disparity index.