



## **WHO WE'RE TALKING ABOUT:**

Nationwide, approximately 400,000 youth are in foster care. Young people enter foster care when the courts determine they need to be temporarily or permanently removed from their current living situation because of challenges at home. Foster youth are children (of all ages) who have been separated from their families of origin due to neglect and/or abuse and are in need of a safe nurturing home. Youth don't sign up for foster care, it is something that happens to them. Despite the challenges of foster care, these youth have dreams, ambitions and the potential to succeed.

Most families first become involved with their local child welfare system because of a report of suspected child abuse or neglect (sometimes called "child maltreatment"). Child maltreatment is defined by The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), as serious harm (neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse or neglect) caused to children by parents or primary caregivers, such as extended family members. Poverty is often conflated with negligence and disproportionately impacts families of color.

Any concerned person can report suspicions of child abuse or neglect. Most reports are made by "mandatory reporters"—people who are required by state law to report suspicions of child abuse and neglect. These reports are generally received by child protective services workers and are either "screened in" or "screened out." A report is screened in when there is sufficient information to suggest an investigation is warranted. A report may be screened out if there is not enough information on which to follow up or if the situation reported does not meet the state's legal definition of abuse or neglect. In these instances, the worker may refer the person reporting the incident to other community services or law enforcement for additional help.

If there is a risk of future maltreatment or ongoing safety concerns are present, a court petition may be filed. If abuse or neglect allegations have been substantiated by the court the youth is placed in out-of-home care and services are provided to the child and family. In most states, the youth is appointed an attorney to represent and advocate for them in court.

The length of a youth's stay in care varies greatly, case by case from a few days to years. Some youth live with relatives and some youth live with unrelated foster families. If at all possible, siblings are kept together in one home. When there is no home available for all siblings, they are sometimes split up into different homes. There is a tremendous need for families who can take multiple children.

The primary goal of foster care is to reunify the child with their family of origin. To this end once a child has been placed in foster care the court orders services and requirements for the family members and sets deadlines for their completion. More than 55% of children in foster care are reunited with their biological families.

The placement of preference for a youth in foster care is with kin, referred to as kinship care. This enables the youth to experience a family bond and potentially remain in their community.

There is a significant shortage of foster parents in the United States with the most acute shortages in major urban areas where the numbers of youth in foster care are highest. If a suitable foster home cannot be found for a youth in foster care and/or if the youth had needs that cannot be met by a foster family youth can be placed in a “group home.” These homes are being phased out as placement with a family as opposed to an institution is preferable.

If a parent is unable to meet the requirements set out by the court, a child in foster care may be eligible for adoption. There are currently more than 100,000 youth in need of a permanent loving family in the U.S. The process, which includes “terminating parental rights” can take one to two years or more. Roughly 50,000 adoptions from foster care take place in the United States each year.

Youth in foster care who are not reunified or adopted “age out” of the system from ages 18 to 21 depending on where they live. Roughly 25,000 youth age out every year.

### **HERE’S WHY AUTHENTICITY MATTERS:**

Entertainment and Media have tremendous power to shape public opinion. Youth in a bad situation are not inherently bad youth. Stories about youth in foster care can tend to position the youth as the villain, citing their time in foster care and relying on tropes like “The apple does not fall far from the tree”. These stereotypes fail to create empathy and often people are discouraged from and less willing to step up and support these youth. Stories about foster parents rely on the “they are just in it for the money” stereotype. The single greatest factor in a youth being placed in foster care is poverty, so in some respects this echoes our societal tendency to criminalize poverty. The continued representation of youth in foster care as “less than” means that they are deprived of the resources they need to thrive and succeed. Foster youth are often pathologized and deemed as undesirable in media, often reifying deficit tropes.

### **OVERREPRESENTED STORIES & HARMFUL STEREOTYPES:**

- **Foster Kid:** Avoid using the term “foster kid” to identify a person. Children are “in foster care”.

- **The “Bad” Kid:** Kids in foster care shouldn’t be depicted as “bad” or “not wanted”. Children are not bad, they may have behaviors that are not okay, but those are not the reasons they enter the foster care system. Children enter the foster care system due to the abuse, neglect, abandonment and parental substance abuse, that make it unsafe for children to remain in their care. Storylines shouldn’t include bad behavior being justified by a child being in care. For example, “She’s just acting out because she spent time in foster care” or “she learned that in foster care.” Rather, children’s behavior is the result of experiencing abuse, neglect, trauma, loss and separation from loved ones that brought them into the foster care system.
- **The “Evil” birth Parent:** Avoid stereotypes depicting birth parents as “bad” or “evil.” Biological parents shouldn’t be seen as not wanting or loving their children. Instead, they might “need some help so that they can make their home a safe place to stay.” Just because a parent might make unsafe choices or mistakes, it doesn’t mean they are a bad person. Child abuse is about parents not being able to keep children safe. Many birth parents were in the foster care system themselves or grew up in families where their own needs were not met as children. Mental health, addiction and incarceration are all related and contributing factors.
- **The “Evil” Foster Parent:** Characters who are one-dimensional or “in it for the money”. This ignores the reality of the complex challenges and struggles foster parents face as well as the successes and joys. Foster parents come from different backgrounds and walks of life.
- Foster care shouldn’t be referred to as a “place”. A child joins a home with foster parents. There are many different types of homes and families that children live in and a foster home is one type of home.
- **The “Bad” Social Worker:** Portrayals that characterize the social worker as the heartless villain who takes children away from their parents. Social workers often carry large caseloads.

#### THINGS WE’D LIKE TO SEE MORE OF:

- **High Achievers:** Successful youth or former youth in foster care. Despite the challenges of foster care these youth have dreams, ambitions and the potential to succeed. A recent study found that 70% of foster youth **aspire** to go to college and only 5% do.
- **Normalization:** Make every effort to normalize kids in care instead of depicting them as outcasts, troubled or unwanted.
- **More nuanced portrayals of foster parents:** More realistic portrayals of foster parents. Foster parents are single, straight, gay and seniors. It’s important to show their struggles

and their successes. Recently, there has been an increase in single women and LGBTQ couples becoming foster parents.

- **Reunification:** The primary goal of foster care is to reunify families. We'd like to see more authentic portrayals of not only the struggles that biological parents face, but also portrayals of families that succeed in being reunified.
- **Kincare:** Many children who are not able to live with their parents are cared for by grandparents and other extended family members. We'd like to see that reality reflected in storylines. Kinship care has become a preferred option in most U.S. child welfare systems. Children in kinship care have fewer disruptions and often experience better outcomes than those in non-familial placements.

#### **QUICK FACTS:**

- There are approximately 400,000 youth in foster care nationwide
- The median age of children in foster care is 8 years old
- 25,000 youth age out of the foster care system between the ages of 18 – 21 annually
- The foster care system underinvests in youth in foster care, contributing less than 50% of what it costs an average American family to raise a child from 0 – 17 years of age
- Within four years of aging out, 50% have no earnings, and those who do make an average annual income of \$7,500
- 65% of youth experiences seven or more school changes
- There are approximately 117,000 children in care that are waiting for an adoptive family
- 48% of youth exiting foster care reunite with their biological family, 25% are adopted and 9% age out foster care
- Relative to other children, African-American and Native American children spend more time in foster care
- There is a disproportionate number of youth of color in the child welfare system. 23% of youth in foster care are Black or African American while Black/African American make up 13% of the general population
- There are 1.5 to 2 times as many LGBTQ youth living in foster care as LGBTQ youth living outside of foster care
- 70% of youth in foster care aspire to pursue secondary education
- Half of Black children, as well as half of Native American children, experienced a CPS investigation at some point during the first 18 years of their lives, compared to nearly a quarter of white children.

#### **GLOSSARY**

**domestic adoption** : The adoption of children residing in the United States by adoptive parents who are U.S. citizens and/or lawful permanent residents.

**family reunification** : Refers to the process of returning children in temporary out-of-home care to their families of origin. Reunification is both the primary goal for children in out-of-home care as well as the most common outcome.

**foster care adoption** : Adoption of children who are in the custody of their State or county's Department of Child and Family Services. These adoptions are usually handled by local public agencies and/or private agencies under contract with their State or county

**foster parent:** Adults who provide a temporary home and everyday nurturing and support for children who have been removed from their homes. The individual(s) may be relatives or non relatives and are required to be licensed in order to provide care for children in foster care.

**short-term residential therapeutic program (STRTP) or group home** : A residence intended to serve as an alternative to a family foster home. Homes normally house 4 to 12 children in a setting that offers the potential for the full use of community resources, including employment, health care, education, and recreational opportunities.

**independent adoption, private adoption** : Adoption arranged through an intermediary rather than through a licensed adoption agency to assist prospective parents with the adoption process. This method of adoption usually involves the adoption of an infant.

### **Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)**

ICWA is a federal law that was passed in 1978 in response to the alarmingly high number of Indian children being removed from their homes by both public and private agencies. The intent of Congress under ICWA was to “protect the best interests of Indian children and to promote the stability and security of Indian tribes and families” (25 U.S.C. § 1902). ICWA sets federal requirements that apply to state child custody proceedings involving an Indian child who is a member of or eligible for membership in a federally recognized tribe.

**informal kinship care:** A kinship care arrangement that occurs outside the child welfare system. These informal arrangements are often made by family members without the involvement of the child welfare or juvenile court systems and are sometimes referred to as either informal or private kins

**kinship foster care** : An arrangement that can occur when a public child welfare agency has legal custody and places a child with relatives or kin in a foster care arrangement. This type of arrangement is often referred to as either “formal” or “public” kinship care. Kinship foster homes may be either licensed or unlicensed, depending on State licensing requirements and family preferences.

**mandated reporter:** Groups of professionals who are required by State statutes to report suspected child abuse and neglect to the proper authorities (usually Child Protective Services or law enforcement agencies). Mandated reporters typically include educators and other school

personnel, health care and mental health professionals, social workers, child care providers, foster parents and law enforcement.

**out-of-home care** : Also called foster care, including family foster care, kinship care, treatment foster care, and residential and group care. Out-of-home care encompasses the placements and services provided to children and families when children must be removed from their homes because of child safety concerns, as a result of serious parent-child conflict, or to treat serious physical or behavioral health conditions that cannot be addressed within the family.

**parental rights:** Describes the legal relationship between the parent and the child. This legal relationship includes the parent's responsibility to financially support the child, the parent's right to custody, to visit with the child, to make educational, religious, or medical decisions for the child.

**permanency** : A legally permanent, nurturing family for every child and youth. As defined in the child and Family Services Reviews, a child in foster care is determined to have achieved permanency when any of the following occurs: (1) The child is discharged from foster care to reunification with his or her family, either a parent or other relative; (2) the child is discharged from foster care to a legally finalized adoption; or (3) the child is discharged from foster care to the care of a legal guardian.

**termination of parental rights (TPR):** Voluntary or involuntary legal severance of the rights of a parent to the care, custody, and control of a child and to any benefits that, by law, would flow to the parent from the child, such as inheritance.

#### **ONLINE REFERENCES AND RESOURCES:**

Williams Institute

<https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/sgm-youth-la-foster-care/>

The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS)

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/adoption-fostercare>

California State PTA

[capta.org](http://capta.org)

FosterMore

<https://fostermore.org>