

# **Child Welfare Placement Dynamics, 2008 through 2017: Long-Term Trends in Allegheny County's Child Welfare System**



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## DEFINITIONS

**Assisted housing:** Administered by the Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh or the Allegheny County Housing Authority, these services include housing assistance for low-income families, older adults and people with disabilities

**Adoption:** The legal transfer of parental rights and responsibilities from the birth parents (caretakers) to new parent(s)/caretakers

**Caseload:** Number of cases handled by child welfare in a particular period

**Congregate care:** Out-of-home placement in a non-family setting such as a group home or residential care facility

**Entry:** An entry into an out-of-home placement spell paid for by child welfare. An individual child is counted each time he/she enters out-of-home placement in a given year.

**Exit:** A child's exit from an out-of-home placement spell. Exit destinations include home reunification, adoption, permanent legal custodianship and non-permanent exits (aging out/reaching age of majority, runaway and emancipation). An individual child is counted each time he/she exits out-of-home care in a given year.

**First placement:** The first placement setting a child experiences in a placement spell

**First entry:** The first out-of-home placement spell; a subset of entries

**Foster care:** Out-of-home placement in a home setting with non-relatives

**Independent living:** Out-of-home care for older youth transitioning out of the child welfare system; may be in scattered-site or semi-supervised apartments, clustered or supervised apartments, or shared homes

**Juvenile probation:** Supervision, placement and other services for juveniles involved with the juvenile justice system

**Kinship care:** Out-of-home placement with a family member or friend of the family

**Length of stay:** The amount of time a child spends in one placement spell

**Majority placement:** Placement setting in which a child spends greater than 50% of his/her placement spell

**Non-permanent exit:** A child's exit from a placement due to aging out/reaching age of majority, running away or emancipation. These types of exits are considered less positive than permanent exit types.

**Out-of-home placement:** A temporary home for a child who, for safety reasons, must live away from his/her home of origin. Placement types include congregate care, foster care, kinship care and independent living.

**Permanent exit:** A child's exit from an out-of-home placement to a situation considered to be permanent. Permanent exit types include home reunification, adoption and permanent legal custodianship.

**Permanent legal guardianship (PLC):** A court-approved permanent exit from a child welfare out-of-home placement. PLC may be appropriate for children who cannot be reunited with their parents or for whom adoption is not possible. PLC does not require parental consent and parental rights need not be terminated.

**Placement setting:** The type of environment in which a child resides while in out-of-home care. Placement settings include congregate care, foster care, kinship care and independent living.

**Placement spell:** Continuous period of time during which a child is in out-of-home care, from entry to exit. A single spell may contain multiple placement settings. Also referred to as “spell.”

**Point-in-Time count:** The number of children in out-of-home placement at one specific point in time.

**Reach majority:** Youth who has reached the age of 18 and has not requested the court to retain jurisdiction.

**Re-entry:** Entry into out-of-home placement after an exit from a previous placement spell

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) is mandated by law to protect children under the age of 18 from abuse and neglect. When a child welfare investigation finds that a child is at risk of abuse or neglect, a case is opened, and DHS works with the family to identify natural supports and other supportive services that will help the child remain safely in the home. If DHS finds that the child cannot continue to reside safely in the home, the case is brought before a judge, who may determine that a temporary home, called an out-of-home placement, is necessary. Whenever possible, out-of-home placements are in homes of relatives or friends of the family (known as kinship care) or in foster homes. Less often, children are placed in congregate care in either a group home or a residential treatment facility. At the end of an out-of-home placement, DHS aims to reunite children with their families whenever possible. If a child cannot return home, DHS works to identify other permanent options such as adoption or permanent legal guardianship (PLG).

In 2017, DHS's child welfare office received approximately 15,000 calls reporting the possible abuse or neglect of a child. Of those calls, approximately 50% were assessed for services. About 20% of assessed families were accepted for service and a case was opened. In approximately 20% of the cases opened in 2017, a child was ultimately removed from home and placed into out-of-home care.

This report analyzes long-term child welfare placement trends in Allegheny County from 2008 through 2017.<sup>1</sup> The report gives an overview of the child welfare caseload during the decade, describes the characteristics of children in placement, and looks at children's placements: what type of placements were used, how long children stayed there, where they went after their placement ended (exits), and how many returned to the child welfare system after returning home (re-entries). See below for key findings and topic-specific sections for more detailed analysis.

<sup>1</sup> For an interactive dashboard of child welfare trends, see [here](https://www.alleghenycountyanalytics.us/index.php/2011/01/01/child-welfare-placement-dynamics-long-term-trends-in-allegheny-countys-child-welfare-system/). For analysis of child welfare system trends from 2000 through 2009, see <https://www.alleghenycountyanalytics.us/index.php/2011/01/01/child-welfare-placement-dynamics-long-term-trends-in-allegheny-countys-child-welfare-system/>.

## Key Findings

From 2008 through 2017, Allegheny County's child welfare system saw a decrease in the number of children involved in the system as well as a decrease in the number of children in congregate care, two positive trends for a system that is working toward keeping children with their families of origin whenever possible and placing children in family environments when they must be removed from home. On the other hand, steady re-entry rates, or the rate at which children return to out-of-home placement after previous placement, suggest that more could be done to help children remain in their homes after a placement has ended. See below for more information about major trends during the ten-year period.

## Number of Children in Placement

The number of children in out-of-home placements (as measured by the count of children in placement on the first day of each year) declined from 2,165 in 2008 to 1,340 by the end of 2017, a total decrease of 38%. While first entries into care declined during this period, the decrease in total caseloads was driven more by a greater number of children exiting care than entering care.

## Demographics of Children in Placement

### Age

The youngest and the oldest children comprised the majority of children entering out-of-home care for the first time. Infants were a particularly large segment of the cohort entering care. For example, infants under age one entered into placement at a rate about four times that of teenagers (14 per 1,000 for infants compared to three per 1,000 for teenagers).

### Race

Black children entered care at a rate about five times that of their White counterparts. Black children made up the largest proportion (a range of 48% to 42% throughout the decade) of children entering their first placement, even though Black children comprised only 18% of the county's under-18 population in 2017. White children made up 37% of first placements, compared to their share of 73% of the County's under-18 population in 2010.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Source: U.S. Census Bureau (Allegheny County Children Population Statistics)

## Placement Types

Allegheny County has emphasized kinship care as one of the least disruptive placements for children. The use of kinship care has doubled from 30% of first placements in 2008 to 64% of first placements in 2017. During the same period, use of foster care and congregate care has decreased by 46%.

Placement type trends varied by age. From 2008 through 2017, nearly all children ages birth to five were placed in family-based settings (either foster or kinship care). On the other hand, only 41% of 12-to-17-year-olds were placed initially in family-based settings from 2008 through 2017.



When looking at placement type by child's race, we see that Black children were more likely to spend the majority of their placements in congregate care (19% of Black children compared to 13% of White children) while White children were more likely to be placed in kinship care (56% of White children compared to 50% of Black children).

### **Time in Placement**

From 2008 through 2017, the median length of stay for children in care was about six months, with 75% of children exiting their placement within 19 months. Infants tended to have a longer length of stay; half of infants stayed in care for more than one year. On the other hand, half of teenagers exited care from their first placement within two and a half months.

### **Exits**

Over half of children returned to their family of origin with the remaining children being adopted, obtaining permanent legal custodianship (PLC) or aging out of the system. Exit types were highly influenced by a child's age; while over 90% of children younger than 12 years of age exited to permanent settings (return to family of origin, adoption or PLC) only 55% of older children and teenagers exited to permanent settings. A child's race and legal sex were not closely related to their exit type.

### **Re-entries**

More than half of children who entered an out-of-home placement from 2008 through 2017 exited to a permanent setting and did not re-enter care. The other half entered into placement more than once, with 35% of children entering placement two or three times, and a small percentage entering placement more than three times. Looking at trends over time, re-entry rates within one year decreased from 37% to 21% between 2008 and 2016 (the most recent year for which exits could be followed for an entire year).

Children exiting at ages three through five had the lowest re-entry rate, with the rate increasing as the child's exit age increased, reaching the highest rate of re-entry when children exit at ages 15 through 17. Children who exited care at under two years old also had relatively high re-entry rates (22%). Black children had higher re-entry rates than White children for all age categories.

## METHODOLOGY

This analysis builds on the 2007 Chapin Hall report that studied a sample of 348,695 children admitted to foster care for the first time between 2000 and 2005. The report provides a broad overview of what happens when children are placed in foster care and offers a useful national baseline analysis for studying entry and exit patterns regionally. This report also is an update to an earlier analysis of Allegheny County's child welfare placement dynamics, published in 2011.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.alleghenycountyanalytics.us/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Child-Welfare-Placement-Dynamics-Long-Term-Trends-in-Allegheny-County-s-Child-Welfare-System.pdf>

### Longitudinal Data

Longitudinal data were used to examine trends that are not possible to observe in point-in-time data. For example, point-in-time data provides the number of children in care on a certain day and in what type of placement setting they were residing. Longitudinal data, on the other hand, can track this same set of data over time, allowing one to analyze how long individuals remain in care and whether length of stay varies by placement setting.

Cohorts were used to facilitate analysis of longitudinal data. Cohorts are groups of individuals who experience an event within a specific time frame. Entry cohorts are the primary type used throughout this report, and they contain all children who first entered care during a given year. Exit cohorts were also used in some instances, but this form of analysis always underestimates the population of children with longer lengths of stay by capturing more individuals with shorter lengths of stay. The time frame used in most analyses was 2008 through 2017.

The longitudinal data file had a censor date of December 31, 2017, meaning that 1,668 placement spells were still open on this date; the experiences of these children following this date (such as future length of stay values or exit types) were not considered. Most analyses in this report, such as entry and exit counts by year, first placement types, median durations, etc., are not impacted by censored data, but there are a few instances of statistics throughout the report that could change slightly as these children continue to move through the system.

### Cross System Analysis

The final section of the analysis looks at other systems with which children in out-of-home placement have contact. This analysis isolates children who were in placement on Oct. 31, 2018 and identifies which other systems the child interacted with — both in the prior month and ever (as far back as data are available).

### Data Sources

The Allegheny County Key Information and Demographics System (KIDS) is the County's child welfare case management system for all child welfare-related work and contains information about all referred, investigated and active clients associated with any allegation of child abuse or neglect. KIDS includes details about individual demographics, case activity, services received, family plans and assessments.

Independent policy research center Chapin Hall — whose mission is to build knowledge that improves policies and programs for children and youth, families, and their communities — provided data cleanup, technical assistance and analysis support to DHS through the Improving Outcomes for Children and Families initiative, funded by Casey Family Programs.

DHS integrates numerous data sources in its Data Warehouse to identify cross-system usage trends of services like mental health treatment or juvenile probation.<sup>4</sup>

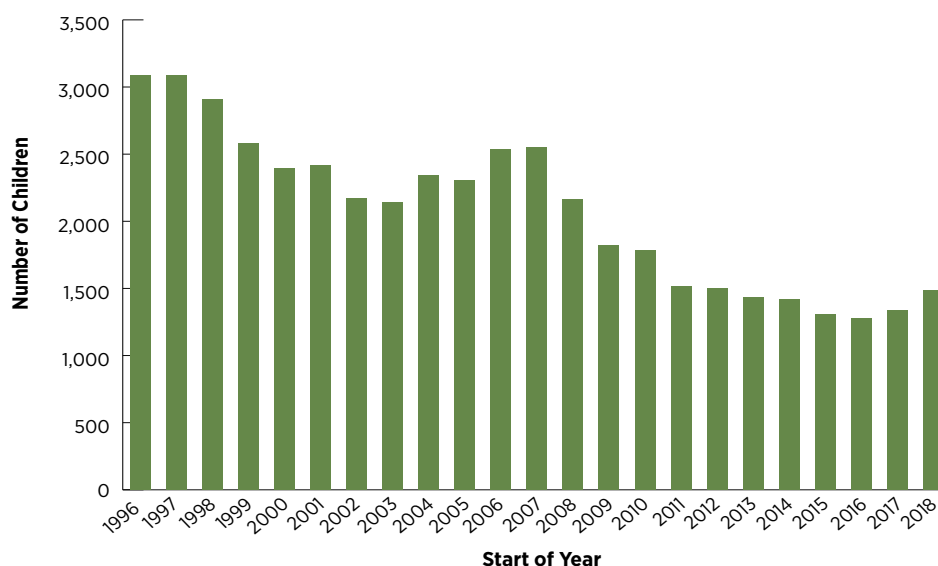
<sup>4</sup> For more information about the Data Warehouse, see <https://www.alleghenycountyanalytics.us/index.php/2018/08/13/alleggheny-county-data-warehouse/>

## NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN CHILD WELFARE PLACEMENTS

One of the most basic child welfare indicators is caseload, or the count of children in out-of-home placement at a given point in time. Caseload size helps to quickly identify one of the most obvious and important trends: Is the number of children in placement growing or shrinking?

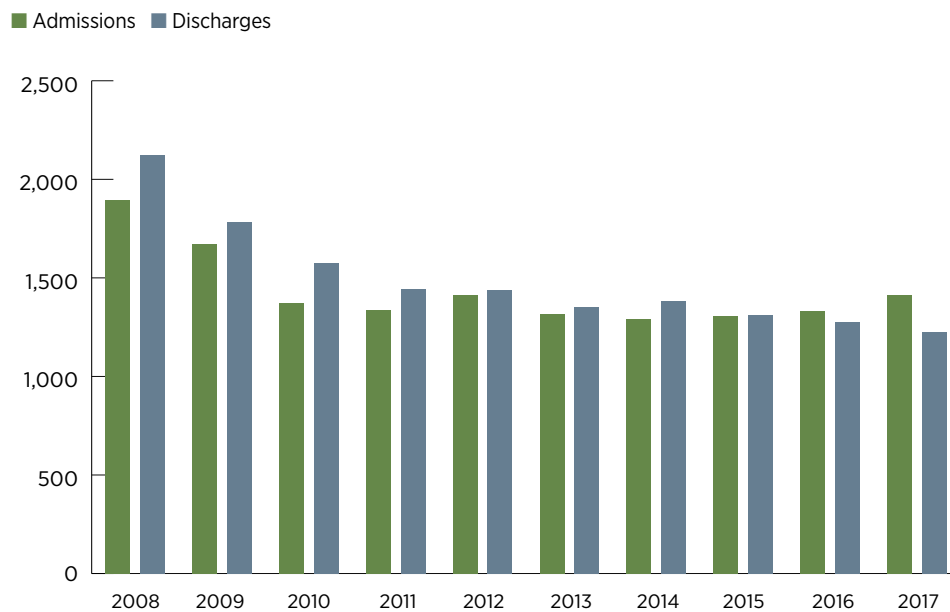
While most of this report focuses on the 10-year period from 2008 through 2017, **Figure 1** displays point-in-time caseload counts on the first day of each year from 1996 through 2018 to give a broader view of caseload trends. Caseloads in Allegheny County declined from 3,088 in 1996 to 1,487 on the first day of 2018 — a total decrease of 52%. This decline wasn't perfectly constant throughout the period, as slight upticks occurred between 2004 and 2007 and again during 2017 to 2018.

**FIGURE 1: Total number of children in out-of-home placement on the first day of the year, 1996 through 2018**

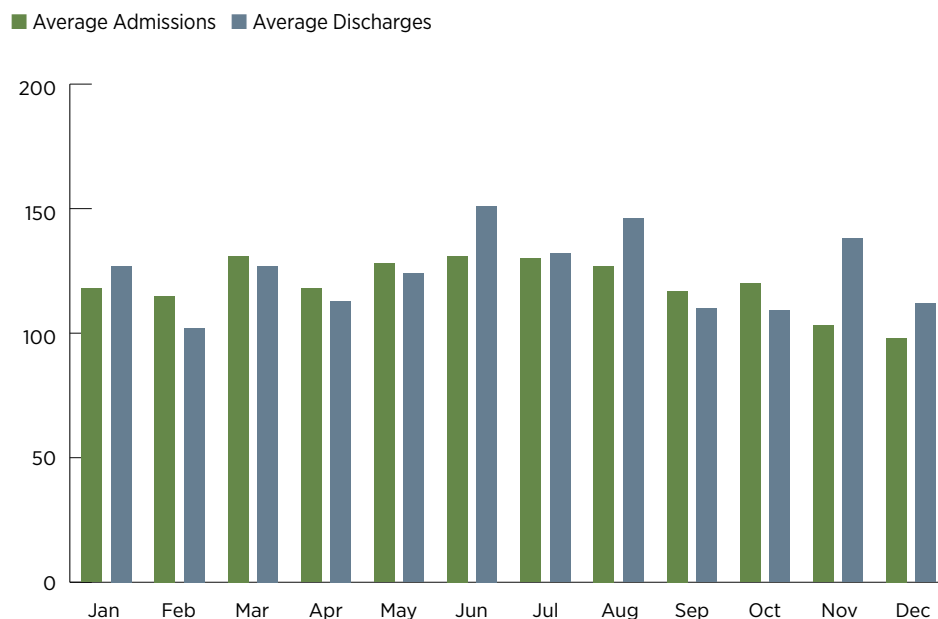


## Entries and Exits

Changes in placement caseloads over a given period of time are a function of how many children are entering into new out-of-home placements or exiting from current ones. Caseloads will decrease when the number of children exiting care exceeds the number coming into care, and vice versa. **Figure 2** illustrates the total admissions and discharges that occurred each year from 2008 through 2017.

**FIGURE 2: Total admissions and discharges by year, 2008 through 2017**

Within a given calendar year, there is some seasonal variation in placement admissions and discharges. Admissions tend to drop late in the calendar year, while discharges from care have notable spikes in June, August and December — related to the beginning and end of school years as well as the holiday season.

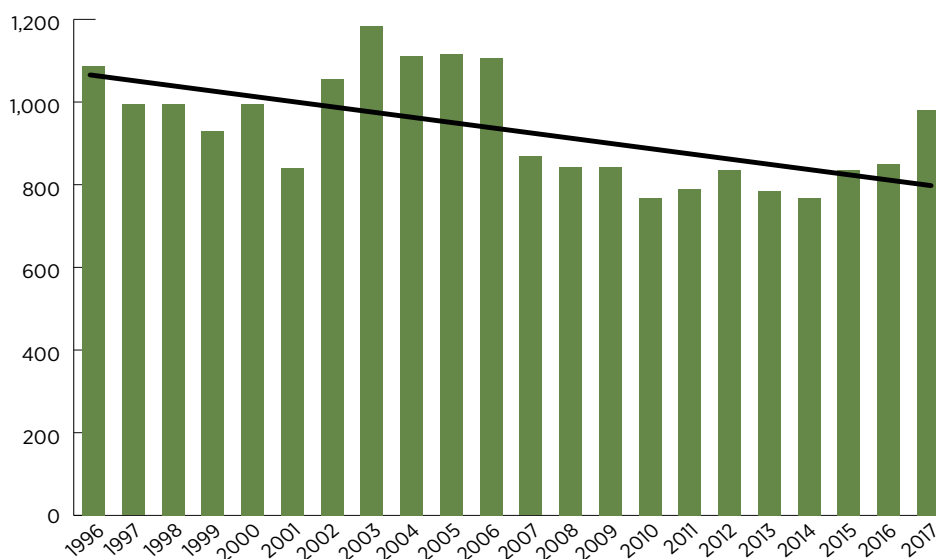
**FIGURE 3: Average admissions and discharges by month, from January 2008 through December 2017**

### First Entries into Care

Yearly entry cohorts can be used to follow the placement experiences of children in the County's child welfare system. The number of children in the first entry cohorts differs from the total caseload numbers presented above because in the cohort analysis, each child is counted only once — in the year they first entered care. In comparison, the point-in-time caseload counts are much higher because children remaining in care for multiple years appear in the data for as many years as their placement experiences last.

**Figure 4** displays the number of children who entered a child welfare placement for the first time in each cohort year, and how the numbers have changed since 1996. Similar to the caseload figures in the prior section, first entries into care have generally been declining over time, with some exceptions in the early 2000s and from 2015 through 2017.

**FIGURE 4: First entries into out-of-home placement, 1996 through 2017**



### DEMOGRAPHICS OF CHILDREN IN PLACEMENT

The rates at which children enter into out-of-home placement in Allegheny County vary among demographic groups. **Tables 1 and 2** display the composition of the entry cohorts by age, race<sup>5</sup> and legal sex. The data show that:

The youngest and the oldest children tend to comprise the majority of children entering out-of-home care for the first time. Since 2008, about 35% of children entering placement for the first time were under age two, while another 18% were ages 15 through 17. The percentage of first entries into care by children ages 15 through 17 has declined some since 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this report, counts and percentages for only Black and White children are included because the number of children of other races/ethnicities is too small to create a sample size large enough for discussing placement trends.

<sup>6</sup> Further analysis on racial disproportionality in Allegheny County's Child Welfare System can be found at <https://www.alleghenycountyanalytics.us/index.php/2017/10/02/racial-disproportionality-allegheny-countys-child-welfare-system/>

During the period of study, Black children consistently made up nearly half of all children entering their first placement each year, although they accounted for only about 18% of the total 18-and-under population in Allegheny County. White children ranged from 33% to 41% of first entries each year, with children of other races and ethnicities represented in smaller numbers.<sup>6</sup>

The legal sex distribution is fairly balanced, although it has fluctuated slightly year by year.

**TABLE 1: Age at entry, race and legal sex of children first entering out-of-home placement, 2008 through 2017**

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	TOTAL
<b>Age at Entry</b>											
Under 1 Year	168 (20%)	150 (18%)	187 (24%)	159 (20%)	152 (18%)	160 (20%)	147 (19%)	184 (22%)	181 (21%)	179 (18%)	1,667 (20%)
1-2 Years	123 (15%)	107 (13%)	99 (13%)	105 (13%)	119 (14%)	129 (16%)	98 (13%)	124 (15%)	148 (17%)	121 (12%)	1,173 (14%)
3-5 Years	93 (11%)	105 (12%)	94 (12%)	127 (16%)	127 (15%)	123 (16%)	132 (17%)	125 (15%)	147 (17%)	152 (16%)	1,225 (15%)
6-8 Years	89 (11%)	87 (10%)	68 (9%)	91 (12%)	75 (9%)	83 (11%)	83 (11%)	108 (13%)	102 (12%)	135 (14%)	921 (11%)
9-11 Years	60 (7%)	82 (10%)	44 (6%)	68 (9%)	74 (9%)	53 (7%)	68 (9%)	84 (10%)	84 (10%)	115 (12%)	732 (9%)
12-14 Years	113 (13%)	115 (14%)	121 (16%)	98 (12%)	108 (13%)	89 (11%)	106 (14%)	92 (11%)	80 (9%)	121 (12%)	1,043 (13%)
15-17 Years	196 (23%)	195 (23%)	154 (20%)	138 (17%)	180 (22%)	148 (19%)	126 (16%)	117 (14%)	99 (12%)	151 (15%)	1,504 (18%)
<b>Race</b>											
Black	402 (48%)	384 (46%)	345 (45%)	353 (45%)	331 (40%)	328 (42%)	346 (45%)	374 (45%)	324 (38%)	415 (42%)	3,602 (43%)
White	302 (36%)	288 (34%)	275 (36%)	277 (35%)	344 (41%)	293 (37%)	254 (33%)	282 (34%)	348 (41%)	374 (38%)	3,037 (37%)
Other or Unknown	139 (16%)	170 (20%)	147 (19%)	159 (20%)	160 (19%)	164 (21%)	167 (22%)	180 (22%)	179 (21%)	191 (19%)	1,656 (20%)
<b>Legal Sex</b>											
Female	419 (50%)	411 (49%)	396 (52%)	442 (56%)	413 (49%)	399 (51%)	383 (50%)	401 (48%)	421 (49%)	493 (50%)	4,178 (50%)
Male	424 (50%)	431 (51%)	371 (48%)	347 (44%)	422 (51%)	386 (49%)	384 (50%)	435 (52%)	430 (51%)	487 (50%)	4,117 (50%)
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>843 (100%)</b>	<b>842 (100%)</b>	<b>767 (100%)</b>	<b>789 (100%)</b>	<b>835 (100%)</b>	<b>785 (100%)</b>	<b>767 (100%)</b>	<b>836 (100%)</b>	<b>851 (100%)</b>	<b>980 (100%)</b>	<b>8,295 (100%)</b>

### Demographics of Children in Placement: Rates

In order to understand entries into out-of-home placement in a broader context, it is informative to consider the size and demographic composition of the County population. Incidence rates control for these factors by expressing the number of children who first enter placement per 1,000 children in the population.

Analysis of entry rates in Allegheny County by demographics suggest several trends occurring by age and race (Table 2 and Figure 5). Specifically, the data suggest that:

- Rates of entry into placement (per 1,000 children in the County population) stayed at a steady level through the window of 2008 through 2016, but ticked upward in 2017.
- Infants had the highest rate of entry. Infants under age one entered into placement at a rate about four times that of teenagers and much higher than any other age grouping (Table 2 and Figure 5).
- Black children entered placement at 3.5 times the rate of their White counterparts from 2008 through 2017.<sup>7</sup> The rate of Black children entering placement generally trended downward over the 10-year period, but 2015 and 2017 entries represented relative spikes in prevalence (Table 2).

<sup>7</sup> This analysis does not take into account racial disproportionality that takes place in earlier stages of the child welfare system, such as referrals to child welfare and decisions to investigate those referrals. For analysis about racial disproportionality at different decision points prior to placement, see <https://www.alleghenycountyanalytics.us/index.php/2017/10/02/racial-disproportionality-allegheny-countys-child-welfare-system>

**TABLE 2: Rate of children per 1,000 first entering out-of-home placement, by age at entry, legal sex, race and year of first admission, 2008 through 2017**

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<b>Age at Entry</b>										
Under 1 Year	13.3	11.8	14.7	12.5	12.0	12.6	11.6	14.5	14.3	14.1
1–2 Years	4.8	4.2	3.9	4.1	4.6	5.0	3.8	4.8	5.8	4.7
3–5 Years	2.5	2.8	2.5	3.3	3.3	3.2	3.5	3.3	3.9	4.0
6–8 Years	2.3	2.3	1.8	2.4	1.9	2.2	2.2	2.8	2.7	3.5
9–11 Years	1.5	2.0	1.1	1.7	1.8	1.3	1.7	2.1	2.1	2.9
12–14 Years	2.7	2.8	2.9	2.4	2.6	2.2	2.6	2.2	1.9	2.9
15–17 Years	4.3	4.3	3.4	3.0	4.0	3.3	2.8	2.6	2.2	3.3
<b>Race</b>										
Black	8.8	8.4	7.6	7.7	7.3	7.2	7.6	8.2	7.1	9.1
White	1.7	1.6	1.6	1.6	2.0	1.7	1.5	1.6	2.0	2.1
Other/Unknown	2.1	2.5	2.2	2.4	2.4	2.5	2.5	2.7	2.7	2.9
<b>Legal Sex</b>										
Female	3.5	3.5	3.4	3.7	3.5	3.4	3.2	3.4	3.6	4.2
Male	3.6	3.6	3.1	2.9	3.6	3.3	3.3	3.7	3.6	4.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>4.1</b>

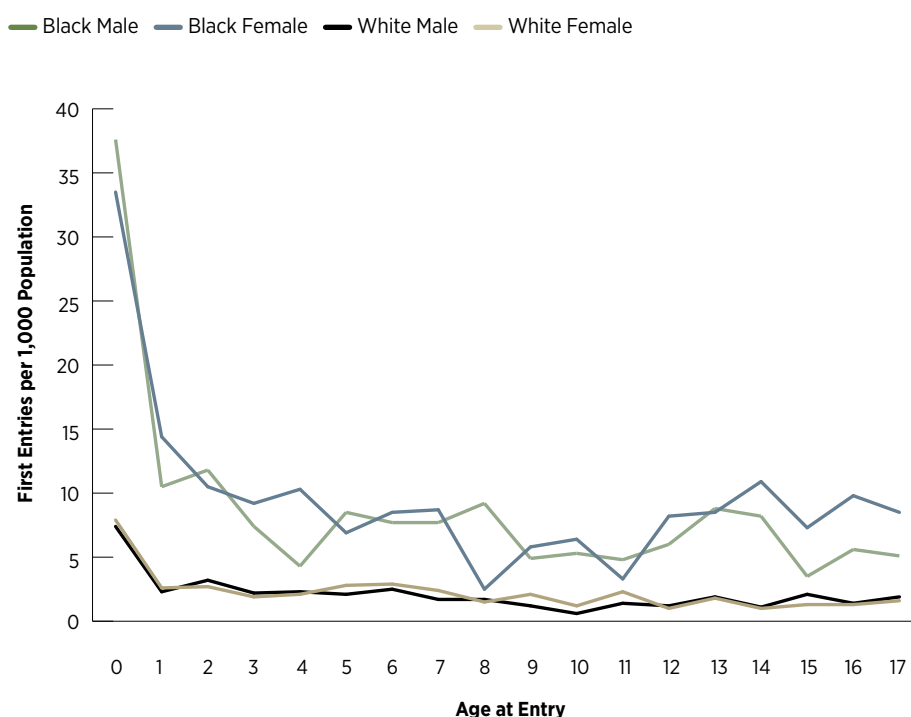
Source: Tables P12A, P12B, P14. Census 2000 Summary File 1 (SF 1) 100-Percent Data. Census Bureau. [www.factfinder.census.gov](http://www.factfinder.census.gov).



**Figure 5** illustrates the intersections of age, race and sex with regard to first entries. Entry rates for Black infants under the age of one averaged 33 (female) and 38 (male) per 1,000, while rates for White infants were approximately eight per 1,000 (female) and seven per 1,000 (male).

There is minimal legal sex variation in placement rates of Black and White children (**Figure 5**), except that Black female teens are more likely than Black male teens to enter a first out-of-home placement. One contributor to this dynamic is the fact that Black male teens who might otherwise enter into a child welfare placement may already be in a juvenile probation placement. At the beginning of 2018, about 60% of all children in juvenile probation placements were Black males.

**FIGURE 5: Rate of children first entering placement, by race, legal sex and age at entry**



### OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENT TYPES

When placing children in out-of-home care, caseworkers and the court must determine which placement setting (e.g., congregate care, foster care, kinship care, independent living) is most appropriate for a child based on his or her age, family situation and siblings, as well as current availability. Allegheny County prioritizes placing children in family-based settings like kinship or foster care whenever possible.

### First Placements

A child's first placement refers to the type of care the child enters on the first day in out-of-home care. **Table 3** and **Figure 6** show the initial placement settings for children first placed in 2008 through 2017. Foster care was used most frequently during the early part of the decade, while the use of kinship care has steadily increased, particularly from 2014 onward. Simultaneously, the use of congregate care has decreased significantly from 25% of first placements in 2008 to 9% in 2017. These notable shifts can be attributed to system-wide efforts to increase awareness of the beneficial aspects of family-based placements, and a particular emphasis on family-finding activities and prioritizing the use of kinship care placements.

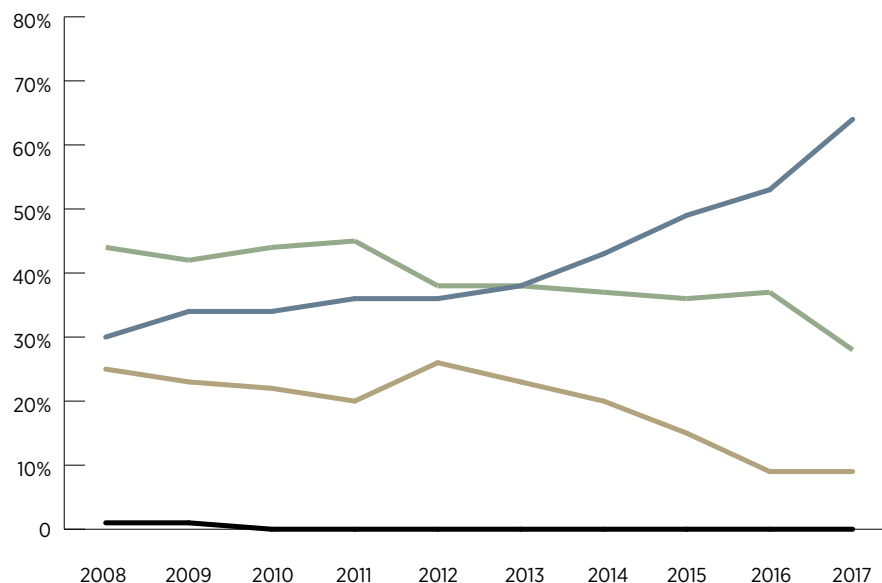
**TABLE 3: Type of first placement for first spells, 2008 through 2017**

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Kinship Care	30%	34%	34%	36%	36%	38%	43%	49%	53%	64%
Foster Care	44%	42%	44%	45%	38%	38%	37%	36%	37%	28%
Congregate Care	25%	23%	22%	20%	26%	23%	20%	15%	9%	9%
Independent Living	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<b>Total Count*</b>	<b>843</b>	<b>840</b>	<b>763</b>	<b>775</b>	<b>825</b>	<b>782</b>	<b>752</b>	<b>817</b>	<b>824</b>	<b>963</b>

\*Counts and percentages omit a small number of placements coded as "unknown" placement type.

**FIGURE 6: Type of first placements for first spells, 2008 through 2017**

— Foster Care — Kinship Care — Independent Living — Congregate Care



### Majority Placement

Ideally, a child's time in out-of-home placement is brief and the child experiences only a single placement setting. However, moves between placement locations and types sometimes occur; if a child remains in care for an extended period of time and a current placement setting becomes unavailable or doesn't best fit the child's needs, the child may need to move to another location or care type. "Majority placement" is a concept for capturing the care type in which a child ultimately spends 50% or more of their time during a placement spell, which may or may not be the same as their initial care type. In some rare cases, it is also possible that a child may not be in one setting for 50% of their time in care. If this is the case, the child will be classified as having "no majority placement" in the following charts and figures.

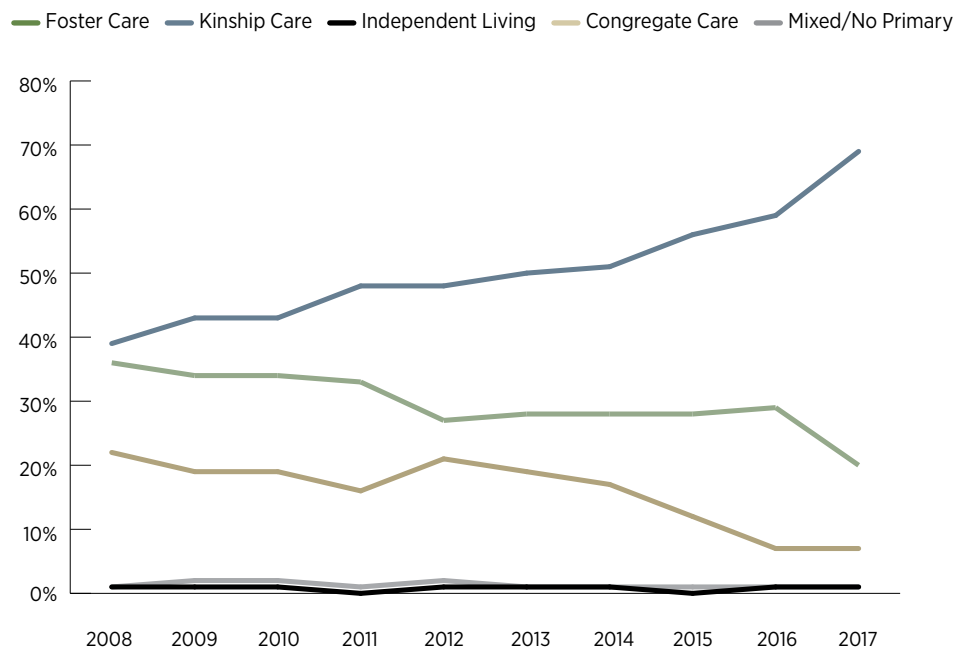
**Table 4** and **Figure 7** display the distribution of majority placement types experienced by children in first spells from 2008 through 2017. In 2008, about the same number of children had foster care and kinship care as their majority placement. Since 2009, the percentage of children whose majority placement type ended up being foster care or congregate care has been decreasing, while the percentage experiencing mostly kinship care has been increasing. About 20% of children were in congregate care for the majority of their first placement spell from 2008 through 2014, and this number has fallen significantly since 2014, to less than 10% as of 2017.

When comparing first placements to majority placements, the proportion of children who were first placed in foster care (28% in 2017) was higher than that of children whose majority placement was foster care (20% in 2017), suggesting that while a high percentage of children experience foster care as their first placement, children who remain in care for an extended period of time may go on to other types of care for the majority of their placement experience (**Figure 7**).

**TABLE 4: Type of majority placement for first spells, 2008 through 2017**

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Kinship Care	39%	43%	43%	48%	48%	50%	51%	56%	59%	69%
Foster Care	36%	34%	34%	33%	27%	28%	28%	28%	29%	20%
Congregate Care	22%	19%	19%	16%	21%	19%	17%	12%	7%	7%
Independent Living	1%	1%	1%	0%	1%	1%	1%	0%	1%	1%
Mixed/No Primary	1%	2%	2%	1%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
<b>Total Count*</b>	<b>843</b>	<b>842</b>	<b>767</b>	<b>789</b>	<b>835</b>	<b>785</b>	<b>767</b>	<b>836</b>	<b>851</b>	<b>980</b>

\*Counts and percentages omit a small number of placements coded as "unknown" placement type.

**FIGURE 7: Type of majority placements for first spells, 2008 through 2017**

Similar demographic trends emerged for both first placements and majority placements. For example, White children experienced first and majority placements in family settings (kinship and foster care) at higher rates than Black children (approximately 85% vs. 79%).

A comparison of **Tables 5 and 6** shows that regardless of legal sex or race, the percentage of children experiencing majority placement in kinship care is higher than the percentage first entering kinship care. The numbers reveal that some children first placed in foster care and congregate care do move into kinship care and spend greater than half of their time in care with a relative or kin.

**TABLE 5: Type of first placement for first spells, by age, race and legal sex, 2008 through 2017\***

	KINSHIP CARE	FOSTER CARE	CONGREGATE CARE	INDEPENDENT LIVING	TOTAL SPELLS
<b>Age at Entry</b>					
Under 1 Year	41%	59%	<1%	n/a	1,628
1–2 Years	49%	51%	<1%	n/a	1,164
3–5 Years	51%	49%	<1%	n/a	1,224
6–8 Years	53%	45%	2%	n/a	917
9–11 Years	56%	35%	9%	n/a	728
12–14 Years	35%	20%	45%	n/a	1,036
15–17 Years	23%	9%	67%	1%	1,479
<b>Race</b>					
Black	38%	39%	22%	0%	3,553
White	48%	36%	16%	0%	2,997
<b>Legal Sex</b>					
Female	44%	38%	18%	0%	4,150
Male	41%	40%	20%	0%	4,034

\*Counts and percentages omit a small number of placements coded as “alternative” placement type.

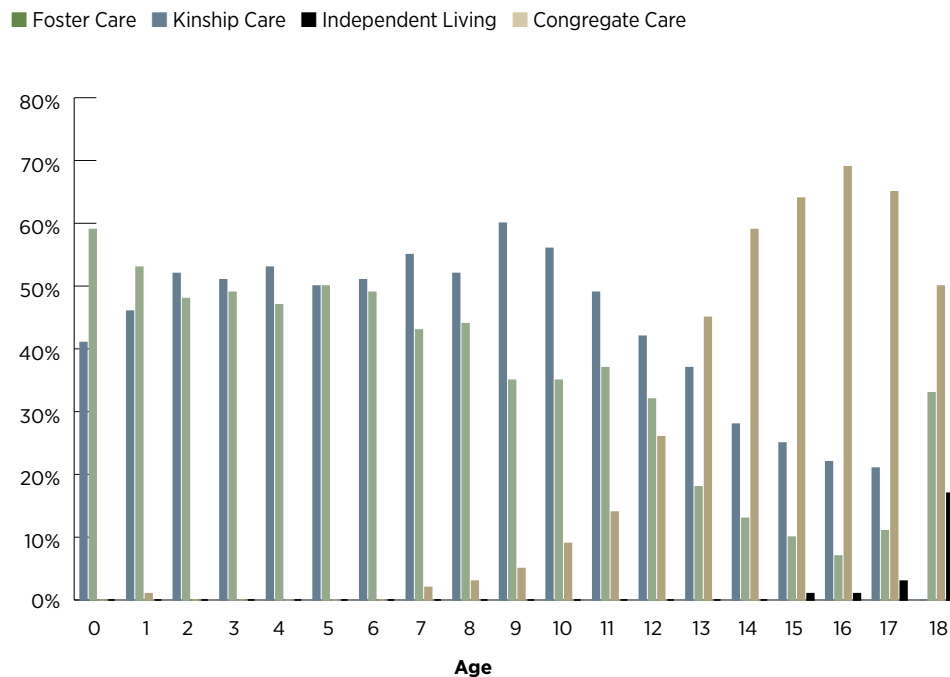
**TABLE 6: Type of majority placement for first spell, by race and legal sex, 2008 through 2017\***

	KINSHIP CARE	FOSTER CARE	CONGREGATE CARE	INDEPENDENT LIVING	MIXED (NO PRIMARY)	TOTAL SPELLS
<b>Race</b>						
Black	50%	29%	19%	1%	2%	3,525
White	56%	29%	13%	1%	1%	2,991
<b>Legal Sex</b>						
Female	53%	29%	15%	1%	2%	4,137
Male	50%	31%	17%	0%	2%	4,016

\*Counts and percentages omit a small number of placements coded as “alternative” and “unknown” placement type.

**Figure 8** illustrates how majority placement type changes depending on the age at which children enter care. Each bar represents the percentage of children primarily placed in a given type of care, listed by their age at the time they entered that placement spell. A vast majority of children entering care prior to their teenage years experience mostly kinship or foster care settings in their out-of-home episode. The likelihood of experiencing a majority-congregate care spell increases significantly for entries that occur when the child is above age 13.

**FIGURE 8: Type of first placement for first spells, by age at beginning of spell, 2008 through 2017**



All figures above provide analysis based on only the first out-of-home placement experiences of children. **Table 7** below compares proportions of children at different age groups placed in family settings (kinship and foster care) or non-family settings (congregate care and independent living) during their first out-of-home placement experiences and during their subsequent out-of-home placement experiences. These experiences are examined separately because children experiencing multiple entries and exits to and from placement may have particularly challenging circumstances and their placement experiences may differ from the rest of the population of children entering care.

The distribution of first placement types experienced by children re-entering care confirms that their placement experiences do differ from their first out-of-home placements. While all children under age five were first placed into family settings during their first spells, only 70% of children under five who re-entered care were first placed into family settings. A similar dynamic holds within each age group — holding age constant, first-ever out-of-home placement spells are more likely to experience family settings than subsequent ones.

**TABLE 7: Type of first placement for first and non-first spell, by age at the beginning of spell, 2008 through 2017**

	FIRST SPELLS			NON-FIRST SPELLS		
	FAMILY SETTING	NON-FAMILY SETTING	TOTAL	FAMILY SETTING	NON-FAMILY SETTING	TOTAL
Under 1 Year	100%	0%	1,628	72%	28%	918
1-2 Years	100%	0%	1,164	69%	31%	683
3-5 Years	100%	0%	1,224	67%	33%	685
6-8 Years	98%	2%	917	60%	40%	492
9-11 Years	91%	9%	728	51%	49%	414
12-14 Years	55%	45%	1,036	31%	69%	890
15-17 Years	32%	68%	1,479	23%	77%	627

#### LENGTH OF TIME SPENT IN PLACEMENT

DHS strives to reunify children with their families or find them another permanent home as quickly as possible. **Table 8** shows the number of months that passed before the corresponding proportion of children exited care from their first placement spell. Time frames are provided for different age groups and for the total population. From 2008 through 2017, 25% of all children entering care for the first time exited in just over a month. Half of all children exited care in 6.3 months or less. After this, the rate at which children exited care slowed, with 75% of children exiting their placement within 19 months. Infants tended to have a longer length of stay; half of infants stayed in care for more than one year, compared to six months for the overall population. On the other hand, teenagers tended to stay in care for a shorter period; 75% of teenagers entering care for the first time exited within nine months compared to over a year and a half (19.2 months) for the total population.

**TABLE 8: Duration (in months) of first placement spell, by age at entry, 2008 through 2017**

PERCENT OF CHILDREN EXITING CARE	AGE							TOTAL POPULATION n=7,481
	LESS THAN 1 n=1,502	1-2 YEARS n=1,064	3-5 YEARS n=1,087	6-8 YEARS n=795	9-11 YEARS n=627	12-14 YEARS n=966	15-17 YEARS n=1,410	
25%	2.3	1.5	1.4	1.1	1.2	1.0	0.7	1.1
50%	12.3	8.4	8.0	7.1	7.2	3.7	2.6	6.3
75%	22.5	21.8	21.1	19.5	20.4	13.5	8.7	19.2

**Table 9** displays spell lengths by entry year, measured in months. Each value represents the number of months that passed before the corresponding percentage of children who entered placement in a given year exited placement. While there was no drastic change in the first quartile for length of stay, the median (length of time by which 50% of children had exited care) increased from less than six months to more than 10 months from 2009 through 2016 and dropped again in 2017 to eight months. The third quartile was steadier than the median but also started to drop in 2016 and 2017.

**TABLE 9: Duration quartiles (in months) of first out-of-home care spells by year of entry, 2008 through 2017**

PERCENT OF CHILDREN EXITING CARE	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
25%	1.0	1.0	1.3	1.0	1.2	1.5	1.2	1.8	1.7	3.5
50%	4.6	5.7	7.6	7.2	7.5	8.7	8.5	8.2	10.2	*
75%	22.0	21.8	22.3	21.9	21.4	22.3	20.6	22.4	20.1	*

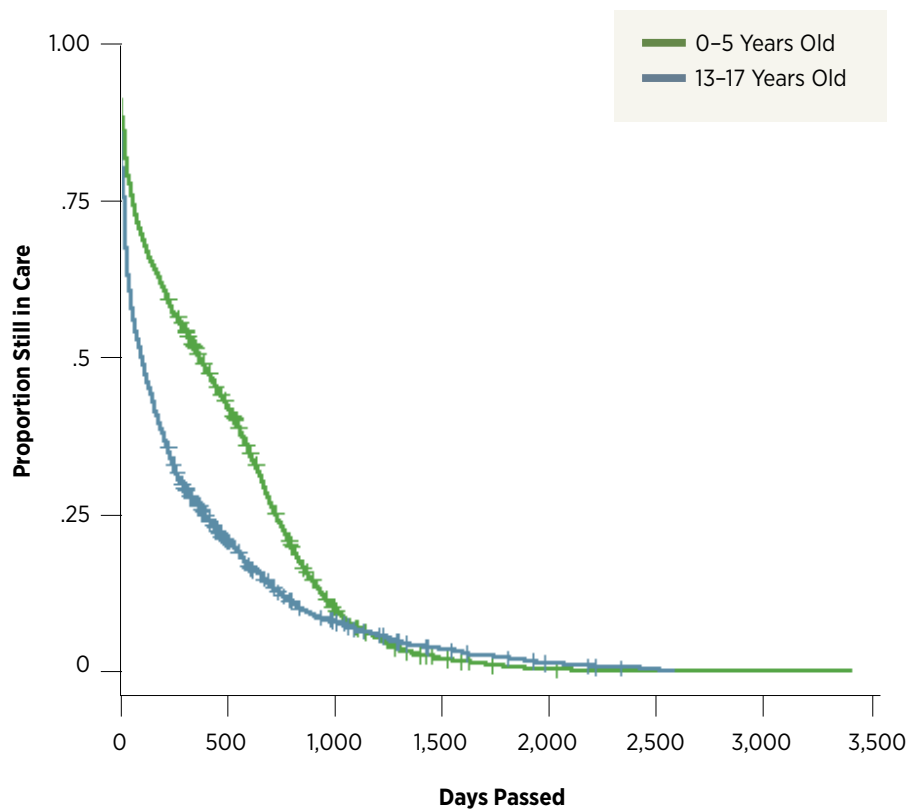
\*Cannot be accurately calculated because too few children from this cohort year have exited care.

**Figure 9** illustrates the declining rate of exit over time for two segments of the population: children five and under and adolescents ages 13 through 17. The steepness of the curve varies by age group, but the general shape of the curves reflects the overall trend described above. The number on the vertical axis reflects the proportion of children still in care, and the horizontal axis represents the passage of time in days. The steeper the curve, the more quickly children are exiting care. The curve for adolescents who are 13 through 17 years old is much steeper than the curve for children ages five and under, meaning teens exit care more quickly.

These results are not surprising. Younger children exit to adoption or PLC (similar to adoption, but parental rights are not terminated) more often than other age groups. The legal process to complete this kind of exit takes significantly longer than the process to exit children back to their family. Additionally, the risk and safety factors in a home that would necessitate removal can be different for a very young child versus an older adolescent. Because young children are more vulnerable, the threshold of household safety is likely higher for their return home, which results in longer placement lengths.



**FIGURE 9: Survival curve demonstrating length of stay in first spell for children ages 0 through 5 and adolescents ages 13 through 17, 2008 through 2017**



The trends identified above are both reflected in **Table 10**, which looks at changes in the median length of stay for children of different ages from 2008 through 2017.

**TABLE 10: Median duration (in months) of first placement spell, by age and year of entry, 2008 through 2017**

AGE AT ENTRY	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Under 1 Year	14.5	12.1	14.4	16.1	13.5	15.0	15.7	14.1	13.4	*
1–2 Years	6.1	9.6	8.4	11.5	10.9	14.2	9.3	9.0	11.7	*
3–5 Years	8.7	4.5	9.6	8.0	9.5	9.4	12.8	16.3	10.9	*
6–8 Years	5.0	10.3	13.7	6.4	8.1	9.9	12.4	10.0	12.2	*
9–11 Years	12.9	9.7	7.3	6.1	13.6	9.7	9.5	9.1	13.5	*
12–14 Years	2.9	4.6	3.5	4.6	3.9	3.2	5.7	5.0	6.4	*
15–17 Years	1.7	2.4	2.4	3.6	2.2	4.4	2.5	4.6	3.7	*
Total	4.6	5.7	7.6	7.2	7.5	8.7	8.5	8.2	10.2	

\*Cannot be accurately calculated because too few children from this cohort year have exited care.

Finally, length of stay was examined by children's race and legal sex (**Table 11**). Length of stay did not vary much by race except that Black children were more likely to exit within 90 days during their first out-of-home placement compared to White children (43% vs. 33%). Lengths of stay for females and males were also very similar.

**TABLE 11: Duration of first spell by race and legal sex, 2008 through 2017 (entry year)**

	LESS THAN 90 DAYS	3–6 MONTHS	6–12 MONTHS	1–1.5 YEARS	1.5–3 YEARS	MORE THAN 3 YEARS	TOTAL EXITS	STILL IN CARE
<b>Age at Entry</b>								
Under 1 Year	29%	9%	11%	12%	35%	4%	1,502	165
1–2 Years	32%	10%	16%	10%	26%	7%	1,064	109
3–5 Years	34%	9%	15%	10%	27%	5%	1,087	138
6–8 Years	36%	10%	15%	10%	23%	6%	795	126
9–11 Years	34%	12%	13%	10%	24%	7%	627	105
12–14 Years	46%	11%	16%	7%	14%	6%	966	77
15–17 Years	52%	14%	14%	7%	10%	4%	1,410	94
<b>Race</b>								
Black	43%	11%	14%	8%	19%	6%	3,281	321
White	33%	12%	14%	10%	27%	4%	2,730	307
<b>Legal Sex</b>								
Male	38%	11%	14%	9%	22%	5%	3,713	404
Female	38%	11%	14%	9%	23%	5%	3,768	410

Note: Percentages are calculated among children who had already exited.

## CHILDREN'S EXITS FROM PLACEMENT

This part of the analysis focuses on where children in Allegheny County child welfare placements went at the end of their placement. Whenever possible, the goal is to reunite the child with the family. If this is not possible, other permanent options are sought, such as adoption or PLC. Less desirable exit types include juvenile probation, living with relatives, running away or aging out of the system (also called “reaching majority”).

The data in this section continue to be examined by entry cohort, even though not all children who entered care in 2008 through 2017 experienced an exit. This method was chosen because exit cohorts provide a distorted picture of discharge patterns as children with shorter stays in care will be over-represented: The shorter a stay in care, the more likely a child is to exit before the time window expires, and the opposite is true for children with longer stays in care. Another methodological issue related to exits is the fact that exit information is unobserved for all children remaining in care at the end of the period of observation (Dec. 31, 2017).

**Table 12** summarizes the exit destinations of all children experiencing their first placement during the years 2008 through 2017. Of the 14,351 entries, 1,170 children were still in out-of-home placements; the remaining 92% had exited. Because of this, percentages below apply to children who have exited and are subject to change as more children exit. Of the total number of children who entered, 54% exited to their families, and another 12% exited to adoption. Among all these children, a total of 73% experienced an exit that is considered positive (return to family, PLC or adoption) from their out-of-home placement as of December 2017.

**TABLE 12: Exits from all spells as a percent of entries, 2008 through 2017**

ENTRY 2008 -2017	STILL IN CARE*	EXITS	EXIT TYPE				
			RETURN TO FAMILY	ADOPTION	PLC	NON- PERMANENT**	REACH MAJORITY (AGE OUT)
14,351	1,170	13,181	7,063	1,637	952	2,600	845
	8%	92%	54%	12%	7%	20%	6%

\*Still in care as of December 31, 2017

\*\*Non-permanent exits include: exit to an out-of-home placement through the juvenile probation office (JPO), exit to relatives, other permanent living arrangement, running away, hospital admission or other.

Exit types are highly influenced by a child's age, as shown in **Table 13**. Younger children, especially infants, are more likely to exit by being adopted, while older children and teenagers are more likely to run away or age out of care.

**TABLE 13: Exit destinations from all spells, by age at entry, race and legal sex, 2008 through 2017 (entry year)**

	RETURN TO FAMILY	ADOPTION	PLC	NON- PERMANENT*	REACH MAJORITY (AGE OUT)
<b>Age at Entry</b>					
Under 1 Year	48%	30%	7%	11%	3%
1-2 Years	56%	18%	8%	13%	4%
3-5 Years	59%	14%	10%	12%	4%
6-8 Years	59%	12%	9%	16%	4%
9-11 Years	55%	6%	10%	21%	6%
12-14 Years	54%	2%	4%	32%	7%
15-17 Years	49%	1%	2%	32%	15%
<b>Race</b>					
Black	53%	8%	10%	23%	13%
White	55%	17%	12%	14%	8%
<b>Legal Sex</b>					
Female	52%	12%	7%	21%	7%
Male	55%	13%	7%	18%	6%

*Note: Proportion of children still in care is out of all entries, and proportions of exit destinations are out of all those who exited.*

*\*Non-permanent exits include: exit to juvenile probation (JPO), exit to relatives, other permanent living arrangement, running away or other.*

Allegheny County's child welfare system has continued to work toward increased exits to permanent destinations. **Table 14** shows the distribution of different exit types for children who were in their first placement spell during the years 2008 through 2017. Beginning in 2010, fewer children exited to a non-permanent destination or aged out (reached majority).

TABLE 14: Exit destinations from all spells, by entry year, 2008 through 2017

EXIT TYPE	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Return to Family	47%	52%	51%	53%	52%	53%	52%	55%	60%	53%
Adoption	12%	10%	15%	15%	13%	15%	13%	15%	9%	2%
PLC	5%	5%	6%	8%	8%	8%	10%	12%	9%	3%
Non-Permanent	29%	23%	18%	17%	19%	17%	19%	14%	18%	18%
Reach Majority	7%	9%	9%	6%	8%	6%	5%	4%	3%	3%
Still in Care	3	5	3	4	8	19	42	120	279	687

Note: The distribution of exit destinations is subject to change as not all children have exited yet. The more children who are still in care, the greater the chance that changes will occur in the future.

Table 15 examines the relationship between placement type and exit destination. If the percent of children exiting to positive exits (return to family, adoption and PLC) are combined for each placement type, children primarily placed in foster care and kinship care exit to positive placements most frequently (89% and 84%), with high numbers exiting to their family (60% and 54%) and to adoption (26% and 14%). Children leaving congregate care are very likely to return to their families (52%) but are also at high risk of exiting to non-permanent destinations (47% of children in congregate care went to non-permanent destinations or aged out). Similarly, 80% of children in independent living placements did not experience a permanent exit, and 37% of these children aged out. This is not surprising as independent living facilities, by definition, serve older youth. Compared to other placement types, foster care and kinship care had the lowest percentage of children exiting to non-permanent situations (8% and 11%, respectively).

TABLE 15: Exit destinations from all spells, by majority placement type, 2008 through 2017

	RETURN TO FAMILY	ADOPTION	PLC	NON-PERMANENT	REACH MAJORITY
Congregate Care	52%	0%	0%	40%	7%
Foster Care	60%	26%	3%	8%	2%
Kinship Care	54%	14%	16%	11%	6%
Independent Living	19%	0%	0%	42%	37%
No Primary Placement	31%	2%	4%	40%	21%
<b>Total</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>6%</b>

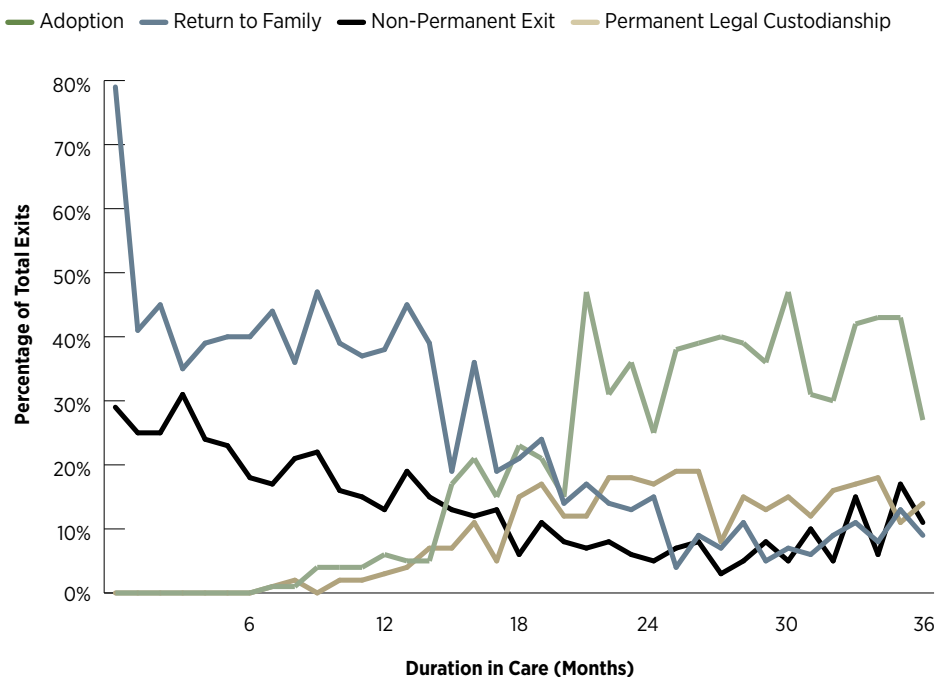
Note: Proportions of exit destinations are out of all those who exited.

Figure 10 displays the distribution of exit destinations by months in care for all exits occurring within 36 months among children who entered into care during 2008 through 2017. As shown in the chart, while the percentage returning to family begins to decline rapidly at about 14 months in care, adoptions begin to increase. Adoptions outpace returns to home for children exiting care after 21 months. This is not surprising because the decision to move forward with the adoption

process is made by a judge after evidence is reviewed and it is determined that attempts to reunify a child with his or her birth parent(s) were unsuccessful and reunification is no longer in the best interest of the child. Making the appropriate efforts to reunify and provide evidence necessary to move toward adoption takes many months, extending the time a child is in care, although technically they are already residing with their permanent family.<sup>8</sup> Exits to PLC begin to increase at 18 months in care.

<sup>8</sup> Further analysis about Termination of Parental Rights decisions can be found in the data brief, "Adoptions and Involuntary Termination of Parental Rights Cases" at [https://www.allegheycountyanalytics.us/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/ACDHS\\_CYF-Kinship-Adoption-and-TPR-Brief-011618.pdf](https://www.allegheycountyanalytics.us/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/ACDHS_CYF-Kinship-Adoption-and-TPR-Brief-011618.pdf).

**FIGURE 10: Exit destinations from all spells, by months in care, 2008 through 2017**



### RE-ENTRY INTO OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENT

While every effort is made to ensure a safe homecoming for all children leaving an Allegheny County child welfare placement, sometimes children do return to care again. For purposes of analysis in this section, a child was considered to re-enter out-of-home placement if he/she exited to family or PLC and subsequently experienced a new placement spell.

More than half of children first entering an out-of-home placement in 2008 through 2017 exited to a permanent setting and did not re-enter care. Thirty-five percent of children experienced two or three entries into placement. Only rarely are children placed more than five times.

**Table 16** examines the percentage of children, by the number of placement spells experienced, who re-enter care within one year after exiting. This part of the analysis focuses on re-entries within a year of exit because relatively quick re-entries like these suggest challenges in the reunification process and indicate situations in which the child welfare system might be able to

better prepare families for a child's return to the home. Nineteen percent of the total population exited their first spell and then re-entered within one year. All of these children experienced a second spell of placement. Of these, 29% exit and re-enter to a third spell, and so on.

As the number of placement spells experienced by a child increases, so do his/her chances of experiencing another re-entry following an exit from care. The 19% of children who re-entered after their first spell are a particularly vulnerable subset of the population, as their chances for permanency and stability decrease with each re-entry. Despite this tendency, it is important to remember that the number of children experiencing more than three placements is a very small segment of the population in care.

**TABLE 16: Re-entry rates (re-entry within one year of permanent exit), by spell number, 2008 through 2017**

SPELL NUMBER <sup>9</sup>	COUNT OF CHILDREN	RE-ENTRY RATE
1	8,295	19%
2	2,807	29%
3	1,379	38%
4	802	40%
5	447	46%
6	271	43%
7	149	47%
8	89	46%
9	50	45%
10	27	50%
10+	38	45%

<sup>9</sup> Figures include new placement spells experienced by children whose first, and possibly subsequent, placement spell(s) occurred prior to the year 2006. For this reason, the percentage of children re-entering from spell one may not equal the number of children experiencing a second spell, and so on.

*Note: Re-entry rate for high spell numbers (10 or more) may not be representative due to the small raw count.*

The rest of this section examines further the 31% of children who re-entered care at some point from 2008 through 2017, focusing on the initial re-entry after exiting from their first placement spell. The statistics are based on exit cohorts.

**Table 17** outlines how exits and re-entries have changed among those who exited from 2008 through 2017, for re-entries within one year after the first spell or after any spell. As shown in the table, the rates of re-entering within one year after the first spell are lower than the rates of re-entering within one year overall for all years. The re-entry rates declined after 2014 for both first spell and overall.

**TABLE 17: Re-entries into care after first spell, by exit year, 2008 through 2017**

EXIT YEAR	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<b>First Spell</b>										
Total Exits	969	871	828	819	798	810	818	789	779	780
Re-entry within 1 Year	265	188	160	135	156	138	150	133	109	*
As percent of All Exits	27%	22%	19%	16%	20%	17%	18%	17%	14%	*
<b>All Spells</b>										
Total Exits	2121	1781	1573	1444	1439	1351	1381	1309	1276	1223
Re-entry within 1 Year	794	515	388	342	393	343	320	287	266	*
As percent of All Exits	37%	29%	25%	24%	27%	25%	23%	22%	21%	

\*Cannot be accurately calculated because too few children from this cohort year have exited care.

**Table 18** examines re-entries by age and race. Children who exited before age two have a high re-entry rate, and the re-entry rate drops to the lowest among children exiting at age three through five years and then starts to increase as the exit age increases. For both race groups, children who exited at the ages of 15 through 17 have the highest rate of re-entering into care within one year (50% for Black children and 38% for White children). Black children were more likely to re-enter within one year no matter at what age they exited. The biggest difference by race is among children who exited at ages 12 through 14: 43 % of Black children of that age re-entered while only 30% of White children re-entered within one year.

**TABLE 18: Re-entries into care after all spells, by race and exit age, 2008 through 2017 (exit year)**

	LESS THAN 1 YEAR	1-2 YEARS	3-5 YEARS	6-8 YEARS	9-11 YEARS	12-14 YEARS	15-17 YEARS
<b>Black</b>							
Total Exits	288	697	834	633	546	1,088	2,470
Re-entry within 1 year	84	124	83	96	76	464	1,226
As Percent of All Exits	29%	18%	10%	15%	14%	43%	50%
<b>White</b>							
Total Exits	260	600	665	496	375	485	1,054
Re-entry within 1 year	71	81	62	52	39	145	403
As Percent of All Exits	27%	14%	9%	10%	10%	30%	38%

## ANALYSIS

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