

# **REDUCING THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN WHO ENTER THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM**

**PART 1 OF A 3-PART SERIES**



**A REPORT BY  
ARKANSAS ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES  
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# REDUCING THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN WHO ENTER THE ARKANSAS FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

## Part I of a 3-Part Series

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### Executive Summary

Too many children enter the Arkansas foster care system for a short period of time. Even a short stay in foster care can be extremely traumatic for a child. The child may be placed with strangers in a foster home and have to start a new school, only to return home or be placed with a relative within 30 days. This raises the question of whether there is a way to prevent these children from entering the foster care system, either by keeping them safely in their homes or placing them with relatives or adults they know, if appropriate services can be provided.

The Arkansas Division of Children and Families Services (DCFS) obtained a demonstration waiver from the federal government to help tackle this problem along with two others. The three main goals of the waiver are to: (1) safely reduce the number of children entering foster care, (2) reduce the time spent in foster care, and (3) increase the stability of a child's placement while they are in foster care. The demonstration waiver allows DCFS to redirect part of its current funding to implement new initiatives to help achieve these goals.



This brief is the first in a three-part series. Each brief focuses on one of these goals and examines data from DCFS, comparing it with data compiled before the waiver began.

This brief focuses on the first goal of safely reducing the number of children who enter foster care. It examines data from a five-year period to determine why children were removed, how long they stayed in foster care, and where they went after they left. The data show:

- many children enter foster care because of parent substance abuse or parent incarceration.
- a significant number of children exit foster care within a week or a month.
- half of all children entering foster care are younger than six.
- the reasons for removing children vary widely by region, as does the proportion of children who exit in a shorter period of time.

To reduce the number of children entering foster care, DCFS is implementing the following initiatives: Differential Response, Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths Assessment, Nurturing Parenting Program, and Team Decision-Making. DCFS will conduct an intensive evaluation of the new initiatives as a requirement of its demonstration waiver. Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF) will monitor their progress and report on the results of the evaluation.

## Introduction

When a child enters foster care, even for a little while, their whole world changes. In many cases, they are placed in an unfamiliar home with strangers and placed in a new school. Many children who enter foster care are returned home or to a relative in a very short period of time (30 days or less). This raises the question: is there a way, using appropriate services, to prevent children from entering the foster care system by keeping them safely in their homes or placing them with relatives or adults they know? Arkansas was awarded a demonstration waiver from the federal government to attempt to solve this problem.

The demonstration waiver allows DCFS to redirect federal IV-E foster care funding and use it for services that will hopefully keep children safely in their homes. IV-E funding is the largest source of federal funding for child welfare and pays for services for children while they are in foster care. Without a waiver, there is little funding to pay for services to keep children at home.

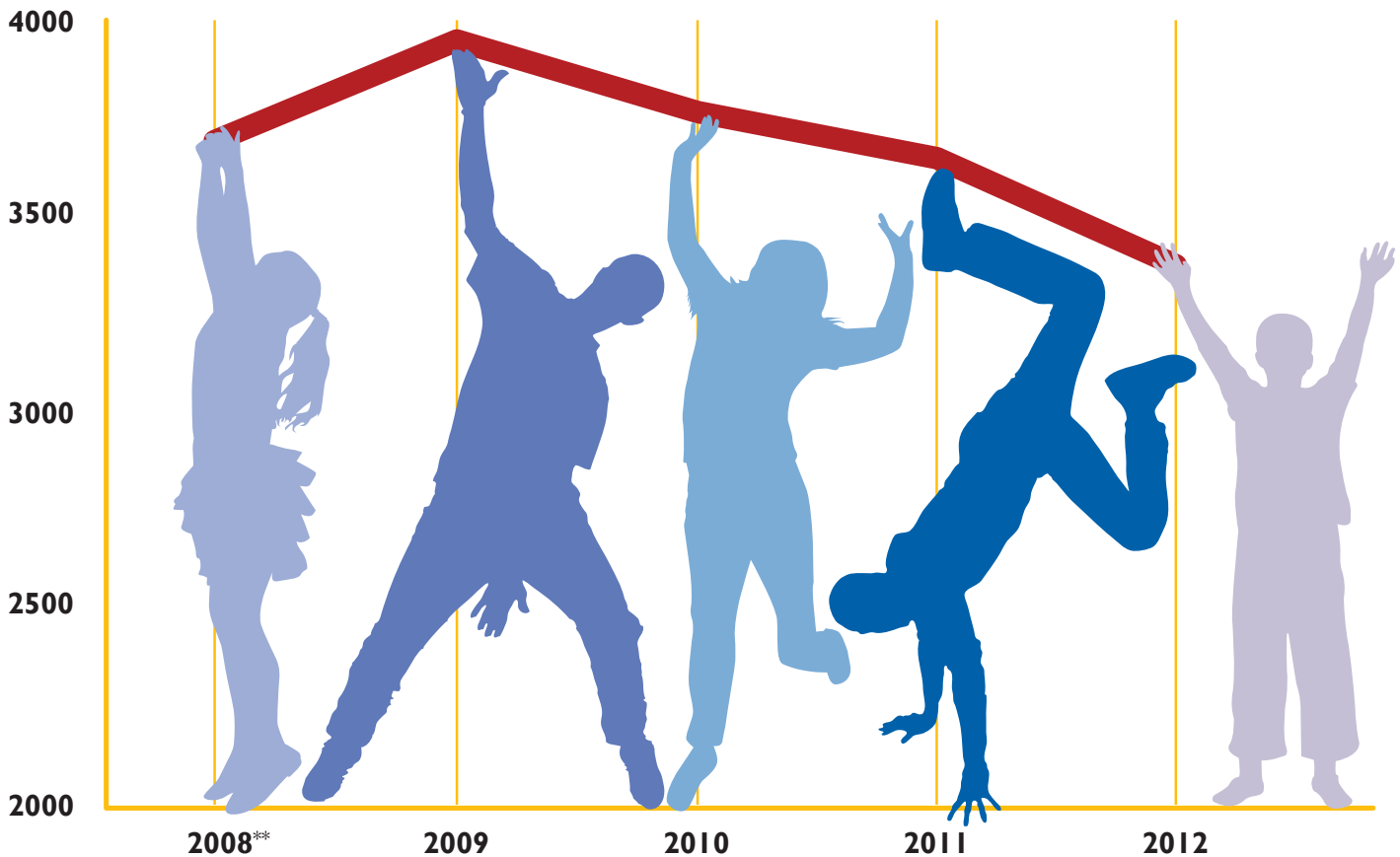
The three main goals for the IV-E demonstration waiver are (1) to safely reduce the number of children entering foster care, (2) to reduce the time spent in foster care, and (3) to increase the placement stability while children are in foster care. This brief looks at data on children who entered the Arkansas foster care system in a five-year period from July 2007 to June 2012, and then follows them through June 2013. The number of times a child has been removed from the original home varies, ranging from one to eight beginning as of July 2007. This brief focuses on the first goal, which is to safely reduce the number of children entering foster care.

### Who are the children who entered foster care over this period of time?

From July 2007 through June 2012, a total of 18,469 children entered the foster care system in Arkansas. Beginning in 2008, 3,698 children entered foster care. That number increased to its highest level in 2009 (3,959), but has declined since that time.

## CHILDREN ENTERING FOSTER CARE ON THE DECLINE

Number of children\* entering care, with peak in 2009



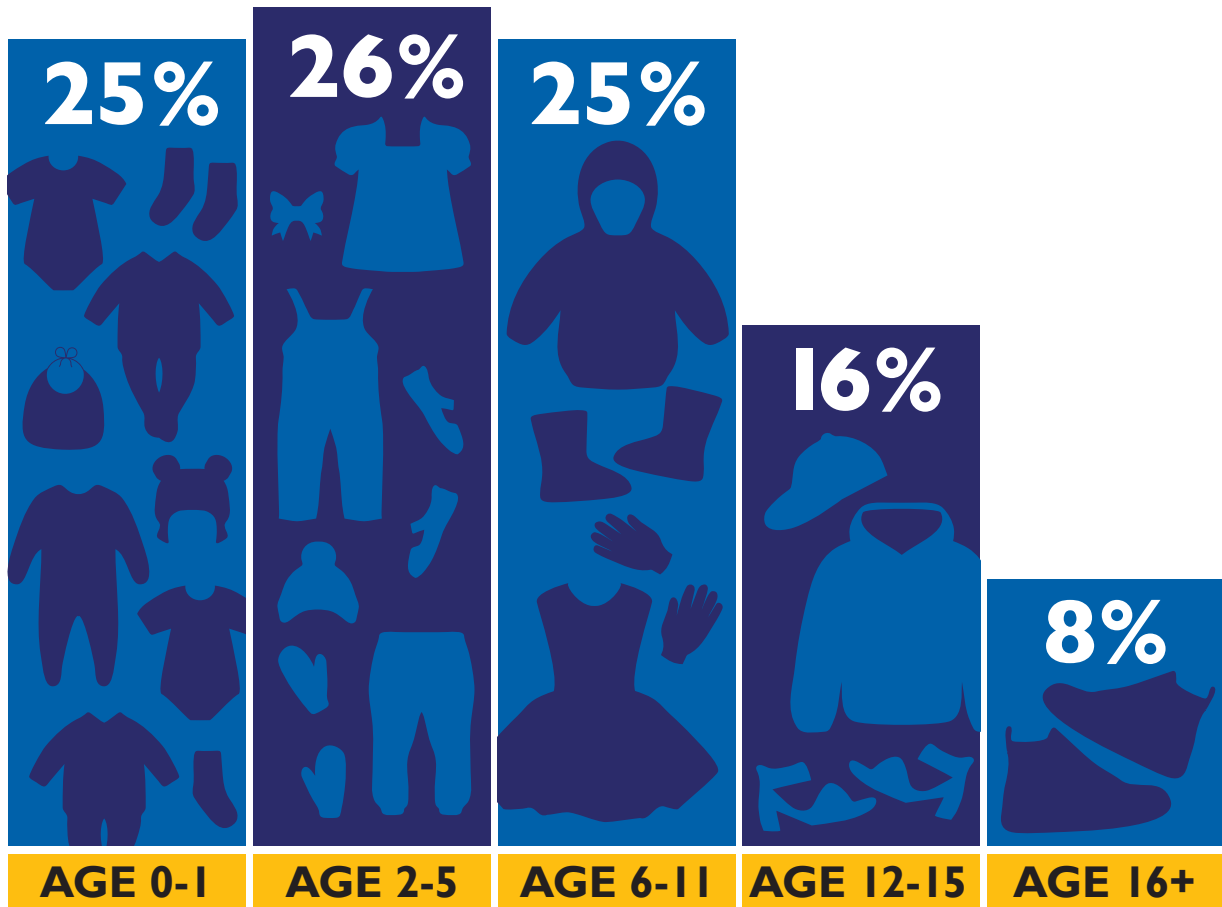
\*A child may have entered more than one time during a five year period, but they are only counted once during that time period

\*\*July 1, 2007 through June 30, 2008

Their ages at entry into foster care were evenly split among the first three age groups (0 to 11). Older children were a smaller percentage of children who entered. The age of children at the time of entry into foster care widely varies among states.<sup>1</sup> However, when compared to the national statistics, children who entered the Arkansas foster care system were somewhat younger. In 2012, 47 percent of children in foster care in the U.S. were ages 0 to 5 at the time of entry into care<sup>2</sup>, compared to 51 percent in Arkansas during the five-year period examined.

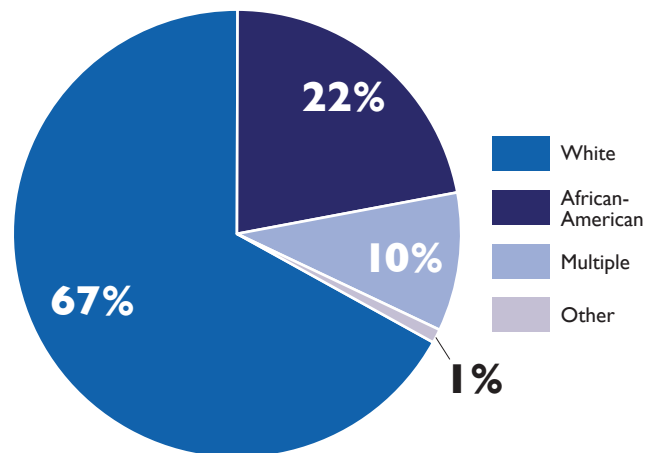
### CHILDREN ENTERING FOSTER CARE IN ARKANSAS SKEW YOUNGER

Age of children entering foster care



Their gender was almost evenly split between boys (49 percent) and girls (51 percent). And their race was very close to the overall population of children in Arkansas. In 32 states, the proportion of African American children in foster care was significantly larger in comparison to their percentage of the state's overall population.<sup>3</sup> This does not appear to be the case in Arkansas. African American children comprise 19 percent of Arkansas children and 22 percent of those who entered care during the period of time examined. Of the children who entered care in Arkansas, 7 percent were Hispanic.\* Eleven percent of the overall population of children in Arkansas is Hispanic.

### RACIAL MAKE-UP OF CHILDREN ENTERING FOSTER CARE MIRRORS STATE POPULATION



\*Whether a child is Hispanic is captured under ethnicity and not race in DCFS data.

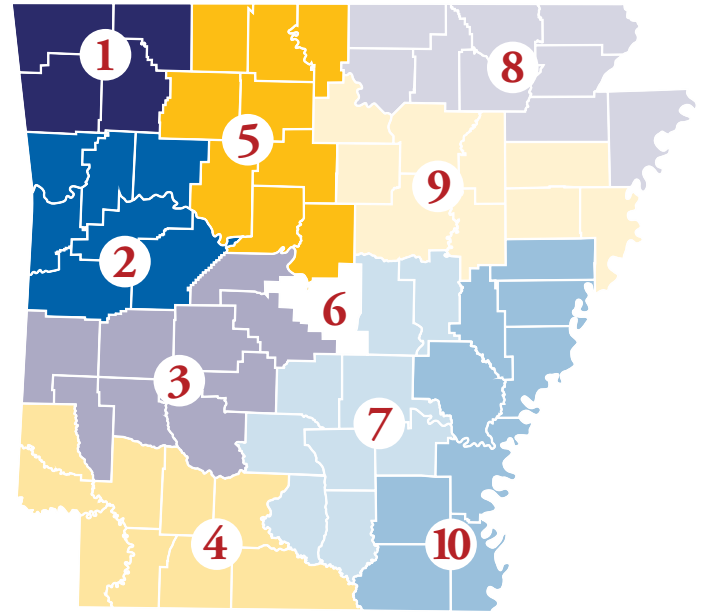
## Removal Reasons for Those Children Who Entered Foster Care

### Why were these children removed from their families?

The most frequent reason for removal was neglect (45 percent), followed by parental substance abuse (36 percent) and physical or sexual abuse (22 percent). Forty percent of children experienced multiple types of maltreatment, ranging from two to seven types. In national statistics, parental substance abuse or parental incarceration is not recorded as a maltreatment type. But the national data do indicate that 67 percent of children who received foster care suffered from neglect, and 18 percent experienced multiple types of maltreatment.<sup>4</sup>

In Area 9, more than half of the children (54 percent) came into foster care because of parental substance abuse. Area 2 had the higher percentage of children (58 percent) come into care due to neglect, and Area 1 had the highest percentage of children in foster care who were removed due to parent incarceration (37 percent). Several Areas, including Areas 3 and 4, had higher rates of children who came into care due to physical or sexual abuse.

## DCFS AREAS



## REASONS FOR ENTERING FOSTER CARE VARY ACCORDING TO REGION

	Neglect	Physical or Sexual Abuse	Parental Substance Abuse	Parent Incarceration	Other*	Multiple Maltreatment Types
State-wide	45%	22%	36%	20%	27%	40%
Area 1	47%	21%	33%	37%	24%	50%
Area 2	58%	19%	34%	29%	33%	51%
Area 3	38%	27%	40%	12%	29%	38%
Area 4	38%	28%	33%	9%	30%	32%
Area 5	37%	22%	36%	24%	31%	39%
Area 6	52%	23%	23%	16%	25%	33%
Area 7	31%	24%	31%	15%	30%	27%
Area 8	49%	19%	40%	21%	22%	42%
Area 9	45%	21%	54%	14%	16%	42%
Area 10	45%	24%	24%	9%	30%	29%

The total percentage may exceed 100 percent because children could have multiple maltreatment types.

\*Other includes child-related reasons (e.g., child behavioral problems, child substance abuse), abandonment, parent inability to cope, and inadequate housing.

## ALMOST ONE-THIRD OF CHILDREN LEAVE FOSTER CARE WITHIN A MONTH OR LESS

Percentage of children who exited foster care within three years or less

	All	White	African-American
Exited less than 1 month	31%	30%	34%
Exited 1 to 3 months	19%	19%	18%
Exited 3 to 6 months	11%	11%	9%
Exited 6 months to 1 year	16%	17%	16%
Exited 1 to 2 years	16%	16%	15%
Exited 2 to 3 years	6%	6%	6%

### Permanency Outcomes For Children Who Left Care

#### How long did children stay in care for those who left care during this time period?

Arkansas had more children leave care within a short period of time when compared to national statistics. Approximately half of the children who left care during this time period exited within three months. Almost one-third exited within a month or less. Nationwide, only five percent of children exited care within a month of their entry and another 22 percent within five months<sup>5</sup>. In examining race, there were no large differences between white and African-American children. The percentages were very close for those who exited within three years or less.

#### Of the children who entered into care during this time period, how many exited care within 7 days?

If you look at an even shorter time period, 16 percent of those who entered left within seven days or less. Compared to other areas, Areas 1, 4 and 7 had a larger percentage of children exiting care within a week. A lower percentage of children exited care within a week of their entry in Area 2.

### CHILDREN WHO EXITED FOSTER CARE WITHIN 7 DAYS

Areas 4 and 7 have highest percentage

Area 1	20%
Area 2	10%
Area 3	14%
Area 4	23%
Area 5	16%
Area 6	12%
Area 7	24%
Area 8	15%
Area 9	12%
Area 10	18%
State-wide	16%



## AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHILDREN WERE MORE LIKELY TO BE REUNITED WITH CAREGIVERS

Where children went when they left foster care within one month

	Reunification	Relative	Adoption	Age Out
All children*	44.9%	37.0%	11.5%	3.1%
White	43.0%	38.7%	11.7%	3.2%
African-American	48.8%	34.4%	10.3%	3.2%
Exited 7 days or less	58.0%	38.0%	0.0%	0.3%
White	54.9%	41.3%	0.0%	0.4%
African-American	64.2%	31.3%	0.0%	0.3%
Exited 1 month or less	48.6%	46.5%	0.0%	0.4%
White	45.2%	49.9%	0.0%	0.5%
African-American	56.1%	39.6%	0.0%	0.3%

\*All children who left foster care during the six year period.

### For children who left care in a short period of time, where did they go?

The majority of children who exited care within a month were either reunified with their parents (49 percent) or placed with a relative (47 percent). Among those children who exited care within a week, the majority of them (58 percent) returned to their original home, and approximately 38 percent of children exited into placements with relatives. African-American children were more likely to be reunified with their original caregivers than placed with a relative when compared to white children.



### Initiatives to Reduce the Number of Children Entering Foster Care

The initiatives that DCFS has identified as part of their IV-E demonstration waiver to safely reduce the number of children entering foster care include: Differential Response, CANS Assessment, Nurturing Parenting Program, and Team Decision-Making. These programs are described below and are in various stages of being implemented.

**Differential Response:** Instead of receiving a full investigation, certain types of low-risk allegations are assigned to Differential Response, in which they receive an assessment, including a health and safety assessment. DCFS tries to help the family with basic resources (for example, buying household cleaning items and showing them how to clean) and find local community organizations that may be able to help. This program began statewide in State Fiscal Year 2013. That year, 33,353 maltreatment reports were assigned for investigation. Of those, 1,302 were assigned to the Differential Response Program.

**Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) Assessment:** DCFS is implementing this functional assessment tool, used by 25 other states, to better determine what services should be provided to the children and their families. It helps prioritize the needs of the families and identify the needs earlier in the case to address the issues that brought them into the child welfare system. It also allows them to better monitor the outcomes of the

services and will hopefully allow more children to remain safely at home if the right services are in place. This tool has not been implemented yet.

**Nurturing Parenting Program:** This is an evidence-based parenting education program. It has built-in assessments for before, during, and after the program to see if parenting skills have improved. It has not been implemented yet.

**Team Decision-Making:** This model, developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, allows DCFS to make immediate decisions about removing a child by using an internal facilitator who is not a case-carrying social worker. The meeting includes the family and other individuals who have the family's permission to participate. It has been implemented in 13 counties (Carroll, Columbia, Conway, Craighead, Faulkner, Lafayette, Lawrence, Madison, Miller, Pulaski, Randolph, Saline, and Union).



## Recommendations/Conclusion

- 1) A significant proportion of children exited foster care within a week or within a month. Since the majority of these children returned home, many of them may benefit from additional services that could ensure they don't enter foster care to begin with. It should be examined whether this statistic changes with the implementation of the new initiatives. At the same time, it should be closely monitored whether children who were not removed from their homes later entered foster care again or had new maltreatment allegations reported.
- 2) Approximately half of children who are entering the Arkansas foster care system are younger than 6. It should be examined why younger children in Arkansas are at greater risk of being removed from their original homes compared to national statistics. At the same time, more support should be put in place and offered for parents with young children, especially considering the challenges new parents may experience. Furthermore, the current data do not provide any information on children's disabilities. More attention should be focused on young children with disabilities, considering multiple challenges their parents may encounter in caring for them.
- 3) Wide variations are noted among the 10 areas of the state in relation to a child's removal reason and the proportion of children exiting care within a short period of time. The reasons for such variations should be more closely examined, especially in relation to similar and different policies and practices within each area.

As part of the IV-E demonstration waiver, DCFS is required to evaluate the effectiveness of the programs and whether or not they are able to reduce the number of children entering foster care. They are implementing evaluation tools and making changes to their database in order to capture key data to conduct the evaluations. AACF will monitor the data and the evaluations and report on their results.



## Endnotes

- 1 Children's Bureau (2013b). Child welfare outcomes 2008-2011: Report to Congress. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/cwo-08-11>
- 2 Children's Bureau (2013c). The AFCARS report: Preliminary FY 2012 estimates as of November 2013. Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport20.pdf>
- 3 Children's Bureau (2013b). Child welfare outcomes 2008-2011: Report to Congress. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/cwo-08-11>
- 4 Children's Bureau (2013a). Child maltreatment 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cm2012.pdf>
- 5 Children's Bureau (2013c). The AFCARS report: Preliminary FY 2012 estimates as of November 2013. Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport20.pdf>



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