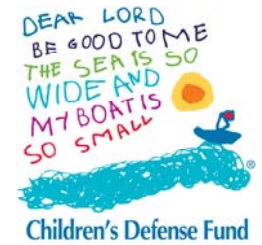


Children's Defense Fund Number of Children in Foster Care Decline: Fewer Children Entered Care and They Didn't Stay as Long



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There was some good news in the Children's Bureau's latest Adoption and Foster Care Reporting and Analysis System (AFCARS) data for fiscal year 2009, released on August 10, 2010. AFCARS is a national data system operated by the Children's Bureau in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that tracks the number of children who entered and exited foster care, demographics of the children in care (such as age, race, ethnicity, and gender), and other characteristics, such as length of time in care, placement type, and the number of children who are adopted.

Policy and practice improvements, prompted by the new Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections), likely contributed to decreases in the number of children in foster care, but challenges remain that highlight the need for vigorous implementation of the new reforms and additional reforms. There needs to be continuing efforts to prevent children from entering foster care and to move children out of foster care and into permanent families. Hopefully more children will be helped soon through the additional provisions of Fostering Connections that were implemented after the 2009 AFCARS data was collected. For example, effective October 1, 2010, states will have the option to use federal funds to extend supports and services to youths and young adults in foster care, in adoptive homes, or who are living with permanent legal guardians up to age 21. This will give states additional time to identify permanent families for these youths. In October 2009, more older youths with special needs also became eligible for the first time for federal adoption assistance payments. These children too were not captured in this new AFCARS data.

Improvements and Encouraging Trends:

- **Decrease in the number of children in foster care.** The number of children in foster care dropped to 423,773 in 2009. This is more than an eight percent drop from the 463,000 children who were in foster care in 2008, and more than a 20 percent drop in the number of children who were in foster care a decade ago (567,000 in FY 1999).
- **Decrease in the number of children entering foster care.** The number of children entering foster care dropped more than six percent from 273,000 in 2008 to 255,418 in 2009. This follows a four year trend in decreasing entries into foster care.
- **Decrease in time spent in foster care.** The length of time (mean months) a child stays in foster care dropped to 26.7 months in 2009, compared to 27.2 months in 2008. The length of time a child spends in foster care has been declining since FY 2001 when the average length of time in care was 32.5 months.
- **Decrease in the number of Black children in and entering foster care.** Between 2008 and 2009 there was more than a ten percent decrease in the number of Black children in foster care and an eight percent decrease in the number of Black children entering foster care. In 2009 there were 127,821 Black children in foster care and 64,690 Black children who entered care; in 2008, 142,502 Black children were in foster care and 70,378 Black children entered care. The number of Black children in foster care generally has been declining since FY 1998 (except for an increase in FY 2000). However, the overall percentage of Black children in foster care is still double the percent of all Black children in the general population. Continuous work needs to be done to ensure Black children are not overrepresented in foster care.

- **Increase in the number of children adopted and a decrease in children waiting to be adopted.** The number of children adopted with public agency involvement increased to 57,466 children in 2009, up from 55,000 children in 2008. The number of children adopted has increased over the years (except for FY 2003), with more than a 50 percent increase in the number of children adopted in the last decade (37,000 in FY 1998). The number of children waiting to be adopted also decreased from 123,000 in FY 2008 to 114,556 in FY 2009.

Continuing Challenges:

- **The number of older youths aging out of foster care remains too high.** Although the actual number of youths who aged out of foster care decreased very slightly in 2009 to 29,471 from 29,516 in 2008, there was an increase in the percent of children aging out of care from 10 to 11 percent. This continues an alarming trend of youths aging out of foster care without permanent families, which has increased by 70 percent since FY 1998.

For More Information:

- Read the full [AFCARS Report #17](#)
- Analysis of the [Trends in Foster Care and Adoption – FY 2002 – FY 2009](#)
- For a [State-by-state comparison of the number of children in foster care, entries and exits between FY 2002 to FY 2009](#)