

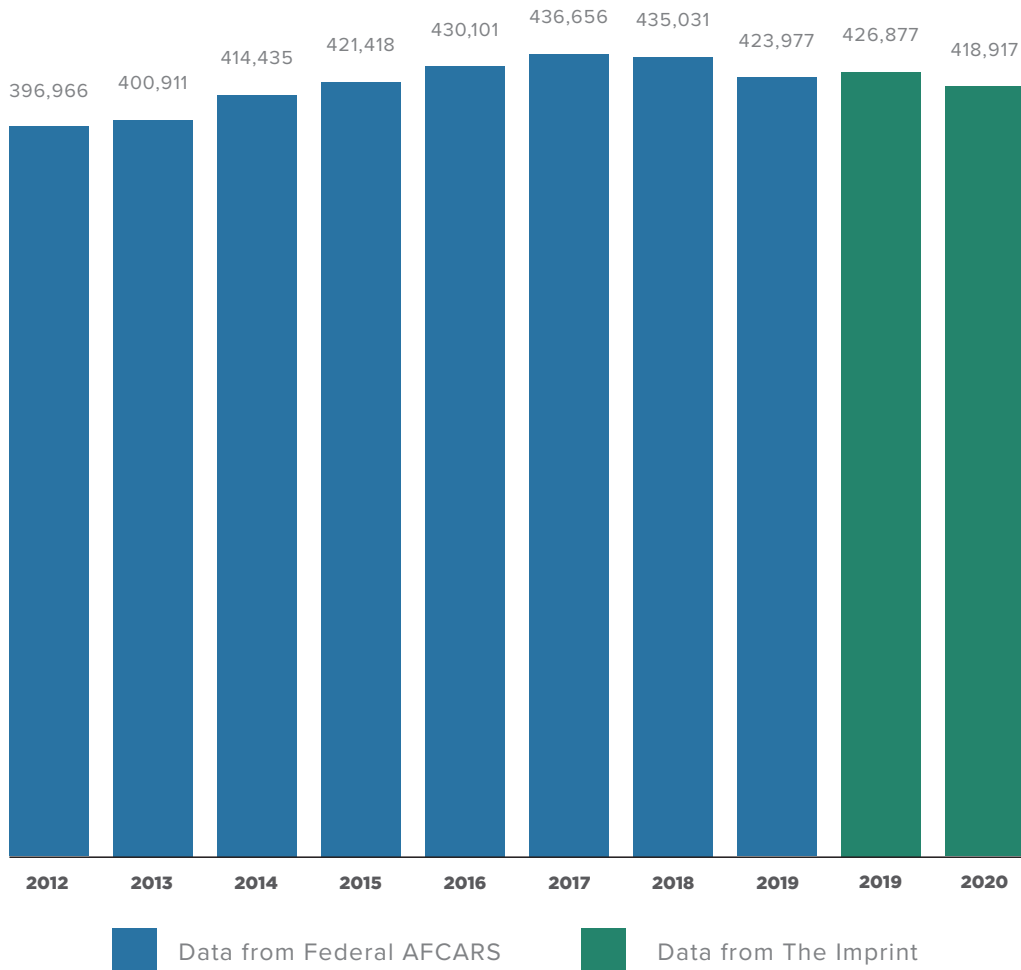
# WHO CARES: A NATIONAL COUNT OF FOSTER HOMES & FAMILIES

A Project of The Imprint  
2020 Executive Summary

Newly released data compiled and analyzed by The Imprint, the nation's leading news outlet covering child welfare, finds the number of foster youth in America has declined for a second straight year, but the percentage of them who are not identified as white appears to be growing.

This marks a third consecutive year of decline since the recent peak of nearly 443,000 in 2017. The number of youth in care declined for more than a decade until 2012, and then spiked by nearly 12% in the ensuing five years, fueled in part by the opioid epidemic. After a recent period where the overall racial disproportionality in foster care declined, nearly three dozen states saw the share of foster youth who were white decline in 2019.

## YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE



Meanwhile, the availability of licensed foster homes took a hit in 2020, according to figures collected directly from state child welfare agencies. And while the child welfare systems are relying more on relatives and less on group homes and institutions to care for kids, a new data point in the Who Cares project shows a wide range from state to state when it comes to keeping youth in the homes of people who they call family.

## About the Project

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Since 2017, The Imprint (formerly The Chronicle of Social Change) has been working to build the nation's first public resource on foster care capacity. We collect data directly from each state, and combine that with specially obtained federal reports to shed light on two critical questions:

### How many children and youth are in foster care today? And where and with whom are they living?

**When children are removed from their homes, states generally have three placement options:**

- ▶ The homes of relatives and other unrelated kin.
- ▶ The homes of non-relative foster parents recruited and trained by both public and private child welfare agencies.
- ▶ "Congregate care," which includes emergency shelters, group homes and other residential facilities.

At [www.FosterCareCapacity.org](http://www.FosterCareCapacity.org) you can also find news stories and opinion pieces from stakeholders and prominent state and federal officials discussing some of the most significant themes that arise from our data findings on foster care capacity.

## Methodology

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The Imprint began Who Cares: A National Count of Foster Homes and Families in 2017 to gauge trends in where child welfare systems were placing children.

We collect the following numbers directly from state child welfare agencies:

- ▶ Total licensed foster homes
- ▶ Non-relative foster homes
- ▶ Relatives with an active, ongoing placement of foster youth in their homes
- ▶ The number of congregate care providers that take placements of foster youth, and the number of total beds available in them
- ▶ The number of children in foster care placements of any kind

We ask that states provide these figures for March 31, or the closest possible point in time.

We then work with research partners to acquire and aggregate the most recent data collected through the federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), which is generally published in the year following its collection (for example, the public topline report on AFCARS for fiscal year 2019 was

published in August of 2020). We use this federal data to provide context on the demographics of both foster parents and foster youth, and trends in the number of youth living in each type of foster care setting.

## **Our Newest Metric: Family Separation**

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This year, for the first time, we have added a new feature to the Who Cares: A National Count of Foster Homes and Families collection that will be called “Family Separation.” For each state, this measurement tracks the average number of days per year that a child spends without his or her family.

There is an important distinction between this and every other data point in our database: Family Separation is inclusive of all children in the state, not just those in foster care. The goal is to quantify the extent to which a state is separating children from their families or keeping families together.

The organization Fostering Court Improvement created this measure. The data sources for this measure are AFCARS, the National Center for Health Statistics, and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

## **Findings**

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### **FOSTER CARE TOTALS WERE DOWN EARLY IN THE PANDEMIC**

Since we began the Who Cares project, our annual total for the number of youth in foster care has tracked closely with the corresponding federal AFCARS number, which is usually released a year later. For example, our 2019 total, published in September of 2019, was 426,877. The AFCARS total, released in August 2020, was 423,997.

Our 2020 data collection from states indicates that the number of youth in foster care has continued its descent from a recent peak in 2018. Our state data collection found 418,917 youth in foster care this year, a 4% decrease from the recent peak of nearly 436,656 in 2017.

Inadvertently, the difference between our collection and the AFCARS data may capture the early effect of coronavirus on the national foster care numbers. We ask states for the number of youth in care on March 31 of each year, and the federal count is based on a point-in-time count of September 30.

That span of time roughly coincides with the first six months that all state child welfare systems operated during the outbreak. Thus, a comparison of the two is likely to reflect the trend in foster care for the first six months of the pandemic.

### **THE NUMBER OF LICENSED FOSTER HOMES DECLINED**

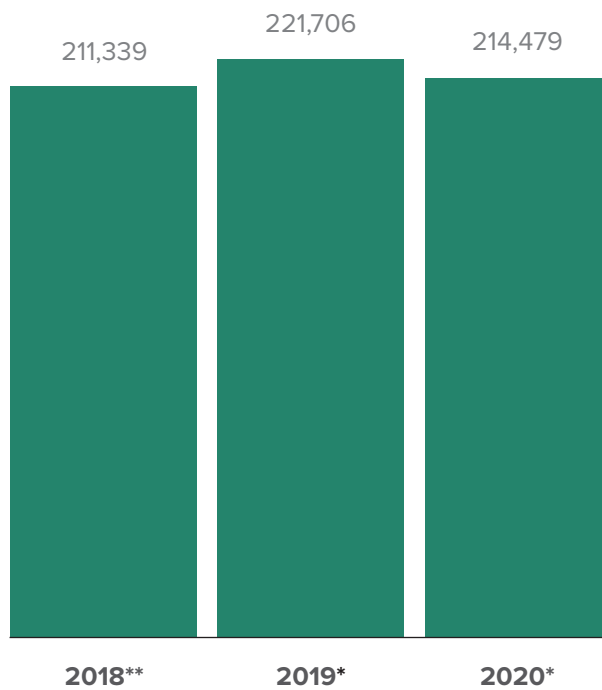
In 2019 and 2020, we were able to obtain the number of licensed foster homes from every state with the exception of Virginia. For 2018, we were able to collect from all states except for Delaware and Virginia.

The changes in this figure can be affected by several factors, including: recruitment of new foster homes, loss of existing foster homes, and the completion of cases where a relative or family friend had become licensed exclusively to care for a child or children in that case.

The number of licensed foster homes increased 5% between 2018 and 2019, but this year’s numbers show a decline. There were 221,706 licensed foster homes in 2019, according to state data. The total dropped to 214,479 in 2020, a decline of approximately 3.3%.

In all likelihood, the decline was even larger this year. Florida saw a 40% uptick in licensed homes, but state officials informed us that this increase does not necessarily suggest a major change in the number of caregivers. Rather, it is mostly attributable to a new tier of licensure available to relatives and other kin.

**TOTAL LICENSED FOSTER HOMES**



\* Excludes: Virginia  
 \*\* Excludes: Delaware, Virginia  
 Source: Who Cares state data collection

The decline in 2020 in was fueled by notable dropoff in several large states:

- ▶ New York: -3,183 homes (22%)
- ▶ California: -2,796 homes (8%)
- ▶ Georgia: -1,531 homes (20%)

New York’s decline appears to connect with a decline in non-relative foster homes in the state; the number of those dropped by 3,144, or 28%. In California a main driver appears to be fewer licensed relative homes, because the number of non-relative homes declined by just 3%.

Overall, 20 states saw the number of total licensed homes decrease by 5% or more. Ten states saw their total number of licensed homes increase by 5% last year.

**AFTER YEARS IN OTHER DIRECTION, FOSTER CARE BECOMES LESS WHITE**

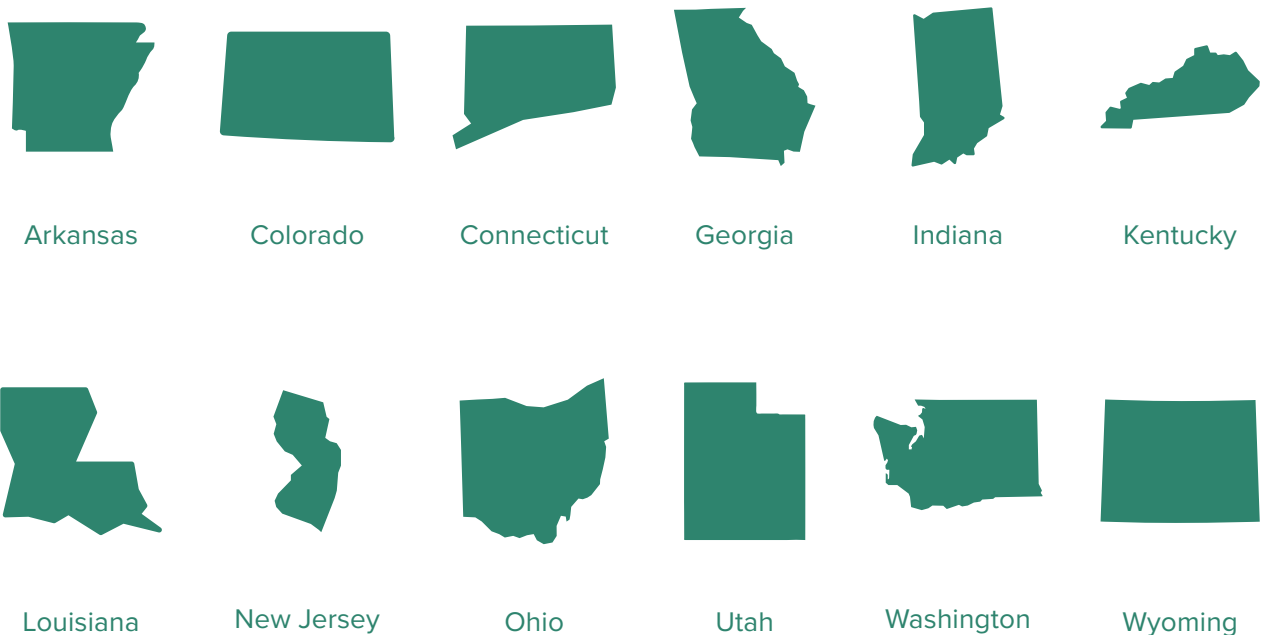
Last year we noted that, across the nation, foster care had gotten whiter in the past decade. In 2010, just under 59% of youth in foster care were identified as white in federal data. In 2019, about 67% of foster youth were white. Only 11 states saw foster care become less white between 2010 and 2019. Four saw no change, and 35 saw a greater percentage of white foster youth.

But the 2019 numbers suggest that perhaps this trend has slowed, and we could be headed for a shift in the demographics of care. Thirty-four states saw the percentage of foster youth who are white decline by at least 1% last year.

Twelve of those 34 states saw an increase of 1% or 2% in the share of foster youth who are Black. Sixteen of them placed a greater share of foster youth in the “Undetermined” group, not assigning a race or ethnicity.

**FOSTER YOUTH DEMOGRAPHICS**

*States with decreased share of white youth, increased share of Black youth in 2019*



Source: AFCARS

The most pronounced demographic shift in foster care has occurred in North Dakota, where the percentage of foster youth who are white dropped from 64% in 2010 down to 49% last year. At the same time, the proportion of youth who were identified as American Indian jumped from 36% to 47%. According to the most recent U.S. Census Bureau data, only 8% of children in North Dakota are American Indian.

### THE ROLE OF RELATIVES CONTINUES TO GROW

We were able to collect the number of relative caregivers with an active, ongoing placement in their home as of March 31, 2020 from 41 states and the District of Columbia. In those states, there were 87,287 relatives with ongoing placements. Last year, we identified 86,095 relatives with active placements in 42 states.

In the 40 states where we had data from both 2019 and 2020, there was a net 2% increase of 1,642 relatives with active placements.

Federal data acquired for the project shows that the number of children in foster care who lived with relatives increased by 36% between 2010 and 2018, and plateaued in 2019. However, because there were fewer total youth in foster care in 2019, the percentage of youth living with relatives was actually higher (31.5% in 2019, compared with 30.4% in 2018).

Within that national frame, 18 states saw a 10% or greater increase in the number of foster youth living with relatives, and only eight states saw a decline of 10% or more.

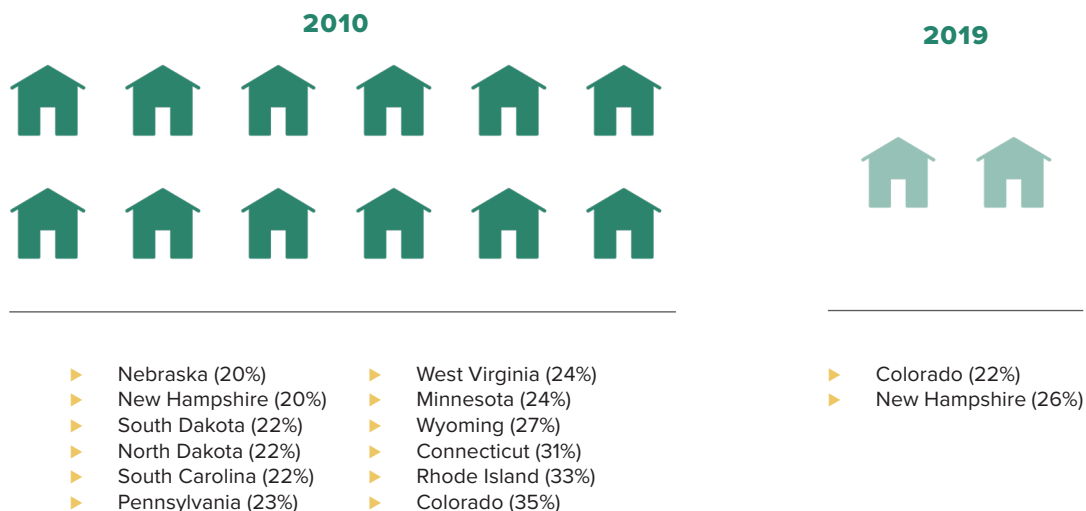
### DECLINING USE OF CONGREGATE CARE

In real terms, the number of foster youth living in group homes and institutions decreased in 2019 by 5%, according to federal data, though the share of foster youth in those settings was relatively unchanged (10.7% in 2018 vs. 10.3% in 2019).

Since 2010, all but seven states have seen the proportion of youth in congregate care decline. However, nine states saw the congregate care proportion increase last year, including New Hampshire, which continues to hold the highest percentage of youth in congregate settings at 26%.

#### HIGH CONGREGATE CARE USAGE

*States where more than 20% of youth live in group homes or institutions*



FAMILY SEPARATION 2019 Average Days Separated		
1	Utah	0.5
2	Maryland	0.5
3	New Jersey	0.6
4	Louisiana	0.7
5	Virginia	0.8
6	Texas	0.8
7	Delaware	0.9
8	New York	0.9
9	Idaho	0.9
10	Minnesota	0.9
11	Michigan	0.9
12	Illinois	0.9
13	Hawaii	1.0
14	Colorado	1.0
15	Connecticut	1.0
16	North Carolina	1.0
17	Florida	1.0
18	Nevada	1.1
19	California	1.1
20	Washington	1.1
21	New Mexico	1.2
22	New Hampshire	1.2
23	Nebraska	1.2
24	South Carolina	1.2
25	District of Columbia	1.2
26	Pennsylvania	1.2
27	Wisconsin	1.2
28	Iowa	1.2
29	Mississippi	1.2
30	Arkansas	1.2
31	Missouri	1.2
32	Georgia	1.3
33	Maine	1.3
34	Oregon	1.3
35	Wyoming	1.4
36	Alabama	1.4
37	Massachusetts	1.4
38	Tennessee	1.4
39	Arizona	1.4
40	Ohio	1.5
41	Oklahoma	1.5
42	South Dakota	1.6
43	Indiana	1.7
44	Alaska	1.7
45	Rhode Island	1.7
46	North Dakota	2.1
47	Kansas	2.1
48	Montana	2.1
49	Kentucky	2.5
50	Vermont	2.5
51	West Virginia	4.8

The number of states with a very high percentage of foster youth in congregate care has plummeted in this decade. In 2010, there were 12 states where more than 20% of youth were living in group homes or institutions, and half of all states were above 15%.

While we have not yet included it on the Who Cares website, we have been collecting information about the congregate care bed capacity kept in each state for the past two years, and are able to make comparisons between 2019 and 2020 in 33 states. Of those, 22 reported reduced bed capacity in 2020.

In 2019, just 12 states were above the 15% mark, and only two states — New Hampshire and Colorado — housed more than 20% of youth in congregate care.

### FAMILY SEPARATION HAS GROWN SINCE 2010

As mentioned, our Family Separation metric expresses the average number of days per year that children in each state spend living outside of their family. This is a population-level calculation, meant to capture the extent to which states maximize the time that all kids spend safely in a family: birth, relative, kin or adoptive.

Despite the increased use of relatives and decreased use of congregate care in many states' foster care systems, family separation has grown by 10% since the start of the decade. Nationwide, the average number of days that children spent outside the care of their own families increased from 1 in 2010 to 1.1 in 2019.

That shift was balanced on both ends by stark changes in both directions on the state level. Since 2010, 13 states and the District of Columbia have experienced a decrease in family separation of 10% or more. At the same time, family separation has increased by 10% in 28 states during that time frame.

Among the states that have experienced the highest increases in family separation since 2010 are New Hampshire (52%), Kentucky (54%), West Virginia (85%), Georgia (84%) and New Mexico (91%).

Equally interesting is the wide state-to-state range on this metric in any given year. In 2019, all of the children in Maryland spent an average of half-a-day outside the care of a family. In the bordering state of West Virginia, children spent an average of 4.8 days separated from family.

### Conclusion

The year 2020 was one of tremendous disruption across the world, predominantly due to the coronavirus pandemic that took hold in winter and continues its grip on society and the economy. The field of child welfare was not spared from the effects of the virus, with most agencies and court systems forced to adapt on the fly to a world where in-person visits, hearings and services became health risks.

At the same time, the nation has moved a year closer to the deadline for all state child welfare systems to meet the new federal standards of the Family First Preven-

tion Services Act, which President Donald Trump signed in 2018. The law seeks to incentivize family preservation, avoid foster care in more child welfare cases, and lower the use of group homes and institutions.

The persisting effects of a pandemic that has disproportionately affected the poorest families, combined with a looming seismic change in federal child welfare financing, carry the potential for a disruptive period in the field.

This year's data offers a fairly pristine picture of the child welfare field before the confluence of these factors occurs. It shows a shrinking foster care footprint – fewer youth in the system, fewer licensed foster homes – and a continued move toward kin and away from congregate care. But as our new family separation metric shows, there is a huge range across states when it comes to keeping children in the homes of family.