



U.S. Department of Health  
and Human Services  
Administration for Children  
and Families  
Office of Family Assistance

[www.fatherhood.gov](http://www.fatherhood.gov)

# Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight

March 2008



## Nonresident Fathers and Children in Foster Care

In 2005, approximately 520,000 children were removed from their homes and placed in foster care. More than half of these children were removed from their homes because of an incidence of abuse or neglect. Approximately 80 percent of these children had noncustodial fathers, and roughly 54 percent had no contact with their father in the past year.

### Definitions

*Foster care* is defined as 24-hour substitute care for children who have been removed from their homes by a child welfare agency. Foster care placements are temporary placements that house children until they can be reunified with their families or be adopted. The majority of children enter foster care because they have been removed from their homes as a result of an incidence of abuse or neglect. Children may also enter foster care because of their delinquent behavior, a disability for which their parents are unable to adequately care for them, or absence of their parents through illness, death, or disability.<sup>i</sup>

Foster care includes a variety of placements:

- *Non-relative foster care* placements are provided in a home setting where licensed foster parents who are unrelated to the children are trained to be temporary caregivers of children as they await a permanent placement.<sup>ii</sup> These foster care placements may also include *therapeutic foster homes*, which are alternatives to institutional placements. Therapeutic foster parents go through special training and have special skills to care for children with significant emotional, behavioral, and/or medical problems.<sup>iii</sup>
- *Relative foster care* placements, often referred to as *kinship care*, are placements where full-time care is provided by relatives or other adults who have a kinship bond with the child.<sup>iv</sup> Most kinship caregivers are relatives, but kinship caregivers can also include close friends or neighbors of the child or the child's family. Each state's policy specifies which adults are eligible to be designated as kinship caregivers.
- *Emergency placements* are immediate, short-term placements where children are assigned to live while the child welfare agency and courts decide where they will be placed.<sup>v</sup>
- *Group homes* are homelike settings in which a number of children live together with rotating staff members who serve as houseparents.<sup>vi</sup> Also included in this category are *therapeutic or treatment group homes* with specialized staff to care for children with emotional and/or behavioral issues.
- *Institution care or residential treatment centers* are 24-hour residential facilities that are licensed by the state to offer intensive treatment services for children with emotional and/or physical conditions that require intensive therapy.<sup>vii</sup>
- *Pre-adoptive placements* are supervised living arrangements with a child's potential adoptive family.<sup>viii</sup>
- *Independent living placements* are for older youth in foster care up to age 21 who are transitioning out of the child welfare system or who have left the child welfare system because they were unable to return home, were not placed with relatives, or were not adopted.<sup>ix</sup> In independent living placements, youth may live on their own with some supervision, and typically

*Take Time to Be a Dad Today*

are provided case management, life-skills training, education and employment assistance, and counseling, among other support services.<sup>x</sup>

*The child welfare system* is a group of services provided by public and private entities that are designed to promote the well-being and safety of children by ensuring that they remain in permanent placements, and ensuring that families are supported to successfully care for their children.<sup>xi</sup>

*Termination of parental rights (TPR)* refers to the legally binding decision made by a judge that ends all parental rights for birth parents.<sup>xii</sup> Birth parents can elect to voluntarily terminate their rights, or can have their rights involuntarily relinquished by not complying within the time limits of their service plans.

*Service plans* are agreements between the child welfare system and families who have a substantiated report of abuse or neglect and are receiving ongoing services from the system. Service plans include requested and/or required services for the child and family, and specify the conditions that must be met that affect where a child will be placed.

### Importance and Implications of Foster Care

Foster care is intended to be a temporary placement to remove children from high-risk situations involving their birth family or current home. When a child is removed from his or her home, often into a new and strange environment, it can be a traumatic event with long-lasting effects. This trauma can be intensified by long-term foster care placements or multiple moves within a certain period. Recent research has shown that state child welfare systems are beginning to focus more on both nonresident and resident father involvement in the child welfare system as a potential resource in finding more suitable placements for children in foster care and to make removal from home a less traumatic experience. For children removed from their homes, having more supports can have an impact on their progress and on the time that they spend in the system.

#### *Implications for Fathers*

- Fathers may become more invested and seek better communication with their children if their opinions and input are sought about their child's welfare and future while the child is in foster care.<sup>xiii</sup>
- Legislation such as the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 has encouraged child welfare case workers to conduct a diligent search for nonresident fathers whose children are in care.<sup>xiv</sup> As a result, more men may be able to provide financial and other support to their children while in foster care. This involvement may also positively impact the amount of support the child receives if the child returns home.
- Fathers with children in foster care may resist involvement with the child welfare system because they view government systems with mistrust as a result of previous negative experiences. Fathers with criminal records are reported to be especially distrustful.<sup>xv</sup>
- Mothers' resentment of nonresident fathers because of a perceived lack of commitment to their children, mothers' lingering resentment from prior abuse, or mothers' fears of fathers' learning about the foster care placement may prevent fathers' involvement and communication with their children in foster care.<sup>xvi</sup>
- Nonresident fathers become more at risk for less involvement with their children when they are unemployed and are less able to provide for their children financially.<sup>xvii</sup>

#### *Implications for Children*

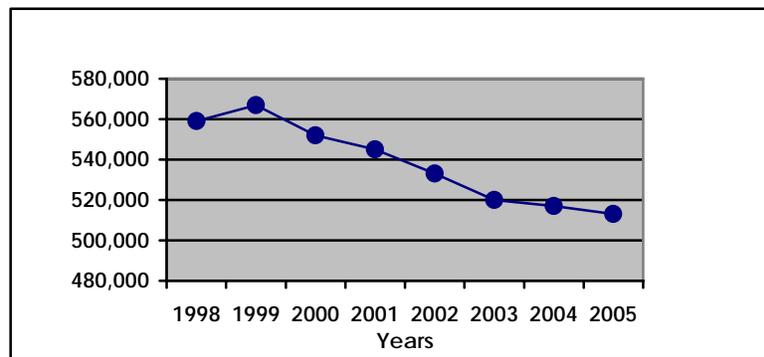
- Nonresident fathers can be a valuable resource to children in foster care by providing pathways to additional options for permanent placements, such as paternal relatives, and the information nonresident fathers provide can shorten their children's time to a permanent placement.<sup>xviii</sup>
- When nonresident fathers are identified and engaged, caseworkers have better access to information about the children (health insurance, child support benefits, etc.), which will help ease children's transition to their placement.<sup>xix</sup>

- Children in foster care tend to have poorer outcomes, such as more physical and mental health issues, delayed cognitive development, poor academic functioning, higher rates of depression, poor social skills, and more externalizing behavioral problems.<sup>xx</sup> However, children who have family stability and caregivers that are a constant in their lives tend to have better outcomes.

### Trends in Foster Care Over Time

Figure 1 shows that, overall, the total population of children in foster care has been declining since 1998. Specifically, the number of children who were placed in foster care decreased 8 percent between 1998 and 2005. Table 1 shows the steady decline of the U.S. foster care population from 559,000 children in 1998 to 513,000 children in 2005.

**Figure 1. U.S. Foster Care Population, 1998-2005**



Source: AFCARS data, 1998-2005 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, 2006)<sup>xxi</sup>

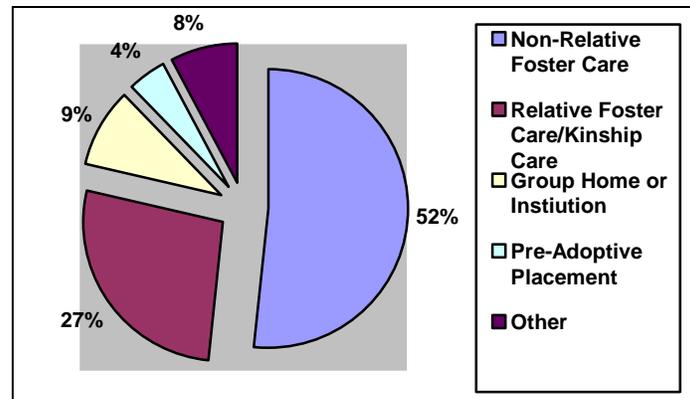
**Table 1: U.S. Foster Care Population, 1998-2005**

Year	Population
1998	513,000
1999	517,000
2000	520,000
2001	533,000
2002	545,000
2003	552,000
2004	567,000
2005	559,000

Source: AFCARS data, 1998-2005 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, 2006)<sup>xxii</sup>

Figure 2 shows the proportions of the foster care population in different types of foster care placements in 2005. Of children in foster care, 52 percent were placed in non-relative care, whereas 27 percent were placed with kin. The remaining 21 percent of foster care placements were group homes or institutions, pre-adoptive placements, or classified as "other," which includes independent living arrangements and trial home visits. The "other" category also includes runaways from the foster care system.

**Figure 2. Foster Care Population by Type of Placement, 2005**



Source: AFCARS data, 2005

(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, 2006).<sup>xxiii</sup>

### Differences in Foster Care by Subgroups

#### *Characteristics of Children in Foster Care by Relationship to Noncustodial Father*

**Table 2** shows that children in foster care are more likely to have noncustodial fathers, to have paternity established or known, to have fathers who are less likely to have contributed child support, and to be less likely to have had contact with their father in the past year.

**Table 2: Characteristics of Children in Foster Care and Their Relationships With Noncustodial Fathers, 1994**

Have noncustodial fathers	80%
Paternity established/known	81%
Noncustodial fathers contributed to child support	16%
Contact with their father in the past year	54%

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1994 National Study of Protective, Preventive, and Reunification Services (Malm, 2003)<sup>xxiv</sup>

#### *Differences by Age of Birth Parents*

**Table 3** shows that in 2005, nonresident fathers of children in foster care were slightly older than were resident mothers of children in foster care.

**Table 3: Mean Age of Birth Parents, 2005**

Parents of Children in Foster	Mean Age
Mothers (N=1,635)	32.4 years
Fathers (N=1,721)	36.3 years

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services-Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, (Malm, Murray & Geen, 2006)

*Differences by Marital Status of Birth Parents*

**Table 4** shows that in 2005, 29.9 percent of nonresident fathers of children in foster care were single and had never been married. More nonresident fathers tended to be separated or divorced from their child's birth parent, compared with resident mothers of children in foster care. Fewer nonresident fathers were married to, divorced, or separated from someone other than their child's birth parent.

**Table 4: Marital Status of Birth Parents of Children in Foster Care, 2005**

Current Marital Status		
Never married	47.4%	29.9%
Married to someone other than birth parent	12.8%	10.9%
Married to, but separated from birth parent	5.8%	11.7%
Divorced from birth parent	9.7%	11.6%
Divorced from someone other than birth parent	7.9%	4.7%
Separated from someone other than birth parent	3.6%	1.3%
Unknown	12.4%	29.9%

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services-Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, (Malm, Murray & Geen, 2006)

*Differences by Living Status of Birth Parent*

**Table 5** shows that in 2005, nonresident fathers of children in foster care were less likely than were resident mothers to live alone, and a slightly higher percentage were living with their child's mother (parents living together were not allowed to be included in the study; however, some couples reconciled during the course of the study and moved in together, thus the category of "living with other birth parent"). More nonresident fathers of children in foster care were living in "other" arrangements, a category that includes incarceration; living with family members, friends or female partners; living in a shelter or other group care environment; or being homeless.

**Table 5\*\*: Living Status of Birth Parents of Children in Foster Care, 2005**

Current Residential Status		
Living alone	13.9%	18.5%
Living with other birth parent <sup>xxv</sup>	4.0%	2.6%
Living with another male/female not parent of the child	22.4%	23.3%
Other	24.1%	21.4%
Unknown	35.6%	34.2%

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services-Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, (Malm, Murray & Geen, 2006). \*\*Table 5 includes residential status of parents after child had been removed and placed in foster care.

*Differences by Status of Parental Rights*

A large number of parents of children in foster care still have their parental rights intact. **Table 6** shows that the majority of nonresident fathers still had parental rights to their children in foster care in 2005. A higher percentage of nonresident fathers had their rights terminated than did resident mothers. Yet fewer nonresident fathers voluntarily relinquished the rights to their children than did resident mothers.

**Table 6: Parental Rights Status of Birth Parents of Children in Foster Care, 2005**

Status of Parental		
Still has parental rights	65.9%	73.5%
Rights were terminated	20.3%	18.4%
Rights were voluntary relinquished	4.8%	5.9%
Don't know	9.0%	2.2%

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services-Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, (Malm, Murray & Geen, 2006)

#### *Differences by Problems Identified*

The problems and issues that birth parents are dealing with—such as drugs, inadequate housing, and unemployment—are often the reason for removal of children from their homes and placing them in foster care. **Table 7** shows that in 2005, a majority of resident mothers and nonresident fathers of children in foster care had difficulties with alcohol and drugs. Though some nonresident fathers may have limited contact with the home of removal, the problems faced by both nonresident fathers and resident mothers are similar. Compared with resident mothers, nonresident fathers suffered many fewer mental or physical health difficulties. Nonresident fathers had more issues with criminal justice involvement.

**Table 7: Problems of Birth Parents of Children in Foster Care, 2005**

Problems Identified		
Alcohol/drugs	58.2%	65.4%
Prior finding of abuse/neglect	29.6%	58.6%
Unemployment	40.7%	58.1%
Inadequate housing/homelessness	41.7%	57.4%
Mental/physical health	22.9%	54.1%
Domestic violence	33.3%	39.7%
Criminal justice involvement	52.5%	37.5%
No child care	21.2%	26.2%

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services-Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, (Malm, Murray & Geen, 2006)

#### **Definition of Measures and Data Sources**

Trends in foster care population and subgroups of the foster care population were obtained from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). AFCARS is a national adoption and foster care reporting system supported by the federal government. The Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services collects AFCARS data from all states and the District of Columbia. All states and the District of Columbia are required to submit case-level information to AFCARS for all children who are in foster care and for all children who have been adopted. For foster care population trends, states were asked to report the number of children in care on the last day of the fiscal year, September 30, 2005.

Data on the relationships between nonresident fathers and their children in foster care compared with the general population were based on analyses from The 1994 National Study of Protective, Preventive, and Reunification Services. This study provided information on the number and types of services provided to children and their families, case duration, in-home and out-of-home services, race, and kinship care.<sup>xxvi</sup> Caseworkers were asked if the paternity of the child was known.

Data on the characteristics of nonresident fathers and resident mothers with children in foster care were reported by Malm, Murray, and Geen (2006) in *What About the Dads? Child Welfare Agencies' Efforts to Identify, Locate, and Involve Nonresident Fathers*. Local agency caseworkers were interviewed to examine how caseworkers conduct their work with nonresident fathers. Telephone interviews were conducted with 1,222 caseworkers in reference to 1,958 eligible cases.<sup>xxvii</sup>

### Data Limitations

Limited data exist on birth families or the homes of removal of children in foster care. Notably, information is even more limited on the fathers of children in the foster care system or in the child welfare system in general. Therefore, the data presented here are taken from one primary source: Malm, Murray, and Geen (2006). The sample size for this study does not constitute a statistically representative sample of foster children in the United States. Data from this study were gathered from four states: Arizona, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Tennessee. The authors specifically note that they targeted certain areas of the country and only targeted children who had entered foster care for the first time, had been in care for a maximum of 36 months, and had biological fathers who were not living in the home.<sup>xxviii</sup> Also, information on the characteristics of nonresident fathers and resident mothers was reported by case workers, which affects the accuracy of the information presented. Since mothers are typically the point of reference in child welfare cases, certain information on fathers may be limited.

Data on the relationships between nonresidential fathers and their children in foster care from the 1994 National Study of Protective, Preventive and Reunification Services did not use a statistically representative sample of the U.S. foster care population. Thus, the generalizability of this data is limited.

### Resources

- **AFCARS Data** is published on the Children's Bureau Web site and gives national and state-by-state data on characteristics of the foster care and adoption population:  
[http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats\\_research/index.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm)
- **Pew Commission on Foster Care. A Child's Journey Through the Child Welfare System.** This guide describes how a child may progress through a typical state child welfare system:  
<http://pewfostercare.org/docs/index.php?DocID=24>
- **The Child Welfare Information Gateway**, formerly the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information and the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse, is a Web site that provides access to information and resources to help protect children and strengthen families. The Web site is a service of the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: <http://www.childwelfare.gov>
- **The Children's Bureau** provides state and national data on adoption and foster care, child abuse and neglect, and child welfare services. The Children's Bureau also funds research in collaboration with other organizations:  
[http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats\\_research/index.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm)

## References

- <sup>i</sup> Badeau, S., & Gesiriech, S. (n.d.) A child's journey through the child welfare system. Retrieved June 22, 2007, from <http://pewfostercare.org/docs/index.php?DocID=24>
- <sup>ii</sup> McCarthy, J., Marshall, Al, Collins, J., Arganza, G., Deserly, K., & Milon, J. (2005). A family's guide to the child welfare system: Second edition. Retrieved June 28, 2007, from <http://www.cwla.org/childwelfare/fg.pdf>
- <sup>iii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>iv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>v</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>vi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>viii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>ix</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>x</sup> Child Welfare League of America (1999, October 19). CWLA testimony submitted to the Senate Finance Subcommittee on Health Care for the Hearing on the Health Care Needs of Children in the Foster Care System. Retrieved July 17, 2007, from <http://www.cwla.org/advocacy/indivtest991013.htm>
- <sup>xi</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth, and Families. Child Welfare Information Gateway (2006). *How does the child welfare system work?* Retrieved June 18, 2007, from <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/cpswork.cfm>.
- <sup>xii</sup> McCarthy, J., Marshall, Al, Collins, J., Arganza, G., Deserly, K., & Milon, J. (2005).
- <sup>xiii</sup> National Child Welfare Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice. (2002). Father involvement in child welfare: Estrangement and reconciliation. *Best Practice Next Practice, Family-Centered Child Welfare*. Retrieved June 18, 2007, from [www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/newsletter/BPNPSummer02.pdf](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/newsletter/BPNPSummer02.pdf)
- <sup>xiv</sup> Malm, K., Murray, J. & Geen, R. (2006). *What about the dads? Child welfare agencies' efforts to identify, locate and involve nonresident fathers*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.
- <sup>xv</sup> Malm, K., Murray, J., & Geen, R. (2006).
- <sup>xvi</sup> Sonenstein, F., Malm, K., & Billing, A. (2002). *Study of fathers' involvement in permanency planning and child welfare casework*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.
- <sup>xvii</sup> National Child Welfare Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice. (2002).
- <sup>xviii</sup> Malm, K., Murray, J., & Geen, R. (2006).
- <sup>xix</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xx</sup> Harden, B. (2004). Safety and stability of foster children: A developmental perspective. *The Future of Children*, 14(1), 3-4.
- <sup>xxi</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, AFCARS Reports #10, 11, 12 and 13. Retrieved May 3, 2007, from [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats\\_research/index.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm)
- <sup>xxii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, AFCARS Report #13. Retrieved May 3, 2007, from [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats\\_research/afcars/tar/report13.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report13.htm)
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Malm, K.E. (2003). Getting noncustodial dads involved in the lives of foster children. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Parents living together were not allowed to be included in the study, but some couples reconciled during the course of the study and moved in together.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect. (2007). National Study of Protective, Preventive, and Reunification Services Delivered to Children and Their Families, 1994. Retrieved July 2, 2007, from [http://www.ndacan.cornell.edu/NDACAN/Datasets/Abstracts/DatasetAbstract\\_71.html](http://www.ndacan.cornell.edu/NDACAN/Datasets/Abstracts/DatasetAbstract_71.html)
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Malm, K., Murray, J., & Geen, R. (2006).
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Malm, K., Murray, J., & Geen, R. (2006).