



September 2013

## Recent Demographic Trends in Foster Care

### Introduction

Over the last decade, the U.S. foster care population has undergone a substantial reduction in size and experienced a shift in its racial and ethnic composition. Using data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), this data brief summarizes those changes and provides new detail that identifies the geographic areas most responsible for these national trends.

### Demographic Trends

#### Total Population in Foster Care

The number of children in foster care on the last day of the federal fiscal year (FY)<sup>i</sup> declined by almost a quarter (23.7%) between 2002 and 2012, from 523,616 to 399,546 (see Table 1). While numbers declined among all major non-Hispanic

race groups, reductions among African American children were the most dramatic, declining by 47.1 percent between 2002 and 2012 and accounting for nearly three-quarters (74%) of the overall decline.<sup>ii</sup> Hispanic numbers also decreased modestly (2.5%) despite their continued rapid growth in the general population. In contrast to the general trend, one group, children identified with two or more races, did experience substantial growth over this period, increasing from 13,857 to 22,942.

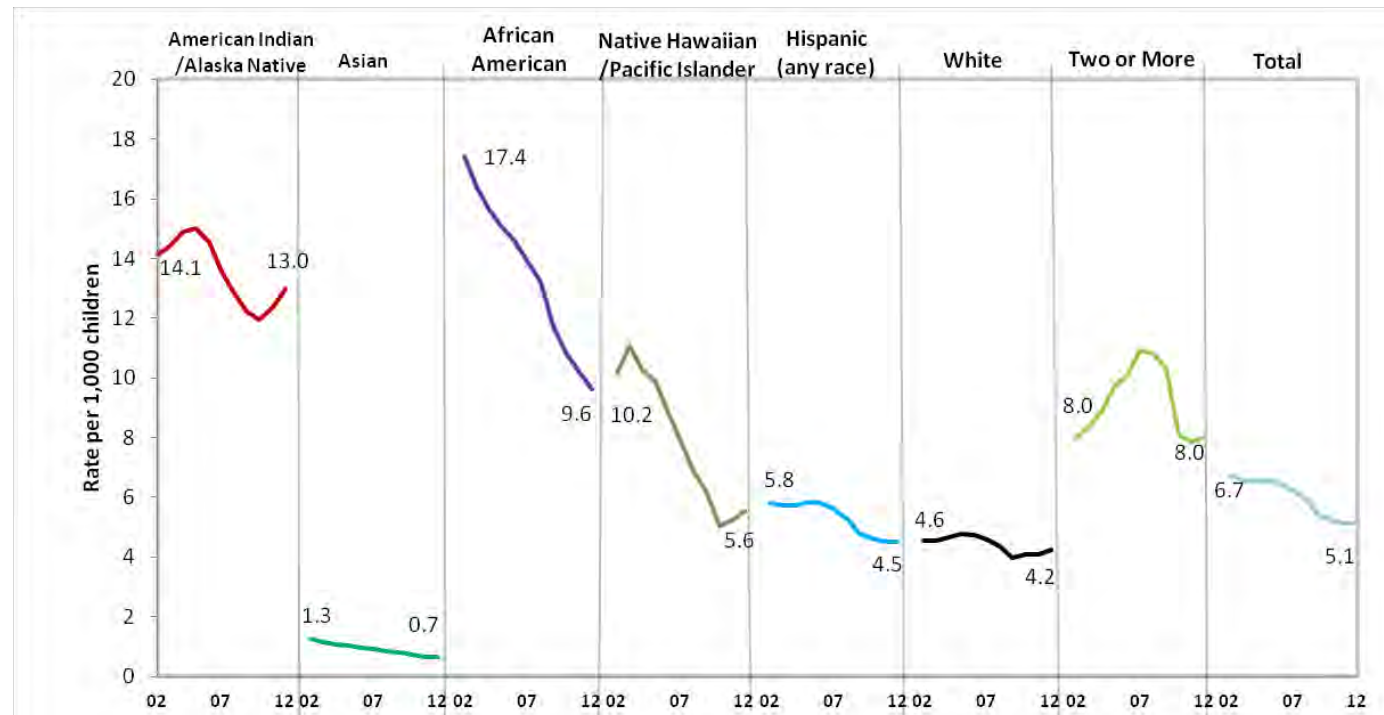
**Table 1: Number of Children In Foster Care on September 30 by Race/Ethnicity\***

Race/Ethnicity	FY 2002	FY 2012	Percent Change
Black or African American	192,859	101,938	-47.1%
White	202,018	166,195	-17.7%
Hispanic (of any race)	86,698	84,523	-2.5%
American Indian/Alaska Native	9,735	8,344	-14.3%
Asian	3,443	2,296	-33.3%
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	1,194	789	-33.9%
Two or More	13,857	22,942	65.6%
Missing or Unable to Determine	13,812	12,519	-9.4%
Total	523,616	399,546	-23.7%

**Rates per 1,000 Children**

Figure 1 shows national trends for children in care for the major race/ethnicity groups as rates per 1,000 in the general population under age 18.<sup>iii</sup> The use of rates controls for population size differences among the groups being compared.

**Figure 1: Rates of Children Under Age 18 in Foster Care per 1,000 in the General Child Population, by Race and Hispanic Origin, 2002-2012\***



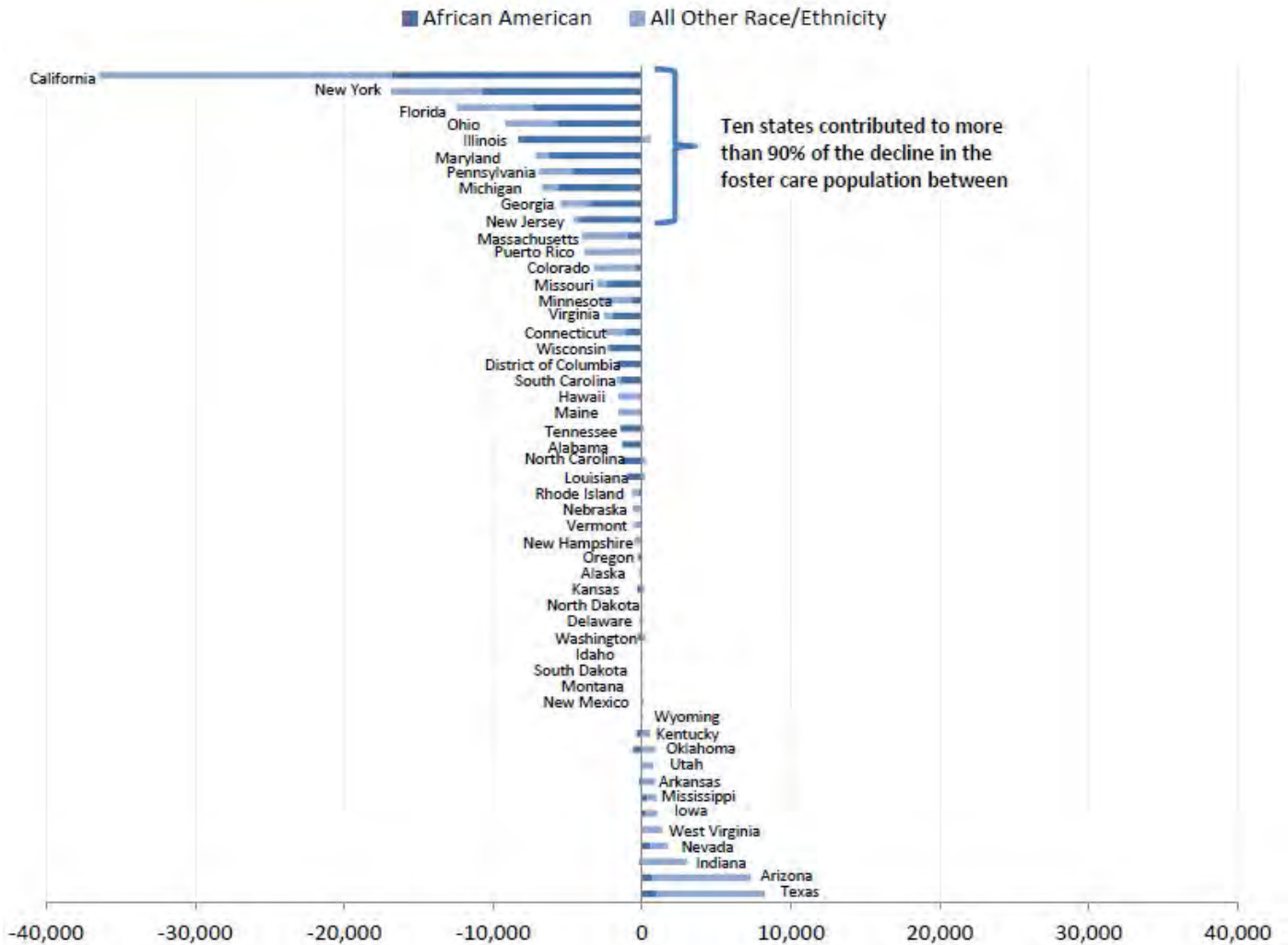
\*All races exclude children of Hispanic origin. Puerto Rico data was excluded due to unavailable Census population estimates.

In 2002, African American and Native American children had the highest rates of representation at 17.4 and 14.1 per 1,000, compared to 5.8 per 1,000 among Hispanic children and 4.6 per 1,000 among White children. Rates for Asian children were the lowest at 1.3 per 1,000. Between 2002 and 2012, rates declined steadily for African American children, from 17.4 to 9.6 per 1,000. Rates fell modestly for White, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American children between 2002 and 2012, though in the last several years trends have largely leveled off for these groups and appear to be climbing modestly for Whites and Native Americans. Since 2009, Native American children have had the highest rates of representation in foster care.

**State and County Patterns**

Patterns are more diverse at the state and local levels, with a relatively small number of geographic areas appearing to drive national trends. While the majority of states did show some level of decline in the size of their foster care population between 2002 and 2012, ten states accounted for over 90 percent of the total decline, and three states (California, New York, and Florida), accounted for over 50 percent (see Figure 2). About a quarter of states showed some increase during this period, with relatively large increases in Texas (8,294) and Arizona (7,296).

**Figure 2: Change in Size of Foster Care Population by State, 2002 to 2012: African American Children\* and All Other Race/Ethnicity**



\*Excludes children of Hispanic origin.

Drilling down to the county level, a very small number of counties accounted for a large proportion of the national decline. With over 3,000 counties or county equivalents in the U.S., just 10 counties accounted for one half of the national decline, both overall and among African American children (see Table 2).

**Entries and Average Length of Stay**

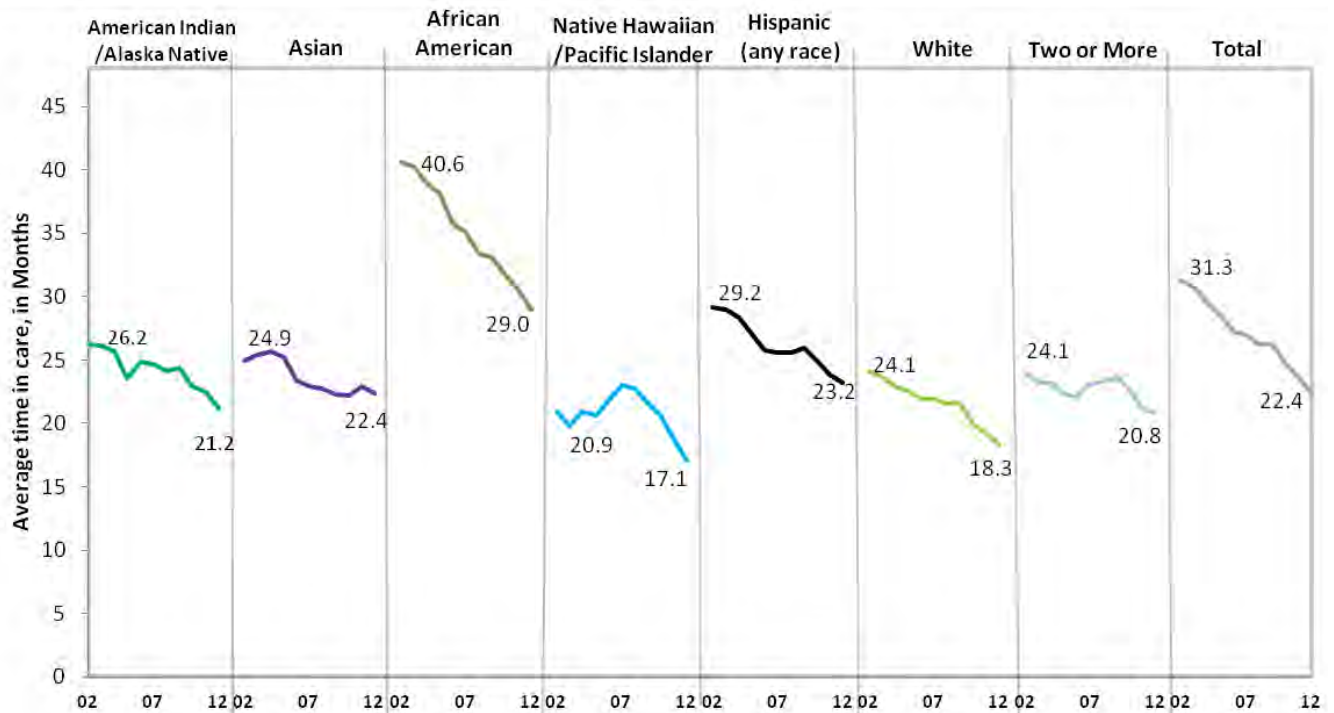
The number of children in the foster care system at any one time is largely determined by the number of children entering the system and the amount of time each child spends in foster care once he or she is there. Average length of stay has declined by more than one quarter overall between 2002 and 2012, from 31.3 months to 22.4 months (see Figure 3). Declines in average length of stay were evident among all race/ethnicity groups over this period. The number of children entering the foster care system between 2002 and 2012

**Table 2: Top Ten Counties Contributing to the Decrease of Children in Foster Care, 2002-2012**

County	Total Population Change	African American Population Change*	Hispanic Population Change	White Population Change*
Los Angeles County (CA)	-16,734	-9,582	-4,075	-2,523
New York County (NY)	-12,520	-8,951	-3,328	-465
Cook County (IL)	-9,637	-8,577	-507	-441
Baltimore City (MD)	-5,660	-5,355	16	-335
Wayne County (MI)	-4,173	-3,900	-27	-331
Cuyahoga County (OH)	-4,048	-2,950	-172	-815
Milwaukee County (WI)	-2,983	-2,387	-274	-248
Philadelphia County (PA)	-2,844	-2,548	-136	-233
Sacramento County (CA)	-2,656	-879	-469	-1,217
Miami-Dade County (FL)	-2,417	-1,716	-329	-353

\*Excludes children of Hispanic origin.

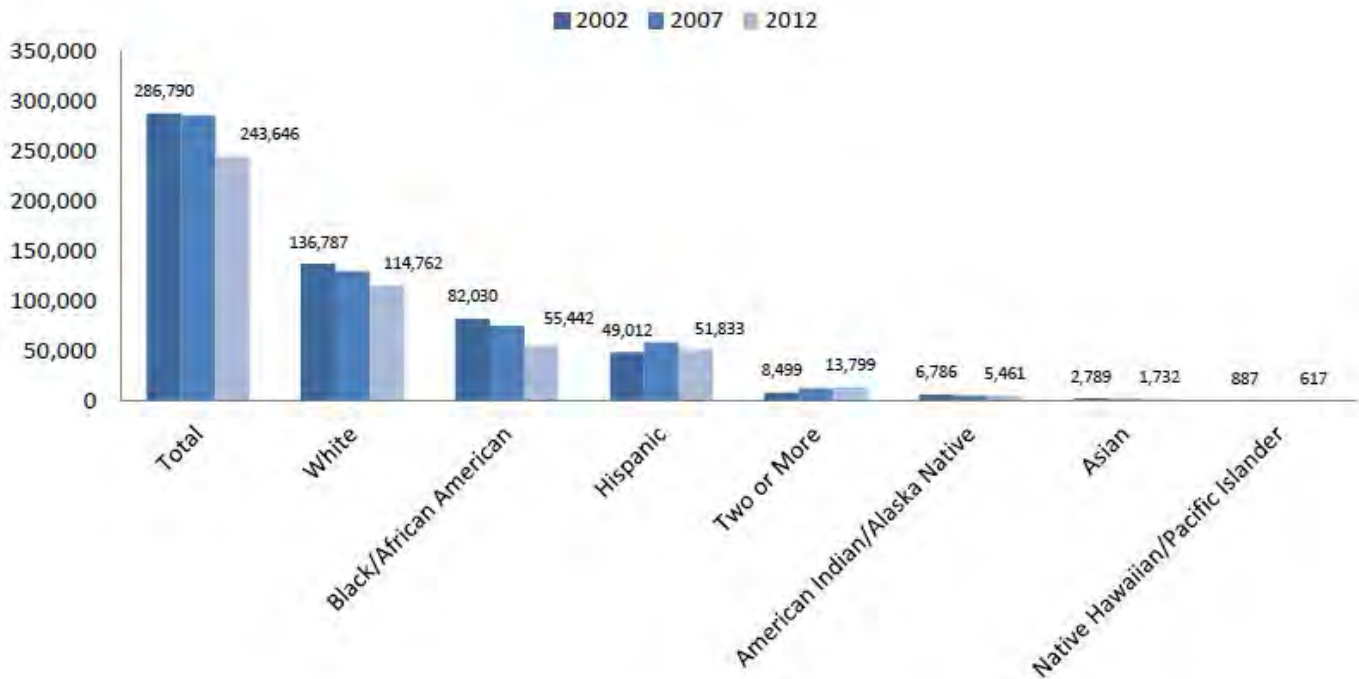
**Figure 3: Average Length of Stay for Children in Foster Care by Race/Ethnicity, 2002-2012\***



\*All races exclude children of Hispanic origin.

also showed an overall decline. In addition, the number of children entering care declined for all major non-Hispanic race groups (White, African American, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander) (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Number of Children Entering Foster Care by Race/Ethnicity, 2002-2012\***



\* All races exclude children of Hispanic origin.

## Discussion

For well over a decade, federal policies have emphasized increasing permanency for children in the child welfare system through strategies that include family preservation and more timely permanency. Examples include the Adoption and Safe Families Act and the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. Some states have also been given increased flexibility to pursue these goals through title IV-E waiver demonstration projects. Further, through the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) process, state performance of child welfare systems is monitored on a variety of indicators, including the timeliness and permanency of reunification and the timeliness of adoption.

The pursuit of these strategies has coincided with substantial reductions in the number and rates of children in the foster care system since 2002.<sup>iv</sup> The downward trends between 2002 and 2012 were shared by most race/ethnicity groups, with African American children experiencing the largest reductions. Those trends have produced significant changes in the composition of the foster care population. African American children, who once made up over a third (37%) of all children in foster care, are now just over one quarter (26%). Hispanic children’s proportion of the foster care

population has increased from 17 percent to 21 percent. Children classified as belonging to two or more races have doubled during this period to reach 6 percent.

Native American children, like other groups, have experienced some reductions in average length of stay, but their overall rates in foster care dropped little between 2002 and 2012, from 14.1 to 13.0 per 1,000. Since 2009 they have had the highest rates of any racial/ethnic group owing to continuing declines among African Americans. It should be noted, however, that while rates have dropped for African American children, they remain at nearly twice the national average.

Finally, the data presented on state and county trends highlight the benefits of looking at local patterns to better understand national trends. The finding that half of the reduction in the national foster care population has taken place in just ten counties indicates that it may be worth taking a closer look at their policies and programs over the last decade to see if there are lessons that may be useful to other localities.

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<sup>i</sup> All data used in this data brief are based on the federal fiscal year, October 1 through September 30.

<sup>ii</sup> Up to 8 percent of this reduction might be accounted for by the increase in the number of children identified as belonging to two or more race groups. Over 70 percent of children of two or more races in 2012 include African American as one of their race groups.

<sup>iii</sup> Rates were based only on children under the age of 18. All other data included in this Data Brief include children over the age of 18.

<sup>iv</sup> Annual trend data not shown in this data brief indicate that the absolute number of children in foster care may be leveling off in the 2011-2012 period. See Trends in Foster Care and Adoption on the Children's Bureau website:

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/trends-in-foster-care-and-adoption>.