

Overview of the Child Welfare System and Foster Care in Wisconsin

by the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families

The goal of Wisconsin's child welfare system is to safely maintain children in their own home, family, and community with connections, culture, and relationships preserved and established. In 2013, 27,037 reports were "screened-in" by county and Milwaukee child welfare agencies with 5,466 substantiated allegations of child abuse and/or neglect. As of December 31, 2013, there were 6,516 Wisconsin children in out-of-home care with about one third (34%) living with relatives. In total, over 8 in 10 (84%) children in out-of-home care are living with a relative or foster family and 1 in 10 (10%) live in a group home or residential care center. Of children in out-of-home care, about one third (34%) are aged 4 and under, and about one third (31%) are 11 to 16. The average number of out-of-home placements for all children in Wisconsin's child welfare system is 2.5, with an average of 4.8 placements for youth aged 17 to 19. The majority (60%) of youth reunify with their families.

Introduction

Wisconsin's child welfare system strives to achieve the following outcomes for all children, youth, and families involved in the system:

- Children are cared for in safe, permanent, and nurturing families who have the necessary skills and resources to provide for their physical and mental health as well as their behavioral and educational needs.
- Through effective intervention, parents, caregivers, and families improve their ability to develop and maintain a safe, stable environment for their children.
- Children are safely maintained in their own home, families, and communities with connections, culture, and relationships preserved and established. When it is necessary to place children in out of home care, it is a safe, short, and stable experience.

The child welfare system in Wisconsin is state-supervised and county-administered in all counties other than Milwaukee and state-administered in Milwaukee through the Department of Children and Families, Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare (BMCW). The county child welfare agencies and the BMCW follow numerous state and federal requirements and practice standards in carrying out their functions. In addition, many of the actions taken in the child welfare system require the review and approval of the court system.

The child welfare system in Wisconsin seeks to apply trauma-informed principles in its work. Scientific research has shown that abuse, neglect, or other traumatic experiences in childhood have a "toxic effect" that can inhibit the healthy development of a child's brain. As a result, a child's cognitive development, social skills, behavior, and physical health can be significantly impaired in both the short- and long-run. Child welfare policies and practices are designed to help children heal from the trauma they have experienced and avoid exposing children to additional trauma.

The goal of Wisconsin's child welfare system is to safely maintain children in their own home, family, and community with connections, culture, and relationships preserved and established.

Entry into the Child Welfare System/Foster Care

Children come to the attention of the county and Milwaukee (BMCW) child welfare agencies through calls from members of the community expressing concerns and providing information about possible maltreatment of a child in the community. Adults in certain professions, such as teachers and physicians, are mandated by law to report cases of suspected child abuse and neglect. All individuals, regardless of whether they are mandated reporters, are encouraged to report concerns about a child's safety to their local child welfare agency.

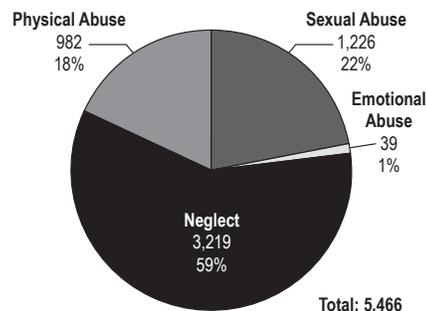
Based on the information received, the child welfare agency determines if the situation constitutes an allegation of child maltreatment as defined by Wisconsin statutes; and if so, it "screens-in" the report for further investigation. To carry out the investigation, the child welfare agency interviews the child, family, and other individuals closely involved with the family and reviews relevant written material. In the investigation and all other steps of the child welfare process, the child welfare agency follows the requirements of the federal and state Indian child welfare laws, which include notifying and involving the Tribe(s) if the child is a member or possible member of a Tribe.

The primary purpose of the child welfare agency investigation is to determine if the child is safe. In addition, except for cases handled through the Alternative Response approach, the investigation determines if maltreatment has occurred (i.e., whether the maltreatment is "substantiated"); if the maltreatment was determined to have occurred, a determination is made regarding whether a specific individual or individuals is "substantiated" to have committed the maltreatment. Alternative Response, which operates in a selected number of pilot counties in Wisconsin, is utilized in relatively less severe child welfare cases where it is likely the agency will be able to collaborate with the family to reduce the risk of recurrence through early service provision. As such, the determination in an Alternative Response case reflects a finding of "Services Needed" or "Services Not Needed" rather than a substantiation finding.

Of Wisconsin's 5,466 substantiated allegations, 59% involved neglect, 22% sexual abuse, and 18% physical abuse.

In Wisconsin in calendar year (CY) 2013, there were 27,037 screened in CPS Reports, and 5,466 substantiated allegations of child abuse and/or neglect affecting 4,886 children. The majority of substantiated allegations (59%) involved neglect. Neglect, as defined in Wisconsin statutes, is failure, refusal, or inability on the part of a caregiver, for reasons other than poverty, to provide necessary care, food, clothing, medical or dental care, or shelter so as to seriously endanger the physical health of the child.

Figure 1. Substantiated Allegations of Child Abuse and Neglect: Calendar Year 2013



When the child welfare agency determines through its investigation that a child is not safe, regardless of whether maltreatment is substantiated, the child welfare agency develops a safety plan. Because removal of a child from his/her family to out-of-home care is traumatic for a child, the agency considers whether and how supports and services can be put in place to maintain a child safely in his or her own home whenever possible. An in-home safety plan may be voluntary or court-ordered.

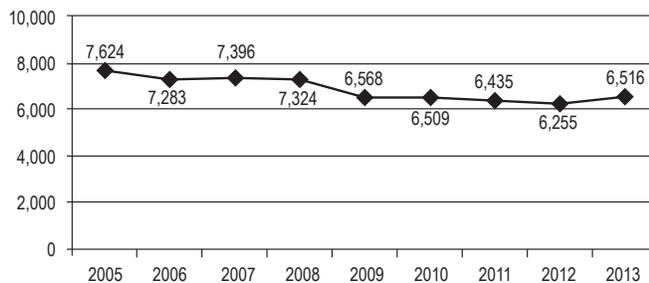
Out-of-Home Care/Foster Care

When a child cannot remain safely at home with his/her family, the child welfare agency arranges for a temporary out-of-home placement for the child. The court must review and approve an out-of-home placement, unless the family voluntarily agrees, through a Voluntary Placement Agreement, to the out-of-home care arrangement. Out-of-home care placements include: relatives through the kinship care program; foster families, which can be relatives or non-relatives; and congregate care settings, which include group homes and residential care centers.

As shown in Figure 2 below, the number of children in out-of-home care in Wisconsin as of December 31, 2013 was 6,516.

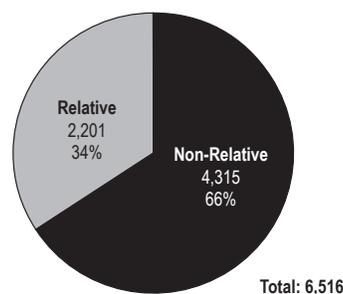
The number of children in out-of-home care in Wisconsin as of December 31, 2013 was 6,516.

Figure 2. Total Number of Children in Out-of-Home Care on Dec. 31 From 2005-2013



If an out-of-home care placement is necessary, the child welfare agency seeks to place a child with a relative, whenever possible, to enable the child to be in a familiar setting, which helps reduce the trauma of the removal and preserves the child's connections to his/her birth family. In Milwaukee and many other counties, a thorough "family finding" search is undertaken in each child welfare case to find relatives who can serve as placement or support resources for the child. As a result of these efforts, a significant proportion (34%) of Wisconsin children in out-of-home care are living with relatives.

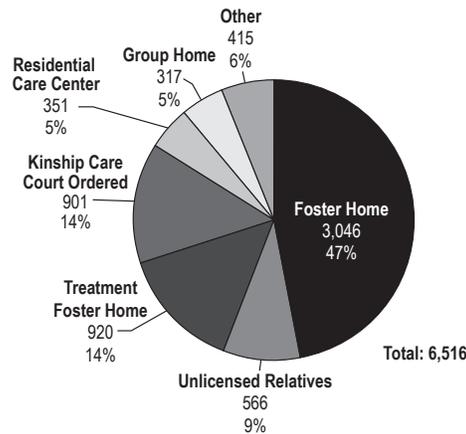
Figure 3. Children in Out-of-Home Placements with Relatives: Dec. 31, 2013



In Wisconsin, 84% of children in out-of-home care are in a family setting with a relative or foster family, and only 10% are in group homes or residential care centers.

In identifying an appropriate out-of-home setting, the child welfare agency also seeks to place a child in the least restrictive and most natural setting possible, which is a family setting. Consistent with this principle, 84% of children in out-of-home care in Wisconsin are in a family setting with a relative or foster family, and only 10% are in congregate residential facilities, which can be a group home or a residential care center (RCC). Out-of-home care settings are shown in Figure 4 below with the “Other” category composed of secure facility, trial reunification, supervised independent living, shelter, and missing from care.

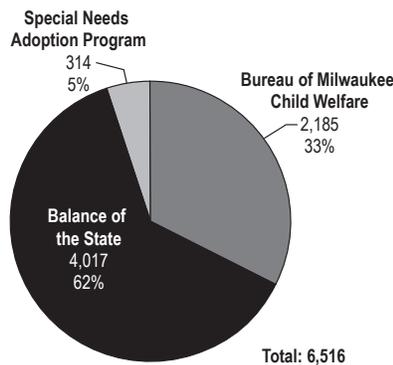
Figure 4. Children in Out-of-Home Care by Setting: Dec. 31, 2013



Other characteristics, including geographic distribution, age, and race and ethnicity of children in out-of-home care are provided in Figures 5, 6, and 7.

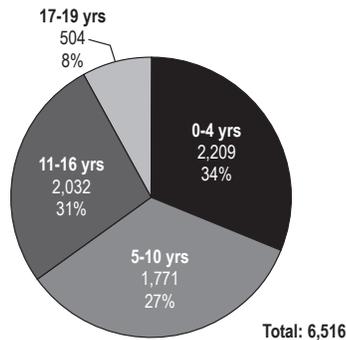
As shown below, of the total number of children in out-of-home care, approximately one-third of the children are placed in Milwaukee.

Figure 5. Children in Out-of-Home Care by Geographic Area: Dec. 31, 2013



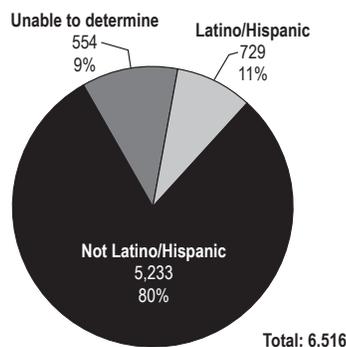
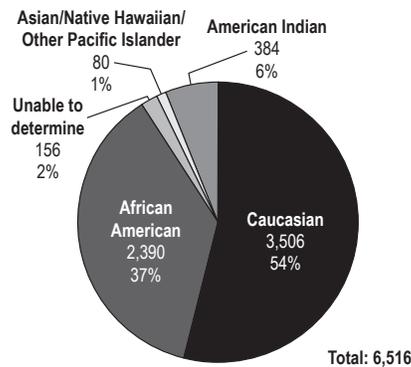
As shown in Figure 6, the two largest age groups in out-of-home care are children aged 4 and under, which account for 34% of all children in out-of-home care, and children aged 11-16, which account for 31% of all children in out-of-home care.

Figure 6. Children in Out-of-Home Care by Age: Dec. 31, 2013



The race of children in out-of-home care is shown below with 54% Caucasian, 37% African-American, and 6% American Indian. With respect to ethnicity, Latino children represent 11% of the children in out-of-home care.

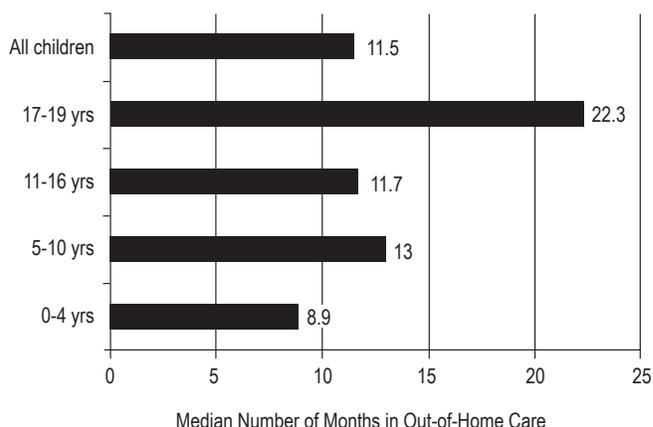
Figure 7. Children in Out-of-Home Care by Race and Ethnicity: Dec. 31, 2013



As shown in Figure 8, the median length of time for all children in out-of-home care is 11.5 months. The briefest median episode, 8.9 months, is experienced by children 0-4 years and the longest median episode, 22.3 months, is experienced by the oldest youth aged 17-19 years.

The briefest median episode in care (8.9 months) is experienced by the youngest children and the longest median episode (22.3 months) by the oldest youth.

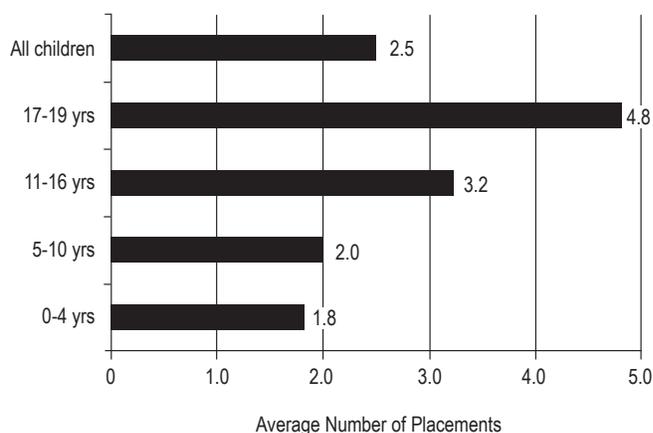
Figure 8. Median Length of Stay in Out-of-Home Care: Dec. 31, 2013



The average number of out-of-home placements for children in Wisconsin's child welfare system is 2.5.

Because changing home settings is disruptive and traumatic for a child, child welfare agencies seek to minimize the number of changes in living settings a child experiences while in out-of-home care. The average number of out-of-home placements for all children in Wisconsin's child welfare system is 2.5. However, older youth, ages 17-19, experience a significantly higher number of changes resulting in an average of 4.8 placements while in out-of-home care.

Figure 9. Average Number of Placements by Age Group in Out-of-Home Care: Dec. 31, 2013

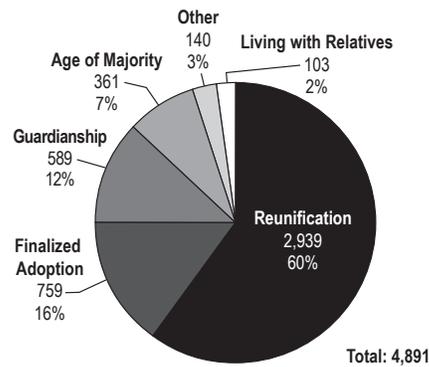


Exiting from Foster Care/Out-of-Home Care

When it is necessary to place children in out-of-home care, it should be a safe, short, and stable experience. When a child is in out-of-home care, the child welfare agency develops a permanency plan for the child, which includes a goal of transitioning the child to a safe, permanent, and nurturing setting as expeditiously and successfully as possible with his/her birth family, a relative, or adoptive family services. The permanency plan includes the provision of services to the child and birth parents to help achieve the permanency goal and support the well-being of the child and birth family. The court reviews and approves the permanency plan.

The child welfare agency seeks to reunify the child with his/her birth parents, whenever possible. The majority of Wisconsin children in out-of-home care (60%) reunify with their families. When reunification is not possible, the child welfare agency identifies guardianship with a relative or adoption as the permanency outcome for the child. As shown in Figure 10, any permanency outcome must be reviewed and approved by the court, including reunification (60%), adoption (16%), and guardianship (12%). (The “Other” category in the figure below includes transfer to another agency, independent living, missing from care, and death of a child.)

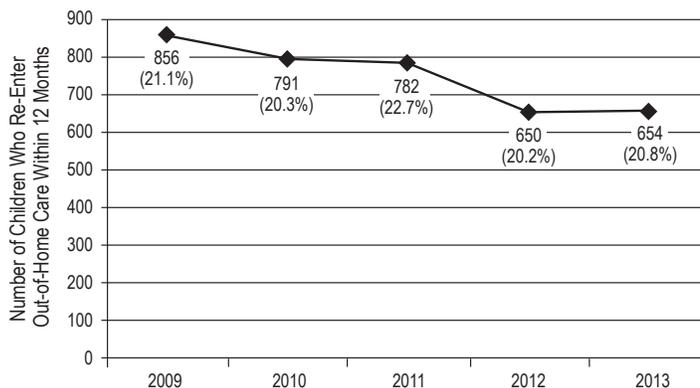
Figure 10. Outcomes for Children in Out-of-Home Care: Calendar Year 2013



Of Wisconsin children in out-of-home care, 60% reunify with their family.

Some families are not able to maintain their children safely at home after reunification and their children re-enter the out-of-home care system due to the recurrence or risk of recurrence of maltreatment. In Wisconsin, approximately 20% of children re-enter out-of-home care within 12 months of reunification, thereby experiencing additional trauma due to maltreatment and separation.

Figure 11. Number and Percent of Children Who Re-Enter Out-of-Home Care Within 12 Months of Reunification From 2009-2013



To reduce the out-of-home care re-entry rate and improve outcomes for children and families, the Department of Children and Families initiated a Post-Reunification support program in 2014. The program, which was approved by the federal

government as a Title IV-E waiver, provides at-risk families 12 months of services and supports after reunification. The Post-Reunification Program is designed to meet the family’s unique needs and support the safety, stability, and well-being of the child and family.

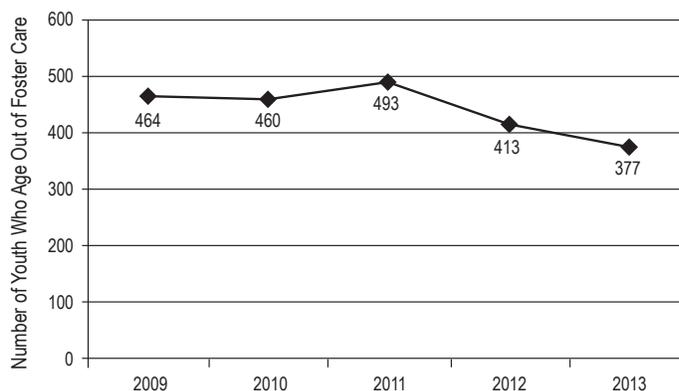
In Wisconsin, foster care eligibility ends at age 18 or 19, depending on whether the youth is expected to graduate high school prior to age 19, unless the youth has an Individualized Education Program (IEP). An Individualized Education Program is defined in Wisconsin State Statute 115.787 and includes the child’s present level of academic achievement and functional performance, including how the child’s disability affects the child’s involvement and progress in the general curriculum and a statement of measurable annual goals for the child designed to enable the child to make progress. Youth with an IEP who are over the age of 19 and are attending high school full-time have the option to remain in out-of-home care to age 21.

Youth who age out of the foster care system experience higher rates of unemployment and homelessness, lower rates of graduation and post-secondary education, and a higher probability of incarceration.

Some foster youth end or “age out” of foster care without achieving a permanent setting with their birth family, a relative, or an adoptive family. Youth who age out of the foster care system face a number of challenges compared to their peers, including higher rates of unemployment and homelessness, lower rates of high school graduation and post-secondary education, and a higher probability of incarceration.

The number of youth in Wisconsin who aged out of out-of-home care without achieving permanency has steadily declined since 2011.

Figure 12. Number of Youth Aging Out of Foster Care From 2009-2013



In 2012, the Department of Children and Families established a new Office of Youth Services within the Department to establish more comprehensive and well-coordinated services and supports to vulnerable youth. With the assistance of a federal grant, the new Office is developing an initiative, called PATHS to success, to promote positive social, emotional, employment, and educational outcomes for youth during their time in the child welfare system, and to prepare them with the education, training, and life skills for living productively and successfully as adults.