The Evidence for Extended Foster Care

And a New Standard of Care for Older Youth

Every young person who experiences foster care deserves the relationships, resources and opportunities they need to thrive. **Extended foster care** — serving young people beyond age 18 — is one way that states improve outcomes for older youth. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 enabled states to extend foster care to age 21, with federal reimbursement. Some support young people even longer to ensure they gain stability and advance academically. Currently, extended foster care eligibility and how states fund the programming with their own and/or federal resources, vary considerably. Reform is needed to ensure all youth experience the positive benefits associated with extended foster care.

WHAT OUTCOMES ARE ASSOCIATED WITH EXTENDED FOSTER CARE?

Youth who remain in care past age 18 show higher educational attainment and lower risks of homelessness, incarceration and early parenthood than those who do not receive continued services. Newly released federal data shed light on how the young people who remain in foster care beyond age 18 are faring. Those who participate in extended foster care experience better young adult outcomes than those who exit foster care at age 18 (either to permanency or emancipation).

POSITIVE OUTCOMES ASSOCIATED WITH EXTENDED FOSTER CARE

19-year-olds in extended foster care were...	19-year-olds in extended foster care were...
69% more likely to have a high school diploma or GED	*76% more likely to have a high school diploma or GED*
63% more likely to be enrolled in secondary or postsecondary school	*90% more likely to be enrolled in secondary or postsecondary school*
61% more likely to have received educational financial aid	*84% more likely to have received educational financial aid*
42% less likely to be disconnected from school and work	*64% less likely to be disconnected from school and work*
41% less likely to have experienced homelessness in the past two years	*65% less likely to have experienced homelessness in the past two years*
32% less likely to be young parents	*65% less likely to be young parents*
31% less likely to have been incarcerated in the past two years	*64% less likely to have been incarcerated in the past two years*
than 19-year-olds who were not in extended foster care.	**than 19-year-olds who exited to permanency at age 17 or 18.**

SOURCE: Child Trends analysis of data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), Foster Care File 2021–2023, and National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), Cohort 4 (Age 19 in FY 2022), Outcomes File, U.S. Administration for Children and Families.

NOTE: NYTD provides data on a cohort of young people who participated in the survey at ages 17, 19, and 21. This analysis compares young people who were in extended foster care at age 19 but did not remain in care at age 21 compared to young people who were not in extended foster care at age 19. The regression analysis comparing young people who exited to permanency at ages 17 or 18 (N=1,395) to young people who were in extended foster care at age 19 (N=3,393) uses data from AFCARS and NYTD. AFCARS data provides information on exit reasons and is merged with NYTD Outcomes data, which provides information on young adult outcomes.

Even young people who spend a short time in extended foster care show stronger outcomes compared to those who spend no time in care after age 18. The data above are based on youth who were in foster care at age 19 and demonstrate the benefits of extended foster care after one year.[1] The table also includes data on young people in extended foster care at age 19 (whether or not they stayed to age 21) and compares them to young people who exited foster care to permanency (reunification, living with relatives, guardianship or adoption) at ages 17 or 18.[2]

Extended foster care is consistently associated with better young adult outcomes.[3] For each year a young person participates in extended foster care, their likelihood of positive outcomes increases — including an 8% higher probability of completing high school or earning a GED and a 19% lower probability of experiencing homelessness or couch surfing.

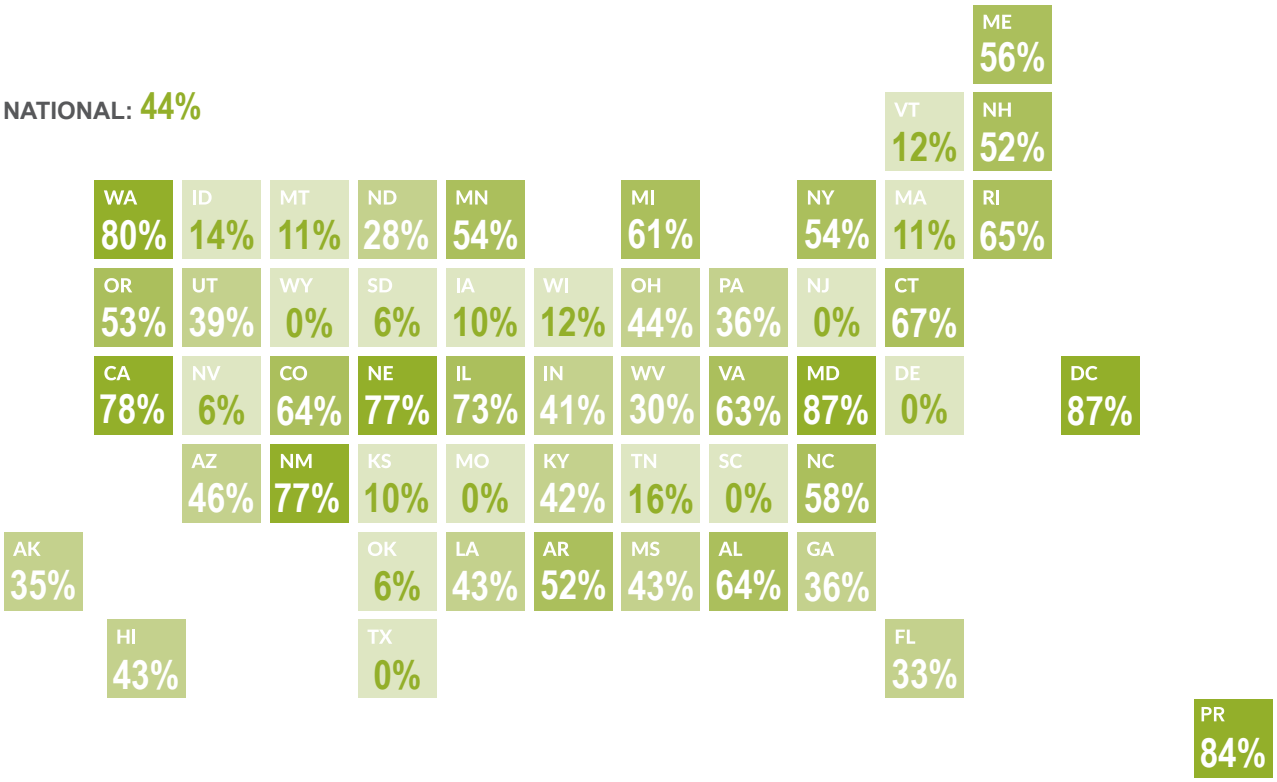
IS YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN EXTENDED FOSTER CARE GROWING?

Since 2008, participation in extended foster care has grown but remained uneven across states. As of 2023, 44% of youth who were in care on their 18th birthday remained in care at age 19.[4] Research suggests that low participation may stem from inconsistent information shared with youth about extended foster care, confusing eligibility rules and structural barriers, such as system policies requiring youth to "opt in" or apply to extend care rather than offering them automatic enrollment with an option to "opt out." [5]

STATE BY STATE, WHAT ARE THE PARTICIPATION RATES FOR EXTENDED FOSTER CARE?

While national utilization of extended foster care has increased, participation rates vary widely across states.[6] New national data offer a more complete assessment of extended foster care utilization than in the past, as states now must report on all participating young people, not just those who are eligible for Title IV-E funding.[7]

PERCENTAGE OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN FOSTER CARE ON THEIR 18TH BIRTHDAY IN 2022 WHO REMAINED IN CARE ON THEIR 19TH BIRTHDAY IN 2023



NOTE: States marked 0% did not report data on young people who were in foster care on their 18th birthday in 2022 remaining in care on their 19th birthday in 2023.

SOURCE: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Foster Care File, 2022-2023, U.S. Administration for Children and Families. Data analyzed by Child Trends.

A BETTER, SUPPORTED PATH FOR OLDER YOUTH WHO EXPERIENCE FOSTER CARE

Notably, 19-year-olds in extended foster care report better young adult outcomes than their same-age peers who exited to legal permanency at ages 17 or 18, according to analysis of the most recent Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System and National Youth in Transition Database Outcomes File data.

This data analysis points to a clear opportunity: The availability and types of support that boost outcomes for youth in extended foster care and put them on a path to independence could also improve outcomes for eligible young people who are on permanency pathways.

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Chafee) envisions a broad continuum of transitional resources and services that are individually tailored, developmentally appropriate and community-driven — and that are available to all older youth who experience foster care.

Similarly, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 enabled states to extend foster care to age 21 with federal reimbursement, aligning the intent of extended care with the aims of Chafee programming. While every state now provides some form of extended foster care, these services are not consistently or fully integrated with those of the Chafee program.

Every young person deserves family. Yet too often, older youth in foster care face a false dichotomy: pursue legal permanency and lose eligibility for the resources that help young people transition to adulthood or remain in foster care past age 18 to access Chafee services and support.

Young people in Kansas understood this when, in 2024, they championed an innovative permanency model called the SOUL Family framework, which ensures they don't have to choose between belonging and support. In the Kansas model, young people have a voice in establishing a legal caregiving relationship with one or more adult primary caregivers, and they have access to Medicaid, aid for postsecondary education and training and Chafee transition services.

The new national outcomes data on 19-year-olds who have experienced foster care suggest that many who reunite with family or enter kinship, guardianship or adoptive relationships need support beyond what their families can provide. Child welfare systems have a responsibility to ensure that permanency is not only achieved but sustained through access to care within families and communities.

What's needed is a new standard of transitional care that provides comprehensive, concrete and relational support to every young person who has experienced foster care. Services such as mentoring, financial literacy, workforce development and educational guidance should not depend on a young person's placement status or legal designation. This support should be universally accessible, reflecting the vision of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood.

1 Child Trends analysis of data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), Foster Care File 2021–2023, and National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), Cohort 4 (Age 19 in FY 2022), Outcomes File, U.S. Administration for Children and Families.

2 Child Trends analysis of data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), Foster Care File 2021–2023, and National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), Cohort 4 (Age 19 in FY 2022), Outcomes File, U.S. Administration for Children and Families.

3 Courtney, M., Okpych, N. J., & Park, S.. (2018). *Improved outcomes at age 21 for youth in extended foster care.* Chapin Hall. https://www.chapinhall.org/research/improved-outcomes-at-age-21-for-youth-in-extended-foster-care/

4 2023 is the most recent data available. Child Trends analysis of data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), Foster Care File 2022–2023, U.S. Administration for Children and Families.

5 Flannigan, A., Rosenberg, R., Ball, J., Ibarra, A., Downing, K., & Sanders, M. (2025). *Three strategies to enhance extended foster care in Minnesota.* Child Trends. https://www.childtrends.org/publications/three-strategies-enhance-extended-foster-care-minnesota

6 Child Trends analysis of data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), Foster Care File 2022–2023, U.S. Administration for Children and Families.

7 In 2023, the AFCARS technical bulletin was updated to clarify that states should report data on all young people in extended foster care, regardless of whether the state has an approved Title IV-E extended foster care plan. The change in reporting requirements increased the quality of extended foster care data in AFCARS, providing a more accurate estimate of utilization than in previous years.

Learn more about young people who age out of foster care: https://www.aecf.org/blog/what-happens-to-youth-aging-out-of-foster-care