

**The Center for**  
State Child Welfare Data

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**Foster Care Utilization**  
**among School-age Children**

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# Foster Care Utilization among School-age Children

## Overview

This report provides a multistate analysis of two different populations of children in foster care: school-age children who were in foster care on the first day of the 2010-2011 school year and school-age children who entered foster care over the course of that school year. Knowledge about the circumstances of these two groups offers insight into the proportion of foster children with whom the education system can expect to come into contact in a given year and the points at which child welfare and education staff can expect this interaction to occur.

The cross-cutting message across all of the analyses in this report is one that emerges in all analysis of foster care outcomes, namely that variation exists within the foster care population. The graphs that follow show that states vary with regard to the proportion of children in foster care who are of school age, and that within the population of school-age children, the proportion of elementary (age 5-10), middle school (age 11-13), and high school (age 14+) age children also varies by state. The results also show between-state variation in the length of stay of school-age children in foster care and the destinations to which they exit upon leaving care.

The results of these basic analyses have implications for practice and resource allocation in both the child welfare and education sectors. They spawn policy and practice questions such as: For children who are in foster care throughout the year, how can child welfare and education professionals attend to their educational needs in a sustained way? For children who are in care at the start of the year, but leave during the school year, how will the systems maintain the continuity of their education if the ends of their foster care spells are associated with mid-year school changes? If entry into foster care is associated with school change, how will new foster care entrants be integrated into new schools? And for children who enter and exit care during the school year, how will systems manage the compounded discontinuity of school changes and multiple placement changes throughout the school year? Answering these questions requires further analysis of children's experiences in care using variables not presented here; but at the very least, the state-to-state variation evidenced by the analyses that follow indicates that the answers to these questions will not be the same across all jurisdictions.

## Analytic parameters

### Data source

The findings in this report are based on analyses of the Multistate Foster Care Data Archive (FCDA), a longitudinal data warehouse maintained by the Center for State Child Welfare Data.<sup>1</sup> The FCDA contains

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<sup>1</sup> Note to Data Center member states: The analyses presented in this report were conducted using the statistical software, SAS. Because of differences between the SAS code employed for this report and the code used to generate analyses through the FCDA web tool, results using the two methods may differ slightly. There are two main reasons for this variation: (1) The analyses in this report were conducted on a standardized, multistate file with a censor date of 12/31/2011; your particular state's file may have a later censor date and may therefore contain more updated data. (2) The SAS programs used for this report employ the Kaplan-Meier method for estimating median length of stay in samples containing censored data. In contrast, the web tool does not employ any estimation method in determining median length of stay; rather it counts children's exits one by one until the 50th percentile length of stay is achieved.

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decades of data on approximately 3 million children who have spent time in foster care in 25 states (23 states and 2 major urban counties). The report provides data on all participating states (jurisdictions are de-identified).<sup>2</sup> The Multistate FCDA is updated as of 12/31/2011. For more information on the Center for State Child Welfare Data and the Multistate FCDA, please visit <https://fcda.chapinhall.org>.

### Definitions

*Foster care spell.* The main building block of the Multistate FCDA is the foster care spell. A spell is a period of time a child spends in foster care; it has a start date and an end date. A child may have more than one spell, as is the case when a child re-enters foster care after being discharged. In the Multistate FCDA, foster care spells are defined according to the following criteria:

- Spells that are fewer than five days long are not included.
- A spell is not included if, at the start of the spell, the child is 18 years old or older.
- If a child exits care by running away, reaching the age of majority, or exiting to a destination classified as "other/unknown" and the child comes back into care within seven days of exit, the re-entry is bridged to form one spell, rather than identified as a new spell.
- A spell is forced to exit to "reach majority" on the child's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday if the child is still in care at that time.
- If a child exits care to "runaway" and the child's age at exit is less than 10 years old, the exit type is changed to "other."
- If a child exits care to "reach majority" and the child's age at exit is less than 13 years old, the exit type is changed to "other."

Analyses in this report are based on all spells that were active at the start of or during the 2010-2011 school year. This means that, depending on the analysis, children experiencing more than one spell during the 2010-2011 school year may appear more than once.

*School-age.* According to the Census Bureau, the majority of children enrolled in kindergarten are five years old.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the analyses in this report consider children age 5 and older to be of school age. In the FCDA, child age is truncated at the integer and is not rounded. For example, a child who is 4.7 years old is classified as being four years old; this child will be classified as five years old after her fifth birthday.

*School year.* The analyses in this report describe children who were in foster care on the first day of the 2010-2011 school year and children who entered care during the 2010-2011 school year. School year calendars vary by jurisdiction. As a general estimate of the school year, the analyses presume that the school year started on September 1, 2010 and ended on June 30, 2011.

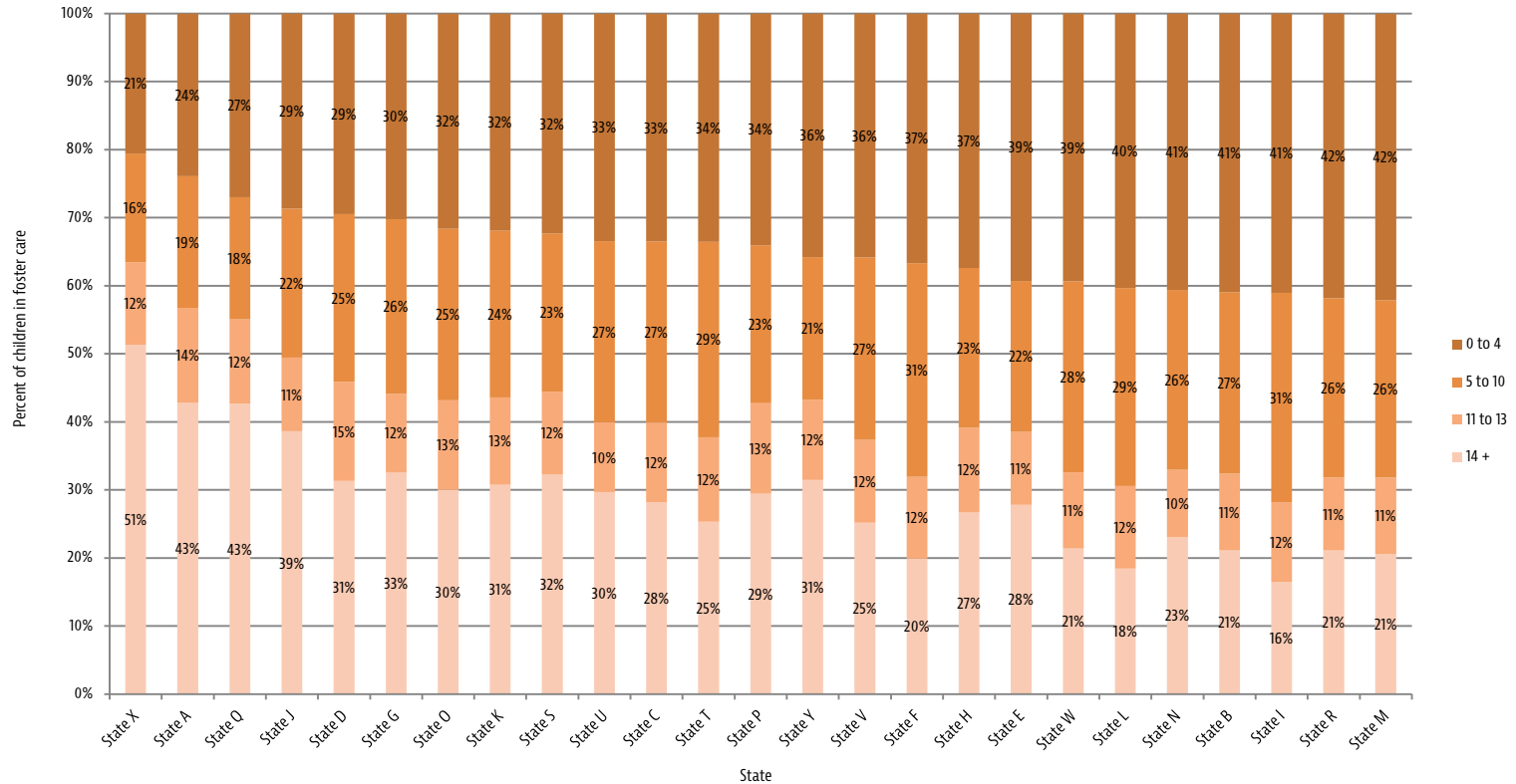
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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of convenience, the 23 states and two major counties are all referred to as "states."

<sup>3</sup> US Census Bureau (2008). *School Enrollment in the United States: 2008*. Retrieved April 22, 2013, from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/p20-564.pdf>.

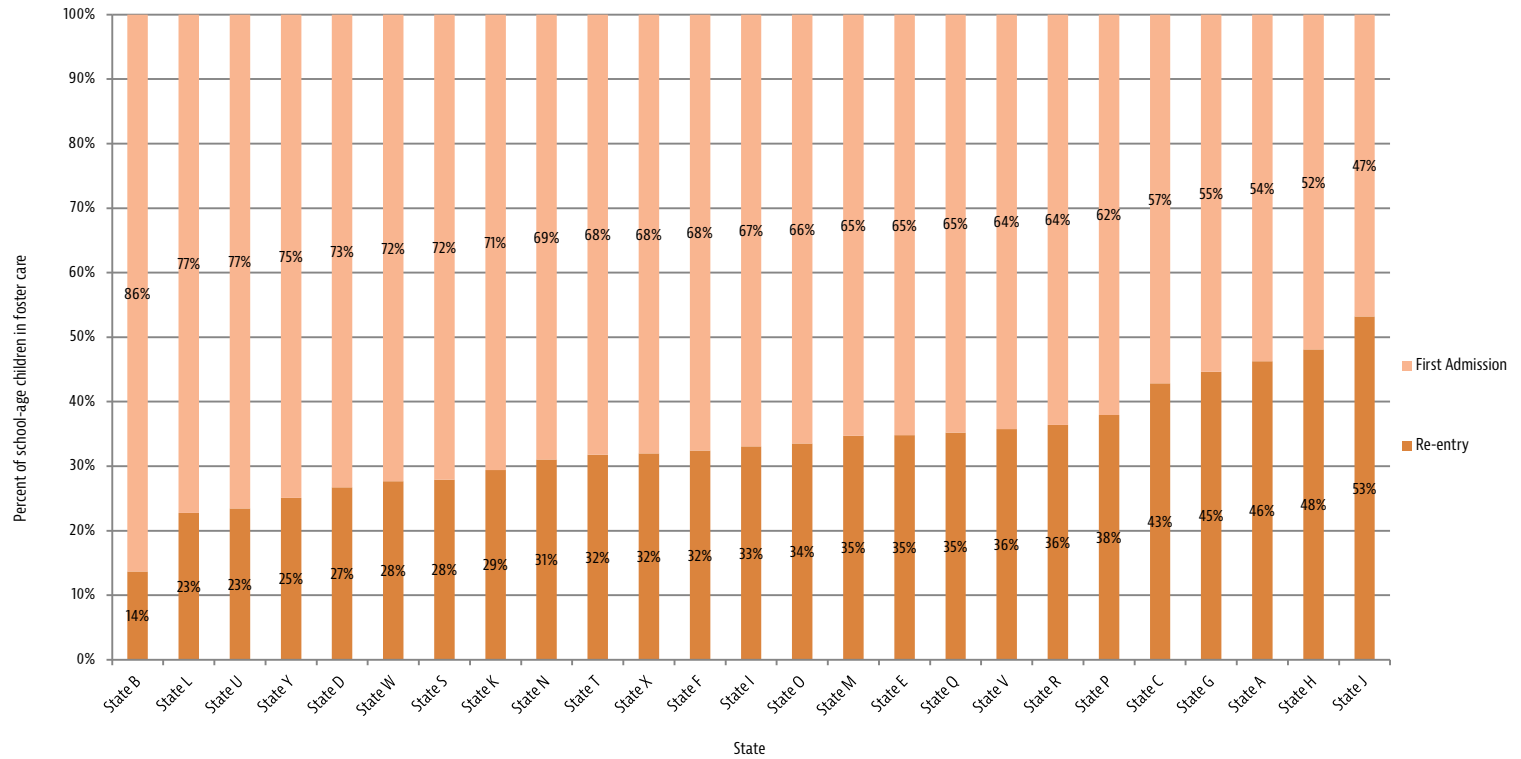
## 1. Children in foster care at the start of the 2010-2011 school year

### 1.a. How old were the children who were in foster care on the first day of school?



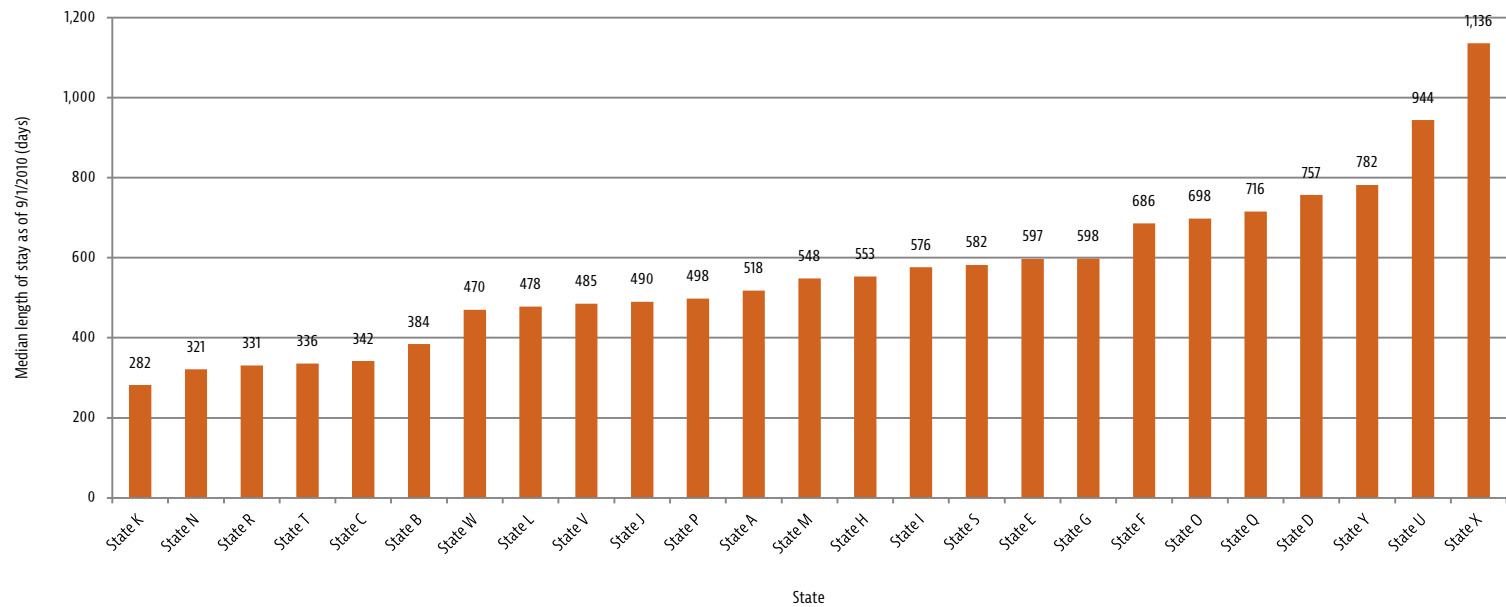
- The proportion of school-age children in the foster care population at the start of the school year varied by state. School-age children (age 5 and older) made up between 58% and 79% of the in-care population on 9/1/2010. Non school-age children (age 0-4) made up between 21% and 42% of the in-care population on that day.

1.b. Of school-age (5 and older) children in care on the first day of school, how many were experiencing their first spell in foster care?



- Of school-age children in care on 9/1/2010, admission type varied by state. First admissions (children experiencing their first spell in foster care) made up between 47% and 86% of school-age children in care. Re-entries (children experiencing their second or higher spell in foster care) made up between 14% and 53% of school-age children in care.

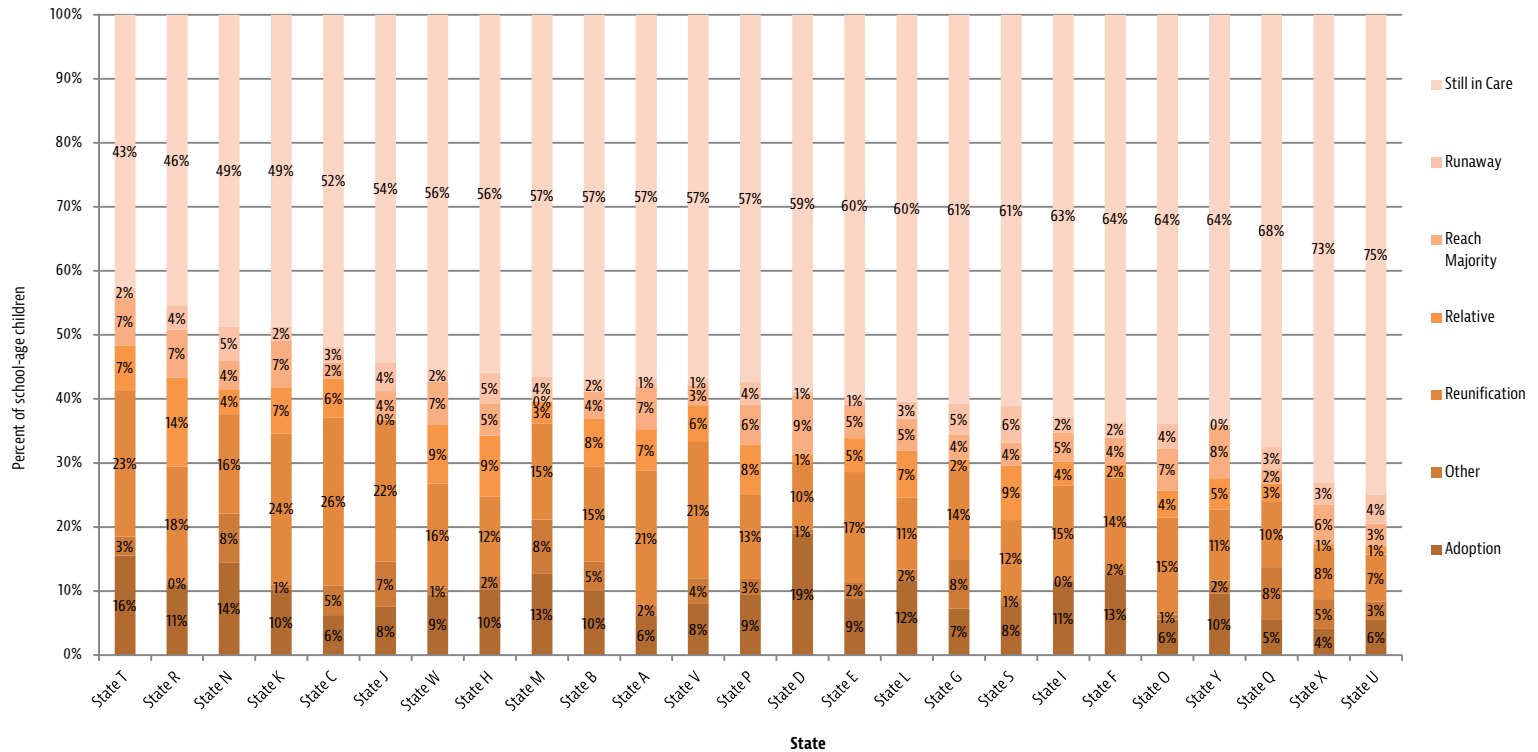
1.c. Of school-age (5 and older) children in care on the first day of school, how long had they already been in care as of the first day of school? (i.e., Of children in care on the first day of school, what was their median\* length of stay to date?)



\* Median length of stay pertains to the spell the child was in on 9/1/10; it does not include any time children may have spent in care during previous spells.

- Of school-age children in care on 9/1/2010, median length of stay to date varied by state. In State K, school-age children in foster care had already been in care for a median of 282 days (approximately 9 months) as of the first day of school. In contrast, in State X, school-age children in foster care had already been in care for a median of 1,136 days (approximately 3 years) as of that date.

1.d. Of school-age (5 and older) children in care on the first day of school, what percent exited foster care by the end of the school year? For children who did exit care, what were their destinations?

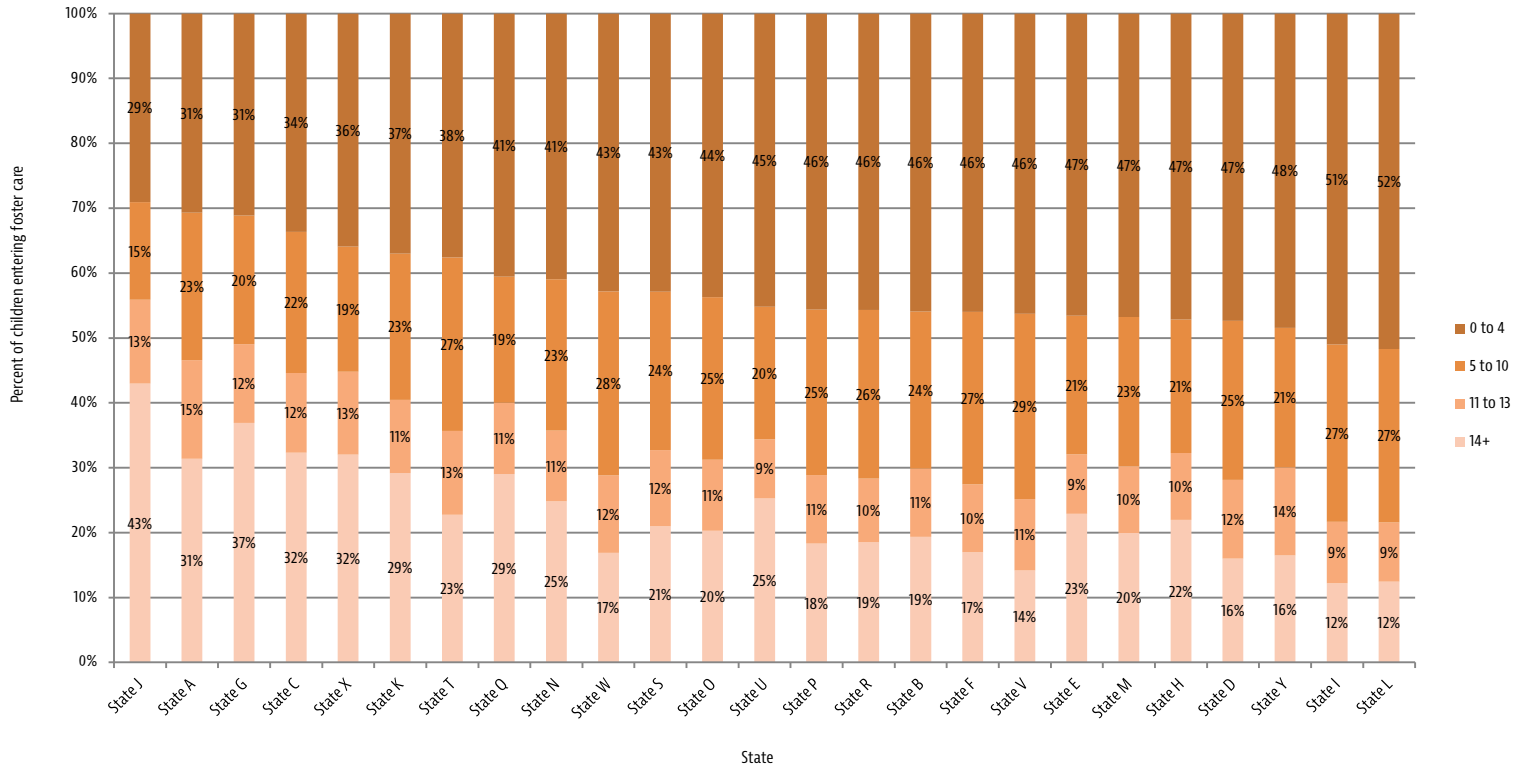


➤ Of school-age children in care on 9/1/2010, exit status as of 6/30/2011 varied by state. In State T, 43% of school-age children who started the year in foster care were still in that same foster care spell at the end of the school year. In contrast, in State U, 75% of school-age children who started the year in foster care were still in that same foster care spell at the end of the school year. Exit destinations also varied by state. Of school-age children who started the school year in foster care:

- Between 4% and 19% exited to **adoption** by the end of the school year.
- Between 7% and 26% exited to **reunification** by the end of the school year.
- Between 0% and 14% exited to a **relative** by the end of the school year.
- Between 0% and 9% **reached majority** (aged out) by the end of the school year.
- Between 0% and 6% **ran away** by the end of the school year.
- Between 0% and 8% exited to some **other non-permanent exit** type by the end of the school year.

## 2. Children entering foster care during the 2010-2011 school year

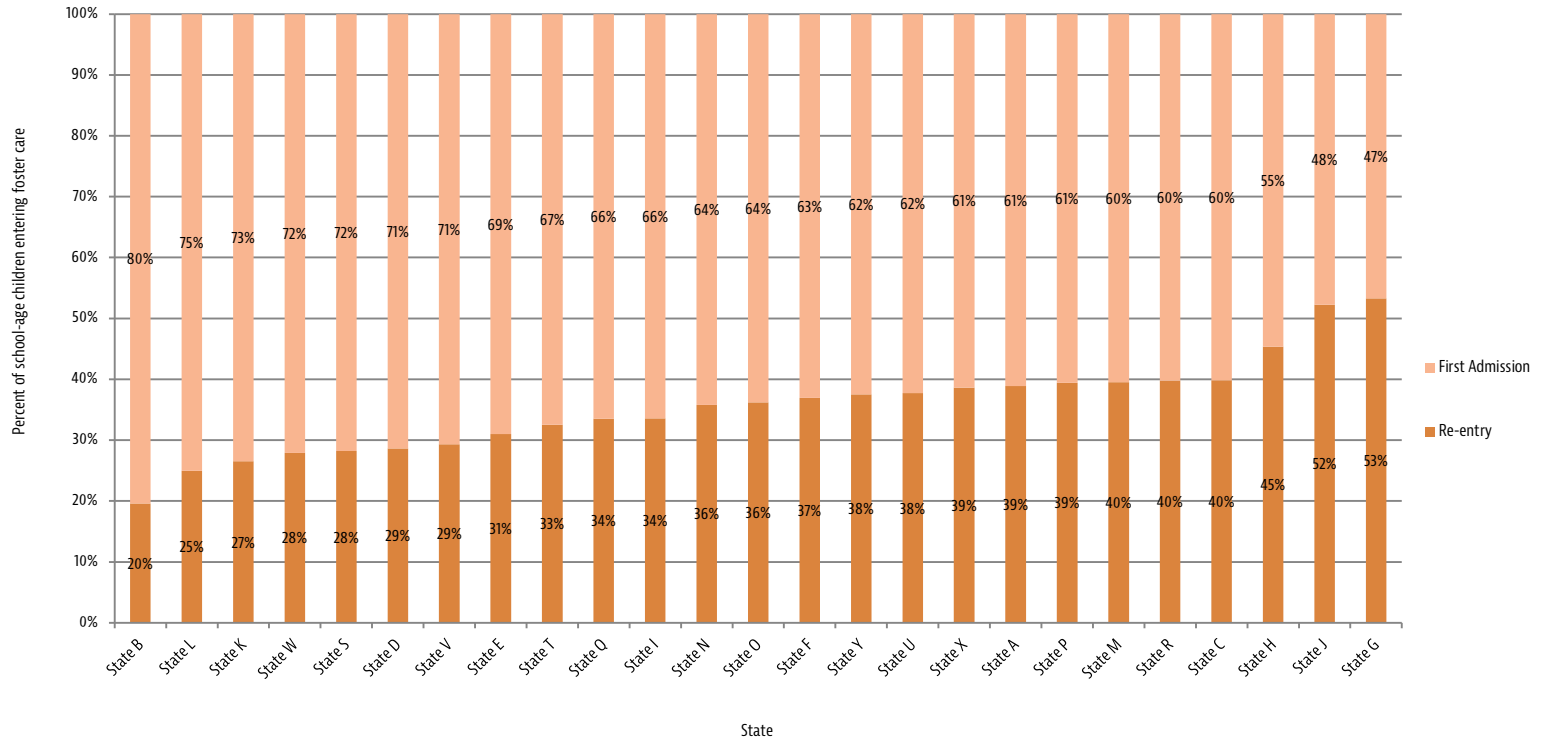
2.a. How old were the children who entered foster care during the 2010-2011 school year?



- The proportion of school-age children entering foster care during the 2010-2011 school year varied by state. School-age children (age 5 and older) made up between 48% and 71% of children entering care between 9/1/2010 and 6/30/2011. Non school-age children (age 0-4) made up between 29% and 52% of the entry cohort.

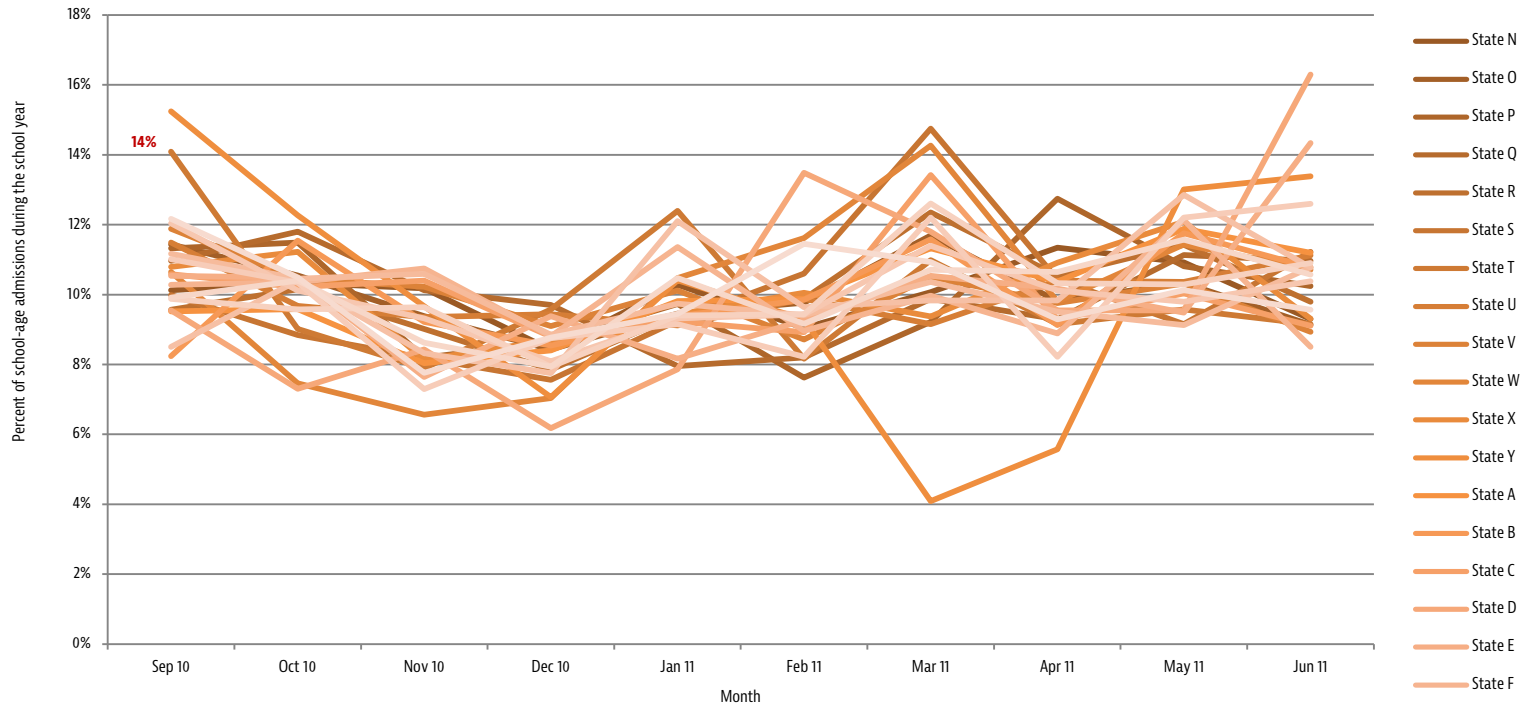


2.b. Of school-age (5 and older) children who entered foster care during the 2010-2011 school year, how many entered their first spell in foster care?



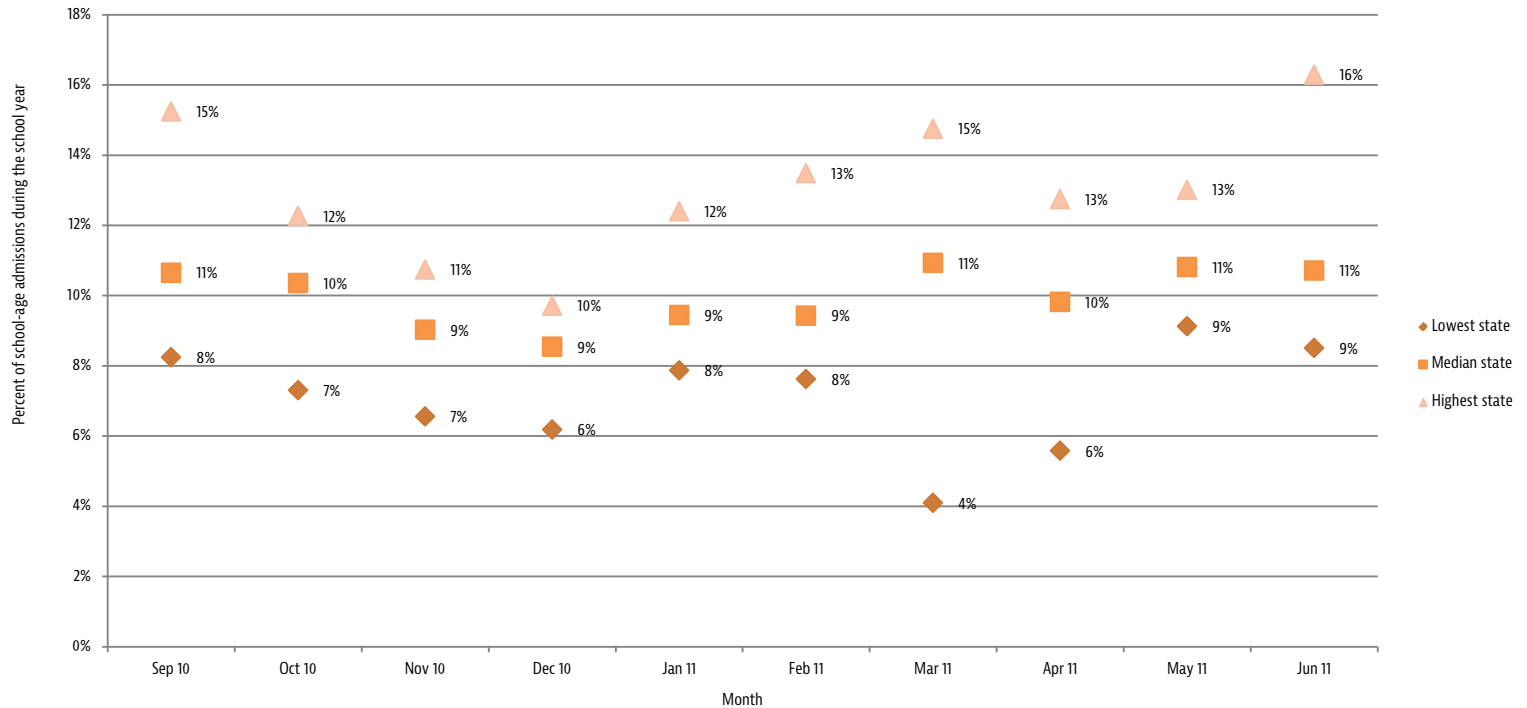
- Of school-age children entering foster care between 9/1/2010 and 6/30/2011, admission type varied by state. First admissions (children experiencing their first spell in foster care) made up between 47% and 80% of school-age children entering care. Re-entries (children experiencing their second or higher spell in foster care) made up between 20% and 53% of school-age children entering care.

2.c. Of school-age (5 and older) children who entered foster care during the 2010-2011 school year, when during the school year did they enter care?



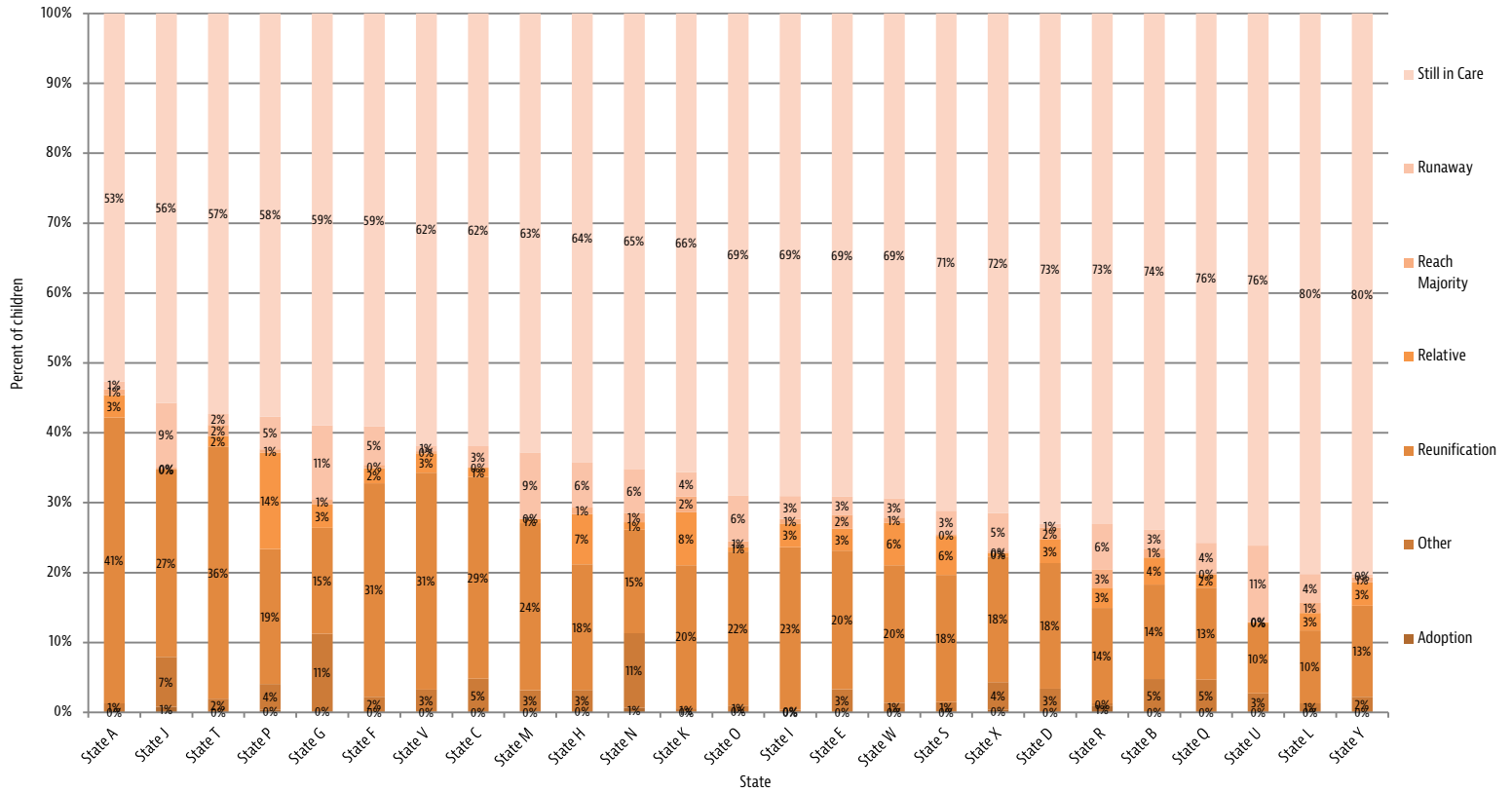
- This graph shows all school-age children entering care between 9/1/2010 and 6/30/2011 and breaks down that entry cohort by month of entry for each individual state. For example, the single data point marked in red in the top left-hand corner of the graph shows that in State T, 14% of the school-age children entering care during the school year entered care in September.
- The general trend shows a slight decline in the proportion of admissions between September and December, followed by an increase between January and March, after which the trend generally flattens. Most states follow this general pattern, with the exception of State F, which had a lower proportion of admissions in March and April than the rest of the states in the dataset.

2.d. Of school-age (5 and older) children who entered foster care during the 2010-2011 school year, when during the school year did they enter care?  
[continued]



- This graph also breaks down school-age admissions between 9/1/2010 and 6/30/2011, but presents the data in a different way. For each month, the green triangle shows the state with the highest proportion of admissions; the blue diamond shows the state with the lowest proportion of admissions, and the red square shows the state with the median proportion of admissions.
- For example, of all school-age children entering foster care during the school year, the proportion of children entering in September ranged from 8% to 15%, depending on the state. The median proportion of school year admissions for September was 11%.

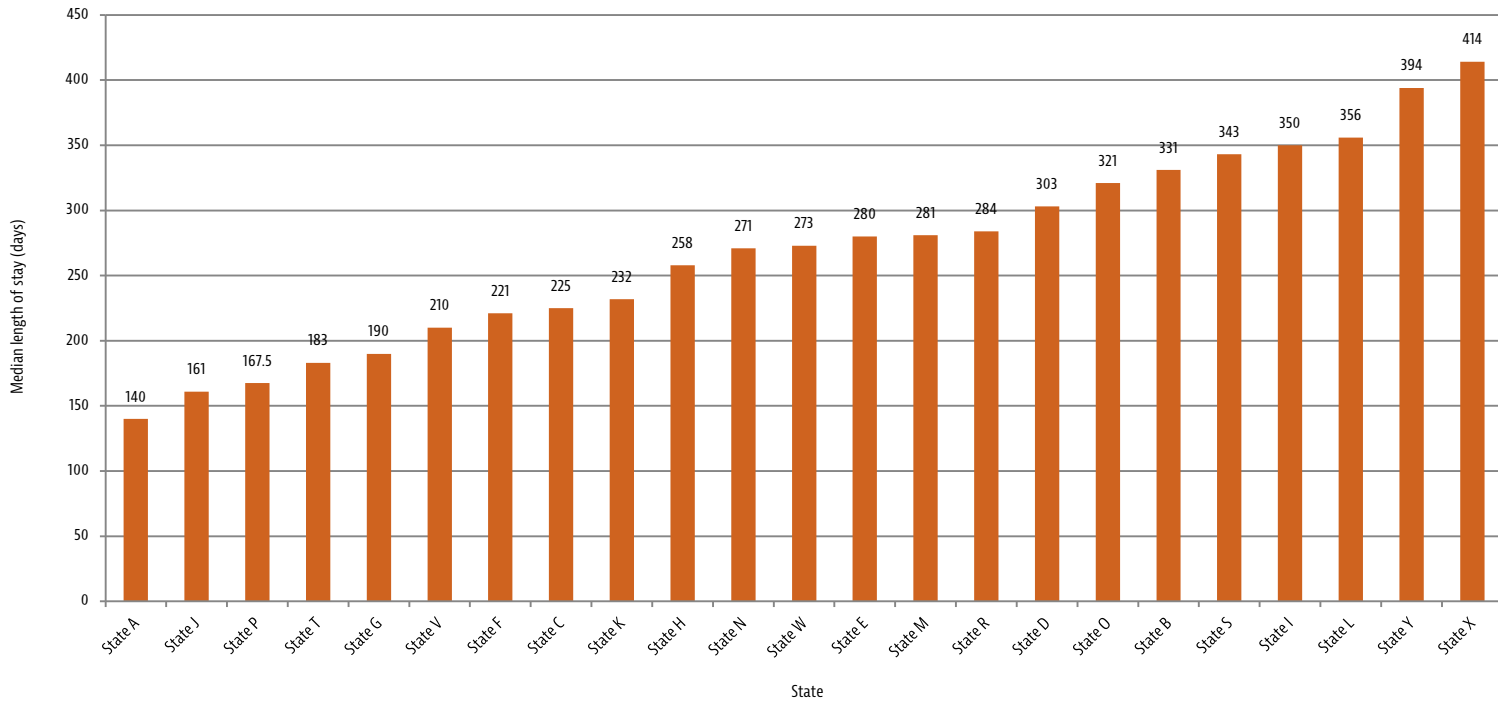
2.e. Of school-age (5 and older) children who entered care during the 2010-2011 school year, what percent exited foster care by the end of the school year? For children who did exit care, what were their destinations?



➤ Of school-age children entering care between 9/1/2010 and 6/30/2011, exit status as of 6/30/2011 varied by state. In State A, 53% of school-age children who entered care during the school year were still in care at the end of the year. In contrast, in State Y, 80% of school-age children who entered care during the school year were still in care at the end of the year. Exit destinations also varied by state. Of school-age children who entered care during the school year:

- Between 0% and 1% exited to **adoption** by the end of the school year.
- Between 10% and 41% exited to **reunification** by the end of the school year.
- Between 0% and 14% exited to a **relative** by the end of the school year.
- Between 0% and 3% **reached majority** (age out) by the end of the school year.
- Between 0% and 11% **ran away** by the end of the school year.
- Between 0% and 11% exited to some **other non-permanent exit** type by the end of the school year.

2.f. What was the median\* length of stay for school-age (5 and older) children who entered care during the 2010-2011 school year?



\* Median length of stay pertains to the foster care spell(s) the child was in during the 2010-2011 school year; it does not include any time children may have spent in care during previous spells. Outcomes are current as of 12/31/2011. Reported medians are Kaplan-Meier estimates of median length of stay. Median length of stay could not be estimated for States Q and U because in these states, too few children in the entry cohort had exited care as of 12/31/2011.

- Median length of stay for school-age children entering foster care between 9/1/2010 and 6/30/2011 varied by state, ranging from 140 days (approximately 4.5 months) in State A to 414 days (approximately 14 months) in State X.