

The Center for State Child Welfare Data

Understanding the Differences in How Adolescents Leave Foster Care

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Executive Summary

The Context

How young people leave foster care differs for reasons tied to their age at admission, gender, race/ethnicity, placement experience, and the part of the state where they were living when they entered foster care for the first time. For example, children who enter care before their first birthday are much more likely to be adopted than children who enter care as adolescents. It is also true that adolescents are more likely to return home to their families. Understanding these differences is one key to developing smart child welfare policies.

The Question

In this policy brief, we explore how young people leave foster care given they entered care for the first time between the ages of 13 and 17. We start by looking at the reason for leaving care, by age at first admission. Whereas it is true that adolescents as a group are more likely to be reunified, there are specific differences that go along with whether the young person entered as a 13-year-old or a 17-year-old. From this starting point, we look specifically at young people who leave care by running away from placement. As the age at admission rises, so too does the probability of running away. As part of the analysis, we examine the impact of placement history—care type and number of moves—on how young people leave care. Finally, because foster youth who run away may return to care, we focus the last question on young people who ran away from care but did not return before their 18th birthday.

The Analysis

Data for this study come from the Multistate Foster Care Data Archive (FCDA), a longitudinal archive containing the foster care records of approximately 3 million children nationwide. The analysis has two primary parts. The descriptive study looks at the counts of children in relation to how young people leave care. We then use a multilevel model to examine how child characteristics (age, race/ethnicity, and gender), placement history (last placement type, level of care change, predominant placement type, and number of moves), and county characteristics (socioeconomic disadvantage and urbanicity) influence the likelihood a teenager will leave care (1) by achieving permanency, (2) by reaching the age of majority, or (3) by running away.

The Findings

Most teenagers who enter care will leave their first spell to permanency, which includes reunification, adoption, and guardianship. The other two most likely outcomes for teenagers are reaching the age of majority while in care or running away. Gender does not predict the likelihood of leaving care to permanency, but males are more likely to reach the age of majority while in care and females are more likely to run away from care.

Black youth are less likely to reach permanency than white or Hispanic youth; black and Hispanic youth are more likely to run away from care, but less likely to reach the age of majority while in care. Age is linked to all outcomes. Teenagers who are older when they first enter care are less likely to reach permanency than teenagers who enter care earlier in their adolescence, in part because they are more likely to reach the age of majority while in care.

The likelihood of running away does not incrementally increase with age at first admission; compared to younger and older teenagers, teenagers who first enter care when they are 15 have the highest chance of running away.

Placement history is also linked to outcomes. Youth who experience a change in their care level have a higher risk of reaching the age of majority or running away and they are less likely to exit to permanency. Young people who spent most of their time in congregate care or in a mix of care types, or whose last placement ended in congregate care, or both are most likely to run away and least likely to reach permanency. On the contrary, adolescents who spent most of their time in kinship care, or whose placement ended in kinship care, or both are most likely to reach permanency and least likely to run away. Youth who spent their time in a mix of care types have the highest risk of reaching the age of majority while in care. Additionally, a higher number of moves is linked to the risk of either reaching the age of majority while in care or running away.

County characteristics are important but the importance is mostly connected to the urban character of a county as opposed to socioeconomic status of the local population. Socioeconomic status did not have a clear effect on outcomes. However, youth from the large urban core counties achieve permanency at slower rates and are more likely to reach the age of majority. Rates of running away from care are also higher for youth from urban counties.

Our last finding refers to the last time a child left care and more specifically on children who ran away from their last placement before they turned age 18 and did not return to care. For half of the teenagers in this group this last placement was also their first placement. Results also show that females are more likely to run away from care before they turn 18, without returning to care, than males and, that the females who run away are slightly younger than the males.

Summary and Implications

The findings highlight the importance of understanding placement outcomes from a developmental perspective. Specifically, to the extent that age is marker for developmental processes underway, it is important to consider how outcomes differ for young people given where they are developmentally. Adolescence is a unique developmental period, but even within that developmental context, there is considerable heterogeneity. Exit reasons for 13-year-olds are markedly different than the reasons reported for 15-year-olds and so on. These baseline differences must be accounted for when planning service improvements.

The findings point to other important differences. The fact that black youth leave care in ways that are different than the way white youth leave care adds to concerns about disparate outcomes tied to race and ethnicity. That adolescent girls are more likely to run away from care than adolescent boys reinforces concerns about the vulnerabilities facing young girls connected to the child welfare system. Too little is known about why young girls run away, the risks associated with running away, and whether services designed to protect young girls are effective. The data also point to significant differences based on whether adolescents come from an urban or rural county.

Differences in experience tied to urban/rural differences have been described before but there is still too little known about the features of urban child welfare systems that account for why children and young people have different experiences if they live in an urban county. Given the desire to improve child welfare systems, it is important that we understand why urban systems operate differently and how those differences are tied to outcomes.

Finally, to a large extent, differences in exit reasons are tied to the risk of running away, leaving care for nonpermanent outcomes (i.e., reasons other than reunification, adoption, or guardianship), or reaching the age of majority while still in care. Among adolescents, better than one in five leave care either because they run away or they exit for other reasons. For 16- and 17-year-olds, the figure is one in four. If we include reaching the age of majority, fully 50 percent of the 16- and 17-year-olds leave care for reasons other than reunification, adoption, or guardianship. Although transition-age youth have received considerable policy and practice attention, young people who run away from care or leave for other reasons have before reaching the age of majority received far less attention, but may be just as vulnerable vis a vis their adult outcomes (e.g., education and employment). The lack of attention is perhaps best typified by the fact that nonpermanent exits (e.g., running away) are not used to monitor differences in state performance within the context of the federal Child and Family Service Reviews.

Introduction

How young people leave foster care varies for children with different characteristics, children who have different placement experiences, and children who live in different parts of the state than where their placement was recorded. For example, children entering care as infants are more likely to be adopted and less likely to be reunified. In contrast, older children are less likely to be adopted than younger children, but are more likely to run away from foster care or reach the age of majority while in care than younger children are. Understanding these differences is key to developing smart child welfare policies that target outcomes.

In this brief, we focus on the exits from care of the children admitted to care between the age of 13 and 17 years old. We focus on three main exit types: (1) permanency, defined as exits to adoption, reunification, or guardianship; (2) reaching age 18 while still in care (i.e., the age of majority); and (3) running away. We pay particularly close attention to running away from care. Although running away from foster care is common among teenagers, there has been surprisingly little attention given to the problem and little focus on how policy and practice might be used to reduce running away. For example, running away is not included as a core outcome on the list of outcome measures the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services uses to track the performance of the state child welfare systems, even though running away is an important exit reason—especially for children who enter care when they are older (Courtney & Wong, 1996; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney & Zinn, 2009; English & English, 1990; Fasulo, Cross, Mosley, & Leavy, 2002; Nesmith, 2006; Biehal & Wade, 2000; Grayson, 2002; Finkelstein, Wamsley, Currie, & Miranda, 2004; Witherup, Vollmer, Van Camp, & Borrero, 2005). The aim of this brief is to help policymakers and advocates use the findings to better understand how adolescents leave placement and to improve policy.

Methodology

The data for this analysis came from the Multistate Foster Care Data Archive (FCDA), a longitudinal database maintained by Chapin Hall's Center for State Child Welfare Data. It is a repository of state administrative data provided by state child welfare agencies to support research and development in the child welfare field, with specific emphasis on children who are placed in foster care. Because of the large number of children for whom data are collected and how the data are organized, the data provide a useful baseline for studying exit patterns.

The FCDA contains foster care placement records for approximately 3 million children in 21 states.¹ The sample for this analysis includes all youth who (1) entered foster care for the first time between January 1, 2009 and December 31, 2011, as observed through December 31, 2015 and (2) had at least one spell that began when they were between 13 and 17 years old. The sample does not include young people who were in care for four or fewer days. The 2009–11 timeframe was selected to maximize the time available to observe how a young person left care (sometimes referred to as “right censoring”). For this sample, just 3 percent of the children admitted at any point between 2009 and 2011 were still in care as of December 31, 2015. The total number of children in this sample is just over 55,000.

To provide a clear picture of discharge patterns we analyzed three reasons for leaving care: (1) permanency, which includes adoption, guardianship, and reunification, (2) reach majority, and (3) running away. In each case, time is marked from the start of placement and ends with an indication in the administrative record that the young person left care along with the reason why. A more detailed description of these dependent variables is provided in Appendix A.

We also examined three clusters of variables associated with how young people leave care: The first cluster was child characteristics, including age, race/ethnicity, and gender. The second cluster, placement history, refers to the last placement type before exit, level of care change (e.g., did the child move from family-based care to group care), predominant placement type (i.e., where did the young person spend the majority of his or her time in care), and number of placement changes. The third cluster was county characteristics: the level of socioeconomic disadvantage and the urbanicity of the county where the child was living when the first placement happened. A more detailed overview of the variables we used, including values and definitions, can be found in Appendix A.

¹ For more information about the FCDA, please visit <http://fcda.chapinhall.org>. The states included, which range in size and geographic location, are broadly representative of the US.

Sample Characteristics

Just over 55,000 youth between the ages of 13 and 17 years old entered a first out-of-home care spell between January 1, 2009 and December 31, 2011, as observed through December 31, 2015. Table 1 shows demographics for the youth whose placement experiences we considered.

White youth (39%) made up a larger fraction of the total population, but black youth (28%) and Hispanic youth (25%) were overrepresented relative to the general population. Females (56%) made up a larger proportion than males (44%). Two-thirds of the youth were 14 to 16 years old the first time they entered foster care and nearly half came from an urban core county.

Table 1. Youth Characteristics ($N = 55,082$)

Variables	Number	Percent
Race/Ethnicity		
Black	15,412	28.0
White	21,465	39.0
Hispanic	13,902	25.2
Other*	4,303	7.8
Gender		
Female	31,022	56.3
Male	24,058	43.7
Age at first entry to care		
13	10,644	19.3
14	11,741	21.3
15	12,904	23.4
16	12,059	21.9
17	7,734	14.0
Socioeconomic disadvantage		
Low	13,003	23.8
1	6,599	12.1
2	7,962	14.6
3	12,135	22.2
High	14,951	27.4
Urbanicity		
Rural	7,781	15.2
Urban collar	25,249	49.5
Urban core	18,023	35.3

* Other includes: Native American, Asian/Pacific Islander, unknown, and other races/ethnicities not shown separately.

Findings

How Do Young People Leave Care?

Table 2 shows the number of adolescents admitted to care between 2009 and 2011 by their exit reason. Of the 55,082 who entered foster care for the first time during this three-year period, most youth (61%) exited their first spell to permanency, 14 percent reached the age of majority during their first spell, and 13 percent left their first spell by running away. Other nonpermanent exits accounted for 9 percent of the exits. Nonpermanent exits include children who may have been transferred to another child-serving system. The remaining 3 percent were still in care on December 31, 2015.

Table 2. Number of Adolescents Admitted to Foster Care by Reason for Leaving Care: First Admissions, 2009–11 Entry Cohorts

Outcome	Total number of exits	Percent of total exits
Permanency	33,447	61%
Reach majority	7,776	14%
Runaway	7,145	13%
Other nonpermanent exit	5,118	9%
Still in care	1,596	3%
Total	55,082	100%

Age at Admission and Reasons for Leaving Care

Across the population of all children admitted to foster care, adolescents have a fundamentally different experience than children of other ages. Adolescents are much less likely to be adopted and more likely to leave care for reasons other than being placed with a family. Having said that, the range of experiences in foster care varies significantly depending on how soon into adolescence the first placement takes place and their placement history. For example, in Table 3 young people are divided into three groups based on their age at admission: 13- and 14-year-olds, 15-year-olds, and 16- and 17-year-olds. When looking at how 15-year-olds leave care, we see that the risk of reaching the age of majority is greater for 15-year-olds than it is for 13- and 14-year-olds but not as great as what we observe for 16- and 17-year-olds. Regarding permanency, 15-year-olds are again in the middle, but the order is reversed. Fifteen-year-olds are less likely to exit to permanency than children who are 14 or younger, but much more likely than teens who are 16 years or older. Finally, it is important to note that the likelihood of running away from care among 13-, 14-, and 15-year-olds is considerably larger than the likelihood of reaching the age of majority while still in care. Among 16- and 17-year-olds, slightly more than 1 in 4 reach the age of majority while still in care. The comparable figure for 15-year-olds is 1 in 10.

Table 3. Age at First Admission to Care and Reason for Leaving Care

Age group	Permanency	Reach majority	Runaway	Other non-permanent exit	Still in care	Total
≤ 14 years old	16,058	1,019	2,392	1,765	1,151	22,385
15 years old	7,997	1,352	1,915	1,305	335	12,904
≥ 16 years old	9,392	5,405	2,838	2,048	110	19,793
≤ 14 years old	71.7%	4.6%	10.7%	7.9%	5.1%	100%
15 years old	62.0%	10.5%	14.8%	10.1%	2.6%	100%
≥ 16 years old	47.5%	27.3%	14.3%	10.3%	0.6%	100%

Placement History and Reason for Leaving Care

Table 4 shows how placement history and the reason for leaving care are related. To summarize placement history, we considered the type of placement and whether the child changed the level of care. If the young person entered foster care and 90 percent or more of the time spent in care was in foster care, we denoted foster care as the predominant placement type. We summarized relative and congregate care placements in the same way. Finally, children who changed care types and ended up spending less than 90 percent of their time in care in any one care type were labeled as having a mixed placement type history.

Results show that teenagers who spent 90 percent or more of their spell in kinship care have the highest permanency rates. These rates are lower for children whose predominant placement type was foster care or congregate care. The chances of reaching the age of majority while in care are highest for children who spent their spell in a mix of placement types and lowest for youth who had congregate care as their predominant placement type. The chances of running away are highest for children whose predominant placement type was congregate care or who spent their spell in a mix of placement types. Children who spent most of their spell in kinship care have the lowest chance of running away.

Table 4. Placement History and Reason for Leaving Care

Predominant Placement Type	Permanency	Reach majority	Runaway	Other non-permanent exit	Still in care	Total
Congregate Care	9,414	1,299	2,599	1,987	132	15,431
Foster Care	9,252	1,859	1,457	1,116	320	14,004
Kinship Care	7,050	879	502	487	120	9,038
Mixed Care	7,731	3,739	2,587	1,528	1,024	16,609
Total	33,447	7,776	7,145	5,118	1,596	55,082
Congregate Care	61.0%	8.4%	16.8%	12.9%	0.9%	100%
Foster Care	66.1%	13.3%	10.4%	8.0%	2.3%	100%
Kinship Care	78.0%	9.7%	5.6%	5.4%	1.3%	100%
Mixed Care	46.5%	22.5%	15.6%	9.2%	6.2%	100%
Total	60.7%	14.1%	13.0%	9.3%	2.9%	100%

Table 5 highlights the relationship between the number of moves and how young people leave care. For example, the permanency rate for teens who have not experienced any moves is 75 percent and drops to 56 percent for children who experienced between one and five moves and to 24 percent (or lower) for teens who moved more than five times.

In general, a higher number of moves is linked to the risk of either reaching the age of majority while in care or running away. Among children with 5 or more moves, the likelihood of reaching the age of majority while still in care is as high as 28 percent. The risk of running away does rise with the number of moves: of all youth who have experienced 1-5 moves, 14 percent ran away; among those young people who moved between 5 and 10 times, 24 percent ran away. Young people with between 10 and 15 moves ran away 29 percent of the time.

Table 5. Number of Placement Moves and Reason for Leaving Care

Number of Moves	Permanency	Reach		Other non-		Total
		majority	Runaway	permanent exit	Still in care	
No moves	16,371	1,541	1,896	1,898	105	21,811
1-5 moves	16,178	5,060	4,163	2,676	970	29,047
6-10 moves	728	868	749	392	347	3,084
11-15 moves	117	192	201	92	92	694
Over 15 moves	53	115	136	60	82	446
Total	33,447	7,776	7,145	5,118	1,596	55,082
No moves	75.1%	7.1%	8.7%	8.7%	0.5%	100%
1-5 moves	55.7%	17.4%	14.3%	9.2%	3.3%	100%
6-10 moves	23.6%	28.1%	24.3%	12.7%	11.3%	100%
11-15 moves	16.9%	27.7%	29.0%	13.3%	13.3%	100%
Over 15 moves	11.9%	25.8%	30.5%	13.5%	18.4%	100%
Total	60.7%	14.1%	13.0%	9.3%	2.9%	100%

The Impact of Child, Placement, and County Characteristics on How Adolescents Leave Care

In this section, we look more broadly at who enters care as an adolescent and how the reason for leaving care is influenced by child, placement, and county characteristics. At the child level, we use the child's age at first placement, their gender, and their race/ethnicity to construct a basic demographic profile. Regarding place, we consider the urban character of where the child was living at the time of the first placement and the socioeconomic standing of that county (see Appendix A). As for placement experience, we consider the type of placement the child experienced and whether during their time in care the child experienced a change in the level of care (e.g., moving from family-based care to congregate care).

The findings are presented in Table 6. As the results presented are derived from statistical models, it is important to understand the nature of the evidence found in Table 6. First, when we point to differences between groups, the differences we describe account for the other things we know about the young people. For example, the age effects we describe account for where the child was living when they entered care, their placement experience, their gender, and their race/ethnicity.

Second, the models assess the rate of exit. For each young person, we consider whether they left care during consecutive three-month intervals of time, given they started an interval still in care.² In this way, we adjust for how long the young person has been in care.

Here we describe the organization of Table 6. The columns correspond to the model results for each of the outcomes we looked at: permanency, reaching the age of majority, and runaway. When looking at the results, it is important to consider both the within-exit type differences and the between-exit type differences. For example, Table 6 shows that gender is not a significant predictor of permanency rates. However, the rate of reaching majority while still in care is lower for girls whereas the rate of running away is higher for girls. In other words, the effect of gender on the reason for leaving care depends on the reason under consideration.

Race and ethnicity are also important determinants of exit rates. Over their time in care, the rate of exit to permanency for black teenagers is about 20 percent lower when compared to either white or Hispanic teenagers. Exit rates reaching the age of majority are slightly lower for black and Hispanic teenagers than white teenagers. However, the rate of running away is higher for black and Hispanic adolescents than white teenagers (30% and 18%, respectively). Age is also an important determinant of exit rates. Older teens (e.g., teens admitted at age 15 or older) have lower exit rates to permanency than younger teenagers. For example, the rate of exit to permanency for youth entering care at the age of 16 is about 78 percent lower than the rate for 13-year-olds. Age also has a significant effect on whether a teen will reach the age of majority while still in care. Exit rates for teenagers who enter care at the age of 16 are about 22 times greater than the rates recorded for adolescents who entered care when they were 13.³

Rates of running away are also influenced by the age at admission. Results show teenagers who entered care at the age of 15 have the highest rates of running away. Compared to 13-year-olds, rates of running away are 30 percent greater for 15-year-olds, which is greater than the rate reported for 16-year-olds.

Placement history and the characteristics of the county where children were placed are also linked to how teenagers leave care. When compared to children who did not change the level of care when their placement changed, children who did move between levels of care (e.g., foster home to group care or group care to foster home) have lower permanency rates, higher rates of reaching age 18 while still in care, and higher runaway rates.

² More specifically, for each child, we divided the length of their placement into person-periods of three month duration (time from the date of entry through the end of three months is the first person-period; the second person-period extends from the 4th through 6th months of placement, provided the child was in care that long). If a young person leaves care during a given interval, then that three-month person period is labeled with a 1, indicating discharge. We also note the reason for discharge. If no exit was recorded, the interval is labeled with a 0. Constructed in this way, the models assess the likelihood of exit in a given three-month person-period. Technically, this is the period-specific probability of leaving care. For convenience, we refer to this probability as the rate of exit.

³ It may help to put this finding into context. One reason why 16/17 year olds are so much more likely than 13 year olds to reach the age of majority is because entering care as a 13 year old and staying until age 18 is relatively rare. Children in this age group tend to achieve permanency or leave the system for other reasons, including running away, before they reach the age of majority while still in care.

Table 6. Exits to Permanency, Reaching Majority, and Runaway Exits

Independent variable	Exits to permanency		Reaching majority		Runaway exits	
	Relative risk*	Signif.	Relative risk*	Signif.	Relative risk*	Signif.
Female	Reference		Reference		Reference	
Male	0.99	0.136	1.04	<.001	0.82	<.001
White	Reference		Reference		Reference	
Black	0.8	<.001	0.91	<.001	1.3	<.001
Hispanic	1	0.814	0.91	<.001	1.18	<.001
Other	0.95	0.013	0.96	0.05	1.03	0.257
Age 13	Reference		Reference		Reference	
Age 14	0.64	<.001	2.99	<.001	1.06	<.001
Age 15	0.41	<.001	6.67	<.001	1.27	<.001
Age 16	0.22	<.001	21.72	<.001	1.06	<.001
Age 17	0.11	<.001	59.24	<.001	0.83	<.001
No level change	Reference		Reference		Reference	
Level change	0.55	<.001	1.63	<.001	1.26	<.001
Foster care	Reference		Reference		Reference	
Cong. care	0.79	<.001	0.71	<.001	2.06	<.001
Kinship	2.63	<.001	0.74	<.001	0.44	<.001
Other	0.17	<.001	1.76	<.001	0.58	<.001
Soc. disadvantage low	Reference		Reference		Reference	
Soc. disadvantage 1	0.98	0.829	0.81	0.167	1.12	0.472
Soc. disadvantage 2	1.09	0.437	0.86	0.305	1.09	0.571
Soc. disadvantage 3	0.96	0.749	1	0.994	1.27	0.123
Soc. disadvantage High	0.97	0.787	0.9	0.507	1.28	0.119
Rural	Reference		Reference		Reference	
Urban Core	0.67	0.045	1.33	0.285	2.67	<.001
Urban Collar	0.91	0.256	1.29	0.02	1.4	0.003

* Differences in the rate of exit, within exit type, are measured as relative risks. Within each category (i.e., age, gender, level of change, placement type, level of social disadvantage, and urbanicity), one subgroup is identified as the reference category (e.g., males are compared to females – the reference group). Children of other races and ethnicities are compared to white children; adolescents above the age of 14 are compared to 13-year-olds, and so on. When the relative risk is below one, it means the rate of exit is slower for the listed group when compared to the reference group. If the relative risk is greater than 1, it means the rate of exit exceeds the rate observed for the reference group. The column adjacent to the relative risk shows the statistical significance. A significance level of .05 was used to distinguish statistically significant results from other results. Shading is used to highlight the statistically significant results. The in-text narrative highlights some of the important differences

Finally, county characteristics were important, but the importance is connected more to the urban character of the county as opposed to socioeconomic status of the local population. Using the measure of socioeconomic disadvantage described in Appendix A, adolescents from counties with relatively high levels of socioeconomic

disadvantage did not have exit rates that were markedly different from the experiences of young people from counties where the level of disadvantage was lower. What does matter is where the county falls on the urbanicity scale. Adolescents from the large core urban counties (e.g., New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago) achieve permanency at slower rates, have higher rates of reaching majority, and have higher runaway rates than young people from rural counties. Adolescents from the collar counties that surround urban core counties, when compared with adolescents from rural areas, have comparable permanency rates, higher runaway rates, and higher rates of reaching majority.

Children Who Run Away from Care and Do Not Return

Up until now, we have focused on how children left placement the first time they entered care. Young people may, of course, return to foster care following their first discharge, regardless of why they left.⁴ For that reason, we focus in this section on the last time a child left care and whether the young person ran away from their last foster care spell. Within the context of the sample used for this study, the group we are looking at consists of the children admitted to care at age 13 or older who ran away from care before they turned 18 years old and did not return to care, at least insofar as the administrative data allows us to track movement into and out of the system for that group of children. Also, it is important to note that in the tables that follow we show the young person’s age at original admission and not their age when they started the spell from which they ran away. In Table 7, there were 18 girls who were admitted as 11-year-olds in the population. They did not run away from care as 11-year-olds. Rather, they entered care, left care, and then returned to care again as an older child. It was during one of these subsequent spells that they ran away and did not return. We use the start age to reinforce who these children were from the point of their first contact with the placement system.

Of the total population of young people in the sample (55,082), about 9 percent of the population (4,851) ran away from care and did not return. Of those, the majority were females (58%) as compared to males (see Table 7), which is consistent with elevated risk of running away observed for females relative to males. Of the males and females in this group (i.e., young people who ran away and did not return), the females tended to be somewhat younger than the males. For example, 26 percent of the females in this group were age 15 when they entered care. The comparable figure for males was 23 percent. Among the 16-year-olds, males made up the larger portion.

Table 7. Age at First Entry to Care and Gender

Age at first entry to care	Number			Percent	
	Female	Males	Total	Female	Males
11	18	10	28	0.6	0.5
12	95	74	169	3.3	3.7
13	323	226	549	11.4	11.2
14	521	346	867	18.4	17.2
15	725	453	1,178	25.5	22.5
16	723	568	1,291	25.5	28.2
17	433	336	769	15.3	16.7
Total	2,838	2,013	4,851	100.0	100.0

⁴ Adoption is the one exception. Regardless of age, when a young person leaves care because they were adopted, they may one day return to care. However, tracking the return of children who were adopted is not possible with the data we assembled for this study.

Regarding the last placement type (see Table 8), the data indicate that most young people who ran away from care and did not return to care left from a congregate care placement.

Table 8. Last Placement Type and Running Away

Last placement type	Frequency	Percent
Congregate Care	2,463	50.8
Foster Care	1,519	31.3
Kinship Care	518	10.7
Other	351	7.2
Total	4,851	100

The data also suggest that young people in this group tend to have run away after their first encounter with the foster care system (see Table 9). This is not to say that children in their first placement spell are likely to run away and not return. It simply means that of those that do, they would have run away from their first placement spell.

Table 9. Spell Sequence Number and Running Away

Spell Sequence Number	Frequency	Percent
1	2,475	51.0
2	1,232	25.4
3	563	11.6
4 or more	581	12.0
Total	4,851	100.0

Summary and Implications

Before addressing the implications, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the analysis. Because the FCDA data do not include assessments of individual children, we have not adjusted the findings to account for how young people are doing when they enter care and how their well-being affects what happens. For this reason, when considering differences in outcomes based on placement settings, we should be mindful of the fact that placement decisions are not made randomly. For example, children placed in congregate care settings are more likely to run away. However, rates of running away may reflect underlying population differences with respect to the risk of running away. Similarly, higher rates of permanency associated with placement with kin (and lower rates of running away) reflect not only the importance of relatives as placement resources but may also reflect underlying differences in young people placed with their relative. In other words, the findings should be treated as one source of the evidence needed to improve child welfare services.

Having said that, the findings highlight the importance of understanding placement outcomes from a developmental perspective. Specifically, to the extent that age is a marker for developmental processes underway, it is important to consider how outcomes differ for young people given their age at admission and what admission age says about where a young person is developmentally. Adolescence is a unique developmental period, but even within that developmental context, there is considerable heterogeneity. Exit reasons for 13-year-olds are markedly different than the reasons reported for 15-year-olds and so on. These baseline differences must be accounted for when planning and monitoring service improvements.

The findings point to other important differences. The fact that black youth leave care in ways that are different than the ways white youth leave care reinforces concerns about disparate outcomes tied to race and ethnicity. That adolescent girls are more likely to run away from care than adolescent boys heightens concerns about the vulnerabilities facing young girls connected to the child welfare system. Too little is known about why young girls run away, the risks associated with running away, and whether services designed to protect young girls are effective. The data also point to significant differences based on whether adolescents come from an urban or rural county. Differences in experience tied to urban/rural differences have been described before, but there is still too little known about the features of urban child welfare systems that account for why children and young people have different experiences if they live in an urban county. Given the desire to improve child welfare systems, it is important that we understand why urban systems operate differently and how those differences are tied to outcomes.

Finally, to a large extent, differences in exit reasons are tied to the risk of running away and leaving care for nonpermanent outcomes (i.e., reasons other than reunification, adoption or guardianship, or reaching the age of majority while still in care). Among adolescents, better than one in five leave care either because they run away or they exit for other reasons. For 16- and 17-year-olds, the figure is one in four. If we include reaching the age of majority, fully 50 percent of the 16- and 17-year-olds leave care for reasons other than reunification, adoption, or guardianship.

Although transition age youth have received considerable policy and practice attention, young people who run away from care or leave for other reasons have received far less attention. The lack of attention is perhaps best typified by the fact that nonpermanent exits (e.g., running away) are not used to monitor differences in state performance within the context of the federal Child and Family Service Reviews. In essence, for a large subpopulation of young people, our approach to tracking outcomes simply fails to take into account what

happens as a result of being placed into foster care. Bringing nonpermanent exits into sharper focus when tracking outcomes is a simple, yet potentially powerful change in how the nation monitors its child welfare system.

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Appendix A. Methodology

In this appendix we explain the dependent variables (the reasons for leaving care) and independent variables (determining how a child leaves care) in more detail.

Dependent Variables

We analyzed three reasons for leaving care (dependent variables): (1) permanency, which includes adoption, guardianship, and reunification, (2) reach majority, and (3) running away.

Generally, a young person is listed as having run away when the young person's whereabouts are unknown. This generally means the young person left placement without permission, although local practices are important insofar as carers must report a young person as having left care without permission.

For young people listed as reaching the age of majority, we read the data to determine whether they are still in care on their 18th birthday. Because some of the states extend care beyond the 18th birthday, we consider here only whether they were in care on their 18th birthday. For each young person in the sample we note the date of admission and the date the young person exited care along with the reason why they left care. We define exits from care in two ways:

- Exit type from first spell only: this measure refers simply to how the child left care after their first placement spell. Children may return to care following their first exit.
- Exit type from last spell: among children with one or more spells in out-of-home care, this measure is used to examine exit reason following the most recent (or last) placement spell.

Children might still return to care from this observed last placement, but they have not done so prior to December 31, 2015. Therefore, this reentry is not showing in this data sample.

Independent Variables

We examine three clusters of variables that can determine how a child leaves care / independent variables: child characteristics, placement history and county characteristics. Table A-1 provides a more detailed overview of these variables, including values and definitions.

Table A-1. Independent Variables

Domain	Measure	Values	Definition	
Child	Race/ethnicity	White	Non-Hispanic white.	
		Black	Non-Hispanic black alone or in combination with other races.	
		Hispanic	Alone or in combination with other races.	
		Other	Includes non-Hispanic Asian, Native American, other races/ethnicities not listed separately, and unknown or not identified.	
	Gender	Male Female		
	Age	13–17	The child's age on the date of his/her first placement into foster care.	
Placement history	Last placement type	Foster care Congregate care Kinship care Other care types	This is the last placement type before the young person left care, regardless of why they left care.	
	Level of care change	Yes or No	This refers to whether the young person changed the level of care. These changes could be a step up, a step down, or both.	
	Predominant placement type	Only Cong. Care Only Foster Care Only Kin. Care Mixed care	This is the predominant (90% or more) placement type in a young person's spell. Mixed care means a young person experienced a combination of different placement types within his or her spell with no one type accounting for at least 90%.	
	Number of moves	No moves		The number of moves a young person experienced within his or her spell. These moves could be within the same placement type or between placement types, referred to as level of care changes.
		1–5 moves		
6–10 moves				
11–15 moves over 15 moves				
County	Socioeconomic disadvantage	Low 1 2 3 High	This is a composite based on child poverty, unemployment, education, and family structure.	
		Urbanicity	Rural Urban Core Urban Collar	Categories are based on the National Center for Health Statistics classification.

For socioeconomic disadvantage, we categorize each county relative to their state on four indicators collected by the 2010 US Census: poverty rate, percent of people with less than a high school education, unemployment rate, and percent of homes with a single head of household. The counties with a higher poverty rate than the state poverty rate are noted with a one. Counties are compared with the state across each indicator, with the results summed to create an index ranging from 0 to 4. A county with a score of 0 would be low on socioeconomic disadvantage because it is below the state average on each of the indicators. Conversely, a county with a score of 4 would be high on socioeconomic disadvantage because it is above the state average on each of the indicators.

The urbanicity level is based on the classification of the National Center for Health Statistics. NCHS urban-rural classification scheme classifies all US counties and county equivalents into six levels: four for metropolitan counties and two for nonmetropolitan counties (Ingram & Franco, 2014). In our study we reduced these to three levels:

Table A-2. Urbanicity

Current study	NCHS categories	NCHS definition
Rural	Micropolitan Noncore	Counties in micropolitan statistical areas (MSAs). Nonmetropolitan counties that did not qualify as micropolitan.
Urban Core	Large Central Metro	Counties in MSAs of 1 million or more population that: 1. contain the entire population of the largest principal city of the MSA, or 2. have their entire population contained in the largest principal city of the MSA, or 3. contain at least 250,000 inhabitants of any principal city of the MSA.
Urban Collar	Large Fringe Metro Medium Metro Small Metro	Counties in MSAs of 1 million or more population that did not qualify as large central metro counties. Counties in MSAs of populations of 250,000 to 999,999. Counties in MSAs of populations less than 250,000.