

The Center for State Child Welfare Data

The Dynamics of Foster Home Recruitment and Retention

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Introduction

Foster parents are principal agents of the foster care system, yet we know very little about the dynamics of retention and recruitment. Prior qualitative and quantitative research has mostly focused on the factors associated with foster parents' decisions to continue or cease providing foster care. These studies have identified reasons for low retention, such as negative interactions with the child welfare agency, too little financial support, personal issues such as age or a marital crisis, and child-related factors, such as having no voice in the future of the child (Ahn, Greeno, Bright, Hartzel, & Reiman, 2017; Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007; Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001).

In this study, we use longitudinal administrative data to answer questions about: (1) the number of foster homes that open and close each year and the characteristics of the homes and the foster parents; (2) the reasons for home closure; (3) the length of service of foster homes (the continuous period of time during which a foster home was eligible to receive foster children); and (4) the occupancy of foster homes (the time a home actually received placements).¹ By analyzing these data and by building a body of evidence that speaks to the underlying dynamics, we have uncovered new insights that will help public agencies manage this important service asset in response to the demand for it.

Methodology

The work we describe below considers what we refer to as *foster home spells*. Analogous to a placement spell, the foster home spell refers to a continuous period of time during which a foster home was eligible to receive foster children. The start of the spell begins with licensure and ends when the foster home license ends. Foster parents may stop being foster parents for any of several reasons, such as decisions the foster parent makes or for reasons tied to a decision someone else makes (e.g., the child welfare agency).

The data for this analysis came from administrative data files about foster homes that were merged with administrative data that track the whereabouts of foster children. The sample for the analysis includes all foster homes that opened in one state for the first time between January 1, 2011 and December 31, 2016.² Opening simply means that the home was ready to accept children given the rules in place that govern licensure. Foster homes may have more than one spell. In those cases, we start our analysis with the first spell. This analysis includes 14,834 unique foster homes.

¹ We were granted access to this data by one state child welfare agency and the report is provided with the consent of leadership.

² For the analysis, the point of departure is the start date recorded in the administrative data. The start date is the date licensure was in place. One issue we encountered is that a small proportion of foster homes appear in the administrative data that are not fully licensed. That is, they started but did not complete the licensure process. These homes are not easily identified in part because recording practices are not clear cut. As we will discuss in the Summary and Next Steps section, ensuring that there is an administrative record of licensed foster homes is a critical step for improving the recruitment and retention of foster homes.

Findings

Foster Parent and Foster Home Characteristics

In this section, we present descriptive information about 14,834 foster homes that opened for the first time between 2011 and 2016. For homes with more than one foster parent, the data contained demographic information only for the foster parent that was listed first. Table 1 looks at the characteristics of the 14,834 foster homes and the first listed foster parents for these homes.³ With regard to the variables that show whether homes are approved to provide care for (1) both male and female children and (2) sibling groups, we note that the decision about this “approval” is based on parents’ preference (e.g., what gender they would be willing to take care of) and their prior parenting experience.

Table 1. Number and Percentage of Foster Parents by Foster Parent and Foster Home Characteristics and Year of First Licensure: 2011 to 2016

Foster Parent and Home Characteristics	Number						Percentage					
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Total	2,584	2,735	2,525	2,289	2,318	2,383	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Age at Start												
18 to 19 years old	3	6	6	2	4	3	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
20 to 29 years old	312	356	324	318	344	385	12%	13%	13%	14%	15%	16%
30 to 39 years old	663	766	708	622	669	704	26%	28%	28%	27%	29%	30%
40 to 49 years old	713	781	703	656	601	585	28%	29%	28%	29%	26%	25%
50 to 59 years old	587	506	502	448	438	448	23%	19%	20%	20%	19%	19%
60 to 69 years old	246	258	231	207	213	216	10%	9%	9%	9%	9%	9%
70 or older	60	62	50	36	48	42	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%
Missing data	0	0	1	0	1	0	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Gender												
Female	1,841	1,946	1,743	1,549	1,637	1,656	71%	71%	69%	68%	71%	69%
Male	743	789	782	740	681	727	29%	29%	31%	32%	29%	31%
Race / Ethnicity												
Black	533	593	491	436	514	483	21%	22%	19%	19%	22%	20%
White	1,904	1,999	1,891	1,732	1,710	1,819	74%	73%	75%	76%	74%	76%
Hispanic	37	51	60	51	47	42	1%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%
Other	22	14	17	18	12	17	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Unknown	88	78	66	52	35	22	3%	3%	3%	2%	2%	1%
Gender of child approved for service												
Female	680	677	562	501	539	505	26%	25%	22%	22%	23%	21%
Male	615	552	553	467	478	500	24%	20%	22%	20%	21%	21%
Both	1,287	1,502	1,409	1,317	1,289	1,362	50%	55%	56%	58%	56%	57%
Missing data	2	4	1	4	12	16	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	1%

³ It was unclear whether or not specific rules were applied when the data was entered. Rather than inferring something about the person referenced first, we have simply labelled them the first listed parent.

Foster Parent and Home Characteristics	Number						Percentage					
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Approved to care for sibling groups												
Yes	1,561	1,717	1,586	1,432	1,464	1,502	60%	63%	63%	63%	63%	63%
No	1,021	1,014	938	853	842	865	40%	37%	37%	37%	36%	36%
Missing data	2	4	1	4	12	16	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	1%

Some characteristics of foster homes that opened for the first time/started their first foster home spell between 2011 and 2016 include:

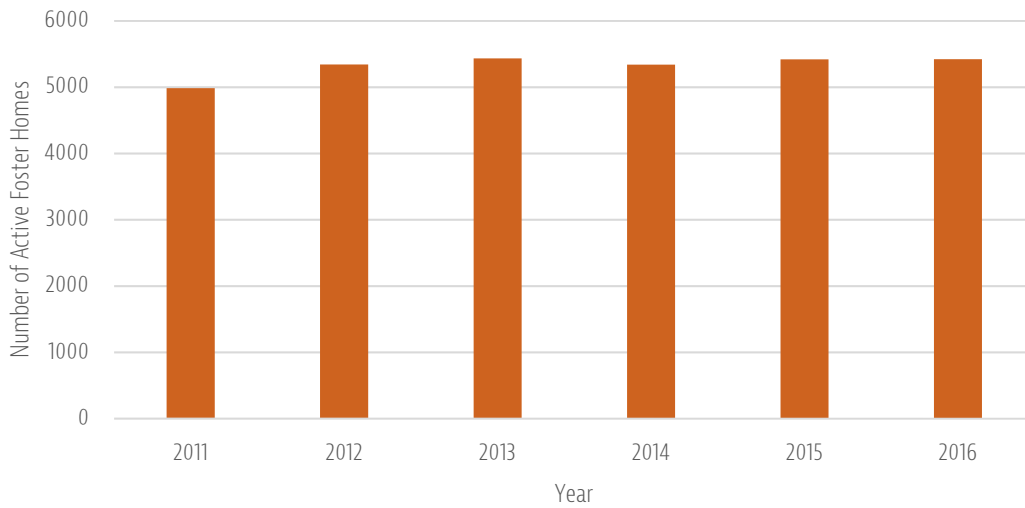
- Most primary caregivers start their first foster home spell between the ages of 30 and 49.
- Two-thirds of the primary caregiver population is female.⁴ This number remained steady for all 6 years.
- Of the primary caregiver population, 75% are white, 21% are black and 2% are Hispanic.
- Both male and female children were approved for care in 55% of the foster homes. Some foster homes were approved to care for only one gender—23% were approved to care only for females and 21% only for males. The percentage of homes approved to provide care for only one gender decreased slightly between 2011 and 2016, while the percentage of homes approved to provide care for more than one gender has increased.
- Two-thirds of the homes were approved to provide care for sibling groups. This has remained consistent from 2011 to 2016.

Foster Home Dynamics

A count of active foster homes shows whether the number of foster homes is growing or shrinking. Figure 1 displays the point-in-time count of all foster homes open on January 1 each year between 2011 and 2016. These data point to a modest increase in the number of open foster homes after 2011; however, this may be an artifact of data collection since these data were compiled for the first time for 2011. Between 2012 and 2016, the number of active foster homes fluctuated between 5,340 and 5,434.

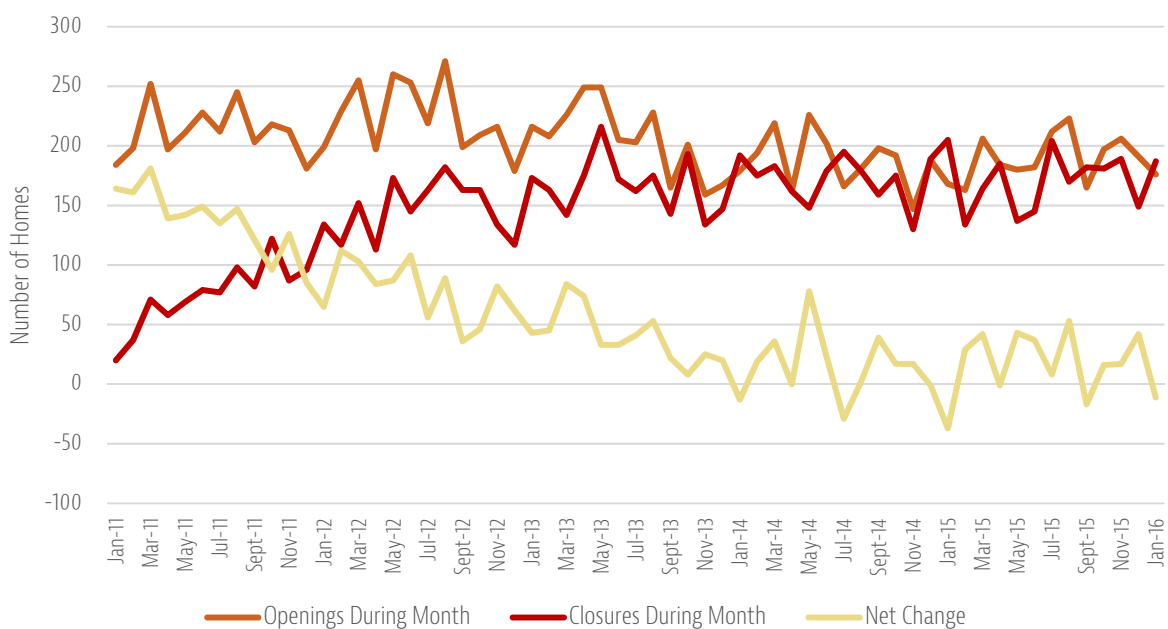
⁴ Males are likely underrepresented because when there are co-foster parents, females may be more likely to be listed first.

Figure 1. Number of Active Foster Homes as of January 1, between 2011 and 2016



The relatively stable number of homes at the start of year each masks the fact that the number of foster homes beginning and ending each month varies considerably. Figure 2 shows the monthly start and stop dynamics between January 1, 2011 and January 1, 2016. The dynamics include the number of homes that opened, the number of homes that closed, and the resulting net change in the number of active foster homes. Between the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2016, the number of openings fluctuated between 147 and 226 per month. Between the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2016 the number of foster homes closing fluctuated between 130 and 205 per month. Given the stable overall population, it appears that, on balance, closings and openings are offsetting.

Figure 2. Number of Foster Homes Opened, Closed, and Net Change by Month: 2011 to 2016



Reasons for Homes to Close

The results in this section focus on the end of the foster home spell: when the home stopped being eligible to receive children and the reasons why. For this purpose, we grouped the range of reasons homes close into the eight categories in Table 2. Appendix A gives a complete overview of closure reasons and how they were combined to make the categories listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Reason for Foster Home Closure

Code	Description
XAN	Closed because of abuse/neglect
XAD	Agency decision related to concerns about foster parent's performance
XFR	Family request (related to change in circumstances, personal or family issues)
XFC	Family request (related to concerns about DCS/provider agency)
XAP	Family adopted and is selecting out of foster care
XKC	Family serving as kinship only and kinship case has ended
XOT	Other reason
ZTC	Censored observation (foster home is still open)

Table 3 summarizes the reported reasons for closure, by year of opening, for homes that opened for the first time between 2011 and 2016. Please note that some of the homes were still open when the file used for this analysis was pulled. For example, among the homes that were licensed for the first time in 2016, 53% were still active as of December 31, 2016. Therefore, when describing closures, we will focus on the homes that opened from 2011 through 2014.

Table 3. Number and Percentage of Foster Homes by Reasons for Home Closure and Year of First Licensure: 2011-2016

Reason for home closure	Number						Percentage					
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Total	2,584	2,735	2,525	2,289	2,318	2,383	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Closed-Abuse/neglect	27	22	12	16	9	6	1%	1%	0%	1%	0%	0%
Agency decision	222	236	201	142	110	92	9%	9%	8%	6%	5%	4%
Family request (changed circumstances)	872	1,063	990	859	735	519	34%	39%	39%	38%	32%	22%
Family request (concerns about agency)	8	12	7	5	8	1	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Adoption	268	293	264	201	132	48	10%	11%	10%	9%	6%	2%
Kinship care	906	778	707	591	635	407	35%	28%	28%	26%	27%	17%
Other	142	117	96	97	71	43	5%	4%	4%	4%	3%	2%
Still active	139	214	248	378	618	1267	5%	8%	10%	17%	27%	53%

As shown in Table 3, most closures (70%) fall into two categories: Family requests (XFR), which includes changes in circumstances, personal, or family issues, account for between 34% and 39%. Kinship care (XKC) account for between 26% and 35%. The higher percentage reported in 2011 is likely an artifact of how long some children stay in relative care.

Table 4 displays the reasons foster homes close by various foster home and foster parent characteristics. We highlight the following findings:

- The percentage of foster parents closing their home because the family was serving as kin and the kinship case has ended, is higher for foster parents who start providing care at a younger age (18–19 years) or after the age of 50.
- The percentage of homes closing because the family is adopting (XAP) is lower for black foster parents (4%) than white (9%), Hispanic (10%), and “other” (9%) foster parents. The percentage of homes closing because they only served as kin (XKC) is higher for black (26%) and white (27%) foster parents compared to Hispanic and “other” foster parents (both 21%). These data reflect the reasons why children leave care.
- The percentage of foster homes closing because of a family request related to change in circumstances, personal, or family issues (XFR) is higher for homes that are approved for both male and female children (39%) compared to homes that are only approved for females (30%) or only for males (27%). However, the percentage of homes closing because the family served as kin only (XKC) is much lower for homes that are approved for both male and female children (14%) compared to homes that are only approved for females (42%) or males (46%).
- The percentage of foster homes closing because the family served as kin only (XKC) is much higher for homes that are not approved to care for sibling groups (40%) compared to those approved to care for sibling groups (19%).
- Most homes that never had any placements close because of a family request related to change in circumstances or personal or family issues (57%; XFR).
- The reasons for closure (by foster parent and home characteristics) varied somewhat over the different entry cohort years, but there are no clear increase or decrease patterns between the years.

Table 4. Number and Percentage of Foster Homes by Foster Parent and Foster Home Characteristics and Reasons for Home Closure for Foster Homes Licensed for the First Time: 2011–16

Foster Parent and Home Characteristics	Number								Percent							
	XAN	XAD	XFR	XFC	XAP	XKC	XOT	ZTC	XAN	XAD	XFR	XFC	XAP	XKC	XOT	ZTC
Total	92	1,003	5,038	41	1,206	4,024	566	2,864	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Age at Start																
18 to 19 years old	0	2	9	0	1	11	1	0	0%	8%	38%	0%	4%	46%	4%	0%
20 to 29 years old	12	142	755	7	187	424	95	417	1%	7%	37%	0%	9%	21%	5%	20%
30 to 39 years old	19	235	1,515	13	484	775	171	920	0%	6%	37%	0%	12%	19%	4%	22%
40 to 49 years old	29	297	1,374	9	350	997	175	808	1%	7%	34%	0%	9%	25%	4%	20%
50 to 59 years old	25	217	900	11	128	1,070	81	497	1%	7%	31%	0%	4%	37%	3%	17%
60 to 69 years old	5	92	403	1	45	595	34	196	0%	7%	29%	0%	3%	43%	2%	14%
70 years or older	2	18	81	0	11	152	9	25	1%	6%	27%	0%	4%	51%	3%	8%
Missing data	0	2	9	0	1	11	1	0	0%	8%	38%	0%	4%	46%	4%	0%
Race/Ethnicity																
Black	27	207	1,099	9	111	807	139	651	1%	7%	36%	0%	4%	26%	5%	21%
White	60	720	3,653	31	1,046	3,033	401	2,111	1%	7%	33%	0%	9%	27%	4%	19%
Hispanic	0	26	104	1	28	61	9	59	0%	9%	36%	0%	10%	21%	3%	20%
Other	2	8	41	0	9	21	3	16	2%	8%	41%	0%	9%	21%	3%	16%
Unknown	3	42	141	0	12	102	14	27	1%	12%	41%	0%	4%	30%	4%	8%
Gender of child approved for service																
Female	22	237	1,030	12	240	1,436	105	382	1%	7%	30%	0%	7%	41%	3%	11%
Male	18	199	851	6	219	1,450	88	334	1%	6%	27%	0%	7%	46%	3%	11%
Both	52	566	3,156	23	747	1,137	372	2,113	1%	7%	39%	0%	9%	14%	5%	26%
Approved to care for sibling groups																
Yes	65	666	3,334	27	804	1,783	389	2,194	1%	7%	36%	0%	9%	19%	4%	24%
No	27	336	1,703	14	402	2,240	176	635	0%	6%	31%	0%	7%	40%	3%	11%
Occupancy of home																
At least one child	60	569	2,489	29	1,099	3,491	179	2,447	1%	5%	24%	0%	11%	34%	2%	24%
Never been occupied	32	434	2,549	12	107	533	387	417	1%	10%	57%	0%	2%	12%	9%	9%

Note: XAN: Closed because of abuse/neglect; XAD: Agency decision related to concerns about foster parent's performance; XFR: Family request (related to change in circumstances, personal or family issues); XFC: Family request (related to concerns about DCS/provider agency); XAP: Family adopted and is selecting out of foster care; XKC: Family serving as kinship only and kinship case has ended; XOT: Other Reason; ZTC: Foster home is still open.

Length of Service

Length of service refers to a continuous period of time during which a foster home was eligible to receive foster children. Service begins with licensure and ends when the foster home license ends. Table 5 shows estimates of length of service quartiles (expressed in number of months) for all foster homes that opened for the first time between 2011 and 2016. The first quartile (25%) indicates how much time elapsed before 25 percent of the homes that opened in the given year then closed. Similarly, the 50th and 75th percentiles indicate how much time elapsed before 50 and 75 percent of the foster homes opened in the given year closed (ended their first foster home spell). Please note that the 50% and 75% quartiles for the 2016 entry cohort are still unknown because more than 50 percent of the foster homes were still open as of December 31, 2016.

Based on Table 5 we can say:

- Each entry year, 25 percent of first foster homes close in 2.5 to 3.8 months. It takes an additional 7.6 to 8.8 more months for the next 25 percent to close, which makes the median length of service of foster home in their first experience less than a year (between 10 and 12 months).
- The median length of service for the five entry years (2011 – 2015) is just under one year.
- Seventy-five percent of the licensed homes stop taking children within about 2 years; conversely, about twenty-five percent of the homes are open for more than 2 years.

Table 5. Length of Service Quartiles (in months) of First Foster Home Spells by Year of First Licensure (as of December 31, 2016)

Quartiles	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
25%	2.5	2.3	2.7	3.1	3.0	3.8
50%	10.1	11.0	10.9	11.9	11.0	-
75%	22.4	24.3	23.4	24.8	20.5	-

Length of Service by Foster Parent and Home Characteristics

Identifying and understanding why some types of foster homes have a longer length of service can help child welfare agencies identify recruitment and retention strategies. Table 6 compares the median length of service of first foster home spells by year of entry and by various foster parent and foster home characteristics. (Please note that the median length of service of first foster home spells for the 2016 entry cohort are still unknown because more than 50% of the foster homes were still open as of December 31, 2016).

As shown in Table 6:

- Foster parents who start providing care for the first time between the ages of 30 and 39 have the longest median length of service, followed by foster parents who start providing care for the first time between the ages of 40 and 49. Younger and older foster parents have a shorter median length of service.

- Black, white and Hispanic foster parents have a very similar median length of service.
- Homes that are approved to provide care for both male and female children have a longer median length of service in comparison to homes that are approved only for females or males.
- Homes that are approved to provide care for sibling groups in the same home have a much longer median length of service compared to homes that are not approved to provide care for siblings.

Table 6. Median Length of Service (in months) of First Foster Home Spell by Year of First Licensure, by Foster Parent Characteristics and Foster Home Characteristics (as of December 2016)

Foster Parent and Home Characteristics	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Age at Start					
18 to 19 years old	10.8	5.5	5.2	4.2	0.9
20 to 29 years old	7.3	10.2	10.1	11.0	11.8
30 to 39 years old	11.5	12.7	13.5	13.0	13.9
40 to 49 years old	11.2	11.9	11.2	12.6	11.7
50 to 59 years old	10.5	10.3	8.3	10.4	8.0
60 to 69 years old	6.1	7.0	8.4	8.7	6.8
70 years or older	5.2	6.9	4.7	11.0	7.9
Gender					
Female	9.5	10.3	9.6	11.2	10.6
Male	11.0	12.5	13.1	12.9	12.0
Race/Ethnicity					
Black	10.4	9.8	9.5	12.6	11.0
White	10.3	11.5	11.5	11.8	11.1
Hispanic	13.2	9.2	9.9	10.3	10.7
Other	21.5	4.4	7.6	10.8	7.6
Unknown	4.3	2.9	2.3	7.1	9.3
Gender of child approved for service					
Female	5.8	5.7	7.2	8.0	7.1
Male	7.1	7.3	6.6	8.1	7.2
Both	13.7	15.5	13.8	14.7	15.3
Approved to care for sibling groups					
Yes	12.5	14.4	13.5	13.8	13.8
No	6.5	6.0	6.5	8.0	6.6

Length of Service by Reason for Home Closure

Table 7 shows the relationship between the length of service and reason for home closure. Regardless of length of service (whether 1 day or 12 months), the main reasons a home closes is because of a family request (XFR) or the family served as kin only and the kinship case closed (XKC). While these numbers and percentages decrease when the length of service goes up, this is due to the number of homes that are still active.

Table 7. Length of Service (in days) of First Foster Home Spell by Reason for Home Closure (as of December 2016)

Length of Service (in days)	Number								Percent							
	XAN	XAD	XFR	XFC	XAP	XKC	XOT	ZTC	XAN	XAD	XFR	XFC	XAP	XKC	XOT	ZTC
Total	92	1,003	5,038	41	1,206	4,024	566	2,864	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
1 day to 1 month	20	261	739	6	4	837	159		1%	13%	36%	0%	0%	41%	8%	
1 to 2 months	10	176	791	3	8	699	74		1%	10%	45%	0%	0%	40%	4%	
3 to 5 months	5	192	668	7	9	611	66		0%	12%	43%	0%	1%	39%	4%	
6 to 11 months	10	149	999	9	193	844	100	703	0%	5%	33%	0%	6%	28%	3%	23%
12 to 17 months	17	77	634	4	270	678	59	564	1%	3%	28%	0%	12%	29%	3%	24%
18 to 35 months	19	110	864	11	525	335	78	805	1%	4%	31%	0%	19%	12%	3%	29%
≥ 36 months	11	38	343	1	197	20	30	792	1%	3%	24%	0%	14%	1%	2%	55%

XAN: Closed because of abuse/neglect; XAD: Agency decision related to concerns about foster parent; XFR: Family request (related to change in circumstances, personal or family issues); XFC: Family request (related to concerns about DCS/provider agency); XAP: Family adopted and is selecting out of foster care; XKC: Family serving as kinship only and kinship case has ended; XOT: Other Reason; ZTC: Foster home is still open.

Occupancy

A home's length of service shows the time between its opening (when the home was licensed for service) and its closure. The foster home is open during its length of service and able to receive placements and provide care to children. However, length of service does not give us any information about the actual placements in the home (the time the home was occupied). Our data show that, of the 14,834 homes that opened for the first time between 2011 and 2016, 30% (4,178 homes) never had any placements. Either these homes closed without ever having received any placements (4,054 homes) or they are still open/active as of December 31, 2016 and still able to receive placements (417 homes).

First Placement

Although a substantial number of homes are approved but do not take children in, the time between licensure and the first placement following opening is a more important element of the dynamic between recruitment and placement of children in foster homes. As shown in Table 8, one-third of the homes received their first placement on their first day of service (the day they opened). However, this number includes 4,069 kinship homes licensed after the child was already placed. After licensure, 8% of the homes receive their first placement after 1 to 20 days, 7% after 21 to 50 days, 8% after 51 to 100 days, 8% after 101 to 200 days and 5% after more than 200 days. In addition, 30% of the homes do not receive any placements. On average, homes receive their first placement after being open for 52 days.

Table 8. Number of Days between Licensure and First Placement of First Foster Home Spells (as of December 2016)

Elapsed Days between Licensure and First Placement	Number	Percent
0 days	4,928	33
1–10 days	813	5
11–20 days	482	3
21–50 days	1,086	7
51–100 days	1,128	8
101–200 days	1,216	8
Over 200 days	710	5
No placement	4,471	30

Length of Service compared to Length of Time Occupied

As we noted earlier, 30% of the homes in our sample never received any placements. We compared the number of days a home is open (length of service) to the number of days a home is actually providing care to children (length of time occupied). This comparison showed the average home is only occupied for 51% of its total service (open) days and is vacant for 49% of its total service (open) days. Table 9 shows the average percentage of time that homes were occupied based on their length of service. The longer the length of service, the longer the time that the home was occupied.

Table 9. Length of Service, Average Length of Time Occupied (in months) and Average Percent of Time Occupied of First Foster Home Spells by Number of Placements (as of December 2016)

Length of Service	Average Length of Time Occupied (in months)	Average % of Time Occupied
1 to 3 months	0.6	36%
4 to 10 months	3.2	45%
11 months to 2 years	8.8	55%
2 years and above	25.8	63%

Table 10 further explores the relationship between first-time foster homes' length of service and the length of time they are occupied.⁵ The results show that most homes are occupied for the same period of time as they are open. For example, homes that were open for 6 to 11 months were generally occupied for 6 to 11 months. Homes that have never been occupied are the exception to this; this situation is found among homes with all lengths of service. The percentage of homes that were never occupied (0 days) does go down when the length of service goes up. In other words, homes that have a longer length of service (are open longer) are more often occupied for at least one day.

⁵ Some of these homes are still open and therefore right-censored. This means that the numbers in Table 10 will change after these homes close and we can observe their full length of service and length of time occupied.

Table 10. Length of Service (in days) Compared to Length of Time Occupied for First Foster Homes (as of December 31, 2016)

Length of Service	Time Occupied - Number								Total
	0 days	1 day to 1 month	1 to 2 months	3 to 5 months	6 to 11 months	12 to 17 months	18 to 35 months	≥ 36 months	
1 day to 1 month	1,259	767							2,026
1 to 2 months	846	191	724						1,761
3 to 5 months	655	87	219	597					1,558
6 to 11 months	866	153	222	488	1278				3,007
12 to 17 months	432	97	107	133	739	795			2,303
18 to 35 months	326	60	99	111	415	603	1133		2,747
≥ 36 months	87	18	15	16	48	87	571	590	1,432

Length of Service	Time Occupied - Percent								Total
	0 days	1 day to 1 month	1 to 2 months	3 to 5 months	6 to 11 months	12 to 17 months	18 to 35 months	≥ 36 months	
1 day to 1 month	62%	38%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
1 to 2 months	48%	11%	41%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
3 to 5 months	42%	6%	14%	38%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
6 to 11 months	29%	5%	7%	16%	43%	0%	0%	0%	100%
12 to 17 months	19%	4%	5%	6%	32%	35%	0%	0%	100%
18 to 35 months	12%	2%	4%	4%	15%	22%	41%	0%	100%
≥ 36 months	6%	1%	1%	1%	3%	6%	40%	41%	100%

Results also show few homes with a large difference between how long the home was open and how long the home was occupied. For example, of all homes that were open for 18 to 35 months, most homes were also occupied for 18-35 months. Only 2% of these homes were occupied for 1 day to 1 month, 4% for 1 to 2 months and 4% for 3 to 5 months.

Summary and Next Steps

It is difficult to overstate the importance of foster parents within the context of the nation's child welfare system. Once a child is placed with a family, and for as long as that child is in that home, no single adult or set of adults spends more time with the child than their foster parent. For this reason, the recruitment and retention of high-quality foster homes is of utmost importance. This is reflected in passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act in the Spring of 2018. The Act provides \$8 million in competitive grants to states to support the recruitment and retention of high-quality foster homes.

With the Family First Prevention Services Act as context, the evidence presented here takes on new meaning, particularly as it relates to strategies states might undertake in their efforts to maintain a stable supply of high-quality foster homes. Although there has been some research that addresses recruitment and retention, there have been relatively few attempts to test systematically targeted strategies (i.e., interventions) that improve recruitment and/or retention given a specific aspect of the recruitment or retention problem. More to the point, the evidence presented here clarifies that there is more than one subpopulation of foster parents and foster homes. It is unlikely that a single strategy that targets foster homes generally will be as effective as strategies that are tailored to the dynamics of a specific subgroup. Thus, here we focus on how data might be used to generate the evidence needed to design effective strategies that improve recruitment and retention strategies.

Before delving into how these data might be used in an evidence-building exercise, we should mention some limitations. These data come from one state. It is important to generalize carefully from this bit of evidence to other jurisdictions. For example, our findings suggest that a number of foster homes recruited and licensed leave service rather quickly. This is likely to be true in other jurisdictions, although differences in numbers and how quickly they leave are an essential part of local conversations and strategy making. The results here suggest this is an important dynamic that needs exploration in other states. To the extent we find similar results in other jurisdictions, those commonalities will give way to strategies that can be tested and used by other jurisdictions. To the extent these dynamics are idiosyncratic to the jurisdiction, the more important it is to innovate solutions based on local needs.

Another limitation is the quality of the data. Ambiguities regarding licensure stop and start dates affect how well the data capture recruitment and retention processes. In this case, we were able to knit start and stop dates together in all but a small percentage of cases. More broadly, as states put their foster home data to use building evidence, they will jump-start a learning process about the data they have. As we have observed with other administrative data sources, the use of data improves its quality over time.

Given this, what are the next steps? Although recommendations for more research or analysis are often viewed as tepid, the truth is child welfare systems do not yet know enough to boldly test new recruitment and retention strategies. Put more simply, defining problems is an important action step; poorly defined problems are much harder to solve. Resources are limited, and we should expect some trial and error as strategies are refined over time. However, better problem definition, coupled with a clear theory of action, will shorten the improvement cycle.

A next step focuses on retention as opposed to recruitment. As we have explained, the number of foster homes that begin each year is large enough to maintain a steady population of active homes. However, we don't know anything about the processes that precede licensure in terms of recruitment and efforts to increase the number of families that express interest *and* go onto become a foster parent licensed to accept children. A study of this process requires pre-licensure data; however, those data are sparse when compared with post-licensure data.

Another next step would focus on strategies that affect retention. It is clear, for example, that a substantial number of families are licensed and then leave the system before ever having a child placed with them. Of those foster parents who leave quickly and did have a child placed with them, it would appear that a significant subset of those families are providing kinship care. For families who never have a child placed with them, we ask whether efforts should be made to retain those families. These families tend to leave for family reasons. Child welfare workers should consider testing other strategies to retain these families, such as better screening methods or supportive services that sustain a family's interest while they sort through their changing circumstances.

With regard to process, it is important to understand more about the time it takes to place the first child in a licensed home. The delays may be related to how vacancies are managed in response to demand. The need to place a child or a group of children vacillates quite a bit from one month to the next; seasonality is another important contributor to the ebb and flow of demand. Because it is hard to predict what will happen next week, let alone next month, maintaining vacancies is an important strategy, especially in systems that undergo bursts in demand. For this reason and others, we need to better understand retention in the state. Do parts of the state exhibit different patterns—a larger fraction of short-term foster parents with no placements or a smaller fraction that leave for family reasons—that are the result of practice differences? In times of peak demand, are homes that were recently vacated more likely to be receive new placements? And, to what extent do these patterns vary with the age of the foster parent or characteristics of children needing placement?

Quality is another aspect of foster home retention. Although foster homes are important resources, it is important to be selective. Fortunately, as our findings suggest, closing foster homes at the discretion of the public agency because of their concerns with foster parents is relatively rare, although there may be some connection with longevity (see Table 3). That said, it is important to anticipate, as opposed to react to, problems with the service a foster home provides. A deeper look than what we've provided here is warranted, starting with how foster parent age is related to terminations arising from the public agency's own concerns. For example, are older, willing foster parents simply no longer able to perform the

duties required given the demand for placements in a given location? If so, does the termination happen while children are in the foster parent's care or does it tend to happen when the home is empty? The answer may influence how the initial placement gets made. If, however, systematic efforts to close foster homes are undertaken, then they have to be matched with systematic efforts to recruit homes. Otherwise the overall supply of homes will shrink, leading to a different set of problems.

Likewise, foster home quality and placement stability are important from a retention perspective. With linked foster home and foster child data, such as we used here, an important next line of inquiry would join what we know about a young person placed in a home (i.e., the assessed well-being), the match with a foster home, the likelihood the placement will disrupt, and the likelihood a foster parent leaves service due to a poor match with a child.

Foster homes are an important resource. However, greater attention has to be paid to what policymakers already know and how they can increase their knowledge with more effective use of data. We have tried to illustrate how that data might be used to build a body of evidence that points toward innovation. Without better problem definition up front, it is hard to see how the challenges of recruitment, retention, and quality can be addressed swiftly, safely, and effectively.

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Appendix A. Methodology

Table A-1. Exit Reasons Coding Map

Reason Detail	Summary Code
Consistent failure to attend the group sessions or refusal to complete forms within time frames	XAD
Criminal charges or conviction	XAD
Demonstrated inability to sufficiently parent children in state custody	XAD
Failure to meet minimum requirements for resource parents or residence	XAD
Failure to preserve the continuity and value of the child's racial, ethnic, and cultural identity	XAD
Home previously closed in bad standing	XAD
Inability to cooperatively participate in permanency plans	XAD
Inability to cope with children's behaviors due to resource parent's poor coping skills	XAD
Lifestyle not conducive to mental, ethical, and emotional development	XAD
Alleged perpetrator in active investigation and home previously closed in bad standing	XAN
Validated child protective services case	XAN
Family has adopted and is selecting out of foster care	XAP
DCS not disclosing all known information about the children prior to placement	XFC
DCS not providing timely financial support of placements	XFC
DCS not responsive in crisis situations with the children or the family	XFC
DCS not returning phone calls	XFC
Feeling a lack of input to permanency planning for children	XFC
Feeling disrespected by DCS	XFC
Insufficient respite resources	XFC
Lack of agency support	XFC
Lack of training offered by DCS	XFC
Poor communication between the family and DCS	XFC
Change in family circumstance prevents them from continuing to foster at this time	XFR
Family asks to cease contact	XFR
Family has decided not to foster at this time	XFR
Family withdrew application	XFR
ICPC Case Ended	XFR
Inability to cope with children's behaviors due to child no fault of resource parent's coping skills	XFR
Medical problems (physical or mental) that inhibit the ability to care for the child	XFR
The family had placement preferences that do not meet the agency's needs at this time	XFR
Unable to attend or complete all of required trainings due to jobs, lack of child care, etc.	XFR
Family began fostering to care for relative solely and foster care is no longer necessary for child	XKC
Kinship Case Ended	XKC
Family can no longer be reached	XOT
Other Reason	XOT
Duplicate Home	XOT
In Error	XOT
Family to continue fostering but changing to another agency	XOT
Resource Home Under SIU Investigation	XOT