



The Office of Innovation, Alignment, and Accountability

RESEARCH BRIEF: CHILD OUTCOMES IN KINSHIP CARE IN WASHINGTON STATE



Washington State Department of
CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES

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January 2022



Washington State Department of
CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES

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Background

When a child or youth must be removed from their parent's care, kinship care provides continuity of family relationships and culture while affirming a child's sense of belonging and identity. Children entering out-of-home care frequently lose not only their home, neighborhood, school, pets, and friends, they also frequently lose their relationships with extended family and the traditions, language, and history maintained and passed on by these relationships. It is in the context of these relationships that children develop their earliest identity and sense of belonging. When children are placed with kin, they are more likely to maintain these connections and experience their associated protective factors.

Reflexively, families also often want to care for their children when a parent is not available. Out-of-home placement can disrupt and create a void in the entire family system. This is especially true for racial and ethnic groups whose children may be disproportionately placed in foster care. Kinship care affirms the vital importance of culture and provides one way to address the racial and ethnic disproportionality and disparities found in child welfare. If children are placed with kin, it is more likely that they will be cared for by someone who shares their ethnicity, culture and/or language.

Washington State's child welfare laws are found in Title 13 of the Revised Code of Washington. It is worth noting that the Washington State Legislature felt strongly enough about the importance of the family unit to open chapter 13.34 with the following statement:

The Legislature declares that the family unit is a fundamental resource of American life which should be nurtured. Toward the continuance of this principle, the Legislature declares that the family unit should remain intact unless a child's right to conditions of basic nurture, health, or safety is jeopardized. [RCW 13.34.020](#)

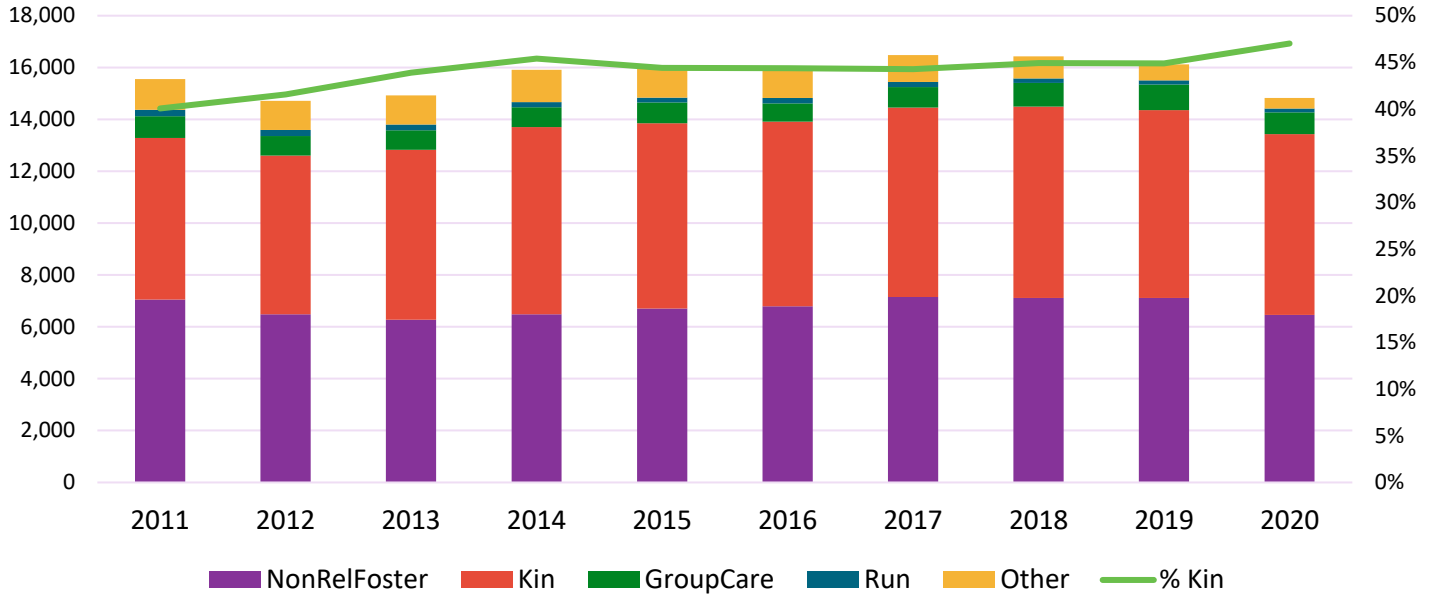
If a child or youth must be removed from their parent's care, it is incumbent upon the child welfare system to seek out and place children with kin. By doing so, the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) affirms the importance of the family unit and the child's identity and culture and intentionally engages in a practice that begins to address racial and ethnic disproportionality.

DCYF maintains a kin-first preference as reflected in [Policy 4250 Placement Out-of-Home and Conditions for Return Home](#). When children must be removed from a parent's care, DCYF staff only place children with a licensed, typically unrelated caregiver when a kinship caregiver is unavailable.

In Washington State laws and policies, the term "kin" includes relatives, by blood or adoption, and suitable other persons.

In Washington State in FY 2020, about 47% of all children under 18 experiencing foster care were placed with kin. This is higher than seen in the past decade when anywhere from 40% to 45% of children in out-of-home care were placed with kin.

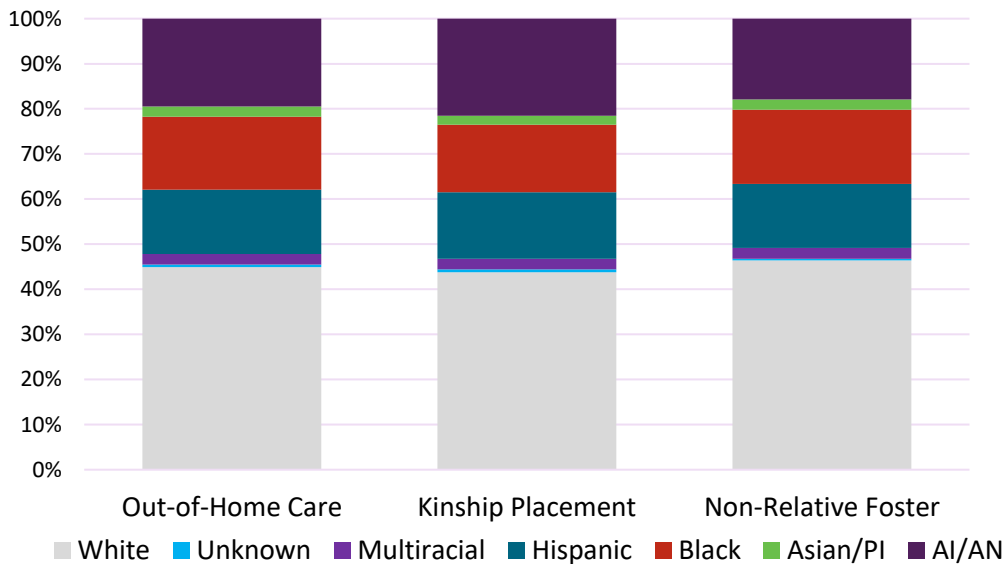
Figure 1. Total Children <18 in Out-of-Home Placements, by FY 2011-2020



Note: Data exclude children exclusively in Trial Return Home during FY.

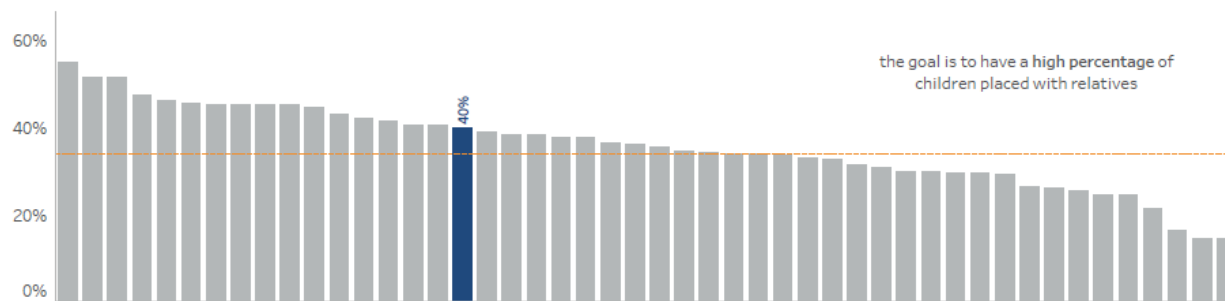
We can compare the racial/ethnic makeup of children experiencing kinship care each year with DCYF compared with those experiencing non-relative foster care. In Figure 2, we see that a slightly higher portion of children in kinship care are children of color (53.2%) than the portion in non-relative foster care (50.8%).

Figure 2. Children <18 Experiencing Out-of-Home Care by Race/Ethnicity and Placement Setting, FY 2020



Note: Data exclude children exclusively in Trial Return Home during FY; race/ethnicity calculated using WSRDAC/m standard.

Compared with other states, Washington is just above average in terms of percent of children placed with kin. The chart below from Casey Family Programs shows that on Sept. 30, 2020, 40% of Washington’s children were in kinship care, compared with the about 38% national average among states.

Figure 3. Percent of Children in Kinship Care, All Ages

Data Note: Sept 30, 2020 point in time, children on Trial Return Home excluded, data courtesy Casey Family Programs.

Child Outcomes

Researchers across the nation have studied the potential benefits and risks of kinship placement in the child welfare system on outcomes for children for many years. In a 2014 meta-analysis of over one hundred such rigorous studies, involving over 600,000 children total, Cochrane found that children in kinship foster care on average experience fewer behavioral problems, fewer mental health disorders, better well-being, and less placement disruption than do children in non-kinship foster care.¹

In Washington State, we have a number of sources of data that provide us information about how children in kinship care are faring in our state. The first is the Healthy Youth Survey, a general survey of youth in grades 6, 8, 10, and 12, where youth can self-identify if they are living with a relative or friend instead of their parents. We also have specific data from child assessments administered by DCYF staff. The findings from Washington's Healthy Youth Survey as well as the examination of children placed in out-of-home care by DCYF are consistent with findings in the broader research. On average, children and youth in Washington State placed in out-of-home care experience greater well-being when placed in kinship care.

The 2018 Healthy Youth Survey (most recent data available) provides data on youth who self-identified as living with parents, relatives, unrelated kin, or in foster care. It is important to note that living with relatives and unrelated kin would include many children in informal kinship arrangements who are not involved in the child welfare system, as well as those in kinship placement through DCYF. The analyses below are taken from a forthcoming report.²

Youth in alternative living arrangements are more likely to feel hopelessness, but hopelessness is lower for youth in kinship care.*

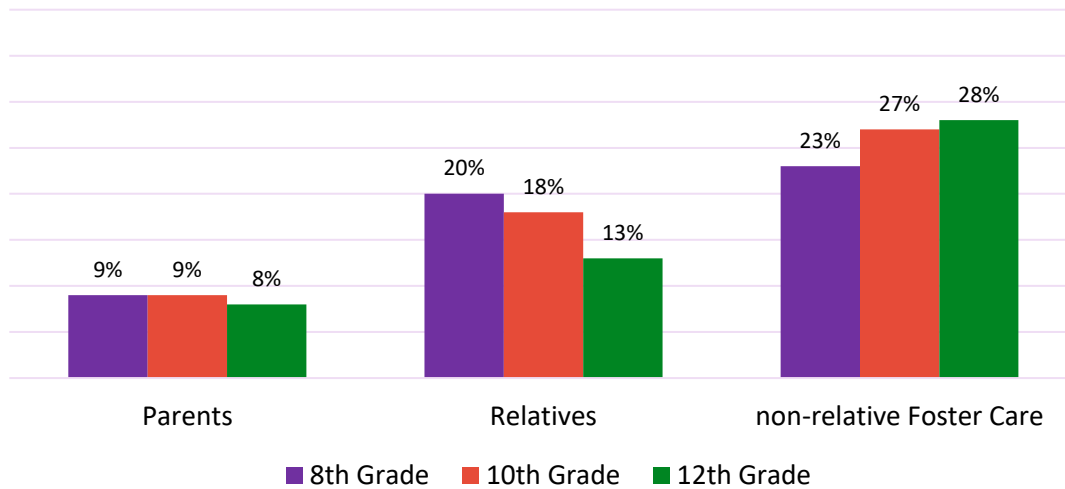
Youth not living with their parents were more likely to report feeling low or very low hope. Hopelessness increased the further youth were separated from their family. Compared to living with parents, hopelessness was:

- **3.0** times higher for youth in relative care
- **4.8** times higher for youth in foster care

¹ Winokur, M., Holtan, A. and Batchelder, K.E., 2014. [Kinship care for the safety, permanency, and well-being of children removed from the home for maltreatment](#). *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, (1).

² *Forthcoming*. Risk Factors Associated with Different Living Arrangements: Youth in Kinship Care and Foster Care. Findings from the 2018 Healthy Youth Survey, Department of Social and Health Services.

Figure 4. Percent reporting “Hopelessness” by grade level, HYS 2018



* Odds ratios adjusted for grade and sex.

* Hopeless is computed using the Children's Hope Scale, a six-item self-report measure of children's perceptions that their goals can be met.

Youth in alternative living arrangements are more likely to have been harassed and feel unsafe, but substance use was lower for youth in kinship care compared to foster care.

Youth not living with their parents were more likely to feel unsafe and experience harassment. Feeling unsafe and harassment increased the further youth were separated from their family. Compared to living with parents:

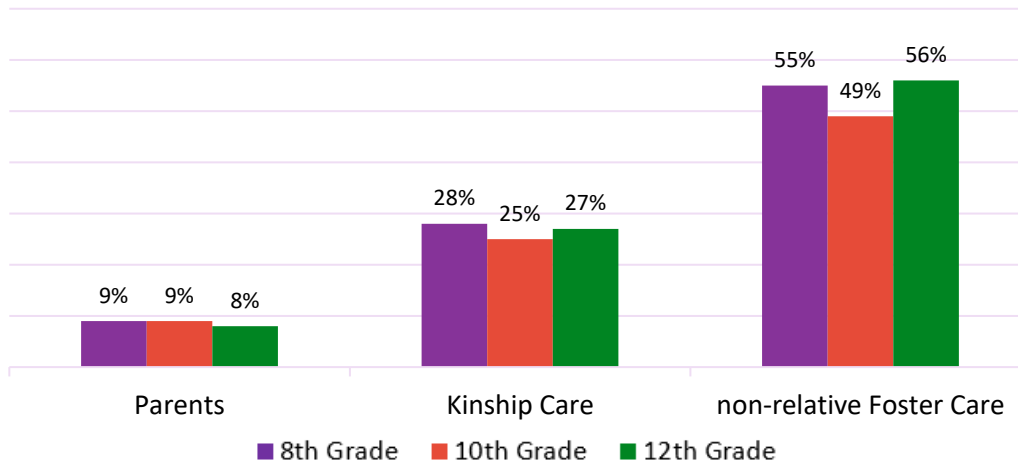
Youth living in kinship care were:

- **3.6** times more likely to feel unsafe going to/from school
- **2.9** times more likely to experience harassment because of race
- **3.7** times more likely to experience harassment because of perceived sexual orientation

Youth living in foster care were:

- **12.7** times more likely to feel unsafe going to/from school
- **7.9** times more likely to experience harassment because of race
- **11.5** times more likely to experience harassment because of perceived sexual orientation

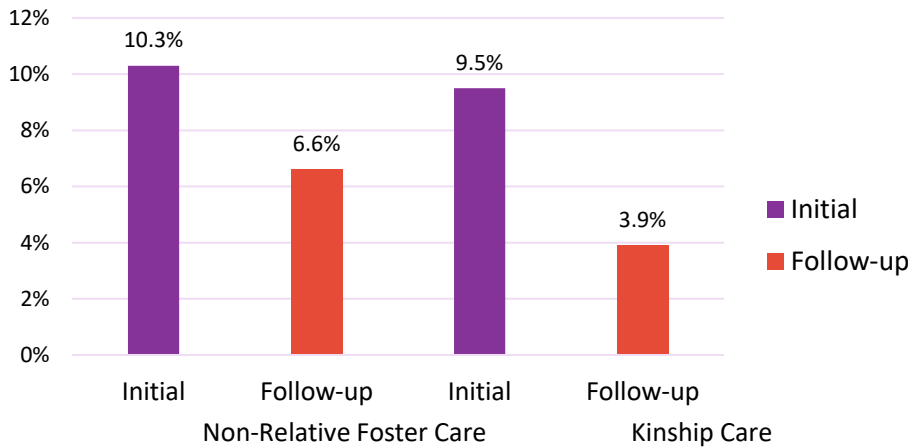
Figure 5. Percent harassment and feeling unsafe among 10th graders, HYS 2018



A recent analysis by DCYF’s Office of Innovation, Alignment, and Accountability on screening and assessment data from a group of children ages 6-17 who entered out-of-home care as a result of child welfare involvement in 2016-2019 adds additional insight into the benefits of placing children in kinship care.

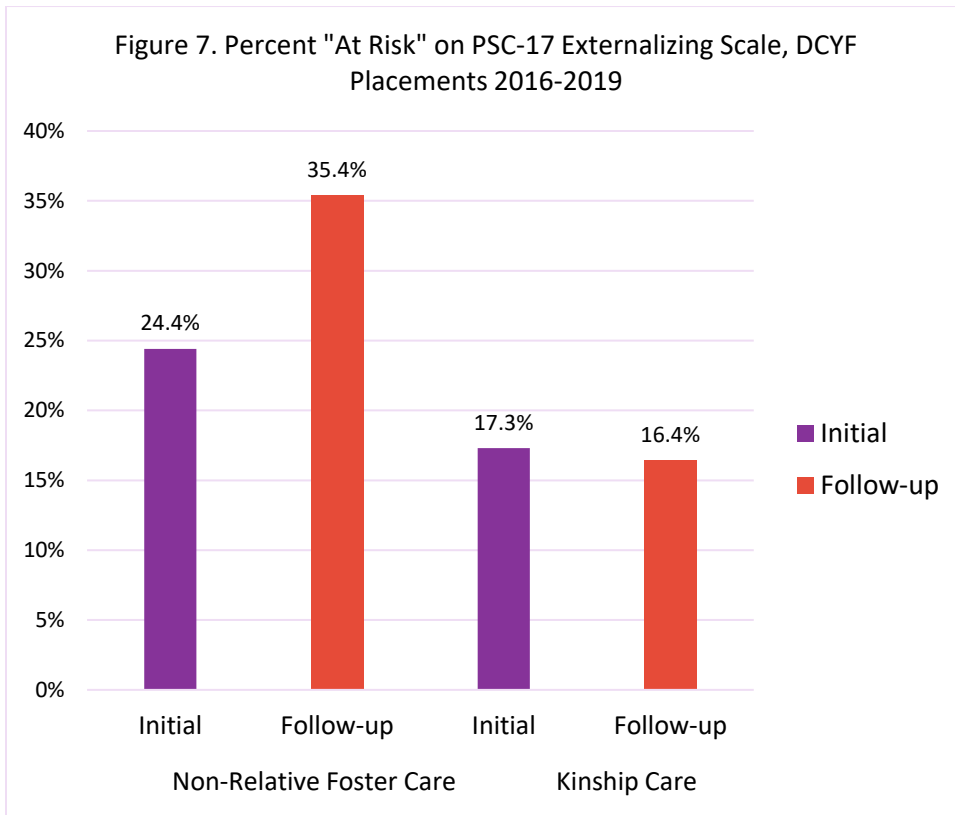
When children involved with child welfare enter out-of-home care, DCYF staff conduct a number of screening and assessment measures that provide insight into the child’s emotional/behavioral wellbeing. Examination of these various measures indicate that, on average, children and youth placed in kinship care in Washington’s child welfare system tend to do better emotionally and behaviorally than those placed in non-relative foster care. For example, children and youth ages 6 to 17 placed in kinship care showed greater improvements on their PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) scores over the course of their first six months in out-of-home care (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Percent “At Risk” on PTSD Screener, DCYF Placements 2016-2019



Total N=364

Additionally, children and youth placed in kinship care show slight improvements in externalizing behavior over the first six months of placement, while those placed in foster care showed significantly worse externalizing behavior problems over the same time frame (Figure 7).

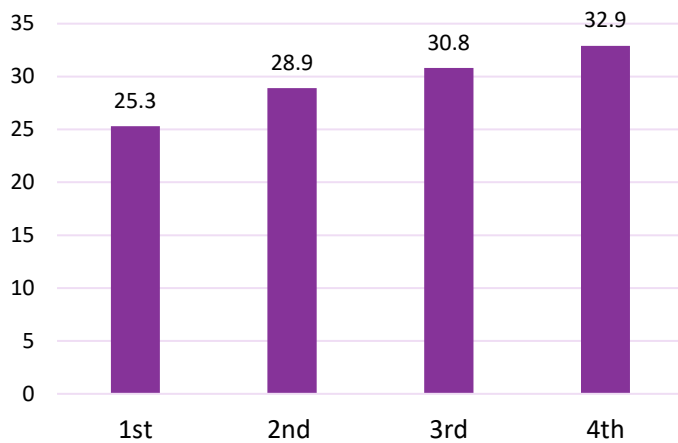


Total N=711

This increase in externalizing behavioral problems among children placed in licensed (primarily non-kin)³ foster care was also found when examining the scores on the Foster Care Rate Assessment, which is completed initially when a child is placed into licensed foster care and then every six months. Here we see a steady increase in the number of hours required to meet the behavioral needs of children placed in licensed foster care over the first four Foster Care Rate Assessment (first 18 months in out-of-home care). As indicated on the Foster Care Rate Assessment, foster parents are initially reporting that on average 25.3 hours are needed per week to meet the behavioral needs of children placed in their care, with this number steadily increasing to on average 32.9 hours per week by the fourth rate assessment (Figure 8).

³ In Washington, most kinship care is not licensed, so this licensed sample is 98% non-kinship care across all four observations.

Figure 8. Average Number of Hours Needed Each Week to Meet Behavioral Needs of Child, All Children Ages 0-18 in Care 2016-2019



Data source: Foster Care Rate Assessment-Behavioral Needs Domain; N=520 children

Relevant Policies and Laws

DCYF Policy

- [4250. Placement Out-of-Home and Conditions for Return Home.](#)
 - Policy (4) gives kin placement priority.
- [4527. Kinship Care: Searching for, Placing with, and Supporting Relatives and Suitable Other Persons.](#)
 - Defines kinship, relative, and suitable person.
 - Policy (5) prioritizes kinship placements.

RCW

- [13.34.060](#)—Gives kin (relatives and suitable other persons) placement priority at the time removal.
- [13.34.130](#)—Authorizes the agency to place a child with kin and states that children should only be placed with a person not related to them when it is in the best interests of the child.
- In general, RCW 13.34 uses the relative definition in RCW [74.15.020\(2\)\(a\)](#).
- Suitable others are defined in [13.34.130\(1\)\(b\)\(ii\)](#).

Federal Law

- 42 U.S.C. § 671(a)(19) and 42 U.S.C. § 671(a)(29)

Title IV-E of the Social Security Act requires that states prioritize relative placements over nonrelated foster care (as long as the caregiver meets all relevant requirements) and demonstrate due diligence to identify and notify relatives. States must meet these requirements in order to receive IV-E funds.