

Family Ties:

Exploring Massachusetts' use of Kinship Foster Care for Children in the Child Welfare System

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The importance of maintaining family connections for children in foster care

When we don't give children the best opportunity for healthy growth and development, we put their future – and our future as a Commonwealth – at risk. Fortunately, we know what works for children in foster care. We know that children are most likely to thrive if they live in stable and loving homes; and that their outcomes will be even better if these homes are familiar to them. Research has shown that placing children with “kin” – other family members or close friends – is often better than putting them in a stranger's foster home or a group home.¹

In Massachusetts, the percentage of children in foster care placed with kin is increasing, yet the state still trails many other states. And although the rates for kinship care are increasing for children of all races in Massachusetts, a significant disparity exists between children of color and white children. African American and Latino children who are removed from their homes are placed with kin at a lower rate than white children.

In Massachusetts, over 30,000 children live in households headed by a family member who is not their parent.² Most of these children are not abused or neglected and thus do not become involved with the state child welfare agency, the Department of Children and Families (DCF). However, a small group of children are removed from their homes and placed by DCF with other family members or close friends, what is called a “kinship foster care” placement. The majority of these children live in kinship foster care placements headed by a grandparent, but they may also live in homes headed by siblings, aunts, uncles, other relatives and even close friends. Kinship foster care helps children maintain connections to their family and friends, and often provides an opportunity for siblings to stay together. Kinship foster care provides more consistency and stability for children in school and at home, maintains important links to community and cultural heritage, and increases the likelihood that children will find permanent homes.³

For children who have been removed from their parents, providing a stable support system gives the best chance for overcoming the trauma they have faced in their lives.⁴ Foster care placements help provide this support system. Kinship foster care, though, usually provides even better support than non-relative foster care by placing children with a loving adult they may already know.

Mass. Law Reform Institute Companion Report

Massachusetts continues to increase kinship foster care rates for all kids in the state. However, more can be done, both to further increase the use of kinship foster care for our most vulnerable children, and to decrease disparities between children of color and white children. “*The Ties That Bind*,” a companion report by the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI) highlights recommendations that would help the state increase the use of kinship foster care for all kids. It calls attention to policies that would lead to increases in kinship foster care rates, but also those that would provide more support for the families who care for these children. It also examines policies which would reduce unnecessary barriers to kinship foster care and help DCF leadership communicate a strong and unified message that kinship care should be the first option for all kids, regardless of their race or where they live in the state. The MLRI report “*The Ties That Bind*” can be found at <http://www.mlri.org/>

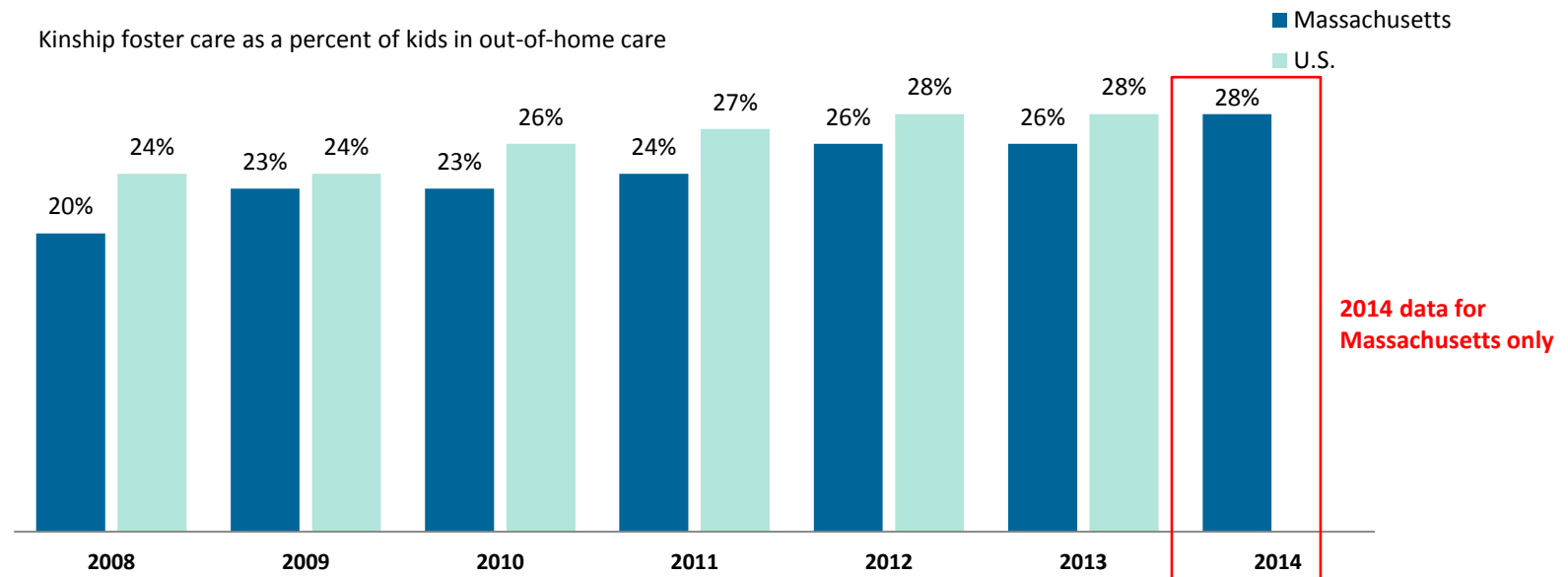
2 This research was funded in part by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

Kinship foster care rates in Massachusetts are increasing and are now essentially even with national rates

Kinship foster care placements have increased across the country. State child welfare agencies and national experts have increasingly prioritized the importance of placing children with kin. In 2013, of the approximately 400,000 children removed from their home by child welfare agencies in the 50 states, around 113,000 (28 percent) were placed with kin. In 2008, 24 percent of children were placed with kin nationally.¹ Following this national trend, kinship foster care rates in Massachusetts are increasing as well. Between 2008 and 2014, the statewide rate increased from 20 percent to 28 percent for children removed from their home by DCF (“in placement”).²

Kinship foster care rates in Massachusetts are increasing more quickly than for the nation as a whole, and the state has essentially caught up to the national rate. For the last year we have data for both (2013), Massachusetts was 2 percentage points below the national average, but Massachusetts rates have grown since.

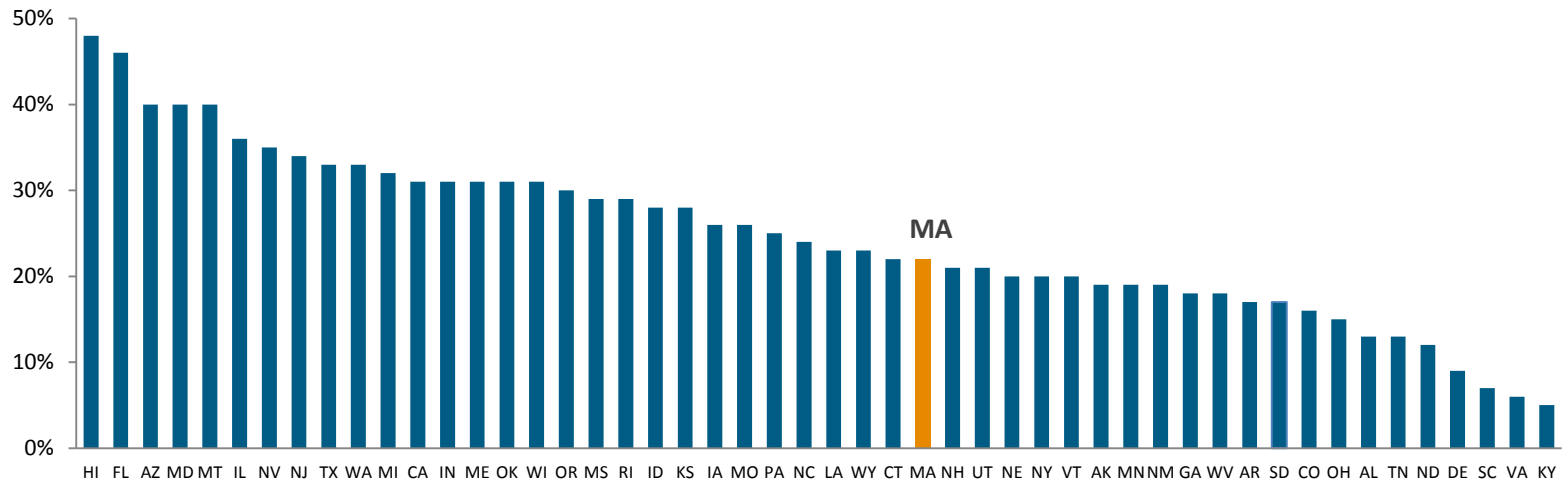
In Massachusetts, children placed with kin 38 percent more often in 2014 than in 2008



Source: Massachusetts data from DCF Monthly Operations Statistical Reports; U.S. data from AFCARS <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/afcars>

Massachusetts is in the middle of states for placing children with kin

In 2012, the last year we have kinship foster care data for both Massachusetts and other states, Massachusetts still placed in the middle of states in the use of kinship foster care for children in out-of-home care. Between 2012 and 2014, Massachusetts has continued to make strong strides, but more recent comparative data are not currently available.

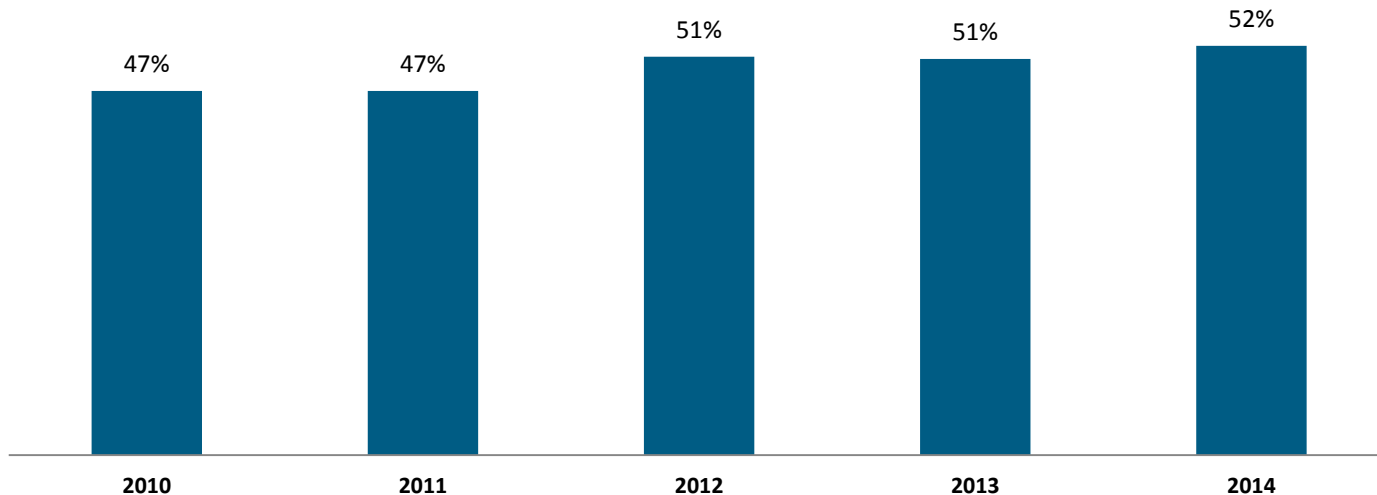


Kinship foster care rates, 2012

Source: KIDS COUNT Data Center at <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/6247-children-in-foster-care-by-placement-type?loc=1&loct=2#detailed/2/2-52/false/868,867,133,38,35/2621/12995>

Kinship foster care is used roughly half the time for children placed in a foster home

Even though kinship foster care is usually preferable, it is not an appropriate option for all children. Children who are removed from their homes can go to one of multiple placements. The more common options include: 1) kinship foster care; 2) non-relative foster care; 3) intensive foster care - a family that has training to handle children with certain medical or emotional needs; 4) a group home for children with behaviors that may be too tough for a foster family to handle; or 5) or a longer term residential placement for children with the most severe behavioral problems – usually due to the trauma they have experienced. Of the children for whom a foster placement is appropriate, over half are being placed with kin.

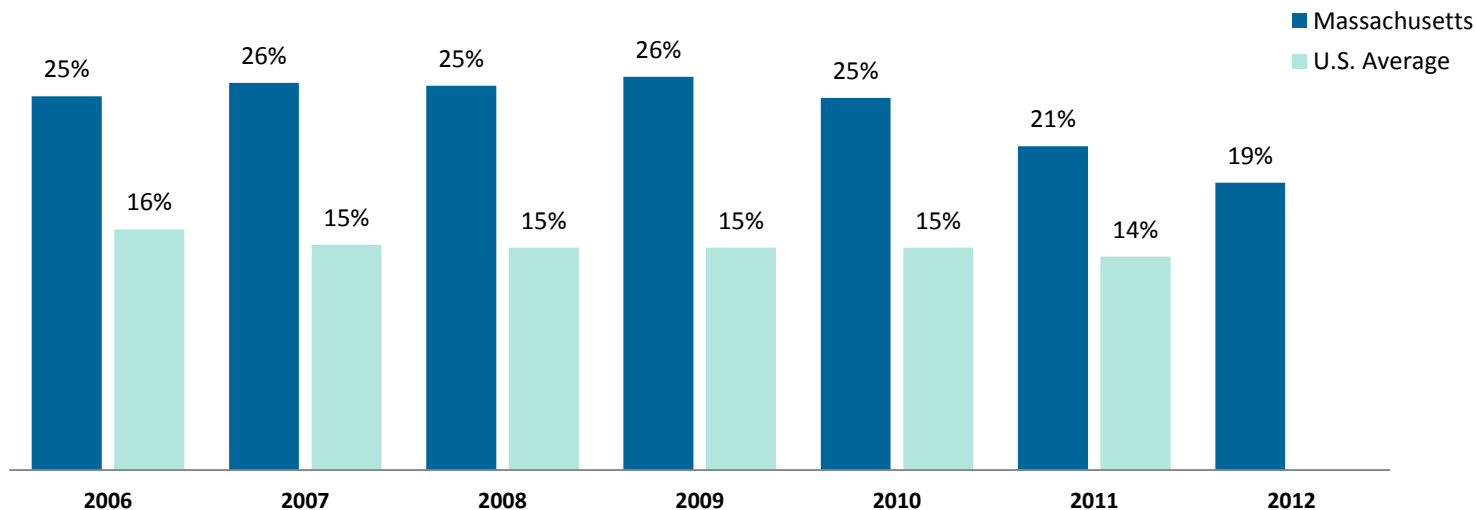


Percentage of children in foster homes placed with kin

Source: DCF Monthly Operations Statistical Reports

Stability rates in Massachusetts improving, but kids still moving placements more than the national average

Kinship foster care provides more consistency and stability for children, at home and at school.¹ In Massachusetts, what is referred to as “stability,” the number of times a child moves from one home to another, has improved. Children who move placements more often, who don’t have a stable place to stay, have lower high school completion rates, and higher rates of mental health and behavioral problems.² In Massachusetts, in 2012, 55.7 percent of children in kinship foster care placements stayed in their district school compared to only 44.9 percent of children in foster care.³ For children in care less than 12 months, about one in five moved placements two times or more. Even with this improvement, children in Massachusetts still move more often than other children in care across the country where fewer than one in seven moved placements two times or more in 2011.



The percentage of children switching homes more than twice in one year

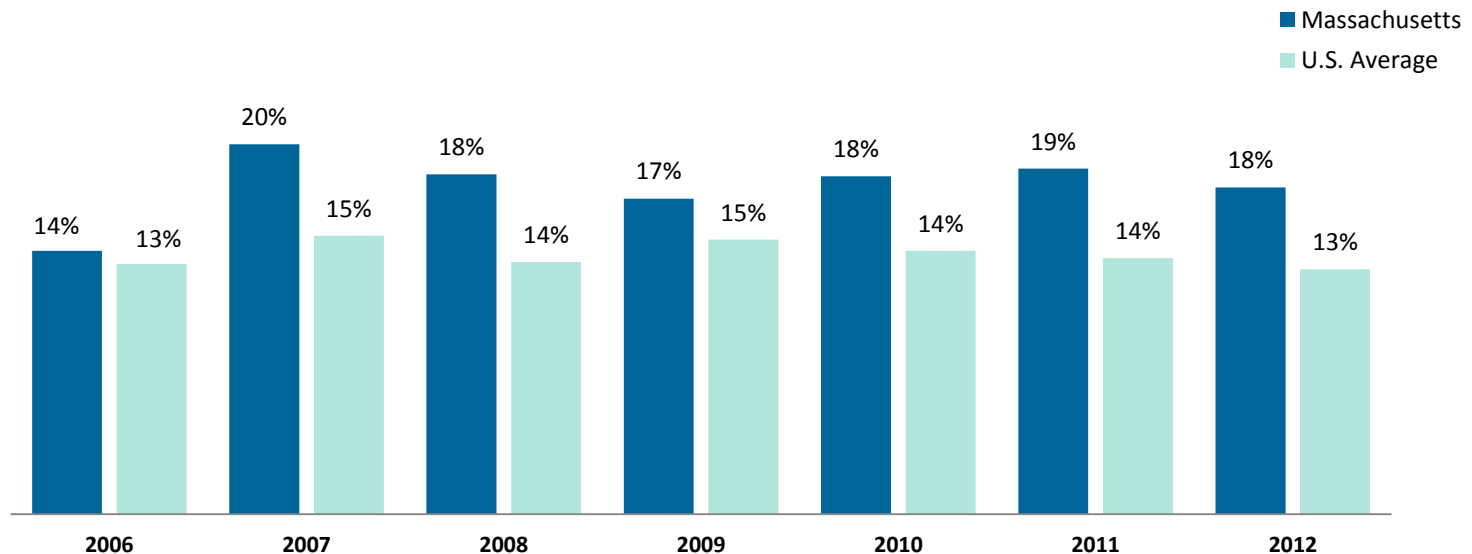
Source: AFCARS Child Welfare Outcomes - <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/cwo>

Note: AFCARS data shows children with 2 or fewer placements – this graph has been inverted to show children with more than 2 placements.

Children in Massachusetts leave the child welfare system without a permanent home more often than other children in the U.S.

“Permanency,” leaving DCF to a permanent family either through re-unification with parents, adoption, or legal guardianship provides an ongoing bond, and the resources and support that all children need to help them through their young adulthood and beyond. Children who leave the child welfare system to permanency have higher school completion rates, lower rates of incarceration and lower rates of homelessness than children who age-out of the child welfare system without the support of a permanent family.¹

More children are leaving the child welfare system without permanency in Massachusetts than in the country overall. Unfortunately, for children who age-out without permanency, leaving care and living on their own is a significant challenge.²



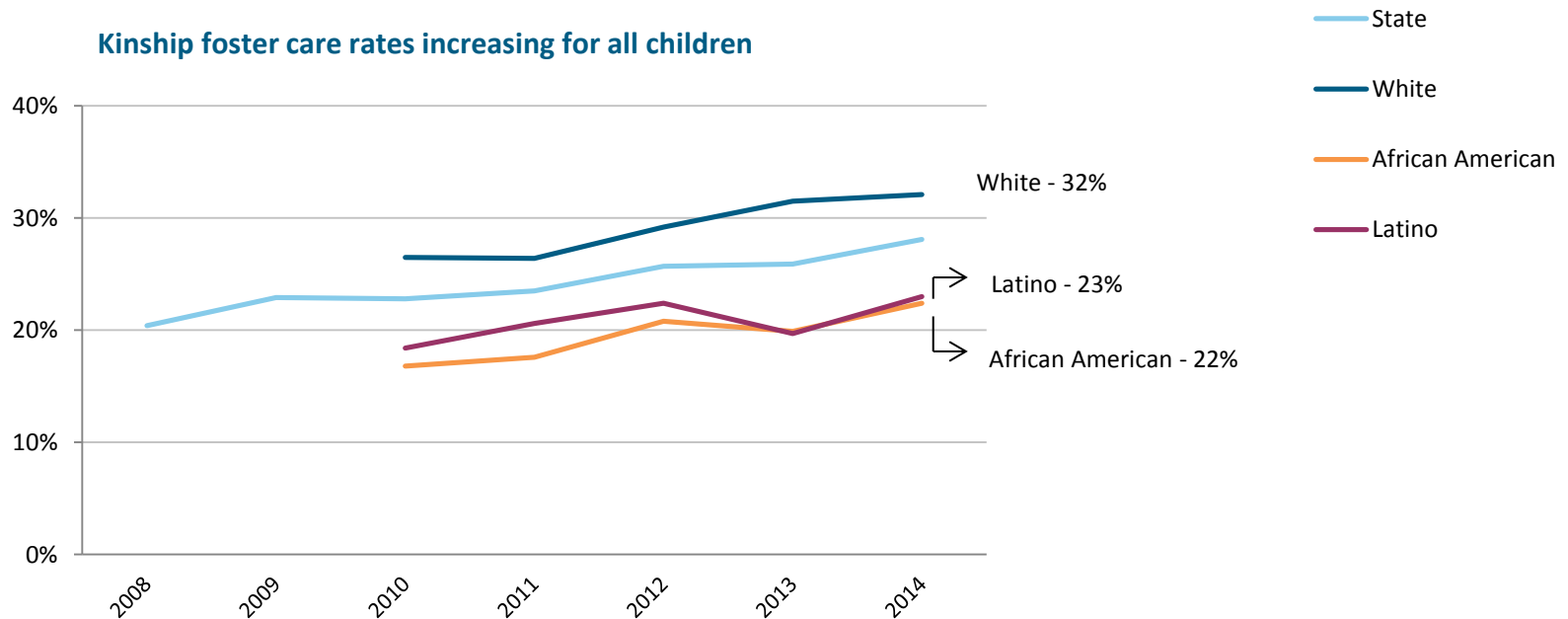
The percentage of children leaving the child welfare system without permanency. Permanency includes : reunification, adoption and guardianship

Source: AFCARS Child Welfare Outcomes - <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/cwo>

Note: AFCARS data shows children placed in permanent homes - this graph has been inverted to show children not placed in permanent homes. AFCARS recently released 2013 national data. This data are not included in the chart above. but the 2013 rate is unchanged from 2012.

African American and Latino children in out-of-home care are placed in kinship foster care at lower rates than white children. But these gaps are decreasing.

In recent years, Massachusetts has increased kinship foster care rates for the children in its care by a significant amount. And children of color experienced the highest increases in kinship foster care placements from 2010 to 2014. Even with a dip in 2013, African American children experienced a 33 percent increase in kinship foster care rates (from 17 percent to 22 percent) while Latino children experienced a 25 percent increase (from 18 percent to 23 percent) between 2010 and 2014. Over the same time period, kinship foster care rates for white children increased 21 percent (from 27 percent to 32 percent). Even with higher rates of increase recently, children of color overall are still placed in kinship foster care less than white children.



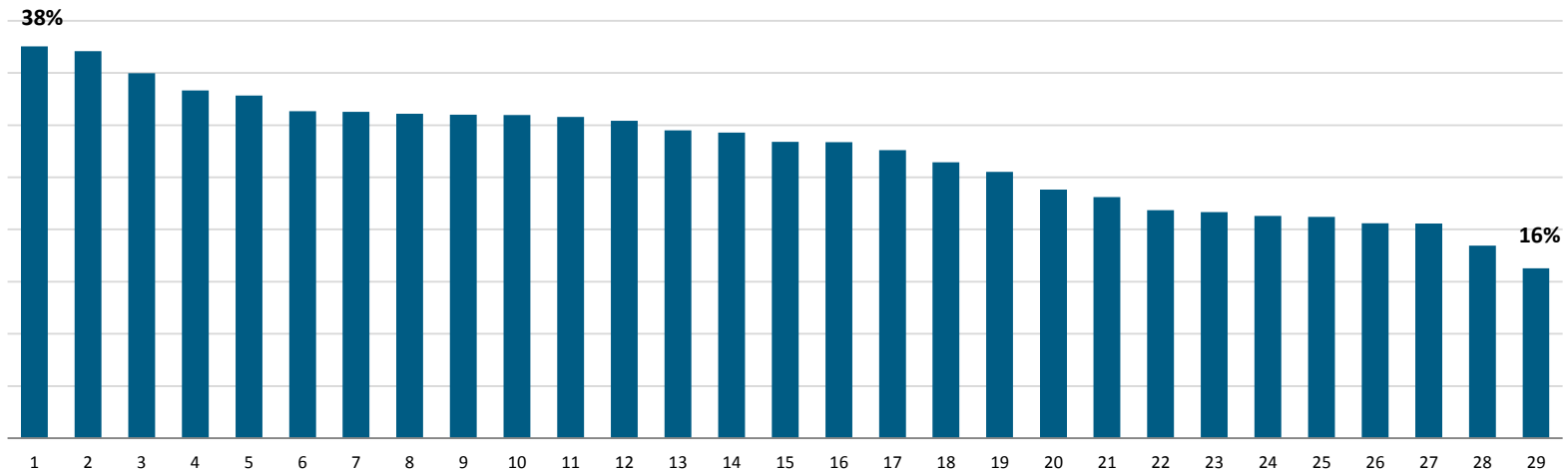
Source: DCF Monthly Operations Statistical Reports

There is significant variation across the state in the use of kinship foster care for children in the child welfare system

The chance to have a permanent home and all the other benefits of kinship care should not be influenced by geography. In Massachusetts though, there is a large gap in the use of kinship foster care across the different area offices in the state. While some area offices place more than 1 out of every 3 children in kinship foster care, others place fewer than 1 in 5 children with kin. In the chart below, the area offices placing the highest percentage of children with kin do so at a rate more than double the area offices with the lowest rates. There is a similar gap in the area offices for white children across the state. As we will see on the next page, variations in rates across the state are even larger for children of color.

Area offices place children with kin at different rates

Children placed with kin in each area office – as a percent of children in out-of-home care.



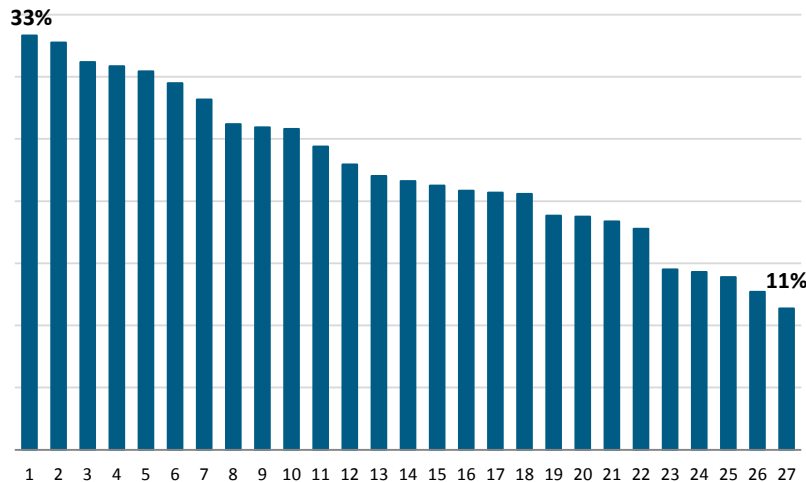
Source: February 2014 DCF Monthly Operations Statistical Report

There is large variation across the state in the use of kinship foster care for children of color

There is significant variation in the use of kinship foster care throughout the state. For children of color, the differences are even greater. Area offices with the highest kinship foster care rates for white children place children at rates more than double area offices with the lowest rates of kinship foster care. For Latino children the area office with the highest kinship foster care rate places children with kin at triple the rate of the area office with the lowest rate. And for African American children, the gap is tremendous. The area office with the highest rate places children with kin 10 times more than the office with the lowest rate. At the area office with the lowest kinship foster care rate, fewer than 1 in 30 African American children are placed with kin.

Area offices place Latino children with kin at different rates

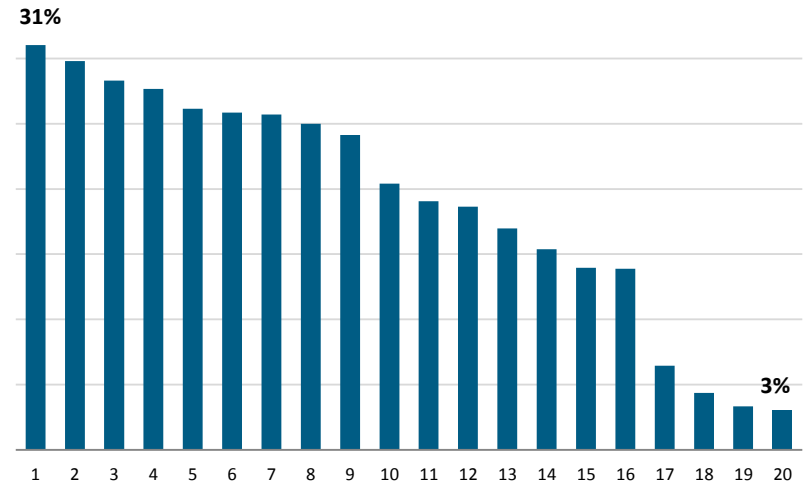
Children placed with kin in each area office – as a percent of children in out-of-home care.



Source: February 2014 DCF Monthly Operations Statistical Report. Only includes area offices with 20 or more Latino children in out-of-home care.

Area offices place African American children with kin at very different rates

Children placed with kin in each area office – as a percent of children in out-of-home care.

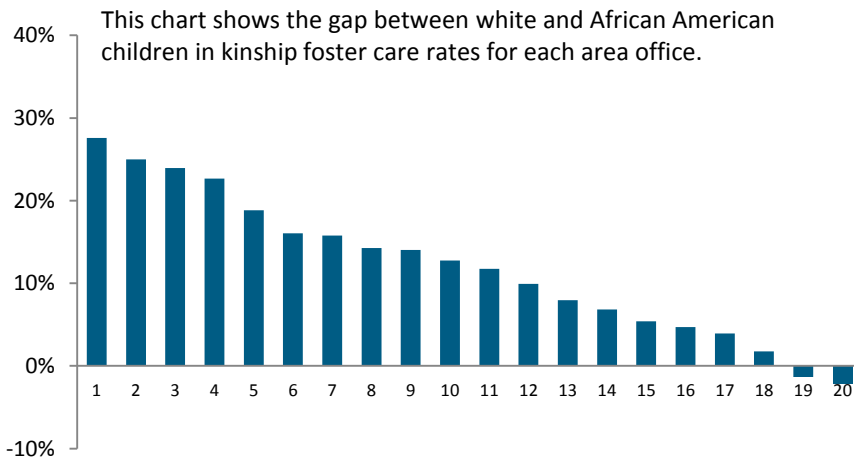


Source: February 2014 DCF Monthly Operations Statistical Report. Only includes area offices with 20 or more African American children in out-of-home care.

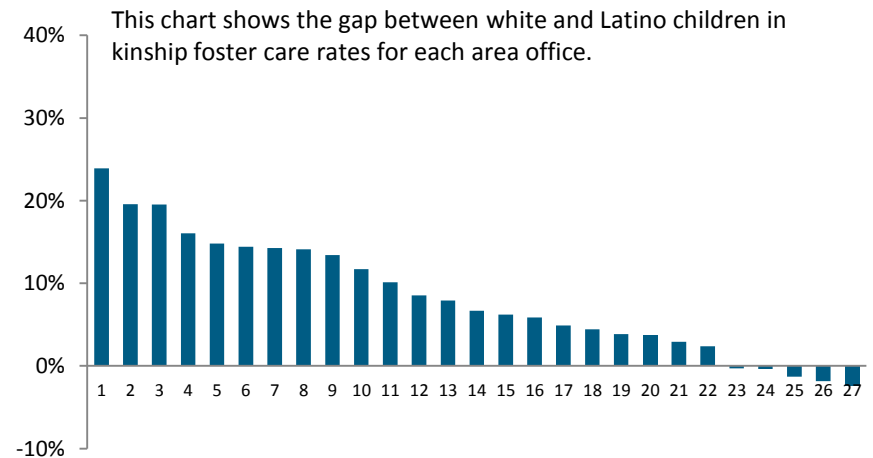
Within DCF area offices, children of color are placed in kinship foster care less than white children

In area offices with at least 20 children in out-of-home placement, almost 90 percent, 17 out of 19 area offices, place a higher percentage of white children in kinship foster care than African American children. In 11 of those offices, the gap between white and African American children in kinship foster care placement is more than 10 percentage points. In fact, the area office with the largest gap places almost 40 percent of white children with kin, while at the same time placing less than 7 percent of African American children. Similarly, 22-out-of-27 area offices place a higher percentage of white children in kinship foster care than Latino children with 11 of those offices having a gap of more than 10 percentage points. Narrowing the gaps in each area office is one way to improve outcomes for children.

Most area offices place a higher percentage of white children in kinship foster care than African American children



Most area offices place a higher percentage of white children in kinship foster care than Latino children



Source: February 2014 DCF Monthly Operations Statistical Report

* Only includes area offices with 20 or more African American children in out-of-home care.

Source: February 2014 DCF Monthly Operations Statistical Report

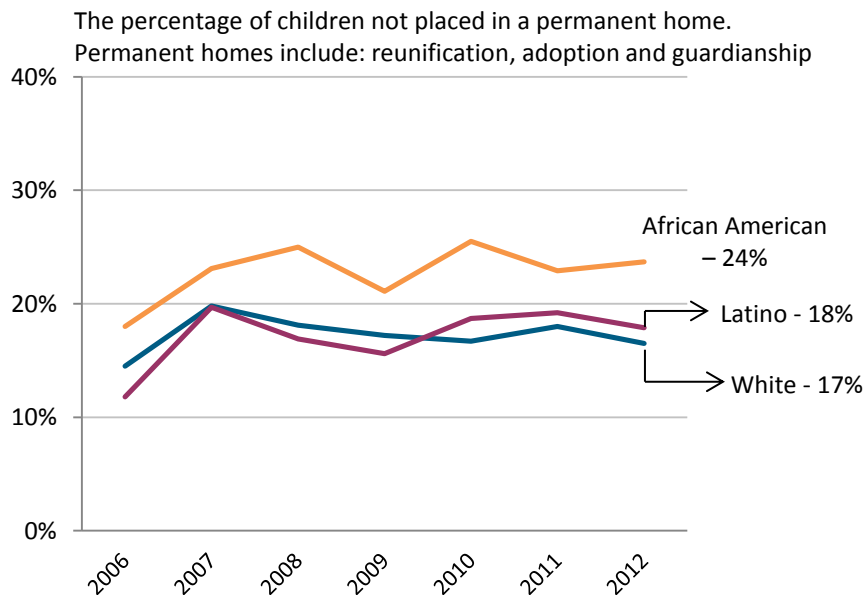
* Only includes area offices with 20 or more Latino children in out-of-home care.

African American children in Massachusetts leave the child welfare system without a permanent home more often than children of other races

When children leave the child welfare system in Massachusetts, they leave to uncertainty more often than other children in the U.S. In 2012, almost a quarter of African American children left DCF care without a permanent home to go to in Massachusetts. The state average was 18 percent. Just 13 percent of children in the entire country left care without a permanent home. In Massachusetts, Latino children find permanent homes almost as frequently as white children even though their kinship foster care rates lag behind.

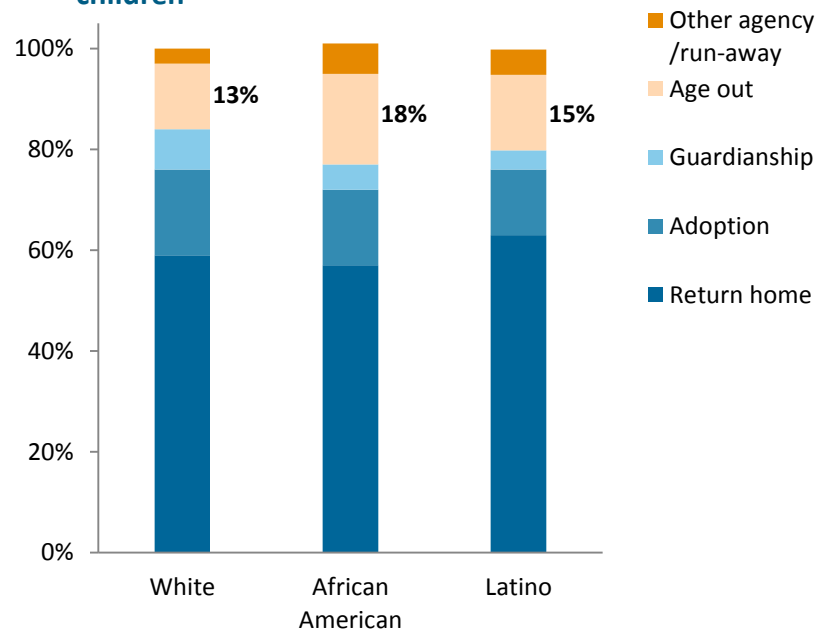
African American children also age out of the system more than other children in Massachusetts. Approximately 18 percent of African American children aged out of the system in 2012, compared to 13 percent of white children and 15 percent of Latino children.

African American children exit care without permanency more often than other children



Source: AFCARS Child Welfare Outcomes - <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/cwo>

African American children age out more than other children



Source: DCF Quarterly Report Fiscal Year 2013 3rd Quarter

Sources

Slide 2

- 1 Winokur, Holtan, and Batchelder. "kinship care for the safety, permanency, and well-being of children removed from the home for maltreatment." *status and date: New search for studies and content updated (no change to conclusions), published in 1* (2014); Rubin, David M., et al. "Impact of kinship care on behavioral well-being for children in out-of-home care." *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 162.6 (2008): 550-556.
- 2 Mass KidsCount from, <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/7172-children-in-kinship-care?loc=1&loct=2#detailed/2/10-19,2,20-29,3,30-39,4,40-49,5,50-52,6-9/false/1218,1049,995/any/14207,14208>
- 3 Webster and Barth, (2000) Placement stability for children in out-of-home care: a longitudinal analysis. Needell B School of Social Welfare, University of California at Berkeley, USA. Child Welfare; Winokur, Holtan, and Batchelder. "kinship care for the safety, permanency, and well-being of children removed from the home for maltreatment." *status and date: New search for studies and content updated (no change to conclusions), published in 1* (2014).
- 4 Ibid.

Slide 3

- 1 Mass KidsCount from, <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/7172-children-in-kinship-care?loc=1&loct=2#detailed/2/10-19,2,20-29,3,30-39,4,40-49,5,50-52,6-9/false/1218,1049,995/any/14207,14208>
- 2 Massachusetts DCF Monthly Operations Statistical Reports

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- 2 Winokur, Holtan, and Batchelder. "Kinship care for the safety, permanency, and well-being of children removed from the home for maltreatment." *status and date: New search for studies and content updated (no change to conclusions), published in 1* (2014); Rubin, et al. 2007. The Impact of Placement Stability on Behavioral Well-being for Children in Foster Care. *Pediatrics Vol. 119 No. 2 February 1, 2007. pp. 336 -344*; Gauthier, Fortin, & Jeliu, 2004 Clinical application of attachment theory in permanency planning for children in foster care: The importance of continuity of care; Pecora, 2012. Maximizing educational achievement of youth in foster care and alumni: Factors associated with success. *Children and Youth Services Review* 34 (2012) 1121-1129; pp. 336 -344; Rubin, et al., 2004 Placement Changes and Emergency Department Visits in the First Year of Foster Care.
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- 1 Courtney, Mark E., et al. "Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 21." (2007); Osgood, Foster, and Courtney. "Vulnerable populations and the transition to adulthood." *The Future of Children* 20.1 (2010): 209-229; Kaplan, Skolnik, and Turnbull. "Enhancing the empowerment of youth in foster care: supportive services." *Child welfare* 88.1 (2008): 133-161; Gauthier, Fortin, and Jeliu, (2004). Clinical application of attachment theory in permanency planning for children in foster care: The importance of continuity of care.
- 2 Ibid.