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CHILDREN AFFECTED BY PARENTAL SUBSTANCE USE

PARENTAL SUBSTANCE USE AND CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT

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Children in the US who enter the child welfare system with parental substance use as a risk factor differ from children who enter the system for other reasons.

Key takeaways:

- 1 Young children and children living in more rural areas are more likely to enter the child welfare system because of parental substance use.
- 2 Children removed from home because of parental substance use are more likely to experience inadequate housing and parental incarceration, compared with children removed from home without a parental substance use risk factor.
- 3 Children removed from home because of parental substance use have longer stays in out-of-home care compared with children removed without that risk factor.

DIFFERENCES BY AGE

Younger children are more likely than older children to live with a parent who misuses substances. And among those who interact with the child welfare system, either because of a maltreatment report or out-of-home care placement, younger children are more likely to have parental substance use documented as a risk factor.

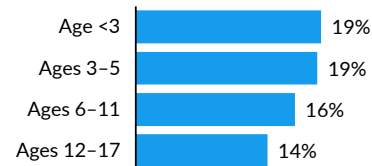
Among children younger than age 3, 19 percent lived with a parent who misused substances in the past year (figure 1). When a child welfare agency receives a maltreatment report for an infant, parental substance use is a risk factor in about one-third of cases (37 percent; figure 2). And parental substance misuse is a risk factor in out-of-home placements in about half of cases involving infants (51 percent; figure 3).

Teenagers are the least likely to have lived with a parent who misused substances in the past year (14 percent; figure 1). And among those reported for maltreatment, teenagers are also the least likely to have parental substance use as a risk factor (17 percent; figure 2). The share of teens who enter out-of-home placement because of parental substance use is markedly lower than younger children (19 percent; figure 3).

FIGURE 1

Younger Children Are More Likely to Live with Parental Substance Use

Share of all children who lived with a parent that misused a substance in the past year, average across 2015–19



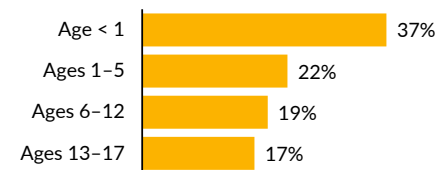
Source: Robin Ghertner, “U.S. National and State Estimates of Children Living with Parents Using Substances, 2015–2019,” US Department of Health and Human Services, Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Office of Human Services Policy, November 2022. <https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/f34eb24c1aff645bed0a6e978c0b4d16/children-at-risk-of-sud.pdf>; National Survey of Drug Use and Health, 2015–19.

Note: Substances include marijuana and misuse of prescriptions and exclude alcohol and tobacco.

FIGURE 2

Maltreatment Reports for Younger Children, Especially Infants, Are More Likely to Include a Parental Substance Use Risk Factor

Share of child welfare system maltreatment reports with parental substance use as a risk factor

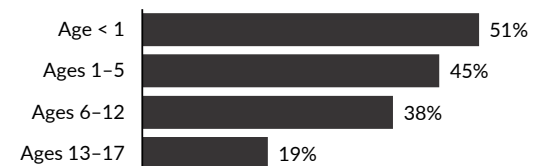


Source: National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) Child File FFY 2019. See the About the Data section for more details.

FIGURE 3

Younger Children Are the Most Likely to Enter Out-of-Home Care because of Parental Substance Use

Share of children who enter out-of-home care because of parental substance use

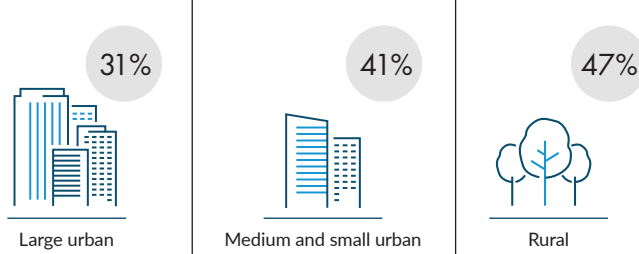


Source: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Foster Care File Annual File 2019. See the About the Data section for more details.

FIGURE 4

In More Urban Counties, the Share of Children Entering Out-of-Home Care with a Parental Substance Use Risk Factor Is Lower

Share of children entering out-of-home care with parental substance use as an identified risk factor



Sources: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Foster Care File Annual File 2019; 2013 National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). See the About the Data section for more details.

FIGURE 5

Risk Factors for Out-of-Home Care Entry Differ for Children from Families with and without Parental Substance Use

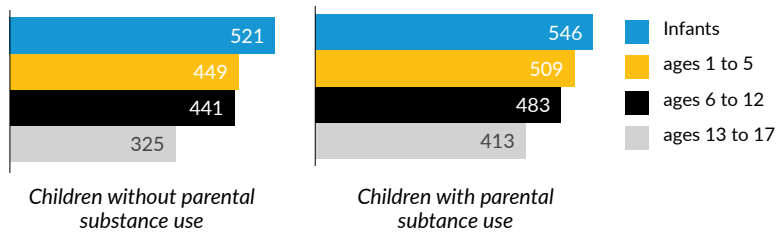
Removal reason	Removed with a parent affected by substance use	Removed without a parent affected by substance use
Inadequate housing	15%	7%
Parent incarceration	10%	5%
Physical abuse	9%	15%
Sexual abuse	2%	5%

Source: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Foster Care File Annual File 2019. See the About the Data section for more details.

FIGURE 6

Children Have Longer Lengths of Stay in Out-of-Home Care When Parental Substance Use Is a Risk Factor

Median number of days per stay in out-of-home care among children with and without a parental substance use risk factor by age at entry



Source: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Foster Care File Annual Files 2017-19. See the About the Data section for more details.

Note: Includes all children who entered out-of-home care during FY 2017 who either exited or were still in care as of September 30, 2019.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

This research was funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation under Contract Number #HHSP2332015000481 and carried out by NORC and the Urban Institute. The opinions, views, and data expressed in this fact sheet are those of the authors and do not reflect the official position of ASPE or the US Department of Health and Human Services. For more information on this fact sheet, please contact laura.radel@hhs.gov.

For more information on preventing child abuse and neglect, check out the following resources:

[What Is Prevention and Why Is it Important?](#)

[Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect](#)

[CDC Essentials for Childhood](#)

ABOUT THE DATA

This fact sheet uses data from three federal sources: the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Annual File, the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) Child File, and the 2013 National Center for Health Statistics Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties.

AFCARS is a federally mandated administrative data collection system and includes case-level data on all children in out-of-home care. These data can produce statistics that represent the universe of all children who are in the custody of a state's Title IV-E child welfare agency, which includes all children in out-of-home care. We used the AFCARS Annual Files from 2017 through 2019. Out-of-home care includes family foster care, kinship care, treatment foster care, and residential and group care. Note that some authors use the language

"foster care" to refer to out-of-home care, even when out-of-home care includes types of care beyond foster care.

NCANDS is a federally sponsored national data collection effort to track the volume and nature of child maltreatment reporting each year. The data contain all investigated reports of maltreatment to state child protective service agencies for children from birth to age 17. These data can produce statistics that represent the universe of child-specific reports of alleged child abuse and neglect that received a child protection service (CPS) response. We used the NCANDS Annual Child File from FFY 2019. The NCANDS subsample used here includes all children who were reported to the child welfare system in FFY 2019 with a nonmissing value for the parent drug and/or alcohol risk variables.

The 2013 NCHS Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties is based on the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB's) February 2013 delineation of metropolitan statistical areas (MSA) and micropolitan statistical areas. All US counties and county-equivalent entities are assigned to one of six levels based on: (1) their February 2013 Office of Management and Budget designation as metropolitan, micropolitan, or noncore; (2) for metropolitan counties, the population size of the metropolitan statistical area (MSA) to which they belong; and (3) for counties in MSAs of 1 million or more, the location of principal city populations within the MSA. For our analysis, we defined "large urban" as counties assigned large central metro or large fringe metro, "medium and small metro" as medium metro or small metro, and "rural" as micropolitan or noncore.

DIFFERENCES BY URBANICITY

Children living in rural areas that enter out-of-home care are more likely to have lived with someone with substance use issues compared with similar children in urban areas.

Figure 4 shows that nearly half of children in rural counties who are placed in out-of-home care are separated from their parents in part because of a parent's substance use, compared with 31 percent of children in the most urban counties.

CHILD WELFARE INVOLVEMENT

As a group, children who encounter the child welfare system because of parental substance use have a different experience than those not affected by substance use.

Parental substance use is a common reason for placing children in out-of-home care, but it usually co-occurs with other risk factors.



About 4 in 10 children who enter out-of-home care have parental substance use identified as a concern.



Only 1 in 10 enter out-of-home care with parental substance use as the only identified risk factor.

Figure 5 shows that children who enter out-of-home care, for whom parental substance use was a factor in their removal, are more likely to have experienced inadequate housing or parental incarceration. These children are also less likely to have been physically or sexually abused.

Figure 6 shows that children who enter out-of-home care with parental substance use as a risk factor typically stay longer in out-of-home care than those without this risk factor. This is true across all age groups.