

The Association Between Child Race, Region, and Length of Stay in Substitute Care in Illinois

Children and Family Research Center

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Children who are removed from their homes by the child welfare system should not languish in foster care. The state may need to take custody of children to keep them safe, but they should not be raised in a substitute care setting for long periods of time. Once a child is placed in substitute care, the goal is to move them out of care as quickly as it is safe and reasonable to do so. Therefore, length of stay (LOS) in substitute care is one of the outcome indicators used to measure the performance of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) in the annual *Monitoring Report of the B.H. Consent Decree*. In the report, length of stay is examined by identifying all the children who exited care during the fiscal year and then determining the number of months that they spent in substitute care before either exiting to permanency through reunification, adoption, or guardianship, or exiting without achieving a permanent family (e.g., aging out). The median LOS is reported, which is the number of months that it takes for 50% of those children to exit substitute care.

Figure 1 is taken from the FY2023 *B.H.* monitoring report and shows the median LOS for children exiting substitute care in FY2008 through FY2022.¹ Median LOS decreased from a high of 38 months in FY2008 to a low of 26 months in FY2021; it then increased to 29 months in FY2022. The median length of time that children spend in substitute care in Illinois is high compared to that for children in care nationally; in FFY2021,² the median LOS in the U.S. was 17.5 months.³

¹ Children and Family Research Center. (2023). *Conditions of Children in or at Risk of Foster Care in Illinois: FY2023 Monitoring Report of the B.H. Consent Decree*. Available online:

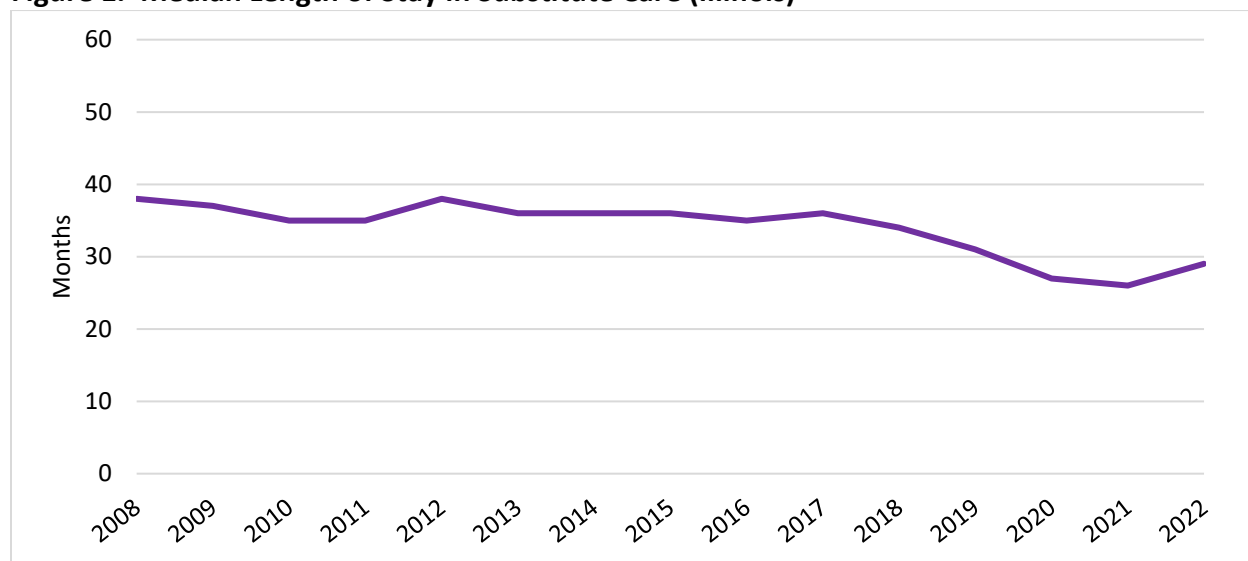
https://cfrc.illinois.edu/pubs/rp_20230901_BHReport.pdf

² Federal Fiscal Year 2021 (October 1, 2020 – September 30, 2021)

³ Children's Bureau. (2022). The AFCARS report: Preliminary FFY 2021 estimates as of June 28, 2022 (29). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

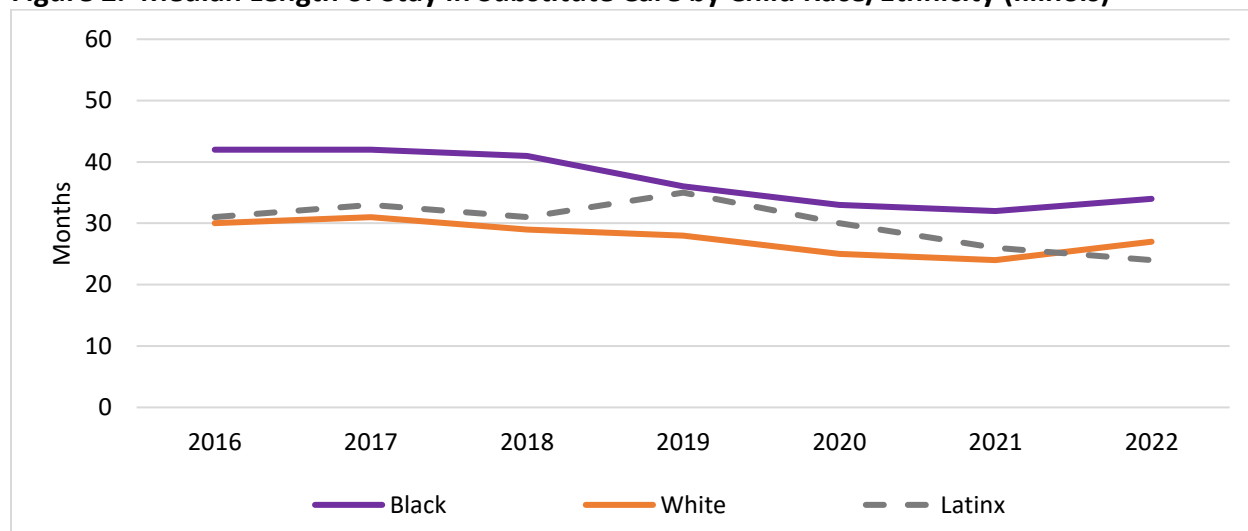
<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-report-29.pdf>

Figure 1. Median Length of Stay in Substitute Care (Illinois)



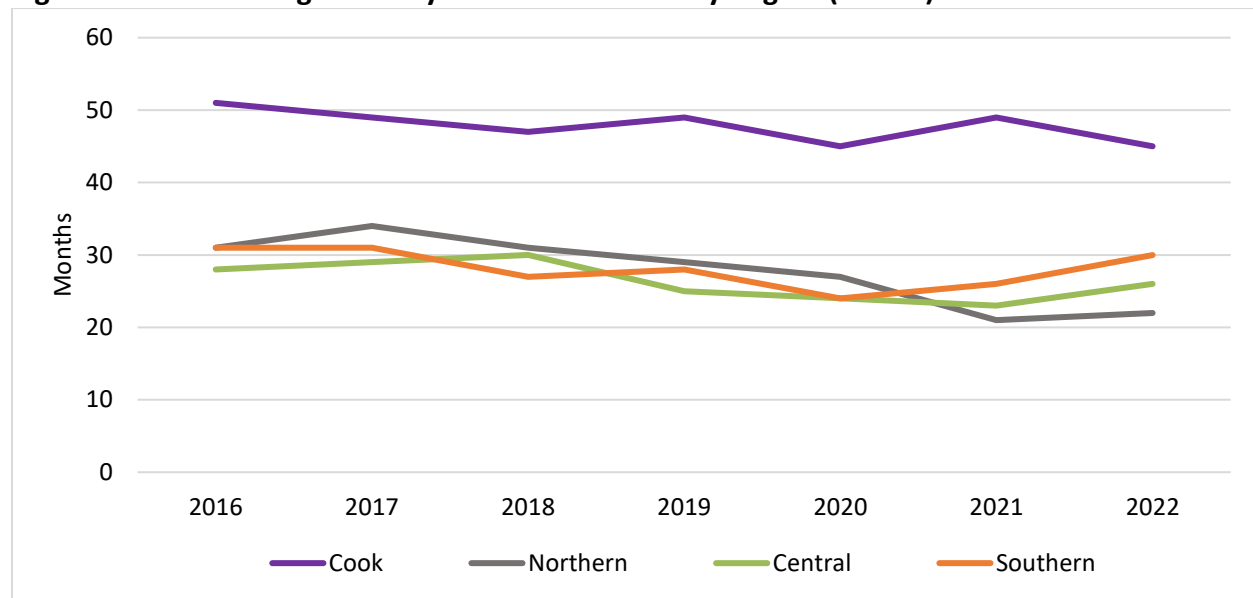
The FY2023 *B.H.* monitoring report also examined median LOS by child race and ethnicity and found that LOS was higher for Black children (34 months) compared to White children (27 months) and Latinx children (24 months) among those who exited care in 2022 (see Figure 2). However, there has been a decrease in the median LOS among Black children, from 42 months among children who exited care in FY2016 to 34 months among those who exited care in FY2022.

Figure 2. Median Length of Stay in Substitute Care by Child Race/Ethnicity (Illinois)



There are also large regional differences in the median LOS for children in Illinois (see Figure 3). Children in the Cook region spent substantially longer time in substitute care (45 months for children who exited care in FY2022) than children who resided in other regions (Northern region, 22 months; Central region, 26 months; Southern region, 30 months).

Figure 3. Median Length of Stay in Substitute Care by Region (Illinois)

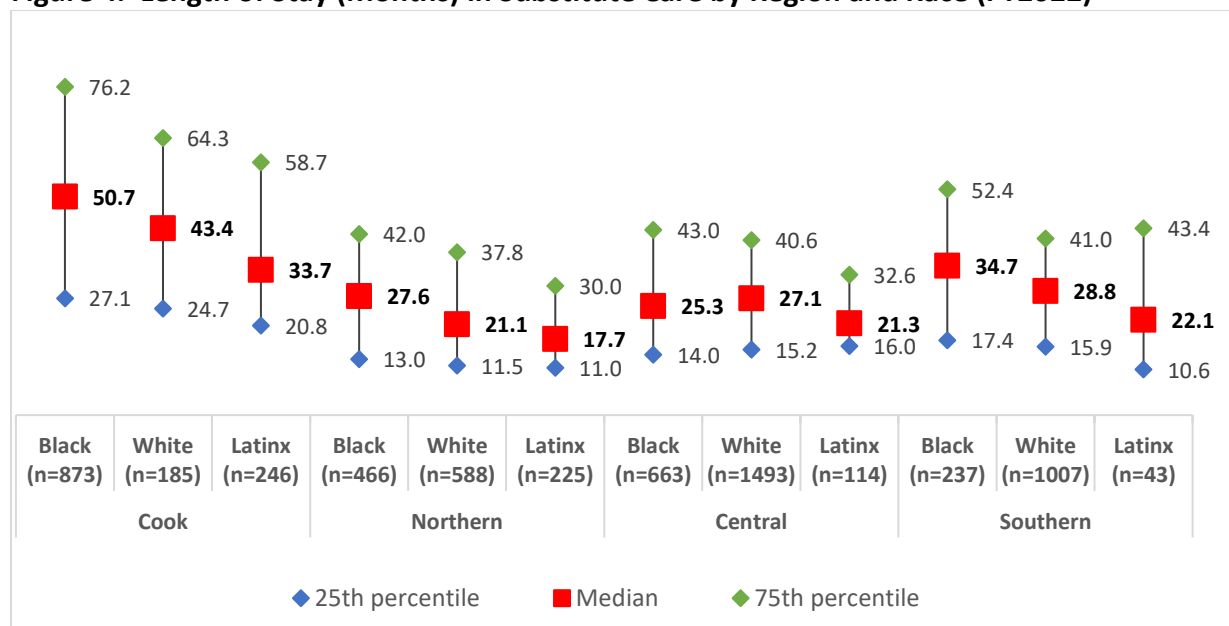


These results from the *B.H.* monitoring report show that there are substantial regional differences in children’s LOS (Cook region > others) and moderately large differences in LOS between racial/ethnic groups (Black children > others). In Illinois, race and region are related; that is, there is a larger proportion of Black children in the Cook region than in other regions. Therefore, examining LOS by race and region together provides a fuller understanding of the influence of these two variables.

Figure 4 presents the 25th percentile, median (50th percentile), and the 75th percentile of LOS of all children who exited substitute care in FY2022 in each racial/ethnic group by region. Black children in the Cook region had the longest LOS in the state (median = 50.7 months), indicating that it took more than 4 years for half of Black children to exit the substitute care. The 75th percentile for the LOS for Black children in the Cook region was 76.2 months (6.3 years) in FY2022. This means that 25% of Black children in the Cook region lived in substitute care for longer than 6 years before they achieved a permanent family or emancipated from substitute care.

Children of all racial/ethnic groups had considerably longer lengths of stay in the Cook region compared to their stays in any other region. For example, median LOS for White children in the Cook region was 43.4 months, compared to 28.8 months in the Southern region, 27.1 months in the Central region, and 21.1 months in the Northern region. Median LOS for Latinx children in the Cook region was 33.7 months, compared to 22.1, 21.3, and 17.7 months in the Southern, Central, and Northern regions, respectively. Black children had the longest length of stay in each region except for the Central region, where the LOS for Black children (25.3) was slightly shorter than that for White children (27.1). Latinx children had the shortest LOS in each region. Children of all races and in all regions in Illinois had longer median lengths of stay than the national average of 17.5 months.

Figure 4. Length of Stay (Months) in Substitute Care by Region and Race (FY2022)



^aChildren who entered substitute care and stayed seven days or fewer were excluded from the population.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The median length of stay for children in substitute care in Illinois was 29 months for children who exited care in FY2022; this is substantially longer than the median length of stay in care for children nationally (17.5 months in FFY2021). Results from the annual *B.H.* monitoring report have shown sizable differences in median LOS between the regions of the state, with the longest stays occurring in the Cook region (45 months in FY2022). In addition, Black children experience longer median LOS than White or Latinx children (34 months versus 27 and 24 months, respectively). When median LOS was examined by region and race together, findings reveal that Black children living in the Cook region had the lengthiest stays in substitute care, with a median stay of 50.6 months (4.2 years).

A child's length of stay in substitute care is a critically important outcome that has an impact on other aspects of their long-term well-being. It is affected by a variety of factors, including the type of maltreatment that brought them into care, their health and behavioral health needs, and the types of placements they live in. However, the fact that there are such large regional differences in LOS suggests that there are also systemic obstacles to moving children out of substitute care within the Cook region; determining the nature of these obstacles requires additional attention. In May 2023, the Illinois House of Representatives passed a resolution (HR0085) that urges the Supreme Court of Illinois and Circuit Court of Cook County to examine the reasons for the disparate length of foster care experienced by children in the Cook region and to recommend legislation to reduce this disparity and shorten the duration of foster care experienced by children in the Cook region.⁴ The resolution is closely aligned with

⁴ <https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/103/HR/PDF/10300HR0085lv.pdf>

one of the goals of the DCFS 2023-2025 strategic plan, which is to reduce the average length of stay among youth in DCFS' care.⁵ In order to develop effective strategies for reducing the length of stay in care, a comprehensive study of the factors that lead to long stays in substitute care is needed. This study should include an examination of systemic factors that may influence LOS in the DCFS regions, including juvenile court processes.

Recommended Citation

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Related Publications

Children and Family Research Center. (2023). *Conditions of children in or at risk of foster care in Illinois: FY2023 monitoring report of the B.H. Consent Decree*.
https://cfrc.illinois.edu/pubs/rp_20231016_FY2023MonitoringReportOfTheBHConsentDecree.pdf

⁵ Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. (2022). *State of Illinois' Child Welfare System Strategic Plan 2023-2025*. Springfield, IL: Author. Retrieved from <https://dcfs.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/dcfs/documents/about-us/reports-and-statistics/documents/dcfs-strategic-plan%202023-2025.pdf>