

Monitoring Permanency Rates for Children in Substitute Care in Illinois

Children and Family Research Center

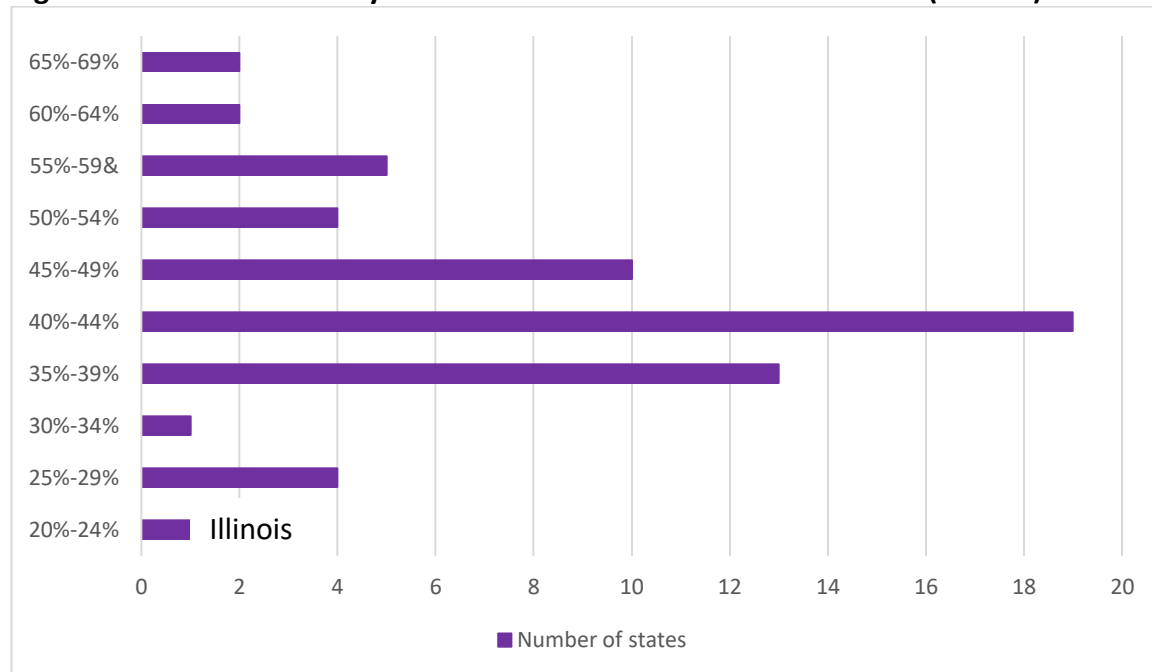
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All children deserve permanent homes. Although abuse and neglect sometimes make it necessary to temporarily place children in substitute care, federal and state child welfare policies mandate that permanency planning should begin at the time of placement and that children should be placed in safe, nurturing, permanent homes within a reasonable timeframe.

Reunification with parents is the preferred method for achieving permanence for children in substitute care, and it is the most common way that children exit care, accounting for 47% of exits nationwide in the most recent national statistics (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). Reunification is possible if parents are able to address the issues that endangered their children. In some cases, it is determined that parents are not able to provide a safe, nurturing home for their children; in these instances, child welfare professionals must find alternative permanent placements for children. A second permanency option is adoption, in which kin or non-kin adoptive parents legally commit to care for children. Adoptive parents have identical rights and responsibilities as biological parents; they may also receive financial support from the state. In 2021, adoptions made up 25% of foster care exits nationally (USDHHS, 2022). Guardianship is a third permanency option in which caregivers, usually kin, assume legal custody and permanent care of children and may receive financial assistance from the state. This form of permanence allows caregivers to provide a permanent home for children while not requiring the termination of the parental rights of the biological parent, who is typically a close relative of the guardian. Guardianship is less common than reunification and adoption, accounting for 12% of foster care exits nationally in 2021 (USDHHS, 2022).

Monitoring permanence is particularly important for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services because Illinois lags significantly behind other states in achieving permanence for its youth in foster care. Figure 1 shows the distribution of permanency rates for all 50 states (and the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico) in 2022, using data from the Children's Bureau (2022). Illinois is at the very bottom of the distribution (see the text box label "Illinois"); only 22.1% of children in Illinois who had been in foster care for 12 to 23 months achieved permanency during FY2022, compared to a median of 44% across the country. This research brief presents results from the *FY2023 Monitoring Report of the B.H. Consent Decree* (Children and Family Research Center, 2023). It focuses on the performance of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) in pursuing timely permanence for children in substitute care. The report provides a more complete presentation of results and description of the methodology used to produce the findings in this research brief.

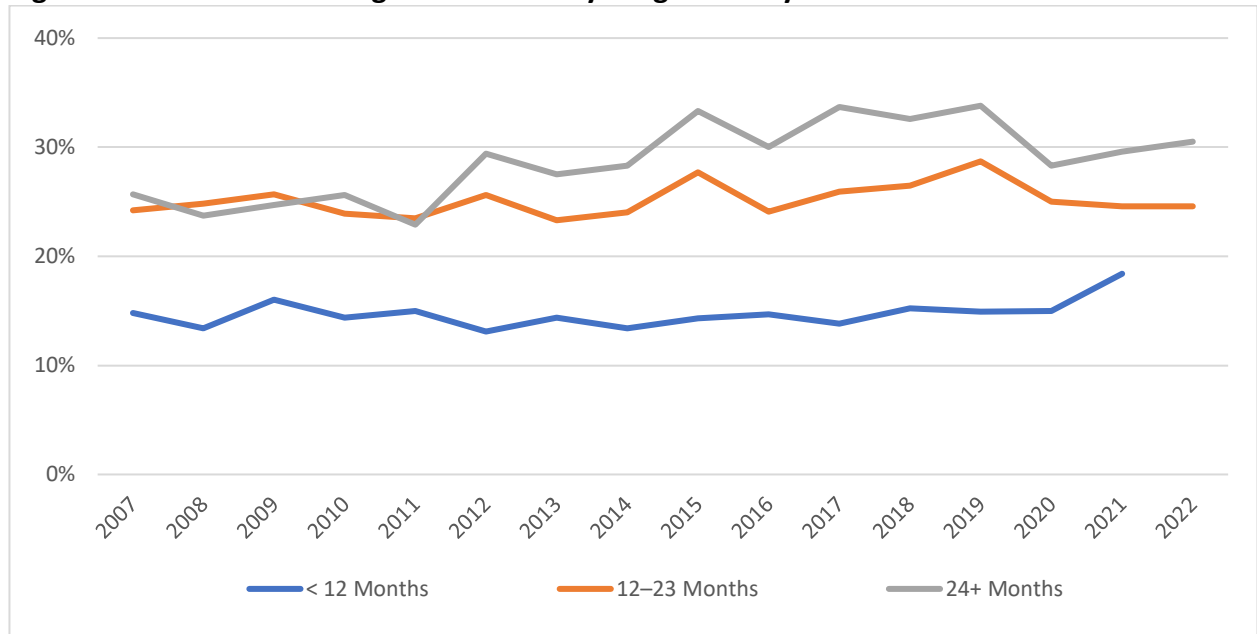
Figure 1. State Permanency Rates for Children in Care 12-23 Months (FY2022)



Children Achieving Permanence

Figure 2 shows the percentages of children that exit substitute care each year through any of four different means of achieving permanency (reunification, living with relatives, adoption, and guardianship). Permanency rates are shown for three different groups of children: 1) children who enter substitute care during the fiscal year; 2) children who have been in care between 12 and 23 months on the first day of the fiscal year; and 3) children who have been in care 24 months or more on the first day of the fiscal year. Between 13-18% of children who entered substitute care during the year achieved permanency within 12 months of entering care. The permanency rate among children who had been in care for 12 to 23 months has fluctuated between 24-29% over the last seven years. Permanency rates for children in substitute care for 24 or more months decreased from 33.8% in 2019 to 30.5% in 2022. Although there have been small year-to-year changes in the overall permanency rates in Illinois, there have been no consistent changes in performance over the last decade.

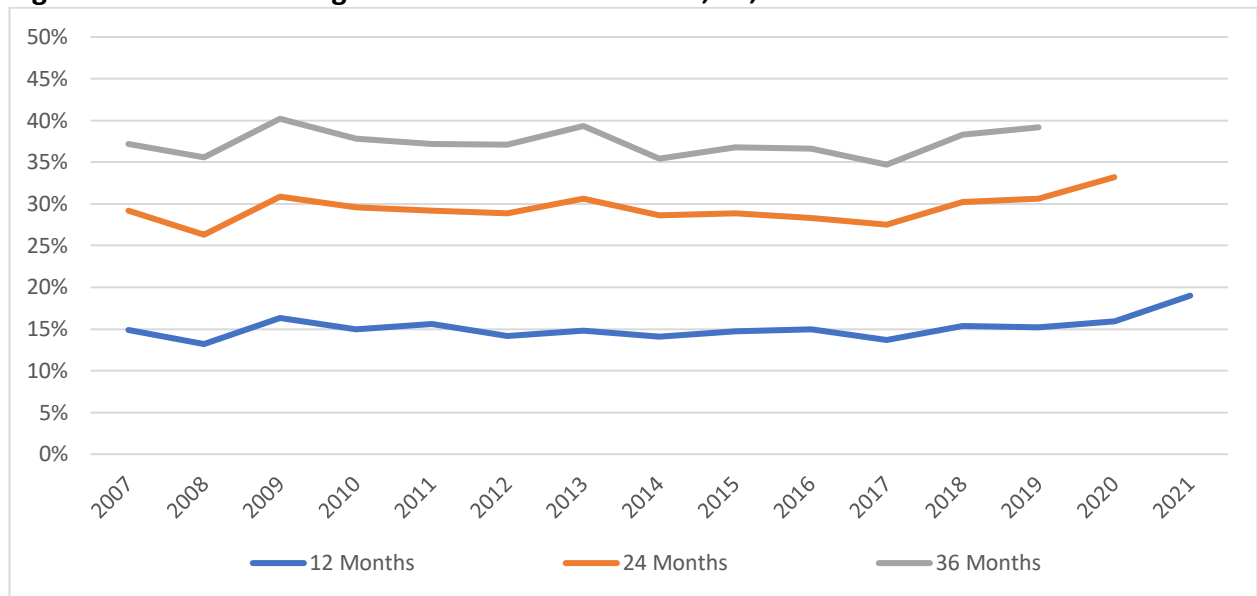
Figure 2. Children Achieving Permanence by Length of Stay in Care



Children Achieving Reunification

Figure 3 examines the percentage of children exiting substitute care to reunification within 12, 24, and 36 months of their entry into care. After many years in which rates were relatively consistent, there were slight increases in the percentage of children reunified within 12 and 24 months in the most recent entry cohorts. However, it is too soon to determine if this is a trend or a short-term fluctuation.

Figure 3. Children Exiting to Reunification Within 12, 24, and 36 Months



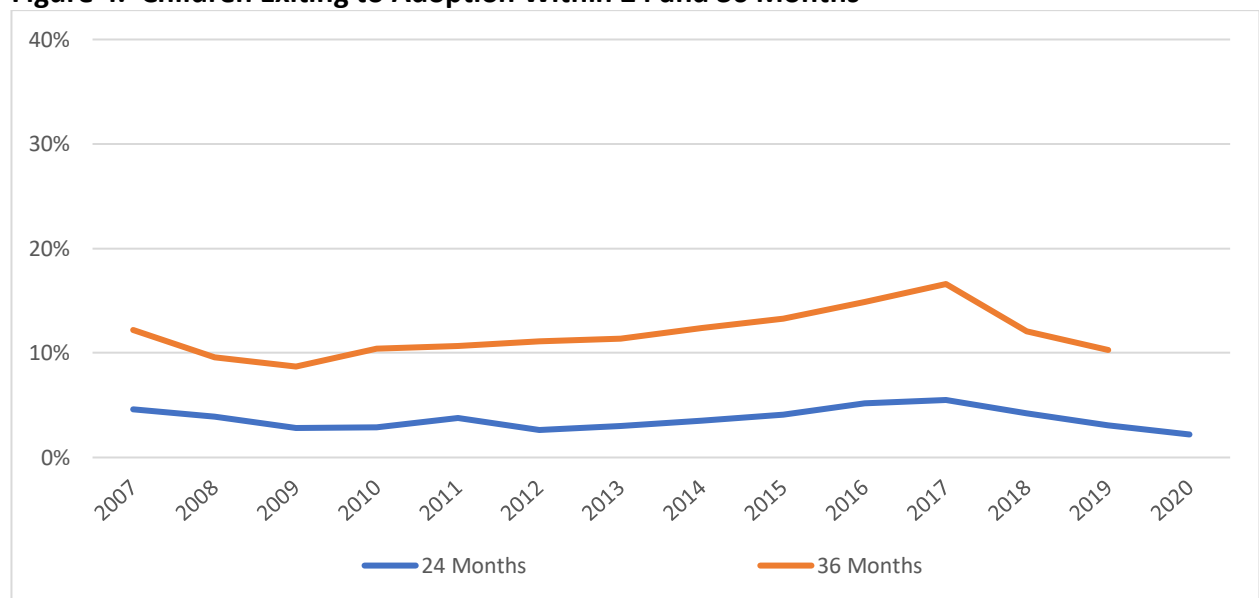
Reunification rates differed by child age, race-ethnicity and region. The younger the child, the more likely they were to be reunified. Black children were less likely to be reunified than either White or Latinx children. Reunification was significantly less likely in the Cook region than in the rest of the state. Results supporting these statements are available in the full report.

Children Achieving Adoption

Adoption is generally considered a secondary option for permanence and is only available after reasonable efforts to achieve reunification have failed or become impossible. As such, it is unlikely to occur within 12 months of entry into care. Figure 4 presents the percentages of children adopted within 24 and 36 months of entry into care. The 24- and 36-month adoption rates have both decreased in the most recent entry cohorts.

Adoption rates also differed by child age, race-ethnicity and region. The younger the child, the more likely they were to be adopted. White children were more likely to be adopted than either Black or Latinx children. Adoption was significantly less likely in the Cook region than in the rest of the state. Results supporting these statements are available in the full report.

Figure 4. Children Exiting to Adoption Within 24 and 36 Months

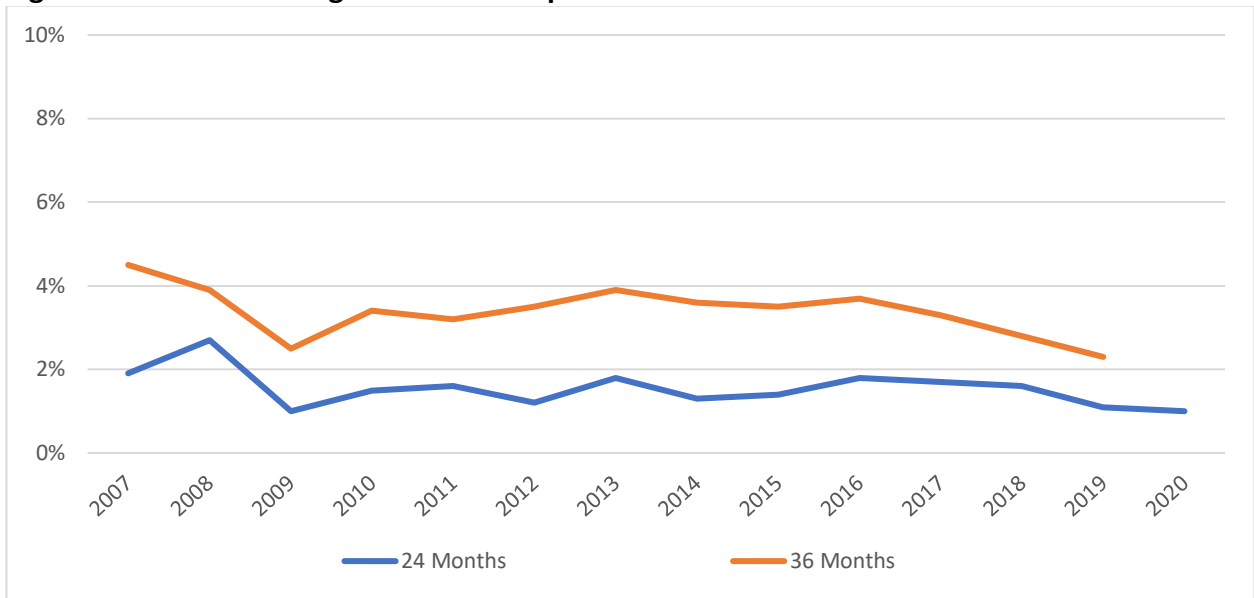


Children Achieving Guardianship

As with adoption, guardianships generally are considered as an option for permanence only after attempts at reunification have been exhausted; rates of guardianship after 24 and 36 months of entering care are shown in Figure 5. Exits to guardianships within 24 months of entry are rare and have ranged between 1.0-2.7% over the observed time period. The percentage of children exiting to guardianship within 36 months has decreased in recent years to a new low of 2.3% in the most recent entry cohort. As detailed in the full report, guardianship within 36 months is most likely to

occur among children between 6 and 17 years old and least likely to occur among children 0 to 5 years.

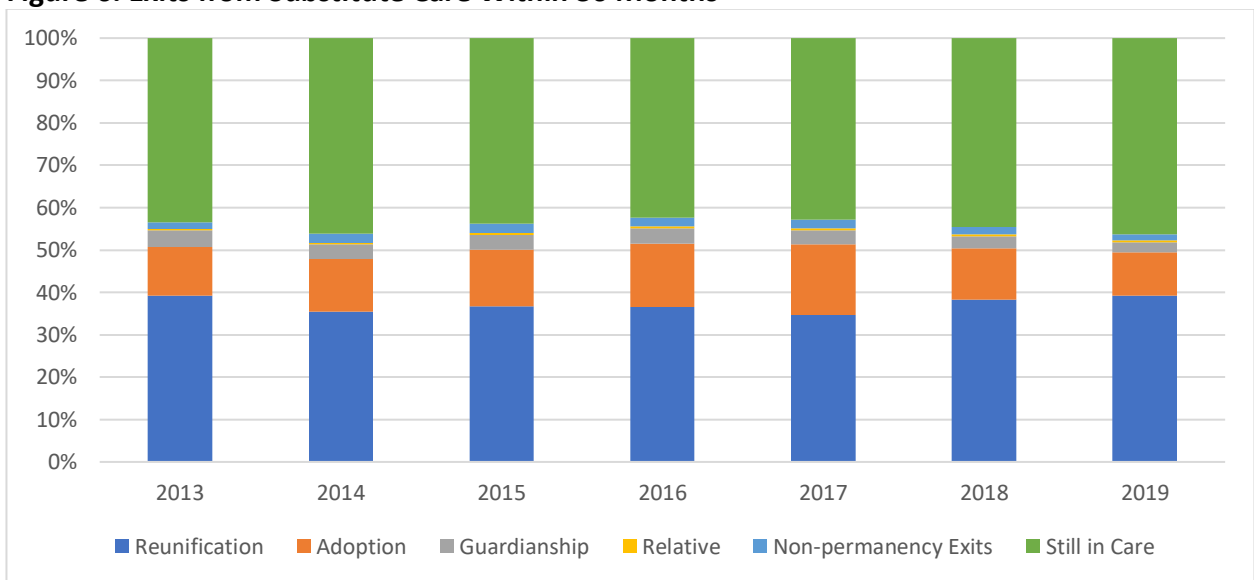
Figure 5. Children Exiting to Guardianship Within 24 and 36 Months



Children Who Do Not Achieve Legal Permanence

Figure 6 shows that, from 2013 to 2019, between 42.4% and 46.4% of children remained in care more than 36 months. A small percentage of each entry cohort (between 1.3% and 2.3%) exited substitute care within 36 months without ever achieving legal permanence; these “non-permanency exits” include aging out, incarceration, and running away.

Figure 6. Exits from Substitute Care Within 36 Months



Discussion

State child welfare agencies are not meant to be long-term caregivers for children. Once a child is removed from his or her home, the goal is to find a safe and permanent home in which he or she can be nurtured and thrive. In Illinois, about half of the children who enter substitute care achieve permanence within three years, either through reunification, adoption, or guardianship; this rate has been consistent for the past decade. The permanency rate in Illinois lags significantly behind other states in the country, and there has been little evidence of improvement from 2007 to 2022.

Reunification remains the most common exit type, followed by adoption and then, for a small number of children, guardianship or living with relatives. Age, race, and region continue to be associated with a child's likelihood of achieving permanence. Children who enter care when older, children who are Black, and children who live in the Cook region are less likely to achieve permanence than children who are younger, children who are White, and children who live elsewhere in the state.

In Illinois, there continue to be large regional differences in the achievement of timely permanence for children in care. Over 68% of children in the 2019 cohort taken into substitute care in the Cook region can expect to stay there longer than three years. In contrast, 41% of children in other regions of the state stay in care longer than three years. Another noticeable regional difference was adoption: only 2.6% of the children who entered substitute care in the Cook region in FY2019 were adopted by the end of FY2021, as compared to 12.2% of children in the rest of state. There were large regional differences in reunification as well. A quarter (25.8%) of children who entered care in 2019 in the Cook region exited to reunification within 36 months compared to 41-43% for the rest of the regions in the state.

References

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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