

Executive Summary

Measuring Transformation and Elevating Youth Voice

Each of the 25,000 children who spent time in foster care in Ohio foster care needs positive, supportive relationships to improve the child welfare system. This system must be designed to incorporate the voices of those with lived experience in meaningful ways, ranging from individual cases to system-wide decisions.

This new report by the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio captures insights from youth with lived experience on how to measure the impact of improvement efforts in the child welfare system.

Ohio trails the nation in outcomes for youth who were in foster care in their late teens. Data from 2018 indicate that, at age 21, Ohio's youth were much more likely to be unemployed and to have experienced incarceration than their peers in other states. Ohio ranks in the bottom 10% of the U.S. on four indicators highlighted in the National Youth in Transition survey:

- Graduating high school or getting a GED;
- Being employed;
- Being enrolled in school; and
- Experiencing incarceration.

Leaders in Ohio recognized the need for reform and have since undertaken major initiatives to improve these outcomes, such as the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council recommendations, the establishment of a Youth Ombudsman office, implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act, and efforts to address racial equity and improve outcomes for infants through the Safe Babies™ approach. Measuring progress will be essential to understanding the effectiveness of these reforms. The purpose of this report is to put forward specific measures that can be used by practitioners and policymakers as key indicators of change.

Key Findings

The current measures do not fully capture the experiences of children while they are in care. Youth experience surveys should be an integral part of an agency's practices. The data from these surveys can be used as part of a continuous quality improvement framework that makes data accessible, identifies standards, measures progress, and innovates with new practices.

*Focus group participant with experience in foster care

“My hope for youth in care is that their voices can be heard in a meaningful way.”



Ohio ranks in the bottom 10% of the U.S. in child welfare outcomes		
	OH	US
Those who attained a High School Diploma/GED	60%	70%
Those who were employed	46%	57%
Those who were enrolled in school	12%	28%
Those who experienced incarceration	37%	19%
Bottom 20%		
Those who experienced homelessness	37%	29%
Those who have a connection to an adult	81%	87%

“We also need to be taking qualitative, anonymous, if need be, surveys of our kids in care frequently, and asking them if they are being maltreated.*”



Though incomplete, existing measures are an important part of the system, and this report describes them in detail and evaluates Ohio's performance on them.

Does Ohio meet the National Standard?


Safety

-  More Ohio children experience multiple instances of abuse and neglect than nationally.
-  More Ohio children experience maltreatment while in care than nationally.

Permanency

-  Ohio performs better than average on measures of permanency.
-  Of children who are reunified, more return to foster care within 12 months than the national average.

Stability

-  Placement stability is an area of strength for Ohio, with children moving less frequently than in other states.

These measures are part of the process that the federal Children's Bureau uses to review state performance. At the state level, the Office of Families and Children has also identified performance measures. Measures include the number of children who are placed in group homes and institutions, known as congregate care, the number of youth who age out of care, and the number of children who have multiple reports of maltreatment, among others.

Race Equity

Rates of racial disparity are not prescribed performance measures at the federal or state level; however leaders in child welfare recognize that disparities exist, and Black and brown children are affected disproportionately.⁵ Racial disparity measures may indicate there is an opportunity to address racial biases through reflective consultation or other innovative practices. All reforms must address racial equity and be evaluated for their impact on different demographics.

*Focus group participant with experience in foster care

Key Statistics

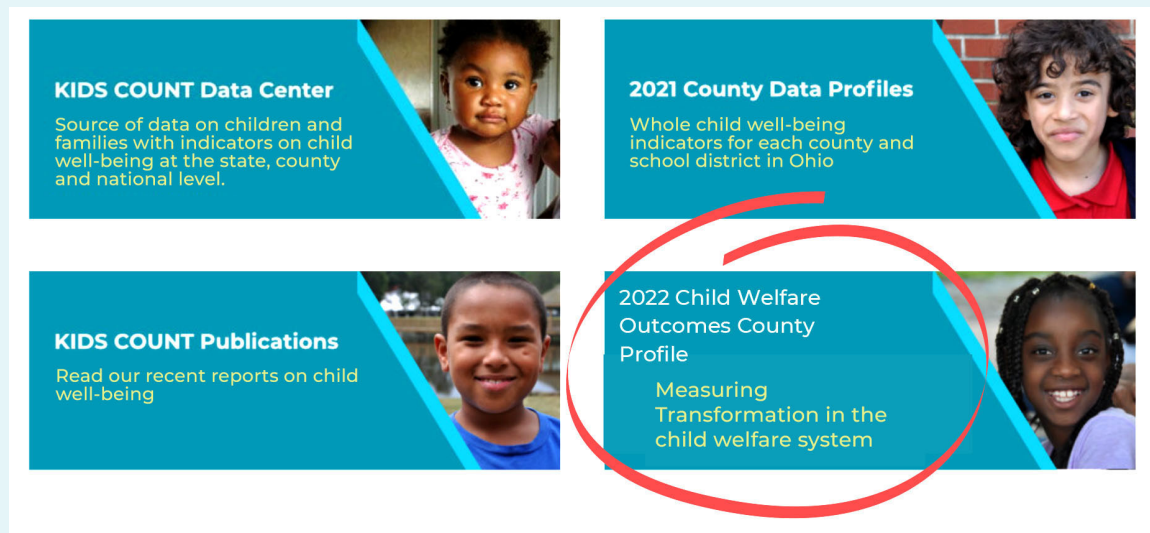
- The percentage of children placed in congregate care among counties ranges from as high as 63% to as low as 5%.
- Over 1,000 youth aged out of care in 2019 and 2020, but in 2021, the number decreased to 952.
- Participation in Bridges, which offers independent living services to youth who age out of care, increased by more than 20% in each of the last two years.
- Roughly one in four children have more than one screened-in report of maltreatment in one year.
- Children in Ohio who are Black are three times more likely to be placed in out-of-home care as children who are white.

County Profiles

Because Ohio's child protection and children's services system is county administered, it is important to measure the impact of reforms at the county level. This report includes a "Child Welfare Outcomes County Profile." These county profiles serve as a model of information that the state should be providing so that county-level data is easily accessible. Individual counties will have their own profile available online at the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio website as part of the KIDS COUNT Data page.

Link to Dashboard

<https://cdfohio.org/policy/resources/kids-count/>



Leverage what is already working

Several models already exist for improving the way Ohio measures transformation. Existing practices, such as Ohio's exit interviews and case reviews, provide the groundwork for gathering meaningful data about youth experiences while in care. Other states serve as models as well. For example, New York has been surveying youth annually since 2018. Florida's performance dashboard includes targets, trends over time, and details about sibling groups, for example. OhioRISE, a new initiative for youth in the Ohio Department of Medicaid, has identified performance measures that include graduation rates and other educational benchmarks. An Ohio Youth Ombudsman office, which is in the planning stages to be established in 2022, can review data about children who run away from placements or who are housed in office buildings to support efforts to protect youth rights while in care.

Key Recommendations

Elevate youth voice

- Focus on performance measures that matter to youth.
- Measure youth experiences in care by directly asking them.

Re-imagine existing processes to ensure that children are safe in their placements

- Change the name of the current process of asking children in foster care questions about their placement from "Exit Interviews" to "Youth Experience Surveys" and conduct them on a quarterly basis.
- Make Youth Experience Surveys a priority by including them as a part of the annual review for an agency.

At a minimum, the measures that should be included in a review are:

- ♦ The percentage of "Yes" responses to the existing questions: "Were you comfortable in that foster home?", "Did you feel safe in that home?", "Do you think that is a good foster home for other children?"
- ♦ The percentage of interviews that were completed out of the total that should have been completed.
- ♦ Add at least the following questions to the survey: "Did you receive a copy of the Foster Youth Bill of Rights?" and "Do you believe your rights have been violated while you have been in care?"

Use data to identify areas where further investigation is necessary

- Track the number of youth who run away from placements as a flag to investigate whether the placement is safe.
- Track whether children who run away have had a counseling session in compliance with the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act.
- If placement concerns involve rights violations, refer the child to the Youth Ombudsman office after other attempts at resolution have been exhausted.

