



Who  
Are Our  
Children  
in Foster  
Care?



**DSS**

*Serving Children and Families*

Planning and Quality Assurance Division June 1, 2010

Editing and Graphics by The Center for Child and Family Studies, College of Social Work, University of South Carolina

## Who Are Our Children in Foster Care?



*"... it wasn't until my early 20s that I was able to come to peace with it all. There's still a lot of shame for having been a foster child."*

Reflections on Foster Care, Families and Diversity, *Excerpts from remarks by Actress and former foster child Victoria Rowell at Casey Family Services Foster Care 2000 Conference.*

Foster children range in age from infancy to eighteen years old and come from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Many are teenagers; some are brothers and sisters. Some face physical, emotional or mental challenges. Each foster child is going through a troubled period in his or her family life and needs care. Many require not only warmth and acceptance, but consistency, structure and behavioral management. Older children often need help to develop the life skills to care for themselves.

In South Carolina, the 5,368 children in foster care on June 30, 2009, were almost evenly divided between male (52%) and female (48%). Just under half (48%) of these children were African American, closely followed by Caucasians (46%); the remaining children (6%) were Hispanic, multi-racial, or other. As seen in Table 1, just over one-third (34%) of the children were aged 5 or younger. And just under

half (45%) were aged 11 or older.

Children come into foster care for a variety of reasons. Most enter care when removed from their homes by law enforcement or court order because they have been abused or neglected. While often not the primary reason for removal, an estimated 80-85% of the cases involve the use of drugs and/or alcohol by the caretaker. Others enter care because of the absence of their parents due to illness, death, disability, or other problems.

As seen in Table 2, of those children who leave care, almost half return to their parent or guardian. When this is not possible, DSS looks for relatives. The next most frequent reason for leaving is placement with a relative. Children who cannot return to their families are either adopted or remain in foster care until they reach the age of majority, often described as aging out of care.

Age Range	Number	Percentage
0 to 5	1,799	34%
6 to 10	1,109	21%
11 to 15	1,313	24%
16 to 20	1,147	21%

Discharge Reason	Pct
Custody of Parent/Guardian	48%
Living w Other Relatives	26%
Adoption	13%
Reached Age of Majority	9%
Other	4%

## What is life like for a child in care?



Foster care is intended to provide a safe temporary home for children until they can be reunited safely with their parent(s). However, being removed from home and placed in foster care can be traumatic for a child, and the time when they first enter care can be filled with uncertainty and change. A child will experience a lot of new people in their life including foster parents, caseworkers, teachers, counselors, doctors and a guardian ad litem. The child must adjust to sleeping in a strange place, eating different food and learning new rules at home. The child may not have been allowed to bring their own clothes and other belongings with them.

Children sometimes think it is their fault that they were removed from their home. It is a very emotional time and children are often not able to express their feelings about being afraid, or about being angry and confused. It is important to have caring, understanding

foster parents and caseworkers available to help children through these difficult times.

The experiences of abuse and neglect, of separation from family and the loss of people and things that are familiar to a child frequently results in the child being behind in school. This increases the risk for children in foster care to drop out of school or to lose hope of being able to continue their education beyond high school.

### **Voices from SC's DSS Caseworkers Concerning Neglect**

*"One home I visited looked like a landfill. Garbage was everywhere and piled about two feet high. Mattresses were just laid on top of the garbage pile and that is where the children slept."*

*"Mothers have depression or some other mental health issue and they refuse treatment. They can't really take care of their kids."*

*"A ten-month-old baby tested positive for meth because it was being manufactured in his home."*

### **Voices from SC's Foster Youth**

*"Moving around will mess with your grades. Moving affects college applications, colleges want to know what you've done – grades, activities."*

*"I have the desire for a state of normalcy, more freedom to do things."*

*"I feel as if my whole life is documented."*



**Where do the children stay while in foster care?** The majority (62%) are placed in foster family homes around the state. Foster parents are recruited



and trained to provide the special care that the children need. The challenge is that more foster homes are needed. While the Department has almost 2000 licensed foster homes, the number of homes is not adequate to care for the number of children in care. There is especially an ongoing need for homes willing to care for teens and sibling groups. Children who are not placed in foster homes stay in shelters or group homes.

**What happens to the children who cannot safely return to their families?**

Approximately 300 children “age out of foster care” each year. Independent living services assist these young people to complete their education, prepare for employment and plan for a place to live. Despite receiving these services, many young people are not, at age 18, able to live independently. They often experience homelessness, under-employment, or unemployment. In an attempt to remedy this situation, *Aftercare Services* are provided for youth between the ages of 18 and 21. Services provided during this period include assistance with a place to live (when needed), financial assistance to complete post secondary education, employment preparation, and counseling.

Through no fault of their own, children in foster care face overwhelming and sometimes life-threatening challenges. It is our responsibility to ensure their safety and help them find stable, permanent homes. Together, we can support foster children as they grow into responsible, productive members of South Carolina’s communities.

### **Voices from SC’s Foster Parents**

*“She had horrendous nightmares and by the time that I could get into the bedroom she would have the mattress almost completely off the bed thrashing and trying to get away in her dreams.”*

*“The first time I raised my voice and it so devastated him that he went into his room and was curled in the fetal position and was shaking all over. I spent 2 hours sitting there holding him and just talking and he was telling me all kinds of things that went on in his life and why it scared him. That was one of the stepping-stones. I was learning how to be a dad to him also.”*