

VDSS Research Brief

How Does Time in Foster Care Vary by Age of Entry and Type of Exit?

Although the age at which children enter foster care is well understood to be a primary determinant of how much time they spend in care and how they leave, many reports show outcomes without regard to age. For example, locality A may have a lower emancipation rate than locality B only because locality A tends to have younger children in care, and almost no younger children end up emancipating. Examining emancipation rates separately for children who enter as teens would remove the distortion caused by differences in age composition.

This research brief takes a detailed look at how age of entry and type of exit influence the length of time in foster care in Virginia. The brief addresses the following questions:

- How much does total time in foster care vary by age of entry into care?
- How much does total time in foster care vary by the type of exit?
- What explains differences across age groups in time spent in foster care?
- How does Virginia compare to other states in length of time in foster care?

The analysis uses longitudinal data from the Multistate Foster Care Data Archive for all children entering foster care in Virginia between 1999 and 2005. Survival analysis techniques are used to account for children still in care at the end of the observation period (December 2009).

The relevance of age in understanding foster care dynamics is emphasized in a recent multi-state study of foster care dynamics notes:

Because the child's age is strongly correlated with the likelihood a child will enter care, age is also important when looking at how long children stay in foster care and how they leave care. Infants stay in foster care for much longer periods than older children, and teenagers have the shortest duration in care... Among children who enter care in their early teens, the probability of adoption is negligible. The essential feature of these findings is their persistence over time and place, suggesting that even though states differ with respect to social and economic context, policy, administrative structures, and modes of providing services, *age to a large extent trumps all such factors as a determinant of what happens in the foster care system.* [emphasis added]¹

¹ Wulczyn, F., Chen, L., & Hislop, K.B. (2007) *Foster care dynamics 2000-2005: A report from the Multistate Foster Care Data Archive*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

Key findings

- Contrary to the Chapin Hall study cited above, median time in foster care in Virginia does not differ much for infants, pre-school age children, and teenagers (between 15 and 20 months), but is considerably higher for children who enter care during elementary school (23 months).
- One reason for the difference between the Chapin Hall study and the results for Virginia is that the former examined only the *initial* spell in foster care, while we examine *total* time in care. Consistent with the Chapin Hall study, infants in Virginia tend to have the longest initial spell in care. But elementary school-age children have a longer total time in foster care, in part because they are more likely to have multiple spells.
- Elementary school-age children spend more time in foster care than other age groups for another key reason: each exit type (reunification, exit to relative, adoption, emancipation) takes longer for elementary-age children than for other age groups.
- Across age groups, the amount of time spent in foster care depends strongly on the type of exit. Children who are placed with a relative spend the least time in foster care (median of 5 months), while children who are adopted spend about five times as long in care.
- How children leave foster care depends on their entry age. For infants and pre-school age children the most frequent exit type is adoption, while for school-age children the most frequent exit type is reunification. Infants are less likely to reunify than other age groups, and one-third of teenagers emancipated from foster care.
- Based on combined longitudinal data for 17 other states, median time in foster care is longer in Virginia for every age group except infants. This appears to be due more to differences in the *types* of exit (children in Virginia are more likely to be adopted or to emancipate) than to differences in the time to exit by type (for example, children in Virginia did not take longer than children in other states to reunify or exit to a relative, and took only slightly longer to be adopted or emancipate).

This analysis does not show *why* each exit type (reunification, exit to relative, adoption, emancipation) takes longer for children who enter care in elementary school than for other age groups. Exit types vary more for children in this age group than other age groups, which may reflect greater difficulties in identifying the appropriate permanency goal. Given their relatively long time in care, efforts to reduce time in foster care may have the biggest payoff for elementary school-age children.

The remainder of this research brief provides additional information on these findings. The next section shows how time in care varies by entry age. The subsequent section shows how time in care varies by exit type, and the following section examines both factors (entry age and exit type) together. This is followed by a comparison of time in

care between Virginia and other states, and a discussion of how measuring time in care for cases in care at a point in time (rather than a cohort of cases) leads to much higher estimates of time in care. A final section provides more detail on the data and analysis approach.

Total months in foster care by entry age

Figure 1 shows that total time in foster care is fairly similar for all age groups except children who enter care in elementary school, who spend considerably more time in care. About one-fourth of children in all age groups have relatively short stays, seven months or less. But more than half of children who enter foster care in elementary school are in care for much longer than children who enter at younger or older ages.

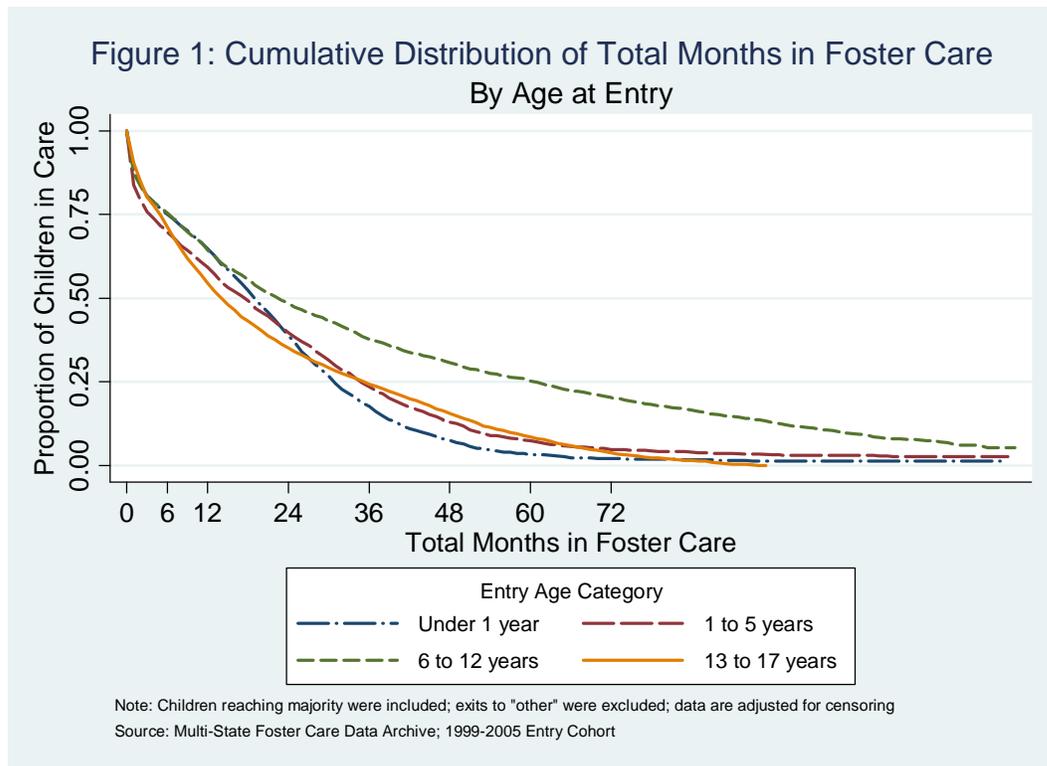


Table 1 provides more detail on the results shown in Figure 1. The median and 75th percentile of total months in foster care is similar across all ages – except for elementary school-age children. About half of elementary school-age children stay for 23 months or longer, compared to 15 to 20 months for other age groups. One quarter of elementary school-age children spend 5 years (60 months) or longer in foster care, compared to less than three years for other age groups.

Table 1 also shows that children who enter foster care are heterogeneous. Across all age groups, about one-fourth of children spend six months or less in care, but another one-

fourth spend more than three years in care. The majority of resources are spent on a minority of long-term stayers.

Table 1: Distribution of Total Months in Foster Care by Entry Age Group

Age at Entry	Percentile				
	10th	25 th	Median	75 th	90 th
Under 1 year	1	7	20	31	44
1 to 5 years	1	4	18	35	51
6 to 12 years	1	7	23	61	83
13 to 17 years	2	5	15	36	55
All age groups	1	6	18	39	61

Source: Multi-State Foster Care Data Archive; 1999-2005 Virginia entry cohort; exit category "other" was excluded
 Note: Data are current through December 31, 2009

Total months in foster care by type of exit

Figure 2 shows the total time in foster care by type of exit.² Children who reunified with parents or who exited to relatives had much shorter stays in care than children who were adopted or emancipated. This finding is not surprising given the legal and procedural requirements associated with the adoption process, and given that emancipation indicates an inability to reunify or exit to a relative. Children who left to relatives had the shortest time in care, a median of 5 months, compared to 8 months for reunification with parents.

² The Chapin Hall data for Virginia include a substantial proportion of exits in the "other" category; 16 percent of all final exits were classified as "other." According to Chapin Hall staff, "other" exits include: death, commitment to corrections, and custody transfer to another agency. We took a random sample of 100 children who had a final exit in the "other" category and looked up their final exit in OASIS. Very few of the exits from the sample were in the three categories used by Chapin Hall. This result indicates errors recording exit type in OASIS. Nearly 80 percent of the errors were for exits prior to 2005, so data quality has improved since that time. Because the actual exits in the "other" records did not correspond to the Chapin Hall mapping, we excluded "other" exits from the analyses that used final exit categories.

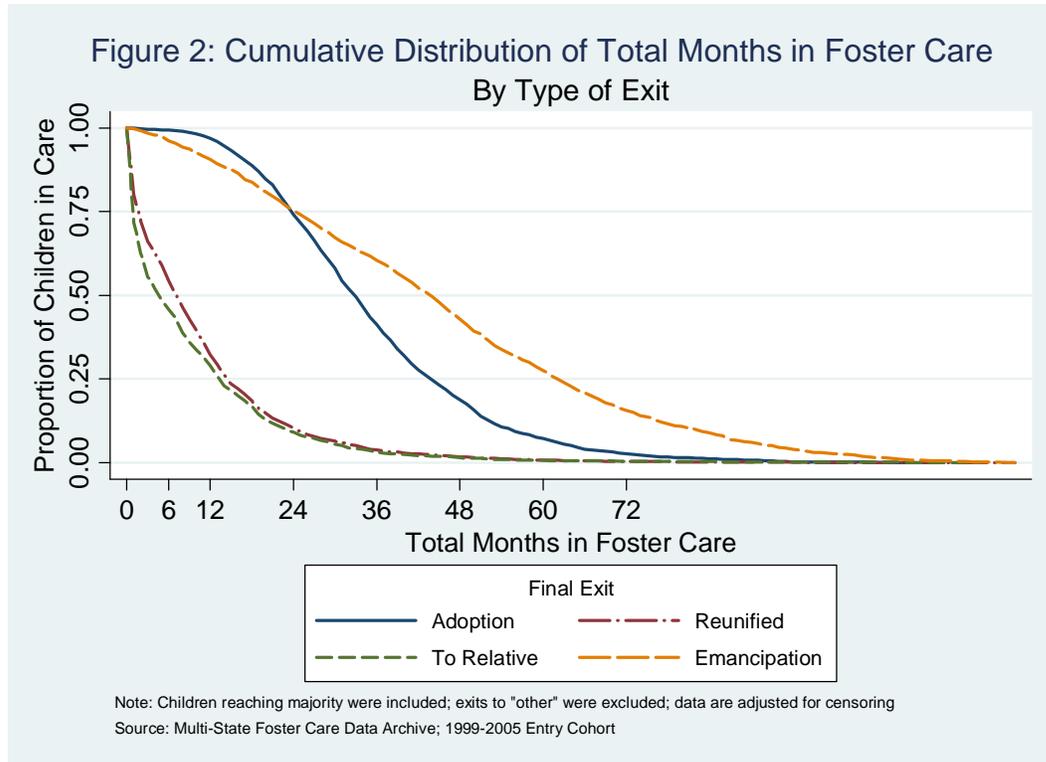


Table 2 provides more detail on the results shown in Figure 2. Children who were adopted or emancipated from foster care had the longest median time in foster care. Of the children who emancipated, half of them spent 44 months or more in foster care.

**Table 2: Distribution of Total Months in Foster Care
by Exit Type**

Exit Type	Percentile				
	10th	25 th	Median	75 th	90 th
Reunify	1	2	8	15	25
Exit to relative	1	1	5	14	23
Adoption	18	24	33	44	56
Emancipation	13	25	44	63	82
All exit types	1	6	18	39	61

Source: Multi-State Foster Care Data Archive; 1999-2005 Virginia entry cohort; exit category "other" was excluded
Note: Data are current through December 31, 2009

Total months in foster care by age of entry and type of exit

In addition to the separate analyses above of total time in foster care by entry age and exit type, we combined the analyses to examine the total time in care for each type of exit by each age category. Median times to exit for several exit types were similar across age categories. Exits to a relative and reunification took the least time for each age group,

and adoption and emancipation took the most time. But Table 3 shows some differences across age groups. Reunification takes longer for older children: 8 to 9 months, compared to 6 months for younger children. Adoption is quicker for infants and teens than for children between those age groups.

Table 3: Median Time to Exit by Entry Age Group and Exit Type (in months)

Age at Entry	Median Time by Final Exit Type				
	Median Time in Care	Reunify	To Relative	Adoption	Emancipate
Under 1 year	20	6	5	28	n/a
1 to 5 years	18	6	5	35	n/a
6 to 12 years	23	9	6	38	79
13 to 17 years	15	8	5	28	39
Total	18	8	5	33	44

Source: Multi-State Foster Care Data Archive; 1999-2005 Virginia entry cohort; exit category "other" was excluded

Note: Data are current through December 31, 2009

Table 4 shows the likelihood of different exit types by age group. For example, infants are most likely to be adopted and virtually never age out of foster care, while teens are very rarely adopted and frequently age out of care. Reunification is a common exit route for all age groups.

Table 4: Percentage of Final Exits from Foster Care by Age at Entry and Type of Exit

Age at Entry	Final Exit							Total
	Reunify	To Relative	Adoption	Emancipate	Runaway	Still in Care		
Under 1 year	23%	20%	54%	0%	0%	3%	100%	
1 to 5 years	33%	24%	38%	0%	0%	6%	100%	
6 to 12 years	37%	19%	20%	7%	1%	16%	100%	
13 to 17 years	43%	11%	1%	33%	7%	4%	100%	
Total	36%	18%	24%	12%	2%	8%	100%	

Source: Multi-State Foster Care Data Archive; 1999-2005 Virginia entry cohort; exit category "other" was excluded

Note: Data are current through December 31, 2009

Together, Tables 3 and 4 show that time in foster care varies across age groups not just because time to exit differs across exit types, but also because exit types differ across age groups. For example, infants tend to have relatively long stays in care not because adoption or reunification takes longer for infants, but because infants are much more likely to be adopted than children in other age groups (Table 4), and adoption takes *much* longer than reunification or exits to a relative (Table 3).

Tables 3 and 4 also help explain why elementary school-age children spend longer in foster care than other age groups. *Elementary school-age children take longer than other age groups for every type of exit, as shown in Table 3.* Reunification takes longer, adoption takes much longer than for infants and emancipation takes much longer than for

teens. Elementary-age children who emancipate spend the longest time in care because of the age at which they enter foster care. Even though only a small proportion of elementary-age children emancipate (7 percent), their very long times to emancipation increase the overall length of stay for the group. Similarly, the longer time to adoption for elementary-age children (38 months) combined with a significant proportion of adoptions in this age group (20 percent) contribute to their longer time in care. In short, *elementary-age children spend the longest time in foster care because each exit type takes longer for them and because over one-fourth of these children are adopted or emancipate, which take much longer than other exits.*

Comparison to Other States

Using reporting tools from the Multi-State Foster Care Data Archive, we compared length of initial spell in foster care in Virginia to the initial spell length for children in all states available for comparison.³ Table 5 provides a comparison of the median initial spell length for children in Virginia and the comparison states by type of discharge and entry age.⁴

Table 5: Median Initial Spell Length for Virginia and Other States, by Entry Age and Exit Type

Entry age group	Median Length (in months) of Initial Spell, by Exit Type									
	All Exits		Reunify		To Relative		Adoption		Emancipate	
	VA	Comparison States	VA	Comparison States	VA	Comparison States	VA	Comparison States	VA	Comparison States
0 to 1	15	15	6	7	4	11	24	24	N/A	N/A
2 to 5	13	12	6	7	4	11	27	27	N/A	N/A
6 to 12	14	11	7	7	5	11	30	27	N/A	N/A
13 to 17	11	8	7	5	3	9	26	23	22	18
Total	13	Not available	7	7	4	11	26	25	22	18

Source: Multi-State Foster Care Data Archive; 2004-2006 entry cohort; The states included AZ, CO, CT, FL, GA, ID, IL, MD, ME, MN, MO, NC, NH, NJ, NY, TN, and TX. Exit category "other" was excluded.

Note: Data are current through December 31, 2007

Compared to other states, young children in foster care in Virginia spend about the same amount of time in care, but elementary school-age and older children spend more time in care in Virginia than other states. Elementary school-age children in Virginia have an

³ The states included in the analysis were AZ, CO, CT, FL, GA, ID, IL, MD, ME, MN, MO, NC, NH, NJ, NY, TN, and TX. In the Multi-State Foster Care Data Archive, length of stay comparison reports are only available for initial foster care spells – not for total time (duration) in care.

⁴ Due to limitations in data available for comparison states, the cohort for this analysis included first admission spells for children entering foster care between 2004 and 2006, and the children were followed through December 31, 2007. The Virginia results for this analysis therefore differ from the rest of this research brief.

initial spell median of 14 months, compared to 11 months for other states. Teen entrants in Virginia have an initial spell of 11 months, compared to 8 months for other states.⁵

For both Virginia and the comparison states, infants have the longest initial spell in care (15 months), consistent with the Chapin Hall study referenced earlier. In the comparison states, the length of the initial spell decreases as entry age increases. In contrast, Virginia elementary school-age children have the second longest initial spell duration (14 months). Older children take longer to adopt in Virginia than other states, but do not take longer to reunify or exit to a relative. In fact, all age groups in Virginia leave to relatives (from the initial spell) much more quickly than children in the comparison states. This may reflect the absence of a subsidized guardianship program in Virginia; exiting to a relative through subsidized guardianship takes more time because of length of stay and licensing requirements.

Snapshot versus Cohort Approach to Measuring Length of Time in Foster Care

The results above are based on all children entering care from 1999 to 2005. This approach is often referred to as a “cohort” approach: following children who enter care during a specified time period. The cohort approach is the standard way to measure length of time in care. A primary advantage of this approach is that it includes *all* children who enter care during a specified time period.

An alternative is to measure total time in care for all children in foster care *at a point in time*. This is sometimes referred to as a “snapshot” approach, because it is a snapshot of the caseload at a point in time. Most reports of characteristics or outcomes for children in foster care are based on children in care at a point in time. Although the snapshot perspective is useful for understanding the current caseload, it is less useful as a basis for measuring time in care. The snapshot perspective overstates time in care because children in care at a point in time are more likely to be long-term stayers. In other words, children who spend a long time in foster care are more likely to be in foster care at a point in time. The same phenomenon holds for participation in most social programs: the caseload at a point in time has a higher proportion of long-term recipients than a cohort of all entrants.

To estimate length of time in foster care for a snapshot of children in care, we identified children who were in care during June 2004.⁶ We identified the entry month for each child, then totaled the number of months that each child was in foster care through December 2009. Using survival analysis to account for those children who were still in care in December 2009, we determined the percentiles for length of stay in foster care.

⁵ The longer spells in Virginia for older children may be due in part to higher rates of adoption for elementary school-age children (20 percent compared to 12 percent in other states) and higher rates of emancipation for teen entrants (22 percent in Virginia compared to 12 percent elsewhere).

⁶ The choice of June 2004 was arbitrary, but based in part on the need for an observation period long enough to determine median time in care.

Table 6 shows the results – an overall median length of stay (42 months) that is more than double that of the entry cohort group. This result holds true for all age groups except infants.

The cohort perspective provides a better overall picture of length of stay because it represents all children in care. The comparison between cohort and snapshot perspectives also suggests that reports based on the caseload at a point in time do not accurately represent all children who have been in care.

Table 6: Distribution of Total Months in Foster Care for Children in Care at a Point in Time by Entry Age Group

Age at Entry	Percentile				
	10 th	25 th	Median	75 th	90 th
Under 1 year	14	20	31	44	59
1 to 5 years	12	23	37	54	79
6 to 12 years	15	32	61	92	100
13 to 17 years	10	20	38	54	68
All age groups	13	24	42	65	87

Source: Multi-State Foster Care Data Archive; Children in care during June 2004

Note: Data are current through December 31, 2009

Data Source and Analysis Approach

The data source for the analyses in this research brief was the Multistate Foster Care Data Archive from the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. The format of the data file was a longitudinal file comprised of “spells” or episodes in foster care by child. For the entry cohort, we created a file with all children who entered foster care in Virginia for the first time between 1999 and 2005 – the file had a total number of 19,596 children. The data file was current as of December 31, 2009. Table 7 shows that at that time a total of 18,276 children (93 percent) in the cohort had exited foster care with 1,320 (7 percent) were still in care.

Table 7: Number of Children in Entry Cohort Data File

Entry Age Category	Exited Foster Care		Still in Care		Total	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Under 1 year	2,460	98%	59	2%	2,519	100%
1 to 5 years	4,257	95%	237	5%	4,494	100%
6 to 12 years	4,852	86%	820	14%	5,672	100%
13 to 17 years	6,707	97%	204	3%	6,911	100%
Total	18,276	93%	1,320	7%	19,596	100%

Source: Multi-State Foster Care Data Archive; 1999-2005 Virginia entry cohort
 Note: Data are current through December 31, 2009

For the snapshot analysis we used the same source of data from 1999 to 2009 and created a file with all children who were in care during June 2004. Table 8 shows that there were 6,263 children in care in June 2004. By December 2009, 89 percent of those children had left care.

Table 8: Number of Children in the Snapshot Analysis Data file

Entry Age Category	Exited Foster Care		Still in Care		Total	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Under 1 year	663	96%	30	4%	693	100%
1 to 5 years	1,142	90%	134	11%	1,276	100%
6 to 12 years	1,815	78%	500	22%	2,315	100%
13 to 17 years	1,939	98%	40	2%	1,979	100%
Total	5,559	89%	704	11%	6,263	100%

Source: Multi-State Foster Care Data Archive; Children in care during June 2004
 Note: Data are current through December 31, 2009

We created several variables to facilitate analysis. For each child, we summed the number of months across spells to create a total months in foster care variable. If a spell was less than one month, we coded the time for that spell as one month. In addition, we created a variable indicating whether the child was still in care as of December 31, 2009, the last date observable in the data. Using the latest spell record, we created a variable showing the final exit type.

We then created a file with one record per child and performed survival analysis. Failure was defined as any type of exit from foster care.