



# HOW TO DEFINE YOUR POST-PERMANENCY POPULATION AND WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO DO SO

## INTRODUCTION

Creating and maintaining a census of all children in a jurisdiction's post-permanency population is a key first step for agencies to support families' well-being and stability. This brief covers the definition of the post-permanency child population, how to create a census of the population, and how to use that information.

Additionally, we provide information on how the population includes a disproportionately large share of older children, which has implications for post-permanency service provision.

Developing and maintaining a census of your post-permanency population will allow for:

- Conducting regular outreach to families to increase participation in needed services
- Identifying which family characteristics and experiences are linked with a higher risk of instability in order to target families that may be at risk for customized, intensive outreach
- Understanding and analyzing trends in instability



## Definitions

A **census** is a list of all individuals in a population, including selected details about each individual's characteristics and contact information.

**Post-permanency instability** refers to situations in which children who exit foster care to adoptive and guardianship homes no longer reside with their adoptive parent or legal guardian. Instability may be formal (when a child reenters foster care) or informal (when a child lives temporarily with another family member)

- Estimating annual costs of post-permanency services, taking into consideration any anticipated increases in service uptake and any improvements needed for the post-permanency service array.

## Defining the Population

In general, the post-permanency population is comprised of all children who:

- ever had a finalized adoption or guardianship, regardless of how long ago, and
- are under the jurisdiction's age of majority (typically age 18).

Agencies can consider additional criteria for determining which children should be defined as part of their post-permanency population. These, in addition to the criteria above, will determine which children will be tracked over time. Examples of groups of adoptive/guardianship children that agencies may want to track include:

- Children who have moved into the agency's jurisdiction, following adoption or guardianship in a different jurisdiction
- Children whose permanency was finalized within the jurisdiction, but who have moved to a different jurisdiction
- Children adopted privately, including domestically and internationally
- Children with special needs such as physical or cognitive disabilities who are over age 17
- Children over age 17, perhaps through age 20
- Children whose adoptions dissolved or whose guardianships ended prior to age 18, even if they subsequently have a new guardianship or adoption finalized.

## Focusing on individual children

The National Center for Enhanced Post-Adoption Support (Post-Adoption Center) recommends prioritizing a census of individual

children, rather than of parents/guardians or families. One reason is that child welfare agencies generally base their post-permanency service eligibility criteria on child-specific characteristics, such as permanency status and child age.

Another reason is that, although each adopted/guardianship child eventually ages out of the population of interest, many of their families may still have younger adopted/guardianship children who remain part of the post-permanency child population. By maintaining a census of adopted/guardianship individuals, starting from the time each achieves permanency, agencies can determine at any given point in time how many children each family has as well as their characteristics.

The risk of instability in families tends to depend on child age, as well as characteristics such as special health care needs or behavioral health challenges.<sup>1</sup> Having information about the characteristics of all children in a family improves agencies' abilities to identify all families at risk of or experiencing instability, even if the risk lies only with a specific child.

## Ages of children in the post-permanency population

Agencies that have not developed a census of their post-permanency population might reasonably assume that the population resembles the population of the children that exit care to adoption or guardianship in any given year.

<sup>1</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2021.) Discontinuity and Disruption in Adoptions and Guardianships: Numbers and Trends. Available at [www.childwelfare.gov/resources/discontinuity-and-disruption-adoptions-and-guardianships](http://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/discontinuity-and-disruption-adoptions-and-guardianships).

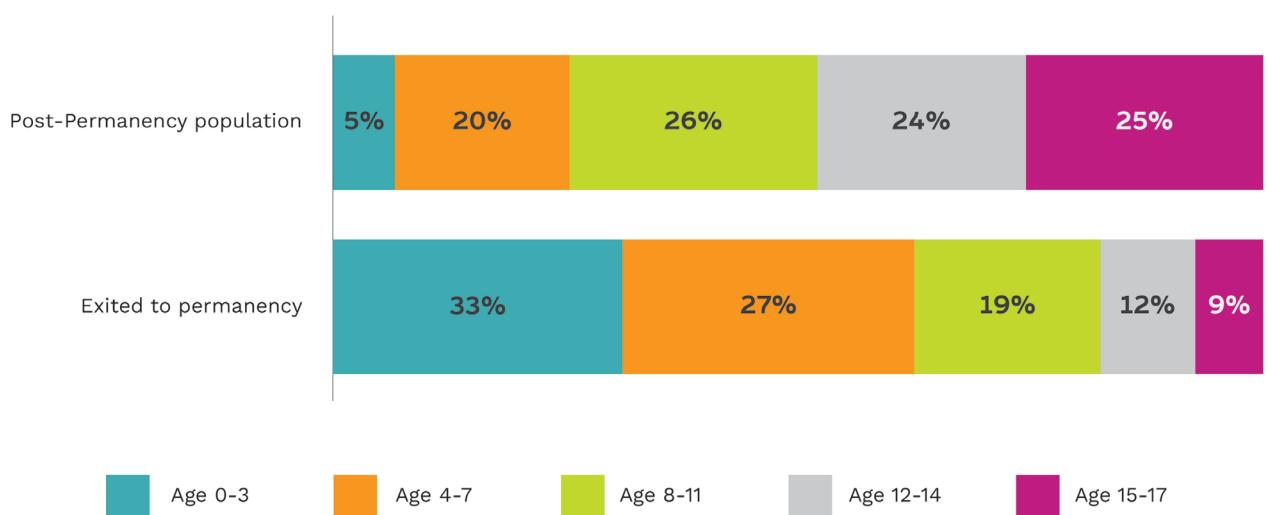
However, post-permanency children are disproportionately older. Most adoption/guardianship instability occurs in adolescence, regardless of children's age at permanency.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, child behavior problems (often resulting from mental health challenges), the strongest known cause of family instability, often emerge in adolescence.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, older child age at the time of permanency finalization has been linked with post-permanency instability.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1 displays the age distributions of the post-permanency population as of 2021 (top bar in the figure) compared with the age distribution of children that exited foster care to adoption or guardianship in 2021 (lower bar in the figure). Both groups in our analysis are limited to 0 to 17-year olds. However, the foster care exits of children in the post-permanency population may have occurred up to 18 years ago (for those whose adoption or guardianship occurred in infancy), whereas the group of



children exiting to permanency includes children exiting in a single year. As shown in Figure 1, 75 percent of children in the post-permanency population are 8-to 17-year-olds. In contrast, this older age group represents a minority of children exiting to permanency in a single year (40%).

**Figure 1. Ages of children in the post-permanency population as of FY 2021 compared with ages of children who exited to permanency in 2021**



2 Rolock, N., & White, K. R. (2016). Post-permanency discontinuity: A longitudinal examination of outcomes for foster youth after adoption or guardianship. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 70, 419-427.

3 Paniagua, Palacios, et al., 2018; Palacios, Rolock, et al., 2018

4 Paniagua, C., Palacios, J., Jiménez-Morago, J. M., & Rivera, F. (2018). Adoption breakdown in Spain: A survival and age-related analysis. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 1049731518791037; Palacios, J., Rolock, N., Selwyn, J., & Barbosa-Ducharne, M. (2018). Adoption Breakdown: Concept, Research, and Implications. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 1049731518783852.



The discrepancy is even larger for older age groups. For example, the share of the post-permanency population that are ages 12 to 14 is double that of the share that exited to permanency (24% compared with 12%). A quarter of the post-permanency population are ages 15 to 17, compared with less than a tenth of children that exited to permanency (25% compared with 9%).

Child age also has implications for the length of time since permanency was achieved. Logically, the younger the age at time of permanency finalization, the more recently it occurred.

Conversely, the older a child, the longer ago permanency may have occurred.<sup>5</sup> Because the post-permanency population is skewed toward having a larger portion of older children, it is also skewed toward having a disproportionately large number whose permanency occurred years ago, up to 17 years. Note that some older children have been adopted or had a guardianship recently, but this is relatively rare among the post-permanency child population, since most adoptions occur among children at younger ages.

## Creating and maintaining a census of the post-permanency child population

To develop a comprehensive census of their post-permanency population, agencies can begin by reviewing their administrative child welfare data (i.e., Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System [SACWIS] or Comprehensive Child Welfare Administrative Data System [CCWIS]). The specific process for requesting such data varies, but in general agencies need to specify who they want

data on (i.e., the specific parameters for the children for whom they want data, in this case the post-permanency child population) and what specific data points they want. At a minimum this would include information that uniquely identifies each child, as well as key information that the Post-Adoption Center recommends:

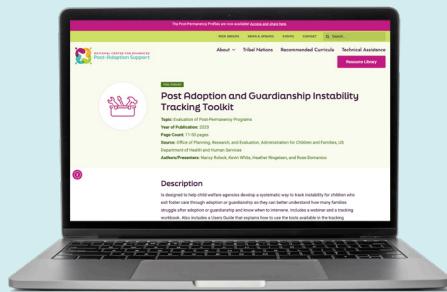
- Child first and last name
- Child identifying (ID) number, including any second ID assigned after finalization<sup>6</sup>
- Date of birth
- Date of permanency finalization
- Type of permanency arrangement (e.g., adoption, customary adoption, guardianship)
- Parent/caregiver IDs for each of the child's adoptive/guardianship parents
- Family ID number
- Contact information such as phone number, email and mailing address for each child and parent/caregiver

Given that the census of post-permanency children is always changing, it is important to regularly request updated data. We recommend that agencies speak with the staff that manage their data to discuss how to ensure their census is consistently complete and accurate.

5 To demonstrate why the population is skewed toward older children, consider that 17-year-olds in the post-permanency population may have been had their permanency finalized in any year from 2008 to 2025 and had their permanency finalized at any age between 0 and 17. No younger children had their permanency finalized 17 years ago, because they had not been born yet. For example, the longest ago that a 10-year-old might have had their permanency finalized was as an infant in 2015, and the longest ago a 5-year-old would have been as an infant 5 years ago, in 2020.

6 The IDs to which we refer are uniquely identifying numbers for children, adults, and families which allow agencies to identify which children and parents/guardians are part of the same families.

To keep information about families updated, maintaining ongoing contact with families from the time permanency is established is critical, since the information can change over time—in particular, factors that might indicate risk for instability. Agencies generally collect little to no data about families post-permanency, given that their child welfare cases have been closed. An exception to this is re-entry into foster care, which is a key indicator of family instability.



**A companion brief, “How to Track Instability: Identifying Children who Re-enter Foster care after Adoption or Guardianship,” provides guidance on calculating the numbers and percentages of the post-permanency child population who re-enter foster care.**

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Not only is it important to update the post-permanency census with children who have newly achieved permanency, it is also important to remove those who, over time, are no longer part of the post-permanency population, such as those age 18 and older.

It may be useful to include important information from other sources that is not available from the SACWIS/CCWIS .

For example, if agencies find that key types of information are not collected and stored within their administrative data systems, agencies could direct workers to ask a routine set of new questions during case intake. Service providers or agency workers may be able to provide information about specific families, based on their service records, case files, or personal knowledge. This can be particularly useful if families are added to the list of population members on an ongoing basis.

Agencies will most likely need to develop additional approaches to collect any future information (other than foster care re-entry) about families after they have been added to the census. The [User Guide for the Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability Tracking Toolkit](#) includes a suggested approach for doing this.

## Conclusion

In summary, a key point regarding jurisdictions' post-permanency populations is that they differ from the characteristics of children in or exiting foster care in any given year. The population includes relatively large shares of older children, who likely represent the largest share with behavioral health challenges. Instability is more common among both children who are older, as well as those with behavioral health challenges.

**To delve further into this topic, check out the Post-Adoption Center Resource Library:**  
[www.postadoptioncenter.org/resource-library](http://www.postadoptioncenter.org/resource-library)

In addition, the numbers and characteristics of post-permanency children will change over time. By developing a census of their post-permanency populations, including contact information, agencies gain the ability to reach out to all families potentially at risk for instability, and over time, learn more about the causes of instability and the effectiveness of their services in ameliorating and preventing it.



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