

# Right for Kids Ranking



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## Executive Summary

Few institutions are more important for promoting human flourishing and a healthy civil society than the family. Parents, neighbors, and social institutions are an integral part of securing the necessary conditions for families and children to realize their full potential and achieve prosperity.

Tragically, far too many children are denied the safety, love, and stability they deserve. When a child is abused or neglected, state child welfare systems step in to protect the child and help them find a safe, loving home. At least, that's how it's supposed to work.

There are more than 440,000 American children living in the foster care system—and more enter every year ([Administration for Children and Families 2018, 1](#)). The future for these children is shockingly bleak. Only 50 percent will ever return home to their families. Roughly 20,000 will “age out” of the system without finding a permanent home ([Administration for Children and Families 2018, 3](#)). Children who grow up in foster care are less likely to graduate college, and they experience higher rates of poverty, incarceration, and mental health issues (Baker; Conn et al.; [Dworsky et al.](#); Riebschleger et al.; Vaughn et al.).

Despite spending billions of dollars every year on child welfare, state governments routinely fail the most vulnerable children in our country. The average American, and even most policymakers, pay little attention to how their state’s child welfare system performs. Failures go unnoticed for years until a tragedy, usually the death of a child, grabs the public’s attention. Even when child welfare reform becomes a priority, the conversation often focuses on operational aspects like caseloads, funding, and foster parent recruitment efforts instead of the most important priority—actual results for kids.

The Right for Kids Ranking aims to shift the focus of how we assess performance. For this study we identified seven major outcome categories related to safety, permanency, stability, and older youth in care. Within these seven categories we analyzed 22 unique performance indicators (more detail on these outcomes and indicators is included in the *Right for Kids Methodology* section of this report). In determining which outcomes and indicators to analyze, we focused solely on those that were directly related to actual outcomes for children in foster care or at risk of entering foster care. Accordingly, data related to inputs, such as caseloads or the number of visits by a child protective worker, were excluded. This is not to minimize the importance of these metrics, but merely an acknowledgment that they do not necessarily show how well a state performs at generating optimal results for kids. We also chose to prioritize performance indicators that the states themselves identify as their highest priorities, such as achieving permanency for children through either reunification or adoption.

## Key Points

- Policy may have a more significant impact on the overall performance of state child welfare systems than factors like wealth, geography, socioeconomic makeup, or population.
- Performance is not about money—our analysis indicates that there is no statistical correlation between the amount of money spent on foster care and outcomes achieved for kids.
- If the entire nation performed like the top 10 highest-performing states, there would be over 57,000 fewer victims of child maltreatment.
- Children in the top 10 highest-performing states spend, on average, four fewer months in care as compared to the rest of the nation.

<sup>1</sup> This study was peer-reviewed.

## Key Findings

- Socioeconomic makeup or population size may not be the main driver of how well or how poorly a given state will perform. Our analysis indicates that other variables, such as the way states respond to the needs of children and organize their child welfare systems, could play a more important role than wealth or other unique characteristics.
- It's not about money—our research showed there is no statistical correlation between the amount of money spent on foster care and outcomes achieved for kids.
- Roughly half of all children in foster care are reunified with their families.
- Just under one-quarter of children in foster care exit to an adoptive placement.
- Children in the 10 highest-performing states spend, on average, four fewer months in care as compared to the rest of the nation.
- The 10 highest-performing states do a significantly better job of protecting children who exit foster care from a subsequent incident of maltreatment within six months of exit.
- If the entire nation performed like the 10 highest-performing states, there would be over 57,000 fewer victims of child maltreatment.

The Right for Kids Ranking represents a sea change for how to approach child welfare reform. Each data point we examined for this study represents a life that can be changed for the better. By giving states a clear picture as to how well they are meeting the most important goals and how they measure up against other states, we hope the Right for Kids Ranking will inspire states to implement proactive, transformational reforms that will give every child the opportunity to thrive.

## Introduction

In 2017, more than 269,000 children entered the U.S. foster care system—roughly 739 children each day ([Administration for Children and Families 2018, 1](#)). With such a large number it's easy to lose sight of the fact that these are 269,000 individual lives that are forever being altered.

The goal of the child welfare system is to protect children who are in imminent danger of being harmed by either abuse or severe neglect. Yet, too often, children who enter the care of the state leave in worse condition than when they entered.

Of those who exit foster care, just under half will be reunified with their families ([Administration for Children and](#)

[Families 2018, 3](#)). Approximately 8 percent of children leaving the system, almost 20,000 kids in 2017, “age out” without ever finding a permanent home ([Administration for Children and Families 2018, 3](#)). These children, many of whom have spent most of their childhoods in the care of the state, are thrust into adulthood without the skills to build a life for themselves and lacking the social safety net family provides. They exit to a bleak future where it's more likely that they will experience poverty, homelessness, and incarceration than graduate from college (Baker; Conn et al.; [Dworsky et al.](#); Riebschleger et al.; Vaughn et al.). A disproportionate number will experience severe mental health issues, with some studies showing a PTSD rate equivalent to or even greater than that of U.S. war veterans ([Pecora et al., 1](#)).

State child welfare systems are tasked with the important and difficult job of protecting children who are in imminent danger of abuse. Equally as important is its role in protecting children from further harm once they enter the system and ensuring that these children exit as quickly as possible to a safe, permanent home.

This is a high duty—and a costly one. Tens of billions of dollars are spent each year by federal, state, and local government for direct child welfare services. Beyond the direct costs associated with administering the system, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that the total economic burden on the U.S. for investigating and responding to allegations of child maltreatment, including costs associated with health care, criminal justice involvement, special education, and lost productivity, is \$2 trillion ([Peterson et al., 1, 5](#)).

How states manage their foster care system is an important function for taxpayers and policymakers to monitor closely. Each day the state takes actions that have lifelong ramifications for children and families and the health of civil society. Yet, these actions often take place outside the public eye unless a tragedy, like the death of a child or blatant overreach resulting in the wrongful removal of a child, makes headlines.

One of the main goals of the Right for Kids Ranking is to change this by shining a light on how well (or poorly) states are actually serving vulnerable children and families. By identifying top performers and giving states a clear picture of how they measure up at achieving the most important goals, we hope that this study will increase public awareness and inspire policymakers to implement proactive, transformational reforms that will give every child the opportunity to thrive.

**Figure 1. Outcomes analyzed**

OUTCOME CATEGORY	HIGHEST POSSIBLE SCORE
<b>Outcome 1: Reduce Number of Children in Foster Care</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rate of children in foster care (per 100,000)</li> <li>• Rate of children entering foster care (per 100,000)</li> </ul>	6 points
<b>Outcome 2: Reduce Number of Victims and Recurrence of Child Maltreatment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rate of confirmed victims of maltreatment (per 100,000)</li> <li>• Percent of children with a subsequent incidence of maltreatment (within 6 months)</li> <li>• Percent of children who re-enter foster care (within 12 months)</li> <li>• Rate of children with confirmed maltreatment while in foster care (%)</li> </ul>	10 points
<b>Outcome 3: Increase Permanency for Children Exiting Foster Care</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reunification rate of children exiting foster care (%)</li> <li>• Kinship placement rate of children exiting care (%)</li> <li>• Adoption rate of children exiting care (%)</li> <li>• Emancipation rate of children exiting care (%)</li> </ul>	20 points
<b>Outcome 4: Reduce Time in Foster Care to Permanency</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Average total days in care, all episodes</li> <li>• Rate of reunification within 12 months (%)</li> <li>• Rate of adoption within 12 months (%)</li> <li>• Rate of children waiting for adoption for 5+ years</li> </ul>	17 points
<b>Outcome 5: Increase Placement Stability</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children in care 12-24 months with two or fewer placements (%)</li> </ul>	3 points
<b>Outcome 6: Least Restrictive Placement Setting</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rate of children under age 12 placed in an institutional setting</li> <li>• Rate of children under age 12 placed in group home</li> </ul>	2 points
<b>Outcome 7: Achieve Permanency for Teenagers</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rate of children aged 12-17 in foster care (per 100,000 total child population aged 12-17)</li> <li>• Adoption rate of children aged 12-17 (%)</li> <li>• Reunification rate of children aged 12-17 (%)</li> <li>• Average months to reunification for children aged 12-17</li> <li>• Average months to adoption for children aged 12-17</li> </ul>	12 points

## Right for Kids Methodology

### Data Collection

The Right for Kids Ranking primarily utilizes data reported by the states to the federal Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and made available to the public through the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) ([Administration for Children and Families 2015](#)), the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect ([Administration for Children and Families 2019](#)), and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System ([Administration for Children and Families 2012b](#)).

**Note:** There were discrepancies in data reported by New York to the Administration for Children and Families for Outcome 3 (“Increase Permanency for Children Exiting Foster Care”) and Outcome 6 (“Least Restrictive Placement Settings”). We reached out to New York officials for clarification but did not receive a response. For Outcome 3, data on kinship placement and emancipation rates were excluded. We were able to score New York based on data for reunification and adoption rates obtained from the Children’s Bureau ([Administration for Children and Families 2017\\*](#)). For Outcome 6, since we were unable to obtain data on rates of placement in institutional and group home settings, New York received no points for this outcome.

### Selecting Indicators

For the purposes of this ranking, we focused solely on metrics that were directly related to actual outcomes achieved for children in the foster care system or at-risk of entering the system. We identified 7 major outcome categories related to safety, permanency, stability, and older youth in care. Within these 7 categories, 22 unique performance indicators were selected for analysis. In determining indicators that are most critical to child well-being, we followed the stated priorities of the individual state child welfare systems. Nearly every state’s child welfare system has reunification of children with their families as its highest priority. If reunification is not possible, then the second highest priority is quickly finding a permanent home for the child, generally through adoption. For this reason, our study assigns the most weight to indicators related to timely reunification and adoption.

**Figure 1** shows the seven major outcome categories, the unique performance indicators within each category, and the highest possible score for each outcome category.

### Scoring Methodology

The total possible points for each outcome category vary based on the available data for that category and the weight

assigned. When deciding on our weight values for each indicator, we avoided assigning specific weight limits to each outcome due to the differing number of indicators in each outcome. This allowed us to assess performance holistically rather than outcome-by-outcome. Assigning a weight limit to each outcome would disproportionately weigh the outcomes with the least number of indicators heavier than the outcomes with the most indicators, throwing off the balance of our priorities. In determining the weight given to each outcome category, we chose to prioritize those indicators we felt were most critical to child well-being and which demonstrated longitudinal improvement. The normal distribution of the weights is ( $\mu = 3.18$ ).

The scoring formula uses simple additive weighting with range normalization techniques. This means we calculated the range of each indicator’s raw data and used this as the constant, or baseline, in our formula. This allows us to more accurately convert the raw data to points and allows us to prioritize our indicators by assigning weights. If there is no additional weight being put on a value, indicating a weight of 1, this causes the winning state to have a score of 1, and the losing state to have a score of 0, with all other states falling somewhere in between 0 and 1 in sequential order. The actual formula is described in detail below.

When determining which formula to use, we first determined whether a state would be rewarded for a higher or lower value for the selected indicator. If higher, we subtracted the smallest observed value of the collective raw data points ( $x_{min}$ ) from the state’s individual raw data point ( $x$ ) as shown:

$$(x - x_{min})$$

Inversely, if an indicator would be rewarded for a lower raw data point, we subtracted the state’s individual raw data point ( $x$ ) from the largest observed value of the collective raw data points ( $x_{max}$ ) as shown:

$$(x_{max} - x)$$

Next, we divided this number by the range of the indicator’s collective raw data points. To calculate the range, you subtract the smallest observed value ( $x_{min}$ ) from the largest observed value ( $x_{max}$ ) of the raw data points as shown:

$$(x_{max} - x_{min})$$

Finally, we multiplied this value by the indicator’s designated weight to create each state’s individual score. The

\* The data used in this publication (Dataset 225, AFCARS Foster Care File 2017) were obtained from the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect and have been used in accordance with its Terms of Use Agreement license. The Administration on Children, Youth and Families, the Children’s Bureau, the original dataset collection personnel or funding source, NDACAN, Cornell University and their agents or employees bear no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here.

entire formula for both higher and lower desired values is written as:

**Higher desired data point:**

$$[(x - x_{min}) / (x_{max} - x_{min})] * weight$$

**Lower desired data point:**

$$[(x_{max} - x) / (x_{max} - x_{min})] * weight$$

A hypothetical example can be shown in the tables below. In this example, we are trying to score and assign an overall rank to each state (A, B, and C) when given two different indicators with two different weights. Indicator 1 has a weight of 2 while Indicator 2 has a weight of 4. Each state's raw data point is listed under "x". For this example, we will have both indicators desire a higher raw data point, so we use the formula  $[(x - x_{min}) / (x_{max} - x_{min})] * weight$ .

#### Indicator 1:

State	x	$x_{max}$	$x_{min}$	Range	Weight	Score 1
A	2	2	0	2	2	<b>2</b>
B	0	2	0	2	2	<b>0</b>
C	1	2	0	2	2	<b>1</b>

#### Indicator 2:

State	x	$x_{max}$	$x_{min}$	Range	Weight	Score 1
A	2	20	2	18	4	<b>0</b>
B	20	20	2	18	4	<b>4</b>
C	5	20	2	18	4	<b>.668</b>

To determine the final rank, we add the scores for each state.

State	Score 1	Score 2	Combined Score	Final Rank
A	2	0	2	<b>2</b>
B	0	4	4	<b>1</b>
C	1	.668	1.668	<b>3</b>

As shown, state B went from last place to first, state A went from first to second, and state C went from second to last due to the difference in weighting. This example is used to not only show how the formula works in action, but also to show that assigning weights allows us to prioritize the impact certain indicators have over others.

The highest possible overall score for each state is 70, while the lowest possible score is 0. Due to the varying number of

indicators per outcome, each outcome has a unique highest possible score, while the lowest possible score is always 0.

#### Defining Terms: "Best" and "Worst" Performing States

Throughout this report, we will frequently compare outcomes generated by the "best" and "worst" performing states. These labels are associated with each state's overall combined score as well as each state's score within each outcome category. Positive outcomes are reflective upon the individual data points analyzed. For example, states with the higher reunification rates are awarded more points than states with lower rates for that indicator. States which are producing the highest observed level of positive outcomes for each category are deemed the "best," while states which produce the lowest observed level of positive outcomes are deemed the "worst." As discussed above, the highest possible overall score for each state is 70, while the lowest possible score is 0.

#### Limitations

There are strengths and limitations to any attempt to holistically assess and compare state performance in a given policy area. This is especially true in child welfare given the diversity among states in the way they structure their systems and the standards that they apply when making decisions affecting the well-being of children. There are also certain data points that would be useful but are not required to be reported by states such as juvenile justice involvement, stability after exit, homelessness among former foster youth, and welfare utilization.

Due to the additive weighting methodology, some states produced very similar scores, at times being separated by only one one-hundredth of a point. However, stretching the distribution of weights would not change the final ranking, it would only change the variance of the scores. This does not necessarily negatively affect our findings; it is just important to keep in mind that although some states may be producing similar outcomes they will fall slightly above or below their counterparts.

Additionally, socioeconomic diversity among states should be considered when evaluating the Right for Kids Ranking. A regression analysis comparing the Right for Kids Ranking and two socioeconomic factors, total population and median household income, showed no statistical significance ( $F = 0.16$ ), with  $p$ -values of (.59) and (.07), respectively. This suggests that the total population and socioeconomic status of an individual state may not have a significant effect on the performance of that state's child welfare system, and that other variables, such as state policies and procedures guiding caseworker decision-making, could play a more important role. However, further in-depth research would need to be done to examine how

unique demographics are affecting a state's ability to produce positive outcomes for kids.

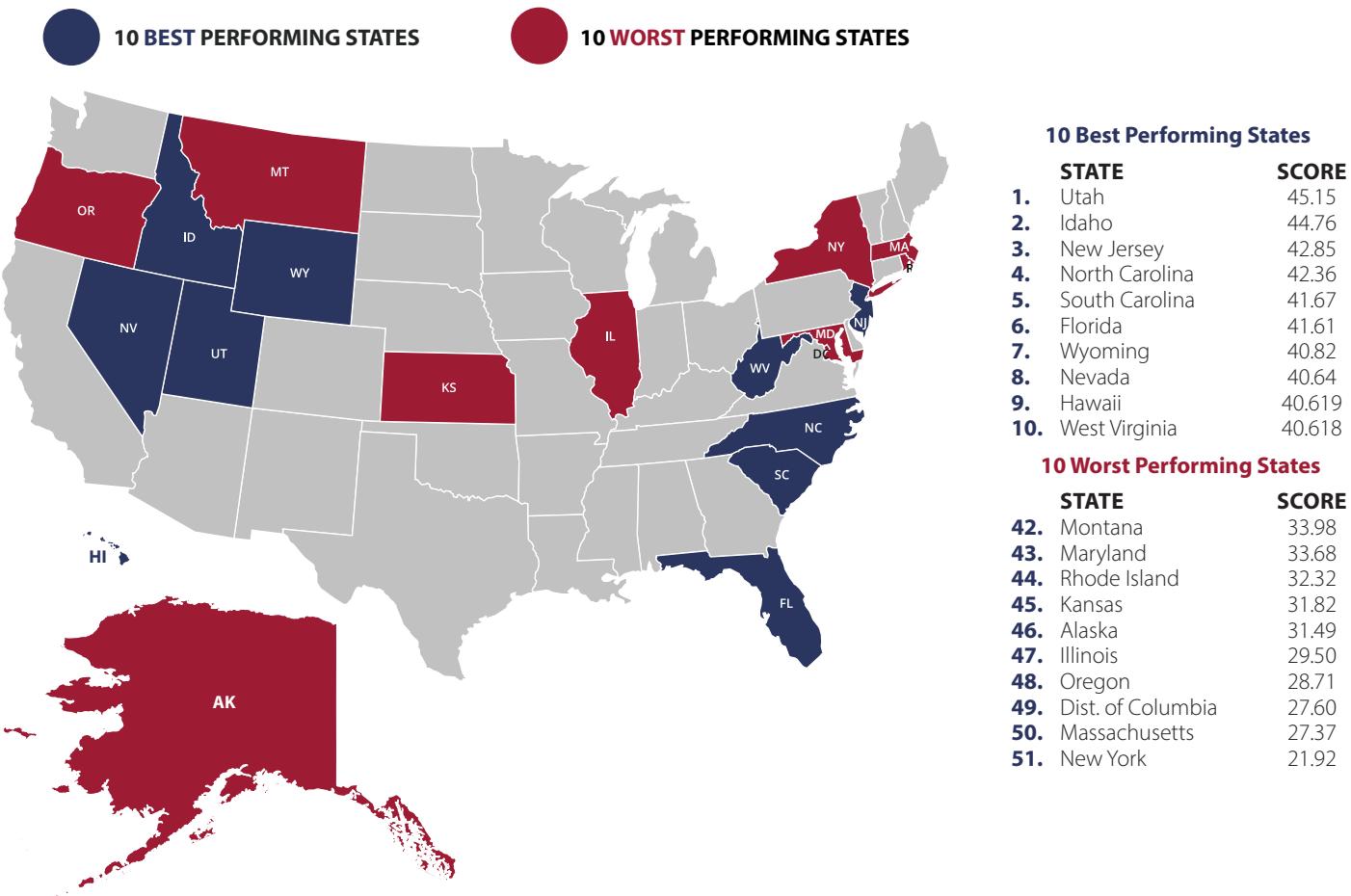
### **Future Implications**

Overall, the Right for Kids Ranking is a powerful tool to help states easily identify areas where they are excelling or falling behind. Policymakers will find it helpful in their efforts to identify promising new policies and programs to improve their system by following the lead of top performers in each outcome category. But the greatest strength of the Right for Kids Ranking is that it provides a one-of-a-kind holistic view of how states perform relative to each other in achieving the best results for kids in their care. The Right for Kids Ranking is just one way to synthesize and contextualize state statistics, but we believe that it is one of the best as it shifts the focus from the numbers to the individual children whose lives are forever affected by the decisions made by policymakers.

### **The Best and Worst Performing States**

How do the states measure up and what can we learn from their performance? The 10 best and 10 worst performing states, defined as a comparative measure of overall scores across the seven outcome areas analyzed, are listed below.

**Figure 2.** Top 10 best and worst performing states



One thing becomes immediately apparent when looking at the rankings—there is an incredible amount of diversity among the highest and lowest ranking states. As mentioned above, we ran a multivariable regression analysis comparing the rankings and two socioeconomic factors, total population and median household income. The regression produced no statistical significance ( $F = 0.16$ ) with total population ( $p\text{-value} = .59$ ) and median household income ( $p\text{-value} = .07$ ) both showing no significant correlation. This suggests that socioeconomic makeup or population size may not be the main driver of how well or how poorly a given state will perform and that other variables, such as the way states respond to the needs of children and organize their child welfare systems, could play a more important role than wealth or other unique characteristics. Further research should be done to examine whether other demographic or socioeconomic factors influence a state's ability to achieve optimal outcomes for children who enter its care.

### **Case Study: New Hampshire vs. West Virginia**

Interestingly, the ranking of certain states seems to run counter to conventional wisdom and expectations. For example, West Virginia, a state with one of the highest poverty rates in the country and widely seen as the epicenter of

**Table 1.** Comparison of New Hampshire and West Virginia

State	Total Population	Median Household Income	Rate of Children in Foster Care	Title IV-E Spending per Foster Child	Right for Kids Rank
New Hampshire	1,356,458	\$71,305	574.2	\$10,145.90	<b>37</b>
West Virginia	1,805,832	\$44,061	1,273	\$8,160.26	<b>10</b>

the opioid epidemic, ranked in the top 10 for overall score in generating optimal outcomes for children in foster care, while New Hampshire, a wealthy state with one of the lowest poverty rates in the nation, ranked 37th ([Semega et al.](#)).

**Table 1** provides a comparison of West Virginia and New Hampshire. The median household income in West Virginia is more than \$27,000 less per year than in New Hampshire, and the rate of children in foster care in West Virginia is more than double that of New Hampshire. Despite these striking differences, our study indicated that West Virginia achieved better outcomes overall for the children in its care while spending almost \$2,000 less in Title IV-E spending per foster child. While not conclusive, this example is illustrative of two findings of the Right for Kids Ranking—population and certain socioeconomic factors do not necessarily play a statistically significant role in influencing how well a state performs at meeting the needs of children in foster

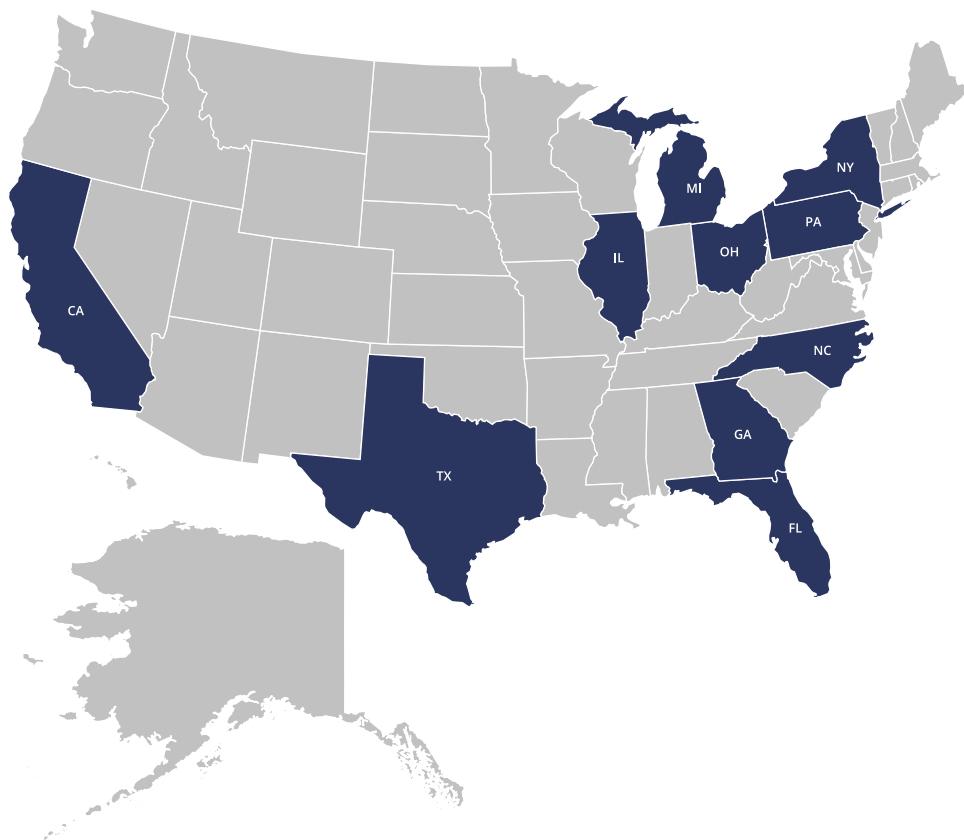
care, and more funding is not necessarily a guarantee of better outcomes. Further research comparing the policies and practices of these two states would be beneficial to shed light on factors driving the difference in performance and may identify promising strategies for meeting the needs of children who enter foster care.

## Ranking the Most Populous States

Although specific characteristics of an individual state, like its relative wealth or geography, do not seem to have a statistically significant impact on the performance of its child welfare system, it is still helpful to compare states to their peers. **Figure 3** shows how the child welfare systems of the 10 most populous states, based on current U.S. Census data, compare to one another.

Only two of these states—North Carolina and Florida—rank among the 10 best performing states. Two others—Georgia and Pennsylvania—fall in the top half. The remaining most populous states, with the exception of Texas and Ohio, rank in the bottom quarter of performers. This

lends further credence to the theory that unique state characteristics, such as population or relative wealth, are not the major driver of how well that state's child welfare system does at achieving optimal outcomes for at-risk kids.

**Figure 3.** Ranking of the 10 most populous states

### Top 10 Most Populous States

RANK	STATE	SCORE
4.	North Carolina	42.36
6.	Florida	41.61
17.	Georgia	39.28
18.	Pennsylvania	39.12
27.	Ohio	38.11
34.	Texas	36.31
39.	California	35.30
40.	Michigan	34.99
47.	Illinois	29.50
51.	New York	21.92

## Full Right for Kids Ranking

The Right for Kids Ranking is a snapshot in time, utilizing federally reported data from fiscal year 2017—the most recent year for which full data is available.<sup>2</sup> Rankings are based on each state's overall score across the seven outcome areas analyzed.

**Figure 4.** Full national ranking

	<b>SCORE</b>				
<b>1.</b> Utah	45.15	<b>18.</b> Pennsylvania	39.12	<b>36.</b> Delaware	35.92
<b>2.</b> Idaho	44.76	<b>19.</b> Arizona	39.08	<b>37.</b> New Hampshire	35.70
<b>3.</b> New Jersey	42.85	<b>20.</b> New Mexico	39.05	<b>38.</b> North Dakota	35.67
<b>4.</b> North Carolina	42.36	<b>21.</b> Minnesota	38.86	<b>39.</b> California	35.30
<b>5.</b> South Carolina	41.67	<b>22.</b> Colorado	38.76	<b>40.</b> Michigan	34.99
<b>6.</b> Florida	41.61	<b>23.</b> Nebraska	38.75	<b>41.</b> Kentucky	34.55
<b>7.</b> Wyoming	40.82	<b>24.</b> Wisconsin	38.61	<b>42.</b> Montana	33.98
<b>8.</b> Nevada	40.64	<b>25.</b> Virginia	38.42	<b>43.</b> Maryland	33.68
<b>9.</b> Hawaii	40.62	<b>26.</b> Louisiana	38.24	<b>44.</b> Rhode Island	32.32
<b>10.</b> West Virginia	40.62	<b>27.</b> Ohio	38.11	<b>45.</b> Kansas	31.82
<b>11.</b> Tennessee	40.29	<b>28.</b> Maine	38.07	<b>46.</b> Alaska	31.49
<b>12.</b> Arkansas	40.19	<b>29.</b> Vermont	37.65	<b>47.</b> Illinois	29.50
<b>13.</b> Connecticut	39.80	<b>30.</b> Iowa	37.65	<b>48.</b> Oregon	28.71
<b>14.</b> Washington	39.59	<b>31.</b> South Dakota	37.07	<b>49.</b> Dis. of Columbia	27.60
<b>15.</b> Alabama	39.56	<b>32.</b> Oklahoma	36.79	<b>50.</b> Massachusetts	27.37
<b>16.</b> Mississippi	39.41	<b>33.</b> Indiana	36.47	<b>51.</b> New York	21.92
<b>17.</b> Georgia	39.28	<b>34.</b> Texas	36.31		
		<b>35.</b> Missouri	35.99		

<sup>2</sup> Information on how rankings were calculated is in the “Right for Kids Methodology” section of this report. Data used in this report was obtained from the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect ([Administration for Children and Families 2019](#)) maintained by the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families Children’s Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

## OUTCOME 1: Fewer Kids in Foster Care

Foster care is an unfortunate reality for far too many children. While it is sometimes necessary to remove a child from their family to protect them from imminent harm, there is increasing awareness of the trauma caused by separating a child from his or her family. Reducing the number of children in foster care is an indicator of how well a state performs at both reducing incidents of maltreatment as well as preventing removals of children through alternative services. Fewer kids in care is one indicator that a state's child welfare system is doing its job and, more importantly, that

the state's children are growing up in safe, healthy environments.

For this outcome, states were scored based on the rate of children in their foster care system (per 100,000 state child population) and the rate of children entering the foster care system (per 100,000 state child population) during FY 2017. Using these metrics, we were able to assess state performance based on both the number of children already in the system as well as new entries that occurred during the fiscal year. The highest possible score for this outcome was 6 points.

**Figure 5.** Outcome 1 full national ranking

	SCORE				
1. Virginia	6.00	18. Colorado	4.71	36. Oregon	3.51
2. Maryland	5.83	19. Alabama	4.69	37. Missouri	3.49
3. New Jersey	5.77	20. New Hampshire	4.63	38. Iowa	3.41
4. Utah	5.53	21. Hawaii	4.62	39. Kentucky	3.34
5. Delaware	5.48	22. Maine	4.62	40. Nebraska	3.30
6. Idaho	5.33	23. New Mexico	4.57	41. Oklahoma	3.18
7. Illinois	5.31	24. Florida	4.45	42. North Dakota	3.15
8. North Carolina	5.21	25. Wisconsin	4.40	43. Rhode Island	3.10
9. Texas	5.21	26. Washington	4.37	44. Arizona	3.01
10. South Carolina	5.14	27. Tennessee	4.34	45. Kansas	2.85
11. Louisiana	5.11	28. Pennsylvania	4.30	46. Vermont	2.56
12. Connecticut	4.96	29. Ohio	4.29	47. Wyoming	2.55
13. New York	4.91	30. Nevada	4.02	48. Indiana	1.48
14. Dist. of Columbia	4.89	31. Mississippi	3.92	49. Alaska	1.46
15. Georgia	4.88	32. Massachusetts	3.85	50. West Virginia	1.16
16. Michigan	4.82	33. Arkansas	3.80	51. Montana	0.00
17. California	4.78	34. Minnesota	3.68		
		35. South Dakota	3.60		

**Figure 6.** Outcome 1 ranking for 10 most populous states

OUTCOME 1 RANK (vs. 10 Most Populous States)		STATE	OVERALL OUTCOME 1 RANK (vs. Rest of Nation)
1		Illinois	7
2		North Carolina	8
3		Texas	9
4		New York	13
5		Georgia	15
6		Michigan	16
7		California	17
8		Florida	24
9		Pennsylvania	28
10		Ohio	29

## OUTCOME 2: Reduce Abuse and Neglect

The child welfare system exists to protect children who are in imminent danger of harm due to abuse or neglect. While it is impossible to prevent every incident of abuse or neglect, how a state performs at reducing the number of victims of maltreatment can reveal much about the effectiveness of the state's policies and practices. For example, a decrease in the rate of abuse and neglect can indicate that a state's prevention and enforcement efforts are working. Conversely, an increase in the number of incidents could be evidence of structural failures that need to be addressed.

Although reducing the number of kids in foster care (Outcome 1) is a key indicator of how well a given state's child welfare system performs, it must be balanced with how well that state does at preventing abuse and neglect. This

includes both front-end prevention as well as preventing maltreatment while the child is in care and after they exit.

This outcome analyzed state performance in four areas related to front-end and back-end prevention. The highest possible score for this outcome was 10 points.

Indicators analyzed:

1. Rate of confirmed victims of maltreatment (per 100,000 state child population)
2. Percent of children with a subsequent incident of maltreatment within six months of the initial incident
3. Percent of children who re-enter foster care within 12 months of leaving the system
4. Percent of children with a confirmed incident of maltreatment while in foster care

**Figure 7.** Outcome 2 full national ranking

	<b>SCORE</b>					
<b>1.</b> North Carolina	9.03	<b>18.</b> Wisconsin	7.11	<b>36.</b> Michigan	5.60	
<b>2.</b> Virginia	8.62	<b>19.</b> Florida	6.92	<b>37.</b> Indiana	5.58	
<b>3.</b> Texas	8.46	<b>20.</b> Arkansas	6.91	<b>38.</b> Ohio	5.56	
<b>4.</b> Missouri	8.42	<b>21.</b> Washington	6.87	<b>39.</b> Mississippi	5.52	
<b>5.</b> Georgia	8.18	<b>22.</b> Utah	6.86	<b>40.</b> Dist. of Columbia	5.37	
<b>6.</b> Idaho	8.15	<b>23.</b> Pennsylvania	6.82	<b>41.</b> Iowa	5.02	
<b>7.</b> South Dakota	7.93	<b>24.</b> Tennessee	6.79	<b>42.</b> Minnesota	4.98	
<b>8.</b> Arizona	7.56	<b>25.</b> Wyoming	6.76	<b>43.</b> Colorado	4.66	
<b>9.</b> Kansas	7.46	<b>26.</b> California	6.73	<b>44.</b> Alaska	4.60	
<b>10.</b> Nebraska	7.44	<b>27.</b> West Virginia	6.72	<b>45.</b> Louisiana	4.57	
<b>11.</b> Alabama	7.41	<b>28.</b> Vermont	6.65	<b>46.</b> Oregon	4.34	
<b>12.</b> New Hampshire	7.40	<b>29.</b> North Dakota	6.64	<b>47.</b> New Mexico	4.17	
<b>13.</b> Nevada	7.39	<b>30.</b> South Carolina	6.54	<b>48.</b> Rhode Island	3.90	
<b>14.</b> Hawaii	7.38	<b>31.</b> Oklahoma	6.40	<b>49.</b> Kentucky	3.61	
<b>15.</b> Delaware	7.27	<b>32.</b> Connecticut	6.34	<b>50.</b> Massachusetts	3.45	
<b>16.</b> New Jersey	7.25	<b>33.</b> Illinois	6.01	<b>51.</b> New York	2.12	
<b>17.</b> Maine	7.16	<b>34.</b> Montana	6.00			
		<b>35.</b> Maryland	5.86			

**Figure 8.** Outcome 2 ranking for 10 most populous states

<b>OUTCOME 2 RANK</b> (vs. 10 Most Populous States)		<b>STATE</b>	<b>OVERALL OUTCOME 2 RANK</b> (vs. Rest of Nation)
<b>1</b>		North Carolina	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>		Texas	<b>3</b>
<b>3</b>		Georgia	<b>5</b>
<b>4</b>		Florida	<b>19</b>
<b>5</b>		Pennsylvania	<b>23</b>
<b>6</b>		California	<b>26</b>
<b>7</b>		Illinois	<b>33</b>
<b>8</b>		Michigan	<b>36</b>
<b>9</b>		Ohio	<b>38</b>
<b>10</b>		New York	<b>51</b>

### OUTCOME 3: Safe, Permanent Homes

The ultimate goal for any child who enters foster care is finding them a safe, permanent home as quickly as possible. Permanency is a critical factor affecting child well-being. Achieving permanency for children minimizes the risk of additional trauma and helps improve brain development and social and emotional functioning ([Westerman, 8](#)).

Nearly every state's child welfare system has achieving permanency for children through reunification with their family as their highest priority. However, reunification is not always possible. In such cases, permanency can be achieved through either placing the child with other relatives or adoption by nonrelatives. This outcome tracks how well states perform at finding safe, permanent homes for children in their care.

**Figure 9.** Outcome 3 full national ranking

	SCORE				
1. West Virginia	11.12	18. Louisiana	9.87	35. Pennsylvania	8.25
2. Mississippi	11.11	19. Colorado	9.61	36. South Dakota	8.17
3. New Mexico	11.04	20. Nebraska	9.55	37. Michigan	7.90
4. Washington	10.96	21. Alaska	9.47	38. Wisconsin	7.62
5. Arkansas	10.93	22. Iowa	9.28	39. Oregon	7.31
6. Wyoming	10.77	23. Arizona	9.27	40. Missouri	7.28
7. Oklahoma	10.74	24. Alabama	9.25	41. Kansas	7.21
8. Indiana	10.73	25. Minnesota	9.18	42. Texas	7.12
9. South Carolina	10.61	26. North Dakota	9.13	43. Virginia	6.92
10. Connecticut	10.49	27. North Carolina	9.06	44. Rhode Island	6.70
11. Illinois	10.39	28. Georgia	8.88	45. Maryland	6.54
12. Maine	10.26	29. Tennessee	8.87	46. California	6.49
13. Vermont	10.20	30. Ohio	8.87	47. New Hampshire	6.32
14. Idaho	10.15	31. Utah	8.73	48. Massachusetts	6.30
15. Montana	10.12	32. Florida	8.61	49. Delaware	5.52
16. Nevada	9.91	33. Hawaii	8.52	50. New York <sup>3</sup>	5.03
17. New Jersey	9.89	34. Kentucky	8.51	51. Dist. Of Columbia	4.58

**Figure 10.** Outcome 3 ranking for 10 most populous states

OUTCOME 3 RANK (vs. 10 Most Populous States)	STATE	OUTCOME 3 RANK (vs. Rest of Nation)	OUTCOME 3 RANK (vs. 10 Most Populous States)	STATE	OUTCOME 3 RANK (vs. Rest of Nation)
1	Illinois	11	6	Pennsylvania	35
2	North Carolina	27	7	Michigan	37
3	Georgia	28	8	Texas	42
4	Ohio	30	9	California	46
5	Florida	32	10	New York	50

<sup>3</sup> For Outcome 3, data on kinship placement and emancipation rates were excluded due to discrepancies in data reported by New York to the Administration for Children and Families. New York officials did not respond to our queries for clarification. Data for reunification and adoption rates are from the Children's Bureau ([Administration for Children and Families 2017](#)).

States were scored based on their performance in four areas related to reunification, adoption, and emancipation. The highest possible score for this outcome was 20 points.

Indicators analyzed:

- Percent of children who are reunited with their families after exiting foster care.
- Percent of children who achieve permanency through placement with relatives.
- Percent of children who are adopted out of foster care.
- Percent of children who age out of the system without finding a permanent family.

For this outcome, high rates of reunification, relative placement, and adoption counted in the state's favor, while a high rate of children who age out of the system counted against the state's overall score.

## OUTCOME 4: Forever Families ... Fast!

Just as important as achieving permanency for children is the time it takes to move a child from foster care to a permanent home. While entering foster care itself is a traumatic event that will have long-lasting effects on a child, children who spend less time in foster care fare much better than their peers who experience extended stays in the system. Longer stays in foster care decrease the likelihood that a child will achieve reunification and can result in poor development and behavioral problems ([Murray et al., 90](#)).

For this outcome, states were scored based on four factors related to the overall amount of time children spend in the foster care system as well as how long it takes for a state to successfully achieve permanency for children through either reunification or adoption. The highest possible score for this outcome was 17 points.

**Figure 11.** Outcome 4 full national ranking

	<b>SCORE</b>				
<b>1.</b> Utah	15.10	<b>18.</b> Louisiana	9.89	<b>36.</b> New Hampshire	8.35
<b>2.</b> Florida	12.39	<b>19.</b> Delaware	9.77	<b>37.</b> North Carolina	8.26
<b>3.</b> Colorado	11.89	<b>20.</b> Ohio	9.63	<b>38.</b> Massachusetts	8.13
<b>4.</b> Tennessee	11.64	<b>21.</b> Iowa	9.60	<b>39.</b> Texas	7.98
<b>5.</b> West Virginia	11.59	<b>22.</b> North Dakota	9.55	<b>40.</b> Michigan	7.46
<b>6.</b> South Carolina	11.22	<b>23.</b> Vermont	9.26	<b>41.</b> Alaska	7.18
<b>7.</b> Minnesota	11.13	<b>24.</b> Rhode Island	9.25	<b>42.</b> Washington	7.14
<b>8.</b> Arkansas	10.86	<b>25.</b> Wisconsin	9.03	<b>43.</b> Connecticut	7.01
<b>9.</b> Wyoming	10.77	<b>26.</b> New Jersey	8.81	<b>44.</b> Oklahoma	6.97
<b>10.</b> Idaho	10.71	<b>27.</b> South Dakota	8.78	<b>45.</b> Kansas	6.96
<b>11.</b> Nevada	10.70	<b>28.</b> Montana	8.77	<b>46.</b> Maryland	6.49
<b>12.</b> Hawaii	10.57	<b>29.</b> Georgia	8.71	<b>47.</b> Maine	6.10
<b>13.</b> Arizona	10.45	<b>30.</b> California	8.65	<b>48.</b> Oregon	6.07
<b>14.</b> Kentucky	10.34	<b>31.</b> Indiana	8.60	<b>49.</b> Dist. of Columbia	5.37
<b>15.</b> Alabama	10.18	<b>32.</b> Mississippi	8.51	<b>50.</b> New York	3.87
<b>16.</b> New Mexico	10.14	<b>33.</b> Missouri	8.49	<b>51.</b> Illinois	0.31
<b>17.</b> Pennsylvania	10.10	<b>34.</b> Nebraska	8.43		
		<b>35.</b> Virginia	8.37		

**Figure 12.** Outcome 4 ranking for 10 most populous states

<b>OUTCOME 4 RANK</b> (vs. 10 Most Populous States)	<b>STATE</b>	<b>OVERALL</b> <b>OUTCOME 4 RANK</b> (vs. Rest of Nation)	
		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
	Florida		<b>2</b>
<b>1</b>	Pennsylvania		<b>17</b>
<b>2</b>	Ohio		<b>20</b>
<b>3</b>	Georgia		<b>29</b>
<b>4</b>	California		<b>30</b>
<b>5</b>	North Carolina		<b>37</b>
<b>6</b>	Texas		<b>39</b>
<b>7</b>	Michigan		<b>40</b>
<b>8</b>	New York		<b>50</b>
<b>9</b>	Illinois		<b>51</b>
<b>10</b>			

Indicators analyzed:

1. Average total number of days children spent in foster care.
2. Percent of children reunified with their families within 12 months of entering foster care.
3. Percent of children adopted within 12 months of entering foster care.
4. Percent of children who wait for five or more years before being adopted.

Positive scores were awarded to states with the lowest average days in care and with the highest rates of reunification and adoption within 12 months of entry. High rates of children waiting five or more years for adoption counted against a state's overall score.

## OUTCOME 5: A Firm Foundation

The stability of a child's placement while in foster care is an important factor in achieving optimal outcomes for the child. This is especially true for children who are in foster care for more than one year. Multiple placement changes can increase trauma and negatively affect the child's emotional and psychological development ([Connell et al., 2](#)).

For this outcome we looked at the number of placements experienced by children who spent 12-24 months in state custody. States with high rates of children who had two or fewer placement changes during this time received the best scores. The highest possible score for this outcome was 3 points.

**Figure 13.** Outcome 5 full national ranking

	SCORE				
<b>1.</b> Maine	3.0	<b>18.</b> Montana	1.95	<b>36.</b> Kansas	1.19
<b>2.</b> North Carolina	2.74	<b>19.</b> Pennsylvania	1.95	<b>37.</b> Vermont	1.19
<b>3.</b> Rhode Island	2.53	<b>20.</b> Idaho	1.94	<b>38.</b> Delaware	1.13
<b>4.</b> Nebraska	2.52	<b>21.</b> New Hampshire	1.93	<b>39.</b> Louisiana	1.00
<b>5.</b> New Jersey	2.49	<b>22.</b> South Dakota	1.89	<b>40.</b> Oklahoma	1.00
<b>6.</b> Iowa	2.45	<b>23.</b> Mississippi	1.81	<b>41.</b> Texas	0.89
<b>7.</b> Michigan	2.43	<b>24.</b> Florida	1.80	<b>42.</b> Nevada	0.71
<b>8.</b> Hawaii	2.38	<b>25.</b> Oregon	1.71	<b>43.</b> South Carolina	0.61
<b>9.</b> Connecticut	2.37	<b>26.</b> Minnesota	1.70	<b>44.</b> Utah	0.57
<b>10.</b> Indiana	2.35	<b>27.</b> Virginia	1.69	<b>45.</b> Alabama	0.47
<b>11.</b> New York	2.30	<b>28.</b> Arizona	1.64	<b>46.</b> New Mexico	0.44
<b>12.</b> Wisconsin	2.27	<b>29.</b> Alaska	1.61	<b>47.</b> Colorado	0.41
<b>13.</b> West Virginia	2.22	<b>30.</b> Dist. of Columbia	1.49	<b>48.</b> Tennessee	0.40
<b>14.</b> Maryland	2.18	<b>31.</b> Washington	1.46	<b>49.</b> North Dakota	0.38
<b>15.</b> Wyoming	2.14	<b>32.</b> Kentucky	1.40	<b>50.</b> Massachusetts	0.13
<b>16.</b> Ohio	2.12	<b>33.</b> Missouri	1.31	<b>51.</b> Arkansas	0
<b>17.</b> California	2.10	<b>34.</b> Georgia	1.29		
		<b>35.</b> Illinois	1.20		

**Figure 14.** Outcome 5 ranking for 10 most populous states

OUTCOME 5 RANK (vs. 10 Most Populous States)	STATE	OVERALL OUTCOME 5 RANK (vs. Rest of Nation)
<b>1</b>	North Carolina	<b>2</b>
<b>2</b>	Michigan	<b>7</b>
<b>3</b>	New York	<b>11</b>
<b>4</b>	Ohio	<b>16</b>
<b>5</b>	California	<b>17</b>
<b>6</b>	Pennsylvania	<b>18</b>
<b>7</b>	Florida	<b>24</b>
<b>8</b>	Georgia	<b>34</b>
<b>9</b>	Illinois	<b>35</b>
<b>10</b>	Texas	<b>41</b>

## OUTCOME 6: Bedrooms Over Dorm Rooms

Children do best living in a natural family setting. However, approximately 1 in every 7 children in foster care currently reside in an institutional setting ([Wiltz](#)). These placements, sometimes referred to as “group homes” or “congregate care,” are most often used for children whose placements in a foster family home was disrupted or who have more intense care needs due to trauma or disability. Shortages in

foster home capacity also drives the use of congregate care in some states.

For this outcome, we ranked states based on their ability to place children in the least restrictive placement setting. States with the best scores had lower rates of children under 12 years of age placed in institutions or group homes. The highest possible score for this outcome was 2 points.

**Figure 15.** Outcome 6 full national ranking

		<b>SCORE</b>	<b>17</b>	Georgia	1.73	<b>36</b>	Texas	1.45
<b>1</b>	Nebraska	1.96	<b>17</b>	Wisconsin	1.71	<b>37</b>	Mississippi	1.44
<b>1</b>	Dist. of Columbia	1.92	<b>19</b>	California	1.70	<b>37</b>	Washington	1.44
<b>2</b>	Utah	1.90	<b>20</b>	Iowa	1.70	<b>39</b>	Minnesota	1.39
<b>3</b>	Connecticut	1.89	<b>20</b>	Tennessee	1.67	<b>40</b>	Hawaii	1.35
<b>4</b>	New Jersey	1.89	<b>22</b>	Maryland	1.65	<b>41</b>	Alabama	1.31
<b>4</b>	Indiana	1.89	<b>23</b>	Wyoming	1.64	<b>42</b>	New Mexico	1.28
<b>4</b>	Maine	1.88	<b>24</b>	West Virginia	1.64	<b>43</b>	Florida	1.24
<b>7</b>	Kansas	1.85	<b>24</b>	Missouri	1.63	<b>44</b>	Virginia	1.21
<b>8</b>	Louisiana	1.85	<b>27</b>	Kentucky	1.61	<b>45</b>	Massachusetts	1.11
<b>8</b>	Illinois	1.83	<b>28</b>	Colorado	1.59	<b>46</b>	Nevada	1.08
<b>10</b>	Oklahoma	1.83	<b>28</b>	Pennsylvania	1.59	<b>46</b>	Oregon	1.08
<b>10</b>	Oregon	1.83	<b>30</b>	Idaho	1.58	<b>47</b>	Alaska	1
<b>10</b>	Alaska	1.80	<b>31</b>	Vermont	1.57	<b>48</b>	North Dakota	1
<b>13</b>	North Dakota	1.76	<b>32</b>	Rhode Island	1.54	<b>49</b>	South Dakota	0.96
<b>14</b>	Delaware	1.75	<b>33</b>	New Hampshire	1.53	<b>50</b>	South Carolina	0.90
<b>15</b>	Michigan	1.75	<b>34</b>	North Carolina	1.49	<b>50</b>	Arkansas	0.84
<b>15</b>	Ohio	1.73	<b>35</b>	Montana	1.47	<b>51</b>	Arizona	0
							New York <sup>4</sup>	

**Figure 16.** Outcome 6 ranking for 10 most populous states

<b>OUTCOME 6 RANK</b> (vs. 10 Most Populous States)	<b>STATE</b>	<b>OVERALL OUTCOME 6 RANK</b> (vs. Rest of Nation)
<b>1</b>	Illinois	<b>10</b>
<b>2</b>	Michigan	<b>15</b>
<b>3</b>	Ohio	<b>17</b>
<b>4</b>	Georgia	<b>17</b>
<b>5</b>	California	<b>20</b>
<b>6</b>	Pennsylvania	<b>28</b>
<b>7</b>	North Carolina	<b>34</b>
<b>8</b>	Texas	<b>36</b>
<b>9</b>	Florida	<b>43</b>
<b>10</b>	New York	<b>51</b>

<sup>4</sup> Due to issues with data reported by the state of New York on rates of placement in institutional and group home settings we were unable to award New York any points for this outcome. We reached out to New York officials for clarification but did not receive a response.

## OUTCOME 7: Homes for Older Youth

It is critically important for state child welfare systems to focus on quickly finding permanent homes for older youth in their care. Older foster youth are less likely to find a permanent placement and are at greater risk of aging out of the system ([Salazar et al., 10](#)). Roughly 20,000 foster youth each year will leave the system without finding a permanent home ([Administration for Children and Families 2018, 3](#)). These youth experience disproportionately higher rates of poverty, incarceration, and mental health issues (Baker; Conn et al.; [Dworsky et al.](#); Riebschleger et al.; Vaughn et al.).

For this outcome, we analyzed five key indicators to determine how well each state performed at achieving permanency for teenagers. The highest possible score for this outcome was 12 points.

**Figure 17.** Outcome 7 full national ranking

	<b>SCORE</b>				
<b>1.</b> New Mexico	7.42	<b>18.</b> Vermont	6.23	<b>36.</b> Missouri	5.37
<b>2.</b> Washington	7.36	<b>19.</b> Florida	6.21	<b>37.</b> Alaska	5.37
<b>3.</b> Mississippi	7.11	<b>20.</b> Wyoming	6.18	<b>38.</b> Rhode Island	5.30
<b>4.</b> Idaho	6.91	<b>21.</b> West Virginia	6.18	<b>39.</b> Texas	5.20
<b>5.</b> Nevada	6.83	<b>22.</b> Iowa	6.17	<b>40.</b> Maryland	5.13
<b>6.</b> Arkansas	6.79	<b>23.</b> Pennsylvania	6.11	<b>41.</b> Maine	5.06
<b>7.</b> Minnesota	6.78	<b>24.</b> Louisiana	5.95	<b>42.</b> North Dakota	5.05
<b>8.</b> New Jersey	6.76	<b>25.</b> Ohio	5.92	<b>43.</b> Michigan	5.04
<b>9.</b> Connecticut	6.75	<b>26.</b> Colorado	5.90	<b>44.</b> Delaware	5.00
<b>10.</b> Oklahoma	6.65	<b>27.</b> Indiana	5.85	<b>45.</b> California	4.85
<b>11.</b> South Carolina	6.59	<b>28.</b> Hawaii	5.79	<b>46.</b> Illinois	4.44
<b>12.</b> Tennessee	6.57	<b>29.</b> Kentucky	5.74	<b>47.</b> Massachusetts	4.41
<b>13.</b> North Carolina	6.57	<b>30.</b> South Dakota	5.69	<b>48.</b> Kansas	4.30
<b>14.</b> Utah	6.47	<b>31.</b> Montana	5.66	<b>49.</b> Dist. of Columbia	3.98
<b>15.</b> Wisconsin	6.46	<b>32.</b> Virginia	5.62	<b>50.</b> Oregon	3.94
<b>16.</b> Arizona	6.30	<b>33.</b> Georgia	5.60	<b>51.</b> New York	3.69
<b>17.</b> Alabama	6.25	<b>34.</b> Nebraska	5.56		
		<b>35.</b> New Hampshire	5.55		

**Figure 18.** Outcome 7 ranking for 10 most populous states

<b>OUTCOME 7 RANK</b> (vs. 10 Most Populous)	<b>STATE</b>	<b>OVERALL OUTCOME 7 RANK</b> (vs. Rest of Nation)
<b>1</b>	North Carolina	<b>13</b>
<b>2</b>	Florida	<b>19</b>
<b>3</b>	Pennsylvania	<b>23</b>
<b>4</b>	Ohio	<b>25</b>
<b>5</b>	Georgia	<b>33</b>
<b>6</b>	Texas	<b>39</b>
<b>7</b>	Michigan	<b>43</b>
<b>8</b>	California	<b>45</b>
<b>9</b>	Illinois	<b>46</b>
<b>10</b>	New York	<b>51</b>

Indicators analyzed:

1. The rate of children aged 12-17 in foster care (per 100,000 state child population aged 12-17).
2. Percent of foster youth aged 12-17 who are adopted.
3. Percent of foster youth aged 12-17 who are reunified with their families.
4. Average number of months between entry into foster care and reunification for youth aged 12-17.
5. Average number of months between termination of parental rights and adoption for youth aged 12-17.

The best performing states are those that were able to achieve the highest rates of reunification and adoption for children aged 12-17 within the shortest period of time.

## Is It Really About the Money?

Any effort to reform the child welfare system will inevitably include funding as a central consideration. Policymakers spend countless hours wrestling over important questions like how much to reimburse service providers for the costs of caring for children and whether increasing caseworker salaries will lead to improved staff retention. Roughly \$30 billion is spent each year by federal, state, and local governments on child welfare services ([Rosinsky and Williams, 1](#)). Given this high price tag, taxpayers deserve to know whether increased spending really produces better outcomes for children.

The federal government provides funding for foster care services to the states on an annual basis through a grant program authorized by Title IV-E of the Social Security Act ([Administration for Children and Families 2012a](#)). Each state's Title IV-E agency, generally the state agency responsible for the foster care program, must submit a plan to the secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services detailing how the state will comply with the requirements of Title IV-E to qualify for funding ([45 CFR §1356.20](#)). States must also submit annual expenditure estimates as well as quarterly reports of estimated and actual Title IV-E expenditures ([Administration for Children and Families 2012a](#)).

**Figure 19** shows where each state falls in total Title IV-E spending per foster child.

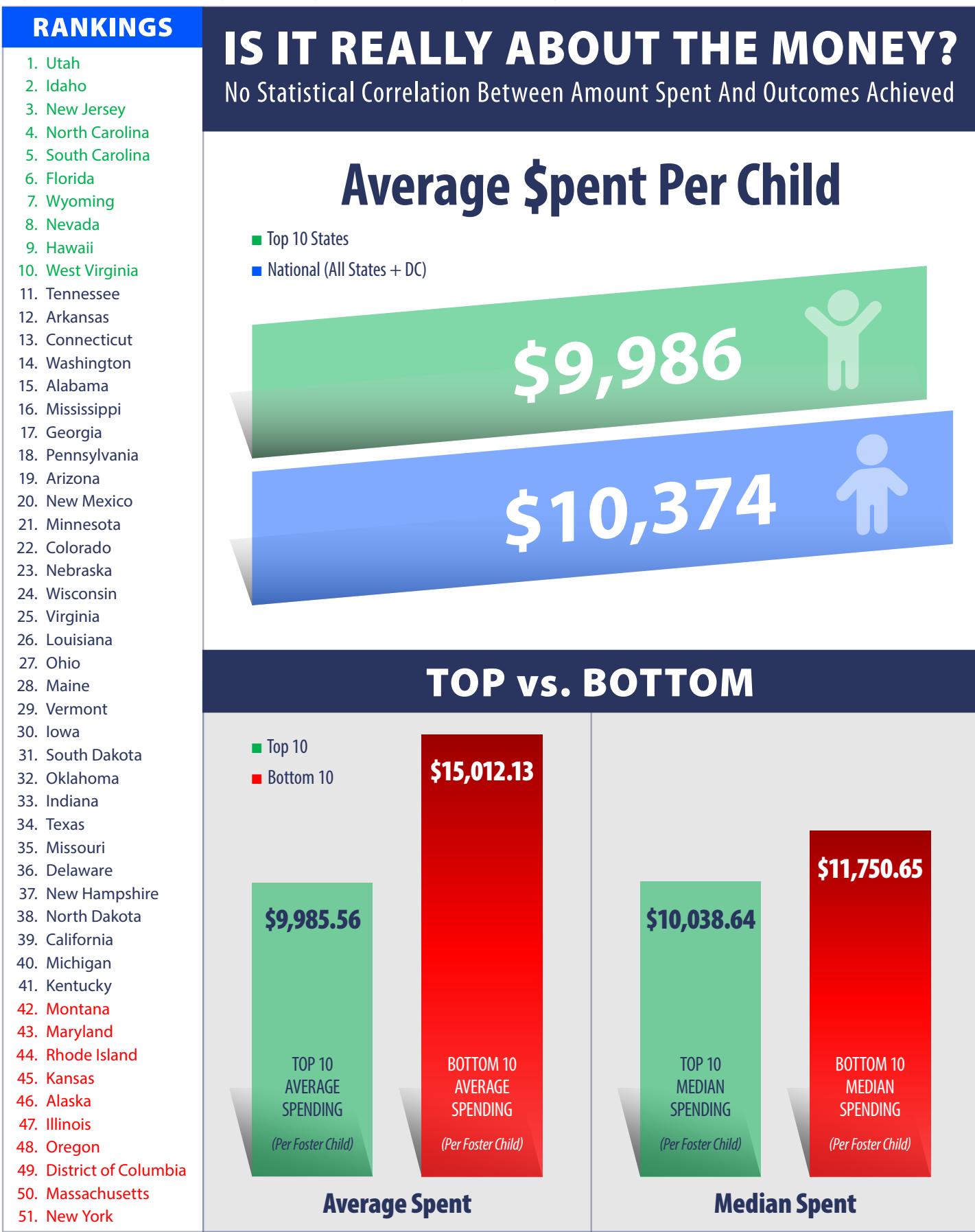
One finding in particular stands out from our spending analysis—the states that spend the most on child welfare services are not necessarily the best performing. A regression analysis comparing the Right for Kids rank and each state's Title IV-E spending showed no statistical correlation between spending and outcomes ( $F = 0.17$ ). Our analysis also showed that the 10 best performing states spent less per child than both the national average and the bottom 10 worst performing states. This suggests that the key to achieving better outcomes may not be how much money states invest in their child welfare systems, but rather other factors like policy and practice.

It should be noted that Title IV-E funds are just one funding stream states utilize for their foster care system. Due to inconsistencies in the

**Figure 19.** Title IV-E state foster care spending per state (from highest to lowest spending)<sup>5</sup>

STATE	TOTAL TITLE IV-E FOSTER CARE SPENDING (FY17)	TOTAL CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE (FY17)	TOTAL SPENDING PER FOSTER CHILD (FY17)	RIGHT FOR KIDS RANK
DC	\$45,951,829	751	\$61,187.52	49
CA	\$1,457,006,875	51,869	\$28,090.13	39
CT	\$76,502,051	4,135	\$18,501.10	13
MD	\$67,405,355	3,923	\$17,182.09	43
NJ	\$90,859,459	5,946	\$15,280.77	3
VA	\$71,887,956	4,795	\$14,992.27	25
OH	\$210,177,980	14,961	\$14,048.39	27
OR	\$105,689,024	7,972	\$13,257.53	48
MA	\$136,367,939	10,919	\$12,489.05	50
HI	\$19,661,932	1,607	\$12,235.18	9
CO	\$68,739,140	5,704	\$12,051.04	22
AZ	\$179,805,039	15,031	\$11,962.28	19
NY	\$331,400,589	27,821	\$11,911.89	51
LA	\$52,479,199	4,460	\$11,766.64	26
IL	\$184,619,365	15,930	\$11,589.41	47
PA	\$192,436,248	16,891	\$11,392.83	18
NV	\$49,617,218	4,408	\$11,256.17	8
ME	\$17,213,272	1,584	\$10,866.96	28
FL	\$252,213,323	24,641	\$10,235.51	6
NH	\$15,076,814	1,486	\$10,145.90	37
SC	\$40,627,424	4,041	\$10,053.80	5
NC	\$107,311,305	10,706	\$10,023.47	4
MI	\$118,709,149	11,918	\$9,960.49	40
UT	\$28,623,698	2,954	\$9,689.81	1
ND	\$13,908,221	1,495	\$9,303.16	38
ID	\$13,960,497	1,593	\$8,763.65	2
WI	\$67,240,126	7,721	\$8,708.73	24
AK	\$23,883,044	2,766	\$8,634.51	46
AR	\$41,223,235	4,776	\$8,631.33	12
VT	\$10,477,810	1,270	\$8,250.24	29
WV	\$54,127,012	6,633	\$8,160.26	10
DE	\$6,388,608	787	\$8,117.67	36
NM	\$20,960,907	2,657	\$7,888.94	20
WA	\$81,369,211	11,355	\$7,165.94	14
OK	\$64,279,769	9,312	\$6,902.90	32
GA	\$90,031,064	13,146	\$6,848.55	17
AL	\$36,821,285	5,631	\$6,539.03	15
KY	\$52,607,088	8,089	\$6,503.53	41
TN	\$54,448,860	8,558	\$6,362.33	11
TX	\$202,555,047	32,150	\$6,300.31	34
MN	\$60,736,111	9,651	\$6,293.25	21
RI	\$11,547,907	1,846	\$6,255.64	44
MS	\$25,750,646	5,440	\$4,733.57	16
NE	\$19,324,804	4,195	\$4,606.63	23
MT	\$16,562,392	3,853	\$4,298.57	42
MO	\$52,441,378	12,390	\$4,232.56	35
WY	\$4,510,337	1,085	\$4,156.99	7
SD	\$6,373,652	1,603	\$3,976.08	31
KS	\$25,701,598	7,753	\$3,315.05	45
IA	\$19,700,260	5,952	\$3,309.86	30
IN	\$13,592,766	20,904	\$650.25	33

5 State spending data was obtained from Casey Family Programs' state-by-state data fact sheets ([Casey Family Programs](#)).

**Figure 20.** National average spending vs. Top 10 average spending

availability of published information on individual state and local funds spent on foster care services in FY 2017, we were unable to include these dollars in our analysis. Since Title IV-E spending is the most consistent data for every state that is made publicly available by the federal government we chose to utilize it as the basis for an “apples-to-apples” comparison between states.

## Conclusion

It is our hope that the Right for Kids Ranking will inspire states to take a closer look at the performance of their child welfare system and make reforms that prioritize the needs of vulnerable children. While there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach, states can learn from each other and craft innovative solutions tailored to meet the unique needs of children in their care.

The next two years provide an unprecedented opportunity for states to fundamentally transform their child welfare systems. In 2018, President Donald Trump signed the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 ([H.R. 1892](#)), which included the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA). This landmark piece of legislation represents the most expansive restructuring of how the federal government funds child welfare services since 1980 ([Kelly 2018](#)). Previously, states were only permitted to use Title IV-E funds to help with the cost of providing services to children in the foster care system and certain administrative and training expenses ([National Conference of State Legislatures](#)). As of October 1, 2019, states are now permitted to direct Title IV-E funds to services targeted at preventing children who are identified as “candidates for foster care” from entering the system. This includes supportive services intended to allow children to remain at home while equipping their parents or caregivers to address issues that put their family at risk ([National Conference of State Legislatures](#)). The legislation also seeks to reduce the use of congregate and institutional care by restricting the ability of states to claim reimbursement for the cost of keeping kids in congregate settings for more than two weeks ([National Conference of State Legislatures](#)).

As of the writing of this report, at least 27 states have chosen to delay implementation of FFPSA ([Kelly 2019](#)). Four

states—Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, and Pennsylvania—have notified the federal government of their intention to delay implementation until October 2020, and 23 states have delayed until October 2021 ([Kelly 2019](#)).<sup>6</sup> As policymakers work toward bringing their child welfare systems into compliance with FFPSA, the Right for Kids Ranking can serve as a powerful tool to help them assess their current performance, open dialogue with other states on promising reforms, and gauge their success at creating transformational change.

In addition to assisting states as they work to implement FFPSA, the Right for Kids Ranking can serve as an important resource for identifying other reforms to improve system performance. Categories of reforms that policymakers should consider include strategies for reducing removals by prioritizing prevention services, providing for greater local control over foster care services, increasing foster family recruitment, implementing programs that provide services to high-needs children in a family-based setting, and revising standards governing child protective investigations and court oversight of actions taken by child welfare departments. Over the course of the next year, the Texas Public Policy Foundation will publish policy papers exploring such reforms in greater detail.

The Right for Kids Ranking is an important starting point for a bigger discussion among policymakers on the effectiveness of state efforts to prevent and respond to the problem of abuse and neglect. By providing a transparent look into how child welfare systems are actually performing in comparison to the rest of the nation, the Right for Kids Ranking provides a foundation and catalyst for states to be proactive in making the difficult but necessary decisions that will allow children to realize their fundamental right to a stable, loving family. 

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