The number of Alaska children in foster care was up sharply in 2015, with the average monthly number jumping more than 20%. We don't have the data to document why the number went up, but state officials have said it might be partly because the Office of Children’s Services (OCS) is investigating more cases and taking more aggressive measures to protect children and avoid another spate of child deaths, as happened in 2014. Recent news reports also point to increased abuse of heroin among parents as potentially contributing to more child abuse and neglect.

As one step toward better understanding changes in who goes into foster care, this paper reports the changes in Alaska’s foster care population from 2011 through 2015, updating our previous report, covering 2006 through 2013. We used the monthly data on region, race, age, and gender of foster children published on the OCS website. Our analysis is limited, though. Data on the race and gender of foster-care children is available by region, but age breakdowns are only available statewide. We report the average monthly number of children in foster care for each year, but that number is based specifically on the number of children in foster care the last day of the month. Below we first summarize our findings, then provide a one-page overview of Alaska’s foster children in the period 2011-2015. After that we describe our findings in more detail.

Key Findings

The average number of children in foster care by month in 2015 was close to 2,700—up from about 1,900 in 2011. There are some striking changes in the foster care population in recent years, particularly 2015.

- The average number of children in foster care increased every year since 2012, with the steepest increase between 2014 and 2015. About 480 more children were in foster care in any given month during 2015 than in 2014—a 22% jump. The increase was 10% between 2013 and 2014, and 5% between 2012 and 2013.
- The number of children in foster care increased significantly in all regions except the Western region in 2015. The largest increase was in Anchorage, which saw the average monthly number increase 28% in 2015—from 898 children in any given month in 2014 to 1,151 in 2015. By contrast, the Western region saw a comparatively small increase of about 8 children more in any given month in 2015—or 4% more. But the Western region still has by far the highest rate of children in foster care.
- The rate of foster-care placement by region in 2015 varied from 10 children per 1,000 in the Northern and Southeastern regions to 17 per 1,000 in the Western region—marking the first year that rates in all regions were in the double-digits. These regional numbers are all much higher than the U.S. average of 5 or 6 per 1,000. Anchorage's rate increased steadily from 7 per 1,000 children in 2011 to 13 per 1,000 in 2015.
- For the first time since 2006, the share of foster children who are Alaska Native dropped below 60% in 2015. That share was 62% in 2014 but 56% in 2015—because the number of foster children of other races increased faster. The number of White children in foster care was up 33% in 2015 and the number among children of other races increased 50%, while the number of Alaska Native children grew 11%.
- More children of all ages went into foster care in this period, but the youngest (four and younger) continue to be the largest proportion and they saw the fastest increase in 2015—up more than one-quarter.
- Boys and girls in foster care are almost equally distributed across regions, races, and ages. The exceptions are that boys outnumber girls in the 8-11 age cohort and girls outnumber boys among those 14 and older.
The Changing Picture of Foster Children in Alaska, 2011-2015*

- The number of children in foster care statewide was up 22% in 2015—a monthly average of nearly 2,700, compared with 2,214 in 2014. The average number increased 40% between 2012 and 2015.

- More children of all races went into foster care. But the fastest growth was among White and other non-Native children, with the monthly average number of White foster children up a third in 2015 and the number of other non-Native foster children up 50%.

- Alaska Native children still account for the biggest share of foster children in Alaska. But because the numbers grew faster among other children, the share of Alaska Native children among all foster children dropped from 62% in 2011 to 56% in 2015.

- More children of all ages went into foster care between 2012 and 2015. But children under 10 still account for most, and their numbers grew the fastest. The monthly average number of the youngest (4 or under) increased close to 30% between 2014 and 2015.

- Among all Alaska children, the share in foster care increased in every region except the Western in 2015—still, the rate in that region remained the highest, with 17 per 1,000 children in foster care. In other regions the 2015 rate was from 10 per 1,000 children in the Northern and Southeastern regions to 13 in Anchorage—which saw the fastest growth. The rates in all regions are far above the national average of 5 or 6 children per 1,000 in foster care.

*Note: Most of those in the foster-care system are 18 or younger, but a few remain until they are 21.
Anchorage saw the largest increase

OCS divides the state into five regions—Anchorage (ARO), Northern (NRO), Southcentral (SCRO), Southeast (SRO), and Western (WRO); see the map on page 2. Panel A in Figure 1 shows the number of children in foster care, by region, at the end of any given month during years 2011 through 2015. During that period the average number of Alaska children in foster care in any month increased 41%, from 1,917 in 2011 to 2,696 in 2015. Just between 2014 and 2015 the monthly average increased by about 480 (22%). The average was up 198 (10%) between 2013 and 2014, and 90 (5%) between 2012 and 2013.

Panel B in Figure 1 shows the annual percentage increases in the number of children in foster care by region. With a few exceptions, the percentage increase was higher in each subsequent year. In 2015, the number increased in all regions, with more than 20% increases in Anchorage, Southcentral, and Southeast. Anchorage saw the largest increase (28%), from an average of 898 2014 to 1,151 children during 2015. The Northern region saw an increase of 16%, but there was comparatively minimal change in the Western region.

While reporting the numbers of children in foster care statewide and by region is useful, it’s also important to look at what share of all Alaska children are entering foster care. Figure 2 shows the number of children per 1,000 in foster care by region. Every region except the Western saw a higher rate in 2015 than in 2014. Still, approximately 17 of every 1,000 children in that region were in foster care in 2015—a slight decrease from the highs of 2011 and 2012—but still by far the highest rate. And for the first time since the Western region was created in June 2010, all regions saw double-digit rates of foster-care placements in 2015. Comparable numbers for the entire U.S. are not available for the year 2015. But Alaska’s numbers are likely going to be far higher than the national numbers, as they were in 2013 and 2014, when Alaska’s children were twice as likely to be in foster care.
While children in four of the five regions entered foster care at increased rates in 2015, here too Anchorage saw the largest increase between 2014 and 2015. More importantly, Anchorage saw increases every year since 2011. The Northern region had a similar trend, with annual increases since 2012. The rate of placement of course depends on how many children live in the region. Therefore, an increase or decrease in the total number of children in any given region would affect the rate. Nevertheless, if we assume that assessment of risk or harm is uniform and accurate across the state, and reasons for taking children out of their homes are uniformly applied, it’s reasonable to compare rates of children in foster care across regions. While children in the Western region continue to be placed out of their homes at an exceptionally high rate, Anchorage is now not too far behind.

### Decreased racial disproportionality

Alaska Native children under 21 comprise approximately 20% of the state population under 21 but consistently accounted for more than 60% of all foster children from 2006 until 2015, when the share dropped to 56%.

The trend we observed in our earlier paper, during the years 2006 through 2013, continued in 2014, with Alaska Native children making up 62% of all children in foster care (Panel A, Figure 3). In 2015, Alaska Native children continued to make up a large proportion in foster care (a monthly average of 1,514) compared with White children (777) and children of other races (405). But the share of Alaska Native children dropped by 6 percentage points in 2015—to 56%. The share of White children in foster care was up 3 percentage points between 2014 and 2015, from 26% to 29%. The share among children of other races was likewise up 3 percentage points between 2014 and 2015, from 12% to 15%.

That happened because the numbers of White children and children of other races in foster care increased faster (Panel B in Figure 3). The number of Alaska Native children in foster care monthly in 2015 was up 11%, but the number of White children was up 33% and the number of children of other races increased 51%. Over the years, the rate at which Alaska Native children in foster care increased has been steady, but the rates among White children in 2015, and children of other races in 2014 and 2015, increased very steeply. While the racial disproportionality decreased in 2015, the number of Alaska Native children in foster care is still alarmingly high and steadily increasing. Incidentally, between the years 2006-2015, the number of Alaska Native children in foster care was lowest in 2011.

Figure 4 shows the regional breakdown by race, and the percentage changes from year to year, in all regions except the Western. Children in foster care in the Western region are almost all Alaska Native, and the general population of that region is predominantly Alaska Native. Therefore, we did not include the Western region in this part of the analysis. More children of all races were in foster care in all regions in recent years, but the patterns varied by region. Panel B in Figure 4 shows the percentage change.
The year 2015 saw big changes. The number of White children in foster care increased by 3 percentage points statewide, reflected almost equally across all regions except the Western. On average, 59 more White children per month entered foster care in Anchorage in 2015—a 30% increase from 2014. In the Northern region the monthly average of White children increased by 51, or 37%, and in Southcentral the number was up 98, or 35%. In Southeast the increase in numbers of White foster children was somewhat smaller—9 more children per month, for an increase of 28%. Children of other races also entered foster care at a much higher percentage in the Anchorage, Southeast, and Southcentral regions in 2015, with increases above 50%. But keep in mind that the actual number of foster children of other races in all regions is much smaller than the number of Alaska Native or White foster children.

Younger children continue to dominate

Younger children continue to make up the biggest share of foster children. Panel A in Figure 5 shows the numbers divided into four age groups. Panel B shows the percentage change in the individual age groups in consecutive years. Children ages 4 and under have consistently made up a third or more of children in foster care since 2006. Those between ages 5 to 9 have made up close to 30% of all children in foster care in recent years. The number of children in those age groups also increased the fastest between 2014 and 2015; numbers of children 4 and younger increased 28% and numbers of those 5 to 9 were up 24%.
Discussion

There were significant changes in Alaska’s foster care population in 2015. Numbers rose sharply, and some long-term trends shifted. For the first time in ten years, Alaska Native children made up less than 60% of the state’s foster care population. That doesn’t mean there are fewer Alaska Native children in foster care—there were just more White children and children of other races. Also for the first time in ten years, the number of children in foster care for every 1,000 children in the general population rose to double-digits in all regions of the state. The rates of children in foster care per 1,000 children in regions of Alaska are double or more than the U.S. average rate.

And the foster-care figure for January 2016 showed a continuing jump: 2,928 children were in foster care at the end of the month, the most ever. Two possible explanations for this recent sharp increase in numbers have been identified.iii

1. OCS is being more aggressive in responding to reports. There was a series of child deaths in Alaska during the summer of 2014. OCS was familiar with many of these children and their life situations. To avoid similar preventable deaths, OCS reports it is erring on the side of caution by aggressively responding when children are at risk of maltreatment. It is screening-in larger percentages of all reports of suspected maltreatment for further investigation. It is implementing new practices in the Southeast and Anchorage regions to help reduce repeat maltreatment. In February 2015, OCS introduced a new protocol for substantiating abuse that, at least partially, is causing an increase in substantiations. In other words, multiple internal changes in OCS’s policies and procedures seem to be directly linked to the increased numbers of children in care. These are important and significant changes in how OCS does things that have direct effects on children and families. But until these changes are evaluated, we cannot be certain of their impact on observed or desired trends.

2. Heroin abuse has increased. This is harder to establish as a potential explanation. For every case of child maltreatment, OCS investigators record whether substance or alcohol abuse was involved. But those records don’t differentiate between substances. The state Division of Public Health’s most recent reports on heroin use in Alaska used data from 2012 and 2013.iv Equivalent data for 2014 or 2015 are not yet available. Even if this data were available, until OCS differentiates between substances while recording substance abuse, it will be challenging to establish if heroin is causing the spike in foster-care numbers.

Whatever the reasons for the increasing numbers, foster care is presumed to be a safer alternative if children are judged at high risk of harm in their homes. Some analysts argue that it is often better to keep children in their homes and take steps to reduce the risks. Evidence from many studies points to successes and failures of both approaches—providing services to children in their homes, or placing children in foster care. While that debate is ongoing, it would arguably be more productive to have discussions on ways to involve extended families and communities in preventing maltreatment, or in responding to known instances of maltreatment.
Available options for Alaska’s children being abused or neglected were last evaluated more than 10 years ago, before OCS deployed its current data system. Since then, OCS has adopted a new practice model and introduced several changes in its practices and procedures, and new laws have been passed. Also, with a more than 30% turnover rate, OCS likely has a largely new frontline workforce. Whether the planned changes had the intended effect, whether heroin is causing the recent spike, or if the children are safer out of their homes will remain unknown until these factors are closely examined.

The next federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) of Alaska’s child protection services is due in 2017. It is the third such review evaluating OCS’s performance. The first was in 2002 and the second in 2009. As comprehensive as the new review may be, it is limited to assessing OCS’s performance over a limited time. This review is not designed to examine impacts of any of the policy or practice changes discussed above. Consequently, the CFSR is less likely to yield sweeping changes in response to either of the two possible reasons discussed above for the growing number of foster children. While we continue to note the alarming rise in numbers of children in foster care and speculate on reasons for the rise, and while OCS tries to muster its limited resources to respond, it is important that practices are examined and evaluated for their intended and unintended outcomes.

Meanwhile, the differing increases across race, age, and region raise important questions that cannot be answered with the available data. For example, what is causing children of other races to enter foster care at such a higher pace? Why are the numbers of children of White children in foster care spiking in the Northern region? What is special about the Southeast region that is causing children of other races to enter foster care at these higher rates? And, despite all the focus and efforts on improving services for Alaska Native children and families, why do they continue to enter foster care at a steady and increasing rate? None of these questions can be answered with the available data. But they are important questions that would help Alaskans understand the reasons behind the numbers and provide a better opportunity to devise effective policy.

Endnotes


ii These are significant assumptions. Due to various factors, practices and procedures are not uniform across the state, and any assessment tool will have issues of accuracy and much room for worker judgment. However, these numbers are still valuable for a comparison across regions.


v A series of reports were published by the Child Welfare Evaluation Program at the University of Alaska Anchorage in 2005.

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