



# Time for Reform:

*Hoping for a Family  
for the Holidays*



**KIDS ARE WAITING**  
Fix Foster Care Now



fosterclub  
the national  
network for  
young people  
in foster care

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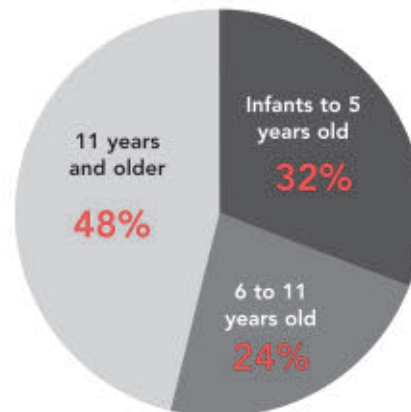


# Time for Reform:

## *Hoping for a Family for the Holidays*

Each year, more than 500,000 children spend the holidays in foster care. In some cases the holidays may be spent with extended family, but more often it is spent with foster families to whom children are not related, or in group homes or institutional settings. Although foster care is an important safety net for children who have suffered abuse or neglect, being in foster care is not always easy. The holiday season is often particularly difficult for children who are wards of the state, and who range in age from infants to teenagers (See Figure 1).

FIGURE 1—Percent of Children by Age in Foster Care



During the holidays, most children in foster care are separated from their families, including parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and even brothers and sisters. At a time when “family” is at the heart of gatherings for dinner, gift exchanges and joining together to watch parades and sports events on television, these children are often disconnected from family members who could make the holidays the special event that they should be. For many of these children, this holiday will not be the first holiday that they have spent in foster care without their families. On average, foster youth have been in foster care 28.6 months—a time period that spans at least two holiday seasons.

*“Christmas for me was always an emotional time. Everything it represented was a source of pain—the support, the love, the family. These issues were exacerbated by the fact that I had nowhere to go for the holidays... Luckily I was the basketball manager so they let me stay in the dorms at school. The pain of that holiday season was so unreal—I was so lonely.”*

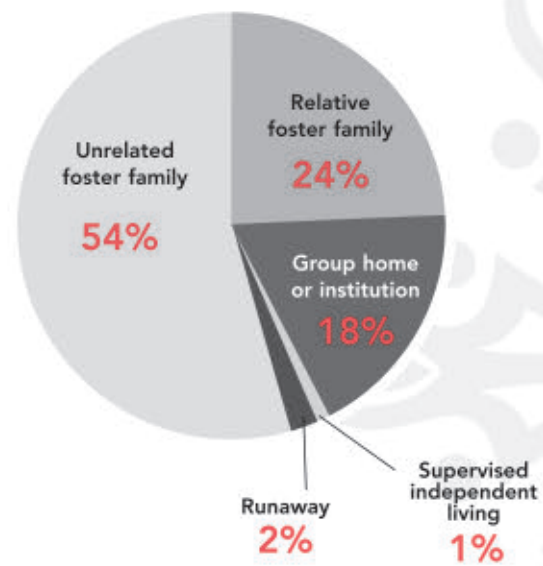
**Sharde Armstrong,**  
age 22, Indiana





Some children in foster care have the benefit of a “family” that is committed to them: children placed with relatives, children living with families who plan to adopt and children who are on trial visits home with their parents. However, this group only represents approximately one-third of the children in foster care. The remaining two-thirds are with unrelated foster families, in group homes or institutional settings (See Figure 2).

FIGURE 2—Where Children in Foster Care Live



*“I remember Christmas in my last foster home. I felt a part of my immediate foster family but alienated by their parents and extended family. I had this feeling they didn’t understand why they [their children] would want to be foster parents. I felt awkward and sometimes like a charity case.”*

**Shawn Semelsberger,**  
age 21, Michigan

Some of these children do have happy holiday seasons spent safely with foster families and supportive adults who do their best to make the holidays a special time for the children and youth temporarily in their care. However, many current and former foster youth report the holidays are a tremendously difficult time when it is spent without a safe, permanent family of their own. They report feeling sad, lonely, isolated, and unwanted. Spending time in foster care often means:

- No contact with parents, members of their extended families or friends during holiday celebrations.
- The loss of family holiday traditions such as attending services at a house of worship, special holiday foods, or their family’s unique ways of honoring the meaning of the holiday.



*"I still suffer from what I like to call the "foster holiday" syndrome. I never did and never will enjoy a holiday like those that have homes and best friends to experience them with... My holidays with my real family weren't good either, but I knew in my heart what the holidays were supposed to be about and that was Family. Family coming together as one."*

**Juan Jones,**  
age 19, Missouri

- Not being able to give gifts or receive gifts with people the child loves.
- Moving to a temporary "respite" family that the child does not know when the child's foster family leaves for holiday travel outside the state, or cannot cover the travel costs for the child to accompany the family.
- For children in group homes, at best, a holiday dinner for residents overseen by group home staff.
- For those youth who leave foster care without a permanent family (at age 18 or beyond), holidays can serve as a stark reminder that as a young adult, they have nowhere to go home to.

All children, including those in foster care need and deserve the benefit of family each day of their lives. With the right services and support (including funding to ensure that these services and supports are in place) many children in foster care can spend next year's holidays with families who are permanently committed to them.

## Kelly Cates

MARYLAND

Because of Kelly's addiction to drugs, her children were placed in foster care with her parents for three years. During the first two years, Kelly had little contact with her children and no contact with her social worker. When her mother told Kelly that the social worker wanted to speak with her, Kelly learned the agency was ready to terminate her parental rights. After meeting Kelly, however, the social worker concluded that Kelly was prepared to work with the agency and began efforts to reunify the family. Kelly then discovered that she was pregnant. She entered and successfully completed an intensive outpatient substance abuse treatment program. Thanks to the help of her social worker, her counselors, and a range of services, including housing supports, Kelly was able to get her children back. "I had everybody pulling for me." Kelly and her new husband and her three beautiful girls will spend these holidays together. Kelly says, "I am so happy to be at my children's Christmas pageants and it means so much to them to have their mom there for them."



## Joscelynn “Jojo” Carbonell

AGE 22, CALIFORNIA

When Jojo entered the foster care system at age 8, she was taken in by Sue Crowley, a 25-year veteran of the foster system. While some foster children shuffle from one foster situation to another, Jojo said “she was blessed” to have a stable home with Crowley. “My foster mother is amazing. She’s one reason I’m as successful and stable as I am. My two greatest influences have been my foster mother and my faith,” Carbonell says.

Jojo recalls her first Thanksgiving in the home of Sue Crowley. She learned the importance of family during the holiday season and began to develop meaningful traditions she will carry through life. From early on, Jojo wished that she could be adopted by Sue, but knew that would cut off the financial assistance and support services needed to raise her.

Jojo has big plans about how to improve life in foster care for her younger peers coming through the system. She would like to start a California Youth Connections chapter in her county to advocate for legislation supporting their needs, and she continues to work with groups like FosterClub and Foster Care Alumni Association to advocate for federal changes that would help more foster children to find permanent families.

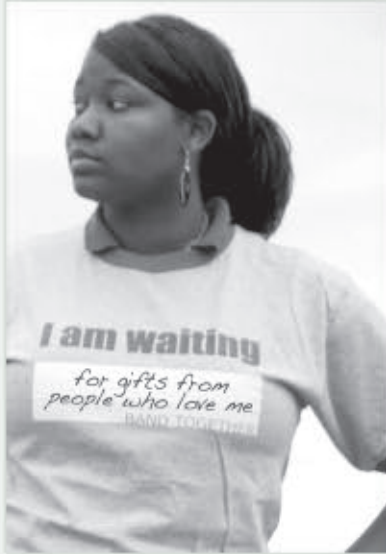
It’s a personal mission for Jojo because finally, at age 22 and out of foster care, Jojo is getting a permanent family of her own through adoption by Sue Crowley. This holiday, Jojo will fully appreciate all the blessings of family.

Jojo is in her last term at Allan Hancock College, in Santa Maria, California.

*“My 14th birthday in foster care was very hard. By that time I had already moved four times in a period of a few months. The friends I had lived with were now about an hour away and often we were not able to talk on the phone as it was long distance. Not fully understanding my situation (it was my first year in care) I was left feeling very lonely, depressed and out of place.”*

**Jen Leedy,**  
age 20, Michigan





## Joshua

AGE 22, TENNESSEE

"I am proud to announce I was adopted on November 6, 2007 by my long-standing friend and mentor, Roger Connor. I had moved to Nashville and found life to be very challenging. I met Roger through the Tennessee Youth Advisory Council. He was a transitions coach for a foundation, and he helped me and other council members write a proposal for funding services for youth who, like me, had aged out of foster care. During this time Roger and I began to have coffee every Saturday. Shortly afterwards I met Roger's whole family. Right away, I knew that it was home. Having welcoming, comfortable people to talk with was all I needed to know I was where I belonged. With my adoption, my name has been appropriately changed from Joshua Gilliam to Joshua Connor. I will be joyfully spending the holidays with my dad and my family."

*"I think Christmas was the worst. Christmas reminded me that I was in foster care. On Christmas, I would watch others open their gifts with love, knowing that it came from their parents. But I knew mine came from an Empty Stocking Fund or the state government because it would always be in a black garbage bag, the presents weren't wrapped."*

**Sherena Johnson,**  
age 22, Georgia

## Robin ("Granny")

CALIFORNIA

Robin, who goes by "Granny," is raising five grandsons. The first year the boys were in foster care they spent Thanksgiving with Robin and Big Aaron, now her husband, who was living with her at the time. (He's called Big Aaron because one of the boys is also named Aaron.) When the family began making plans for another visit at Christmas, social workers realized they forgot to include Big Aaron in the home approval. The agency tried to rush the approval process but couldn't get it accomplished on time. Just a few days before Christmas, they told the kids they would not be able to join Granny and Big Aaron for the holiday.

"My heart still aches when I think about that Christmas," Granny Robin states. "The younger children didn't understand and just cried and cried when we told them. The older children were angry that people were keeping them from their grandma, who had always been there for them." A two-time breast cancer survivor, Granny Robin had just been through surgery and was looking forward to the smiling children's faces to help keep up her spirits. After that Christmas she promised the children they would never spend another one in foster care... and they didn't. Two years later, all five boys were home with her, and she and Big Aaron are now raising them together.



## Schylar

AGE 24, MONTANA

"I was in foster care for 11 years, after which I left foster care to be on my own. I am now happy to be in a relationship for the past five (going on six) years. My partner's family is my family. My partner's mother makes each of us a birthday cake and home-made navy bean and ham soup. Then Thanksgiving arrives, and we travel to my partner's entire family gathering. When we're all together it's apparent there are some "interesting" individuals in the group. But I don't care, I feel at home. Who knew family holiday drama could be so annoying, but at the same time make you feel like you really belong and are wanted. I look forward to the family get-togethers because I get to experience what it is like to truly be part of a family."

*"It's an unusual feeling because holidays are so personal. When you are with a family that isn't native to you, it is hard to feel that compassion that the family already has established. Also, it's hard to provide presents for everyone at Christmas, not having money or knowing what to get for people. Extended family sometimes doesn't get you presents or forgets or doesn't know a foster kid is there too."*

**Crystal Lipek,**  
age 20, Wisconsin

As the experiences of the individuals cited in this brief demonstrate, a loving, committed family provides children and youth with the foundation they need to grow, thrive and enjoy the celebrations of life—during the holidays and throughout the year.

Unfortunately, current federal child welfare funding laws contribute to an over-reliance on the use of foster care services over alternative types of services and supports that would help children live safely with permanent families. With the right services and supports, some children could remain safely with their parents or return home from foster care more quickly and safely. For those who cannot be returned home safely, if federal funding could be used by states to develop and sustain alternative services, more children and youth could be moved out of foster care to safe families through adoption or guardianship.







*"I remember one Christmas when I was in junior high. I was just placed in my foster home a month or so earlier. Anyhow, I ended up getting hand-me-downs from my foster parent's biological son. It sucked, but I figured that it was better than nothing. I would have gone for their son's mountain bike any day!"*

**Schylar Canfield,**  
age 24, Montana

The federal financing structure needs to give states increased flexibility in how they use federal dollars available through Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, which funds foster care and adoption assistance. With greater flexibility in the way that they can use federal child welfare dollars, states can achieve significantly improved outcomes for children, youth, and families. Flexible use of federal child welfare dollars would:


- Help communities broadly implement programs that have been proven safe and effective at keeping children together with their families without the need for foster care and returning those who do enter the system to their families as quickly as possible.
- Enable states, tribes and counties to develop programs reducing the time children spend in foster care, so youth could more quickly become part of permanent families.
- For those children who cannot be reunified with their parents safely, help communities develop services and supports to meet the needs of children and families in order to maximize the success of placements through adoptions and guardianship and move children out of foster care more quickly and safely.

By releasing the financing straitjacket, which restricts the majority of federal child welfare funds for foster care use only, states could develop and provide a variety of services and supports needed by vulnerable children and families. Such restructuring would mean that far fewer children would have to spend their holidays living in the temporary state of foster care.

A change in federal law to provide federal support for subsidized guardianship would also provide children with additional opportunities to leave foster care to safe permanent families, primarily with relatives. Currently, Title IV-E provides federal support for families who adopt children with "special needs" from foster care but not for families who assume legal guardianship. Many children could leave foster care safely to live with relatives through guardianship if support were available to these families—providing them a permanent home for the holidays and throughout their lives.

Foster care is an important and necessary safety net for many children each year, and some of those children may need protection for an extended period of time. Unfortunately that means, each year some children must, out of necessity for their safety, spend the holidays in foster care. However, federal child welfare financing reform could help reduce the number of children who are placed in foster care in the first place as well as shorten the length of stay and decrease the number of holidays children spend in the system without the safe, permanent families they need and deserve.

TABLE 1—The number of children and length of stay in foster care by state.



STATE	# OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE	AVERAGE # OF DECEMBER HOLIDAYS SPENT IN FOSTER CARE		# WAITING TO RETURN HOME	% WAITING TO RETURN HOME	# WAITING TO BE ADOPTED	% WAITING TO BE ADOPTED
		YEARS	(OR MONTHS)				
Alabama	6,913	3	(or 33 months)	2,168	31	2,213	32
Alaska	1,791	2	(or 22 months)	703	39	489	27
Arizona	9,685	2	(or 19 months)	4,968	51	2,479	26
Arkansas	3,253	2	(or 21 months)	1,384	43	997	31
California	81,174	3	(or 37 months)	43,426	53	4,180	5
Colorado	8,213	2	(or 22 months)	3,967	48	1,757	21
Connecticut	7,032	3	(or 34 months)	1,950	28	1,332	19
Delaware	962	1	(or 17 months)	345	36	275	29
District of Columbia	2,505	4	(or 44 months)	596	24	618	25
Florida	29,312	2	(or 20 months)	17,108	58	7,377	25
Georgia	13,965	2	(or 22 months)	9,580	69	2,372	17
Hawaii	2,766	2	(or 20 months)	1,685	61	878	32
Idaho	1,818	1	(or 17 months)	917	50	374	21
Illinois	19,431	4	(or 51 months)	6,416	33	3,383	17
Indiana	11,257	2	(or 23 months)	5,746	51	3,296	29
Iowa	6,794	1	(or 15 months)	2,949	43	1,275	19
Kansas	5,835	2	(or 22 months)	3,400	58	1,830	31
Kentucky	7,287	2	(or 21 months)	3,604	49	2,154	30
Louisiana	4,833	2	(or 25 months)	3,264	68	1,162	24
Maine	2,309	3	(or 37 months)	731	32	754	33
Maryland	10,867	4	(or 48 months)	3,747	34	2,090	19
Massachusetts	12,197	3	(or 31 months)	5,007	41	2,940	24
Michigan	20,498	2	(or 25 months)	10,488	51	7,193	35
Minnesota	6,978	2	(or 23 months)	4,527	65	1,572	23
Mississippi	3,269	2	(or 22 months)	1,752	54	870	27
Missouri	11,433	2	(or 26 months)	4,750	42	3,548	31
Montana	2,222	2	(or 25 months)	1,273	57	660	30
Nebraska	6,231	2	(or 19 months)	4,130	66	918	15
Nevada	4,696	2	(or 22 months)	2,157	46	1,220	26
New Hampshire	1,178	3	(or 38 months)	422	36	274	23
New Jersey	12,042	2	(or 29 months)	3,990	33	4,558	38
New Mexico	2,316	2	(or 19 months)	1,307	56	711	31
New York	30,420	3	(or 41 months)	15,101	50	9,561	31
North Carolina	10,698	2	(or 22 months)	5,979	56	3,160	30
North Dakota	1,364	2	(or 18 months)	727	53	343	25
Ohio	17,442	2	(or 26 months)	7,337	42	4,448	26
Oklahoma	11,393	2	(or 21 months)	6,266	55	3,193	28
Oregon	11,021	2	(or 26 months)	5,158	47	3,457	31
Pennsylvania	21,691	2	(or 25 months)	13,687	63	3,721	17
Rhode Island	2,509	2	(or 26 months)	1,137	45	388	15
South Carolina	4,757	2	(or 29 months)	2,017	42	1,819	38
South Dakota	1,712	2	(or 23 months)	660	39	482	28
Tennessee	9,017	2	(or 19 months)	5,837	65	1,725	19
Texas	28,883	2	(or 22 months)	9,408	33	10,769	37
Utah	2,285	2	(or 19 months)	996	44	437	19
Vermont	1,436	2	(or 23 months)	1,055	73	272	19
Virginia	7,022	2	(or 30 months)	2,281	32	1,831	26
Washington	10,068	2	(or 21 months)	7,595	75	2,179	22
West Virginia	4,331	2	(or 21 months)	2,434	56	991	23
Wisconsin	8,109	2	(or 27 months)	4,018	50	1,291	16
Wyoming	1,263	1	(or 16 months)	870	69	77	6
<b>National</b>	<b>506,483</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>(or 29 months)</b>	<b>251,020</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>115,893</b>	<b>23</b>

**Source:** Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) 2005. Due to state variability in data tracking practices, numbers presented here may be higher or lower than each state's own calculations. However, the numbers do represent what states report to the federal government through the AFCARS system. The federal definition of waiting children is used, as provided by the Children's Bureau in the AFCARS Report, available from: [www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/stats\\_research/afcars/tar/report13.htm](http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report13.htm).

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KIDS ARE WAITING: FIX FOSTER CARE NOW  
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