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**Data on Children in Foster Care  
from the Census Bureau**

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## Executive Summary

This paper provides the first systematic examination of data regarding children in foster care collected by the U. S. Census Bureau. The 2000 Census was the first Decennial Census in the United States to identify children in foster care and data on foster children have been collected in the American Community Survey (ACS) each year since 2000.

The study is exploratory and descriptive. The paper is meant to illustrate the kind of analysis that can be done with Census Bureau data regarding foster children. The paper first examines the question used to identify foster children in the Decennial Census (as well as the American Community Survey). It is important to recognize that the Census Bureau surveys identify only about half of the number of children shown to be in foster care based on administrative records. I argue that the data collected in the Census Bureau surveys primarily reflect those children living in non-kinship family foster care, but not those living in kinship care or those in institutional or group home settings. Nonetheless, the Census Bureau data represent an important source of information on a large segment of the foster child population and the households where they live.

Comparisons based on Census Bureau data show that households with foster children are different from other households with children on almost every dimension examined. In general, households with foster children are disadvantaged compared to all households with children. In terms of living arrangements, analysis shows that compared to all households with children, households with foster children are typically:

- Larger than other households with children
- Have a larger number of children
- Have a larger ratio of children to adults
- Less likely to be married-couple households
- More likely to be single-parent or cohabiting-couple households

With respect to socioeconomic measures, analysis shows that compared to all households with children, households with foster children are:

- More likely to be in low-income families (income less than 200 percent of the poverty line)
- Have lower average household income
- More likely to have a severe financial housing burden, that is, paying more than 30 percent of their income on housing
- More likely to report receiving public assistance income
- More likely to be have a householder or spouse who did not complete high school
- Less likely to have a householder or spouse who graduated from college
- More likely to have a householder or spouse who did not work in the previous year
- Less likely to have a householder or spouse who worked full time in the previous year

## Data on Children in Foster Care from the Census Bureau

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### Introduction

This paper provides the first systematic examination of data regarding children in foster care collected by the U. S. Census Bureau. The 2000 Census was the first Decennial Census in the United States to identify children in foster care and data on foster children have been collected in the American Community Survey (ACS) each year since 2000. These two data sources are the main focus of this paper.

The first part of the paper discusses quality and usefulness of the data on foster children derived from the Census Bureau's Decennial Census and American Community Survey (ACS). Data from the Census Bureau are compared to data from the Adoption, Foster Care Analysis and Research System (AFCARS), which shows that the Census Bureau surveys capture only about half the number of children in foster care at any point in time. On this issue, I argue that the data collected by the Census Bureau in the 2000 Decennial Census and in the ACS are a good reflection of the children in what is commonly called non-relative family foster care, but do not capture many of the foster children in kinship care or those living in group quarters such as group homes or institutions.

The second part of the paper uses the 2006 ACS to provide data on the characteristics of non-kinship family foster care households compared to all households with children. The analysis first focuses on characteristics of household living arrangements, including family size and family structure, and the second part of the analysis examines socioeconomic characteristics of households with foster children. There is no other source of systematic data that provides such information for foster care providers or households where foster children live.

## Background

Foster care impacts a significant number of children. Administrative data from AFCARS indicate that in 2000 there were 544,303 children in foster care at the end of September 2000. However, this does not reflect the full impact of foster care. AFCARS records also indicate that there were more than 700,000 children who passed through foster care at some point during Fiscal Year 2000. This means about 1 percent of children experienced foster care in 2000. Finally, one analysis found that about 5 percent of the children born in 1990 had experienced foster care by the time they were 15 years old.<sup>1</sup> This means that roughly 200,000 children from that birth cohort experienced foster care before reaching age 15. So it appears that the foster care system touches the lives of many more children than the single year snapshot data suggest.

It is important to recognize that foster children are among the most vulnerable groups in our society.<sup>2</sup> One comprehensive study<sup>3</sup> concluded, “Overall, the existing research suggests that children in foster care have more compromised developmental outcomes than children who do not experience placement in foster care.” As a recent editorial in the San Francisco Chronicle<sup>4</sup> says, “Young people in the nation’s troubled foster-care system are all too accustomed to inattention and indignities from bureaucracies that are supposed to be caring for them.”

Typically children end up living in foster care when child welfare agencies remove them from the birth families because of abuse or neglect on the part of their parents. So their lives are already traumatic before they enter foster care. Too often the foster care experience adds to the disadvantages these children experience. Older children in particular often end up living in a series of foster homes or group homes, before they “age out” of foster care. In most states, under current law, children in foster care are “emancipated” and on their own at age 18. By the time they leave foster care, a large proportion of these children are behind in school, partly from having to change schools repeatedly as they move from one living arrangement to another. Youth aging out of foster care often have a host of other socio-emotional problems. One study found, that more than half (55 percent) of 21-year-olds who had “aged out of foster care” had been arrested at least once between age 18 and 21, compared to only 8 percent of a similar-age group who did not age out of foster care.<sup>5</sup>

Sources of Data on Foster Children from the Census Bureau

There are at least four different sources of data on foster children from the Census Bureau. It is encouraging that they all produce relatively similar numbers. The sources of data along with recent estimates from those sources are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Estimates of the Number of Children in Foster Care from Various Census Bureau Sources

	American Community Survey	March Current Population Survey	2000 Decennial Census		Survey of Income and Program Participation
			100% file	Sample	
2000	283,000	262,000	335,000	292,000	
2001	326,000	269,000			245,000
2002	312,000	270,000			
2003	315,000	258,000			
2004	298,000	227,000			308,000
2005	309,000	240,000			
2006	297,000	267,900			

All estimates rounded to the nearest 1,000.

Collectively, recent estimates of foster children from these sources vary from a low of 227,000 in the 2004 March CPS to a high of 335,000 in the short-form 2000 Census data. It should be noted that the 2004 March CPS estimate has a very large standard error in large part because it is based on only 199 observations. Given the relatively small sample size for these estimates the figures are remarkably consistent. It should be noted that the 2000 Decennial Census was the first Decennial Census to identify foster children and the 2010 Decennial Census will not identify foster children.<sup>6</sup>

The remainder of this study will focus on data from the 2000 Census and the 2006 ACS. Data from the 2000 Census are used to gain a better understanding of how data from the Census Bureau matches data from administrative sources. Data from the 2006 ACS are used because it provides the most recent data on foster children from the Census Bureau and

because the ACS is the major source that will be used to ascertain information on foster children from the Census Bureau as we move forward.

Quality of Data on Foster Children Collected by the Census Bureau

In the 2000 Decennial Census data collection process, one person in the household (usually the homeowner or the person in whose name an apartment or house is rented) was designated as the householder, and all the other household members were then categorized in terms of their relationship to the householder. Census Bureau respondents were offered 16 different options for this question (see Table 2). Foster child was one of the options for the relationship to householder question.

Table 2. All Children (under age 18) by Relationship to Householder: 2000 Census

	<b>All Children</b>	
	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>72,174,979</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Householder</b>	<b>38,207</b>	<b>0.1</b>
<b>Husband/wife</b>	<b>22,759</b>	<b>under 0.05</b>
<b>Natural born son/daughter</b>	<b>59,746,031</b>	<b>82.8</b>
<b>Adopted son/daughter</b>	<b>1,592,202</b>	<b>2.2</b>
<b>Stepson/stepdaughter</b>	<b>3,309,975</b>	<b>4.6</b>
<b>Brother/sister</b>	<b>242,697</b>	<b>0.3</b>
<b>Grandchild</b>	<b>4,447,180</b>	<b>6.2</b>
<b>Son-in-law/daughter-in-law</b>	<b>27,553</b>	<b>under 0.05</b>
<b>Other relative</b>	<b>217,547</b>	<b>0.3</b>
<b>Brother-in-law/sister-in-law</b>	<b>42,148</b>	<b>0.1</b>
<b>Nephew/niece</b>	<b>837,837</b>	<b>1.2</b>
<b>Cousin</b>	<b>75,219</b>	<b>0.1</b>
<b>Roomer/boarder</b>	<b>146,230</b>	<b>0.2</b>
<b>Housemate/roommate</b>	<b>45,780</b>	<b>0.1</b>
<b>Unmarried partner</b>	<b>23,298</b>	<b>under 0.05</b>
<b>Foster child</b>	<b>289,160</b>	<b>0.4</b>
<b>Other non-relative</b>	<b>770,764</b>	<b>1.1</b>

<b>Institutionalized GQ person</b>	<b>155,156</b>	<b>0.2</b>
<b>Non-institutionalized GQ person</b>	<b>145,236</b>	<b>0.2</b>

**Source: 2000 Census 1% PUMS file.**

The 2000 Census 100-percent file<sup>7</sup> shows 334,974 children in the foster child category compared to 552,000 in AFCARS in September 2000.<sup>8</sup> The one-in-six sample used to ascertain socioeconomic characteristics has a big impact on the aggregate Census Bureaus foster child population estimate. The 2000 Census shows 291,507 children in the foster care category based on sample data (see Table 2).<sup>9</sup> The 1-percent PUMS file from the 2000 Census shows 289,160 foster children.

It is not clear why the number of foster children in the 100-percent file is so much larger than the number in the sample data, but the fact that weights assigned to sample cases are not controlled for household relationship may play a role.

### Why Foster Children Are Under-Identified in the Census

There is no good estimate of the extent to which foster children are actually missed in the Decennial Census, but there are a number of reasons why one might expect some of them to be missed in the Census. Many foster children are in an individual foster home for only a short period of time, and in the context of “usual place of residence” the Census respondent may not feel the foster child is part of the household in terms of filling out the Census form. The 2005 AFCARS report indicates that there were about 96,000 children who exited foster care in less than 5 months, and almost 50,000 who exited in less than one month in foster care.<sup>10</sup>



A small number of children in foster care are probably not included in the Census count at all. It is likely that many foster children are included in the Census Bureau but are not classified as foster children because they legitimately belong in another Census category or they are in group quarters where foster care status is never assessed.

A scan of the placement categories for children in foster care suggests a number of reasons why many of them may not be identified as such in the Census. In the AFCARS data, each child is included in one of seven placement categories shown in Table 3.

The 2000 Census data and the AFCARS figures are inconsistent, in part, because the Census Bureau limited the foster child category to those under age 18. Persons over age 17 who marked “foster child” had their status changed by the Census Bureau. In the 2000 AFCARS report, there were nearly 25,000 people in foster care who were 18, 19, or 20 years old. Starting in the 2008 ACS, persons up to age 20 will be included in the foster child category, which should remedy this inconsistency.

Table 3. Placement of Children in Foster Care FY 2000

		Percent of foster care
Total	544,303	under 18
age 18 or older	24,947	Population
Total (in foster care at the end of FY 2000) under age 18	519,356	100
Group Home or Institution (under age 18)	88,420	17.0
Foster Family Home, Relative (Kinship Care) (under age 18)	129,977	25.0
Trial Home Visit (under age 18)	17,532	3.4
Runaway or Independent Living (under age 18)	9,633	1.9
Missing Current Placement Information	10,118	1.9
Pre-Adoptive Home (under age 18)	21,265	4.1
Non-Relative Family Foster Home (under age 18)	242,411	46.7

In 2000, 88,420 children under age 18 in foster care were in group homes or institutions. The Census Bureau’s questionnaire used in group homes and institutions does

not include a question about each person's relationship to the householder so these foster children would not be identified as such. Thus, the 17 percent of foster children living in group homes or institutions in 2000 are not likely to be included in the Census figures as foster children.

About a quarter of the children in foster care in FY 2000 (129,977 children under age 18) were living in "kinship care" where they are placed with relatives.<sup>11</sup> In this context, the foster child is likely to have a relationship to the householder, such as niece/nephew or grandchild, which is likely to be marked on the Census form instead of the foster child category.

According to the instructions accompanying the ACS<sup>12</sup>, a foster child is defined as:

- **Foster Child** – A foster child is a person who is under 18 years old placed by the local government in a household to receive parental care. Foster children may be living in the household for just a brief period or for several years. Foster children are nonrelatives of the householder. If the foster child is also related to the householder, the child is classified as that specific relative.

To the extent respondents are aware of or pay attention to instructions accompanying the Census Bureau surveys, they instruct them to put related foster children into the related category rather than the foster child category.

There were 17,532 children (3 percent of foster children) in foster care in 2000 who were in trial home visits. These are visits back to the home of the child's birth parent(s) to see if reunification is feasible. It seems unlikely that a parent would report their child as being in foster care in this context.

There were 10,118 children in the AFCARS data in 2000 where the current placement information was unknown and another 9,633 classified as "runaway or

independent living.” It seems unlikely that many of the children in these two categories were counted as foster children in the 2000 Decennial Census.

In 2000, the number of children under age 18 in non-kinship family foster care (including those children who were on pre-adoptive home visits) in the AFCARS system was 263,676, which is much closer to the number of foster children identified in the Census.

The fact that the Census Bureau figure for the number of children in foster care is slightly higher than the AFCARS figure for non-kinship family foster care may be due to a number of factors including sampling error, conceptual fuzziness, and respondent misunderstandings.<sup>13</sup> There are also a number of reasons why the AFCARS figure (263,676) may be inaccurate.<sup>14</sup> It is also important to recognize that the AFCARS data only reflect foster children who have been put into the foster care system through the state or local child welfare agencies. Children may enter foster care through other means.

Some Census respondents are likely to think of foster care in a much more informal way. One survey estimated that there were 405,000 children in kinship foster care in 2002 compared to 131,000 included in the 2001 AFCARS data.<sup>15</sup> The fact that there are nearly 3 million children in the country living with neither parent provides ample opportunity for adults to feel that they may be taking care of someone who could be defined as a foster child even if they do not meet the AFCARS definition.

There is probably some conceptual fuzziness about the concept of foster care among some survey respondents. One study found between 2 and 7 percent of respondents who indicated they had a foster child in their household were incorrect in terms of the definition of foster child used in the AFCARS data.<sup>16</sup>

It is also important to note that foster children in subfamilies are not identified as foster children in the Census because they are not a foster child of the householder. For example, in a cohabiting-couple household where the female partner has a foster child but the male partner is named the householder on the Census form, the foster child would not be identified as such on the Census form because the child is not a foster child of the householder. While this situation would explain why the number of foster children identified in the Census is lower not higher, than AFCARS data, it also reflects the broader point about uncertainty in identifying foster children.

Table 4 shows the relationship between the foster child figures from the ACS from 2000 to 2005 along with the figures on non-kinship family foster care from AFCARS. There is a remarkable consistency in the relationship between these two sets of figures. Overall the figures from AFCARS are between 1.11 and 1.20 larger than those from the ACS. If you disregard the figure for 2000, the first year of the ACS (C2SS), the relationship is even more consistent. It appears that the Census data collection is identifying a relatively consistent subset of children in foster care.

Table 4. Number of children in foster care from ACS and AFCARS: 2000 to 2005

	AFCARS FY	AFCARS NON- KINSHIP FAMILY FOSTER CARE*	ACS**	Ratio of ACS/ AFCARS Family Foster care
2000	552,000	280,131	311,554	1.11
2001	545,000	278,858	326,196	1.17
2002	533,000	271,890	315,858	1.16
2003	520,000	265,722	310,377	1.17
2004	517,000	259,567	303,042	1.17
2005	513,000	255,466	307,291	1.20

\* These are Fiscal Year figures and include those in non-kinship Care Family Foster Care and Pre-adoptive Homes.

\*\* For 2000 and 2001 these figures are from the Supplementary Survey Table PCT007.

### Analysis of Characteristics of Households with Foster Children

The AFCARS data provide good information on the demographic characteristics (age, gender, race/Hispanicity) of children in foster care but provide little data on socioeconomic characteristics or living arrangements for foster children or the households where they reside. The main value of the Census Bureau data is to provide information on households where foster children live and also on the foster care providers. While there have been scattered small-scale studies of foster care providers, there is no systematic nationwide data on this topic.<sup>17</sup>

This section of the paper examines data from the 2006 ACS for those households who identified one or more of the children in the household as a foster child. Note that this analysis focuses on households with foster children, not foster children directly.

I use data from the ACS Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) file for this analysis. The 2006 ACS PUMS file contained 2,929 unweighted persons identified as foster children and 1,846 unweighted households with at least one foster child. Weighted data from the 2006 ACS PUMS file show 296,544 children in foster care and 184,166 households with one or more foster children in them. Less than one-half of 1 percent of all households with children are households with foster children (184,166 out of 38.6 million).

In this paper, households with foster children are compared to all households with children. This is simpler than comparing households with foster children to households with children but without any foster children. And because households with foster children comprise such a small portion of the household population, the substantive outcome of the comparison is not much different.

This analysis is meant to show the kinds of analysis that can be done with the data on foster children collected by the Census Bureau. Many of the tables presented here could be sharpened and/or expanded to bring the condition of foster children into sharper relief or to focus on a segment of the foster care population such as black children or young children.

Most (61.5 percent) of the households with foster children were households with only one foster child in the household, but nearly a quarter (24.3 percent) of households with a foster child have two foster children, and a little over 10 percent of households with foster children have three or more foster children (see Table 5). Consequently, most foster children live in households with more than one foster child.

Table 5. Households with Foster Children by Number of Foster Children: 2006 ACS

Households with 1  
or more foster  
children under age  
18

Number of foster children in household	Number	Percent
1	113,236	61.5
2	44,728	24.3
3	17,461	9.5
4	6,582	3.6
5+	2,159	1.2
Total	184,166	100.0

**Source: 2006 ACS PUMS file.**

Living Arrangements of Households with Foster Children 2006

Table 6 shows the living arrangements for households with foster children and all households. Households with foster children are different than all households with children on nearly every dimension examined here.

Table 6. Living Arrangements for Households with Foster Children and All Households with Children: 2006 ACS

	Households with 1 or more <u>foster</u> children under age 18		All households with at least one person under age 18	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
<b>Total number of households</b>				
unweighted total	1,846		378,873	
weighted total	184,166		38,615,199	
<b>Number of children under age 18 in household</b>				
1	41,125	22	16,262,719	42
2	51,475	28	14,156,911	37
3+	91,566	50	8,195,569	21
<b>Ratio of adults (age 18+) to kids (under 18) in household</b>				
no adult (or child) in household	0	0	18,291	0
Under 1	89,478	49	9,387,238	24
Between 1 and 1.99	56,979	31	15,590,066	40
2 and over	37,709	20	13,619,604	35
<b>Family Structure</b>				
Married-couple households	105,205	57	25,618,434	66
Householder not married nor cohabitating	53,577	29	10,469,723	27
Cohabitating-couple households	25,384	14	2,527,042	7
<b>Householder or spouse disabled*</b>				
	43,641	24	5,308,918	14
<b>More than 1 person per room</b>				
	13,029	7	1,778,993	5

Source: 2006 ACS PUMS file.

\* Any one of the 6 types of disabilities identified in Census.

Households with foster children are larger than all households with children. A full 50 percent of households with foster children have three or more children, while only 21



percent of all households with children have three or more children. At the other end of the spectrum, 42 percent of all households with children have only one child while only 22 percent of households with foster children only have one child. In general this means households with foster children must distribute their resources (human and material) among a larger number of children.

One example of the difference in the distribution of household resources is the ratio of adults to children. In almost half (49 percent) of the households with a foster child the ratio of adults to children is less than one. That is, there are more children than adults. Only 24 percent of all households with children have an adult-to-child ratio of less than one. On the other hand, one-fifth of households with foster children have an adult-to-child ratio of two or more, compared to 35 percent of all households with children.

There is plenty of evidence on the benefits of growing up in married-couple families.<sup>18</sup> One example is the fact that the poverty rate for female-headed families (28 percent) is more than five times that of married-couple families (5 percent).<sup>19</sup>

Households with foster children are less likely to be married-couple households. Only 57 percent of households with foster children are married-couple households compared to 66 percent of all households with children. On the other hand, households with foster children are slightly more likely to be single-parent households (29 percent for foster care households compared to 27 percent of all households with children) and foster care households are twice as likely as all households with children to be cohabiting-couple households (14 percent compared to 7 percent).<sup>20</sup> Research suggests that cohabiting partnerships are less stable than married-couple households, so this may add to instability in the life of foster children.

One other aspect of household composition that differs for households with foster children is disability status. Households with foster children are more likely to be ones where the householder (head of household) or spouse has a disability (any one of six kinds of disability recorded in the ACS). About a quarter (24 percent) of households with foster children had a householder or spouse with a disability compared to less than one-sixth (14 percent) of all households with children.

It is also important to recognize that foster children are much more likely than other children to be suffering from a disability themselves. In the ACS, questions are asked to ascertain four kinds of disabilities for persons age 5 to 17:

- Physical Disability indicates whether the respondent has a long-lasting condition that substantially limits one or more basic physical activities, such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching, lifting, or carrying. "Long-lasting" is not defined in the Census form or survey questionnaire. Separate questions assess whether the person has difficulty with specific tasks.
- Difficulty Remembering indicates whether the respondent has any difficulty learning, remembering, or concentrating, because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition lasting 6 months or more.
- Difficulty with Personal Care indicates whether respondents have any physical or mental health condition that has lasted at least 6 months and makes it difficult for them to take care of their own personal needs, such as bathing, dressing, or getting around inside the home. This does not include temporary health conditions, such as broken bones or pregnancies.
- Difficulty with Vision indicates whether the respondent has a long-lasting condition of blindness, deafness, or a severe vision or hearing impairment. "Long-lasting" is not defined in the questionnaire.

The results are shown in Table 7. For every type of disability, foster children have much higher rates than children overall. In every case, the incidence among foster children is two or three times that of all children.

Table 7. Presence of Disabilities Among Foster Children and All Children Ages 5-17: 2006 ACS

	Percent of Children with this Disability	
	Foster Children age 5-17	All Children age 5-17
Physical Difficulty	3	1.2
Difficulty Remembering	18	5.2
Difficulty with Personal Care	3	0.9
Difficulty with Vision	2.5	1.2
Weighted Totals (in 1000s)	216	53,406
Unweighted totals	2,139	527,575

Source: 2006 ACS PUMS file accessed through MPC.

It is important to recognize the higher rates of disabilities among foster children as we assess the work status of foster parents. It is feasible that more foster parents are not in the workforce because they need to be home to care for a foster child with a disability.

#### Socioeconomic Status of Households with Foster Children 2000

Table 8 shows how households with foster children compare to all households with children on several measures of socioeconomic status.

**Table 8. Income and Poverty for Households with Foster Children and All Households with Children: 2006 ACS**

	Households with 1 or more unrelated foster children under age 18		All households with at least one person under 18 years of age	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
<b>Total number of households</b>	<b>184,166</b>		<b>38,615,199</b>	
<b>Household income and poverty</b>				
<b>Mean household income (for those households with income)</b>	<b>\$56,364</b>		<b>\$74,301</b>	
<b>None</b>	<b>1,091</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>275,944</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Less than \$20,000</b>	<b>28,253</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5,194,729</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>\$20,000 to \$49,999</b>	<b>68,146</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>11,190,153</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>\$50,000 to \$99,999</b>	<b>65,670</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>13,497,876</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>\$100,000+</b>	<b>21,006</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>8,456,497</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Below 100% of poverty</b>	<b>27,751</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5,789,684</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Below 200% of poverty</b>	<b>69,260</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>13,455,662</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Households with public assistance income</b>	<b>18,837</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>1,687,415</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Households receiving food stamps</b>	<b>27,856</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5,297,678</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Households paying more than 30% of income for housing</b>	<b>86,946</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>14,234,994</b>	<b>37</b>

Source: 2006 ACS PUMS file.

Even though households with foster children are larger than all households with children, the income in households with foster children is significantly lower than the average income in all households with children. The mean income for all households with

children (\$74,301) is nearly one-third higher (31 percent) than the mean income of households with foster children (\$56,364).

The Decennial Census (and the ACS) questionnaire uses eight separate questions to gather information on household income, including a question on any other sources of income received regularly that is designed to capture income from sources like state funding for providing foster care.

The relatively low income of households with foster children is also seen in the distribution of households across income categories. Households with foster children are much more likely to be in the lowest income category (less than \$20,000 a year) and much less likely to be in the highest income category (\$100,000 or more a year). There are 15 percent of households with foster children in the less than \$20,000 a year category compared to only 13 percent of all households with children. Households with foster children (11 percent) are only half as likely as all households with children (22 percent) to be in the highest income category (\$100,000 or more).

Households with foster children are no more likely than all households with children to have incomes below 100 percent of the poverty line, both are at 15 percent. However, households with foster children are slightly more likely than all households with children to be below 200 percent of the poverty line. Poverty status of the householder was used to ascertain the poverty status of children in the household. It is important to recognize that when families are recruited to become foster families, sufficient income is one criterion. So it should not be a surprise that few are poor.

Households with foster children are more likely to be devoting an excessive amount of their budget for housing. This may be related to the larger family size (and need for a

larger house) and the large number of households with income just above the poverty line. Guidelines say that households should generally not pay more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs. But 47 percent of all households with foster children pay more than 30 percent of their income on housing compared to 37 percent of all households with children. In 2000, only 36 percent of households with foster children paid 30 percent or more for housing.

Households with foster children are significantly more likely than all households with children to receive cash public assistance (this is primarily TANF and SSI), but about equally likely to receive food stamps. Ten percent of households with children received cash public assistance in 2006 compared to 4 percent of all households with children. Among households with foster children, 15 percent reported receiving food stamps compared to 14 percent of all households with children.

### Education and Employment

The lower average income of households with foster children can be traced to lower educational attainment and less involvement in the paid labor force. The data on educational attainment and employment of adults in households with foster children is shown in Table 9.

The education levels of householders and spouses in households with foster children are lower than those for all households with children. In terms of householders, a fifth (20 percent) of those in households with foster children lack a high school degree compared to 14 percent for all households with children. At the other end of the education spectrum, more than a quarter (28 percent) of all householders with children have a four-year college

degree compared to only 20 percent of householders with foster children. The situation is similar for spouses.

Parental employment is certainly important for reducing poverty among children, but it has other benefits as well. For example, parental employment may enhance children's psychological well-being and improve family functioning by reducing stress brought by un- or underemployment.<sup>21</sup>

Householders and spouses in households with foster children are less likely to be employed compared to all households with children. Householders in households with foster children are 50 percent more likely as those in all households with children to have gone without work in the previous year (20 percent compared to 13 percent). While 60 percent of householders in all households with children worked full time in the previous year, only 56 percent of householders in households with foster children worked full time in the previous year. (Full time is defined here as 35+ hours per week at least 50 weeks a year.)

Keep in mind that children in foster homes are less likely to be living with a householder who has a spouse present (see Table 6). However, when there is a spouse present, the spouses in households with foster children are less likely to be working than the spouses in all households with children.

In all fairness, it should be pointed out that a disproportionately large share of children in foster care are children with disabilities and may require an degree of care that prohibits foster parents from working outside the home (see Table 7).

Table 9. Education and Employment of Householder and Spouse for Households with Foster Children and All Households with Children: 2006

	Households with 1 or more unrelated foster children under age 18		All households with at least one person under 18 years of age	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
<b><u>Education of householder</u></b>				
Less than high school graduate	37,840	21	5,482,188	14
High school graduate only	57,191	31	10,651,838	28
Some college	53,214	29	11,694,091	30
Four-year college degree+	35,921	20	10,787,082	28
<b><u>Education of spouse</u></b>				
No spouse	78,961	43	12,996,765	34
Spouse Present	105,205	100	25,618,434	100
Less than high school graduate	19,932	19	3,261,142	13
High school graduate only	36,417	35	6,951,799	27
Some college	32,149	31	7,414,074	29
Four-year college degree+	16,707	16	7,991,419	31
<b><u>Employment status of householder</u></b>				
Did not work last year	36,161	20	4,992,650	13
Worked part time or part year last year*	44,303	24	10,393,055	27
Worked full time last year	103,702	56	23,229,494	60
<b><u>Employment status of spouse</u></b>				
No spouse	78,961	43	12,996,765	34
Spouse Present	105,205		25,618,434	
Did not work last year	31,033	30	5,803,233	23
Worked part time or part year last year	28,406	27	7,987,116	31
Worked full time last year	45,766	44	11,828,085	46
Neither householder nor spouse worked full-time year-round**	22,540	12	4,535,236	12
Both householder and spouse worked full-time year-round*	66,803	36	13,974,381	36
* less than 35 hours per week or less than 50 weeks a year		**35 hours per week 50+ weeks a year		*** worked any amount

Source: 2006 ACS PUMS file



DISCUSSION

The disadvantaged position of foster children may be related to the fact that disproportionate shares of foster children are Hispanic and African American – segments of the population that are disadvantaged. This racial disproportionality in foster care has been repeatedly noted.<sup>22</sup> This underscores the need to look at the data separately by race. Data from the 2006 ACS shown below indicate that black children were 26 percent of the foster care children identified in the ACS, but blacks make up only 15 percent of all children (under age 18) in the ACS. Table 10 also shows Hispanic children were 28 percent of the children in foster care although Hispanics are only 20 percent of all children.

Table 10. All Children\* and Foster Children by Race and Hispanic Origin: 2006 ACS

	<b>Foster children</b>		<b>All Children</b>	
	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Non-Hispanic White</b>	<b>117,385</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>42,252,386</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Non-Hispanic Black</b>	<b>77,051</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>10,698,274</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Non-Hispanic Asian or Pacific Islander</b>	<b>4,026</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2,954,536</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Non-Hispanic American Indian and Alaska Native</b>	<b>4,824</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>583,240</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Non-Hispanic other race and 2+ races</b>	<b>11,306</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2,331,637</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>81,952</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>14,965,045</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>296,544</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>73,785,118</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: IPUMS analysis of 2006 ACS.

\*under age 18

On the other hand, there is evidence to support the idea that the largest group of foster children included in the Census – those in non-kinship family foster care – are better off than those in kinship foster care – the second largest group of children in foster care. One report<sup>23</sup> found, “50 percent of children in kinship live in low-income households compared with 24 percent of children living with non-kin foster parents.”

### Usefulness of Census Bureau Data

It is reasonable to believe that the data collected by the Census Bureau on children in foster care are largely reflective of the non-institutional non-kinship portion of the foster care population under age 18.

The administrative data on children in foster care focus heavily on their experience in the child welfare system, but have very little information on socio-demographic status or living arrangements. And provide almost nothing about the characteristics of foster parents or foster homes. The ACS data can provide information on topics like average family income or household composition for households with foster children in them that is not available on a systematic basis from any other source. The ACS provides systematic data that can be used to show an enormous list of characteristics, compare foster children to other groups, and show how this population is changing over time.

The ACS data on households with foster children can also be used to prepare a profile of the types of households that are likely to volunteer to house foster children. Since these data represent primarily non-kinship foster care arrangements, they are precisely on target for foster home recruitment. Foster care officials are constantly looking for new homes to provide shelter for foster children since many homes drop out of the program each

year. The ACS data can help program officials build a profile of current households providing foster care that may help them target recruitment efforts for foster parents.

In the context of the using the data from the ACS, it is worth noting that the state and sub-state data from this source will be limited. Table 11 shows the unweighted number of foster children identified in the 2006 ACS Public Use Micro-data Sample (PUMS). The number of cases ranges from a low of three in Alaska, North Dakota, and Rhode Island, to a high of 405 in California. More than half the states have less than 50 observations in the 2006 sample. For many states, even three- or five-year estimates will not produce sufficient sample size for reliable figures.

Table 11, Unweighted Number of Foster Children Identified in the 2006 ACS by State

State	Unweighted Number of Foster Children
Alabama	55
Alaska	3
Arizona	56
Arkansas	27
California	405
Colorado	66
Connecticut	38
Delaware	8
District of Columbia	7
Florida	144
Georgia	106
Hawaii	21
Idaho	7
Illinois	122
Indiana	54
Iowa	37
Kansas	24
Kentucky	54
Louisiana	27
Maine	5
Maryland	36
Massachusetts	55
Michigan	76

Minnesota	28
Mississippi	30
Missouri	68
Montana	9
Nebraska	39
Nevada	11
New Hampshire	4
New Jersey	79
New Mexico	26
New York	169
North Carolina	65
North Dakota	3
Ohio	128
Oklahoma	53
Oregon	49
Pennsylvania	103
Rhode Island	3
South Carolina	33
South Dakota	11
Tennessee	69
Texas	261
Utah	18
Vermont	6
Virginia	53
Washington	118
West Virginia	15
Wisconsin	37
Wyoming	8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2,929</b>

## Conclusions

While children in foster care are one of the most vulnerable groups in our society, there is very little good data on their living situations or on foster care providers.

Information from the Census Bureau can be used to broaden and deepen our understanding of these vulnerable children and the households where they live. Although the data collected in the ACS only reflect about 60 percent of all children in foster care, the Census Bureau data sources provide valuable information about the non-kinship foster family's portion of the foster care population.

ACS data show that households with foster children are substantially larger than all households with children and households with foster children are at a socioeconomic disadvantage on nearly every measure examined here when compared to all households with children based on data from the 2000 Census.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Personal correspondence from Fred Wulzcyn dated July 16, 2007.
- <sup>2</sup> Shirk, Martha, and Gary Stangler, 2006, On Their Own: What Happens to Children When They Age Out of the Foster Care System, Perseus Publishing; Courtney, Mark E., et al., Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 19, Chapin Hall Working Paper, May 2005; Pecora, Peter J., et al., 2005, Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study, Casey Family Services, Seattle, WA.
- <sup>3</sup> Jones, Brenda Harden, 2004, "Safety and Stability for Foster Children: A Developmental Perspective" in The Future of Children, Vol. 14, No. 1, p. 36, The David and Lucille Packard Foundation, online at [www.futureofchildren.org](http://www.futureofchildren.org).
- <sup>4</sup> The San Francisco Chronicle, 2007, "Inconvenient Youth," p. E4, April 22.
- <sup>5</sup> Courtney, Mark E., et al., 2007, Midwest Evaluation of Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at age 21, Chapin Hall, Center for Children, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, Table 4.
- <sup>6</sup> This is spelled out in a letter from Census Bureau Director Charles Louis Kincannon to the Honorable Carolyn Maloney of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform in the U.S. House of Representatives, dated June 11, 2007.
- <sup>7</sup> 2000 Census, SF 1, Table PCT15. NONRELATIVES BY HOUSEHOLD TYPES.
- <sup>8</sup> AFCARS data are available online at [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats\\_research/index.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm).
- <sup>9</sup> [www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/censr-14.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/censr-14.pdf).
- <sup>10</sup> The 2005 AFCARS report is available at [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats\\_research/afcars/tar/report13.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report13.htm).
- <sup>11</sup> [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats\\_research/afcars/tar/report12.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report12.htm).
- <sup>12</sup> Subject Definitions for 2006 American Community Survey, from U.S. Bureau of the Census, available online at [www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/2006/usedata/Subject\\_Definitions.pdf](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/2006/usedata/Subject_Definitions.pdf).
- <sup>13</sup> Macomber, Jennifer Ehrle, Rob Geen, and Regan Main, 2003, "Kinship Foster Care," Urban Institute, Snapshots of America's Families III, No. 14, Washington, DC.

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<sup>14</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation and Child Trends, 2005, An Assessment of State-Level Data on Child Maltreatment and Foster Care: Summary of a Meeting of Experts, available on the web at [www.aecf.org/KnowledgeCenter/Publications.aspx?pubguid={CDC8DC0C-AD2E-462E-A0B4-B8CC290E760F}](http://www.aecf.org/KnowledgeCenter/Publications.aspx?pubguid={CDC8DC0C-AD2E-462E-A0B4-B8CC290E760F}).

<sup>15</sup> Macomber, Jennifer Ehrle, Rob Geen, and Regan Main, 2003, “Kinship Foster Care,” Urban Institute, Snapshots of America’s Families III, No. 14, Washington, DC.

<sup>16</sup> Ehrle, Jennifer and Rob Geen, 2002, “Identifying a Child Welfare Population In National Surveys, Consortium on Child Well-Being Indicators for Child Welfare Population,” Urban Institute, Washington, DC.

<sup>17</sup> See for example, Rhodes, Kathryn W., John G. Orme, and Cheryl Buehler, “A Comparison of Family Foster Parents Who Quit, Consider Quitting, and Plan to Continue Fostering,” Social Service Review March 2001, pp 84-114

<sup>18</sup> McLanahan, Sara, and Gary Sandefur, 1994, Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MASS.

<sup>19</sup> DeNavas-Walt, Carmen, Bernadette D. Proctor, and Jessica Smith, 2007, “Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2006,” Current Population Reports, Series P60-233, Table b-3.

<sup>20</sup> Same-sex unmarried partners are included in cohabiting couples, the same as opposite-sex unmarried partners, although very few same-sex unmarried partners have foster children in the household.

<sup>21</sup> Mayer, Susan E., 1997, “Income, Employment, and the Support of Children,” in Hauser, Robert M., Brett Brown, and William Prosser, (Editors), Indicators of Children’s Well-Being, Russell Sage Foundation, New York City; Smith, J. R., Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, and A. P. Jackson, 1997, “Parental Employment and Children,” in Hauser, Robert M., Brett Brown, and William Prosser, (Editors), Indicators of Children’s Well-Being, Russell Sage Foundation, New York City.

<sup>22</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2007, African American Children in Foster Care: Additional HHS Assistance Needed to Help States Reduce the Proportion in Care, GAO-07-816, July, Washington, DC.

<sup>23</sup> Macomber, Jennifer Ehrle, Rob Geen, and Regan Main, 2003, “Kinship Foster Care,” Urban Institute, Snapshots of America’s Families III, No. 14, Washington, DC.



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