

Strengthening Families From the Start

*Innovations for Young Children and Their Families in the **Child Welfare** System*

June 2026

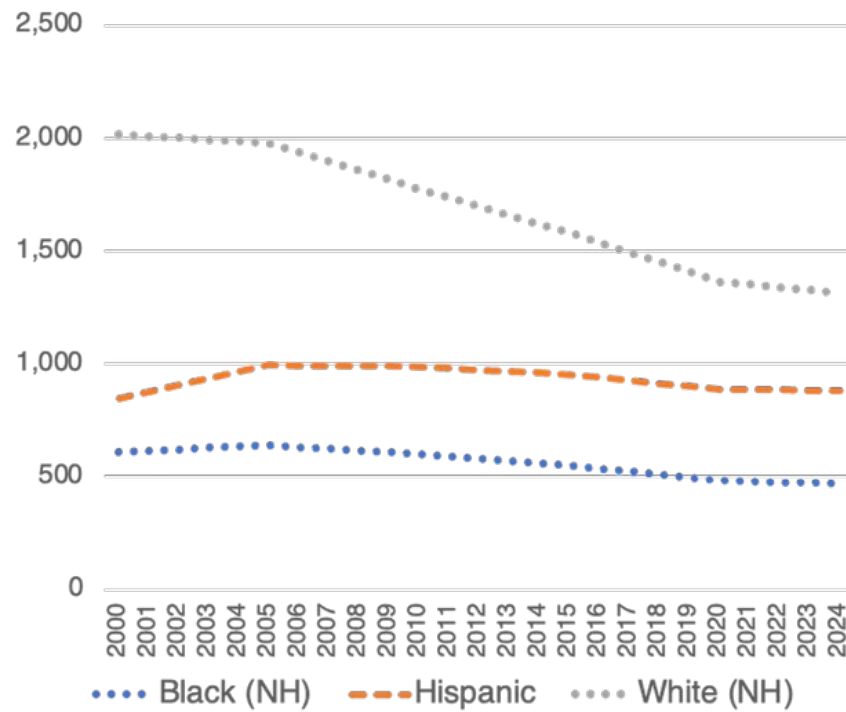
Overview

- Introduction
 - My history with this particular issue
 - Common working knowledge
- Part 1
 - Demography is destiny
- Part 2
 - Human Capital as child well-being
- Part 3
 - What works and how to invest?

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- Admissions - age structure
 - Growing up in foster care
 - Leaving foster care
 - Returning to care

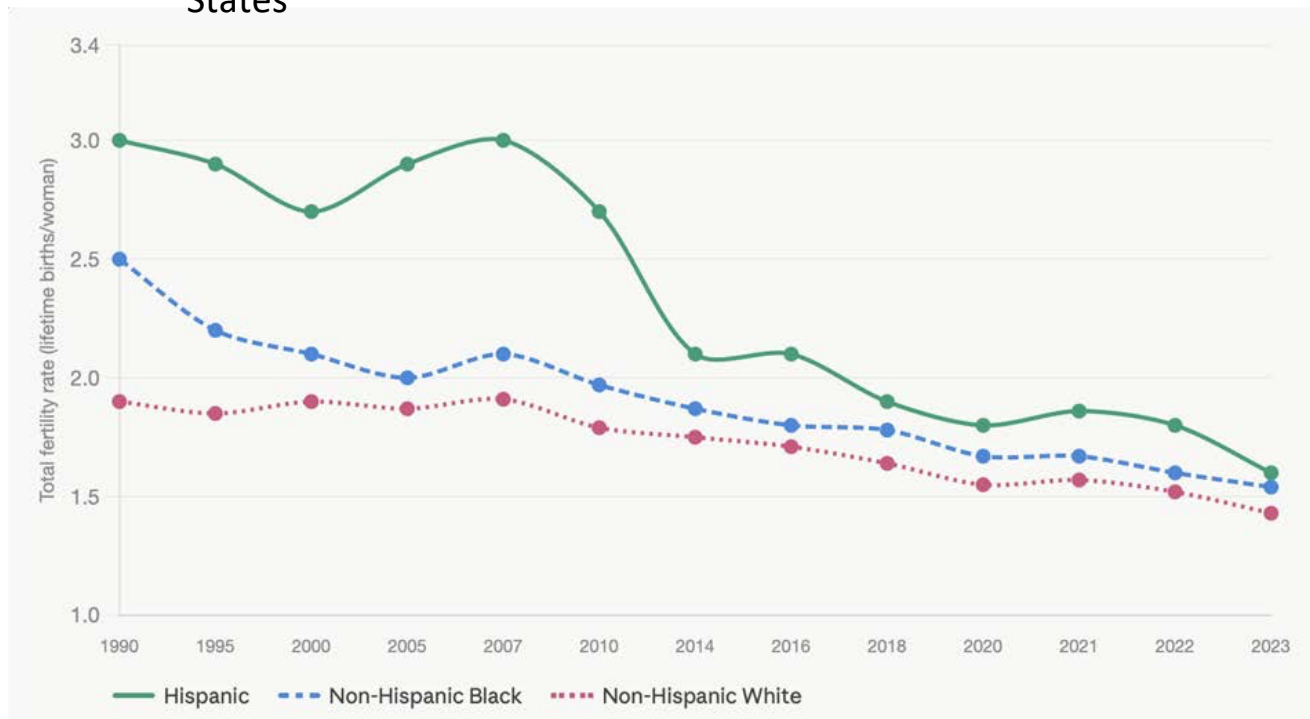
Framing the Discussion: Demography as context

Number of Births (in thousands) by Year and Race Ethnicity: United States

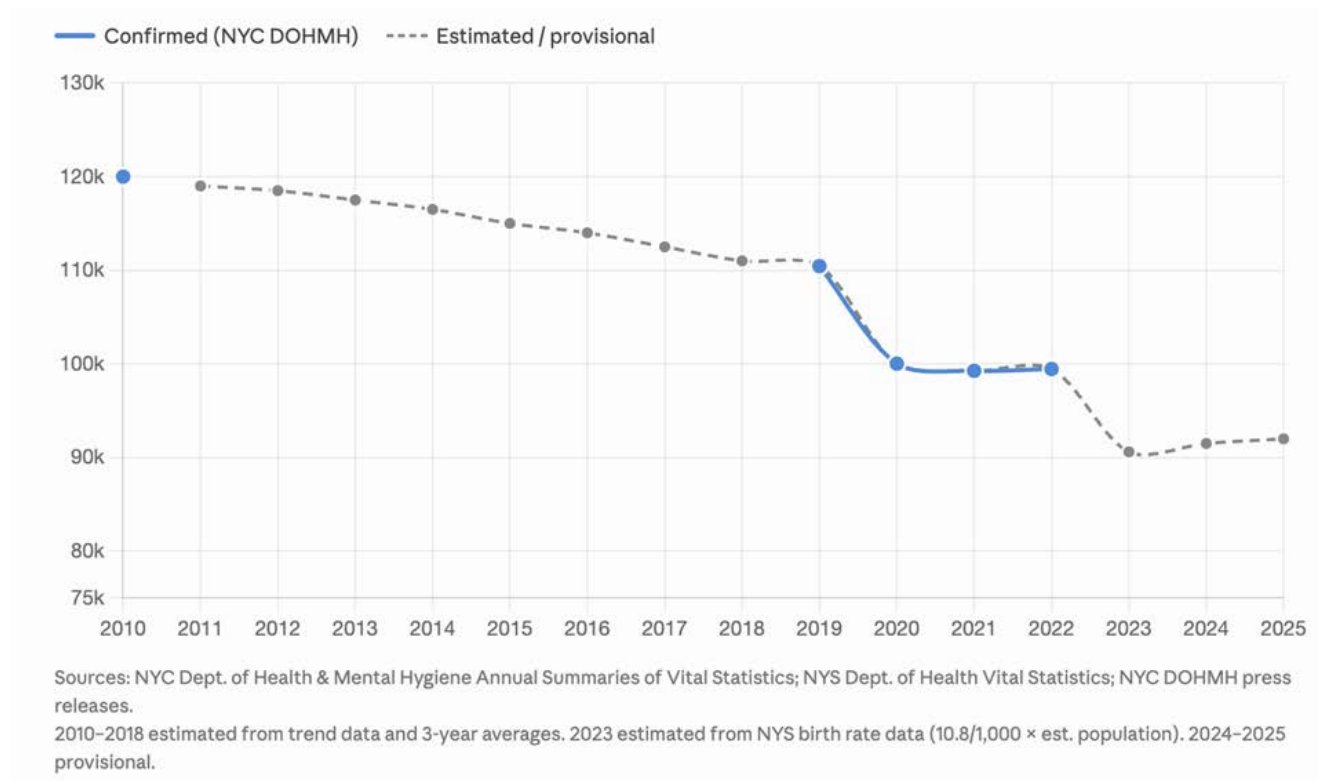


Below Replacement - Fertility in the United States

Total Fertility Rates by Year and Race Ethnicity: United States



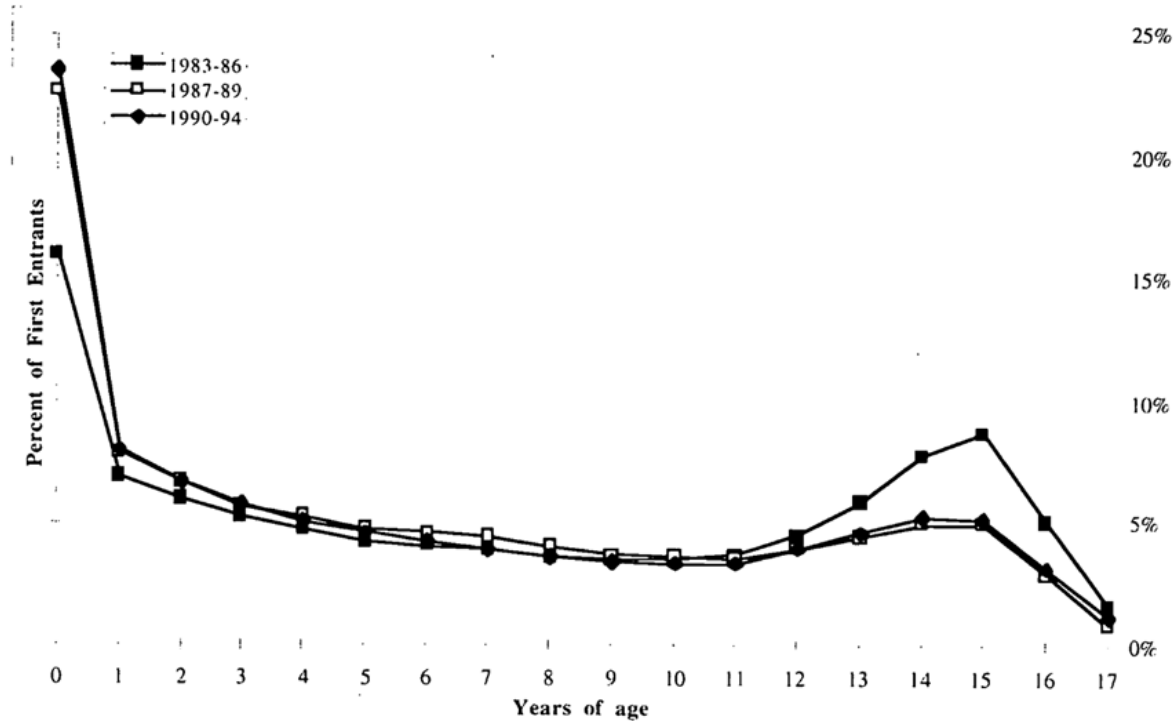
Births in New York City



Four views of who enters for care for the first time

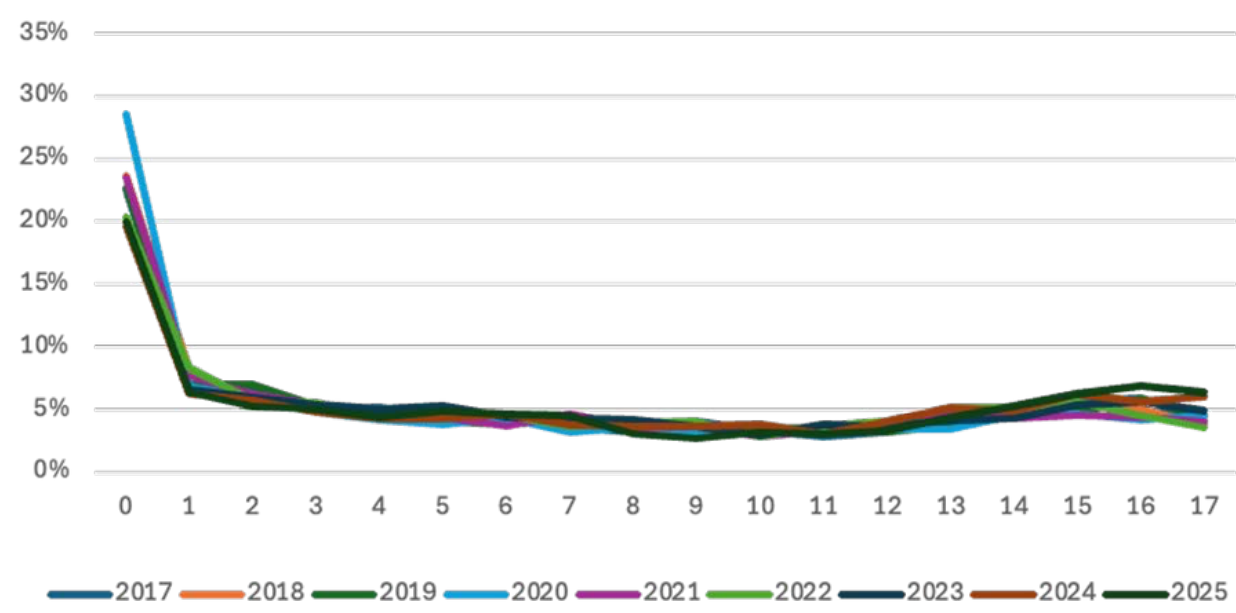
Historical perspective

*Age at First Entry to Foster Care, by Date of Entry
Percentage Distribution for Six States Combined*



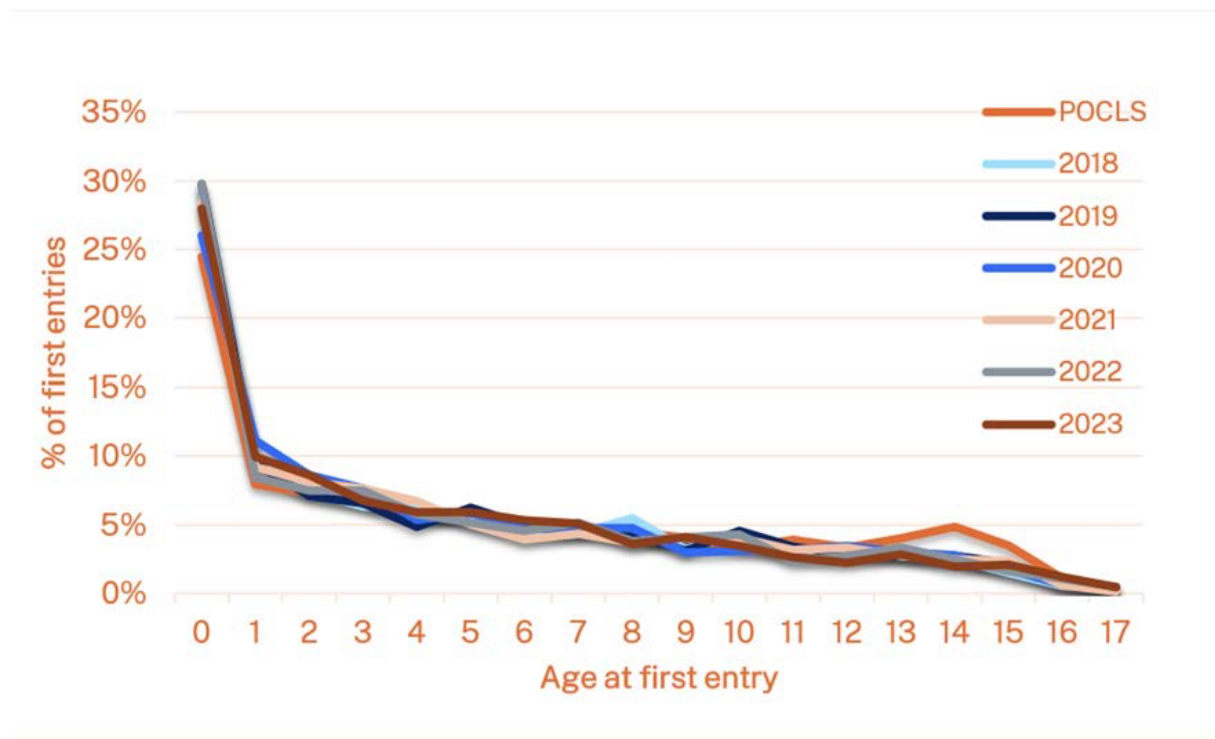
Contemporary Perspective

First Admissions to Foster Care: NYC



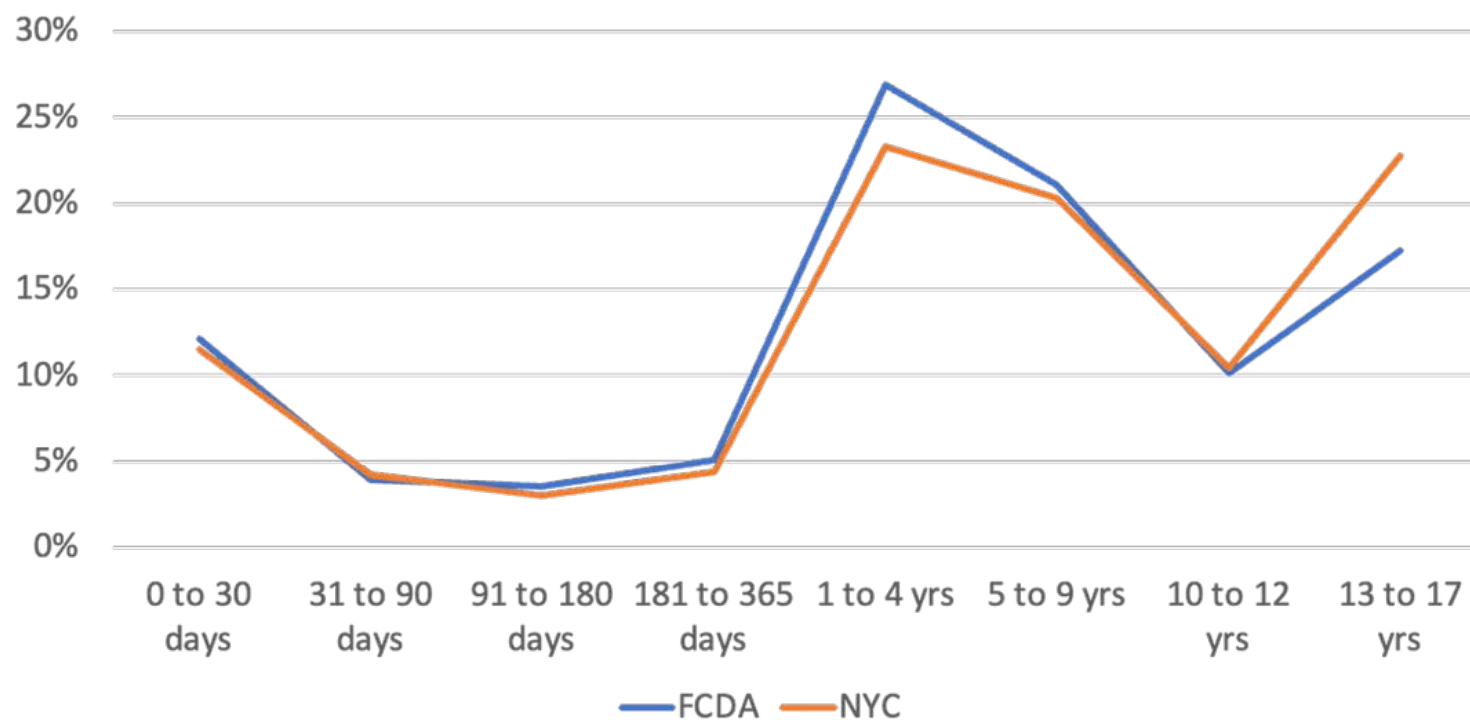
International Perspective

First Admissions to Foster Care: New South Wales, Australia



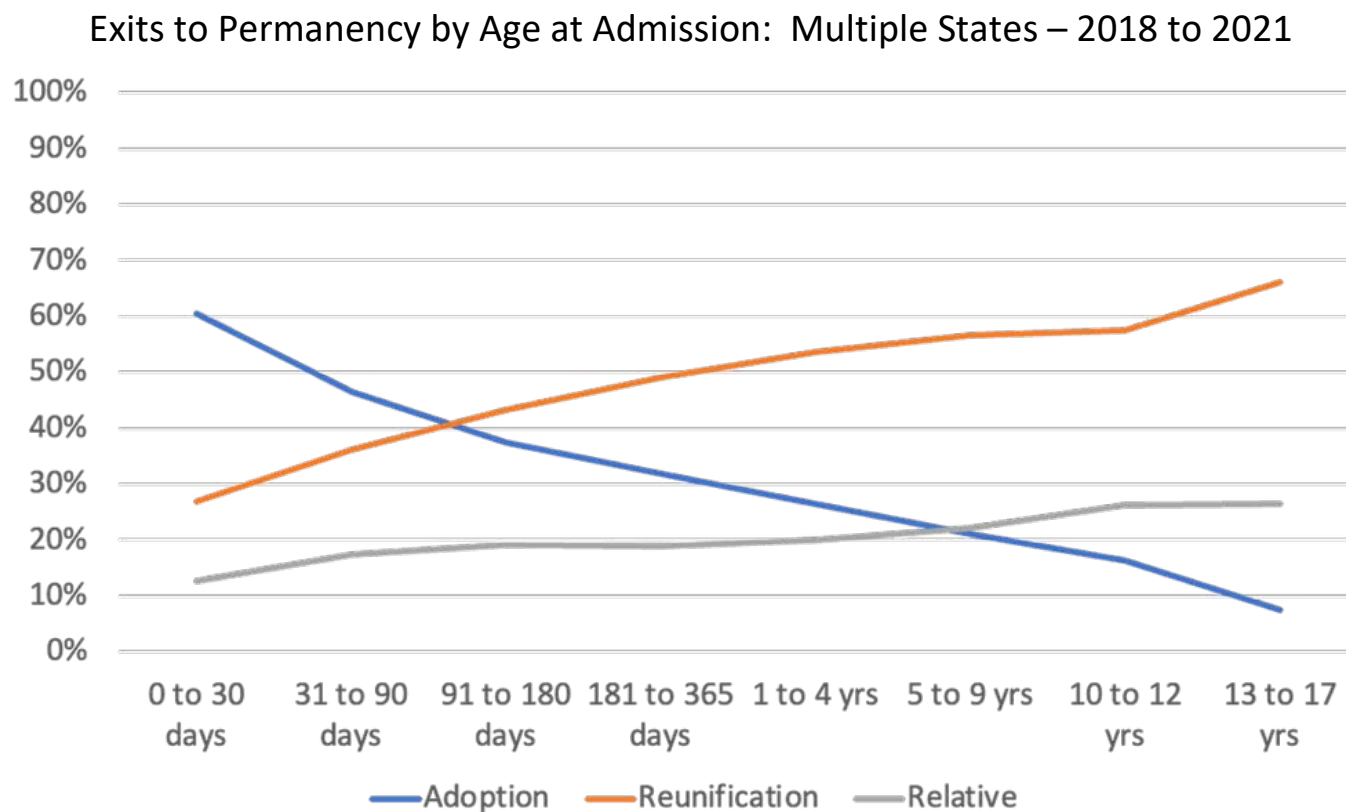
Detailed Age Structure

First Admissions to Foster Care by Age at Admission: NYC and FCDA, 2018 to 2024

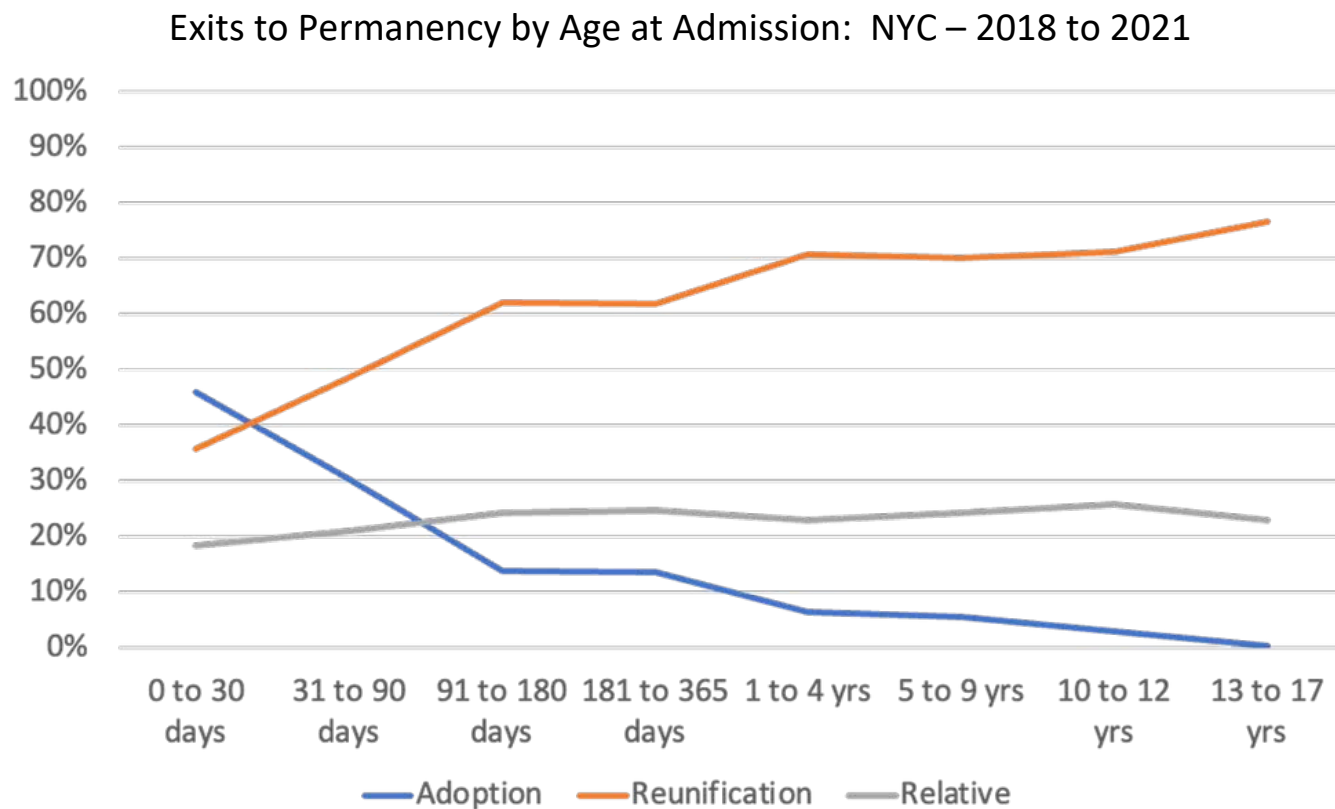


How do children leave foster care?

Age Effects



Age Effects



Do children grow up in foster care?

Spending Your Childhood in Care

- Two-tenths of 1 percent of children admitted as babies spent the rest of their childhood in foster care
- Spending the rest of your childhood in care after admission to foster care has been going down except for children admitted for the first time at age 15 or above.

	Year of Entry into Care (Calendar Year)																		
Age at Entry	2000	'01	'02	'03	'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14	'15	'16	'17	'18
0	0.2	0.1																	
1	0.5	0.3	0.2																
2	0.5	0.7	0.4	0.2															
3	1.2	0.9	0.8	0.6	0.3														
4	1.3	1.2	1.1	1.0	1.0	0.3													
5	2.0	1.9	1.8	1.4	1.4	1.1	0.7												
6	2.8	2.4	2.3	2.2	2.1	1.5	1.3	0.8											
7	3.7	3.7	3.4	2.9	2.9	2.2	1.8	1.7	0.9										
8	4.7	5.0	4.0	3.5	2.8	3.2	2.1	2.2	2.3	1.2									
9	6.3	6.3	5.5	4.2	5.2	3.8	3.7	3.5	3.2	3.3	1.3								
10	8.2	7.2	7.9	6.7	6.7	5.4	4.7	5.2	4.7	4.8	3.6	2.0							
11	10.7	9.2	9.6	8.5	8.3	6.9	7.0	6.7	7.2	6.0	6.3	6.0	3.1						
12	12.2	11.3	10.7	10.3	11.0	9.7	9.7	9.1	8.4	8.5	8.2	7.8	8.5	4.9					
13	13.2	12.6	12.2	11.9	12.5	11.7	10.9	10.7	12.3	11.1	10.4	12.0	11.3	9.4	5.7				
14	14.4	14.7	13.9	14.3	14.8	14.6	14.4	13.9	14.5	14.4	15.6	14.8	15.5	13.5	14.1	6.9			
15	17.0	18.4	17.8	18.5	17.2	18.5	18.5	17.6	19.0	18.0	19.0	19.8	20.5	21.6	20.5	20.9	13.0		
16	26.9	27.7	29.2	28.3	27.5	28.0	29.5	27.5	28.8	30.4	31.4	31.4	32.8	34.8	33.7	33.0	32.8	19.5	
17	49.2	48.7	52.2	52.8	49.4	51.6	52.8	53.2	55.2	53.3	56.3	55.9	57.8	58.3	61.2	59.8	59.4	59.8	32.2

Do children return to care?

Reentry Risk Changes with Age

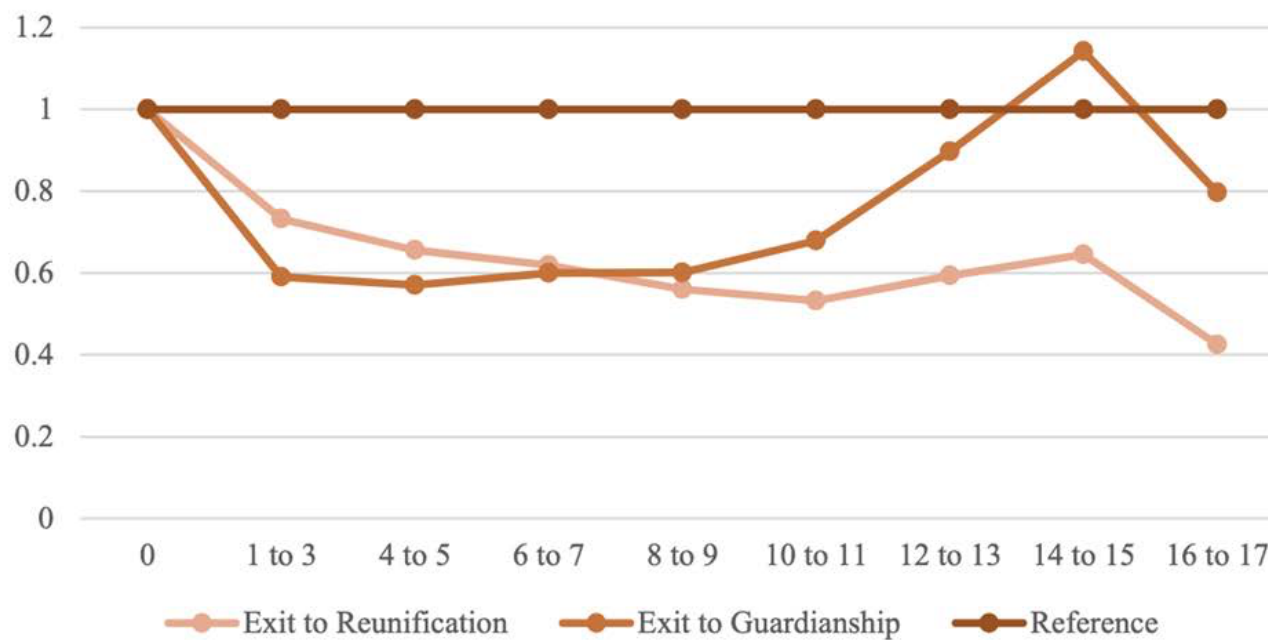
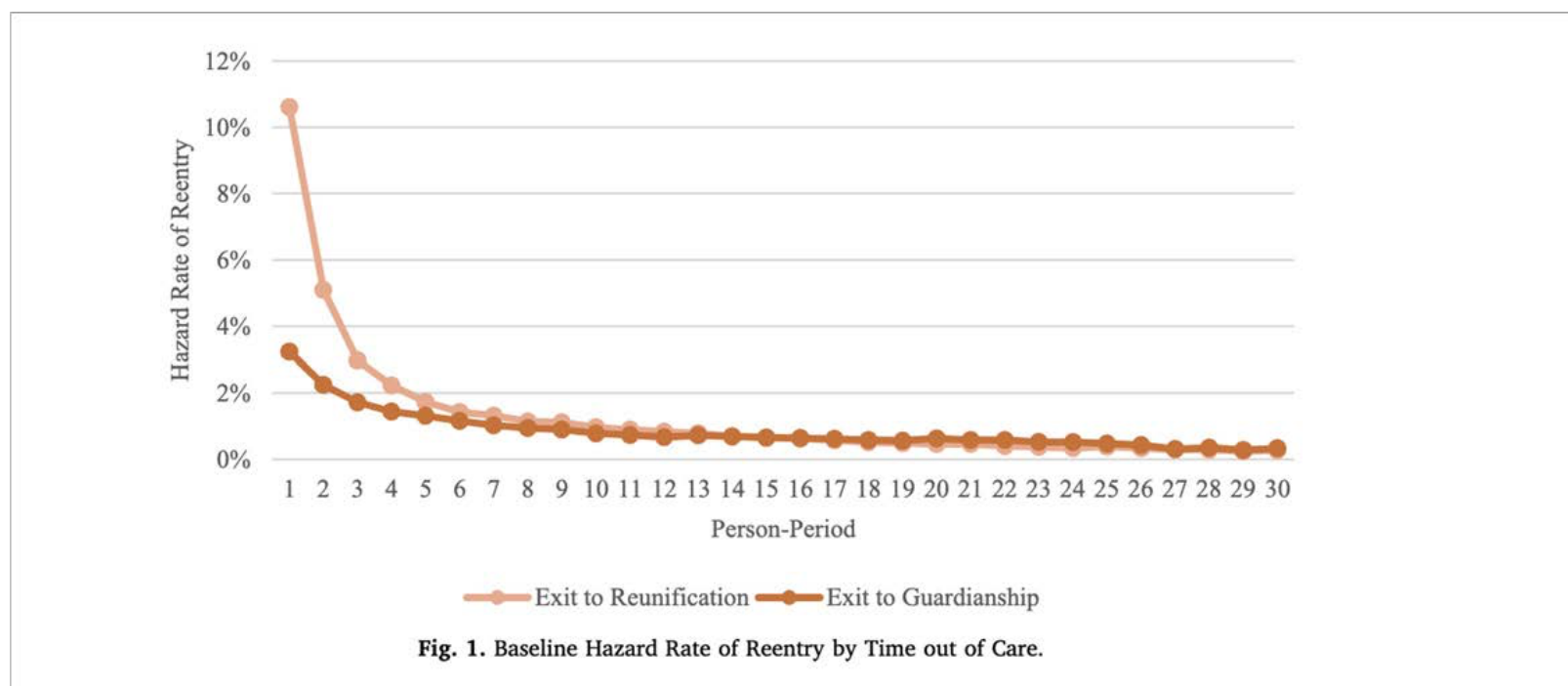


Fig. 4. Relative Rate of Reentry by Exit Reason and Person Period Age, with Infants as the Reference Group.

Reentry Risk by Type of Permanency

Returning to Care by Discharge Type and Time Since Discharge



Human Capital as Well-being

First Things First

- Well-being is a fuzzy term with broad appeal but ultimately little utility
- Well-being sits awkwardly alongside safety and permanency
- Safety and permanency are protective factors in a development model

The Central Developmental Tasks

- Cognitive skills
- Social-emotional regulation
- Relational capacity
- Health and adaptive functioning
- Ability to participate in family, community, and work life

Development as a Dynamic process

- Trajectories capture change over time
- Early capacity influences what happens later
- Skills beget skills
- Skills influence the efficacy of interventions
- The sequence, timing, and duration of life course experiences

Trajectories Take Shape From Risk and Protective Factors

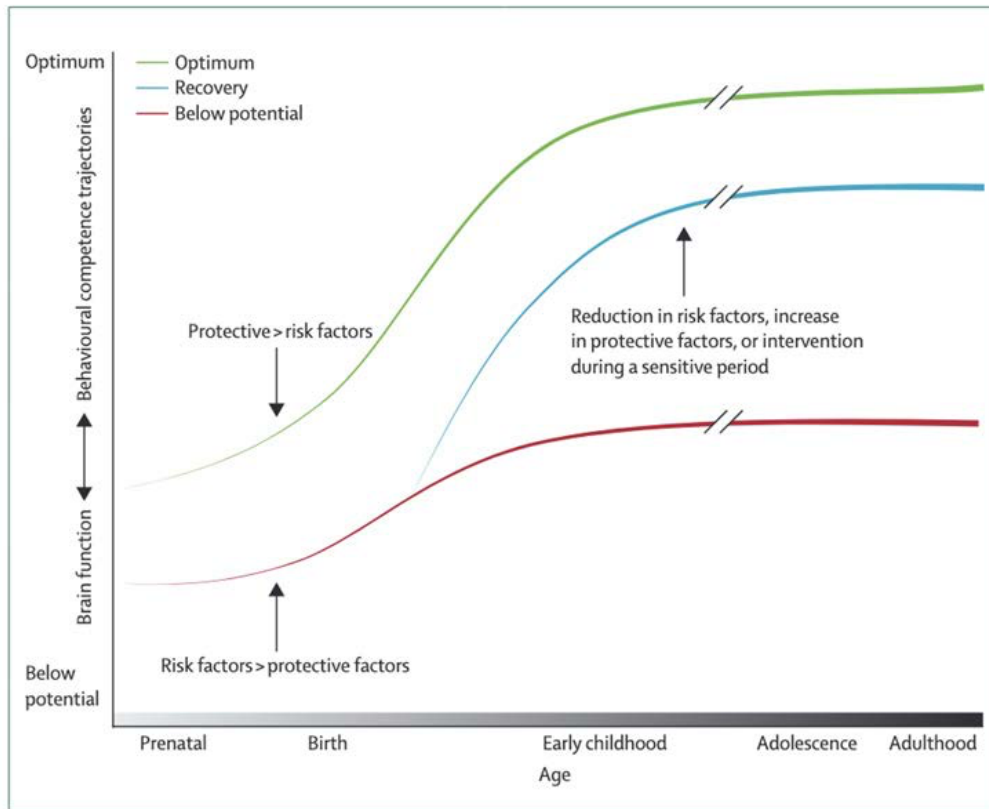


Figure 2: Differing trajectories of brain and behavioural development as a function of exposure to risk and protective factors

Skills beget skills – skills are their own protective factor

Walker, S. P., et al. (2011). Inequality in early childhood: risk and protective factors for early child development. *The Lancet*, 378(9799), 1325–1338.

Child Protection or Child Welfare: What's it going to be?

- Child protection isolates that parents contribution to child well-being
 - Legal traditions protect this point of view
- Child welfare is an inherently developmental construct that recognizes the full range of risk and protective factors within and outside the family
- Child protection is inherently episodic – is the child safe?
- Child welfare is inherently developmental
- The policy problem is therefore developmental – how do systems organize protective factors to improve long run outcomes?

CENTER FOR STATE CHILD WELFARE DATA

From What Works to How to Invest

The Age of Evidence

- Family First Prevention Services Act
 - Strong preference for evidence-based interventions
- Limited view of what constitutes evidence
 - What works vs. how to allocate resources
- Not conducive to thinking in system terms

The Limit of What Works

- What works
 - Does a program improve outcomes
 - Was the program effect statistically significant
 - Can the model be replicated
 - Does it meet standards
- What's missing:
 - Where should resources go
 - For whom
 - At what scale
 - Under what capacity constraints
 - What tradeoffs

What Is a System?

- A term that is widely used but rarely understood in a formal sense
- Systems have:
 - Purpose – work toward a goal
 - Protect child
 - Support development
 - Reduce exposure to harm
 - Promote well-being
 - Structures
 - Functions
 - Capacities
 - Processes
 - Accountability
- Systems shape context; context shapes systems

Why the System Matters

- Systems are not:
 - Business process maps
 - Organizational charts
- Systems are:
 - Dynamic
 - Adaptive
 - Interactive
 - Emergent
 - Constrained
- Systems thinking requires a new language
 - Stocks and flows are ubiquitous in child protection

Constraints and Decisions

- Allocating resources under conditions of uncertainty, interdependence, and feedback
 - Decisions are interdependent
 - Decisions affect flow
 - Capacity affects outcomes
 - Assessments are not independent – service capacity affects decisions
- In a constrained system, efficacy alone does not determine outcomes
 - Need-based allocation model – the greatest need should command the greatest attention
 - Success-based allocation model - what suppresses the probability of success, what capacities are missing

Where and How to Invest

- Systems decide:
 - Who receives attention
 - When intervention happens
 - Where capacity is deployed
 - What risks are tolerated
- These are allocation problems rather than program decisions
- Rather than predict risk, manage compliance, and optimize programs, investment decisions alleviate strain, manage adaptive capacity, optimize trajectories, and protect development