

COMMUNITY
PULSE
REPORT



Pulse Report for Children & Families

April 2022

Influence of COVID-19

Previous reports considered COVID-19's impact on children through vaccination rates, learning disruptions, and mental health. This Pulse Report begins to identify indicators of COVID-19's continued effects and potential areas for recovery initiatives. Specifically, COVID-19's impact on vulnerable children through the topics of foster care, youth homelessness, and juvenile justice.

Although it is too soon to understand all of COVID-19's impact on vulnerable children within the region, we begin to explore how the loss of guardians, housing, or family employment contributed to familial challenges during the pandemic and will extend into recovery initiatives.

When available, we consider changes in trends between pre-pandemic and COVID-19 year data. Across all three topics, the need for permanent, stable housing, and guardianship was a common theme.



Taking Our Pulse

The goal of the Community Pulse Report is to keep track of a consistent set of indicators as a way of taking the pulse of our community during the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery to further inform policy makers, nonprofit leaders, reporters, and the general public. This report is organized into three sections:



Foster Care: Lost Caregivers, Kinship Care, Aging out of Care



Homeless Youth: Reliability of Counts, Nighttime Residences, Access and Education



Juvenile Justice: Placements, Racial Disparities, Restorative Justice

Our aim is to utilize data that will give us a snapshot of what is happening in the five-county region—Allegheny, Armstrong, Butler, Fayette and Westmoreland Counties. Important to the project will be finding data that deepens our understanding of the intersecting disparities in health care, society, and the economy and their impacts on Black and Latino/a/x children and families.

A Note on Disaggregated Data & Geographies

We are committed to utilizing data that can be disaggregated by race, gender, and age.

We continue to strive to identify proxy indicators where disaggregated data is not available, and advocate for the disaggregation of data by race, gender, and age.

Where such data is available, we note that throughout the report with this symbol:



Where it is not available, we note with this symbol:



Throughout this report, the geography of analyzed data is noted in the upper left-hand corner of each chart or graph:



United States



Pennsylvania



Five-County Region
(Allegheny, Armstrong, Butler, Fayette, Westmoreland)



Allegheny County
(Only used rarely – where regional data is not available)



Foster Care

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month. While the understanding of COVID-19's impact on child abuse and the foster care system is still developing, early indicators are concerning. While overall referrals dropped, so, likely, did potential opportunities for intervention.

Locally, the demand for foster parents continues to grow as local foster care agencies promote family settings over congregate care models.

In 2021, Pennsylvania released its first [Kinship Care Report](#). The report promotes kinship care, or extended family care, while highlighting the barriers family members face in fostering their related children.



Losing Caregivers to COVID-19



Pediatrics found **+140,000 children lost a caregiver to COVID-19** from April 2020 to June 2021.

- Caregivers account for **one in every four** COVID-19 deaths.
- Though 39% of the population, **children of racial and ethnic minorities accounted for 65%** of those that lost a caregiver to COVID-19.
- Losing a caregiver is linked to lower-self esteem, depression, PTSD, shorter schooling, and substance abuse.

A 2018 UPMC study on the long-term impact of parent-loss showed increased incidences of depression and PTSD in children. Children were most vulnerable in the two years following the parental death.



COVID-19's Impact on Foster Care



After trending upward, the number of children served by the foster care system in PA **fell by 12%** from 2019-2020. First-time entries were down by 23% or 1,700 children. Though there were fewer overall referrals in 2020, [PA Partnerships for Children](#) recognized this trend may not be positive, as COVID-19 may have suppressed referrals.

Racial disparities in the system continued during COVID-19:

2x

Rate in which Black children and children of multiple races are represented in foster care versus the overall population.

4.5x

Rate at which Black children are more likely to **enter** foster care than white children.

5x

Rate at which Black children are more likely to **re-enter** foster care than white children.



Source: PA Partnership for Children, [State of Child Welfare 2021](#)

COMMUNITY PULSE REPORT



From Congregate to Kinship Care



Nationally, the use of congregate care (group homes, institutions) is down.



Research from Casey Family Programs shows that family settings, particularly kinship care, correlates to **less additional placements, less abuse, and greater proximity to family and community** than congregate care.

Notably, the first PA [Kinship Care Report](#) was released in 2021. Only **38%** of PA youth were placed with kin in 2019.

The report reveals how kin are often **disqualified due to past minor infractions, bias, or lack of support services.**





From Congregate to Kinship Care



Recognizing the positive outcomes associated with family settings, local agencies were shifting away from congregate care (group homes, institutions) even before COVID-19:

Changes in Placement Settings 2014-2019

	Family Setting	Congregate Care
Allegheny	5.9%	-19.7%
Armstrong	20.7%	-38.4%
Butler	1.9%	-16.5%
Fayette	18.6%	-59.7%
Westmoreland	4.8%	-45.9%

From 2014 to 2018, reports of child abuse in PA increased by over 50% - from a rate of 10.5 to 15.8 per 1,000 children. However, the share of substantiated claims remained stable around a rate of 11.5 per 1,000 children.



Source: PA Partnerships for Children. [2020 State of Child Welfare](#).

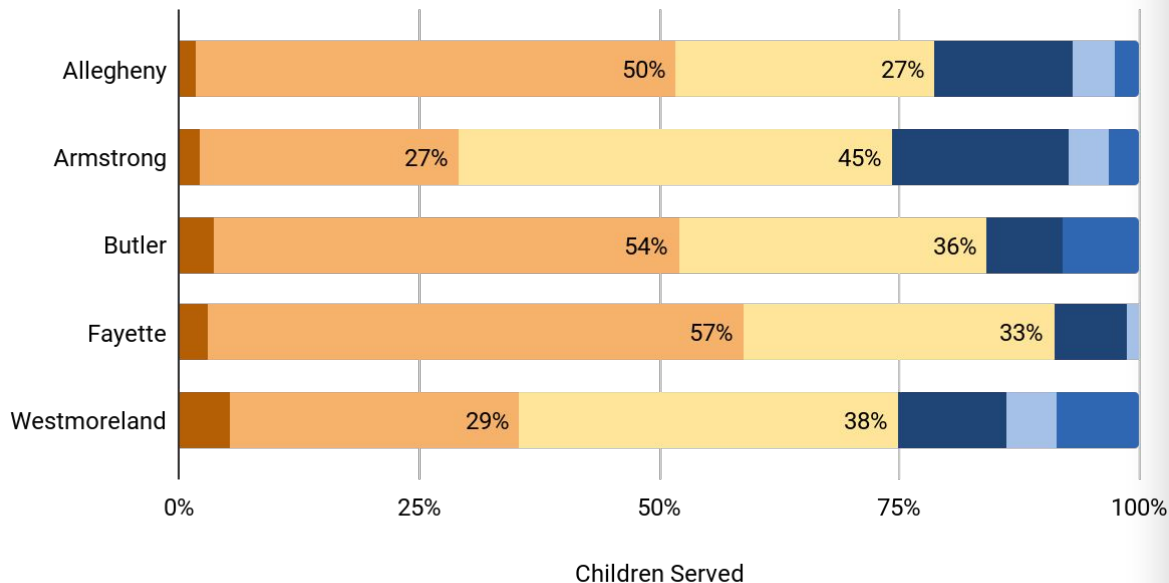


Maintaining Family Settings for Local Children



Placement Settings 2019

Family Setting: ■ Pre-adoptive Home ■ Foster Family Home - Relative ■ Foster Family Home - Non-Relative
Congregate Care: ■ Group Home ■ Institution ■ Supervised Independent Living



Most local children entering the foster care are placed in non-relative family home settings.

Non-relative placements surpassed kinship care (extended family care) in Armstrong County and Westmoreland County.

Growth in the rate of kinship care is outpacing non-relative placements in all but Westmoreland County.



Source: PA Partnerships for Children. [2020 State of Child Welfare.](#)



Foster Parents are Needed in our Region



Locally, the demand for foster parents remains:

"Auberle continues to have a great need for foster parents to host children of all ages, but we have seen the greatest need for families of color that will accept newborns.

COVID-19 has caused everyone stress, and we are seeing parents struggling with mental health and drug and alcohol use, leading to a need for temporary care of children while treatment is obtained.

Many families are timid about committing to becoming foster parents, but we welcome anyone that is interested to come and learn, sit through free trainings, and interact with others who have fostered for many years.

An open heart can help a child through the toughest time of their life."
-Sara Ulish, Auberle Supervisor.

BRIGHT SPOT:

On May 14th, [KidsVoice](#) will host its annual [Kites for Kids](#) event at the Science Center for children in foster care in Allegheny County. Featuring games and kite building, the event is also an opportunity for children in foster care to socialize.





Promising Practice: Love Carries



Auberle's new campaign, Love Carries, is using public art to raise awareness of the need for foster parents in the region. Local artists and foster families painted images in high-visibility corridors of the city.

In Allegheny County, approximately 1,300 children need to be matched with families.



Photo Credit: Fourth Economy





Policy Impacts: Aging Out of Foster Care



Permanence – achieving stable housing and guardianship – is a central goal of foster care. [Extended foster care](#), which allows youth to remain in foster care until age 21, leads to **higher rates of permanency for youth aging out of care**. As foster care continually faces challenges involving mental health and juvenile justice, the extended foster care policy process can serve as a model to further improve future outcomes.

	2012	2016	2020
POLICY	Fostering Connections to Success Act allows youth to stay in foster care until age 21.	Every Student Succeeds Act promotes educational stability.	DHS extends aftercare counseling services to youth up to age 23.
IMPACT	Less than half (49%) of youth aging out of foster care in Allegheny County have permanent living arrangements.	Permanent arrangements increased to 71%.	While outcomes develop, impact on mental health, employment, and permanence should be considered.

In addition to offering housing counseling, the [412 Youth Zone](#) works with 100+ community partners to provide youth 16-23 with comprehensive transitional services, from employment and life skills to behavioral health and the arts.





Youth Homelessness

Youth aging out of foster care at 18 are especially vulnerable to experiencing homelessness. The number of youth experiencing homelessness was trending upward in Pennsylvania even before the onset of COVID-19.

Students experiencing homelessness in PA are most likely doubled-up in existing households. Youth in these living arrangements not only face barriers to educational attainment, but also transportation to school. [Bus driver shortages](#) are disrupting the schooling of students experiencing homelessness.

The SHARE program, a state initiative piloted in select counties, provides a promising practice in connecting vulnerable populations, such as youth aging out of care, to affordable housing.



Youth experiencing homelessness



Between **31% and 46%** of youth exiting foster care will experience homelessness by age 26.

1/2 of the US homeless population spent time in the foster care system.



Of homeless foster youth, **28%** identify as LGBTQ+, compared to 22% of non-foster youth.



From school year 2016-17 to 2018-19, the number of students experiencing homelessness in PA **increased 26.7%**, compared to the national rate of 2.2.%.

Despite dramatic increases, [Research for Action](#) found PA is likely undercounting youth experiencing homelessness in their [2018 report](#).

The state's identification rate was 8% in school year 2016-2017, compared to 14% nationally.

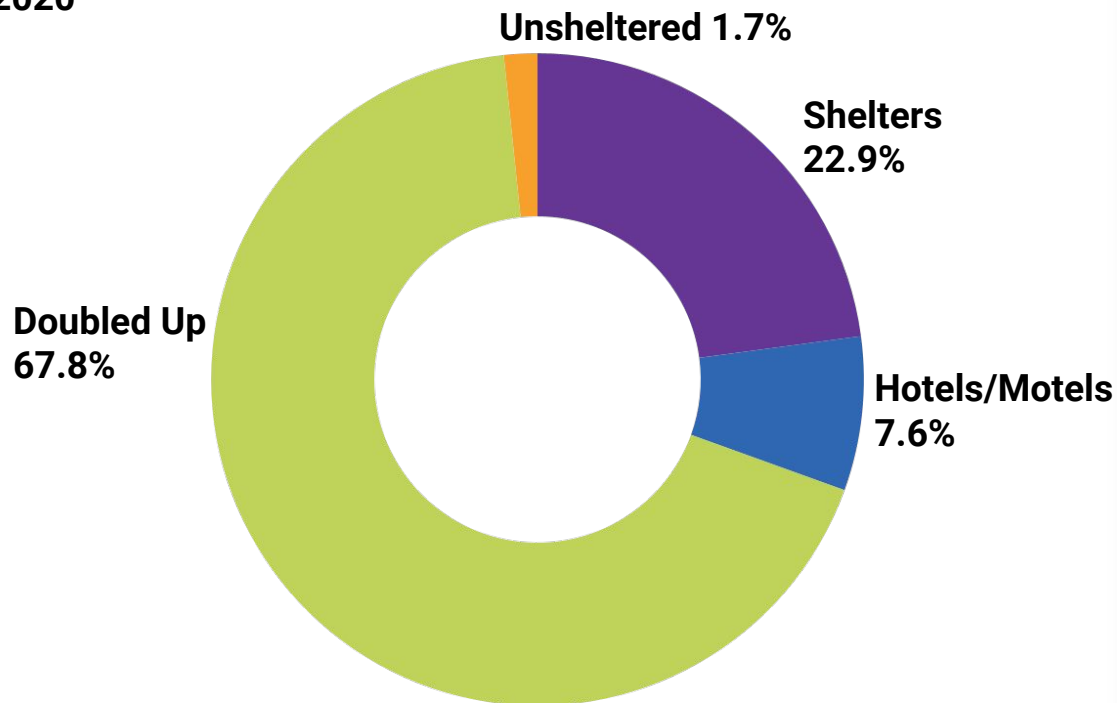


Source: [National Foster Youth Institute](#), [AJPH](#)

Most Youth in Doubled Up Residences



Nighttime Residences of Students Experiencing Homelessness 2020



[HUD](#) considers households doubled-up when they include two or more related or unrelated families living together.

More than $\frac{2}{3}$ of youth experiencing homelessness spend their nights doubled-up.



Source: [United States Interagency Council on Homelessness](#), January 2020

Educational Attainment



Local youth and education advocate Dr. Michael J. Warren on the importance of educational attainment:

"After a host of foster homes until age 21, and housing insecurity from 21-24, I was able to defy the odds. Thanks to the right support, a makeshift support system, and a growth mindset, I knew that my educational goals were more than a dream and that finishing my degree was the first step to securing housing stability.

Now five years later, I am proud to have married, graduated with a masters degree, and finished my doctoral degree. Homelessness was my current situation then, but it was never meant to be a life-sentence or my permanent destiny. The most important takeaway for me is not allowing my current situation to dictate my future."

- Dr. Michael J Warren

In 2019, PA reported **70%** of homelessness youth graduate within 4 years, while **77%** graduate in 5-years.

Economically disadvantaged students follow the same [achievement patterns](#) as youth experiencing homelessness. Math remains the subject area with the lowest outcomes.



Promising Practice: Share Program



A new state housing program could **benefit youth aging out of foster care**. Through Pennsylvania's Department of Aging, the [Shared Housing and Resource Exchange](#) (SHARE) program matches senior homeowners with people seeking affordable housing. In an exchange for a private bedroom, participant home seekers contribute to household expenses and/or maintenance.

SHARE exists in 9 PA counties, but remains outside of our region:



Venango County Housing Counselor Jeremy Tidd reports that the SHARE program has been met with excitement, especially by seniors looking to age in place and remain in their homes.

While COVID-19 related hesitancy reduced initial participation, interest is growing.





Juvenile Justice

Allegations of juvenile delinquency fell during COVID-19, though the racial disparities in outcomes and placements persist. At the state and local level, Black juveniles disproportionately face the most severe punishments.


Placements - where juveniles are removed from their homes and placed in group homes, institutions, or programs such as drug rehabilitation - were down in 2020. Some juvenile justice advocates are promoting permanent shifts away from secure placement, or detention, towards at-home-placements.

Racial Disparities in Juvenile Justice




OUTCOMES

PLACEMENTS



14% of 10-17 year olds in PA are Black but Black juveniles received **37%** of dispositions, or decisions, in 2020.

61% of juvenile secure detentions were Black, while 23% were white.



Black juveniles received **50%** of local decisions, while white juveniles received 44%.

Locally, **70% of juveniles in secure detention were Black**, while 24% were white.

Between 2019-2020, delinquency allegations fell by **fell by 34%** in PA and **28%** in the 5-county region. However, a disproportionate number of Black youth interact with the system and face harsher outcomes.



Source: [Pennsylvania Juvenile Court Annual Report 2020](#)



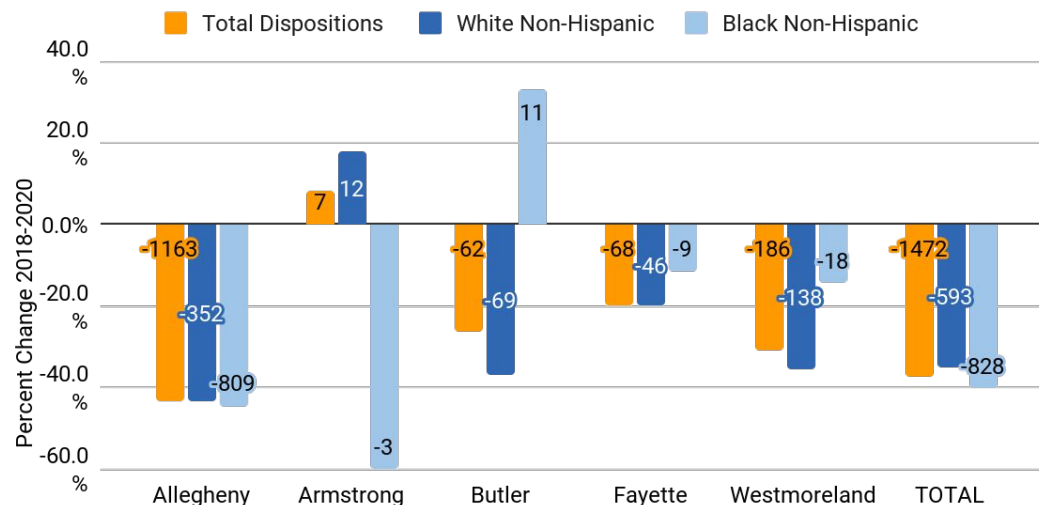
Allegations are down for White and Black youth



From 2018 to 2020, total allegations against juveniles fell within in our region. At -43.4% and -44.5% respectively, white and Black juveniles in Allegheny County experienced similar declines in allegations from 2018 to 2020.

However, Black youth remain more than **twice as likely** to receive dispositions (decisions) than white youth in Allegheny County.

Change in Allegations by Race 2018-2020

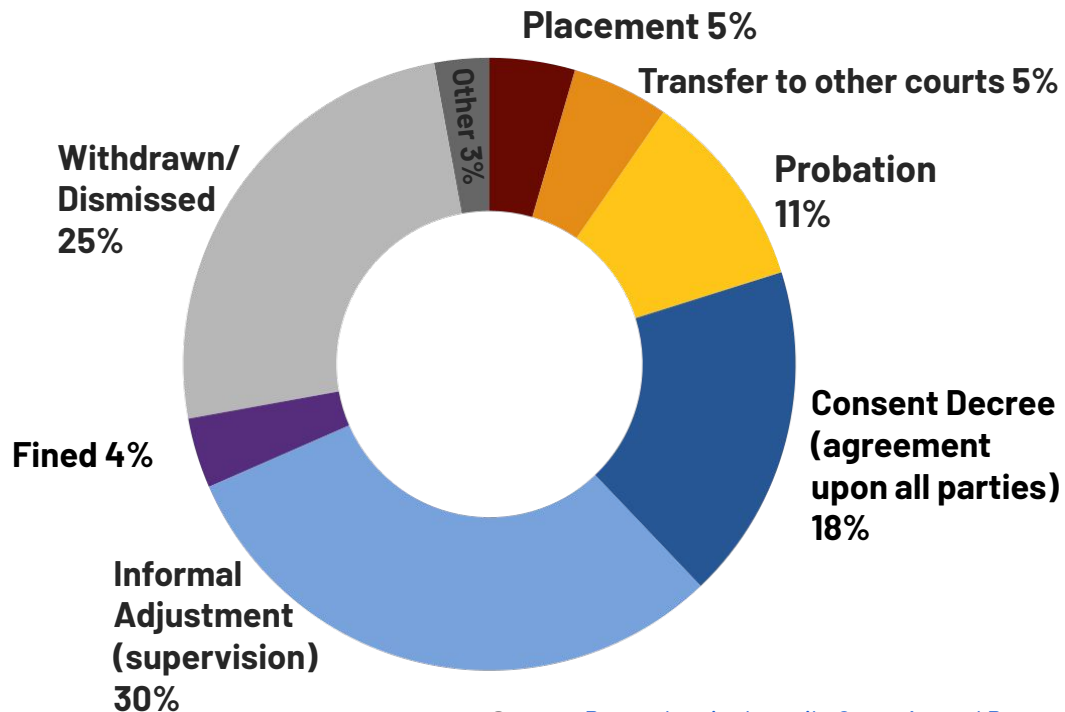




Most juveniles receive non-placement outcomes



Juvenile Outcomes in the Region 2020



The vast majority of local juvenile interactions with courts result in lower level dispositions.

This provides an opportunity to keep children in their homes, promoting their safety and development.



Limiting out-of-home placement

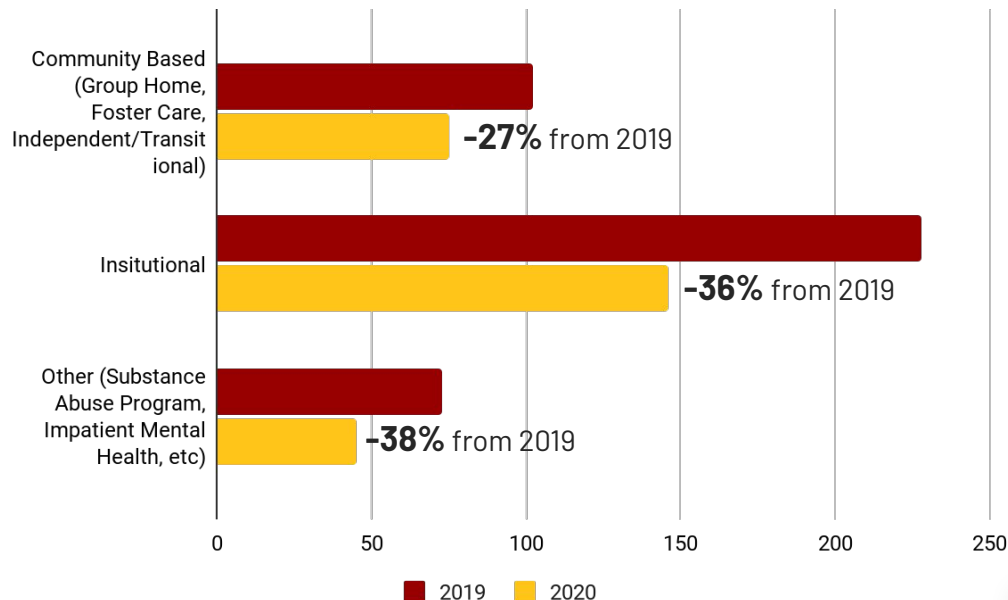


Fewer placements occurred in 2020 than in 2019 in the five-county region. However, out-of-house placements remained the most common. Institutional placements accounted for around 55% of all placements in both years.

"There has been a downward trend in out of home placements and more focus on diversion."

- Judge Jennifer McCrady

Juvenile Placement by Type 2019-2020



At-Home Placement and Restorative Justice



Advocates and academics, including the [PA Juvenile Justice task force](#), increasingly recommend [at-home placement](#) or [restorative justice alternatives](#).

“Restorative justice offers an alternative societal response to crime and harm. [...] Restorative justice empowers individuals and groups to address violence, respond to social, political and economic injustice, and engage in resistance to existing structural inequities.”

-Thalia Gonzalez

[The Legalization of Restorative Justice: A Fifty State Empirical Analysis](#) (2019)

2021 Task Force Recommendations seek to reinvest cost-savings from placement reductions to:

1. Promote Diversion
2. Add Funding goals to Human Service Code
3. Extend child welfare services
4. Conduct an inventory of gaps/services



Source: [The Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force 2021 Report & Recommendations](#)

More Information & Previous Reports

- Previous reports:
 - [Community Pulse Report: September '20](#)
 - [Community Pulse Report: October '20](#)
 - [Community Pulse Report: November/December '20](#)
 - [Community Pulse Report: January '21](#)
 - [Community Pulse Report: February '21](#)
 - [Community Pulse Report: April '21](#)
 - [Community Pulse Report: June '21](#)
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