

A Call For Change: Rethinking American Foster Care - Literature Review

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The Social Problem

Each year, hundreds of thousands of children enter foster care due to neglect, abuse, or parental substance use. Despite federal reforms, significant concerns remain regarding long term outcomes.

Youth in foster care often experience:

- Placement instability
- Limited financial and emotional support
- Disproportionate exposure to poverty and trauma
- Aging out without permanent family connections

The National Association of Social Workers emphasizes protecting vulnerable and oppressed populations. Foster youth represent a population that depends on systems of care for safety, stability, and opportunity.

As a profession committed to social justice and human dignity, social workers have an ethical responsibility to address structural inequities within the foster care system.

Children In Foster Care

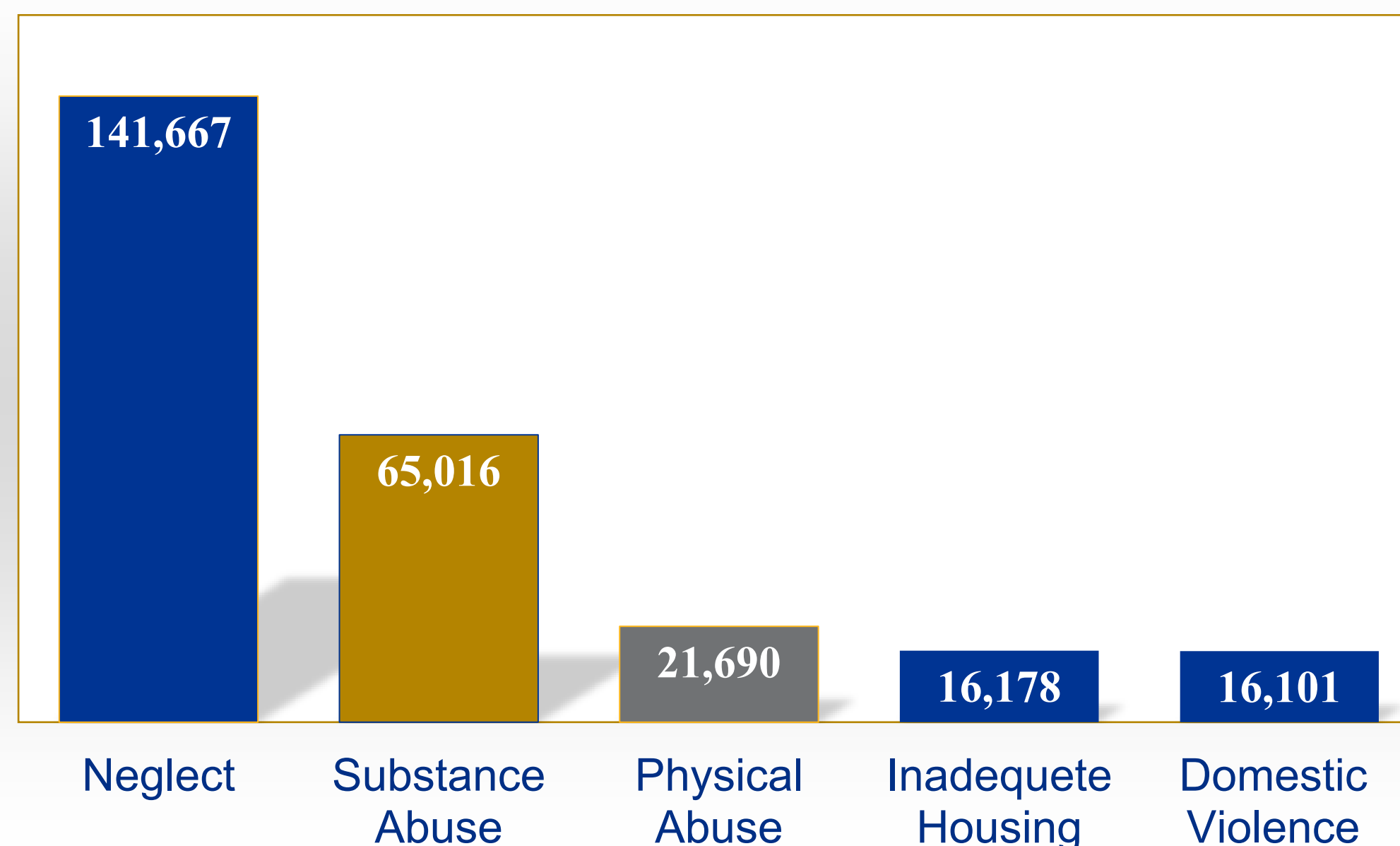
Approximately 329,000 children experience foster care annually in the United States.

Primary reasons for placement include:

- Neglect
- Parental substance abuse
- Physical abuse
- Inability to provide adequate care

These, and long-term developmental challenges. early experiences increase the likelihood of trauma exposure, placement instability

Reasons for Entry into Foster Care



AFCARS | Children's Bureau- 2024

Funding Gaps in the Foster Care System

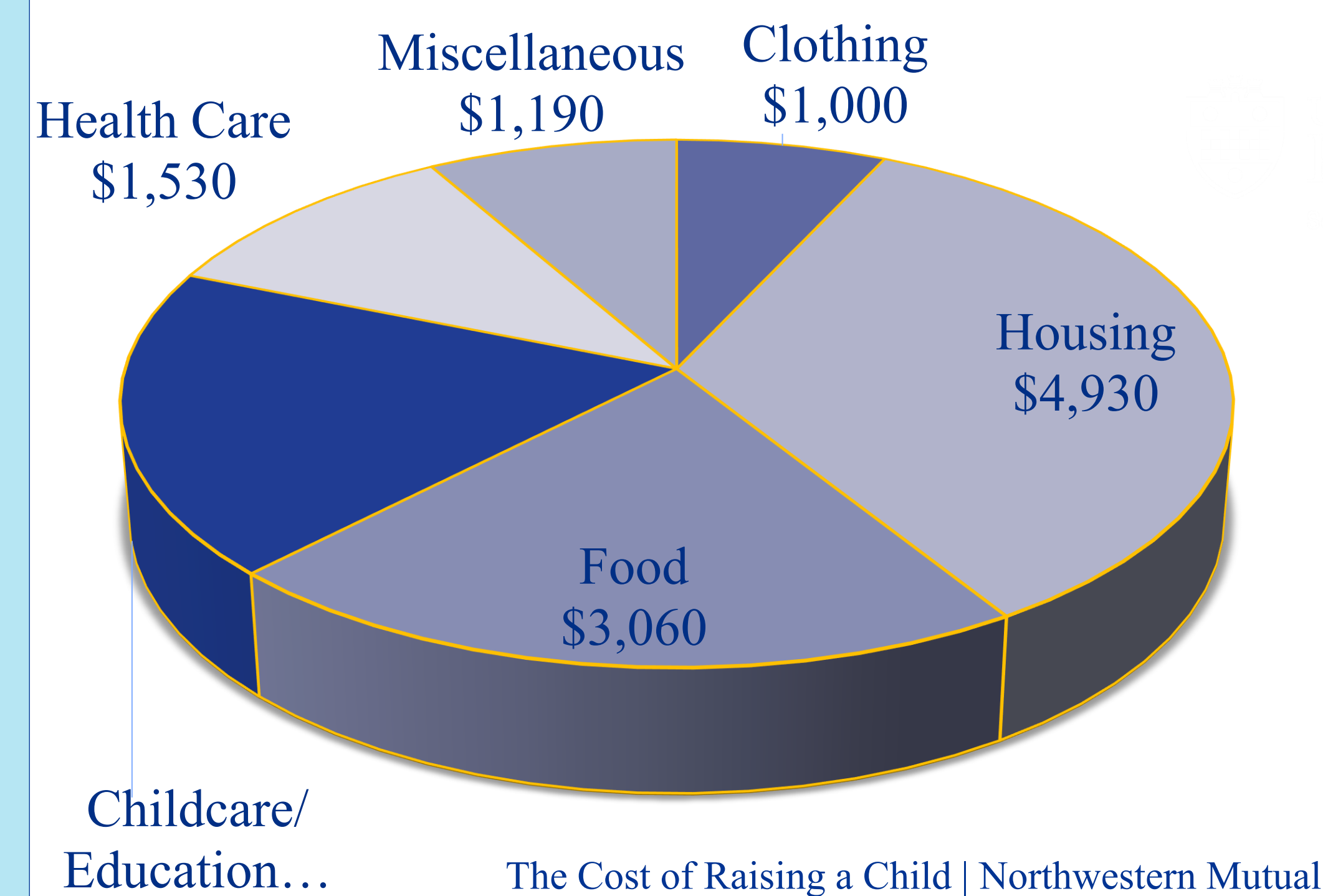
The average annual cost of raising a child exceeds 20,000 dollars, yet foster care funding is often insufficient to meet the complex needs of youth in care.

Typical annual expenses include:

- Housing
- Food
- Childcare and education
- Health care
- Clothing and miscellaneous needs

The disparity between the cost of raising a child and available foster care resources highlights structural funding gaps that affect service delivery, placement stability, and long-term outcomes.

Average Annual Cost of Raising a Child



The Cost of Raising a Child | Northwestern Mutual

Risk Factors for Youth Aging Out

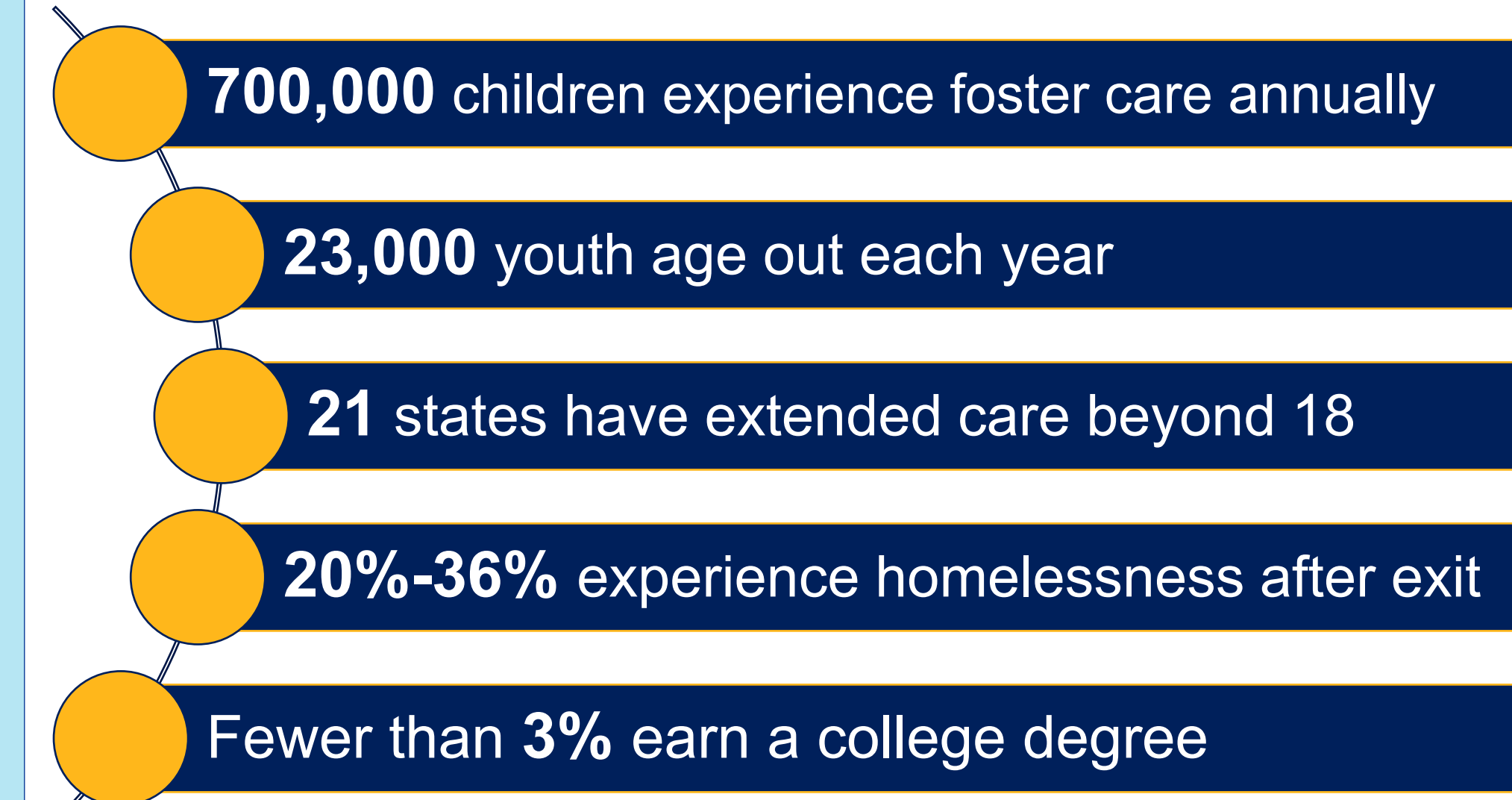
Each year, approximately 23,000 youth age out of foster care without permanent family connections.

Research consistently identifies elevated risks among this population, including:

- Housing instability and homelessness
- Early parenthood
- Substance use
- Economic insecurity
- Increased vulnerability to exploitation

Without structured transition planning and extended support, many young adults enter independence without the social, financial, or emotional resources necessary for stability.

Foster Care Snapshot



Political and Policy Context

Despite decades of federal reforms, research continues to demonstrate ongoing concerns regarding foster youth outcomes.

The Increasing Access to Foster Care Through Age 21 Act proposes extending foster care eligibility beyond age 18. Evidence from states that have implemented extended care shows improvements in:

- Educational attainment
- Employment outcomes
- Housing stability
- Reduced public assistance reliance

However, policy advancement remains slow, and many youth continue to age out at 18 without adequate transitional support.

Policy Implementation Barriers

Although research supports extending foster care eligibility to age 21, implementation remains inconsistent and slow. Legislative efforts such as the Increasing Access to Foster Care Through Age 21 Act have stalled despite evidence demonstrating improved education, employment, and housing outcomes in states that have already adopted extended care.

Key barriers include:

- Political disagreement and competing funding priorities
- Uneven policy adoption across states
- Limited federal and state funding allocations
- Variability in child welfare systems and service capacity

Research indicates that while policy solutions exist, structural and political challenges delay reform and limit consistent access to transitional supports for youth aging out of foster care.

The Role of Social Work

The National Association of Social Workers emphasizes advocacy for vulnerable and oppressed populations. Youth in foster care represent a population that depends on systems of care for protection, stability, and opportunity.

Child welfare reform requires engagement at multiple levels of practice.

Micro Level	Mezzo Level	Macro Level
Provide trauma informed services	Strengthen community-based supports	Advocate for policy reform and equitable funding
Develop individualized transition planning	Promote kinship placements and placement stability	Support legislation that extends care and strengthens prevention services
Empower youth through skill building and connection to resources	Facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration among schools, courts, and community agencies	Conduct and disseminate research to influence national child welfare reform

Call for Change

If the foster care system is intended to protect children, then policies must ensure that protection extends beyond temporary placement and into sustainable adulthood.

Effective reform must include:

- Passage of policies extending care beyond age 18 (Bill H.R. 7010)
- Increased funding to support prevention and transitional services
- Expanded access to mental health and educational resources
- Strengthened accountability and outcome tracking

Contact



References

