Children with High-Acuity Needs in Foster Care: A National Snapshot

Adoption Competent Mental Health · https://bridges4mentalhealth.org/hub/adoption-competence/children-with-high-acuity-needs-in-foster-care-a-national-snapshot/

The Children With High-Acuity Needs in Foster Care: A National Snapshot, published by the Administration for Children and Families on November 2, 2026, uses Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data from FY2023–2025 to examine the characteristics, placements, and outcomes of children entering foster care with high-acuity needs (HAN).

Key findings

- **1 in 5 children entering foster care (20%)** were identified as having high-acuity needs. Among youth ages **11–17, the rate increases to 27%**.
- **Mental health needs are especially prominent:** about **three-quarters of youth with HAN had a reported mental health diagnosis**.
- Children and youth with HAN were **more likely to be placed in congregate care** than children without HAN.
- Children with HAN tended to **remain in foster care longer and were more likely to re-enter care** after leaving.
- Among the diagnostic groups examined, children with **mental health diagnoses had the highest rate of re-entry into foster care**.
- Youth with HAN were also **more likely to emancipate or age out of foster care**, rather than leave through another permanency outcome.

- The brief cautions that diagnosed conditions may be **underreported in AFCARS**, meaning the available data may not capture the full extent of need.

The findings make a strong case for closer coordination between **child welfare and behavioral health systems**. The combination of high mental health needs, greater use of congregate care, longer stays in foster care, re-entry, and aging out suggests that youth with complex needs cannot be effectively served by child welfare alone.

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