

Loving Our Children: Finding What Works for First Nations Families

Canada Research Chair in First Nations Child and Family Services
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Information Sheet #5 What is Out-of-Home Care?

Nico Trocmé, Sue Sullivan and Rachael Lefebvre

Out-of-home care placements (also known as alternative placements) are a range of placement types for children whose safety and well-being would be seriously compromised by leaving the child at home.

Although most First Nations children involved with child welfare are not placed in out-of-home care, First Nations children continue to be at much higher risk of out-of-home placement than non-Indigenous children. The First Nations/Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect² found that during a child welfare investigation, First Nations children were 17 times more likely to be placed in out-of-home care than non-Indigenous children.

The Census³ shows that in 2021, 42.5% of foster children were First Nations, while only 4.7% of children in Canada were First Nations. Furthermore, the Census shows that despite calls to decrease overrepresentation, the proportion of foster children who were First Nations has been increasing, from 39.2% in 2011 to 42.5% in 2021.

Reducing the number of First Nations children in out-of-home care is imperative. First Nations families face higher rates of poverty and housing insecurity; have less access to services to help parents deal with problems such as substance abuse, mental health and domestic violence;

This information sheet is [one in a series](#)¹ about child welfare prevention services, written for First Nations developing child and family prevention services as part of the systemic reform underway across Canada.

and are assessed in ways that do not account for the systemic underfunding of services and the compound harms arising from residential schools and other forms of colonialism.

New federal funding, arising from a historic Canadian Human Rights Tribunal legal case for First Nations family support services, is designed to help prevent unnecessary placements. However, the scope of the problem will require investments and changes in funding to address the structural drivers that fuel the overrepresentation and reforming family services practices at all levels, including the provinces and territories.

Types of Out-of-Home Care

Out-of-home care covers a broad range of situations, from arrangements made with kin (often based on traditional extended family parenting modes) to formal placements in family-

type foster homes, group homes or treatment facilities.

- Kinship placements include grandparents, other relatives or family friends and can be based on informal arrangements or traditional practices with little or no involvement of child welfare authorities.
- Formal kinship placements include arrangements made with child welfare authorities and usually include providing financial support and supervision.
- Non-kin family foster care is formal child welfare placements with a foster placement.
- Staff-run group home placements are usually reserved for older youth and run by child welfare agencies or by private fee-for-service organizations.
- Treatment facilities include specialized treatment group homes, residential units or even hospital settings. These facilities include therapeutic treatment programs and may also have a range of security arrangements that can go as far as locked settings for youth who are a danger to themselves or others. Some of these facilities may include a mix of youth coming from child welfare, mental health and the youth criminal justice system.

Although kinship placements are considered to be the least disruptive option for most children and youth, adequate funding and support and training to meet the special needs of First Nations children and youth who have experienced trauma are required to ensure that kin caregivers can meet their added responsibilities. Finding specialized placements for children and youth with special health or mental needs can be a challenge, especially in rural and remote areas. In a number of Ontario Indigenous child and family well-being agencies, the rapidly

increasing costs associated with some of these placements is becoming a major budgetary issue, especially for smaller agencies.⁴

A recent Public Health Agency of Canada study of alternative placements for all children found that kinship care accounted for 36% of children in out-of-home care; family foster care for another 49%; and group care for another 11% in the 10 provinces and territories with data on placement type for 2021/22. Based on data from nine provinces and territories, the overall percentage of children in foster homes has been decreasing and the percentage in kinship placements has been increasing.⁵ While this study did not break down information by First Nations status, data from a number of jurisdictions indicate a similar trend towards greater reliance on kinship care for First Nations children.

Short- vs. Long-Term Care

While most children return home after a relatively short stay in out-of-home care, for a significant minority of children, out-of-home care can drift into becoming long term, with increasing risk of placement instability and alienation from family and community. A longitudinal study of placements of First Nations children in Quebec found that 26% of children were still in care after three years. For those who had returned home, however, half did so within three months of being placed and 80% returned home within a year.

Family Support for Children in Out-of-Home Care

Most First Nations children involved with child welfare systems are not placed in out-of-home care. In some circumstances, however, temporary out-of-home care may be necessary while a family receives the services and supports needed to resolve the issues that led to placement. While much attention is paid to decisions

to place children, there is a risk that less attention is paid to ensuring that families get the services they need to support rapid and successful reunification. It is also essential, especially if children are not placed

with kin, to support frequent and positive contact with their parents and siblings, as well as active engagement with their community and culture.

If you would like to share information about a First Nations child and family support initiative in your community, the Loving Our Children project researchers would like to hear from you. LOCwhatworks@gmail.com

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Endnotes

- <https://cwrp.ca/loving-our-children>
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