

# Children in Foster Care in Canada in 2016 & 2021

---

Black, T., Trocmé, N., Fallon, B., & Houston, E.

When child welfare authorities deem it unsafe for a child to remain in their home because of concerns related to harm or risk of harm they may place the child in out-of-home care. Nation-wide information on the number of children in out-of-home care is lacking in Canada – which largely stems from the fact that child welfare falls under the jurisdiction of provinces, territories, and First Nations. As a result, there is no centralized system for tracking the number of children in care, and reporting methods as well as inclusion criteria vary considerably across provinces, territories, and reserve boundaries. Although out-of-home placements are often necessary to ensure a child’s wellbeing and/or safety, high rates of placements can be an indication of a lack of access to support services or socio-economic conditions that impact a family’s ability to meet their children’s needs.<sup>1</sup>

## Previous Estimates

Caution is needed in interpreting and comparing statistics on children in out-of-home care. The number of children in out-of-home care is usually reported either as (1) a point-in-time count of the number of children in out-of-home care at a given date (e.g., month-end or year-end), as (2) the number of children who enter out-of-home care in a certain year, or as (3) the number of children in out-of-home care at the beginning of the year plus all entries during the year. Because some children come in and out of care multiple times in a year, counts based on entries into care can be complicated to interpret. On the other hand, point-in-time counts, sometimes referred to as “snapshot” or “cross-sectional” counts, while easier to report and interpret, under-represent the volume of children who end up being placed in out-of-home care at one point during their childhood.

**CIS:** The last national cycle of the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-2019) estimated that 5% of the 299,217 maltreatment-related

---

<sup>1</sup> Nico Trocmé et al., “National Child Welfare Outcomes Indicator Matrix (NOM),” *CHILD WELFARE*, 2009, 8.

investigations conducted in Canada in 2019, an estimated 14,960 child investigations, led to an out-of-home placement during the initial 30-to-45-day investigation period.<sup>2</sup> Because many children enter care after the initial investigation, this number underrepresents annual entries into care.

**Compilations of provincial and territorial reports:** In a previous CWRP Information Sheet<sup>3</sup> we compiled out-of-home care data publicly reported by provincial and territorial child welfare authorities and found that the number of children in out-of-home care in Canada 2019 at year end was 54,139 when informal kinship services are excluded and 59,283 when reported informal kinship services are included in the final count. The rate of children in care per 1,000 children in Canada was between 7.46 and 8.16 depending on whether reported informal kinship care services are excluded or included. Like the Census data, these are point-in-time estimates, however, unlike the Census, these estimates also include children and youth in group and treatment care, and do not rely on respondent recall.

**Census:** Census data from 2016 and 2021 provide point-in-time estimates of children from birth to 14 years in foster care in those years: 29,590 and 26,680 respectively. However, these estimates do not include other types of out-of-home placement options, such as group care or treatment care. Furthermore, the Census category of “foster care” may include some children with special health or developmental needs who placed in foster homes outside of the child welfare system. Finally, the voluntary and discretionary nature of the Census can lead to biases in the data that might contribute to underestimating the total number of children in foster care. For example, a grandmother who is fostering her grandchild could select “grand-child” or “foster-child” on the census form, which can undercount the number of foster children.

## Findings

Figure 1 below presents a point-in-time estimated rate of children in foster care per 1,000 children aged 0 – 14 in each province/territory in 2016 and 2021. In 2021, an estimated 26,680 children in Canada were reported to the Census as living in a foster home, a rate of 4.45 children per 1,000; a slight decrease from the rate of 4.93 per 1,000 reported in 2016. As shown in Figure 1, the rate of foster placement varied significantly across Canada, from a low of 1.70 and 1.82 per 1,000 in Prince Edward Island and Ontario respectively, to a high of 19.72 per 1,000 in Manitoba. This between province variation is similar to the variation noted in our previous Information Sheet using provincially reported data, where variations between provinces corresponds to the relative size of Indigenous populations within these jurisdictions (Saint-

---

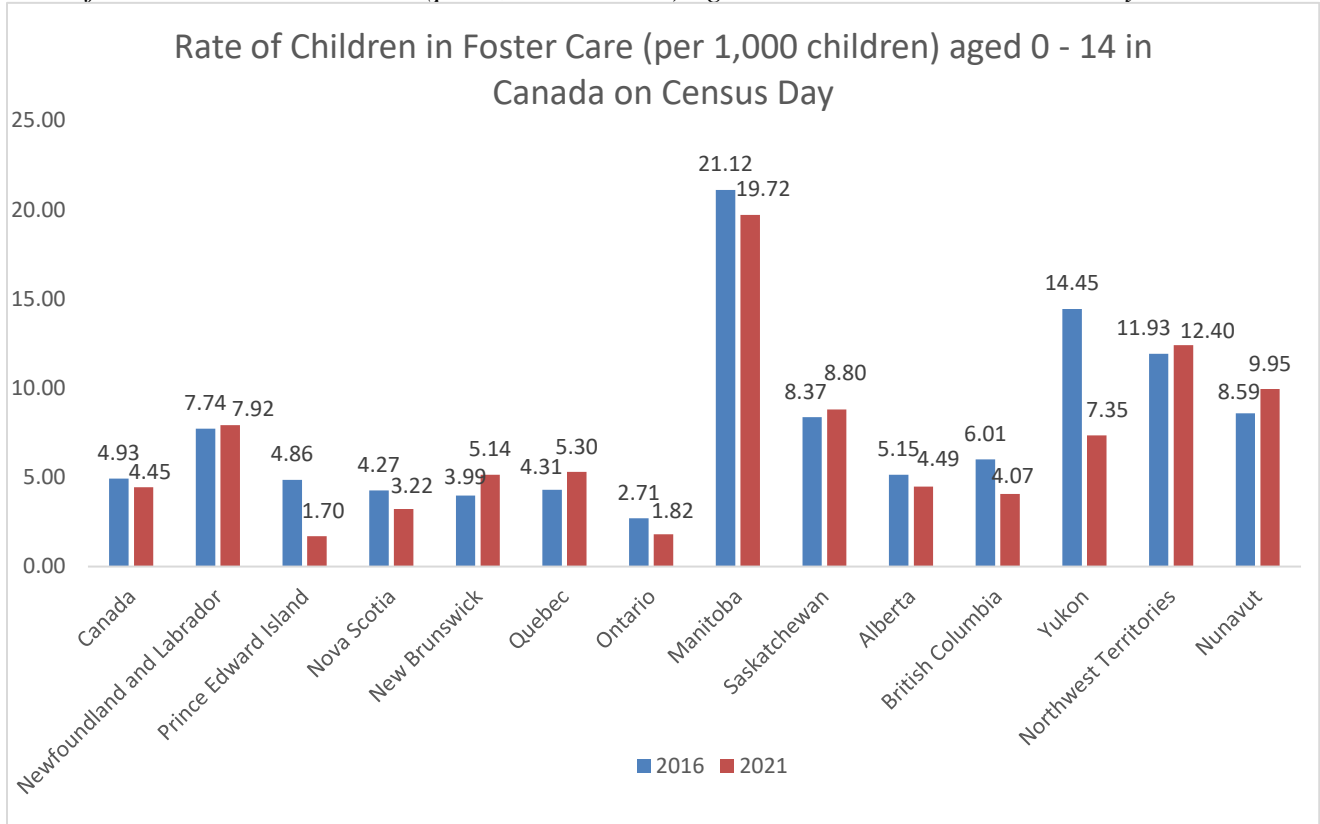
<sup>2</sup> Barbara Fallon et al., “Major Findings from the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect 2019,” *International Journal on Child Maltreatment: Research, Policy and Practice* 5, no. 1 (March 1, 2022): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42448-021-00110-9>.

<sup>3</sup> Saint-Girons, M., Trocmé, N., Esposito, T., & Fallon, B. (2020). Children in Out-of-Home Care in Canada in 2019. CWRP Information Sheet #211E. Montreal, QC: Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal.

Girons et al., 2020). This will be explored further in an upcoming Information Sheet, as soon as the more detailed Indigenous data are publicly released by Statistics Canada.

Figure 1.

*Rate of Children in Foster Care (per 1,000 children) aged 0 - 14 in Canada Census Day*



## Methodology

The data presented in this information sheet was collected in the 2016 and 2021 Canadian Census. Canadian Census data is publicly available on the Statistics Canada Website: <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/index-eng.cfm>. Table 98-10-0135-01 provides the total number of foster children living in the home on census day for both the 2016 and 2021 census. To obtain the rate of foster children in care, the total number of foster children is divided by the child population and multiplied by 1,000. The child population is available in Table: 39-10-0041-01

**Suggested Citation:** Black, T., Trocmé, N., Fallon, B., & Houston, E. (2022). *Children in Foster Care in Canada in 2016 & 2021*. CWRP Information Sheet #240E. Toronto, ON: Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal.