When I set out, I wanted to ask the question: How many foster care children have been diagnosed with mental illness? I decided to focus on those states with the largest percentages of kids under 18 years old in foster care.

To decide which states to focus on, I found states with the largest percent increase of children entering foster care as well as the largest percent increase in number of children in care on the last day of fiscal year over a nine year period (2003-2012)

Using Department of Health and Human Service data on the number of children entering, exiting and in foster care, I found that Arizona, Texas and West Virginia had the highest percentages of kids entering and kids in care. The increases seem pretty drastic, especially in Arizona, so I decided to focus primarily on story ideas that could come from these three states.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| State | % change of kids entering FC | % change of kids in FC on last day of fiscal year |
| Arizona | 71.76 | 80.22 |
| Texas | 44.35 | 35.34 |
| West Virginia | 47.42 | 36.06 |

The lowest states for percent of kids entering foster care were Hawaii and Delaware. Hawaii also had the largest decrease overtime of children in the foster care system – almost 63%. Upon doing some research I learned that Hawaii has an effective child welfare system in place – so much so other states have travelled there to see how their system is run. This could be an interesting story – what does Hawaii do differently to have such a decrease in the amount of children who need to go through the foster care system?

Just for comparisons sake, I used 2010 US Census data to find the total number of children (people under 18) in each state. Using this information, I found the percentage of the state population in foster care. From these findings, West Virginia had one of the highest percentages of their under 18 population who is in foster care (2.31% or 6,384 children)

To figure out how many of these children have mental illness, I looked at the Medicaid spending on therapy and in-patient mental health services. I found a report from the Urban Institute on Medicaid spending on foster children. The report points out that foster children are at a greater risk for mental health problems because of maltreatment as well as the trauma of being separated from their homes and families. The report says that studies show that as much as 80 percent of children who go through welfare agencies have some kind of mental or behavioral disorder.

The report used data from the Medicaid System Information Summary since that datamart has a special basis of eligibility designation for foster care children.

I found the number of foster children that received benefits for in-patient mental health services as well as benefits for therapy. For the purposes of this initial research, it’s a good indicator of how many children have mental health issues. It’s not entirely complete because mental health is subjective and there could be children who are in therapy who are not mentally ill as well as kids with mental health issues who don’t receive treatment.

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| --- | --- |
| State | % of foster kids received MH treatment |
| Illinois | 27.94 |
| Louisiana | 23.97 |
| Maryland | 21.56 |
| Arkansas | 21.37 |
| South Dakota | 20.35 |
| West Virginia | 17.27 |

Only 1.86% of Illinois’s under 18 population is in foster care, but close to 28 percent of those children have been in some kind of mental health services. Could it be that Illinois has a good mental health program for Medicaid beneficiaries? Or have they just done the best job reporting their mental health services?

West Virginia

Arizona on the other hand, reported zero in-patient services and zero therapy benefits for their foster children. This seems odd since they have one of the largest increases in their foster care population. Does Arizona use another system of treatment instead of Medicaid? Why is their percent increase so large?

Upon doing some research on the state of the Arizona foster care system, I found articles telling of the sharp increases of foster children coming into the Arizona system and their inability to find enough foster homes for children because more of the children coming into the system have behavior problems. So why aren’t they using mental health services for these kids? I also found that the state has cut programs that help families stay together (welfare, section 8 housing) so children don’t have to enter foster care in the first place.

In Texas, 3.14% of their foster children have received some kind of mental health services. Which still doesn’t explain the large increases in

Texas: foster care system redesign.

Another factor could be the amount spent on mental health services for each child. Using the MSIS data,

There were a few limits to the data. Firstly, the number of foster children on Medicaid was much larger than the DHHS data. The Medicaid numbers could include children who were only in foster care for a short time, but it’s still curious that the numbers are so different. For example, in Arizona 15,408 foster care children received benefits of Medicaid while the DHHS says there were only 3,711 children in care.

Also, I noticed that the list of states from the two different sources were in a different alphabetical order because one spelled the state name out and the other used the state abbreviation.

When I fixed this, I found there were five states - Maine, Iowa, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Utah - missing data 2011 Medicaid state summaries. What could be the reasons for that? After checking, most of the MSIS data is missing different states each year but 2011 was most complete. Did these states not report for that year or is the database itself just incomplete?

Other things I found in this data set include the amount of Medicaid benefits per foster child – where there could be some interesting story ideas. On average for the whole country, $7447.27 is spent per year on each foster child. This includes all types of care not just mental health. States vary greatly on the amount spent per child with Vermont spending $19,679.08 per child and Massachusetts spending $3969.06 per child.