

Children in Foster Care and Home-Based Child Care in California

AUTHORS: Mary Frese and Juliet Bromer, Erikson Institute

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— INTRODUCTION

While child care use among families involved in state child welfare programs is documented, the types of child care arrangements used for children in foster care and their families are not widely known. Home-based child care (HBCC) is widely used in the state of California, accounting for 56% of publicly funded child care arrangementsⁱ and may be a particularly good fit for children and families in state foster care systems due to low provider-to-child ratios, small group size, home-like environments, and individualized and responsive care that are common features of high-quality HBCC settings. Prior research suggests these features of HBCC may have the potential to support the unique needs (e.g., developmental delays, trauma) of children in foster care.ⁱⁱ This data snapshot is one in a series of state-level analyses on the prevalence of children in foster care who are also cared for in HBCC settings. This data snapshot examines the HBCC arrangements used by families receiving an emergency child care voucher through California's Emergency Child Care Bridge Program during a specific 6-month period. All data reported in this brief come from CCB-18 Emergency Child Care for Foster Children Bridge Program Quarterly Reports for Fiscal Year 2025-26.ⁱⁱⁱ

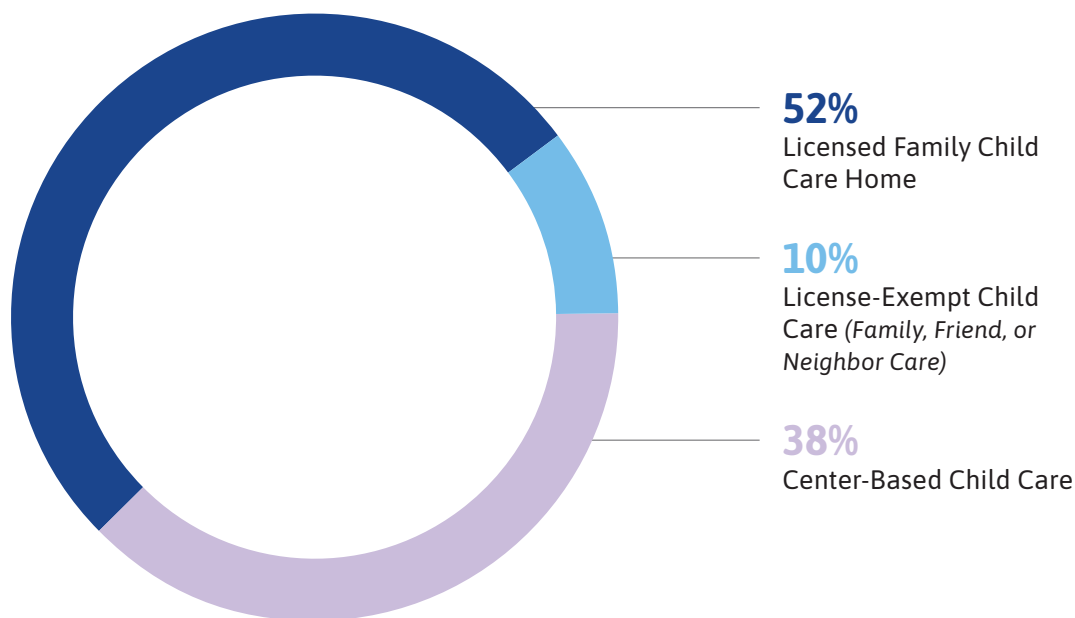
— BACKGROUND: FOSTER CARE AND CHILD CARE IN CALIFORNIA

Over five in 100,000 children in California are in custody of the state's Child Welfare System. Although this per capita rate is aligned with national averages, the dense population of California makes it the largest foster care system in the United States, with over 10% of all U.S. children in foster care (36,000 children) residing in California.^{iv} It is currently estimated that for every 100 children entering foster care in California, there are only 57 licensed foster families to care for them.^v The lack of available child care may be one reason there are not enough foster care placements for children who need them. A 2015 study of emergency shelter workers at California Youth Welcome Centers estimated that 25% of their placement requests were denied by potential families due to lack of access to child care. Workers reported that families cited locating available child care providers/programs and being able to afford the cost of child care as specific challenges.^{vi} In response to these challenges,



California instituted the Emergency Child Care Bridge Program (Bridge Program) to address child care challenges faced by families caring for children through the foster care system. The program offers foster families within the state's system short-term vouchers—up to 12 months—to help cover child care costs while they apply for longer-term child care subsidies (e.g., DCFS Parent Services Child Care and CalWORKs).¹ The program also provides logistical support by helping families and child care providers and offering participating providers trauma-informed training to help them navigate caring for children who have experienced a family disruption.

Figure 1. Child Care Arrangements for Children in California's Emergency Child Care Bridge Program



Note: Total Children= 2522; Source: CCB-18 Emergency Child Care for Foster Children Bridge Program Quarterly Reports for Fiscal Year 2025-26; <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/research-and-data/calworks-data-tables/ccb18>

— DATA ON PREVALENCE OF HBCC FOR CHILDREN IN CALIFORNIA'S EMERGENCY CHILD CARE BRIDGE PROGRAM

Between July and December 2025, the Bridge program served an average of 1,861 families and 2,522 children, with an average of 231 first-time voucher users entering the program each month. During this six-month period, children in families with a Bridge voucher were cared for in a variety of child care settings (see Figure 1). It is noteworthy that nearly two-thirds of children (62%) whose family received a Bridge voucher were placed in some form of HBCC which is slightly higher than the overall use of HBCC in the state. Specifically, over half of children using Bridge vouchers during this period (52%) were cared for in a licensed family child care home, and 10% were cared for by a license-exempt provider, defined as a family, friend, or neighbor caregiver. By comparison, 38% of children whose family received a Bridge voucher were cared for in a center-based child care setting.

¹ The Bridge program is available to families with children 12 years and under and youth with exceptional needs through age 21 years.



This data snapshot indicates that HBCC may fill a need among families caring for children in the California foster care system. Finding reliable and high-quality child care for children in foster care may be difficult, especially for working families who need immediate child care placements. This data snapshot suggests that families in California, where access to child care subsidies is facilitated within the foster care system, overwhelmingly use HBCC. Importantly, these data do not explain the reasons for these usage patterns, the search experiences or preferences of families, or the costs and availability of child care arrangements. Future research is needed to better understand the support that families and child care providers may need and want to ensure healthy outcomes for children in foster care. Future analyses may examine data and trends for HBCC use in other state foster care systems.

— ENDNOTES

- ⁱ Pryor, L. & Schumacher, K. (2026). California families need a variety of child care settings: Understanding key trends in enrollment for publicly funded child care. California Budget & Policy Center. <https://calbudgetcenter.org/resources/california-families-need-a-variety-of-child-care-settings/>
- ⁱⁱ Bartlett, J. D., & Smith, S. (2019). The role of early care and education in addressing early childhood trauma. *American journal of community psychology*, 64(3-4), 359-372.
- ⁱⁱⁱ California Department of Social Services (2026). CCB-18 Emergency Child Care for Foster Children Bridge Program Quarterly Reports for Fiscal Year 2025-26; <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/research-and-data/calworks-data-tables/ccb18>
- ^{iv} Children's Bureau. (2025). AFCARS Dashboard [Data set]. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. <https://acf.gov/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/afcars> [1]
- ^v Kelly, J. (2018). *Who cares: A national count of foster homes and families*. The Imprint Youth and Family News. <https://www.fostercarecapacity.com/data>
- ^{vi} Alliance for Children's Rights. (2016). *Bridging the child care gap for California's foster children*. <https://allianceforchildrensrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Bridging-the-Child-Care-Gap-New.pdf>

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