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Most in foster care are teens

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Foster care took charge of nearly 700 children between Adams and York counties in March, and a new study shows the majority of those children were teenagers.

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children released a study this month examining the state's foster-care system, which involved 19,956 children in March, as part of its Porch Light Project. The project aspires to ensure children have permanent families.

Adams County had 109 children in foster care in March, including 20.2 percent ages 16 and 17 and 19.3 percent between the ages of 13 and 15, according to the study. York County had similar results, with 24.2 percent of the 583 children in foster care in March aged 16 or 17 and 21.3 percent between the ages of 13 and 15.

The two counties' results also are comparable to those statewide. Pennsylvania had 19,956 children in foster care in March 2008. Of that group, 20.2 percent were ages 16 or 17 and 19.4 percent were between the ages of 13 and 15, according to the study.

Sara Meisenhelter, foster care program specialist for Adams County's Children and Youth Services, said she had not seen the study, but said the largest Adams County's placements occur with older youth.

Ten of the children in Adams County's foster-care system in March were in a relative's home; 78 were in a non-relative's home; one was in a group home; 15 were in an institution and five were in a trial home visit, the study showed. Adams County did not have any runaways or

children in supervised independent living or pre-adoptive homes, according to the study.

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"If family members are available and offer, we will pursue them first," Meisenhelter said. "If not, then we

do use other providers."

Judges can order children to be removed from a situation if an investigation finds the child is not safe, Meisenhelter said. Children are placed in foster care if they seriously are at risk for harm, abuse or neglect, she said.

"That's pretty much our last resort if we can't offer other services or work with the family to ensure the child's safety," Meisenhelter said.

The study showed six children in York County in March were in pre-adoptive homes; 100 were staying with relatives; 291 were with non-relatives; 106 were in group homes; 52 were in institutions; nine were in supervised independent living and 11 were in trial home visits. York County also had eight runaways, according to the study.

Between Oct. 1 and March 31, Adams County had 70 children in care for less than a year; 33 in care for one to two years and 68 in care for two or more years, according to the study. For the same time period, the study showed York County had 436 children in care for less than a year; 220 in care for one to two years and 272 in care for two or more years.

About 13 percent of children ages 10 to 12, 10 percent of children ages 13 to 15 and 35 percent of children ages 16 and 17 returned to Adams County's foster-care system within a year, according to the study.

The study also showed about 35 percent of children ages 10 to 12, 41 percent of children ages 13 to 15 and 21 percent of children ages 16 or 17 in York County returned to foster care within a year.

State Rep. Bev Mackereth said last week York County's Children and Youth Services director, Jerry Anderson, has put into place "intensive services" to try to ensure children do not return to the foster-care system. Mackereth, who will take over as York County's director of human services in December, said officials discussed the matter at a meeting last week.

"Dr. Anderson did talk about concerns about re-entry and the need to put in evidence-based programs and services so we can ensure better successes," she said. "We're well aware of the problem and the issue, and we're really looking at what can we do."

The York Daily Record contributed to this story. Contact Caitlin Heaney at cheaney@eveningsun.com.



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