

# Placing Teens in Foster Care with their Siblings in New York City

## POLICY BRIEF

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### SUMMARY

Sibling relationships are emotionally influential in childhood and over the course of a lifetime. For children in foster care, sibling relationships often provide a much-needed source of continuity and support during periods of instability. Keeping a sibling group together throughout their time in care has implications for the placement stability and permanency outcomes of the children in the sibling group. This brief uses four years of data from New York City (NYC) to examine how often siblings entering care are placed together. We found that larger sibling groups and sibling groups with at least one teen are separated more often than smaller sibling groups and those with only younger children. This has implications for removal and placement practice by NYC's Administration for Children's Services (ACS), as well as areas for future research.

### BACKGROUND

For children entering care, staying with their siblings can augment their sense of safety and well-being, as well as provide a source of organic mutual support. In families involved with child welfare, sibling relationships often take on additional importance because they can provide the support not consistently available from parents. Studies find positive associations between children in foster care placed with siblings and subsequent competence in education, occupation, housing quality, relationship quality, and civic engagement as youth emerge into adulthood.<sup>2</sup> Placing siblings in the same foster home is also associated with a significantly higher rate of family reunification.<sup>3</sup> However, not all sibling groups that enter foster care are placed together. Sibling groups are separated for many reasons, such as entering care at different times, the size of the sibling group, differences in the needs of siblings, safety concerns, and age differences amongst siblings.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Action Research thanks the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation for their support. Many thanks also to the staff at the New York City Administration for Children's Services for their contributions to this brief. Any errors, omissions, or opinions are the responsibility of the authors.

<sup>2</sup> Sabrina M. Richardson, Tuppert M. Yates (2014), Siblings in foster care: A relational path to resilience for emancipated foster youth. *Children and Youth Services Review*, Volume 47, Part 3, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Webster, D., Shlonsky, A., Shaw, T., & Brookhart, M. A. (2005). The ties that bind II: Reunification of siblings in out-of-home care using a statistical technique for examining non-independent observations. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27(7), 765-782.

Albert, V. N., & King, W. C. (2008). Survival analyses of the dynamics of sibling experiences in foster care. *Families in Society*, 89(4), 533-541.

<sup>4</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway. "Sibling Issues in Foster Care and Adoption," *Bulletin for Professionals*, January 2013, 21.

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008, for the first time, required states to make reasonable efforts to preserve sibling connections in order to receive federal funding.<sup>5</sup> The National Center for Child Practice Excellence launched a web-based toolkit that provides an overview of sibling relationships and discusses how siblings are addressed in this act.<sup>6</sup> New York State has supported the act by passing statutes requiring diligent efforts to maintain sibling connections and preserve families.

## SIBLING PLACEMENT TRENDS IN NYC

*Data Source and Methodology.* For our analysis of sibling placement trends in NYC, we used data from the Child Care Review Services (CCRS) as of December 2018. CCRS data is part of the New York State child welfare management information system and the primary source of OCFS’ reporting to the federally-required Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). We analyzed entries into foster care from FFY2015 to FFY2018 of children 18 years and younger, excluding children entering placement due to juvenile delinquency petitions. We defined “teen” as a youth who is 14 to 17 years old when they enter foster care.

Our methodology defines a sibling group as two or more children with the same case who enter foster care within 30 days of each other.<sup>7</sup> “Teen sibling group” refers to a sibling group with at least one youth aged 14 to 17, and “child sibling group” refers to a sibling group with all children in the group aged zero to 13. We examined two distinct types of sibling groups: (1) sibling groups where no member of the group was recorded as entering the Children’s Center (CC), NYC’s pre-placement facility, and (2) sibling groups where one or more members of the group were recorded to enter care at the CC. For children that initially entered the CC, we examined their first placements that were not at the CC to determine if they were placed together.

*Sibling groups entering care.* A little more than half (52%) of the children entering care from FFY2015 to FFY2018 came in alone, while the remaining children entered care as a part of a sibling group. During these four years, there were 2,831 sibling group entries. Most (60%) of the sibling group entries were pairs, one in four (25%) were in a sibling group of three, and the rest (15%) were a part of a sibling group with four or more children (see Figure 1).

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<sup>5</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway. “Sibling Issues in Foster Care and Adoption,” Bulletin for Professionals, January 2013, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Working with Siblings in Foster Care, A Web-based NCCWE Toolkit: <http://www.nccwe.org/toolkits/siblings/>

<sup>7</sup> We used a different methodology to analyze the number of sibling groups placed together than what is used in the NYC Mayor’s Management Report (MMR). NYC’s Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) worked with external consultants to develop the methodology used for the MMR many years ago. To ensure consistent measurement that allows comparisons over the several years of MMR reporting, the methodology has stayed the same.

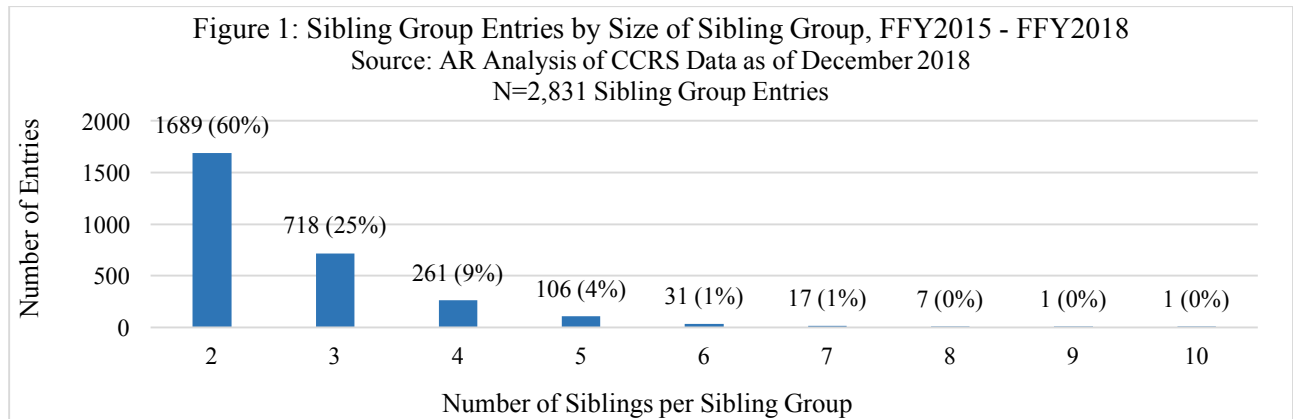


Figure 1: Sibling groups entering foster care in NYC by size of sibling group. These entries are not of unique sibling groups. Sibling groups could enter foster care more than once in these four years.

Overall, sibling groups with at least one teen aged 14 to 17 years old were a part of larger sibling groups when compared to sibling groups with only younger children. Of the teen sibling groups, a little less than half (47%) entered as a pair, 29 percent entered as a group of three, and the rest (25%) were a part of a sibling group with four or more children (see Figure 2).

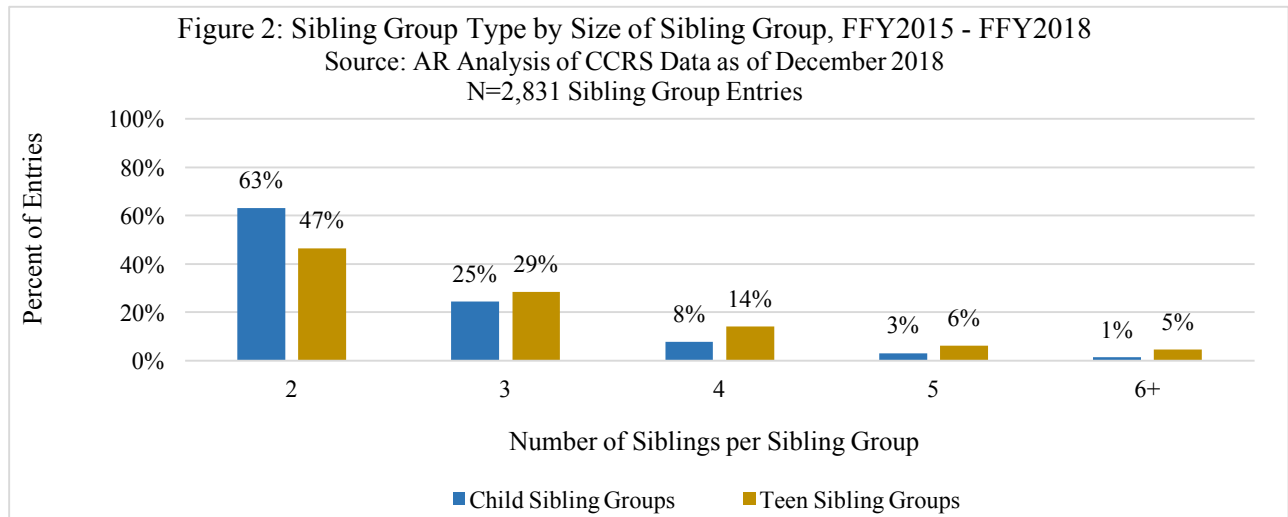


Figure 2: Sibling groups with and without at least one teen aged 14 to 17 entering foster care in NYC by size of sibling group. These entries are not of unique sibling groups. Sibling groups could enter foster care more than once in these four years.

The proportion of teen sibling groups remained stable over the four years analyzed. Overall, one in five sibling groups had at least one teen aged 14 to 17 (see Figure 3).

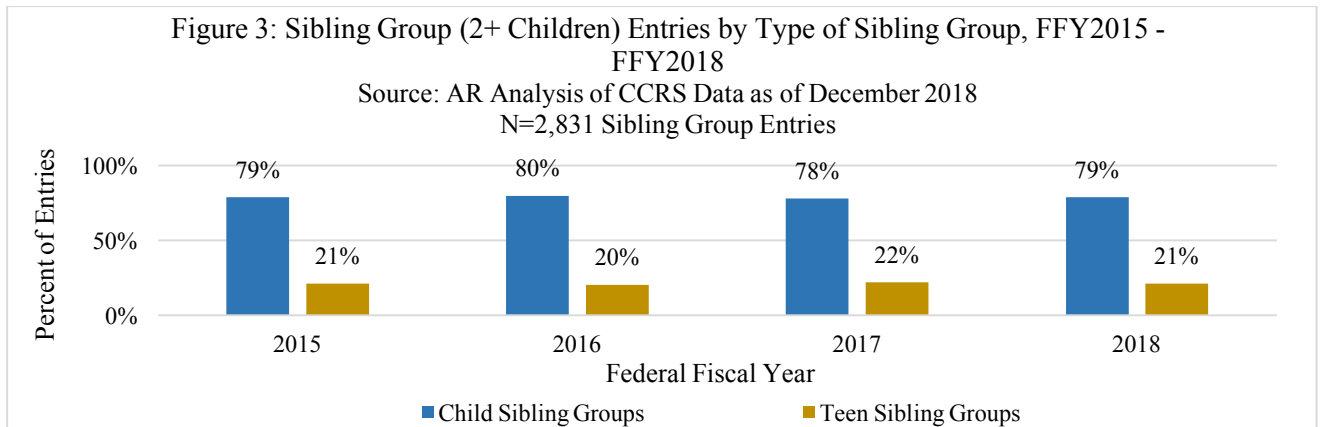


Figure 3: Sibling groups with and without at least one teen aged 14 to 17 entering foster care in NYC. These entries are not of unique sibling groups. Sibling groups could enter foster care more than once in these four years.

*Placed together.* Overall, from FFY2015 to FFY2018, 85 percent of sibling groups were placed together, while 15 percent were separated. Of those sibling groups where no member was recorded as initially spending time at the Children’s Center, the sibling placement rate increased to 88 percent, while sibling groups that did have any member initially spend time at the Children’s Center had a placed together rate of 74 percent.

Teen sibling groups were separated more often than child sibling groups. This trend remained consistent across the four years (see Figure 4). For teen sibling groups, placement trends fluctuated from a low of 67 percent of sibling groups placed together in FFY2016 to a high of 74 percent in FFY2017.

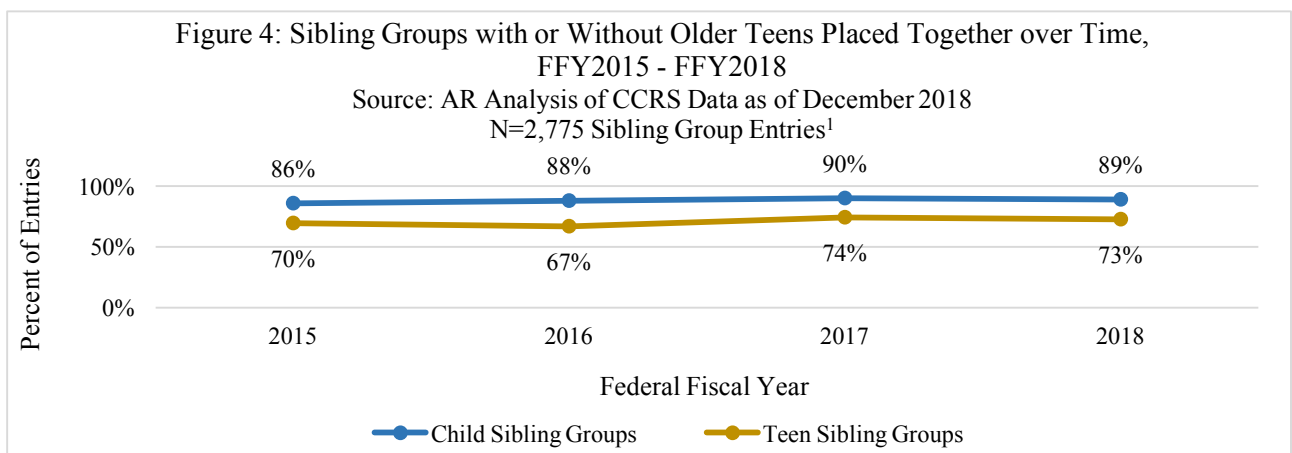


Figure 4: Sibling groups with and without at least one teen aged 14 to 17 entering foster care in NYC by percentage placed together. These entries are not of unique sibling groups. Sibling groups could enter foster care more than once in these four years. Fifty-six sibling groups were removed from the denominator.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> These 56 sibling groups had a complex series of movements into and out of the Children’s Center that prevented a determination of whether they were placed together.

Both a) teen sibling groups and b) larger siblings groups had lower rates of being placed together. Since teen sibling groups were commonly larger, we explored whether the rate of teen sibling groups placed together could be a function of being a part of larger sibling groups. What we found is that teen sibling groups still had lower rates of being placed together, even when accounting for sibling group size. For example, of the teen sibling groups of two that entered foster care, 80 percent were placed together, while 95 percent of child sibling groups of two were placed together. This disparity continues for sibling groups of three, four, and six or more (see Figure 5).

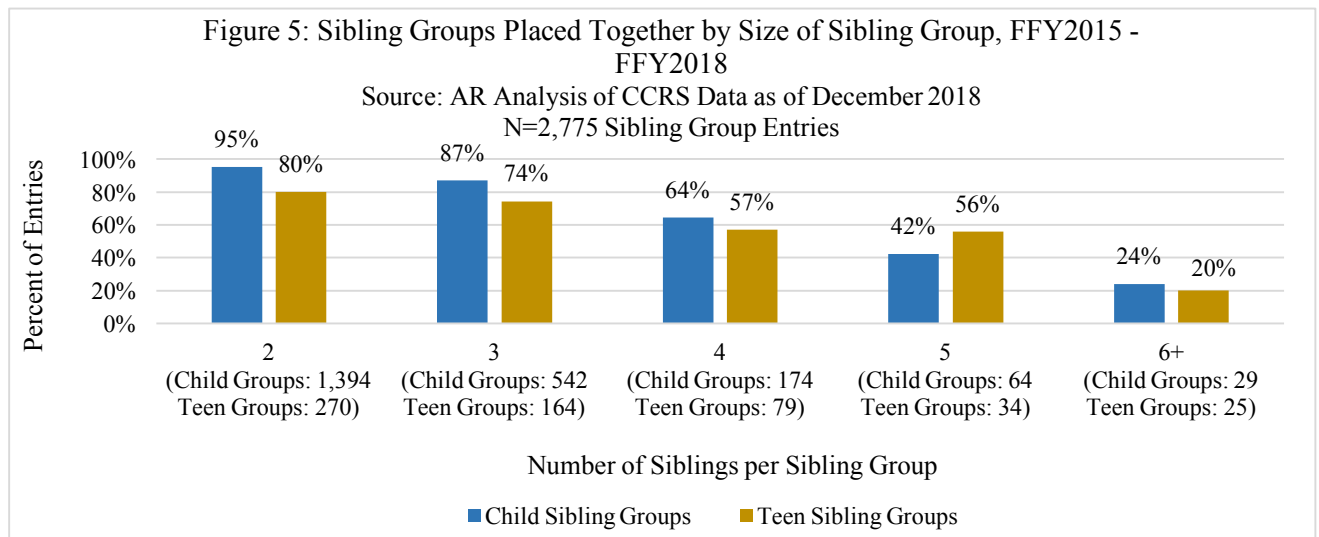


Figure 5: Sibling groups with and without at least one teen aged 14 to 17 placed together by size of sibling group. Entries are not of unique sibling groups. Sibling groups could enter foster care more than once in these four years. Fifty-six sibling groups were removed from the denominator.

**Placement types.** Over the four years examined, 50 percent of the sibling groups placed together were placed at a foster boarding home, 43 percent with kin, and 7 percent in congregate care or other (see Figure 6).

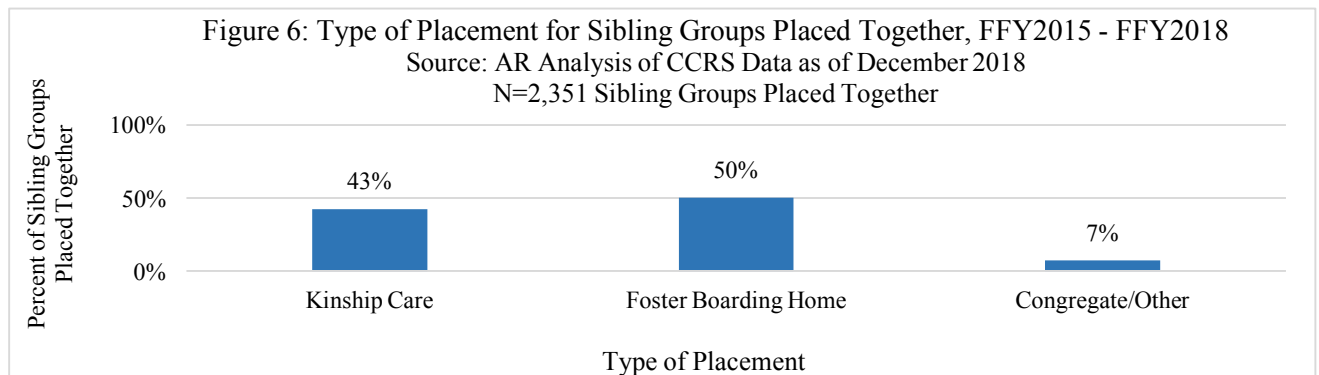


Figure 6: Sibling groups placed together by type of placement. These entries are not of unique sibling groups. Sibling groups could enter foster care more than once in these four years.

Of the teen sibling groups placed together from FFY2015 to FFY2018, about half (49%) were placed together with kin, 40 percent in a foster boarding home, and 11 percent in congregate care or other (see Figure 7). Of the child sibling groups placed together, 52 percent were placed together in a foster boarding home, followed by 41 percent with kin, and then seven percent in congregate care or other.

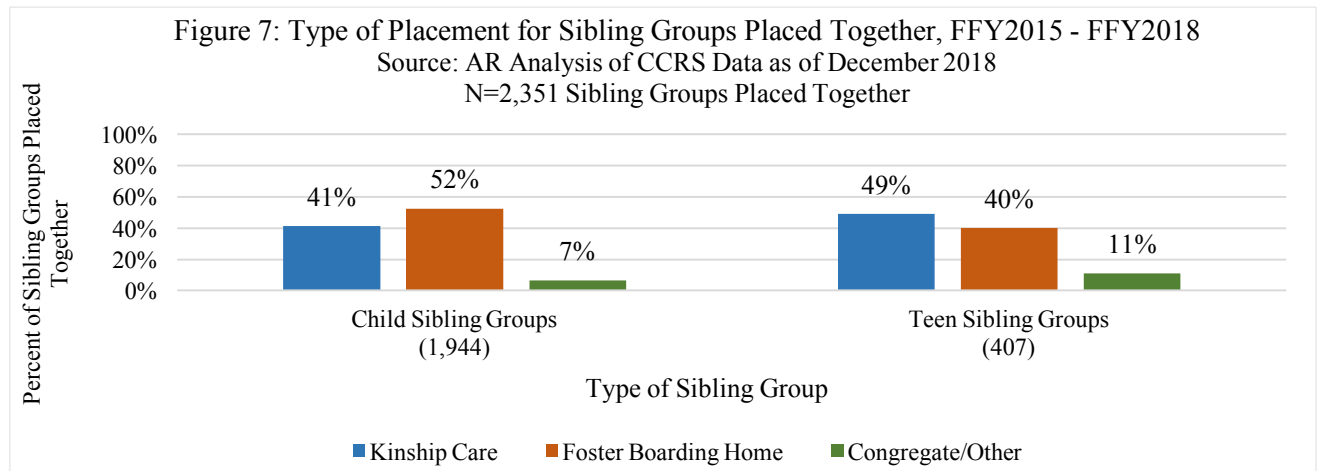


Figure 7: Sibling groups with and without teens aged 14 to 17 placed together by type of placement. These entries are not of unique sibling groups. Sibling groups could enter foster care more than once in these four years.

### CONCLUSION

That NYC places 85 percent of sibling groups together is good news for children, youth, and their families. Many of our findings are consistent with literature: Sibling groups are more likely to be placed together if they are small in size, the siblings are close in age, and the group lives in kinship care.<sup>9</sup> “Parentification”,<sup>10</sup> the process of a child adopting the responsibilities of an adult particularly during traumatic experiences, may cause teens entering foster care to take on the role of the parent for their younger siblings. That teen sibling groups are less likely to be placed together is cause for concern, as teens often feel responsible for their younger siblings, may experience trauma and loss upon separation, and may be at higher risk for behavioral issues.

These findings support the goals of two foster care initiatives ACS started in the current administration. Starting in 2016, NYC aimed to move to a foster care system that placed only one family group in each foster home.<sup>11</sup> By following this “one family group, one home” model, ACS should improve the sibling placement rate over time. NYC also set a public goal of having

<sup>9</sup> Shlonsky, A., Webster, D. & Needell, B. (2003). The ties that bind: A cross-sectional analysis of siblings in foster care. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 29(3), 27-53.

<sup>10</sup> Boszormenyi-Nagy, I., & Spark, G. M. (1973). *Invisible loyalties: Reciprocity in intergenerational family therapy*. Hagerstown: Harper & Row.

<sup>11</sup> Ross, T., Gerber, L., & Pang, Y. (2019). *Home Away From Home: Lessons for Building a One Family, One Home Foster Care System*. <https://www.actionresearch.io/news/2019/10/21/action-research-report-finds-gains-in-kinship-placement-and-foster-caregiver-recruitment>

46 percent of the foster care census placed with kin care by June 30, 2020. Since kinship care is associated with keeping teen sibling groups together, continuing to focus on raising the kin placement rate may help raise the teen sibling placement rate. By increasing the availability of family-based care, both initiatives can help reduce the number of children who spend time at the Children’s Center—which should also raise the sibling placement rate.

There are several areas where further research and analysis might produce useful insights. In other jurisdictions, the rates of sibling groups placed together are a function of the age gap between the youngest and oldest sibling, but we are not sure if that’s true in NYC. We also do not know if sibling placement rates vary by borough, community district, gender mix of the group, or the demographics of the children’s caregivers. Among sibling groups that are separated, we do not know the reasons for separation or the impact on permanency outcomes.