



Strategies to improve the ratio of homes available to children in foster care: findings from five states

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The goal of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) [A Home for Every Child](#) initiative is to have a safe and supportive home available for every child or youth in foster care. ACF measures the initiative's success by a one-to-one home-to-child ratio, meaning there are as many foster homes available as there are children in foster care. In 2025, the national ratio was 57 foster homes for every 100 children in care.¹ This brief presents findings across five states with some of the best baseline home-to-child ratios (based on available data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and The Imprint's *Who Cares: A National Count of Foster Homes and Families*), highlighting themes in states' strategies, areas of progress, and challenges. This brief also discusses opportunities for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to help states meet the goal of A Home for Every Child. Separate case studies of each state are also available at: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/home-every-child-case-studies>.

KEY POINTS

- ACF's A Home for Every Child initiative aims to ensure that every child and youth in foster care has access to a safe and supportive home by improving the ratio of available foster homes to children in care. States can pursue this goal by increasing placement capacity, preventing unnecessary entries into care, and promoting timely permanency.
- The five case study states (Idaho, Oregon, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Vermont) expanded their placement capacity by identifying relatives, fictive kin, and other trusted adults before recruiting new foster families and by using locally tailored recruitment and streamlined licensing approaches to make it easier for families to become foster parents.
- States sought to reduce unnecessary foster care entries by strengthening decision making about removal, improving coordination with other public systems, and connecting families to voluntary services such as home visiting and economic self-sufficiency services before crises escalated.
- States reported efforts to improve reunification and permanency through simplified case plans, enhanced family supports, increased monitoring of progress, and the use of data to identify children and families that could benefit from earlier intervention.
- States highlighted strong partnerships, foster parent support and retention efforts, and increased use of data and continuous quality improvement processes as important contributors to improving their home-to-child ratios.
- Despite their progress, states continue to face challenges, including limitations in data and analytic capacity, difficulty in recruiting homes for youth with complex needs, and service gaps, among others. ACF has taken numerous recent steps to empower states to innovate and overcome such barriers.

BACKGROUND

In July 2026, ACF announced that all 50 states; Washington, DC; and Puerto Rico had signed on to the A Home for Every Child initiative, publicly committing to the goal of making sure that every child and youth in foster care has access to a safe and supportive home.² To learn about strategies states have used thus far to increase the availability of foster homes and reduce the number of children in foster care, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) contracted with Mathematica to conduct case study interviews with staff in five states with some of the best home-to-child ratios, as calculated using [AFCARS data](#) on the number of children in care at the end of FY2024 and the number of foster homes in 2025 from The Imprint's *Who Cares* dataset (Exhibit 1). Methods for the case studies appear in Appendix A.

Exhibit 1. Research questions

Through the case studies, ASPE aimed to address three research questions:

1. What strategies or policies are currently being used or have been used by states with the highest baseline home-to-child ratios to increase the availability of foster homes?
2. What strategies or policies are currently being used or have been used by states with the highest baseline home-to-child ratios to reduce the number of children in foster care?
3. What challenges or lessons learned have states experienced in implementing strategies or policies to increase their home-to-child ratio? ▲

PARTICIPATING STATES

Five states—Idaho, Oregon, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Vermont—participated in the case studies (Exhibit 2). These states included the two with the top baseline home-to-child ratios in the country (Idaho and Vermont) and three with ratios that improved from 2020 to 2025 (Idaho, Oregon, and Oklahoma).³ As of 2025, South Carolina's home-to-child ratio was above the national average and among the highest in the southern U.S.³ States also represented a range of geographic locations and varied in size from fewer than 1,000 children in care (Vermont) to more than 6,000 (Oklahoma).⁴

STRATEGIES USED BY STATES WITH SOME OF THE BEST HOME-TO-CHILD RATIOS

This section describes the cross-cutting themes among the strategies states used to increase availability of foster homes and reduce the number of children in care. Details about each state's strategies appear in individual case studies that accompany this brief.

Recruiting foster parents

States described success using localized strategies to recruit foster parents (Exhibit 3). For example, Oregon and Idaho employ staff in each region who develop local partnerships and host events to recruit and retain foster parents. Oklahoma conducts a monthly gap analysis at the zip code level to understand the characteristics and needs of children and youth in care and assess whether there are available homes for them. The state shares results of the analysis with its 14 regional contracted child welfare providers to help tailor foster home recruitment.

Exhibit 2. Map of states participating in the A Home for Every Child case studies^{1,3,4}

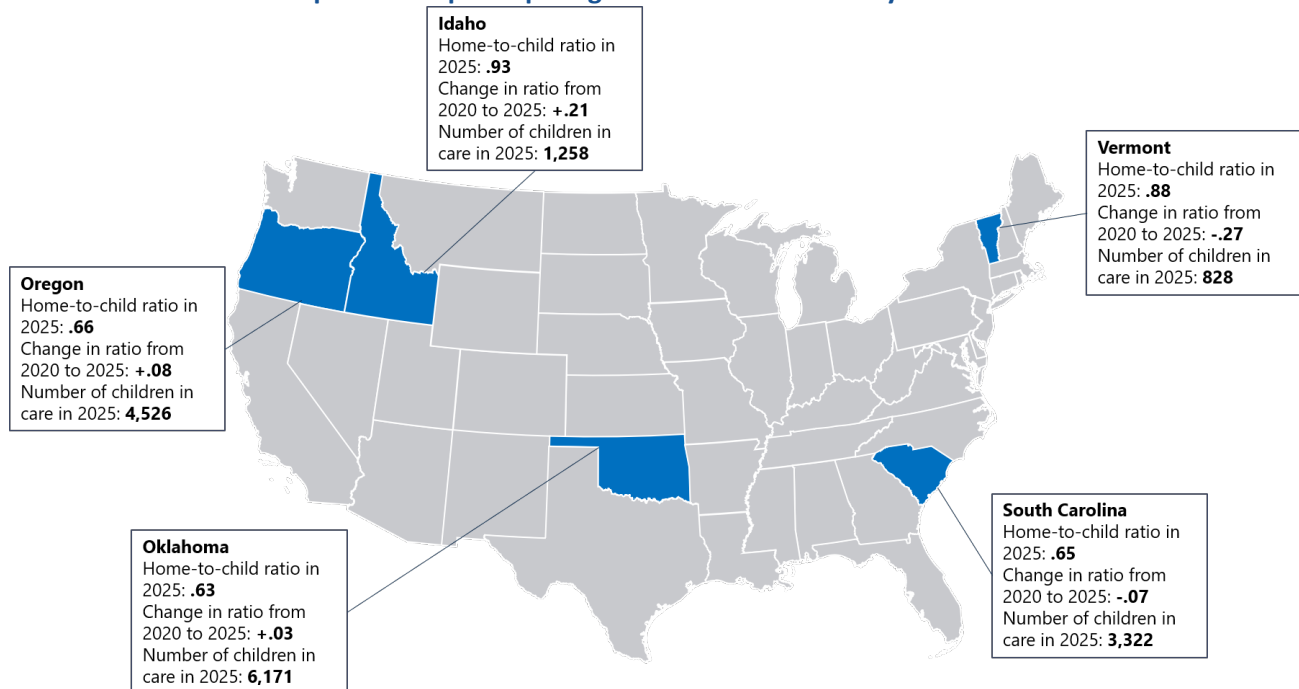


Exhibit 3. Local child welfare staff leading foster parent recruitment and retention

Oregon employs full-time staff (referred to as resource family recruitment and retention champions) in all 16 districts in the state. Oregon created the program in 2020 as a locally driven strategy to improve foster parent recruitment and retention. Champions develop data-informed recruitment goals for the district, tailor community outreach and marketing to local placement needs, respond to inquiries from prospective foster parents, and help prospective families with application and licensing.

Vermont's local resource coordinators assess local foster and respite needs, recruit caregivers in response to those needs, help identify and assess relatives and other natural supports, ensure that caregivers participate in required trainings, help match children and youth with suitable caregivers, and provide ongoing support to caregivers through in-person visits and regular communication.

States also reported focusing on identifying relatives, fictive kin,ⁱ and other trusted adults to expand placement options for children and youth in care. Three states highlighted their family-finding efforts. For example, Idaho has a dedicated team to identify relatives and other people already known to a family when a child comes into care before seeking a new foster home for the child. By creating the team, Idaho intended to standardize ownership and strengthen accountability for the family-finding process. Vermont uses eco-mapping and genograms to identify existing family connections, including fictive kin. Two states reported broadening their definitions of who could qualify as kin. For example, South Carolina broadened kinship eligibility to include fictive kin. Oregon created a state program and streamlined certification requirements to encourage more kin—including fictive kin—to become licensed foster parents.

ⁱ Fictive kin refers to adults who have a close social relationship with a child but do not have biological or marital ties, such as godparents, close family friends, neighbors, or teachers.

Updating foster home licensure and approval

All five states reported efforts to reduce administrative burden and make the licensing process for prospective foster parents easier to navigate. South Carolina and Idaho reported digitizing their application and licensing processes so they were easier for prospective parents to complete. South Carolina noted that the portal they created also has made it easier for case workers to identify and address delays in approval. Three states noted efforts to make the licensing and approval process more flexible and streamlined. For example, Oregon allows prospective foster parents to complete their home study before finishing all required training, while Vermont relaxed rules requiring extensive upfront documentation for approval.

States also noted the need to balance streamlining approval and training processes with maintaining core safety protections. Oregon, South Carolina, and Vermont addressed known barriers to licensing kin caregivers, by updating standards that prevented relatives from becoming approved foster parents, but were not considered safety risks, like bedroom requirements. Additionally, Idaho and Oklahoma reduced upfront training burdens. Rather than requiring extensive training for all foster parents, Idaho reduced the length of its basic foster training by more than half and made it self-paced, while requiring additional training modules depending on the needs of the children being fostered. Oklahoma shortened its training for kinship caregivers and made it possible for them to be approved before fully completing the training.

Supporting and retaining foster parents

To retain foster parents, four states emphasized the importance of gathering formal feedback and responding to foster parents' concerns. Idaho, Oklahoma, and Vermont reported regularly surveying foster parents. In Idaho, senior child welfare staff follow up individually with foster parents to address their negative experiences. Oklahoma convenes meetings of staff called "barrier busters" to address challenges identified in survey responses. Oregon and Oklahoma also engage foster parents through advisory groups.

State staff highlighted the importance of relationships and resources for retaining foster parents. Four states explicitly referenced supports available to relative and non-relative foster parents, including access to helplines, clinicians, and case managers. Two states noted the importance of financial assistance. Vermont, for example, equalized reimbursement rates for relative and non-relative foster parents and makes additional adjustments based on children's medical or developmental needs. Oklahoma's Enhanced Foster Care model provides additional case management, training, support from treatment providers, and supplemental funding to foster parents serving children with more complex needs.

Three states reported dedicated efforts to provide peer support to foster parents. For example, Idaho and Oklahoma have offered formal peer mentoring programs that paired experienced foster parents with new ones. Oklahoma staff reported that its mentoring program improved foster parent retention in the state. In Oregon, regional recruitment and retention champions connect newly certified foster parents with experienced ones for informal mentoring. Oregon also operates an evidence-based program for foster parents, Keeping Foster and Kin Parents Supported and Trained (KEEP), that offers peer support groups.

Preventing entry into the foster care system

All states reported making services available to families to reduce unnecessary or more extensive child welfare involvement. For example, Oklahoma highlighted home visiting—which intends to improve parenting skills—as a centerpiece of its primary prevention strategy. Idaho and Vermont offer voluntary case management and other services to families whose reports were screened out because they did not meet criteria for further investigation, while Oregon is piloting proactive support to screened-out families through referrals to agency staff or community-based organizations. Based on an analysis of patterns in teen foster care entry due to

behavioral concerns, South Carolina implements a prevention program, Teaming for Teens, in three counties. The program brings families, community partners, and service providers together to address behavioral and family needs. Exhibit 4 shows how some states coordinated public services to prevent child welfare involvement.

Exhibit 4. Coordinating public services to prevent child welfare involvement

Oregon uses a cross-program family preservation strategy that pairs child welfare services with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families services to address safety concerns and families' economic needs before removal becomes necessary. Child welfare staff focus on managing safety concerns, and self-sufficiency staff connect families to services such as job search assistance.

South Carolina's child welfare and child support divisions work together to reduce financial barriers that can contribute to foster care re-entry. Staff found that some families accrued substantial child support debt during or after involvement with foster care and that the debt could contribute to housing instability after reunification. The child welfare division partners with the child support division to forgive child support debt for families who are unable to pay, with the goal of supporting family stability and preventing children from reentering care.

Vermont uses a cross-agency "system of care" framework to coordinate services for children and youth with complex needs. Through the Vermont State System of Care Plan, the child welfare agency works with partners in education, juvenile justice, and mental health. These partners hold local, coordinated service-planning meetings to review a child's strengths and needs, develop a shared service plan, and identify which agencies can provide or coordinate supports. Families participate directly in these meetings, making the approach collaborative and family-centered rather than agency-driven.

Four states reported strengthening existing practices and tools to reduce unnecessary child welfare involvement. For example, South Carolina and Idaho provide additional training and guidance for mandated reporters to help them better distinguish between families who could benefit from social services and situations with serious safety concerns. Idaho, Vermont, and Oklahoma provide guidance, training, and coaching to child welfare staff to make more consistent decisions about removal. Idaho, for example, reported using predictive analytics to determine which reports scored higher on measures of risk and were therefore in need of investigation (Exhibit 5). Vermont changed how it applied its structured decision-making risk assessment tool so that certain risk scores prompted workers to explore whether the family could benefit from voluntary services instead of automatically opening a family support case.

Exhibit 5. Using predictive analytics to improve the home-to-child ratio

Idaho uses predictive risk assessment at the screening stage to help determine whether a report warranted a higher level of investigation. The goal was to better distinguish families facing serious safety risks from those who may not require intensive child welfare intervention, allowing the state to use investigative resources more efficiently.

Oklahoma combined case reviews and predictive analytics with analysis of placement data to identify children at risk of delayed permanency or placement instability and then target supports. The state examines indicators to flag situations for which intervention may be necessary; examples of indicators include the reason for removal, length of time in care, and number of caseworkers involved in a case.

Promoting permanency and placement stability

All five states noted efforts to improve reunification outcomes. Oklahoma and Oregon simplified service plans to make them easier for families to understand and complete. Oregon, Vermont, and South Carolina provide additional services to families, including flexible visitation and supports to address barriers to reunification such as substance misuse. South Carolina noted that it continues services for families after children return home. In addition to using data to identify families more likely to reunify, Idaho has increased the frequency of reviews for families to help them stay on track with their reunification goals.

Two states reported using case-level data to identify factors associated with delays or instability and target intervention accordingly (Exhibit 5). Oklahoma, for example, reviews cases and tracks adverse placements to identify and address factors related to placement instability. Idaho analyzed early reunification indicators and shared the information with judicial partners to help identify families more likely to reunify. After these efforts, Idaho reported that it was able to reduce the average time from removal to reunification by about three months.

STATE PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES IN ACHIEVING A HOME FOR EVERY CHILD

Progress for states

States reported several areas that have facilitated progress in advancing the goals of ACF's A Home for Every Child initiative. Interviewees described improvements in placement processes, including more systematic efforts to identify relatives, fictive kin, and other trusted adults as potential caregivers as well as more locally tailored recruitment strategies and streamlined licensing processes for foster families. They also identified progress in taking steps to prevent unnecessary foster care entries through strengthened removal decision making; improved coordination across public systems; and connections to voluntary services, such as home visiting or economic stability services.

States also reported strengthening efforts to support reunification and permanency. These included simplifying case plans, expanding supports for children and families, more closely monitoring progress toward permanency, and using data to identify opportunities for earlier intervention. Across states, interviewees emphasized that strong partnerships, expanded foster parent support and retention efforts, and increased use of data and continuous quality improvement processes contributed to progress in increasing the availability and stability of family-based placements for children and youth in foster care. Exhibit 6 describes how staff emphasized the importance of partnerships and coordination to improve their home-to-child ratios.

Challenges and opportunities for states

Despite these successes, states reported ongoing challenges related to data use, service gaps, funding, administrative requirements, and workforce retention that could hinder efforts to improve the home-to-child ratio. The content below summarizes these challenges and describes potential opportunities to address them, based on recent publications and actions from ACF.

States noted inconsistent use of data and some mismatch in staff skills to support efforts to improve child welfare outcomes. Although states reported increased use of data to identify recruitment gaps, placement needs, and permanency trends, data limitations and insufficient analytic expertise/capacity have hindered implementation and evaluation. Interviewees in one state, for example, noted that they lack staff capacity to review, analyze, and interpret available data. Interviewees in another state reported a mismatch in the available staff with necessary quality assurance and continuous quality improvement expertise to provide continuous case review, coaching, and implementation support. Interviewees in a third state reported that their child welfare data system is outdated, making it difficult to track prevention outcomes or use data to improve practice.

- **Opportunities:** Children’s Bureau initiatives, such as the Child Welfare Technology Incubator, have taken proactive steps to support states in modernizing their child welfare information systems in alignment with Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System requirements and principles, such as modular design.^{5,6}

Exhibit 6. How child welfare agencies improved communication and coordination

With other state agencies. States reported working with education, economic assistance, juvenile justice, law enforcement, court, behavioral health, and other public agencies to support children and families. These partnerships helped connect families to services, coordinate decision making, and address needs that extended beyond the child welfare system. In particular, states noted the importance of working with courts and judicial partners to promote a shared understanding of risk and how to support families involved with the child welfare system.

With community- and faith-based partners. States viewed these partners as essential in providing material support to foster families and preventing families’ deeper involvement in the child welfare system. The knowledge and trust that organizations built in their communities have made them cornerstones of states’ locally driven foster parent recruitment efforts. Some states noted the importance of churches and faith-based organizations for identifying and supporting foster parents.

Between state and local child welfare offices. States described mechanisms for coordinating work across state, regional, and local levels of the child welfare agencies. Regular communication, feedback channels, and recurring meetings have helped partners share information, identify challenges, and connect leaders with frontline staff. In particular, states described regional implementation teams that bring together state and regional child welfare staff, as well as regional partners, to review data and collaboratively address challenges.

With families and people with lived experience. States highlighted the importance of relationships with families and foster parents and noted efforts to engage youth, birth parents, and caregivers through surveys, case management interactions, and advisory groups. These efforts have created opportunities for people with lived experience to inform agency practices, provide feedback, and support other families and caregivers through peer connections and shared experiences.

States noted ongoing challenges with foster parent recruitment and support. In particular, states described challenges identifying foster parents for teenagers, sibling groups, and children with behavioral health needs. When agencies offered less support to foster parents caring for children with complex needs, interviewees noted more placement disruption, lower foster parent retention, and difficulty recruiting other foster parents.

- **Opportunities:** As a part of ACF’s A Home for Every Child initiative, ACF gave states the opportunity to revise their Program Improvement Plans that monitor child welfare state performance indicators in order to try a different and more focused approach to performance management. States have risen to the challenge; for example, caregiver recruitment and retention appear in 97 percent of the revised PIPs, indicating that new lessons learned may emerge from state practices.⁷

Service gaps hindered states’ efforts. According to interviewees across states, shortages in behavioral health and crisis response services also have made it more challenging to identify and sustain foster homes able to support children with complex needs. One state reported shortages of adolescent-focused, adoption-competent crisis and mental health services, which could deter families from accepting children with greater behavioral health needs and challenge retention. Another state described long mental health waitlists and clinician turnover, and limited ability to address needs such as housing before removal. One state noted that these types of supports were outside the child welfare agency’s control and had become less available in recent years. Child care shortages, particularly in rural areas, could also prevent prospective foster parents from opening their homes or existing foster parents from accepting additional children.

- **Opportunities:** ACF increased state flexibility, clarifying guidance about how states can use Title IV-E prevention funds for mental health and substance use services and in-home parenting programs.⁸

Nearly all states reported that funding limited prevention, recruitment, and retention activities. One state reported that a limited number of interventions are approved for Title IV-E reimbursement, especially for interventions used with individuals instead of families. Two states described challenges related to prevention services funding, characterizing the opportunity as promising but complex and difficult to secure. One state reported that its total foster parent reimbursement rates have not substantially increased since 2018 or been able to keep pace with inflation, and state budget shortfalls have led to ending retention supports for foster parents, such as mentoring and foster parent respite care programs.

- **Opportunities:** To address prevention, ACF reduced the burden on states by expediting the approval of eligible prevention services under Title IV-E.⁹ ACF also supported states in including measures of caregiver recruitment and retention in 97 percent of their revised PIPs, indicating that states may be interested in identifying and implementing effective practices that can further be leveraged to navigate around state budgetary challenges.¹⁰

Interviewees cited state requirements and processes as barriers to improvement. Participants noted that state-level requirements and administrative processes have slowed implementation of strategies, limited local-level flexibility, and made it difficult for states and local partners to respond quickly to the needs of children and families. To help address these barriers, Oklahoma reported reviewing foster family approval and training requirements, while Vermont has established working groups to address recurring barriers related to reimbursement, transportation, Medicaid, and vouchers.

- **Opportunities:** ACF has published updated National Model Foster Family Home Licensing Standards, including kin-specific licensing standards, to encourage Title IV-E agencies to streamline their standards and remove process barriers.¹¹ ACF has also worked to improve regulatory efficiency by reducing sub-regulatory guidance found to be burdensome or duplicative so states have more capacity to focus on innovation and improvement.¹²

Workforce and organizational capacity constrained recruitment, prevention, and permanency strategies. One state cited staff turnover, regional shortages, private sector competition, low pay, demanding work, and travel for out-of-region placements as barriers to staffing child welfare work. Another state's staffing constraints have increased reliance on contracted child placing agencies for non-kin recruitment. A third state described a less experienced workforce that requires ongoing training. An unstable and inexperienced child welfare workforce can contribute to more placement disruptions, more time spent in foster care, and other adverse child welfare outcomes.¹³

- **Opportunities:** ACF's Child Welfare Workforce Study and the National Governors Association have highlighted priorities such as reducing worker burnout and supporting worker well-being.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

The five states participating in the A Home for Every Child case studies provide key insights into what it takes to improve the ratio of homes available to children in foster care. Across states, common strategies included identifying relatives, fictive kin, and other trusted adults as placement resources; using locally tailored recruitment approaches; reducing barriers to foster parent licensing and approval; providing meaningful supports to foster families; and strengthening prevention, placement stability, and permanency efforts. States also emphasized the importance of partnerships with courts, community organizations, service providers, and people with lived experience as well as the use of data and continuous quality improvement processes to guide decision making and implementation. At the same time, states reported ongoing challenges related to workforce capacity, funding constraints, service gaps, placement needs for children with complex behavioral health needs, and sustaining consistent implementation across regions and partners.

Although no single strategy is sufficient on its own, the experiences of these states demonstrate that improving the home-to-child ratio requires coordinated efforts across the child welfare continuum, from prevention and family support to placement stability and timely permanency. Together, these findings highlight a range of approaches that may help states strengthen foster care capacity and advance the goal of ensuring that every child and youth who needs foster care has access to a safe, supportive, and appropriate home.

APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

Site selection

To identify states to participate in the case studies, the study team compiled a list of 14 states that had the highest home-to-child ratios in 2025³. Next, the study team examined trends in states' ratios from 2020 to 2025; publicly available information about factors contributing to their ratios; and key state features, including the number of children in care, the region of the country, and whether the state's child welfare system was state or county administered. Of the 14 states, ASPE selected eight with variation in their key features and high or improving ratios.ⁱⁱ The study team conducted outreach to all eight states. The five states described in this summary are the first five that agreed to participate.

Case studies

The study team conducted 60-to-90-minute semi-structured interviews with representatives from the five states in July and August 2026. For each state, a two-person study team conducted one to four interviews with key child welfare stakeholders (such as prevention and permanency directors and foster parent recruitment coordinators) using discussion protocols tailored to each state and topic area. The interview topics included strategies states have used to increase the number of foster homes (such as recruitment, licensing, and providing retention supports to placements) and reduce the number of children in care (such as prevention interventions, family engagement, screening, investigation, removal processes, and permanency); data use; successes, challenges, and lessons learned; and local adaptation of statewide initiatives. In total, the team spoke with 29 key informants across 12 interviews.

The team recorded and transcribed interviews using Microsoft Teams. After data collection, the team de-identified, cleaned, and synthesized notes into a single state-level summary organized by interview topic. The team piloted the use of Mathematica's Enterprise version of ChatGPT for cleaning and synthesizing de-identified notes, but it was not more efficient than a manual process. The team used the manually developed state-level summary to populate an approved case study brief template with details about the state's strategies.

Cross-site analysis

To develop the cross-site analysis, the study team brainstormed and grouped key insights into emerging themes in a meeting using Mural, a virtual whiteboard tool. The study team also compiled the case study summaries into a single summary spreadsheet using ChatGPT. The team used the emerging themes documented in Mural and the summary spreadsheet developed by ChatGPT to identify insights and cross-cutting themes to address the study's research questions. The study team consulted interview notes and the case study summaries to confirm details and check the accuracy of the group brainstorm and AI-generated summary. The team also used ChatGPT to query case study summaries for specific details and then reviewed the relevant case study summary to confirm the ChatGPT output.

ⁱⁱ Although the eight states included a mix of state- and county-administered child welfare systems, all five that ultimately agreed to participate were state administered.

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