



Knowing the Numbers: Accessing and Using Child Welfare Data

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Introduction

Data can be an incredibly powerful tool for child welfare advocates, policymakers, and program administrators in their work to improve the lives of vulnerable children and families. From identifying target population characteristics and needs, to documenting program or service outcomes, to assessing a policy's effect, using data to inform efforts to help children and families thrive is critical. Data can play an invaluable role in helping to highlight the need for a program, service, or policy, or to communicate about how a particular population is faring. They provide objective evidence to “make the case.”

Although some may find data intimidating, or believe them to be primarily in the purview of researchers, many available resources make data accessible to individuals with a wide range of experiences and expertise. In addition to public-use datasets with case-level records available for customized analyses, a wealth of resources present national and state-specific data already summarized or tabulated. Further, user-friendly tools exist to help make sense of and communicate data about children currently or previously involved in the child welfare system across a variety of populations and topics.

This brief provides an overview of data sources that are useful to the child welfare community specifically and answers the following questions: What are the major data sources? What can I do with the data/what can they tell me? How do I access them (both the public-use datasets with child-level information, as well as summary data)?

First, we describe federal data sources specifically related to children and youth involved with the child welfare system:

- Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS)
- National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS)
- National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW)
- National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD)

Then we summarize other federal datasets that, although not focused exclusively on the child welfare population, can provide key contextual information about the broader population of children, families, or communities:

- American Community Survey (ACS)
- National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH)
- National Survey of Adoptive Parents (NSAP)
- National Survey of Children in Non-parental Care (NSCNC)

We also describe two additional resources for child welfare data: the Multistate Foster Care Data Archive and an example of a state resource, the California Child Welfare Indicators Project. Finally, for an illustration of how data can be used by child welfare advocates, we present case-study examples from Pennsylvania.

Federal Sources for Child Welfare Data

Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System

What is it? AFCARS includes information on all children in foster care and children who have been adopted through state child welfare agencies. States are federally mandated to submit data to AFCARS, and the number of states that submit data, particularly following the implementation of fiscal penalties for not submitting data beginning in 1998, has been increasing over time, as has the quality of the data. AFCARS includes information on the following topics (among others):

- Demographic information on children and caretakers (including foster and adoptive parents)
- Removal and discharge reasons
- Dates of entry into care and exit from care
- Placement settings

Separate data files are available for each fiscal year. Records do not currently include unique identifiers that enable linkages across years. Two files for each fiscal year are available:

1. Foster care file: one record per child who spent any time in foster care during the fiscal year
2. Adoption file: one record per child adopted in the fiscal year

Data are publicly released following the end of the fiscal year. The data are straightforward to analyze using any statistical software program. When analyzing AFCARS data, users should keep in mind that the quality of the data depends on whether data are reliably and consistently entered into each state's administrative data system; data quality varies across states. The meaning of specific data elements can also vary from state to

state due to differing legal definitions, policies, and practices. These caveats apply to any administrative data sources, including NCANDS data (described later).

What can I do with the data? What can they tell me? Examples of what might be done with AFCARS data include:

- Describing your state’s current foster care population and/or identifying changes over time (e.g., ages, race, sex, special needs)
- Determining what percentage of foster children in your state are in group homes and institutions
- Assessing how long children are in foster care in your state before they are adopted
- Determining the proportion of children adopted in a given year in your state whose families receive subsidies

How do I get these data? Public-use **case-level data** are held at the [National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect](#) (NDACAN) at Cornell University and are stored as two files: “Foster Care” and “Adoption”. You can request child-level data for a particular file and particular year through NDACAN. Terms of Agreement must be signed to receive files.

Tabulated data (i.e., data that have been analyzed/summarized already) are available in:

- [The AFCARS Report](#) from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services includes national-level data on children in foster care at the end of the year, children entering care, children awaiting adoption, and children exiting foster care. See the fiscal year (FY) 2012 report [here](#).
- [The Child Welfare Outcomes Report](#) from ACF provides national and state level data. Previously, it was produced as a large book; it is now an interactive website.
- The KIDS COUNT Data Center from the Annie E. Casey Foundation includes national and state level data tabulated by Child Trends. Indicators are available on its [website](#) under “Safety and Risky Behaviors.”
- State Foster Care Fact Sheets and State Adoption Fact Sheets from the [State Child Welfare Policy Database](#)

National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System

What is it? NCANDS consists of information on child maltreatment reports to Child Protective Services (CPS) agencies from participating states. States voluntarily submit data annually to the Children’s Bureau of the ACF from their administrative data systems (unlike AFCARS, which is federally mandated), though the vast majority of states do participate. In Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2012, 51 states submitted data to NCANDS. Separate NCANDS data files are available for each FY.

NCANDS includes data on the following topics (among others):

- Demographic information about children and perpetrators
- Report sources (e.g., child daycare providers, medical personnel)
- Types of maltreatment experienced by children
- Dispositions/findings of investigations or assessments¹

- Services provided after the investigation or assessment

Two data files are available—a child file and a combined aggregate file—for each fiscal year:

1. **Child File:** contains case-level data on children who received an investigation or assessment for abuse or neglect in the report year. These are child-report combinations, so the file may include multiple records per child, for children subject to more than one report. Records are included for investigations or assessments reaching a disposition during the report year.
2. **State Level data/Combined Aggregate File:** contains aggregate, state-level data on certain measures from the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) that are not available on a child-level basis. Also includes aggregate state-level data on maltreatment reports for states that do not submit the child file.

Data are publicly released at varying times following the end of the fiscal year. Because of the complexity of the data, they are more difficult to analyze than AFCARS data. Each child may have multiple maltreatment report records, and each maltreatment report may include multiple types of abuse or neglect, each of which can have a different finding.

What can I do with the data/what can they tell me? Examples of what might be done with NCANDS data include:

- Describing your state’s population of children experiencing abuse or neglect and/or identifying changes over time (e.g., ages, race, sex)
- Determining what types of individuals are most frequently (or least frequently) reporting maltreatment
- Assessing how long CPS takes to respond to reports of maltreatment in your state
- Exploring the relationship between repeat maltreatment and service provision post-investigation/assessment in your state

How do I get these data? Public-use **case-level data** are held at NDACAN at Cornell University, stored as two files:

- **Child File:** you must apply for a user license through NDACAN. It is considered to be restricted data, so eligibility requirements are strict (more info [here](#)).
- **State Level:** you can [request state level data](#) for a particular year through NDACAN. Terms of Agreement must be signed to receive files.

Tabulated data are available in:

- The annual *Child Maltreatment* report (ACF), accessed [here](#). See the FFY 2012 report [here](#).
- The interactive [Child Welfare Outcomes Report website](#) (ACF), which also reports AFCARS data, includes national and state level NCANDS data.
- [The KIDS COUNT Data Center](#) (Annie E. Casey Foundation) includes both national and state level data tabulated by Child Trends. To find the indicators, go to “Safety and Risky Behaviors.”

National Youth in Transition Database

What is it? The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 provided states with flexible funding intended to serve youth at risk of exiting foster care without permanency, and required that states track the services received by youth as well as youth outcomes. The data system developed to meet this requirement is referred to as NYTD.

Two data files are available, a services file and an outcomes file, for each fiscal year.

1. **Services File:** based on data maintained in administrative data systems, states report on all youth – regardless of age and foster care status – receiving independent living services paid for or provided by the State agency that administers the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP). States report services received in two 6-month periods, so youth who received services in both periods have two records in the file. The file contains data on the following 14 independent living skills services:

- Independent living skills needs assessment
- Health education & risk management
- Academic support
- Family support & healthy marriage education
- Post-secondary academic support
- Mentoring
- Career preparation
- Supervised independent living
- Employment programs or vocational training
- Room & board financial assistance
- Housing education & home management training
- Education financial assistance
- Budget & financial management assistance
- Other financial assistance

2. **Outcomes File:** states are required to invite all youth who reach their 17th birthday in particular fiscal years and are in foster care for some portion of time during the 45-day period following their 17th birthday to participate in the NYTD survey. Those who respond to the survey constitute the cohort to be followed and interviewed again at ages 19 and 21. Once the cohort has been identified, states have the option of using probabilistic sampling of youth in the cohort. That is, states may interview a sub-sample of youth in the cohort, rather than all youth in the cohort, although federal guidelines specify the minimum size of the sample. Twelve states elected to use the sampling option for the 2011 cohort. Youth may or may not be in foster care at the time of the follow-up interviews at 19 and 21. A new cohort will form every three years. NYTD is newer than AFCARS or NCANDS, with the first cohort identified in 2011.

Youth are surveyed about the same outcomes at each wave of data collection. NYTD includes information on six outcomes:

- Financial self-sufficiency
- Experience with homelessness
- Educational attainment
- Positive connections with adults
- High-risk behavior
- Access to health insurance

States are expected to achieve high survey participation rates for the outcomes portion and are penalized financially (by a reduction on their CFCIP allotment of 1 to 5 percent) by not meeting reporting standards. At

least 80 percent of youth in foster care and at least 60 percent of youth who have left foster care must be surveyed.

What can I do with the data? What can they tell me? Examples of what might be done with NYTD data include:

- Describing your state’s population of youth receiving independent living services (e.g., age, sex, race)
- Understanding the frequency of service provision for particular services in your state, and to particular populations
- Reporting on the employment status of former foster youth in your state
- Exploring the relationship between outcomes and independent living services (e.g., homelessness and receipt of housing education and home management services)

How do I get these data? Public-use **case-level data** are held at [NDACAN](#) at Cornell University, stored as two files. You can request data for a particular file (Services or Outcomes) and a particular year through NDACAN. Terms of Agreement must be signed to receive files.

Tabulated data are available in:

- Annual NYTD Research Briefs (ACF) (national):
 - [FY 2011 \(Services & Outcomes\)](#)
 - [FY 2012 \(Services only\)](#)
- Examples of state-specific analyses and reports:
 - [South Carolina](#)
 - [Oregon](#)

National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being

What is it? NSCAW is a nationally-representative, longitudinal survey on children who have been involved with the child welfare system due to maltreatment reports. Federally-mandated, it is funded by ACF and administered by a variety of organizations. The survey includes multiple respondents and data sources (children, parents and other caregivers, caseworkers, teachers, and administrative data).

Topics include:

- Characteristics of children and families who come to the attention of child welfare systems
- Experiences of children and families, including services received, while involved with the child welfare system
- Outcomes (short- and long-term) for these children

Two cohorts of children, referred to as NSCAW I and II, have been followed longitudinally.

- *NSCAW I*: NSCAW I includes two samples, a CPS sample and a long-term foster care sample. Both samples were followed from 1999/2000 to 2007, with five waves of data collection. It is possible to generate state estimates but only with the restricted use version of the data, which has stringent access requirements.
 - CPS Sample: the CPS sample includes 5,501 children age 0 to 14 in contact with the child welfare system between October of 1999 and January of 2000 in 97 counties. The children may or may not have entered foster care.

- Long-term Foster Care Sample: In order to ensure a sufficient sample size of children in foster care, the NSCAW also included a sample of 727 children who had been in foster care for at least a year at baseline (1999/2000).
- *NSCAW II*: NSCAW II includes 5,873 children age 0 to 17.5 sampled from child welfare investigations closed between February 2008 and April 2009 in 83 counties nationwide. High-risk groups (infants, children in out-of-home placement) were over-sampled to allow for subgroup analyses. The cohort includes substantiated (i.e., it was determined that child experienced maltreatment) and unsubstantiated (i.e., the level of evidence was not sufficient to determine that maltreatment had occurred) investigations of abuse or neglect, as well as children and families who did and did not receive services. Wave 2 data collection ended 2011. Unlike NSCAW I, state-level estimates are not possible with NSCAW II.

Analyzing the NSCAW data can be challenging due to the complex sampling methodology, longitudinal nature, multiple data sources, and vast array of variables.

What can I do with the data? What can they tell me? Examples of what might be done with NSCAW data include answering:

- What paths do children follow into and through the child welfare system?
- What factors affect investigation, services, placements, and length of involvement?
- What are the long- and short-term outcomes for children and families in the child welfare system in terms of safety, well-being, and permanence?

How do I get these data? Public-use **case-level data** are held at NDACAN at Cornell University, stored as two files:

- General Use files have identifying information and geographic data removed.
- Restricted Use files have geographic data included and fewer variables recoded.
- Requests for both files can be made through [NDACAN](#), but restrictions exist.

Because of the richness of the data, **tabulated data** have been used in multivariate analyses to address complex research questions as well as to provide basic descriptive tabulations. [Dozens of reports and research briefs](#), highlighting key data and findings, have been produced on a variety of topics, such as:

- Adverse childhood experiences
- Use of psychotropic medications
- Kinship caregivers
- Risk of long-term foster care
- Special health care needs
- Transition to adulthood

Other Federal Data Sources

In addition to the data sources described above, several data sources based on nationally representative data collected by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) may be useful. These include the NSCH, as well as one-time “add on” survey modules to the NSCH: the NSAP and the NSCNC. We briefly describe each of these below, including links to additional information. We also provide a short summary of ACS that may be particularly relevant to child welfare professionals.

National Survey of Children’s Health

The NSCH collects information about children’s health and well-being, demographic characteristics, and about their family, including socio-economic characteristics. The public-use data include state identifiers, so users can tabulate data that are representative of their state’s population. The NSCH uses the sampling frame of the National Immunization Survey, which contacts over a million households annually. It is a repeated cross-sectional survey, meaning that it does not track the same children longitudinally. Rather, it is designed to represent the population of children younger than age 18 at each fielding. In each household, a parent or guardian knowledgeable about a randomly selected child’s health answered the survey questions. The NSCH included information about more than 95,000 focal children in 2011-12.

- Further information on the data is available at the NCHS [website](#).
- Tabulations of the data, including state-level estimates, can be found [here](#).

National Survey of Adoptive Parents

The NSAP, a follow-on module to the 2007 NSCH, yielded the first nationally representative data on the population of adopted children under age 18. If the focal child in the NSCH was adopted, an adoptive parent of the child was asked to participate in the NSAP, a 40-minute telephone survey. NSAP interviews were carried out between April 2007 and June 2008 regarding approximately 2,000 children. Adopted children who were also living with a biological parent, whose adoptions were assumed to be primarily step-parent adoptions, were excluded from the NSAP. State identifiers are not available on the public-use version of the NSAP.

Further information on the data is available at the NCHS [website](#). Tabulations of the data, which include variables merged on from the NSCH, can be found [here](#).

National Survey of Children in Non-parental Care

The NSCNC is an add-on module to the NSCH. If the focal child in the 2011-12 NSCH was living in a household with no adoptive or biological parent, a caregiver of the child was asked to participate in the NSCNC, a 30-minute telephone survey. NSCNC interviews were carried out between April and August 2013 regarding approximately 1,300 children. The NSCNC asked caregivers about the reasons for non-parental care, about custody arrangements, and about their and the child’s well-being, among other topics. State identifiers are not available on the public-use version of the NSAP.

Data have only recently been released, so tabulated data are not yet available. However, further information on the data may be found at the [NCHS website](#).

American Community Survey

The ACS is an ongoing survey that samples a small subset of the U.S. population. It was designed to collect more detailed information on the population than the decennial census. It asks the household respondent for information about the demographics and relationships of family members, income and benefits, health insurance, educational attainment, veteran status, disabilities, employment, and housing. Data are available for single years, but pooled three- and five-year data are also available which allow tabulations for smaller

geographic levels, such as counties, than would otherwise be possible. ACS data are particularly useful as a source of geographical contextual information. For example, a state may want to examine how county-level differences in poverty or demographic characteristics may be associated with county-level variation in child maltreatment report rates.

The main ACS website is [here](#). The Census Bureau provides multiple ways to access the data, described [here](#).

Additional Data Resources

Finally, we summarize two additional data resources below that are of interest to the child welfare community: the Multistate Foster Care Data Archive (FCDA) and the California Child Welfare Indicators Project (CCWIP).

Multistate Foster Care Data Archive

Established in 2004 by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and the American Public Human Services Association, the FCDA contains data for three million children from more than 30 states representing approximately 70 percent of the U.S. foster care population. Active states have provided data through the end of 2013. In addition to full placement histories, the FCDA is linked to certain Census files. FCDA data are valid from 2000 forward in all states. Active states include Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio (Franklin County), Oklahoma, Pennsylvania (Allegheny County), Tennessee, Texas, and Washington.

The data are maintained by Chapin Hall's [Center for State Child Welfare Data](#). The center's mission is "...to use research and technical assistance to promote evidence-based decision making in the field of child welfare." Using data from the FCDA, the center conducts analyses and produces research on child welfare topics. In addition, the center provides technical assistance and training to child welfare agencies to build their capacity to use their own data for quality improvement. For an annual fee of \$25,000, child welfare agencies join the center and contribute their foster care and adoption administrative records to the FCDA and gain access to the training and technical assistance. Active states then have access to a web-based tool to analyze data and generate reports based on their own state data, and on aggregate data from the FCDA.

California Child Welfare Indicators Project

Collaboration between the University of California-Berkeley and California's Department of Social Services (CDSS) resulted in [an interactive website](#) that makes California child welfare data accessible and available through the CCWIP. The CCWIP receives quarterly extracts from CDSS's SACWIS system. The website allows for data analysis over time and county comparisons. CCWIP also conducts research using the child welfare data linked with other data systems (e.g., birth and death records).

Case Study: Pennsylvania

One state organization, Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC), has used various data sources in its child welfare advocacy work. PPC is able to obtain, analyze, and report data because of its strong partnership with their state child welfare agency, and the commitment of their state officials to PPC's efforts. This relationship is key to receiving semiannual child welfare data and special data runs the state agency and their data contractor provide on request.

Analysis of the fiscal implications of the Fostering Connections Act

This project, summarized in a 2012 report entitled [Maximizing 'Fostering Connections' to Benefit Pennsylvania's Youth](#), involved fiscal analysis using AFCARS and expenditure data to project future costs associated with implementation of the Fostering Connections Act. It examined placement settings, length of stay, and permanency outcomes. The fiscal analysis was coordinated in partnership with Juvenile Law Center. Juvenile Law Center contracted with the Finance Project to conduct the analysis, and PPC, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, developed an issue brief to highlight the analysis and educate policymakers. Read the report [here](#).

Following the release of this report, Pennsylvania enacted two measures that fully implement Fostering Connections. These included [Act 80 of 2012](#), which made revisions to the state's Welfare Code that are key to full implementation of Fostering Connections, and [Act 91 of 2012](#), which made corresponding changes to the commonwealth's Juvenile Act. The aim of these measures is to promote adoption among older youth in foster care, while at the same time resulting a state and county cost savings and garnering federal funding. Youth who do not achieve permanency will have extended access to foster care resources to help them navigate the transition to adulthood.

Annual State of Child Welfare Report

Another project of PPC is its annual indicators report on state, regional, and local child welfare data. In their current year report, indicators are reported across five years. Foster care indicators include: children served, first-time entries into foster care, re-entries into foster care, foster care exits, demographics, placement settings, timely reunification, and placement stability. Previous year reports compared two years of data as they built up their data inventory. See the 2013 and 2014 reports: [\(2013\)](#) and [\(2014\)](#).



The First Focus State Policy Advocacy and Reform Center (SPARC), an initiative funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, and Walter S. Johnson Foundations, aims to improve outcomes for children and families involved with the child welfare system by building the capacity of and connections between state child welfare advocates. You can visit us online at www.childwelfaresparc.org or on Twitter at [@ChildWelfareHub](https://twitter.com/ChildWelfareHub).

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Notes

¹ Assessments may be used in some states as an alternative to a traditional investigation of alleged child maltreatment. Sometimes referred to as part of a “differential response” or an “alternative response” to a report of maltreatment, an assessment typically does not result in an official “finding” or substantiation of abuse or neglect. However, through an assessment response, agencies may identify that a child has experienced or is at risk of experiencing maltreatment, and may identify and/or provide needed services for the family.