ADOPTION AND FOSTER CARE ANALYSIS AND REPORTING (AFCARS)

AFCARS ANNUAL FOSTER CARE FILE AND ADOPTION FILE
USER'S GUIDE

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NATIONAL DATA ARCHIVE ON CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT
NDACAN

ADOPTION AND FOSTER CARE ANALYSIS & REPORTING SYSTEM (AFCARS)

ANNUAL FILE

DATA COMPILED BY

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PREFACE

Data for the *Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS)* are given annually to the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN) for distribution to the research community by the Children's Bureau. Funding for the project is provided by the Children's Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This user's guide orients the user to the AFCARS Foster Care and Adoption data for years 2000 and after.

ADOPTION AND FOSTER CARE ANALYSIS AND REPORTING SYSTEM (AFCARS)

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ABSTRACT

The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) is a federally mandated data collection system that receives case-level information on all children in foster care and those who have been adopted with a state agency's involvement and report this data to the Department of Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families/Administration on Children Youth and Families/Children's Bureau. From the Children's Bureau, the data collected by AFCARS is submitted to the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect at Cornell University for distribution to qualified users. This Guide is intended to provide background and guidance on use of the AFCARS data.

AFCARS data are used by the Children's Bureau for providing summary data to the public, for monitoring states' progress on improving child welfare programs, for allotting funds for various programs, and for data quality improvement. The data housed by NDACAN is most commonly used for academic research on child welfare and child welfare policy.

The data files submitted to the Children's Bureau are case-level data. There is information on each child that was removed from their home and are under the agency's responsibility for placement and care. The file contains information on the child, including:

- Child demographics including sex, birth date, race, and ethnicity
- Number of previous stays in foster care
- Case goals, including availability for adoption
- Dates of entry into and discharge from foster care
- Payments paid on behalf of the child
- Data on parents and other caretakers

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF SOURCE

Authors should acknowledge the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect and the original collector of the data when they publish manuscripts that use data provided by the Archive. Users of these data are urged to follow some adaptation of the statement below.

PUBLICATION SUBMISSION REQUIREMENT

In accordance with the *Terms of Use Agreement* for these datasets, users of these data are required to deposit with the Archive a copy of any published work or report based wholly or in part on these data. A copy of any completed manuscript, thesis abstract, or reprint should be emailed to NDACANsupport@cornell.edu. Such copies will be used to provide funding agencies with essential information about the use of NDACAN resources and to facilitate the exchange of information about research activities among data users and contributors.

OVERVIEW OF AFCARS

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The AFCARS system was created as a result of federal legislation passed in 1986 requiring the development of a data system to replace an earlier, voluntary system that was found to be of limited usefulness. The newer system would be mandatory, include financial penalties for non-compliance, and use common data definitions and reporting periods. On September 27, 1990, HHS published proposed federal regulations to implement the data collection system, called the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). On December 22, 1993, the final rule implementing AFCARS appeared in the Federal Register.

The regulation mandates that States submit to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) specific data on all children in foster care beginning with Federal Fiscal Year 1995 (October 1, 1994). States are also required to submit information on adoptions when the State IV-B/IV-E agency was involved in the placement or financial support of the adopted child.

In 1993, congress passed the Family Preservation and Support Services Program Act. Among other things, this law provided funding to states to develop statewide automated child welfare information systems (SACWIS), which have greatly enhanced the quality of data, and made it much easier for states to transfer data to the AFCARS system.

PURPOSE OF AFCARS

The purpose of AFCARS is twofold:

1. First, AFCARS is designed to address policy development and program management issues at both the state and federal levels, including program assessment, Child and Family Service Reviews, and Performance Improvement Plans.

2. Second, the data are useful for research aimed at analyzing such characteristics of state foster care and adoption programs as timing, trends, and populations. It is important to keep in mind, however, that AFCARS was developed as an ongoing administrative data collection system and does not conform to rigorous criteria for scientific research design.

Specific objectives of AFCARS include collecting and managing:

- Reliable and consistent data through the use of uniform definitions, methodologies, and data standards.
- Statewide and national information on the number and characteristics of adoptive and foster care children and their parents (including step-parents, adoptive parents, and foster care parents).
- Statewide and national information on the status of the foster care population (i.e., type of placement, availability for adoption, and case-plan goals).
- Information on the source of financial assistance provided by federal, state, and local adoption and foster care programs.
- Information on any services provided.

AFCARS – AT THE STATE LEVEL

DATA COLLECTION

Under the final AFCARS rule, states are required to collect data on all children in foster care for whom the state child welfare agency has responsibility for placement, care, or supervision, regardless of eligibility for Title IV-E funds. Each fiscal year's AFCARS data provide case-level information for children served by the foster care system and children whose adoptions were finalized during the federal fiscal year (October 1 of the previous calendar year to September 30 of the nominal fiscal year).

States are also required to collect case-specific data on all adopted children who were placed by the state child welfare agency, by private agencies under contract with the public child welfare agency, or by private adoptions voluntarily reported during the given reporting period.

States are required to submit all their adoption and foster care data electronically to the Children's Bureau at the close of each of two semi-annual reporting periods. The first semi-annual reporting period ("A" period) extends from October 1 through March 31, the second ("B" period) from April 1 to September 30. States submit 37 adoption data elements and 66 foster care data elements. The Children's Bureau combines the state files from the two periods into a single annual database.

CREATION OF THE ADOPTION FILE

Adoptions that states are legally required to report to AFCARS:

> • Children placed for adoption by the public child welfare agency.

> • Children who have been in the public foster care system and were placed for adoption by a private agency under contract with the public child welfare agency.

> • Children in whose adoption the public child welfare agency was involved but who had not been in the public foster care system (e.g., children who received Title IV-E funds for non-recurring costs of adoption).

Adoptions that states are NOT legally required to report to AFCARS:

> • Those involving children who were not in the public foster care system

> • Placed for adoption by tribal agencies

> • Placed for adoption by private agencies

These may be voluntarily reported to AFCARS, however, these adoptions do not involve a state agency and are not included in the publicly available version of the data.

States submit data for each child with a finalized adoption. Duplicate records are removed, and the remaining records are sorted by the year that the adoption was finalized.

Please note that the actual electronic data transmission for many adoptions finalized in a fiscal

year may not occur until a subsequent year. Consequently, data submissions in subsequent years may contain data from a number of earlier adoptions. To the extent possible, such transmissions are included in the data file for the year in which the adoption was finalized, but as such, the reported adoptions will inherently be an underrepresentation.

Later submissions, released as new versions of the updated data, will lead to small increases in the final count of adoptions in a state.

Prior to transfer of the data from the Children's Bureau to NDACAN, a matching program is used to remove duplicate records. However, the adoption file does not contain county-level FIPS Code (the Federal Information Processing Standard code for geographic entities) or the child's day of birth, and consequently it can be difficult to discriminate between records that are truly duplicates and those that are merely very similar. Duplicate records are not distributed evenly among states.

CREATION OF THE FOSTER CARE FILE

Collection of data is done by state agencies. As long as a child is in foster care, the state must submit an AFCARS record for every report period in which the child is in care. When the child is discharged from foster care, the child's record for the period in which the discharge took place will contain a discharge date and other information concerning the discharge. State AFCARS data are submitted by each state to the Children's Bureau for review, cleaning, compiling, and abstraction into the annual file. The file is then transferred to NDACAN for further processing and distribution to qualified users.

Only one record per foster care child is included in the annual database. The retained record will be the most recent record received for each child served. If a child has a record in both 6-month periods, the record from the second period will be retained; the record from the first period will not be included. A child who is in care or comes into care at the start of the year, exits care, and then later returns to care in the second half of the year, will have one record in the annual database, the one submitted in the second report period when the child re-entered care. See the section "Foster Care Entry and Exit History" in this Guide, for more details.

It is likely that there will be foster care entries and discharges for the most recent fiscal year in the data that have not been submitted until after the close of the fiscal year, so early versions of an annual file will be incomplete to that extent. As updated data is received, the undercounts for that year will correct themselves.

THE REPORTING POPULATION

The 50 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico (the term "States" applies to all of these agencies) are required to submit data on children who meet one of the following criteria:

- Children in the title IV-E agency's responsibility for care and placement (C&P).

- Children who at the time the agency obtains/receives C&P is on runaway status or whose

location is otherwise not known.

- Children under the responsibility of another public agency for placement and care but for whom a title IV-E foster care payment is being made under an inter-agency agreement between the State and the other public agency. States may have an interagency agreement with juvenile justice or a tribe, or both.

- Children whose removal episode is more than 24 hours.

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 allows states the option of providing Title IV-E reimbursable foster care, adoption, or guardianship assistance payments to children up to the age of 19, 20 or 21 if the youth is:

- Completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential;

- Enrolled in an institution which provides post-secondary or vocational education;

- Participating in a program or activity designed to promote, or remove barriers to, employment;

- Employed for at least 80 hours per month; or

- Incapable of doing any of the above due to a medical condition.

Thanks to this law, most states and the District of Columbia have extended foster care beyond age 18 under Title IV-E, as of 2018. (https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/extension-foster-care-beyond-age-18/)

For youth who are 18 and whose foster care eligibility has not been extended, or who live in a state that does not allow extended eligibility, states are to report the child as discharged as of their 18th birthday with a discharge reason of "emancipation." For youth 18 or older receiving title IV-E payments or services, they are to be reported as discharged if they are no longer eligible for title IV-E. The discharge date is the date IV-E ended.

AFCARS – AT NDACAN

CONFIDENTIALITY PROTECTIONS FOR CHILDREN IN AFCARS

FOSTER CARE

Before distributing the AFCARS data, NDACAN makes certain manipulations to the foster care data to protect the privacy of the children in foster care.

- The county FIPS code for the children from counties with fewer than 700 records in the annual database are recoded to indicate that information not provided for reasons of confidentiality.

- The child's day of birth (DOB) is recoded to the 15th of the month.
  NOTE: All derived age variables are based on the actual DOB, so may not agree with an age computed from the recoded DOB.

- All other dates in the file are adjusted to the recoded date of birth so that the span of time between any two dates is preserved. As a result, all dates in the file are recoded, but all timespans are accurate.
  NOTE: These recoded dates may affect your ability to match the values for the NDACAN-derived variables InAtEnd, InAtStart, IsWaiting, etc. Use the derived variables to define populations.

ADOPTION

Adopted children's county FIPS codes are not reported to AFCARS. The month and year, but not the day of birth are reported. We set the day to the 15th of the month so that we can provide the date as a date/time data type.

OTHER CHANGES TO THE AFCARS FILE AFTER TRANSFER TO NDACAN

After receiving the AFCARS Data File, NDACAN makes certain changes to the file, with the intention of making the data easier to use and more convenient to analyze. The data itself does not change. The values of the original AFCARS variables are exactly as received. However, dates, which are contained in three variables in the original file (Month, Day, Year), are combined and converted to date-type variables. Also, several variables, derived from the original data, are added:

- The two-character postal code for a state (e.g. 'NY', 'CA', 'TX')

- Status flags ("InAtEnd", "InAtStart", "Entered", "Exited", "IsWaiting", "AgedOut", "IsTPR")

- Child's age on certain dates ("AgeAtStart", "AgeAtEnd", "AgeAtLatRem")

- Length of Stay at discharge or at the end of the fiscal year ("LatRemLOS", "SettingLOS",

"PreviousLOS", "LifeLOS")

- Rural/Urban continuum code developed by the USDA - since the county code is often removed, this variable gives some information about the county of the agency responsible for the case.

- Race variables. "Race" ignores Hispanic ethnicity; "RaceEthn" takes it into account

More detailed information on these variables is in the Code Book.

NDACAN Data Versions

Each NDACAN version of the files contains the most complete and accurate data that are available at the time of release. Version 1 data are drawn from the annual database, the creation of which is described above. States always have the option of submitting corrected or updated data to the Children's Bureau after a required reporting date. In such cases subsequent versions of the data will contain more accurate and complete information. When corrected data from any state is loaded to the publicly-available AFCARS file, the version number of that file is increased.

History of State Submissions to AFCARS

By AFCARS regulation, states were required to submit AFCARS data beginning in 1995. However, it was not until 1998 that penalties established by the same regulation became applicable. Data submitted prior to 1998 were often incomplete and unreliable. FY 2001 was the first year that all states (including Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia) submitted data. Since then, all states have submitted data each year.

State Footnotes

In addition to the required data elements states are encouraged - though not required - to include footnotes with their data submissions. The footnotes allow states to provide additional information they deem vital to the interpretation of their data. Footnotes may include the following:

- General characteristics of the state's adoption and foster care system.

- Characteristics of the population, such as whether certain types of placements are included.

- State definitions that vary from federal AFCARS definitions.

- Explanations for data counts such as the number of deaths in foster care, the number of children with disabilities, or the number of children in types of institutional settings.

The state footnotes associated with each state should always be taken into account when utilizing a state's data. Footnotes for elements arranged by state can be found in the AFCARS User's Guide Annual Appendixes, included with the annual Foster Care file.

USING THE FOSTER CARE FILE

UNDERSTANDING FOSTER CARE ENTRY AND EXIT HISTORY.

Patterns of entrances and exits to and from foster care are illustrated in Figure 1 (see next page). In the following descriptions, the term *current year* means the fiscal year of the dataset you are working with.

Example A: The child entered foster care in this or a previous year and is still in care at the end of the current fiscal year. Since this is the child's first foster care episode, the original removal date (*Rem1Dt*) and their most recent removal date (*LatRemDt*) are the same. There is no discharge date (*DoDFCDt*).

Example B: The child entered foster care in this or a previous year and was discharged in the current fiscal year, ending their only foster care episode. The discharge date will exist and will be in the current fiscal year.
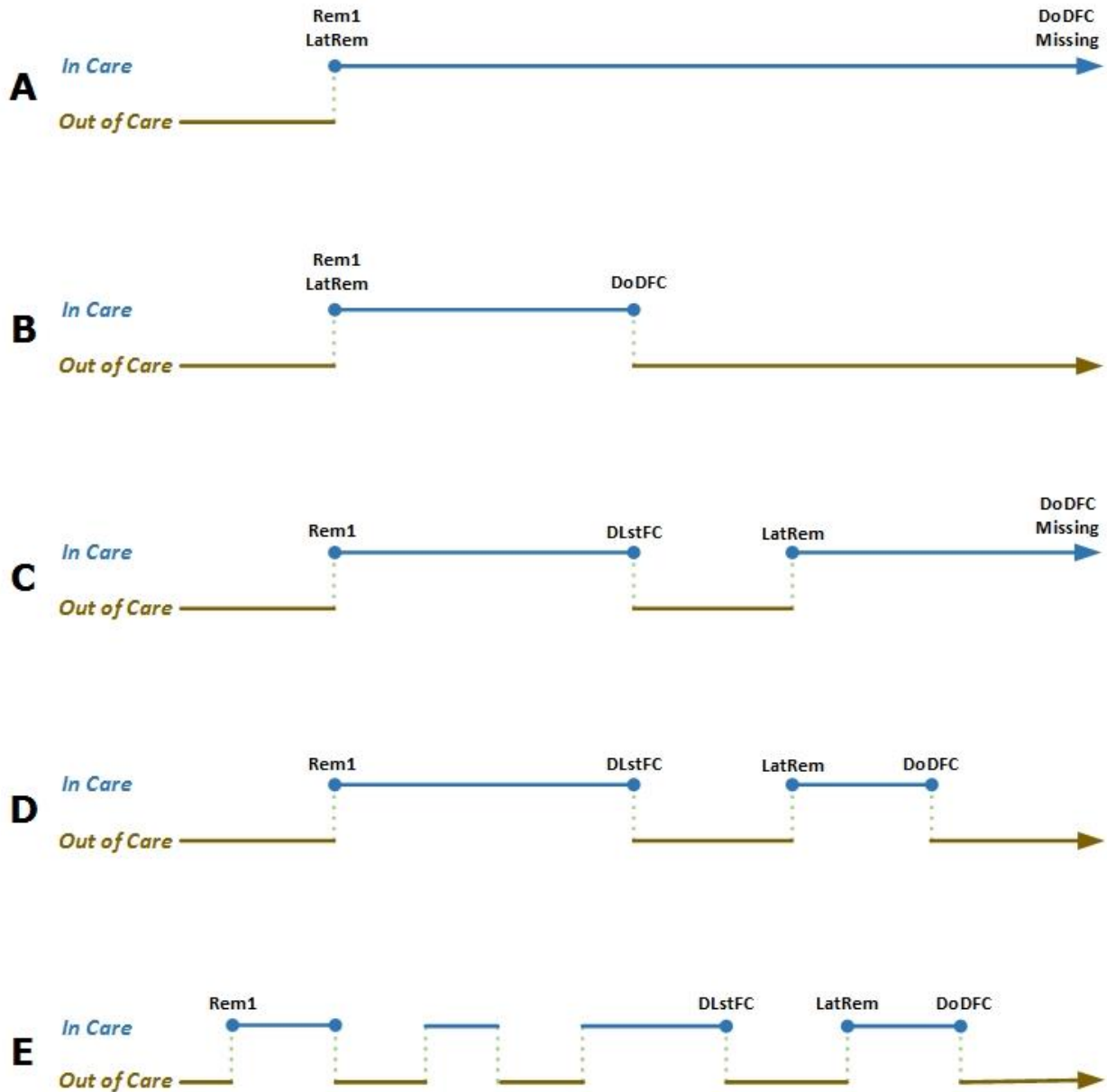
Example C: The child is currently in a second foster care episode. The removal date for the first episode (Rem1Dt) never changes. The date for the most recent removal (LatRemDt) is, in this case, the date the child entered foster care the second time. Whenever a child re-enters care, the *DoDFCDt* is copied to the *DLstFCDt*, and then set to null.

Example D: The child has completed two foster care episodes and is not in foster care at the end of the fiscal year. The discharge date (*DoDFCDt*) will exist and will be in the current fiscal year.

Example E: There have been more than two foster care episodes. As always, *Rem1Dt* remains the same. The entry date for the most recent episode will be in the current year if there is no discharge date (*DoDFCDt*). The total number of foster care episodes is captured in the variable TotalRem. With more than two episodes, dates between the original removal date (*Rem1Dt*) and the discharge date of the episode prior to the current one (*DLstFCDt*) are missing from the current FY data, though they may be traceable using previous years' foster care datasets.

Figure 1: Relationship of Variables to Foster Care Entries and Exits

Relationship of Variables to Foster Care Entry / Exit Events

Rem1 = Date of original removal / entry into 1st foster care episode

LatRem = Date of most recent removal / entry into foster care

DoDFC = Date of discharge from most recent foster care episode

DLstFC = Discharge date of previous episode

LINKING THE FOSTER CARE FILE WITH THE AFCARS FAMILY OF DATASETS

In the NDACAN Archive, the AFCARS Foster Care and Adoption files, the NCANDS Child File, and the NYTD Outcomes and Services files form a family of interrelated datasets that can be linked using a common child identier. This is the child's AFCARS ID. However, the name of this identifier is inconsistent across datasets. To alleviate this problem NDACAN provides a child identifier variable with a common name across datasets – the StFCID. This variable is constructed by concatenating the two-character state code with the child's AFCARS ID. Adding the state code prevents a possible duplication where more than one state uses the same child id.

Note that the native child identifier in the Child File is called *ChID*. This is *not* the AFCARS ID (*StFCID*). The AFCARS ID (called "AFCARSID" in the Child File) is added by the states so that the Child File can be linked with the other AFCARS-related datasets. However, not all states in all years provide the AFCARS ID to the Child File. Consequently, not every row in the Child File can be linked to the Foster Care File, even if the child has a corresponding record there. Use *ChID* in the Child File when linking within or across years. Use the Child File's *StFCID* when linking to other AFCARS datasets.

ENCRYPTION

The child's AFCARS ID (RecNumbr) is encrypted by the state prior to submitting their data to the Children's Bureau. Encryption involves substituting the characters of the original identifier with a character randomly selected from a standard pool of symbols, known as a "character set". The well-known ASCII character set has just 128 symbols and includes those seen on a standard computer keyboard. While most states adhere to using the ASCII set, a few states use larger character sets such as UTF-8, which includes the ASCII set plus many more additional characters. This has the advantage of producing a more secure encryption, but results in uncommonly used characters that may look unusual, or even "wrong". NDACAN adopts the UTF-8 standard to NCANDS and AFCARS data to ensure that all characters, e.g. non-ASCII, will be correctly stored and readable to users.

For example, a Child ID from one of these states might look something like this:

<div align="center">‡Ž˜Ž††●●÷øÔ÷¦¼¦®</div>

Don't panic! These are legitimate IDs and can be used for linking. These characters may be present in the NCANDS variables ChID and StFCID, and in the AFCARS variables RecNumbr and StFCID. As of this writing, states that use extended character sets for linking include MS, OR, IN, TX, and HI.

LINKING TO THE ADOPTION FILE

The child identifier (AFCARS ID) in the Adoption File is called *RecNum*. Don't use this one. As discussed above, use *StFCID* to link to the other AFCARS-family datasets. Some states give a child

a new identifier when they are adopted. This breaks the link and prevents tracking a child from Foster Care to Adoption. For a list of states that use and do not use the same child identifier in the Foster Care and the Adoption Files, which varies by year, contact us at NDACANsupport@cornell.edu

NOTES REGARDING THE DATA FILES

In using these data, one should be aware of the following:

While every effort has been made to create the cleanest, most reliable and up-to-date AFCARS datasets possible, anomalies still exist in the data. Users are encouraged to examine overall and by-state frequencies of the data elements they are using in their analyses.

Differing state practices, policies, regulations, and laws have an impact on how information is categorized and reported and any attempt to compare states should be sensitive to these differences. States differ, for example, on how "maltreatment" is categorized and defined, who is a mandated reporter, the circumstances under which parental rights can be removed, and many other differences, all of which can affect the probability of a child being removed from the home.

DUPLICATE RECORDS.

In the adoption data files, each record is supposed to represent a unique child whose adoption was finalized during that fiscal year. However, there are duplicate child ID, so one child can be in the data more than once.

The foster care file is intended to have just one child record (unique St+RecNumbr) per year. This is true of all FC Files since FY2005, but earlier years do have duplicate RecNumbrs.

DESCRIPTION OF THE
NDACAN-DISTRIBUTED FILES

NDACAN distributes the AFCARS data in three native formats: SAS, SPSS, and Stata. For users with other software, we provide the data in a tab-delimited text file, along with tables containing variable names, variable labels, values, value labels, data types, etc.

The distributable package includes two folders, "Data" and "Documentation", as well as a text file or pdf with a description of the folder contents.

FILE CHARACTERISTICS

NDACAN distributes annually two new sets of files for the most recent fiscal year -- one for Foster Care and one for Adoption. We also annually release updates to older fiscal years, if any were received. Brief descriptions of the data files are provided below. For information regarding variables, please refer to the codebook that accompanies this guide. In each file the child is the unit of analysis.

ADOPTION FILE

Files containing adoption data are named *Ad<year>v<version number>*. Year is the 4-digit fiscal year in which the data were collected and version number is the NDACAN file version number. The file named *Ad2014v2* would therefore contain the second version of fiscal year 2014's adoption data.

FOSTER CARE FILE

Files containing foster care data are named *FC<year>v<version number>*. Year is the 4-digit fiscal year in which the data were collected and version number is the NDACAN file version number. The file named *FC2014v2* would therefore contain the second version of fiscal year 2014's foster care data. The foster care data files contain 104 variables (73 original variables and 31 NDACAN-derived variables). The number of cases in the file varies by year and by version.

If you have questions, or encounter problems using these datasets, please contact us at: NDACANsupport@cornell.edu

SOURCES:

The Children's Bureau Legacy: Ensuring the Right to Childhood. Published by the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2012