

ADOPTION AND FOSTER CARE ANALYSIS
AND REPORTING (AFCARS)

AFCARS AB
FOSTER CARE FILE

USER'S GUIDE

Revised April 24th, 2026



NATIONAL DATA ARCHIVE ON
CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

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ADOPTION AND FOSTER CARE
ANALYSIS & REPORTING SYSTEM
(AFCARS)

AB FILE

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FUNDED BY

Children's Bureau Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

DISTRIBUTED BY

National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect

USER'S GUIDE AND CODEBOOK WRITTEN BY

National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect
in collaboration with AFCARS Technical Team -- Children's Bureau

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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 AB data.

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 these 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 are submitted to the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect for distribution. 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 statistics 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 are commonly used for academic research on child welfare and child welfare policy.

The data files submitted to the Children's Bureau contain information on each child that was removed from their home while under the responsibility of a reporting agency. This includes information on:

- 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.

The data used in this publication were made available by the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect and have been used with permission. Data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) were originally reported to the Children's Bureau. Funding for the project was 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. The receiver of the original data, the funder, the Archive, Duke University, Cornell University and their agents or employees bear no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here.

PUBLICATION SUBMISSION REQUIREMENT

In accordance with the *Terms of Use Agreement* for these datasets, users of these data are required to deposit with NDACAN 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 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) system was created as a result of federal legislation passed in 1986. It replaced an earlier system of voluntary data submissions that was found to have limited usefulness. States' participation in the newer AFCARS system became mandatory, with non-compliance leading to financial penalties. AFCARS also instituted common data definitions and reporting periods. Proposed federal regulations to implement AFCARS were published by the US Department of Health and Human Services on September 27, 1990; and the final rule implementing AFCARS appeared in the Federal Register on December 22, 1993.

The regulation mandated 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 were 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, the 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 easier for states to transfer data to the AFCARS system.

The 1993 Final Rule (henceforth "AFCARS 1993" or "old data") guided AFCARS data collection and definitions until the 2023 federal fiscal year. It also governed datasets distributed to the research community by NDACAN for the fiscal years 2000-2021, including the "Foster Care Annual Files", "Foster Care 6-month files", and "Adoption File".

In 2016, CB proposed revisions to AFCARS 1993. Those revisions were authorized in 2020 and significantly expanded the range of data elements that are reported by states. Under this new set of regulations (henceforth "AFCARS 2020" or "new data"), states were required to collect and submit new and evolved data, starting in fiscal year 2023. Datasets produced in accordance with AFCARS 2020 provide added richness and granularity in child welfare measures, with more detail on children and family demographics, placements, removals, and more. More details about AFCARS 2020 are described below.

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 UNDER THE 2020 RULE

Data collection under the AFCARS 2020 Final Rule began in FY 2023. The data elements collected under AFCARS 2020 are referred to as “out-of-home care” measures, rather than “foster care”. Additionally, the adoption file elements that were previously distributed under the Adoption File of AFCARS 1993 are now captured within the “out-of-home care” elements. There is no analogous version in AFCARS 2020 to the former Adoption File from AFCARS 1993.

States had to revise and implement new database systems to enable them to collect AFCARS 2020 data, and each state made progress at different rates. During this transition period, states also had to continue to collect data, as is federally required. This often required states to maintain old data collection systems and data reporting practices even as they transitioned to new ones, and has led to some data quality issues.

Below is a summary of the major changes to the information that title IV-E agencies must report under AFCARS 2020:

- The reporting population for the out-of-home care data file was expanded to include those in out-of-home care who are over age seventeen, regardless of the funding source.
- Reporting requirements changed from only reporting the information about a child’s most recent removals, permanency plans, and placements to reporting all the child’s removals, permanency plans, and living arrangements.
- The file also allows for multiple dates and information on specific elements, instead of just the most recent, such as caseworker visit dates and locations.
- The adoption data file was removed. Many of the data elements that were previously reported as part of the adoption data file are now part of the out-of-home care data file.
- The Adoption and Guardianship Assistance Data File is new. Title IV-E agencies report on children who were in a finalized adoption or legal guardianship under a title IV-E adoption or guardianship assistance agreement.

In Technical Bulletin #20, the Children’s Bureau provides additional explanatory text and

examples to demonstrate the differences between AFCARS 1993 and AFCARS 2020:
<https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-tb-20.pdf>

TRANSLATING AFCARS 2020 TO AFCARS 1993

Since the transition from AFCARS 1993 to AFCARS 2020 was not immediate (and since states have different transition timelines as they align their data collection and reporting with AFCARS 2020 requirements), the current release of FY 2023-2025 AFCARS datasets are currently distributed in the AFCARS 1993 format. This approach ensures continuity for data users and allows the Children’s Bureau to evaluate AFCARS 2020 data collection and reporting processes before releasing the redesigned files.

To support this approach, data reported by states under AFCARS 2020 are translated, where possible, to align with AFCARS 1993 variables and definitions. As a result, all variables in the current files are formatted to match AFCARS 1993 specifications. However, some elements cannot be directly mapped. For example, new variables or categories introduced may not have equivalents in AFCARS 1993, and some legacy elements may no longer be available.

Important: Because of this translation process, the distributed AFCARS data may not exactly match published AFCARS results (e.g., the AFCARS Dashboard), which may use different processing rules or incorporate AFCARS 2020 data directly.

See AFCARS Technical Bulletin #20, Appendix A, for a side-by-side comparison of how each data element from the new data relates to a data element of the old data¹:
<https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-tb-20.pdf>.

¹ See also: https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars_data_elements_comparison.pdf

AFCARS – AT THE STATE LEVEL

DATA COLLECTION

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 or who are under a legal guardianship and with a title IV-E assistance agreement (October 1 of the previous calendar year to September 30 of the nominal fiscal year).

States are required to submit all out-of-home data electronically to the Children's Bureau at the close 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.

Beginning in FY 2023, under AFCARS 2020 regulations, states collect 186 out-of-home care data elements and 19 adoption and guardianship assistance data file elements. However, these are being mapped to a format compatible with AFCARS 1993 data, which includes 66 foster care data elements.

THE ADOPTION FILE

The AFCARS 1993 Final Rule included a distinct set of data fields collected about adoptions (that involved a public agency), which was distributed as the Adoption File. However, under AFCARS 2020, almost all elements that were previously collected in the Adoption File are now part of the out-of-home care data fields.

AFCARS 2020 implemented several new data elements called "Adoption and Guardianship Assistance", with data collection beginning in FY 2023. These relate to the financial assistance for adoption or guardianships.

CREATION OF THE FOSTER CARE FILE

Data collection is done by state agencies; they must submit an AFCARS record for every child that is in foster care in every reporting period during which that 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 (CB) for review, cleaning, compiling, and abstraction. The file is then transferred to NDACAN for further processing and distribution to qualified users.

Only one record per child is included per year in an AB file. If a child experiences more than one

foster care placement, the retained record will be the most recent record received during the reporting period. 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” for more details.

It is likely that some foster care entries and discharges for the most recent fiscal year will not have been submitted by the close of the fiscal year, so early versions of AFCARS files may be incomplete. As updated data are received by CB, undercounts for that year will correct themselves.

The new AFCARS data are released by CB as “AB” files, rather than Annual files. The Annual File was constructed by utilizing the “A” and “B” period of the respective FY, plus the “A” period of the following FY. Including this subsequent “A” period allowed the capture of reports that may have happened, or had not been resolved, by the end of the FY and may not have captured or transmitted at the time the state submitted data to CB. The annual file was constructed with these three periods and then cleaned and processed before submission to NDACAN.

The AB file, however, is constructed with only the “A” and “B” period of the nominal FY. In all other ways it is identical and undergoes the same cleaning and processing steps that the annual file underwent. This means, however, that aggregate counts derived from an AB file may yield artificially lower counts compared to aggregate counts derived from an annual file of the same year (if one exists) or compared to analogous counts from a previous years’ annual files. It’s possible to attempt to replicate the Annual file format by combining fiscal year datasets and anchoring the analysis by removal date rather than fiscal year, however this method is not exact and is only possible when a more recent FY dataset exists (e.g., it is not possible for FY23 prior to the release of FY24).

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 any child under the title IV-E agency’s placement and care responsibility for at least 24 hours who:

- Has run away or whose whereabouts are unknown at the time of the title IV-E agency’s responsibility for the child.
- is placed into foster care after a non-foster care setting,
- is placed at home, including a child on a trial discharge or trial home visit,
- is placed from a foster care placement into a non-foster care setting,
- is age 18 or older, including those in a supervised independent living setting,
- enters foster care after 18, regardless of whether title IV-E dollars are used,

- Or is 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.

The reporting population was revised in AFCARS 2020 to include children of any age who are under the placement and care responsibility of the agency and are in foster care. The expanded reporting population also includes children who are in living arrangements that are not traditionally considered foster care settings under title IV-B and IV-E program rules once the child enters the reporting population.

Due to changes in the reporting population, caution should be taken when comparing counts for years before and after fiscal year 2023.

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 AB database are recoded to indicate that information is 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.

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 ("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")
- Race variables. "Race" ignores Hispanic ethnicity; "RaceEthn" takes it into account
- County FIPSCode is linked with Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RU23)

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

NDACAN DATA VERSIONS

Each NDACAN version of the AFCARS files contains the most complete and accurate data available at the time of release. After required reporting deadlines, states may submit corrected or updated data to the Children's Bureau. When these updates are incorporated, a new version of the dataset is released with an incremented version number, reflecting improvements in data completeness and accuracy.

NDACAN updates the publicly available AFCARS files as revised data are received. Licensed data users are notified when new versions are released. Users are strongly encouraged to download and use the most recent version of the data for all analyses, as earlier versions may contain incomplete and outdated information.

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.

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.

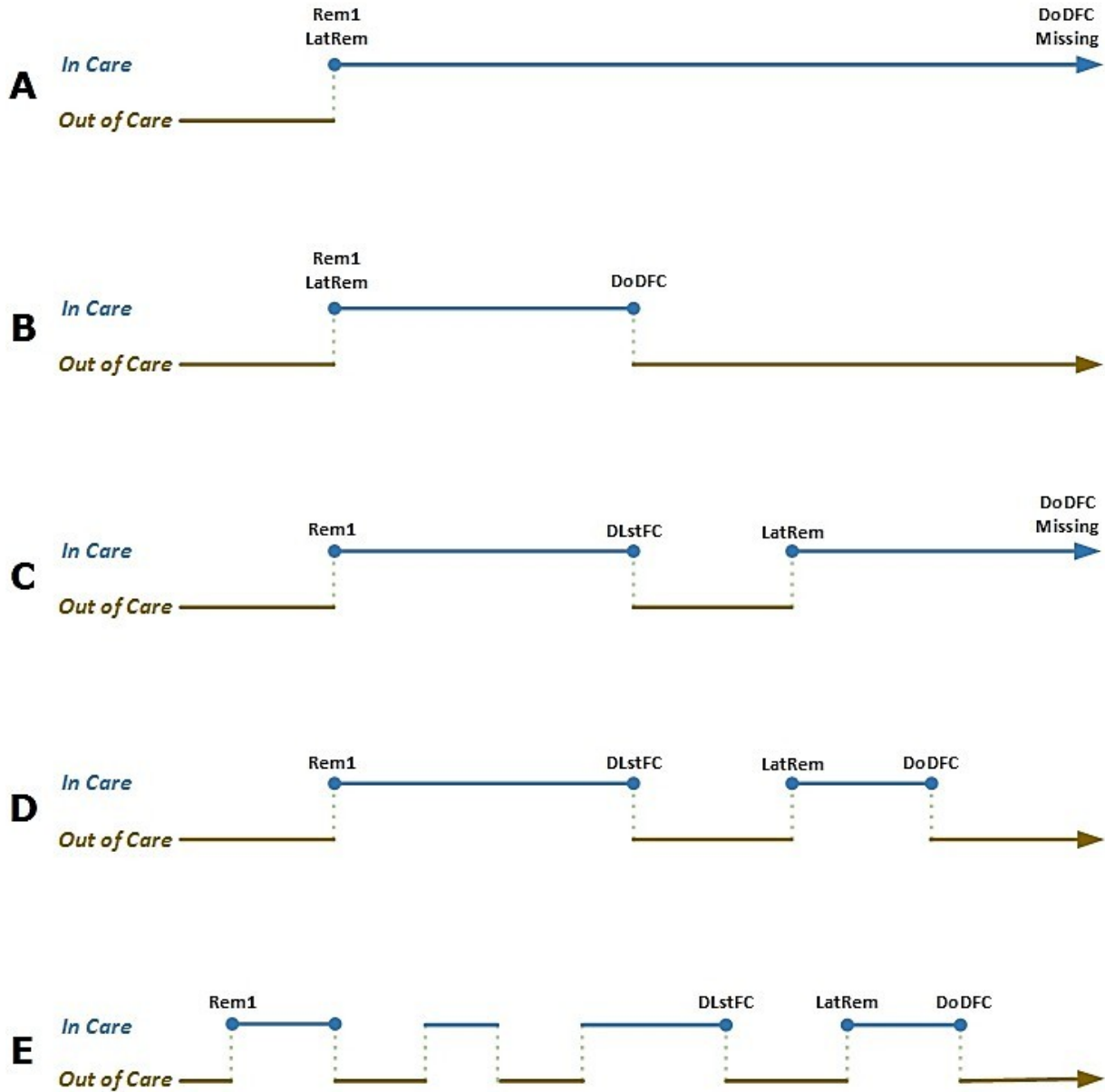
Example C: The child is currently in a second foster care episode. The removal date for the first episode (*Rem1Dt*) never changes. The date for the most recent removal (*LatRemDt*) is, in this case, the date the child entered foster care the second time. Whenever a child re-enters care, the *DoDFCDt* 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 identifier. 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:

‡Ž~Ž†† ÷øô÷|¼|®

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.

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.

The AB and annual foster care files were 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 has historically, annually distributed two new sets of files for the most recent fiscal year -- one for Foster Care and one for Adoption. However, at the time of this writing NDACAN will only be releasing a foster care file. This is expected to change as the new AFCARS data collection and processes fully mature.

We will 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.

FOSTER CARE FILE

Files containing foster care data are named *FC<year>ABv<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 *FC2023ABv2* would therefore contain the second version of fiscal year 2014’s foster care data. The foster care data files contain 107 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:

Children’s Bureau. (2024). AFCARS 2020 Technical Bulletin 20: Data elements for out-of-home care & adoption and guardianship assistance data files (Version 2.2). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-technical-bulletin-20.pdf>

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