

ADOPTION AND FOSTER CARE ANALYSIS  
AND REPORTING (AFCARS)

AFCARS ANNUAL  
FOSTER CARE FILE AND  
ADOPTION FILE

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**USER'S GUIDE**

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NATIONAL DATA ARCHIVE ON  
CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research  
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Ithaca, NY 14853

[www.ndacan.acf.hhs.gov](http://www.ndacan.acf.hhs.gov)

# ADOPTION AND FOSTER CARE ANALYSIS & REPORTING SYSTEM (AFCARS)

## *ANNUAL FILE*

### DATA -COMPILED BY

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National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect  
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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 data for years 2000 and after.

# ADOPTION AND FOSTER CARE ANALYSIS AND REPORTING SYSTEM (AFCARS)

## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	1
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF SOURCE.....	2
PUBLICATION SUBMISSION REQUIREMENT .....	2
OVERVIEW OF AFCARS .....	3
Historical Background .....	3
Purpose of AFCARS.....	3
AFCARS – AT THE STATE LEVEL .....	4
Data Collection .....	4
Creation of the Adoption File.....	4
Creation of the Foster Care File .....	5
The Reporting Population .....	6
AFCARS – AT NDACAN.....	7
Confidentiality Protections for Children in AFCARS.....	7
Foster Care .....	7
Adoption.....	7
Other Changes to the AFCARS File After Transfer to NDACAN.....	7
NDACAN Data Versions .....	8
History of State Submissions to AFCARS.....	8
State Footnotes .....	8
USING THE FOSTER CARE FILE.....	9
Understanding Foster Care Entry and Exit History. ....	9
Linking the Foster Care File with the NCANDS Child File .....	11
Linking to the Adoption File .....	11
Notes Regarding the Data Files.....	11
Duplicate Records. ....	11
DESCRIPTION OF THE NDACAN-DISTRIBUTED FILES.....	13
File Characteristics .....	13
Adoption File .....	13
Foster Care File.....	13
Sources: .....	13

# 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 used most commonly 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 under the agency's responsibility for placement and care that was removed from their home. The file contains a minimal amount of information on the child but does include:

- Child demographics including sex, birth date, race, and ethnicity.
- Number of previous stays in foster care,
- Service goals, availability for adoption,
- Dates of removal and discharge,
- Funding sources, and
- 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, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, 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, 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 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 sent to the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, Cornell University, Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research, Ithaca, New York 14853-4401.

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 data collection system and does not conform to rigorous criteria for scientific research design.

Specific objectives of AFCARS include creation of the following:

- 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 extent and nature of 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 to September 30 of the following 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 of 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.

Prior to 1998, data submissions were required; however, fiscal penalties were not applicable while many states brought their information systems online. Therefore, pre-1998 fiscal year datasets are not as complete or reliable as subsequent datasets. Dramatic improvements in data quality and completeness occurred between 1995 and 1998 and continue to occur as states further develop their electronic information systems and financial penalties are levied for poor quality data.

## 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. 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 the adoption count should not be considered an absolute, final count.

These late submissions will lead to small increases in the final count of adoptions in a state. Releases of new versions of the datasets include the updated data.

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 during 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 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, approximately 25 states and the District of Columbia have extended foster care beyond age 18 under Title IV-E, as of 2018. (<http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/extending-foster-care-to-18.aspx>)

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 18<sup>th</sup> birthday with a discharge reason of “emancipation.” For youth 18 or older receiving title IV-E, 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 1,000 records in the annual database are recoded to indicate 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 time spans 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. 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 variable 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. It was not until 1998, however, 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 -- but 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.

The footnotes are 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.

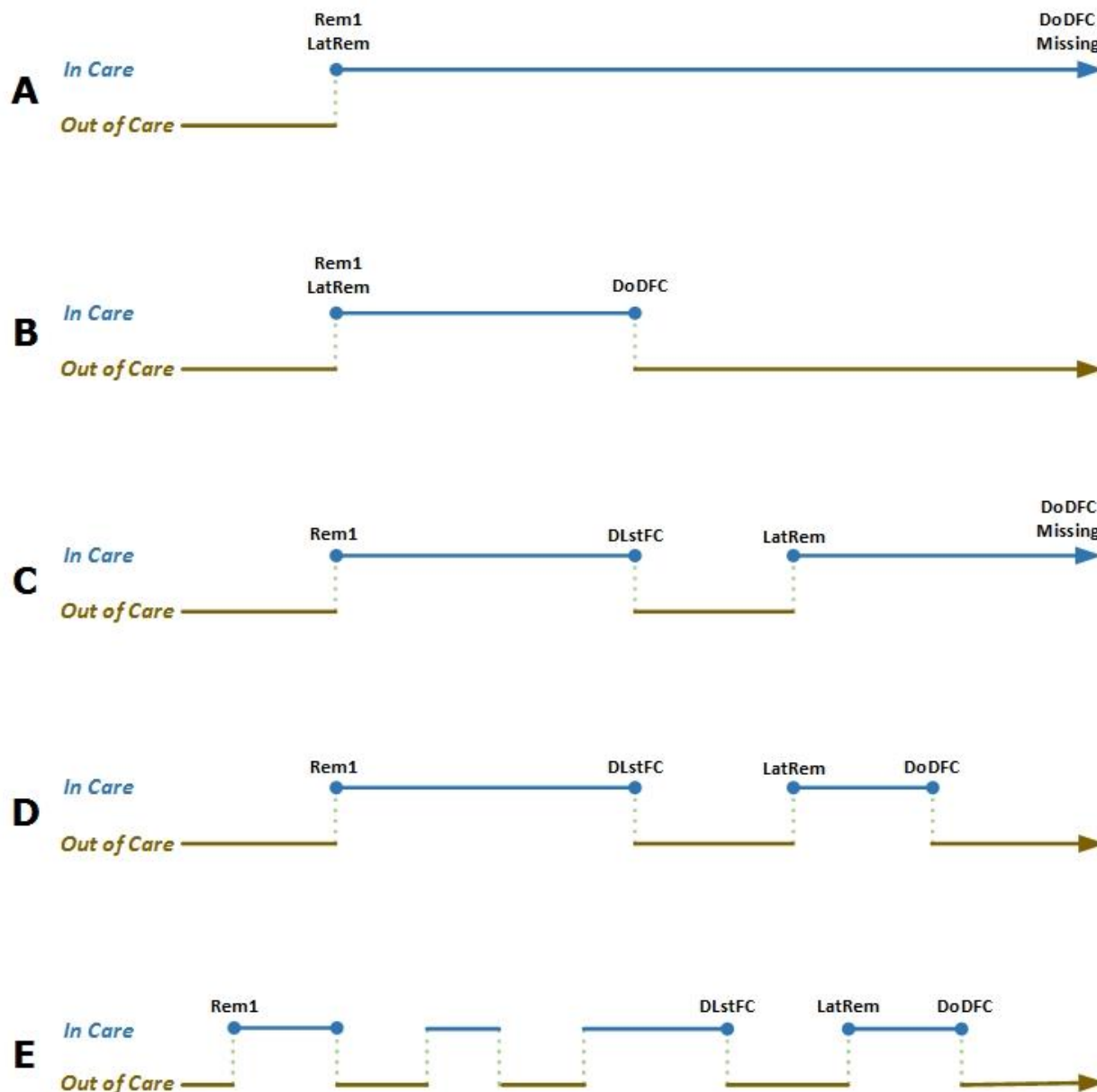
**Example C:** The child is currently in a second foster care episode. The removal date for the first episode (*Rem1Dt*) never changes. The date for the most recent removal (*LatRemDt*) is, in this case, the date the child entered foster care the second time. Whenever a child re-enters care, the *DoDFCDt* 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 NCANDS CHILD FILE

The NCANDS Child File (CF) contains two child identifiers - *ChID* and *AFCARSID*. The *ChID* is for identifying the child *within the child file* (including across years). The *AFCARSID* is the child's corresponding identifier in the Foster Care File (FC). So when linking the CF to the FC File the linking variable on the Child File side is *AFCARSID*. This must be combined with the state identifier, which for the CF is "*StaTerr*". We recommend combining (concatenating) the state identifier with the child identifier to make linking easier. For illustration, we'll call the new linking variable "*StFCID*".

In the Child File:

*StaTerr* (2 chars) + *AFCARSID* (12 chars) = *StFCID* (14 chars)

In the Foster Care File:

*St* (2 chars) + *RecNumbr* (12 chars) = *StFCID* (14 chars)

Even in the simple case of linking one year of the CF with one year of the FC, there will be duplicates of the Child File variables if the child appears more than once in the CF. In most cases, the Child File should be resolved to the child level before linking.

## LINKING TO THE ADOPTION FILE

This link is straightforward, but for two issues, one minor and one deal-breaker (with regard to linking). The minor one is that the Child Identifier names are slightly different. In the FC file, the Child ID is called "*RecNumbr*"; in Adoption, it's called "*RecNum*". The deal-breaker that prevents linking is that 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.

## 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 as 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 policies have an impact on how information is categorized and reported and any attempt to compare states should be sensitive to these differences. Differences in ethnic and racial classifications are an important example.

### *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, as well as notes on the data.

## 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](mailto: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