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Foster Care Data

Data Assessment

I got my data from a number of different places. The main sources were the Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau, the Medicaid Statistical Information System and the US Census.

Finding the data on the number of kids in foster care through the Children’s Bureau was the difficult part. Foster kids come in contact with a few departments within the Department of Health and Human Services, so finding inform

The Department of Health and Human Services had multiple departments that foster kids come in contact with, depending on their specific issues. The Children’s Bureau along with the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) produces a lot of annual and quarterly reports and reviews on child welfare in foster care, but doesn’t make the raw data readily available on their website. The ARCARS collects case-level data and produces assessment reviews for states on a rotating basis. I chose not to use that information to compare the states since the fiscal years were different.

Also, the ARCARS doesn’t have a database where you can search for national, state, or case-level information on children in foster care so it makes finding the scope a little difficult. I did (finally) find a report from the Children’s Bureau summarizing the stats on kids entering, exiting, and in care on the last day of the fiscal year that had data for each state in the past 10 years. It was provided in an excel file that had to be cleaned up a little, but overall it was easy to work with once I found it.

Since ARCARS doesn’t have a database to search for national, state, or case-level information on children in foster care, I found the Medicaid Statistical Information System (MSIS). The MSIS is a ‘datamart’ with stats on enrollment, utilization and expenditures for state level Medicaid data.

The datamart comes with a user guide that defines all the abbreviations and gives step-by-step instructions for how to build tables. The user guide was really only helpful in figuring out what different terms meant because it was created in 2004 and the datamart website had been redesigned since then.

The MSIS datamart is a pretty complete database, but getting out the information that you want out of it is easier said than done. There’s supposed to be a certain order to how measures and dimensions should be searched for, but when I did searches, it kept returning error messages (or just showing up all zeros, which is equally as unhelpful)

Thankfully, there’s a designation for foster care children under the eligibility category. Using that for the basis of eligibility I had to find one piece of information at a time and export it. The MSIS allows you to export tables to excel or save them as a csv, and there’s also tools that create simple visualizations.

Overall, the MSIS is full of useful data – it just requires some understanding of how to query the database. The Children’s Bureau data was easy to access once I found it, but there wasn’t a lot of raw data available on foster care children.

I also found the total population under 18 for each state from the US Census. There wasn’t one table that held all that information so I did a lot of copy and paste from individual state factfinder sites to find those numbers. It was a hassle, but I really wanted to info so I did it.

When I combined the different data sources into one spreadsheet, I noticed that the list of states from the two different sources were in a different alphabetical order because one spelled the state name out and the other used the state abbreviation. For each new part of the data set, I had to switch numbers and state names around so they matched up properly since the Children’s Bureau data spelled the state out and the MSIS data used abbreviations.

Also, I noticed that the numbers for foster children on Medicaid were a lot larger than the DHHS data. The Medicaid numbers could include children who were only in foster care for a short time, but it’s still off that the numbers are so different. For example, in Arizona 15,408 foster care children received benefits of Medicaid while the DHHS says there were only 3,711 children in care. For this reason, I only used the DHHS data to find the percent of change and to compare it to the US Census data for population under 18.

Also, I found there were five states - Maine, Iowa, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Utah - missing data 2011 Medicaid state summaries. What could be the reasons for that? After checking, most of the MSIS data is missing different states each year but 2011 was most complete. Did these states not report for that year or is the database itself just incomplete?