

ADOPTION AND FOSTER CARE  
ANALYSIS AND REPORTING SYSTEM  
(AFCARS)

*ANNUAL FILE*

# USER'S GUIDE

FOR FISCAL YEARS 2000 TO PRESENT



NATIONAL DATA ARCHIVE ON  
NDACAN CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

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

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

## 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. For information on AFCARS data for prior years, see [AFCARS\\_Guide\\_1995- 1999.pdf](#), which is available from NDACAN.

## ABSTRACT

The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) is a federally mandated data collection system intended to provide case specific information on all children covered by the protections of Title IV-B/E of the Social Security Act (Section 427). Under the final AFCARS rule, states are required to collect data on all children in foster care for whom the State child welfare agencies have responsibility for placement, care or supervision and on children who are adopted under the auspices of the State's public child welfare agency. AFCARS also includes information on foster and adoptive parents.

AFCARS was designed to address policy development and program management issues at both the state and federal levels. The data are also useful for researchers interested in analyzing aspects of the United States' foster care and adoption programs. Tables and other reports summarizing the AFCARS data are available from the Children's Bureau Web site.

AFCARS reporting periods are tied to the federal fiscal year (October 1 to September 30). The National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect distributes two data files for each fiscal year; one for adoption data and the other for foster care data. Each adoption data file contains information on the adopted child's gender, race, birth date, ethnicity and prior relationship with the adoptive parents. The date the adoption was finalized, as well as dates parental rights were terminated, characteristics of birth and adoptive parents, and whether the child was placed from within the United States or from another country are also captured. The foster care data files contain information on child demographics including gender, birth date, race, and ethnicity. Information about the number of previous stays in foster care, service goals, availability for adoption, dates of removal and discharge, funding sources, and some data on the biological and foster parents is also included in the foster care files.

## 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 collected by 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 collector 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 a copy of any published work or report based wholly or in part on these data with the Archive. 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, Beebe Hall, 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

In 1982 the Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Children, Youth and Families, through a grant to the American Public Welfare Association, implemented the Voluntary Cooperative Information System (VCIS) which collected national data on foster care and adoption. The VCIS system had a number of weaknesses including variation from state to state in reporting periods, a lack of common definitions for data elements and services, and inconsistent methodologies in reporting. In addition, the aggregate nature of the data limited both the analyses that could be performed and the data's usefulness for purposes of planning or policy development at the federal and state levels. Due to these weaknesses in the VCIS system, the U.S. Congress set forth to establish an improved, mandatory national reporting system.

In 1986 Congress approved an amendment to Title IV-E of the Social Security Act (Section 479) requiring that an advisory committee be established to prepare a Report to Congress and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) with recommendations for establishing, administering, and financing a system for collecting data on adoption and foster care in the United States. The advisory committee submitted a final report detailing recommendations for a mandatory system that would collect data on all children covered by the protections of Title IV-B of the Social Security Act (Section 427). On September 27, 1990, HHS published proposed federal regulations to implement the data collection system, which has become known as the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). On December 22, 1993, the final rule implementing AFCARS appeared in the Federal Register.

## PURPOSE OF AFCARS

The purpose of AFCARS is twofold. First, AFCARS is designed to address policy development and program management issues at both the state and federal levels. 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 (biological parents, adoptive parents, and foster care parents).

- Statewide and national information on the status of the foster care population (i.e., type of placement, length of placement, availability for adoption, and goals for ending or continuing care).
- Information on the extent and nature of assistance provided by federal, state, and local adoption and foster care programs.
- Information on the characteristics of the children to whom varying levels of assistance are provided.

## DATA COLLECTION

Under the final AFCARS rule, states are 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 also 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 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

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.

Only one record per foster care child is included in the annual database. The database includes only the most recent record received for each child served. If a child has a record in both periods, the record from the second period will be retained. 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 returned to care.

It is possible that foster care entries and discharges for the fiscal year under review may not be submitted by a state until after the close of the fiscal year. To minimize an undercount of

entries and discharges, these records are identified in the data from the first period of the subsequent fiscal year and included in the dataset for the period in which they belong.

## 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.

## 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.

## 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 data to the Children's Bureau after a required reporting date. In such cases subsequent versions of the data will contain more accurate information. When corrected data from any state is loaded to the publicly-available AFCARS file, the version number of that file is increased.

## 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.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE DATA FILES

NDACAN distributes these 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.

### 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 newer versions of 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. Each adoption data file contains 60 variables (representing 37 elements) and a varying number of cases from states each year. The file contains information on child demographics, including gender, birth, race, and ethnicity, as well as some information on disability or special needs of the child, funding sources, the dates that parental rights were terminated, and information on the adoptive parents.

### 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. Variables include child demographics such as gender, birth, race, and ethnicity, as well as the number of previous stays in foster care, service goals, availability for adoption, dates of removal and discharge, funding sources and information on the biological and foster parents. Data are from the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

## FOSTER CARE ENTRY AND EXIT HISTORY.

The data included are those for the most recent removal. 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.

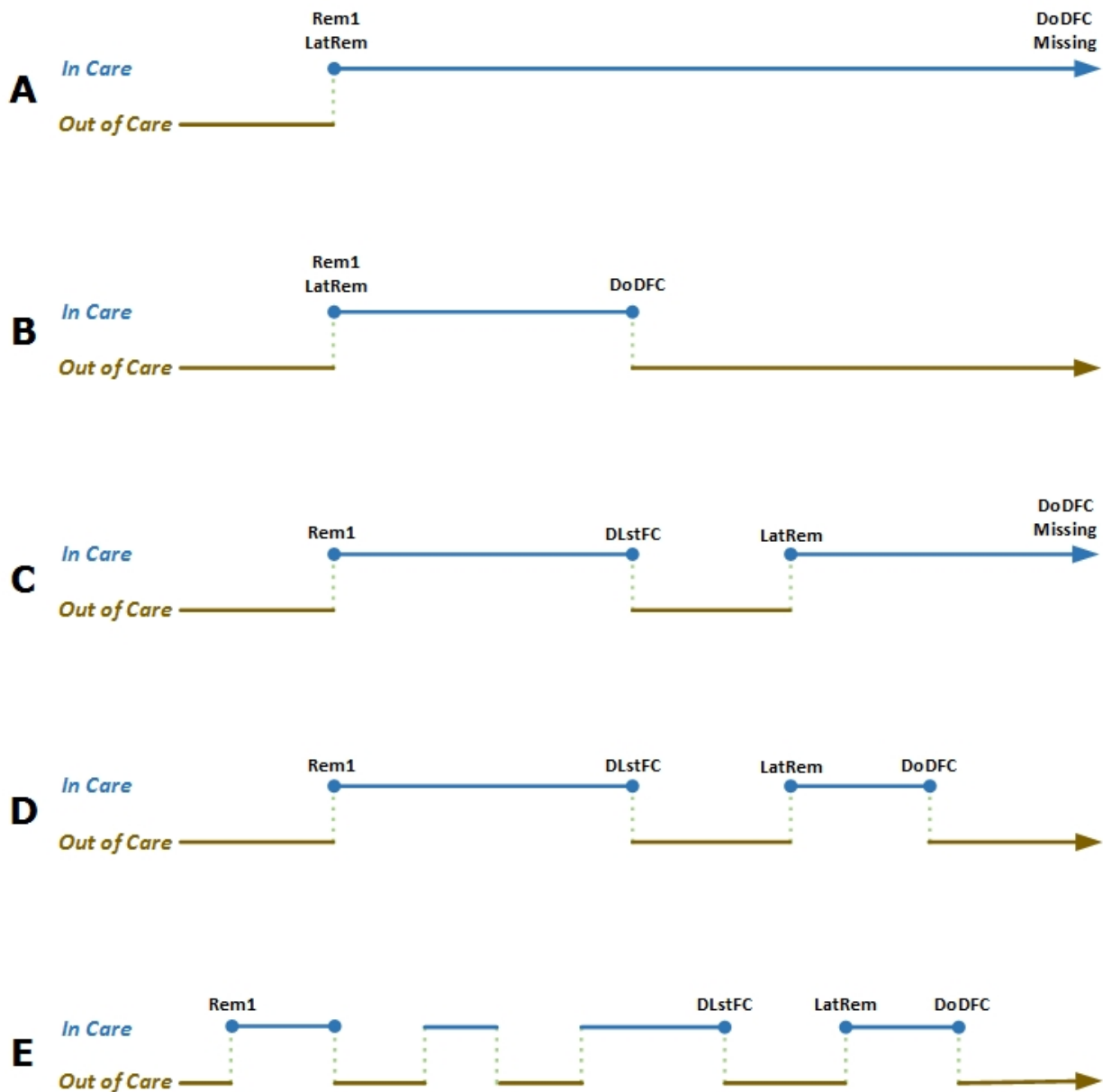
**Example C:** The child is currently in a second foster care episode. The removal date for the first episode (*Rem1Dt*) never changes. The date for the most recent removal (*LatRemDt*) is, in this case, the date the child entered foster care the second time. Whenever a child re-enters care, the *DoDFCDt*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

**Derived Variables.** All derived variables (variable number greater than 74) are computed using original data. Any derived variable that was computed using dates may not agree with a re-

computation using the data you downloaded from NDACAN, where dates have been adjusted. Using the variable definitions to check the validity of *AgeAtStart*, *AgeAtLatRem*, *AgeAtEnd*, *InAtEnd*, *InAtStart*, *Entered*, *Exited*, *Served*, *IsTPR*, *IsWaiting*, and *AgedOut* may produce results that are inconsistent with the original data. Use the derived variables.

## LINKING THE FOSTER CARE FILE WITH THE NCANDS CHILD FILE

The 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.

## NOTES REGARDING THE DATA FILES

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

In the unduplicated adoption data files, each record should represent a unique child whose adoption was finalized during that fiscal year. 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*.

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.

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.

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.

If you have questions, or encounter problems using these datasets, please contact us at:

[NDACANsupport@cornell.edu](mailto:NDACANsupport@cornell.edu)