

# CHILD WELFARE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

## Overview

ACF seeks to improve the safety, permanency, and well-being of children through leadership, support for necessary services, and productive partnerships with states, tribes, and communities. ACF's [Children's Bureau](#) has the primary responsibility for administering federal programs that support state child welfare services. ACF provides matching federal funds to states, tribes, and communities to help them operate every aspect of their child welfare (CW) systems. This includes the prevention of child abuse and neglect, the support of permanent placements through adoption and subsidized guardianship, and the creation and maintenance of information systems necessary to support these programs. In fiscal year 2019, ACF had a budget of approximately \$9 billion dollars to administer entitlement, formula, and discretionary grants. The authorities to carry out federal, state, and tribal child welfare programs include, but are not limited to:

- Title IV-E Foster Care
- Title IV-E Adoption Assistance
- Title IV-E Guardianship Assistance
- Tribal Participation in Title IV-E
- Title IV-E Plan Development Grants
- Child Welfare (Title IV-E) Demonstration Projects
- John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood
- Stephanie Tubbs Jones Child Welfare Services Program: Title IV-B, Subpart 1 of the Social Security Act
- Promoting Safe and Stable Families: Title IV-B, Subpart 2 of the Social Security Act
- Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) State Grants
- Community-Based Grants for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (CBCAP)
- Children's Justice Act
- Court Improvement Program

Current legislation and appropriations support the following child welfare discretionary grant program areas:

- Adoption Opportunities
- Child Welfare Training
- Child Abuse and Prevention Act Research Demonstration Project
- Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) Program
- Regional Partnership Grants (RPG)
- Family Connections Grants

ACF supports a number of research and evaluation activities as well as learning from a broad array of other activities relevant to child welfare such as performance management, technical assistance, stakeholder engagement, site monitoring, developing systems to oversee and use data, and continuous quality improvement. ACF also analyzes and reports information on administrative data such as the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), and National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD).



## ACF's Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) performance measures related to Child Welfare:

Decrease the percentage of children with substantiated or indicated reports of maltreatment that have a repeated substantiated or indicated report of maltreatment within six months - *Performance Measure 7B* (CAPTA; [p. 148](#))

Improve states' average response time between maltreatment report and investigation, based on the median of states' reported average response time in hours from screened-in reports to the initiation of the investigation - *Performance Measure 7C* (CAPTA; [p. 148](#))

Decrease the rate of first-time victims per 1,000 children - *Performance Measure 7A* (CBCAP; [p. 157](#))

Increase the percentage of Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) total funding that supports evidence-based and evidence-informed child abuse prevention programs and practices - *Performance Measure 7D* (CBCAP; [p. 158](#))

For those children who had been in care less than 12 months, maintain the percentage that has no more than two placement settings - *Performance Measure 7Q* (Child Welfare Services; [p. 164](#))

Decrease the percent of foster children in care 12 or more months with no case plan goal (including case plan goal "Not Yet Determined") - *Performance Measure 7R* (Child Welfare Services, PSSF, Foster Care; [p. 164](#))

Increase the adoption rate - *Performance Measures 7T & 7.8LT* (Foster Care, Adoption Opportunities, Adoption and Legal Guardianship Incentives, Adoption Assistance; [p. 173](#) & [p. 314](#))

Decrease the gap between the percentage of children nine and older waiting to be adopted and those actually adopted - *Performance Measure 7U* (Adoption and Legal Guardianship Incentive Payment Program; [p. 177](#))

Of all children to exit foster care in less than 24 months, maintain the percentage who exit to permanency (reunification, living with relative, guardianship or adoption) - *Performance Measure 7P1* (PSSF, Guardianship Assistance; [p. 284](#))

Of all children who exit foster care after 24 or more months, maintain the percentage who exit to permanency (reunification, living with relative, guardianship or adoption) - *Performance Measure 7P2* (PSSF, Guardianship Assistance; [p. 284](#))

Decrease improper payments in the title IV-E foster care program by lowering the national error rate - *Performance Measure 7S* (Foster Care; [p. 313](#))

Increase or maintain the percentage of youth currently or formerly in foster care who report in the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) survey having a connection to at least one adult to whom they can go for advice or emotional support - *Performance Measure 7W* (Chafee; [p. 315](#))

Increase the percentage of youth currently or formerly in foster care who report in the NYTD survey having at least a high school diploma or GED - *Performance Measure 7X* (Chafee; [p. 315](#))

Promote efficient use of CFCIP funds by increasing the number of jurisdictions that completely expend their allocations within the two-year expenditure period - *Performance Measure 7Y1* (Chafee; [p. 316](#))

Promote efficient use of CFCIP funds by decreasing the total amount of funds that remain unexpended by states at the end of the prescribed period - *Performance Measure 7Y2* (Chafee; [p. 316](#))



## Past Research and Evaluation

Over the past several decades, research and evaluation activities in child welfare have increased significantly.<sup>15</sup> This body of knowledge has shown that child maltreatment is a complex problem associated with multiple, interrelated risk and protective factors at individual, family, community, and contextual levels. This research has demonstrated that child abuse and neglect may have long-lasting and cumulative effects on the well-being of children into adulthood. There is burgeoning research examining the potential effectiveness of preventative and intervention treatments to improve the safety, stability, and well-being of children and their families. However, much still remains unknown about why child maltreatment incidence may vary over time, across types of child abuse and neglect, and across states or localities; the interplay of risk factors, protective factors, and child and family outcomes; and the evidence of effectiveness for current and ongoing prevention and treatment practices.

The promotion of children's safety, permanence, and well-being are the principles that guide child welfare practice and policy. ACF's child welfare research portfolio includes studies of children who have experienced or are at risk for maltreatment, families who are investigated by Child Protective Services, and children and families who access child welfare services, as well as research covering a broad array of related topics, including identification of antecedents and consequences of child maltreatment, strategies for its prevention, and service needs and outcomes for children who experience it. Past ACF research includes the completion of large national surveys, such as the first and second cohorts of the [National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being \(NSCAW\)](#) and [National Incidence Studies \(NIS\) 1-4](#). Additionally, ACF has conducted multi-site demonstration projects that integrate implementation science and rigorous evaluation to build an evidence base for child welfare policy and practice, including the [Permanency Innovations Initiative \(PII\) Evaluation](#), [Multi-site Evaluation of Foster Care Youth Programs \(Chafee Independent Living Evaluation Project\)](#), Regional Partnership Grants<sup>16</sup>, Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System<sup>17</sup>, [Family Connections Grants: Family Group Decision Making](#), [Grants to Address Trafficking within the Child Welfare Population](#), and [Youth at Risk of Homeless \(YARH\) Grants](#).

## Research and Evaluation Stakeholders

In setting child welfare research and evaluation priorities, ACF takes into account legislative requirements and Congressional interests; the interest and needs of ACF, HHS, and Administration leadership; program office staff and leadership; ACF partners; the populations served; researchers; and other stakeholders. ACF routinely interacts with these stakeholders through a variety of engagement activities. These activities inform our ongoing research and evaluation planning processes.

---

<sup>15</sup> IOM (Institute of Medicine) and NRC (National Research Council). (2014). *New directions in child abuse and neglect research*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK195985/>

<sup>16</sup> For more details on the Regional Partnership Grants, see Discretionary Grant Program descriptions at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/discretionary-grant-awards-2012>, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/discretionary-grant-awards-2014>, and <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/discretionary-grant-awards-2019> as well as a program description at <https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/technical/rpg.aspx>.

<sup>17</sup> For more details on Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System, see Discretionary Grant Program Description at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/discretionary-grant-awards-2012>.



## Who

- State, territory, tribal, local, and non-profit child welfare administrators and staff
- Child welfare training and technical assistance providers, such as the Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative; Family Resource Information, Education, and Network Development Service (FRIENDS) National Center; and Child Welfare Information Gateway
- Child welfare curriculum and model developers
- Law enforcement and court systems
- Youth and families served by the child welfare system
- Federal partners in HHS and other agencies, such as the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), the Department of Education (ED), the Social Security Administration (SSA), and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
- Researchers and policy experts
- National organizations, resource centers, and legal associations, such as Child Welfare League of America, Foster Youth in Action, National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators, National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, and the American Bar Association
- Partners in the fields of health care, mental health, substance use, early care and education, parenting, self-sufficiency and employment, financial assistance, housing, domestic violence prevention and intervention, etc.

## How

- Conferences and meetings, such as the National Child Welfare Evaluation Summit, the National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN), and Society for Social Work and Research
- Children's Bureau Annual Grantee Meeting, Discretionary and Formula Grantee Annual Meetings, and the State Team Planning Meeting
- Engagement with child welfare training and technical assistance networks
- Surveys, focus groups, interviews, and other activities conducted as part of research and evaluation studies
- Interagency collaborations, such as the Federal Interagency Work Group on Child Abuse and Neglect
- Structured mechanisms for broad stakeholder engagement, such as a [request for comments](#) in the Federal Register on the Children's Bureau Proposed Research Priorities for Fiscal Years 2018-2020

## Examples of Broad Questions

1. What are promising approaches and strategies for establishing and maintaining primary prevention strategies to improve the safety, stability, and well-being of all families? What factors promote or impede implementation of primary prevention?
2. What is the incidence of child abuse and neglect across states? What risk and protective factors are associated with child maltreatment incidence? Why does incidence of child abuse and neglect vary across states?



3. Who are the children and families that come into contact with the child welfare system? What programs and services are being provided to children and families involved with the child welfare system? What are the short- and longer-term outcomes for these children and families?
4. How effective are the programs and services currently available and/or being provided to children and families involved with the child welfare system? How do these programs and services support improved outcomes for children and families?
5. How can programs, services, and judicial oversight for children and families involved with the child welfare system be improved?

### Examples of Recent and Ongoing Research and Evaluation Activities

	Broad Question				
	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5
Building Capacity to Evaluate Community Collaborations to Strengthen and Preserve	X				X
Building Capacity to Evaluate Interventions for Youth at Risk for Homelessness (YARH)				X	X
Chafee Independent Living Evaluation Projects				X	X
Child Maltreatment Incidence Data Linkages (CMI Data Linkages):		X			
Community Collaborations to Strengthen and Preserve Families	X				
Definitions and Policies Related to the Incidence of Child Abuse and Neglect and Related Risk		X			
Domestic Human Trafficking and the Child Welfare Population			X		X
Engaging Fathers and Paternal Relatives: A Continuous Quality Improvement Approach in the Child Welfare System					X
Expanding Evidence on Replicable Recovery and Reunification Interventions for Families				X	X
Judicial Decision-Making and Hearing Quality in Child Welfare:					X
National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW)			X		X
Postadoption and Guardianship Instability for Children and Youth Who Exit Foster Care (PAGI)					X
Regional Partnership Grants (RPG) to Increase the Well-Being of, and to Improve the Permanency Outcomes for, Children and Families Affected By Substance Abuse				X	
RPG Cross-Site Evaluation and Evaluation-Related Technical Assistance Project				X	X
Supporting Evidence Building in Child Welfare				X	X
Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse				X	
Title IV-E Waiver Demonstration National Study			X	X	

- **Building Capacity to Evaluate Community Collaborations to Strengthen and Preserve:** provides technical assistance for organizations awarded cooperative agreement grants that support the development, implementation, and evaluation of primary prevention. An additional objective is conducting a cross-site process evaluation of grantees’ implementation processes and outcomes. (#1) (#5)
- **Building Capacity to Evaluate Interventions for Youth at Risk for Homelessness (YARH):** supports efforts to build evidence on how to end homelessness for at risk youth by continuing work with organizations who conducted



foundational work as part of Phases I and II of the YARH project. Phase III of YARH will continue to provide important information to the field by supporting organizations from Phase II in evidence-building activities. (#4) (#5)

- **[Chafee Independent Living Evaluation Projects](#)**: are multi-site evaluations of selected programs funded through the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (Chafee Program). The current project supports the implementation of a “Next Generation” evaluation agenda for the Chafee Program. This project will implement program evaluation designs that enable ACF to continue to fulfill the legislative mandate specified in the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. Formative evaluations of employment and college success programs are currently underway, as well as an analysis of the Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) program usage and outcomes. (#4) (#5)
- **[Child Maltreatment Incidence Data Linkages \(CMI Data Linkages\)](#)**: explores how enhancing and scaling innovative data linkage practices can improve our understanding of child maltreatment incidence and related risk and protective factors. (#2)
- **[Community Collaborations to Strengthen and Preserve Families](#)**: are cooperative agreements that support the development, implementation, and evaluation of primary prevention strategies to improve the safety, stability, and well-being of all families through a continuum of community-based services and supports. (#1)
- **[Definitions and Policies Related to the Incidence of Child Abuse and Neglect and Related Risk](#)**: supports the creation of a database of state definitions and policies related to the surveillance of child maltreatment to address important questions about how variations in these definitions and policies are associated with child welfare intake, screening practices, substantiation decisions, service provision, and child safety and well-being. (#2)
- **[Domestic Human Trafficking and the Child Welfare Population](#)**: supports a review of the literature, examination of state policies, and design and implementation of studies to better understand domestic human trafficking in the child welfare population. A recent Report to Congress, *The Child Welfare Response to Sex Trafficking of Children*, was published in 2019. (#3) (#5)
- **[Engaging Fathers and Paternal Relatives: A Continuous Quality Improvement Approach in the Child Welfare System](#)**: uses a collaborative continuous learning approach to work with child welfare agencies and their system partners to identify, implement, and test strategies and interventions that can be used to improve father and paternal relative engagement. (#5)
- **[Expanding Evidence on Replicable Recovery and Reunification Interventions for Families](#)**: lays the foundation for a three-part evaluation. This first phase of the evaluation aims to compile and disseminate a synthesis on the existing body of evidence of recovery and reunification interventions that utilize coaching models in the field. It will also determine the feasibility of conducting a rigorous impact evaluation of one or more potentially replicable and scalable interventions. (#4) (#5)
- **[Judicial Decision-Making and Hearing Quality in Child Welfare](#)**: supports the design and implementation of a study or group of studies that would examine judicial decision-making during the life of a child welfare case as well as the quality of child welfare court proceedings. (#5)



- **[National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being \(NSCAW\)](#)**: is a nationally representative, longitudinal survey of the functioning and well-being, service needs, and service utilization of children and families who come to the attention of the child welfare system. NSCAW examines data from first-hand reports of children, parents, and other caregivers, as well as reports from caseworkers, teachers, and administrative records data. (#3) (#5)
- **[Postadoption and Guardianship Instability for Children and Youth Who Exit Foster Care \(PAGI\)](#)**: supports a review of the literature, examination of state policies, and design and implementation of a study or studies to better understand post-permanency instability for children and youth who exit foster care through adoption or guardianship. (#5)
- **Regional Partnership Grants (RPG) to Increase the Well-Being of, and to Improve the Permanency Outcomes for, Children and Families Affected By Substance Abuse<sup>18</sup>**: is a cooperative agreement of regional partnership grant projects designed to increase well-being, improve permanency, and enhance the safety of children who are in, or at risk of, an out-of-home placement as a result of a parent's or caregiver's opioid or other substance use. (#4)
- **RPG Cross-Site Evaluation and Evaluation-Related Technical Assistance Project<sup>19</sup>**: is a rigorous national cross-site evaluation of the RPG Grant Program that provides legislatively mandated performance measurement to grantees, furnishes evaluation-related technical assistance to the grantees in order to improve the quality and rigor of their local evaluations, and supports their participation in the cross-site evaluation. (#4) (#5)
- **[Supporting Evidence Building in Child Welfare](#)**: supports an increase in the number of evidence-supported interventions for the child welfare population by conducting rigorous evaluations and supporting the field in moving toward rigorous evaluations. (#4) (#5)
- **[Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#)**: conducts an independent systematic review of research on programs and services intended to provide enhanced support to children and families and prevent foster care placements. The Clearinghouse was developed in accordance with the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) of 2018, as codified in Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. (#4)
- **[Title IV-E Waiver Demonstration National Study](#)**: is a national study that examined the collective experience of 23 jurisdictions approved for a Title IV-E waiver in federal fiscal years 2012–2014 in implementing their demonstrations and operating with increased fiscal flexibility. The study consisted of four data collection components: the Web-Based Survey, the Fiscal Flexibility Telephone Survey, the Measuring Well-Being Telephone Survey, and the Interim Evaluation Report Review. A supplemental outcomes report based on the final evaluation reports of the waiver demonstration projects will be available in 2021. (#3) (#4)

<sup>18</sup> For more details on the Regional Partnership Grants, see Discretionary Grant Program descriptions at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/discretionary-grant-awards-2019>

<sup>19</sup> For more details on the Regional Partnership Grants, see Discretionary Grant Program descriptions at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/discretionary-grant-awards-2007>, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/discretionary-grant-awards-2012>, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/discretionary-grant-awards-2014>, and <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/discretionary-grant-awards-2019> as well as a program description at [https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/files/rpg\\_bifold\\_final\\_508.pdf](https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/files/rpg_bifold_final_508.pdf)



## Future Directions for Research and Evaluation

The broad questions listed above will continue to drive much of ACF's research and evaluation activity in this area. Future activities will also be informed by emerging findings from ongoing research and evaluation activities, other learning activities, and continued engagement with child welfare stakeholders.

Examples of activities planned for the next few years include, but are not limited to:

- Supporting the implementation and rigorous evaluation of prevention and intervention programs to improve the safety, stability, and well-being of children and families
- Collecting information on states' use of linked administrative data to enhance understanding of child maltreatment incidence and related risk
- Gathering nationally representative data about the CW workforce, including the potential influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on CW agencies and practice
- Collecting and analyzing data on permanency and stability of children's living situations (in-home, foster care, kinship care, and adoptive families) to better support the continuity and preservation of family relationships and connections
- Building the evidence of effectiveness of programs and services in improving outcomes for kinship caregivers and the children they are raising
- Examining tribally-defined program effectiveness for tribal child welfare and court processes
- Developing and disseminating products (such as webinars, toolkits, and briefs) to provide technical assistance to states and other key stakeholders that help to build evidence, strengthen practice, and inform policy
- Planning national evaluation summits and conferences to provide child welfare leaders, members of the research and evaluation community, and their partners and stakeholders with

