



# Using Child Welfare Administrative Data in the Permanency Innovations Initiative Evaluation

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## Background

Administrative data provide a rich source of information for child welfare administrators and the child welfare research community. With administrative data, program managers, evaluators and others may examine who is served by the child welfare system, engage in continuous quality improvement efforts, and evaluate changes in service delivery outputs and outcomes over time. In addition, using administrative data to evaluate child welfare programs and practices can help inform program development, policy decisions, and program funding to improve the safety, permanency, and well-being of children involved in the child welfare system. This brief discusses the PII Evaluation Team's (PII-ET) and PII Grantees' use of administrative data in the PII evaluation. It begins by defining administrative data and providing information about the most commonly used child welfare administrative datasets, outlines several of the challenges associated with using administrative data, then highlights the ways in which administrative data are used in the PII evaluation.

## Permanency Innovations Initiative (PII)

The federal Permanency Innovations Initiative (PII) is a multi-site demonstration project designed to improve permanency outcomes for children in foster care who face the most serious barriers to permanency. Child welfare policy and practice are limited by a lack of evidence-supported interventions. The PII project aims to address this lack by increasing the rate of children discharged to permanent homes and adding to the body of knowledge about what works in child welfare. In 2010, the Children's Bureau, within the Administration for Children and Families funded six Grantees, a training and technical assistance provider (PII-TTAP), and an evaluation team (PII-ET). Each Grantee is implementing a unique approach to the project, both in the populations they target and the interventions they develop or adapt. PII-ET is charged with designing and carrying out rigorous evaluations to examine the implementation and effectiveness of the interventions designed to reduce long-term foster care stays and improve child and family outcomes.

## What are Administrative Data?

Administrative data include "information collected in the course of operating government programs" (Hotz et al., 1998, p.81). In public child welfare agencies, Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information Systems (SACWIS) or similar information systems have been created to track families and children served, including services provided and the cost of those services. Most child welfare administrative data systems are case management systems that caseworkers, supervisors, program managers, and administrators use to store and track information about the clients they



serve. This includes child- and family- level characteristics (e.g., child’s date of birth, race, maltreatment experiences such as abuse and neglect, and caregiver status); family and child assessments; case history; case plan goals; and services needed, referred, and provided. The systems also track placement events for children in foster and kinship care, including date of entry into care, reason for removal from home, and date of and reason for discharge (i.e., reunification, guardianship, adoption, and emancipation). In addition, many of these systems automatically generate reports such as court documents and appointments, visitations, alerts and notices on case reviews and family team meetings. Finally, variables in these datasets can be used as outcome measures to assess the effectiveness of child welfare services in formal evaluations, like the ones being conducted for PII.

SACWIS and other state data systems inform two national administrative data systems, the [Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System](#) (AFCARS) (mandatory for states) and the [National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System](#) (NCANDS) (voluntary for states). With guidance from the Children’s Bureau (CB), state and tribal child welfare agencies submit child- and family-level data about children and families involved with the child welfare system. AFCARS data are submitted twice a year based on two 6-month reporting periods, whereas NCANDS data are submitted annually. Because state and federal agencies alike are contributing to these datasets, they provide a wealth of information about the status of child welfare at the state and federal levels. States can use this information to assess how they are faring in comparison to other states on outcomes of interest. In addition, because common identifiers are used across the datasets, they may be linked across reporting periods, making them especially useful for research and evaluation studies.

## Challenges of Using Administrative Data

PII-ET has experienced many of the benefits of using administrative data, but has also encountered many of the challenges. Some of the challenges in using administrative data for evaluation purposes include the size and complexity of the relational databases involved, quality and completeness of data elements, lack of key variables (and relevance to evaluation questions), and data access and ownership. These challenges and our solutions to them are briefly discussed here.

***Large and complex relational databases.*** The current child welfare administrative data systems store their data in complex relational databases that often have hundreds of data tables. Extracting and transforming data to address evaluation questions requires extensive knowledge of the source database design, expertise not often found in public child welfare agencies. One way the PII-ET addressed this challenge was to partner with universities that had experience and expertise with the data.

***Data quality and completeness.*** Prior to using administrative data for evaluation, it is important to assess the quality and completeness of variables needed to answer the research question. In doing so, an evaluator may find there is a large amount of missing data for key variables, which may preclude answering a particular evaluation question, or that data were not entered consistently by those required to enter the data (e.g., caseworkers, supervisors, program

managers, and administrators); both of these issues can compromise the usefulness of the final dataset. One way the PII-ET handled this was to conduct thorough data quality and completeness checks to help identify problems and inform discussions about the feasibility of using administrative data to answer research questions.

***Lack of key variables.*** In some cases, administrative data may not capture variables that are key to evaluation questions. Administrators may decide to modify the administrative system to include these variables, as they may be important to both the evaluation and ongoing casework records; however doing so can be complicated and may require the assistance of outside evaluators. If adding variables is not feasible, other data sources may be considered for the evaluation. The PII evaluation uses a combination of primary and administrative data sources to answer site specific and cross-site research questions.

***Data access and ownership.*** Administrative data may only be used with the permission of the child welfare or other agency and for an explicit purpose. When an outside evaluator uses administrative data, the evaluator and agency usually enter into a data sharing agreement, as did PII-ET with each Grantee. Data sharing agreements provide an opportunity to identify and resolve ethical, legal, or other issues. For example, data-sharing may affect the sense of ownership and trust of the staff involved, which can compromise the evaluation. In addition, applicable laws may allow a variety of interpretations of, for example, the type of information that can be shared or who approves what gets shared. A lack of clear agreement around such issues may result in a reluctance to share data. To address these kinds of challenges, among other requirements, the PII-ET data sharing agreements clearly identify the purpose of data sharing, the tables and variables to be shared, and a schedule for data delivery.

## Using Administrative Data for Evaluation

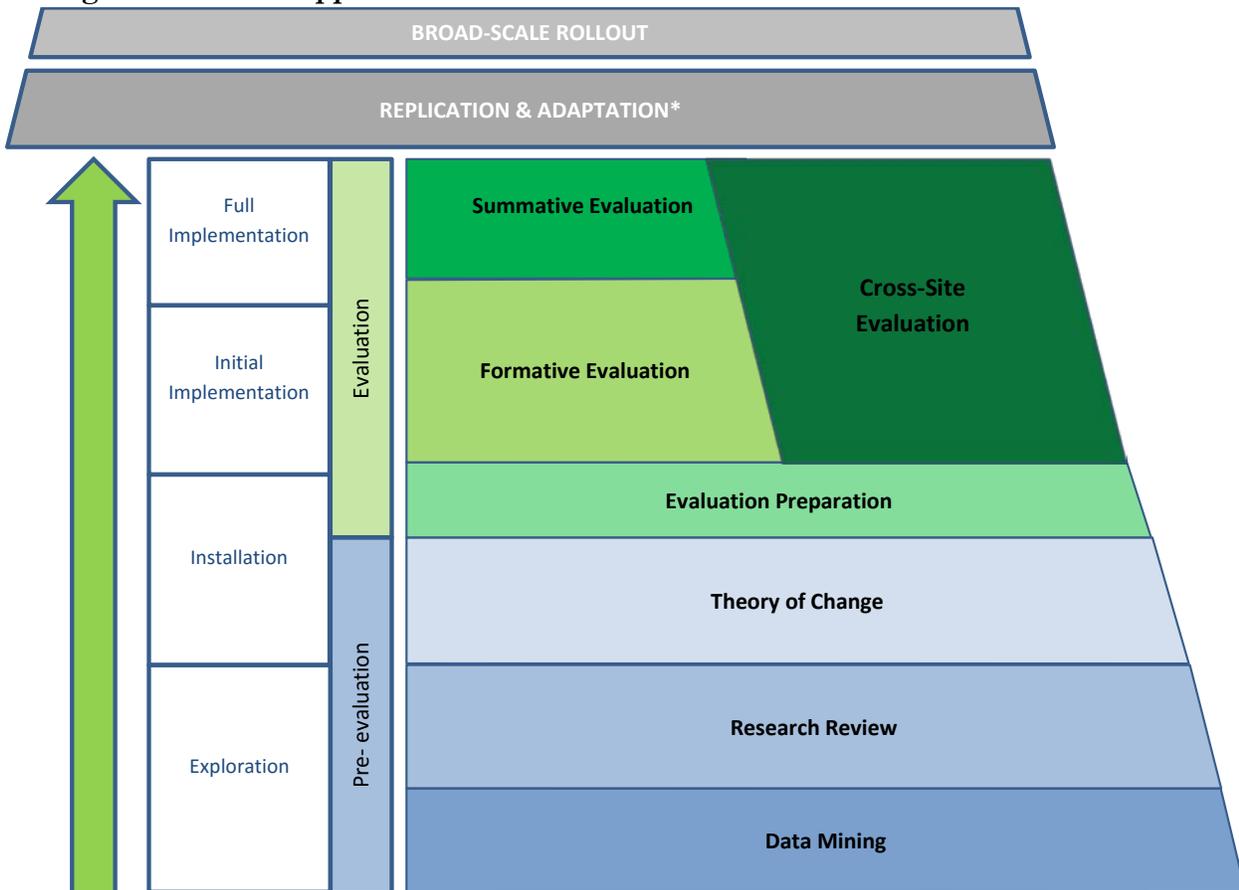
Increasingly, researchers, evaluators and child welfare administrators are using administrative data for research and program evaluation. State child welfare agencies also use administrative data for continuous quality improvement efforts; that is, to assess how successful agencies are at improving child safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes. Administrative data may also be used to identify appropriate target populations for an intervention, identify and monitor performance indicators, and assess the impact of programs on child and family outcomes.

There are several benefits to using administrative data for evaluation and research. First, it poses less data collection burden on staff and clients because information is entered and stored in large databases in the normal course of casework. As such, staff and clients are not asked to participate in surveys, interviews, and focus groups to gather primary data. In addition, using administrative data may be more cost effective than collecting primary data, which requires developing or purchasing measures (e.g., survey questions) and then administering them. Finally, standard definitions have been created as part of administrative data collection. For example, AFCARS and NCANDS provide standardization in how child maltreatment, foster care, and adoption data are reported across states. This makes comparisons across datasets possible.

## Using Administrative Data in the PII Evaluation

The PII evaluation incorporates use of administrative data into site-specific and cross-site evaluation plans<sup>1</sup>. PII Grantees and PII-ET work together to identify outcome measures and potential administrative data sources that could be used for evaluation, with the aim of identifying standardized data sources while minimizing the data collection burden on child welfare agency staff. PII-ET uses administrative data in data mining activities and in site-specific formative evaluations, as described below and depicted in Figure 1. Administrative data are also used in site-specific summative evaluations and in the PII cross-site evaluation to assess the impact of PII interventions on long-term outcomes (e.g., reductions in long-term foster care).

**Figure 1. The PII Approach to Evaluation**



\*Beyond the scope of PII

**Administrative data in PII data mining.** PII-ET and the Grantees use state and county child welfare administrative data during the Exploration Stage of the [PII Approach](#) to conduct data mining activities<sup>2</sup> to identify or refine their target populations. Data mining is an analytic process

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/pii-evaluation-overview>

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see *Using Data Mining to Identify At-Risk Populations in the Permanency Innovations Initiative*.

used to drill down through large datasets to gain knowledge about patterns, trends, or group characteristics. For example, NCANDS data can be used to assess trends in child maltreatment for specific age groups. Using these data for data mining helps the Grantees identify which target populations are at risk of long-term foster care (LTFC) or disproportionately represented in long-term foster care by:

- Identifying specific types of placement and/or child and family characteristics that are associated with LTFC;
- Establishing evidence that identified characteristics are associated with LTFC; and
- Prioritizing the characteristics for which there is evidence of association, thus establishing the most salient risk factors for LTFC.

***Administrative data in PII formative evaluations.*** PII-ET also uses administrative data in formative evaluations of Grantee interventions, as described in the examples below. In addition to informing the formative evaluations, these data provide evidence to support decisions about whether Grantees should proceed to summative evaluation to test the impact of each intervention.

Kansas Intensive Permanency Project (KIPP): KIPP is examining the effectiveness of Parent Management Training – Oregon (PMTO), an early, intensive home-based parent management training to improve permanency outcomes for children with serious emotional disturbance (SED) using a two-stage randomized design. For the formative evaluation, KIPP used AFCARS data to track reunification (return home), one of its long-term outcomes.

Washoe County Department of Social Services: PII-ET is evaluating the impact of Washoe County’s SAFE-FC model, based on two established interventions: Safety Assessment Family Evaluation (SAFE) and Family Connections (FC). SAFE-FC aims to prevent LTFC by providing tailored services and intensive engagement for families with children in care and at risk of LTFC. PII-ET used administrative data in the formative evaluation to examine outputs regarding the number of caseworker-caregiver, in-person contacts (in the first 100 days of the case), and the type of safety plan (in or out of home) initially and at 120 days into the case.

California Partners for Permanency (CAPP): CAPP’s Child and Family Practice Model is a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional frontline practice intervention that seeks to reduce racial disparity in child welfare for African American and American Indian children through improved, culturally sensitive casework. For evaluation purposes, PII-ET combined data from three administrative datasets—AFCARS, NCANDS, and the State’s Child Welfare Services/Case Management System—to match CAPP children to comparison children, and examine selected child outcomes in the two groups of children.

***Administrative data for PII summative evaluations and cross-site evaluation.*** Administrative data can provide critical evidence as to the effects of a policy, program, or service intervention through outcome analysis. For the PII summative or final evaluation stage and the cross-site evaluation, PII-ET uses administrative data to analyze long-term (distal) outcomes related to permanency to determine whether PII interventions were successful in reducing LTFC. Findings

from the final evaluation reports will be used to guide program and funding decisions, including whether or not to continue or expand implementation of PII interventions. Further, if findings show reductions in LTFC, they can be used for broader policy decisions regarding efforts to reduce LTFC across the country.

Several of the cross-site evaluation outcomes are consistent with those being examined in the site-specific evaluations. In evaluating multi-site initiatives like PII, it is important to have standardized data across all evaluation participants. For the PII cross-site evaluation, PII-ET uses outcome measures from AFCARS and NCANDS because definitions of key outcomes (e.g., permanency, re-entry into foster care) are standardized across the systems; data can be integrated across systems; and because they are publicly available, they are cost effective.

In addition to measures from AFCARS and NCANDS, some Grantees identified additional outcomes utilizing administrative data from their own child welfare information systems. For example, one Grantee uses administrative data to assess the frequency of caseworker-caregiver in-person contacts, and another uses data from administrative case reviews—a process used to examine individual cases for purposes of permanency planning or as part of a wider process examining the effectiveness of the system as a whole—to assess biological parent service completion.

## **Conclusion**

Several features of administrative data make them an important source of information for child welfare administrators and practitioners at the federal and state levels, and the research and evaluation community. First, NCANDS and AFCARS use common identifiers and provide standardization in how child maltreatment, foster care, and adoption are reported across states, making comparisons (or links) across datasets possible. Comparing data from multiple data sources can be useful in understanding trends in, for example, incidence of child maltreatment and foster care placement. This is especially useful in the PII cross-site evaluation, where administrative data is being used to assess child welfare outcomes across PII Grantees. Additionally, these data are collected as part of standard business practices for child welfare agencies. Having caseworkers enter this data as part of casework practice minimizes the need for primary data collection, which increases burden on agency staff and can be quite expensive to gather. This is particularly important in large evaluations like PII where there is a sizable primary data collection component. Finally, these data provide information on individuals and cases over time. Opportunities to track children and families over time—as PII-ET is doing in both the cross-site and site-specific evaluations—are increasingly important as we work to understand how behavior and well-being change in response to changes in child welfare policies and practices.

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