



# How Current Data Can Help Us Measure Progress Toward a Home for Every Child

**April Wilson,\* Rachel Rosenberg,\* Brittany Mihalec-Adkins, Karlee Naylor, and Berenice Rushovich**

\* These authors contributed equally to this report. Additional authors are listed alphabetically given their similar level of contribution.

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# Executive Summary

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Ensuring that children experience safe, stable, and family-based homes is a shared priority across the child welfare field and a central focus of the federal [A Home for Every Child initiative](#). Advancing this goal requires clear, practical information about how child welfare systems operate at key decision points and the degree to which existing data help us better understand children's experiences of safety, stability, and permanency.

This report presents a decision-point framework for assessing progress toward A Home for Every Child. It examines what current federal data can and cannot show about children's experiences, identifies gaps that limit our understanding of the full scope of those experiences, and highlights opportunities to strengthen measurement in ways that improve usefulness without increasing reporting burden on states and Tribes.

## Why this matters now

- **A Home for Every Child has already moved from concept to implementation.** Early state participation in A Home for Every Child and the planned use of foster-home-to-child ratio and related metrics create an immediate opportunity to clarify which measures can best support learning, interpretation, and course correction as implementation unfolds.
- **States and Tribes are being asked to demonstrate progress toward A Home for Every Child,** but some rely on data systems that were not designed to capture key factors such as service availability, placement capacity, or placement fit. As a result, progress can be difficult to assess using existing measures alone.
- **Current federal and state performance and improvement efforts increasingly emphasize outcomes across multiple decision points,** rather than single indicators, creating demand for clearer, more interpretable measurement that supports learning rather than compliance.
- **States and Tribes are seeking measures that support learning and continuous improvement** without expanding reporting requirements or relying on metrics that are difficult to interpret in practice.
- **Renewed attention to prevention, kinship placement, and timely permanency** has highlighted gaps between what existing federal data can tell us and what federal, state, and Tribal decision makers need to understand to act effectively.

## A decision-point framework for measurement

Progress toward A Home for Every Child unfolds across key child welfare intervention points as systems respond to concerns about children's safety and well-being. This report organizes measurement around three decision points:

- **Can children remain safely with their families?** Federal data provide insight into maltreatment reports, recurrence of maltreatment, and foster care entry, but these indicators have known data quality challenges. Federal data also provide limited information on the availability, timeliness, and intensity of family preservation services that support children remaining safely at home.
- **When removal is necessary, are children placed first with kin or, when that is not possible, in other family-based settings that can meet their needs?** Existing data describe overall rates of placement with kin, but they provide limited insight into how quickly kin are identified and selected as the first placement. Further, existing federal data provide limited information on the availability of kin and non-

kin foster homes and whether the available placements have the capacity—and willingness—to keep siblings together and serve children with higher support needs.

- **Once in foster care, do children experience safety, stability, and timely permanency?** Federal data can measure placement stability, safety while in foster care, length of stay, and exits from care. These indicators require careful interpretation because placement changes may reflect positive transitions and because permanency timelines are shaped by multiple factors, including the time needed to support safe reunification.

## Cross-cutting data considerations

Across all three decision points, federal administrative data are well suited to describing, at a high level, children's experiences and system responses. Taken together, however, the framework highlights several limitations that affect interpretation across the child welfare continuum, including limited information on:

- Service availability and intensity
- Placement capacity and fit
- Reasons for placement changes
- Context surrounding permanency timelines

## Looking ahead

The report presents illustrative measurement options that are aligned to each decision point, ranging from measures that can be constructed using existing federal data to early concepts that would require testing and refinement. Together, these options demonstrate how a small, complementary set of measures can provide clearer signals of progress toward A Home for Every Child. Understanding what existing federal data can and cannot show is especially important as states and Tribes are asked to demonstrate progress using existing federal data systems that were often not designed to capture service availability, placement capacity, or placement fit.

Prioritizing a small set of high-value indicators, refining existing measures, and strengthening data quality can help the field better understand what supports children's safety, stability, and permanency. Federal data can provide important insight into children's experiences, while research and analyses conducted by states and Tribes add critical context that federal datasets cannot capture. Collaboration among federal, state, and Tribal partners; researchers; and families can help ensure that these measures provide clear and actionable signals of progress toward A Home for Every Child.

# Introduction: Advancing the Goal of a Home for Every Child

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Federal leadership, including the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), has emphasized the importance of ensuring that there is A Home for Every Child, an initiative reflected in recent [executive actions](#) and [public statements](#). A Home for Every Child promotes a [proactive approach](#) to finding safe and stable placements in communities before those placements are needed. This focus could reduce emergency placements—such as housing children in hotels and offices—while increasing the use of kin and non-kin family placements. In this report, we interpret A Home for Every Child as a call to ensure that children have safe, stable, and family-based homes that meet their needs. At its core, this priority reflects a shared principle in the child welfare field: Children should be safe with their families whenever possible; when that is not possible, they should be [placed with kin](#) or family-based caregivers who can provide stable and nurturing care. A safe and stable home is the [foundation for children’s well-being](#) and shapes their experiences [well into adulthood](#).

This report is intended to inform discussions on how existing data can be used to assess progress toward A Home for Every Child and to identify additional information needed to support effective measurement. Available federal data do not capture the full story, but they can provide an important starting point and help inform the development of more in-depth measures that may ultimately be needed to ensure every child has a safe and stable home.

This conversation is particularly timely because A Home for Every Child is already being implemented in [multiple states](#). Early participants are beginning to operationalize the initiative and track indicators related to foster home capacity and placement availability. As additional states join these efforts, new information will emerge about how jurisdictions measure progress and respond to placement capacity challenges. As such, this moment presents an opportunity to shape ongoing learning by identifying which measures are most meaningful, interpretable, and useful to policymakers, practitioners, and communities. This report is intended to contribute to that conversation by encouraging discussion across the field about how progress toward A Home for Every Child can best be measured as implementation unfolds.

This report is intentionally focused on placements and placement stability in the context of A Home for Every Child. Subsequent products will provide information on other important topics, such as outcomes and experiences of older youth in foster care.

## A Measurement Framework for Assessing Progress Toward a Home for Every Child

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Assessing progress toward A Home for Every Child requires identifying decision points in the child welfare process that shape whether children remain in, or move into, family-based settings that support safety and stability. Table 1 presents three decision points alongside key questions that must be answered to assess whether systems are supporting A Home for Every Child.

For each decision point, assessment depends on understanding both children’s and families’ circumstances and the system’s capacity to respond. High-level measures can provide useful signals of progress toward system goals, but they are most informative when paired with clarity about what information is needed to

interpret them. The sections that follow examine what existing federal data can and cannot tell us at each decision point and identify additional information needed.

**Table 1.** Key Decision Points for Assessing Whether Children Can Experience Safe and Stable Homes

Key decision point	Key questions needed to assess progress toward children having safe, stable homes
Are children who experience maltreatment able to remain safely with their families?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How frequently do maltreatment concerns arise, and which type of concerns lead to removal versus in-home responses?</li> <li>• Are family preservation services available when needed?</li> <li>• What services are provided to support family preservation?</li> <li>• To what extent are children whose families receive preservation services able to remain safely at home and free of recurring maltreatment?</li> </ul>
When removal is necessary, are children placed with kin or in other family-based settings?	<p><b>Kinship homes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How often are kin identified and available as placements?</li> <li>• How quickly after removal are children able to be placed with kin?</li> <li>• What policies or practices support or limit placement with kin?</li> <li>• To what extent do kin placements support placement stability and continuity of relationships while permanency efforts are underway?</li> </ul> <p><b>Family foster homes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are sufficient family foster homes available to meet demand when removal occurs (e.g., adequate number of licensed foster homes)?</li> <li>• Are there sufficient family foster homes (e.g., available foster beds) that can care for sibling groups?</li> <li>• Are family foster homes meeting the needs of all children, including those at all levels of care needs (e.g., behavioral health or medical needs)?</li> </ul>
Do children in foster care experience safety, stability, and timely permanency?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent do children experience placement stability and remain safe from maltreatment while in care?</li> <li>• To what extent do children reunify with their families or exit to other permanent family connections in a timely manner?</li> </ul>

Together, these decision points reflect how system-level policies and capacities shape children’s day-to-day experiences of safety, stability, and permanency.

## Applying the Framework to Available Data

Below, we apply the measurement framework to available information to assess progress toward A Home for Every Child. For each decision point, we focus on the key questions identified in Table 1 and examine the extent to which existing data can help answer them. This synthesis includes federal administrative data as well as other relevant research and state-level information.

Several federal administrative datasets provide national information on children’s experiences and system responses through the child welfare system and serve as an important foundation for measurement. Two commonly used federal datasets relevant to A Home for Every Child include the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System ([NCANDS](#)) and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System ([AFCARS](#)).<sup>1</sup> While [NCANDS](#) and [AFCARS](#) offer critical insight into children’s experiences and system responses, they are not designed to capture system capacity, service availability, or placement fit. As a result, additional sources of information are needed to better align measurement with priority outcomes relevant to A Home for Every Child.

<sup>1</sup> Additional detail on federal data sources and indicators is provided in Appendix A, with a description of the approach used to assess data availability in Appendix B and interpretation considerations in Appendix C

Below, for each decision point, a summary table highlights whether the information needed to answer each key question is currently available, partially available, or limited; and identifies the primary data sources. The accompanying text interprets whether these data are sufficient to measure progress and highlights emerging work that may address gaps in measurement, including opportunities to improve data-driven decision making.

## Are children who experience maltreatment able to remain safely with their families?

The first decision point in assessing progress toward A Home for Every Child is to determine whether children who experience maltreatment are able to remain safely with their families. Supporting families of origin by meeting families’ needs and providing services to keep children at home reflects the child welfare system’s prevention and early response capacity and shapes whether children experience unnecessary separation from their families. Understanding the data on child maltreatment is essential for [strengthening prevention efforts](#), identifying which families can safely stay together, and determining when removal is necessary to ensure child safety.

Assessing the child welfare system’s progress at this decision point requires answering several key questions, including those about the frequency of maltreatment concerns, the types of maltreatment that lead to a child’s removal versus receipt of in-home services, and whether services are available and sufficient to address families’ needs and support children remaining safely at home. Together, these questions focus attention on whether systems have the capacity to respond to safety concerns in ways that protect children while minimizing removals.

Table 2 summarizes the extent to which existing data can help answer each key question and identifies available sources of information.

**Table 2.** Information Available to Assess Whether Children Can Remain Safely With Their Families

Key question	Is information currently available?	Primary data sources
How frequently do maltreatment concerns arise, and which types of concerns lead to removal versus in-home responses?	Partially	NCANDS; AFCARS
Are family preservation services available when needed?	Partially	NCANDS (limited); state administrative data; surveys <sup>^</sup>
What services are provided to support family preservation, and to what extent do these services help children remain safely at home?	Limited	NCANDS (limited); Research studies; program evaluations; state data (not standardized)

**Note:** See Appendix A for indicator definitions and Appendix C for important considerations when interpreting these data.

<sup>^</sup> In this context, references to surveys reflect a potential data collection strategy to supplement administrative data, rather than existing national survey sources that capture family preservation service participation.

Existing data provide partial insight into these questions. Federal administrative data offer the most consistent information on the frequency at which maltreatment concerns arise and whether those concerns result in alternative responses<sup>2</sup> or removal. Data from NCANDS describe the volume and types of maltreatment reports and case outcomes while data from AFCARS provide information on entries into foster care and reported reasons for removal. Together, these data help define the scale of maltreatment concerns and identify when children enter out-of-home care.

Federal datasets capture only a narrow view of service provision and do not reflect the timing, intensity, or accessibility of services, particularly in moments of crisis. In addition, information on the type and effectiveness of services is limited, making it difficult to assess how service availability relates to decisions about removal versus in-home response. While NCANDS includes indicators of whether services were reportedly received, much of the detail on service participation is embedded in case plans, case notes, or payment systems and is not consistently structured for analysis or reported in standardized ways across states. In these areas, [research studies](#), [program evaluations](#), and [state-level analyses](#) provide important complementary evidence, but this information is not consistently available or comparable across jurisdictions.

#### Measurement Takeaway: What Is Needed to Assess Whether Children Can Remain Safely With Their Families

- Specific information on the availability and timeliness of family preservation services
- More consistent state and federal data on the type and intensity of services provided to address safety concerns
- Linkage between service provision and decisions about removal versus in-home response

## When removal is necessary, are children placed with kin or in other family-based settings?

The second decision point is whether children who must be removed from their homes are placed in family-based settings, including with kin whenever possible and—when kin are unavailable or unable to provide care—with non-kin foster families. When children cannot remain safely with their families of origin, placement with kin<sup>3</sup> is [widely viewed](#) as the preferred option because it helps maintain family, cultural, and community connections and can promote both placement stability and continuity of caring relationships. Placing children with kin reflects the system’s capacity to identify and support kinship caregivers and the availability and suitability of other family-based placements.

Assessing progress requires answering several key questions, including how often kin are identified and available as placements, how quickly children are placed with kin following removal, what policies or practices support or hinder placement with kin, and the extent to which kin placements support placement stability and continuity of relationships while permanency efforts are underway. In addition, assessing progress requires understanding whether there are sufficient family-based placements (including number of foster homes and open beds) and whether available placements can meet children’s needs, such as keeping sibling groups together or serving children with higher needs.

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<sup>2</sup> [Alternative or differential response](#) allows caseworkers to assess the family for safety and risk without opening a formal investigation and to engage families in developing a service plan to reduce risk for maltreatment. This approach is typically used for cases assessed at low risk and high safety in the home.

<sup>3</sup> This report is focused on formal kinship care through the child welfare system and does not capture children placed with kin through kinship diversion programs or kinship care that happens outside of the child welfare system.

Table 3 summarizes the extent to which existing data can help answer each key question and identifies available sources of information.

**Table 3.** Information Available to Assess Whether Children Are Placed With Kin When Removal Is Necessary

Key question	Is information currently available?	Primary data sources
How often are kin identified and available to serve as a placement?	Partially	AFCARS
How quickly after removal are children able to be placed with kin?	Limited	AFCARS (limited); state administrative data
What policies or practices support or hinder placement with kin?	Limited	State policy reviews; surveys; research studies
To what extent do kin placements support stability while permanency efforts are underway?	Limited	Research studies; evaluations; state data (not standardized)
Are sufficient family-based placements available and ready to meet the child's needs when removals occur (e.g., adequate number of licensed foster homes)?	Limited	State administrative data; surveys; research studies
Are there enough available family-based placements with capacity and beds to keep sibling groups together?	Limited	State administrative data; surveys; research studies
Do available family-based placements meet the needs of all children, including those at all levels of care (e.g., behavioral health, medical needs)?	Limited	Research studies; evaluations; state data (not standardized)

**Note:** See Appendix A for indicator definitions and Appendix C for important considerations when interpreting these data.

Existing federal data provide partial insight into what we know about states' and Tribes' capacity to place children with kin. AFCARS data identify whether a child's current placement is with kin and allow for examination of overall rates of kinship placement among children in foster care. However, AFCARS data are limited in their ability to assess how quickly kinship placements occur following removal, whether kin are identified but children are not placed with them, or what barriers prevent placement with kin. Publicly available AFCARS files also provide limited longitudinal detail on placement trajectories and do not capture kinship care arrangements that occur outside the foster care system.

In addition, federal administrative data do not capture the policies and practices that affect [kinship placement](#), such as [licensing pathways](#), [financial supports](#), or [agency engagement with kin caregivers](#). [Research studies](#), [state policy reviews](#), and [surveys of child welfare administrators](#) provide important complementary information in these areas and help explain variation in kinship placement rates across jurisdictions.

Federal data also provide limited insight into whether systems have sufficient family-based placement capacity to meet children's needs. While high-level comparisons between the number of children entering care and the number of licensed foster homes can offer a useful signal of system strain, most states and Tribes do not routinely maintain or report consistent data on the availability, composition, or utilization of family-based placements, including non-kin foster homes. The cause of these challenges varies and may include difficulty updating the data reporting infrastructure and inconsistent definitions across states. As a result, it is difficult to assess placement capacity using federal data alone.

More nuanced assessments of capacity would require information beyond the number of licensed foster homes. For example, understanding the ratio of the number of available foster care beds to the number of children needing placement is particularly important for keeping sibling groups together. Even more informative would be [information on the types of needs](#) children have and the levels of care that foster homes are able or willing to provide—for example, the capacity to care for older youth, children with behavioral health needs, or children who require medical supports. Without this information, shortages may be masked and states may rely more heavily on temporary or less appropriate settings even when licensed homes exist.

**Measurement Takeaway: What Is Needed to Assess Whether Children Are Placed With Kin or in Other Family-Based Settings**

- Specific information on the timing and pathways through which children are placed with kin or other family-based caregivers after removal
- Data on family-based placement capacity, including the availability of foster homes and open beds
- Information on placement fit, including the ability to keep sibling groups together and serve children with higher needs
- Improved insight into policies, supports, and practices that facilitate or limit stable family-based placements during permanency efforts

## Once in foster care, do children experience safety, stability, and timely permanency?

This decision point reflects the system’s capacity to monitor safety, support placement stability, and ensure that children are reunified or that another permanent family is found. When children must enter foster care, three things are central to achieving the goal of A Home for Every Child: ensuring that children are safe from maltreatment, that they experience stability in family-based settings, and that they return to their families or exit to other permanent homes in a timely manner.

Assessing progress at this decision point requires answering several key questions, including the extent to which children experience placement stability and remain safe from maltreatment while in care, and whether children exit foster care to reunification or other permanent family connections in a timely manner. To support this assessment, Table 4 summarizes the extent to which existing data can help answer each key question and identifies available sources of information.

**Table 4.** Information Available to Assess Safety, Stability, and Timely Permanency for Children in Foster Care

Key question	Is information currently available?	Primary data sources
To what extent do children experience placement stability while in foster care?	Partially	AFCARS
To what extent do children remain safe from maltreatment while in foster care?	Partially	AFCARS; NCANDS (linked in some analyses)
To what extent do children reunify with their families or exit to other permanent family connections in a timely manner?	Partially	AFCARS

**Note:** See Appendix A for indicator definitions and Appendix C for important considerations when interpreting these data.

Existing federal data provide insight into children's experiences once they enter foster care. AFCARS data describe placement types, length of stay in care, and exits to reunification, guardianship, adoption, or other outcomes. In addition, NCANDS data, when linked with AFCARS, can provide limited information on substantiated maltreatment that occurs while children are in foster care. Together, these sources help establish broad understanding related to placement safety, stability, and permanency.

Finally, although placement stability and time to permanency can be measured using federal data, these indicators lack important context. Placement moves may reflect both negative disruptions and positive transitions, such as placement with kin or movement to less restrictive settings. Similarly, time to permanency is influenced by multiple factors, including the time required to support safe reunification as required by the [Adoption and Safe Families Act](#). [Research studies](#), [state administrative systems](#), and [targeted analyses](#) provide important evidence that help us interpret and clarify how placement capacity, matching, and safety interact over time.

#### Measurement Takeaway: What Is Needed to Assess Safety, Stability, and Timely Permanency for Children in Foster Care

- More complete information on safety in foster care, including maltreatment occurring while children are in care
- Better contextual information to interpret placement stability, including the reasons for placement changes and whether moves represent positive transitions or disruptions
- Improved understanding of permanency timelines, including factors that support safe and timely reunification or other lasting family connections

## What These Findings Suggest About Measuring Progress Overall

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Key takeaways across decision points include the following:

- **Federal administrative data are well suited to describe children's trajectories through the child welfare system**, including entry into foster care, placement type, length of stay, and exits to reunification or other permanency outcomes.
- **Measures of placement capacity, usability, and fit are central to understanding these pathways** but are not captured in federal data.
- **Simple capacity measures can provide useful signals of system strain** but often require additional context.
- **Safety, stability, and permanency outcomes should be interpreted together**, as indicators such as placement stability and time to permanency may reflect both positive transitions and system constraints.
- **Data and research beyond federal datasets help explain the experiences of children and youth in the child welfare system**—and particularly how policies, practices, and service context shape children's safety and stability. State child welfare information systems often contain richer operational data than what is reported to federal datasets, creating opportunities for states to use their own data to deepen interpretation of these indicators.

In addition, the utility of federal administrative data is shaped by how quickly data are collected, reported, and released. While state child welfare information systems can support more frequent monitoring and reporting of progress toward key goals, the aggregation and standardization required for federal reporting mean that national data experience a time lag between receipt and publication. This delay may limit the usefulness of federal data for real-time policy and practice adjustments, even as these data remain valuable for identifying broader trends and patterns.

Together, these insights suggest that progress toward A Home for Every Child is best assessed using a small set of complementary measures, each aligned to a key decision point and informed by both federal data and broader evidence. The next section builds on these insights to identify better ways to measure progress.

Stay tuned for upcoming Child Trends products that will highlight innovative research and evaluation projects that further examine policies, supports, and system practices relevant to A Home for Every Child.

## Illustrative Measurement Options Aligned to Key Decision Points

Building on the decision-point analyses in the Framework section and the cross-cutting insights summarized in the Measuring Progress section, we present illustrative measurement options aligned to the time points at which children can experience safety and stability. These options are intended to support discussions about assessing progress toward A Home for Every Child, focusing on whether children experience safety, stability, and timely permanency—rather than proposing finalized or validated measures.

The options shown in Table 5 vary in their level of maturity and data readiness. Some reflect indicators that can be constructed using existing federal data, while others draw on information that many states use operationally but do not report in standardized ways. Several composite concepts are included as early ideas, consistent with interest in summary measures that capture children’s cumulative experiences across placements or decision points (marked with an early concept flag in Table 5). These concepts should be treated as hypotheses and would require careful testing for validity, feasibility, and unintended consequences before use in monitoring or accountability.

Table 5 is organized by decision point to reinforce that progress toward A Home for Every Child unfolds across the child welfare continuum, and that no single measure can capture all relevant dimensions. Some measures provide clear, high-level metrics that can support communication between states, Tribes, and the federal child welfare system, while others help explain why children experience particular pathways. Considered together, these options illustrate how different types of information can complement one another when assessing progress.

**Table 5.** Illustrative Measurement Options Aligned to Key Decision Points

Candidate measure or concept	What it adds	Key limitations or cautions	Data readiness
<b>Decision Point 1: Can children remain safely with their families?</b>			
Rate of foster care entry (overall or per screened-in report)	Signals reliance on removal versus in-home response; policy relevant	Sensitive to state definitions and removal thresholds; does not capture service availability	Available (AFCARS, NCANDS)
Proportion of screened-in cases	Indicates emphasis on prevention and early response	Variation in practice may mask risk severity; not all	Partial (NCANDS)

Candidate measure or concept	What it adds	Key limitations or cautions	Data readiness
receiving in-home response		in-home responses are equivalent	
Availability of family preservation services when needed (early concept)	Targets whether systems can support safe family preservation	Definitions and data inconsistent; not captured federally	Limited; state-level
Adverse Early Response Experiences (early composite concept)	Summarizes cumulative risk related to repeated reports, lack of timely services, and subsequent removal	Requires careful construction and validation to maintain fairness in risk assessment	Concept only; requires testing
<b>Decision Point 2: If removal is necessary, are children placed with kin or in other family-based settings?</b>			
Percent of children placed with kin	Clear indicator of family-based placement use	Does not capture kinship care that occurs outside of the child welfare system; timing matters	Available (AFCARS); state administrative data
Time from removal to placement with kin	Captures timeliness of kin identification and placement	Limited longitudinal detail in public federal files	Limited; some states capture
Kinship placement stability during reunification efforts	Reflects whether kin placements support stability while families work toward reunification	Requires consistent definition of stability and timing	Limited; research and state data
Kinship Access Barriers Index (early composite concept)	Integrates placement rates with policy and support context	Complex to construct; relies on policy data	Concept only; requires testing
Children needing placement per licensed foster home	Simple, easy-to-communicate signal of system strain; strong rallying point	Does not account for beds, utilization, or child needs; definitions vary	Limited; state-level
Children needing placement per available foster bed	Adds context for sibling placement and household capacity with similar burden	"Available" beds hard to define consistently	Limited; state-level
Children needing placement per available foster bed by level of care needed	Directly targets matching and placement "fit"	Most complex; risk of unintended incentives if poorly designed	Rare; requires development
<b>Decision Point 3: Once in foster care, do children experience safety, stability, and timely permanency?</b>			
Placement stability during foster care	Reflects fit and consistency over time	Requires context, as some moves are positive	Partial (AFCARS)
Maltreatment while in foster care	Keeps safety central after removal	Measurement challenges; requires linkage and careful interpretation	Partial (NCANDS with linkages)
Timely reunification or other permanency	Captures exits to lasting family connections	Timing must be interpreted alongside reunification quality	Available (AFCARS)
<a href="#">Adverse Placement Experiences</a> (early composite concepts)	Summarizes cumulative instability related to temporary placements, multiple moves, or lack of family-based options	Requires extensive testing and validation	State administrative data systems

Taken together, these illustrative measurement options highlight both the promise and the limitations of current measurement approaches. The options underscore the value of focusing on a small set of high-value measures that are aligned to key casework decision points, while also being transparent about data gaps and areas requiring further development. Moving from these early concepts to actionable measurement will require collaboration with states and Tribes, targeted testing and refinement, and attention to how new and revised measures can improve insight without increasing reporting burden. The next section outlines steps ACF and its partners could take to advance this work.

## Action Items for Strengthening Measurement and Partnering With the Field

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Achieving A Home for Every Child will require ongoing attention to [how data are collected, interpreted, and used](#). The available data and associated limitations described in this report point to clear opportunities for improving the information available to federal, state, and Tribal partners as they work to strengthen child welfare systems. Moving to more effective and responsive measurement will require a coordinated effort that focuses on refining existing indicators, improving the usefulness of data to informing practice and policy, and ensuring that future measurement efforts are informed by the perspectives of children, youth, families, and those who work with them. This section outlines several actions that can support this work.

### Strengthen measurement of what matters most.

Strengthening measurement begins with focusing on the indicators that [most clearly reflect](#) children's safety, stability, and connections to family. This step includes improving information on placement pathways, such as the timing and reasons for placement changes, and filling gaps in what is known about kinship diversion<sup>4</sup> and kinship care that happens before/without child welfare involvement.<sup>5</sup> It also includes developing better information about the pool of foster homes, both in terms of availability and in their ability to meet caregiving preferences.

### Reduce reporting burden and improve data utility.

More effective measurement also requires aligning reporting expectations with the information most useful for improving outcomes. States dedicate [significant time and resources](#) to submitting federal data, so focusing requirements on indicators that meaningfully support decision making will reduce burden. [Modernizing data systems, clarifying reporting guidance](#), providing technical assistance on data collection and reporting best practices, and [identifying indicators](#) that add limited value are all steps that can improve the quality and usefulness of federal reporting while allowing states to concentrate their efforts on essential information. Further, tools such as simple analytic templates or automated calculation spreadsheets may also help states apply these indicators using existing data while minimizing additional analytic burden.

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<sup>4</sup> [Once a child welfare investigation has occurred, the system may work with kin to keep children out of foster care and with kin](#); these placements often take place without oversight from the child welfare system.

<sup>5</sup> Families may place children with kin before a report of maltreatment occurs. This allows families to avoid involvement with the child welfare system altogether.

## Partner with states, Tribes, practitioners, researchers, and families to build better measures.

Improving measurement will require collaboration across the child welfare field. Input from [children, youth, families, caseworkers, and caregivers](#) can help clarify which aspects of the system matter most for stability and well-being. [State and Tribal agencies, researchers, data system experts, and national partners](#) each bring important perspectives on feasibility, interpretation, and utility. A cooperative approach can help identify priority indicators, guide refinements to existing datasets, and support the development of new measures that reflect what children and families need to thrive.

## Concluding Thoughts

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The goal of ensuring A Home for Every Child requires clear information about what factors best support safety, stability, and permanency. The indicators summarized in this report show what federal data can currently reveal about children’s experiences, while additional research and state-level analyses highlight important context that federal datasets cannot provide. Together, these insights point toward opportunities to improve how the field measures progress toward this national goal. Moving forward, collaboration among federal, state, and Tribal partners; researchers; and families can help refine existing indicators and strengthen data quality—all in support of efforts to ensure that A Home for Every Child is realized in practice as children experiencing safe, stable, and lasting homes.

## Contributions

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# Appendix A. Federal Data Sources and Indicators Referenced in This Report

Appendix A provides additional detail on the federal administrative data sources and specific indicators referenced throughout the report. These tables are intended to support transparency and technical review while allowing the main text to remain focused on key questions, interpretation, and measurement needs. The indicators below are organized by the three key decision points from Table 1.

## A.1. Federal administrative data sources

### *National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS)*

NCANDS is a federal system that collects, compiles, and disseminates data from state and territory child protective service agencies. Submission of data to NCANDS is voluntary and generally includes data from all 50 states, the District of Columbia (DC), and Puerto Rico. Established in 1988 with amendments to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), NCANDS data are used to produce annual reports of state and national prevalence of child maltreatment reports, substantiations, and agency responses. NCANDS maintains both agency- and child-level data files.

### *Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS)*

AFCARS is a federal data system that gathers, synthesizes, and disseminates case-level information about children who are served by foster care in all states—including those entering and exiting foster care for any reason. States are required to submit data to AFCARS twice per year. Established by a 1986 amendment to Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, AFCARS has been modified over the years, with the most recent substantial changes in both format and data elements occurring in 2023. AFCARS contains data on child characteristics, entry reason, experiences in foster care (including placement type and length of stay), and exit reason.

## A.2. Indicators related to family preservation and early response

**Table A.2.** Federal Indicators Informing Whether Children Can Remain Safely With Their Families

Indicator	What it tells us	Why it's important for a safe and stable home	Federal data source
Reports to child protective services	Number of alleged cases of maltreatment reported to CPS within a year	Provides an estimate of maltreatment concerns across a state	NCANDS (Agency File)
Screened-in reports	Share of reports that move forward for further investigation	Helps identify the resources needed to investigate maltreatment cases and ensure that families who need supports receive them	NCANDS (Agency File)
Maltreatment type	Nature of alleged maltreatment such as neglect, physical abuse, or sexual abuse	Different concerns may require different responses and supports to keep children safe at home	NCANDS (Child File)

Indicator	What it tells us	Why it's important for a safe and stable home	Federal data source
Substantiated cases	Number of children for whom maltreatment is confirmed	Reflects the prevalence of confirmed maltreatment and informs prevention and intervention strategies	NCANDS (Child File)
Differential or alternative response	Whether lower-risk cases receive an assessment and services rather than a full investigation	Shows whether states use approaches that support families and reduce unnecessary investigations	NCANDS (Child File)
Family preservation services	Whether families receive services intended to address safety concerns and keep children at home	Indicates whether families are receiving the supports needed to prevent foster care entry	NCANDS (Child File)
Reason for entry into foster care	Reason for removal from the family of origin (e.g., neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, parental substance use)	Provides an estimate of how many children and youth will need a foster placement	AFCARS
Child fatalities	Number of children who die due to maltreatment	Reflects the most serious safety concerns; many fatalities occur among infants or families not previously involved with child welfare, so this indicator often signals broader community risk and unmet needs	NCANDS (Agency and Child Files)

### A.3. Indicators related to kinship placement

Table A.3. Federal Indicators Informing Placement With Kin

Indicator	What it tells us	Why it's important for a safe and stable home	Federal data source
Current placement type	Identifies the type and license status of the home or setting a child is living in (kinship home, non-kin foster home, group home, institution, supervised independent living, pre-adoptive home, or trial home visit)	Placement with kin supports continuity of relationships, stability, and connection to family and culture. Lower rates of kinship placement may indicate challenges in identifying or licensing kin or gaps in family-based placement capacity.	AFCARS
Placement with kin	Identifies whether a child is placed with kin	Children placed with kin experience better outcomes than those placed in other settings. Kin placements foster connection to family and community for children.	AFCARS

Indicator	What it tells us	Why it's important for a safe and stable home	Federal data source
Timing of placement	Identifies how quickly a child is placed with kin after entering the foster care system	Placing children with kin quickly may reduce the number of placement disruptions a child experiences and increases stability while working toward permanency.	AFCARS

## A.4. Indicators related to placement stability and permanency

Table A.4. Federal Indicators Informing Stability and Permanency

Indicator	What it tells us	Why it's important for a safe and stable home	Federal data source
Number of placements	How many placements a child experiences during their current foster care episode (and across episodes, if applicable)	Multiple placements may indicate instability, difficulty finding a good fit, or gaps in placement availability. Stability supports well-being and helps maintain relationships.	AFCARS
Length of stay in foster care	How long children spend in foster care, measured in multiple ways (current episode, current placement, or total time across episodes)	Long stays may indicate barriers to permanency or insufficient supports for reunification. Very short stays may suggest needs for stronger family preservation services and supports.	AFCARS
Time to permanency	Time from entry into foster care to exit through reunification, guardianship, adoption, or placement with kin	Timely permanency is strongly associated with better long-term outcomes. Different permanency types have different timelines and implications for stability.	AFCARS
Exit reason	The manner in which a child leaves foster care (e.g., reunification, guardianship, adoption, living with kin, emancipation, transfer to another agency, or death)	Helps identify whether children are exiting to permanent families. High rates of emancipation may indicate challenges in ensuring permanency for older youth.	AFCARS
Maltreatment recurrence	Whether a child experiences a subsequent substantiated or indicated report of maltreatment within a defined time period	Indicates ongoing safety concerns. Recurrence while in foster care may reflect challenges in placement quality or supervision.	NCANDS (with AFCARS linkages in some federal reports)
Foster care re-entry	Whether children who exit foster care later return to the system, measured by number of episodes	High re-entry rates may signal that children did not exit to stable homes after reunification, adoption, or guardianship, or that sufficient post-permanency supports were not provided to families.	AFCARS

# Appendix B. Methods and Approach for Assessing Data Availability

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A team of researchers at Child Trends reviewed relevant federal and state data sources to assess the availability of information relevant to measuring progress toward children having safe and stable homes. This review focused on identifying what information is currently captured in widely used administrative datasets and where gaps remain related to the key questions outlined in Table 1.

To conduct this assessment, the team reviewed documentation, codebooks, and publicly available data files associated with major federal child welfare datasets, including AFCARS, NCANDS, and the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD).<sup>6</sup> We examined indicators based on their consistent availability (e.g., updated regularly), level of detail, and relevance to the decision points described throughout, rather than on their use in formal performance monitoring or reporting.

This review resulted in a focus on two primary federal datasets that include indicators related to having safe and stable homes for children and are collected by states and reported to the federal government on a recurring basis. These datasets are subsequently de-identified and released for research use. In some cases, indicators across datasets can be linked using common identifiers, allowing for descriptive analysis of children's pathways through the child welfare system, from maltreatment reports through foster care experiences and, for a subset of youth, early adulthood outcomes.

While these datasets provide reliable and consistent information on many aspects of children's experiences in child welfare, they have important limitations. In particular, they capture limited information on system capacity, service availability, service quality, and placement fit. As a result, this assessment also considered findings from published research, evaluations, and state-level analyses to identify areas where additional or different information may be needed to support meaningful measurement.

Examining what information is currently available, how it is used, and where gaps exist can inform efforts to improve the usefulness of child welfare data while minimizing reporting burden. Aligning data collection more closely with priority measurement needs may support more effective decision making without requiring expansion of existing reporting requirements.

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<sup>6</sup> NYTD was part of the team's review. Although NYTD is an important source of federal data on older youth, it was omitted because our focus in this report is on finding and supporting safe and stable homes for children.

# Appendix C. Cautionary Notes About Existing Federal Datasets

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While the current publicly available federal child welfare datasets contain important information, some caution should be used when interpreting results from the available data. Key issues include wide variation in state definitions and reporting standards, the subjective nature of many measures, and a lack of sufficient detail for definitive conclusions on the prevalence of maltreatment or service effectiveness. Taken together, these limitations mean that publicly available child welfare data should be interpreted within the context of state policy, practice, and reporting differences.

**Variation in state definitions and standards.** Definitions of and responses to maltreatment vary widely across states—including what constitutes maltreatment, how “perpetrators” are identified, thresholds for removing a child, or how data are recorded—making cross-state comparisons difficult. Many indicators (e.g., report volume and maltreatment type, as well as investigation, substantiation, and entry/exit rates) are influenced by local policies and statues, caseworker judgment, and available evidence, further underscoring the limitations of comparisons across states. How states document entry reasons also varies: Some states allow multiple reasons while others require choosing only one, and some carry forward outdated entry reasons after reentry. Furthermore, child fatality data are especially inconsistent, as states differ in how they identify, investigate, and substantiate maltreatment fatalities.

**Subjective measures.** Decisions in child welfare rely heavily on professional judgement, interpretation of broad guidelines, and state-specific definitions, rather than on universal criteria. For example, the final decision on whether to reunify a child with their family is informed by evaluations of family functioning and parental or protective capacities, which are based on caseworker observations and assessments. Judges then use those assessments to decide on case outcomes. States also define specific types of maltreatment differently. A child's experience categorized as “neglect” in one state might be classified differently (or not proven) in another, depending entirely on state policy and definitions.

**Lack of detail.** Data often omit essential context, hindering accurate interpretation of outcomes. For example, measures like the number of placements lack full context because AFCARS does not record why a move occurred; moves may reflect positive transitions (e.g., to kin or a less restrictive setting) rather than instability. Time to permanency and length of stay are influenced by many factors, including the time needed to support safe reunification, availability of permanency options, or complexities in family circumstances; as a result, longer stays are not inherently negative. Similarly, foster care reentry does not indicate cause; without information on why a child reentered care (e.g., adoption disruption, challenges after reunification), the data point alone cannot speak to system performance or family stability. Data on services, such as family preservation services reported in NCANDS, lack detail about intensity or modality, limiting their usefulness for understanding what supports families actually receive.