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Using Integrated Data Systems to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes



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How two states are working to change outcomes for children in foster care through the strategic use of integrated data

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Children who spend time in foster care typically do not fare well on many outcomes later in life. Child welfare agencies strive to reduce the time children spend in foster care, but their efforts can be undermined by the unintended consequences of actions taken by other agencies that are simultaneously working with the same families.

For example, many parents whose children are in foster care are also involved in the child support enforcement and Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF) systems. The rules and regulations in these systems that affect a parent's income can directly influence placement outcomes in the child welfare system. These cross-system effects, however, are difficult to identify and understand because each system records information about its clients in separate administrative databases that typically aren't shared or linked.

An integrated data system (IDS) that links information from separate administrative data systems offers policymakers, program administrators and researchers a powerful tool to analyze interactive effects across systems and make more informed decisions to improve outcomes for vulnerable families. This case study discusses how two states have used their integrated data systems to design and conduct evaluations to understand how child support enforcement policies and TANF benefits affect the length of time children spend in child welfare placements. With this information, state policymakers are taking action to

improve child welfare outcomes by enabling their child-focused systems to work together more effectively.¹

- In Wisconsin, child support enforcement workers, acting on information provided by the child welfare system, have pursued child support orders to offset the cost of a child's out-of-home placement. But when researchers matched the administrative records in an IDS, they discovered this policy not only failed to reduce total costs, but actually lengthened the time children spent in foster care. Based on these findings, the Department of Children and Families is revising its policy on referring parents to child support enforcement when their child is in out-of-home care. Under the revised policy, set for statewide implementation in 2018, a referral will be sent to the local child support agency only if the child has been in out-of-home care for at least six months and the parent is not making progress toward reunification.
- In Washington, analysts used the state's IDS to evaluate the effectiveness of an innovative state policy known as concurrent benefits. Ordinarily, TANF benefits are reduced or terminated when a child is removed from the home and placed in care. Designed to speed family reunifications by easing economic hardship, the concurrent benefits policy allows a parent to receive full TANF benefits for up to 180 days after a child enters care. The evaluation's positive findings on reunification rates and cost neutrality enabled state officials to push back against skeptics and budget cutters and to keep concurrent benefits in place.

An integrated data system (IDS) periodically links individual-level administrative data from multiple public service agencies and contracted service providers, creating a rich picture of individual service needs, participation and outcomes over many years. In some systems, individual records are linked together to form comprehensive, longitudinal household and family records. An IDS can be operated at the state, county or city level within government or by nonprofit or university partners. By offering large sample sizes, longitudinal data and the ability to identify multisystem clients, integrated data systems are valuable tools for policy analysis, program planning and monitoring and evaluation. Due to the confidential and sensitive nature of the data, organizations that house an IDS carefully follow privacy laws, securely store data and maintain rigorous standards for use and access. For additional information, visit www.aecf.org/IDS, www.aisp.upenn.edu and www.neighborhoodindicators.org/resources-integrated-data-systems-ids.

**WISCONSIN:
USING CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT POLICY TO
SHORTEN THE TIME CHILDREN SPEND IN CHILD
WELFARE PLACEMENTS**

Policy issue:

Are efforts to collect child support to offset the costs of an out-of-home placement in the best interests of the child?

Longstanding federal policy requires states to refer parents to child support enforcement if a child is removed from the home and placed in substitute care. The goal is to offset the cost of care and uphold parental responsibility for supporting their children. But states are given some flexibility in determining which cases are appropriate for referral to child support enforcement, and child welfare workers have an obligation to act in the best interests of the child. Under current policy in Wisconsin, referrals of one or both parents to child support enforcement to offset the cost of the out-of-home placement (OHP) are made as soon as a child is placed in care.

Policymakers and caseworkers have struggled to understand whether collecting offset child support is always in the best interests of the child. Data from an IDS helped the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) officials answer this question. Two analyses of data stored in the IDS, completed in 2012, challenge the notion that collecting child support from parents who have a child in protective care is always in the best interest of either the child or the state.

The studies were conducted for DCF by the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the organization that developed and maintains the IDS, which is known as the Multi-Sample Person File (MSPF). Through its long-term research partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, IRP has worked with DCF officials on numerous studies that use IDS data to understand how the child support enforcement, TANF and child welfare systems can be better aligned to improve outcomes for the individuals and families served by the department.

Wisconsin's IDS, known as the **Multi-Sample Person File (MSPF)** data system, is a secure, longitudinal administrative database developed and maintained by the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Created in 2008, the MSPF includes administrative data sets on public assistance, child support, child welfare, unemployment benefits and incarceration, which can be merged into a single file containing one record per individual and using a unique identifier created by IRP. The MSPF data system also includes linkable files with parent/child and case-level data, and program participation files. The MSPF is updated annually; the version completed in 2016 contains data for more than five million individuals.

IDS data showed unintended negative effects in child welfare placements

Using integrated data from the child welfare system and the child support enforcement system, IRP researchers discovered that the practice of collecting child support to offset out-of-home placement costs had surprising and unintended effects:

Effects on families: Delayed reunifications

IRP researchers used the IDS to study a group of more than 2,800 mothers who had a child removed from the home between July 2004 and June 2006 and placed in care that ended in a reunification with the family, adoption or guardianship within 48 months. About 22 percent of these mothers and 38 percent of the (non-resident) fathers had orders to pay child support to offset out-of-home placement costs. Collection rates were low: only 17 percent of the mothers and 28 percent of the fathers in the full group actually made a payment.

Wisconsin is a state-supervised, county-operated system, and the IDS revealed considerable variation across counties in the proportion of parents ordered to pay support to offset out-of-home placement costs. Due to differences in county practices, this variation provided a natural experiment, allowing the researchers to control for other differences in child welfare policy and to evaluate the effect of child support offset orders on reunification times.

The analysis showed that child support orders to offset the costs of substitute care not only were correlated with longer spells of out-of-home placement, but also

actually led to longer lengths of stay in placement before reunification or some other permanent resolution. A \$100 increase in a parent's monthly child support order was estimated to add 6.6 months to the time a child spent in placement. This finding suggests that the income lost when child support payments go to the state creates an economic burden diminishing a mother's ability to meet the criteria for reuniting with her child. Information about the size of child support orders and payments also supports this notion.

Conducting this type of analysis requires a very large number of variables. For example, IRP's analysis used almost 170,000 observations across eight variables over multiple years. Integrated data systems, which are built to serve multiple purposes, are large enough to support such complex analyses. A more limited database would not have provided the analytic precision necessary to determine this causal relationship.

Effects on systems: Minimal cost offset

In a second study using merged data from child support and child welfare, IRP researchers found that very little of the cost of out-of-home placements was recovered from child support payments. In 2011, the direct costs of payments made to providers to care for children placed outside the home totaled \$147 million, while the child support payments collected by the state from parents amounted to \$4.1 million — only about 3 percent of the costs.² Even if the parents had paid all of the ordered monthly child support (most did not), the total collected would have amounted to only 8 percent of the out-of-home placement cost.

“We don't often have such a clear policy direction in our work. Lacking research, we are often making decisions in the dark. But in this case we could be confident that the change will produce a positive outcome — and we will have a way to measure it.”

- Rebecca Schwei, Bureau of Performance Management,
Wisconsin Department of Children and Families

“Whenever we got into a tough spot about bringing counties on board for the new policy, we could bring them back to what the IDS data showed about shorter stays for kids in out-of-home care.”

- Katy Petershack, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families

Policymakers reacted by rewriting state policy

After reviewing research based on data from the IDS, high-level DCF officials realized that reducing the time children spend in out-of-home placements required a revision of state policy on using child support to offset out-of-home placement costs. Under the revised policy, planned for statewide implementation in 2018, a referral will be sent to the local child support agency only if a child has been in out-of-home care for at least six months and the parent is not showing progress toward reunification. Developing the new policy was a lengthy process that required a high degree of coordination between the staffs of the child welfare and the child support enforcement systems at both the state and county levels.³

Departmental officials see this process — using integrated data to make decisions and bringing together cross-division workgroups at both the state and county levels — as a model for future policy development. The catalyst was the IRP analysis of IDS data that showed child enforcement orders lengthen the time children spend in out-of-home care. Once they had this information, state officials began to rethink the ramifications of requiring low-income parents to pay child support to the state while they are struggling to keep their family together. “This is something we can control” state officials concluded, according to Jennifer Noyes, associate director of IRP. The IDS findings helped division directors see that the policy of offsetting child welfare costs with child support payments “on its own, made sense. But in the context of a program that works to reunite kids with their families, it

made no sense,” says Rebecca Schwei, director of the DCF Bureau of Performance Management. “We don’t often have such a clear policy direction in our work. Lacking research, we are often making decisions in the dark. But in this case we could be confident that the change will produce a positive outcome — and we will have a way to measure it.”

The IDS findings were just as powerful in convincing county-level workers of the need to adjust current practice to improve outcomes for the kids they serve. “Whenever we got into a tough spot about bringing counties on board for the new policy, we could bring them back to what the IDS data showed about shorter stays for kids in out-of-home care,” says Katy Petershack, the DCF policy analyst who staffed the county work group. “Timely reunification is the goal. That’s the most important thing.” Having reliable evidence from the IDS about “what dollars were coming in and out of specific counties” also helped to allay concerns about how the loss of offset payments would affect county budgets. As Wisconsin moves forward to implement the new policy, IRP researchers continue to work with the state and counties to provide data and analyses from the IDS.

Washington's Integrated Client Database (ICDB), a secure system developed and maintained by the Research and Data Analysis Division of the state's Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), collects and stores information from more than 30 administrative data systems within DSHS and other state agencies, including the Department of Corrections, the Employment Security Department, the Department of Commerce and the Health Care Authority. A longitudinal data system, ICDB contains individual-level records that go back over a decade, providing detailed information about service histories, risks, costs and outcomes in the programs and services administered by DSHS. The ICDB also contains administrative data collected by other state agencies that provide information on DSHS client outcomes — for example, employment and wages, incarcerations, housing supports and health services utilization. For additional information, visit www.dshs.wa.gov/sesa/rda/research-reports/dshs-integrated-client-database-0.

WASHINGTON STATE: USING TANF BENEFITS TO HELP FAMILIES REUNITE

Policy issue:

Do concurrent benefit payments help families reunite?

Policymakers in Washington State used analyses and results generated from the state IDS to determine whether an innovative policy permitting mothers to maintain TANF benefits when their children are in foster care actually helps the families to reunite. Normally, a family's TANF grant is reduced or eliminated when a child is placed in care. But Washington allows the payment of concurrent TANF benefits when a child is removed from the home, with the expectation that the family will reunite within 180 days. With concurrent benefits, the parent can continue to receive TANF benefits, including the child's portion, for up to 180 days while the child is in foster care or relative care. During this period, a relative or a licensed caregiver who is caring for the child can also receive payments on behalf of the child.⁴ In addition, the state will not pursue child support from the parent while concurrent benefits are in place. On a case-by-case basis, child welfare caseworkers can extend the concurrent benefits period beyond 180 days if the parent is making progress and family reunification is still the goal.

The presumption is that maintaining income support will help to stabilize the removal family and speed family reunification. Washington adopted the concurrent benefits policy in 2008, at the urging of a state representative who was concerned that the loss of income from TANF benefits would make it more difficult for a mother

to reunite with her child. (The mother, for example, might have difficulty maintaining stable shelter.) State administrators believe Washington is the only state that pays concurrent TANF benefits.⁵

Implementing concurrent benefits requires coordination between two agencies housed within the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), an umbrella agency that serves more than two million clients per year. Child welfare workers in the Children's Administration make the decision to approve concurrent benefits, and TANF workers in the Economic Services Administration implement it. To improve coordination and ensure that all eligible families receive concurrent benefits, both divisions made changes in their reporting procedures and data systems and developed joint trainings for staff. As anticipated, the use of concurrent benefits increased as workers became more familiar with the policy.

Pressure to find budget savings and uncertainty about whether concurrent benefits actually shorten stays in out-of-home placements put the policy in jeopardy. To address these concerns, the assistant secretary's office in the DSHS Economic Services Administration asked the Research and Data Analysis Division (RDA) to evaluate the effectiveness of the concurrent benefits policy in 2013. Having service records linked in the IDS allowed RDA research staff to conduct the assessment quickly and efficiently. Because client records were organized by individuals over time, researchers with expertise in TANF and child welfare data systems could complete the analysis within DSHS's decision-making timeline.

IDS data showed better outcomes with little additional cost

To see if concurrent benefits really speed up family reunification, an RDA research team compared child welfare outcomes for 3,732 children whose families received the child's TANF grant after the child was removed from the home (the concurrent benefits group) to 779 similar children whose families lost the child's portion of TANF when the child was removed from the home (the comparison group). Both groups were identified through the IDS.⁶ The goal for all the children was reunification with their families within 180 days. To do the analysis, RDA researchers examined integrated data from the Children's Administration and the Economic Services Administration.

The researchers found that concurrent benefits improved outcomes for children in foster care and didn't cost the state much additional money:

Higher Reunification Rates: Family reunification rates were 39 percent among the families who received concurrent benefits, compared with 34 percent among the families who did not. Across both groups, a total of 1,732 children reunited with their families.

Faster Reunifications: Among children who were reunited with their families, children whose families received concurrent benefits spent an average of 41 fewer days in protective care than the comparison group that did not receive these benefits. A higher percentage of the concurrent benefits children (23 percent) were reunited with their families within 12 months, compared with only 16 percent of the comparison group.

Successful Reunifications: Family reunifications among the concurrent benefits group were not statistically more likely to end with the reentry of a child into placement or a substantiated allegation of abuse. Among the 1,540 reunification cases before March 1, 2012, the concurrent benefits families showed higher rates of these incidences than the comparison group within the first 12 months of the child's return to the home. The differences, however, were small and not statistically significant. (Lack of statistical significance means that these differences might not be found in every group of families that receive concurrent benefits; this outcome should be monitored over the long term, RDA analysts suggest.) Across both groups, about 8 percent of the reunifications were disrupted.

Cost Neutrality: The concurrent benefits policy was approximately cost neutral from a budget perspective. Most of the additional cost of the concurrent benefits payments was offset by reductions in foster care payments because the children spent fewer days in care. The net cost per child was calculated as \$132, but some of this cost would also have been incurred under the older policy that concurrent benefits replaced.

Policymakers reacted by keeping concurrent benefits in place Conscientious, data-driven state officials have been able to keep the concurrent benefits policy in place by showing speedier family reunifications and modest costs. The research findings based on the IDS convinced state officials to keep the policy intact when they were looking for ways to cut spending. "The IDS data answered our questions about whether the families that receive concurrent benefits reunify, how quickly and whether the reunifications last," says David Stillman, assistant secretary of the Economic Services Administration. "Looking across systems allows us to take action so policies are not in conflict."

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- David Stillman, Assistant Secretary,
Economic Services Administration

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Endnotes

- 1 This case study is one of a series that shows how state and local policymakers and practitioners use IDS data to improve policies, programs and practice. Case studies 1 and 4 discuss additional examples of using IDS to improve child welfare outcomes. Case study 4 also features another use of IDS in Washington State. For more information, visit www.aecf.org/IDS
- 2 This conservative estimate of the public cost of having children in OHP does not include the time staff spends on administering the placements. A special study of Milwaukee County, where the administrative costs were calculated and added to the provider payments, showed that the child support collected amounted to only 0.3 percent of OHP costs.
- 3 Three division heads within the Department of Children and Families jointly crafted the outlines of the policy that the DCF Secretary approved in 2014. In 2015–2016, a state-convened workgroup composed of 15 county representatives from both child welfare and child support enforcement fleshed out the policy. They drafted new, more specific criteria for making referrals and developed new trigger questions to generate a referral to child support after six months.
- 4 An unlicensed relative caregiver can receive a child-only TANF grant; a licensed caregiver receives foster care payments.
- 5 State administrators developed the policy by using flexibility permitted in federal law to expand the “TANF child temporarily out of the home” policy.
- 6 All the children were removed from their homes and placed in state custody between August 1, 2008 (when the concurrent benefits policy went into effect), and June 30, 2011. Another 118 children who did not receive concurrent benefits were dropped from the analysis because their baseline characteristics were not sufficiently similar to those of the children receiving concurrent benefits. Although the policy was intended to be universal, some eligible families did not receive concurrent benefits. As noted, use of concurrent benefits increased over time as procedures were better coordinated and streamlined.

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