

Roadmaps to Building Evidence in Child Welfare

RESEARCH REPORT

# Administrative Data in Child Welfare Evaluations

Using Administrative Data to Understand Populations and Measure Outcomes

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# Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Administrative Data in Child Welfare Evaluations</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction to Administrative Data	1
What Is Administrative Data?	1
Where Can You Find Administrative Data?	2
What Are the Benefits and Limitations of Administrative Data?	3
Using Administrative Data to Understand Your Evaluation Populations	5
Using Administrative Data to Understand and Adjust the Target Population	6
Using Administrative Data to Make Sure the Study Population Is Like the Target Population	9
Using Administrative Data to Make Sure the Analysis Sample is Like the Study Population	11
Using Administrative Data to Look at Outcomes	11
Measuring How Well a Program Works	12
Using Administrative Data in QEDs	14
Linking to Administrative Data Outside of Child Welfare	15
Conclusion	17
<b>References</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>About the Authors</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Statement of Independence</b>	<b>20</b>

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# Administrative Data in Child Welfare Evaluations

Child welfare administrators implement programs, policies, and initiatives to improve the lives of children, young people, and families. They test if these programs improve the lives of the children and families they serve—the population—through evaluations. In these evaluations, they measure improvements by tracking child and family outcomes. Data already collected in child welfare administrative data systems—administrative data—can be a valuable resource for these evaluation efforts. This report will introduce administrative data and discuss two ways child welfare administrators and evaluators can use it: (1) to understand the populations in the evaluation and (2) to measure outcomes to see improvements.

## Introduction to Administrative Data

You can use evidence to make sure programs improve the lives of children and families. One way to create evidence is by carrying out evaluations. Evaluations can answer questions about the implementation and effectiveness of a program or intervention (OPRE 2018). Evaluations can use administrative data to answer many of these questions. In the section below, we define administrative data, describe where it can be found, discuss its unique properties, and review its benefits and limitations.

## What Is Administrative Data?

To understand how well a program works, you measure its outcomes. Outcomes show the changes or improvements in the lives of children or families served. For example, a program may hope to improve permanency for children. You would measure permanency outcomes (such as the rate of children leaving care for permanency) before and after the program to see if rates improved. Two types of data are used to measure outcomes in evaluations: primary and secondary data.

- **Primary data.** You collect primary data directly from a person—for example, a program participant, case worker, or community member. Examples of primary data include data collected via self-report measures, assessments, surveys, focus groups, or interviews.

- **Secondary data.** You collect secondary data for other purposes—for example, child welfare agency operations, service delivery, workforce information, and fiscal administration. You can access and use these data for evaluations. *Administrative data are a common source of secondary data.*

Administrative data are “official information generated through the routine tasks of government about...program participants and the services they receive” (OPRE 2016). Child welfare administrative data include information on children, their families, and the services they receive. These data usually include the following:

- child- and family-level characteristics (such as age, race or ethnicity, or socioeconomic status)
- risk and strength assessments
- case history and planning goals
- referral and investigation details
- placement events such as removal information, type and length of placement, and exit reason

## Where Can You Find Administrative Data?

Public child welfare agencies store administrative data in child welfare data systems.<sup>1</sup> These agencies use these systems to track services provided to families and children and meet federal reporting requirements. Child welfare staff, such as case managers, supervisors, or program managers, usually enter the data into these systems (PIIET 2016). Families involved in the child welfare system often receive services from other public or private human services systems, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). You can find data on these families and their experiences in other agencies’ data systems outside of child welfare, such as in TANF or Medicaid data. These data can provide a broader view of the families’ experiences and outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> Federal legislation encourages states to develop and use child welfare information systems. Previously, these systems were known as Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS), but with updated legislation, most states now use a Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) (see “CCWIS Status,” US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau, May 25, 2016, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/training-technical-assistance/ccwis-status>).

# What Are the Benefits and Limitations of Administrative Data?

## Benefits

Using administrative data has many benefits for evaluations of child welfare programs and policies.

Benefits of administrative data include the following.

- **Collected on the whole child welfare population.** The child welfare population is the entire group of children and families served by a child welfare system. Administrative data usually include information on all children referred to and served by a child welfare system. This is a benefit compared with primary data. With primary data, people can drop out of or leave the study before completing follow-up data collection. This common issue in primary data collection is known as “attrition.”
- **Can keep data collection effort low.** As already mentioned, child welfare agencies collect administrative data as part of their “routine tasks.” Using administrative data in evaluations can keep data collection burden low for agency staff and evaluators. The alternative—primary data collection—can be more time-consuming and expensive.
- **Include key child welfare outcomes.** Administrative data have the information (variables) needed to measure key child welfare outcomes. These outcomes include those related to child safety, placement stability, placement type, and permanency.
- **Follow a standardized structure.** Staff enter data into administrative data systems in standardized ways. This means they follow specific rules that make the data more consistent and reliable. Consistent, reliable data are important, especially when measuring outcomes over time.
- **Usually have fewer biases.** There are some common biases in primary data that administrative data lack. This is because the data are not self-reported and are instead routinely collected by agencies during their ordinary operations. For example, social desirability and recall biases can occur in self-reported, primary data. Social desirability bias happens when people respond to survey or interview questions with answers that they think others would like to hear. Recall bias happens when people do not remember past experiences correctly.

## Limitations

Administrative data also have limitations. You should keep these limitations in mind when using administrative data:

- **Limited outcomes.** You cannot track some outcomes or answer some evaluation questions using administrative data. For example, well-being outcomes are rarely found in child welfare administrative data. If your evaluation asks questions about well-being, you may need to look beyond your child welfare administrative data.
- **Complex data structures.** Administrative databases can be large and complex. To access the data needed for your evaluation, you or a member of the evaluation team must have extensive knowledge of the database design. You need to also retrieve the necessary data and put it in a format that will allow you to answer your research questions. This takes data and analytic skills (Lery, Packard Tucker, and Kuhns forthcoming; PIJET 2016).
- **Censored information.** All administrative data have a date through which you have complete information. This date usually reflects the latest update of the data and is known as the censor date. When measuring outcomes, you need to consider the censor date because you cannot track outcomes after it. For example, suppose you are interested in permanency and that your administrative data was complete through June 30, 2021. June 30, 2021, would be the censor date. You need to consider this date when measuring outcomes. You could calculate the likelihood of exiting to permanency within one year for any child who entered care through June 30, 2020. But, given your data's censor date, you could not calculate that outcome for any child who entered care after June 30, 2020.
- **Data integrity issues.** The usefulness of administrative data depends on the quality and completeness of the information. Some administrative data entered are subjective, such as the level of risk at the time of investigation. Child welfare staff (such as case workers) who enter this data may have implicit or explicit biases that affect their judgment (such as racism) and therefore influence the data collected. There may also be human error in data entry. Someone might accidentally type the wrong date or forget to log something. If data are not entered properly and updated regularly or accurately, the resulting dataset and outcomes may not be valid or reliable.

## Data-Sharing Considerations

You may choose to include partners from outside your agency in your evaluation, such as external evaluators (Lery, Packard Tucker, and Kuhns forthcoming). If so, you need to grant them access to your child welfare administrative data. This can take some effort. You will need to set up data-sharing agreements between your child welfare agency and your partner's organization. These agreements can be time-consuming to negotiate and complete. These data-sharing processes are similar for child welfare administrators looking to use administrative data from other governmental sources. Even within your own jurisdiction, you may find accessing other human service data complicated.

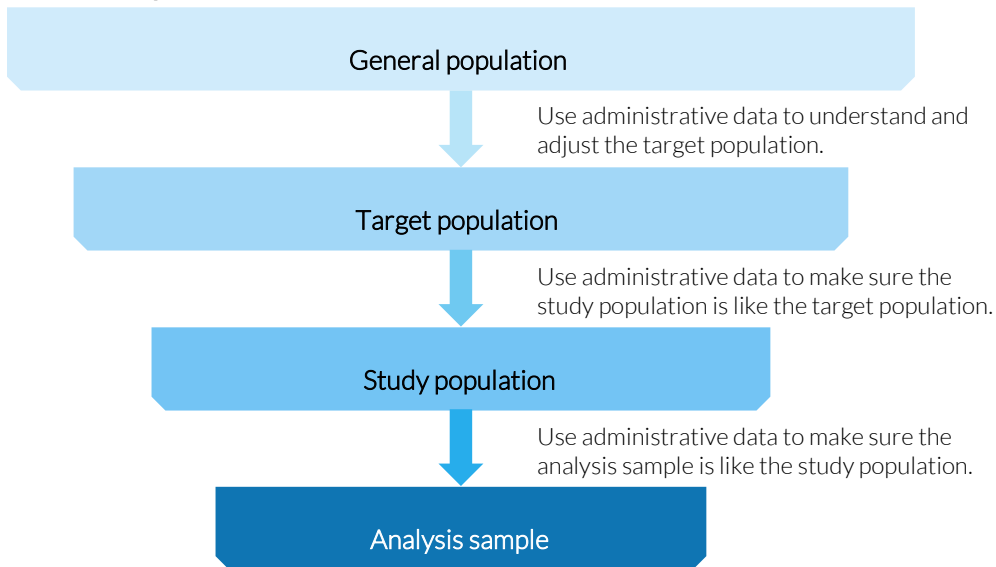
In the remaining sections, we focus on two evaluation tasks where administrative data can be helpful: understanding populations and measuring outcomes.

## Using Administrative Data to Understand Your Evaluation Populations

Throughout an evaluation, you need to consider three subpopulations drawn from the general population: the target population, study population, and analysis sample (Banerjee and Chaudhury 2010). You need to choose these groups of people carefully to evaluate a program well. Start by identifying the general population. Then, identify the target population, study population, and analysis sample—each a subpopulation of the previous population. In other words, the target population is a subset of the general population. The study population is a subset of your target population. And the analysis sample is a subset of your study population (figure 1).

- **General population.** The general population is a group of people who share at least a single characteristic of interest, such as all children involved in the child protection system.
- **Target population.** The target population is the entire group of people the program is meant to serve.
- **Study population.** The study population is the group of people you select from the target population to be in the evaluation. Participants in the study population either get the program's services (the intervention group) or receive services as usual (the comparison group).
- **Analysis sample.** The analysis sample includes the group of people from the study population included in the analysis.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Evaluation Populations**



**Source:** The author developed this graphic to visually demonstrate the flow of evaluation populations.

A well-defined target population, study population, and analysis sample are important parts of a strong evaluation. The following sections talk about how to use administrative data to properly define, understand, and track these three groups.

## Using Administrative Data to Understand and Adjust the Target Population

To design a rigorous evaluation, you need to understand the program’s target population. When developing or planning to implement a program, child welfare or program staff usually already have in mind a group of people that the program intends to serve (a target population). When you plan an evaluation, you should revisit the program’s theory of change and make sure the target population you’ve chosen is based on the program’s theory of change (TOC) (box 1). Your target population will determine how you set up your study eligibility and sampling method. Evaluations may not show impacts when the target population is not well defined or when the program does not meet the target population’s needs (Prendergast and Malm 2021).

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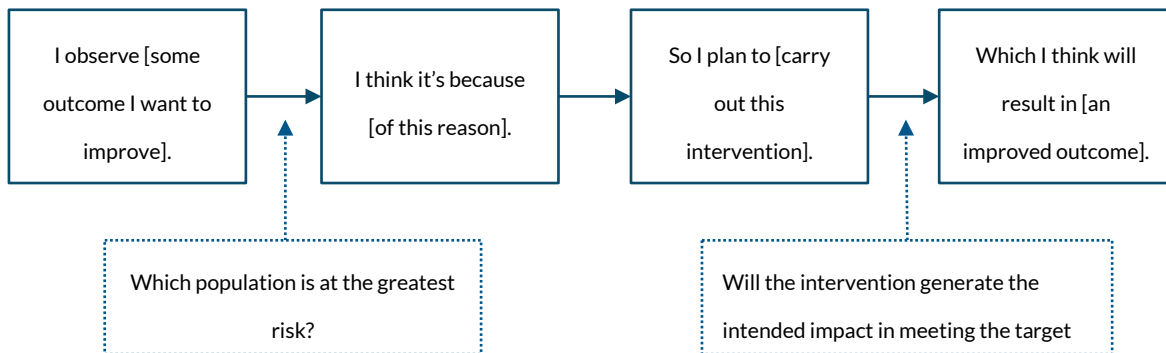
## BOX 1

### Use a Theory of Change to Guide Target Population Selection

A TOC is a roadmap for your program. It shows the path of change from a problem to an improved.<sup>2</sup> If you are not clear on the answers to the following questions, you may not have correctly identified your target population:

- Who is the target population for this program? Is the target population at the greatest risk of the identified problem? What evidence supports this?
- What is the current outcome for the target population? How much does the target population's outcome have to change to reach our expectations? Is that change reasonable?

Your program's theory of change should guide your answers to these questions.



**Source:** Fred Wulczyn, Lily Alpert, Britany Orlebeke, and Jennifer Miller Haight, "Principles, Language, and Shared Meaning: Toward a Common Understanding of CQI in Child Welfare" (Chicago: Center for State Child Welfare Data, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2014).

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When designing an evaluation, you should look to the target population and make sure you understand who the program is meant to serve. This should include talking to service providers and any external evaluation partners. You can use administrative data to understand the characteristics of the target population, such as age, race and ethnicity, risk level, and location. These characteristics can help you see potential adjustments to the target population. The following examples present three ways in which you can use administrative data to understand and possibly adjust the target population:

- **Finding the groups most at risk.** Suppose a local child welfare agency is implementing a program. This program is intended to make it less likely that a child is removed from their home.

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<sup>2</sup> "Theory of Change," Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative," accessed May 11, 2021, <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/topics/cqi/change-implementation/theory-of-change>.

Placement rates in that state vary, depending on the group of children you're looking at. When planning the evaluation, you will want to understand who the children at the highest risk of placement are. They can use administrative data to look at placement rates for children based on their demographics, such as race and ethnicity or age. This can find the children who are at the highest risk of removal. For instance, you may find that babies are at the highest risk for removal. You could narrow your original target population to infants whose placement rates are among the highest.

- **Spotting the best time to intervene.** Imagine a county child welfare agency launched a program meant to reduce instability in foster care. When are children most at risk of changing placements? Analyzing the timing of placement events in the administrative data could answer this question. When looking to understand the target population, you can look at a child's age, placement history, service needs, and service uptake information in the administrative data. This could help find the best timing for a program. For example, you may find out that during the first 30 days of placement, children ages 13 to 15 with behavior issues have the highest likelihood of movement. You could focus your program on these children within their first month of care. This type of targeting could help improve your program's success.
- **Finding the right geographic location to target.** Picture a state child welfare agency planning to implement a statewide program meant to increase permanency within twelve months of a child's removal from home. The overall statewide permanency rate may be lower than the national standard. But administrative data may reveal a wide gap in permanency rate among regions (with some above and some below the national standard). Narrowing down the target population to those regions with the lowest permanency rate may make the most sense given limited resources.

To sum up, evaluation design includes looking at and understanding a program's target population. You may find people, times, or locations that are more likely to have the outcome you're trying to improve. Based on this information, you could adjust your target population to better reach the group(s) that need the intervention the most. Also, a well-defined target population sets a good foundation for a successful evaluation. This is because the target population is the group from which the study population and analysis sample will be drawn.

# Using Administrative Data to Make Sure the Study Population Is Like the Target Population

You select the people from the target population to be in your study, and this is known as a study population. The study population always includes children or families receiving services (also known as the treatment group, experimental group, or intervention group). In an impact evaluation, the study population also includes people selected to be in the control group or comparison group. A control group is usually used in an experimental design with random assignment. A comparison group is usually in quasi-experimental designs without random assignment.

The study population would ideally include all people in the target population. But the study population usually includes only some of the target population (Brewsaugh and Prendergast 2021; Hanson and Pergamit forthcoming; Tucker 2021). This may be because of the evaluation's research questions, design, or resource limits (especially funding). During the evaluation design stage, you need to decide who will be in the study population. This should be done in collaboration with evaluation partners, such as agency administrators, program developers, and community stakeholders. Administrative data can play a key role in the process.

You can use administrative data to make sure that the study population is like the program's target population and check if the intervention and comparison groups are similar at the beginning of the evaluation. If the study population is not like the target population, it can be hard to find program impacts.

- **Is your study population like the target population?** To be like the target population, the study population must have similar characteristics to the target population. These can include things such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, geographic location, or poverty status. Preferably, the characteristics are of the same proportion in the study and target populations. For example, if the target population is 50 percent male and 50 percent female, it's important that the study population have a similar makeup. To decide whether the study population is representative of the target population, administrative data should be used to compare it with the target population.
- **Are your intervention and comparison groups similar?** For comparison group designs, it's also important to look at the characteristics of the intervention group before the program begins (at baseline). Then you need to compare them with the characteristics of the comparison group. The more similar (equivalent) the two groups are at the beginning of the evaluation before the intervention, the more likely that any eventual difference in outcomes was caused by the intervention (and not by differences between the groups). You can use administrative data to

check if the intervention and comparison groups are similar in key characteristics at baseline, such as race or ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES).

The study population may differ from the target population for reasons other than evaluation design. Sometimes, the study population differs from the target population because of issues with service referral. You may find that some people referred to the program are not in the target population. Or some members of the target population may get missed in the referral process. You can check for these situations during the evaluation using administrative data. Early in the evaluation, you can check if the program is being offered to the right group of people. If it is not, you can take the opportunity to fix the issue.

- For example, a program may intend to offer mental health support to young people ages 14 to 16 with severe mental health challenges. But when reviewing the case records and referral data, you may find this program is offering services to young people who have mild mental health issues or are in the wrong age group. Left unresolved, this could weaken your study findings. The evaluation may not be able to say whether the program is effective for the true target population.
- Or, on the flip side of the example above, maybe the referral process is missing some young people in the intended population. This could mean that some of the young people ages 14 to 16 with severe mental health issues are not receiving services. Missing these referrals could decrease the number of young people in your study population (sample size). It could also make it harder to detect the effectiveness of your program.

You can use administrative data to check whether your study and target populations are similar (box 2). You can test and address any problems early to improve implementation and strengthen your evaluation.

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## BOX 2

### Does the Study Population Match the Target Population?

To find places where and when the study population may not match the intended target population, we suggest you ask the following questions:

- How are participants identified, referred, and enrolled?
- Is *everyone* in the target population included through those processes?
- Is anybody *not* in the target population included?

Administrative data can help you answer these questions.

**Source:** Michael Pergamit, "Slide Deck Session 5: Aligning the Target Population, Study Population, and Analysis Sample - Child Welfare Evidence-Building Academy," OPRE Report 2021-111 (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2021).

## Using Administrative Data to Make Sure the Analysis Sample is Like the Study Population

The analysis sample is the part of the study population included in your analysis. You should check the analysis sample throughout the evaluation and see if it is different from the study population.

Administrative data can identify sample issues and allow you to take any actions needed.

Many evaluations involve primary data collection. When you collect primary data, two common situations may arise that can lead to differences between the analysis sample and study population (Brewsaugh and Prendergast 2021):

- **Differences can happen when people do not agree to take part in the evaluation.** If your evaluation uses primary data collection, you will need to get people to agree (consent) to take part in the evaluation and have their data collected. When many members from the study population do not consent, the people left in the analysis sample may not be like the study population. This is because those who consent may be different from those who do not consent.
- **Differences can happen when there is attrition.** Your evaluation may involve data collection after the intervention ends. Perhaps you need to conduct a survey or phone interview six months after the program ends. Attrition happens when some people do not take part in this follow-up data collection. They may choose to leave the study, or you may not be able to find them. When attrition is high, your analysis sample may not be like the study population. Those who respond to follow-up data collection may be different from those who do not respond.

In both examples above, you can use administrative data to check if the analysis sample matches the study population on key characteristics. Characteristics often used to check for differences include age, gender, race or ethnicity, SES, geography, risk level, and assessment results.

## Using Administrative Data to Look at Outcomes

Below, we focus on how you can use administrative data to measure how well an intervention is working in an outcome or impact evaluation (box 3). We also discuss how administrative data outside of the child welfare system can help your evaluation.

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### BOX 3

#### Choosing the Right Evaluation Type

Evaluations help us understand whether programs are making a difference in families' lives. The choice of the right evaluation type depends on your program. Two types of evaluations look at how a program affects outcomes:

- An **outcome evaluation** helps you answer the question, "Is the program producing the expected outcomes?" Outcome evaluations look at outcomes in program participants only and do not include a comparison or control group. For example, an outcome evaluation of a program meant to improve reunifications may show that a certain percentage of participants exit to reunification. But that outcome evaluation would not be able to tell you what percentage of those people would have exited to reunification without the program.
- **Impact evaluations** ideally test a well-defined, mature program in a known context with predictable outcomes. They answer the question, "Are families better off after participating than they would have been without the program?" Programs that are "ready" for a rigorous impact study have reduced as many unknowns as possible. This helps impact evaluations better attribute outcomes to the program and not other factors.

**Source:** Carrie Furrer and Marla McDaniel, "Slide Deck Session 3: What Types of Evaluation can Answer your Evaluation Questions? - Child Welfare Evidence-Building Academy," OPRE Report 2021-109 (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2021).

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## Measuring How Well a Program Works

To look at how well a program works, you measure its outcomes. Outcomes show the changes or improvements in program participants' lives. For both outcome and impact evaluations, administrative data can be used to measure the outcomes a program means to change. When designing your evaluation, you need to be sure the outcomes you're measuring match your research questions and the program you're evaluating. The theory of change should tell you what outcome you are interested in by making it clear what the program is trying to improve for children and families (box 2). If you choose outcomes that do not match your program's theory of change, your evaluation might not build evidence of program impact. Mismatch can lead to weak findings and incorrect conclusions.

Once you find the right outcomes to measure, you can decide whether the outcomes can be measured using administrative data. As mentioned earlier, administrative data are good for measuring common child welfare outcomes. These include outcomes related to child safety, placement stability, placement type, and permanency.

## Thinking about When or If Outcomes Happen

You may be interested in the timing of an outcome (when something happened) or the likelihood of an outcome (if something happened). For example, maybe your program is trying to change how quickly children achieve permanency (timing). Or maybe your program is trying to change whether children experience placement instability (likelihood). Either way, it is helpful to think about the outcome as an event. Administrative data provide information on the key events in a child's path through child welfare.

If your evaluation is looking at child welfare outcomes, you will likely be interested in one or more child welfare events. Events in child welfare may include a report of maltreatment; placement into out-of-home care; or an exit from care (such as reunification or adoption). To track these events, each event in the administrative data needs to have a date and link to a person (such as a child, parent, or caseworker). The theory of change should tell you what outcome to track and how to calculate that outcome. The theory of change may be concerned with improving the likelihood (probability), frequency, timing, or level (severity) of an outcome.

## Measuring Likelihood, Change, and Time

The way you use administrative data to calculate outcomes depends on what you're trying to measure:

- **Measuring likelihood.** If your program is trying to change whether an outcome happens—the likelihood—you need two numbers: (1) the number of people who could experience the outcome (the event); (2) the number of people who do experience the outcome. For example, if you want to measure the probability of reunification, you take the number of children reunified divided by the number of children who could have reunified (all the children admitted to foster care during the period of interest). Because administrative data hold information on all children in the child welfare system, it provides a great resource for calculating outcomes where you want to understand the likelihood of an event for the whole or a specific population.
- **Measuring change.** If you are trying to measure the amount of change (maybe on a risk score or functioning scale), you need at least two measurement events. You measure the change by looking at the difference between those two measurements. These types of outcomes often come from assessments. Administrative data can be a useful source of assessment data. But only if the assessments are regularly and accurately logged in the data for the full population.
- **Measuring time.** If you are trying to measure the time between events, then you need two dates: the start and stop dates. For example, to measure a child's time in foster care, you would

need the date they entered care and the date they exited. For key child welfare events, administrative data contain not only events for the entire population, but also the dates of these events. This structure makes it easy to calculate outcomes where you're concerned about the time between events. For example, child welfare administrative data would hold the start and stop dates of a child's trial home visit, helping measure the duration of their visit.

Outcomes can help you better understand if the program is helping participants and improving their lives. Because collecting administrative data takes less work than primary data, it's possible to calculate outcomes from administrative data more often. This evidence can be used to improve program implementation.

## **Taking Advantage of Administrative Data in Impact Evaluations**

Impact evaluations look at the same types of outcomes as outcome evaluations. And administrative data can be used in the same way to calculate them. Compared with other evaluation types, the biggest difference in an impact evaluation is the presence of a comparison group. You need to calculate outcomes for them as well. Administrative data can be a valuable resource for calculating outcomes for both the intervention and comparison groups. This is because it includes information on the entire child welfare population.

All impact evaluations use statistical models. These models estimate if there is a significant difference in outcomes between the intervention and comparison groups. The right statistical model depends on the type of outcome you're measuring. Administrative data can supply the information needed to calculate outcomes. It can also provide valuable information on the demographics and child welfare history of the population. This information can strengthen your statistical modeling approach.

## **Using Administrative Data in QEDs**

Impact evaluations can use either a randomized control trial (RCT) or a quasi-experimental design (QED). RCTs randomly assign participants to the intervention or control group and are considered the "gold standard" of rigorous impact evaluations (Hanson and Pergamit forthcoming; White and Sabarwal 2014; JBA 2013). QEDs do not randomly assign people to an intervention. Instead, QEDs name a comparison group that is as similar as possible to the intervention group in terms of preprogram (baseline) characteristics (Tucker 2021).

Beyond calculating outcomes, administrative data can be helpful in conducting QEDs in other ways. In QEDs, administrative data can be used to do the following:

- **Build comparison groups.** Depending on the type of QED, you may look to other geographic locations or historical periods for a comparison group. Administrative data systems can have data on children and families across a wide geographic area like a state. They also typically have data going back many years.
- **Watch for confounding variables at the person level.** A confounding variable is an “extra” variable that you did not account for when looking at the effect of a program on an outcome. A confounding variable can make it look like a program caused an outcome when that is not true. Because administrative data hold many of the common confounding variables (such as age, race or ethnicity, geography), they can help you control for such variables in your analysis.
- **Look for baseline equivalence.** Those same confounding variables are also helpful to show baseline equivalence. As we’ve mentioned, baseline equivalence is the extent to which the intervention and comparison groups are like one another before intervention (at baseline). You should check baseline equivalence on any characteristics that might contribute to group differences after intervention.

## Linking to Administrative Data Outside of Child Welfare

Administrative data exist in many places outside of child welfare information systems. You can link child welfare administrative data to other data sources. By doing so, you can track other outcomes and understand program impacts outside of the child welfare system. You can connect data in one dataset to another using a common identifier that exists in both datasets (such as a child or family ID, service ID, or provider ID). This is called “linking” the data.

### Linking to Fiscal Data

One data type you should think about linking with your child welfare administrative data is fiscal data (such as cost records). Child welfare administrators have limited resources to improve outcomes for children and families. So it is important to create evidence about whether programs are changing outcomes in a cost-effective manner. By linking service data with fiscal data, evaluations can calculate the cost of delivering services (CCCWSW 2013). If your evaluation includes information on

outcomes and program costs, you may have the opportunity for cost-effectiveness analysis or cost-benefit analysis.<sup>3</sup>

## Linking Data across Systems

There are other opportunities to link administrative data across human service agencies. Linking child welfare administrative data to other human service agencies' administrative data (such as Medicaid, TANF, behavioral health, or education data) gives you the chance to understand a child welfare program's impact on outcomes outside of child welfare.

To link these data, you will need to share data between systems and/or agencies. This can happen in different ways:

- You can set up **data-sharing agreements**. Data-sharing agreements are contracts that say what data will be shared, how the data will be protected, and how the data will be used. These agreements help with the sharing and then linking of data.
- You can build **integrated databases**. These databases can connect administrative data on children and families across agencies and departments. These databases create a fuller picture of the children and families who come into contact with the child welfare system.

You can find many examples of integrated databases via the AISP Network. The AISP Network includes a community of practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and community stakeholders. Sites in the network have already set up cross-agency data agreements. They also routinely integrate data or work to develop their data-sharing capacity.<sup>4</sup> Their website has a wealth of resources.

Sharing data, either with data-sharing agreements or by building an integrated database, can strengthen partnerships between agencies. Data sharing can also increase the number of outcomes you can measure and track. By looking at a larger range of outcomes, you can better understand the impact of your program. You may also be able to reduce the need to collect primary data.

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<sup>3</sup> Cost-effectiveness analysis looks at the relationship between a program's costs and its effectiveness. For example, an evaluation of a permanency program may show increased reunifications. A cost-effectiveness study would calculate the cost per reunification achieved. Cost-benefit analysis measures intervention benefits in dollars and checks whether they exceed program costs. These benefits can be near or far reaching.

<sup>4</sup> "About the AISP Network," Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy (AISP), University of Pennsylvania, accessed November 19, 2021, <https://www.aisp.upenn.edu/about-aisp-network/>.

## Conclusion

The unique features of administrative data make it a valuable resource for evaluations. It usually contains data on the whole population and key child welfare outcomes across time in a standardized way.<sup>5</sup> Collected as part of your agency’s routine tasks, it also minimizes the need to collect primary data and reduces data collection burden. This avoids some of the biases present in primary data collection activities. When used properly, administrative data can help your evaluation despite some of its limitations.

During the evaluation design phase, administrative data can help you find the target population and align the study population and analysis sample. Administrative data has rich information about child- and family-level characteristics and each child’s maltreatment, assessment, and placement history. Because of this, administrative data give you a powerful tool to understand these evaluation populations and are an important foundation for a strong evaluation.

Largely because of its ability to track data for the full population, administrative data can be helpful when measuring outcomes in an outcome or impact evaluation. Administrative data can help you generate evidence about outcomes, especially when you’re looking at a key child welfare outcome such as child safety, placement stability, or permanency. Linking to other data sources beyond your child welfare information system can increase the number of outcomes you can track.

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<sup>5</sup> One resource we recommend for learning and thinking about administrative data is the Child Care and Early Education Research Connections’s “Working with Administrative Data” site (accessed November 19, 2021, <https://www.researchconnections.org/research-tools/working-administrative-data>). Although not child welfare specific, the website provides guidance on topics such as linking and integrating administrative data, managing the data, and dealing with data confidentiality and security.

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