

Glossary

State-level Data for Understanding Child Welfare in the United States

- **Abandonment:** A condition or circumstance under which the child has been left alone or with others and their caretaker did not return or make whereabouts known.
- **Adoption:** The legal process through which children who will not be raised by their birth parents become full and permanent legal members of another relative or nonrelative family.
- **Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS):** The federal collection of case-level information from state and Tribal Title IV-E agencies on all children in foster care for whom state child welfare agencies have responsibility for placement, care, or supervision; and on children who are adopted under the auspices of the state's public child welfare agency. Agencies are required to report demographics of children, foster parents, and adoptive parents; removal episodes; placements; and exits from foster care. AFCARS data are broken down into two files; the Foster Care file includes data on all children in foster care and the Adoption file includes data on children who have been adopted with Title IV-E agency involvement.
- **Alternative response:** A responsive approach to a child maltreatment report that is usually applied to reports with low and moderate risk factors. Such cases do not usually undergo an investigation or require a formal determination or substantiation of child abuse or neglect. A determination of maltreatment is not made and a perpetrator is not determined. In alternative response systems, screened-in reports are assigned to service provision tracks based on factors such as the type and severity of the maltreatment, the number and sources of previous reports, and the willingness of a family to participate in services. Families may be referred to services at the child protective services agency and/or community agencies to address needs and concerns.
- **Assessment:** A process by which a child protective services agency determines whether the child or other persons involved in a report of alleged maltreatment is in need of services. Assessment is an ongoing practice of informing decision making by identifying, considering, and weighing factors that impact children, youth, and their families.
- **Child behavior problem:** As a condition associated with a child's involvement with child protective services, defined as a child's behavior in the school and/or community that adversely affects socialization, learning, growth, and moral development. This may include adjudicated or non-adjudicated child behavior problems, and would include the child's running away from home or from another placement.
- **Child disability:** As a condition associated with a child's involvement with child protective services, defined as a clinical diagnosis by a qualified professional of one or more of the following: mental retardation; emotional disturbance; specific learning disability; hearing, speech, or sight impairment; physical disability; or other clinically diagnosed handicap.
- **Child protective services:** An official state agency with the responsibility to receive and respond to allegations of suspected child abuse and neglect, determine the validity of allegations, and provide services to protect and serve children and their families.
- **Death of a child:** As a reason for a child's discharge from foster care, defined as a child having died while in foster care.

- **Disposition:** A determination made by a child protective services agency that evidence is, or is not, sufficient under state law to conclude that maltreatment occurred. A disposition is applied to each alleged maltreatment in a report and to the report itself.
- **Emancipation:** As a reason for a child's discharge from foster care, defined as a child having reached majority according to the law by virtue of age, marriage, etc.
- **Fatality:** Death of a child as a result of abuse and neglect—either because an injury resulting from the abuse and neglect was the cause of death, or because the abuse and neglect were contributing factors to the cause of death.
- **Foster care:** 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom the state agency has placement and care responsibility. Foster care includes family-based foster homes, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, child care institutions, etc. Foster care may be provided by those related or not related to the child.
- **Foster parent:** Individual who provides placement, care, or supervision for children who have been removed from their home by the state. The foster parent may be a relative or nonrelative and, depending on state regulations, need not be licensed by the state agency to be considered a foster parent.
- **Group home:** A licensed or approved home or child care facility providing 24-hour care for children. Homes normally house four to 12 children in a setting that offers the potential for the full use of community resources, including employment, health care, education, and recreational opportunities.
- **Guardianship:** A judicially created (i.e., legal) relationship between a child and caretaker that is intended to be permanent and self-sustaining, as evidenced by the transfer of the following parental rights to the caretaker: protection, education, care and control, and custody of the person; and decision-making power on their behalf. The caretaker may be a relative or nonrelative.
- **Inability to cope:** As a condition associated with a child's involvement with child protective services, defined as physical or emotional illness or a disabling condition adversely affecting the caretaker's ability to care for the child.
- **Inadequate housing:** As a condition associated with a child's involvement with child protective services, defined as a condition in which housing facilities are substandard, overcrowded, unsafe, or otherwise inadequate. This results in the housing being inappropriate for the parents' and children's ability to reside together; also includes homelessness.
- **Institution:** A child care facility operated by a public or private agency that provides 24-hour care and/or treatment for children who require separation from their own homes and/or group living experience. These facilities care for more than 12 children and may include child care institutions, residential treatment facilities, maternity homes, etc.
- **Investigation:** A type of child protective services response that involves the gathering of objective information to determine whether a child was maltreated, or is at risk of maltreatment, and that establishes whether an intervention is needed.
- **Legal guardian:** An adult to whom a court has given parental responsibility and authority for a child. Appointment as guardian requires the filing of a petition and approval by the court and can be done without terminating the parental rights of the child's parents. This person may be a relative or nonrelative.
- **Living with relative or guardianship:** As a reason for the child's discharge from foster care, defined as a situation in which the child has gone to live with a relative (other than the one from whose home they were removed), or in which permanent custody of the child has been awarded to an individual (either relative or nonrelative).

- **Medical neglect:** As a condition associated with a child’s involvement with child protective services, defined as a type of maltreatment caused by failure of the caregiver to provide for the appropriate health care of the child despite being financially able to do so, or despite being offered financial or other resources to do so.
- **National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS):** A voluntary national data collection and analysis system created in response to the requirements of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act. NCANDS contains two types of data: a Child File with case-level data and an Agency File with agency-level aggregate statistics. The Child File includes child-specific records for each report of alleged child abuse and neglect that received a child protective services response in the form of an investigation or alternative response (e.g., types of maltreatment, CPS findings, risk factors of the child and caregiver, services provided). The Agency File contains data that are not reportable at the child-specific level and are often gathered from agencies external to CPS. Information collected in the Agency File include receipt of prevention and post-response services, as well as caseload and workforce data.¹
- **Neglect:** A type of maltreatment that refers to a caregiver’s failure to provide needed, age-appropriate care despite being financially able to do so, or despite being offered financial or other means to do so. As a condition associated with a child’s involvement with child protective services, defined as alleged or substantiated negligent treatment or maltreatment, including failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, or care.
- **Nonrelative foster family home:** A licensed foster family home, with caregivers who are not related to the child, regarded by the state as a foster care living arrangement.
- **Overrepresentation:** A condition in which the proportion of one group in a population is disproportionately larger than in the general population. For example, in FY 2020, in South Dakota, American Indian and Alaska Native children make up 12 percent of the general child population and 53 percent of the foster care population. Therefore, American Indian and Alaska Native children are overrepresented in the child welfare system in South Dakota.²
- **Parent death:** As a condition associated with a child’s involvement with child protective services, defined as the death of a parent or caretaker.
- **Parental incarceration:** As a condition associated with a child’s involvement with child protective services, defined as the temporary or permanent placement of a parent or caretaker in jail that adversely affects their care for a child.
- **Parental relinquishment of rights:** As a condition associated with a child’s involvement with child protective services, defined as a situation in which parent(s) assign, in writing, the physical and legal custody of the child to the agency for the purpose of having the child adopted.
- **Parental substance abuse:** As a condition associated with a child’s involvement with child protective services, defined as the principal caretaker’s compulsive use of drug or alcohol that is not of a temporary nature.
- **Permanency:** In relation to the goal of child protective services, the realization of a legal, permanent family relationship for every child and youth. As defined in the Child and Family Services Reviews, a child in foster care is determined to have achieved permanency when any of the following occurs: (1) The child is discharged from foster care to reunification with their family, either a parent or other relative; (2) the child is discharged from foster care to a legally finalized adoption; or (3) the child is discharged from foster care to the care of a legal guardian.

¹ <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/fact-sheet/about-ncands>

² <https://www.childtrends.org/blog/american-indian-and-alaska-native-aian-children-are-overrepresented-in-foster-care-in-states-with-the-largest-proportions-of-aian-children>

- **Physical abuse:** As a condition associated with a child’s involvement with child protective services, defined as a type of maltreatment that involves physical acts that caused or could have caused physical injury to a child.
- **Postresponse services/Postinvestigation services:** Activities provided or arranged for the child or family by the child protective services agency, social services agency, or child welfare agency, as a result of needs discovered during an investigation. Services might include family preservation (e.g., Parent Child Interaction Therapy), family support (e.g., mental health services, substance use disorder services, school-based services), and foster care.
- **Pre-adoptive home:** A type of placement in which the child resides with a family that intends to adopt the child. The family may or may not be receiving a foster care payment or an adoption subsidy on behalf of the child.
- **Psychological maltreatment:** As a condition associated with a child’s involvement with child protective services, defined as acts or omissions—other than physical abuse or sexual abuse—that caused or could have caused conduct, cognitive, affective, or other behavioral or mental disorders.
- **Racial disparity:** In the child welfare system, used to describe inequitable outcomes experienced by one racial or ethnic group at various decision-making points, relative to another racial or ethnic group’s outcomes. Disparities can occur at every decision-making point, including the initial report of alleged maltreatment, acceptance of reports for investigation, substantiation of maltreatment, entries into substitute care, and exits from care.
- **Racial disproportionality:** In the child welfare system, defined as the difference between the percentage of children of a certain racial or ethnic group in the general population (e.g., country, state, county, community) and the percentage of children of the same population that are involved with the child welfare system.
- **Referral:** An initial notification to a child protective services (CPS) agency alleging child maltreatment. Referrals can include multiple children. Referrals that meet CPS agency criteria are screened in to receive an investigation or alternative response, and are then called "reports."
- **Relative foster family home:** A licensed or unlicensed home of the child’s relatives regarded by the state as a foster care living arrangement for the child, even if there is no payment.
- **Reunification:** As a reason for the child’s discharge from foster care, defined as a situation in which the child was returned to the home from which they were removed, to their principal caretaker.
- **Runaway:** As a reason for the child’s discharge from foster care, defined as a situation in which the child ran away from their foster care placement.
- **Screened-in referral:** An allegation of child maltreatment made to child protective services that met the state’s standards for acceptance and became a report.
- **Screened-out referral:** An allegation of child maltreatment made to child protective services that did not meet the state’s standards for acceptance.
- **Screening:** The process through which an agency hotline or intake units screen referrals to determine whether further action is appropriate. Referrals that do not meet agency criteria for possible child abuse and neglect are screened out or diverted from child protective services to other community agencies.
- **Sex trafficking:** As a condition associated with a child’s involvement with child protective services, defined as a type of maltreatment that involves the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act.
- **Sexual abuse:** As a condition associated with a child’s involvement with child protective services, defined as a type of maltreatment in which the child is involved in sexual activity to provide sexual gratification or

financial benefit to the perpetrator, including contacts for sexual purposes, molestation, statutory rape, prostitution, pornography, exposure, incest, or other sexually exploitative activities.

- **Subsidized guardianship:** Program that provides financial assistance for caregivers who take legal guardianship of children with child welfare involvement, and who cannot be safely reunified with their family.
- **Substance abuse by the child:** As a condition associated with a child's involvement with child protective services, defined as the child's compulsive use of or need for drugs or alcohol that is not of a temporary nature. This includes infants exposed to drugs and alcohol during pregnancy and addicted at birth.
- **Substantiated:** A condition in which an allegation of maltreatment or risk of maltreatment is found to be supported or founded by state law or policy, as the result of an investigation. A substantiated disposition indicates that credible evidence exists that child abuse or neglect has occurred.
- **Supervised independent living setting:** An alternative traditional living arrangement in which the child is under the supervision of a child welfare agency but without 24-hour adult supervision, is receiving financial support from the agency, and is in a setting that provides the opportunity for increased responsibility for self-care.
- **Termination of parental rights:** Voluntary or involuntary legal severance of the rights of a parent to the care, custody, and control of a child and to any benefits that, by law, would flow to the parent from the child, such as inheritance. A termination of parental rights must occur before a child can be adopted.
- **Transfer to another agency:** As a reason for the child's discharge from foster care, defined as a situation in which the responsibility for the care of the child was awarded to another agency, either in or outside of the state or Tribal service area.
- **Trial home visits:** The child has been in a foster care placement but, under state agency supervision, has been returned to the principal caretaker from whose custody they were removed for a limited and specified period of time.
- **Unsubstantiated:** A condition in which an investigation determines that there was not sufficient evidence under state law to conclude or suspect that a child was maltreated or at risk of being maltreated.
- **Victim:** A child for whom the state determined that at least one maltreatment referral was substantiated or indicated, and for whom a disposition of substantiated or indicated was assigned in a specific report.

Unless noted otherwise, the definitions in this glossary pull from the following sources:

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/glossary/glossarya/>

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/report/child-maltreatment-2020>

https://www.ndacan.acf.hhs.gov/datasets/pdfs_user_guides/afcars-foster-care-file-codebook.pdf

https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/es2011_session_509.pdf