



NDAS National Working Group to Improve Child Welfare Data

# COMMON DEFINITIONS

## Permanency of Reunification: Definitions for Foster Care Entry and Re-entry

To Promote Consistency in State Data Reporting  
for the Federal Outcome Measure

First Edition, Final Version

**Developed by:**

**Child Welfare League of America  
National Working Group to Improve Child Welfare Data (NWG)**

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*The CWLA National Working Group definitions provided in this paper represent a general consensus of state child welfare agencies, with leadership from a Definitions Work Group and input from other child welfare professionals. The parameters defined here have been developed in the context of the federal guidance to help states voluntarily report the data more consistently. The definitions also provide a reference point that states may use to explain how their data diverge. This work is not federally sanctioned or required.*

## Acknowledgements

The CWLA National Working Group definitions provided in this paper represent a general consensus of state child welfare agencies, with input from other child welfare professionals.

The National Working Group to Improve Child Welfare Data (NWG) consists of representatives from 51 state child welfare agencies, and is facilitated by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA). A majority of the states participated in meetings to discuss the definitions and variations, and all had the opportunity to provide feedback. A definitions work group with leadership from Kristen Tromble, developed these common definitions for terms related to entry and re-entry as they apply to the federal outcome measures. CWLA and the NWG acknowledge the time and contributions of the definitions work group members, listed below:

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**\*A preliminary version of this document was written by Kristen Tromble , based in part on an unpublished earlier version prepared by Kristen Woodruff. Both Kristen Tromble and Kristen Woodruff are past Project Directors of the National Working Group to Improve Child Welfare Data, and we are particularly grateful for their contribution to this work.**

## NWG Definitions for Foster Care Entry and Re-entry

### Introduction

Child welfare agencies strive to provide permanency for children exiting foster care, but some children who exit care later re-enter. As part of the Child & Family Services Reviews (CFSRs), the federal government periodically assesses the ability of state child welfare agencies to reduce the time to reunification for children in foster care without increasing re-entry rates. In the first round of CFSRs, the federal government set a national standard that, of all children who entered foster care during the year under review, 8.6% or fewer of those children re-entered foster care within 12 months of a prior foster care episode (US DHHS, 2004). For the second round of CFSRs, the federal government introduced a new re-entry measure, *Permanency of Reunification*, as one component of the new permanency composite, *Timeliness and Permanency of Reunifications* (Federal Register, 2006). Permanency of reunification is assessed as follows: “Of all children discharged from foster care to reunification in the year prior to the one shown, what percent re-entered foster care in less than 12 months from the date of discharge?” (NRC-CWDT, 2006)<sup>1</sup>. Each measure relies on data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS).

The National Working Group to Improve Child Welfare Data (NWG) seeks to promote consistency among states in their AFCARS submissions through the development of common definitions. A survey conducted by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) illustrated definitional disparities in the way states report AFCARS data used for the federal measures pertaining to reunification and re-entry (CWLA, 2005). In order to supplement the NWG reunification definitions (CWLA, January 2007) and promote more consistency in the federal measure of foster care re-entries, this paper reviews the permanency of reunification measure and defines terms related to *entry* and *re-entry* into foster care<sup>2</sup>.

The NWG definitions relating to entry and re-entry emanate from and build on federal definitions and guidance for AFCARS reporting and the federal measures, but this work is not authorized or approved by the Children’s Bureau. **State child welfare agencies should continue to contact the Children’s Bureau and the National Resource Center for Child Welfare Data Technology (NRC-CWDT) with questions about how to report the data to AFCARS.**

**Note on Preliminary January 2007 Version:** A preliminary version of this document was published before corrections and interpretations of the original federal regulation were available. This version incorporates corrections released in the January 23, 2007 Federal Register, Vol.72, No. 14. The corrections may be found on line at [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/cwmonitoring/legislation/fed\\_reg.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/cwmonitoring/legislation/fed_reg.htm)

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<sup>1</sup>For the second round of CFSRs, a national standard was set for the composite, *Timeliness and Permanency of Reunification*, rather than for each individual measure in the composite. For the measures, the national median value is provided to help states assess their performance. For federal fiscal year 2004, the national median for the permanency of reunification measure was 15.0%.

<sup>2</sup> Other concepts relevant to measuring the permanency of reunification include temporary protective custody, temporary living condition (TLC), trial home visit, and discharge. Detailed discussion and definitions for these terms are found in the federal Child Welfare Policy Manual (CWPM) (US DHHS, n.d.), and the NWG publications, Reunification Definitions (CWLA, January 2007) and Placement Change Definitions Implementation Guide (CWLA, February 2006).

## Part 1. Permanency of Reunification: A Federal Measure of Re-entry<sup>3</sup>

**1.1 Measuring Re-entry:** The federal measure for permanency of reunification as stated in the sample State Data Profile (NRC-CWDT, 2006) is:

**Of all children who were discharged from foster care to reunification in the 12-month period prior to the target 12-month period, what percent re-entered foster care in less than 12 months from the date of discharge?**

Children count as a re-entry in the calculation of the permanency of reunification measure if they were discharged to reunification in the previous year and re-entered care within 12 months of discharge.

The federal measure, as corrected in January, 2007, defines the denominator as children for whom:

**The child's date of discharge from foster care occurs during the 12-month period just prior to the 12-month target year and, at the time of the date of discharge, the reason for discharge is either "reunification with parents or primary caretakers" or "living with other relatives."**

The federal measure, as corrected in January, 2007, defines the numerator as children who meet all of the criteria for inclusion in the denominator and also meet the following criterion:

**The child's date of latest removal from home is less than 12 months from the date of discharge from foster care that occurred during the 12-month period just prior to the 12-month target year.**

*Note that the re-entry measure is one of four measures used in the composite titled "Timeliness and Permanency of Reunification."*

**1.2 Elements Used to Calculate the Measure:** The following AFCARS elements are used in calculating the permanency of reunification measure<sup>4</sup>:

- Date of Latest Removal from Home (#21)
- Total Number of Removals from Home to Date (#19)
- Reason for Discharge (#58)
- Date of Discharge from Foster Care (#56)
- Date Child Was Discharged from Last Foster Care Episode (#20)

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<sup>3</sup> Information in this document is not official guidance and is not intended to replace federal instruction or address all scenarios that might arise. For help understanding and calculating the measure, state agencies should refer to the 2006 State Data Profile Toolkit (NRC-CWDT, 2006) and consult with the Children's Bureau and the NRC-CWDT.

<sup>4</sup> Additional AFCARS fields used in the process of generating the measure are not addressed in this document. They include identification codes such as State (#1), Local Agency FIPS Code (#3), and Record Number (#4), and the Child's Date of Birth (#4).

## Part 2. AFCARS and NWG Definitions to Promote Consistency in the Permanency of Reunification Measure

For each AFCARS element listed in 1.2, Part 2 provides the federal definition and clarification as found in the online Child Welfare Policy Manual (CWPM). For the elements *Date of Latest Removal from Home* and *Reason for Discharge*, related NWG definitions are also provided. Definitions of additional terms are included at the end of this Part. The definitions in this document are meant to clarify concepts related to entry and re-entry. Additional NWG definitions and discussion of issues related to discharge are covered in a separate NWG document, *Reunification Definitions* (CWLA, May 2006). The federal definitions and guidance are found in the CWPM (US DHHS, n.d.) and the AFCARS Toolkit (NRC-CWDT, 2003).

**2.1 AFCARS Element: Date of Latest Removal from Home (#21)** – Month, day and year the child was last removed from his/her home for the purpose of being placed in foster care. This would be the date for the current episode or, if the child has exited foster care, the date of removal for the most recent removal<sup>5</sup>.

Clarification:

CWPM: AFCARS, 1.2.B.3, Question 4 [This guidance clarifies the terms removal, placement, episode, and discharge. Only the information on removal is provided here.]

A **Removal** is either the physical act of a child being taken from his or her normal place of residence, by court order or a voluntary placement agreement and placed in a substitute care setting, or the removal of custody from the parent or relative guardian pursuant to a court order or voluntary placement agreement which permits the child to remain in a substitute care setting.

CWPM: AFCARS, 1.2.B.7, Question 24 [This guidance clarifies that children who run away prior to placement in the first foster care setting are considered part of the AFCARS population.]

The State should report to AFCARS children who are under the placement and care responsibility of the title IV-E agency but who ran away prior to the child's placement in a foster care setting. In this situation, the State should report the child as having a current placement setting (foster care element #41) of runaway and indicate the date the child ran away as the date of placement in the current foster care setting (foster care element #23). Since there has not been an actual placement, the State should indicate a placement count (foster care element #24) of zero.

See the CWPM (US DHSS, n.d.) and the NWG document, *Reunification Definitions* (CWLA, 2006), regarding discharge, trial home visit, and the inclusion of juvenile justice populations in AFCARS.

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<sup>5</sup> In states' information systems, fields labeled as a removal date or reported as a removal date for non-AFCARS purposes may not match the definitions of *date of latest removal from home* and *entry date* given in this document. These definitions apply to the date that is extracted for reporting removal information to AFCARS, regardless of how it is represented in a state's system or when title IV-E related findings, such as "contrary to the child's welfare" and "reasonable efforts to prevent removal" are made by the court.

### 2.1.1 Related NWG definitions:

**Entry** – For AFCARS reporting and the CFSR measures the NWG defines entry as follows<sup>6</sup>. A child enters foster care (is removed from home) when the conditions described below are met.

One of the following occurs...

- a state or local child welfare agency that has the authority for placement and care of a child removes the child from home and places the child in a substitute care setting
- a state or local child welfare agency gains authority for the placement and care of a child which permits the child to remain in a substitute care setting outside the child's home
- a state or local child welfare agency gains authority for the placement and care of a child who ran away prior to the first placement in a substitute care setting
- a state or local child welfare agency that has the authority for placement and care of a child decides to place the child in substitute care but the child runs away prior to the first placement

And both of the following are true:

- the child is in a substitute care setting or in an initial status of runaway for at least 24 hours while under the agency's authority<sup>7</sup>
- the child is not in detention, a camp, or hospitalized for medical treatment or acute psychiatric episodes or diagnosis<sup>8</sup>.

An entry also occurs when:

- A child whose first setting was detention, camp, or hospitalization for medical treatment or acute psychiatric episodes or diagnosis, or for whom the agency gained authority while the child was in one of those settings is moved to a substitute care setting<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> In states' information systems, fields labeled as a removal date or reported as a removal date for non-AFCARS purposes may not match the definitions of *date of latest removal from home* and *entry date* given in this document. These definitions apply to the date that is extracted for reporting removal information to AFCARS, regardless of how it is represented in a state's system or when title IV-E related findings, such as "contrary to the child's welfare" and "reasonable efforts to prevent removal" are made by the court.

<sup>7</sup> A child who is placed outside his or her home for less than 24 hours is not considered to have entered foster care. This 24-hour rule applies to the total time the child is placed in a substitute care setting or in initial runaway status while under the authority of the agency, not to the length of an individual placement.

<sup>8</sup> The definition of removal used to determine eligibility under Title IV-E differs from the AFCARS guidance on removal reflected in the NWG definition of entry. Generally, related IV-E findings will be made from the date the agency removes the child regardless of whether the child's initial placement is a camp, hospital, detention or substitute care setting. State information systems need to be able to document and report dates and legal information related to both AFCARS and IV-E.

<sup>9</sup> A child whose first placement is detention, a camp, or hospitalization for medical treatment or acute psychiatric episodes or diagnosis, or for whom the agency gains authority while the child is in one of those settings is not considered an entry to foster care until the agency moves the child into another setting such as foster home, group home, residential treatment, etc. Note that this rule does not apply to children whose first setting is hospitalization for chronic, long-term psychiatric treatment, who are considered entries when they are placed in that setting or when the agency gains authority while the child is in that setting.

- A child for whom the agency has placement and care authority who had been returned home on a trial basis for more than six months with no end date for the trial specified is placed in a substitute care setting. See *re-entry* below.

An agency gains the **authority for placement and care of a child** in one of the following ways:

- a voluntary placement agreement is executed by the parent(s)/caregiver(s) and the child welfare agency
- the child is taken into temporary protective custody (initiated prior to court involvement)
- the child welfare agency gains temporary custody (short or long term) of the child, as granted by the court
- the child welfare agency gains placement and care responsibility for the child in order to provide specific services (e.g. residential treatment), although the parent retains legal custody

Note that, for children who begin out-of-home care in runaway status, entry occurs when the agency receives custody, with the following exception. If, after custody was received, the child initially remained in his or her own home, the entry occurs when the agency decides to change the child's status to out of home<sup>10</sup>.

For all other children, an entry occurs when a child is physically removed from his or her normal place of residence and placed in a substitute care setting, or the custody of a child is removed from the parent or legal guardian and the child is placed in or remains in a substitute care setting. With the exception of children whose first setting is runaway (as described above), situations in which the agency has custody of the child but has not placed the child in a substitute care setting do not count as entries.

**Entry date** –Also known as removal date (in AFCARS). See *entry* for a description of the circumstances in which a child enters care. Depending on the circumstances, the entry date is:

- the date the child is placed in a substitute care setting following a physical or custodial removal
- the date the agency gains authority for placement and care of a child who is in a substitute care setting
- the date the agency gains authority for placement and care of a child whose initial out-of-home-care status is runaway, if the receipt of authority was not followed by a period of in-home care<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> States should contact the Children's Bureau for verification of reporting removal data for children whose first placement setting is runaway.

<sup>11</sup> States should contact the Children's Bureau for verification.

- for children whose initial out-of-home-care status is runaway and the receipt of placement and care authority was followed by a period of in-home care, the date the agency decides to change the child's status from in home to out of home<sup>12</sup>
- the date the child is moved from an initial setting of detention, camp, or hospitalization for medical treatment or acute psychiatric episodes or diagnosis to a substitute care setting
- the date a child who has been returned home on a trial basis for more than six months with no end date for the trial specified is placed in a substitute care setting

**Re-entry** – A re-entry occurs when a child enters care for a second or subsequent time (see the definition of *entry* above). A re-entry occurs only *if* the child had previously been discharged from foster care, so that the state no longer has authority for placement or care of the child (e.g. state legal custody ends, temporary protective custody expires or voluntary placement ends, and the child is discharged to a permanent setting<sup>13</sup>.) For the purpose of AFCARS reporting, the child must have been reported as discharged in order to count as a re-entry. If a child returns home on a trial basis (but is not reported as discharged) and then is placed back in a substitute care setting, it is not considered a re-entry. Conversely, a child who was reported as discharged from AFCARS after being home on a trial basis must be reported as re-entering care, even if the child is still considered to be in 'placement' according to state policy<sup>14</sup>.

**Re-entry after reunification** – A re-entry after reunification occurs when a child enters foster care following a *discharge to reunification* (see *re-entry* above). The permanency of reunification measure counts re-entries that occur within 12 months of reunification.

**2.2 AFCARS Element: Total Number of Removals from Home to Date (#19)** – The number of times the child was removed from home, including the current removal.

See the AFCARS definition of *removal* and the NWG definition of *entry* in 2.1.1.

**2.3 AFCARS Element: Reason for Discharge (#58)** – Enter data only for children who have exited foster care during the reporting period.

### 2.3.1 Related NWG definition:

**Discharge to reunification** – A child is considered discharged from foster care to reunification if the AFCARS *reason for discharge* is either *reunification with parents or primary caretakers or living with other relatives*. A discharge to reunification occurs when the child leaves care to live with parents, other primary caretakers, or other relatives (excluding relative adoptions and

<sup>12</sup> States should contact the Children's Bureau for verification.

<sup>13</sup> See the CWPM and the NWG's *Reunification Definitions* for the definition of *discharge*.

<sup>14</sup> A child who is returned home on a trial basis is reported to AFCARS as being in care on a trial home visit. However, a child who has been home on a trial basis (trial home visit) for more than six months, with no end date specified by the court or the child welfare agency, is reported to AFCARS as discharged when the trial exceeds six months, even if the agency retains care and placement authority. If the child returns to care after the six-month point, he or she is considered a re-entry. A child who has been home for more than six months on a trial basis for which an end date greater than six months has been specified is not considered discharged until the specified end date.

guardianships) and the child welfare agency either no longer has care and placement authority for the child or the child has been returned home on a trial basis (trial home visit) for more than six months and no end date for the trial has been specified<sup>15</sup>.

For more information, see the NWG's document, *Reunification Definitions* (CWLA, May 2006), regarding reason for discharge.

**2.4 AFCARS Element: Date of Discharge From Foster Care (#56)** – Enter data only for children who have exited foster care during the reporting period. Enter the month, day and year the child was discharged from foster care. If the child has not been discharged from care, leave blank.

Clarification:

CWPM: AFCARS, 1.2B.3, Question 4 (This guidance clarifies the terms removal, placement, episode, and discharge. Only the information on discharge is provided here.)

A **Discharge** represents that point in time when the child is no longer in foster care under the care and responsibility or supervision of the State agency. For AFCARS purposes, situations in which the State retains supervision of a child and the child returns home on a trial basis, for an unspecified period of time, are considered a discharge from foster care after a six-month period.

See the CWPM and the NWG's document, *Reunification Definitions*, regarding discharge, trial home visit, and the inclusion of juvenile justice populations in AFCARS.

**2.5 AFCARS Element: Date Child Was Discharged From Last Foster Care Episode (#20)** – For children with prior removals, enter the month, day and year they were discharged from care for the episode immediately prior to the current episode. For children with no prior removals, leave blank.

Clarification:

See *Date of Discharge From Foster Care* in 2.4.

**2.6 Additional Definitions:** The following definitions of selected terms used in the permanency of reunification measure or the definitions above are provided for further clarification. They represent a compilation of the guidance from various federal and state sources.

**Foster care** – Describing a comprehensive definition of foster care is outside the scope of this document. In the context of this document, a child is considered to be in foster care if he or she meets the criteria for inclusion in the AFCARS foster care population. A child enters foster care when these criteria are met (date of removal) and exits foster care when these criteria no longer apply (date of discharge). For any individual state, several factors influence which children are included in AFCARS. States should consult with the Children's Bureau or the NRC-CWDT for guidance on defining the AFCARS foster care population.

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<sup>15</sup> For the permanency of reunification measure, children are considered discharged to reunification on the date of discharge as reported to AFCARS, regardless of their last placement setting. The three measures for the timeliness of reunification component of the permanency composite, timeliness and permanency of reunification, count certain children whose last placement setting is trial home visit as reunified (though not discharged) at the start of the trial home visit.

**Substitute care setting** – A setting providing 24-hour care that is outside the child’s home and is reportable as an AFCARS placement setting, excluding trial home visit and runaway<sup>16</sup>. Substitute care settings include, but are not limited to, pre-adoptive homes, licensed and unlicensed relative homes, licensed non-relative homes, emergency homes, group homes, child care institutions, residential treatment facilities, maternity homes, and supervised independent living. In some circumstances, placements in detention are considered a substitute care setting and reported to AFCARS. However, if the child’s first setting is detention the child is not considered an entry to foster care or reported to AFCARS until he or she is moved to another type of substitute care setting.

**Voluntary placement** – Voluntary placement is defined as a status in which a child is removed from home and temporarily placed in the care of the child welfare agency for a specified period of time initiated by and/or with the consent of the child’s parent or guardian. If the child is in placement for six months, the agency must petition the court (PL 96-272). Voluntary placements generally occur when the parent or guardian is unable to provide care for the children (e.g. due to medical issues or family emergencies). The child is not in the legal custody of the child welfare agency, but the agency gains temporary placement and care responsibility until the agreement ends.

## Summary

Common definitions are needed to reliably measure and interpret data on re-entry and the permanency of reunification. The definitions provided in this paper build on federal definitions and guidance, but offer language designed to reach more clarity and consistency in how states interpret and report the data. The NWG definitions provided in this document are not approved by the Children’s Bureau, so state child welfare agencies should continue to contact the Children’s Bureau and NRC-CWDT with questions about how to report data to AFCARS.

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<sup>16</sup>AFCARS placement settings of trial home visit and runaway are considered temporary living conditions. See the CWPM and NWG Placement Change Definitions Implementation Guide for more information on TLCs.

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