



## It's not as simple as it sounds: Problems and solutions in accessing and using administrative child welfare data for evaluating the impact of early childhood interventions☆



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### ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in using administrative data collected by state child welfare agencies as a source of information for research and evaluation. The challenges of obtaining access to and using these data, however, have not been well documented. This study describes the processes used to access child welfare records in six different states and the approach to combining and using the information gathered to evaluate the impact of the Early Head Start program on children's involvement with the child welfare system from birth through age eleven. We provide "lessons learned" for researchers who are attempting to use this information, including being prepared for long delays in access to information, the need for deep understanding of how child welfare agencies record and code information, and for considerable data management work for translating agency records into analysis-ready datasets. While accessing and using this information is not easy, and the data have a number of limitations, we suggest that the benefits can outweigh the challenges and that these records can be a useful source of information for policy-relevant child welfare research.

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In the past 10 years, policy makers, researchers, and funders have increasingly called upon state human service agencies to share data and information as a means to both improve services for families and to support research and evaluation of policies and programs (Academy of Medical Sciences, 2006; Lee, Warren, & Gill, 2015; Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics, 2014; Goerge & Lee, 2013). Administrative data that are collected and compiled by state and local agencies have the potential, it has been argued, to serve as an existing source of information that could be useful for answering a variety of important research and evaluation questions (Brownell & Jutte, 2013; Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, 2012). For example, in 2013, the federal agency that oversees child welfare interventions, funding, and research, the Children's Bureau, issued an Information Memorandum (ACYF-CB-IM-13-02) to state child welfare agencies urging them to work with program evaluators to facilitate access to child

welfare administrative data for research purposes, noting that sharing this information provides a broad benefit to the field of child welfare. Specifically, by providing information on policy-relevant outcomes such as incidents of abuse and neglect and episodes of foster care, states can support relevant and rigorous evaluation to contribute to the much-needed evidence base of successful interventions to prevent maltreatment and ameliorate its negative consequences.

Despite the logic of using administrative data to evaluate intervention effectiveness, the process of obtaining, manipulating, analyzing, and interpreting this information, which is typically not collected for research purposes, is complex (Lee et al., 2015). This article presents an example of lessons learned from accessing and combining child welfare administrative data across six states to evaluate an early childhood preventive intervention. We describe the steps we took to develop information access agreements, to match and ensure accuracy of data, and to define and operationalize key child welfare-related indicators across agency databases, as well as the challenges we encountered and the solutions generated.<sup>1</sup> We also provide recommendations for both

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<sup>1</sup> Results from the evaluation using child maltreatment records are reported in a separate publication (see Green et al., 2014).

researchers planning to use administrative data, as well as for the design and improvement of state agency data systems.

## 1. Using administrative data to evaluate child abuse prevention programs

Efforts to implement and rigorously evaluate child maltreatment prevention programs have expanded considerably over the past three decades. While a number of these programs have shown promise in terms of promoting positive parenting and reducing risk factors for maltreatment, relatively few programs have examined the impact of services on rates of child maltreatment directly (Howard & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; MacMillan et al., 2009). One commonly cited reason for the absence of studies directly examining child maltreatment outcomes is the difficulty of obtaining reliable information about child abuse and neglect occurrence (Fallon, Trocmé, MacLaurin, Sinha, & Black, 2011). While a variety of measures, including parental self-report, emergency room records, and service provider reports, have been used in evaluation studies (with varying levels of success), state child welfare agency records remain the most direct and widely available source of information about child maltreatment for researchers (Brownell & Jutte, 2013).

Brownell and Jutte (2013) provide a strong rationale for using administrative data as a resource for research related to child abuse and neglect. They note a number of advantages of using administrative child welfare records as a source of outcome information for research. First, these records are not subject to the social desirability bias likely to be present in self-report measures of harsh/abusive parenting behavior (Cicchetti & Carlson, 1989; MacMillan, Jamieson, & Walsh, 2003). Compared to parental self-report of their own behavior (the most commonly used outcome measure in most program evaluation studies), documented child maltreatment bears the stamp of 'objectivity' at least in contrast to parents' reports of their own abusive/neglectful behavior. Further, while administrative records almost certainly underrepresent actual incidence rates, as shown in studies comparing self-reported abuse compared to agency records (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998; MacMillan et al., 2003), documented maltreatment incidents do provide some externally validated information that maltreatment likely occurred. Reports that are substantiated through agency investigation at a minimum meet that state's criteria for abuse or neglect, although the levels of harm, types of neglect/maltreatment, age of victims, and other factors, as well as the subjective influences brought to bear by agency investigators are also likely to influence the decision to substantiate a maltreatment incident (or not).

Other administrative sources of information about child abuse and neglect, such as hospitalizations and childhood injuries, are likely to under-estimate actual incidence even further by focusing only on those cases that result in physical harm (O'Donnell, Nassar, Leonard, Hagan, Mathews, Patterson, & Stanley, 2009; Spivey, Schnitzer, Kruse, Slusher, & Jaffe, 2009). Third, child welfare administrative records provide information about highly relevant outcomes such as length of stay in foster care that can be linked to service system costs and potential cost-savings of program interventions. Fourth, administrative records provide case level data on a population (within a given jurisdiction) that can be tracked longitudinally without the attrition and loss to follow-up that can plague researchers utilizing longitudinal survey or interview data (Macmillan, Jamieson, Wathen, Boyle, Walsh, Omura, Walker, & Lodenquai, 2007). Thus, there are potential benefits in terms of the level of rigor that can be maintained in studies that utilize administrative records. Further, because these data are available over extended periods of time, researchers can collect data retrospectively and examine patterns of maltreatment for children across a number of years at a significantly lower cost than original-source longitudinal studies (Brownell & Jutte, 2013; Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, 2012). Indeed, the availability and perceived efficiency of conducting research that uses data that are already collected and compiled is a key

factor in the growing interest in using administrative records for research purposes.

At the same time, the challenges of accessing administrative data and using these records for understanding child maltreatment prevention efforts have been noted. As noted above, the most frequently cited problem with the use of state agency records is the likelihood that these documented reports underestimate the actual prevalence of child maltreatment (Fallon et al., 2011; MacMillan et al., 2003). Additionally, there have been concerns about using documented child maltreatment records in evaluating intervention program outcomes due to heightened surveillance by mandated reporters (e.g., program staff) for children in the treatment group (Howard & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Reynolds, Mathieson, & Topitzes, 2009). Another concern with utilizing child welfare records in research is the variability in definitions of child maltreatment, and in state and local processes for investigating and recording it. States differ considerably in how investigators decide which cases to investigate, the threshold or level of harm required to substantiate the incident, and the types of evidence that are elicited and used in decision-making (Fallon et al., 2011; Runyan et al., 2005). To the extent that child welfare records are combined across different states or data sources, researchers must be cautious in interpreting and synthesizing this information. Goerge & Lee (2002) note that having to access data on a state-by-state basis is a major deterrent to the use of administrative data for research purposes; however, federal datasets do not typically contain the identifying information needed to use those data sources for program evaluation. Moreover, privacy concerns and concerns with confidentiality of child maltreatment records, especially at the individual child or case level, are often used to create unnecessary barriers to research access to this information (Academy of Medical Sciences, 2006; Brownell & Jutte, 2013). Finally, Brownell and Jutte (2013) note that while administrative data sources have long been used successfully in the field of health research and epidemiology, many of the variables important to understanding child abuse and neglect (such as family risk factors, parenting, and even basic socio-demographic information) are often not reliably available in administrative datasets. For this reason, researchers interested in understanding child development, family risk and protection, and child maltreatment have not typically used administrative data, and are therefore unfamiliar with the processes for accessing, linking, and manipulating these data for research purposes. While administrative data records provide a potentially useful source of information, they are not usually developed or structured for individual level, longitudinal data analysis that is standard in developmental and evaluation research.

This paper provides a description of the approach and methodology used to address some of these challenges in using administrative data to evaluate long-term child welfare outcomes for an early childhood intervention program. We provide a detailed example of the processes used to access, link, and compile and combine child welfare records obtained from six different states as a means of evaluating a large-scale randomized controlled trial study of the Early Head Start program, a prevention program for low income families with infants and toddlers (see Green et al., 2014, for results of this study). By highlighting methodological issues, providing detailed descriptions of how we operationalized maltreatment variables, and suggesting areas in which state agencies might improve the quality of administrative records, we provide researchers with a template that can be used to facilitate more opportunities for accessing and using child welfare administrative records for program evaluation purposes. Additionally, we aim to increase opportunities for cross-project comparison and synthesis by providing specific techniques for operationalizing administrative child welfare data elements that can be adopted in other research studies.

## 2. Methodology

This research was initiated by federal agency staff from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Administration for Children,

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