

AFCARS: What Defaults, If Any, Are Allowed?

Since 1994, federal law and regulation have required states to collect case-level information on all children for whom the state child welfare agency has responsibility for placement, care, or supervision and on children adopted under the auspices of the state's public child welfare agency. The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) includes information on foster and adoptive parents. The information required by AFCARS is what a social worker would normally collect during the course of assessment, planning, and service provision, so workers do not need to collect additional information solely for the purpose of meeting AFCARS requirements. The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) uses the data for many purposes, such as responding to requests from Congress and the public for current data on children in foster care or those who have been adopted; policy decisions; budget decisions and state allocations; monitoring; and technical assistance for states.

The information collected and reported via AFCARS is critical to the federal government. The government uses it to determine a state's level of compliance with the national standards on child safety, permanence, and well being. In connection with these standards, all states have undergone a Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) and have developed a CFSR-related Program Improvement Plan. The government either has reviewed or will review the automated information systems of states with an operational Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System, and at some point, expects all states to have an AFCARS Assessment Review.

The following discusses errors identified during the AFCARS Assessment Review process. This information is intended to assist reporting agencies in improving the quantity and quality of the information that they report via AFCARS.

Examples of Errors Identified During AFCARS Assessment Reviews

Some reviews found that a practice had been adopted of defaulting missing data to valid AFCARS codes for nearly every element in the program code that extracts and maps the AFCARS data. This approach does not meet the requirements for reporting the foster care and adoption data, and it provides a misleading, inaccurate account of the children in foster care and those who have been adopted. All defaulted elements that require a system change may only require a change of mapping missing data to blanks and not to a valid AFCARS value. Although this may be an easy correction to the system, it will require that workers enter any missing data and clean up data fields.

The only acceptable default for AFCARS purposes is in the area of race. A state's automated information system must support the ability to select multiple racial categories for all clients or the selection of "unable to determine." Assuming that the worker selects all appropriate racial categories for a client, the AFCARS extraction process may default any category not selected to "does not apply." "Unable to determine" is appropriate only if the child is abandoned and no one is available to provide the required information. "Unable to determine" and the other racial categories must be mutually exclusive.

Other than the previous example, for AFCARS extraction and submission purposes, information not collected or not available for a particular client record (for whatever reason) is mapped as all blanks (not all zeros, all 9s, etc.). Information that is missing or not collected should never be mapped to any valid AFCARS value.

Technical Assistance: Readers may obtain technical assistance from the Children's Bureau's National Resource Center for Child Welfare Data and Technology (NRC-CWDT). The resource center can be contacted at 877/672-4892, or at its Web page: <http://nrccwdt.org>. If you wish to request onsite technical assistance from the NRC-CWDT, contact your ACF Regional Office.