

Advancing Children's Health and Well-Being



To protect the nation's most vulnerable and at-risk children, RTI International is conducting a groundbreaking study to help policy makers understand the characteristics and needs of children and families in the child welfare system.

Background

Sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, two National Surveys of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) are the first representative studies of children and families involved in the U.S. child welfare system. RTI has worked with ACF since 1997 to conduct these studies.

To answer fundamental questions about outcomes for abused and neglected children, NSCAW research has focused on the well-being of children involved with child welfare agencies, the ability of those agencies to find permanent living arrangements for children unable to stay with their families of origin, the mental health of these children, and developmental risks these children face, especially those who experienced the most severe abuse and exposure to domestic violence.

RTI's responsibilities on NSCAW include sample design and implementation, questionnaire development and testing, agency recruitment and retention, data collection, data processing, preparation of public use files, and data analysis and reporting.

RTI's Approach

For NSCAW I, RTI staff selected and recruited child welfare agencies in 97 counties from 36 states. From their records for 1999 and 2000, RTI developed a cohort of 6,228 children from birth to age 14. In addition to sampled children, their caregivers, and their teachers, RTI surveyed child welfare agency directors and conducted in-person interviews with over 6,000 investigative caseworkers. Interim interviews, conducted 12 months after the case was investigated, focused on services received since the prior interview. Third and fourth waves of interviews were conducted at 18 and 36 months. The final follow-up was fielded by age cohort, at 52–96 months after the close of the index investigation. In all waves, interviewers used laptop computers with computer-assisted interviewing technology to gather and transmit data securely to RTI.

The NSCAW II study design essentially mirrored that of NSCAW I. The NSCAW II cohort included 5,873 children, aged birth to 17.5 years of age, who had contact with the child welfare system within a 15-month period that began in February 2008. Interviews with children, their current caregivers, and their caseworkers were completed at baseline, and at 18 months and 36 months after the close of the maltreatment investigation.

Highlights

RTI continues to succeed with this large, complex study.

- Field staff are trained to deal effectively with extraordinarily sensitive topics such as substance abuse, involvement with the law, caregiver experience with intimate partner violence, and child physical and sexual abuse.
- Interviewers resolve all types of data collection challenges, including obtaining cooperation from families just after investigation and gathering data from individuals with tumultuous lifestyles, children fearful of strangers, and people with language barriers.
- NSCAW project staff members manage the collection of complex and varied data. Project procedures for both human subjects' protection and mandatory reporting requirements are successfully negotiated across sites.
- NSCAW receives enormous support from agencies and their staff members. During NSCAW I agency recruitment, only 6 of 103 county agencies and no state agencies declined to participate, and response from caseworkers exceeded 90%. Not one local agency dropped out before completion. For NSCAW II, only 14 agencies declined to continue with the project.
- Children and families have been remarkably cooperative and willing to participate. Child and caregiver response rates in NSCAW follow-up surveys were approximately 85%.

Creative RTI staff members from various disciplines work together to use technology to proactively meet project needs. Significant innovations include the following:

- Computer audio-recorded interview technology developed by RTI records selected portions of field interviews, which are then reviewed as part of steps to monitor quality. This technology is invaluable for determining if questions were asked as intended, probes and feedback to respondents were neutral, and respondent questions were answered correctly.
- Document Manager is an RTI-developed system allowing paperless data collection that also fulfills data security needs.

Results

NSCAW data are improving children's lives. NSCAW I data have increased understanding of policies and practices that affect child safety, permanence, and well-being, as well as child and caregiver services provided by Child Protective Services. NSCAW results give researchers and policy makers valuable information on child well-being to help design programs and target resources for treatment and prevention of abuse and neglect. Investigators have offered many recommendations for policy and practice, from better screening of children, to eliminating barriers to mental health care, to better practice for identification of domestic violence.

RTI analysts produce numerous NSCAW publications:

- ACF posts reports and research briefs on its website (<http://bit.ly/2lrAzKy>) summarizing findings from both NSCAW I and II. A series of 21 research briefs has been developed to highlight findings on topics such as the well-being of children investigated as infants, young adults making the transition to adulthood, and children with special health care needs.
- *Child Welfare and Child Well-Being: New Perspectives from the National Survey on Child and Adolescent Well-Being*, which highlights findings from the longitudinal analyses through the 36-month follow-up, was co-edited by RTI staff and published by Oxford University Press in January 2010.
- The extended research team has published 30 book chapters and more than 100 journal articles and has made numerous presentations at professional conferences (e.g., National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, Society for Research in Child Development).
- Several supplemental studies on a broad array of policy issues have resulted from NSCAW.

More Information

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