

CHILD WELFARE

Most States Are Developing Statewide Information Systems, but the Reliability of Child Welfare Data Could Be Improved

Why GAO Did This Study

To better monitor children and families served by state child welfare agencies, Congress authorized matching funds for the development of statewide automated child welfare information systems (SACWIS) and required that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) compile information on the children served by state agencies. This report reviews (1) states' experiences in developing child welfare information systems and HHS's role in assisting in their development, (2) factors that affect the reliability of data that states collect and report on children served by their child welfare agencies and HHS's role in ensuring the reliability of those data, and (3) practices that child welfare agencies use to overcome challenges associated with SACWIS development and data reliability.

What GAO Recommends

In order to improve the reliability of state-reported child welfare data, GAO recommends that the Secretary of HHS consider ways to enhance the guidance and assistance offered to states to help them overcome the key challenges in collecting and reporting child welfare data. In commenting on this report, HHS generally agreed with GAO's findings and commented that the report provides a useful perspective of the problems states face in collecting data and of HHS's effort to provide ongoing technical assistance to improve child welfare data.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-809.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cornelia M. Ashby at (202) 512-8403 or AshbyC@gao.gov.

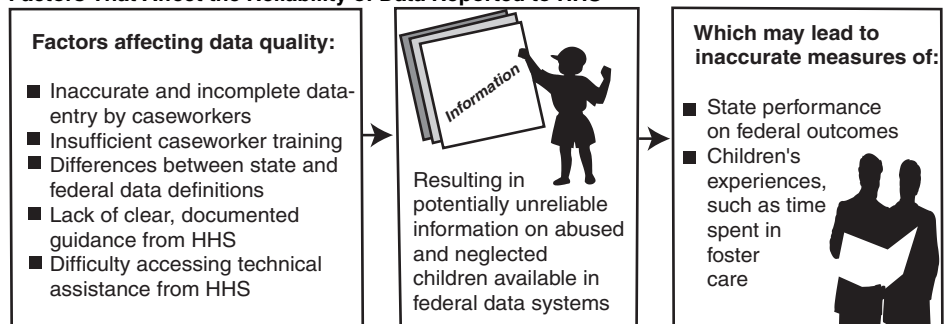
What GAO Found

HHS reported that 47 states are developing or operating a SACWIS, but many continue to face challenges developing their systems. Most state officials said they recognize the benefit their state will achieve by developing SACWIS, such as contributing to the timeliness of child abuse and neglect investigations; however, despite the availability of federal funds since 1994, states reported a median delay of 2-1/2 years beyond the timeframes they set for completion. States reported that they encountered some difficulties during SACWIS development, such as challenges receiving state funding and creating a system that reflected their work processes. In response to some of these challenges, HHS has provided technical assistance to help states develop their systems and conducted on-site reviews of SACWIS to verify that the systems meet federal requirements.

Despite efforts to implement comprehensive information systems, several factors affect the states' ability to collect and report reliable adoption, foster care, and child abuse and neglect data. States responding to GAO's survey and officials in the 5 states GAO visited reported that insufficient caseworker training and inaccurate and incomplete data entry affect the quality of the data reported to HHS. In addition, states reported technical challenges reporting data. Despite HHS's assistance, many states report ongoing challenges, such as the lack of clear and documented guidance on how to report child welfare data. In addition, although states were mandated to begin reporting data to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) in 1995, few reviews of states' AFCARS reporting capabilities have been conducted to assist states in resolving some of their reporting challenges.

Some states are using a variety of practices to address the challenges associated with developing SACWIS and improving data reliability. For example, 44 states included caseworkers and other system users in the design and testing of SACWIS, and 28 states reported using approaches to help caseworkers identify and better understand the data elements that are required for federal reporting.

Factors That Affect the Reliability of Data Reported to HHS



Source: GAO analysis.