Improving the Quality of Licensing Data

TRLECE
The Role of Licensing in Early Care and Education

Improving the Quality of Licensing Data

Introduction

Child care and early education[1] (CCEE) **licensing agencies** have a wealth of licensing **administrative data** and may be eager to analyze it—possibly with the support of research partners—to improve licensing practices and policies. **In this brief, we offer considerations for improving the quality and useability of licensing data for licensing agency staff interested in learning from their data, based on our experiences.**[2]

Every state and territory licensing agency collects data about licensed centers and family child care (FCC) homes. Licensing data are useful for licensing agencies, families, and researchers. For example, the data can help:

- **Licensing agencies** improve licensing by exploring patterns in licensing **violations** or by identifying training topics based on which **regulations** are most frequently violated
- **Families** identify licensed providers and find CCEE that meets their needs
- **Researchers** address questions about licensing that may be of interest to the licensing agency

This brief is part of the project The Role of Licensing in Early Care and Education (TRLECE). TRLECE is funded from 2019-2024 by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families. The project team includes staff from Child Trends and ICF. The team has conducted a variety of activities to strengthen the field's understanding of child care and early education licensing.

We have reviewed licensing and consumer education websites in all states to learn more about the types of licensing data publicly available and to identify licensed providers in each state to invite to complete a survey. We have also worked with six states to access and analyze their licensing data.

The data's usefulness is related to its quality. Missing data, errors, outdated information, and limited documentation of data elements may make it more challenging for families, licensing agencies, or researchers to use the data. **Improving the quality of data can help licensing staff make data-based decisions, communicate more clearly with families, and more easily answer policy questions of interest, among other uses** (NCECQA, 2017).

The TRLECE project team has conducted several studies (some in partnership with licensing agencies) that relied on licensing data. See Box A to learn more about TRLECE and our work with licensing data. Through these studies, we know that states have rich licensing data. Some, but not all, states have strong data systems and supports (e.g., definitions of key terms) that make it easier for licensing staff and their research partners to analyze data to help them make decisions and address questions of interest. When we interviewed 48 state and territory CCEE licensing administrators in 2021, nearly everyone told us that they used data to make decisions (e.g., adjust caseloads, identify provider training topics). Many also reported challenges with their licensing data system (e.g., human error in collecting and entering data, challenges

[1] The first time we use a term that is defined in the glossary, it will appear in bold purple text. View the glossary section toward the end of this document for definitions.

[2] This brief focuses on licensing data that the licensing agency regularly collects and maintains. These data include characteristics of the providers (e.g., hours of operation, setting type) as well as information about compliance with licensing regulations (e.g., violations, enforcement actions). Some of these data may be publicly available on a website, while others may require a data sharing agreement for people outside of licensing to access.

accessing or updating data) and some described weak data systems (e.g., out-of-date or not designed for their needs). Thus, while data can inform licensing agency staff and help improve their work, staff may also face significant challenges in using data.

This brief may also appeal to researchers interested in working with licensing data. We believe that researchers need to work closely with licensing agency staff to conduct research about licensing. Such partnerships can help ensure that research questions are relevant, the right data are analyzed, and findings are interpreted appropriately.

We acknowledge that licensing agencies (and licensing data) vary. The issues we raise may not apply to all licensing agencies and the considerations may not be feasible for some. We hope that raising the issue of data quality will, at a minimum, help licensing staff reflect on their data, consider any limitations, and implement strategies appropriate for their circumstances.

Considerations for Improving the Quality of Licensing Data

Improvements in CCEE licensing data may help licensing agencies evaluate practices, address licensing and CCEE questions (alone or in partnership with researchers), make policy and program decisions, support continuous quality improvement, increase transparency, and coordinate with other programs (NCECQA, 2017). We offer these ideas based on our experiences using licensing data for research. Licensing agencies' goals and contexts differ, so we emphasize that these are *considerations*, not *recommendations*.

1 Clearly indicate whether each provider in the data system is licensed.

- A data element specifying whether a provider is licensed may improve the data's usability. If there is a searchable database on a consumer education website, consider allowing users to filter by licensing status.

Potential benefits of implementing this consideration

Families, licensing staff, researchers, and others can easily find providers who are licensed.

TRLECE team's experiences

In preparation for a nationwide survey of licensed providers, the TRLECE team reviewed each state's licensing or consumer education website to create a national list of licensed providers. We found that some states publish information on a range of providers, such as those who are licensed, registered, or license exempt. It was sometimes challenging to determine which programs were licensed and what it meant to be licensed in a state. We observed that:

- States used different terms (e.g., in some states, registered may mean the same as licensed).
- There wasn't always a clear definition for what it meant to be "licensed."
- We did not always find a way to filter by licensing status, which would allow users to generate a list of certain types of providers, such as only providers who are currently licensed or only license-exempt providers.

2 Define key terms.

- Create a list of all the variables included in licensing data, along with a definition of each term (e.g., license-exempt, routine inspection, high-risk violation). Researchers refer to this as a code book or data dictionary. Regularly review and update the list of variables and their definitions, as needed.

Potential benefits of implementing this consideration

Clearly defining terms minimizes the risk that people (both within and outside of licensing) will misinterpret licensing terms. It also improves accuracy by providing individuals collecting and entering information with a common understanding of the data elements. If terms are defined internally, licensing staff can quickly reference them when internal or external questions arise; and if definitions are online, the public has immediate access.

TRLECE team's experiences

In the interviews we conducted with licensing administrators in 2021, licensing violations data was the most common type of data administrators said they used to make decisions (38 of 47; 81%). Thus, it seems especially important to define terms such as *violations*. We also learned in the 2021 interviews that only about half of the 48 states/territories included in the study reported that they maintain a code book or data dictionary that they regularly update.

In another TRLECE study, we worked with six states to analyze their licensing administrative data to examine shared questions of interest regarding violations. Through this experience, we learned that different states used different terms for violations (e.g., noncompliance, deficiency) with different meanings. Sometimes, similar terms had different meanings. (Miranda et al., in press).

An aspirational goal may be to one day have shared definitions across states/territories of key licensing terms, like *licensed provider*. Using a common definition could help:

- Families and the public better understand licensing and find licensed providers in any state.
- National entities make state-to-state comparisons of the number and type of licensed providers.
- Researchers analyze data across states or identify licensed providers for studies.

Some of the states we worked with further classified violations based on severity or type of violations, sometimes using labels such as "high risk" or "critical" to identify violations they saw as more severe. Not all states had documents that clearly stated what it meant for a violation to be "high-risk" or the implications of a provider having such a violation. Relatedly, some states may identify a subset of "key indicators" or "core rules." For these states, it could be helpful to document the purpose of having this subset of rules and what it means if there's a violation of one of these rules (e.g., whether a violation of a core rule leads to a different type of **enforcement** action than a violation of a non-core rule). Because these violations may or may not be considered "high risk" violations, it could also be helpful to explain any differences in these terms used within a state.

3 Provide some information in the data dictionary to help users understand each data element.

- Identify who provides information for each data element in the **dataset** (e.g., self-reported by provider, by licensing staff).

- Identify whether each data element is required to be completed. Licensing staff or providers may have to provide certain types of information about programs (e.g., hours of operation), while other types of information are voluntary (e.g., languages spoken by director).
- Note when each data element was updated. This can help users understand how current the information is, which could help them decide which data elements to use.

Potential benefits of implementing this consideration

Knowing whether a data element is required or optional can help data users select the best data elements to analyze. Required data elements might include provider capacity, zip code, or number of violations. Optional data elements might include languages spoken, director race or ethnicity, or technical assistance provided. Optional data elements may have missing data that could make them challenging to analyze. When licensing agencies partner with researchers or analyze data on their own, they may be interested in using required data elements because those data elements are more likely to be complete.

Noting which data elements are gathered by licensing staff or reported by providers could help users understand possible limitations of the data. Providers, for example, may not have the information or training needed to consistently report information. Data users may find it helpful to review any instructions or training offered about data included in the licensing data set.

TRLECE team's experiences

When we reviewed information on state licensing websites or read descriptions of datasets, information about the quality of the data or limitations in the data wasn't always available, making it difficult to gauge the data quality. Instead, to identify data that were of high quality and had little missing data, we had to meet with licensing staff and data specialists to determine which variables were appropriate for our analyses. Documenting the source and which elements were optional would eliminate the need to request this information directly from licensing staff.

4 Work with users to ensure that public documents about licensing data are clear and include the information they need.

- Ask users (e.g., researchers, families) for feedback on documents meant to describe licensing; use their feedback to improve the documents' clarity and completeness.
- Ask users for feedback on licensing or consumer education website text and functions (e.g., search options) and use their input to improve clarity and ease of use.
- Feedback could be gathered via focus groups, surveys, or feedback forms on the internet.

Potential benefits of implementing this consideration

Users' input on documents describing licensing data (e.g., data dictionary or **codebook**; interpretive guidance documents) may help licensing staff clarify the documents. Feedback on consumer education websites could make it easier for key users, such as families, to find and understand licensing information. If users can understand the information about licensing, they may be more likely to use it to inform decisions. The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) regulations require Lead Agencies to have a "consumer friendly and easily accessible website" (CCDF, 45 C.F.R. § 98.33(a), 2016) that includes, among other things, information related to **monitoring** and licensing, and a "localized list of all licensed child care providers"

(CCDF, 45 C.F.R. § 98.33(a)(2),2016).[3] Working with families and other key users could help licensing staff ensure their information is "friendly and easily accessible."

TRLECE team's experiences

In reading documents or online materials to help us understand state licensing data, we at times were not certain that we understood what the data element or variable meant. In the six states we partnered with to analyze their licensing data, we met with staff multiple times and asked them questions to help ensure that we understood the data.

5 In the licensing dataset, document which licensing regulations[4] were checked during an inspection and whether each of the checked regulations was met.

- Develop a system to collect information about every licensing regulation reviewed during any type of inspection. For each licensing regulation, consider noting:
    - Whether the regulation was or was not checked (some regulations, like those related to swimming pools, do not apply to all providers); and
    - Whether the provider was in compliance with the regulation.

Potential benefits of implementing this consideration

Having more specific information about regulations checked during inspections would allow others beyond the person conducting the inspection to easily know whether providers met regulations, as well as the type of regulations they met and did not meet. This information would make it easier for licensing staff and researchers to analyze violations data to address questions and support decision-making. Five violations out of 150 regulations, for example, indicates that a provider is compliant with nearly all (97%) of the regulations. Yet, 5 violations out of 25 indicates that a provider is compliant with only 80% of the regulations. Knowing the number of regulations checked helps give meaning to the number of violations. Licensing staff and researchers may also be interested in knowing whether providers met certain types of regulations. For example, did the program meet all of the regulations related to supervision? When choosing CCEE, families might find it useful to know which regulations were checked and which ones were not met, if this information were publicly available in an easy-to-read format.

TRLECE team's experiences

In partnering with a few states to examine factors related to licensing violations, we learned that states vary in what data they collect about violations as well as the licensing regulations checked during inspections. For our research study, we wanted to know the number of violations *and* the number of licensing regulations checked during the inspection to help us understand the extent to which providers were compliant with licensing regulations.

[3] We cite the CCDF regulations that were in place at the time this product was developed. The CCDF regulations were updated in 2024 (Child Care and Development Fund, 45 C.F.R. § 98 [2024]), and we encourage readers to review those for the most up-to-date information about CCDF guidelines.

[4] If there is not a one-to-one correspondence between regulations and possible violations (e.g., it's possible to receive multiple violations related to a single regulation), then document the total number of all possible violations checked as well as the number of violations noted during the inspection visit.

There were a few reasons this information was sometimes challenging to attain:

- Licensing staff may not check each licensing regulation during every licensing inspection. There are various reasons for this. For instance, some regulations do not apply to all providers.
- Some licensing agencies use an abbreviated monitoring approach that checks a subset, rather than all, of licensing regulations. *Monitoring Practices Used in Child Care and Early Education Licensing* (Miranda et al., 2022) describes different approaches to monitoring.
- Licensing agencies may ask front-line licensing staff to note which regulations were violated, but not all that were inspected. If there is a blank left next to a regulation in an inspection checklist, it may be unclear whether the provider was in compliance or the regulation was not covered in the inspection.

6 Include a variable in the dataset to indicate the type of inspection visit.

- Each type of inspection visit (e.g., initial, routine, follow up) could have its own variable (coded as yes or no) or there could be a single inspection type variable with multiple options, such as initial, routine, or follow up. If multiple types of inspections are conducted in the same visit, signify the primary reason for the inspection.

Potential benefits of implementing this consideration

Licensing staff visit providers for various types of inspections. They may, for example, conduct a pre-licensing inspection, an annual inspection, or a follow-up inspection to ensure that violations have been addressed. Licensing agencies and research partners could more easily analyze information for certain types of inspections if the inspection type was indicated in the dataset. Likewise, making the inspection type available on a public website could help families understand provider compliance. For instance, such information could clarify why some programs were inspected more often than others and why different inspections include different regulations.

TRLECE team's experiences

In one of our research studies, we were interested in analyzing violations data only from annual inspections. This required ensuring we weren't including data from any other type of inspection. Because that information was not always readily available in the data, we had to work with the state agency to separate annual inspections from other types. Likewise, we sometimes saw violations data coded as part of multiple types of inspections conducted on the same visit. If possible, it could be helpful to indicate the primary reason for each inspection visit.

7 Implement strategies to minimize the chance of errors in the data.

- Offer training to everyone who enters data to improve the likelihood they do so correctly. Talk regularly with staff to ensure they're implementing rules consistently. Develop written procedures or guidance for staff.
- Develop a system to electronically record data during an inspection visit, rather than using a paper form. This minimizes data entry error (e.g., mistakes made when someone transfers information from paper

into an electronic data entry system). Including licensing staff in the development of an electronic data system can help ensure that the system is clear and user friendly.

- Establish ways to check the data for unusual numbers. If data are collected on paper, it may be helpful to create a checklist to help licensing staff review the data they collect or enter before they finish their inspection visit. If data are entered electronically, licensing agencies could use a software program to automatically check the data. These automatic checks could flag missing data to help ensure that licensing staff collect everything they need before leaving. Automatic checks could also flag unusual entries, like a follow-up visit date that is in the past instead of the future or an extreme value such as having 100 children in a classroom.

Potential benefits of implementing this consideration

The more errors in the data, the less useful the data are. Implementing strategies to minimize error (e.g., electronic data systems, automatic checks for unusual responses) could give users more confidence in the data and make it easier for licensing staff to trust the data when they make decisions. This could also improve providers' and families' confidence in licensing data, which may contribute to their trust in the licensing agency.

TRLECE team's experiences

In reviewing state licensing data, we saw some values that seemed implausible. Licensing staff explained that these values were likely errors. When we conducted surveys of administrators, front-line licensing staff, and providers, we checked the data for unusual numbers. In other TRLECE research projects, we trained staff to implement rules consistently as they collect and enter data, to improve the quality of the data. To the extent possible, we also use electronic data entry systems instead of paper to eliminate the separate step of copying information into a data system.

8 Include data elements to identify subgroups of interest or link to existing data that would allow for subgroup analysis of licensed providers.

- If licensing staff are interested in learning about subgroups of providers, review the data to ensure key subgroups can be identified. Licensing data may already include some information, such as setting type, that would allow the data to be analyzed for centers only or FCC providers only. If provider zip code is included in the dataset, researchers or staff could use this to determine the level of urbanicity and compare, for example, rural areas with more urban areas. If new data elements are needed to address some subgroups of interest, licensing agencies may consider the feasibility of collecting new information.
- If licensing staff are interested in examining possible relationships between licensing violations and characteristics of licensing staff and providers they serve (e.g., match or mismatch related to race or languages spoken), it may be helpful to include data elements on key characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, and primary language spoken) for both licensing staff and CCEE providers.
- It may be possible to identify subgroups of providers by linking licensing data with other datasets, such as CCDF subsidy or quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS). Each data set would need to include an identifier (e.g., the licensing number) that would allow researchers to link data about a provider across data sets.

Potential benefits of implementing this consideration

Adding or linking data to identify subgroups of providers would allow licensing agencies to understand similarities and differences in those subgroups. This understanding could help licensing agencies examine policy issues, such as participation in subsidy or QRIS, and would allow licensing agencies and research partners to address more refined questions rather than questions about licensed providers as a whole. For example, licensing agencies might be interested in examining the relationship between the type or number of licensing violations and provider subsidy receipt or zip code. Findings from these analyses (should they be published) may be of interest to the public.

TRLECE team's experiences

The TRLECE team and a few state licensing agencies were interested in examining questions about licensing violations and program characteristics. We were able to identify some subgroups of interest using licensing data (e.g., centers, FCC providers) and **linked** licensing data with other datasets to identify other subgroups of interest (e.g., providers participating in QRIS, providers serving children who receive CCDF subsidies). Some variables of interest, though, such as the race and ethnicity of providers or the level of income for families served, were not available in any administrative dataset. For these, the team relied on community-level data available from other data sources by linking using program zip code. See Miranda et al., in press, for more details.

In the 2021 TRLECE interviews with licensing administrators, about two-thirds reported that they linked or shared licensing administrative data with data from other programs. This suggests that in some states, it might be possible to identify subgroups of providers by linking licensing data with other program data (e.g., CCDF subsidies). This would eliminate the need to collect new data or add a variable to the licensing administrative data.

9 If licensing agencies monitor regulations or standards outside of CCEE licensing, consider noting in the dataset which regulations or standards are associated with which program type (e.g., licensing, QRIS, pre-K).

- In states with coordinated monitoring across funding streams, licensing staff may check regulations or standards for other programs (e.g., QRIS, CACFP, pre-K; Maxwell et al., 2016) at the same time they are checking licensing regulations. This means that a licensing dataset might include information from multiple types of standards in addition to licensing.

Potential benefits of implementing this consideration

By identifying which regulations in the dataset are associated with which federal or state programs, licensing agencies or their research partners can easily identify a specific type of regulation for analysis. They could, for instance, examine information about violations or noncompliance across multiple sets of standards or within only one.

TRLECE team's experiences

In reviewing states' licensing violations data, the TRLECE team could not always tell which violations were related to licensing or other program standards. We were able to address this challenge by talking with

licensing staff about the dataset. Licensing staff could save time in helping others understand the data by specifying the type of regulation included in the dataset.

Summary

Child care and early education licensing is foundational to the CCEE system. Analyzing licensing data can inform licensing agencies as well as the broader CCEE field. Families may also rely on licensing data to help them find a provider for their children. States have a wealth of licensing administrative data and may be eager to analyze it or support researchers in analyzing it so they can learn more about their licensing systems and improve licensing practices and policies. To the extent state and territory licensing agency staff are interested in using data for research or making their data more easily accessible for families, we offer considerations for improving the quality and usability of licensing administrative data.

The considerations are summarized here, for quick reference. Because licensing agencies and their data vary markedly, not all these recommendations will be appropriate or feasible in all states and territories. Likewise, these considerations include ideas that may be relatively easy to implement as well as ideas that may take more time and resources to implement. Some considerations may be easier to implement because they can be completed by licensing staff, whereas others may be harder or may take longer to implement because they require approval, additional funding, or significant work from staff outside of licensing. **Although states and territories may vary in terms of what is easier or harder to do, we have added a ⚙ next to considerations that may be *easier* for licensing agencies to address**.

⚙ 1. Clearly indicate whether each provider in the data system is licensed.

⚙ 2. Define key terms.

⚙ 3. In the data dictionary, document the source, quality, and limitations of each data element.

⚙ 4. Work with users (e.g., researchers, families) to ensure that public documents about licensing data are clear and include the information they need.

5. Document in the licensing dataset which licensing regulations were checked during an inspection and whether each of the checked regulations was met.

6. Include the type of inspection visit (e.g., annual, follow-up) in the dataset.

⚙ 7. Implement strategies to minimize the chance of errors in the data. Note that some of these strategies, like training, are relatively easy to implement, while others, such as creating or updating an electronic data system are likely expensive and time-consuming.

8. Include data elements to identify subgroups of interest or link to existing data that would allow for subgroup analysis of licensed providers.

9. If licensing agencies monitor regulations or standards outside of CCEE licensing, consider noting in the dataset which regulations or standards are associated with which program type (e.g., licensing, QRIS, pre-K).

Resources

Getting Help Answering Your Policy Questions: How to Plan for Research Procurement (2023), Child Care Research and Evaluation Capacity Building Center. This webinar, which provides tips and real-world examples of CCDF agencies contracting for research services, could help licensing staff understand how best to engage an external research partner to help analyze licensing data.

Posting Child Care Inspection and Monitoring Reports: Best Practices Brief (2023), Child Care State Capacity Building Center. This resource describes some suggestions for helping families find and understand licensing inspection reports.

Engaging Stakeholders in Research: Tips for CCDF Lead Agencies (2021), Child Care Research and Evaluation Capacity Building Center. This brief could inform licensing staff about how best to engage CCEE providers, families, and researchers in documenting licensing data and sharing family friendly information on consumer education websites.

Consumer Education Website Continuous Quality Improvement Series: Child Care Search Suite (2020), Child Care State Capacity Building Center. This series of five resources is focused on helping CCDF Lead agencies strengthen their consumer education websites. One of the resources, for example, focuses on data governance—what it is and why it's helpful. A data governance team and policies can support implementation of the considerations offered in this brief.

Improving Consumer Education Websites with User Research (2019), Child Care State Capacity Building Center. This resource offers tips in conducting research with users to improve consumer education websites. This resource could help licensing agency staff gather information from people who use licensing data.

Guidelines for Developing Data Sharing Agreements to Use State Administrative Data for Early Care and Education Research (2018), Child Care and Early Education Policy and Research Analysis. This research brief could help licensing staff and their research partners develop agreements that would allow researchers to analyze licensing and other CCEE data.

Considerations in Preparing to Analyze Administrative Data to Address Child Care and Early Education Research Questions (2017), Child Care and Early Education Policy and Research Analysis. This research brief can help licensing staff and their research partners understand the scope and limitations of data sets, select data elements to analyze, assess their capacity to analyze data, and prepare data for analysis.

A Guide to Support States and Territories' Use of Child Care Licensing Data (2017), National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance. This guidance document can support licensing staff as they assess their current data systems and identify needed changes.

The ABCs of Data Dictionaries (2014), The Center for IDEA Early Childhood Data Systems. This resource defines a data dictionary, describes how it can be helpful, and offers ideas about what to include in a data dictionary.

Glossary

Administrative data: "Information programs collect about individual children, families, and staff to deliver program services and meet program, funding, or legal requirements. Generally, programs collect administrative data to determine child/family eligibility for services, monitor staff workload, document services provided, or examine progress children are making" (King et al., 2016, p.2).

Child care and early education: Caregiving and educational services for children from birth to age 13. CCEE includes center- and home-based settings for infants, toddlers, preschool- and school-aged children. CCEE refers to services for a larger age group than early care and education (ECE), which consists of services provided only for young children (birth to age 5 who are not yet in kindergarten). ECE programs are included within the definition of CCEE.

Codebook: "Information on the structure, content, and layout of a data set. The codebook typically provides background on the project, describes the study design, and gives detailed information on variable names and variable value codes. User's manuals and user's guides are examples of codebooks" (Child Care & Early Education Research Connections, n.d. - b). Some may consider a codebook to be the same as a data dictionary.

Dataset: A collection of separate pieces of information or data (e.g., pieces of information about each licensed CCEE provider).

Data dictionary: A document containing descriptions of the data elements or variables in a data set (adapted from Gould et al., 2014).

Enforcement: The actions that licensing agencies use to address licensing violations. These may include fines, probation, and revocation of licensure.

Inspection: A visit to assess if a CCEE provider is meeting licensing regulations.

Licensing agency: The agency responsible for regulating and licensing CCEE facilities. The term "licensing unit" may also be used.

Licensing regulations: "Requirements that providers must meet to legally operate child care services in a state or locality, including registration requirements established under state, local, or Tribal law" (Child Care & Early Education Research Connections, n.d. -a). (Child Care & Early Education Research Connections uses this definition for "licensing or regulatory requirements.")

Linked data: "Data are considered linked when information from two or more separate data systems or databases are shared, connected, combined, or merged" (King et al., 2016, p.2).

Monitoring: "The process used to enforce child care providers' compliance with licensing rules and regulations" (Child Care & Early Education Research Connections, n.d. -a).

Violation: Failure to comply with a licensing regulation.

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Kelly Maxwell, Diane Early, Brenda Miranda, Nina Johnson, and Ying-Chun Lin

Submitted to:
Ivelisse Martinez-Beck, Ph.D., Contracting Officer's Representative
Tracy Carter Clopet, Ph.D., Project Officer
Laura Cutler, Ph.D., and Shannon Warren, Ph.D., Project Monitors
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
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Project Directors:
Kelly Maxwell and Brenda Miranda
Child Trends
12300 Twinbrook Parkway, Suite 235, Rockville, MD 20852

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