

Children's Data Network

Harnessing the Power of Data to Help Make
Children, Families and Communities
Healthier, Safer and Stronger



What is the Children's Data Network?

The Children's Data Network (CDN) is a new research collaborative funded by First 5 LA with additional support from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, housed at the USC School of Social Work, and developed in partnership with the California Child Welfare Indicators Project at UC Berkeley. The CDN offers a secure, university-based infrastructure for confidentially linking and analyzing data collected by agencies serving children and families. Through research partnerships with state and local public agencies the Children's Data Network helps California make better and smarter use of existing data.

What makes the Children's Data Network approach to data different?

Each year, significant resources are invested and data are collected about programs serving children and families. Yet these data are gathered by different agencies and entered into distinct data systems. Each system captures valuable information, but separately these data only provide a snapshot of children's experiences and encounters with individual agencies.

The CDN links information from these distinct data collection systems to address policy-relevant research questions, support cost-effective program evaluations, and generate population-level information concerning children.

Data for children served by mental health providers are useful for describing diagnoses and examining variations in the type of treatment delivered. But data from this system do not capture how many children are concurrently involved with child protective services or whether specific interventions are tied to better mental health and other outcomes in the years following treatment.



Why the Children's Data Network and why now?

As never before, the spotlight is on the safety and well-being of our most vulnerable children. Every day, social service, health, and child protection agencies are under pressure to provide effective services to at-risk children and families. Yet these providers, and the governments that oversee them, often have limited budgets to support data mining and analysis.

The CDN's data linkage model creates opportunities to cost-effectively use information and generate new knowledge through analysis of existing data. Just as the power of "big data" is transforming other sectors, the integration of government data can advance efforts to assess population needs, monitor program effectiveness, and support the strategic and equitable allocation of resources. By drawing upon data that have been linked, anonymized, and configured through the CDN, researchers and agencies can focus on the development of rigorous, high-quality analyses rather than cross-system data management.



What does this work mean to children and families in California?

Raising a child in California may require the involvement of dozens of human services agencies and public departments. But that chain of support can be disjointed, especially when challenged by the size, scale, and public transportation challenges in larger counties such as Los Angeles County. Many systems function in silos, responding separately to concerns about child health, safety, or well-being. Linked and shared data can provide essential information to help policy makers and community leaders make more proactive and strategic decisions.

By using data collected across multiple systems, we can better understand critical milestones as children age and examine whether and how various services affect children's lives. We can ensure that policies are developed and program investments are made with high-quality evidence and information in hand.

The bottom line? Vital resources can be targeted to the most effective services and to communities and populations with the greatest need. Better and smarter use of data means more informed policy and program decisions, more effective services in communities, and more support for families so they can nurture healthier, safer, and stronger children.



Los Angeles County's Education Coordinating Council demonstrated how matching data between the Departments of Children and Family Services and Probation with those managed by LA Unified and other school districts could inform efforts to improve outcomes such as academic achievement, expulsions, and attendance.



What's next for the Children's Data Network?

The CDN is currently focused on:

- Developing the infrastructure for the linkage and analysis of administrative data concerning children and families in California
- Engaging agency leaders, policy makers, and community stakeholders in framing key questions that can be answered using available data and information
- Generating applied and actionable research by funding collaborative agency-university-community data analysis projects



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For more information about the Children's Data Network please visit our website at www.datanetwork.org