
Introduction

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) has provided grants to a number of states and large counties to study outcomes for families leaving or diverted from welfare. Under the grants, awarded in September 1998, September 1999, and forthcoming in September 2000, Welfare Outcomes Grantees are required to produce some form of “public use” data files.

A variety of questions about the production and documentation of such files were raised by grantees in Spring 2000 during a telephone interview/needs assessment conducted by ORC Macro, the Technical Assistance contractor for the Welfare Outcomes Grantees. In response to the expressed needs of its grantees, ASPE has undertaken several measures to provide further guidance on the production of welfare outcomes data files, including:

- Creation of a short statement of “ASPE preferences” that provided an initial responses to questions asked by grantees. This statement was initially published in April 2000 and revised in June 2000. (A copy of this question-and-answer document is provided as Appendix A).
- Formation of a Data Files Work Group, comprised of a small number of grantee and research community representatives, which met during spring and summer 2000 to produce technical guidance on producing welfare outcomes data files.
- Development of “Producing and Documenting Data Files: Guidance for ASPE Welfare Outcomes Grantees” based on the Work Group’s recommendations.
- Distribution of “sample documentation” from one of the grantees, prepared following the Work Group’s recommendations and put forth in the “Producing and Documenting Data Files” document.
- Establishment of an interagency agreement with the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) to use its Research Data Center as a mechanism for storing and distributing grantees’ welfare outcomes data files.
- Support under an ongoing contract with ORC Macro for technical assistance to Welfare Outcomes grantees on issues related to public-use files and other matters.

The following document reflects the ongoing collaboration between ASPE and its grantees to produce data files that will be useful to the research community in its ongoing investigation of welfare outcomes.

This document is intended to provide grantees with guidance related to the questions they have raised, and to simplify the process for producing welfare outcomes files.

The Group's recommendations and guidelines were developed to provide grantees with a model for reporting and labeling their data. However, for some grantees that have already produced data files for reporting and analysis, these recommendations and guidelines may require an additional level of effort to implement.

While it is not expected that grantees will follow all of the Work Group's recommendations presented in this document, grantees should review this guide and incorporate these recommendations to the extent practicable for the circumstances of their particular projects. If a different approach is selected, it is incumbent on grantees to clearly document their approach.

This following Guide has six chapters that correspond with key tasks associated with producing Welfare Outcomes Data Files. Chapters 1 and 2 provide an overview of the Work Group's recommendations for the files' format, structure and contents. Chapters 3 and 4 provide specific guidance on creating documentation for Welfare Outcomes survey and administrative data files. Chapter 5 outlines ASPE's proposed approach for storing and disseminating grantee Welfare Outcomes Data Files. Finally, Chapter 6 discusses helpful templates included in the Grantee Toolkit. Tips for implementing Work Group recommendations also have been included throughout the guide.

ASPE is firmly committed to producing data files in a manner that both protects the identities of individuals who have participated in the Welfare Outcomes studies and does not overburden its grantees. Grantees are encouraged to continue to contact ASPE and ORC Macro staff with questions and concerns that arise when using the guidance provided in this document and during the course of producing their welfare outcomes files.