

# Contextualizing CFSR Outcomes with Case Review Measures: A Mixed-Methods Examination of Permanency in Los Angeles County

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## BACKGROUND

The Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) is a process whereby the Federal Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Children's Bureau conducts periodic reviews of state child welfare systems. These reviews help the Children's Bureau ensure conformity with federal child welfare requirements, determine what is actually happening to children and families as they are engaged in child welfare services, and assist states in helping children and families achieve positive outcomes.

Since 2012, the Children's Bureau has promoted the use of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) efforts within states and jurisdictions to utilize quantitative and qualitative data to better understand their child welfare systems, and enhance system reform. Since 2015, California counties have conducted their own case reviews and qualitative interviews using the Federal Onsite Review Instrument (OSRI) for children and youth involved in both the child welfare and probation-supervised child welfare systems.

In October 2016, the ACF released a letter (Technical Bulletin #9) indicating to states that they had discovered technical errors in the syntax and formulation of the statewide data indicators. As a result of these issues, ACF indicated that they would not use the indicators in determinations of substantial conformity for the entire Round 3 of the CFSR, and encouraged the states to focus their CQI efforts on the case review process. However, some researchers (Lery, n.d.) have raised concerns about the sampling method used in the CFSR case review process and problems that could result in making valid inferences about case practices and their impact on child welfare outcomes. This study seeks to explore the utility of case review data in understanding child welfare performance; specifically, the degree to which performance on case review items pertaining to assessment, case planning, and providing for the needs of children, parents, and caregivers are associated with system-wide measures of timely permanency (CFSR3 P1, P2, P3).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Assessment & Service Provision (CFSR Case Review Items 12 A-C)

In child welfare, assessment is a "continuous, individualized, strengths-based process for gathering, analyzing and using information about children, youth and families to determine their strengths, needs and wishes" (McCarthy, 2012, p. 8). This process creates the conditions for creating an effective, mutually-developed case plan (Schene, 2005). According to a report using second round CFSR data, produced by the Children's Bureau, the ability of an agency to promote permanency and stability in children's living arrangements was significantly associated with their ability to adequately assess and provide services to parents (USDHHS, 2011). Similar results were found in a separate review of first round CFSR data (USDHHS, n.d.), which indicated that outcome ratings associated with efforts to achieve the permanency goals of reunification, guardianship, and permanent placement with relatives in a timely manner were significantly associated with strength ratings on an agency's assessment of needs and provision of services.

### Case Planning (CFSR Case Review Item 13)

A child welfare case plan is a written, agreed upon, individualized plan of action between the child welfare agency and the family. When done correctly, this plan represents the continuous cycle of working together, assessing progress, and updating the plan to reflect progress, changes in family circumstances, and new information (McCarthy, 2012). Examinations of past CFSR data have supported the idea that effective case planning processes are beneficial to long-term permanency outcomes. Specifically, in a report summarizing second round CFSR data, the Children's Bureau (USDHHS, 2011) found that engaging all members of the family (including relatives and noncustodial or incarcerated parents, especially fathers) and individualizing and adjusting case plans were noted as strengths in states that performed well on achieving permanency and stability for children. In addition, first round CFSR data (USDHHS, n.d.) indicated that states with higher percentages of children in permanent and stable living situations also had high ratings for involving children and parents in case planning.

Research conducted outside the CFSR supports a relationship between client engagement in case planning and positive case outcomes. For example, Gladstone et al. (2012) found that parents who were more engaged with their workers reported greater satisfaction with the outcome of services and with the way that services were provided. Parents also reported that their parenting had improved and that their children were safer than they had been before agency involvement. To help explain their results, Gladstone et al. (2012) provided evidence that parent engagement was largely explained by the extent to which workers did not ignore problems perceived to be important to parents, the extent to which workers did not ask parents to do things that they felt would be unhelpful, and how skilled workers were at locating appropriate services. These findings are supported by those of other researchers (Cheng, 2010; Choi & Ryan, 2007; D'Andrade & Chambers, 2012) who have found that parents who receive services that are "matched" to parental problems are more likely to reunify, while poorly targeted services may disincite parents from participation.

## SAMPLE & COMPARISONS

Variables	CFSR Case Review Sample*		Most Recent CFSR3 – P1 Denominator**		Most Recent CFSR3 – P2 Denominator***		Most Recent CFSR3 – P3 Denominator***	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
	N = 136		N = 8,661		N = 4,658		N = 6,173	
Child Gender								
Female	60	44.1	4,314	49.8	2,326	49.9	3,011	48.8
Male	76	55.9	4,347	50.2	2,331	50.0	3,162	51.2
Missing	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.02	0	0.0
Child Age								
Under 1 year	34	25.0	1,884	21.8	N/A	--	N/A	--
1-2 years	16	11.8	1,269	14.7	1,423	30.5	519	8.4
3-5 years	24	17.6	1,501	17.3	954	20.5	1,316	21.3
6-10 years	19	14.0	1,945	22.5	1,099	23.6	1,755	28.4
11-15 years	29	21.3	1,512	17.5	835	17.9	1,641	26.6
16-17 years	14	10.3	550	6.4	347	7.4	942	15.3
Race/Ethnicity								
Black	36	26.5	1,999	23.1	1,148	24.6	1,913	31.0
White	26	19.1	860	9.9	491	10.5	615	10.0
Latino	66	48.5	5,018	57.9	2,700	58.0	3,295	53.4
Asian/PI	3	2.2	140	1.6	67	1.4	52	0.8
Native American	0	0.0	26	0.3	17	0.4	17	0.3
Missing	5	3.7	618	7.1	235	5.0	281	4.6
Exit Type								
Reunification	44	32.4	2,796	32.3	920	19.8	257	4.2
Adoption	26	19.1	9	0.1	345	7.4	1,110	18.0
Guardianship	15	11.0	36	0.4	470	10.1	511	8.3
Non-Permanency	11	8.1	89	1.0	34	0.7	113	1.8
Still in Care	40	29.4	5,731	66.2	2,889	62.0	4,182	67.7

Among these:

- 18 children achieved permanency within 12 months (CFSR3 – P1)
- 24 children achieved permanency after 12-23 months (CFSR3 – P2)
- 43 children achieved permanency after 24+ months (CFSR3 – P3)

\* Open Child Welfare Cases: Q4\_15 – Q1\_18

\*\* Child Welfare Entries: April 2017 – March 2018 obtained from Q1\_2019 CCWIP web reports

\*\*\* Child Welfare Entries: April 2018 – March 2019 obtained from Q1\_2019 CCWIP web reports

## CONTACT

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Please see the Supplemental Information Handout for literature references and other information.

## MEASURES & METHODS

### Measures

**Child welfare practice data** were based on results from LA County DCFS Case Review Process using questions contained in the Federal Onsite Review Instrument (OSRI), and stored in a third-party database called the Online Monitoring System (OMS). Each of these items was scored as an Area Needing Improvement or a Strength:

- Did the county conduct a formal or informal initial and/or ongoing comprehensive assessment that accurately assessed the needs of the child (Item 12A), mother and/or father (Item 12B), and caregiver (Item 12C)? Were appropriate services provided to meet identified needs?
- Did the county make concerted efforts to actively involve the child, mother, and father in the case planning process (Item 13)?

**Child welfare system permanency outcome data** were obtained from the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS), a statewide data system containing information on all child welfare events in California from 1998 to the present. Data for this study were current through March 31, 2019. The following permanency outcomes were measured and compared against case review data:

- CFSR-3 Permanency Measure 1: Of all sample children who entered foster care, what percent discharged to permanency within 12 months of entering foster care?
- CFSR-3 Permanency Measure 2: Of all sample children who entered foster care and remained in foster care between 12 and 23 months, what percent discharged to permanency?
- CFSR-3 Permanency Measure 3: Of all sample children who entered foster care and remained in foster care 24 months or more, what percent discharged to permanency?

### Methods

1. LA County DCFS provided UC Berkeley researchers with an Excel document containing case review scores for all items. Variables in the DCFS case review file included:
  - ✓ ClientID, Case Type (FC/IH), Race/Ethnicity, Gender, PUR Start Date, Case Review Item Scores (1-18), Qualitative Outcome Scores (S1-S2, P1-P2, WB1-WB3)
2. CFSR case review data were linked to administrative permanency outcome data, located in CWS/CMS using the unique but anonymous client identifier, and additional variables were brought in:
  - ✓ fkclient\_t, Birthdate, Removal Date, Placement Episode End Date, Placement Termination Reason Type
3. Using the combined data set, a series of chi-square tests were performed to explore associations between social worker practices assessed through case review and child welfare outcomes.

## CONCLUSIONS

- The CFSR Case Review sampling method yields a diffuse group of cases that is not representative of the population of either children entering care or children who are in care at a given time.
- The result of this method is a sample that includes more adolescents than the CFSR P1 and P2 cohorts and nearly twice as many children 0-5 years old than the CFSR P3 cohort. This sample is also more likely to be male, include children who have spent more time in care, and is too small to be representative or produce statistically significant results, particularly for children and youth with shorter stays in foster care.
- Case review data did suggest associations (not displayed) between child and family involvement in case planning and permanency for children/youth within 12 months of foster care entry or after 24 or more months in care. Associations were also found between assessment and provision of services to children and caregivers and permanency for children/youth after 24 or more months in care. However, the small frequencies, and resulting minimal effect sizes warn against over-interpretation until more robust and representative samples can be examined.
- Moving forward, a more useful application of case review information would be driven by results of administrative outcome data augmented by targeted case record reviews. Specifically, states should be supported in monitoring system-wide outcomes to identify areas of need and strength, and then case reviews could be conducted to glean contextual understanding of how problems arise or are mitigated.
- To support targeted case record reviews, motivated by the results of administrative outcome data, LA County DCFS and Probation Child Welfare partnered to produce "Guiding Question" documents for each CFSR outcome (examples provided). These documents can be used as CQI tools to better understand child welfare outcome data and make plans for system improvement.