Types of Data Used to Measure Child Welfare Outcomes*

Evaluation efforts in *Family to Family* rely heavily on longitudinal data to describe the experiences of children involved with the child welfare system. This is in contrast to cross-sectional profiles or data based on the group of children exiting care during a given period. The following discussion indicates why we emphasize this approach.

Cross-Sectional Data

Cross-sectional data, or snapshots of the caseload, have traditionally been the primary basis for characterizing the children served by child welfare agencies. Many agencies report characteristics of the group of children in placement on the last day of the month, the last day of the calendar year, or the last day of the fiscal year. These data represent the group of children in out-of-home placement at one specific point in time, however, they are not representative of all the children served by the child welfare system.

Compared to all the children served by the child welfare system, the group of children in care on any given day includes a disproportionate number of children with long lengths of stay These children also tend to be those with the largest number of moves. As a result, caseload profiles do not portray the experiences of all children served because it over-represents those with long stays. Thus, cross sectional data:

- Provide a profile of children in care on a given day or on any day during a given period
- Are useful for day-to-day agency and caseload management, but
- ***Portray outcomes in worst possible light*** – longest lengths of stay, highest disruptions because children who stay in care the longest are most likely to be in this group.

Exit Cohort Data

An exit cohort is the group of children who leave out-of-home care during a given period; e.g., children who were reunified with their families in the past six months or children who were adopted in the past nine months. This has intuitive appeal because it seems to be a way of capturing the experience of every child. Unfortunately, this approach inherently ignores the experience of children who are "stuck in care" and for whom the system is having difficulty achieving a permanent placement.

Using an exit cohort to obtain a representative sample of children in the child welfare system is not reliable because we cannot describe the population of children to which it is relevant. The only thing children in the group have in common is that they left care during the same period and we know that children with longer lengths of stay are underrepresented, but we are not sure to what degree. In contrast to caseload

snapshots, therefore, data from exit cohorts tend to portray outcomes in a more favorable light.

From the standpoint of performance measurement, using exit cohorts to establish standards for "time to reunification" or "time to adoption" incorporates a perverse incentive not to find permanent placements for children who have been in care for long periods. This would discourage efforts to "clean up the backlog" of cases stuck in care because adding more of those cases to the exit cohort would increase estimates of time-to-permanency measures.

Longitudinal Data

Longitudinal data build statistical case histories for each child who enters out-of-home care, for the first time, during a specified period. We use the term *entry* cohort to refer to this group for two reasons. First, child welfare is one of the few fields in which exit cohorts are used in spite of the well-known biases of such data, and therefore, the label entry cohort clearly distinguishes it from the use of exit cohorts. Second, generally one-fourth or fewer children who achieve permanent placements later re-enter out-of-home care, thereby making them a distinct subset of all the children served in out-of-home care. It is appropriate, therefore, to separate initial entries to care from re-entries because it is likely that the two groups are systematically different and the experiences of children re-entering care are likely to differ systematically from children initially entering care.

A longitudinal database incorporates case histories that track events such as initial custody, placement changes, custody termination, and re-entries to care. Because it includes children who have left care and those who still remain in care, longitudinal data provide a sample of ***all the children served by the child welfare agency over multiple years.*** Longitudinal data:

- Include a series of entry cohorts of children who enter out-of-home care for the first time during a designated time period (e.g. calendar or fiscal year).
- Track the occurrence of custody and placement events through specified periods of time.
- Represent *all* child who ever enter care.
- *Provide valid and reliable estimates of length of stay and other outcomes such as placement stability.*

*Excerpt from the 2004 UNC Data Camp Manual:

http://www.unc.edu/~lynnu/campmanual.pdf