

# Measuring Outcomes and System Performance in Child Welfare

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Strengthening Data Use and Analysis in Class Action Litigation

A Conference Sponsored by Children's Rights, Inc. and  
the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago

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# “Real” Outcomes vs. the Experiences of Families and Children Involved in the Child Welfare System

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- All child welfare information systems contain data that make it possible to describe the experiences of children, but most do not contain clinical assessments of the well-being of children
- Responsibility for the outcomes of children extends to our society as a whole, not just the child welfare system—foster care is intended to provide *temporary* homes
- The field of child welfare is much more attuned to results today, compared to procedural compliance 10 years ago



# Whose Outcomes?

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## □ Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997

*It establishes unequivocally that our national goals for children in the child welfare system are safety, permanency, and well-being.*

*ACF Program Instruction, 1-8-98*



# Federal Outcome Framework

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## Safety

- Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect.
- Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.

## Permanency

- Children have permanency and stability in their living situations.
- The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for families.

## Well-Being

- Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs.
- Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs.
- Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.



# Whose Outcomes?

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- ❑ Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997
- ❑ Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) Process
  - Safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes
  - Systemic factors:
    - (1) Statewide information systems; (2) case review system; (3) quality assurance system; (4) staff and provider training; (5) service array; (6) agency responsiveness to the community; and (7) foster and adoptive parent licensing, recruitment and retention.



# National Standards for CFSRs

<b>Recurrence of Maltreatment</b>	6.1%	For six months following the first report date during the period from January-June, the percentage about whom another substantiated or indicated report is received.
<b>Incidence of Abuse and/or Neglect in Foster Care</b>	0.57%	The percentage of children reported as maltreated by a perpetrator who was a foster parent or a residential facility staff person for the nine-month period of January 1 through September 30 divided by the population of children served in foster care for the same time period.
<b>Foster Care Re-Entries</b>	8.6%	Of all children who entered foster care during a given year, the percentage who were re-entering foster care within 12 months of a prior foster care episode.
<b>Stability of Foster Care Placements</b>	86.7%	At a point in time, among children who have been in foster care less than 12 mos from the time of the latest removal or left care in the previous 12 months without having been in care 12 mos, the percentage with < 3 placement settings.
<b>Time to Achieve Reunification</b>	76.2%	Among children reunified in a given year, the percentage reunified in < 12 months from the time of the latest removal.
<b>Time to Achieve Adoption</b>	32.0%	Among children who exit in a given year to a finalized adoption, the percentage who exit care in < 24 months from latest removal.



# Whose Outcomes?

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- ❑ Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997
- ❑ Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) Process
- ❑ Consent Decrees and Reform Initiatives

Emphasis on particular aspects of system performance, such as placement near a child's original home or over-reliance on congregate-care settings, that are rooted either in a reform agenda or in court findings that a class of children has not been served appropriately or effectively



# Tracking Experiences to Assess Outcomes

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The appropriate group to track varies according to the stage of involvement in the system

**Stage 1:** Does the reporting process accurately and completely identify maltreatment in a state or locality?

- Understanding of maltreatment and perceptions of reporting responsibilities among the public and professionals
  - Number of children who are subjects of reports of maltreatment per 1,000 children
- Screening of referrals
  - Percentage of reports that are screened out and not investigated
- Efficiency and effectiveness of assessment/investigation process
  - Number of children who are deemed to be victims of *substantiated* maltreatment per 1,000 children



# Tracking Experiences (cont'd.)

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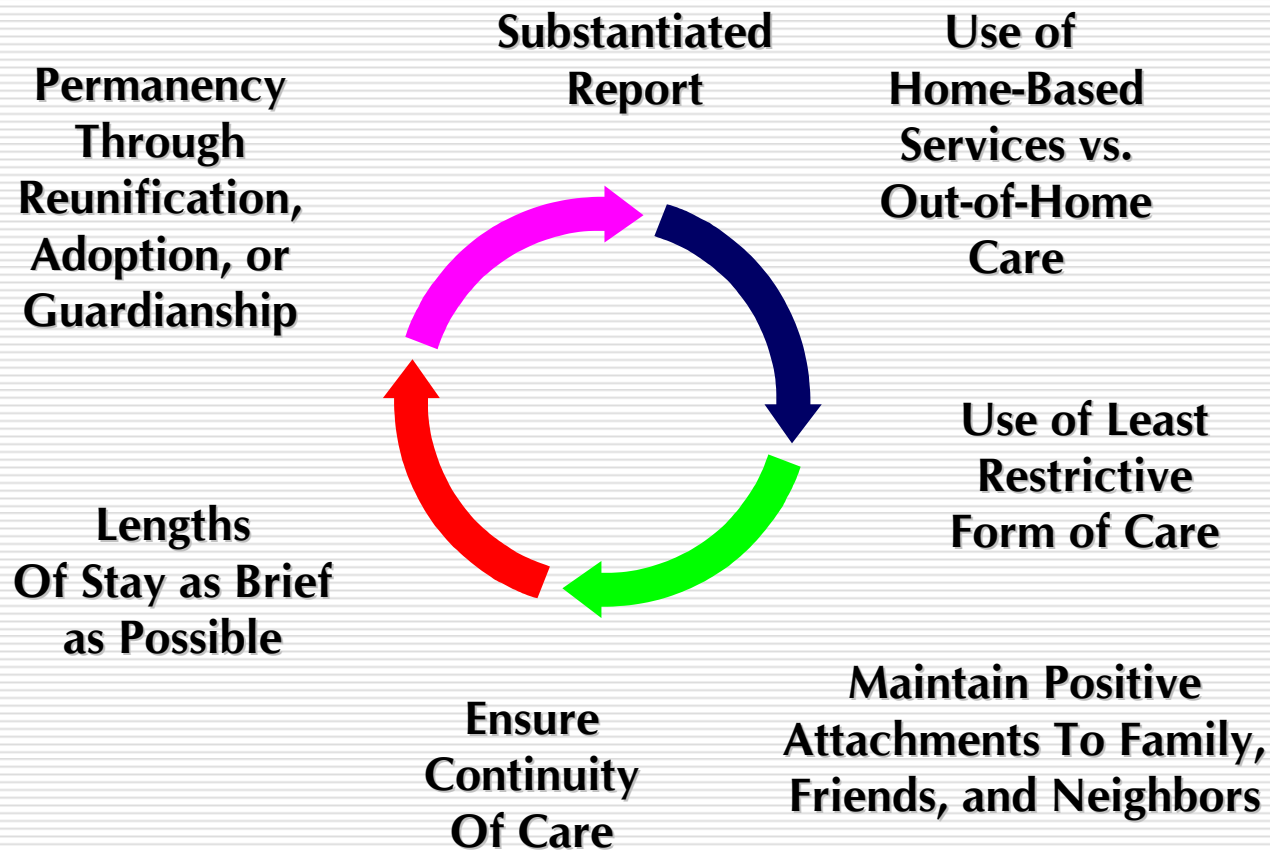
**Stage 2:** Does the system respond to reports in a timely fashion and make appropriate decisions about reported maltreatment?

- Children remain safely with their families when possible, either because risk of maltreatment is minimal or family supports effectively counteract risks
  - Proportion of children with a *substantiated* report during a quarter who remain with their families and do not have subsequent reports
  - Rate of children with *any* report during a quarter who remain with their families and do not have subsequent reports
  
- Children are removed when the risk to their safety is such that it is not appropriate for them to remain with their families
  - Measuring “imminent risk” proved to be challenging in evaluating IFPS



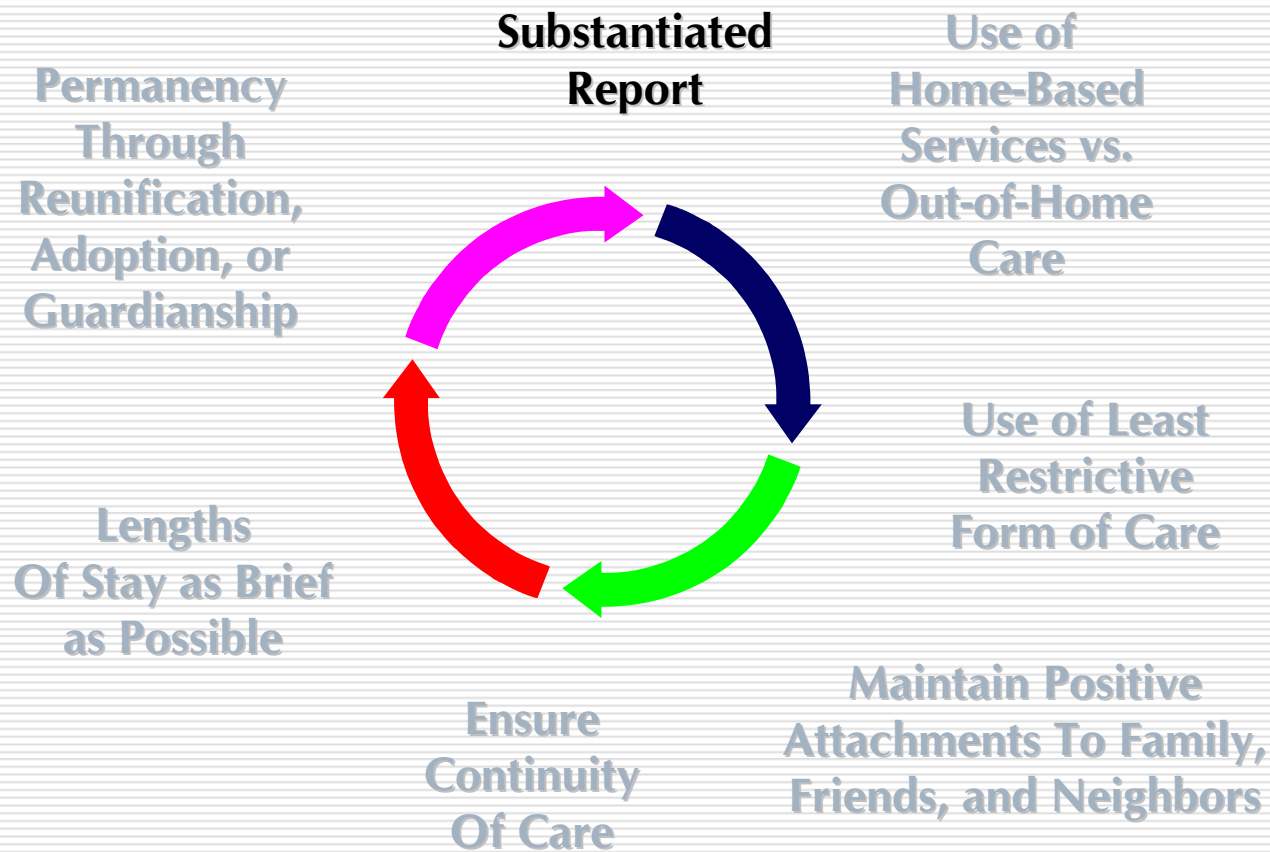
# The Cycle of Experiences in the Child Welfare System

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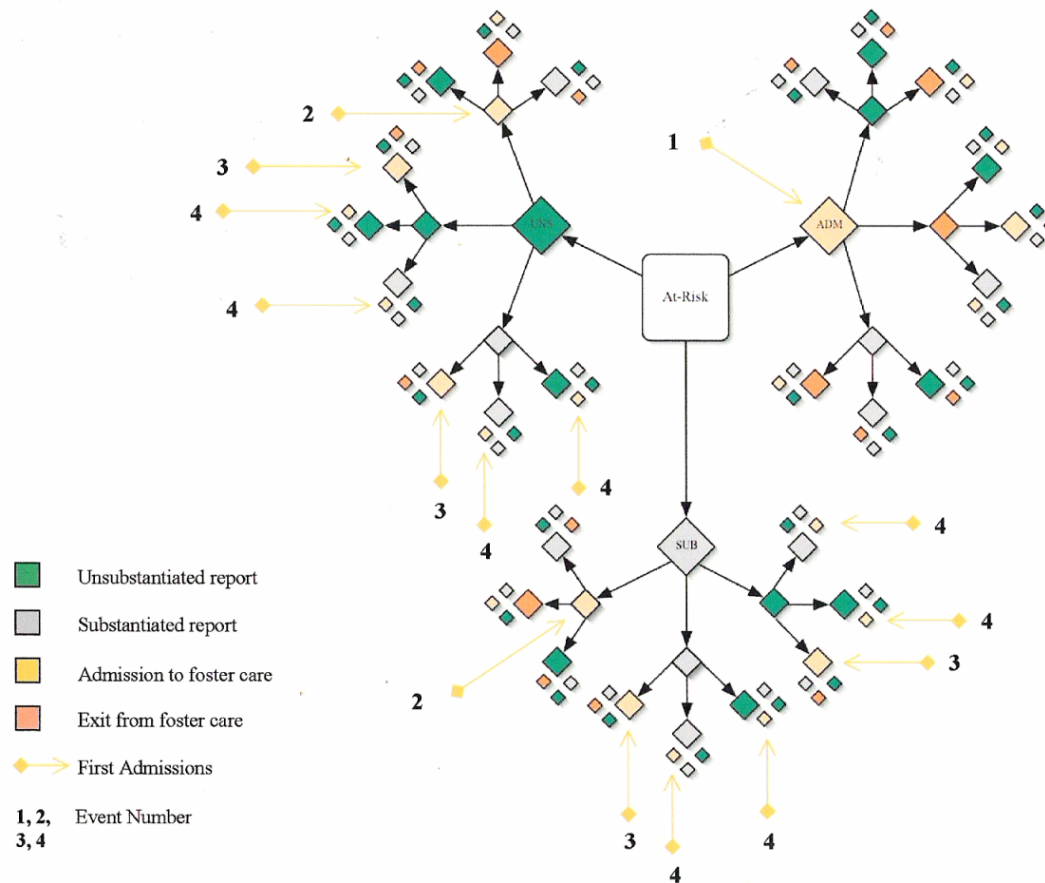
# The Cycle of Experiences in the Child Welfare System

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# Tracking Experiences to Assess Outcomes

Child Welfare Events in Succession Trajectories

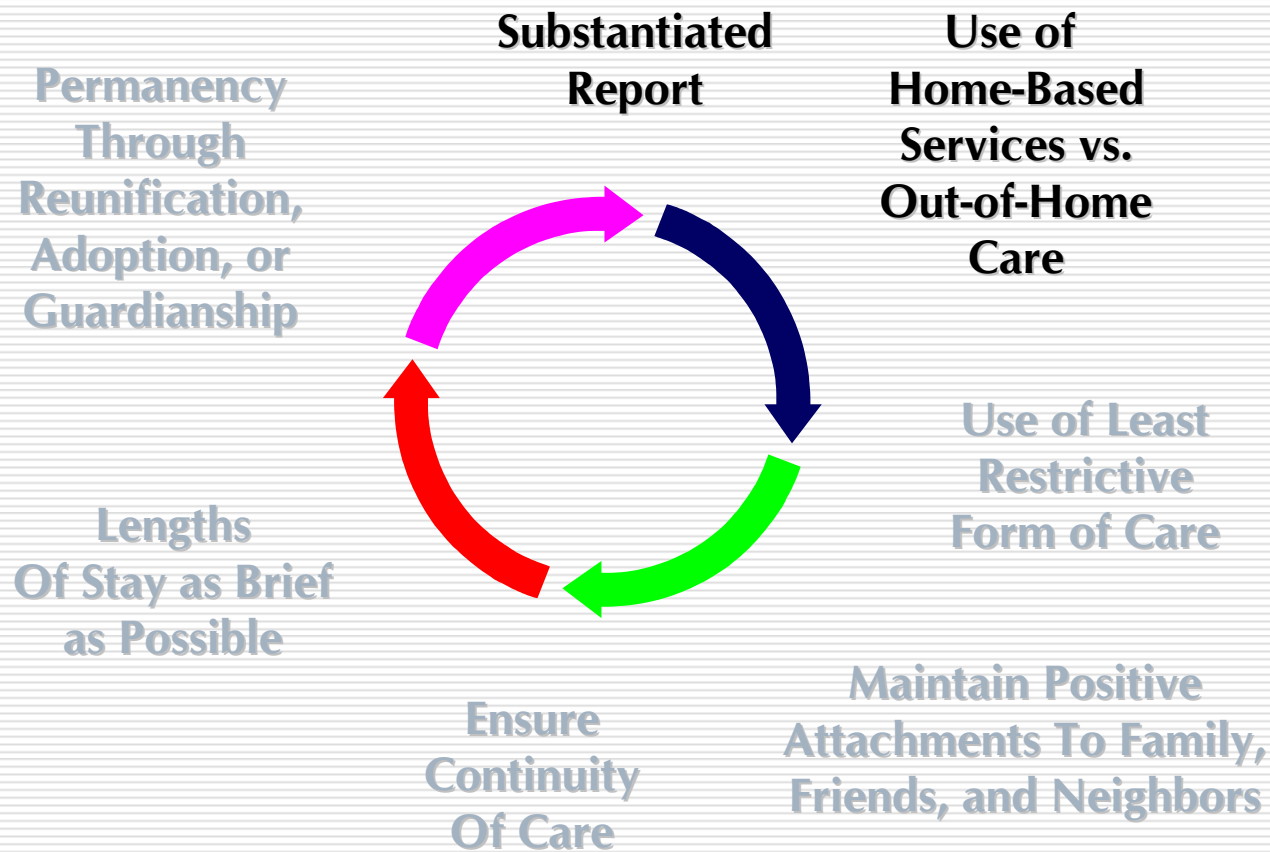


Source: Fred Wulczyn,  
Chapin Hall Center for Children



# The Cycle of Experiences in the Child Welfare System

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# Home-Based Services to Families vs. Placement in Out-of-Home Care

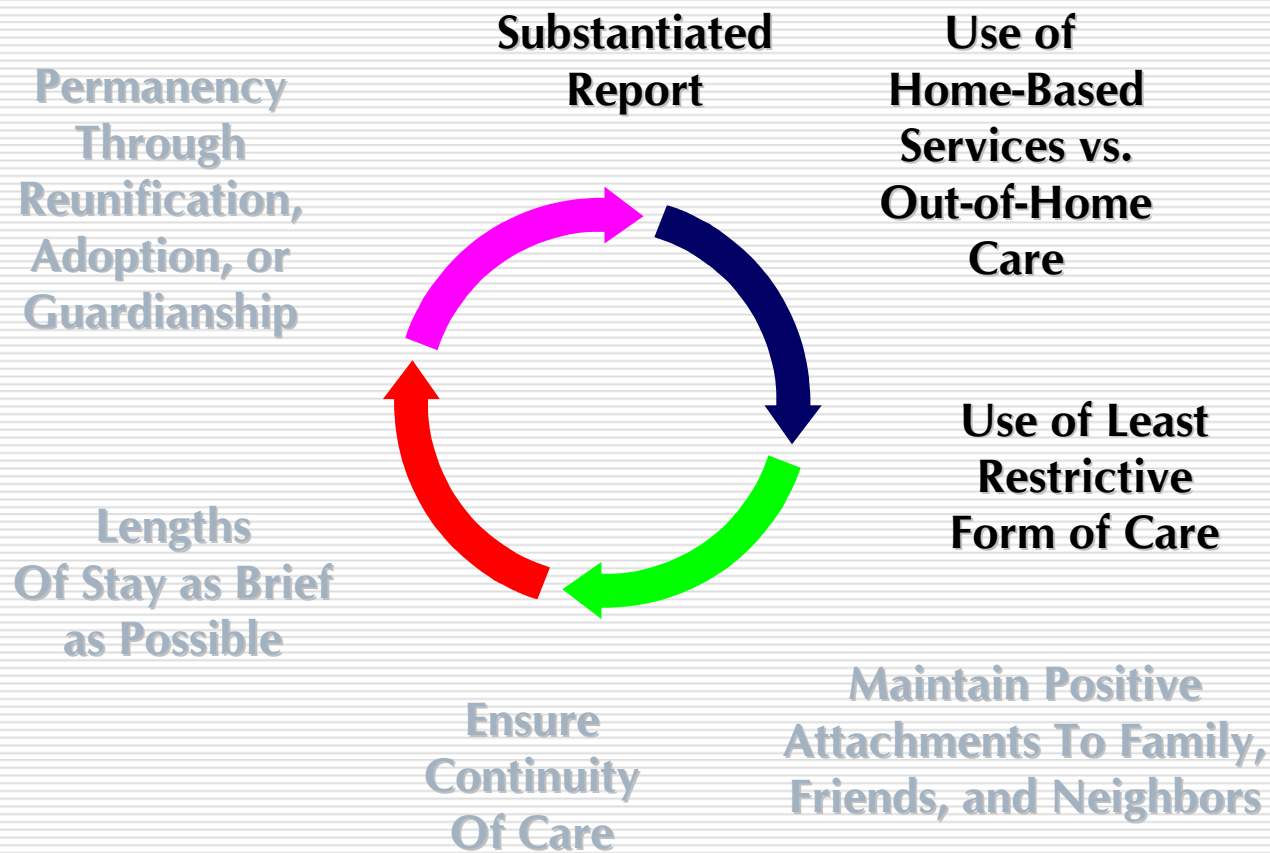
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- If the response is home-based services to families to promote permanency, the quality of agency decision-making and the resulting safety of children must be monitored by tracking the **rate of subsequent maltreatment**
- Lack of detailed data about home-based services inhibits comparative assessment of interventions' impact on safety and permanency



# The Cycle of Experiences in the Child Welfare System

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# How do children enter and experience care?

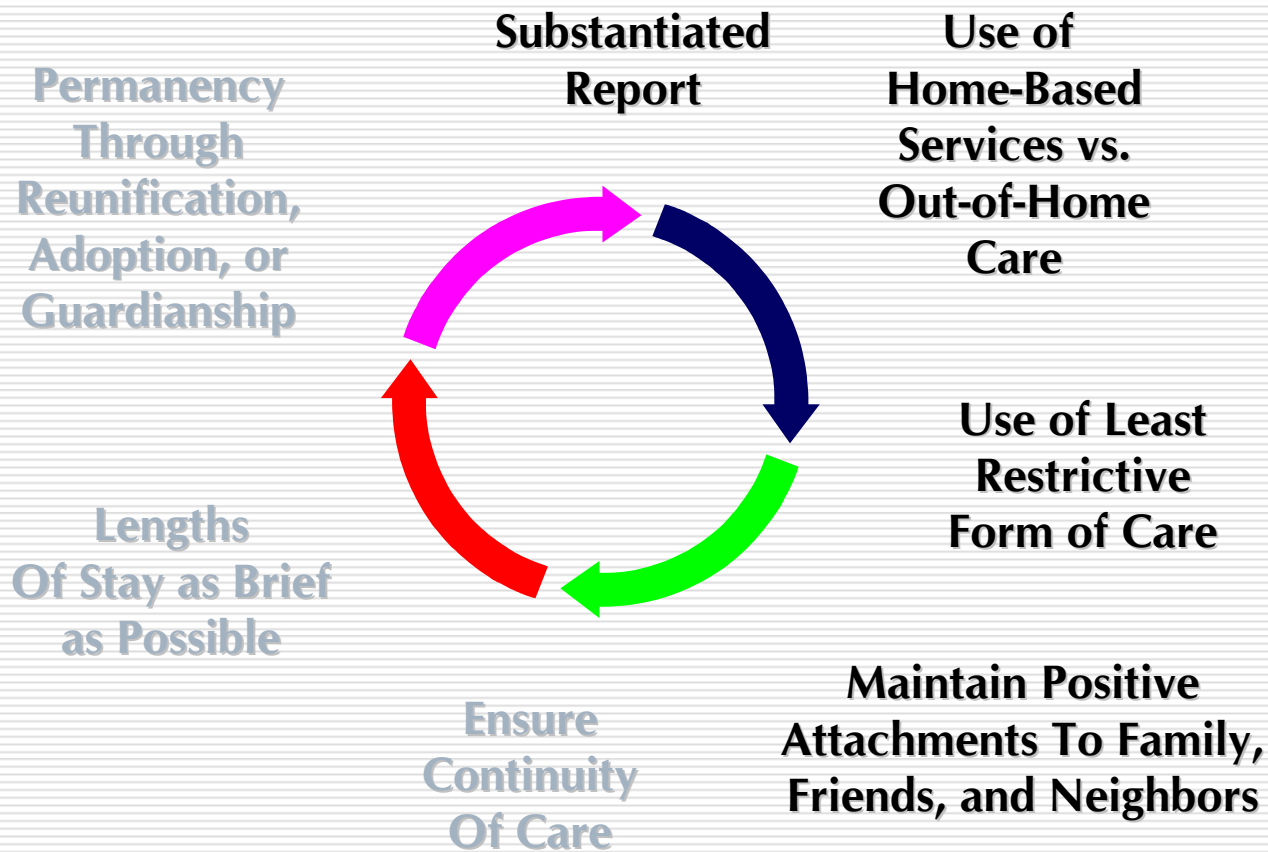
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- Pattern of use of different types of settings
  - Shelters
  - Diversion into kinship care, but not custody
  - Kinship care with custody
  - Family foster care
  
- Rate of placement in non-family settings



# The Cycle of Experiences in the Child Welfare System

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# Attachment to birth family and community

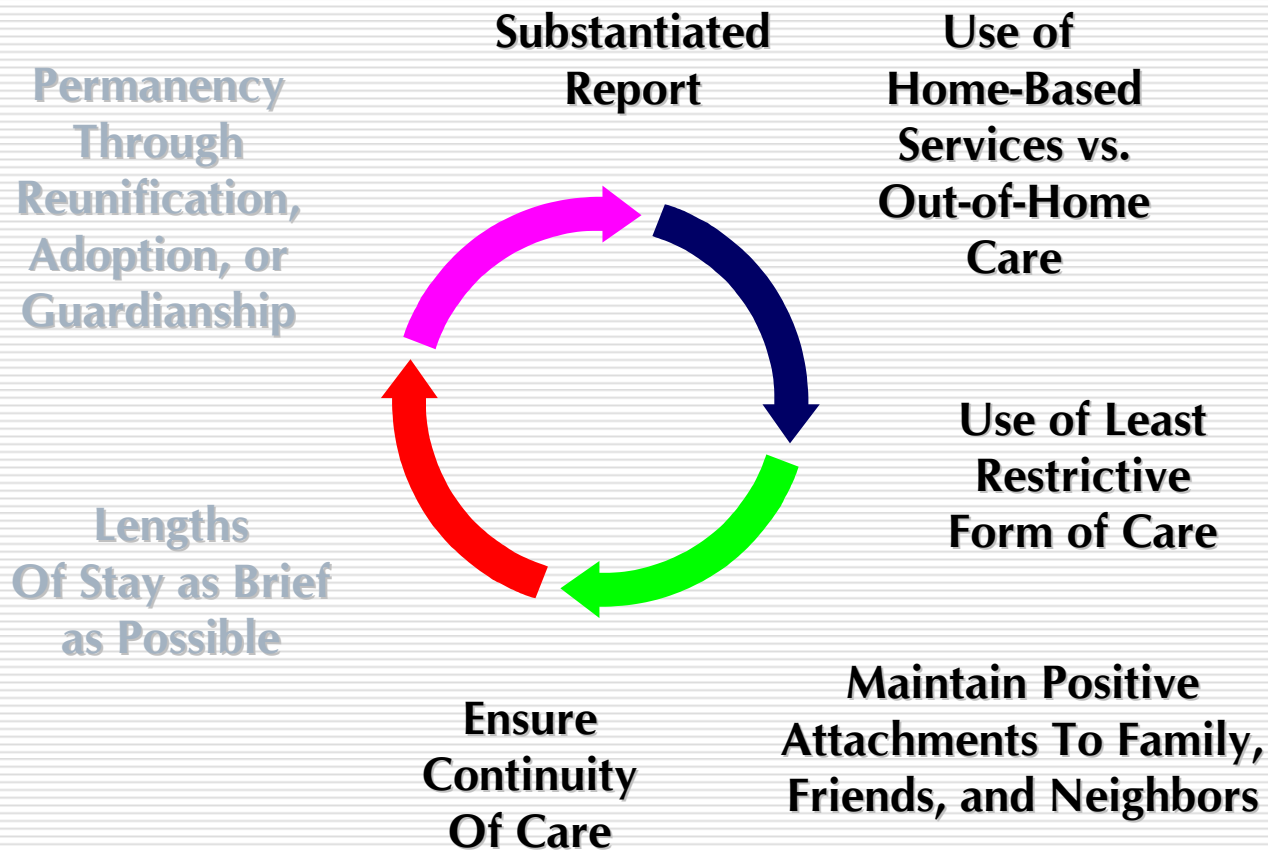
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- Proximity to home of birth family
- Rates of kinship placement—initially and subsequently
- Movement to new school or change of district
- Frequency and nature of contact with birth family while in care



# The Cycle of Experiences in the Child Welfare System

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# Continuity and stability of care

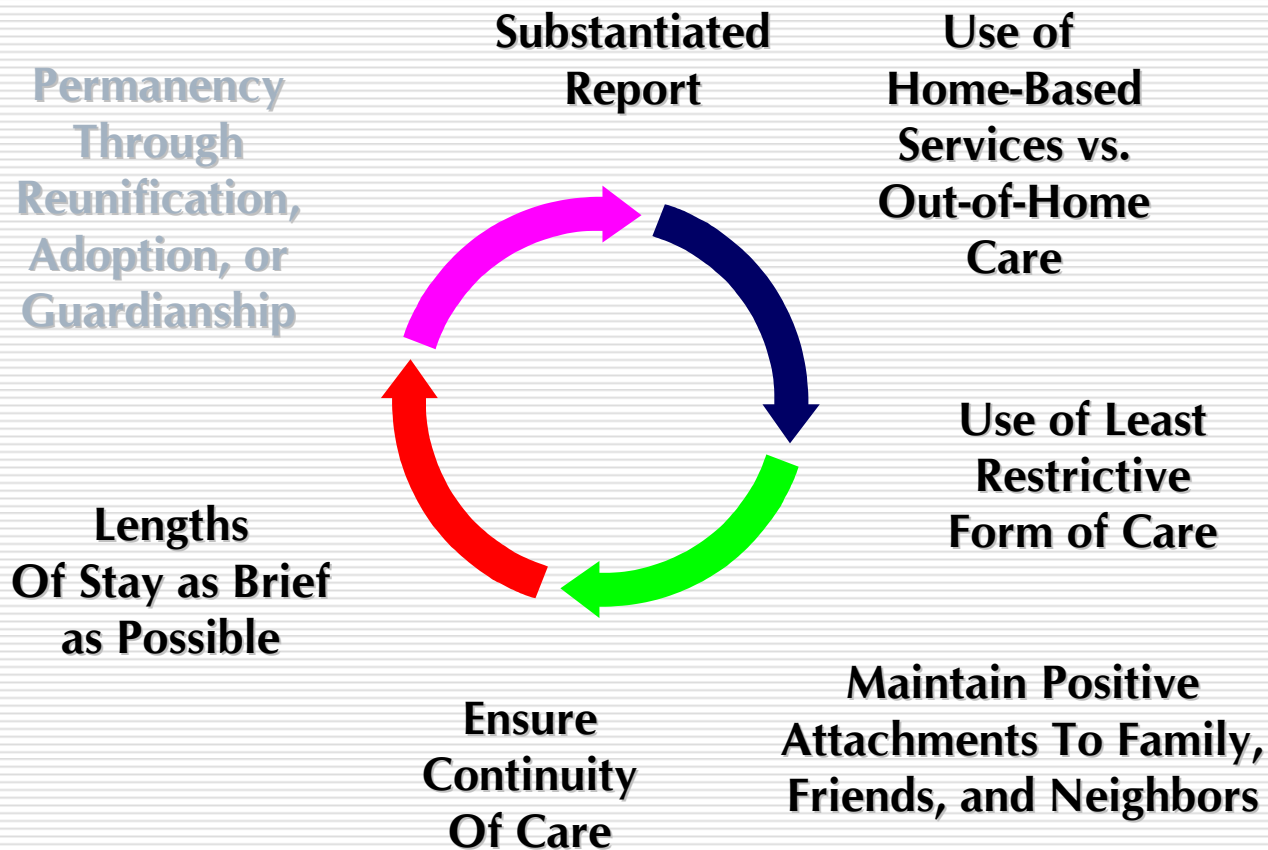
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- Number of moves:
  - Among cohorts of children initially entering care vs. re-entrants
  - Among cohorts of children initially entering care, the number of moves within 30 days, 90 days, 6 months, 1 year, 2+ years
- Does placement process inherently entail changes in settings?
  - Assessment centers
  - Emergency foster homes
- Encourage stepping down of care without penalty by distinguishing moves that entail movement to a less restrictive placement
- Balance proximity to child's home of origin against kinship placement or other compelling factors



# The Cycle of Experiences in the Child Welfare System

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# True length of stay vs. “time to . . .”

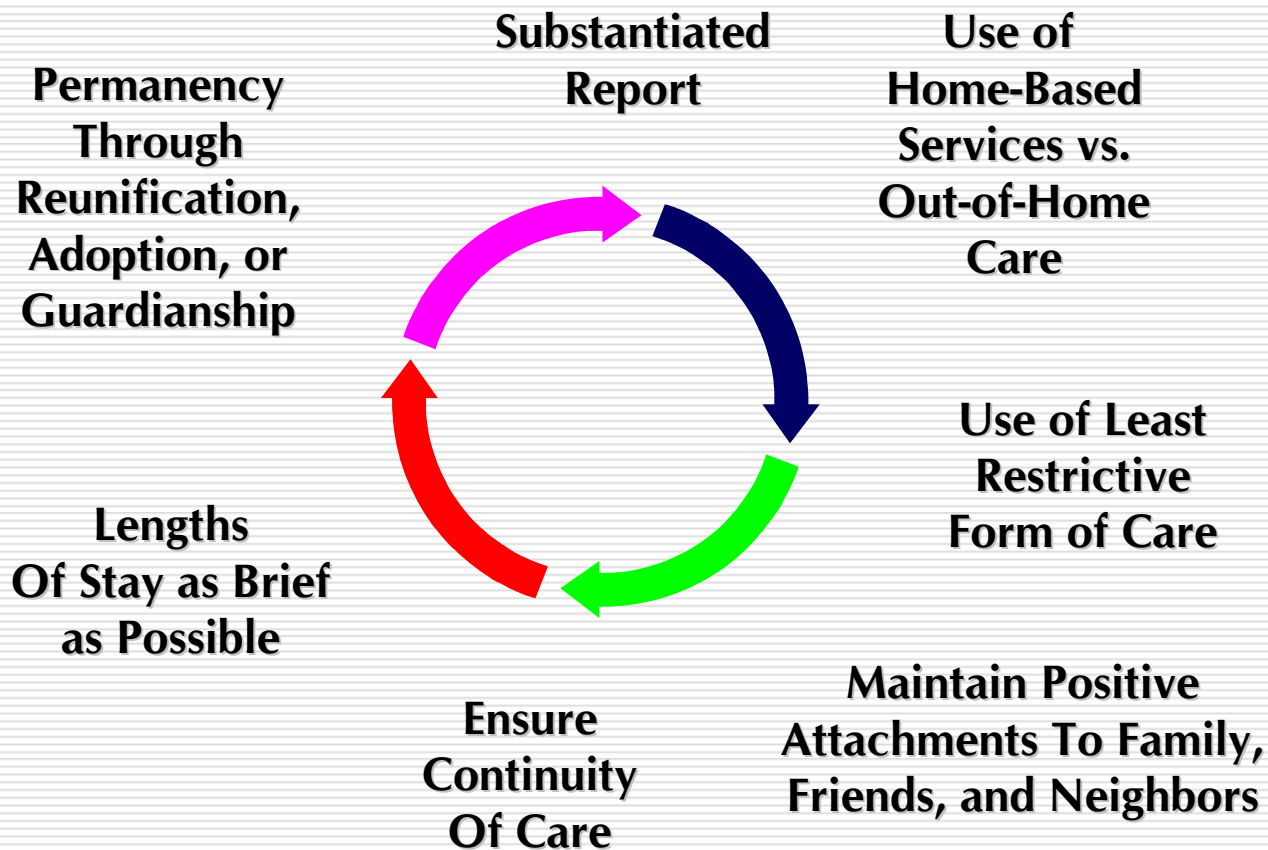
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- ❑ Cohort perspective yields valid and reliable estimates of length of stay based on the experiences of *all* children
- ❑ Cohort perspective provides reliable basis for comparing length of stay across successive cohorts
- ❑ Avoids perverse incentives to retain custody of children who are experiencing much longer than average lengths of stay when the inclusion of such cases would adversely affect performance measure



# The Cycle of Experiences in the Child Welfare System

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# Permanent placements

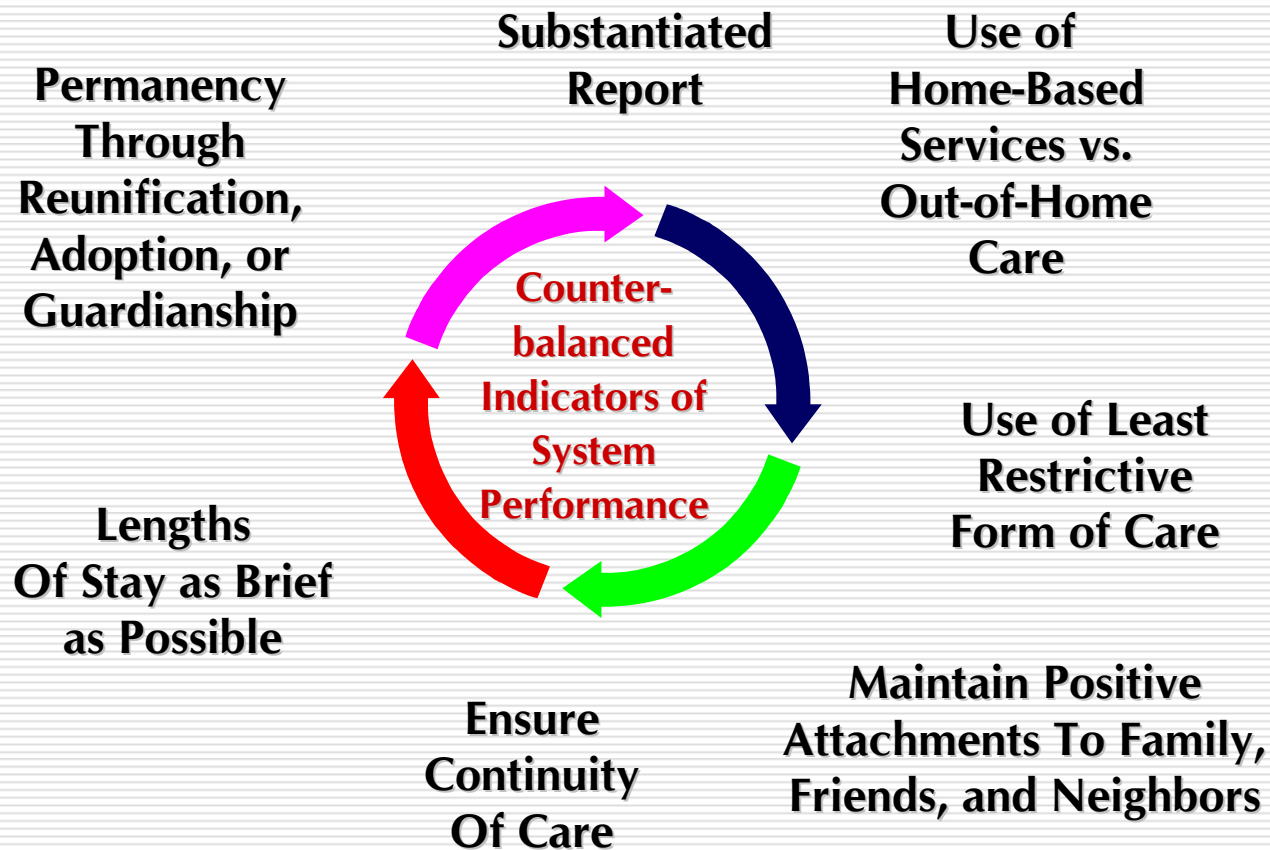
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- ❑ Overall **likelihood of permanent placement**
- ❑ Changing pattern of permanent placements, recognizing that reunification tends to occur more quickly, then guardianship, then adoption
  - Can model permanency outcomes to estimate **likelihood of certain types of placements relative to others**
- ❑ Avoiding the **“notch” problem** in selecting specific indicators
- ❑ Patterns among exit cohorts tend to be affected by efforts to deal with backlogs of cases and natural changes in patterns over time may suggest a decline in performance
  - **Federal adoption standards**
  - **Classes of children identified in consent decrees**



# The Cycle of Experiences in the Child Welfare System

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# Expanding the Cycle

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- Track children after permanent placements to identify and prioritize subsequent reports of maltreatment and re-entry to care
  
- Identify and track specific risk pools
  - children entering under voluntary placement agreements
  - children in care when consent decree established
  - children entering care after settlement agreement



# Sampling and Outcome Measurement

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**Caseload snapshots**—on a day or for a year—are essential to good management, but inherently biased toward the experience of children who have the worst experiences in the system

- *Length-biased samples*

**Exit cohorts** systematically exclude children who are stuck in care and do not have a clear referent population

- *How and why are the children who exited care this year different from those who left care last year and how does this affect outcomes?*

**Entry cohorts** capture the experiences of *all* children, count each child once, and provide a basis for evaluative comparisons across successive cohorts

- *Must distinguish initial entrants from re-entrants*



# Outcomes and System Performance

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Tracking each child through the system and compiling data about the experiences of successive cohorts yields two perspectives:

- Patterns of experiences and associated safety and permanency outcomes for children
- Distinct patterns of care often exist across localities within states, across neighborhoods within cities, and among different groups of children (age, type of maltreatment, etc.)  
*Much can be learned from within-state variations in experiences and patterns of care, and although not directly apparent from CFSR, states are building capabilities to identify such differences*

