

Agency Policy and Community Context as Determinants of Placement Decisions in Child Welfare

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Premises (If Not Myths) of Child Welfare Practice

- The decision to place a child in out-of-home care is the net result of an **individualized assessment** that—
 - identifies risks to safety and well-being and
 - judges how those risks can be offset by resources and capabilities in the child's family and community—
 - formal services (such as IFPS)
 - informal supports (such as kinship care)

 - Agencies provide a **tailored response** to individual children and families
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Some Underlying Premises

- ❑ Valid and reliable assessment instruments are available to support objective, evidence-based decision-making by workers and their supervisors
 - ❑ The child welfare agency can draw on an array of home-based services and placement resources in deciding when and where to place children
 - ❑ Staff of the child welfare agency actually make decisions about when and where to place children
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Decision-making and decisions about individual children and families are highly constrained by agency policy, programming, and structure

Prevailing values and public opinion within the state, locality, and agency



Policy expressed in legislation, regulations, and judicial behavior



Agency structure and organization



Agency programming

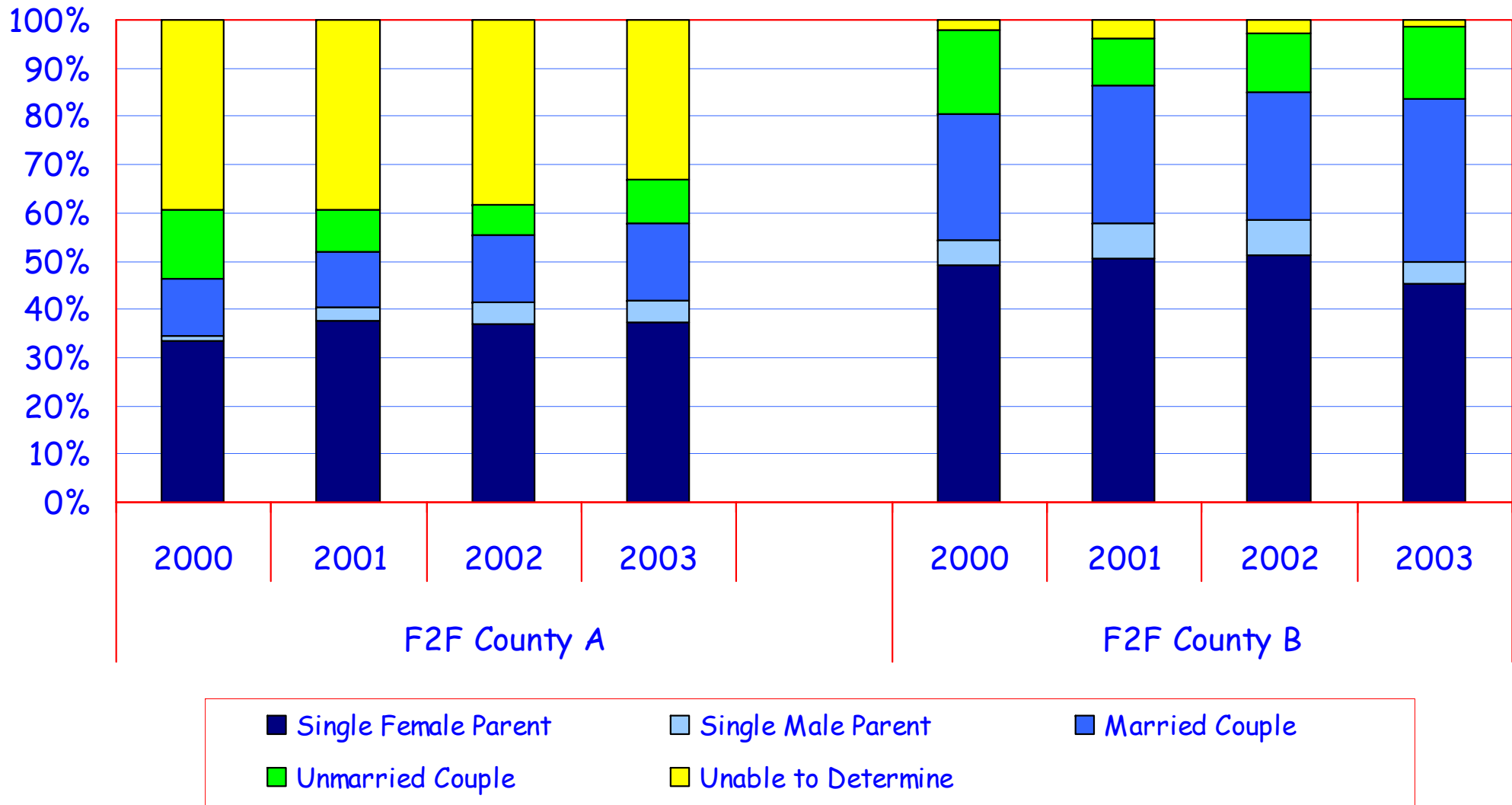


Agency practice

Why is it so difficult to assess the competing effects of individual factors and contextual constraints on practice?

- ❑ Reliance on cross-sectional data blinds us to an accurate understanding of prevailing patterns of care and children's experiences
 - ❑ Absence of systematic needs and risk assessment data precludes rigorous modeling of service responses to children with particular characteristics
 - ❑ Even basic demographic data are not captured entirely reliably
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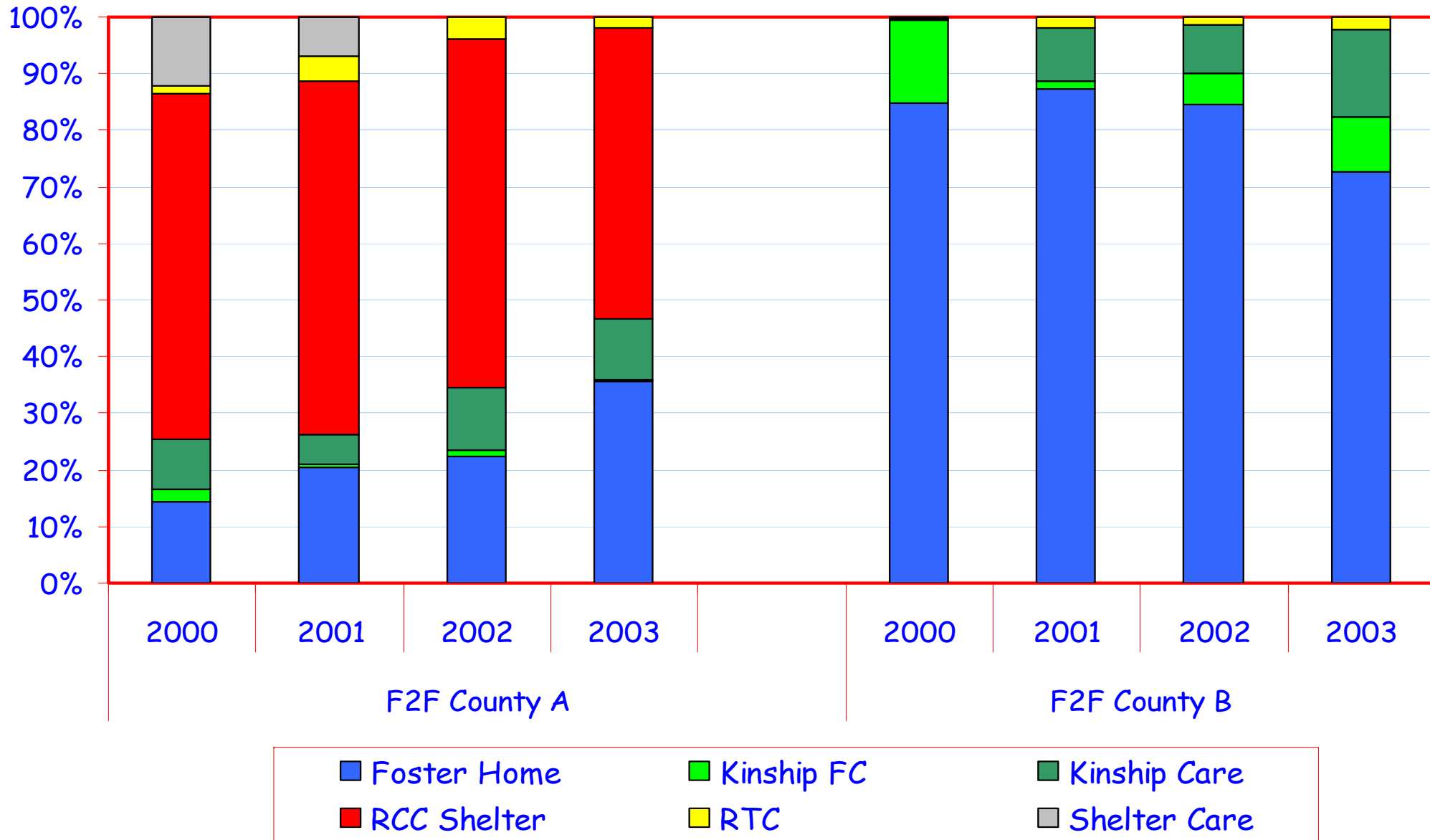
Family Structure of Children Initially Entering CP Custody



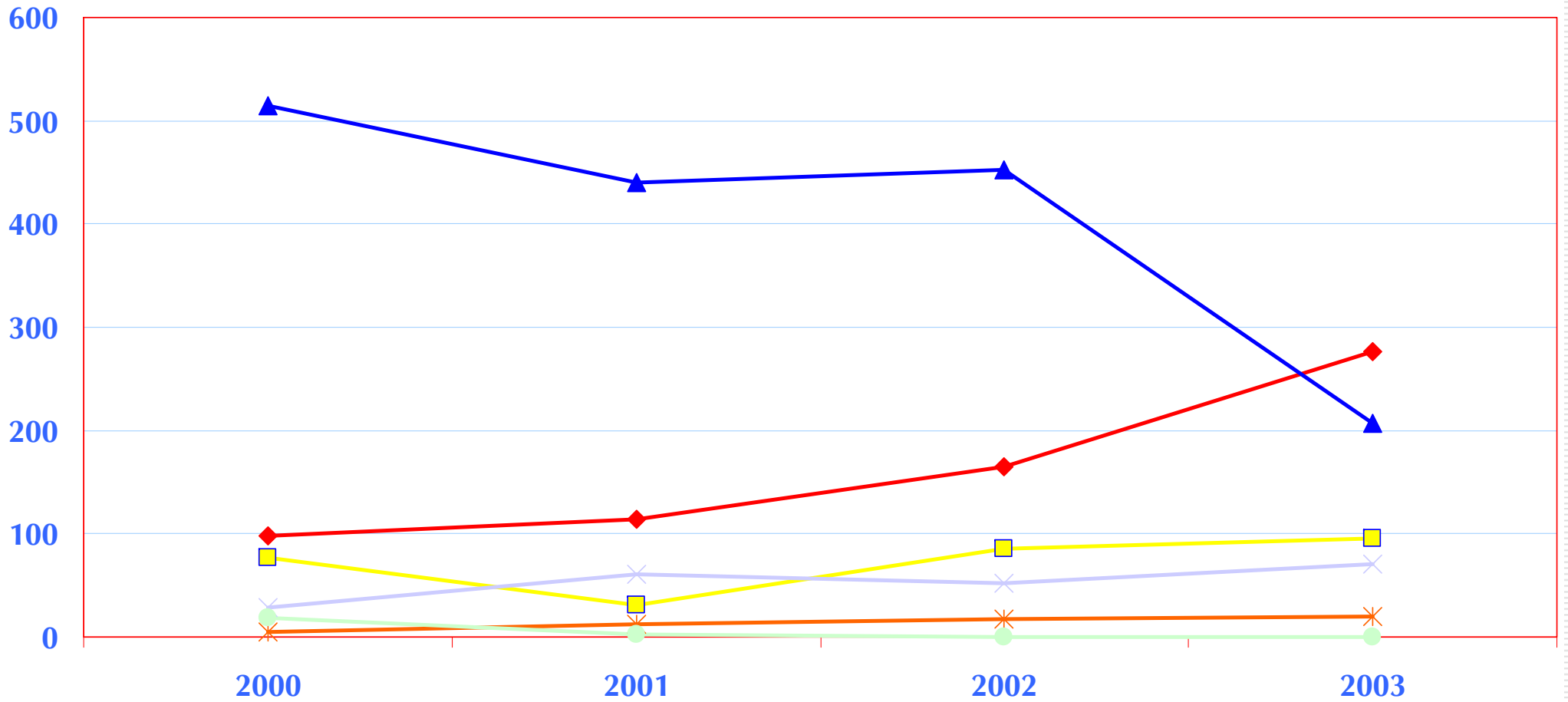
Observing and Measuring Variations in Programs and Practice Across Localities Within States

- Since 1992, the *Family to Family* initiative has produced longitudinal data for each participating site
 - **Phase I:** Alabama, Maryland, New Mexico, Ohio, and Pennsylvania
 - **Phase II:** Los Angeles and New York City
 - **Phase III:** Colorado, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, North Carolina, Oregon, Tennessee, and other California localities
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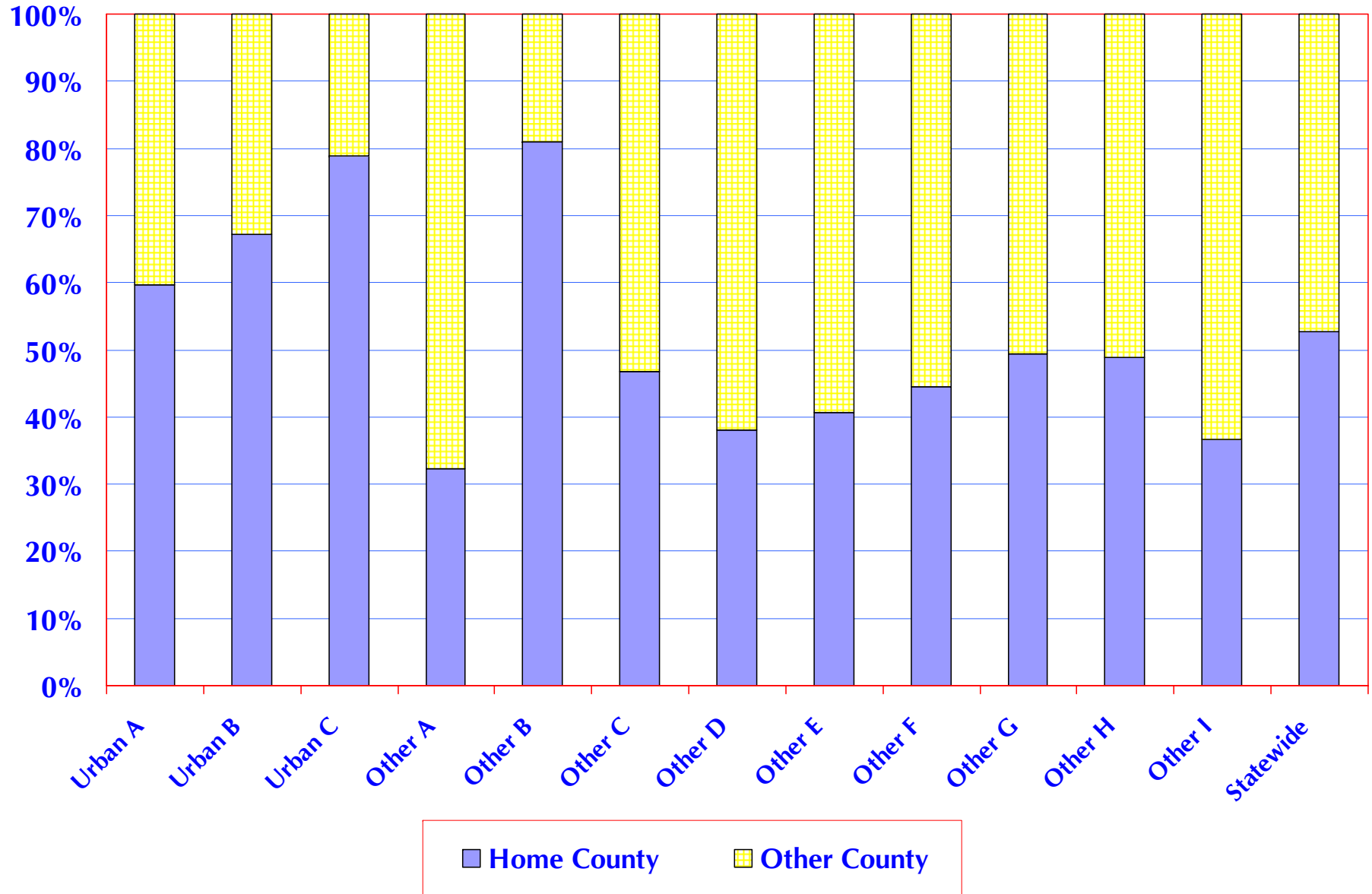
Placements at Initial Entry by Cohort



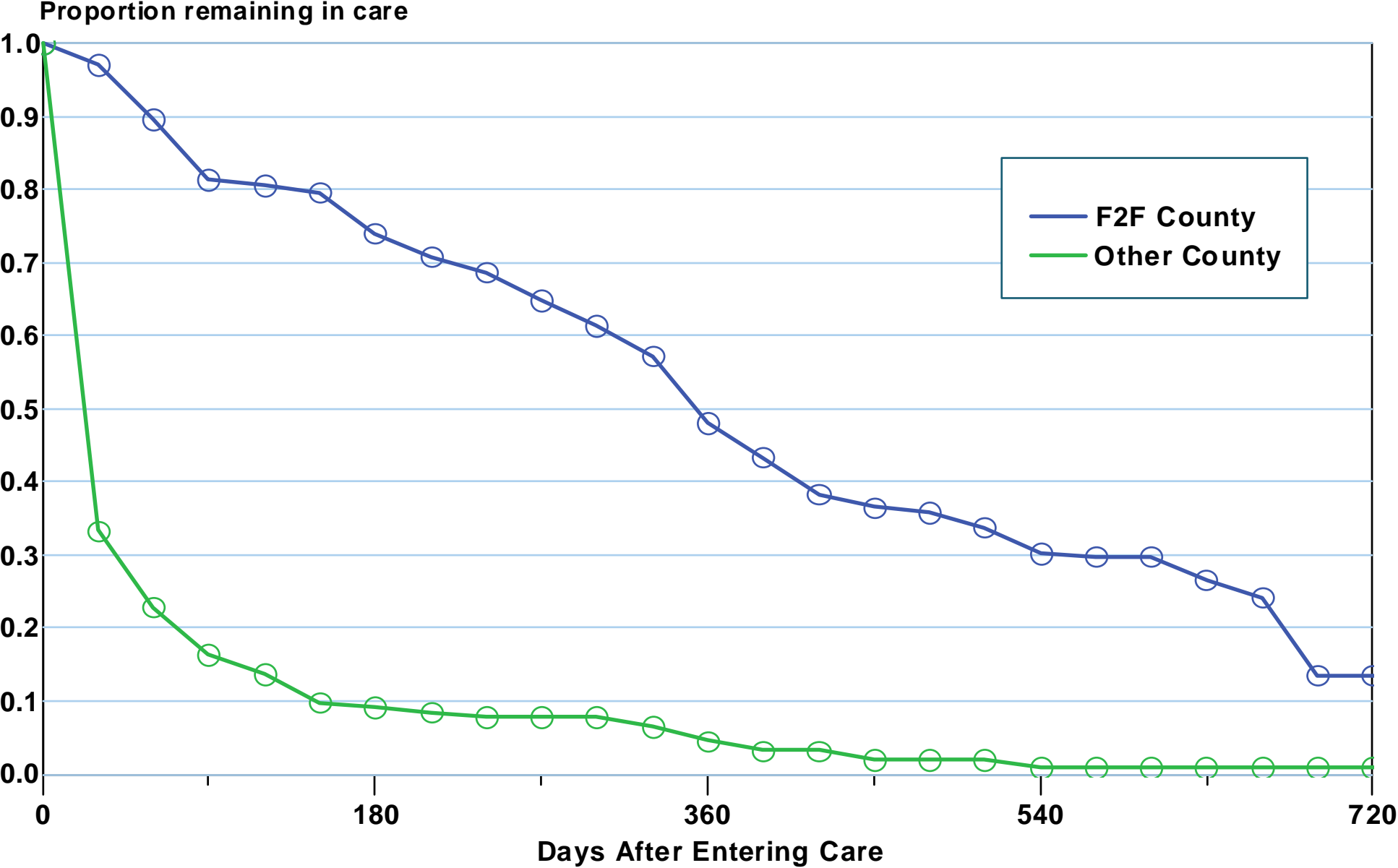
Initial Placements for Children Entering Child Welfare Custody in F2F County A



Percentage of Initial Placements in Home County



Length of Stay Among Children Initially Placed With Relatives



Data Describing Local Variations in the Experiences of Children in Out-of-Home Care Reveal Underlying Policies, Programs, and Practices

- Dominant patterns of out-of-home care *within a locality* define the boundaries of practice in that locality
 - Distinct patterns of care *across localities* within a state are evidence of the extent to which individualized practice is constrained by policies and programs as they are implemented in each local agency
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Implications for Evidence-Based Practice

- EBP oftens amounts to marginal tweaking when what is needed is a major overhaul
 - Taking nighttime removals out of the hands of police and putting resources in place to ensure that a child welfare worker is present any time a child is at risk of removal—establishing a true 24/7 child welfare system
 - Recognizing the potential of relatives and neighbors in helping ensure the safety of children and helping them retain important linkages to family and community
 - Investing time and resources in broadly inclusive decision-making processes that provide support to over-stressed workers and produce alternatives to out-of-home care
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Implications for Social Intervention Research

- Case mix issues are relevant to provider agencies and programs within the public child welfare agency, but agency policy and not merely “natural” variation in the service population plays a stronger role who is served by the child welfare system in a given locality
 - Intervention research must place a higher priority on external validity and test interventions in specifically defined contexts that are appropriate to the test practice
 - Randomization is as important at the site level as it is at the case level
 - First things first—evidence-based policy, then evidence-based programs, and finally, evidence-based practice
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