Measurement Issues in the Child and Family Service Review Process

Lynn Usher

Jordan Institute for Families
School of Social Work
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Excerpt From One State's CFSR

- **I**tem 7. Permanency goal for child

_____   Strength   __X__   Area Needing Improvement

Basis: Statewide Assessment

The median length of stay for each of the last five entry cohorts . . . is (in days) 425, 401, 391 and 369 respectively.

The number of children in foster care has declined from a peak of 6,982 in 1997 to 5,765 in 2000. In part because of the requirements of ASFA, the percentage of terminations resulting from adoption increased from 14.8% of all closures to 21.3% of all closures.

Basis: Onsite Review

While the length of time to achieve reunification and achieve adoption did not meet the national standards, the trend is demonstrably going in that direction, as measured by declining average length of stay in foster care and the declining number of children in foster care.

Scoreboard for 2001 CFSRs

Outcomes	States in Substantial Conformity	States Not in Substantial Conformity
Safety 1	3	14
Safety 2	4	13
Permanency 1	0	17
Permanency 2	4	13
Well-Being 1	0	17
Well-Being 2	4	13
Well-Being 3	1	16

Key Concerns Regarding CFSR

- Limited range of outcomes reflected in national standards

- National standards ignore problems in comparing state child welfare systems and arbitrarily establish 75th percentile as standard

- Reliance on cross-sectional data and exit cohorts produces biases in opposite directions, but indicators are not countervailing

- Use of exit cohorts yields high sampling error that undermines comparability of results across reporting periods and makes it difficult to link changes in policy and practice to changes in performance

- Measures based on exit cohorts unintentionally create perverse incentives to ignore needs of certain groups of children

- Attempt to blend qualitative case reviews and quantitative national standards injects inconsistency in findings

Positive Features of CFSR

- Encourages a focus on outcomes rather than process—a major accomplishment

- Capitalizes on existing data

- Use of AFCARS data contributes to the reliability of data within and across states

Federal Outcome Framework

Safety

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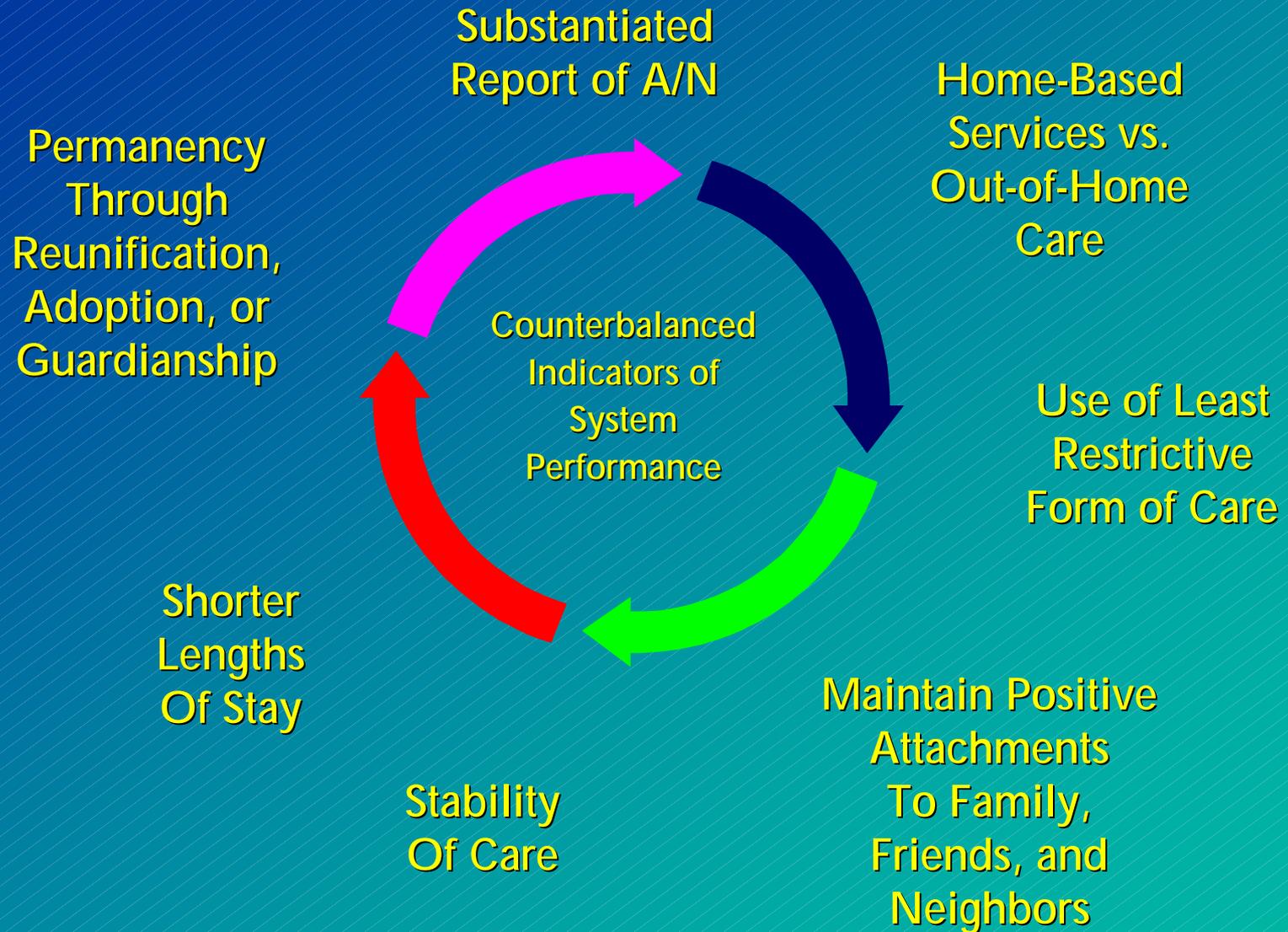- Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.

Permanency

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

Family and Child 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.

The Cycle of Experiences in the Child Welfare System

Substantiated Report of A/N

Home-Based Services vs. Out-of-Home Care

Permanency Through Reunification, Adoption, or Guardianship

Counterbalanced Indicators of System Performance

Use of Least Restrictive Form of Care

Shorter Lengths Of Stay

Maintain Positive Attachments To Family, Friends, and Neighbors

Stability Of Care

Federal Indicators & National Standards
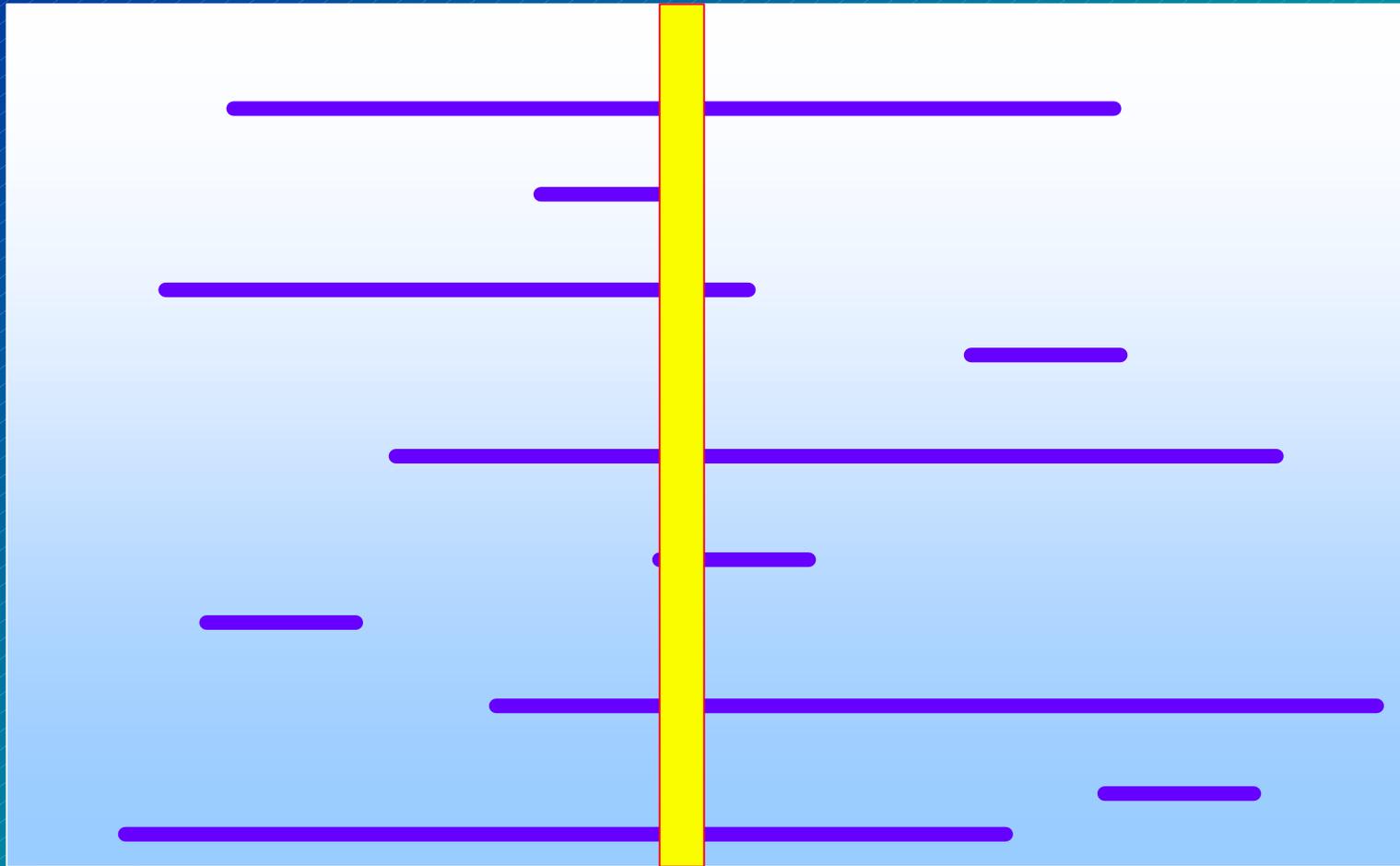
Recurrence of Maltreatment	6.1%	For six months following the first report date during the period from January-June, the percentage about whom another substantiated or indicated report is received.
Incidence of Abuse and/or Neglect in Foster Care	0.57%	The percentage of children reported as maltreated 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.
Foster Care Re-Entries	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.
Stability of Foster Care Placements	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.
Time to Achieve Reunification	76.2%	Among children reunified in a given year, the percentage reunified in < 12 months from the time of the latest removal.
Time to Achieve Adoption	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.

Sampling and Outcome Measurement

- 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

  – *Cross-sectional data yield length-biased samples*

- Exit cohorts systematically exclude children who are stuck in care and do not have a clear referent population—who are we talking about and how does this year's cohort differ from last year's?

- Entry cohorts capture the experiences of all children and special analytical procedures permit analysis regardless of where children are in the placement process

  – *Must distinguish initial entries from re-entries*

The Bias of Caseload Snapshots:
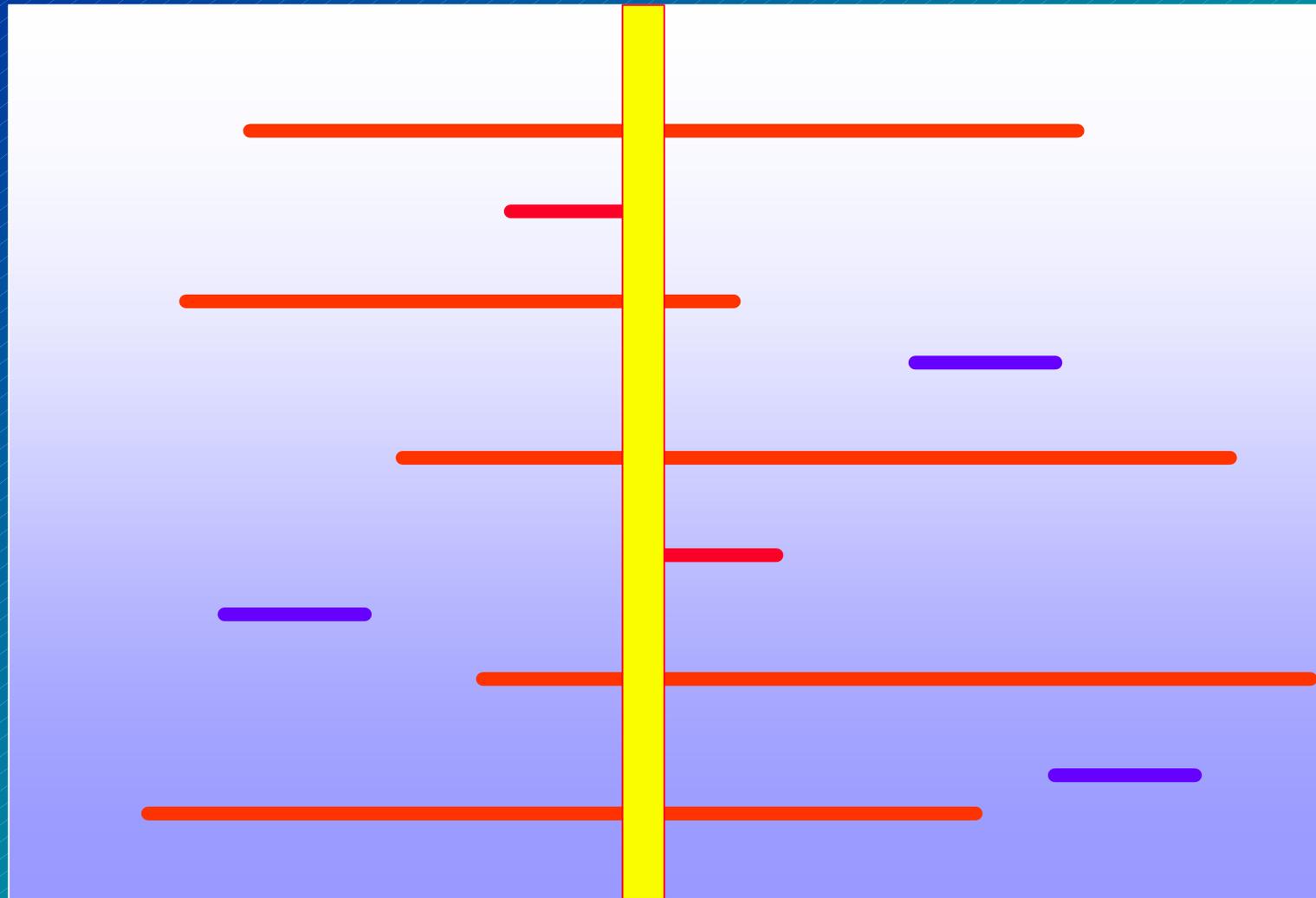# The Long and the Short of It
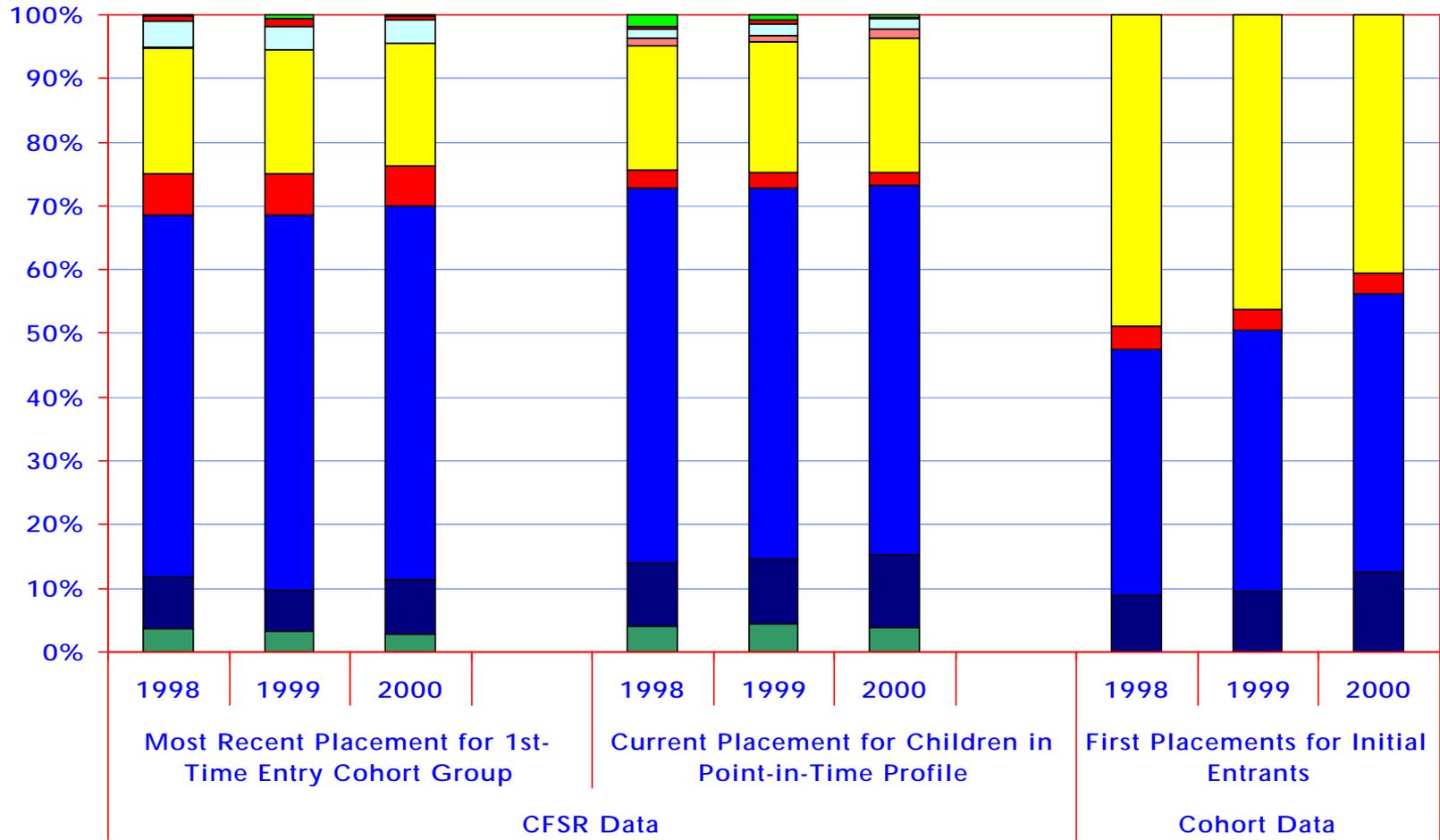
Jan. 1, 2001

Jan. 1, 2000

Jan. 1, 2002

Animation by Aron Shlonsky, Columbia University, School of Social Work

The Caseload: A Length-Biased Sample

Jan. 1, 2001

Jan. 1, 2000

Jan. 1, 2002

Restrictiveness of Care From Three Perspectives: State A

Placement Stability From Three Perspectives: State A
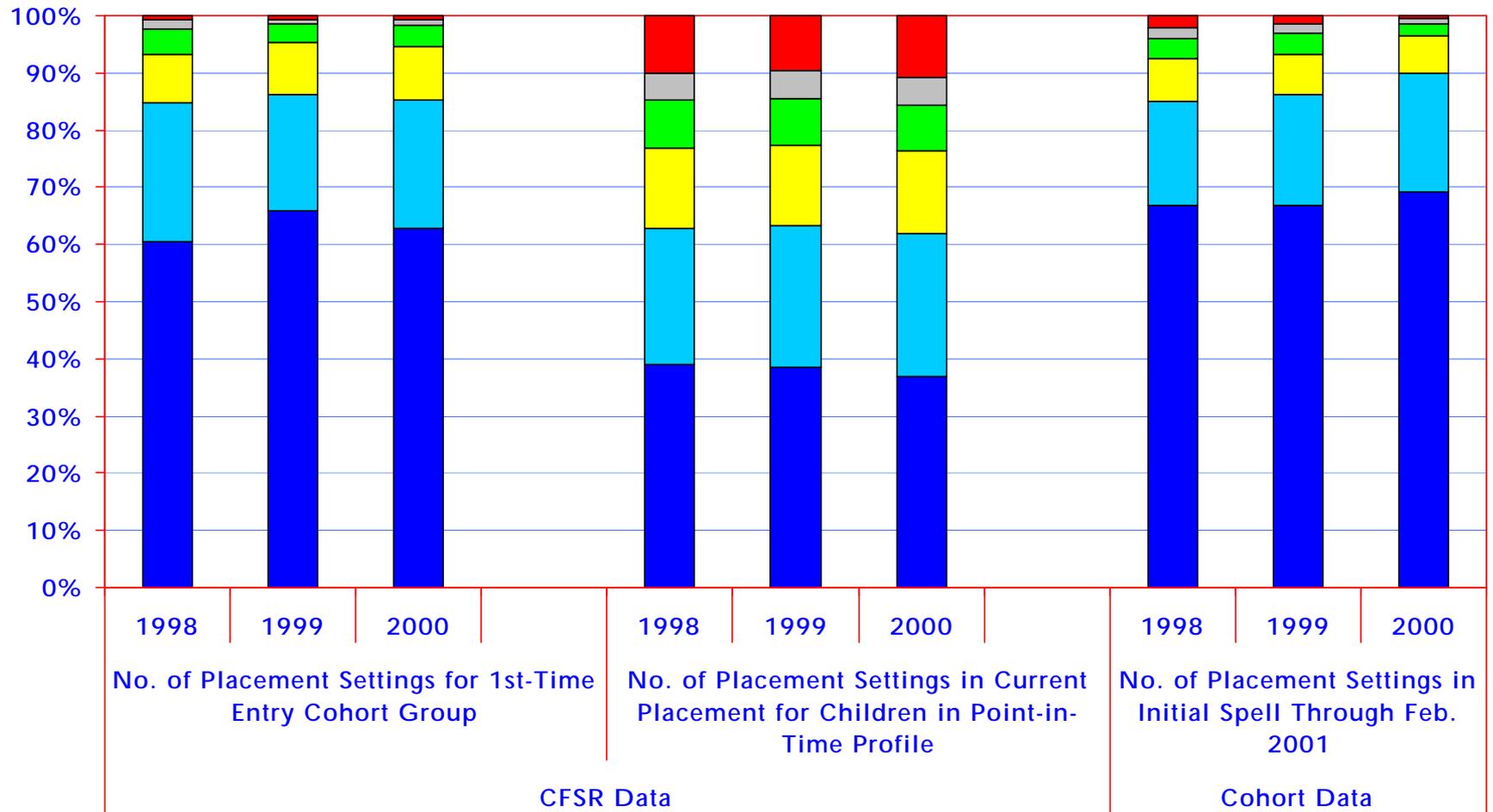
	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six or more

No. of Placement Settings for 1st-Time Entry Cohort Group
1998 1999 2000

No. of Placement Settings in Current Placement for Children in Point-in-Time Profile
1998 1999 2000

No. of Placement Settings in Initial Spell Through Feb. 2001
1998 1999 2000

CFSR Data

Cohort Data
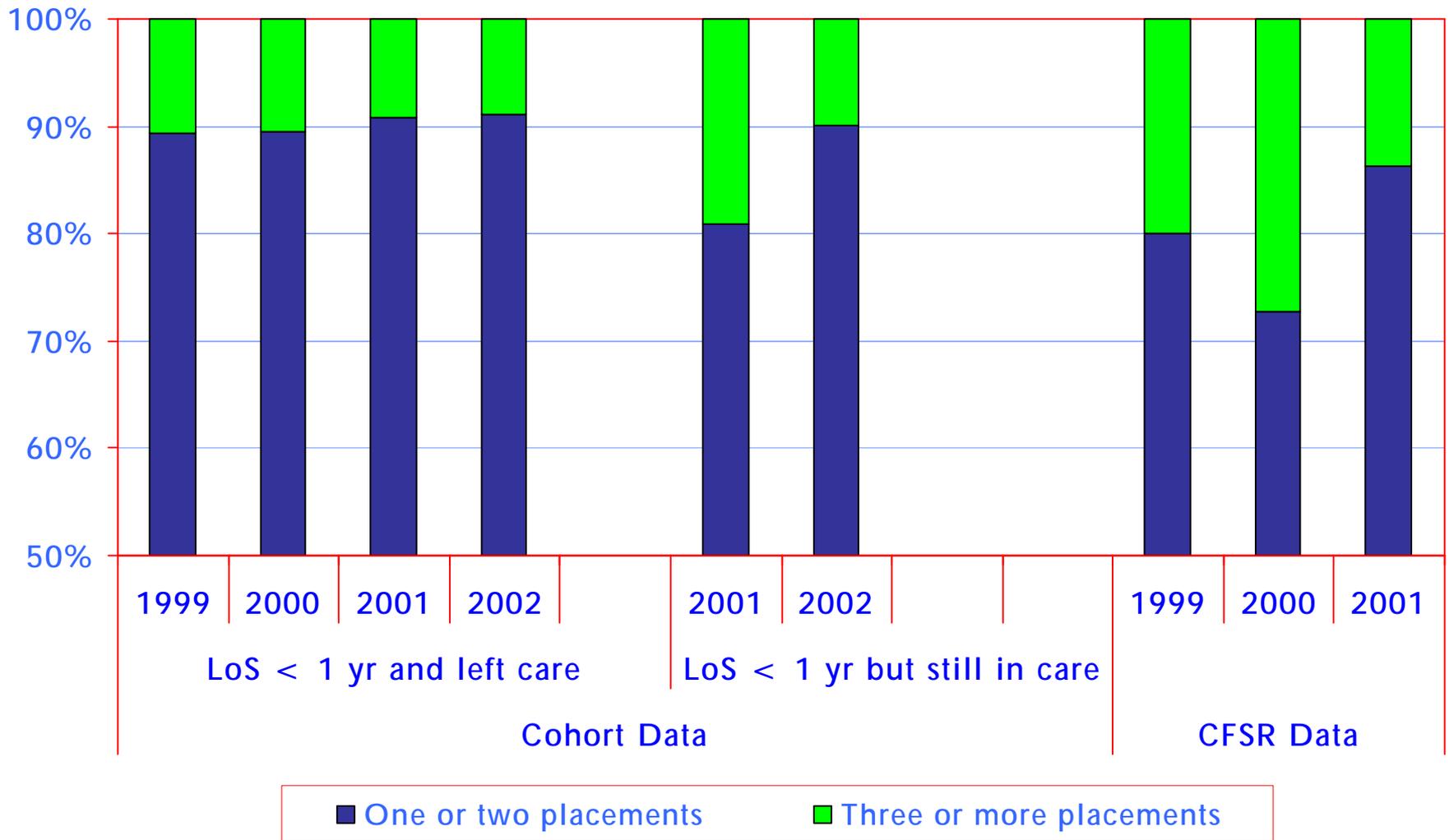
Placement Stability in State B

Measures Create Unintentional Perverse Incentives to Ignore Needs of Certain Groups of Children

- **Among children who exit in a given year to a finalized adoption, the percentage who exit care in less than 24 months from latest removal.**

  - *Finding adoptive homes for children in care longer than 24 months would adversely affect performance measure.*

- **Best performers with regard to CFSR measures of length of stay, placement stability, and re-entry to care are systems that rely heavily on shelters**

  - *Large numbers of children are placed in shelters (by police and child welfare agency) for brief stays and they return home without moving to other settings*
  - *Low rate of re-entry to care among such children suggests that they were inappropriately placed in out-of-home care*

CFSR Should be Based on a Framework That Facilitates *Evaluation* of Changes in Outcomes

- **Comparisons of the experiences of cohorts across time reveal changes in local policies, practices, and outcomes**

  Provides earliest indication of changes because focus is on distinct groups, especially those who entered care most recently and were subject to changes in policy and practice.

  The impact of changes is often concealed by caseload data.

- **Within-state comparisons of regions and localities**

  Capitalize on variations in local policies and practices, focusing on how they are related to differences in outcomes, to help frontline managers and staff identify where improvements are needed and how to improve outcomes

  Avoids the "information in a vacuum" problem of working only with data from a single site .