**3rd International Conference of the International Society for Child Indicators**

**Children's Well-Being: The Research & Policy Challenges**

Title: Indicating Success in Public Child Welfare: Child Outcomes, System Performance and the CFSR Process

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Abstract Proposal

The structure of child welfare in the United States presents challenges in identifying indicators of success. In the late 1990s, the federal government created the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), compelling states to track outcomes of children in foster care. A complex process of qualitative review, progress reports, and quantitative measurement ensued. The focus on child welfare indicators is on child safety, with increasing attention on permanence and, to a lesser extent, child well-being. Still, the indicators tracked as part of the CFSR process have been widely criticized (see Schuerman and Needell, 2009) as contradictory and narrow in scope.

A broader movement in U.S. child welfare has a foothold. Based on a growing public discourse that children are best served at home, foster care placement has dropped by almost twenty percent over the past 7 years. The number of families receiving in-home services has nearly doubled. The number of children in foster care peaked at nearly 550,000, yet it is likely that fewer than 400,000 children will be out of home by the end of 2011. Fueled by brain research linking childhood trauma and cognitive development, along with the increased use of diversion services, foster care is no longer the only tool available to state agencies in addressing child abuse and neglect.

Casey Family Programs is a national foundation dedicated to improving, and ultimately eliminating the need for, foster care. The foundation has developed a data tracking system with shared indicators across all U.S. states, with a focus monitoring indicators of safe foster care. State performance on these measures, in contrast to the CFSR measures, will be discussed, including the tension between improving performance around timely permanence while reserving foster care placement for the children at greatest risk. Recommendations for federal reform of the CFSR measures will be discussed.