

# Searching for Outcomes: How Child Welfare Agencies Describe the Use of Data and the Intended Impact of Systems Change Efforts in their Organizations

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## Introduction

As child welfare agencies work to improve their services to children and families, they are under increasing pressure to demonstrate outcomes. Yet the identification of outcomes in child welfare can be challenging given the complexity of the work, the public nature of the organization, limited staff data capacity, and the impact of negative feedback.

## Research Questions

1. What types of outcomes are identified by Child Welfare agency staff during large scale system change efforts?
2. What components of data use are described by child welfare agency staff?
3. What facilitates data use, and what are the barriers?

## Methods

Child welfare agency staff in five states involved in the design and implementation of projects were interviewed at three points in time: beginning, midpoint, and at the end of the project. Questions included what state agency staff expected to occur as a result of their project, and how they would assess whether improvements had been made. Interviews were coded based on proposed facilitators to evaluation and outcome measurement within community based organizations (Botcheva, 2002) with additional codes developed from agency descriptions of barriers and facilitators in data use, and types of outcomes. Interviews were analyzed using qualitative data analysis software (NVivo).

## Types of Outcomes Described



Products

**PRODUCTS:** Tangible items produced to support agency processes and practice.

**Examples include:** curriculum, policies, practice guidelines, data systems, tools developed to promote changes in practice



Process

**PROCESS:** Events and processes meant to support changes in practice.

**Examples include:** training to increase staff competence, revision of hiring practices, involving youth in decision making



Practice

**PRACTICE:** changing staff practice, creating consistency in practice across the organization

**Examples include:** increased staff use of data, increased occurrence and quality of supervision



Agency

**AGENCY:** Changes related to the agency's mission, vision, and goals, culture that supports new practices

**Examples include:** increased reliance on data to set performance goals, increased belief in the value of family engagement

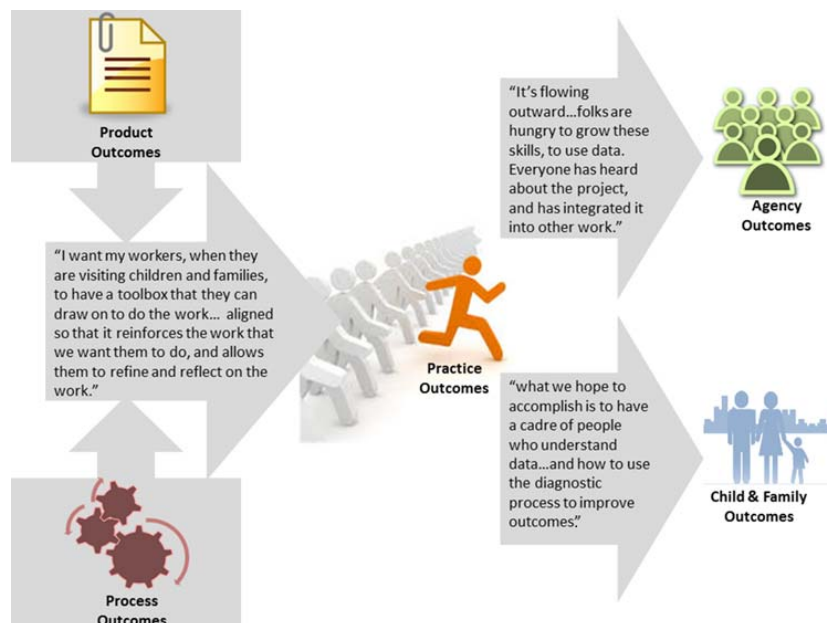


Child & Family

**CHILD AND FAMILY:** How children and families feel the effect of system change.

**Examples include:** Increasing permanent connections for children and youth, serving children more effectively in their homes, increased reunifications

## Early Outcomes are Linked to Later Outcomes



## Components of Data Use Described

### Management Support:

Executive & mid-level support collection and use of data, are interested in evaluation results, and dedicates appropriate resources

#### Facilitators:

- A dedicated staff person (in-house position or external evaluator) for research and evaluation
- Commitment of resources for evaluation (IT staff time, incorporating evaluation into meetings)

#### Barriers:

- Lack of capacity - inability to add research/evaluation tasks to existing staff responsibilities
- Lack of understanding of skills, time resources, and role of evaluator

“Support from leadership and area directors... There were built in check-ins with leadership; that reinforcement meant a lot.”

### Staff Involvement:

Field staff through executive management are aware of how data is used, contribute to data collection, analysis, and/or interpretation of data

#### Facilitators:

- Clear message from leadership to all staff that agency values data
- Training staff in using data
- Involving staff in data collection
- “Live”, “real” data meaningful to the field/day- to-day work
- Collecting and using feedback from staff
- Sharing the results of evaluation activities with staff

#### Barriers:

- Lack of a quick turnaround between data collection and sharing the results back with the field

“People could choose to start to learn about it...having data there, having it discussed at meetings.”

### Technology & Infrastructure:

Systems are in place to store and access needed data and information, staff have the technical skills and support to utilize the systems

#### Facilitators:

- Relevant data collection instruments
- A data system for storage
- IT support
- Ability to draw relevant reports from the system
- “Rich” data sets in child welfare

#### Barriers

- Lack of resources
- Lack of qualified staff
- Competing priorities for IT staff and the agency overall

“Buy-in and support from the technical people... learning technical skills, but also how to bring it back to the offices.”

### Data Culture:

Staff attitudes toward data usage, overall desire to “challenge the status quo” and learn from data to improve practice

#### Facilitators

- “Let’s learn together” approach
- Relationships with funders and federal partners, open communication
- Data is collected and shared back to the field
- Results are used to improve practice, celebrate successes
- Management supports data for ongoing improvement

#### Barriers

- Changing culture takes time
- Differentiating between meeting targets and doing quality work
- Difficulty obtaining buy in to CFSR and other data drives practice

“We are open to feedback...we hear feedback, and we can incorporate it.”

## Conclusions

All five states identified several types of outcomes resulting from system change efforts. Processes and products were identified as outcomes necessary to achieve practice change throughout the organization. Practice change was the link from processes and products to agency and child and family level outcomes.

States differed in regard to the components of data use. Management support was strong in some states, but lacking in others. Those states with strong management support, also reported involving all levels of staff in the evaluation process. Some states had a strong infrastructure for data and technology, while others found the lack of a system to be a barrier. States that described more components of a data culture also described a wider variety of data use components; conversely, states describing fewer aspects of a data culture described fewer data use components.

Assessing an agency's data culture, based on the facilitators identified above could help identify the likely barriers to using data to improve outcomes for children and families. Ongoing development of "data culture" within agencies' may not only increase the likelihood of improved outcomes, but also impact and develop the overall culture and climate of the organization. Further research is needed to determine the extent to which of the components of data culture effects the type of outcomes achieved, and how strengths in one component may compensate for weakness in another.

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