

Reading the CFSR Round 4 Statewide Data Indicators

A methods guide for state and county child welfare managers who use the federal indicators to track safety and permanency

Writing sample by Brad Leake. October 2026.

Key points

- The federal Child and Family Services Reviews use seven statewide data indicators, calculated from data states already report to two federal systems, to help judge safety and permanency outcomes.³
- The federal comparison uses risk-standardized performance with a 95 percent interval, measured against national performance values that stay fixed for all of Round 4.^{5,6}
- Observed performance is the measure for tracking a state's own change over time, and the Children's Bureau advises against comparing it with national performance.^{6,7}
- The indicators are most useful when managers read them with attention to cohort timing, small numbers, and data quality, and alongside case review findings.

What the reviews measure

The Children's Bureau, in the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, conducts the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) for three stated reasons: to ensure conformity with federal child welfare requirements, to determine what is actually happening to children and families as they are engaged in child welfare services, and to assist states in helping children and families achieve positive outcomes.¹ The reviews cover child and family services programs under titles IV-B and IV-E of the Social Security Act, and after a review the state develops a program improvement plan.^{1,2}

Round 4 assesses state performance on 7 child and family outcomes and 7 systemic factors.² For a state to be in substantial conformity with an outcome, 95 percent or more of the cases reviewed must be rated as having substantially achieved it.² Safety Outcome 1 and Permanency Outcome 1 carry a second test: the state's risk-standardized performance on the applicable statewide data indicators must be better than or no different from national performance.² The case review looks closely at a sample of cases. In the Kansas Round 4 review, for example, reviewers examined 65 cases, 40 in foster care and 25 receiving in-home services.² The data indicators are calculated from statewide administrative data rather than a sample, so the two methods give different and complementary views of the same outcomes.³

The seven indicators

The indicators are aggregate measures calculated from information states report to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS).³ Title IV-E agencies are required to submit case-level AFCARS data on children in foster care twice a year. NCANDS is a voluntary collection of information about reports of child abuse and neglect.⁴ Two indicators fall under Safety Outcome 1 and five under Permanency Outcome 1.⁸ Round 4 introduced a new reentry measure that follows children who exited foster care to reunification, living with a relative, or guardianship and counts those who reentered care within 12 months of discharge.^{5,8}

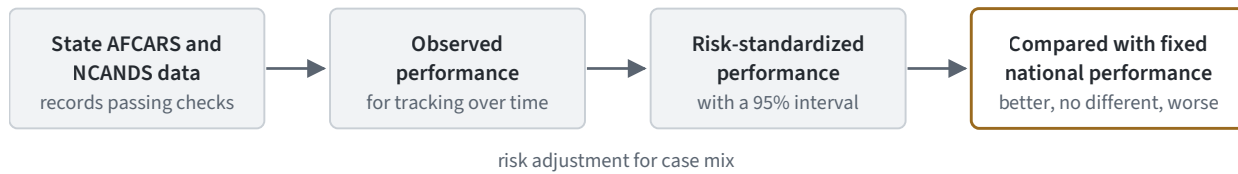
Indicator	What it measures (summarized)	Better when	National performance
Maltreatment in foster care Safety	Substantiated or indicated maltreatment reports for children in foster care during a 12-month period, per 100,000 days in care	Lower	9.07 per 100,000 days
Recurrence of maltreatment Safety	Share of children with a substantiated or indicated report who had another one within 12 months	Lower	9.7%
Permanency in 12 months, children entering care Permanency	Share of children entering care in a 12-month period who discharged to permanency within 12 months of entry	Higher	35.2%
Permanency in 12 months, in care 12 to 23 months Permanency	Share of children in care 12 to 23 months on the first day of the period who discharged to permanency within 12 months	Higher	43.8%
Permanency in 12 months, in care 24 months or more Permanency	Share of children in care 24 months or more on the first day of the period who discharged to permanency within 12 months	Higher	37.3%
Reentry to foster care in 12 months Permanency	Share of children who exited to reunification, living with a relative, or guardianship and reentered care within 12 months	Lower	5.6%
Placement stability Permanency	Placement moves per 1,000 days in care for children who entered care in a 12-month period	Lower	4.48 per 1,000 days

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, CFSR Technical Bulletin #13A (Amended), 2022. The same national performance values appear in the CFSR Round 4 Statewide Data Indicators Workbook, March 2026.^{5,6} Definitions are shortened here; the bulletin lists each indicator's full numerator, denominator, and exclusions.

How the federal comparison works

Technical Bulletin #13A defines national performance as observed performance for the nation and states that the Round 4 values will remain fixed throughout the round.⁵ States are compared with those values using risk-standardized performance (RSP). The bulletin explains that the multilevel model behind RSP enables accurate evaluation of relative performance among states with different case mixes, and the Round 4 workbook describes the adjustment as accounting for factors states have little control over, such as children's ages.^{5,6}

Figure 1. From reported data to the federal comparison



Each state's RSP is reported with a 95 percent confidence interval. When the interval overlaps national performance, the state is statistically no different from the nation. When the whole interval falls above or below national performance, the state is better or worse, depending on whether higher or lower values are desired for that indicator.⁶ The workbook adds two cautions: RSP should not be compared with a state's observed performance, and observed performance should not be compared with national performance.⁶ Observed performance is the unadjusted figure, and the Capacity Building Center for States describes it as the measure for tracking change over time and identifying strengths and needs.⁷

Data quality affects both figures. Records flagged by a data quality check are excluded from the relevant indicator calculations, and when a state's RSP cannot be calculated because of data quality problems, the state must include that indicator in its program improvement plan.⁵ For indicators in a plan, a state can show the required improvement in either of two ways: its observed performance meets or exceeds the improvement goal, or its RSP is better than or no different from national performance.⁵ States receive updated data profiles twice a year, in February and August.⁹

Considerations for state and county use

The federal rules above apply to the state as a whole. Many agencies also produce the indicators for regions, counties, or offices to manage day-to-day practice. The following points are methodological suggestions for that kind of internal reporting.

- **Label the period each value describes.** Several indicators follow children forward in time. Permanency in 12 months for children entering care counts discharges within 12 months of entry, and reentry counts returns within 12 months of discharge.⁵ A cohort's value is not final until its follow-up window closes, so internal reports are easier to read when they state which entry or exit period each number describes.
- **Show numerators and denominators.** At the county level, an indicator may rest on a few dozen children. Printing the counts beside each rate, and flagging values based on small numbers, helps readers avoid treating a change of one or two children as a trend.
- **Compare like with like.** Because the federal comparison relies on RSP and the workbook cautions against comparing observed values with national performance, county results are better framed against the state's own observed value for the same period or against the county's own trend.⁶

- **Apply the federal definitions consistently.** The definitions include exclusions that change the counts, such as removing foster care episodes shorter than eight days from several indicators.⁵ A locally built report that skips these rules will not match the federal data profile, so it helps to document which rules each internal report applies.
- **Read the indicators with case review results.** The indicators show where outcomes differ. Case reviews and interviews are the usual way to learn why, for example whether placement moves in a county follow provider requests, planned moves to relatives, or other causes.

What the indicators do not show

The indicators summarize outcomes for groups of children, and they depend on the completeness of the AFCARS and NCANDS data behind them.^{3,5} On their own, they do not describe the quality of casework, the services a family received, or the reasons behind a result. The CFSR addresses those questions through case reviews and the assessment of systemic factors.² Within those limits, the indicators give state and county managers a stable, shared set of definitions that can be calculated the same way from one data profile to the next.

Endnotes

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. "Child and Family Services Reviews." Web page. <https://acf.gov/cb/monitoring/child-family-services-reviews>. Accessed October 12, 2026.
2. Children's Bureau. Kansas Child and Family Services Review, Round 4 Final Report. 2023. <https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/ks-cfsr-r4-final.pdf>. Accessed October 12, 2026.
3. Children's Bureau, CFSR Information Portal. "CFSR Round 4 Statewide Data Indicators." Web page. <https://cfsrportal.acf.hhs.gov/resources/round-4-resources/cfsr-round-4-statewide-data-indicators>. Accessed October 12, 2026.
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6. Children's Bureau. CFSR Round 4 Statewide Data Indicators Workbook. March 2026. <https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/cfsr-r4-statewide-data-workbook.pdf>. Accessed October 12, 2026.
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9. Children's Bureau. "CFSR Round 4: Measurement and Sampling, Part II: Program Improvement Plan Measurement." Presentation, March 9, 2022. <https://www.cfsrportal.acf.hhs.gov/document/download/dJzNYq>. Accessed October 12, 2026.