

Child Protective Services Agencies

Turn Data Into Action Using Quality Tools

by Janet Jacobsen

At a Glance . . .

- For child protective services and foster care agencies, performance and outcome analysis can be severely hindered by poor data quality and complicated database structures.
- Using quality tools to help navigate data fog and provide meaningful analysis, SafeMeasures® offers an easy way to turn data into quality metrics.
- Results from agencies using SafeMeasures demonstrate how making timely and useful data available to frontline supervisors dramatically improves how child protective services are documented, delivered, and monitored.
- One example of rapid improvement comes from the San Francisco County Department of Human Services, which, in just one quarter, saw contact compliance improve from 65% to 83% once it began using SafeMeasures. After one year, the agency's compliance rate rose to 94%.

As they made the six-hour car trip from Madison, Wisconsin, to visit a client in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Peter Quigley and Tim Connell of the Children's Research Center (CRC) passed the miles brainstorming ideas to meet the needs of their child protection agency clients. When the discussion turned to state automated child welfare information systems (SACWIS), which at the time were newly mandated by the federal government, both men shared the opinion that the feedback loop for end users was inadequate. These large-scale systems didn't provide the timely, reliable feedback needed by child protection workers. As Quigley, director of information systems explains, there were a lot of data going into the systems, but not a lot coming out that managers could readily use. He, Connell, and their colleague Joel Ehrlich exchanged ideas for creating a system similar to the Bloomberg Index for the financial markets. The new system would provide quality tools as well as quick feedback to child protection agencies on critical performance indicators—this was the birth of SafeMeasures® in 1998.

About the Children's Research Center

CRC is a private, nonprofit agency created by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD). To help federal, state, and local child welfare agencies reduce child abuse and neglect, CRC develops case management systems and conducts research to improve service delivery to children and families. Operating as a subsidiary of the NCCD since 1993, CRC works with agencies to implement structured decision-making systems for child protection to:

- Provide simple, objective, and reliable tools and protocols for workers to use in making decisions in individual cases.
- Supply managers with case information for improved planning and resource allocation.

What is SafeMeasures?

A team of experts with deep understandings of database systems, analytical methods, federal outcomes, and case practice standards is at the core of the SafeMeasures service. Their experience with agencies across the country enables CRC to provide customized reports for each state within a common presentation and navigation framework. Currently, CRC has 52 SafeMeasures contracts, including 47 in California alone, as well as others with state agencies in New Jersey, Virginia, and Minnesota.

Using a client agency's existing database(s), SafeMeasures provides a reporting environment that can identify the underlying source of a problem in detail, not just its symptoms. Requiring no additional data entry, SafeMeasures provides a Web-based analytical service, a data warehouse, and Internet security.

Child welfare agencies need only to provide periodic updates to the CRC data warehouse. Authorized users with Internet Explorer from administrators through caseworkers interact with SafeMeasures reports by using point-and-click capabilities to:

- Display trend, comparative, and present-time performance/outcome metrics.
- Filter to any level within the organization.
- Drill down to underlying cases and extensive case histories.
- Combine the drill-down capability with near real-time reporting (1-5 days), allowing agencies to identify problem cases or caseloads and take corrective action before they turn into failed outcomes.
- Utilize descriptive statistics such as cross tab, median, and mode.

Cutting Through Data Fog to Find Root Causes

SafeMeasures not only shows a child welfare agency how it is performing in meeting state and federal standards, but it also reveals what cases are on the verge of noncompliance. “With SafeMeasures you are not relying on random sampling in hindsight and coming up with a percentage of errors, but rather you are looking prospectively

and finding all the cases that are on the verge of going out of compliance while you still have a chance to do something about it,” notes Dr. Raelene Freitag, director of the CRC.

Quigley explains that when data are analyzed in the human services field, those data may suggest service problems, when in fact the issue might be one of poor data quality. SafeMeasures helps child protection agency personnel detect what areas need improvement and how much of the issue is simply a case of incomplete or incorrectly entered data. “SafeMeasures

helps them see through the ‘data fog’ and to really analyze the level of service provided,” notes Quigley. He defines data fog as a database state where questions may not be confidently answered because of the uncertainty about the accuracy and timeliness of data entry. Data fog results from data in one of three states:

- Data are absent.
- Data are partially entered.
- Data are incorrectly entered.

To properly assess whether staff are actually adhering to standards, agencies must take action to identify and fix records that are in each of these states. Only after this step has been completed can management really “see” services that are not being provided because of a lack of resources, poor assessments, failure of staff to follow standards, or other reasons.

The CRC’s service helps lift data fog by enabling users to identify offices, units, and cases that are not complying with service delivery standards. It distributes complex analyses to all levels of management—administrators, managers, supervisors, and line staff—by using built-in tools to filter down to any level, including caseloads, and identify cases with data problems. Further, with analyses conducted and communicated at least weekly, and sometimes daily, detecting and fixing errors in near real time becomes possible.

Making Quality User-Friendly

By designing the SafeMeasures quality assurance reporting tool from the perspective of a child protective services manager rather than an IT professional, the CRC offers an untimidating approach to quality. As Freitag observes, “People don’t get into this field [social work] because they like statistics.” She and her staff understand the need to communicate the value of data and provide updates in a nonthreatening, easy-to-use manner because, in this field where the health and even the lives of children are at risk, data and reporting tasks are easily left to the end of the week, or worse, the end of the month.

To make the service user-friendly, SafeMeasures utilizes a variety of pie and trend charts. “People love the pie charts and seeing how they are doing. It’s perfect when you have a lot of young staff members who are used to computers and computer-based games,” notes Donna Younkin, director of quality and analysis and information for New Jersey’s Department of Children and Families. Her agency has used the SafeMeasures service since 2004.

With SafeMeasures used at every level of the New Jersey agency—from the commissioner’s office to front-line caseworkers—more than 3,000 employees work with quality tools each day. Younkin says that employees now embrace SafeMeasures since overcoming any original fears and learning to trust the accuracy of the data.

Using Quality to Improve Data and Results

While state and federal regulators use several metrics to assess agency performance, monitoring compliance is difficult for most agencies, as they are already overtaxed with expanding caseloads. SafeMeasures makes monitoring easier by refreshing most reports twice weekly and making them available online within five days of entry into the system.

Dramatic improvements in contact levels quickly became apparent in California’s San Francisco County after beginning to use the SafeMeasures service in 2004. As shown in Figure 1, starting in the third quarter of 2004, the first quarter after the county

Taking Quality to the Next Level

While SafeMeasures is an excellent tool for identifying cases that are not in compliance with standards or that are in danger of becoming noncompliant, child protection workers still need a means to identify solutions to address root causes. This is where the second phase of SafeMeasures begins. With the help of a \$5,000 ASQ Community Good Works grant, Freitag is piloting an advanced curriculum to teach a quality work team in Santa Cruz County, California, a variety of basic quality techniques to search for root causes and use SafeMeasures data to test hypotheses. “The idea is that at the end of the curriculum they’ve not only completed a quality project, but team members also will have quality tools in their tool chest which they can use to address further issues using data-driven improvement techniques,” Freitag explains.

To learn more about this pilot project, see the companion case study, “Improving Child Protective Services Using Quality Improvement Tools.”

implemented SafeMeasures, the number of face-to-face timely social worker contacts began to rise. By the fourth quarter of 2005, just over a year after signing on to the service, the county's contact rate increased to more than 90%, where it remains at this time. Using this information, the agency can consistently monitor, improve, and maintain high case contact compliance rates. The vertical line indicates the quarter when the county adopted SafeMeasures and provides a comparison of performance before and after implementation.

Quigley cautions that understanding the meaning of the chart is important. It appears that no case contacts were made in nearly 35% of cases prior to implementing SafeMeasures. In reality, because of "data fog" only a portion of those cases had no contact at all, while many others did have face-to-face contacts that were simply not recorded or were not recorded correctly. SafeMeasures helps sort out these cases, bringing data-reporting issues to light and giving workers the chance to enter missing information and to correct documentation errors. The workers receive the credit they deserve and the agency benefits from a much better picture of case practice and service delivery.

Social services agencies using SafeMeasures also employ data to track and improve their response time for investigating reports of possible child abuse or neglect. Once an agency receives a report, it assigns a priority—in California that becomes either a 24-hour highest priority or a 10-day period. Fresno County had always shown timely responses on 24-hour investigations, but low compliance for 10-day investigations. Dramatic improve-

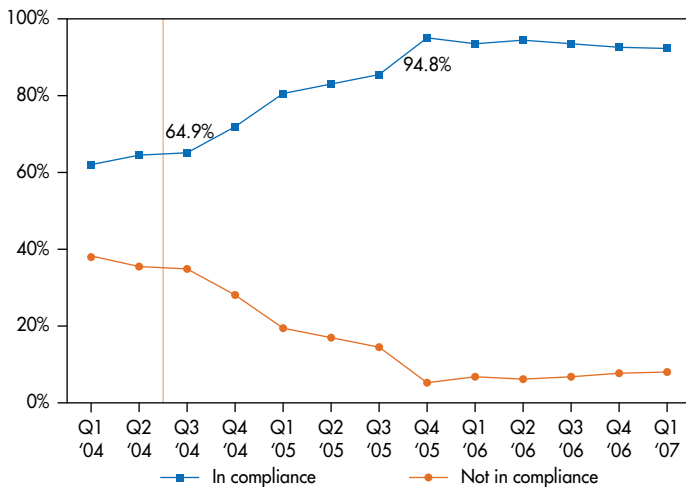
Figure 1—San Francisco County improvements in contact levels

AB 636 Measure 2C: Timely Social Worker Visits

Were the required contacts made during the last month of the selected quarter? Voluntary Guardianship Cases default to a six-month contact schedule.

Cohort: All cases that were open in the last month of each quarter, except cases that are not supervised by the Child Welfare Department, cases in which the child is 22 years old or older, cases in which the child is missing, or cases in which the child is placed out of state.

San Francisco
Extract Date: 05/22/2007
Analysis Date: 05/24/2007



This report from the SafeMeasures system shows a dramatic increase in San Francisco County's contact rate once SafeMeasures was implemented.

ment in response time for 10-day investigations became evident once the county began using SafeMeasures, as shown in Figure 2. By the fourth quarter of 2004, just one quarter after implementing SafeMeasures to track agency compliance in meeting state and federal regulations, the county reached and has maintained a compliance rate of between 90-95%. Again, the vertical line indicates when SafeMeasures was implemented.

Across the country in New Jersey, where child welfare is the responsibility of the state, quality assurance teams from the Department of Families and Children visited field offices to provide refresher and updated training on SafeMeasures in late 2006. In Figures 3 and 4 the vertical line represents the approximate time that the Mercer South and Camden Central offices completed the training. As Figure 3 shows, the Camden Central staff achieved additional and significant gains in compliance after the 2006 training. For the Mercer South staff, the training served as a springboard for more effective use of SafeMeasures, and thus corresponding improvements in contact compliance, as depicted in Figure 4.

When agency personnel have available both current and forward views of cases, they can understand trends, which makes them better equipped to serve children and families. Spotting and preparing for emerging trends, for instance, means having enough foster homes available during months of peak referrals or employing sufficient staff in counties with growing numbers of investigations to handle. Quigley notes that, over time, the SafeMeasures tools help agencies reach a point where they can effectively monitor compliance with federal and state performance and outcome indicators and assess the impact of their

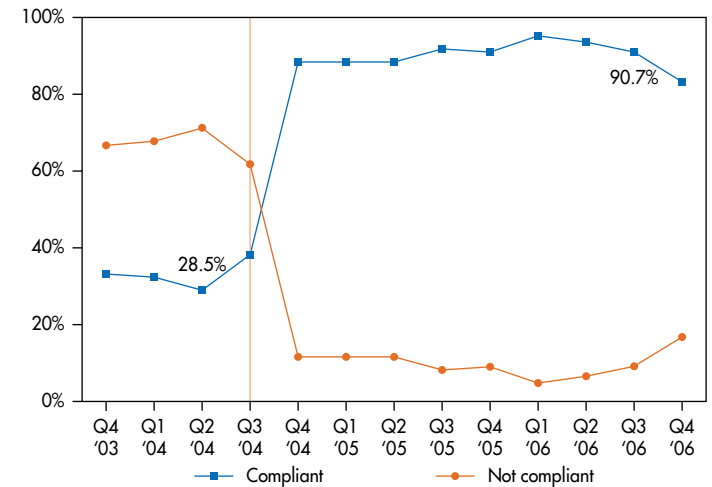
Figure 2—Fresno County improvements in response time for 10-day investigations

AB 636 Measure 2B: Timely Response to 10-Day Referrals

Was contact made in a timely manner for 3-, 5-, and 10-day referrals?

Cohort: All 3-, 5-, and 10-day referrals received during the selected quarter.

Fresno
Extract Date: 03/26/2007
Analysis Date: 03/28/2007



Since implementing SafeMeasures in late 2004, the Fresno County, California, agency has made and sustained improvement in meeting state and federal requirements for timely investigation of reports of possible child abuse or neglect.

programs and services, something that in the past was difficult to measure because of poor data.

Clients, of course, benefit when child protection workers meet or exceed service standards, whether results come in the form of timely completion of investigations of child abuse or neglect or moving legally free children quickly toward adoption. “It all comes back to the fact that you have to see the children to get the job done and this tool [SafeMeasures] helps you do that,” Younkin says.

For Additional Information:

- To learn more about SafeMeasures, visit http://www.nccd-crc.org/crc/c_sfm_about.html.
- Additional information on the work of the Children’s Research Center is available at http://www.nccd-crc.org/crc/c_index_main.html.
- Further information about the National Council on Crime and Delinquency can be found at http://www.nccd-crc.org/nccd/n_index_main.html.
- Contact Dr. Raelene Freitag, director of the CRC, via e-mail at RFreitag@mw.nccd-crc.org.
- To reach Peter Quigley, director of information systems, send an e-mail to: PQuigley@mw.nccd-crc.org.
- Contact Donna Younkin, director of quality analysis and information for the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, via e-mail at donna.younkin@dcf.state.nj.us.
- Read the companion case study on the pilot program for teaching an advanced curriculum on SafeMeasures.
- For additional information about the ASQ Community Good Works program, visit <http://www.asq.org/communities/good-works/> or contact Jeanine Becker at jbecker@asq.org.

About the Author

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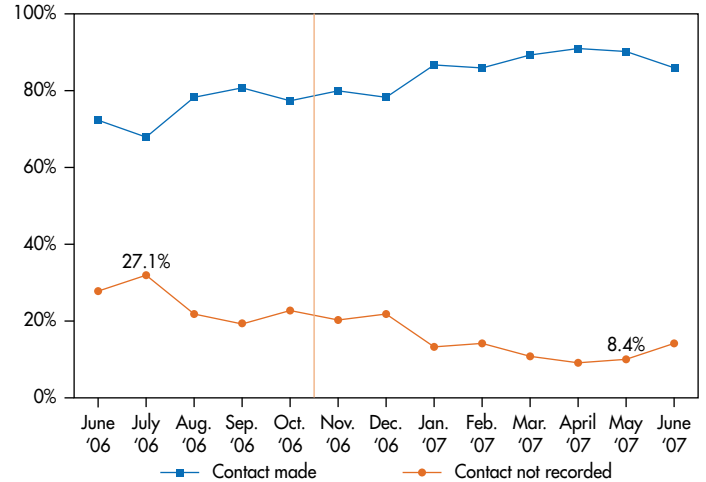
Figure 3—Camden Central, New Jersey, improvements in compliance

Permanency Cases: Monthly Staff Contacts With Children
Contacts with children made in month.

Cohort: All children in a case open during the selected month. (Children with only investigation services are excluded.)

Camden

Extract Date: 07/17/2007
Analysis Date: 07/19/2007



After completing a refresher training course on SafeMeasures, the staff at New Jersey’s Camden Central office made and sustained gains in compliance with state and federal requirements such as monthly contacts with children in permanency cases. The vertical line indicates the approximate time of the training.

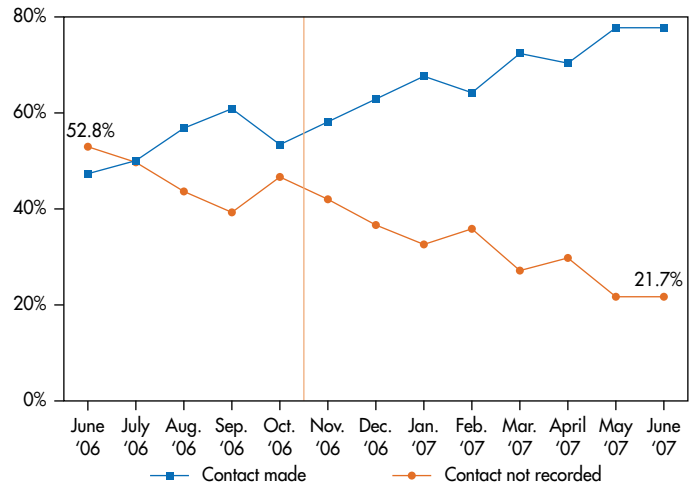
Figure 4—Mercer South, New Jersey, improvements in contact compliance

Permanency Cases: Monthly Staff Contacts With Children
Contacts with children made in month.

Cohort: All children in a case open during the selected month. (Children with only investigation services are excluded.)

Mercer-Burlington

Extract Date: 07/17/2007
Analysis Date: 07/19/2007



Once refresher training was completed at the Mercer South office, compliance for one measure quickly increased. The vertical line indicates the approximate time that the SafeMeasures training was conducted.