A necessary foundation for the development of a successful policy and practice response to the permanence needs of youth in foster care is an accurate and detailed description of the challenges. It is essential to clearly frame the problem, specify the questions that must be answered in order to develop sound policy and practice, and use data to address those questions as fully as possible. Only through clarifying what is known and what needs to be known is it possible to set priorities within policy and practice and identify the needed levers for change.

Historically, national child welfare data have been limited. Until the mid-1990s, states were asked to voluntarily provide child welfare data through the Voluntary Cooperative Information System (VCIS). There were limited outcome studies regarding youth in foster care, and in few studies were the voices of youth sought as a source of information about youth's experiences and outcomes in foster care. Foster care and adoption data, however, have become more available since the mid-1990s with implementation of the Chapin Hall Multi-State Foster Care Data Archive and the federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). At the
same time, certain broad-based studies seeking the perspectives of youth have examined the outcomes for youth who age out of foster care.

Fred Wulczyn and Penelope Maza use two major sources of child welfare data to help clarify the challenges associated with youth permanence and to describe some of the dynamics that shape the experiences and outcomes of youth in foster care. In chapter 1, Wulczyn uses data from the Chapin Hall archive to answer several questions: Who grows up in foster care, and what portion of their childhood was spent in a foster home or some other placement setting? Where do adolescents fall within the broader context of children entering foster care for the first time? Are there entry rate disparities for white children and black children when age is taken into account? How do youth leave foster care: that is, what portion of youth leave through reunification, adoption, aging out, and running away? In chapter 2, Maza uses AFCARS data to identify the similarities and differences between youth who achieved and who did not achieve permanence. She examines various factors that are associated with permanence, including gender, race/ethnicity, placement history, length of stay, and age at time of removal. Using a different data repository, her findings triangulate on similar themes and lend credence to the conclusions, despite the limitations of looking across states’ administrative data.

The growing body of outcome research has contributed to a fuller understanding of the poor outcomes for many youth who leave foster care to live on their own. The research contributes to the great sense of urgency that policy and practice respond more effectively to the needs of youth in foster care, particularly those who age out to “independent living.” In chapter 3, Mark Courtney provides a concise but comprehensive review of the findings from twenty-two studies with samples of youth who had aged out of foster care. These findings make clear that, on average, young people who age out of foster care are significantly disadvantaged across a number of domains as they approach and later negotiate the transition to adulthood. The studies also demonstrate that youth in foster care are much less likely than their peers to be able to rely on family for support to compensate for their disadvantages during the transition. In chapter 4, Peter Pecora responds, discussing two additional, recently completed studies and highlighting some of the most pressing needs facing youth who have exited foster care. Both Courtney and Pecora discuss the implications of the research findings for policy, program, and practice improvements.

Progress in child welfare research is impeded by lack of conceptual models that can be tested. In chapter 5, Richard Barth and Laura Chintapalli
suggest one such model. They propose a model for understanding the relationships among placement instability, youth’s emotional and behavioral problems, administrative decisions, disconnection from family, and placement into residential care. In particular, they examine instability in care and the use of congregate care facilities as impediments to permanence, and they describe the challenges of “impermanent” permanence when reunifications are not successful and when termination of parental rights does not lead to adoption.

In response, in chapter 6, Gretta Cushing and Benjamin Kerman spotlight the need for clarity around the dimensions of permanence that further reflect on the ultimate goal of family connections. They urge that the discourse regarding research, interventions, and policy extend beyond legal permanence and incorporate a recognition of the vital role that nurturing parental connections plays in youth development, irrespective of whether the relationships are formally recognized with legal sanction. With a focus on emotional security and belonging, they explore the practice, policy, and research implications of viewing permanency as a “state of security and attachment.”