

Serving the Community's Children with Parents in Prison: The Family Services Advocate Program

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Abstract

For many children and youth, the experience of having an incarcerated parent is not only marked by missing that parent, but also by transitions in caretakers and living situations. Many of these caretakers may not be prepared for this situation financially or materially. Additionally, prisons may or may not be equipped to foster connectivity between incarcerated parents and their children, whether through visitation, counseling, or communication programs. Compass Mark runs a Family Services Advocate Program which strives to fill gaps in the lives of these children. The question this paper explores is, what are the needs of children with incarcerated parents in Lebanon County, and has the program been effective in its mission? This research has found that Compass Mark Lebanon makes a significant difference in the lives of children in Lebanon County, particularly by providing caretakers with household and practical needs, but also going above and beyond necessities to become a trusted resource. The findings of this research make clear where community needs lie, and produce a discussion point for how the program can be used more effectively in the future. Data show that Compass Mark Lebanon is a valuable program for a group of children and youth who are otherwise overlooked, and it is effective in helping their caretakers provide a secure environment for them during a vulnerable time in their lives.

Children with a parent in prison are vulnerable. They are at a higher risk of facing hardship, from problems such as physical and psychological health consequences, to risks of homelessness and educational failures (Cyphert, 2018). Currently there are approximately 2.3 million incarcerated Americans (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020), and while data remains missing on exact numbers, a significant number of American children are missing a parent to the penal system. One report estimates between 1.7 million - 2.7 million children having an

incarcerated parent during their childhood, which would affect approximately 11% of all children (Martin, 2017). The scope of the risks associated with having an incarcerated parent have been documented, and include a higher risk of incarceration, psychological problems and antisocial behavior including limited resilience, and lower educational attainment (Martin, 2017). Children may have also experienced trauma leading up to their parent's arrest, or witnessed violence in their communities or households, or have

been exposed to drug or alcohol abuse (Children of Incarcerated Parents, 2021).

The Family Services Advocate Program (hereafter referred to as FSA), run by Compass Mark Lebanon, is a community program that seeks to meet the unique needs of children with a parent incarcerated in the Lebanon County prison through connection to community support, advocating for the child's rights, and helping to maintain healthy parent-child relationships (Compass Mark Lebanon, 2020). When a parent enters the Lebanon County prison, a Family Services Advocate works to identify the children of these inmates and to connect them with the Compass Mark program. In this research, the questions were raised: Who are the children with parents in prison in Lebanon County? What are the needs of these children? Finally, the most important question was raised, is the program effective in meeting these needs? We gathered and analyzed data from the year 2019. We present our findings with the aim to show the program's significance, and to make recommendations toward refining program goals for the future so that Compass Mark can meet the greatest possible number of needs.

Demographics and needs

While the majority of clients served in the year for which we have data were aged five and under (26.3%) or over age 12 (26.3%), the largest age group was between ages 6-12 (47.5%). A total of 90 children were served with ages known for all but ten. Of these 90 children, 82.2% were White, 16.7% were Latino/a, and 1.1% were African American. Of the 85 children whose sex was known, 43 (50.6%) were female and 42 (49.4%) were male. Out of the 90 clients, 47(52.2%) of the children's mothers were incarcerated and 39(43.3%) of the children's fathers were incarcerated. For 4 (4.4%) of the children both parents were incarcerated. Clients had a variety of primary caretakers, including a

mother (27.0%), a grandmother (24.7%), a father (19.1%), "other (10.1%)," a grandfather (9.0%), a friend (4.5%), a Children and Youth Advocate (3.4%), or an aunt (2.2%).

FSA was able to take clients that were referred to the program through 3 main referral categories, including the county prison (66; 73.3%), schools (19; 21.1%) and community organizations (5; 5.6%). As one of Compass Mark's main goals is to help children and their caregivers and to connect them to needed resources and services, they identified and categorized the needs and requests of children and their caregivers at intake. These included access to the following things: an incarcerated parent (45.7%), clothing (18.6%), food (14.3%), health insurance (11.4%), advocacy in school (11.4%), and therapy (8.6%). These services were the top needs requested. Additionally, 11.4% had requested access to more than one service.

Program outcome

One of the main responsibilities of FSA is to make sure children and primary caregivers have access to the services that they need. To this end, we conducted a 90-day followup and compared the results to the needs at intake. This provided us with data to measure whether FSA has been successful in its goal of making a significant difference in the lives of children with a parent in prison.

Of the 90 children who participated in intake, we were able to conduct a 90-day follow up with 24. Our evaluation of the program's effectiveness focuses on the percentage of children whose needs had declined at the 90-day mark. We were able to say that FSA was highly effective at meeting the needs of children with an incarcerated parent, as the percentage of clients requesting help had declined in nearly every area at 90 days. In fact, in most areas the percentage of clients requesting help declined to 0%. We

can therefore say that FSA was successful in its goal, and was highly effective in meeting the needs of its clients.

Discussion

It is clear that this program makes a difference in children's lives. In order to do this as effectively as possible moving forward, we make several suggestions. First, there are several needs missing from the needs assessment, such as access to furnishings, as well as access to technology and the internet. Second, more data would be helpful on the current needs assessment, e.g. what does "more access to incarcerated parent" mean? Lastly, the program could

benefit from an assessment survey for caregivers about their experiences with the program. Yet, despite these possible improvements, the program is effective at its mission and makes a difference in children's lives.

Conclusion

Children with a parent in prison face difficult situations, oftentimes "doing time" along with their parents. Programs such as FSA strive to make a tangible difference in the lives of these children, and our data shows that this difference is significant. We can say with certainty that FSA is a valuable program for the community's children and families.

References

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Recommended Citation

Pomales, K. & Preibisch, R. (2021). Serving the community's children with parents in prison: The family services advocate program. *Made in Millersville Journal*, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.mimjournal.com/paper-5>