

The DAC Corridor Evaluation for AY 19-20

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Academic Year: 2019-2020

Background and Purpose

The number of people under the supervision of the criminal justice system has dramatically increased over the last 25 years, from 1.8 million people in 1984 to 6.9 million people in 2009.ⁱ Parents on criminal probation are at greater risk of coming to the attention of child protective services for a variety of reasons: they use substances and alcohol at higher rates than the general population, and they are more likely to be in poverty and suffer from mental health disorders as well.ⁱⁱ Parents who struggle to meet the terms of their probation potentially face re-arrest and incarceration, and unless a plan has been developed for substitute care arrangements, the probationer's children can end up going into foster care.ⁱⁱⁱ Santa Clara County's Probation Department partners with the Dependency Advocacy Center (DAC), a non-profit agency that offers legal support to indigent parents with open, pending or closed cases of child maltreatment in Santa Clara County. The goal of the DAC program is to keep families intact by providing services that are focused on reducing risks to children so that they can remain home or in other safe arrangements outside of the foster care system. The Corridor Program, one program at DAC, addresses the specific needs of parents on formal probation with an open dependency case.

This project is an evaluation of the DAC Corridor program, and is comprised of three separate research studies. The first, by Celine Caton-Darby, is a quantitative analysis of changes in measures of client self-sufficiency from before and after program involvement. The second, by Michael Fernwood, is a quantitative analysis of program outcomes for families participating in DAC. The third, by Alexandra Olson, is a qualitative analysis of DAC client and staff perspectives on the value of the Corridor Program.

Study 1: Quantitative Analysis of Self-Sufficiency Data

Research Question and Project Aims

This quantitative study aimed to determine the effects of Corridor participation on clients' self-sufficiency. The overall research question was the following: Does participation in the Corridor program improve clients' self-sufficiency in areas of housing, employment, mobility, life skills, family relations, community involvement, parenting skills, legal issues, and substance abuse?

Methods

Research Design

This quantitative study was a single group pre- and post-test design.

Sampling

The data for this research comes from the "Self-Sufficiency Matrix" form completed on at least two separate occasions for each of the participants receiving services through the Corridor Program. There were a total of 117 individuals in the sample.

Procedures

As an intake procedure, a staff member completes the matrix to record each client's baseline status before services. Upon the completion of the program - or after six months if the client continues with the program - the matrix is completed again. Single items measure the client's level of self-sufficiency in each of ten domains: housing, employment, mobility, life skills, family/social relations, community involvement, parenting skills, legal (dependency), legal (probation/other) and substance abuse. Each item is scored using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1= in crisis, 2= vulnerable, 3= safe, 4= building capacity, 5=thriving).

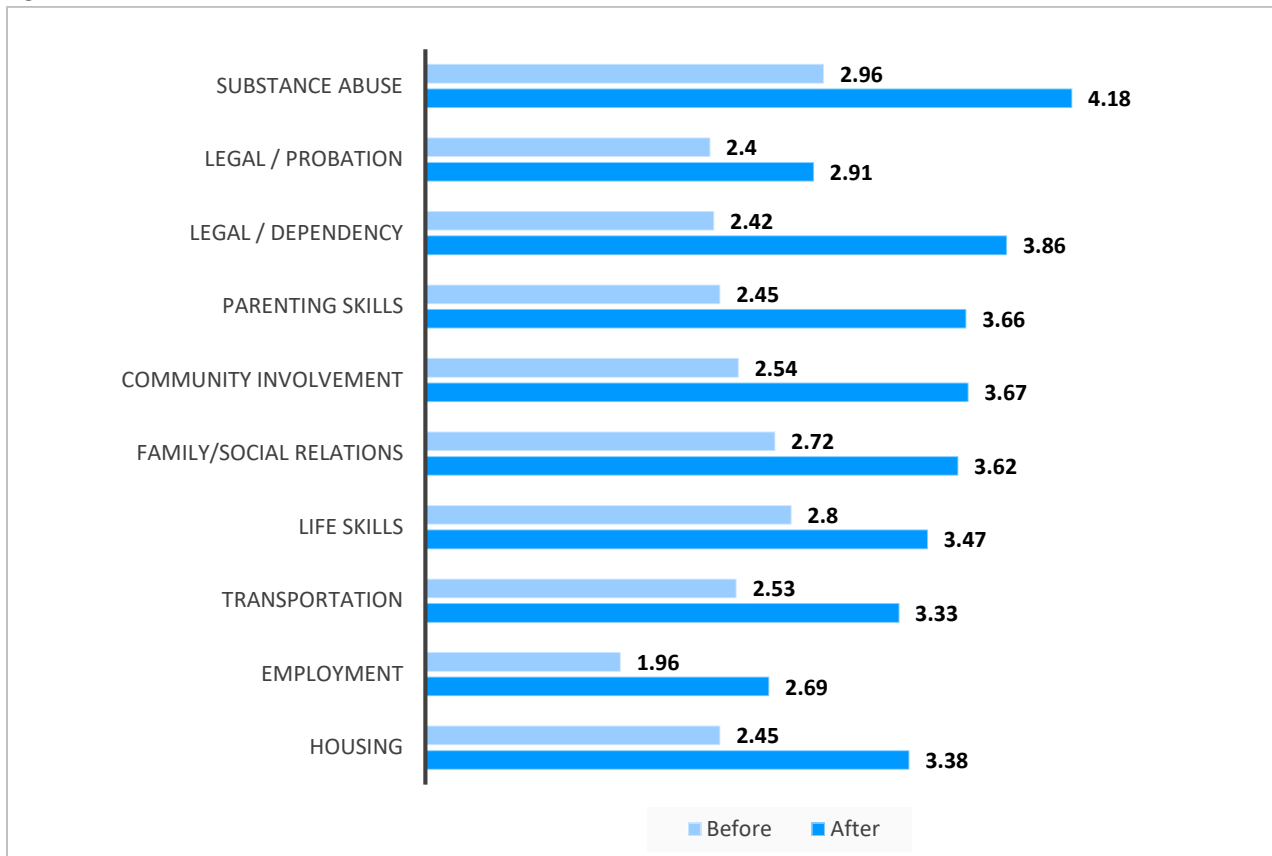
Data Analysis

For this analysis, each client's baseline assessment was compared to their final assessment or the last assessment completed if the client remained in the program. Data were hand-entered from the forms into SPSS, and analyzed using descriptive summary statistics and paired sample t-tests.

Findings

Figure 1 shows the average scores in each domain for parents before Corridor services, and after receiving Corridor services. For every item, average scores on the matrix improved from baseline to final assessment. Differences in all tests were statistically significant. The largest improvements were seen in community involvement, parenting skills, legal dependency, and substance abuse. The smallest changes were seen in legal probation, employment and life skills.

Figure 1



Conclusions and Implications

After receiving services in the program, clients' scores for each domain increased. Parents' enrollment in the program allowed them to improve their social circumstances and empower themselves and their families. One

concern is that in some cases items were left blank or an item was unable to be assessed. In the initial matrix, employment and mobility were the most likely to be “unable to assess” or left blank. In the post-matrix, mobility and substance abuse were the most likely to be unable to assess or blank. In these cases, the observations were dropped from the analysis.

Study 2: Quantitative Comparison of Outcomes

Research Question and Project Aims

This is an exploratory study that evaluates the impact of the Corridor Project by comparing participants’ child welfare system outcomes with the outcomes of the general population of Santa Clara County and of child welfare-involved Santa Clara County families using publicly available data tables from the California Child Welfare Indicators Project (CCWIP) maintained by the University of California at Berkeley. The research question for this study was the following: Do the Corridor Project services improve outcomes for the families served by the program? The hypothesis is that participation in the Corridor Project will show lower rates of referrals to the child welfare system, and higher rates of positive child welfare outcomes.

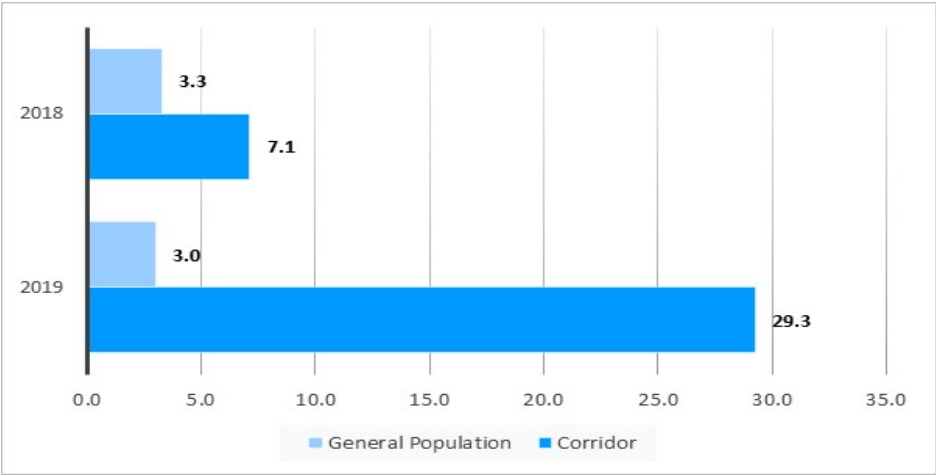
Methods

This study uses a pre-experimental static-group comparison design. Corridor data were provided to the researcher in a de-identified format. Comparison group data come from CCWIP’s publicly available data tables. The sample includes all of the children whose parents were participating in the program in 2017, 2018, or 2019. Five outcomes are considered: 1) New referrals of child abuse or neglect; 2) New child welfare cases opened; 3) Reunifications; 4) Dismissals of existing child welfare cases; and 5) Recurrence of maltreatment. The comparison group for outcome 1) is the entire estimated child population of Santa Clara County in 2017, 2018, and/or 2019 as reported in CCWIP. The comparison group for outcomes 2)-5) is the child welfare-involved child population of Santa Clara County in 2017, 2018, and/or 2019 as reported in CCWIP. The analysis consists of descriptive statistics on each measure for its defined data set and sample.

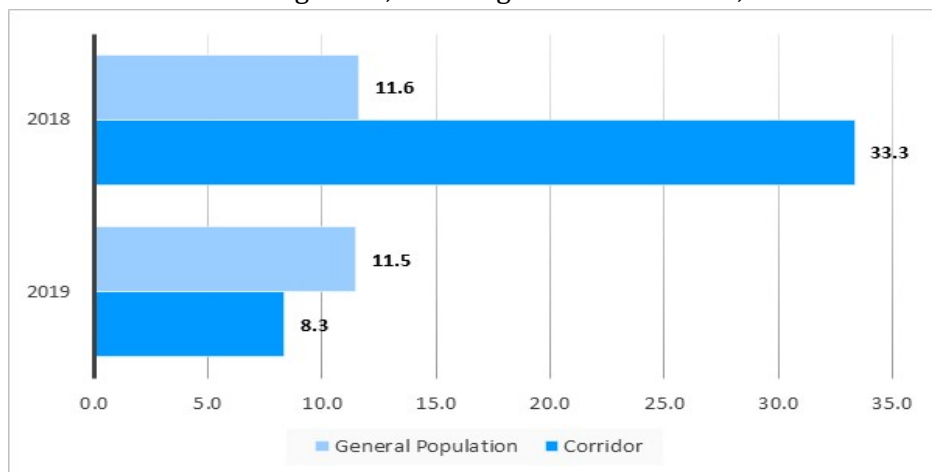
Findings

Comparisons across the five outcomes show mixed results.

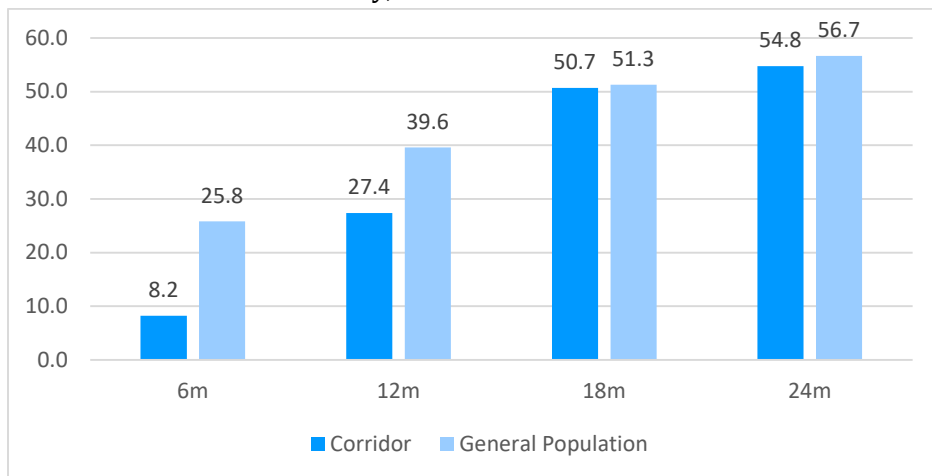
- 1) New referrals of child abuse or neglect: Children of Corridor clients were more likely than the general child population of California to experience new referrals of child abuse or neglect: in 2018 7% of Corridor children had allegations, and in 2019 29% did; in the general population, the rate was approximately 3% each year.



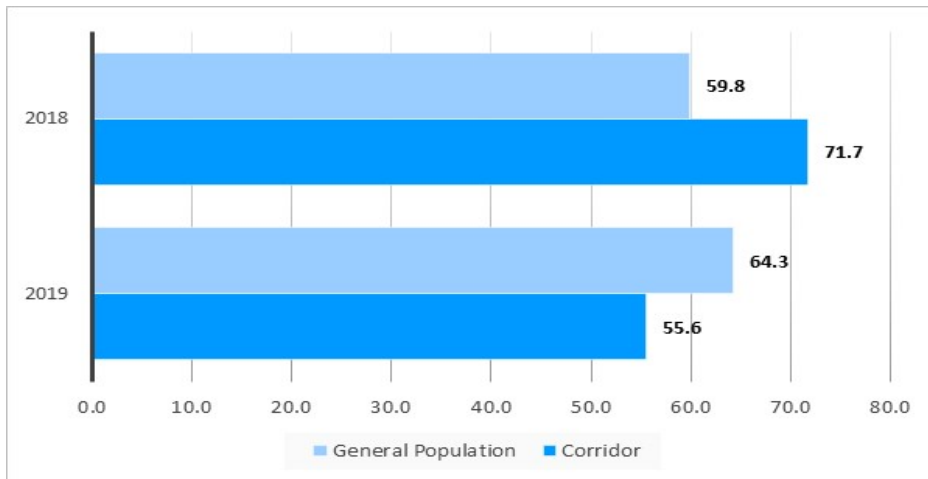
- 2) **New child welfare cases opened:** Findings in this area are mixed. In 2018, the Corridor Project had one prevention child with a new child welfare case out of three with allegations, resulting in a rate of 33.33%, higher than the countywide rate for 2018, 11.58%. In 2019, there was one prevention child with a new case out of 12 with allegations, resulting in a rate of 8.33%, lower than the countywide rate of 11.45%.



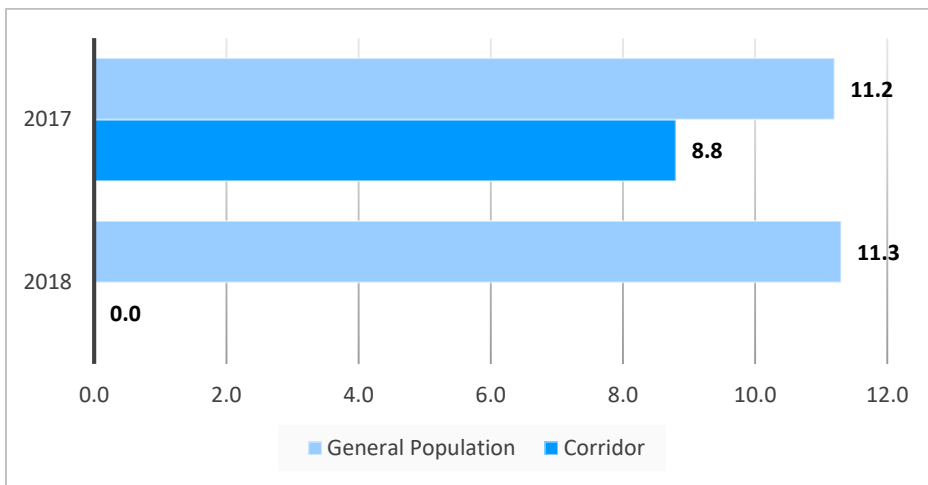
- 3) **Reunifications:** Children of Corridor clients were as likely to reunify after 24 months as other foster children in California in 2017; however, they did so more slowly. Approximately 8% of Corridor Project participants' children reunified within the initial six months, compared to 26% of all foster children. The children of Corridor Project participants continue to lag behind other foster children at 12 months, at 27% versus 40%; however, by 18 months, the gap closes, and at both 18 months and 24 months, the reunification rates for the children of Corridor Project participants approximate the rates of other foster children in Santa Clara County, at around 50%-55%.



- 4) **Dismissals of existing child welfare cases:** Findings in this area are mixed. In 2018, cases of children of Corridor clients were more likely to be dismissed than those of the population of children involved in child welfare in California, and in 2019, they were somewhat less likely. In 2018, the percentage of successful exits for DAC children about 72%, while the rate for all county children in the child welfare system was slightly under 60%. In 2019, the percentage of successful exits for DAC was about 56% compared to just over 64% for all county children in the child welfare system.



- 5) *Recurrence of maltreatment*: Children of Corridor clients were less likely to experience recurrence of maltreatment than other children whose cases were dismissed in California. These children had lower rates of recurrence for both cohort years at each time interval considered (6, 12, 18, and 24 months); in fact there were no reported recurrences in the 2018 cohort. The chart shows recurrence rate at 12 months for 2017 and 2018.



Conclusions and Implications

Outcomes for children of Corridor clients are sometimes similar, sometimes worse, and sometimes better than those of children in the comparison group. However, comparison group children were different from Corridor clients' children in important ways. Corridor clients are on Probation and thus fundamentally different from the general child population and the child welfare population. Additionally, there were differences in data structures, such as time from entry to system (Corridor services did not necessarily start at time of children's entry to system) and level of observation (Corridor tracks outcomes at the level of the parent, not the child, while Berkley does the opposite). In addition, outcome data for Corridor clients were taken from brief narrative summaries of cases and did not include specific dates of outcomes. DAC could consider structuring its data to align with the current federal performance measures.

Study 3: Qualitative Analysis of DAC Client and Staff Perspectives

Research Question and Project Aims

This qualitative exploratory research examines the role of the DAC Corridor program in helping dually involved parents navigate the system to decrease involvement in the child welfare and criminal justice systems. This study aims to answer the question: How do Corridor participants and staff perceive the value of Corridor services, and what aspects of the services to they find most and least helpful?

Methods

This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine the perceived value of Corridor services gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews of program participants and program staff. A convenience sample consisted of volunteer participants of Corridor employees and Corridor Project clients. Five Corridor Project clients and four DAC employees were recruited to participate. The interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted approximately forty-five minutes to one hour. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic areas were then coded, organized and compared to derive the final thematic areas.

Findings

Five primary factors contributing to the effectiveness of DAC emerged:

1. Reassurance. Many of the clients shared that the DAC team provided reassurance in times of uncertainty, whether that be at DWC, dependency court, or any other aspect in life that they needed reassurance. Clients discussed how the consistent reassurance, feeling like someone was on their side, and positivity, promoted their well-being and ability to engage in their case plans. Having someone that took the time to listen, advocate for them, provide guidance and reassurance impacted clients' outlook on their case.
2. Hope. When asked what they gained most working with their parent mentors, many of the responses reflected a sense of hope that was given to the clients. "He was very helpful in making me feel like there was hope, because he himself had been there and he knew what I was going through." Clients shared that the hope provided by the Corridor team positively impacted their outlook on their situation and promoted case plan engagement.
3. Advocacy. Participants and Corridor employees noted the advocacy that Corridor staff provide. Many clients shared that for the first time they felt that they had someone in their corner that truly believed in them. One client stated: "The attorney gave me my life back. Because she took my case when I was incarcerated and gave me a second chance. I have everything today. I have a career. I have a home. I have my kids back. I have a relationship with my family, the people that I hurt." Another said of her attorney, "She has always gone up to bat for me".
4. Engagement. Many of the clients discussed the importance of having someone that is available for calls and texts if needs emerge. "My parent mentor was there every step of the way, every court date and checking in and calling me weekly." Multiple clients commented on the level of support that the social worker provides on many different fronts. For example, a client stated, "She's very supportive. Very supportive. And anything I need, like I might need advice, she always tries to help me the best way possible."
5. Encouragement. Clients shared the encouragement that they received through working with team members at the Corridor Program. One client shared, "My team really understands me. They get me, they help me, and they want to see me succeed." Other clients shared the importance of words of encouragement from Corridor staff, and the impact of having a team willing to give them a second chance when so many others didn't believe in them. "They actually made me feel like I could change."

Conclusions and Implications

The DAC team addresses risk factors through engagement and consistent communication with their clients, providing the clients with a holistic level of support. Overall, both Corridor participants and employees believe that the support that clients receive from the Corridor team successfully addresses their needs as parents and human beings. One concern that emerged throughout interviews with DAC employees was the impact of high caseloads on service delivery. Although this theme did not arise during interviews with Corridor Program participants, it was discussed in every employee interview. From the client's perception, they are not experiencing a lack of support and they feel that their needs are met. From the perception of DAC employees, the limitations associated with having a small team and large caseloads impedes their service delivery.

Summary and Conclusion

Taken together, findings from the three studies provide evidence of an intervention providing important and valuable service to a high needs population. The analysis of the Self-Sufficiency Matrix data suggest that client circumstances and capabilities are substantively improving over time in the program. Outcomes data results were mixed: for maltreatment, outcomes for Corridor children were not as good as those of children in the county general or child welfare population; for new child welfare cases and dismissals of child welfare cases, outcomes for Corridor children were sometimes better and sometimes worse; for reunification, they were about the same (although occurring more slowly), and for recurrence, outcomes for Corridor children were better than those of children in the child welfare population. Since research has demonstrated that parents on criminal probation are at greater risk for poor child welfare outcomes and criminal recidivism, outcomes for the children of Corridor participants that are similar to or better than those of other children provide some evidence in support of the hypothesis that the program contributes to participant success. The qualitative analysis showed an overwhelmingly positive experience for clients with Corridor services, with clients and staff reporting that the reassurance, advocacy, engagement, hope, and encouragement provided by staff were important and highly valuable in helping parents to free themselves of child welfare and criminal justice systems involvement.

References

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- ⁱ Phillips, S. D., & Dettlaff, A. J. (2009). More than parents in prison: The broader overlap between the criminal justice and child welfare systems. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 3 (1), 3-22. doi:10.1080/15548730802690718
- ⁱⁱ Phillips, S., Leathers, D., & Erkanli, S. (2009). Children of Probationers in the Child Welfare System and Their Families. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 18(2), 183-191.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Phillips, S., Leathers, D., & Erkanli, S. (2009). Children of Probationers in the Child Welfare System and Their Families. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 18(2), 183-191.