Targeting Families for Family Preservation Services: The Decision-Making Process

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Statement of the Research Problem

The population of children and adolescents who have been placed outside their natural homes due to maltreatment, delinquency, or mental health problems is already astronomical and it is increasing. Nationally, 429,000 children were in out-of-home care at the end of 1991, a 4.1% increase from 1990 and a 64% increase since 1982 (Merkel-Holguin, 1993). As a result, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers face new challenges as they strive to decrease alarming rates of out-of-home placement.

To counter rising rates of out-of-home placement, a nationwide proliferation of family preservation programs has emerged. However, the population of children and families in need of these services is wide and complex. Since intensive family preservation services can be quite costly, agencies would like to ensure that the appropriate families are "targeted" for these services. Theoretically, targeting involves a program decision to restrict or direct services to specific children and families who have been identified along a previously established line of eligibility.

As family preservation services evolve, it has been discerned that services are no longer restricted to families who meet predetermined service criteria (Berry, 1991). Services are provided to a wide array of client-families. Researchers have noted that the population of children who actually meet service criteria and receive these services is unknown (Wells & Biegel, 1990). Moreover, other researchers have noted the significance of clear definitions of target populations to a program's success (Feldman, 1990). For services to be most effective, there is a need to determine which families are true candidates for service and then provide the service to these families.

This research project focuses on an examination of the decision-making process involved in targeting families for family preservation services. The issue of targeting was examined through an exploration of two critical approaches to service delivery: imminent risk and special population. Previous research has shown that although these two approaches are touted as accepted criteria, children and families in these groups are not being served (Berry, 1991; Close, 1983; National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), 1992; National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI), 1989; Pinderhughes, 1991; Stehno, 1990).
The concern for imminent risk is a desire to target services to families who would have a child placed immediately into substitute care if something were not done to improve the family situation. In the field of family preservation, disagreement exists over the importance of the concept of imminent risk of placement as a criterion for accepting and serving families. Some agencies adopt policies in which they strictly limit the families being served to those having a child at imminent risk of placement; other programs are willing to serve various family needs without restriction. Arguably this is an issue of crisis intervention versus preventive maintenance. Nonetheless, the use of imminent risk is important, because it is believed to be the best way of deciding which families should receive family preservation services. More important, imminent risk is currently touted as the accepted service criterion.

A second component in the decision-making process addressed in this study involves the use of "special population" as a targeting approach in family preservation programs. It can be argued that certain segments of the population experience a disproportionate number of hardships which can increase the likelihood of their children being placed outside the home. Such hardships place special populations in a precarious situation requiring the services of family preservation programs. Special populations can include ethnic minority children who enter the system at greater rates, remain longer, and experience more difficulty with permanency planning. Moreover, there is evidence that family preservation services which target some special populations such as those needing reunification, have had some success (Fraser, Pecora, & Haapala, 1991; Sudia, 1982; Walton, Fraser, Lewis, Pecora, & Walton, 1993). What is neither known nor understood is the decision-making process utilized in selecting families for family preservation services. An understanding of the use or nonuse of special population as a criterion for providing services is needed.

Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to evaluate how a sample of family preservation workers handle the issues of imminent risk and special population in deciding service delivery. A theoretical model of decision making in family preservation programs guided inquiry. One major component in this model involves the role played by workers. The theory maintains that such factors as worker values, biases, and characteristics have an effect on their attitudes, belief structure, and behavior. Ultimately, these factors influence service delivery. This research explored the role played by workers in decision making, by posing the following ten research questions for each of the study's two measure (i.e., imminent risk and special population): (1) What are workers' attitude toward using imminent risk (special population) as a service criterion; (2) to what extent do workers use imminent risk (special population) as a service criterion; (3) if workers do not use imminent risk (special population) as a service criterion, then what families are served; (4) what factors hinder workers from using imminent risk (special population) as a service criterion; (5) what factors support workers' use of
imminent risk as a service criterion; (6) why are workers in favor of using imminent risk (special population) as a service criterion; (7) why do workers who are in favor of using imminent risk (special population) as a service criterion not use it; (8) why are workers against using imminent risk (special population) as a service criterion; (9) why do workers who are against the imminent risk service criterion (special population) use it anyway; and (10) what are the socio-demographic differences between those workers who have a favorable attitude toward the use of imminent risk (special population) and those who do not.

Methodology

The overall design for this study was exploratory-descriptive research that utilized the cross-sectional survey technique. Specifically, the mail-survey method was used and designed according to Dillman’s (1978) “Total Design Method (TDM).” A list of 250 agencies was generated from the National Resource Center on Family-Based Services Annotated Directory of Selected Family-Based Services Programs, 1994, using a systematic random sampling technique. Each agency received two instruments which produced an attempted sample of 500 family preservation workers. The study’s research questions were pursued through the use of the “Decision-Making Survey,” a 127 Likert-item scale.

Various descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis, including nonparametric tests and advanced multivariate techniques. Specifically, the following tests were used for analyzing the data:

*Cronbach Alpha* was used to ascertain the reliability score of the “Decision-Making Survey” during both the pilot study and final study. *T-test statistic* was used to check for nonresponse bias by measuring the mean difference between early and late respondents in all socio-demographic categories. *Descriptive statistics* were used to organize raw responses into indices that summarized the entire set of data. *Correlation matrices* were executed to ascertain whether a co-relationship exists among willingness/nonwillingness to target services by imminent risk and special population) and moderating variables such as supports and barriers to targeting practices. Finally, *discriminant analysis* was used to discover linear combinations of variables which distinguish between those family preservation workers who target services by the two criteria (i.e., imminent risk and special population) and those who do not.

Results

The following section contains a description of the respondents in the study. Included are agency and worker demographic data based on twenty-one survey items.
Type of program. The sample was composed of workers from private, nonprofit agencies (63%) and public child welfare agencies (31%).

Number of families served annually. Over half of the sample serve 100 or fewer families per year.

Number of workers employed by the agency. Seventy-five percent of the total sample work in family preservation programs in which there are 10 or fewer workers.

Caseload size per worker. In keeping with the small number of workers employed in agencies, a small number of cases are handled by each worker. Seventy-two percent of the respondents carry ten or fewer cases at any given time.

Number of weeks cases remain open. One third (33%) of the sample service cases for only 10 weeks or less. Nearly one-half (48%) of the respondents' cases remain open anywhere from 3-8 months.

Year program began. Most (48%) of the programs in which the respondents work, began their family preservation program in the 1980s. Thirty percent began their program in the 1990s, and few (8%) initiated programs prior to 1980.

Treatment model used. Most (49%) respondents described their program's treatment approach as that of family systems. Twenty percent use the Homebuilders model. Twelve percent use a Modified Homebuilders approach, and the remaining 13% use a treatment model specific to their agency setting, or various other approaches or combinations of approaches.

Primary presenting problem. Almost 70% of the respondents encounter child abuse and neglect as the primary presenting problem of their service population. The category mental health problem is 18% of the respondents' primary service area. Finally, 11% of the workers deal with juvenile delinquency as their primary service area.

Service population by race. Seventy percent of the respondents indicated that most of their clients are European American (i.e., Caucasian), 35% stated that African Americans are the second group most often serviced, and 37% indicated that biracial children and interracial families are the third group most often seen for service.

Place of Employment. One-half of the family preservation workers are employed in urban areas. Another 25% work in rural areas. The remaining 25% work either in suburban areas or other areas (i.e., combination of rural and urban areas).

Type of family preservation worker. The sample was composed of 82% contract workers (i.e., workers who receive referrals including workers employed in a family preservation unit within a major agency) and 11% referring workers.
Service regulation. Respondents were asked whether family preservation services fell under the auspices of a single regulatory body in their states. Sixty-three percent of the respondents felt that this was the case, whereas 32% said no.

Single state service model. A question of interest was whether there exists a uniform service model for delivering family preservation services in the workers' respective states. Sixty-five percent of the respondents said no single service model is consistently used throughout the state, whereas 28% said that one model is used statewide.

Respondents' age. Nearly one-half (48%) of the family preservation workers surveyed ranged in age from mid '30s to 50. Thirty-eight percent were 35 or younger.

Gender. The sample consisted of 76% female and 22% male.

Social service experience. Consistent with the respondents' ages, 60% have worked in the field of social services for ten or fewer years. Thirty-eight percent have 11-25 years of social service experience.

Family preservation experience. Consistent with the relative newness of family preservation services, the majority of the sample (65%) has worked in family preservation for five or fewer years. Twenty-three percent have 6-10 years of family preservation experience.

Race of respondents. The sample was composed of 84% European Americans (i.e., Caucasians) and 16% non-European Americans. The non-European American category included 9% African Americans, 2% Hispanics, <1% Native Americans, and 2% Bi-racial individuals.

Highest level of education. A highly educated sample, 65% of the respondents have at least a master's degree. Twenty-two percent have a bachelor's degree.

Type of degree. An even split, 50% of the respondents hold social work degrees and 50% hold social work-related degrees such as counseling, criminal justice, sociology, and family relations.

Descriptive findings reveal that, for the most part, family preservation workers do not support the practice of targeting imminent risk nor special population cases. Surprisingly, this research discovered that the reasons that workers do not support the two service criteria are not because of institutional-based practices (e.g., absence of sound risk assessment tools, agency bias, agency policy). Instead, workers do not support targeting because of personal, idiosyncratic factors and the belief that targeting practices exclude nonspecial populations from receiving services. In those rare instances where workers do target, it is not by their own volition but because of the agency's forced adherence.
Discriminant Analysis - Measure #1 Imminent Risk.

Because conclusive answers to the research questions were not fully obtainable through the use of descriptive data alone, further analyses were undertaken. These analyses corroborated some of the findings reached through the use of the descriptive analyses, while others were not corroborated. Likewise, the more robust tests undertaken in this phase of the analysis, yielded some findings undetected in the descriptive data. In order to further identify differences between those family preservation workers who use the service criterion imminent risk and those who do not, discriminant analyses were computed between these two groups using "attitude," "belief," and "attribute" variables as predictors. The attitude, belief, and attribute scales were first disaggregated and then analyzed aggregately resulting in four discriminant analyses.

The dichotomous criterion variable was whether family preservation workers used imminent risk as a primary consideration in service decisions. It should be noted that the researcher chose not to draw a composite score on the entire "Behavior subscale" for use as a criterion variable. This decision was made because of the amount of missing data contained in some items. Meaningful discriminant analyses should contain large subject to variable ratios. The discriminant test is sensitive to missing data. If the entire scale had been taken, the overall N would have been greatly decreased. The researcher chose instead to use the single item in the "Behavior subscale" which had the least amount of missing data.

Of all four model (i.e., attitude, belief, attribute, and combined scales) Model #4, the combined scale model is best at predicting workers' service decisions (Percent Correctly Classified=86%) and a canonical correlation of .71 (p < .000). In Model #4, the researcher was curious to learn whether all scales combined (i.e., attitude, belief, attribute) could produce a good predictor model to determine family preservation workers' service decisions related to the use of imminent risk. A discriminant analysis was performed on the combined scales. The key predictor of service decisions turned out to be attitudes related to the use of imminent risk as an assurance that the appropriate families are being served.

When all scales are considered together, some items which previously proved to be predictors of service decisions (e.g., the attitude that non-imminent risk cases should be considered for some other form of service, the belief that the use of imminent risk identifies those best suited for services, length of time cases remain opened) dropped out of the model. Nonetheless, other predictors which remained fairly strong include: the attitude that services should be reserved for imminent risk cases, the attitude that imminent risk promises something it cannot deliver; the type of treatment model used in the family preservation program; the belief that imminent risk is too difficult to determine; the belief that early prevention cases should be targeted; the attitude that imminent risk is an effective screening mechanism; the type of presenting problem imposed by the primary service population; the attitude that out-of-
home placement rates are only reduced through the use of imminent risk; and the belief that agency funding specifications hinder the use of imminent risk.

In sum, family preservation workers who agree that imminent risk should be the service criterion believe so because of the following reasons: the criterion assures that the appropriate families are served; it is the best way to reserve services; it is an effective screening mechanism; and out-of-home placement rates will only be reduced through the use of imminent risk. Those workers who do not use the imminent risk criterion do not do so because of the following reasons: it promises something it cannot deliver; it is too difficult to determine; they (the workers) would like to target cases of early prevention, and agency funding specifications hinder the use of imminent risk.

Discriminant Analysis - Measure # 2 Special Population.

The same steps, rules, and procedures used to run and interpret the discriminant analysis on the imminent risk measure are true for the special population measure. Of all the models used on this measure (i.e., measure #2 - special population), the beliefs (i.e., Model #2) held by workers are best at predicting their decisions to target services to special populations. In Model #2, belief variables were used in a prediction of workers' service decisions and this model was most successful in predicting service decisions (Percent Correctly Classified = 80%). The key predictors of service decisions turned out to be beliefs related to the agency's treatment model not being conducive to special populations, beliefs about too few community resources available to support the delivery of services to special populations, beliefs about the agency's support of special populations as a targeting criterion, and beliefs about so few cases actually being classifiable as special populations.

The key correlates of a service decision to use special population as a criterion were: (1) agreement that the agency supports targeting to special populations; (2) disagreement with the survey question that too few community resources exists to assist workers in service delivery to special population; and (3) disagreement with the item that so few cases are actually special populations. With the enhancement of the predictor capability of this model, over the previous ones, the canonical correlation was improved to .39 (p < .012).

Utility for Social Work Practice

Much of a family preservation program’s success lies in the nature of the decision-making process. Human service administrators still face the dilemma of deciding how to best target services in an effort to effectively allocate scarce resources. Program architects have long espoused the view that children at imminent risk of placement and special populations are the ones who receive family preservation. Quite to the contrary, the findings of this study reveal that workers do not appear to support targeting services through the use of the criteria
imminent risk and special population. This study uncovered three main reasons for workers' disagreement with the notion that imminent risk and special population cases should be the target of service delivery: (1) exclusionary nature of these targeting criteria; (2) problems with the conceptualization and operationalization of the terms; and (3) the exclusion of workers from formal service decisions.

Workers recognize that targeting services using imminent risk as the criterion may be feasible and cost-effective and that special populations are overrepresented and in the greatest need of service. However, they only support policies that will include a broad-based service delivery approach. In cases where they disagree with the service criteria yet use them, it is because of the influence of the agency and other advocacy groups.

This research clearly demonstrates, that workers' actual practices are counter to intended program construction. This discrepancy may be a clue in discovering why there is a lack of widespread, long-term, demonstrable family preservation program success. Such a phenomenon provides many other implications as well and poses new questions. Among many implications, we glean from this research, the fact that there is little to be gained by mandating targeting strategies if workers choose not to implement them. The view that better targeting criteria are needed is only part of the answer. We, too, need better ways of ensuring that targeting criteria will actually be implemented.

Moreover, it may be more fruitful to assess workers' views and critiques of targeting criteria and study ways in which targeting objectives can be met while recognizing workers' desire to be more inclusive in service delivery. It is also prudent that attention be given to developing strategies that will increase workers' insights into the rationale for targeting children at imminent risk of placement and special populations. We must also implement mechanisms that will prompt workers to reaffirm their commitment to meeting the needs of our most vulnerable service populations. Finally, until targeting procedures can be reformed, agency officials and indigenous advocacy groups must continue to demand that children who are at imminent risk of out-of-home placement and special populations receive services. From this research, we learn that these two groups are only the target of services when agencies and advocates press the issue.

In addition to the above implications, this research prompts more questions: (1) should the notion of targeting be abandoned?; (2) should agencies create multiple-layer service programs; (3) is there a need to "reeducate" workers and students of social work about the rationale behind targeting children at imminent risk of placement and special populations; or (4) should programs be reformed to require consistent, statewide service models, employ a profiled type of worker, and allow service workers the autonomy to define risk; thus, better ensuring that targeting will take place?; and (5) why is there such a large discrepancy in viewpoint between those who deliver family preservation services and those who design these services? These and other such questions will shape the future of family preservation programming and the construction of research endeavors.
The research offered here represent a beginning step to understanding workers' attitudes toward imminent risk and special population as service criteria in an effort to contribute to a larger, growing literature base on targeting services in family preservation programs. Although much remains to be learned about targeting approaches in family preservation services and their role in program success, it is evident that worker influence is crucial in directing policy and deciding who actually receives services.
References


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