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Family Services Advocate (FSA) Lancaster Program Evaluation, 2020–2021

by

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INTRODUCTION

In this report, we provide a program evaluation of the effectiveness of Lancaster County’s Family Services Advocate (FSA) program. Currently, the FSA program consists of one full-time paid staff member, who is housed at Compass Mark. The FSA is jointly funded by the Lancaster County Prison and a Human Services Block Grant (HSBG). Funds are set aside from the category of Human Services Development Fund (HSDF) within HSBG to support the FSA program. In addition to the HSBG, the Lancaster County Prison Store Fund also provides funding for the FSA program. A key job responsibility of the FSA staff, among others, is to provide access to needed services for children whose parents are currently incarcerated. For this program evaluation, we examine two aspects of the program: contact with clients and ability to provide clients with access to needed services. This program evaluation covers the fiscal year 2020–2021, which runs from July 1 through June 30.

This report consists of four main sections. First, we report on the demographics of all clients referred to the program. While the program staff is unable to establish contact with all client referrals, it is important to keep track of referral demographics. Currently, we lack an accurate county-wide picture of children whose parents are incarcerated, as well as their backgrounds and needs. Collecting the demographics of all clients referred to the program helps provide some sense of the larger county-wide picture. Second, we report on the demographics of all clients for whom intake was conducted. Third, we focus specifically on clients for whom intake was conducted and for whom there was a 90-days follow-up. Here, we track the effectiveness of the FSA program over the 90-days period to assess whether clients’ needs were met. Finally, we close this report with recommendations and suggestions for improving data collection procedures, as well as the program itself.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF CLIENTS REFERRED TO THE PROGRAM

In this section, we provide an in-depth look at the backgrounds and demographic information for all the clients who were referred to the program. For fiscal year 2020-2021, 198 children were referred to the program.

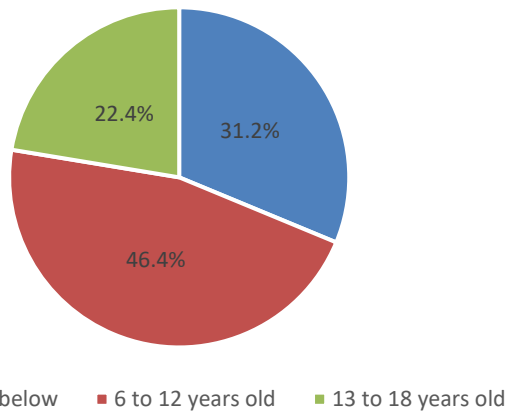
Clients’ Age

We did not have information on the child’s age for six children. Of the remaining 192 children, 89 (46.4%) were six to 12 years old. Sixty (31.2%) children were five years old and younger, while the remaining 43 (22.4%) children were between 13 and 18 years old (see Table 1 below and Figure 1 on the next page).

Table 1 Age of Children (n=192; information not available for six children)

Age Range	Number of Children (percentage in parentheses)	
5 years old and below	60	(31.2%)
6 to 12 years old	89	(46.4%)
13 to 18 years old	43	(22.4%)
	192	(100%)

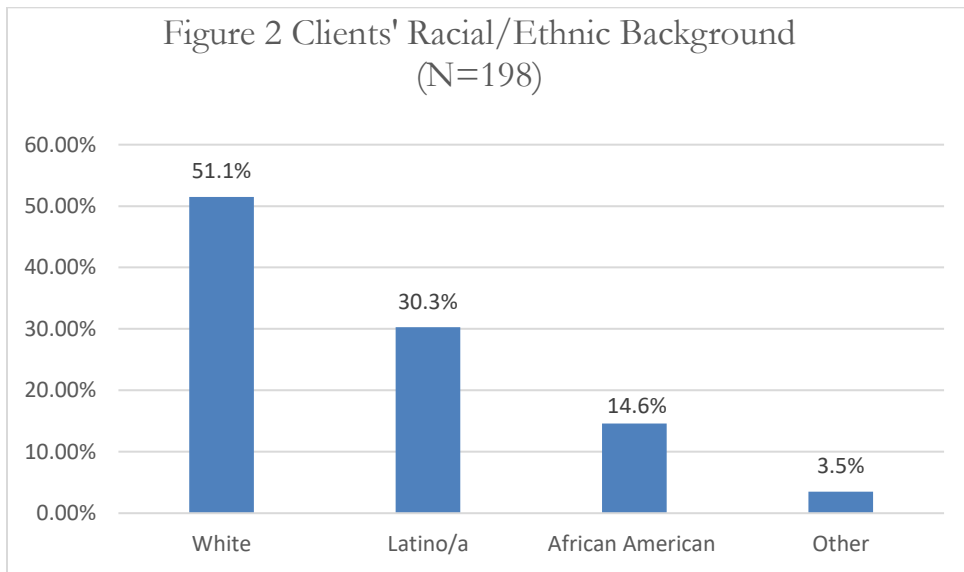
Figure 1 Ages of Clients (n=192; no information for six children)



Client’s Racial and Ethnic Backgrounds

Out of the 198 children referred to the program, 102 (51.5%) were white, 60 (30.3%) were Latino/a, and 29 (14.6%) were African American. The remaining seven (3.5%) children were of “other” racial and ethnic background (see Figure 2 below).

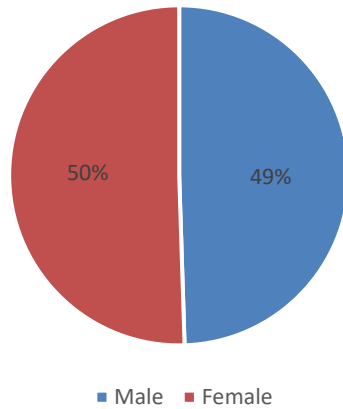
Figure 2 Clients' Racial/Ethnic Background (N=198)



Clients’ Sex

For 2020-2021, we did not have gender information for two children. Of the remaining 196 children, 99 (50%) were female and 97 (49%) were male (see Figure 3 on the next page).

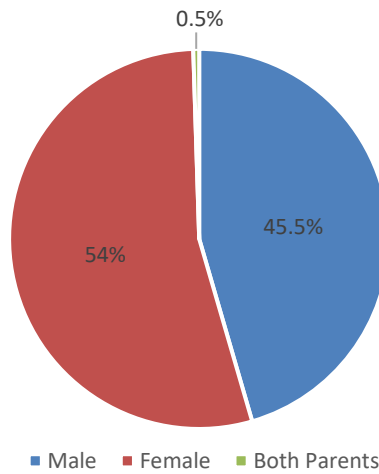
Figure 3 Clients' Sex (n=196; no information for two children)



Sex of Incarcerated Parent

For the sex of the incarcerated parent, out of the 198 clients, 107 (54%) of the children's mothers were incarcerated, 90 (45.5%) of the children's fathers were incarcerated, and two (0.5%) children had both parents incarcerated (see Figure 4 below).

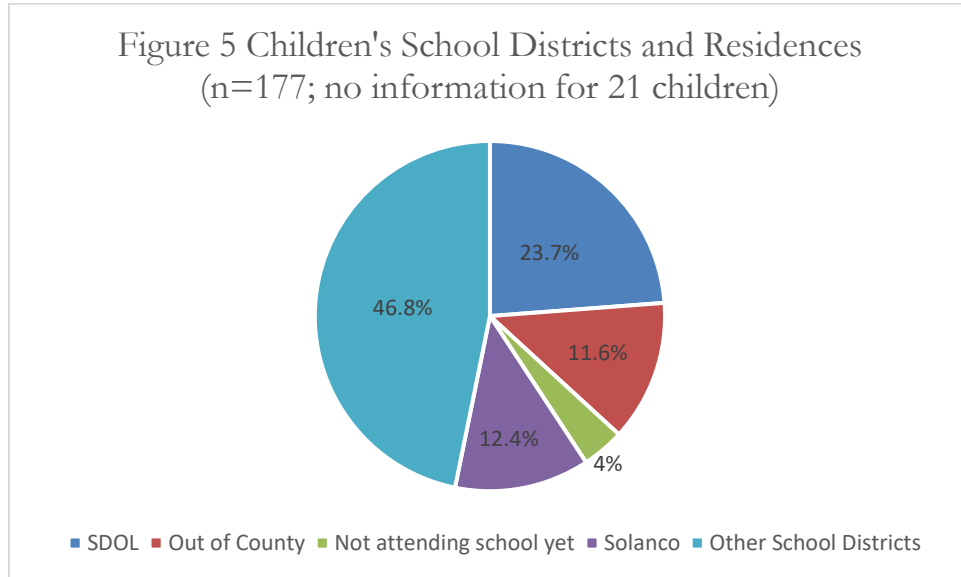
Figure 4 Sex of Incarcerated Parent (N=198)



Clients' Residence and Location

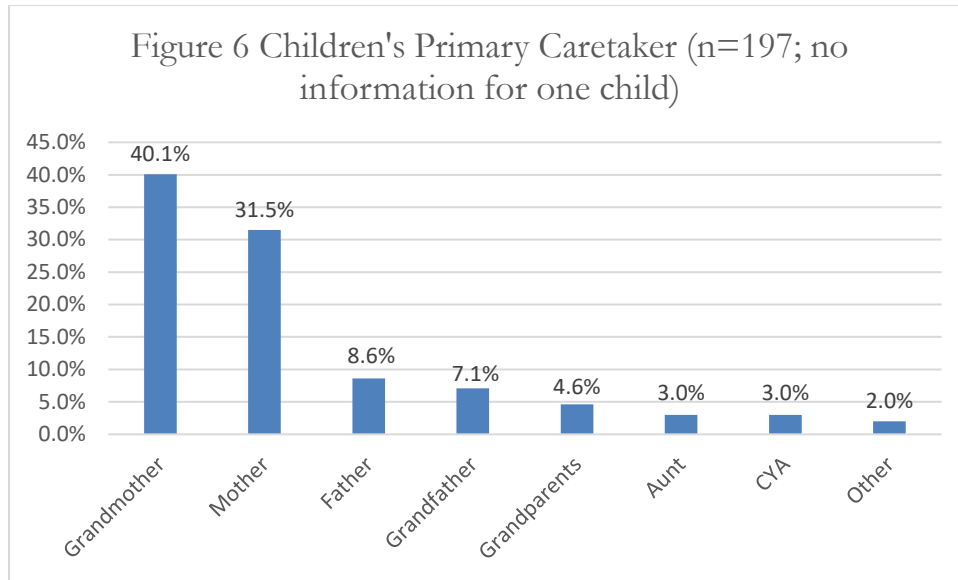
Out of the 198 children who were referred to the program, we did not have information for 21 of them. Of the remaining 177 children, 42 (23.7%) were from the School District of Lancaster, 22 (12.4%) were from the Solanco School District, and 7 (4%) children were not yet attending school. 83 (46.8%) children attended the following districts: Cocalico, Columbia Borough, Donegal, Eastern Lancaster County, Elizabethtown Area, Ephrata, Hempfield, Lampeter-Strasburg, Manheim Central, Manheim Township, Penn Manor, and Warwick. Of note, 23 (13%) children were attending school outside the county, but their

parent(s) were incarcerated in Lancaster County. As with previous evaluations, the trend of children with an incarcerated parent is by no means a “Lancaster City problem.” Children with an incarcerated parent lived and attended schools all over the county (see Figure 5 below).



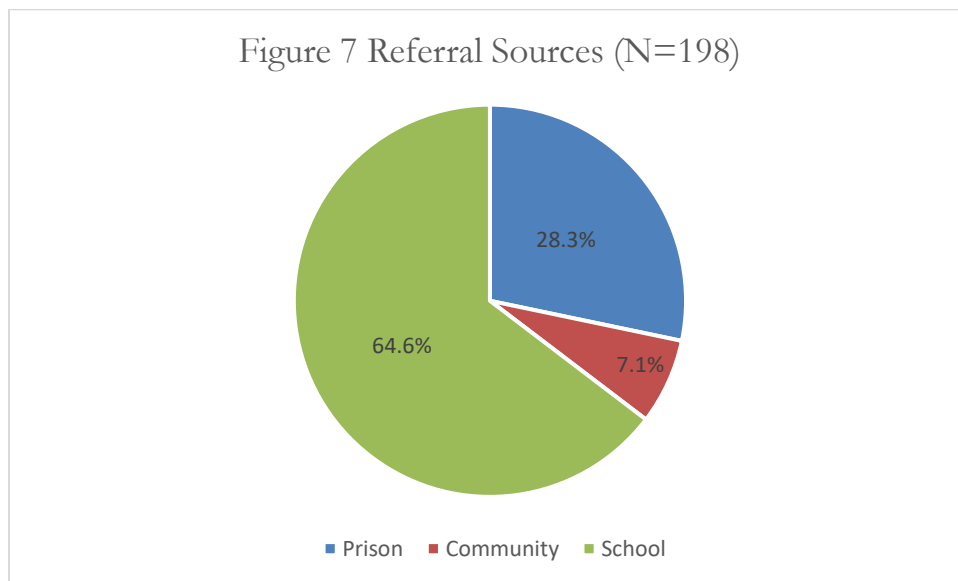
Primary Caretakers

Grandmothers were the largest category of primary caregivers for the children referred to the program (79; 40.1%). 62 (31.5%) of the children had their mother as their primary caregiver, while 17 (8.6%) of the children had their fathers as their primary caregiver. Other primary caregivers also included grandfathers, grandparents, and aunts (see Figure 6). We did not have information for one child’s primary caretaker. As seen in previous evaluations, the majority of primary caregivers are women – grandmothers, mothers, and aunts made up 74.6% of the primary caregivers for this group of children. Fathers and grandfathers do serve as primary caregivers, but the impact of incarceration remains a gendered issue as women are more likely to bear the responsibility of child-rearing (see Figure 6 on the next page).



Program's Referral Sources

For 2020–2021, 128 (64.6%) of the referrals were made through the schools. 56 (28.3%) referrals were made through the FSA's visits to the county prison, while 14 (7.1%) referrals were made through the community and community organizations (see Figure 7 below).



DEMOGRAPHICS OF CLIENTS FOR WHOM INTAKE WAS CONDUCTED

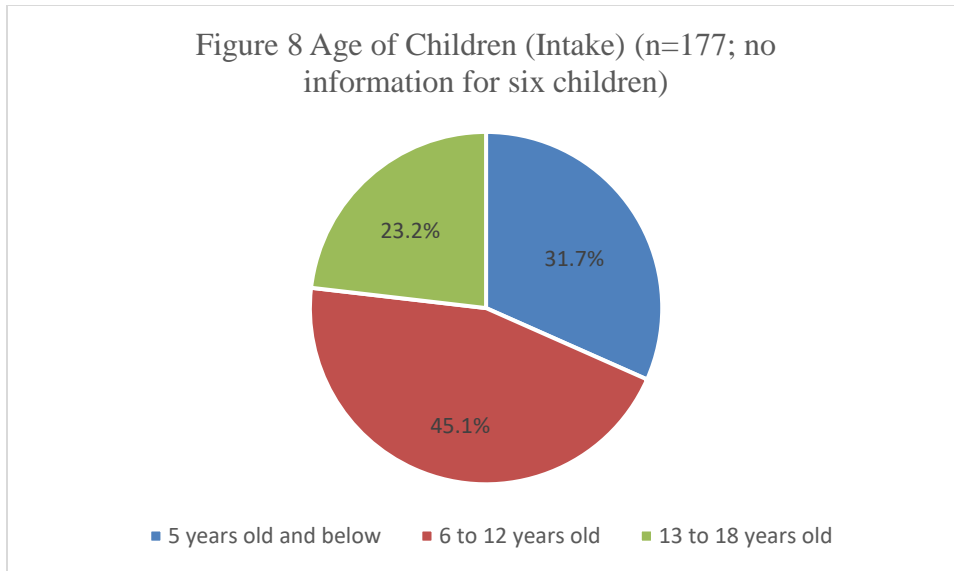
In this section, we provide a detailed look at the backgrounds and demographic information for the clients for whom intake and case management was conducted. It can be difficult to reach clients, and the FSA staff member works diligently to do so. For each referral, the FSA staff member makes three attempts to establish contact. For fiscal year 2020–2021, contact was established, and intake and case management conducted, for 183 (92.4%) of the original 198 clients referred to the program.

Clients' Age

Of the 183 children, we did not have age information for six children. Of the remaining 177 children, 56 (31.7%) were five years old and younger. 80 (45.1%) were between the six and 12 years old, while the remaining 41 (23.2%) were between 13 and 18 years old (see Table 2 and Figure 8 below).

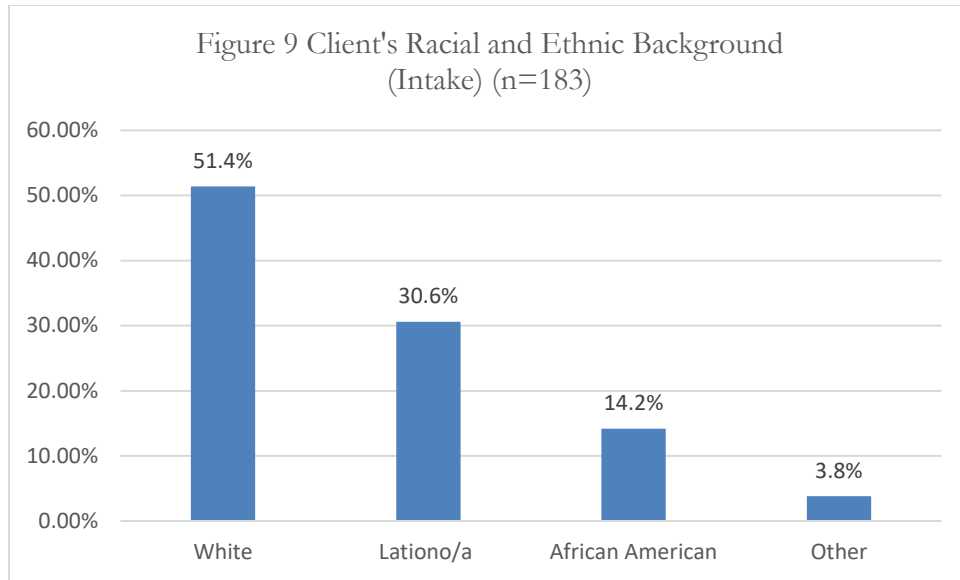
Table 2 Age of Children (n=183; information not available for six children)

Age Range	Number of Children (percentage in parentheses)	
5 years old and below	56	(31.7%)
6 to 12 years old	80	(45.1%)
13 to 18 years old	41	(23.2%)
	183	(100%)



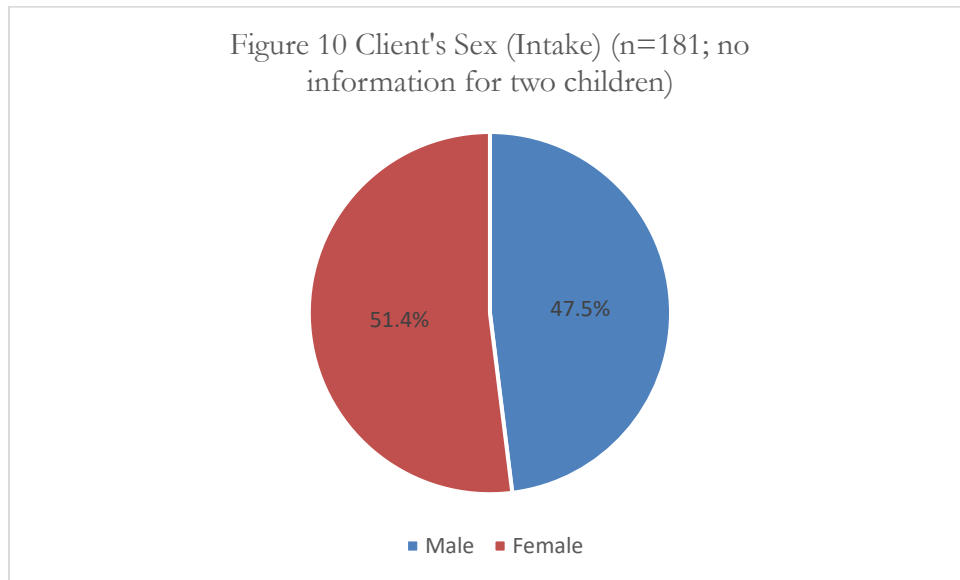
Clients' Racial and Ethnic Backgrounds

Out of the 183 children for whom intake and case management were conducted, 94 (51.4%) were white, 56 (30.6%) were Latino/a, and 26 (14.2%) were African American. The remaining seven (3.8%) children were of “other” racial and ethnic background (see Figure 9 on the next page).



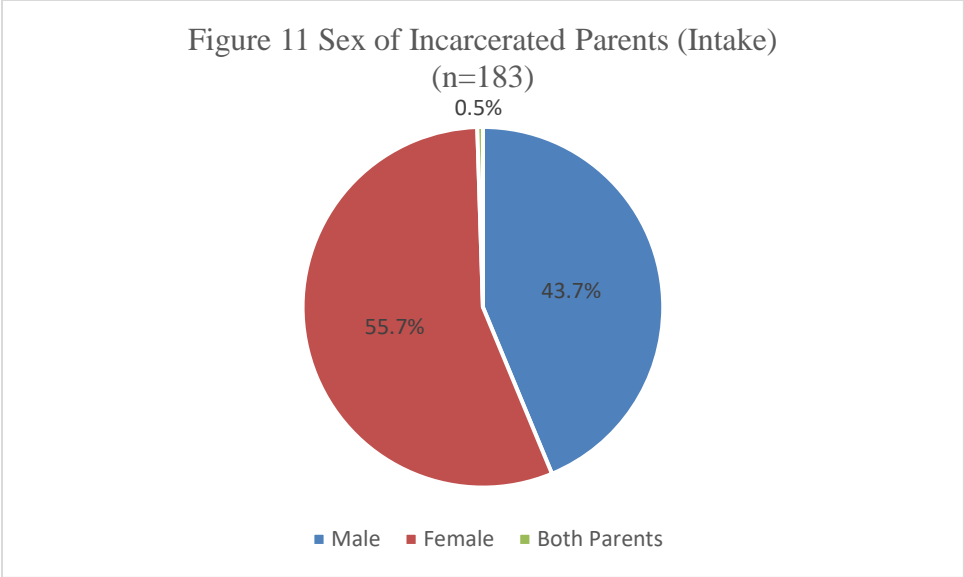
Clients' Sex

Of the 183 children in the intake group, we did not have sex information for two children. Of the remaining 181 children, 94 (51.4%) of the children were female, while 87 (47.5%) of children were male (see Figure 10 below).



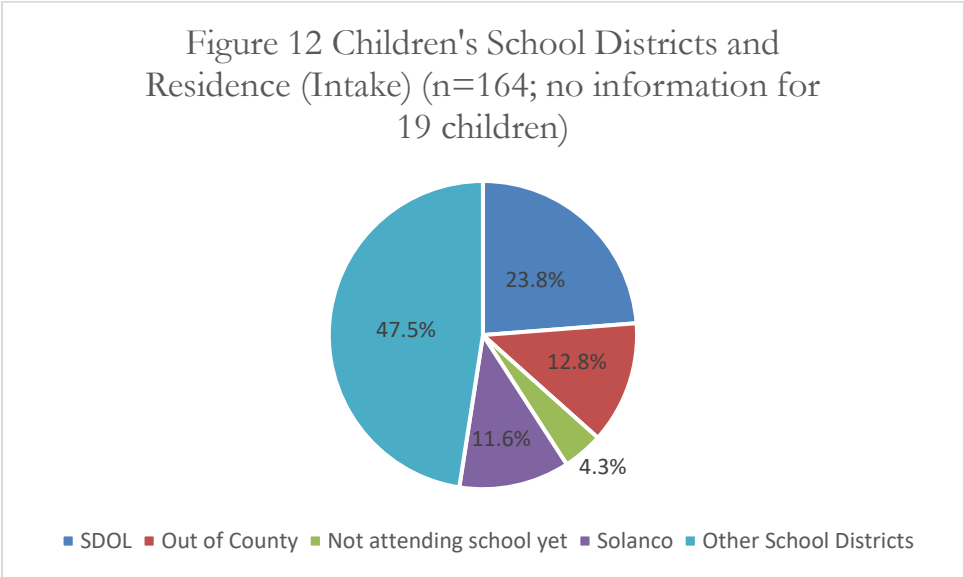
Sex of Incarcerated Parent

For the sex of incarcerated parents, 102 (55.7%) of the children's mothers were incarcerated, 80 (43.7%) of the children's fathers were incarcerated, and one (0.5%) child had both parents incarcerated (see Figure 11 on the next page).



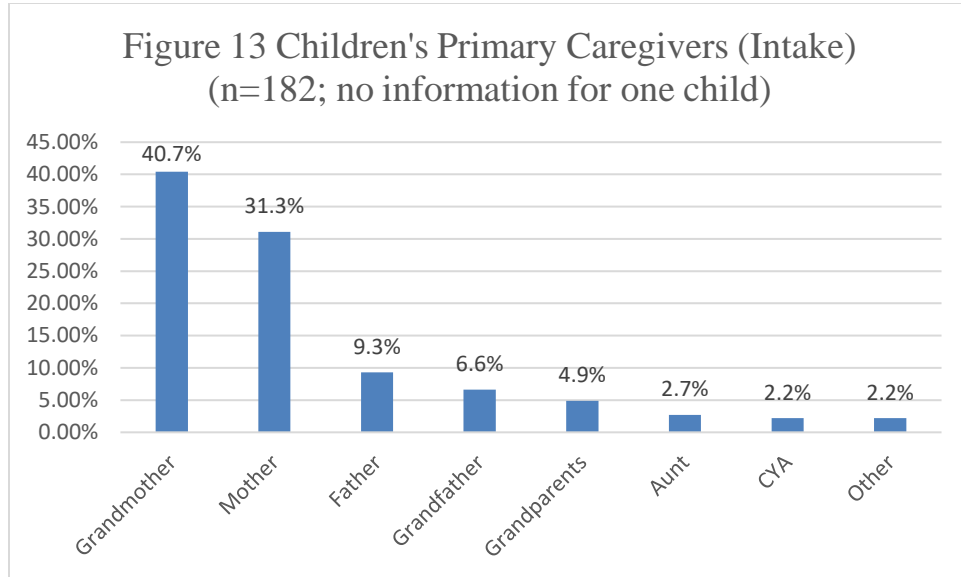
Clients’ Residence and Location

Out of the 183 children for whom intake was conducted, we did not have residence and school district location for 19 children. Of the remaining 164 children, 39 (23.8%) were from the School District of Lancaster, 19 (11.6%) were from the Solanco School District, and 7 (4.3%) children were not attending school yet. 78 (47.5%) children attended the following districts: Cocalico, Columbia Borough, Donegal, Eastern Lancaster County, Elizabethtown Area, Ephrata, Hempfield, Lampeter-Strasburg, Manheim Central, Manheim Township, Penn Manor, and Warwick. Of note, 21 (12.8%) children were attending school outside the county, but their parent(s) were incarcerated in Lancaster County. As with previous evaluations, we emphasize that the trend of children with an incarcerated parent is by no means a ‘Lancaster City problem.’ Children with an incarcerated parent lived and attended schools all over the county (see Figure 12 below).



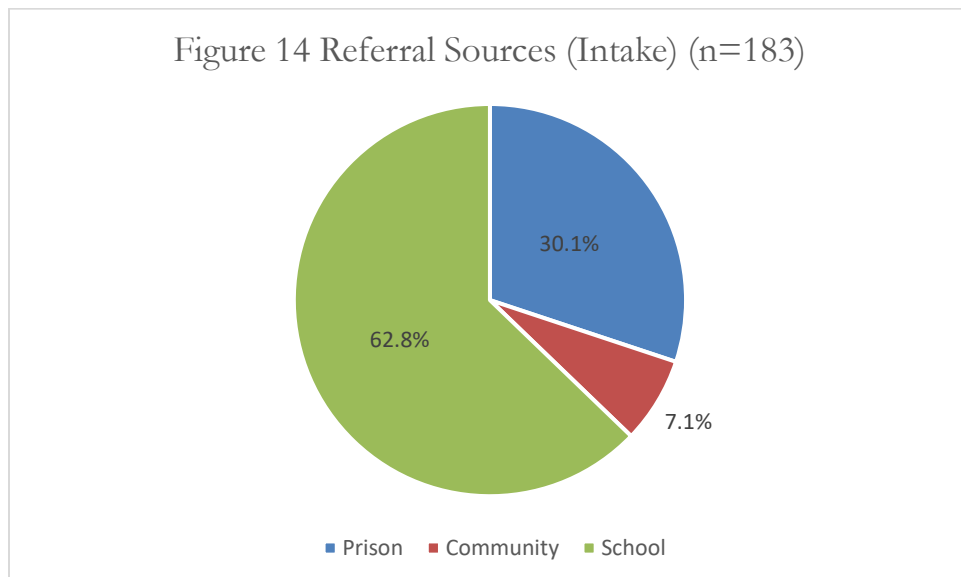
Primary Caretakers

Out of 183 children, we did not have information for one child’s primary caretaker. Grandmothers were the largest category of primary caregivers for the children in the intake group (74; 40.7%), while mothers were the second largest category (57; 31.3%). The third largest category of primary caregivers were fathers (17; 9.3%) (see Figure 13 below).



Program’s Referral Sources

Finally, for children in the intake group, a majority of the referrals were made through the schools (115; 62.8%). 55 (30.1%) referrals were made through the FSA’s visits to the county prison, while 13 (7.1%) referrals were made through the community and community organizations (see Figure 14 below).



In our program evaluation for the 2019–2020 fiscal year, we included a sub-section comparing all referrals and clients for whom intake was conducted. Our goal in doing so was to determine whether core demographics matched up for both groups. Divergences could indicate whether outreach needs to be more focused and intentional to ensure that all demographic groups were able to access the FSA program. For this program evaluation, we conducted a comparison as well. During this fiscal year, unlike last year, the core demographics of referrals and clients for whom intake was conducted aligned.

EFFECTIVENESS OF FSA PROGRAM IN MEETING CLIENTS' NEEDS

Clients' Needs at Intake

One of the main responsibilities of the FSA program is to help children and their primary caregivers access the services they need. To that end, we measure several services that children with incarcerated parents might require. Table 3 (on the next page) focuses on the intake group of 183 clients and the identified services that they reported needing help accessing.

Not surprisingly, a large percentage of children in the intake group requested help establishing legal guardianship (55; 30.1%) and accessing their incarcerated parent (46; 25.1%). 50 (27.3%) clients requested help accessing advocacy in schools. 30 (16.4%) clients requested help accessing health insurance and 27 (14.8%) clients requested help accessing therapy. Of note, 23 (12.6%) clients requested help accessing support through CYA and food stamps respectively, while 20 (10.9%) clients requested help accessing clothing.

Compared to the previous year, we noticed decreased percentages in several help request areas. Requests for help in establishing legal guardianship declined (from 34% the previous year to 30.1% this year), as did access to the incarcerated parent (from 41.2% the previous year to 25.1%). Interestingly, requests for access to advocacy in schools held steady (27.3% in both years). Conversely, we saw increased percentages for help requests in the areas of clothing (from 2.6% the previous year to 10.9% this year), stable housing (from 5.9% the previous year to 9.8% this year), and food (from 5.9% the previous year to 8.7% this year).

For this fiscal year, 6.0% of the children in the intake group identified assistance accessing multiple needs. This is a percentage that has been declining for the past two years – from 81.8% two years ago to 10.5% last year and to 6% this year. We noted last year that it would be worthwhile for us to continue monitoring these data since the first decline was very steep. Once again, this year, the percentage continues to decline, albeit at a much less steep pace. We know that parental incarceration often impacts, simultaneously, various aspects of children's lives (e.g., see Harris, 2020). Hence, we expect clients to request help accessing multiple needs. Thus, it is interesting to see the percentage declines of clients requesting help accessing multiple needs. We note again that this is a trend we should continue to monitor.

Over the years that the FSA program has been in existence, the requests for assistance in the areas of access to the incarcerated parent and establishing legal guardianship have generally been numerous. Two years ago, we noted a high level of need for basic subsistence needs, specifically for food security. Last year, emotional and mental health concerns were of great urgency. Interestingly, during these past two fiscal years, the level of requests for assistance with advocacy in schools have increased and have stayed at a high level (18.9% for 2018-2019 to 27.3% for 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 respectively). Given that we entered a global pandemic in March 2020 which disrupted schooling significantly, these higher request levels might be an anomaly.

Table 3 **Children’s Needs Assessments at Intake (2020-2021) (n=183)**

Need	Number of Children Whose Caregivers Requested Access to Service (percentages in parentheses)	
Establishment of legal guardianship	55	(30.1%)
Access to advocacy in a school setting	50	(27.3%)
Access to incarcerated parent	46	(25.1%)
Access to health insurance	30	(16.4%)
Access to therapy	27	(14.8%)
Access to support through CYA	23	(12.6%)
Access to food stamps	23	(12.6%)
Access to clothing	20	(10.9%)
Access to stable housing	18	(9.8%)
Access to cash assistance	16	(8.7%)
Access to food	16	(8.7%)
Access to primary care physician	10	(5.5%)
Access to parenting classes	5	(2.7%)
Access to domestic violence services	4	(2.2%)
Access to WIC	2	(1.1%)

More than one service requested	11	(6.0%)

Clients’ Needs at 90 Days Follow Up

In assessing the program’s effectiveness, we focus on the 167 children for whom an intake was conducted, as well as a 90-days follow-up. Our evaluation of the program’s effectiveness focuses on the percentage of children whose need for assistance declined at 90-days’ assessment. **If the program is effective, the percentage of children who need assistance will be lower at 90 days.** By this indicator, the program has been **highly effective in meeting the needs of the children, as the percentage of children needing assistance in every area (save one) decreased at 90 days (see Table 7 on the next page).**

Table 7 Children’s Needs Assessments at Intake and at 90-Days for 2020-2021 (n=167)

(Number of Children Whose Caregivers Requested Access to Service; Percentages in parentheses)

Need	Intake	90 Days	Outcome
Establishment of legal guardianship	55 (32.9%)	0 (0.0%)	IMPROVED
Access to advocacy in school setting	50 (29.9%)	50 (29.9%)	NO CHANGE
Access to incarcerated parent	46 (27.5%)	5 (3.0%)	IMPROVED
Access to health insurance	30 (18.0%)	0 (0.0%)	IMPROVED
Access to therapy	27 (16.2%)	0 (0.0%)	IMPROVED
Access to support through CYA	23 (13.8%)	0 (0.0%)	IMPROVED
Access to food stamps	23 (13.8%)	1 (0.6%)	IMPROVED
Access to clothing	20 (12.0%)	0 (0.0%)	IMPROVED
Access to stable housing	18 (10.8%)	4 (2.4%)	IMPROVED
Access to cash assistance	16 (9.6%)	0 (0.0%)	IMPROVED
Access to food	16 (9.6%)	0 (0.0%)	IMPROVED
Access to primary care physician	10 (6.0%)	0 (0.0%)	IMPROVED
Access to parenting classes	5 (3.0%)	0 (0.0%)	IMPROVED
Access to domestic violence services	4 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	IMPROVED
Access to WIC	2 (1.2%)	0 (0.0%)	IMPROVED

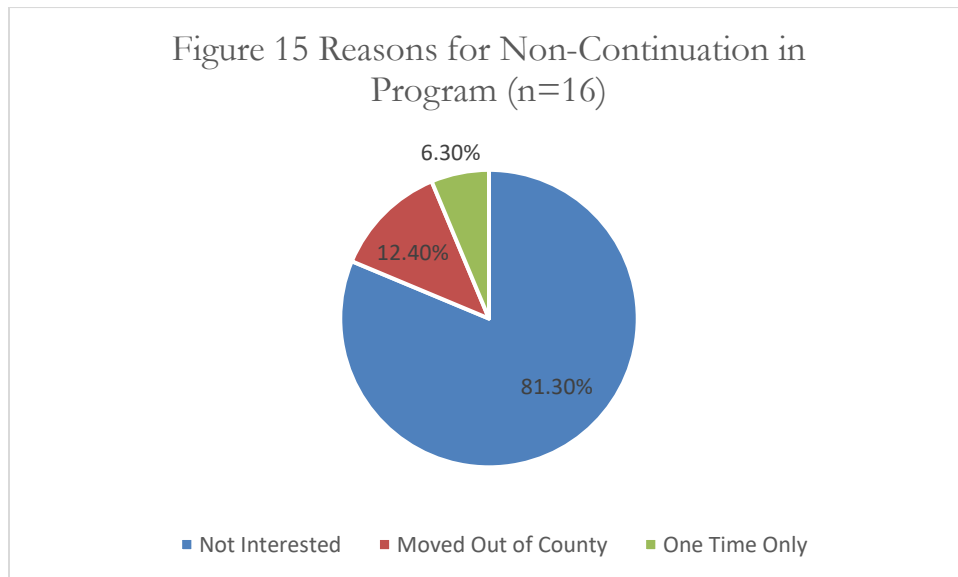
More than one service requested	11 (6.6%)	0 (0.0%)	IMPROVED

Of note, the percentage of children whose caregivers requested access to multiple services has improved significantly – declining from 11 (6.6%) to 0 (0.0%). We also see high levels of improvement in helping clients establish legal guardianship (a decline from 55 (32.9%) to 0 (0.0%)), gain access to their incarcerated parent (a decline from 46 (27.5%) to 5 (3.0%)), gain access to health insurance (a decline from 30 (18%) to 0 (0.0%)), gain access to therapy (a decline from 27 (16.2%) to 0 (0.0%)), gain access to support through CYA (a decline from 23 (13.8%) to 0 (0.0%)), and gain access to food stamps (a decline from 23 (13.8%) to 1 (0.6%)).

We note two areas where there were relatively smaller decreases. 18 (10.8%) clients requested assistance with accessing stable housing, and at the 90-days follow-up, 4 (2.4%) clients still needed help with this need. Like many areas of the country, Lancaster County currently suffers from a shortage of affordable and stable housing options. The fact that the FSA staff member is able to assist so many of the clients access stable housing is highly commendable. Most notably, the percentage of clients requesting help accessing advocacy in the school setting did not change – it stayed at 29.9%. This evaluation covers July 2020 through June 2021, when major disruptions to schooling occurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given these constraints and the extraordinary duties that school faculty and staff were facing, it is not surprising that securing advocacy in a school setting would present significant challenges.

Retention in the FSA Program

At 90 days, 167 (91.3%) of the 183 children served at intake maintained contact with the FSA. This is an extraordinary program retention rate, especially when there is only one staff member maintaining contact with the intake group. We strongly commend the program staff for their work, time, and effort in maintaining this impressive retention rate. What happened to the 16 (9.6%) children who had lost contact with the FSA (see Figure 15 below)?



Of these 16 children, 1 (6.3%) needed only one-time assistance. 2 (12.4%) children had moved out of the county, while 13 (81.3%) were no longer interested in utilizing the services of the program.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Since we began conducting program evaluations of the FSA program, we have continually noted the extraordinary demands placed on the county's sole FSA staff member. The data for 2020-2021 once again support our assessment – it is simply not feasible or sustainable, for one staff member, to shoulder this heavy workload on their own. In addition to the caseload for the current fiscal year, it is important to remember

that the FSA staff member continues to work with clients from previous years. Our first recommendation, which we have proposed in every single program evaluation, is to provide more resources and staffing for this program.

In conversations and discussions with the FSA staff member, it is clear that the services she provides go beyond what is measured in the current needs assessment. Thus, our second recommendation, which we also proposed last year, is that we conduct an annual review (and if needed, a revision) of the needs assessment instrument to ensure that we are capturing accurately both the workload of the FSA staff member and the needs of children with incarcerated parents in this county. For instance, the current needs assessment instrument does not capture requests for assistance accessing furniture like baby car seats, cots, and child appropriate furniture. In prior years, there have also been times when primary caretakers needed financial assistance with paying water and utility bills – situations which are not captured in the current instrument. The COVID-19 pandemic has shed further light on children's needs, particularly in accessing technology and reliable high-speed internet. We noted in previous evaluations that an annual review also provides us with the opportunity to refine the measures we are currently using, e.g., recording the method through which children are maintaining contact with their incarcerated parent.

Third, we would like to propose more in-depth analysis of the data. For instance, with several years' worth of program evaluations at this point, it would be an appropriate time to begin the process of longitudinal comparison. These comparisons will give us a broader picture of how the program's clientele and their needs have changed over time in the county. In addition, we might also approach the data through cross-tabulating clients' requested needs access with various demographic traits. This would help us determine whether particular groups of children were more likely to need assistance assessing particular needs. We have begun preliminary cross-tabulation analysis and have found some interesting trends. Looking at age groups, for instance, at intake, we found that children aged 6 to 12 years old were much more likely to request access to advocacy in school settings (26; 44.8%), compared to children five years old and younger (14; 27.5%) and those 13 to 18 years old (10; 28.6%). Another stark difference could be seen in the child's gender – at intake, females were more likely to request assistance with accessing therapy (20; 27.8%) than males (7; 10.1%).

Fourth, given the crucial role that primary caretakers play in the lives of children with incarcerated parents, program evaluations must, of necessity, examine how well these caretakers' needs are being met. In last year's program evaluation, we proposed surveying primary caregivers about their experiences in working with the FSA, and their perceptions of the assistance they have received. We also proposed surveying primary caregivers on their perceptions of how the FSA program would better work with them. In recent conversations with the FSA staff member, we understand that inquiries have been made about the availability of primary caretaker support groups. Clearly, primary caretakers of children with incarcerated parents face challenges of their own. While the FSA program's focus is primarily on the children, thought needs to be paid to the primary caregivers since their health and well-being no doubt impact their charges.

Finally, we propose a comprehensive overview of the extant literature on which programs for children of incarcerated parents have been successful. While the county's FSA program is performing very well, we might begin to consider what other approaches and programs have been successful. Based on the results of a literature review, for instance, we might be able to identify other programs with which the FSA might partner to strengthen positive outcomes for its clients. This is a labor and time intensive undertaking, and we propose that team members of the university's Center for Public Scholarship & Social Change might be able to take the lead on this endeavor.

References

Harris, Sylvia A. 2020. *The Shadow System: Mass Incarceration and the American Family*. New York, NY: Bold Type Books.