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Research Subcommittee Research Review

Research Summary: Huefner, Jonathan C.; Pick, Robert M.; Smith, Gail L.; Stevens, Amy L.; Mason, W. Alex (2015). Parental involvement in residential care: Distance, frequency of contact, and youth outcomes. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24(5), 1481-1489.

Overview – Residential treatment (RT) programs have long embraced family involvement for youth in residential care, in many cases viewing the physical separation of youth and family as inherently problematic. Family contact is viewed as an important treatment component, a view supported by research. This study examines a chief factor that impacts family contact, the distance of family from the residential facility, and its relationship to the frequency and type of contact (youth “home visits”, phone contact and family visits to the facility), and how these factors interact to affect youth outcomes. The authors predicted that 1) the farther the distance from the RT facility, that fewer contacts that would occur; and 2) that greater contact would be associated with better outcomes. In addition, the authors anticipated that over-night home visits by youth would be associated with more positive outcomes than family visits to the facility, and that weekday phone calls would have a more positive impact than weekend calls.

Method – Data for this study came from a single multi-site agency database and included records from 350 youth who had been admitted over a 27-month period. Information about distance and family contact was derived from the records, and outcomes were based on routine agency collection of information for pre-discharge (disruptive behavior in the two weeks prior to discharge), discharge (a combined measure reflecting goal attainment and other factors at discharge) and 6-months post-discharge (a rating based on a subset of 14 status items in a follow-up interview). Data were analyzed using a PATH analysis, which is a statistical tool that allows one to infer directional relationships among multiple variables.

Results – Results from this study largely supported the authors’ predictions. Greater distance from home was related to fewer face-to-face contacts (although it was not related to the frequency of phone contact), and home visits (but not program visits) were related to positive outcomes. Weekday phone contacts were not related to outcomes at all, but weekend phone calls were related to negative outcomes (disruptive behavior and departure success). A surprising finding of the study was that greater distance from the facility was related to better outcomes.

Discussion – The findings from this study have important implications for RT programs. First, they add to the evidence that in-person family contacts have clear positive impact on youth outcomes, something that cannot be overstressed in working with youth in RT. However, the findings also indicate that this is only the case for home visits and not for family visits to the facility. The authors suggest that this difference may be due to the shorter duration and different nature of campus visits as compared with longer and more intensive home visits. It also may be the case that youth with fewer home visits are youth with weaker family connections, which in turn are likely related to poorer outcomes. Regardless, the practice in some RT programs of mandating family visits to the facility rather than home as a consequence for problematic behavior should be reconsidered in light of the finding of the differential value of these visits.

The authors discuss the finding of negative relationships between weekend calls and outcomes in terms of suggestions that these calls are often focused on weekend plans being cancelled by the family and the youth’s unhappiness with this. It may also be the case that more problematic youth are less likely to be deemed safe for home visits, and more likely to be in the RT on a

weekend to make the calls; if this is the case the negative outcomes are less surprising. With respect to the finding of greater distance from family being related to better outcomes, the authors offer a few speculative suggestions, but call for further research to better understand this finding.

Reviewer comments –It also would be interesting to know how some of the individual subject variables (gender, race, etc.) interact with the factors of distance, contact and outcomes.

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