



DCF Needs Assessment 2018

Executive Summary: Phase IV Survey Findings and Synthesis

Needs and service use among children, their families of origin, and resource parents

Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

The full report presents the findings from the fourth phase of a multi-method Needs Assessment examining the needs of families served by the Division of Child Protection and Permanency (CP&P), a division of New Jersey’s Department of Children and Families (DCF). The purpose of this endeavor is to provide data for DCF to understand the needs of children, youth, and families, and to utilize that information to guide the prioritization of needs for implementing actionable change to enhance the current service array. This Needs Assessment has been conducted by Rutgers University School of Social Work’s Child Welfare and Well-Being Research Unit. Phases I through III included review of: extant DCF reports and assessments; archival administrative data analysis; and qualitative data collection and analysis, respectively.

This executive summary provides an overview of Phase IV of the Needs Assessment and highlights its main findings. Readers are encouraged to refer to the full report for a full treatment of the study’s methods, results, and implications.

Methods

The current phase of the Needs Assessment involved surveys of three critical stakeholder groups: (1) CP&P staff, including intake workers and permanency workers (2) parents from families of origin, including those with children in the home (in-home) and those whose children had been removed to foster care (out-of-home), and (3) resource parents providing out-of-home foster care. Together, nearly 2,000 people participated in these surveys, providing extensive, rich data about the needs that families face during the course of their involvement with CP&P and the services currently available.

Executive Summary: Table 1. Survey Details

	Survey Method	Participants (N=1,952)	Response Rate/ Cooperation Rate
Staff Survey	Online	637	30%
Resource Parent Survey	Online	739	46%
Parents from Families of Origin Survey – <i>In-home</i>	Telephone	391	8% ^a
Parents from Families of Origin Survey – <i>Out-of-home</i>	Telephone	185	4% ^a

^a Cooperation Rate: The number of complete and partial surveys divided by the number of people who answered the phone when called by the research team.

Each survey asked participants to evaluate family needs in eight major domains: housing, family poverty, domestic violence, caregiver mental health, caregiver substance use, child mental health, child substance use, and parenting skills. Likewise, the surveys asked about the services available to meet needs within each of these domains, focusing on their availability, accessibility, and adequacy (operationalized in this report as quality and helpfulness). The data collected from staff, resource parents, and parents from families of origin tell a story about what families are facing in the course of their involvement with CP&P and the extent to which services can provide support.

Findings

Previous phases of the Needs Assessment have emphasized a consistent finding: the experience of need in at least one of the assessed domains is shared by families who become involved with CP&P. Often, these

families, whose involvement with the Division indicates some level of risk has been identified, are experiencing multiple needs at once.

Finding: Families involved with CP&P have substantial needs across domains.

Asked to estimate the percentage of families on their caseload in the last 30 days with needs in each of the eight domains, staff described what they perceive as the prevalence of needs in the population served. According to intake and permanency workers, nearly half of the families they encounter in a month are struggling with issues related to caregiver substance use, and half are coping with needs associated with family poverty (See Executive Summary: Table 2). **Staff also reported that 60% of the families they encountered in the month before the survey was administered were dealing with needs in three or more of these domains.**

Executive Summary: Table 2. Staff-estimated percentage of families on caseloads with needs in each domain in the past 30 days^a

	%
Caregiver Substance Use	49.3
Family Poverty	48.1
Caregiver Mental Health	39.0
Parenting Knowledge	27.0
Child Mental Health	26.9
Parenting Capacity	26.8
Domestic Violence	26.6
Housing	25.9
Homelessness	17.3
Child Substance Use	15.1

^aThe housing domain was split into two subdomains for this question: housing and homelessness. The parenting skills domain was also split into two subdomains for this question: parenting knowledge and parenting capacity.

Parents from families of origin were also asked to describe their needs since their CP&P case was opened. The most commonly reported needs were in the areas of family poverty and caregiver mental health, echoing the estimates of staff.

While previous phases of the Needs Assessment did not explicitly focus on resource parents, the current phase of the project allowed for a closer look at the needs and service use of this group. Resource parents were most likely to describe issues related to the child in their care, specifically the child’s mental health, but needs were reported in other areas as well. For instance, some resource parents reported having needs related to family poverty and housing. Compared to parents from families of origin, the needs expressed by resource parents were largely less urgent. Where the former were more likely to describe needing help finding stable housing, resource parents’ needs were often related to needing more space or additional furniture.

Finding: Family poverty was one of the most commonly-reported needs. As an underlying, structural issue affecting families, it cuts across all of the domains addressed in the Needs Assessment, with a particular impact on housing.

Across all three surveys administered, problems related to family poverty emerge as common challenges for families involved with CP&P. In addition to staff estimates of need, reported above, evidence comes from parents' self-reported income. Nearly 70% of parents from families of origin listed their annual, household income as being below \$20,000. For reference, the Federal Poverty Level in 2017 was \$20,420 for a family of three (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

That many system-involved families are economically disadvantaged does not come as a surprise. The issues that bring a family to the attention of the child welfare system are often closely linked to family poverty. Families experiencing poverty are at higher risk of experiencing more stress, leading to increased risk of maltreatment, and they are more likely to live in disadvantaged neighborhoods with fewer resources. Evidence indicates that children living in poverty are more likely to come to the attention of the child welfare system because of the accumulation of risk across domains (Jonson-Reid, Drake, and Kohl, 2009).

A strength of the survey methodology used in this phase of the Needs Assessment is that it allowed caregivers to describe their needs in their own words. Indeed, their responses indicated that economic insecurity influenced their experiences of need in other domains, most notably housing. Describing their housing-related needs, parents from families of origin and some resource parents noted that they had trouble making their rent, paying utility bills, or acquiring furniture.

For families struggling to make ends meet, there may be multiple causes, many of which are structural or societal. A lack of suitable employment opportunities, the high cost of living in New Jersey, and strict eligibility standards for accessing support services may each contribute to the intractability of poverty-related problems among families served by CP&P. These issues, certainly, are beyond the scope of what DCF is equipped to address as a single department. Without widespread policy changes and significant investment on the part of state and federal government, family poverty will remain a major challenge for families involved with CP&P and for families at risk of becoming involved with CP&P.

Finding: In most domains, there are services available to serve families with needs.

With the exception of those services related to family poverty and housing, there was stronger alignment between the level of needs among families and the services that are available in the other need domains. As the following table shows, services were most commonly received in the area of caregiver mental health, followed by parenting skills and caregiver substance use. These were among the more prevalent needs in the population, so it is a sign of a degree of match between needs and services that utilization is high in these areas. Notably, 20% of staff also indicated that services related to caregiver substance use were most closely matched to the level of need in the population.

In all cases, more than half of the parents accessing services were referred to them by CP&P, suggesting that workers' assessments and practice are serving to connect families to supports that they otherwise would not have had.

Resource parents also accessed a range of services, most frequently in the area of child mental health. Kin caregivers were more likely than non-kin resource parents to use services related to family poverty, parenting skills, housing, and caregiver mental health. Again, in several areas (child mental health, parenting skills, housing, and family poverty), the majority of resource parents received their referral to services from CP&P. It should be noted that, in the areas of family poverty and housing, the services used by resource parents addressed less serious needs than those used by parents from families of origin.

Executive Summary: Table 3. Caregiver receipt of services by need domain

	Parents from Families of Origin		Resource Parents	
	n	%	n	%
Caregiver Mental Health	258	45.6	73	10.2
Parenting Skills	189	33.5	186	25.5
Caregiver Substance Use	187	33.2	<10	1.4
Child Mental Health	146	26.7	256	37.1
Family Poverty	96	16.9	233	32.5
Domestic Violence	79	14.0	<10	1.2
Housing	72	12.7	123	17.1
Child Substance Use	<10	7.4	<10	5.0

n: number of item respondents reporting needs in given domain; %: percent of item respondents reporting needs in given domain

For parents from families of origin and resource parents who did not receive services in a given area, the surveys asked if those caregivers thought services could have been helpful. With the exception of housing and family poverty, less than one quarter of parents from families of origin who did not receive services thought it would have been helpful if they had. A subset of those did receive a referral from CP&P but did not ultimately access the service. Certainly it is important to note that there is a percentage of parents from families of origin who feel they could benefit from services but are not connected to them. However, these numbers are small in comparison to the number who do in fact access the services they need. There were even fewer parents who did not receive services but thought it would have been helpful if they did.

Finding: When parents received services, most found them to be helpful, across domains.

Among those parents from families of origin and resource parents who did receive services, the vast majority found them to be helpful, across almost all domains. In fact, over three quarters of parents from families of origin—and in some cases far more—agreed or strongly agreed that the service they got was helpful. Three quarters or more resource parents also found the services they received to be helpful, except in some areas where fewer than 10 respondents reported accessing the service.

These findings largely align with staff reports on the quality of services across need domains. In all but one need domain, more than half of the staff agreed or strongly agreed that services available to families were of high quality; the exception was family poverty services, which only one third of staff thought were of high quality. As discussed previously, family poverty is an area where the need is widespread and services may be quite limited; staff, who see these gaps across families they serve, may be especially likely to find available resources to be inadequate.

Executive Summary: Table 4. Helpfulness of Services by Need Domain: Respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that the services they received were helpful.

	Parents from Families of Origin		Resource Parents	
	n	%	n	%
Child Substance Use	<10	88.9	<10	80.0
Parenting Skills	165	88.7	152	82.6
Domestic Violence	67	85.9	<10	33.3
Child Mental Health	110	79.7	189	75.9
Family Poverty	75	79.0	191	84.1
Caregiver Mental Health	198	78.6	62	74.3
Caregiver Substance Use	144	77.4	<10	50.0
Housing	55	76.4	89	75.4

n: number of item respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that the services received were helpful; %: percent of item respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that the services received were helpful.

Finding: Caregiver and staff data suggest that there are service gaps in the areas of housing and family poverty.

Across the three surveys, family poverty and housing emerged as areas where families’ need for help seems to outstrip the available services. Asked about the availability of services, only 36% of staff reported that there were enough services in the areas of both family poverty and housing. Additionally, 58% of staff identified housing as the need domain characterized by the largest gap between family needs and services; 14% saw the largest gap in the area of family poverty.

Moreover, among parents from families of origin who did not receive services in these areas, large numbers indicated that services would have been helpful. Nearly 4 in 5 non-recipients of services related to family poverty (62, 79%) thought they could have benefitted from services, and three quarters of non-recipients of housing services (358, 75%) thought supports in that area would have been helpful. Likewise, family poverty (235, 52%) and housing (250, 43%) were the domains where most resource parents, especially kin, thought services could have helped. The needs these resource parents described were less severe than those reported by parents from families of origin, however. Taken together, this suggests rather widespread unmet need in New Jersey related to family poverty and housing, certainly among parents from families of origin who become involved with CP&P. Again it must be stressed that these are structural issues in the State that CP&P itself is not equipped to address; their resolution depends largely on systemic change at both the state and federal levels.

Finding: In the areas of family poverty and housing, eligibility and accessibility are barriers to service use for families who need help.

To the extent that the survey could capture information about barriers to service use, eligibility and accessibility appear to pose challenges for families trying to get help related to housing and family poverty.

Reporting on services for parents from families of origin, less than half of responding staff indicated that caregivers were usually eligible for services in these areas. Similarly, only 35% of staff reported that services related to family poverty were conveniently located for families who needed them, and 31% said housing services were conveniently located for families who needed them. Asked why they did not access housing or family poverty services, “Wasn’t eligible for service” was the most commonly-cited reason among parents from families of origin in each area.

Conclusion

The Needs Assessment, up to and including the current phase of survey research, has illuminated certain themes about the families CP&P serves and the service array in place to meet their needs. Certainly these are families facing high levels of risk, often struggling with multiple needs at once. An issue that cuts across domains to magnify the challenges families face is the pervasiveness of economic hardship. The experience of family poverty is shared among CP&P-involved families, but it is not unique to them. Structural and societal factors throw many New Jersey families into financial distress, and these factors require broad, cross-system solutions to truly improve the odds for the state’s impoverished communities and families.

In many domains, even some where there are high levels of need among the CP&P-involved population, though, it seems that the service array is well-aligned with what families need. For instance, while staff reported that caregiver substance use is a factor in half of the cases they encounter within a month, many also felt that the services in this area were the best matched to the level of need among families served. Moreover, when families received services, they generally thought they were helpful. In most cases CP&P was the source of the referral to services, suggesting that, on balance, workers are connecting parents and children to the help they need.

Even so, there are gaps between needs and services in two notable and related areas: family poverty and housing. Parents from families of origin reported experiencing pervasive financial strain, affecting their ability to provide safe, stable homes for their children; resource parents, to a lesser degree, described similar difficulties. Compared to the level of need, relatively few caregivers received services to address family poverty or housing problems; many more felt they could have benefitted from help. Among parents who were referred but did not access services, strict federal and state eligibility standards and limited accessibility were barriers. It bears repeating that these services fall outside of the scope of those for which CP&P contracts, limiting the division’s influence, and solutions to these issues ultimately lie across multiple systems.

As a whole, the Needs Assessment suggests that CP&P’s workers are endeavoring to support New Jersey’s vulnerable children and families, and that in many cases, families are helped. They often receive services, and, by their own report, those services are usually seen as helpful. Certainly adjustments to the service array, in terms of availability of services, accessibility of services, and adequacy of services, can be made to fine-tune the alignment between families’ needs and supports. Detailed findings from this survey and the previous phases of the Needs Assessment can help CP&P identify and prioritize specific areas where these efforts might be best deployed moving forward. This research, however, is best seen as providing CP&P with a baseline set of data in an ongoing cycle of assessment of the match between what families need and the extent to which the services the division links them to are helpful. In addition to tracking these metrics over time, future assessments should also examine how needs and services are related to child welfare outcomes, including child safety, permanency, and well-being.