Home Visitor Experiences of Serving Families Involved in the Criminal Legal System

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Purpose

- Millions of families with young children in the U.S. are impacted by the criminal legal system (CLS).
- Parental incarceration is a well-documented adverse childhood experience (ACE) that often co-occurs with other adversities, including poverty, exposure to violence, and parental substance use or mental illness.
- Family home visiting (FHV) programs might be uniquely suited to support families with CLS involvement by strengthening parenting skills, promoting healthy child development, and connecting families to community-based resources.
- However, CLS involvement is rarely explicitly addressed in the most commonly-implemented FHV models.
- The purpose of this study is to gather home visitors' (HVs) perspectives about the needs of CLS-involved families, how they talk to families about the CLS, and their preparation for serving these families.

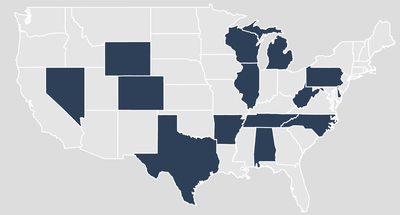
Methods

- We recruited HVs through the Home Visiting Applied Research Collaborative (HARC) Practice Based Research Network (PBRN).
- HVs who were interested in participating in the focus groups filled out a brief online questionnaire with demographic and professional characteristics, and were then invited to participate in 90-minute virtual focus groups. Participants were offered a $50 gift card for their participation.
- 28 HVs participated in 8 focus groups.
- Data were analyzed us Rapid Qualitative Analysis

Participants

- Age: 39 years or younger (50%), 40 to 49 years (29%), 50 years or older (21%)
- Years of Experience: Less than 4 years (54%), 5 to 9 years (25%), 10 years or more (21%)
- Race/Ethnicity: White (46%) Black (21%), Hispanic (14%), More than one race (14%), Asian (4%)
- Education: Bachelor's degree (64%), Associate's degree (18%), Less than Associate's Degree (18%)
- Home Visiting Model: Parents as Teachers (43%), SafeCare (18%), Early Head Start (14%), Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters / + (14%), Healthy Families America (11%)

Home Visitor State of Residence



Results

CLS-involved families have unique needs as compared to other families

- HVs universally reported that CLS-involved families have needs that are unique from the other families they serve including stress, social isolation, and stigma.
- HVs suggested that CLS-involved families are initially less trusting and perceive HVs as an instrument of surveillance or control.
- HVs reported CLS-involved caregivers can become overly-reliant on HVs, which has at times required them to work outside their scope or qualifications.
- HVs reported they feel more concern for their personal safety when serving CLS-involved families.
- HVs suggested that serving CLS-involved families requires a unique set of skills including: empathy, discernment, reliability, flexibility, and patience.

They have so much negative going in their life. They do not need another negative person to come in and just harp on all the problems. And so whether it's... 'Wow, you did a wonderful job doing your dishes today.' Or it's, 'Oh, look, you are dressed.' Like, 'Wow, are you feeling good?' You know, just noticing those small things for those families.

It is hard to get people to stop being worried that we're here to catch you doing something wrong.

They've been let down for so many people. And that's where home visiting, I think, is best because if we say we're going to be there Tuesday at 4, you can depend on that we're going to be there Tuesday around 4.

You know, I'm helping her with a lot of things like looking for housing, looking for employment. So there's a lot more needs I see. And that's across the board with my legal system families. They just have a lot higher needs that require a lot more like work that's outside the scope of what we normally [do].

Home visitors use diverse strategies to screen for CLS involvement

- Most HVs do not screen families for CLS-involvement unless they are required to do so by their model.
- Many HVs reported they know about CLS-involvement prior to meeting families because someone else in their organization does this screening.
- HVs may learn about CLS-involvement from other sources, including discussions in their community (e.g. reports in newspapers, colleagues).
- Many HVs work with families who are referred to them from the CLS or child protection systems; these referral relationships create dissonance about the voluntariness of home visiting.
- HVs reported that many families disclose CLS involvement when it is relevant to other screenings (e.g., mental health, substance use, or intimate partner violence).
- HVs reported that talking about CLS-involvement promotes, rather than hinders, the goals of home visiting.

They know that you're not there to hurt them, but help them stay out of the system and all the things. They'll kind of just let it out one day. And those, one of those days when you go for a visit and they're really not wanting to visit, they have lots of things going on in their life. Those are the days that it usually, it all spills out.

Our program is voluntary but there are entities that can mandate them from their side to participate one of them being child welfare... um so in her situation she was mandated to join our program. So she's signing forms on our side saying this is voluntary, but she knows that she has to participate in order to close her child welfare case and the situations leading up to her criminal case as well, because it was directly related to putting her child in physical danger. So she's got the criminal, criminal side, the child welfare side, and then us as a support.

When we do our family resilience skills, they actually get to, we use their words in our initial contact. So it's their story that they get to share instead of us hearing it from like legal documents or something like that. We get to initially hear their perception of it so they're gonna, they're gonna tell their own story with their own words and the way that they make meaning about their past.

Home visitors want more training for serving CLS-impacted families

- Most HVs have no training specific to working with CLS-involved families and have had to learn on the job, particularly those HVs who are going to court with their clients.
- Most HVs have education or training from prior professional experiences that they utilize to support their work with CLS-involved families (e.g., experience as a guardian ad litem or court appointed special advocate, working in domestic violence shelter, social work, or criminal justice).
- Many HVs also draw on personal experiences to support their work with these families, such as friends or family members who have had interactions with the CLS.
- Nearly all HVs expressed a desire for more training about the CLS .
- Some HVs expressed interest in training on how to advocate for the rights of CLS-involved people at the state or local level.

[We get training] but it's when you like first start the job. And I also don't think it stays with you. And I also don't think those trainings are very helpful.

I've been to court quite a bit and writing letters. And it takes some getting used to. At first, I was very intimidated by it. But after a while, I think you kind of get to know how it works. You learn more about how the system works and how different judges work and all kinds of different things. So now I feel pretty comfortable doing it. But it took some doing.

If we knew the process, that would be helpful. Like, after your charge, where do you go from there? And I'd like to know what the expectation is. If I'm going to have court, tell me I'll have court in two months. Let me get my life figured out until that day, you know, or let me figure out who's going to be watching my kid when I'm going to court. If there was a way to tell us what the process is and to give us some guidelines as far as the expectation, I think that would even be helpful. Even if it was simple. If you tell me that this charge, and I know it's because every charge is different, but if I have a guideline to go by, I at least know something. It is like an unknown cloud over your head the whole time that you're waiting to go to court. And that cloud affects everything. It affects your money. It affects your children. It affects your family. It affects if you need to pay rent or not pay rent. If where you're going to be, it affects everything.

Discussion

- HVs reported that CLS-involved families have unique needs that influence how they practice home visiting with these families.
- HVs face significant challenges in serving CLS-involved families, including addressing initial distrust on the part of families, concerns about personal safety, and the perception they are often asked to practice outside the scope of their training.
- HVs believe that talking about CLS-involvement supports the practice of home visiting and is compatible with a strengths-based approach, primarily by allowing caregivers to make sense of their past experiences and set goals for the future.
- However, most home visitors are not explicitly screening for CLS-involvement, unless required to do so by their model or funder; this suggests that many HVs might be missing opportunities to tailor their practice to these families.

Implications for Policy

- Home visiting funders and providers should consider how to most effectively prepare HVs for serving CLS-involved families, particularly in regards to activities such as attending court with families, and helping families navigate their criminal cases.
- Model developers should consider how well their models align with the unique needs of CLS-involved families, whether and how the model can be adapted to meet those needs, and collect data about CLS-involvement in the families they serve.

Acknowledgements

- The authors of this brief extend their deepest gratitude to the home visitors who shared their time, insight, and expertise with us. The authors also thank the HARC Leadership team, and our study consultants: Alyssa Silver, Christina Gonzalez del Riego, and Tyler Roenicke.
- This project is supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under cooperative agreements UD5MC30792, Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Research and Development Platform and X104358, Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Grant Program. This information or content and conclusions are those of the authors and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by HRSA, HHS, or the U.S. Government.