

## Evaluating Parents in Partnership: A Preliminary Study of a Child Welfare Intervention Designed to Increase Reunification

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### ABSTRACT

Child welfare systems struggle with how best to accomplish reunification for children who have been removed from their home due to child maltreatment. Parent mentor programs may facilitate the reunification process. In these programs, parents who have successfully reunified with their children after child welfare involvement provide support and guidance for parents currently navigating the system. The current study examines (a) whether distance was a barrier to participation in orientation of a parent mentor program (called Parents in Partnership [PIP]) for 98 parents involved with the child welfare system and (b) whether participation affected reunification outcomes for 73 parents. Logistic regression models showed parents who lived closer to the PIP orientation location were more likely to participate in the orientation. Further, parents who attended PIP orientation were 5 times more likely to reunify with their children. Parent mentor programs may be one way to increase the likelihood of reunification for families involved in the child welfare system and may increase the engagement of fathers involved with the child welfare system. Future research should examine whether participation in parent mentor programs reduces the length of time children stay in foster care in addition to increasing rates of reunification.

### KEYWORDS

Parent mentor; reunification; service availability

### Introduction

Child maltreatment continues to be a public health concern, with over 3.4 million referrals for investigations of child abuse and/or neglect in 2011 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012b). During that same period, over 400,000 children were in foster care due to child maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012a). Children who are victims of child abuse and neglect are at greater risk for a variety of health, mental health, and behavioral problems including juvenile delinquency, arrests for violent crime, alcohol and drug abuse, obesity, and depression (Kaplan et al, 1999; Wang & Holton, 2007; Widom et al., 1995). The direct and indirect costs of child maltreatment are significant because they have been estimated at \$284 million each day, or \$103 billion a year (Wang & Holton, 2007).

Reuniting children in foster care with their birth families is the primary goal of public child welfare services. Yet, many child welfare agencies have experienced difficulties in developing programs that effectively assist parents whose children have been removed from

their care (Berrick, Young, Cohen, & Anthony, 2010). Issues such as low parent participation, limited time frames to fulfill mandated requirements for reunification, noncompliance with court-mandated cases, and distance to services serve as barriers to reunification (Alpert, 2005; Freisthler, 2013; McCurdy & Daro, 2001; Smith, 2003). The current study assesses how one pilot parent mentor program may address some of these barriers to reunification and increase permanency outcomes for children placed in out-of-home care.

Many parents in the child welfare system, especially those involved for the first time, have a difficult time navigating the child welfare system because few have ever been engaged in such a high stakes process and they lack the know-how to navigate the child welfare and family court system (Berrick et. al., 2010). To address this problem, as well as improve success rates among families newly involved in the system, many child welfare agencies have implemented parent mentor programs that pair new parents with those who have successfully navigated the system and reunified with their children. This peer support is designed to

address engagement barriers and improve reunification opportunities (Cohen & Canan, 2006). These mentors are engaged as child welfare staff to help support parents whose children have been removed and help navigate the child welfare system by offering informal support, experiential expertise, and advocacy (Leake, Longworth-Reed, Williams, & Potter, 2012). The use of parent mentors may be especially beneficial for populations who have lower rates of reunification, as is the case for families of color such as African American families (Harris & Courtney, 2003).

Parent mentors may be appropriately suited to provide psychosocial support to families, advocate for family needs, connect families to community-based services, and educate families on how to navigate the bureaucracy of the child welfare system and advocate for themselves (Frame et al., 2006; Lorthridge et al., 2012; Nilsen et al., 2009). Scholars have argued that when parent mentors are engaged with the family from the beginning of a case, parents obtain the support and knowledge they need to navigate the system and improve their chances of family reunification (Berrick et al., 2011).

Distance to meetings with parent mentors can pose a significant barrier to reunification given that regular attendance in such meetings could drastically improve parents' chances of reunification. No studies have addressed whether distance to parent mentor programs is related to participation and whether those parents who participate in such programs are more likely to reunify with their children when compared to those who do not.

## Literature Review

Few outcome studies have been conducted on interventions that utilize peer support for child welfare-involved families. A qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of 61 Canadian child welfare-involved families found that more than half of participants (52%) expressed a need for more help than was received from child protective services and felt that they were able to reunify with their children due to assistance from their mentors (Manji, Maiter, & Palmer, 2004). Similarly, Berrick and colleagues (2010) conducted a mixed-methods study of parent mentoring using a focus group with parent clients who worked with a peer mentor. From their focus groups with parents, three major findings

emerged, which emphasized (a) the value of shared experiences, (b) ease of communication, and (c) one-on-one support. The participants discussed the importance of supportive relationships with peer mentors, which often sharply contrasted with their relationships with social workers, lawyers, and other social services workers, who were described as uncaring, lacking in effective communication practices, or unable to understand or relate to these parents' experiences. These parent engagement strategies, which may include the use of parent mentors, support positive outcomes by promoting children's permanency and well-being (Steib, 2004) and empower families by inviting them to collectively address concerns identified by the child welfare system (Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, & Burford, 2003). Despite the promise of parent engagement programs, relatively little is known about who participates in these programs and their effectiveness at increasing reunification for families involved in the child welfare system.

## Outcomes of Parent Mentor Programs

The few empirical studies that have been conducted on parent mentor programs suggest that they may be a viable option to increase rates of reunification among parents in the child welfare system. The use of peer mentors was related to higher reunification for parent participants (Berrick, Cohen, & Anthony, 2011). In fact, 60% of children with a parent mentor reunified with their parents within 12 months of removal from their parent's care, compared to 26% of children whose parents were not served by the program (Berrick et al., 2011). Controlling for demographic race/ethnicity of the family, child age, and child gender, parents who participated in this parent mentor program were over 4 times as likely to reunify than as who did not (Berrick et al., 2011). However, there was no relationship between the parent's race or ethnicity and reunification rates in that study, and parent gender was not examined (Berrick et al., 2011).

More evidence of possible effectiveness of parent mentor programs exists in the so-called gray literature. Gray literature refers to reports, conference proceedings, or other evaluation documents not found in the published academic literature. Parent mentor programs have been shown to reduce the length of stay for children in the child welfare system. A quasi-experimental evaluation of the Parent Mentoring

Program in Washington State found that children whose parents participated in the program spent fewer days in foster care than did children of parents not in the program (Marcenko, Brown, DeVoy, & Conway, 2010; Marcenko & Grossman, 2008). An evaluation of the Parent Advocate Program in Jefferson County, Kentucky, revealed that children whose families received parent mentor services had fewer placement moves, spent less time in care, had higher reunification rates, and less frequently exited to adoption or emancipation than those who did not receive parent mentor services (Lianekhammy & Huebner, 2008; Rauber, 2009). Specifically, of the 202 children who were served by parent advocates, 70.3% successfully reunified with their parents or relatives compared to 56.7% of children who did not participate in parent advocate services (Lianekhammy & Huebner, 2008).

### ***Distance as a Barrier to Service Participation for Child Welfare Families***

Accessibility of these parent programs is an important factor when considering who uses them and their effectiveness. Previous work has found that greater density of some child welfare-related services (e.g., parenting, child care) in local and adjacent zip code areas was related to fewer referrals for child abuse investigations and foster care entries (Freisthler, 2013) while child care slots per need for child care were related to lower rates of referrals in census tracts (Klein, 2011). With respect to distance, Maguire-Jack and Klein (2015) found that the further away a person lived from mental health/substance abuse services, the more often they used neglectful parenting practices. Thus, the distance of the parents involved with the child welfare system to where the parent mentor program is located may affect use of the services.

Thus, the uneven geographical distribution of social services, including mental health, substance abuse, and parenting, may affect service participation for child welfare families (Dear, 1977; Freisthler, 2013). A significant barrier for parents attempting to complete their service plan may be distance from their home to the locations of mandated or recommended services. This becomes considerably more difficult when the places parents need to go to fulfill these obligations are spread geographically far apart, severely interfering with parents' ability to successfully reunify with their children and adhere to case service plans

(Freisthler, 2013). For example, Lery, Webster, and Chow (2004) found that parents whose children were over 10 miles away from where they lived were significantly less likely to be reunified within 18 months than were those whose children were placed less than a mile away. This study will examine whether distance from home to the location of a parent mentor program orientation is related to whether a parent attends.

### ***Research Questions***

A limited amount of research is currently available on parent mentorship in child welfare. The current study adds to this work by conducting an evaluation of a pilot parent mentor intervention to determine whether similar positive outcomes for reunification are achieved. As little is known about whether distance to services is related to participation among child welfare families, this study seeks to assess how accessibility of the parent mentor orientation (as measured by distance) is related to participation. Hence, this study aims to examine the parent engagement process by asking the following questions: (a) Is geographic distance from home to the parent mentor orientation location a barrier to attending the orientation? (b) Are parents who participate in the orientation more likely to reunify with their children than parents who do not participate in the program? By examining these questions, the current study will provide information about where to locate parent mentor programs to increase participation and whether use of this pilot intervention will achieve better reunification outcomes for families involved with the child welfare system.

### ***Methods***

#### ***Participants***

For research the first question, which examines whether distance is a barrier to participating in PIP orientation, the sample size included a total of 98 parents involved in the child welfare system. Forty-nine participants attended the parent mentor orientation (PIP described in the following) with the remaining 49 participants composed of matched controls. PIP participants were identified from parent orientation sign-in sheets from a county regional office located in a Western state during fiscal years 2009–2011 (described in more detail in the following). The

sample size for the second research question (the relationship between participating in PIP orientation and reunification) was 73 of the original parents who had their child welfare cases closed by December 2011.

All names on the sign-in sheet were available to be included in the study. Originally, 98 names were obtained from the sign-in sheets. Of those, 20 orientation participants were not included in the sample due to no search results in the child welfare system database, the case having been transferred to another county, having only a referral and no case, or the case being marked as sensitive. An additional four could not be included because they were repeat participants; 18 did not have an open case at the time of the parent mentor orientation; and seven were cases where the child was not removed from the home. Table 1 describes the demographics of the total sample, including differences between the participants in the parent mentor orientation and those that did not participate in the orientation.

### Program Description

PIP is a pilot intervention run by the child welfare system regional office. The program involves a committed group of parent advocates that successfully navigated the system. The parents work in partnership with the child

welfare system to provide current program participants with information, empowerment, and hope. They provide support, information, and mentorship to parents who have recently lost custody of their children, as well as parents whose children are in the foster care system without permanency. PIP began in 2006 as a pilot program funded through a grant awarded to the child welfare system from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, as part of their Family to Family Initiative.

Parents may be referred to the PIP program through an internal child welfare referral from the caseworker, or a parent may self-refer when recruited by PIP volunteers in the lobby of the child welfare office. Regardless of the referral source, all PIP participation was voluntary, and parents had the right to end their participation at any time without affecting the outcome of their case.

PIP program services include parent orientations, parent support groups, lobby assistance, Team Decision Making (TDM) meeting support, and a warmline (i.e., a telephone line staffed by PIP volunteers that handles nonemergency questions for parents involved in the child welfare system; PIP, 2009). During orientations, parent partners provide birth parents with information on child welfare policies, procedures, dependency court, and their rights (PIP, 2009). During fiscal years 2009–2011, the

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of full sample and bivariate comparisons by participation in Parents in Partnership (vs. control group) and family reunification status (reunified vs. did not reunify).

Variable name	Full sample		PIP (n = 49) % (n)	Control (n = 49) % (n)	p	Reunified (n = 33) % (n)	Did not reunify (n = 40) % (n)	p
	%/ $\bar{x}$ (SD)	n						
Attended PIP orientation								
Yes	50.0	49						
No	50.0	49						
Reunification status								
Reunified	33.7	33						
Did not reunify	40.8	40						
Pending case	25.5	25						
Parent gender					.007			.049
Male	13.3	13	22.4 (11)	4.1 (2)		3.0 (1)	17.5 (7)	
Female	86.7	85	77.6 (38)	95.9 (47)		97.0 (32)	82.5 (33)	
Parent race/ethnicity					.315			.277
Latino	32.7	32	34.7 (17)	30.6 (15)		33.3 (11)	42.5 (17)	
African American	39.8	39	32.7 (16)	46.9 (23)		45.5 (15)	27.5 (11)	
Caucasian/other	27.6	27	32.7 (16)	22.4 (11)		21.2 (7)	30.0 (12)	
Most severe allegation type					.010			.644
Physical/emotional abuse	34.7	34	49.0 (24)	20.4 (10)		33.3 (11)	30.0 (12)	
Absence/incapacity	33.7	33	28.6 (14)	38.8 (19)		27.3 (9)	37.5 (15)	
General neglect/substantial risk/sibling	31.6	31	22.4 (11)	40.8 (20)		39.4 (13)	32.5 (13)	
Distance to nearest PIP orientation	6.5 (7.7)	98	4.4 (6.2)	8.7 (8.5)	.006	6.3 (8.4)	7.7 (8.0)	.475

Note. PIP = Parents in Partnership; SD = standard deviation.

PIP program at the County regional office conducted a total of 19 parent orientations, approximately one per month, with a total of 98 parents in attendance.

### **Study Design and Procedures**

The current study utilized a nonequivalent control group design to study whether parents who participated in a PIP orientation intervention were more likely to be reunified than parents who did not participate in the orientation. All data were collected via case record reviews. In other words, no study participants were contacted directly for this study, and no new data were obtained. Study procedures were approved by the University Institutional Review Board. Data were obtained via case record review by matching the names on the sign-in sheet to names in the child welfare system. The electronic case management system used by the child welfare system was utilized in order to search client files and review court reports to determine demographic information on the parent, reason for entry into the child welfare system, current status of the case, and length of stay in foster care. The name and birthdate of the participant's youngest child was initially searched to locate client files. When this information was not listed or no results were found, the parent's name was searched instead. All available information provided on the sign-in sheet was crosschecked with that available in the electronic system to ensure accuracy of matches.

A comparison group was then obtained by generating a list of possible matches with the participant sample according to the month and year of child detention (i.e., the date the child was placed in out-of-home care). A child welfare system intranet database was utilized to compile this comparison group of parents with open child welfare cases. To be eligible to be in the control group, the parent must have had a child placed in out of home care from the same regional child welfare office as those in the PIP sample. The electronic system was also used to collect the same types of information as was collected for the PIP intervention sample.

### **Measures**

#### **Participation in PIP Orientation**

The outcome for the first research question is participation in the PIP pilot orientation. Participation

in the PIP program was measured by attendance at a PIP orientation. Unfortunately, records that document exactly what aspects of PIP a parent utilized (i.e., support groups, warmline) were not collected. Thus the study is only able to capture this minimal level of involvement in the PIP program. Participation in the PIP orientation is also the primary independent variable for the second research question.

#### **Reunification**

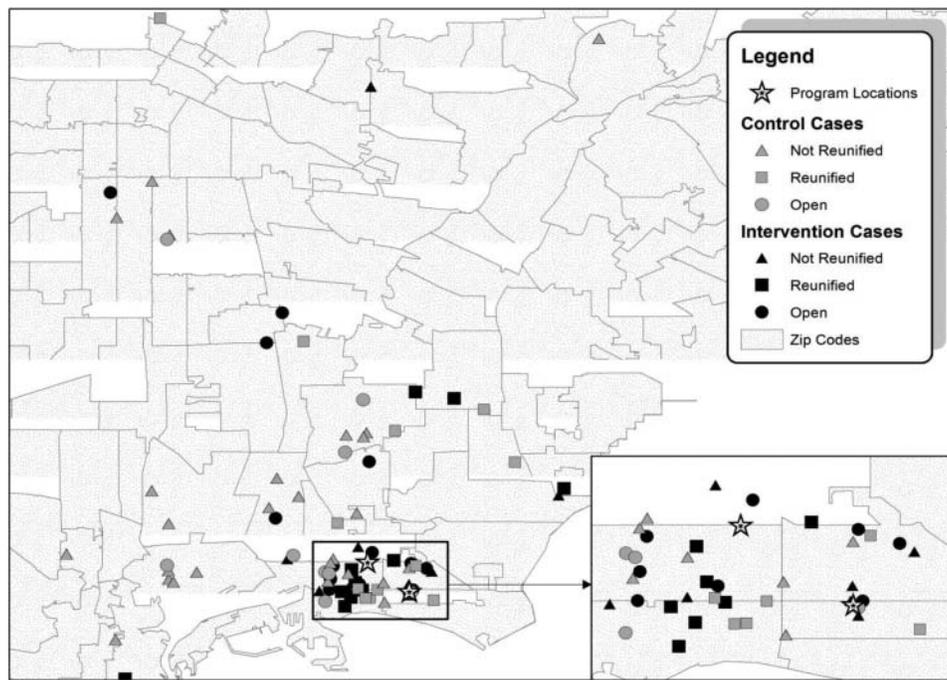
Whether a family is reunified is the dependent variable for the second research question. As all families in the study had children removed from their home, the major indicator of program success is reunification status. Case status was determined by examining court records and caseworker reports. About 31% of cases reunified; 41% did not reunify; and the remaining cases were still open at the time of data collection. The multivariate analysis only includes those cases that were closed.

#### **Allegation Type**

Allegation type refers to the reason for entry into the child welfare system. Caseworkers can choose more than one allegation; however, for the purposes of this study, each case was coded for only the most severe allegation type. In this study, about 35% of cases were referred for physical or emotional abuse, about 34% for caretaker absence or incapacity, and the remaining 31% for general neglect and/or substantial risk for a sibling.

#### **Distance to PIP Orientation**

Given that participation in PIP may be partially due to the ease of attending PIP orientation, distance to the nearest orientation site was calculated in ArcGIS 10.1. The "as the crow flies" distance was used, meaning a straight line was drawn between the home address of the parents (obtained via case files) and the location of the PIP orientation to calculate distance. This does not take into account travel time, availability of public transportation, or other more nuanced measures of access to the orientation locations. Two of the cases in the control group had addresses significantly outside the range of the other cases (i.e., both were outside of the county under study). To minimize the effect of these outliers on the multivariate analyses, these values were



**Figure 1.** Map of intervention location and home locations of study participants by intervention group (control vs. PIP) and case outcome.

windsorized (i.e., given the next largest distance in the sample.) **Figure 1** shows the locations of the PIP orientation, locations of participant and control homes, and their reunification statuses.

### Demographics

Demographic data, including gender and race/ethnicity, of the parents in the control and intervention groups were also collected.

### Data Analysis

Two sets of analyses were conducted. The dependent variable for the first analysis is attending orientation in the PIP program to determine the demographic and case characteristics related to participating in this service. The second analysis focuses on case outcomes, particularly reunification, for families in the entire sample whose case closed during the study period. Bivariate analyses (chi-square and *t* tests) were conducted for both outcome variables. Since both outcomes were dichotomous variables, logistic regression was used to conduct multivariate analyses. A *p* value of .10 was used to interpret the data for statistical significance due to the small sample size and exploratory nature of the study.

### Results

**Table 1** presents the bivariate analysis comparing the intervention and control groups and comparing those that reunified to those that did not on key study variables. **Table 2** presents the results of the multivariate logistic regression analysis.

### PIP Participation

Bivariate analyses of the PIP participant sample and the comparison group yielded an association between parent gender and orientation participation ( $p = .007$ ), with more males in the PIP sample. The association between most severe allegation type and orientation participation was statistically significant ( $p = .01$ ), with the majority of the PIP sample having allegations of physical or emotional abuse (49.0%,  $n = 24$ ); the comparison group had primarily general neglect or substantial risk (40.8%,  $n = 20$ ). However, no association was found between parent ethnicity and orientation participation ( $p = .315$ ). In the logistic regression model, parents with an allegation of physical or emotional abuse were more likely to participate in the PIP program. Women, African American parents (compared to White parents), and those living further away from the PIP orientation location were less likely to participate in PIP. There was no

**Table 2.** Logistic regression models of participation in Parents in Partnership ( $n = 98$ ) and effects of PIP on reunification status ( $n = 73$ ).

Variable name	PIP participation ( $n = 98$ )			Reunification ( $n = 73$ )		
	OR	95% CI	$p$	OR	95% CI	$p$
Constant	5.663		.060	.014		.005
Female	.207	[0.038, 1.130]	.068	17.342	[1.511, 199.053]	.022
Parent race/ethnicity*						
Latino	.791	[0.364, 3.766]		1.269	[0.327, 4.923]	
African American	.427	[0.139, 1.313]		4.638	[1.081, 19.903]	.039
Physical/emotional abuse**	3.307	[1.237, 8.843]	.017	1.119	[0.335, 3.736]	
Distance to nearest PIP	.932	[0.869, 0.999]	.046	1.000	[0.933, 1.071]	
PIP participant				5.431	[1.562, 18.879]	.008

Note. PIP = Parents in Partnership; OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval.

\*Reference group is Caucasian/other. \*\*Reference group is caretaker absence and incapacity, general neglect, substantial risk, or sibling at risk.

relationship between Latino/Hispanic ethnicity and PIP participation.

### Reunification Status

The association between parent gender and reunification status ( $p = .049$ ) was significant, with female parents being more likely to reunify with their children. There was no association found between parent ethnicity and reunification ( $p = .277$ ) or between most severe allegation type and reunification ( $p = .644$ ). Reunification status could not be determined for 25 parents in the full sample due to the cases remaining open with the families continuing to receive reunification services. According to the logistic regression analysis presented in Table 2, mothers and African American parents were more likely to be reunified in the current study. It is important to note that parents who attended PIP orientation were 5.6 times as likely to be reunified as parents who did not participate in PIP. There were no statistically significant relationships between reunification status and allegation type, Latino/Hispanic ethnicity, or distance to PIP orientation in the logistic regression analysis.

### Discussion

The current study examined two research questions. The results for the first question show that, compared to the control group, program participants were less likely to attend PIP parent orientation if they lived further away and were more likely to attend if they were fathers and had allegations of physical or emotional

abuse (compared to neglect). The results of the analyses for the second research question yield some promising findings, which suggest participation in the PIP parent orientation was related to a higher likelihood of parents reunifying with their child. Of those who did attend orientation, African American mothers were more likely to reunify.

With regard to assessing distance to the PIP orientation location, living further from a PIP parent orientation location was related to a lower likelihood of participation, but not related to rates of reunification. Thus, it appears that distance from home to the orientation location may be a barrier to attendance. Previous work has generally found that greater density of services in a local area is related to higher use of services (McLafferty & Grady, 2004) and that service-rich areas were related to lower referrals for child welfare investigations and entries into foster care (Freisthler, 2013). Thus, implementing PIP programs in as many locations as possible so that clients may have a close location at which to attend an orientation may ultimately increase use of services, which leads to higher rates of reunification. Increasing promotion and marketing for a select number of consistent orientation locations may also serve to promote use of this program. Using locations that are accessible via major streets and public transportation may also aid participation.

Being male was related to a greater likelihood of participating. This finding could suggest that parent mentor programs like PIP are successful in engaging fathers and thus could be utilized to address the

general lack of engagement that is often identified as an issue in many child welfare cases. Thus, a modification to the PIP program that develops a parent orientation focusing on fatherhood may increase father engagement with both the child welfare process and their children.

Findings from the second research question show that parents who attended the PIP orientation were about five times as likely to reunify with their children as parents in the comparison group. The finding that participating in parent mentor programs is related to a greater likelihood of reunification is similar to previous evaluations (Berrick et al., 2011; Leake et al., 2012). This further supports the possible effectiveness of parent mentor programs in achieving permanency through reunification for children involved with the child welfare system. African American parents were not more or less likely to participate, but those who did participate had higher likelihoods of reunification; this suggests that if engagement among African American parents could be achieved, parent mentor programs could be used to reduce disproportionality. However, given the limited sample size and wide confidence intervals, these results should be interpreted cautiously and more work is needed to replicate and understand these findings. As an alternate explanation, the African American parents who chose to attend could have had a higher level of motivation, in general, resulting in the differences seen in reunification rates.

### ***Implications for Policy and Practice***

The implementation of mentor programs has been prominent in the provision of youth engagement and substance abuse treatment services for many years and has more recently been increasing in the provision of mental health services (Ryan, Marsh, Testa, & Louderman, 2006). Previous consumers who received mental health services themselves, as well as have children or other family members who have received services, become parent partners or mentors to families currently receiving services to increase levels of engagement while decreasing barriers due to stigma (cf. Jensen & Hoagwood, 2008). That being said, shifts in policy are already occurring that allow funding at the federal, state, and county levels to be allocated in ways that affect the field of practice by allowing for mentor services to be provided through public funding (e.g.,

[http://sonoma-county.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view\\_id=2&event\\_id=349&meta\\_id=173845](http://sonoma-county.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=2&event_id=349&meta_id=173845)).

This study contributes to an emerging practice within the field of child welfare for consideration by public leaders when determining the allocation of Social Security Act Title IV-B and Title IV-E funding. Further assessment could be done to determine whether the inclusion of mentor programs within the child welfare system would be more effective in increasing reunification and cost effective by reducing expenses for foster care and adoptions. In addition, reunification and cost effectiveness could be further assessed by determining whether the allocation of funds to operate these programs as internal child welfare programs with county employees produces the best outcomes, or whether these programs are better suited to be put out for bid by counties through requests for proposals and provided by private or non-profit organizations through contracts or other agreements.

### ***Limitations of Study***

Study findings must be interpreted cautiously due to several limitations. Parents who chose to participate may have been more motivated to reunify with their children. Thus, understanding when parents choose to participate (i.e., within six months of children being removed from the home) and why they participate may provide important information about when best to engage parents in this program. The current study did not have access to data on how often parents used PIP services or what types of PIP services these parents utilized as this information was not tracked. Thus, this study is unable to determine how dosage of the intervention may be related to likelihood of reunification.

Another limitation of this study is the small sample size of only 98 participants. Future work needs to use larger sample sizes in order to determine whether these promising findings can be replicated when studied on a larger scale. The sample size also limited the number of covariates that could be included in the models. Several variables not previously included in studies of parent mentor programs (e.g., allegation type, distance from home to program orientation location) were included here, but that meant the exclusion of other variables that were not collected (e.g., child age). Omitted variable bias could mean that the findings are not due to the PIP intervention but to other factors. Larger sample sizes would enable better controls for the variety of factors that

predict reunification rates among children involved in the child welfare system. The study uses a nonequivalent control group design. Although the study attempted to match on some relevant factors (i.e., date entering the child welfare system, county regional office), the groups could differ on other characteristics that may have affected study findings. Randomized controlled trials or other means of randomly assigning parents to participate in a parent mentor program or not would strengthen the ability of studies to assess how these programs affect reunification rates.

Finally, the current study only assessed distance to PIP orientation as a measure of accessibility of services. The availability of public transportation between a parent's home address and the location of services could also be used to assess barriers to participation. Varying the day and time of the event might provide information on other barriers to participation as well.

### **Strengths of Study**

Despite the limitations, the current study is one of just a few empirical studies designed to assess the effectiveness of parent mentor programs to increase rates of reunification in the child welfare system. Thus, the study provides a promising intervention that may reduce costs associated with longer lengths of stay in out-of-home placement and may result in better outcomes for children. By assessing factors related to who chooses to participate in PIP, the study provides important information on barriers that can be addressed to encourage and support participation. For example, ensuring that PIP orientation events are located in multiple sites across the area where child welfare families are located may make it easier for parents to attend. This may ultimately increase the likelihood that they reunify with their children. Finally, the study expanded the list of covariates controlled for in parent mentor studies, such as allegation type and distance to PIP program, showing that the findings across studies are similar despite the inclusion of different variables.

### **Conclusion and Directions for Future Research**

Participation in an orientation for a parent mentor program was related to higher likelihood of family reunification. This may suggest that child welfare

permanency outcomes could be improved through the inclusion of PIP in case service referrals.

Although the findings from this small pilot intervention are encouraging, future studies should include larger sample sizes and randomly assign parents to participate or not participate in the parent mentor programs. The favorable results for fathers and African American families in the current study should be assessed further to determine whether they hold up in better-powered studies. If so, they might provide innovative ways to engage these groups that are often not engaged (in the case of fathers) or are overrepresented (in the case of African American parents) in the child welfare system. Assessments would need to be conducted on the basis of county demographics as compared to the demographics of children and families within the child welfare system to better understand which racial communities are being most affected and the extent of the disparity and disproportionality. In addition, assessments would need to be conducted on the basis of regional office locations within individual counties to further determine whether certain geographies are experiencing even greater levels of disparity and disproportionality in relation to others. The effect of mentor programs in addressing issues of disparity and disproportionality may also be twofold in that they allow parents to see reunification as a real possibility in communities where personal experiences of family, friends, and neighbors may suggest otherwise.

Understanding how the dosage of parent mentor programs (e.g., what pieces of the program are most effective and in what amounts) may positively affect reunification rates is important in order to develop interventions that are most effective for the least cost. Finally, in addition to increasing reunification, the study could assess whether it achieves additional cost savings by reducing the length of time in foster care or other out-of-home placements.

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