

A STUDY OF NEW YORK CITY'S FAMILY
ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

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Executive Summary

When families are struggling with a breakdown in communication, trying to control the behavior of an unruly child, or experiencing a crisis, they often look for outside help and support. For many families in New York the place to turn is the status offender system. Status offenders, or Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS) as they are called in New York, are young people who are charged with behavior unique to their “status” as juveniles such as running away or being excessively truant.

In 2001, as the result of the advocacy efforts of parents seeking help with older teens, the New York State Legislature expanded the age of eligibility for PINS to include 16- and 17-year-olds. Fearing an influx of between 3,800 and 5,300 16- and 17-year-olds into the system under the legislation, along with millions of dollars in associated costs, New York City’s Department of Probation and the Administration of Children’s Services (ACS)—the two agencies primarily responsible for administering and funding the city’s PINS system—collaborated to design and implement an innovative approach to PINS intake and assessment, the Family Assessment Program (FAP). Launched in December 2002, FAP seeks to connect children and families swiftly to appropriate services in the community, reduce the city’s reliance on family court in PINS cases, and decrease the number of out-of-home placements for PINS youth.

Two and a half years after the city began rolling out the program, officials at ACS and probation asked the Vera Institute of Justice to study FAP with particular attention to the program’s impact on probation case loads, PINS court referrals, and out-of-home remands and placements, and to record the impressions of actors working within the system and the families it serves.

Vera’s investigation reveals that in less than three years since the implementation of FAP, the city is already reaping significant benefits: families are receiving assistance more immediately; probation intakes have dropped by more than 80 percent; court referrals are down by more than half as youth are being informally connected to services without the need for a family court order; and out-of-home remands and placements for PINS youth—the most expensive and often least effective service option—have been reduced by more than 20 percent. And all of this has occurred while the number of youth eligible for PINS services has increased.

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Introduction

In 2001 the New York State Legislature, in response to parents seeking governmental assistance with troubled older teens, expanded the definition of status offenders—referred to in New York as Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS)—to include 16- and 17-year-olds. (This change is often referred to as “PINS 18.”)

The state also commissioned a study to examine the strengths and weaknesses of its current PINS system and assess the effects of the new law on county PINS administration.¹ Projections indicated that raising the age of status offenders from 16 to 18 could increase the number of cases coming into the PINS system by between 69 and 105 percent statewide, potentially costing localities millions of dollars per year. An influx of an additional 3,800 to 5,300 youth was projected for New York City’s PINS system alone. With the average cost of New York City congregate care placement—where most city PINS youth are placed—hovering at \$170 per day, the financial impact of PINS 18 was expected to be devastating.

Prompted by PINS 18, the city’s Department of Probation and Administration of Children’s Services (ACS) joined together to examine the city’s PINS system critically and comprehensively. The result of this collaborative effort is the Family Assessment Program (FAP), an innovative approach to PINS intake and assessment. Under FAP, families wishing to access the PINS system are directed to the FAP office where they promptly meet with an experienced ACS social worker. (Under the old PINS system, families seeking to file a PINS complaint were referred to the probation office and typically had to wait several weeks before having an initial interview.) The ACS social worker assesses the families’ concerns and, on the spot, implements next steps and service referrals. All of this occurs before probation or court involvement.

In June 2004, ACS and probation asked the Vera Institute of Justice to conduct a preliminary study of FAP in an effort to assess the program’s impact on probation case loads, PINS court referrals, and out-of-home remands and placements and to record the impressions of actors working within the system and the families it serves. This report summarizes Vera’s findings in detail. The first section describes FAP and outlines the ways in which the program has changed New York City’s traditional PINS process. The next two sections examine FAP’s impact on the system and on the experience of families accessing the program. The concluding section discusses future opportunities for program enhancement, particularly with regard to public education, processing of warrants in runaway cases, and research.

¹ In New York State individual counties administer the PINS system, designing their own procedures within the framework provided by the Family Court Act. The cost of the system, however, is shared between the counties and the state with New York State reimbursing counties 50 cents on the dollar for expenditures on out-of-home placements.

Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative research support the findings of this report. From July through November 2004, Vera staff interviewed probation and ACS officials involved in the design and implementation of FAP; probation PINS supervisors and line staff in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx; FAP supervisors and specialists in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx; administrators from the Children's Aid Society and Neighborhood Youth and Family Services who oversee diversion service assessments for PINS cases, and three family court judges. Vera staff also observed eight FAP assessments: one in Manhattan, four in Brooklyn, and three in the Bronx.

In October 2004, Vera convened a focus group of youth and a focus group of adults who had been through FAP. To ensure a random sample of FAP participants with relatively recent experience, ACS provided the names of the 26 families in each borough who accessed FAP during April 2004.² Vera then contacted these families by phone and by mail inviting them to participate in the focus group. Seven adults and nine youth attended the focus groups. Participants came from Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and the Bronx.

In addition, Vera staff reviewed and analyzed three separate sources of administrative data. The Comprehensive Justice Information System, which captures and integrates data from the Department of Probation, the Mayor's Office of the Criminal Justice Coordinator, the Law Department, and the Department of Juvenile Justice, provided a record of all PINS cases initiated with probation since 2000. We learned about foster care remands and placements for PINS and FAP cases by accessing Administration for Children's Services data from the Child Care Review Service (CCRS). The CCRS does not include a reason for placement, but it does include a record of all legal activities requiring ACS's involvement and records of all foster care placements. By matching these legal activities with placement records, we were able to identify ACS remands and placements resulting from a PINS petition. Finally, all four FAP programs provided a complete record of the cases they had seen as of June 30, 2004.

² The Bronx provided 28 names; the other boroughs each provided 26.

Program Design and Implementation

Context for Reform: New York City's PINS System Prior to FAP

Before the introduction of the Family Assessment Program, parents struggling with disobedient children sought help by filing a PINS complaint with juvenile probation. Typically, probation scheduled an intake appointment with the family in three to six weeks while providing no support in the interim. Only families seeking warrants for runaways and, when scheduling permitted, families who brought their children with them at the time of filing, had intake appointments the same day.

At the intake appointment, a probation officer interviewed the parent and youth and opened a formal probation case. PINS intake interviews took place at the probation office in family court. The probation officer met with the youth and family together and offered the youth the possibility of a referral to social services while stressing the importance of school attendance and compliance with curfews and other rules of the home. Officers explained to youth at the first meeting that non-compliance with probation oversight or future service plans could result in punitive family court action.

Youth and families who agreed to services were referred for a social service assessment with a nonprofit social service provider, known as the Designated Assessment Service (DAS).³ DAS conducted three to four assessment interviews over 30 to 40 days and then referred the case to services. Probation checked with DAS one or two times before the close of the probation oversight period to ensure that the youth was complying with the service plan and rules of the home. If the youth was not in compliance, or the parent was not amenable to services, the family would be permitted to bring the case to family court. Though the majority of youth accepted social service referrals, those who did not or those whom probation determined to be ineligible or unsuitable for services (typically runaways or youth whose parents insisted on court access) were referred directly to family court from the probation intake interview.

Performing intake and monitoring for every PINS case, probation officers found themselves under a monumental caseload; anecdotally, probation officers reported caseloads approaching 100. This inevitably led to long waits for intake appointments and sporadic contact during the monitoring term. A youth's problematic behavior often escalated during these delays, prompting family members and probation officers to seek family court intervention.

³ The New York Family Court Act defines a Designated Assessment Service (DAS) as an entity that provides assessments to determine the service needs of PINS youth referred to diversion. In many counties, DAS is comprised of officials from the various departments that administer the PINS system. In New York City, however, ACS contracts with a nonprofit social service agency in each borough that provides service assessments: in Manhattan and Brooklyn the Children's Aid Society is the provider; in Queens it is Community Mediation Services; Staten Island contracts with the Jewish Board of Family and Children Services; and the Bronx utilizes Neighborhood Youth and Family Services.

Once in court, it was common for PINS youth to violate court orders by continuing to miss school or resisting both parental and judicial authority. In the absence of alternative systemic responses judges regularly ordered youth into foster care placement.

Youth, parents, probation, and ACS all acknowledged that this system was not working. Often distrustful of law enforcement authority, youth recall probation oversight as either a hassle or an aggressive imposition. In the words of one PINS youth “[Probation] don’t get it. If a probation officer tells you there are going to be all sorts of consequences if you don’t go, it makes you not go.” Likewise, parents recognized that the threat of court involvement did not result in more obedient children. As one mother observed, “Kids nowadays, that reality check don’t work...when you talk about giving them that scared straight thing, it’s almost like they’ll take it on their shoulders and roll it off.” Probation and ACS officials felt disheartened by staggering placement costs and the knowledge that many families they were trying to help were leaving the system in disarray.

Problem Solving: FAP Program Design

With a failing system and bracing for the influx of thousands of new youth under PINS 18, ACS and probation agreed that something needed to be done. Working together, the two agencies created FAP to remedy the core failings of the PINS system by addressing the needs of families through immediate response, family-based assessment, and interagency collaboration.

Under FAP, families wishing to access the PINS system are directed to the FAP office. In some boroughs this office is in the courthouse; in others it is down the street. With the exception of Brooklyn, the FAP office has its own waiting area so that FAP youth do not mingle with youth brought in on delinquency charges. FAP intakes occur the day the parent walks in, regardless of whether the youth is present. If the youth is not present, the social worker interviews the parent and arranges for a subsequent interview for the youth within a few days.⁴

When a family enters the FAP office they are greeted by an administrative worker who runs the family’s names through the ACS data systems and consults with probation’s data system to determine if they have open cases or past history with either agency. In addition, while waiting for the intake interview, parents fill out a “Request for Services” form that asks them to describe the issue that has brought them to the PINS system. Similarly, youth complete a “Youth Response” form in which they are asked why they think they have been brought to FAP and what they think will happen.

Once these forms are completed and screening has begun, the family is interviewed by a family assessment specialist, an experienced ACS employee with a master’s degree

⁴ A total of eight FAP interviews were observed during the months of July and August in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Manhattan. During that time appointments were being scheduled for the next day or following week in Brooklyn and the Bronx. In Manhattan appointments were being set for two to three weeks out.

in social work who is equally concerned with the parent's and youth's perspectives and experience. Family assessment specialists interview the youth and parents separately and together. The interviews focus on expectations, family dynamics, and potential services. By allowing both sides to air their feelings, the interviewer begins the process of breaking down the barriers that are causing family friction. In the words of one youth, family assessment specialists "talk to you and see where you're coming from as a child...they try to help you."

For approximately one third of the families that come to FAP, involvement with the PINS system ends after the initial interview. FAP categorizes these cases as either "refused and withdrawn," meaning the family left after refusing services, or "advocacy and information," meaning that the family's interaction with FAP ended after receiving information on FAP and/or supportive services.⁵

In most cases, however, the family assessment specialist assesses the family's concerns during the initial interview and immediately implements next steps: a follow-up meeting, a referral to emergency mental health or medical services, a referral to an ACS-contracted or neighborhood-based provider, scheduling of further, more extensive assessment through DAS, or, in the case of a runaway, referral to probation to begin the process of obtaining of a warrant.

For parents who insist on probation monitoring or court access—parents who previously would have been permitted to go before a judge—probation and ACS work together to steer the family into services. If, after the FAP intake, a parent is adamant about getting to family court, the family assessment specialist will brief the probation supervisor on the case. Then the probation supervisor and the specialist hold a "case conference" with the family to reinforce their understanding of the process and to prevent any unrealistic expectations about what court access can provide. Typically, the family will agree to have their cases remain with FAP and they will be referred to DAS.

In addition to referring families to DAS assessment and relevant services, FAP screens out cases more appropriately handled through other programs. If an open probation or ACS case is discovered during the administrative screening, the family may be referred back to the social worker or contact made with the probation officer already working with them. Families insistent on placement can be referred to an ACS field office for a critical case conference (a conference involving all family members, a caseworker, and other support providers such as school and extended family) which may result in intensive ACS services or a voluntary out-of-home placement. When issues involving abuse and neglect surface during the interview, the specialist will inform the State Central Registry.⁶

⁵ It is unknown how many of these families end their contact with FAP at this early stage because they are satisfied with the information they have received, they are inappropriate for additional services (for example, they do not meet the statutory requirements of a PINS), or they are dissatisfied with the program.

⁶ Referral to the Central Registry was also a potential outcome under the prior system.

Table 1 shows the referral outcomes for all FAP cases processed through June 30, 2004. Overall, approximately one half of the families were referred to services in the community (46 percent). In 61 percent of those cases (2,764 of 4,523), a referral was made to DAS for a more thorough assessment followed by services. Approximately 12 percent of families were referred to another division of ACS, either because they already had an open case or because the family assessment specialist suspected child abuse or neglect and informed the State Central Registry. Only 11 percent of families were referred to probation for a PINS intake.

Table 1: FAP Referral Outcomes, December 2002 – June 2004*

FAP Outcome	Total	Manhattan	Brooklyn	Queens	Bronx
ACS	1,192 (12%)	318 (17%)	377 (9%)	237 (12%)	260 (12%)
<i>Field Office</i>	470	169	196	105	NA
<i>Protective/Diagnostic</i>	371	50	104	17	200
<i>Applications</i>	173	44	2	79	48
<i>SCR Report**</i>	121	27	59	29	6
<i>OCACM***</i>	50	26	15	7	2
<i>Other ACS</i>	7	2	1	0	4
Probation	1,086 (11%)	195 (11%)	484 (12%)	165 (9%)	242 (11%)
Service Referrals	4,523 (46%)	749 (41%)	1,591 (39%)	874 (46%)	1,309 (61%)
<i>DAS</i>	2,764	493	869	547	855
<i>ACS Contracted Provider (PPRS)</i>	650	92	392	72	94
<i>Mental Health</i>	352	82	176	41	53
<i>Neighborhood Based Services (NBS)</i>	341	30	124	122	65
<i>Other Service Referral</i>	416	52	30	92	242
Non Service Referrals	3,135 (32%)	566 (31%)	1,610 (40%)	622 (33%)	337 (16%)
<i>Refused/Withdrawn</i>	1,597	235	927	167	268
<i>Advocacy and Info</i>	1,327	331	531	449	16
<i>Other</i>	211	0	152	6	53
Total	9,936	1,828	4,062	1,898	2,148

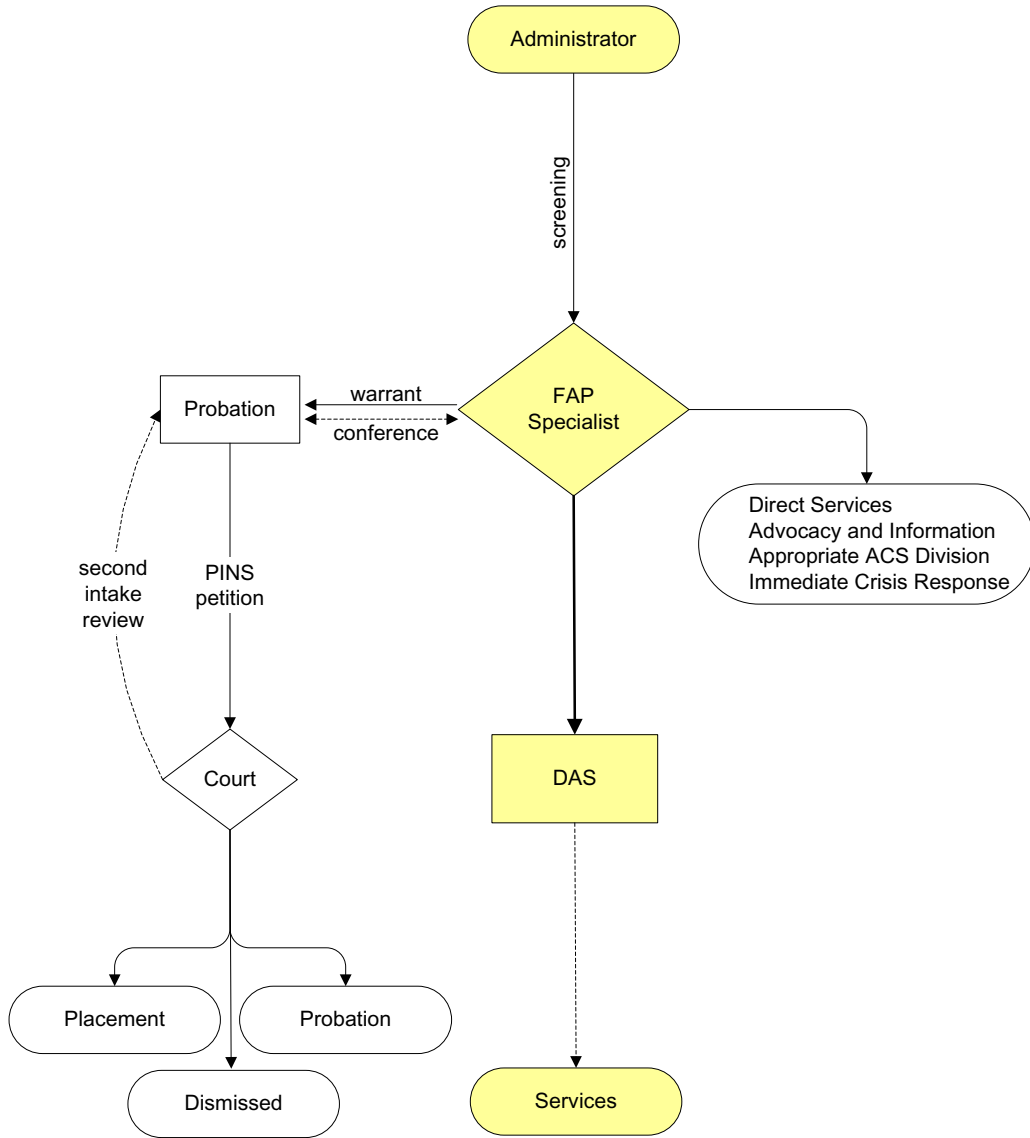
* note: The percentages in Table 2 represent column percentages. For example, referrals to other branches of ACS accounted for 17% of the FAP outcomes for Manhattan.

** Abuse/Neglect Report

*** Office of Contract Agency Case Management

The few FAP cases that do end up proceeding to probation arrive there in one of two ways: either they concern runaway cases requiring a warrant or they are cases in which the youth or parent failed to engage in DAS assessment or subsequent services. Unlike the old system, probation now reports PINS caseloads of about 25 cases per officer, thus allowing probation officers to engage more actively in oversight. The following chart illustrates the city's FAP process.

FAP Process



System Outcomes

By placing family assessment and service delivery at the beginning of the PINS process, FAP is conserving resources at subsequent stages of the process, resulting in significant financial and administrative savings for the city. FAP has freed up probation to concentrate on its juvenile delinquency caseload and on more difficult, court-involved PINS cases. It has reduced referrals to court, thus conserving judicial resources. And, with fewer cases in court, fewer cases are being placed out of the home—the most expensive and often least effective outcome for PINS families.

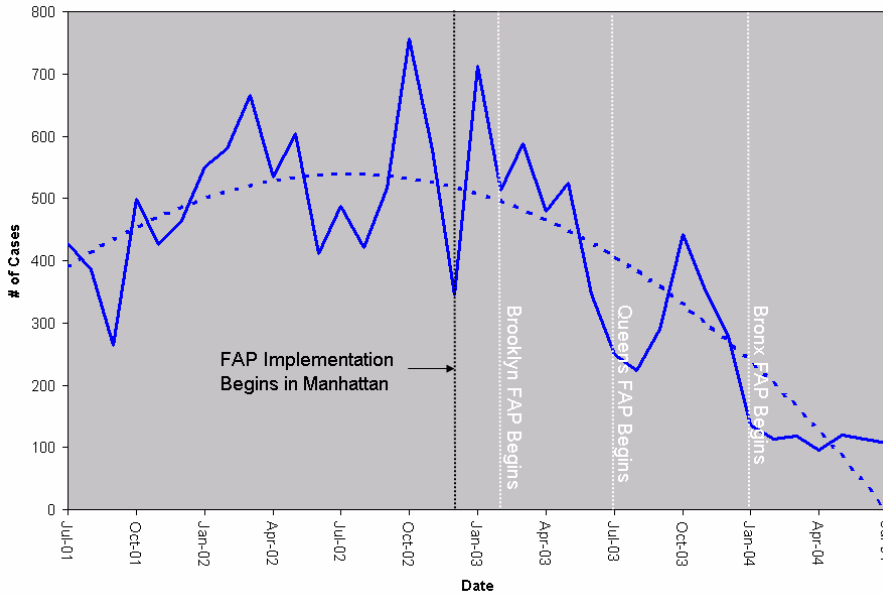
In order to quantify the scope of FAP’s effect on resources in the PINS system, Vera researchers compared the outcomes of those cases initiated during the first six months of 2004 in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx, with cases that went through the traditional PINS intake process in those four boroughs during the same six-month period in 2002, before the implementation of FAP. ACS and probation implemented FAP gradually, with the first office opening in Manhattan in December 2002 and the fourth in the Bronx in January 2004. (The last office, which is not part of this study, opened in Staten Island in November 2004.) The period of January through June 2004, is a useful time frame because FAP was operating in four of the boroughs and we were able to use the most current data available.⁷

Intakes

After the implementation of FAP, the number of PINS filings with probation dropped 79 percent. From January 1 through June 30, 2002, the Department of Probation opened a total of 3,345 PINS cases. During the same six-month period in 2004, only 697 PINS intakes were opened. Figure 1 shows the number of PINS probation intakes logged on a month-by-month basis over a three-year period, beginning with July 2001 and ending in July 2004. The graph shows that at the time of the initial FAP launch (December 2002), the number of probation PINS intakes citywide was rising. Despite occasional spikes, by the summer of 2003, this number began to decline rapidly and has stabilized at approximately 110 intakes per month.

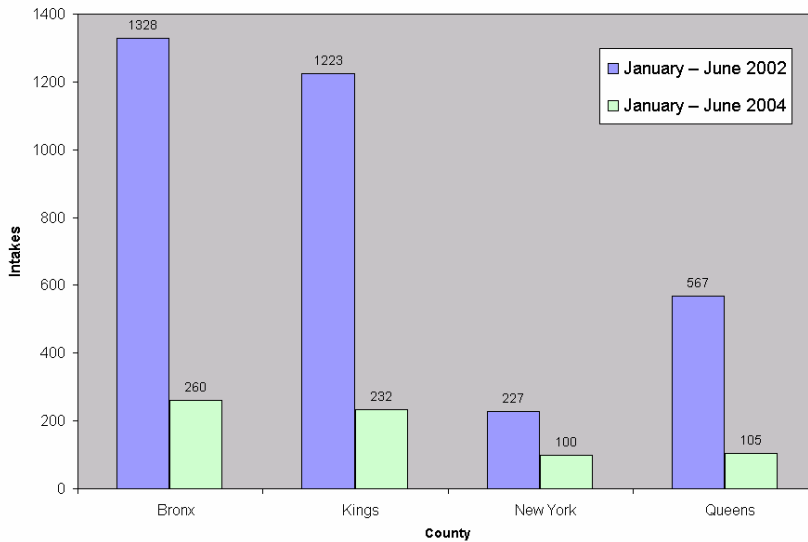
⁷ To avoid overwhelming new FAP offices and to address resource issues, ACS and the Department of Probation implemented the program gradually in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens with some cases still referred to probation for the first several months of implementation in each borough. In the last two boroughs to receive the program, the Bronx and Staten Island, the FAP office began conducting all PINS intakes starting opening day. During the later time period studied, January through June 2004, FAP conducted all intakes in the four relevant boroughs.

Figure 1: Probation PINS Intakes by Month, July 2001 – July 2004



Looking at the effect of FAP on PINS intakes at the borough level, we found significant reductions for all four offices. Figure 2 shows dramatic reductions in PINS intakes for the Bronx (80 percent), Brooklyn (81 percent), and Queens (81 percent), and a smaller, yet still significant, decline in Manhattan (51 percent). These reductions are even more compelling considering that 16- and 17-year-olds were ineligible for PINS in 2002.

Figure 2: PINS Probation Intakes by Borough, Jan. - June 2002 vs. Jan. - June 2004



With burdensome juvenile probation caseloads in every borough, this decrease in probation PINS cases has not meant layoffs as some staffers feared, but instead has

facilitated a much needed reallocation of probation staff to other, arguably more significant assignments that are more consistent with their skill sets. For example, in Queens, probation reassigned four officers from PINS intake to other family court assignments. The experience of other boroughs is similar.

In addition, the PINS cases remaining with probation are court-involved cases requiring oversight for compliance with court orders. In the six-month period before FAP, 69 percent of probation's PINS cases had been referred to DAS and were receiving some ongoing probation monitoring during the diversion term. The remaining 31 percent consisted of PINS intakes referred to family court. The 2004 data show a complete reversal of the type of PINS probation cases. After the implementation of FAP in four boroughs, 68 percent of probation PINS cases are now cases involving court petitions: runaways or cases that have not succeed with services accessed through FAP. This change illustrates FAP's success in referring to the Department of Probation primarily those PINS cases that will require the court's involvement.⁸

Court Referrals

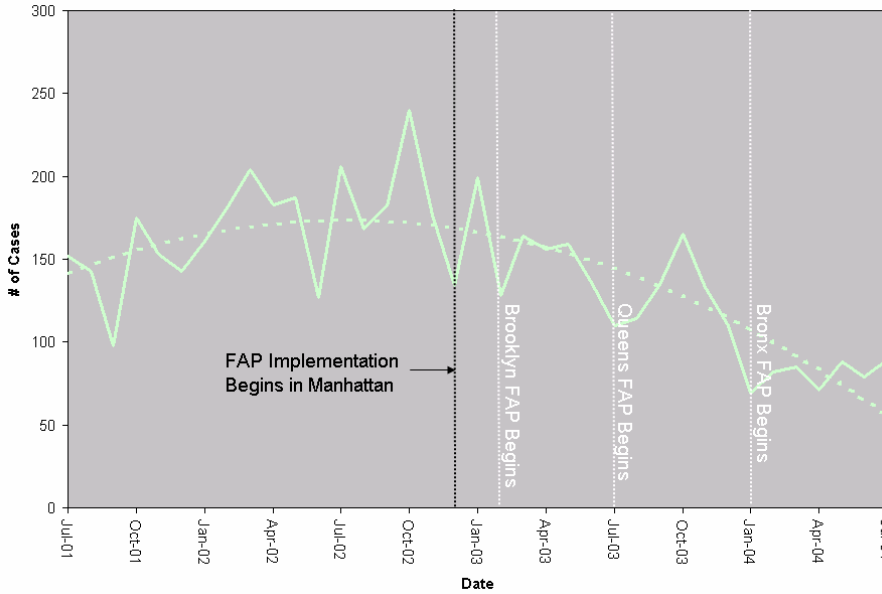
After the introduction of FAP, PINS referrals to Family Court have declined by 55 percent. The number of PINS cases referred to family court from January through June, 2002, was 1,043. From January to June 2004, only 474 PINS intakes were referred to the court.

This decrease is consistent with the programmatic design and goals of FAP. When social workers present family-oriented services as the core of the PINS process, court becomes a more distant and less appealing option to families who are better served by addressing underlying family dynamics than by judicial proceedings.

Figure 3 tracks the number of PINS court referrals on a month-by-month basis over a three-year period, beginning with July 2001 and ending in July 2004.

⁸ Under the FAP program design only cases needing court involvement should be referred to probation. It is unclear, therefore, what accounts for the 32 percent of probation's January–June 2004 PINS caseload that were classified “adjusted/diverted.”

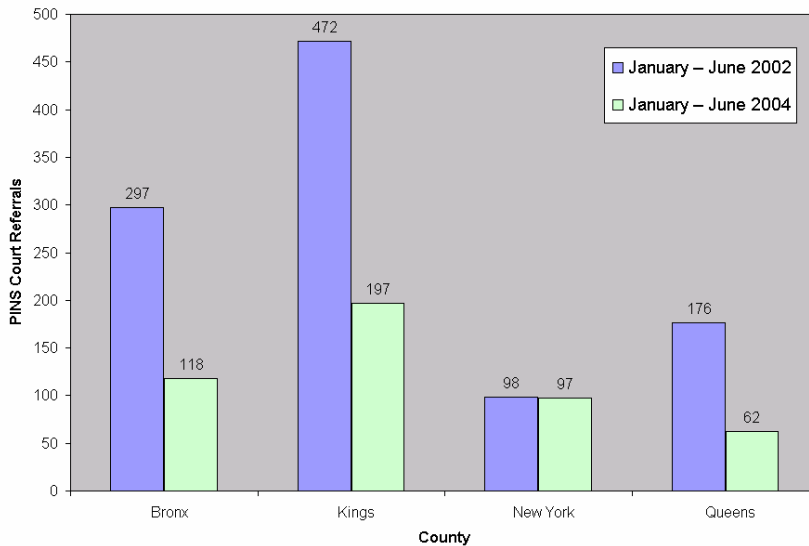
Figure 3: PINS Court Referrals by Month, July 2001 – July 2004



At the time of the initial FAP launch in December 2002, the four boroughs typically referred between 175 and 225 PINS cases a month to the Family Court. Court referrals have declined steadily since the introduction of FAP, settling at around 80 referrals per month in 2004.

Queens experienced the most dramatic reduction in court referrals for PINS (65 percent), followed by the Bronx (60 percent), and Brooklyn (58 percent) (see Figure 4). Court referrals for PINS in Manhattan have not declined.

Figure 4: PINS Court Referrals by Borough, Jan. - June 2002 vs. Jan. - June 2004



Borough-specific factors may explain the uneven rate in decline. In Manhattan, the borough with the lowest number of PINS cases generally (227 intakes between January and June 2002, compared to 1,326 intakes in the Bronx, 1,223 in Brooklyn, and 567 in Queens during the same time period), probation referred substantially fewer cases to court under the old system than in the other boroughs. Consequently, FAP may not have been as radical a shift for Manhattan PINS.

ACS Remands and Placements

Once a PINS petition is filed in family court, judges have the option of sending a child home or remanding him/her to out-of-home placement pending the outcome of the case. Prior research on the PINS system in New York City found that judges usually base this decision on the wishes of parents and guardians; if the parent does not want to take the child home and no relative steps forward to care for the child, the judge usually remands the child to the care of ACS.⁹ Placement in foster care is also one of the options available to judges at the disposition phase of a PINS case.

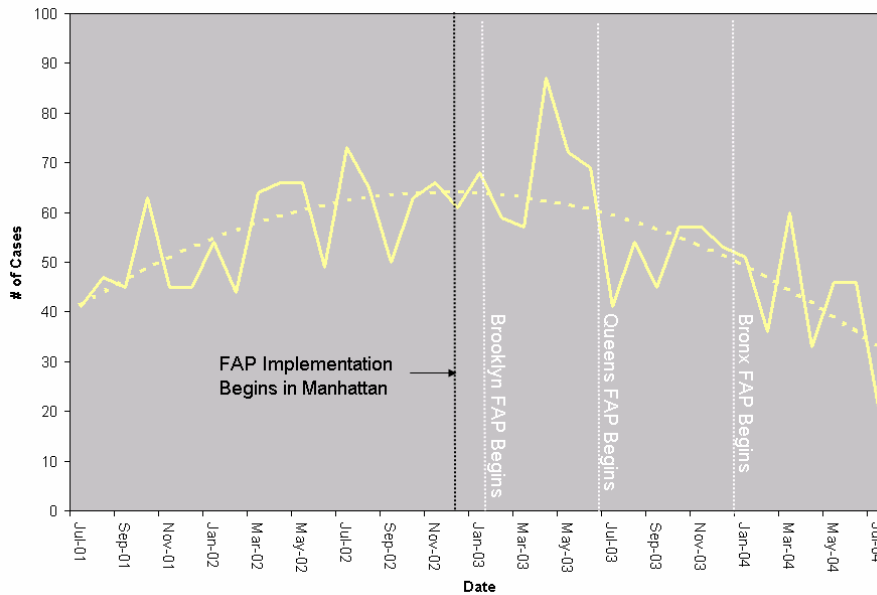
FAP seeks to reduce the use of out-of-home remands and placements. To see if the program met this goal, we examined data from ACS's Child Care Review Service for our two study periods. The ACS dataset used for this analysis does not distinguish between pre-dispositional remands and post-dispositional placements. Therefore, throughout this section, references to "remands/placements" include both types.

During the first six months of 2002, ACS records show that judges issued 343 remand/placement orders in PINS cases. From January through June 2004, the number of remands/placement orders declined to 272. This represents a 21 percent reduction in the use of foster care for PINS cases.¹⁰ Figure 5 traces the number of foster care admissions for PINS youth on a month-by-month basis from July 2001 through July 2004. The figure shows a steady increase in PINS remands/placements from the beginning of this period through the first half of 2003. The number of remands/placements peaks at 87 for the month of April 2003 and then begins a sharp descent reaching its lowest point in July 2004 (21).

⁹ Eric Weingartner, Andrea Weitz, Ajay Khashu, Robert Hope, and Megan Golden, *A Study of the PINS System in New York City: Results and Implications* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2002), p. 30.

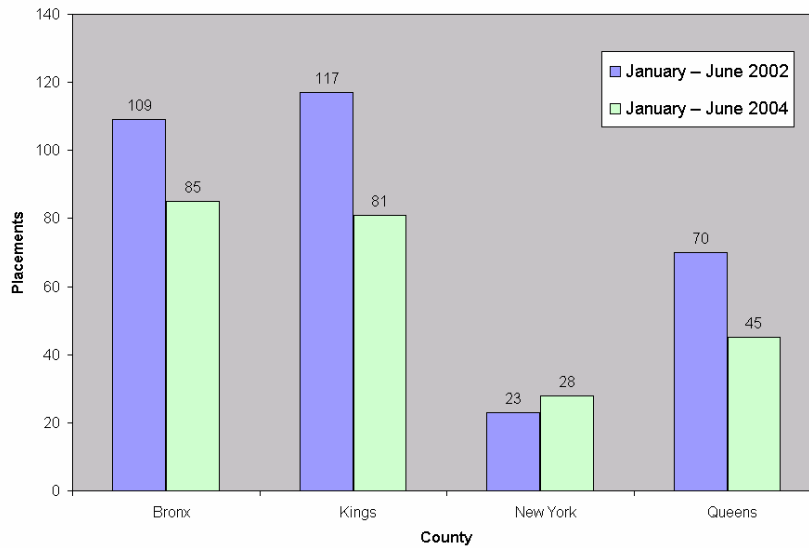
¹⁰ Of the 287 placements between January and June 2004, we were able to confirm that 116 of these youth received FAP intakes. Most likely, many more than the 116 received FAP intakes but, because of inconsistency in how FAP and CCRS collecting information on cases, we could only confirm that 116 of the youth placed had been intaked through FAP.

Figure 5: PINS Placements by Month, July 2001 – July 2004



When we analyzed PINS remands/placements for individual boroughs, we found similar reductions for Brooklyn (31 percent), Queens (36 percent), and the Bronx (22 percent). The data show a 22 percent increase in PINS placements for Manhattan (see Figure 7). In actual numbers, this increase is only five placements. Manhattan family court still places significantly fewer PINS youth than the other boroughs studied. As noted above, the relatively smooth functioning of Manhattan’s PINS system prior to FAP may account for the fact that outcomes have remained fairly constant while the other boroughs have been more noticeably affected by the introduction of the program.

Figure 6: PINS Placements by Borough, Jan. - June 2002 vs. Jan. - June 2004



Though the overall 21 percent decline in remands/placements has meant significant cost savings for the city, it is still less of a decrease than would be expected given the 55 percent decrease in the number of cases going to court. Without further study into the nature of the cases receiving remand/placement orders there is no empirical explanation for this trend. A few possible theories, however, flow from the information known. One is that the limited numbers of cases now receiving judicial attention are of such a serious nature that this cohort is in greater need of high intervention than the larger cohort arriving at court before FAP. Another possible explanation is that a number of the remands/placements occurring in the 2004 study period were older cases that did not receive the FAP service. As the number of court-bound PINS cases *not* seen by FAP continues to taper off, it is likely that we will see a further decline in the rate of remands/placements.

Experiencing FAP

In addition to the financial and administrative savings the city is realizing through FAP, our interviews indicate that the introduction of FAP has significantly altered the experiences of those participating in the PINS process: families are being responded to more immediately; efforts are being made to manage parent and youth expectations; ACS and probation are collaborating to better leverage the strengths of both agencies to address the varying needs of families; and families participating in FAP say they are more receptive to receiving supportive services.

Crises Response/Timely Response

“She was out of control. She walked out the door and I told her don’t come back and I really meant it, I wanted her to go away.”

—Mother who accessed FAP services for her teenage daughter

FAP recognizes that families turn to the PINS system when they are in need of immediate help. In the words of Joe Dillon, PINS Coordinator for the Department of Probation, “The whole point [of FAP] is these families are in crisis and need to be dealt with right then.” Under the old system, there were no mechanisms for promptly connecting families to help. Intake interviews usually took place weeks after the parent filed a complaint. Even if a family was able to see a probation officer the same day, they did not have access to same-day emergency services.

Correcting for these delays, under FAP, all parents are seen the day they come in. This immediate response is possible, in part, because family assessment specialists are responsible only for intake assessments, whereas under the prior system, probation was charged with both conducting intakes and providing monitoring in every case.

Prompt intake means that cases are being referred out quickly—often the same day as the intake. DAS officials have commented that, under FAP, they are getting much “fresher” cases in which the family is still directly engaged in the underlying problem. These cases, according to DAS administrators, are easier to work with because families are most open to services during the crisis and immediate post-crisis period.

As Nancy Hruska of the Division of Policy and Planning at ACS explains, “With the FAP screening, families have been connected to assessment services or services in their community more quickly and appropriately, resulting in more families staying intact and being brought from crisis to stability.”

In addition to referring cases faster, FAP also contains protocols for emergency crisis response, a service absent from the traditional PINS process. When family members speak with a family assessment specialist they are asked about the events that motivated them to come to FAP and about any psychiatric or medical conditions or incidents in the family. If the family appears in need of emergency services for example, if the initial

interview reveals a suicide gesture, the aftermath of a violent episode, or other serious mental health concerns, the specialist can refer the family directly to medical or psychiatric emergency services. Among the several FAP interviews observed for this study was the case of a teenage girl who had covered her arms in scars. At the conclusion of the interview, the specialist called—and paid for—a car service to take the girl and her mother to the psychiatric emergency room. Since the program’s inception in December 2002 through June 2004, family assessment specialists have made 61 immediate referrals to emergency services.

Managing Expectations

Often a family’s expectation of what follows the filing of a PINS complaint is markedly different from what the system was designed to deliver. In our focus group, parents frequently expressed the expectation that PINS would provide a “Judge Hatchet” figure to scare their children into behaving or that a probation officer would ensure that the children attend school.

With probation removed from the initial system interface under FAP, families are met with a service model that is even more divergent from the programming they may have been expecting. Consequently, FAP makes a conscious effort to manage family expectations so that families are prepared for and receptive to the program. Each interview begins with a description of FAP services and a discussion of the parent’s or youth’s expectations. Brochures describing the FAP process are available in waiting areas. Specialists want families to know upfront what will and will not be available to them. As one supervisor explains, “Parents think ‘PINS warrant’ is a piece of paper that will change their child, that a probation officer will wake their child and bring them to school every day. Instead we educate parents about child development and having patience and refer them to supportive services.”

Probation officers also play an important role in managing family expectations. If a parent insists on seeing a judge, the family assessment specialist will brief a probation supervisor on the case and then the specialist and probation supervisor will hold a “case conference” with the family to address their understanding of the process and to prevent any unrealistic expectations about what court access can provide. Probation and ACS officials report that these cases typically remain with FAP and are referred to DAS. Recognizing that misconception may be a barrier to successful service engagement, ACS and probation work together to get families informed and helped.

Interagency Collaboration

Collaboration between ACS and probation has been critical to FAP. It has enabled the agencies to pool their strengths and resources to help families, and it has opened up communication, allowing for smoother case processing.

When FAP was first introduced, it engendered some concern among probation officers who perceived the program as a criticism of the way they had been working with PINS youth and who feared losing their jobs in the transition. As discussed above, the results have been quite different. Officers relieved of intake responsibility have been reassigned to delinquency investigation and supervision, duties more consistent with probation's traditional, law enforcement role.¹¹ As one probation supervisor explained, "Probation is law enforcement, and these families are here for family crises. [PINS intakes] took us away from working with delinquents... It takes time and a social worker to sift through family problems." FAP assigns probation and ACS different, complementary roles that play to each agency's skill set: probation is now reserved for court-involved cases, and ACS social workers are being used for initial assessments, where they are the most effective.

Some ACS staff also were initially troubled by the shift in roles and questioned why they were doing "probation's work." PINS youth were historically considered "court kids," and, as a result, were deemed by some ACS caseworkers to be outside the rightful purview of preventive services. But, as ACS line staff have become more educated about PINS families and the role of probation, they report seeing PINS as a valuable gateway to services and understanding the role of PINS in the larger juvenile justice context.

Interagency collaboration has also yielded efficiencies in case management for both agencies. Probation officials and line staff recalled that prior to FAP they would receive a number of referrals that were inappropriate for PINS services—for example cases where a family also had an open ACS case. Without an expedient screening mechanism, a case might spend several weeks or months with probation before being "pushed back" to the appropriate service division within ACS. Now, however, FAP and probation are better equipped to refer cases to the right place in a timely manner, and probation reports a drop in the number of "push back" cases lingering inappropriately as PINS.

Facilitating Service Delivery

Unlike the old PINS system, where intakes took place in a law enforcement setting with the threat of court involvement hanging over the child's participation in services, FAP lays the groundwork for youth and parents to engage in supportive services by listening to all family members, managing expectations, and beginning to discuss and examine family dynamics. This not only better prepares families for what lies ahead but also can help facilitate service delivery.

¹¹ In every borough, the start of FAP has meant reassignment of probation officers. Before FAP, Brooklyn and Bronx probation dedicated seven officers to PINS intake and supervision. Now, the two boroughs have two and three PINS probation officers respectively. Most of the officers previously assigned to PINS are now supervising and investigating delinquency cases. Because New York City's juvenile probation caseload continues to be significant, even with the decrease in probation PINS involvement, all former PINS officers have remained with the department.

DAS administrators interviewed reported that, because of the explanations given during interviews, families referred through FAP are more receptive to services and have a better understanding of what will be available to them moving forward. DAS administrators also commented that FAP referrals provide more detailed, useful information for subsequent assessment and service referral and that DAS workers use family assessment specialists as valuable resources for case conferencing and information on ACS.

Youth focus group participants uniformly expressed favorable opinions of their FAP interactions. Many commented that they felt “listened to” and “respected” by the specialist. In addition, one youth who had experienced both FAP and the traditional probation intake said that under the old PINS system she had been offered counseling services but had not been interested. At FAP, however, services were explained clearly and in a way that made them more appealing.

While the limited scope of this study did not afford us the opportunity to study the effects of referred services on the lives of families, the responses of some youth focus group participants indicate that family counseling accessed through FAP is having a positive impact in the lives of some families. Several participants told how family counseling enabled them to understand their parents’ perspective and ultimately improved family communication. As one young person explained, “It helped ’cause we got counseling because I was seeing that [my mom] was always favoring my brother all the time...now I see that she lets him do things ’cause he’s two years older than me...now I understand where she’s coming from.” Another commented, “Before I couldn’t talk to my mother about anything because I felt like she’d take it the wrong way...so all that’s changed now and I talk to her.”

It should be noted, however, that an equal number of youth in the focus group had less positive experiences after their FAP intakes. One girl expressed disappointment in her mother’s failure to follow up with her DAS assessment. She was discouraged that there appeared to be no outreach once her mother missed their DAS appointment. Two young people recounted how their parents engaged law enforcement in other jurisdictions to provide a “scared straight” approach. One girl was brought to the status offender system in North Carolina while a boy’s parents arranged for him to receive supervision from his local police precinct.

As discussed, several parents interviewed were disappointed in FAP because it did not provide the intensive supervision or “scared straight” services they were looking for when they accessed the PINS system. Nevertheless, approximately half of the adult focus group participants reported some positive result from FAP-referred services, whether it was that their child’s listening had improved, a disagreement had been settled in mediation, or they were given needed support.

Issues Going Forward

In a short time, the Family Assessment Program has significantly changed the PINS process in New York City. As with any system, however, there continue to be areas for further examination and program development. This section highlights some of those areas with the confidence that, as FAP continues to develop and refine its family-based approach, it will generate new innovations as it tackles new problems.

Streamlining the Process Further

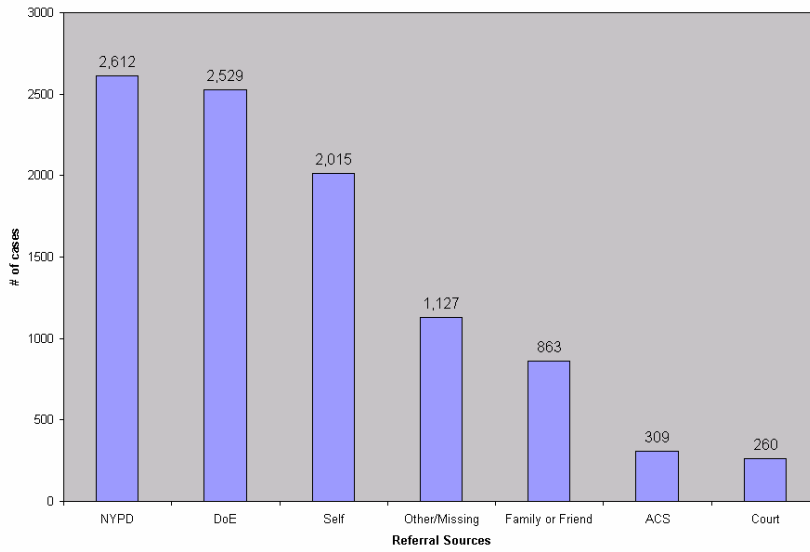
As currently administered, the majority of families (61 percent) referred to services through FAP are referred for intensive DAS assessments. A typical experience for these families will include a meeting with a family assessment specialist followed the same day by a meeting with a DAS social worker who will set up additional assessment interviews to be conducted over the next month, culminating in a service referral. Though FAP has already decreased wait times and simplified service access, participants continue to find the two-tiered FAP/DAS process a source of confusion and delay. One focus group parent explained, “I thought I was going to see a case worker right away but first I saw someone else who...referred me to someone else but nobody ever contacted me back about services. It was just left like that.” Many families were confused as to who their family assessment specialist was, who their DAS caseworker was, and when they would receive a service referral. Other families lost information on their referral and expected follow-up phone calls to keep them engaged. Like the parent quoted above, when no call came, they dropped out of the process.

Outreach

While FAP has deliberately worked to manage family expectations through brochures, inquiring into expectations, and explaining the program up front, these efforts occur only after the family has walked into the FAP office, acting on their prior understanding of what the PINS system would provide. Often in crisis and expecting something very different from what they are offered, many parents expressed resistance to FAP. As one mother who had sought out PINS specifically for probation supervision recounted, “[when I got to family court] they told me they don’t do PINS and that I’d have to go through this special program. I’ve been through so many special programs so I chose not to at that time.”

Fueling this problem, many families are receiving misinformation from authoritative sources before they arrive at the FAP office. Police and schools are the most frequently cited referral sources for families accessing FAP (see Figure 7). A combined 53 percent of all families seen by FAP said they were referred by one of these two sources.

Figure 7: Sources of Referrals to FAP



Yet many officers and school officials are unfamiliar with PINS and FAP, having only a vague notion that some array of PINS services and court intervention are available. The story of one Bronx mother is illustrative. Concerned about her daughter’s poor school performance and failure to adhere to curfew, she went to her local police precinct for assistance. There, she said, a police officer instructed her to go to family court to seek a “PINS warrant,” explaining that a “PINS warrant means that a youth officer goes with her to school and checks up on her to make sure she’s doing her homework and is following her curfew and would pick her up if she was out past her curfew and take her to Bridges [secure detention] just to give her a little taste of reality.” Expecting the supervision and law enforcement services described to her at the station house, this mother expressed frustration and disappointment at discovering that her engagement of the PINS process would result in a referral to counseling. In the words of another parent, “There’s a lot of information, it’s just not accurate information.”

Recognizing the need to engage in broad community education, family assessment specialists have attended community board meetings in some boroughs, and ACS and probation have conducted outreach to police precincts. But given the size of the New York City Police Department and Department of Education, the efforts to date are a drop in the bucket. Consequently, as probation and ACS recognize, the current public education initiative must be continued and expanded.

Lack of information about FAP extends not only to the agencies referring families but also the ultimate decision maker, the court. Interviews with three family court judges revealed that the judges have little if any knowledge of FAP. Judges interviewed also stated that they rarely had detailed information on family assessments or the specific service referrals made in the cases before them. As one judge said, knowing the experience of the family with the system prior to the court appearance and the results of prior evaluations would allow him to make more informed decisions. Accordingly,

additional efforts should be made to educate judges about FAP and the experience of families appearing in court.

Helping Runaways

Under both the old PINS system and under FAP, runaway cases are intaked through probation and then forwarded to family court for a “PINS warrant.” PINS warrants authorize a located child to be returned to court by law enforcement and, once in court, allow the family to utilize the PINS system. In order to gain faster court access, officials from both probation and ACS report that it is not uncommon for parents to falsely claim that their child has runaway. Indeed, officials note that in some cases involving runaway allegations the child is, in fact, skipping curfew or staying outside of the home at a known and safe location.

To screen out these false cases, under FAP, all families seeking PINS warrants must first provide a missing persons report from the police department. Then a family assessment specialist will interview the parent and call the youth’s school, family friend, or relative to confirm that the youth is not easily locatable. Only after these requirements have been met will the family be referred to probation, which then interviews the parent and can forward the case to family court.

This process (missing persons report, FAP intake, probation interview, forwarding to family court) is necessary for separating out the wheat from the chaff—the true runaway cases from the cases in which a parent may be using a runaway allegation to circumnavigate the FAP process, receive court access, and obtain a warrant. Once a family is identified as an actual runaway case, however, it can still take several hours before a warrant is issued. In some instances, this process can take two days. Because family court generally will not accept new cases after 4:00 pm, in some boroughs, probation will not accept runaway cases after the lunch break because these cases will not be processed quickly enough to make it onto court by 4:00 pm. When this happens, a family anxious about their missing child’s safety will be asked to return to court the next day to continue the process of obtaining a warrant.¹²

Of the eight FAP intakes observed by Vera, two involved runaway youth and frightened parents. In one instance, the local police precinct had refused to provide the parent a missing persons report based on a misunderstanding of protocol. Without that report, FAP could not refer the case to probation for a warrant. Only after the family assessment specialist had spent hours speaking with the family and with local police was

¹² It should be noted that a warrant is not necessary in all cases for returning a runaway youth. Family Court Act section 718 provides that a peace officer or police officer “may return to a parent or other person legally responsible for such child’s care any child under the age of eighteen who has run away from home without just cause or who, in the reasonable conclusion of the officer appears to have run away from home without just cause.”

the case referred to court and then only after probation made a special accommodation to take the case late in the day.

Even then, once a “true” runaway case has received family court attention, it is unclear that they are receiving the help and support they need or want. Conversations with probation and ACS as well as observations of FAP families reveal that many families with missing children are under the false impression that a PINS warrant will help speed up the process of the police locating their child. These families may not be seeking the intervention of a family court judge, but rather are looking for a way to bring their missing child home quickly. While these families may benefit from FAP-type services, it is not at all clear that court access is a necessary first step.

The problems of false information and false expectations are particularly acute in the case of runaways. One mother interviewed over the phone recounted that when she went to fill out a missing persons report she was told by a police officer that she also needed to get a PINS warrant. She was not at all interested in PINS services—she had already arranged for private therapy upon her daughter’s return—but based on the instructions of the officer she nonetheless went to the FAP office. When she discovered, several hours into the process of obtaining a warrant, that this would result in her daughter being produced in court, she left in a rage.

Families of runaway children are, in many ways, the most appropriate for support; they are experiencing obvious family crises and have significant concerns over their child’s safety. It is clear, however, that there continues to be room to develop improved procedures and services for helping these families.

Additional Research

Through administrative data, observations, and interviews we were able to explore the effect of FAP on PINS administration and to document the experience of family members and agency officials. This report has demonstrated that, by the reducing placement rate and immediately addressing family concerns, FAP has avoided certain negative outcomes of the old system and has created an atmosphere more conducive to family healing. In this limited study we were not, however, able to answer a broader and more fundamental question: Is the New York City PINS system helping families over the long term?

A more in-depth, qualitative and quantitative exploration of families’ experiences with FAP-referred services would begin to answer this question and would assist the city in ensuring that resources are being allocated to the most effective service modalities. A study along these lines would analyze the range of services FAP families receive, the length of service engagement, the factors contributing to termination of services, family satisfaction, and the effect of services on youth behavior (school attendance, substance abuse, etc).

A broader examination would look at the impact of FAP on PINS recidivism and involvement in criminal justice system: Are FAP families more or less likely to pursue

future PINS cases than families who went through the traditional probation intake? Are FAP youth more or less likely to recidivate? A comparative longitudinal study of FAP youth and youth receiving traditional probation intake would allow us to explore FAP's longer term impact on the larger criminal justice system.

Finally, our analysis of administrative data demonstrates that FAP has had a significant effect on the administration of the PINS process in New York City. Despite the success of FAP, however, the Family Court ordered 272 out-of-home placements during the first six months of 2004. A more in-depth analysis of the current population of PINS youth in ACS placement could help frame strategies to decrease continuing high placement numbers. This research could examine the characteristics of those youth and their families and compare them to petitioned PINS cases that do *not* result in placement. A more focused look at this population could also examine the circumstances that led to placement despite the efforts of FAP.

Conclusion

Although many New York City officials feared the passage of PINS 18, many now feel the new legislation was a blessing in disguise. Faced with the threat of thousands of new cases flooding an already over-taxed system, the city's Administration for Children's Services and Department of Probation worked together to implement effective change that would allow the system to absorb new cases. As this report documents, their innovation, the Family Assessment Program, has not only averted projections of a substantial increase of PINS cases, but has, in fact, reduced the number of formal probation PINS cases by quickly and effectively providing meaningful assistance to families before the services of probation and the family court are needed.