



520 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10018

p. 646 386 3100

f. 212 397 0985

courtinnovation.org

Research. Development. Justice. Reform.

Courtney Bryan, Director

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For over 25 years, the Center for Court Innovation (the Center) has supported the vision embraced by New York State to reduce unnecessary and harmful involvement in the justice system wherever possible and to build public safety through sustainable solutions. Our firsthand experience and research uniquely positions us to offer insights that the State can look to as it considers policies and the development of initiatives that respond to the needs of New Yorkers.

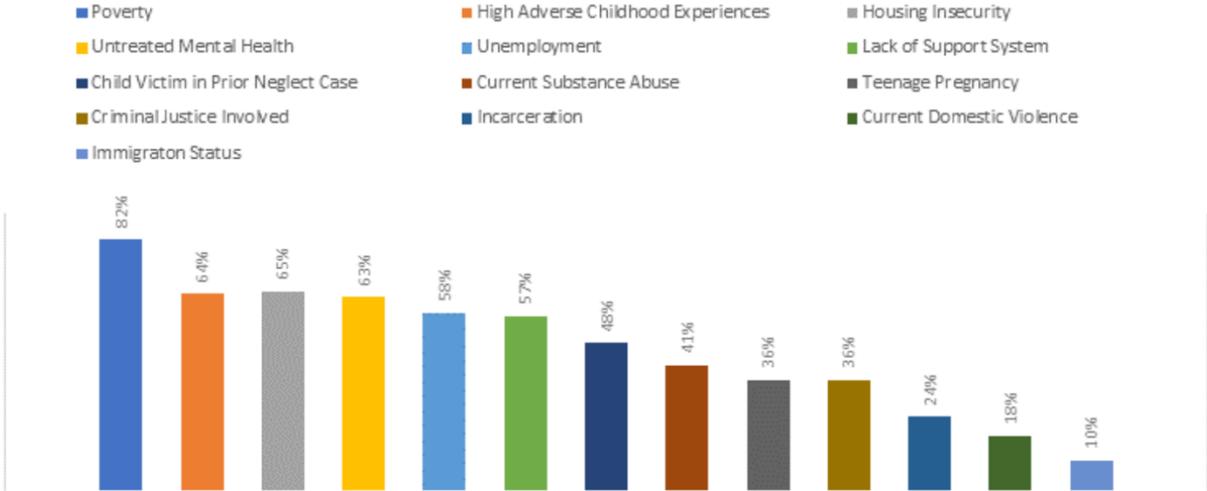
These programs, which are located in courts and communities across New York City and Upstate, have been built on the strength of proven data and original research and are meant to improve trust and efficiency in the justice system. One such program is the Strong Starts Court Initiative (“Strong Starts”). Strong Starts is a two generational Family Court-based project that focuses on infants and toddlers, birth to three years of age, who are subjects of child protection cases, where courts, families and the agencies are provided with more frequent and consistent information through monthly convenings that improve outcomes for children and families.

We focus on infants and toddlers for two reasons: first, they constitute the largest cohort of children who enter the child welfare system each year. Currently, there are more than 10,000 children birth to three years of age who have open cases in the family court system in New York City – with Strong Starts operating in all five New York City counties. Second, we focus on these particular children because they are contending with severe adversity - including neglect, abuse, exposure to family violence or other traumatic events, including system-imposed harm - during the most formative stage of development when the care they receive, and the environments in which they grow, determine whether they will have a strong, or a shaky foundation for all of their subsequent development. We know that chronic adversity during these earliest years adversely impacts brain development, with lifelong implications for learning capacities and social-emotional competencies.

And their parents have complex problems. Many were in foster care when they were children. Many have chronic struggles with substance abuse and mental health problems as a result of the adversities they experienced since they were children. They are often attempting to

raise their infants and toddlers in poverty, without parenting models or social support, and without solid educations or secure housing.

STRONG STARTS RISK ASSESSMENT FLAGS FOR ENROLLED PARENTS



These infants and parents enter a child welfare system that is over-stretched at every level – including the caseloads of their caseworkers and attorneys – and that has no established expertise in infant mental health or early childhood. They need systems and services – like Early Intervention and supportive housing – that are extremely difficult to navigate. And they are too often sent for services that have no efficacy for remediating the problems that resulted in child welfare system involvement. Twenty-five percent of babies who are reunited with their parents after placement in foster care, return to foster care within a short time, suggesting that the system does not do enough, or the right things, to strengthen vulnerable families even when it has been deemed necessary to remove children from their parent’s care. Yet we all strongly believe that in most cases, children do best when they remain in the care of their parents and families.

Strong Starts brings expertise in infancy and early childhood to the courts, including expertise in the kinds of interventions that best shift the balance between risk and protective factors. Here’s how it works. A dedicated judge in each borough is paired with a specialist in infant mental health. Cases selected by the judge receive intensive outreach and clinical assessment by the Strong Starts Coordinator so that parents stay engaged with their children and their cases, and families are referred for meaningful services that improve parents’ capacity for safe and nurturing care and promote children’s learning and development. There is also an expedited court calendar, in which the families’ entire court teams of attorneys, caseworkers and clinical service providers meet on a monthly basis to share information, address barriers to service provision and case progress, and solve problems. A strong focus on collaboration and information sharing underlies this entire process. This significantly reduces the usual adversarial

stance that obscures problems that need to be addressed, and that contribute to court inefficiency since the Judge and all parties convene with the family once a month, compared to the unpredictable adjournment schedule in the typical process.

With focused caseloads aimed at coordinating services for the youth, family and informing the Judge, Strong Starts Clinical Coordinators can also do things that promote family reunification and family stability that other parties in an adversarial system are not appropriate or equipped to do. For example, a Strong Starts Clinical Coordinator in Queens stabilized a child's placement in childcare by providing guidance to the childcare staff in managing the child's difficult behaviors that resulted from trauma, and thereby averted his termination from the program. Our Clinical Coordinator in Staten Island has engaged in a thorough search of emergency and supportive housing for a young mother with legal blindness who is committed to reunification with her infant. The examples of this degree of effort and outreach are bountiful.

Strong Starts has been operating out of the Bronx since 2015 and is now in all five boroughs. To date, it has prevented the removal of a significant numbers of infants from their parents, has effectuated the return to their parents or families of infants who were in foster care, has prevented the removal of children from foster homes and thereby has reduced further attachment disruptions and instability in their young lives. Strong Starts has assured that families have strong and evidence-backed services during the course of their child welfare case and once they are reunited.

Strong Starts Judges have repeatedly attested to the marked differences in their Strong Starts cases. The Strong Starts Judge in the Bronx has noted the complete culture change in the court over the short time that Strong Starts has been in place in that borough, in that evidence-backed infant parent relational therapies are now court-ordered instead of the ineffectual parenting classes that have long been the backbone of child welfare system interventions. The Strong Starts Judge in Staten Island has remarked on the way that parents who, in the past, abandoned their efforts to get their children back due to frustrations with and anger at the system have stayed engaged with the support, encouragement, and strength-based posture of the Strong Starts Coordinators. Judge Ruiz, prior Administrative Judge of the NYC Family Courts, has included Strong Starts in her strategic plan for the courts and Judge DiFiore, Chief Judge for NY State, specifically mentioned Strong Starts in her State of the Judiciary address in 2019.

With inquiries from other localities, and technical assistance provided to other Family Courts and child welfare systems across the state, Strong Starts is well positioned to expand capacity in NYC and replicate the model for implementation throughout New York State. As demonstrated by the data, there is an opportunity to address inter-generational system involvement in a way that builds trust with families where 70% continue to reach out for services after their cases are concluded. While Court Administration has set the goal for expansion, it

does not have the means to do this. We urge government to consider the assets that Strong Starts brings to a system that is supposed to help families, and to provide access to this infant-focused expertise, and this collaborative effort and strength-based approach, on behalf of our youngest children.

Conclusion

We thank the joint State Legislature for its continued partnership and are available to answer any questions you may have.