
**Serving Parents
Who Leave Prison:
Final Report on the
Work and Family Center**

December 2001

Jessica Pearson, Ph.D.

Lanae Davis, M.A.

Center for Policy Research

1570 Emerson Street

Denver, Colorado 80218

303/837-1555

FAX: 303/837-1557

cntrpolres@qwest.net

centerpolicyresearch.org

Prepared under a grant to the Colorado Department of Human Services from the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement — “Collecting Child Support from Incarcerated and Paroled Obligor,” Grant No. 90-FD-0033.

**Serving Parents Who Leave Prison:
Final Report on the
Work and Family Center**

Acknowledgments

Special thanks are due to the following individuals for their assistance in preparing this report:

Steve Chorak, Colorado Department of Corrections

Rogelio Contreras Garcia, Work and Family Center

C. Scott Hromas, Colorado Department of Corrections

Vickey Ricketts, Community Reintegration Project of the Colorado AFL/CIO

Kathy Rodriguez, Denver Division of Child Support Enforcement

Mario Salinas, Work and Family Center

Dan Welch, Colorado Division of Child Support Enforcement

Laurie Perea and **Rosalie Benavidez** helped to collect the information on child support payment patterns. Case managers at the Work and Family Center updated client files.

**Serving Parents Who Leave Prison:
Final Report on the
Work and Family Center**

Table of Contents

Executive Summary i

Introduction and Goals 1

Background and Rationale 1

Staffing and Services 3

Evaluation 7

Referral to the WFC and Criminal Status 8

Client Background Characteristics 10

Incarceration History 12

Conditions of Release 13

Post-Incarceration Living Situation 14

Financial Situation 15

Interest in Various Services 16

Follow-Up Patterns 25

Summary of Findings and Recommendations 39

References 52

**Serving Parents Who Leave Prison:
Final Report on the
Work and Family Center**

List of Tables

Table 1. Referral Sources and Patterns for WFC Clients 9

Table 2. Selected Demographic and Employment Characteristics of WFC Clients, the Inmate Population in Colorado, and the Parole Population in Denver 10

Table 3. Family Status of WFC Clients 11

Table 4. Offense, Sentence, and Prison Profile for WFC Clients, the Inmate Population in Colorado, and the Parole Population in Denver 13

Table 5. Conditions of Release Reported by WFC Clients 14

Table 6. Living Arrangements Reported by WFC Clients 15

Table 7. Selected Indicators of Earnings and Obligations for WFC Clients at Intake 16

Table 8. Types of Help WFC Clients Indicate They Want at Intake 17

Table 9. Types of Help Interviewed Clients Reported Wanting and Receiving 18

Table 10. Client Reports of Their Interests/Needs When They Visited the WFC 19

Table 11. Employment Status of WFC Clients Seen by June 30, 2000, and Interviewed Six Months Later 21

Table 12. Actions Taken for WFC Clients With at Least One Open Child Support Case 23-24

List of Tables - Continued

Table 13. Child Support Status of Clients at Initial Visit and Six Months Later	24
Table 14. Quarterly Earnings for All 350 WFC Clients and Employed Clients	27
Table 15. Quarterly Earnings for All 135 WFC Clients and Employed Clients Seen by June 30, 2000	28
Table 16. Quarterly Earnings for Newly Released WFC Clients Seen by June 30, 2000	29
Table 17. Quarterly Earnings for Previously Released WFC Clients Seen by June 30, 2000	30
Table 18. Child Support Payment Behavior for WFC Clients Prior to and After Their Visit to the WFC	32-33
Table 19. Payment Behaviors Demonstrated by NCPs in Recent Colorado Studies	34
Table 20. Percent of WFC Clients Who Return to Prison, by Reason	35
Table 21. Clients' Evaluation of Changes in Their Lives Six Months After First Visit to the Work and Family Center	37
Table 22. Client Ratings of the WFC Six Months After Their First Visit	38
Table 23. Percent of WFC Clients and No Shows Who Return to Prison, by Reason	39

Executive Summary

This report focuses on the characteristics and experiences of 350 clients seen during August 1999 to March 15, 2001, at the Work and Family Center, a multi-agency collaboration to enhance the successful reintegration of offenders upon their release from Colorado prisons. All clients in the study had minor-aged children and were known to the child support agency in Colorado. They were offered assistance with employment, child support issues, and family reintegration.

Mirroring the evaluation methodology used in studies of responsible fatherhood programs, this assessment draws on information collected from a variety of sources including (1) intake forms completed by clients when they visited the WFC covering demographics, criminal history, family composition, living arrangements, and interest in various services; (2) telephone interviews conducted with clients six months following their initial visit to the WFC; and (3) reviews of automated records maintained by child support, employment, and criminal justice agencies to gauge patterns of child support payment, earnings, and return to prison. The study yielded the following results.

- , **After a slow start, the WFC succeeded in cultivating a steady stream of referrals from many different sources in the criminal justice system and the community.** On its two-year anniversary, the WFC was serving an average of 70 new clients per month, who reported learning about the facility from a variety of sources both within and outside of the criminal justice system.

- , **The WFC serves a varied clientele that resembles the parole population released to Denver but is a less violent and lower risk group than Colorado's inmate population.** The average WFC client in this study was a 35-year-old male, repeat offender, with a variety of racial and ethnic characteristics who had committed a drug crime or a burglary or theft. On average, clients had served 2.8 years and faced 2.3 years of parole. While 30 percent reported committing a violent crime, this was the case for 43.8 percent of Colorado's inmate population. Most WFC clients reported having a GED and being employed full-time before going to prison.

- , **Many WFC clients reported regular contact with their children before going to prison, but little contact during their incarceration.** Although more than half of WFC clients said they had lived with their children before going to prison, and nearly half of those who did not cohabit with their children reported seeing them "often," most WFC clients reported that they never saw their children while in prison.

When they visited the WFC, clients were living in a variety of community and halfway house settings, and levels of contact with children were far lower than they had been prior to incarceration. When they visited the WFC, 41 percent reported that they had not had contact with any of their children since their release.

WFC clients faced many financial pressures and had limited resources. When they visited the WFC, two-thirds of clients owed child support and had an average total monthly support obligation of \$295, plus an arrears obligation of \$16,651. Seventy percent reported being required to pay restitution, with the average amount being \$3,144. At their initial visit, half of the clients were employed full-time, earning an average of \$9.00 per hour. Forty percent said they were unemployed, with the remainder working part-time or at pick-up jobs.

Paroled and released offenders came to the WFC for assistance with issues pertaining to their employment and financial situation, with child support being the most frequently mentioned type of desired help. Paroled and released offenders came to the WFC wanting help with child support (69%), transportation (57%), clothing (50%), employment (47%), and housing (41%). At their initial visit, very few reported wanting help getting to see their children or improving relationships with their children or the other parent, although 29 percent met with the mental health specialist and 16.3 percent met with a family law attorney for help with custody or visitation. The popularity of the WFC's child support services reflects the fact that parole officers and community corrections agents tended to recommend the WFC to clients with child support problems, and the evaluation focused exclusively on clients with minor-aged children who were known to the child support agency.

Although nearly all WFC clients find jobs on their own, they report high levels of satisfaction with the employment service they receive at the WFC, with a small, non-representative sub-group of interviewed clients showing significantly higher earnings two quarters following their visit to the WFC. Nearly all interviewed WFC clients who saw an employment specialist said the intervention had been "very" or "somewhat" helpful, although only 20 percent (11 clients) reported that WFC staff had helped them find a job. Among the sub-group of clients seen at the WFC by June 30, 2000, and interviewed six months later, rates of full-time employment rose from 48 to 65 percent and quarterly earnings noted on wage records supplied by employers were significantly higher. At the same time, 60 percent of interviewed clients reported that their salary still did not cover their financial

needs.

Employment activity peaks in the quarter during which clients visit the WFC and tapers off in subsequent quarters; earnings remain stable. According to wage records reported by employers, 77 percent of clients seen by June 30, 2000, had earnings for the quarter in which they visited the WFC. By three quarters following their visit, the percentage with earnings had dropped to 57 percent. Employment rates are stronger for clients who stay out of prison, although there is some drop-off by the third quarter for this group, too. Quarterly earnings for those who were employed were stable over this time period, suggesting that no wage growth had occurred.

Interviewed clients report high levels of satisfaction with the child support specialist, with half of clients with open child support cases receiving some kind of “responsive” child support action. Half of WFC clients with open cases experienced at least one “responsive” action designed to make their child support obligations more manageable, such as a reduction in the monthly amount to be paid toward child support arrears, suspension of automated enforcement activity, and/or reinstatement of driver’s licenses.

The child support situation that clients faced did not substantially change in the six months following their visit to the WFC. The plethora of actions that the child support technician took on behalf of clients did not alter their child support status or obligations in any substantial way. Six months following their visit to the WFC, clients had average total monthly support obligations of \$257 and arrears balances of \$17,183.

Although payment is far from perfect, clients pay a higher percentage of their child support obligations after they visit the WFC, and the percentage of clients paying nothing drops. On average, WFC clients paid 17.5 percent of their child support obligation in the six months prior to visiting the WFC. Six months after their visit, the average percent paid rose to 39 percent for all clients and 41 percent among those who did not return to prison. For those who had been in the community for more

than 90 days before visiting the WFC, payments rose from 24 to 44 percent. The increases were due to new employment activity and wage withholding.

The child support payment behaviors that WFC clients exhibit are consistent with those observed in several Colorado demonstration projects and programs for low-income, noncustodial parents. The 39 to 41 percent payment rate for WFC clients is similar to the payment rate for participants in two other Colorado programs that provide assistance with employment, child support, and parenting to low-income NCPs.

WFC clients return to prison at lower rates than those reported for all DOC inmates. A quarter (24.8%) of WFC clients were back in prison when the DOC checked its records in August 2001. Among newly released clients, the rate of return was somewhat higher and stood at 28.6 percent. Most of the returns were due to parole violations and infractions of rules that are termed “community regressions.” We calculate the return to prison differently than does the DOC because we include community regression as a return while the DOC does not. The one-year recidivism rate reported by the DOC was 40 percent in 1999.

Interviewed clients report a mixture of positive and negative changes in their lives six months after they visit the WFC. When they were interviewed six months after they visited the WFC, substantial proportions (50-70%) of clients reported “doing a better job of getting their life together,” being better able to keep their job, and that their life was much better than it had been six months earlier. At the same time, many clients reported severe financial, practical, and emotional difficulties, with 85 percent saying they would like to spend more time with their children and half reporting that their salary did not cover their financial needs.

Interviewed clients rate the WFC highly and value the child support help and the emotional support they received. Interviewed clients rate the WFC favorably, with child support services attracting the highest marks. Most clients also credited the WFC with giving them a sense of “hope about the future.”

While clients show some positive outcomes after they visit the WFC, it is impossible to separate the effects of the program from pre-existing characteristics of the population being served and the other interventions they receive from parole officers and community corrections agents. Since attending the WFC is voluntary and there is no identical group of non-attendees against whom

clients may be fairly compared, it is impossible to separate the effects of the program from the pre-existing characteristics and motivation levels of the client body or the other services that clients receive. Nevertheless, a comparison of prison return rates for WFC clients with those who scheduled an appointment but failed to appear shows that WFC clients were more successful in remaining out of prison.

Even though the two-year program is still young, the evaluation results offer some clues about the appeal of this type of facility and its impact. It also suggests steps that the WFC and other prison reintegration programs might take to enhance their effectiveness.

- **Multi-service interventions for paroled and released offenders should be created and supported.** The WFC demonstrates that many paroled and released offenders will voluntarily visit a facility that offers them help with the many practical, financial, and emotional challenges that they face upon their release. In addition to receiving tangible help, clients credit the WFC with giving them “hope about the future.”
- **Child support assistance should be included in the mix of services offered to paroled and released offenders.** Most paroled and released parents have substantial monthly child support obligations and high arrears balances. They are frequently misinformed about their obligations and unaware of the consequences they face if they fail to pay, which include having up to 65 percent of their take-home pay garnished. It is imperative that reintegration programs and local child support agencies develop arrangements for effectively serving paroled and released parents.
- **Faster appointments are needed if the WFC is going to help more clients find employment.** Paroled and released offenders face strict time lines for securing employment. To play an effective role in helping ex-offenders secure employment, reintegration programs need to figure out how to quickly schedule and serve those who face severe time constraints, especially as unemployment rates rise and fewer paroled and released offenders are able to find jobs on their own.
- **More sustained interventions over a longer period of time are needed for paroled and released offenders to reconnect with their children and deal with family reintegration.** When they first visit the WFC, most clients are understandably focused on getting a job, minimizing their monthly child support obligations, and addressing other practical issues pertaining to their economic survival. Only 29

percent used the mental health services and 16 percent used the legal services available at the WFC to help them reconnect with their children or deal with the other parent. These issues persist. The WFC should consider re-contacting clients and providing case management services over a longer period of time to address both the immediate issues and the longer-term concerns that ex-offenders have after their work and living situations become somewhat more stabilized.

- **Case management and other sustained interventions over time may help to stem the employment attrition that WFC clients appear to demonstrate over time.** While most employment attrition is due to the return to prison, the rate of employment for those who stay in the community begins to taper off three quarters after the WFC visit. It is unclear why some clients who do not return to prison fail to show evidence of earnings in the quarters following their visit to the WFC. Some may have moved out of Colorado, switched to cash employment, or changed to jobs for which employers do not file wage reports with the DOLE. Others may simply have dropped out or become involved with the underground economy. The WFC should explore the feasibility of re-contacting clients over time and implementing other supervisory interventions that might help to keep more ex-offenders on the right track.
- **The child support agency should establish more realistic support orders and arrears obligations for low-income NCPs.** WFC clients and low-income NCPs served at two other Colorado programs that offer assistance with employment, child support, and parenting appear to pay 40 to 45 percent of what they owe in child support six months after they receive help. The similarity in payment outcomes across the three programs suggests that order levels may simply be too high for low-income parents, particularly when totals are considered across their multiple cases. The Colorado Child Support Guidelines Commission is currently recommending some changes to the formula for establishing orders that would go a long way in generating more realistic orders. These changes and more liberal policies for review and adjustment of orders are needed to insure that child support orders reflect an individual's true ability to pay.

- **Prisons should do more job training with inmates, and reintegration programs like the WFC should develop more job opportunities that offer liveable wages and wage growth possibilities.** Most WFC clients find jobs on their own, with half of those employed full-time earning less than \$9.00 per hour. Wage reports filed by employers show no significant change in average total quarterly earnings among those who are employed over six calendar quarters, and most interviewed WFC clients say their income does not cover their financial needs. Prisons need to do more job training with prisoners so that they leave with marketable skills. Simultaneously, reintegration programs need to generate jobs for ex-offenders that offer a liveable wage and opportunities for wage growth. Programs that fail to do so will ultimately have limited impact on client earnings and yield disappointing results with respect to employment stability, child support payments, and recidivism.
- **Reintegration programs like the WFC are a promising strategy to reduce recidivism.** Without a control group, it is impossible to say how WFC clients would have fared in the absence of the program or to separate the effects of the program from the intrinsic characteristics of the clients and the other interventions and services they receive. Nevertheless, the patterns are encouraging, with prison return rates for WFC clients falling below rates for those who phoned for an appointment but never appeared (25% versus 34%) and the regular DOC population, which has a one-year recidivism rate of 40 percent.
- **To more reliably gauge the impact of the WFC on outcomes pertaining to employment, child support payments, and the return to prison, evaluations should be conducted over a longer period of time.** There may be a lag of up to five months in quarterly earnings appearing on the wage database maintained by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). This is due to delays in employer reports, as well as posting lags by DOLE personnel. To permit a more reliable assessment of earnings, the evaluation should be conducted over a longer period of time. A longer study time period is also needed to gauge child support payment behaviors and the return to prison.

Introduction and Goals

The Work and Family Center¹ (WFC) is a multi-agency collaboration to enhance the successful reintegration of offenders upon their release from Colorado prisons. Originally designed to focus on parents with minor-aged children, the WFC broadened its focus to include all paroled and released offenders in the Denver area. The WFC offers clients assistance with employment, child support issues, and family reintegration, if this is appropriate and desired.²

The origins of the WFC, early implementation patterns, and the characteristics and experiences of the first 63 clients are described elsewhere.³ This report focuses on 350 clients seen at the WFC during August 1999 to March 15, 2001. We considered the characteristics and experiences of clients with minor-aged children who were known to the child support agency in Colorado and had either an open or a closed child support case. The report does not consider 270 other clients seen at the WFC during this time period who either did not have minor-aged children or had children but had no case on file with the Colorado Child Support Enforcement Agency.

Background and Rationale

Admissions to the adult prison system in Colorado have increased every year since 1992, and in 2000, there were 15,999 inmates in the Colorado Department of Corrections: 14,733 men and 1,266 women. Recidivism has also steadily increased, with the one-year return rate rising from 27.4 percent in 1992 to 40 percent in 1999. Three years after

¹ Effective August 1, 2000, the WFC was named the John C. Inmann Work and Family Center.

² During its first two years of operation, the WFC was jointly administered, funded, and staffed by the Division of Community Reintegration of the Colorado Department of Corrections (DOC); the Colorado Department of Human Services, Division of Child Support Enforcement (CSE); the Denver Department of Human Services, Division of Child Support Enforcement (Denver CSE); and the Community Reintegration Project of the Colorado AFL/CIO. Other collaborating entities were the Colorado Judicial Department, the Parent's Legal Resource Center, the Mayor's Office of Employment and Development, Real Life Ministries, and the Rose Community Foundation.

³ See "First-Year Report on the Work and Family Center," Jessica Pearson and Lanae Davis, Center for Policy Research, Denver, Colorado, September 2000.

release, 48.6 percent of Colorado offenders return to prison for either a new criminal activity or a technical violation of parole, probation, or non-departmental community placement. In 2000, 5,532 inmates were released from the Colorado Department of Corrections (DOC).

Studies have shown that employment and family ties help to reduce recidivism and improve the success of prisoners who move into parole. For example, evaluators report that the recidivism rate for participants in an employment reintegration program known as the Texas RIO project was 23 percent, as compared to 38 percent among a comparable group of non-RIO parolees (Finn, 1999). As for family support, researchers report that family relationships and understanding of the reintegration process are key to the success of inmates upon their release, with relapses more common among those who feel unneeded or overwhelmed by the demands being placed on them (Skolnick, 1960; Field, 1998).

Child support is also believed to affect inmates and their reintegration patterns (Cavanaugh and Pollack, 1998). There are approximately 6,000 Colorado inmates and parolees who are also known to the Colorado child support enforcement system based on a match of computerized records for the two agencies. Under Colorado law, when a noncustodial parent (NCP) goes to prison, his or her child support order continues at the pre-incarceration level unless he or she files a Motion to Review and Adjust Child Support. More to the point, since there is no statewide policy on incarcerated NCPs, filing a request is no guarantee that a modification will be granted. In counties where incarceration is viewed as a form of “voluntary underemployment,” the court may keep orders at imputed or pre-prison wage levels. As a result of failing to request a review and adjustment modification and/or its denial, child support debt can mount during incarceration. After they leave prison and become employed, paroled and released parents who owe child support may have up to 65 percent of their take-home pay garnished for child support. Those who fail to pay may have their driver’s license and/or their state-issued professional license suspended. Some advocates fear that large monthly child support obligations and arrearages have the potential to drive paroled and released parents away from their

families and legitimate employment (National Center on Fathers and Families, 1998). The average incarcerated/paroled NCP in Colorado owes \$178 per month for current child support and \$11,738 in past due support for each of his child support orders.⁴

The Work and Family Center was conceived as a way of addressing an array of issues that inmates confront when they are released. It was the first program in the U.S. to include child support assistance in the array of services provided to paroled and released offenders.

Staffing and Services

Staffing: The WFC has evolved from a fledgling program to a project that is embraced by the Department of Corrections with a dramatically higher budget and level of staffing.⁵ For nearly the entire first two years of its existence, the WFC was housed in partially donated church space and was staffed by two full-time and four part-time individuals who worked without the benefit of a full-time director. During the first three months of operation, it received an average of 3.1 referrals per week. In April 2001, 18 months after its inception in August 1999, a full-time director was hired. In June 2001, the WFC moved from its church space to an office facility located two blocks from the Denver Department of Human Services, which administers a range of relevant agencies, including Denver's child support program. By August 2001, on its two-year anniversary, the WFC was serving approximately 70 new clients each month. Its staff consisted of nine full-time and four part-time workers and/or consultants. In addition to a director, there were five case managers, one full- and one part-time employment specialist, a child support specialist, a receptionist, and a part-time analyst. A lawyer and a mental health specialist serve as consultants to the WFC in order to provide legal services and therapy to interested clients on an as-needed basis.

⁴ In Colorado, up to 1/24th of the amount of past due support can be added to the monthly support obligation (or an additional \$489 per month). On average, WFC clients had 1.9 open child support cases.

⁵ The early obstacles that program architects faced when they organized an implemented the WFC are described in "Designing Programs for Incarcerated and Paroled Obligor," by Jessica Pearson and Chris Hardaway, an Expanded Case Study by the *Welfare Information Network*, Vol. 1, No. 2, August 2000.

During the time period covered in this report, WFC staff were housed at one site and offered ex-offenders assistance with employment, child support, and family reintegration. Clients who visited the WFC had the opportunity to meet with a general case manager and specialists who dealt with employment and child support issues, respectively. Depending upon whether they met the qualifications for Welfare-to-Work, clients may have also been eligible for other types of services, such as bus tokens and work tools. Clients also had access to the services of a family law attorney and a therapist for individual and family counseling and peer support groups, with appointments scheduled on an as-needed basis. Mediation and supervised visitation are other types of services available to interested clients. Finally, WFC staff provided clients with assistance with food and clothing, Christmas toys for children, and referrals to other community service providers. Some of the issues that pertain to each specific type of service provided at the WFC are described below.

Employment Services: Paroled and released offenders are required to find work soon after they leave prison. According to one parole officer, they have ten working days, after which they are required to do day labor a few times each week while they continue their search for regular employment. In addition to a short time frame for finding a job and the barriers posed by a felony conviction, offenders face other employment challenges. They have mandatory meetings with parole officers and community corrections agents, often during regular business hours. They are frequently compelled to attend treatment programs and go for unscheduled urine tests or antabuse treatments during the work day, and they are often prohibited from working evening shifts. Finally, their ability to perform overtime work may be limited by their reliance on public transportation and their requirement to spend a certain number of hours per day in a community corrections facility.

During 1999 and 2000, the period covered under this study, Denver had a strong economy with an unemployment rate of only 3.2 percent. As a result, many paroled parents found employment on their own and were already employed by the time they came to the WFC. Being employed, however, did not necessarily mean that an individual could meet his financial needs. Most employed clients had low wages that did not begin to cover their

obligations, which include child support, restitution, substance abuse treatment, and anger management classes.

Child Support Services: Child support in Colorado is administered at the county level. This complicates the delivery of child support services, since individuals may have two or more cases handled by different county agencies with different policies. During the time period covered in this evaluation, the Denver Division of Child Support Enforcement (Denver CSE) had a technician based at the WFC.⁶ While she could review all child support records in Colorado on the Automated Child Support Enforcement System (ACSES) and explain a client's child support situation to him or her, she had the ability to make substantive changes only to child support cases under the jurisdiction of the Denver CSE. For Denver County cases, the child support specialist could help clients file a request to review their child support order and adjust it to reflect changed financial circumstances; develop a schedule for the payment of support and arrears so that obligations increase on a gradual basis; reduce monthly payments for arrears owed to the state;⁷ reinstate driver's licenses that have been suspended for non-payment of support; and suspend other automated enforcement remedies. For child support cases under the jurisdiction of one of Colorado's other 62 counties or another state, the technician could only explain a client's child support situation and contact the technician in the enforcing county or state to recommend that various actions be taken. The technician⁸ also could initiate wage withholding orders for all cases in order to achieve automatic payroll deductions for child support.

⁶ With the end of the OCSE grant 90-FD-0033 on September 30, 2001, the Denver CSE removed its child support technician from the WFC. Welfare-to-Work (WtW) eligible clients are receiving child support assistance on site; clients who do not meet the WtW eligibility criterion are referred to the child support agency's main office, which is located several blocks from the WFC.

⁷ If child support is owed to a custodial parent rather than to the state to reimburse it for public assistance payments, the custodial parent must approve any reduction of the unpaid balance due to him or her.

⁸ Wage withholding may also begin without technician intervention, since new hire reporting laws require that employers notify the child support agency about their new employees, and those with orders are subject to automated wage withholding actions.

Reintegration Services: The WFC offered three types of services to help clients regain contact with their children, if appropriate. One was mediation services by a professional mediator affiliated with the Office of Dispute Resolution of the Colorado Judicial Department. A second was a private meeting with a family law attorney, who explained custody and child support laws and assisted clients with filings, such as a Motion to Establish Parenting Time (visitation), which the ex-offender could file in court. The attorney could also explain how to prepare for a hearing on parenting time and refer the parent to family counseling to help develop a reintegration plan to present to the court. A third service was supervised visitation, which offered monitored visits for parents who have a court order that authorizes supervised contact. Through these arrangements, ex-offenders had an opportunity to reestablish ties with their children in a safe setting and develop a track record of responsible parenting behavior that might help them acquire unsupervised visitation rights at a later date.

Therapist Interventions: The WFC offered interested clients counseling in individual, couple, family, and group formats. In these various settings, WFC clients grappled with reintegration issues and the frustrations of finding that relationships had changed during their incarceration. Therapists reported that some parents needed help learning how to discipline their children and how to play. With their employment schedules, parole supervision visits, limited transportation resources, and mandatory therapy commitments for anger management, domestic violence, and substance abuse, paroled offenders have little free time for peer support group meetings. For this reason, most therapy interventions were scheduled on an individual basis.

Other Support Services: Clients who met the Department of Labor's lower-living standard and qualified for Welfare-to-Work funding were eligible for transportation assistance, clothing vouchers, and tools for work. Still other clients received bus tokens, clothing vouchers, and work tools through less restrictive funding sources provided by the Division of Community Reintegration of the Department of Corrections and the Community Reintegration Project of the AFL/CIO.

Evaluation

Does the WFC help paroled and released parents remain employed, make their child support payments, and succeed on the outside? These are the key questions the Center for Policy Research tried to answer in its evaluation of the WFC. The assessment is based on the analysis of information generated from a variety of sources using different techniques.⁹

Client Intake Form: When they arrived for an appointment at the WFC, all clients completed a detailed Intake Form that elicits demographic information, criminal history, education and work experience, family composition, relationships with children, and interest in various services. Clients also indicated the type of help they would like to receive at the WFC.

Six-Month Follow-Up Interviews: Six months after they were seen at the Work and Family Center, clients were interviewed by telephone about their employment and child support status. The interview elicited information on the client's contact with his or her children and whether that had changed over time. Clients were also asked to reflect about their experiences with the WFC, the types of services they received, its helpfulness, and the more lasting utility of the WFC. To maximize the response rate, interviewed clients received a \$20 payment.

Follow-Up Review of Agency Records: At the conclusion of the evaluation, researchers reviewed relevant agency records for reliable information on client earnings, child support payments, and recidivism. Evaluators reviewed automated child support records for evidence of child support status and payment behavior before and after clients were seen at the WFC. In a similar vein, evaluators reviewed the records of earnings reported by employers to the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) for evidence of Colorado earnings prior to and following service at the WFC. Assessments were made at six-month and quarterly intervals. Finally, at the end of the evaluation, the DOC supplied information on the prison status of all clients in the WFC study, which was restricted to paroled and released offenders with minor-aged children who were known to the Colorado child support agency.

⁹ The evaluation methodology mirrors the approach being used to evaluate eight responsible fatherhood projects funded by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement. The assessment is being conducted by CPR and Policy Studies Inc. under contract No. HHS-100-98-0015 with the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

In addition to these standard sources of information, we reviewed records of client contacts with the project lawyer to address a custody or visitation issue and counseling interventions with the project therapist. Finally, we interviewed several parole officers and community corrections agents about their reactions to the WFC and their clients' experiences.

The following is an analysis of the characteristics of 350 clients who were served at the WFC from its inception in August 1999 through March 15, 2001.¹⁰ All of these clients had minor-aged children and were known to the child support agency in Colorado. Thus, they had one or more open or closed child support cases recorded on ACSES. The analysis focused on client characteristics, their child support and employment status when they arrived at the WFC, the types of help they wanted, the types of help they received, and their situation 6 to 12 months after coming to the WFC with respect to earnings, employment, and recidivism. Although we lacked a control group, we did have a list of released and paroled offenders who were scheduled to see a case manager at the WFC but never kept their appointment. We compare their prison return patterns with those for WFC clients.

Referral to the WFC and Criminal Status

WFC staff spent a good deal of time and effort publicizing the program during the first year of operation. These efforts appear to have paid off, with clients currently finding their way to the WFC from a variety of sources. Nearly half of the clients covered in this study were referred by parole officers or community corrections agents. About 17 percent of clients heard about the WFC from reintegration staff at DOC before they were released from prison. A similar proportion of clients reported learning about the WFC from friends and acquaintances. Finally, about 26 percent heard about the WFC from other sources, including halfway houses, churches, and other community agencies.

¹⁰ During August 1999 through June 2000, the WFC only served clients with minor-aged children. Beginning in July 2000, it broadened its service criteria to include all paroled and released offenders, irrespective of their parental and child support status.

Clients in this study had been out of prison for different lengths of time when they were seen at the WFC, ranging from days to 12 years. More than half of the 350 clients in the study had been out for less than 3.3 months. Thirty-nine percent were seen within one month of their release from prison. Sixty-four percent were seen within six months of their release.

Given the variety of ways they heard about the WFC and the wide range of times since their release from prison, it is not surprising that WFC clients fell into many different criminal classifications when they made their initial visit. While more than one-third were on parole or living in a community corrections facility, respectively, one-fifth were being supervised intensively by community corrections agents, and 7 percent were discharged and had no formal connection with the Department of Corrections. (See Table 1.)

Table 1. Referral Sources and Patterns for WFC Clients (N=350)

Referral source:	
Referred to the WFC by parole officer	27%
Referred to the WFC by community corrections/ISP agent	18%
Referred to the WFC by DOC personnel before release from prison	17%
Referred to the WFC by a friend or acquaintance	17%
Referred to the WFC by halfway house staff or other sources	21%
Length of time out of prison:	
Seen at the WFC within 1 month of release	39%
Seen at the WFC within 2 to 6 months of release	25%
Seen at the WFC within 7 to 12 months of release	16%
Seen at the WFC after more than 13 months of release	20%
Criminal classification:	
On parole when seen at the WFC	37%
At a community corrections facility when seen at the WFC	34%
On ISP when seen at the WFC	20%
Discharged when seen at the WFC	7%
Other	2%

Client Background Characteristics

Most WFC clients with child support cases were young men with a variety of racial and ethnic characteristics who had been educated at least to the GED level and had been employed full-time before their incarceration. Many reported substantial levels of employment stability prior to their incarceration, with nearly 20 percent working for a single employer for more than five years, and another 19 percent working for one employer for three to five years. (See Table 2.) WFC clients were more apt to be racial minorities than both Colorado inmates and Denver parolees.

Table 2. Selected Demographic and Employment Characteristics of WFC Clients, the Inmate Population in Colorado, and the Parole Population in Denver

	WFC (N=350)	Colorado (N=15,846) ^a	Denver (N=1,273) ^a
Average age	35 years	35 years	36 years
Male	86%	92%	84.1%
Female	14%	8%	15.9%
African American	35%	23%	41.9%
Hispanic	38%	29%	20.6%
White	24%	45%	35.6%
Less than GED	18%	*	NA
GED	61%	NA **	NA
High school or more	21%	NA	NA
Employed full-time before incarceration	82%	NA	NA
Worked for one employer less than one year	25%	NA	NA
Worked for one employer 1 to 3 years	37%	NA	NA
Worked for one employer 3 to 5 years	19%	NA	NA
Worked for one employer more than 5 years	19%	NA	NA

^a Colorado Department of Corrections, "Fiscal Year 2000 Statistical Report." Colorado Springs, Colorado, June 2001.

* Average grade level performance is 8.72 for reading, 7.28 for language arts, and 7.2 for math.

** NA = not available.

Many (39%) of WFC clients characterized their current marital status as “never married.” Another 32 percent said they were separated or divorced, and 29 percent reported being married by conventional or common-law arrangements. Typically, clients reported having two children, with the average age being 9.7 years. Three-fifths had at least one out-of-wedlock child, but approximately the same number said they had acknowledged their legal relationship by entering their name on the birth certificate or pursuing a paternity establishment procedure for at least one of their children. More than half (58%) reported having children with different women. Many clients reported having regular contact with their children before going to prison. For example, more than half of the clients seen at the WFC indicated that they had lived with at least one of their children before going to prison, and of those who did not live with their children, nearly half reported that they had seen one or more of their children “often.” Only one quarter said that they never saw any of their children before going to prison. (See Table 3.)

Never married	39%
Separated/divorced/widowed	32%
Common law	12%
Married	17%
Average number of children	2.6
Average age of children	9.7 years
At least one out-of-wedlock child	62%
Children have different mothers	58%
Lived with at least one child before incarceration	54%
Saw at least one child “often” before incarceration	46%
Never saw any child before incarceration	27%
On the birth certificate as the father for at least one child	63%
Established paternity for at least one child	54%

Incarceration History

WFC clients resemble Colorado's incarcerated population in some, but not all, respects and appear to fall into lower risk categories. While drug offenses were the most prevalent for both groups, they were twice as numerous for the WFC population (40%) as the incarcerated population as a whole (19.8%). Burglary or theft crimes were the second most common among both groups, but twice as numerous for WFC clients (29%) as the regular DOC population (15%). Forgery and fraud crimes were also more common among WFC clients, while homicides and sexual assaults were less common. While 30 percent of WFC clients reported ever being convicted of a violent crime, the number of offenders with violent convictions comprised 43.8 percent of the DOC inmate population in 2000.

Other characteristics of WFC clients and DOC inmates, however, were more similar. For example, average sentences for both groups were 5.4 years. WFC clients reported that they had actually served 2.8 years for their most recent conviction and had 2.3 years left on parole. WFC clients also reported that they had served a good deal of time for prior convictions, with the average being 4.9 years. WFC clients more closely resembled the parole population released to Denver. Like WFC clients, the parolees had overwhelmingly committed drug (25.8%) and burglary/robbery and theft crimes (25.8%).

While in prison, more than half of WFC clients said they had worked at a correctional industry job, and one-fifth received a certificate for participating in an academic and/or vocational program, respectively. Nearly half reported participating in a special education program such as anger management or drug and alcohol rehabilitation. Prison clearly undermined parent-child relationships for most WFC clients. Half said that they never saw any of their children while they were in prison, and only 19 percent reported having regular contact with at least one of their children. (See Table 4.)

Table 4. Offense, Sentence, and Prison Profile for WFC Clients, the Inmate Population of Colorado, and the Parole Population of Denver

	WFC (N=350)	Colorado (N= 15,846) ^a	Denver (N=1,273) ^a
Homicide	0.6%	9.9%	2.4%
Drug crime	40%	19.8%	36.2%
Burglary/robbery/theft	29%	15%	25.8%
Assault	7%	7.7%	8.2%
Sexual assault	8%	13.8%	2.8%
Fraud/forgery	7.7%	2.0%	2.2%
Ever convicted of a crime involving a weapon	22%	NA	NA
Ever convicted of a crime involving drugs/alcohol	68%	NA	NA
Ever convicted of a violent crime	30%	43.8% *	NA
First-time offender	36%	NA **	NA
Repeat offender	64%	NA	NA
Average sentence	5.4 years	5.5 years	NA
Average time served	2.8 years	2.5 years	NA
Average time left on parole	2.3 years	14.8 months ***	NA
Employed in prison	53%	NA	NA
Received education certificate in prison	20%	NA	NA
Received vocational certificate in prison	21%	NA	NA
Never saw children while in prison	53%	NA	NA

^a Colorado Department of Corrections, "Fiscal Year 2000 Statistical Report." Colorado Springs, Colorado, June 2001.

* Number of offenders with violent convictions.

** NA = Not available.

*** Average length of stay on parole in 2000.

Conditions of Release

Nearly three-quarters of WFC clients reported that they were required to pay restitution following their release from prison, with the average amount owed being \$3,144. More than half were required to attend and pay for drug/alcohol treatment classes. A

quarter were required to go to counseling, and 20 percent were required to go to anger management classes. One-quarter faced driving restrictions. Although nearly a third reported that their parole plan included the payment of child support, parole officers maintain that this provision is not rigorously imposed or enforced. (See Table 5.) Indeed, since parole officers receive no independent information about the child support status of parolees, it is up to the individual parolee to disclose that he has a child support obligation.

Table 5. Conditions of Release Reported by WFC Clients (N=350)

Required to pay restitution	70%
Average amount of restitution	\$3,144
Required to pay child support	31%
Required to attend counseling	27%
Required to attend anger management classes	22%
Required to attend drug/alcohol treatment classes	58%
Driving restrictions imposed	27%

Post-Incarceration Living Situation

When they visited the WFC, most clients were living in a house or apartment, typically with parents or other relatives, a spouse or significant other, or on their own. They reported having some contact with their children, but less than before their incarceration. While 54 percent had lived with one or more of their children before going to prison, this was the case for only 19 percent of WFC clients after their release. Parents were more apt to have lost contact with their children following their release. While 27 percent reported no contact with one or more children prior to their incarceration, this was the case for 41 percent of clients after their release. Six percent reported that at least one of their children was in foster care. (See Table 6.)

Table 6. Living Arrangements Reported by WFC Clients (N=350)

Living in house/apartment	55%
Living with spouse	19%
Living alone	14%
Living with parents/other relatives	51%
Living with boyfriend/girlfriend	11%
Living with friend	6%
Living in halfway house	37%
Living in shelter/boarding house	8%
Living with at least one child since release	19%
See at least one child often since release	31%
Never see any child since release	41%
At least one child in foster care	6%

Financial Situation

Work and Family Center clients face many financial pressures and limited resources. Fully 41 percent were unemployed, and a few worked part-time or temporary jobs. Among the half who said they were employed full-time when they came to the WFC, earnings averaged \$9.00 per hour, and only 25 percent reported receiving any benefits.

Agency records show that when they visited the WFC, 69 percent owed child support for at least one child and had an average of 1.9 open child support cases. On average, their total obligations for monthly child support was \$295. Nearly half of all WFC clients (48%) also owed money to the custodial parent for past due support, with arrearages averaging \$8,368. More than half (60%) owed money to the state for welfare that had been paid to their children, with arrearages averaging \$11,877 per case. Taken together, the average amount owed for back-due support among the 234 clients with arrears was \$16,651 and ranged from \$168 to \$111,622. Up to 1/24 of the amount due in arrears can be added to the monthly child support obligation as long as the total does not exceed 65 percent of take-home pay.

The average amount owed by 70 percent of WFC clients who report being required to pay restitution was \$3,144, with total amounts ranging from \$30 to \$70,285. As previously noted, 60 percent were required to obtain substance abuse treatment, a quarter were ordered to participate in counseling, and 20 percent were required to attend anger management classes — interventions that can run up to \$60 per hour. (See Table 7.)

Table 7. Selected Indicators of Earnings and Obligations for WFC Clients at Intake (N=350)

Employed full-time	50%
Employed part-time	7%
Working pick-up jobs	3%
Unemployed	40%
Average hourly wage for clients working full-time (N=176)	\$9/hour
Average total owed for monthly child support (N= 242 with support orders)	\$295
Average total arrears owed to custodial parent and state (N=234 with arrears)	\$16,651
Average restitution owed by those ordered to pay (N=245)	\$3,144

Interest in Various Services

Clients indicated that they wanted many forms of help when they visited the WFC. The 11 most frequently mentioned types were help with child support (69%), transportation (57%), clothing (50%), finding a job or a better job (47%), tools for work (44%), housing (41%), food (31%), dental services (32%), learning job skills (26%), seeing their children (26%), and medical/disability services (24%). The high level of interest in child support services reflects the sample of clients in this evaluation, all of whom had minor-aged children and were known to the child support agency. The salience of child support help may also be due to referral patterns by parole officers and community correction agents, several of whom indicated that they refer clients to the WFC specifically for its child support services. (See Table 8.)

Table 8. Types of Help WFC Clients Indicate They Want at Intake (N=350)

Type of Help	Percent Interested	Type of Help	Percent Interested
Child Support	69%	Parenting skills	16%
Transportation	57%	Practicing job interviews	14%
Clothes	50%	Peer support group	11%
Finding a job	47%	Drug/alcohol problems	9%
Tools for work	44%	GED	9%
Housing	41%	Mental health counseling	8%
Dental problems	32%	Getting children back from foster care	6%
Food	31%	Learning to read	5%
Learning job skills	26%	ESL	5%
Seeing children	26%	Anger management	3%
Medical problems	24%		

Another indicator of the type of help clients wanted and actually received at the WFC comes from telephone interviews conducted with clients six months after their initial appointment. Interviews were completed with 100 clients, or 28.5 percent of the 350 seen during the time period under study. All patterns based on the follow-up interviews must be viewed with caution because they reflect the experiences of a small group of clients who can be presumed to be the most stable and successful since they could be reached by telephone six months after being served at the WFC. As part of the follow-up interview, clients were asked to reflect on the types of help they had wanted and whether it had been provided. They were also asked to rate the usefulness of the assistance they received.

The responses confirm that the primary forms of assistance that interviewed clients wanted and received dealt with employment and child support, transportation, clothing, and food. All other types of assistance were mentioned less commonly, with only 9 percent of interviewed clients reporting wanting help getting to see their children, 4 percent reporting interest in improving relationships with their children, and 2 percent reporting interest in improving their relationship with the other parent. (See Table 9.)

Table 9. Types of Help Interviewed Clients Reported Wanting and Receiving (N=100)

Area of Service	Wanted Help	Received Help
Help with employment	45%	89%
Help with child support	55%	87%
Help seeing children	9%	78%
Help with parenting skills	3%	67%
Relations with children	4%	75%
Relations w/other parent	2%	100%
Getting clothes or food	32%	94%
Help with transportation	34%	91%
Help with housing	8%	50%
Tools and work supplies	15%	73%
Money management/budgeting	1%	100%
Education	4%	100%

As further evidence of the salience of work and child support issues and the lesser import of other issues, such as establishing contact with children and improving relationships with the children's other parent, we present client responses to questions about whether a variety of services offered at the WFC had been of interest to them. The ratings show that when they visited the WFC, clients were heavily focused on pragmatic items pertaining to their employment and financial situation and were far less interested in obtaining services dealing with the more socio-emotional aspects of their lives, including seeing their children or communicating with the other parent. (See Table 10.)

Table 10. Client Reports of Their Interests/Needs When They Visited the WFC (N=100)

Area of Service	Wanted Help	Not Interested
Understand child support situation	61%	39%
Understand legal rights regarding children	68%	32%
Help with child support	62%	38%
Learn about community services	73%	27%
Get a job/better job	60%	40%
See others have same problems	55%	45%
Communicate with other parent	29%	71%
See children more	34%	66%
Hope about the future	85%	15%

Employment Assistance Provided: Although employment help was one of the most important types of help that clients wanted, it is difficult to assess the specific types of assistance provided because this was not routinely documented by staff. There is also some debate about the utility of the employment assistance that was provided. According to parole officers and community corrections agents, many clients just “get a list of places of where to look,” or things to “check out.” While this is often valuable, some officers had hoped that the WFC would have more of a “pipeline to real jobs.” Delay in getting seen at the WFC is also an issue for some parole officers and community corrections agents. As one put it:

When a parolee comes out, he must get a job in ten working days. He needs employment help and bus tokens right away. It is taking two to three weeks to get them an appointment to the WFC. It’s faster to have them go find a job on their own.

Client feedback about the employment assistance they get is limited but more positive. Although only 54 percent of interviewed clients recalled seeing an employment specialist, and fully 40 percent said they had not been interested in receiving help with finding a job or getting a better one, clients who saw the employment specialist at the WFC rated their experiences favorably. Among those who saw the employment specialist, 57

percent rated the intervention as “very helpful,” and another 31 percent rated it as “somewhat helpful.” Among those who saw the specialist, 20 percent (11 clients) reported that the WFC had helped them find their job. The other 89 clients we interviewed had found their current job on their own.

One way of looking at the change in employment status that clients experienced after they visit the WFC is to compare pre- and post-visit rates of employment for those who were interviewed at the six-month follow-up time point. In order to gauge their earnings at both points in time, we limited the investigation to the 54 clients who had an initial appointment at the WFC by June 30, 2000,¹¹ and were interviewed six months after their visit. As previously noted, this analysis probably focuses on the most stable segment of the client body at the WFC — those who could be contacted by telephone six months after their initial appointment. Thus, these patterns are not representative of the experiences of all clients served at the WFC, since it ignores the experiences of the 85 percent who were served after June 30, 2000, or were not interviewed because they either were back in prison or were in the community but could not be contacted by telephone.

The comparison for 37 clients with employment information at both points in time shows a significant rise in full-time employment activity six months following the WFC visit and significant increases in average and median earnings. For the 54 enrolled by June 30, 2000, and interviewed six months later, there were significant increases in total quarterly earnings. The percent reporting full-time employment rose from 47.2 to 64.9 percent. Average earnings for those working full-time rose from \$7.39 to \$9.22 per hour. And according to wage reports filed by employers, total quarterly earnings increased from \$2,850 to \$3,746, with 76 percent of both groups of WFC clients appearing in the wage report database maintained by the Department of Labor and Employment.

¹¹ Since there may be a posting lag of up to five months in getting employer-reported wages noted on the DOLE database, we restricted the analysis to the earliest cases that would most reliably reflect any earning activity.

While these patterns were substantially better than the employment situation these same clients reported when they visited the WFC approximately six months earlier, many clients still faced serious financial difficulties. Sixty percent reported that their salary did not cover their financial needs.¹² Nor does this analysis establish any causal connection between improvements in employment status and earnings and the WFC visit. (See Table 11.)

Table 11. Employment Status of WFC Clients Seen by June 30, 2000, and Interviewed Six Months Later

Employment Indicator		Initial Visit to the WFC	Six Months Later
Percent employed full-time (Self report)		47.2%**	64.9%**
Hourly salary for those employed full-time	Mean	\$7.39	\$9.22
	Median	\$8.50	\$9.00
Percent reporting got job on own pre-WFC visit		100%	37.5%
Percent reporting got job on own post-WFC visit		0%	50.0%
Percent reporting the WFC helped get job		0%	12.5%
Percent reporting salary does not cover financial needs		N/A	60%
Number of interviewed clients		(54)	(37)
Percent with earnings (DOLE wage records)		76%**	76%**
Average quarterly earnings (DOLE wage records)		\$2,850*	\$3,746*
Number of clients with DOLE wage record		(41)	(41)

* Differences significant at the .05 level.
 ** Reports of employment are given at a single point of time, while quarterly wage records reflect any earning activity in a three-month period of time.

¹² It is difficult to reconcile differences between clients' reports of employment and the DOLE database. Client reports reflect employment status at one point in time, while DOLE records cover earnings within a calendar quarter. DOLE wage records do not reflect cash, out-of-state, and "under-the-table" earnings. Finally, the absence of earnings may reflect a delay in getting quarterly earnings reported and posted on the DOLE database, rather than a lack of employment activity.

Child Support Assistance Provided: It is easier to report on the types of child support assistance that clients received at the WFC because they were documented on Colorado’s computerized child support system (ASCES), as well as being discussed with clients at the six-month follow-up interview. Sixty-eight of the 100 clients interviewed six months after they visited the WFC said they met with the child support specialist. As with employment assistance, it appears that clients rate their interactions with the child support specialist at the WFC highly. Thus, 56 percent of clients who met with the child support specialist at the WFC reported that the interaction was “very helpful,” and another 21 percent said it was “somewhat helpful.”

According to ACSES, 267 of the 350 WFC clients in the study had at least one open child support case that could warrant attention, and 83 WFC clients had closed child support cases for which no further action was taken.¹³ The child support specialist could take a variety of actions on behalf of clients with open cases. Minimally, the specialist could meet with the WFC client and explain his or her child support situation. If the client had a case in a county other than Denver, the specialist could contact the appropriate technician in another county to recommend that various actions be taken.

The child support specialist (or a technician in another county with authority over the case) could initiate a wage withholding order in order to generate automatic deductions of child support from client earnings and convey them directly to the state or the other parent. Among the other actions that the WFC specialist (or a technician in another county) could take was to initiate a review and adjustment to better align the child support order with an individual’s earnings, modify the arrears owed to the state or reduce the monthly arrears payment, defer the collection of monthly child support or the collection of state arrears for a period of time, suspend automated enforcement activity, reinstate an individual’s driver’s license, and/or close a child support case, thereby ending enforcement activity. Finally, the

¹³ It is unclear why 23.7 percent of WFC clients had closed cases. Some child support cases were closed because the NCP was in prison. Although arrears accumulate, the child support agency takes no action and pursues no payment while a case is closed. Eventually, some closed cases will be reopened by the child support agency, and the NCP will be subject to wage withholding, tax intercepts, and other enforcement remedies.

child support specialist (or the ACSES system itself) could initiate a variety of punitive remedies aimed at promoting payment. These include generating a negative credit rating for a client and conveying it to the credit bureau reporting agency, filing a bank lien, and/or suspending his or her driver’s license for nonpayment of support.

Table 12 shows the proportion of WFC clients with open child support cases who experienced various types of actions during or following their visit to the WFC. The analysis shows that the specialist met with two-thirds of WFC clients, reviewed the child support database, and explained their child support situation to them. Other common actions they took were to contact technicians in other counties, which they did for 38 percent of clients with open cases, and/or initiate wage withholding orders, which they did for 51 percent of WFC clients. While other actions leading to the adjustment of orders or arrears and/or the suspension of enforcement activities were less common on an individual basis, at least one action that could be termed “remedial” was taken on behalf of 49 percent of WFC clients. As a result of non-payment behavior, one or more enforcement actions were taken against 37 percent of clients with at least one open child support case. (See Table 12.)

Table 12. Actions Taken for WFC Clients With at Least One Open Child Support Case (N=267)

Action	Percent	# of Clients
Explained child support situation	66%	177
Contacted technician in another county	38%	102
Initiated wage withholding	51%	137
Initiated “responsive” action	49%	130
Review and adjustment of MSO	8%	21
Modify state arrears balance	3%	8
Modify monthly arrears payment	17%	46
Defer MSO collections	10%	27
Defer collection state arrears	8%	21
Reinstate driver’s license	13%	35
Suspend automated enforcement activity	16%	43
Close child support case	9%	23
Initiated enforcement actions	37%	98

Table 12. Actions Taken for WFC Clients With at Least One Open Child Support Case (N=267)

Action	Percent	# of Clients
Report to credit bureau	24%	65
File a lien	2%	5
Suspend driver's license	18%	48

Despite the number of review and adjustment activities and other “remedial” actions taken by the child support specialist, clients experienced few changes in their basic child support obligations as a result of visiting the WFC. A comparison of the child support status of clients with established orders when they were seen at the WFC and six months later shows little change in monthly support obligations and arrearages. At both points in time, clients had an average of 1.9 child support cases and owed a total of approximately \$250 to \$300 per month for child support. They also carried substantial arrearages that actually rose from an average of \$16,651 at the initial visit to \$17,183 six months later. (See Table 13.)

Table 13. Child Support Status of Clients at Initial Visit and Six Months Later (N=350)

Child Support Indicator	Initial Visit	Six Months Later
Percent with at least one closed case	35%	42%
Percent with at least one open case	69% (242)	58% (202)
Average # of cases/client	1.9	1.9
Percent only owing arrears	27%	29%
Average total MSO/client	\$295	\$257
Median total MSO/client	\$231	\$217
Average total arrears owed to CP	\$8,368	\$8,169
Average total arrears owed to state	\$11,877	\$12,827
Average total arrears	\$16,651	\$17,183
Total arrears range	\$168-\$111,622	\$17-\$107,702

Reintegration Services: In addition to getting help with child support and

employment, some WFC clients received services aimed at helping them get to see their children and reconnecting with their family. For example, one client received mediation services to resolve a visitation dispute, and one client used supervised visitation services to establish contact with his child(ren). A total of 102 clients (29%) received individual or couple counseling with a mental health specialist or attended a support group on reintegration issues conducted by a mental health specialist, and 57 (16%) met with an attorney for legal education and assistance on issues pertaining to custody and visitation. Thirty-four clients saw both the therapist and the lawyer.

Clients tend to be preoccupied with stabilizing their work and living situation when they visit the WFC; family reintegration is clearly a secondary concern. Since there are no full-time staff at the WFC dealing with family reintegration, and all therapists, family lawyers, mediators, and others are consultants who work on an as-needed basis, their intermittent presence at the WFC may contribute to the relative neglect of these concerns.

Other Types of Services: A small proportion of WFC clients (27.5%) in this study met the eligibility requirements for Welfare-to-Work and received additional forms of assistance. These individuals had one or more children who were current recipients of TANF or another benefit for low-income, at-risk children and/or had been TANF recipients in the past 12 months. All of these clients received vouchers for work tools, clothing, and bus tokens or passes. WFC staff made some of these same resources available for non-Welfare-to-Work clients through funds provided by the Colorado Department of Corrections. In addition, they referred clients to a wide range of other community agencies for assistance of various types. No individual records were maintained regarding the provision of these types of services.

Follow-Up Patterns

Assessing the impact of the WFC involved reviewing information gleaned from a variety of sources. As previously noted, telephone researchers were able to locate and interview 100 WFC clients six months after their initial visit to the WFC. The interview elicited client reactions to the services received at the WFC, as well as changes in parent-child contact and other living conditions since the initial visit. The generalizability of these

assessments is limited by the fact that only 28.5 percent of WFC clients were interviewed. More to the point, interviewed clients probably reflect the more stable and successful elements of the client population.

Our other measures of outcome come from records maintained by three Colorado agencies: the Division of Child Support Enforcement, the Department of Labor and Employment, and the Department of Corrections. In the summer and autumn of 2001, researchers and agency personnel reviewed automated child support records, DOLE wage records, and QT profiles for DOC inmates. From the DOLE records, we extracted information on earnings for two quarters prior to and up to four quarters following the initial visit to the WFC. From the child support records, we extracted information on payment activity for six months prior to and up to 12 months following the initial visit to the WFC. And from DOC records, staff extracted information on the return to prison and the reason for a return, including new crimes, parole violations, and community regressions.

Agency records have certain limitations. For example, DOLE records do not routinely capture earnings generated outside of Colorado, in certain non-profit settings, or among employers who pay cash or fail to report quarterly earnings. In addition to non-reporting, there may be a lag of up to five months in posting earnings information reported by employers. Consequently, the absence of earnings on the DOLE database may reflect a posting delay rather than a lack of employment activity. Child support records may not reflect modification activity or other adjustments that are in progress. They also do not include actions that the technician neglected to record. On the positive side, agency records provide a more reliable portrait of outcomes because they are available for all 350 clients who were served at the WFC and not just the fraction who could be contacted by telephone six months after intake. They also provide objective information on earnings and child support payments and avoid some of the social desirability factors, inaccuracies, and other biases endemic to self-reported behaviors.

Changes in Employment and Earnings: Given the fact that many clients were in prison prior to coming to the WFC, it is perhaps not surprising that most WFC clients showed no earning activity in the quarters before their initial visit and that labor force participation increased substantially in the quarter in which they were seen. What is more surprising, however, is the fact that employment activity and, consequently, earnings taper off in the quarters following the initial visit to the WFC. The pattern is most dramatic for all 350 WFC clients (See Table 14); however, some of these individuals were served at the WFC in 2001 and may not have had enough time for more than two quarters of employer-reported earnings to appear on the DOLE database.

Table 14. Quarterly Earnings for All 350 WFC Clients and Employed Clients

Indicator	2 Qtrs Pre	1 Qtr Pre	Qtr Seen	1 Qtr Post	2 Qtrs Post	3 Qtrs Post
All 350 Clients						
Ave \$	\$936	\$1,401	\$2,034	\$2,594	\$2,046	\$1,263
Median \$	\$0	\$0	\$1,134	\$1,760	\$0	\$0
Employed Clients						
% Employed	31% (108)	39% (137)	71% (248)	66% (230)	49% (170)	30% (104)
Ave \$	\$3,034	\$3,578	\$2,871	\$3,947	\$4,213	\$4,252
Median \$	\$2,703	\$2,665	\$2,325	\$3,519	\$3,827	\$3,598

For a more reliable assessment of post-visit earning activity, we conducted a separate analysis for the earliest 135 who were seen from August 1999 to June 30, 2000. These individuals would have had enough time to produce at least three quarters of earnings that would have been posted on the DOLE database at the time of the final data check on November 1, 2001. For this latter group of clients, labor force participation rose to a high of 77 percent during the quarter they were seen at the WFC. By one quarter after the initial visit, the percent showing earnings was 74 percent. By two quarters after the initial visit, the proportion with earnings was 71 percent. By three quarters after the initial visit, the proportion with earnings dropped to 57 percent. This pattern reflects employment declines due to the return to prison, as well as job loss among those who remain in the

community. On a positive note, earnings for clients who were in the labor force during each quarter prior to and following the WFC visit increased following exposure to the WFC, although none of the changes were statistically significant. (See Table 15.)

Table 15. Quarterly Earnings for All 135 WFC Clients and Employed Clients Seen By June 30, 2000						
Indicator	2 Qtrs Pre	1 Qtr Pre	Qtr Seen	1 Qtr Post	2 Qtrs Post	3 Qtrs Post
All 135 Clients Seen Before June 30, 2000						
Ave \$	\$1,292	\$1,624	\$2,405	\$2,854	\$2,923	\$2,459
Median \$	\$0	\$108	\$1,742	\$2,123	\$1,881	\$1,009
Employed Clients						
% Employed	43% (58)	51% (69)	77% (104)	74% (100)	71% (96)	57% (77)
Ave \$	\$3,007	\$3,178	\$3,122	\$3,853	\$4,110	\$4,311
Median \$	\$2,685	\$2,708	\$2,496	\$3,329	\$3,698	\$3,682

We repeated the comparison of labor force participation and average monthly earnings for two different sub-groups. First, we analyzed earning patterns for newly released clients who were seen at the WFC within 90 days of being released from prison. Next, we analyzed earning patterns for WFC clients who had been out of prison for more than 90 days before they were seen at the WFC and would have had an opportunity to demonstrate at least one quarter of pre-WFC earning activity. For both analyses, we eliminated clients who returned to prison in the quarter following the one in which they went back in order to restrict the assessment to those who were in the community and presumably had the capacity to work. We focused on clients seen on or before June 30, 2000, to allow enough time for at least three quarters of earnings to be posted on the DOLE wage database.

Among newly released clients, the return to prison was sharpest in the first quarter following the initial visit to the WFC, with 25 percent returning to a facility and 30 percent returning by the end of the third quarter. Among those who had been released more than 90 days prior to visiting the WFC, rates of return were much lower, with only 7 percent returning to prison in the first quarter and a total of 18 percent returning by the end of the third quarter after they were seen.

Both analyses yielded similar results. Labor force participation among those who did not return to prison was strong for two full quarters following the WFC visit but appeared to taper off by the third quarter when about two-thirds of those who were out of prison showed earnings. Among those in the labor force, earnings increased in the quarters following the initial visit to the WFC, but not significantly. This suggests that employed clients experienced no measurable wage growth during the period under study. (See Tables 16 and 17.)

Table 16. Quarterly Earnings for Newly Released WFC Clients Seen By June 30, 2000

Indicator	2 Qtrs Pre	1 Qtr Pre	Qtr Seen	1 Qtr Post	2 Qtrs Post	3 Qtrs Post
Number of Clients			56	56	56	56
% in Prison			0%	25% (14)	29% (16)	30% (17)
Ave \$	NA	NA	\$2,125	\$3,607	\$3,672	\$3,150
Median \$	NA	NA	\$1,089	\$3,212	\$2,414	\$1,386
Number of Clients Not in Prison			56	42	40	39
% Employed	NA	NA	73% (41)	79% (33)	85% (34)	67% (26)
Ave \$	NA	NA	\$2,903	\$4,590	\$4,320	\$4,725
Median \$	NA	NA	\$2,724	\$4,297	\$3,620	\$4,459

Table 17. Quarterly Earnings for Previously Released WFC Clients Seen by June 30, 2000

Indicator	2 Qtrs Pre	1 Qtr Pre	Qtr Seen	1 Qtr Post	2 Qtrs Post	3 Qtrs Post
Number of Clients		71	71	71	71	71
% in Prison	NA	0%	0%	6% (4)	14% (10)	17% (12)
Ave \$	NA	\$2,028	\$2,400	\$2,667	\$2,885	\$2,723
Median \$	NA	\$1,069	\$1,742	\$2,204	\$2,082	\$2,002
Number of Clients Not in Prison		71	71	67	61	59
% Employed	NA	65% (46)	79% (56)	75% (50)	74% (45)	68% (40)
Ave \$	NA	\$3,130	\$3,044	\$3,574	\$3,911	\$4,016
Median \$	NA	\$2,686	\$2,315	\$2,955	\$3,688	\$3,209

Interviews with parole officers and community corrections agents provide some clues but no definitive answers about why there is a drop-off in employment activity over time among those who do not return to prison. Some offenders may switch to cash employment situations where employers do not file quarterly wage reports, especially after they complete their parole. Cash-only jobs are attractive to employees because the individual avoids deductions for taxes and child support and pockets more money. As one parole officer put it, “I run into my old guys, and they are working as movers and with construction crews, and it is all cash.” The drop-off may also reflect a lessening of supervision by parole officers over time. After they are first released, offenders may be seen several times a week. When they are transferred to parole, they may have to check in twice a month. Eventually, they face only a monthly contact with their parole officer. As one parole officer explained, “As you get to know them and they don’t screw up, you lessen the scrutiny.” The drop-off may also reflect a high level of employment turnover and change, a return to illegal activities such as drug selling, or a move to another state. Finally, the drop-off in the third quarter may be due to lags in posting employer-reported earnings that exceed seven months. The drop-off in employment appears to be consistent with work history patterns

for a sample of ex-offenders who received reintegration services at Chicago's Safer Foundation, 75 percent of whom remained employed three months after they found a job, and 57 percent after nine months (Finn, 1999).

Changes in Child Support Payments: The examination of child support payment patterns is based on automated records maintained by the Colorado Division of Child Support Enforcement. For all WFC clients with one or more open child support cases, we compare total amounts due with total amounts paid during specified time periods prior to and following the initial visit to the WFC. Client payment activity is presented as a percentage of what was owed. We also show mean and median payment amounts. As with the analysis of employment and earnings, we first present patterns for all clients with monthly child support obligations, and then we eliminate clients who returned to prison and restrict our assessment of payment to those who were in the community and had the capacity to work and to pay child support.

This analysis reveals that WFC clients paid a significantly higher proportion of what they owed in child support following their visit to the WFC. For example, all clients with orders paid an average of 17.5 percent of what they owed during the six months prior to their initial visit to the WFC. Following their visit, they paid 39 percent of what they owed, with the proportion paying nothing dropping from 60 percent to 25 percent. The average amount of support paid also increased significantly and went from \$308 to \$681 in the six months prior to and following the WFC visit. When clients who returned to prison were removed from the analysis, the percent paid rose to 41 percent, and at 12 months following their visit, payment stood at 43 percent of what was owed.

Of course, nonpayment is to be expected among those newly released from prison during the six months prior to their visit to the WFC. But even those who were out for more than 90 days before they visited the WFC paid an average of only 24 percent of what they owed and nearly half (46%) paid nothing at all. In the six months following their initial visit to the WFC, payments more than doubled for both groups. Among newly released inmates who did not go back to prison, payments stood at 35 percent of what was owed at the six month follow-up and the percent paying nothing dropped to 23 percent. Among those who

had been out for more than 90 days before they visited the WFC, average payments rose to 44 percent six months following their visit and the percent paying nothing dropped to 24 percent. (See Table 18.)

Table 18. Child Support Payment Behavior for WFC Clients Prior to and After Their Visit to the WFC			
Indicator	6 Mos. Prior	6 Mos. After	12 Mos. After
All Clients With Monthly Child Support Obligations			
Mean \$ Due	\$1,824	\$1,746	\$3,674
Mean \$ Paid	\$308	\$681	\$1,247
Mean % Paid	17.5%	39%	38%
% Pay \$0	60%	25%	26%
% Pay 75%+	10%	21%	18%
# of Clients	212	223	110
All Clients Not Back in Prison			
Mean \$ Due	\$1,824	\$1,754	\$3,601
Mean \$ Paid	\$308	\$689	\$1,391
Mean % Paid	17.5%	41%	43%
% Pay \$0	60%	24%	24%
% Pay 75%+	10%	23%	23%
# of Clients	212	193	83
Newly Released Clients Not Back in Prison			
Mean \$ Due	NA	\$1,486	\$2,633
Mean \$ Paid	NA	\$448	\$926
Mean % Paid	NA	35%	38%
% Pay \$0	NA	23%	33%
% Pay 75%+	NA	14%	17%
# of Clients	NA	79	24

Table 18. Child Support Payment Behavior for WFC Clients Prior to and After Their Visit to the WFC

Indicator	6 Mos. Prior	6 Mos. After	12 Mos. After
Clients Released More Than 90 Days Before Initial Visit to the WFC and Not Back in Prison			
Mean \$ Due	\$1,725	\$1,836	\$3,666
Mean \$ Paid	\$370	\$771	\$1,367
Mean % Paid	24%	44%	44%
% Pay \$0	46%	24%	22%
% Pay 75%+	13%	27%	28%
# of Clients	98	93	45

The improvements in child support payments for WFC clients reflect their higher rates of labor force participation following their visit to the WFC and the initiation of wage withholding. While less than one-fifth of WFC clients demonstrated any payment activity through wage withholding in the six months before they visited the WFC, this was the case for 64 percent of WFC clients with child support orders who did not return to prison in the six months following their visit to the WFC. It is relevant that new hire reporting laws require employers to notify child support agencies about all new employees they retain and that this notification process leads to the automatic initiation of a wage withholding action.

Of course, these improved payment patterns are still far from being perfect. An assessment of the proportion paying all or nearly all of what they owed on a monthly basis shows that fewer than one-fifth fell into this almost-complete payment category. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that many noncustodial parents in Colorado fail to pay all of the child support that they owe. For the state as a whole, rates of collection of current support stand at 49.5 percent, while the rate of collection for prior support due is only 5.5 percent. More to the point, a recent study of payment activity among low-income NCPs in Jefferson and Mesa counties showed that clients paid an average of 32.4 to 34.5 percent of the monthly support that they owed six months following the establishment of their orders, and at 12 months, they paid an identical 34 to 35 percent (Pearson, Davis, Thoennes, 2001). In a similar vein, preliminary analyses of low-income NCPs in Larimer

and El Paso counties who participated in responsible fatherhood programs aimed at improving their earnings and child support payment patterns paid only 45 and 40.5 percent, respectively, of what they owed for monthly support and arrears in the six months following their enrollment or exit from those programs (Pearson and Davis, 2001; Thoennes, 2002). As in the WFC evaluation, payment behavior in other Colorado studies was best for clients who had wage withholding orders. (See Table 19.)

Table 19. Payment Behaviors Demonstrated by NCPs in Recent Colorado Studies

Study	Population	% Support Paid at 6 Mos.
Dropping Debt Project Jefferson/Mesa Counties	64 NCPs in experimental group 102 NCPs in control group	34.5% of MSO 32.4% of MSO
Parent Project Larimer County	46 clients who participated in responsible fatherhood program	45.5% of total amount due
Parent Opportunity Project El Paso County	124 fathers who participated in responsible fatherhood program	40.5% of total amount due
WFC Evaluation	223 WFC clients 193 WFC clients who did not return to prison	39.0% of total amount due 41.0% of total amount due

In addition to making formal child support payments, 38 percent of interviewed clients said that they provide other forms of support, with most of these individuals (81%) reporting giving money directly to the child or the other parent and making purchases of clothes, furniture, or other items (25%). Naturally, there is no way to corroborate these claims, although past research shows that informal support tends to supplement formal child support payments, rather than replace them, with noncustodial parents who pay support also making extra contributions.

Returning to Prison: A check of DOC records for 133 newly released WFC clients who were out for at least one full year showed that 38 were back in prison. This translates into a return rate of 28.6 percent. Of those who returned, more than half (55%) were re-incarcerated because of a parole violation. A third (34%) were sent back to prison because they committed some infraction of a halfway house or ISP rule. The DOC terms

these returns “community regressions” and does not count them in their recidivism statistics. Only 11 percent had committed new crimes.

We also analyzed re-incarceration patterns for all WFC clients, including those who had been released more than 90 days before they visited the WFC and those who had been out for less than one year. For the 316 clients for whom DOC information could be located, the rate of return stood at 25 percent, with 53 percent returning because of a parole violation, 35 percent going back for a community regression, and 13 percent committing a new crime. On average, WFC clients were in the community for 5.6 months before they returned to prison. (See Table 20.)

Table 20. Percent of WFC Clients Who Return to Prison, by Reason

	Newly Released Clients (N=133)	All Clients (N=316)
Total who return	28.6% (38)	24.8% (78)
Parole violation	55.3% (21)	52.6% (41)
Community regression	34.2% (13)	34.6% (27)
New crime	10.5% (4)	12.8% (10)

The return rate for WFC clients is comparable to the rate for other reintegration programs, such as the Texas RIO project (23%) and Chicago’s Safer Foundation (28%), and well below the one-year recidivism rate for DOC, which was 40 percent in 1999.

Other Changes in Clients’ Lives: Interviews with 100 clients reveal that many experienced improvements in other areas of their lives. One area of change had to do with the amount of contact they had with their children during the six months that followed their first visit to the WFC. Fully 36 percent reported that they see one or all of their children more often, 7 percent reported that they see their children less often, and 57 percent reported that their level of contact was about the same. Most clients reporting higher levels of contact attributed these patterns to improvements in their relationship with the other parent. Only 10 percent agreed with the statement, “The program helped me get visitation.” Most of those who reported no change in contact with their children said that they do not

see their children at all and attributed this to the fact that they “haven’t seen their children for a long time” or “live farther away from them.” Overall, 85 percent of interviewed WFC clients said they would like to be spending more time with their children, and only 14 percent characterized themselves as “very” satisfied with the amount of time that they spend with their children.

A small proportion of interviewed clients (7.5%) reported that they began living with a girlfriend or boyfriend. The same proportion said they began living with one or more of their children. An additional 4 percent reported getting married, and 6 percent reported having another child. Overall, 56 percent of interviewed clients characterized the job they were doing as a parent and how well they were getting along with their children as “better.” Far fewer WFC clients said that their relationships with the other parent had improved, with only 26 percent characterizing this as “better.”

About a third of interviewed WFC clients believe their financial situation improved in the six months since they first visited the WFC. They report being better able to provide financially for themselves (39%) and their children (41%). Thirty-nine percent feel they are getting their child support situation under control, and two-thirds report feeling better about their job skills and doing better at keeping a job. Overall, most interviewed clients (76%) feel as though they are doing better at getting their life “together,” and half (51%) characterized their life as “much better” than it had been six months ago.

The problems that clients report are chiefly financial. As previously noted, half (49%) say that their salary does not cover their financial needs. All of those who did not pay all the child support they owed cite the lack of money to explain their non-payment. Nearly half (40%) report having serious transportation problems. More than a third (36%) were attending a drug or alcohol treatment program. And about a fifth, respectively, reported suffering from a serious illness, injury, or disability; having a child or other family member become seriously ill or injured; and/or moving or changing their living situation at least once in the past six months.

As with all the interview data reported in this study, the changes in clients’ lives noted herein are based on a survey with a response rate of only 28.5 percent and

doubtlessly reflect the experiences of the more stable and successful segments of the client body who could be contacted by telephone six months after their initial visit to the WFC. (See Table 21.)

Table 21. Clients' Evaluation of Changes in Their Lives Six Months After First Visit to the Work and Family Center (N=100)

Began living with kids	7.5%
Seeing kids more often	36%
Doing a better job as a parent	56%
Getting along better with the other parent	26%
Providing better for the kids financially	41%
Providing better for self financially	39%
Getting child support situation under control	39%
Doing better at keeping a job	68%
Doing better at getting life together	76%
Feeling life is much better than 6 months ago	51%
But. . . .	
Would like to spend more time with their children	85%
Salary does not cover financial needs	49%
Have serious transportation problem	40%
Suffered a serious illness, injury, or disability	21%
Go to a drug or alcohol treatment program	36%
Have a child or other family member become seriously injured or ill	23%
Stay in a shelter, rooming house, or other temporary housing	6%
Move or change of living situation at least once	22%

Reactions to the WFC: Six months after they were served, interviewed WFC clients reported high levels of satisfaction with the WFC and the assistance they had received. Overall, 44 percent gave the WFC a rating of “excellent,” while 39 percent rated the facility as “good.” Nearly two thirds (62%) reported that they would use the WFC again

if they needed services; 38 percent said they would not. In their open-ended comments, some clients praised the WFC for giving “ex-felons a chance” and for being a place that “doesn’t judge you.” The key services they said ex-offenders need to succeed after they released are employment, housing, and drug and alcohol treatment. (See Table 22.)

Table 22. Client Ratings of the WFC Six Months After Their First Visit (N=100)

	Excellent	Good	Can’t Evaluate/Didn’t Want Help
Explaining child support situation	34%	14%	39%
Explaining legal rights and responsibilities	28%	18%	33%
Assistance with child support problems	33%	11%	38%
Information about community services	29%	23%	28%
Assistance in getting a better job	19%	22%	40%
Peer support	20%	23%	45%
Improving communication with other parent	11%	8%	71%
Improving visitations with children	18%	8%	66%
Showing clients hope for the future	33%	33%	15%
Overall rating of the Work and Family Center	56%	36%	NA

Comparisons to Other Groups of Offenders: There is no comparable group of paroled and released offenders who were not served at the WFC against whom WFC clients may be compared. WFC clients attended voluntarily — they are apt to be more motivated individuals who chose to make and keep their appointment at the WFC in order to take advantage of a free service aimed at enhancing prisoner reentry. Thus, it is impossible to distinguish between the effects of the WFC and individual motivation and risk factors, as well as interventions offered by parole, community corrections agents, and other community entities. It is also impossible to differentiate between the effects of simply being released from prison and receiving services at the WFC.

We had one group of paroled and released offenders whose return-to-prison experiences we could examine. They consisted of individuals who phoned for an

appointment at the WFC but never appeared. Arguably, they are either less motivated individuals who did not bother to visit the WFC or more resourceful individuals who did not need assistance with employment, child support, and family reintegration.

An examination of return patterns for 241 individuals who failed to attend their scheduled appointment at the WFC suggests that they fared worse than those who appeared for service. A review of their DOC records shows that 34.4 percent went back to prison, with 64 percent returning for a parole violation, 20.5 percent experiencing a community regression, 8.4 percent returning for a new crime, and 7.2 percent noted as absconding/escaped. In comparison, 24.8 percent of WFC clients went back to prison. (See Table 23).

Table 23. Percent of WFC Clients and No Shows Who Return to Prison, by Reason

	WFC Clients (316)	WFC No Shows (241)
Total who return	24.8% (78)	34.4% (83)
Parole violation	52.6% (41)	64.0% (53)
Community regression	34.6% (27)	20.5% (17)
New crime	12.8% (10)	8.4% (7)
Abscond/escape	0% (0)	7.2% (6)

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Summary of Findings: During the time period covered in this report, ex-offenders with minor-aged children who visited the Work and Family Center met with case managers who helped them with employment and child support issues. Some clients received bus tokens and work tools. Clients also had the opportunity to meet with a family law attorney who could help them with their custody and visitation issues and a therapist for individual and family counseling sessions. The following is a summary of the results of a comprehensive evaluation of 350 clients with minor-aged children who were seen at the WFC during August 1999 to March 15, 2001.

- **After a slow start, the WFC succeeded in cultivating a steady stream of referrals from many different sources in the criminal justice system and the community.** Although it took WFC staff a good deal of time and effort to publicize the program during the first year of operation, these efforts appear to have paid off. On its two-year anniversary, the WFC was serving 70 new clients per month. Clients reported learning about the facility from a variety of sources both within and outside of the criminal justice system — reintegration staff at DOC facilities, parole officers, community correction agents, other inmates, and friends. Forty percent of WFC clients in the study were seen at the WFC within one month of their release from prison; two thirds were seen within six months of their release. Most WFC clients were on parole or living in a community corrections facility, although a small proportion had been discharged and had no formal connection with the Department of Corrections.

- **The WFC serves a varied clientele that resembles the parole population released to Denver but is a less violent and lower risk group than the Colorado inmate population.** The average WFC client in this study was a 35-year-old male, repeat offender who had committed a drug crime or a burglary or theft, had served 2.8 years of his 5.4 year sentence, and faced 2.3 years of parole. A mixed group of African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites, most clients held a GED degree and had been employed full-time before their incarceration, with 40 percent reporting having worked for a single employer for three or more years. Just over half reported having a job in a correctional industry while in prison. Although comparable statistics are not available for the DOC population as a whole, this group of WFC clients may be better educated and may have been more stably employed prior to their incarceration. While 30 percent of WFC clients reported committing a violent crime, this was the case for 43.8 percent of DOC inmates.

- **Many WFC clients reported regular contact with their children before going to prison, but little contact during their incarceration.** Although two-thirds of WFC clients had at least one out-of-wedlock child, most reported that they had acknowledged paternity and had strong relationships with their children. More than half of WFC clients said they had lived with their children before going to prison, and nearly half of those who did not cohabit with their children reported seeing them “often.” Prison clearly disrupts parent-child relationships, with more than half of WFC clients reporting that they never saw their children while in prison.
- **When they visited the WFC, clients were living in a variety of community and halfway house settings and levels of contact with children were far lower than they had been prior to incarceration.** More than half of WFC clients reported living in a house or apartment, typically with a parent or relative; a third lived in a halfway house. Eight percent lived in a shelter or boarding house, and a small proportion lived alone in an apartment. While a fifth reported that they were living with at least one of their children and a third reported some contact with children, 41 percent reported no contact with any of their children since their release.
- **WFC clients faced many financial pressures and had limited resources.** When they visited the WFC, two-thirds of clients owed child support and had an average total monthly support obligations of \$295. Most of these individuals also owed back-due child support to the other parent(s) and/or the state, with total obligations ranging from \$168 to \$111,662, and the average being \$16,651. Seventy percent reported being required to pay restitution, with the average amount being \$3,144. At their initial visit, half of the clients were employed full-time earning an average of \$9.00 per hour. Forty percent said they were unemployed, with the remainder working part-time or at pick-up jobs.

- **Paroled and released offenders came to the WFC for assistance with issues pertaining to their employment and financial situation, with child support being the most frequently mentioned type of desired help.** Paroled and released offenders came to the WFC wanting help with child support (69%), transportation (57%), clothing (50%), employment (47%), and housing (41%). At their initial visit, very few reported wanting help getting to see their children or improving relationships with their children or the other parent. Given the recency of their release, it is not surprising that WFC clients focused on pragmatic items that are central to their survival and were less interested in dealing with the more socio-emotional aspects of their lives, including seeing their children or communicating with the other parent. Ultimately, the mental health specialist reported meeting with 102 clients for individual, group, or couple counseling, and the family law attorney met with 57 clients to discuss custody and visitation issues. The popularity of the WFC's child support services reflects the fact that parole officers and community corrections agents tended to recommend the WFC to clients with child support problems, and the evaluation focused exclusively on clients with minor-aged children who were known to the child support agency.

- **Although nearly all clients find their job on their own, they report high levels of satisfaction with the employment service they receive at the WFC, with a small, non-representative sub-group of interviewed clients showing significantly higher earnings two quarters following their visit to the WFC.** Nearly all interviewed WFC clients who saw an employment specialist said the intervention had been “very” or “somewhat” helpful, although only 20 percent (11 clients) reported that WFC staff had helped them find a job. WFC staff provide work boots, clothing, and tools to individuals who secure a job offer. Among the sub-group of clients seen at the WFC by June 30, 2000, and interviewed six months later, rates of full-time employment rose from 48 to 65 percent and quarterly earnings noted on wage records supplied by employers were significantly higher.

At the same time, 60 percent of interviewed clients reported that their salary still did not cover their financial needs.

- **Employment activity peaks in the quarter during which clients visit the WFC and tapers off in subsequent quarters; earnings remain stable.** According to wage records reported by employers, 77 percent of clients seen by June 30, 2000, had earnings for the quarter in which they visited the WFC. By three quarters following their visit, the percentage with earnings had dropped to 57 percent. Quarterly earnings for those who were employed were stable over this time period, suggesting that no wage growth had occurred. Rates of employment are stronger when individuals who returned to prison are removed from the analysis, suggesting that most employment attrition is due to re-incarceration. Nevertheless, employment among newly and previously released clients began to taper off by three quarters. The drop-off in employment among those who do not return to prison may reflect a lessening of supervision by parole officers over time, an out-of-state relocation, cash employment, job change and instability, employment in non-profits and government agencies that do not report to the Department of Labor and Employment, or lags in posting earning on the DOLE database that exceed seven months.
- **Interviewed clients report high levels of satisfaction with the child support specialist, with half of clients with open child support cases receiving some kind of “responsive” child support action.** Two-thirds of WFC clients with one or more open child support cases met the child support technician and had an in-person explanation of his or her child support situation. About half had a wage withholding action initiated for the automatic deduction of child support. Half also experienced at least one “responsive” action designed to make their child support obligations more manageable. Most often this included a reduction in the monthly amount to be paid toward child support arrears, suspension of automated enforcement activity, reinstatements of driver’s licenses, and/or deferments in the commencement of child support collection activity for 60 or 90 days.

- **The child support situation that clients faced did not substantially change in the six months following their visit to the WFC.** The plethora of actions that the child support technician took on behalf of clients did not alter their child support status or obligations in any substantial way. Six months following their visit to the WFC, clients had about the same total monthly child support obligations (\$257) and high and unchanged levels of arrears (\$17,183). Indeed, enforcement actions for nonpayment were initiated for 37 percent of WFC clients with open child support cases, principally driver's license suspensions or credit bureau reporting, which is the first step leading to a license suspension in Colorado.
- **Although payment is far from perfect, clients pay a higher percentage of their child support obligations after they visit the WFC, and the percentage of clients paying nothing drops.** On average, WFC clients paid 17.5 percent of their child support obligation in the six months prior to visiting the WFC. Six months after their visit, the average percent paid rose to 39 percent for all clients and 41 percent among those who did not return to prison. Both newly released clients and those who had been in the community for more than 90 days before visiting the WFC exhibited improved payment patterns, with the latter group going from a payment rate of 24 to 44 percent. For this group, the proportion paying nothing dropped from 46 percent to 24 percent, and the proportion paying nearly everything that they owed doubled from 13 percent to 27 percent. Payment increases were due to new employment activity and wage withholding that goes into effect automatically as a result of new hire reporting and/or action taken by the child support specialist.
- **The child support payment behaviors that WFC clients exhibit are consistent with those observed in several Colorado demonstration projects and programs for low-income, noncustodial parents.** On average, WFC clients paid 39 percent of what they owed in child support six months after they visited the WFC. Those not back in prison paid 41 percent. While this falls far short of full payment, it is consistent with payment patterns observed for participants in the El Paso

County POP program and the Larimer County PARENT program, both of which provide employment, child support, and parenting assistance to low-income NCPs. A six-month follow-up study of participants in those two projects showed that they paid 40.5 percent and 45.5 percent of what they owed in child support, respectively.

- **WFC clients return to prison at lower rates than those reported for all DOC inmates.** A quarter (24.8%) of WFC clients were back in prison when DOC checked its records in August 2001. Among newly released clients, the rate of return was somewhat higher and stood at 28.6 percent. Most of the returns were due to parole violations and infractions of rules that are termed “community regressions.” Although we calculate the return to prison differently because we include community regression as a return, it appears that WFC clients return at substantially lower rates. DOC’s one-year recidivism rate was 40 percent in 1999.
- **Interviewed clients report a mixture of positive and negative changes in their lives six months after they visit the WFC.** When they were interviewed six months after they visited the WFC, three-quarters of interviewed clients reported that they were “doing a better job of getting their life together.” Two-thirds said that they were better able to keep their job. Approximately half reported that their life was much better than it was six months earlier, and that they were being a better parent. Nearly 40 percent said that they were doing a better job of financially supporting themselves and their children. While these patterns are promising, many clients reported severe financial, practical, and emotional difficulties. For example, nearly all (85%) said they would like to spend more time with their children, half said their salary did not cover their financial needs, and about 40 percent reported serious transportation problems.
- **Interviewed clients rate the WFC highly and value the child support help and the emotional support they received.** More than half of the interviewed clients gave the WFC an overall rating of “excellent,” another third rated it as “good.” The specific area that garnered the highest ratings from clients dealt with child support,

with about half rating the help they received as “excellent” or “good.” Most clients also credited the WFC with giving them a sense of “hope about the future.” Other WFC services that attracted positive ratings dealt with legal outreach, referrals to community services, assistance in getting a better job, and mental health services. Ratings for help with “communication with the other parent” or “visitation with children” were lower, principally because most clients did not seek assistance with these issues and were unable to evaluate them.

- **While clients show some positive outcomes after they visit the WFC, it is impossible to separate the effects of the program from pre-existing characteristics of the population being served and the other interventions they receive from parole officers and community corrections agents.** Attending the WFC is voluntary. There is no comparison group of comparable offenders who do not visit the WFC against whom clients may be fairly compared. Thus, there is no way to separate the effects of the program from the pre-existing characteristics and motivation levels of the client body or the other services that clients receive through their parole officers, community corrections agents, and other community agencies. A comparison of prison return rates for WFC clients with those who scheduled an appointment but failed to appear shows that WFC clients were more successful in remaining out of prison. The fact that WFC clients were motivated enough to make an appointment and appear may suggest that they were somewhat more predisposed to succeed than the non-served population.

Recommendations: While several post-release programs that focus on employment show that their participants experience lower rates of recidivism (Finn, 1999), the WFC is the first program to offer assistance with the issues of child support and family reintegration. Even though the two-year program is still young, the evaluation results offer some clues about the appeal of these types of services and their impact. It also suggests steps that the WFC and other prison reintegration programs might take to enhance their effectiveness.

- **Multi-service interventions for paroled and released offenders should be created and supported.** The WFC demonstrates that many paroled and released offenders will voluntarily visit a facility that offers them help with the many practical, financial, and emotional challenges that they face upon their release. The facility must be collaborative and have good working relationships with many public and private agencies in order to obtain referrals and address the many needs that offenders face when they return to the community. Some clients learn about the facility from parole officers, community corrections agents, and others in the criminal justice system; others learn about it through word-of-mouth. Clients who use the service experience a good deal of user satisfaction. In addition to receiving tangible help, they credit it with giving them “hope about the future.”

- **Child support assistance should be included in the mix of services offered to paroled and released offenders.** Most paroled and released parents have substantial monthly child support obligations and high arrears balances. They are frequently misinformed about their obligations and unaware of the consequences they face if they fail to pay. New child support laws require that employers report all new hires to child support enforcement agencies. Once their employment is detected, they may have up to 65 percent of their take-home pay garnished. Those who fail to pay may experience other enforcement actions, including driver’s license suspension. The size of monthly child support obligations, debts, and the negative consequences that can ensue from failing to make payments make it imperative that

child support be included in the array of reintegration services offered to paroled and released offenders. Not surprisingly, for this group of WFC clients who were known to the child support agency, child support assistance was the form of help that was most appreciated. As one parole officer noted, “I had some guys who were getting 65 percent of their wages taken away, and they negotiated that to something manageable.” With the end of the OCSE grant that helped to start and fund the WFC and the withdrawal of the on-site, child support technician, it is imperative that the WFC and the local child support agency develop a new arrangement for effectively serving clients.

- **Faster appointments are needed if the WFC is going to help more clients find employment.** Paroled and released offenders face strict time lines for securing employment. They cannot wait two or three weeks to get an appointment with a case manager and still satisfy their work requirements. If the WFC wants to play a more active role in helping ex-offenders secure employment, it needs to figure out how to more quickly schedule and serve those who face severe time constraints. This issue may become more salient as the unemployment rate rises and fewer paroled and released offenders are able to find jobs quickly on their own.
- **More sustained interventions over a longer period of time are needed for paroled and released offenders to reconnect with their children and deal with family reintegration.** Most clients visit the WFC once or twice soon after their release from prison. At this point of time, they are understandably focused on getting a job, minimizing their monthly child support obligations, and addressing other practical issues pertaining to their economic survival. Only 16 percent used the legal services and 29 percent used the mental health services available at the WFC to help them reconnect with their children or deal with the other parent. These issues persist, however, with virtually all WFC clients who are interviewed six months after their initial visit saying they would like to spend more time with their children. The WFC should consider re-contacting clients and providing case management

services over a longer period of time to address both the immediate issues and the longer-term concerns that ex-offenders have after their work and living situations become somewhat more stabilized.

- **Case management and other sustained interventions over time may help to stem the employment attrition that WFC clients appear to demonstrate over time.** While most employment attrition is due to the return to prison, the rate of employment for those who stay in the community begins to taper off three quarters after the WFC visit. It is unclear why some clients who do not return to prison fail to show evidence of earnings in the quarters following their visit to the WFC. Some may have moved out of Colorado, switched to cash employment, or changed to jobs for which employers do not file wage reports with the DOLE. Others may simply have dropped out or become involved with the underground economy. Case management, contact by WFC staff over time, and other interventions aimed at demonstrating interested supervision and oversight may help to keep more ex-offenders on the right track. This strategy is used by other reintegration programs. For example, Safer’s case managers, called “lifeguards,” have the exclusive duty to stay in touch with clients for a year after they have found a job (Finn, 1999).
- **The child support agency should establish more realistic support orders and arrears obligations for low-income NCPs.** Like their low-income counterparts in responsible fatherhood programs in Larimer and El Paso counties, WFC clients pay an average of 39 to 41 percent of what they owe in child support in the six months following their meeting with a child support worker at the WFC. Although payment behavior improves for clients after they visit the WFC, chiefly because of the initiation of wage withholding, it remains far from perfect. The similarity in payment outcomes among low-income NCPs in all three Colorado programs suggests that order levels may simply be too high for low-income parents, particularly when totals are considered across their multiple cases. The Colorado Child Support Guidelines Commission is currently recommending some changes to the formula for

establishing orders that would go a long way in generating more realistic orders. These changes and more liberal policies for review and adjustment of orders should be encouraged. Without making changes to insure that child support orders reflect an individual's true ability to pay, improved payment patterns will remain elusive.

- **Prisons should do more job training with inmates, and reintegration programs like the WFC should develop more job opportunities that offer liveable wages and wage growth possibilities.** Most WFC clients find jobs on their own, with half of those employed full-time earning less than \$9.00 per hour. Wage reports filed by employers show no significant change in average total quarterly earnings among those who are employed over six calendar quarters (two before they visited the WFC, the quarter of the visit, and three following the visit). Most interviewed WFC clients say their income does not cover their financial needs. Prisons need to do more job training with prisoners so that they leave with marketable skills. Simultaneously, reintegration programs need to generate jobs for ex-offenders that offer a liveable wage and opportunities for wage growth. For example, CEO, a New York reintegration program, created its own work crews and job placement services to ensure that ex-offenders get immediate employment and transition into permanent jobs (Finn, 1999). Programs that fail to aggressively develop new jobs will ultimately have limited impact on client earnings and yield disappointing results with respect to employment stability, child support payments, and recidivism, especially with the changed economy and higher rates of unemployment.
- **Reintegration programs like the WFC are a promising strategy to reduce recidivism.** Without a control group, it is impossible to say how WFC clients would have fared in the absence of the program. It is impossible to separate the effects of the program from the intrinsic characteristics of the clients, their risk level, and the other interventions and services they received. Nevertheless, the patterns are encouraging. A comparison of prison return rates for WFC clients with those who phoned for an appointment but never appeared shows that WFC clients were less

apt to return to prison (25% versus 34%). Although we calculate the return to prison differently than does the DOC because we include community regression as a return, while the DOC does not, it appears that WFC clients return at substantially lower rates, with the one-year return rate standing at 28.6 percent compared with the DOC's one-year recidivism rate of 40 percent. These patterns are comparable to Texas RIO project reincarceration rates of 23 percent versus 38 percent for non-Rio parolees (Finn, 1999).

- **To more reliably gauge the impact of the WFC on outcomes pertaining to employment, child support payments, and the return to prison, evaluations should be conducted over a longer period of time.** There may be a lag of up to five months in quarterly earnings appearing on the DOLE wage database maintained by the Department of Labor and Employment. This is due to delays in employer reports, as well as posting lags by DOLE personnel. For this reason, this evaluation only considers earning patterns for 135 WFC clients who were enrolled by June 30, 2000, and would have had three full quarters of potential earning activity following their visit to the WFC, plus seven months to allow for posting delays. The analysis ignores the earning experiences of 215 clients who enrolled between July 1, 2000, and April 15, 2001, and did not have at least 16 months of time in which to work and earn for three calendar quarters and have this activity reliably recorded on DOLE wage records. To permit a more reliable assessment of earnings, the evaluation should be conducted over a longer period of time. A longer study time period is also needed to gauge child support payment behaviors and the return to prison.

References

- Cavanaugh, K.F. and D. Pollack. "Child Support Responsibilities of Inmates." *Corrections Compendium*, May 1998: pp. 7-13.
- Colorado Department of Corrections, "Fiscal Year 2000 Statistical Report." Colorado Springs, Colorado, June 2001.
- Field, G. "From the Institution to the Community." *Corrections Today*, October 1998: pp. 94-97.
- Finn, P. "Job Placement for Offenders: A Promising Approach to Reducing Recidivism and Correctional Costs." *NIJ Journal*, July 1999.
- National Center on Fathers and Families. *Fathers in Prison: A Review of the Data*. NCOFF Issue Brief. Philadelphia, PA., 1998.
- Pearson, J. and C. Hardaway. "Designing Programs for Incarcerated and Paroled Parents." *Welfare Information Network*, August 2000, Vol. 1, No. 2.
- Pearson, J. and L. Davis. "First-Year Report on the Work and Family Center." Center for Policy Research, Denver, CO, September 2000.
- Pearson, J. and L. Davis. "Parent Program: Preliminary Report — People Achieving Responsibility Through Education, Nurturing And Training." Center for Policy Research, Denver, CO, October 2001.
- Pearson, J., N. Thoennes, L. Davis. "Does Dropping Debt and Retroactive Support Affect the Payment of Current Support?" *Child Support Quarterly*, Fall 2001, Volume XXXVII, No. 7.
- Skolnick, J.H. "Toward a Developmental Theory of Parole." *American Sociological Review*, 1960, 25(4): 549-900.
- Thoennes, N. "The El Paso County Parent Opportunity Project (POP): An Evaluation." Center for Policy Research, Denver, CO, February 2002.