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Current Resources

Evaluating Family-Based Services. Peter J. Pecora, Mark W. Fraser, Kristine E. Nelson, Jacquelyn McCroskey & William Meezan. Aldine de Gruyter. New York, NY. 1995.

Reviewed by

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One of the few certainties in evaluation research is the potential for error-or, as the authors of *Evaluating Family-Based Services* wisely advise us, “what *can* go wrong *will* go wrong” (p. 215). Such has been the case with family based services as the field has moved from simple one-group designs to large experimental studies, presenting every increasing opportunities for error. The good news is that much has been learned in the process.

Evaluating Family Based Services, a new and welcome addition to the growing literature in this field, reflects the collective experience and expertise of five prominent researchers in the family based services arena. Contributions by specialists in constructivist research, evaluation and social policy, and systems change supplement the more quantitative, program-specific approach of the co-authors to offer a comprehensive examination of family based services evaluation.

As the authors note, this is not an introductory research text, but one which assumes a basic familiarity with research and evaluation methods and terminology. This assumption permits a focused effort on the unique challenges of evaluating family based services programs--such as targeting services and assessing placement risk. For those readers needing a “refresher” course, however, this volume offers useful reviews of such topics as sampling, evaluation design, human subjects protection, data analysis, and report writing.

Critics of the use of placement prevention as the sole outcome measure of program success will appreciate the substantial attention paid to the assessment of services and interventions, family functioning, child functioning, parent functioning and social support. Chapters on each of these topics offer conceptual definitions of these domains as well as discussions of specific instruments that have been used in existing studies. Child functioning remains the most elusive area; while the authors describe a range of promising instruments, they acknowledge that the instruments have been used primarily for clinical assessment, not extensively for purposes of research or evaluation.

Placement prevention and cost efficiency, however, are not neglected in this book. The authors present various issues that have plagued the measurement of placement including competing definitions, placement as service failure, and organizational/environmental influences on rates of placement. Various approaches to measuring placement--the use of hazard rates, days in placement, and restrictiveness of placements--are discussed. A chapter on measuring program efficiency provides an overview of cost-effectiveness and benefit-cost analysis, but individuals preparing to undertake such an evaluation will likely need more assistance than can be provided in one chapter.

Evaluating Family-Based Services should be read by researchers and research-oriented practitioners alike. Anyone who has been involved in family based services research or evaluation--as the evaluator struggling to maintain a sound design in a changing service environment, the field coordinator dealing with client attrition and disgruntled workers, or the social worker trying to fulfill dual roles of service provider and data gatherer--will identify with the issues and dilemmas described in the chapter subtitled: "Doing Research in the Real World".

After two decades of work, the field is still debating definitional, measurement, and implementation issues, but with a deeper understanding of each. We can take heart in the fact that these authors have survived and persevere in this most heavily scrutinized area of child welfare research. Despite past, present, and unknown future hurdles, we are reminded that there is much work to be done and every reason to keep moving forward.

The Civil Rights of Homeless People: Law, Social Policy, and Social Work Practice. Madeleine R. Stoner. Aldine De Gruyter. Hawthorne, NY. 1995.

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The Civil Rights of Homeless People identifies laws, potential legal arguments and strategies which may assist advocates in challenging the onslaught of antihomeless activity across the nation; and demonstrates how the interaction of law and social policy practice advances entitlement, equity and empowerment goals.

The book's central thesis is that judicial advocacy has made it possible to advance and protect the interests of homeless people in the face of hostile legislation and public sentiment. Utilizing the paradigm of the judiciary as power broker, and numerous case examples, the book demonstrates the value and efficacy of collaboration between the social work and legal professions in the quest for social change and equity.

The book presents a very useful introduction with an inspiring section on the history of advocacy law. Part One provides a review of litigation regarding homeless persons and their entitlements to shelter and emergency assistance, income, child welfare, education, mental health services, and voting. Part Two reviews litigation attempting to reverse the national trend to criminalize homelessness and includes a final chapter focused on the limitations of judicial advocacy and useful suggestions for interprofessional collaboration. Family preservation issues are primarily addressed in chapter four, "Public Child Welfare", which delineates strategies that have resulted in permanent housing and the opportunity for homeless families to remain intact.

The Civil Rights of Homeless People possesses many strengths including the provision of resources, via case studies, for creativity in sociolegal advocacy; the definition of key terms of judicial and homeless advocacy work; and a unique focus on the need for, and efficacy of interprofessional work.

The only apparent weaknesses were inherent in its greatest strength. The very thorough description of cases that helped illustrate each area of discrimination and related strategies created a sometimes dry and repetitive tone. This also allowed for little development of the interdisciplinary roles and collaborative suggestions delineated in the final chapter. Nonetheless, this book presents a step in the right direction.

The Civil Rights of Homeless People should prove a very useful resource for practitioners and educators regarding the plight of the homeless and the study of the application of law to social problems.

***From Case Management to Services Coordination for Children with Emotional, Behavioral, or Mental Disorders: Building on Family Strengths.* Barbara Friesen & John Poertner (Eds.). Paul H. Brookes. Baltimore, MD. 1995.**

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Barbara Friesen and John Poertner have assembled a collection of 21 chapters devoted to case management, systems of care, and policy issues in children's mental health issues. Many of the chapters in this book extol the need to design and implement services that are specifically tailored to the needs of children. However, it is clear that the majority of programs described in this collection have borrowed heavily from interventions developed for adults who face severe mental illness. Thus, there is a continued need, recognized throughout this text, for good empirical research on case management services and other specialty programs specifically designed to help children and families.

What is clearly explicated in these pages are the various systems barriers that hinder the development of adequate, accessible, and effective children's mental health services. Indeed, one of the key issues that planners must fact is that a variety of systems are involved in the care of children. Ultimately, this creates a plethora of potential stakeholders and also fragments funding streams. It is in the area of systems level development and basic primers on funding mechanisms that this volume makes a strong contribution. While this is an area that may be less exciting reading for most students, practitioners, and academicians, it is naive to expect interventions like case management or any model program will integrate and bring rationality to children's services. Indeed, flexible funding strategies, extending purchasing power to case managers, or empowering families both emotionally and fiscally (like the Illinois Family Assistance Program described in this text) are likely to create the needed incentives to bring coherence to children's services.

This book succeeds as a sampler of new developments in the area of children's mental health service and can serve as a useful adjunct text in graduate level courses. The practitioner who is looking for specifically detailed or how to sections will probably be best served by exploring works referenced in the text.