Project Research

BACKGROUND

On May 18, 1994, Presiding Judge Stephen N. Tiktin, created a family court department, for the 11th Judicial District, pursuant to ORS 3.405. By court order, family related cases are now coordinated and referred to the same judge for adjudication. These cases include: juvenile delinquency and dependancy, dissolution of marriage, filiation, mental competency, guardianship, criminal and domestic violence. With the establishment of a family court department, the presiding judge is also required by statute to coordinate human services that affect family court proceedings (see ORS 3.417).

At the request of the presiding judge, the Deschutes County Commission on Children and Families created a task force to research and propose methods to coordinate human services with family court. Task force members included representatives from mental health, children services division, courts, citizens, etc. Their primary recommendation was to create a family court advocate position, to integrate human service activities with court proceedings. The task force also proposed that the court research existing families in the justice system, to create profiles and determine the extent of services received. This report outlines the findings obtained from court's research.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Several factors should be considered as this report is reviewed: 1) only a small number of cases were sampled because the program is relatively new; 2) the definition for a "high and low risk" family was limited to the frequency of court contacts; 3) data is limited to the accuracy of court records; and 4) the number of agency contacts is probably understated.

METHODOLOGY

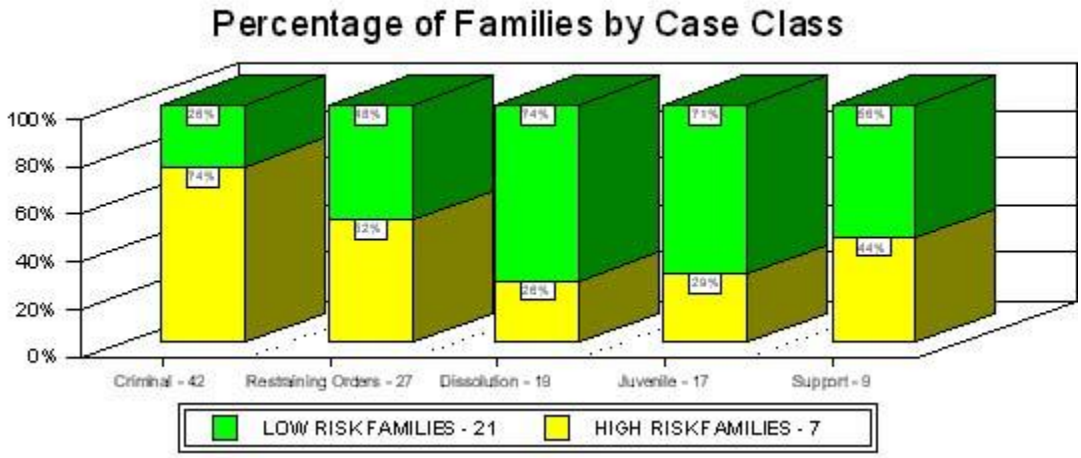
There were 28 families researched. These families generated 124 court cases, filed between 1987 and June 1995. There were 57 adults and 59 children. The sample consists of open and closed cases. Cases were examined, solely from court records, to determine what, if any differences and similarities exist among families. Data was collected with the use of a standardized form, developed prior to researching each file. Ms. Rita Olin was the sole researcher.

FINDINGS

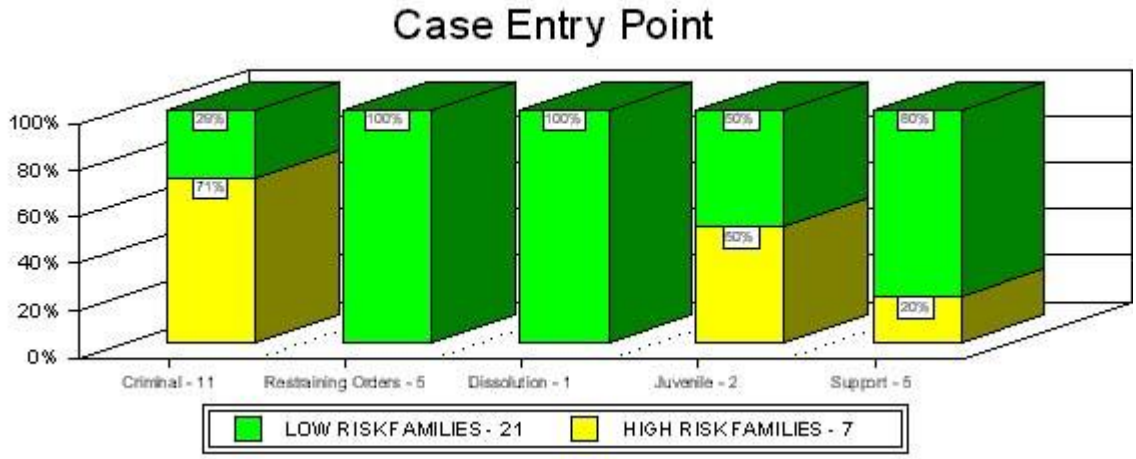
Of the 124 cases sampled, 34 percent were criminal, 22 percent were restraining orders (domestic violence), 15 percent were marriage dissolutions, 14 percent were juvenile, 7 percent were support, and 8 percent comprise filiation, guardianships and mental commitments.

Seven families generated 52 percent (64) of the cases. To compare populations, these families were defined as "high risk" and the remaining 21 families were "low risk." High risk families averaged 9 cases, while low risk families averaged 2.9 cases.

Between high and low risk families, the cases are distributed as follows:

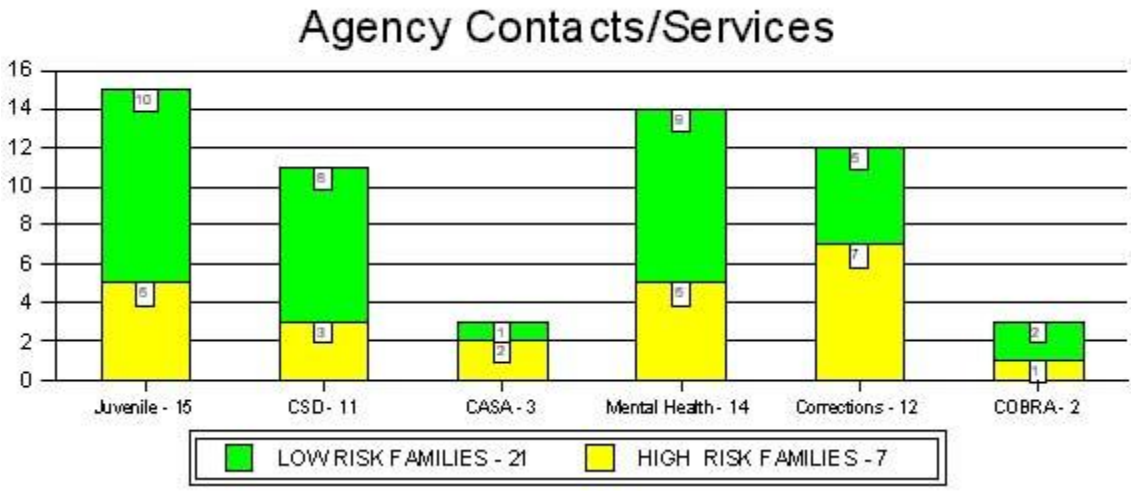


A family is most likely to enter the justice system through a criminal proceeding. A high risk family was twice as likely to enter through a criminal case than a low risk family. A high risk family never entered through a restraining order, while 25 percent of low risk families did.



Of the criminal cases sampled, 50 percent (21) were drug/alcohol, 12 percent (5) were sexual abuse, 12 percent (5) were assault and 26 percent (11) were a variety of different crimes. Of the high risk families, 86 percent had drug/alcohol related cases, compared to 19 percent of the low risk families.

Of the juvenile cases sampled, 65 percent (11) were dependency and 35 percent (6) were delinquency. Low risk families generated 70 percent of these cases (8 dependent and 4 delinquent).



There were 57 human service agency contacts for high and low risk families. High risk families received 40 percent of the services and they were always referred to adult corrections. No service was provided to seven low risk families (see graph at right).

Data also revealed that a high risk family: 1) averaged 6.7 years in the court system, compared to 3.3 years for a low risk family; 2) averaged 2.6 children, compared to 1.9 children for a low risk family; and 3) entered the court system at an average age of 32, compared to an average age of 30 for a low risk family