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**SUBJECT:**     *Research in Review*

**TO:**           Executive Staff  
                  Superintendents  
                  Other Readers



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Enclosed please find Volume 8, Number 2 of *Research in Review* (RIR). With this issue of RIR, we continue with summarizing findings from evaluation projects that have been conducted within the Department.

This issue features a summary and commentary on the outcome evaluation of the Department's Long Distance Dads (LDD) program. LDD aims to better enable incarcerated fathers to maintain productive, pro-social contacts with their children while incarcerated, and to be better fathers upon release. This study was conducted by Dr. Kimberly Skarupski, then of the Pennsylvania State University – Behrend with funding from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency and was completed in late 2003. This study examined the impact of LDD on several indicators of parenting attitudes, knowledge, skill and behaviors. Collateral information was collected from the caregivers of the incarcerated fathers' children, which added some valuable data on how relevant others viewed the impact of LDD. Dr. Skarupski has previously completed a process evaluation of LDD.

The outcome evaluation unfortunately found that LDD had little measurable impact on inmates receiving the program. On some indicators, inmates in the comparison group (those not receiving LDD) did better than the LDD study group. On the whole, this study supports a conclusion that LDD makes little difference in the parenting knowledge, skills or behaviors of inmates. The Department is presently reviewing its entire range of parenting programs with the goal of producing a more consolidated parenting model that may or may not include elements of LDD.

We welcome your feedback on RIR. We also welcome your suggestions for specific topical areas for future issues. While we cannot promise that we can produce an issue in response to all suggestions offered, we are very much interested in knowing what questions and topics are most interesting to our readers. Future issues of RIR will continue with a review of our own departmental evaluation projects, as well as article reviews, book reviews, and other relevant pieces.

Thank you for your continued interest in *Research in Review*.

# Research in Review

Office of Planning, Research, Statistics and Grants

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## Special Focus on *Pennsylvania DOC Evaluation Agenda*

Volume 8, Number 2 of *Research in Review* continues with the focus on research and evaluation projects conducted within the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections. This issue highlights contributions made by our own organization to the national literature on effective correctional programs. As many readers of RIR know, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections maintains an active agenda for evaluating its inmate treatment programs. A summary of the Department's program evaluation agenda and major projects can be found at:

<http://www.cor.state.pa.us/stats/lib/stats/EvaluatingPrograms&Issues.pdf> (or on DOCNET at: <http://docnet.cor.state.pa.us/stats/lib/stats/EvaluatingPrograms&Issues.pdf> ).

This issue of RIR features a summary of the outcome evaluation of the Long Distance Dads (LDD) program conducted by Dr. Kimberly Skarupski, then of the Pennsylvania State University – Behrend, during the period 2001 – 2003, with funding from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD). LDD was implemented in the DOC in the late 1990's, and is designed to help incarcerated fathers maintain pro-social contacts with their children while incarcerated, and to prepare them to be better fathers and positive role models once released. LDD, like other prison-based parenting programs in the DOC and elsewhere, is ultimately directed towards disrupting the "intergenerational cycle of crime" and decreasing the risk that offenders' children will become offenders themselves. LDD is a peer facilitated program, where inmates are trained to guide other inmates through the program, under the direction of staff leaders.

Dr. Skarupski had previously conducted a process evaluation of LDD in 2000 – 2001, also with funding from PCCD, the results of which are reported on in Volume 6, Number 2 (June 2003) of RIR, available at <http://www.cor.state.pa.us/stats/lib/stats/RIR/Volume%206%20-%202003/RIRV6N2.pdf> (or on DOCNET at: <http://docnet.cor.state.pa.us/stats/lib/stats/RIR/Volume%206%20-%202003/RIRV6N2.pdf> ). The process evaluation set the stage for the outcome evaluation reported on here. The LDD outcome evaluation examined the impact of the program against several indicators of knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors, such as attitudes towards parenting and knowledge of parenting skills, letter writing and phone calls to by inmates to their children and relationships with the children's caregivers. Data was collected on LDD participants, their children's caregivers in the community and on a similar group of inmates not in LDD. The results did not lend support to the efficacy of LDD; the findings overall indicated a neutral program effect. In sum, LDD did not seem to have much measurable impact. Implications for DOC policy and practice are also discussed.

Volume 8 of RIR will continue to feature summaries of evaluations of DOC programs, such as outcome findings for educational/vocational programs and results from the DOC's in-house parole outcomes study, as well as article/book reviews and special briefing papers. We at RIR hope that you find these reports to be informative, practical and relevant to your work in corrections.

## **OUTCOMES EVALUATION OF THE LONG DISTANCE DADS (LDD) PROGRAM**

by

Kimberly A. Skarupski, Ph.D.

Pennsylvania State University – Behrend (while study was underway)

Rush Institute for Healthy Aging: Rush-Presbyterian - St. Luke's Medical Center (present affiliation)

### Background

In the summer of 2001, Penn State Erie's Center for Organizational Research and Evaluation (CORE) submitted a proposal to the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime & Delinquency (PCCD) to conduct an outcomes evaluation of the LDD program at SCI Albion. CORE was awarded a contract in the amount of \$141,887 in September of 2001. The 18-month evaluation was conducted from October 1, 2001 – March 31, 2003.

### Methods

This outcomes study utilized a time series, matched comparison design including proxy measures and archival data, to measure baseline and post-program changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors among LDD participants. This study had 4 components: survey of inmates; caregiver telephone interviews; face-to-face inmate interviews; and institutional data collection. We collected quantitative and qualitative data via survey from participants in three, twelve week LDD sessions. All inmates and caregivers signed written consent forms prior to their study participation.

The primary analytic test used was General Linear Models (GLM) Repeated Measures to measure within-group and between-group differences over the subsequent time periods. We also used t-tests, Pearson's correlation coefficients, chi-square, McNemar's, and linear regression to analyze the data.

### Results

We collected pre-test data on 84 LDD inmates, 60 comparison inmates, and 37 caregivers. At post-test, we collected data on 42 LDD inmates, 47 comparison inmates, and 18 caregivers for retention rates of 50 percent, 78 percent, and 49 percent respectively. The comparison group was matched to the LDD group and there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups on the five key matching variables at pre-test: race/ethnicity; age; marital status; education; and sentence length (minimum and maximum).

To answer the primary research question: "Does the LDD program have any effect?" we first compared the data from the pre-post tests between the LDD and comparison groups and found five differences. At pre-test, the comparison group's average score was higher for: 1) involvement (26.6 vs. 15.5 out of 40); 2) awareness (30.7 vs. 26.1 out of 40); and 3) ICAN (Involvement, Consistency, Awareness and Nurturing Scale, used by the LDD program) Fathering Profile total score (122.7 vs.

101.7). At post-test, there were two differences where the LDD group mean was higher/better than the comparison group: 1) average number of letters father reported sending home to children (5.0 vs. 3.0) and 2) total contact with child per year on average (92.2 vs. 50.9) and one difference where the comparison group scored higher than the LDD group (“involvement” 25.7 vs. 18.9 respectively).

We combined the series of follow-up data (up to nine months of in-prison measurement of attitudes, knowledge and behavior for both groups) into one group and averaged the scores. We then compared the combined follow-up data to the pre- and post-test data via the GLM repeated measures procedure (multivariate statistics Wilk’s Lambda was used for computation). Results from these tests indicated only one significant difference between the LDD and comparison groups: the comparison group indicated higher “involvement” than the LDD group. There were trends of increasing means over times for both the LDD and comparison groups for: anger & frustration; skills & consistency; LDD content test sum; and parental locus of control. However, the post-test mean for “awareness” was significantly higher than the pre-test and follow-ups. We tested the interaction of time and group effects and found only two significant associations: “awareness”, “ICAN Fathering Profile score.”

In a further attempt to examine the data, we fit a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models for each of the 20 outcome variables (data not shown here). Each of the models included three independent/predictor variables: the pre-test; post-test; and group variable (LDD vs. comparison). The group variable was not a significant predictor of any of the outcome variables, indicating that receiving the LDD program did not yield measurable changes in the inmates.

We combined all caregiver data over all three of the LDD sessions for analyses which resulted in a sample of 18 caregivers who completed both the pre- and post-test interviews. There was one significant research finding for the outcome variables: caregivers stated that the number of calls fathers made to their children decreased significantly from pre to post-sessions (3 calls/month vs. 2.1/month).

In order to provide an in-depth assessment of the impact of the Long Distance Dad’s Program, CORE conducted face-to-face audio-taped interviews with LDD participants. Six inmates ultimately participated in both the pre- and post-LDD interviews. The interview questions covered a multitude of fathering topics that related directly to the curriculum taught in the LDD program. For example, there were questions dealing with: anger; nurturing skills; children’s needs; the definition of defense mechanisms; child development stages; consistency with parenting habits, etc. In summary, of the three main analytical domains (skills, knowledge, anger), there were 68 occurrences of post-session change out of 132 opportunities (52%). When asked if the LDD program met their expectations, 5 out of 6 fathers answered in the affirmative.

## Discussion

In answer to the primary research question: “Does the Long Distance Dads program improve inmates’ fathering knowledge, attitudes, skills, and/or behaviors?” our outcomes evaluation found minimal evidence.

Both the LDD and comparison groups were identically matched on demographics and virtually identical at pre-test on the outcome variables. At post-test, of the 20 possible measured outcomes, there were only two variables that showed the LDD group performing better than the comparison group: number of letters sent to the child (self-report) and total contact with the child (self-report). Because this self-reported contact was *not* corroborated by the caregiver data (i.e., the caregivers reported no significant improvement in father contact with the child from pre-post interview; in fact, the one significant difference was a reported *decrease* in number of times fathers telephoned their children), it is reasonable to suspect that at post-test, the inmates participating in the LDD program may have felt obligated to report more evidence of positive fathering with the child. However, it is also possible that the caregivers underestimated the number of letters sent to the child/children.

Furthermore, upon conducting the GLM repeated measures with the pre-, post-, and combined follow-up tests, we found only one significant group effect: the comparison group reported more involvement with their children than the LDD group. However, the involvement domain of the ICAN scale is tenuous since many of the questions are not applicable to an inmate population. Hence, interpretation of this domain is troublesome. Nonetheless, the LDD program participants' lower scores in this involvement domain may be a function of their introspection and hence desire and motivation to improve their degree of involvement via enrollment in the program. However, it remains the case that OLS regression modeling also failed to show that LDD program participation was associated with any of the outcomes.

### Limitations

The first and most important limitation to this study has to do with the nature of quasi-experimental designs. The "gold standard" in evaluation is the randomized trial; however, randomizing inmates to a treatment vs. **control** group was not possible in this project and therefore we chose the quasi-experimental design with a *comparison group* component. As such, we cannot state unequivocally that any findings/non-findings were necessarily the result of the LDD program.

A second limitation involves the issue of small sample sizes; especially with the follow-up measurements. While the drop-out rate in this outcomes study appears to be consistent with the program's typical drop-out rate, the loss of data was unfortunate. Additionally, enrolling and retaining the caregivers was challenging due to a number of circumstances including: many fathers were not in contact with caregivers; some fathers did not have the caregiver's phone number; some had a strained or severed relationship with caregivers/children; some fathers had not seen or heard from the caregiver or their child/children in years; there was an ongoing issue of phone numbers being disconnected and/or caregivers moving; or caregivers simply refusing to participate.

Other limitations include the fact that we did not measure any characteristics of the actual groups that comprised each LDD session (typically 4 groups per session) and hence cannot determine outcomes based on particular groups and/or compare between-group differences. We also did not determine the motivation (i.e., selection bias) for each particular inmate for enrolling in LDD which may in-turn drive the outcomes nor did we talk with any of the children to gauge changes in

fathering.

In this outcomes evaluation, we also did not examine the potential impact of other sources of knowledge, attitudes, or skills such as other inmates, other institutional programs, television programming, the inmates' own reading/research, or family collaboration; any of which could have been responsible for improvements/losses.

As with any special population, particularly a prison-based population, there are special issues that may impede the collection and/or interpretation of data. In our case, there appeared to be a heightened concern about privacy and trust issues particularly concerning the involvement of the inmates' families. Correspondingly, the caregivers may also have had a bias in their participation and/or responses to the interview questions. Thus, this fact, in conjunction with the established issues revolving around self-report data, should be considered in the interpretation of the results.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

There are many issues that concern incarcerated fathers. Among these are: 1) legal issues (finding competent legal representation and the perception that contact with an incarcerated parent is not in the child's best interest); 2) economic issues (incarcerated fathers cannot provide financial support for their children); 3) environmental issues (visitation conditions are not always conducive to engaging visits); 4) emotional issues (most incarcerated fathers suffer from anxiety, depression, and lack of self esteem); and 5) relationship issues (most fathers are concerned about their relationships with their families both while they are in prison and when they get out) (Lanier, 1995). Addressing these issues is important and may serve to enhance familial relationships, and could also reduce disciplinary problems within the prison system (Klein, Bartholomew, & Bahr, 1999).

Furthermore, a key element to any prison-based rehabilitative program is addressing criminal thinking errors; "To be effective, prison family life education programs must also address the aspects of the criminal personality that prevent inmates from having good family relationships" (Bayse, Allgood, & Van Wyk, 1991:257). Anti-social attitudes, values, and beliefs are key criminogenic risk factors (Harris, 1984). Rehabilitative programs should teach inmates about psychological traits, personality disorders, and defense mechanisms that are common to criminal behavior such as narcissism, egocentrism, blameshifting, justification, denial, and rationalization. Most importantly, criminals need to be taught "correct thinking" and "taught that there is a worthy substitute for crime" (Samenow, 1998:168).

While quantitative analyses indicated that the LDD program may not be reaching its potential, the qualitative results suggest that this fathering program has some promise. The program is quite popular with the inmates as evidenced by an extensive waiting list and the inmates appear to be satisfied with program and hold it in high regard. In addition, based on the random sample of inmates interviewed, approximately half gained knowledge and skills from the program and nearly 70 percent learned about dealing with anger. Thus, there is a solid framework of inmate support for the program. SCI Albion and other institutions that are using the program might consider the recommendations in this report as a way to increase desired programming outcomes.

### Institution-specific recommendations

- 1) establish an LDD steering committee with the goal of monitoring program administration issues (e.g., curricula, training, dissemination, outcomes)
- 2) create a new training program policy so that all DOC staff have at least a basic understanding of the variety of programs offered with the goal of creating institution-wide support and encouragement of programming
- 3) list the LDD program in the psychology and education programming materials
- 4) promote and increase contact between inmates and their children
- 5) improve training for LDD program administrators and peer leaders
- 6) improve the environment of the group sessions (to allow for easier group communication)
- 7) improve the environment of the family visitation area by reinstating a child play area and/or by allowing inmates to change into “street clothes” or non-institutional attire for visits
- 8) investigate providing programming to inmates’ children
- 9) standardize programming across the state

### Program-specific recommendations

- 1) enhance the curriculum/programming (e.g., include components on personality profiling, psychological assessments, and/or “criminal thinking errors” as risk factors for incarceration)
- 2) increase subject matter retention via reviews/exams
- 3) streamline the material in order to increase learning (e.g., encourage the father to connect the information from the “child development” section directly to their child/children)
- 4) meet more than once/week or increase each week’s session length
- 5) group inmates based on the similar ages of their children
- 6) teach specific communication skills (e.g., phone conversations and letter-writing)
- 7) incorporate actual letter-writing in the course
- 8) make arrangements for fathers’ reading level/translation needs
- 9) increase the amount, quality, and variety of resources fathers can send home
- 10) implement an internal evaluation system (e.g., improve data collection and tracking with the goal of examining the data for gaps in knowledge, attitudes, or skills)
- 11) ask for structured feedback from the inmates on the program
- 12) provide additional/follow-up LDD sessions
- 13) implement multi-faceted programming (i.e., guest speakers, multi-media presentations, cognitive therapy, role-playing, etc.)
- 14) bring children and fathers together (e.g., family day at the end of the program)
- 15) reduce the drop-out rate (e.g., provide make-up classes for those who miss the class due to mandatory call-outs)

- 16) enhance the milieu for the class (explore other rooms for meeting)
- 17) better utilize peer leader meetings
- 18) link the LDD program with community programs such as pre-release planning

Collaboration between the LDD program administration and the DOC to adopt some of these recommendations and/or examine some of the related incarcerated fathers issues may result in inmate change that would have implications for fathers, their children and families, and the institution.

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#### **ENDNOTE:**

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"An Outcomes Evaluation of the Long Distance Dads Program at SCI-Albion." Kimberly A. Skarupski (Penn State University) Principal Investigator. Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency - Grant # 00-DS-19-11588 (\$141,887). October 2001-March 2003.

More information about this project and results are found in the full evaluation report, available from the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (online version at <http://www.cor.state.pa.us/stats/lib/stats/LDDOutcomeEvaluationFinalReport.pdf>, or on DOCNET at <http://docnet.cor.state.pa.us/stats/lib/stats/LDDOutcomeEvaluationFinalReport.pdf>) or the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency ([http://www.pccd.state.pa.us/pccd/lib/pccd/stats/ldd\\_outcomes\\_final\\_report.pdf](http://www.pccd.state.pa.us/pccd/lib/pccd/stats/ldd_outcomes_final_report.pdf)):

Kimberly A. Skarupski. (August 2003). *Outcomes Evaluation of the Long Distance Dads<sup>®</sup> Program*. Erie, PA: Penn State Erie: The Behrend College's Center for Organizational Research and Evaluation (CORE). Report to the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency.

**THE PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS RESPONSE:  
RECONSIDERING OPTIONS FOR BUILDING PARENTING SKILLS**

Investigating the outcomes of LDD presented something of a challenge to conventional correctional program evaluation practices. LDD is a relatively brief, low intensity intervention that does not necessarily target factors closely associated with criminal recidivism (e.g. criminal thinking, anti-social attitudes, criminal associates, etc.). Moreover, the program is not *intended* to reduce criminal behavior of the inmates themselves, but rather to prepare them to more appropriately father their children. This is a valuable goal, as it can have important consequences for the children by disrupting the postulated intergenerational cycle of criminal deviance. It does mean, though, that recidivism is *not* an appropriate outcome indicator for LDD. Ideally, we would want to know something about the long term outcomes of the LDD inmates' children. To the extent that they go on to lead productive, pro-social lives (compared to the children of similar inmates who did not receive LDD), we could have some confidence that LDD had a positive impact on the fathering they received. This would require a very long term study that carefully controlled for the myriad of other factors contributing to child development.

Instead, the LDD evaluation examined a set of intermediate variables that were more feasible to measure and that should theoretically be influenced by a program such as LDD. These variables include attitudes towards parenting, knowledge of various parenting skills, and perhaps most importantly, specific behaviors that would demonstrate change in the overall quality of fathering. These behaviors include letter writing, phone calls, gifting and visits (admittedly, the latter is not entirely within the control of the incarcerated father, but would certainly be impacted by their attitudes towards their families). In addition, the children's caregivers were interviewed to gain insight into how the family rated changes in the incarcerated father's attitudes, skills and behaviors. Caregiver interviews also provided insight into the father's attitudes and behaviors towards the caregiver, which is an important component of good fathering.

Data was collected on 84 LDD inmates and 60 comparison individuals (similar inmates who did not receive LDD) at SCI-Albion, as well as 37 caregivers. These numbers are smaller than what one would see in evaluations of other treatment domains (such as alcohol and other drug programs), but the LDD program itself is much smaller than many other types of interventions. LDD began at SCI Albion, which was the focus of this study, although as of the writing of this issue of RIR, it operates in over a dozen SCI's. It should be noted that the researchers secured the cooperation of as many inmates and caregivers as possible during the timeframe of the study. The numbers were also depressed by the relatively high dropout rate for the LDD program (upwards of 50 percent); the most comprehensive data could be collected only for those inmates who completed the program. Data was collected at program admission, program completion and up to three follow-up points after program discharge (as many as nine months after program discharge). The study utilized surveys, interviews, program observations and data runs.

The primary research question asked “Does the Long Distance Dads program improve inmates’ fathering knowledge, attitudes, skills and/or behaviors?”. The answer is perhaps best summed up on page 2 of the final report “Our outcomes evaluation found minimal evidence”. The LDD program seemed to have difficulty showing an impact even on the rather modest criteria selected for this study. Of 20 variables examined after program completion, only 2 showed the LDD inmates doing better than the comparison group inmates: number of letters sent to the child and total contact with the child. These findings were not corroborated by the caregivers, and were subject to some statistical “noise”. When subjecting these data to more sophisticated analysis that better controlled for noise and the small N’s (involving complete analysis of all pre-tests, post-tests and follow-up data), only one significant difference between the two groups remained: inmates in the comparison group reported more involvement with their children than did the LDD inmates.

When looking just at the caregiver data, the one significant finding was that caregivers stated that the number of phone calls fathers made to their children *decreased* after completion of LDD. While the researchers note that there may be other factors that can affect phone call patterns (i.e. the cost of the calls), there is no evidence that these external factors changed during the course of the study. On the bright side, the evaluation found evidence that LDD has some positive impact on knowledge of fathering skills, but these effects appear to be weak to moderate.

In spite of the minimal evidence of positive impact, and some suggestions of negative impact, the most compelling finding seems to be that of a *null effect*; in other words, LDD made no real difference in the attitudes, knowledge and behavior of the inmates. Changes in measured attitudes and behaviors were influenced more by random chance than by any true programmatic effects.

In addition to the findings presented in this report, the researchers found some admittedly anecdotal evidence that LDD does not address antisocial attitudes and values that are highly correlated with criminal deviance and that could have consequences for transmission to inmate’s children. If we found evidence that the LDD program had helped inmates to understand why they are imprisoned (and unable to parent their children), why their own thinking and behavior are responsible for this, and what they can do to change these when they are released, we would have some reason to conclude that it is a good program. If, on the other hand, programs allow inmates to persist in believing that others are responsible for their criminal offending and imprisonment, we may not be able to expect much change in their ability to responsibly parent their children.

In sum, this study reinforces conclusions from the admittedly limited evaluation literature on prison-based parenting programs that these sorts of interventions have minimal impact on inmate behavior. This evaluation in fact has a stronger methodology than is often found in other parenting studies, lending greater weight to its findings. These findings also support the decision not to examine recidivism as an indicator of LDD program effect. If LDD is having difficulty impacting proximal variables such as attitudes and knowledge, and relatively simple behaviors such as letter writing, it is difficult to see how it could have any hope of impacting criminal deviance (either of the inmates or their children).

What does this study mean for LDD? Over the past several years, the DOC has been engaged in a review of all of its treatment programs, with the goal of implementing standardized, evidence-based program models across all institutions and all program domains. This process has been informed by the evaluations conducted on the DOC's programs. This process is further along in some program domains than in others. For example, previous issues of RIR have reported on several evaluations of the DOC's alcohol and other drug (AOD) treatment programs and on the DOC's utilization of these evaluations, noting an expansion of AOD therapeutic community capacity and the phase out of the original RSAT model.

As noted above, parenting programs are not targeted primarily towards criminogenic needs and the reduction of recidivism rates. As such, they can be said to assume a somewhat lower priority than other core interventions that are intended to reduce criminal thinking and behavior. This does not mean that parenting programs are unimportant, but simply that scarce treatment resources must be carefully allocated. The DOC is presently reconsidering how best to deliver a standard parenting intervention to inmates who can benefit from it. In addition to LDD, the DOC offers other parenting skills programs and related activities to promote positive inmate contact with their families. The result of this review will be a unified program that follows evidence-based practices and that will address inmate parenting deficits. Some flavor of LDD may be reflected in this model program, but the object is to base the model on what shows promise for promoting pro-social parenting behavior on the part of inmates. Unfortunately, this study did not provide evidence that LDD could serve as an effective model for the DOC's new parenting intervention. As we have seen with the LDD and RSAT evaluations, though, studies that find neutral or negative treatment effects still provide many useful lessons and policy guidance.