



ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
OFFICE OF PLANNING, RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Portfolio of Research in Welfare and Family Self-Sufficiency FY 2014

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Administration for Children and Families

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/>

The Administration for Children & Families (ACF) is a division of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. ACF promotes the economic and social well-being of families, children, individuals, and communities.

ACF programs aim to:

- Empower families and individuals to increase their economic independence and productivity,
- Encourage strong, healthy, supportive communities that have a positive impact on quality of life and the development of children,
- Create partnerships with front-line service providers, states, localities, and tribal communities to identify and implement solutions that transcend traditional program boundaries,
- Improve access to services through planning, reform, and integration, and
- Address the needs, strengths, and abilities of vulnerable populations including people with developmental disabilities, refugees, and migrants.

Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre>

The Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) studies ACF programs and the populations they serve through rigorous research and evaluation projects. These include evaluations of existing programs, evaluations of innovative approaches to helping low-income children and families, research syntheses, and descriptive and exploratory studies. OPRE aims to build and disseminate knowledge about effective approaches to helping low-income children and families.

OPRE includes three divisions:

- The Division of Economic Independence focuses on welfare, employment, and family self-sufficiency.
- The Division of Child and Family Development focuses on child care, Head Start, Early Head Start, and child abuse and neglect.
- The Division of Family Strengthening focuses on teen pregnancy prevention, youth development, healthy marriage, responsible fatherhood, family violence, runaway and homeless youth, and home visiting.

ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES

 **OPRE**

*Rigorous evidence for improving
child and family well-being*

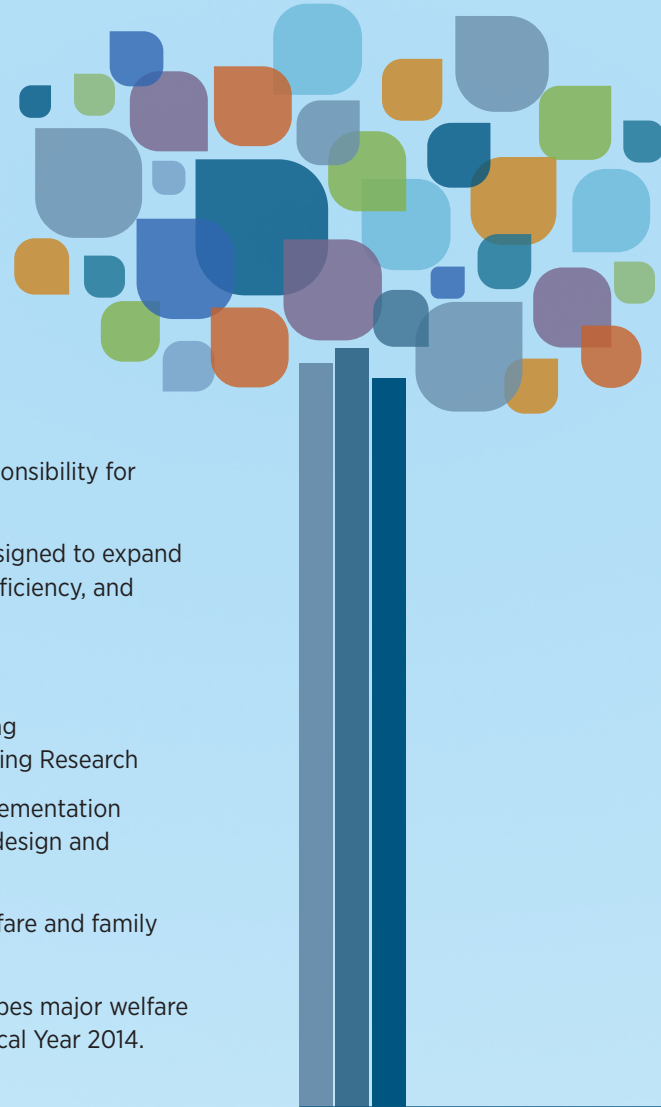


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Welfare and Family Self-Sufficiency Research



The Division of Economic Independence within OPRE has primary responsibility for welfare and family self-sufficiency research.

OPRE's research in the area of welfare and family self-sufficiency is designed to expand knowledge about effective programs to promote employment, self-sufficiency, and economic well-being among low-income families.

Research focuses on four major areas:

- TANF and the Safety Net
- Education and Training
- Employment and the Labor Market
- Other and Cross-Cutting Research

Within these areas, OPRE funds experimental impact evaluations, implementation evaluations, and descriptive research projects aimed at informing the design and implementation of programs.

OPRE also invests in activities to disseminate rigorous research on welfare and family self-sufficiency topics.

This *Portfolio of Research in Welfare and Family Self-Sufficiency* describes major welfare and family self-sufficiency research projects sponsored by OPRE in Fiscal Year 2014.

ACF Evaluation Policy

ACF seeks to promote rigor, relevance, transparency, independence, and ethics in the conduct of evaluations. ACF's Evaluation Policy, which was published in the Federal Register on August 29th 2014, addresses these five key principles to govern ACF's planning, conduct, and use of evaluation. The [full evaluation policy](#) is available on the OPRE website.

- **Rigor:** ACF is committed to using rigorous methods to yield accurate and unbiased findings.
- **Relevance:** Our evaluations should address legislative requirements and congressional, federal, state, tribal, and local interests.
- **Transparency:** We will make information about planned and ongoing evaluations easily accessible. We will release results regardless of the findings. Reports will present comprehensive results, including favorable, unfavorable, and null findings.
- **Independence:** Evaluation should not be biased. To promote objectivity, we protect independence in the design, conduct, and analysis of evaluations.
- **Ethics:** ACF-sponsored evaluations will be conducted in an ethical manner and safeguard the dignity, rights, safety, and privacy of participants.



TANF & The Safety Net

The federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program provides block grants to states to design and operate programs to help needy families achieve self-sufficiency. OPRE's research examines the local implementation of TANF programs and policies, the intersection of TANF with other safety net programs, and other relevant issues related to TANF program operations, TANF recipients, and TANF-eligible families.

Past projects include: a study of local implementation of TANF; an examination of state and local efforts to divert TANF applicants from applying for cash assistance; an examination of the implementation of sanction policies and the relationship of these policies to federal work participation requirements; a study of what is known about the effects of time limit policies; a synthesis of knowledge about the TANF caseload and TANF leavers; an examination of the TANF child-only caseload; and a series of research briefs synthesizing knowledge on important TANF topics.

OPRE is currently funding several descriptive studies of state TANF and related safety net programs and recently completed a qualitative study of "disconnected" low-income families who are neither receiving TANF nor working. In addition to the studies described below, OPRE conducts experimental research on welfare-to-work and innovative employment strategies; these efforts are described in the following sections on employment and the labor market and education and training.

Understanding the Dynamics of Disconnection from Employment and Assistance

Since the creation of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program in 1996, there has been concern about low-income individuals who may be eligible for TANF cash assistance but are neither receiving TANF nor working. These individuals are often referred to as “disconnected.” While several previous studies had explored the pervasiveness and circumstances of disconnected families, this project, launched in 2011 and led by the Urban Institute, used a qualitative approach to address important knowledge gaps related to disconnected families’ work, benefit receipt, economic coping strategies, material hardship, and overall well-being. The project team conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 51 unmarried low-income mothers from Southeast Michigan and Los Angeles, California. Analysis of the interview data shows some differences between the samples due to age, location, and immigration status of the respondents, but also striking similarities in reasons for and experiences of disconnection. The final report was published in June 2014.

TANF/SSI Disability Transition Project (TSDTP)

Numerous past studies had identified the substantial potential for overlap in families and individuals served by TANF and the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program (an income supplement for low-income aged, blind, and disabled people). The TANF/SSI Disability Transition Project (TSDTP) was an effort to examine the extent of the overlap between the TANF and SSI programs and populations and to develop innovative pilot programs intended to improve a variety of outcomes for individuals with disabilities and barriers to employment. TSDTP was a collaborative effort between ACF and the Social Security Administration through a contract to MDRC.

The first stage of the project was to understand the existing environment. Federal TANF and SSI data were merged to determine the national overlap between TANF and SSI application and participation. Analysis of this merged data revealed a number of interesting findings.

Findings from the Understanding the Dynamics of Disconnection from Employment and Assistance Project

Primary reasons for women’s disconnection from employment included:

- Limited job opportunities
- Challenges balancing work with family caregiving responsibilities
- Lack of transportation

Primary reasons for disconnection from TANF included:

- Having reached the TANF time limit
- Opting not to use the program due to the perceived hassle involved
- Having barriers to work that were also barriers to participating in a welfare-to-work program
- Within the community of immigrant women in LA, widespread misconceptions about negative consequences of participating in TANF

Primary sources of material support and economic coping strategies included:

- Use of other public benefits including WIC, SNAP, and Medicaid
- Informal and/or irregular “side jobs”
- Living doubled-up or in subsidized housing to afford rent
- Receiving support from children’s fathers, male partners, and other family and friends

Despite receiving assistance from these different sources, experiences of material hardship were quite common.

In the second stage of the project, the team worked with three sites – Ramsey County, MN; Los Angeles County, CA; and Muskegon County, Michigan – to implement pilot tests of innovative approaches to serving individuals with disabilities either through the provision of services to TANF clients with barriers to employment, streamlining the SSI application process, or improving coordination between the two systems.

Key findings from the TSDTP analysis of merged TANF and SSI data include:

- Less than 10 percent of TANF recipients had an open SSI application, and just 6 percent of adults applying for SSI received TANF benefits within a year of the application.
- Most TANF recipients who apply for SSI do so long before nearing their federal benefit time limit.
- TANF recipients who applied for SSI were slightly less likely to be found disabled than other SSI applicants. Much of this difference is explained by differences in demographic characteristics like age.

A [report](#) on this analysis is available online.

OPRE released several final project publications including briefs to assist TANF program staff in assessing clients:

- *The TANF/SSI Disability Transition Project: Innovative Strategies for Serving TANF Recipients with Disabilities*, a full-length report describing the three TSDTP pilots;
- *Examining the Interaction Between Welfare and Disability: Lessons from an In-Depth Data Analysis*, a brief describing the analysis of merged national-level SSI and TANF data;
- *Understanding Supplemental Security Income (SSI): A Guide for TANF Staff Members*, which describes the SSI disability determination process, compares it with procedures TANF agencies use to identify recipients who meet TANF work-limitation criteria, and discusses strategies TANF agencies use to assess which individuals are most likely to qualify for SSI;

- *Assessing and Serving TANF Participants with Disabilities*, a brief which describes different approaches to disability-related needs assessment used by some TANF programs and offers points for TANF administrators to consider in choosing assessment approaches; and
- *Connections between TANF and SSI: Lessons from the TANF/SSI Disability Transition Project*, a brief providing an overall summary of the lessons learned from the project.

Improving Engagement of TANF Families: Understanding Work Participation and Families with Reported Zero Hours of Participation in Program Activities

This project, launched in 2011 and conducted for OPRE by Mathematica Policy Research, was initiated to provide information about state TANF work activity reporting, especially with regard to TANF participants who do not participate in TANF work activities or are reported to have zero hours of participation. The project's final report will describe the perceptions of interviewed TANF administrators and staff regarding the policy and program reasons that lead families to have zero reported hours of participation in allowable work activities. The findings suggest that nonparticipation, particularly of families with zero reported hours of participation, is not accurately represented across states because of differences in the definition of participation as well as differences in policy decisions, reporting, and program practices. As a result, there is currently no method for fully capturing the degree of total nonparticipation among low-income families that receive cash assistance. This also complicates the task of identifying and quantifying factors that may contribute to the number of families with reported zero hours of participation. The study identifies categories of influences—TANF policies and procedures, service delivery and performance management, and initial activities and ongoing transitions—that may affect the number of families with reported zero hours of participation. The final report will also describe promising strategies that state and local TANF agencies are using to encourage and support client engagement.

Descriptive Analysis of TANF/WIA Coordination

The TANF program and programs supported by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) (recently reauthorized as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act program) both provide employment and training services to low-income individuals. The similarities between the programs have generated interest in coordinating and integrating TANF and WIA services. OPRE launched the Descriptive Analysis of TANF/WIA Coordination in 2011 to learn more about how and to what degree the programs coordinate at the state and local level and the considerations that influence coordination within selected locations.

The project team, led by Mathematica Policy Research, conducted interviews with state and local respondents in 8 states and 11 localities. The team identified 12 strategies for TANF/WIA coordination that study sites use and that other locations could replicate. The strategies fall under six program components: (1) administration and management; (2) funding; (3) policies and procedures; (4) program missions and knowledge; (5) services for customers; and (6) accountability and performance measurement. Overall, the study found that TANF and WIA programs are generally parallel operating programs with varying levels of coordination across specific strategies. No study site was highly coordinated across all 12 strategies, but a few sites achieved mostly high to moderate levels of coordination across the strategies. The extent to which coordination occurs is largely determined by how much TANF program administrators are willing to operate the TANF program within the structure of the WIA program. Coordination above a base level for most strategies requires co-location of program services within WIA's American Job Centers. The extent of coordination may also fluctuate with the policy and funding environment or with the willingness of administrators to take risks in service delivery innovation or performance measurement. The project's final project report is expected in early 2015.

Descriptive Study of County vs. State TANF Administration

While the majority of states centrally administer their TANF programs, eight states (California, Colorado, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North

Carolina, North Dakota, and Ohio) play a supervisory role and delegate the administration of the TANF program to their counties. Wisconsin also operated a county-administered TANF program until January 2013. This study, conducted for OPRE by the Urban Institute, assessed how TANF programs administered by counties and supervised by states differ from programs administered by states. The project gathered information from a sample of county- and state-administered TANF programs in order to examine different program experiences and identify potential approaches for technical assistance specific to state-supervised, county-administered TANF programs. Based on interviews and surveys with administrators in both state-administered and county-administered settings, the project found that differences between state- and county-administered programs are a matter of the degree of authority retained by the state.

Institute for Research on Poverty National Poverty Center Fellows

OPRE and HHS's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) established the National Poverty Center Fellows Program in 2013 in order to build the capacity of emerging researchers to conduct high-quality policy-relevant research on poverty and inequality in the United States. The program, which is administered by the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, supports post-doctoral fellows in residence at OPRE and ASPE. The fellows conduct poverty-related research and analysis, contribute to planning and overseeing poverty-related research and evaluation studies, and work on their own related research projects.

Two fellows from the inaugural 2014 – 2015 class are in residence in the Division of Economic Independence at OPRE working on a variety of projects related to economic mobility, housing stability, geographic poverty trends, low- and middle-skills labor sector analysis, skills acquisition and development, and safety net studies.

Overall, state-administered TANF programs retain greater authority and allow less flexibility locally than county-administered TANF programs. However, state-administered programs also exhibit a range of authority and flexibility. The project also found that the structural differences between state- and county-administered TANF programs do not correlate with any quantifiable differences in key program or client outcomes. County-administered TANF programs have a wide range of technical assistance needs, some unique but many shared with state-administered TANF programs. The project's final report will be published in early 2015.

A Descriptive Study of Tribal TANF Programs

American Indian Tribes and Alaska Native Villages have the option to administer Tribal TANF programs rather than having tribal members receive benefits and services from state TANF programs. The law gives Tribal TANF programs more flexibility than it gives to states, offering tribes the opportunity to design TANF programs that align with tribes' geographic, economic, and demographic circumstances and that are grounded in their unique cultural traditions. Currently, there are 68 approved Tribal TANF programs serving almost 300 American Indian Tribes and Alaska Native Villages and the non-reservation American Indian and Alaska Native populations of over 121 counties.

This study, conducted for OPRE by the Urban Institute, examined the characteristics, implementation, and promising practices of four diverse Tribal TANF programs (the Navajo Nation Program for Self Reliance, Tanana Chiefs Conference, Athabascan Self-Sufficiency Assistance Project, and South Puget Intertribal Planning Agency). The study provided an in-depth look at program implementation, operations, outputs, and outcomes in these sites and identified promising practices and other areas for further study. Overall, the study found that tribes use the flexibility of Tribal TANF to create diverse programs that reflect their unique circumstances, opportunities, and cultures. The Tribal TANF programs in the study generally focus on the broad goal of self-sufficiency, beyond the narrower goal of employment. Each program pursues self-sufficiency for its clients through a combination of work, education, and case management, but each program has its own emphasis, philosophy, and implementation approach. The study also documented, identified, and recommended

potential approaches for further study. A final report was published in November 2013.

State TANF Policies Database

Under TANF, states have considerable authority to design the parameters of their programs and set their own rules. Since 1997, the Urban Institute has maintained the State TANF Policies Database, also known as the Welfare Rules Database (WRD), in order to document state program rules. The database is meant to be a single location where information on TANF program rules can be researched across states and/or across years. ACF, with contributions from ASPE, has funded updates to the database, as well as publication of tables summarizing state TANF policies for each year since 1997. Annual publications are available on the OPRE website.

NEW

The Intersection Between TANF and Refugee Cash Assistance Services

ACF's Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) administers a variety of social service programs intended to connect newly resettled refugees with resources and help them become economically self-sufficient and integrated into American society. One such program is the Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA) program, which provides financial support and social services to newly resettled refugees. RCA and TANF are both cash assistance programs that provide services aimed at promoting self-sufficiency. However, there is little documented information on the extent to which refugees access TANF v. RCA, how outcomes for refugees compare under these two programs, whether integration of these programs holds promise for refugee self-sufficiency, and other important questions.

The Intersection Between TANF and Refugee Cash Assistance Services project aims to improve understanding of how RCA and TANF serve refugee populations, how the programs intersect, and how the programs may be related to refugee self-sufficiency and employment outcomes. The study, which was launched in September 2014 and is being conducted by Abt Associates, will document the similarities and differences between RCA and TANF in selected jurisdictions while exploring the population of refugees served by TANF and RCA and differences in program services. The study will also explore how states and localities have coordinated TANF and RCA programs

and whether these approaches hold promise for long-term job stability and economic self-sufficiency for refugees. By improving knowledge of these programs and participant experiences, ACF hopes to move toward better serving refugee populations.

Family Self Sufficiency and Stability Research Consortium

To fill gaps in TANF research and data activities and to complement its ongoing research, OPRE in recent years developed and launched a multi-faceted Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Consortium.

The first component of the Research Consortium is the **Advancing Welfare and Family Self-Sufficiency Research Project**. Launched in 2012 and led by Mathematica Policy Research, this project provides research support and a flexible research and evaluation mechanism for responding to policy priorities and research opportunities among state TANF programs.

The second component of the Consortium is the **Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Network**. In 2013 OPRE awarded grants to a network of university-based researchers to investigate critical issues in improving family self-sufficiency and stability. The Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Network supports cooperative agreements with

scholars to work independently and collectively on systematic, multi-disciplinary examinations of the current gaps in family self-sufficiency and stability research. In their first year of award, each of the scholars investigated a particular topic in the area of family self-sufficiency and stability as well as convening as a network to map the research landscape and identify gaps for investigation in future years.

The third component of the Consortium is the **Family Self-Sufficiency Data Center**. In 2013 OPRE awarded the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago a cooperative agreement to support the development, implementation, and ongoing operations of a data center to support family self-sufficiency research and activities. This center serves as a hub to support the development of state and institutional capacity for data collection, linkage and, where necessary, storage in order to provide access to high-quality data to practitioners and policymakers in family self-sufficiency programs and research. The center works independently and in collaboration with the affiliated Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Network. During its first year, the data center conducted a comprehensive needs assessment and developed a prototype for a web-based data archive and analysis tool. In its second year, the center will work with states and localities to add data and functionality to the web-based data archive to improve its utility for state and local policymakers and researchers.

FAMILY SELF-SUFFICIENCY AND STABILITY RESEARCH NETWORK SCHOLARS

Scholar	Institution	Research Topic
Yumiko Aratani	Columbia University	Examining the Impact of Policy Changes on Child Care Subsidy Receipt and Child Care Stability among Low-Income Families with Young Children in Illinois
Gregory A. Fabiano	University at Buffalo, State University of New York	Engaging Fathers to Promote Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability
Colleen Heflin	University of Missouri	Family Stability and Material Hardship
Heather D. Hill	University of Washington	Promoting Economic Stability Amidst Precarious Employment and Complex Family Structure
Marybeth Mattingly	Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire	Understanding Family Stability and the Intergenerational Implications of Work across Place
Jennifer Romich	University of Washington	Income Stability of Families Involved with the Child Welfare System
Jodi Sandfort	University of Minnesota	Studying Family Self-Sufficiency Program and Policy Implementation: A Multi-Level Approach



EMPLOYMENT & THE LABOR MARKET

A major focus of OPRE's welfare and family self-sufficiency research is strategies for helping TANF recipients and other low-income individuals find jobs, maintain employment, and advance in the labor market. Past projects in this area include: the Enhanced Services for the Hard-to-Employ Demonstration and Evaluation, which tested several strategies for helping hard-to-employ parents find and sustain employment; the Employment, Retention and Advancement Project, which tested strategies for helping employed individuals keep their jobs and advance in the workforce; and the National Evaluation of Welfare to Work Strategies, which evaluated the effectiveness of mandatory welfare-to-work programs.

OPRE is currently conducting random assignment experiments of employment strategies including subsidized and transitional employment models and job search assistance and is also supporting multi-disciplinary research on reducing work-family conflict.

Subsidized and Transitional Employment Demonstration Project (STED)

ACF launched the Subsidized and Transitional Employment Demonstration Project (STED) in 2010 with the goal of demonstrating and evaluating the next generation of subsidized employment models for critical low-income populations. The project, led by MDRC, examines strategies for providing counter-cyclical employment and for successfully transitioning individuals from short-term subsidized employment to unsubsidized employment in the regular labor market. These strategies build upon approaches that have demonstrated effectiveness in previous studies and also test new and innovative interventions. The evaluation includes a random assignment impact evaluation in seven sites, an implementation evaluation at each project site, and a cost-benefit analysis. Of note, an in-program survey will attempt to measure potential non-economic benefits of subsidized employment, such as emotional and social well-being.

The STED project is being conducted in close coordination with the Department of Labor’s (DOL)

Enhanced Transitional Jobs Demonstration (ETJD). ETJD, a project of DOL’s Employment and Training Administration (ETA), is funding seven grantees to provide temporary, paid work experiences to noncustodial parents and ex-offenders to improve their employability, earnings, and opportunities for advancement. As a requirement of their grant, ETJD grantees must participate in a rigorous evaluation. Given the complementary nature of these efforts, OPRE and ETA have entered into a memorandum of agreement to coordinate the STED and ETJD studies, including shared data collection instruments, shared evaluation sites and coordinated reporting efforts.

STED began with an analysis of what was known about existing or previous approaches to subsidized employment, especially within the context of current TANF policies and requirements, as well as efforts under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. OPRE released a report, *Subsidizing Employment Opportunities for Low-Income Families: A Review of State Employment Programs Created Through the TANF Emergency Fund* in 2011.

Following this initial scan, the project team recruited sites to participate in the evaluation. As of fall 2014, seven sites are participating in the study, including:

STED Site	Description
Goodwill of North Georgia	This DOL-funded program provides transitional jobs in Goodwill locations to low-income noncustodial parents referred to the program by the child support agency.
TransitionSF	This DOL-funded program, which is operated by Goodwill and the San Francisco Department of Child Support Services, provides transitional jobs to low-income noncustodial parents using a tiered approach that places participants into one of three tiers – traditional transitional job, public sector position, or subsidized private sector placement – based on their employability.
Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services	Los Angeles County is testing two different program models for low-income individuals: (1) paid work experience in non-profit or public sector placements; and (2) “hybrid” on-the-job training in for-profit, private sector placements.

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STED Site	Description
San Francisco City and County Agency for Human Services	San Francisco is testing private sector (both non-profit and for-profit) subsidized employment placements for low-income individuals who have timed out of TANF or have exhausted Unemployment Insurance benefits.
New York City Center for Economic Opportunity	The Young Adult Internship Program targets disconnected youth – out of school and work for at least three months – ages 16 to 24 and provides initial training followed by a private sector (both for- and non-profit) internship for up to 12 weeks.
Chicago Department of Family and Support Services	Developed in partnership with the Chicago Crime Lab and University of Chicago, DFSS is operating a pilot of the Bridges and Pathways Initiative, which targets 16 to 24 year olds leaving incarceration and includes three components: (1) a transitional job; (2) an on-line high school program; and (3) a cognitive behavioral therapy-like program.
Minnesota Department of Human Services	This new program targets Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP – MN’s TANF program) clients who are not working and have been in the program for at least 6 months. The program features two tiers: (1) an 8-week structured work experience in non-profit or public agencies designed to build participant soft skills and work experience; (2) a 16-week subsidized job in the private sector. Participants can start in either tier depending on their work readiness.

Random assignment began for the first sites in early 2012 will continue through mid-2015. Data collection is ongoing with the in-program survey, 12-month, and 30-month follow-up surveys.

A summary report describing the seven STED programs and five additional ETJD programs will be released in 2015, and initial findings may be released as early as 2016.

Job Search Assistance Strategies Evaluation

In fall 2013, OPRE launched the Job Search Assistance (JSA) Strategies Evaluation. Led by Abt Associates, the JSA evaluation is a multi-site random assignment evaluation of the relative impact of specific TANF job search services on short-term labor market outcomes such as earnings and time to employment. JSA builds on OPRE’s recent [Design Options of the](#)

[Search for Employment \(DOSE\)](#) project. The DOSE project conducted a literature review and developed recommendations for an overall approach and design for a job search strategies evaluation. JSA is drawing from this work to conduct the first rigorous test of job search services for TANF recipients.

The JSA evaluation aims to achieve several goals. First, JSA will provide information about the relative impacts of various JSA services and the manner in which agencies provide them. Second, JSA is intended to provide actionable and policy-relevant feedback to the TANF field, including federal TANF policymakers, state and local TANF administrators, and frontline caseworkers. A third and final goal is to use innovative and state-of-the-art methods to develop a study that is cost-effective and efficient, while rigorous and methodologically sound.

The JSA evaluation will use a random assignment experimental design and will include an impact and

implementation evaluation carried out across the selected sites. Consistent with the policy framework of TANF, ACF expects that the job search assistance approaches studied will be relatively short-term in nature. The project team is currently undertaking a broad assessment of the field, recruiting sites to participate in the study, and developing policy relevant tests of JSA strategies.

Complementing this work will be a series of special TANF studies that will feature short-term descriptive or qualitative inquiries into TANF-related topics of interest. The project is expected to publish initial findings beginning in late 2016.

Work, Family and Health Network (WFHN)

“Family-friendly” or “work-life” policies have become increasingly prevalent in the United States, but few longitudinal studies using experimental design have been implemented to test such policies. Moreover, knowledge about work-life policies aimed at low-wage workers is scant. To address this gap, OPRE is supporting a study by the Work, Family and Health Network (WFHN) of the National Institute for Child Health and Development (NICHD).

WFHN implemented a workplace intervention designed to reduce work-family conflict by working with supervisors and employees to redesign work activities to better meet employee needs and achieve employer goals. Implemented with two large employers, the intervention includes training supervisors on ways to support work-family balance and to increase employees’ control over their work time. Within each employer, worksites were randomly assigned to participate in the intervention. The two employers represent different industries – one is more “white collar,” while the other employs low-wage workers with more irregular hours.

OPRE contributed funding for the collection of follow-up data on employees in the low-wage industry who leave their jobs over the course of the study. This funding will contribute to a fuller understanding of the effects of the intervention on all workers and especially lower-income workers, including how family-friendly or work-life policies may or may not contribute to employment retention for low-wage workers.

A descriptive report presenting characteristics of participants who left their job over the course of the study compared to those who stayed will be released in 2015. Early findings from the overall study are available at the [Work Family and Health Network website](#).

Employment Strategies for Low-Income Adults Evidence Review

Systematic evidence reviews are a reliable, transparent, and comprehensive way to review the universe of research literature and provide an assessment of the evidence of effectiveness for specific programs and strategies. In recent years ACF and HHS have undertaken systematic evidence reviews in a number of programmatic and policy areas, including home visiting, teen pregnancy prevention and strengthening families.

In 2013 OPRE launched the Employment Strategies for Low-Income Adults Evidence Review in order to conduct a comprehensive review of the evidence on employment and training programs and strategies for low-income adults. The review, which is

being conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, will systematically identify, assess, and synthesize evidence from the existing research literature and then use this synthesis to identify programs and strategies with the strongest evidence of effectiveness.

In its first year the project team refined the scope of the review and the review criteria and identified studies for inclusion in the evidence review. The team is reviewing studies to assess the evidence of effectiveness of employment and training strategies and programs for low-income adults. Results of the review will be released by the end of 2015 and will be available on the ACF website.



EDUCATION & TRAINING

OPRE has a strong history of sponsoring rigorous research on the effectiveness of education and training strategies for improving employment and earnings for TANF recipients and other low-income individuals. Currently, OPRE is a national leader in the rigorous evaluation of post-secondary career pathways programs.

Career pathways programs connect education, training, and related supports in a pathway that leads to employment in a specific sector or occupation or to further training. The approach is gaining attention as a promising strategy to improve post-secondary education and training outcomes for low-income and low-skilled adults. Although there is some research evidence on selected components of career pathways programs, to date, there has been no rigorous research on the overall effectiveness of this approach.

Beginning in 2007, with the launch of the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) project (formerly the Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency project) and continuing through the evaluations of the Health Profession Opportunity Grants program (HPOG), ACF has developed a robust portfolio of research on the career pathways approach. In addition, OPRE recently launched an Employment Sectors Analysis project to identify jobs that can be attained with twelve months or less of full-time post-secondary education or training.

Career Pathways

The career pathways framework is gaining steady attention as a promising approach to post-secondary education and training for low-income and low-skill adults. Its central thesis is that instruction should be organized as a series of manageable and well-articulated steps, accompanied by strong supports and connections to employment. The steps provide opportunities for pre-college-level students to access college-level training and for better-skilled students to move to successively higher levels of credential-bearing training and employment. Each step is designed to incorporate customized curricula and instruction, academic and non-academic supports, and employment experiences and opportunities.

To engage, retain, and facilitate learning among low-skilled adults, the career pathways framework includes four categories of service strategies: (1) assessments of skills and needs; (2) promising and innovative approaches to basic skills instruction and occupational training; (3) academic and non-academic supports; and (4) approaches for connecting students with career-track employment opportunities. Within each of these categories, a variety of strategies have emerged as promising approaches. Though there has been a trend to develop comprehensive programs inclusive of all of these strategies, the extent and ways in which programs include these strategies vary.

For more information see the OPRE report [Career Pathways as a Framework for Program Design and Evaluation](#).

Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE)

In 2007, OPRE initiated the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) project (formerly the Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency project), a multi-site, random assignment evaluation of promising strategies for increasing employment and self-sufficiency among low-income families. During the project's development, consensus emerged that the evaluation should study interventions with potential

for substantial effects on earnings and income rather than just modest effects, should prioritize strategies focused on skills development, and should focus on a relatively wide population of low-income parents. Based on stakeholder input, PACE came to focus on post-secondary career pathways as the main intervention framework to study.

The PACE team, led by Abt Associates, is randomly assigning participants in nine innovative sites operating career pathways programs around the country. These PACE partners include:

PACE Site (Career Pathway Program)	Description
Des Moines Area Community College (Prepared Learner Program)	Students in the Prepared Learner Program receive contextualized basic skills instruction, instruction in employment and life skills, and vocational training through a short-term certificate course. Each short-term certificate offered in the Prepared Learner Program ladders into one or more specific certificate, degree, or diploma programs.
I-BEST Programs in Washington State	The Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program operates in all 34 of Washington's community colleges to provide basic skills or English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction and training in a range of credit-based occupational training programs along with counseling and other supports. The PACE project is evaluating I-BEST model programs at the Bellingham Technical, Everett Community, and Whatcom Community Colleges. <i>(continued on next page)</i>

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PACE Site (Career Pathway Program)	Description
Instituto del Progreso Latino (Carreras en Salud)	Instituto del Progreso Latino is a large non-profit education and employment organization in Chicago dedicated to serving the city's growing Latino population. Launched in 2005, Carreras en Salud (Careers in Health) is a career pathway program in nursing occupations for low-skilled and limited English proficient Latinos that leads participants from a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) degree to Pre-Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) to LPN and ultimately to Registered Nurse (RN).
Madison Area Technical College (Patient Care Pathway)	The Patient Care Pathway Program provides short-term condensed training that allows lower-skilled students to take courses for college credit and prepares them for healthcare degree and diploma programs. The program is split into two tracks offered in the program depending on the student's skill level.
Pima Community College (Pathways to Healthcare)	The Pathways to Healthcare Program offers training to students in sixteen different healthcare professions based on personal preference and test scores. Trainings range from home health aides to medical billers/coders, to EMT-Paramedics. The length of training can be as short as the five-week Nursing Assistant training, or up to two or three years for any of the associate degree programs. This program is supported by a Health Profession Opportunity Grant.
San Diego Workforce Partnership (Bridge to Employment)	The Bridge to Employment job training programs enable eligible adults to develop the skills and knowledge needed for emerging career opportunities in healthcare by providing extensive case management and support services. This program is supported by a Health Profession Opportunity Grant.
Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement	Serving four large counties in southern Texas, the non-profit Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA) aims to help students achieve an Associate's degree and gain occupational training in allied health, manufacturing, technology, business, education, and other specialized trades. VIDA offers a bridge program, the College Prep Academy, to build basic educational and language skills in preparation for enrollment at a local community college.
Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County (Health Careers for All)	Health Careers for All (HCA) is designed to meet the region's expanding healthcare labor needs while simultaneously addressing the training, employment, and advancement needs of its low-income residents by preparing them for jobs such as Nursing Assistant, Medical Office, and Phlebotomist. This program is supported by a Health Profession Opportunity Grant.
Year Up	Year Up operates in nine sites to provide urban young adults with the skills, experience, and support that will empower them to reach their potential through professional careers and higher education. The intensive one-year program provides high school graduates and GED recipients between the ages of 18-24 with a combination of hands-on skill development and corporate internship opportunities.

Program sites are randomly assigning participants in full-scale experiments, and Abt will conduct implementation and impact evaluation studies for all nine programs. The project will release implementation and initial impact reports beginning in 2016.

The PACE project released several publications in FY2014 including

- *PACE Career Pathways Program Profile: Year Up*
- *PACE Career Pathways Program Profile: Des Moines Area Community College Workforce Training Academy Connect Program*
- *PACE Career Pathways Program Profile: Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) Program*
- *Improving the Economic Prospects of Low-Income Individuals through Career Pathways Programs: The Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education Evaluation*
- *The Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education Evaluation*
- *PACE Career Pathways Program Profile: Instituto del Progreso Latino, Carreras en Salud*
- *PACE Career Pathways Program Profile: Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA)*
- *PACE Career Pathways Program Profile: Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County Health Careers for All Program*
- *PACE Career Pathways Program Profile: San Diego Workforce Partnership's Bridge to Employment in the Healthcare Industry Program*

Evaluation Portfolio for the Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) Program

Authorized by the Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA), the Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) program funds training in high-demand healthcare professions targeted to TANF recipients and other low-income individuals. The HPOG program has dual goals: to provide TANF recipients and other low-income individuals with opportunities for education and training that lead to employment and advancement in the healthcare workforce, and to address the increasing shortfall in the supply of healthcare professionals in the face of expanding demand. Grant funds may be used for training and education as well as supportive services such as case management, child care, and transportation.

In 2010, ACF awarded five-year grants to 32 HPOG grantees in 23 states. HPOG grantees include post-secondary educational institutions, workforce investment boards, state or local government agencies, and community-based organizations. Five grantees are tribal organizations. ACF distributes approximately \$67 million annually to these grantees. Enrollments to date and HPOG grantee projections suggest that HPOG will serve more than 30,000 individuals over the five-year period of the grants (2010–2015).

The ACA mandated an evaluation of the HPOG demonstration projects. OPRE is using a multi-pronged evaluation strategy to provide information on program implementation, systems change, outcomes, and impact. The portfolio includes the following projects:

- **HPOG Implementation, Systems, and Outcomes (ISO) Evaluation Design and Performance Reporting Project** developed an evaluation plan for measuring the implementation, systems change, and outcomes of HPOG programs, including enrollment, program retention, training completion, job entry, employment retention and advancement, and earnings. In support of the evaluation design, the project developed a detailed knowledge base, including reviewing the pertinent literature. Three literature reviews have been published—[one on career pathways programs](#); [one on analyzing implementation and systems change](#); and [one on the policy context within which HPOG is operating](#).

The ISO project also built and maintains the HPOG Performance Reporting System (PRS), a management information system, to track grantee progress for program management and accountability and to record participant data for use in the evaluation. The project analyzes data entered into the PRS to prepare annual reports that describe and document the range of HPOG programs and plans and grantee activities and performance progress. The [Year Three Annual Report \(2012-2013\)](#) was released in July 2014.

The ISO project is being conducted by Abt Associates in collaboration with the Urban Institute.

- **HPOG National Implementation Evaluation (NIE)** is the execution of the study designed by the ISO Project. The NIE, which is being conducted by Abt Associates in collaboration with the Urban Institute, includes an in-depth examination of the HPOG grantee programs' design and implementation, a systems analysis of networks created by HPOG programs (e.g., among grantees, employers, and other partners), and a quantitative descriptive analysis of HPOG program outputs and outcomes. Twenty-seven grantees—excluding the five tribal organizations—are included in this analysis. [The NIE Design Report](#) is available on the OPRE website, as is the [Interim Outcome Study Report](#). Released in September 2014, this report presents findings on the interim key outcomes of HPOG healthcare training completion and employment, as well as on participants' pre-training activities and receipt of support services and employment assistance.
- **The HPOG Impact Study** is using an experimental design to examine the effect of HPOG on participants' educational and economic outcomes. This evaluation aims to identify which components of HPOG programs (e.g., types of support services, program structure, and training areas) contribute to participant success. For some grantees, a multi-arm experimental design is being implemented, creating a control group that does not have access to HPOG, an "HPOG services" treatment group, and an "enhanced HPOG" group that receives additional supports and services. The 20 grantees that are not part of another study within OPRE's portfolio that is collecting individual-level data are included in the HPOG Impact Study. Additionally, the HPOG Impact Study analysis will include data from the three HPOG grantees being evaluated as part of the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education

(PACE) study. The HPOG Impact Study is being conducted by Abt Associates in collaboration with the Urban Institute.

The HPOG Impact Study is addressing the following research questions:

1. What impacts do the HPOG programs, as a group, have on the outcomes of participants and their families?
2. To what extent do those impacts vary across selected subpopulations?
3. Which locally adopted program components influence average impacts?
4. To what extent does participation in a particular HPOG component (or components) change the impact on trainees?

Three program enhancements were selected for the experimental test: facilitated peer support groups, emergency assistance, and non-cash incentives. Random assignment concluded in November 2014. The study plans to examine impacts at 15 months after random assignment.



- **Intermediate Outcomes of Career Pathways Programs**, launched in September 2014 and led by Abt Associates, will conduct a 36-month follow-up study of both HPOG and PACE participants to assess the intermediate and longer-term impact of career pathways program models on the educational progress and employment and earnings of individuals who participate in the programs. These studies will complement and augment the current

HPOG Impact Study and PACE project studies, both of which are examining outcomes at 15 months after entry into the study.

- **Evaluation of Tribal HPOG** is a separate evaluation designed for the five tribal grantees considering the unique contexts in which these programs operate. The evaluation, led by NORC at the University of Chicago in partnership with Red Star Innovations and the National Indian Health Board, focuses on the implementation and outcomes for the tribal grantees. The study's goal is to provide documentation and lessons about diverse programmatic approaches to health professions training serving tribal populations. Three practice briefs have been published to date to disseminate lessons learned and findings. The briefs provide an [overview of the tribal grantee programs and the evaluation, provision of supportive services, and program implementation and evolution](#). Additionally, the [Interim Report](#) published in March 2014 provides an overview of the tribal HPOG grantees' progress over the first two years of the program.
- **University Partnership Research Grants for HPOG** fund studies being conducted by university-based researchers who have partnered with one or more HPOG programs to answer specific questions about how to improve HPOG services within local contexts. Grants were awarded to Brandeis University, Loyola University of Chicago, North Dakota State University, Northwestern University, and Temple University.

Organization Receiving Award:	Project Title:	HPOG Grantee Partner:
Northwestern University, Institute for Policy Research	<i>CareerAdvance</i> : A Dual-Generation Program's Effects on Families and Children	Community Action Project of Tulsa County, Inc. (Tulsa, OK)
Temple University, School of Social Work	Building Capacities/Making Connections: A Multi-Year Study of Human and Social Capital Development through the HIP Career Pathways Initiative	Temple University, Center for Social Policy & Community Development (CSPCD)
Brandeis University, Institute on Assets and Social Policy (IASP), Heller School for Social Policy and Management	Study of Employment and Advancement of Racial, Ethnic and Linguistic Minorities for New Hampshire Health Profession Opportunity Project	New Hampshire Office of Minority Health and Refugee Affairs (OMHRA) (Concord, NH)
Loyola University of Chicago, School of Social Work	Evaluation of Empowerment Pathways to Self-Sufficiency in Health Professions Career Development for Low-Income Individuals	Gateway Technical College (Kenosha, WI) & Southland Health Care Forum, Inc. (Chicago Heights, IL)
North Dakota State University	Sustaining Career Pathways for American Indian Health Professionals in ND: Building Apprenticeship and Workforce Options with the <i>Next Steps</i> HPOG Project	Cankdeska Cikana Community College (Fort Totten, ND)

NEW

■ **Evaluation and System Design for Career Pathways Programs: 2nd Generation of HPOG**

In October 2014 OPRE awarded a contract to Abt Associates and the Urban Institute to conduct the Evaluation and System Design for Career Pathways Programs: 2nd Generation of HPOG project. The project will develop an approach to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of new HPOG programs funded by ACF under the extension of HPOG recently authorized by the Protecting Access to Medicare Act (HR 4302). The evaluation will build on and add to the knowledge generated in the ongoing OPRE career pathways research and evaluation portfolio and other similar studies and will address research questions that explore outcomes for HPOG participants, how best to implement HPOG program strategies, and what strategies or program components are successful. The project is also responsible for defining uniform data requirements for the purposes of program and performance management and evaluation, and designing, building, and maintaining a web-based data system to be used by the new HPOG grantees.

NEW

Employment Sectors Analysis for TANF Recipients and Other Low-Income Families

Launched in Fall 2014 and conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, the Employment Sectors Analysis will examine sectors of the labor market that are experiencing high-growth and in which a stable job can be attained with twelve months or less of full-time post-secondary education or training. A goal of this analysis is to inform TANF programs seeking to strategically support post-secondary education and training opportunities for recipients. OPRE expects to release a summary report and three practice briefs in 2015.



CROSS CUTTING RESEARCH

In addition to research that falls clearly within the substantive areas of TANF and the Safety Net, Employment and the Labor Market, and Education and Training, OPRE's family self-sufficiency research portfolio includes several projects that span these issues in a cross-cutting way.

Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS)

Many human services programs are designed such that individuals must make active decisions and go through a series of steps in order to benefit from them — from deciding which programs to apply for, to completing forms, attending meetings, showing proof of eligibility, and arranging travel and child care. Program designers often implicitly assume that individuals will carefully consider options and make decisions that maximize their well-being. But over the past 30 years, innovative research in the area of behavioral economics has shown that human decision-making is often imperfect and imprecise. People — clients and program administrators alike — procrastinate, get overwhelmed by choices, and miss important details. As a result, both programs and participants may not always achieve the goals they set for themselves.

Insights from behavioral economics, which combines findings from psychology and economics, suggest that a deeper understanding of decision-making and behavior could improve human services program design and outcomes. Principles from behavioral economics can both shed light on decision-making and offer new tools to improve outcomes for program participants. Small changes in the environment can facilitate desired behaviors; planning and commitment devices can be used to improve self-control; and default rules can produce positive outcomes even for people who fail to act.

The Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) project is the first major opportunity to apply a behavioral economics lens to programs that serve poor and vulnerable families in the United States. BIAS was launched in 2010 and is being led by MDRC in collaboration with academic behavioral science experts.

In the first two years of the project, the BIAS team developed a strong base of knowledge of the existing behavioral economics literature and the needs of human services programs. The team engaged in detailed conversations with stakeholders from the academic, policy, and practitioner communities, created a glossary of behavioral interventions from a review of select field experiments, and hosted a Peer Practicum

Taking The First Step: Using Behavioral Economics to Help Incarcerated Parents Apply for Child Support Order Modifications

- The BIAS project partnered with the Texas Office of the Attorney General Child Support Division to design and test a behavioral intervention intended to increase the number of incarcerated noncustodial parents who applied for modifications to reduce the amount of their child support orders.
- The BIAS team diagnosed bottlenecks in the application process, hypothesized behavioral reasons for the bottlenecks, and designed behaviorally informed changes to the mailing sent to incarcerated noncustodial parents. Changes included revising the letter to make it more readable, printing it on blue paper so that it would stand out, pre-populating a section of the application, and sending a postcard before the letter was sent and another reminder postcard following the letter.
- The pilot was evaluated using a random assignment design. The results showed:
 - The BIAS intervention increased the percent of incarcerated noncustodial parents who sent in a completed modification application by 11 percentage points. 39% of the BIAS program group and 28% of the control group returned completed applications
 - BIAS program group members returned their applications more quickly than the control group
 - The cost of BIAS materials was approximately \$2/person more than the cost of standard materials

SPOTLIGHT ON SELF-SUFFICIENCY RESEARCH FOR HISPANIC CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Increasing proportions of ACF program participants are of Hispanic origin, and many more Hispanic families and individuals who could benefit from these services do not access ACF programs. OPRE has developed and oversees several research and evaluation projects to inform ACF policies and programming to help low-income Hispanic children and families. Across these projects, OPRE aims to advance the research on specific programmatic concerns related to self-sufficiency of Hispanic populations. Current OPRE research efforts that aim to improve understanding of the self-sufficiency needs of Hispanic children and families include:

HISPANIC RESEARCH WORK GROUP (2011-2014) brought together experts in a wide range of content areas relevant to ACF's mission to assist ACF/OPRE in identifying research priorities concerning low-income, Hispanic families and to identify priorities for future research that is more inclusive of and culturally responsive to Hispanic communities to better reflect their experiences. To these ends, the group's efforts led to the publication of two research briefs in 2014:

Survey Data Elements to Unpack Diversity of Hispanic Populations presents ten additional data elements that will improve understanding of the diversity within low-income, Hispanic populations in the U.S.

Enhancing Cultural Competence in Social Service Agencies: A Promising Approach to Serving Diverse Children and Families summarizes the state of the field on cultural competence in social services and provides concrete strategies for strengthening cultural competence in services for children and families from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds.

RESEARCH INITIATIVE ON POVERTY, INEQUALITY, AND MOBILITY AMONG HISPANICS (2012-2013). In 2012, OPRE funded a research initiative focused on poverty, inequality, and mobility among Hispanics in the U.S. Led by the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, the initiative established five research groups and funded research projects focused on the following areas: basic trends related to poverty among Hispanics, intergenerational social mobility, immigration policy, and health and well-being. Most of these projects were completed in the fall of 2013.

CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON HISPANIC CHILDREN AND FAMILIES (2013-2018). In 2013, OPRE established the Center through a cooperative agreement with Child Trends in partnership with Abt Associates to advance a cutting-edge research agenda, build research capacity in the field, and provide research-based information concerning the needs of Hispanic populations served by ACF and promising approaches to promote social and economic well-being among low-income Hispanic families. Efforts center on three priority areas—poverty reduction and self-sufficiency, healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood, and early care and education—to inform ACF programs and policies supporting Hispanic families and children. In the area of self-sufficiency, the Center has begun exploring patterns of income instability, housing complexity, and utilization of public assistance among Hispanic families.

EVALUATIONS OF PROGRAMS THAT SERVE HISPANIC POPULATIONS. A number of OPRE projects are evaluating programs that serve majority Hispanic populations. An example is Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE), which is testing strategies to promote employment and self-sufficiency among economically disadvantaged families. The project team is working with two partner organizations that serve primarily low-income Hispanic families - the Instituto del Progreso Latino, in Chicago, IL, and the Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement, in the Rio Grande Valley, Texas. In OPRE's Understanding the Dynamics of Disconnection from Employment and Assistance project, approximately half of the in-depth interviews were with Latina mothers, many of whom are immigrants.

during which program administrators from across the nation joined with behavioral experts to explore the application of behavioral economics to ACF programs. The BIAS report “Behavioral Economics and Social Policy: Designing Innovative Solutions for Programs Supported by the Administration for Children and Families” describes insights from these early stages of the project.

In September 2014 BIAS released results from its first experiment, a test of a behavioral intervention designed to increase the number of incarcerated noncustodial parents in Texas who apply for modifications to reduce the amount of their child support orders. BIAS redesigned the mailings informing incarcerated parents of the option to apply for an order modification. The redesigned materials resulted in a significant increase in applications at a relatively low cost and demonstrated the promise of applying behavioral economics principles to improve program implementation and outcomes.

Currently, BIAS is working with a range of human services programs from across the country to diagnosis program challenges using a behavioral economics lens and design and test behaviorally-informed interventions. Findings will be published on a rolling basis throughout 2015 and 2016.

NEW

Goal-Oriented Adult Learning in Self-Sufficiency (GOALS) Project

ACF launched the Goal-Oriented Adult Learning in Self-Sufficiency (GOALS) project in September 2014 to investigate the extent to which psychology-informed frameworks can usefully be incorporated into programs aimed at improving job entry, retention, and advancement as well as parenting practices.

The project, which will be conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, reflects the confluence of several lines of research suggesting that adults who engage in goal-directed activities are more likely to be productive and achieve success in the workplace and at home. Emerging research by psychologists and neuroscientists suggests that certain cognitive processes such as executive functioning, soft skills, and related areas are critical for cultivating goal-directed behaviors including goal-setting, self-regulation, planning, and problem-solving.

In addition, current and past circumstances and individual barriers such as exposure to poverty, lack of in-demand skills, parenting responsibilities, and other factors may challenge an individual’s ability to operationalize psychological processes that support goal-directed behaviors and advance self-sufficiency. While there has been substantial research on the impact of exposure to adverse experiences in early childhood and adolescence, there has been less research on psychological processes that could support adults and young adults to overcome similar contextual challenges.

This project aims to improve understanding of relevant psychological processes associated with goal-directed behaviors through the synthesis of existing research, development of logic models, and fieldwork to learn about existing programs that are currently integrating these frameworks into employment and training and parenting programs. The project will address how insights gained from research can be used to promote economic advancement among low-income populations; identify promising strategies for strengthening underlying skills in these areas; and enhance measurement of changes and developments in skill acquisition for employment and parenting. OPRE intends to use the results of this project to inform future programmatic and evaluation efforts in the areas of strengthening and supporting goal-directed behavior for families.

Assets for Independence (AFI) Evaluation

In the fall of 2011, ACF launched the first-ever random assignment evaluation of the impact of participation in the Assets for Independence (AFI) Program. The AFI Evaluation builds on the previous quasi-experimental evaluation of the AFI program, as well other research on Individual Development Accounts (IDAs). While research suggests that IDAs help low-income families save, rigorous, experimental research is limited, and the majority of research has not focused on AFI-funded IDAs. Thus, questions remain about the impact of the AFI program on participant outcomes.

The study, led by the Urban Institute and its partners, began with an extensive field assessment to identify potential evaluation sites. The study now includes two current AFI Grantees – Prosperity

Works in New Mexico and the Community Financial Resource Center in Los Angeles, CA. Study enrollment began in mid-2013 and ended in summer 2014. The 12-month follow-up survey launched in 2014, and additional follow-up surveys may occur in the future. An implementation study, which will complement the impact study, took place in fall 2014. A report summarizing findings from the follow-up survey will be available in late 2015.

NEW

Homeless Families Research Briefs

In September 2014, OPRE and ASPE awarded a contract to Abt Associates to produce a series of research briefs on issues related to the well-being and economic self-sufficiency of families and children experiencing homelessness. The Homeless Families Research Briefs project will be based on data collected as part of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) [Family Options Study](#), a multi-site random assignment experiment designed to study the impact of various housing and services interventions on homeless families. The Family Options Study, which enrolled over 2,000 families and will follow them over the course of three years, provides a rich set of data with which to examine the well-being and self-sufficiency of homeless families with children. Abt Associates will produce a series of research briefs for OPRE and ASPE that build on the data and analysis already being conducted for HUD to answer additional questions related to the well-being and economic self-sufficiency of families and children experiencing homelessness. Six research briefs or short reports will be released on a rolling basis throughout 2015 and 2016.

OPRE Methods Inquiries

OPRE regularly convenes meetings of scientists and research experts to advance the scientific understanding of critical topics in social science research methodology. These meetings bring together experts from varying disciplines and policy fields and from academia, government, and the private sector to explore innovations in research design, analytic techniques, and data measurement that could be employed to advance the government's use of rigorous and innovative research methods. These meetings ensure that OPRE-supported research continues to represent the most scientifically rigorous approaches to determining effectiveness and efficiency of ACF programs. RTI International provides support to OPRE in its efforts to expand knowledge about scientific methodological tools and practices to advance the field and enhance the government's production and use of rigorous research.

OPRE has sponsored five day-and-a-half long research methods meetings in recent years. The most recent meeting, held in September 2014, focused on methods for unpacking the "black box" of programs and policies. The four prior meetings explored 1) Effect Size, 2) Sub-group Analysis, 3) Implementation Science, and 4) Innovative Directions in Estimating Impact. The primary goals of these meetings have been to understand the history as well as recent advances in the field and to identify the gaps in knowledge and examine how to build a research agenda to fill those gaps. These meetings bring together experts from multiple disciplines to discuss advances in study design, measurement, and analytic techniques that can be applied in behavioral and social science research and establish a common framework on which federal agencies and researchers may draw in the future. Each meeting has included approximately 100-150 attendees from academia, government, and the private sector representing varying disciplines and policy fields.

Spotlight on Dissemination

OPRE is continually striving not only to produce high-quality rigorous research, but also to ensure that this research is available, accessible, and relevant to policymakers and program operators. Program and policy research is not created in a vacuum, but as part of a cycle of communication between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. If research does not reach those who can use it—if it is not responsive to key questions in the field and presented in accessible forms—then the work will not have maximum impact.

Self-Sufficiency Research Clearinghouse (SSRC)

The Self-Sufficiency Research Clearinghouse (<https://www.opressrc.org/>) was launched in the summer of 2012. The SSRC disseminates quality research and evaluation studies on TANF and low-income populations, focusing on self-sufficiency, employment, and family and child well-being, not limited to ACF-sponsored research. The clearinghouse is intended to be of use to researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, assisting all three groups in accessing high-quality research. The clearinghouse, administered by ICF under a cooperative agreement, continues to look at how to engage and serve the needs of these three user groups, while also considering questions around research standards and categorization. During the past year, the Clearinghouse has offered several webinars on relevant topics to enhance its services to users.

Welfare Research and Evaluation Conference (WREC)

For more than seventeen years, the WREC has been a leading forum for family self-sufficiency and poverty researchers, state

and local administrators, practitioners and program operators, and federal officials and policymakers to network with peers and discuss cutting-edge research on family self-sufficiency and social welfare programs and policies. The WREC promotes conversation about the latest findings from evaluations of poverty and safety net programs, ways to incorporate findings into the design and implementation of programs, and strategies for future evaluations. In addition, the conference also provides opportunities for emerging scholars who are early in their research careers to showcase their work. Conference topics include: TANF; Education, Training, and Success in the Labor Market; Child and Youth Well-Being; Fatherhood, Relationships, and Strengthening Families; Evaluating Social Programs: Building and Using Evidence; and Approaches to Alleviate Poverty and Strengthen the Safety Net. The 2014 WREC had over 1,000 participants, included 35 plenary and breakout sessions, and featured the work of 20 emerging scholars. The next WREC will be held in 2016 as the conference moves to a biannual schedule. For more information on past and future conferences, visit <http://www.wrconference.net>.

Portfolio of Research in Welfare and Family Self-Sufficiency

January 2015

OPRE Report # 2015-15

Prepared by:

Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation

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