



Connecting to Opportunity

Lessons on Adapting Interventions for Young People
Experiencing Homelessness or Systems Involvement

Executive Summary


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September 2019



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OVERVIEW

The Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP)TM initiative, a nationwide project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, aims to improve education and employment outcomes for young people ages 15 to 25 who have been involved in the child welfare and justice systems or who are experiencing homelessness. Young people eligible for LEAP are likely to be disconnected from school and work, and face added challenges that stem directly from their systems involvement or homelessness, including disrupted schooling, housing instability, limited family support, and trauma. LEAP seeks to reduce the inequalities in life chances and outcomes that affect this population, with the goal of helping these young people reach their full potential by connecting them to postsecondary and career pathways.

LEAP operationalizes two education- and employment-focused program models to help young people at different stages along their educational and employment pathways. One program, Jobs for America's Graduates, or JAG, targets young people who have not completed high school. JAG's goal is to help these individuals obtain a high school credential and to equip them with the work and life skills they need to land quality jobs or acquire a postsecondary education. The second, JFF's Back on Track program, aims to help young people transition to postsecondary education and persist through their crucial first year of college or advanced training.

Ten grantees in eight states are implementing LEAP, each in multiple locations. This report presents implementation, outcomes, and cost research findings from MDRC's evaluation of the grantees' LEAP programs, which focused on the early years of the initiative.

KEY FINDINGS

- Strategic partnerships with public agencies and other organizations are essential to reaching young people who are eligible for LEAP, aligning resources, and opening access to services.
- The LEAP population faces a set of systemic and structural barriers that are unique to their involvement in the child welfare and justice systems, which can hinder their progress in programs designed to elevate their educational and economic opportunities. To better serve participants, LEAP programs adapted how they delivered services to mitigate these barriers and make it easier for young people to participate.
- Back on Track participants had high engagement in the program: Most received a set of services to prepare them for success in postsecondary education or training, 68 percent enrolled in postsecondary education or a job-training program, and 40 percent persisted in school and completed their first year.
- Most JAG enrollees received the program's key services, but more than half did not complete the program. Of those who completed the program's Active Phase, in which the majority of services are delivered, 40 percent earned their high school credential and 76 percent were employed or in school at one point during the first six months of follow-up.
- The costs of providing LEAP services varied by program structure and local context. Costs per participant, including outreach and follow-up, ranged from \$5,300 to \$7,300.

LEAP program staff members found early on that they needed to adapt their service delivery plan to keep young people engaged for the full program period. This calls out the need for more research into how programs can sustain the engagement of young people on the long path to attaining a high school credential or postsecondary degree. This report details some of the adaptations that LEAP programs developed to promote engagement, but a longer follow-up period is needed to assess whether these adaptations were successful.

PREFACE

Young people ages 15 to 25 who have experienced homelessness or have been involved with the foster care or justice systems are likely to face unique challenges as they transition to adulthood. Disrupted schooling, housing instability, limited family support, and the trauma that these hardships create can lead to inequities in educational and employment outcomes throughout adulthood for these individuals. The Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP)[™] initiative, launched by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2015, is an attempt to improve access to postsecondary and employment opportunities for this population and improve their long-term earning potential and well-being.

This study evaluates the implementation of two programs for young people that were adapted by 10 LEAP grantees. Although each of these program models was developed to help young people, neither one specifically targeted young people experiencing systems involvement and homelessness before LEAP was launched. One program, Jobs for America's Graduates, targets young people who have not completed high school, and offers services to help them earn a high school credential and acquire work and life skills that can lead to quality jobs or postsecondary education. The second program, JFF's Back on Track model, aims to help young people transition to postsecondary education and persist through their crucial first year of school. During the first three years of this initiative, LEAP grantees enrolled nearly 2,800 young people in their programs.

The evaluation findings presented in this report provide important information for practitioners and policymakers about the type of community supports that can benefit young people who have experienced systems involvement or homelessness as they transition to adulthood. LEAP grantees did this by partnering strategically within their communities.

Programs for young people often struggle to sustain participant engagement over the time it takes to earn a high school diploma or postsecondary degree. But LEAP grantees may provide insights for better engaging young people over the long term. For instance, LEAP staff members offered financial rewards for reaching program milestones, or individualized service delivery for students who could not attend classes regularly. Though the findings are promising, a longer follow-up period is required to gauge whether these adaptations improved program completion among later LEAP cohorts.

During its first three years, LEAP grantees advanced viable educational and career pathways for their priority populations. This work will inform the next phase of the LEAP initiative, which started in summer 2019. LEAP's next phase will allow for more outreach to young people experiencing systems involvement and homelessness and will heighten the focus on promoting positive change in related practices and policies.

Gordon L. Berlin
President, MDRC

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We greatly appreciate the support from staff members at the LEAP grantees who participated in implementation site visits and were open and thoughtful in answering our questions. They work tirelessly to provide services to young people in their communities. The 10 LEAP grantees were the Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services (CASES), Coalition for Responsible Community Development (CRCDD), Covenant House Alaska, The Door, Jobs for Arizona's Graduates, Jobs for Michigan's Graduates, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, Project for Pride in Living (PPL), South Bay Community Services (SBCS), and University of Southern Maine (USM).

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Finally, we are deeply appreciative of the young people who agreed to participate in interviews. Without them, this research would not have been possible.

The Authors

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the United States, there are almost 5 million young people making the transition from school to work who are “disconnected” — that is, neither in school nor employed.¹ These young people are often involved in the child welfare and justice systems or experiencing homelessness. As a result, they are likely to face added challenges that stem directly from their systems involvement, such as disrupted schooling, housing instability, limited family support, and trauma. The goal of the Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP)TM initiative, launched by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2015, is to improve the educational and employment outcomes of these young people by opening access to opportunity pathways for this historically underserved community.²

Education and employment are predictors of future success.³ The LEAP initiative seeks to reduce the inequities in life chances of those who are experiencing homelessness or systems involvement and to help them succeed. LEAP focuses on building the educational and work-related skills of these young people by connecting them to opportunities through postsecondary and career pathways that improve their long-term earning potential.

ABOUT LEAP

The population of young people who are systems-involved or experiencing homelessness is substantial. In 2016, nearly 65,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 20 were in foster care and, though declining in recent years, about 45,000 young people were held in residential placement facilities each day.⁴ In 2017, more than 50,000 young people under 25 were homeless, including 10,000 who

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1. Measure of America, “Youth Disconnection” (2016), website: <http://measureofamerica.org/disconnected-youth/>.
 2. The Annie E. Casey Foundation received funding from the Social Innovation Fund (SIF) to support a portion of this initiative. SIF was a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) that received funding from 2010 to 2016. Using public and private resources to find and grow community-based nonprofits with evidence of results, SIF intermediaries received funding to award subgrants that focus on overcoming challenges in economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development. Although CNCS made its last SIF intermediary awards in fiscal year 2016, SIF intermediaries will continue to administer their subgrant programs until their federal funding is exhausted. Federal funding support for LEAP was initially slated to last for five years. However, a decision by Congress in 2017 to discontinue funding for most SIF projects means that federal funding for LEAP through SIF will instead end after three years of services.
 3. Andrew Sum, Ishwar Khatiwada, Joseph McLaughlin with Sheila Palma, *The Consequences of Dropping Out of High School: Joblessness and Jailing for High School Dropouts and the High Cost for Taxpayers* (Boston: Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, 2009).
 4. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, “One Day Count of Juveniles in Residential Placement Facilities, 1997-2016” (n.d.), website: <https://www.ojjdp.gov>.

were homeless while parenting.⁵ These young people often make the transition to adulthood with relatively little family support, have experienced disrupted schooling, and are at risk for experiencing trauma.⁶ Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that young people experiencing homelessness or systems involvement may face troubling outcomes as adults across a wide range of areas. Young adults with a history of foster care or juvenile justice custody are less likely than their peers to obtain a high school credential or to be employed.⁷ Few foster care youth (only 20 percent of those who graduate high school) go on to college, and even fewer former foster care youth (less than 10 percent) obtain a four-year college degree.⁸

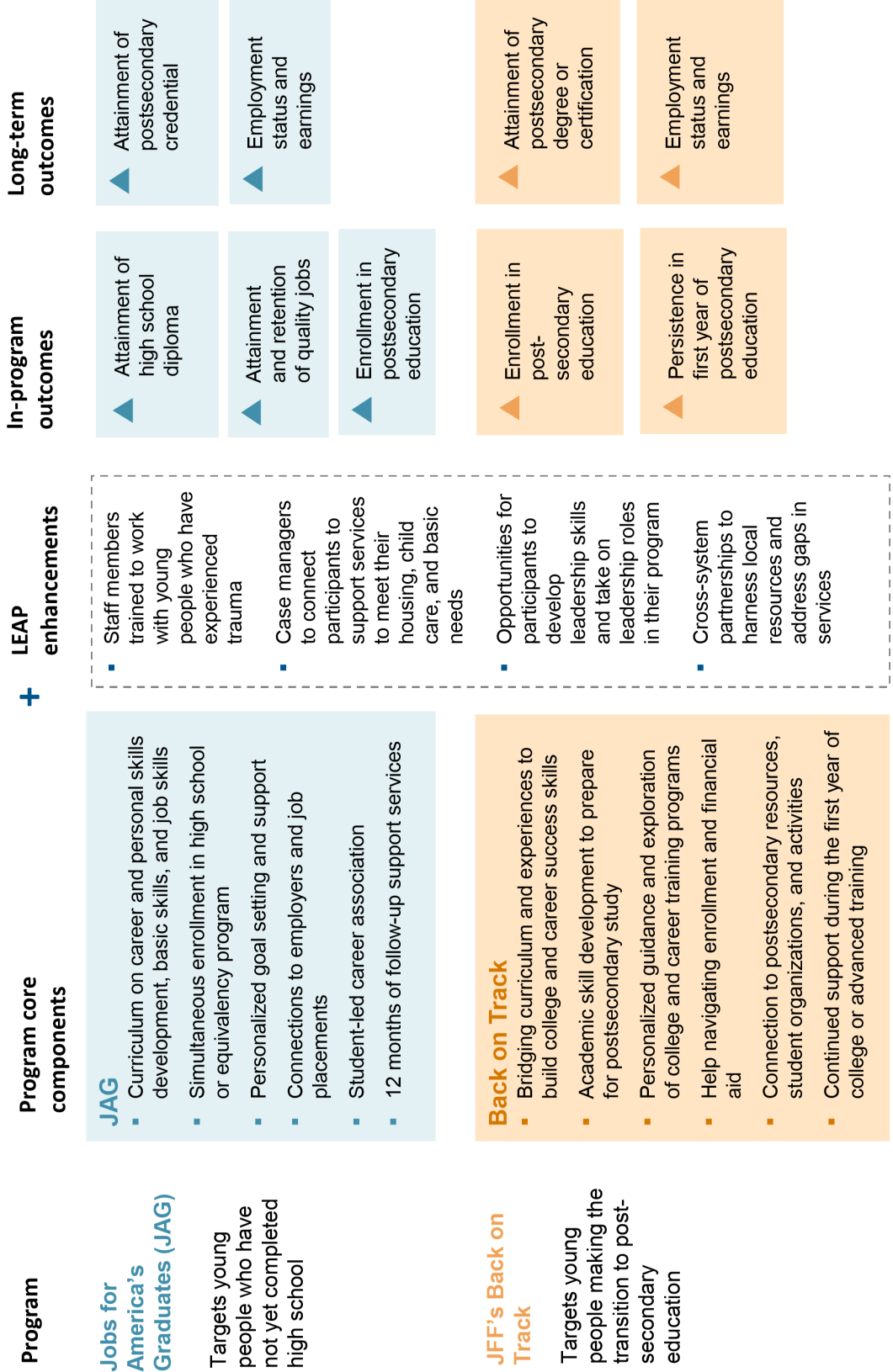
Through two education- and employment-focused program models, the LEAP initiative aims to address these challenges and improve young people's connections to school and work, and thus improve their longer-term economic outcomes. These two program models were developed specially for young people, but before LEAP was launched, neither model targeted the specific population of young people who are experiencing homelessness or involved in the child welfare and justice systems. One program, Jobs for America's Graduates, or JAG, focuses on young people who have not completed high school and provides them with services that aim to help them gain a secondary credential and equip them with work and life skills to transition into quality jobs or postsecondary education.⁹ The second, JFF's Back on Track model, aims to help young people transition to postsecondary education and persist through their crucial first year of school. Figure ES.1 provides an overview of the LEAP models, showing how the two models were focused on different populations, activities, and goals. As shown, LEAP grantees were to provide JAG or Back on Track core services but adapt them in a way that addressed the needs of the LEAP population. These LEAP "enhancements," informed by prior research about what this population of young people might benefit from, included additional supports to promote participant success. The immediate goals of these activities were to help participants earn their high school credential and embark on a postsecondary education or employment pathway that would lead, ultimately, to higher earnings.

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5. Megan Henry, Rian Watt, Lily Rosenthal, and Azim Shivji, *The 2017 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, Part 1: Point-in-Time Estimates of Homelessness* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2017).
 6. Robert Schoeni and Karen Ross, *Family Support during the Transition to Adulthood* (Ann Arbor, MI: National Poverty Center, 2005); Richard Settersten, Frank Furstenberg, and Ruben Rumbaut, *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Vincent Felitti, Robert Anda, Dale Nordenberg, David Williamson, Alison Spitz, Valerie Edwards, Mary Koss, and James Marks, "Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14, no. 4 (1998): 245-258.
 7. Mark Courtney, Amy Dworsky, Adam Brown, Colleen Cary, Kara Love, and Vaness Vorhies, *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 26* (Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2011).
 8. National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, "Fostering Success in Education: National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care" (2014), website: <https://bettercarenetwork.org>.
 9. There are several versions of the JAG model, called "applications" that are specific to the age and setting of participants. LEAP grantees could implement either the Alternative Education application or the Out-of-School application.

FIGURE ES.1

LEAP Services and Expected Outcomes

LEAP adapts two established programs for a special population: young people ages 15-25 with involvement in the child welfare system, juvenile or criminal justice, or homelessness...with the aim of producing positive short-term and long-term outcomes in young people's lives.



Implementing the two models in LEAP are 10 grantees in eight states: Alaska, Arizona, California, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, and New York.¹⁰ LEAP grantees reflected a range of structures — including a statewide initiative in Maine; programs at community-based organizations in the large urban areas of New York, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Minneapolis; and programs that operated in multiple locations within their states. LEAP grantees were required to provide JAG or Back on Track services but adapt them to address the local needs of the LEAP population. Each LEAP grantee operated in multiple locations and in partnership with other organizations such as the K-12 educational system, postsecondary education and training institutions, employers, workforce development organizations, child welfare and justice agencies, and other local nonprofit organizations and government entities. About half of the grantees had prior experience operating the core JAG or Back on Track models; other grantees began operating the programs when they joined the LEAP initiative. Two LEAP grantees functioned as intermediaries, overseeing implementation of the initiative and contracting with local partners to deliver LEAP services, but not delivering services to participants themselves. LEAP grantees began implementing services in April 2016, and the Social Innovation Fund (SIF) phase of the initiative, which is the focus of this evaluation, operated through June 2019.

ABOUT LEAP PARTICIPANTS

Young people ages 15 to 25 who had current or prior involvement in the foster care system, juvenile or criminal justice system, or who were recently or currently homeless were eligible to participate in LEAP.¹¹ During the first three years of the initiative, LEAP programs enrolled nearly 2,800 young people. Figure ES.2 provides a snapshot of LEAP participants upon enrollment with demographic information, involvement in child welfare or justice systems, homelessness, and their prior educational and work experience. Most participants were youth of color.¹² Approximately 51 percent of enrollees had current or prior foster care involvement, 37 percent had current or prior justice system involvement, and 50 percent had experienced homelessness. The demographic composition of participants for each grantee varied, largely due to their geographic location and population focus.

The JAG and Back on Track models target different points along the educational and employment pathways of young people. JAG focuses on young people who have not yet completed high school. Ninety-six percent of all JAG participants did not have a high school credential at the time of enrollment. In contrast, Back on Track targets those who have completed or are nearing completion of high school. Seventy-three percent of Back on Track participants enrolled in LEAP with a high school credential or were on track to receive it soon. JAG and Back on Track enrollees also differed

10. Grantees were selected by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and a team of internal and external partners from a pool of applicants. Five grantees operate JAG programs, three run Back on Track programs, and two offered both JAG and Back on Track.

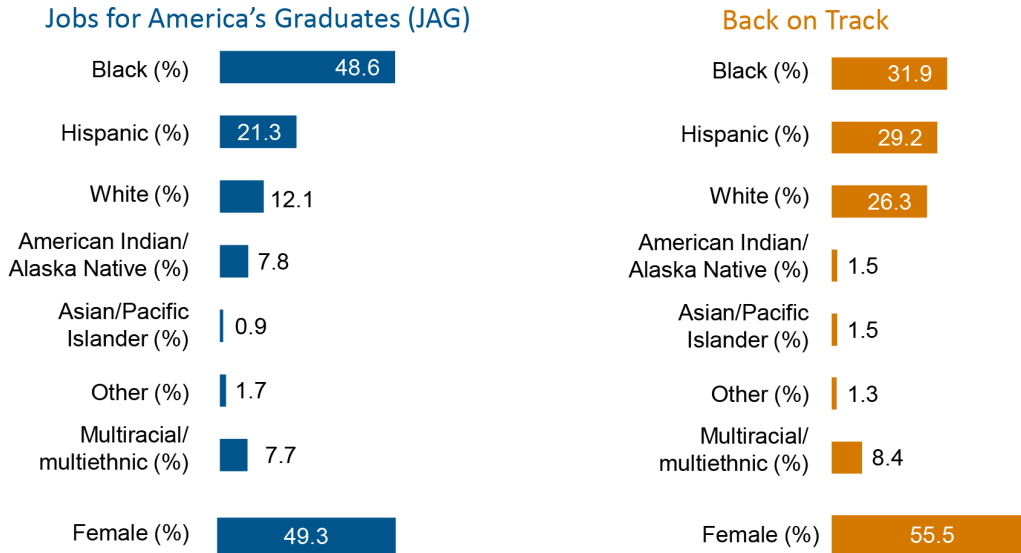
11. Young people who were currently or ever involved with the foster care or juvenile justice systems were eligible for the program, including those who have exited either system and foster youth who have achieved permanent placement. LEAP used the Housing and Urban Development definitions of homelessness, including young people who experience homelessness either with, or without, a parent or guardian.

12. Specifically, 42 percent are African-American, 25 percent Hispanic, 18 percent white, and 14 percent other, including 5 percent American Indian, 1 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and 8 percent multiracial.

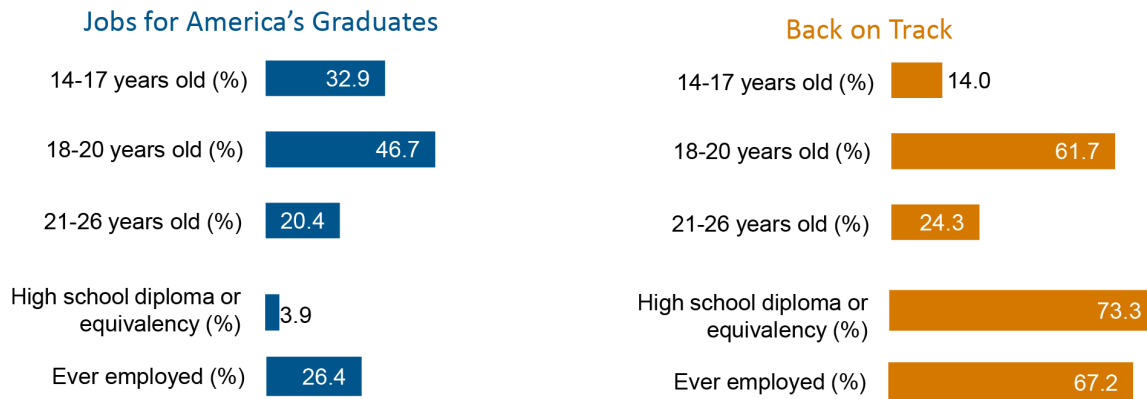
FIGURE ES.2

LEAP Participants at Enrollment

Most LEAP participants were young people of color; 17 percent were parents. **JAG** and **Back on Track** participants differed in several ways.



Back on Track participants were older and most already had their high school credential, compared with **JAG** participants. More **Back on Track** enrollees had work experience.



Across LEAP, 27 percent of participants had involvement in more than two systems, and 6 percent had experienced all three; 53 percent of **JAG** enrollees and 60 percent of **Back on Track** enrollees had current involvement at the time of enrollment.



SOURCE: Program data from JAG e-NDMS and Back on Track sites' management information systems. Reflects individual-level demographics on 2,238 individuals who enrolled prior to October 1, 2018.

NOTE: Distributions may not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

in their employment experience. About two-thirds of Back on Track participants had work experience, compared with only one-fourth of JAG participants, who were generally younger than those enrolled in Back on Track. These differences in the educational and employment backgrounds of JAG and Back on Track participants highlight the differing objectives of each program model: JAG focuses on obtaining a high school credential and employment skills whereas Back on Track focuses on access and persistence in postsecondary education.

Demographic data and interviews conducted by MDRC with staff members expose the unique challenges that confront young people in both programs. One of the most prevalent concerns for LEAP participants is homelessness and housing insecurity in general, according to program staff members. Seventy percent of LEAP enrollees, particularly Back on Track participants, did not live with their biological parents. Approximately one-fifth of participants were experiencing homelessness at the time of enrollment, although participants and staff members described how a young person's living situation could change quickly and unexpectedly. Staff pointed out the pressures on participants to contribute financially to their households and thereby prioritize earning money in the short term over pursuing an education or career. In total, 17 percent of participants were parents at the time they enrolled in the LEAP program. The circumstances that many LEAP participants experienced in their lives could hinder their engagement in program services.

Program staff members also described participant assets. They uniformly pointed to LEAP participant attributes such as resilience and resourcefulness. Staff members reported that participants are good at accessing supports and asking for help. Staff at all program locations described participants as self-motivated, driven, and determined to achieve their goals.

THE LEAP EVALUATION

There is limited evidence about what are effective employment and education interventions for young people who have experienced systems involvement or homelessness. Prior studies of the effectiveness of JAG and Back on Track are very limited, and no research findings on their effectiveness specifically with young people who are systems-involved or experiencing homelessness were available at the time of MDRC's evaluation.¹³ Given the limited prior evidence, the LEAP evaluation contributes to understanding how to improve employment and educational outcomes for this population.

13. For JAG, a quasi-experimental evaluation found positive impacts on employment, but the study did not include either the Out-of-School or Alternative Education applications that are implemented in LEAP. See Sum, Khatiwada, and McLaughlin with Palma (2009). For Back on Track, an outcome study found promising rates of enrollment into postsecondary education among participants, but without an impact study, it is not possible to know how Back on Track compares to other programs with similar goals. See Center for Youth and Communities, *Creating New Pathways to Postsecondary: Evaluation of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Postsecondary Success (PSS) Initiative* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, The Center for Youth and Communities, Heller School for Policy and Management, 2013).

The LEAP evaluation is primarily an implementation study that seeks to understand how LEAP grantees launched their programs and adapted them to their participant populations.¹⁴ Underlying this main objective, the evaluation seeks to explain why programs chose certain adaptations and how participants responded as a result. Learning about participant experiences during and after LEAP was an important objective of this evaluation and can inform how programs facilitate engagement in their services. This evaluation also focused on how LEAP grantees partnered with local public agencies and nonprofit organizations to deliver services. The evaluation also includes a study of program outcomes. The analysis of program participation data from grantees offers an initial view on engagement and outcomes but stops short of making a determination about causality since this evaluation did not use a random assignment design, which means there was no control group.¹⁵ Finally, a limited study of program costs for three LEAP grantees might help program staff members or policymakers budget for any replication of the LEAP program.

While the evaluation draws on a range of data sources, it has some limitations. The implementation study, which focuses on how services were provided and adapted, covers the first 30 months of the SIF period (Years 1, 2, and midway through Year 3). The outcome study, which averages results across the LEAP grantees, is mostly restricted to participants who enrolled in the first 18 months of the SIF period (Year 1 to midway through Year 2) due to the short follow-up period that is granted during the SIF timeframe. Because participants may take a year or more to complete the program, the analysis had to be limited to participants who enrolled early on to allow for a 12- or 18-month follow-up period. Since LEAP grantees were continuing to adapt their programs based on implementation experiences in the first years of LEAP, the participation rates and outcomes for the earlier cohorts may not adequately reflect the experience of later cohorts. It is too soon to tell how participation rates and outcomes for later cohorts will compare with those of earlier cohorts. Additionally, small sample sizes and the clustering by grantees of participants by race and ethnicity make it impossible to draw conclusions about subgroup results.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Partnering strategically with public agencies and other organizations was key to reaching eligible young people, aligning resources, and opening access to services.**

14. SIF grantees are required to undergo an evaluation of their programs, with the goal of building evidence on effective interventions. The LEAP evaluation originally targeted a SIF “moderate” level of evidence which requires study designs that can support casual conclusions, such as impact studies using random assignment or quasi-experimental designs. However, the planned impact study of LEAP required a five-year period to allow for enrollment and follow-up of study participants. Once the SIF period was cut back to three years following the decision to discontinue funding for the SIF in 2016, the evaluation design was changed to an implementation study. Under SIF’s evidence rubric, this implementation study is a “preliminary” level of evidence.

15. A random assignment design uses a process akin to a lottery to assign individuals to a group whose members receive the specified intervention or to a control group whose members are not eligible to enroll and participate in the program but free to receive other available services. If random assignment is done correctly, the members of both groups share the same characteristics. Then, when the two groups are followed up over time, the differences in their outcomes provide a reliable measure of the program’s effects — or impacts.

LEAP grantees found that partners, including child welfare departments, juvenile justice and criminal justice agencies, school districts, nonprofit organizations, workforce systems, and local vocational and postsecondary institutions, were vital to LEAP implementation. LEAP grantees partnered directly to deliver services. Some grantees developed a strategy with cross-system partners to bring LEAP services to young people who were participating in other types of services such as a General Educational Development (GED) program or transitional living services. Grantee connections to foster care agencies or the justice system, though they could be difficult to establish, provided strong referral pathways for participants.

Partnerships were also vital to connecting participants to other services or supports that could benefit them. Staff members as well as participants themselves said they were not always aware of the programs and supports available to young people. Further, accessing these programs and supports when they were aware of them could be challenging due to paperwork requirements and procedural hurdles. Staff members found they needed to become experts in navigating the system, so they could help participants obtain services that could benefit them.

Many LEAP partnerships were born from existing relationships. Nevertheless, LEAP grantees reported that strong and productive cross-system partnerships took time and resources to develop. One strategy used by grantees was to cultivate a shared understanding with partners of how the programs could work together so that each organization could focus on its respective strengths and contribute to a greater whole.

- **Particularly during the first year of implementation, LEAP grantees had difficulty identifying appropriate program participants. Strategic partnerships helped boost recruitment.**

Program staff encountered challenges to identifying and recruiting systems-involved young people, particularly in the first year of LEAP, but most had established referral partnerships and were dedicating less time to recruitment by Year 3. A key recruitment strategy was strengthening relationships with partners in various systems such as child welfare departments, justice agencies, homeless services, and schools. Some LEAP grantees developed data-sharing agreements with system partners that made it easier to access information about potential candidates, while others developed relationships with caseworkers who sent direct referrals.

LEAP grantees described how eligibility for LEAP could be “invisible” — organizations did not always have a good way to identify who in their programs might need additional support. Staff described how participants may not be comfortable openly sharing details about their systems involvement or housing status, particularly if the experience was in the past; young people may not see the relevance of such information for accessing services now. Some grantees shared information about LEAP with all of their participants and gave them the opportunity to share their eligibility privately.

- **LEAP grantees adapted JAG and Back on Track services to focus on addressing the circumstances in young people’s lives that constrained their potential. This included adapting how grantees planned to deliver core model activities to promote engagement.**

The LEAP population faces a set of structural and systemic barriers that may make it hard for them to remain engaged in services. Participants faced challenges ranging from food and housing instability to mental health issues to meeting financial obligations to their families. LEAP grantees reported that addressing the barriers young people faced had to be done before focusing on school or work. One way LEAP grantees did this was allowing participants to exercise the option of pausing LEAP programming and returning at a later point. Working with partners to align resources was critical to addressing the circumstances of participants in order to support their pursuit of a high school or postsecondary credential, or to gain work experience.

The JAG and Back on Track models are intentionally flexible in terms of how core activities can be delivered, which allowed LEAP grantees to change the format of service delivery to promote engagement and persistence. For example, some grantees found that they needed to provide services one-on-one instead of in groups to accommodate participants' schedules. LEAP grantees also provided incentives to encourage participation and help with the financial needs that many participants had.

- **Staff-participant relationships were key to delivering services and supporting participant engagement.**

Participants who had positive experiences with the program often reported that their connection to a staff member was a primary reason for enrolling and staying engaged in programming. Staff strove to develop relationships that were authentic, positive, focused on strengths, and driven by young people. A key part of building relationships with participants was building trust. Staff members reported hearing that participants lacked supportive adults in their lives, leaving them hesitant to trust and rely on a staff member. A key part of working with young people was appreciating each one as an individual who should be treated uniquely. Staff members often got to know participants through one-on-one interactions rooted in discussions about participants' goals, personal experiences, and challenges.

When engagement is driven by a participant's relationship with one or two staff people, staff characteristics and turnover can have outsized effects on a young person's engagement in the program. If a staff person is not the right fit and is not able to build relationships with participants, these young people may not remain engaged with the program. The duration of the LEAP program could be 18 months or longer, so it was not uncommon for participants to experience turnover in staff. Grantees noted that staff turnover affected participant engagement negatively.

- **Back on Track participants had high engagement in services and high levels of enrollment in postsecondary education.**

While a longer follow-up period is necessary to evaluate degree and certificate attainment among participants, early results indicate that Back on Track may help participants enroll and persist in postsecondary education. The top panel of Figure ES.3 shows the participation and early outcomes for Back on Track participants. Of those who enrolled during the first 18 months of LEAP implementation, three-fourths completed the model's initial "Postsecondary Bridging" phase, which helps

FIGURE ES.3

LEAP Participation and In-Program Outcomes

Back on Track participants progressed through program phases and enrolled in postsecondary education.^a

76%

Completed Bridging

41%

Completed First-Year Supports^b

Average time to complete Back on Track phases

15.7 months

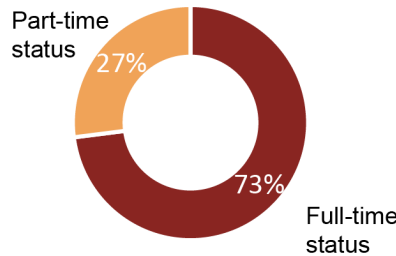
Back on Track participants enrolled in postsecondary education...

...pursued a full-time course load...^c

...and worked toward earning credentials

68%

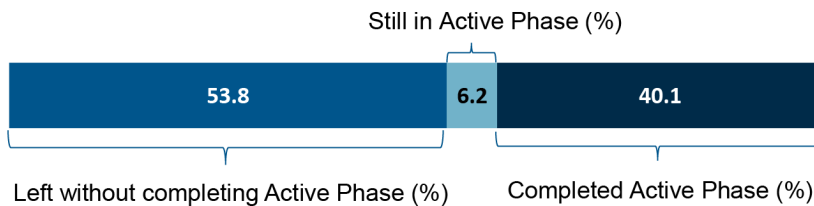
Enrolled in post-secondary education



5%

Earned a certification within 18 months

JAG participants received an average of 42 hours of services.^d About 40 percent of JAG participants who enrolled in the **Out-of-School** application completed the Active Phase.^e



JAG participants who completed the Active Phase did so in an average of

7.2 months^f

76% reported they were in school, working or both during of follow-up.^g

Average hourly wages^h

Some earned credentials while in LEAP^j

51%

Employed

51%

In school

\$12.00

Among those who were employed prior to JAG, wages increased by **29%**ⁱ

40%

Earned high school equivalency

21%

Obtained an industry-recognized credential^k

(continued)

FIGURE ES.3 (continued)

SOURCES: Program data from Back on Track sites' management information systems and JAG e-NMDS.

NOTES: ^aFor Back on Track, all measures shown among those enrolled prior to 4/1/2017. N = 315.

^bParticipants complete First Year Support and Back on Track by completing their first year of postsecondary education or training.

^cAmong those enrolled in postsecondary. N=214.

^dAmong JAG participants who enrolled on or before 4/1/2017. N = 683.

^eOut-of-School (OOS) participants who enrolled prior to 4/1/2017. N = 307.

^fAmong OOS participants who completed the Active Phase regardless of when they enrolled. N = 272.

^gSubsample of OOS participants in Follow-up Phase, looking at status reported during the first 6 months of follow-up among those who started Follow-up prior to 4/1/2018. School includes both secondary and postsecondary programs. Work includes both full- and part-time jobs. Categories not mutually exclusive. N = 153.

^hAmong OOS participants ever in employment during follow up. N = 104.

ⁱAmong OOS participants with prior employment at enrollment into LEAP. N = 27.

^jAmong OOS participants in follow-up. N = 274. Categories not mutually exclusive.

^kDefined in U.S. DOL Training and Employment Guidance Letter 15-10.

participants identify, prepare for, and access a postsecondary pathway.¹⁶ More than two-thirds of the sample enrolled in postsecondary education during the study follow-up period. Among those who enrolled, 73 percent had full-time status, which is comparable to the national average for college students at four-year institutions (75 percent).¹⁷ Of this sample, 41 percent completed the full program by the end of this evaluation's follow-up period (September 30, 2018), indicating they had completed their first year of college or a training program.

- **Most participants who enrolled in JAG received the program's key services, but less than half fully completed the program. Among those who completed the program's Active Phase, in which the majority of services are delivered, most were employed or in school at one point during the first six months of the follow-up period.**

The bottom panel of Figure ES.3 shows the participation and in-program outcomes for JAG. Participants who enrolled received an average of 42 hours of services. Of those who enrolled in JAG's Out-of-School application during the first 18 months of LEAP, about 54 percent disengaged before completing the program's initial phase — the "Active Phase."¹⁸ Participants can complete the Active Phase by attaining their high school equivalency or other credential or obtaining a quality job. JAG participants did not yet have their high school credential, were often behind on credits, and most did not have prior work experience. It could, therefore, take participants more time to complete JAG than

16. Postsecondary Bridging was the first phase in the LEAP Back on Track model but is the second phase of JFF's original model.

17. Joel McFarland, Bill Hussar, Jijun Zhang, Xiaolei Wang, Ke Wang, Sarah Hein, Melissa Diliberti, Emily Forrest Cataldi, Farrah Bullock Mann, and Amy Barmer, "The Condition of Education 2019" (2019), website: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019144.pdf>.

18. JAG grantees implemented one of two models, the Out-of-School application, which was implemented primarily by community-based organizations, or the Alternative Education application, which was implemented primarily in alternative schools. Only Out-of-School application outcomes are presented in the report due to small sample sizes and data quality issues with the data for the Alternative Education application.

Back on Track. Depending on the participant's goals and the LEAP grantees' requirements, several years of program engagement might have been needed for participants to complete the Active Phase. During this time, young people can experience substantial changes in their life circumstances, such as moving, having a baby, working full time, or enrolling in a different program. Staff reported that they were not always able to contact former participants to learn why they had left the program. The report details some of the adaptations JAG programs developed to promote engagement, but it is too soon to tell from the available data whether these adaptations led to increased rates of completion in later cohorts.

Young people who were engaged in JAG say the program helped them get a job or their high school equivalency credential (such as a GED certificate), gave them a support system, taught them valuable life skills, and provided opportunities they would not have had otherwise. Most Out-of-School application participants (76 percent) who successfully completed the Active Phase went on to engage in work, school, or both during the first six months of the JAG Follow-up Phase.¹⁹ However, 36 percent reported being disconnected from school or work at some point during the Follow-up Phase, indicating that the career pathways of participants were still stabilizing in the period following the Active Phase. Among those who completed the Active Phase, 40 percent obtained their high school credential and about a fifth obtained a credential.²⁰

- **As staff-intensive interventions, JAG and Back on Track incurred personnel-related expenses that made up the majority of their costs. The costs of adding LEAP services varied by how the programs were structured and their local context. Per participant costs, including outreach and follow-up, ranged from \$5,300 to \$7,300.**

A cost analysis for three grantees showed how the costs to operate LEAP varied by each grantee's program structure. The cost analysis looked at different approaches to providing LEAP services, including providing services in a rural context and integrating LEAP services into existing services. Though LEAP has the potential to be cost-effective if it improves high school graduation rates, participation in the labor market, or college persistence, the study design does not allow for the determination of effectiveness since its impact on participants compared with other programs that have similar goals cannot be assessed. There is limited comparative information available about the costs of programs like LEAP, which layer services onto existing services in the community. Most of the cost estimates available for youth programs are of programs that offer a more intensive set of services, such as stipends and tuition waivers, and have higher costs per participant.²¹

19. JAG programs require a 12-month follow-up period, but this evaluation reports on outcomes during the first six months of follow-up to allow for reporting on a larger sample size.

20. These categories are not mutually exclusive. Credentials include only those that meet the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act definition of industry-recognized credentials. See U.S. Department of Labor, "Training and Employment Guidance Letter 15-10" (2006), website: <https://wdr.doleta.gov/>.

21. YouthBuild was estimated to have a cost of \$24,500 per participant; see Cynthia Miller, Danielle Cummings, Megan Millenky, Andrew Wiegand, and David Long, *Laying a Foundation: Four-Year Results from the National YouthBuild Evaluation* (New York: MDRC, 2018). CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs was estimated to cost \$14,000 per participant. See Susan Scrivener, Michael J. Weiss, Alyssa Ratledge, Timothy Rudd, Colleen Sommo, and Hannah Fresques, *Doubling Graduation Rates: Three-Year Effects of CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for Developmental Education Students* (New York: MDRC, 2015).

LESSONS

The findings in this evaluation bring to light five key observations for staff members and policymakers on program design for young people who have experienced homelessness or systems involvement.

- **Address barriers to opportunity.** Structural barriers, such as housing, transportation, child care, and financial needs, were very salient challenges for the young people who participated in LEAP. To promote engagement, programs must help address these barriers through partnerships or by changing local practices and policies. Additional support for these young people can help address the inequities they face when pursuing their educational and career goals.
- **Develop recruitment pathways through partnerships and data-sharing agreements.** LEAP points to promising strategies for identifying young people who may benefit from additional supports that they may not know are available to them. One promising strategy is partnering with other organizations that may already be connected to young people to align services and build referral relationships. Establishing data-sharing agreements with local or state child welfare, justice, or housing agencies can also help connect eligible participants to services.
- **Collaborate with agencies and other organizations to support implementation.** Partnerships were crucial to LEAP implementation. Grantees built strong partnerships by developing a shared understanding of the initiative's goals among partners, focusing on the mutual benefits of the partnerships to address potential concerns about competition, and establishing formal mechanisms for planning and feedback. Cross-system partnerships can also influence a community's broader approach to a challenge.
- **Staff-participant relationships are key.** Finding the right staff-to-participant fit and retaining key staff is central to participant engagement. Grantees sought to hire staff members with whom young people could identify and with whom they had something in common — such as a shared background. Staff intentionally focused on building strong relationships with participants. Staff also received training in trauma-informed care. Organizations should consider how to promote staff retention and make sure that participants are connected to multiple staff members to mitigate the potential effects of turnover on staff-participant relationships.
- **Allowing flexibility in the delivery of program models can promote participant engagement and success.** LEAP programs found early on that they needed to adapt their original plans for service delivery to better serve participants, such as by offering incentives or one-on-one service delivery options. JAG participants, who usually had a long horizon in the program, often did not complete the Active Phase. Back on Track participants also left the program without completing it. This finding calls out the need for more research into how programs that serve young people can sustain engagement over a long period, as the path to a high school credential or postsecondary degree is a long one. Offering interim milestones, such as pursuing credentials that take less time to earn or paid work experiences, may provide participants with more easily attainable successes that keep them engaged as they reach for long-term goals. LEAP grantees developed these adaptations and others to promote engagement, but a longer follow-up period is needed to assess whether these adaptations will improve engagement among later LEAP cohorts.

LOOKING FORWARD

During the first three years of the initiative, LEAP programs made significant strides in building their partnerships and adapting how they delivered JAG and Back on Track services to LEAP's priority populations. This effort was a response to what staff members for each program model were learning about the support that participants required to persist on their educational and career pathways. These lessons are being carried forward into the next phase of the LEAP work, which started in summer 2019. During this next phase, all LEAP grantees will continue to work with participants who are currently enrolled to support their completion of the program. A subset of the original LEAP grantees will also expand their work to deepen their relationships with system partners, with the goal of replicating services. The ultimate objective is to reach more young people who are involved with systems and experiencing homelessness — and who could thus benefit from LEAP — and to promote change in public system practices and policies for this population.

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