

# **ENGAGING YOUNG MEN INVOLVED IN CHICAGO'S JUSTICE SYSTEM**

A Feasibility Study of the  
Bridges to Pathways Program

## **Executive Summary**

# **Engaging Young Men Involved in Chicago's Justice System: A Feasibility Study of the Bridges to Pathways Program**

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**Authors: Kyla Wasserman, Johanna Walter, Beata Luczywek, Hannah Wagner,  
and Cindy Redcross**

## **Submitted to:**

### **Girley Wright, Project Officer**

Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation  
Administration for Children and Families  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

### **Project Director: Dan Bloom**

MDRC  
200 Vesey Street  
New York, NY 10281

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# Overview

## Introduction

This report presents findings from a feasibility evaluation of the Bridges to Pathways (Bridges) program. Bridges was a program for young men in Chicago between the ages of 17 and 21 years who were involved with the criminal or juvenile justice system and lacked a high school credential. The program offered intensive mentoring and case management, as well as the opportunity to earn a high school credential, attend social-emotional learning workshops, and participate in a subsidized internship.

The Bridges evaluation is a part of the larger Subsidized and Transitional Employment Demonstration, funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Bridges program was launched in 2013, and the evaluation of this developing program builds knowledge about operating this model and its potential to achieve its intended effects: to help participants attain a high school credential, obtain unsubsidized employment, and reduce their involvement with the criminal justice system. Designed as a feasibility assessment, the evaluation includes an implementation study and a small-scale randomized controlled trial.

The Bridges evaluation enrolled 480 young people between June 2015 and July 2016. This report provides a detailed description of the Bridges model and how the program providers adapted the model. It also presents findings about whether the program improved young people's outcomes and decreased criminal activity during the first year after study enrollment. The implementation study concluded that the program succeeded in enrolling a high-risk population, and it focused its services on keeping participants engaged with the program and removing barriers to their participation. An analysis of the program's impacts indicates that the program reduced the rate of arrest for felony crimes, and that it also reduced the rate of arrest for violent crimes. However, the program had no impact on the overall rate of arrest or incarceration. It also had no impact on educational or training certification and no sustained effect on employment. Overall, the evaluation indicates that the Bridges model shows promise to help decrease violence among high-risk young men. However, more information will be needed to understand the ability of programs such as Bridges to make a difference in the lives of the young people they serve.

## Purpose

Young adults are overrepresented in the criminal justice system. These individuals have a harder time exiting the criminal justice system than their older counterparts, and they face significant challenges when they do, including poorer outcomes in education and employment. Young adults involved with the criminal justice system are becoming recognized as a subset of the "transition-aged youth" population: young people between the ages of 18 and 24 years with distinctive needs stemming from their developmental stage, social interactions, and changing involvement with the justice, education, child welfare, and other systems. Policymakers, practitioners, and advocates are beginning to focus on age-appropriate interventions to help this population abstain from crime and avoid reentering the criminal justice system.

Bridges is a violence prevention program that aims to reduce the likelihood that young adults at high risk of violence will engage in criminal activity. Originally launched in 2013, Bridges closed in 2016 and was revamped in 2017. MDRC evaluated the original Bridges program to determine whether it showed promise for improving the outcomes of the young people it was intended to serve.

## **Research Questions and Methods**

The Bridges evaluation included an implementation study to shed light on the demand for the program and how it operated. Key data sources for the implementation study were staff interviews, observations, and information about young people's participation in program services collected by the providers. The implementation analysis integrated qualitative and quantitative data from these sources to create a full picture of the implementation of the program.

The evaluation also included a small-scale random assignment study. Individuals who were eligible for and interested in Bridges were randomly assigned to either a program group, which was offered Bridges services, or to a control group, which was not offered those services. The study provides preliminary evidence about the program's potential to improve short-term outcomes on education, employment, and recidivism. Key data sources included administrative records on involvement in the criminal justice system and records on employment and earnings, as well as a follow-up survey.

The Bridges evaluation seeks to answer the following questions:

- What were the characteristics of the participants who entered Bridges?
- How did the providers implement the program and what adjustments did they make over time?
- What were the duration and intensity of the participants' engagement in the program?
- What are the preliminary impacts of Bridges on young adults?

## **Key Findings**

- Bridges enrolled a hard-to-reach, high-risk population, made up of young men who were disconnected from education and employment and involved with the criminal justice system.
- Keeping this population engaged was a challenge for the program, which prompted the providers to emphasize services aimed at encouraging young people to persist in the program. Mentoring and case management were key tools the program used to engage participants and facilitate their participation. Ongoing challenges with attendance made it difficult to systematically implement the program's academic, social-emotional, and employment components.
- The program produced modest increases in access to education, training, and employment services. However, it had no impact on receipt of a high school credential or training certification and did not produce a sustained effect on employment.
- The program reduced the rate of arrest for felony crimes by 8 percentage points. Participants were also significantly less likely to be arrested for a violent crime. However, the program had no impacts on the overall rate of arrest or incarceration.

## Acknowledgments

This report would not have been possible without the support of many individuals and organizations. The Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services developed the Subsidized and Transitional Employment Demonstration Project (STED) and has supported the project since its inception. Dedicated staff members in that agency have been instrumental to the success of the project, in particular Girley Wright and Erica Zielewski.

We would like to thank the Chicago Division of Family and Supportive Services for their role in designing and overseeing the Bridges to Pathways (Bridges) program. In particular, we would like to acknowledge former Commissioner Evelyn Diaz, Kia Coleman, and Jennifer Axelrod. We also greatly appreciate the efforts of the program's directors and managers, including Greg Martinez, Jamie Roth and Rubin Gerena at SGA Youth and Family Services and Pedro Mendez at Central States SER. We would also like to acknowledge all the many other staff members who implemented Bridges. All of these individuals gave generously of their time to help us learn about the program.

Christine Devitt at the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority and Rebecca Skorek at the Cook County Sheriff's office extracted Bridges' arrest, conviction, and jail data for us and helped us understand them. We also thank staff members from HHS who worked to provide us with data from the National Directory of New Hires.

We are grateful for the help of our colleagues at MDRC, without whom this report would not be possible. Dan Bloom directs the STED project and assisted in many aspects of the project including partner relations, qualitative data collection, and project management. Michelle Manno provided ongoing guidance and mentoring to refine the qualitative research design for this evaluation. Throughout the program's implementation, Christine Johnston served as a liaison to the Bridges program providers and provided valuable information about program operations. Sally Dai supported the data processing efforts.

In partnership with MDRC, Janae Bonsu and Cliff Bersamira conducted in-depth interviews with program participants.

Dan Bloom, Richard Hendra, Michelle Manno, and Christine Johnston reviewed early drafts and provided thoughtful comments that helped shape this report. Melissa Cummings and Ada Tso coordinated the production of the report. Christopher Boland edited the report, and Ann Kottner prepared it for publication.

We are especially grateful to the many young men who agreed to be a part of the study. We hope that the knowledge they helped to provide will benefit other young people in similar circumstances.

The Authors

## Executive Summary

Although young adults ages 18 to 24 make up just 10 percent of the U.S. population, they account for 28 percent of arrests and people in jail, 26 percent of people on probation, and 21 percent of admissions to prison.<sup>1</sup> These individuals have a harder time exiting the criminal justice system than their older counterparts,<sup>2</sup> and they face significant challenges when they do, including poorer outcomes in education and employment.<sup>3</sup> Young adults involved with the criminal justice system are becoming recognized as a subset of the “transition-aged youth” population: young people between the ages of 18 and 24 years with distinctive needs stemming from their developmental stage, social interactions, and changing involvement with the justice, education, child welfare, and other systems. Policymakers, practitioners, and advocates are beginning to focus on age-appropriate interventions to help this population abstain from crime and avoid reentering the criminal justice system.

In 2013, a violence prevention program called Bridges to Pathways (Bridges) was launched that aimed to improve the outcomes of young adults at high risk of violence. The program was developed by the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS) and operated by two community-based organizations: Central States SER and SGA Youth and Family Services. The pilot program was designed to curb youth violence and reduce recidivism among young men in Chicago who were involved in the criminal and juvenile justice systems. The six-month program had the following four components: academic enrichment, social-emotional learning, workforce readiness, and intensive mentoring and case management.

This report presents the findings from a feasibility study of Bridges that looks at the program’s design, implementation, and short-term impacts. The evaluation of this new program includes an implementation study and small-scale randomized controlled trial and is designed to provide preliminary information on the model’s promise. The Bridges evaluation is a part of the larger Subsidized and Transitional Employment Demonstration, funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families called the Subsidized and Transitional and Employment Demonstration (STED), which is testing various subsidized employment strategies in several cities across the country. MDRC is conducting the

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<sup>1</sup>Justice Policy Institute, *Improving Approaches to Serving Young Adults in the Justice System* (Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute, 2016).

<sup>2</sup>Matthew R. Durose, Alexia D. Cooper, and Howard N. Snyder, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 30 States in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014).

<sup>3</sup>Gary Sweeten, “Who Will Graduate? Disruption of High School Education by Arrest and Court Involvement,” *Justice Quarterly* 23, 4 (2006): 462-480; Devah Pager, Bruce Western, and Naomi Sugie, “Sequencing Disadvantage: Barriers to Employment Facing Young Black and White Men with Criminal Records,” *The Annals of the American Academy* 623, 1 (2009): 195-213.

STED evaluation, along with its research partners MEF Associates, Decision Information Resources, and Branch Associates.

## **Background**

Enhancing services that use age-appropriate interventions may be a way to increase public safety. Crime rates indicate that targeting transition-aged youth makes sense: In the critical years of one's late teens, the probability of committing a crime increases, and criminal activity tends to become more serious and violent.<sup>4</sup>

Transition-aged youth have a number of age-specific characteristics that may increase their likelihood of engaging in criminal activity and make them distinct from younger and older subsets of the population. Criminal and juvenile justice reform advocates, policymakers, and administrators are increasingly in agreement that age-appropriate strategies for deterrence, custody, and reentry are needed for this population.<sup>5</sup> However, while there is some evidence about strategies to reduce crime among younger teens and older adults, little is known about what works to support young adults as they make the transition to adulthood. The evaluation of Bridges aims to help build evidence about how to curb violence and recidivism among transition-aged youth.

## **The Bridges to Pathways Program**

Introduced in late 2013, Bridges was designed to provide a multifaceted package of services to young men in Chicago who were involved with the criminal or juvenile justice system. Bridges' stated goals were to help participants attain a high school credential, obtain unsubsidized employment, and reduce their involvement with the criminal justice system.

As originally designed, Bridges was a three-phase program in which groups of young men (or "cohorts") participated in a sequence of academic, employment, and social-emotional well-being activities together. Over the three phases, cohorts were expected to take online courses toward either a high school diploma or a high school equivalency certificate such as a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, complete a five-week employability skills training course, work a 12-week subsidized internship, and attend cognitive-behavioral therapy workshops designed to change thought patterns believed to lead to criminal behavior. The design also featured intensive mentoring and case management services that were to be offered throughout the three phases of the program. These services were to be provided over a six-month period, followed by three months of contact with program staff for additional support. The Bridges program closed in 2016 and a revised version of the program was launched in 2017 that draws from lessons learned in its early implementation.

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<sup>4</sup>National Institute of Justice, "From Juvenile Delinquency to Young Adult Offending" (2014), Website: [www.nij.gov/topics/crime/Pages/delinquency-to-adult-offending.aspx](http://www.nij.gov/topics/crime/Pages/delinquency-to-adult-offending.aspx).

<sup>5</sup>Justice Policy Institute (2016), 1-29.



## The Bridges Evaluation

The Bridges program aimed to deliver a complex package of services to a hard-to-serve population. When Bridges launched in late 2013, many elements of the program and its services were still in development. In its first two years, the program design shifted as the providers searched for promising recruitment channels, adopted core curricula, and honed strategies to keep participants engaged in program services. After running for close to two years, the program had stabilized in significant ways, and the evaluation focuses on the program's implementation from June 2015 through July 2016. Throughout the evaluation period, the program continued to evolve as the providers learned more about the needs of their clients.

The evaluation of this developing program was designed as a feasibility study. Feasibility studies can provide information about whether a proposed intervention is possible to operate and whether it shows promise to achieve its intended effects. The feasibility study of Bridges provided the research team with a unique opportunity to gather valuable information about the model's implementation on the ground, the characteristics and engagement of participants, and the potential of the program to reduce recidivism. The Bridges evaluation included an implementation study that used mixed methods to learn about the demand for the program and its operations. In addition, the evaluation included a small-scale random assignment study to assess preliminary evidence about the program's potential to improve short-term outcomes on education, employment, and recidivism.

The Bridges evaluation addresses four primary questions:

1. What were the characteristics of the participants who entered Bridges?
2. How did the providers implement the program and what adjustments did they make over time?
3. What were the duration and intensity of the participants' engagement in the program?
4. What are the preliminary impacts of Bridges on young adults?

The Bridges evaluation enrolled 480 young people between June 2015 and July 2016, with 60 percent randomly assigned to the program group and 40 percent to the control group.

- **The program group.** The 289 individuals who were randomly assigned to this group were offered Bridges program services, including preparatory classes for earning a high school diploma or high school equivalency credential, cognitive-behavioral therapy workshops, a paid internship, and intensive case management and mentoring.
- **The control group.** The 191 individuals who were randomly assigned to this group were not offered Bridges services but were able to access other services that were available in the community, including non-Bridges services offered at the agencies operating Bridges.

By measuring outcomes for both the program and control groups over time, it is possible to assess whether Bridges services led to better outcomes for the program group than would have happened in the absence of the program, as represented by the control group. Any statistically significant differences that emerge between the two groups would be considered Bridges' "impacts," or effects, because, owing to the random assignment design, the research groups should be comparable on both measured and unmeasured characteristics at the time of study enrollment. However, because this feasibility study used a small sample size and therefore has limited statistical power, any impact findings should be understood as indications of promising practices that further research might explore.

## The Implementation of Bridges

The assessment of Bridges' implementation is based on data from several sources, including interviews with provider staff and participants, observations of program services, analysis of data collected from young people when they enrolled in the study, a survey of staff time, and program participation data from the Bridges management information system.

To be eligible for the Bridges program, applicants had to identify as male, be between the ages of 17 and 21 years, and lack a high school credential. Additionally, they had to report that they had been incarcerated at least once. Staff were committed to serving youth that they thought could benefit the most from the program, often young people who were not connected to school, work, or other programs. Bridges did not have any requirements related to academic ability, credit standing, or work experience.

- **Bridges succeeded in enrolling a hard-to-reach, high-risk population. The study sample comprised young men who were disconnected from education and employment and who were involved with the criminal justice system.**

At the time of study enrollment, members of the study sample were 18 years old on average. Nearly all participants were black, non-Hispanic (74 percent) or Hispanic (22 percent). Participants had been repeatedly involved with the criminal justice system. Administrative records show that nearly all sample members had been arrested (95 percent) and that the majority (73 percent) had been arrested four times or more. On average, sample members reported that they were arrested for the first time at the age of 14 and convicted for the first time at age 15. In addition, most sample members were not in school and fewer than half reported ever having worked. Table ES.1 shows selected demographic characteristics of the sample members at the time they enrolled into the study.

- **Poor attendance among participants was an ongoing challenge for the program, which prompted the providers to emphasize services aimed at reengaging the young people and encouraging them to persist in the program.**

**Table ES.1**

**Selected Baseline Characteristics of the Bridges to Pathways Sample Members**

Characteristic	Full Sample
<b>Demographics</b>	
Average age	18.4
Race/ethnicity (%)	
Black, non-Hispanic	74.2
Hispanic	21.6
White, non-Hispanic	0.8
Native American/Asian/multiracial/non-Hispanic	3.4
<b>Education and employment history</b>	
Highest grade completed in school <sup>a</sup>	10.0
Ever employed (%)	48.7
<b>Criminal history</b>	
Ever arrested (%)	95.2
Age at time of first arrest	14.2
Number of times arrested (%)	
0	4.8
1	7.5
2 or 3	14.8
4 or more	72.9
Age of first conviction (years) <sup>a</sup>	15.1
Sample size	480

SOURCES: MDRC calculations based on baseline survey data and arrest records from the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority.

NOTES: Sample includes individuals randomly assigned between June 2015 and July 2016.

Arrest measures come from administrative records; all other measures are self-reported.

Measures in italics are calculated among individuals who had a certain characteristic.

<sup>a</sup>Sample size varies due to missing responses. Most measures are missing less than 5 percent of the sample size with the exception of "highest grade completed in school" (missing 7 percent) and "age of first conviction" (missing 13 percent).

Table ES.2 presents data on participants' enrollment and participation in Bridges during the six months after entering the program. About two-thirds of program group members ever attended program activities. Once they entered Bridges, their attendance was often inconsistent. On average, young people who ever attended the program attended for 30 days spread out over 13 weeks, or an average of two out of every five program days available to them.

Many factors may have contributed to poor attendance, including lack of interest in the program, problems with transportation, housing instability, and other responsibilities that affected the young men's ability to participate in the program. In addition, participants faced emotional or psychological barriers to receiving services. Many participants had lost family or friends to gun violence, witnessed the shooting of others, or been shot themselves. The program staff felt that exposure to trauma could lead participants to lose hope in their ability to achieve their goals and to mistrust strangers, including program staff and other participants.

Staff members were expected to encourage attendance by addressing barriers that could prevent participants from coming to the program and by building close relationships with participants. Through close relationships, staff members sought to demonstrate their belief in participants' ability to succeed in Bridges. Mentors asserted that they needed to prove to participants that they would not give up on them by repeatedly being involved in their lives and present in their community. Helping participants overcome barriers to attendance accounted for nearly one-fourth of the program staff's time. Despite these efforts, attendance remained an ongoing challenge for the program, which changed how providers operated the program's academic, social-emotional, and employment services.

- **Participants' intermittent and unpredictable attendance made it difficult for providers to systematically implement the academic, social-emotional, and employment components.**

The academic component incorporated an online education platform through which participants could earn a high school credential at Bridges. The opportunity for participants to earn a high school diploma outside of a school setting was a key feature of the program's design; however, as an unaccredited institution, Bridges was unable to confer high school credits or credentials. Finding they could not overcome the challenge of accreditation, the providers focused on helping participants make progress toward a GED certificate. Daily social-emotional learning workshops made use of an evidenced-based cognitive behavioral therapy program for youth and adults involved with the criminal justice system. Instructors brought enthusiasm, interactive media, and relevant examples to the curriculum. However, intermittent attendance coupled with a slow pacing of lessons meant that participants were unable to complete the curriculum during the program period.

The program's employment component also suffered from problems related to poor attendance. This component featured a five-week employability skills workshop followed by a 12-week subsidized internship. Bridges offered a range of internships that focused on giving participants an

**Table ES.2**

**Enrollment and Participation Within Six Months of Entering  
Bridges to Pathways**

Outcome	Program Group
Ever attended (%)	67.8
Among those who ever attended	
<i>Average number of weeks in the program<sup>a</sup></i>	13.3
<i>Average number of days attended</i>	29.5
Received a stipend (%)	55.0
Worked in an internship (%)	25.6
Sample size	289

SOURCES: MDRC calculations from Bridges participation data and stipend payment records.

NOTES: Sample includes individuals randomly assigned between June 2015 and July 2016.

Measures in italics are calculated among individuals who participated in the activity.

<sup>a</sup>Measure is based on the duration between the first and last dates of attendance.

opportunity to practice soft skills, such as arriving on time. However, most internships were reserved for participants who had relatively steady attendance. Only one-fourth of participants began internships and fewer completed them.

- **Staff members focused on modest short-term outcomes that could help participants achieve their goals, and they sought to connect participants to other programs.**

Program staff found the six-month program to be too short a time for most participants to obtain a high school credential or secure unsubsidized employment. They focused on helping participants make gains in their level of self-confidence, communication skills, and attendance during their time in the Bridges program. The staff hoped to prepare and connect these participants with programs where they could continue to work toward longer-term education and employment goals.

## **Findings from the Small-Scale Random Assignment Study**

Although this report focuses mainly on the implementation of Bridges to Pathways, it also presents the survey and administrative data that the research team collected to assess the program's potential to improve participants' outcomes and reduce violence. The study's primary data source was arrest data from the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority. In addition, the research

team analyzed data from a follow-up survey fielded to study participants approximately 11 months after random assignment, as well as employment and earnings data from the National Directory of New Hires (NDNH). However, the analysis was limited since less than half of sample members responded to the survey and only about half of them provided identifying information that the team could match to the NDNH.

As explained earlier, control group members were not eligible to participate in Bridges, but they could access other services that were available in the community, including non-Bridges services offered at the agencies operating Bridges. Using survey data collected from approximately half of the sample, the research team assessed the extent to which the offer of the Bridges program increased the services received by the program group over and above what the control group received. This comparison is important because without a meaningful service differential, impacts on outcomes were unlikely.

- **The program produced modest increases in participants' access to education and training, employment services, and supportive relationships with staff members.**

Nearly 70 percent of survey respondents in the program group reported participating in either education or training activities, compared with 62 percent of respondents in the control group. The resulting 7 percentage point increase in participation in these activities for program group members is not statistically significant. Program group members were more likely to report having received employment-related assistance than control group members (82 percent and 63 percent, respectively). Program group members were also more likely to report having received advice or support from a staff member at an agency or organization compared with their control group counterparts (66 percent and 50 percent, respectively). While Bridges increased participants' access to certain services, it had no impact on receipt of educational or training certification. Among program group members, 15 percent reported that they had earned a high school diploma or equivalency certificate, compared with 18 percent among control group members.

- **Following an early increase in employment due to participation in the program's internships, there was no sustained positive effect on employment through the end of the follow-up period.**

Although program group members were employed at higher rates than control group members early in the follow-up period, once their participation in internships declined, the rate of employment was similar for the two research groups. In the third quarter after random assignment, the employment rate for both groups was approximately 27 percent. In the fourth quarter following random assignment, employment among control group members increased, reaching nearly 40 percent, but remained flat for program group members. It is unclear what accounts for the uptick in employment among control group members.

- **Bridges reduced the rates of arrest for felony crimes and for violent crimes.**

The program had no impacts on the overall rate of arrest or incarceration in the Cook County jail during the first year of follow-up. However, the program did reduce the rate of arrest for felony crimes by 8 percentage points (34 percent of the program group compared with 42 percent of the control group). Program participants were also significantly less likely to be arrested for a violent crime (21 percent of the program group compared with 28 percent of the control group).

## **Lessons**

Bridges was designed to be an intensive program to help a vulnerable population achieve key education and employment milestones, and thereby desist from violence. The program succeeded in enrolling members of its target population but struggled to keep them engaged. As the program operated, it revised its approach to service delivery and emphasized the importance of mentorship and case management. The implementation study suggests that supporting and engaging this population may require robust supports, caring staff, and substantial time to make progress toward long-term goals. The findings from the limited impact study indicate that the program reduced the rates of arrest for violent and felony crimes among program group members. Despite some challenges, the program was able to engage a subset of young men and reduce arrest for serious crimes. Therefore, it is important to test programs that continue to refine the model that Bridges outlined in order to identify the appropriate mix of services that can make a difference in the lives of young adults involved with the justice system.

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