

What is the community challenge?

According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, 21% of children in the United States live in poverty. Exposure to multiple poverty and trauma-related risks increases the odds that children will demonstrate less social and emotional competence, lower executive functioning skills, and more behavior problems. Research has shown that geographic areas with poverty rates of 20 percent or higher experience systemic problems: things like systemic poverty, structural racism, childhood trauma, underfunded schools, violence, hunger and homelessness. Concentrated poverty and the stressful conditions that accompany it compromise health and well-being, negatively affecting attention, decision-making, learning, and self-regulation – in the short and long term.

What is the promising solution?

Friends of the Children (FOTC) identifies 4-6 year old children from schools, foster care, and community partner agencies, pairing them with highly trained, skilled, paid professional mentors (called “Friends”) who sustain an intensive Friend-child and family relationship over 12 + years of a child’s growth and development. This one-on-one approach is based on research showing that the single most important factor in fostering resiliency in children is a caring and consistent relationship with an adult. Friends provide developmentally appropriate experiential teaching and modeling of healthy behaviors, directly coaching children on social-emotional skill development areas. Friends also assist youth in achieving individualized “road map” goals in the areas of school success, making good choices, planning skills for the future, prosocial development, and healthy habits. Friends work collaboratively with caregivers on social-emotional skill development, problem solving, meeting concrete family needs, and improved understanding of how to meet their child’s unique needs.

What was the purpose of evaluation?

The evaluation of FOTC’s program began in 2016 and finished in 2020. FOTC carried out both an implementation study and an outcome study. The goal of the SIF implementation study was to explore how and why the FOTC model works by examining its replication and expansion in new sites or to new populations. The implementation evaluation included a school study, which involved analyzing school administrative data to answer exploratory research questions related to school behavior, academic proficiency on standardized math and reading assessments, and school absenteeism. The outcome study sought to answer exploratory research questions related to time in foster care, time to permanence, and the number of removals, placements, and re-entries to the child welfare system for FOTC-enrolled youth and a comparison group of youth. A caregiver survey explored self-reported program influences on children’s socio-emotional learning, school behavior, family stability and parenting efficacy, as well as caregiver’s assessments of program quality.

Program At-a-Glance

CNCS Program: Social Innovation Fund

Intervention: The program uses paid professional mentors (Friends) who sustain an intensive mentor-child relationship over 12+ years of the child’s growth and development, beginning at 4-6 years of age.

Grantee: Friends of the Children (FOTC)

Focus Area(s): Youth Development

Focus Population(s): Youth, aged 4-18+

Community(ies) Served: San Francisco, CA; Los Angeles, CA; Seattle, WA; Austin, TX; Boston, MA; Central Oregon, OR; Charlotte, NC

What did the evaluation find?

As a grantee of the Social Innovation Fund, FOTC engaged an independent evaluator, ICF, to evaluate their program.

- The implementation evaluation found that program sites generally implemented the model with fidelity, with all sites, on average, achieving the targeted number of school and caregiver contacts each month. Sites struggled the most with achieving the targeted number of hours with youth.
- Findings from the caregiver survey indicate that FOTC helped caregivers strengthen family relationships and parenting and connected them to concrete supports that promoted family well-being.
- The child welfare exploratory outcomes study found that program youth (FOTC-enrolled) had a significantly decreased length of stay in foster care (an average of 399 days) compared to the comparison group (an average of 576 days).
- The school study was exploratory and limited due to challenges identifying an appropriate comparison group with administrative data. Findings confirmed those in FOTC's randomized control trial (RCT) study namely that the program's impacts during the early years are not demonstrable using school administrative data. Caregivers' reports of significant youth progress on key social emotional skills are aligned with early learning research and are more illustrative of the program's impact at school in the elementary years.

Notes on the evaluation

Due to congressional sun-setting of the Social Innovation Fund program, FOTC was not able to conduct an impact evaluation, and instead conducted an implementation evaluation and exploratory outcomes study. Additionally, FOTC program activities and data collection efforts during the final year of their evaluation in 2020 were severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

How is FOTC using the evaluation findings to improve?

FOTC plans to use the findings from this study to strengthen implementation fidelity and advance their evidence-base in the following ways:

1. Incorporate findings into the next phase of the ongoing RCT of FOTC focusing on the adolescent years.
2. Strengthen the FOTC logic model and implementation of a two-generation (2Gen) approach, and then leverage these enhancements to build a quasi-experimental or RCT evaluation plan to achieve a higher level of evidence for the model's 2Gen impact.
3. Strengthen the training and support of Friends and supervisors through continued development of a new quality improvement system.
4. Partner with network sites to review program fidelity standards related to benchmark hours spent with youth, caregivers, and schools.

The content of this brief was drawn from the full evaluation report submitted to CNCS by the grantee/subgrantee. The section of the brief that discusses evaluation use includes contribution of the grantee/subgrantee. All original content from the report is attributable to its authors.

To access the full evaluation report and learn more about CNCS, please visit nationalservice.gov/research.

Evaluation At-a-Glance

Evaluation Design(s): Implementation Evaluation & Outcome Evaluation

Study Population: Children in Pre-K – 3rd grade

(Independent) Evaluator(s): ICF

This Evaluation's Level of Evidence*: Preliminary

*SIF and AmeriCorps currently use different definitions of levels of evidence.

The Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), combines public and private resources to grow the impact of innovative, community-based solutions that have compelling evidence of improving the lives of people in low-income communities throughout the U.S. The SIF invests in three priority areas: economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development.