

Evaluation Report Brief

Jobs for the Future: Back on Track Model

What is the community challenge?

In 2016, six percent of young people aged 16 to 24 were not in school and did not have high school credentials. Among youth from the lowest-income families, nearly 10 percent dropped out of school and did not have high school credentials. Males were about 45 percent more likely to have dropped out than females. About 14 percent of high school dropouts in this age range were unemployed and about 40 percent were not in the labor force.

What is the promising solution?

The Opportunity Works program and Back on Track model provides opportunity youth with supported transitions to postsecondary and career pathways. Back on Track is characterized by three program phases: (1) enriched preparation, (2) postsecondary/career bridging, and (3) first-year support.

What was the purpose of evaluation?

The evaluation of Jobs for the Future's Opportunity Works program and Back on Track model by The Urban Institute began in 2015 and finished reporting in 2019. The evaluation sought to assess the impacts of the Back on Track model on the educational and career outcomes of participants. This included assessing whether participants in the program were more likely to receive a high school diploma or GED, apply to a training program, apply to college, enroll in a training program, and/or enroll in college. Likewise, the evaluation assessed whether, after completion of the program, participants were less likely to be disconnected from work and education and/or less likely to be looking for work (if they were not pursuing education).

What did the evaluation find?

As a grantee/subgrantee of SIF, Jobs for the Future engaged an independent evaluator to evaluate the Back on Track model. The evaluation included an implementation study to observe how the program was implemented and operated and an impact study to determine the impact of the Back on Track model on program participants. The impact study used a quasi-experimental research design using a matched comparison technique with propensity score matching.

The impact study found the following:

- When pooling the sites together, twice as many Opportunity Works participants enrolled in both two- and four-year postsecondary institutions compared to their matched counterparts.
- Young men of color enrolled in postsecondary education at even higher rates compared to the comparison group. Six times more young men of color enrolled in postsecondary programs compared to young men of color from the comparison group.
- Program participation was associated with higher postsecondary enrollment at all sites.
- Program participants were seven percentage-points more likely to get a high school credential than individuals in the matched comparison group.
- Program participants were more likely to apply for an associate degree and to apply to training programs than individuals in the comparison group (14 and 7 percentage-points more likely, respectively).

Program At-a-Glance

CNCS Program: Social Innovation Fund

Intervention: Back on Track

Grantee: Jobs for the Future, Inc.

Focus Area: Youth Development

Focus Population: Young people aged 16 to 24 who were not in school or meaningfully employed.

Communities Served: San Francisco, CA, Boston, MA, Hartford, CT, New Orleans, LA, Santa Clara County, CA, Philadelphia, PA, and South King County, WA

- Despite the barriers they face, program participants who enrolled in postsecondary education/training had first- to second-semester persistence rates that are roughly equal to those of other community college students.¹
- Program participants who were not enrolled in school were less likely to be looking for a job (i.e., not employed, in school and unable to find work) than those in the comparison group. Only 18 percent of treatment group members were looking for a job, compared to 41 percent of the matched comparison group.
- Program participants were less likely to be disconnected from work and education. About 21 percent of program participants were not enrolled in school and not working, compared to 46 percent of the comparison group.

Notes on the evaluation

The original evaluation plan was premised on a five-year study period. However, federal cuts to SIF grant funds limited the evaluation period to only three years and the research questions were modified to reflect outcomes that the research team could measure in the observed timeframe. Accordingly, this study had a relatively short follow-up period, and it would be valuable to conduct future research with a longer follow-up period to understand how students fare in the medium- and long-term. While all sites implemented the program features, implementation varied across sites. Results of this evaluation should therefore be interpreted with an understanding that specific program impacts may vary based on the level of implementation at each site. Finally, while the comparison group was formed by selecting programs in the same region as the program sites serving an underemployed, out-of-school youth population but offering a set of services distinct from the Back on Track framework, individuals did self-select into each program. If this self-selection is associated with unobservable characteristics, this may affect the validity of the impact results presented in the report.

How Is Jobs for the Future and the subgrantees using the evaluation findings to improve?

The evaluation identified several key lessons learned for the current program and future programs looking to implement and use the Back on Track framework. These include:

- The concept of “disconnected” opportunity youth was not simple. The working definitions used by the sites for recruitment of the target population reflected a continuum of engagement around school, work, and career pathways.

Sites cautioned that it is important to ensure that program components are logistically coordinated, and that young people are supported in accessing them.

- Youth expressed the importance of relatable and caring staff, being held to high expectations, having peer support networks, having a voice in program design, and having a safe place with sufficient space. They valued the support services offered, but often struggled with the need for additional supports, such as transportation and child care.

Evaluation At-a-Glance

Evaluation Designs: Implementation Study and Impact Evaluation using a Matched Comparison Design with Propensity Scores.

Study Population: Young people aged 16 to 24 who were not in school or meaningfully employed.

Independent Evaluator: The Urban Institute

This Evaluation's Level of Evidence*: Moderate

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

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 <http://www.nationalservice.gov/research>.

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.

¹ This finding is not in relationship to the comparison group but to the broader population entering community colleges. See <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/early-momentum-metrics-leading-indicators.pdf>