

MDRC Working Paper

**What Works for Disconnected Young
People
A Scan of the Evidence**

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Overview

This paper was commissioned by the Youth Transition Funders Group in 2015. The purpose was to conduct a scan of the current state of the evidence regarding what works in helping disconnected young people, defined as the population of young people ages 16 to 24 who are not connected to work or school. To prepare the paper, MDRC conducted a literature review of relevant policies and programs. The literature reviewed included writing on impact, quasi-experimental, and implementation studies. MDRC also conducted reviews of numerous websites to learn about current policy trends and evaluations in process. To supplement what was learned from written materials, MDRC interviewed a number of practitioners in the field, including representatives from foundations, coalitions, and research organizations.

The main findings of this scan are:

- Policies affecting disconnected young people span a range of systems, including public schools; adult basic and secondary education; and the juvenile justice, foster care, and mental health systems. As a result services, funding, and research are often uncoordinated and fragmented, though collective impact or system-level approaches are attempting to combat these challenges.
- Though program impacts may be modest or short-lived, successful programs share some common features. These include: opportunities for paid work and the use of financial incentives; strong links among education, training, and the job market; the use of youth development approaches; comprehensive support services; and support after programs end.
- Programs share some common implementation challenges, including: outreach and enrollment practices that may limit the populations they serve; difficulties keeping young people engaged in a program long enough to benefit from it; staff turnover; and difficulties addressing young people's barriers to participation, particularly their lack of transportation and child care.
- The field's understanding of what works in serving disconnected young people could advance significantly in the coming years, as more than a dozen evaluations of programs are currently under way, including evaluations of collective impact approaches.
- There are gaps in the existing services available: There are not enough programs for young people who are not motivated to reconnect to education or the job market on their own, nor for young people who have weak basic skills, especially those who have aged out of the public school system. The areas where there are gaps in services also tend to be areas where there is little evidence regarding what works.

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I. Introduction

The paper was commissioned by the Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG) in 2015. The purpose was to conduct a scan of the current state of the evidence regarding what works in helping disconnected young people, defined as the population of young people ages 16 to 24 who are not connected to work or school. YTFG asked MDRC to cover four main research questions:

- What local, state, and federal policies have an impact on disconnected young people? What policies are helping improve services for this population? What policies are barriers to creating effective programs?
- What programs have been shown to be effective in serving disconnected young people? What evaluations in process have the potential to contribute to the evidence base?
- What is known about the effectiveness of system-level approaches, also called “collective impact approaches?”
- Where are there gaps in services or knowledge? What programs or practices should be targeted for further research or expansion?

To prepare this paper, MDRC conducted a literature review of relevant policies and programs. The literature reviewed included writing on impact, quasi-experimental, and implementation studies. MDRC also conducted reviews of numerous websites to learn about current policy trends and evaluations in process. To supplement what was learned from written materials, MDRC interviewed a number of practitioners in the field, including representatives from foundations, coalitions, and research organizations.

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- Though program impacts may be modest or short-lived, successful programs share some common features. These include: opportunities for paid work and the use of financial incentives; strong links among education, training, and the job market; the use of youth development approaches; comprehensive support services; and support after programs end.

- Programs share some common implementation challenges, including: outreach and enrollment practices that may limit the populations they serve; difficulties keeping young people engaged in a program long enough to benefit from it; staff turnover; and difficulties addressing young people’s barriers to participation, particularly their lack of transportation and child care.
- The field’s understanding of what works in serving disconnected young people could advance significantly in the coming years, as more than a dozen evaluations of programs are currently under way, including evaluations of collective impact approaches.
- There are gaps in the existing services available: There are not enough programs for young people who are not motivated to reconnect to education or the job market on their own, nor for young people who have low basic skills, especially those who have aged out of the public school system. The areas where there are gaps in services also tend to be areas where there is little evidence regarding what works.

II. Dimensions of the Issue

This section summarizes some of the major recent trends and policy developments affecting disconnected young people. This group is also referred to as “opportunity youth,” a term intended to capture the untapped potential of these young people. In 2014, the population of disconnected young people in the United States was estimated at 5.6 million, or just over 14 percent of the total population of 16- to 24-year-olds.¹ As many as 1.6 million of these young people have reached age 18 yet lack either a high school or high school equivalency diploma.² Though the percentage of young people who are disconnected from education and the job market has fallen slightly in recent years, the economic and social costs of disconnection are still significant — by one estimate disconnected young people cost taxpayers \$93 billion in 2011.³

There have been positive signs in recent years that young people are staying in school and entering postsecondary education at higher rates. In 2013, the national dropout rate (the share of 18- to 24-year-olds who were not in school and had not completed high school) reached a record low of 7 percent.⁴ College enrollment rates have increased in recent years, and now about 40 percent of the 18- to 24-year-old population is enrolled in college.⁵ Though en-

¹Measure of America (2015).

²U.S. Census Bureau (2012).

³Bridgeland and Milano (2012).

⁴Fry (2014).

⁵National Center for Education Statistics (2013b).

rollment is up, data on college graduation rates show that the majority of students who enter community college or nonselective four-year public institutions do not receive degrees within six years.⁶

While the rises in high school completion and college enrollment rates paint a positive picture on the academic front, youth unemployment rates tell a different story. In the aftermath of the Great Recession, youth unemployment rates in the United States dramatically increased; only about half of young people ages 16 to 24 held jobs in 2013. Among 16- to 19-year-olds, labor-force participation dropped from 54 percent in 2000 to 34 percent in 2013.⁷ There are a number of reasons for the rise of youth unemployment. A share of this drop may be the result of young people pursuing education at higher levels. Indeed, the share of young people who are enrolled in school (high school or college) and who are also employed has dropped. Structural changes in the labor market are also driving this trend, as job opportunities for high-skilled workers have expanded while demand for less-skilled, blue-collar workers has shrunk. Some segments of the young population are faring worse than others in employment. Black young people are unemployed at almost twice the rate of white young people.⁸

Though young people in general face a challenging labor market, disconnected young people face particular challenges. Many come from disadvantaged families and communities and have experienced a number of challenges and impediments to success in school and work that their more affluent peers have not. Still, analyses of longitudinal data on young people have shown that the majority of disconnected young people attempt to reconnect to education and the labor market at some point. According to one study, two-thirds of disconnected young people ultimately reconnected with education or the labor market, with the majority reconnecting first through work.⁹ This study used data collected before the Great Recession, so it is not known how recent changes in the youth labor market have affected young people's attempts to reconnect.

Policies Affecting Disconnected Young People

Disconnected young people are a heterogeneous population with a range of experiences and risk factors. This section provides a high-level summary of the federal, state, and local policies that have an impact on them. As this paper focuses on programs for young people who are already disconnected from education and the labor market, this section does not cover the numerous programs and policies that focus on dropout prevention.

⁶Community College Research Center (2015).

⁷Hossain and Bloom (2015).

⁸NPR (2014).

⁹Hair et al. (2009).

Public Schools

The public school system is often the last point of “connection” for many disconnected young people, and some of these young people will eventually attempt to reconnect to public schools. Though data are not available at the national level on the precise number of dropouts who return to school, local estimates from some cities and districts have found that between one-third and one-half of dropouts attempt to reengage with the public school system at least once.¹⁰ However, there are limits on who is eligible to reconnect to the public school system. Many states have age limits on who is eligible for public school education, leaving many young people without this option. Still, for young people who have not “aged out,” the public schools are a vital part of the system to reconnect disconnected young people.

Researchers and advocacy groups have described a number of ways that federal, state, and local policies serve as obstacles to reconnecting young people to public school. Though many educational policies are set at the state and district level, federal policy also plays a role. The federal No Child Left Behind legislation requires schools to measure and report on Adequate Yearly Progress, and schools face consequences if they fail to meet their targets. One measure of Adequate Yearly Progress for a high school is its graduation rate, which is typically measured over four years. Schools face a disincentive to reenrolling students who have dropped out, because they are unlikely to graduate within that four-year time frame. However, states can apply for permission to use an extended time frame of five to six years for the purposes of calculating graduation rates. A 2012 report found that only 10 states had applied for and received approval to use extended-year graduation rates in their Adequate Yearly Progress calculations.¹¹

Policies on how school funds are allocated to individual schools, which are often made at the state or local level, also affect the opportunities for young people who want to reconnect to public school. Advocates for disconnected young people have called for weighted-student funding approaches as opposed to unweighted methods that use Average Daily Attendance. In weighted-student funding, schools receive more funds per pupil for children with special needs — such as low-income students, English-language learners, and those with learning disabilities. In this way, schools receive a financial incentive to work with struggling students. California is in the middle of implementing such a weighted approach to its school funding system.¹²

Outside of funding, school district policies that offer increased flexibility can improve opportunities for disconnected young people by lowering common barriers they face to reconnecting with public schools. Many school districts have alternative schools that target the needs of young people at risk of dropping out or those who are looking to reconnect. Though exact numbers are not tracked at the national level, one estimate found that close to 40 percent of

¹⁰Sparks (2015).

¹¹National Association of Secondary School Principals (2015).

¹²WestEd and California State Board of Education (2015).

school districts offered an alternative option.¹³ These programs may be competency-based (that is, focused on helping students master subjects) rather than focused on keeping them in the classroom for a certain amount of time, as a way to help them finish their degrees faster. Alternative schools may offer flexibility in schedule, providing evening or online programs. As mentioned above, age limits on eligibility may exclude older disconnected young people from these services. Most states set their age limits at 21, but some states have elected to set higher or lower age limits. Texas has the highest upper age limit at 26, while young people in Montana age out of public school at 19.¹⁴

School financing policies can also support disconnected young people by allowing public school dollars to flow to non-public school providers that may be better positioned to meet their needs, including public charter schools. Though such programs may be a better fit for some young people, school districts have disincentives to referring students to those programs, because they will then lose the funding associated with those students. Though more public charter schools to serve out-of-school young people seem to have formed recently, it is hard to pin down precise information on the number of these schools and the number of young people they serve. These schools often serve as both dropout-prevention and dropout-recovery programs — that is, they serve both students who were struggling in their district schools and are at risk of dropping out, and those who have already dropped out and are reconnecting with school.

High School Equivalency Credentials

For many disconnected young people, reconnecting with education involves a high school equivalency test, not a high school diploma. According to one study, young people who were disconnected from education and the labor market at some point between the ages of 16 and 24 were more than twice as likely to have a high school equivalency by age 28 than young people who had not experienced disconnection.¹⁵ A high school equivalency may be more attainable than a high school diploma, either because the young people have aged out of the public school system or because they believe that they can finish a high school equivalency faster than they could a high school diploma.¹⁶ Many programs aimed at reconnecting disconnected young people only offer high school equivalencies. However, studies have shown that high school equivalencies do not have the same value as high school diplomas in the labor market. In an attempt to address this discrepancy, 12 states currently offer high school equivalency recipients high school diplomas, and such a policy is currently under consideration in the District of Columbia.

¹³Culbertson, d’Entremont, and Poulos (2014).

¹⁴National Center for Education Statistics (2013a).

¹⁵Belfield, Levin, and Rosen (2012).

¹⁶Alternative schools and charter schools operating in the public school system may also offer a high school equivalency option.

In 2014, the company offering the General Educational Development (GED) exam — the most common high school equivalency test — changed the test to align it better with Common Core standards. At the same time, test administration became completely computer-based and fees rose. Since these changes, the number of people taking and passing the GED has dropped significantly.¹⁷ Some states are no longer using the GED test, and are instead using alternative high school equivalency tests such as the TASC or the HiSET.

High school equivalency programs are housed in a number of types of institutions, including school districts, community-based nonprofit organizations, and community colleges. Recognizing that a high school equivalency should be a stepping stone to broader career goals, some programs go beyond just preparing students for those exams and promote connections to college or careers. Some programs, discussed later in this memo, integrate high school equivalency and career pathways approaches, allowing students to both prepare for the equivalency test and begin training for a career. Students usually do not have access to financial aid while pursuing their high school equivalencies, but Congress recently restored Pell Grant eligibility for students without educational credentials who enroll in career pathway programs that integrate adult basic education with college-level course work.¹⁸

Employment and Career Pathways

Past research has shown that disconnected young people tend to reconnect first with employment, as opposed to education. Since this research took place before the Great Recession and the structural changes in the labor market described earlier, it is hard to tell whether this pattern still holds true. Still, experts agree that young people need the opportunity to connect to employment, and a number of initiatives targeting disconnected young people focus on employment and career pathways. The largest of these initiatives are federally funded programs that combine academic and vocational training with paid work experience, for example Youth-Build and Job Corps. Funding for these two programs, which together are estimated to serve more than 70,000 young people annually, totaled nearly \$1.8 billion in fiscal year 2015, a slight increase over recent years. Studies of these programs will be discussed later in this paper.

Summer employment programs provide the first work experience of many young people. Federal funding for summer jobs was cut in 1998, yet some cities continue to fund their own summer jobs programs and have had to initiate lotteries to allocate the limited number of slots available. But most young people who participate in summer employment programs are in

¹⁷Turner and Kamenetz (2015).

¹⁸McCarthy (2014).

school. Some summer jobs programs specifically target disconnected young people, but they serve a very low percentage of the population of disconnected young people.¹⁹

The revised Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA), which replaces the Workforce Innovation Act (WIA) of 1998, will affect employment and training services for disconnected young people. Changes took effect July 1, 2015. WIOA focuses more sharply on young people who are out of school: It requires that a higher percentage of youth funds go to programs serving “out-of-school youth” (75 percent, compared with 30 percent under WIA). WIOA also raises the age of eligibility to 24 for out-of-school young people, and relaxes some requirements on eligibility that will make it easier for disadvantaged young people to benefit from WIOA funding.²⁰ For example, young people can meet the low-income eligibility criteria by living in a high-poverty area; they do not need to prove that they themselves come from low-income families. WIOA also adds some required program elements, like financial literacy training and preparation for postsecondary education. Finally, WIOA changes the standards used to measure program performance, adding “measurable skills gains” as a new measure of progress, a change intended to encourage programs to serve populations with low skill levels.²¹

While WIOA could increase funding for services for disconnected young people, how individual states implement it will determine the magnitude of its impact. For example, WIOA requires that more funds go toward “out-of-school youth,” but leaves it to states to define that population. Depending on how each state does define the population, young people who have dropped out of school but have subsequently reenrolled in an alternative school may not be eligible for WIOA funds. While WIOA stipulates that young people enrolled in YouthBuild or Job Corps may be counted as “out-of-school,” young people in similar programs may not be eligible under the WIOA definition.²²

Career pathways approaches also received increased emphasis in WIOA. Career pathways approaches identify occupations where the supply of qualified applicants does not meet labor-market demand, and tailor education and training programs for low-income, low-skill populations to fill those gaps. Though career pathways approaches do not specifically target disconnected young people, youth programs have been adopting these approaches. Each pathway has multiple points of entry, so that workers of varying skill levels can join the career path. For example, one program may target participants who do not yet have their high school equivalency credentials, and a separate program will target participants with some college. Career pathway approaches also offer multiple opportunities for workers to advance

¹⁹González-Rivera (2014).

²⁰Bird, Foster, and Ganzglass (2014).

²¹Interview with Don Spangler, Executive Director, National Youth Employment Center, 3/18/15.

²²Strumpf Associates: Center for Strategic Change and the Center for Youth and Communities (2015).

their education and move up the career ladder. Other elements of career pathway approaches include assessments and services to guide participants and connect them with the support they need to be successful, including help addressing nonacademic barriers to employment like a lack of child care.²³

Special Populations

Some young people may be disconnected from school and work, but connected to other institutions such as the foster care system or the juvenile and criminal justice systems. These populations have particular risk factors that make their return to school or work especially difficult.

Young people leaving the foster care system are vulnerable, for example, because they typically have not progressed far in school, have histories of mental health problems and substance abuse, and lack family support. A number of legislative changes in the last few decades have benefited young people in the foster care system. Since 1999, federal legislation has provided states with more funding and greater flexibility to support young people as they left foster care. This legislation includes the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, which allows states to keep young people in the foster care system until they are 21 and gives them access to funding for independent living programs. States also have access to the Chafee Educational and Training Voucher Program to provide education and training vouchers for young people up to 23 years old.

Young people leaving the juvenile and criminal justice systems also face significant challenges. Research has shown that being in residential confinement (the juvenile equivalent of prison) has a negative impact on young people's education and employment outcomes. Since its peak in 1995, the rate at which the United States confines young people in residential facilities has dropped considerably.²⁴ Still, the United States confines young people at a higher rate than other industrialized countries. Young people over 18 are likely to be in the adult criminal justice system. Although imprisonment rates for 18- to 24-year-olds have dropped over the last decade, huge disparities still exist between the United States and other industrialized countries. Black males of this age group are imprisoned at rates six times higher than white males.²⁵

Disconnected young people who are parents are also a population of special concern. In addition to the challenges that their nonparent peers face in reconnecting to work and school, they have the added stress that comes with parenting and caring for young children. The lack of resources these parents have to meet their own needs and those of their children places both

²³Center for Law and Social Policy (2014).

²⁴Annie E. Casey Foundation (2013).

²⁵Cook et al. (2014).

generations at risk and contributes to intergenerational cycles of poverty. Programs for disconnected young parents typically take three forms: interventions targeting the parents, interventions targeting their children, and two-generation programs that seek to serve both parents and children. Coordinating services for both generations is challenging because the funding sources for programs targeting each population are often administered separately.²⁶

Adolescent Development and Mental Health

New science is shedding light on how the brain continues to develop into adolescence, with implications for programs aimed at disconnected young people. Research has shown that adolescents must undergo a series of developmental tasks, including developing identity and autonomy, identifying career goals, and gaining impulse control. At the same time as their brains are working on these tasks, chemical changes to the brain encourage them to take risks. Adult support can help adolescents navigate these challenges, but disconnected young people often lack such adult support.²⁷ As will be discussed later, many programs attempt to provide young people with the support they may lack from their families.

Recent efforts in the mental health field are raising awareness of the impact of trauma on a young person's life trajectory. Studies have demonstrated that exposure to traumatic events has many adverse short- and long-term effects for children and adolescents. These studies have led to federal efforts to increase trauma-focused care, including the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Programs are increasingly incorporating a trauma-informed approach into their models.

Collaboration and Collective Impact

Recognizing that the policies affecting disconnected young people involve a broad range of agencies and actors, states and communities across the country are implementing efforts to foster collaboration across these systems. Collaboration is challenging; each stakeholder brings to the table its own set of priorities, sources of funding, and definitions of success. Each organization, agency, or school typically collects separate performance measures. It takes significant effort for these actors to settle on common indicators to track progress and for them to reach agreements to share data.

Recent initiatives indicate that collaborative approaches to meeting the needs of disconnected young people are of increasing interest to the field. At the federal level, the White House Council for Community Services focused on issues related to disconnected young people, and the recommendations it released in 2012 stressed issues of collaboration and coordination. In-

²⁶Katz et al. (2013).

²⁷Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (2011).

terest in city-level Reengagement Centers is on the rise, and the Aspen Group's Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund is funding collective impact efforts in 21 cities.

III. The Evidence Base on Programs and Practices for Disconnected Young People

The preceding section described the range of policies that touch the lives of disconnected young people. This section provides an overview of the evidence base on effective programs and practices targeting these young people. First, the types of evaluations that are included in the scan are described, including how each type of evaluation contributes to the evidence base. The review of the evidence is then broken into two sections. The first section covers evidence relating to specific *programs* or *interventions*, including evaluation efforts that are under way. The second section discusses evidence related to *system-level* or *collective impact* approaches.

Types of Evaluations

The evidence on “what works” has mostly come from evaluations of publicly funded programs that have the scale to undergo randomized controlled trials. Though smaller programs within school districts, community-based organizations, and community colleges serve many disconnected young people, few of these programs have been formally evaluated. This section gives a brief overview of the common types of evaluations and the research questions they answer.

Considered the “gold standard” of evaluation, randomized controlled trials can demonstrate a program's impact on a certain population. In a randomized controlled trial, study participants are randomly assigned either to a program group that is eligible to participate in the intervention, or to a control group that is not eligible to participate in the intervention. Since the program and control groups are formed at random, any differences in outcomes between the two groups can reasonably be attributed to the effect of the program and not to some underlying variable. This type of evaluation requires sample sizes that may be prohibitive for smaller organizations.

A quasi-experimental evaluation does not require randomization. Instead it creates a comparison group in some other way, for example by examining the administrative records of populations with characteristics similar to the population targeted by the intervention. This comparison group is then compared with the program group to estimate program effects. Though quasi-experimental evaluations avoid some of the challenges of randomized controlled trials, without randomization it is difficult to form a comparison group that is not biased in some

way. Results from quasi-experimental evaluations should be interpreted with some caution. Such evaluations may be more or less rigorous depending on the study design used.

An implementation or process study is an evaluation that focuses on a program's implementation, examining whom it serves, how it operates, and how well it achieves its intended goals. Implementation studies may include data on participant outcomes. They may stand alone, or may be combined with impact studies. Though an implementation study does not assess an intervention's impact, it can offer a valuable opportunity to learn about best practices and about what factors facilitate or impede successful program implementation. An implementation study that includes in-depth interviews or focus groups with disconnected young people also reveals the needs and experiences of the population served by the program.

The evaluations discussed next include randomized controlled trials, quasi-experimental studies, and implementation evaluations. Only evaluations conducted by third-party evaluators are included. While many programs report their outcomes on websites or other forums, such self-reported data were not included in this evidence scan.

Evidence on Programs

This section focuses on evidence concerning specific programs that serve disconnected young people, specifically on findings from evaluations of programs that are currently operating.²⁸ The discussion is divided into four main sections, organized by the program or intervention's primary target outcome. Employment-focused programs are discussed first, followed by education-focused programs. A third section focuses on outreach and case management models, which often serve the most disconnected segment of the population. A fourth section focuses on behavioral and therapeutic interventions. A summary of this information is provided in Appendix A. It should be noted that these categories are arbitrary in some ways — programs often target multiple outcomes. A synthesis of “what works” is provided at the end of the section.

The studies covered here largely focus on education- or employment-related outcomes. These outcomes are often the easiest to measure because programs generally already collect data on them. There are also state and federal sources of data on these outcomes; using data that are already collected as standard practice lowers the cost of evaluations and can allow easier comparisons across programs. However, a program may produce outcomes in other aspects of a young person's life that are harder to measure, but that are linked to a person's well-being. The Youth Transition Funder's Group Well-Being Framework outlines these areas, which include

²⁸Evaluations of programs that are no longer operating were mostly excluded from the scan, though some evaluations of discontinued programs found impacts on employment and education outcomes. These discontinued programs include the National Supported Work Demonstration, JOBSTART, and the Youth Incentive Entitlement Pilot Project.

social development, mental health, physical health, and safety.²⁹ A limited number of studies have measured outcomes in these areas and they are mentioned when applicable.

Employment-Focused Programs

As mentioned above, youth employment rates are at historic lows. Though some stereotypes portray disconnected young people as being uniformly high school dropouts, according to a recent study, 40 percent of the disconnected young people surveyed already had secondary credentials (high school diplomas or high school equivalency credentials).³⁰ Though they had completed their secondary education, they were not connected to work or postsecondary education. The same survey found that, regardless of their education levels, more than half of disconnected young people were looking for full-time jobs.³¹

This section focuses on evidence regarding programs that specifically target employment. While many programs combine education and career training (and these are discussed in later sections of this paper) there are few programs that have employment as their primary focus. The populations served by these programs tend to fall at the “least disconnected” end of the disconnection spectrum, as many of them require participants to have a secondary credential to enroll.

Year Up, which operates in 14 cities, provides participants ages 18 to 24 with six months of training in information technology and finance, followed by a six-month internship. Participants need to have secondary credentials to qualify for the program. Each participant receives a stipend tied to a performance contract during both the training and internship phases. Staff advisers help young people with both personal and professional issues, and each participant is also paired with a mentor. A small random assignment evaluation found that *Year Up* participants had higher earnings and were more likely to be working full time a year after program participation than members of a control group.³² At the three-year mark, the program group had higher earnings, mostly as the result of higher wages. However, the program group was less likely to be attending college than the control group. The three-year follow-up findings should be interpreted with some caution, as the study had a short embargo period (the period during which control group members were prevented from joining the program); nearly a third of control group members ultimately ended up participating in *Year Up*.³³ Efforts to learn more about the effectiveness of *Year Up* are under way. *Year Up* has eight locations participating in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education study (formerly the Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency study), a ran-

²⁹Langford, Badeau, and Legters (2015).

³⁰Bridgeland and Milano (2012).

³¹Bridgeland and Milano (2012).

³²Roder and Elliott (2011).

³³Roder and Elliott (2014).

dom assignment evaluation of nine career pathways programs. The evaluation will follow the study sample for 30 months, and early impact results are expected in 2016.³⁴

A randomized controlled trial of three sector-based training and employment programs found impacts on employment and earnings gains for young adults (ages 18 to 26) in two of the three programs evaluated: *Jewish Vocational Service* in Boston and *Per Scholas* in New York City.³⁵ These programs offered a combination of sector-specific training (health care in the case of Jewish Vocational Service and information technology in the case of Per Scholas), internships, job placement, and postplacement support. The interventions did not specifically target young people and, like Year Up, they required participants to enter the program with secondary credentials.

Other evaluations of employment programs for young people are under way. Two programs in the Subsidized and Transitional Employment Demonstration (STED) evaluation (which MDRC is leading and which includes a random assignment design) focus on young people. The *Young Adult Internship Program* serves young adults in New York City who are disconnected from school and work, many of whom have high school diplomas or high school equivalency credentials. The nine-month program uses a cohort structure (that is, it starts groups of young people at the same time so they progress together) and starts with an assessment of employability skills and social-support needs. Work-readiness training and supportive counseling are provided for the duration of the program. Participants engage in a 10- to 14-week paid internship, after which they receive placement support from the program to connect with education, advanced training, or employment. Impact results are expected in 2017. Chicago's *Bridges to Pathways* program, also in the STED evaluation, is a six-month transitional jobs program for young men who have recently been incarcerated. The program includes online educational support, subsidized jobs, mentoring, and social-emotional/cognitive behavioral programs. Impact results are also expected in 2017.

Education-Focused Programs

Most disconnected young people lack secondary credentials, which greatly impedes their ability to connect to work or college. Employers may require a high school diploma or high school equivalency credential, putting young people without one at a disadvantage when applying for jobs. Not having a secondary credential can also prevent them from entering post-secondary education and receiving financial aid.

A longitudinal study of disconnected young people found that by age 28, nearly three-quarters had received high school diplomas and 10 percent had high school equivalency creden-

³⁴Interview with Karen Gardiner, Abt Associates, 3/20/2015.

³⁵Maguire et al. (2010).

tials.³⁶ These numbers indicate that a strong majority of young people who disconnect from school eventually achieve secondary credentials.

There are multiple ways young people can achieve secondary credentials. Young people who have not aged out have the option of returning to public school, and many are served through alternative schools, which are either operated by the district or by charter organizations. The number of alternative schools that target at-risk and disconnected young people has increased in recent years. But for some young people, returning to school is not an option, either because they have aged out or because they are reluctant to return to institutions that were not able to meet their needs the first time around. For these young people, a number of program options can lead to a secondary credential. These programs vary in their structure and approach, but roughly fall into two categories: comprehensive programs that specifically target young people, and programs that target postsecondary education and serve a range of ages. Some of these programs incorporate career pathway approaches.

Comprehensive Youth Programs

Programs in this category specifically target young people and have age limits on eligibility. They tend to combine support services to address participants' academic, employment, and life goals. Many of these programs are federally funded and operate at the national scale, and evaluation data from studies of these programs offer lessons on promising strategies to help disconnected young people.

Two comprehensive youth programs are residential: *Job Corps* and *National Guard Youth ChalleNGe*. Job Corps is the largest federal program for disconnected young people, serving more than 60,000 each year across 125 centers. Participants can earn high school diplomas or equivalency credentials and receive career training in one of many fields, such as business, health, or construction. Participants also get health care, stipends, career counseling, and transitional support for a year following graduation. A four-year random assignment study found that the program increased the amount of education and training participants received, and increased literacy rates. The program generated employment and earning gains through a four-year follow-up period, but these effects were not sustained after the end of that follow-up period, except for young people who entered the program when they were 20 to 24 years old.³⁷

In ChalleNGe, participants engage in a five-month, intensive residential program that includes eight core components: education, life-skills training, leadership-skills development, community service, citizenship building, physical fitness, health and hygiene, and job-skills training and career exploration. The program also helps participants set up structured mentoring

³⁶Belfield, Levin, and Rosen (2012).

³⁷Schochet, Burghardt, and McConnell (2006).

for at least a year with mentors of their choice in their own communities so they have some support after they leave. A three-year random assignment study found that participants were more likely than their control group counterparts to have obtained high school credentials, to have earned college credits, and to be working. Their earnings were also 20 percent higher than control group members.³⁸ The U.S. Department of Labor will soon be testing *Job ChalleNGe*, an adaptation of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program that will add five months of occupational training to the core ChalleNGe program. An evaluation of the demonstration is planned, with results expected in 2020.

Conservation Corps targets out-of-school young people, offering participants temporary, full-time subsidized work in community service projects, along with basic adult education and opportunities to earn college credits, case management, and job-readiness training. An impact evaluation in the late 1990s found that more than a year after entering the study, Corps participants were 26 percent more likely than control group members to be employed and were also working more hours. The program produced the largest impact on young black males and was found to be cost-effective by producing a net benefit to society.³⁹ However, the positive results were called into question by a 2011 evaluation of Conservation Corps that found the program had no significant impacts on the probability of its participants being employed or in school roughly 30 months after they entered the study.⁴⁰

Civic Justice Corps was a variant of the Conservation Corps model directed at formerly incarcerated young people and those involved in the court system. It offered a combination of job-readiness activities, community service, and internships. Participants were supported by a stipend while in the program. A study of the program in New York City found that while the program had some modest positive effects on employment, it did not have any effect on education or criminal justice outcomes.⁴¹ Civic Justice Corps programs are not currently active.

YouthBuild is a privately and federally funded program that combines construction and vocational training with academic services, counseling and supportive services, youth development activities (that is, activities that foster leadership or that give young people the chance to form strong relationships with adults), stipends, and support during transition. An impact evaluation is under way of the federal YouthBuild program in 75 locations. The evaluation includes an extensive implementation study, which was published in March 2015. The implementation study does not include information on participant outcomes, but offers a detailed description of the diversity of academic and training activities offered and the program model's focus on youth development. The implementation study also described how YouthBuild programs typically

³⁸Millenky, Bloom, Muller-Ravett, and Broadus (2011).

³⁹Jastrzab, Masker, Blomquist, and Orr (1996).

⁴⁰Jastrzab, Masker, Blomquist, and Orr (1996).

⁴¹Bauer et al. (2014).

focus on recruiting young people who are “ready for change.”⁴² An interim impact report is expected in 2017 and the final report is expected in 2018.

Project Rise combines education, work-readiness training, and paid internships. The yearlong program targets 16- to 24-year-olds who do not have high school diplomas or high school equivalency credentials. Participants start with career-readiness and educational programs before they are placed in paid internships; continued participation in the internship is contingent on a young person’s consistent engagement in education. The program started in New York City and is being replicated in Newark, New Jersey, and Kansas City, Missouri, in connection with funding from the Social Innovation Fund. An implementation study of the program released in fall 2015 found that it was challenging to implement the internship component as intended. The report also describes difficulties the programs had sustaining the engagement of participants, including the finding that participants with child care needs faced particular challenges.⁴³

Two comprehensive youth programs in California are also undergoing evaluations. The *Los Angeles Reconnections Career Academy* targets high school dropouts ages 16 to 24, reconnecting them to school and subsidizing vocational training in the health care field. Implementation, impact, and cost-effectiveness studies of the effort are under way, funded by a Workforce Innovation Fund grant. *Linking Innovation and Knowledge (@LIKE)*, is a program in three California counties for 18- to 24-year-olds who have been out of school and work for more than 90 days. It includes a mix of educational and employment services. Each participant works with a life coach. A quasi-experimental study and cost-benefit study are planned for 2016.⁴⁴

As mentioned earlier, many alternative schools target disconnected young people, offering them the chance to earn high school diplomas or high school equivalency credentials. Some school districts have developed “GED Plus” programs, which offer students a way to earn their high school equivalency credentials and include other forms of support to connect them to the next step on a college or career pathway. GED Plus programs also often include partnerships with community-based organizations serving young people. Examples of this type of initiative include the Pathways to Graduation programs (formerly GED Plus) in New York City. Though public school systems provide data on outcomes of individual schools, there are few independent evaluations of programs for disconnected young people in public schools.

One evaluation of a network of alternative schools in Florida is under way and will be publishing results in coming years. The *PACE Center for Girls* is a statewide program that provides academic services, counseling, and transition support in a gender-responsive environment

⁴²Wiegand et al. (2015).

⁴³Manno, Yang, and Bangser (2015).

⁴⁴Workforce Innovation Fund (n.d.).

to girls ages 14 to 18 who are at risk of dropping out of high school or who have already dropped out. It is currently undergoing a random assignment study in connection with a grant from the Social Innovation Fund. The evaluation includes an implementation study, impact study, and cost-effectiveness analysis. An interim report that includes early impacts and implementation findings is due in 2017.

Postsecondary Pathways

Postsecondary education has a high value in today's labor market, where nearly 60 percent of all job openings require some postsecondary training.⁴⁵ Most disconnected young people lack experience with college,⁴⁶ and researchers have shown using longitudinal data that by age 28, only 1 percent of them have obtained associate's or bachelor's degrees, compared with 36 percent of other young people.⁴⁷ Disconnected young people can face a long road to obtaining a postsecondary credential. Young people who already have secondary credentials may find that they need developmental education before they can enroll in degree programs, while those who lack secondary credentials often must first obtain them before they can qualify for postsecondary education. However, new innovations in adult education are seeking to remove some of these obstacles and improve the transition to postsecondary education. Unlike the comprehensive youth programs described above, most of these programs do not specifically target disconnected young people, but serve a range of adult learners.

One set of programs targets students who are seeking high school equivalency credentials. Equivalency-to-college bridge programs have shown promise in both increasing equivalency exam pass rates and persistence into postsecondary education. Bridge programs take place on college campuses and include college preparatory components, typically in a cohort-based approach.⁴⁸ Programs usually offer students additional forms of support, such as career and college counseling. Recent evaluations have shown that bridge programs are promising models for reconnecting high school dropouts to education. A random assignment evaluation of the *GED Bridge to Health and Business* program at LaGuardia Community College found higher rates of GED completion and college entry for participants compared with students in LaGuardia's traditional GED course. The bridge program included full-time instructors (compared with adjuncts in the traditional GED course) and individual career and transition counseling. As opposed to the generic worksheets used in many high school equivalency programs, students in the GED Bridge program learned by using materials specific to the health care or business track

⁴⁵Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2010).

⁴⁶Bridgeland and Milano (2012).

⁴⁷Belfield, Levin, and Rosen (2012).

⁴⁸Students in high school equivalency bridge programs do not qualify for Pell grants since those programs do not lead directly to postsecondary credentials.

they were considering pursuing.⁴⁹ The program did not specifically target young people; the average study participant was 27 years old. A replication of the program is currently being tested in Wisconsin, and early results will be available in 2018.

Concurrent-enrollment programs take bridge programs a step further, allowing students to enroll in college classes while they take classes to obtain their high school equivalency credentials.⁵⁰ These models allow participants to earn postsecondary credentials more quickly by permitting them to engage in postsecondary education while they work toward secondary credentials. Students can enroll in different types of college classes in different programs; some programs limit college classes to noncredit “student success” courses designed to build the skills students will need to be successful in college.⁵¹

Though many concurrent-enrollment programs exist, there is little evidence on their effectiveness. *I-BEST*, a concurrent-enrollment program that incorporates a career pathways approach, has shown promise. First developed in Washington State, I-BEST integrates basic skills instruction with career and technical education. Students also receive other forms of support, including transition support. Students receive college credit for the portion of their time that is spent in career and technical training. A quasi-experimental study found that program participants were more likely to make learning gains and earn college credits than those in a comparison group. I-BEST does not specifically target young people. The mean age of participants in the I-BEST study was 32.⁵² The I-BEST model is currently being tested as part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education study, and is also being expanded and tested in a number of locations outside of Washington State.

Unlike GED Bridge and I-BEST, programs that serve a range of ages, a couple of programs specifically focus on connecting disconnected young people to postsecondary education. *Gateway to College* is a national program where students without high school credentials have the opportunity to earn high school diplomas and college credits simultaneously. Students attend classes on the college campus and also receive comprehensive support services. An implementation study of the program, conducted in connection with a Social Innovation Fund grant, was published in late 2015.⁵³ The study provides lessons on student engagement and replication.

⁴⁹Martin and Broadus (2013).

⁵⁰Students in concurrent enrollment programs that use a career pathways approach qualify for Pell grants because the programs do lead to postsecondary credentials.

⁵¹Rutschow and Crary-Ross (2014).

⁵²Jenkins, Zeidenberg, and Kienzl (2009); Rutschow and Crary-Ross (2014).

⁵³Willard, Bayes, and Martinez (2015).

Several of the comprehensive youth programs mentioned in the previous section include pathways to postsecondary education as part of their models. The Gates Foundation's *Postsecondary Success Initiative* provided funding to 15 community-based organizations that were already operating youth programs (including seven YouthBuild programs), to strengthen the pathway for their participants into postsecondary education. Grantees were to implement a Back on Track model, which includes enriched academic preparation to prepare students for college success, bridge programs to support their transition into college, and follow-up support during the first year of college. An analysis of short-term outcome data found that nearly 75 percent of participants received a secondary credential, and nearly half enrolled in postsecondary programs.⁵⁴

Basic Skills Programs

The programs described above target young people who either have secondary credentials or have academic skill levels that would allow them to obtain secondary credentials within a year. Many disconnected young people do not have the literacy or numeracy required to be eligible for or successful in these programs. Young people who have not aged out of the school system have the option of returning to school to improve their basic skills, and may be served through alternative schools operated by their districts or by charter organizations. As mentioned earlier, there are limited evaluation data on the effectiveness of these schools for disconnected young people. Meanwhile, a few programs target young people with low skills outside of the school system.

One such program is New York City's *Young Adult Literacy* (YAL) program. The YAL program targets 16- to 24-year-old young adults who read at the fourth- through eighth-grade levels, and serves them until they are academically ready to enter a program that prepares them for a high school equivalency test. The year-round program offers up to 15 hours of literacy and numeracy instruction each week, along with social support services, life-skills and work-readiness training, a paid internship, and some modest incentives. A correlational analysis of program data in 2012 found that YAL program participants had increased 1.41 grade levels in literacy and over one grade level in numeracy. MDRC conducted an implementation study of the program in 2014 and found that most program locations did not find it challenging to recruit participants. This finding reinforces the notion that demand exists for programs to serve low-literacy young people. The study examined the program in five locations, finding that program locations with stronger outcomes shared some features, including strong leaders, being able to draw on additional support from sponsor organizations to benefit the program and participants, strong academic staffs, and transition services. YAL was based on a now discontinued New York City program called the *Community Education Pathways to Success* (CEPS). An outcome

⁵⁴Center for Youth and Community (2013).

evaluation of CEPS also found that the program improved participants' literacy and math scores and was successful in moving a subset of participants into high school equivalency programs.⁵⁵

Outreach and Case Management Models

The programs described in the previous sections generally serve young people who are actively seeking opportunities to reconnect to school or work. As longitudinal studies have shown, the majority of young people who are disconnected from education and the labor market at some point eventually reconnect with one or the other. However, a portion of the population — which one study estimated at 10 percent — is chronically disconnected.⁵⁶ There are very few programs targeting these young people and even less evidence of what works for engaging them. The few programs targeting very disconnected young people take an intervention or case management approach. Rather than providing employment training or academic services, these programs focus on providing young people with case managers who work with them intensively to address the barriers they face to achieving their goals.

Roca in Boston is one organization that takes a proactive approach to connecting with young people. Its Intervention Model is designed to reach those young people who are the most persistently disconnected. At the heart of the model are the youth workers who conduct “relentless outreach” to at-risk young people, in an effort to form transformational relationships with them.⁵⁷ *Roca* has been through an implementation study that documented the intervention's logic model and the resources needed to provide its services. *Roca*'s effectiveness will be evaluated through a new Pay for Success initiative that started in 2014. As part of the initiative, *Roca* will provide its Intervention Model to young men involved in the adult probation system or leaving the juvenile justice system. The initiative includes a random assignment design where eligible participants will be assigned to either the program or control group, and the program will be paid based on *Roca*'s ability to achieve impacts on employment and recidivism (that is, the rate at which participants commit new crimes or are reincarcerated). Data on educational outcomes will also be gathered.⁵⁸

The *Safe and Successful Youth Initiative* is another outreach program in Massachusetts. It targets young people in 11 communities who are identified as being at high risk of involvement in gun violence. Street outreach workers find the targeted young people and connect them with a host of support services, including trauma counseling, intensive supervision, employment and education services, and support for their families.⁵⁹ A quasi-experimental evaluation found that young people with similar risk profiles were 42 percent more likely to be incarcerated than

⁵⁵Campbell, Kibler, and Weisman (2009).

⁵⁶Belfield, Levin, and Rosen (2012).

⁵⁷Parker (2015).

⁵⁸Patrick (2014).

⁵⁹Campie et al. (2013).

those who were involved with the initiative. The evaluation also found that communities in the program experienced a reduction in the number of victims of violent crimes.⁶⁰

Youth Villages provides a number of programs for emotionally and behaviorally troubled children in 13 states. MDRC is conducting a random assignment evaluation of its transitional living program, a case management program for young people aging out of foster care or exiting the juvenile justice system. The program provides intensive case management that begins with a comprehensive assessment and the development of an individual treatment plan, weekly sessions with a case manager that may include counseling, and connection to other forms of support. The impact study, which measured a range of outcomes associated with well-being, found that the program boosted earnings, increased housing stability and economic well-being, and improved some outcomes related to health and safety.⁶¹ A final report that includes a second year of follow-up and a cost-benefit analysis will be available in 2016.

The *Latin American Youth Center* in Washington, DC, is conducting a random assignment evaluation of its Promotor Pathway program in connection with a Social Innovation Fund grant. The Promotor Pathway program is a long-term case management program, where “Promotores” (staff members) work one-on-one with young people to address their barriers to education and employment and connect them to services. Promotores are meant to work with young people for a long time — four to six years. An impact evaluation of the program is due to publish results in early 2016.

Home visiting programs also take a case management approach to working with low-income women who are pregnant or have young children. Though models vary, the general approach is that a trained home visitor develops a long-term relationship with a mother and offers support in a variety of forms, possibly including guidance on prenatal care, education about child development, and connections to other services to help the mother reach her educational and career goals. Numerous home visiting models have demonstrated their effectiveness.⁶² Though these programs do not specifically target disconnected young people, there is considerable overlap between the populations of disconnected young people and young mothers. Some organizations have designed home visiting programs specifically to target young populations. For example, Roca operates two home visiting programs for young mothers.⁶³ Though there is a strong evidence base for home visiting programs, evaluations of home visiting programs specifically targeting disconnected young people are not available.

⁶⁰American Institutes for Research (2015).

⁶¹Jacobs, Skemer, and Courtney (2015).

⁶²U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2015).

⁶³Roca Inc. (2015).

Behavioral Interventions

Many mental health and behavioral interventions are considered to be “evidence-based,” and these are increasingly making their way into programs for young people. Programs targeting disconnected young people, including those mentioned above, may incorporate these evidence-based models into their services. While the evidence on many of these interventions includes random assignment evaluations, the interventions may not have been tested on young people who were very disconnected from education and the labor market. Rarely are these evidence-based programs the sole service that a young person will receive — they are often combined with other forms of support.

One example of an evidence-based behavioral intervention is *Becoming a Man*, an in-school life-skills program that was shown in a randomized controlled trial to reduce violent crime and weapons arrests and increase school achievement.⁶⁴ Because *Becoming a Man* was tested on an in-school population, it is unclear whether the intervention would have a similar effect on out-of-school young people. Some programs for at-risk girls implement a curriculum called *Girls Circle* that has shown improvements in outcomes related to drug use and self-confidence.⁶⁵

Cognitive behavioral therapy is an umbrella term for a therapeutic approach that targets the client’s thinking approach and behavior. It has been adapted into a variety of specified treatment models, many of which are considered evidence-based. Meta-analyses of cognitive behavioral programs have found them to be effective in reducing recidivism, particularly when they were implemented with quality and fidelity.⁶⁶ *Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy*, for example, has been shown to be effective in reducing the mental health effects of exposure to trauma, something many disconnected young people suffer from.

Motivational interviewing is another approach that youth programs have incorporated into their models. Motivational interviewing aims to help clients identify and change behaviors that make it harder for them to achieve their personal goals. It has been implemented around the world for more than 30 years, and has been found effective in numerous experimental studies. Like cognitive behavioral therapy, motivational interviewing has been adapted into a range of specified treatment models.

Multisystemic Therapy is an intervention for teens involved in the juvenile justice system. It combines cognitive behavioral therapy, behavior management training, and family therapy to address the many issues in a young person’s life that may have an impact on his or her

⁶⁴Center for Law and Social Policy (2014).

⁶⁵Logue (2002).

⁶⁶Landenberger and Lipsey (2005).

behavior. Multisystemic Therapy has been subject to many random assignment studies and has been found to be effective in reducing arrest rates and out-of-home placements.⁶⁷

The nation's first social impact bond program, the *Adolescent Behavioral Learning Experience* in New York City's Riker's Island jail, tested a cognitive behavioral intervention to reduce recidivism. Program implementation was led by MDRC; the Vera Institute of Justice conducted an evaluation using a quasi-experimental design. Results released in 2015 found that the program did not have an impact on recidivism.⁶⁸

Some parenting programs have also shown promise in improving outcomes for both parents and children, and these programs may help young parents. *Triple P* is an evidence-based parenting program that can be tailored to populations in a variety of circumstances. The program trains parents in skills they can use to manage their children's behaviors using a positive approach grounded in developmental theory.⁶⁹

Synthesis of “What Works”

A synthesis of the studies discussed above reveals that a number of evaluations have found impacts on participant outcomes, though these impacts may have been modest, short-lived, or both. As others have pointed out, it may be unrealistic to believe that a program of relatively short duration will have an impact that lasts throughout a four-year follow up period. Because these programs have multiple components and the evaluations were not set up to test each component separately, it is difficult to disentangle which aspects of the program were most critical to success. Despite these limitations, and even though the programs targeted different segments of the population, it is possible to identify some broad features successful programs shared:

- *Opportunities for paid work and the use of financial incentives.* Many youth programs — including Youth Corps, Job Corps, and Year Up — offer a stipend or other paid work experience. The paid work in one of these programs may be young people's first exposure to work, giving them experience that they can use to advance themselves when they leave the program. Additionally, financial incentives may boost engagement in the program by meeting some of a young person's financial needs so he or she can focus on the program. They may also serve as an incentive to boost attendance and the completion of program milestones.

⁶⁷MST (2015). “Out-of-home placements” is a broad term that encompasses foster care, group homes, and shelters — situations in which a child is removed from the home.

⁶⁸Vera Institute of Justice (2015).

⁶⁹Triple P (2015).

- *Strong links among education, training, and the job market.* Evidence suggests that programs that connect training to identifiable opportunities in the local labor market — career pathways approaches — are more likely to achieve strong employment outcomes. Year Up designs its training curricula with input from corporate partners and gets employer commitments to sponsor and provide on-the-job training. Successful high school equivalency or developmental education programs have incorporated career pathway approaches.
- *Youth development approaches.* Successful programs address the developmental needs of young people, many of whom are facing difficult family and life circumstances. Youth development approaches include offering young people leadership opportunities within the program and the opportunity to develop trusted relationships with adults through mentoring. Features like these are included in the programs of Year Up and ChalleNGe.
- *Comprehensive support services.* Successful programs also address young people’s barriers to participation. These barriers may include a young person’s difficulties in meeting basic needs such as transportation, child care, and food. Other forms of support may include connecting young people to physical or mental health care. For example, Year Up has social workers on staff to provide counseling and connect young people to the resources they need. Youth Villages’ Transitional Living program provides intensive case management in weekly sessions.
- *Support after placement.* Support after participants are placed in either employment or education has been another feature of successful programs including Job Corps, GED Bridge to Health and Business, ChalleNGe, and Year Up.

Findings from Implementation Studies

While the impact components of these evaluations help reveal the programs’ potential to improve outcomes in education, employment, or other areas, implementation studies can shed light on aspects of program delivery that facilitate success or impede program implementation. These findings can be useful to programs and funders seeking to understand how best to support effective program implementation or expand a program to a larger scale. A review of the implementation studies cited above yielded some common themes:

- *Outreach and enrollment practices can limit the populations that programs serve.* Implementation studies can provide considerable information on the

populations that programs serve. Limited resources for outreach can mean that programs serve people who are motivated to apply on their own. Many of the programs described also have multistep admissions processes requiring young people to return multiple times and demonstrate their “readiness for change.” As a result, young people who are not sufficiently motivated often drop out during the application process. Few of the programs described above serve young people who fall on the “very disconnected” end of the spectrum.

- *Keeping young people engaged in a program long enough to benefit is a central challenge.* Disconnected young people, even the most motivated, experience a host of barriers to engagement. Financial incentives are one way that programs encourage engagement. Cohort approaches, where young people start and go through a program together, may help keep participants involved by building a sense of community among them. Having staff members who reflect participants’ experiences and play the role of stable, caring adults in their lives can also promote engagement.
- *Staffing is a persistent challenge.* The implementation studies describe how staff members often serve as mentors and proxy parents for participants. However, the studies also describe the challenges presented by staff turnover. The YouthBuild implementation study found that half of programs had issues with staff turnover. Similarly, an evaluation of Our Piece of the Pie in Hartford found that turnover among youth development specialists was very disruptive to the young people in the program.⁷⁰ Staff turnover also affects transition support. Studies have described how, if a young person is connected to a staff member and that staff member leaves the program, the young person is less likely to seek support from the program after he or she is no longer actively engaged with it.
- *Programs need to address young people’s barriers to participation, particularly their lack of transportation and child care.* Interviews with program staff members and participants reveal the many barriers to participation that young people face. A lack of transportation is one of the ones most often mentioned. Though programs may provide bus passes to help young people pay for public transportation, in areas underserved by public transit the lack of affordable transit options can severely limit their participation in school and work. For young parents, child care is also a common impediment to sustained program

⁷⁰Center for Health, Intervention, and Prevention (2009).

participation, and many communities lack quality and affordable child care options.

- *Partnerships in the community can help meet young people's varied needs.* Disconnected young people need many forms of support, many more than can be provided directly by one program. Implementation studies found that partnerships with other agencies and programs can make it possible for youth programs to meet young people's needs — but some partnerships are more effective than others. A recent process study of Job Corps found that higher-performing centers had partners that shared space with them. Partnerships also come with challenges. The YouthBuild implementation study found that programs that relied on partners to furnish work sites had a more difficult time customizing training to the needs of participants.

Evidence from Evaluations of Collective Impact Approaches

Those trying to meet the needs of disconnected young people increasingly recognize the importance of improving connections among the community systems that serve them. This section describes community-wide efforts, also called collective impact approaches, and evaluation lessons from those efforts. System-level or collective impact approaches do not lend themselves easily to impact evaluations. Since these efforts target the entire population of a city or neighborhood, random assignment of individuals is not possible. Instead, quasi-experimental studies may be used, relying on comparison groups in localities with similar characteristics. Good comparison groups can be challenging to identify and the results of such studies should therefore be interpreted with caution. Additionally, since these efforts involve multiple stakeholders and programs, it is difficult to determine which aspects of a collective impact effort are more effective than others.

Past Efforts

The *Youth Opportunity Initiative* (YO Initiative) offers some insight into the impact of community-level efforts targeting disconnected young people. In 2000, the U.S. Department of Labor funded community-wide efforts to provide comprehensive services to at-risk young people in 36 communities across the country. The YO Initiative was designed to give a “saturation effect” to the communities (meaning that services would be concentrated within a geographical area), so that the initiative would have an impact not only on people who received services directly but also on the people connected with them (so called “peer effects”). Efforts were to be coordinated across systems, and were to involve public, private, and nonprofit organizations. Each community had to create a center for young people that served as a meeting place and a place to deliver services. Grantees were to include supportive services such as case

management and mentoring in their delivery models. The initiative ended in 2005 and has not been funded since.⁷¹

The YO Initiative grants were subject to an extensive evaluation funded by the Department of Labor that included ethnography, a process study, and a quasi-experimental impact study using comparison communities. The evaluation found that the participating communities reached 52 percent of their out-of-school young people. Due to the recession that occurred during the study period, most employment outcomes changed negatively during the study period. But relative to comparison communities, young people in YO Initiative communities fared better — or at least less badly. Young people in the YO Initiative communities also fared better on some measures related to education. However, there seemed to be some negative effects in YO Initiative communities, including decreases in full-time employment rates for some groups of young people.

The Center for Law and Social Policy surveyed the communities toward the end of the grant period. Communities reported several positive results of their participation in the program, including mobilizing stakeholders, blending resources and staffing to support the delivery of youth services, and connecting young people to alternative education programs and work experiences. Challenges reported included finding mentors to work with young people, managing employer expectations of young people's skills, and creating and funding interventions for the hardest-to-serve young people.⁷²

Current Efforts

There are several efforts under way that use many of the same principles as the YO Initiative. One example is *Reengagement Centers*, which are city-level efforts to put out-of-school young people on multiple pathways to continue their education. Comprehensive in their approach, Reengagement Centers reach out to disconnected young people, assess their needs, and connect them with appropriate services, including various opportunities to continue their education, mentoring programs, employment and internship programs, and other services. These centers are tailored to the circumstances of individual communities, but include the involvement of multiple agencies and community organizations. The formation of successful initiatives starts with the planning process. It requires engagement from a wide net of stakeholders; partnerships with school districts, community colleges, and other service providers; adequate funding; and the right staff and location. The National League of Cities gathers data from the Reengagement Centers in its network, and according to 2013-2014 school year data, 15 centers reported reaching more than 20,000 young people, placing more than 10,000 in education or training programs. Seventy percent of those young people were still enrolled or had completed a credential

⁷¹Jackson et al. (2007).

⁷²Harris (2006).

by the end of the reporting period.⁷³ Though these outcomes are positive, since Reengagement Centers touch multiple institutions it is difficult to determine which outcomes the Reengagement Centers are directly responsible for.⁷⁴

Project U-Turn in Philadelphia has received a lot of attention as a role-model program for a collective impact approach to raising the city's graduation rates. Its successes — a 6 percent rise in the graduation rate between 2006 and 2011 — have been attributed to several main features: cross-sector collaboration involving the school district, other city agencies, and non-governmental organizations; authentic youth participation; dedicated staffing; and common data and metrics used to track progress across the collaboration. One component of Project U-Turn is a Reengagement Center.⁷⁵

The Aspen Institute recently launched the *Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund* with support from many other funders. The Fund is engaging in a multifaceted approach to serve disconnected young people through the collective impact model, funding initiatives in 21 communities. Participating communities are required to collect and report on a set of common indicators that include system-level change indicators (for example, instances of policy changes) and youth-level outcomes in the areas of education and employment. Equal Measure will be conducting an initiative-wide evaluation that will examine the Fund's collective impact approach. It will explore how communities in the initiative developed their collaborations and acted collectively, including what factors hindered systems change and what factors facilitated it. The evaluation will also analyze the data from the common indicators to assess the initiative's effect.⁷⁶ In connection with the Social Innovation Fund, 8 of the 21 communities will receive additional funding to implement the Back on Track model, which includes enriched college preparation in high school equivalency and high school completion programs and enhanced connections to postsecondary education. The Social Innovation Fund initiative will also include a quasi-experimental evaluation measuring postsecondary outcomes. This evaluation will be conducted by the Urban Institute. It is now in the early design stage.⁷⁷

Performance Partnership Pilots are a recent effort to increase collaboration across institutions that provide services to disconnected young people. These pilot projects allow up to 10 awardees increased flexibility to blend some of the funds they receive from multiple federal programs (including funds from the U.S. Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services) in order to improve outcomes for disconnected young people. The idea is that by blending funds, they can remove some of the barriers to effective partnerships across com-

⁷³Cook et al. (2014).

⁷⁴Interview with Andrew Moore, Senior Fellow, National League of Cities, 3/17/2015.

⁷⁵Bridgespan Group (2012).

⁷⁶Interview with Justin Piff, Senior Director, Equal Measure, 9/21/2015.

⁷⁷Interview with Monique Miles, Deputy Director, Aspen Forum for Community Solutions, 3/20/2015.

munities. Applications were due in March 2015. The initiative includes a national evaluation and awardees may also elect to conduct their own evaluations.⁷⁸

Another systems-change initiative targets adult education programs. The *Accelerating Opportunity* initiative combines best practices in career pathway models into state-level initiatives in five states. It has the potential to clarify the effect of career pathways approaches on student college and career outcomes. A report on program impacts (from a study using a quasi-experimental design) is due in 2016.

Other system-level efforts are focused on generating employer demand for disconnected young people. *Opportunity Nation* has launched several initiatives targeting potential employers of disconnected young people. One product of the effort is the Grads of Life public service campaign, which seeks to change employers' perceptions of these young people. The Rockefeller Foundation is investigating demand-driven strategies to address the youth employment issue and is seeking to develop and pilot test its own intervention. Since the evidence base for demand-driven strategies is so small, evaluations of these efforts may provide important information on what works in this emerging field.

IV. Opportunities for Expanding Services and Learning What Works

The evidence cited above demonstrates that the services available to disconnected young people target the segment of the population most ready to reconnect to education or employment — and most of the related evidence about what works concerns services targeting this segment of the population. Many of the traditional youth programs that have been studied serve the most motivated segment of the population, as evidenced by the screening done by these programs. While this screening is used to assess readiness for the program, it is also one way to allocate limited slots to those young people whom staff members believe will benefit the most. Adult education programs at community colleges, while showing promising results, for the most part do not specifically target disconnected young people but rather serve a range of adult learners seeking opportunities to advance their education.

Even when young people are motivated to reconnect with education or employment, there are few programs that can serve them if they have very weak basic skills. For young people who have not yet aged out of the public school system, remedial education may be most easily obtained from the local school district, yet many districts face disincentives to reaching out to and reengaging young people, for reasons mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Despite

⁷⁸Uvin and Stack (2015).

these disincentives, however, a number of school districts are playing a role in reengaging dropouts through initiatives that include district-led programs at alternative schools and public charter schools that are forming to specifically serve this population. Examples of public charter schools that have designed programs to meet the needs of out-of-school young people include the nationwide SIATech program, Maya Angelou Schools in Washington, DC, and Our Piece of the Pie schools in Connecticut. While these schools report promising outcomes, no third-party evaluations of them have been conducted and none are in progress.⁷⁹

Programs for young people who are not actively seeking opportunities to reconnect with school or work are lacking; there are few programs like Roca or Larkin Street that pursue “relentless engagement.” While some research supports the theory of change behind these interventions, no evidence yet exists to demonstrate their effectiveness. The Reengagement Centers that have been established in several cities are examples of efforts to reach persistently disconnected young people, but the data on these efforts do not shed light on their effectiveness in engaging those most difficult to serve.

Many disconnected young people face circumstances that are huge barriers to their regular participation in programs, such as unmet housing, child care, and transportation needs. Programs have difficulty helping young people to meet these needs, either directly or through referrals, because of a lack of services in their communities. The challenge of transportation and how it limits regular program participation comes up time and time again in interviews with program staff members and participants.

Recently, many discussions of policymakers and practitioners regarding how best to address the issues of disconnected young people have focused on the need for system-level change and collective impact approaches. While there are now a number of initiatives under way, evaluating the impact of these initiatives comes with steep challenges. For one thing, it is challenging to obtain the necessary data: While all stakeholders may agree that system-level approaches may help them overcome the fragmentation of services that now make it difficult to meet the needs of disconnected young people effectively, the reality is that each involved stakeholder has its own system for tracking data and outcomes of interest. A common approach to tracking outcomes of interest is essential to evaluating success.

A rising number of evidence-based programs, including behavioral and mental health interventions, target many of the risk factors that lead to disconnection from education and the labor market. Some programs are incorporating these practices into their services to better address the needs of participants, but doing so comes with a number of challenges. Usually evidence-based programs have highly specific criteria defining their target populations, and more

⁷⁹Rock, Rath, Dawson, and Silva (2014).

needs to be understood about how well these programs might be applied to somewhat differently defined populations.

As shown in the previous section, there are more than a dozen studies under way that have the potential to significantly contribute to the evidence base concerning “what works.” There are also a number of evaluations of programs for at-risk young people that have found positive results but that were not included in this evidence scan because they targeted an in-school population. One example is the *One Summer Plus* program in Chicago, which combined a summer jobs program with mentoring and, for a subset of participants, a social-emotional learning component. A random assignment study found that the program reduced violent crime rates among the program group by 43 percent.⁸⁰ One option to expand the programs available for disconnected young people could be to look for successful models in programs for in-school young people.

Opportunities and Recommendations

As this evidence scan lays out, there is a solid foundation of knowledge about “what works” in serving disconnected young people. There are also more than a dozen evaluations under way that have the potential to contribute to the knowledge base in the next few years. Still, this scan has identified several areas where there are significant gaps in knowledge or services. The recommendations that follow are organized by the target population of the intervention.

All Disconnected Young People

Many of the statistics cited in this paper about the paths young people take to reconnecting with education and the labor market use data collected before the Great Recession. Structural changes to the labor market, which were accelerated by the Great Recession, have dramatically affected youth employment rates. Updated research is needed to clarify how labor-market changes have changed patterns of reconnection for young people, as the traditional path to employment has shifted and more young people are instead pursuing education. In a similar vein, little is known about persistently disconnected young people and what can successfully reconnect them to school and work. A longitudinal study that gathers data about young people who are currently disconnected from education and the labor market would provide knowledge in these areas where it is currently limited.

Young People Who Are Persistently Disconnected

Evaluations of major youth programs have shown that most of these programs, while they do serve a disadvantaged population, tend to target the most motivated young people. Few

⁸⁰Heller (2014).

programs specifically target the most disconnected segment of the population. However, outreach and intensive case management approaches like those taken by Roca and Youth Villages have shown promise in helping the most disadvantaged young people get back on track. These programs exist in only a few communities currently, providing many opportunities to bring them to other areas. Investing in research while expanding these programs to a larger scale would increase the field's knowledge regarding the effectiveness of these interventions. Additionally, as many of the existing programs were born in a particular community, studying expansion would shed light on how to incubate these approaches successfully in new communities.

Young People with Low Basic Skills

As discussed in this paper, many disconnected young people have low academic skills and lack work experience, huge barriers to reconnection through school or work. Most programs in this scan targeted young people with the academic skills needed to achieve at least a secondary credential. Few programs exist for young people with the lowest skill levels, especially if reconnecting to the local school system is not an option for them, and little is known about how to improve outcomes for this group.

A lack of work experience presents a significant barrier to employment for these young people, yet few programs aim to provide them with work experience. Efforts should focus on how to create job opportunities for these young people. Investing in demand-side strategies — for example, supporting summer jobs and internship programs that engage employers — could provide valuable work experience to young people with limited skills and limited opportunities.

A growing number of alternative schools (including district schools, charter schools, and schools run by community-based organizations) serve young people with weak basic skills. While these programs are probably serving an increasing number of disconnected young people, little is known about their effectiveness. A number of adult education programs, including those using high school equivalency bridge approaches and career pathway approaches, have shown promise in moving participants with low basic skills toward secondary credentials and into postsecondary education. However, since these programs are not specifically designed for young people, it is difficult to know how they compare with comprehensive youth programs in achieving outcomes for young people. For example, youth development approaches — a hallmark of comprehensive youth programs — are rarely a component of adult education programs. More research is needed to understand how effective these programs are for young people.

Disconnected Young People with Stronger Skills

Disconnected young people are not a static population. Young people with stronger skills, which may include some work experience and a secondary credential (or close to it), can experience periods of engagement and then disengagement. They may work in a series of low-

wage jobs with gaps in between, or start classes at a community college but then drop out, or a combination of the two. A number of interventions may help this population advance along a career path.

Evidence suggests that programs that take career pathways approaches and connect training to identifiable opportunities in the local labor market are more likely to achieve strong employment outcomes. As the success of Year Up shows, connecting with local employers to understand their needs and interests can also greatly improve opportunities for young people to obtain meaningful internships and employment. Youth programs should adopt strategies that incorporate career pathway approaches and cultivate employers. Such strategies could include engaging employers to shape services, so that young people leaving programs have the skills that companies seek, or educating employers about supervision strategies to help improve performance and retention.

Community college is another place where big impacts are possible. According to one study, only 40 percent of community college students complete a degree within six years.⁸¹ Young people who connect to community college need support to ensure that they stay engaged. MDRC's study of the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs at the City University of New York found one promising model to improve graduation rates.⁸² However, few interventions or efforts target people who enrolled in community college but who later dropped out without finishing their degrees. Most community colleges do not attempt to reconnect with students who have dropped out. One opportunity to make a difference could be to work with community colleges to design efforts similar to Reengagement Centers that would conduct active outreach to college dropouts and offer one-on-one counseling to help address their barriers to completing their education.

⁸¹Shapiro et al. (2014).

⁸²Scrivener et al. (2015).

Appendix

**Selected Evaluations of Programs
for Disconnected Young People**

Program	Evaluation Type	Target Group	Program Model	Summary of Findings	Evaluation Dates
Employment-focused programs: completed evaluations					
Year Up	Impact	18- to 24-year-olds with secondary credentials	Technical skills training in information technology or investment operations for 6 months, followed by 6 months of internship; stipend for both components	Earnings impacts in Years 2 and 3, driven by higher hourly wages for program participants	2007-2011
P/PV Sectoral Study of Jewish Vocational Service and Per Scholas	Impact	Young people and adults over age 18 with secondary credentials	Training tied to a specific sector (health care, information technology); other forms of support including job placement, child care and transportation assistance, and postprogram follow-up	Employment and earnings impacts for young people	2003-2006
Employment-focused programs: evaluations in process					
Year Up	Impact	18- to 24-year-olds with secondary credentials	Technical skills training in information technology or investment operations for 6 months, followed by 6 months of internship; stipend for both components		Early impact results expected in 2016
Young Adult Internship Program	Impact	16- to 24-year-olds not working and not in school	Work-readiness training, 10-week paid internship, transition support		Impact results expected in 2017
Bridges to Pathways	Impact	Young men ages 16 to 20 who are leaving juvenile detention	Transitional jobs program that includes online educational support, mentoring, and social-emotional/cognitive behavioral programs		Impact results expected in 2017
Comprehensive youth programs: completed evaluations					
Job Corps	Impact, implementation	Disadvantaged young people ages 16 to 24	Employment, education, and training in a (mostly) residential setting	Earnings and employment impacts in Years 3 to 4 of the study period, impacts faded after Year 4; results stronger for older young adults	1994-2003

Program	Evaluation Type	Target Group	Program Model	Summary of Findings	Evaluation Dates
Comprehensive youth programs: completed evaluations (continued)					
ChalleNGe	Impact, implementation	High school dropouts, ages 16 to 18, who are drug free and not heavily involved with the justice system	Education, service to the community, and other forms of support in a quasi-military residential setting; 12-month postresidential mentoring program	Increases in high school equivalency credentials; earning and employment impacts in Year 3	2005-2008
Youth Corps	Impact	18- to 25-year-old, out-of-school young people, mostly dropouts	Paid work experience in community service projects, education and training, support services through case management; typical participation full time and intended to last from 6 to 12 months	First evaluation: increases in employment and decreases in arrests, particularly for black males; second evaluation: no impacts on employment	1993-1996 2006-2009
Project Rise	Implementation	16- to 24-year-olds without secondary credentials	Career-readiness and educational programs combined with a conditional internship	Implementation findings discuss challenges implementing internship and engagement	2011- 2015
Comprehensive youth programs: evaluations in process					
YouthBuild	Impact, implementation	Disadvantaged young people ages 16 to 24	Education and job training, combined with community service and additional support; stipend for most participants	Implementation findings: program largely implemented with fidelity	2010-2018; early impact findings expected in 2017
Los Angeles Reconnections Career Academy	Impact, implementation, and cost-effectiveness	High school dropouts ages 16 to 24	Connection to secondary education and subsidized vocational training in health care		Findings expected in 2016
Linking Innovation and Knowledge (@LIKE)	Impact (quasi-experimental) and cost study	18- to 24-year-olds who have been out of work and school for more than 90 days	Connection to secondary education and vocational training, life coaches, and transition support		Findings expected in 2016
PACE Center for Girls	Impact, implementation, and cost-effectiveness	Girls ages 12 to 17 who have dropped out or who are at risk of dropping out	Academic services to support attainment of secondary credentials, life- and career-skills education, counseling, and connection to support services		Interim impacts and implementation study in 2017; cost study, final impacts in 2018

Program	Evaluation Type	Target Group	Program Model	Summary of Findings	Evaluation Dates
Postsecondary pathways: completed evaluations					
GED Bridge to Health and Business	Impact	Adult learners seeking their General Educational Development credentials (GEDs)	GED instruction on a college campus, curriculum geared to health or business track, career and college counseling, transition support, cohort enrollment	Higher attendance and persistence in a GED program, higher rates of GED completion, higher rates of college entry	2010-2013
I-BEST	Impact (quasi-experimental)	Adult learners who have basic skills needs or who are English as a Second Language learners	Basic skills instruction and career and technical education delivered through co-teaching (basic skills and content teachers teach the classes together); supportive services including transition support	Higher learning gains, higher enrollment in college-credit-bearing courses, greater persistence in college, more earned credits toward a credential, and more earned occupational credits	2006-2009
Gateway to College	Implementation	16- to 20-year-olds who have dropped out or who are close to dropping out	Students simultaneously earn high school and college credits while taking classes at a community college; additional support services	Implementation study offers lessons in replication and the engagement of young people	2010-2015
Postsecondary pathways: evaluations in process					
GED Bridge - Wisconsin	Impact	Adult learners seeking their GEDs	GED instruction on a college campus, curriculum geared to a career track, career and college counseling, transition support		Results expected in 2018
I-BEST	Impact	Adult learners who have basic skills needs or who are English as a Second Language learners	Basic skills instruction and career and technical education delivered through concurrent enrollment; supportive services including transition support		Results expected in 2017
Basic skills programs: completed evaluations					
Young Adult Literacy Program	Implementation	16- to 24-year-olds with 4th- through 8th-grade reading levels	Literacy and numeracy instruction, social support services, life-skills and work-readiness training, a paid internship	Increases in literacy and numeracy levels	2013-2015

Program	Evaluation Type	Target Group	Program Model	Summary of Findings	Evaluation Dates
Outreach and case management models: completed evaluations					
Safe and Successful Youth Initiative	Impact (quasi-experimental)	14- to 24-year-olds at risk of gun violence	Street outreach to connect young people to customized support services	Reduced risk of incarceration, reduction in number of violent crimes in target communities	2012-2014
Outreach and case management models: evaluations in process					
Youth Villages	Impact, implementation, cost	Young people ages 18 to 24 aging out of foster care or exiting the juvenile justice system	Clinically focused case management, including counseling and connection to other services	Impacts on employment and earnings, housing stability, mental health issues and involvement in violent relationships	2010-2016; final impacts and cost study expected in 2016
Roca	Impact	Young men ages 17 to 24 in adult probation or exiting the juvenile justice system	“Relentless” outreach to at-risk young people, youth workers who employ motivational interviewing and cognitive behavioral programs to build transformational relationships, additional programs that include academic, vocational, and life-skills education		Unknown
Latin American Youth Center	Impact	Young people ages 14 to 24	Long-term case management		Results expected in 2016
Behavioral interventions: completed evaluations					
Becoming a Man	Impact	In-school, at-risk boys in the 7th to 10th grades	Social and cognitive skills development	Increased school engagement, reduced violent crime arrests	2009-2012
Multisystemic Therapy	Impact (multiple studies)	Young people ages 12 to 17	Systems approach combining cognitive behavioral therapy, behavior management training, and family therapy	Reduced recidivism, reduction in out-of-home placements, decreased substance use, reduction in mental health problems	Varies

Program	Evaluation Type	Target Group	Program Model	Summary of Findings	Evaluation Dates
Behavioral interventions: completed evaluations (continued)					
Adolescent Behavioral Learning Experience	Impact (quasi-experimental)	Young people 16 to 18 years old detained in jail at Riker's Island	Cognitive behavioral program focused on personal responsibility, training, and counseling		2012-2015
Collective impact approaches: completed evaluations					
Youth Opportunity Initiative	Impact (quasi-experimental), implementation	Young people in 36 communities	Coordinated efforts across systems touching young people, formation of community centers	Better employment outcomes than non-YO communities, better educational outcomes in some YO communities	2000-2005
Reengagement Centers	Outcome analysis	15 communities	Outreach to disconnected young people, connections back to school via multiple pathways, connection to other supportive services	70 percent of young people remained in school or achieved secondary credentials	2013-2014
Collective impact approaches: evaluations in process					
Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund	Implementation, impact (quasi-experimental)	Disconnected young people in 21 communities	Collective impact model; 8 of the communities will implement the Back on Track model		Equal Measure report expected 2018; Urban Institute report unknown
Performance Partnership Pilots	Unknown at this time	Disconnected young people in 10 communities	Coordination across agencies; greater flexibility to blend funds, streamline performance measures		Unknown
Accelerating Opportunity	Impact (quasi-experimental)	5 states	State-level efforts to implement career pathways approaches		Report expected in 2016

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About the Youth Transition Funders Group

The Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG) is a national network of funders that work together to support the well-being and economic success of vulnerable young people ages 14 to 25. YTFG members seek to ensure that all young people have lifelong family, personal, and community connections and the opportunities and tools to succeed throughout adulthood. YTFG provides a vibrant and active community for national, regional, and community funders to learn from each other and other experts in the field, stay abreast of new research and key policy developments, inform and influence policy and practice, and foster collaborative approaches to grantmaking. YTFG supports peer networking and sharing, creates key partnership with leaders in the field, and provides strategic opportunities to leverage and extend the efforts of individual members.

Our network provides a unique space for diverse funders to come together to explore cross-cutting issues affecting all vulnerable youth. Our members' interests and expertise span a wide range of content areas, including education, workforce development, child welfare, youth justice, housing, health, and mental health. We seek to expand beyond narrow and often siloed dialogue to build a collective understanding of how a multi-systems approach can produce improved youth outcomes. YTFG works to highlight critical overlaps and intersections of youth-serving systems and identify creative approaches to design cross-system strategies and solutions.

In addition to our cross-systems efforts, YTFG operates three dedicated workgroups for members desiring to connect with colleagues to address the unique needs of particularly vulnerable youth populations: those disconnected from work or school and those currently experiencing the child welfare or youth justice systems.

Learn more about the Youth Transition Funders Group online at www.ytfg.org.

About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.