



## Issue Brief

### **The State of Opportunity Youth Research: Early Lessons from Five Multi-Site Evaluations of OY Programs and Collaboratives**

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**Abstract:** *This Issue Brief describes the work of the OYES (Opportunity Youth Evaluations and Studies) project, an ongoing project looking at five multi-site evaluations of different opportunity youth projects happening across the US. It describes these evaluations and their scopes and research questions, and describes the cross-study learning that came out of a convening of the participating organizations in March 2019. This includes similarities and differences between the studies; insights and questions about OY evaluation; and what future OY evaluation and studies might focus on. (Note: this Brief does not describe or compare the impacts-related findings of the five studies, as four of the evaluations have yet to publish results as of this date.)*

### **Introduction**

There are currently 4.6 million opportunity youth – defined as young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither enrolled in school nor participating in the labor market – about one in nine members of this age group. However, the chances that a young person will be disconnected from school and work *at some point* between the ages of 16 and 24 are much higher, and according to Jobs For The Future “nearly 40 percent of our young people between the ages of 16 and 24 are weakly attached or unattached to school and work at some point during that formative stretch of their young lives.”

Moreover, despite young people’s aspirations to advance and secure family wage jobs, make connections in civic engagement, and improve their communities, once they have

experienced disconnection from school and work, it's very unlikely they'll be able to meet these aspirations, as only 1 percent of youth who've been disconnected will ever earn an associate's degree or higher, compared to 36 percent of the general population. And the data is clear: a large majority of today's and the near future's family-supporting wage jobs will require some kind of training or credential beyond a high school degree. The question is: can the U.S. afford to write off such a large group of young people? One estimate places the personal and public costs of not changing the trajectories of opportunity youth at \$6.3 trillion dollars over the lifetimes of all current opportunity youth.

The current movement for opportunity youth was energized in 2012 by the White House Council on Community Solutions and its report [Community Solutions for Opportunity Youth](#), which called for innovative, place-based, collaborative solutions to reconnect opportunity youth. Communities, government and organizations have, of course, been working to improve education and workforce outcomes for young adults for a long time, but 2012 marked a moment when people came together for "disconnected youth" (and based on youth input, renamed the group "opportunity youth") in a new way, and launched a movement at both the local and national levels simultaneously.

Within a few years, several major public and private funding initiatives began focusing on opportunity youth, and with some of those investments came a push for greater evaluation, and accompanying resources to more thoroughly document and analyze efforts to support opportunity youth.

Several of these were multi-location efforts to look at the impacts of either individual direct service delivery programs, and/or impacts of community-wide collaborations. In 2018 a group of national organizations noted that several multi-year studies of such opportunity youth efforts would be concluding soon, and with grant funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, launched an effort (called the Opportunity Youth Evaluations and Studies project – or OYES) to bring together the researchers from these evaluation projects to learn from each other and, if possible, look across the different studies to see if new learning could be gleaned.

OYES focuses on five major evaluations of multi-site opportunity youth-focused efforts in the US:

- **Performance Partnership Pilots for Disconnected Youth:** evaluation by Mathematica (USDOL sponsor)
- **Opportunity Works:** evaluation by Urban Institute (JFF intermediary; SIF sponsor)
- **Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund** (now known as the Opportunity Youth Forum): evaluation by Equal Measure (Aspen FCS sponsor/intermediary)
- **Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential:** evaluation by MDRC (Annie E. Casey Foundation sponsor)

- **Generation Work:** evaluation by MDRC (AECF sponsor)

While the programmatic efforts being studied vary in their approaches and desired impacts, and their accompanying evaluations also focus in different ways and seek to measure different kinds of impacts, we believe that an effort to crosswalk findings amongst these efforts could yield additional knowledge useful to the opportunity youth movement, to individual services providers, and to funders and policy makers.

The OYES project brought together the primary investigators/researchers from these evaluations, in addition to the lead coordinating partner organizations, to compare preliminary results -- both published and unpublished findings. This was accomplished through preliminary calls to scope and set up the project, followed by a full day learning exchange meeting in March of 2019.

The meeting covered a wide range of topics, in addition to increasing the understand of each evaluation. Among other topics, people expressed interest in thinking about systems change implications, as well as policy change implications of these evaluations, and several members of the group brought particular attention to equity-focused questions and ramifications of this work. As most projects were gearing up to produce final reports, there was also an interest in how results would be disseminated.

Following the descriptions of each of the evaluations, this report provides more detail on the discussions and topics discussed, but a few highlights of those discussions include:

Commonalities and differences between the evaluations:

- Most all focus on systems change in some manner, and most have an implementation study component
- Many focus on understanding the dynamics of collaboration/cross-sector partnerships
- “Basic needs” of OY is a large issue noted across all the studies, barriers are similar across youth studied, and approaches used to address basic needs are multifaceted
- The foci of the evaluations is at different levels (eg system/org/individual); which might imply different underlying theories of change
- The evaluations have “level of evidence” differences

Major takeaways and new insights and questions from the meeting conversations:

- Can these studies tell us if there is a connection between youth outcomes and systems changes? What are the theories of change (TOCs) at work in these evaluations/projects?
- Is there a need for a more thorough definition of what constitutes OY? Or what constitutes an OY “program.”?

- Geographic overlap is significant in these evaluations -- but is it positive/negative/neither that projects happened in the same communities frequently? Is how collaboratives are locally organized (centralized vs. distributed) a factor in whether multiple projects in the same place is a positive or negative thing? Are funders picking different (or same) backbones in the same place to do OY work a factor relating to success of efforts?
- Some of the efforts (at the site level; also at the national design level) have much stronger connections to public systems. Is that a factor in success, if not sustainability or scalability, of these efforts?
- Are any of the places where these projects happened more successful? Are there community 'exemplars' of this kind of work? If so, what are their characteristics?
- Is a 'meta-analysis' possible, across these studies? Is there a "meta-TOC" implied in all these studies?
- At minimum, we should stop rediscovering what we already know. If these studies agree on some items/findings (say a component of good 'practice' with OY or in collaboratives), there is no need for the next evaluation to study that as well.

And there were ideas on what any new OY evaluations and research might look at:

- Operationalizing equity: how does an equity focus manifest itself in OY work (and in OY evaluation?)
- Summary of the current state of evidence. Arrange by level of 'rigor,' both at the youth outcomes level and the systems change/collaborative practices levels?
- The relationship between youth outcomes and systems change work.
- A retrospective analysis, particularly if there is prior work (and/or administrative records) that could be analyzed to test for change over greater time periods?
- What's not working.
- Solutions for known OY barriers: what can we learn from the models/frameworks about what will remove barriers?
- Program-level learning: how to best implement OY programs, by specific OY population groups

In the near future, once the majority of OYES evaluations have formally published findings, OYES intends to support a research project that will look at commonalities, differences, and potentially new lessons by looking across these published studies as a group.







**Evaluation Funder(s):** Jobs for the Future from a Social Innovation Fund grant and philanthropic sources

**Dates:**

**Evaluation start date:** February 2015

**Evaluation end date:** April 2019

**Evaluation Purpose/Goal:**

The goal for the evaluation is to provide evidence about what works to help opportunity youth achieve their college and career goals. We also intend to document the nature of the programming, including challenges and opportunities for future programs. We hope that the evaluation will help inform the program funders, program administrators, and the wider field about successes and challenges so that providers can create even better programs for opportunity youth in the future.

The evaluation goal is to achieve CNCS’s standard of “moderate evidence,” which characterizes rigorous quasi-experimental approaches or experimental approaches that are limited in generalizability. Based on early data collection, we determined that the best evaluation approach is to conduct quasi-experimental analysis in three sites (Hartford, Philadelphia, and South King County) to evaluate program impacts. This means that we are collecting data on Opportunity Works enrollees and an appropriate comparison group of opportunity youth who are not in Back on Track programming and matching youth with similar characteristics on a variety of factors to determine the impact of the program on key outcomes. We designed and fielded a web-based survey for Opportunity Work enrollees and potential comparison group members, which will serve as a primary data source for this effort. We also fielded a 12-17-month follow-up survey to track student progress over time. In the sites that are not part of the impact study, we fielded the baseline survey only to Opportunity Works participants.

In addition, we have worked with sites to collect program data on Opportunity Works participants. We also have obtained education records from the National Student Clearinghouse for impact site study participants. Across all sites, these data sources – the survey, program data, and administrative records – will inform a quantitative process study to document the trajectory of students’ progress in education and employment over time.

**Special or Priority Populations that were the focus of this evaluation:** Opportunity youth, with a particular emphasis on young men of color

**Evaluation method(s):** The evaluation includes an analysis of participant outcomes compared with matched comparison groups to assess program impacts. It also includes site visits and other qualitative research to understand program implementation at each site.

**Published evaluation products:**







**Evaluation Purpose/Goal:**

The Generation Work evaluation consists of two studies. First, to help both the Generation Work partnerships and other cities learn from the current initiative, MDRC is conducting a system change evaluation. In addition to documenting how the five partnerships have approached systems change including how they have infused an REEI lens into their workforce development system, the study is examining the role of leadership since prior system change research highlights the critical importance of leadership. The systems change study is also examining the role funders have had in initiating or facilitating system changes.

A second study will describe young adults' program experiences and outcomes when education and training organizations they are enrolled in robustly incorporate both PYD and DDW practices. This study will serve two main purposes. First, it will provide local partnerships with evidence that could support their ongoing systems change work. Casey anticipates that local partnerships could use data from this study to demonstrate to other local stakeholders that combining PYD and DDW approaches is good for youth (as evidenced by strong outcomes and/or positive experiences). Second, this study will provide Casey with a better sense of how young people are likely to be affected by the Generation Work initiative.

While it is hoped that the evaluation and its two studies will be useful to the local partnerships, the evaluation's ultimate purpose is to inform the field. In other words, the Foundation wants to ensure that the information generated from the evaluation will help funders, policymakers, and practitioners know what they can do to increase the job opportunities for young adults and provide guidance to other entities who wish to achieve similar changes.

**Special or Priority Populations that were the focus of this evaluation:** Young adults (ages 18-29) involved with the local education and vocational partners as well as the broader youth systems; and the staff and leader of these partners working to support the young adults.

**Evaluation method(s):** Mixed methods: key informant interviews (e.g., local partnership leaders; key funders, leaders in other partner organizations such as the public work force system), participant focus groups, short participant survey, review of performance metrics, document review

	<b>Gen Work</b>	<b>LEAP</b>	<b>OW</b>	<b>OYIF</b>	<b>P3</b>
	GW connects more of America’s young adults with meaningful employment by changing the way public and private systems prepare them for jobs..., combining employer-facing strategies that are aligned to labor market needs with positive youth development techniques	LEAP is adapting two established models (Jobs for America’s Graduates and JFF’s Back on Track) focused on building opportunity pathways for system-involved and homeless youth.	Opportunity Works is an evaluation of the JFF Back on Track model.	21 communities received financial, TA and other supports to create/enhance collaboratives focused on improving outcomes for OY.	P3 allowed federal policy waivers/blended funding for select fed funds and offered add'l funds for pilot activities, such as governance and partner building, that serve OY to 15 communities.
<b>time</b>	2016-2020	2015-2019	2015-2019	2015-2018 (+)	2015-2020
<b>Site #s</b>	5	10 partners (some multi-place)	7 (3 in eval)	21	15
<b>study description</b>	a system change evaluation ; young adults’ program experiences and outcomes	MDRC’s evaluation will include a thorough look at the two models’ implementation and adaptation, an examination of the role of local systems in LEAP implementation and LEAP enhancements, an analysis of individual-level participation and outcome data, a cost study, and in-depth interviews with participants.	both an impact and an implementation evaluation. The evaluation goal is to achieve CNCS’s standard of “moderate evidence,” which characterizes rigorous quasi-experimental approaches or experimental approaches that are limited in generalizability.	The portfolio-level evaluation was designed to track progress on the extent to which the 21 communities have seen “evidence” of systemic shifts in each of three areas and highlight examples of these shifts for other communities.	This study will provide information to policymakers and administrators to help determine how states, localities, and Indian tribes used their granted flexibilities to overcome their identified hurdles to providing services to disconnected youth and improve their outcome.
<b>pop focus</b>	Young adults (ages 18-29) involved with the local education and vocational partners; also The staff and leader of these partners	Young people ages 14-25 who have current or prior experience of homelessness or systems-involvement—child welfare, criminal justice, or juvenile justice systems.	Opportunity youth, with a particular emphasis on young men of color.	opportunity youth	disconnected youth

<b>research questions</b>	How do Generation Work partnerships infuse an REEI lens into their workforce development system—both in their organizations and across systems?	How are the JAG and Back on Track models being implemented and adapted to serve the LEAP populations? How are the LEAP enhancements implemented?	IMPLEM: To what extent have the core features of the identified intervention(s) been put in place? That is, what is the level of fidelity to the interventions?	How do communities develop collaborative infrastructure, build commitment, and act collectively to shift systems that improve outcomes for OY?	Implementation: How do the P3 pilots use federal-, state-, and local-granted financial and programmatic flexibilities, including waivers and blended/braided funding, to design and implement interventions with the goal to improve the outcomes of disconnected youth?
	When and how does creating new leadership and/or building relationships among organizations lead to change in any of Generation Work’s core areas (DDW, PYD, REEI)? Why doesn’t it?	Who does LEAP serve? How are applicants recruited and enrolled in the program? How do the characteristics of LEAP participants vary by site?	IMPLEM: Which features of the interventions did opportunity youth receive or participate in?	What systemic shifts have resulted from the OYIF investment?	Implementation: How and to what extent has each pilot leveraged the P3 flexibilities, including waivers and blended/braided funding, to enhance its partnerships and work across partners to provide effective and efficient services to disconnected youth?
	How do national and local funders facilitate or hinder systems change related to DDW, PYD, and REEI?	What are LEAP participants’ perspectives on their program experiences and the period following participation?	IMPLEM: What are the perceptions of participants who received the intervention(s)?	What OY outcomes have communities achieved?	Implementation: Who are the youth who participate in the P3 pilot and what services do they receive? What are youths’ outcomes, especially in the education and employment domains?
	What are the outcomes of young people who participate in programs that robustly incorporate both PYD and DDW practices?	To what extent are youth engaged in LEAP program activities, and what factors facilitate or constrain their participation?	IMPLEM: What contextual factors promote or impede implementation of these interventions?	How do Aspen OYIF resources and design elements (e.g., funding match requirements, learning community) catalyze local efforts?	Implementation: What systems and programmatic changes and improvements resulted from P3 at the federal and pilot levels (as reported by respondents)?
	What role do PYD and DDW practices appear to play in the experiences of young adult participants—overall and by racial/ethnic group?	What are the outcomes for the young people who participate in the program?	IMPACT: Does involvement in Back on Track programming result in more academic, social, and/or employment success?		Implementation: What are the lessons and promising areas for developing and/or building upon the P3 integrated governance and service strategies to improve the outcomes of disconnected youth?
		What are the program costs of serving this population?			LOCAL PILOTS SYNTHESIS: 1) What interventions and outcomes are the focus of the local evaluations? 2) What is the level of rigor in the local evaluations? 3) Do the local evaluations find the expected impacts for their interventions?

## **OYES Convening, March 2019**

FCS brought together the evaluators, national intermediaries, and the sponsoring entities for the OYES group in March of 2019. As noted, based on the 5 multi-city evaluations of opportunity youth-related work happening currently, OYES is seeking to uncover unique knowledge about OY programs and approaches by looking across all 5 evaluations as a group, in addition to each individually.

Because only one of the evaluations (Equal Measure's evaluation of OYIF/OYF) has formally released findings (particularly of ultimate outcomes such as systems changes or youth outcomes), discussion at the convening focused on sharing lessons learned more in regards to formal and informal implementation-related studies, methods used, challenges in studying this population, and also focused on potential next steps needed in evaluation of OY.

The meeting had the following stated goals:

- Understand each of the 5 evaluations, what's been learned to date, and preview as possible upcoming findings and other learning from each evaluation.
- Understand focus of any research reports still to come, for each evaluation.
- Discover where learning to date may overlap/agree between the evaluations, and where they may differ or stand alone from other evaluations and plumb for any new insights.
- Discuss potential topics that a future OYES cross-evaluation report might cover once the majority of evaluations have published findings.
- Understand common challenges in evaluating OY approaches, innovative approaches to evaluation in this area, and discuss unmet evaluation needs related to OY work.

### **Summary of Discussions**

Robust conversations happened throughout the day. While many attendees knew each other, it was also a chance for some to get acquainted for the first time. A major goal for everyone was just to understand, in more detail than typically is available, more of the 'inside' details of what each evaluation was most intent on focusing on. People also expressed interest in thinking about systems change implications, as well as policy change implications of these evaluations, and several members of the group brought particular attention to equity-focused questions and ramifications of this work. As most projects were gearing up to produce final reports, there was also an interest in how results would be disseminated.

Notes from many different discussions at the convening are combined in this Brief under 4 topics:

- Interesting commonalities and agreements between the evaluations
- Interesting differences between the evaluations
- Insights/ideas/questions sparked by all the discussions
- Potential useful topics for a future OYES report that looks across the evaluations, and other OY-related future evaluation work

### **Interesting commonalities and agreements between the evaluations**

- Most all focus on systems change in some manner
- Many focus on understanding the dynamics of collaboration/cross-sector partnerships
- Most have an implementation study component
- “Basic needs” of OY is a large issue noted across all the studies, barriers are similar across youth studied, and approaches used to address basic needs are multifaceted
- The evaluations were not so much of narrowly defined programs, rather, flexible methods/approaches to implementation of models/frameworks were most commonly being evaluated
- Most have at least a partial focus on youth-level outcomes; and they looked at similar youth outcomes (eg. education, workforce outcomes)
- There was little use of control groups; challenges were noted in applying ‘rigorous’ methods
- The study periods are very similar
- There was geographic overlap; some happened in the same communities
- Most looked in some way at ‘implementation fidelity’
- A common sense from the room was that staff relationships are key to youth success
- None of the studies seem to address impacts of things happening in the community outside of what is being studied (OY programs and related systems)
- OY are similarly defined in the studies
- Evaluations focusing on youth outcomes experienced recruitment challenges
- The programs being studied exhibited an asset-based view of OY

### **Interesting differences between the evaluations**

- The foci of the evaluations is at different levels (eg system/org/individual); which might imply different underlying theories of change
- Some studies looked at different, specific subgroups of OY
- Equity, including racial equity, was only addressed explicitly in a few of the studies
- The evaluations have “level of evidence” differences

- Only one uses separate/independent local evaluations alongside a national evaluation
- Cohort size differences
- Some look at systems aside from education and workforce (ie justice, child welfare, housing)
- Whether there was any focus outside of urban areas
- The actual measures being used

### **Insights/ideas/questions sparked by all the discussions**

- Can these studies tell us if there is a connection between youth outcomes and systems changes? What are the TOCs at work in these evaluations/projects?
- To what extent is there an overlap in the “north star” or ultimate goals of these studies?
- Need for a more thorough definition of what constitutes OY? Or what constitutes an OY “program.”?
- We should connect these evaluations into an OY movement/ecosystem ‘map.’
- There are significant cost and time barrier/challenges in doing this work. The evaluations take time. It takes time for outcomes/changes to appear. Do we need longer study periods?
- Are there retrospective analytical opportunities we have not considered? Is there prior work (and/or administrative records) that could be analyzed to test for change over greater time periods?
- The current approach to evaluation is selective – it seems to leave some groups out/un-evaluated. Examples: rural communities, specific sub-groups of OY.
- Geographic overlap is significant in these evaluations -- but is it positive/negative/neither that projects happened in the same communities frequently? Is how collaboratives are locally organized (centralized vs. distributed) a factor in whether multiple projects in the same place is a positive or negative thing? Is funders picking different (or same) backbones in the same place to do OY work a factor relating to success of efforts?
- Some of the efforts (at the site level; also at the national design level) have much stronger connections to public systems. Is that a factor in success, if not sustainability or scalability, of these efforts?
- Are any of the places where these projects happened more successful? Are there community ‘exemplars’ of this kind of work? If so, what are their characteristics?
- Direct youth/OY input into these efforts (and in the evaluations themselves) appears limited; should that be expanded in future work?
- Are OY-focused interventions perhaps good for new “rapid” evaluation methods?
- Can coordination (either systems coordination, or at the client level, coordination of services/case mgt) improve OY outcomes, absent the basic



needs of OY being met? Are most of these evaluations just testing the impacts of coordination, mainly?

- The differences in the methodology of the studies could be learned from and used to inform future studies of OY.
- Is a 'meta-analysis' possible, across these studies? Is there a "meta-TOC" implied in all these studies?
- There is a large burden of evaluation on local communities (particularly ones with multiple studies).
- Focusing on equity and disaggregating data is needed. Data availability and cost may be barriers.
- At minimum, we should stop rediscovering what we already know. If these studies agree on some items/findings (say a component of good 'practice' with OY or in collaboratives), there is no need for the next evaluation to study that as well.
- What we do learn needs to be made more useable by the people who could change practices/policies based on it.

**Potential useful topics for a future OYES report that looks across the evaluations, and other OY-related future evaluation work:**

- Potential purposes of such a next OYES report:
  - Improvement of programs and collaboratives
  - Advocating for increased resources
  - To help us to know if we are still testing an approach, vs. scaling known impact
- Summary of the current state of evidence. Arrange by level of 'rigor,' both at the youth outcomes level and the systems change/collaborative practices levels?
- The relationship between youth outcomes and systems change work.
- A retrospective analysis, particularly if there is prior work (and/or administrative records) that could be analyzed to test for change over greater time periods?
- What's not working.
- Solutions for known OY barriers: what can we learn from the models/frameworks about what will remove barriers?
- Program-level learning: how to best implement OY programs, by specific OY population groups
- Systems/Collaborative-level learning: potentially use OYIF frame to look at learning across all the studies?
- Do a quick list of 20 (or so) maxims for doing OY work
- Create a resource bank of tools, checklists, and self assessments
- Report on what still needs to be known; what needs to be researched next (to advance the field)

- Focus on equity/race/disaggregation/positive youth development topics and issues: what we know, and tie to other research and frameworks on these topics.
- Operationalizing equity: how does an equity focus manifest itself in OY work (and in OY evaluation?)

## Appendix A: Geographic Locations/Overlap of Evaluations

<b>Community</b>	<b>Aspen OYIF/OYF</b>	<b>Opportunity Works</b>	<b>P3</b>	<b>LEAP</b>	<b>Generation Work</b>
Albuquerque, NM				X	
Anchorage/Wasilia AK				X	
Atlanta, GA	X				
Austin, TX	X				
Baltimore, MD	X				
Baton Rouge, LA			X		
Benton Harbor, MI				X	
Boston, MA	X	X			
Broward County, FL			X		
Chicago, IL	X		X		
Cleveland, OH					X
Del Norte County, CA	X				
Denver, CO	X				
Detroit, MI	X			X	
Eastern KY			X		
Flint, MI				X	
Greenville, MS	X				
Hartford, CT	X	X	X		X
Hopi Reservation, AZ	X				
Indianapolis, IN			X		X
Los Angeles, CA	X		City/Cty	X	
Maine, Southern Rural	X			all ME	
Minneapolis				X	
New Orleans, LA	X	X			
New York State			X		
New York, NY	X		X	X	

Oakland, CA	X				
Oklahoma (State)				X	
Omaha and Lincoln, NE					X
Philadelphia, PA	X	X			X
Phoenix, AZ			X	X	
Sacramento, CA			X		
San Diego, CA	X			X	
San Francisco, CA		X			
San Jose / Santa Clara County, CA	X	X			
Seattle/South King County, WA	X	X	X		X
Tucson, AZ	X			X	
Ysleta del sur Pueblo, TX			X		