



# THE CONSORTIUM

stimulating self-sufficiency & stability scholarship

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## YEAR*in*REVIEW

### OUR AIM

To improve the lives of low-income families and children by integrating research, policy, and practice on family self-sufficiency and stability

### HOW WE WORK

- By engaging federal, state, and local actors to become better producers and users of data
- By doing path-breaking, rigorous, and relevant research on contemporary questions related to family self-sufficiency

The Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Consortium (The Consortium) seeks to improve the lives of low-income families and children by integrating research, policy, and practice. The Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) established the consortium in 2013 to undertake path-breaking, rigorous, and relevant research on contemporary questions related to these issues. The consortium consists of:

#### 1. **Advancing Welfare and Family Self-Sufficiency Research Project.**

Led by Mathematica Policy Research, Project AWESOME provides timely and flexible research and evaluation support to a variety of stakeholders—including policymakers, researchers, and practitioners.

#### 2. **Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Scholars Network.**

The Scholars Network is a multidisciplinary collaborative of seven scholars who are investigating critical issues in family self-sufficiency and stability through independent and collective research.

#### 3. **Family Self-Sufficiency Data Center.**

Led by the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago and Chapin Hall, the Data Center provides technical support to states and builds state capacity for high-quality data management, linkage, and analysis.



The Consortium, September 2015. Photo courtesy of Jodi Sandfort.

Since it began, the consortium has met regularly to organize and advance the work of these three projects. In 2015, the consortium engaged with more than a dozen states and localities on research and evaluation efforts, launched two new research projects, and presented at several conferences and other key venues. This Year in Review highlights the consortium's individual and collective efforts to make meaningful contributions to the family self-sufficiency and stability field.

**MATHEMATICA**  
Policy Research

**OPRE**

OPRE Report 2016-17  
March 2016

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By providing evaluation technical assistance, Project AWESOME seeks to help states and localities become better users and producers of high-quality research.

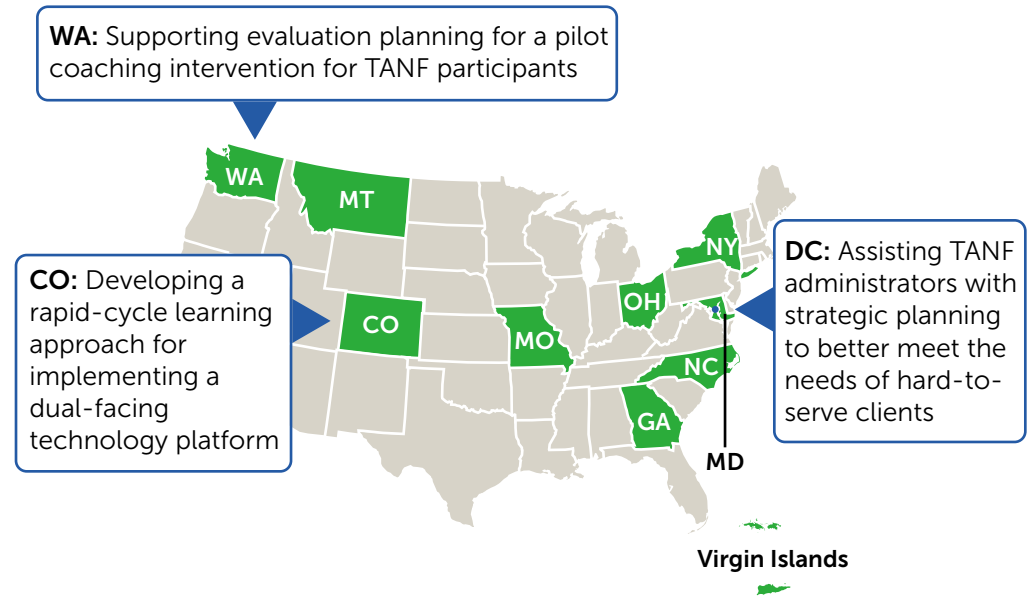
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## PROJECT AWESOME

Mathematica worked closely with practitioners in 2015 to help states and localities become better users and producers of high-quality research. Project AWESOME produced a [toolkit](#) and [practice brief](#) to assist program administrators in recognizing and implementing

opportunistic experiments in their family self-sufficiency and stability programs. In addition, the team partnered with several programs around the country in order to build local capacity for using rigorous evaluation and systematic learning to make decisions about policies and services. Figure 1 highlights the assistance provided to states and localities over the past year.

**Figure 1. Evaluation technical assistance to states and localities in 2015**



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Through independent and collective research, the Scholars Network is undertaking a multi-disciplinary examination of family self-sufficiency and stability policies and programs in collaboration with state and local human services agencies.

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## SCHOLARS NETWORK

The Scholars Network members continued to work both independently and collectively in 2015 to examine gaps in family self-sufficiency and stability policies, programs, and existing research. Jodi Sandfort of the University of Minnesota co-authored *Effective Implementation in Practice: Integrating Public Policy and Management*, a book that uses examples from Sandfort's self-sufficiency research to present an instrumental approach to implementation analysis.

With colleague Jennifer Hook (USC) and other co-authors, Jennifer Romich of the University of Washington completed a manuscript, "Trajectories of Economic Disconnection Among Families in the Child Welfare System," which was accepted for publication in the peer-reviewed journal *Social Problems*.

Heather Hill of the University of Washington presented a manuscript from her analysis of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) dataset at the Institute for Research on Poverty Summer Research Workshop in June 2015 which found that few state-level safety net policies accurately predict monthly income dynamics.

Romich, Hill, and Scott Allard, all of the University of Washington, are examining the connections between family self-sufficiency and increases in the city of Seattle's minimum wage. The team interviewed approximately 45 low-wage Seattle workers who have children. These data are being used as part of a broader analysis within the consortium's policy and instability research project. Romich presented early analysis from this work in a presentation titled, "Minimum Wage Mandates and the Safety Net: Do Gains Outweigh Losses?" at the meeting of the Society for Social Work and Research in January 2016.

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Colleen Heflin of the University of Missouri published three studies that provided key findings on the relationship between military status and self-sufficiency, including articles in *Population Research and Policy Review*, *the Disability and Health Journal*, and *the Journal of Gerontological Social Work*.

In collaboration with local Head Start administrators, Gregory Fabiano of the State University of New York—Buffalo implemented an after-school parent-child father engagement program and conducted the first phase of a randomized controlled trial evaluation to assess impacts on parenting and program outcomes.

Marybeth Mattingly of the University of New Hampshire is conducting a qualitative exploration of work among low income families in two rural New England counties. In 2015, Mattingly presented findings to community service providers in one county on how the community's economic and population structures have coalesced to form seasonal and service-based employment opportunities.

Yumiko Aratani conducted an in-depth characteristics analysis of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) long-term program participants for the District of Columbia Department of Human Services and presented preliminary findings to administrators in November 2015.

## DATA CENTER

The Data Center made significant progress in 2015 toward its mission to increase the amount and quality of data available for family self-sufficiency research. In July, the center hosted a two-day workshop at the University of Chicago, which involved representatives from state human services agencies as well as other stakeholders interested in administrative data use. Participants included (1) TANF agency representatives from Colorado, Illinois, Tennessee, and Washington, D.C.; (2) members of the consortium; (3) observers from the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) and the Pew Charitable Trusts; and (4) the Data Center team, led by Robert Goerge of Chapin Hall and Scott Allard of the University of Washington.

The workshop introduced participants to several opportunities for using administrative data

to improve service delivery and performance management. Sessions focused on several uses of the new Family Self-Sufficiency Data Tool, such as program caseload analysis, as well as practical discussions on data security, data sharing agreements, formulating research questions, and translating analytics into program or policy change. The data tool—powered by ORLIN Research—offers data analytics functionality to users with minimal data or statistical analysis training. In December, the center launched [a video demonstration](#) of the tool.

Throughout 2015, the Data Center engaged several state partners on data linking projects. In addition, the center worked with APHSA and the National Association of State Chief Information Officers to identify other partnership opportunities and technical assistance needs. To date, the center has assisted 12 states with their data needs.

## NEW RESEARCH PROJECTS

The consortium launched two collaborative research efforts in 2015. One project is addressing the interplay between social policy and the instability experienced by low-income families by expanding on the conventional ways in which instability is conceptualized and examining the extent to which major policies prevent instability or buffer its effects. A second project is working to explore and document the changing landscape of providing human services in the 21st century.

## OUT AND ABOUT

Our experts were featured at two major conferences in 2015: the 55th annual National Association for Welfare Research and Statistics (NAWRS) Workshop in Atlanta, Georgia, and the 37th annual Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM) Fall Research Conference in Miami, Florida.

**NAWRS Research Academy.** Representing the consortium's Data Center as part of a panel session on using administrative data to support program evaluation, Emily Wiegand of Chapin Hall discussed opportunities and challenges associated with using family self-sufficiency data. Jonathan McCay of Mathematica Policy Research, representing Project AWESOME, introduced a new toolkit for practitioners on the

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The Data Center seeks to increase the quality and accessibility of data for use in answering fundamental policy and program questions related to family self-sufficiency and stability.

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Roundtable discussion at the NAWRS Annual Workshop in Atlanta, Georgia, August 2015. Photo courtesy of Jonathan McCay

use of opportunistic experiments—randomized controlled trials that study the effects of an initiative, program change, or policy action that an agency or program plans or intends to implement, as opposed to one designed specifically for a research study.

**NAWRS Roundtable.** Yumiko Aratani of Columbia University and Colleen Heflin of the University of Missouri, representing the Scholars Network, Sook Jin Ong of the University of Minnesota, and Michelle Derr of Mathematica Policy Research, representing Project AWESOME, participated in a roundtable session on the consortium's new project to investigate innovative approaches to social service delivery in the 21st century. Emily Schmitt of OPRE, the consortium's project officer, moderated the roundtable.

**APPAM Caucus.** Jennifer Romich of the University of Washington, representing the Scholars Network, facilitated a breakfast roundtable discussion—"Family Stability: What Is It and Should It Be a Goal of Social Policy?"—that addressed topics related to the consortium's ongoing project on the intersections between family instability and public policy.

**Other public engagements.** Project AWESOME supported the Office of Family Assistance with its Systems to Family Stability National Policy Academy by providing evaluation-related technical assistance to member sites, such as Washington State's Department of Social and Health Services. Derr of Mathematica Policy Research also presented at the academy's fall summit, "Gateway to Opportunity: Improving Parental Employment and Family Well-Being Outcomes." In October, Heflin of the University

of Missouri spoke at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's conference, "Reflecting on 20 Years of Measuring Household Food Security." Mattingly of the University of New Hampshire gave two paper presentations at the Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America in May 2015, one of which addressed her recent work to examine the gender and social class differences in the distribution, experience, and perception of leisure as it relates to health and well-being. In November, Romich of the University of Washington briefed the State of Washington's House Committee on Early Learning and Human Services about poverty issues.

## COMING IN 2016

Stay tuned to the consortium's work in 2016 as we continue our efforts to build and use evidence to improve family self-sufficiency and stability. Below is a preview of what we have planned:

- Heflin and Project AWESOME will facilitate a training workshop on rapid-cycle learning techniques for the Missouri Department of Social Services, Children's Division, Quality Assurance and Quality Improvement units.
- Various members of the consortium will participate in OPRE's biennial Research and Evaluation Conference on Self-Sufficiency in Washington, D.C.
- Project AWESOME will publish three practical resources for programs to connect TANF recipients and other low-income families to good jobs, including an interactive, state-by-state analysis of promising occupations for low-income workers. Check out the [Project AWESOME web page](#) for these resources and more.

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