THE CONSORTIUM
stimulating self-sufficiency & stability scholarship

Jonathan McCay and Sarah Lauffer, Mathematica Policy Research

2016 **YEAR**in**REVIEW**

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 seeks to improve the lives of low-income families and children by integrating research, policy, and practice. Established by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in 2013, the consortium conducts path-breaking research on contemporary questions related to family self-sufficiency.

The Consortium has three parts:

SCHOLARS NETWORK

The Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research 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.

DATA CENTER

Led by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, the Family Self-Sufficiency Data Center provides technical support to states and builds capacity for high quality data management, linking, and analysis.

PROJECT AWESOME

Led by Mathematica Policy Research, the Advancing Welfare and Family Self-Sufficiency Research Project (Project AWESOME) provides timely, flexible research and evaluation support to policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and other key stakeholders.

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MATHEMATICA
Policy Research

Yumiko Aratani

Marybeth Mattingly

Jennifer Romich

Heather Hill

Colleen Heflin

Greg Fabiano

Jodi Sandfort

SCHOLARS NETWORK

Members of the Scholars Network continued their research—individually and collectively—in 2016 to address gaps in the policies, programs, and existing research regarding family self-sufficiency and stability.

Yumiko Aratani of Columbia University continued her work with the District of Columbia's Department of Human Services to conduct an in-depth analysis of clients enrolled in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program for more than 60 months. Her goal is to help the agency better understand one of its hardest-to-serve populations. Aratani has made recommendations to the department on best practices to improve its data collection and storage.

In 2016, **Marybeth Mattingly of the University of New Hampshire** presented findings to practitioners on obstacles to and opportunities for building stability for low-income families in two rural New England counties, and continued her qualitative exploration of employment among these families. Together with **Jennie Romich of the University of Washington**, Mattingly is conducting research on "benefit cliff effects" and earnings across states' public assistance programs (that is, a decrease in benefits that outpaces an individual's ability to replace them with earned income).

Heather Hill of the University of Washington presented her manuscript "Coupling minimum wage hikes with public investments to make work pay and reduce poverty," written in collaboration with Romich, at three venues in 2016. Hill, Romich, and Mattingly were selected as guest-editors of a forthcoming special issue of

Social Service Review. Due to be published in fall 2017, the special issue will include four to six articles submitted by the broader academic community and a conceptual essay written by members of the consortium on the effects of income instability on means-tested social safety net programs.

Colleen Heflin of the University of Missouri published two studies addressing the critical relationship between social positioning, family instability, and material hardship, as well as articles about the studies in the peer-reviewed journals *Social Problems* and the *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*. Heflin has also partnered with the quality assurance and quality improvement units within Missouri's child welfare agency to provide evaluation and research support; in 2016, she hosted a workshop for the agency on infusing research methods into program processes.

In collaboration with local Head Start administrators, **Greg Fabiano of the State University of New York at Buffalo** completed a clinical trial of a father involvement intervention designed to promote parenting skills and assess impacts on parenting and program outcomes. Fabiano plans to publish a manuscript on the trial in 2017.

In partnership with county and state agencies, **Jodi Sandfort of the University of Minnesota** created a new institute within the Humphrey School of Public Affairs focused on supporting research-based decision-making and system redesign. The Future Services Institute conducts program evaluations, hosts innovation labs, sponsors peer learning networks, and is launching a new graduate degree in human services leadership.

A recent **Future Services Institute** training event

DATA CENTER

The Data Center made significant progress in 2016 toward engaging state partners in its mission to increase the availability and quality of data for family self-sufficiency research. In October, the center hosted a two-day workshop in Chicago, Illinois, which brought together representatives from 11 state human services agencies and other stakeholders to discuss the use of administrative data to address core operational questions posed by public assistance programs.

At the workshop, members of the Data Center and the Scholars Network discussed ways to manage and organize data. They used the Data Center's analytic tool to conduct sample analyses drawn from TANF, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and child care subsidies data. These presentations led to rich discussions with state representatives about their current data usage, needs, interests, and challenges.

State representatives expressed a strong interest in improving communication between states by devoting more time to state-specific use cases, interactive discussions with other states, and the creation of state-to-state peer networks.
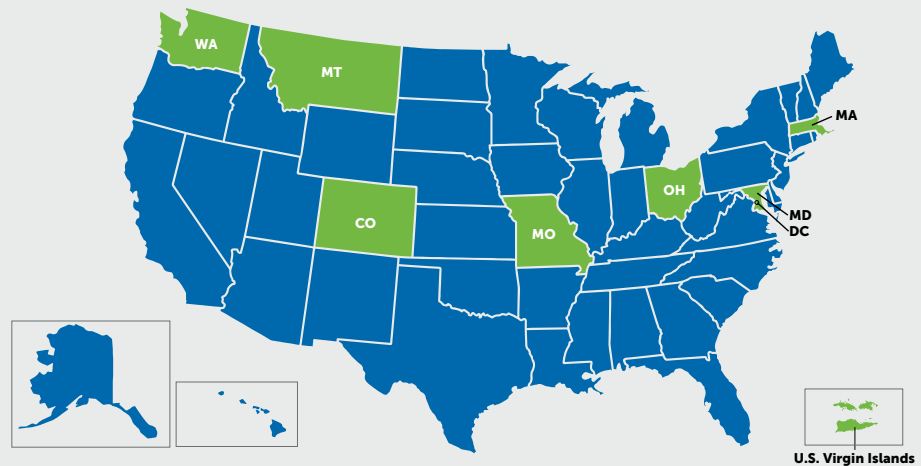
The Data Center worked closely with the Colorado Department of Human Services to link and transform administrative data available through 2016 to help identify and answer new policy-related research questions. The Data Center continues to offer support to state agencies to improve their data analytics capabilities. Moving forward, the Data Center will focus on comparing performance metrics across states and using data visualization to communicate information.

PROJECT AWESOME

Mathematica partnered with several state and local human service agencies in 2016, supporting human services programs in their efforts to make evidence-based decisions and improve the quality of services. Two highlights from 2016 are described to the left.

Sites where Project AWESOME provided evaluation TA in 2016

U.S. Virgin Islands

Colorado Larimer County Workforce Center; Prowers, Otero, Kiowa, and Crowley Counties Departments of Human Services (a rural consortium of counties working together)

District of Columbia Department of Human Services

Maryland Department of Human Resources

Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance

Missouri University of Missouri/Department of Social Services, Child Welfare Division

Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services

Ohio Department of Job and Family Services

Virgin Islands University of the Virgin Islands/ U.S. Department of Human Services

Washington Department of Social and Health Services

OUT AND ABOUT

At the 2016 Research and Evaluation Conference on Self-Sufficiency (RECS), four members of the consortium delivered a panel presentation entitled "Building Research Capacity in Human Services Agencies." As part of this panel, Jonathan McCay of Mathematica presented on using rapid-cycle evaluation as a tool for advancing evidence-based decision-making and continual program improvement. Data Center principal investigator Robert Goerge of Chapin Hall discussed how administrative data can inform program decision support and performance management. Jodi Sandfort presented several strategies to build local program managers' capacities for creating and using reliable evidence. Michelle Derr of Mathematica discussed some of the work she is leading on the use of research evidence to transform employment services for disadvantaged populations.

Also at RECS, Yumiko Aratani discussed her ongoing work with the District of Columbia's Department of Human Services as a case study for forging successful partnerships between policymakers and practitioners.

Several consortium scholars showcased their research at the fall conference of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management. Heather Hill and Hilary Wething of the University of Washington presented their recent research on the Seattle minimum wage increase. Beth Mattingly discussed her recent demographic study on poverty risk among families adding a new child to the household. Hill, Wething, and Mattingly also presented the consortium's ongoing research on the definition and measurement of economic instability for policy analysis. Colleen Heflin shared her recent work on social program participation and material hardship.

COMING IN 2017

Stay tuned to the consortium's work throughout 2017 and beyond as we continue building and using evidence to improve family self-sufficiency and stability:

- Catch us at the biennial workshop of the National Association for Welfare Research and Statistics in Pittsburgh, July 30–August 1, or follow along on social media (#NAWRS).

- Project AWESOME will publish a brief on the "Learn, Innovate, Improve" process—or LI[2]—an analytic framework that researchers and practitioners can use to guide evidence-informed program change.

- Colleen Heflin will publish a brief summarizing her recent research on the intersections between material hardship and economic and family instability.

- The special issue of *Social Service Review*, co-edited by Heather Hill, Marybeth Mattingly, and Jennifer Romich, will be published in fall 2017.

- Hill and Romich will publish a brief on the intersection between income instability and income support programs, with recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

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