

RECONNECTING YOUNG PEOPLE TO SCHOOL AND WORK

A Map of Evidence and Opportunities

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March 2022

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FUNDERS

Funding for this project came from the Office of Human Services Policy in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Dissemination of MDRC publications is supported by the following organizations and individuals that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Arnold Ventures, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, Daniel and Corinne Goldman, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc., The JPB Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and Sandler Foundation.

In addition, earnings from the MDRC Endowment help sustain our dissemination efforts. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

OVERVIEW

The Reconnecting Youth evidence gap map aims to systematically summarize the available evidence about the practices used by programs in the United States to support young people who experience disconnection from school and work during their transition to adulthood, often referred to as opportunity youth. The evidence gap map provides information about what evidence exists and insights into where there are opportunities to build evidence.

The evidence gap map focuses on programs targeting education and employment outcomes that serve young people who have had experiences that put them at greater risk of long periods of disconnection from school and work, such as not having a high school credential, being parents, or having been involved with the foster care or justice systems. The map contains 60 studies, and includes experimental designs, outcome studies, qualitative studies, and cost studies.

KEY FINDINGS

- **There is a sizable volume of research about programs that serve opportunity youth, but most are not impact studies.** The studies in the evidence gap map include a large number of qualitative studies. Many studies combined qualitative approaches with quantitative measurement of outcomes, either through measuring impact to a comparison group or measuring participant outcomes. The qualitative studies provide many opportunities to learn about how practices were implemented in diverse settings, which can provide lessons to strengthen programs. Less than half of the studies were impact studies that measured the causal effect of programs on outcomes.
- **Studies in the map are of programs that primarily serve people under 25, but most do not focus on a specific subpopulation.** Although the scope of the map was defined such that studies could serve both young people (ages 16 to 24) and people older than 25, few studies of programs that served both age groups met the criteria, indicating there is not much evidence about how well adult-focused programs serve Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Out-of-School–eligible youth (WIOA OSY). There are limited studies in the map that focus on the outcomes or experiences of specific subgroups of young people (for example, young parents or youth in the foster care system).
- **The programs studied were comprehensive in the practices they employed, and the overwhelming majority utilized youth development approaches. Programs in the map focused on nearer term practices in a youth’s reconnection.** Most programs provided services across domains, combining education and job training, and incorporating youth development practices to meet the interests and needs of a diverse group of participants. Practices associated with later steps on education and employment pathways (for example, postsecondary education advising and coaching after enrollment, or supports to maintain employment) were less common in the studies, as were practices that reflect a specific approach to program design or implementation (for example, two-generation or career pathway models).
- **The studies measured a range of education and employment outcomes, with a stronger focus on short-term outcomes, and a lesser focus on wellbeing outcomes.** Both outcome and impact studies were used to examine a range of education and employment outcomes. Intermediate and short-term outcomes, such as enrollment in education or job attainment, were more frequently

measured than long-term outcomes, such as postsecondary degree attainment or job retention. Outcomes related to a young person's wellbeing, such as housing or mental health, appeared less often and were mostly measured in large impact studies.

- **Together, the Reconnecting Youth program compendium and evidence gap map point to areas where additional research is needed to bridge the gaps between practice and evidence, as some practices were common in the compendium but rare in the evidence gap map.** A separate program compendium created for this project provides information about 78 programs and the practices they employ. Comparing the practices reported by those programs and the practices that were documented in the studies in the map highlights some practices where there is minimal research, although programs report the practices are widespread. These “gaps” can be used to set priority areas for future research.

The evidence gap map can be used to develop a research agenda in the following ways:

- **Explore areas with a concentration of studies to deepen learning.** The evidence gap map systematically catalogs and organizes studies of programs with a similar scope, allowing researchers to identify areas where systematic review or meta-analysis might be appropriate. The wealth of qualitative studies in the map could be further analyzed to explore the range of implementation approaches of a practice, and best practices for engaging and working with WIOA OSY-eligible young people. Additionally, a systematic review of the outcomes reported in the studies, whether measured against a comparison group or not, could provide more insights into the experiences of these young people and their range of outcomes.
- **Explore the gaps in evidence to build a research agenda.** Reviewing the practices in the map where there are limited studies offers the opportunity to develop a research agenda to fill these gaps. Such an agenda should first be informed with an assessment of why there are gaps, which can stem from many sources, including few programs using the practice, researchers not studying the practice, or researchers not including the discussion of a practice in public reports.
- **Learn what works for whom by building evidence that allows for a better understanding of the experiences of subgroups of youth, especially those who experience the greatest inequities.** Young people served by the programs in the map are diverse in terms of their prior education, work experience, system involvement and other characteristics. However, there is a limited number of studies in the map that look at subgroups of young people who are known to face more challenges during the transition to adulthood, such as young people in foster care or young parents. A better understanding of the causes of inequities, such as the role of systemic racism, is needed to develop solutions and ensure they are appropriately targeted at root causes. Researchers should employ meta-analysis, or other research designs, including qualitative methods, to better understand the experiences of young people who experience inequities. Additionally, participatory methods—which were not present in studies in the map—should be utilized to include people with lived experience in designing and conducting research. Finally, more research is needed into how programs are addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion, as illustrated by the very limited description of these practices in the studies in the map.
- **Leverage existing evidence to strengthen evaluation design and explore innovative evaluation designs.** Researchers and practitioners, among others, can use the evidence gap map to access a foundation of existing research to inform continuous quality improvement efforts, identify best practices and common challenges to implementation, and inform future study designs. The evidence gap map can also be leveraged to build additional evidence, such as by conducting meta-analyses.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to the leadership of Lisa Trivits, Kaitlyn Jones, Sofi Martinez, and Cheri Hoffman at the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, who provided thoughtful oversight of the Reconnecting Youth project. We are additionally grateful to Beth Sullivan and Litza Stark of Clever Name Here for developing the accompanying Reconnecting Youth website, as well as Inna Kruglaya of MDRC for her assistance in keeping the task organized. Our gratitude goes to Madeline Price of MDRC for her adept project management and research support. Thank you to Affiong Ibok of MDRC and Samuel Beckwith of Child Trends, who coded studies for the evidence map. We are thankful for the many experts and program staff who provided advice and guidance throughout the life of the project. We are deeply appreciative of the programs that participated in the qualitative questionnaire, providing the basis for the Reconnecting Youth program compendium that is discussed in this report. Jean Grossman of MDRC provided feedback on drafts of the report. Luisa LaFleur edited the report, and Carolyn Thomas of MDRC prepared it for publication.

The Authors

INTRODUCTION

The Reconnecting Youth project aims to systematically summarize the programs and practices available in the United States to support young people who experience disconnection from school and work during the transition period to adulthood (typically defined as ages 16 to 24) to help them reconnect to education, obtain employment, and advance in the labor market. This population of young people is sometimes referred to as “disconnected youth” or “opportunity youth.”

This project, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service’s Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), has produced two online tools to support these goals. The first is a compendium that provides an overview of 78 programs and the practices they employ. The second, the focus of this report, is an evidence gap map that systematically looks at the available evidence about these practices to identify what evidence exists and where there are opportunities to build evidence.¹ Together, these tools highlight the areas in which practices used by programs and evidence about those practices do or do not overlap and suggest areas of focus for future programming and research. Since there are numerous programs and practices in use to support this population, these tools focus on a specific scope of programs and practices: those that target young people who are not currently in school and have experiences that can hinder their access to and progress on education and career pathways.

Prior syntheses of evidence have identified the limitations of existing research on programs for opportunity youth: a limited number of rigorous impact studies focused on large, national programs; multi-component programs that present challenges for identifying the optimal mix of services; and insufficient research about what works for those young people who are most likely to be disconnected for long periods of time since many of the programs studied are voluntary and enroll those who are most motivated or with easiest access to services.² These limitations motivate the focus of this project: how much and what type of evidence exists that is directly related to programs that are serving young people in the United States who are experiencing disconnection?

The Reconnecting Youth evidence gap map helps to answer this question. Developed within the last 20 years, evidence gap maps are a relatively new tool.³ These maps use a defined scope to search for, screen, and code studies. The results are organized in an interactive map that provides users with a bird’s-eye view of the evidence as well as the ability to explore evidence organized by practice, outcomes measured, or other relevant dimensions. Box 1 provides more information about evidence gap maps.

This report summarizes the findings from the Reconnecting Youth evidence gap map. It first provides an overview of the methodology used to create the map, followed by a summary of the findings, and concludes with a discussion of the implications of the results.

BOX 1

Uses and Limitations of Evidence Gap Maps

The evidence gap map is a useful tool to describe the volume and type of studies that have been conducted on a particular topic. Users can interact with the map to quickly identify studies that describe specific practices, report on particular outcomes, or focus on certain populations. However, users should consider the limitations of this and other evidence gap maps when using the tool. First, evidence gap maps do not assess the quality or rigor of the evaluations. Second, when considering the findings and results from searches of the interactive map, users should understand the evidence gap map gives equal weight to each study, although the evaluations are diverse and include differences in the size and number of sites, sample sizes, and combinations of practices. Similarly, the evidence gap map reports on any practice that was described in an evaluation report, but the quality of the implementation of these practices likely varies.

SCOPE AND METHODS

The Reconnecting Youth evidence gap map contains a broad range of study types, including the following:

- randomized controlled trials
- quasi-experimental studies
- outcome studies (studies that have no comparison group)
- qualitative studies including implementation and case studies
- economic evaluations such as cost-benefit analyses

The inclusion of study designs beyond random assignment or other methods used to estimate impact, which most evidence gap maps focus on, reflects the reality of the field of opportunity youth—many of the studies that have been conducted are not impact studies. Therefore, limiting the evidence gap map to impact studies would exclude a large body of work. Importantly, there is growing discussion in the field of human services research and evidence building about extending the definition of evidence of effectiveness beyond studies of programs focused on demonstrating statistically significant impacts on outcomes. A more inclusive approach to defining and building evidence involves continuous development of knowledge about practices and outcomes and accounts for the complex realities of program implementation through additional methods, such as formative and implementation studies. Such knowledge should be defined by and co-created with participants and communities.⁴ Therefore, there is also increasing emphasis on partnering with program participants, practice professionals, and other community stakeholders in conducting evaluations (that is, participatory methods of evaluation).⁵ By describing

the full range of evidence available for programs that serve opportunity youth, this evidence gap map can help further these discussions.

In defining the scope of the evidence gap map, the team, in consultation with ASPE and experts in the field, focused on programs that serve young people who are most likely to experience disconnection for long periods of time and need the most support to advance on educational and employment pathways. Though one definition cannot capture all the factors that may lead to persistent disconnection, the eligibility criteria for the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Out-Of-School Youth (WIOA OSY) funds are a close approximation.⁶ Young people who are WIOA OSY-eligible are not attending or enrolled in school and have at least one other risk factor for disconnection. (See Box 2.) The team also established additional scope criteria based on the characteristics of the programs that were studied. The scope criteria are summarized in Figure 1 and align with the criteria used to identify programs for the compendium.

BOX 2

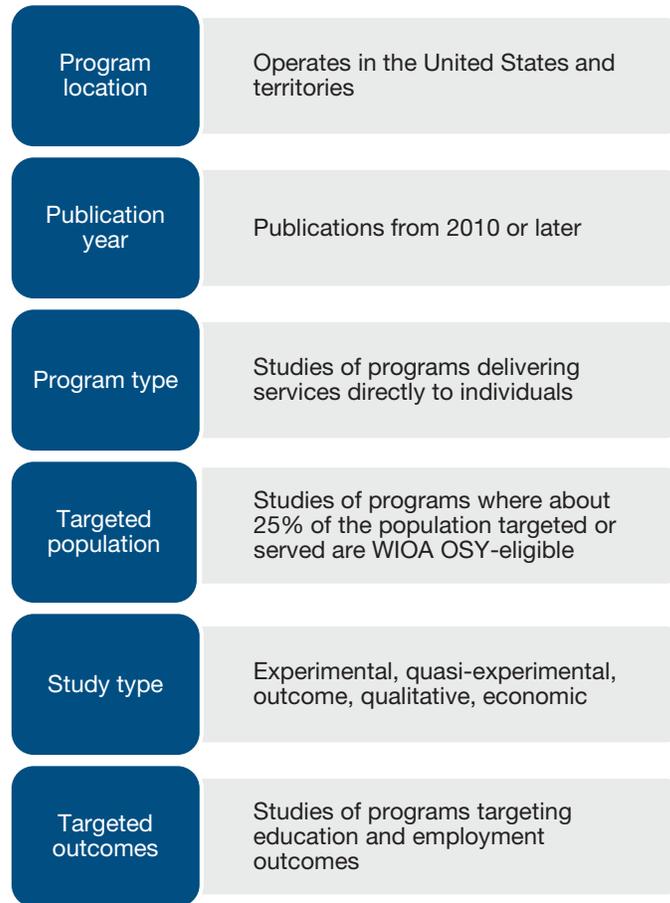
The WIOA Out-of-School Youth Definition

An “out-of-school youth” is an individual who is not attending any school (as defined under State law), not younger than age 16 or older than age 24 at the time of enrollment, and one or more of the following:

1. a school dropout
2. a youth who is within the age of compulsory school attendance, but has not attended school for at least the most recent complete school year calendar quarter
3. a recipient of a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent who is a low-income individual and is either basic skills-deficient or an English language learner
4. an offender
5. a homeless individual, a homeless child or youth, or a runaway
6. an individual in foster care or who has aged out of the foster care system or who has attained 16 years of age and left foster care for kinship guardianship or adoption, a child eligible for assistance under sec. 477 of the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. 677), or in an out-of-home placement
7. an individual who is pregnant or parenting
8. an individual with a disability, or
9. a low-income individual who requires additional assistance to enter or complete an educational program or to secure or hold employment

SOURCE: Division of Youth Services, “WIOA Youth Program Fact Sheet” (Washington, DC: US Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 2021).

FIGURE 1
Evidence Gap Map Scope Criteria



NOTE: See Box 2 for Workforce Investment Opportunity Act Out-of-School Youth eligibility criteria.

The framework—that is, which practices and outcomes would be captured in the map—lays the foundation for the map. The team developed a comprehensive list of services and practices that might be present in programs focused on education and employment outcomes for this population from prior studies of programs, expert interviews, and a one-time virtual group event that took place over two days with experts and federal staff. The list included both services and implementation practices known to be common, as well as those that were identified as “innovative,” meaning that they were not believed to be widespread but there was reason to believe they might be beneficial to opportunity youth. The outcome categories were determined through consultation with experts and an initial review of the evidence to determine the range of outcomes reported.

To identify studies to be included in the map, the team searched for studies published between January 1, 2010, and the fall of 2021 in a comprehensive range of sources including journals, research organization websites, evidence syntheses, and reports submitted by programs in the compendium. Once a publication was identified, it was screened against the scope criteria in Figure 1. If a publication met the screening criteria, the team identified the characteristics of the study (for example, study type), what outcomes were measured in the study, and which practices were used by the program being evaluated. Coders relied solely on information in the article or report. If there was not enough detail to determine if the program implemented a practice, the team did not code the publication as including that practice. Eighteen percent of the publications were double coded to ensure inter-rater reliability; one master coder reviewed and resolved any differences in coding.

FINDINGS

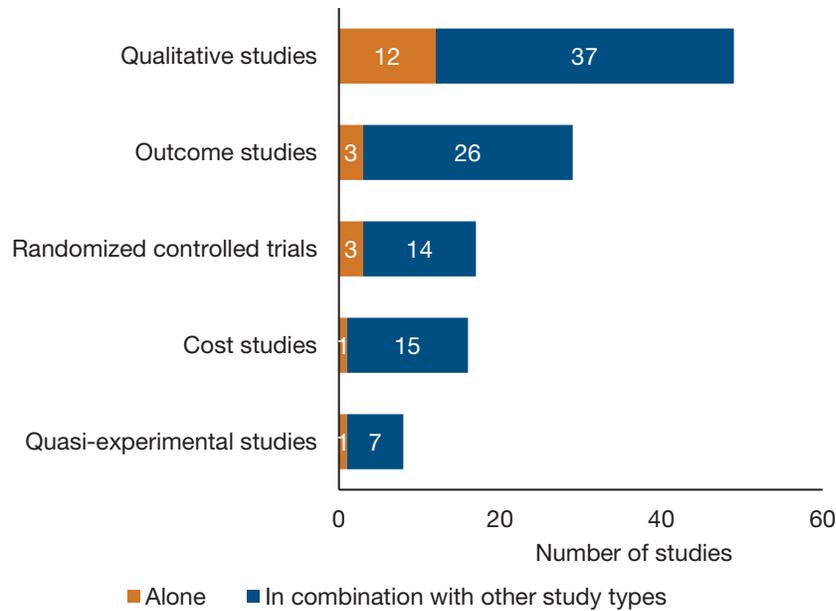
The search resulted in 89 publications. (See Appendix B for a full listing of publications.) Publications within the same study (for example, an interim report and a final report using the same research sample) were consolidated into one study. Sixteen studies had multiple publications. A total of 60 unique studies were included in the evidence gap map. This section summarizes key takeaways from the analysis of the 60 studies in terms of study design, programs studied, outcomes measured, and comparison with the programs in the Reconnecting Youth program compendium.

There is a sizable volume of research about programs that serve opportunity youth, but most studies are not impact studies. Of the 60 studies in the map, 49 (82 percent) included a qualitative study component,⁷ and 47 (78 percent) measured outcomes quantitatively in some way. However, only 23 studies (38 percent) used a method that can determine causal impacts (randomized controlled trial and quasi-experimental designs). Most studies used more than one study method, and most of the studies that measured participant outcomes (outcome studies, randomized controlled trials, and quasi-experimental studies) also included a qualitative component. Figure 2 provides a summary of the studies by study type, distinguishing between studies that used one method and those that used that method in combination with another method.

The small share of impact studies indicates there is limited information about the causal impacts of programs on participant outcomes. While some practices and outcomes have more than 10 impact studies shown on the map, most do not. A user focused on causal impacts will find multiple gaps, depending on the practice or outcome of interest. However, users wanting to learn about the range of ways that programs implement a specific practice may find a wealth of opportunities to learn from studies in the evidence gap map. For example, there are 12 impact studies of programs that included temporary and transitional work experiences as a practice, but there are 22 additional qualitative and/or outcome studies of programs that used this practice. Because newer and smaller programs may be less likely to have the resources to engage in an impact study, outcome and qualitative studies offer insights into how these programs operate. Information about the full range of practices and how they might be implemented is useful for

FIGURE 2

Number of Studies in the Evidence Gap Map, by Study Type



SOURCE: Analysis of Studies in Reconnecting Youth Evidence Gap Map (website: <http://reconnectingyouth.mdrc.org>).

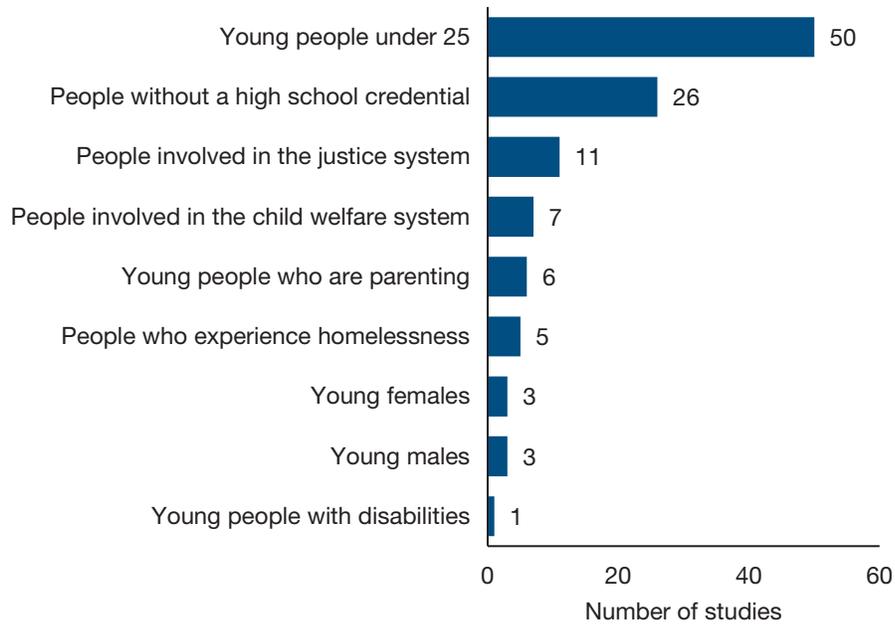
program developers, funders, and policymakers to inform program designs and funding. Program operators and practitioners can also use implementation data to inform their work. In addition, information about practices, whether from impact study or other designs, can help evaluators explore the range of practices that programs provide and improve evaluator capacity to design and conduct more thorough and better-informed implementation studies.

Studies are of programs that primarily serve young people, but most do not focus on a specific subpopulation. Though the scope of the map was defined such that studies could serve both young people (ages 16 to 24) and people aged 25 and older, few studies of programs that served both age ranges met the criteria for inclusion in the evidence gap map (10 of 60). Most studies were of programs that only serve people under 25. (See Figure 3.) Studies of programs that served an older population often did not meet the scope because the young people served by those programs did not meet the WIOA OSY eligibility criteria. Thus, there is limited evidence in this map about how well programs that enroll people aged 25 and older serve WIOA OSY-eligible youth.

In alignment with the WIOA OSY criteria, many of the programs studied targeted young people who did not have their high school credentials. Populations with other risk factors captured in the WIOA OSY criteria, such as system involvement or parenting status, were targeted to a much lesser extent. The team also coded studies to determine if they targeted people who identify as LGBTQ but did not find any studies of programs focused on this population. Though the pro-

FIGURE 3

Population Focus of Studies in the Evidence Gap Map



SOURCE: Analysis of Studies in Reconnecting Youth Evidence Gap Map (website: <http://reconnectingyouth.mdrc.org>).

grams likely served young people with these experiences, most of the programs studied were not designed to serve a specific subpopulation and programs served many of these populations at the same time. This finding highlights some challenges for evaluation related to understanding the experience of specific groups of young people. It is difficult to study some subpopulations of youth through impact evaluations of single interventions, as the number of young people in each subpopulation will be small.

The diverse population that programs served likely contributed to the modest number of population-specific or subgroup analyses among the studies. Twenty-three studies were identified as either focusing exclusively on a specific population of interest or including subgroup analyses. These studies mostly compared impacts between subgroups, but a few studies looked at the experience of a particular group qualitatively, either alongside the subgroup analysis or independently. Subgroup analyses most commonly focused on age, gender, race or ethnicity, or education or employment experience at enrollment. A few studies looked at subgroups by systems involvement (for example, child welfare or justice systems), housing, or parenting status. The limited studies of young people who have these experiences speaks to an opportunity to better understand the conditions that influence young people and their outcomes.

The studies describe programs that combine practices across domains to provide comprehensive services to participants. The number and distribution of practices used by programs described in the studies suggest that programs take a comprehensive approach to providing services. The research team coded for 36 practices across seven domains. Three domains focused on the core activities that programs provide to young people to build their skills to advance in education and work, namely:

- *secondary education services* that helped young people work towards a high school credential
- *postsecondary education services* that helped young people enter and persist in postsecondary education
- *job and career training* practices that helped young people build work readiness or occupational skills to enter or advance in the labor market

Three domains focused on the practices that programs often provide alongside these services to help young people stay engaged with the programs and persist towards their goals, namely:

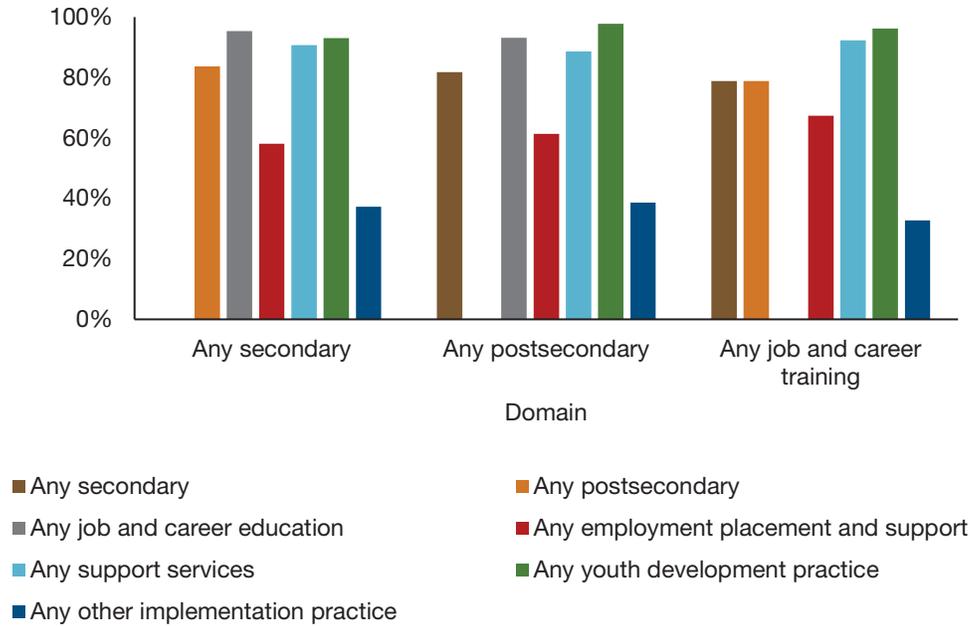
- *support services*, such as mental health care or material supports, to help a young person engage in a program, school, or work
- *youth development approaches*, such as leadership activities or connections to a caring adult, that target the developmental needs of young people
- *employment placement and supports* that help participants obtain and retain employment

A seventh domain, *other implementation practices*, included a range of practices related to the way that programs might approach their work with young people, such as career pathways models, two-generation programs, and collective impact approaches.⁸

Most commonly, the studied programs had practices in five of the seven domains, indicating that programs did not focus on one area but provided comprehensive services and supports. As shown in Figure 4, programs provided a combination of services. Each panel of the figure shows the share of programs that provided an education or training practice (secondary, postsecondary or job and career training) that also had a practice in one of the six other areas. In addition to often providing multiple practices within a domain, most programs provided services across domains, meaning that they could work with young people on a range of education and career goals, rather than specializing in one area. For example, programs that helped participants achieve a secondary credential would also offer services to support postsecondary education or job training, reflecting a “meet youth where they are at” approach. Most programs also provided support services and used youth development practices. Employment placement and support practices were less common but were also found in more than half of the studies. Other implementation practices were least common and appeared in a minority of studies.

FIGURE 4

Percentage of Studies with Secondary, Postsecondary, and/or Job and Career Training Practices with Practices in Other Domains, by Domain



SOURCE: Analysis of Studies in Reconnecting Youth Evidence Gap Map (website: <http://reconnectingyouth.mdrc.org>).

Nearly all programs studied used practices related to youth development and support services, reflecting the population served by the programs in the map. In alignment with the earlier discussion that programs focus on youth, programs overwhelmingly incorporated youth development models (57 of 60 studies). Most commonly, programs provided a connection to a caring adult. (See Studies with Youth Development Practices in Appendix Figure A.1.) WIOA OSY-eligible youth have experiences that make their engagement and persistence in a program and education or employment placement more challenging. It was also common for programs in the map to provide support services to mitigate barriers, most often supports for basic needs like transportation. (See Studies with Support Services in Appendix Figure A.1.)

The practices described in the studies indicate that the programs evaluated focused on the early stages of reconnecting young people to school or employment, and practices associated with later steps in education and employment pathways were less common. Across domains, practices associated with the initial steps a young person might take to reconnect to school or work were most common (Appendix Figure A.1). Aligned with the population served, more than half of the studies (36 of 60) provided services toward earning a high school diploma or equivalent. About half of the programs in the map provided occupational skills training (53 percent), and a similar share provided pre-enrollment supports for postsecondary education (48

percent). Supports for young people once enrolled in postsecondary education, such as coaching or supports to pay for postsecondary education, were less common. Though 58 percent of the programs provided help to place young people in jobs, supports to help young people stay in jobs (either to young people or to employers) were less common (17 percent).

The distribution of practices to earlier stages of a young person's reengagement in school or work suggests that programs that WIOA OSY-eligible youth enter are mostly short term and are not designed to carry young people fully through postsecondary education or up multiple steps on a career pathway. The programs that might be the "next step" after one of the programs in this map (such as on-campus college support programs) would not be included in this map since participants would not be WIOA OSY-eligible. Thus, the studies in this map provide a wealth of information about the initial programs that young people may reconnect to, but limited information about young people's experiences after they leave these programs. This suggests that an area for further learning is youth pathways after these programs and their later outcomes related to employment, education, and wellbeing.

Studies measured a range of education and employment outcomes, with a stronger focus on short-term outcomes, and less of a focus on wellbeing outcomes. Both outcome and impact studies were used to examine a range of education and employment outcomes. Intermediate and short-term outcomes, such as enrollment in education or job attainment, were more frequently measured than long-term outcomes, such as postsecondary degree attainment or job retention. (See Appendix Figure A.2.) Studies may focus on short-term outcomes because they reflect the disconnection from education and employment that youth are experiencing at program entry, and thus these outcomes are most proximal to the program's services and goals. Further, shorter-term outcomes may be the most realistic outcomes for a program to achieve within a study timeframe. Longer-term outcomes, such as postsecondary degree attainment, require programs and evaluators to follow youth for years beyond program services and require significant evaluation resources.

It is primarily the impact studies in the map that measured wellbeing outcomes, such as social emotional skills, health, and housing status. One possible explanation is that wellbeing outcomes are typically measured through more resource intensive methods of data collection that may only be feasible in well-funded impact studies. About half of the studies in the map were federally funded, sometimes in combination with funding from other sources. Federal studies tend to be well-supported and funded. Of the impact studies, about three-fourths were federally funded. Examples of data collection strategies that require more resources include the administration of surveys and the analysis of administrative data sets. The exploration of wellbeing, in addition to education and employment outcomes, allows for a more complete understanding of the experiences of young people as they transition to adulthood, in addition to helping understand if programs have an impact on these outcomes.

COMPARING THE PROGRAM COMPENDIUM AND EVIDENCE GAP MAP

The Reconnecting Youth compendium and evidence gap map together lead to a better understanding of what practices are commonly used and studied, and where existing research is not aligned with current practice. These findings can be used to determine priority areas for future research. The compendium provides a new source of information about the practices that programs serving opportunity youth use.⁹ Taken together, these two sources show that programs in the compendium provide similar youth-focused comprehensive supports as the programs studied in the evidence gap map. Comparing the two tools also exposes some gaps between what practices have been captured in evaluations compared with what programs say are common.

As with studies in the evidence gap map, programs in the compendium also reported using practices across domains. Most programs in the compendium provided at least one secondary and postsecondary service, and nearly all programs provided at least one employment service and at least one support service.¹⁰ Nearly every program in the compendium provided connections to a caring adult. Programs also reported providing support services, either directly or through a referral partner.

However, programs in the compendium reported the common use of some practices that were not common in the evidence gap map. Though only two studies in the map captured the use of practices related to providing supports to employers to help young people retain and advance in jobs, more than 40 percent of the programs in the compendium reported that this was a core practice. Similarly, very few of the activities captured under “other implementation practices” were found in the studies in the map, but the majority of the programs in the compendium reported using these practices. For example, only one study described racial equity practices, but 96 percent of the programs in the compendium reported having at least one racial equity practice. The limited descriptions of these practices in studies may suggest a need for greater attention to the ways researchers document these practices.

These comparisons suggest a couple of lessons for evaluators and users of evidence. First, the evidence gap map and the compendium reflect different points in time. The evidence gap map includes studies published as far back as 2010, while the compendium collected data at a point in time—spring 2021. The compendium may reflect innovations that have been adopted by programs recently, and lack of evidence about these practices points to areas that evaluators could focus on in the future. Additionally, these gaps could point to differences in practitioner and evaluator perspectives. The evidence gap map relies exclusively on practices described in publications. Thus, practices may have been in use by the programs studied, but they were not captured by the evaluator for reasons of study design (for example, the practice was not viewed as central to the program logic model or research questions) or they could have been captured but not included in the reports. The research team coding studies for the map observed a minimal description of practices in some publications, suggesting that evaluators can improve on descriptions of practice implementation in study reports.¹¹ Additionally, readers of study reports should keep in mind that the reports may not have complete descriptions of practices. All these

potential sources for discrepancies between the compendium and the map point to a need for new research on the practices in the map for which there are limited studies.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE EVIDENCE GAP MAP

The Reconnecting Youth evidence gap map suggests several directions for future research.

Explore areas with a concentration of studies to strengthen programs and deepen learning. The evidence gap map systematically catalogs and organizes studies of programs with a similar scope, allowing researchers to identify areas where systematic review or meta-analysis might be appropriate. Additionally, the wealth of qualitative studies in the map could be further analyzed to explore the range of implementation approaches of a practice, and best practices for engaging and working with WIOA OSY-eligible young people. Additionally, a systematic review of the outcomes reported in the studies, whether measured against a comparison group or not, could enhance the understanding of the experiences of these young people. For example, looking at high school completion rates across the impact and outcome studies in the map would provide information to understand the range of young people who complete this milestone after enrolling in a program.

Explore the evidence gaps to build a research agenda. Reviewing the practices on the map that have limited studies offers a unique opportunity to develop a research agenda to fill these gaps. Such an agenda should first be informed by an assessment of why there are gaps, as they can stem from several sources. For example, the lack of studies for some practices may be a result of programs not using the practices because they were not viewed as essential or were difficult to implement. Practices captured in the map are limited to those described in study reports. In some cases, practices may have been used by programs, but reports did not describe them either because the evaluator did not gather information on the practice or chose not to include a description of the practice in the report. Finally, some gaps may be because the practices are new and have not been in place long enough to study. Each of these potential reasons for gaps requires a customized approach to address. The program compendium can inform an understanding of where there are gaps, and why they might exist.

The types of programs with limited representation in the evidence gap map also suggest areas for future research. Studies that met the scope were primarily youth-focused. An examination of the 10 studies in the map that also enrolled people ages 25 and over could provide insight into how their practices compare with the youth-focused programs. Additionally, the assessment of the practices and outcomes measured indicate that the programs in the map are short term and focus on near-term outcomes after reconnection (such as high school completion and/or employment). Since these programs are likely the first of many steps on education and employment pathways, research into approaches to linking shorter-term programs with longer-term pathways would be beneficial.

Consider evidence-building opportunities that link practices and outcomes. By looking across studies, users of the evidence gap map can observe the accumulation of evidence for different kinds of practices but cannot draw conclusions that a specific practice is associated with a specific outcome. The studies describe programs that combine multiple practices, often across many domains and targeting multiple outcomes. Thus, these studies have the classic “black box” problem: they have difficulty identifying which aspects of complex programs are responsible for positive impacts (that is, what works and why). It is possible that an understanding of the practices associated with outcomes may be better studied using other evaluative methods. Rather than studies of individual programs, methods that may better detect the impact of program practices on outcomes include, for example, mixed methods studies using continuous quality improvement approaches (for example, improvement science and plan-do-study-act cycles) and studies of program components (such as, practices and/or groups of practices).

Learn what works for whom by building evidence that allows for a better understanding of the experiences of subgroups of youth, especially those who experience the greatest inequities. Young people served by the programs in the map are diverse in terms of their prior education, work experience, system involvement and other characteristics and experiences. Understanding what works for whom is important, particularly for young people who experience the greatest inequities. However, there are limited studies in the map that look at subgroups of young people who are known to face more structural barriers during the transition to adulthood, such as young people in foster care or young parents. Better understanding of the causes of inequities, such as the role of systemic racism, is needed to develop solutions and ensure they are appropriately targeted at root causes. The small number of young people in these subgroups who enroll in a particular program make subgroup analyses challenging. Instead, research might need to employ meta-analysis, or conduct studies combining multiple interventions with similar components to understand the experiences and outcomes of these subgroups. Qualitative studies could focus on youth subgroups within a program to understand their experience and inform how programs may need to adapt to best serve them. Additionally, the use of participatory methods should be expanded to include young people with lived experience in design, data collection, analysis, and reports. Finally, more research is needed into how programs are addressing issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, as illustrated by the misalignment between the compendium and evidence gap map related to racial equity practices.

Leverage existing evidence to strengthen future research and explore innovative evaluation designs. Researchers and practitioners, among others, can use the evidence gap map to access a foundation of existing research to inform continuous quality improvement efforts, identify best practices and common challenges to implementation, and inform future study designs. The evidence gap map can also be leveraged to build additional evidence, such as meta-analyses or by using existing evidence to inform Bayesian analyses.¹² Studies that use Bayesian analyses require information about prior evaluation findings to establish the information needed to assess the probability of outcomes in new studies (that is, “Priors”). Bayesian statistics can be a useful approach to measuring the probability of outcomes when studies are under-powered (for example, studies have sample sizes that are too small to demonstrate statistical significance).

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7. Qualitative studies were defined as those that used qualitative methods to collect and analyze data, such as document review, observation, interviews, and focus groups and associated analysis techniques, in order to explore aspects of program implementation.
8. Definitions for each practice can be found in the evidence gap map tool page of reconnectingyouth.mdrc.org.
9. Of the studies in the map, 29 of 60 are programs in the compendium. In the compendium, 23 of 78 programs are associated with a study in the map. Some programs are associated with multiple studies in the evidence gap map. To learn about the methodology used to create the compendium, see Emma Alterman and Louisa Treskon, *Responding to Young People: An Analysis of Programs Serving Young People Not Connected to School or Work* (New York: MDRC, 2022).
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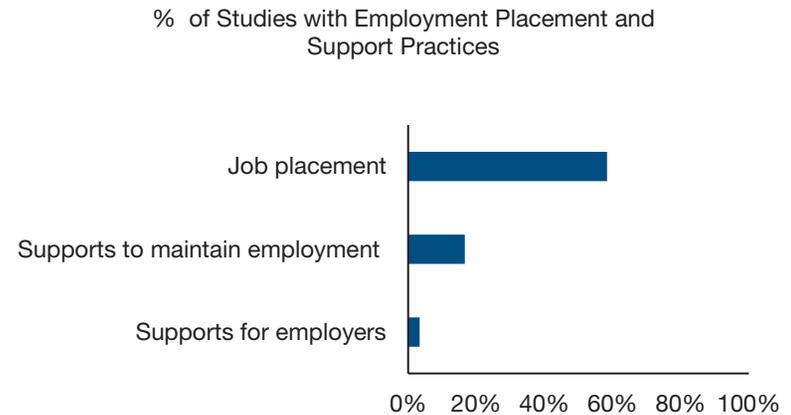
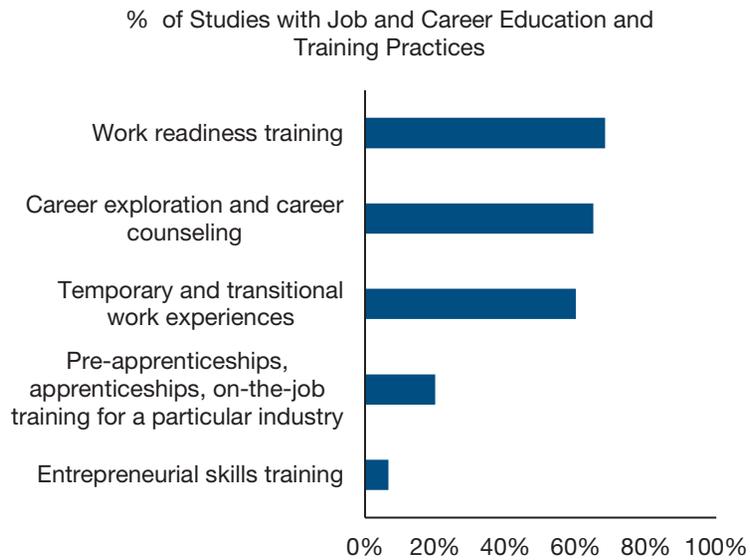
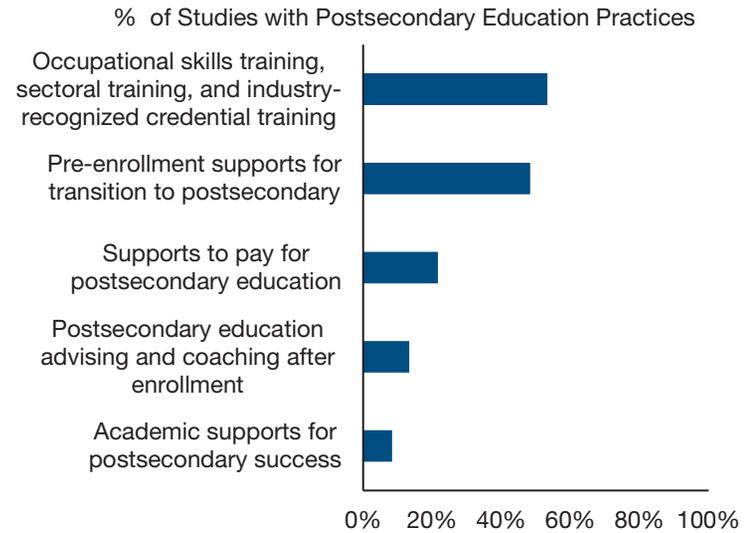
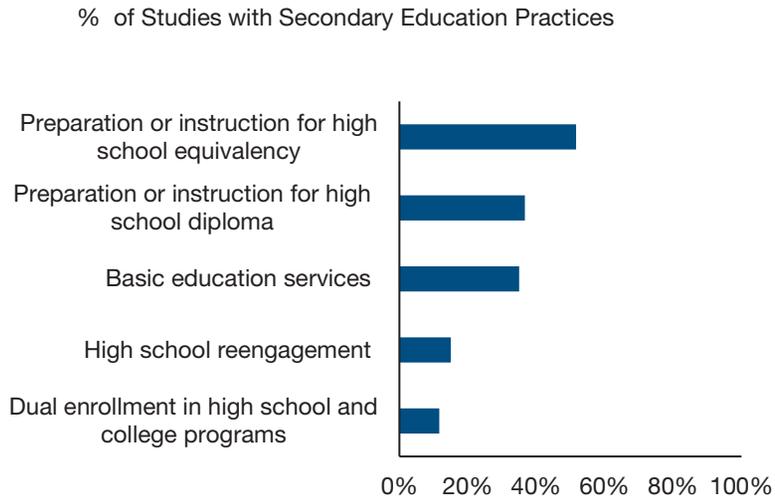
APPENDIX

A

Supplemental Figures

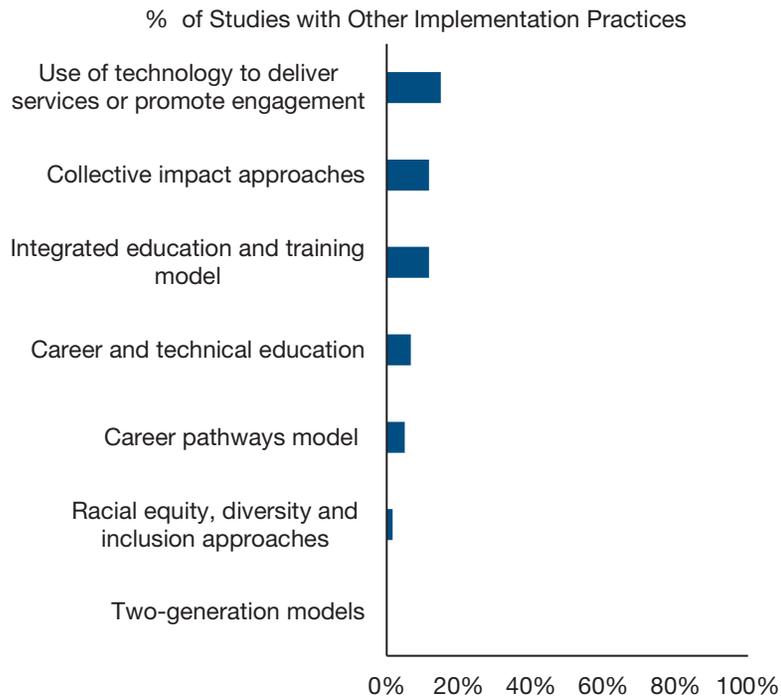
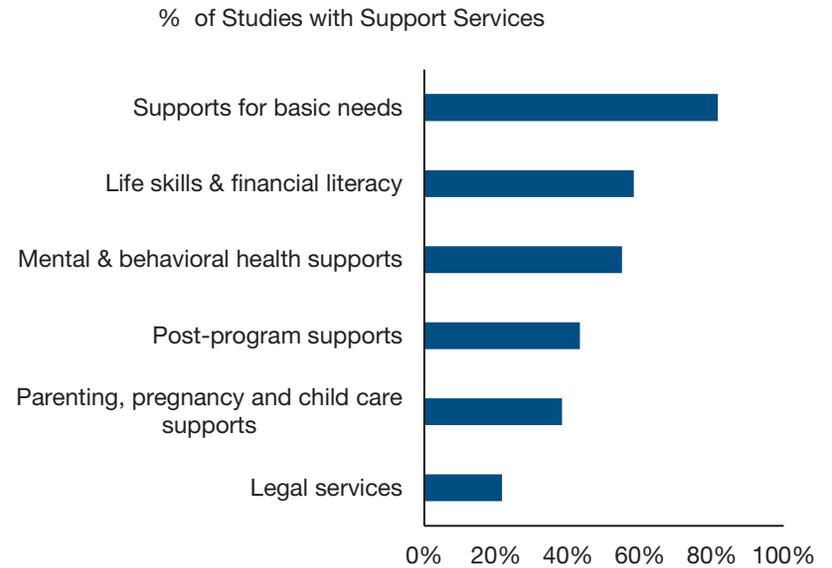
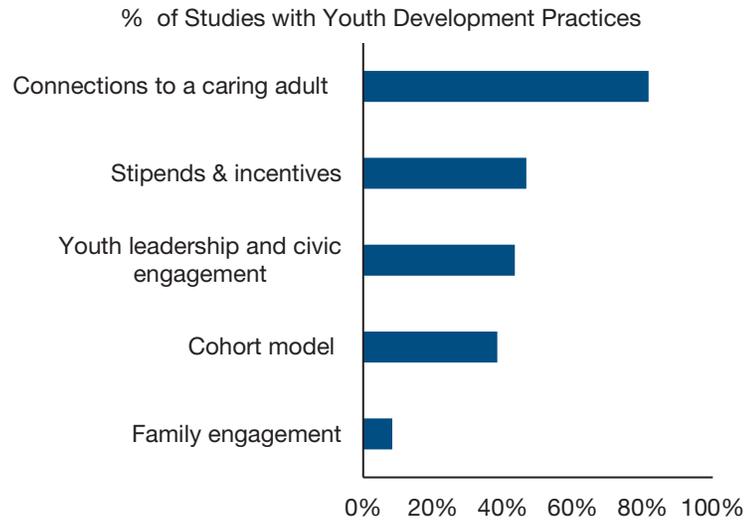
APPENDIX FIGURE A.1

Percentage of Studies with Practices, by Domain



(continued)

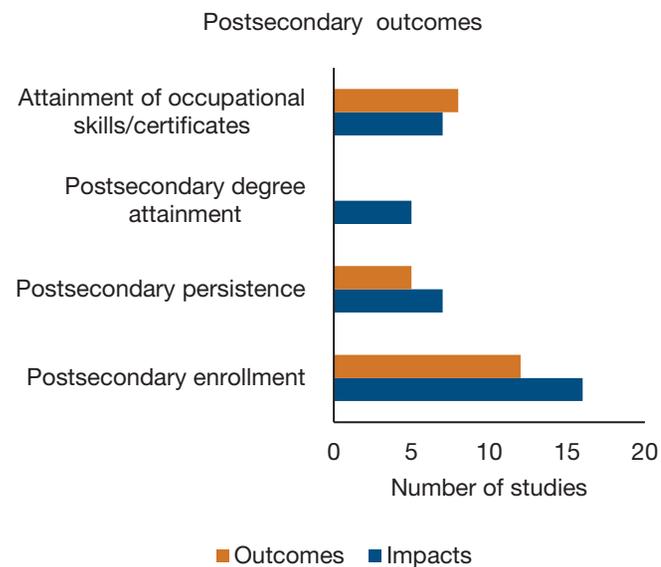
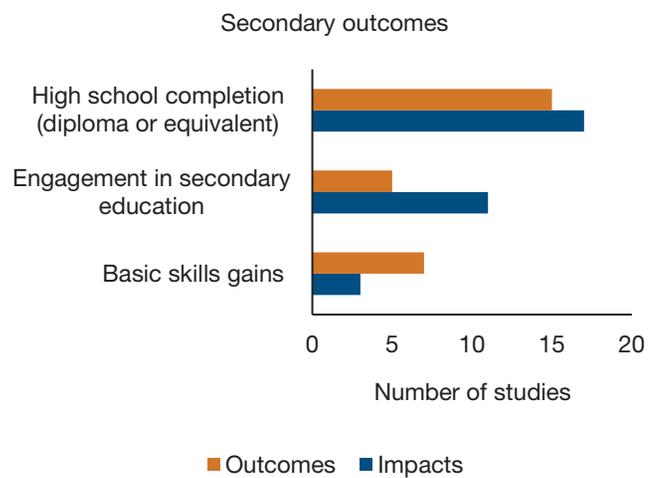
APPENDIX FIGURE A.1 (continued)



SOURCE: Analysis of Studies in Reconnecting Youth Evidence Gap Map (website: <http://reconnectingyouth.mdrc.org>).

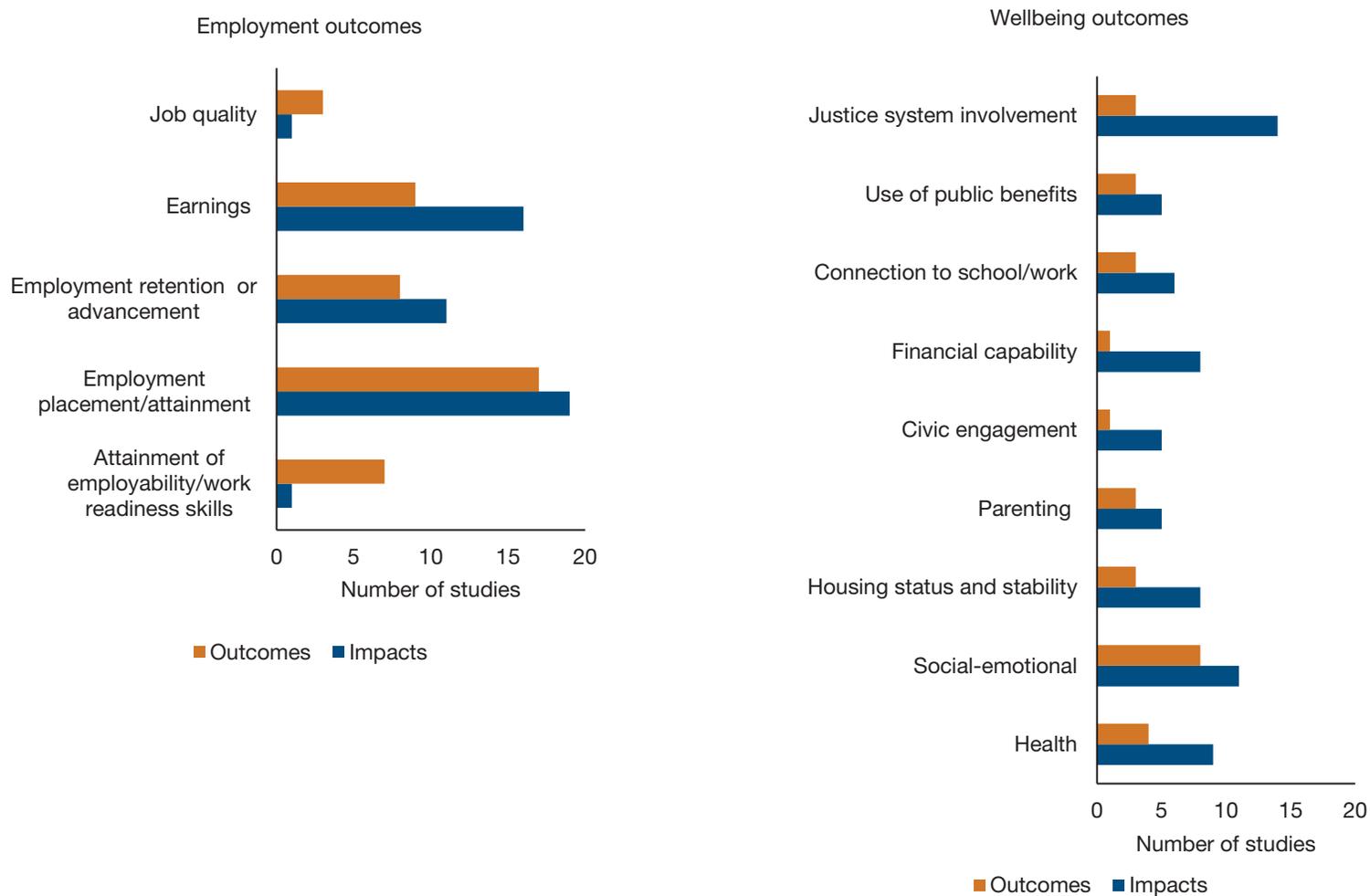
APPENDIX FIGURE A.2

Number of Studies with Outcomes Measured, by Outcome and Study Type



(continued)

APPENDIX FIGURE A.2 (continued)



SOURCE: Analysis of Studies in Reconnecting Youth Evidence Gap Map (website: <http://reconnectingyouth.mdrc.org>).

NOTES: Impact studies included a comparison group either as part of a randomized controlled trial or a quasi-experimental

APPENDIX

B

List of Studies in the Evidence Gap Map

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