

WELFARE AND FAMILY SELF-SUFFICIENCY LEARNING AGENDA



Welfare and Family Self-Sufficiency Learning Agenda

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Introduction

The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), studies ACF programs and the populations they serve through rigorous research and evaluation projects. These projects include evaluations of existing programs, evaluations of innovative approaches to helping children and families with low incomes, research syntheses, and descriptive and exploratory studies. OPRE also works to improve the analysis of data, coordinates performance management for ACF, and aims to build and communicate knowledge about effective approaches to helping children and families with low incomes.

OPRE includes four divisions in addition to the Office of the Director:

- The Division of Economic Independence focuses on welfare, employment, and family self-sufficiency.
- The Division of Child and Family Development focuses on child care, Head Start, Early Head Start, child abuse and neglect, and human trafficking.
- The Division of Family Strengthening focuses on teen pregnancy prevention, youth development, healthy marriage, responsible fatherhood, family violence, runaway and homeless youth, and home visiting.
- The Division of Data and Improvement focuses on increasing the quality, usefulness, sharing, and analysis of data to improve ACF programs and outcomes for people participating in those programs.

The Division of Economic Independence has primary responsibility for welfare and family self-sufficiency research and evaluation. The Division's work is funded mostly through the Social Security Act § 413 (Title IV-A: Block Grants to States for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF]). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 established the TANF block grant to provide funds to states, eligible territories, and tribes, which decide on the design of their programs, the type and amount of assistance payments to families, and the range of other services to be provided. The law also authorized funding for research and evaluation to test the effectiveness of state innovations and demonstrations in promoting economic self-sufficiency and family well-being, and for technical assistance activities to support states in carrying out their TANF programs and services.

Within ACF, the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) administers federal grant programs that foster family economic security and stability, including the TANF program. The Division of Economic Independence and OFA partner to conduct research, evaluation, technical assistance, and related learning activities in order to produce and apply knowledge about how TANF and other human services programs can best support the self-sufficiency and economic well-being of children and families with low incomes.

The work carried out by the Division of Economic Independence and OFA does not cover the entirety of programs that might contribute to family economic self-sufficiency and well-being. Rather, their research, evaluation, and technical assistance focuses on understanding and improving the programs that serve families receiving TANF cash assistance or other TANF-funded services as well as those who are eligible for or might become eligible to receive TANF assistance or services. Most research, evaluation, and technical assistance projects focus on improving outcomes related to employment in addition to other aspects of family economic security, stability, and self-sufficiency.

The Division of Economic Independence and OFA jointly developed the Welfare and Family Self-Sufficiency Learning Agenda, or WFSSLA, to guide the development and execution of their learning activities pertaining to welfare and family self-sufficiency so that the activities proceed in a way that is grounded in, and seeks to build on, current and recently completed learning activities; addresses gaps in knowledge; is responsive to changes in programs, policies, and context; and reflects the interests, needs, and priorities of ACF and key internal and external parties. The goal of the agenda is to enable the Division and OFA to work more effectively, efficiently, and collaboratively to advance their missions and support broader ACF goals.

The WFSSLA contains many learning questions of interest to the Division of Economic Independence and OFA—far more than could be addressed through learning activities launched in a single year. Therefore, it is designed to serve as a repository of learning questions the Division and OFA might wish to address over time.

This introduction to the WFSSLA discusses the context that motivated its development; its purpose both within ACF and for external audiences; its development, structure, and content; and the process for and frequency of periodic updates.

Background

Rigorous research and evaluation are at the heart of OPRE's mission. Through a range of research and evaluation activities, described above, OPRE advises the Assistant Secretary for ACF on increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of programs designed to improve the economic and social well-being of children and families. In addition, OPRE helps ACF program offices manage and use data responsibly, and oversees and coordinates performance management activities for ACF. In 2012, OPRE established [ACF's Evaluation Policy](#), which addresses the principles of rigor, relevance, transparency, independence, and ethics. These principles govern ACF's planning, conduct, and use of evaluation.

The [Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018](#) (Evidence Act) was established to advance evidence-building in the federal government through requirements intended to improve access to data and expand evaluation capacity. Among these requirements is a mandate that cabinet agencies develop evidence-building and evaluation plans, which the Evidence Act defines

as systematic plans for identifying and addressing priority questions relevant to the programs, policies, and regulations of the agency.

In line with its mission, OPRE has a long history of helping ACF pursue learning agendas and related activities at multiple levels. At the broadest level, ACF contributes to HHS's multiyear evidence plan and the annual evaluation plan required by the Evidence Act. OPRE also works closely with individual ACF program offices to develop detailed learning agendas for specific ACF programs. OPRE drew on these individual learning agendas to establish the ACF Research and Evaluation Agenda, which summarizes key past, ongoing, and future research and evaluation efforts, and the priority questions and engagement activities that guide these efforts, for each program area. The WFSSLA is a program-specific learning agenda; it is intended to guide the development of the Division of Economic Independence's and OFA's portfolios specific to welfare and family self-sufficiency. As such, the WFSSLA rolls up into and informs the ACF Research and Evaluation Agenda and ACF's contributions to HHS's multiyear evidence plan and annual evaluation plan.

WFSSLA Purpose

Purpose and Use Within ACF

As noted, the WFSSLA is broadly intended as a tool to guide the development and execution of the Division of Economic Independence's and OFA's welfare and family self-sufficiency portfolios in a manner that enables more effective, efficient, and collaborative work that will advance the Division's and OFA's missions and support wider ACF goals. More specifically, as shown in Figure 1, the WFSSLA has three primary purposes: (1) documentation, (2) planning, and (3) communication.

Figure 1. Uses of the WFSSLA Within ACF

- Documentation →** Document the status of the Division of Economic Independence's and OFA's current and recent past learning activities.¹ Identify learning questions that are grounded in these activities and seek to build on them; address gaps in knowledge; be responsive to changes in programs, policies, and context; and reflect the interests, needs, and priorities of ACF and other internal and external parties.
- Planning →** Inform discussions and decision making regarding the Division's and OFA's portfolio development. Support coordination and complementarity in the development and execution of the Division's and OFA's portfolios.
- Communication →** Communicate the Division's and OFA's work and learning priorities to ACF leaders and other internal and external parties.

¹ The WFSSLA does not currently document OFA's current or past learning activities. However, this information may be added to a future version of the WFSSLA.

Foster engagement with interested parties to gather input on current and proposed learning activities and priorities.

The WFSSLA formalizes the collaborative and generative planning process that has always guided the Division of Economic Independence's and OFA's portfolio development. However, through its three primary purposes, it aims to strengthen and systematize that process.

As discussed, the Division of Economic Independence and OFA will not be able to address all the learning questions in the WFSSLA through learning activities launched in a single year. Therefore, the WFSSLA is designed to serve as a repository of learning questions that the Division and OFA might wish to address over time. The Division and OFA plan to reference the full list of learning questions to inform new investments in research, evaluation, and other learning activities. In addition, the Division and OFA will continue to coordinate with other OPRE divisions to address learning questions that intersect with or are pertinent to topics within other divisions' portfolios.

Purpose and Intended Uses for Readers Outside ACF

In addition, by publishing the WFSSLA, the Division of Economic Independence and OFA aim to reach two key audiences outside ACF:

- **The general public** – to promote transparency and accountability regarding the Division's and OFA's accumulated knowledge, interests, and current work, and to invite feedback on the document
- **Research funders and researchers both inside and outside of government** – to invite collaboration on learning activities of mutual interest, to share the Division's and OFA's broad interests with those who might bid on solicitations for contracted research, to encourage other researchers to initiate research of mutual interest and share the findings, and to invite feedback on the document

The Division of Economic Independence and OFA invite feedback on the WFSSLA and submissions of recently completed research relevant to questions in the WFSSLA. To provide general feedback on the WFSSLA, contact ACFOPREDivisionofEconomicIndependence@acf.hhs.gov. To submit completed research, contact the [Pathways to Work Evidence Clearinghouse](#),² a systematic evidence review sponsored by the Division of Economic Independence. Researchers also are encouraged to submit proposals to present their research at the next biennial [Research and Evaluation Conference on Self-Sufficiency](#).

² See [the Pathways to Work Evidence Clearinghouse website](#) for submission instructions. The Pathways team reviews submitted research for possible inclusion in the Clearinghouse, which informs the WFSSLA.

WFSSLA Development

The development process for the WFSSLA has been a focused effort informed by a range of inputs. The Division of Economic Independence initiated work on the WFSSLA in 2017 by conducting a scan of learning agendas published by other federal agencies and holding informal discussions with federal partners to better understand the elements of and process for developing a learning agenda. The Division also reviewed recent reports of findings from projects within its portfolio to start to identify research gaps and implications for future directions. Based on these activities, the Division developed an initial draft of the WFSSLA and shared the draft at a 2019 convening of experts in family economic security, for preliminary input.³

In 2020, the Division of Economic Independence partnered with OFA to expand the WFSSLA to incorporate OFA's portfolio, given the close coordination inherent to the offices' welfare and family self-sufficiency activities. The Division and OFA participated in a series of internal meetings to discuss the WFSSLA's purposes and uses, and to uncover key gaps in knowledge and potential learning questions based on the collective experience and expertise of Division and OFA staff. Given the breadth and depth of content these activities generated, the Division enlisted contractor support under the [ACF Evidence Capacity Support](#) project to help finalize the initial version of the WFSSLA and conceptualize a process for periodic updates.⁴

WFSSLA Structure and Content

The result of the multiyear, iterative development process just described is the WFSSLA's final structure—a set of internal and external components organized according to a framework that represents the focal domains of the Division of Economic Independence and OFA portfolios that seek to advance knowledge about effectively fostering family economic security, stability, and self-sufficiency.

WFSSLA Framework

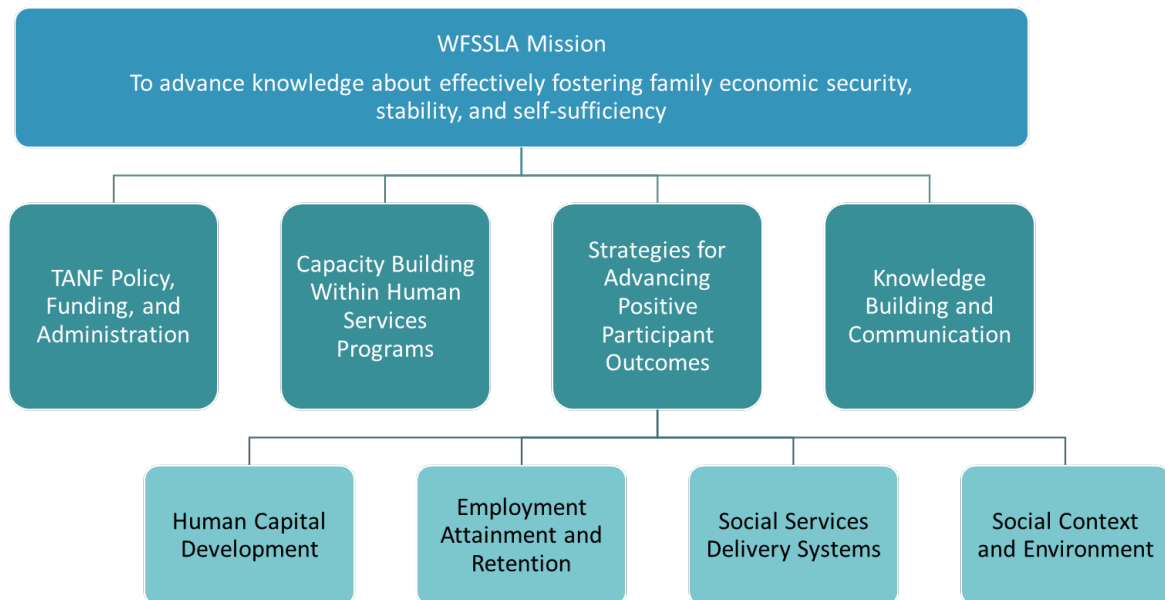
The WFSSLA's foundation is its organizing framework. As Figure 2 shows, the framework is intended to reflect (1) the overarching mission of the WFSSLA (top blue box)⁵ and (2) the major portfolios of work, or workstreams, across the Division of Economic Independence and OFA, that are avenues to advancing that mission (middle green boxes). Work under one of these workstreams is further divided into four sub-workstreams (bottom light green boxes).

³ Between 2010 and 2019, the Division of Economic Independence convened a Family Self-Sufficiency Research Technical Working Group to provide input on current and potential future directions for research. This group comprised subject matter experts from academia, research firms, and state and county human services agencies. The Division did not seek consensus advice from the group but rather diverse perspectives on a range of topics.

⁴ See Appendix A for more information on the WFSSLA's development process.

⁵ Although each office has its own distinct mission, the WFSSLA mission statement is intended to represent the Division of Economic Independence and OFA's shared objective with regard to pursuing learning activities pertaining to welfare and family self-sufficiency.

Figure 2. WFSSLA Framework



The WFSSLA workstreams and sub-workstreams cover the following topics:

- **TANF Policy, Funding, and Administration** addresses questions related to specific regulations or policies within the TANF cash assistance, the block grant structure, and TANF program administration.
- **Capacity Building Within Human Services Programs** addresses questions related to building state, local, and tribal human services programs' (1) programmatic and operational capacity and (2) data, monitoring, and evaluation capacity.
- **Strategies for Advancing Positive Participant Outcomes** addresses questions related to strategies that seek to foster family economic security, stability, and self-sufficiency.
 - **Human Capital Development** focuses on strategies that seek to build or improve people's skills, also known as human capital, to help them obtain employment and become economically self-sufficient.
 - **Employment Attainment and Retention** focuses on strategies that seek to help people participating in TANF and other people with low incomes find jobs, maintain employment, and advance in the labor market.
 - **Social Services Delivery Systems** focuses on how implementing, coordinating, and improving social services delivery systems, including TANF and other human services programs, relates to participants' outcomes.

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- **Social Context and Environment** focuses on how broader social context and environmental factors, including public policy and economic conditions, relate to participants' outcomes.
 - **Knowledge Building and Communication** addresses questions related to expanding and synthesizing the evidence base, supporting scholars who focus on research related to ACF initiatives and the people who ACF serves, and ensuring knowledge generated within and outside of ACF is communicated effectively to inform policy, practice, and further research.

Mapping the Division of Economic Independence's projects to these workstreams facilitates the Division and OFA's consideration of the existing knowledge base and key gaps in each area, and development of learning questions to inform potential future directions for their work in each area.⁶ Although many of the Division's projects are cross-cutting and could apply to more than one workstream, each project is grouped within the workstream that most closely aligns with its primary goal. The Division and OFA will continue to consider how projects across the WFSSLA workstreams inform, interact with, and build on each other. For example, several projects across workstreams relate to the Division and OFA's priorities to advance equity and learn from the experiences of human services programs and the people they have served during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following sections describe how the WFSSLA framework serves as the organizing structure for its external and internal components.

WFSSLA External Components

This document publicly shares the following external components of the WFSSLA, organized into three major sections:

- This **introduction** summarizes WFSSLA's primary purposes and uses, structure, and process for initial and continued development.
- The **workstream briefs** are the primary substance of the WFSSLA. For each workstream or sub-workstream in the WFSSLA framework, this document includes a brief that synthesizes learning to date in that area based on key Division of Economic Independence projects;⁷ discusses select remaining gaps in knowledge; lists learning questions to inform future learning activities; and includes a table listing current Division projects pertaining to the workstream.⁸

⁶ The WFSSLA does not currently document OFA's current or past learning activities. However, this information might be added to a future version of the WFSSLA.

⁷ The learning syntheses in the workstream briefs are limited in scope as they are based on seminal reports and products from key Division of Economic Independence projects, and a select few reports from other federal agencies. See Appendix A for more information on the WFSSLA's development process. Future iterations of the WFSSLA might expand the syntheses to reflect learning from OFA's portfolio, relevant portfolios supported by other federal agencies, or the broader research and practice field.

⁸ In some cases, the Division of Economic Independence and OFA streamlined terminology in the workstream briefs to keep the narratives concise and accessible to a range of audiences. For example, for simplicity, learning questions might reference only individual outcomes; however, broadly, both the Division and OFA are also interested in child-, family-, and community-level outcomes.

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- The **appendices** describe the methods used to develop the workstream briefs and list all references used to develop the introduction and each workstream brief.

WFSSLA Internal Components

The components of the WFSSLA that will remain internal to the Division of Economic Independence and OFA are tools for the two offices to track knowledge as it emerges across a range of inputs (such as project reports and active engagements with researchers, practitioners, communities, and people with lived experience), and to support planning for the ongoing use of the WFSSLA and periodic updates to it. Currently, these tools take the form of compilation Excel sheets for tracking learning; plans for active engagements focused on the WFSSLA; and guidance for updating the external and internal WFSSLA components.

Moving Forward

The research, evaluation, and learning activities described in the WFSSLA are not exhaustive of the Division of Economic Independence's and OFA's learning plans. The offices are often called on to respond to ad hoc information requests or to adjust ongoing learning activities to account for changes in policies or context. They also continuously seek out and engage in new learning opportunities. These factors inform their portfolio development on an ongoing basis.

Further, the WFSSLA is a living document; it will remain iterative in its development, with periodic refinements to ensure the WFSSLA's internal and external components reflect findings released from or knowledge gained by completed learning activities; recently funded learning activities, such as research, evaluation, and technical assistance projects; significant changes in programs, policies, or context; and feedback gathered from key partners and audiences during engagement activities. The WFSSLA internal components previously described will support the continued development and refinement of the external WFSSLA.

Workstream Briefs

TANF Policy, Funding, and Administration



The TANF Policy, Funding, and Administration workstream addresses questions related to regulations or policies specific to TANF cash assistance (for example, work participation rate, eligibility requirements, cash assistance levels, and time limits); the block grant structure (for example, how it is allocated to states, how states are using TANF funding and why); and TANF program administration (for example, processes, procedures, and staffing plans for state agencies, and how TANF is administered at the federal level).

Learning to Date

ACF sponsors research, evaluation, and other resources that describe TANF policy, funding, and administration and build understanding of how these shape the way local programs operate and engage low-income families with children.

This synthesis was developed by reviewing select research, evaluation, and other resources about TANF cash assistance since the passage of PRWORA. Most of the resources reviewed for this synthesis are descriptive research studies that focus on (1) specific regulations or policies for TANF cash assistance (for example, work participation rate, eligibility requirements, cash assistance levels, and time limits) and (2) program administration of TANF cash assistance (for example, processes, procedures, and staffing plans for state agencies). This synthesis describes the three broad findings that emerged from the review.

What do we know from select research, evaluation, and other resources?⁹

Federal TANF policy and funding mechanisms under PRWORA give states considerable flexibility in allocating funds and implementing their TANF cash assistance programs, resulting in broad differences in programs across states. This flexibility means each state has designed a cash assistance program to reflect its state-specific priorities.¹⁰ ACF has supported descriptive studies, many of which were conducted in the early 2000s, that reported on state- and county-level policies and their implementation, and highlighted promising practices. For example, studies documented the similarities and differences in how states use federal TANF funds, the time limit and sanction policies in their cash assistance programs, and state- and county-administered programs.^{11, 12, 13} The Welfare Rules Database includes a publicly available website and accompanying reports that centralize information about state TANF policies and features of their cash assistance programs from the passage of PRWORA in 1996 through the present day; this database is continuously updated.¹⁴ In addition, OFA collects, analyzes, and posts data on TANF caseloads, expenditures, work participation rates, and more.¹⁵ Nevertheless, variation across states makes it challenging to determine how state policies are related to other aspects of TANF programs, such as the characteristics and outcomes of people participating in TANF.

Research on the effectiveness of various TANF cash assistance policies and programs is difficult to conduct and has not been extensive. TANF cash assistance programs differ in how they specify eligibility and exit criteria, shift caseloads among federal and state-funded sources, and collect and report data. Thus, it is challenging for researchers to use administrative or other large-scale data to answer questions about how the characteristics and outcomes of TANF recipients in states with one set of cash assistance policies and programs compare with TANF recipients in states with different policies and programs. Research in this area, largely published in the early 2000s, focuses more on describing the characteristics and experiences of people who participate in TANF cash assistance programs without assessing the extent to which TANF policies and program features influence those characteristics and experiences. For example, research has noted the challenges experienced by people participating in TANF cash assistance programs that limit their participation and their ability to find and maintain work.¹⁶ Other research described the characteristics of TANF cash assistance cases subject to the federal time limit; these cases were more likely than those not subject to the time limit to be headed by people who were older, who

⁹ Mathematica supported the development of this synthesis through the ACF Evidence Capacity Support project (Contract No. HHSP233201500035I/75P00120F37052). The synthesis focuses on select research, evaluation, and resources supported by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. See the appendices for a complete list of references and description of methods used to develop this synthesis.

¹⁰ Pavetti, LaDonna, Linda Rosenberg, and Michelle Derr. "Understanding Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Caseloads After Passage of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005." Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009.

¹¹ Thompson, Terri, and Kelly Mikelson. "Ten Important Questions TANF Agencies and Their Partners Should Consider." Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001.

¹² Pavetti et al. 2009

¹³ Rosenberg, Linda, Michelle Derr, LaDonna Pavetti, Subuhi Asheer, Megan Hague Angus, Samina Sattar, and Max Jeffrey. "A Study of States' TANF Diversion Programs Final Report." Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008.

¹⁴ The Urban Institute. "Welfare Rules Database." n.d. <https://wrd.urban.org/wrd/Query/query.cfm>.

¹⁵ Office of Family Assistance. "State TANF Data and Reports." January 6, 2013, updated August 3, 2022. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/tanf/data-reports>.

¹⁶ Acs, Gregory, and Pamela Loprest. "TANF Caseload Composition and Leavers Synthesis Report." Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007.

had lower levels of education, who had a family member with a disability, and who lived in public housing. ¹⁷

More recent studies focus on how TANF programs might leverage other federal programs serving similar populations. Several studies explored collaboration between TANF programs and those that served similar groups of people and were funded by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, which replaced WIA but is broadly similar in structure), and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Employment & Training. ^{18, 19, 20} One study found that TANF and WIA programs operated in parallel, with some coordination; for example, they offered WIA job search assistance to people receiving TANF cash assistance. ²¹ However, the programs generally did not serve TANF and WIA participants the same way, often referred to as integration. Another study explored the challenges of integrating performance measures across the various programs, concluding that using the same performance measures across programs would likely be impossible, but that programs could find ways to better align their performance measures. ²²

What are some of the gaps that remain in this area?

Research could build knowledge on the effectiveness of TANF cash assistance policies and programmatic approaches taken by states. Authors of the reviewed resources suggested a need for more information about the effectiveness of policies such as time limits, sanction approaches, work requirements, and diversion programs on outcomes for people and families who are eligible for TANF. Questions also remain about the effectiveness of integrating, coordinating, or aligning TANF program requirements with those of other federally funded programs that serve similar populations, such as WIOA and SNAP Employment & Training. For instance, one study highlighted several implementation challenges of service integration and acknowledged the lack of evidence about whether coordination or integration improves participants' outcomes. Future random assignment demonstration projects could implement and test the effectiveness of various models of coordination and integration.

Research could better document and explain changes in TANF cash assistance take-up, with a focus on differences by race and ethnicity. Authors of the reviewed resources noted uncertainty about how to interpret the steep decline in the number of eligible families that have taken up

¹⁷ Farrell, Mary, Sarah Rich, Lesley Turner, David Seith, and Dan Bloom. "Welfare Time Limits: An Update on State Policies, Implementation, and Effects on Families." Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008.

¹⁸ Kirby, G., J. Lyskawa, M. Derr, and E. Brown. "Coordinating Employment Services Across the TANF and WIA Programs." OPRE Report 2015-04. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015.

¹⁹ Derr, M., and E. Brown. "Improving Engagement of TANF Families: Understanding Work Participation and Families with Reported Zero Hours of Participation in Program Activities." OPRE Report 2015-06. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015.

²⁰ Brown, E., and M. Derr. "Serving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Recipients in a Post-Recession Environment." OPRE Report 2015-05. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015.

²¹ Kirby et al. 2015

²² Hahn, Heather, Teresa Derrick-Mills, and Shayne Spaulding. "Measuring Employment Outcomes in TANF." OPRE Report 2018-74. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018.

TANF benefits since PRWORA. On the one hand, the decline in take-up could be viewed as a reason for optimism if, for example, people do not need TANF because they have secured other sources of income, such as stable employment. On the other hand, declining take-up could be cause for concern if people avoid TANF because they are experiencing a barrier that keeps them from fulfilling program requirements and that also prevents them from working. Although study authors did not note this as a gap, because of the age of many of the resources that informed this synthesis, there is limited research examining differences in TANF take-up by race and ethnicity. Research also has not considered how various state-level policy and programmatic decisions might influence those differences. Future research could consider the complex interplay between federal and state TANF policies; the broader policy landscape; economic trends; and personal, economic, and social situations that could influence participants' take-up of cash assistance.

Research could provide a historical picture of the evolution of TANF cash assistance policies and programmatic approaches since PRWORA. Although study authors did not cite it as a gap, no single resource consulted for this synthesis provided a complete historical view of TANF cash assistance policies and programs. Rather, resources examined discrete aspects of the cash assistance program that together can provide comprehensive documentation of its evolution. A single resource would be valuable for understanding political, economic, and other contextual factors that have led to TANF cash assistance as it exists today.

Research could explore how the TANF block grant is allocated across cash assistance and other programs, and the implications of those allocations. Little research exists about TANF funding and administration outside of cash assistance and work activities. For example, in Fiscal Year 2021, states spent only about 23% of the TANF block grant on cash assistance and another 8% on work activities; the remainder went to child care (16%), tax credits (9%), pre-K and Head Start (10%), child welfare (9%), and other services. TANF legislation or regulation might benefit from research about how states allocate their TANF block grant, and how other programs and services supported by state TANF funds (such as child welfare and child care) intersect with TANF programs.

Learning Questions

Number	Learning Question
1.	<u>Federal support and influence.</u> What strategies at the federal level are the most effective for helping states, territories, and tribes use TANF funds to foster family economic security, stability, and self-sufficiency?
2.	<u>Laws, regulations, and policies.</u> How do federal laws and regulations and state, local, and tribal policies shape the characteristics of TANF cash assistance programs?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. How do state, local, and Tribal TANF cash assistance program policies affect the experiences and outcomes of subpopulations or subgroups of the people participating in TANF?
3.	<p><u>Funding.</u> How do states, localities, and tribes administering TANF programs use TANF funds?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. How do states, localities, and tribes determine how to spend TANF funds? b. How is TANF funding allocated among cash assistance and non-cash assistance services (e.g., job training activities, childcare) and across TANF's four statutory purposes? c. How is TANF funding distributed across different subpopulations or subgroups of the people participating in TANF? d. How does the use of TANF funds for services other than cash assistance (e.g., child care, child welfare services) affect state, local, and tribal human services programs?
4.	<p><u>Outcomes-based measurement.</u> How are outcome-based performance measurement systems implemented at the state level in TANF programs? How does the use of outcome-based performance measurement systems affect family economic security, stability, and self-sufficiency?</p>
5.	<p><u>Caseloads.</u> What are the current characteristics of and trends in the TANF cash assistance caseload?</p>
6.	<p><u>Program coordination.</u> What are the federal levers available to enable and encourage coordination between TANF and other federal and state human services programs?</p>
7.	<p><u>Effects of TANF-funded benefits and services.</u> To what extent and how do TANF-funded benefits and services contribute to family economic security, stability, and self-sufficiency?</p>

Current Division of Economic Independence Projects Related to Workstream

Project	Brief Description
Making State TANF Data More Comparable to Better Understand the Operations of Basic Assistance Grant	This project is exploring ways to increase the usefulness of state TANF data by examining proposed methods to adjust for client and contextual differences. The University of Maryland is conducting this work in close coordination with OFA.

State TANF Policies: Welfare Rules Database
Expansion

The Welfare Rules Database is a comprehensive resource for comparing TANF cash assistance programs across all 50 states and the District of Columbia, researching changes across time in cash assistance rules within a single state, and determining the rules governing cash assistance in one state at a point in time. This expansion contract supports improvements and updates to the database.

Capacity Building Within Human Services Programs



The Capacity Building Within Human Services Programs workstream addresses questions related to building the capacity of human services programs—whether they are administered by state, local, and tribal human services agencies or nongovernmental service providers—to foster family economic security, stability, and self-sufficiency. The workstream includes building two types of capacity: (1) programmatic and operational capacity, and (2) monitoring and evaluation capacity.

Learning to Date

ACF sponsors technical assistance, research, evaluation, and other resources to build the capacity of human services programs. ACF's work aims to help programs strengthen their operations; conduct research, evaluation, and data analyses; and respond, adapt, and recover in the face of crises and other changes. Broadly, these efforts can be grouped into two categories of capacity building: (1) programmatic and organizational capacity building, and (2) monitoring and evaluation capacity building.

This synthesis was developed by reviewing select technical assistance products, research, evaluation, and other resources, including practice guides for using research and analytic methods, case studies of program innovation and data use, and policy guidance that might support capacity building. This synthesis describes the five broad findings that emerged from the review.

What do we know from select research, evaluation, and other resources?²³

Monitoring and evaluation capacity building

One of ACF's key approaches to building evaluation capacity in human services programs is to provide resources and tools that make research and analytic methods more accessible to staff. Examples include practice guides on methods for building and using evidence, including improvement frameworks, opportunistic experiments, and rapid-cycle experiments. These practice guides outline the key steps for using these methods and frameworks, provide examples of how programs can apply methods to make data-informed decisions, and discuss key considerations for implementing these methods, such as minimizing burden during data collection and engaging diverse groups.²⁴ Although these resources and tools aim to build evaluation capacity, little is known about their effectiveness or the extent to which program providers have used them.

ACF resources for human services programs highlight potential benefits and challenges of practitioner–researcher partnerships. Practitioner–researcher partnerships might build monitoring and evaluation capacity by increasing program access to data, generating and documenting best practices for data use, and training program staff.²⁵ However, these partnerships can have challenges, including the cost to the program in terms of dollars and time, and difficulties maintaining the relationship through staff turnover. Researchers might face additional challenges with setting clear expectations, identifying the monitoring and evaluation needs of the program, and customizing the support they provide to a program.²⁶

A recent needs assessment suggested that program priorities, staff skills and abilities, and data quality can help—or hinder—monitoring and evaluation capacity. A 2019 needs assessment conducted across TANF programs indicated that, in many cases, staff can manipulate data, create reports, and perform basic descriptive analyses.²⁷ However, staff reported lacking skills to perform more complex analyses, such as assessing causality. In addition, data staff often spent their time on performance and caseload reports (analyses that support day-to-day operations) rather than analyses related to program evaluation and continuous improvement. Data access and quality can also pose challenges to a program's evaluation and analytic capacity. For example, many programs use outdated and inflexible data systems, and incomplete data documentation can lead to poor data quality, making basic analyses difficult or unreliable.

²³ Mathematica helped develop this synthesis through the ACF Evidence Capacity Support project (Contract No. HHSP233201500035/75P00120F37052). The synthesis focuses on select research, evaluation, and resources supported by the OPRE, ACF, HHS. See the appendices for a complete list of references and a description of methods used to develop this synthesis.

²⁴ McCay, Jonathan, Michelle Derr, and Ann Person. "Using a 'Road Test' to Improve Human Services Programs." OPRE Report 2017-107. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, December 2017.

²⁵ Goerge, Robert M., Emily R. Weigand, and Leah Gjertson. "Unpacking Data Use in State TANF Agencies." OPRE Report 2021-94. Washington DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, August 2021.

²⁶ Allard, S.W., E. Weingard, R. Goerge, and L. Gjertson. "The Family Self-Sufficiency Data Center: Lessons Learned." Washington, DC: Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Consortium, 2020.

²⁷ Goerge et al. 2021

Finally, programs might struggle to find and access public data (for example, employment and wage data) to support research and continuous improvement. Programs can address infrastructure challenges through improved documentation, clear messaging about the use of data repositories, and streamlining data sharing or governance processes.²⁸

Programmatic and organizational capacity building

Crises and policy changes might provide opportunities to build human services programs' capacity to respond and adapt to challenges while strengthening program operations and service delivery. Two descriptive resources highlighted how crises, such as economic downturns, can create an urgency for change that drives agencies to improve service coordination and delivery. For example, many TANF programs adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic by using existing technology or adopting new technology, to continue serving people.²⁹ Policies can also drive innovation and the need to adapt. A scan of state policies found several mechanisms that could encourage innovation to strengthen service delivery and program operations, such as adopting policies that support accessible and human-centered services, coordinating services, and incentivizing the private sector to provide supports to workers with low incomes.³⁰ However, little is known about the adoption rates and effectiveness of such policies.

Partnerships between human services agencies and local organizations can strengthen their capacity to increase economic security, stability, and self-sufficiency among people with low incomes. Interagency partnerships can build the capacity of local social services systems to provide more comprehensive services. Two descriptive studies suggested that partnerships between human services agencies and other local organizations might be most effective when they are collaborative and coordinated. For example, agencies can share data to identify and address service gaps.³¹

What are some of the gaps that remain in this area?

Research could help identify existing measures or create new measures of program capacity. Identifying or developing measures of monitoring and evaluation capacity as well as measures of programmatic and organizational capacity could better equip researchers and program staff to track program capacity over time. Measuring and tracking capacity at the program level could position programs and researchers to make more informed decisions about which capacity-building activities a program should engage in.

Research could explore the effectiveness of various capacity-building approaches. Researchers could use the capacity measures previously mentioned as well as rigorous descriptive and impact

²⁸ Goerge et al. 2021

²⁹ McCay, Jonathan, and Ellen Bart. "Pandemic-Era Innovations for the Future of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Programs." OPRE Report 2021-188. Washington DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, December 2021.

³⁰ Miller, J., F. Molina, L. Grossman, and S. Golonka. "Building Bridges to Self-Sufficiency: Improving Services for Low-Income Working Families." New York: MDRC and Washington, DC: NGA Center for Best Practices, March 2004.

³¹ Allard et al. 2020

study designs to assess the effectiveness of capacity-building approaches. Such studies could examine implementation of the approaches and their effects on program capacity to use research and analytic methods, improve program operations and participant outcomes, and manage change.

Research could build knowledge on how human services programs can more easily adapt to change. As programs face increasingly complex and rapidly changing environments, additional research could identify promising practices and innovative strategies to support programs' capacity to respond, adapt, and recover. Research could also explore how programs engage in continuous learning as a method for developing innovative solutions to adapt and sustain change.

Learning Questions

The following learning questions relate to (1) programmatic and operational capacity, (2) monitoring and evaluation capacity, or (3) both types of capacity.

Questions related to both programmatic and operational capacity and to monitoring and evaluation capacity

Number	Learning Question
1.	What are effective strategies for assessing the following dimensions of capacity in TANF and other human services programs: resources, infrastructure, staff knowledge and skills, culture and climate, and engagement and partnership? a. What are effective strategies that TANF and other human services programs can use on their own to make this assessment? b. Can existing federal reporting requirements be leveraged to facilitate this assessment?
2.	How do approaches to building both programmatic and operational capacity and monitoring and evaluation capacity differ between state, local, and Tribal TANF agencies and their service providers? Do the approaches differ in effectiveness?
3.	What are effective strategies for identifying areas of programmatic and operational capacity and monitoring and evaluation capacity that need improvement and for assessing improvements in these areas over time?
4.	What aspects of programmatic and operational capacity and monitoring and evaluation capacity do human services program staff report are most in need of improving, and which of these aspects are they most interested in improving?

5.	<p>What is the effectiveness of various approaches to building programmatic and operational capacity and monitoring and evaluation capacity, such as training, technical assistance, and peer-to-peer support?</p> <p>a. What are design options for assessing the effectiveness of capacity-building approaches overall and of core components within each approach?</p>
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Questions related to programmatic and operational capacity

Number	Learning Question
6.	What are effective strategies that OFA can use to build the programmatic and operational capacity of TANF and other human services programs to hire, support, train, and retain skilled program staff?
7.	What are effective strategies that OFA can use to build the programmatic and operational capacity of TANF and other human services programs to establish and maintain successful partnerships, such as those with each other, with the workforce system, and with employers?
8.	What are effective strategies that OFA can use to strengthen the programmatic and operational capacity of TANF and other human services programs to adapt to contextual changes, such as changes in the labor market, technology, or policies?

Questions related to monitoring and evaluation capacity

Number	Learning Question
9.	What are effective strategies that the Division of Economic Independence and OFA can use to build the capacity of TANF and other human services programs to use evidence to inform program design and implementation?
10.	What are effective strategies that the Division of Economic Independence and OFA can use to build the capacity of TANF and other human services programs to use data to guide continuous quality improvement efforts?
11.	What are effective strategies that the Division of Economic Independence and OFA can use to facilitate connections between TANF and other human services programs and researchers, including those in academia, to build program monitoring and evaluation capacity?

Current Division of Economic Independence Projects Related to Workstream

Project	Brief Description
Family Self-Sufficiency Demonstration Development (FSSDD) Grants and Evaluation Support	FSSDD grants support the development and implementation of coordinated, client-centered approaches to improving employment and other family well-being outcomes for people with low incomes. The evaluation support contract provides FSSDD grant recipients with research and evaluation technical assistance.
Promoting and Supporting Innovation in TANF Data (TDI)	TDI supports innovation and efficiency within TANF by facilitating enhanced use of administrative data from TANF and related human services programs.
Supporting Partnerships to Advance Research and Knowledge (SPARK) (ended June 2022)	SPARK provided research and evaluation technical assistance to selected TANF programs; documented existing approaches to evaluation technical assistance; and examined whether certain approaches are more promising than others for building programs' evaluation capacity.

Strategies for Advancing Positive Participant Outcomes



The Strategies for Advancing Positive Participant Outcomes workstream addresses questions related to strategies that seek to foster family economic security, stability, and self-sufficiency. The overarching aim of the workstream is to understand and improve the determinants of family economic well-being across multiple levels, including individuals and families, human services programs, and the broader social context and environment in which people live and programs operate. These levels are examined in four sub-workstreams:

- Human Capital Development: Strategies that seek to build or improve people's skills, also known as human capital, to help them obtain employment and become economically self-sufficient.
- Employment Attainment and Retention: Strategies that seek to help people participating in TANF and other people with low incomes find jobs, maintain employment, and advance in the labor market.
- Social Services Delivery Systems: How implementing, coordinating, and improving social services delivery systems, including TANF and other human services programs, relate to participants' outcomes.
- Social Context and Environment: How broader social context and environmental factors, including public policy and economic conditions, relate to participants' outcomes.

Four foundational questions related to positive participant outcomes guide the overall workstream. These questions are based on common themes that emerged across the sub-

workstreams during the review and synthesis of learning to date and remaining gaps in each area. Additional and further nuanced learning questions are addressed in each sub-workstream.

Learning Questions

Number	Learning Question
1.	What are key participant outcomes related to family economic security, stability, and self-sufficiency and how should they be defined and measured? To what extent are employment and training programs designed to improve these outcomes?
2.	What employment and training approaches, specific programs, and core components improve participants' outcomes in the short and long term? a. How does effectiveness vary by participants' characteristics and program context?
3.	What barriers exist for people trying to access, complete, and achieve positive outcomes in employment and training programs in the short and long term? What supports lower barriers to program access, program completion, and positive outcomes? a. How do barriers and needed supports vary by participants' characteristics and program context?
4.	What are effective approaches to using labor market and other community-, program-, and participant-level data to inform the design and improvement of employment and training programs and support positive participant outcomes?



Strategies for Advancing
Positive Participant Outcomes

Human Capital Development

The Strategies for Advancing Positive Participant Outcomes workstream addresses questions related to strategies that seek to foster family economic security, stability, and self-sufficiency. The Human Capital Development sub-workstream focuses on strategies that seek to build or improve people's skills, also known as human capital, to help them obtain employment and become economically self-sufficient.

Learning to Date

ACF sponsors research and evaluations of programs and services that seek to build the occupational and nonoccupational skills of people participating in TANF and other people with low incomes. ACF's work in this area has focused on defining, describing, and understanding the effects of career pathways programs. ACF is also engaged in work to assess the effectiveness of employment coaching in strengthening self-regulation skills—also referred to as soft skills or executive functioning skills—to achieve employment goals.

This synthesis was developed by reviewing select research, evaluation, and other resources focused on approaches to building occupational and nonoccupational skills and obtaining employment. This synthesis describes four broad findings that emerged from the review.

What do we know from select research, evaluation, and other resources?³²

In general, career pathways programs increase educational progress and employment in the industry people trained for. Career pathways are a strategy to promote long-term earnings

³² Mathematica helped develop this synthesis through the ACF Evidence Capacity Support project (Contract No. HHSP2332015000351/75P00120F37052). The synthesis focuses on select research, evaluation, and resources supported by OPRE, ACF, HHS; the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation; and the U.S. Department of Labor, Chief Evaluation Office. See the appendices for a complete list of references and a description of methods used to develop this synthesis.

advancement for people with limited education through rigorous and high-quality education, training, and other services delivered as a series of successive steps.³³ Services fall into four categories: (1) skills and needs assessments, (2) instruction and occupational training, (3) academic and nonacademic supports, and (4) employment connections. Several impact studies demonstrated that these programs increase educational progress and receipt of credentials needed to obtain employment in the occupations targeted. Studies also have shown that career pathways increase employment in the industry people trained for more than they increase employment in general. For example, evaluations of the first and second round of Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG 1.0 and 2.0) showed that people randomly assigned to HPOG programs completed health care-specific trainings and more months of training, received credentials and certifications, and obtained employment in the health care field at higher rates than those who were randomly assigned to not have access to HPOG.^{34, 35} Despite these findings, several studies, including a meta-analysis of evaluations of career pathways programs, have indicated that career pathways programs do not generally increase earnings.³⁶ However, several evaluations are still ongoing.

A large body of research defined and documented the implementation of career pathways programs, highlighting promising implementation strategies. Often conducted in tandem with impact studies, several implementation studies have suggested—though did not establish a causal impact—that some features of career pathways programs might lead to larger impacts on educational progress, employment, and earnings. For example, programs in which the lead partner was a staffing agency or in which employers were involved in program and curriculum design were associated with larger positive impacts on educational progress.³⁷ Labor market impacts, such as employment and earnings, were positive but smaller when programs offered flexible course sequencing. Implementation studies of non-Tribal and Tribal HPOG 1.0 and Tribal HPOG 2.0 highlighted several features of career pathways programs that led to greater educational progress, industry-specific employment, and earnings. These features included partnerships to expand the programs’ geographic reach and the number and type of trainings offered; support for the social, academic, and employment needs of people participating in the program; and pretraining activities.^{38, 39} Tribal HPOG programs also incorporated family involvement into their programming, formally or informally, to create a sense of community.

³³ U.S. Congress. “Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.” Pub. Law 113-128, 128 Stat. 1425. July 22, 2014.

³⁴ Peck, L.R., D. Litwok, D. Walton, E. Harvill, and A. Werner. “Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG 1.0) Impact Study: Three-Year Impacts Report.” OPRE Report 2019-114. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, November 2019.

³⁵ Klerman, Jacob A., David R. Judkins, Sarah Prenovitz, and Gretchen Locke. “Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG 2.0) Short-Term Impact Report.” OPRE Report 2022-37. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022.

³⁶ Peck, L.R., D. Schwartz, J. Strawn, C.C. Weiss, R. Juras, S. Mills de la Rosa, N. Greenstein, T. Morris, G. Durham, and C. Lloyd. “A Meta-Analysis of 46 Career Pathways Impact Evaluations.” Washington, DC: Chief Evaluation Office, U.S. Department of Labor, December 2021.

³⁷ Peck et al. 2021.

³⁸ Walton, D., E.L. Harvill, and L.R. Peck. “Which Program Characteristics Are Linked to Program Impacts? Lessons from the HPOG 1.0 Evaluation.” OPRE Report 2019-51. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, March 2019.

³⁹ Hafford, C., C. Fromknecht, M. Dougherty, C. Holden, and P. Maitra. “Key Findings from the Evaluation of the Tribal HPOG 2.0 Program, 2015-2020.” OPRE Report 2021-202. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, December 2021.

Qualitative findings indicated that this involvement can lead to increased support for people participating in the program and an improved perception of education in the home.⁴⁰

Research has indicated that mid-level occupations requiring certain types of transferrable skills might help with skills gains and wage growth over time. These so-called launchpad occupations typically require more than a high school education or equivalency but less than a four-year degree, and emphasize problem-solving, managing others, and communication.⁴¹ Research has suggested that, compared with other occupations, launchpad occupations have greater potential to grow people's skills and generate earnings gains over time. However, these occupations, and trainings that could prepare someone for them (such as career pathways programs), are not always readily accessible to people with low incomes. This could be because of the educational requirements of the training programs, barriers to accessing or attending the program (for example, lack of child care or transportation), or a variety of challenges related to TANF participation (for example, needing to remain engaged in core activities). In addition, research noted that among people who start in the same mid-level occupation, women generally experience lower wage growth than men; Hispanic and non-Hispanic Black workers experience lower wage growth than non-Hispanic White workers; and when women, Black, and Hispanic workers transition from one job to another, it is most likely a lateral move, and not to a higher-level job.⁴²

Some employment, training, and education programs use approaches informed by the science on self-regulation. Drawing on insights from the fields of psychology, neuroscience, and behavioral science, a recent literature review and descriptive study proposed that improved self-regulation skills might lead to improved employment, well-being, and self-sufficiency outcomes for people with low incomes. One way people actively use and strengthen their self-regulation skills is by engaging in a structured process to identify, set, plan for, and pursue goals.⁴³ This theoretical relationship has been used to develop evidence-informed approaches for employment programs, including coaching-based programs. The hypothesis underlying these approaches is that by working with people participating in programs to set individualized goals and by providing motivation, support, and feedback, coaches will help participants use and strengthen their self-regulation skills, succeed in the labor market, and move toward economic security. ACF is currently conducting a study using an experimental research design to describe implementation of coaching programs, the effect of coaching on self-regulation skills, and the role of self-regulation skills in employment outcomes.

⁴⁰ Meit, M., C. Hafford, C. Fromknecht, A. Knudson, T. Gilbert, and N. Miesfeld. "Tribal Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) Evaluation: Final Report." OPRE Report 2016-38. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, March 2016.

⁴¹ Schwartz, D., A. Clarkwest, M. Hashizume, T. Kappil, and J. Strawn. "Building Better Pathways: An Analysis of Career Trajectories and Occupational Transitions." Washington, DC: Chief Evaluation Office, U.S. Department of Labor, December 2021.

⁴² Schwartz et al. 2021.

⁴³ Kauff, J.F., and E.W. Cavadel. "GOALS Summary Report." OPRE Report 2019-39. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, April 2019.

What are some of the gaps that remain in this area?

Research could examine the longer-term effects of career pathways programs. Most recent work has focused on effects over one to four years. Looking at effects at five years or beyond could show whether the short-term effects observed in some career pathways programs are sustained and, if not, what causes the effects to fade. ACF is addressing this gap by funding research to assess long-term effects (measured at five to six years after study enrollment) of career pathways programs; this study was recently completed for HPOG 1.0 and is currently underway for HPOG 2.0. Research could also examine whether people who participated in programs continue to progress along a career pathway by completing additional training in the same pathway. If so, research could examine whether that continuation translates into career progression, employment, and effects on earnings. If participants do not continue to progress along a career pathway, research could examine the reasons why not, to inform career pathway program design.

Research could improve understanding of the components of career pathways programs that are associated with larger effects. Although career pathways programs have common features, their specific components and implementation often vary. Research could more closely examine career pathways programs with favorable effects and thoroughly document and describe their components. This research could support future work to replicate and scale such programs. Researchers could consider designing impact evaluations that test the effectiveness of various components to shed light on the extent to which fidelity to these components leads to greater impacts on employment and earnings.

Research could assess which skills are important for promoting wage growth and self-sufficiency. Systematically assessing the technical skills of people participating in training programs, and their broader skills, such as problem-solving, could help identify which skills influence wage growth and self-sufficiency. This could help career pathways and other programs refine their offerings and focus on the skills most relevant for people participating in the program.

Research could help explore reasons for disparities in wage growth. Research on the drivers of disparities in wage gains by gender, race, and ethnicity, as well as research on potential solutions, could help programs identify ways to support equitable advancement. Studies could explore employers' processes for and employee experiences with career advancement to better understand reasons for wage growth disparities for people entering the same occupation. Additional research might also uncover patterns of transitions between occupations based on gender, race, and ethnicity.

Research could help develop, document, and explain the effectiveness of program models that aim to build self-regulation skills. Formative evaluations could help identify and define the essential components for integrating self-regulation skills and goal achievement into employment programs for people with low incomes. This work could also explore the staff qualifications, skills,

and experiences needed to implement these approaches. Additional summative research could build evidence on the effectiveness of this type of model.

Learning Questions

Number	Learning Question
1.	What are effective strategies for employment and training programs to identify in-demand skills and help people build these skills?
2.	What are effective strategies for using technology to improve access to and completion of employment and training programs among people with low incomes?
3.	To what extent are career pathways programs and other sectoral training programs, including apprenticeships, accessible to people with low incomes, and what are effective strategies for increasing accessibility?
4.	What are effective strategies for career pathways programs and other sectoral training programs to help people advance to higher levels of training and obtain higher paying jobs?
5.	What are effective strategies for employment and training programs to help people build “soft” skills and self-regulation skills?
6.	What are effective strategies for replicating and scaling effective employment and training programs?
7.	What are effective strategies for building networks of supportive services for people participating in employment and training programs?

Current Division of Economic Independence Projects Related to Workstream

Project	Brief Description
<u>Career Pathways Secondary Data Analysis Grants</u>	These grants support secondary analysis of data collected for OPRE’s career pathways research portfolio, including the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) project and the impact and implementation evaluations of HPOG 1.0 and 2.0.
<u>Evaluation and System Design for Career Pathways Programs: 2nd Generation of HPOG (ended Sept 2022)</u>	This project provided recommendations for the design of the HPOG 2.0 National Evaluation. It also built and provided ongoing support for the

	Participant Accomplishment and Grant Evaluation System, a web-based management information system for the HPOG program.
<u>Evaluation of Employment Coaching for TANF and Related Populations & Long-Term Follow-Up Study</u>	These studies are evaluating the short-, intermediate-, and long-term effects of coaching for people participating in TANF and other people with low incomes.
<u>HPOG 2.0 National Evaluation, Long-Term Follow-Up Study, and COVID-Cohort Study</u>	These studies are evaluating the short-, intermediate-, and long-term effects of HPOG 2.0 and assessing the effectiveness of HPOG 2.0 before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.
<u>Promising Occupations Achievable Through Education or Training for Low-Income Families</u>	This project is building a website that identifies promising occupations, and the training required for these occupations, at the state and local levels. It seeks to help TANF administrators and other workforce development practitioners connect participants to growing occupations with family-sustaining wages.

Strategies for Advancing
Positive Participant Outcomes

Employment Attainment and Retention



The Strategies for Advancing Positive Participant Outcomes workstream addresses questions related to strategies that seek to foster family economic security, stability, and self-sufficiency. The Employment Attainment and Retention sub-workstream focuses on strategies that seek to help people participating in TANF and other people with low incomes find jobs, maintain employment, and advance in the labor market.

Learning to Date

ACF sponsors research and evaluations to understand the effectiveness of employment and training programs that are designed to help people with low incomes, or those who face other challenges to working, attain and retain employment. In general, these programs help people develop skills to search and prepare for a job, connect them directly with employment or work experiences, and provide them with case management and other supports. Some programs evaluated in the literature focused on specific groups of people, such as single parents, people with prior or current justice involvement, youth not connected to work or school, people who received public benefits in the past, people with less than a high school diploma, and people with limited formal education or work experience.

This synthesis was developed by reviewing select research, evaluation, and other resources that focus on how programs and their components might influence short- and long-term employment outcomes for people with low incomes or those who face other barriers to employment. This synthesis describes the five broad findings that emerged from the review.

What do we know from select research, evaluation, and other resources?⁴⁴

Programs that directly provide employment opportunities improve participants' short-term employment outcomes, such as increasing employment or earnings and reducing public benefit receipt—even among those facing multiple challenges to employment. However, these programs generally do not lift people out of poverty. Evaluations of several programs that provided subsidized or transitional employment collectively reported favorable effects on participants' employment and earnings. Almost all showed favorable effects while people were engaged in the program, and about half had effects on earnings at least one year after the subsidized or transitional job ended. Compared with the effects on the larger study population, nearly all programs studied produced larger effects among people who had been out of work for more than a year when they enrolled, people at higher risk of criminal justice recidivism because of limited employment opportunities, or people who lacked high school credentials at enrollment.^{45, 46, 47} A recent meta-analysis of rigorous studies of employment and training programs conducted by the OPRE Pathways to Work Evidence Clearinghouse similarly found that programs that included subsidized employment or transitional jobs tended to have larger average effects on employment outcomes than programs that did not use these approaches.⁴⁸ However, looking across studies of these types of programs, the resulting earnings gains were generally not enough to lift people out of poverty.

In general, programs designed to improve employment attainment and retention tend to have larger effects on employment in the short term than the longer term. The Pathways Clearinghouse meta-analysis, which drew on findings from 191 rigorous studies of 144 programs aimed at improving employment outcomes among people with low incomes, found that average effects on employment in the short term (within 18 months following random assignment) were larger than average effects in the longer term.⁴⁹

Some employment and training programs did have evidence of large average effects or longer-term effects that warrant further exploration. Three programs that provided subsidized or transitional employment had long-term effects on the economic security of people who participated.⁵⁰ The Pathways Clearinghouse meta-analysis found that six of the 144 programs

⁴⁴ Mathematica helped develop this synthesis through the ACF Evidence Capacity Support project (Contract No. HHSP2332015000351/75P00120F37052). The synthesis focuses on select research, evaluation, and resources supported by OPRE, ACF, HHS, and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. See the appendices for a complete list of references and description of methods used to develop this synthesis.

⁴⁵ Cummings, Danielle, and Dan Bloom. "Can Subsidized Employment Programs Help Disadvantaged Job Seekers? A Synthesis of Findings from Evaluations of 13 Programs." OPRE Report 2020-23. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020.

⁴⁶ Williams, Sonya, and Richard Hendra. "The Effects of Subsidized and Transitional Employment Programs on Noneconomic Well-Being." OPRE Report 2018-17. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018.

⁴⁷ Barden, Bret, Randall Juras, Cindy Redcross, Mary Farrell, and Dan Bloom. "New Perspective on Creating Jobs – Final Impacts of the Next Generation of Subsidized Employment Programs." Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018.

⁴⁸ Streke, Andrei, and Dana Rotz. "Synthesis Report: What Works to Improve Employment and Earnings for People with Low Incomes?" OPRE Report 2022-51. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022.

⁴⁹ Streke and Rotz 2022

⁵⁰ Hamilton, Gayle, Stephen Freedman, Lisa Gennetian, Charles Michalopoulos, Johanna Walter, Diana Adams-Ciardullo, Anna Gassman-Pines, Sharon McGroder, Martha Zaslow, Jennifer Brooks, Surjeet Ahluwalia, Electra Smalls, and Bryan Ricchetti. "How Effective Are Different Welfare-to-Work Approaches? Five-Year Adult and Child Impacts

included in the analysis had large average effects on employment outcomes.⁵¹ These programs used varying approaches but generally gave participants options about what services to participate in, a supportive environment, and individualized services to address the complexity of a person's unique situation. For example, one program's success suggested that the following factors might contribute to participants' labor market success: an employment focus, the choice of either job search and short-term education or training, and an emphasis on holding out for a promising job rather than taking the first minimum wage opportunity. However, evidence of long-term effects among a handful of programs should be interpreted with caution, as effects were modest, and most programs tested did not improve long-term outcomes. As such, future research could further explore these and similar models.

Job search assistance and employment retention strategies, such as those commonly employed by TANF and other employment programs, generally do not improve employment outcomes substantially. Research using experimental designs to evaluate such strategies generally found few effects on people's short- or long-term employment, earnings, or benefit receipt.^{52, 53, 54, 55, 56} Similarly, the Pathways Clearinghouse meta-analysis found that programs focusing on employment retention services had no evidence of any effects on employment outcomes. Those focusing on services to help people prepare for, find, apply to, and obtain jobs did have positive effects, on average, but were not likely to improve outcomes enough to make a notable difference in people's lives.⁵⁷

Employment and training programs often implement multiple strategies simultaneously, or as a bundle, making it difficult to tell how much a single strategy contributes to finding and maintaining employment. Many of the programs studied included some case management, supportive services, and connections to other programs to reduce participants' challenges to employment, along with direct employment opportunities and job search assistance. This made it challenging to study the effectiveness of the individual components within the bundle. Future research could aim to decompose the effects of complex bundles of interventions.

for Eleven Programs." Washington, DC: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; and U.S. Department of Education, 2001.

⁵¹ Streke and Rotz 2022

⁵² Miller, Cynthia, Victoria Deitch, and Aaron Hill. "Can Low-Income Single Parents Move Up in the Labor Market? Findings from the Employment Retention and Advancement Project." MDRC Practitioner Brief. New York: MDRC, January 2011.

⁵³ Hamilton, Gayle, and Susan Scrivener. "Increasing Employment Stability and Earnings for Low-Wage Workers: Lessons from the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) Project." OPRE Report 2012-19. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012.

⁵⁴ Butler, D., J. Alson, D. Bloom, V. Deitch, A. Hill, J. Hsueh, E. Jacobs, S. Kim, R. McRoberts, and C. Redcross. "Enhanced Services for the Hard-to-Employ Demonstration and Evaluation Project: Final Results of the Hard-to-Employ Demonstration and Evaluation Project and Selected Sites from the Employment Retention and Advancement Project." OPRE Report 2012-08. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012.

⁵⁵ Hendra, Richard, Keri-Nicole Dillman, Gayle Hamilton, Erika Lundquist, Karin Martinson, and Melissa Wavelet. "The Employment Retention and Advancement Project: How Effective Are Different Approaches Aiming to Increase Employment Retention and Advancement? Final Impacts for Twelve Models." New York: MDRC, April 2010.

⁵⁶ Martinson, Karin, Eleanor Harvill, and Deena Schwartz. "The Effectiveness of Different Approaches for Moving Cash Assistance Recipients to Work: Findings from the Job Search Assistance Strategies Evaluation." OPRE Report 2020-113. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020.

⁵⁷ Streke and Rotz 2022

What are some of the gaps that remain in this area?

Research could consider the factors that drive the fade-out in the effects of employment attainment and retention programs over time. Fade-out of effects might be a result of subsidized or transitional jobs ending without participants being able to transition to permanent positions. It could also be caused by participants remaining in entry-level jobs with little wage progression. Researchers suggest such programs should focus on *employment* retention (steady employment maintained through consistent work in any job) rather than *job* retention (staying in the same job) and provide post-employment services to place participants in better-paying jobs or those positioned for advancement. However, as noted previously, few retention strategies tested so far seem to be effective.

Research could assess whether better program implementation and quality can improve long-term effects for people participating in programs. Researchers noted program implementation challenges in some of the evaluations that found minimal or no effects. However, the causes and potential solutions to implementation challenges remain unclear. Future research could more thoroughly consider implementation feasibility and quality—to ensure programs are well implemented—before embarking on randomized controlled trials of programs.

Research could explore employment and training programs tailored to people with certain characteristics and challenges. Challenges to employment are complex and nuanced, as noted in most studies reviewed. Programs that focus on specific groups of people with shared backgrounds and characteristics might be more effective than a one-size fits-all approach. More research is needed to understand how programs can improve earnings and employment stability, particularly for people facing the following barriers:

- Especially complex challenges to employment, such as previous involvement in the justice system or no recent work history
- Low literacy skills or lack of basic education credentials, such as a high school diploma or GED (this group is at a disadvantage in the labor market, because of the competition for jobs they are considered qualified for)
- Long-term participation in TANF
- Young children and limited options for child care

Research could identify, document, and evaluate best practices to tailor employment and training programs to the context in which they operate. Implementation studies conducted alongside the impact evaluations summarized in this synthesis show how a program's context plays an important role in shaping its design and operation and understanding its effectiveness. Some researchers speculated that programs are not responsive enough to the dynamic nature of the

labor market, leading to limited long-term labor market success for people participating in programs. For example, if a program focuses on connecting participants to occupations with high projected job growth, minimal automation risk, and earnings potential above the federal poverty level, participants might be more likely to experience longer-term career growth and economic security. As such, researchers could seek opportunities to develop and evaluate programs that are informed by employers' needs and projected job growth.

Learning Questions

Number	Learning Question
1.	What are effective strategies for helping people attain jobs considered “high-quality”? a. What factors define a high-quality job?
2.	Which TANF work activities require additional evidence building to determine their effectiveness for people participating in TANF?
3.	What constitutes high-quality implementation of TANF work activities, and how does this compare with how TANF work activities are typically implemented in the field? What approaches are effective for strengthening the implementation of TANF work activities?
4.	What are effective strategies for TANF and other human services programs to use labor market information and other data in dynamic and responsive ways to match people with low incomes who are seeking employment to new and growing occupations with the potential for advancement?
5.	What are ongoing trends in the changing nature of work and the associated implications for employment attainment, retention, and advancement for people with low incomes?
6.	What are effective strategies for promoting employment retention and advancement?

Current Division of Economic Independence Projects Related to Workstream

Project	Brief Description
<u>Building Evidence on Employment Strategies (BEES)</u>	BEES is evaluating the effectiveness of innovative programs designed to increase employment and earnings among people participating in TANF and other people with low incomes and includes a special focus on programs for people with substance use disorder.
<u>Next Generation of Enhanced Employment Strategies (NextGen) Project</u>	The NextGen Project is evaluating the effectiveness of innovative programs designed to help people facing complex challenges secure a pathway toward economic independence and includes a special focus on programs that engage employers.
<u>Pathways to Work Evidence Clearinghouse</u>	Pathways to Work is a congressionally mandated evidence review and <u>website</u> that identifies what works to help people with low incomes who are seeking employment succeed in the labor market.

Strategies for Advancing
Positive Participant Outcomes

Social Services Delivery Systems



The Strategies for Advancing Positive Participant Outcomes workstream addresses questions related to strategies that seek to foster family economic security, stability, and self-sufficiency. The Social Services Delivery Systems sub-workstream focuses on how implementing, coordinating, and improving social services delivery systems, including TANF and other human services programs, relates to participants' outcomes.

Learning to Date

ACF sponsors research, evaluation, and other resources to build knowledge about how implementing and coordinating social service delivery systems—including TANF and other human services programs—might support family economic security, stability, and self-sufficiency. ACF-sponsored resources highlight strategies programs could use to better serve various populations and improve their experiences in programs in order to improve participants' outcomes.

This synthesis was developed by reviewing select research, evaluation, and other resources that focus on human services delivery systems that serve families with low incomes and people who face other barriers to employment. The resources included in this synthesis are primarily descriptive, with a few impact studies. This synthesis describes the four broad findings that emerged from the review.

*What do we know from select research, evaluation, and other resources?*⁵⁸

Promising strategies exist for TANF programs to tailor services to better meet the needs of specific populations. TANF and Tribal TANF serve families from varying backgrounds and circumstances. Several studies indicated that adapting and tailoring service delivery, coordination, and overall programming to better align with the needs and cultural values of those being served might improve access to and increase participation in services.

- **American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) populations.** A descriptive study of Tribal TANF programs found that integrating tribal culture and values into program design is a key factor in serving people with low incomes and diverse tribal populations.⁵⁹ Aligning a program's culture and values with those of the community could mean adapting the language used in program materials and by program staff. It might also mean offering culturally respectful services and activities that accommodate the economic realities and opportunities of a tribe's location.
- **Refugees and immigrants.** Using culturally responsive practices, such as having bilingual or multilingual program staff who are familiar with refugee processes and policies, can reduce challenges to participation for refugees.⁶⁰ TANF programs can improve their accessibility and increase participation by co-locating staff in refugee resettlement agencies and by offering reduced or flexible work requirements.⁶¹
- **People experiencing homelessness.** TANF programs can support families experiencing homelessness by providing rental assistance, partnerships with local housing agencies, case management for housing stability, housing-related supportive services, and altered work requirements and exemptions.⁶² ⁶³ TANF programs can also coordinate policies and services with and offer funding to other agencies that support people experiencing homelessness.
- **People with disabilities.** Most TANF programs do not have specific services to meet the unique needs of people with disabilities, and their connections with other programs are

⁵⁸ Mathematica helped develop this synthesis through the ACF Evidence Capacity Support project (Contract No. HHSP233201500035I/75P00120F37052). The synthesis focuses on select research, evaluation, and resources supported by OPRE, ACF, HHS. See the appendices for a complete list of references and description of methods used to develop this synthesis.

⁵⁹ Hahn, Heather, Olivia Healy, Chris Narducci, and Walter Hillbrant. "A Descriptive Study of Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Programs." OPRE Report 2013-34. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, September 2013.

⁶⁰ Gaffney, Angela, Mary Farrell, Sam Elkin, and Robin Koralek. "Understanding the Intersection Between TANF and Refugee Cash Assistance Services—Serving Refugee Families Through TANF: Lessons from the Field." OPRE Report 2018-57. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018.

⁶¹ Elkin, Sam, Mary Farrell, Robin Koralek, and Hannah Engle. "Understanding the Intersection Between TANF and Refugee Cash Assistance Services, Final Report." OPRE Report 2018-42. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, April 2018.

⁶² Dunton, Lauren, and Cara Sierks. "Approaches to Assisting Families Experiencing or at Risk of Homelessness with TANF Funds." OPRE Report 2021-192. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, September 2021.

⁶³ Dunton, Lauren, and Cara Sierks. "Assisting Families Experiencing Homelessness with TANF Funding: Findings from a Survey of TANF Administrators." OPRE Report 2021-43. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, January 2021.

often weak. For instance, studies have shown that only a small percentage of people with disabilities who are receiving TANF benefits also apply for Supplemental Security Insurance.⁶⁴ However, in the past few years, some TANF programs have been directly offering service models that are promising for this group, such as Individual Placement and Support.⁶⁵

Behavioral nudges and supportive services might increase people's engagement in TANF and other programs. An impact study found that low-cost behavioral nudges, such as postcards with appointment reminders, personalized letters, and other tailored outreach efforts, increased program engagement, attendance, and child support payments.⁶⁶ In addition, wraparound supports within employment programs can reduce challenges to participation, thereby creating more time to build skills.⁶⁷

A positive, person-centered culture in TANF programs might better support the development of staff and families participating in TANF and improve the overall program experience. Several descriptive studies suggested TANF programs can create this culture by demonstrating respect for people participating in programs and staff, leading with a clear and motivating vision, and investing in staff development and growth.⁶⁸ TANF programs can also engage staff and people participating in TANF in program decisions, create space for them to connect with one another, and engage them more regularly in program improvement. Researchers hypothesized that this type of organizational climate, in turn, leads to better participant engagement and outcomes.

A large literature review highlighted disparities in accessing human services across racial and ethnic groups.⁶⁹ African American, Latin American, and AIAN populations tend to experience poorer outcomes than other groups across ACF human services programs. Researchers hypothesized that the disparities in outcomes might be driven by factors that influence access to and take-up of program services. These include factors internal to the service delivery system, such as worker bias and discretion or location of services, and external factors, such as discrimination in the labor market.

⁶⁴ Skemer, Melanie, and Brian Bayes. "Examining the Interaction Between Welfare and Disability: Lessons from an In-Depth Data Analysis." OPRE Report 2013-49. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013.

⁶⁵ Farrell, Mary, Peter Baird, Bret Barden, Mike Fishman, and Rachel Pardoe. "The TANF/SSI Disability Transition Project: Innovative Strategies for Serving TANF Recipients with Disabilities." OPRE Report 2013-51. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013.

⁶⁶ Richburg-Hayes, Lashawn, Caitlin Anzelone, Nadine Dechausay, and Patrick Landers. "Nudging Change in Human Services: Final Report of the Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) Project." OPRE Report 2017-23. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017.

⁶⁷ Eddins, Katie, Linda Rosenberg, and Sharika Rakibullah. "State Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Case Studies: Summary of Innovative Programs Serving People with Low Income." OPRE Report 2021-125. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, June 2021.

⁶⁸ Jayanthi, Akanksha, Asaph Glosser, and Jordan Engel. "Designing Participant-Centered Program: Participant Reflections on What Works Well in Social Services Programs." OPRE Report 2021-150. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, September 2021.

⁶⁹ McDaniel, Marla, Tyler Woods, Eleanor Pratt, and Margaret C. Simms. "Identifying Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Human Services: A Conceptual Framework and Literature Review." OPRE Report 2017-69. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017.

What are some of the gaps that remain in this area?

Research could further explore tailoring services for specific populations. Across the breadth of populations considered in this sub-workstream, researchers highlighted the need for more descriptions of service approaches for specific populations and details about their effectiveness.

- **AIAN populations.** Given the diversity of tribal communities, including their size and geographic location, research could investigate a broader variety of Tribal TANF programs and how they operate. The flexibility of Tribal TANF programs can make comparing participants' outcomes across programs difficult; developing standard, yet culturally responsive, measures of participant outcomes would allow for potential summative evaluations and a deeper understanding of how various program approaches work in different contexts.
- **Refugees and immigrants.** Future research could further explore the implementation of culturally responsive practices for groups of refugees and strategies to coordinate services with other social services programs and local partners. Additional research could evaluate the effect of such approaches on specific refugee populations, to identify what works for whom and under what circumstances.
- **People experiencing homelessness.** Further research could document the extent to which TANF programs support people experiencing homelessness and the approaches used; research could also assess the effectiveness of these approaches. Analyses of participation rates and family characteristics could help programs better understand what circumstances might lead families to be at risk of homelessness, which can inform TANF and other service offerings.
- **People with disabilities.** Additional research is needed to understand how to best serve people with disabilities participating in TANF to increase their earnings and self-sufficiency. This includes the best practices for assessing disability status and understanding which program models best support people with disabilities.

Research could identify, document, and evaluate the effectiveness of strategies to increase engagement with TANF programs. Future research could focus on specific approaches associated with positive staff and participant experiences—on average and for certain subgroups—including methods for creating supportive and responsive relationships. This work could also document the implementation and compare the effect of various wraparound services to better understand how addressing certain needs relates to program engagement.

Research could identify methods for creating positive cultures within TANF and other human services programs. Future research could identify and describe the implementation of approaches

for improving and creating positive organization climates. It could also rigorously evaluate the effects of a person-centered culture on staff and people participating in TANF.

Further research is needed to better estimate underlying population need. Authors reported a need for additional analyses to understand participation rates in human services programs, across people and families with different characteristics. This research could also explore the effects of factors both external and internal to programs that might drive disparities. Researchers could use existing national survey and program data to estimate the underlying population needs specific to racial and ethnic groups in order to identify groups more likely to be eligible for services. However, because these data are missing for certain programs, future work could focus on setting up systems to collect the data.

Learning Questions

Number	Learning Question
1.	<p>What is the nature and extent of coordination among human services programs, and how does service coordination affect the experiences and outcomes of people served?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. What are the characteristics of successful coordination efforts, key challenges to coordination, and effective strategies for strengthening coordination?b. Are there models of service coordination that are more effective at advancing positive participant outcomes?
2.	<p>What are effective strategies for TANF and other human services programs to engage and tailor services to specific populations?</p>
3.	<p>What approaches do TANF and other human services programs use to build the financial preparedness of families with low incomes, and how does financial preparedness relate to participants' outcomes?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. How is "financial preparedness" defined as it relates to people with low incomes?b. What strategies strengthen the ability of families with low incomes to withstand financial shocks and uncertainty during economic downturns?
4.	<p>How can the application of behavioral science in human services programs be expanded beyond "nudges" or modest changes to programs to advance more substantial process and practice changes within programs to improve participant outcomes?</p>

Current Division of Economic Independence Projects Related to Workstream

Project	Brief Description
<u>Behavioral Interventions Scholars (BIS) Grant Program</u>	BIS grants support dissertation research by advanced graduate students who are applying a behavioral science lens to specific research questions relevant to social services programs and policies and other issues facing families with low incomes.
<u>Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency - Next Generation (BIAS-NG)</u>	BIAS-NG is designing and testing behaviorally informed interventions in TANF, child welfare, and Head Start.
<u>Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Scholars Network (FSSRN)</u>	FSSRN supports independent researchers working to enhance and improve family self-sufficiency research at the state and local levels.
<u>Human-Centered Design for Human Services (HCD4HS) (ended Sept 2022)</u>	HCD4HS aimed to improve understanding of HCD in the context of human services; the requirements for implementation across a range of programs; and the measurable outcomes, evaluability, feasibility, and sustainability of HCD approaches across ACF's programs.
<u>Integrating Financial Capability and Employment Services (InFin)</u>	InFin aims to improve understanding of the extent to which employment and training programs incorporate financial literacy training, how such training is incorporated, and options for future research and evaluation efforts.
<u>Next Steps for Rigorous Research on Two-Generation Approaches (NS2G)</u>	NS2G includes formative evaluations of a set of two-generation programs; technical assistance to build the capacity of programs to conduct rigorous evaluations of integrated approaches; and pilot testing a measure that will support future evaluation.
<u>Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Human Services Analysis Execution Project (RED-X)</u>	RED-X is building on OPRE's <u>RED</u> project by implementing RED's research design plan to identify and analyze racial and ethnic disparities

	in TANF and Child Care Development Fund child care subsidies.
<u>TANF and Child Support Moving Forward: [Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic and] Further Incorporating Family Input</u>	One component of this project focuses on advancing knowledge regarding how TANF and child support programs can incorporate input from families they have served or are currently serving to inform program improvements and operations.
<u>Understanding Poverty: [Childhood and Family Experiences and] TANF Office Culture</u> (ended June 2022)	One component of this project was a descriptive study of TANF office culture that examined six programs to explore how organizational culture, office design, and office procedures help shape the experiences of people participating in TANF.
<u>Understanding the Value of Centralized Services</u> (VOCS) (ended Sept 2022)	VOCS aimed to build understanding of the advantages, disadvantages, and costs of providing families with low incomes with multiple benefits and services in one location.

Strategies for Advancing
Positive Participant Outcomes

Social Context and Environment



The Strategies for Advancing Positive Participant Outcomes workstream addresses questions related to strategies that seek to foster family economic security, stability, and self-sufficiency. The Social Context and Environment sub-workstream focuses on how broader social context and environmental factors, including public policy and economic conditions, relate to participants' outcomes.

Learning to Date

ACF sponsors research, evaluation, and other resources to build knowledge about how social context and environmental factors might affect people with low incomes who participate in TANF and other human services programs. ACF's work in this area focuses on context and factors including public policy, the labor market, family and cultural contexts, and crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

This synthesis was developed by reviewing select resources about how social context and environmental factors can affect the path to self-sufficiency. Some of these resources reflect research conducted during welfare reform in the late 1990s and early 2000s, whereas others reflect more recent research. This synthesis describes the five broad findings that emerged from the review.

***What do we know from select research, evaluation, and other resources?*⁷⁰**

As it relates to public policy and family contexts, work conducted during welfare reform suggested that welfare reform programs might have had positive effects on children's outcomes. One literature synthesis of experimental studies of welfare reform programs from five states in the 1990s examined effects on the outcomes of young children. Increases in parental employment and program participation led to an increase in children's participation in child care and before- and after-school programs. Authors found that an increase in family income seemed to be related to positive effects on children's functioning. In addition, children from families with the most challenging circumstances experienced the most favorable developmental impacts. However, the authors noted there was little evidence of widespread positive or negative effects on children.^{71, 72}

As it relates to the changing labor market, a 2008 survey of employers who hire workers with less than a college education found that employers have specific preferences and look for certain skills as they fill positions. This survey investigated the characteristics and skill sets employers seek from candidates, employee benefits, how jobs are filled, and how workers perform. Findings suggested that employers who hire workers with less than a college education tended to prefer candidates with strong soft skills, such as timeliness as well as reading and writing ability and computer literacy.⁷³ The study noted that the ability to perform cognitive tasks well was important to these employers because many jobs available for people with less than a college education require daily reading and writing. In addition, study findings highlighted that employers seeking candidates with less than a college education were willing to hire people who had previously received public benefits but tended to be less willing to hire people who had previously been incarcerated. At the time of this research, employee benefits offered by these jobs often included pension plans, health insurance, a median hourly rate of \$11 (in 2007 dollars), and paid leave. This work also explored strategies to address biases in the low-wage labor market.⁷⁴ In 2021, ACF funded new work to understand how employment processes related to hiring, promotion, and wage setting can present barriers for people of color who are seeking employment or are already employed.

With the expectation that access to labor market information (LMI) could help employment and training programs better connect people to jobs, ACF published and continues to update guides and tools drawing on LMI. In 2015, an ACF project developed a variety of resources that (1) identified occupations expected to experience growth through 2022 that required short-term

⁷⁰ Mathematica helped develop this synthesis through the ACF Evidence Capacity Support project (Contract No. HHSP233201500035I/75P00120F37052). The synthesis focuses on select key research, evaluation, and resources supported by OPRE, ACF, HHS and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. See the appendices for a complete list of references and a description of methods used to develop this synthesis.

⁷¹ Tout, K., J. Brooks, M. Zaslow, Z. Redd, K. Moore, A. McGarvey, S. McGroder, L. Gennetian, P. Morris, C. Ross, and E. Beecroft. "Welfare Reform and Children: A Synthesis of Impacts in Five States." Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004.

⁷² Grogger, J., L. Karoly, and J. Klerman. "Consequences of Welfare Reform: A Research Synthesis." Washington, DC: Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002.

⁷³ Acs, G., and P. Loprest. "Understanding the Demand Side of the Low-Wage Labor Market: Final Report." Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, April 2008.

⁷⁴ Acs and Loprest 2008

investment in education or training; (2) provided basic information about LMI for TANF administrators and staff to use to connect people with low incomes to jobs; (3) offered guidance on how TANF programs can develop partnerships with other workforce programs; and (4) provided TANF administrators and staff with tools and assessments to use when working with people participating in TANF, including resources focused on career exploration, career pathways, and sector strategies.^{75, 76, 77} In addition, a more recent study highlighted important trends for the future labor market with a focus on populations with low incomes. The study looked at the automation of jobs as technology advances, and changes to remaining jobs that might require more analytical, social, and creative skills as opposed to routine and automatable tasks, to identify implications for future research and practice.⁷⁸ To account for the rapidly changing labor market, ACF is sponsoring new work that includes updated projections for occupations beyond 2022 with positive growth for people with low incomes.

Cultural context is important to consider in program design. A recent evaluation of Tribal HPOG 2.0 examined how grant recipients incorporated tribal culture into their programs and served rural communities. HPOG 2.0 provided opportunities for people participating in TANF and other people with low incomes to obtain education and training for health care jobs that pay well and are expected to experience labor shortages or be in high demand. The Tribal HPOG 2.0 evaluation found tribal culture and values were incorporated into many aspects of these programs at the institutional level, such as providing spaces for students of similar backgrounds and cultures to connect, integrating practices to maintain tribal language and traditions, and promoting community and cultural sensitivity in health care delivery.⁷⁹ In addition, programs operating in rural tribal communities often used their strengths, such as social cohesion, community resiliency, and cross-sector cooperation, throughout program development and implementation.⁸⁰ ACF is currently sponsoring a mixed-methods study to understand how a broader variety of human services programs can better support families in rural communities, given their unique challenges accessing resources.

Descriptive studies documented how the COVID-19 pandemic affected TANF and other human services programs, as well as employment and training programs, and the people they serve. The

⁷⁵ Mastri, A. "Promising Occupations Achievable Through Short-Term Education or Training for Low-Income Families: Introduction." OPRE Report 2015-111. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015.

⁷⁶ Joyce, K., A. Gould-Werth, M. Derr, E. Sanchez-Eppler, C. Clowney, and L. Roberts. "Using Data to Connect TANF Clients to Good Jobs: An Opportunity to Foster WIOA Partnerships." OPRE Report 2015-109. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015.

⁷⁷ Joyce, K., M. Derr, A. Mastri, S. Bates, A. Gould-Werth, C. Clowney, and L. Roberts. "Resources for Connecting TANF Recipients and Other Low-Income Families to Good Jobs." OPRE Report 2015-110. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015.

⁷⁸ Miller, Cynthia. "Understanding the Changing Nature of Work: Implications for Research and Evaluation to Inform Programs Serving Low-Income Populations." OPRE Report 2021-178. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021.

⁷⁹ Hafford, C., C. Fromknecht, E. Tolbert, and M. Dougherty. "Implementation of Tribal HPOG 2.0: Integration of Tribal Culture into Healthcare Training Programs." OPRE Report 2021-83. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021.

⁸⁰ Meit, M., C. Hafford, C. Fromknecht, N. Miesfeld, E. Tolbert, and T. Nadel. "Implementing Healthcare Career Pathways Training Programs in Rural Settings: Responsive Approaches by Tribal HPOG 2.0 Grantees." OPRE Report 2020-08. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020.

pandemic forced rapid innovation in a range of programs serving people with low incomes. For example, TANF programs began to offer their services virtually, including coaching, case management, employment and training services, orientation, and other group activities. Incorporating technology made service delivery more flexible for staff and people participating in TANF; staff were able to work flexible hours, which ultimately led to more flexibility for participants, who could choose the mode of contact that worked best for them.^{81, 82, 83, 84} One study noted that to reduce the challenges associated with virtual service delivery, programs provided participants with technology assistance and increased the frequency of staff–participant interactions.⁸⁵ ACF is currently sponsoring work to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affected people participating in the non-Tribal HPOG 2.0 Program, including examining effects on their education and employment-related outcomes. Other ongoing ACF studies are conducting special analyses to examine the effects of the pandemic on approaches employment and training programs use to engage employers and maintain those connections. These studies will also explore how TANF program leaders might apply the lessons from and practices used during the pandemic to address persistent stress and trauma, and to support the well-being of staff and people participating in TANF beyond the end of the public health emergency.

What are some of the gaps that remain in this area?

Research could consider updated information on characteristics and preferences of employers hiring people with less than a college education. Given rapid changes in employment, an updated survey of employers could capture employer preferences and practices related to hiring people with limited formal education or work experience. The authors of the 2008 study noted that they explored many areas—such as job requirements, hiring practices, and opportunities for advancement—but suggested that deeper analysis in these areas is needed. Such analysis could further examine employers’ preferences when hiring people with less than a college education, as research in this area was relatively limited at the time of the study. In addition, studies employing qualitative methods might be beneficial to understand the nuances and context of employer practices.

Research that considers contextual factors beyond TANF policy and the low-wage labor market, including factors related to equity, might be helpful for supporting family economic security, stability, and self-sufficiency. The research and resources examined for this synthesis focused largely on several important contextual factors: TANF policy, the low-wage labor market, family and

⁸¹ Kauff, Jacqueline. “Employer Engagement: Lessons Learned for Employment Programs from the COVID-19 Pandemic.” OPRE Report 2021-135. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021.

⁸² Derr, Michelle K. “Supporting Mental Wellness for Program Staff and Participants: Strategies for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Leaders.” OPRE Report 2022-63. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022.

⁸³ McCay, Jonathan, and Ellen Bart. “Pandemic-Era Innovations for the Future of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Programs.” OPRE Report 2021-188. Washington DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, December 2021.

⁸⁴ Dougherty, M., C. Hafford, C. Fromknecht, C. Holden, and P. Maitra. “Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Tribal HPOG 2.0 Grantees’ Program Adaptations.” OPRE Report 2021-146. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021.

⁸⁵ Ruggiero, Ryan, Katie Eddins, and Benjamin Christensen. “Lessons Learned Delivering Remote Services to Job Seekers with Low Incomes During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” OPRE Report 2021-159. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021.

culture, and crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is likely that other social context and environmental factors shape the capacity of TANF and other human services programs to foster positive outcomes for families. Future research could consider such factors. For example, research could document structural barriers to employment advancement; unequal access to publicly funded resources such as TANF; and racial disparities in economic security, stability, and self-sufficiency outcomes across the United States. Future research could identify strategies TANF programs could use to address these contextual challenges. ACF is currently funding work to advance understanding of equitable research practices and ways to incorporate these practices into future research and evaluation. These participatory approaches might provide ACF with a framework for incorporating contextual factors into future work.

Research could examine the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on virtual training programs, labor market trends, and employment and economic disruptions. In a previously referenced study, authors noted several opportunities for learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because many human services programs, including their employment and training components, were offered virtually, future research could examine the effectiveness of virtual services and trainings. Furthermore, it might be important to monitor the labor market and employer characteristics continuously in future years, given the rapid economic fluctuations that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, examining lessons from the pandemic might benefit human services programs when they encounter future disruptions to the economy.⁸⁶

Learning Questions

Number	Learning Question
1.	How do the context and environment in which human services programs operate affect program characteristics, program operations, and participants’ outcomes? a. What role do human services programs play in perpetuating or reducing disparities among participants along multiple dimensions of identity? b. What role do or can human services programs play in influencing context and environment in a way that supports positive outcomes for people participating in programs?
2.	What are participants’ life experiences with discrimination along multiple dimensions of identity and what are the implications for the design of and services provided by human services programs?

⁸⁶ Epstein, Zachary, and Maureen Sarna. “The Healthcare Workforce During COVID-19: Results from an Environmental Scan.” OPRE Report 2021-104. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021.

3.	<p>What racial and ethnic disparities and discrimination exist in human services programs, and how do such disparities and discrimination affect participants' experiences and outcomes?</p> <p>a. What are effective strategies for human services programs to identify, assess, and address racial and ethnic disparities and discrimination?</p>
4.	<p>How do local labor market conditions shape human services program design and participants' outcomes?</p> <p>a. What are effective strategies for human services programs to improve their understanding of and adapt to conditions in the local labor market?</p>
5.	<p>How do national labor market trends, including the changing nature of work, shape human services program design and participants' outcomes?</p> <p>a. What are effective strategies for human services programs to improve their understanding of and adapt to national labor market trends?</p>

Current Division of Economic Independence Projects Related to Workstream

Project	Brief Description
Advancing Contextual Analysis and Methods of Participant Engagement (CAMPE)	This project supports activities to incorporate participatory methods and analysis of contextual factors into federally funded research and evaluation projects. It also provides consultation to OPRE staff on applying an equity lens to project communications.
Baby's First Years Qualitative Substudy	This study is evaluating the impact of unconditional cash gifts to mothers with low incomes and their children in the first three years of a child's life. The Division of Economic Independence contributes funds to support qualitative work examining how the cash income affects families' lives.
Employment Processes as Barriers to Employment in the Lower-Wage Labor Market	This project aims to build understanding of racial biases and disparities in processes related to hiring, promotion, and wage assignment and explore and identify potentially promising practices for mitigating these barriers.

<u>Human Service Programs in Rural Contexts</u> (ended March 2023)	This mixed-methods study aimed to build understanding of the unique opportunities and challenges involved in administering human services programs in rural communities.
<u>Measuring, Supporting, and Understanding Child and Caregiver Well-Being Through Employment and Self-Sufficiency Research</u> (Measuring SUCCESS)	This project supports activities to build the knowledge base on child and family well-being in the context of parents' participation in and completion of welfare and family self-sufficiency programs or interventions.
<u>TANF and Child Support Moving Forward: Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic [and Further Incorporating Family Input]</u>	One component of this project is an examination of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected TANF and child support programs, including changes made during the pandemic and lessons learned.
<u>Understanding Poverty: Childhood and Family Experiences [and TANF Office Culture]</u> (ended June 2022)	One component of this project was a qualitative study of the experiences of children and families living in poverty, including those who apply for and access TANF.

Knowledge Building and Communication



The Knowledge Building and Communication workstream addresses questions related to expanding and synthesizing the evidence base, supporting scholars who focus on research related to ACF initiatives and the people who ACF serves, and ensuring knowledge generated within and outside of ACF is communicated effectively to inform policy, practice, and further research.

Summary of Work⁸⁷

The Division of Economic Independence not only produces original research and analysis but also works to synthesize knowledge across the evidence base; build the field of scholars who examine topics of interest to ACF; and share findings generated by Division-supported research. For example, the Division builds knowledge through systematic evidence reviews and meta-analyses; supports scholars outside of government through grant-funded research centers; helps fund studies conducted by nongovernmental entities, such as the National Academies of Sciences; and shares Division-supported research through a variety of communication activities. The following sections describe recent projects and ongoing efforts in these domains.

Knowledge building. In recent years, the Division of Economic Independence sponsored a series of knowledge-building projects that were designed to iterate and build on one another to improve our understanding of the evidence base and important questions to consider for future research.

- The [Employment and Strategies for Low-Income Adult Evidence Review \(ESER\)](#), which concluded in 2018, systematically reviewed literature on the effectiveness of employment

⁸⁷ This synthesis focuses on major previous and ongoing knowledge-building efforts supported by OPRE, ACF, HHS. The section does not identify gaps in learning because projects in this workstream are intended to share or synthesize existing learning, or to build the capacity of those working to generate new learning in the welfare and family self-sufficiency field. See the appendices for a description of the methods used to develop this synthesis.

and training programs for people with low incomes. It published the results in a searchable database.

- The [Next Steps for Employment and Training Research: Roundtable and White Papers](#) project, which concluded in 2020, convened a roundtable of experts on employment and training. It produced a series of complementary white papers to describe the history of employment and training research, discuss advances in the field, and identify knowledge gaps.
- The [Pathways to Work Evidence Clearinghouse](#), which launched in 2018 and whose work is ongoing, builds on the work completed under ESER by providing an assessment of the evidence of effectiveness for specific employment and training programs and strategies. The congressionally mandated Clearinghouse systematically reviews the effectiveness of employment-related programs and shares its findings on an accessible, user-friendly public [website](#). Pathways also releases products, such as meta-analyses and Evidence Snapshots that summarize and synthesize findings across the evidence base.

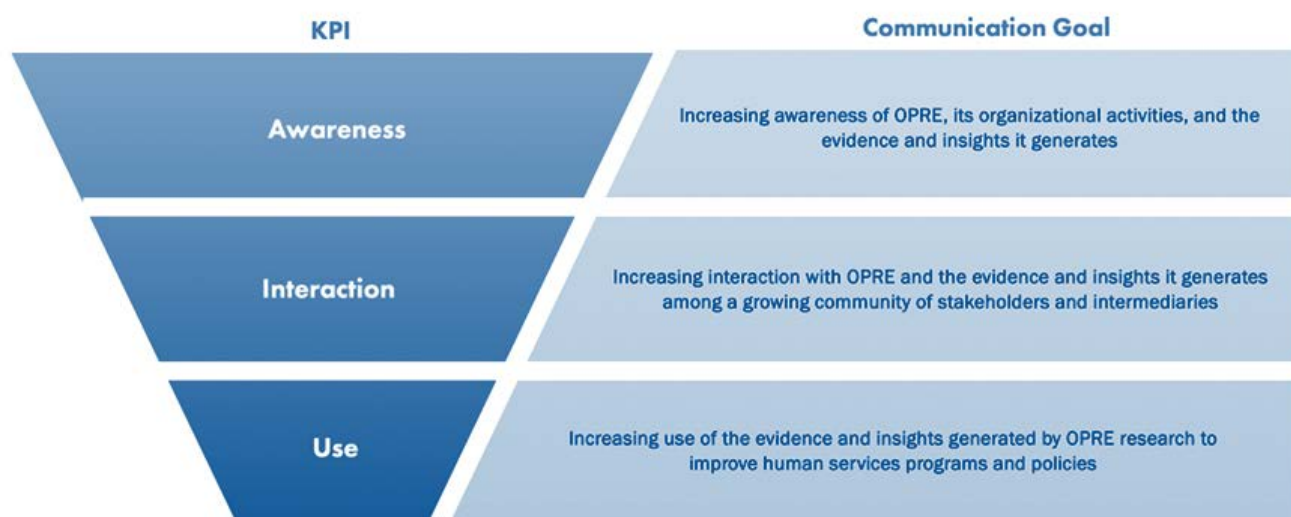
In addition to these projects, the Division of Economic Independence funds efforts to build the field of scholars who focus on economic security, stability, and self-sufficiency and to promote research related to ACF initiatives and the populations that ACF serves. Unlike other Division efforts, most of which are conducted on behalf of the government through contracts, these initiatives are funded primarily through grants and cooperative agreements, and support researchers outside of government to conduct work that benefits ACF and the broader field. Examples include the following:

- [Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Scholars Network Grants](#) support independent researchers working to enhance and improve economic security research at the state and local levels. The Division of Economic Independence also funds secondary data analysis grants and dissertation research grants; these efforts are described further in the relevant workstream brief.
- Funded by the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), the [National Research Center on Poverty and Economic Mobility](#) focuses on projects and programs designed to improve the effectiveness of public policies that reduce poverty, inequality, and their consequences; promote economic mobility and equity; and further develop knowledge of the structural causes of poverty, inequality, and economic insecurity. The Division of Economic Independence supports the Center's National Poverty Fellows program, which seeks to build the capacity of postdoctoral researchers conducting policy-relevant research on poverty and inequality by placing them at HHS to work with federal offices. It also supports the Center's communications events.

- The [African American Child and Family Research Center](#), the [Center for Research on Hispanic Children & Families](#), and the [Tribal Research Center on Early Childhood Development and Systems](#) promote rigorous research to better understand the characteristics, assets, and needs of the diverse populations that ACF services. The centers are cross-division OPRE initiatives that the Division of Economic Independence supports.
- The Division of Economic Independence contributes to two studies led by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine: (1) [Policies and Programs to Reduce Intergenerational Poverty](#) and (2) [Addressing the Long-Term Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children and Families](#). These studies support nongovernmental work to synthesize knowledge on timely topics for the field.

Communication. The insights and evidence generated by Division of Economic Independence-sponsored research are valuable only if they reach audiences—policymakers, program providers, researchers, and others—who can use them. Thus, translating and communicating research findings are critical to the Division’s mission. OPRE’s office-wide communication goals, which the Division shares, are outlined in the engagement funnel depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3. OPRE Engagement Funnel



In the service of these goals, OPRE and the Division of Economic Independence conduct the following communication activities:

- OPRE shares research across multiple channels, including the [OPRE website](#), social media platforms, conferences and events, an [OPRE email newsletter](#), and other email outreach. OPRE also has an internal dashboard that provides real-time data on how project

webpages and publications are performing, such as number of website visits and publication downloads. OPRE uses these data to adjust and improve communication strategies over time.

- The Division of Economic Independence convenes the biennial [Research and Evaluation Conference on Self-Sufficiency](#) (RECS), which is an established national forum for researchers and practitioners to share knowledge and information, including findings from many Division-sponsored projects.
- Projects sponsored by the Division of Economic Independence share research through a variety of mechanisms, including project websites, project-specific email newsletters, webinars and presentations, podcasts, videos, and blog posts. Some Division projects put an even greater emphasis on communication. For example, the [Pathways to Work Evidence Clearinghouse](#) established project-specific quantifiable communication goals and tracks real-time communications data on an internal dashboard it uses to adjust and improve its communication strategies.

Learning Questions

Number	Learning Question
1.	What are effective strategies for the Division of Economic Independence and OFA to incorporate an equity focus into knowledge building activities and the communication of learning?
2.	What are effective strategies for the Division of Economic Independence and OFA to include diverse interested parties in the planning and conduct of knowledge building activities and the communication of learning?
3.	What are effective strategies for the Division of Economic Independence and OFA to facilitate communication, translation, and use of findings from learning activities among intended users of the findings? <ol style="list-style-type: none">a. What are effective strategies for the Division and OFA to track and document uses of learning among intended users?b. What are effective strategies for the Division and OFA to integrate feedback loops more systematically (for example, from contractors, grant recipients, federal staff, practitioners, and families) to ensure current learning activities continuously inform policy, programs, and future learning activities?
4.	What are effective strategies for the Division of Economic Independence and OFA to continually assess and respond to the information needs of state and county policymakers, TANF administrators, and other human services practitioners?

5.	What are effective strategies for OFA to strengthen TANF agencies' understanding of the TANF program structure, requirements, and flexibilities?
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Current Division of Economic Independence Projects Related to Workstream

Project	Brief Description
<u>African American Child and Family Research Center</u>	This Center leads and supports research on the assets, needs, and experiences of African American families and children served by ACF. The Division of Economic Independence is a funder of the Center.
<u>National Academies of Sciences Study on Addressing the Long-Term Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children and Families</u>	An ad hoc committee of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine is conducting this study on the consequences of and solutions to the long-term effects of COVID-19 on children. The Division of Economic Independence is a sponsor of the study.
<u>National Academies of Sciences Study on Policies and Programs to Reduce Intergenerational Poverty</u>	An ad hoc committee of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine is conducting this study to provide an evidence-based analysis of and recommendations for policies and programs to reduce intergenerational poverty and improve child welfare. The Division of Economic Independence is a sponsor of the study.
<u>National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families</u>	This Center leads and supports investigation into the needs of Hispanic populations served by ACF and promising approaches to promote social and economic well-being among Hispanic families with low incomes. The Division of Economic Independence is a funder of the Center.
<u>National Research Center on Poverty and Economic Mobility</u>	Funded by ASPE, this Center leads and supports research on poverty and economic mobility. The Division of Economic Independence supports the Center's National Poverty Fellows program and communications events.

Research and Evaluation Conference on Self-Sufficiency (RECS)	RECS is a leading forum for researchers, state and local administrators, practitioners, policymakers, and federal officials to discuss cutting-edge research on family self-sufficiency and social welfare programs and policies. The Division of Economic Independence convenes RECS biennially.
Tribal Research Center on Early Childhood Development and Systems (TRC)	The TRC leads and supports community-based participatory research and evaluation of ACF early childhood initiatives that serve tribal communities. The Division of Economic Independence supports the Center’s research on topics related to family economic well-being in American Indian and Alaska Native communities.

Appendices

APPENDIX A. Methods

Syntheses of Learning to Date and Gaps in Learning

The syntheses of current and past learning and the list of remaining gaps in learning that appear in each workstream and sub-workstream section are primarily based on seminal work from the Division of Economic Independence's research and evaluation portfolio, and from a select few other federal research offices.

Under the [Administration for Children and Families \(ACF\) Evidence Capacity Support](#) contract, a team at Mathematica developed the syntheses and list of gaps for the following workstreams: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Policy, Funding, and Administration; Capacity Building within Human Services Programs; and the four sub-workstreams under Strategies for Advancing Positive Participant Outcomes. The team used the following process to conduct this work:

- Division of Economic Independence staff identified 83 seminal research, evaluation, and other resources published from 1999 to 2022 across the workstreams and sub-workstreams. Division staff drew on their institutional knowledge and familiarity with federally supported research and evaluation to identify these seminal resources, focusing on the Division's research and evaluation and select resources from other federal research offices. Resources that were considered seminal included final reports from major federally funded research efforts; other research and evaluation findings that had informed policy or later federal research investments; cross-project analyses and syntheses of findings; technical assistance products; and existing summaries of learning to date and suggestions for future research in particular content areas.
- Between December 2021 and June 2022, the Evidence Capacity Support team extracted high-level information from these resources with a primary focus on the background and context, findings and implications, and remaining questions. For each publication, the team documented the information in a customized Excel file specific to each workstream or sub-workstream.
- The Evidence Capacity Support team developed the syntheses by systematically identifying high-level themes across the documented findings and gaps for each publication within the Excel file for each workstream and sub-workstream. The team defined high-level themes as those that were most frequently mentioned across each resource in a given workstream or sub-workstream.
- To identify gaps, the Evidence Capacity Support team extracted and summarized any gaps or key next steps noted by the authors of each resource. In addition, the team identified

workstream-specific gaps drawing on the team members' knowledge of the broader field and input from the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) on current and planned ACF-funded research.

- Some gaps in learning named in the syntheses have already informed ACF's research and evaluation investments. When available, findings from these current projects will be incorporated as part of periodic updates to the Welfare and Family Self-Sufficiency Learning Agenda.

To develop the synthesis of learning to date that appears in the Knowledge Building and Communication workstream, Division of Economic Independence staff summarized major previous and ongoing knowledge-building efforts supported by the Division as well as examples of communication strategies at the OPRE, Division, and project levels. The section does not identify gaps in learning because projects in this workstream are intended to share or synthesize existing learning, or to build the capacity of those working to generate new learning in the welfare and family self-sufficiency field.

Learning Questions

To develop the lists of learning questions that appear in each workstream and sub-workstream section, the Division of Economic Independence and the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) undertook an iterative process of convening interested groups, generating questions relevant to the groups' interests and expertise, collating and refining an evolving inventory of questions, and validating the resulting list with the engaged groups. To date, these interested groups have included the Division and OFA staff and a technical working group comprising subject matter experts from academia, research firms, and state and county human services agencies. These groups reflected on the following prompts to generate learning questions:

- Questions with answers that would directly inform their work overseeing research and evaluation, technical assistance, and human services programs
- Information needs of key constituencies (for example, policymakers, human services managers) in a continually changing social, economic, and political context
- Gaps in the research literature, including areas for future research surfaced by current and completed projects, and gaps in learning listed in the workstream syntheses
- Questions generated through reflection and discussion in the field (for example, conferences, listening sessions)

To inform the development and refinement of learning questions moving forward, the Division of Economic Independence and OFA will continue engaging interested parties and expand the groups involved to include people with lived experience participating in ACF programs, additional ACF program offices, and other federal research offices and working groups.

APPENDIX B. Works Consulted for All Workstream Briefs, by Workstream

TANF Policy, Funding, and Administration

- Acs, Gregory, and Pamela Loprest. "TANF Caseload Composition and Leavers Synthesis Report." Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007.
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Rosenberg, Linda, Michelle Derr, LaDonna Pavetti, Subuhi Asheer, Megan Hague Angus, Samina Sattar, and Max Jeffrey. “A Study of States’ TANF Diversion Programs Final Report.” Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008.

Thompson, Terri, and Kelly Mikelson. “Ten Important Questions TANF Agencies and Their Partners Should Consider.” Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001.

The Urban Institute. “Welfare Rules Database.” n.d. <https://wrd.urban.org/wrd/Query/query.cfm>.

Capacity Building within Human Services Programs

Allard, S.W., E. Weingard, R. Goerge, and L. Gjertson. “The Family Self-Sufficiency Data Center: Lessons Learned.” Washington, DC: Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Consortium, 2020.

Derr, Michelle, Ann Person, and Jonathan McCay. “Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI2): Enhancing Programs and Improving Lives.” OPRE Report 2017-108. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, December 2017.

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McCay, Jonathan, Michelle Derr, and Ann Person. “Using a ‘Road Test’ to Improve Human Services Programs.” OPRE Report 2017-107. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, December 2017.

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Strategies for Advancing Positive Participant Outcomes

Human Capital Development

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Hafford, C., C. Fromknecht, M. Dougherty, C. Holden, P. Maitra, K. MacLean, and S. Chmelir. “Tribal Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) 2.0 Evaluation: Final Report.” OPRE Report 2021-201. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, December 2021.

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