



THE CONSORTIUM

stimulating self-sufficiency & stability scholarship

Jonathan McCay and Sarah Lauffer, Mathematica Policy Research

2017 YEAR in REVIEW

The Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Consortium seeks to improve the lives of low-income families and children by integrating research, policy, and practice. Established in 2013 by the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), the consortium conducts research on contemporary questions related to family self-sufficiency.

HOW WE WORK

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

The three parts of the consortium

DATA CENTER

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



PROJECT AWESOME

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

SCHOLARS NETWORK

The Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability Research Scholars Network is a multidisciplinary collaboration of seven scholars who are investigating critical issues in family self-sufficiency and stability through independent and collective research.



Yumiko Aratani
Columbia University



Greg Fabiano
State University of New York at Buffalo



Colleen Heflin
Syracuse University



Heather Hill
University of Washington



Marybeth Mattingly
University of New Hampshire



Jennifer Romich
University of Washington



Jodi Sandfort
University of Minnesota

SCHOLARS NETWORK

Members of the Scholars Network continued their research—individually and collectively—in 2017 to address gaps in the existing research on policies and programs supporting family self-sufficiency and stability.

Marybeth Mattingly of the University of New Hampshire, **Jennifer Romich** of the University of Washington, and **Heather Hill** of the University of Washington, along with Shomon Shamsuddin of Tufts University and Hilary Wething of the University of Washington, guest-edited a special issue of *Social Service Review*, [An Introduction to Household Economic Instability and Social Policy](#). This special issue presents original research on the determinants and consequences of economic instability, with a focus on the interplay between instability and social policy.

In addition, Mattingly worked with the New Hampshire Division of Family Assistance to recruit and interview participants in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program about balancing work requirements with child care needs. From her qualitative work on challenges to and opportunities for stability among low-income rural New England families, Mattingly's team published a research brief on [rural housing challenges](#), wrote an article on the interaction of economic opportunities and population responses which is under review, and is working on a second article for submission to a social services journal, with a corresponding abstract submitted for presentation at a rural poverty conference.

Romich and Hill published a brief on [income instability and the safety net](#) that was distributed to 100 Seattle and Washington State leaders in antipoverty work from the nonprofit, government, and philanthropic communities as part of the West Coast Poverty Center's 2017 Poverty Summit focused on economic instability.

Hill contributed to the introductory article of the special issue of *Social Service Review* on [income instability and means-tested public assistance programs](#). Hill and Romich coauthored a new paper in *Child Development Perspectives* on [challenges for low-income children in an era of increasing income inequality](#).

Greg Fabiano of the State University of New York at Buffalo continued his efforts to develop the Laboratory Assessment of Behavior in Occupational Roles (LABOR), a simulation setting to investigate workplace skills, executive functioning, and decision making in employment settings (a laboratory pizza restaurant). His team has completed several preliminary feasibility studies. Fabiano also continues work on a systematic review of father engagement strategies:

his research team identified an initial pool of 88 papers addressing fathers in parent and/or child interventions, and these studies will be catalogued for engagement and retention strategies.

Jodi Sandfort of the University of Minnesota led an effort called "Equity Works" at the Future Services Institute (FSI) to shed more light on ways that program implementation can be improved in workforce development to reduce racial disparities. Statewide employer surveys and in-depth information gathered from community-based nonprofits show that the operation of publicly funded services leaves much room for improvement. FSI also worked with local governments to support progress toward integrated service delivery through the use of standardized tools and new practice models. In 2017, Sandfort was elected to the National Academy of Public Administration.

Colleen Heflin of Syracuse University and **Yumiko Aratani** of Columbia University co-authored a research brief published in 2017 on a national analysis of the [changing demography of social safety net program participation](#). Heflin also published "The Role of Social Positioning in Observed Patterns of Material Hardship: New Evidence from the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation" in *Social Problems*. Separately analyzing four domains of material hardship (food insecurity, housing hardship, medical hardship, and essential expense hardship), the study looks at the relationships between experiences of hardship, demographic characteristics, and the probability of hardships being one-time or repeated occurrences. In addition, Heflin gave several presentations in 2017 on food insecurity during adolescence and material hardships facing undocumented immigrants in the United States.

Aratani continued her partnership with the District of Columbia Department of Human Services in 2017, providing data analysis and a summary of findings for the TANF program. Aratani's findings led the department to focus on improvements to better capture client engagement with secondary service providers. These data are important for examining how the TANF program and its partners address clients' needs. Aratani also contributed to a research brief in partnership with the Future Services Institute at the University of Minnesota on [safety net program participation and demographic trends in the state of Minnesota](#).

DATA CENTER

In 2017, the Family Self-Sufficiency Data Center continued to engage state partners as part of its mission to analyze and more effectively leverage state administrative data for family self-sufficiency research. The Data Center published a brief [describing a data model for using TANF data to understand caseload dynamics and address key policy questions](#), which provides a simple guiding structure for agencies to extract and transform their data into a format for easy analysis. The Data Center continued partnerships with the Illinois Department of Human Services and offered extensive support to its new State Data Practice, charged with conducting multiagency analyses to improve policy and practice

in the state. The Data Center also provided technical assistance and support to human services agencies in Colorado, the District of Columbia, and Tennessee for analyses of their TANF caseload data.

Drawing on research from the Data Center's 2014 [needs assessment](#) and experiences working with states, several members of the team authored a paper submitted to the *Public Administration Review* special issue on administrative data use. The paper, entitled "[State Agencies' Use of Administrative Data for Improved Practice: Needs, Challenges, and Opportunities](#)," discusses how state agencies can become more sophisticated users of administrative data.

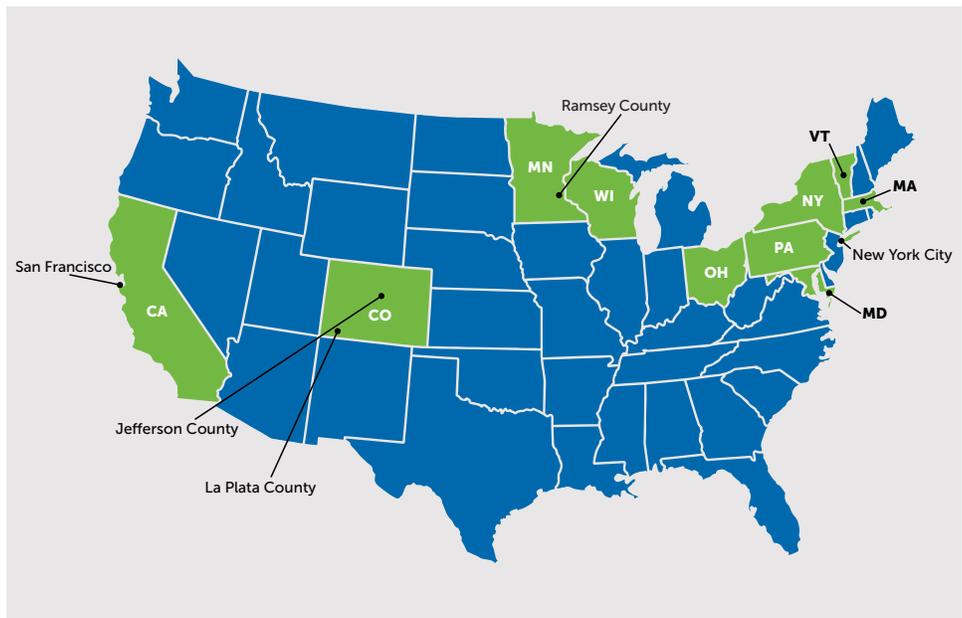
PROJECT AWESOME

Through Project AWESOME, Mathematica partnered with a dozen state and local human services programs in 2017, providing research and evaluation technical assistance to help these programs become better users and producers of high-quality evidence for decision making and quality improvement.

Mathematica uses the *Learn, Innovate, Improve* (LI²) process to guide programs through a systematic, evidence-informed approach to change. LI² begins with a targeted assessment of the program environment and

exploration of the motivation for change (Learn); building on these insights, Mathematica researchers collaborate with practitioners to design practical, research-informed solutions (Innovate), as well as test and refine newly formed strategies until program improvement goals are met (Improve). Iterative testing leads to continuous learning and further innovation beyond the time of Mathematica's engagement with programs. More detailed information about the LI² process is available in two practice briefs: an [overview of LI²](#) and an [overview of the "road test" process](#) (part of the Improve stage).

Vermont Department for Children and Families, Economic Services Division. Mathematica partnered with state administrators of the Reach Up program (local version of TANF) along with the Burlington and Morrisville districts to begin the process of formulating a more cohesive, outcome-driven vision. Beginning with the Learn phase of LI², Mathematica visited a variety of service locations and community partners to understand the programs strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improvement. Mathematica subsequently facilitated an Innovate-stage workshop of state administrators and district field staff centered on defining the Reach Up program's key measurable outcomes, targeted changes, and core service strategies. Collaboration with Vermont continues into 2018.



Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Office of Human Services Innovation. Mathematica partnered with Ohio's Office of Human Services Innovation to support the state's effort to strengthen implementation of the Comprehensive Case Management and Employment Program (CCMEP). CCMEP was developed to help low-income youth in Ohio prepare for and find employment through an integrated service combining TANF and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programming. Beginning with the Learn phase of LI², Mathematica visited two counties, Franklin and Stark, to better understand the strengths and challenges of CCMEP implementation. A few months later, Mathematica facilitated an Innovate-stage strategic planning workshop involving state administrators and seven county teams (each of which consisted of 8 to 14 staff) to explore implementation challenges and opportunities for strengthening the CCMEP model. As a result, Ohio state leaders planned to regularly convene a learning community among counties to share best practices and also to support counties in their efforts both to formalize CCMEP innovation plans and to incorporate the LI² process into their implementation of CCMEP.

Mathematica will continue to engage with states and localities to provide this kind of technical assistance through September 2018.



COMING IN 2018

Stay tuned to the consortium's work in 2018 as we continue building and using evidence to improve family self-sufficiency and stability.

- Connect with us at OPRE's biennial Research and Evaluation Conference on Self-Sufficiency in Washington, DC, May 30–June 1, or follow along on social media with #RECS2018
- Continue exploring how to apply the LI² process to your program using forthcoming practice briefs on the Learn and Innovate stages
- Gain a better understanding of the intersection between income instability and income support programs through a short explanatory video, or take a deeper dive into the issue by revisiting the consortium's [brief](#) or the [recent special](#) issue of *Social Service Review* from 2017
- Learn more about rural housing challenges in New England or a demographic investigation into the risk of falling into poverty when a child joins the home. These forthcoming briefs, along with our other research, can be found on the [Self-Sufficiency Research Clearinghouse website](#)

You can also follow our work through social media using [#research4FSS](#)

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