

## Executive Summary

The Bootstrap project was developed as a supplement to the existing Texas Fragile Families Initiative (TFF), a program that helped organizations around the state increase their capacity to serve young, low-income fathers. Bootstrap provided enhanced services to fathers so they could develop the necessary resources to become responsible parents who met the needs of their children. Specifically, it aimed to enhance the ability of low-income fathers to pay child support by providing them with a cash stipend to participate in job skills training. Four of the eleven TFF sites were selected to participate in the Bootstrap program: Austin, Houston-Baylor, Laredo, and San Angelo.

The Bootstrap demonstration was funded by a Section 1115 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The grant required an impact evaluation to measure Bootstrap's effectiveness so project officers at the Texas Office of the Attorney General (OAG) contracted with the Ray Marshall Center (RMC) of the University of Texas to design and implement this research. The original evaluation plan called on RMC researchers to measure the extent to which Bootstrap services increased paternity establishment, participation in workforce services, employment and earnings, and child support payments. When the Bootstrap project encountered difficulty enrolling the number of participants needed to conduct this evaluation, the OAG asked RMC to expand its analysis to investigate reasons that this occurred.

This report addresses the research question: What are the primary factors contributing to the low enrollments in the Bootstrap program? Findings from the impact analysis will be discussed in a second report, *Economic Impacts of Workforce Services for Young, Low-Income Fathers: Findings from the Texas Bootstrap Project*, that will be available in the fall of 2004.

To investigate the probable reasons for enrollment challenges, RMC researchers conducted a review of relevant literature, discussed enrollment issues with staff from the OAG and TFF, and conducted interviews with staff members from each of the four demonstration sites.

## *Findings*

Recruiting fathers to participate in Bootstrap was a challenge for all sites. Only the Houston-Baylor site satisfied the initial goal of 25 fathers per site, and Austin was able to reach its adjusted target. After TFF staff allowed local sites to substantially lengthen the time period for enrolling Bootstrap participants, the program was successful in meeting 77 percent of its original overall enrollment target.

The literature review indicated that enrollment challenges are common among both social services and workforce-related programs serving low-income young noncustodial fathers. Program partnerships are difficult to implement and agencies sometimes do not anticipate recruitment challenges. Furthermore young, low-income fathers face multiple personal barriers, are difficult to contact, and difficult to engage.

Analysis of this literature, interviews with program staff and review of relevant program information led RMC researchers to draw several conclusions about the slow Bootstrap enrollment rates from their research findings:

- Bootstrap’s innovative features did not mitigate known challenges as much as program designers anticipated.
- Divergent institutional cultures made coordination between partners difficult.
- Young fathers were sometimes not interested or prepared to accept program requirements.
- Expert, responsive staff can improve organizations’ capacity to assist difficult-to-serve constituents.
- The Section 1115 grant timeframe created significant barriers to conducting a novel, experimental, and constantly evolving project.

Site-specific factors (staff turnover, local partnerships) and issues related to the fathers themselves (lack of permanent address/phone number, limited education, no work experience) also affected enrollment trends.

## ***Recommendations***

Lessons learned from this demonstration should be considered when planning future programs to enhance the earning potential of young, low-income noncustodial fathers. The following recommendations are offered from the analysis of factors influencing low enrollments in Bootstrap:

Program designers should carefully review the restriction of potential funding sources.

Significant time should be reserved for planning, coalition building, and testing prior to full-scale implementation.

Best practices for recruitment should be identified and integrated into a program's design.

Programming should provide strong incentives for fathers to participate.

Workforce partners need incentives to work with difficult-to-serve populations.

Staff leadership must be flexible, adaptive, and experienced.

Innovative approaches to child support enforcement need to be explored.

In conclusion, there is still work to be done to understand how to best serve young, low-income, noncustodial fathers. Demonstration projects are an ideal tool for testing different service delivery models but must build on lessons learned from previous projects to further advance the quality of services for fathers.