

Executive Summary

Background

In 2001, the Texas Office of the Attorney General (OAG) partnered with the Texas Fragile Families Initiative (TFF) and secured a Section 1115 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), to implement the Texas Bootstrap Project (Bootstrap) demonstration. The Bootstrap program was designed to provide enhanced services to young, low-income noncustodial fathers at selected TFF sites (Austin, Houston, Laredo, and San Angelo) to help them access resources to assist them in becoming responsible parents and meeting the needs of their children. The OAG contracted with the Ray Marshall Center (RMC) for the Study of Human Resources at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin to evaluate the impacts of this program.

Research Questions

Four specific research questions are addressed in this impact evaluation. These questions test for the economic effects of necessary Bootstrap services on low-income noncustodial fathers by comparing the outcomes for Bootstrap participants to those of a carefully selected comparison group of other young, low-income fathers on the OAG's child support caseload. The research questions are:

- To what extent does receipt of Bootstrap services increase workforce development and skills training participation by noncustodial fathers?
- To what extent does receipt of Bootstrap services increase employment rates and earnings for noncustodial fathers?
- To what extent does receipt of Bootstrap services increase consistent payment of child support by noncustodial fathers?
- To what extent does receipt of Bootstrap services reduce the use of TANF benefits by custodial mothers?

Research Methods

Since the use of a random assignment design for the Bootstrap project demonstration was not possible, a ‘quasi-experimental’ approach to comparison group selection was utilized. Quasi-experimental methods represent the best approach available, short of random assignment, for selecting near-equivalent comparison groups. For each Bootstrap participant the potential comparator from the OAG child support caseload with the closest matching characteristics (known as the ‘nearest neighbor’) was selected to be in the comparison group. Outcomes for the Bootstrap and comparison groups were then compared in order to compute net impacts.

Findings and Conclusions

The results reported herein strongly suggest that the Bootstrap program was successful in achieving its goals of improving outcomes for young, low-income noncustodial fathers and the mothers of their children. However, these results should be interpreted cautiously due to a number of factors, some of which could be clarified by future research:

- This was not a random-assignment experiment, but a quasi-experiment designed to mimic the best properties of an experiment. As such, we cannot be absolutely certain that Bootstrap *caused* the observed impacts.
- Local sites had difficulty in recruiting participants, and some noncustodial fathers attempted to enroll but there were no suitable workforce development activities available to serve them.
- Other program factors — such as a variation of services among sites and the immature development of the program — made it impossible to specify which services contributed most strongly to the observed outcomes.
- The time frame for follow-up observation was relatively short.

Keeping these caveats in mind, the results suggest that young, low-income noncustodial fathers can potentially benefit from a package of services designed to help

them become more able to support their children financially. Specifically, the results indicated that:

- Fathers participating in Bootstrap showed greater participation in workforce development and skills training than comparison group members did;
- Bootstrap led to substantially greater net employment rates among participants, but to reduced earnings among those who were employed;
- Bootstrap participants were substantially more likely to pay child support than comparison group members, and more likely to pay it consistently over time; and
- Custodial mothers associated with Bootstrap participants showed smaller rates of welfare receipt subsequent to the program than was true of the comparison group.

These impacts were largely positive, with the single exception of reduced earnings levels among those fathers who were employed. However, this could be a direct function of a greater number working in entry-level jobs at lesser rates of pay. Future research should investigate whether over the longer term the kinds of jobs the participants acquire lead to advancement and increasing earnings, or whether their earnings levels remain stagnant.

Much of the debate and policy development surrounding welfare reform research over the past decade have focused almost exclusively on the mothers. The present results suggest that there is substantial room for economic improvement among members of the population of low-income fathers, and that a basic package of services offered to some of these fathers appears to promote such improvement. Future policy development should include robust strategies for increasing the earnings capacity of young, low-income noncustodial fathers.