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Developing Pathways to Justice and Emergency Services Careers for At-Risk Youth: A Formative Evaluation

Christian Geckeler and Laura Pryor, Social Policy Research Associates

Study background

Mathematica Policy Research and Social Policy Research Associates are conducting a study of DOL-funded grants targeting justice-involved youth to understand how well the grants are working, to inform future funding, and to promote knowledge sharing among current and prospective grantees.

This brief on PJC grantees may be of interest to policymakers, researchers, and practitioners who wish to implement career-pathways programs, especially for careers in justice and emergency services, for at-risk youth in low-income communities.

Youth from low-income neighborhoods are at risk of poor outcomes throughout their lives. Many will drop out of school, which can lead to economic hardship[1] and a greater chance of getting involved in the criminal justice system—making their lives even more difficult.[2,3]

In response to these issues, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) awarded Pathways to Justice Careers (PJC) grants to 13 organizations in 2016. These programs are designed to improve the outcomes of at-risk, in-school youth by providing exposure to the world of work in the career fields of justice and emergency services, mentoring, and supportive services.[4]

Why focus on justice and emergency services careers?

- These careers are varied, often require less than a four-year degree, and offer good wages and benefits.
- Many of these careers are growing and in-demand.
- Introducing youth to these careers may improve relationships between justice system agencies and people in low-income communities.

This brief discusses the findings of a formative evaluation of these 13 PJC programs. It describes the data used in the study, program recruitment, the program participants, the services provided, and the partnerships that grantees developed. It also examines the challenges that grantees have encountered thus far in implementing their programs and the lessons they have learned.

Key Findings

- About half the grantees are meeting their recruitment goals, but the other half are encountering barriers, including too little time to build new programs and the distrust of justice system providers by youth.
- According to respondents, PJC programs enroll low-income, at-risk youth who are disproportionately people of color; only few youth who are court-involved; and youth who are more motivated than other at-risk youth served by grantees.
- Despite some services being limited in intensity, staff said that PJC programs have improved youth's lives, leading to meaningful relationships with program staff, better relationships with law enforcement, and more work experience in and knowledge of careers in justice and emergency services.
- Partnerships are critical for PJC programs; working together helps grantees and partners deepen their understanding of career pathways and provides better employment pipelines between employers and participants.

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DATA AND METHODS

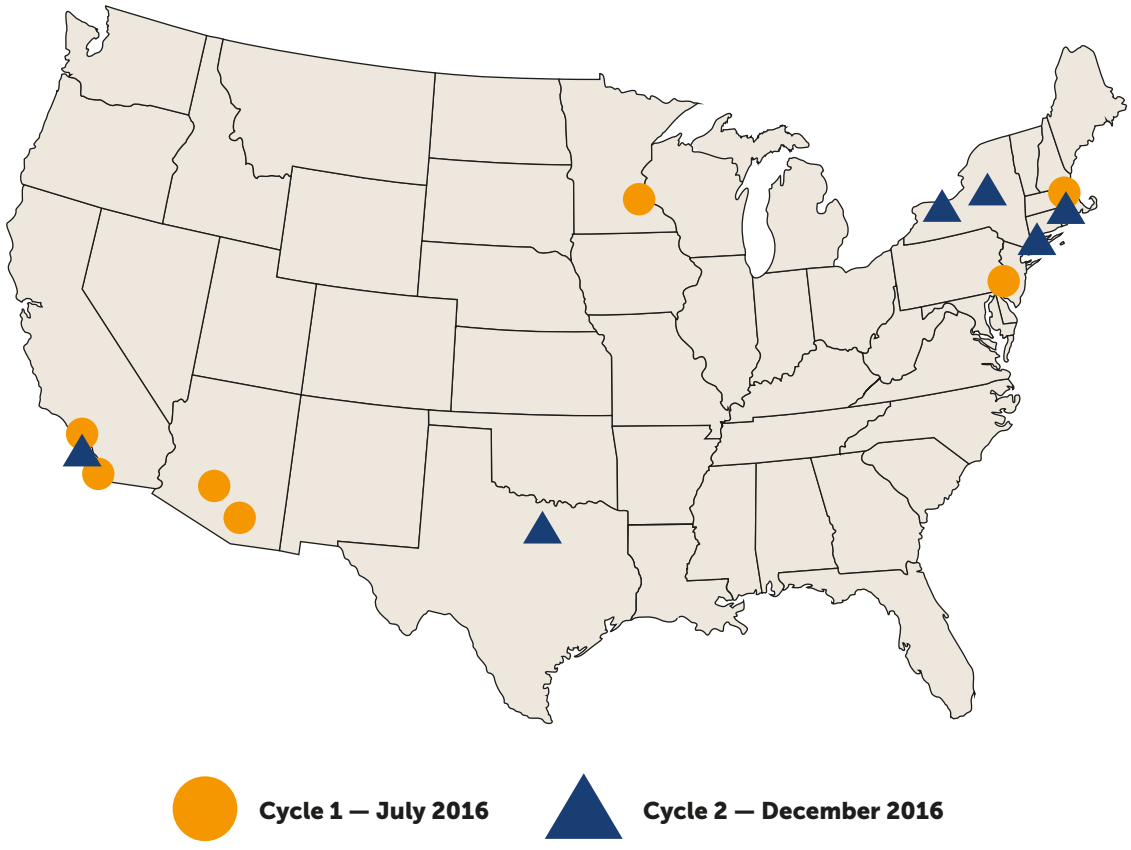
To conduct this evaluation, the study team analyzed information from several sources: PJC grantees' applications; one-hour telephone interviews with program coordinators (November and December 2017); and one-and-a-half-day site visits with grantees, partners, and participants of six PJC programs (March and April 2018).[5] Data collection took place at about midpoint in the implementation process. Thus, the analysis is formative; grantees are still learning how to build successful programs.

PJC PROGRAM OVERVIEW

DOL awarded seven PJC grants in July 2016 (Cycle 1) and six more in December 2016 (Cycle 2). With this funding, DOL expects grantees to run 33-month programs that coordinate with different types of partners, including those in education, justice and emergency services, and the workforce system. Grantees must recruit and enroll at-risk or court-involved youth and provide them with a services (described below) designed to help them complete their secondary education and start working toward a career in justice or emergency services.[6]

Grantees are geographically dispersed, although they are somewhat clustered in the Northeast and Southwest (Exhibit 1). Shortened names used to refer to grantees are indicated in the legend, and asterisks indicate which grantees were visited by the study team. Eleven grantees received a grant of at or just below $1 million, whereas Minneapolis and ULR received grants of about half that size. Grantees are primarily nonprofits, but a few (Long Beach, Minneapolis, San Diego, and Utica) are city or county public agencies.

Exhibit 1. Location of PJC grantees, by grant cycle



Cycle 1 grantees: Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD)*; City of Minneapolis*; Friendly House, Phoenix; Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN); Pima Prevention Partnership, Tucson*; San Diego County Office of Education; Youth Policy Institute, Los Angeles (YPI)*

Cycle 2 grantees: City of Long Beach; Community Learning Center, Inc., Ft. Worth (CLC)*; LifeBridge Community Services, Bridgeport; Urban League of Rochester, Inc., (ULR); Volunteers of America, Fall River (VOA), Workforce Development Board of Herkimer, Madison, and Oneida Counties, Utica*

*PJC programs that received site visits.

PROGRAM RECRUITMENT

To be eligible for PJC, youth need to be ages 16 to 21; enrolled in a public, charter, or alternative high school with the potential to graduate within two years; low income;[7] and either court involved, "at risk" (living in certain high-poverty, high-crime census tracts), or both.[8] However, grantees could narrow these criteria or simply be more selective. For instance, some grantees—because they place youth in internships—also require that youth meet right-to-work requirements, as defined under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Other grantees prioritize youth who meet other at-risk criteria (such as parenting youth or foster youth) or who live in specific neighborhoods.

The 11 grantees that received $1 million plan to enroll about 250 participants each, and the 2 grantees that received about $500,000 plan to enroll about 125 participants each. At the time the study team conducted the phone discussions (late 2017), grantees varied widely in how much progress they had made toward their enrollment targets. Based on their own assessments, about half the grantees in each cohort were where they expected to be at that point or were slightly ahead. The other half were behind.

Many of the implementation challenges discussed in this brief appear to have hindered enrollment—programs without certain partnerships or other components in place had trouble enrolling youth. But our interviews revealed two recruitment-specific challenges that grantees encountered:

1. **Many youth are not interested in careers in justice.** Respondents from several grantees said that youth in the targeted communities, and especially their friends and families, have negative associations with and often distrust law enforcement, which stems, at least in part, from the high rate of arrest and incarceration of people from these neighborhoods. For instance, staff from one grantee said that many Latino youth they work with fear the police because of the unstable status of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. Staff from another grantee said that even youth who are interested in law enforcement were embarrassed to admit it and felt the need to hide this interest from their friends. Yet another respondent said how even hearing the word "police" or "law enforcement" is a turnoff. Given these perceptions, the PJC program is often a "hard sell," as one staff member put it.
2. **Eligibility requirements created enrollment roadblocks.** To enroll in the PJC program, several grantees required youth to provide paperwork such as Social Security cards, proof of residence in an identified census tract, or proof of the ability to work in the United States. Staff members said that some youth were prevented from enrolling because families were not comfortable with providing—or could not easily provide—such paperwork. For some grantees, the census-tract designation sometimes excluded youth who would otherwise be eligible for the program—these were low-income, at-risk youth who lived in areas that were too affluent to qualify.

PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Grantees were still enrolling participants at the time of the study's data collection, but they provided qualitative impressions of the characteristics of participants.

- Most participants were younger than 18. Although PJC grantees were allowed to serve youth up to age 21, grantees tended to serve younger youth, likely because of the program's focus on in-school youth. This younger population can be difficult to serve in an employment-focused program. Older participants can more easily be placed into jobs and are often more interested in finding long-term employment.
- Participants are "at risk" along many dimensions identified by DOL. Respondents also described program participants as being students of color who came from under-resourced schools, struggled with high levels of poverty, faced language and cultural barriers associated with first-generation immigrant families, had experienced significant trauma, had little work experience, and needed additional soft skills.
- Fewer youth than expected are court involved. In their applications, most grantees planned to serve a group made up of about 50 percent court-involved youth and 50 percent youth who were otherwise at risk. But respondents for most programs said

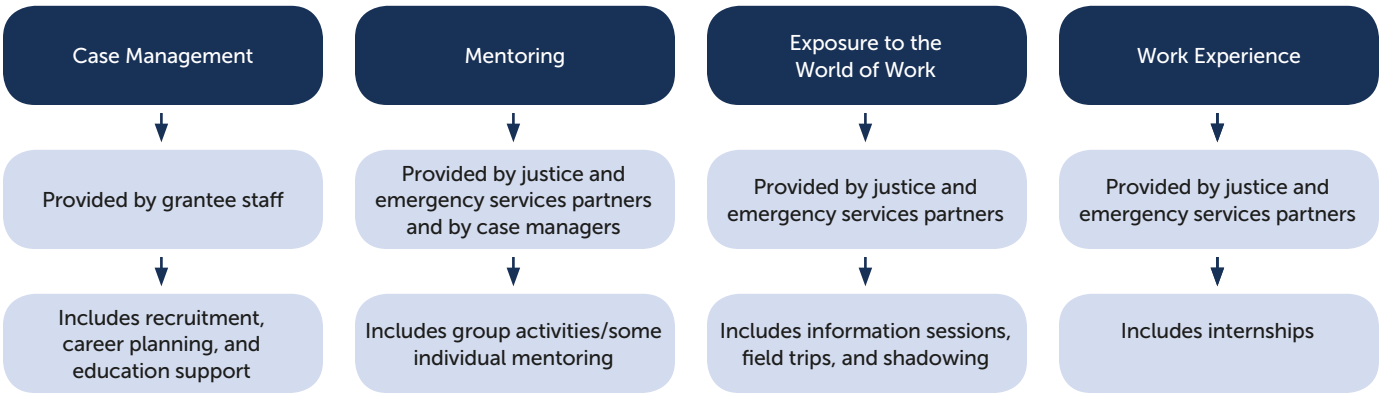
that few participants are court involved (less than 10 percent for some grantees). This is a result of the way DOL defined eligibility, allowing programs to recruit struggling youth from any area deemed at risk based on poverty and crime levels. One respondent described the PJC program as more of a prevention program than a re-entry program.

- PJC participants are highly motivated. According to respondents, many PJC participants are more motivated and are stronger performers than the at-risk youth whom grantees serve through other programs. Some respondents theorized that applying to the program required both ambition and a willingness to face criticism by peers and family who distrust the justice system and disapprove of this career path.

KEY PROGRAM SERVICES

PJC grantees deployed a service delivery model with four main components: case management, mentoring, exposure to the world of work, and work experience. Grantees delivered these services to participants at varying points over a program cycle of about seven to eight months—sometimes up to a year. Participants enroll at the start of (or occasionally during) a semester or at the start of summer. During the school year, services are delivered through weekly, biweekly, or monthly sessions, with regular, ongoing follow-up by case managers. During the summer, youth take part in more intensive internships and other work-related activities. Grantee staff members are responsible for organizing these activities and for the flow of participants through the program. Exhibit 2 summarizes the four service components and providers.

Exhibit 2. PJC program: service components and providers



Details on each service component follow:

- **Case management** is primarily delivered by grantee staff, who coordinate with education partners to identify prospective youth, hold program orientations, check eligibility, enroll participants, and ensure that youth continue to make educational progress throughout the school year. Grantee staff also help participants develop employment plans, connect them with supportive services needed to complete the program, and provide career advising. They typically check in with participants on a regular basis, usually at program meetings; through outreach at schools; and by phone, text, or email.
- **Mentoring services** are typically provided by justice and emergency services professionals. Although the approach varies across grantees, mentoring is usually done in small groups during regular program meetings (once or twice a month). Some grantees have a single guest speaker working with the group, whereas others arrange for a larger group of mentors who split up to meet with smaller groups of youth. Respondents also said that case managers played a mentoring role; they formed close relationships with participants and guided and supported their decisions.
- **Exposure to the world of work** is primarily done through group sessions in which justice and emergency services professionals share their career experiences. In some cases, PJC program staff also arrange for field trips, tours, and job-shadowing experiences, both during the school year and summer. Finally, youth get work exposure through observational activities they do during their summer internships.

- Work experience mainly consists of internships provided by justice and emergency services partners. These internships are usually offered in conjunction with or through a city's existing summer youth internship program, which often provides additional services to youth such as transportation and work-readiness training. Internships are typically paid, are offered to participants in the summer, and last about 10 to 12 weeks, with youth working about three to four days a week. Some respondents said that the program works better when youth are offered internships only after they take part in the school-year portion of the program; youth highly value the internships, and so they are a good incentive to participate in other program activities.

Introducing youth to professionals who reflect their community: Through the PJC program, participants meet police officers, firefighters, and emergency services professionals. Meeting such individuals, especially if they are similar to the youth (in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, or background, for example) and from their communities, often gives youth the confidence to pursue these careers. Staff members from Pima said that PJC youth are now educating their younger siblings and cousins about these opportunities, explaining how they are accessible to youth like them.

Most grantees have implemented all of these program service components. But the services are often limited in intensity:

- Program activities happen somewhat infrequently. Throughout the school year, a few programs schedule activities weekly or every other week, but many programs only meet monthly. These group sessions are where much of the case management, mentoring, and exposure to the world of work occur, with only limited contact between sessions.
- Work-readiness training is often limited. Despite noting that participants needed additional soft skills—and DOL's emphasis on work-readiness—grantees do not typically provide work-readiness training as a service component. Rather, this training occurs on an as-needed or ad hoc basis during meetings between participants and case managers. Some programs have a formal work-readiness component, but it is typically provided as part of a pre-internship orientation run by a non-PJC provider.
- For many programs, mentoring was slow to start or provided only limited contact with professionals. Many respondents said that mentor recruitment was challenging: people in emergency services and justice fields often work atypical hours, making scheduling difficult. A few grantees, like Minneapolis, drew on existing mentor programs as a model for their own mentor recruitment and training, but many grantees had never run a mentorship program before PJC and therefore had to create one. Finally, as noted previously, mentoring typically occurs in groups, rather than one on one, and often involves a professional sharing what he or she does, rather than providing direct support and advising to participants.
- Work exposures and internships were sometimes limited due to safety concerns. DOL and local agencies raised concerns about and prohibited specific internships or activities that grantees wanted youth to explore and which may have helped youth understand different types of careers. For instance, youth could not work as security guards and were barred from riding along with police and firefighters.

Although many services appear to be light-touch, the programs are nevertheless meaningful to participants. The following are some of the ways that participants are reportedly benefiting from the program.

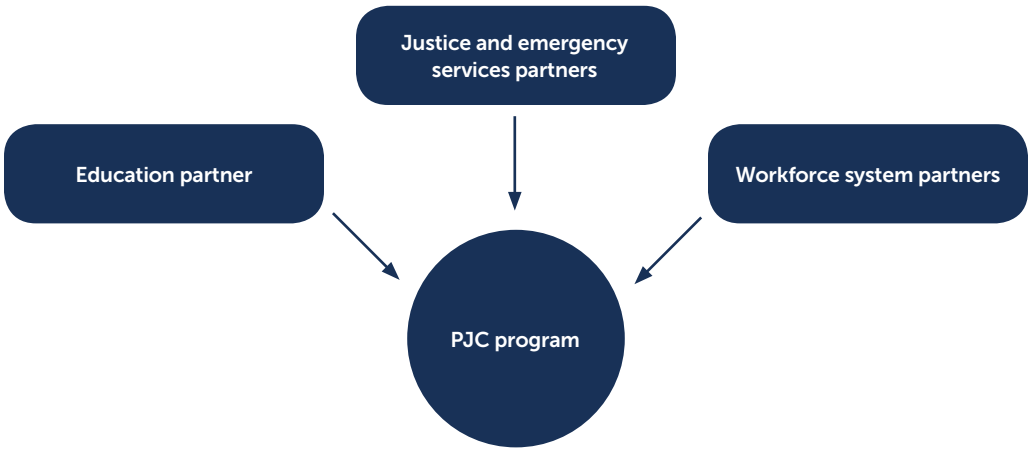
- Youth have formed deep bonds with case managers. Formal mentoring is provided by justice and emergency services professionals, but case managers have also become critical supports for participants. For example, one participant discussed how her case manager helped her to stay in school. Another youth insisted that his PJC case manager attend his high school graduation, reflecting the significant role that this person has played in his life. Yet another youth said that having caring adults in their lives through PJC was the best aspect of the program. Case managers seem especially important as a means of guiding these youth through their schooling and supporting them in their career search.
- The PJC program has exposed youth to new careers. Many participants did not previously know about the range of careers available to them in justice and emergency services. Exposing youth to different careers through internships, guest speakers, and mentors helped them further define their career interests. For example, one participant said that a guest presentation inspired him to pursue a career as a probation officer. Another participant said that because of PJC, his career interest switched from police officer to emergency medical technician (EMT).

- The PJC program has built and strengthened ties between communities and law enforcement. Grantees often serve communities with negative perceptions of police and the justice system, but PJC gives youth a chance to interact with these entities in a positive way. As one mentor put it, his interactions with youth helped to "humanize the badge." Case managers from another program discussed how guest speakers from legal services and police departments help to ease fears that youth have. Other staff members said that interactions with police help youth confront their own trauma from past police encounters and help law enforcement see and support participants' goals and dreams.

THE ROLES OF PJC PARTNERS

Partner organizations are critical to PJC program operations. Grantees initially identified several partners in their applications, but these partners often changed as they set up their programs. Each program relies on multiple partners, which fall into three broad categories (Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3. Types of PJC partners



Partners in education

Education partners play a wide range of roles in PJC programs. Each grantee works with one or more secondary schools, including standard public schools, alternative schools, charter schools, university schools, and specialized vocational training schools. A few also work with colleges to provide vocational training to youth. Nearly all grantees work with a combination of school types, most work with many schools (5 to 10 is common), and a few focus on a small number of schools or on a specific type (such as public schools).

Education partners contribute to PJC programs in three main ways:

1. **Recruiting participants.** Education partner staff (such as guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators) identify interested and potentially eligible students to take part in PJC and refer them to PJC case managers for orientation and enrollment. For most PJC programs, recruitment falls almost entirely to the education partners. But in a few cases, the PJC case managers do most of the recruiting by visiting schools, reviewing student data to find potentially eligible students, talking to youth, and requesting that they attend information and eligibility-review sessions. For example, the Minneapolis PJC program hired a school employee to work for the program and handle much of the recruitment. Because she works for the school, she has access to school records and familiarity with school staff. In contrast, ABCD partly relies on its workforce system partner, which provides career counselors in the public schools where the PJC program recruits.
2. **Providing customized education services to PJC participants.** Through partners, PJC programs have been able to customize routine education services (such as teaching, assessments, tutoring, and career exploration) for participants. For example, CLC takes advantage of a career-oriented assessment system that its education partner uses with students; CLC case managers ask participants about their assessment results and use those to discuss possible careers. ULR, as another example,

built on its long-standing relationship with an education partner, which had counselors already co-located in schools, to add more tutoring services for PJC participants. Other grantees have been able to use justice-specific career programs at some education partners as both a recruitment tool and a source of content for PJC participants. For example, Utica partners with a college that offers an EMT training program, in which participants can enroll.

3. **Providing space for program operations.** Although some grantees host program activities elsewhere, several grantees conduct activities at partner schools, both during and after school and, in some cases, on the weekends or over the summer. For example, YPI holds its career club for participants after school at one of its partner schools. It also uses the school for regular staff meetings to coordinate YPI programming. Likewise, CLC holds mentoring sessions during lunch on school grounds, and Pima hosts meetings on a partner's campus twice a week after school, along with additional activities on Saturdays.

Partners in justice and emergency services

Justice and emergency services partners are responsible for providing mentors to work with youth one on one and in small groups; information about careers, which they typically present in small or large meetings organized by grantees; job-shadowing opportunities to give youth exposure to the world of work in justice and emergency services; and internships in these fields. Most PJC grantees tend to work with police and fire departments, but they also work with other types of law enforcement agencies (such as the sheriff's office, park police, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and college police departments); legal services providers (such as district, city, and private attorneys); and emergency services providers (such as EMTs, 911 operators, and hospitals).

Meeting the needs of employers:
Some employers see PJC as way to build a recruitment program. For example, to prepare for the impending retirement of firefighters, the Minneapolis Fire Department is making a deliberate effort to recruit from the community. The PJC program provides an opportunity to create a recruitment pipeline targeting local youth.

Partners in the workforce system

PJC grantees are often part of the workforce system, including local workforce development boards, American Job Centers, and workforce system agencies. But whether or not they were part of this system, they did not always take full advantage of other workforce system programs. Respondents said that PJC programs often coordinated with municipal summer internship program structures (such as the application, screening, training, or orientation systems) but paid interns' wages with PJC grant funds. Also, PJC programs rarely co-enrolled youth in the local area's WIOA youth program, even if they did sometimes enroll them in the state's Wagner-Peyser or labor-exchange system. Some respondents suggested that WIOA enrollment would complicate PJC enrollment due to the added eligibility requirements and the lack of a streamlined process for such enrollment. But using these programs more extensively could be valuable as they would allow PJC grantees to access additional services (such as support services, internships, or work-readiness classes) or to obtain funding for such services.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

Although grantees were often able to draw on existing partnerships when applying for PJC grants, few had any justice or emergency services partners or enough education partners to make their programs work as intended. As a result, most grantees had to build new partnerships for their programs. As respondents discussed in interviews, this process could be challenging:

- **Some planned partnerships fell apart or were delayed upon grant award.** Turnover among grantee or partner staff members was one complicating factor, especially when it occurred between the initial planning phase and the grant award, when implementation began. Respondents at several grantees said that staff turnover either delayed program implementation or resulted in a lack of support for the program and the dissolving of the partnerships. Another factor was partners backing out of their agreements after reconsidering the logistics, such as the challenges of working with youth or the time it would take out of a student's school day to participate.
- **Bureaucratic delays slowed or halted certain program plans.** Some grantees had problems getting agreements signed with partners in a timely manner, which slowed implementation and subsequently impeded enrollment.

Nevertheless, grantees were able to overcome these challenges and build successful partnerships. They did so by using several approaches:

- **Grantees with existing partnerships used them to expedite implementation.** Overall, implementation has been simpler for grantees that already had partners in the education and workforce system before the grant (few grantees had previous justice or emergency services partners). Some grantees manage their own schools and have been able to use these education partnerships as a starting point. Respondents from Pima described how they avoided problems with recruitment because of their strong pre-PJC presence in partner schools. ABCD also had a long-standing relationship with the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC), which helped grantee staff members connect with PIC career counselors, who worked in schools, to get help with recruitment.
- **Grantees worked to find the right person to "champion" the program.** Staff members from CLC discussed how much more easily they were able to secure help from one school in the district because they had the support of that school's principal. Likewise, Minneapolis was able to work with an employee from the fire department who was able to arrange for 10 internship positions; a grantee staff member described this person as "a big champion of the program." A champion might also assist a PJC program by convincing fellow employees to serve as mentors or to create internship positions.
- **Staff were persistent and flexible when working with partners.** Respondents from several grantees described their staff members as persistent and tenacious when recruiting partners. This included having flexibility with partners' schedules and the capacity for, as one respondent put it, "meeting them where they are at." For example, Minneapolis staff members recognized that although some partners could not provide internships, they could provide mentors. Similarly, CLC staff members were not able to bring a particular justice system partner on board due to concerns about staff capacity, but the partner was enthusiastic about the program and referred the grantee to other organizations—several of which turned into actual partners. Keeping the partners' needs and capacities in mind has helped grantees build, maintain, or draw on these relationships while not pushing anyone away.
- **Many grantees broadened their initial focus beyond justice system careers.** At first, many grantees focused on building partnerships with traditional law enforcement agencies (such as the police department, sheriff's office, or probation department). Many of these have worked out—staff members at LifeBridge, for example, reported a "blossoming" relationship with workers in the juvenile justice system. But grantees have also forged partnerships with emergency services providers. This wider range of partners provides a more compelling set of career options for youth, who might otherwise not be interested in PJC due to reservations about law enforcement careers. Importantly, expanding into emergency services also provides a broader array of partners to work with and expands the pool from which grantees can recruit pathway-specific mentors.
- **Grantees identified a common goal of community outreach with justice and emergency service partners.** For example, Boston's Fire Department (BFD) was planning a youth cadet program at the time that ABCD was applying for the grant. A partnership made sense because it could help both parties achieve their goals of recruiting and serving youth. Although this is a striking example of a partnership created through attention to a shared goal of community outreach, many grantees have taken a similar approach when reaching out to justice and emergency service partners.

LESSONS LEARNED

About halfway through implementation, valuable lessons about PJC programs are starting to emerge. As many respondents pointed out in interviews, 33 months is perhaps too little time to build a program that is so new to these communities. To build their programs, grantees had to establish many new partnerships, especially with justice and emergency services organizations. They also had to overcome challenges related to staff turnover, employers' and funders' willingness to work with youth and take on the associated liability, the need to find champions to support the program, and distrust of law enforcement among many at-risk youth and their friends and families. Despite these challenges, the 13 PJC grantees have thus far accomplished a great deal: hiring case managers, establishing recruitment pipelines, enrolling youth, forging numerous partnerships, finding mentors, and giving youth exposure to and work experience in justice and emergency services careers.

This study was designed to generate lessons that might help PJC grantees as they continue to implement their programs—as well as funders, policymakers, practitioners, and employers who are trying to change the lives of at-risk and court-involved youth. The following are some of these lessons:

- Offering career pathways in justice and emergency services is a promising approach for helping at-risk youth. The study shows that building career pathways in justice and emergency services for at-risk youth can be difficult: youth and partners can be reluctant to participate. Nevertheless, a career-pathways program in this field can be built and can be rewarding, bringing together people in unforeseen ways. Respondents reported many positive experiences. Participants learned about careers they had not previously thought were available to them, formed close connections with case managers, and built better relationships with law enforcement in their communities. At the same time, justice and emergency services professionals came to understand and support the youth's goals.
- Running PJC programs helped grantees and communities deepen their understanding of career pathways and expand their use of this workforce strategy, a key approach emphasized under WIOA. Some grantees had experience with youth internship programs, but in those programs, youth were not necessarily matched to internships based on their preferences or long-term career interests. With PJC, justice and emergency services partners hosted youth who wanted to enter these professions. Working with employers in these fields also expanded the capacity of grantees, giving them the ability to offer similar employment opportunities in their other programs.
- Building relationships between education, workforce, and employer partners has present and future value for employment programs for at-risk youth. PJC grantees and their partners have built new relationships and strengthened existing ones. They have learned to work with one another and have greatly increased their knowledge of what each organization does. In the process, they have learned how to steer youth toward employment-focused programs, involve new employers in these programs, and draw on existing resources like municipal summer internship programs. These partnerships help bridge the gaps between the workforce system, educational institutions, and employers, creating more seamless transitions for young adults looking for training and work.

Overall, the PJC program shows that developing career pathways in justice and emergency services can give grantees, partners, and participants the chance to learn about and pursue careers not typically explored in programs for at-risk youth. At the same time, these efforts can create lasting change in the ways that grantees and their partners approach at-risk youth services in their communities.

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ENDNOTES

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[5] The study team's goal in selecting sites to visit was to create a diverse group of grantees, using six broad criteria: geography, grant cycle, recruitment progress, partnership changes, types of partnering schools, and range of career pathways. This would allow for data collection that captured the full scope and richness of PJC program experiences. The team originally identified seven grantees in conversation with DOL, but only six were able to host the team for visits.

[6] PJC programs are scheduled to last 33 months: 6 months for planning, 24 months for operation, and 3 months for follow-up. Programs are therefore scheduled to end in March 2019 (Cycle one) and September 2019 (Cycle two).

[7] This requirement is per Section 3 (36) of WIOA (Pub. Law No. 113-128, July 22, 2014).

[8] Male participants ages 18 or older also needed to show that they had met selective-service requirements.