Guidance for ongoing monitoring & future evaluation of Bridge to Independence (b2i)

Child Trends drafted this document as a technical assistance guide to support the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of Nebraska's Bridge to Independence (b2i) extended foster care program. In 2019, Child Trends completed an evaluation of b2i that compared outcomes of current and former b2i participants to those of their peers. Considering the findings and limitations of the 2019 study, Child Trends recommends the following actions that fall under three categories:

- Create/maintain processes and systems for future evaluations
- Investigate additional short-term lines of inquiry based on the 2019 evaluation results
- Engage in ongoing monitoring for continuous quality improvement

Child Trends has placed each of the recommendations into one of these categories. However, some may move between short-term lines of inquiry and ongoing monitoring. The b2i Evaluation and Data Collection Workgroup should consider the following when determining whether to prioritize monitoring of a measure and how frequently to review the data related to that measure:

- **Has Nebraska recently implemented a policy or practice change that may influence the measure?** For example, if b2i participants complete a new financial training curriculum or if more trainings are made available, the workgroup might expect to see improved financial capability among b2i participants. Thus, the workgroup might prioritize examining measures such as the percent of b2i participants who report being able to cover their expenses or the percent of b2i participants who report having savings. Differences in these numbers before and after the change will inform conversations about whether the new curriculum or expanded class availability should be maintained. The effects of policy and practice changes often take time to appear in data, so Child Trends suggests the workgroup examine data collected one to two years after the policy or practice is implemented. For some policies and practices, such as those that are meant to increase post-secondary education completion, the length of time needed to see movement in the data may be even longer.
- **Does the measure indicate that b2i participants could use additional supports in that outcome area?** It is important to keep an eye on outcome measures where b2i participants are faring well. New policies may have unintended consequences or economic changes may result in b2i participants needing additional supports in domains where they had previously had positive outcomes. However, routine (e.g., quarterly or annual) monitoring is most important for outcome areas that could use the most improvement, while sporadic monitoring (e.g., every five years) is more appropriate for outcomes measures where most participants consistently fare well. For example, Child Trends includes a suggestion below to review the language used to collect data on housing outcomes. The workgroup should determine how long to monitor changes in housing outcomes once the data collection instruments have been reviewed and initial data are collected. If the data reveal that there is significant room for improvement in this outcome area, the workgroup should continue to monitor responses to these measures.

Ongoing monitoring can support the case for any policy or practice changes and inform whether any of those changes are improving outcomes in the areas where b2i participants require additional supports.

- **Does the data move over time? Is there room for significant improvement?** For example, Child Trends includes a suggestion below about collecting data on post-secondary completion. If the new data show that over 90 percent of b2i participants complete a post-secondary education, there is not much room for improvement on that measure. Any movement in the data will likely be insignificant and occur slowly. Thus, it would be appropriate for the workgroup to monitor this measure less frequently than those that have more room for improvement.

Create/maintain process and systems for future evaluations

Make linking datasets a more regular process

This recommendation, or portions thereof, should be implemented if the following research question is a priority: How do the outcomes of current and former b2i participants compare to those of their peers?

In 2019, Child Trends completed an evaluation that compared the outcomes of current and former b2i participants to those of their peers without b2i experience. In order to know which survey respondents were b2i participants, the Foster Care Review Office created a key that linked IDs across surveys and administrative data and included a flag for b2i participation. Creating this linking dataset was one of the most time intensive steps in completing the evaluation.

A regularly updated linking dataset that flags b2i participants by Transitional Services Survey (TSS) ID, Opportunity Passport® Participant Survey (OPPS) ID, or both will allow the b2i Evaluation and Data Collection Workgroup to more regularly examine outcomes data for b2i participants. Although young people provide information on their foster care status in OPPS, members of the workgroup report this data is often unreliable because many young people do not know their participation in b2i means that they are in extended foster care. Using administrative data to regularly update a linking dataset would ensure that a young person's b2i status is accurate for future evaluations. In order to review outcomes data on a regular enough basis to inform policy and practice, Child Trends suggests updating the linking dataset annually.

An alternative to continuously updating a linked dataset is to add a b2i flag in the Nebraska [National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD)](). This option would allow the workgroup to leverage the outcomes data that the federal government requires Nebraska to collect. NYTD contains outcomes data on a number of domains, including employment, education, and housing, and surveys are completed by youth at age 17, 19, and 21. Although this alternative is an easier lift than maintaining a linked dataset, it will not allow the workgroup to monitor outcomes for young people after they have aged out of b2i because the last survey is completed at age 21. Additionally, the TSS and OPPS datasets contain information on domains beyond those collected in NYTD (e.g., health), as well as more nuanced information on domains such as education and housing. Young people who complete the NYTD survey are likely to be b2i participants, which may also present a limitation because of the small sample size of a comparison group (i.e., those who complete the NYTD survey because they are in care at 17 who do not participate in b2i).

Survey b2i participants before, during, and after participation in b2i

This recommendation, or portions thereof, should be implemented if the following research question is a priority: Is b2i responsible for the improved outcomes of its participants?

A survey that collects outcomes data from b2i participants at different stages in program involvement will clarify findings from Child Trends' 2019 evaluation by eliminating selection bias. The survey should collect outcomes data on the following domains:

- Education
- Employment
- Housing
- Financial capability
- Hope
- Self-regulation
- Goal setting
- Social supports/relationships

Either a new survey or the TSS can be leveraged to collect this data. However, if TSS is used, some of these domains should be added to the current version of the survey.

Consider adding questions to TSS

This recommendation, or portions thereof, should be implemented if the following research question is a priority: Is enrollment in b2i related to civic engagement or health perceptions?

Because youth who participated in focus groups and interviews included community involvement in their definition of success in b2i, we suggest adding the following questions:

	None of the time	Some of the time	Half of the time	Most of the time	All of the time
I have a strong attachment to my community	1	2	3	4	5
I can make a difference in my community	1	2	3	4	5
I feel responsible for helping my community	1	2	3	4	5
I try to find the time to make a positive difference in my community	1	2	3	4	5
I am aware of what can be done to meet the needs in my community	1	2	3	4	5

While data on health perceptions is collected in OPPS, it is not currently collected in TSS. The following questions can be used to collect the data:

Would you say that, **in general**, your physical health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Fair

- Poor
- Don't Know

Would you say that, **in general**, your mental and emotional health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor
- Don't Know

Investigate additional short-term lines of inquiry based on evaluation results

Track post-secondary completion

This recommendation, or portions thereof, should be implemented if the following research question is a priority: Does b2i support young people in completing their post-secondary education?

Findings from the Child Trends' 2019 evaluation show that b2i participants are more likely than their peers without b2i experience to have some post-secondary education (58 percent compared to 48 percent), and several b2i participants reported that the resources provided by b2i support them as they complete their education.

However, limited data are available on post-secondary *completion* by b2i participants. According to OPPS data available for a small sample (n=21) of exited b2i participants, 19 percent of exited b2i participants ages 22 to 25 had completed a post-secondary education, compared to 18 percent of OPPS participants without b2i experience.

Additional data are needed for a more accurate estimate of the post-secondary completion rate of b2i participants to determine whether additional supports should be considered for participants hoping to complete a post-secondary education. The National Student Clearinghouse maintains data on post-secondary[1] enrollment and completion for students around the country. Requesting this data every few years will provide accurate post-secondary completion rates to inform policy and practice changes.

Track housing outcomes

This recommendation, or portions thereof, should be implemented if the following research question is a priority: Do current and former b2i participants have safe, stable, and affordable housing?

The high rate of homelessness among current and former b2i participants (39 percent and 49 percent), along with the conflicting findings that most participants feel their housing is safe, stable, and affordable (82 and 92 percent), suggest that ongoing monitoring is needed to get a clear picture of housing outcomes.

The conflicting findings may also mean that the survey language needs to be clarified to ensure reliable housing data are being collected. Focus group or interviews with young people about these questions

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[1] Includes two-year, four-year, public, private, trade school, vocational, etc.

and their housing experiences would likely help explain the conflicting findings and provide insight into how the measures can be improved.

Engage in ongoing monitoring for continuous quality improvement

Explore differences between those who enroll in b2i and those who decline

This recommendation, or portions thereof, should be implemented if the following research question is a priority: Are there any demographic differences between young people who enroll in b2i and those who decline to participate?

Most eligible young people choose to enroll in b2i and take advantage of the resources available to them, but more information is needed about those who choose *not* to enroll in b2i and those who exit b2i due lack of cooperation. Understanding whether there are demographic differences (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, young parenthood) between those who enroll and successfully complete the program and those who do not may inform whether practice changes can be made to further increase enrollment and success in b2i. Annual monitoring of these differences will provide timely information that can inform practice changes to further increase enrollment rates.