

Nebraska Bridge to Independence Extended Foster Care Evaluation

Kristin Sepulveda, Samuel Abbott, Sunny Sun,
Alaina Flannigan



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Executive Summary

Overview

Nebraska's Bridge to Independence (b2i) program supports young adults who recently exited foster care in "transitioning to adulthood, becoming self-sufficient, and creating permanent relationships."ⁱ The program provides three broad types of services to all enrolled: medical care, housing, and case management. These services support young people while they pursue education and employment. Participants receive monthly stipends and are assigned to an independence coordinator who helps them develop and modify their transition proposal and connects them to available resources. To be eligible for the program, a young person must be pursuing a degree or otherwise enrolled in educational activities, employed at least 80 hours a month, participating in programs or activities to enhance employment opportunities, or unable to complete the aforementioned activities due to documented medical conditions.ⁱⁱ

Many b2i participants are also part of Nebraska Children and Families Foundation's Connected Youth Initiative (CYI). CYI is a statewide network, supported by multiple agencies and organizations, that focuses on youth ages 14 to 25 who are unconnected to family and extended social supports due to involvement in state systems such as foster care or juvenile justice, or who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of being homeless. The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative's Opportunity Passport[®] asset matching program is one component of the CYI network.

To support the success of b2i through activities such as quality assurance monitoring, evaluation, and policy guidance, the b2i Advisory Committee meets regularly to make recommendations to the Nebraska Children's Commission.ⁱⁱⁱ The Committee's 2018-2019 Annual Report^{iv} highlights evaluating the efficacy of b2i and assessing outcomes for participants as priorities in 2019 and beyond. This report, prepared by Child Trends with the support of the b2i Evaluation and Data Collection Workgroup,¹ is one component of the Advisory Committee's broader evaluation and monitoring efforts.

Data sources

The research team at Child Trends used three datasets (Foster Care Review Office administrative data, Opportunity Passport Participant Survey, and the Transitional Services Survey) to evaluate young people's outcomes during and after b2i. The datasets were also used to evaluate whether and how b2i, together with other initiatives, improves participant outcomes.

The datasets used in the outcomes analysis contain information obtained through surveys from young people who are part of the CYI network and young people in Opportunity Passport. As a result, none of the analyses involve a true comparison group because all young people who participated in the surveys were connected to some type of service or support. Additionally, young people who are eligible for b2i but not connected to any programs and services did not participate in the surveys.

To supplement the quantitative findings obtained through surveys and administrative data, Child Trends collected qualitative data through interviews and a focus group with young people. Some of the young people who participated had never enrolled in b2i, while others were current participants or had aged out of the program.

¹ The b2i Evaluation Workgroup is one of several workgroups in the b2i Advisory Committee.

Key findings

Defining success in b2i

The final definition of success used in this evaluation came directly from conversations with young people. **While many of the young people listed some of the outcomes Child Trends included in the original definition (e.g., education and financial stability), most centered on attributes other than the typical outcomes used to measure well-being. Participants also stressed the importance of setting and working toward goals with a positive attitude.** Several participants included self-advocacy and community involvement in their definitions of success, or said that, ultimately, success was feeling “normal” when spending time with peers without foster care experience. As a result of these conversations with young people, the evaluation team expanded the definition of success in b2i to measures of being goal-oriented and having hope for the future.

Outcomes

In general, participating in b2i is associated with improved outcomes for young people.² B2i participants are more likely than their non-b2i peers to:

- Report having some post-secondary education experience
- Have safe, stable, and affordable housing
- Be able to cover monthly expenses
- Have adults to turn to in a crisis or for a loan

Young people who participate in both b2i and in the Opportunity Passport asset matching program through CYI are also more hopeful and have better self-regulation than their peers who are only part of the CYI system without asset matching.

Importance of b2i resources

All interview and focus group participants reported having a high-quality, positive relationship with their b2i independence coordinator. They also reported that their independence coordinator was able to address any concerns they had and help them make progress toward their goals. To be successful in b2i, young people emphasized the importance of having a positive attitude, setting goals and working to reach them, and building a strong relationship with their independence coordinator. When asked what advice they would give future b2i participants, most focus group participants and interviewees emphasized the importance of building a relationship with their independence coordinator and making the most of that resource.

Participants were also appreciative of the monthly stipend, reporting that it allowed them to feel financially secure and focus their energy elsewhere (e.g., education, parenting). However, some participants expressed difficulty with managing their money when they first entered b2i and began receiving the stipend.

Exiting b2i

Young people reported not thinking about the exit process from b2i until a few months before they aged out of the program. Although they perceived that they had gained knowledge, skills, and relationships as a

² When examining education and employment outcomes, all young people with b2i experience (participants currently enrolled or exited) were included in the analyses, as these outcomes are less likely to change based on enrollment status.

result of b2i, those close to aging out expressed concerns about their futures upon leaving the program. Several participants expressed anxiety about covering their expenses after no longer receiving the monthly stipend.

Outcomes data show that young people who have exited b2i do not report all the same positive outcomes as those still in the program. Young people who have exited b2i are more likely than their peers without b2i experience to have safe, stable, and affordable housing, some savings, and enough people to turn to for advice during a crisis or for a loan. However, exited b2i participants were no less likely than their non-b2i peers to experience recent homelessness or couch surfing. They also were no more likely to be able to cover their monthly expenses.

Recommendations

Preparing participants to exit b2i

Although participants reported that their independence coordinators already help them prepare for their transition out of b2i, more tailored supports are needed as participants approach age 21. The differences in outcomes for exited b2i participants when compared to current participants suggests that participants need more support to prepare for their exit from the program. Practices that may ease the stress of transitioning out of b2i include the following:

- Require participants to open a savings account and draft a savings plan.
- Leverage the Opportunity Passport matching-savings program and the savings mentioned above to purchase assets before exiting b2i.
- Provide trainings and information strategically and frequently.
- Taper off the stipend amount in the months before exit.

Preparing participants to enroll in b2i

Young people can also be better prepared to *enter* b2i. Some participants reported that they struggled to manage their stipend or trust their independence coordinator when they first enrolled in the program. **Caseworkers for pending b2i participants should work closely with independence coordinators to educate young people about the program and help them establish a budget before they receive their first monthly stipend.** More communication will not only prepare young people for the financial responsibilities of b2i, it will also ease the transition between young people's graduation from high school and their enrollment in the program. Earlier contact with their independence coordinator will also provide more time for young people to build that important relationship.

Future evaluations

Future evaluations should reflect young people's definition of success in b2i and should monitor outcomes at different points in their b2i experience. Young people's definition of success extended beyond traditional outcomes areas such as education, employment, and financial stability. They also described success as setting and achieving personal goals (e.g., purchasing a vehicle or graduating from college) and having hope for the future. Although b2i participants already respond to some survey questions about hope, data collection instruments should be modified to include measures that assess normalcy, community engagement, self-advocacy, and focus on goals.

Although this evaluation examined the outcomes of b2i participants during the program and after they exited, future evaluations should evaluate young people's knowledge, perceptions, and outcomes before,

during, and after b2i. This pre- and post-test design of future evaluations will eliminate the selection bias present in this evaluation by determining whether individual participants' responses change throughout their experience.

Introduction

Establishment and purpose of b2i

In 2008, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act extended federal funding through Title IV-E to support states in offering voluntary foster care services for young people 18 years and older. The purpose of this program, often referred to as extended foster care, is to allow young people more time to achieve self-sufficiency and positive young adult outcomes, including education and employment attainment, with the services and support of the child welfare system.^v

Nebraska is one of 26 states with an extended foster care program approved and funded by Title IV-E.^{vi} Nebraska's Bridge to Independence (b2i) program was authorized by the state's 2013 Young Adult Voluntary Services and Supports Act for the purpose of supporting former state wards in "transitioning to adulthood, becoming self-sufficient, and creating permanent relationships."^{vii} The program represents a cultural and philosophical shift away from a child protection system and toward an individualized strengths- and needs-based support net that aims to assist young adults in achieving their goals. Responsible risk taking and youth-driven decision making are valued principles of the program design.

The b2i program provides three broad types of services to all enrolled: 1) medical care, 2) housing, and 3) case management. Medical care is provided under the medical assistance program for those who meet the eligibility requirements.^{viii} Housing support is provided through monthly maintenance payments (referred to as stipends) for young people living in a foster family setting or independent living placements.^{ix} Both types of services provide young people with an important safety net while they pursue education and employment.

The final component of b2i, case management services, includes the development or continuation of an independent living transition proposal that is developmentally appropriate and individualized according to the young person's goals and strengths. Participants are assigned an independence coordinator, who helps them develop and modify their transition proposal and connects them to available resources. The statute enumerates, but does not limit, additional services and assistance that the case manager may provide to help a young person achieve self-sufficiency, including in the areas of financial literacy, employment, education, access to critical documents, and others.^x

Eligibility

Initially, Nebraska's 2013 Young Adult Voluntary Services and Supports Act extended services to young people who were at least 19 years old, adjudicated (determined to be under the supervision of the court) due to child abuse or neglect under current law,^{xi} and living in an out-of-home placement or independent living setting. Young people also needed to meet at least one of the basic enrollment conditions enumerated in the federal Fostering Connections Act. These include 1) working to obtain a high school diploma or GED, 2) being enrolled in a post-secondary or vocational program, 3) being employed at least 80 hours a month, 4) participating in programs or activities meant to enhance employment opportunities, or 5) being unable to complete the preceding activities due to documented medical conditions.^{xii}

Since 2015, eligibility has expanded in several ways. The first expansion clarified that young people could be adjudicated to be a juvenile under applicable Nebraska law and equivalent tribal law. Eligibility was also granted to young people meeting the conditions outlined above who do not live in out-of-home-placement or an independent living setting, but for whom a federal- or state-funded guardianship agreement had been enacted after they turned 16.^{xiii} In October of 2019, the state plan will be amended again to expand eligibility to young people entering Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) custody and adjudicated due to a disrupted guardianship or adoption agreements at age 16 or older. Eligibility was also limited in two ways: Young adults participating in the program must maintain Nebraska residency³ and must not be eligible for nursing facility, skilled nursing facility or intermediate care facilities for persons with developmental disabilities.^{xiv}

The b2i Advisory Committee was created to make recommendations to DHHS and the Nebraska Children's Commission regarding the b2i program. Since 2015, the Advisory Committee has recommended statutory changes expanding eligibility to young people exiting Juvenile Probation who are in juvenile justice out-of-home placement at age 19. Additionally, the Advisory Committee's 2019 report proposes extending eligibility to young people exiting Tribal Court custody at age 18 in order to address the discrepancy in how the tribal territory and the state define the age of majority. Nebraska's legislature has not yet approved these two recommendations.

Ongoing evaluation and monitoring

To support the success of b2i through activities such as quality assurance monitoring, evaluation, and policy guidance, the b2i Advisory Committee meets regularly to make recommendations to the Nebraska Children's Commission.^{xv} The Committee's 2018-2019 Annual Report^{xvi} highlights evaluating the efficacy of b2i and assessing outcomes for participants as priorities in 2019 and beyond. This report, prepared by Child Trends with the support of the b2i Evaluation and Data Collection Workgroup,⁴ is one component of the Advisory Committee's broader evaluation and monitoring efforts. Drawing on focus groups, interviews, and a variety of administrative and survey data sources, this report addresses key evaluation topics:

1. Defining success in b2i and how to achieve it
2. B2i's association with positive outcomes for young people during enrollment and after exiting
3. How b2i case management services and the stipend influence young adult outcomes
4. B2i participants' perception of gains in their knowledge, skills, and relationships
5. How case management at younger ages (< 19 years) prepares young people for b2i
6. Implementation differences across communities
7. Appropriate target population for b2i

³ Except those who are placed outside of Nebraska pursuant to the Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children.

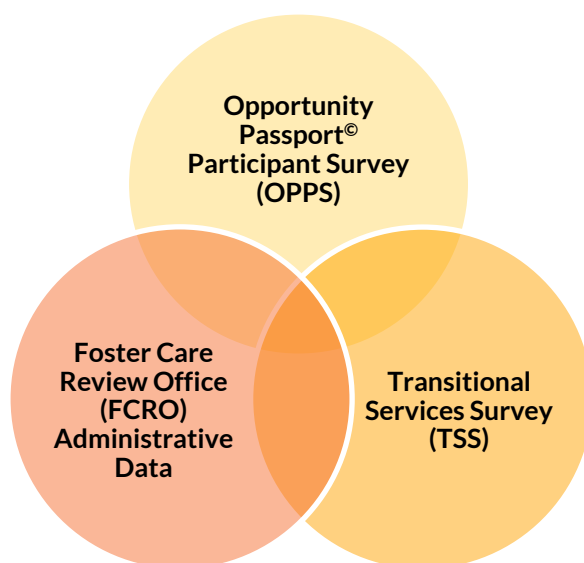
⁴ The b2i Evaluation Workgroup is one of several workgroups in the b2i Advisory Committee.

Methodology and Data

Quantitative data and analyses

Data sources

For the quantitative analyses presented in this report, the evaluation team used three datasets: a set of administrative data on young people's foster care experience, and two survey datasets that contain information on young people's characteristics, experiences, and outcomes.⁵ The Foster Care Review Office (FCRO) dataset contains information about the experiences of young people (i.e., whether they meet b2i eligibility standards). Young people are eligible to complete surveys that appear in the two other datasets—the Opportunity Passport Participant Survey (OPPS) and the Transitional Services Survey (TSS)—if they receive certain types of services and supports or participate in certain programs. As the diagram shows, the young people whose outcomes are examined in this evaluation may be included in one, two, or all three of these datasets.



Foster Care Review Office Administrative Data

Administrative data comes from the FCRO dataset and includes information about b2i enrollment and young people's experiences in foster care, including total number of placements and most recent placement type.

⁵ The FCRO used Link Plus to match young people across the three data sets based on first name, last name, and date of birth. After the matching process was completed, all young people were assigned an encrypted identifier. Nebraska Children and Families Foundation and the FCRO applied the encrypted identifiers across the respective datasets and removed identifying information. Child Trends received the de-identified data and merged the datasets based on the encrypted identifiers.

Transitional Services Survey

Nebraska Children and Families Foundation collects data using TSS as part of its Connected Youth Initiative (CYI). CYI is a statewide network, supported by multiple agencies and organizations, that focuses on youth ages 14 to 25 who are “unconnected” from family and extended social supports due to involvement in state systems such as foster care or juvenile justice, or who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of being homeless. CYI uses a youth-centered approach to help unconnected youth reach positive outcomes by increasing their protective and promotive factors so that they can thrive. CYI’s approach includes individualized, goal-oriented coaching; youth leadership; emergency support funds; and asset matching financial capability programs. All of these are set within community-based prevention collaborative systems that align efforts of multiple organizational partners.

Beyond collecting demographic and outcome information, TSS includes questions about respondents’ hopes and self-regulation.⁶ Young people involved in the CYI system of support are asked to complete a TSS survey twice a year.

Opportunity Passport Participant Survey

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative developed and supports Opportunity Passport in 17 states. Opportunity Passport is a matched-savings program that provides young people with financial literacy training, and it is part of the CYI network of services. Throughout this report, when we refer to young people participating in CYI with asset matching, we are referring to those in the Opportunity Passport program. Young people participating in the Jim Casey Initiative’s Opportunity Passport program complete the OPPS. This survey collects demographic and outcome data, including information on education, health, and social capital. Opportunity Passport participants complete a baseline survey at enrollment, and they are asked to complete a follow-up survey twice a year throughout their participation in the program. Young people receive a stipend for completing both the TSS and OPPS surveys, which supports consistently strong response rates.

Analyses

Outcomes during and after b2i

To determine how participating in b2i enhances young adult outcomes during the program and after completing the program, the evaluation team examined OPPS responses from 2015 through 2018. Using b2i enrollment data from FCRO, we grouped surveys into three categories depending on whether they were completed by young people:

1. Without b2i experience
2. Currently participating in b2i
3. Who exited b2i

A respondent who completed a survey before enrolling in b2i, while participating in b2i, and after leaving b2i may be included in each of the three groups.

⁶ The hope scale measure includes participants rating the truth of statements such as, “Right now, I see myself being pretty successful.” The self-regulation measure includes participants rating their agreement with statements such as, “I feel in control of my emotions.”

B2i with other initiatives

To better understand how enrollment in b2i works with other services and supports to influence young adult outcomes, the evaluation team analyzed TSS data from 2015 through 2018. Using Opportunity Passport data and FCRO data on b2i enrollment, we once again created three groups:

- CYI (no asset matching)
- B2i and CYI (no asset matching)
- B2i and CYI (asset matching)

Unlike the groups we compare in the first analysis (outcomes during and after the program), the above groups are mutually exclusive. Those enrolled in CYI with asset matching are participants enrolled in the Opportunity Passport asset-matching program. Participants are only considered to be enrolled in b2i, Opportunity Passport, or both, if they completed a survey while enrolled in the program(s). If a participant completed more than one survey while enrolled in the program(s), only the most recently completed survey is included in the analysis.

Because the young people who complete OPPS are enrolled in Opportunity Passport, and TSS respondents are typically receiving CYI services, there is not a “true” comparison group in either of these analyses. Importantly, differences found between groups might be larger if data were available on young people who are eligible for b2i but are completely disconnected from all programs and services.

Qualitative data and analysis

To supplement the quantitative datasets, the evaluation team also collected and analyzed qualitative data. With the support of the b2i Evaluation and Data Collection Workgroup, Child Trends drafted a protocol to use in focus groups with young people. Our initial plan entailed conducting focus groups with young people in both rural and urban communities to gain a better understanding of how services and experiences differed in these areas. The evaluation team also intended for these focus groups to capture the perspectives of a diverse group of young people, including both current and former b2i participants, as well as young people who did not have experience with b2i.

Although incentives⁷ were offered to young people willing to participate in a focus group, recruitment and scheduling proved difficult.⁸ Young people indicated several barriers to participation (e.g., work schedules and travel distance for participants in rural areas); as a result, the decision was made to conduct individual phone interviews, in addition to a focus group, to ensure that a diversity of voices and experiences was captured. In all, eight young people participated in a focus group, and seven were interviewed by phone. Together, they represent a mixture of rural/urban and never/current/former b2i participants.

⁷ Incentives included a \$50 Amazon gift card, as well as reimbursement for child care and transportation costs.

⁸ Focus group recruitment efforts spanned approximately six weeks and included direct outreach by multiple service providers across the state (both public and private), e-mail outreach, and texting outreach to participants who indicated interest and who were eligible to participate. Potential participants were contacted a minimum of three times via these methods.

Findings

Demographics

Table 1 includes demographic data for the young people included in each of the three datasets used in this evaluation. The race/ethnicity composition of the groups is largely consistent across the three groups; however, Black/African American, non-Hispanic young people are more represented in the OPPS dataset when compared to young people in the FCRO and TSS datasets. Females are a greater proportion than males in each of the datasets, and the difference in representation of the two genders is greater in the two survey datasets (OPPS and TSS).

Table 1. Demographic data for young people included in each dataset

Demographic	FCRO (N=1,064)	OPPS (N=766)	TSS (N=1,725)
Race/Ethnicity			
White, non-Hispanic	53%	38%	47%
Black/African American, non-Hispanic	19%	31%	18%
Hispanic or Latino	16%	17%	14%
More than one race, non-Hispanic	5%	8%	7%
Other or Unknown	6%	6%	14%
Gender*			
Male	45%	33%	35%
Female	55%	66%	63%

** OPPS and TSS include gender identities other than male and female. In order to maintain respondent confidentiality, young people who chose these options are not included in the above figures due to small sample size. Sources: TSS data from October 2015 through October 2018; OPPS data for 19+ from January 1, 2015, through June 20, 2018; FCRO data on young people eligible to participate in b2i since its inception.*

Defining success in b2i

To carry out this evaluation, the evaluation team first had to define “success” for participants in b2i. The initial definition that the team developed was outcomes-based and included the following measures:

- Employment
- Educational attainment
- Financial capability
- Housing stability
- Social capital

Because the survey data captures a wealth of information on these measures, the team was able to define success by examining b2i participants' outcomes.

The final definition of success came directly from conversations with young people. While many of the young people described success in terms of some of the outcomes we included in our initial definition (e.g., education and financial stability), most focused on attributes other than the outcomes typically used to measure well-being. Most focus group and interview participants stressed the importance of setting goals and working to reach them. Having a positive attitude was also a common theme in these discussions. Several participants also mentioned self-advocacy and community involvement in their definitions of success. Others explained that success was ultimately their experience of feeling “normal” when spending time with their peers without foster care experience. As a result of these conversations with young people, the evaluation team expanded the definition of success in b2i to include measures of being goal-oriented and having hope for the future, as well as traditional measures (e.g., educational attainment and financial capability). We explore these domains throughout this section.

I would say somebody who is successful coming out of [b2i] would be someone who developed goals while they were in the program and achieved those goals. Somebody who came out better than the person they were when they came in.

— b2i participant

How to be successful in b2i

When they were asked about how to be successful in b2i, most focus group and interview participants pointed to **attitude as the most important factor**. They said they would encourage future b2i participants to build a strong relationship with their independence coordinator and view the coordinator as their advocate and a valuable resource. As mentioned previously, participants also stressed the importance of setting goals and discussing ways to achieve them with their independence coordinator. Several participants mentioned that they stumbled with maintaining finances or housing when they first enrolled in b2i. They also said that those initial struggles forced them to learn about the resources available to them and how to take advantage of them.

Trust your coordinator and...build a good relationship with them. Don't be afraid to speak about the problems that you are having. [My coordinator] was a person who was put into my life as someone who is helping me succeed so I shouldn't see him as an enemy. That can be a problem coming from the foster care system.

— b2i participant

Well-being during b2i

Overall, participating in b2i is associated with improved outcomes.⁹ Below, we examine differences in outcomes across several domains.

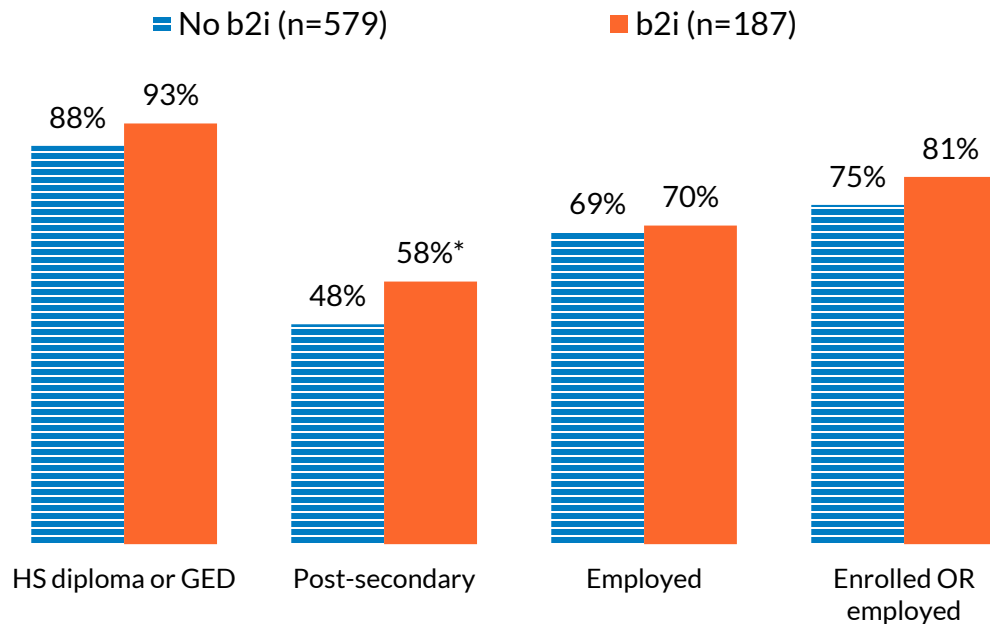
Education and employment

Although slightly more b2i participants (93%) reported graduating from high school or earning their GED when compared to their non-b2i peers (88%), this difference is not statistically significant. However, b2i participants were more likely than their non-b2i peers to have some post-secondary

⁹ When examining education and employment outcomes, our analyses included all young people with b2i experience (participants currently enrolled or exited) as these outcomes are less likely to change based on enrollment status.

experience (58% vs. 48%).¹⁰ We found no differences in employment or in disconnection from both work and school.

Figure 1. Education and employment outcomes, by b2i enrollment



*Statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$)

Sources: OPPS data for 19+ from January 1, 2015, through June 20, 2018. B2i flag provided by FCRO.

Housing

B2i participants also have better housing outcomes than non-b2i peers. Of the survey respondents who pay for their housing, b2i participants were more likely than those with only CYI experience to have safe, stable, and affordable housing (see Figure 2). Several focus group participants and interviewees expressed frustration with housing difficulties caused by the gap in time between graduating from high school and becoming eligible for b2i and able to sign a lease.¹¹ A few participants also mentioned that they found housing but lost it quickly because they lacked knowledge of standard tenant procedures; they reported problems such as being evicted for failure to pay rent after sending late payments or mailing cash that the landlord never received.

¹⁰ Small sample sizes prevented us from examining completion of post-secondary education for older b2i participants and their peers.

¹¹ The age of majority in Nebraska is 19.

Figure 2. Safe, stable, and affordable housing, by initiative/program involvement



*Statistically significant difference from CYI ($p < 0.05$)

Sources: TSS data from October 2015 through October 2018. B2i flag provided by FCRO, and asset matching (Opportunity Passport) flag provided by Nebraska Children and Families Foundation.

Financial capability

B2i participants were more likely than their non-b2i peers to report being able to cover expenses in the month before they completed the survey. Seventy-eight percent of participants in b2i and CYI and 77 percent of participants in b2i and Opportunity Passport (i.e., CYI with asset matching) reported that they covered their monthly expenses, compared to only 61 percent of young people without b2i experience.

Figure 3. Covered monthly expenses, by initiative/program involvement



*Statistically significant difference from CYI ($p < 0.05$)

Sources: TSS data from October 2015 through October 2018. B2i flag provided by FCRO, and asset matching flag (Opportunity Passport) provided by Nebraska Children and Families Foundation.

Hope and goals

Young people participating in both b2i and CYI with asset matching reported being more hopeful compared to their peers in CYI alone and those in b2i and CYI without asset matching. The research team created a “hope index” that counted the number of items respondents rated “mostly true” or “definitely true.”¹² Table 1 displays the percent of respondents who answered each item with one of those two options.¹³ The mean score for each group is presented in the bottom line of Table 1, and the hope index scores range from zero to five. Because young people in b2i and CYI asset matching appeared to be more hopeful than their peers without the asset matching component, the research team decided to also examine hope index scores of young people participating in CYI asset matching (i.e., Opportunity Passport) who were not in b2i. Based on their responses, these young people were also more hopeful than their peers not taking part in the Opportunity Passport asset matching program. This means that young people participating in Opportunity Passport, regardless of whether they are in b2i extended foster care, reported being more hopeful than their peers outside of the program.

Table 2. Hope items and index, by program/initiative involvement

Hope Scale Item	CYI (n=868)	CYI w/ asset matching (n=534)	b2i & CYI (n=131)	b2i & CYI w/ asset matching (n=192)
I am energetically pursuing my goals.	57%	60%	55%	*65%
If I should find myself in a jam, I could think of many ways to get out of it.	54%	59%	*63%	*69%
At this time, I am meeting the goals that I have set for myself.	47%	49%	53%	*56%
Right now, I see myself as being pretty successful.	51%	*56%	53%	*63%
There are lots of ways around any problem that I'm facing.	49%	*54%	58%	*64%
Hope Index (Mean)	2.68	*2.89	2.87	*3.22

*Statistically significant difference from those in CYI without asset matching ($p < 0.05$)

Sources: TSS data from October 2015 through October 2018. B2i flag provided by FCRO, and asset matching (Opportunity Passport) flag provided by Nebraska Children and Families Foundation.

¹² Hope measures are taken from Snyder's *Adult State Hope Scale*:

https://booksite.elsevier.com/9780123745170/Chapter%203/Chapter_3_Worksheet_3.5.pdf. The evaluation team calculated the scale using a different approach from the traditional calculation because not all measures are included in early versions of the TSS survey.

¹³ Respondents are asked to respond to hope items using one of the following options: definitely false, mostly false, somewhat false, slightly false, slightly true, somewhat true, mostly true, definitely true.

Self-regulation¹⁴

Young people participating in both b2i and CYI with asset matching also reported more self-regulation than their peers in CYI without asset matching and those in b2i and CYI without asset matching. The research team created an index that counts the number of items for which respondents chose either “agree” or “strongly agree.” Table 2 displays the percent of respondents who answered each item with one of those two options.¹⁵ The mean score for each group is presented in the bottom line of Table 2, and self-regulation index scores range from zero to seven. Although young people participating in b2i and CYI with asset matching (i.e., Opportunity Passport) had a mean self-regulation index higher than their peers outside of both programs, we saw fewer differences across individual self-regulation items. Once again, the research team also calculated the mean index for those in CYI with asset matching who were *not* in b2i. Opportunity Passport participants, regardless of whether they were enrolled in b2i, had better self-regulation than their peers who not enrolled in the asset matching program.

Table 3. Self-regulation items and index, by program/initiative involvement

Self-Regulation Item	CYI (n=868)	CYI w/ asset matching (n=534)	b2i & CYI (n=131)	b2i & CYI w/ asset matching (n=192)
If I think about a situation ahead of time, I can avoid losing my cool.	86%	86%	*92%	86%
I can stop myself when I am going to say something I will regret.	79%	81%	80%	*87%
After leaving a heated argument, I can return and talk to the person I am mad at.	75%	*84%	81%	*85%
I can remove myself from a frustrating situation.	85%	87%	87%	*90%
I value feedback from people about how I handle different tense situations.	84%	*88%	83%	86%
I don't let little things upset me.	65%	*71%	66%	71%
I feel in control of my emotions.	77%	*83%	77%	82%
Self-Regulation Index (Mean)	5.51	*5.78	5.73	*5.86

*Statistically significant difference from those in CYI without asset matching ($p < 0.05$)

Sources: TSS data from October 2015 through October 2018. B2i flag provided by FCRO, and asset matching flag provided by Nebraska Children and Families Foundation.

¹⁴ Self-regulation measures come from the emotional self-regulation domain of the *Child and Adolescent Wellness Scale*.

¹⁵ Respondents are asked to respond to self-regulation items using one of the following options: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree.

B2i resources

Independence coordinator

All b2i participants who participated in an interview or focus group reported a positive relationship with their independence coordinator. Most participants reported that their independence coordinator was able to address any concerns they had and help them make progress toward their goals. According to participants, independence coordinators supported their progress primarily by helping them identify and access resources.

Participants found that discussing their goals with their independence coordinator was particularly helpful. According to participants, the goals that their coordinator supported included the following:

- Staying in contact with biological family
- Budgeting
- Obtaining a driver's license
- Signing up for post-secondary schooling (including securing funding)
- Improving credit

She helped from the time I was 19 to the time I was 21, so having that person who is there consistently that knows all your needs and knows what you need, I think that's the best part—and creating that relationship with them.

—b2i participant

This youth-driven process of setting and working toward goals is central to the work of b2i and highlights the importance of young people taking a role in making decisions about their own lives. Independence coordinators support the growing autonomy of b2i participants in a developmentally appropriate manner by helping them identify and make progress toward goals that they choose for themselves.

While young people are enrolled in b2i, it is important for them to have the support that independence coordinators provide; however, one goal of the program is to ensure that these young people can turn to other non-related adults once they age out of b2i. **Our findings showed that young people who already exited b2i were less likely than peers still in the program to report having an unrelated adult to whom they will always be able to turn.** This difference likely reflects that when young people leave b2i, they lose the valuable resources and connection that independence coordinators provide.

Figure 4. Percent of respondents who report having an unrelated adult to whom they can always turn for support, by b2i enrollment status



*Statistically significant difference from No b2i ($p < 0.05$)

Sources: OPPS data for 19+ from January 1, 2015, through June 20, 2018. B2i flag provided by FCRO.

Monthly stipend

All participants we spoke to expressed their appreciation for the monthly stipend they receive as part of the b2i program. **Participants reported that the stipend allows them to feel financially secure while working toward their goals.** For many, the stipend prevents the stress that can come from worrying about expenses and allows them to focus their energy on other concerns, such as school or parenting.

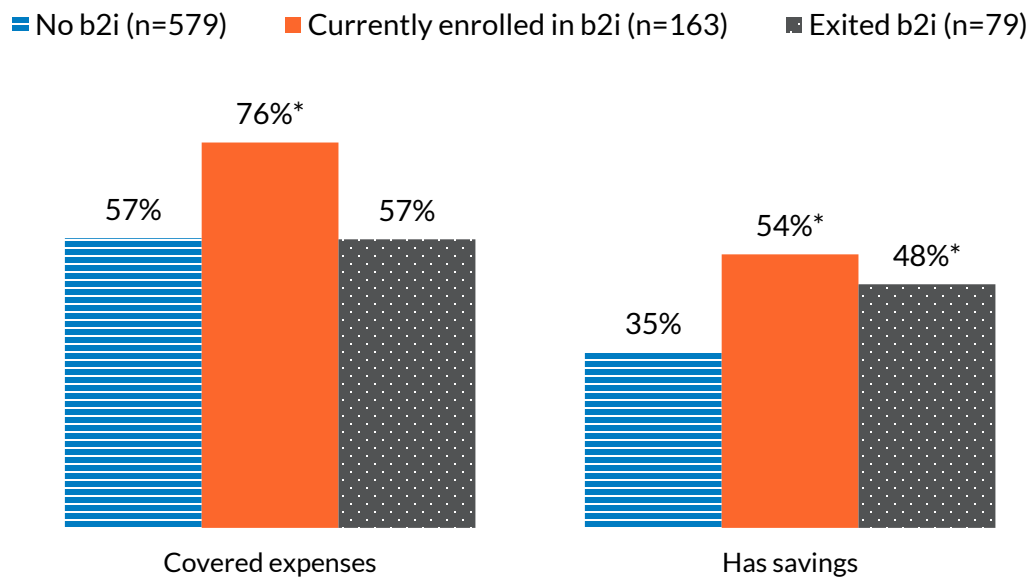
Although participants appreciate the stipend, some also discussed difficulties related to it. Several participants had trouble managing their money when they first began to receive the stipend. Some disclosed that they would quickly spend their stipend and not have funds to cover expenses for the rest of the month, which led them to accumulate credit card debt. All participants who reported initially having difficulty managing the stipend also said that they eventually learned how to manage their money and pay off their debt.

One former b2i participant also expressed that it was difficult to adjust to no longer receiving the stipend after exiting the program. The findings from our analysis of OPPS data support this sentiment: **Young people currently enrolled in b2i were more likely to report that they were able to cover their expenses in the previous month than their non-b2i peers (57% vs. 76%). Young people with b2i experience (54% of current participants and 48% of former participants) were more likely than their non-b2i peers (35 percent) to report having some savings.**

I think the financial support helped me a lot to get to where I am today. I didn't have parental support, so it wasn't like I could ask for money. Who am I gonna ask? My friend, who's also struggling in school? ... I can't believe how incredibly lucky I was to have that.

— b2i participant

Figure 5. Percent of respondents who report being able to cover their expenses and having savings, by b2i enrollment status



*Statistically significant difference from those without b2i experience ($p < 0.05$)

Sources: OPPS data for 19+ from January 1, 2015, through June 20, 2018. B2i flag provided by FCRO.

The evaluation team analyzed housing outcomes for b2i participants during enrollment and after exit to determine whether participants were able to maintain their safe, stable, and affordable housing (see Figure 2) after they exited b2i and were no longer receiving the monthly stipend. **Current and former b2i participants (82% and 92%, respectively) were more likely than their peers without b2i experience to report having safe, stable, and affordable housing.** We also examined the percentage of young people who were currently homeless or couch surfing, or had reported housing instability in the six months before completing their survey.¹⁶ **Young people currently enrolled in b2i were less likely to report homelessness or couch surfing than their peers without b2i experience, but this difference in outcomes disappeared when examining participants who have exited b2i.**

¹⁶ OPPS questions on homelessness and couch surfing were modified in 2017. Baseline surveys now ask about whether participants have ever been homeless or couch surfed, and follow-up surveys ask about the six-month window before the survey. The b2i Evaluation and Data Collection Workgroup also requested that we limit our analysis to b2i participants who had been enrolled in the program for at least six months. As a result, this analysis is limited to follow-up surveys completed after January 1, 2017.

Figure 6. Safe, stable, and affordable housing, by b2i enrollment status



*Statistically significant difference from those without b2i experience ($p < 0.05$)

Sources: OPPS data for 19+ from January 1, 2015, through June 20, 2018. B2i flag provided by FCRO.

Given the percentage of respondents who reported having safe, stable, and affordable housing, we were surprised at the large portion who responded that they had recently been homeless or couch surfed. These measures do represent slightly different samples (see footnotes); however, we also noted that close to one quarter (24 percent) of young people who reported having safe, stable, and affordable housing also reported being homeless or couch surfing within the past six months. These young people may have struggled to find housing before finding a stable place to live.

Figure 7. Homeless or couch surfing in the past six months, by b2i enrollment status



*Statistically significant difference from those without b2i experience ($p < 0.05$)

Sources: OPPS data for 19+ from January 1, 2015, through June 20, 2018. B2i flag provided by FCRO.

Participant perceptions of gained knowledge, skills, and relationships

Accessing and securing resources

All b2i participants who took part in a focus group or interview reported gaining knowledge, skills, and relationships as a result of the program. **Two areas in which participants reported the most growth were in their ability to find and access resources (e.g., parenting classes) and their ability to manage money.**

Young people who participated in b2i were no more likely than their non-b2i peers (82% vs. 85%, respectively) to know what to do if they had an emergency and needed \$500. However, both rates were high.

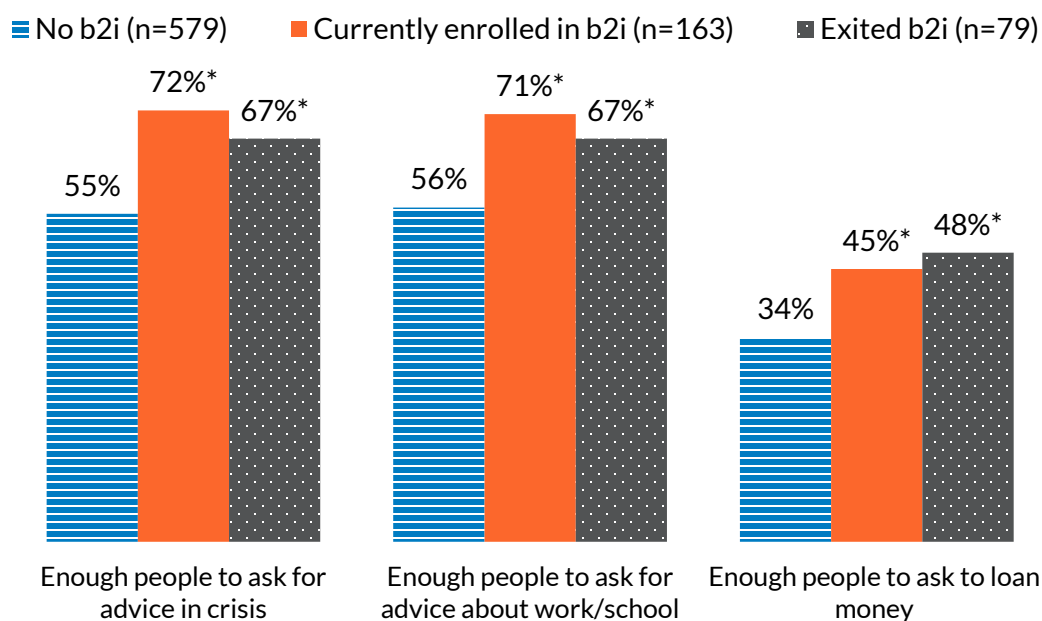
I get stressed out really easily so I don't know what I would do if I had this situation without b2i's help. Parenting causes stress but I know I can look up parenting classes. There's not much that I'm stressed about anymore.

- b2i participant

Relationships

Current and former b2i participants were more likely than those without b2i experience to report having enough people to turn to when they need advice during a crisis or advice about school or work. For both measures, however, the percentage of respondents who reported having these relationships was lower for those who have exited b2i (5% lower for advice during a crisis, 4% lower for advice about school or work). Current and former b2i participants (45% and 48%, respectively) were also more likely to report having enough people to turn to if they needed a loan when compared to their peers without b2i experience (34%).

Figure 8. People to turn to for loan or advice, by b2i enrollment status



*Statistically significant difference from those without b2i experience ($p < 0.05$)

Sources: OPPS data for 19+ from January 1, 2015, through June 20, 2018. B2i flag provided by FCRO.

Many of the focus group attendees and interviewees expressed a desire for increased opportunities to interact with other young adults with foster care experience. Several young people said they had never spoken to another b2i participant, and all the young people expressed that interacting with others who have similar experiences would make them feel more supported.

Exiting b2i

While b2i participants reported that the program helped them build needed skills, several also expressed concern when asked about exiting the program. Many participants had not given much thought to the process of transitioning out unless the transition was set to occur within a couple months. **Some current b2i participants worried about being able to afford transportation or housing when they were no longer receiving the stipend provided by the program.** Similarly, many participants were concerned about how they would be able to repay car loans they had taken on—even though the payments were reasonable—without the benefit of the monthly stipend. One participant expressed regret over not prioritizing school and completing a degree while having the financial support of the monthly stipend. Another common sentiment among participants was apprehension over no longer having a formal mentoring relationship (i.e., the b2i independence coordinator) where they could seek advice as needed.

Even with their concerns about exiting B2i, most participants also reported that their coordinators were helping them to plan for the transition. Most participants reported that having a full-time job with steady income and understanding their monthly finances helped them prepare for budgeting without the stipend. According to some participants, their independence coordinator explained which services they would remain eligible for, such as Medicaid, and where they could receive other services, like income tax filing assistance.

I just feel like there's always going to be some things you just don't get about life yet that you want someone to be able to ask questions like that, and it's like an added person that you can go to.

— b2i participant

Several b2i participants remarked that having a more formal transition process would be helpful.

One participant suggested that during transition, it would be helpful for young people to receive a folder of important documents and checklists that they can continue to use as they manage their lives more independently. **Multiple participants suggested that a gradual reduction of the stipend over the last few months of program eligibility would give young people more time to adjust their finances.**

Case management at younger ages (<19 years)

B2i participants' experiences with case management at younger ages varied. While some participants said that they did not receive information about b2i until the last month or so before their aging out, they did note that their caseworkers were able to help them get quickly connected with the program. These young people reported that their caseworker told them about the program, helped them get enrolled, and introduced them to their independence coordinator before they turned 19. Notably, participants did not uniformly report that their caseworker was the first or most informative source of information about b2i: Some participants reported that they first heard about b2i through friends, networks of foster families, or other program staff. All participants agreed that the enrollment process was easy once they found out about the program and decided to apply.

Some participants said that their caseworker helped prepare them to enter b2i by encouraging them to be open to the program experience and reminding them of the requirements around school and work. **Participants reported that they would have benefitted from better preparation before enrolling in b2i.**

Many reported being unprepared to handle the stipend and making poor financial decisions in the beginning of the program; some accumulated credit card debt before they learned the financial literacy skills of responsible credit management and budgeting.

Several focus group participants and interviewees said that initially, they had reservations about having an independence coordinator because of their previous experiences with the foster care system. However, these participants reported eventually building a strong relationship with their independence coordinator.

[My independence coordinator] was a person who was put into my life as someone who is helping me succeed, so I shouldn't see [them] as an enemy. That can be a problem coming from the foster care system. Even throughout some of my cases, I felt I wasn't being advocated for properly, so I felt my needs weren't being addressed all the time.

— b2i participant

B2i implementation in different communities

Little data is currently available about how b2i implementation varies across communities. However, focus group and interview participants reported some differences in experience based on whether they lived in an urban or rural area. **Urban and rural participants agreed that urban areas had far more resources available, and several focus group participants also felt that resources varied across different urban areas.** These participants reported that Omaha has more resources available than Lincoln.

Young people also reported that service quality differed in urban and rural areas. While one participant felt that case management in urban areas was less personal, others expressed that in an urban area, it was easier for staff in different organizations and agencies to communicate and coordinate services. One rural participant expressed frustration that their independence coordinator had to travel for an hour in order to meet face to face.

Is the program targeting the right population?

B2i enhances young adult outcomes in several domains, but more data must be collected to determine whether the program is targeting the right population. For example, collecting more data on young people who choose not to enroll in b2i may be useful for determining whether resources should be spent on recruiting participants who are already eligible, or spent on expanding eligibility to other populations.

Recommendations

Based on our findings about the outcomes and experiences of b2i participants and their peers, we offer several recommendations.

Staff and agencies should work to ensure that young people are prepared for b2i prior to enrollment.

Several focus group and interview participants reported struggling to manage finances and maintain housing early in their b2i experience. Participants also discussed their initial hesitation to trust their independence coordinators. Caseworkers for pending b2i participants should work closely with independence coordinators to educate young people about the program and help them establish a budget before they receive their first monthly stipend. While some participants reported coordination between their caseworker and independence coordinator prior to their enrollment in b2i, not all participants shared this experience. Closer coordination between agency staff will allow them to better prepare young people for the financial changes related to the stipend. Better support for young people who complete high school before turning 19 during the gap between their graduation and enrollment in b2i will also require improved coordination between caseworkers and b2i.

B2i participants need more support and guidance to prepare for exiting the program.

Young people who exited b2i are no more likely than their peers without b2i experience to be able to cover their monthly expenses, or to report having a non-related adult they can always turn to for support. Former b2i participants are also no less likely than their peers without b2i experience to report experiencing homelessness or couch surfing. Current b2i participants report better outcomes than their peers without b2i experience on each of these measures. The differences in outcomes between current and former participants is likely caused by the loss of valuable resources, such as the monthly stipend and independence coordinator. Although participants report that their independence coordinators help them prepare for their exit from b2i, they may need supports that are tailored supports to prepare them for the transition. Some practices that may ease the stress of transitioning out of b2i include:

- **Require saving accounts.** When participants enter b2i, they should be required to open savings accounts, and independence coordinators should support b2i participants in creating saving plans. Participants and their independence coordinators should track savings balances, and savings deposits should increase as the participant gets closer to exiting the program.
- **Leverage Opportunity Passport.** The savings accounts mentioned above can be used to leverage the matching savings provided to Opportunity Passport participants. The money saved by participants at the time they exit b2i can be matched to purchase approved assets. Matched funds can be used for purposes such as paying off a car loan, covering first month's rent and move-in fees, or purchasing laptops and other items that support education or employment.
- **Provide timely information.** While most b2i participants receive financial literacy training at some point, the timing and frequency of these trainings and other conversations about expenses and saving should be more strategic. A member of the b2i Evaluation and Data Collection Workgroup referenced one participant who completed the same financial literacy training multiple times before feeling confident about fully understanding the material. Specific training modules and conversations might also be more relevant to participants at different stages throughout the program (i.e., before entering, after receiving their first stipend, and when preparing to exit).
- **Taper off the stipend.** Several participants raised the idea of tapering off the amount of the monthly stipend as the exit from b2i approaches. To avoid reducing the amount of money participants receive

overall, the monthly stipend can be increased in the six months prior to exit and then reduced each month. This will allow young people to adjust to the decrease in funds available to cover their monthly expenses and reduce the impact of no longer receiving the stipend.

Studies must reflect participant definitions of success in b2i.

Young people expanded the definition of success in b2i beyond traditional outcomes measures in areas such as education, employment, and financial capability. They reported that success can look different for each participant and stressed the importance of setting and achieving personal goals. Ultimately, they reported that success was feeling “normal” (i.e., not feeling different from their non-foster care peers because of their experiences in foster care).

Future evaluations of b2i should include measures that reflect a more expansive definition of success in the program. Although the TSS currently collects data on hopefulness and self-regulation, data collection instruments should be modified to also include measures that assess normalcy, community engagement, and self-advocacy.

Given that simply participating in b2i is not associated with having more hope—as well as the importance that interview and focus group participants placed on having hope to be successful in b2i—more discussions with young people and analyses should be completed on this outcome area.

Data on participants’ knowledge, perceptions, and outcomes should be collected at different stages in their b2i experience.

Although this evaluation examined the outcomes of b2i participants during the program and after they exited, future evaluations should evaluate young people’s knowledge, perceptions, and outcomes before, during, and after their b2i experience. This pre-and post-test design will eliminate the selection bias present in this evaluation by determining whether individual participants’ responses change throughout their experience. Completing this analysis will require longitudinal data collection through a survey for b2i participants.

Housing measures should be reviewed to better understand b2i participant experiences.

Findings on housing stability in this evaluation were mixed. While most participants reported safe, stable, and affordable housing, many also reported recent experiences of homelessness and couch surfing. Longitudinal data collection may clarify these mixed findings; however, the current survey questions should be reviewed with young people to determine whether the language can be improved to collect more accurate and useful data.

Study Limitations

The greatest limitation in this evaluation is the absence of a control group. Survey respondents in each of the outcomes datasets we analyzed were connected to programs and/or services other than b2i. In analyses using Opportunity Passport data, participants in the comparison group were participating in a matched savings program that also provides the financial capability training that may improve participant outcomes. The comparison group in the analyses using TSS data included young people receiving CYI services. Differences between b2i participants and young people disconnected from all programs and services are likely greater than those presented in this report.

Even if data on young people in a control group were available, selection bias would still be a limitation. Young people who choose to engage in b2i or Opportunity Passport are also probably more likely to approach and secure supportive connections, maintain stable housing, and be employed and/or enrolled in school.

This evaluation is also limited because little is known about program implementation differences across jurisdictions. Conversations with independence coordinators, caseworkers, and other staff would provide valuable insight into the extent of program differences and how those differences affect young adult outcomes.

Another limitation to this study is that it does not consider dosage and extent of engagement in b2i, CYI, and Opportunity Passport.

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