Helping Los Angelenos Involved in the Criminal Justice System Get and Keep Jobs

I n 2018, the City of Los Angeles Mayor's Office of Reentry launched Project imPACT,[1] which aims to help individuals involved in the justice system obtain employment. The program, which is designed to serve individuals with a history of mental health conditions and/or substance use disorders provides wraparound services (i.e., employment-focused services in combination with other supportive services) to help participants overcome barriers to getting and keeping jobs, with the end goal of reducing recidivism. The RAND Corporation and Harder+Company Community Research were invited to conduct a process and outcome evaluation of the first cohort of Project imPACT (July 2018–December 2020). This brief presents key takeaways from that evaluation.

About Project imPACT

Employment services provided by local employment agencies are central to Project imPACT, but clients (known as Fellows) also receive behavioral health and legal services as core components of the program. In addition, group-based cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) aims to address mindsets and behaviors specifically associated with involvement in the criminal justice system. A Peer Navigator (i.e., a program staff member with lived experience of incarceration or involvement with the justice system) works closely with Fellows throughout their time in the program. By providing wraparound, holistic support that is specific

KEY FINDINGS

- Of enrolled Fellows, 44 percent (192 Fellows) were known to have obtained employment, mostly in full-time positions (156 Fellows).

- Mean monthly income increased from $105 at enrollment to $2,206 at exit, representing an increase of almost 2,000 percent.

- Provider experience, commitment, teamwork, and flexibility in service provision were key factors for program success.

- Wraparound services were also critical to success. Nevertheless, Fellows needed other things that could affect employment, such as access to transportation.

to Fellows' needs, Project imPACT aims to improve employment outcomes and job retention for Fellows, reduce recidivism, and enable community-based partners to serve this population more effectively.

Project imPACT services are provided in four areas of Los Angeles—Downtown, the San Fernando Valley, South Los Angeles, and Watts—each of which has its own team of providers working to support Fellows. In the first cohort, Project imPACT enrolled 432 Fellows, with the following distribution across regions: Downtown (108), San Fernando Valley (95), South Los Angeles (101), and Watts (128). Table 1 provides general characteristics of program Fellows.

Evaluation of Project imPACT

Implementation

The various groups of providers helped Fellows address a wide variety of barriers to employment. For example, employment service providers helped Fellows prepare for interviews and write résumés. Behavioral health treatment, including individual therapy, helped Fellows manage stress and develop anger management and emotional regulation skills. Legal services helped Fellows correct, remove, seal, or expunge criminal records and address Department of Motor Vehicles issues, including license reinstatement.

According to the program's requirements, the services were consistent with the overall Project imPACT model, but there was flexibility with how they were implemented, and different providers had different approaches to services.

TABLE 1

Characteristics of Fellows Enrolled in Project imPACT, July 2018–December 2020

Fellow Characteristics	Total (%)
Risk of recidivism[a]	
Low	2.8
Medium	44.7
High	44.4
Very high	8.1
Gender	
Male	79.4
Female	20.4
Other	0.2
Age	
18–25 years	13.0
26–43 years	57.4
44+ years	29.6
Race/ethnicity	
Black or African American	53.6
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish	34.4
White	9.6
Other (includes Native Hawaiian, Asian, and American Indian or Alaska Native), multiracial, or declined to state	4.4

[a] Fellows were characterized as low, medium, high, or very high risk of recidivism based on a structured risk-needs assessment.

Outcomes

Approximately 78 percent of Fellows completed at least two of the three core program components (employment, behavioral health, and legal services). Fellows who completed employment services were more likely to be employed.

Of enrolled Fellows, 44 percent (192) were known to have obtained employment, mostly in full-time positions (156). Employment retention rates were also promising. Once a Fellow gained employment, providers would check in at quarterly intervals. Over the course of the study period, 110 Fellows were employed at the 3-month follow-up, 107 were employed at the 6-month follow-up, 63 were employed at the 9-month follow-up, and 49 were employed at the 12-month

follow-up. Researchers noted that providers faced challenges following up with Fellows, and the number of employed individuals who participated in Project imPACT might exceed the numbers for which providers were able to collect data.

Income data at enrollment and exit were available for 158 Fellows. **Mean monthly income increased from $105 at enrollment to $2,206 at exit, representing an increase in income of almost 2,000 percent.**

Project imPACT providers assess recidivism when conducting regularly scheduled follow-ups with Fellows at 6, 12, and 18 months after program completion. However, these conversations did not always happen consistently. Therefore, the evaluation team could not report on recidivism outcomes.

Lessons Learned

The evaluation of Project imPACT offered important lessons about what contributed to the success of the program and about the obstacles that limited success.

Success Factors

Among the key ingredients for program success were

- provider teamwork, commitment, professionalism, and experience working with individuals involved with the criminal justice system
- the wraparound nature of the services
- the regional placement of the services
- provider autonomy within the Project imPACT framework.

Challenges

Providers noted some challenges to program success, including staff turnover that affected continuity of care and difficulties engaging people in CBT and behavioral health services. Furthermore, providers highlighted additional needs on the part of Fellows, including a lack of access to transportation, legal expenses, a lack of food security, a lack of access to medical care, and the need for housing services.

Unsurprisingly, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic had substantial effects on the program. In mid-March 2020, all program services transitioned to being offered in a virtual, remote format. Previously, employment agencies served as the hub for services, with the other providers colocated onsite several times per week.

"The legal help that is available . . . is very important to former prisoners that are coming out, because they need legal help in navigating [the legal system] . . . and [knowing] what to file."
–Project imPACT Fellow

"If it wasn't for this program, I don't know what I would have done. I really don't know. I probably would have went back. I probably would have failed. . . . They talk to me as a person, not as an inmate, not as a prisoner, not as a convict. They treated me as a person. That's what I loved about this program."
–Project imPACT Fellow

However, during the pandemic, services became somewhat decentralized. Several months after the onset of the pandemic, some agencies were able to begin offering in-person services again with additional safety protocols. However, some services remained fully virtual, likely affecting implementation and outcomes.

A final challenge relates to collecting the data needed to ensure that progress is being made on program objectives, particularly employment and recidivism. As a result of limited resources, the sensitivity

> "It was a big adjustment for me coming back out into society and especially having gone in so young . . . basically my whole life was spent in there. . . . The services and the tools that I gained through the therapy . . . helped me to adjust."
> –Project imPACT Fellow

of the topic, and known challenges tracking the target population, providers were, in many cases, unable to make contact with Fellows after they were no longer enrolled in the program.

Adaptations

In many cases, providers were able to adapt to meet the challenges they encountered. For example, by strengthening the messaging and rationale for each type of service, they were able to more effectively engage Fellows in such services as CBT and behavioral health. Providers also partnered with other organizations or leveraged Project imPACT funds to offer ancillary services when possible (e.g., transportation support) and worked with group homes (where many Fellows lived) to facilitate greater access to technology during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Project imPACT is building on its core of services by adding housing support services and is adding a pilot program focused specifically on young adults.

Finally, the evaluation team continues to support providers by streamlining data submission requirements and identifying other sources of recidivism data (e.g., the Los Angeles Superior Court).

Looking Ahead

Project imPACT is currently funded until May 2023. To build on its initial successes, local policymakers and other key stakeholders should consider how to support and strengthen service provision. Specifically, stakeholders could take the following actions:

- Make sure providers have needed training, including on such topics as trauma-informed care.
- Provide resources for additional support staff who can assist with such tasks as Fellow outreach and collection of follow-up employment data to alleviate the burden on providers.
- Find ways to offer additional supports to address other common psychosocial needs, such as lack of transportation or food insecurity.
- Increase awareness of the program in the greater Los Angeles community to increase enrollment of Fellows and interest of employers.

Moving forward, the successes and lessons offered by Project imPACT can inform how other communities in Los Angeles could mobilize similar efforts to increase the safety and well-being of their residents.

Note

[1] Project imPACT is funded by California Proposition 47 (The Safe Neighborhoods and Schools Act), which reclassified certain felony offenses as misdemeanors, thereby decreasing incarceration in the state prison system. The savings created at the state level are used to fund, among other things, programs seeking to reduce recidivism of people with substance abuse and mental health problems.

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