Local Workforce Systems: Understanding Implementation Processes to Effectively Serve Vulnerable Youth

Mary Elizabeth Collins, A.M., PhD.

Professor and Department Chair, Social Welfare Policy

January 2021

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Prior Research, Gaps, Research Question

- <u>Prior Research</u>: Negative effects of disconnection from school and work are profound (Lewis & Gluskin, 2018). System-involved youth have high rates of unemployment and low levels of income when employed (e.g., Macomber et al., 2008; Wiesner, Kim, & Capaldi, 2010).

- <u>Reasons</u>: Circumstances that led to system involvement, disruptions in life/schooling that impact efforts to build educational/pre-employment skills, lack of resources/networks to access academic/vocational opportunities.

- <u>Gap</u>: Previous research focused on employment outcomes of system-involved youth; current study is focused on workforce development systems' focus on these youth.

- <u>Research Question</u>: *How do State and Local Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) address the needs of system-involved youth?*

BU School of Social Work

Summary of Methods

- One Local WDB in each of 10 states was selected

- Primary interview targets: (1) Executive Director of Local WDB; (2) Youth Committee Chair/Youth Specialist; (3) Executive Director of State WDB

- 30-45 minute phone interviews (25 interviews with 33 subjects) conducted April – August 2020

- Key topics: past/current initiatives for child welfare and juvenile justice populations, structure and membership of the WDBs, interactions across the state-local-contractor, mechanisms for engaging youth in policy

- Thematic analysis of transcripts + analysis of documents (State WDB plan, Local WDB plan)

BU School of Social Work

Results

- Child welfare and juvenile justice systems
  - juvenile justice > child welfare
  - lack of automatic referrals from child welfare
  - initiatives often grant-funded

- Highly variable organization of LWDBs/SWDBs, including engagement of agency directors

- Youth expertise primarily found within contracted agencies

- Current engagement of youth voice in policy and programming was minimal, but common expressions of interest to engage youth voice: "I'd like to be better" at engaging youth perspectives. "There is no shortage of young people who want to be heard… I see a real lack in doing that."

School of Social Work

Policy Implications

- Engage youth as experts
  - Adopt best practices re: Positive Youth Development
  - Utilize regional/state expertise (e.g., Youth Resource Centers)
- Supports for youths' basic needs, wraparound services, mental health and trauma – so that they can benefit from the workforce services
- More institutionalized integration of child welfare and juvenile justice with workforce development
  - Engagement on SWDB
  - Routine referral mechanisms (from child welfare)
  - Contracting processes
- COVID impacts: address the digital divide to forestall further erosion
- More workforce funding

BU School of Social Work

Results: COVID Impacts

- <u>Challenges</u> : (1) Online platforms require a lot of motivation. (2) Many people will jump at work [rather than training]. (3) Youth may need required drug test to get into a program; test may expire.

- <u>Adaptations/Innovations</u>:
  - "We'll have to do even more to support them."
  - "… summer bridge program; bring students back to finish up requirements left undone in spring."
  - "Opened up dialogue for retail to be more of an option again. Working with stores more now because they're hiring."
  - "Pushing the envelope on how to stay connected. Doing best we can, trying to adapt."
  - "We put out guidance immediately, to local areas, that money is still there, can be used for support services, LMI, financial literacy."

- <u>Fears</u>: Youth who are already hard to serve are going to get harder to serve.

BU School of Social Work