



illuminate.

WILSON SHEEHAN LAB FOR ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES



Fall 2022

10 years and...

Since. Always. Now.



Tin for Ten

Katelin Cortney, Guest Writer

For those romantics entering into a lifelong partnership, anniversaries are the markers of success. The proof and evidence of something built that lasts; something that works. And in this spirit of love and commitment, this issue celebrates the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities (LEO) at the University of Notre Dame's ten-year anniversary. So successful the decade in action that if it were a marriage union, everyone on staff would be given a gift made of tin, the marital symbol for durability and withstanding.

And so here we are, ten years into a grand experiment (upon experiment). While I haven't prepared a slideshow for this milestone, a good summary of the meet cute and some anecdotes of those close to the love story seem fitting of such an important anniversary.

"Ten years...so how did you get here?" I asked Heather Reynolds, LEO's managing director, while on her car audio that quite literally sounded like she was in a tin can.

She recounts the first meeting, which happened when Father Larry Snyder, Head of Catholic Charities USA at the time, brought her to the table alongside Jim Sullivan and Bill Evans of the prestigious University of Notre Dame. In what was a precursor to what would one day be called LEO, the giants in the Catholic world were uniting to figure out how to best combine their powers for good. They were curiously debating who in the nonprofit sphere would be willing to open up their most vulnerable innerworkings and see if they were effective (and to what degree) to begin with.

"Me!" Heather said, the then CEO/President of Catholic Charities Fort Worth. Four other pedigreed organizations declared the same, moving the curiously bold organizations onto the next round of group presentations before the research team.

At one point, Heather recalls, the expected skeptical pair of raised eyebrows on Jim slowly wore off until he saw the stars aligning and declared, "This. This is it. I think we can do this."

And soon, randomized controlled trials were set by dates and LEO was born. There were fireworks as



everyone rode off into the sunset.

Well, there's more to the story of course, but any romantic analogy calls on a Disney reference before the real work gets underway.

I talked to a couple of people closest to the inception of the project to help in the telling of this great love story, and how it changed their projects for the better.

Cindy Casey, Director of Client Services at Catholic Charities Fort Worth (CCFW), heads up the Padua Program, one of LEO's earliest randomized controlled trials. It's the second study at CCFW next to Stay the Course, which looks at community college persistence rates. She calls the partnership the gold (tin?) standard.

In 2015, Cindy and her team were working the resources and brain power

they had to help clients in the Padua Program, a strengths-based holistic case management program designed to walk with clients however long it took on their path out of poverty. But she was stuck on financial assistance in addressing scarcity. It made sense that by addressing the immediate financial burdens of a client, there would be room for more bandwidth to do the larger work. Net/Net: money spent meant success forthcoming.



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YEARS &

But the clients weren't achieving success. Thanks to LEO's early involvement with the project, CCFW was inspired to create their own internal research and evaluation team. This is how they were able to discover that the clients who were given the most financial assistance were indeed the very ones worse off. And the clients who received the least, but were nevertheless engaged with the program, were faring the best.

Armed with this data, CCFW was able to create a strategic

"It was that day she remembers Bill painting a picture of the magnitude of ripple effects a study like this could have, of the possibilities to change hundreds of thousand of lives, of the importance of the work being done by her team in that moment."

flexible financial assistance plan, whereby funding was generated in a dignified partnership between the client and the agency. A few tweaks to the model and today, one of the hallmarks of the successful program is this exact strategic flexible financial assistance.

When the formal research results came out later that year, Cindy held her breath. Like any good overthinker in a partnership, she braced for the worst, but it never came. Instead, they got incredible data on an opportunity to improve the lack of participation in client savings, which turned into strategic fuel to start working with clients earlier in the model on savings. It worked.

Cindy tears up remembering Bill carefully explaining to her team that they had taken the results to many an academic institution who challenged that there must be some kind of mistake. That these types of results were unheard of. It was that day she remembers Bill painting a picture of the magnitude of ripple effects a study like this could have, of the possibilities to change hundreds of thousands of lives, of the importance of the work being done by her team in that moment.

Cindy tells me that working with LEO and their own research team enables them to be able to ask questions and get to the root of an issue in real time. "There's a huge difference," she notes, "between what your perception is versus what is actually happening."

Kathy Donahue Coia, former Acting CEO of Catholic Charities Chicago, entered into dialogue with me by speaking of a general hesitancy among the nonprofit world to introduce research. As social work is not for the faint of heart, the people who are on the ground with the clients hardly have a moment to think, let alone run numbers or look for overarching themes. But they do input data on clients every single day. So, by taking work that they were already doing and sending it to the right people (enter LEO), they added exactly zero expectations to their already hands-full staff.

As with so many of the best things in life, Kathy tells me that "research answered the questions they weren't even asking."

For example, by gathering data on the usage of their only-in-the-nation WIC grocery store model, LEO discovered a surprising bit of news: almost no teen mothers were using the program. Armed with this curious information about vulnerable clients leaving money on the table, Catholic Charities Chicago learned that only one of the twelve WIC grocery stores had a high teen utilization rate, and that was because it was bundled with other teen services located at the same center.

This was the genesis for the team to relocate more projects and services for teen moms into other WIC grocery stores in other neighborhoods. As Catholic Charities Chicago set out to make a larger footprint of accessible services near stores, sure enough, WIC coupon utilization for teens increased. An opportunity to increase teen participation was something that not only wouldn't have been done before LEO, it would have been something not even on their radar.

“That’s what research has done for us,” Kathy tells me excitedly. “In this case, it helped us to completely redesign a program for maximum effectiveness.” In two other cases, LEO’s findings were able to help them verify that their work was effectively on the right track. One showed that they were indeed reducing hospital readmission rates based off their signature case management model. Another showed

As the mission states, they create evidence and put evidence to use. Her sights are set not just on the partner agencies and rich data they can mutually benefit from collecting, but change in national policy and understanding. When they prove out a models’ effectiveness, they can (and have) taken it to state legislatures to effect change. The more models



that a small investment of rental assistance did prevent homelessness and was useful in securing continued funding from the city of Chicago. By way of program redesign or program affirmation, her teams were equipped to move forward confidently in the right direction.

She also notes that “it doesn’t hurt your funding efforts to have a research partner in your proposal.”

Knowing well that successful partnerships hardly rest on the laurels of the past, I asked Heather about their plans for the future.

When she started, Heather was employee #12 with 30 projects or so under her purview and a budget of around 1M. A few flops, free falls, and victories later, a 36th team member just started to help with the 80+ projects and current working budget of 5.5M. Within eight years, they’ll have a portfolio of 300 sites she tells me.

proven, the more momentum. The more momentum, the more powerful the testimonies for various think tanks and governments. The more change in policy and understanding, the more they can help orchestrate connecting the largest funders to the most proven models in the country without having to recreate the wheel. It’s her version of a house and white picket fence.

Happy Anniversary indeed to LEO. To sharing in the great adventure of taking a risk, always staying curious, and never giving up. As the elderly couples holding hands on the sidewalk after decades of hard work promise, it will be worth it, and the best is yet to come. Cue the champagne. Cheers! ●

PHOTO: PADUA PROGRAM, CATHOLIC CHARITIES FORT WORTH



Up at night

Heather Reynolds
LEO Managing Director



Dear Friends,

Recently I had the privilege of testifying before Congress about solutions to poverty. As I was preparing, I pulled together loads of information, data, and client stories to help form what I wanted to share. While gathering all this information, I paused to reflect on how much we're starting to understand about solving poverty and some significant examples of putting that evidence into action.


LEO turns 10 on September 30th and I can't help but think with a big smile on my face of some things that have happened in the past decade. Ten years ago, my husband and I had been matched with a little girl in Taiwan and were getting ready to travel there to bring Olive home as her mom and dad. Ten years ago, I was serving as CEO of Catholic Charities Fort Worth and actively pitching to Jim and Bill for them to begin a randomized controlled trial with the "about to be created" LEO. Ten years ago, I was desperate for solutions that would do more than just make poverty a bit less painful for Americans struggling in it, but rather move them completely out, for good. Ten years ago, there were no domestic poverty labs building causal evidence about what works to reduce poverty.

A lot can happen in a decade. Motherhood, the creation of LEO, a personal move to Notre Dame to take on the "role of a lifetime" with an institution that makes good on its promise to be a force for good in this nation, more domestic anti-poverty labs created at preeminent universities, many much-needed research projects launched, and the resulting evidence that goes beyond a journal publication and moves towards scalability and impact.

We talk often at LEO about President Johnson's War on Poverty almost 60 years ago. The U.S. is largely providing services to people in poverty the exact same way they were provided when that "war"



100
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A woman with dark hair and glasses is speaking at a conference table. She is wearing a grey blazer over a red top with a dark pattern. A microphone is positioned in front of her. In the background, a man in a blue suit and a patterned face mask is visible. The setting appears to be a formal meeting or press conference.

“People living in poverty deserve programs that work. Evidence honors their dignity.”





was declared. Things need to change. But we also see how much has been done in this last decade that is changing lives:

- Eight programs throughout our nation have done the hard work of building causal evidence on how to solve the community college completion crisis. These programs, now armed with evidence, are scaling and impacting public policy.
- We're gaining a deeper understanding of the need for comprehensive services and intensive case management as a solution for upward mobility.
- We've learned so much about homelessness prevention—how to avoid making the problem of homelessness in our country any worse than it already is by building evidence-based solutions that ensure folks get the help they need before they lose their housing.
- The federal government convened an Evidence-Based Policy Making Commission that led to an Evidence Act passed by Congress and signed by the President that advocates for the creation and use of evidence in the policy space.
- Probably most importantly, providers across the country, poverty's fiercest adversaries, give us a great gift by allowing us into their lives, into their programs, into their data, into their efforts...all with the goal to create the evidence that will help us move past assumptions and one-off successes and towards real understanding about if their programs have their intended impact. With over 70 partners creating evidence with us, we are well positioned for the next decade of learning together.

My dream for the next decade is quite simple—pull out this article and say, “And I thought we had made progress in our first decade—HA! LEO’s first decade was nothing compared to the evidence we have built now and how that evidence has translated to more impact.” We can do it. We can move mountains in the next decade because I believe the will is there. I have the privilege of seeing it every day with the commitment of our provider partners, our researchers, our benefactors, our LEO team, and yes, even sometimes the political will in Congress.

Here's to 10! **And here's to the next 10!**

With sincere gratitude to each of you,

Heather Reynolds.

PHOTO: HEATHER REYNOLDS CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

Calling poverty's fiercest adversaries

BY THE NUMBERS

2 location-based cohorts

6 organizations

1000's of lives impacted each year

Meet some of our newest LEO partners!

Our second location-based cohort includes six service providers in the Seattle area that all work in the housing or homelessness space.

Join us in welcoming the six partners preparing to build evidence for reducing and preventing homelessness.



Pierce County's Department of Human Services is interested in studying the impact of providing behavioral health services in the context of emergency shelters. The goal is to remove barriers to treatment and meet people where they are so that they can access services when they need them.



Mary's Place is planning on evaluating their homelessness prevention program—specifically understanding the impact of different amounts of financial assistance and supportive services on long-term housing stability outcomes.



The **King County Regional Homelessness Authority** wants to learn more about emergency shelters -- what are the core components of services that lead to more successful exits to permanent housing and long-term housing stability.

Stay tuned!

As research begins, these organizations will surely produce important and exciting results. •



City of Seattle

The **City of Seattle and Office of City Auditor** is interested in studying the impact of Contingency Management (CM) offered to individuals who are polysubstance users and experiencing unsheltered homelessness throughout the City of Seattle. Contingency Management is a 12-week program that provides cash incentives to individuals for passing drug tests.

King County's Office of Performance,



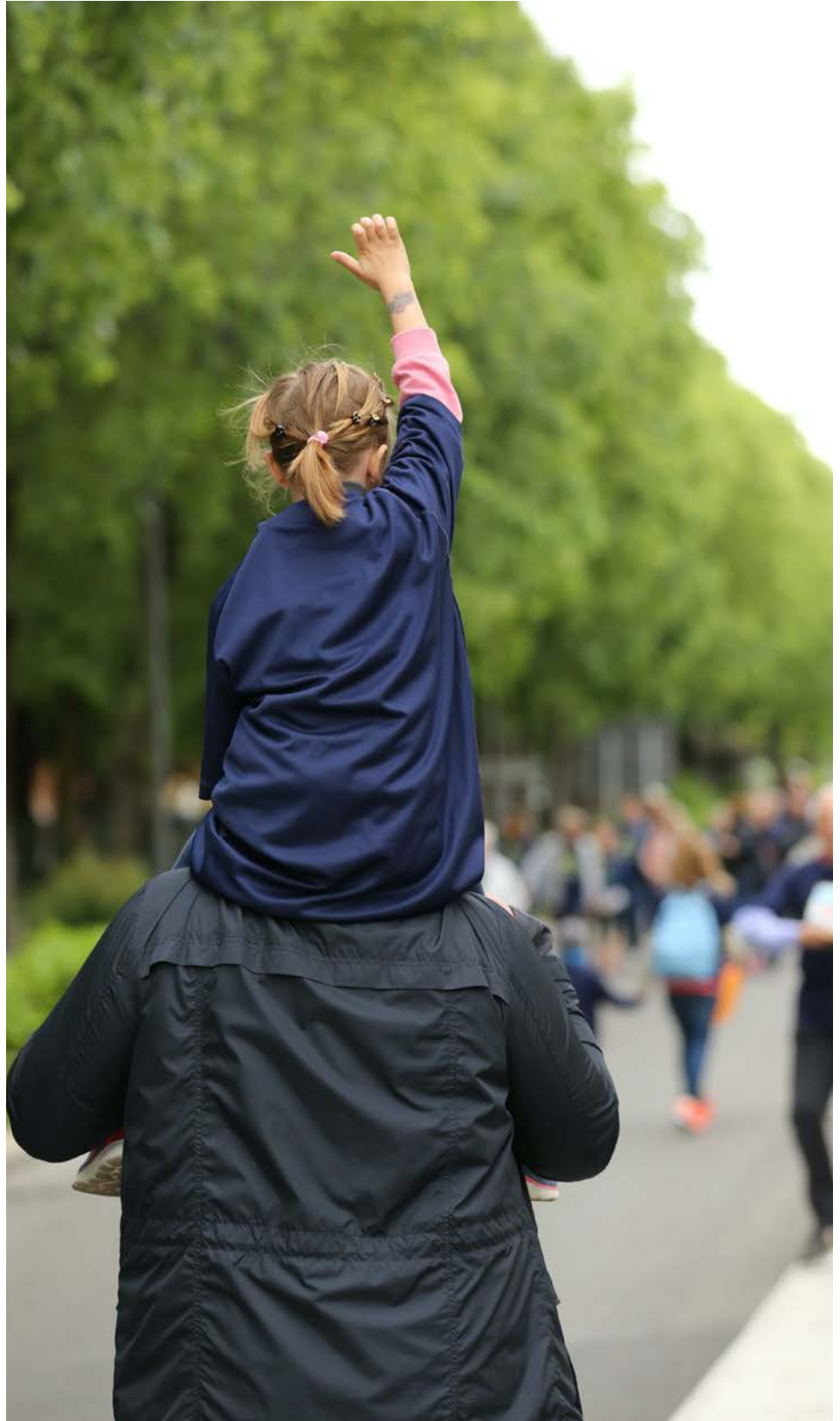
King County

Strategy, and Budget is planning to evaluate a new Jobs and Housing program, which pairs individuals experiencing homelessness (or housing instability) with jobs and a housing subsidy for up to 12 months. The goal is to understand the impact on employment and housing stability outcomes.



Seattle Department of Transportation

The **City of Seattle's Department of Transportation** is partnering with Uplift NW, a non-profit temporary staffing agency that serves low-income individuals and helps them get connected with jobs, to understand the impact of subsidized transportation on employment outcomes.



10 years and...looking at 2022

Project growth

JUNE 2019

31

JUNE 2022

81

\$4,072,174

FY2022 EXPENSES

Progress in homelessness prevention

For the last several years, we've partnered with Santa Clara County (SCC) on multiple projects focused on reducing and preventing homelessness. The SCC Homelessness Prevention program provides emergency financial assistance (EFA) to families on the brink of homelessness. Research from our evaluation of the program indicates that EFA decreases the likelihood a recipient will need to enter a shelter and decreases the use of homelessness services over time, preventing a return to homelessness rather than just delaying it. These findings are especially relevant because they occurred in a county with high rates of homelessness and an expensive rental market. Our dissemination team is working with Santa Clara County to present these findings to a larger audience, including an event on campus this fall.

Transforming Evidence into Action

Our dissemination team focuses on making our evidence actionable and builds relationships with policymakers, nonprofits, local governments, and philanthropists. Our presence at the highest levels of policymaking continues to strengthen. Here's a handful of the many exciting developments in our efforts to share our evidence with policymakers:

LEO is supporting efforts like the recently announced "Year of Evidence for Action" initiative of the Biden-Harris Administration. Launched at its first-ever White House Summit on Evidence for Action, the Administration will co-host a series of events with leading nonprofits and academic organizations to co-develop concrete strategies for mobilizing research-based evidence that can improve the lives of the American public.

In order to lay groundwork for future events and legislation, LEO's team of Jill Pentamonti, Federal Relations Associate and LEO associate director of research operations, Rachel Fulcher-Dawson met with several policymakers in Washington, DC as well as key policy and advocacy organizations. The current focus of this work is on sharing more about what we know on homelessness prevention, foster care, senior companion programs and transit studies.

Stay tuned as LEO finds new ways to promote the power of using research and evidence to fight poverty through informed policymaking.



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Creating causal evidence aimed at reducing poverty

81

high-quality active and completed projects

23

academic papers published or accepted for publication

22

states and 48 communities across the country partnering with LEO through active and completed projects

67

faculty affiliates—10 of whom are leading LEO research projects as principal investigator

Partnership with innovative poverty fighters

5

partners with more than one LEO research project

71

partners are creating evidence with LEO

Presentations, panels, and philanthropy

More presentations than we can count—sharing the LEO story and our research with service providers, philanthropists, policymakers, and other poverty-fighters. Here's a few of the recent hits!

Four of LEO's staff and faculty members presented at the University of Notre Dame's Celebration of 50 Years of Undergraduate Women at Our Lady's University. LEO speakers included associate director of administration, Katie Kuka, director of research advancement, federal relations, Jill Pentimonti, assistant research professor of economics, Mary Kate Batistich, and research associate, Catherine Lawlor. All Notre Dame grads, they spoke to an audience of Notre Dame benefactors about LEO's work to partner with front line service providers in the fight against domestic poverty. Attendees have since reached out to LEO regarding potential provider partnerships—a perfect example of the types of opportunities that LEO is actively pursuing to get our discoveries in front of the philanthropic community.

LEO managing director Heather Reynolds was part of a speaker panel at the American Compass education policy workshop, Beyond College-for-All. Attendees included stakeholders interested in education policy and using evidence to better inform education programming and funding decisions.

Also in the college completion area, LEO associate director of research operations, Rachel Fulcher-Dawson, presented early findings from her paper on the replication of evidence based college access and completion programs with our research partners at The Institute for College Access & Student Success (TICAS) during the 5th convening of service providers across the country that offer Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success (CASS). Solving for how replication can be done more successfully has implications that go beyond college completion. Read more about lessons learned in replication on page 19.

Letters from our founders

You may have noticed a theme emerging in this quarter's edition of *Illuminate*: the idea of "10 years and..." It's been intriguing to ponder the many ways to complete that sentence. 10 years and...81 active or completed studies. 10 years and...23 published research papers. 10 years and...now 30 plus full-time faculty and staff members. There's no one way to complete the sentence, but a common theme is that LEO has been a catalyst for change.

LEO has changed how researchers and providers interact. In fact, when we first got started, few if any of our provider partners had ever collaborated with a researcher. LEO set out to change that. When LEO was still just an idea, we invited the leaders of five social service agencies and a small group of researchers to come to Notre Dame to see if the potential for these groups to work together was real. Well, we quickly found out that it was. The researchers saw opportunities to address important, unanswered questions, and the providers saw the potential to better understand their impact.

These conversations led to our very first projects. LEO has been bringing researchers and providers together ever since.

LEO has changed the undergraduate experience for many Notre Dame students. Our undergrad internship program has created a unique opportunity for our students to be actively involved in original, mission-driven research. These students, many of whom are now published scholars, represent great hope for the future of poverty fighting in America.

"LEO has changed how evidence is used to fight poverty in America."

LEO has changed how evidence is used to fight poverty in America. It has been exciting to see how receptive providers, policymakers and funders are to our work. When we launched a relatively small scale study that provided fewer than 100 low-income students comprehensive case management to help them graduate from community college, we had no idea that the positive results from that study would lead to a major scale up of the program, and that our findings would inform a national conversation about how to promote success in college for vulnerable students, a conversation



Jim Sullivan

LEO Co-founder and Gilbert F. Schaefer College
Professor of Economics

that has spurred a movement to provide wraparound services to such students all across the country. And just last month, Congress passed legislation authorizing the National Secure Data Service, which will help LEO access the data we need to understand which programs are most effective at improving the lives of the most vulnerable. The NSDS was a primary recommendation of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking, which grew out of conversations between LEO and members of Congress about the need for more evidence on effective programs.

The more things change, the more we realize that we are only just getting started. So much more needs to be done. 10 years and more change to come,

Jim •



Bill Evans

LEO Co-founder and Keough-Hesburgh
Professor of Economics

When Jim and I first hatched the idea for LEO, the biggest unknown was whether there was demand among service providers for the evidence we hoped to generate. To help reduce this uncertainty, before we launched, we ran a two-day “get to know you” session where leaders from six Catholic Charities and the same number of academics met at Notre Dame. The social service agencies outlined their signature programs and the academics discussed how evaluations are done and suggested how they might be welded into their programs. Our fear was that over the two days the two groups would have little in common and awkward silence would prevail. To our delight, the conversation was active, exciting, and in the end, four projects were in the works allowing LEO to launch.

As we approach the 10th anniversary, I am constantly reminded that the most rewarding component of my work with

LEO is the same today as it was back in that pre-launch conference—our interactions with our service provider partners. Their passion for their work and their devotion to helping their clients find a way to a better future is humbling. Truly poverty’s fiercest adversaries and their creativity in solving problems, ability to stretch limited resources, and their desire to make systemic change in a sometimes-stagnant system provides fuel for our incredible staff.

“My delight in working with our partners is no more evident than when we conduct a site visit.”

My delight in working with our partners is no more evident than when we conduct a partner site visit. On these trips we get to see programs in action and chat with clients about their experiences. These visits are important because we can get more done in a day and a half in person than in eight weeks over zoom video conferences. Unfortunately, over the past two and a half years, COVID has made most of our interactions with our partners virtual. Thankfully, this summer, we’ve had the opportunity to return to these visits and I’ve made trips to projects in Dallas, Detroit, Chicago, Columbus, Dayton, Cincinnati, Hagerstown, Phoenix, and West Virginia. The life

stories of clients are at one time heart wrenching in that many did not start life with the resources or love that my family provided me. At the same time, there is the uplifting aspect of hearing how a program can alter the trajectory of someone’s life.

Maybe the most impressive aspect about our partners is that they think broadly. It’s not only about their little corner of the world. They understand that the evidence from their community can potentially change lives elsewhere. Many of you that I’ve talked to about LEO know that one of my favorite partnerships is with Uplifting Parents (UP) run by Catholic Social Services in Rapid City, South Dakota. UP provides trauma-informed case management and financial assistance for single parents hoping to complete a college degree. We’ve completed recruitment into the experiment and are waiting as the evaluation participants move through their schooling. The interim results we’ve generated are very encouraging that the program is having a tremendous impact on increasing college completion. When I relayed these early estimates to the creator of the program, it was certainly time to do a little endzone dance or celebrate with a nice bottle of wine. In contrast, her response was to say she would not celebrate until the 100th site of UP was opened. Another example of how our social service partners drive loudly echoes the Notre Dame call to be a force for good in the world. It’s a privilege for us at LEO to use our research skills to put some empirical content on the great work they do.

Bill ●

What the Experts Say

Improving Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care

Brendan Perry
LEO Project Design Manager

Approximately one in 20 U.S. children experience foster care at some point in their childhood. Those who have experienced foster care have a higher risk of living in poverty, having a teenage pregnancy, engaging in alcohol and drug use, being arrested, having long term mental and physical health problems, and are less likely to enroll and complete college than the general population.

“It would be fair to say that youth exiting foster care have the worst outcomes of any population in the United States,” says LEO Research Sarah Kroeger. “Yet, despite the challenges faced by these youth, there is very limited rigorous evidence on which interventions improve their outcomes.”

Sarah and a team of LEO research assistants recently surveyed the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse as well as prominent papers in the field of foster care, cataloging studies that explore the effectiveness of programs aimed at improving outcomes for youth in the child welfare system. This exercise left the research team with more questions than answers.

Only a handful of programs have been evaluated through large, randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and shown to be successful. Foster care prevention programs like Positive Parenting Program (Triple P), Parent Management Training-Oregon Model, and SafeCare, are among those with promising evidence. Evaluations of other models

that focus on supporting the youth while in foster care through mentoring, coaching, and or clinical support, such as Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC), also find some evidence of success. While these findings are important, these interventions are not available across the country, leaving most case managers in a poor position





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to make evidence-based decisions about program referrals. More program-level impact evaluations are needed to build out the knowledge base of effective child welfare programming.

Through partnership with Friends of the Children, a national nonprofit committed to empowering youth, Sarah and the LEO team are looking to contribute to the knowledge base by designing a randomized evaluation of Friends of the Children’s new 2Gen approach. The 2Gen intervention includes mentor support to caregivers to build protective capacities, navigate social service programs, and build social capital while helping children focus on creating goals and developing social-emotional skills. LEO is collaborating with the national office and five Friends of the Children chapters (Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Fargo-Moorhead, and Tacoma) to launch a study this fall.

While conducting more impact evaluations is an important piece of the puzzle, as we look forward, there are several big questions in the space

of child welfare. Sarah and her team identified the following:

- Can we identify interventions that decrease the need for foster care?
- Which programs improve outcomes for foster alumni at various life stages?
- How can foster care best support kinship placements?
- How much does kinship placement matter and what makes kinship care more successful?
- What is the impact of privatization of foster care?
- What are the effects of services on objective child welfare outcomes?

In the coming months and years, LEO is eager to collaborate with counties, states, and nonprofits to answer these questions and build evidence to support youth and families in the child welfare system. •

A note from Paul Ryan

A core part of Notre Dame's mission is to "create a sense of human solidarity and a concern for the common good," and there is no better embodiment of this principle than the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities (LEO). Notre Dame's mission further states that the University has a "responsibility to advance knowledge in a search for truth" and over the past decade, LEO has capably shouldered this heavy responsibility by advancing poverty-fighting strategies rooted in evidence and designed to actually help people who are in-need.

In today's polarized age, LEO's use of data and research to combat poverty has become more important than ever. And as the laboratory celebrates 10 years of advancing policies and solutions that help people realize their version of the American Dream, it's important to take stock of their approach and why it matters.

As a legislator in Congress, I was appalled and frankly surprised at the dearth of non-partisan research and the lack of basic evidence when it came to measuring the federal government's poverty-fighting efforts. Despite a more than 50-year "War on Poverty," the



federal government myopically focused on dollars spent rather than outcomes achieved.

Because Congress lacked real-world evidence and data about how programs and strategies were actually impacting those they served, legislators were often flying blind when it came to allocating federal funds. Far too frequently, well-meaning debates about expanding upward mobility devolved into ideological fights. The end result of these partisan battles was sadly predictable: Real progress on fighting poverty remained elusive, solutions delivering real results were not

prioritized, and Americans continued to struggle.

It was clear Congress had to act if we were ever going to make progress and one day break the endless cycles of poverty in our communities.

That is why, working with Democratic Senator Patty Murray of Washington and LEO, we developed the Evidence-Based Policymaking Commission Act of 2016, which brought a bipartisan group of experts together to address the federal government's data and evidence gap in the poverty-fighting space. This bipartisan Commission offered recommendations that were



worked into legislation called the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018. This law, signed right after my time as Speaker of the House concluded, modernized the government’s data collection, sharing, protection, and dissemination practices. And over the long-term, it will help the federal government share data more robustly and more regularly with practitioners, legislators, and academics around the country.

The underlying theory of the law was simple: If well-intentioned policymakers and researchers are able to access more data and better understand what strategies are working, the federal government could allocate funds and develop interventions based on evidence and outcomes. We could avoid those ideological cul-de-sacs when it came to fighting poverty and simply follow the data to determine what works.

In many ways, this approach is one that LEO has adopted and mastered over the last decade. Working on the front-lines of communities around the

country, LEO has actively buttressed programs and promoted strategies making tangible differences in people’s lives. They are backing this tactical support up with randomized controlled trials, pilot programs, and qualitative and quantitative studies. This hands-on, data-driven approach should, in my view, take a lot of the partisanship out of fighting poverty.

Poverty is persistent. It won’t be solved overnight, but we need organizations like LEO to shine a spotlight on the transformative efforts underway in our country. We need to consistently collect evidence and data to objectively determine how we can best help more Americans who are struggling. We need to encourage everyone—from policymakers in Congress, to leaders in our communities, and to researchers at universities like Notre Dame—to move off partisan talking points and onto unassailable evidence and objective data. This is how we can actually win the “War on Poverty.”

I have every confidence that LEO will remain at the foreground of this battle. They have amassed a 10-year track record of showing how we can successfully fight poverty and change lives for the better. LEO has created a model that not only works in our polarized environment but also makes a tangible, real-world impact. Their efforts are simply amazing and I cannot wait to see what LEO will accomplish in its next decade. ●

“Because Congress lacked real-world evidence and data about how programs and strategies were actually impacting those they served, legislators were often flying blind when it came to allocating federal funds.”

Future learnings

Replication: Then, Now, and Tomorrow

Patrick Borders

LEO Dissemination Associate

These first 10 years, the LEO team has primarily been focused on creating evidence through rigorous research and has become a leader in that regard. But the use of evidence is becoming a greater priority—especially in terms of scaling and replicating proven programs.

What is Replication?

When it comes to our work, replication really means two different things. For a program it means taking what's been done and proven effective in one environment and packaging it and replicating it in a new context. This is related to, but different from scale, which typically means taking what's worked well and expanding it within the original context to serve more people. For research, replication means taking a proven program into a new context (new location and/or new type of organization) and replicating it with fidelity to achieve similar results as measured by implementing a replication RCT. One way to think about this is program replication can happen without research, but research replication needs program replication.

In the early years of LEO, we had the opportunity to research a couple of programs ("Stay the Course" in Texas and "Reading for Life" in Indiana) that both saw early evidence of promise. With each program, LEO researchers showed that the interventions were leading to the intended outcomes. Based on that initial evidence of promise, both providers decided to expand by way of replication. Here's a closer look at each project.

Stay the Course[®] Learnings

Stay the Course is a program which pairs nontraditional students with a "Navigator" to help them overcome barriers that may otherwise prevent them from graduating. Upon completion of LEO's initial research, Stay the Course was taken from one campus at Tarrant County Community College to all five of the college's campuses. The provider, Catholic Charities Fort Worth (CCFW) set the goal of packaging this program and moving it outside of the original site via replication. With this goal came the need for increased fundraising, manuals, training and technical assistance for new sites, and for a replication study to determine if the new sites saw the same initial success as the original. In executing this plan, LEO and CCFW realized a few challenges:

- It was difficult to select new sites with partners equally committed to both the mission of Stay the Course and to continuing to build rigorous research.
- It was a challenge to achieve fidelity of program implementation and required more ongoing technical assistance from the provider.
- Replication sites wanted more control over the program and specific logistics or decisions throughout the implementation process.
- The funding model of using an RFP requiring a local match involved many local and national private foundations and donors, thus time and capacity.

Facing these challenges, and others, CCFW decided not to continue with the replication support and all but one site stopped running the Stay the Course program.

Reading for Life Learnings

Reading for Life (RFL) was a juvenile diversion program that used volunteers to guide first time offenders through reading groups. LEO's research showed juveniles in RFL were significantly less likely to commit another crime and particularly less likely to commit a felony. The Reading for Life, Inc organization aimed to then scale the program and replicate it in three new communities with LEO doing a replication RCT to determine impact. In pursuing this rapid expansion, the Reading for Life, Inc organization faced many challenges, some of them being:

- The original designer of the program was also the person responsible for running the nonprofit, which proved to be a logistical challenge.
- New leadership at the nonprofit was committed to expansion and replication, but struggled to shift control of the program from the original designer to multiple new staffers.
- Criminal justice systems in different jurisdictions present challenges in creating buy-in due to having to receive sign-off from judges, probation officers, and other community stakeholders.
- The original intervention was delivered by volunteers, which proved cost-effective, but proved difficult with replication efforts due to challenges with recruitment and training.

Due to these challenges, Reading for Life, Inc. replication efforts ended.



A Model of Successful Replication

One of the most successful scale and replication efforts in social programs is the Nurse-Family Partnership® (NFP). This program partners specially trained nurses with first-time moms, starting early in the pregnancy and continuing until the child's second birthday. This partnership, which centers around regular in-home visits, has proven to be successful via one RCT in the 1970s

supporting evidence—George W. Bush's Administration piloted home visiting programs in 15 states and in 2010 the Obama Administration created The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program. MIECHV now receives around \$400 Million per year of federal dollars that are sent to states and local community agencies to run evidence-based nurse home visiting programs, like NFP,

right kind of agency partners to run these programs in their own local communities.

Growing LEO's Replication Efforts

LEO has big goals for building out and supporting replication efforts—both for our partners and for the vulnerable populations evidence-based programs can help. We have a strong partnership with the Goodwill Excel Center. Excel Centers provide an accelerated adult learning program to help adult students earn their full Core-40 High School degrees within 2½ years, with the goal of improving labor-market outcomes for graduates of the program. LEO conducted a quasi-experimental study which showed that Excel Center students have higher earnings and more stable employment. Because Goodwill Excel centers are already being replicated across many states, LEO is working with them to learn more about how Excel programs can benefit specific populations like justice involved persons and in different geographic locations.

While a key goal for LEO is to find the next Nurse-Family Partnership program and duplicate its amazing scaling success, LEO is spending time focused on meeting our provider partners where they are with sharing the impact of their programs—whether that means supporting the dissemination of results to their stakeholders or packaging it to be replicated in new communities. We're excited for this work, as we see replication is a key to allowing our top notch research to have the broadest impact and serve the most people in poverty. •



and two additional replication RCTs in the 1980s. Replication programs demonstrated the same strong results for mothers and children as the original and thus, an effort to scale nationally was begun. A national organization, the Nurse Family Partnership expanded and now has served over 366,000, since replication efforts began in 1996 and is a staple in 41 of the 50 states. A part of this success was policymakers

across the country.

NFP figured out crucial elements of replicating and scaling successfully. They built a full training and technical assistance program to ensure support and program fidelity at all sites. They have identified the appropriate and best beneficiaries of their program—first time mothers and their children. Further, they have identified the

Forming the future

Bridget Schippers (ND '24)

Undergraduate Marketing & Communications Assistant

From the moment we were founded in 2012, LEO has employed undergraduate economics students as research assistants. Our interns dive into meaningful projects, working both onsite with nonprofit service providers across the country and in-person at Notre Dame with our communications and research teams.

The program gives students a unique opportunity for research experience while also tapping into their passion for LEO's mission of building evidence and outsmarting poverty. For many, their LEO internship is just the beginning of this work. Past interns have gone on to careers in government, public service, and even as researchers themselves, where they put the skills learned at LEO to use as a force for good in our nation

This summer, as we welcome a new class of LEO undergraduate interns, we check in with past interns to see what they are up to today.

"I want to be doing something that dedicates my time and my skills to something that matters..."

Meet Emily

Emily's interest in economics started in her high school economics class—actually it was the first class Emily ever thought about outside the classroom. She remembers wondering, "Wait, do people have jobs in economics? Can people do that?" So that's the first thing Emily did when she came to Notre Dame.

She heard about LEO from her first-year advisor and applied for an internship after working hard to get into and do well in LEO co-founder Bill Evans' Econometrics class. Next thing she knew, Emily was spending the summer in a field-based internship for LEO partner Catholic Charities Fort Worth. (see page x in our cover story). "Working with people, collecting data, and being on the ground learning the operations of running an RCT was so interesting," she said. "There's a lot of moving pieces and details to really take into account, and that was something that I was learning."



EMILY MEROLA, FORMER LEO RESEARCH ASSISTANT

Emily continued working for LEO part time during the school year. "It's one of the best ways and one of the only ways to really be involved with research in a meaningful way for Econ in undergrad."

After graduating in 2020, Emily joined the LEO team as a research associate. "If I have the means to choose what I'm going to be doing with my job, I want to be doing something that dedicates my time and my skills to something that matters or something that seems to be making a difference for people."

Plus, she explains, "being an RA here is really unique compared to being an RA elsewhere in the economics field. Being an RA for LEO you're also a project manager. You're the point person with the providers and there's an incredible amount of responsibility that you get to have and work with really cool partners all around the country."

Her time as an RA gave a chance for responsibility and discernment. "It allowed me a place to decide where I wanted to go next, and it ended up being a really great fit." Now, Emily is confident that she wants to pursue research. After finishing up her position with LEO this summer, she will be heading off to Princeton this fall to pursue a PhD in Economics.

"I'm excited to really just dive into the challenge and know everything that I can about this subject. Interests can develop and change, but I largely want to continue studying poverty, studying applied micro, thinking about policy interacting with people and what we can do to make things better."

Building evidence and outsmarting poverty will continue to be important to her no matter where she goes. Emily emphasized, "Regardless of where I might end up, it's going to be at a place that's doing high-quality research that seems meaningful in this field."



Meet Vivian

Vivian's introduction to economics was also in high school, but it was a microeconomics class at Notre Dame that really sparked her interest. Especially when she learned about LEO. "To hear that there was a way I could study microeconomics that had meaning... that was really important and awesome to get involved in," explains Vivian.



VIVIAN CRUMLISH, CURRENT LEO RESEARCH ASSISTANT

Vivian spent two summers interning for LEO as a research assistant, spending much of her time reading economics research and putting together literature reviews. "I spent a lot of time learning about tiers of evidence and how papers connect to each other. The first step in research is to prove that your research is important." Familiarizing herself with the academic world of economics sharpened her understanding of how researchers evaluate each other's work and what makes a study strong.

Vivian graduated a semester early and worked on projects for LEO full-time until beginning her program that summer with the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE). Following her interest in education research and policy, she

spent her time with ACE as a teacher at a disadvantaged school in Oklahoma. She found, "Being in the classroom was really important to me during ACE, and I really enjoyed that direct service, but there were a lot of things going on around me, with decisions being made about education or about my students, that really frustrated me."

With her experience studying economics and education initiatives at LEO, she couldn't help imagining ways to improve these students' outcomes at a larger scale. So she came back to LEO as a research associate in hopes of having a broader impact on education.

Currently, Vivian is working on LEO's Porter Leath project, which reflects the full circle aspect often seen at LEO. The project is evaluating the impact of an early childhood educator coaching program. Something Vivian experienced first hand. "We had teacher coaching, and so I really believe that giving anyone an academic coach would make them better," she shared.

Certainty in the research world is hard fought to say the least, but is clear when Vivian is asked what direction she'd like to go next. "Whatever I do, it will be with education." •

"The first step in research is to prove that your research is important."





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YEARS &

"Ten years ago, I was desperate for solutions that would do more than just make poverty a bit less painful for Americans struggling in it, but rather move them completely out, for good. Ten years ago, there were no domestic poverty labs building causal evidence about what works to reduce poverty. A lot can happen in a decade."

Heather Reynolds, *Up at Night*, page 5.



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