

Spring 2019

LEO QUARTERLY REPORT



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BILL EVANS AT MIDWEST ECONOMICS ASSOCIATION

On March 15, LEO Co-Founder Dr. Bill Evans delivered the keynote address at this year's Midwest Economics Association Annual Meeting in St. Louis. He presented on two LEO evaluations of intensive case management: the Padua Program, which aims to increase economic self-sufficiency for families in crisis, and Stay the Course, which incorporates mentoring as a catalyst for community college completion. Both projects are in partnership with one of LEO's longest-standing partners, Catholic Charities Fort Worth. Dr. Evans highlighted the need for case management, the benefits of holistic, client-centered service delivery, and what research projects look like for providers on the ground.

JIM SULLIVAN PRESENTS ON NCAF PANEL

On March 20, LEO Co-Founder Dr. Jim Sullivan presented about evidence-based policymaking to the National Community Action Foundation (NCAF) in Washington, DC. The NCAF represents the policy interests of over 1,000 Community Action Agencies working on poverty alleviation across the country. Dr. Sullivan discussed how the growing emphasis on evidence is transforming the way we fight poverty in America.

LEO AT MPH DATA DAY

Patrick Turner, Rachel Fulcher Dawson and Becca Brough from LEO took part in Data Day at the Indiana Statehouse. Hosted by the Management Performance Hub (MPH), Data Day brought together over 27 different state agencies, research labs and vendors focused on the ways data can be used to evaluate programs and to understand where

state resources are being used. LEO presented on an evaluation of the Excel Center run by Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana.

LEO HOSTS SAN FRANCISCO EVENT ON HOMELESSNESS

This spring, LEO gathered a panel of researchers and providers in San Francisco to discuss research and programs on homelessness in the Bay Area. This area has one of the largest homeless populations in the country. Residents and leaders have shown their commitment to finding a solution to homelessness through their support of numerous measures to increase affordable housing. LEO has a strong and growing body of work evaluating the impact of different programs aimed at preventing and reducing homelessness.

WE'RE GROWING

Joining the LEO team are Melissa Benefiel, our new Grant Support Specialist, and Scott Hurbough, as the Senior Associate, Project Development. In addition, joining us this summer are nine undergraduate Research Assistants working at LEO to support the research, evaluation and dissemination work we do with providers around the country. We are grateful for the talented people joining our already talented team and look forward to working with them to reduce poverty and improve lives!

LEO CASE STUDY SERIES

In March, LEO launched a new Case Study Series on our website. This series is designed to highlight research projects and partners to give brief snapshots of what it's like for providers to work with us and the impact of our work.

FACULTY AFFILIATE UPDATES

LEO's research network is comprised of faculty affiliates from universities around the country with experience evaluating anti-poverty programs. LEO identifies innovative projects and matches them to academic researchers with appropriate expertise.

ABBIE WOZNIAK

LEO Faculty Affiliate Abbie Wozniak has been named senior research economist and the first director of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis' Opportunity & Inclusive Growth Institute. In this role, Professor Wozniak will oversee the Institute's research teams, partnerships, and outreach activities.

JEN DOLEAC

LEO Faculty Affiliate Jen Doleac, Associate Professor of Economics at Texas A & M University, recently launched a new podcast about law, economics, and crime, called Probable Causation. Each episode features an in-depth interview with a fellow scholar about their research related to crime and criminal justice policy. Current and past episodes can be found at <http://probablecausation.com>, or by following the show on Twitter @ProbCausation.

CHLOE GIBBS

LEO Faculty Affiliate Chloe Gibbs, Assistant Professor of Economics at Notre Dame, was featured in the first episode of the new podcast Probable Causation. Professor Gibbs talked about her work on the intergenerational effects of anti-poverty programs like Head Start.

RESEARCH PROJECT UPDATE

Partner Agencies:
King County Metro
Transit

Policy Focus Area:
Transportation

Investigators:
David Phillips, Matt Freedman

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The ORCA LIFT transit subsidy program is offered by King County Metro Transit in King County, WA. Eligible residents pay a flat rate of \$1.50 per ride for public transportation at seven participating transportation agencies in the County, including trains, rails, and busses. The program is targeted at low-income families and individuals, and residents are considered eligible if they earn below 200% of the federal poverty level.

SIGNIFICANCE

Increasing access to affordable transportation for low-income and marginalized populations is crucial in reducing poverty. Low-income households continually report transportation as their second highest living expense (behind housing), and transportation costs as a share of overall budget are increasing (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Additionally, because transit access increases access to employment opportunities, geographic mobility improves economic mobility. The opposite is true, too: a 2014 NYU study finds that poor public transit access is linked to higher rates of unemployment and lower levels of income. By prioritizing affordable public transit for low-income residents, cities can improve outcomes for vulnerable residents.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What is the effect of providing five free months of public transit, compared to \$10 of free public transit, on recipients' transit use, employment, and other outcomes? Do individuals who receive extended access to free public transit alter their transportation habits? Does receiving expanded access to free transit increase the likelihood of employment? How does free transit affect other outcomes, including use of public benefits and healthcare?

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

This project uses a randomized controlled trial to measure the effect of a deeper transit subsidy on transportation and economic outcomes. Eligible individuals receive an ORCA LIFT card, which is randomly preloaded with either five months of free rides, or \$10 in transit fare. Individuals are recruited from the SNAP- and TANF-eligible populations at several Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) offices throughout the County. DSHS customer service specialists currently offer \$10 ORCA LIFT cards to all beneficiaries, so study participants will receive a transit card of greater or equal value to what they would have received in the absence of the study. An additional aspect of this study is a Chatbot text survey that will be used to collect data on how participants' transportation preferences may shift towards public transit use. Linking participants' data with DSHS administrative records will then allow the researchers to measure the impact of the ORCA LIFT deeper subsidy on outcomes of interest.

PROJECT STATUS

The project first launched on March 13, 2019 and was fully operational at all three DSHS offices by March 15. There are currently about 220 people enrolled in the study, half of whom are actively engaging with the Chatbot survey.



Briana Lovell leads the policy and pricing team within King County Metro's Mobility Division. This group is working to simplify fares for customers and enhance regional coordination, launch innovative programs and services, and adopt an income-based approach to fares. As part of this work, Metro has conducted extensive stakeholder outreach, customer research, and data analysis to identify how fare policies could be more equitable and to inform policy recommendations. Briana has worked for Metro for five years leading strategic planning and policy efforts. Previously she worked as a consultant on transit projects.

BRIANA LOVELL

Why did King County choose to prioritize transit for low-income residents?

King County Metro has a long history of addressing racial justice and social equity issues. In 2015, Metro introduced one of the nation's first low-income fare programs, ORCA LIFT, which offers nearly 50% off single rides and monthly passes for those at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. Facing persistent racial inequities and a mounting homelessness crisis, King County leadership and community members advocated for expanding access to transit for low-income people and wanted to better understand the impact of transit fares and access.

What does the County hope to learn from the study?

While there is strong evidence of the success of the ORCA LIFT program – customers have taken nearly 20 million trips since the program launched – we have not been able to conduct a rigorous evaluation of the program's benefits to truly understand the impact. Through this study, we hope to learn about the potential of reduced-cost or free transit access to increase access to jobs and opportunity and reduce household transportation spending for low-income households. Additionally, we hope to gain insight into several topics that will inform future investments, including the potential administrative and fare costs of operating an expanded benefit program, the potential secondary benefits of reducing fare evasion or reducing cash payment on-board, and whether there are ways to identify those who are more or less likely to benefit from this program model.

How do you anticipate the County will utilize the results of the evaluation?

King County Metro is currently studying ways to expand the ORCA LIFT program. The results of this evaluation will be critical to development of policy proposals for the King County Council and County Executive this fall, as well as in upcoming budget processes. Project learnings will also be used to inform and support additional program evaluation efforts that are currently in the planning stages.

What have you gained from working on a LEO research project?

This project has been an incredible learning opportunity and partnership for Metro. This was our first time launching a randomized controlled trial, which required significant internal education and preparation. We are also using some new techniques, such as a Chatbot survey for study participants. LEO was also critical in bringing the project from design to implementation, conducting enrollment training, preparing materials, supporting analysis, and providing project management and support to keep this complex effort on track. Through this project, we have built increased in-house knowledge as well as institutional support for conducting in-depth evaluations of our programs and services.

In your opinion, what role does research play in reducing poverty?

Research is critical to ensuring that public policy and resources are set up to support the programs and strategies that are most effective at achieving results. While designing a high-quality research project can require an up-front time commitment, using rigorous methods will provide us with the best information about how to be responsible stewards of public funds and advance the county's equity and social justice mission. Hopefully, we can use this type of information to increase the funding available to poverty-reduction programs and improve outcomes for people in King County.



Becca Brough is a Research Associate at the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities (LEO). In this role, she manages impact evaluations in issue areas like homelessness and transportation. Becca is currently working on the ORCA LIFT project and several other impact evaluations currently in the exploratory and developing stages. Becca graduated from University of Virginia in the spring of 2018 with a B.A. in Economics and Foreign Affairs. Prior to joining LEO, she participated in research at the University of Virginia where she focused on two individual year-long projects regarding the demographic effects surrounding fertility and migration.

BECCA BROUGH

What is your role at LEO?

I am a Research Associate here at LEO. In this role, I have the opportunity to be involved in all stages of projects; from building relationships with providers to study implementation and evaluation. My favorite aspect of the Research Associate role is working with social service providers. I enjoy learning about the innovative programs that have been designed to address critical needs in communities across the United States.

Why did you join LEO?

I was attracted to the way LEO's work uses economic tools to address poverty. I am very interested in economics research, but I am passionate about the ways this research can be used to improve lives. I am very fortunate to work in an environment where we are not just united by an interest in economics, but first and foremost are united by the mission to end poverty.

In your opinion, what role does research play in reducing poverty?

I believe research can be the *solution* to poverty. There are many organizations and programs in the US that are united in their mission to reduce poverty. But fewer organizations are dedicated to helping these organizations understand the impact of their programs. Researchers can play a valuable role in filling this knowledge gap. By helping social service providers and policy makers understand which programs are most effective, we can ensure that these programs are expanded to reach everyone who stands to benefit from them.

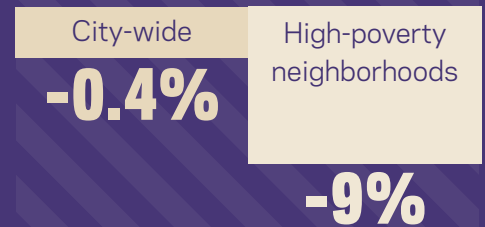
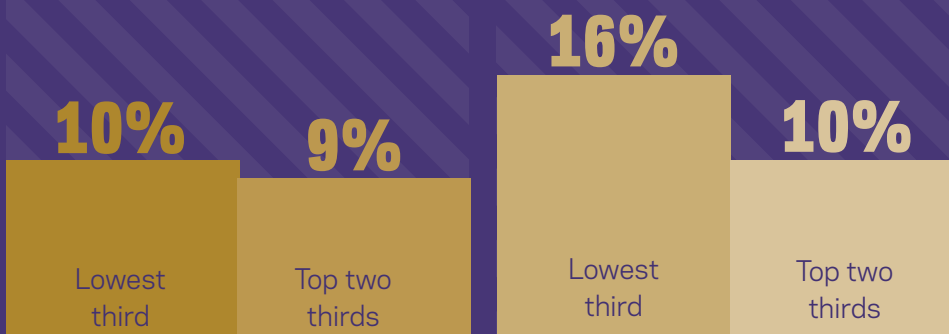
You recently visited Seattle to launch the ORCA LIFT project in the field. What did you do while you were there?

In partnership with DSHS and King County Metro, we launched a study to better understand the impact of reducing transit barriers. We recently traveled to Seattle to introduce DSHS staff to the study and to the crucial role they play in the study's enrollment process. DSHS staff are really at the frontline of this study; they work with clients to fill out the intake survey and answer questions that clients have about the study.

I had the opportunity to visit each DSHS office to assist during the first few days of study enrollment. This was a crucial step in the process - it was in these first few days where DSHS staff helped identify things that needed to be modified in the enrollment process, survey, etc. These visits also gave me a better understanding of the landscape of DSHS and allowed me to build relationships with the staff who are responsible for enrollment.

BY THE NUMBERS: TRANSPORTATION COSTS AND ACCESS TO JOBS

Nationally, transportation costs as a share of total expenditures are rising faster for low-income families over time.



Percentage of total income spent on transportation, by income distribution (2000)

Percentage of total income spent on transportation, by income distribution (2014)

Decline in number of jobs within the median commuting distance in Seattle (2000-2012)

Statistics come from the American Community Survey.