Idaho Safe Teen Assessment Centers: Early Results and ROI Impact

Report prepared August 2025 by J. Mac McCullough, PhD, MPH under contract from ISTAC

Introduction

In 2022, the Idaho Legislature set aside $6.5 million to create a network of centers to support youth and families across the state. These **Assessment Centers**, are based on a national best-practice model. Their purpose is to give families **one main place to go for help**, serving as a single point of contact that screens youth, provides assessments when needed, and builds individualized service plans.

Instead of pushing kids further into the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, the goal is to **catch problems early** and link families to resources that can help. The overall aim is to **keep kids out of jail, out of foster care, and on track toward healthier futures**.

As of August 2025, there are **12 assessment centers** across Idaho. Together they form the **Idaho Safe Teen Assessment Center (ISTAC) Coalition**. Each center reports data on who they serve, what services they provide, and how many youth are referred to outside programs.

While ISTAC is still new, and changes at this scale take time to fully measure, early evidence suggests the centers are making a difference. The purpose of this report is to estimate the Coalition's **return on investment (ROI)**—including whether the benefits of the program outweigh the costs.

How the Analysis Was Done

This analysis was conducted by Dr. J. Mac McCullough, a health economist from Boise. The approach used was careful and conservative. In other words, whenever there was uncertainty, the calculations were set up to **underestimate benefits and overestimate costs**. This way, if the results still showed a positive ROI, we could be more confident the program is truly beneficial.

Data came directly from the 12 ISTAC sites. Every center shared information about how many youth they served, what services they provided, and in some cases, what results they saw. Some centers reported exact numbers—for example, how many youth stopped using drugs or stayed in school—while others provided impact stories or qualitative evidence. For sites without hard numbers available, averages from other centers were used in this analysis.

The analysis focused on three main outcomes:

1. **Preventing substance use** (drug abuse)
2. **Preventing juvenile justice system involvement**
3. **Helping youth stay in school** (preventing dropouts)

These outcomes were chosen because many centers had data available and because reliable dollar values already exist for how much society saves by avoiding these problems. For example, preventing a single high school dropout provides society with an estimated **$263,651** in lifetime benefits.

Program Costs

The centers were funded with state legislative money and support from the Millennium Fund. Between FY23 - FY25, the state spent about **$12.2 million total**, or just over **$4 million per year**. This covered the launch of some centers, including four in rural areas, and ongoing support to keep them running.

What the Data Shows

Across all sites, ISTAC centers serve an average **2,000 youth per year** statewide. When looking at outcomes, the data suggest that every year, ISTAC centers collectively:

- Prevented about **43 cases of substance use**
- Prevented about **11 cases of juvenile justice involvement**
- Helped about **9 youth stay in school**

When translated into dollar values, these impacts add up to about **$16.8 million per year in benefits**. Compared to the annual program cost of $4 million, that equals an **ROI of 313%**.

In simpler terms, **for every $1 spent on ISTAC, the program creates over $3 in benefits for Idaho**. In fact, the program's *annual* benefits are higher than the *total* amount invested so far. That means the program has already "paid for itself" and more.

Testing the Results

To make sure these findings were robust and reliable, the analysis tested different alternative scenarios:

- **If centers with missing data were counted as having no outcomes at all**, the ROI was still positive (29%).
- **If higher but still reasonable dollar values were used for each outcome**, the ROI jumped to 550%.
- **When running a simulation with 10,000 possible variations of the data across the entire range of plausible values for each parameter**, the ROI was positive more than 99% of the time.

These tests show that the conclusion—ISTAC provides more benefits than it costs—is not dependent on any single assumption.

Why It Matters

The financial savings are important, but the real impact goes beyond money. Each prevented case of substance use, each youth kept out of the justice system, and each student who stays in school represents a life changed for the better. These benefits ripple out to families, schools, and communities.

The numbers also highlight how costly negative outcomes are for society. A single case of drug misuse or school dropout can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars over a lifetime. By preventing even a handful of these cases each year, ISTAC can generate large societal benefits for Idaho.

Limitations

This report is an **early look** at the program. Some limits to keep in mind:

- Not all centers were able to collect full outcome data yet.
- Only a few types of outcomes were measured, meaning the true impact is likely even larger.
- Long-term effects may grow stronger as the centers mature and serve more youth.

Still, even with these limits and very conservative estimates, the program shows a strong positive return.

Conclusion and Next Steps

In just a few years, the Idaho Safe Teen Assessment Centers have built a statewide network that serves thousands of youth. Early data show clear benefits: fewer youth using substances, fewer getting involved with the justice system, and more staying in school.

Financially, the program is already returning more than **three dollars in benefits for every one dollar invested**. This makes ISTAC not only a smart social investment but also a smart financial one.

As the program grows, collecting more detailed data will help sharpen these estimates. Future reports could include health outcomes, family well-being, and community-wide impacts. For now, the evidence is clear: ISTAC is making a difference for Idaho's youth, families, and taxpayers.

Idaho Safe Teen Assessment Center: Early Estimates of Coalition Return on Investment

Report prepared August 2025 by J. Mac McCullough, PhD, MPH

under contract from Idaho Safe Teen Assessment Center Coalition

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Executive Summary

This report examines the work carried out by the Idaho Safe Teen Assessment Center (ISTAC) Coalition. Data on the Coalition's outcomes and costs were used to estimate the return on investment (ROI) for the Coalition's work as of August 2025.

The Idaho Safe Teen Assessment Center (ISTAC) Coalition is funded by $12.2 million in investment by the Idaho Legislature across fiscal years 2023-2025. There are currently twelve assessment centers across Idaho. Many assessment centers follow National Assessment Center best practice models and operate as single points of contact to divert youth from child welfare and justice systems while connecting youth and families with individualized community-based services and resources.

The ISTAC Coalition has served approximately 3,958 participants in Idaho since program inception, averaging 1,972 participants annually. According to Coalition site reports, on an annual basis ISTAC sites prevent an estimated 43 cases of substance use, avert 11 instances of juvenile justice system involvement, and support 8 instances of school persistence among program participants. Using established societal benefit valuations from peer-reviewed literature and applying conservative estimation principles throughout the analysis, these outcomes are associated with approximately $16.8 million in annual societal benefits for Idahoans.

Compared to average annual program costs of $4,080,333, the Coalition generates an ROI of 313%. For every dollar invested in ISTAC, the program covers its costs and in addition returns more than $3 in additional societal benefits to Idahoans. Comprehensive sensitivity analyses, including Monte Carlo simulations, demonstrate that the positive ROI finding is robust across varying assumptions. The Coalition's ROI remained positive in 99.1 percent of simulation iterations.

ISTAC impact and cost data collected as of August 2025 strongly suggest that the Coalition's work is associated with a positive societal ROI for Idahoans. Future work examining a broader range of ISTAC outcomes may reveal even stronger ROI estimates.

Introduction

In 2022, the Idaho Legislature appropriated $6.5 million to establish a network of centers across the state to support Idaho's youth and families. These centers follow the National Assessment Center's (NAC's) best practice models and aim to divert youth from child welfare and justice systems through a single point of contact, identify underlying issues contributing to concerning behavior, and partner with youth and families to access individualized services and/or resources.[1] As stated in the Idaho Department of Juvenile Corrections (IDJC) Grant Manual:

> *Assessment Centers provide a single point of contact, screening for need, and when appropriate, provide a more comprehensive assessment of youth and families to inform an individualized plan connecting youth and families with community-based resources within their area. The goal of the grant is to prevent youths' entrance (or further entrance) into the juvenile justice and child welfare systems by providing connections to community-based resources and services through expanded access to centers or centers services.*

As of August 2025, there are 12 assessment centers across Idaho that have come together as the Idaho Safe Teen Assessment Center (ISTAC) Coalition (see Figure 1). Sites that are members of the ISTAC Coalition have received funding from the Idaho Legislature via the IDJC.[2] ISTAC members leverage local expertise and resource networks to carry out assessment center work in their communities. Each site completes quarterly performance metric reporting on number of participants served, participant demographics, referrals, partnerships, program staffing, and other key outputs from their work.[3] Additional information on assessment centers and the ISTAC is available online from the IDJC.[2]

Motivation for establishing assessment centers in Idaho was to "…mak[e] it easier and faster for youth to get help" and to "create opportunities for better outcomes at far less cost to taxpayers" by "reducing hospitalization and incarceration… domestic violence, child abuse, and out-of-home placements," according to statements from Monty Prow, Director of IDJC, and Dave Jeppesen, then-Director of the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare.[4]



Figure 1: Map of Current Idaho Safe Teen Assessment Center Coalition Sites

As the ISTAC Coalition grows and establishes itself across the state, it is important to examine the extent to which these impact and cost-saving visions are being realized. For example, The Bridge, a youth and family resource center in Ada County, reports providing orientation, screening, and case planning services to more than 500 participants between opening in March 2023 and the end of 2024.[5] Yet ISTAC sites are, as a group, targeting large-scale changes in participant outcomes. Such outcomes can take time to occur and measure.[6,7] It is therefore still somewhat early in the ISTAC lifecycle to fully assess outcomes and financial impacts. Recognizing that important caveat, it is nevertheless possible to collect estimates of early Coalition results.

The purpose of this report is to compile and analyze available data on the outcomes of ISTAC Coalition work and to estimate the societal value of the benefits of these outcomes in comparison to costs, often known as the return on investment (ROI).

Methods

This assessment was performed by J. Mac McCullough, PhD, MPH, under contract from the ISTAC. McCullough has performed numerous similar analyses on similar health and prevention programs and is a leading academic expert on economic analyses for health promotion programs. All analyses were performed using approaches consistent with established scientific methodologies for measuring the return on investment for health and prevention programming.[6-8]

A guiding principle for the analysis was one of conservatism in estimates. Given the high degree of uncertainty for many parameters in this report, wherever possible program outcomes or benefits are calculated using the most conservative estimates possible whereas program costs are calculated using most generous estimates possible. This approach tends to underestimate program benefits and overestimate program costs, resulting in a final calculation that represents the worst-case scenario ROI. This approach risks underestimating true ROI but minimizes the risk of accidentally overstating a program's ROI and incorrectly concluding that program benefits outweigh costs.

Calculating Program Benefits

ISTAC Coalition Outcomes: ISTAC Coalition sites routinely collect program "output" data including number of participants served, specific services provided, number of referrals made, and more. Sites often report data according to the NAC framework.[1] However, data required for ROI analysis differs from the standard data collected. Therefore, Coalition sites completed a data request form to aid in this ROI analysis. All twelve Coalition sites provided quantitative data on program scope and services and some qualitative description of the impacts or outcomes of their work on program participants. Additionally, five of twelve sites provided quantitative statements of outcomes from their work.

Site reports were used to calculate the total number of participants served (i.e., individuals who were referred, contacted, and participated) and at each site on a per year basis. Outcome data from site reports was extracted into summary tables and estimates for a range of outcomes were calculated for each site overall, per year, and per person-year (i.e., number of impacts per year divided by number of overall participants per year). For example, one site reported the following for its substance use prevention impacts: "One youth was referred to us while integrating back into life after several months of inpatient treatment. We referred another youth to inpatient substance use treatment. We have also seen three of the youth served completely stop using, while remaining in the community." Based on this center's self-report, this analysis used the value of 3 total substance uses prevented, with a range of 0 (no impact; none of the success is due to program involvement) to 5 (all success is entirely due to program involvement). A full set of site-level program impact reports and outcome calculations is shown in appendix tables.

Seven sites were not able to quantify outcomes due to lack of available data, though all reported positive qualitative impacts and a desire to collect outcomes data in the future. For sites without quantitative impact data, a simple imputation approach was used. For each outcome, sites with missing data were assigned the median per-person per year Coalition-wide value for each outcome. Total annual impact estimates for each site and for each outcome were then calculated. Full calculations are available in an accompanying Excel spreadsheet.

Estimating the Value of Outcomes: Outcomes were selected to be consistent with the NAC framework and with established ROI costing categories. Outcomes included in this report represent only a fraction of the total potential impacts from Coalition work. Again, this analytical decision would tend to *underestimate* the true value of program work, since other impacts not included here due to lack of data availability would only add to the total true value of this work. Outcomes assessed in this report include [1] prevention of substance use ("drug abuse"), [2] prevention of juvenile justice involvement, and [3] persistence in schooling (preventing school drop outs) among program participants. No data were available to assess other direct benefits to participants or families nor was data available regarding potential indirect benefits to communities from Coalition work.

Estimating the societal value of an outcome for health and prevention programs is commonly done by obtaining valid, reliable estimates from other studies performed for that express purpose. A review of the scientific literature found several relevant sources for this work. The most relevant peer-reviewed source for this initial examination of ISTAC outcomes was a systematic review article by Cohen, Piquero, and Jennings entitled "Estimating the costs of bad outcomes for at-risk youth and the benefits of early childhood interventions to reduce them" (*Criminal Justice Policy Review* 21(4);2010: 391-434). This source identified and compiled published societal valuations for relevant outcomes of Coalition work. A range of values is provided for all three outcomes assessed in this analysis. Keeping with the principle of maximal conservatism, the low end of estimate ranges was used, with higher discount rates for future values applied, and only the tangible benefits included. See Table 9 in Cohen et al. 2010 for a full presentation of values. For the purposes of this report, the following values were used for outcomes assessed:

Table 1: Baseline and Range for Societal Benefit Valuations Used in Analysis

Outcome	Tangible Benefits to Society per Case (Adjusted for inflation to 2025 dollars)	Range – Low	Range – High
Substance use prevention	$333,440	$0	$1,147,656
One-time juvenile criminal offender	$14,423	$0	$121,745
School persistence (prevent high school dropout)	$263,651	$0	$387,722

Calculating Program Costs

Program cost data was obtained directly from the Idaho Department of Juvenile Corrections. Since ROI analyses were performed at the Coalition-wide level, costs were also assessed across the Coalition. Costs since program inception in FY23 were considered, as shown below.

Table 2: ISTAC Program Cost Data for Fiscal Years 2023-2026

Fiscal Year (FY)	Budget Description	Cost
FY23 (July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023)	Supplemental one-time funding allowed IDJC to establish eight youth assessment centers to connect youth & families with long term community-based resources within their area, thus preventing entrance or further entrance into the juvenile justice and child welfare systems.	$6,500,000
FY24 (July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024)	IDJC was appropriated additional funds to provide limited support to existing youth assessment centers to transition to NAC Framework Tier 2 sites and to increase their service capacity. Funds also supported the replication of these services by adding four new Centers to rural areas across the state.	$4,100,000
FY25 (July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025)	• IDJC appropriated funds to support existing sites ($350,000) • Additional funds for sustainability efforts awarded to Idaho Assessment Centers through the Millennium Fund ($1,291,000)	$1,641,000
FY26 (July 1, 2025 – June 30, 2026)	Funds for sustainability efforts awarded to Idaho Assessment Centers through the Millennium Fund ($2,500,000) *Please note:* Outcome data for FY26 are not available. To align program benefits and costs, this $2,500,000 funding amount is not included in cost estimates for this analysis	---
TOTALS	**3-Year Total** **Average Annual Total**	**$12,241,000** **$4,080,333**

Calculating Program ROI

Once data were obtained for estimated ISTAC Coalition site program outcomes, societal benefit valuations, and program costs, the overall estimated ROI was calculated. The formula for ROI is fairly straightforward: $\frac{(Program\ Benefits - Program\ Costs)}{Program\ Costs}$.

To account for uncertainty throughout the analysis, two main approaches were used. One is the principle of maximum conservatism explained above. Again, this would result in a 'floor' or minimum calculated ROI value; the true ROI would be higher if additional benefits were included in analysis, higher program impact assumptions were used, larger societal benefit valuations estimates were used, less conservative assumptions were applied, or if lower cost estimates were used. Second, margin of error calculations were performed. All study parameters used conservative 'base case' estimates and also had a range. Several specific uncertainty calculations were performed to assess sensitivity of findings to the assumptions or values used in this analysis. Specifically, alternative scenarios included (1) no imputation of outcome values for sites that did not report outcomes and instead treating these sites as having zero values for all outcomes, (2) being less conservative and using higher societal benefit value estimates (i.e., using midrange or upper range values from Cohen 2010 rather than the lowest possible valuations), and (3) using a Monte Carlo simulation to allow for a range of outcome estimates for each site. Simulation parameters are shown in appendix tables. Briefly, each parameter had minimum, mode or most likely ("baseline"), and maximum value estimates as shown in the outcome tables (see

appendix). A triangle distribution was used and 10,000 iterations performed to generate a margin of error and quantify uncertainty. The main measure from simulation was the percentage of simulation trials in which the Coalition's overall ROI was positive (benefits greater than costs).

Findings

ISTAC Coalition members reported having served a total of some 3,958 participants across all program years. This equates to an average of 1,972 participants per year across the state of Idaho.

Based on these participants, Coalition sites reported the following outcomes. On a per 100-person per year basis (i.e., serving 100 participants for a full year), the median ISTAC Coalition site reported preventing 2.4 cases of substance use, averted 0.4 instances of juvenile justice system involvement, and aided in 0.4 instances of school persistence (averted drop outs). When imputed across the entire Coalition, this equates to the impacts shown in the table below:

Table 3: ISTAC Program Annual Outcomes and Societal Benefits Generated for Idahoans

Outcome	Total Annual Number of Cases Averted	Estimate of Societal Benefits Per Averted Case[8]	Annual Outcome Societal Benefits Total
Substance Use (drug abuse)	43.3	$333,440	$14,421,456
Juvenile Justice Involvement (one-time)	11.1	$14,423	$159,806
School persistence (high school dropout)	8.6	$263,651	$2,247,783
TOTAL			$16,846,046

These program benefits compare favorably to program costs. Specifically, on an annual basis, ISTAC Coalition sites are estimated to be generating outcomes that have a societal benefit of approximately $16.8 million while receiving an average of approximately $4.0 million in funding. This equates to a ROI of roughly 313%. In other words, for every $1 invested in ISTAC, Coalition sites are estimated to return more than $3 in additional benefits to society through fewer instances of substance use, fewer instances of juvenile justice system involvement, and through greater school persistence. Notably, the baseline estimate for annual ISTAC societal benefits is greater than the $14,791,000 in combined total funding provided to the Coalition for the entire FY22-FY26 period from the Idaho Legislature ($10,950,000) and Millennium Fund ($3,791,000).

Findings from sensitivity analyses suggest that the finding that the program has a positive ROI is not driven by any single study assumption nor is it unduly sensitive to any single parameter used. Sensitivity analyses are shown in full in appendix tables and summarized below. Monte Carlo simulation analysis of all parameters across showed that the estimated ROI of ISTAC Coalition outcomes reported was positive (i.e., benefits greater than costs) 99.1% of the time.

Table 4: Findings from Sensitivity Analyses

Sensitivity Analysis	Outcome	Total Annual Number of Cases Averted	Estimate of Societal Benefits Per Averted Case[8]	Annual Outcome Societal Benefits Total
(1) No imputation of data for ISTAC sites with missing outcome data	Substance Use	11.5	$333,440	$3,835,315
	Juvenile Justice Involvement	7.5	$14,423	$108,282
	School persistence	5.1	$263,651	$1,332,930
	Total Annual Societal Benefits = $5,276,527 Total Annual Costs = $4,080,333 ROI = 29%			
(2) Less conservative societal benefit valuation estimates (Cohen 2010)	Substance Use	43.3	$527,301	$22,806,047
	Juvenile Justice Involvement	11.1	$32,258	$357,417
	School persistence	8.6	$387,722	$3,345,269
	Total Annual Societal Benefits = $26,508,733 Total Annual Costs = $4,080,333 ROI = 550%			
(3) Monte Carlo simulation of outcome data for each site for each outcome using range and triangle distribution	Substance Use	36.0	$493,357	$17,765,962
	Juvenile Justice Involvement	9.6	$44,851	$431,213
	School persistence	9.0	$217,517	$1,955,034
	Total Annual Societal Benefits = $20,152,210 Total Annual Costs = $4,081,151 ROI = 394%			

Discussion

Analysis of data from twelve ISTAC sites suggests that work performed by the Coalition has a strong positive ROI for the state of Idaho. The base case estimates show that Coalition sites are serving nearly 2,000 participants per year and result in prevention of more than 40 cases of substance use, more than 10 cases of juvenile justice involvement, and 8 instances of school dropout. Together the societal benefits of these reported impacts total more than $16.8 million per year. In comparison, average annual costs for Coalition sites are roughly $4,080,333. Therefore, the ROI of ISTAC for Idahoans is 313%. This ROI is far above and beyond what can usually be realized in traditional savings accounts, stock market securities, or other financial sector investment options. Such sizable ROI estimates are possible because of the substantial societal costs of the adverse outcomes that ISTAC Coalition sites are averting. As calculated by other researchers,[6-8] even a single case of substance use, justice-system involvement, or school dropout can have a societal benefit ranging from tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Sensitivity analyses performed for this work strongly suggest that findings are not driven by any one particular study assumption, estimate, or parameter used. Even allowing for wide variation across all study parameters, the Coalition's reported impacts showed a positive ROI 99.1% of the time.

Limitations

Findings from this initial examination of ROI for ISTAC should be viewed in light of several limitations. One, ISTAC Coalition members reported not having the current capacity—and in some cases the legal or practical ability—to collect robust outcomes data for participants, their families, and their communities. For the purposes of this report, stories of proven impacts from those closest to the participants and the work were obtained and used as the basis for this analysis. In some ways this approach is actually methodologically strong as we can both be fairly confident in crediting program participation for these impacts (as opposed to simply looking at community-level rates and assuming any change was due to Coalition site work).

Second, not all impacts of Coalition work were assessed. This approach would tend to *underestimate* program impacts, since only a narrow range of outcomes was assessed, outcomes were limited to a subset of overall potential beneficiaries, and numeric estimates of impacts were conservatively generated. Changes in any of these areas would result in higher estimates of societal benefit valuations, and thus ROI, for Coalition work.

Third, Coalition data were not available for all sites for all program years. In some cases, participation data were available but not outcome data. Conservative imputation methods were used that did not unduly drive study findings, according to sensitivity analysis as the overall ROI was still positive even without assuming *any* impacts from sites that did not report outcomes. Fourth, this analysis should be considered an initial look at Coalition impacts and ROI. There may be compounding effects of the work (and thus equal or greater levels of impact) that accrue over time and as program operations are refined and expanded in later years following this initial start-up period.

Finally, analyses were performed for this current iteration of the program in Idaho. The specific findings may or may not generalize beyond this setting or if major changes occurred to the program.

Conclusion & Next Steps

Data compiled and reported by the ISTAC Coalition show a large program reach across Idaho, impacts across a range of substance use, juvenile justice, and educational outcomes, and a large positive ROI. Analyses strongly suggest that Coalition work has a large, positive ROI for Idahoans, on the order of more than $3 in societal benefits above and beyond each dollar invested in the program.

This report should be viewed as an initial examination of the ROI for ISTAC Coalition outputs, outcomes, and impacts on Idahoans. Ideally, additional data would be available on other outcomes, physical or behavioral health measures, and family- or community-level impacts. This report was completed using sound economic analysis methods, validated societal benefit valuations, and all currently available data. Yet Idaho policymakers may wish to continue work in this area and develop customized approaches, valuations, or data sources to inform future ROI calculations.

As of its third program year, ISTAC is currently generating an estimated $16.8 million per year in societal benefits to Idahoans. Compared to average annual costs of $4,080,333, that represents an ROI of 313%--or an additional $3.13 in societal benefits above and beyond every $1 invested in the program.

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