

REVIEW PROTOCOL FOR PROGRAMS PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH

Highlights

- The objective of this systematic review is to determine the quality of existing causal evidence on the effectiveness of specific programs to improve the labor-related outcomes of youth; describe lessons learned from the implementation of such programs; and provide descriptive information from research about the programs.
- The review focuses on employment, training, and education programs providing opportunities for youth aged 14-24 who were neither in school nor in the labor force for an extended period, or were at-risk of dropping out of school and/or the labor force.
- Research with causal, implementation, and descriptive analysis was included in this topic area. CLEAR reviewers assessed the quality of causal evidence presented in impact studies. CLEAR reviewers also evaluated the implementation or process analyses associated with impact studies. All other research was summarized but did not receive a comprehensive review.

Introduction

The topic area for this review protocol is employment, training, and education programs providing opportunities for youth aged 14-24 who were neither in school nor in the labor force for an extended period, or were at-risk of dropping out of school and/or the labor force. These youth are more likely to be poor, suffer mental health and/or substance abuse issues, be involved in violence, and be teen parents. They may also have poorer long-term labor market outcomes, such as lower earnings, and an inability to find and maintain employment.¹

The effects of programs on the labor market outcomes of targeted youth are of primary importance for this topic area. Specifically, the review addresses the following research question:

- Which programs are effective in improving the labor market outcomes of youth with limited ties to the education system and/or labor markets?

Because education and training are closely tied to labor market outcomes and can be viewed in some cases as intermediate steps necessary to obtain better labor market outcomes, the evidence review also addresses the following secondary research question:

- Which programs are effective in helping youth with limited ties to the education system and/or labor markets acquire credentials and/or education that will enhance their labor market outcomes?

¹ Hair, E., Moore, K., Ling, T., McPhee-Baker, C., & Brown, B. (2009). Youth who are “disconnected” and those who then reconnect: Assessing the influence of family, programs, peers and communities. Child Trends Research Brief #2009-37. Available at <http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/8.pdf>.

In addition to determining the quality of causal evidence supporting the effectiveness of programs for these youth, CLEAR conducts in-depth reviews of the implementation or process studies associated with these impact studies. CLEAR also reviews the research on interim outcomes associated with demonstration projects when there is no associated impact study or the impact study is forthcoming.

The rest of this evidence review protocol sets forth the criteria by which research is determined to be eligible for review, the topic-area specific causal evidence guidelines used to evaluate the quality of the causal evidence, and an outline of review procedures and study report contents. Appendix A describes the methods used to identify the research for this topic area.

Eligibility Criteria

CLEAR conducted a broad literature search to identify all the research papers and reports that examined one of the research questions of interest. This included impact studies examining the effectiveness of a given program; the implementation studies associated with the impact studies; and a broad range of descriptive studies. The identified research was then screened against the eligibility criteria described below; studies meeting these criteria were entered into the citation database and received a first-level review (see the CLEAR Policies and Procedures for further information about the two levels of review). Additional screening criteria were applied to determine which studies received a second-level review.

Criteria for Inclusion in the Citations Database and First-Level Review

1. **Does it examine the population of interest?** The research eligible for review under this protocol must include youth aged 14-24 who either have not been employed or have not been enrolled in school or training for an extended period of time or have been identified as being at-risk of dropping out of school and/or the labor force.² This age range encompasses the Department of Labor's definitions for disadvantaged youth under Workforce Investment Act programs (for youth aged 14-21) and the Job Corps program (for youth aged 16-24).³
2. **Does it examine a program designed to provide opportunities for youth to improve their labor market outcomes?** To be eligible for review, the research must examine a program designed to improve the labor market outcomes of youth with limited ties to the education system and/or labor market. These programs can include activities and services such as mentoring, counseling, internships, subsidized employment, occupational/vocational training, or community service.
3. **Was it conducted in a relevant time and place?** To be the most relevant to current practitioners, policymakers, and other stakeholders, the research must have taken place in the United States, including the 50 states, the District of Columbia, territories, and tribal entities, in 1992 or later.

Research that meets these criteria is included in the citation database accessible at <http://clear.dol.gov>. In addition to the citation of the original research, the website provides a link

² CLEAR uses the authors' assessment of whether targeted youth have dropped out of or are at-risk of dropping out of school and/or the labor force.

³ See <http://www.dol.gov/dol/topic/training/youth.htm>.

to help interested users locate the research. Finally, CLEAR reviewers draft Highlights of every eligible study. These concisely summarize the research objective, description of the program, research methods, and key findings.

Criteria for Second-Level Review

Selected studies also undergo a more comprehensive second-level review. For impact studies, this second-level review includes assessing the quality of the causal evidence presented in the study; this is summarized in a causal evidence rating. For implementation and other descriptive studies using either qualitative or quantitative methods, this includes assessing the technical qualities of the research approach.

1. **Does it contain an impact analysis?** Research that uses quantitative methods to assess the effectiveness of a program (and other eligibility criteria) receives a second-level review as long as it contains an outcome of interest.⁴ Because one of the goals of the review is to determine which programs are effective at providing opportunities for youth to obtain successful labor market outcomes, impact studies must contain at least one outcome that is included in the employment and earnings domain: the employment rate or probability of being employed, retention at a job, wages or earnings, and access to employer-provided benefits are examples. Outcomes in the employment and earnings domain are further separated into those examining short-term outcomes, such as retention in a job measured 6 months after the intervention, and long-term outcomes, such as earnings measured 30 months after the intervention.

In addition, because education is closely tied to labor market outcomes, analyses of secondary outcomes related to education and training programs are also included in the review, as long as the analysis also examines at least one labor market outcome. The education domain includes enrollment in a secondary school or post-secondary school and completion of a high school diploma, General Educational Development certificate (GED), or post-secondary degree. The training domain includes enrollment in a training or apprenticeship program and completion of a certificate or credential as a result of occupational training. Like outcomes in the employment and earnings domain, education and training outcomes are further divided into short-term and long-term outcomes.

2. **Does it examine a program that has not already been included in a systematic review?** CLEAR focuses on programs that are not based in a school and do not apply only to narrowly defined subpopulations including youth offenders and youth with disabilities. Other systematic reviews have included these programs, including the Institute for Education Sciences' What Works Clearinghouse (for programs based in schools) and the Department of Justice's CrimeSolutions.gov (for programs for youth offenders). Programs for youth with disabilities are covered in CLEAR's topic area on employment and training programs for individuals with disabilities. The database entries for research on these programs will contain links to the websites of the relevant systematic reviews (forthcoming).

⁴ Causal studies in this topic area were reviewed according to CLEAR Causal Evidence Guidelines, Version 1.0. The full set of guidelines can be found at <http://clear.dol.gov>.

Note that CLEAR will conduct second-level reviews of impact analyses that are included in other systematic reviews if the other review did not examine labor-related outcomes. For instance, the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) Dropout Prevention topic area includes impact studies of interventions designed to keep students in school, progress through school, and complete school by obtaining a high school diploma or GED certificate. Some of these studies examined labor market outcomes, but these were not included in the WWC review. In this case, CLEAR reviewed the causal evidence in support of these outcomes.

3. **If not an impact study, is it an implementation or other descriptive study associated with an impact study that received a second-level review?** To provide information on implementation experiences and other related information relevant to the interpretation of an impact study, CLEAR also conducts second-level reviews of the implementation studies associated with impact studies. In addition, CLEAR conducts second-level reviews of ethnographic research and case studies associated with an impact study.⁵
4. **If not an impact study, is it a demonstration project?** To provide information on new programs that might not yet be subject to an impact analysis, CLEAR conducts second-level reviews of reports associated with demonstration projects. These might contain interim findings from an impact analysis or present outcomes or implementation analyses.

Causal Evidence Guidelines

This topic area includes reviews of both experimental and nonexperimental causal research. CLEAR assesses the quality of evidence for randomized controlled trials (RCTs) using an adaptation of the Institute for Education Science's What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) standards.⁶ RCTs can receive a High causal evidence rating if there are no obvious confounds to the RCT design and if the level of attrition in the RCT is low. This topic area uses the conservative attrition standard, on the presumption that attrition in studies of programs for at-risk youth may be linked with their labor market outcomes. For instance, youth who drop out of school or the labor market may be more difficult to track or less responsive to data collection efforts and also more likely to have poorer labor market outcomes; this means that high rates of missing data may yield a skewed comparison of treatment and control groups. If CLEAR determines that an RCT cannot be rated as providing High causal evidence, the research is reviewed using the nonexperimental causal evidence guidelines developed by CLEAR.

Nonexperimental Causal Evidence Guidelines Specific to the Topic Area

In collaboration with a Technical Work Group of experts, Mathematica Policy Research developed a set of evidence guidelines to be used in reviewing nonexperimental studies with causal designs. These causal designs include instrumental variables, difference-in-differences, fixed and random effects, and other types of regression analyses. Research designs that meet the causal evidence guidelines receive a Moderate causal evidence rating; this rating indicates that there is

⁵ Quantitative descriptive studies in this topic area were reviewed according to CLEAR Quantitative Descriptive Guidelines. Implementation studies in this topic area were reviewed according to CLEAR Guidelines for Reviewing Implementation Studies.

⁶ See <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/InsidetheWWC.aspx> for details.

evidence that the study establishes a causal relationship between the intervention being examined and the outcomes of interest, but there may be other factors that were not included in the analysis that also could affect the outcomes of interest. Designs that do not meet the guidelines receive a Low causal evidence rating, which indicates that we cannot be confident that the estimated effects are attributable to the intervention being examined.

Causal evidence guidelines for nonexperimental studies are tailored to the topic area of interest. In particular, the topic area protocol sets forth the specific types of control variables that need to be included in nonexperimental regression analyses (other than those using fixed effects) for a study to receive a Moderate causal evidence rating. The topic area protocol also describes whether changes in group composition should be a concern for the review.

Control Variables

The control variables for the opportunities for youth protocol are:

- At least one measure of degree of disadvantage, such as eligibility for school meal programs (for school-aged kids), family poverty status or family income, parents' education (or education level of at least one parent), or teen parent status.
- At least one pre-intervention measure of earnings or employment status. This could include pre-intervention earnings or wages, pre-intervention employment status, or measures of pre-intervention work history.
- *When looking at education or training outcomes*, studies must control for pre-intervention highest level completed, dropout status, or previous training enrollment or certificate completion.
- Other baseline participant characteristics. For further information about how the evidence review was conducted, please contact DOL's Chief Evaluation Office at chiefevaluationoffice@dol.gov.

Regression methods that incorporate a matching design, in which statistical methods are used to create a comparison group that is as similar as possible to the group receiving the intervention, must match on the previously listed control variables or, if they do not match on them, must include them as controls in the regression.

Changes in Group Composition

This is relevant for nonexperimental research designs that use aggregate data. Although uncommon in this topic area, the change in group composition as a result of the intervention is potentially a concern for studies with this type of design. For instance, a difference-in-differences analysis comparing the average change in earnings of program participants to nonparticipants could be biased if the earnings for participants who did not complete the program were not included in the post-intervention outcome measure.

Review Procedures

For first-level reviews of all types of research, a trained reviewer uses an abbreviated rubric to systematically capture information about the research question of interest, design, setting, data,

methods, and key findings. A quality assurance reviewer confirms the information contained in the rubric is accurate.

For second-level reviews of all types of research, a trained reviewer reads each report that meets topic area criteria in detail; applies the full set of relevant review guidelines; and documents all aspects of the review in a comprehensive rubric. In addition to the fields contained in the abbreviated rubric, the comprehensive rubric contains an assessment of the technical aspects of the research and considerations for interpreting the findings. If the research does not have a causal design, and thus a causal evidence rating is not assigned, the comprehensive rubric undergoes a quality assurance review by a senior CLEAR staff member to confirm that the information contained in the review rubric is accurate and verifiable.

However, second-level reviews of causal research undergo additional scrutiny to ensure the accuracy of the assigned causal evidence rating. If the first reviewer assesses the quality of causal evidence as High or Moderate, a second reviewer also reviews the study to confirm such a rating is warranted. Any discrepancies between the two reviewers' ratings are resolved by the principal investigator (PI) and/or the content expert, as needed, to determine a final rating. If the first reviewer assigns a rating of Low, the PI examines the comprehensive rubric and confirms that the rating is appropriate. When a report containing causal research does not contain sufficient information to determine its causal evidence rating, CLEAR may contact the study authors to gather this information; whether this step is undertaken depends on the age of the study and the quantity of information that would need to be gathered (so as not to overly burden study authors). Authors receive a minimum of four weeks to respond, and reasonable requests for extensions are granted. If the information is provided by the authors, it is incorporated into the review and factors into the causal evidence rating. If the authors do not provide the relevant information, the design is given the highest rating that can be determined with the information available in the report.

APPENDIX A

The initial reviews for this topic area were conducted on impact studies of programs identified for the Youth Opportunities project, funded by DOL. That project team provided to CLEAR a list of programs of interest, and CLEAR staff conducted literature searches to identify research on them. The programs of interest were:

- Center for Employment and Training
- Job Corps
- New Chance
- Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative
- Youth Corps
- Youth Opportunities

CLEAR also conducted a comprehensive literature search to identify other programs meeting the eligibility criteria described in the review protocol. This included keyword searches of Scopus, which covers 19,500 peer-reviewed journals, 400 trade publications, 360 book series, and “Articles-in-Press” from over 3,850 journals.⁷ Unpublished research was identified by searching the Social Science Research Network (SSRN), which contains abstracts on over 464,100 scholarly working papers and forthcoming papers.⁸

The search parameters for both searches were:

- Limited geographically to the United States
- Limited to the English language
- Limited to articles published from 1992 to the present
- Excluded editorials, letters, newspaper articles, and commentary
- Limited to causal studies, content analysis, descriptive studies, focus groups, field studies, implementation studies, interventions, narratives, qualitative, quantitative, and thematic analysis
- Excluded results related to drugs and health

CLEAR used combinations of the following search terms (asterisks indicate truncation):

- Criminal justice
- Disadvantaged
- Dropout
- Apprentice*
- Employ*
- Intervention
- Job training
- Labor market

⁷ <http://www.info.sciverse.com/scopus/scopus-in-detail/facts>

⁸ <http://www.ssrn.com/>

- On-the-job training
- Program
- Unemploy*
- Vocational Education
- Vocational training
- Adolescent
- Teen
- Young adult
- Youth

In addition, relevant research was identified by searching the websites of over 40 organizations conducting research in this area through a Custom Google Search tool, including:

- Abt Associates
- American Enterprise Institute
- America Institute of Research
- Annie E. Casey Foundation
- Association for Public Policy and Management
- Berkeley Policy Associates
- Booz Allen
- Brookings Institute
- Cato Institute
- Center for Economic Policy and Research
- Center for Health, Intervention, and Prevention (University of Connecticut)
- Center for Law and Social Policy
- Center for Public Policy and Administration
- Child Trends
- Children's Defense Fund
- CLASP
- Congressional Research Library
- Decision Information Resources
- Economic Policy Institute
- Ethics and Public Policy Center
- Heritage Foundation
- Institute for Educational Leadership at Johns Hopkins
- Institute for Policy Studies
- Institute for Policy Studies at Johns Hopkins
- Institute for Research on Poverty
- Institute of Policy Research
- Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies
- Levy Economics Institute

- Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center
- Mathematica Policy Research
- Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC)
- Milken Institute
- National Bureau of Economic Research
- National Center for Children in Policy
- National Youth Employment Coalition
- NORC
- Pacific Research Institutes
- Public Policy Associates
- RAND Corporation
- Resources for the Future
- RTI International
- Social Policy Research Associates
- SRI International
- Tax Foundation
- The Center for Public Justice
- Urban Institute
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
- U.S. Government Accountability Office

APPENDIX B

Studies with high causal evidence ratings

Bloom, H., Orr, L., Bell, S., Cave, G., Doolittle, F., Lin, W., & Bos, J. (1997). The benefits and costs of JTPA Title II-A programs: Key findings from the National Job Training Partnership Act study. *Journal of Human Resources*, 32(3), 549–576.

Bloom, D., Gardenhire-Crooks, A., & Mandsager, C. (2009). Reengaging high school dropouts: Early results of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program evaluation. New York: MDRC.

Cave, George, Bos, H., Doolittle, F. & Toussaint, C. (1993). JOBSTART: Final report on a program for school dropouts. New York: MDRC.

Hirsch, B., Hedges, L., Stawicki, J., & Mekinda, M. (2011). After-school programs for high school students: An evaluation of after-school matters. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University.

McClanahan, W., Sipe, C., & Smith, T. (2004). Enriching summer work: An evaluation of the Summer Career Exploration Program. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.

Millenky, M., Bloom, D., & Dillon, C. (2010). Making the transition: interim results of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program evaluation. New York: MDRC.

Millenky, M., Bloom, D., Muller-Ravett, S., & Broadus, J. (2011). Staying on course: Three-year results of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Evaluation. New York: MDRC.

Related report:

Millenky, M., Bloom, D., Muller-Ravett, S., & Broadus, J. (2011). Staying on course: Three-year results of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe evaluation. Executive summary. New York, NY: MDRC.

Rodríguez-Planas, N. (2012). Longer-term impacts of mentoring, educational services, and learning incentives: Evidence from a randomized trial in the United States. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 4(4), 121–139.

Schirm, A., Stuart, E., & McKie, A. (2006). The Quantum Opportunity Program demonstration: Final impacts. Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research.

Schochet, P., Burghardt, J., & Glazerman, S. (2001). National Job Corps Study: The impacts of Job Corps on participants' employment and related outcomes. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research.

Schochet, P., Burghardt, J., & McConnell, S. (2006). National Job Corps Study and longer-term follow-up study: Impact and benefit-cost findings using survey and summary earnings records data. Washington, DC: Employment and Training Administration, U.S. Department of Labor.

Schochet, P., McConnell, S., & Burghardt, J. (2003). National Job Corps Study: Findings using administrative earnings records data. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research.

United States General Accounting Office. (1996). Job Training Partnership Act: Long-term earnings and employment outcomes (GAO/HEHS-96-40). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Studies with moderate causal evidence ratings

Gritz, R., and Johnson, T. (2001). National Job Corps Study: Assessing program effects on earnings for students achieving key program milestones. Report Prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration.

Heinrich, C., Mueser, P., Troske, K., & Benus, J. (2008). Workforce Investment Act non-experimental net impact evaluation final report. Columbia, MD: IMPAQ International, LLC.

Jastrzab, J., Masker, J., Blomquist, J., & Orr, L. (1996). Impacts of service: Final report on the evaluation of American Conservation and Youth Service Corps. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates Inc.

Miller, C., Bos, J., Porter, K., Tseng, F., & Abe, Y. (2005). The challenge of repeating success in a changing world: Final report on the Center for Employment Training replication sites. New York: MDRC.

Price, C., Williams, J., Simpson, L., Jastrzab, J., & Markovitz, C. (2011). National evaluation of Youth Corps: Findings at follow-up. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, Inc.

Roder, A., & Elliott, M. (2014). Sustained gains: Year Up's continued impacts on young adults' earnings. New York: Economic Mobility Corporation.

Studies with low causal evidence ratings

Callahan Consultants, Inc. (n.d.). YO! participants' employment and earnings. Ellicott City, MD: Author.

Jackson, R., Dixon, R., McCoy, A., Pistorino, C., Zador, P., Thomas, C., ... Bruno, L. (2007). Youth Opportunity Grant Initiative: Impact and synthesis report. Houston, TX: Decision Information Resources, Inc.

Roder, A., & Elliott, M. (2011). A promising start: Initial impacts of Year Up on low-income young adults' careers. Economic Mobility Corporation.

Schirm, A., & Rodriguez-Planas, N. (2004). The Quantum Opportunity Program Demonstration: Initial post-intervention impacts. Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research.

Schirm, A., Rodriguez-Planas, N., Maxfield, M., & Tuttle, C. (2003). The Quantum Opportunity Program Demonstration: Short-term impacts. Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research.

Implementation studies reviewed

Abrazaldo, W., Adefuin, J., Henderson-Frakes, J., Lea, C., Leufgen, J., Lewis-Charp, H., ... Wiegand, A. (2009). Evaluation of the YouthBuild Youth Offender Grants. Oakland, CA: SPR Associates.

Bellotti, J., Rosenberg, L., Sattar, S., Esposito, A., & Ziegler, J. (2010). Reinvesting in America's youth Lessons from the 2009 Recovery Act Summer Youth Employment Initiative. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research.

Bruno, L. & Pistorino, C. (2007). Youth Opportunity Grant Initiative: Process evaluation final report. Houston, TX: Decision Information Resources, Inc.

Burghardt, J., McConnell, S., Meckstroth, A., Schochet, P., Johnson, T., & Homrighausen, J. (1999). National Job Corps Study: Report on study implementation. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research.

Hershey, A., & Rosenberg, L. (1994). The study of the replication of the CET job training model. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research.

Holcomb, P., Ziegler, J., & Laird, E. (2011). Beyond a summer work experience: The Recovery Act 2009 Post-Summer Youth Employment Initiative. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research.

Johnson, T., Gritz, M., Jackson, R., Burghardt, J., Boussy, C., Leonard, J., & Orians, C. (1999). National Job Corps Study: Report on the Process Analysis. Submitted to the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, Office of Policy and Research. Seattle: Battelle Human Affairs Research.

KPMG (2006). An examination of the delivery of literacy services at Job Corps Centers. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Job Corps.

Maxfield, M., Castner, L., Maralani, V., & Vencill, M. (2003). The Quantum Opportunity Program Demonstration: Implementation findings. Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research.

Related report:

Maxfield, M., Schirm, A., Rodriguez-Planas, N. (2003). The Quantum Opportunity Program demonstration: Implementation and short-term impacts. Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research.

Mitchell, M., Jenkins, D., Nguyen, D., Lerman, A., & DeBerry, M. (2003). Evaluation of the Youthbuild Program. Report submitted to U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Research and Development Division. Chicago: The Counselors of Real Estate.

Monsma, S., & Smidt, C. (2009). An Evaluation of the Latino Coalition's Reclamando Nuestro Futuro (Reclaiming our Future) Program. Paul Henry Institute for the Study of Christianity and Politics, Calvin College.

Walsh, S., Goldsmith, D., Abe, Y., & Cann, A. (2000). Evaluation of the Center for Employment Training replication sites: Interim report. Oakland, CA: Berkeley Policy Associates.