

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Part I. Characteristics of Employment Programs

This synthesis places youth employment programs within the context of youth development. It focuses on ten programs that serve youth under age 18, but it also considers some programs that include older youths. The programs share the broad goal of improving the employability of young people, but some take an academic approach, while others focus on job skills training. The majority of the programs are community-based, although some are school-based and one stands out as a residential program. The effects of the programs on youth outcomes in four domains—educational and cognitive attainment, health and safety, social and emotional well-being, and self-sufficiency—have been evaluated.

Part II. Documented Employment Program Outcomes

While educational achievement is not an employment outcome in itself, the attainment of a high school or college degree helps young people secure gainful employment, and many employment programs have educational goals. Employment programs appear to reduce school absences, but their impacts on other outcomes are mixed: They do not appear to improve high school grades, and they improve reading and math skills only while students are participating in the program. Many, but not all, evaluations link employment programs to the achievement of a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma (GED). One program links participation to college enrollment, while another does not. Thus, employment programs can be said to influence only a few educational and cognitive outcomes consistently.

Few employment programs have been evaluated for their impact on health and safety, but those that have appear to exert little influence. This is not surprising, because health and safety outcomes are not the primary target of job-training programs. Participation in employment programs does not have a significant impact on family formation behaviors or general health, but one program does increase knowledge of responsible sexual practices and the use of contraceptives. Findings are mixed regarding whether participation curbs drug and alcohol abuse.

Employment programs show potential for exposing youths to supportive relationships and for reducing criminal behavior during the time youths participate in them. Participants in one school-based initiative believe that their teachers give them personalized attention and have high expectations of them and that their peers are supportive. Two studies show that programs reduce the number of arrests in the short term, but that the impacts disappear when youths leave the programs.

Employment programs increase young people's exposure to career development and job training, but studies do not confidently support the expectation that the programs promote self-sufficiency. Evidence from three diverse programs indicates that

participation does not result in significantly higher employment in the long run. It may be that more intensive programs are needed: Participants in the primarily residential Job Corps program, for example, were slightly more likely than those in the control group to be employed when interviewed at a 30-month follow-up (63 percent compared to 59 percent). Job Corps was also the only program that increased the long-term earnings of participants as a whole, although another program did increase such earnings for some subgroups. Studies suggest that participation in employment programs can help youths secure better jobs (jobs with benefits, for example). Most program evaluations sought to determine whether participants were less likely to receive various types of welfare; only Job Corps reduced the overall percentage of program members receiving food stamps (but not other forms of assistance).

Part III. Characteristics Associated with Effective and Ineffective Employment Programs

Given the mixed success of employment programs, are there any program characteristics that can be identified as more promising than others? While only a few studies examine this question, some lessons can be gleaned from nonexperimental analyses:

- Program participation may be most beneficial for younger teens and youths at high risk of poor educational or employment outcomes.
- One evaluation found that the more well-structured a program, the more effective it is for sustaining youth participation.
- Some beneficial impacts were observed in all three types of programs—residential, school-based, and community-based.
- No one type of job training stands out as more effective than others.

Part IV. Unanswered Questions

This synthesis raises one main question: Why *aren't* employment programs more successful, especially with regard to employment-related outcomes? Planned variation studies would be useful to help answer another important question – What strategies are effective? A number of other questions remain unanswered:

- Are different types of job training more effective? For which groups?
- Who are the best teachers for employment programs?
- How much training in job skills is needed for successful longer-term outcomes?
- How much does skills training or education contribute to successful outcomes, compared to such services as assistance obtaining child care or searching for a job?

We conclude by suggesting that program evaluators and designers should focus on positive socio-emotional, academic, and health outcomes among youth and not just unemployment outcomes.