

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Major strides have been made in the field of youth development. However, youth who drop out of high school and do not pursue graduation credentials, or complete high school but do not go on to college or vocational school have not necessarily benefited from the recent advances. Often referred to as “the forgotten half” because they make up nearly half of the 18- to 24-year-olds in the United States (American Youth Policy Forum, 1998), these educationally disadvantaged older youths have frequently been overlooked by policymakers and practitioners designing programs and services for young people. Educationally disadvantaged older youths face a unique set of challenges and risks as they move into adulthood. Accordingly, it is important to identify strategies that can enhance the development and success of at-risk youth who are making the transition into adulthood. Programs for these youths could address the gamut of risks they are exposed to and the unique challenges they face in employment, independent living, drug and alcohol use, pregnancy, parenting, life skills, mental health, release from the foster care system, homelessness, violence, education, and literacy.

This synthesis examines the role that programs designed to serve educationally disadvantaged older youth can play in promoting positive youth development and subsequent self-sufficiency in adulthood. Specifically, the synthesis addresses the following questions: What do programs for older youth look like? What resources do they provide to promote healthy development? What impacts do they have? What positive outcomes are achievable through programs designed for older youth? What characteristics are associated with effective and ineffective programs? To answer these questions, this report focuses on 12 programs that have all undergone rigorous evaluation: Alcohol Skills Training Program; Job Corps; JOBSTART; Job Training Partnership Act; New Chance; Nurse Home Visitation Program; Ohio Learning, Earning, and Parenting Program; School Attendance Demonstration Project; Skill-Based Intervention on Condom Use; Teenage Parent Demonstration; Youth Corps; and AmeriCorps. The effects of the programs on youth outcomes in four domains—educational achievement and cognitive attainment, health and safety, social and emotional well-being, and self-sufficiency—have been examined.

PART I. CHARACTERISTICS OF PROGRAMS FOR OLDER YOUTHS

Programs for older youths target a common age group, as opposed to using a common intervention approach and therefore attempt to influence a wide range of outcomes through various activities and program designs. As such, programs are diverse with respect to their stated objectives or goals as well as the services they offer. The majority of programs reviewed here focus on employment and/or education, although some others focus on civic involvement, pregnancy prevention, parenting, responsible sexual behavior, or substance abuse. Many of the programs are community-based government initiatives with full time program staff.

PART II. OUTCOMES POSITIVELY AFFECTED BY PROGRAMS FOR OLDER YOUTHS

The programs reviewed in this synthesis, for the most part, have demonstrated impacts on some of the outcomes they were designed to affect, but impacts are small to moderate in magnitude and inconsistent. That is, significant impacts are not always found, or they are found only for some subgroups or only at an early point in time.

Educational Achievement and Cognitive Attainment

Evidence shows that programs for older youths can improve educational outcomes; however, no program evaluated here tried explicitly to influence cognitive outcomes. For example, three of the four programs with a primary goal of employment and a secondary goal of educational achievement had moderate positive impacts on attainment of a GED or high school diploma. Two of the three programs that examined school attendance found that programs do improve it. One program found moderate impacts while the other program found small but significant impacts that increased over time. With regard to enrollment in an education program, one program had moderate positive impacts, but those impacts faded over time. The programs reviewed here did not specifically target cognitive attainment, and the one program that assessed this outcome did not find impacts on cognitive skills.

Health and Safety

Few programs for older youths target outcomes related to health and safety, and their success at improving outcomes in this area are mixed. Two programs successfully reduced alcohol and drug use with moderate impacts. However, the two programs that studied contraceptive use found no impacts. Further, the one program evaluation that measured mental health outcomes found small to moderate negative impacts. Finally, one program that did not target health outcomes had a small but significant positive impact on participants' perceptions of their health.

Social and Emotional Well-Being

Evidence shows programs can improve outcomes related to the social and emotional well-being of older youths. However, a wider range of outcomes needs to be examined, and program goals and outcome measures need to be better aligned. Few outcomes in the area of social and emotional well-being are specifically targeted by programs for older youths. Moreover, the social and emotional outcomes measured do not map directly onto the outcomes that are targeted by programs. Three of the five programs evaluated for their effects on antisocial behaviors were found to be successful at reducing such behaviors with moderate impacts. Programs for older youths, especially those with an employment focus, reduce arrest rates for participants with moderate impacts, but the impacts disappear once participants leave the program. No program evaluations directly measured life skills; however, two programs were moderately successful at improving access to social support systems. Evidence is

mixed as to whether programs for older youths are effective at improving parenting skills; more research is needed. In addition, there is a shortage of research on whether programs for older youths can successfully foster civic involvement and volunteerism.

Self-sufficiency

Programs for older youths are successful at meeting some goals related to employment and welfare dependence. In general, programs improved employability with moderate impacts, both through employment and job training. However, programs' ability to improve participants' earnings and reduce welfare dependence were mixed. Two out of six programs studied had a moderate positive impact on participants' earnings, and two out of six had small but significant positive impacts on welfare dependence. In addition, with the exception of one site in Teen Parent Demonstration, programs were not successful at postponing pregnancy. Additional research on a wider range of self-sufficiency outcomes, such as job retention, is necessary.

PART III. CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH EFFECTIVE AND INEFFECTIVE PROGRAMS FOR OLDER YOUTHS

This synthesis also summarizes the evidence available on the effectiveness of programs by participants' characteristics and program classification (i.e., employment, education, pregnancy). Programs findings were generally positive for African American and Hispanic participants, but results were mixed for white participants. One program had positive results on poor, unmarried participants, and younger participants benefited more from the programs than older participants.

Programs that provided specific referrals to support services were effective at helping participants gain access to those services. In addition, civic involvement/volunteerism programs were successful at improving life skills and employment outcomes. Further, programs with a focus on employment do not increase employment but do lead to increased participation in job training. However, no one type of job training stood out as most effective. The Alcohol Skills Training Program was the only program classified as a substance abuse program and evidence from this program indicates that substance abuse programs have the potential to decrease alcohol use. Educational enhancement programs and pregnancy prevention/parenting programs have mixed outcomes.

PART IV. UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Regrettably, few programs for educationally disadvantaged older youths have been evaluated rigorously. As a result, many questions about the effects of such programs remain unanswered and little practical information is available for practitioners. To provide sound, practical suggestions for practitioners, experimental studies of the programs that exist must be carried out and evidence about successful program implementation strategies needs to be developed. Given the current research, this synthesis raises one main question: Do the programs reviewed here offer enough to make a difference in the lives of out-of-school youth? The research reviewed here

suggests that a more complete and balanced approach by program practitioners can lead to a greater and broader impact on the well-being of these young people. In an effort to assist in the development of more effective programs, this synthesis concludes with a list of the many questions that remain to be answered in regard to the implementation, infrastructure, effectiveness, and population served by programs for older youths.