

SERVING HIGH-RISK YOUTH
LESSONS FROM RESEARCH AND PROGRAMMING

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I. INTRODUCTION

Since the passage of the War on Poverty Legislation in 1964, the federal government (through the then Office of Economic Opportunity and Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, Justice, and Education), state and local governments and private foundations have spent trillions of dollars developing and implementing programs specifically designed to assist youth who face severe challenges “making it” in our society. Over the years, these youth have been labeled disadvantaged, at risk, high risk, vulnerable and disconnected. Whatever the label, most in the youth field agree that youth who have been the target of these programs have one or more of the following characteristics: they are from poor families and communities; are (usually) high school dropouts, homeless or young parents; they are unemployed or underemployed; and they are involved with or are transitioning from the child welfare or juvenile justice systems. Youth from minority groups have always been disproportionately represented in these categories.

While estimates of the number of “high-risk” youth at any given time vary, some experts indicated that in 1999 more than five million youth between the ages of 14 and 24 fit that definition. Today, we seem no closer to productively engaging these young people in our society than we were over 30 years ago. In fact, the situation today may be even more troubling. The youth population between the ages of 18 and 24 is expected to grow by 22 percent by 2015, with the majority of that growth among minority youth. Many experts believe that this population growth means a corresponding increase in the frequency and severity of the problems high-risk youth present not just for themselves but also for society in general.

Two other trends are cause for concern. First, fundamental changes over the past decade in this country’s welfare policy and economy make today’s labor market a much more daunting place for youth who are high school dropouts or have poor basic skills, and it is likely to get worse. With the 1996 Welfare Reform Bill and its current (as of September 2002) proposed reauthorization emphasizing “work first,” youth may find themselves competing with adults for low-wage and entry-level jobs. Second, both the public and philanthropic sectors are currently spending less on this age group than they have in the past. Public sector cuts began toward the end of the Carter administration and have continued to the present, as the federal government has continued to spend less on discretionary domestic programs. Another significant factor was the disappointing results from the 1994 National Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) study, which were interpreted by legislators as “nothing works” for older, high-risk youth. Philanthropic giving was affected by the results of the JTPA study as well as by evaluations of other programs that showed little impact on youth outcomes. A recent P/PV survey of over 40 major foundations shows that a large majority have decided that it makes more sense to “start earlier” and are focusing a significant portion of their children, youth and family giving on infants and toddlers.

Nonetheless, recently, some foundations have begun to turn their attention to high-risk youth—perhaps realizing that their investments in communities, schools, families and younger children are often diminished by the behavior of troubled, older youth. The federal Department of Justice (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention) has also shown interest in testing new strategies through their funding of local partnerships between law enforcement and faith-based groups to work with very high-risk youth who generally do not respond to other approaches.

Accompanying this new attention is a desire to understand the lessons from the past 30 years of programming for high-risk youth. Foundations, the federal government, youth intermediaries and advocates are asking, what do we know about programming for this population? What do research and field experience tell us about what works and what does not; about promising strategies, and where additional testing and information are needed. And most important, what does what we have learned tell us about what we should do now to effectively address this population of young people?

In this paper, we attempt to answer the above questions by drawing on past and present research and experience in the youth field. We draw on findings generated by a wide variety of initiatives funded by both the public sector and private foundations, and operated and evaluated by a number of intermediary organizations. Prevention and intervention initiatives, and data from programs and strategies that target a number of subgroups within the high-risk youth population are included.

In conducting this assessment we rely heavily on information from programs and strategies that have been rigorously evaluated. Lessons about the implications of research and operational strategies are also included. Our ultimate goal is to provide the Hewlett Foundation with information from past and ongoing initiatives and strategies that can be built on, and that will support the Foundation's decision to take a leadership role in addressing the challenges of the high-risk youth population.

II. LESSONS FROM YOUTH PROGRAM RESEARCH

Lesson 1: Few programs that target or have targeted high-risk youth have been rigorously evaluated; therefore, there is limited *definitive* information available about what should be done to address the needs of this population. More youth programs should be the subjects of rigorous evaluation study.

While it is often unpopular with program operators, a random assignment evaluation is considered by researchers to be the most powerful method of determining the impact of programs on their target population. Most researchers see this strategy as extremely important since it is the only proven method of comparing what happens to program participants with what happens to youth who are statistically like the participants and eligible for the program but are denied entry as part of the evaluation. In attempting to take stock of effective programs for high-risk youth, a number of researchers have lamented the lack of studies using this strategy—or even studies that use a comparison group or pre- and post-test evaluation strategy to determine program effectiveness. Grossman and Halpern-Felsher (1993) cite such a lack in their review of effective youth programs.¹ In an assessment of the U.S. Department of Education's (DOE) evaluations of their dropout prevention programs, Dynarski (2000) notes that DOE's evaluations studied more than 100 programs, though rigorous evaluations were used for only 30.²

¹ "Research Findings on the Effectiveness of Youth Programming: Support for a Developmental Approach." Jean Baldwin Grossman and Bonnie L. Halpern-Felsher. November 1993.

² *Making Do with Less: Interpreting the Evidence from Recent Federal Evaluations of Dropout-Prevention Programs*. Mark Dynarski, Mathematica Policy Research. December 2000.

The number of rigorously evaluated programs for high-risk youth is so small in comparison with the number of programs that have been operated, that we find these same programs and studies being consistently cited in the research literature. This is certainly true of the random assignment studies. Some of the most consistently cited (but not an exhaustive list of) programs include:

Career Academies—A 30-year-old school-within-a-school approach designed to create supportive learning environments for at-risk youth in large comprehensive high schools.

Students are provided with a combined academic and occupationally related curriculum.

Academies establish partnerships with employers to build sequences of career awareness and work-based learning opportunities for students. The goal of the Career Academies approach is to prevent high school dropout and prepare youth for work or post-high school education. Nine Academies were part of the evaluated demonstration, which operated between 1993 and 1999.

Job Corps—A three-decade-old national training and employment program administered and funded by the U.S. Department of Labor and primarily delivered through residential settings to economically disadvantaged youth between the ages of 16 and 24.

Job Corps offers a mix of comprehensive services, including basic academic education; GED, health and parenting education; introduction to computers and driver's education; social skills training; community service, work experience and skills training programs; health care; and counseling and other social supports. An initial study of Job Corps was conducted between 1977 and 1982. A longitudinal study based on the full national sample of eligible Job Corps applicants was conducted between 1994 and 1998 has recently been released.

Job Start—A demonstration created in 1985 under the Job Training Partnership Act and based on the Job Corps model, but with a non-residential approach.

Job Start operated between 1985 and 1989 in 13 sites, targeting high school dropouts between the ages of 17 and 21. Youth were offered basic academic and occupational skills training; life skills training; support services, including assistance with transportation and child care; and job placement assistance.

National Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) Study—The National JTPA Study was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor in 1986 to measure the impact and costs of selected employment and training programs funded under Title II-A of the Job Training Partnership Act. JTPA, which replaced the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) in 1982, was designed to serve economically disadvantaged Americans. Approximately 20,000 JTPA participants were in the 1986 study sample; 28 percent were out-of-school youth between the ages of 16 and 21. Youth in JTPA could receive, depending on their service recommendation: classroom training; on-the-job training; job search assistance; other services, such as school-related training to receive a GED; or job readiness training. The study focused on employment and earnings of participants in 16 local service delivery areas during the first 18 months after their acceptance into the program.

New Chance—A national demonstration that targeted young women who had children as teenagers and were high school dropouts. The demonstration operated between 1989 and 1992 in 16 sites across the country. The goals of the demonstration were to help young mothers:

acquire education and vocational credentials and skills so they could improve their employability and leave welfare; and postpone additional childbearing and become better parents. New Chance also sought to enhance the cognitive abilities, health and socio-emotional well being of the enrollees' children.

Project Redirection—A national demonstration of a comprehensive program for low-income teenage mothers and mothers to be who had not completed high school. The demonstration, operated between 1980 and 1983, was conducted in four sites around the country. The goals of the initiative were to help the participants attain a high school diploma; acquire job skills and experience; delay subsequent pregnancies; improve health care for participants and their infants; and acquire life management skills. Participants were provided a wide variety of services designed to support these goals through the brokerage of services with community-based organizations and the use of three additional strategies: Individual Participation Plans, which were developed and jointly managed by the mothers and program staff; the use of “community women,” who were volunteers drawn from the local communities to act as support and role models for the youth; and peer group meetings, which brought participants together to discuss problems and experiences.

The Summer Training and Education Program (STEP)—An intervention program developed in the mid-1980s to target poor and educationally disadvantaged 14- to 15-year-olds. The goals of STEP were to reduce dropout levels among this population by addressing poor academic performance and adolescent parenthood. The STEP model provided youth with two consecutive summers of academic remediation, life skills instruction and work experience. An initial three-city pilot of STEP was operated in 1984. The national demonstration began in five cities in 1985 and concluded in 1988.

Supported Work (Youth Target Group)—A national demonstration of a highly structured work experience program for persons with severe employment disabilities, including long-term welfare recipients, former addicts, ex-offenders, and high school dropouts with records of delinquency. The demonstration operated from 1975 to 1978. Participants were provided with 12 to 18 months of stable employment and income, with gradual increases in performance and productivity standards on the job. The goal of the effort was to give participants an opportunity to develop good work habits and a history of stable employment. Three programmatic techniques were emphasized in the program: peer group support, graduated stress, and close supervision. Fifteen sites around the country participated; five sites enrolled 17- to 20-year-old dropouts. (In 1979, five sites implemented a “youth variation” of Supported Work that focused entirely on the specific needs of the 17- to 20-year-old group. However, the variation was not the subject of a rigorous test.)

Youth Corps-- Conservation and Youth Service Corps funded by the National Community Service Act of 1990 to organize educationally and economically disadvantaged youth to do productive work with visible community benefits while receiving a mix of work experience, basic and life skills education and training, and support services. Participants are generally between the ages of 18 to 25. Considerable emphasis in these programs is based on meeting community needs through environmental, education, and human service projects and on promoting corpsmembers social and personal development. There are currently 120 youth corps

nation-wide. Eight of those corps took part in an evaluation during the 1993-94-grant cycle. Four of these corps participated in a random assignment impact study.

Youth Incentive Entitlement Pilot Projects (YIEPP)—A demonstration project authorized by the 1977 Youth Employment Demonstration Projects Act and operated from 1978 to 1981 to test three major innovations: (1) a guaranteed minimum wage job for 16- to 19-year-old youth from low-income or welfare households who were still in school. Jobs were part-time during the school year and full-time during the summer on the condition that youth stayed in or returned to school; (2) the large scale of the job guarantee—the offer was extended to all eligible youth in 17 demonstration areas across the country; and (3) the role of the private sector, since, for the first time, work experience positions with private employers could be fully subsidized. The goals of YIEPP were to reduce school dropout rates, increase high school graduation rates, provide work experience and on-the-job training, and provide income during the program participation period.

There is growing agreement in the youth field that not all programs are good candidates for random assignment tests or even other rigorous evaluation strategies. However, additional tests of carefully selected, promising programs and strategies would provide much needed information about effective approaches for improving the outcomes of high-risk youth.³

Lesson 2: Of those programs for high-risk youth that have been rigorously evaluated, results show that few have produced enduring impacts for their overall target populations. This has become a critical problem for the youth field.

Table 1 shows 10 programs that have been rigorously evaluated and their effects on key indicators as taken from their impact studies. Of those listed, Job Corps shows the most impressive overall impacts on education, employment and earnings for high-risk youth—impacts that have been sustained for thirty months post enrollment. Youth Corps also shows positive impacts on youths' employment and earnings at fifteen months post enrollment, particularly for African Americans who made up 50 percent of the sample. Four of the 10 programs (Career Academies, STEP, Supported Work and New Chance) had no significant, sustained effects overall on any variables; in fact, STEP had a negative effect on treatment group graduation rates. Job Start had a large significant impact only on education. The JTPA system's significant impact on youth's education (GED attainment) is completely overshadowed by negative impacts in the areas of employment and earnings—particularly for young black men. Project Redirection showed significant results in some important areas, but none in the areas of education, pregnancy prevention or employment. The Youth Incentive Entitlement Project (YIEPP) had highly significant in-program and post-program employment and earnings impacts, although the follow-up period was too short to determine whether these effects could be sustained; YIEPP had no impact on education outcomes.

³ The Quantum Opportunities Program, a year round youth development effort designed to provide disadvantaged high school youth with educational support, life skills and youth development activities, was the subject of a random assignment study. However, since there are serious questions about the methodology used to evaluate the initiative and how the results have been interpreted, it is not included in this list.

Evaluations of some of the above programs showed that they did have short-term or in-program impacts that did not last over time. For example, analysis of in-program outcomes for STEP showed that it successfully produced significant, short-term benefits for participants in both education and fertility related areas. The evaluation of the Career Academies program showed that this approach produced modest improvements in students' engagement and educational performance during high school. Short-term results from Project Redirection indicated significant gains in schooling, pregnancy prevention and employment. The Supported Work evaluation indicated that during the first year of the program participants worked and earned significantly more than the control group.

Evaluations also showed that these programs (even those that did not produce positive overall effects) often had been most effective for the highest-risk participants, who were usually not the majority of the overall group. It appears that the benefits these youth received from program participation had real impact when compared with control group youth, who faced some of the same disadvantages but were not motivated to improve their lives on their own. Career Academies' in-school impacts on education and school engagement were highest for participants at most risk of dropping out. Project Redirection appears to have had the strongest and longest lasting effects on the most disadvantaged teen mothers, including those who had dropped out of school at the time of the baseline and those with a subsequent pregnancy during the program. Finally, the Job Start evaluation showed that program impacts were strongest for young men with prior arrests and youth with severe educational deficiencies who had dropped out of school.

Evaluations of many programs for high-risk youth show that most participants fare no better than similar youth in the control group and that only the most highly disadvantaged youth are benefiting. In reality, it is very useful for the youth field to know which strategies work for the highest risk youth so that they can continue to be built into programs. However, the fact that many youth programs haven't produced positive sustained impacts for large numbers has become an albatross around the neck of the youth field. These findings have negatively influenced both public sector and private foundation investments in programs for high-risk youth. This response, in turn, has affected the quality and quantity of programs for this population.

TABLE 1

IMPACT FINDINGS FROM SELECTED PROGRAM EVALUATIONS

PROGRAMS	EXPERIMENTALS	CONTROLS/ COMPARISON	
CAREER ACADEMIES (year after scheduled graduation)			
- % Earned high school diploma/GED	87.2	86.7	
- % Enrolled in post-secondary education	54.8	54.6	
- % Ever employed	88.7	87.2	
SUMMER TRAINING/EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM (54 months post enrollment)			
- % Dropout rate	31.4	29.8	
- % Graduation rate	43	50	*
- % Employment rate	57.0	58.6	
YOUTH ENTITLEMENT (young black sample)			
- In-program employment rate (full sample)	\$40.3	\$21.5	*
- Following data for young black sample:			
- Mean weekly earnings (3 months post program)	\$37.2	\$26.7	*
- % Employment rate (3 months post program)	27.5	23.0	*
- Mean hours worked per week	34.3	32.3	*
- School graduation rate (cumulative over 4 years)	46.9	50.2	
- Dropout rate (cumulative over 4 years)	39.5	36.7	
JOB START (4 years post enrollment)			
- % High school diploma/GED attainment	42.0	28.6	
- % Ever employed	86.4	86.0	
- Total earnings	\$17,010	\$16,796	
JOB TRAINING PARTNERSHIP ACT (JTPA) (18 months post enrollment)			
- % High school diploma/GED attainment – males	23.9	14.0	*
- % High school diploma/GED attainment – females	28.6	16.6	*
- Mean earnings – males: loss of	-\$854	10,736	*
- Mean earnings – females: loss of	-\$182	6,225	
JOB CORPS (30 months post enrollment)			
- % High school diploma/GED	39.2	23.1	*
- % Employed	56.0	53.5	*
- Mean weekly earnings	\$180	\$167	*

*Significant Finding

PROGRAMS	EXPERIMENTALS	CONTROLS/ COMPARISON	
YOUTH CORPS (15 months post enrollment)			
- % Working for pay	99.0	73.0	*
- Mean number hours worked (over 15 months)	2,030	1,465	*
- Mean hourly wages	\$6.66	\$6.26	*
SUPPORTED WORK/YOUTH (36 months post enrollment)			
- % Some employment	74.0	65.9	
- Mean monthly earnings	\$301.94	\$336.33	
- % Drug use (other than marijuana/alcohol)	16.8	11.0	
- % Arrested	10.3	16.7	
PROJECT REDIRECTION (5 years post enrollment)			
- % With high school diploma/GED	48.0	48.0	
- % Employed	34.0	28.0	
- Mean weekly earnings	\$68	\$45	*
- % Receiving AFDC	49.0	59.0	*
- Mean number pregnancies	3.1	2.9	
- % Enrolled child in Head Start	47.0	34.0	*
NEW CHANCE (at or within 3½ years post enrollment)			
- % High school diploma/GED	51.9	43.8	*
- % Employed (at 42 months)	27.8	30.9	
- % Receiving AFDC (at 42 months)	75.0	73.5	
- % Gave birth	54.7	55.3	

*Significant Finding

Lesson 3: While overall findings from the evaluations of many programs for high-risk youth indicate “no” or “limited” impacts for youth, a review of study findings by site may reveal successful or promising individual programs—programs that should be mined for useful information about their practices.

Most demonstrations of initiatives for high-risk youth have been designed to simulate how a particular program model or approach would perform in various parts of the country. The evaluation strategy has been to conduct a random assignment experiment in a number of geographically dispersed sites and draw conclusions about impacts based on aggregate data. In most cases, aggregate results have led to the conclusion that the initiative overall did not have impacts and was therefore unsuccessful. However, a review of the performance of individual study sites may show that this is not the whole story.

The national JTPA study is an important illustration of this issue. The aggregate average findings from the study report “no” and in some cases “negative” impacts on employment and earnings for out-of-school youth; this is the study’s primary message. A close look at the report’s tables indicate that four of the fifteen study sites had positive impacts—increases in earnings for youth at these four sites ranged from \$2,566 to \$15 over the 18-month study period. While it is true that only the highest of the increases was statistically significant, this information puts the finding of “no impacts” in a somewhat different light.

The JTPA study does not identify the study sites by name and gives little information about program implementation. However, the study tables do show that the four sites with relatively positive impacts on youth also had relatively positive impacts for adults and, therefore, might have been operating solid or at least promising programs.

The Job Start evaluation presented a similar situation. A major finding from this study is that for the full sample, there were no statistically significant earnings impacts for the experimental group. However, the study tables point to the strikingly strong impacts for one site—CET/San Jose, where the difference in earnings between experimental and control groups was \$6,715 over the four-year follow-up period. While the evaluators stated that they found it difficult to identify exactly which features of the CET/San Jose approach led to its strong impacts, they did note two interesting issues. First, they note the site’s characteristics as: a relatively heavy dose of Job Start, strong job placement efforts, close ties to the employer community, integrated education and training, a clear organizational mission and a good reputation in the local community, and experienced and skilled staff—program characteristics that youth practitioners agree can contribute to good outcomes for high-risk youth. Second, the CET/San Jose site’s reputation for producing large positive impacts in other demonstration projects indicates effectiveness as a program operator.

These two examples show that it may be shortsighted to primarily focus on aggregate data when reporting and interpreting the results of demonstration projects. As mentioned above, the large number of studies of programs for high-risk youth reporting “no” or “very limited” impacts have done considerable damage to the youth field. Another approach to reporting and interpreting evaluation data from such demonstrations, and one that more closely represents a private sector market test, would be to conduct an in-depth look at the individual demonstration sites, disregard the clearly unsuccessful ones, and conduct further studies on the successful or promising ones to identify success factors (such as those associated with the CET/San Jose program). The ultimate goal would be to generate better information about how to improve outcomes for high-risk youth.

Lesson 4: Although research on most programs for high-risk youth has not shown long-term positive results for this population, we may be making assumptions about outcomes too early.

Most research on demonstrations of programs for high-risk youth has been structured to collect follow-up data at 18, 30 and 48 months after program participation. There is growing information that suggests that even 48 months post program may be too early to assess the effectiveness of program participation. For example, Frank Furstenburg, a sociology professor at

the University of Pennsylvania, tracked the life trajectories of the same group of mothers and children in Baltimore from 1966 to 1996. Findings from his Baltimore Teenage Parenting study showed that many of the mothers did not start making significant progress in their lives until they had reached their late 20s and early 30s. A (rare) five-year follow-up of participants in Project Redirection, a program for teen mothers, found that five years post program, the women had made more progress obtaining work, increasing earnings and leaving welfare than had been shown in the two-year follow-up results. The research on the Job Start demonstration showed that the earnings of participants were just beginning to overtake those of the control group in the final two years of the follow-up.

Many of the studies of programs for high-risk youth end with the words “additional research is needed.” Extended follow-up of participants in select research demonstrations could provide critical information about strategies that might show long-term impacts for high-risk youth.

III. LESSONS FROM YOUTH PROGRAM OPERATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION

Lesson 5: Programs that are well structured, well implemented and provide participants with intensive exposure to a variety of program activities are necessary to produce impacts for high-risk youth.

According to prevailing evaluation theory, in order for a program to show sustained, positive impacts for its target population, it has to not only provide good services but also more and better services and activities to the target group than they could get without the program. The evaluation results of a number of rigorously tested programs, and as noted above, show that Job Corps is the only program that has produced significant, sustained impacts for high-risk youth across a variety of outcomes. The program provides participants with extensive education and vocational services, including job placement, and other support services directly related to their employability and personal development. The residential component, which removes participants from often-negative neighborhood environments, intensifies the program experience, and has been shown to be effective for all subgroups of youth, including males, females and females with children. The non-residential component is effective for young women with children.

The most recent study of Job Corps showed that the program significantly increased the education and training that participants received despite the substantial activity of a control group:

- Nearly 90 percent of Job Corps participants engaged in some education and training compared with about 64 percent of the control group.
- Average length of stay was eight months.
- Job Corp participants received about 1,000 hours of education and training while in the program (the rough equivalent of one additional year of schooling). Control group members received 634 hours.

The study says, “Job Corps uses a well-developed model with generally good implementation across sites.”

While data is not available to directly compare the intensity and quality of Youth Corps members’ work experiences with the work experiences of a control group, information from the program evaluation points to implementation factors that likely lead to positive impacts. With few exceptions service projects are not make-work like other work experience programs, but carefully screened opportunities with host agencies that provide adequate supervision and opportunities for on-site learning. Corpsmembers are required to actively participate in program activities 40 or more hours weekly, most of it dedicated to service projects—often-hard physical labor. The intensity of the service experience very likely has a permanent effect on participants, including their social and civic behavior. Still Youth Corps impacts are not as impressive as those for Job Corps. Youth Corps spend little time on educational activities and have little effect on corpsmembers’ educational outcomes. Also findings on Youth Corps are from a short-term 15-month follow-up as oppose to Job Corps four-year follow-up.

Consistently coherent, high-quality implementation has been challenging for programs serving high-risk youth. For example, Job Start, a non-residential Job Corps-like program, also provided more services to participants than to the control group (94% versus 56%, respectively). However, the quality and intensity of Job Start services were not high enough to significantly affect most outcomes for the participants. The average length of stay was 6.6 months and participants averaged 400 total hours of education and training.

A relatively well-delivered educational component contributed to significant education impacts. However, the program had difficulty delivering quality job development and placement activity, and the participants did no better in the labor market than the control group. The Job Start evaluation described the training and job development component in most of the sites as weak and “an afterthought.” In fact, as mentioned above, one site, CET/San Jose, is acknowledged as having a superior training and placement component, and is the site with the most positive employment and earnings impacts. CET/San Jose carefully chose vocational training to correspond to local market demands and involved employers in developing training programs. In some Job Start sites, youth fell through the cracks when making the transition from educational services provided by Job Start programs and occupational training services provided by outside vendors. Given all of these factors, 41 percent of participants spent fewer than 200 hours in Job Start activities. According to the project’s evaluation, “Job Start did not constitute an intensive or lengthy enough program.”

Supported Work and YIEPP also provide interesting examples. The good of Supported Work was to provide structured, supportive, disciplined work experiences for the very hard to employ, including young dropouts. Early in the implementation of the Supported Work program, youth participants showed large, significant gains in earnings. However, by the second year, as the control group began to find jobs on their own and participants began to leave the program, the early differentials disappeared. The program had simply provided participants with a job sooner than one they could have gotten on their own. The program also did not have significant impacts on other variables it was trying to affect, such as drug use and crime. The Supported Work

program showed that work experience may boost youth earnings in the short term, but youth need other, more intensive supports to help them transform their lives or make them more attractive to employers in the long run.

The job guarantee offered to poor, school-aged youth by the YIEPP demonstration caused participants' earnings, especially those of black youth, to rise dramatically above those of the control group. This effect was seen while youth were in the program as well as during a short, three-month follow-up period. YIEPP was well implemented, in that public sector officials and private sector employers collaborated to provide youth with productive work experiences. However, another aim of the program was to use the job guarantee to increase high school retention and graduation. The guarantee proved to have no impact on education outcomes because the education component was not well defined or implemented, leaving work experience as the only program intervention.

Teen pregnancy programs, like New Chance, provide a final example. Program participants received a greater quantity and a more varied set of employment, life skills and child care services than their control group counterparts. However, the level of services received by the control group was greater than expected, especially in the employment area: 94 percent of program participants received employment-related services, as did 85 percent of the control group. This set a high bar for the New Chance program in terms of participation and service delivery. In general, participation was much less intensive than had been planned. Average lengths of stay were 6.4 months, although teens were permitted to stay in the program for 18 months. On average, the young women participated for 296 hours of program activity; 25 percent participated for only 100 hours and 11 percent did not participate at all. Absenteeism was high and in the end only about one-third of the participants received the level of skills training intended by the program.

On the implementation side, New Chance project staff lacked experience in delivering skills training, and the employment component of the program was not well implemented. Staff also found counseling teens on family planning issues difficult—they were not experienced in delivering this type of information and the teens were not necessarily responsive. New Chance had no impacts on employment, AFDC receipt or child bearing outcomes. These results were similar to those of other programs that target this population. There were significant effects on GED receipt, a component that was relatively well implemented by experienced teachers.

The above experiences of several demonstration projects are sobering. Certainly, there are other programs and initiatives that could be listed: P/PV's STEP initiative was well implemented but too short and not intense enough to generate long-term impacts; the JTPA youth programs in general did not help, and in fact hurt, some poor youth in the areas of employment and income; and Career Academies, which positively affected the school engagement of potential dropouts, did not adequately address academic performance.

The difficulties that many youth programs have had responding to the needs of high-risk youth are represented in the above examples. The difficulties cover a wide-range of areas including staffing, program structure and length, the quality of program offerings and the intensity of youth participation. These problems are particularly critical in the areas of job development and

employment. As mentioned above, there is renewed interest in developing organizational and content approaches that will work for this population. The lessons from the experiences of the above initiatives should provide useful information.

Lesson 6: Programs and initiatives may be able to improve their effectiveness and impacts on high-risk youth if they continued services to youth after program completion or the initial job.

Many of the program evaluations we reviewed for this paper showed that program participants made progress during the program, but did no better than non-participants once they left. Programs may be able to extend the benefits of program participation by having an open-door policy that allows youth to continue a relationship with the program for as long as they need. Such a policy could be particularly beneficial for youth leaving programs to enter the labor market. High-risk youth face a number of stresses after they are placed in a job—issues such as unreliable child care or transportation, conflicts with co-workers or supervisors, or other personal problems often come up. It is at these times that youth still need the support services that youth programs provide. Also, few high-risk, economically disadvantaged youth dramatically change their economic status with their first job. They need support to build on the first work experience and move on to additional education, training or a better job.

Some programs practice this type of open-door policy and maintain a connection with participants, continuing to provide counseling and support services after they officially leave the program. The STRIVE program, which has attracted considerable attention for its job placement record with very high-risk populations, operates on the assumption that people who have a number of barriers to employment—dropouts, recovering drug addicts, those with criminal backgrounds, welfare mothers and those chronically unemployed for any number of reasons—need open-ended and consistent support for a considerable amount of time before they can navigate the labor market on their own. STRIVE allows participants to return as often as necessary for counseling, skills brush-up and new job placements. Other programs, such as YouthBuild and the Quantum Opportunities Program, also have this kind of policy. Many in the youth field are now calling for this kind of open-door policy to be a standard feature of all youth programs.

Lesson 7: The desire to change their lives, prompting from a trusted adult, or the opportunity for income all appear to be factors that motivate high-risk youth to join programs. Relationships with staff, a sense of belonging, and having their needs and interests met appear to be factors that make them stay.

The results from the demonstration projects outlined above indicate the importance of engaging and retaining high-risk youth in program activities so that they gain benefits from their participation. Programs that want to serve this population and that have even been specifically designed to do so often have trouble attracting and retaining participants and end up “creaming,” even if not intentionally. Information about why high-risk youth join programs and what retains them has been generated from a wide variety of program experiences—through youth focus groups and interviews, interviews with program staff, and observation of program operations.

Joining Programs

The desire to change their lives.

Studies on why high-risk youth join programs often describe an “awakening” process that prompts these youth to want change their lives.⁴ In-school youth talked about joining dropout prevention programs when they decided it was time to improve their grades or learn how to read. Older, out-of-school youth talked about “having to get serious” or wanting to “get their lives together.” Some older youth decided on a specific goal they thought was important to their future—like getting their GED or gaining a specific skill—and were ready for a program that they believed could help them achieve that goal. Seventy-three percent of the youth selected by Job Corps showed up to participate, indicating their decision to make a change and their belief that Job Corps was a vehicle for change.

Prompting from a trusted adult.

Youth development literature lists adult support and guidance as one of the critical elements that youth need to grow up healthy. Adolescents, in particular, indicate that adults whom they trust play important roles in their decision to join a program. Interviews with 14- to 15-year-old potential dropouts who attended P/PV’s Summer Training and Education Program (STEP) indicated that many youth joined in response to parent or teacher encouragement. P/PV’s research on mentoring and other kinds of positive adult-youth relationships provides solid evidence of the important and supportive roles that adults can play in the lives of young people.

A P/PV study of select Boys & Girls Clubs (B&GC) that attempt to serve gang members and potential gang members indicates that high-risk youth of all ages often decided to participate in B&GC activities after being cultivated over time by a staff member. B&GC’s hire outreach workers that live in the community, are former gang members, or are very knowledgeable about gang life. Direct outreach by staff has been found the most productive way to meet recruitment goals.

Income.

The opportunity for income clearly motivates high-risk youth to join programs. Research shows that this is particularly true for in-school youth who join work-experience programs; they are attracted by the opportunity to simultaneously go to school and earn money when there would be few other opportunities for them to do so. This was powerfully demonstrated in the YIEPP demonstration, where a job guarantee was offered to all poor high school youth in 17 sites around the country. Sixty-three percent of eligible youth enrolled. Youth who decided to attend the STEP program also appeared drawn to the school-work combination.

⁴ In *Young Adults Guide to Making It!* Edward DeJesus interviewed a wide variety of young adults from across the country that had overcome barriers to success. Some had dropped out of high school or become teen parents; others had criminal backgrounds or had been homeless. These young people told him they were not motivated to change their lives, join a program or take some other positive step, until they had an “awakening,” a realization that they were going down the wrong path or maybe nowhere at all.

Information about older youth, especially those joining Youth Corps programs, shows that while youth are attracted to the income programs provide, this is generally not their prime motivation. The stipends or wages (from work programs) that these programs offer are generally quite small. Older youth appear more motivated by their “awakening” experience described above and the desire to change their lives.

Staying in Programs

Program staff.

Across all ages and program types, supportive relationships with staff appear to be the most important reason youth stay in programs. Youth who attend in-school programs speak about the supportive relationships they have with teachers as a key reason they “stick it out.” Youth Places, a Pittsburgh-based after-school program, attributes their unusual ability to attract older, very high-risk males to hiring staff that are able to develop a unique rapport with these youth. Youth Corps participants often form very close relationships with crew leaders and may leave a program if there are too many changes in crew leadership. Older, high-risk youth appear highly sensitive to the backgrounds of program staff. In YouthBuild programs, for example, participants respond best to counselors who have “walked the walk” or have “been there.”

A sense of belonging.

Programs that provide high-risk youth with a sense of belonging and group identity appear more likely to retain them. Again, this is an element that seems important across all age groups and types of programs. Career Academies youth, particularly those most at risk of dropping out, responded to the smaller “school-within-a-school” environment. Over 60 percent of the high-risk youth participating in the B&GC gang outreach project reported coming to the clubs “several times a week” because they felt a sense of belonging. Youth Corps participants often make decisions about whether to stay or leave the programs based on the cohesiveness of or affiliation they feel with their crew.

Getting needs met.

Research shows that high-risk youth of all ages stay in programs when they are getting their developmental and instrumental needs met. Youth want to be accepted, respected and supported in programs. They want someone to talk with if they are having a problem—someone who will listen and take the problem seriously. At the same time, these youth want the program to live up to its billing and provide them with the skills and opportunities they need to change their lives. These issues are closely related to the two discussed above—the relationships youth develop with staff and their sense of identification with the program.

In-school youth in remedial programs like STEP spoke fondly of teachers that were “nice,” but also wanted teachers who could make reading exciting and “keep order in their classroom.” They also tended to stay in programs when they learned practical lessons they felt would help them in the future, such as “how to talk to people” and how to use a bank.

Boys and Girls Clubs, in an attempt to retain high-risk youth, worked hard to identify the youth's needs and interests and adapted their regular services to be responsive. According to P/PV's study, once the Clubs "drew in" the youth, they provided services that helped youth disengage from gang life, work toward completing their education, get on-site help with alcohol and drug use, work out alternatives to traditional probation (when necessary), and develop needed life and job skills. They also provided a secure atmosphere that responded to the youth's need to feel safe. A majority of the high-risk youth (approximately 70%) who were recruited by the Clubs remained in attendance after one year.

The National Job Corps evaluation showed that youth participants clearly felt they were getting their needs met. A large majority of enrollees (77%) extensively engaged in the program's academic and vocational activities, and stayed in the program longer than high-risk youth generally stay in employment and training programs. Seventy-three percent of participants in the Youth Corps study said they learned a skill in the program that would benefit them in the future. In contrast, a majority of the youth participating in the Supported Work program (62%) felt that the program was not preparing them for "regular jobs." On average, they stayed for shorter periods of time than was allowed under program guidelines.

Pregnant and parenting teen mothers in Project Redirection often sporadically attended program activities because of their parental responsibilities and otherwise complicated lives. However, it is interesting to note that they most regularly attended activities they felt more directly met their needs, like medical care for themselves and their babies, and life management skills classes.

Understanding what attracts high-risk youth to and retains them in programs is critical to providing them with the services they need. Also, programs must be concerned about maintaining enrollment levels in order to keep program per-person costs down—thereby improving the political viability of their efforts.

IV. INFORMATION ABOUT NEW AND INNOVATIVE RESEARCH AND PROGRAM EFFORTS

There is a growing body of information being generated by organizations carrying out relatively new research, programs and strategies for high-risk youth. Some research studies are just getting under way, some have been ongoing for a few years, and others have been completed. Few meet the rigorous standards of a random assignment study or have yet to provide lessons. Still, they represent directions in the youth field to address the challenges faced by our society's most vulnerable youth, and may provide useful information and ideas for other initiatives being designed.

Vera Institute of Justice

The Vera Institute of Justice in New York recently completed Project Confirm, a research study to identify suspected bias in juvenile detention decisions of foster-care youth; and is just starting a research demonstration project to test the value of home-based sentences for juvenile delinquents.

The Vera Institute began Project Confirm in 1996 when the New York City Child Welfare Administration asked them to examine whether and the ways in which foster children were over-represented in juvenile detention centers. In 1988, the Vera Institute hired a small staff to begin reviewing the names of all youth arrested and detained in New York City and then to quickly confirm which ones were in foster care. Project Confirm staff then notified relevant foster-care agencies about their legal responsibilities to send someone to the hearing as a release resource. The process was studied to measure the foster-care bias in detention decisions and the degree to which this intervention reduced that bias. For youth without prior detentions who were charged with misdemeanors and minor felonies, the results show a foster-care bias of almost 10 percentage points higher than the probability for youth not in foster care. For these youth, getting their caseworkers to court and helping the workers navigate the system proved sufficient to eliminate this bias. According to the Vera Institute, the work that remains is establishing a process to get foster-care workers routinely involved in juvenile delinquency cases and thereby ensuring their presence in court.

The Vera Institute's Home-Based Sentencing for Juvenile Delinquents project is based on national research that suggests that some delinquent youth have better success if they remain in their homes and communities, and receive appropriate support and supervision. The Vera Institute, and New York City and State agencies responsible for delinquent children plan to test this theory by developing a state-of-the-art, home-based placement program for non-violent youth who would otherwise be confined. This new effort will build on promising national programs. The intervention will be intensive but last only six months, followed by after care or probation supervision. The evaluation will look at the degree to which this intervention reduces recidivism, prevents placements in state facilities and improves school attendance.

Philadelphia's Youth Aid Panel

The Youth Aid Panel (YAP), a community-based, diversion program for first-time youthful offenders between the ages of 10 and 17, has been operating out of the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office since 1987. YAP provides an opportunity for low-level juvenile offenders to face a panel of volunteers from their community instead of a juvenile judge. The community panel sets and monitors punishment for the youth, which often includes restitution for victims. If youth complete their punishment contract their record is expunged. Currently, there are panels in every police district in the city. Research shows that YAP has promising effects: in the 36-month period after their first arrest, 29.9 percent of youth who completed a YAP contract were rearrested at least once compared with 44.4 percent of non-YAP youth.

The Youth Violence Reduction Project

The Youth Violence Reduction Project (YVRP) is an effort in Philadelphia to reduce youth violence in one of the city's most violent police districts. The police department, juvenile probation and social service agencies work together to identify the youth in the district most likely to commit or be the victim of violence. These youth are provided with intensive supervision from police and probation; linked to various social supports as necessary; provided with community-level advocates; and given expedited judicial process if they violate the terms of

their probation or are arrested for a violent offense. P/PV is conducting research on this effort and data on the overall effectiveness of this strategy is not yet available. However, operational principles from this project are emerging, including:

- Participation by targeted youth must be mandatory;
- Law enforcement and the community must be partners;
- Youth workers/advocates should come from the same community as participants;
- Probation should be reorganized to reduce officers' caseloads and allow more time for on-street supervision; and
- Police and probation officers should patrol together and become familiar with community residents and youth's families.

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)

OJJDP is involved in four relevant efforts that officials say will influence the organization's future policies. The first two, the Juvenile Mentoring Program and SafeFutures are not so new (both were originally funded in 1994 and 1995). However, they have ongoing research components that may yield interesting results about juvenile justice prevention strategies.

The Juvenile Mentoring Program (JUMP) is designed to provide one-on-one mentoring for youth at risk of delinquency, gang involvement, educational failure or dropping out of school. Organizations in 93 communities around the country are participating. A national evaluation is under way to determine the degree to which mentoring can be expected to impact long-term JUMP and OJJDP goals of reducing juvenile delinquency and gang participation. The JUMP approach to mentoring is based on the Big Brothers Big Sisters model and the evaluation is heavily influenced by P/PV's impact study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. Results from the evaluation are expected this year.

SafeFutures is working with six communities to help prevent and control youth crime by creating a continuum of care that responds to youth's needs at critical points in their development. The continuum starts with prevention programs and progresses through treatment and sanctions for youth already in the justice system. Mentoring is one of the components. The national evaluation is designed to assess the degree to which communities have been able to develop and implement a system of services that respond to youth's needs. The evaluation results are due this year.

The second two projects represent interesting and newer efforts by OJJDP. Through P/PV's Faith-Based Initiative for High-Risk Youth, OJJDP (along with private foundations) is supporting collaboratives in 16 communities that are led by faith organizations and include law enforcement and social service agencies. The goal of this effort is to test the ability of these faith-driven collaboratives to address the needs of the highest-risk youth in their communities and, in the process, reduce violence. P/PV is conducting the evaluation, which focuses on the capacity of faith organizations to lead these kinds of collaboratives and organize services to this population of youth; the role that faith plays in the process and the impact of local efforts on high-risk youth.

In 1997, OJJDP and The Pinkerton Foundation began funding an evaluation of the Boys & Girls Clubs of America's Gang Prevention/Intervention Through Targeted Outreach project. Some aspects of this project have been previously discussed in this paper.

The purpose of the Boys and Girls Clubs' gang project is threefold: to increase the Clubs' capacities to recruit and serve hard-to-reach youth; to provide these youth with positive developmental experiences by developing programs and services that meet their interests and needs; and to mobilize community resources to combat the gang problem. The evaluation included 21 clubs that were focused on preventing gang behavior in high-risk youth; three were focused on intervening with youth who were already gang members. The goals of the study were to learn if the Clubs succeeded at attracting youth at high risk of gang involvement; discover if the Clubs could keep these youth involved in Club programming; determine if youth were receiving positive supports through participation in the Clubs; and determine if Club participation has a positive effect on youth's lives. Findings from the study include:

- Clubs were successful in reaching youth at high risk of gang involvement. These youth are generally older than the typical Club or youth-serving organization participant. Clubs recruited these youth through direct outreach to youth in their neighborhoods, and by getting referrals from schools, social service agencies, the juvenile justice system and parents.
- Clubs were able to keep target group youth involved in activities by hiring staff who could gain youth's trust and develop close relationships with them; providing a comfortable and safe place for youth to hang out; and providing activities and services that directly met the needs and interests of the youth such as gang tattoo removal, GED classes and help finding alternative education, drug rehabilitation services, job and life skills training and support for dealing with probation issues and various types of recreational activities. Close to 70 percent of youth reported going to a Club or Club program at least once month and staying between one to three hours. To implement these activities, Clubs had to develop and maintain relationships with a variety of outside agencies, and develop a case management system to track youth activity outside the clubs. Both of these tasks were challenging for the clubs. Staff turnover also presented a challenge to the Clubs' ability to maintain relationships with referral agencies and youth.
- More frequent participation in Club activities is associated with the following positive outcomes: delayed onset of gang behavior and disengagement from gang associated peers; less contact with the juvenile justice system; fewer delinquent behaviors, like stealing and smoking marijuana; more positive school engagement and improved school outcomes; and more positive social relationships with family and peers.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Lessons from research and program operations point to the following strategies that should be considered in developing a new initiative for high-risk youth:

Expand and Strengthen Youth Corps. Research on Youth Corps shows that these programs have short-term effects for high-risk youth, particularly African Americans, across a variety of indicators. They also have a number of the characteristics that youth say make them “stick” with programs long enough to absorb what the programs have to offer. Therefore one programmatic strategy to consider would be to: (1) help Corps develop a public relations strategy to make sure that minority youth are aware of the benefits of being corpsmembers; (2) support Corps capacity to expand and serve more participants and (3) support the strengthening of their education component—the one area where the Corps model is weak. Strengthening the Corps’ education component could provide an opportunity to test the value of community colleges or the newer twilight schools for this population, and help develop the Corps’ capacity to partner with outside organizations.

Since the current evidence of Youth Corps’ effectiveness is based on a 15-month follow-up study, any expansion and strengthening of the program should be accompanied by additional and longer term, random assignment research. This would not only provide more definitive information about the Corps effectiveness, but also provide the field with another rigorous study from which to draw lessons.

Expand the Capacity of Boys and Girls Clubs to Reach and Serve High-Risk Youth.

P/PV’s recent study of the Boys and Girls Clubs attempts to attract and serve gang members showed very promising results and indicates that this strategy is worth expanding. Given the Clubs’ success working with gang members, it might also be useful to see if there are Clubs interested in targeting teen mothers. The research from teen pregnancy programs shows that this group has been particularly difficult to effect, especially when it comes to preventing additional childbearing. Clubs might also be the right vehicle for trying an intensive pregnancy prevention initiative patterned on their gang prevention efforts. Research shows that it is so difficult to change the sexual behavior of teen mothers that many experts believe prevention is the most effective intervention.

Any expansion of the Clubs’ efforts to attract and serve high-risk youth should pay particular attention to helping them strengthen administrative and record keeping capacities. P/PV’s research study indicates that the Clubs need this additional capacity to be effective in networking with community partners who provide specific services to high-risk youth and in monitoring youth when they participate in services outside of the Club. A formal long-term evaluation of any expanded effort would provide very valuable information about the capacity of the Boys and Girls Clubs to serve very difficult populations.

Investigate Promising Local Juvenile Justice Efforts for their Expansion Potential. Efforts like the Youth Aid Panels and the Youth Violence Reduction projects in Philadelphia or the new Home Based Sentencing project being implemented by the Vera Institute and juvenile justice agencies in New York City indicate that there are localities interested in developing innovative

approaches to reducing youth violence and improving the operations of their juvenile justice system. The Vera Institute initiative is so new that it only bears watching at this point. However, the two Philadelphia projects have several years of operating experience and one, the Youth Aid Panel, has promising research results. Developing a new juvenile justice effort might include taking a closer look at these two efforts and exploring whether or not there are other cities that might want to be part of an expanded test.

Develop a Strong Relationship with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). OJJDP is currently involved in developing and researching a number of innovative efforts that will influence their future programming and funding policies. Developing a strong relationship with them now may lead to opportunities to partner in the future when research results from their ongoing evaluations are in and they are ready to promote or expand promising juvenile justice efforts. This kind of relationship could be patterned after the partnership formed between the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and the Department of Education to promote after-school programming.

Build Open-Ended Programming and Research Strategies that Facilitate Additional Learning into any New Efforts. The case for both of these strategies is made clearly in this paper. Any new program efforts for high-risk youth should be structured to provide youth with ongoing services and supports after program completion. The effectiveness of this approach can be tested as a part of the accompanying research.

CONCLUSION

The mantra of “nothing works” when it comes to high-risk youth has reverberated throughout the youth field for over a decade now. This has taken its toll on program funding and the capacity of youth organizations-- as well as the ability of the field to move forward with any confidence that it can do anything to address the issues these young people face. Nothing can take the place of improving the operational and service delivery capacity of promising organizations that serve high-risk youth—this should certainly be the immediate priority. However, the two strategies discussed in this paper, longer-term follow-up which gives youth an opportunity to fully absorb program benefits and mining lessons from successful demonstration sites—even when the overall project shows “no impacts”—would go along way towards increasing learning about what “works” for high risk populations.