

# Issue BRIEF

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## Three-Year Impacts of Services and Work Incentives on Youth with Disabilities

Three of the Youth Transition Demonstration projects had positive impacts on paid employment during the third year after youth enrolled in the evaluation.

The cost of providing disability benefits to young people is high. In 2013, 1,176,000 people ages 13 through 25 received Supplemental Security Income benefits totaling \$8.7 billion (SSA 2014a). In the same year, 206,000 people ages 25 and under received Social Security Disability Insurance benefits totaling \$1.6 billion (SSA 2015).

The Youth Transition Demonstration, an initiative of the Social Security Administration, provided employment services and enhanced work incentives to young people on the disability rolls in 10 sites across the country. Mathematica's evaluation of this initiative involved enrolling 5,103 youth from 6 of these sites into the study; randomly assigning them to treatment or control groups; and collecting baseline and follow-up data on the enrollees. The findings show that treatment group youth in 3 of the sites were about 7 percentage points more likely than their control group counterparts to have worked for pay during the third year after study enrollment. Those differences—the estimated impacts of the demonstration projects on youth in the 3 sites—are statistically significant.

### THE YOUTH TRANSITION DEMONSTRATION

The transition to adulthood for youth with disabilities can be especially difficult. Besides the host of issues facing all youth at this age, young people with disabilities face unique challenges related to health, social isolation, service needs, the potential loss of benefits, and lack of access to supports (Osgood et al. 2010). These challenges complicate their planning for future education and work, often leading to poor education and employment outcomes, dependence on public programs, and a possible lifetime of poverty (Davies et al. 2009).

Recognizing the importance of supporting young people with disabilities at this critical juncture in their lives, the Social Security Administration (SSA) launched the Youth Transition Demonstration (YTD) in 2003 (Fraker and Rangarajan 2009). Focusing on youth ages 14 to 25, SSA invested considerable resources in developing and evaluating promising strategies to help youth with disabilities become as economically self-sufficient as possible. YTD projects around the country offered services designed to lift the

barriers facing these youth as they made the transition to adulthood. YTD also included SSA waivers of disability program rules to allow young workers to keep more of their benefits as their earnings increased.

Mathematica Policy Research and its partners rigorously evaluated YTD using an experimental design. Youth with disabilities who agreed to be in the study were randomly assigned to either a treatment or control group. The treatment group was eligible for both the waivers and YTD services, whereas the control group followed standard SSA program rules and could only access the non-YTD services that happened to be available in their communities. Because of the random assignment, the two groups were expected to be equivalent at the beginning of the study; consequently, any observed differences in their outcomes could be attributed to YTD. The evaluation team tracked employment, earnings, and benefits, among other outcomes, to assess whether YTD helped youth find jobs and reduced their dependency on Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (DI). In addition to an impact analysis of these outcomes, the study also included an analysis of the implementation of YTD. The final report on the study (Fraker et al. 2014) presents

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comprehensive findings from those analyses, which are summarized in this research brief.

## YTD COMPONENTS

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Because SSA wanted to test a solid set of program components grounded in best practices, the agency specified core components for YTD based on *Guideposts for Success*, a handbook developed by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (2009). *Guideposts* was informed by an extensive review of research, demonstration projects, and effective practices covering a wide range of programs. It represents the most comprehensive information available on “what works” in promoting a successful transition to adult life for youth with disabilities.

Foremost among the components of YTD were *individualized work-based experiences*. These included worksite tours; volunteer work; subsidized jobs; and most notably, competitive paid employment in integrated settings, where people with disabilities work alongside able-bodied individuals. Research shows that having a competitive paid job in secondary school is the strongest predictor of job success after graduation (Colley and Jamison 1998; Luecking and Fabian 2000; Wagner et al. 2005). The *youth empowerment* component enabled youth to acquire the skills and knowledge they needed to chart their own courses and advocate for themselves. YTD fostered empowerment by engaging youth in intensive planning that focused on education, employment, health care, and independent living. *Family involvement* is important because of the critical role that families play in helping youth manage their disability benefits and formulate plans for employment. The program encouraged this involvement by providing family-focused training activities, supporting parent networking, and offering transition-related information. YTD also facilitated *system linkages*, or the connections with service providers that youth may need to access health care, education programs, transportation assistance, and accommodations and assistive technologies for education and employment.

*SSA's waivers* for YTD—and the *benefits counseling* that youth needed to understand the waivers and other SSA benefit program rules—were also central to the program because they enhanced some of the standard

SSI work incentives, thus allowing treatment group youth who actually participated in YTD to keep more of their benefits while working than would otherwise have been possible.<sup>1</sup> For example, when calculating a person's SSI benefit, SSA generally excludes \$85 plus one-half of additional earnings each month (SSA 2014b), but with the YTD waivers, this exclusion was \$85 plus three-quarters of additional earnings. Also under the waivers, the consequences of a negative continuing disability review or age-18 medical redetermination were delayed for YTD participants, thus allowing them to continue to receive cash and medical benefits for four years after they enrolled in the evaluation or until they reached age 22, whichever came later.

Another noteworthy feature of YTD was the intensive technical assistance provided to projects. TransCen, Inc., a leader in the design and implementation of employment programs for youth with disabilities, delivered technical assistance focused on helping project staff network with employers to identify competitive paid jobs and to match youth with appropriate jobs.

## THE YTD PROJECTS

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SSA signed cooperative agreements with seven agencies in September 2003 to operate YTD projects in California, Colorado, Iowa, Maryland, Mississippi, and New York (one in Bronx County and the other in Erie County). Two years later, SSA selected a team of contractors headed by Mathematica to conduct the random assignment evaluation and to provide technical assistance to the projects. The team also included MDRC, a nonprofit corporation that evaluates social welfare programs, and TransCen. Based on information gathered through visits to the seven projects, the contractors recommended that those in the Bronx, Colorado, and Erie County participate in the first phase of the evaluation. SSA accepted this recommendation, and youth began to enroll in the evaluation in Colorado and the Bronx in August 2006, and in Erie County in February 2007. Table 1 lists these projects, along with their lead agencies and target populations, and shows the number of youth who were randomly assigned to treatment or control groups. The table also shows the number of treatment youth who participated in the YTD projects. Services ended in fall 2009 in Colorado and Erie County and in spring 2010 in the Bronx.

### YTD COMPONENTS

- Individualized work-based experiences
- Youth empowerment
- Family involvement
- System linkages
- SSA waivers and benefits counseling

**Table 1. Projects in the YTD evaluation**

Project location and name	Lead agency	Target population <sup>a</sup>	Sample Size	
			Treatment cases (YTD participants)	Control cases
<b>Phase 1 projects</b>				
Bronx Co., NY: CUNY Youth Transition Demonstration Project	John F. Kennedy, Jr., Institute for Worker Education of the City University of New York	SSI and DI recipients ages 15–19 and their families	492 (387)	397
Colorado (4 counties): Colorado Youth WINS	Colorado WIN Partners of the University of Colorado, Denver	SSI and DI recipients ages 14–25	468 (401)	387
Erie Co., NY: Transition WORKS	Erie 1 Board of Cooperative Educational Services	SSI and DI recipients ages 16–25	459 (380)	384
<b>Phase 2 projects</b>				
Miami-Dade Co., FL: Broadened Horizons, Brighter Futures	Florida regional office of ServiceSource	SSI and DI recipients ages 16–22	460 (388)	399
Montgomery Co., MD: Career Transition Program	St. Luke’s House, Inc.	High school juniors or seniors with severe emotional disturbances or other significant mental illnesses	422 (374)	383
West Virginia (19 counties): West Virginia Youth Works	Human Resource Development Foundation, Inc.	SSI and DI recipients ages 15–25	455 (388)	397

Note: Martinez and colleagues (2008) provide more complete descriptions of the six projects participating in the YTD evaluation.  
<sup>a</sup>Five of the six projects exercised their option to not serve the full 14–25 age range allowed by SSA for YTD.

Three additional projects participated in the second phase of the evaluation. They were selected from a group of five projects that were funded by SSA through its contract with Mathematica to deliver YTD services on a pilot basis in 2007. Projects were selected based on the number of youth recruited during the pilot phase, the strength of the services delivered, the degree of fidelity to the program design, and the size of the target population. The projects selected for full implementation were located in Miami-Dade County, Florida; Montgomery County, Maryland; and 19 counties in West Virginia. Youth in these locations began to enroll in the evaluation in March 2008, and SSA-funded YTD services ended in March 2012.

### **ENROLLING YOUTH IN THE EVALUATION**

In all project sites except Montgomery County, enrollment in the evaluation was restricted to youth who were SSI or DI recipients. In these sites, survey interviewers at Mathematica reached out to youth on the disability rolls to include them in the study. A young person

enrolled in the evaluation by completing a baseline survey and sending Mathematica a signed consent form affirming his or her decision to take part. Emancipated youth could sign the consent form themselves; otherwise, a signature by a legal guardian was required. After a young person enrolled, Mathematica randomly assigned him or her to a treatment or control group. The staff of the individual YTD projects were responsible for encouraging treatment group members to sign agreements to participate in the services offered by those projects.

Only in Montgomery County was eligibility for the evaluation restricted to youth who were considered, either by the county’s public school system or mental health system, to have a severe emotional disturbance or other significant mental illness. For youth who met these criteria, the project staff conducted the initial outreach, primarily through presentations to students in high school transition classes. Mathematica then followed up with the youth to complete the baseline survey, obtain written consent, and randomly assign them to a treatment or control group. Twenty-two percent of these youth

were receiving disability benefits; the others were considered to be at risk of receiving benefits.

## DATA SOURCES

The YTD evaluation included analyses of (1) the implementation of the individual projects and (2) their impacts on youth employment and related outcomes. The implementation analysis relied primarily on qualitative data collected during three visits to the project sites by the evaluation team over two years. The team also used Efforts-to-Outcomes (ETO), the web-based management information system used by the YTD projects, to glean important quantitative data on service delivery.

The impact analysis was based on data from surveys of evaluation enrollees and from administrative files for SSA benefit programs. In addition to the baseline survey, Mathematica conducted follow-up surveys one and three years after youth entered the evaluation. The surveys captured information on service receipt, educational attainment, employment and earnings, attitudes and expectations, contact with the justice system, and other outcomes for evaluation enrollees. The administrative data included monthly amounts of disability benefits from SSA and annual earnings records from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).<sup>2</sup>

Guided by the YTD conceptual framework, the analysis plan for the final evaluation report identified a parsimonious set of outcomes on which longer-term impacts of the YTD projects were expected. This brief highlights the estimated impacts of YTD on paid employment,

earnings, disability benefit amount, total income (earnings plus benefits), and contact with the justice system (arrested or charged with delinquency or a criminal complaint) during the third year after youth enrolled in the evaluation. We had two measures for each of the first two outcomes, one based on survey data and the other based on IRS records.

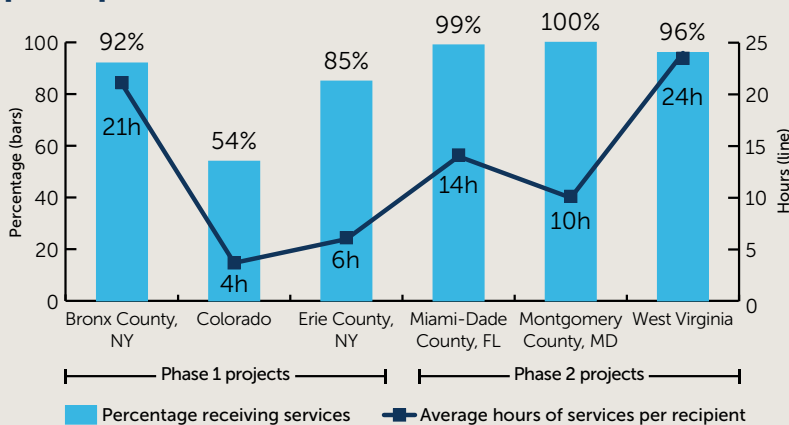
## RECEIPT OF EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

Among the 84 percent of treatment group members who agreed to participate in YTD, almost all received some services; however, the focus and intensity of those services varied considerably by project, with notable differences between the phase 1 and phase 2 projects (Figure 1). Only about half of the participants in the phase 1 Colorado project received YTD employment services, such as career exploration, assistance in preparing resumes, placement in paid jobs, and job coaching. Among the participants in the phase 1 projects who did receive employment services, the average number of hours of those services was 21 in the Bronx but just 4 and 6, respectively, in Colorado and Erie County. Nearly all participants in the phase 2 projects received YTD employment services, and the average number of hours of those services was relatively high: 14 in Miami-Dade County, 10 in Montgomery County, and 24 in West Virginia. These findings are based on information about service delivery recorded in ETO by project staff.

TransCen's technical assistance to the YTD projects was designed to facilitate the provision of employment services and the achievement of desirable employment outcomes by youth. However, the implementation analysis for phase 1 revealed a need to not only sharpen the focus of the technical assistance on services directly linked to paid employment but also to closely monitor the delivery of those services and the outcomes. Technical assistance for the phase 2 projects was adjusted accordingly and yielded positive results in terms of employment services, as shown in Figure 1. The average number of hours of YTD employment services was higher for participants in each of the phase 2 projects than for participants in the phase 1 projects in Colorado and Erie County.

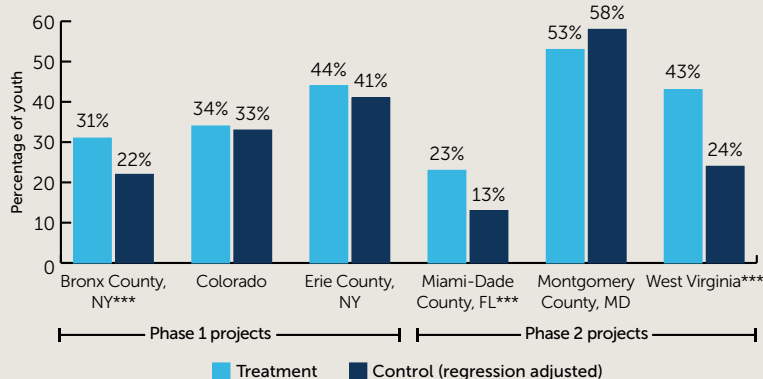
The evaluation's one-year impact analysis provides a valuable measure of the delivery of these employment services. If the projects

**Figure 1. Receipt of YTD employment services by project participants**



Source: The management information systems of the YTD projects.

**Figure 2. Paid employment rate during the first year following enrollment in the evaluation**



\* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01

Source: Outcome measures are from the YTD evaluation's three-year follow-up survey.

effectively delivered the services (including the capstone service of placement in a paid work experience), we would expect the rate of paid employment during the year after enrollment in the evaluation to be significantly higher for the treatment group than for the control group. Figure 2 shows that this was the case for one of the phase 1 projects and two of the phase 2 projects. Treatment group members in the Bronx, Miami-Dade County, and West Virginia worked for pay at some time during that year at rates that were 9, 10, and 19 percentage points higher, respectively, than the rates for control group members. These differences are all statistically significant at the .01 level. Notably, they were achieved by the same projects that provided the largest doses of employment services, as shown in Figure 1.

### THREE-YEAR IMPACTS OF THE YTD PROJECTS

In the third year, the Phase 1 projects had few statistically significant impacts in desirable directions (Table 2). The projects in the Bronx and Erie County both had positive impacts on youth total income, but this was primarily due to increases in benefits rather than to increases in earnings. The Erie County project also expanded the proportion of youth with paid employment, whereas the Bronx County project reduced youth contact with the justice system. The only statistically significant impact of the Colorado project was an undesirable one: greater youth contact with the justice system.

Compared with the phase 1 projects, the phase 2 projects provided intensive employment services

and had more statistically significant impacts in desirable directions during the third year (Table 3). The project in Miami-Dade County had desirable impacts on paid employment, earnings, total income, and contact with the justice system. The Montgomery County project increased earnings, whereas the West Virginia project increased paid employment, and both projects increased total income.

We found no evidence that the YTD projects in either phase decreased the amount of disability benefits received by youth. Indeed, four of the six projects significantly increased the benefit amount. This is not surprising because one of SSA's waivers allowed a YTD participant to continue receiving benefits for four years following enrollment in the evaluation or until age 22, whichever occurred later, in the event of a negative continuing disability review or age-18 medical redetermination.

### DISCUSSION

The findings summarized in this brief show that delivering a substantial amount of well-designed employment services to youth with disabilities, along with SSA waivers that make work more rewarding for those on the disability rolls, can increase paid employment among youth, raise their earnings, and otherwise help them make the transition to adulthood. It is noteworthy that these impacts can persist beyond the period of service delivery. These findings are especially useful because employment outcomes for youth on SSI are markedly poor (Wittenburg and Loprest 2007).

Most of the YTD projects struggled to develop and maintain a focus on employment in their delivery of services; however, the technical assistance provided by TransCen was helpful in this regard. This was especially evident in the phase 2 projects, which generally were more receptive to technical assistance than were the phase 1 projects and provided more intensive employment services. The intensity of the employment services provided by each project played a key role in determining its impacts on employment-related outcomes.

Two of the YTD projects (in the Bronx and Miami-Dade County) that provided relatively intensive employment services significantly lowered the share of youth who were arrested or charged with delinquency or a criminal

The YTD project in Miami-Dade County had desirable impacts on:

- Paid employment
- Earnings
- Total income
- Contact with the justice system

complaint during the third year following enrollment in the evaluation. Because the costs of criminal activities for society are high, the savings from reducing crime could be substantial.

The implications of the YTD evaluation for policy and practice will not be fully known until SSA completes a long-term benefit-

cost analysis of the demonstration projects, which will not occur for at least several years. However, the findings presented here show that interventions that provide substantial doses of well-designed services—most notably employment services, including paid work experiences—to youth with disabilities can improve key transition outcomes in the short to medium term.

**Table 2. Impacts of the phase 1 YTD projects during the third year following enrollment in the evaluation**

	Bronx Co., NY		Colorado		Erie Co., NY	
	Treatment mean	Estimated impact	Treatment mean	Estimated impact	Treatment mean	Estimated impact
Paid employment (%)						
Survey data	32.7	-0.1	37.9	0.2	45.0	7.7**
IRS data	34.5	0.8	36.7	1.1	39.0	1.0
Earnings amount						
Survey data	\$1,002	\$25	\$1,988	-\$94	\$2,462	\$521
IRS data	\$1,094	-\$291	\$1,793	\$74	\$2,217	\$215
Disability benefit amount; SSA data	\$6,277	\$1,528***	\$6,841	\$287	\$7,280	\$618**
Total income; survey and SSA data	\$7,497	\$1,729***	\$8,863	\$82	\$9,865	\$1,106***
Contact with justice system; survey data (%)	4.0	-3.8**	4.0	2.8*	3.9	-0.6

\* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01

Source: Outcome measures are from the YTD evaluation's three-year follow-up survey and from SSA and IRS administrative files.

**Table 3. Impacts of the phase 2 YTD projects during the third year following enrollment in the evaluation**

	Miami-Dade Co., FL		Montgomery Co., MD		West Virginia	
	Treatment mean	Estimated impact	Treatment mean	Estimated impact	Treatment mean	Estimated impact
Paid employment (%)						
Survey data	32.7	7.8**	69.4	3.6	35.7	5.7
IRS data	36.4	6.5*	61.8	-4.1	36.2	7.6*
Earnings amount						
Survey data	\$1,834	\$615**	\$6,823	\$1,162*	\$1,971	\$241
IRS data	\$2,386	\$282	\$4,354	\$47	\$1,952	\$172
Disability benefit amount; SSA data	\$5,340	\$698***	\$1,625	\$229	\$6,278	\$748**
Total income; survey and SSA data	\$7,414	\$1,246***	\$8,682	\$1,382**	\$8,405	\$1,010***
Contact with justice system; survey data (%)	0.5	-2.7**	5.2	-1.5	3.9	-0.8

\* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01

Source: Outcome measures are from the YTD evaluation's three-year follow-up survey and from SSA and IRS administrative files.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Sixteen percent of the treatment group youth were YTD nonparticipants. Although they had enrolled in the evaluation, they (or their parents) did not sign agreements with the YTD projects to participate in services. Because these youth did not participate in YTD services, they were ineligible for the SSA waivers. YTD nonparticipants were included among the treatment group members in the evaluation's follow-up data collection and impact analysis.

<sup>2</sup> The evaluation team did not have direct access to the IRS earnings records; rather, the team prepared analysis programs that SSA staff ran on the IRS records.

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**The final report on the YTD evaluation is available at <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/disabilityresearch/documents/YTD%20Final%20Report%20508%20Compliant%2012-29-2014.pdf>.**

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