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The Youth Transition Demonstration: Lifting Employment Barriers for Youth with Disabilities

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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).

The cost of providing disability benefits to young people is quite high. In 2011, 1,136,000 youth age 13 to 25 were receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits totaling \$8.0 billion (Social Security Administration 2012a). In the same year, 213,000 people age 25 and under were receiving Social Security Disability Insurance (DI) benefits totaling \$1.5 billion (Social Security Administration 2013). Many other young people are at high risk of receiving SSI or DI benefits in the future if they do not successfully make the transition to paid employment as adults. Some of them have disabilities that are currently not severe but are expected to worsen over time. Others are currently ineligible for benefits because of their parents' incomes but might become eligible after reaching age 18, especially if they move out of their parents' households.

The Youth Transition Demonstration

Recognizing the importance of providing support to 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 age 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 grow into adults. 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 are rigorously evaluating YTD using an experimental design. In this design, youth with disabilities who had agreed to be in the evaluation 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

YTD COMPONENTS

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

beginning of the study; consequently, any observed differences in their outcomes could be attributed to YTD. The evaluation team is tracking employment, earnings, and benefits, among other outcomes, to assess whether YTD helped youth find jobs and reduced their dependency on SSI and DI. The evaluation also includes a comprehensive study of the implementation of YTD.

All YTD project operations funded by SSA had ceased as of the writing of this brief in February 2013; evaluation activities are ongoing, however, with a scheduled completion date of September 2014.

YTD Components

Because SSA wanted to test a solid set of program elements grounded in best practices, the YTD components were based on *Guideposts for Success*, a handbook developed by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (2005). *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 *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—were also central to the program because they modified some standard SSI incentives to allow YTD participants to keep more of their benefits while working than would otherwise have been possible. For example, when calculating a person’s SSI benefit, SSA generally excludes \$65 plus one-half of additional earnings each month (SSA 2012b), but with the YTD waivers, this exclusion was \$65 plus three-quarters of additional earnings. Also under the waivers, the consequences of a negative

continuing disability review or medical re-determination at age 18 were delayed for youth enrolled in YTD, thus allowing them to continue to receive cash and medical benefits for four years after enrollment or until they reached age 22, whichever came later.

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

YTD Projects

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 TA to the projects. The team also includes MDRC, a non-profit 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. The top panel in 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 cases that participated in the YTD projects. Services ended in fall 2009 in Colorado and Erie County and in spring 2010 in the Bronx.

Table 1.
PROJECTS IN THE YTD EVALUATION

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

Note: Martinez et al. (2008) provide more complete descriptions of the six projects.
^a Five of the projects exercised their option to not serve the full 14–25 year 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 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.

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 in the future.

The staff of the projects were responsible for convincing treatment group members to participate in YTD services, and they were successful with 84 percent of them.

Data Sources

The YTD evaluation includes an analysis of the implementation of the individual projects and an analysis of their impacts on youth employment and related outcomes. The implementation analysis, which has been completed, relied primarily on qualitative data collected during three visits to the projects 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, still in progress, is 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 three-year follow-up is ongoing as of this writing. The survey data include information on service receipt, educational attainment, employment and earnings, attitudes and expectations, and other outcomes for evaluation enrollees. The administrative data include monthly amounts of disability benefits and the use of SSA work incentives.

The YTD evaluation team prepared six reports, one for each project, with findings

from the implementation analysis and interim impact analysis. These reports are available at <http://mathematica-mpr.com/Disability/ytd.asp#pubs>. They are based on the full data for the implementation analysis and on one year of follow-up survey data and administrative data for the impact analysis. Key findings from these reports are discussed in the remainder of this brief.

Findings from the Implementation Analysis

Almost all treatment group members who agreed to participate in a YTD project received some services; however, the amount and focus of those services varied considerably from project to project. The amount of services of any type received by participants in the phase 1 projects was high in the Bronx (42.8 hours per participant, on average) but low in Colorado and Erie County (7.1 and 12.7 hours, respectively), as shown in the top panel of Table 2. Only about half of the Colorado participants received employment services, such as assistance in preparing resumes and placement in paid jobs. Among participants in the phase 1 projects who did receive employment services, the average number of hours of those services was 20.7 in the Bronx but just 4.0 and 5.8, respectively, in Colorado and Erie County.

TransCen’s TA to the YTD projects was geared toward employment services and the achievement of desirable employment outcomes. However, the implementation

Outcome Measure	Percentage Receiving	Average Hours per Recipient ^a	Percentage Receiving	Average Hours per Recipient ^a	Percentage Receiving	Average Hours per Recipient ^a
Phase 1 Projects						
	Bronx County, NY		Colorado		Erie County, NY	
Any services	100.0	42.8	96.3	7.1	98.4	12.7
Employment services	91.7	20.7	54.4	4.0	85.0	5.8
Phase 2 Projects						
	Miami-Dade County, FL		Montgomery County, MD		West Virginia	
Any services	100.0	28.5	99.5	28.3	100.0	33.7
Employment services	99.0	13.9	99.5	10.2	96.4	23.6

^a The denominator in the calculation of average hours of services per recipient is the number of participants who actually received “any services” or “employment services.”

analysis for phase 1 revealed a need to not only sharpen the focus of the TA on services directly linked to paid employment but also to closely monitor both the delivery of those services and the outcomes for participants. TA for the phase 2 projects was adjusted accordingly and yielded positive results, as shown in the bottom panel in Table 2. The amount of any type of services received was consistently high for these projects, averaging about 30 hours per participant. Virtually all participants received employment services, and the average number of hours received was higher than for participants in the phase 1 projects in Colorado and Erie County: 13.9 hours in Miami-Dade County, 10.2 hours in Montgomery County, and 23.6 hours in West Virginia.

The TA refinements were designed to help the phase 2 projects focus more closely on connecting youth with competitive paid jobs and thus better fulfill the goals of YTD. These refinements led to impacts on key outcomes that were generally larger than those seen in phase 1, as discussed in the next section.

Findings from the Interim Impact Analysis

Just one of the three phase 1 projects had a positive effect on employment during the year after random assignment. Given the few hours of employment services received by YTD participants in Colorado and Erie County, it is not surprising that the projects in those sites had no statistically significant impacts on the number of youth who found paid jobs (Table 3, top panel). The project in the Bronx, which provided its participants with more employment services, had a significant positive impact on employment of 9 percentage points. Most of the youth in this project were placed in jobs through New York City’s Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), with their wages paid by either SYEP or the YTD project rather than by the employers. None of the phase 1 projects had a significant impact on total earnings during the year after random assignment.

Table 3.						
ONE-YEAR IMPACTS OF YTD PROJECTS ON EMPLOYMENT AND EARNINGS						
Outcome Measure	Treatment Mean	Impact	Treatment Mean	Impact	Treatment Mean	Impact
Phase 1 Projects						
	Bronx County, NY		Colorado		Erie County, NY	
Employed in a paid job (%)	30.5	9.0***	34.4	1.3	43.6	2.9
Annual earnings (\$)	544	14	1,574	-274	1,842	35
Phase 2 Projects						
	Miami-Dade County, FL		Montgomery County, MD		West Virginia	
Employed in a paid job (%)	22.8	9.4***	53.4	-4.2	42.7	19.1***
Annual earnings (\$)	895	306*	2,591	-346	1,559	524***

Note: A regression model was used to estimate impacts while controlling for baseline differences between treatment and control group members.

*/***/Impact estimate is significantly different from zero at the .10/.01 level using a two-tailed t-test.

Among the phase 2 projects, those in Miami-Dade County and West Virginia had statistically significant positive impacts on both paid employment and total earnings during the year after random assignment. As shown in the bottom panel of Table 3, 42.7 percent of the treatment group in West Virginia was employed, reflecting an impact of 19.1 percentage points. The impact on mean annual earnings was \$524 in that site. In Miami-Dade County, the impacts on paid employment and earnings were 9.4 percentage points and \$306, respectively. The Montgomery County project, however, had no significant impacts on these outcomes during the year after random assignment. The lack of impacts in that site may be explained by two factors: first, 78 percent of youth who were recruited into the evaluation in Montgomery County were not SSI or DI beneficiaries and therefore may not have had consistently large barriers to employment, and second, the services available to the control group in that county were relatively strong.

Discussion

Our findings clearly show that, compared to YTD projects that offered fewer hours of services, projects that provided

more hours had a greater impact on the employment outcomes of youth during the year after they entered the evaluation. Of the four projects that provided the most hours of services, three had positive impacts on the number of youth who found paying jobs, and two also had positive impacts on annual earnings. In contrast, the two projects that provided the fewest hours of services had no impacts on employment and earnings.

It should be noted that many treatment youth were receiving services during the period covered by our interim impact analysis, which may have influenced their short-term outcomes. More research is needed to determine whether the positive impacts we found persisted beyond this period of service receipt. Our ongoing analyses of YTD will show whether the impacts changed in the second and third follow-up years, by which time project services had ended.

For a full list of references, go to http://www.disabilitypolicyresearch.org/brief13_01_ref.asp.

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