

Vocational/Job Training

Providing at-risk youth with vocational training and work opportunities is a common strategy to discourage future delinquency and involvement with the justice system. Of special concern are disconnected youths – those out of school, out of work, and in other high-risk situations. More than one third of all public school students in the United States drop out before they graduate, including about half of all African American and Hispanic students (Greene and Forster 2003). School dropouts, juvenile offenders, youths aging out of foster care with low high school completion rates, and youths with disabilities all face significant challenges to gainful and legal employment. To find jobs, they need effective supports (Brown and Thakur 2006; Larson and Turner 2002; Platt, Casey, and Faessel 2006).

The prevention literature emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach for youth that includes vocational services to address the education and workforce needs (Jekielek, Cochran, and Hair 2002; Partee 2003; Zabel and Nigro 2007). Vocational or job training programs that take a preventive approach typically concentrate on attainment of basic skills competencies, opportunities for academic and occupational training, and exposure to the job market and employment. Depending on their emphasis, vocational training and employment programs address several risk factors, including academic failure, alienation and rebelliousness, association with delinquent and violent peers, and low commitment to school. At the same time, vocational training enhances protective factors by providing job skills, on-the-job experiences, and recognition for work performed. Programs built on a developmental approach help young people avoid high-risk behavior and promote academic and work-readiness skills as well as the personal attributes employers seek (Brown and Thakur 2006).

Employment and vocational programs, which vary in program intensity and expense, include

- ***Career curricula.*** These programs are usually incorporated into high school and summer programs that serve at-risk youth.
- ***Summer work and subsidized employment.*** These programs generally are limited to several months.
- ***Short-term training with job placement.*** These short-term vocational skills programs generally last 6 months and help participants find employment.
- ***Long-term intensive residential programs.*** These programs provide vocational and life skills training, general education, and job placement.

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Successful employment training programs for at-risk youth prepare participants for employment, provide counseling and other support services, provide job placements, and make supports available to help participants retain their employment. This comprehensive approach requires collaboration among an array of service agencies and providers (Brown and Thakur 2006).

In an attempt to provide comprehensive services, including long-term work training, Congress in 1998 passed the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). This legislation combined the short-term youth summer jobs program and the year-round programs previously provided through the Job Training Partnership Act into a more comprehensive vocational program. The WIA, administered by the U.S. Department of Labor, requires states to use approximately one third of the funds to serve out-of-school youth. This requirement and the WIA's close collaboration with the juvenile justice system provide a preventive approach to addressing the needs of high-risk youth. Local programs supported by WIA funds mobilize collaborative efforts among agencies to provide a range of services. Program activities may include tutoring (leading to a high school degree or GED), internships, job shadowing, work experience, adult mentoring, and comprehensive guidance and counseling. Evaluations of the WIA programs highlight challenges in providing comprehensive services to out-of-school youth because of limited funding (Barnow and King 2005; Fisher, Montgomery, and Gardner 2008) and the difficulty in developing and coordinating comprehensive vocational services tailored to the unique needs of youth (Allen 2002). Job Corps and YouthBuild are two vocational/job training programs that utilize WIA funds.

Job Corps, one of the most renowned employment programs, was originally created by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. Job Corps serves more than 60,000 young adults annually and has enrolled more than 2 million since its inception. It provides remedial education, GED preparation, vocational training, job placements assistance, and other supports to economically disadvantaged young people ages 16 to 24. The average Job Corps participant spends about 8 months in the program and receives more than a thousand hours of education and training. There is a 2-week orientation and assessment of skills and interests, after which participants receive a mix of vocational and academic instruction designed to meet their needs. Job Corps participants reside in dormitories and receive room and board along with a wide range of services. In some programs, residential services are not provided.

The YouthBuild program also targets out-of-school youths ages 16 to 24. It includes youths who have been adjudicated, are aging out of foster care, and are low income. YouthBuild has more than 200 YouthBuild grants across the country and serves more than 5,000 young people each year. The program provides participants with academic instruction along with occupational skills training while they build affordable housing in their communities.

Other shorter and less intensive vocational training programs include those used in high schools and as summer programs. These programs – such as the Summer Career Exploration Program (SCEP), and Career Academy – often target youths from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and seek to reduce the number of students who drop out of school before getting their degree.

Theoretical Foundation

Much has been written about the complex relationship between crime and unemployment (Bushway and Reuter 2002; MacKenzie 2006; Hirschi 1969). *Social control theory* (Hirschi 1969), applied to the workplace, suggests that supervision and expected behaviors experienced at the job reduce the possibility that youths will engage in delinquent behavior. *Social learning theory* (Bandura 1997), applied to the workplace, suggests that appropriate behavior can be learned, not only from observation and modeling of family behaviors, but also from role models observed at work. *Economic strain theory*, another of the many theories used to explain delinquency, posits that strain resulting from economic

pressures can place at-risk adolescents who realize their dismal employment prospects at heightened risk for delinquency (Wester, MacDonald, and Lewis 2008). The young male's decision to engage in crime is thought to be strongly affected by his bleak employment opportunities in the legitimate labor market. According to the economic model of crime, employment reduces the probability of engaging in crime possibly for one or more of several reasons, including increased income, reduced free time available for criminal activity, and the promotion of conventional norms (Ihlanfeldt 2006). Local labor market opportunities that are confined to the low-wage service sector have also been regarded as influencing the likelihood of violent delinquency (Bellair, Roscigno, and McNulty 2003).

Outcome Evidence

A 2002 review (Public/Private Ventures 2002) of outcome evaluations of employment and vocational skills training programs conducted in the 1990s found that, unfortunately, most of the programs had negligible or only very modest success. The findings indicate that the impact of employment and vocational skills training on delinquency and protective factors was mixed. The authors called for more rigorous evaluation and highlighted the shortcomings of the program evaluations, which make it difficult to assess the true potential of the programs. For example, the follow-up period examined in some studies may have been too brief to document long-term employment gains. Programs that did not show strong outcomes were found to have benefited the highest-need participants while doing little for the majority of participants who were less needy. Programs often had differential results for various components so that programs sometimes showed positive results in only one or two of the outcomes: dropout rates, employment rates, average weekly earnings, or hours worked.

Job Corps, the most frequently analyzed program, was evaluated in a randomized, control study (Schochet, Burghardt, and Glazerman 2001; Public/Private Ventures 2002) cited by the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse. The 4-year follow-up of the nationally representative sample of more than 6,000 Job Corps youths revealed that a significantly higher number of Job Corps participants achieved a GED than comparison group participants. Another evaluation (Jekielek, Cochran, and Hair 2002) revealed that Job Corps participants were slightly more likely than those in the control group to be employed at a 30-month follow-up, had greater long-term earnings, and were less likely to be enrolled in a food stamp program.

An evaluation of four YouthBuild (YB) programs in three states (Cross 2004; Jekielek, Cochran, and Hair 2002) indicated that 85 percent of those who were convicted of felonies before they entered the program had not reoffended since completing the program. In addition, two thirds of the program graduates who had been involved with the criminal justice system before entering the program had not been arrested, convicted of a misdemeanor or felony, or spent one or more nights in jail or in prison since completing the program. An evaluation of the YB Offender Program targeted at youth offenders indicated reduced recidivism and improved educational outcomes for the YB participants (Cohen and Piquero 2008).

A review of summer career development programs (Terzian, Moore, and Hamilton 2009) revealed few rigorous evaluations. Most of the programs that were evaluated appeared to have few positive outcomes. SCEP did not affect the frequency and duration of employment, continuation of work once school resumed, or school-year earnings, and the Summer Training and Education Program had no effect on the likelihood of employment. Only Upward Bound increased employment 3 years after the program.

In summary, the available evidence regarding success of employment and vocational skills training programs is mixed (Public/Private Ventures 2002). While some positive outcomes have been

documented, they are often not large in magnitude and may be greatest for a small percentage of participants—typically those at highest risk. Shortcomings of evaluation designs may also result in failure to detect positive effects. Participants may need to be followed for longer periods, and differences in dosage among program sites may need to be considered in program analyses.

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