

LESSONS FROM THE J-PAL STATE AND LOCAL INNOVATION INITIATIVE

Case Study: Puerto Rico



How can a research project be sustained across an administration change?

Developing and carrying out a randomized evaluation often spans multiple years, so it is not uncommon for the researchers and policymakers collaborating on a randomized evaluation to have to adapt to an election and subsequent change in administration. In Puerto Rico, the process of designing a randomized evaluation to assess the impact of an earnings incentive and job-coaching program, called the Puerto Rico Self-Sufficiency Project, began under one governor's administration and now continues into another. By securing buy-in from staff at multiple levels, drawing on support from outside stakeholders, and providing opportunities for the new administration to provide input into the evaluation, the research team has been able to sustain the project through the administration change.

The Puerto Rico Self-Sufficiency Project aims to increase employment and earnings among current [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families \(TANF\)](#) participants by offering them a time-limited monthly financial incentive, conditional on formal sector employment. The project will also implement modified job-coaching and case management services that occur both before and after participants secure a job.

The evaluation will test the effect of the financial incentives alone, the modified job services alone, and the combined incentives and modified services on employment status, earnings, and social benefits payments to recipients. Researchers Gustavo J. Bobonis (Center for a New Economy, University of Toronto), Frederico Finan (University of California-Berkeley), Marco Gonzalez Navarro

(University of Toronto), and Deepak Lamba Nieves (Center for a New Economy) are leading the study.

Securing buy-in from staff at all levels of the implementing agency early on eased the research projects' transition to the new administration after a new governor was elected in Puerto Rico in November 2016. Helping staff appreciate the value of the evaluation should be a priority regardless of upcoming elections, but also helps build sustainability across administrations.

In Puerto Rico, the turnover among political appointees in January 2017 did not imply the turnover of all staff contributing to the research project. Staff at multiple levels within the Administration for Socioeconomic Development of the Family (ADSEF), including non-appointees and service providers on the ground, had been engaged in developing the evaluation and during the transition. These continuing staff could attest that they understood, valued, and supported the evaluation—and wanted it to continue.

Partnering with a non-partisan, non-governmental organization, [Espacios Abiertos](#), also played a pivotal role in easing the transition. Espacios Abiertos, an organization committed to increasing government transparency and civic engagement in Puerto Rico, is working with ADSEF to improve and implement the agency's job training program. As an organization based on the ground in Puerto Rico and not aligned with a particular party, Espacios Abiertos has been able to steward the evaluation through the governmental change.

Making the value of the evaluation clear to the incoming administration also helped sustain the research project. The randomized evaluation will provide actionable information to the government about whether the benefits of providing the earnings supplements and reforming the standard employment services outweigh their additional costs. The evaluation may provide additional potential value to the government by linking previously disparate administrative datasets. The research team plans to link data on benefits payments collected by Puerto Rico's Department of the Family with data on employment and earnings collected by Puerto Rico's Department of Labor. This linkage could, for example, provide insights into labor force participation among TANF recipients in general.

Listening to the new administration and understanding its priorities has helped open the door to broader collaboration. Staff from J-PAL, the research team, and administrative datasets. The research team

To read more about lessons from the State and Local Innovation Initiative, see: bit.ly/2fvG7j6

plans to link data on benefits payments collected by Puerto Rico's Department of the Family with data on employment and earnings collected by Puerto Rico's Department of Labor. This linkage could, for example, provide insights into labor force participation among TANF recipients in general.

By proactively looking for new connections after the administration change and being flexible about what the research project would yield, the research team and J-PAL have used the initial evaluation as an opportunity to help expand evidence-based policymaking efforts across a range of agencies. As one output from this engagement, J-PAL North America is hiring a Chief Evaluation Officer who will be embedded in the Department of Education. [J-PAL Latin America & Caribbean](#) will provide training opportunities to develop the government's capacity for research and evaluation.