Community Service Grants to Foster Social and Economic Integration for Youth in Kazakhstan

Sector(s): Labor Markets, Political Economy and Governance

Sample: 3783 youth

Target group: Youth

Outcome of interest: Charitable giving Employment Aspirations Social cohesion

Intervention type: Coaching and mentoring Intergroup/social contact Monetary incentives

AEA RCT registration number: AEARCTR-0004708

Research Papers: Can community service grants foster social and economic integration for youth? ...

Partner organization(s): Ministry of Education and Sciences of Kazakhstan, SANGE Research Center, World Bank

In many low-and-middle-income countries, youth struggle to integrate into society, displaying high levels of social discontent and experiencing economic and political isolation. In Kazakhstan, researchers tested whether offering youth community service grants and training impacted their level of community engagement, pro-social behavior, life skills, and labor market outcomes. Engaging youth in civic service and/or training had little to no effect on these outcomes one-year post-program, with some evidence of negative training effects on labor market outcomes.

Policy issue

In low and middle-income countries, where nearly half of the population is under 25, young people often struggle to integrate into society, with limited community engagement and low labor force participation[1]. To address this issue, many governments have introduced subsidized community service programs, offering youth opportunities to engage in activities that benefit their communities.

Policymakers expect these programs to foster social integration by increasing youth's community engagement and pro-social behavior (voluntary actions intended to benefit others). Involvement in community service is also anticipated to boost their life skills—the essential abilities for navigating the demands and challenges of everyday life, such as creativity and teamwork—by offering hands-on project experience. Enhanced life skills can in turn improve youth employability and economic integration.

Despite the interest in youth community service programs, evidence on their effectiveness is limited. To shed light on this approach, researchers evaluated an intervention in Kazakhstan that provided youth with community service grants paired with life skills training and mentorship.

Context of the evaluation

In Kazakhstan, youth constitute a large proportion of the total population (27 percent were aged 15-24 in 2017) and face significant hurdles, including disengagement from social institutions and a high prevalence of risky behaviors. Less than ten percent of Kazakh youth were involved in community-driven volunteering in 2014[3] , compared to 23 percent in OECD countries , and only a quarter of youth considered it important to engage in politics and civil society. Kazakhstan also ranked among the highest in youth suicide and mortality rates in the world in 2010 [4], and media reports have drawn attention to the growing

involvement of youth in political protests and extremism.

Challenges extend to economic outcomes: while the share of Kazakh youth who are neither in school nor employed was favorable compared to other countries (9.5 percent in 2016 compared to 14 percent in OECD countries and the United States), the proportion of NEET (not in education, employment, or training) youth has been on the rise since 2012. Additionally, despite the near-universal completion of secondary education in Kazakhstan, analyses of NEET youth have identified limitations in both technical and soft skills as significant barriers to finding employment. [5]

In this context, the Government of Kazakhstan launched the Kazakhstan Youth Corps (KYC), a youth community service program funded by the World Bank that offered youth a combination of community service grants with life skills training and mentorship . The piloting phase of the program was implemented in four regions in Kazakhstan, namely Pavlodar, Karaganda, Almaty and South Kazakhstan. The pilot was led by the Coordinating Agency, a group of non-governmental agencies engaged in youth development, under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and Sciences.



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Details of the intervention

Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to test the impact of KYC on Kazakh youth's community engagement, pro-social behavior, life skills, and access to labor market opportunities. Youth aged 18 to 29 were eligible to apply for the program if they had been living in one of the pilot regions for longer than six months. To apply, eligible youth had to sort into groups of three to five people and submit a proposal with an idea for a potential community project.

The KYC opportunity was advertised through social media, billboards, posters, and public meetings at universities and local youth centers, resulting in 1320 submitted proposals. After the application period, a committee of local stakeholders examined proposals for their social importance and selected 1113 groups, totaling 3784 youth, to participate in the study. The program took place between August and December 2017. Participant groups were randomly assigned to one of four interventions:

1. *Community service grant* (295 groups, 998 youth): Groups were offered a grant of up to US$3,000 to design and implement a community service project for six months. Additionally, each participant received a monthly stipend comparable to an entry-level wage—US$200 per month for university graduates and US$100 for non-graduates.
2. *Training program* (263 groups, 890 youth): Groups were offered a program that comprised a one-week training focused on life skills and project management, six bi-monthly meetings with a mentor, and a one-week concluding module. The life skills explored in training modules included critical thinking, goal setting, collaboration, team building, and creativity.
3. *Combined intervention* (294 groups, 1002 youth): Groups were offered both the community service grant and the training intervention. Youth in this group attended the same training sessions as youth in the training-only group.
4. *Comparison group* (261 groups, 894 youth): Groups were not offered any of the interventions.

Researchers surveyed youth about a year after the program to build an index of community engagement and pro-social behavior (combining seven indices of related outcomes, such as civic engagement and interpersonal trust) and a survey tool measuring life skills (combining indices that captured life skills, such as mental health, self-esteem/locus of control, and propensity to work in groups). The survey also captured labor market outcomes, measured as hours worked in the last week, days worked in the last month, income over the last month, and engagement in income-generating activity such as wage labor and self-employment. In addition, researchers used administrative data from the Ministry of Education and Sciences to track the number of beneficiaries of the community service projects, and surveyed community and local government leaders to measure the impact of the program on communities. Leveraging both data sources, researchers tracked program take-up among participants.

Results and policy lessons

Overall, program participants experienced no changes in community engagement or life-skills one year after the intervention. Labor market outcomes remained unchanged in all groups but the training-only group, which experienced weakly adverse effects on economic activity and income.

Take-up: Program take-up was high, but only in groups that received community grants. Over 91 percent of grant recipients completed their projects, and 88 percent of those receiving the combined intervention reported attending every mentorship session, compared to 41 percent in the training-only group . Additionally, 96 percent of the combined intervention group reported attending both week-long training sessions, while only 58 percent of the training-only group attended.

Community engagement and pro-social behavior: Across all three interventions, participants experienced no measurable change in the average index of community engagement and pro-social behavior relative to the comparison group .

Life skills: Participants in the three programs also saw no measurable impact on the average life-skills index with respect to the comparison group.

Labor market outcomes: Youth in the training-only intervention experienced decreases in work time and income, while participants in the combined and grant-only groups saw no meaningful changes in their labor market outcomes . In the training-only group, youth reported working 3.1 fewer hours the previous week, 1.7 fewer days the previous month, and earning KZT 6,286 (USD 19) the previous month than the comparison group, which averaged 28 hours of work the previous week, and 15 days of work and KZT 57,684 (USD 173) in earnings the previous month. These impacts appear to be driven by a decline in wage employment in the training-only group, though researchers could not identify the specific drivers of lower labor market engagement in that

group. Labor market outcomes remained mostly unchanged for the grants and combined intervention groups.

Community impact: The community service projects reached 150 beneficiaries on average and had a positive perceived impact on the communities they served. Ninety percent of the surveyed community leaders reported that the projects had an impact in their community and 40 percent reported that the impact was substantial .

Taken in sum, these results suggest that in the context of Kazakhstan, engaging youth in civic service and training had no meaningful impact on their community engagement. Effects on economic integration were also muted or slightly adverse for those who only received training. This indicates that youth community service programs may need to be justified by reasons other than their impact on the youth delivering the services, such as the potential benefits they offer to service recipients.

The estimated cost of the KYC program was around US$1500 per youth receiving the grant and the stipend, with US$780 allocated to the stipend, and US$330 per youth receiving the training and mentorship. The transfers corresponded to 3.1 percent of the per capita GDP in 2017 for the stipend alone and 6.2 percent for the stipend and grant together.

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2. The World Bank Data, available at [link:1, , 2, ,3, ,4] on [25 July 2024]

3. Umbetaliyeva, Tolganay, Botagoz Rakisheva Peer Teschendorf. 2016. “Youth in Central Asia: Kazakhstan” Friedrich Ebert Foundation Kazakhstan, [link].

4. UNICEF. 2024. “Study on Prevalence, Underlying Causes, Risk and Protective Factors in Respect to Suicides and Attempted Suicides in Kazakhstan.” Technical Report, The UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in the Republic of Kazakhstan, [link]

5. Alimkhanova, Dinara. 2018. “Understanding the Rising NEET Phenomenon in Southern Kazakhstan.” CAP Paper 206 (CAAF Fellow Papers) [link].