

AN INTRODUCTION TO J-PAL NORTH AMERICA



The challenge The creation and dissemination of rigorous empirical evidence is an essential ingredient for high-quality academic research and effective public policy that reduces poverty and inequality. Yet policymakers are often hampered by a lack of evidence on the efficacy of existing programs or the potential of possible alternatives. Evidence from rigorous impact evaluations, especially randomized evaluations, can provide valuable insights for learning which policies work best, and which can achieve their goals most cost-effectively.

There are two primary challenges. First, there are important areas of social policy in North America where randomized evaluations are rare, leaving key questions unanswered. Second, in areas where there is a tradition of randomized evaluations, their impact often falls far short of its potential. Interventions may not be designed to yield broadly applicable lessons; opportunities are sometimes missed to coordinate and synthesize studies to achieve broader insights; and the evidence and insights too often fail to reach decision makers in an understandable, relevant format.

Launch of J-PAL North America

In the 12 years since its creation, the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) at MIT has become an international leader in advancing the science and practice of randomized evaluations, communicating the need for rigorous empirical academic research, and synthesizing and disseminating the resulting policy lessons. J-PAL's network of more than 120 affiliated professors has produced more than 680 randomized evaluations, and more than 200 million people have been reached by policies found to be effective by J-PAL studies. J-PAL's affiliates have evaluated anti-poverty policies in developing, middle-income, and developed countries through its affiliated regional research centers in Africa, Europe, Latin America, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. An obvious gap has been the North American region.

J-PAL launched J-PAL North America in 2013 to expand its network to include academics focused on domestic policy, to spur more rigorous research on critical questions in social policy, and to ensure that the evidence is synthesized and communicated effectively to decision makers. **J-PAL North America follows J-PAL Global's proven model of three core activities:**

core activities

- ◆ **Research:** Catalyze randomized evaluations to generate rigorous evidence of policies' impact
- ◆ **Policy outreach:** Synthesize and disseminate evidence to help translate research into action
- ◆ **Capacity building:** Build decision makers' ability to conduct randomized evaluations and understand their importance

J-PAL North America tailors these core activities to suit the needs of two different types of social policy areas we have identified: those where there is a dearth of rigorous evidence and those where there is an existing tradition of high-quality, randomized evaluations but where J-PAL's involvement can further enhance both the lessons learned and their impact on policy.

First, in areas where there is a dearth of rigorous evidence, J-PAL fosters individual randomized evaluations and helps build a systematic, evidence-based approach to policy. J-PAL provides thought leadership to identify areas of need and opportunity, and encourages randomized evaluations in these areas by: (1) Building a shared administrative data platform to be used in research; (2) Providing pilot money to help launch promising and innovative projects; (3) Establishing a central clearinghouse for matching researchers and implementing partners; and (4) Establishing a centralized hiring and training system for research staff conducting randomized evaluations.

Second, in areas that already have traditions of randomized evaluations by academics and survey research firms, J-PAL supports and encourages additional high-quality evaluations through the services listed above. It also focuses on activities designed to maximize the potential impact of findings from randomized evaluations through: (1) Facilitation of partnerships between existing U.S. evaluation research firms and academic researchers in J-PAL's network; (2) Policy briefs synthesizing the evidence across many evaluations; and (3) "Evidence workshops" and training courses bringing together policymakers, donors, social entrepreneurs, and private sector actors.

the big picture

J-PAL Global has had enormous success in raising the standards of empirical research on important social policy questions in international development, in galvanizing, guiding and supporting a new generation of academic researchers committed to rigorous empirical research on important applied problems, and in improving policy effectiveness. J-PAL North America's vision is to have a similar, long-lasting effect in creating a movement for rigorous, empirical research on some of the most pressing domestic problems of poverty and inequality, and translating that research into policy action.



J-PAL North America's work spans a wide variety of areas including: Education, Environment and Energy, Consumer Finance, Crime, Health, Labor Markets, and Political Participation.

Leadership: Amy Finkelstein and Lawrence F. Katz

J-PAL North America is led by Amy Finkelstein, Ford Professor of Economics at MIT and Lawrence F. Katz, Elisabeth Allison Professor of Economics at Harvard. In 2012, Amy won the John Bates Clark Medal for her work in health economics; she is leading the Oregon Health Insurance Experiment, the first randomized evaluation of insuring the uninsured ever conducted in the United States. Larry is a leader in research on labor markets, inequality, and U.S. social policies. He has been a pioneer in the use of randomized evaluations to analyze domestic labor market and housing issues and is the principal investigator of the long-term evaluation of the Moving to Opportunity program, a large-scale randomized housing mobility experiment.

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TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO ACTION

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