

LESSONS FROM THE J-PAL STATE AND LOCAL INNOVATION INITIATIVE

Case Study: Philadelphia



PHOTO: PHILADELPHIA YOUTH NETWORK

A WORKREADY PHILADELPHIA PARTICIPANT HOLDS ONE OF THE PRODUCTS DESIGNED BY YOUTH IN THE PROGRAM.

How can a randomized evaluation be designed to minimize disruption to the usual recruitment and enrollment processes?

Randomized evaluations are not one-size-fits-all; rather, they can be thoughtfully tailored to minimize disruption for programs implemented by multiple service providers or that involve multiple service models. The ongoing randomized evaluation of Philadelphia's [WorkReady](#) summer jobs program involves both of these factors. The research team has worked collaboratively with the City of Philadelphia and the service providers to design a study that will provide rigorous evidence on the impact of the program while minimizing any disruption to program operations.

Led by J-PAL affiliate Sara Heller (University of Michigan), the randomized evaluation will test the impact of being offered a summer job through Philadelphia's WorkReady program on criminal justice, employment, and education outcomes. Young people in Philadelphia face challenges common to youth in low-income neighborhoods across the United States—high rates of dropout, lack of employment opportunities, and exposure to violent crime. Previous randomized evaluations in New York City and Chicago found that summer jobs programs led to a drop in violent crime, incarceration, and even mortality.¹ The evaluation in Philadelphia will test whether these results apply in a new setting, as well as whether the summer jobs program impacts other outcomes such as mental health, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, housing instability, and child maltreatment. WorkReady Philadelphia is a portfolio of programs that address the skills gap for vulnerable young people, managed by the Philadelphia

Youth Network (PYN). PYN has offered youth employment training skills and work experience through the WorkReady summer jobs program for 15 years. Sixty local agencies contract with PYN to place youth in six-week (120-hour) summer jobs. Given limited resources, demand for the program consistently outpaces available positions. In 2016, for example, 16,000 youth applied for approximately 8,000 summer jobs. In the past, jobs were awarded by provider discretion, screening processes, or on a first-come, first-served basis. Applicants were matched to jobs based on geographic proximity and experience. This approach meant that many youth who received summer jobs perhaps may have been more likely to find summer opportunities without WorkReady. On the other hand, youth who were less likely to be selected by providers may have actually been those who would benefit most from the program. Analysis of program data showed, for example, that young people of color were less likely to be placed in jobs.

Committing to a more equitable distribution of program slots in 2017, PYN agreed to randomly allocate roughly 1,000 of its 8,000 program slots by a fair lottery—which would also enable a rigorous evaluation of the program. The remaining 7,000 program slots would be allocated as usual. Only youth whose participation was determined by lottery will be included in the evaluation.

WorkReady providers and the research team placed paramount importance on implementing the lottery in a way that placed youth in appropriate jobs while retaining random assignment. Youth who received jobs would need a reasonable commute to their workplace, so assigning individuals to difficult-to-reach positions could not only create obstacles for the youth and the providers, but also negatively impact the research—far-flung job placements could lower compliance with the program (i.e., increase dropout), reducing the researchers' ability to estimate the impact of the program.

To address this potential issue, researchers designed a randomization strategy that included geographic blocking based on the preferences of each provider. Applicants were subdivided into pools by the geographic catchment area appropriate for specific jobs and then randomized to either the treatment or control group for those positions.

The research design also accounted for the fact that not every summer job is appropriate for every applicant. The WorkReady program offers four program models to meet the needs of different

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

populations and a range of ages from 12-21. Three of these models were included in the study: service learning for youth with little or no prior work experience, structured work experience for youth with little or no prior experience, and internships for youth already prepared for the workplace. To accommodate the multiple service models, eligible youth were first categorized based on age (in addition to geographic area). Youth were then randomized within these age categories into either the treatment group or control group, so that they were only assigned to job models appropriate for their age.

PYN added new recruitment and enrollment supports as part of the evaluation, which also aligned with the City's goal of enrolling more disadvantaged youth in the program. To make the randomized evaluation informative, it was important to ensure that take-up rates in the treatment group were high. If few youth in the treatment group accepted and completed their summer job, the effects of the program on participating youth would be diluted by individuals in the treatment group who had not actually received the intervention, and the randomized evaluation would underestimate the program's impact.

To encourage the high take-up needed for an informative evaluation, PYN hired a recruitment specialist and additional support staff.

One barrier to high take-up was potentially burdensome paperwork requirements for accepting the job. For individuals assigned to the treatment group, the recruitment specialist and support staff encouraged them to accept the job and followed up to make sure they completed the required paperwork. The WorkReady program was already seeking to expand to and engage youth facing barriers to employment such as criminal justice involvement, pregnancy or parenting responsibilities, and unstable housing. Increasing take-up support helped the City, PYN, and service providers achieve their goals by assisting youth who might not otherwise enroll in or complete the program.

¹ Read about the New York City evaluation at bit.ly/2fcQ2K8 and the Chicago evaluation at bit.ly/2f3IRDE.