

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Job Corps program has been a central part of federal efforts to provide employment assistance to disadvantaged youths since 1964. Job Corps serves economically disadvantaged youths between the ages of 16 and 24 who can benefit from a wide range of education, vocational training, and support services in a predominantly residential setting. Currently, 116 Job Corps centers operate nationwide, serving more than 60,000 new enrollees each year, at an annual cost of more than 1 billion dollars. Given the program's size and its central role in federal efforts to assist disadvantaged youths, a comprehensive evaluation of the program is an important priority.

The National Job Corps Study, funded by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), is designed to provide a thorough and rigorous assessment of the impacts of Job Corps on key participant outcomes. An analysis of program benefits and costs and a process study are also being conducted. The cornerstone of the study is the random assignment of all program applicants found eligible for Job Corps to either a program group or a control group. Program group members were permitted to enroll in Job Corps. Control group members were not permitted to enroll in Job Corps for a period of three years (although they could enroll in other training or education programs). Program impacts will be estimated using follow-up survey data collected 12, 30, and 48 months after random assignment, as well as administrative records data.

This report describes the implementation of random assignment and sample intake, presents evidence that the process was implemented in a way that will enable the study to realize its goals, and draws lessons from the experience that may be applicable to other program evaluations.

STUDY DESIGN

The Job Corps evaluation is based on a national sample of eligible program applicants. Youths were sampled from all outreach and admissions (OA) agencies nationwide between November 1994 and February 1996. This nonclustered design was adopted because the national sample will produce more precise impact estimates than a clustered design of the same size, and because this approach spreads the burden of random assignment across all OA agencies and Job Corps centers.

Youths were randomly assigned after they were determined to be eligible for the program and were ready to be, but had not yet been, assigned to a center. This point in the Job Corps intake process was chosen for two reasons. First, it addresses a useful and well-defined policy question: What are the effects of Job Corps on youths who apply for and are found eligible for Job Corps? Second, random selection procedures could be incorporated into the existing intake process, with acceptable levels of disruption.

Overall, the sampling rate to the control group was 7.4 percent on average. It was set lower for females who had a high likelihood of being a residential student because residential females are difficult to recruit and Job Corps staff were concerned that the study would cause slots for residential females to go unfilled.

IMPLEMENTATION OF SAMPLING PROCEDURES

A well-implemented random assignment study requires consistently accomplishing three tasks:

1. Explaining the study to prospective program applicants
2. Ensuring that all people in the population of interest are subject to random selection and that each person is subject to it once and only once
3. Ensuring that only people randomly selected to the program group enroll in the program

To ensure that these tasks would be accomplished with minimum burden on OA staff, the study team investigated OA procedures in each region and developed proposed procedures for conducting random assignment tailored to each region. With assistance from Job Corps regional office staff, we then met with senior representatives of each organization that conducted outreach and admissions in each region. These meetings were used to discuss why random assignment was necessary and then to refine the proposed procedures for conducting random assignment to be sure they worked for staff in the region. These meetings helped OA managers to think concretely about how the need to form a control group who could not enroll in Job Corps would affect their staff. The meetings also produced several specific suggestions for materials that would assist OA staff in presenting the study.

In late summer and fall 1994, the study team conducted training sessions for nearly all the OA counselors and coordinators in each Job Corps region. Approximately 900 OA staff from 100 OA agencies attended the sessions, which were designed to inform Job Corps staff about the reasons for the study and to provide them with the information necessary to perform their study-related tasks.

After a brief period for testing procedures beginning on November 1, 1994, sample selection began on November 17, 1994 and continued through February 28, 1996. During this period, OA staff were required to submit information to MPR for all new eligible applicants before the applicant could be assigned to a Job Corps center. All eligible Job Corps applicants whose application date for Job Corps was between November 17, 1994, and December 16, 1995 were subject to selection for the study control group. For applications that MPR received from December 17, 1995, to February 28, 1996, only people whose application date was before December 17 were part of the sample and subject to random selection.

The core random assignment process consisted of four steps:

1. Job Corps OA staff informed each Job Corps applicant about the study.
2. For each new applicant in the sample frame, Job Corps OA staff completed and transmitted three forms to MPR: the Job Corps application form, a study-specific supplement to the application form, and an Agreement to Participate form.

3. MPR checked that all key information for random assignment was complete, that applicants were in the sample frame, and that they had not previously been sent for random assignment. Then, each new applicant in the sample frame was randomly assigned to the control, program research, or program nonresearch group.
4. MPR notified Job Corps staff of the random assignment results within 48 hours, and sent an official notification letter signed by DOL officials to control group members. Most OA staff also contacted youths they recruited about the random assignment results.

Job Corps staff assigned only program group members to a center slot. By checking a study form completed for each applicant, center staff determined that each incoming student had been sent to MPR for the random selection process and had not been assigned to the control group.

Over 1,300 Job Corps OA counselors nationwide were directly involved in random assignment during the sample intake period, and approximately 110 Job Corps OA coordinators and approvers transmitted materials to MPR. During the sample intake period, nearly 81,000 applications in the sample frame were processed by MPR. The final sample consists of 5,977 control group members, 9,409 program research group members, and 65,497 program nonresearch group members.

MONITORING SAMPLE BUILDUP AND ENDING RANDOM ASSIGNMENT

During the sample intake period, MPR staff monitored sample buildup to assess whether the research sample was near target levels and whether initial sample design parameters needed to be adjusted. This monitoring process also guided plans for ending random assignment because we wanted to end sample intake only after the research sample size targets were attained.

By mid-1995, the cumulative number of eligible Job Corps applicants sent for random assignment was well below the levels anticipated on the basis of historical data, and centers were operating well below full capacity. Three factors appear to be responsible for the shortfall in applicants. First, in March 1995, Job Corps instituted several major changes in program policies (for example, strengthening zero tolerance policies for violence and drugs) that temporarily disrupted flows into the program. Second, the Job Corps program received significant negative publicity during late 1994 and early 1995. Finally, the presence of the control group for the National Job Corps Study contributed to the shortfall, as the outreach system was initially not able to increase the numbers of eligible applicants as planned.

Because of the shortfall, initial plans to end random assignment in late fall 1995 were revised, and sample intake was extended until early 1996. Beginning in summer 1995, the outreach and intake system began a concerted effort to bring centers to full capacity. This led to a surge in new applications in late summer and fall 1995, which allowed sample size targets to be met and exceeded by the end of the year. Sample intake ended on February 29, 1996, although only those eligible applicants who applied to Job Corps before December 17, 1995, were included in the sample frame.

MONITORING ADHERENCE TO RANDOM ASSIGNMENT PROCEDURES

Job Corps staff implemented the random assignment procedures successfully over the 16-month sample intake period. Less than 0.6 percent of youths in the sample frame were not randomly assigned, and we estimate that very few youths who are outside of the sample frame are in the sample. In addition, through the end of February 1999, just 1.4 percent of control group members enrolled in Job Corps before the end of the three-year period during which control group members were not supposed to enroll. Hence, we believe that the research sample is representative of the youths in the intended sample frame and that the bias in the impact estimates due to contamination of the control group will be small.

The Job Corps Student Pay, Allotment, and Management Information System (SPAMIS) has enabled MPR to identify center enrollees in the sample frame who were not randomly assigned and those who were previously assigned to the control group. MPR receives information on all new enrollees in Job Corps each week and matches this information with that for youths who were sent for random assignment. Early discovery of errors allowed the study team and Job Corps to take prompt corrective action. OA staff had lists of control group members showing the date on which each can enter, and SPAMIS incorporates a check when a center adds a student to the data system.

EFFECTS OF THE STUDY ON PROGRAM OPERATIONS

Overall, the study had noticeable effects on key aspects of program operations. Job Corps experienced a decline in program intakes during the first half of the study intake period and a very large decline in on-board strength (OBS)--from 96 percent in January 1995 to under 80 percent in July 1995. The study appears to have played a relatively modest role, with removal of control group members from the flow of applicants into the program accounting for approximately one-fourth of the drop in OBS.

The effects of the study on OA counselors' activities and the composition of students coming to the program appear to have been modest. Few said they started new outreach activities, spent more time on outreach, or lost referral sources because of the study. Most said the study had no or only small effects on their ability to recruit students, although one-third of students were recruited by OA counselors who said the study caused them significant problems that made recruiting more difficult. OA counselors reported that few students were dissuaded from applying or decided to postpone their application because of the study's random selection procedures. Finally, OA counselors do not appear to have provided substantially more assistance in finding alternative training opportunities to the control group than they provided for other applicants who could not enroll in Job Corps.

LESSONS

We believe that the implementation of the National Job Corps Study offers three lessons for the successful implementation of a randomized study design in an ongoing program:

1. ***The active, visible commitment of program managers to the success of the study is very important.*** Job Corps managers wanted a well-implemented study because they believed a strong study would demonstrate that their program is effective, and thereby engender continued public support for it. Program managers effectively communicated this message to program staff. Believing their study-related tasks were important, program line staff performed diligently the tasks of telling applicants about the study, gathering necessary information, and making sure that only program group members are sent to Job Corps.
2. ***Research staff should work closely and continuously with the line staff who conduct program outreach and intake.*** This entails making sure line staff understand why random assignment is necessary; making study-related tasks of line staff as simple as possible; providing staff with appropriate materials to help them explain the study to applicants and the public; training staff to perform their study-related tasks, and providing ongoing technical assistance to program staff.
3. ***Monitoring entry into the program ensures the integrity of the study.*** Maintaining study integrity is essential for ensuring that staff's efforts are not wasted. It allows problems to be identified and corrected quickly.