

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 1964, the Job Corps program has been a central part of federal efforts to provide employment assistance to disadvantaged youths. Job Corps serves economically disadvantaged youths between the ages of 16 and 24 who can benefit from education and vocational training in a predominantly residential setting. Currently, 111 Job Corps centers operate nationwide, serving more than 60,000 new enrollees each year.

The National Job Corps Study, funded by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), will assess impacts of Job Corps on key participant outcomes. The study uses an experimental design, in which all program applicants found eligible for Job Corps during the sample intake period were randomly assigned to either a program or a control group. Program group members were permitted to enroll in Job Corps; control group members were not. Baseline data were collected in interviews conducted soon after random assignment. Program impacts will be estimated from data gathered during follow-up interviews conducted at 12, 30, and 48 months after random assignment and from administrative records data.

This report describes the characteristics of eligible Job Corps applicants and compares their characteristics with those of the broader national population of disadvantaged youths. To be eligible for the program, Job Corps applicants must satisfy 11 specific criteria designed to ensure that the youths enrolled need and can benefit from additional education and training, come from debilitating environments that impair prospects for successful training in the home community, and are free of serious medical or behavioral problems. Using data from the study's baseline interview, the report presents the characteristics and recent experiences of eligible applicants at the point when they were determined to be eligible for Job Corps.

What Groups Does Job Corps Serve?

As Congress intended, Job Corps serves disadvantaged youth, most of whom have not completed high school. (Nearly 80 percent are high school dropouts.) Most eligible applicants are male (60 percent). Over 70 percent are members of racial or ethnic minority groups: 50 percent are African Americans, 18 percent are Hispanic, 4 percent are Native American, and 2 percent are Asian or Pacific Islander.

Job Corps draws eligible applicants disproportionately from certain groups within the broader national population of low-income youth. Compared to the nationwide population of disadvantaged youth between the ages of 16 and 24, an eligible Job Corps applicant is more likely to be male, African American, 16 or 17 years old, a high school dropout, and from a large urban area. Job Corps youth have lower family income. They are also less likely to have children, reflecting the lower percentage who are female. The geographic distribution of Job Corps youth across regions of the country mirrors the geographic distribution of disadvantaged youth.

The characteristics of youths served by Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) Title II programs, the main federally funded training alternative to Job Corps, are similar to those of the nationwide population of disadvantaged youth. Both JTPA Title II program participants and low-income youth nationally are predominantly female. Compared to Job Corps youth, a higher proportion have completed high school, and a higher proportion are white.

The detailed information from the study's baseline interview provides additional insights about the backgrounds of eligible Job Corps applicants (although comparable data are not available for disadvantaged youths nationally):

- Job Corps serves youths from disadvantaged backgrounds. Half of eligible applicants lived in single-parent households when they were 14 years old, and half lived in families that received public assistance while they were growing up. About one-third of the sample members' parents did not complete high school, and most parents worked in low-paying jobs.
- Most eligible Job Corps applicants have work experience of some kind. Eighty percent of eligible applicants had held a job at some point, and 65 percent held a job in the year before they were found eligible for Job Corps. However, most of these jobs were low-skilled, with low wages and earnings. For example, the average hourly wage in an applicant's most recent job was about \$5.
- Two-thirds had attended school or a training program within a year of being found eligible for Job Corps.
- Most eligible applicants say they are in good health.
- More than half of sample members report that they have ever smoked cigarettes prior to the baseline interview, and about 60 percent report that they consumed alcoholic beverages. About 40 percent report that they have ever used drugs, and one-third report that they used drugs in the year prior to the baseline interview. Most drug users have used only marijuana or hashish. A very small percentage report having used harder drugs. About 5 percent have participated in a drug or alcohol treatment program.
- Reflecting Job Corps' goal of serving youths who need and can benefit from training away from their home community, some eligible Job Corps applicants have had encounters with the law. Over one-quarter reported that they had been arrested, and nearly 15 percent had been arrested in the year prior to application. The most common arrest charges were for property crimes (for example, larceny and motor vehicle theft) and minor miscellaneous violations (for example, disorderly conduct, trespassing, and liquor law violations). Still, about 5 percent of the youths (and nearly 20 percent of those arrested) had been charged with more-serious crimes such as assault, robbery, and burglary. About 17 percent of sample members had been convicted or had pled guilty, and about 8 percent had been incarcerated.

Do the Characteristics of Eligible Applicants Differ Depending on Gender and Age?

The training needs and the barriers to successful employment of young women who enroll in Job Corps, especially if they have children, are different from those of young men who enroll. Similarly, the broad age range Job Corps serves means that the program must serve adolescents and young adults together. In light of the different programmatic needs of subgroups defined by gender and age, we examine the characteristics and backgrounds of subgroups defined by these key characteristics. The data show that the background of women differs from that of men, and the background of younger students differs from that of older students.

Gender Differences. Female applicants are older than male applicants, a higher percentage have children (29 percent, compared to 11 percent), and a much higher percentage live with their children and live alone with their children. Consequently, a much higher percentage of females (and especially females with children) are designated for nonresidential program slots. Females are more likely to have completed high school (27 percent, compared to 17 percent) at the time of program application, in part reflecting the fact that they are older. Females are also less likely to report drug use (33 percent, compared to 45 percent of males) or arrests (17 percent, compared to 33 percent of males).

Differences by Age. Many of the differences across age groups would be expected. Older applicants have higher employment, fertility, and marital rates than younger applicants. Older applicants are much more likely to have completed high school (50 percent of those 21 to 24) and less likely to have participated in an education program recently. Within the past year, about 85 percent of those 16 and 17 years old were in school (mostly high school), compared to only about 30 percent of those 21 to 24 (who were mostly in GED, vocational-technical, and two-year college programs).

Younger eligible applicants exhibit several characteristics that suggest they may be more disadvantaged and harder to serve than older applicants. A higher proportion of younger applicants report having used drugs, having ever been arrested, and having recently been arrested. Furthermore, younger applicants are more likely to come from single-parent households and from families that receive public assistance. Thus, younger applicants tend to come from highly disadvantaged households and usually turn to Job Corps after dropping out of school and experiencing problems with drugs and the criminal justice system. Older applicants, in contrast, tend to come from less disadvantaged households and enter Job Corps after having been in the labor force (nearly three-quarters worked in the prior year).

Did Job Corps Policy Changes Affect the Observed Characteristics of Youths Served by Job Corps?

In response to congressional concerns about drugs and violence at Job Corps centers, Job Corps instituted a strict “zero tolerance” policy for drugs and violence and a “one strike and you’re out” rule to govern terminations of students found guilty of offenses prohibited under the zero tolerance policy. Implemented in March 1995 (during the period of sample intake for the study), the new policies were specifically designed to discourage applications by youth who were not prepared to

refrain from violence and drug use while enrolled in Job Corps. Accordingly, the policy changes may have affected the characteristics of individuals who applied for and were found eligible for Job Corps.

Most key characteristics of eligible applicants who applied to Job Corps before and after the policy changes are similar. However, some small changes that appear to be consistent with the intent of the policy changes are apparent. For example, a slightly larger percentage of applicants in the pre-March period than in the post-March period were age 16 or 17, and a larger percentage admitted to drug use and to ever being arrested. These small changes, however, should be interpreted cautiously because they may also reflect the effects of seasonal differences in the characteristics of program applicants and recruitment patterns. In addition, the policy changes may have affected characteristics that cannot be measured using baseline interview data.