

Citation

Roder, A., & Elliott, M. (2011). A promising start: Initial impacts of Year Up on low-income young adults' careers. Economic Mobility Corporation.

Highlights

- This report presents preliminary findings for the impacts of the Year Up program, which provides technical skills training and internships to low-income adults ages 18 to 24.
- The authors randomly assigned eligible applicants to either be invited to participate in the program immediately (treatment group) or gain entry after 10 months (control group). They compared the outcomes of treatment and control group members for approximately two years after random assignment.
- The authors reported many statistically significant and positive impacts of the program in the second year after random assignment. These included impacts on annual earnings and hourly wages.
- The quality of causal evidence is low because the randomized controlled trial had high attrition and the study did not show that the groups being compared were equivalent prior to the program. This means we are not confident that the estimated effects are attributable to Year Up. Other factors are likely to have contributed.

Features of Year Up

Year Up is a nonprofit organization headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts. It was founded by a former software entrepreneur with the goal of providing a year of training and work experience to urban young adults. Participants in the Year Up program must be low-income and ages 18 to 24. A chief feature of the program model is six months of technical skills training in information technology and investment operations fields followed by a six-month internship with a top company in the region. The program also includes classes in business writing, communication, and professional skills training. Participants receive a weekly stipend and the support of social workers and mentors throughout the program.

Features of the Study

In summer 2007, eligible Year Up applicants were randomly assigned to either be invited to participate in the program immediately (treatment group) or be placed on a waiting list to gain entry to the program after 10 months (control group). In total, 135 applicants were assigned to the treatment group and 60 to the control group. A follow-up survey was administered to both groups to capture post-program earnings and employment outcomes; the last survey was administered 24 to 30 months after random assignment.

Study Sites

Year Up sites in three cities participated in the evaluation:

- Boston, Massachusetts
- New York City
- Providence, Rhode Island

Findings

- During the first year after random assignment, the Year Up group's earnings lagged those of control group members because most members of the Year Up group were participating in program-related activities. However, by two years after random assignment, Year Up participants were earning more than control group members by a statistically significant margin (\$15,082 versus \$11,621).
- During the second year after random assignment, Year Up and control group members had similar levels of employment, but the Year Up group held higher-paying jobs, on average, than the control group (\$12.58 per hour versus \$10.32 per hour).
- The two groups were equally likely to be attending college two years after random assignment.

Considerations for Interpreting the Findings

Although this study was based on a randomized controlled trial, which can provide the highest possible causal evidence if well-implemented, the trial suffered from high differential attrition across the study groups. In other words, outcomes were available for a larger proportion of Year Up members than control group members. This could bias the estimated effects of the program if characteristics of the control group are systematically related to responding to the follow-up survey. Therefore, this study cannot receive a high causal evidence rating.

In addition, the study did not demonstrate that the groups being compared were equivalent at the time of program application, nor was it clear from the study whether the authors included controls for baseline characteristics in their analysis approach. Attempts to reach the authors to clarify these issues were unsuccessful. Therefore, this study cannot receive a moderate causal evidence rating in the absence of additional information from the authors.

Causal Evidence Rating

The quality of causal evidence is low because the study was a randomized controlled trial with high attrition. In addition, the pre-program equivalence of the groups being compared was not established and the study did not control for baseline characteristics. This means we are not confident that the estimated effects are attributable to Year Up. Other factors are likely to have contributed.