

Citation

Kemple, J., & Willner, C. (2008). Career Academies: Long-term impacts on labor market outcomes, educational attainment, and transitions to adulthood. New York: MDRC.

Highlights

- The report's objective was to evaluate the impact of Career Academies on labor market participation and educational attainment over the eight years following scheduled high school graduation. Earlier reports presented impact findings over a shorter period.
- Career Academies are schools within schools that are organized around one occupation or industry. Employer partners help design the curriculum and provide work-based learning experiences for students. The effectiveness of Career Academies was evaluated using a randomized controlled trial conducted in nine high schools located in or near urban school districts. The evaluation included approximately 2,000 students.
- The study reported statistically significant, positive impacts on average monthly earnings, average hours worked per week, and average hourly wages over the eight years following scheduled high school graduation. However, there were no statistically significant differences in educational attainment of the two groups.
- The quality of the causal evidence presented in this report is high because it was a well-implemented randomized controlled trial. This means we are confident that the estimated impacts are attributable solely to Career Academies, not other factors.

Features of Career Academies

Career Academies were first established some 45 years ago and have become a widely used high school reform initiative. They are designed to keep students engaged in school and improve their employment and educational outcomes. Students apply for admission into Career Academies during 8th or 9th grades (depending on the rules of the program to which they are applying).

Career Academies have three distinguishing features, and the study authors pointed out that a true Career Academy must exhibit all three:

1. They are organized as small learning communities, or schools within schools. They typically serve 150 to 200 students from grades 9 or 10 through grade 12. This smaller size fosters a more personalized learning environment.
2. The curriculum is organized around one career, occupation, or industry and combines academic and technical aspects relevant to the career.
3. The academies offer work-based learning experiences, often through partnerships with local employers. These can include summer employment, internships, and mentoring.

Features of the Study

The study was a randomized controlled trial conducted in nine high schools located in or near large urban school districts. Districts served a substantially higher percentage of African American and Hispanic students and a higher percentage of low-income families compared with school districts nationally. They also had higher rates of high school dropout and unemployment.

All study participants applied for admission in one of the Career Academies. Because there were more applicants than the programs could serve, a lottery system was used to assign applicants to Career Academies. Approximately 55 percent of the applicants were randomly assigned to a Career Academy and formed the treatment group; the rest of the applicants enrolled in general education and formed the control group. The study examined labor market participation and educational attainment in the eight years following the participants' scheduled high school graduation dates.

Study Sites

- Baltimore, Maryland
- Miami-Dade, Florida
- Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- San Jose, California (two sites)
- Santa Ana, California
- Socorro, Texas
- Watsonville, California
- Washington, D.C.

Findings

- There were no statistically significant differences in any of the educational attainment outcomes between the treatment and control groups.
- The authors found sustained, statistically significant impacts of Career Academies on average monthly earnings over the eight years following students' scheduled graduation dates. Over the period one to four years after scheduled high school graduation, Career Academies students earned an average of \$1,358 per month, compared with \$1,225 in the control group (a difference of \$133). The impact was even larger (about \$216) over the period five to eight years after scheduled high school graduation, with Career Academies students earning an average of \$2,112 per month, compared with \$1,896 in the control group.
- Although the components of monthly earnings—the number of months employed, hours worked per week, and hourly wages—were greater for Career Academies students than control students one to four years after scheduled graduation, the differences were only marginally statistically significant five to eight years after scheduled graduation.

- The labor market impacts of Career Academies were more concentrated among young men; the monthly real earnings for young men who attended Career Academies were \$2,558, compared with \$2,197 for the control group, measured five to eight years after scheduled graduation.

Considerations for Interpreting the Findings

The study was a well-conducted randomized controlled trial. The study's authors estimated multiple related impacts on labor market participation; performing multiple statistical tests on related outcomes makes it more likely that some impacts will be found statistically significant purely by chance and not because they reflect program effectiveness. CLEAR confirmed that the main impacts on average monthly earnings remained statistically significant after making a multiple comparisons adjustment.

Causal Evidence Rating

The quality of causal evidence presented in this report is high because it is based on a well-conducted randomized controlled trial. This means we are confident that the effects estimated in the study are attributable solely to Career Academies, not to other factors.