

Evidence Summary

Economic and Employment Interventions for Youth Homelessness

November 2019

Highlights

- **Very few studies** assess the effects of economic and employment interventions with youth experiencing homelessness. The evidence base on youth employment programs for this population is inconclusive.
- As we await additional evidence, the broader research to date (not specific to youth experiencing homelessness) suggests that **youth employment programs can be effective with vulnerable youth.**

Overview

The **Voices of Youth Count** initiative's systematic evidence review is the most comprehensive synthesis of evaluation evidence on programs and practices related to youth homelessness to date.¹ This document is one in a series of seven topical evidence summaries derived from the longer evidence review brief. Here, we summarize evaluations of economic and employment interventions for youth experiencing homelessness. The evidence here includes only impact evaluations designed to assess measurable changes in outcomes due to specific programs and practices. Other kinds of evaluation, including assessments of program implementation, processes, or participant experiences, will be summarized and reported elsewhere.

Economic and employment interventions typically involve a range of components such as vocational training, career services, apprenticeships, and financial services and assistance. Career development strategies among youth experiencing homelessness is an important effort toward sustained exits from homelessness and the ongoing ability to thrive.

1. For detailed information about our evidence review methods and findings, please refer to Morton, M.H., Kugley, S., Epstein, R.A., & Farrell, A.F. (2019). *Missed Opportunities: Evidence on Interventions for Addressing Youth Homelessness*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

In the context of increasingly unaffordable US housing markets, we need new pathways to sufficient income that enable young people to secure their basic needs. Employment and training programs may be key pathways for a young person to make adequate income to survive and thrive.

Separate from our work, a **recent global systematic review** of youth employment programs identified 113 impact evaluations. Evidence was relatively scarce: just six studies covering two employment programs. Findings indicate mixed outcomes, but suggest that youth employment programs are most effective with under-resourced, low-income subpopulations. This suggests promising potential for improved outcomes should interventions be contoured to youths' unique needs.

Evidence Summary

There are no rigorous randomized or statistically matched non-randomized evaluations comparing employment programs to usual community services for youth experiencing homelessness. There are two studies assessing effects of employment programs, each with mixed or inconclusive results.

Social Enterprise Intervention (SEI) and Individual Placement Support (IPS) were both delivered over a 20-month period and included a combination of classroom-based and experiential vocational learning along with mental health services. One study suggested positive effects of IPS on youth having worked at all after 20 months, but not on average weekly hours or earnings. Another study showed no employment-related progress associated with either IPS or SEI.

Both interventions were associated with some improvements in broader aspects of social-emotional well-being and a reduction in living in shelter after 20 months. A comparison study showed few differences in outcomes between IPS and SEI.

Included Studies of Economic and Employment Interventions

| Description | Study design* | Results |
|--|--|---|
| Social Enterprise Intervention (SEI) (Ferguson, 2008; 2012b; 2017; 2018; Ferguson et al., 2013) | | |
| A program offering vocational and small business training and clinical services referrals to homeless young adults (18-24). | A non-randomized evaluation comparing participants to youth at another agency that did not provide the intervention (n=28).* Pre-post evaluation, no service-as-usual comparison group (n=72)* | Improved life satisfaction, family contact, peer support, and depressive symptoms; no improvement in employment outcomes. Reduced living in a shelter. |
| Individual Placement Support (IPS) (Ferguson, 2017; 2018; Ferguson et al., 2012; 2013) | | |
| Individualized and long-term support through integrated vocational and clinical services, adapted for homeless young adults (18-24). | A non-randomized evaluation comparing participants to youth at another agency that did not provide the intervention (n=36).* Pre-post evaluation, no service-as-usual comparison group (n=72)* | One study showed increased rate of having ever worked but not weekly hours worked or income. Another study showed no improvement in any employment-related outcomes. Improved some aspects of social-emotional well-being. Reduced living in a shelter. |

* All evaluations, even the most rigorous, have some risk of bias. Bias is especially likely when an evaluation lacks a credible comparison group to assess what would have happened without the intervention. Without such a comparison group, we can't know if changes occur (for example) because youth got older, they were already motivated to improve, or due to other influences in the young person's life. We indicate evaluations as "high risk of bias" if they lack a "usual services" comparison or control group, or if the group was created without specific efforts (like statistical matching) to create comparable groups. Without similar comparison groups, findings are interpreted with additional caution. In some cases, it is necessary to rely on less rigorous studies to inform interventions while we await additional evidence.

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