

Issue BRIEF

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A Framework for Selecting Employment Interventions to Benefit Youth

A companion brief presents a worksheet based on this framework, with questions that policymakers can ask themselves to identify and develop interventions to improve employment-related outcomes for youth with disabilities

The U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, along with many other stakeholders, is working to improve outcomes for youth ages 14 to 24 who receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits or are at risk of receiving SSI. Mathematica Policy Research contributed to this effort—known as the SSI Youth Recipient and Employment Transition Formative Research project—in two ways. First, we identified promising programs and policies for youth with disabilities, including research questions for further study. Second, we uncovered testable interventions that could help these youth make the transition to sustained, gainful employment.

To choose between the numerous interventions that could help youth with disabilities to secure employment, policymakers could follow a three-step process.

Process for selecting an intervention



Figure 1

1. REFINE POLICY OBJECTIVES

For all interventions identified by this project, the primary policy objective is to promote sustained, gainful employment for a target population. But many employment-related interventions can also affect other outcomes. Policymakers' specific objectives will directly affect which interventions they choose, as well as any possible modifications they might make to the service system. Objectives could include affecting SSI-related outcomes, such as the use of SSI work supports or amount of SSI cash payments, or outcomes involving education, health, or self-determination. A final consideration for refining policy objectives is how an intervention might help programs address the challenges that youth and families face when accessing public programs.

2. ASSESS THE LANDSCAPE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Policymakers can pursue interventions that either draw on existing programs (through collaboration, for example) or that supplement existing programs. Programs and intervention services should promote the agreed-on policy objectives and not further fragment or complicate an already fragmented and complex service delivery system. One way to do that is to modify existing programs through coordination between agencies at the federal, state, or local levels. Any new effort to coordinate or conduct an intervention must comply with the existing federal agencies' authorities for conducting demonstrations or tests of policy changes. Demonstration authorities are important to consider in designing an intervention because they help ground the intervention in what is feasible under current law and indicate what changes, if any, might be needed to move forward.

3. APPLY CRITERIA FOR SELECTING INTERVENTIONS

Policymakers can consider three factors in selecting an intervention: (1) causal evidence; (2) costs; and (3) replicability, scalability, and sustainability. Causal evidence indicates whether past research is credible enough to suggest that an

intervention could have the desired outcomes for the target population. Costs of implementing the intervention must be taken into account because policymakers often have limited staff, time, and funding. Replicability, scalability, and sustainability refer to whether an intervention can be deployed in new areas, for a larger number of people, and in a way that can be supported over time. Interventions that are replicable, scalable, and sustainable might attract more interest from policymakers because they can be applied to larger populations and use resources that are available or likely to become available if the test is successful.

CONCLUSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

Policymakers can choose from many promising, testable interventions for youth with disabilities. Many of these interventions have some limited evidence of their success for employment outcomes, but there is often no causal evidence to support them. Providing more rigorous evidence would help show whether implementation is justified at a broader scale. To decide on an approach, policymakers could refine their policy objectives, assess the landscape for implementation, and apply criteria for selecting interventions. Policymakers can use this framework to build supporting evidence for approaches that improve the prospects of youth with disabilities, especially those who are already receiving SSI or are at risk of receiving SSI.

We see two possibly overlapping ways that policymakers could move forward to improve outcomes for youth with disabilities. The first is to select and implement one intervention that would promote policymakers' goals for this population. The second is to design a broad research and development agenda to guide policymakers' efforts. A broad agenda could help the federal government proceed with a consistent set of approaches to further its goals for youth with disabilities. Regardless of the approach they take, policymakers might consider incorporating two guiding principles: obtaining rigorous evidence and collaborating across public programs. To promote better collaboration, policymakers may need to give agencies more guidance on the priority they should give to collaborative efforts, on their authority to collaborate, and on who should lead such efforts.

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