

The Impacts of Psychosocial Support and Cash for Work on Vulnerable Youth in Liberia



To foster economic productivity and stability in post-conflict countries, many development organizations have created economic programs and psychosocial programs aimed at vulnerable youth. In Liberia, Innovations for Poverty Action worked with researchers to evaluate the impacts of a cash-for-work program and a psychosocial support program on the behavior and labor outcomes of young people. Results indicate that psychosocial support through a group sports program led to a slight reduction in aggression and some improvement in labor force participation, but no positive psychosocial or economic impacts were observed. The cash-for-work program was found to be undesirable and faced implementation challenges, and therefore, only a fraction of young adults invited to the cash-for-work program participated.

Policy Issue

In post-conflict contexts like Liberia, growing populations of unemployed youth represent both an opportunity to develop the economy as well as a potential source of renewed instability as competition among youth for limited job opportunities can fuel conflict. Youth with few economic prospects may also be vulnerable to the influence of other external forces such as violence, drugs, crime, and political incitement. In response, many organizations have implemented youth economic development programs as a way to foster economic productivity as well as social and political stability. Despite significant investments in such programs, little evidence exists on which interventions are most effective at increasing economic opportunity and reducing risky behavior and violence among youth.

Evaluation Context

In 2003, Liberia emerged from a 14-year civil war, but the security situation remains fragile and economic development has been slow.¹ In a context in which 60 percent of the population is between the ages of 15 and 35 years², the government has identified youth unemployment as a major challenge.³

Mercy Corps, a global aid agency, which has been active in Liberia since 2003, launched a multi-year program in 2012 called Promoting Sustainable Partnerships for Economic Transformation, or



RESEARCHERS

Lori Beaman, Niall Keleher, Jeremy Magruder

COUNTRY

Liberia

PARTNER

Mercy Corps

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PROSPECTS. The program combined life skills training and workforce development via apprenticeships, technical training, financial education, and mentoring, and aimed to help participants find employment while also developing positive social ties within their communities.

PROSPECTS included a Cash for Work program that paid youth to collect recyclables in their communities as well as a Sports for Change program that combined sports with life skills sessions for groups of youth. Both interventions aimed to develop the self-confidence and resilience of highly vulnerable youth in Monrovia and prepare them for the local labor market. Each program lasted approximately three months with two sessions typically held per week.

Details of the Intervention

Innovations for Poverty Action worked with researchers to evaluate the impacts of the Cash for Work and Sports for Change programs on risky and violent behaviors and labor market outcomes of 3,000 out-of-school youth, aged 16 to 25, in urban Monrovia.

Through a public registration and lottery, researchers randomly assigned participants to one of four peer groups below, a design which enabled them to measure the impacts of each program individually as well as any complementary effects between the programs.

- Cash for Work program only
- Sports for Change program with psychosocial support only
- Both Cash for Work and Sports for Change
- No program

Researchers measured the impact and cost-effectiveness of the programs, separately and combined, on enabling vulnerable Liberian youth to resist risky behaviors and to become economically productive adults, over a one-year period.

Results and Policy Lessons

Overall, the results suggest the Sports for Change program slightly reduced aggression and produced some improvement in labor force participation. However, participants in the Sports for Change program did not demonstrate the anticipated improvement in psychosocial or economic outcomes.

Participation: Participation in the Cash for Work program was very low. Individuals assigned to this program attended, on average, less than one-quarter of the sessions. Participation in the Sports for Change program, however, was considerably higher with more than two-thirds of youth having attended the majority of group sessions.

Labor and income: The program slightly increased labor activity for youth, but only for those who participated in Sports for Change, who worked, on average, 1.87 hours per week more than non-participants. However, the study did not detect any increase in income among participants.

Risky behavior and aggression: The program did not decrease the propensity for youth to engage in risky behavior, although it did appear to slightly reduce aggression. Researchers estimate a 0.10 standard deviation drop in the aggression index among those that participated in Sports for Change.

Policy Lessons

Targeting: One potential reason for which the program did not yield significant impacts on the outcomes of interest may be due to imperfect targeting. Although the program aimed to reach vulnerable youth, most individuals surveyed were already economically active, and although living conditions in the study communities were fragile and tenuous, not all youth were vulnerable in the psychosocial sense. Careful screening prior to the start of similar programs could improve targeting by identifying individuals who lack employment and with low psychosocial scores.

Interest: Many of those assigned to the Cash for Work program expressed disinterest in collecting recycling materials, which resulted in very low participation. Targeting the most vulnerable youth through an unconditional cash transfer may be a more efficient means of providing assistance, without requiring individuals to undertake an undesirable, laborious activity.

Social connections: Highly-connected youth were more likely to participate in the PROSPECTS program. Such peer effects should be considered when designing programs with a social element because they may exclude youth who are more isolated or depressed due to limited social interaction. Additional efforts to include youth that have few friends or more one-on-one mentoring may help reach less-connected youth.

Sources

[1] [World Bank. Country Overview, Liberia.](#)

[2] [United Nations Volunteers. "Peacebuilding and Volunteerism: Considerations for post-2015 development agenda."](#)

[3] [All Africa. "Liberia: Youth Unemployment is a Major Concern." November 21, 2013.](#)

GLOBAL HEADQUARTERS

101 Whitney Avenue
New Haven, CT 06510 USA
+1 203.772.2216 | contact@poverty-action.org

poverty-action.org