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Assessing the Evidence Base: Strategies That Support Employment for Low-Income Adults

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Over the past 25 years, evaluations have produced a great deal of research on interventions designed to improve the employment outcomes of low-income adults. But, the quantity and diversity of the findings can make it challenging to identify the most reliable and relevant research and learn from it. The *Employment Strategies for Low-Income Adults Evidence Review (ESER)* was designed to make this research more accessible and easier to understand. ESER is a systematic review of studies published between 1990 and mid-2014, in which reviewers examined research about employment and training interventions for low-income adults.

The mission of the review, funded by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, was:

To provide practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and the general public with a transparent and systematic assessment of the research evidence for effectiveness of programs designed to improve the employment-related outcomes of low-income adults.

After identifying, compiling, and reviewing this research, ESER created an online, searchable database that allows users to find research and see what the findings suggest about the effectiveness of certain employment and training interventions.

This brief, the first in a series of briefs that synthesize findings from the review, discusses the ESER approach, describes the studies reviewed, and presents some results from the review. (See Box 1 for details about other information available from ESER.)

ESER's Approach

ESER used a systematic, transparent, and replicable approach to find research on interventions designed to improve employment-related outcomes for low-income adults. The steps taken in this approach include identifying

Box 1: More from ESER

The Employment Strategies for Low-Income Adults Evidence Review (ESER) created a searchable public database of results from well-designed and well-executed studies of the impacts of employment and training programs that served low-income adults. That database is available at <http://employmentstrategies.acf.hhs.gov/>. The website also includes a detailed handbook on the study's standards and methods, available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/research/project/employment-and-training-evidence-review>.

To support the information in the database, ESER will also produce a series of briefs, beginning with this one, to synthesize the results of the systematic review. The next two briefs in this series will focus on two primary strategies (work-readiness activities and financial incentives and sanctions) that showed promise, explore the interventions that included these strategies, and describe the impacts of those interventions. A fourth brief will describe various gaps in the literature. These include primary strategies for which there is little or no high quality evidence; target populations for whom there is little or no research; and common design problems in the studies we reviewed. The brief will also have recommendations for the focus and design of future research. Finally, we will carry out a meta-analysis, to more rigorously examine what employment strategies worked for whom and in what context.

the research, rating the quality of the research evidence, and examining the impacts of the tested interventions.

Identifying research. To identify research, we conducted a systematic literature search and screened studies to find those eligible for review. A study was eligible if it: (1) used randomized controlled trials or comparison group designs to evaluate an intervention and (2) targeted an intervention designed to improve employment-related outcomes among low-income adults in the United States.¹

Within the pool of eligible research, we found that many complex *evaluations* were best considered as a series of *studies* within the evaluation. This is because a single evaluation can test several interventions, perhaps in different locations, and can assess impacts at several points in time. For that reason, ESER defined a *study* as research on the impact of a certain *intervention* (that is, a program, group of services, or policy strategy) on certain people over a certain period of time. So, for instance, if evaluators conducted a project in six sites that each offered different programs and reported the impacts separately by site, ESER considered these to be six separate studies. If evaluators reported the impacts at two points in time at each site, the whole evaluation would count as 12 separate studies in ESER. Also, if evaluators researched several programs at each site, ESER counted the test of each program at each site as a separate study.

Rating the strength of evidence. Trained reviewers examined the rigor of each study by looking at the strength of the evidence to suggest that the intervention caused certain impacts. A rating of high causal evidence means that the study was designed and executed in such a way that there can be little chance the impact was *caused* by something other than the intervention being studied. The reviewers rated the strength of the evidence for each impact as high, moderate, or low (Box 3). The overall rating for a study was the highest rating assigned to any impact found in that study.

Note that the strength of the evidence is not the same as the effectiveness of the intervention. A study could be rated high or moderate even if the intervention that was

¹ Studies conducted in the United Kingdom or Canada were eligible if they were also cited in literature reviews that we consulted during the search. Details about the literature search and review methods appear in Mastri, Annalisa, Emily Sama-Miller, and Andrew Clarkwest (2015). *Employment Strategies for Low-Income Adults Evidence Review: Standards and Methods*, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available at <http://employmentstrategies.acf.hhs.gov/Content/ESERMethods.pdf>.

Box 2: Key Terms

Evaluation—A research project that may cover multiple locations, programs, populations, or time periods; the evaluation results may be reported in several citations (publications), perhaps each with multiple embedded studies.

Intervention—A program, group of services, or policy strategy that is being evaluated.

Study—A study examines the impact of an intervention on a specific population after a specific period of time. For the purposes of this review, each comparison between the group that received the intervention (the treatment group) and the group that did not (the control group) is reported as a separate study. For example, if a research report compares multiple services, strategies, or programs, or looks separately at the impacts in multiple locations, then each set of findings is reported as a separate study.

Domain—A group of related outcomes that measure the same or similar underlying theme. The ESER review includes seven outcome domains: short-term earnings, long-term earnings, short-term employment, long-term employment, short-term public benefit receipt (such as TANF, EITC, SNAP, etc.), long-term public benefit receipt, and education and training (which focuses on attainment of a degree or credential).

Promising intervention—An intervention that had at least the same number of favorable impacts as null impacts in three or more of the following domains: short-term earnings, long-term earnings, short-term employment, and long-term employment.


examined did not improve the outcomes for low-income adults. In other words, the ratings were based on the design of the study rather than on the direction of any impacts (for example, positive or negative; favorable or unfavorable). We summarized the direction of impacts only for studies rated high or moderate.


A high or moderate study rating is about the study design—it means that the ESER team has high or moderate confidence that any impacts observed were caused by the intervention being studied, and not by something else. A study could be rated high or moderate even if the intervention that was studied did not improve outcomes for low-income adults.


Examining impacts. We examined an intervention’s impact (as reported in each study) on selected outcomes in four domains: employment, earnings, public benefit receipt, and education and training. For employment, earnings, and public benefit receipt, we looked at outcomes over the short and long term separately. We defined short term as 18 months or less, and long term as more than 18 months. For each outcome reviewed in each study, we noted whether the findings were favorable, unfavorable, or null. Favorable findings were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) and accomplished the goals of the intervention, whereas unfavorable findings were statistically significant impacts in the opposite direction. Null findings were not statistically significant ($p \geq 0.05$) and could be in either direction.

Box 3: ESER Ratings

The outcomes ESER reviewed could earn one of three ratings. These ratings reflect the rigor of the study, regardless of the findings. Typically, all outcomes in a study received the same rating.

 **High** ratings were reserved for outcomes of randomized controlled trials with low attrition—a low rate of people or cases dropping out of the study—and no reassignment of people or cases after the original random assignment.

 **Moderate** ratings were applied to outcomes of two types of studies. The first is randomized controlled trials that, due to flaws in the study design or analysis (for example, high attrition), do not meet the criteria for the high rating. The second type is well-executed, comparison group designs. For both study types, it was critical that both groups be similar at the start of the study with respect to basic demographic characteristics, including race/ethnicity, gender, age, and socioeconomic status, to receive a moderate rating. Also, at the recommendation of ESER’s expert panel, the groups had to have equivalent lagged earnings (that is, earnings in a period that concluded one year or more before baseline). Finally, the evaluators had to make statistical adjustments for differences in measured outcomes between the two groups before the intervention began.

 **Low** ratings were assigned if outcomes did not meet the criteria for a high or moderate rating.

In most cases, we relied on the information authors reported in their manuscripts to assign ratings to the outcomes in the study. But occasionally, the reviewers followed up with authors for more information to help select the correct rating.

Sharing the results of the review. After we reviewed the studies, we published a website that includes a searchable database of the results. The website, located at <http://employmentstrategies.acf.hhs.gov/>, shows the rating for each study and the impacts, as reported by authors,² for any studies rated high or moderate. In the domains examined in this review, impacts are typically reported as dollar amounts³ and percentages. The effect sizes (a standardized measure of the size of the difference between two groups) were often unreported in the studies, and thus were not reported in this review. The ESER database contains results at the study level and connects users to other studies on the same program or from the same evaluation.

The database includes tags for each study’s populations and intervention strategies to help users filter their search results. The population tags describe the full group examined in a study. For example, a study of a program for unemployed parents would be tagged “unemployed” and “parents,” but it would not be tagged “men” or “women” unless the study only included men or only included women. Studies are also tagged to reflect any service offered as part of the intervention being studied. For example, if an intervention offered work readiness services, case management, and supportive services, reviewers would tag the study of that intervention with all three of those services. Nearly all interventions examined in the review had several components, often implemented at the same time.

Findings: Research Characteristics

ESER found considerable high quality research on a range of employment strategies for low-income adults. In total, we examined 314 studies of 109 interventions that came from 51 evaluations. Of those, 246 studies (78 percent) earned a high rating, and 1 study earned a moderate rating. The remaining 67 studies received a low rating. In the rest of this brief, we focus on findings from the 247 highly- or moderately-rated studies.

Outcomes. Nearly all the highly- or moderately-rated studies had at least one measure of employment (231 studies, or 94 percent) or earnings (234 studies, or 95 percent). Most of these studies also had at least one measure of benefit receipt (215 studies, or 87 percent). Conversely, education and training outcomes were seldom measured (only 37 studies, or 15 percent).

² We did not test or make any statistical adjustments to the reported impacts.

³ The dollar amounts are the actual values reported by authors in studies published from 1990 to mid-2014 and are not adjusted for inflation.

Populations. Among the highly- and moderately-rated studies, some populations were represented more frequently than others. For instance:

- **The two populations studied most often were welfare clients⁴ and parents with low incomes, who together, were the target population of 201 studies (81 percent); more than three in four of these studies focused on both populations combined.** In the studies that focused on welfare clients, 133 studies (74 percent) of the samples were composed entirely of single parents.
- **Few studies focused explicitly on only employed or unemployed people (36 studies and 19 studies, respectively).** Most studies either focused on interventions that served both the employed and unemployed or did not specify the employment status of the target population.
- **Very few studies were limited to only men (6 studies) or only women (9 studies).**
- **For some populations, ESER found few studies to review, despite specifically including relevant keywords in the search terms.** These populations include people who are homeless, prisoners re-entering society, and people with disabilities.

⁴ ESER defined welfare clients as both applicants to and participants in cash benefit programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

Primary intervention strategies studied. Interventions typically included a few different strategies and services in combination, but one strategy often stood out among other program components. To support the analyses in this series of briefs, we identified one “primary strategy” per intervention. The primary strategy for each intervention was the employment or training strategy that (1) most intervention group members received and most comparison group members did not and (2) appeared integral to the theory of change tested by the study.⁵ The goal of naming a primary strategy is to help readers think intuitively about the findings across all interventions that tested a certain strategy and to offer descriptive information about those interventions.

Most of the interventions reviewed that had highly- or moderately-rated studies (74 percent) tested one of six primary strategies: work-readiness activities, financial incentives or sanctions, employment retention services, case management, training, and education (Table 1).

⁵ We determined the primary strategy for each intervention by having two reviewers independently read the description of each intervention, identify a primary strategy, compare their assessments, and discuss any differences until they reached an agreement. A summary table listing the primary strategy for each intervention is available at employmentstrategies.acf.hhs.gov.

Table 1. Six most common primary strategies in ESER-reviewed interventions

Primary strategy	Definition	Interventions evaluating this primary strategy
Work-readiness activities	Assessment of employment barriers, skills, and interests; help designing a resume and cover letter; job clubs or job-readiness workshops; job shadowing; and development of an individual employment plan.	18
Financial incentives or sanctions	Rewards for engaging in a specific activity or achieving a certain goal, or sanctions for failing to participate in mandated services.	14
Employment retention services	Services to help employed workers retain and advance in their jobs. Could include ongoing assistance to address barriers or supplemental training to maintain skills.	14
Case management	Individual or small group meeting(s) with an employment specialist or counselor who helps to assess clients' needs and address barriers; for instance by providing referrals to address specific barriers such as mental health/substance abuse issues. Case management, which includes coaching and developing an individualized plan, may occur at any time, including before, during, or after training and/or employment.	12
Training	Any training program.	10
Education	Services to support educational attainment, such as GED support, adult basic education, or post-secondary education.	8

Source: Employment Strategies for Low-Income Adults Evidence Review.

The most common primary strategy was work-readiness activities. This was the focus of only 22 percent of interventions, so no single strategy was identified as the primary one for the majority of the interventions studied. Although rarely classified as the primary strategy, supportive services were offered as a companion to other main strategies in 68 percent of the interventions. ESER found relatively little research on the impacts on the other two primary strategies not listed in the table: subsidized employment and transitional jobs, and health services.

Findings: Patterns of Impacts

ESER found that the impacts of the interventions across the review were mainly null or favorable, although unfavorable impacts were occasionally reported.⁶ Here, we describe the pattern of findings at the outcome level first. We then summarize how that pattern translated into results for various interventions.

At the outcome level, when impacts were statistically significant, they were typically favorable. We examined a total of 2,251 impacts in all the studies that had a high or moderate rating. Among these, 67 percent were null, 28 percent were favorable, and 5 percent were unfavorable.

⁶ Importantly, the literature search for this review specifically sought out unpublished literature (by examining grey literature and issuing a call for studies); consequently, the literature base for this review is broader than just peer-reviewed journal articles, so there is a low risk that publication bias artificially inflated the relative proportion of statistically significant impacts.

This distribution—of null impacts being about twice as common as statistically significant impacts and of unfavorable impacts being relatively rare—held in every domain examined in the review, except education and training, which had an even greater proportion of null impacts (Table 2).

An interesting pattern emerged when separately examining the short- and long-term impacts, however, that suggests employment and training interventions for low-income adults may need a longer period of time to work. In the domains of employment, earnings, and benefit receipt, favorable impacts were more common in the long term than in the short term (Table 2). Specifically, in the short term (18 months or less), studies reported about one favorable impact for every three null impacts, but in the long-term studies reported about one favorable impact for every two null impacts. That is, favorable impacts were more likely to be observed during longer-term follow-ups. This suggests that these interventions may require a longer time horizon (more than 18 months) to produce favorable impacts.

Favorable outcomes in well-designed studies in this systematic review were relatively more common in the long-term than in the short-term. This finding suggests that employment and training interventions may require a longer time horizon (more than 18 months) to produce favorable impacts for low-income adults.

Table 2. Pattern of impacts reviewed in ESER

Outcome domain	Percent of impacts favorable	Percent of impacts unfavorable	Percent of impacts null
Short-term earnings	24	3	73
Short-term employment	25	3	72
Short-term benefit receipt	21	9	71
Long-term earnings	34	1	65
Long-term employment	34	2	64
Long-term benefit receipt	34	7	59
Employment and training	20	3	77
Overall	28	5	67

Source: Employment Strategies for Low-Income Adults Evidence Review.
 Note: Numbers may not total to 100 percent due to rounding.

Findings: Promising Interventions

To help policymakers and practitioners find interventions that had favorable impacts, we identified the most promising interventions—those with a favorable pattern of findings in several domains. We defined a promising intervention as one that had at least the same number of favorable impacts as null impacts in three or more of

the following domains: short-term earnings, long-term earnings, short-term employment, and long-term employment. A total of 11 interventions met this standard (Table 3 lists these 11 interventions, grouped by the primary strategy that characterized the intervention). Notably, the promising interventions did not test all the most common primary strategies.

Table 3. Promising interventions identified by ESER

Primary strategy	Promising interventions	Evaluation
Employment retention services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-Assistance Self-Sufficiency—Riverside, California 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment Retention and Advancement Project
Financial incentives or sanctions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connecticut’s Jobs First Program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connecticut’s Jobs First Program
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Transition Program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Transition Program
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indiana Welfare Reform Evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indiana Welfare Reform Evaluation
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-Sufficiency Project (SSP) and SSP Plus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-Sufficiency Project
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Center for Employment Training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minority Female Single-Parent Demonstration
Work-readiness activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grand Rapids (Labor Force Attachment) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Los Angeles Jobs-First Greater Avenues for Independence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Los Angeles Jobs-First Greater Avenues for Independence Evaluation
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minnesota Family Investment Program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minnesota Family Investment Program
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portland Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Riverside (Labor Force Attachment) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies

Source: Employment Strategies for Low-Income Adults Evidence Review.
 Note: Interventions are listed alphabetically within primary strategy.

Summary

In the research that we examined, employment, earnings, and benefit receipt impacts were measured frequently, whereas education and training impacts were measured less often. Null impacts were more prevalent than statistically significant impacts overall, but when the results were statistically significant, favorable impacts were more common than unfavorable impacts. This pattern was true in the short and long term. Across all highly- and moderately-rated studies, favorable impacts on employment, earnings, and benefit receipt were more common in the long term (more than 18 months) than in the short term, suggesting that employment and training interventions take time to produce results.

In the ESER review, well-designed studies on employment and training for low-income adults most frequently examined interventions that focused on six strategies: work-readiness activities, financial incentives and sanctions, employment retention services, training, case

management, and education. Several interventions within work-readiness activities and financial incentives and sanctions had promising impacts on employment and earnings for low-income adults. Employment retention services and training also had one intervention each with promising impacts.

Limitations

The designs of the studies ESER reviewed do not easily support conclusions about which strategies are the most effective. Nearly all the interventions we examined had several components, and the emphasis placed on one component versus the others varied considerably from one intervention to the next. The interventions studied in the research ESER reviewed were exploratory. This means that the evaluations were conducting an initial test of an intervention, rather than testing the scaled-up replication of an intervention across several settings. Because each pilot test was different and the literature

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did not describe a group of clear models that were tested multiple times, it was difficult to group and summarize the studies. Furthermore, the interventions took place in different contexts. ESER included studies of interventions that occurred in different regions across the United States, focused on a range of populations, and took place at varying points over a 25-year period (1990–2014). Differences in policies and programs across the regions and over time might mean an intervention that was promising in one place at a given time, may not be in another place or time.

The ESER database helps users to easily identify high quality research and understand general conclusions, but it is not a meta-analysis, and therefore does not show which strategies are most effective. A meta-analytic approach could explore the rich data from these evaluations to address questions such as: Which strategies work best? For whom? A forthcoming brief in this series will examine these types of questions using a meta-regression framework.

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