Employment Issue Brief

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Building on an Evidence-Based Program Model to Improve the Education and Employment Outcomes of Court-involved Youth

Many youth in America are not on track for labor market success, and youth who have early involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice systems are particularly at-risk. The Department of Labor, through its Reentry Employment Opportunities grant program, funds community programs for youth with previous justice-involvement that are designed to help put youth on a path towards career success. The Job ChalleNGe grants provided funds to three National Guard Youth ChalleNGe programs to expand their programs to include more court-involved youth and to create Job ChalleNGe, a residential occupational training program. This brief examines grant implementation and the education, employment, and criminal justice outcomes of court-involved youth who participated in Job ChalleNGe.

For youth, even low levels of justice involvement can disrupt school attendance and increase the likelihood of dropping out of school (Kirk and Sampson 2013; Hjalmarsson 2008). Additional collateral consequences—including restrictions on financial aid, employer discrimination, and occupational licensing restrictions—also create barriers to future labor market success (Simpson and Holthe 2018). Youth with prior involvement in the justice system need targeted support to overcome these barriers (Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention 2000).

In 2015, the Department of Labor issued grants that built on the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program, a residential, quasi-military, evidence-based model for youth ages 16 to 18. A well-conducted randomized controlled trial provides strong evidence that Youth ChalleNGe improves the educational and labor market outcomes of youth (Millenky et al. 2011; Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research 2016). REO funded Youth ChalleNGe programs in three states, to expand their programs to include more court-involved youth and to create a follow-on residential occupational training program called Job ChalleNGe.

About the study

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL)'s Job ChalleNGe grants, awarded in 2015, provided funds to three National Guard Youth ChalleNGe programs to expand their programs to include more court-involved youth and to create Job ChalleNGe, a follow-on 20-week residential occupational training program. The grants supported six cohorts of Job ChalleNGe with youth enrolling between January 2016 and July 2018.

DOL's Chief Evaluation Office funded an evaluation to examine the implementation of these grants and the outcomes for youth participants related to postsecondary education, employment, and criminal justice involvement in the two years following the program.

The issue brief examines one aspect of the Job ChalleNGe grants – the goal of serving more court-involved youth. It draws on findings from multiple data sources including two rounds of site visits, a background information form, a follow-up survey with Job ChalleNGe participants, program records, and postsecondary and criminal justice administrative records.

The National Guard Youth ChalleNGe/Job ChalleNGe Evaluation examined the implementation of these grants and the outcomes for youth participants related to postsecondary education, employment, and criminal justice involvement in the two years following the program. This brief examines one aspect of the grant—the goal of serving more court-involved youth—and reports findings on program implementation as well as the education, employment, and criminal justice outcomes of court-involved youth who participated in Job ChalleNGe.

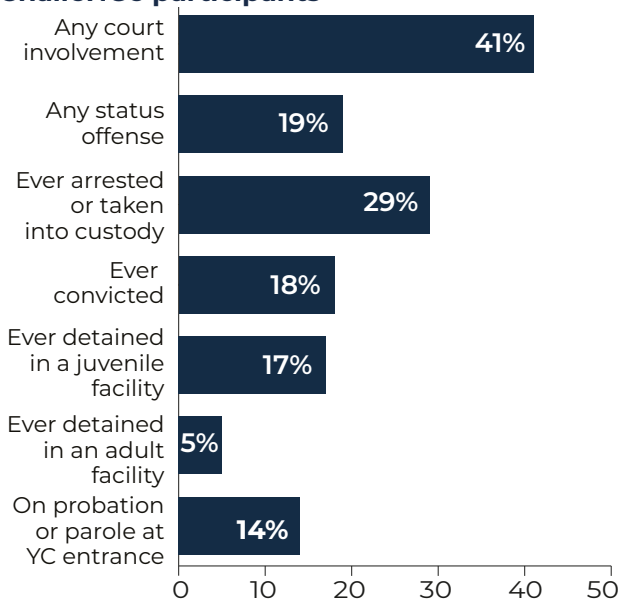
Recruitment of Court-Involved Youth

The original grant announcement for the DOL Job ChalleNGe grants noted that successful grantees will "pilot a program to enroll court-involved youth in the core National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program…to determine if court-involved youth can reap the same benefits from the program as other at-risk youth" (DOL 2015).

As part of our implementation study, we explored the approach to recruiting youth for the existing Youth ChalleNGe program during two rounds of interviews with program administrators and staff. Key findings are below.

- **None of the grantees substantially changed their recruitment strategies.** Grantees continued to use previous recruitment strategies that attracted some court-involved youth. Staff from two programs reported maintaining previous relationships with justice system partners including the Department of Juvenile Justice, family courts, and local judges. Recruitment staff at these programs discussed how they were continually conducting outreach and trying to foster new connections with the justice system. However, these changes were already underway and were not driven by the new Job ChalleNGe grant.
- **All grantees reported struggling to operationalize "court-involved."** The grant guidelines were layered on top of existing Department of Defense (DoD) guidance on Youth ChalleNGe eligibility criteria. Staff reported confusion around activities that classify youth as "court-involved" but do not lead to their exclusion from the program based on DoD eligibility guidelines. DoD criteria required that the youth were "not currently on parole or probation for other than juvenile status offenses, not awaiting sentencing, not under indictment, accused or convicted of a felony; and cannot have any pending court dates after the program starts."
- **Some staff revealed concerns about the potential stigma associated with the term "court-involved," but we were unable to document the exact number of staff with this concern.**. Reacting to these concerns, programs did not focus on court-involved youth in public marketing and did not distinguish between court-involved and non-court-involved youth within the program to avoid stigmatizing youth among their peers.
- **Forty-one percent of Youth ChalleNGe participants reported some prior justice system involvement on the study-administered background information form (Exhibit 1).** Among the Youth ChalleNGe participants, 29 percent reported that they were ever arrested or taken into custody, and 18 percent

Exhibit 1. Prior court involvement of Youth ChalleNGe participants



Source: Study-administered background information form collected from 984 youth in the three participating Youth ChalleNGe programs in Georgia, Michigan, and South Carolina. Analysis includes youth who enrolled between January 2017 and January 2018. Estimates are weighted to match the observable characteristics of all Youth ChalleNGe participants in these cohorts. Youth are classified as having any court-involvement if they reported a prior status offense, prior arrest, conviction, detention in a juvenile or adult facility, or were on probation or parole at program entry.



reported a conviction. Seventeen percent had been detained in a juvenile facility, and 5 percent in an adult facility. We are not able to measure whether the enrollment of court-involved youth increased under the grant. Prior to the grant, the Youth ChalleNGe programs did not track the number of court-involved youth who enrolled.

Implementation of Job ChalleNGe

All three grantees successfully established new 20-week residential programs for youth that served as a follow-on to the core Youth ChalleNGe program. Each grantee enrolled six cohorts of youth in Job ChalleNGe, with an average of 50 youth per cohort. Service delivery in Job ChalleNGe focused on the implementation of an intensive occupational skills training program in partnership with a community or technical college.

- **Only one of the grantees met the DOL performance target of 50 percent of youth in Job ChalleNGe having prior court-involvement.** Based on the performance data grantees reported to DOL, 44 percent of participants were court-involved youth. Programs reported that they prioritized court-involved youth in the Job ChalleNGe application process, but only one of the programs consistently had more applications than available slots.
- **All Job ChalleNGe participants received occupational training.** Some of the most common occupational programs were nurse's aide/certified nursing assistant and welding, although enrollment varied by site. Seventy-three percent of participants received an occupational training certification.

- **Court- and non-court-involved youth received largely the same services.** Although the original grant announcement suggested that programs might need to adapt their programs to best serve court-involved youth, program staff did not differentiate the services they provided to youth based on whether the youth were court-involved. The only exception was that staff steered some youth with criminal backgrounds away from occupational training in fields in which it might be difficult for people with criminal records to obtain employment.

Data sources on participant outcomes

Survey approximately 14 months after Job ChalleNGe: includes employment, education, military enlistment, and criminal justice involvement

National Student Clearinghouse on post-secondary education outcomes

State criminal justice administrative records. ◢

Outcomes of Job ChalleNGe Participants

The primary goal of the Job ChalleNGe program was to improve the outcomes of participants through access to education and job training. As part of the evaluation, we analyzed the education, employment, and criminal justice outcomes of participants. For more detail on the data sources, analysis, and findings see Berk et al. 2020.

- **Court-involved and non-court-involved participants had similar post-secondary enrollment rates within six months of Youth ChalleNGe completion, but more non-court-involved participants continued their education or received a certification.** Within six months of Youth ChalleNGe completion, there was no measurable difference in the enrollment rates for court-involved participants and non-court-involved participants. However, at the one-year mark, only 5 percent of court-involved participants were enrolled relative to 13 percent of non-court-involved participants. Significantly fewer court-involved youth received a credential any time following the program with 36 percent of court-involved participants receiving a credential compared to 50 percent of non-court-involved participants.
- **Employment outcomes were similar for youth with court involvement and youth with no court-involvement.** At Job ChalleNGe exit and at the time of the follow-up survey collection, there was no measurable difference in the employment rates of the two groups. Among participants who were employed at the time of follow-up survey collection, there were no measurable differences in employment characteristics, including weekly earnings, benefits, hours, and job tenure, between court-involved youth and non-court-involved youth.
- **Participants with court-involvement prior to enrollment had higher rates of criminal justice involvement following Youth ChalleNGe completion than non-court-involved participants.** Fourteen percent of court-involved youth were arrested for a new crime within one year of Youth ChalleNGe compared to five percent of non-court-involved participants.

Exhibit 2. Key outcomes for Job ChalleNGe participants (reported in percentages unless otherwise specified)

Outcomes	Total	Court-involved	Not court-involved	*p*-value[e]
Any productive activity[a,b]	86	81	88	
Postsecondary education				
Enrolled within six months of YC[c]	67	66	68	
Enrolled one year following YC[c]	10	5	13	**
Employment				
Currently working[a]	81	78	82	
Average weekly earnings (dollars)[a]	379	394	374	
Military				
Currently enlisted[a]	13	10	16	
Criminal justice involvement				
Arrested within one year of YC[d]	8	14	5	***
Convicted within one year of YC[d]	5	9	2	***
Sample size (NSC and CJ)	**304**	**103**	**194**	
Sample size (FUS)	**150**	**53**	**95**	

Source: Weighted data from the background information form, follow-up survey, and administrative records.

Notes: Analysis sample includes Job ChalleNGe participants in Cohorts 4–6 who completed the background information form. Youth were categorized as having court involvement if at baseline they reported ever being arrested, found guilty of a status offense, convicted of a crime, or spent time in a juvenile or adult detention facility, or if they were on probation or parole at the time of program entry. YC=Youth ChalleNGe.

[a]Source: Follow-up survey (FUS) weighted data.

[b]Any productive activity is defined as employment, education, or military enlistment.

[c]Source: National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) weighted data. YC=Youth ChalleNGe.

[d]Source: Criminal justice (CJ) administrative weighted data. Arrests and convictions are for new offenses. YC=Youth ChalleNGe.

[e]Statistical significance is estimated using t-tests to compare differences between court-involved youth and the not court-involved youth. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Future Considerations

Job ChalleNGe provided an opportunity for youth with prior court involvement to receive occupational training in a residential environment. Although the education and employment outcomes for these youth are encouraging, there are some important factors to consider. Less than half of the court-involved youth had a prior conviction, and youth with lower levels of prior justice-involvement may face fewer barriers than youth with a conviction or a period of detention. Job ChalleNGe participants, regardless of prior court-involvement, were also motivated enough to attend Youth ChalleNGe, complete the program, and choose to enroll in additional occupational training. The findings from the evaluation raise a few questions for the REO office and the Youth ChalleNGe program to consider:

- If Youth ChalleNGe and Job ChalleNGe were to enroll youth with more substantial prior court-involvement, would the programs benefit from tailoring services or providing additional services, such as legal services, to support these youth?
- How would enrolling youth with more serious court-involvement affect public perception of the Youth ChalleNGe program? Would the presence of more youth with court-involvement have any influence on the other youth in the program?
- Is it optimal to serve youth with prior court-involvement in dedicated programs? Or are the youth development and skills needs similar for disconnected youth regardless of prior court involvement?

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