

ECONOMIC SCENE

A study backs up what George Foreman already said: the Job Corps works.

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WHEN the Job Corps, an original antipoverty program from Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, was on the ropes and facing deep budget cuts in the mid-1990's, George Foreman came to its defense. "Job Corps took me from the mean streets and out of a nightmare lifestyle into a mode where the most incredible of dreams came true," Mr. Foreman, the two-time heavyweight boxing champion, said.

More scientific evidence is in a study by Mathematica Policy Research quietly released last week. The study finds that the Job Corps measurably improves the education and job prospects of disadvantaged youth. It also offers clues as to why.

The Job Corps is the most intensive and expensive of the dwindling number of government programs for disadvantaged youth. The \$1.3 billion cost last year amounts to about \$20,000 for each participant. Although critics mistakenly argue that the Job Corps is as expensive as a year at Harvard -- ignoring the public subsidy and endowment spending that raise Harvard's true costs for each student well above \$50,000 a year -- the costs are high.

The stakes are also high. Each year, the program serves more than 60,000 mostly poor, urban high school dropouts who are 16 to 24 years old. A third of the male participants had been arrested at least once before joining the program; two-thirds of all participants had never held a full-time job. If the Job Corps does not improve the prospects of disadvantaged youths, then less-intensive programs are unlikely to help either.

The Job Corps is expensive because 90 percent of students are sent from their neighborhoods to one of 116 residential campuses in 46 states. There they stay for about eight months of academic education, vocational training, counseling, health education and job placement assistance. Students train for jobs in the new and old economy, from Jiffy Lube to Cisco Systems.

Mathematica's "National Job Corps Study" (www.ttrc.doleta.gov/opr/FULLTEXT/jobcorps/Outcomes/), financed by the Labor Department, presents initial results of the most scientifically rigorous evaluation of the program ever done. Researchers followed 9,409 applicants to the Job Corps between November 1994 and December 1995 who were randomly selected for the program, and another 6,000 applicants who were randomly assigned to a control group that was excluded from the Job Corps services for three years. Applicants were surveyed 12 and 30 months after they applied; almost 80 percent responded.

The study compares the self-reported employment, earnings and criminal activity of the participant and control groups in the 30 months after students applied to the program. By the last survey, participants had typically lived on their own, away from the Job Corps, for a year and a half.

The participants received about 1,000 more hours of education and job training than members of the control group. For high school dropouts, attending the Job Corps raised the percentage who earned a General Equivalency Development degree to 40 percent from 16 percent.

Two and a half years after applying to the Job Corps, the average applicant selected for the program earned 8 percent

more each week than the average control group member. Because only three-quarters of the selected applicants actually attended the Job Corps, the Mathematica analysts figured that the program raised the average participant's earnings by 11 percent. This increase is about what labor economists expect for every year of schooling.

Program participants also had slightly higher employment rates, average weekly work hours and hourly earnings. For 16- to 17-year-old males -- a group whose prospects are notoriously difficult to improve with other employment training -- earnings increased, according to Peter Z. Schochet, co-author of the study, by an impressive 20 percent. Extrapolating from the most recent quarter, the Job Corps appears to raise the average participant's earnings by almost \$1,000 a year, to \$9,563 from \$8,642. Participants also received about \$425 less in public assistance during the study period.

A striking finding is that participants were about 20 percent less likely to be arrested, charged or convicted of a crime, and if convicted, they served less jail time.

Except for women with children, students slotted for a nonresidential Job Corps program had no statistical improvement relative to comparable control group members. Evidently, by sending young people to residential campuses, the program overcomes the distraction of gangs, drugs and poverty that plague their normal neighborhoods.

Some social scientists, like Lisbeth Schorr of Harvard, have argued that complex, multipronged social interventions cannot be evaluated with scientific treatment and control methods. The National Job Corps Study proves them wrong. Orley Ashenfelter, a Princeton economist, commented that the methods used in the study have made labor economics a "powerful science."

Mathematica will wait to complete a 48-month follow-up survey before performing a cost-benefit analysis of the Job Corps next year. Nonetheless, the short-term results are similar to those found in an earlier evaluation of the program by Charles Mallar, then at Mathematica. That study, conducted in 1982 without the benefit of random assignment, concluded that every dollar spent on the Job Corps returned more than a dollar in benefits for society.

Had the new study shown the Job Corps to be a bust, the program surely would be on the ropes again. Instead, the program works for the same reasons it helped George Foreman: it takes troubled youth out of "the mean streets" and places them in a safe, constructive and disciplined environment where they learn employment and social skills.

Yet the number of the Job Corps slots has been stable for decades, while the number of disadvantaged youth has exploded. President Clinton's latest budget proposal requests only a small increase. Why not set a loftier goal? Why shouldn't the Job Corps be able to accommodate every eligible youngster in the country?