

Spotlight Summary

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Can Existing Employment Programs Help Autistic Young Adults Achieve Employment Goals? Four Ideas to Expand the Evidence Base

The transition from school to employment can be challenging for the growing number of autistic young adults. These young adults often struggle to engage in competitive integrated employment or in appropriate training programs that would prepare them for such employment.^{1,2,3,4} Although many efforts from communities and employers across the nation aim to improve employment outcomes for young adults on the autism spectrum or with intellectual or developmental disabilities, rigorous evidence of the effectiveness of these programs in improving employment outcomes is scarce.⁵ This spotlight summary presents evaluation design options for future evidence-building activities around four programs that have the potential to improve employment outcomes for young adults on the autism spectrum.

Evaluation design options for two types of programs

The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) at the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) seeks to build the evidence base on employment programs for young adults on the autism spectrum. As part of its Research Support Services for Employment of Young Adults on the Autism Spectrum (REYAAS) Project, ODEP funded knowledge-development activities to identify promising employment programs. The development phase included literature reviews and listening sessions. Based on those activities, ODEP selected four design options to expand the evidence base. These four options can be grouped into two categories (see box).

Two categories of design options

1. Programs that draw on the success of large, broadly available programs that have been rigorously evaluated and found to improve employment-related outcomes for other groups of youth and young adults: **Registered Apprenticeship** and **YouthBuild**
2. Programs with promising rigorous evidence on employment-related outcomes specifically for autistic young adults or youth with intellectual or developmental disabilities: **supported employment in Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)** and **Virtual Interview Training for Autistic Transition Age Youth (VIT-TAY)**

In this spotlight summary, we briefly describe an evaluation design for each of the four programs. To develop these designs, we reviewed program documents and past evaluation studies and conducted interviews with program administrators, implementers, and past evaluators. These conversations helped us understand the feasibility of and challenges associated with evaluating existing, expanded, or adapted versions of these programs. More details about each design, including recommendations on collecting data from young adults on the autism spectrum, are available in Ben-Shalom et al. (2023).



Registered Apprenticeship

Program background: Registered Apprenticeship is a career training program serving over half a million people nationwide annually.⁶ Despite encouragement of businesses to increase the participation of people with disabilities, apprenticeship programs report that less than 1 percent of apprentices in 2023 self-identified as having a disability.⁷

Evidence base: Rigorous studies show that Registered Apprenticeship programs can improve employment outcomes and increase participants' earnings.^{8,9} However, no evidence exists to date on its impact on the employment outcomes and earnings of people with disabilities, let alone those on the autism spectrum.⁷

Intervention overview: An enhanced version of Registered Apprenticeship that includes counseling and mentoring by dedicated staff at American Job Centers (AJCs), which are located across the United States. An outreach and marketing campaign will encourage autistic young adults to enroll in the program, and an intermediary organization will provide relevant technical assistance and other supports to both employers and apprentices.

Evaluation design: The evaluation would randomly assign AJCs in one or more states into treatment and control groups. AJCs in the treatment group would offer access to enhanced Registered Apprenticeship programs to young adults on the autism spectrum. The evaluation would compare outcomes for autistic young adults who received services in treatment group AJCs to those who received services in non-treatment group AJCs.

Intervention partners: AJCs, employers, and intermediary organizations with expertise in providing technical assistance to both employers and autistic young adults. Alternatively, the evaluation could be designed with community colleges, schools, or VR offices partnering with Registered Apprenticeship programs.

Recruitment: A targeted outreach and marketing campaign (online and in high schools, VR offices, and postsecondary institutions) encouraging autistic adults ages 16–28 to seek Registered Apprenticeship opportunities at their local AJC.

Available data sources: Workforce Integrated Performance System (WIPS), Registered Apprenticeship Partners Information Database System (RAPIDS), and the National Directory of New Hires (NDNH) will be utilized.

Practical considerations: Registered Apprenticeship programs can take one to six years to complete, so their evaluation would take longer than the other options. The evaluation might also have higher implementation costs due to the targeted outreach and marketing campaign and additional funds needed to provide participants with access to transportation, technology, and other resources.





YouthBuild

Program background: DOL's YouthBuild program is a nationwide, community-based pre-apprenticeship program serving more than 5,000 youth per year at over 175 organizations across 40 states.¹⁰ Participation usually ranges from six to 24 months, averaging about one year, and includes job training and educational opportunities for young adults. About 10 percent of participants have been diagnosed with a disability.¹¹

Evidence base: A study that randomly invited youth to enroll in YouthBuild showed that YouthBuild programs had a direct cause-and-effect relationship on improved employment, earnings, and education outcomes for participants.¹¹ However, the study did not estimate the effects of YouthBuild specifically for youth with disabilities.

Intervention overview: A YouthBuild program with enhancements tailored to the needs of young adults on the autism spectrum. Such enhancements, including customized education techniques, development services focused on communication and life skills, and one-on-one counseling with the YouthBuild case manager, would support the different individual needs of participating autistic young adults.

Evaluation design: Cohort study: the first cohort would participate in a regular YouthBuild program, and the second cohort would participate in an enhanced version tailored to the needs of young adults on the autism spectrum. The evaluation would compare the outcomes across cohorts.

Intervention partners: One or more YouthBuild programs and an intermediary organization with expertise in providing employment support services to autistic young adults.

Recruitment: A targeted outreach and marketing campaign (online and in high schools, school districts, and VR offices) encouraging autistic adults ages 16–24 to apply to the YouthBuild program.

Available data source: WIPS.

Practical considerations: An enhanced program would require the financial resources needed to provide equitable access to transportation, technology, and other resources that support successful participation.





Supported employment in VR

Program background: The VR program provides employment-related services and supports to people with disabilities to prepare them for and encourage their participation in competitive integrated employment. About half a million people with disabilities nationwide applied for VR services in 2019, including autistic young adults.^{12,13} Supported employment is one of the services VR agencies offer. It provides ongoing support and other appropriate services that people with a significant disability need to secure and maintain competitive integrated employment.¹⁰

Evidence base: Rigorous evidence suggests that VR services can improve employment outcomes for youth and young adults with disabilities.^{14,15} Among the services VR agencies offer, research has found that receiving supported employment is associated with improved employment outcomes for young adults with developmental disabilities.¹⁶ However, there is no evidence that VR services can specifically improve employment outcomes for autistic young adults.

Intervention overview: The intervention would boost access to existing supported employment services in VR.

Evaluation design: The evaluation would randomly assign VR offices in one or more states into treatment and control groups. VR offices in the treatment group would offer enhanced access to supported employment services for autistic and non-autistic young adults. The evaluation would compare outcomes for autistic young adults who received services in treatment group offices to those who received services in non-treatment group offices. This design also allows the evaluation to compare the effects of the intervention on autistic young adults and other young adults with disabilities.

Intervention partners: One or more state VR agencies and local employers.

Recruitment: Expanded outreach by VR agencies to schools, service providers, DOL-related programs, and postsecondary institutions to encourage autistic young adults ages 16–28 to seek VR services.

Available data sources: State VR data, state unemployment insurance data.

Practical considerations: Access to VR services, including supported employment, varies substantially by state.¹⁷ If more than one state participates in the intervention, the evaluation should randomly assign VR offices separately within the state. This is because local characteristics, such as the availability of VR services and job market conditions, might impact the effectiveness of the intervention.





VIT-TAY

Program background: VIT-TAY is an interactive, computerized job interview simulator. It consists of e-learning content and simulated practice of filling out job applications and handling job interviews. VIT-TAY was designed for transition-age young adults with autism. The program design was based on feedback from transition-age youth and other interested parties on another interview training program developed for adults with severe mental illness.

Evidence base: Strong evidence shows that VIT-TAY improved interview performance and short-term employment outcomes among autistic young adults, increasing their likelihood of placement in competitive integrated employment six months after the intervention.¹⁸ However, the longer-term impacts of job interview trainings, and how these impacts might change when such trainings are offered to a larger group, have not been evaluated.

Intervention overview: The intervention will incorporate VIT-TAY in DOL's Job Corps centers. Job Corps is a large, nationwide residential career training program that has been operating for more than 50 years. The program helps tens of thousands of people ages 16 to 24 complete their high school education, trains them for meaningful careers, and assists them with attaining employment.

Evaluation design: The evaluation would randomly assign Job Corps centers in one or more Job Corps

regions into treatment and control groups. Job Corps centers in the treatment group would implement VIT-TAY for both autistic and non-autistic participants. The evaluation would compare outcomes for autistic young adults who received training in treatment group Job Corps centers to those who received training in control group centers. This design also allows the evaluation to compare the effects of the intervention on autistic young adults and non-autistic Jobs Corps participants.

Intervention partners: Job Corps centers and VIT-TAY trainers.

Recruitment: Targeted outreach and marketing campaign (online and in high schools, welfare offices, AJCs, and VR offices) encouraging autistic young adults ages 16–24 to participate in Job Corps.

Available data sources: Job Corps Information System, and NDNH.

Practical considerations: Virtual training requires fewer resources than other interview trainings, such as mock interview role-plays with a teacher. The main cost drivers for carrying out the intervention are purchasing the VIT-TAY software and training staff to implement VIT-TAY at the centers. Therefore, scaling it up would not be resource intensive.

Research Support Services for Employment of Young Adults on the Autism Spectrum (REYAAS) Project.

This spotlight summary is part of the Research Support Services for Employment of Young Adults on the Autism Spectrum (REYAAS) Project. REYAAS is identifying promising practices and policies to support employment of young adults (ages 16 to 28) on the autism spectrum. The project is funded by the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) within the U.S. Department of Labor. Mathematica leads the project in partnership with ODEP. More information is available on the project's web page. ▲

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Endnotes

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