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Using TANF Sanctions to Increase High School Graduation

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The School Attendance Demonstration Project (SADP) was aimed at encouraging AFDC teens to attend school and finish high school. The project used a combined approach of the financial incentive in the form of a penalty for non-attendance, and the provision of social services. SADP tracked the school attendance and graduation status of eligible teens (n=997) in the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD). The study utilized a control group with random assignment. Data indicated that SADP did not effect graduations. The findings seem to indicate that at-risk teens from families receiving public assistance have on-going problems with securing an education that are difficult to correct with SADP services and sanctions.

Introduction

Finding ways to motivate AFDC teens to finish high school as a step toward self-sufficiency has been a major concern of policy makers. The School Attendance Demonstration Project (SADP) was authorized by the California Department of Social Services under a Federal waiver and implemented by the San Diego County Department of Social Services (DSS) in collaboration with the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD). DSS is the public agency charged with administering the AFDC program in San Diego. The project required that 16 to 18 year old

recipients of Aid for Dependent Children (AFDC) attend school on a full time basis as a condition of AFDC (now replaced by TANF) eligibility. This "social contract" approach defines public assistance not as a one way relationship, but as an exchange in which the recipient has responsibilities to fulfill as a condition of eligibility. Adult welfare recipients are required to cooperate with employment and training programs as a condition of receiving assistance (General Accounting Office, 1996; Jimenez, 1999). This approach is consistent with the policy principle that the receipt of public assistance requires that recipients work on establishing their own independence. It is believed that such requirements will result in higher work levels among public assistance recipients (Corbett, 1995; Mead, 1998).

However, questions have been raised about whether this approach improves the financial circumstances of welfare recipients. The equivalent social exchange for teens is that they complete their secondary educational program while receiving benefits. One avenue available to encourage AFDC dependent students to finish high school is to use public assistance payments as an incentive. This mandate provides a financial incentive for parents to place a priority on their teens securing an education. In addition to the financial incentive, SADP attempts to help teens and their families reach independence through a multifaceted service delivery approach. The financial incentive is assumed to give an immediate tangible reward for school attendance. The services are supposed to address issues that prevent graduation. This paper presents model estimates that predict high school graduation among students participating in SADP.

Welfare reform ideology supports the idea that an increased level of education among AFDC recipients will lead to higher levels of employment, and lower levels of dependence on public income maintenance programs. The consensus among labor market analysts is that completion of secondary education is the minimum credential needed to insure that citizens can provide for themselves and their families (Randolph, Fraser, & Orthner, 1999; United States Department of Commerce, 1995).

Some research suggests that welfare receipt is negatively associated with high school graduation (Brooks-Gunn, Guo, & Furstenberg, 1993 and Zil, 1991). Poorly educated teens are likely

to be caught in a cycle of welfare dependency. A large amount of data substantiates the notion that high school graduates have higher rates of labor force participation, lower unemployment rates, and higher yearly incomes than non-graduates. United States Department of Labor Statistics (1997) reports that among adults over 25, the rate of labor force participation was 65.6% for high school graduates versus 41.1% for dropouts. The reported unemployment rate among the same age group in 1996 among high school graduates was 4.8%, and 8.7% among non-high school graduates.

Considerable income differences were also found according to whether one finished high school or not. Median annual income of year round full-time workers 25 years old and over in 1995 who had finished high school was \$29,510. The comparable figure for high school dropouts, age 25 and over, and for graduates was \$22,185. Similar differences are reported for women in the same age category as men based on educational attainment, but regardless of degree women's incomes lag behind men's (\$20,373 for female high school graduates and \$15,825 for female non-high school graduates (United States Department of Commerce, 1997).

Review of Past School Attendance and Welfare Projects

There have been a number of pre-SADP efforts to try to motivate teens to attend and finish school. One effort was Wisconsin's pioneering Learnfare Program. Learnfare provided a sanction in which students who had more than 2 or 3 unexcused absences in a month were deleted from their parent's AFDC grant (Pawasarat & Quinn, 1990). This non-experimental study did not increase school attendance or the likelihood of graduation for most students. (Etheridge & Percy, 1993). SADP differed from Learnfare by providing services to students with attendance problems.

LEAP, a school attendance program that targeted AFDC teen mothers in Ohio, yielded more positive results than the Wisconsin Learnfare Program. This evaluation used a control group and random assignment. This program reported results which suggested that the program increased school attendance among teenage parents, but did not affect graduation or dropout rates. The LEAP program differed from Learnfare by providing both

supportive services aimed at keeping the teen in school, and a monthly bonus of \$62 to students who maintained good attendance (Long, Gueron, Wood, & Fellerath, 1997). SADP did not provide a financial incentive to increase attendance, but reduced a family's grant if their child did not attend school.

The other major test of a mandatory education program for welfare recipients was the Teenage Parent Demonstration (TPD) which operated from 1987–1991 at 3 sites in New Jersey and Illinois. TPD used randomization in assigning the target population of 6,000 teenage mothers to equal sized control and experimental groups. This Demonstration used a financial sanction and case management. The evaluators reported increased rates of school attendance, job training, employment, and lower rates of dependence on public assistance. However, there was little or no measurable change in economic welfare of participants, and no reductions occurred in subsequent pregnancies (Maynard, 1993). SADP differed from LEAP and TPD by aiming its services not at teenage mothers but at the broader populations of teens.

The three programs were behavioral in orientation relying on an incentive or sanction to effect behavior. In addition, LEAP and TPD recognized the psychosocial needs of the teens by providing case management and social services. All three programs reported mixed results. None of the evaluations reported increased graduations. The target group has many needs beyond school attendance which programs struggle to meet.

Methodology

Overview of the Study Design

The study was designed was designed to test the following hypothesis:

The secondary school graduation rates will increase for AFDC recipients relative to the control group after participating in the SADP program."

Also, the researchers sought to identify factors that predict or inhibit graduation from secondary school. The study utilized a two group design (experimental and control group) with random assignment. The school status of eligible students was tracked from January 1996 until June 1998. The experimental group was

subject to a sanction if they did not attend school at least 80% of the time. By requiring that students attend school for a minimum of 80% of the school days in a month, it was expected that students in the experimental group would graduate at a higher rate than students in the control group. They were also eligible to receive social services to assist them with school. All students in both study groups were eligible to receive school-based services, but only the experimental group were eligible to receive social services from the SADP services unit. The control group was not subjected to the attendance requirement or penalty.

Subjects

The SADP target population was all 16 to 18 year old AFDC recipients attending a San Diego Unified School District school (SDUSD). The following types of AFDC teen recipients were excluded from the study: (1) teens who were pregnant or parenting (pregnant teens participated in CALEARN, a similar program developed for their needs), (2) teens who received foster care, (3) teens attending private schools, (4) teens who had graduated from high school or received a GED, and (5) teens who were engaged in work activities as an alternative to schooling.

At the start of each month all County AFDC recipients were examined for eligibility, and if eligible, were randomly assigned to a study group. The difference in the number of observations between the experimental group and the control group was a magnitude of two on average for the monthly time periods. Differing size in study groups was requested by county officials who wished to see as many students as possible participate in the program. The difference was controlled for in reporting the model estimates. The control group remains large enough to analyze. There are no differences between study groups on critical variables.

Data from SDUSD were matched monthly to track AFDC status and school attendance. Experimental group students whose attendance was less than 80% received a notice to attend an orientation meeting. Students may have begun to access SADP services at this point. Attendance at an orientation could also bring a student into compliance by agreeing to participate in the SADP service program. Failure to attend the orientation could

result in a discontinuance from public assistance if the student's attendance was still below 80%. Teens were assessed for service needs at the orientation, and if appropriate, they were assigned a case manager. The case manager acted as a service broker, advocate, and attendance monitor

Students whose attendance was still below 80% after two months and who did not attend an orientation received a financial penalty notice. The penalty deleted teens from their parents' public assistance grant. The amount would vary according to family size since AFDC grants were computed on the number of eligible people in a household.

Data Collection

Data came from the SDUSD (attendance data, graduation status, type of school attended), and from DSS (income maintenance data such as benefit amounts, sanctions, and basic demographics). The evaluators also did data matches to determine if the teen or a family member had an active case with the Children's Services Bureau (CSB) and San Diego Juvenile Probation. The CSB is the public agency charged with delivering child protective services in San Diego. A match with CSB indicated that either the teen or a sibling had an active child protective service case. A match with probation meant the youth was a probationer. Data from these various sources were merged to create the data file for analysis.

Variables

Data were available for teens who graduated in June 1998. These teens could have participated in SADP for up to 21/2 years so they do provide a test of SADP abilities to increase graduation rates. The SDUSD provided information on how many teens received a graduation certificate. A graduation certificate is provided to teens in their senior year of high school who are eligible for graduation. Some students may skip this option and choose to seek a GED or equivalency. The data do not permit the identification of these teens. The dependent variable is: "student has a graduation certificate" (yes = 1, no = 0). A code of "No" meant a student should have graduated in June 1998,

but did not have a certificate, and is therefore not considered a graduate.

The independent variables include:

- (1) Study group (experimental group coded 1, control group coded 0)
- (2) Gender (male coded 0, female coded 1)
- (3) Race/ ethnicity of the student (Hispanic coded 1, other coded 0) This analysis focuses on Hispanics as a category because of attendance patterns observed in the sample. Asians were found to have the highest school attendance rates in the sample. Hispanics had the poorest attendance of any group in the sample. Whites and African-American fell in between Asians and Hispanics. Because the ethnicity variables were all highly correlated only one variable could be entered into the regression model reported later in this paper.
- (4) Age (years)
- (5) Number of parents/ caretakers in household (1 parent coded 0, 2 parents coded 1).
- (6) Number of people in household of the student
- (7) Children's Services Bureau involvement (yes coded 1, no coded 0) The researchers believed that CSB status captures presenting problems within the family that could inhibit graduation.
- (8) Juvenile Probation involvement (yes coded 1, no coded 0). The evaluators hypothesized that probation involvement would indicate the presence of behavioral problems that could interfere with school attendance.
- (9) School Type (alternative coded 1, comprehensive coded 0) Alternative schools serve students who have difficulty attending the "mainstream" comprehensive schools. Attendance at an alternative school implies that they are at risk for dropping out and having other school difficulties.
- (10) Received services (yes coded 1, no coded 0) Experimental group students were required to attend orientation for services when they failed to comply with attendance requirements. This variable indicates whether they attended that orientation.

Findings

Significant differences between study groups were not observed on any demographic variables which validates the randomization procedure. Gender and race/ethnicity of students were evenly split between males and females for the experimental group and control group. Age was stable between the study groups. The largest ethnic group in the sample was Asian and Pacific Islander students (41.2%). Whites comprised the smallest groups by ethnicity in the sample (10.1%). African-Americans were 27.0% of the sample, and Hispanics were 21.7% of the teens.

Records for June 1998 were chosen. Students whose age indicated they should be seniors (997) were then selected. The SDUSD uses December 1st as a cutoff date for age in assigning students to grade level. In order to be selected students had to be more than 17 years old on March 10, 1998, when the school records were matched with AFDC records. All students born after November 30, 1980 were removed from the database. Of the 665 students in the experimental group, 382 (57.4%) had graduation certificates compared with 184 (55.4%) of the 332 students in the control group.

Only 22.86% of teens came from two parent families. the average family size was 3.61 (sd=.3752). CPS involvement was found for 4.6% of the sample, and 3.51% of the sample were probationers. A little over 12.37 % of the students attended alternative schools. Only 9.63% of the students requested services from SADP. We find this surprising since in any month that we have data, 14% to 25% of the experimental group students are out of compliance with the attendance rule. It should also be noted that the service recipients were a self-selected group of students which may have meant they were more likely to want to change their attendance than the teen who ignored the summons for services. Students were more likely to ignore the summons for services than request services. It is possible that these teens could have self-corrected their attendance without intervention.

To determine what might explain graduation, a multivariate model described in Table 1 was estimated including (1) study group, (2) gender, (3) race/ethnicity, (4) number of parents, (5) household size, (6) Children's Service Bureau status, (7) Juvenile

Table 1

Logistic Regression: Explaining Graduation

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Study Group	-.084	.170	.243	1	.622	.920
Gender	.556	.157	12.528	1	.000***	1.744
Hispanic	-.346	.183	3.566	1	.059	.708
Number of Parents	.406	.206	3.863	1	.049*	1.500
Household Size	-.141	.046	9.514	1	.002**	.869
Children's Services Bureau	.217	.378	.329	1	.566	1.242
Juvenile Probation	.134	.437	.093	1	.760	1.143
Alternative Education	-1.781	.264	45.337	1	.000***	.168
Received Services	-.376	.272	1.914	1	.167	.686
Constant	.715	.228	9.802	1	.002**	2.045

N=765

*P-value $\geq .05$ (less than or equal to 5 chances in 100)

**P-value $\geq .01$ (less than or equal to 1 chance in 100)

***P-value $\geq .001$ (less than or equal to 1 chance in 1000)

Cox & Snell R Square = .115

Nagelkerke R Square = .153

Cases Correctly Predicted = 64.3%

Probation status, (8) alternative educational program, and (9) attended orientation. Because age is invariant across study groups, it was excluded from the statistical model. The logits indicate no statistical difference between the experimental and the control groups for graduation. The study hypothesis that services and the financial penalty would increase graduation rates is rejected.

The results show that females were significantly more likely to graduate than males. Number of parents in the home and household size are both significant, but have reverse signs. Students with two parents were more likely to graduate than students with one parent, while students in larger sized households were less likely to graduate than students from smaller sized households. Hispanic students were less likely to graduate from high school than the other race/ethnic groups, but only at a level approaching significance ($p < .059$). Finally, educational program predicted graduation. Placement in an alternative school, rather than a

comprehensive school is the strongest predictor of graduation. Children's Service Bureau status and Juvenile Probation status were unrelated to graduation.

Conclusions and Discussion

This research was conducted at a single site. Generalizing the findings to other sites should be done with caution. Moreover, the two experimental conditions were tested together which may mean they confound one another. Getting a clear picture of the exact contributions of either the penalty or services to school attendance was difficult. The hypothesis on increasing graduations was not supported by study data. The findings in these tables seem to indicate that at-risk teens from single parent families have on-going problems with securing an education that are difficult to correct with SADP services and sanctions. School type is more influential than study group in predicting outcome. Students were in Alternative school because they had problems adjusting to comprehensive schools. Alternative school students were less likely to graduate than mainstream students.

The key effect of SADP for society, the youth, and taxpayers was the hypothesized increase in graduations. Increased graduations would suggest improved employability and/or enhanced likelihood of college entry. The SADP did not achieve this goal. As some critics of Learnfare suggested, the assumption that parents of AFDC are aware of their teen's school problems and have control over them may be unwarranted (Ethridge & Percy, 1995).

Students from single parent families and larger sized households appeared to be less likely to graduate than students from two parent families. Having two parents should mean more support for students whether financial or emotional. Students receiving public assistance are likely to reside in single parent households which are mired in poverty and may be suffering from a variety of psychosocial difficulties. These problems may make it more difficult for teens to attend school and for parents to monitor their activities. A work requirement may reduce parents' ability to monitor their children, which could increase school-related problems.

It may also be unfair to hold SADP entirely accountable for

graduations. The school district is responsible for the quality of education that would increase graduations. There are systemic issues that need to be addressed. The educational system is designed for those more fully integrated into the nation's opportunity system and who therefore value education as a means to self-sufficiency or upward mobility. The LEAP evaluators suggest the lack of success in graduations they found may be related to the teen perceptions of their own future economic prospects. Student participants were not optimistic about their future economic prospects which they did not see as improved with a diploma (Long, et al., 1997). Also, these families in many instances do not have a history of work or educational engagement. This history may make them less likely than middle class families to encourage schooling. Changing those perceptions may be a precondition to changing attendance behavior.

The challenge of future interventions is to reach teens who have attendance problems and who also do not respond to an offer of assistance. One improvement would be to provide intervention at earlier ages than adolescence. Student attendance patterns had been set long before the demonstration and were difficult to change.

Incentives more substantial than LEAP's for school completion might be considered. Making a much more visible link from graduation to work might help. Public and private partnerships that guaranteed jobs or future educational prospects for graduates would be that visible link. These partnerships would include closer cooperation between higher education and secondary education to increase the notion that the diploma provides a payoff.

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