

Reconnecting Disconnected Young Adults The Early Experience of Project Rise

By Michael Bangser

In the United States, 1.6 million young people between 18 and 24 years old are out of school (lacking either a high school degree or General Educational Development certificate) *and* out of work.¹ These “disconnected” young people face significant barriers to economic opportunity and distressingly high odds of becoming involved with the criminal justice system.

Project Rise, a program currently operating as part of the federal Social Innovation Fund (see Box 1 on page 2), seeks to reconnect these young people with education, work, and social support as a pathway to a brighter future. A distinctive feature of Project Rise is that participants are offered paid internships if they maintain satisfactory attendance in the program’s education component.

This policy brief provides early lessons from Project Rise, including that:

- Enrolling participants in a series of groups (or cohorts) can promote bonding among them through a combination of peer support and peer pressure.
- Surprisingly, participants appear to value the program’s education component more than they value the offer of a part-time paid internship.
- Given the challenges of engaging disconnected young people for the full duration of the program, it is important to respond flexibly to participants’ barriers and strengths.

These lessons and others that will emerge from the Project Rise implementation research can inform federal, state, and local policies for disconnected young people.

THE NATURE OF THE CHALLENGE

Educational attainment and early work experience provide an important foundation for young people’s future success. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, median annual earnings in 2011 for workers age 25 and older without a high school degree were below \$19,000. Those with a high school degree or General Educational Development (GED) certificate earned a median of almost \$27,000; workers with some college or an associate’s degree, more than \$32,000; and workers with a bachelor’s degree, more than \$48,000.² Attaining a GED certificate can provide an economic payoff for dropouts, although not as much as a regular high school degree does.³ Completing high school or attaining a GED certificate is a prerequisite to seeking a postsecondary credential (a certificate in a trade or an associate’s or bachelor’s degree) that could boost future earnings.

Work experience during their teenage years can also help young people gain a foothold in the labor market and prepare them for adulthood. Yet over time the employment picture for teens has deteriorated, particularly for males. In 1978, about 52 percent of 16- to 19-year-old males had some employment

BOX 1. THE SOCIAL INNOVATION FUND

Project Rise and its evaluation are being funded through the federal Social Innovation Fund (SIF), an initiative enacted under the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act. The SIF, administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service, is a public-private partnership designed to identify and expand effective solutions to critical social challenges. The SIF generates a 3:1 private-public match, sets a high standard for evidence, empowers communities to identify and drive solutions, and creates an incentive for grant-making organizations to target funding more effectively to promising programs in three issue areas: economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development and school support.

Project Rise is part of the New York City SIF project, which is led by the Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) and the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City in collaboration with MDRC. In eight cities, the SIF project is replicating, improving, and testing five antipoverty programs — including Project Rise — that draw on strategies that have shown evidence of effectiveness in New York City and elsewhere.

between January and June. In 2006 — before the onset of the recession of 2008 — that rate had dropped to 37 percent. By the first half of 2009 it had fallen even more, to 28 percent, and was lower still for African-American teens.⁴ This trend, combined with what has been characterized as “vanishing” summer youth employment,⁵ could have severe consequences for low-income young people.

Despite these common challenges, there is considerable heterogeneity within the disconnected young adult population. For example, 18-year-olds may have different issues than 24-year-olds. The duration and extent of young people's disconnectedness can vary: some are persistently disconnected while others “reconnect” reasonably soon, and those who do reconnect can do so in different ways.⁶ At any given time, some out-of-work young people are actively seeking employment while others have given up searching, at least temporarily. Individuals leave school at various grades and skill levels, and for different reasons. Finally, young adults may have one or more additional risk factors: they may have been involved with the criminal justice or foster care systems, be pregnant or parenting, need to deal with housing instability, or face substance abuse or mental health challenges.

INITIATIVES FOR AT-RISK, OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS

Concern about at-risk, out-of-school young people has spawned policy responses and “second chance” initiatives at least since the Job Corps program began in the 1960s. A number of other programs are also now tackling these issues.⁷ The commitment extends to collaborative efforts such as the Campaign for Youth (a coalition of national policy and youth-serving organizations) and the Interagency Forum on Disconnected Youth (which comprises representatives from nine federal government agencies).

Research results and programs' operating experiences both suggest that programs for at-risk young people should include several core features. They should engage participants long enough to make a genuine difference; combine well-implemented education, work, and other activities; connect participants with caring adult role models; create a positive group identity among participants; give participants opportunities to act as leaders and contribute to the community; and promote a smooth transition to postprogram employment and continued education.⁸ Project Rise incorporates these features.

Now operated by the organizations described in Box 2 (on page 4) in New York City, Newark, NJ, and Kansas City, MO, Project Rise builds on two pilot projects initiated by New York City's Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO). The first, the Young Adult Internship Program (YAIP), provides disconnected 16- to 24-year-olds (some of whom have their high school degrees or GED certificates) with short-term paid internships; placement into regular jobs, education, or training; and follow-up services. CEO's operating experiences have been encouraging, and evaluations suggest that YAIP has helped reconnect participants to education or employment.⁹ MDRC is currently evaluating the program using a rigorous random assignment design.

A second CEO initiative, the Young Adult Literacy (YAL) program, provides instructional services to 16- to 24-year-olds with low reading levels, readying them to enter a GED preparation program. Two evaluations suggest that YAL improves participants' test scores in reading and math, that those who began the program with the lowest academic levels had the largest gains, and that attendance and retention could be improved by adding paid internships that participants only receive and keep if they maintain satisfactory attendance in instructional services.¹⁰

OVERVIEW OF PROJECT RISE

Project Rise was launched in 2011 to reach young adults who have been disconnected for a relatively long time. To participate, at the time of enrollment individuals must:

- Be age 18-24
- Have been out of school and out of work for at least six months
- Not have a high school degree or GED certificate
- Not have regularly participated in other education or training programs during the six months prior to enrollment
- Be reading at or above the sixth-grade level (and half of all participants must be reading at or below the eighth-grade level)

The Project Rise program operators were instructed to screen out hard-to-serve applicants as little as possible, so long as the applicants satisfied the eligibility criteria listed above. Each site enrolls two cohorts of participants per year, with approximately 30 young adults in each cohort. The cohort approach was adopted in the hopes of creating greater cohesion among participants than would be fostered with rolling program entry.

The Project Rise program model envisions a sequence of activities over a 12-month period that prepares participants for unsubsidized employment and continued education. (The program operators were allowed reasonable flexibility to adapt the model to their organizational contexts. MDRC's research will document how they implemented the model in practice.)

For the full program duration, participants are assigned to a *case manager*, who assesses their job readiness and interests, determines the support they need, and develops an individual plan with each of them. The case manager then meets regularly with participants, coordinates referrals and other staff engagement, and monitors participants' progress using agreed-upon benchmarks.

The first program component is a brief *pre-internship phase*, during which participants receive basic job-readiness preparation (for example, in résumé writing, interview skills, and "soft" workplace skills) and undertake a short-term group project that promotes

BOX 2. THE ORGANIZATIONS IMPLEMENTING PROJECT RISE

Project Rise is currently operated by three organizations in New York City, one in Newark, NJ, and one in Kansas City, MO. Each Project Rise program operator is a large nonprofit institution that is well known locally. To varying degrees, this has enabled Project Rise to draw on other parts of the host organization's job development, classroom instruction, and programming capacity.

The New York City program operators are: FECS, a citywide agency that provides a range of health and human services programs (the Project Rise program is housed in the Bronx); Henry Street Settlement, a provider of social services, health, and arts programming to residents of the Lower East Side of Manhattan; and Kingsborough Community College, which offers a wide range of credit and noncredit courses in the liberal arts and career education on its campus at the southeastern tip of Brooklyn.

The Newark program is run by Rutgers University's Transitional Education and Employment Management (T.E.E.M.) Gateway, which supports at-risk and disconnected urban youth across the state of New Jersey.

The Kansas City program is operated by the Full Employment Council, a business-led, private, nonprofit corporation whose mission is to obtain public and private sector jobs for unemployed and underemployed individuals.*

*A second Kansas City provider discontinued operations after the third cohort. Its caseload for future cohorts was assigned to the Full Employment Council.

teamwork and benefits the community. The group projects have included activities such as painting a mural at a day care center, cleaning up vacant lots, and conducting public outreach on a community issue.

The **education component** (approximately 15 hours per week, primarily in pre-GED or GED instruction) begins during the preinternship phase. Educational activities are supposed to continue for the full 12-month program period (and beyond), with the exact activities depending on how the participants progress.

In approximately the sixth week, participants enter **paid internships** at the current federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour. The internships are for approximately 10 to 15 hours a week and last for about 18 weeks, after which participants are expected to enter unsubsidized employment. Importantly, participants can only start and keep their internships if they maintain satisfactory attendance in the education component. This was made a central feature of Project Rise because the experience of other programs suggested that paid work op-

portunities could be more of an attraction for participants than the education component.

Since for some of the program operators, taking part in Project Rise meant serving a more difficult population or providing a different combination of services than they were used to, the first cohort of participants was treated as a pilot phase. It was anticipated that program operators might face challenges in engaging participants for the full 12 months of the program,¹¹ linking the education and internship components, and managing key transition points (such as at the end of the internship, or the continuation of participants' education after they attained a GED certificate or high school degree). Therefore, in addition to oversight from CEO and MDRC, the local programs were given ongoing technical assistance from the Youth Development Institute (www.ydinstitute.org).

THE PROJECT RISE EVALUATION

Project Rise is the subject of a careful implementation study to assess its operational performance. The evaluation focuses on three sets of questions:

1. Does Project Rise attract especially hard-to-serve young people? The evaluation will document the local programs' outreach efforts and the extent to which they enroll participants with significant barriers to educational and labor market success. It will also document what motivated young people to sign up for Project Rise.

2. How do the program operators adapt Project Rise to local conditions and respond to challenges? To answer this question, the evaluation will examine the actual content and structure of the preinternship, case management, GED instruction, and internship components. Evaluators will pay particular attention to how program operators implement the educational attendance requirement for participation in internships.

3. How much are the program operators able to engage participants in key activities? Since programs like Project Rise often struggle to engage participants continuously, the evaluation will gauge participation levels in the preinternship group activities, education, and internships, and also measure the extent to which participants achieve positive outcomes. Special attention will be paid to the points at which participation drops off and the reasons for those drop-offs. The evaluation will examine participation levels and outcomes (such as attaining a GED credential and unsubsidized employment) for Project Rise participants overall and for various subgroups.

The evaluation draws primarily on data from Baseline Information Forms that capture preprogram characteristics for all Project Rise participants,¹² management information systems used by each local provider's staff to track participation levels and outcomes over the 12-month program period, observations

of program activities, and interviews of program staff and participants.

The outcomes for participants will be interpreted especially cautiously, since without a reliable control or comparison group it will not be possible to determine how different these outcomes would have been if the participants had not entered Project Rise. The researchers are considering the feasibility of conducting a randomized control trial of Project Rise in the future (as noted earlier, such a study is underway on YAIP, one of the precursors of Project Rise).

CHARACTERISTICS OF PROJECT RISE PARTICIPANTS

The local Project Rise programs have so far succeeded in attracting a highly disadvantaged group of young adults. Most participants are either Black/African-American (53 percent) or Hispanic/Latino (38 percent). They have been split roughly evenly between males and females, as well as between 18- to 20-year-olds and 21- to 24-year-olds. Table 1 and Box 3 highlight the limited education and work histories of Project Rise participants, along with other challenges that they face.¹³

BOX 3. PROJECT RISE PARTICIPANTS: OVERCOMING BARRIERS

At the time they entered the program:

- Over 70 percent of Project Rise participants had been suspended from school
- Almost half had been arrested, and 16 percent had been convicted of a crime
- Average reading and math levels were below ninth grade
- More than a fifth had been in foster care

TABLE 1. SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS AT THE TIME OF ENROLLMENT: AUGUST 2011 TO APRIL 2013

Characteristics

EDUCATION

Highest level of education (%) ^a	
Grade 9 or less	28.4
Grade 10	27.6
Grade 11	40.0
Grade 12, no GED certificate or diploma	3.6
Ever held back or repeated a grade (%)	54.9
Ever suspended from school (%)	71.0
Ever in special education (%)	23.5
Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) Grade Level Equivalent (GLE) scores	
Average reading score	8.9
Average math score	6.6

EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

Ever employed (%)	67.4
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OTHER POTENTIAL RISK FACTORS

Ever arrested (%)	50.6
Ever convicted of a crime (%) ^b	15.6
Misdemeanor	9.5
Felony	5.1
Ever in foster care (%)	21.8
Has children (%)	35.8
Moved in the past 6 months (%)	46.1
Referred to psychological or emotional counseling in the past year (%)	23.5
Referred to substance abuse treatment program in the past year (%)	9.3

Sample size

522

Source: MDRC calculations from Project Rise Baseline Information Forms.

NOTES:

a Less than 1 percent of participants entered the program with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) diploma.

b Conviction categories may not add up to the total percentage of participants who were ever convicted due to missing values.

Participants' schooling and education levels were low, with grade repetition and suspensions being common. In accordance with Project Rise eligibility criteria, none of the participants had earned a regular high school diploma or GED certificate at the time they entered the program. More than half had only completed tenth grade or less. They had also experienced significant challenges while in school: more than half reported being held back or repeating a grade, 71 percent had been suspended from school at least once, and about a quarter had been in special education at some point.

Participants entered Project Rise with lower skills in math than in reading, a pattern that has also been seen in other programs for at-risk young people. Project Rise participants read at slightly below the ninth-grade level, on average, with more than half reading at or below the eighth-grade level. By comparison, participants' baseline math grade level averaged 6.6, with more than 80 percent of participants scoring at or below the eighth-grade level.¹⁴

Participants had limited employment experience. In addition to being out of work for at least six months prior to program enrollment, a third of the participants reported that they had *never* had a paid job. Of those with some work experience, most of their jobs had been part time, paid less than \$300 per week, and lasted an average of about six months. Almost half of participants reported that they had spent most of their time in the past year looking for a job.

Multiple additional risk factors presented challenges to participants. More than half of Project Rise participants had a history of arrests, and 16 percent had been convicted of a crime, mostly misdemeanors. More than fifth had at some point been in the

foster care system. At the time of program enrollment, more than a third were parents, and more than a quarter reported that they spent most of their time during the past year taking care of their children. Almost half had changed their residence in the previous six months, and 12 percent had moved three or more times during that period. Finally, almost a quarter of participants had been referred to psychological or emotional counseling in the previous year, and about 9 percent had been referred to a substance abuse treatment program.

EARLY PROJECT RISE OPERATING EXPERIENCES

Although program operations are still at a relatively early stage, it is possible to identify some developments that will be explored more fully in an implementation research report to be published in 2015:

As intended, the program staff rarely screened out difficult-to-serve applicants who satisfied the Project Rise eligibility criteria.

This was confirmed both in staff interviews and through a special “funnel analysis,” in which intake staff collected detailed information on all individuals who expressed interest in the third Project Rise cohort. The data show that staff rarely excluded potential participants who came to scheduled interviews or orientation sessions, although a number of potential participants essentially screened themselves out by failing to attend scheduled appointments.

Contrary to expectations, a higher percentage of participants have said they joined Project Rise for its educational component than for

A higher percentage of participants have said they joined Project Rise for its educational component than for the paid internships.

the paid internships. Ninety-two percent of participants reported on their Baseline Information Forms that they came at least in part to get their GED certificate or high school diploma, whereas 53 percent cited the paid internships. This priority interest was

Enrollment in cohorts may promote bonding among participants through a combination of peer support and peer pressure.

repeated during interviews with program operators' staffs and in focus groups with participants. Before drawing broader inferences from this, however, it will be important to explore possible explanations. For example, some of the Project Rise providers are better known for their education programs than for employment services. Other free GED classes appear to be scarce in the Project Rise communities. The program's

staff may have featured the education component more than the internships in Project Rise descriptions. Finally, short-term, minimum-wage internship positions with no guarantee of becoming permanent jobs may not have generated as much interest as full-time jobs of longer duration would have.

It has been difficult for the local programs to engage participants continuously in the planned sequence of activities. As with other programs for disconnected young people, many Project Rise participants have not proceeded through components continuously (that is, their attendance has sometimes lapsed) or in the prescribed manner. This may partly reflect the individualized plans developed for all participants, but other reasons appear to include the prevalence of court appointments, child care demands, and housing issues. Participants also face challenges making a quick transition from an extended period of disconnection to engaging in up to 30 hours per week of education, internship, and other activity. The implementation research will examine how case management along with

financial and other incentives may improve participant engagement.

Early indications suggest that enrollment in cohorts may be beneficial, in part because it promotes bonding among participants through a combination of peer support and peer pressure. Program staff and participants alike cited the benefits of the relationships established within cohorts, even though participants do not necessarily proceed through the program components at the same pace. So far, two of the sites have adopted the cohort approach for selected programs they run besides Project Rise. But the approach does present operational challenges. For example, some participants find it difficult to make the transition from the relative comfort of group activities to individual internship placements, the character of cohorts can vary significantly from one to the next (sometimes driven by a few leaders in the group), and interested program applicants often must wait longer for a new cohort to begin than they would with rolling program entry.

Traditional educational and employment outcome measures may not fully capture participants' progress in programs designed to help young people reconnect. Project Rise staff members report that many participants are making tangible progress, even when they do not earn their GED certificate or enter stable employment within the 12-month program. In their view, interim steps that reflect tangible improvement include better engagement in the classroom and "soft" measures such as improvement in participants' ability to set priorities, deal with conflicts, wear appropriate attire in business settings, and communicate (for example, by making eye contact when speaking, or by calling ahead if they will be late for an appointment). If, however, any measures of this type are used to judge programs like

Project Rise, it will be important that they reflect meaningful steps along the path to employment and further education.

Some program operators have adjusted the structure and timing of internships. For example, two have broadened the range of internship offerings to satisfy participants' varied interests. Since some participants have needed additional time to prepare for individual placements, internships have sometimes been delayed or structured initially either as group internships or as "internal" internships within the Project Rise agency. Not surprisingly, it can be important to identify employers who are flexible since, for example, interns might be pulled off the job for low attendance in the education component.

Opportunities for trial and error and ongoing technical assistance have helped local providers refine program operations. The program operators have begun to tailor the Project Rise model to their own circumstances by, for example, altering the structure of financial incentives, changing whether Project Rise participants attend GED classes by themselves or with non-Rise students, refining the attendance standards required for internship participation, and adjusting the timing and structure of the internship component (as discussed above). A few program operators have needed to hire stronger staff in key positions, such as GED instructors and case managers. Technical assistance to the local programs has focused on matters such as case management, GED instruction that incorporates the Common Core State Standards, supervisory skills, and developing internships. Local site staffs have also welcomed opportunities to interact with peers from other Project Rise programs in periodic conference calls, joint training sessions, and occasional meetings of a SIF "learning network."

WHAT'S NEXT FOR PROJECT RISE?

Local Project Rise operations are expected to continue for a total of nine cohorts in Newark, eight cohorts in the three New York City programs, and seven cohorts in Kansas City. The program providers have begun discussions about how to sustain their operations when the current federal SIF grant ends in 2015.

Project Rise, in conjunction with other ongoing research, has the potential to inform policy and practice for disconnected young people in many arenas. For example, federal proposals for Performance Partnerships and Innovation Funds envision flexible funding streams to support program models like Project Rise that combine education, employment, and social services. Lessons from Project Rise could also apply to efforts to reduce recidivism among young offenders or to employment programs subsidized by Temporary Assistance to Needy Families.

Leaders in the three Project Rise cities are considering how lessons from the program can improve services to disconnected young people. For example, the Full Employment Council in Kansas City and FECS in New York City both used their experience in Project Rise to help them win major grants to expand services. In Newark, where programs typically serve out-of-school young people until the age of 21, Project Rise provides lessons on extending educational programming to young people ages 22 to 24. New York City is replicating programs that informed the development of Project Rise as part of its Young Men's Initiative.¹⁵

MDRC's implementation research report in 2015 will address a range of issues identified here, especially the ways program operators have addressed implementation challenges

and adapted the Project Rise model. The report will include participant characteristics for the second through sixth cohorts and detailed participation and outcome data for the second through fifth cohorts. It will also include participants' perspectives on the challenges they face, the reasons they entered Project Rise, and their experiences in the program.

NOTES

- 1 U.S. Census Bureau (2012).
- 2 U.S. Census Bureau (2012).
- 3 Tyler (2005); Ewert (2012).
- 4 See, for example, Bloom, Levy Thompson, and Ivry (2010); Sum and Khatiwada (2010b).
- 5 Sum and Khatiwada (2010a).
- 6 Vericker, Pergamit, Macomber, and Kuehn (2009).
- 7 Bloom, Levy Thompson, and Ivry (2010).
- 8 Bloom, Levy Thompson, and Ivry (2010).
- 9 Westat and Metis Associates (2009).
- 10 Westat and Metis Associates (2011); Westat (2013).
- 11 To promote continued participation, program sites developed a range of financial incentives (such as transportation cards, prizes, and awards) to reward participants for achieving attendance standards and reaching key milestones such as a GED certificate. In addition, weekly group sessions reinforce job-readiness skills, help participants continue exploring career options, facilitate peer support, and allow participants to reflect on and discuss work experiences.
- 12 Data on the Baseline Information Forms were collected for all young people who enrolled in Project Rise. A small number of enrollees did not actually participate in the program, meaning that they did not show up for at least one preinternship activity or education class. Thus the data on "participants" presented in Table 1 and discussed in the text do not include the 20 people who enrolled in Project Rise but did not participate.
- 13 Since, as mentioned above, the first cohort of participants was treated as a pilot phase, Table 1 presents aggregate data for the second through

fourth cohorts. There was modest variation across the five sites, which will be described in MDRC's implementation research report.

14 Project Rise participants have less educational attainment than participants in YAIP (60 percent of whom have a high school degree or GED certificate), but higher reading and math levels than participants in the YAL program, which serves lower-level readers by design.

15 The Young Men's Initiative is a public-private partnership focused on finding new ways to tackle problems affecting young African-American and Latino men in New York City. The initiative includes new programs and policies that address disparities between young African-American and Latino men and their peers in education, health, employment, and the criminal justice system. See City of New York (2013).

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