A Helping Hand Goes a Long Way: The Long-Term Effects of Counseling and Support to Workfare Program Participants

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Introduction

- Helping low-income households achieve self-sufficiency is a central focus of social policy.

- Lots of effort has been devoted to “making work pay” by reducing the marginal effective tax rates faced by households that receive government transfers.

- Growing realization that reducing financial disincentives to work may not be enough: also necessary to address psychological barriers to self-sufficiency.

- Intensive, individualized supports delivered by social workers may have large impacts but are costly to provide.

- Evidence of long-term impacts can tilt benefit-cost ratio in favour of greater investments in intensive services.
Our contribution

- Our paper looks at the long-run impacts of intensive case management provided to participants in a Canadian workfare demonstration study, the Self-Sufficiency Project Plus.
- We estimate program impacts on employment and earnings up to 20 years after participation.
- We investigate mechanisms for observed effects.
Outline

- Description of the Self Sufficiency Project
- Details of SSP Plus
- Data and descriptive stats
- Results
- Discussion on possible mechanisms
- Framing of results relative to existing literature
- Conclusion
Background to the Self-Sufficiency Project

- Self-Sufficiency Project (SSP) conceived in early 1990s by policymakers in federal government concerned with dramatic increases in welfare caseloads across Canada.

- SSP would test whether a generous, time-limited earnings supplement could increase employment rates of lone parents on Social Assistance long-term.

- Earnings supplement would help welfare recipients overcome the “Welfare Wall” created by 100% marginal tax rate on earnings within Social Assistance.
SSP earnings supplement

- To initiate supplement, necessary to find a full-time job and leave welfare within one-year of offer

- Monthly supplement paid half the difference between gross earnings and a benchmark level of earnings
  - Annual benchmark was $30,600 (current CAD) in New Brunswick in 1994
  - A parent working 35 hours per week at minimum wage ($5 per hour) would get a supplement payment of approximately $895 each month

- Following initiation, supplement payments made for months with full-time work (average of 30+ hours per week) over the next 36 months
Study design

- SSP demonstration consisted of three separate studies
  - SSP Recipients study (supplement offered to lone parent long-term welfare recipients in BC and NB)
  - SSP Applicants study (new applicants to welfare in BC offered supplement to test opt-in effects)
  - SSP Plus study (addition of employment services to supplement offer in NB)
- SSP Plus study comprised 892 lone parent long-term welfare recipients: 293 assigned to “Plus” treatment (services + supplement); 296 to “Regular” treatment (supplement only); 303 to control
SSP Plus services

- SSP Plus services were delivered by non-profit, Family Services Saint John, Inc., contracted to run SSP Recipients and SSP Plus studies in NB

- Services available to Plus treatment group included resume preparation assistance, job search workshops, and employment planning
  - Regular treatment group and control group members could access similar services available in the community

- SSP staff created a service differential by encouraging participation and making sure their services were qualitatively superior

- A service uniquely available to Plus treatment group members was job coaching
Job coaching

- Plus treatment group members were paired with an SSP staff member who became their “job coaches”
  - Job coach served as “counsellor, advisor, advocate, and mentor”
- Job coaching available to all Plus treatment group members during first year after random assignment; afterwards available only to supplement initiators
- Job coaches helped job seekers prepare their resumes and get ready for interviews, helped navigate conflicts with co-workers or bosses, provided job leads and job search tips
- Coaches provided emotional support and targeted self-esteem
What we already know about SSP

- SSP has been the subject of official reports (Michalopoulos et al. 2002) and many academic studies (Card and Hyslop 2005; Bitler, Gelbach, and Hoynes 2008; Riddell and Riddell 2014)

- Results from SSP Recipients study initially encouraging (increases in full-time employment, earnings, and household income) but effects of earnings supplements alone quickly faded once payments stopped

- SSP Plus findings initially underwhelming: higher rates of supplement initiation among Plus vs. Regular (52% vs. 35%) but only small differences in monthly full-time employment
  - Did services encourage unready welfare recipients to find jobs they couldn’t keep?
What we already know about SSP (cont.)

- Larger incremental impacts of Plus services emerged as supplement payments wound down.
- SSP Plus more likely to be working full-time than Regular group or controls; Regular SSP group reverted to control group mean once supplement payments ceased (Michalopoulos et al. 2002; Robins et al. 2008).
- Evidence of incremental impacts of Plus services available only up to 54-months post-random assignment for most outcomes (6-18 months following termination of supplement payments).
- Our paper extends analysis to 20 years post-random assignment.
Data

- Baseline SSP Plus survey combined with administrative data held by Statistics Canada using Social Insurance Numbers
- Tax data: T1 personal income tax filings (equivalent to US 1040); T4 statements of remuneration paid (analogous to W2); T5007 statement of benefits
- Tax records available from 2 years prior to random assignment to 20 years afterwards
- Study participants can be connected to spouses/common-law partners, children, and employers via tax filings
# Tax filing rates high and balanced throughout panel

## Table 2: Data Linkage Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SSP Plus (1)</th>
<th>Regular SSP (2)</th>
<th>Control (3)</th>
<th>SSP Plus – Control [(1)-(3)] (4)</th>
<th>Reg. SSP – Control [(2)-(3)] (5)</th>
<th>SSP Plus – Reg. SSP [(1)-(2)] (6)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years 1-4</td>
<td>0.987</td>
<td>0.987</td>
<td>0.993</td>
<td>-0.006 (0.006)</td>
<td>-0.006 (0.007)</td>
<td>0.000 (0.007)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Years 5-8</td>
<td>0.964</td>
<td>0.972</td>
<td>0.976</td>
<td>-0.012 (0.012)</td>
<td>-0.004 (0.012)</td>
<td>-0.008 (0.013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years 9-12</td>
<td>0.946</td>
<td>0.947</td>
<td>0.949</td>
<td>-0.003 (0.015)</td>
<td>-0.002 (0.016)</td>
<td>-0.001 (0.016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Years 13-16</td>
<td>0.892</td>
<td>0.914</td>
<td>0.903</td>
<td>-0.012 (0.022)</td>
<td>0.010 (0.021)</td>
<td>-0.022 (0.022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years 17-20</td>
<td>0.871</td>
<td>0.873</td>
<td>0.893</td>
<td>-0.022 (0.024)</td>
<td>-0.021 (0.024)</td>
<td>-0.001 (0.026)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| N | 293 | 296 | 303 |

Notes: Standard deviation in brackets; cluster robust standard errors in parentheses. Share of baseline sample linked to T1H by calendar year relative to year of random assignment (year=1).
Some Descriptive stats

Table A1: Balance Tests – Extended Set

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SSP Plus</th>
<th>Regular SSP</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>SSP Plus-Control</th>
<th>Reg. SSP-Control</th>
<th>SSP Plus-Reg. SSP</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Share female (%)</td>
<td>97.2</td>
<td>96.9</td>
<td>95.1</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>0.33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>19-24</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>5.75</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>2.19</td>
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<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>-3.76</td>
<td>5.66*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>-10.70***</td>
<td>-3.42</td>
<td>-7.29**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 or older</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>2.44*</td>
<td>-0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married or living common-law</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>-1.03</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-1.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>-1.04</td>
<td>2.48</td>
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<tr>
<td>Divorced, separated, or widowed</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>-0.41</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>-1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed education (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school education</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>-1.74</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>-5.21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Completed high school, no post-secondary education</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>-0.69</td>
<td>3.40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some post-secondary education</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>-0.97</td>
<td>-2.78</td>
<td>1.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Empirical strategy

- Estimate intent-to-treat effects using specification:
  \[ y_{it} = \beta_{Plus,\tau} T_{Plus,\tau,i} + \beta_{Reg,\tau} T_{Reg,\tau,i} + \delta_t + \epsilon_{it} \]

  - \( T_{Plus,\tau,i} \) indicator for Plus member in year group \( \tau \)
  - \( T_{Reg,\tau,i} \) indicator for Regular member in year group \( \tau \)
  - \( \delta_t \) is a year FE

- Four-year groupings: years 1-4, 5-8, 9-12, 13-16, 17-20 post-randomization
  - Choice of four-year groups to boost statistical power
  - Initial four-year period covers the original studies
Estimands of interest

- $\beta_{Plus,\tau}$ is average effect of SSP Plus relative to controls over years in $\tau$

- $\beta_{Reg,\tau}$ is average effect of Regular SSP relative to controls over years in $\tau$

- $\beta_{Services,\tau} = \beta_{Plus,\tau} - \beta_{Reg,\tau}$ is average incremental effect of the offer of intensive Plus services above and beyond effect of supplement
Primary outcomes

- Employment
- Full-time employment
- Employment earnings
- Receipt of welfare
Control group labor market dynamics

Panel A: Employment

Panel B: Real Earnings

Panel C: Social Assistance Participation

Notes: Fraction Employed, SSP+ Control Group, earned over $3\times30+4.33\times\text{minwage}$. Long Term IA Recipiency Rates, SSP Participants and Spouses: SSP and SSP+ Recipiency Experiments – New Brunswick_T1FF-T5007 Linked Data, Observations Unambiguously On Or Off IA.
Trends in employment
Impacts of Plus services on employment

Comparison with controls

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Trends in full-time employment

![Chart showing trends in full-time employment over years after randomization. The chart compares SSP Plus, Regular SSP, and Control groups.](image)
Impacts of Plus services on full-time employment

Comparison with controls

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Unadjusted specification, comparison of SSP Plus to Regular SSP
Trends in earnings

![Graph showing trends in earnings over years after randomization. The graph compares earnings for SSP Plus, Regular SSP, and Control groups. The x-axis represents years after randomization, ranging from -2 to 19. The y-axis represents earnings (2010 constant CAD), ranging from 0 to 20000. The graph demonstrates a clear upward trend in earnings for all groups, with SSP Plus consistently showing the highest earnings.]
Impacts of Plus services on earnings

Comparison with controls

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Impacts of Plus services on welfare receipt

Comparison with controls

Unadjusted specification, comparison of SSP Plus to Regular SSP
Summary of results

- 13%-20% increase in employment rates in first 8 years post-randomization
- 19%-27% increase in full-time employment in first 12 years post-randomization
- 21%-27% increase in earnings over entire 20-year post-randomization period
- 7%-18% decrease in welfare receipt in first 8 years post-randomization
Possible mechanisms

- Higher earnings likely a combination of extensive and intensive margin effects and wage effects
  - We don’t directly observe hours worked or wages received; we inferred employment status based on earnings reported on tax filings

- Differences in earnings between Plus and Regular groups attributable to characteristics of employment?
  - Unionization
  - Tenure with main employer
  - Number of employers

- Evidence of non-cognitive benefits of services?
  - Suggestive evidence of more stable marriages or common-law relationships
Impacts of Plus services on unionization rate

Unadjusted specification, comparison of SSP Plus to Regular SSP
Impacts of Plus services on tenure

Unadjusted specification, comparison of SSP Plus to Regular SSP
Impacts of Plus services on number of employers

Unadjusted specification, comparison of SSP Plus to Regular SSP
Impacts of Plus services on firm size (conditional on employment)

Unadjusted specification, comparison of SSP Plus to Regular SSP
Impacts of Plus services on median earnings at firm (conditional on employment)

Unadjusted specification, comparison of SSP Plus to Regular SSP
Impacts of Plus services on 25th percentile earnings at firm (conditional on employment)

Twenty-fifth percentile of earnings distribution at main employer (levels)

Unadjusted specification, comparison of SSP Plus to Regular SSP
Impacts of Plus services on marriage rate

Unadjusted specification, comparison of SSP Plus to Regular SSP
Qualitative effort for better understanding SSP+ Mechanisms

- Unpublished focus groups conducted with Plus group members
- Recent interviews with SSP staff and Plus service providers:
  - Kelly Foley, SRDC Analyst
  - Sheila Curie, SRDC operations lead for New Brunswick, responsible for contracting Family Services Saint John
  - Wendy Bancroft, SRDC Researcher (conducted focus groups)
  - Heather Maughan, Family Services counsellor, not FS director
  - Shelly Price, Director of FS during SSP Plus
Key themes:

- SSP Plus staff were proactive, which helped increase take-up of services
- SSP Plus staff offered empathy, which made recipients feel connected and willing to listen to advice
- Advice helped, in terms of improving job materials, interviews, and navigating job and life challenges
- Proactive support lasted beyond finding job, that led to greater trust and appreciation

Interviews
Staff were proactive

“They called me...and they told me about anything that may be coming up, like the job-finding club, job search. They were sending you letters and they would call just in general, just to see how you were doing. And maybe if they had any leads, they would call and give you these leads, and everything.”
Staff were empathetic and established trust

“...they made me feel very important. Each time they spoke to me, each time I called, they really made me feel glad I had called. They would do whatever they could to help... they made me feel that I wasn’t bothering them.”

“Even Plus group members not able to find work and initiate earnings supplement had favorable perceptions of staff: “They made me feel really pretty good to know that there were people out there who really and truly did care whether you got work or not, and that were there to encourage you. And, I mean, before that, you think, ‘I’m the only one who cares,’ but when you were out there with, and working with, the Self-Sufficiency people, you knew that they did care too.... They didn’t put you down, and they tried to encourage you...they were there for you....”
Services addressed multiple barriers and were high quality

“...Because it helped me a lot, like, things I didn’t know—for everything. And helped me introduce myself to an employer—how to talk to an employer, and self-esteem, and everything... It’s like, ‘Hmmn, I can present myself to an employer now—the good way... I’m not afraid to go to an employer now.’

“The job leads- when you’re alone and looking for work you can get awfully depressed, and there’s no one to talk to. You can talk to your friends but there’s no one there who is supporting you and helping you. These people, they’re there. I met them many times. I called them when I was discouraged. My year was running out and I thought, ‘Am I ever going to make this?’ and they were ‘Yes, you are Pauline! Now, get your confidence up there again and go out there. What do you need today?’”
Costs

Net supplement cost per program participant over program: $3,000

Total service cost per person for SSP Regular (outreach, orientation, dealing with SSP case managers about supplement issues): $1,000

Total service cost per person for SSP Plus (from unpublished SRDC memo): $2,500

- SSP regular costs don’t include IA case support
- Would be nice to test PLUS services on their own
Financial incentives vs. services

- Longstanding debates about relative effectiveness of financial incentives provided through transfer programs compared to provision of social services (Moynihan 1973)
- Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) held up as example of financial incentives increasing participation
- But experimental evidence for the impact of financial incentives is decidedly mixed
- There’s also some reconsideration of existing evidence about the EITC’s effectiveness (see Kleven 2020)
What we know about employment services

- Many studies are “black box” estimates of very different programs (e.g., job search assistance, monitoring of jobseekers, in-class education, on-the-job training, subsidized jobs)

- A handful of studies explicitly consider role of caseworkers and case management practice in helping the long-term unemployed
  - Effect of caseload size (Riccio et al. 1994)
  - Specialization among caseworkers (Schrivener et al. 2001)
  - Public vs. private provision of case management (Behaghel et al. 2014; Cottier et al. 2015; Krug and Stephan 2015, and Rehwald et al. 2015)
  - Decision-making by caseworkers and assignment of clients to programs (Huber, Lechner, and Mellace 2017; Bolaar et al. 2020; Schiprowski 2020)
Why might caseworkers matter?

- Neo-classical perspectives on casework:
  - Monitor search effort of the unemployed, use threat of sanctions and tagging to improve targeting of UI and welfare (Boadway et al. 1999; Boadway and Cuff 1999; Pavoni and Violante 2007)

- Behavioural econ perspectives on casework:
  - Unemployed want to find work but procrastinate because of time-inconsistent preferences (Babcock et al. 2012)
  - Complexity of job search can be overwhelming
  - Non-cognitive factors related to poverty-induced stress (managing behaviour and emotions) can complicate job-finding and job-keeping
  - Case workers (a.k.a. “coaches” or “navigators”) can help jobseekers set and attain goals, manage negative thoughts using CBT-informed approaches (Babcock 2018)
Related ongoing work

- Creating Moves to Opportunity (Bergman et al. 2020)
  - RCT featuring “housing navigators” who provide high intensity support to rental voucher recipients to lease in low-poverty neighbourhoods
  - Phase II study finds that reducing intensity of navigator services reduces impact, provision of financial supports alone produces no impact

- Evaluation of “Bridges to Success” program in Rochester, NY by Evans et al.
  - Low-income participants assigned to “liaisons”, caseworkers who help set goals and provide supports related to work, education, and family
Conclusions

- We provide a more definitive picture of the impact of the SSP Plus program by matching participants to subsequent administrative tax records and following them for twenty years.

- Results point to the importance of the proactive and sustained empathetic personal assistance from caseworkers in the Plus program.

- Increase in full-time employment, eventually into wage-premium paying firms, led to substantial increase in earnings sustained over 20 years, along with the decrease in welfare receipt.

- The intensive employment services offered through the program considerably transformed the lives of these individuals.
Comments welcome:
philip.oreopoulos@utoronto.ca
Supplementary slides
Share of Canadians receiving welfare

Source: Kneebone & White (2014)
### Service differential (18 month after random assignment survey)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Outcome – Percent Using Service</th>
<th>SSP Plus Program Group</th>
<th>Regular SSP Program Group</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Took part in job-search program such as job club or job-search workshop</td>
<td></td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>16.0***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took part in life-skills program such as money management or parenting</td>
<td></td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>-1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received counseling for personal problems</td>
<td></td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>-2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in work-related training or education</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in subsidized employment program</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>-1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took courses towards completion of high school diploma, college diploma, or university degree</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>286</td>
<td>288</td>
<td></td>
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Outreach: focus group testimonials

Welfare office staff

Anytime I’ve ever called and asked for help or for information, it’s like they’d get back to me and they’ve never got back to me. And I’ve called again and they just never gave me any information that was helpful. – Carol

SSP staff

They called me...and they told me about anything that may be coming up, like the job-finding club, job search. They were sending you letters and they would call just in general, just to see how you were doing. And maybe if they had any leads, they would call and give you these leads, and everything. – Jan
Service quality: focus group testimonial

The [SSP Plus] services [rate] right up there as high as you can get them because they were accessible; they were comfortable. That made me feel very good because of the experience I had with Social Assistance before that. That was like you couldn’t get it—you hung up the phone and you felt down.

– Janet
Nearly all Plus recipients completed an employment plan, 2/3 received resume help, job coaching, and job leads (admin data reproduced from Quets et al. (1999))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Number</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completed employment plan</td>
<td>94.2</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used resume service</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended job club</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received job coaching</td>
<td>71.3</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In person</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By phone</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received job leads</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In person</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By phone</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>168</td>
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<td>By mail</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Emotional support: focus group testimonial

The job leads—when you’re alone and looking for work you can get awfully depressed, and there’s no one to talk to. You can talk to your friends but there’s no one there who is supporting you and helping you. These people, they’re there. I met them many times. I called them when I was discouraged. My year was running out and I thought, ‘Am I ever going to make this?’ and they were ‘Yes, you are Pauline! Now, get your confidence up there again and go out there. What do you need today?’

– Pauline
Self-esteem: focus group testimonial

They brought the more positive Taylor out. Then she was in a shell because she felt more like a number as opposed to a person. If this had been anything else, I wouldn’t have been—they made me feel good about myself. They made me the positive, the extra positive, person that I am.

– Taylor
Impacts of services and supplements on employment

![Graph showing the effects of different services and supplements on employment over 20 years after randomization. The graph compares the share of individuals employed across different conditions, with lines representing the four-year average and annual estimates, and shaded areas indicating the 90% confidence intervals. The legend explains the different line styles and symbols used in the graph.](image-url)
Impacts of services and supplements on full-time employment

![Graph showing the share of people employed full-time over years after randomization. The graph compares different groups: SSP Plus, SSP Plus compared to controls, annual estimates, and regular SSP compared to controls. The graph indicates statistical significance at certain points and provides confidence intervals. Unadjusted specification.]
Impacts of services and supplements on earnings

[Graph showing earnings over years after randomization]

Unadjusted specification

- Four-year average SSP Plus compared to controls
- Annual estimates SSP Plus compared to controls
- Four-year average Regular SSP compared to controls
- Annual estimate Regular SSP compared to controls
- Four-year average 90% CI
- Annual estimate statistically significant
- Four-year average 90% CI
- Annual estimate statistically significant