

Did Building Strong Families Program have Positive Effects?

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BSF program

In the early 2000s, two large-scale relationship education programs (the “Building Strong Families” (BSF) project and the “Supporting Healthy Marriage”(SHM)), targeted low-income urban couples expecting or already having children, were launched by U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)

Their common goal was to improve the quality and durability of the relationship between (future) parents, in the hope of generating positive impacts on the next generation.

Randomized experimental design allowed researchers to assess the short-run (about 15 months) and medium-run (about three years) effect of these programs.

Overall, neither BSF nor SHM had a quantitatively significant impact on most relationship and educational outcomes

We focused on four questions

simplest possible outcome measures, based on the answer to single question, such as:

1. “...married”- marriage status
2. “... romantically involved on a steady basis” –relationship quality
3. “strongly agree that it is better for a couple to be married than to just live together” –value
4. “...better for children if their parents are married” - belief

BSF 15-month program impacts

The program appears to have had positive impact on marriage quality but not on marriage status.

This result suggests that the program may have changed couples opinions but not necessarily their behaviors.

After all, the program did not increase the likelihood of getting married among the treatment group.

Program impacts

To investigate whether the program changed couples values on marriage we focus on the “yes” or “=1” responses to the “strongly agree that it is better for a couple to be married than to just live together” statement in the 15-month survey.

Mothers rather than fathers changed their values after they are treated. The coefficient of treatment dummy is significant and positive in mothers-only regression and in couple level regression where at least one member of the couple provides “yes” response.

Program impacts, cont.

Did the program change the values about marriage or those with stronger beliefs responded more? “Yes” or “No” responses to the “It is better for children if their parents are married” statement are converted to “1” and “0” responses under belief variable.

Marriage values is regressed on treatment dummy variable and initial belief variable.

The coefficient of treatment variable is significant and positive in mothers-only regression and in couple level regression

Program impacts, cont.

The program did not have significant and positive impact on those provided “0” answer to “...better for children if their parents are married” question

The couples with stronger initial belief on marriage gained more from the program. The program did not change behavior or even belief in relationship quality.

This result is also consistent with the outcome of the randomized experiments carried out in other areas of economics, including workforce training programs and enterprise zones programs.

These studies documented that the participants who have stronger work and business aspirations gain more from new opportunities.

Relation to Broader Research

Our research shows that relationship training did not lead to more marriages

but positively changed opinions on marriage and beliefs

Those with stronger initial beliefs now have stronger beliefs after they have gone through the program

Economic research on job training and enterprise zones point out to similar conclusions: having aspirations and being successful may not go together

Success also depends on local economic conditions

Success of these programs, in case of job training, depend on local economic conditions, access to transportation, residential segregation, isolation and other factors

Success in case of enterprise zones depends on local infrastructure, availability of business services, and access to business clusters (Bartik, 2004)

Thank You!

Please send your questions and comments to

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