



Center for Advanced Studies
in Child Welfare

Minn-LInK Issue Brief
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Strong Beginnings: An initial examination of outcomes and recommendations for future research

Purpose

Since 1992, Hennepin County has provided intensive, early learning and family support programming through the Strong Beginnings (SB) child care program. There are currently 11 SB centers in operation. The County monitors SB program outcomes through a number of mechanisms including the contracting process, observations and the incorporation of Minneapolis school district kindergarten entry assessment data when possible. To date, the County has not been able to follow children beyond kindergarten entry. Only large, well-funded early intervention programs such as Abecedarian, Perry Preschool and others have been able to afford long-term study of program participants.

Hennepin County sought an efficient and affordable means to examine the children served by SB programs in early grades by utilizing the secondary data resources available at the Minn-LInK Project. The Minn-LInK Project at the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare at the University of Minnesota School of Social Work holds large, statewide datasets that allow for tracking children across school districts and systems. The County requested that Minn-LInK explore the feasibility of prospective longitudinal study of SB children utilizing the Hennepin University Partnership (HUP) master agreement. Findings from this work are intended to inform planning for future longitudinal study as well as explore what initial outcome measures are available on SB children. To conduct the outcomes exploration, a comparison group of children was randomly selected from county Child Care Assistance records, matched by attributes that are known to be influential in child outcomes and who were not participating in SB programs.

Findings

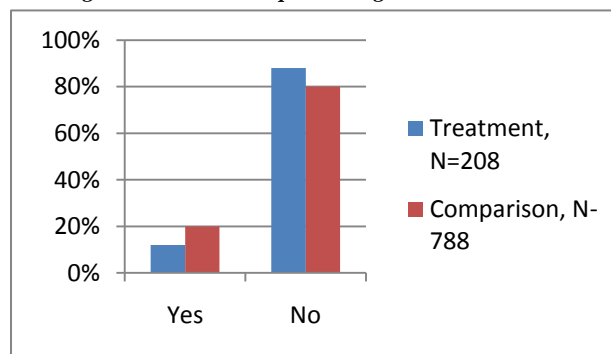
Match Rates

An 86% match rate was achieved when study children (both SB and Comparison children) were matched to education and child welfare system records. Non-matched children either had not yet enrolled in kindergarten in Minnesota, or their families had left the state. Child welfare outcomes were examined for all children in the study over their lifetimes. Although study children entered kindergarten over three different school years (2005, 2006, & 2007), they were combined into two main groups for the study of outcomes: treatment (SB) and comparison (non-SB).

Residential Stability

Although the residential addresses of children and families in this study were not available, it was possible to infer residential mobility by examining changes in residential district moves for students during their kindergarten year. Children who participated in SB were significantly less likely to experience residential moves than were comparison children, based on evidence in their education records.

Figure 1. Children Experiencing Residential Moves

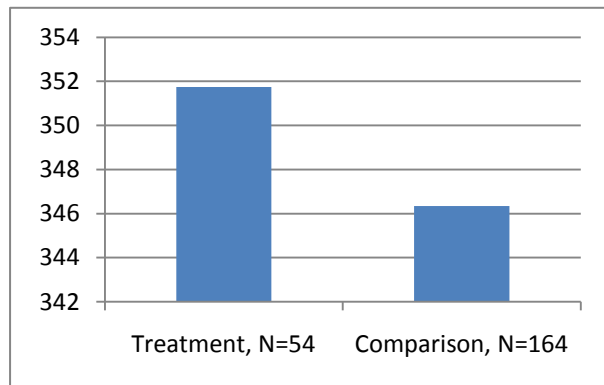


$\chi^2=6.694, df=1, p=.010$

MCA Reading Scores

Not all children in the study were old enough (in third grade on or before April, 2009) to be able to take the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCAII) statewide assessment test. Only a small group of SB children (N=54) took the MCA reading test in April, 2009 along with 164 comparison children. Evidence showed that children who participated in SB had significantly higher mean summary scores for reading on the MCAII than comparison children (Figure 2).

Figure 2. MCA Reading Scores



$F=2.849, df=1, p=.093$

Other Group Differences

Although SB children were less likely to be disabled (85% non-disabled versus 89% nondisabled) and participating in special education than comparison children, differences were not statistically significant. SB children had slightly higher incidences of disruptions to school attendance (52%) compared to comparison children (45%) but again, these differences were not statistically significant. Mean attendance ratios were nearly identical in kindergarten for children in both groups, at 91% overall.

With regard to child welfare involvement, the greater surveillance to which SB families may be subjected by intensive programming may in part explain higher proportional reports (21% versus 15%), determined maltreatment (14% versus 10%), and out-of-home placements (10% versus 5%) compared to comparison children. Because this study data did not differentiate child welfare contacts that occurred during program participation versus post-program participation periods, it is impossible to know whether these contacts reflect the additional surveillance produced by participation in SB. Literature suggests that surveillance is much more likely to occur only when individuals are actively participating in public programs and that this surveillance ends shortly after program participation ends (Chaffin & Bard, 2006). It does not necessarily represent disproportionate occurrences of harm or neglect.

There were no significant group differences in two-year attendance trajectory patterns (i.e., improved or stable versus decreased) between children enrolled in both 2007 and 2008 school years. Future research should re-examine attendance rate differences

between SB children and their non-participating peers. Although results were not statistically significant, SB children who were enrolled in both 2006 and 2007 had higher rates of improved to stable school attendance (63%) than comparison students (53%).

Feasibility of Further Research

- Given the substantial match rates achieved here (roughly 86%) and the fact that non-matched children were not significantly different from matched children, further longitudinal follow-up has merit.
- There is a typical year-to-year loss of about 10% of any study subject group over time, and given the growing body of knowledge on achievement and engagement that holds third grade as a pivotal year for long term outcomes, longitudinal study using secondary data may be best through third grade.
- Future analyses would benefit from the incorporation of data on the specific program components that are hypothesized to have a direct impact on the positive outcomes observed here. Without data on program intensity, specific services, participation, or consistency of service delivery it is not possible to identify what specific activities are producing these results.

References

- Chaffin, M., & Bard, D. (2006). Impact of intervention surveillance bias on analysis of child welfare report outcomes. *Child Maltreatment, 11*(4), 301-312.
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The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) is a resource for child welfare professionals, students, faculty, policy-makers, and other key stakeholders concerned about child welfare in Minnesota. Minn-LInK is a unique collaborative, university-based research environment with the express purpose of studying child and family well being in Minnesota using state administrative data from multiple agencies. For more information, contact Anita Larson at 612-625-8169 or email at amlarson@umn.edu.