

Social Protection and Youth

Caridad Araujo
Sarah Baird
Saini Das
Berk Özler
Luca Parisotto
Tassew Woldehanna



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Abstract

This paper provides a narrative review of social protection policies for youth (ages 15–24) in low- and middle-income countries; assesses the state of the evidence on their impacts; and provides recommendations for policy and future research. It summarizes the findings by three groups of policies: transfers and scholarships, active labor market policies, and life skills programs. While social protection policies serve their primary purpose as safety nets, they do not have transformative effects for youth, overall. The paper highlights the tradeoffs that arise from using social

protection programs to address particular market failures: many beneficiaries of popular programs are inframarginal. The impacts of social protection programs targeted to youth are likely to improve if there is higher human capital accumulation earlier in life and the programs account for age and gender, are of sufficient length and intensity, and are intentionally designed to address the underlying constraints and goals, including an understanding of important social norms in the settings in which they operate.

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Social Protection and Youth

Caridad Araujo¹, Sarah Baird², Saini Das³, Berk Özler⁴, Luca Parisotto⁵, and Tassew Woldehanna⁶

¹ Division Chief, Gender and Diversity Division, Inter-American Development Bank

² Professor, Department of Global Health, Milken Institute School of Public Health, George Washington University

³ Postdoctoral Research Scientist Department of Global Health, Milken Institute School of Public Health, George Washington University

⁴ Senior Economist, Development Research Group, The World Bank

⁵ PhD Student, Department of Economics, Università Bocconi

⁶ Professor, Department of Economics, Addis Ababa University

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1. Introduction

Young people today have more years of education than their parents, with globalization and urbanization driving new migration and employment opportunities. But while inequality between countries has been declining since 1990, large inequalities remain within countries (Kraay et al. 2023). Additionally, exposure to conflict and natural disasters has led to unprecedented levels of forced displacement that disproportionately impacts young people (IOM 2018). Youth also face higher levels of unemployment than adults (Pastore 2018), which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with unemployment rates still above pre-crisis levels (International Labor Organization 2022). These challenges are most stark in low-income countries where youth will increasingly live (Baird et al. 2022). Hence, access to social protection (SP) will be critical to promote positive youth development and safe transitions to adulthood.

SP for youth may target the household (e.g., conditional cash transfers – CCTs), or directly target young individuals (e.g., life skills or scholarships). SP programs have traditionally been designed with the household as the unit of intervention – although they often focus on investments in the human capital of children. For youth, there is a growing interest in the possibility of combining SP with skills building or in the potential of ‘cash plus’ programming. There is also increased awareness of the importance of gender- and age-responsive SP (Gavrilovic et al. 2022).

Grounded in rigorous causal evidence, this paper provides an overview of the landscape of SP for youth; assesses the state of the evidence on its impact; and provides recommendations for policy and future research.

2. Definitions

We adopt the World Bank’s definition of SP, which states “Social protection...helps individuals and societies manage risk and volatility and protects them from poverty and destitution – through instruments that improve resilience, equity, and opportunity” (World Bank 2012). The World Bank lists six types of SP policies that guided our review: migration, safety nets and cash transfers, pensions, skills development, jobs, and labor markets.

Whenever possible, our review pertains to the main target group of SP programs, namely the poor and the vulnerable: there are many studies that provide relevant evidence for SP programs targeted at a broader or different population, whose poverty statuses can be hard to discern. The task is easier when we review studies that evaluate government-implemented SP programs.

We adopt the UN’s definition of youth, i.e., ages 15-24, but recognize that countries and regional bodies have varied definitions (e.g., the African Union includes ages 15-35).

3. Methods

Our paper focuses on the literature with robust causal evidence, limiting our scope to randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and regression discontinuity designs. We included evaluations of government programs, smaller scale RCTs, and existing systematic reviews. We utilized a formal search strategy incorporating peer-reviewed journal articles and working papers from EconLit, World Bank eLibrary, NBER working papers, and PubMed databases; restricted to articles published in English from January 1, 2000, to May 31, 2024, and focused on lower- and middle-income countries (LMIC). The search strategy used the six types of SP noted above and incorporated age-specific terms, such as adolescents and youth. We focused on the following outcome domains: education, cognitive skills, employment, migration, pregnancy, marriage, and unpaid work. We complemented our search using consultations with experts. The formal search strategy, full list of excluded articles, and the detailed extraction sheet are available at <https://sites.google.com/site/decrgerkozler/publications>.

We do not attempt a formal meta-analysis, but instead undertake a narrative review that summarizes the findings by three themes: transfers and scholarships, active labor market policies, and life skills. We conclude with some key lessons for policy and areas for future research.

4. Findings

4.1 Transfer, Scholarship, and Public Works Programs

4.1.1 Education and Labor Market Outcomes

The most studied form of SP programs that benefits young people are conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs). For some of these programs, especially in Latin America, sufficient time has passed for long-term (LT) evaluations. A 2016 review of CCTs – covering studies from 10 countries with follow-up durations between four and 13 years – has found that they cause higher levels of schooling among beneficiaries who were exposed to these programs when they were school-aged, but yield mixed impacts on learning, labor force participation (LFP), and income (Molina-Millán et al. 2019). While the focus of this paper is youth, there is also a substantial literature on the impacts of CCTs on primary-school aged children (see Box 1).

Box 1: Cash Transfers and Primary School-Aged Children.

Cash transfers (CT) to families with primary school-aged children have been implemented widely in LMICs, many of which have been evaluated. In the short- and medium-term, CT have almost always resulted in improvements in school attendance, gains in years of schooling, reduced dropout, or improved the likelihood of transitioning from primary to lower-secondary education (see Fiszbein et al. (2009) and Bastagli et al. (2016) for reviews and Akresh, de Walque, and Kazianga (2016) on Burkina Faso; Benhassine et al. (2015) on Morocco; Cahyadi et al. (2020) on Indonesia; Maluccio and Flores (2005) on Nicaragua; Morris et al. (2004) on Honduras; Schultz (2004) on Mexico). The magnitude of cash transfer program impacts on schooling often varies depending on program design attributes (such as size of transfer or whether payments were conditional on school enrollment or attendance), and on characteristics of the target population (Molina-Millán et al. 2019) with some programs exhibiting larger impacts on attendance for girls than for boys (Bastagli et al. 2016).

Evidence on whether these additional years of schooling resulted in improved learning is mixed (see Araujo, Bosch, and Schady (2018) on Ecuador; Barham, Macours, and Maluccio (2018) on Nicaragua; Behrman, Parker, and Todd (2008) on Mexico) possibly because in most cases these interventions were not bundled with investments in school quality. Consistent with evidence on learning outcomes, LT impacts of CT on earnings, employment, early family formation or migration are also mixed and often inconclusive (Araujo, Bosch, and Schady (2018) on Ecuador; Araujo and Macours (2021) on Mexico; Barham, Macours, and Maluccio (2018) on Nicaragua; Cahyadi et al. (2020) on Indonesia; Molina-Millán et al. (2020) on Honduras).

Several recent studies broaden the scope of our review to other SP programs, such as unconditional cash transfers (UCTs), scholarships and student loans, and public works programs. The evidence is generally consistent with the findings discussed above but offers some nuance and lessons for program design.

Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer (2023) find that a scholarship program for secondary schooling in Ghana substantially increased school attainment for males and females, modestly improved math and reading comprehension five years into the study, and improved tertiary completion only for females. Labor market (LM)

gains were muted and there were no effects for men at any point. LM gains for females were primarily in obtaining highly rationed public sector jobs, which led to earnings gains of approximately 25% 12-15 years after baseline.

Other studies evaluating the effects of CCTs, scholarships, grants and loan programs come to similar conclusions: with higher grade attainment, secondary school completion, and enrollment in tertiary institutions (Attanasio et al. 2021; Baird, McIntosh, and Özler 2011, 2019; Filmer and Schady 2014; Molina-Millán et al. 2020; Bucarey, Contreras, and Muñoz 2020; Barrera-Osorio, Linden, and Saavedra 2019). A small number of studies find modest positive impacts on LM outcomes (Barham, Macours, and Maluccio 2024; Wright 2021). UCTs, with a smaller evidence base, produce smaller effects on schooling and limited or no effects on LFP and earnings (Baird, McIntosh, and Özler 2019; Lambon-Quayefio et al. 2024).

Nonetheless, there are some lessons that can be gleaned from these studies towards the design of SP programs for youth. The first of these is *the importance of targeting* those who are at the highest risk of a bad outcome. Baird, McIntosh, and Özler (2019) offer CCTs to people who have dropped out of school and find very large effects on inducing return to school, while Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer (2023) offer scholarships to students who passed the exams to enter secondary school but have not yet enrolled one month into the first semester. Such strategies identify a much larger share of marginal students than inframarginal ones, yet they

cannot be employed more than once. Filmer and Schady (2014) find large effects on grade attainment among Cambodian students eligible to attend lower-secondary school but targeted using a high risk of dropout score. In contrast, de Hoyos, Attanasio, and Meghir (2023) find no effect of a scholarship program on graduation rates and test scores among upper secondary school students in Mexico and cite the poor targeting of the program as a main culprit for lack of impact. Their findings are consistent with a universal scholarship program for high school students in Mexico City that found no impact on learning (Dustan 2020). The key message here is that when these programs are evaluated solely on the basis of their effectiveness to improve schooling, they are very costly because they treat many more inframarginal students than marginal ones.

Another lesson relates to *merit- vs. need-based targeting*. The second culprit behind the lack of impacts on schooling in de Hoyos, Attanasio, and Meghir (2023) was the poor readiness of students to successfully complete secondary school. As also suggested by Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer (2023), the promise of free secondary school education or even the promise of a small UCT entitlement supplemented by conditional transfers for desired behaviors (Özler 2020) could increase earlier investments in schooling, improving preparedness for upper levels. Supporting this suggestion is Barrera-Osorio, de Barros, and Filmer (2024), which finds that merit-based scholarships targeted to primary school students improve schooling outcomes and learning, more than need-based ones, especially for poor

students.¹ Their findings indicate that merit-based targeting need not exacerbate inequalities, although it devotes a large share of funds to inframarginal students.

A third lesson is the *blunt nature of conditionalities* attached to safety-net programs (not just CCTs) and their potential for unintended consequences. Barrera-Osorio, Linden, and Saavedra (2019), studying the effects of a CCT in Bogota, Colombia, find that incentivizing secondary graduation and on-time enrollment in a tertiary institution causes students to enroll in low-quality colleges rather than higher-quality four-year universities. Instead, forcing families of high school students to save a portion of their transfer, improves enrollment in four-year universities compared with a traditional CCT. Similarly, Bucarey, Contreras, and Muñoz (2020) find that state-guaranteed loans to attend university in Chile increase enrollment but reduce graduation rates, because the marginal eligible beneficiary switches from a high-quality vocational institution to a low-medium-quality university. Wright (2021) finds that a targeted grant to attend tertiary education in Jamaica increased GPA, graduation rates, earnings, and taxes paid, while a similar program that provided loans rather than grants caused comparable educational improvements, but led to lower earnings immediately after graduation – possibly due to the short moratorium on loan repayments leading graduates to accept lower

¹ Similarly, de Hoyos, Attanasio, and Meghir (2023) only find gains among students with high test scores at baseline.

paying jobs. These findings indicate that key design parameters in SP programs can cause large heterogeneity in impacts.

A fourth lesson points to the importance of *social norms and parental preferences*, especially those related to gender (Ferreira, Filmer, and Schady 2017). For example, Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer (2023) find that the marginal female induced to attend secondary school is much more likely to continue to tertiary education than the marginal male, which, they argue, is consistent with a model with credit constraints and a higher LFP rate for males. However, economic incentives can also overcome social norms that disadvantage females. Jensen (2012) and Heath and Mobarak (2015), in India and Bangladesh, respectively, find that the availability of safe and well-paying jobs improved LFP and skills acquisition among young women, and increased investments in human capital among younger girls. While these cases might not necessarily generalize more broadly, the fact that economic incentives can cause significant improvements in the health and education of young women without any government support is promising.

Recent studies of public works programs – either targeted to or reporting impacts on youth in beneficiary households- show modest effects. Bertrand et al. (2024) evaluate a seven-month public works program, combined with job search skills or entrepreneurship training for underemployed youth, aged 18-30, in Côte d’Ivoire. There are limited effects on employment, but moderately higher earnings

and savings during the program. Fifteen months after the program ended, there were no lasting effects on employment or behaviors, mixed effects on earnings, but higher stocks of savings. Trainings did not prove beneficial. The study reinforces the importance of targeting: the authors suggest that alternative targeting approaches (e.g., low predicted baseline earnings), as well as self-targeting under a lower wage rate could improve welfare during the program without hurting LT effects.

Shah and Steinberg (2021) evaluate the effects of India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and find that exposure to the program decreases school enrollment and increases labor among adolescents, with girls primarily substituting into unpaid domestic work.² That adolescents exposed to anti-poverty programs (especially where child labor is present and parental education levels are low) can experience negative effects from some programs targeting their households is also borne in Edmonds and Theoharides (2020). Studying the effects of a large asset transfer program by the Philippines government, they find that child labor among adolescents increases as a result of the asset transfer, especially in

² An alternative policy approach could be to provide childcare for younger siblings in the household, which may also allow youth to re-engage with schooling or engage in paid work (Attanasio et al. 2022).

households with a family business prior to the transfer. Changes in the value of (child) time dominate the wealth effect for school enrollment and child labor.³

4.1.2 *Marriage, fertility, and empowerment*

There is convincing evidence pointing to the fact that UCT, CCT, or scholarship programs, as well as other economic incentives can delay marriage and the start of childbearing among young women – by keeping them in school longer, increasing the opportunity cost of childbearing and marriage, and enhancing their aspirations.

Baird, McIntosh, and Özler (2011) and Baird, McIntosh, and Özler (2019) document the impacts of a CCT-UCT experiment targeted to never-married adolescents in Malawi. They find large and sustained reductions in marriage and pregnancy two years after the end of the CCT intervention among girls who were *out of school at baseline*—because CCTs, conditional on attending school regularly, were very successful in allowing this group to return to school. They were less likely to be ever married or pregnant, had a lower number of live births, and desired a smaller number of children.⁴ Immediately after the end of the two-

³ Agte et al. (2022), studying microfinance borrowers in Kolkata, observe similar findings: in households where at least one parent is illiterate, treatment decreases secondary school completion by 13.9 pp.

⁴ Another study that reports reductions in fertility as a result of large increases in educational attainment is Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer (2021). Women who were offered a scholarship for secondary school were less likely to have been ever pregnant at age 22, and had fewer children and were less likely to be married at age 28.

year intervention, there were large reductions in teen pregnancies and marriage for *baseline schoolgirls* receiving a UCT, all of which dissipated within two years. The contemporaneous UCT effects on marriage and fertility points to the ***importance of income effects*** on marriage and fertility in this setting, which dominated the indirect effects of additional schooling on these outcomes in the CCT arm.

Other studies report impacts of transfer or scholarship programs on marriage and fertility. Filmer and Schady (2014) find that a scholarship program for lower-secondary students in Cambodia had no significant effects on the probability of getting married or having a child in adolescence. Attanasio et al. (2021) and Barham, Macours, and Maluccio (2024), studying CCT programs in Colombia and Nicaragua, respectively, report lower teen pregnancies and delayed fertility among young female beneficiaries. Buchmann et al. (2023), studying an in-kind transfer program conditional on the target adolescent female (aged 15-17) not getting married until the age of 18, find that the treatment reduced child marriages and teen pregnancies, and increased school enrollment, especially for those aged 15 at baseline. By age 22, marriage rates had converged (Buchmann et al. 2021) and there was no significant impact on school attainment or completion. Outside safety net programs, Heath and Mobarak (2015) find reductions of approximately 30% in marriage and childbearing among young women in Bangladeshi villages exposed to garment factories, while Jensen (2012) finds significantly lower marriage, fertility, and desired fertility rates among women who

have been informed about nearby jobs in the business process outsourcing industry – highlighting the importance of economic opportunities in young women’s marriage and fertility choices.

The trials targeting adolescents in Malawi and Ghana highlight two important messages. First, *to cause sustained reductions in marriage and fertility, programs need to achieve large shifts in school attainment* such that their knock-on effects can be meaningful. Second, UCTs can cause contemporaneous *delays in marriage and pregnancy in certain contexts, but impacts are unlikely to be sustained if they are not accompanied by gains in human capital accumulation.*

The marriage market in most of the world is characterized by the fact that educational attainment and youth among women are valued by men. This implies that interventions that increase both school attainment and age of marriage do not, on average, cause women to suffer a marriage market penalty for getting married at an older age. The Malawi and Ghana programs are examples of such programs. However, if an intervention were to delay marriage and pregnancy without sufficiently increasing human capital, it could hurt beneficiaries in the marriage market. This seemed to be the case among UCT beneficiaries in Malawi, who delayed marriage and pregnancy during the program with little increase in school enrollment or attainment. Many of these beneficiaries started childbearing and married immediately after the end of the transfers. Baird, McIntosh, and Özler (2019) indicate that they not only caught up to the control group in being ever

pregnant and number of births, but they also experienced significantly lower levels of female empowerment, largely because of the (lower) quality of their marriages.

Another caveat to the effects of transfers and scholarships on early marriage and teen pregnancy involves the context in which these programs take place. In settings like Eastern or Southern Africa, where transactional sex is common and bride price is more prevalent, safety net programs targeting young women (or other positive income shocks) can delay marriages. However, as Baird, McIntosh, and Özler (2011), foreshadowing Buchmann et al. (2023), state: *“In countries like Bangladesh, where dropout and marriage rates among adolescent girls are also high but, unlike Sub-Saharan Africa, dowry payments are made from the bride’s family to the grooms, UCTs may have no effect, or perhaps even the opposite effect, on the timing of marriage. In such settings, CCTs for schooling or for staying unmarried may be more effective than UCTs.”*

4.2 Active Labor Market Policies

Youth unemployment rates are almost universally higher than those of older adults, which is particularly pronounced in LMICs. In response, governments have invested heavily in Active Labor Market Policies (ALMPs) (Carranza and McKenzie 2024). We discuss two types of ALMPs that are typically targeted to young, disadvantaged jobseekers: (a) technical and vocational education; and (b) job search assistance.

A. Technical and Vocational Education

The rationale behind job-training policies is the belief that youth are not finding jobs because they lack the skills demanded by firms (Carranza and McKenzie 2024). However, despite the proliferation of such programs worldwide, findings from rigorous evaluations mostly point to limited impact at a high cost (McKenzie 2017; Carranza and McKenzie 2024; Agarwal and Mani 2024; Kluge et al. 2019).

Although there are many evaluations of training programs, the mechanisms driving their success are not well-established. In part, this is because most studies evaluate the ‘full’ package of services provided and insights on curriculum components or program features must be obtained through cross-study comparisons. Still, a few key insights have emerged.

First, it appears that *programs that lead to improvements in technical skills* result in better LM outcomes, even if very few studies rigorously measure post-program technical skills.⁵ Two notable contributions, Alfonsi et al. (2020) and Field et al. (2019), both find that a significant improvement in sector-specific skills translates into better LM outcomes up to four years later. Similarly, Crépon and Premand (2019) find that program participants can perform more complex tasks on the job relative to a control group in the long run. Shonchoy, Tomoki, and Selim

⁵ The evidence on soft skills is more ambiguous despite their established importance in labor markets (see e.g., Heckman and Kautz (2012)).

(2018) and Maitra and Mani (2017), both studying smaller NGO-implemented programs targeting sector-specific skills in the garment sector in Bangladesh and India, respectively, report similar findings.

A promising avenue for future research concerns ***“on-the-job” training and apprenticeship programs, combined with classroom-based training***. The existing evidence points to a positive marginal impact of combining them, but there is little experimental evidence backing this up (Shonchoy, Tomoki, and Selim 2018; Honorati 2015; Attanasio et al. 2017; Crépon and Premand 2019). Programs that provide on-the-job training *only* typically find muted or no impacts on employment and earnings (Cho et al. 2013; Hardy et al. 2019; Alfonsi et al. 2020; Agarwal and Mani 2024). In large part, this can be attributed to firm-side constraints and their reluctance to invest in potential trainees. A nascent literature has begun exploring the underlying mechanisms (Caicedo, Espinosa, and Seibold 2022; Hardy and McCasland 2023; Brown et al. 2024; Hardy et al. 2019), but much remains to be learned about how these constraints can be tackled through policy design.

Finally, there are questions on the role of the private sector in the provision of technical and vocational training. A leading approach to program design has been to deliver interventions through public-private partnerships that allow private sector providers to determine program structure and content. This was the design of the highly successful and influential *Jóvenes en Acción* program in Colombia, evaluated by Attanasio, Kugler, and Meghir (2011) and Attanasio et al. (2017), and

has been a leading model since (Carranza and McKenzie 2024). However, an experimental comparison of private vs. public providers in Türkiye found that neither generated lasting impacts (Hirshleifer et al. 2016). In involving the private sector, *financing arrangements and incentive design must be carefully considered against social objectives*. Recent evaluations of demand-driven programs with performance incentives have found that effects tend to be concentrated among male, older, and more experienced participants, which may have been driven by providers selecting participants based on their employability and expected success (Gómez and González-Velosa 2023; Alzúa et al. 2021).

B. Job-search assistance

A second set of interventions aim to improve the matching process between jobseekers and firms. Jobseekers are often credit constrained and face information frictions. Furthermore, labor markets in LMICs are typically highly segmented, most search is done informally through networks and walk-ins as opposed to posted ads, which makes the search costly (Abebe et al. 2021; Carranza et al. 2022). These factors are likely to put young jobseekers at a disadvantage. Recent studies evaluated interventions that reduce search frictions – e.g., reducing search costs by providing transport subsidies or organizing job-fairs, or reducing informational

frictions by providing certification – and found encouraging results, but it is not always clear how these initiatives may translate into public policy.⁶

A set of studies looking at reducing the costs of search has yielded mixed results. Many interventions have directly targeted credit constraints by providing young jobseekers with search subsidies, with somewhat positive short-run impacts, especially marked for more credit constrained individuals, that dissipate in the longer-run (Franklin 2018; Abebe et al. 2021; Banerjee and Sequeira 2023). Another approach has been to directly match jobseekers to potential employers, but most studies have found impacts on neither employment nor earnings (Groh et al. 2015; Bandiera et al. 2023). Related programs involve job fairs, where jobseekers and firms can be exposed to each other at a low cost (Beam 2016; Abebe et al. 2023): neither study finds any direct impact of fairs, but in both studies fair attendance led to substantially improved LM outcomes in the longer run, which are attributed to jobseekers' exposure to a large number of firms.

However, more information does not always have a positive impact. Recent evidence indicates that jobseekers are overoptimistic in their prospects (Alfonsi et al. 2020; Bandiera et al. 2023; Jones and Santos 2022), and that correcting these beliefs can have unexpected consequences. Banerjee and Sequeira (2023) find that although search subsidies allow jobseekers to search over a larger geographic area

⁶ See a comprehensive review by Caria et al. (2024).

in Johannesburg, the lack of success leads to frustration, discouragement, and ultimately a decline in LM outcomes. A similar process occurs in Bandiera et al. (2023), where the lack of results from the matched offers undoes some of the benefits of a vocational training program, likely by causing those with a matched offer to search for jobs in lower quality firms. This ‘behavioral’ aspect of job search is an active area of research, and *a better understanding of jobseekers’ motivations and beliefs is key* to effective job search policy design.

Information frictions also *hold firms back from hiring*, as they are unsure on how to assess candidates – especially in cases where the formal education system sends weak signals of their skills and qualifications. Alfonsi et al. (2020) evaluate the effect of vocational training provided and certified by a reputable NGO (BRAC) and find that those who received it had improved LM outcomes up to four years later compared to a control group, *as well as* to those assigned to on-the-job training, who did not receive any certification.

Other studies have provided supporting evidence on the role of credible signals for skills. Carranza et al. (2022) provide jobseekers with certificates attesting to their cognitive and non-cognitive skills in South Africa, which led to increased employment rates and earnings. Abebe et al. (2021) evaluate a workshop that provides training on building appropriate CVs and certifies workers’ cognitive and non-cognitive skills, and find it led to higher rates of formal employment and wages up to four years later. Bassi and Nansamba (2022) provide a similar

treatment and find that it results in higher earnings. They do not find an overall increase in employment and attribute this to having created ‘better’ matches rather than new ones. Abel, Burger, and Piraino (2020) report similar results for women encouraged to obtain reference letters from past employers. *Credible signaling of skills is especially important for youth*, as they have neither as much experience nor as extensive networks as their older counterparts, and this is especially true for more disadvantaged youth.

4.3 Life Skills

Life skills programs are increasingly used in LMICs to support young people to develop both hard and soft skills. These programs typically take place in a ‘safe space,’ where young people engage with different interventions and educational material often related to sexual and reproductive health and economic empowerment (Shah et al. 2024). In the past, these programs focused only on adolescent girls, but there has been increased interest to include boys and involve the wider community (Andrew et al. 2022; Boulhane et al. 2024; Shah et al. 2023). Most of the literature on life skills programs focuses on impacts on sexual behavior, intimate partner violence, attitudes, and mental health (see Temin and Heck (2020) and Shah et al. (2024) for useful summaries). Broadly speaking, the evidence shows that these programs are more likely to change outcomes that are internal to the adolescent (e.g., attitudes and mental health) with more limited evidence of impacts

on outcomes that require complementary external changes (e.g., condom use and HIV testing) (Temin and Heck 2020).

Bergstrom and Özler (2023) provide a comprehensive summary of the literature on the impacts of life skills interventions on education, marriage and fertility and find mixed evidence of effectiveness. Perhaps the most prominent program in this space is BRAC's Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA), which operates through community clubs that adolescent girls can attend five afternoons a week. Bandiera et al. (2020) found, four years post intervention, that ELA decreased early marriage and teen childbearing in Uganda. However, other studies of similar programs in Tanzania, Bangladesh and Zambia found small or no impacts on education, marriage, or childbearing (Austrian et al. 2020; Buchmann et al. 2023; Buehren, Goldstein, et al. 2017; Waidler et al. 2022).⁷

There is more robust evidence that programs with a specific focus on economic activities lead to improved economic outcomes, although effect sizes are often small. Bandiera et al. (2020) found ELA increased self-employment from 6.3% in the control group to 9.5% in the treatment group four years post intervention in Uganda, while Buehren, Goldstein, et al. (2017) showed that the

⁷ There is some evidence that these programs can protect against negative shocks. Bandiera et al. (2024) find that access to safe spaces during the Ebola epidemic reduced out-of-wedlock pregnancies in Sierra Leone. However, Buehren, Chakravarty, et al. (2017) find the opposite: safe spaces increased the probability of being engaged in IGA and having savings only among girls not impacted by the conflict in South Sudan.

introduction of microfinance to ELA groups in Tanzania increased savings. Austrian et al. (2020) evaluated a two-year multicomponent program that included an adolescent-friendly savings account in Zambia and found that, four years post intervention, adolescent girls in treatment communities were more likely to have saved money in the past year. Beaman et al. (2021) evaluated life skills delivered through sports groups to youth in Liberia with a specific focus on connections to the labor force. One year post intervention, an aggregate labor force index increased by 0.12 standard deviations (SD) in the treatment group, with larger benefits among the more disadvantaged. Boulhane et al. (2024), with a target group of out-of-school girls in Côte d'Ivoire, found that while life skills alone had no impact on economic opportunities (or on any of our other outcomes of interest), it increased an index of income generating activities (IGAs) by 0.18 SD when combined with IGA support. Links to LM outcomes could be enhanced if these programs were able to provide a credible signal of skills perhaps through some sort of certificate, and this could be a valuable add-on in future work.

Recent work is testing the added value of targeting boys and men (Boulhane et al. 2024; Shah et al. 2023) and involving the community in life skills programs – recognizing that broader external change is needed to move many of the outcomes of interest. Amin, Saha, and Ahmed (2018) do not directly evaluate community engagement, but note that it is a likely factor that led to significant reductions in marriage among adolescent girls in their evaluation of a skills training program in

Bangladesh. Andrew et al. (2022) evaluate girls' groups in rural Rajasthan, India, compared to an intervention that also included broader community engagement. They find that the girls groups increased school enrollment with significant declines in marriage immediately at the end of the intervention, but no additional benefit from community engagement. Boulhane et al. (2024) find mixed evidence of including community leaders and reflected that better alignment was needed between the messaging coming directly from leaders and that coming from the girls' clubs. The importance of working with the community is particularly salient when change in youth outcomes requires movement in social norms, likely the case for outcomes like child marriage and teen pregnancy.

In summary, life skills programs vary substantially in terms of duration, content, and target group, making it hard to provide a succinct summary of the evidence base. The findings clearly suggest that implementation and context matter for effectiveness and that one needs to think carefully about what outcomes the program is trying to influence in its design. Programs specifically linked to economic activity may support transitions to work and economic empowerment. However, changes in marriage and fertility are more complex and likely linked to broader societal change. Uptake of programs and targeting remain a concern: only 21% of adolescents invited in Bandiera et al. (2020) chose to participate, and rates of participation in similar programs tend to be

under 50%. In addition, it is often, though not always, the better off who choose to participate. Ultimately, life skills programs alone are unlikely to be transformative for youth, but can be valuable when thoughtfully designed and linked to education, health, and SP programs.

5. Conclusion

Well-designed SP programs targeted to youth in LMICs are essential to promote safe transitions to adulthood, particularly for the most vulnerable. This matters not only for young people, but also their communities. While the success of these programs ultimately depends on broader societal changes (e.g., an improved macroeconomic context or a relaxing of restrictive gender norms), there are design considerations that are likely to promote effectiveness.

Our review of the evidence suggests that policy makers should pay attention to the following *four factors* when considering SP design:

1. SP programs for youth should take account of age and gender, be of sufficient length and intensity, and be intentionally designed to address the underlying constraints and goals in the specific context. Key design parameters, such as conditions (or lack thereof), can often cause tradeoffs, which requires careful deliberation by the policy makers on the exact goals of the program at hand. Programs must also understand the relevant community norms, and either be designed to influence outcomes *despite*

these norms, or aim to *change* the norms themselves – but this will require a longer-term perspective. Findings suggest that relaxing multiple constraints simultaneously may be key for program success.

2. The literature suggests a lack of transformative effects of SP programs for youth. In many cases, significant short-term impacts are small in magnitude, and even when these effects are large, they often disappear in LT follow-ups. While convergence of outcomes in the longer-run does not imply failure, these findings do speak to clearly defining program goals and have implications for key features of SP program design. If the aim is to ensure that SP programs yield long-lasting benefits, policy makers and NGOs must persist in adapting existing initiatives – such as “cash plus” or “productive inclusion” programs – for young people and develop new ones that reinforce and extend the efficacy of prior interventions. Furthermore, we speculate that SP programs for youth might be more effective in the presence of higher human capital accumulation earlier in life.
3. Policy makers need to consider adaptive programming, particularly at scale, that considers that youth of different identities may face different challenges, risks, and constraints even within a country or region (rural vs. urban, male vs. female, etc.).
4. Improved targeting is essential. Many SP programs, especially those with conditionalities targeting certain behavior change, are second-best options.

However, this also implies that they are not needed for most beneficiaries: for example, in CCT or scholarship programs, an overwhelming majority of beneficiaries are infra-marginal, making these programs very costly per unit of improved outcome. Hence, in the absence of first-best solutions targeting a specific market failure, it is pertinent to find subgroups that are most at risk: impacts get diluted as the target population grows and becomes less marginal, explaining why programs at scale often have small impacts.

We propose the following five factors as important considerations for future research:

1. Across all types of SP programs discussed here, there is vast heterogeneity in impact, making it hard to draw systematic lessons. Meta-analysis may be helpful as the number of studies increases, but differences in program design make this proposition complicated. New machine learning techniques as well as traditional heterogeneity analysis could be applied across studies (similar to Shah et al. (2024)) to try and tease out more generalizable lessons around who benefits the most from programming as well as what aspects of program design matter. To facilitate this, researchers should ensure datasets are publicly available, and that sufficient details on program design, targeting, context, sampling etc. are readily accessible.
2. Even where impacts do exist, they often come at high cost, and there is uncertainty whether they can be sustained at scale, and what might be the

general equilibrium implications of these programs. These are still open questions that need to be seriously tackled by future research – not only evaluative research with causal inference, but also implementation science research to enable more success in scaling up efficacious programs.

3. The importance of targeting for equity and efficiency reasons should be a key focus of future research on the design of SP programs. Recent developments in big data and machine learning might be helpful in identifying at-risk youth.
4. It would be valuable if all programs targeting youth measured a concise set of key outcomes across different domains of adolescent well-being. This could include, for example, a measure of soft and hard skills, a measure of (economic) empowerment, a measure of educational attainment, age of marriage, and age at first child. Future research could propose a core set of measures for evaluations of youth programming.
5. When there is evidence of substantial short-term effects, or reason to think LT effects are likely, it is essential for researchers to assess long-term impacts, and for funding and publication outlets to support this critical work.

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