

Interim Report – March 2022

“Education, Work and Peace - promoting opportunities for young adults in Colombia”

Vivamos Mejor

Purpose: Update on study progress and planned next steps.

Study overview

The study aims at evaluating the impact of a development project providing market-oriented vocational training, soft skills training, psychosocial support, and labor market placement (henceforth VET+SST) on vulnerable young adults (including internally displaced persons) in Bogotá's marginalized neighbourhood of Bosa and the neighbouring municipality of Soacha in Colombia. The study examines the impact of Vivamos Mejor's long-standing project approach to income generation and poverty reduction in Latin America. The project is implemented by the local partner organisation Fundación Apoyar. The impact study is being realised by University of Lausanne (UNIL) in partnership with the local University of los Andes.

The study ran from 2018-2021, and followed 300 young adults who were randomly allocated to three groups:

- Group A: state-certified vocational education and soft-skills training/psychosocial support/labor market placement (VET+SST) (project approach)
- Group B: Only state-certified vocational education (VET)
- Group C: No treatment (control)

The intervention, baseline, midline and endline data collections have been successfully completed (see next section). The project aims to explore the medium term effects of the project on labor market outcomes and mental health of marginalized young adults.

Progress and data collection

Baseline data collection and random allocation to the treatment groups were realized in late 2018 and early 2019. The trainings of the treatment groups were carried out in 2019 as planned. The intervention ended in December 2019, a few months before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The midline data collection was originally planned to be conducted in April 2020; however, due to the imposed pandemic-related lockdown, we postponed the midline data collection to November 2020. The project was approved by the UNIL ethics committee in early 2019, and registered under the AEA Social Science registry under the title 'Education, Work and Peace - promoting opportunities for young adults in Colombia' in February of 2019¹.

The lockdown prompted us to conduct an additional lockdown survey in August 2020 to obtain information on the effect of the pandemic on the study participants. This data collection was conducted by telephone and participants were compensated for their participation, as was the case for each data collection. The additional data complement our planned data collection and did not lead to any change in the original budget, as the costs were covered by a separate grant from E4S. We expect two benefits from this data collection:

1. Obtain additional data on the impact of the pandemic on study participants. This data collection, which was conducted immediately after the curfew, helps us paint a fuller picture in terms of the benefits of the project on participants.
2. To further test the hypothesis that our psychosocial work has a positive effect on the psychological well-being of the beneficiaries. We formulated the hypothesis that study participants who received full vocational education as well as soft skills training/psychosocial support (Group VET+SST) were able to cope better with stress and isolation during the COVID-19 related lockdowns.

¹ Education, Work and Peace - promoting opportunities for young adults in Colombia." AEA RCT Registry. February 10. <https://www.socialscienceregistry.org/trials/3869/history/41278>

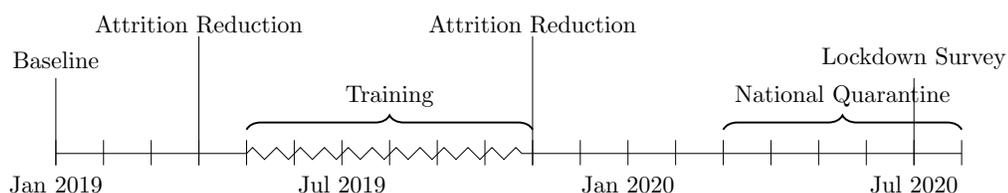


Figure 1: Timeline of data collection

Data analysis

The study co-authors from the University of Lausanne and University of Los Andes will conduct the impact evaluation based on the data collected during the baseline (January 2019), midline (November 2020), and endline (November 2021). Preliminary evidence from the COVID-19 lockdown survey conducted in August 2020 and funded by E4S gives some insights into the mental health benefits of the project.

We would like to point out that all results presented here are preliminary and the impact evaluation consists of an analysis of the baseline, midline and endline data, according the comments of the 2nd Workshop with Nadel on May 10th 2021.

The figure below (see 2 and 3) presents some evidence on the mental health effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on our study participants. Our preliminary findings reveal that on average, levels of depression, distress and trauma increased significantly across all groups. The increase in depression and distress is smaller in young adults who received vocational education bundled with soft skills training/psychosocial support (VET+SST). In other words, while everyone suffered from the pandemic, those exposed to a mix of soft and hard skills training were less negatively affected.

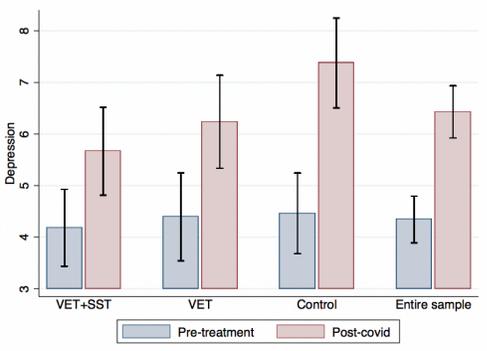


Figure 2: Bar height corresponds to mean levels of depression, the lines correspond to confidence intervals

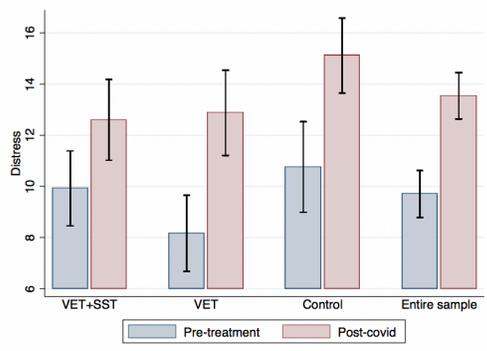


Figure 3: Bar height corresponds to mean levels of distress, the lines correspond to confidence intervals

The COVID-19 lockdowns further exacerbated income precarity and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in all study participants. There is no effect of treatment on either variable.

Our results suggest that the vocational training project of Vivamos Mejor combined with soft skills training and psychosocial support helps to reduce the negative mental health effects of lockdowns.

Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on the Colombian economy. The GDP decreased by 6.8% compared to 2019. Over 4.8 million people lost their jobs during the lockdown in the second quarter of 2020. Another 2.8 million workers reported not having worked an hour for several months. Many marginalized families face livelihood hardship as a result. The unemployment rate increased by 3.9 percentage points in December 2020 compared to the previous year. The proportion of people in extreme poverty increased from 10.9% to 14.3%. As a result, our study participants will also suffer from the shocks to the economy. It is possible that the labor market will not recover in time for the benefits of intervention to be measurable. The lockdown survey already shows that the pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns had non-negligible effects on the mental health of the study participants.

Despite the difficult circumstances presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, we were able to carry out the planned data collection, albeit with a certain delay. Our implementing partner, Fundación Apoyar, was able to follow up with most of the 300 young adults officially registered in the project. Furthermore, we were also able to show certain benefits of the project on the participants receiving vocational education and soft skills training/psycho-social support.

Outlook

The endline survey was successfully conducted by the end of November 2021. The study results and a policy brief will be published by the end of 2022. The main results will be publicly presented to policy makers and relevant stakeholders in Colombia at the beginning of 2023.