

**Making a Difference: Impact of AmeriCorps\*State/National Direct on Members and Communities 1994-95 and 1995-96.** Aguirre Associates, August 1999.

A two-year, three-tier investigation to assess the outcomes and impacts of AmeriCorps State/National Direct programs on beneficiaries, members, and communities served.

This study of impacts of AmeriCorps State and National programs was conducted by Aguirre International during the 1994-1996 program years. The study examined what AmeriCorps programs accomplished; the impact of those accomplishments on service recipients; the impact of the program upon members' life skills, educational attainment, and educational opportunity, and civic attitudes; and the impact of AmeriCorps upon grantee institutions and the communities in which the programs were located.

Aguirre International used a multi-tiered evaluation design utilizing quantitative and qualitative approaches. First, survey data on accomplishments were collected from all programs during 1994 - 1996. Next, a random sample of 60 programs was drawn from which interview and observational data were collected from program staff, members, and community representatives. Using a quasi-experimental design, evaluators conducted interviews and Life Skills Inventories of participating members in these programs. Members reported on their skills in five areas before beginning service and upon completing service. A control group of demographically similar non-members was also surveyed. Finally, eight programs were selected at random from the sample of sixty sites for intensive investigation, including benefit/cost analyses. The case studies augmented information on the impact of AmeriCorps, documented outcome results regarding communities and service beneficiaries, and provided evidence and indicators needed to assess overall impact.

All AmeriCorps programs studied had meaningful service accomplishments for the populations served, including impoverished children and youth in both urban and rural communities, low-income and homeless people, the disabled and the elderly. Programs developed innovative services to meet social problems in their communities. Services had a moderate to substantial impact on beneficiaries, who felt that they had received useful and helpful services.

AmeriCorps had multiple impacts on institutions. AmeriCorps strengthened infrastructures and brought new financial resources to needy communities, expanding the number and type of organizations involved in community service and increasing service capacity at existing institutions. New organizations and partnerships developed as a result. The majority of institutions that received AmeriCorps grants reported that association with AmeriCorps improved their organization's quality and/or quantity of services and increased their overall professionalism. Eighty-two per cent of community representatives interviewed reported that AmeriCorps' impact upon their community had been "very good" or "outstanding."

The analysis of members' life skills before and after the program experience showed that participation had a substantial positive impact on a range of skills, including communication, interpersonal, problem-solving, understanding organizations, and using information technology. Ninety percent of AmeriCorps members reported gains in these life skills during their program year. These changes occurred in members of all ethnic, racial, economic, and educational backgrounds. Members whose skills were the lowest upon entering the program gained the most. AmeriCorps members' life skills gains were significantly greater than the gains reported by a matched comparison group of non-members.

Members' levels of civic engagement were positively affected by AmeriCorps service, strengthening their commitment to focus on community concerns and be part of a civil

society that deals with social issues. Many members' career plans became more community-oriented as a consequence of their AmeriCorps experience.

AmeriCorps was successful in increasing the educational attainment of all members to the extent that programs provided focused vocational or technical training in areas related to service. Through such training, members acquired valuable skills that increased their employability. There was also evidence that these newly developed or enhanced skills lay the foundation for competencies that will continue to be valuable to members, their employers, and their communities in the future.