

# The EARN-Health Trial

*What effects do matched Individual Development Account programs have on the mental and physical health of low-income Americans?*

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*Evidence for Action is part of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's ongoing efforts to strengthen the evidence base for building a Culture of Health. Learn more at [rwjf.org/researchprograms](http://rwjf.org/researchprograms) and [evidenceforaction.org](http://evidenceforaction.org).*

"If we devote so many resources to pharmaceutical trials, yet we think social determinants of health have a bigger impact than drugs on people's well-being, then we should at least devote the same resources and energy to randomized trials attempting to determine what programs best address those social determinants."

— Sanjay Basu

While many studies have explored the impact of poverty and debt on mental and physical health, few have examined how anti-poverty and debt-reduction programs, such as matched Individual Development Account (IDA) initiatives, can improve health and well-being. **The EARN-Health trial is a randomized control trial that investigates the effects of a matched IDA on the mental and physical health of low-income Americans.**

## STUDY DESIGN

- » Randomized control trial (RCT). Participants were placed into two groups: either receiving a financial incentive (match) to save money in an IDA, or on a 12-month waitlist.
- » The program was designed to incentivize participants' continued savings by matching their deposits with \$5 for every \$20 they deposited into their respective IDAs. An additional \$5 match was contributed for consecutive deposits, providing a maximum of \$10 per month or \$55 over the course of the study.

## KEY FINDINGS

- » **No Significant, Long-Term Effects:** Individuals in the IDA program did not experience a significant improvement in their mental or physical health, as compared to controls, potentially because the matching amount was relatively small.
- » **Short-Term Improvements:** After six months, those in the development program did report increased ability to work, better management of binge drinking, and an increased sense of control over their lives. These improvements were not sustained after the trial concluded.
- » **Further Evaluation Needed:** Incentives of varying amounts should be tested to determine whether larger matches might yield better outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

- » While public health and health care organizations are increasingly partnering with organizations in other sectors to address social determinants, it remains unclear how these efforts actually influence health. The development of further rigorous evaluations of these efforts is crucial to determine what works to reduce poverty and improve health.

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