Nearly one billion people will enter the labor force between now and 2030—the deadline that World Bank President Jim Kim set for ending extreme poverty. Helping young adults find productive work and giving them the tools they need to succeed is crucial to meeting this goal. But what happens when the young adults are mainly skilled in armed conflict and illegal money-making activities and the countries where they live have devastated economies and few work opportunities? Development experts and policymakers are exploring options for improving employment opportunities through programs that can boost job earnings while also reducing the likelihood of social instability.

In Liberia, where civil wars were fought on and off between 1989 and 2003, the non-profit organization, Action on Armed Violence, the Government of Liberia, and the United Nations developed an innovative program to help ex-combatants move into full-time farm work by giving them training, counseling, and start-up capital. The World Bank, which is committed to helping countries improve work opportunities as part of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, helped support a randomized impact evaluation of the program to measure the impact.

The evaluation found that the program successfully shifted high-risk men from criminal activities into farming. Graduates earned more money than their counterparts who weren’t enrolled in the program, spent less time in illegal work and were less likely to consider fighting as mercenaries in neighboring conflicts. The evaluation also showed that skills training isn’t always enough—men who received training but didn’t get their start-up capital didn’t do as well as those who did. As policy makers in the region look to strengthen their economies and boost stability, the results of this evaluation offer guidelines for crafting successful programs.

By the end of the civil war in 2003, the majority of Liberia’s three million citizens were displaced and the country had been devastated. People were poor and, after so many years of war, often had little, if any, schooling. Although the security situation slowly improved and the economy expanded, by 2008 there were still close to 10,000 ex-fighters living in remote, ungoverned parts of the country. They earned money through illegal activities such as unlicensed mining and rubber tapping.

Action on Armed Violence, a non-profit based in Britain, wanted to see whether it was possible to shift former combatants from illegal work to steady agricultural labor, the main source of income for most rural Liberians. There was also the hope that the program,
Men who attended the program spent more time farming and…

More than a year after completing the program, participants were 14.1 percentage points more likely to have farmed the previous season, up from 69 percent for the control group. They were 15.5 percentage points more likely to be currently farming, up from 61 percent for the control group. Participants in the program were also 35 percentage points more likely to grow their own seedlings and 12 percentage points more likely to have sold crops.
... fewer hours every month engaged in potentially illegal activities.

Participation in the program didn’t end illicit activities completely—around 37 percent of men still engaged in such activities, a small decline compared with the control group. Nor did it lead to any change in the overall number of hours worked in the previous month. However, men who had gone through the program were spending 33 percent more of their time farming and 24 percent less in potentially illicit work, such as rubber tapping or unlicensed gold and diamond mining. In short, men shifted their portfolio of activities from illegal to legal ones.

They also showed less interest in being recruited as mercenaries.

An impetus for the program was to reduce the likelihood that ex-combatants would return to fighting, whether in Liberia or as mercenaries in a neighboring country. When the civil war ended in 2003, the United Nations ran a traditional Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration program, giving cash and training vouchers to former fighters. However the lack of legal opportunities limited the impact and when the program ended in July 2009, thousands of former fighters still lived in remote areas, involved in illegal or unlicensed work.

Action on Armed Violence hoped that a more directed program, and one that specifically trained men to enter the country’s dominant agricultural sector, would reduce the chances of criminal or armed activities. In fact, participants reported less interest in joining the war that broke out in neighboring Cote d’Ivorie in December 2010. They were 44 percent less likely to attend a secret recruitment meeting and 61 percent less likely to consider joining, even at a going recruitment rate of $1,000.

Ensuring that program participants received the agricultural supplies they were promised turned out to be important to success.

The shift from illegal resource extraction to farming was concentrated among the young men who specialized in crop raising and therefore received their capital. Hours of agricultural work did not increase among men who trained to become animal specialists. Start-up capital therefore appeared to be crucial to the men’s ability to successfully shift into new occupations.

But the program didn’t appear to reduce aggressive behavior or violence.

The program included a life skills component and counseling intended to help participants curb aggressive behavior, such as physical fights and destroying property, and also taught methods of non-violent conflict resolution. The study showed no effect of the program on these behaviors, however, suggesting that the life skills component was not sufficient to change behavior, and that the economic incentives alone likely led to the shift away from illicit and mercenary work. One possibility is that behavior was changed in a temporary and artificial environment, and may not have survived the transition to a new village life.

Nor did the program affect existing chains of command and ex-combatant relationships.

The researchers hoped that relocating ex-combatants to a new village for training would encourage them to sever ties with their former commanders, but the program didn’t seem to break down existing chains of military command. The men in the pro-

This policy note is based on the report “Can Employment Reduce Lawlessness and Rebellion? A Field Experiment with High-Risk Youth in a Fragile State,” May 2014, Christopher Blattman (Columbia University) and Jeannie Annan (International Rescue Committee)
In post-conflict countries, work training programs have the potential to help rebuild a shattered economy, provide job opportunities, and boost peace-building efforts. Indeed, as this impact evaluation shows, training and access to capital does help young people shift away from illegal activities into legal, non-violent, and productive work. This should be welcome news for policy makers in post-conflict regions looking to rebuild the economies—and social fabric—of their countries.

But the findings also shed light on some of the constraints that youth face when trying to pursue work opportunities: Training alone may not be enough if it isn’t supplemented with start-up capital. These findings will likely help development experts as they continue to create programs that help the millions of young people entering the labor force find meaningful and productive work.

The program seems to make economic sense when the higher incomes are factored in. Assuming a permanent income boost of almost $11 a month, the per person program cost of $1,275 would be paid back in nine years. This doesn’t take into account national economic gains from a drop in illicit activity, in addition to the potentially stabilizing effect in the country and in neighboring countries from a lack of steady recruits for mercenary work.