

ASSET ACCUMULATION IN LOW-RESOURCE HOUSEHOLDS: EVIDENCE FROM INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT ACCOUNTS

Mark Schreiner
Michael Sherraden
Margaret Clancy
Lissa Johnson
Jami Curley
Min Zhan
Michal Grinstein-Weiss
Washington University in St. Louis

Sondra Beverly
University of Kansas

To escape from poverty requires assets, be they human, physical, social, or financial. Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) are designed to help the poor build assets. Withdrawals from IDAs are matched if used for home purchase, post-secondary education, or self-employment. Participants also receive financial education and support from IDA staff. This paper discusses evidence from the American Dream Demonstration (ADD) on a series of questions.

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Can the poor save in IDAs? Low-resource people did save and build assets in IDAs in ADD:

- *Average monthly net deposits per participant were \$25.42.*
- *The average participant used two-thirds of match-eligibility.*
- *The average participant made a deposit in seven of 12 months.*
- *With an average match rate of 2:1, participants accumulated about \$900 per year in IDAs.*

How do IDAs work? Key links between savings and institutional characteristics in ADD were:

- *Savings increased — up to a point — with more hours of financial education.*
- *Higher match rates were linked with fewer unmatched withdrawals and with less risk of exit but not with higher savings.*
- *Higher match caps were associated with better savings outcomes.*

Where do IDA deposits come from? Participants used both new savings and reshuffled assets.

Who saves in IDAs? ADD did not necessarily serve only the most able:

- *Income was not linked to savings, and the very poor saved at a higher rate than the less poor.*
- *The receipt of public assistance, all else constant, was not associated with savings.*
- *Asian Americans saved about \$10 more per month than Hispanics or Caucasians and about \$20 more per month than African Americans or Native Americans.*

What do IDAs cost? So far in ADD, program costs have been about \$2.70 per dollar deposited. Costs seem to have fallen through time.

Introduction

The question of how to help the poor get rich is, in essence, the question of how to help them accumulate assets. Poverty is a trap because resources are needed to produce resources. People with low resources relative to subsistence consumption, however, save few resources and so produce too little to embark on a path of consistent increases in consumption in the long term.¹

To escape from poverty requires capital, be it human, physical, social, or financial. To this end, many U.S. policies subsidize asset accumulation. Few of these policies, however, reach low-resource people because they leverage existing wealth, operate via tax breaks, or require debt.

A new policy proposal designed to help the poor accumulate assets — Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) — does not make these requirements. Withdrawals from IDAs are matched if used to buy a home, pay for post-secondary education, or finance self-employment. Participants in IDAs also receive financial education and support from IDA staff.

This paper uses data from the American Dream Demonstration (ADD) to address a series of questions about asset accumulation in IDAs by low-resource people. We find that:

- Low-resource people can save and build assets in IDAs. We do not know, however, how much of IDA deposits were new savings and how much were reshuffled assets.
- Observed factors constant, income, gender, and welfare receipt were not linked with net deposits in IDAs. Although members of all racial/ethnic groups saved in IDAs, some saved more than others. Also, the very poor saved a larger share of their income than the less poor.
- Institutional characteristics mattered, especially financial education and match rates.
- IDAs in ADD were costly. A different structure and bundle of services will be needed if IDAs are to become universal and permanent.

This paper proceeds as follows. We first present IDAs and ADD, review relevant saving theory, and discuss current asset-subsidization policy. We then discuss evidence from ADD on whether the poor can

save in IDAs, how IDAs work, where deposits come from, who saves in IDAs, and what IDAs cost. The final section discusses the main results.

Individual Development Accounts and the American Dream Demonstration

IDAs subsidize asset accumulation by the poor. Unlike Individual Retirement Accounts (IRAs) or 401(k) plans, IDAs are targeted to the poor, provide subsidies through matches rather than tax breaks, and require financial education. IDAs largely decouple the asset-subsidy mechanism from wealth, taxes, and loans.

People who pass a means test deposit post-tax dollars in insured, interest-bearing passbook savings accounts. They receive monthly statements (from the bank and the IDA program), financial education, and support from staff and peers. Withdrawals are matched if used for home purchase, post-secondary education, or small business.² Matches are disbursed directly to vendors, and withdrawals for other purposes are allowed but are not matched. The original proposal calls for permanent accounts for all, opened at birth, with greater subsidies for the poor (Sherraden, 1991). Regardless of balances or activity, people would not be “on” or “off” IDAs just as they are not “on” or “off” IRAs. Funds for program costs and matches may come from public or private sources. As a simple way to subsidize savings earmarked for specific purposes, IDAs may fit a wide range of community-development and public-policy purposes.

Intellectual History

Development economics has long seen saving as central to long-term improvement in the well-being of the poor in nonindustrialized countries (Besley, 1992; Deaton, 1992). The importance of saving for the poor in industrialized countries, however, was somehow overlooked (Sherraden, 1991). Public assistance aimed to meet subsistence requirements, but it stopped short of transfers in levels and forms that would allow and encourage people to break out of poverty.

In 1988, a movement started to include the poor in asset-subsidy policies. Friedman’s *The Safety Net as Ladder* proposed changes to public assistance to encourage development beyond subsistence. Haveman’s *Starting Even* said that “transfer payments are necessary but not sufficient” (p. 149). Sherraden’s “Rethinking Social Welfare: Towards Assets” critiqued the subsistence paradigm and proposed IDAs as a step toward a development paradigm.

The movement has gained intellectual momentum (Ackerman and Alstott, 1999; Conley, 1999; Oliver and Shapiro, 1995) and attracted support from all points along the political spectrum. For example, Bill Clinton — who as governor of Arkansas wrote the foreword to *The Safety Net as Ladder* — supported IDAs in his 1992 campaign and later proposed a large matched-savings program (Wayne, 1999). The Savings for Working Families Act (H.R. 4106 and S. 2023) would budget up to \$10 billion for IDAs. Both George W. Bush and Al Gore had billion-dollar IDA proposals in their platforms, and both proposed some form of individual accounts for retirement.³ The government of Canada plans to sponsor an IDA demonstration in 10 cities, and in the United Kingdom, the New Labour government has also proposed accounts that are like IDAs.

The American Dream Demonstration

Evaluation was built into the design of IDAs in the United States (Sherraden, *et al*, 1995). The focal point is the American Dream Demonstration (ADD). Run by the Corporation for Enterprise Development with private and public funds, ADD enrolled 2,378 participants in 14 programs across the United States since July 1997. In most cases, deposits are eligible for matches through 2001, and matched withdrawals may be made after that.⁴ The evaluation of ADD uses several methods:

- Assessment of the process of program start-up and implementation through interviews with program staff. This component addresses the question, “How are IDA programs best set-up?”
- Monitoring of savings by participants. This component — reported on in this paper — asks, “What are the savings outcomes in IDAs?” It uses demographic and socio-economic data from interviews at enrollment and data from bank statements on monthly IDA cash flows.
- Case studies and in-depth interviews with participants. These add depth and context to the question, “How and why do people save in IDAs, and what do they see as impacts?”
- Cross-sectional survey of participants. The intent is to inform policy and program design even before ADD is complete (Moore *et al*, 2001).

- Assessment of community-level effects. This will address the question, “How does a concentration of IDAs affect a community?”
- An experimental design with a longitudinal survey of qualified applicants randomly allowed or denied access to IDAs in one program. This will address the question, “What are the economic and noneconomic impacts of IDAs?” There will also be a financial cost-benefit analysis.

Data from ADD

Data on programs and participants in ADD come from the Management Information System for Individual Development Accounts (MIS IDA), a system designed, sold, and supported by the Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis (Johnson, Hinterlong, and Sherraden, 2000). The software stores data for evaluation as programs use it to manage logistics.

IDA staff members record five types of data in MIS IDA:

- Account-structure parameters at the start of the program
- Demographic and socio-economic data on participants at enrollment
- Monthly IDA cash-flow data from account statements
- Monthly program inputs and expenses
- Intermittent events such as attendance at financial-education classes or program exit

The cash-flow data may be the best (or the only) data on high-frequency saving by the poor in a subsidized-savings program. The analysis in this paper uses these data. The cash flows are accurate and complete; they come from records of depository institutions, satisfy accounting identities, and have passed through extensive cross-checks.

Of course, no data set is perfect. IDA staff are not researchers, and, despite their consistent commitment to accurate data and their strong support for the evaluation as a whole, quality varies among programs and types of data. Most time-constant demographics are accurate.

Time-varying socio-economic data, regardless of accuracy, may change after enrollment, but the analysis here uses at-enrollment data to avoid endogeneity issues. Also, variables added to MIS IDA after ADD started were not collected from all already-enrolled participants, especially those who had exited. As in all surveys, income, assets, and liabilities are noisy and probably understated. The account-structure parameters in MIS IDA may not always match the rules used in practice. We have no foolproof way to know whether program staff recorded all intermittent events. Finally, program costs are measured with noise. Throughout this paper, we take care to note when data issues might influence results. Schreiner *et al* (2001) discuss the data at length.

The Questions that ADD Can Answer

Participants in ADD were both self-selected (they chose to participate based on expected net benefits) and program-selected (most programs targeted the “working poor,” women, and/or people of color). With data only on participants, we cannot sort out the effects of selection from the effects of use. The MIS IDA data cannot reveal the impact of access to IDAs on eligibles.

In fact, MIS IDA data cannot reveal impact even on participants because we have no credible way to estimate outcomes in the absence of participation. The experimental-design component of ADD will estimate impact for participants, but that data is not yet available, and even the experiment randomizes access not across eligible persons but across qualified applicants.

ADD runs for a limited time because it has limited funds. If the goal is long-term improvement in well being, if assets foster development, and if IDAs increase asset accumulation by the poor, then a permanent program is probably better than a time-limited one. ADD cannot tell us, however, how people would behave if they had permanent access to IDAs.

The MIS IDA data do show how participants saved in IDAs in ADD. This is not the grandest of questions, but it matters, especially because many people believe that the poor cannot save at all.

The MIS IDA data also address how institutions affect saving. Sherraden (1991) and Beverly and Sherraden (1999) hypothesize that saving by the poor and nonpoor depends not just on rational choice but also on institutions. Variation in rules across groups of participants in ADD shows how saving behavior changes with match rate, match cap, and financial education.⁵

Theories of Saving and the Poor

This section describes theories of saving and asset accumulation and how the institutional structure of IDAs incorporates insights from these theories.

Saving and Asset Accumulation

Income is defined as the inflow of resources to a household in a given period of time. *Assets* are defined as stocks of resources held at a given point in time. Whether seen as assets or income, resources may be *consumed* (changed into forms no longer useful) or moved through time.

Saving is defined as an increase in assets (or net worth) in a period. *Dissaving* is a decrease in assets. Saving is due to not consuming income, and dissaving is due to consuming assets.

Asset accumulation is a long-lasting increase in assets. Saving consistently in excess of dissaving leads to asset accumulation; saving followed soon after by dissaving does not.

The concept of *assets* encompasses far more than financial assets as cash or as balances in a bank account. The chief asset of most people, especially the poor, is human capital. People also possess household durables (such as homes, cars, clothes, furniture, and appliances) and producer durables (such as tools for self-employment). People also use the networks, norms, and trust encompassed in social capital to produce information, reduce transaction costs, buffer shocks, and comfort psyches. Sherraden (1991) gives a typology of assets and their returns.

Asset accumulation matters because resources are required for production (and thus for income and future capacity to consume and/or produce), smooth consumption, cope with risk, and make lumpy purchases. In the absence of constant, massive, and probably unsustainable transfers from government, long-term improvement in individual well-being requires increased productive capacity. Because assets beget assets, the escape from poverty requires asset accumulation.

Beyond these economic effects of resource use, Sherraden (1991) suggests that mere resource ownership has healthy effects on thoughts, behavior, goals, and overall well being. People who own assets expect better economic outcomes in the future, and this expectation may spark hope that changes current feelings, beliefs, and choices.

If asset accumulation matters so much (for both economic and noneconomic reasons) and if everyone both saves and dissaves to some extent, then what determines who enjoys the benefits of asset accumulation when savings exceed dissavings in the long term? Why do some people become (or stay) poor, and why do others become (or stay) rich?

Theories of Saving and Asset Accumulation

Three theories of saving relevant to IDAs are economic, social/psychological, and behavioral.

Economic theory. Economics assumes that people seek to maximize long-term utility subject to opportunities and constraints. People are assumed forward-looking and rational, and preferences are fixed. Choices and the stochastic distribution of their consequences are known and exogenous. Preferences are the *deus ex machina* of unknown causes that drive results.

Perhaps the most fundamental insight of economic theory for saving and the poor is simply that people with few resources relative to subsistence constraints, be they biological, psychological, or cultural, have less resources available to save. Also, the decreasing marginal utility of consumption means that the poor pay more (in terms of foregone utility) to save. Because current savings (in human capital, financial assets, social networks, and producer and consumer durables) determines future production and future income, poverty can be a trap of low assets.

Some economic theory also highlights the importance of indivisibilities. Some assets (such as a house, car, or college education) have a minimum size, and saving for a lumpy purchase is more difficult than if the asset could be purchased (and be productive) in smaller pieces.

Through the match, the institutional structure of IDAs addresses both the rate-of-return issue and the size-of-return issue. For example, the average match rate in ADD of 2:1 may be so high that people may find saving worthwhile despite a high value for current consumption.⁶ Also, the match changes a given level of savings by participants into a higher level of asset accumulation, perhaps enough to purchase a lumpy asset.

*Social/psychological theories.*⁷ These theories emphasize that people are not always rational and that social norms and interactions shape preferences. They try to get behind the *deus ex machina* of preferences to explain saving-related goals and expectations.

These theories assume that people do not always form their own goals or even know what choices they might make, let alone know the complete distribution of the consequences of choices. For example, people who see family and friends save tend to see saving as a choice that they themselves might make (Lusardi, 2000). Likewise, different cultural and familial norms and experiences may lead to different savings goals. For example, the American Dream of homeownership is a goal that U.S. society expects of married people more than of single people.

Broad social norms also mold saving expectations. Americans learn that Benjamin Franklin was wise and advised that a penny saved was a penny earned. Social norms are susceptible to policy through the rules of thumb that people use in the absence of perfect omniscience and rationality. For example, the Japanese seem to have largely conformed to the rather arbitrary suggestion of their government to save one-fifth of income (Bernheim, 1994). In the United States, the home-mortgage interest deduction implicitly suggests that a home is a good investment. Likewise, 401(k) plans signal workers that saving matters and is at least partly their responsibility.

The institutional structure of IDAs builds on social/psychological theory in several ways. First, the mere existence of IDAs sends a message that the poor can (and perhaps should) save. The match in particular attracts attention.⁸ Second, IDAs require financial education; people are not assumed to know how to save nor the consequences of choosing to save. Third, IDAs provide feedback and social support through staff and peers. Fourth, planning for IDA withdrawals encourages participants to make goals and to think about the benefits of saving. Fifth, participants receive monthly statements that remind them of their saving goals and show their progress.

Behavioral theories. Like social/psychological theory, behavioral theory relaxes some assumptions in economic theory. It recognizes that people impose nonfungibility on resources through systems of mental accounts (Shefrin and Thaler, 1988). For example, small windfalls, perhaps from lottery wins, may be assigned to splurges. Likewise, debt may be acceptable for assets such as a home or college education, but not for restaurant meals or Christmas gifts.

Behavioral theory also recognizes that people know that they do not always do what is best for themselves. People are both forward-looking and myopic; they recognize that they will be tempted to spend

even if saving would make them better-off in the long term. Thus, they may create their own mental or external rewards and punishments that make it difficult to spend rather than save (Thaler; 1994, Maital, 1986). For example, they may commit to rules of thumb (and make themselves feel guilty when they break them) such as saving all of the income of one spouse or “paying oneself first.” Payroll deduction, probably the most common precommitment constraint, attenuates payday temptations. Christmas Clubs and time deposits offer the precommitment constraint of a substantial penalty for early withdrawal. Mortgage-financed purchases of homes or cars can also be a way to commit to save (Maital and Maital, 1994).

Behavioral theory also notes that people who try to save and succeed may learn to like saving more (Mischel, 1977). Because repetition is easier than innovation, saving may be habit-forming.

The institutional structure of IDAs fits behavioral theory because it provides ways to commit to save and to resist the temptation to dissave. First, IDAs create a new mental account: savings for a home (or college, or small business). The distinct account (and reinforcement from staff that its funds are off-limits, even though in fact they can be withdrawn — but not matched — at any time for any use) helps participants view IDA balances as distinct from “spending money” (Beverly, Moore, and Schreiner, 2001). Second, the expression of the match cap in terms of a monthly savings target may encourage participants to develop regular savings habits and give them a goal that they might not otherwise set for themselves. Third, when available, automatic deposits into IDAs may help curb temptations to spend money before it is deposited. Fourth and finally, the perceived obligation to make deposits in IDAs may give participants a socially acceptable excuse to deny requests from importunate members of social networks.

Asset-Subsidization Policy in the United States

U.S. public policy often subsidizes asset accumulation (Sherraden, 1991), and sometimes it reduces poverty. For example, the most important asset of the poor is their human capital, and the most widespread asset-subsidy policy is public education. Deductions for mortgage interest subsidize homeownership, the bedrock of the middle class and the second-most important asset of the poor. Subsidized student loans (and public colleges and universities) and subsidized retirement accounts are also common asset subsidies that reduce poverty.

The Homestead Act (Williams, 2000) and the G.I. Bill subsidized assets for many poor people.

Subsidies for asset accumulation often go disproportionately to the nonpoor because they directly or indirectly require existing wealth. For example, local-school finance leads to better public schools in wealthy neighborhoods. Tax-advantaged retirement accounts link subsidies to the human capital required to earn income in a high tax bracket.

Subsidized debt is indirectly linked to wealth because loans can finance only part of an investment package and because lenders often take wealth as a signal of creditworthiness. Prospective home buyers must accumulate both financial capital for a down payment and human capital to earn income to make mortgage payments. Likewise, student debtors must have savings (or wealthy parents, or time for a job) to pay for living expenses beyond tuition and books.

Tax breaks for asset accumulation (such as deferments for IRAs and 401(k) plans or deductions for student-loan interest and home-mortgage interest) are weak incentives for people in low tax brackets. Furthermore, larger loans mean larger subsidies, so the poor — who go to less-expensive colleges and who buy less-expensive homes — get smaller subsidies. Whatever the administrative, targeting, and incentive reasons to link asset subsidies to existing wealth (and thus previous saving), loans, and taxes, the current system does less for the poor than for the nonpoor.

Community development has focused on asset accumulation through education reform (job training, desegregation, and abolition of local-school finance) and homeownership (the Community Reinvestment Act and neighborhood redevelopment). These efforts will continue, but additional efforts may also be warranted. School reform, for example, is slow, and for many people, too late. Likewise, greater access to loans will help the poor buy homes, but it will not help them make mortgage payments. Finally, those who escape welfare may still get stuck in the ranks of the working poor unless they have high human capital.

IDAs may be a useful way to subsidize home purchase, post-secondary education, and self-employment for the poor because they largely decouple subsidies from existing wealth, taxes, and loans. Of course, IDAs require deposits, and these are easiest for people who already have wealth. If it makes sense to subsidize debt for asset accumulation by the nonpoor, however, then perhaps it also makes sense to subsidize savings for asset accumulation by the poor.

Can the Poor Save in IDAs?

ADD shows that the poor can save in IDAs. Although ADD does not prove that the poor saved more than they would without IDAs, it at least proves that the poor can save.⁹

Participation

Enrollment. As of June 30, 2000, the 14 programs in ADD had enrolled 2,378 participants. The average length of participation was 13.3 months, and 81 percent of enrollees were still active.

Graduation. About 13 percent of participants had a matched withdrawal; one-fourth of these “graduated” and left the program, and the rest were still saving for more matched withdrawals.¹⁰

Exit. About 16 percent of participants exited without a matched withdrawal. The cumulative risk of exit was 11 percent for the first 12 months and 16 percent for the first 24 months.

Savings Outcomes

Gross deposits. The average participant deposited \$41.43 per month (\$552 in 13.3 months).

Unmatched withdrawals. About 25 percent of matchable balances were removed in unmatched withdrawals. The 37 percent of participants with unmatched withdrawals (43 percent of whom were exits) averaged 2.9 unmatched withdrawals worth a total of \$320. With an average match rate of 2:1, these people lost potential matches worth about \$640. The unexpected size and frequency of unmatched withdrawals, in spite of their high opportunity cost, highlight the difficulty of asset accumulation for the poor, even in the supportive institutional context of IDAs.

Net deposits. Defined as gross deposits minus unmatched withdrawals minus balances in excess of the match cap, net deposits per participant in ADD were \$353 (\$420 for nonexits).

Average monthly net deposits (AMND) takes into account the length of participation. Mean AMND was \$25.42 (\$30.30 for nonexits). Median AMND was \$17.96 (\$23.35 for nonexits).

With an average match rate of 2:1, the average participant accumulated about \$75 per month. Asset accumulation in ADD as of June 30,

2000 (assuming all balances at that point will eventually be removed in matched withdrawals) is about \$1,000 per person ($13.3 \cdot 25.42 \cdot 3$).

Matched withdrawals. Those with matched withdrawals averaged 2.0 withdrawals for a total of \$603. With an average match rate of 1.82:1, their total asset accumulation averaged \$1,698.

Matched withdrawals were more common as balances grew with time; the probability of a matched withdrawal was nine percent in the first 12 months and 27 percent in the first 24 months.

Matched uses. Of participants with a matched withdrawal, 24 percent bought a home, 24 percent invested in microenterprise, and 21 percent pursued post-secondary education. The rest used their matched withdrawals for home repair, retirement, or job training.

Among the 87 percent of participants (including exits) with no matched withdrawals, 57 percent planned to buy a home, 18 percent planned for microenterprise, and 15 percent planned for post-secondary education. The other 10 percent planned for home repair, retirement, or job training.

Savings Behavior

Savings rate. On average, net deposits were 2.2 percent of income at enrollment (median 1.3 percent). The savings rate in IDAs decreased as income increased in cross-section. As discussed later, it may be that the institutional effects of IDAs are stronger than the economic effects of income, and perhaps these institutional effects are somehow stronger for poorer people.

Deposit frequency. At the mean and median, participants made deposits in seven of 12 months (7.6 of 12 months for nonexits). Although causality is difficult to determine, some evidence suggests that frequent depositors accumulate more than infrequent depositors. We suspect that this results when people target a level of saving and then consume the rest (rather than target a level of consumption and then save the rest) and so make a greater effort to save in difficult months.

Net deposits as a percentage of the prorated match cap. On average, participants were on a pace to save two-thirds of their match-eligibility. At the median, the share was 49 percent.

IDAs and EITC. Net deposits increased about \$15 per participant per month in March, April, and May. Participants seem to save a chunk of tax refunds and/or payments from the Earned Income Tax Credit. Some programs in ADD explicitly encourage this, and other evidence (Beverly, Tescher, and Marzahl, 2000; Smeeding, 2000; Souleles, 1999) supports the idea that saving is easier from tax refunds and the EITC than from “regular” income.

Discussion

Can the poor save in IDAs? The possibility cannot be dismissed. Participants in ADD saved \$25.42 per month, made deposits in seven of 12 months, and were on a pace to use about two-thirds of match eligibility.

Is two-thirds a high or low rate of utilization? The opportunity cost of not saving the full amount is rather high. As a comparison, three-fourths of IRA contributors take full advantage of that program (and more than 90 percent of eligibles do not participate at all), and one-third of contributors reach the contribution limit in each of three straight years (Bernheim, 1997).

Are IDAs enough to make a difference? To give perspective, median liquid assets at enrollment were \$125. Median illiquid assets (mostly homes and cars) were \$1,200, median debt was \$1,335, and median net worth was \$100.¹¹ At the median savings level (\$17.96 per month), match rate (2:1), and months of potential participation (36), asset accumulation would be \$1,940. Even if all deposits came from reshuffled assets, IDAs would increase median net worth by more than 1,000 percent.

For the nonpoor, a few hundred dollars, or even a few thousand dollars, may not seem like much. Data on matched withdrawals, however, suggest that participants in ADD do use IDAs to purchase assets expected to have high returns and that mark key steps in the life course. Perhaps more important, participants in qualitative components of the evaluation of ADD say that their accumulations have changed their outlooks for the better. Perhaps what matters is not only the amount accumulated but also the process (and the simple existence) of accumulation.

If the structure of IDAs offers strong incentives to make deposits and then to maintain them until a matched withdrawal, then why were unmatched withdrawals so common and large? The data do not reveal an answer, but a couple of explanations are possible. First, some participants may be close to subsistence and have highly variable income and/or expenses. If income drops (or if expenses spike, perhaps due to

job loss or illness), then short-term needs may outweigh long-term opportunity costs. Second, some participants may be short-sighted or unwise; to the detriment of long-term well being, they may make unmatched withdrawals for consumption.

Should IDA programs restrict unmatched withdrawals? If participants expect at enrollment that they will later succumb to make withdrawals for consumption, then they would welcome restrictions. Indeed, Moore *et al* (2001) report that some participants in ADD seem to appreciate the formal and informal restrictions on unmatched withdrawals.

On the other hand, recurrent emergencies are a fact of life for the poor. One of the few ways that IDAs might do harm would be to put the cash out of the poor's reach. If unmatched withdrawals were tightly restricted, and if participants expected that they might have emergencies, then, to avoid the trouble of enrollment, deposits, and then withdrawals, they might not enroll, or they might wait to make deposits until the deadline.¹² If restrictions do lead some people to save outside IDAs until the deadline, then net deposits may decline because this cash is more likely to be spent (Bernheim, 1997; Caskey, 1997). Perhaps IDAs could offer, at enrollment or afterwards, the choice (but not the requirement) to put at least some IDA deposits in an account with greater restrictions on unmatched withdrawals.

Why did so many participants exit? As with unmatched withdrawals, the level of exit was unexpected and suggests that, even in the supportive institutional context of IDAs, saving is not easy for the poor. Some exits are inevitable, but two changes to policy and program design may reduce them. First, permanent access to IDAs would, in a way, make the exit issue moot, because everyone would always have an IDA, even if the balance were zero. Second, some programs in ADD kicked people out for low or infrequent deposits. This freed match funds for other participants, but if the goal of IDAs is long-term improvement in well being, then it makes little sense to cut off access precisely to those for whom saving is the most difficult. Not all people will save the same amount in the same length of time, but this does not mean that low savers would not benefit from greater access to institutionalized and subsidized savings mechanisms.

How Do IDAs Work?

Links between saving and the institutional structure of IDAs matter for two reasons. First, asset accumulation probably depends not only on

tastes but also on the constraints and opportunities afforded by institutions (Sherraden, 1991). Second, policy can affect institutions.

With IDAs, three institutional effects may matter. First, the match, apart from its economic incentives, may signal that saving is worthwhile. Second, people may mentally change a match cap — technically a limit — into a goal, so that higher match caps may lead to higher savings for noneconomic reasons. Third, financial education may increase knowledge of how to save and of the benefits of saving (economic models often assume no need for education).

Here, we use Probit regressions to link match rates, match caps, and financial education with the risk of unmatched withdrawals and with the risk of exit. We also use a two-step regression to measure links between program rules and net deposits.¹³ All the regressions start with the 2,378 participants in ADD and control for a wide range of program and participant characteristics.¹⁴

Match Rates

The question of the effect of the match rate on IDA savings relates to classic questions of the elasticity of saving to the rate of return and of the response of employees to match rates in 401(k) plans. The consensus, based on models and data known to be imperfect, is that the elasticity is indistinguishable from zero. Research on 401(k) plans consistently finds that the presence of a match boosts participation, but that higher match rates — at least once past 0.25:1 or so — do not increase contributions and may even decrease them (Bassett, Fleming, and Rodrigues, 1998; Bayer, Bernheim, and Scholz, 1996; Papke and Poterba, 1995; Kusko, Poterba, and Wilcox, 1994).¹⁵ The income effect seems to overwhelm the substitution effect at all but very low rates of return. Of course, the match rates in IDAs are far higher than those in 401(k) plans.

In addition to institutional effects, substitution effects, and income effects, the match rate might be correlated with IDA savings through censoring of desired savings at the match cap. This masks any link between match rates and savings. As of June 30, 2000, 10 percent of participants in ADD were at the match cap. The share censored will increase once they all reach their time cap, much as the number of IRA contributors at the contribution limit is higher on April 15 than in October. Once ADD is complete, we will account for censoring, but we do not do so here.

In sum, institutional effects and substitution effects lead to a positive association between match rates and savings, but the income effect and censoring dampen the link.

In ADD, 24 percent of participants had a match rate of 1:1, 51 percent had 2:1 (the mean and median), 14 percent 3:1, and 6 percent from 4:1 to 7:1. In the regressions, a set of four dummies stands for match rates.

Unmatched withdrawals. Unmatched withdrawals are like negative savings, so the theory discussed above applies in reverse. Compared with participants with match rates of 1:1, participants with match rates of 3:1 or 4:1 to 7:1 had statistically less risk of unmatched withdrawals. Censoring is not an issue in this case, so it appears that institutional and/or substitution effects dominate the income effect.

Exit. People who leave an IDA program are like people eligible for a 401(k) plan who do not join. Consistent with the effects of match rates on participation in 401(k) plans, we expect higher match rates to decrease the risk of exit from IDAs.

For exit, censoring and income effects are irrelevant. It turns out that higher match rates were strongly and statistically significantly linked with less risk of exit. This makes sense, since institutional effects and/or substitution effects are the only forces in play.

Average monthly net deposits. The match rate had no statistically significant link with AMND. This result is consistent with research on 401(k) plans. Like that literature, we fail to control for censoring, but unlike that literature, we acknowledge this failure. Also unlike the 401(k) literature, we control for the match cap and for a host of other variables, and we use individual-level data rather than firm-level data. Thus, although the test here is still flawed, it is probably less flawed than any other tests so far.

Match Cap

The *match cap* is defined as the maximum accumulated deposit eligible for matches. To control for the length of time that different participants have to make match-eligible deposits, we divide the match cap by the number of match-eligible months to give the *monthly savings target*. We call this a *target* both to reflect the belief that participants often change caps into targets and to reflect that many IDA programs in ADD advise participants to deposit this amount each month.

The average monthly savings target in ADD was \$43, and average monthly net deposits per participant were two-thirds of the target. In the regressions, higher targets were strongly and statistically significantly linked with less risk of unmatched withdrawals, with less risk of exit, and with higher average monthly net deposits.

As with links between match rates and savings outcomes, three factors may explain these strongly positive associations between the monthly savings target and savings outcomes in IDAs. These are:

- Institutional effects in which participants change limits into goals. Thus, people may save more (or withdraw less, or exit less) when presented with a higher limit/goal.
- Net deposits are censored at the match cap. If caps vary and if they would censor some participants even in the absence of institutional effects, then censoring would induce a spurious positive correlation between savings outcomes and match caps.
- Endogeneity. Some IDA programs probably assigned higher savings targets to groups of participants whom they expected to save more, regardless of institutional structure. As with censoring, this induces a spurious positive correlation between caps and savings outcomes.

The data from ADD do not allow us to distinguish among these three factors.

Financial Education

Besides matches, a key feature of IDAs is required financial education.¹⁶ Financial education in ADD took two forms, general and asset-specific, with the following broad goals:

- To increase awareness of savings as a wise choice through discussion of long-term benefits.
- To instill stronger future orientation through exercises in planning and budgeting.
- To transfer practical techniques to reallocate resources from consumption to savings, to convert savings to illiquid forms, and to maintain savings through time.

- To communicate IDA rules.
- To provide a setting for peer support and for the exchange of experiences.
- To equip participants to purchase and maintain large assets, houses in particular.

Each program in ADD sets the number of required hours, and some programs probably required more hours if they expected their participants to be low savers. Furthermore, each program selected or developed its own curricula and enforced the financial-education requirement in its own way. MIS IDA recorded only the number of hours attended by each participant. All hours of financial education were not the same, but the analysis here must assume that they were.¹⁷ Average hours required were 13, and the average hours attended per participant were 10.4.

Regression results suggest that net deposits increased about \$1 per month per hour of general financial education, up to 12 hours, at which point more hours had no effect.¹⁸ Asset-specific education followed the same pattern with a large effect up to six hours and then a plateau.

The results from ADD strongly suggest that some financial education improves saving performance. Furthermore, short courses may be just as effective as longer courses.

Where Do IDA Deposits Come From?

IDAs aim to increase saving, but they do so only to the extent that deposits come from new savings rather than shifted (reshuffled) assets. For IRAs and 401(k) plans, research suggests that some deposits come from new savings and some from shifted assets (Bernheim, 1997; Hubbard and Skinner, 1996). Sherraden (1991) argues that the bulk of IDA deposits would be mostly new savings because the poor have few assets to shift. Some evidence for IRAs and 401(k) plans does suggest that the poor are less likely to shift (Engen and Gale, 2000; Bernheim and Scholz, 1993). Still, the poor do have some assets, and the match in IDAs provides strong incentives to shift.

Schreiner *et al* (2001) lay out a framework in which new savings come from increased income, increased net appreciation, increased gifts, and/or decreased consumption. Increased income or decreased

consumption come from increased effort, increased time in production (household or market), and/or increased amounts, returns, or utilization of human capital. In contrast, asset shifts come from increased debt, decreased asset maintenance, or increased net conversions from non-IDA assets.

The ADD data do not distinguish well between new savings and shifted assets. First, like most data sets, some components of net worth are not measured. Second, net worth for participants without IDAs is, by definition, not observed. Third, participants are self-selected and program-selected, so they probably differ from non-participants in ways that make it difficult to use the net worth of non-participants as a proxy for the net worth of participants without IDAs.

If only liquid assets (balances in checking accounts and in pass-book savings accounts, but not cash) held at enrollment could be shifted, and if all liquid assets that could be shifted were indeed shifted, then shifted assets would make up 53 percent (44 percent median) of IDA deposits. The strong assumptions of this exercise do little more than show that shifts were possible.

Survey responses from ADD participants (Moore *et al*, 2001) show that IDA deposits came from both new savings and asset shifts. As examples of new savings, 29 percent were more likely to work longer hours, 41 percent were more likely to work more, 61 percent were more likely to increase income in ways other than working more hours, 70 percent shopped more carefully for food, 68 percent ate out less often, and 34 percent of all participants spent less on alcohol or tobacco. As examples of shifted assets, 35 percent were less likely to save in non-IDA forms, seven percent borrowed from family or friends to finance IDA deposits, 16 percent postponed bill payment, nine percent found it more difficult to pay bills, 12 percent sold household or personal items, 17 percent postponed visits to the doctor or dentist, and eight percent gave up food or other necessities. In sum, IDA deposits were some mix of new savings and shifted assets.

Who Saves in IDAs?

Because IDAs require participants to save and because participants are both self-selected and program-selected, there is some concern that IDAs work better for the most-advantaged of the poor. Evidence from ADD suggests that this is sometimes, but not always, the case.

Demographics

Compared to the U.S. low-income population, participants in ADD were better educated, more likely to be employed, and more likely to have a bank account.¹⁹ This probably reflects how programs in ADD target the “working poor.” Participants in ADD are also more likely to be female (80 percent), African-American (47 percent), or never-married (49 percent).²⁰ This reflects how ADD programs target the disadvantaged among the “working poor.”

Gender, marital status, and employment were not linked with net deposits. Four-year college graduates saved the most, and high-school graduates and two-year college graduates saved the least. All else constant, owners of checking accounts saved about \$50 more per year than others, but ownership of a passbook savings account had no statistical effect.

Public Assistance

Half of participants had received public assistance, either at enrollment or before. This was not, however, linked with net deposits, so unobserved characteristics correlated with receipt of public assistance were not correlated with willingness and/or ability to save in IDAs.

Income

ADD had a means-test at 200 percent of the family-size adjusted poverty guideline, and median income was just at poverty. About 21 percent of participants were below half the poverty line.

In regressions, income was not associated with net deposits, with unmatched withdrawals, or with exit. Furthermore, the savings rate decreased as income increased; the very poor saved a greater share of their income in IDAs than the less poor. This would not be expected from economic theory (Deaton, 1992) or from evidence for the United States as a whole (Wolff, 1998).

What explains this? First, a host of measurement issues tend to depress measured income more for the very poor than for the less poor (Schreiner *et al.*, 2001). This could induce a spurious negative correlation between income and the savings rate. Second, censoring of savings at the match cap could also induce a spurious negative correlation.²¹ Third, institutional effects may be strongest for the poorest. The “pull” of the savings target may be greater for those furthest away. Likewise,

the asset accumulation due to the match is a larger share of total resources for the very poor than for the less-poor. Furthermore, the very poor may have more to learn about how or why to save, so, in response to given a level of financial education or social support/pressure, they may change their behavior more. All three factors — measurement error, censoring, and institutional effects — are probably at work, but the data from ADD cannot disentangle them. Still, the broad lesson is that in IDAs, less income need not imply less savings.

Do the poor save too much in IDAs? Saving postpones consumption, so, at least in the short term, people who save consume less and, all else constant, are worse off. Savers make this short-term sacrifice because they expect that it will improve their long-term well-being. Of course, saving can be overdone, but saving in IDAs is voluntary, and ADD provides little evidence that matches in IDAs have enticed participants to save to the point of harm.

Race/Ethnicity

About 47 percent of participants in ADD were African-American, 37 percent were Caucasian, nine percent Hispanic, three percent Native American, two percent Asian-American, and three percent “Other.” Average monthly net deposits were at least \$19.50 for all groups, but differences between groups were large. Compared with Asian Americans, AMND was \$11.62 less for Hispanics, \$12.77 less for Caucasians, \$20.82 less for African Americans, and \$22.30 less for Native Americans. The groups rank the same on other savings outcomes. Asian Americans had lower risks of unmatched withdrawals and exit, but these risks were about the same for African Americans and Caucasians.

Of course, these differences are not due to race/ethnicity *per se* but rather to a constellation of socially produced unobserved factors (often sedimented through centuries) linked with both savings and race/ethnicity. In a perfect model that controlled for everything, the estimated link between race/ethnicity and savings would be zero.

In the models here, observed characteristics explain about half the savings gap. Even half the gap, however, is large. Most analyses attribute to discrimination differences in outcomes correlated with unobserved factors that are correlated with race/ethnicity. This is correct, but differences in outcomes correlated with observed characteristics that are correlated with race/ethnicity are also due to discrimination. With more data, the correlation between outcomes and unobserved factors

would shrink, but not because discrimination decreased. In the end, what matters are improvements in long-term well-being. This requires smaller gaps in observed and unobserved characteristics and smaller gaps in savings and asset accumulation.

Do IDAs narrow these gaps? The MIS IDA data do not reveal whether disadvantaged groups increased their savings more than others (or whether IDAs increased savings for anyone). It is virtually impossible, however, for IDAs to have worsened the African-American/Caucasian wealth ratio. With a match rate of 2:1, the worst case is that all IDA deposits from African-Americans (\$20.99 per month) came from shifted assets and that all deposits from Caucasians (\$29.04) came from new savings. Even so, the ratio of net worth would fall from about 4:1 at enrollment to about 3:1 at the end of ADD.²² IDAs do not pretend to be a panacea for racial/ethnic gaps in wealth, but they do seem to have improved equity in at least some ways, and they certainly can improve access to institutionalized savings mechanisms for the poor regardless of race/ethnicity.

What Do IDAs Cost?²³

Wise allocation of scarce resources requires some knowledge of costs. All resources have opportunity costs; a dollar used in an IDA is a dollar removed (at least implicitly) from some other use. What matters is not that IDAs have benefits for participants nor that IDAs have benefits for society as a whole. Rather, what matters is that the social net benefits of the use of resources in IDAs exceed the social net benefits of those resources in their best alternative use.

Benefit measurement awaits data from the experimental design. Until then, cost measurement can inform policy and program choices. Even without knowledge of benefits, knowledge of costs sets a benchmark for performance and may prompt greater efforts to improve efficiency.

Data on program expenses in MIS IDA are very rough and almost certainly overstated. We had no way to clean the data, and most host organizations did not break out IDA programs as cost centers. Furthermore, ADD programs were among the first IDA programs and so incurred extraordinary expenses in start up, in policy work, and in guidance for other programs in the field. Data collection for ADD itself added extraordinary costs.

With these caveats, program expenses (without matches) were about \$70 per participant month, or \$2.77 per dollar of net deposits.

With a 2:1 match, total outlays in IDAs were about \$6 per \$1 of net deposits (\$1 savings, \$2 match, and \$3 program expense), or \$2 per dollar accumulated.

Are these costs high or low? There is no benchmark from which to judge. The ultimate criterion is whether benefits exceed costs, but benefits are not yet measured. Furthermore, we do not know what level of efficiency is possible. IDAs are young, and “best practices” continue to evolve.

Costs in ADD did fall as programs grew and matured. Up to June 30, 1999, program expenses were about \$117 per participant-month (\$3.66 per dollar of net deposits); in the 12 months after June 30, 1999, expenses were about \$43 per participant month (\$2.20 per dollar of net deposits).

Would it be better to give participants \$70 rather than to have them save \$25? The comparison is not straightforward. IDAs are more than just a way to transfer resources to the poor (Sherraden, 1991). The institutional structure forces participants to form savings strategies, to save, and then to plan for matched withdrawals. Because IDAs encourage participants to think about their savings, they may spark hope, future orientation, and middle-class values.

Even if costs fell to \$1 per dollar of net deposits and even if social benefits exceeded social costs, funders probably would not support a universal, permanent IDA program with the current decentralized structure and intensive bundle of services. At the same time, qualitative evidence from ADD suggests that participants highly value financial education and close contact with staff. The tension between the desire for intensive services and the cost structures that would allow for wide access may lead to two tiers of IDA designs, the first with broad access, simple services, and lower costs, and the second with targeted access, intensive services, and higher costs.

Discussion

To escape poverty requires asset accumulation. The United States has a wealth of policies that subsidize saving, but they often exclude low-resource households because they leverage existing wealth, operate via tax breaks, or require debt. Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) are a new policy proposal meant to help the poor accumulate assets without these requirements. Withdrawals of IDA deposits are matched if used to buy a home, to pay for post-secondary education, or to finance self-employment. Participants also receive financial education and support from IDA staff.

The American Dream Demonstration (ADD) shows that the poor can save in IDAs. Among the 2,378 participants as of June 30, 2000, average monthly net deposits per participant were \$25.42, or two-thirds of match eligibility. The average participant made a deposit in seven of 12 months. With an average match rate of 2:1, the average participant accumulated assets at a rate of \$75 per month or \$900 per year.

Although the data are not conclusive, the institutional structure of IDAs — the match rate, the match cap or savings target, and financial education — seems to encourage participants to make deposits, to maintain their deposits, and to stay in the program. The effects of the savings target and of financial education are particularly strong.

The MIS IDA data from ADD do not reveal whether IDAs increase savings. Qualitative evidence from other components of the evaluation of ADD suggests that IDA deposits are financed both from new savings and from shifted (reshuffled) assets.

Participants in ADD were more advantaged than the general low-income population in some ways and more disadvantaged others. Gender and receipt of public assistance were not linked with net deposits. All else constant, income was also not linked with the level of net deposits, but the share of income saved in IDAs was greater for the very poor than for the less poor. We suspect that at least part of the explanation lies in institutional effects that are strongest for the poorest.

Although members of all racial/ethnic groups saved in IDAs in ADD, there were large gaps among groups. IDAs almost certainly decreased the ratio of Caucasian net worth to African-American net worth among participants, but the current pattern of unequal savings outcomes for different groups is still disturbing because it represents large amounts of lost potential for asset building, particularly for African Americans and Native Americans. Future work should ask why this occurs and what might be done to narrow the gaps.

IDAs are costly. In the long term, two types of programs seem likely, one with a universal and permanent design with low costs and one a local and temporary design that offers greater services but that costs more.

Mark Schreiner is Research Director in the Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis. He studies ways to help the poor build assets through savings and loans in the United States and the Third World. In the United States, his research interests are asset-based development policy — especially Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) — and microenterprise. He was lead

author of Savings and Asset Accumulation in Individual Development Accounts, and he designed the benefit-cost analysis of the Down Payments on the American Dream Demonstration of IDAs. He also conducted the first cost study of an IDA program. His microenterprise work appears in Evaluation Review and in Social Service Review. In the Third World, Mark's research interest is microfinance, and he designed and built the first credit-scoring models for microfinance organizations.

Michael Sherraden is Benjamin E. Youngdahl Professor of Social Development and founding director of the Center for Social Development, George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University in St. Louis. He was educated at Harvard (AB) and the University of Michigan (MSW, Ph.D.). As an overarching theme, his work focuses on development rather than maintenance. He is particularly interested in ways in which social policies do not detract from — but rather contribute to — economic growth of households and communities. His work is characterized by innovative approaches to long-standing policy challenges, frequently drawing on insights from U.S. history, as well as experiences of other nations. Topics of research and policy development include service by youth (The Moral Equivalent of War? 1990), productive aging (Productive Aging: Concepts and Controversies, forthcoming) and asset building (Assets and the Poor, 1991; Inclusion in Asset Building, forthcoming). Sherraden coined the phrase “asset-based policy” and proposed matched savings in the form of IDAs. He co-conceived the American Dream Demonstration, the first major demonstration of IDAs, and designed the research agenda. Research results from ADD have been influential in federal and state proposals for IDAs and other matched-savings policies. He introduced the concept of Individual Development Accounts.

Margaret M. Clancy, a Project Director with the Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis, is involved in national, state, and local projects of IDA data collection, analysis, and reporting. Her work also includes MIS IDA software development and training for state and regional IDA initiatives. She is involved with IDA program and policy design. Margaret was formerly a Vice President at a large trust company, where she worked in the pension and institutional division administering corporate 401(k) and defined benefit pension plans. She received her Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from Southern Illinois University in

Edwardsville, Illinois, and her Master of Social Work degree from Washington University in St. Louis. She is also a Certified Employee Benefits Specialist.

Lissa Johnson is a Project Director with the Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis. Her current projects include IDA data monitoring and evaluation, IDA software design and development, end-user training, and youth-service information network design. Johnson received her B.A. in English Literature from Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, and her Master of Social Work degree from Washington University in St. Louis. She is also a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) in the state of Missouri.

Jami Curley is a doctoral student at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis and a research associate for the Center for Social Development. She works on the MIS IDA data from the American Dream Demonstration — cleaning data, conducting analyses, and reporting.

Min Zhan is a doctoral student at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis. She is also a research associate for the Center for Social Development. She works on the data from the American Dream Demonstration and her responsibilities include conducting analyses and writing reports and academic publications. She is particularly interested in the uses of IDAs for post-secondary education under the current welfare reform.

Michal Grinstein-Weiss is a Ph.D. candidate in the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis. She received her BA and MSW from The University of Haifa, where she graduated with honors. Currently, Michal is a research associate at the Center of Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis. Prior to entering the doctoral program, she was a research associate at Minerva Center For Youth Studies, and at Richard Crossman Chair, in The University of Haifa. While there, she successfully managed national research projects and co-authored several articles and reports.

Sondra Beverly is an assistant professor in the School of Social Welfare at the University of Kansas. She received an M.S.W. and a Ph.D. from the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis and an M.A. in economics from the University of

Missouri–St. Louis. Dr. Beverly is Faculty Associate at the Center for Social Development and Research Affiliate at the Joint Center for Poverty Research. She is currently evaluating a program that links tax refunds to low-cost bank accounts in an effort to encourage account ownership and saving.

Notes

- ¹ These insights come from a standard economic-growth model with stochastic production and subsistence constraints.
- ² Some IDA programs also match for job training, home repair, investment in retirement accounts, or even for the purchase of a car or computer.
- ³ Bush proposed a regressive system within Social Security, and Gore proposed a progressive system outside Social Security.
- ⁴ Schreiner *et al* (2001) describe programs and rules in ADD.
- ⁵ Although programs set rules before enrollment, the rules still depended in part on expected participant behavior, so they are tainted by endogeneity bias to some unknown extent.
- ⁶ Economic theory does not unambiguously predict that savings will increase in response to an increased rate of return. People might save more due to the increase in the inter-temporal price of current consumption (substitution effect). But people might also save less if the inter-temporal price of future consumption falls enough (income effect). We take up this issue again below.
- ⁷ Parts of this section and the next draw on Beverly and Sherraden (1999).
- ⁸ Some participants in ADD hesitated to enroll because IDAs seemed too good not to be a scam.
- ⁹ The empirical results from here on are drawn from Schreiner *et al* (2001).
- ¹⁰ These and other figures presented here will change as ADD progresses.
- ¹¹ Median net worth is participant-by-participant, not median assets minus median liabilities.
- ¹² Likewise, many IRA contributors make a deposit only if they have extra cash in tax season.
- ¹³ The first part of the Heckman two-step controls for unobserved factors that influence both the risk of exit and the level of average monthly net deposits for non-exits.
- ¹⁴ Detailed results are in Schreiner *et al* (2001) and are available upon request.

- ¹⁵ These studies all have several (usually unacknowledged) flaws. First, they do not control for censoring at the contribution limit. Second, they do not control for the contribution limit, for the combined maximum contribution plus match, or for more than a handful of other variables. Third, they measure match rates and contributions not for individuals but for averages across participants in a firm. Fourth, they do not control for endogeneity between the match rate and savings.
- ¹⁶ Bernheim and Garrett (1996) find that financial education increases participation in 401(k) plans and that the effects are largest for those who saved little before the education. Bayer, Bernheim, and Scholz (1996) find that financial education also increases contributions to 401(k) plans. They also find that the effects are largest for non-highly compensated employees.
- ¹⁷ Schreiner *et al* (2001) discuss other weaknesses in the data on hours of financial education.
- ¹⁸ The two-step regression has exit as the first step and controls for the length of participation and thus for the opportunity to attend financial education. In principle, a two-step hazard model would produce cleaner estimates, but MIS IDA did not record monthly changes in the independent variables nor exactly when participants attended classes.
- ¹⁹ This looks at people in households with income at or below 200 percent of the family-size adjusted poverty threshold in the first week of September 1995 in the Survey of Income and Program Participation. The fall in poverty since 1995 suggests that, all else constant, participants in ADD are likely more disadvantaged than the general low-income population in 1995.
- ²⁰ About 42 percent were in households headed by unmarried women with children.
- ²¹ As discussed above, it is not worthwhile to control for censoring until ADD is complete.
- ²² The average absolute wealth gap, however, would increase in this scenario. Also, it is unclear how IDAs might change the aggregate wealth gap between Caucasians and African Americans.
- ²³ This section draws on Schreiner (2000) and Sherraden (2000).

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