

ESF

INVESTEERT IN
JOUW TOEKOMST

NOTA BIJ IMPACTEVALUATIE OPROEP WERKINLEVING BIJ JONGEREN (WIJ!)

Verslag van interviews met medewerkers van VDAB en
bijkomende statistische analyses

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is werk



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1 Introduction

Recently, the Centre for Research on Impact Evaluation (CRIE) of the European Commission conducted a counterfactual impact evaluation of the “WerkInleving voor Jongeren!” (WIJ!) program that originated from ESF-call 312. In the WIJ program, NEET¹ youth were given extensive guidance in order to better prepare them for the labor market. However, one of the main shortcomings of the evaluation, as acknowledged by the researchers, was the lack of insight into how individuals were allocated to the WIJ by the caseworkers from the VDAB², the Flemish Public Employment Services (PES). Unfortunately, this weakens the conclusions that can be drawn from this analysis³. To gain additional insight into this allocation process, we have performed several interviews with caseworkers from the PES. In this report, we will discuss the findings of these interviews. Furthermore, the PES supplied us, after CRIE had finished their report, with additional information on whether or not the job seekers in our control group have participated in a tender. This data is also exploited in additional analyses that are included in an appendix. The results of these analyses and their implications for the CRIE report are briefly discussed in the conclusion as well.

The ESF-call that was evaluated by CRIE was extended in another ESF-call (404) in which some small changes were made to the WIJ program. When we talk specifically about this follow up program, we will refer to it as WIJ3, while the program that was evaluated by CRIE will be labeled as WIJ2. The interviews that were carried out can shed light onto the general allocation process⁴ and can both be used to help in assessing the validity of the findings in the evaluation of WIJ2 as well as support an upcoming evaluation of WIJ3. We will therefore also give specific recommendations for future evaluations at the end of this note.

2 The interviews

2.1 Participants

To find suitable interview candidates, we have requested contact information for caseworkers from the PES that had experience in assigning young job seekers to the WIJ program. Subsequently, they provided us with a list of caseworkers that had assigned people to the WIJ. Several caseworkers on

¹ Not in Education, Employment or Training

² Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding

³ Because the WIJ specifically targeted young people that had difficulties in finding a job, simply comparing those that participated in the program to those who did not participate would yield a biased estimate of the impact of the program on the chances of being in employment or education. To enable comparisons between program participants and non-participants, a matching approach was used in this evaluation report. The key assumption in this approach is that, after every participant has been matched to similar non-participants based on observable characteristics, both groups are similar on all relevant dimensions, except for the treatment itself. If unobserved differences between both groups remain due to characteristics that were not taken into account, the selection bias will not completely be accounted for. Therefore, it is crucial that there is sufficient insight into which individuals were selected to participate in the WIJ. However, as indicated by the researchers, it was unclear how caseworkers from the PES decided to allocate certain individuals to the WIJ.

⁴ As will be discussed below, caseworkers generally didn’t see big differences between both programs and therefore did not change their allocation strategy.



these lists were contacted and were asked if they were willing to participate in an interview⁵. In total, seven caseworkers were interviewed. To ensure that our sample represents caseworkers that work in different environments, we have selected caseworkers from both bigger cities as well as from smaller cities.

2.2 Contents of the interview

During semi-structured interviews, PES caseworkers were asked a series of questions on how they assigned people to the WIJ and how they perceived the WIJ. Although each interview is of course unique, in general they were asked the following things. First, they were asked how they decided to assign a person to the WIJ or not. After they had talked about all things that they could think of, they were also asked if other factors such as age, their gut feeling, perceived chance of employment, language proficiency, work experience, digital literacy, having a realistic job target and the preferences of the job seeker him- or herself played a role. Next, they were asked if capacity at the external partner influenced the decision. To finish the interview, they were asked if they had a clear view on what happened to job seekers in the WIJ program and what the differences and similarities were between the WIJ and other tenders/programs.

3 Findings

3.1 Differences between WIJ2 and WIJ3

About half of the caseworkers that we have interviewed only had experience with assigning young job seekers to WIJ3, the successor of the WIJ program that was evaluated by CRIE. However, those that had experience with both ESF-calls did not see any significant differences in how young job seekers were allocated to the program. They argued that the target group did not change, so their allocation strategy did not change either. As such, we assume that our findings apply to both WIJ2 as well as WIJ3.

*“Interviewer: if you would compare the WIJ2 to the WIJ3, was the allocation there different?
No, no. My experience is that this isn’t the case” -Caseworker 1*

3.2 Differences between WIJ and tenders

When asked about the difference between the WIJ and tenders, most caseworkers did not really seem to differentiate between the two. One interviewee just stated that the WIJ was “specifically for younger people”, so young people would be sent to the WIJ and others to another tender. The major decision for caseworkers seemed to be if they would assign a job seeker to an external partner or not, rather than to which specific partner or program.

⁵ Out of nine people, only two people were not interviewed. The first was not interviewed due to a temporarily higher workload than usual. The interview would have needed to be postponed for a couple of months. The other potential interviewee already had a colleague who had done the interview earlier and could thus have discussed the questions with her beforehand. All other caseworkers agreed to be interviewed.



This would mean that allocation to an external partner is somewhat random and suggests that using these other people in tenders to construct a control group could be a viable strategy. After CRIE finished their report, the PES supplied us with additional information on whether or not people in our control group participated in a tender. This allowed us to perform such additional analyses using only those who were in a tender as potential controls. The results of these analyses are shown in the appendix and are discussed in the conclusion of this note.

3.3 Personal factors that influence allocation to the WIJ

3.3.1 Age and education

The WIJ was primarily focused on NEET young. As such, it targeted young job seekers below 26 years old who were low- or medium educated. Although exceptions were allowed, almost all participants fell into this category.

3.3.2 Being ready for the labor market

When asked about what they based their decision to allocate individuals to the WIJ on, several factors emerged. One interviewee noted that those who were ready for the labor market were rarely assigned to the WIJ. For example, if they were not actively applying for jobs, or they were not very proficient at it, they were a lot more likely to be allocated to the WIJ.

“[...] And if I notice that these young people really need intensive guidance, than I start to talk about the WIJ project. What it is about...”

Interviewer: And how do you notice this?

Euh.. So I always ask people to bring proof that they applied for jobs to the first meeting. If they don't bring anything, or they say 'I haven't applied for anything yet', then I ask them 'do you have a resume? Do you have a motivation letter? Are you familiar with these?' and if they say 'well, no I don't have a resume', then I start talking about this WIJ project.” – Caseworker 2

“I first look at 'Can they make their own resume, can they make a motivation letter on their own, does the client know which channels he can use to find jobs?' Then I also give them the room to do this. If I then see that it doesn't work, then I start to think 'okay, now I can use an external partner' so that there, the client can get intensive guidance and the client can take care of himself. Actually, we try to make an assessment of whether or not someone is self-reliant and that we did based on, in our conversations, ask about things. For example, ask them to bring proof of job applications that they have done.” - Caseworker 3

All other caseworkers also mentioned this as an important factor. If information on how often job seekers have applied for jobs would be available, this could be used in the matching procedure. This would probably greatly increase the quality of the matches.



3.3.3 Motivation

Related to this, one interviewer noted that how the young job seeker interacted with her was an important indicator for how engaged someone was. Those who were more proactive where seen as more motivated and therefore more likely to find a job without additional guidance. These people where thus less likely to be inscribed in the WIJ. She mentioned that

“But if I notice that these young people are really entrepreneurial, that have a resume, a motivation letter and they apply for jobs daily... I won’t send those to the WIJ. But if after, for example, six months, I see that they have applied for jobs and nothing comes of it, then I will talk about the WIJ project, because it shows that something is wrong to get a job.” – Caseworker 2

“Interviewer: But that interaction, you can also see it in ‘My Career’ [VDAB-tool “Mijn loopbaan”], if they fill in a lot of things there...?”

Yes, yes, absolutely [enthusiastically], we can deduce a lot from that. Even amongst the elder, you can learn a lot from that. We’re actually no longer allowed to say this, but these people are really self-reliant. They don’t really need the help.” – Caseworker 1

That is not to say that all WIJ-participants were less motivated. One caseworker, from a major city in Flanders, noted that some interviewees specifically asked for more intensive guidance and were very motivated to participate in the WIJ. In general, it seems that there are two groups of people in the WIJ. One group of people that were motivated to join and wanted to do this as soon as it was suggested and another group of people that wanted to postpone participation in the WIJ and first wanted to try to find a job without this additional guidance.

“So I suggest it [to go to the WIJ project], and then I look at how they react and I must say, that those who I suggest it to, they do go for it, they seem to be interested.

Interviewer: Would you ever not suggest it because you think they would not be interested?”

Well, they have to do something, right? I have to evaluate them, so I have to let them make a choice [to join the WIJ project or to get a negative evaluation]. I let them ... If they would offer a solution themselves like applying for more jobs, and being able to provide more proof of that, than I will allow that. Then I give them one month of respite. Then I say: ‘I will invite you again next month, we’ll see how it went in the last month. If you haven’t done enough of an effort, well then it will be the WIJ project.’” – Caseworker 2

It appears as if motivation can also be captured by looking at how much interaction there is between the young job seeker and the caseworker. The degree to which the online profile by the PES (“Mijn Loopbaan”) is completed could be used as an indicator for this. Furthermore, there seemed to be two types of participants in the WIJ. In an attempt to differentiate between these two groups of job seekers, it could be interesting to look at differences between those who have joined the WIJ quickly



perform as good on the labor market as those who have participated in tenders. This leads us to conclude that it is very likely that the original analyses by CRIE suffered from a selection bias due to which the WIJ-participants were mostly compared with job seekers who had a stronger position on the labor market⁶.

These interviews have also illustrated that, in addition to personal characteristics, there are some external factors that influence the possibility of participating in the WIJ. These external factors could be exploited in future impact evaluation. For example, by constructing a control group of people that may have been sent to the WIJ had these external factors been different for them. Instead of using the entire population as possible matches, we could restrict our sample to those were less likely to be in the WIJ due to external factors, as we have done in the additional analyses that we performed in the appendix. This would leave us with a pool of young jobseekers that, regardless of personal characteristics, were less likely to participate in the WIJ and would therefore, in theory, also include more people that would be suitable for the WIJ. During our interviews, two of these external factors that could influence the likelihood of being included in the WIJ have emerged. The first external factor that could influence the likelihood of being sent to the WIJ is the caseworker that a job seeker is assigned to. Those who were assigned to a caseworker that rarely sends people to the WIJ may have joined the WIJ if they had a different caseworker. The second external factor is the city where the individual lives. Although, in principle, the whole of Flanders is covered, there is not always a WIJ program close by. Because it's not always possible to go to another city to join the WIJ, some young people, who would have been in the WIJ had it been in their own city, will not participate in the WIJ. There are also differences between cities in the availability of places at the WIJ. If there are no more spots available, some job seekers will not be able to join the WIJ, while elsewhere, they would have. In order to be able to use these external factors, we would of course also require some data on these external factors.

5 Appendix

5.1 Additional analyses based on information on tenders

After CRIE had finished their report, the PES supplied us with additional data on whether or not job seekers have participated in tenders, which can be used to extend the analyses performed by CRIE. This data, however, is quite undetailed and therefore does not allow us to perform extensive analyses. It simply shows whether someone has participated in one of the large tenders of the PES⁷. It does not say anything about which tender they participated in, how long they participated in this tender, when they participated or who the organizing external partner was. Nonetheless, we can still expect that this group, in general, is a group that benefits from additional guidance when looking for a job and is thus

⁶ It is also worth noting that 19,15% of the controls that were deemed suitable and available for matching participated in a tender. After matching, the number of selected controls that has participated in a tender increased to 20,89% or 21,97%, depending on the specific matching procedure. This relatively small increase also indicates that the original matching procedure was unable to select those who are most similar to the WIJ-participants.

⁷ There were also some smaller tenders on which there was no information available.

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quite similar to the WIJ-participants. By restricting the controls available for matching to those who have participated in a tender, the number of available controls decreases from 132 160 to 25 315.

Using this restricted group of potential controls, we have rerun the matching algorithms used by CRIE. The estimated impact of the program on rates of employment, unemployment, education and inactivity can be found in figures 1 -8. In order to allow for an easy comparison between these results and those obtained by CRIE, we have also included the results previously found by CRIE on the same page on the right-hand side. As in the report by CRIE, three different ways of matching were used. The figures in the left top corner uses Coarsened Exact Matching (CEM) for all variables. The figures in the right top corners shows the second specification (Exact Matching (EM) on relevant dates, controlling for other variables in the regression) and the figure in the bottom left corner uses a combination of CEM and Propensity Score Matching (PSM). More detailed information on these matching methods and the variables that they have used can be found in the report by CRIE. In figure 1, the impact of the WIJ-program on employment probability is shown for WIJ-participants in comparison to those who have been in a tender. The vertical axis indicates the employment probability in comparison to the control group and the horizontal axis shows the number of months since the start of the program. In general, the difference between these two groups is equal to around 0, with one matching method indicating a small positive effect and another indicating a small negative impact. This is in clear contrast to the findings in the report by CRIE (shown in figure 2) in which all three matching approaches have suggested that there is a negative impact of the WIJ-program. We can see similar results in figures 3 and 4 for unemployment rates. The original report by CRIE showed significantly higher chances to be unemployed after having participated in the WIJ-program (figure 4), while our new analyses reveal that there are no clear differences (figure 3). If any difference exists, figure 3 suggests that it lowers chances of unemployment slightly. For education (figures 5 and 6), we find similar results. After matching with those who have participated in tenders, there do not seem to be significant differences. Inactivity rates (figures 7 and 8) seem to suggest that those who have participate in the WIJ are slightly more likely to become inactive over time than others who have participated in tenders. However, this effect appears to be so small (about 2%) that it seems negligible. For a more elaborate interpretation of these types of figures, we refer to the CRIE report. All things considered, it appears as if there is no large difference between the WIJ and tenders concerning labor market outcomes.





Figure 1. Differences in employment rates between WIJ-participants and matched controls from tenders. Source: own analyses.

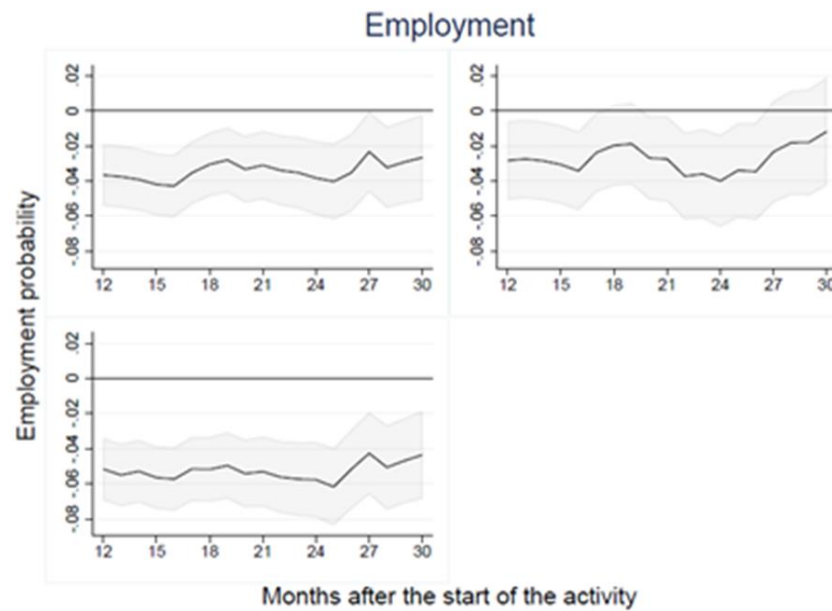


Figure 2. Differences in employment rates between WIJ-participants and matched controls from all possible controls. Source: CRIE report.

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Figure 3. Differences in unemployment rates between WIJ-participants and matched controls from tenders. Source: own analyses.

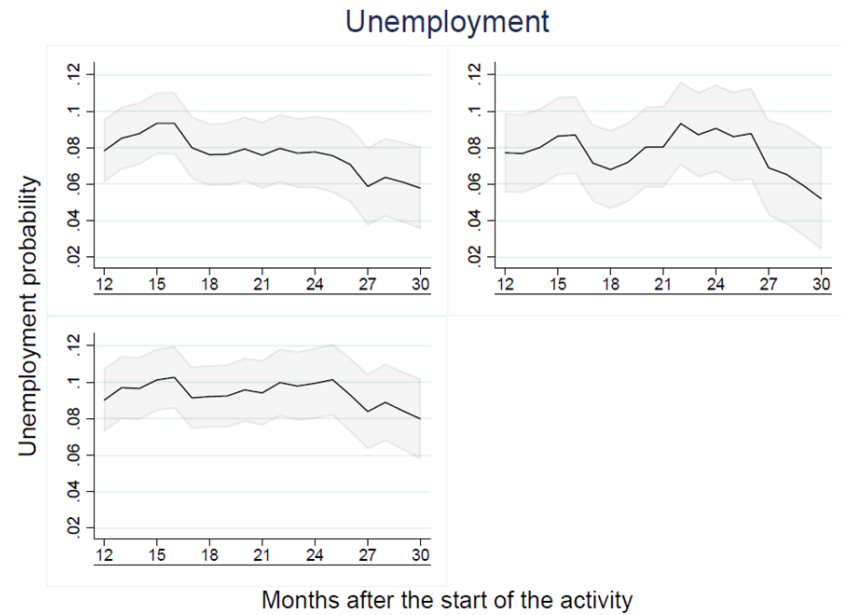


Figure 4. Differences in unemployment rates between WIJ-participants and matched controls from all possible controls. Source: CRIE report.

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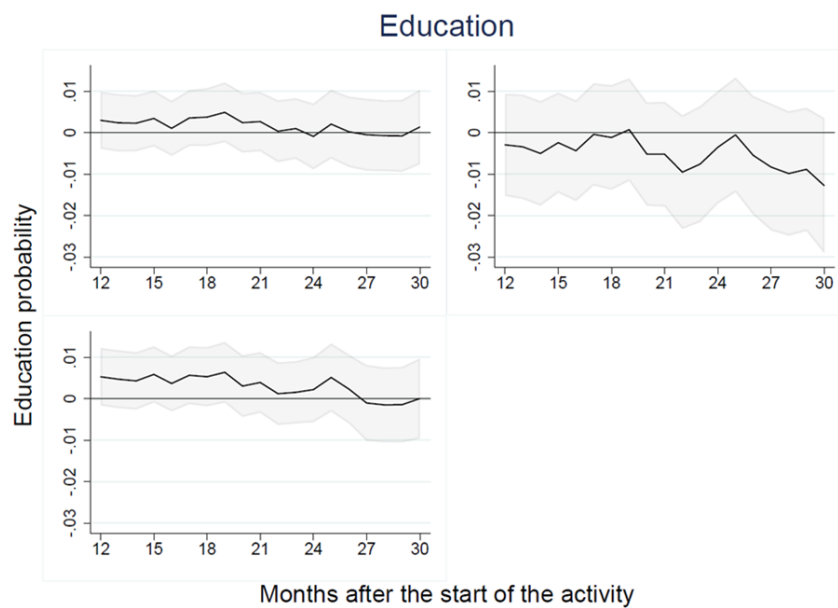


Figure 5. Differences in education rates between WIJ-participants and matched controls from tenders. Source: own analyses.

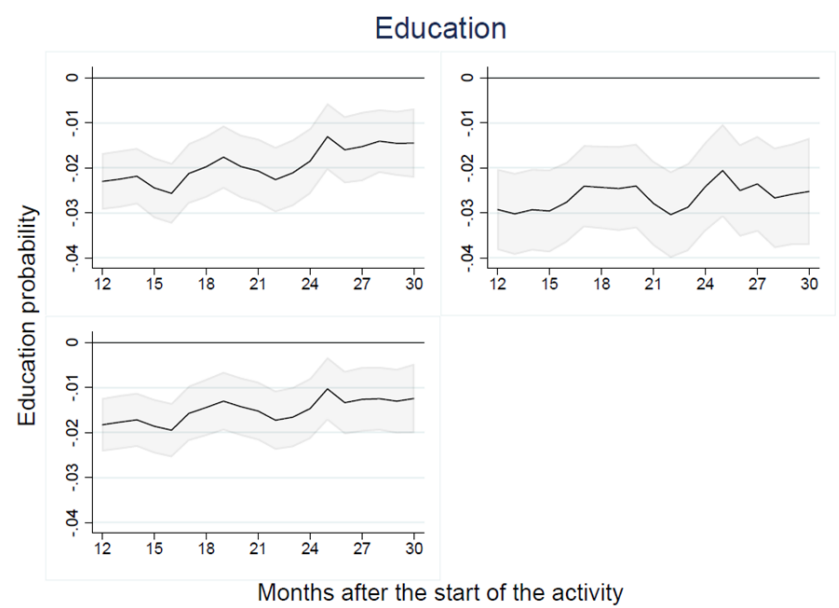


Figure 6. Differences in education rates between WIJ-participants and matched controls from all possible controls. Source: CRIE report.



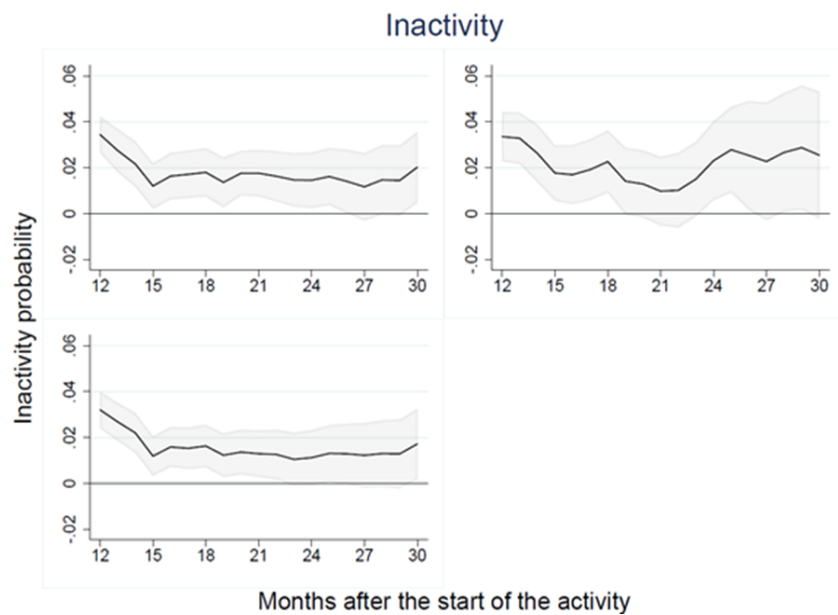


Figure 7. Differences in inactivity rates between WIJ-participants and matched controls from tenders. Source: own analyses.

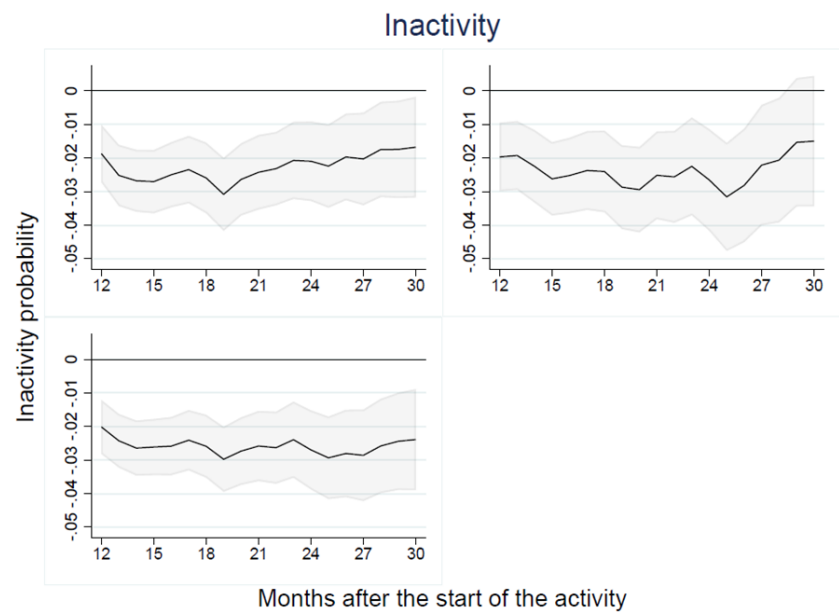


Figure 8. Differences in inactivity rates between WIJ-participants and matched controls from all possible controls. Source: CRIE report.

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