

Citation

Bruno, L., & Pistorino, C. (2007). Youth Opportunity grant initiative: process evaluation final report. Washington, DC: Decision Information Resources, Inc.

Highlights

- This report summarized the results of the final round of the process evaluation of the Youth Opportunity (YO) grant initiative. The YO program offered educational, employment, leadership enhancement, and other support services to all youth ages 14 to 21 in targeted high-poverty areas across the country in order to boost their high school graduation, college enrollment, and employment rates.
- The study assessed program implementation and examined strengths and weaknesses of the YO model by gathering information on services provided, program outcomes, and implementation challenges and best practices at 25 sites. It drew on management information systems (MIS) data; group interviews with program administrators, line staff, and youth participants; and past process evaluation reports.
- Projects were successful in enrolling a large number of participants and nearly 40 percent of those enrolled received a long-term placement. Projects eventually succeeded in establishing YO centers but faced challenges in launching and running the centers, delivering comprehensive and integrated youth development services, sustaining long-term youth engagement, and developing partnerships for sustainability.

Features of the Youth Opportunity Grant Initiative

In 2000, the Employment and Training Administration (ETA) awarded YO grants to 36 sites in urban, rural, and Native American locations in 30 states, and over the course of their five-year period served 67,710 youth. The YO model had five key features: (1) geographic saturation, or the eligibility of all youth ages 14 to 21 in targeted high-poverty areas to participate in the program; (2) the establishment of YO community centers, where youth would be able to gather, socialize, and engage in program activities in a safe and welcoming environment; (3) the linkage of leadership opportunities, support services, and educational and career-related programming under a youth development framework; (4) long-term engagement of youth after their completion of program activities; and (5) partnerships with external organizations to ensure program continuity beyond the project period. ETA selected 15 types of youth development services to offer to youth, but allowed sites to combine and emphasize strategies as needed to develop intervention packages best suited to their participant pool and local context.

Features of the Study

This study assessed program implementation and strengths and weaknesses of the five elements of the YO model. It examined the services provided in the final phase of program implementation, described how services changed over time, and compared service strategies and outcomes for in-school youth (ISY) versus out-of-school youth (OSY). It discussed key human capital and social outcomes, analyzed how

they varied across ISY and OSY, and identified factors associated with positive outcomes by comparing the three best-performing sites with the four lowest-ranking sites. The study conducted a combined analysis of information from three data sources: (1) MIS data from all five years of the program; (2) previous process evaluation reports; and (3) group interviews conducted in months 3 through 8 of program year 5 (2005) with program administrators, line staff, and youth participants at 25 of the 30 rural and urban sites (the 6 Native American sites were not included in the study). The study was part of a broader evaluation of the program, which included an ethnographic study, an analysis of MIS data, and a youth survey to assess changes in labor market outcomes.

Findings

Most sites were able to establish one or more YO centers and were successful in creating safe and comfortable spaces that youth found appealing. Project staff did find it challenging to set up and run these centers due to the size of the grant, the large number of partners, the short start-up period, and constraints in management capacity and continuity. Despite these difficulties, the YO program succeeded in reaching large numbers of eligible students and saturating its targeted low-income areas; 14 of the 25 projects studied met enrollment targets.

Sites faced difficulties designing and delivering comprehensive and integrated youth development services. They focused instead on high school graduation (especially for ISY) and long-term employment (especially for OSY). Sites emphasized provision of job readiness training, internships, short-term occupational skills training, short-term unsubsidized jobs, and generalized education diploma (GED) preparation. Program strategies varied for ISY and OSY.

The projects were successful in ensuring their participants achieved important educational and employment goals, with 44 percent of OSY and 36 percent of ISY receiving long-term placements. OSY were more likely to receive job placements, whereas ISY were more likely to opt for college entry. Take-up rates among those placed were 61 percent for OSY and 46 percent for ISY. Enrollment rates among those placed in college were 26 percent for OSY and 54 percent for ISY.

The study found that some, but not all, elements of the YO model had been successfully implemented; not many projects were able to successfully engage participating youth in the long term or conceptualize and implement the more holistic approach to youth development put forward by the YO model, which sought to improve not only academic and employment outcomes, but also leadership capacity and social skills. Only a few projects were able to leverage partnerships successfully to increase the sustainability of the YO program. Only 9 of 25 were able to retain some YO programming upon grant completion, and only 2 anticipated being able to continue providing the comprehensive set of YO services.

Considerations for Interpreting the Findings

This was a well-executed study of the YO program, which set out and answered its research questions systematically. It relied on a variety of data sources, validated data using on-site member checks and regular triangulation across sources, and took steps to increase study objectivity by conducting consistency checks across field reports and using a coding scheme to analyze site visit data. The findings provided a helpful summary of the program's core activities and offered insights into the factors influencing key outcomes. The report's lessons learned chapter is particularly rich, describing at length the solutions proposed by respondents to key implementation challenges.