

Citation

Mitchell, M., Jenkins, D., Nguyen, D., Lerman, A., & M. DeBerry. (2003). Evaluation of the Youthbuild Program. Report submitted to U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Research and Development Division. Chicago: The Counselors of Real Estate.

Highlights

- This report presents an implementation analysis of the Youthbuild program. The program provided hands-on construction training, educational experiences, leadership training, and counseling and other support to youth ages 16 to 24 who had very low incomes (or resided in very low-income households) and had dropped out of high school.
- The study examined Youthbuild programs in 20 sites, focusing on program design, grantees' characteristics, changes in program participants' outcomes, and costs of operation. The study used program documentation, staff interviews, site visits, participant interviews, and a literature review of other workforce development programs targeting at-risk youth.
- The program was successful in enrolling and graduating more participants, and working on more housing units, than planned. More participants held jobs and a high school diploma or general equivalency degree (GED) at program exit than entry. However, many grantees faced implementation challenges.
- The authors noted that study results should not be interpreted as generalizable to all Youthbuild program sites because studied sites were only those that received a second round of funding.

Features of the Youthbuild Program

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) began funding the national Youthbuild program in 1992. From 1996 to 2002, HUD funded 521 grants to 253 program grantees. The program served at-risk youth ages 16 to 24 and sought to provide opportunities for meaningful work and service, educational experiences, and employment skills training. The program also sought to foster leadership skills and a commitment to community development, and to expand the supply of permanent affordable housing for homeless and low-income families (as a result of the construction component). HUD required Youthbuild programs to spend half of their time on hands-on construction activities and the remaining half on other program components, such as educational activities, leadership training, and other support. At least 75 percent of the participants at each site were required to be high school dropouts and youth who had very low incomes or were from very low-income households. The maximum length of participation in the program was capped at 24 months, though participants could still obtain services up to 12 months after completing training. Program grantees were typically local governmental agencies, community- or faith-based nonprofit organizations, and educational institutions.

Features of the Study

The study sought to describe the program's design, grantees' characteristics, changes in participants' outcomes, and operating costs. The study drew on three data sources: (1) a literature review on Youthbuild and other youth workforce development programs; (2) an examination of grantees' records

from 128 grantees; and (3) site visits to 20 grantee sites. Site visitors interviewed key program administrators, staff, and some program participants, and collected program documentation. The study included grantee sites in 19 states and the District of Columbia; 17 sites were urban and 3 were rural. To be eligible for the study, sites had to be currently operating grants and have received a grant in the past. Sites were selected to capture variation in funding amount, urban and rural locations, construction type, type of service provider, and the number of units proposed to be built or rehabilitated. The study was conducted from spring 2002 to spring 2003.

Findings

Grantees offered a variety of services and activities to program participants. All grantees offered hands-on construction training, educational experiences, leadership training, counseling, and other support activities. Some grantees offered other activities, such as entrepreneurial training and drivers' education courses. All grantees in the sample included academic training services, but approaches varied. Many sampled grantees offered counseling and substance abuse, pregnancy, violence, and HIV prevention services. Leadership training was delivered in a variety of ways; the authors highlighted student government-like "advisory boards."

Overall, the study found that effective programs among the sampled sites had strong and dynamic executive directors, program managers, and other leadership staff members. Many grantees faced substantial implementation challenges. Several grantees faced high staff turnover due to uncertain funding and low operating budgets. Some grantees tried to cut costs by stretching beyond the capacity of staff members. Partnerships with other organizations were sometimes frustrating and dysfunctional. The grantees also found it difficult to balance service delivery and housing construction. The authors reported that some sampled programs had to call in professional construction crews to complete projects. Grantees adjusted their expectations to focus on degree and employment attainment, rather than the construction objectives.

Despite these challenges, grantees enrolled and graduated more participants, and worked on and built more housing units, than proposed. More participants held a high school diploma or a GED at program exit than at entry (29 percent compared with 11 percent). An additional 12 percent of participants pursued higher education after the program. The 20 sites placed 36 percent of enrolled participants into jobs; only 9 percent held jobs at entry. Of those employed, 35 percent entered the construction field. New housing built was generally inhabited by the very-low income participants. The study reported that participants faced challenges such as unstable housing, health and behavioral problems, and a number of other risk factors; not being able to meet attendance requirements was the primary reason for program dropout.

Considerations for Interpreting the Findings

The study clearly identified the research topics of interest and explored an array of data sources to explore these topics. It also included a systematic description of findings and effectively illustrated some findings using case studies and descriptive quantitative data from program documents. However, the study did not include a thorough description of the data collection methods, respondents, or analysis methods for site visits. This makes it difficult to determine the extent to which the findings based on site visits reflect the average program experience. The authors noted that study results should not be interpreted as generalizable to all Youthbuild program sites because studied sites were those that received a second round of funding and could have been more representative of successful sites.