Decision Information Resources, Inc.

Youth Opportunity Grant Initiative: Ethnographic Evaluation Final Report

December 2005

Submitted to:

Dan Ryan
Employment and Training Administration
The United States Department of Labor
200 Constitution Ave, NW
Room N-5637
Washington, D.C. 20210

Submitted by:

Decision Information Resources, Inc.
2600 Southwest Freeway, Suite 900
Houston, TX 77098

Authors:

Heather Lewis-Charp,
Sengsouvanh (Sukey) Soukamneuth,
and Annelies Goger of
Social Policy Research Associates

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Tables

Executive Summary

In 2000, 36 Youth Opportunity (YO) programs were funded by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) to provide services—including education, employment, support, and leadership development—to youths from age 14 through 21 in high-poverty urban, rural, and Native American communities.

The YO initiative represented a significant effort to transform distressed neighborhoods by engaging all or most youths within designated Empowerment Zones (EZs) in positive and productive activities. This report highlights findings from a 5-year (2000–2005) ethnographic study of 35 YO communities, which assessed community well-being before and after the delivery of the YO grant services.

Evaluation Design

This ethnographic report describes how residents view the health and well-being of their YO communities. It also describes how external factors—such as economic trends, the quality of youth and education services, and the presence of adult mentors—may have influenced the ability of the YO program to achieve its goals.

During the design phase of this evaluation, we developed a 4-dimension framework of community well-being to guide ethnographic data collection and analysis and within which to report our findings:

- physical and demographic characteristics
- social networks and conditions
- economic opportunity structure
- institutional infrastructure

As part of the YO ethnography, we visited 35 sites: 24 urban, 6 rural, and 5 Native American. This report draws on 35 Year 3 and 24 Year 5 analytic site profiles. It also draws on census data and federal data on housing, teen pregnancy, education, poverty, and crime in order to understand the context of YO communities.

Physical and Demographic Characteristics

The physical and demographic characteristics of YO communities were the most visible and least changeable dimensions that we examined in the ethnography. In this section, we discuss some of the core themes emerging from our study.

- **Geographic Isolation**. All but one of the rural and Native American communities in the YO study were distant from major population centers, and this was a primary factor in the lack of economic opportunities within these communities. Although urban EZ neighborhoods benefited from their relative proximity to transportation networks and business activity, they, too, were often isolated because in many urban communities, the EZ was separated from central business and tourist centers by freeways, industrial zones, or waterways.

- **Lack of Transportation**. Transportation was particularly challenging for rural and Native American sites. Other than lack of jobs, transportation is the most-often-cited barrier to employment among rural residents. All of the urban YO communities had bus systems, but many of these systems were slow, inconveniently located, or unreliable. Lack of bus stops within the community was particularly challenging for urban youths. In neighborhoods with high crime or gang activity, youths were often scared to walk farther than a few blocks from their home. While YO projects often provided transportation assistance for YO participants, this service did not address the long-term transportation challenges facing YO communities.

- **Racial Isolation**. The vast majority of the YO communities, including rural and Native American communities, are made up of racial and ethnic minorities. Only two communities within the YO study are more than 50 percent white. Thirteen of the YO communities that we visited were predominantly African American, six were predominantly Latino, and five were predominately Native American. Some of these EZ communities were highly segregated, which contributed to the isolation of communities.

- **Population Decline**. One of the main challenges facing many impoverished YO communities is long-term population loss. Such loss contributed to decreased services, which, in turn, contributed to an appearance of neglect and disrepair. Population loss also made it difficult to recruit new employers to the area and to acquire funds for economic development. Population loss was accompanied by a "brain drain" of talented young people from the community and by decreased racial and socioeconomic diversity.

- **Housing Stress**. All of the YO communities had high levels of housing stress. Within most urban and many rural communities, large public-housing units were in deplorable condition, and criminal activity was prevalent. In some urban communities, immigration and gentrification led to a general lack of available and affordable housing and to overcrowded conditions. Rural and Native American communities often faced a general lack of infrastructure or financial means to support new construction and renovation; thus, their housing stock became dilapidated and overcrowded.

- **Housing Revitalization**. Although YO communities faced many housing challenges, several highly visible forces within the YO communities (such as public housing reform, city-sponsored block-grant programs, community-development corporations, nonprofit organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, and private developers) led to improvements in the condition of housing over the course of the YO program. Within some YO communities, 50 percent of the houses in some blocks were newly constructed or repaired. In many YO communities, these improvements contributed to a rising sense of community pride. In several communities, the revitalization included the renovation of neglected and underutilized business districts.

- **Underused Recreational Spaces and Programs for Youths**. Most of the urban YO communities had recreational spaces and programs for youths. Yet, many youths did not take full advantage of these opportunities because of issues of access, the poor physical condition of facilities, or broader safety concerns. In many YO communities, residents viewed parks and basketball courts as unsafe because they were sites where gang activity, drug sales or use, and congregations of homeless and mentally ill would take place.

- **Role of YO in Expanding Recreational Spaces and Opportunities.** YO filled a vital niche within many YO communities by creating youth centers and sponsoring increased recreational opportunities for youths. Unfortunately, due to decreased funding levels, many communities were not able to sustain the recreational aspects of YO programs through the whole study period.

Social Networks and Conditions

The ethnography examined social networks and conditions within the YO communities in order to gain a deeper understanding of the social dynamics within YO communities and to track any shifts or changes in these dimensions over time.

Social Networks

Role of Family. Within YO communities, many families are fragmented; single parents, teen parents, and grandparent householders are all common. A high percentage of fathers are absent or in jail. YO community members described a general lack of parental support and involvement in their children's lives. Many parents need to work multiple jobs to support the family or struggled with disability, addiction, or unresolved mental health problems that interfered with their ability to care for their children. Several YO programs adopted a focus on parental involvement; however, in most communities, YO had limited success in these efforts.

Presence of Adult Mentors. In urban and Native American YO communities, community members viewed the lack of adult mentoring, particularly by men, as a core challenge facing their communities. Community members did not perceive that YO expanded the pool of adult mentors within the community, even though this was an explicit goal of the program. YO case managers, however, were perceived by many to be important role models to youths within the program.

Community Cohesiveness. Residents of rural YO communities reported a much higher level of community connectedness and care than those in urban or Native American communities. Most residents of rural communities said that their community was close-knit and that they looked out for one another. On the other hand, residents in several Native American and many urban communities spoke of a lack of trust and mutual support within the community. The data suggests that YO may have made a contribution to community cohesiveness in a handful of cases; however, in many YO communities, either there was no mention of effects on community cohesion, or YO had a small, neutral, or even negative effect on community cohesion.

Access to Resources and Services. Access to resources, jobs, and services within rural and Native American communities was often quite limited due to the physical isolation of the communities. In urban YO communities, on the other hand, respondents often felt that youths did not take advantage of the opportunities that were available to them in the community. Youths were reluctant to leave the perceived safety and familiarity of their neighborhoods for fear of discrimination and other prejudicial treatment from prospective employers. Many believed that this behavior among many urban youths was a primary factor in constraining their employment possibilities.

Social Conditions

Teen Pregnancy. Almost every YO community has higher-than-average teen birth rates, and many have among the highest teen pregnancy rates in the U.S. Further, an increasing proportion of teens are having babies outside marriage. In some YO communities, over 95 percent of births to women under 20 occur out of wedlock. Although economic and social challenges are clearly associated with teen pregnancy, not all YO community members saw teen pregnancy as a problem. Evidence from across the Native American sites indicates that the vast majority of Native American teen mothers completed their education and did not view motherhood as an impediment to their success. Similarly, in some urban YO communities, youths spoke of teen pregnancy as a turning point or as an opportunity, rather than a negative experience. Although some YO programs did connect young women to pregnancy-prevention services, effects of these efforts were not easy to discern from the ethnography.

Perceptions of Crime and Safety. The crime rate fell in many YO communities during the study period. Respondents within a cross-section of different urban and rural communities attributed the decrease in juvenile crime, at least in part, to the YO program, which provided youths with something productive to do. Although the crime rate fell in many YO communities over the study period, the lack of physical safety within a few high-crime urban areas emerged as a consistent barrier to education and employment in those communities.

Youth Gangs. Community members in most YO communities indicated that youth gangs are on the decline and tend to be less violent than the gangs of the past. There are, however, a few urban YO communities, in which gangs continue to be a serious problem. Gangs within these communities intimidated residents, contributed to rising homicide rates, and participated in the trafficking of firearms and drugs. The YO program had a limited role in antigang efforts.

Relationship with Police. Antagonism and mistrust between community members and police were common social conditions within YO communities. Personal accounts of police harassment were common among respondents, while fear of racial profiling by police often kept youths from leaving their communities in pursuit of work or other opportunities. In some YO communities, new collaborative models of police and community partnerships were emerging, but there is little evidence that YO played a major role in improving police-community relationships.

Drugs and Alcohol. Residents in nearly all YO communities expressed serious concerns about the widespread use of drugs and alcohol. Youths were often exposed to drug use and drug trafficking at a very young age, and intergenerational drug and alcohol use is common in some communities. While YO community members perceive marijuana to be more innocuous than other drugs, many employers do not share this perception. Within YO communities, employers commonly administer drug tests, including a test for marijuana use, as a condition of employment. While substance abuse is a common and problematic social condition in YO communities, community members commented that too little is being done about it. In almost every YO community, residents noted that expanded drug and alcohol treatment facilities and services are badly needed. Community members did not perceive the YO program as a resource in the area of drug treatment or abatement.

Economic Opportunities

A primary goal of the YO program was to increase employment among in-school and out-of-school youths, ages 16 through 21, and to improve the quality of jobs available to young adult workers. The *economic context* of YO communities, therefore, is arguably the most important external influence impacting the ability of the YO program to meet its goals.

Economic Conditions in the YO Communities

As the YO program launched in 2000, the U.S. was at the end of nearly a decade of economic growth and widening prosperity. By early 2001, however, the nation had slipped into a recession, which was followed by an extended period of slow job growth. The recession and the slowed economy affected almost all YO communities negatively but to differing degrees.

Because of high levels of concentrated poverty, most of the YO communities remained at the margins of the economy, even in the late 1990s when the overall economy was strong. Those communities that were *most* on the margins, with little to no economic activity, experienced the effects of the recession the least. In 2000, the unemployment rate within many of these YO communities was more than double that of the average for their state. This situation did not change much over the course of the study, and residents had little hope that it would change in the future. The following economic challenges faced these sites:

- Lack of core private-sector industry or economic base
- Geographic isolation and population loss
- Lack of skilled labor
- Weak transportation and institutional infrastructure

The economic downturn had a considerably negative effect on many communities that, in 2000, were showing signs of expanded business development and job growth but that were not seeing high levels of investment and revitalization. Within these communities, unemployment was much higher than the national or state average in 2000, and by 2004, during our last visit, it was even higher. Further, many felt that the official unemployment figures did not accurately reflect the extensive joblessness in the community. The following economic challenges faced these communities:

- A reluctance by private sector businesses to locate in YO communities because of the community's history of neglect, abandonment, and high crime

- Competition with surrounding suburban communities for private sector investment

- Few locally owned businesses, due at least in part to a lack of capital, a lack of entrepreneurial drive, and a lack of business skills and expertise among community residents

- Loss of major industries, agricultural or manufacturing, that once made up the core economic base

A few YO communities, however, were relatively unaffected by the downturn because they were experiencing high levels of investment and growth. Some communities that fit this description

had initiated major revitalization efforts before the recession, and the construction and investment associated with those efforts helped to buoy the economy throughout the YO grant period. Strong local leaders that were willing to leverage their power and influence to bring new businesses to the EZ and to foster creative partnerships for investment, were a primary driving force behind many economic revitalization efforts.

Perceptions of Employment Opportunities

The economic conditions of the communities affected residents' perception of employment opportunities available to them. Several prominent themes emerged across the sites:

- Residents indicate that there are few quality job opportunities for adults and youths.
- Residents indicate that there is considerable competition for jobs.
- Residents perceive racism and discrimination as an employment barrier.

Youth Barriers to Employment

The most pressing obstacle to youths' employment in most EZ neighborhoods is an almost complete lack of local jobs that pay a decent wage. Youths also face a host of barriers that prevent them from obtaining employment and keeping it:

- Lack of supportive services, such as childcare and transportation
- Lack of skills
- Lack of role models who are employed
- Drug use among youths and adults

YO was perceived as successful in helping to address gaps in supportive services (for example, transportation and childcare) and to support skill development among participating youths. Further, many residents indicated that YO case managers served as positive role models for youths.

Effect of Economic Conditions on YO Program

Across the board, respondents whom we spoke to felt that the economic recession of 2001 and subsequent slow job growth created a tremendous obstacle for the YO program. Although the YO program was able to provide job training for YO participants, help youths to address barriers to employment, place youths in subsidized employment, and place some youths into permanent jobs, the program did not bring new employers to the YO communities or surrounding areas. The rise in unemployment experienced by the vast majority of YO communities meant that youths were increasingly in competition with adults for the low-paying and low-skilled jobs. Our ethnographic analysis suggests that economic conditions in most YO communities likely hindered the ability of the YO program to place youths into *any* jobs, let alone the high-quality jobs that the YO program was seeking to create for youth participants.

Institutional Capacity

The strength and connectivity of local institutions are critical because they affect the YO program's ability to build on the existing services and fill in service gaps, essentially creating a niche for the YO program. The YO ethnography examined the institutional capacity of schools, faith-based organizations, and youth- and community-serving agencies.

Schools

Almost every urban YO site and the majority of rural and Native American sites had school systems that were struggling very hard to reach even minimal standards of quality, achievement, and resources. Most YO schools served a predominantly minority student body, and many were struggling with inadequate funding or severe budget deficits, poor quality teaching, violence, lack of parental involvement, and poor administrative leadership or mismanagement by district officials, superintendents, or principals. Many respondents said that youths are being "channeled" or "tracked" into dead-end paths or poorly designed curricula. Many school reform efforts are currently underway in many YO communities, suggesting that a restructuring in education is taking place.

In over two-thirds of the YO communities, YO did not have a very strong connection to the local schools. In many of these cases, YO had a formal relationship on paper or an indirect connection, but the relationship was not strong in practice. However, a number of YO programs were more successful in engaging the local school district. In many of these cases, YO funded staff who were housed in the local school (sometimes in a satellite office). In general, those YO programs that were deemed by the process study to be more successful had very strong relationships with the schools, which may point back to strong leadership. The relationship also tended to be stronger when there was no redundancy in services between YO and schools—when YO had its own niche and could complement rather than compete with the school system. Respondents in only a few sites felt that YO had contributed substantially toward lowering dropout rates or improving the quality of education on a macro scale.

Faith-Based Organizations

Like schools, faith-based organizations (FBOs) are important for understanding the role and relative impact of the YO program. In communities throughout the country, FBOs are a hub for social, political, and service-oriented activities.

The urban YO communities tend to have the most highly active and institutionalized FBO presence because of the higher population density and the concentration of resources. Rural communities also have high FBO presence relative to the size of their community, but because of resource limitations, they typically lack the capacity to provide the types of services that urban FBOs are able to provide. In the Native American YO communities, faith is defined and exercised in ways that are not comparable to FBOs in non-Native-American YO communities. If FBOs are present at all in Native American YO communities, they tend to be there for missionary purposes (Mormon, Catholic, etc.), rather than to be intrinsically generated and supported congregations.

We learned the following lessons about FBOs providing services in YO communities:

- Very large, service-oriented FBOs are active in providing services to the local YO communities. Many of the larger FBOs have their own community-development corporations, housing developments, and human services divisions.

- YO communities that have stronger interfaith connections offer more comprehensive and sophisticated services.

- Service provision is weaker in areas where there is competition and rivalry between FBOs for the dispersal of resources. The wide proliferation of churches in many YO communities contributes to competition.

- When they provided youth services, FBOs typically offered after-school activities, such as tutoring and sports programs, violence-prevention programs, pregnancy prevention, and mentoring programs. The programs did not appear to emphasize religion overtly; rather, they focused on building skills and providing safe recreational spaces.

- Ethnographic data indicates that FBOs and YO rarely collaborated in strong and effective ways. In most cases, informal referral relationships were more effective than formal relationships.

Community Agencies and Organizations

This section discusses existing networks of service providers and the relationship between YO and service providers.

Existing Networks of Service Providers

The urban YO communities generally have a high number of service providers and a more specialized array of services available for different target groups. The rural and Native American YO communities, on the other hand, typically have very few service providers aside from the basic federal or tribal agencies. Throughout the lifespan of the YO program, the respondents in almost all YO communities noted a sizable decline in the number of service providers because of funding cutbacks.

While the service networks in urban communities do tend to be large and specialized, some significant gaps exist. Respondents most frequently noted the lack of healthcare services, mental health services, childcare services, drug- and substance-abuse programs, homeless services, and other supportive services. Several urban YO communities had gang-prevention and teen-pregnancy prevention programs, but respondents generally felt that they lacked the capacity to be effective. Transportation services were severely lacking in rural and Native American YO communities and some of the urban YO communities. Services for youths, especially out-of-school youths, were lacking in many YO communities, particularly in the smaller cities, rural, and Native American communities. Many respondents reported that arts and cultural programs and recreational programs were the first to be cut when budget crises took place.

Relationship between YO and Service Providers

YO was perceived to be most effective when it collaborated effectively, provided services that were otherwise not available, and had decentralized, subcontracted relationships with other service providers.

Typically, the YO program took on one of three roles in relation to other community organizations: sole provider of youth services, independent operator (nonadversarial, and competitive-adversarial), and collaborator. YO programs that collaborated were the best at implementing provider partnerships. Decentralized YO programs also tended to spur better collaboration with partners, as long as the number of partners was manageable.

The independently operating YO programs—those that operated in relative isolation—were less effective at collaborating with the existing network of service providers. These types of YO programs sometimes functioned independently without creating any tensions within the provider community, but at other times the relationships with other providers became competitive or adversarial.

YO acted as sole provider of youth services most commonly in rural and Native American communities. In these instances, YO typically had no other agencies or organizations to collaborate with, or else, they were located long distances from each other.

Community Perceptions of the YO Program

This section summarizes perceptions of the quality of YO program implementation, benefits to youths, and benefits to the community.

Perception of the Quality of YO Program Implementation

In about one-fourth of the communities we visited, the YO program was consistently lauded by residents as highly successful and a tremendous asset to the community. Residents viewed programs as successful if they filled a niche within the community, provided a range of services, and were proactive in their recruitment of youths and in their partnerships with service providers.

In about one-fifth of the communities we visited, community members strongly and consistently criticized the implementation of YO. YO programs in these communities faced implementation challenges, such as high turnover in leadership or staff, ineffective partnerships with community stakeholders, and poorly located youth centers. Restricting services to those in the EZ, limited job placements in within the community, and paperwork requirements were also identified as challenges.

The remaining communities lacked a consensus about the effectiveness of YO. Residents who knew about YO perceived it as effective for participating youths but as a "lost opportunity" for the community as a whole. In fact, nearly all the youths with whom we spoke and who had participated in YO within these communities viewed it positively and could describe the individual benefits derived from their participation. Those not directly involved in the program, however, often knew little about it.

Perception of Benefits to Youth Participants

Almost universally, residents who knew of YO felt that it had profoundly benefited most youth participants. This was true even in most contexts where community members were critical of the YO implementation. Similarly, with a few exceptions, youth participants said that they went through powerful changes as a result of YO.

Although few adult or youth respondents whom we talked to were versed in youth-development concepts, those who knew about the YO program often framed its benefits in the language of youth development. Respondents talked about the program's role in helping to promote a positive and affirming "trajectory" for youths, although residents were not always able to link these opportunities to specific "program" components or youth outcomes. For some rural areas and Native American communities, the YO program was their first exposure to a broad youth-development approach. Respondents often indicated that YO created new models for working with young people that would persist after the funding for the program ended.

We noted the following core outcomes:

- **Safe Space.** Respondents from varied backgrounds (educators, police, parents, youth) viewed the YO center as a vital service because it served as a safe alternative to the streets.

- **Quality Youth and Adult Relationships.** Service providers, community leaders, and youths indicated that YO staff formed high-quality relationships with young people.

- **Enhanced Training and Education Services.** YO was valued for the quality and breadth of training and education services that it provided.

- **Opportunities to be Productive.** Many respondents, including youths and educators, highlighted the importance of the YO program in giving youths something to do. Many YO communities had a dearth of recreational, cultural, and community-service opportunities. The YO program helped to fill that gap.

Perception of Benefits to the Community

Many community members agreed that increased employability for at-risk youths was a necessary and important, but not a sufficient, catalyst for community change. As we state throughout this report, the challenges facing YO communities are profound. In most cases, they are historical and systemic. The multifarious, converging, and cumulative nature of disadvantage within YO communities makes change difficult and slow. A key obstacle in that process is an enduring pessimism. Most community members and residents whom we spoke with in urban areas and Native American communities did not think it was realistic to expect a single initiative like YO to change the broader community. Further, at the sunset of the grant, few urban or Native American residents thought that the grant had any community-wide impact.

Notably, the story is different in several rural areas, one Native American community, and a few urban areas where community members viewed the program as particularly effective. Rural areas were particularly likely to believe that YO had impacted the community as a whole. With the

exception of changes in the network of services, however, the stories and anecdotes of community impact within these settings remained broad and difficult to attribute with any certainty to the YO program. Community members who thought that YO was effective cited the following benefits:

- Temporarily improved physical appearance of neighborhoods
- Reduced crime, youth delinquency, and gang activity
- Improved attitudes among some employers about the skills of youths
- Enhanced job opportunities for youths
- Expanded range of services and supports available to youths
- Reduced dropout rate within some schools
- Increased coordination with community agencies, parents, and schools in some communities
- Expanded or helped sustain the capacity of service providers within the community in a time of general budget cuts

Overall, community members perceived the greatest strengths of the YO model to be the comprehensive approach, dedicated and accessible staff, and the flexibility of funding for a variety of much-needed services. In addition, the community members consistently pointed to benefits above and beyond concrete outcomes, bringing up the more subtle ways in which YO empowered individual youths, provided youths with safe spaces, and connected youths to valuable resources. Finally, YO seems to have been most important to communities that had high saturation levels, where "everyone" was involved, and where no youth services had existed.

Chapter 1. Introduction

The Youth Opportunity (YO) initiative represented an innovative approach and significant effort to transform distressed neighborhoods by engaging all or most youths in activities and relationships that are positive and productive. An ethnographic study to assess community well-being before and after delivery of YO grant services was one of three primary components of the YO evaluation. The evaluation, conducted from 2000–2005, also included a process analysis to document how programs are designed and implemented to meet the employment, training, and educational needs of area youths, and an area survey of local youths to measure labor market outcomes in YO grant sites. DIR is reporting the findings from the study in a series of reports:

- this *ethnographic report*, which provides a rich account of what the YO communities look like and how people in those communities feel about the presence or lack of opportunities available to them

- a *process evaluation*, which examines program strategies and describes administrative and service delivery processes of the grantee and contractor

- a *management information system (MIS) report*, which analyzes detailed reports from each project over the 5-year period

- an *impact report*, which describes impacts of the projects on participants

- a *synthesis report*, which integrates the findings from the study components and applies information from those findings to address key study questions about the YO initiative

This ethnographic report highlights key findings from the ethnographic study: we provide a thorough analysis of how the YO communities changed over time, how communities responded to the YO initiative, and how community members perceived the challenges and opportunities facing youths within their communities.

We begin by providing some background on the ethnography, including its goals, the conceptual framework guiding our inquiry, and methods. To provide a context for the YO grants, we then describe the key findings along multiple community dimensions, including demographic and physical characteristics of YO communities, economic opportunities, and institutions and services available to youths. We conclude with lessons learned about community change and the role of community context in shaping program design.

Goals of Ethnographic Study

Our goal for the ethnographic study was to obtain a detailed understanding of how residents view the health and well-being of their YO communities. Through ethnography, we seek to paint a clear, ground-level picture of the community context by studying how youths, families, and institutions experience the external forces that often affect their ability to thrive. We assume that external factors—such as economic trends, the quality of youth and education services, and the presence of adult mentors—shape the ways in which the YO program is designed and

implemented and have the potential to affect the outcomes that the YO program is trying to achieve.

Specifically, the ethnography has two principal research questions:

- ***What is the influence of YO grants on community members' perception of community well-being?*** Because of the YO saturation approach of providing extensive youth services within specific neighborhoods, the grants had the potential to influence many aspects of YO neighborhoods and communities. To understand how YO contributed to perceptual shifts in the YO communities, the ethnographic study looks at community members' perceptions of community well-being in relation to issues such as crime, youth employment, and the quality of services and neighborhood institutions.

- ***What are the external factors that affect each community's well-being and youths' labor market, human capital, and social outcomes?*** The information gained from the ethnographic study provides context for interpreting the changes in these outcomes measured through the impact and process studies.

The YO initiative operated in diverse and unique community contexts. The purpose of the ethnography is to capture what makes YO communities unique and to better understand how the YO program was or was not able to adapt to the particular community context. Through in-depth interviews and observations, we sought to understand the historical context of each community, with an emphasis on factors that shape the economic and social well-being of community members. Our ethnographic approach helped us to better understand how individuals and families deal with factors that impact their lives, such as immigration patterns, changes in the economy, quality of youth services, and so on.

The ethnographic study examined community members' perceptions about the different dimensions in the community (economic opportunity structure, institutional capacity, and social networks). Documenting community members' perceptions of their well-being helped to uncover their connections to and trust in the institutions that are intended to serve them. For instance, youth's positive perceptions of the YO program may suggest effective community outreach and engagement, enabling YO to meet its outreach and target goals. While the ethnography cannot make sweeping causal links between the YO program and community change, the data can describe community members' perceptions about the well-being of their communities and how these have changed over the lifespan of YO.

Defining Community Well-Being

To address the research questions, we developed a 4-dimension framework essential to community well-being:

- physical and demographic characteristics
- social networks and conditions
- economic opportunity structure
- institutional infrastructure

Each of these elements is interconnected. If one improves, it can influence the development of others. We describe each of these dimensions in detail below.

Physical and Demographic Characteristics

The framework assumes that the YO initiative had the potential to directly and indirectly impact the physical characteristics of neighborhoods, such as the condition of housing, schools, and recreational spaces, and the prevalence of vandalism and graffiti. Such changes could have been supported directly through community-service projects, or they could have been the indirect effect of increased overall economic well-being and youth employment.

The ethnography also looked at demographic shifts, such as those caused by immigration and emigration. Migration out of neighborhoods often suggests low community pride and civic responsibility, whereas migration into neighborhoods may represent movement towards a more favorable economic and social climate. Alternatively, migration out of neighborhoods can mean upward mobility for residents. We documented changes in migration patterns over time, to understand its relationship to changes to community well-being.

Changes in the physical and demographic aspects of community well-being could lead to changes in the attitudes and behaviors of youths and adults in the community. For example, youths may have increased optimism about their future because of the positive changes occurring in the local economy, which could lead to increased pride and engagement in their communities.

Social Networks and Conditions

Many of the activities funded by the YO initiative were designed to help support the development of positive social networks for youths. YO's support for intensive case management and adult mentorship programs was intended to help youths develop positive relationships with adults within their community. We asked youths about the presence of adult mentors, the role of their families, and their ability to access services and other forms of institutional support. These aspects of their lives were important to understanding youths' perceptions of "possible" paths to success within YO communities.

Within the ethnography, we also documented changes in a number of social conditions that put youths and their families at risk: crime, gang involvement, teen pregnancy, and drug and alcohol use. The YO initiative tried to improve these conditions directly and indirectly. We looked at how commonplace those at-risk behaviors were within the community, to what extent community members viewed the behaviors as a problem, what factors contributed to improvements or deterioration of certain social conditions, and to what degree YO was perceived as impacting community well-being.

Economic Opportunity Structure

A primary goal of the YO initiative was to improve the economic opportunity structure for young people living in high-poverty urban and rural areas. The YO grant had the potential to directly increase the availability of internships, summer jobs, on-the-job training opportunities, and permanent positions for youths. Through vocational and academic training, YO sought to increase the ability of youths to retain long-term employment in positions that offer a livable

wage and benefits. Our model assumed that such increases in the employability of youths could indirectly influence the economic structure and opportunity within YO areas. In addition, shifts in the economic opportunity structure of the community have the potential to influence YO outcomes for youths. For example, the closing of a major business could affect youths' labor market outcomes.

The ethnography documented the economic context from several angles, including the economic conditions in the community (for example, the presence of local and new businesses that provide jobs for youths) and the community members' perceptions of employment opportunities for youths (including youths, adults', and employers' perceptions of youth potential, skills, and abilities). We documented these contextual variables over time and, where possible, tried to draw links between these forces and YO implementation.

Institutional Infrastructure

Our ethnographic approach posited that YO could have an indirect impact on other youth-serving and social-service organizations and educational institutions through the improvement of services for their target population and through increased cross-agency collaboration. We documented youths' and adults' perceptions of the quality and availability of social services for youths and others in the communities and their usage of and engagement with the institutions that provide these services. For example, we asked youths about the quality of their schools and their perceptions about whether their education will have an impact on their future. These perceptions provided a powerful window into how YO engaged youths through community institutions and why youths used or did not use other services in the community.

The ethnography also examined the linkages between the YO program and the capacity of institutions (for example, schools, faith-based organizations, and social-service agencies) to provide high-quality services to youths. We also examined others factors that may influence the institutional infrastructure of a community, including funding related to education, youth services, other support services, and coordination of services.

Ethnography Design and Methods

In contrast to traditional forms of ethnography, our ethnographic design employed a focused ethnographic approach. Within focused ethnography, the topic is delineated before data collection, participatory observation is limited to specific events, and interviews are concentrated on selected topics. Thus, our approach included an intensive but short-term examination of the communities. In this regard, our approach is clearly different from traditional forms of ethnography, which involve longer term, in-depth explorations of communities without pre-selected data collection topics.

Our ethnographic design included the following core elements: pairing site visitors with local ethnography coordinators, concentrated data collection, and ongoing and follow-up data collection.

Role of Local Ethnography Coordinators (LECs)

Consistent with ethnographic research, this study was designed with the central goal of capturing the insider-outsider perspective. We believe that pairing a local ethnographer with a contract-research staff member greatly enhanced the quality of our data because the partnership allowed us to understand local culture by using the *insider's* lens and interpret it by using an *outsider's* lens. This combined approach is particularly useful if different perspectives or realities conflict, thus requiring an outsider perspective to translate the meaning of these conflicts and other kinds of local behavior that are difficult to understand from an insider's perspective.[1]

We identified "local ethnography coordinators" (LECs) from each community to serve as "gatekeepers" for the community. The LECs coordinated the site-visit schedule, identified respondents, served as tour guides of the community, observed community events that were more appropriate for community insiders, reviewed the site-visit reports, and collected follow-up data to capture events in the community as they occur. In some sites, the LECs also helped the site visitor overcome language or cultural barriers so that the site visitor was comfortable as an outsider.

In Year 5, we continued to retain the support of the LECs but also emphasized the importance of highlighting the voices of youths in the ethnography. Therefore, we identified youth interns; each intern's role was to conduct interviews with their peers about opportunities in the community and changes over time. Our goal was to capture the perspectives of youths on the shifts that may be occurring in the communities and how those shifts may have affected the lives of youths. We trained the youth interns on the use of interview protocols and the art of conducting interviews. Each youth intern was paid a modest stipend for his or her time.

Defining Community

As part of the YO ethnography, we identified neighborhoods or "cultural communities" to visit that were receiving YO funds. We did this because YO grantees often funded efforts in separate, distinct communities. Communities that were served by a single grantee were often demographically distinct from one another (for example, different ethnic compositions) and physically noncontiguous. In some cases, the area served was too large to make ethnographic data collection feasible. The ethnographic study's ability to chart changes over time in a meaningful way depended on our ability to collect detailed community-level data, and, to do this, we had to limit the areas that we would visit.

In selecting YO neighborhoods to be included in the ethnography, we consulted with the YO grantee project director and local ethnographer in each site. Using this approach, we could capitalize on the knowledge of community residents and focus on an area that the director felt would likely be impacted by the grant or an area in which the YO program's efforts were being concentrated. In this way, we increased the likelihood that we would observe an impact of the YO program over the course of the evaluation.

---

[1] See Fetterman, David M., *Ethnography*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California, 1987.

Data Collection Activities

We collected data for each site by using two main strategies: a concentrated data collection approach and an ongoing data collection approach. Data collection activities were designed to capture the nuances of each community, including its culture, history, and the experiences of the people living in them.

Concentrated Data Collection

For each site, we conducted three rounds of 5-day site visits.[2] We did a site visit in Year 1 as the YO initiative was just being launched, a site visit in Year 3, midway through the funding cycle, and a site visit in Year 5 at the end of the YO funding cycle. During these site visits, the LECs and site visitors captured the insider and outsider perspectives about the different dimensions of community well-being. Before each site visit, the site visitors and LECs were trained on the use of a field protocol, including interview and observation guides. During the visits, the ethnographic team conducted the following activities:

- *Interviews with community leaders* (for example, political representatives, community activists, clergy and religious leaders, youth leaders, school board members, directors of community services) to learn about system-level issues that may affect the community. We also spoke to youth leaders about youths' experiences in the community and contextual influences that may affect those experiences.

- *Interviews with community members* (law enforcement officials, bus drivers, educators, social workers, community youths, and parents) to understand how they experience the community, including the presence of employment and social services to support their families.

- *Interviews with employers* (local business owners and staff from the Chamber of Commerce) to understand the quality of the applicant pool and their needs as employers in the Empowerment Zone or Enterprise Community (EZ/EC).

- *Interviews with YO staff* (case managers, directors, and youth leaders) to understand how they interact with community agencies and learn their strategies for leveraging additional resources to support youths.

- *Focus group of parents* of nonparticipating youths to understand the issues facing parents in the EZ/EC and how the parents address those issues.

- *Focus groups of youth participants and nonparticipants,* to understand their experiences with employment, education, and youth services and their goals for the future.

- *Observations of community events and activities* (for example, church services, community meetings, and recreational activities) to document community life and social interactions among community members.

---

[2] Due to budget constraints, we were unable to complete site visits to Tampa, Florida and the Navajo Reservation in Year 5 of the study.

- *Shadowing selected youths,* including visits to vocational classes or worksites and observations of recreational activities and interactions with peers and family members, to understand first hand how youths experience life in the community.

- *Windshield surveys and photo essays* of the community's infrastructures to learn about the physical characteristics of the community. We took pictures of buildings, parks, and other public areas and compared these photos over the duration of the study to document changes in the community.

Through each of these activities, we documented the economic, social, and political history of the community; the capacity of youth- and adult-serving institutions; the assets and liabilities of the community; high-priority needs for community change; and programs and initiatives other than the YO grants that influenced community well-being.

Ongoing Data Collection

In addition to the concentrated site-visit activities, we conducted ongoing and follow-up data collection at each site during Years 1 and 5 of the evaluation. The goal of the ongoing data collection was to document events in the community as they arise. After the concentrated data collection activities were complete, LECs continued to collect data about the community dimensions, documenting events as they occurred and the changes that may have surfaced between site visits. The ongoing data collection captured "real life" stories of community residents to enhance interview and observation data collection by the site visitors.

After the site visits, we prepared detailed internal write-ups describing the key dimensions of the community and analyzing the influence that the YO grant may have had in the community.

Methodological Limitations

The ethnographic component serves as a powerful tool to uncover the issues or problems in the YO communities that are not captured through the process and impact studies. With ethnography, we can reflect community members' understanding of their own behaviors and gain a situated and "ground-up," rather than "top-down," understanding of complex social phenomena. This approach is an informative complement to the process and impact studies.

There are, however, limitations to ethnography. Most prominently, as an interpretative research approach, ethnography is more subject to researcher bias than many other types of research. This limitation was minimized in the YO evaluation because we had an "insider" and "outsider" perspective on each community. Further, the multiple sites provide a check on bias, as we were looking for themes that cut across different communities.

Another limitation of ethnography is that it does not lend itself to making causal inferences. It can help us understand community members' perceptions and attributions but cannot tell us with any definitiveness that the YO initiative led to a particular shift in community well-being. Within the context of the YO evaluation, we must look to the impact study to make any causal connections between the YO program and youth or community outcomes.

A third limitation of ethnography is that the data collected does not lend itself well to the type of cross-site comparison that is necessary in this type of large scale study. By its very nature, ethnography provides us with rich description, which is bound to a particular place. In the process of generalizing and identifying patterns across communities, we lose much of the situated character that gives ethnography its power. We have tried to preserve some of the depth and character of our data by first providing the reader with a contextual picture of the types of YO communities before moving on to talk about cross-community findings, and by integrating as many quotes and examples in the text as possible.

Data Sources and Analysis

This report includes data from all of the 35 YO communities we visited over a 5-year period.[3] This report draws on Year 3 (Y3) and Year 5 (Y5) analytic site profiles, Y5 process site-visit summaries, and census data sources. Due to budget constraints in the spring of 2005, we were unable to complete all of our Y5 site visits and site-visit reports. The reduction in evaluation funding forced us to stop working on the outstanding visits and reports so that we could preserve as much time as possible for the analysis and reporting of the ethnographic findings. We completed 33 Y5 site visits and constructed Y5 analytic site profiles for 24 of those sites. We were able to draw heavily from the Y3 site visit summaries for all of the 11 sites that were missing data in Y5.

Table 1-1 lists the neighborhoods that we visited throughout the evaluation and the sites for which we have a Y5 analytic site profile. We relied on Y3 data for sites that had no Y5 data.

---

[3] We did not visit the Ute Native American reservation.

Table 1-1. Selected Neighborhoods Visited

Major Grantee	Community or Neighborhoods Visited	Year 5 Profile
Urban Sites		
Birmingham, Alabama	West Birmingham	X
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	West Philadelphia	
Portland, Oregon	Northeast Portland	X
Baltimore, Maryland	Sandtown/Winchester, Pigtown/Washington Village, East Baltimore	X
Boston, Massachusetts	South Boston	
Brockton, Massachusetts	Brockton	X
Buffalo, New York	East side, Lower West Side	X
Cleveland, Ohio	Hough, Glenville, Fairfax	X
Washington, D.C.	Marshall Heights	X
Denver, Colorado	Lincoln Park	
Detroit, Michigan	Southwest Detroit	X
Hartford, Connecticut	North Hartford (Clay Arsenal, North East, Upper Albany, and Blue Hills)	
Houston, Texas	East End & Second Ward	
Kansas City, Missouri	Washington-Wheatley	X
Los Angeles, California	Boyle Heights	X
Louisville, Kentucky	West Louisville	X
Memphis, Tennessee	South Memphis	
Milwaukee, Wisconsin	North Division, Williamsburg Heights, Lindsey Heights, and portions of Metcalfe Park, Brewers Hill, Midtown, Washington Park, and Walnut Hill	X
San Antonio, Texas	"The Courts" housing area	
San Diego, California	West side	X
Seattle, Washington	Southeast Seattle	X
San Francisco, California	Mission District	X
Tampa, Florida	Sulphur Springs, North Tampa Heights, Belmont, West Tampa, Ybor City, Tampa Heights, Palmetto Beach	
Tucson, Arizona	South Tucson	X
Rural Sites		
Georgia Department of Labor, Georgia	Albany	X
Imperial County, California	Brawley, Calipatria, and Niland	X
Rural Louisiana PIC, Louisiana	Lake Providence	
Maui County and Molokai, Hawaii	Molokai, city of Kanaukakai	X
Robeson County, North Carolina	Red Springs	
Southeast Arkansas	Dumas, McGehee	X

Major Grantee	Community or Neighborhoods Visited	Year 5 Profile
Native American Sites		
Cook Inlet Tribal Council, Alaska	Hooper Bay and Angoon (- Alaska)	X
Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa & Chippewa Reservation, Michigan	Peshawbestown, Suttons Bay, and Northport (Michigan)	X
Oglala Sioux Tribe, South Dakota	Pine Ridge Village, Oglala, Wanblee, Kyle (South Dakota)	X
California Indian Manpower Consortium, California	Bishop Pauite Reservation, Bishop (California)	X
Navajo Nation, Widow Rock, Arizona	Chinle & Tuba City (Arizona)	

Site visitors were the first line of analysis in the YO ethnography because they synthesized LEC reports, documents and news reports from the community, observations, and interviews into 20- to 30-page profiles of each community. These profiles provided a rich and detailed portrait of each community. The task leader for the ethnographic evaluation reviewed and commented on the analytic site profiles, raising questions to be addressed by site visitors either during follow-up visits or by LECs in their ongoing data collection. This process contributed to consistency of data across sites.

In our cross-community analysis, we read through analytic site profiles, identified similarities and differences between sites, developed descriptive typologies of communities, and drew on additional data sources, when possible, to confirm or refute emerging findings. We used Y5 process site visits as a resource when trying to establish what particular services a YO program supported in a given community. We also drew on census data and federal data on housing, teen pregnancy, education, poverty, and crime in order to understand the context of YO communities.

Remaining Sections of this Report

We have structured this report so that it speaks to each of the dimensions of community well-being articulated in our framework. We have done our best to present illustrative and representative quotes throughout while still striving for brevity. Within each section, we have made links to the YO initiative where possible, highlighting ways that the initiative was or was not able to address a particular community challenge. The following summaries outline the contents of the remaining chapters:

- Chapter 2 presents a brief typology of YO communities to help the reader understand commonalities across and differences between the different YO communities that we visited. The typology provides a brief summary of the challenges and contexts within the communities studied.

- Chapter 3 presents a summary of our data about demographic and physical characteristics, including an analysis of how issues such as housing, the condition of physical spaces, population change, and economic revitalization influence the overall well-being of YO communities.

- Chapter 4 presents our findings on social networks and conditions, highlighting issues of particular relevance to youths. This chapter includes an analysis of the role of families, presence of adult mentors, crime, gangs, youth pregnancy, and hope in the future.

- Chapter 5 discusses the economic opportunity structure of YO communities, with an emphasis on changes in the economic condition in YO communities over the course of the study and how these changes may have impacted YO programs.

- Chapter 6 presents our findings on changes in the institutional infrastructure of YO communities, with an emphasis on schools, faith-based organizations, and youth and community services.

- Chapter 7 focuses on community members' perception of the YO program. Here, we highlight elements of the program that community members believed were effective and ineffective, as well as perceived benefits for youth participants and the community as a whole.

Chapter 2. Typology of YO Communities

The YO program strived to improve the overall well-being of communities by providing education, training, and job opportunities to a high number of young people. In order to understand the ability of the YO program to reach this goal, it is essential to understand the varied contexts of the YO communities.

The YO communities are demographically, economically, geographically, and culturally diverse. This chapter provides an overview of the "types" of communities that we visited as part of the YO ethnography before we move on to our cross-community analysis of varied dimensions of community well-being. We developed this typology by looking at regional, historical, and economic differences that make the culture and reality of some YO communities significantly different from that of others. When relevant, we draw on this typology throughout the report to illustrate how some challenges or opportunities are unique to certain communities.

Urban Communities

Members of our ethnographic team visited neighborhoods within each of the 24 urban areas that received YO funding. Although urban areas had programs in many different neighborhoods, we often restricted our ethnographic inquiry to one distinct neighborhood within each urban area so that we could better capture cultural shifts over time.

There were profound differences between urban areas. Although members of different YO communities faced common challenges because of their exposure to poverty, some communities had much more potential for change and growth than others. For instance, some YO communities were experiencing population decline, while others were experiencing high immigration.

Because of the broad variations in the conditions of urban sites, we have classified the urban communities we visited according to a variety of factors, such as history, economic conditions, location or region, and trends in population change. We have identified the following types of urban communities: declining industrial, southern cities, business and education centers—gentrifying, business and education centers—isolated, new destination cities, and suburban centers. Table 2-1 groups the visited urban sites into those types.

Table 2-1. YO Sites Grouped by Typology

Urban Typology	YO sites
Declining Industrial	• Baltimore, Maryland • Buffalo, New York • Cleveland, Ohio • Detroit, Michigan • Hartford, Connecticut • Milwaukee, Wisconsin • Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Southern Cities	• Birmingham, Alabama • Louisville, Kentucky • Memphis, Tennessee • Kansas City, Missouri
Business and Education Centers—Gentrifying	• Boston, Massachusetts • Denver, Colorado • Houston, Texas • San Diego, California • San Francisco, California • Seattle, Washington
Business and Education Centers—Isolated	• Los Angeles, California • Washington, D.C.
New Destination Cities	• Portland, Oregon • San Antonio, Texas • Tampa, Florida • Tucson, Arizona
Suburban	• Brockton, Massachusetts

The categories we present in this typology are broad, and while most communities we visited fit consistently into one category, a few could arguably go into more than one type. Different communities within the same urban area could fall into different categories, and we based our classification on the characteristics of the particular neighborhood that we visited.[4] For instance, San Francisco YO operated in two different communities. One, the Mission, was gentrifying, while the other, Hunter's Point, remained isolated. The ethnographic study focused exclusively on the Mission. Similarly, some communities were changing over the course of the study. For instance, Southwest Detroit was becoming a magnet for Latino immigrants. Given the influx of population, we could have described it as a new destination community, but instead, we decided

---

[4] See Chapter 1 for a description of communities that we visited and what criteria we used to select them.

that the community was still more defined by its declining industrial base than by this new immigration. In the remainder of this section, we describe each of the types in detail and give one example of each.

Declining Industrial Cities

Declining industrial cities are Northeastern and Midwestern "rust-belt" cities that rose to prominence in the era of U.S. manufacturing. They were once highly prosperous, attracted high numbers of immigrants and Black migrants from the South, and sustained solid middle class populations. As a result of this rich history, the Empowerment Zone (EZ) communities we visited have many beautiful old historic buildings. Unfortunately, the core industries that supported these cities fell into decline, starting in the 1960s. Although many cities still have a manufacturing sector, the overall decline in U.S. manufacturing had a profoundly negative impact on these communities. They struggle with dramatic population decline, high unemployment, failing urban infrastructure, high teen pregnancy, high percentage of single parents, high crime, and very high rates of poverty. With the exception of one community, which has a large Puerto Rican population, YO communities that we visited in declining industrial centers were predominantly African American with a small or nonexistent immigrant population. Several communities have begun outreach campaigns in an effort to lure immigrants into the centers of their cities and increase their populations. In addition to economic decline, most of these YO communities have experienced white flight,[5] disinvestment, and urban decay since the 1960s.

Buffalo, New York, is an example of a declining industrial community. At the turn of the twentieth century, Buffalo was the largest inland port in the U.S. Between 1979 and 1984, Buffalo lost 76,000 manufacturing jobs, or roughly 46 percent of its manufacturing base. One Buffalo community member reported, "Our rich history has been clouded by two generations of steady job and population loss." Over the course of the YO study, Buffalo experienced a decrease in population and available jobs. The YO neighborhoods in Buffalo reflected long-term neglect and concentrated poverty. The neighborhoods were characterized by a high number of abandoned buildings, empty lots, and empty and abandoned warehouses. Furthermore, the communities lacked safe recreational spaces and businesses.

Southern Cities

Established on key transportation routes, most southern cities play a key role in trade, commerce, manufacturing, and, to a lesser degree, tourism. Southern cities in the YO study share a common history because each was located in a former slave state, and several were central battlegrounds for the civil rights movement. Over the last several decades, many southern YO cities have experienced population decline, white flight, and movement of industry and jobs to suburban centers. This trend appears to be leveling off or reversing in some cities, and some YO neighborhoods within southern cities are undergoing revitalization. Southern YO cities have high

---

[5] "White flight" means an exodus of wealth and whites from the cities into suburban areas during the 1960s and 1970s. This trend was caused in part by government incentives to the middle class to relocate to suburbs, concern over safety and rising crime in cities, and fear that the quality of schools was falling in the wake of racial integration. Race riots, stemming from resistance to redevelopment projects and racial oppression, occurred in a number of large cities in the 1960s, and this fueled white flight. This trend contributed to a decline in the tax base and quality of city life and neighborhoods in these years.

rates of concentrated poverty among African Americans, poor-quality housing, high crime and high teen pregnancy rates. Race is described as an enduring issue but one that is not, in one Black community member's words, "painful." That is, overt racial conflict within southern communities is rare. Most southern YO communities have a rich spiritual tradition, and a high concentration of churches.

South Memphis is an example of a YO community in a southern city. Memphis was segregated until the 1950s, and formal desegregation did not occur until the 1970s. Desegregation of schools and suburbanization contributed to the white flight that characterized the next several decades and led to a concentration of poor African Americans in the South Memphis neighborhood. The community has decaying housing structures, high crime, and high teenage pregnancy rates. Memphis, like many other southern cities, has been undergoing urban revitalization and economic development. Meanwhile, the population of Memphis has become more stable and has even started to increase in the last several years.

Business and Education Centers

Business and education centers are among the most affluent cities in the United States. They have a higher than average mean level of education, high housing prices, and dramatic disparities in wealth. Because of the limited availability of housing, they often have high rates of homelessness. In the following subsections, we describe two patterns we observed among these types of cities.

Gentrifying Communities within Business and Education Centers. Some of the YO communities within business and education centers, particularly those centrally located, were experiencing gentrification. Rising housing costs and the lack of available housing are key challenges facing these YO communities. Not all YO neighborhoods within these cities were experiencing the same level of gentrification. Proximity to the city center and the presence of restaurants and other businesses were key draws. Although gentrification often brought with it increased business activity and decreased crime, residents of color were often forced to leave the community.

YO neighborhoods in Seattle, including central and southwest Seattle, illustrate the effect of gentrification on traditionally poor or working class communities. The central area of Seattle is a historically Black neighborhood. Over the course of the YO ethnography (2000–2004), median house prices in the central area of Seattle rose between 4 and 14 percent per year. Meanwhile, respondents reported that in the last 10 years, the percentage of Black residents in the community declined by half, from nearly 80 percent to 40 percent. An elected official said, "Lower income Blacks are being priced to the southern suburbs where the cost of living is lower." Service providers and housing advocates worry that the suburban schools and youth programs are ill equipped to meet the needs of the new arrivals. On the one hand, the gentrifying neighborhoods are benefiting from falling crime rates, extensive residential and commercial development, and increased racial diversity. On the other hand, gentrification and rising housing costs are forcing the families that have historically lived in the community to move. The consequences for those families and the communities to which they are relocating remain unclear.

Isolated Communities within Business and Education Centers. Other YO communities within business and education centers have been relatively untouched by the prosperity of the

region. The YO communities in our study that fit this description remained segregated, with a predominantly minority population. They had the lowest percentage of non-Hispanic white residents of any type of urban community that we visited. These communities were likely to be cut off from the rest of the city by physical barriers, such as freeways or waterways. Although physically and racially isolated from the rest of the city, these communities still face a shortage of affordable housing.

The Marshall Heights community in Washington, D.C., is an example of an isolated community within a business and education center. Marshall Heights is 98 percent African American and has been undergoing steady population decline for over a decade. The Anacostia River separates it from the central and western parts of the city. The community has few to no grocery stores, drug stores, hospitals, or restaurants. Marshall Heights has many public housing developments, some of which are being torn down and replaced by modern mixed-income town houses. This change is leading to a slow but perceptual shift in population as lower-income, former public-housing residents leave the community and middle-class Black residents move in. Marshall Heights has continued to struggle with high crime, even as the national crime rate has fallen.

New Destination Cities

New destination communities include sunbelt cities and cities throughout the country that are attracting high numbers of immigrants, young families, and retirees. Their economies are based on recreation, retirement, and a strong service economy. These communities struggle to provide services and housing to their rapidly growing and increasingly diverse population. Most of these cities were seeing urban and suburban growth, with some aspects of urban sprawl and the concentration of poverty within some central-city neighborhoods. Their population is, on average, younger than that of the business and education centers, and wealth is more evenly distributed.

South Tucson is an example of a YO neighborhood within a new destination city. South Tucson is a one-square-mile incorporated municipality that is surrounded by the city of Tucson. The city has historically been a port of entry for Mexican immigrants but more recently has seen some influx of immigrants from Central America. Ten percent of the population is estimated to be recent immigrants. The city is almost entirely Spanish speaking. Much of the housing is overcrowded, as large extended families often live together in one small house. Also, transience is an issue because undocumented immigrants often settle in South Tucson for a short while before moving on to other locations. The economy is growing, but the jobs available to residents of South Tucson are often low-paying service jobs. These jobs are often seasonal because retirees and others seeking recreational opportunities tend to live in Tucson only during the winter months. Residents often work several jobs in order to support their families. Teen pregnancy, gangs, and poor-quality schools are pressing issues for the community.

Suburban Community

Suburban communities across the country are becoming increasingly diverse, both racially and economically. Many studies point to the rise in poverty within suburban centers and to the relationship between the economic and social well-being of central cities and their suburban areas. Generally, suburban centers have a less-concentrated network of service providers than central cities do and are less equipped to handle the needs of poor or diverse community

members.[6] This was not the case in the community we visited, which has an extensive network of services.

Brockton is located 20 miles southwest of Boston. Brockton experienced an influx of poor residents on public assistance from Boston in the 1970s and 1980s and subsequently experienced high rates of concentrated poverty. Currently, Brockton is experiencing a wave of immigrants from Haiti and Cape Verde, and their population was estimated by community leaders to have risen 10 percent from 2000 to 2004. The city has concerns about meeting the social and linguistic needs of these new residents. Brockton has a general shortage of housing; however, a number of affordable housing projects are currently being built, and efforts are being made to revitalize neighborhoods.

Rural Communities

We visited each of the six rural sites that received YO funding.[7] Rural communities often were more similar to one another than urban sites were. Residents of rural communities valued their unhurried life style, the friendliness of the community, and being close to the land. One youth said, "It is so simple here. You don't have to worry about complex things like big buildings and traffic. It's a family-oriented environment, where everyone knows everyone and the people are friendly." Residents of rural communities often expressed a great deal of community pride and a sense of independence and self-reliance that was uncommon in the urban or Native American communities that we visited. Faith in God and religion were also strong community values, particularly in the South. Youths were better able to identify a range of adult mentors within the community, suggesting that the small-town character of rural communities translated into a stronger support network for youths.

Rural communities also faced similar economic challenges. Rural YO communities had economies primarily based on agriculture with an increasing reliance on the service sector. The agricultural economic base within many communities was in decline, and civic leaders were struggling to bring new employers to the area. Their distance from urban centers and their dispersed population created unique challenges to employment and the provision of services. The weak tax base within rural YO communities contributed to a low concentration of services for youths, including recreational outlets or training opportunities.

There is no typical rural site. Differences in geography, demographics, and culture make each site unique, but they face similar challenges. To make our classification, we drew on a typology developed by the Economic Research Service (ERS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture for this section.[8] The YO programs operating within rural areas were able to fill vital niches in the areas of employment, education, and recreational and training opportunities.

---

[6] Allard, Scott, *Access to Social Services: The Changing Urban Geography of Poverty and Service Provision*. The Brookings Institution, 2004.
[7] DOL classified sites as rural or Native American. We use the DOL classification in our presentation of data throughout this report, even though some sites do not fit into this classification as well as others. For instance, Albany, Georgia, was classified as rural, even though it is really a small southern city. Similarly, Molokai, Hawaii, was classified as a rural site, even though it had many of the characteristics of a Native American site.
[8] Typology codes can be found at http://www.ers.usda.gov/Data/TypologyCodes/.

In the following summaries, we highlight some of the issues facing rural communities.

- **Population Decline**. Two of the YO communities, each located in the rural south, were experiencing ongoing population decline, which threatened the long-term health of the community. The economies of both communities were based on agriculture, and community leaders' efforts to attract businesses to the area were unsuccessful due both to the physical isolation of the community and the low education levels of residents. Young people who hoped for economic self-sufficiency felt that they had to leave these communities in order to get a job.

- **Poor-Quality Housing**. Housing within the rural YO communities ranged from well-maintained single-family homes to make-shift housing without plumbing. In many communities, middle-income whites, such as teachers, owned nicely maintained houses, while Blacks or Latinos inhabited dilapidated housing. In most cases, housing was racially segregated. In some communities, it was common to see large families living in housing that appeared on the verge of collapse. The need for safe affordable housing was identified as a high priority within all of the rural YO communities.

- **Low Employment**. All of the rural communities that received YO funds were struggling with job creation and high unemployment. The two southern agricultural communities were most challenged by an absence of jobs. Those with more developed manufacturing and service-based economies fared better. Still, job creation was cited by all communities to be a high priority.

- **Low Education**. Four of the rural YO communities were classified by ERS as having low levels of educational achievement. Residents in all the rural YO communities said that it was a challenge to motivate young people to pursue education, mostly because they had so few role models for academic achievement and perceived that there were so few opportunities for them to use academic degrees within their communities.

- **Lack of Recreational or Training Opportunities for Youths**. All of the YO communities lacked formal recreational or training opportunities for youths. Youths reported being bored and had nothing to do. Often, youths used parking lots as places to congregate or spent a great deal of their time inside watching television. The YO program often filled a vital niche in these communities by providing youths with after-school activities, mentoring, and a youth center.

Native American Communities

Six Native American communities participated in the YO program. The Native American sites were geographically isolated, and, because of this, they shared commonalities with the rural sites. Throughout much of this report, we combine the issues of rural and Native American sites because they are similar. In particular, all but one of the Native American sites that we visited were classified by ERS as having poor-quality housing, low employment, and low education. All had a lack of recreational or training opportunities for youths.

Native American communities differ from rural sites, however, in their unique cultural identities and their historic and ongoing relationship with the U.S. government. Native American

communities were in different stages of trying to rebuild their cultural identities, through promoting native language classes and reviving traditional arts and practices. Many of the YO programs incorporated these cultural values into their programming. Native American community members valued their families, their rich history, their connection to the land, and their communal values and lifestyle. Among many tribes, painful scars from their long and conflict-laden history with the U.S. government remain and make it difficult for them to trust outsiders. Limited resources and limited job opportunities sometimes created a climate of competition.

The tribal government continues to be a primary, and sometimes the only, employer in most of the Native American YO communities. Casinos and tourism offered some nongovernment-based income for some tribes located on major transportation routes or in recreationally attractive settings. ERS considers four of the six Native American sites visited to be recreational communities because of their proximity to national parks. The economic potential of recreational tourism remained limited, however because of the remoteness of many of the communities and the overall lack of entrepreneurship and services on the reservation. The Grand Traverse Band (GTB) in Michigan, however, is an example of a tribe that has been able to create extensive economic development through its casinos and tourist resorts. Except for the GTB tribe, all the Native American communities faced low employment and extremely high poverty. Most community members did not seem to think that the economy would change for the better. In one young person's words, "We will have enough to get by, from our families and the government. That's how our families lived so we don't see it being any different for us."

Conclusion

Each YO program operated in a unique community context, defined by history, demographics, politics, and economics. We cannot accommodate all the myriad variations between communities. However, our typology helps us to understand how communities are like each another in significant ways, and, when relevant, we use this information throughout this report to help us to identify key patterns in the data. In Chapter 3, we highlight cross-community characteristics, including geography, housing, demographics, and population change.

Chapter 3. Physical and Demographic Characteristics

The physical and demographic characteristics of YO communities were the most visible and least changeable dimensions that we examined in the ethnography. Our evaluation framework assumed that the YO initiative had the potential to affect different physical and demographic characteristics through direct community service projects, expansion of recreational spaces, and support for youth programs such as Youth Build. We discovered that most of the physical and demographic characteristics of YO communities did not shift significantly as a result of the YO program. One exception is the availability of recreational spaces and opportunities for youths, which expanded in those communities with well-located and well-operated youth centers.

Physical and demographic characteristics are crucial for understanding the context in which the YO program operated, and the unique challenges faced by youths and families within these communities. They also comprise some of the primary forces that shape the opportunity structure within each community and set the stage to discuss public initiatives and investment that have improved community well-being over the course of the YO program.

In order to narrow the breadth of our discussion, we focus primarily on physical and demographic characteristics that relate to economic opportunity and barriers to employment. Within each section, we highlight ways that the YO program addressed key barriers and how these aspects of the program were received by community members.

Geography and Accessibility

The YO ethnography focused on 35 YO communities across the country, including EZ areas within 24 urban communities, 6 rural communities, and 5 Native American communities. Figure 3-1 shows the distribution of YO communities across the country. In some areas, we visited individual neighborhoods within the EZ, while in other more dispersed population areas, such as Imperial County and the Pine Ridge Reservation, we studied community change within a series of small towns.

Figure 3-1. YO Communities

- Seattle-King County PIC
- Work Systems, Inc.
- Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians
- Oglala Sioux Tribe
- Buffalo & Erie County PIC
- Economic Development Industrial Corporation
- Brockton Area PIC
- PIC of Milwaukee County
- City of Detroit
- Capital Region Workforce Development Board
- PIC of San Francisco
- City and County of Denver
- City of Cleveland
- WIB of Philadelphia
- California Indian Manpower Consortium
- Office of Employment and Development
- Full Employment Council, Inc.
- DC Department of Employment Services
- Navajo Nation
- Louisville and Jefferson Counties WIB
- City of Los Angeles/Watts
- Robeson County
- Imperial County
- City of Memphis
- San Diego Workforce Partnership
- Pima County, Tucson
- Chicot & Desha Counties
- Birmingham/Jefferson County Job Training
- PIC/SDA-68 Inc.
- Georgia Dept. of Labor
- Alamo Workforce Development Board
- Hillsborough County
- Houston Galveston Area Council
- Association of Village Council Presidents
- Cook Inlet Tribal Council, Inc.
- Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indi
- Molokai

Miles
0   170 340   600   1,000

Miles
0 80 160   320   400

Miles
0   150   300   600   900

Geography and accessibility were issues for urban, rural, and Native American sites. Urban EZ neighborhoods benefited from their proximity to transportation networks (airports, subways, bus-lines, highways, waterways, etc.) and business activity, and yet they were often surprisingly isolated within these contexts. All but one of the rural and Native American communities in the YO study were distant from major population centers and lacked public transportation. This isolation limited their prospects for economic growth, but some sites were attempting to capitalize on the physical beauty of their surroundings as a resource for economic development. In the following sections, we discuss issues peculiar to urban and rural isolation, and then we discuss transportation challenges.

Urban Isolation

In many urban communities, the EZ was separated from central business and tourist centers by physical barriers. In some cases, these barriers were natural barriers in the form of waterways or hills. In other cases, the barriers were manmade, such as freeways, industrial zones, and railroad tracks. Physical isolation of communities was often accompanied by racial and cultural isolation.

YO communities were often isolated in more than one way. For instance, the Boyle Heights neighborhood in Los Angeles is bounded by the Los Angeles River on the west, the 710 freeway on the east, an industrial area to the south, and the hills of city terrace to the north. These natural and manmade barriers help to create discrete community borders for Boyle Heights, even though it is located within a much larger metropolitan area. Boyle Heights was also culturally homogenous, with a population that was almost entirely Latino or of Mexican descent and predominantly Spanish speaking.

This isolation often posed a significant obstacle to employment and to youths' engagement in educational and recreational opportunities. Many community members expressed a reluctance to travel to other parts of the city in pursuit of work. This reluctance was partially due to a perception of physical distance and issues related to transportation and partially due to perceived racial, cultural, and linguistic differences between the communities. Some youths said that they did not feel safe outside of their neighborhoods. Quantitative research about the effects of urban isolation and racial segregation on youth unemployment supports this finding. For instance, in a study of four urban communities, O'Regan and Quigley[9] found that urban isolation (defined by physical distance from jobs combined with low levels of social access)[10] was responsible for 10 to 40 percent of racial differences in youth employment.

For many YO residents, the lack of businesses in their neighborhood affected not only their employment opportunities but other aspects of their quality of life. In many declining industrial cities, like Philadelphia, there is a general lack of amenities in the EZ. One Philadelphia resident noted, "We have no cleaners, no Laundromat, no supermarket—the closest supermarket is 15 minutes away—and no drug store in this community." Community members said that even when

---

[9] O'Regan and Quigley, "Where youth live: Economic Effects of Urban Space on Employment Prospects," 1997, http://www.uctc.net/papers/358.pdf

[10] The study by O'Regan and Quigley conducted empirical analyses, which linked employment outcomes to dimensions of social access and social isolation. They found that when they controlled for individual and family characteristics, youths living in census tracts that had low numbers of employed adults, had fewer whites, and were farther from jobs were less likely to be employed. Of the spatial effect, they say the predominant factor was social and informational factors rather than job access.

they have amenities, such as a small neighborhood supermarket or convenience store, they pay inflated prices for their products.[11]

In other cases, however, YO communities did have a busy neighborhood center or commercial district. Further, many of the downtown areas were undergoing revitalization and redevelopment. Main streets in some YO neighborhoods, including Southwest Detroit and Memphis, are seeing new business activity and increased foot traffic after years of steady decline. The presence of locally owned businesses and the presence of chain stores appeared to positively affect community members' perception of their quality of life and their attitudes about their community. Locally owned businesses, such as "mom and pop" stores, were also more likely to hire community youths.

Rural and Native American Isolation

With the exception of one rural site, which was more like a small southern city, all rural and Native American reservations were physically isolated. Physical isolation of the communities was due to the lack of highways, to physical barriers such as waterways, or simply to their vast distance from transportation and economic centers. For instance, one Alaskan community that we visited was accessible only by an expensive floatplane ride or an 8-hour ferry ride from Anchorage. Most rural and Native American communities had some small towns or population centers. These centers, however, generally had low services, few amenities, and few employers.

On the positive side, many Native American and rural communities were located in physically beautiful landscapes. Further, most residents loved the privacy and small-town feel of their communities. One Hawaiian youth said, "It is where you can have simple living. We don't worry about how we look. We just hang out and look out for each other." A parent in Dumas, Arkansas, said, "I like the small and close knit environment, people with religious background, family oriented. Everybody knows everyone."

Some YO communities were beginning to use the physical beauty and recreational amenities of their locations as a source of economic development. For instance, the Grand Traverse Band (GTB), in Michigan has been able to make economic strides through its development of tourist casinos and resorts. Six of the 11 YO rural and Native American communities were trying to take advantage of their proximity to state parks or recreational amenities in order to create jobs and revenue by bringing visitors to their towns. The success of these efforts depended on the remoteness of the community and the quality of the recreational amenities it had to offer.

Not all rural and Native American populations, however, were interested in using tourism as a source of economic development. For example, some native Hawaiian residents of Molokai resisted opening up the island to certain types of tourism because they feared environmental consequences and changes to their island lifestyle. During the YO study, many Molokai residents opposed efforts to open the island to cruise ships, despite the economic benefits this might have. One Molokai resident said, "We do not want to create economic opportunity that is dependent on external resources, because we know that kind of development will not make it here." Native American and rural communities that either did not have or did not wish to draw on recreational

---

[11] This finding is further supported by research by the Brookings Institution in "The Price Is Wrong: Getting the Market Right for Working Families in Philadelphia," http://www.brookings.edu/metro/pubs/20050404_priceiswrong.htm.

amenities and tourism as resources for economic development were less optimistic about their prospects for economic growth.

Transportation Infrastructure

The transportation issues facing urban communities were distinct from those in rural and Native American communities. The following subsections summarize the unique issues facing each type of community.

Urban Communities

The quality of urban transit varied significantly from site to site. The quality of some YO urban transport systems, particularly those with rapid transit or street trolleys, was quite high, and community members often considered these systems to be a community asset. Unfortunately, rapid transit and trolley systems were often geared more towards affluent urban and suburban residents and were often too expensive or too far away for EZ residents to take on a regular basis.

All of the YO communities had bus systems, but many of these systems were slow, inconveniently located, or unreliable. For instance, in Tucson, it can take up to two hours by local bus to get from the YO-funded EZ community to Tucson Medical Center, a major employer and training provider in the area. Further, many bus routes only run until 8 or 9 p.m., so late-shift workers must find alternative transportation home. Lack of bus stops within the community was particularly challenging for youths. For instance, in neighborhoods with high crime or gang activity, youths were often scared to walk farther than a few blocks from their home. Bus lines, then, were of use only to youths who lived within close walking distance to a bus stop. Other obstacles to using city buses included inclement weather and crowded conditions.

While these varied transport systems generally could transport community members to jobs downtown or somewhere in the city center, they were not effective at transporting residents to jobs in suburban cities. In many of the YO sites, decent-paying working-class jobs had migrated out to the urban periphery, with no accessibility to public transit. Within some communities, rapid transit or buses could take community residents into the suburbs, but there were usually no transportation options to take residents from the transit terminal to various job sites. YO community members reported that transportation to suburban job sites was difficult, time consuming, or simply impossible. In the words of one resident, "If you do not have a car, you are screwed."

The YO program did play a role in increasing access to transportation among youths within some urban YO communities. YO programs often did provide transportation vouchers and bus passes to youth participants. This service was not unique to YO, as other programs within urban areas also provided bus vouchers, but the assistance was highly valued by community members and program participants. In some cases, YO would also transport participants to various community activities. YO transportation assistance, however, did not address more long-term transportation issues facing urban communities.

Rural and Native American Communities

Transportation was particularly challenging for rural and Native American sites. Other than lack of jobs, transportation is the most often cited barrier to working among rural residents. The rural areas and Native American reservations in the YO study did not have access to rural public transit, the rural analogue to bus service. Only one of our rural sites, which was actually a small southern city, had a public transit system, and even in this case, young people and community members complained that distance from their house to bus stops made it difficult for them to access the system.

Without public transportation, rural residents had to rely on their own vehicles or those of friends and family for transportation. Yet, poor rural and Native American households were likely to be without a vehicle or to have vehicles that were unreliable. Further, those with functioning vehicles often cited long commutes on poor roads as a danger. Native American communities, in particular, were likely to have a disproportionately high level of transportation-related mortality. Transportation challenges that inhibit adult employment were further amplified for young people, who are more likely to be without a vehicle and less likely to be able to pay for fuel.

Several rural YO projects provided transportation assistance for YO participants. YO projects often had shuttles for program youths, and this made the program distinct from other youth services in the community. As was true for urban areas, this service was of very high value to community members but did not address the long-term transportation challenges facing rural and Native American communities.

Community Demographics

The demographics presented in this section are a broad snapshot of community demographics, as captured by the 2000 census.[12]

The vast majority of the YO communities, including rural and Native American communities, are made up of racial and ethnic minorities. Only two communities within the YO study—South Boston and Brockton—are more than 50 percent white. Thirteen of the YO communities that we visited were predominantly African American, six were predominantly Latino, and five were predominately Native American. Some of these EZ communities were highly segregated, which contributed to the isolation of communities. For instance, the communities that we visited in Washington, D.C., and Birmingham were approximately 98 percent African American. Los Angeles and San Antonio YO communities were approximately 92 percent Latino. One resident of Buffalo said:

> *This city has always been a segregated city. I mean, if you superimpose a map on the city and color-code it, you're gonna find that the Black community and the Hispanic community have been in the middle of the city. Ninety percent of the minority community is dead-smack in the middle of the city.*

---

[12] Demographic data were collected at the Zip code level from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Fact Finder. We then mapped EZs to their corresponding Zip codes to provide a snapshot of community characteristics in the year 2000. For urban sites, we reduced these aggregations of Zip codes, when possible, to include only Zip codes that were part of the specific area visited, often a small subset of the EZ designated for YO Grants. Our analysis includes observations from ethnographic site visitors.

The remaining nine communities that we visited were very racially diverse, though several of these had small white populations (under 20 percent). Three of the racially diverse communities that we visited had sizable Asian populations, ranging from 12 to 32 percent.

Youths ages 15–19 were 7.8 percent of the population within YO communities, which is somewhat higher than the national average of 7.2 percent. However, youths ages 15–19 were over 11 percent of the population within some Native American communities that we visited. In general, Native American and Latino communities had a higher percentage of married households with children than the average for all communities.

Changes in Population: Immigration and Emigration Patterns

One of the main challenges facing many highly impoverished YO communities—particularly declining industrial cities, southern cities, and those in the rural south—is long-term population loss. Population loss was caused by a myriad of factors, including the loss of the industrial or agricultural base of the community, suburbanization, the movement of populations and jobs to the urban periphery, and white flight from central cities. The sustained loss of population within many YO communities contributed to reductions in the tax base of the city or town and in federal dollar allocation. It led to decreased services, which, in turn, contributed to an appearance of neglect and disrepair. It also made it difficult to recruit new employers to the area, or to acquire funds for economic development.

Population loss was accompanied by a "brain drain" of talented young people from the community and decreased racial and socioeconomic diversity. A high school valedictorian in rural Louisiana said, "There is just not really anything here for me. There is no way I will come back. There are no jobs." The loss of talented youths from the community contributed to an increasing pessimism and lack of hope among community members. The state senator representing a rural YO community commented, "These young people are our best hope. They are our future. Without them, I don't know what our future will hold."

Most Native American communities were not experiencing notable population change beyond a natural increase in the population, but they, too, were challenged to define success for young people in ways that did not involve them leaving the reservation. Within these types of communities, parents and other community members were often ambivalent about success and cynical about the prospects for change.

Other YO communities, particularly business and education centers and new destination cities, were experiencing population increases. Generally, people move to communities where they see opportunity. Thus, population growth is generally a sign of economic health. It does, however, bring its own unique challenges. High immigration into YO communities contributed to overcrowded housing, increased housing prices, and overburdened schools and social services. Further, forces like gentrification can change the fundamental character and culture of a community without helping those that are most at risk. One service provider in San Francisco said, "The quality of life is improving for new arrivals but not for people who are already here." In many communities with long-term residents, immigration means rising housing prices and increased competition for jobs.

Condition and Availability of Physical Spaces

As captured in the following description of the YO community in Buffalo, the physical condition of YO communities within declining industrial cities and in the rural South was often very poor.

> *There's a bad side of the tracks and a worse side. The bad side starts on Genesee Street, which has 45 abandoned houses and vacant lots as well as two-year athletic fields already sporting crooked goal posts and missing nets on the tennis and basketball courts. The worse side ends at Broadway, a shorter stretch where 37 vacant houses and lots outnumber occupied homes."*
>
> *–Buffalo News, Buffalo*
> *(writing about neighborhoods served by YO program)*

The steady decline in population experienced by these communities contributed to a fall in housing and property values, a high number of absentee landlords or landowners, and a high number of abandoned houses and properties. The empty lots and abandoned houses were often taken over by drug addicts, homeless youths, prostitutes, and others who have no place else to go. Residents would sometimes use empty lots as dumping sites, leading to the accumulation of refuse and trash. Other YO communities also were challenged by the same deteriorating physical environments, but to a lesser degree. In almost all the communities, public housing was badly in need of renovation.

Within this section, we discuss the condition and availability of housing, the condition of public buildings, and the availability of recreational spaces within YO communities. The condition of housing or public buildings was fundamental to community members' sense of well-being and pride in their neighborhood, and we did observe some dramatic improvements in housing within some communities over the course of the YO ethnography. The YO program was not responsible for these shifts, but they do suggest a degree of economic revitalization within some YO communities. Through the creation of YO centers, YO did fill a vital need for recreational space and recreational opportunities within some YO communities.

Housing

The following comment reflects the feelings of a resident of rural Louisiana about available housing:

> *We need housing around here. Back in 1990, there were no houses. This is 2002, and it is even worse. There is no construction. And even if there was, people have bad credit, so they can't afford to buy a house.*
>
> *–Resident of rural Louisiana*

Research shows that housing stress has a negative effect on the well-being of young people and of a community.[13]

---

[13] See Brooks-Gunn, J., Duncan, G., and Aber, J., editors, *Neighbourhood Poverty: Context and Consequences for Children, Volume 1*, Russell Sage, New York, 1997; Boyle, M., and Lipman, E., *Do Places Matter? A Multilevel Analysis of Geographic Variations in Child Behaviour in Canada*, W-98-16E, Applied Research Branch, Human Resources Development Canada, Ottawa, 1998.

The Economic Research Center of the U.S. Department of Agriculture considers a household with *any* of the following conditions to be experiencing housing stress:

- housing expenses exceed 30 percent of income
- there are more household members than rooms
- home lacks necessary bathroom facilities
- home lacks essential kitchen facilities

Housing stress disproportionately affects families in poverty and with children.

All of the YO communities—whether they were rural, Native American, or urban—had high levels of housing stress. Several YO communities had shanty towns or make-shift housing without running water or sewage service. Within some communities, arson was common, leaving the community dotted with the charred remains of houses. Other communities had housing that was severely overcrowded. Community members reported that they had to contend with environmentally contaminated housing, exposing them and their families to arsenic, lead, asbestos, and pollutants from neighboring freeways and industrial plants.

The causes of housing stress varied significantly by the type of community. Due to the declining population, industrial cities and southern rural communities faced a high number of absentee landlords and abandoned properties. On the other hand, immigration and gentrification within business and education centers often led to a general lack of available and affordable housing and to overcrowded conditions. Similarly, construction within rapidly expanding new destination cities could not keep pace with housing demands. Rural and Native American communities often faced a general lack of infrastructure or financial means to support new construction and renovation; thus, their housing stock became dilapidated and overcrowded.

However, most communities had some challenges in common. Within most urban and many rural communities, large public housing units were in deplorable condition, and criminal activity was prevalent. Maintenance of properties was a challenge in most communities because of absentee landowners who would not pay for repairs, the lack of skilled workers (that is, carpenters, plumbers, roofers), and the lack of working householders to pay for building materials and repairs. Our site visitors observed that many YO communities had "poorly maintained homes with broken windows, sagging roofs, peeling paint, or no paint."

Although YO communities faced many housing challenges, several highly visible forces within the YO communities led to improvements in the condition of housing over the course of the YO program. These forces included public housing reform and neighborhood revitalization efforts. We did not find that these forces were caused or facilitated by the YO program, but they did promote a climate of hope and a rising sense of well-being within some YO communities, and that may have influenced the success of YO.

Hope VI Public Housing Reform

During the years of the YO program (2000–2004), 21 of the 24 urban YO sites were in some stage of revitalizing public housing with the support of Hope VI funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Although we did not seek out

information specifically about Hope VI, this initiative was highlighted by community members as a major force for community change within 11 of the urban communities we visited. These YO communities saw the demolition of old public-housing facilities and the construction of new public housing, often in the form of mixed-income developments. Mixed-income developments include public housing, some low-income affordable housing, and some market-rate housing. Some YO communities also experienced downtown revitalization projects that included the construction of low-income housing, public housing, and retail units.

The goal of the Hope VI effort, launched by HUD in 1992, was to replace or renovate the most crime-ridden and unsafe public housing structures. Many of the structures slated for demolition were mammoth buildings that covered city blocks. The buildings generally were poorly constructed, were poorly maintained, were sites of highly concentrated poverty and criminal activity, and had high vacancy rates. The Hope VI program provided vouchers to residents of public housing slated for demolition or relocated residents to other public housing facilities. Residents were supposed to relocate back to the new housing when it was completed, but many residents did not move back.

The effect of the Hope VI initiative varied by community, and in most communities, there was a lack of consensus about the initiative's effect. Many community members talked about how the community was safer and more attractive without the former public-housing facilities. They commented that the communities benefited from increased socioeconomic and racial diversity. For instance, within YO's Los Angeles community, a notorious public-housing development was torn down during the course of the YO program and replaced with new housing. The development had been considered one of the most violent public-housing units west of the Mississippi, partially because it housed several rival gangs and was the site of extensive drug trade. The destruction of this housing complex led to a sizable drop in gang violence, and many residents cited the new, aesthetically pleasing units as a source of pride.

At the same time, the initiative faced strong criticism. Low-income housing advocates noted that the overall availability of public housing in Hope VI communities decreased as a result of the reform effort. Advocates argued that relocation interrupted resident's lives and informal networks of support. HUD acknowledges that many former residents of public housing are unaccounted for and that the percentage of original residents relocating to new developments was often lower than anticipated.[14] One reason for this is that residents often had to meet stringent screening criteria in order to move into new developments. Each Hope VI grantee developed its own criteria for residents of the newly constructed housing, and these criteria varied significantly by site. Some sites required that no one in the house have a felony conviction or that residents comply with random drug testing. Other sites did not develop any screening criteria for former residents, and these sites often experienced a higher return rate. Other relocated residents may have settled into new housing that they liked and simply chose not to return to the newly constructed housing.

In most cases, the overall effect of Hope VI on the communities that we visited appeared to be positive, even though the effects on former residents are less clear. The replacement of blighted public housing with well-constructed multifamily mixed-income developments appeared to

---

[14] See GAO's 2003 report: "Hope VI residents issues and changes in neighborhoods surrounding grant sites," http://www.gao.gov/new.items.

contribute to an increase in community members' sense of community pride. The construction of well-lit walkways and the increased management of newly constructed housing helped contribute to an increase in community members' sense of safety. Yet, the long-term effects of Hope VI are unknown.

Neighborhood Revitalization

Many of the YO communities were experiencing a combination of public and private ventures to revitalize the community. This type of revitalization was occurring in all different types of cities, but it was particularly prominent in declining industrial cities. Through the combined efforts of city-sponsored block-grant programs, community-development corporations, nonprofit organizations, such as Habitat for Humanity, and private developers, vacant properties and lots were being reclaimed and converted into attractive and usable housing. Within YO communities in cities like Milwaukee, 50 percent of the houses in some blocks were newly constructed or repaired. Although there was still extensive work to be done, this contributed to a rising sense of community pride. The model of combining public housing, rent-to-own, senior housing, and middle-income properties seemed particularly successful.

In several communities, the revitalization included the renovation of neglected and underutilized business districts. For instance, during the YO ethnography, Albany, Georgia, was undergoing extensive revitalization of its downtown district. Albany continued to lose population over the course of the YO program, and yet, the construction of a downtown mall and middle-income housing continued unabated. The community development and revitalization was driven by the perception that in-migration would occur as a result of a revitalized urban space, rather than vice versa. This model was apparent in several southern cities and some declining industrial cities in the YO study that were attempting to draw suburbanites and whites back to the inner city.

Unfortunately, Albany is also an example of how revitalization can have unintended consequences on some poor communities. Development and construction in West Albany led to a reduction in traffic to East Albany, which residents say negatively impacted businesses and left the area in a state of visible decline and emptiness. Thus, development in one part of the city can lead to the increased isolation and marginalization of other parts.

Within gentrifying education and business communities, neighborhood revitalization was often driven by the movement of young professionals and the "creative class" to urban areas. Communities like San Diego experienced extensive development over the course of the YO program, including the development of a new downtown baseball park. Such efforts led to increased migration of affluent professionals and families into the EZ and to the displacement of some existing residents, either because they sold their properties or because rents were rising. These communities were often rapidly changing, and residents reported increased job opportunities and decreased crime.

Condition of Public Buildings

Public buildings within many of the YO communities were in better condition than the general housing stock. Our research staff observed that many public buildings were newly constructed or undergoing renovation. Eastern cities like Philadelphia had many old historic public buildings with beautiful architecture scattered throughout the EZ neighborhoods. Many residents perceived

these buildings to be assets to the community. In Latino neighborhoods, murals documenting Mexican history, Catholicism, and community activities were common throughout the community. These murals contributed to a sense of community pride and identity. Within Native American communities, new buildings that reflected cultural symbols had been constructed. For instance, the Grand Traverse site has a newly constructed sports complex in the shape of a turtle, symbolizing "strength and patience."

Many public and historic buildings, however, had not been renovated. In particular, many young people complained of antiquated heating and cooling systems within old school buildings. Schools were often in disrepair. When schools and other public buildings that serve youths are in poor repair, it discourages participation. One teacher in a school with a dreary interior said, "Kids don't want to be here. They are feeling oppressed. It is totally depressing to be here. Look at these walls!"

Availability and Condition of Recreational Spaces

The following comment concerns facilities for children in an urban EZ.

> *This city is unbelievably child-unfriendly. The empowerment zone is building houses but nothing for children unless you include welfare types of agencies and detention centers."*
>
> *–Drug prevention worker, Cleveland*

Most of the urban YO communities had some kind of recreational spaces for youths, including parks and sports fields or basketball courts. Most had some community center or other setting where youths could congregate and a host of programs, such as the YMCA, that provided recreational programs. Yet, in most cases, many youths did not take full advantage of these opportunities because of issues of access, the poor physical condition of facilities, or broader safety concerns. In many YO communities, residents viewed parks and basketball courts as unsafe because they were sites where gang activity, drug sales or use, and congregations of homeless and mentally ill would take place. Because of this, parents often preferred that their children stay at home where they could monitor them, rather than go to public recreational spaces. Further, young people often told us that they did not feel safe to travel more than a few blocks from their house to access recreational opportunities. A community center, therefore, was likely to draw youths only from the immediate area.

Prior to YO, most rural and Native American communities were devoid of out-of-school youth activities or services. There were often few to no playgrounds, parks, sports fields, community centers, libraries, or movie theatres. Youths in these communities would congregate at parking lots around town and spend much of their discretionary time watching television. One rural youth described his community as "Boring, nothing to do. No malls . . . no theatre, no skating, no jobs."

YO filled a vital niche within many YO communities by creating youth centers and sponsoring increased recreational opportunities for youths. Despite a slow start in many communities, by Year 3 of the ethnography, many residents cited the YO center and the recreational activities promoted by YO as a value added to the community. This opinion was particularly true in rural and Native American communities, where the opportunities had often been highly limited before

the YO program. Unfortunately, due to decreased funding levels, many communities were not able to sustain the recreational aspects of YO programs through the whole study period.

Relationship between YO and Demographic and Physical Characteristics

The vast majority of residents within the communities that we visited did not believe that the YO program had much impact on the demographic or physical characteristics of their communities. On a macro scale, each YO community changed in its own way over the 5-year lifespan of YO. Yet, there were some commonalities. We observed some communities where gradual change to the physical characteristics of YO communities was occurring through a combination of federal, state, and local initiatives designed to bring new employers to the EZ, to reform public housing, and to renovate dilapidated housing. In other communities, the changes were driven more by population factors, political leadership (or lack thereof), and budget cuts. Still, in others, very little seemed to change in such a short timeframe.

The YO program did, however, help to temporarily address some barriers to youth employment and contribute to the well-being through community service projects, such as litter pick-up, graffiti removal, and planting of native plants. In a small set of communities, YO was able to help address key gaps—for example, by creating recreational spaces, providing transportation assistance, and engaging youths in community-service activities. These improvements were particularly apparent in rural areas and small cities where organized activities and support services for youth were very limited.

Physical and demographic community characteristics were very important for determining the context within which YO operated. Therefore, the relative isolation of many YO communities, the lack of transportation, and the new revitalization efforts in many communities all presented the YO program operators with opportunities and challenges for serving local youths. Across the YO sites, the success of the YO program in identifying the local priorities, complementing other efforts, and addressing service gaps was directly related to how well the YO program was perceived by youths and community members.

Chapter 4. Social Networks and Conditions

As is captured in the following quotation, the YO communities face tremendous social challenges, many of which are interrelated.

> *The most pressing issues are poverty, lack of education, teenage pregnancy, lack of challenging activities, and getting parents involved . . . . The major problem faced by the community is lack of employment.*
>
> *—Dean of Students, Rural Arkansas*

To address the complex web of challenges facing youths, the YO initiative supported intensive case management. Further, the initiative promoted prosocial or conventional adult mentorship in order to extend and strengthen positive social networks among youths. The YO initiative also sought to improve community well-being through efforts such as gang prevention, pregnancy prevention, leadership activities, and expanded education and training programs.

The ethnography examined social networks and conditions within the YO communities in order to gain a deeper understanding of the complex social dynamics within YO communities and to track any shifts or changes in these dimensions over time. We assessed community members' perception of the quality of social networks available to youths within their communities and their understanding of the types of social conditions that the YO program was seeking to improve. We also attempted to discern what role, if any, the YO program played in any changes in the social networks and conditions in these communities.

Generally, we do not have evidence that the YO programs located in urban areas were responsible for major community-wide shifts in social networks or conditions, but YO did help many youth participants address key challenges individually. Further, community members within rural communities believed that the YO program contributed to an improvement in community well-being, such as decreased crime. In the sections that follow, we first present how YO community members perceive their social networks, and then we describe their perceptions of the social conditions that prevail in their communities.

Social Networks

The ethnography examined social networks as one dimension of social capital. By social capital, we are referring to young people's ties to resources and power.[15] In low-income communities and communities of color, such as the YO communities, ties to resources and power tend to be weak; therefore, access to wealth, power, and resources is limited. The YO model was grounded, in part, on the concept that case managers could expand networks of social capital for youths by acting as a bridge between youths and key resources (that is, jobs, training, childcare, transportation, financial assistance, etc.).

---

[15] Lin, Nan, Ensel, Walter M., and John C. Vaughn, "Social Resources and Strength of Ties: Structural Factors in Occupational Status Attainment," *American Sociological Review* 46, 1981; Wacquant, Loic J. D. , and Wilson, William Julius, "The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion in the Inner City," *Annals of the American Academy* (AAPSS) 501, January 1989; and others.

This section explores the social networks in YO communities, the ways in which they changed over time, and the role of the YO program in strengthening them. We frame social networks in terms of the role of the family, adult mentors, community cohesiveness, and access to resources and services.

Role of the Family

Families play an important and central role in the lives of most young people. Within YO communities, however, many families are fragmented; single parents, teen parents, and grandparent householders are all common. In addition, a high percentage of fathers are absent or in jail. In the words of one San Diego youth, "Everybody I know, their dad is in jail. I never knew mine, and my mom is struggling to feed me." Thus, the primary support network for many youths is limited to one parent or an extended family member, and this makes it challenging for youths to get the attention and support they need in order to succeed.

Due in part to the fragmentation of families, YO community members described a general lack of parental support and involvement in their children's lives. Respondents suggested many related reasons for the low levels of parental support. Most commonly, parents need to work multiple jobs in order to support the family, making it difficult for them to play an active role in their child's life. Many parents also struggled with disability, addiction, or unresolved mental health problems that interfered with their ability to care for their children and sometimes led to abuse or neglect.

Another related theme among adult and youth respondents is that many children are taking care of themselves and are serving as caretakers for siblings or other family members. One rural youth said, "My parents were hardly ever home. My dad was always in town drinking. I cooked for my little brother, and Dad took care of the basic necessities, like food, but he was never home." Teachers in some communities said that youths came to school exhausted because they had been up all night caring for a sick sibling.

When asked about role models, the vast majority of youths that we interviewed in YO communities named a female family member, such as a mother or a grandmother. Fathers and grandfathers were largely absent as role models. Youths said that they admire their mothers because they were able to raise a family on their own with little support. This comment by a Portland youth is typical: "I want to be like my mom. She's a single parent and has worked really hard to support us." Although caring mothers and grandmothers are clear assets to the community, it is a challenge that such a high percentage of children within YO communities are growing up without positive male role models.

Single parents and poor parents also face a tremendous amount of economic stress. One resident said, "If parents are not functional, can't pay their rent or utility bills, or live in homes run by rip-off landlords, kids don't grow up with hope." In many cases, parents were psychologically consumed with issues such as unemployment, the absence of meaningful work opportunities, the lack of affordable housing, and the inability to pay for basic necessities, such as food, clothing, or health care. These stressors, in turn, inhibited the ability of parents to spend quality time with their children and attend events where they can encourage their children to do their best. Community members also felt that many parents lack parenting skills or face other barriers when trying to be supportive of their children. One resident of West Philadelphia said, "Babies are

raising babies, and kids are just going in the wrong direction because of the lack of support in the homes."

Many parents in YO communities lack the types of educational and work experiences that could help them support academic achievement among their own children. Youths often said that their parents encourage them to do well in school, but they didn't feel that this had much value without more concrete guidance. A San Francisco youth told us, "I don't hear anything from my mom about succeeding. She can say, 'Do good,' but she really doesn't know because she never went to school herself."

Immigrant families face barriers that are different from those faced by parents native to the U.S. For example, many immigrant parents often face language barriers, have no experience with U.S.-based education, and feel unable to help their children navigate the system. Also, immigrant parents often have low levels of formal education themselves, making it difficult for them to understand their child's experience or help out. A service provider in Seattle argued, "It is always easier to push kids down a path you know. That is why it is difficult for Cambodians to support their kids in school." Youths with immigrant parents often have to reconcile competing cultural values about education. For example, respondents said that Latino parents sometimes urge their children to quit school in adolescence so that they can start working and help support the family. A school counselor in Houston said, "Youths need a job to help the family so they will settle for whatever [job] comes along." Latinas are also commonly encouraged to stay home from school in order to help provide childcare so that their parents can work.

Although youth programs and schools in urban areas often tried to address issues of parent participation and involvement, community members generally viewed these efforts as inadequate or ineffective. One resident said, "Interventions with parents aren't working. Parents need time off work to meet with their kids' teachers. Parents need more to work with and not to just be called in for a meeting and embarrassed as a parent." Several YO programs adopted a focus on parental involvement; however, in most communities, YO had limited success in these efforts. In Washington, D.C., for instance, the program was praised for its efforts to involve youths and their parents in intensive case management. We did not observe any changes in the overall functioning of families over the course of the YO ethnography.

Presence of Adult Mentors

The ethnographic study explored the value that adult mentors bring to social capital networks within YO communities. Adult mentors were seen as vital because they can model positive behavior, act as a sounding board for youths, and help to connect them with key resources and opportunities. In YO communities, community members viewed the lack of adult mentoring, particularly by men, as a core challenge facing their communities, and we did not observe any changes to this circumstance during the study period. Overall, many residents in YO communities believed that adult mentors are critical so that youths can emulate positive work habits and receive guidance on their career choices and other life decisions. This proved to be true of boys in YO communities because so many of them lack positive images of masculinity. A service provider in a Native American reservation said, "Males especially get stuck in a rut here. There is no strong male influence, no strong mentors." A principal in another Native American community noted, "Someone is always trying to get a mentoring program going, but there are never enough men who want to mentor troubled boys."

In the absence of positive adult role models, youths often look to their peers for guidance. Unfortunately, youths often gain status in YO communities by engaging in reckless or illegal activity. Respondents in Los Angeles said that youths look to "spoons," young men recently released from prison, as role models. Respondents said that many young people seek out jail time in order to earn respect among their peers. In keeping with this finding, one San Diego youth said:

> We don't have positive role models. We look up to the wrong people—people that are in and out of jail . . . There is no one at home telling me what's right from wrong . . . What I learned is if I want a car, [I should] go jack it because that is the only way to get it.

On the other hand, residents also said that young adults who were involved in gangs or high-risk behaviors can be the most influential at persuading younger peers to go straight. One resident in a Native American community said that often people who act as role models don't see themselves that way. He talked of one young adult in the community who "is a wonderful example of someone who has been in trouble but now motivates others."

Perhaps because of the small-town feel of rural communities, rural youths were more able to give examples of nonparental role models than urban or Native American youths were. For instance, youths in rural North Carolina named a number of adult role models within their community, including a police detective, a basketball coach, a local community activist, choir directors, and church members. Youths within urban and Native American communities were often not able to name any nonparental adults in the community as role models.

Community members did not perceive that YO expanded the pool of adult mentors within the community, even though this was an explicit goal of the program. YO case managers, however, were perceived by many to be important role models to youths within the program.

Community Cohesiveness

Community cohesiveness is another aspect of social networks because it relates to the ability of community members to engage in collective action and provide resources and support to one another.

Many YO residents said that their community needed an increased sense of solidarity in order to address key challenges. They felt that community members continued to deal with their individual challenges in isolation, rather than connecting with each other. For example, a Washington, D.C., resident said, "We need to organize more—make connections with our neighbors." This resident felt that community organizing would help push economic development to the forefront. Respondents also said that residents often did not see the big picture or understand how their common challenges could be addressed through coordinated action.

Residents of rural YO communities communicated a much higher level of community connectedness and care than those in urban or Native American communities. Most residents of rural communities said that their community was close knit and that they looked out for one another. For instance, one rural Louisiana resident said, "I don't know a person in Lake

Providence who would be hungry. You can go next door and get a sandwich. There's a feeling of acceptance." A resident of Molokai, Hawaii, echoed this sentiment:

We are survivors. We know what hard living is like financially. We know what it's like when the store runs out of food, like rice and milk. So we go without rice for a few days because we know we can depend on each other for support.

Residents in several Native American communities spoke of a lack of trust and mutual support within the community. Native American residents commonly talked of resentment against families that were economically successful or that occupied positions of importance in the community. Charged disputes between agencies or employers were also common in Native American communities, partially because of competition for limited resources and jobs. Residents often suggested that staff in competing agencies were unqualified or that they received their position through special favors rather than merit. Some respondents linked the lack of community cohesion to their community's traumatic past and to a general scarcity of resources and opportunities on the reservation.

The specific impact of the YO program on community cohesiveness is difficult to measure, given the scope and scale of this ethnographic study. The qualitative data suggests that YO may have made a somewhat significant contribution to community cohesiveness in a handful of cases, particularly in one rural site where the program was seen as a collaborator and a very large asset to the community overall. In the urban sites, YO was much more likely to have a slight impact on the cohesiveness of small subcommunities within the larger community, such as an FBO network that YO operated within a local network of youth service providers. However, there were many YO communities where either there was no mention of any effects on community cohesion or YO had a small, neutral, or even negative effect community cohesion.

Access to Resources and Services

The last aspect of social networks that we examined was access to resources and services. The more access that community members had to resources, the more likely they are to be connected to information about jobs and community events.

Access to resources, jobs and services within rural and Native American communities was often quite limited due to the physical isolation of the communities. In urban YO communities, on the other hand, respondents often felt that youths did not take advantage of the opportunities that were available to them in the surrounding community. As one director of a vocational program said, "If you live in a low income neighborhood, you don't know anything about the rest of the world." Youths were reluctant to leave the perceived safety and familiarity of their neighborhoods for fear of discrimination and other prejudicial treatment from prospective employers. As another respondent commented, young people are able to "navigate the system" within the neighborhood but not outside of it. In some cases, young people have "never experienced the airport or been to a mall." Many believed that this behavior among many urban youths was a primary factor in constraining their employment possibilities. Therefore, in addition to experiencing a genuine lack of access to resources and options within their communities, youths—and many adults as well—do not take advantage of opportunities that do exist.

The impact of the YO program on access to resources is inconclusive and is difficult to measure, given the scope and scale of this study. It is likely that the impact varied widely from YO program to YO program and individual to individual. Yet, the data does suggest that the YO program increased access to resources for some individual youths.

Social Conditions

In addition to the social networks, many social conditions in YO communities influence young people's access to social capital. For example, the high prevalence of crime, gangs, and drug use in certain communities creates a difficult environment for youths to survive in unscathed, let alone gain the skills to be successful in the labor market. All of the YO communities struggle with some destructive social conditions, but some YO communities face far more challenges in this regard than others. In this section, we analyze the extent and nature of social conditions within YO communities based according to observations of the community members that we spoke with. These social conditions include teen pregnancy, perceptions of crime and safety, youth gangs, tensions with police, and drug and alcohol use.

Teen Pregnancy

Almost all YO communities struggle with high rates of teen pregnancy. Young women who have babies as teenagers or out-of-wedlock are more likely to face long-term poverty. In addition, they face additional barriers to employment, including the need to arrange childcare, the lack of time available to conduct educational or training activities, the increased costs associated with raising a child, and the need for flexibility in the workplace to deal with childcare issues that arise.

Overall, the teen birth rate in most YO communities is falling. Many respondents, however, argue that it remains much too high. Teen pregnancy rates within YO communities, as in nearly all communities across the country, have generally been on the decline since the early 1990s. Yet, almost every YO community has higher-than-average teen birth rates, and many have among the highest teen pregnancy rates in the U.S.[16] Teen pregnancy is most prevalent in declining industrial and southern cities. Sixteen to 20 percent of all births within these cities are to mothers under the age of 20. Latinas, in particular, have among the highest teen birth rates.

Despite the overall decline in teen births, an increasing proportion of teens are having babies outside marriage. For instance, in communities like Baltimore, Milwaukee, and Cleveland, over 95 percent of births to women under 20 occur out of wedlock. Single teen mothers face extra burdens associated with caring for the child and earning enough income to support the child. As described in the earlier section on families in YO communities, family fragmentation and a lack of role models are major challenges in YO communities. The rising prevalence of out-of-wedlock teen births indicates that these social challenges are likely to continue to be an issue for YO communities.

Further, within many YO communities, teens frequently have more than one child. One youth respondent said, "[Kids] don't just have one child, they have three or four." A local police officer told of a woman in the community who just turned 20 and had five children. In the YO cities like

---

[16] *Child Trends*, March 2005, sponsored by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Facts_2005.pdf

Milwaukee, Baltimore, and San Antonio, 27 percent of teen births are repeat births; that is, more than one fourth of births are to teens that already have a child. An elected official in Milwaukee proclaimed, "I have met a 38-year-old great grandmother. We are now paying a price for the epidemic of teen pregnancy." Teenagers with more than one child face even greater employment challenges.

Although economic and social challenges are clearly associated with teen pregnancy, not all YO community members saw teen pregnancy as a problem. For example, Native American community members did not generally view teen pregnancy as a problem. A Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition counselor on the Bishop Paiute Native American reservation in California explained, "Children are considered a gift of god," regardless of the circumstances of their birth. Further, parents or grandparents of teen mothers assumed that they should assist in taking care of their grandchildren. A drug counselor in the same Native American community argued, "No Native American girl drops out of high school because she is pregnant." Evidence from across the Native American sites indicates that the vast majority of Native American teen mothers completed their education and did not view motherhood as an impediment to their success.

Similarly, in some urban YO communities, youths spoke of teen pregnancy as a turning point or as an opportunity, rather than a negative experience. For example, one former gang member in Denver applied for YO services when he found out his girlfriend was pregnant and realized that he had a responsibility to support the child. He told the YO coach, "I am ready to work." In addition, teen pregnancy and carrying the child to term often occurs as a result of active decision-making on the part of young mothers. "Young women want to have babies," said a youth worker. Thus, it is not safe to assume that all YO community members viewed teen pregnancy as a social condition that impedes success; instead, some felt that pregnancy was a success in itself.

There are many possible explanations for why teen pregnancy rates are higher in YO communities than they are on average. Research indicates that low educational achievement, poverty, lack of quality relationships with adults, drug use, gang affiliation, and permissive parental values are all predictors of teen pregnancy.[17] YO community members offered their own thoughts about why the teen pregnancy rates are so high. For example, many cited the fact that teens are not getting adequate sex education, they lack an understanding of how it will affect their educational and job opportunities, they have poor self-esteem, and there is a lack of structured recreational activities for youths. Other respondents suggested that having a child may make a young person feel responsible and important, which fills a void that the youths experienced growing up in their community.

Although some YO programs did connect young women to pregnancy prevention services, the role in delivering these programs and services was not well known within the YO communities. We could not discern any causal link between the YO program and changes in the teen pregnancy rate within YO communities. However, YO may have made some important contributions toward pregnancy prevention efforts in some communities.

---

[17] *Wisconsin Plan to Help Prevent Adolescent Pregnancy*, Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, Madison, Wisconsin, 2003.

Perceptions of Crime and Safety

A sense of safety is vital for healthy living within any community because the fear of going out on the street or outside of one's neighborhood can severely restrict one's mobility and, therefore, access to resources and opportunities. For youths, their parents' perceptions of safety are also important because youths are often obliged to follow their parents' wishes with regard to venturing outside the home.

Overall, crime rates across the United States and within many YO communities began falling in the early 1990s, and this overarching trend continued through the first years of the YO program. The last year of our study saw a slight shift in this trend; with some urban residents describing an increase in crime and decreased sense of safety in our 2004 visit. However, in most YO communities, crime was on the decline.

Given that the crime rate was falling nationally during the same time period, it is difficult to separate the influence of the YO program from other factors that might be influencing crime. However, respondents within a cross-section of different communities attributed the decrease in juvenile crime, at least in part, to the YO program. This was particularly true in some rural communities. Some residents and police officers we spoke to within YO communities felt strongly that YO had helped to diminish crime by providing youths with something productive to do.[18] Because perceptions of crime and safety in urban areas differed from those in rural and Native American communities, we discuss each area separately in the following subsections.

Urban Sites

The majority of urban YO communities experienced overall decreases in crime throughout the lifespan of YO. Yet, many residents of urban areas believed that juvenile crime was getting worse and more violent. Crime statistics and police interviews reveal that, for the most part, this is a false perception. Residents' viewpoints appear to be heavily influenced by highly publicized or particularly brutal events. For instance, crime statistics in Milwaukee indicate that youth crime was steadily decreasing, and yet a single horrific event in which 15 youths beat to death a 36-year-old man significantly raised anxiety and made residents feel less safe.

Several factors are likely to have contributed to the decrease in crime in many YO communities. For example, some respondents said that gentrification has led to increased perceptions of safety among residents. Many urban YO communities have been undergoing downtown revitalization efforts and public housing upgrades.[19] Taken together, these improvements may have had a positive influence on crime rates. In addition, several federal programs, such as YO, Weed & Seed, and YouthBuild combined have constituted a considerable investment in youth activities. For example, residents in Tucson and Seattle were apt to attribute the decline in crime to well-coordinated and well-executed Weed & Seed efforts.[20] When those efforts were added to those of local service providers, this indeed may have had a positive impact on juvenile crime rates.

---

[18] For more details about community member's perception of the YO programs influence on crime, see Chapter 7.

[19] For more details on revitalization efforts in YO communities, see Chapter 3.

[20] Weed and Seed is a community-based strategy sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). It is a multiagency approach to law enforcement, crime prevention, and community revitalization. Weed and Seed aims to prevent, control, and reduce violent crime, drug abuse, and gang activity in designated high-crime neighborhoods across the country.

Although the crime rate fell in most YO communities over the study period, crime continues to be a major problem in some cities. Declining crime rates in high-crime cities, such as Detroit and Baltimore, were relatively imperceptible to residents because the crime rate remained at levels well above the national average. The majority of residents in these cities still felt that the streets were unsafe. Violent crime was still a commonplace reality in many YO communities. At the end of October 2004, street violence had led to the deaths of 31 Baltimore youths, exceeding the total number of juvenile homicides in either 2000 or 2001.One youth said, "Things are getting out of hand." A youth to whom we spoke in Washington, D.C., who was shot in the face while walking to church, still "feels threatened" and does not believe the situation has changed, with or without YO.

Some community members within high-crime communities reported that they were afraid to leave their homes and go to work. In one city, a YO case manager was robbed twice at the YO center, including the first week she was there. Another resident was robbed and raped within one block of the center. In the same community, both high-school students and older youths are regularly killed by gun violence, and youths we spoke with said that shootings are frequently retaliatory and drug related.

Many young people in such high crime communities, either by their own choice or because of restrictions put in place by their parents or guardians, were unlikely to use outside recreational spaces, to walk alone in their neighborhood, or to journey beyond a few blocks from their house. A female youth in Southwest Detroit said, "People [that live next door to me] are in gangs and they do drugs, steal, and kill. I don't walk around at night. From 1 to 4 in the morning, I hear gunshots. They get drunk and go crazy."

At the same time, many residents described feeling more unsafe outside their communities in areas where they were a racial minority. For instance, many youths and adults from predominantly African American communities felt considerably safer in their high-crime neighborhoods than they did in lower crime, primarily white areas of the city. Black residents often feared that the police in white neighborhoods would harass or question them. They may also be reluctant to pursue certain job opportunities that they perceive to be predominantly white in culture. As scholars have found, this reflects the reality that "code switching," or the ability to adapt one's behavior to succeed in a different cultural environment, is one of the most important skills for labor market success.[21] In this way, perceptions of the lack of safety outside one's neighborhood translate into employment barriers for many youths of color.

Our ethnographic study underlies the importance of safety as one of the most fundamental dimensions of community well-being. Physical safety emerged as a consistent determinant of whether youths feel comfortable venturing out on the street to participate in activities or to pursue education, training, and work opportunities. Likewise, residents also told us that they are reluctant to step outside their immediate neighborhoods in pursuit of education, training, or work opportunities when they stand out or feel that they are being judged. Thus, we might expect that placement and retention of youths in jobs might be more challenging within high-crime YO communities and within more isolated communities of color.

---

[21] Moss, Philip I., and Tilly, Chris, "'Soft' Skills and Race: An Investigation of Black Men's Employment Problems," *Work and Occupations*, 1996, 23(3): 252–276.

With regard to the effects of the YO program on safety in urban communities, the feedback is mixed. Many respondents said that YO helped to curb criminal activity by keeping youths off the street. One YO case manager also said that the program has decreased crime by helping ex-offenders get jobs. In addition, YO provided recreational activities to youths who would otherwise just "hang around and chill," which some respondents felt was conducive to misbehavior. However, in many urban YO communities, the YO program itself was not well known. Furthermore, so many other programs and service providers were actively pursuing the crime and safety problems in urban communities that it is difficult to isolate the specific effects of YO. Still, it is likely that YO made some positive contribution toward the improving crime trends; even if the contribution was on a very small, or even individual, scale.

Rural and Native American Communities

The story about the perception of safety in rural and Native American YO communities is very different from the one in urban communities. Overall, residents of rural and Native American communities viewed their communities as safe. Residents indicated that they felt safe because of the small-town and tight-knit atmosphere of their communities. They said, "People look after each other," "Everyone knows everyone," and that you can "leave your 10-speed bike on the lawn and no one will get it." Police action within rural and Native American communities generally involved drug sales, drug use, or domestic violence. Some residents talked about youth gangs, but few could cite a gang-related incident.

Rural and Native American residents credited the YO program for the decrease in property and violent crime within two rural communities. Some attributed the decrease in crime to the YO program indirectly, arguing that engaging out-of-school youths in productive activities had the effect of discouraging them from getting involved with criminal activity. One rural community in particular saw a dramatic decrease in crime during the period of the YO grant. In addition, a police person in a Native American YO community said, "YO kids stay out of trouble." A YO youth said, "YO keeps kids safe."

Youth Gangs

The presence of youth gangs is another social condition that has the potential to impede successful employment and education outcomes among youths. It is promising that, within many urban YO communities, residents did not perceive youth gangs as a major issue. Community members indicated that youth gangs are on the decline and tend to be less violent than the gangs of the past. In fact, a police officer in Baltimore said the term "gang" is overused, and this resonated well with what we have heard in other cities. Youths within rural and Native American communities, in particular, were prone to laugh about what they perceived to be adults' obsessions with gangs. Youth in these communities called gang-affiliated youths "wannabes."

Instead of gangs, many youths affiliated with "crews," or other cliques of youths. For instance, a police officer in Brockton described "unorganized groups of unsupervised kids," rather than "gangs." Some of these crews or gangs participated in informal drug trafficking, but they generally kept a low profile, were not highly entrepreneurial or territorial, and were not as violent as gangs had been in the past.

Many residents attribute the decline in serious or antisocial gang activity to a "get tough" attitude about gang involvement among police, community leaders, and political figures. For instance, Hartford saw gang involvement decline rapidly after major shakedowns by local and state police in the 1990s. Although many YO communities, like Hartford, were experiencing a relatively quiet period of gang involvement, some felt that the long-term potential for resurgence remained high.

There are, however, some important exceptions to this overall trend towards decreased gang violence. For a few urban YO communities, particularly Detroit and Los Angeles, youth gangs continue to be a serious problem. Gangs within these communities intimidated residents, contributed to rising homicide rates, and participated in the trafficking of firearms and drugs. Within the Los Angeles community that we visited, police had documented 34 active gangs, with 7,500 documented members. Gang activity was particularly prevalent in predominantly Latino communities. Gang violence increased in Los Angeles over the first two years of our study, with gang-related homicides increasing by 21 percent. Then, the situation improved by Year 5, largely because of the work of CLEAR, a federal antigang program.[22]

Our interviews with community members indicated that high gang activity negatively affects gang and nongang-involved youths. Gang and nongang-affiliated youths often restricted their movements within these communities so that they would not inadvertently cross into gang territory. One youth from Detroit commented, "Gang fights are breaking out all the time. You can't walk in the neighborhood without getting beaten." A police officer in Detroit commented that, despite lower rates of violent crime, "The constant concern of a gang presence has always affected the entire atmosphere of the neighborhood."

We also discovered that the relationships between gangs and residents are often complex. Many residents perceived that gangs act as alternative family structures for youths, providing certain benefits and supports to youth members. Within Latino neighborhoods, gangs tend to be territorial and bound to a particular set of streets or housing development within the neighborhood. Residents in several neighborhoods said that gangs are multigenerational. In addition, some community members, including loosely affiliated youths, believed that the gangs provide a sense of protection.

The YO program had a limited role in antigang efforts. In Detroit, for instance, the YO program had a counselor who was dedicated to monitoring gang activity and re-educating gang members. A youth police officer there said, "Despite the constant concern of gang presence, . . . [the YO Program] has opened new doors for youths." Yet, there is not enough evidence to suggest that the YO program's role in antigang efforts was substantial enough to have a major effect on gang presence in YO communities with high gang activity. YO was part of a myriad of antigang activities, the combined effects of which appeared to play a role in decreasing the presence and power of youth gangs.

Relationship with Police

The following comments reflect a youth's opinion of the police in his urban community.

---

[22] CLEAR stands for Community Law Enforcement and Recovery (CLEAR). CLEAR is a federal program that involves a partnership between community members, LAPD, District Attorney's office, and parole officers.

The police bother everybody in this neighborhood. They stereotype you because they think you're a gang member. They come up to you, harass you, try to see who your parole officer is even if you are straight . . . . Then, when you really need them, they take too long to get there.

– YO youth, San Diego urban community

Antagonism and mistrust between community members and police was another common social condition within YO communities. Many of the African American and Latino respondents in particular had conflicting attitudes about the local police. On one hand, most residents want a strong police presence that responds quickly when an incident occurs within their community. Like the youth quoted above, however, they often felt that the police were quick to harass residents and suspect them of wrongdoing but slow to respond in an emergency. Some residents said they felt that the police viewed their lives as expendable. Police themselves also highlighted tensions with community members. For example, one police officer in Washington, D.C., said that residents view the police as an occupying force. Another police officer in Kansas City said he often hears, "Get out of my neighborhood!" as he drives down the street in his patrol car.

Personal experiences with police harassment were common among respondents. Many youths of color said that the police had stopped, questioned, and searched them for no reason. Youths and other community members also complained of the use of unnecessary levels of force. For instance, one respondent said a police officer ran through a local funeral with guns drawn in pursuit of a suspect. During the YO study, high profile cases occurred in two communities in which a Black man was shot by police under questionable circumstances. These incidents reflect racial tensions that go back generations in many of these communities and which catalyzed riots in these same communities during the 1960s.

Black and Latino youths commonly shared accounts of racial profiling when they traveled to white communities. They said that fear of such profiling by police often kept youths from leaving their communities in pursuit of work or other opportunities. For example, one young Black male in Buffalo described dropping a friend off in a white neighborhood and subsequently being pulled over and given a speeding ticket he didn't deserve. He said,

Our word don't mean anything. You have this white police officer on the one hand, part of the establishment in league with the judge. They are all part of the same system. And, then you have me right here. My word don't mean anything.

The refrain of "Our word don't mean anything" within this quotation captures the feeling of disempowerment and lack of justice many youths within these communities feel in the presence of authority figures, such as police.

In some YO communities, new models of police and community partnerships were emerging. For instance, community members in Tucson and Seattle praised Weed & Seed efforts for reducing crime and bringing forward a more positive community climate. Residents viewed these and other collaborative community-wide policing efforts positively because they engaged community members as partners rather than adversaries. CLEAR, the previously mentioned gang

prevention program, also used a community partnership model that involved local police to address and reduce gang violence in some communities.

With regard to the impact of YO on police-community relationships, there is very little evidence that YO played a major role. We have identified at least five cases (four urban, one rural) in which YO partnered with police in a notable way, but in some cases, these partnerships were indirect (through a subcontractor) or exist only on paper. In four out of five of these cases, the partnership emerged because there was an existing initiative on behalf of the police to reach out to community members and improve relations. Such initiatives were fairly common in urban YO communities (at least 10 urban communities have them) but were more rare in rural and Native American communities. The relationships between YO and police in rural communities tended to be more informal.

Drugs and Alcohol

The following comment reflects the feeling of a Molokai resident about substance abuse.

> *Just about every family here is affected by drugs in one way or another.*
> *—Resident of Molokai, Hawaii*

The social conditions facing YO communities are numerous and interconnected. Many of the challenges facing YO communities, such as higher than average rates of teen pregnancy and crime, appear to be slowly improving. Substance use and drug trafficking, on the other hand, appear to be a particularly intractable issue facing most YO communities.

Residents in nearly all YO communities expressed serious concerns about the widespread use of drugs and alcohol. Youths were often exposed to drug use and drug trafficking at a very young age—in some cases, as young as elementary school. In one community we visited, the youngest member of a local chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous was 14 years old. Marijuana is one of the most ubiquitous drugs used in YO communities, and a high percentage of youths smoke marijuana. Yet, residents often do not consider marijuana a drug. Youths and many adults make a strong distinction between marijuana and what they perceive as hard drugs, such a methamphetamines, heroin, or crack cocaine.

Intergenerational drug and alcohol use is common in some communities. Respondents said that many youths in YO communities drink or take drugs with their families. This theme was particularly strong in Native American communities. A Native American respondent on the Pine Ridge Reservation recounted how alcohol was involved in the death of every member of his family. He said, "the family was completely wiped out by alcoholism." A former drug dealer in Molokai Hawaii, said, "They ask me for drugs right in front of their parents. I see kids smoking with their parents; their uncles give it to them." On the Bishop Pauite reservation, a counselor discussed how difficult it is to interrupt the cycle of abuse. She said, "Alcoholism has gone on for so long. They don't realize it can be different. It is hard to get people to listen and understand, to recognize that drug and alcohol addiction is a disease."

A variety of factors were perceived to influence drug-use patterns. Youths said they find it difficult to escape the drug culture that pervades their community. They frequently face peer pressure to experiment with drugs and ultimately get addicted. According to one youth, they risk

alienation from peers if they choose not to do drugs and are accused of "thinking they are better than their friends because they don't want to 'hang' anymore." Many youths are also attracted to the entrepreneurship of the drug culture (the money, and the lifestyle), and they get sucked into dealing and using. Also, young people are impressed by musicians, sports figures, and trendy cultural icons; and drugs are often part of those images. Thus, youths are influenced by the cultural acceptance and encouragement of drug and alcohol use.

In addition to being a problem itself, drug proliferation also tends to increase the severity of other social problems described in this chapter. For example, high gang presence and high crime rates are often linked to the drug trade. As one respondent said, "Crime is not done for instant gratification; it is almost like a career—if drugs are involved, the crime is more violent." Although many youth gangs are not involved in drug trafficking, those that are usually are the most violent and aggressive.

Drug use also has implications for youth employment. While YO community members may perceive marijuana to be more innocuous than other drugs, many employers do not share this perception. Within YO communities, employers commonly administer drug tests, including a test for marijuana use, as a condition of employment. One youth said that most youths "flunk the [drug test]. Of those who try to get a job, six out of ten flunk the test. So they try to get someone else to take the test for them. Some employers will give you 30 days to clean your system, but you are on probation." In one rural YO community, a new employer to the community found that 75 percent of job applicants failed the drug test. Thus, the perception among youths that marijuana is not as harmful as other drugs is misguided—not because marijuana is necessarily equivalent to these harder drugs but because it is treated the same way in the employment screening process. Marijuana use is ultimately more detrimental to youths' employment prospects than youths seem to realize.

While substance abuse is a very common and problematic social condition in YO communities, community members commented that too little is being done about it. In almost every YO community, residents noted that expanded drug and alcohol treatment facilities are badly needed. In particular, respondents identified the need for expanding the menu of treatment and prevention services and for increasing the capacity of treatment centers in the community.

We could not discern any relationship between the YO program and drug and alcohol use among youths within YO communities. Community members did not perceive the YO program as a resource in the area of drug treatment or abatement.

Social Networks and Community Change

At the close of the YO study, community members communicated a mix of attitudes about the prospects for change within their communities. These variations were closely linked to the extent to which social conditions *were* or *were not* improving. Further, it is important to note that community members did not always view social networks and conditions in the same way that many in mainstream society view them. For example, some youths viewed teen pregnancy as an opportunity to be responsible and important and as a sign of their transition to adulthood. Some youths viewed gangs as a valuable source of protection and a place where they could experience a sense of belonging. Thus, although community members face numerous challenges, they also have personal agency and make decisions for a variety of complex reasons.

Youths in declining industrial and Native American communities remained skeptical about the prospect of change. Youths within many of these communities expected that they would continue to get by any way that they could. An eighth-grade girl on a Native American reservation told us, "We will have enough to get by—from our families, the government. That's how our families lived, so we don't see it being much different for us." The physical and social isolation of many YO communities, including the lack of migration, contributed to a feeling that the community could not and would not change.

Meanwhile, many youths in other YO communities—particularly those undergoing economic revitalization—communicated an increased optimism. Decreased crime, decreased gang activity, decreased teen pregnancy, and improved housing all contributed to improved attitudes about the future. Within some communities, the YO program was credited for improving attitudes about the future. Particularly in rural communities, YO was seen as a beacon of hope because it helped to fill vital gaps in youth services, and community leaders were looking for ways to sustain the more innovative features of the programming.

The YO program's effects on social networks and conditions were most powerful at the individual level. Some YO programs did connect youths to resources that could help address social conditions, such as drug use, and residents often felt that YO staff served as mentors and role models for youths in the program. Yet, the general perception among community members was that the YO program was not directed specifically at addressing issues such as family structure, drug use, teen pregnancy, and gang involvement, and as such, its influence on these factors remained at the youth participant level, rather than the community level.

Chapter 5. Economic Opportunities

A primary goal of the YO program was to increase employment among in-school and out-of-school youths, ages 16 through 21, and to improve the quality of jobs available to young adult workers. The *economic context* of YO communities, therefore, is arguably the most important external influence impacting the ability of the YO program to meet its goals. As with any employment and training program, a host of external forces could affect program outcomes, such as a closing of major businesses or a slowdown in the local and national economy. This chapter focuses on the perceptions of community members about the shifting conditions of the labor within YO communities and the influence of those conditions on youths and on the overall well-being of the community.

In this chapter, we describe the economic setting of the YO communities, including the conditions of the local economy, the types of employment opportunities available, and the factors influencing youths' ability to find employment. We conclude the chapter with a discussion of the effects of the economic conditions on YO's ability to place youths in jobs and on YO's influence on community members' perceptions of employment opportunities.

Economic Conditions in the YO Communities

As the YO program launched in 2000, the United States was at the end of nearly a decade of economic growth and widening prosperity. By early 2001, however, the nation had slipped into a recession, which was followed by an extended period of slow job growth. The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, contributed to the economic decline, particularly in cities that relied on tourist dollars. An analysis of national employment data by one of our partners in the YO evaluation indicates that youths were negatively affected by this shift in national labor market conditions more than any other demographic group.[23] The ethnography can greatly inform our understanding of how and in what ways these national trends impacted the YO communities and the ability of the YO program to reach its goals.

The recession of 2001 and the slowed economy that followed affected almost all YO communities negatively but to differing degrees. Because of high levels of concentrated poverty, most of the YO communities remained at the margins of the economy, even in the late 1990s when the overall economy was strong. Those communities that were *most* on the margins, with little to no economic activity, experienced the effects of the recession the least. In these cases, the communities seem somewhat like "islands," removed from positive and negative forces in the U.S. economy. Most Native American reservations and some rural areas fit this description.

The economic downturn had a considerably negative effect on many communities that, in 2000, were showing signs of expanded business development and job growth but that were not seeing high levels of investment and revitalization. This trend characterized most declining industrial cities, southern cities, and isolated communities in education and business centers. YO communities in cities like Cleveland and Louisville were especially hard hit, with community

---

[23] Sum, Andrew; Tobar, Paulo; and Palma, Sheila, *Trends in the Employment of Teens and Young Adults in the U.S. and selected High Poverty Neighborhoods, 2000–2004: Their Implications for the Impact Evaluation of the YOG Programs*, Center for Labor Market Studies, Northwestern University, August 2004, prepared for Decision Information Resources, Inc.

members reporting that official unemployment numbers were well above 10 percent. Many respondents noted that job losses continued into 2004, when we made our last ethnographic visit for the evaluation. New destination cities were sometimes seeing ongoing construction and business investment, but such activity was not concentrated enough to fully buffer YO communities within these cities from the effects of the recession. Thus, cities like Tucson and Tampa also saw the effects of the economic downturn, though not as severely as some other cities.

A few YO communities, however, were relatively unaffected by the downturn because they were experiencing high levels of investment and growth. Some communities that fit this description had initiated major revitalization efforts before the recession, and the construction and investment associated with those efforts helped to buoy the economy throughout the YO grant period. Businesses were opening, and there was a sense of increased hope within these communities. Several gentrifying business and education centers, such as San Diego and Seattle, fit this description. One rural site, Albany, Georgia, also saw extensive revitalization over the course of the YO study.

In the following sections, we provide more details about the general economic picture of the YO communities by the types of sites: urban, rural, and Native American.

Urban Sites

The economic conditions of urban YO communities and the changes that resulted from the recession varied depending on whether their economy was seeing growth or stagnation at the launch of the YO initiative. In the following subsections, we discuss some of the trends we observed in different types of urban communities.

Growing Urban Economies

Within some cities, particularly gentrifying business and education centers, the economy seemed increasingly vibrant at the start of the YO grant, with growth in the number and types of businesses and in the availability of jobs. For example, cities such as Seattle and San Francisco were experiencing a boom in the local economy, brought on by a surge in their technology sector. New destination cities like Tampa and Tucson were expanding because of increased tourism and migration to Sunbelt cities. Although the YO communities were not at the center of this growth and prosperity, many were beginning to benefit from it. Investors began to see opportunities to make money in EZ communities, especially those with good proximity to downtown.

In 2000, many of the gentrifying business and education centers and new destination cities were experiencing a gradual revitalization and renewal of their urban centers. Some cities were beginning to invest heavily in the downtown areas located near the EZ, bringing new construction jobs, businesses, and a sense of optimism for locals. These urban renewal efforts were spurred partly by the tax incentives offered to employers for locating in the EZ communities and by a strong national economy. For example, Boston was undergoing some development near the EZ, including a development of a new hotel and convention center, bringing new construction jobs which locals were able to fill. San Diego and Seattle were undergoing similar development.

Although this investment helped create job opportunities, some residents expressed some concern that these jobs are temporary, disappearing when the projects are completed. One respondent wondered how the community would continue to provide jobs when the construction jobs are finished. "What do you do when you finish the project? You're right back where you started." Further, within many communities, residents in the EZ lacked the skills to take construction jobs. Respondents felt that to capitalize on the new development, residents needed to focus on the service sector employment and fill the large number of positions in hotel and business services that had already been created. Most respondents predicted that a large number of additional job would open in these fields as new developments arose.

As a general rule, the economy began to even out or decline in the two years after the YO grants were awarded. Indeed, the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks were an important milestone within many communities across the United States, and they were seen as having an impact on the local economies, labor market dynamics, and individual businesses. Many communities that relied on tourist dollars were especially hard hit because of reduced business and personal airline travel. Many local businesses, particularly those in northeast cities, were forced to reduce their hiring. For example, small "mom and pop" stores in some communities started reducing the hours of their workers so that they would not have to pay benefits. A local bakery in one community had a peak workforce of 23 just before September 11; during Year 5 of the evaluation, the owner cut his workforce by nearly half.

Urban communities that were least affected by the recession were helped by large-scale economic-redevelopment efforts occurring in or on the perimeter of the EZ. In these communities, a number of commercial development projects were underway, attracting local businesses and national franchises and creating jobs for local residents. For example, the city of San Diego invested heavily in revitalizing the downtown area, bringing new businesses and opportunities for those living in the adjacent EZ. A number of jobs were created because of these developments, including those in the service and retail sectors. As a result, community members expressed a strong sense of optimism about the future of their communities, and in some cases, youths and adults seemed hopeful about their future, even if their current employment situation was bleak. As one longtime community resident said, "Compared to ten years ago, this community has been completely turned around. There are jobs and stores now. We can see a future for this community."

In a number of urban communities undergoing revitalization, commercial centers were built to accommodate the influx of new businesses (for example, retail stores, supermarkets, shopping malls, hotels, and office spaces). Within two YO communities, a large supermarket was built for the first time, a sign of increased confidence among businesses and investors that the communities were beginning to turn around.

Stagnating or Declining Urban Economies

YO communities within declining industrial and southern cities were still suffering deeply from years of economic hardship, and most of these communities showed few signs of economic growth or activity during the years of the YO study. Many of the EZ neighborhoods in cities like Buffalo, West Philadelphia, and Birmingham were plagued by blight and abandonment, offering little optimism for economic activity and even less hope for revitalization. While a few

communities, like Memphis and Milwaukee, were initiating development projects, many struggled to support the most basic needs of local residents.

Many residents felt that many private sector businesses were reluctant to locate in their communities because of the community's history of neglect, abandonment, and high crime. As one Milwaukee resident said, "There are perception issues here . . . for us, one of the real challenges is getting the private sector, private investors to put their money into our community. We need people interested in bringing needed services into this area."

EZ neighborhoods also often found themselves competing with surrounding suburban communities for private sector investment. In some areas, suburban communities would aggressively pursue companies with promises of inexpensive land, reduced property taxes, and a more educated local workforce. EZ communities often could not compete with such incentives. Further, there were often few locally owned businesses. Respondents attributed the lack of locally owned businesses to a number of factors, including a lack of capital, a lack of entrepreneurial drive, and a lack of business skills and expertise. In one community, a micro-lending program failed because those that took out loans lacked the technical skills to develop and implement a business plan. Consequently, many defaulted on their loans, and the micro-lending program was discontinued.

Other YO communities are still recovering from the loss of major industries that once made up their core economic base. For instance, Louisville, Kentucky, had long relied on manufacturing jobs in tobacco- and alcohol-producing companies such as Phillip Morris and Brown and Forman. By the end of the 1990s, most of these firms began downsizing and moving their operations elsewhere. Residents in communities that had lost major industries said that the loss created a domino effect in the local economy—housing prices and sales dropped significantly, placing more financial strain on community members.

With little external private-sector investment and few locally owned businesses, residents in many YO communities had very low prospects for employment. Unemployment was much higher than the national or state average in 2000, and by 2004, during our last visit, it was even higher. Further, many felt that the official unemployment figures did not accurately reflect the extensive joblessness in the community. Respondents in some communities, like Kansas City, estimated that well over 50 percent of African American men had lost faith in the system and stopped trying to find employment. Jobs that were available in the community were generally low-paying service jobs in fast-food restaurants or retail.

Rural Sites

The economic conditions in most rural communities remained relatively unchanged over the course of the evaluation. Most sites continued to experience high unemployment—some more than double the state average—and very minimal economic growth.

Most employers in rural areas tended to be small, family-owned businesses, but large retail chain stores like Wal-Mart were dominating some areas, such as Southeast Arkansas. While residents seemed pleased with a general increase in private-sector employment, business owners were woeful about the loss of business from these large chains, which forced some small local businesses to close. As one small business owner in SE Arkansas noted,

It is hard to operate a business with Wal-Mart in the area. Other businesses want to sell the same goods but it's hard to compete. The Gift Shop (it survived) is good for those with money and those without; they sell items in-between [medium range prices so people can afford it]. There are four furniture stores that remain because their prices are middle-ranged. The furniture stores that had higher prices for goods or lower prices with poor-quality goods closed.

By and large, rural areas had economies based in agriculture or economies that were historically based in agriculture. For example, in Imperial County, California, agriculture is the most important sector in the local economy, employing 31 percent of the workforce. Like other rural areas, Imperial County has suffered from a poor economy that has paralleled the decline of agriculture since at least the early- to mid-1980s. Despite the lowest unemployment rates in many years, countywide unemployment is much higher than the state or national average. Because the economy is still fundamentally dependent on agriculture and because farm sales have not kept pace with inflation, jobs—especially jobs for youths—are hard to find.

Communities that have historically relied on agriculture as the mainstay of the economy have faced challenges in attracting new industries and businesses. Several reasons account for this challenge. First, many rural communities have experienced a steady decline in the population because of limited employment opportunities. For example, many people in Molokai gave up looking for work because their prospects were so slim, and they moved to the mainland or other islands in Hawaii. The decline in population size also meant that some of the remaining businesses had to close because they did not have a large enough clientele to sustain the business. For example, a factory to build greenhouses opened in Southeast Arkansas but closed soon thereafter because they could not get enough orders. One respondent in Southeast Arkansas said, "Older people retire and then stores close because the children have moved away. Merchants need sufficient numbers of clientele to survive."

This pattern of out-migration of residents means that the towns have difficulty attracting new businesses because of their small population sizes, unskilled labor force, and lack of infrastructure to support companies that are not agriculturally based.

Another reason why some rural communities are having difficulty turning their economies around is, as many respondents claim, poor leadership and the lack of planning by community leaders and city and county officials. As one respondent said, "The city has not demanded that incentive tools be used to build businesses where they should have been built." Many also blame community leaders for neglecting the EZ, focusing their development efforts in areas outside of the EZ. As a result, some small towns in the EZs continue to struggle to attract businesses, and they have limited economic activity and progress. As one community leader put it, "The city must attract businesses to sustain people here or bring businesses in to make the population grow. The leaders in the area have not made a decision on which approach should be taken."

Thus, economic growth in some rural towns continues to cluster disproportionately outside the EZ, in places where relatively wealthier residents live, and this growth acts like a magnet for businesses and services previously located within the EZ. The benefits of growth and renewal, for the most part, still go to selected segments of the population. Consequently, most jobs are

located outside of the EZ, making it difficult for locals to reach them and further limiting their employment options.

There are some minor exceptions however, to this general pattern of limited economic growth. One such exception is Albany, Georgia, where the city is working hard to attract tourists and new businesses. As a result, unemployment in this site has declined from 11 percent to 6.7 percent since Year 1.

Native American Sites

The economic condition in Native American communities continued to be bleak throughout the evaluation period. We noticed few changes to the economic climate in the Native American communities from Year 1 to Year 5 of the evaluation—in nearly all sites, prospects for economic development were limited, and the chronically high unemployment rates continued to be a source and symptom of much distress among Native Americans. In three of the five sites that we visited, the unemployment rate hovered between 50 and 65 percent, with little change over the 5-year period.

Several of the large Native American sites, such as Pine Ridge in South Dakota, the Navajo Nation in Arizona, and the Californian Indian Manpower Consortium (CIMC), faced severe challenges to attracting businesses and relied heavily on federal dollars to sustain them. Thus, tribal governments serve as the primary employers for most sites. In one Alaska village that we visited, only about a dozen private businesses exist, most of which are small stores and repair shops. Other jobs are available in the public sector, but turnover in those jobs is very limited. As a result, roughly 50 to 60 percent of youths and adults are unemployed.

With federal funding on the decline, many tribes are seeking to expand their gaming industry as a viable source of revenue. Bishop, California, for example, plans to enlarge its casino, build an adjacent hotel, and open a second convenience store to accommodate casino customers. When the plan goes into effect, the tribe hopes to create construction and casino jobs for tribal members. The Pine Ridge reservation also plans to build additional casinos in the hope of creating more job opportunities for tribal members.

While job creation is scarce in Native American communities, the situation is further exacerbated by the geographic isolation that characterizes these communities. This isolation impacts the ability of private-sector employers to establish a base on the reservations or near them. For example, the total land area of the Pine Ridge Reservation is 2 million acres. Distances within the reservation are vast, and roads are narrow and in poor condition so that trips to other communities within the reservation become half- to full-day affairs. This isolation means that many are unable to get to jobs without reliable transportation.

The economic context in some rural and Native American sites is unique from other, more developed sites. Alaska and Molokai, for example, have historically relied on a subsistence economy.[24] Many have depended on the land as a source of survival, despite the lack of cash flow. In Alaska, for example, many people have relied on fishing and have engaged in

---

[24] Molokai is technically a rural site but has many characteristics of a Native American site, given that most of the population is Native Hawaiian.

subsistence activity. Most families get about 60 percent of their caloric intake directly from the land or sea. In Molokai, where subsistence living has existed for decades, people feel "rich from the land" because they can hunt, fish, and farm, despite their limited income levels. As one youth said, "We may not be rich financially, but we are rich off the land."

Factors That Influence Economic Growth

While the YO communities hope for positive changes to their economic conditions, many face intractable and enduring challenges that may undermine efforts to transform their economies. These forces may include a continual outflux of jobs, (for example, a shift away from an agriculture-based economy, declining manufacturing sector, and outsourcing of jobs overseas), geographic isolation, the lack of transportation infrastructure (for example, roads and public transportation), and poorly functioning city and tribal governments mired in bureaucratic red tape. Despite these broad challenges, however, we have learned that several factors affect the ability of these communities to establish a strong economic base, including the presence of *locally owned businesses* and *strong community leadership*.

Locally owned businesses provide an important source of employment and economic vitality to the community. The presence of businesses and commerce within the community contributes to community members' quality of life by helping to make amenities accessible and contributes to community pride. Ethnically themed stores and businesses are often the most successful because they offer tailored services that are not available through chain retail or grocery stores outside the community. For example, in Los Angeles, a "Mercado" located along the eastern boundary of Boyle Heights is a large commercial center that contains food markets, restaurants, and a variety of retail shops. This vibrant area is a hub for many small, "mom and pop" businesses that make up a large portion of the employers in the EZ. If a community had a critical mass of consumers, as was often the case in Latino and other immigrant communities, then job and economic growth appeared to be strong.

Many YO communities, however, lacked amenities or a high concentration of small businesses. This was particularly true in African American communities, where local business owners complained that patronage by local community members was low. Residents would often go outside of the community to chain retail and grocery stores, rather than buy from local shopowners, because they felt that the quality and price of goods was superior. Thus, in many communities, there appeared to be a vicious cycle, where local business owners raise prices to support themselves, thereby decreasing patronage to their stores.

There is evidence that some communities are able to leverage the power and influence of local leaders to bring new businesses to the EZ. This requires strong leadership at the city or tribal government levels because they represent the visionaries for the community. In Los Angeles, for example, new industries are moving into the area because of efforts by the city to revitalize the EZ through the work of the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA). Some of the new businesses include expansions of two hospitals, two new schools, and plans by the transportation agency to build a metro lightrail to the area. Similarly, residents in Albany, Georgia, 75 percent of whom are African Americans, finally have majority representation in city leadership. The city elected its first African American mayor and five African American commissioners out of seven. This change has brought increased trust in city leadership to revitalize the area. This area has also seen a sharp decrease in unemployment in the last five years—from 11 percent in Year 1 to

6.7 percent in Year 5. While it is unclear whether the change in city leadership has influenced the higher employment, residents are proud that their city is beginning to improve.

At the same time, community leadership affects how community members perceive their potential for prosperity and the future for their community. Residents of Kansas City, Missouri, for example, don't trust leaders in city hall to help the people get jobs. As one resident said, "The city has not demanded that incentive tools be used to build businesses where they should have been built." In this site, there is a strong belief that community leaders are not interested in the lives of African Americans, having neglected their voices and needs over the years. A cynical mindset pervades local residents, making it difficult for locals to feel a sense of attachment and investment in their community.

Respondents in the Native American communities remark about the challenges facing tribal leaders to bring about positive community change. Themes that emerged included the lack of coordination among tribal leaders and favoritism among tribal leaders towards their own family members, which create factions and resentment in the community. These challenges have some implications for economic development because respondents noted that "it takes time to get anything done around here."

Perceptions of Employment Opportunities

The economic conditions of the communities affected youths' perception of employment opportunities available to them. Several prominent themes emerged across the sites:
- Youths feel that there are limited job opportunities.
- Youths feel that they are competing with adults for jobs.
- Youths feel that racism affects their ability to find decent employment.

Limited Job Opportunities for Youths

A recurring theme in nearly all the sites is that there are few employment opportunities for youths in the EZ.

> *Youths are asking for jobs now more than ever, but they're not getting the jobs.*
> *–YO staff, Seattle*

Throughout the evaluation period, youths and adults continued to struggle to find jobs that they felt met their needs. Many available jobs, according to respondents, were in low wage sectors—such as retail, fast food chains, and childcare—without much hope for career advancement. Many respondents complained that the competition for well-paying jobs was fierce and that it was difficult to find work because of the volume of applicants for each job opening. One respondent said, "For every 10 to 15 opportunities, there are always 100 youths applying." Another respondent in Seattle noted that the recession further strained the employment opportunities for youths. As he put it, "The recession took the heat out of the economy and hurt the chances of kids trying to break into the job market."

This sentiment was true even in sites that were experiencing revitalization. In these sites, youths continued to express their concerns about the availability of jobs that pay a living wage. In

Brockton for example, youths reported that they can easily get jobs in local retail stores and fast food restaurants, but they complained of the low wages that these jobs offer and the lack of benefits. Other informants, including parents and service providers, said that youths were "too picky" and that this inhibited their ability to get work experience and to develop a work history. One employer said youths "want unrealistic pay for no experience. They want nothing less than $10 an hour." This sentiment was supported by our youth interviews, in which some teens said that they refused to take jobs in fast food because they were "disgusted" by it. In the words of one San Diego youth,

> *I'm picky because I don't want just any job. If I'm going to do something, I want to like what I'm going to do because I don't want to waste my time. I'll be bored. I don't want to work at Burger King, because if I don't want to work there, I just won't and will quit if I have to.*

Competition with Adults for Jobs

The following comment offers a reason for competition between youths and adults for jobs.

> *Kids are competing with adults for low-skilled jobs because adults are low-skilled too.*
>
> *–Respondent, Tucson*

In nearly all sites, respondents talked about their struggle to find work, despite what the economic picture may look like in their communities. This was especially true in sites with high unemployment, where youths felt it was extremely challenging to get a job because they were competing with adults with substantially more experience. As a result, youths felt especially vulnerable in a highly competitive market place. As one youth in rural Arkansas said, "There is vicious competition for jobs between young and old. A father feels he should have a job more than his son."

In communities like Louisville, respondents said that unemployment is on the rise, particularly among local youths. Most available jobs are low-paying entry-level positions, offering little to no advancement potential or benefits. Economic conditions like those in Louisville make it difficult for the job developers working for the YO program to place youths in jobs. As one job developer in Cleveland said, "We're being pushed to get youths jobs when unemployment in the city is 13 percent. Adults are filling jobs that kids could typically get. It's nearly impossible to find any 'traditional' youth jobs anymore."

Although YO was not always as successful as community members hoped at placing youths into high-quality jobs, in many communities, YO was perceived as providing good-quality work-experience opportunities for youths through paid internships and other forms of subsidized employment. For youths in areas with scarce opportunities, such as those in Native American communities and some rural communities, YO provided a sense of hope for youths who wanted to work but would otherwise not be able to. Thus, by creating more paid work-experience opportunities for youths, the YO program effectively reduced the competition between youths and adults for the few low-skill jobs that are available.

The Role of Racism and Discrimination

As the following quotations suggests, a number of respondents felt that racism and discrimination effectively barred them from opportunities in their own communities.

> *For every person who likes and hires Indians, there's another employer who does not.*
>
> —*Adult, Bishop Pauite Reservation in California*

> *We are in a recession right now, and so even the people who would normally be able to find great jobs can't right now, which makes it even harder for urban youths. I have been applying for jobs for years, and I have found that if you're not white and not educated, then there aren't that many open doors.*
>
> —*Youth in San Francisco*

Whether real or perceived, these perceptions affected respondents' views of their ability to secure stable employment. There are several layers to this perception of racism.

First, youths from the EZ, most of whom are youths of color, believe that employers effectively shut them out of job opportunities because of their racial and ethnic backgrounds. From the youths' perspective, employers treat them as second-class citizens and do not give them a chance because of preconceived notions of what they can and cannot do on the job. As one San Francisco youth said, "It is hard for people in the [target area] to get jobs, especially if you are an immigrant. And it is hard if you don't have an education." Job developers also confirm that many employers are reluctant to hire minority youths from the inner city because they are afraid of them. As one urban job developer explained, "It's hard for young kids of color to go into industry. They aren't treated well, and many tradesmen are scared of Black kids from the central area." Further, job developers believe that employers are less willing to hire minority youths for jobs than whites because of their own biases. As he put it, "Some employers think our Latino clients are damaged goods."

Another aspect of perceived racism occurs at an institutional level. Respondents from many sites noted that systemic barriers prevent them from getting high-paying jobs. For example, in at least one site, many jobs in the city are union jobs, but many African American men noted that it was difficult to join unions, citing overt racism that has kept them out of the union.

Youths needed to address the difficult challenge of overcoming the biases from *other adults* in the community. In some sites, even if communities experience a positive shift in the economy, some youths still had to overcome common stereotypes that adults have of their abilities. This was true among some adults who provided direct services to youths (for example, education, counseling, and mentoring); these adults felt that most youths in the EZ lacked motivation to work, had a poor work ethic, and were generally "untrainable" or "unplaceable." One service provider noted that, "Young people's demeanor today doesn't translate well into the service jobs in today's economy. Young people are so unprepared for the kinds of interpersonal experiences they are being asked to handle."

While many youths in the EZ lack adequate job skills and experience to succeed in educational settings and the workplace, we learned that, at times, this deficit had subtle consequences for how youths received services in general. For example, some education and training providers within YO communities preferred to work with the most motivated youths. Many noted that in-school youths were generally easier to work with because they had a vision for the future.

Employers' Perceptions of Youths' Abilities

While the condition of the economy can predict youths' ability to keep and retain their jobs, in many sites, it was largely up to the employers to select those whom they felt most comfortable hiring. Our discussions with employers revealed that employers placed less value on specific skills or work experience and more value on general attitudes and "soft employment" skills, such as the ability to show up on time, dress appropriately, and maintain a positive demeanor with customers.

Employers whom we talked with at retail stores in YO communities complained that they have difficulty hiring youths because most lack the skills to properly apply for a job. One employer at Foot Locker stated that the youths who enter his store looking for employment are not typically dressed professionally, do not know how to make eye contact and shake hands when introducing themselves and asking for an application, and do not have their resumes in hand. Another employer, at a female teen-clothing store stated that she discarded half of the applications she received because they were filled out incorrectly.

Many employers whom we talked with said that once employed, many youths are unreliable. Some of the most common complaints were chronic lateness, poor work ethic, calling in sick without proper notice, and not showing up for work. One employer said, "The kids don't have a work ethic. They call in sick on the first week of work or don't call at all, or they just don't show up." For the most part, employers attributed youths' behavior to individual flaws or failings, rather than to life conditions and responsibilities that might inhibit them from succeeding in their job.

Business owners and managers who operated large chain stores often did not appear to have any personal connections to the community. These employers often focused their assessments of youth applicants on traditional indicators of quality, such as work history and education. They frequently viewed neighborhood youths as unemployable. One such employer said, "This is a business. I don't have time to do what the school district and the parents didn't do. I just hire the most qualified man available for the job at the time."

On the other hand, we found that employers from *within* the community, such as those that operated local mom-and-pop stores, were more likely to hire those from inside the community. Small local business owners were more able to identify the assets that local residents bring to the job, such as knowledge of local culture, connections with community members, etc. These employers felt that even if candidates did not have all the skills necessary for the position, they were willing to train them because they thought it was an important investment in the community. This pattern is also true among youth-serving agencies, which preferred to hire staff who live in the community because they felt that these candidates can facilitate trust and relationship-building with young people's families.

Often, employers who were natives of the neighborhood stressed that they looked to hire local community members that demonstrated *potential* and *trainability*. Two local business owners who grew up in the Kansas City area agreed that most of the residents looking for jobs, particularly the young people, just needed to be *taught* how to work and how to apply academics that often seem useless in the real world. Each told stories of individuals who would not have been considered "quality" applicants on paper but on whom they had taken a chance and invested the necessary time and effort, which yielded stellar employees. Local employers were more likely to see the potential in youths, perhaps because they had a better understanding of the challenges that youths face.

Although the general attitudes of employers towards youths did not appear to change as a result of YO's efforts, there were shifts in the attitudes of employers who worked specifically with YO youths. One of the strengths of the YO program was its ability to provide supportive services to youths so that they could be more focused on employment. One employer from Tucson said that YO provided an opportunity for youths to "practice employment in a protected setting."

Youth Barriers to Employment

Although there is some resonance between the employment barriers cited by youths and community members and those cited by employers, they are also distinct from one another in important ways. Youths and residents were more likely to focus on contextual factors in their community that inhibit them from working, while employers were more likely to focus on young people's lack of skills and capacities. The most pressing obstacle to youths' employment in most EZ neighborhoods is an almost complete lack of local jobs that pay a decent wage. Other barriers include racism, competition with adult community members for the low-paying jobs that do exist, and lack of skills.

Youths face a host of individual-level barriers that prevent them from obtaining employment and keeping it. Many of these barriers are described in detail in other portions of this report (see Chapters 3, 4, and 6). As described in the following summaries, the YO program attempted to address some of the employment barriers to youths engaged in the program:

- *Lack of supportive services, such as childcare and transportation*. Residents living in YO communities lack adequate services to support their successful transition to work. For example, as discussed in Chapter 3, residents indicated that the lack of reliable transportation to and from work prevented them from getting and keeping their jobs. This challenge is particularly acute in Native American and rural areas that do not have public transit systems. In addition, the lack of adequate childcare services is an important barrier.

- *Lack of skills*. Many of the YO communities have underperforming schools and inadequate training services (see Chapter 6). Young people said that they feel ill prepared to take many work positions and lack the self-confidence to keep trying. High dropout rates contribute to low levels of literacy. Further, youths often lacked role models and mentors to illustrate the importance of "soft skills," such as the importance of punctuality, dressing neatly, etc.

- *Lack of role models who are employed*. Within many communities, youths talked about their lack of role models from within the community who worked mainstream jobs. Without role models, youths lacked information about how to apply for a job, proper behavior in a job

setting, and so on. The lack of role models also often led to unrealistic expectations about job conditions and pay.

- *Drug use among youths and adults.* The commonplace use of drugs, like marijuana, was a barrier to job placement because many employers administered a drug test as a condition of employment. Many young people and adults failed drug tests. A new employer in one community that we visited found that 75 percent of job applicants failed the drug test (see Chapter 4).

Our ethnography revealed that YO was perceived as successful in helping to address gaps in supportive services (for example, transportation and childcare) and to support skill development among participating youths. Further, many residents indicated that YO case managers served as positive role models for youths. Overall, however, the positive effects of YO were noted only for youths that directly participated in YO, not for the nonparticipating youths.

Effect of Economic Conditions on YO Program

Across the board, respondents whom we spoke to felt that the economic recession of 2001 and subsequent slow job growth created a tremendous obstacle for the YO program. Although the YO program was able to provide job training for YO participants, help youths to address barriers to employment, place youths in subsidized employment, and place some youths into permanent jobs, the program did not bring new employers to the YO communities or surrounding areas. The rise in unemployment experienced by the vast majority of YO communities meant that youths were increasingly in competition with adults for the low-paying and low-skilled jobs that were available. Our ethnographic analysis suggests that economic conditions in most YO communities likely hindered the ability of the YO program to place youths into *any* jobs, let alone the high-quality jobs that the YO program was seeking to create for youth participants.

Chapter 6. Institutional Capacity

The strength and connectivity of local institutions are of key importance for understanding the role and relative impact of the YO program. These institutional assets are critical because they affect the YO program's ability to build on the existing services and fill in gaps where they are lacking, essentially creating a niche for the YO program. This chapter examines the institutional capacity of schools, faith-based organizations, community-based organizations, and service providers in the YO communities and the level of collaboration that the YO programs had with these institutions.

School Quality and Achievement

While many community-level institutions are important to the YO program's success, few are as critical as the educational system. Schools set the stage for youths and for YO to the extent that they are responsible for providing youths with a firm grounding in basic skills, soft skills, and guidance for their futures that will ultimately ensure success in their education, the labor market, and life in general.

Almost all urban YO communities and even many of the rural and Native American YO communities have school systems that fall far short of reaching these goals. In fact, our ethnographic study reveals that school systems in YO communities are generally in an abysmal state, especially in urban communities. This section describes the state of schools in YO communities, the reasons why many schools are struggling, the reform efforts that are taking place, and the roles that YO played in local school systems.

State of the Schools

The following quotation illustrates some of the conditions that are common among schools in urban YO target areas.

> *Schools are dilapidated. Roof has a hole in it; bathroom terrible; half of the water fountains don't work. In the auditorium, most of the seats broke and half the people are standing during assembly. Students tear up stuff, don't want new stuff. Graffiti is on the walls. [A local school] was rebuilt and now the foundation is messed up and kids are tearing up the school.*
>
> *–Urban youth*

Almost every urban YO site and the majority of rural and Native American sites had school systems that were struggling very hard to reach even minimal standards of quality, achievement, and resources. The school systems in declining industrial and business and education centers tended to have schools in the worst condition, whereas those in new destination cities and in smaller cities or suburbs tended to do slightly better. Some of the rural and Native American schools had stronger school systems; however, a majority of them were also struggling.

The challenges facing YO community schools are multifaceted and complex. Almost all of the high schools struggle with achievement. Out of the 30 communities that we visited and that had

achievement data for high schools available,[25] only 5 are performing at or above the state average in either reading or math. No high schools performed higher than the state average in both reading and math, and 7 of the 30 communities had high schools performing at less than 50 percent of the state average in both math and reading.
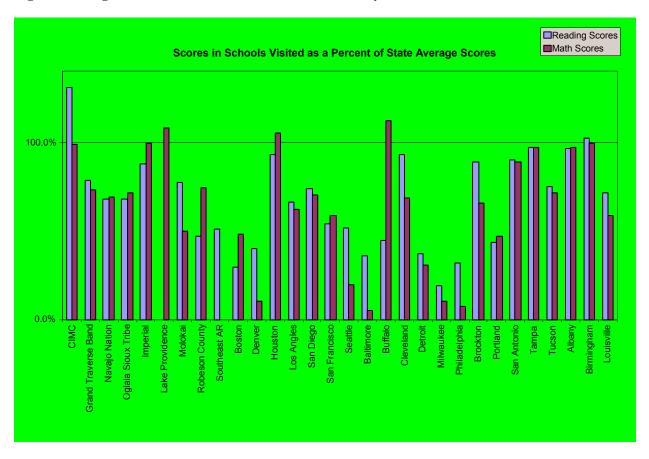
Figure 6-1. High School Achievement in Schools Visited by YO

Several other indicators of the poor state of schools were widespread. Even though dropout rates were improving in the majority of schools in the YO target areas, overall the dropout rates in many such schools were still extremely high. Three of the five YO communities with the highest dropout rates were from declining industrial cities, and the other two were Native American communities.

High truancy was also a challenge for many schools, and some YO communities have begun to enforce policies that fine or incarcerate parents in cases of chronic truancy. High student-teacher ratios are another common phenomenon in the schools we visited, although they tend to vary considerably. Student-teacher ratios ranged from a low of 11.9 to a high of 35.5, and the mean was 17.5.[26]

---

[25] Source: www.greatschools.net, August 2005. Based on most recent data available. Availability varied by state and school. Only those high schools that were visited during the ethnography are included here to maintain consistency between respondents and scores collected.
[26] Source: www.greatschools.net, August 2005. Based on most recent data available. There were no data for 11 of the 44 high schools that we counted as serving the YO community respondents that we spoke to.

Underlying Conditions

Identifying schools in YO communities that are performing poorly as institutions is much easier than diagnosing the underlying causes. The problems are complex, and it would be overly simplistic to assign blame to one factor. This section first explores the role of race and class inequality within public school systems in YO communities and then describes the specific ways in which those inequalities are manifested systemically.

The pervasive dynamics of racism and classism complicate our attempts to draw logical conclusions or explanations for the state of Empowerment Zone schools. By definition, YO communities are among the most impoverished and economically depressed communities in the United States. They overwhelmingly serve students of color and low-income students. Over half of the 33 schools for which race data are available are more than 90 percent nonwhite. Eighty-two percent (27 schools) are more than two-thirds nonwhite. Schools with student populations that are almost entirely nonwhite are particularly common in the business and education centers and the declining industrial cities. Seventy-nine percent of the schools in YO communities in those two categories have nonwhite student populations of over 90 percent. The fact that the public schools in these communities are so imbalanced by race and income and are in a very poor state demonstrates how schools can and often do reproduce and exacerbate existing social inequalities.

When one begins to examine the inequalities present in the school systems we visited, some specific trends emerge. The most frequent patterns described by respondents include poor administrative leadership, violence in schools, inadequate funding, underqualified or inexperienced teachers, flawed tracking or channeling of students, and the lack of parental involvement.

Poor administrative leadership or mismanagement by district officials, superintendents, or principals is seen as a major challenge in many YO community schools. At least eight school districts are at risk of being taken over by the state, have already been taken over, or are facing upcoming sanctions and reconstitution because of poor performance under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. A handful of schools have already been taken over by the state or lost their accreditation, with less than satisfactory results and further loss of public faith in the school systems. Often, the lack of leadership has resulted in an adversarial relationship between parents and schools in several YO communities. As an extreme example, the principal in one school allows the local police to use Tasers, weapons that inflict a painful and incapacitating electric shock, on students in the school. The use of Tasers has angered many youths and parents in the community, but the principal defended their use, claiming that they were instrumental to the school's efforts to curb fighting between students.

Violence in Schools in the YO target areas was a common phenomenon, particularly in urban schools. Some examples include shootings near the school, voyeurism in the girls' bathrooms, fighting among students, and the presence of drug-related gangs in and near schools. The school system is a main agent in detecting cases of child abuse and domestic violence, which is widespread in general. A handful of YO community schools were working directly with violence-prevention programs to try to cope with these problems.

Many schools in YO communities are struggling with inadequate funding and coping with severe budget deficits. At least eight of the schools visited are facing large-scale funding cuts or budget deficits. One state government, for example, is unwilling to raise taxes to fund education. Instead, sports were eliminated in the sixth grade and below. A pastor from a local church said, "Families that can't afford sports at [the YMCA], then no sports. Sports and extracurricular activities were cut for money for schools instead of raising taxes." As a result of the financial difficulties, many schools lack basic supplies such as textbooks. One community resident said that conditions have gotten so bad, "The books are chained to the desk." Many site visitors observed dilapidated facilities and heard concerns about safety in the school buildings from youths and parents. Overcrowding was a problem in at least four schools, whereas, other schools were considered to be below capacity because students and their parents were abandoning the public school system altogether.

The schools in YO communities also face challenges in the area of teacher quality. Several schools have had trouble recruiting high-quality teachers and report high teacher turnover. One respondent said, "We can't seem to keep the new teachers. We hire them in the fall, and they leave by Columbus Day because they can't handle the kids and are in culture shock that there's nothing to do here." Respondents in at least five high schools report that there are substantial cultural and class differences between teachers and students, which inhibits the student-teacher relationship. This is especially a challenge for Native American schools. In addition, some parents feel that teachers are being too lenient in their teaching practices. One parent said, "I found that the school was giving credits to my own son when he did not deserve it, just so they could pass him. I made him retake those classes and had them change the transcripts."

Many respondents said that youths are being "channeled" or "tracked" into dead-end paths or poorly designed curricula. For example, a local religious leader said, "Youths who don't perform get passed along; teachers and counselors are not looking out for their best interests because they've already decided who is going to succeed or fail." A student that we interviewed feels that this type of tracking is often based on flawed judgment. "Teachers and other adults make unfair assumptions about peoples' ability based on stereotypes and race." Thus, it was common for youths in YO communities to be placed in a situation where the expectations were low, and respondents felt that these decisions then sentenced the youths to being poorly prepared for college and the workforce. In a way, some of these problems with tracking are also problems with inadequate curricula for those who are not tracked into college preparatory or high-achieving paths. Many parents felt that the curriculum in their school did not teach the skills needed for success.

Finally, several respondents felt that the lack of parental involvement was a major challenge to the success of youths in schools. Only a handful of high-school respondents reported even moderate levels of parental engagement. As one principal said, "[Parents] drop off in ninth and pick up in twelfth grade, but they are still babies. Parent participation in Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) is low. Parents do not discipline youths and tell the school to take care of it." By far, the most common reason given for the lack of engagement was that parents do not have the time to become involved, because they are working long hours to survive. Other reasons given include adversarial relationships between school officials and parents, language barriers, the lack of access to schools (long distances), different values placed on education, and the lack of parenting skills.

Reform Efforts

A bleak picture has been painted of schools in YO communities, but many reform efforts have been underway during the lifespan of the YO program. Some have been implemented successfully, others have faltered, and the effects of many others remain to be seen. These reform efforts have taken place at the local level, at the federal and state levels, through the private sector, and through a series of other alternative school initiatives. The combined effect of these efforts suggests that major restructuring in education is taking place in communities of color and low-income communities, particularly in urban areas.

Some school districts in the YO communities that we visited are trying hard at the local level to improve their schools, and some have been successful. For example, the city of Albany voted for two sales tax increases in 2004, which will bring in revenue in excess of $100 million, $75 million of which is earmarked for building and upgrading school facilities in Albany. The school board is operating under new leadership and, in partnership with private and public organizations, has unveiled plans for curriculum reform. In addition, the four high schools will operate more independently from each other and will offer different concentrations in science and technology, art, literature, and political and social sciences. Likewise, in Brockton, there is a perception that the quality of schools has improved over time. In 2004, the school system hired a new superintendent who thinks highly of Brockton schools. Four new elementary schools have been built, and others have been renovated. Residents of the Bishop Paiute Reservation in California are generally pleased with the quality of schools. They feel that the school administration has been increasingly receptive to Native concerns. The Paiutes have had a long history with the schools, and this relationship has continued to strengthen as the Tribal Council has become more involved with school politics.

Efforts at education reform have also been made at federal and state levels. As the YO program was being implemented, the School-to-Work legislation was about to sunset. A program that focused on teaching skills in context, School-to-Work has lingered on in several YO communities and continues to have at least some philosophical influence on the youth programs in many schools.

The most influential education legislation, however, has been the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), enacted in 2001. NCLB is a federal program that increases emphasis on student testing in basic skills, allows students to switch to a higher-performing local school if theirs is not performing well, and sets a timeline for improvement. The timeline calls for increased funding for struggling schools in the first few years of underperformance and then drastic school reorganization by the fifth year of underperformance. While funding has increased by over 50 percent from pre-NCLB levels, the federal government has been criticized for not fully funding the program. In fact, the state of Connecticut has sued the federal government on the basis that the extra testing is an unfunded mandate.

NCLB has had some positive effects on schools in YO communities. The respondents in Birmingham and Portland said that more funding has been made available to their underperforming high schools through NCLB. In Portland, NCLB funded a nonprofit tutorial center. Some Schools in the YO target areas, such as one Washington, D.C. high school that we visited, have received professional development for teachers.

While some positive effects were seen, there was still an overwhelmingly negative sentiment about NCLB among YO community respondents. Most commonly, respondents reported that the high emphasis on testing has become a burden. Many respondents feel that the testing limits the classroom-learning experience to only the test content and that it may lead to higher dropout rates when students become discouraged by their scores.[27] Some local areas were disappointed that NCLB did not provide the funds that had been promised. Several schools reported that higher performing schools are becoming overcrowded while lower-capacity schools are becoming underutilized because of the school choice provisions of NCLB; these drastic shifts in student population have been difficult for schools to adapt to in such a short period of time. Many schools with decreasing student populations have faced funding cuts because funding levels are tied to enrollment. Finally, some school districts were forced to cut alternative education programs and extracurricular activities, including after-school sports programs, in order to funnel more resources into meeting the testing requirements.

In addition to local- and federal-level reform efforts, the private and nonprofit sectors have entered the education playing field. In fact, NCLB is occurring in the context of what appears to be a major restructuring of education—the charter school movement. The charter school movement is taking effect primarily in the urban YO communities, rather than the rural or Native American communities. Some of the urban YO communities that we visited are quite far along in the process of establishing charter schools. In Kansas City, for example, the rise of charter schools was spurred by the public school system's losing accreditation. Currently, three charter schools are considered to be well established in Kansas City, and parents are overwhelmingly choosing to send their children to those schools because of the poor perception of public schools. In Washington, D.C., 20 percent of publicly funded students go to charter schools, and many respondents are supportive of them. In other cases, the efforts are still nascent. Private foundations are increasingly promoting their visions of educational innovation through charter schools. For example, the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation funded the small schools movement in Cleveland, a bank funded a charter schools movement in Buffalo, and a philanthropist recently gave money to fund a charter school in Detroit.

In many ways, the jury is still out on whether charter schools are effective. Certainly, there has been evidence of success and failure and of wide variation from case to case. One hopeful YO spokesperson said, "Alternative and charter schools have been on a learning curve, and enrollment has increased over the last 5 years." In at least two YO communities, the charter schools are requiring more parental participation, and respondents are pleased with that. Other respondents appreciate that class sizes tend to be smaller in charter schools than they are in public schools. Still others are simply grateful that something is changing in the school system, although they feel it is too early to know whether education quality will improve.

Some YO community respondents described charter schools as problematic. For example, many respondents feel that the increase of charter schools funnels money out of the public system. Some also claim that charter schools are more expensive than public schools and don't necessarily perform better. As one respondent said,

---

[27] While respondents had this perception, recent dropout data suggests that the dropout rates in most schools are decreasing. This may be a real discrepancy, or it could indicate problems in data collection.

The problem we have with [charter schools] is that the preliminary indications are not good. Out of nine charter schools that we had last year, seven of them are failing, two of them are doing decent. Okay, some of them are doing so bad that they're not even close to the public schools . . . . [One school] has a proficiency rating of fourth grade math . . . of 1.2 percent. That means that 98.8 percent of those kids are not meeting the minimum requirements for the No Child Left Behind statutes. And that's a charter school.

Several respondents said that the emergence of charter schools has resulted in an adversarial relationship between public schools and charter schools because the increased competition for students and funds. Other respondents feel that the charter schools in their local area have lower quality teachers and less stringent hiring practices for teachers.

As charter schools mature, test results emerge, and states and local areas react to the changes being made, the state of the urban public education system will become more defined. However, throughout the lifespan of the YO program, the world of public education was largely characterized by testing, experimentation, and uncertainty.

Role of the YO Program in Schools

As the YO program was implemented in different EZ communities across the country, it took on different roles with regard to working with the local school systems. In over two-thirds of the YO communities, YO did not have a very strong connection to the local schools. In many of these cases, YO had a formal relationship on paper or an indirect connection, but the relationship was not very strong, and the YO program basically operated in relative isolation from the schools. In several other cases, the relationship between YO and schools was actually adversarial, to the extent that the schools refused to cooperate with YO or vice versa. The reasons for these varied relationships are stated in the following section.

Approximately 11 YO communities—just under one-third—were more successful in engaging the local school district. This took several forms. For example, the relationship between YO and schools was generally very strong when the school system was actually one of the main contractors on the YO grant or was funded by YO directly to operate a specific program. This was the case in at least 7 YO communities. In this role, YO typically funded staff who were housed in the local school (sometimes in a satellite office), on-site technology, or even a full-blown alternative school.

In other YO communities, the environment was conducive to a strong relationship with the school, even if the ties to the school system were more informal. For example, in Washington, D.C., the YO program was successful in recruiting in-school youths and had strong partnerships with the high-school counselors. In another example, YO in Southeast Arkansas has had healthy relationships with schools and other agencies, and this has enabled them to offer services to youths more effectively.

Several factors determine the relative strength of the relationship of YO with schools, and the relative quality of the school system does not appear to be one of them. Therefore, there were high-quality school districts in which the connection to YO was low, and others where the connection was high. On the other hand, having high-quality leadership within the school system

and the YO program may be a very important factor in the strength of the relationship of YO with schools. In general, those YO programs that were deemed by the process study to be more successful overall had very strong relationships with the schools, which may point back to strong leadership. Finally, the YO-with-school relationship tended to be stronger when there was no redundancy in services between YO and schools. In other words, the relationship was better when YO had its own niche and could complement rather than compete with the school system.

Overall, respondents in only a handful of sites felt that YO had contributed substantially toward lowering dropout rates or improving the quality of education on a macro scale. At one such site, the YO program had helped to bridge a wide and adversarial gap between the school system and the community. At others, respondents claimed that the dropout rate has gone noticeably down because of YO dropout prevention programs.[28] In most cases, however, respondents felt that the primary impact of YO on education was on an individual level.

Faith-Based Organizations

Like schools, faith-based organizations are also important for understanding the role and relative impact of the YO program. In communities throughout the country, faith-based organizations (FBOs) are not only known for their religious role in the community, but they are also a hub for social, political, and service-oriented activities. Some FBOs are particularly effective at engaging youths in activities and providing services to families and youths who are in need. In this way, FBOs are important community institutions for the YO program to work with, especially where FBOs are very active in the YO community. This section explores the overall presence of FBOs in YO communities, the role of FBOs in providing services for youths, and the level of collaboration that the YO programs had with FBOs.

FBO Presence in YO Communities

Generally speaking, FBOs tend to have a high presence in YO communities. Overwhelmingly, the most common FBOs encountered in YO communities were Baptist and Catholic churches. Nearly half of all YO communities have FBOs with a high presence, and almost all of the YO communities have FBOs that are at least at least moderately active and engaged. For the purposes of this analysis, presence is measured not only by the existence of FBOs and participation in religious services, but also by the level of community-wide contribution that FBOs make through the activities and services that they provide.

The presence of FBOs differs, depending on whether the community is urban, rural, or Native American. The urban YO communities tend to have the most highly active and institutionalized FBO presence on account of the higher population density and the concentration of resources in urban areas. Most of the rural communities also have high FBO presence relative to the size of their community, but because of resource limitations, they typically lack the capacity to provide the types of services that some of the urban FBOs are able to provide. In the Native American YO communities, on the other hand, faith is defined and exercised in ways that are not comparable to FBOs in non-Native-American YO communities. If FBOs are present at all in Native American YO communities, they tend to be there for missionary purposes (Mormon, Catholic, etc.) rather than to be intrinsically generated and supported congregations. For these

---

[28] The relationship may not be causal, but that was the perception of some respondents.

reasons, the rest of this section on FBOs will focus mainly on FBOs in the urban and rural contexts.

The presence of FBOs also varies somewhat, depending on the typology of YO communities. The southern cities and declining industrial communities, most of which are primarily African American, most commonly had a high FBO presence, reflecting the importance of faith and religion in the lives of many African Americans. For example, Baltimore's EZ has about 190 churches, and there are typically several churches on one block. Some are brand new facilities, but most have been in the neighborhoods for years. New destination cities and some of the business and education centers, on the other hand, have slightly less active FBO contingents. The rural communities in the South also tend to have more active FBOs than the rural communities outside of the South.

FBO Role in Provision of Services to YO Communities

In addition to community types, other factors—such as FBO size and strength (resources, funding, political power), ethnic or religious orientation, and collaboration within the faith community—influence the capacity of FBOs to provide services to YO communities as a whole.

In general, three types of FBOs tend to have high capacity to offer services. First, very large FBOs that are also service oriented are among the most active in terms of providing services to the local YO communities. Many of the larger FBOs have a high capacity to operate substantial service programs, and these include having their own community development corporations, housing developments, and human services divisions. For example, at least two large churches in the San Diego area are major service providers, offering homeless and transitional services for poor families. One of them is also a major subcontractor of the YO grantee. In Los Angeles, an FBO founded a nonprofit organization that provides early childhood education, youth academic guidance, adult leadership development, an alternative school, homeless services, and a respite men's shelter. These FBOs also tend to be very well connected politically, holding clout with local and even federal officials.

Second, FBOs that have a distinctly service-oriented mission tend to have a high capacity to offer services. Some religious leaders are more focused on providing services to their communities than others. A variety of denominations are offering services in the YO communities, but within the denominations, there were different interpretations of the importance of providing services. For example, in some communities, the Catholic church provides extensive services, and, in fact, it is the only institution that most residents have faith in. Many residents, especially Latino immigrants, will go to the church for help before they go to a social service agency. However, in other communities, the Catholic church perceives its main responsibility to be religion oriented, building community within the congregation but less so with the larger community. Thus, there are varying interpretations of how service-oriented an FBO should be, and as a result, some FBOs offer more services than others.

Third, small and medium-sized FBOs that are able to collaborate effectively with each other have a high capacity for service. In fact, the level of collaboration is extremely important to service delivery because those YO communities that have stronger interfaith connections invariably offer more comprehensive and sophisticated services. In one of the more successful collaborative projects, the Lake Providence community benefits tremendously from the Northern

Louisiana Progressive Chapel Community Development Corporation, which is part of Project Genesis, a collaborative effort lead by many FBOs, especially Baptist churches. In another example, several smaller churches in Buffalo have formed an alliance of churches called the Jeremiah Partnership to consolidate their strength. They have church schools and charter schools. One church recently purchased a Subway franchise and hires young people from the congregation to do the work and learn the business. Finally, one pastor described their church as "a great community builder of neighbors" because the church has been able to bring people of different backgrounds together who normally do not interact.

Now that the success stories have been outlined, it is also important to identify the challenges that many YO communities have come across with regard to the capacity of FBOs to provide services to their communities. Many respondents report intense competition and rivalry between FBOs and for the dispersal of resources that otherwise could help create stronger service programs for the local community. This competition is likely due to the wide proliferation of churches in many YO communities. Other respondents criticized their local FBO communities for being too "insular" and unable to work together for the good of the general community. Still other respondents said that their FBOs are completely disconnected from the community and, specifically, that they tend to alienate youths. Finally, while political power may be an asset to some FBOs in terms of ability to fundraise and operate programs, it may also be a disadvantage to other FBOs that are not as powerful or well connected.

FBO Services Specifically for Youths

Overall, YO communities have fewer FBOs that offer services specifically for youths than FBOs that offer services to the community as a whole. Five of the 22 YO sites with complete data on this topic report strong programs for youths, and 8 YO communities report very few, if any, programs targeted specifically toward youths. The remaining 9 YO communities report some youth-oriented or youth-friendly programs but not enough to meet demand.

The FBOs in YO communities that are most successful at providing youth services have some similar characteristics. First, they all have fairly active and highly present, meaning that they tend to be well equipped to provide services to the community as a whole. Second, several FBOs became more active in response to a crisis that affected youths in the community. For example, a church in Baltimore started two organizations in response to a youth homicide: Brother 2 Brother and Sister 2 Sister. Recently, area churches also sponsored a "Kidz Nite Inn," whereby churches and police welcomed children and teens from 6 p.m. to midnight so that they could have a safe recreational environment. Finally, the FBOs with the strongest youth focus tend to provide similar types of services. The services provided are typically after-school activities such as tutoring and sports programs, violence-prevention programs, pregnancy prevention, and mentoring programs. The programs do not appear to have an overt emphasis on religion; rather, they are focused on building skills and providing safe recreational spaces.

The remaining YO communities do not offer much in the way of youth-oriented services. Resource limitations are one main challenge with regard to FBOs providing youth services, especially for smaller FBOs and those in rural or Native American areas. However, in many YO communities, respondents feel that the FBOs could do much more than they are currently doing to reach youths. In some cases, community members feel that FBOs are unable to reach youths

effectively. For example, one resident said that churches are "up there, and people need them down here."

Relationship Between YO and FBOs

It has been established that FBOs are generally very active in YO communities, and many are also equipped to deliver services to YO communities. Therefore, FBOs seem to be well positioned to be partners for the YO program. Yet, based on the ethnographic data available, it appears that YO and FBOs have rarely collaborated in strong and effective ways. The types of relationships between YO and FBOs fall into three main categories: formal (YO contracted with an FBO), informal or referral based, and poor or nonexistent collaboration.

In a handful of cases, the YO program had formal contracts with FBOs or even was the primary partner. Hypothetically, one might expect the relationship between the YO program and FBOs to be very strong in communities where an FBO had a formal relationship with YO. However, this is not necessarily the case. In two of the three YO communities that reported having FBO contracts, the relationship with the FBO community and the community as a whole was perceived as weak. In the third, the YO connection to the FBO community was relatively strong, but most of the other agencies in the neighborhood had very little knowledge of YO. Often, the FBO staff were hesitant to talk about YO's outreach to the broader community at all, and other respondents indicated that tensions or challenges were limiting the reach of the YO program. Community residents and agencies in those communities generally perceive the YO program to be insular and confined to the FBO's own congregation and network, and many respondents have little knowledge of the YO program unless they are directly involved with it.

It is as common for FBOs to have a referral relationship or informal ties with the YO program as it is for FBOs to be one of the YO partners. The informal type of relationship has yielded the best results for collaboration between YO and FBOs. Three of the 19 YO sites with complete data on this topic have particularly strong informal or referral ties to FBOs. In these cases, the YO program leaders typically get in touch with FBOs when appropriate. For example, one church in Southeast Arkansas provides tutoring services to YO youths and provides church facilities for YO activities. In Washington, D.C., which has a decentralized YO program, some of the YO centers have strong relationships with local FBOs, while others do not. In Los Angeles, YO has a strong referral network with FBO service providers, especially for childcare services.

The YO-FBO relationship is very weak or nonexistent in at least 10 of the 19 YO communities with data on the topic. Some YO programs actually avoid collaboration with local FBOs because of an adversarial relationship. Other YO programs hold a strong belief that YO should not be tied to a specific faith. For example, in one YO community, the YO staff are reluctant to mix religion with YO activities because their participants come from many different faiths. Finally, in several YO communities, there is a perception that the connection between YO and FBOs is weak because the FBOs are insular and not interested in working with YO.

Community Agencies and Organizations

As the following quotation indicates, the effectiveness of a youth program, such as YO, is only as good as its ability to connect with the community.

We can create programs, but if youths and adults don't know how to connect, it's not good. It's like taking an egg out of the refrigerator, dropping it, and cracking it into pieces.

–Non-YO service provider

Community agencies and organizations are key players in the landscape of the community that YO has inserted itself into. Thus, it is important to consider the capacity of community agencies and organizations in YO communities to get a sense of how YO connected to and evolved within the existing network of service providers. This section explores the number and types of service providers in YO communities, the level of collaboration between service providers, and the relationships between YO programs and other service providers.

Existing Service Provider Networks

There are tremendous variations in the service provider networks of urban YO communities as compared to those in rural and Native American YO communities. The urban YO communities generally have a high number of service providers and a more specialized array of services available for different target groups. The rural and Native American YO communities, on the other hand, typically have very few service providers aside from the basic federal or tribal agencies.

Size of Service Provider Networks

The urban YO communities typically have vast networks of service providers in both breadth and depth. The overall size of the service-provider network is generally proportional to the size of the city. For example, Los Angeles, Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Houston, and San Diego top the list in terms of the number of service providers, and they are also the largest cities in the YO program. Smaller cities such as Birmingham and Kansas City have among the lowest numbers of agencies and organizations in their communities (among urban YO communities). Rural and Native American service provider networks are much smaller and much less specialized than those in urban communities. Service providers who provide services only to youths are rare, which made YO stand out in many rural and Native American YO communities. In fact, in some communities, YO was the "only game in town" when it came to providing services for youths. In Native American YO communities, the service-provider network consisted mainly of the tribal agencies that were funded through the federal government, although some Native American communities were also connected to service providers in nearby, off-reservation towns.

Throughout the lifespan of the YO program, the respondents in almost all YO communities noted a sizable decline in the number of service providers because of funding cutbacks and budget crises. Over time, many agencies and nonprofit organizations had to scale back their programs substantially, and some closed their doors altogether. The problem was more acute for some YO communities than others. In one YO community, respondents described how staffing cuts citywide in youth-servicing agencies affected youths in negative ways. They said that the instability of services exacerbated the inconsistent presence of adults in the lives of youths. "Teachers, case managers, and mentors come and go," said one service provider, "Who can they trust to be there for them?"

The funding cuts also affected the level of collaboration between agencies and organizations in both positive and negative ways. In at least three YO communities, the funding cuts drove service providers to collaborate more and to reduce the duplication of services. Still, this was a lot of work; as one provider said, "It's easier to operate when there's lots of money and nothing driving a deeper connection. During economic hardships, we're more deeply partnered than ever." In other YO communities, the opposite was true. Collaborative efforts fell apart when funding was cut, and competition between service providers increased. For example, one respondent said, "People are fighting over crumbs."

Types of Service Providers

Certain service providers are common in all YO communities. The most common are federal and state programs that serve youths in varying capacities. In urban communities, the common federal programs serving youths during the YO study were the Workforce Investment Act (WIA),[29] Job Corps, YouthBuild, and the Weed & Seed program. The latter has been discontinued, but it was very active and well reputed in many urban YO communities. Rural and Native American YO communities typically receive some federal funding for youth-related programs, but funding levels are much lower, and only the basic programs like WIA are present. There are also some common nonprofit and faith-based programs in urban YO communities, such as the YMCA, Boys & Girls Clubs, and United Way. They have a ubiquitous presence, even in the more rural YO a community, which speaks to the enormity of their reach and influence. With funding cuts, some of the local branches have closed down in YO communities, and others have cut programs. However, they remain very important to the service provider networks in YO communities, and several have been primary YO partners.

In addition to the more common service providers, urban YO sites have specialized types of service providers that the rural and Native American sites typically do not have. Urban communities are far more likely than rural and Native American YO communities to have service providers specifically for youths and have a high presence of nonprofit organizations, community development corporations, faith-based organizations, and city-funded programs (in addition to the usual state and federal programs).

All of the YO communities have local agencies and organizations that are unique to that local area. These range from large, long-standing organizations to small and lean start-ups. Frequently, these organizations are the most culturally appropriate and community-based service providers, and therefore they have especially strong ties to local residents and youths. In many cases, these organizations form because the local community faces a substantial service gap in a particular area. For example, Los Angeles has had a very high gang presence. In addition to the government-related gang abatement programs, a local organization trains some of the most hard-core gang members to fight forest fires. Many YO communities also have local, nonprofit health clinics that opened in response to a dire need for health services.

While the service networks in urban communities do tend to be large and specialized, some significant gaps exist. Respondents most frequently noted the lack of healthcare services, mental

---

[29] The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 funds youth programs through contracted youth-service providers throughout the country. These programs are required to provide 10 elements, including tutoring, GED programs, employment and skill-building opportunities, leadership development, supportive services, counseling, and mentoring.

health services, childcare services, drug- and substance-abuse programs, homeless services, and other supportive services. Several urban YO communities had gang-prevention and teen-pregnancy prevention programs, but respondents generally felt that they lacked the capacity needed to be effective. Transportation services were severely lacking in rural and Native American YO communities and some of the urban YO communities. Services targeted toward youths, especially out-of-school youths, were also lacking in many YO communities, particularly in the smaller cities, rural, and Native American communities. Many respondents also reported that arts and cultural programs and recreational programs were the first to get cut when budget crises took place.

Collaboration and Access to Services

Even though most YO communities—at least the urban communities—have an abundance of services available for youths, use of those services is frequently much lower than desired. Community members suggested numerous explanations for low usage, such as the unpopularity of certain programs (some were perceived by youths as "uncool"). The most common explanations were physical barriers to access, selectivity in serving youth, and the lack of coordination of services. The latter explanation is more complex than the others.

Access and Selectivity

Often, use of youth services was low because it was physically difficult for youths to access them. In urban areas, physical barriers include gang turf lines, location of services outside the neighborhood, and difficulty accessing the services via public transportation because of cost or distance. In rural and Native American YO communities, the largest physical barrier was the lack of transportation because youths typically need to rely on others for transportation.

Selectivity was another challenge to the use of youth service, and selectivity often occurs because of funding shortages in the midst of high demand for services. For example, many programs, including YO and WIA, have strict enrollment criteria that deter access. Thus, community members said that "creaming" is common in some programs, and only youths who are already considered "well qualified" can participate. Community members also mentioned that nepotism or favoritism are common practices in some organizations, making it difficult for youths who are not well connected to access services. For example, one educator said, "It's not what you know, but who you know," emphasizing the personal aspects of partnerships.

Coordination of Services

It is difficult for youths to navigate and, therefore, to access services when service agencies are not well coordinated. Coordination in most rural and Native American YO communities was not a challenge, simply because there were not that many providers to coordinate in the first place. Service providers in these communities were generally well known and informally connected to each other.

However, many urban YO communities were seriously lacking in collaboration and navigability because of the high number of providers and the increased complexity of relationships. According to one service provider, people just don't know where to go, and some are afraid to

seek out services because they don't know how to navigate the system. Another respondent said, "It's difficult for people to come to a common vision."

Respondents discussed a variety of factors that seem to influence the level of coordination of services. A respondent in one YO community indicated that coordination is generally driven by forums and interagency meetings that are grant funded. Often, when grants finish, the coordination does too. In another YO community, a respondent said that coordination is driven by the recent efforts of a city council member. "Youth agencies in [the community] take their cues from the political leadership. You either cooperate or you don't get funded." Finally, another respondent attributed their lack of coordination to problems within the service provider community itself:

> *Agencies need to learn the culture of working together. This has been a challenge because of turf issues and a sense of mistrust that people have of one another.*

Therefore, coordination clearly requires leadership of some kind, whether it is from a funder, a political leader, or a committed set of service providers.

While successful coordination efforts in urban contexts are somewhat rare, some are definitely worth highlighting. Based on the data available, coordination was considered high in YO sites such as Baltimore, Tucson, Milwaukee and Detroit. One of the best coordination efforts took place in Tucson, where the service providers designed what they call the "daisy wheel" model of service delivery. The "daisy wheel" model was actually initiated through the YO program at its inception. Essentially, it is a method of connecting youths to providers through a menu of services, where each provider's role is well defined and the YO grant money reimburses each provider in the network according to usage. Most of the service providers interviewed said that the model had been effective, served their clients well, and strengthened relationships between service providers. Furthermore, these referral and collaborative relationships may continue if other funding is found to replace existing YO funds that are now used for the coordination efforts.

Relationship between YO and Service Providers

Now that we have explored the existing service-provider networks and their cohesion in YO communities, we can focus on the different roles that YO played within that network. As an externally funded program, it was important for YO to connect with the local service-provider networks in ways that build off of existing efforts, avoid duplicating those efforts, and fill some of the service gaps. Overall, YO was generally better connected to community-based agencies and organizations than it was to other community institutions, such as schools and FBOs. However, some YO programs were more effective than others at forming successful partnerships, and many challenges emerged.

Typically, the YO program took on one of three roles in relation to other community organizations: sole provider of youth services, independent operators (nonadversarial, and competitive-adversarial), and collaborator. Clearly, the best implementers of provider partnerships were the collaborators, and more specifically, the YO programs that actually played a lead role in getting local agencies and organizations to collaborate more. Tucson's "daisy wheel" model and Kansas City's YO program were both collaborators. In Kansas City, agencies

collaborating with YO leveraged their resources with YO funds, which not only kept them financially afloat, but also increased the number of youths that the partner agencies served. Decentralized YO programs also tended to spur better collaboration with partners, as long as the number of partners was manageable. YO programs in Baltimore and Washington, D.C., are good examples of programs that were decentralized and perceived by other providers to be collaborative.

The independently operating YO programs—those that operated in relative isolation—were obviously less effective at collaborating with the existing network of service providers. These types of YO programs sometimes functioned independently without creating any tensions within the provider community, but other times the relationships with other providers became competitive or adversarial. Within the context of budget cuts, the perception that YO was competing generally occurred in the communities where YO was not subcontracting or "sharing the wealth" that it was reputed to have.

There were some common trends among the more independent YO programs. For example, nongovernment grantees, such as large nonprofits or FBOs, tended to operate more independently than those that were housed in government agencies. It became a challenge for some of the more independent grantees to collaborate simply because YO became associated with the host organization and its reputation within the community. For example, a large nonprofit in one community had a poor reputation in the community, and this reputation plagued the YO program and inhibited the YO program's ability to collaborate effectively. In other cases, the YO program itself had gained a poor reputation because of mismanagement and bad publicity; hence, they were shunned by other service providers.

The last type of role that YO played, sole provider of youth services, was most common in rural and Native American communities. In these instances, the main challenge was simply that there were not any other agencies or organizations to collaborate with, or else, they were located long distances from each other. In many Native American communities, for example, the tribal council is the "only game in town," according to community members; and many times, YO was part of the tribal council already.

Conclusion: Building on Assets and Filling Gaps

Schools, FBOs, and other service providers are vital institutional assets for programs like YO to connect with in terms of their strengths and their weaknesses. The power behind externally funded programs like YO rests with their ability to complement and build off of the strengths of the existing institutional structure and, at the same time, address the service gaps the current institutions lack the capacity to fill. Overall, community members perceived that YO was most successful when it was able to partner effectively with existing institutions and find a strong niche by addressing institutional deficiencies.

Overall, the YO program struggled to collaborate effectively with schools, FBOs, and service provider networks, although some effective practices are useful to consider for future programs similar to YO:

- Schools in YO communities were generally in a poor and unstable state throughout the lifespan of YO, and this left many challenges and opportunities. In the 11 more successful

cases, YO played a role in increasing the after-school activities available for in-school youths and, in a handful of cases, a role in decreasing the dropout rate.

- FBOs were generally very active in YO communities, although their capacity to deliver services to the community as a whole varied considerably. Respondents indicated that YO was most successful in collaborating with FBOs in the three communities where there was a very strong referral network in place (rather than YO being housed within an FBO) and in cases where FBOs offered activities that were responsive to the community and did not alienate youths.

- Existing service provider networks varied considerably across the 16 YO sites with detailed and complete qualitative data on the topic. YO was perceived to be most effective when it collaborated effectively,[30] provided services that were otherwise not available,[31] and had decentralized, subcontracted relationships with other service providers.[32]

---

[30] 38% of the 16 YO sites with relevant data.
[31] 19% of the 16 YO sites with relevant data.
[32] 19% of the 16 YO sites with relevant data.

Chapter 7. Community Perceptions of the YO Program

The YO program, with its comprehensive youth-development approach to education and training, was received within the target communities with hope and expectation. Perceptions of the YO program varied considerably among respondents within a community. As one might expect, YO service providers and participating youths were consistently the most knowledgeable and positive about the program. Participating youths, in particular, shared stories of personal growth and transformation. In Year 1, many service providers were optimistic about the YO program and the funding that it brought to their communities. As program resources were distributed, this view of the YO program shifted. By Year 3 and Year 5, many non-YO service providers were critical of the program, due, at least in part, to a climate of competition for resources and clients that pervaded many of the YO communities.

Before we describe how community members perceived the YO program, however, here are some important contextual factors to keep in mind. First, not all YO grantees implemented their program in a way that was true to the original design and intent of YO.[33] The community members that we spoke with were speaking from their local experiences with YO, which are based on the local embodiment, rather than the theoretical intents, of YO. Second, there were some substantial shifts in emphasis from the federal level during YO, including a decrease in emphasis on the comprehensive youth-development concepts that the program began with, an increase in emphasis on job training services, and an increase in emphasis on outcomes and accountability measures. Finally, reductions in funding in the later years of YO implementation led some communities to discontinue certain aspects of their program. As funds decreased, many programs shifted towards a narrower and less ambitious model of service provision. At the local level, community members observed these changes. One youth provider said, "YO showed up on the scene in a big way with a lot of resources, and then they dried up." Another respondent said, "It is a good program, but it disappeared."

The ethnography cast a wide net in gathering perspectives of community members, and the insights of elected officials, school representatives, police, employers, parents and other community members were important indicators of how broadly YO had impacted a given community. In several communities, the program was well known and respected, while in others even service providers and community leaders had only limited knowledge of the program or its services. Although conflicting accounts among respondents within each community were common, in some particularly strong or particularly weak YO sites, there was a consensus among various respondents about the effectiveness of the program. These sites have greatly informed our understanding of what program elements were effective and which were ineffective.

In this chapter, we discuss the reputation of the YO program, perception of what made YO effective or ineffective, perception of what benefits YO had for participating youths, and perception of community benefits from the program.

---

[33] Originally, YO was intended to be a new approach to serving youths, focusing on providing wraparound support by incorporating educational, employment, leadership, recreational, and other services through a single site designed specifically for youths. YO programs were intended to leverage the resources already available in the community to build on the skills and assets of youths in the community through a positive youth-development framework.

Reputation of the YO Program

Within each community studied, the reputation of YO among community members depended on their knowledge of the YO program and services offered and their perception of how effectively the program had been implemented.

Knowledge of the YO Program and Services Offered

In general, knowledge of the YO program among community members was higher in rural and Native American communities than it was in urban areas. This finding stems from the fact that rural and Native American communities have smaller populations and fewer competing services than urban communities; therefore, YO reached a higher percentage of youths with greater ease. For example, over 90 percent of youths within some rural and Native American communities were enrolled in the YO program. As a testament to this high level of "saturation," a youth in one community commented, "Everyone, I mean *everyone* is in YO." The high saturation within these communities meant that many community members had some type of personal connection to the program and could comment on it based on personal experience. Further, high saturation also implies a more comprehensive and inclusive result, meaning that YO was not seen in these communities as a program that serves only the "at-risk" population.

Public awareness of YO within *urban* communities was related to the effectiveness and scale of YO public outreach efforts (that is, advertisements, billboards, and door-to-door recruitment campaigns), the range of services offered by YO, and the ability of YO to find and fulfill a unique niche within the community. Awareness of the program within urban communities often was highest during our Year 3 visit, after the public outreach efforts had reached their peak. However, even in urban communities with broad community outreach campaigns, many residents recognized the name of the YO program but did not know exactly what types of services it provided. YO programs that offered comprehensive youth and recreational services were often better known within their communities than those that offered services more narrowly focused on job training.

Perception of the Quality of Program Implementation

Within roughly one-fourth of the communities we visited, the YO program was consistently lauded by residents as highly successful and a tremendous asset to the community. Urban communities of all types, several rural sites, and one Native American site had this perception. Residents viewed programs as successful if they filled a niche within the community, provided a range of services, and were proactive in their recruitment of youths and in their partnerships with service providers. A police officer in a rural community said, "[YO] is a blessing for this town . . . . The YO center has been able to provide our young people with all kinds of opportunities parents could never provide." Employers within these communities viewed the program as effective because it addressed the key "external barriers" that often keep youths from being able to find and keep a job. One employer working with a lot of YO youths commented, "When [YO youths] come to us, they have exterior barriers . . . . The [YO] case managers try to minimize those . . . . The YO program has given us a chance to experiment with the best fit in combining work and educational experience." Residents in these communities viewed YO as having dedicated staff and appreciated their youth-friendly and broad case-management approach.

Within roughly one-fifth of the communities we visited, community members strongly and consistently criticized the implementation of YO, which faced common implementation challenges:

- YO centers had high turnover in leadership or staff.

- They struggled to get the program off the ground and were slow to open youth centers.

- They had few partnerships or were ineffective in their coordination with community partners.

- Some of the YO centers were poorly located with regard to transportation access or gang territories.

- Community members in some communities said that racial or cultural differences between YO staff and youths inhibited YO's capacity to reach and engage with youths.

- Community members did not feel that YO had successfully extended the networks of adult mentors within the community, although they appreciated the types of adult support and mentorship that YO staff provided.

- There was a perceived lack of transparency in the use of funds. In several communities, there were claims of nepotism, including preferential treatment in hiring and in the awarding of contracts, which fueled allegations that program staff were unqualified and that funds were mismanaged. In one teacher's words, "It's not *what* you know, but *who* you know." A respondent in a different city said, "Unless you have some political power, some string thing, you're not going to get a fair share of what's going on out there." Local governments, in several instances, made accusations that YO funds had been mismanaged, and publicity about these inquiries contributed to negative characterizations of the program.

In the remaining communities, there was a lack of consensus about the effectiveness of YO. In most such communities, residents who knew about YO perceived it as effective for participating youths but as a "lost opportunity" for the community as a whole. In fact, nearly all the youths whom we spoke with and who had participated in YO within these communities viewed it positively and could describe the individual benefits derived from their participation. Those not directly involved in the program, however, knew little about it. As one service provider commented, "The only problem with the YO program is that it is not known in the community— and especially in community-based organizations who may know about YO but do not know what they do." Often residents viewed these programs as having too narrow a focus on job training or as being disconnected from other youth agencies. The youth centers within these communities were filled with computers, but community youths whom we talked to said that they did not frequent the youth center because there was "nothing to do there."

Perception of YO Program Characteristics that Make it Effective or Ineffective

This section describes the YO characteristics that *community members* believed made the program effective or ineffective. This analysis is not tied to actual program outcomes but rather

highlights those characteristics of the YO design that were of particular value to community members. For a description of program characteristics that were most effective at supporting positive youth outcomes, see the process report or impact analysis.

Effective Characteristics

Many of the fundamental program elements of YO, when implemented fully, were well received by community members. In the words of one high school counselor, "YO is a great program in terms of premise." Community members appreciated its innovative features and holistic youth-development approach. In the words of one young adult (rural), "There are no meaningful jobs or community activities, except for YO. Before YO, half the youths were hanging out on street corners. YO has made a very big impact on this community."

The YO program was viewed as effective when it filled a clear niche within the community's network of services. The YO program had a different menu of services within each community, and the most effective YO programs were able to customize that menu specifically to meet needs that other programs were not addressing. YO frequently filled gaps in job placement, job training, alternative education (GED), recreational opportunities, supportive services, and services geared toward older youths (age 18-21). In one city where YO was very successful, the program provided vital recreational facilities (basketball, dances), mentors to youths, alternative education (GED), and job training. Similarly, YO was highly regarded in most rural communities because it provided badly needed alternative education and recreational activities.

The focus on 18–21-year-old out-of-school youth population was badly needed in many communities. The 18–21-year-old population is a difficult population to reach and is not often targeted for other intervention efforts. While some YO programs were criticized for not reaching this population, those that managed to engage them were widely praised by community members. Community members indicated that continued focus on engaging those youths is vital for the overall health of their communities.

The capacity to provide supportive services was seen as a particularly important strength of YO. Although the ability of YO to provide flexible financial support for youths appears to have decreased with time, community members appreciated the program's ability to meet a wide range of supportive service needs of youths, thus eliminating key obstacles to employment. For instance, transportation and clothing assistance were appreciated both in rural and urban communities because few other programs were able to provide this type of assistance. Community members said that YO could provide youths with money for work boots, provide bus tokens or other transportation assistance, feed them if they were hungry, link them to childcare providers, help with tuition and books, and so on.

YO youth centers were viewed as effective when they provided comprehensive services and activities for youths. Residents appreciated the ability of YO centers to serve as a "one-stop shop," by providing a range of services and activities in one location. Because so many of the YO communities were severely lacking in recreational opportunities, YO centers and programs that provided recreational activities and events (for example, basketball, choir) were particularly well liked. These types of YO programs were perceived as engaging a broad cross-section of community youths, rather than just those "at risk," and filling a core community need.

Community members appreciated YO programs with active youth centers because they provided "safe spaces" for youths to congregate and get off the streets. One parent in a rural community said, "These kids don't have anything to keep them occupied: no jobs and no recreation. YO has been the most positive thing that has happened in [this community]."

Community members viewed case management as a unique strength of the YO program. Helpful staff and effective case management left many youths feeling that they had a reliable place to turn and a connection to resources when they encountered a barrier. In several communities, respondents felt that YO case managers were unusually proactive in their efforts to recruit and follow-up with youth participants. For instance, one San Antonio youth said, "You are never turned away. There's nothing more important to them than seeing you succeed. You can talk to them about anything."

The YO program was broadly praised for its youth-friendly format, diverse staffing, and the quality of youth adult relationships. Interviews with community members and YO participants highlighted the importance of the "relaxed" atmosphere of YO centers, the youth and diversity of YO staff, and the ability of YO staff to form meaningful personal connections with young people. Many community leaders and service providers indicated that the YO staff was caring and dedicated. The YO's youth-development approach was seen as an important step toward providing the types of relationship opportunities within the community that young people were looking for. In the words of one youth, "There are a lot of people at YO you can open up to. They are cool. They make you feel like family, which is cool because it's like having your brothers or your cousins to hang out with."

Strong partnerships with existing service providers were perceived as effective. Some YO programs had very strong partnerships with existing service providers, while others were viewed as "going it alone." Although strong partnerships were sometimes challenging, respondents viewed them as pivotal for the long-term health of the community. In the most effective sites, YO strengthened the network of youth services by expanding the capacity of existing organizations and fostering coordination between agencies. In these same communities, many believed that changes in capacity and coordination would persist even as YO funding disappeared. For instance, Tucson organizations fully implemented the "daisy wheel" model, which respondents said has coordinated youth services through increased information sharing and referral networks. On the downside, YO programs that used this approach often struggled with "identity issues" and the perception that the program was no different than what had existed before.

Ineffective Characteristics

Although community members generally praised the characteristics of the YO program, certain components of the YO service model were consistently described as ineffective. The most commonly criticized aspects of the program were the EZ-based eligibility and paperwork requirements. Beyond that, some respondents perceived that YO did not focus enough on getting older youths into good jobs or jobs within their own neighborhood.

Restricting services to those in the EZ limited the program's reach. Community residents and other service providers developed negative attitudes about the seemingly arbitrary and unjust distinction between youths who were inside versus outside the EZ, which determined who was

eligible for YO services. Community members repeatedly raised the scenario of a youth who lived "a block" or "one or two blocks" out of the EZ, but he or she was refused services. In some places, the EZ designation covered less then one-third of the community, and one resident described this as "geographic discrimination." Other informants felt that youth participants were stigmatized by their participation in YO because it did not draw youths from all over the community.

Paperwork requirements were a challenge. The paperwork to enroll youths was considered cumbersome by many service providers that worked with the YO program. This was a recurring theme across sites. We spoke with youths who withdrew their interest in the program when they saw the "requirements." Some respondents said it took two to three weeks to complete initial paperwork before youths were eligible for job training.

Job placements within the community were a challenge. Community members, including YO youths, often felt that YO did not fulfill its promise when it came to placing youths in good-quality jobs. A YO staff member said, "If kids want jobs other than work experience, they have to go to other areas." Another YO staff member said, "Kids don't get jobs quickly." In many settings, this difficulty was due to the poor economy. In other sites, the YO program was perceived to have focused more on programs for in-school youths and not enough on placing out-of-school youths into jobs.

Controversial Characteristics

The following characteristics of the YO program were perceived very differently by respondents. In some cases, these differences of opinion were among people from the same community, while in other cases, the same characteristics were perceived in different ways across communities.

Youth stipends were perceived as problematic in some sites. Those who viewed stipends positively felt that it helped to professionalize the training environment and to address the barriers (for example, lack of childcare, lack of clothing, and transportation) that had previously inhibited out-of-school youths from attending school or acquiring a job. Those that criticized the strategy believed that stipends "circumvented good values" by creating the expectations that "things are free" and do not require effort or work to achieve. One YO youth in a rural community said, "A lot of kids are in [the YO program] for the money. They could care less what YO thinks or what YO can do to help them. They're here to make $315 every two weeks and that's it." Others criticized the ways they saw youths using the newly acquired disposable income, such as using the money to buy drugs or nonessentials.

"Standalone" programs were often criticized for lack of coordination. Some YO programs that did not contract extensively with existing service providers were negatively characterized as "Going it alone," "Wasting time by creating a new system," and undermining the work of existing community organizations. We talked with many non-YO service providers that were angry about how YO partnerships had been structured. One such informant asserted, "During the application process, all the minority CBOs were held up for show and tell, but when the money came through, they were dropped." Many of the tensions between the various service providers were financially based because many programs were struggling to survive economically in a climate of decreased public and private funding.

Yet, in some cases, YO program administrators said that that the politics of partnership were too complicated to yield effective collaboration. They felt that a standalone program would be more effective at achieving positive youth outcomes. Indeed, a few of the most effective programs identified in the process analysis were broadly criticized by community members for "going it alone." A YO director of one such standalone project explained the tensions that existed between YO and other community groups in the following way: **"**There was so much money, and people got excited to be included, but those that were not involved were mad. They felt excluded. For us, it was really hard to manage the relationships with partners."

Perception of Benefits to Youth Participants

The following comment expresses what an urban police officer felt about the YO program:

> *YO is a beacon of hope, a one-stop shop for our most difficult and forgotten population.*

> *–Police officer, urban site*

The ethnography did not look in-depth at youth outcomes but rather took note of what benefits community members believed youths were receiving from their participation in the YO program. Almost universally, residents who knew of YO felt that it had profoundly benefited most youth participants. This was true even in most contexts where community members were critical of the YO implementation. Similarly, with a few exceptions, youth participants said that they went through powerful changes as a result of YO. Youth participants consistently indicated that the program was interesting and engaging and that they did not see it as "academic" or "boring." They also spoke repeatedly of the meaningful relationships that they formed with YO staff and about how the program helped them plan for the future.

Those reports do not imply that community members thought the program was a panacea or that it radically changed the conditions for all or most youths. Many young people within urban areas did not know of the YO program. Furthermore, not all young people enrolled in YO attended regularly, and some of the participants who did attend continued to struggle. One YO case manager said, "There are 'sinkers' and 'swimmers' and 'floaters.' In terms of youths who will succeed, I guess it is about 50/50." Further, some youths that we interviewed did criticize the program; for example, they said that YO sent them on interviews that never resulted in jobs and that subsidized job opportunities were promised but never delivered.

The primary and most formidable challenge facing many YO programs was how to access their target population and keep them engaged, especially older youths. Community members said that the YO program effectively served those youths who accepted help. In one respondent's words, "If you have a determined individual who needs help, YO provides the push." However, they acknowledged that many youths within the YO communities needed help but were not able or willing to attend the YO program. A county supervisor in one community said, "[YO], like other organizations, is hamstrung by the nature of the people in the community. There is a lot of ingrained and negative thinking." Thus, YO faced the same difficulties that any program would face in trying to reach a resistant population.

The following sections discuss some perceived benefits of the YO program for youth participants in terms of opportunities for youth development and youth outcomes.

Opportunities for Youth Development

The following quotation reflects the positive perceptions of a member of an urban community:

> *YO is a place where young people can re-engage if home, school, and church have failed. Here kids can feel safe, be validated, and begin preparing for tomorrow.*
>
> *–Community member, urban site*

Although few adult or youth respondents whom we talked to were versed in youth-development concepts, those who knew about the YO program often framed its benefits in the language of youth development. Like the community member in the above quotation, respondents talked about the program's role in helping to support positive youth-adult relationships, create safe spaces, and promote a positive and affirming "trajectory" for youths. Residents were not always able to link these opportunities to specific "program" components or youth outcomes, and yet they repeatedly indicated that they were of value to the community. For some rural areas and Native American communities, the YO program was their first exposure to a broad youth-development approach. Respondents often indicated that YO created new models for working with young people that would persist after the funding for the program ended.

Respondents also talked about the value of specific services that do map clearly to youth outcomes, such as job training, recreational opportunities, and alternative education. Although many YO programs provided community service, leadership, and cultural opportunities, community members did not generally highlight these as core benefits of the program, beyond a generalized sense that YO provided a range of activities for youths. The following descriptions and quotations indicate core youth-development opportunities identified most commonly as positive by community respondents:

- **Safe Space**. Respondents from varied backgrounds (educators, police, parents, youth) viewed the YO center as a vital service because it served as a safe alternative to the streets. One urban youth commented: "YO is a positive wave in the community. When you come [to the YO center] it relieves your mind. You can do your homework, talk to someone. When I was a kid, I had no one to talk to, so I got into a lot of trouble." Youths within rural and Native American communities talked of the value of the youth center and the high percentage of youths within their communities that used the center.

- **Quality Youth and Adult Relationships**. Service providers, community leaders, and youths indicated that YO staff formed quality relationships with young people. Youths often said that YO staff were like "family." "You can talk to [YO staff], and they listen. You can trust them with your thoughts and feelings. They are like an older parent or big brother or sister. They tell you what they think is right."

- **Enhanced Training and Education Services**. YO was valued for the quality and breadth of training and education services it provided. For many rural communities, YO was the only nonschool provider of youth services within the community. A superintendent of schools at

one rural site said, "YO is considered a positive force because of the programs offered. Through YO, youths see the importance of school. They see relevance to education. They are doing better and do not take school for granted."

- **Opportunities to be Productive.** Many respondents, including youths and educators, highlighted the importance of the YO program in giving youths something to do. Many YO communities had a dearth of recreational, cultural, and community-service opportunities. The YO program helped to fill that gap. One youth said, "We don't get in trouble anymore. We use to hang out and do nothing. Now we've calmed down because we have something to do."

Youth Outcomes

The following quotation reflects a YO partner's impression of youth outcomes resulting from YO.

> *There were people who started working, there were kids who got their GED: lots of good work. [YO] changed their [young peoples'] lives. This kid from Texas ended up doing web and graphic design after being at YO. He had his own business.*
>
> *–Former YO partner, urban site*

Typically, community members perceived outcomes much more broadly than the actual outcomes that were measured. Of all our respondents, adult service providers were the most likely to identify concrete youth outcomes, such as completion of GED, development of work history (that is, through work experience), improvement in "soft" job skills (punctuality, dealing with money, appropriate dress), and job placements. Most youths whom we spoke with did emphasize such outcomes but talked more broadly about their transition from the "wrong path" to the "right path." Typically, youths talked about how, once enrolled in YO, they stopped associating with bad influences and began working to obtain their GED and to learn a trade. One rural youth reported, "YO inspired me." Another said, "If I hadn't come to YO, I would probably be in jail. I used to sell dope and stuff like that." Youths also emphasized improved attitudes about learning and raised awareness about careers and colleges. Mostly, youths talked about the satisfaction that they experienced from feeling more productive. They often credited their changes to YO staff, whom they felt never gave up on them.

Perception of Benefits to the Community

The quotation below captures the challenge of creating community change in very poor communities through a single initiative, such as the YO program.

> *To provide services, such as 'dress for success,' how to write a resume, how to go on an interview, the ability to do everything you need to do to get a job is fine, but if there are no places for [youths] . . . to actually do this in, it really doesn't make much of a difference. The reality is that there's no place for them to apply.*
>
> *–Community member, urban community*

YO could have done, and in many cases did, an exceptional job of preparing young people for work, but if youths cannot find jobs, then their life options nonetheless remain limited. Many community members agreed that increased employability for at-risk youths was a necessary and important, but not a sufficient, catalyst for community change.

As we state throughout this report, the challenges facing YO communities are profound. In most cases, they are historical and systemic. The multifarious, converging, and cumulative nature of disadvantage within YO communities makes change difficult and slow. A key obstacle in that process is an enduring pessimism, communicated most consistently among residents of declining industrial and Native American communities. Most community members and residents whom we spoke with in urban areas and Native American communities did not think it was realistic to expect a single initiative like YO to change the broader community. Further, at the sunset of the grant, few urban or Native American residents thought that the grant had any community-wide impact.

Notably, the story is different in several rural areas, one Native American community, and a few urban areas where community members viewed the program as particularly effective. Rural areas were particularly likely to believe that YO had impacted the community as a whole. With the exception of changes in the network of services, however, the stories and anecdotes of community impact within these settings remained broad and difficult to attribute with any certainty to the YO program. In the following sections, we highlight some of the central dimensions of community change raised by these community members as the changes relate to physical and demographic characteristics, social networks and conditions, economic opportunities, and institutional infrastructure.

Physical and Demographic Characteristics

Temporary improvements in physical appearance of neighborhoods. Within some cities, YO did support a variety of neighborhood clean-up campaigns, which some residents said contributed to improvements in the physical appearance of their communities. Most residents felt that these changes were temporary and limited in scope. In one Native American community, YO youths helped to improve their town by participating in trash removal, razing of small buildings (like the post office), removal of debris, and cleaning up graffiti at the school. The youths who had spent days removing graffiti were reportedly insistent that their peers not mar their newly cleaned surface. A YO staff person said, "They did all the work. They didn't want to see it messed up so quickly." Our site visitors did not observe any large-scale shifts in the physical appearance of YO neighborhoods that could be attributed to the YO program, but some community members felt that these efforts contributed to a sense of community pride.

Social Networks and Conditions

Reductions in crime, youth delinquency, and gang activity. Many communities experienced decreased rates of crime over the course of the YO study, and residents of some communities attributed this shift to the YO program. A police officer in an urban area said that YO helped address youth recidivism by serving as a transition program for youths returning to the community. A police officer in a rural area said, "I don't see juveniles getting into as much trouble now. We [the police] can talk to some of these kids now that we could not [talk to] in the past. The attitudes of some of the kids who got into trouble in the past has changed." Community

members felt that crime and delinquency decreased because youths did not have so much free time on their hands and were engaged in productive activities. Youths interviewed said that YO "keeps us out of trouble."

Economic Opportunities

Improved attitudes about the skills of youths among some employers. Many of the employers whom we talked with and who had placed youths into jobs indicated that they had positive experiences and that they would consider hiring youths again in the future. We did not observe attitude changes within the broader group of employers.

Enhanced job opportunities for youths. Some community members felt that YO had expanded the range of job opportunities for youths by expanding partnerships with employers and supporting subsidized work-experience opportunities. One rural community member commented, "They are not good-paying jobs, but they are some type of job. It's a beginning."

Institutional Infrastructure

Expanded or helped sustain the capacity of service providers within the community. Many respondents noted that YO had a positive effect on service providers within the community. YO was able to extend the services of some organizations whose funding was cut because of funding crises and to expand the age group that they were able to reach (over age 17). In other cases, residents believed that YO helped enhance the level of collaboration between agencies.

Expanded range of services and supports available to youths. YO helped expand alternative education (GED), after-school services, pregnancy prevention, antiviolence programs, and job training services for in-school and out-of-school youths. Recreational opportunities were seen as adding value to the network of services. Community members felt that transportation assistance, clothing allowances, tuition reimbursement, and childcare assistance helped youths overcome barriers to employment.

Reductions in dropout rate within some schools. Some schools within YO communities had declining dropout rates over the course of the YO grant. Residents within some communities where YO had strong school-based programs attributed this decline to the YO program. For example, some YO programs had strong links with local public schools and outstationed case managers in the high schools so that they could provide extra support to YO youths.

Increased coordination with community agencies, parents, and schools. Within a few communities, YO was perceived as bringing about greater coordination between community agencies, parents and schools. For example, in one Native American community, YO helped to ease tensions between parents and the school system. In other cases, the YO program was able to bring partners together who had not worked well together before.

Perspectives on Life After YO

As reflected in the following quotation, most YO communities continue to have a large population of youths who are in need but have a limited number of positive strategies for addressing that need.

If YO ends, you have a population of young people who are in need. There is a breakdown in family structure, and schools are not filling the gap. Prisons are not the answer. There are not enough WIA funds to reach all those youths. We need some more money; we must invest in young people. Once you work with youths, a light bulb comes on. There is potential for change. They just need guidance in the right direction.

–Employment services staff, urban community

Although no consensus existed across YO communities about whether YO had been effectively implemented or whether the program had transformed the community, there was a strong sense that the program had benefited youths and a fear that services for youths would decline with the sunset of the program. Within roughly a fourth of the YO communities, the program was perceived to be a tremendous asset, and residents within those communities were often anxious about what would happen when the program ended. One rural parent said, "If [YO] ever goes away, we're going to be back to square one—and probably even worse."

Overall, community members perceived the greatest strengths of the YO model to be the comprehensive approach, dedicated and accessible staff, and the flexibility of funding for a variety of much-needed services. In addition, the community members consistently pointed to benefits above and beyond concrete outcomes, bringing up the more subtle ways in which YO empowered individual youths, provided youths with safe spaces, and connected youths to valuable resources. Finally, YO seems to have been most important to communities that had high saturation levels, where "everyone" was involved, and where there had been no youth services before.