



Decision Information Resources, Inc.

# Youth Opportunity Grant Initiative: Executive Summary

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**Submitted to:**

Dan Ryan  
Employment and Training Administration  
The United States Department of Labor  
200 Constitution Ave, NW  
Room N-5641  
Washington, D.C. 20210

**Submitted by:**

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

**Authors:**

Russell H. Jackson, Project Director  
Jamie Diamandopoulos      Ann McCoy  
Carol Pistorino              R. Malené Dixon  
Paul Zador                      Cynthia Thomas  
John Lopdell                    Frank Bennici  
Juanita Lucas-McLean  
Andy Sum                        Neeta Fogg  
Ron D'Amico                  Andrew Weigand  
Lee Bruno



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Russell H. Jackson  
Project Director

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## Components and Objectives of the Evaluation; Reports of Findings

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. The evaluation, conducted from 2000–2005, had three primary components:

- An *ethnographic study* to assess community well-being before and after delivery of YO grant services;
- 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.

The evaluation was funded at the time the grants were awarded, and it had the following multifaceted objectives:

- Measure the impact of the program on employment, educational enrollment and attainment, graduation rates, wages, welfare enrollment, and youth involvement in crime in target areas.
- Document and assess the effectiveness of the delivery of YO-funded services and leveraged services in the target areas.
- Assess the target areas' sense of well-being before and after receipt of program services.

Findings from the study were reported in a series of documents:

- An *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 and synthesis report*, which describes impacts of the projects on participants; and
- This *executive summary*, which highlights key findings from across the YO initiative evaluation components and reports.

This executive summary first provides an overview of the program, followed by a description of the context in which the program was implemented, and a discussion of the key features of the YO model. Following that, it presents findings about results of YO program activities on

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penetration among eligible youths, program participation levels, and placement outcomes. The summary then discusses changes in YO communities over the period of the grant funding and reports results from an impact analysis, which compares results of youths in YO areas with youths in non-YO areas, providing evidence of YO impacts or effects on selected education and placement outcomes. Finally, the summary presents perceptions of important stakeholders on YO's contributions and lessons learned from the YO initiative implementation.

## Program Overview

The YO Initiative consisted of large and complex projects that provided comprehensive services to economically disadvantaged youths, ages 14 to 21, residing in high-poverty urban, rural, and Native American reservation communities throughout the United States, including Hawaii and Alaska. The projects were intended to build the foundation for community-wide efforts to mobilize resources in helping youths to enter the economic mainstream. The projects were funded from 2000 through at least 2005 and were charged with serving both in-school youths (ISY) and out-of-school youths (OSY) by using a model of program services that had the following features:

- **Geographic Saturation.** Rather than spreading available resources across the entire country, the YO program was intended to concentrate a large amount of resources in selected communities. Unlike other ETA youth programs, the YO grants were open to all youths residing in the designated target area, avoiding the stigma associated with income-based programs. The YO program was intended to reach out to as many youths in the targeted high-poverty areas as possible. By making all resident youths eligible and saturating a high-poverty area with staff-intensive and comprehensive services, the program was expected to positively affect peer pressure, impact the larger community, and create a positive environment for promoting youth development.
- **Youth Opportunity Community Centers.** Under the YO program, each grantee was required to establish in the target area one or more Youth Opportunity Community Centers to provide a safe and accessible place for youths to meet. These centers were to be staffed with youth-development specialists and offer a core set of services.
- **Youth Development Framework.** YO programs were expected to provide supportive services (including mentoring, support groups, and follow-up services) and services that develop the potential of youths as citizens and leaders (such as community service, sports and recreation, and life skills training) as a means for achieving employment and educational outcomes. Emphasis was placed on staff-intensive individualized services in which youth-development specialists or case managers would play a key role.
- **Long-Term Engagement.** With the increased recognition that youths need to be “engaged” over a long period of time to receive meaningful benefits, no participant in the YO program was considered to be an “exiter.” Youths were encouraged to maintain contact and seek assistance, even when they had completed their service plan.

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- **Partnerships and Leveraging.** The YO program strongly emphasized that the grantee—the Workforce Investment Board (WIB) in most cases—establish partnerships with public, private, and nonprofit organizations and leverage resources that would enable the services to continue, even after YO funds cease. These partnerships were intended to enable programs to serve youths in a variety of ways and provide a broad range of services.

## The Context for YO Implementation

The economy, demographic attributes of participants, and characteristics of the targeted communities provided the context and conditions in which YO was implemented and evaluated.

### The Economy

The YO Initiative, which funded 36 programs from 2000 to 2005, was launched during a period characterized by a national economic recession during part of that time. The national labor-market boom of the middle to late 1990s came to a sudden halt in early 2001 with a national recession beginning in March of that year.<sup>1</sup> While the recession officially came to an end in November 2001, the national unemployment rate continued to rise through early summer of 2003,<sup>2</sup> and payroll employment did not begin to grow steadily until late summer of that year.<sup>3</sup> The nation's teens and young adults (ages 16 to 24) were most adversely affected by these deteriorating labor-market conditions, with their employment rates falling steadily from 2001 through 2004.<sup>4</sup> During that time, the teen and young-adult employment rate in metropolitan areas and central cities across the nation dropped from 60 percent to 54 percent while their labor force participation rate dropped from 66 to 61 percent.<sup>5</sup> This decline in employment and labor force participation of young people nationally was true for both ISY and OSY.

The ethnographic analysis—based on site visits that the evaluation team conducted to the YO target areas when the initiative began in 2001 and during subsequent periods in 2003 and late 2004—identified, throughout the period, challenging economic conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> The beginning date of March 2001 and the ending date of November 2001 for the recession of 2001 were established by the National Bureau of Economic Research.

<sup>2</sup> The seasonally adjusted monthly unemployment rate for the nation peaked at 6.3 percent during June 2003. Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Labor Force Statistics From the Current Population survey (National), Seasonally Adjusted Monthly Unemployment Rate," <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/surveymost?ln>.

<sup>3</sup> Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment, Hours, and Earnings from the Current Employment Statistics survey (National), Seasonally Adjusted Monthly Total Nonfarm Employment," <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/surveymost?ce>.

<sup>4</sup> For a review of the changing labor-market fate of teens and young adults from 2000–2004 in the nation and central-city high-poverty neighborhoods, see Andrew Sum, Paulo Tobar, Joseph McLaughlin, and Sheila Palma, *Trends in the Employment Status of Teens and Young Adults in the U.S. and in Selected High Poverty Neighborhoods, 2000–2004*, prepared for DIR and the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration, Washington, D.C., 2004.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Washington, D.C., unpublished CPS data, tabulations by authors.

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Residents and leaders believed that the following factors contributed to their communities' economic conditions:

- lack of a core private-sector industry or economic base
- geographic isolation and population loss
- lack of skilled labor
- weak transportation and institutional infrastructure

## Demographic Attributes of Enrollees

Expectations regarding YO's impacts should take into account the characteristics of youths who were served. Although YO eligibility rules did not require youths to have any particular characteristic to be enrolled (other than being age eligible and residing in the target area), the grantees' catchment areas were, by definition, communities undergoing some distress. For this reason, they included high proportions of youths whose characteristics were likely to cause them difficulty in the labor market.

Table 1 shows tabulations of the characteristics of YO participants at the time of their enrollment. For contrast, it also shows average characteristics of the nation's youths of these ages, the characteristics of youths served by WIA formula-funded youth programs, and the characteristics of eligible youths in the YO catchment areas.<sup>6</sup>

Note that YO participants, including ISY and OSY, are nearly evenly balanced by gender, although females outnumber males slightly. Accordingly, YO has done about as well as WIA formula-funded youth programs in reaching males, who, despite their preponderance in the population of this age group, are often hard to recruit into youth programs.

Compared to both the national and target area distributions, YO programs are somewhat less likely to have enrolled older youths. However, YO is more successful in enrolling older youths than the formula-funded WIA youth programs.

The distribution of youths by race and ethnicity reveals that virtually all YO participants are persons of color. Only about 5 percent of YO participants overall are non-Hispanic whites, while 30 percent of WIA formula-funded youths are non-Hispanic whites, and the national average is much larger at 64 percent. In particular, YO youths are disproportionately (compared to the national average) Latino, American Indian, and African American.<sup>7</sup> These figures reveal the nature of the targeted communities where YO was funded and suggest barriers that participants are likely to face in achieving labor market success.

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<sup>6</sup> The average characteristics of youths nationally were tabulated from the 2000 Census; race and ethnicity were calculated on the basis of youths ages 15 to 21 because this was the breakout provided by Census Factfinder. Characteristics of youths in WIA formula-funded programs were taken from the *PY 03 WIASRD Data Book*. The characteristics of eligible youths in target areas were taken from surveys administered by the evaluation team of the grantees' catchment areas, excluding those in Washington, D.C., and the Navajo Nation.

<sup>7</sup> In Table 1, the category listed as American Indian includes Alaskan Natives; the Hawaiian/PI category includes Hawaiian Natives and other Pacific Islanders. Although the YO MIS allows individuals to be identified as belonging to more than one racial group, no one was so designated.

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Table 1 also shows the distribution of youths according to their educational status and highest educational attainment.<sup>8</sup> YO youths are slightly more likely to be attending school than not, with 54 percent attending school at the time of enrollment and 46 percent not attending school at enrollment. By contrast, WIA formula-funded programs serve a much higher proportion of youths (70 percent) who are attending school at the time of enrollment.

Among YO youths who were attending school, almost all were attending high school rather than postsecondary school (89 percent versus 11 percent, respectively). Thus, it is not surprising that school districts were among the YO grantees' most frequent partners. Table 1 also shows that, among OSY, two-thirds were high-school dropouts and lacked a general equivalency diploma (GED), a higher proportion than for the YO target area.

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<sup>8</sup> Educational and school status is not readily available for these age ranges for youths in the U.S. as a whole.

**Table 1. Characteristics of YO Participants and Others**

	National Average	Target Area Average	WIA Youth Formula	YO Participants		
				OSY	ISY	Total
Number of Youths	—	—	—	44,371	47,892	92,263
Gender (%)						
Female	48.7	51.3%	52.5%	51.7%	53.6%	52.7%
Male	51.3	48.7	47.5	48.3	46.4	47.3
Age						
14 to 15	25.1%	26.6%	32.0%	6.0%	47.8%	27.5%
16 to 17	24.9	25.4	37.7	24.3	36.2	30.4
18 to 19	25.4	26.2	12.4	41.4	12.5	26.5
20 to 21	24.5	21.8	17.9	28.3	3.6	15.6
Race/Ethnicity						
Hispanic/Latino	16.2%	32.0%	28.5%	23.5%	21.4%	22.4%
Not Hispanic/Latino						
Amer. Indian or Native Alaskan (only)	0.9	7.9	1.4	7.1	15.1	11.2
Asian (only)	3.6	2.0	2.5	1.0	0.9	1.0
African Amer. (only)	13.9	47.8	36.0	61.2	56.7	58.9
Hawaiian/PI (only)	0.2	1.6	0.4	1.0	1.5	1.2
White (only)	63.7	8.2	30.3	6.3	4.4	5.3
More than one race	1.5	0.5	0.9	—	—	—
Educational Status (%)						
Attending school	n/a	68.3%	70.3%	6.0%	100.0%	54.3%
High school	n/a	84.9	97.1	0.0	91.6	89.1
Postsecondary	n/a	15.1	2.9	100.0	8.4	10.9
Not attending school	n/a	31.7%	29.7%	94.0%	0.0%	45.7%
High school dropout	n/a	54.2	60.9	65.6	—	65.6
High school grad	n/a	45.8	39.1	34.4	—	34.4

**Note:** The average characteristics of youths nationally were tabulated from the 2000 Census; race and ethnicity were calculated on the basis of youths ages 15 to 21 because this was the breakout provided by Census Factfinder. Characteristics of youths in WIA formula-funded programs were taken from the *PY 03 WIASRD Data Book*. The characteristics of eligible youths in target areas were taken from surveys administered by the evaluation team of the grantees' catchment areas, excluding those in Washington, D.C., and the Navajo Nation. Results for the YO program are taken from the June 2005 cumulative monthly grantee reports and are for all 36 grantees.

The high rate of service to OSY and the fact that many of them were dropouts underscores the challenges that grantees faced in addressing skill deficits and launching OSYs on successful career pathways—an important context for judging the success of these programs. Grantees differed in the balance that they struck between OSY and ISY, in the services that they emphasized for them, and therefore, the outcomes they achieved.

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## Targeted Communities

Residents of targeted communities believed that there were few quality job opportunities for both adults and youths; that there was considerable competition for the limited available jobs; and that racism and discrimination presented employment barriers. The following additional employment barriers were cited as being especially acute for youths in the YO target areas:<sup>9</sup>

- lack of supportive services, such as childcare and transportation
- lack of skills among the youths themselves
- lack of employed role models in their community
- drug use among youths and adults

Obviously, urban, rural, and Native American sites had distinct differences; but many factors (for example, lack of a core private-sector industry or economic base, population loss, lack of skilled labor, and weak institutional infrastructure) were consistent across most YO sites. The design of the YO program was informed by recognition of the need for community-wide efforts to address the challenging issues that impeded the economic and educational progress of YO-area youths and to build on community assets.

## Implementation of the YO Model

The “YO model” is mentioned frequently in reports for the YO project. The model was developed by the evaluation team and is based on the grant guidelines that described the services to be provided and the program goals. The model served as a conceptual template for comparing actual operations with a common standard.<sup>10</sup> DIR used these comparisons to evaluate the grantees’ operations and to draw conclusions about the YO Initiative.

The model comprised the following five features, as described in the “Program Overview” section on page 2. To implement the model, projects were expected to have all features operational and integrated.

- Geographic (target area) saturation
- YO community centers
- Services based on a youth-development framework
- Long-term engagement of youths
- Partnerships and leveraging grant resources

Although it took some projects longer than others (most needed two years to have all elements of the model in place), all projects implemented the model within the 5-year grant period.

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<sup>9</sup> *Youth Opportunity Grant Initiative: Ethnographic Study Final Report*, Decision Information Resources, Inc., 2005, page 6.

<sup>10</sup> Bruno, Lee, and Erlanger, Wendy, *Quick Guide for Conducting Program Evaluations*, U. S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, May 2002, page 8.

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## Strengths and Weaknesses of the YO Model

The *strength* of the YO model was twofold:

- It addressed youths holistically.
- It required community partners who could sustain the programs as integrated community services for youths.

The chief *weakness* of the model was its failure to address two major deficits, which were barriers to successful outcomes for OSY:

- The lack of financial resources to sustain youths during the long-term and intensive engagement needed by many; and
- The lack of educational programs to address the learning deficits typical of high-school dropouts.

The initial delays in making the model operational were due to confusion about the model or managing the start-up of YO centers. Some difficulties in implementation were due to the sheer size and scope of the grant and to a compressed start-up period that exacerbated weaknesses in grantee management and infrastructure. In retrospect, a longer start-up period to allow more time for staff training and infrastructure development might have resulted in more effective service delivery in the long run.

Saturation was fairly easy to achieve (see the “Relative Success with Elements of the YO Model” section on page 10). Although recruitment was a priority among program services, meeting enrollment goals was usually not a problem. The greater problem for service providers was managing and serving enrolled youths. Original contractors were sometimes dropped for performance reasons or to fit lower funding levels. More services were brought in-house, particularly if they related directly to case management and job placement. Generally, grantees found it hard to manage program services through other organizations and were not well equipped to monitor or correct shortcomings in service delivery by contractors.

Neither the characteristics of youths nor the community context seemed to be critical variables in how well the model was implemented. Generally, the views of project staff about the needs and challenges of youths served were consistent across sites. In fact, according to the findings from the process analysis, even when community context varied in terms of available institutional resources, labor market demand, urban characteristics, or community ethnographic features, such context had no discernable effects on how well the model was implemented.

The only factors that appeared to be consistently associated with successful implementation of the model were *management expertise* and *grantee support*. By far, the most critical element to the successful implementation of the YO model was *project leadership*. Experienced, innovative managers were the ones who grasped the concept of the YO model early and found solutions to the many administrative issues that arose in its implementation.

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Management expertise and leadership were particularly critical to:

- Understanding the model and training staff and contractors on the elements of the YO model;
- Managing large numbers of contractors;
- Coordinating youth development services;
- Setting up YO community centers;
- Mastering the MIS;
- Finding solutions to youths' low academic skills;
- Maintaining a consistent and objective system of accountability for staff and contractors;
- Creating stability and time for the grantee to master operational intricacies of the model; and
- Gaining the support of the community to sustain the project.

## **Size and Scope of the Model**

The size and scope of the model made it difficult to manage and gave it high visibility among resource-starved community organizations that saw the YO grant as a source of new funding for their respective organizations. Often, the large grants inspired competition, contractors were more invested in their own survival than the goals of the project, and YO grantees struggled to coordinate and link opportunistic rivals.

The objectives of saturation and long-term engagement created a situation in which youths who could not be served were enrolled and then could not be released, even when there was no viable service strategy. Staff resources were spread thin in futile attempts to serve youths that were not matched to the services available. Lack of resources deprived youths who would likely have been able to benefit from them.

Size and scope of the project affected service delivery. Coordinating services into a meaningful individualized service plan for so many youths taxed the management skills of many grantees. The difficulties were exacerbated when outside contractors were engaged to provide the services for individualized service plans. Grantees found that even as they became more astute in providing services, written agreements with contractors constrained their flexibility to incorporate better methods into their service strategies. The coordination and management of service providers and becoming proficient with unfamiliar services created inefficiencies. Over time, grantees were able to winnow out ineffective approaches and vendors and to develop better contractor management and monitoring tools. However, in some cases, by the time the administrators had learned enough to be proficient, funds were being incrementally reduced.

## **Changes in Implementation and Services over Time**

Descriptions of service delivery processes are “snapshots” of projects at a particular point in time. Looking at projects and processes over time provides a big picture of service strategies and how they responded to changes in environment and experience. Generally, projects evolved through at least three stages—*startup*, when activities focused on infrastructure development; *steady-state operations*, when all planned program elements were in place; and *completion*, when

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the project concluded and final results were achieved.<sup>11</sup> Within these stages, projects constantly adjusted to environmental influences or management decisions.

- **Startup: July 2000–April 2002.** This period covered the startup activities and early service strategies. It was characterized by the largest funding levels of any period, by major infrastructure development, and by the highest number of new enrollments. Half of all youth participants were enrolled during this period.
- **Steady-state implementation: May 2002–April 2003.** In this period, generally all projects had all elements of the model operating. Because this period represented a one-year snapshot, it provided a typical picture of YO operations. Intake of new enrollees during this period slowed, but participation rates increased.<sup>12</sup>
- **Project completion: May 2003–April 2005.** During this period, enrollments slowed to an average of about 7,500 per year, but participation rates increased to reach their highest levels since project inception.

For more details about basic implementation and program strategies, see Chapter 2 of the *Process Evaluation Final Report*.<sup>13</sup>

## Relative Success with Elements of the YO Model

The easiest element of the model to implement was *saturation*. Outreach and recruitment were familiar services that most grantees and youth-serving organizations could perform. High penetration was limited mostly by grant resources.

The hardest element of the model to implement was *long-term engagement*. Youths who had no perceived need for services (because they were in long-term placements and doing well or because they had exhausted all the services that appealed to them) disengaged.<sup>14</sup>

A close second in difficulty to long-term engagement was *setting up YO centers*. This was due, in part, to factors beyond project-management control, such as the availability of suitable existing structures to serve as facilities for YO activities. The condition and cost of available facilities in the YO communities largely dictated how this element of the model was implemented. YO centers were more directly reflective of the community context than any other element of the model.

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<sup>11</sup> Bruno, Lee, *Grant Management from Startup to Phase-Out: Guide for New Earmark Grantees*, USDOL/ETA. Washington, D.C., 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Participation levels are the numbers of youth-development services received by participants who were active during the period.

<sup>13</sup> *Youth Opportunity Grant Initiative: Process Evaluation Final Report*, Decision Information Resources, Inc., 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Youths who moved away, were incarcerated, or were otherwise not able to participate are excluded from this discussion.

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YO centers were a decided strength of the model, providing youths with safe, supportive havens; establishing a means for connecting with other youths; and creating community infrastructure. In some sites, YO centers were a source of community pride and generated social capital in the form of community cohesion and unity. Even where the implementation was flawed, YO centers were a positive influence on other services.

In terms of human capital outcomes, the centers gave the projects a physical presence in the community and sufficient space to experiment with improvements in education. Without the availability of accessible space, YO projects would have been held captive by educational institutions that could not or would not alter programs to meet the needs of OSY. Instead, YO centers gave projects the option of making basic education and GED more accessible to youths and easier to supervise. Bringing these important services in-house was a trend that led to more effective education programs for OSY in many cases and improved educational attainments.

A key element of the YO model was a *youth-development framework*, which provided a comprehensive range of youth-development services leading to placement in either long-term unsubsidized jobs, education, or training. YO centers and practices that would engage youths and thus extend their connection with these comprehensive services were expected to play a pivotal role in the program strategies. Each YO project was free to find the particular mix of services and service strategies that would best accomplish long-term placement objectives, thus allowing variations in emphasis, methods, and approaches across the projects.

Many projects had difficulty understanding and implementing the youth-development framework. Some projects viewed the pursuit of youth development to be in competition with helping youths find jobs. The youth-development services selected for youths' individual service strategies (ISS) primarily addressed academic and job readiness needs but were seldom integrated with development goals.

Generally, youths who were unlikely to achieve either a high-school diploma or GED were left in basic education classes until they dropped out or were placed in unskilled jobs. Of all the segments of youths served by YO, OSY who were unable to master GED or high-school requirements benefited the least from this element of the model. However, when project administrators understood the youth-development framework, it made a major impact on youth-serving agencies by demonstrating models for holistic programs that could address multiple aspects of youthful learning and combine a variety of services. Youth-serving agencies saw the value of including recreation and activities that addressed citizenship and leadership development. More than any other element of the model, the youth-development framework influenced community youth-serving agencies.

*Partnerships and leveraging* were not well understood at the onset of the implementation of the project. In hindsight, and as the grant concluded, nearly all of the projects knew the difference between a contractor and a partner. The partners made contributions and realized some intrinsic value from the partnership. Contractors performed services for compensation and were unlikely to be part of a project sustainability plan. Overall, there were many contractors and few partners, so the results were mixed; some programs benefited from leveraged resources and partnerships, and other projects simply provided a funding source for community youth-serving agencies.

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The benefits of partnerships and leveraging were diluted by the availability of the money YO grants provided. YO grantees found it hard to argue for contributions from partners when they had the largest grant in the community. Where financial incentives were used to leverage future resources as a condition of the partnership, this element worked to sustain the project as an ongoing addition to community resources for youths. That element increased resources to the betterment of human capital goals while institutionalizing changes in partner's efforts to serve youths at the end of the grant.

## **YO Model Accomplishments**

The YO model pursued conventional benefits for individual participants in the form of permanent jobs and entry into long-term occupational training or education. Long-term placements, as measures of human capital outcomes, were one indication of successful implementation of the YO model. In addition, YO had an impact on the youth-serving agencies in the target areas and also demonstrated new methods for addressing the needs of disadvantaged youths and new models for programs.

## **Lessons Learned from Implementing the YO Model**

Program managers and administrators who represented grantees and their contractors were interviewed as a group to discuss what they learned from the nearly five years of experience in operating YO. The discussion focused on the following topics (those in italics are features of the YO model):

- Managing the program;
- *Operating YO community centers;*
- *Designing services around a youth-development framework;*
- Facilitating educational attainments
- *Maximizing geographic saturation;*
- Facilitating job placements and quality jobs;
- *Maximizing long-term engagements;* and
- *Creating effective links and partnerships to leverage resources.*

An overwhelming number of lessons learned from implementing the YO Initiative related to problems encountered and suggestions for addressing them. Only a few features were cited as “best practices”<sup>15</sup> that warranted wider adoption.

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<sup>15</sup> The term “best practices” is used here to describe program features that were cited by respondents as being especially promising or exemplary illustrations of approaches that program providers anticipated would yield successful outcomes if adopted more widely.

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**Management of the program** was the difficulty cited most often. The following challenges were mentioned:

- Managing the numerous contractors that were attracted to the large grant subsidies;
- Finding qualified line staff;
- Launching the project in the 3-month time period set by ETA;
- Dealing with leadership issues; and
- Obtaining beneficial technical assistance.

**Operating YO community centers** was the second greatest areas of challenges. Acquiring appropriate physical facilities, linking multiple centers, balancing multiple purpose centers, and gaining support from the community for centers demanded resourcefulness and resulted in no two YO community centers being exactly the same.

**Designing services around a youth-development framework** was also considered very difficult for project implementers. There were few good examples for connecting the wide array of youth-development services to create a workable framework, and the new concept was neither well understood nor easily explained to staff and partners.

**Achieving educational goals** called for new approaches in remediation, especially for OSY. The following “best practices” were cited:

- Training case managers as teacher assistants and keeping them in the classroom to create better individualized services to address low academic or behavior challenges;
- Using cohort classes so that youths of similar academic levels could encourage each other;
- Hiring instructors who had rapport with youths and giving them flexibility to experiment with various teaching approaches; and
- Organizing classrooms around skill levels rather than mixing all skill levels in one class.

The lack of interim goals between the point of initial learning to the point of passing the GED was a major problem for nearly all projects. Intensive case management was commonly viewed as critical to educational attainments for low-performing youths.

**Geographic saturation** was the least difficult goal to achieve. Projects were experienced in conducting outreach and recruitment and found that community awareness of the project and good public relations were keys to success.

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Projects learned that **facilitating job placements** and **quality jobs** called for the following actions:

- Establishing good employer relations;
- Providing good job-readiness training (JRT);
- Screening youths to reduce the risk of failure on a job; and
- Transporting youths to jobs outside their communities.

**Maximizing long-term engagement** of youths was the least successful element of the model. YO youths are very mobile, and even those participants who benefit tend to leave when they do not want or need further services.

**Establishing links** with community organizations, although relatively easy, was a challenge due to the size of the grant, which made it difficult to find partners who would contribute resources to the project. The general consensus is that partners must receive some intrinsic benefit, not just a monetary benefit, for the new **partnership** to hold up.

For more details about lessons learned, please see Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 of the *Youth Opportunity Grant Initiative: Process Evaluation Final Report*.<sup>16</sup>

## Outcomes of the YO Implementation

In addition to good program design, competent program management was a pervasive influence on project outcomes. Projects that were unable to accomplish average levels of program outcomes in one area frequently failed in the others, too, because poor management influenced all aspects of project implementation.

The implementation of the YO projects was documented by conducting site visits to each site at least once and by reviewing the MIS data, which was maintained by ETA and collected by each site. Over the 5-year period, MIS data provided a measure of YO implementation of activities and services and their outcomes.<sup>17</sup> The following sections summarize YO's penetration, programming and participation, and placements.

### Penetration

Although ISY represented a much higher proportion of the eligible youth population in grantees' service areas, participants in the YO projects were nearly evenly split between ISY and OSY. YO sites enrolled 52 percent of eligible OSY and 26 percent of eligible ISY for a blended participation rate of about 34 percent of the eligible youths in their service area. The high enrollment of OSY reflected the priority placed on this population by the ETA and demonstrates

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<sup>16</sup> *Youth Opportunity Grant Initiative: Process Evaluation Final Report*, Decision Information Resources, Inc., 2007.

<sup>17</sup> *Youth Opportunity Grant Initiative: Management Information System Final Report*, Decision Information Resources, Inc., 2007.

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the relative success that YO grantees had, compared with many other youth-serving programs, in being able to attract this population.

The differences in penetration rates across sites is an important factor in evaluating projects because it relates to decisions that program providers made about how to concentrate their resources. It was also useful to learn whether the degree of penetration into a community was correlated with changes in the community-level educational or employment outcomes examined. The evaluation's hypothesis was that the more YO penetrated into the community of eligible youths, the more likely it would be that community-level outcomes would be measurable among the eligible youth population. For each project, there was a high correlation between the dollar allotment per eligible youth and the penetration rate. That is, the higher the YO grant amount was per eligible youth in a project's target area, the higher the percentage was of target area youths enrolled into that YO project (correlation = .81). However, no correlation was found between YO's penetration into the community, which ranged from 20 to 68 percent for the non-Native American sites, and any of the community-wide employment or educational outcomes for youths in YO target areas, even at the highest penetration levels (above 40 percent).

## **Programming and Participation**

For the process evaluation, the final round of in-depth site visits involved 21 urban sites and 4 rural sites. Visits to those sites and the earlier round of site visits to all 36 of the YO sites were used to identify how YO was implemented and note some key variations.

Although the services are the same for both ISY and OSY, service strategies varied to accommodate different goals and different situations. For ISY, who were full-time students at risk of dropping out, the goals were to assist them to remain in school, graduate, and advance to higher education. For OSY, most of whom were not pursuing an education, the goals were to assist them to complete high school or attain a GED, secure long-term training or college, or find employment. Nearly all ISY are high-school students with a few middle-school and college students included. A majority of OSY are high-school dropouts who have neither a GED nor a high-school diploma.

Long-term job placements were the primary goal of nearly all OSY programs, while high-school graduation was the primary goal of ISY. The following youth-development services were considered core activities because they represented the greatest investment of participant time and were central to the program strategy:

- job-readiness training (JRT);
- internship or subsidized employment;
- short-term occupational skills training;
- short-term unsubsidized jobs; and
- GED preparation.

Such core activities were similar for OSY and ISY, with the exception of college preparation, which was a core activity for ISY but not for OSY, even though OSY programs were more likely than ISY programs to have an intervention focused on college entry.

The most common ISY interventions relied on a combination of the following services:

- reading or math remediation;
- job-readiness training; and
- case-management services.

The most common OSY interventions focused mainly on youths without a high-school diploma and included a combination of the following services:

- job-readiness training;
- reading or math remediation;
- GED preparation or alternative high-school classes; and
- internships or short-term jobs.

YO participants commonly participated in at least one employment-related activity, at least one educational activity, and at least one other activity designed to support youths—for example, sports and recreation. Table 2 shows participation patterns across the YO sites.

**Table 2. Participation Patterns across 30 YO Sites, Excluding Native American Sites**

<b>Pattern and Type of Participation of Enrollees</b>	<b>% of Enrolled Youths Participating*</b>
Education, employment and support services	43
Employment and support	19
Employment only	7
Education and support	7
Support only	6
Education and employment	5
Education only	3

Source: Management Information System data reports for non-Native American sites.

\*Some enrolled youths did not participate in any activities; therefore the total is not 100 percent.

The average number of hours of participation across sites was 563 per participant. The median hours of participation varied widely, with some sites having more than 800 and other sites having fewer than 200.

Penetration levels were not correlated with community-level employment and education outcomes. Further, even in high-penetration sites, the median number of hours of youth participation was not correlated with employment or education outcomes in the YO sites.

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## Placements

Data from the program’s MIS indicate that 41 percent of participants received placement (unsubsidized employment, education, or training).<sup>18</sup> Of those, just more than half received unsubsidized employment (60 percent of placed OSY and 45 percent of placed ISY). Sixty percent of ISY were placed in long-term education, and 14 percent entered training. Forty percent of OSY entered long-term education, and 22 percent entered long-term training.

Grantee placement rates ranged from 90 percent to as low as 20 percent.<sup>19</sup> These differences may be results of differences in demographics. For example, older youths were more likely than younger youths to be placed, and high-school graduates were more likely than dropouts to be placed. Youth participation levels were important; youths who had a greater number of hours and more varied service activities were more likely to be placed.

A regression analysis indicated that the following factors were predictive of a higher rate of placement:<sup>20</sup>

- postsecondary school students versus high-school students;
- among OSY, high-school graduates compared to dropouts;
- older youths, until age 18, at which age, the placement rate plateaus;
- Hispanics and Asians. Others were slightly less likely to be placed, compared to Whites; and
- more types of services (education, employment, support)—meaning higher engagement with the program.

The analysis of outcomes from the YO program MIS for 25 sites revealed interesting differences between ISY and OSY. Of the 11,895 ISY who obtained a long-term placement of some kind, 54 percent—nearly 6,500—entered either a community college or a 4-year college. Nearly 5,500, or 46 percent, of placed ISY were placed in unsubsidized employment. By comparison, OSY were much more likely to take full-time jobs than ISY who sought placement. OSY were also less likely to go to college. Only 4,119, or 26 percent, of placed OSY entered any kind of college, while 60 percent of placed OSY were placed in employment. Table 3 shows a comparison of OSY and ISY placements.

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<sup>18</sup> Several alternative definitions of placement are provided in the MIS report. Thirty-eight percent is based on defining placement as a percentage of all participants. Alternative calculations indicate that (1) 82 percent of those placed or completing services were placed and (2) 46 percent of all “exitors” were placed.

<sup>19</sup> *Youth Opportunity Grant Initiative: Management Information System Final Report*, Decision Information Resources, Inc., 2007, p.30.

<sup>20</sup> For a complete description of the regression analysis, see the *Youth Opportunity Grant Initiative: Management Information System Final Report*.

**Table 3. Comparison of Education and Employment Gains to Enrollment Levels for 30 YO Sites, Excluding Native American Sites**

Placements	OSY	%	ISY	%	Total	%
		40,535		39,243		79,778
Achieved HS diploma	2,391	5.9%	11,224	28.6%	13,615	17.1%
Achieved GED	2,343	5.8%	525	1.3%	2,868	3.6%
College placements	4,760	11.7%	7,609	19.4%	12,369	15.5%
Long-term occupational training placements	4,043	10.0%	2,101	5.4%	6,144	7.7%
Total training and education placements	8,803	21.7%	9,710	24.7%	18,513	23.2%
Job placements	10,935	27.0%	6,519	16.6%	17,454	21.9%
All long-term placements	18,239	45.0%	14,108	36.0%	32,347	40.5%

Source: MIS data reports for non-Native American sites.

The evaluation examined whether the placement rates in high-penetration (above 40 percent) sites were correlated with the employment and education outcomes in the community served by YO. Even in high-penetration sites, placement rates of the YO programs were uncorrelated with educational or employment changes between the two youth surveys.

In the process analysis, respondents were asked to comment on factors that helped keep youths actively participating or facilitated youths' attainment of a long-term placement. The responses focused on the following topics:

- How services were provided;
- Types of services or activities;
- Relationship with a caring adult;
- Positive reinforcements;
- Self motivation; and
- Peer support or influence.

For more details about these responses, see Chapter 3 of the *Youth Opportunity Grant Initiative: Process Evaluation Final Report*.

Due to the small number of observations, it is difficult to generalize about factors that influence education, training placements, and job placement rates; however, comparisons of high- and low-performing projects revealed differences that suggested elements of good program design:

- Unemployment rates and transportation barriers were major factors in whether projects would place youths in jobs, and those factors caused more successful projects to focus on educational attainments to help youths. By designing programs that fit the characteristics of youths as well as the labor market, projects were able to make significant gains in education or employment benefits for youths, which did not occur when projects ignored these factors.

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- Although the types of youth-development services that formed a program's core activities were factors in job-placement rates, they were less critical to long-term education and training placements. A more critical consideration in both types of placements is the quality of education and training methods and the level of resources expended, which was not systematically evaluated as an aspect of project implementation.
  - Intensive case management services were an essential element to good program design. Such services called for case managers with special training and skills.
  - The financial needs of OSY frequently precluded long-term education and training placements and were a major factor in the length of stay for OSY. ISY were more likely candidates for long-term education and training placements.

## **Changes in Employment and Educational Outcomes of YO Communities over Time**

The analysis indicated that changes in education and employment outcomes for youths in YO communities were not correlated with outcomes of the YO program (penetration, participation, or placement levels). However, many significant changes did occur over time among youths in the YO target areas:

- Overall, the number of OSY declined by about 10.4 percent across the urban and rural sites, while the number of ISY increased by more than 15 percent. As a result, the estimated number of youths in the YO target areas increased by approximately 6.5 percent between the YO surveys conducted in 2001 and 2004, representing about 10,000 additional youths eligible to be served. However, the youth population declined in 6 of the 29 non-Native American sites.
- Overall, the evaluation found a higher growth in the younger age ranges in the YO target areas. This is consistent with the finding that the number of ISY in the YO communities increased, while the number of OSY declined.
- Community-level employment outcomes for ISY and OSY in the YO target areas declined considerably between the two surveys conducted in 2001 and 2004. The labor-force participation rates remained relatively unchanged; however, the employment rate declined; unemployment increased; and average hourly wages, hours worked, and percentage of youths working full-time decreased.
- Examination of changes in employment rates for OSY between the two points in time in YO target areas shows considerable site variation despite an overall decline, with OSY in some YO areas actually experiencing a significant increase in employment rates.
- No significant change was found for the educational attainment or school enrollment for ISY. However, OSY improved on education-related dimensions: the percent who graduated from high school or attended some college increased, the percent who were high-school dropouts or had neither a diploma nor GED decreased, and the percent with a high-school diploma

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significantly increased. For individual YO target areas, youths showed a wide site-level variation in education outcomes over time.

From these analyses, it appears that the lower employment outcomes and somewhat more favorable education-related outcomes in the YO communities between the 2001 and 2004 surveys could have been a function of the changing composition of the population in those areas and of the general declining economic conditions during that period. With an increase in the percentage of younger ISY and a decline in the proportion of older OSY in those areas, the youths at follow-up may have had different priorities and needs—for example, a stronger interest in combining employment with educational pursuits than in seeking full-time employment only.

## **Impacts of the YO Program**

The real test of what impact the YO program has had in these communities was to compare the employment and educational outcomes for youths in YO communities with those from similar non-YO areas. The study found that, when compared to youths living in non-YO communities and census tracts, the youths in the YO target areas had several positive employment and education-related outcomes—overall and for specific subgroups.<sup>21</sup> These impacts on outcomes are described as the “YO effect.” Two comparison-group approaches were used, which identified different significant impacts (or YO effects); however, in one instance, significant effects were found in opposite directions (that is, one approach indicated a significantly positive impact on the female employment rate, while the other approach indicated a significantly negative one).

### **Effects on Employment**

The following YO effects on employment were found to be significant:

- YO increased the labor-force participation rate overall and specifically for teens (ages 16 to 19), women, native-born residents, Blacks, and ISY. YO also increased the employment rate among Blacks, teens, OSY, and native-born youths and had a positive effect on the hourly wages of women and teens.
- On the other hand, YO reduced full-time employment among the employed overall and for many subgroups, most notably ISY and OSY, females, older youths, and whites. YO also appeared to decrease significantly the full-time employment rate for ISY.

### **Effects on Education-Related Outcomes**

The significant YO effects on education-related outcomes appear more substantial than the employment-related effects:

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<sup>21</sup> *Youth Opportunity Grant Initiative: Impact and Synthesis Report*, Decision Information Resources, Inc., 2007.

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- YO had a positive impact overall on increasing the percentage of the youths with at least an eleventh-grade education, reducing the percentage of youths who were not in school, and increasing the percentage in secondary school.
  - For several subgroups, the YO effect on educational outcomes was primarily positive: it decreased the number of 16- to 18-year-olds not in school and increased the percentage of 19-year-olds who were in secondary school. YO significantly increased the percentage of Hispanics enrolled in secondary school and decreased the percentage of Hispanic high-school graduates not in college. YO had a positive effect on school enrollment for foreign-born youths—reducing high-school dropouts and increasing their postsecondary enrollment.
  - YO also had a significantly positive effect on reducing the number of OSY and out-of-work (disconnected) youths overall and for males and females, 20- to 21-year-olds, Blacks, Hispanics, native-born youths, and foreign-born youths.
  - The only negative education-related YO effect was that it decreased the percentage of 16- to 18-year-olds and Hispanics who were high-school graduates in college. This result for Hispanics is somewhat puzzling because the study also found that YO decreased the percentage of Hispanic high-school graduates who were not in college.

The significant impacts identified through this analysis must be interpreted cautiously, given certain limitations of the analysis and, more importantly, several notable weaknesses of the approach used. Impacts were identified on the basis of findings from two different comparison-group methods, each using a somewhat different pool of YO sites. On one hand, using these two methods may be seen as a possible strength because they offer a “second opinion” of findings. However, using two methods might be a weakness because different data sources were used for the treatment and comparison groups within each approach.<sup>22</sup> The comparison groups and treatment groups were derived from different labor markets. These aspects of the methods suggest that the findings should be interpreted and used with caution. However, despite these limitations and inherent weaknesses of the methods used, YO appears to have made a positive difference, especially in several educational outcomes, for youths in many YO communities. The following section reports on what the people who worked and lived in the YO communities thought about differences that the YO program made.

## **Did YO Make a Difference in the Communities Where It Was Implemented and for the Youths Who Participated?**

For the process and ethnographic components of the evaluation, the study asked program providers and partners, community residents and youths about what difference, if any, they believe the YO program made in the community. A variety of respondents perceived YO as successful in helping to address gaps in supportive services and to support skill development among participating youths. Further, many residents indicated that YO case managers served as positive role models for youths.

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<sup>22</sup> See the description of methodologies discussed in Appendix 1 in *Youth Opportunity Grant Initiative: Impact and Synthesis Report, Appendixes 1–8*, Decision Information Resources, Inc., 2007.

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However, according to the perceptions of respondents, YO did not bring new employers to the YO communities or surrounding areas. The rise in unemployment during the time YO was operating meant that youths were increasingly in competition with adults for low-paying and low-skilled jobs. The 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.

However, as documented in the ethnographic report,<sup>23</sup> respondents believed that YO benefited its youth participants by providing:

- a safe space;
- quality youth and adult relationships;
- enhanced training and education services; and
- opportunities to be productive.

According to experiences reported by project staff and partners in conjunction with analysis of sites with higher and lower levels of placements, the following revealing factors emerged:

- Unemployment rates and transportation barriers were major factors in whether projects would place youths in jobs, and those factors caused more successful projects to focus on educational attainments to help youths. By designing programs that fit the characteristics of youths as well as the labor market, projects were able to make significant gains in education or employment benefits for youths, which did not occur when projects ignored these factors.
- Although the types of youth-development services that form a program's core activities are factors in job-placement rates, they are less critical to long-term education and training placements. More critical considerations in both types of placements are the quality of education and training methods and the level of resources expended, which were not systematically evaluated as aspects of project implementation.
- Intensive case management is an essential element of good program design. Such service calls for case managers with special training and skills.
- The financial needs of OSY frequently preclude long-term education and training placements and are a major factor in the length of stay for OSY. ISY are more likely candidates for long-term education and training placements.

In addition to good program design, competent program management was a pervasive influence on project outcomes. Projects that were unable to accomplish average levels of program outcomes in one area frequently failed in the others, too, because poor management influenced all aspects of the program.

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<sup>23</sup> *Youth Opportunity Grant Initiative: Ethnographic Evaluation Final Report*, Decision Information Resources, Inc., 2005.

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## Conclusion

Overall, YO provided substantive services to numerous at-risk youths while also expanding organizational capacity and sensitivity to youths' needs. It demonstrated new and better models of service delivery, and it trained managers and line staff to function at a greatly improved level of skill and professionalism. In some communities, these benefits will continue as sustainable elements of the YO Initiative.

The process evaluation of the YO Initiative documented that, although most projects were able to implement the model after a time, the process was challenging and inefficient. Some difficulties in implementation were due to the sheer size and scope of the grant and to a compressed start-up period that exacerbated weaknesses in grantee management and infrastructure. In retrospect, either a start-up period of one year that allowed more time for staff training and infrastructure development or better screening of potential grantees would have led to better quality of services to youths and greater cost efficiencies.

The YO model did not address two major barriers to successful outcomes for OSY—the lack of financial resources to sustain youths during a long-term and intensive engagement and educational programs that address the learning deficits typical of high-school dropouts. A greater emphasis on models that rely on project-based or contextual learning and are linked with immediate employment would have addressed both flaws in the model.

The community saturation feature of the YO model meant that the program was intended to concentrate a large amount of resources in selected communities and to reach out to as many youths in the targeted areas as possible. Unfortunately, in some sites, this approach overwhelmed the service-delivery system with youths who were inappropriate candidates for services. Further, there were simply not enough grant resources to provide comprehensive services to all eligible youths.

Although the evaluation reported challenges in aspects of YO program implementation, adults and youths in the YO communities attributed the program with providing:

- a safe space for young people;
- quality youth and adult relationships;
- enhanced training and education services; and
- opportunities to be productive.

Although persons interviewed in the process and ethnographic portions of the study described YO as not increasing the employment opportunities in most sites, the contributions the program made to these under-resourced communities did not go unnoticed and may have been important in changing the life trajectory of substantial numbers of youths in many of those communities.

The YO grant and evaluation experience has implications for future programming and research. The findings suggest that positive community-level impacts may indeed be achievable for segments of communities such as those served by YO, especially with regard to educational outcomes that other research has shown to be important for future long-term employment

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success. However, the exact way in which these outcomes were achieved through the work of YO grants is still not fully understood, because levels of penetration into the eligible youth population, intensity of youth participation, or even placement rates of the YO program itself do not appear to be directly correlated with community outcomes.

The YO program made a positive difference by establishing community partnerships for serving youths, heightening community awareness about youth development and competencies, and working with other institutions. YO's presence in school settings, with workforce investment organizations, and with other education and training providers in the communities may have helped to make changes in ways that increased the accessibility of those resources and increased their success. YO's influence was especially felt in engaging youths, especially subgroups who were relatively more disconnected like Blacks and younger youths in employment settings and Hispanics and foreign-born youths in educational settings. The pathways through which the YO program was able to achieve these outcomes still must be better understood. But the apparent positive difference that YO made in some of the communities where it operated gives reason to refine further our understanding and programming for serving and ensuring the success of youths—a critical element of the nation's human capital.