

*Executive Summary*

# becoming adults

ONE-YEAR IMPACT  
FINDINGS FROM THE  
YOUTH VILLAGES  
TRANSITIONAL LIVING  
EVALUATION

Erin Jacobs Valentine  
Melanie Skemer  
Mark E. Courtney

May 2015

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE  
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY





## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Becoming Adults**

#### **One-Year Impact Findings from the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation**

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**May 2015**



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The photographs on the cover of this report were furnished by the Youth Villages Communication Department.

## Overview

Young adults with histories of foster care or juvenile justice custody experience poor outcomes across a number of domains, on average, relative to their peers. While government funding for services targeting these groups of young people has increased in recent years, research on the effectiveness of such services is limited, and few of the programs that have been rigorously tested have been found to improve outcomes.

The Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation is testing whether the Transitional Living program, operated by the social service organization Youth Villages, makes a difference in the lives of young people with histories of foster care or juvenile justice custody. The program, which was renamed “YVLifeSet” in April 2015, is intended to help these young people make a successful transition to adulthood by providing intensive, individualized, and clinically focused case management, support, and counseling.

The evaluation uses a rigorous random assignment design and is set in Tennessee, where Youth Villages operates its largest Transitional Living program. From October 2010 to October 2012, more than 1,300 young people were assigned, at random, to either a program group, which was offered the Transitional Living program’s services, or to a control group, which was not offered those services. Using survey and administrative data, the evaluation team is measuring outcomes for both groups over time to assess whether Transitional Living services led to better outcomes for program group youth compared with the control group’s outcomes.

This is the second major report in the evaluation. An earlier report provides a detailed description of the Transitional Living program model and assesses its implementation. This second report assesses whether the program affected key outcomes during the first year after young people enrolled in the study. It shows that *the Transitional Living program improved outcomes in three of the six domains that it was designed to affect*. The program boosted earnings, increased housing stability and economic well-being, and improved some outcomes related to health and safety. However, it did not improve outcomes in the areas of education, social support, or criminal involvement.

These results indicate that the Transitional Living program can improve multiple outcomes for young adults with histories of foster care or juvenile justice custody, a notable finding given the paucity of documented positive effects for programs that serve these populations. While the individual effects of the program were modest, their breadth across several domains is consistent with the highly individualized nature of the program model, which is designed to address the wide variety of needs and circumstances of the young people it serves. These findings set the stage for additional analysis using a second year of follow-up data and an assessment of the program’s benefits relative to its costs. Those results will be available in 2016.



## Preface

Young people who have spent time in foster care or juvenile justice custody often encounter a number of difficulties as they enter adulthood. While others their age frequently get help from their parents well into their twenties, youth who are leaving the custody of the state tend to have relatively little financial or social support. Moreover, many of them suffer from the lingering effects of childhood trauma and the inadequacies of the foster care or juvenile justice system. Given such circumstances, it is not surprising that these young people face troubling outcomes as adults in several areas.

The evaluation that is described in this report shows that the Transitional Living program — now known as “YVLifeSet” — that is run by Youth Villages can make positive differences in the lives of young adults who were in foster care or juvenile justice custody as teenagers. Although the program did not improve all of the outcomes that were measured, the young people who were offered its services were more likely to work and had higher earnings, experienced less homelessness and material hardship, and had fewer mental health problems compared with those who were not offered the program’s services. While the improvements are modest, they are very meaningful.

These findings stand out because few other programs for this population have been shown to be effective. The research evidence on programs designed to improve outcomes for these youth shows that it is extremely difficult to make a positive impact on their lives. While some programs have been shown to affect one area, it is rare when a program improves young people’s well-being across a wide range of outcomes.

The national policy landscape in this area is shifting. In particular, the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 changed foster care policy by offering funding to states to extend foster care through age 21 and to expand independent living services, which are intended to help these individuals get on their feet when they leave foster care. In contrast, young people who are leaving juvenile justice custody have less access to comparable programs, but an increasing interest in “reentry” services for former inmates of prisons and jails has led to some funding for services designed to help such youth.

It is imperative that researchers continue to study the Transitional Living program and other services for young people who lack strong family supports and life skills. Additional follow-up on the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation sample will be important for understanding whether the program leads to lasting improvements in the lives of these young men and women. Further, because foster care policies and contextual factors vary from state to state, extending this research beyond Tennessee is critical.

Gordon L. Berlin  
President, MDRC





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We are tremendously grateful to several individuals on the staff at Youth Villages, including Sarah Hurley, Melanie Manns, Tim Goldsmith, Kristin Landers, and Pat Lawler, with whom we enjoyed a productive collaboration throughout this project. Sarah Hurley, Tim Goldsmith, and Kristin Landers carefully reviewed earlier drafts of the report and provided insightful feedback. Sarah Hurley also worked closely with MDRC to conceptualize and launch the evaluation, facilitate our communication with staff at Youth Villages and partner agencies, provide program participation data, and provide feedback at every stage of the research, among many other efforts that made this evaluation possible. Kristin Landers met with MDRC staff to help us understand the Transitional Living model and interpret program data and procedures. Melanie Manns monitored study enrollment, tracked participant samples, organized study paperwork for MDRC, and generally kept track of research activities onsite.

Staff at NORC at the University of Chicago made the fielding of the one-year follow-up survey a great success. Their hard work and dedication to this project resulted in an unusually high response rate, which can be difficult to accomplish when surveying young people who may be changing residences frequently. At NORC, Sarah Hughes and Shannon Nelson oversaw and managed the survey effort. Angela Banner, whose unparalleled hard work and dedication to this project were crucial to making it a success, was the field manager. The survey interviewers included Joan Chaplin, Juanita Fancher, Mary McKinney, and Mary Runions. Taifoor Beg, Mike Buha, Chad Kiewiet de Jonge, Moazzam Lokhandwala, and Lili Perez provided additional project support. Without the hard work of these individuals, we would not have had follow-up data to analyze.

We could not have learned about the implementation of the Transitional Living program without the help of many other staff at Youth Villages, including Transitional Living specialists, clinical consultants, clinical supervisors, regional managers, regional supervisors, regional directors, and educational/vocational coordinators. We are also grateful to the family service workers and independent living specialists from the Tennessee Department of Children's Services (DCS) and representatives from other entities working with the young people who were in foster care and juvenile justice custody in Tennessee, who took the time to meet with us. We would also like to thank Dave Aguzzi and Dhivya Ben of DCS, who provided us with data on youths' state custody histories and receipt of extended foster care/post-custody services.

At MDRC, John Martinez developed this project from the beginning and was the project director throughout. Sara Muller-Ravett and Joseph Broadus made sure random assignment and onsite operations went smoothly. John Martinez, Dan Bloom, Christopher Boland, Virginia Knox, Michelle Manno, Chuck Michalopoulos, and Alice Tufel provided thoughtful comments on several drafts of this report. Michelle Manno and Julianna Alson put a lot of time into this project and conducted the implementation research. Brit Henderson processed the program participation and postsecondary education data used in the report. Ron Bass and JoAnna Hunter helped us to work with NORC staff on the fielding of the survey. Janae Bonsu, Arielle Sherman, and Nicole Alexander coordinated the production of the report. Alice Tufel edited the report, and Stephanie Cowell prepared it for publication.

We are especially grateful to the young people who participated in the study. They enthusiastically participated in surveys, interviews, and focus groups, and allowed us to learn from their experiences. Many of the study participants were excited to help provide knowledge that could lead to better services for other young people in similar situations. We hope that this report will fulfill that wish.

The Authors

## Executive Summary

Young adults with histories of foster care and juvenile justice custody often face difficulties making a successful transition to independent adulthood. Their outcomes across a number of domains are poor, on average, relative to their peers.<sup>1</sup> While government funding for services targeting these groups of young people has increased, the existing body of research on the effectiveness of those services is thin. Further, few of the programs that have been rigorously tested have been found to improve outcomes.

In order to advance knowledge in this area, MDRC launched an evaluation of the Transitional Living program — now known as “YVLifeset” — which is operated by the social service organization Youth Villages.<sup>2</sup> The Transitional Living program, which is one example of an “independent living” program for young adults in need, is intended to help youth make the transition to adulthood by providing intensive, individualized, and clinically focused case management, support, and counseling. The evaluation is using a rigorous random assignment design, in which study sample members were assigned at random to either a program group that was offered the Transitional Living program services or to a control group that was not offered those services. The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation are funding the evaluation, which is being led by MDRC along with Mark Courtney of the University of Chicago.

This is the second major report in the evaluation. An earlier report provides a detailed description of the Transitional Living program model and assesses its implementation.<sup>3</sup> This second report assesses the differences in the receipt of services by program group members and control group members, and presents the estimated, one-year impacts of the Transitional Living program on youths’ outcomes in six key domains: education, employment and earnings, housing stability and economic well-being, social support, health and safety, and criminal involvement.

As discussed further below, *the Transitional Living program led to statistically significant impacts on a range of outcomes in three of six domains that the program was designed to*

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<sup>1</sup>Mark E. Courtney, Amy Dworsky, Gretchen Ruth Cusick, Judy Havlicek, Alfred Perez, and Tom Keller, *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 21* (Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2007).

<sup>2</sup>As of April 2015, the Transitional Living program was renamed “YVLifeSet.” Because the name did not change until after the study period had ended, this report refers to the program as “Transitional Living.”

<sup>3</sup>Michelle Manno, Erin Jacobs, Julianna Alson, and Melanie Skemer, *Moving Into Adulthood: Implementation Findings from the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation* (New York: MDRC, 2014).

affect.<sup>4</sup> The program boosted earnings, increased housing stability and economic well-being, and improved some of the primary outcomes related to health and safety for these young people. However, it did not significantly improve outcomes in the areas of education, social support, or criminal involvement.

## Background

About 70,000 young people between 14 and 20 years of age leave the foster care system in the United States each year.<sup>5</sup> Roughly one-third of those individuals exit foster care because they age out of the system upon reaching adulthood, often at the age of 18. The juvenile justice system also extends a broad reach; nearly 100,000 youths leave juvenile justice facilities each year.<sup>6</sup> For young people who are leaving these systems, the transition to adulthood can be particularly difficult, as they may have few resources and little or no state or family support. Not surprisingly, youth who have been in foster care or juvenile justice custody have, on average, poor outcomes in adulthood across a number of domains, relative to their peers.<sup>7</sup>

Recent federal legislation has dramatically increased the availability of services for youth who are aging out of foster care or leaving juvenile justice custody. The John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 gave states more funding to support independent living services, room and board, and Medicaid for foster youth as they make the transition to adulthood. The subsequent Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 provided funding for states to extend foster care through age 21 for most youth and to further expand independent living services. To date, about one-third of the 50 states have used this funding to extend foster care past age 18.<sup>8</sup>

Services for youth who are leaving juvenile justice placements are not as consistently supported, though some of these youth are eligible for services supported by the Chafee and Fostering Connections acts. In addition, a general focus on “reentry” services for adults leaving

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<sup>4</sup>Statistically significant impacts are effects that can be attributed with a high degree of confidence to the program rather than to chance alone.

<sup>5</sup>This number refers to fiscal year 2013 (October 1, 2012, through September 30, 2013). See U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2013 Estimates as of July 2014* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau, 2014).

<sup>6</sup>Howard N. Snyder, “An Empirical Portrait of the Youth Reentry Population,” *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* 2, 1: 39-55 (2004).

<sup>7</sup>Courtney et al. (2007).

<sup>8</sup>National Resource Center for Youth Development, “State by State Facts,” online publication (2015), at [www.nrcyd.ou.edu/state-pages](http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/state-pages).

prison and jail has led to federal funding to serve youth with a juvenile justice history. For example, the Second Chance Act provides funds to government agencies and nonprofit organizations to offer employment assistance, substance abuse treatment, housing assistance, and other services to reduce criminal recidivism. Additionally, many states, cities, and counties offer “aftercare” and reentry services for youth who are exiting juvenile facilities.

Despite the growth of independent living services, the research evidence on the effectiveness of these programs is limited. Only four large random assignment evaluations have tested independent living programs for youth with a history of foster care, and among those, three did not find any statistically significant impacts.<sup>9</sup> Rigorous evaluations of programs for juvenile justice youth have been more common. Cognitive behavioral therapy programs in particular are supported by a fairly strong research base, which has found these programs to be effective in reducing problem behaviors like criminal recidivism and substance abuse.<sup>10</sup> However, previous studies have placed little emphasis on measuring impacts on other important outcomes, such as employment, education, and housing.

## **The Transitional Living Program**

The Transitional Living program is operated by Youth Villages, a nonprofit social service organization based in Memphis, Tennessee, which has served emotionally and behaviorally troubled boys and girls of all ages since 1986. The organization operates a variety of residential and community-based programs serving more than 20,000 young people each year in 12 states and the District of Columbia. Within each program, staff members follow a common set of core principles and use a common treatment manual, which contains all the practices that the organization considers to be acceptable and informed by evidence.

In the Transitional Living program, services are expected to last nine months for most youth who successfully complete the program. Transitional Living starts with assessments and the development of an individualized treatment plan that takes into account the particular needs and goals of each young person. Then, the bulk of the services are provided during hour-long Transitional Living sessions with a case manager, called a “TL Specialist,” and are scheduled once a week. Each TL Specialist typically serves only eight youth at a time.

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<sup>9</sup>Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, “Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs (Chafee Independent Living Evaluation Project), 2001-2010” (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Mark W. Lipsey, Nana A. Landenberger, and Sandra J. Wilson, “Effects of Cognitive-Behavioral Programs for Criminal Offenders,” *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 6 (2007): 27; Gilbert J. Botvin, Eli Baker, Anne D. Filazzola, and Elizabeth M. Botvin, “A Cognitive Behavioral Approach to Substance Abuse Prevention: One Year Follow-Up,” *Addictive Behaviors* 15, 1 (1990): 47-63.

The topics covered and the activities that take place during Transitional Living sessions vary depending on the needs and goals of each youth, but TL Specialists are expected to use methods that are included in the treatment manual. These methods fall into three categories: evidence-informed tools, counseling, and action-oriented activities. Evidence-informed tools include specific curricula, such as “Preparing Adolescents for Young Adulthood,” which cover topics like money management and job-seeking skills, as well as practices such as the “Adolescent Community Reinforcement Approach,” which is a behavioral treatment for alcohol and other substance abuse. A second strategy involves counseling, in which the participant and TL Specialist talk about particular issues in the participant’s life from both the past and the present. Finally, TL Specialists use action-oriented activities, such as taking a participant to a bank to open an account or to a community college to gather information about classes.

Aside from direct support that the TL Specialist provides during the regular sessions with youth, Transitional Living offers other resources to participating youth. Youth who are identified as having a history of trauma can undergo trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, a 12- to 20-week course of therapy provided by specially trained Youth Villages staff. TL Specialists may also refer youth to other services in the community, such as General Educational Development (GED) classes or housing services. In addition, TL Specialists have access to some flexible funds to support youth who need money for expenses such as purchasing appropriate clothing for interviews or an apartment application fee. Youth are also encouraged to participate in monthly group social and learning activities with other youth in the Transitional Living program. These group activities are required by a contract that Youth Villages has with the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services (DCS). Finally, educational/vocational coordinators are available to work with youth who require additional support when seeking postsecondary education, vocational training, or employment opportunities.

## **The Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation**

The Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation is assessing the impacts of the Transitional Living program. Although the program operates in six states, the evaluation is only testing the program that is operating across the state of Tennessee. During the evaluation period, the Tennessee program was funded partly by Youth Villages’ contract with DCS and partly by philanthropic support. The study sample includes youth ages 18 to 24 who were living across the state of Tennessee and had left foster care or juvenile justice custody as teenagers or were aging out at 18. The evaluation employs a rigorous random assignment design. Between October 2010 and October 2012, 1,322 young people were assigned at random to one of two groups:

- **The program group**, whose members were offered Transitional Living program services, including intensive case management, support, and counseling

- **The control group**, whose members were not offered Transitional Living program services, but were provided with a list of other social service resources that were available in the community<sup>11</sup>

By measuring outcomes for both the program and control groups over time, the research team can assess whether Transitional Living services led to better outcomes for program group youth than those experienced by the control group. Owing to the random assignment design, the research groups were comparable on both measured and unmeasured characteristics when the study began. Therefore, statistically significant differences in outcomes that emerge between the two groups can be attributed with some confidence to the offer of Transitional Living services to the program group. These differences in outcomes are considered “impacts” or “effects” of the Transitional Living program.

The primary source of outcome data is a survey that was fielded to all sample members by NORC at the University of Chicago. The survey was fielded one year after study entry for each youth, with a response rate of 84.3 percent. Outcomes in six key domains were covered: education, employment and earnings, housing stability and economic well-being, social support, health and safety, and criminal involvement. In addition, the evaluation team collected administrative data on postsecondary enrollment from the National Student Clearinghouse.

Similar to other youth with histories of foster care or juvenile justice custody, the youth who enrolled in the study averaged relatively low levels of educational attainment, employment, and social support at study entry, while experiencing relatively high rates of involvement with the criminal justice system and housing instability. Youth in the study are diverse in terms of gender and race, with over 50 percent of the sample being white/non-Hispanic, while a substantial minority are black/non-Hispanic (37 percent). Study sample members come from varied custody backgrounds, and their first custody placement — often of many — tended to occur in their teens. Sixty-one percent of the sample reported having been in custody because they had been neglected or abused (foster care), while 52 percent indicated that they had been in custody for delinquency (juvenile justice). Some youth had experienced both types of custody.

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<sup>11</sup>While the program group could access other services in the community if they wished, they were not provided with the list of resources that was given to the control group.

## **Program Implementation and Service Receipt Differences Between the Two Research Groups**

In order to help interpret results regarding the impacts of the Transitional Living program, the research team studied the strength of the program's implementation and the dosage (level and intensity) of program services that program group members received.

- **The Transitional Living program was implemented largely in accordance with the program model, and a substantial portion of program group members received services at the expected dosage of program services.**

Though the Transitional Living program had considerable structure, the TL Specialists had a great deal of flexibility to adapt services based on the individual needs of the youth on their caseloads. Youth received support across any number of issues, including employment, housing, education, life skills, and mental health. TL Specialists chose the strategies used in the Transitional Living sessions to capitalize on the strengths of each participant. In general, strategies fell within the three broad categories, discussed above, that TL Specialists were expected to use: evidence-informed tools, counseling, and action-oriented activities.

A substantial portion of the program group received services at the expected dosage of the Transitional Living program model. About two-thirds participated in program services for at least five months, and about half participated for at least nine months, the expected average length of services for youth who successfully complete the program. Nearly all program group members participated in at least one program activity, and 95 percent participated in at least one Transitional Living session. While they were involved in the program, youth participated in nearly one session per week, averaging over an hour per session. In total, program group members averaged about 26 sessions with their TL Specialists during the 12 months after random assignment. During these sessions, TL Specialists and participants covered a wide range of issues, with education, employment, and housing discussed most often.

While control group members could not access Transitional Living services, they were able to access other services that were available in the community, including extended foster care services provided by the state to those who were eligible. Therefore, the research team assessed the extent to which the offer of the Transitional Living program increased the services received by the program group over and above what the control group received.

- **There were large, statistically significant differences between the program and control groups in the dosage of the services they received.**

The program group was more likely than the control group to have had a case manager or social worker (75 percent compared with 44 percent), who could be a TL Specialist, and to



have met with that person at least once per week (60 percent compared with 20 percent). They were also more likely to have received help, from any source, with issues related to education, employment, finances, housing, and daily living. These differences ranged from 13 to 22 percentage points, depending on the category. However, while there was a clear difference in the level of services received, it is also notable that many control group members accessed case management and other services.

## **Impacts of the Transitional Living Program**

Before conducting the impact analysis, the research team specified primary outcomes, discussed below, within each of the six domains, as well as secondary outcomes. Conclusions about the effectiveness of the Transitional Living program in each domain hinge on the impact estimates for these primary outcomes. Table ES.1 shows the results for the three domains in which the program had statistically significant impacts on primary outcomes: employment and earnings, housing stability and economic well-being, and health and safety.

- **Transitional Living boosted earnings, increased housing stability and economic well-being, and improved some of the primary outcomes related to health and safety.**

As the first panel of Table ES.1 shows, the program led to a statistically significant increase of over \$600 in earnings in the year before the survey interview, the primary outcome in the employment and earnings domain. This difference was driven, at least in part, by an increase in the percentage of youth who were employed, particularly in part-time work, during the one-year follow-up period (not shown in table).

Transitional Living also led to statistically significant reductions in housing instability and economic hardship. Housing instability was measured using a scale that is calculated as the number of indicators of housing instability that a youth experienced in the year before the survey interview out of four that the survey mentioned. Program group members experienced significantly fewer types of housing instability, driven by reductions in homelessness and “couch surfing,” or staying temporarily in the homes of others (not shown in table). The second primary outcome in this domain was the economic hardship scale, which is calculated as the number of indicators of economic hardship that a youth experienced in the year before the survey interview out of five that the survey specified. Transitional Living also significantly reduced economic hardship, driven by decreases in the percentage of youth who did not have necessary clothing or shoes and the percentage of youth who had delayed paying a bill in order to buy food (not shown in table).

**The Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation**

**Table ES.1**

**One-Year Impacts on Employment and Earnings, Housing Stability and Economic Well-Being, and Health and Safety**

Primary Outcome, by Domain	Program Group	Control Group	Difference (Impact)	Effect Size	P-Value
<b><u>Employment and earnings (\$)</u></b>					
Earnings from formal work <sup>a</sup>	4,099	3,488	611 **	0.12	0.043
<b><u>Housing stability and economic well-being</u></b>					
Score on housing instability scale <sup>b</sup>	1.0	1.2	-0.2 ***	-0.16	0.005
Score on economic hardship scale <sup>c</sup>	1.3	1.5	-0.2 **	-0.13	0.022
<b><u>Health and safety</u></b>					
Score on mental health problems scale <sup>d</sup>	9.8	11.2	-1.4 **	-0.13	0.025
Substance use					
Days of binge drinking in the past month	0.7	0.9	-0.2	-0.07	0.197
Used illegal drugs <sup>e</sup> (%)	31.4	32.8	-1.4	-0.03	0.622
Used a condom during last sexual encounter (%)					
Yes	49.5	47.7	1.8	0.04	0.360
No	36.6	40.3	-3.7	-0.08	
Not sexually active	13.9	12.0	1.9	0.06	
Was robbed or assaulted <sup>f</sup> (%)	24.4	24.2	0.2	0.01	0.929
Partner violence (%)					
In a violent relationship <sup>g</sup>	15.1	21.5	-6.4	-0.16	0.021
In a nonviolent relationship	38.6	36.3	2.3	0.05	
Not in a relationship	46.3	42.2	4.1	0.08	
<b>Sample size (total = 1,114)</b>					
	659	455			

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on responses to the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation 12-Month Survey.

NOTES: Results in this table are regression-adjusted, controlling for pre-random assignment characteristics.

The effect size is calculated by dividing the impact of the program (difference between program and control groups) by the observed variation for that outcome within the control group (the control group standard deviation).

(continued)

### Table ES.1 (continued)

Statistical significance levels are indicated as follows: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

<sup>a</sup>This self-reported measure includes only earnings from formal employment and does not include overtime pay, tips, commissions, bonuses, or other types of pay, nor does it include earnings from informal work. For the purposes of this measure, formal employment is defined as ongoing employment with a particular employer, such as working at a restaurant or supermarket. Informal work is defined as independent work for several people, with no specific supervisor, such as babysitting and mowing lawns.

<sup>b</sup>The housing instability scale is the sum of responses to four survey questions that ask whether a sample member experienced homelessness, couch-surfed, was unable to pay rent, or lost housing due to inability to pay rent. The scale ranges from 0 to 4.

<sup>c</sup>The economic hardship scale is the sum of responses to five survey questions that ask whether a sample member was unable to afford clothing or shoes, unable to pay a utility bill, had gas or electricity shut off due to inability to pay, had phone service shut off due to inability to pay, or put off paying a bill in order to have money for food. The scale ranges from 0 to 5.

<sup>d</sup>The mental health problems scale is based on responses to the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales, known as “DASS 21.” The scale is calculated using 21 questions that ask how often a person has felt a particular way, ranging from “none of the time” (coded as 0) to “most of the time” (coded as 3). The scale is a sum, ranging from 0 to 63, of the values from those 21 questions.

<sup>e</sup>This measure is based on sample members’ response to three questions that ask about their use of marijuana, “other illegal drugs,” or prescription drugs without the permission of a doctor.

<sup>f</sup>“Assaulted” is defined as attacked, beaten, or sexually victimized.

<sup>g</sup>A “violent relationship” is defined as one in which either partner has ever hit, kicked, shoved, or thrown something potentially harmful at the other, or forced the other to have unwanted sexual relations.

The health and safety results were mixed, as Transitional Living significantly improved two of the five primary outcomes in this domain. It improved mental health, as measured by the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales, a measure of the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress that youth were experiencing at the time of the survey interview. It also reduced the percentage of youth who were in violent relationships. Specifically, close to 22 percent of control group youth were in violent relationships at the time of the survey, compared with 15 percent of program group youth. However, Transitional Living did not significantly reduce substance use, increase condom use (a measure of safe sexual behavior), or lower rates of being robbed or assaulted.

- **Transitional Living did not lead to statistically significant improvements in education, social support, or criminal involvement.**

Table ES.2 shows the results in the three remaining domains: education, social support, and criminal involvement. As the top panel of the table shows, there were no statistically significant impacts on primary outcomes in the education domain. These outcomes focused on secondary educational attainment, including earning a high school diploma or GED certificate, and participation in vocational training.

## The Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation

### Table ES.2

#### One-Year Impacts on Education, Social Support, and Criminal Involvement

Primary Outcome, by Domain	Program Group	Control Group	Difference (Impact)	Effect Size	P-Value
<b><u>Education (%)</u></b>					
Has high school diploma	55.7	52.5	3.2	0.06	0.233
Has GED certificate	15.9	17.2	-1.3	-0.03	0.571
Participated in vocational training	11.8	8.9	2.8	0.10	0.139
<b><u>Social support</u></b>					
Score on social support scale <sup>a</sup>	4.4	4.2	0.2	0.05	0.421
Very close to an adult <sup>b</sup> (%)	92.0	91.2	0.8	0.03	0.639
<b><u>Criminal involvement</u></b>					
Score on criminal behavior scale <sup>c</sup>	0.6	0.6	0.0	0.03	0.664
Spent at least one night in jail or prison (%)	23.1	25.2	-2.1	-0.05	0.405
Sample size (total = 1,114)	659	455			

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on responses to the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation 12-Month Survey.

NOTES: Results in this table are regression-adjusted, controlling for pre-random assignment characteristics.

The effect size is calculated by dividing the impact of the program (difference between program and control groups) by the observed variation for that outcome within the control group (the control group standard deviation).

Statistical significance levels are indicated as follows: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

GED = General Educational Development.

<sup>a</sup>The social support scale is a mean of responses to seven survey questions that ask about the number of people a sample member can count on for various types of support, including invitations to go out and do things, help with budgeting or money problems, advice about important subjects, help with transportation, listening to problems, granting small favors, and providing monetary loans in the event of an emergency.

<sup>b</sup>The “very close to an adult” measure indicates whether sample members reported being very close to a biological mother, a biological father, a stepmother, a stepfather, a grandparent, an adult sibling, or a caring adult outside of the family.

<sup>c</sup>The criminal behavior scale is a sum of responses to 10 survey questions that ask whether a sample member was involved in a gang fight, carried a handgun, purposely damaged or destroyed property, stole something worth less than \$50, stole something worth \$50 or more, committed other property crimes, attacked someone, sold or helped sell illegal drugs, received cash for having sexual relations, or received any service or material good in trade for having sexual relations. The scale ranges from 0 to 10.

The program also did not lead to statistically significant improvements in the primary outcomes in the social support domain. The first primary outcome, measured using a social support scale, is calculated as the mean number of people to whom a youth could turn (as reported by the survey respondent) for seven types of help that were specified on the survey (for example, “How many different people can you go to when you need someone to listen to your problems when you’re feeling low?”). The program did not have a statistically significant impact on this outcome. In addition, a very high percentage of youth in both the program and control groups indicated that they were very close to at least one adult, and there was not a significant difference between groups for that outcome.

Finally, Transitional Living did not significantly reduce criminal involvement. There was not a significant difference between research groups in the number of behaviors (out of 10 types) that youth exhibited (for example, carrying a gun or stealing) or in the percentage of youth who had spent at least one night in jail in the year before the survey interview.

- **The impacts of Transitional Living were consistent across different subgroups of youth.**

There were almost no statistically significant differences in impacts by history of juvenile justice custody, by urban versus nonurban setting, by whether youth had been receiving extended foster care services at baseline, or by subgroups of youth created based on a combination of key baseline characteristics. That is, the program appears to be equally effective across all of the subgroups studied.

## **Discussion and Policy Implications**

The Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation is one of the largest and most rigorous evaluations of services for young people who were formerly in the foster care or juvenile justice system. The findings presented in this report have important implications for future policymaking and research.

The Transitional Living program improved outcomes in three of six domains, including employment and earnings, housing stability and economic well-being, and health and safety. While the individual statistically significant impacts were not large, the breadth of those impacts across several domains is promising. The youth in the study had a wide variety of experiences, needs, and circumstances at baseline, and the program was highly individualized. This meant that the program services had to cover various domains, and that no particular domain applied to all youth in the program. For example, some youth already had stable housing and did not need or receive extensive assistance in that area. Transitional Living would not be expected to improve housing stability for those youth. The individualized, wide-ranging nature of the

program services may explain why the impacts were not large yet were present across a variety of domains and for youth with either foster care or juvenile justice experience (or both). These impact findings are notable given how few other programs have been shown to improve outcomes among young adults with histories of foster care and juvenile justice custody.

Services for young adults with a history of foster care are becoming more widespread, though they are often not as intensive as those provided by the Transitional Living program. For youth with a history of juvenile justice custody, services like Transitional Living are less common, yet the evaluation findings presented here suggest that the benefits for these youth are no less than for their peers who are leaving foster care. However, the program did not reduce criminal involvement, which is a key outcome for juvenile justice youth. This finding suggests that, to be more attractive to juvenile justice authorities, Transitional Living services may need to focus more on criminal involvement or better incorporate other services, such as certain cognitive behavioral therapies, that are designed to affect such behavior.

The results also indicate that the Transitional Living program was equally effective for urban youth compared with rural youth, despite differences in contextual factors, such as the availability of resources, services, and transportation. This finding provides some evidence that the impact findings presented in this report may be applicable to other contexts. At the same time, it is possible that the impacts of Transitional Living would be different in another state that provides more extensive or more widely accessed foster care services.

In addition, it is likely that the individuals who were recruited into the study were relatively stable, motivated, or higher-functioning compared with youth who were not part of the study. While Youth Villages staff attempted to enroll into the study all potential participants who had been identified on a list (provided by DCS) of youth with histories of state custody, many of these young people could not be reached or did not show an interest in the services. In addition, because the program is not intended for individuals with a history of serious violence, intense emotional problems, or other “rule-out” criteria, youth who fell into those categories were not eligible for either the program or the evaluation. These selection mechanisms likely shaped the pool of youth who enrolled in the study, suggesting that the impact findings presented in this report may not be generalizable to all young adults with histories of foster care or juvenile justice custody.

In the end, the study findings indicate that the Transitional Living program was successful in improving some key outcomes for young adults with histories of foster care or juvenile justice custody. Young people with such histories, including those who receive Transitional Living services, continue to face many challenges and to experience poor outcomes relative to their peers. Still, the results of this study are encouraging and provide evidence that interventions exist to effectively diminish some of the difficulties that many of these young people face.

## **Next Steps**

The positive results that are presented in this report set the stage for additional analysis and evaluation of the Transitional Living program. MDRC will conduct a benefit-cost analysis that will provide additional information about the monetary benefits, to both society and program participants, of these impacts, relative to the costs of the program. In addition, the research team will assess longer-term impacts of the Transitional Living program based on additional data covering two years after study enrollment for each individual. The results of both the benefit-cost analysis and the two-year impact analysis will be published in 2016. MDRC is also exploring the possibility of conducting additional research on the Transitional Living program in other contexts.





## **EARLIER MDRC PUBLICATIONS ON THE YOUTH VILLAGES TRANSITIONAL LIVING EVALUATION**

*Moving Into Adulthood:*

*Implementation Findings from the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation*  
2014. Michelle Manno, Erin Jacobs, Julianna Alson, Melanie Skemer.

*After Foster Care and Juvenile Justice:*

*A Preview of the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation*  
2012. Sara Muller-Ravett and Erin Jacobs.

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NOTE: The Transitional Living program was renamed “YVLifeSet” after the evaluation was completed.

A complete publications list is available from MDRC and on its website ([www.mdrc.org](http://www.mdrc.org)), from which copies of reports can also be downloaded.

## About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.