

# LAYING A FOUNDATION

Four-Year Results from  
the National YouthBuild  
Evaluation

*Executive Summary*



**mdrc**  
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE  
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

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MAY 2018

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## Overview

Making the successful transition to adulthood has become increasingly difficult for many young people in the United States, particularly for those without a college education. Those without a high school degree face even tougher prospects, with especially high unemployment rates and falling wages. A typical worker without a high school diploma earns less today than the same worker did in the 1970s. YouthBuild is a program that attempts to improve prospects for less-educated young people, serving over 10,000 individuals each year at over 250 organizations nationwide. Each organization provides hands-on, construction-related or other vocational training, educational services, case management, counseling, service to the community, and leadership-development opportunities, to low-income young people ages 16 to 24 who did not complete high school.

YouthBuild was evaluated using a randomized controlled trial, in which eligible young people at participating programs were assigned to either a program group, invited to enroll in YouthBuild, or a control group, referred to other services in the community. The evaluation included 75 programs across the country and nearly 4,000 young people who enrolled in the study between 2011 and 2013. This report, the final in the evaluation, presents the program's effects on young people after four years.

## Main Findings

The effects observed through four years indicate that the program provides a starting point for redirecting otherwise disconnected young people, but one that could be improved upon.

- YouthBuild increased the receipt of high school equivalency credentials.
- YouthBuild increased enrollment in college, largely during the first two years. Very few young people had earned a degree after four years, and the program had a very small effect on degree receipt.
- YouthBuild increased survey-reported employment rates, wages and earnings, but did not increase employment as measured with employer-provided administrative records, which might not include certain kinds of employment, such as jobs in the gig economy and other types of informal work.
- YouthBuild increased civic engagement, largely via participation in YouthBuild services. It had no effects on other measures of positive youth development.
- YouthBuild had few effects on involvement with the criminal justice system.
- As with many youth programs, YouthBuild's benefits through four years do not outweigh its costs. But it is too early to draw firm conclusions about YouthBuild as an investment, since the benefits accrue over participants' lifetimes.

YouthBuild has continued to evolve since it started in the 1970s and even since the study began. The findings from the evaluation can inform its future direction and help it have greater impact.

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The Authors

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## Executive Summary

Finding a good job has become increasingly difficult for young people without a college education. Young adults were the hardest hit by the Great Recession, and even today their unemployment rates remain high.<sup>1</sup> Those without a high school degree face even tougher prospects, with especially high unemployment rates and falling wages. A typical worker without a high school diploma earns less today than the same worker did in the 1970s, highlighting the importance of postsecondary education or training in today's economy.<sup>2</sup>

YouthBuild is a program that tries to improve these prospects for less-educated young people. It started in the 1970s with one program in New York City, which set out to engage otherwise disconnected young people in the improvement of their community through the renovating and building of housing for low-income residents. At the same time, the program provided participants with the leadership opportunities, education, and job training skills they needed to successfully navigate the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Over the next several decades, YouthBuild expanded dramatically. Today, operating with both federal and private funding, there are over 250 YouthBuild programs nationwide, serving over 10,000 young people each year. Many of the programs are part of the YouthBuild Affiliated Network, under the umbrella of YouthBuild USA, which provides technical assistance, funding, and program design standards to its members.

Each YouthBuild program provides hands-on, construction-related or other vocational training, educational services, case management, counseling, service to the community, and leadership-development opportunities, to low-income, out-of-school young people ages 16 to 24. As the program has grown, it also changed somewhat to reflect the changing economy. The vocational training component, for example, while still focused primarily on construction, has expanded to other areas. And the educational services, still largely high school equivalency preparation, have expanded to include charter schools offering high school diplomas. In addition, programs are increasingly focused beyond high school credentials and on postsecondary education.

In accordance with federal legislation, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) is a major funder of YouthBuild, providing grants to about 70 programs each year through a competitive review process. In 2010, DOL, with initial support from the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), awarded a contract to MDRC and its partners Social Policy Research Associates and Mathematica Policy Research to conduct an impact evaluation of YouthBuild.

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<sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey" (website: [data.bls.gov/timeseries/lms14024887](http://data.bls.gov/timeseries/lms14024887), 2017a).

<sup>2</sup>Economic Policy Institute, "State of Working America Data Library, Wages by Education" (website: [www.epi.org/data/#?subject=wage-education](http://www.epi.org/data/#?subject=wage-education), 2017).



The evaluation includes 75 programs across the country, receiving funding from either DOL or CNCS, and nearly 4,000 young people who enrolled in the study between 2011 and 2013. The evaluation examines YouthBuild's effects on the young people it serves, assessing effects on a wide range of outcomes, including education and training, work and earnings, youth development, and involvement in the criminal justice system.

This report, the final in the evaluation, presents effects of the program after four years and shows that YouthBuild had positive effects on some important outcomes. The program led to a sizable increase in high school equivalency credential receipt. The program also increased college enrollment, although it had only a very small effect on degree receipt. YouthBuild also led to an increase in employment and earnings at the four-year point, as reported on the survey, but there were no significant effects on work reported to the unemployment insurance system. The program increased civic engagement but did not have effects on other measures of youth development or on rates of involvement with the criminal justice system.

A cost analysis shows that YouthBuild involves a substantial upfront investment per participant, owing to its relatively small size, its location in large urban areas, and the educational and training services it provides. A limited benefit-cost assessment shows that YouthBuild is valuable to participants, but its net value to taxpayers and society will depend on the size of earnings impacts beyond the four years covered by the evaluation.

It is hard to say whether the effects on work and earnings will grow over time. The effects observed so far suggest that the model provides a good starting point, but one that will need to be improved upon if it is to make large and sustained impacts on the young people it serves. The increased emphasis on postsecondary education, for example, has been important, and YouthBuild successfully increased access and attendance. However, similar to many low-income students around the nation, YouthBuild participants need additional support to stay in school and complete a degree.<sup>3</sup> Providing those services may be outside of YouthBuild's scope, but the program could do more to partner with supportive postsecondary institutions. Similarly, more work needs to be done to increase employment and earnings, although finding what works on the employment side for this population has been a challenge for many programs. The program's recent focus on apprenticeships and skills training programs may be one strategy.

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<sup>3</sup>Jennifer Ma and Sandy Baum, *Trends in Community Colleges: Enrollment, Prices, Student Debt, and Completion* (New York: The College Board, 2016); Susan Scrivener, Michael J. Weiss, Alyssa Ratledge, Timothy Rudd, Colleen Sommo, and Hannah Fresques, *Doubling Graduation Rates: Three-Year Effects of CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for Developmental Education Students* (New York: MDRC, 2015).

## The YouthBuild Model

The YouthBuild model includes a mix of education, vocational training, counseling, leadership development, and service to community, all provided within a culture that emphasizes respect for young people and positive youth development. Eligibility is typically limited to out-of-school young people ages 16 to 24 who have dropped out before completing high school and who meet one of the following criteria: they are from low-income or migrant families, are current or former foster youth, are involved with the criminal justice system, are disabled, or are children of incarcerated parents.

Programs recruit or rely on word of mouth to identify interested applicants, who then go through assessments before enrolling, such as tests of basic skills and one-on-one interviews. Most frequently, programs then implement a rigorous Mental Toughness Orientation, which can last from a single day to several weeks. Mental Toughness Orientation is designed to facilitate group bonding and ready recruits for the program's activities. It also serves as a period when many young people are screened out because they stop attending or otherwise fail to follow established rules.

Most young people who make it through Mental Toughness Orientation enroll in YouthBuild, are offered the program's services, and participate for 6 to 12 months. New participants typically begin the program with a group of other enrollees, and that group alternates between educational and vocational training. The components of the model are intended to be integrated and are designed to be offered together.

YouthBuild's services consist of the following:

- **Educational services** such as instruction in basic skills, remedial education, and alternative education leading to a high school diploma or high school equivalency credential. A growing number of programs also offer services to prepare young people for enrollment in postsecondary education, such as college tours, assistance with financial aid applications, and, in some cases, dual enrollment.
- **Vocational training**, typically direct hands-on training in construction, in which participants rehabilitate or build housing for low-income people. In 2012, certain DOL-funded programs were authorized to provide a "construction plus" model, in which training is offered for in-demand occupations other than construction. Before that date, some programs were already providing training for other vocations such as certified nursing assistant, commercial driver, or information technology professional through non-DOL funding.

- **Youth development services**, including leadership training and service to community. Defining features of YouthBuild, these services are addressed in multiple ways and serve multiple purposes. Leadership training is approached through structured curricula or formal and informal roles within the YouthBuild program that participants may play, such as on committees, in the classroom, on work sites, or in community activities and meetings. Young people serve their community by constructing affordable housing and through other activities; this service both addresses the community's needs and provides opportunities for young people to practice leadership and other skills.
- **Supportive and transitional services** include counseling, case management, life skills training, workforce preparation, follow-up services for up to one year, stipends for participation, and other forms of support, such as help with transportation, child care, or housing. All of these services are designed to help young people address challenges that may prevent them from achieving success in the program or beyond.

## The Evaluation

The YouthBuild evaluation uses a random assignment research design, in which eligible young people at participating programs around the country were assigned to either a program group, which was invited to enroll in YouthBuild, or to a control group, which was not able to enroll in the program but was provided with information on other services in the community. The research team selected a mix of programs receiving funding from DOL and from CNCS in 2011 for the evaluation. From the 74 programs that received grants from DOL in 2011, 60 were randomly selected to participate in the study, and 58 were ultimately able to participate. From the 24 programs that received CNCS grants but not DOL grants in 2011, 17 were selected as suitable to participate in the study.

These 75 programs (58 funded by DOL and 17 not funded by DOL but receiving funding from CNCS) enrolled a total of 3,929 young people into the study between August 2011 and January 2013, a number that exceeded available slots. For each enrollment cycle, each program used its typical selection process to create a pool of applicants deemed eligible and appropriate for YouthBuild. These applicants were then assigned at random to fill the available program slots or to a control group. In most programs, random assignment took place before Mental Toughness Orientation.

The evaluation consisted of three components. First, a process study consisted of in-person visits by members of the research team to nearly all participating programs, to examine implementation and operations on the ground and to hear firsthand the perceptions and experiences

of the participating young people and staff members. Second, an impact study tracked the program and the control groups for four years using survey data and administrative records to examine the program's effects on a wide range of outcomes, including educational enrollment and attainment, work and earnings, involvement in the criminal justice system, family structure, and social and emotional development. Finally, a cost study estimated the costs of operating and running YouthBuild and compared these costs with the potential benefits achieved.

The analysis presented in this report is based on several data sources. First, the research team administered surveys to a random subset of study participants 12, 30, and 48 months after they entered the study. These surveys collected information on education and training, work, family formation, youth development, involvement in the criminal justice system, and child support. Second, the team obtained administrative records for the full study sample on employment and earnings (from the National Directory of New Hires) and postsecondary enrollment (from the National Student Clearinghouse). Program staff members provided the team with data for the cost study during the process study visits.

The young people enrolled in the study generally fit the profile of typical YouthBuild participants. The majority of study participants were male (64 percent) and most were either black (63 percent) or Latino (15 percent). On average, study participants were nearly 20 years old when they entered the study. Over 90 percent did not have a high school diploma or equivalency credential when they entered the study, and about 60 percent of them had left school after completing the tenth or eleventh grade.

## **Recap of Earlier Findings**

The findings from the process study, presented in an earlier report, indicated that there was variation in how programs implemented the components of the model, in response to their local contexts. The program model was not highly prescriptive and was designed to allow variation based on local circumstances. Overall, however, the participating programs implemented the YouthBuild model well and faithfully. Fidelity to the YouthBuild model among programs was most consistent and highest in vocational services and varied more in leadership development and postsecondary educational preparation.

Findings from the interim report presented effects through 30 months. That report indicated that about 75 percent of young people assigned to the program group went on to participate in YouthBuild during the first year after study entry. About half of these young people reported that they graduated from YouthBuild. Those assigned to enroll in the program had higher rates of participation in educational, training, and personal development activities than those who were assigned to the control group. This was in spite of the fact that control group members also had relatively high rates of participation in other educational and training activities located in the community, indicating that those who seek to enroll in YouthBuild are a relatively motivated group.

Even with this motivated sample, YouthBuild increased high school equivalency credential receipt, college enrollment, and participation in vocational training through Month 30. YouthBuild also led to a small increase in employment rates during the second year after participants entered the study, and a small increase in self-reported wages and earnings 30 months after study entry. Finally, the program increased the rate at which young people engaged in volunteer work, but had few effects on other measures of youth development or involvement in the criminal justice system.

## Findings Through Four Years

- **YouthBuild increased the receipt of high school equivalency credentials.**

Most young people entered the program without having completed high school, and YouthBuild led to a sizable increase in high school equivalency credential receipt. By the 30-month point, about 18 percent of young people in the control group reported having earned this credential, compared with 31 percent of young people in the program group, for an increase of 14 percentage points. By the 48-month point, about 24 percent of the control group had earned the credential and the program impact was 11 percentage points. (See Table ES.1.) This effect was estimated for all young people in the program group and did not account for the fact that 25 percent of program group members did not participate in YouthBuild after study enrollment. The effect on young people who did participate was about 15 percentage points.

- **YouthBuild increased enrollment in college, largely during the first two years. It had a very small effect on degree receipt.**

While many YouthBuild programs focus their educational services on attainment of high school equivalency credentials, a growing number of programs have an explicit focus on helping young people transition to postsecondary education. About 13 percent of young people in the control group reported having enrolled in college since study entry, and YouthBuild enrollment led to an increase in that rate of 8.6 percentage points. The effect for young people who actually participated in YouthBuild was higher, at about 12 percentage points. Most young people who attended college did so at two-year colleges and most of the program's impact was on attendance at two-year institutions. Effects on enrollment were larger at YouthBuild programs with strong postsecondary educational services.

However, less than 2 percent of the study sample reported earning a degree of any type by 48 months, and the program had a statistically significant, but very small effect on that outcome. A look at enrollment over time shows that the program's impacts on college attendance occurred largely during the first two years. After that point, enrollment rates for young people in the program group fell, and the program impact had faded to zero.

**Table ES.1**

**Impacts on Key Outcomes at 48 Months**

Outcome	YouthBuild Group	Control Group	Difference (Impact)
<b><u>Education and training (%)</u></b>			
Earned high school equivalency credential	34.5	23.5	11.0***
Ever enrolled in vocational school	32.9	21.7	11.2***
Received trade license/training certificate	5.3	3.4	1.9*
Ever enrolled in postsecondary courses <sup>a</sup>	21.3	12.7	8.6***
Ever received a postsecondary degree <sup>a</sup>	1.7	0.9	0.8**
<b><u>Work and earnings</u></b>			
Currently employed (%)	50.9	46.4	4.5**
Average weekly earnings (\$)	206.7	174.1	32.6***
Average earnings in Year 4 <sup>b</sup> (\$)	6,980	6,729	251
<b><u>Youth development</u></b>			
Civic engagement <sup>c</sup> (%)	94.3	90.6	3.7***
Self-esteem score <sup>d</sup>	3.3	3.3	0.0
<b><u>Criminal justice involvement (%)</u></b>			
Arrested since random assignment	32.0	31.3	0.7
Convicted since random assignment	19.8	17.4	2.5
Sample size (total = 2,721)	1,784	937	

SOURCES: MDRC calculations using data from the National Directory of New Hires (NDNH), the National Student Clearinghouse, and responses to the 48-month survey.

NOTES: Results in this table are regression-adjusted, controlling for individual baseline characteristics and site fixed effects.

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

<sup>a</sup>Postsecondary education outcomes are based on data from the National Student Clearinghouse. The sample size for these outcomes is 3,929 (2,700 program group members and 1,229 control group members).

<sup>b</sup>This earnings outcome is based on data from the NDNH. Social Security numbers were unavailable for some sample members, who therefore could not be matched to the database. The sample size for these outcomes is 3,878 (2,662 program group members and 1,216 control group members).

<sup>c</sup>"Civic engagement" is defined as at least one of the following: volunteering, being registered to vote at the time of the survey, having voted, or having been involved in politics or local community activities.

<sup>d</sup>Self-esteem is measured using the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale. Response categories range from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 4 = "strongly agree," where higher scores indicate higher levels of self-esteem. Responses to the 10 items are averaged.

- **YouthBuild increased survey-reported employment rates and wages and earnings, but did not increase employment as measured with administrative records.**

The opportunities for education and training in YouthBuild should help participating young people find jobs after completing the program, and the early impacts the program had on high school equivalency credential receipt and college enrollment support this claim. Although the findings span four years of follow-up, they still offer an early glimpse at the potential careers of the participating young adults, who were on average 24 years old at the four-year point. The interim report documented that the program led to an increase in unemployment insurance system-reported employment rates in Year 2 of about 3 percentage points, and an increase in survey-reported weekly earnings of about 12 percent. At the 48-month survey, 46.4 percent of the control group reported working, compared with 50.9 percent of young people in the program group, for an impact of 4.5 percentage points. In addition, young people in the program group earned higher wages (more of them earned at least \$10 per hour), with the result that they had 19 percent higher weekly earnings.

Similar increases in work were not found using the National Directory of New Hires records data, which included employer-reported quarterly earnings covered by the unemployment insurance system, although there was a trend over the four-year follow-up period toward positive earnings impacts. Surveys and records data often show different results, particularly for low-income groups who are more likely to have informal jobs, be self-employed, participating in the gig economy or work for employers who may not report their wages. Separate analyses suggest that part of the reason for the lack of effects in the records data was that these data did not capture some self-employment and informal or intermittent work among the study sample. Another reason for the lack of effects using the records data was that they were estimated for the full study sample, and YouthBuild's effects on work were somewhat more positive for survey respondents than for the full sample.

Finally, effects on work were larger for less academically prepared young people. First, effects were larger for young people who had left high school in the earlier grades. Similarly, impacts on work were larger among those programs that opted not to screen out applicants based on low basic education scores.

- **YouthBuild increased civic engagement, largely via participation in YouthBuild services. It had few effects on other measures of positive youth development.**

Participation in YouthBuild may lead to a number of positive changes for participants through effects on education, work, and leadership opportunities. By the 48-month point, the program had led to a large increase in reported rates of volunteering, of about 21 percentage points,

much of which occurred while young people were participating in YouthBuild given its strong emphasis on service to community. In contrast, YouthBuild had no effects on other measures of youth development, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, future orientation, and feelings of social support. Other research on youth programs suggests that it is difficult to create lasting changes in many of these attitudinal measures.<sup>4</sup>

- **YouthBuild had few effects on involvement with the criminal justice system.**

Finally, by the 48-month point, just over 30 percent of the young people in the study reported that they had been arrested since they entered the study, which was not much higher than the rate reported at the 30-month point. Just under 20 percent had been convicted, most commonly for either drug or property offenses. The program had no effect on arrest or conviction rates.

- **As with many youth programs, YouthBuild's benefits through four years did not outweigh its costs. But it is too early to draw firm conclusions about YouthBuild as an investment, since the benefits accrue over participants' lifetimes.**

YouthBuild involves a significant upfront investment in the young people it serves. A big part of that investment comes from DOL, but the programs themselves must match 25 percent of their DOL grants with non-federal funds. The total cost per YouthBuild participant, from all funding sources, is above average relative to other youth programs. One reason for the higher cost is the fact that YouthBuild programs, which typically serve 30 to 40 young people per cohort, are smaller than other youth programs, which limits the scale economies that can be achieved. Other reasons include the cost of providing services to obtain a high school credential, the cost of providing construction training, and the prevalence of programs in large urban areas, where services tend to be more expensive. Despite its high relative cost, a partial benefit-cost analysis shows that YouthBuild comes closer to breaking even after four years than the two other youth programs used for comparison. After four years, however, only a fraction of the potential return has been measured. More time is needed to see if the effects observed to date translate into lasting economic improvement.

## Conclusion

The effects observed so far indicate that the program provides a starting point for redirecting otherwise disconnected young people, albeit one that could be improved upon. The findings

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<sup>4</sup>Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer Appleton Gootman, "Features of Positive Developmental Settings," pages 86-118 in Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer Appleton Gootman (eds.), *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2002).



show, for example, that YouthBuild successfully served as an access point to college for disadvantaged young people, but that the next steps are to increase this impact and to increase persistence and degree receipt. While it is arguably beyond YouthBuild's service reach to directly affect college persistence, there may be more it can do to provide post-program services or to partner with supportive postsecondary educational institutions. The study findings also suggest that programs may want to conduct less screening based on academic preparation, since program effects on work were larger for young people with lower educational levels. However, the DOL performance standards, outcomes used to rate all programs receiving DOL funding, may discourage programs from doing so. Programs might avoid serving young people with the lowest expected outcomes, even though they may be the group for whom the program makes the most difference.

In terms of effects on employment, as the labor market has continued to change, many programs have expanded their vocational training to areas beyond construction. DOL has also recently emphasized the placement of graduates into Apprenticeship programs. It is difficult to assess how much the Great Recession affected the observed effects on work. The follow-up period for the report was during a time when many sectors were still recovering, and youth unemployment rates remained high, particularly for black and Latino young men.<sup>5</sup> The collapse of the housing market also affected not only employment opportunities in construction, but the quality of the training available to young people while they were in the program.

Finally, although not measurable with the impact data, the implementation report documented that funding stability was an important issue that affected program quality. Most programs were heavily reliant on the DOL funding cycle, in which they competed for and hopefully received a new grant every two years. Not winning a new grant often led to staff and program instability. One potential area for program improvement may be to introduce a longer funding cycle, in order to provide more stability to existing programs.

YouthBuild is a very different program than it was when it began in the 1970s, and it has even evolved in the seven years since the evaluation started. The findings from the evaluation show that YouthBuild led to a number of positive effects on the young people it served, and they can inform its direction in the future and help it have greater impact.

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<sup>5</sup>U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employment Status of the Civilian Noninstitutional Population 16 to 24 Years of Age by School Enrollment, Age, Sex, Race, Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity, and Educational Attainment" (website: [www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpseea16.htm](http://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpseea16.htm), 2017b).