

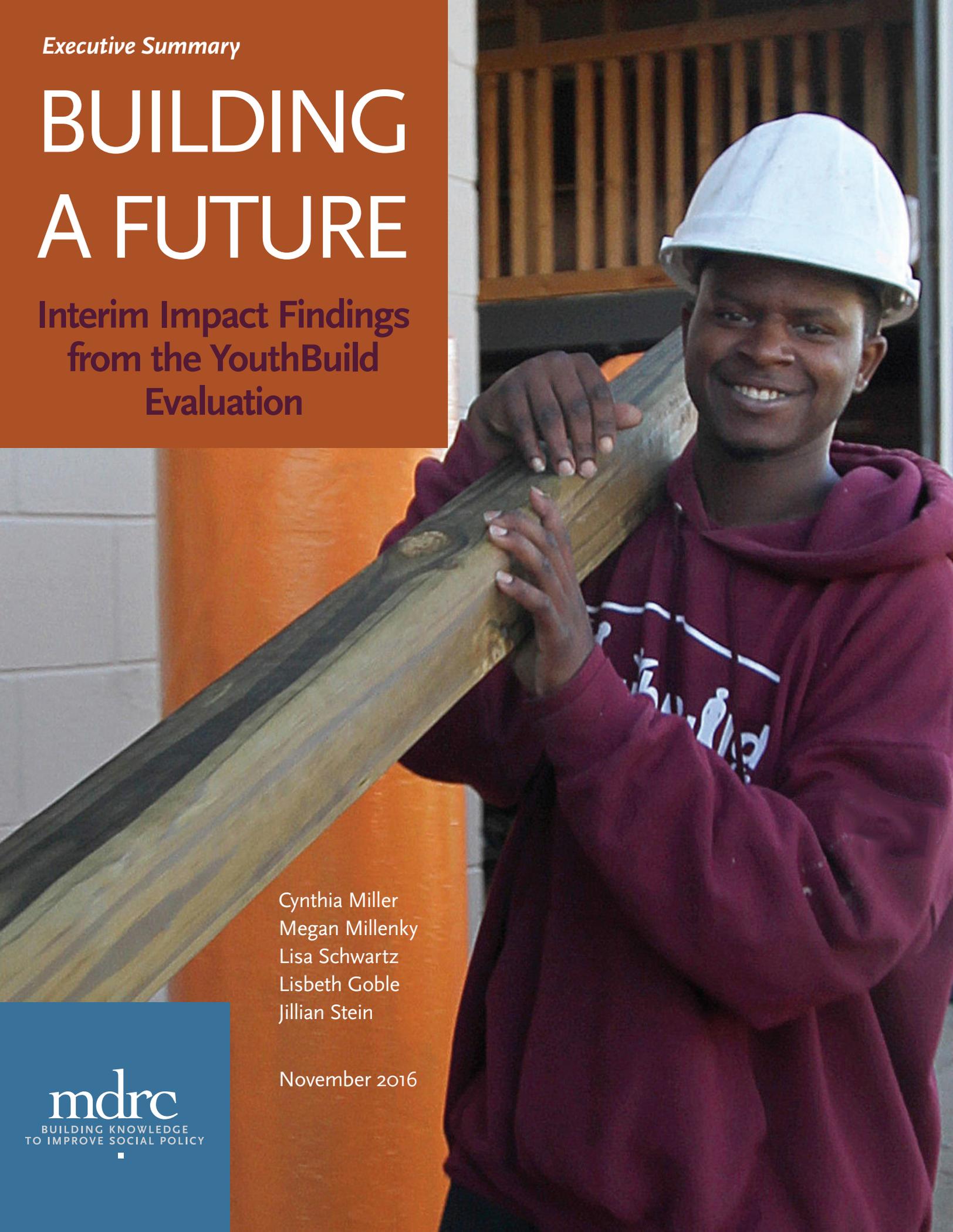
*Executive Summary*

# BUILDING A FUTURE

**Interim Impact Findings  
from the YouthBuild  
Evaluation**

Cynthia Miller  
Megan Millenky  
Lisa Schwartz  
Lisbeth Goble  
Jillian Stein

November 2016





## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# **Building a Future** **Interim Impact Findings from the YouthBuild Evaluation**

**Cynthia Miller**  
**Megan Millenky**  
**(MDRC)**

**Lisa Schwartz**  
**Lisbeth Goble**  
**Jillian Stein**  
**(Mathematica Policy Research)**

**November 2016**



This project has been funded, either wholly or in part, with federal funds from the Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration under contract number DOLJ101A21513. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of Labor, nor does mention of trade names, commercial projects, or organizations imply endorsement of same by the U.S. government.

# Overview

Young people have been hit especially hard by changes in the labor market over the past decades. Unemployment among 16- to 24-year-olds increased the most of any age group during the recent recession, and remains more than double that among older adults. The unemployment rate is especially high for young people without high school diplomas. YouthBuild is one program that attempts to help this group, serving over 10,000 of them each year at over 250 organizations nationwide. Each organization provides construction-related or other vocational training, educational services, counseling, and leadership-development opportunities to low-income young people ages 16 to 24 who did not complete high school.

YouthBuild is being evaluated using a randomized controlled trial, in which eligible young people at participating programs were assigned either to a program group, invited to enroll in YouthBuild, or to a control group, referred to other services in the community. The evaluation includes 75 programs across the country funded by the U.S. Department of Labor or the Corporation for National and Community Service and nearly 4,000 young people who enrolled in the study between 2011 and 2013. This report, the second in the evaluation, presents the program's effects on young people through two and a half years.

## Main Findings

About 75 percent of the young people assigned to the program group participated in YouthBuild, and about half of these participants reported that they graduated from the program within 12 months. YouthBuild led to a number of positive effects on young people, most consistently in the area of education and training.

- YouthBuild increased participation in education and training, even though a high percentage of the young people in the control group also sought out and participated in education and training.
- Overall, participants rated their experiences in YouthBuild favorably, although some program components were rated more highly than others.
- YouthBuild increased the rate at which participants earned high school equivalency credentials, enrolled in college, and participated in vocational training.
- YouthBuild led to a small increase in wages and earnings at 30 months.
- YouthBuild increased civic engagement, particularly volunteering, but had few effects on other measures of youth development or attitudes.
- YouthBuild had few effects on involvement in the criminal justice system.

The program's interim effects on education and training are encouraging. A later report, measuring effects through four years, will examine whether these interim effects lead to longer-term gains in work and earnings.

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

## Acknowledgments

The YouthBuild Evaluation is made possible through the support of many individuals and organizations. It is funded by the Department of Labor (DOL) with initial support from the Corporation for National and Community Service. At DOL, we are grateful to the leadership of Amanda Ahlstrand, Jennifer Troke, and Sanzanna Dean, as well as Gregg Weltz and Anne Stom, who were instrumental in establishing the evaluation. Thanks also to our project officer Eileen Pederson for her guidance throughout the process. Jenn Smith, current director of YouthBuild at DOL, provided valuable input throughout the evaluation and on the report drafts.

We are grateful to the staff members at the 75 YouthBuild programs that participated in the evaluation. They worked tirelessly to provide services to young people in their communities and played a critical role in helping to recruit and enroll participants into the evaluation.

We also relied on the assistance of staff members at YouthBuild USA, who spoke with us about the history and structure of YouthBuild and provided us with essential data about programs. In particular, we are grateful to Dorothy Stoneman, Sangeeta Tyagi, Erin Rodriguez, Helen Whitcher, Paul Gauthier, and Joel Miranda.

The report benefited from the feedback from the Technical Working Group, which includes David Clauss, Rob Hollister, Cliff Johnson, Larry Katz, Simran Sidhu, Jason Snipes, Dorothy Stoneman, and Sangeeta Tyagi.

We also wish to acknowledge the contributions of Mathematica's team of interviewers, locaters, survey operations supervisors, and monitors, who collected the high-quality data on which this report is based. Ellen Siegel, Beverly Kelly, and Alison Ashenfelter oversaw this team at the Survey Operations Center. Scott Reid oversaw the information technology work. We thank him and his team of programmers. The survey research team included Erin Boyle, Sean Harrington, Felicia Hurwitz, Shawn Marsh, Kim Mook, Bevin Mory, Sandra Mukasa, Lisa Quan, Amanda Skaff, and Lindsay Wood.

At SPR, Andrew Wiegand provided helpful comments on earlier report drafts. At MDRC, Gordon Berlin, Rob Ivry, Dan Bloom, Carolyn Hill, Sharon Rowser, Louisa Treskon, Michelle Manno, and Dina Israel provided valuable feedback on report drafts. Danielle Cummings, Emily Terwelp, Adrienne Yao, and Sally Dai processed the quantitative data. Galina Farberova managed the random assignment system. Gary Reynolds created the map of YouthBuild programs. Emily Brennan coordinated the production of the report, and Beata Luczywek and Danielle Craig assisted with fact-checking. Joshua Malbin provided feedback on report drafts and edited the report. Ann Kottner prepared the report for publication.

Finally, we are deeply appreciative of the young people who agreed to participate in the study. Without them, this research would not have been possible.

The Authors

## Executive Summary

Making the successful transition to adulthood has become more and more difficult for many American young people. Unemployment rates among young people are more than double those among older adults, and young people were hit especially hard by the recent recession of 2007-2009.<sup>1</sup> Finding well-paying work has become particularly challenging for young people without high school diplomas or equivalents. Their unemployment rate peaked at over 35 percent during the recession and remains high today, at over 20 percent in the second quarter of 2016.<sup>2</sup> Finding ways to reengage these young people in education and work is one of our nation's central social policy challenges.

YouthBuild is one program that attempts to help this group. YouthBuild is a federally and privately funded program operated at over 250 organizations nationwide, serving over 10,000 young people each year. Each organization provides construction-related training and may also provide training in other in-demand industries, along with educational services, counseling, and leadership-development opportunities, to low-income, out-of-school young people ages 16 to 24.

In 2010, the Department of Labor (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. 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 will examine YouthBuild's effects on the young people it serves for up to four years after they enter the study, 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 presents the interim effects of the program two and a half years after young people applied to YouthBuild, examining participation in the program, effects on education and training, and early effects on work and earnings. The findings show that YouthBuild led to a number of positive effects on this group of young people, including a

---

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "BLS Data Viewer: (Seas) Unemployment Rate — 16-24 Yrs.," 2016, website: <http://beta.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/LNS14024887>; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "BLS Data Viewer: (Seas) Unemployment Rate — 25 Yrs. and Over," 2016, website: <http://beta.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/LNS14000048>.

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "BLS Data Viewer: (Unadj) Unemployment Rate — Not Enrolled in School, Less Than a High School Diploma 16-24 Yrs.," 2016, website: <http://beta.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/LNU04023019Q>.

notable increase in the rate at which they earned General Educational Development (GED) credentials and a small, positive effect on college enrollment.<sup>3</sup> YouthBuild also led to a small, positive effect on wages and earnings. A later report will examine the program's effects on education and work after four years.

## **The YouthBuild Model**

All YouthBuild programs in operation are modeled to some degree on the original YouthBuild program: the East Harlem Youth Action Program founded in the late 1970s in New York City. That original program was designed to address the complex needs of participants and their community with a culture of respect for young people that is still emphasized today.

The YouthBuild model includes a mix of education, vocational training (usually training in construction), counseling, leadership development, and community service. 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 in foster care or are aging out of it, are ex-offenders, have disabilities, 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 in a group with other enrollees, and that group alternates weekly or every few weeks between a focus on education and a focus on vocational training. The components of the model are intended to be integrated and designed to be offered together.

---

<sup>3</sup>The term "GED" is used throughout this report to indicate a high school equivalency credential, even though many states no longer use the official GED test to grant those credentials. Given the timing of the YouthBuild evaluation, most study participants would still have taken the GED exam to earn their high school equivalency credentials.

YouthBuild's services consist of:

- **Educational services** such as instruction in basic skills, remedial education, and alternative education leading to a high school diploma or GED. A growing number of programs also offer services to prepare young people for post-secondary education.
- **Vocational training**, typically construction training in which participants rehabilitate or build housing for low-income people. Beginning in 2012, certain DOL-funded programs were authorized to provide a "construction plus" model, in which funding could be used to offer training for in-demand occupations outside construction. Before that date, some programs were already providing training for other vocations such as Certified Nursing Assistant, commercial driver, or information technology professional.
- **Youth-development services**, including leadership training and community service. These services are defining features of YouthBuild that are addressed in multiple ways and serve multiple purposes. Leadership training is approached through structured curricula or formal and informal roles for participants within the YouthBuild program on committees, in the classroom, on work sites, or in community activities and meetings. Young people participate in community service by constructing affordable housing and through other activities; this community service attends to the community's needs and gives young people opportunities to practice leadership and other skills.
- **Supportive services and transition services** include counseling, case management, life-skills training, workforce preparation, follow-up services for 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

YouthBuild is being evaluated using a random assignment design, in which eligible young people at participating programs around the country were assigned either to a program group, invited to enroll in YouthBuild, or to a control group, provided information on other services in the community. Programs selected for the evaluation include a mix of those receiving funding from DOL and from CNCS in 2011. 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 above a certain amount but not DOL grants in 2011, 17 were selected as suitable to participate in the study.

These 75 programs enrolled a total of 3,929 young people into the study between August 2011 and January 2013. For each enrollment cycle, every 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.

The evaluation consists of three components. First, a process study examined the operations of the YouthBuild programs in the evaluation and the perceptions and experiences of the participating young people. The findings from the process study, presented in an earlier report, indicate that there was variation in how programs implemented the components of the model, in response to their local contexts. Overall, however, the participating programs implemented the YouthBuild model well and faithfully. Fidelity to the YouthBuild model was most consistent and highest in vocational services and varied more among programs in leadership development and preparation for postsecondary education.

Second, an impact study is tracking the program and the control groups for four years using survey data and administrative records. The impact analysis will examine the program's effects on a wide range of outcomes, including enrollment in education and educational attainment, work and earnings, involvement in the criminal justice system, family structure, and social and emotional development. This report presents interim findings, and longer-term findings will be presented in the final report. Finally, a cost-effectiveness study will estimate the costs of operating and running YouthBuild and compare these costs with any positive gains that are achieved. The results from this analysis will be included in the final report.

The analysis presented in this report is based on several data sources. First, surveys were administered to a random subset of study participants 12 and 30 months after they entered the study. These surveys collected information on education and training, work and earnings, use of services, family formation, involvement in the criminal justice system, youth development, and health and well-being. Second, administrative records were obtained for the full study sample on employment and earnings (from the National Directory of New Hires) and postsecondary enrollment (from the National Student Clearinghouse). Third, a survey of YouthBuild programs provided information on program characteristics. Finally, program data on enrollment reported to the DOL management information system are used to corroborate YouthBuild participation as reported by young people on the surveys.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>A management information system is a database that holds information on program operations and that can produce reports on every level of a program's management.

The young people enrolled in the study generally fit the profile of typical YouthBuild participants. The majority of study participants are male (64 percent) and most are either black (63 percent) or Latino (15 percent). On average, study participants were nearly 20 years old when they entered the study, with about 70 percent older than age 18. Over 90 percent did not have high school diplomas or GEDs when they entered the study, and about 60 percent of them had left school after completing the tenth or eleventh grade.

## Findings

- **About 75 percent of the young people assigned to the program group participated in YouthBuild, and about half of these participants reported that they graduated from the program within 12 months.**

At 12 months, 74 percent of the program group reported ever receiving YouthBuild services or participating in YouthBuild activities. Those who reported participating said that they remained in YouthBuild for an average of 8 months, and about 50 percent of them reported completing the program, or graduating. About a quarter of the participants (22 percent) reported still being involved in YouthBuild at 12 months, and 28 percent had left the program without completing it.

- **Overall, participants rated their experiences in YouthBuild favorably, although some program components were rated more highly than others.**

Eighty-seven percent of participants rated their overall YouthBuild experiences favorably, meaning “very good” or “good.” They were also asked about each of the program services: The most highly rated services were construction or job training, counseling, and leadership training. Participants gave the YouthBuild staff favorable ratings related to understanding their needs and helping them to learn. They reported being slightly less satisfied with the services they received after leaving the program, such as assistance finding a job.

- **YouthBuild increased participation in education and training, even though a high percentage of young people in the control group sought out and participated in education and training activities.**

The program’s rigorous screening processes are designed to ensure that the only young people who enter the program are those who have a good chance of completing it. As a result, young people in both the program and control groups who made it through the screening process and into the study are probably more motivated and persistent than the typical young person who has not completed high school. By 30 months after enrollment, for example, 70 percent of the control group had participated in education-related services.

Despite this high rate of control group participation, however, young people in the program group were more likely than their control group counterparts to have participated in education and training, especially GED preparation, vocational training, and a variety of youth-development activities. For example, 75 percent of the program group reported participating in an education-related activity during the first 12 months, compared with 57 percent of the control group.

- **YouthBuild increased GED receipt and enrollment in two-year colleges.**

Most young people who entered the program had not completed high school, and a central goal of the program is to help these young people earn GEDs. The program did have a sizable effect on GED receipt. By 30 months, about 18 percent of the young people in the control group reported earning GEDs, compared with 31 percent of the program group, an increase of 14 percentage points (see Table ES.1). This estimated effect includes all young people in the program group, not accounting for the fact that 25 percent of them never participated in YouthBuild. The effect on young people who did participate in YouthBuild is 19 percentage points.

Getting a GED by itself may increase college attendance, but many YouthBuild programs explicitly focus on helping young people make the transition to postsecondary education. By 30 months, 22 percent of the young people in the program group reported enrolling in a two-year community college at some point since they entered the study, compared with 17 percent of the control group, an impact of 5 percentage points. This increase in survey-reported college attendance is corroborated by administrative records from the National Student Clearinghouse.

- **YouthBuild increased participation in vocational training and led to a small increase in the receipt of training certificates.**

Vocational training, primarily in construction, is another central part of the YouthBuild model. YouthBuild seems to have increased participation in vocational training both during the program period and afterward. In the first year, the program group was more likely than the control group to have participated in a job-skills training program. Many members of the program group did so at a YouthBuild location. When survey respondents were asked at 30 months about *formal* enrollment in vocational training at a technical, business, or trade school, YouthBuild still had an impact: 31 percent of the program group reported having enrolled in such training since entering the study, compared with 20 percent of the control group. Very few young people reported obtaining vocational certificates by Month 30: 4 percent of the program group and 2 percent of the control group.

**Table ES.1**  
**Impacts on Key Outcomes at 30 Months**

Outcome	YouthBuild Group	Control Group	Difference (Impact)
<b><u>Education and training (%)</u></b>			
Earned a GED	31.2	17.5	13.7 ***
Enrolled in vocational school since random assignment	30.8	20.4	10.3 ***
Received a trade license/training certificate	4.1	2.1	2.0 **
Enrolled in postsecondary courses since random assignment	23.6	18.1	5.6 ***
<b><u>Work and earnings</u></b>			
Employed at Month 30 (%)	44.4	44.8	-0.4
Average weekly earnings (\$)	150.2	134.5	15.7 *
<b><u>Youth development</u></b>			
Civic engagement <sup>a</sup> (%)	92.2	88.6	3.6 ***
Self-esteem scale <sup>b</sup>	3.3	3.3	0.0
<b><u>Criminal justice involvement (%)</u></b>			
Arrested since random assignment	27.6	26.4	1.3
Convicted since random assignment	15.7	14.1	1.6
Sample size (total = 2,808)	1,830	978	

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on responses to the 30-month survey.

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

<sup>a</sup>"Civic engagement" covers volunteering, being registered to vote at the time of the survey, having voted, and being involved in politics or local community activities.

<sup>b</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 led to a small increase in employment rates during Year 2, and a small increase in survey-reported wages and earnings at 30 months.**

The opportunities for education and training in YouthBuild and the impact the program had on GED receipt should help participating young people to find jobs after completing the program. At the time of the 30-month survey, just over 40 percent of respondents in the program group

and the control group were employed; the program had no effect on employment reported on the survey. However, young people in the program group reported earning higher wages. The program led to an increase of 3 percentage points in the proportion of young people who reported earning at least \$10 per hour at their current jobs (not shown in the table). These higher hourly wages also translated into higher weekly earnings.

Data from the unemployment insurance system (not shown in the table) present a fuller picture over time. During the first year, while young people were participating in YouthBuild, the program led to a reduction in employment and earnings relative to the control group (whose members were less likely to be enrolled in a program and thus were more available to work). However, by Year 2, there was no difference in earnings between the two groups, and the program group had somewhat higher employment rates. Longer-term follow-up presented in the final report will assess whether the program group pulls farther ahead over time.

- **YouthBuild increased civic engagement, particularly volunteering, but had few effects on other measures of youth development or attitudes.**

YouthBuild has been a leader in integrating youth development into its programs by promoting leadership and community service. In addition, the programs receiving CNCS funding strongly emphasize community service. At 30 months, members of the YouthBuild group were more likely than members of the control group to report that they had volunteered or been involved in politics or local community activities. The largest impact occurred on volunteering: 54 percent of the program group reported volunteering, compared with only 31 percent of the control group (not shown).

A number of questions were included in the surveys to capture other aspects of youth development, such as self-esteem, self-confidence, feelings about the future, and feelings of social support. YouthBuild had no effect on responses to these questions. Other research on youth programs suggests that it is difficult to create lasting changes in many of these measures.<sup>5</sup>

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

Participation in YouthBuild may lead to a number of positive changes for participants through effects on education, work, and youth development. For example, program participation should reduce the amount of time that young people spend hanging out idle, and thus reduce their opportunities to engage in risky and unhealthy activities. Yet at 30 months, the program had no effect on arrest or conviction rates. About 25 percent of the young people in the

---

<sup>5</sup>Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer Appleton Gootman, eds., *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2002).

study (in the program and control groups) reported that they had been arrested since they entered the study. Moreover, the program did lead to increases of about 5 percentage points in rates of self-reported alcohol and drug use (not shown in the table). It will be important to track whether these effects persist.

## Conclusion

The findings presented here show that YouthBuild led to a number of positive effects, most consistently in the area of education and training. The program led to notable increases in GED receipt and participation in vocational training, and positive but small effects on college enrollment. A later report will examine whether these early increases in education and training lead to longer-term gains in work and earnings.

The research to date on youth programs has provided mixed results. Among the numerous programs studied, most increased the rate at which participants earned GEDs or other credentials, and had mixed effects on work and earnings.<sup>6</sup> The effects found here follow suit. They are similar to or more positive than findings from other nonresidential programs, but somewhat smaller than the interim effects found for more intensive, residential programs, such as Job Corps and National Guard Youth ChalleNGe.

Although it is too early to make judgements about YouthBuild's effects overall, the findings here suggest that there may be room for improvement in at least a few areas: helping participants find jobs, preparing them for the transition to postsecondary education, and maintaining contact with them after they leave the program. In some cases, many programs are already beginning to make changes that are likely to strengthen their impact — for example, many are beginning to emphasize more heavily their efforts to create connections with colleges. Similarly, many programs are beginning to offer vocational training not only in construction but in other areas as well, for example in information technology and health care.

---

<sup>6</sup>See George Cave, Hans Bos, Fred Doolittle, and Cyril Toussaint, *JOBSTART: Final Report on a Program for School Dropouts* (New York: MDRC, 1993); JoAnn Jastrzab, Julie Masker, John Blomquist, and Larry Orr, *Evaluation of National and Community Service Programs. Impacts of Service: Final Report on the Evaluation of American Conservation and Youth Service Corps* (Washington, DC: Corporation for National Service, 1996); Cynthia Miller, Johannes M. Bos, Kristin E. Porter, Fannie M. Tseng, and Yasuyo Abe, *The Challenge of Repeating Success in a Changing World: Final Report on the Center for Employment Training Replication Sites* (New York: MDRC, 2005); Cristofer Price, Julie Williams, Laura Simpson, JoAnn Jastrzab, and Carrie Markovitz, *National Evaluation of Youth Corps: Findings at Follow-Up* (Washington, DC: Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Strategy and Special Initiatives, 2011); Peter Z. Schochet, John Burghardt, and Sheena McConnell, "Does Job Corps Work? Impact Findings from the National Job Corps Study," *American Economic Review* 98, 5 (2008): 1,864-1,886; Megan Millenky, Dan Bloom, Sara Muller-Ravett, and Joseph Broadus, *Staying on Course: Three-Year Results of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Evaluation* (New York: MDRC, 2011).

Finally, when interpreting the program's effects, it is important to keep in mind two facts about the context. First, the effects presented here are estimated by comparing YouthBuild participants with similarly motivated young people who sought out other services in their communities. They are not estimated by comparing YouthBuild participants with a group who received no services. For this reason, the effects presented here are not of YouthBuild compared with no services, but of YouthBuild compared with other services for young people. Second, the follow-up period for this report was a time when many areas were still recovering slowly from the national recession that began in 2007, and when the national unemployment rate was still high for less-educated young people. One of YouthBuild's goals is to help these young people get an early advantage in the labor market. A later report will assess whether the program achieves that goal.