



Making

Their Way



SUMMARY REPORT ON THE YOUTH VILLAGES
TRANSITIONAL LIVING EVALUATION



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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

December 2018

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MDRC's evaluation of the Transitional Living program operated by Youth Villages is being funded through grants from The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Dissemination of MDRC publications is supported by the following funders that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, Daniel and Corinne Goldman, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc., The JBP Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, Laura and John Arnold Foundation, Sandler Foundation, and The Starr Foundation.

In addition, earnings from the MDRC Endowment help sustain our dissemination efforts. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

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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 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 tested 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 young people make a successful transition to adulthood by providing intensive, individualized, and clinically focused case management, support, and counseling.

The evaluation used a rigorous random assignment design and is set in Tennessee, where Youth Villages, which is committed to building evidence that could help improve its effectiveness, operates its largest Transitional Living program. Researchers worked with the program, which did not have the resources to enroll all the young people in need of its services, to randomly assign more than 1,300 eligible young people to either a program group, which was offered the Transitional Living program services, or to a control group that was not offered those services. Using survey and administrative data, the evaluation team measured outcomes for both groups over time to assess whether Transitional Living services led to better outcomes for the program group compared with the control group’s outcomes. This report, which draws from earlier reports, summarizes the main findings from the evaluation.

The Transitional Living program was well implemented, and a substantial portion of program group members received services at the expected dosage. The program group also received substantially more services than the control group. In the first year of follow-up, the program improved outcomes in three of the six domains that it was designed to affect. It boosted earnings, increased housing stability and economic well-being, and improved some outcomes related to health and safety. However, the program did not improve outcomes in the areas of education, social support, or criminal involvement.

Longer-term data were only available to assess two-year impacts in three of the original six domains: education, employment and earnings, and criminal involvement. During the second year of follow-up, Transitional Living did not increase young people’s average earnings, but it did have a modest, positive effect at some earnings levels and it led to modest increases in employment and earnings over the full two-year study period. Statistically significant impacts in the education and criminal involvement domains did not emerge in Year 2, spurring Youth Villages’ ongoing efforts to strengthen its program offerings in these areas.

These results indicate that the Transitional Living program can improve some short-term 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. It will be critically important to build on these initial successes to help secure the future life outcomes of participants.

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Preface

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a critical and often challenging time, especially for young people who have been in the foster care or juvenile justice system who often navigate this difficult period without the financial, emotional, or social support of parents that most children this age draw upon well into their twenties. These challenges are often compounded by low levels of education, minimal formal work history, mental health and substance abuse problems, weak social support, extreme poverty, and housing instability. Moreover, many of these young people suffer from the lingering effects of childhood trauma and the limited capacities of government systems that are charged with protecting them. Given such circumstances, it is not surprising that they often struggle in multiple ways as they enter adulthood.

One program designed to help is YVLifeSet, formerly the Youth Villages Transitional Living program. It offers intensive case management, support, and counseling on issues related to housing, employment, education, life skills, and behavioral health to young people who are transitioning from foster care or juvenile justice custody. Taken together, the one- and two-year results of the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation, conducted in the state of Tennessee, show that the program can make positive differences in the lives of young adults who were in foster care or juvenile justice care as teenagers. Those who were offered the program's services experienced improved earnings, a decline in homelessness and material hardship, and better mental health than those who were not offered program services. With these impacts, the program helped to stabilize many of its participants as they made the transition to adulthood. At the same time, the program did not affect outcomes in other important areas, such as educational attainment and criminal justice involvement.

As an organization committed to continuous learning and program improvement, Youth Villages is working to strengthen the YVLifeSet model by testing new strategies to enhance its positive effects on the young people it serves. It is improving the program's initial assessment process to better tailor services to participants, increasing assistance to young people who are at high risk of criminal justice involvement, formalizing the handoffs to post-secondary education and employment, and ramping up its technological capabilities to improve data collection and service delivery.

YVLifeSet is the rare program making a difference at scale for foster care and juvenile justice involved young people who are negotiating the transition to adulthood. It is critical that we continue to learn with its staff and its participants as it expands to additional states and implements program improvement strategies and other services for young people who lack strong family support and life skills.

Gordon L. Berlin
President, MDRC

Acknowledgments

This report and the larger evaluation would not have been possible without the support of many individuals and organizations. In particular, the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation and the production of this report were funded by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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 drafts of earlier reports in this project. 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. Anaga Dalal edited the report, Abby Durgan checked and formatted the tables, and Carolyn Thomas and Ann Kottner 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

Introduction

Large numbers of young people in the United States were in foster care or in juvenile justice custody as teenagers, and many of them have a difficult time making a successful transition to independent adulthood as they leave these systems. Most of them faced a number of disadvantages during childhood and often experience poor outcomes across several domains relative to their peers as they become adults.¹ While government funding to help these groups has increased, few of the programs that have been rigorously evaluated have been found to improve outcomes.

To advance knowledge in this area, the Youth Villages program sought an independent evaluation of its Transitional Living program — now known as “YVLifeSet” — which is one example of an “independent living” program, or a program intended to help vulnerable young people become self-sufficient.² The Transitional Living program aims to help young men and women make the transition to adulthood by providing intensive, individualized, and clinically focused case management, support, and counseling. The evaluation used a rigorous random assignment design in which study sample members were assigned 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 funded the evaluation, which was led by MDRC in concert with Mark Courtney of the University of Chicago.

This report summarizes three previous reports. The first of these reports details the Transitional Living program model and assesses its implementation. The second report analyzes the one-year impacts of the program on outcomes in six domains: education; employment and earnings; housing stability and economic well-being; social support; health and safety; and criminal involvement. The third report examines the program’s impact after two years on outcomes in three of the original six domains — education, employment and earnings, and criminal involvement — for which longer term data were available; and provides information about the costs of operating the Transitional Living program.³

As discussed in more detail below, key findings include:

- 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 (that is, level and intensity).

¹Barbell and Freundlich (2001); Chung, Little, and Steinberg (2005); Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, and Raap, (2010).

²The Transitional Living program was renamed “YVLifeSet” in April 2015. Because the name did not change until after the study period ended, this report refers to the program as “Transitional Living.”

³See Manno, Jacobs, Alson, and Skemer (2014) for a detailed discussion of the Transitional Living model and its implementation; see Valentine, Skemer, and Courtney (2015) for a detailed discussion of the one-year impact results; and, see Skemer and Valentine (2016) for a detailed discussion of the two-year impact results and program costs.

- There were large, statistically significant differences between the program and control groups in terms of the amount of services they received.⁴
- In the first year of follow-up, 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 affect. The program boosted earnings, increased housing stability and economic well-being, and improved some of the primary outcomes related to the health and safety of young people in the study. However, it did not significantly improve outcomes in the areas of education, social support, or criminal involvement.
- Longer-term data were only available to assess two-year impacts in three of the original six domains: education, employment and earnings, and criminal involvement. During the second year of follow-up, Transitional Living did not increase young people's *average* earnings, but it had a modest, positive effect at some earnings levels. Statistically significant impacts in the education and criminal involvement domains did not emerge in Year 2.
- The impacts of Transitional Living were consistent across different subgroups of young people.

Overall, the results suggest that the Transitional Living program was better able to improve outcomes related to immediate needs—such as housing, food, clothing, and avoiding violent relationships—than less immediate outcomes, such as educational attainment. Perhaps the staff time and resources that were required to address immediate needs left less time to address other issues. Nevertheless, Transitional Living affected a broad range of outcomes in some very important domains for young people who are experiencing the transition to adulthood. These findings are particularly noteworthy, given how few other programs have been shown to improve outcomes among young adults formerly in foster care or juvenile justice custody.

As noted above, this report does not include two-year results for three domains that were included in the one-year analysis — housing stability and economic well-being, social support, and health and safety — because administrative data for those domains do not exist, are difficult to obtain, or do not fully measure relevant outcomes. Therefore, this report provides only a partial picture of the two-year impacts of the Transitional Living program, particularly since the one-year analysis showed significant impacts on outcomes in two of the excluded domains for which two-year data are not available: housing stability and economic well-being as well as health and safety.

⁴Statistically significant impacts are those that are larger than would generally be expected if the program had no true effect; thus, they are likely attributable to the offer of the program services.

Background and Policy Context

For those who have spent time in foster care or the juvenile justice system, or both, the transition from adolescence to adulthood can be particularly challenging. Such young people often contend with low levels of educational attainment, minimal formal work experience, mental health and substance use problems, weak social support, extreme poverty, and housing instability.⁵

Recent federal legislation has increased the funding of services for young people who are aging out of foster care. The John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 gave states more funding to support independent living services, room and board, and Medicaid for young people in foster care up to age 21.⁶ The subsequent Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 provided funding for states to extend foster care from age 18 to age 21 for eligible young people and to further expand independent living services. However, the availability and extent of these services vary widely by state depending on whether and how states choose to take advantage of federal funds.

Services for young people who are leaving juvenile justice placements have not been funded as consistently as services for those leaving foster care, though some young people who have been in juvenile justice custody are eligible for services funded by the Chafee and Fostering Connections Acts. In addition, a general focus on “reentry” services for adults leaving prison and jail has led to federal funding to serve young people with a juvenile justice history.

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 young people with a history of foster care, and among those, three did not find any statistically significant impacts—that is, impacts that are larger than would generally be expected if the program had no true effect.⁷ Rigorous evaluations of programs for young people in juvenile justice custody 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.⁸ 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 that was established in 1986. Youth Villages operates a variety of residential and community-based programs serving more than 25,000 young people each year in 15 states.

⁵Courtney et al. (2007).

⁶Medicaid provisions under the Chafee Act have now been superseded by those of the Affordable Care Act, under which all young people in foster care on their 18th birthday are eligible for Medicaid up to age 26.

⁷Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) (n.d.).

⁸See, for example, Lipsey, Landenberger, and Wilson (2007); Botvin et al. (1990).

Transitional Living program services are expected to last an average of nine months. The program starts with assessments and the development of an individualized treatment plan that considers each participant's particular needs and goals. The bulk of the services are then provided during weekly, hour-long Transitional Living sessions with a case manager called a "TL Specialist," who typically serves only eight young people at a time. Sessions usually take place in a young person's home or community.

TL Specialists are expected to use three methodologies outlined in the program treatment manual: evidence-informed tools, counseling, and action-oriented activities. Evidence-informed tools include specific curricula that cover topics like money management and job-seeking skills, as well as behavioral treatment strategies aimed at, for instance, helping participants overcome substance abuse problems. Counseling involves discussions between each participant and TL Specialist to address problems that may be impeding the young person's progress toward stated goals. 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.

In addition, all program participants are screened for trauma. A cognitive behavioral therapy program for trauma victims consists of a 12- to 20-week course of therapy offered by specially trained Youth Villages staff. TL Specialists may also refer participants to other services in the community, such as General Educational Development (GED) classes, specialized mental health services, or housing services. TL Specialists also have access to some flexible funds to support those who need money for expenses such as purchasing appropriate clothing for interviews or an apartment application fee. They also encourage young people to participate in monthly group social and learning activities with others in the program. Finally, educational/vocational coordinators are available to provide extra support to young people who want to go to college, take vocational training, or find a job.

The Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation

The Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation assessed the impacts of the Transitional Living program in Tennessee. The study sample includes men and women ages 18 to 24 who were living in Tennessee and who had left foster care or juvenile justice custody as teenagers or were aging out at 18. The evaluation employed 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; 60 percent of the participants in the study were assigned to this group.
- **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; 40 percent of the participants in the study were assigned to this group.⁹

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 the program group than for 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 for the one-year impact analysis 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 young person, 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 research team collected administrative data covering the full two-year follow-up period for three of those six domains: education, using postsecondary enrollment data from the National Student Clearinghouse; employment and earnings, using unemployment insurance data from the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development; and criminal involvement, using arrest and conviction data from the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation.

Like other young people with histories of foster care or juvenile justice custody, those 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. Young people 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 young people had experienced both types of custody.

Program Implementation and Service Receipt Differences Between the Two Research Groups

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 services that program group members received.

⁹While 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.

- **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.**

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 young people on their caseloads. Young people 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.

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 young people 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, young people 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 within each of the six domains, discussed below, as well as secondary outcomes. The primary outcomes selected for this analysis are broader, more comprehensive measures. Secondary outcomes provide additional detail about where impacts on primary outcomes were concentrated. As a result,

conclusions about the effectiveness of the Transitional Living program in each domain hinge on the impact estimates for primary outcomes.

Table 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.

- **In Year 1, Transitional Living boosted earnings, increased housing stability and economic well-being, and improved some of the primary outcomes related to health and safety. Modest impacts on employment and earnings continued into Year 2. Data are not available to assess whether impacts in the other two domains also persisted.**

As the first panel of Table 1 shows, the program led to a statistically significant increase of over \$600 in self-reported earnings in the year before the survey interview, the primary outcome in the employment and earnings domain in Year 1. This difference was driven, at least in part, by an increase in the percentage of young people who were employed, particularly in part-time work, during the one-year follow-up period (not shown in table). No statistically significant differences between the program and control groups were observed in average total earnings when administrative data were used. Total earnings for both research groups hovered at about \$5,000, with earnings increasing from about \$2,000 in Year 1 to about \$3,000 in Year 2. However, administrative data show a modest, positive impact at some earnings levels. Focusing on Year 2, the Transitional Living program had a statistically significant impact of 6 percentage points on the proportion of young people earning \$2,500 or more. Notably, earnings levels based on administrative data were quite low for both research groups, underscoring the level of disadvantage experienced by young people in the study.

Transitional Living also led to statistically significant reductions in housing instability and economic hardship in the first year of follow-up. Housing instability was measured using a scale that is calculated as the number of indicators of housing instability that a young person 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 young person 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 young people who did not have necessary clothing or shoes and the percentage of young people who had delayed paying a bill to buy food (not shown in table). Unfortunately, data are not available to assess whether these impacts continued into Year 2.

The health and safety results, which are also only available for Year 1, were mixed, as Transitional Living significantly improved two of the five primary outcomes in this domain. The

Table 1
Impacts on Employment and Earnings, Housing Stability and Economic Well-Being, and Health and Safety

Primary Outcome, by Domain	Program Group	Control Group	Diff. (Impact)	Effect Size	P-Value
<u>Employment and earnings (Years 1 and 2)</u>					
Self-reported formal earnings (Year 1) (\$) ^a	4,099	3,488	611 **	0.12	0.043
Total earnings (\$) ^b	5,240	5,016	224	0.03	0.555
Year 1	2,233	2,130	103	0.03	0.562
Year 2	3,006	2,885	121	0.02	0.641
Year 1 earnings (%) ^b					
\$2,500 or more	30.5	25.5	5.1 **	0.12	0.035
\$5,000 or more	16.7	13.4	3.3 *	0.10	0.083
\$7,500 or more	9.0	7.9	1.1	0.04	0.462
Year 2 earnings (%) ^b					
\$2,500 or more	36.6	30.3	6.3 **	0.14	0.016
\$5,000 or more	22.9	19.2	3.7	0.09	0.105
\$7,500 or more	14.2	13.1	1.1	0.03	0.566
<u>Housing stability and economic well-being (Year 1)</u>					
Score on housing instability scale ^c	0.98	1.20	-0.22 ***	-0.16	0.005
Score on economic hardship scale ^d	1.28	1.48	-0.21 **	-0.13	0.022
<u>Health and safety (Year 1)</u>					
Score on mental health problems scale ^e	9.78	11.21	-1.43 **	-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 ^f (%)	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	

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Primary Outcome, by Domain	Program Group	Control Group	Difference (Impact)	Effect Size	P-Value
Was robbed or assaulted ^g (%)	24.4	24.2	0.2	0.01	0.929
Partner violence (%)				**	0.021
In a violent relationship ^h	15.1	21.5	-6.4	-0.16	
In a nonviolent relationship	38.6	36.3	2.3	0.05	
Not in a relationship	46.3	42.2	4.1	0.08	
Survey sample size (total = 1,114)	659	455			
Administrative data sample size ⁱ (total = 1,305)	778	527			

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on responses to the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation 12-Month Survey and unemployment insurance quarterly earnings data from the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

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.

^aThis 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.

^bMeasured using unemployment insurance data. These data are quarter-based; thus, the two-year follow-up period in this table does not necessarily represent the 24 months following random assignment. Rather, the follow-up period represents the eight quarters following the quarter in which participants were randomly assigned.

^cThe 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.

^dThe 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.

^eThe 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.

^fThis 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.

^g"Assaulted" is defined as attacked, beaten, or sexually victimized.

^hA "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.

ⁱValid social security numbers were missing for 17 sample members, for whom employment and earnings data are therefore missing.

program improved mental health, as indicated by the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales, a measure of the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress that young people were experiencing at the time of the survey interview. It also reduced the percentage of young people who were in violent relationships. Specifically, close to 22 percent of the young people in the control group were in violent relationships at the time of the survey, compared with 15 percent of young people in the program group. 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 during Year 1.

- **Statistically significant effects were not observed in Year 1 in the education, social support, and criminal involvement domains, and did not emerge in Year 2 (though social support was measured in Year 1 only).**

Table 2 shows the results in the three remaining domains: education, social support, and criminal involvement. Transitional Living did not produce statistically significant impacts on primary outcomes in the education domain. Just over half of both groups had obtained a high school diploma by one year following their enrollment in the study, while about one-sixth had obtained a General Educational Development (GED) Certificate. Only about one-tenth of both groups had participated in vocational training during that year. Finally, about one-fourth of both program and control group members enrolled in a postsecondary institution at some point in the two years following study enrollment; for both research groups, enrollment rates declined in Year 2 from the levels observed in Year 1.

The program also did not lead to statistically significant improvements in Year 1 in the primary outcomes in the social support domain (data for Year 2 are not available). The first primary outcome, the social support scale, is calculated as the average number of people to whom a young person could turn for help. The scale is constructed as a mean of responses to seven intentionally open-ended survey questions that ask about the number of people a sample member can count on for various types of support. This support includes invitations to go out and do things; guidance with budgeting or money problems; advice about important matters in their lives; help with transportation; a shoulder to lean on when he or she is feeling low; assistance with small favors; and borrowing money in an emergency. In addition, a very high percentage of young people in both the program and control groups indicated that they were very close to at least one adult, with no significant difference between groups for that outcome.

Finally, Transitional Living did not significantly reduce criminal involvement over the two-year follow-up period. The one-year survey data show that there was not a significant difference between research groups in the number of behaviors (out of 10 types) that young people exhibited (for example, carrying a gun or stealing) or in the percentage of young people who had spent at least one night in jail in the year before the survey interview. In addition, an analysis of administrative data shows no statistically significant differences between program and control group members in their rates of arrest or conviction. Just under half of the members of both groups were arrested at some point in the two years following study enrollment. About one-third of sample members were arrested in Year 1, and one-third in Year 2.

Table 2
Impacts on Education, Social Support, and Criminal Involvement

Primary Outcome, by Domain	Program Group	Control Group	Difference (Impact)	Effect Size	P-Value
<u>Education (Years 1 and 2) (%)</u>					
Has high school diploma (Year 1)	55.7	52.5	3.2	0.06	0.233
Has GED certificate (Year 1)	15.9	17.2	-1.3	-0.03	0.571
Participated in vocational training (Year 1)	11.8	8.9	2.8	0.10	0.139
Enrolled in a postsecondary institution (%)	22.0	25.4	-3.4	-0.08	0.111
Year 1	18.9	18.4	0.4	0.01	0.821
Year 2	11.4	13.6	-2.2	-0.07	0.212
<u>Social support (Year 1)</u>					
Score on social support scale ^a	4.37	4.20	0.17	0.05	0.421
Very close to an adult ^b (%)	92.0	91.2	0.8	0.03	0.639
<u>Criminal involvement (Years 1 and 2)</u>					
Score on criminal behavior scale ^c	0.64	0.60	0.03	0.03	0.664
Spent at least one night in jail or prison (%)	23.1	25.2	-2.1	-0.05	0.405
Arrested (%)	47.7	47.6	0.1	0.00	0.972
Year 1	30.7	31.1	-0.4	-0.01	0.877
Year 2	34.0	34.9	-0.9	-0.02	0.721
Convicted of a crime (%)	19.7	17.7	2.0	0.05	0.350
Year 1	10.5	9.5	1.0	0.03	0.564
Year 2	13.4	12.6	0.9	0.03	0.635
Survey sample size (total = 1,114)	659	455			
Administrative data sample size (total = 1,322)	788	534			

(continued)

Convictions were less common: About one-fifth of both research groups were convicted of a crime during the two years following study enrollment. Convictions for serious crime were rarer still (conviction class and categories are not shown in table). Only six percent of program group members and five percent of control group members were convicted of a felony, the more serious conviction class. Sixteen percent of program group members and 15 percent of control

Table 2 (continued)

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on responses to the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation 12-Month Survey, postsecondary education data from the National Student Clearinghouse, and criminal history data from the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation.

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.

^aThe 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.

^bThe “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.

^cThe 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 exchange for having sexual relations. The scale ranges from 0 to 10.

group members were convicted of a misdemeanor. Comparable, small proportions of program and control group members were convicted of violent, property, drug, and public order crimes in the two years after they enrolled in the study. Public order crimes, usually considered to be less serious offenses, were most common. In general, most of the crimes committed by members of the study sample were minor in nature, and many arrests did not have associated convictions. In other words, crime, and especially serious crime, was not a common outcome for the young people in either group.

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

There were almost no statistically significant differences in impacts by history of juvenile justice custody, by urban versus nonurban setting, by whether young people had been receiving extended foster care services at baseline, or by subgroups of young people based on a combination of key baseline characteristics such as the number of different placements in foster care or juvenile justice custody, arrest history, and employment history, among others. That is, the program appears to be equally effective across all of the subgroups studied.¹⁰

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 systems. The findings presented in this report have important implications for future policymaking and research.

¹⁰See Valentine, Skemer and Courtney (2015) for more detailed information about the various subgroups and how they were created.

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 young people 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 domain applied to all young people in the program. For example, some young people 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 young people. 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 young people with either foster care or juvenile justice experience (or both).

The results suggest that the Transitional Living program was able to improve outcomes related to immediate needs, such as housing, food, clothing, and avoiding violent relationships, but was not as successful in affecting less immediate outcomes, such as educational attainment. Given the challenges that these young people must overcome, it may be that addressing the basic needs of participants requires a good deal of staff time and resources. Accordingly, less time may be left to address other issues. Nevertheless, Transitional Living affected a broad range of outcomes in some very important domains for young people who are experiencing the transition to adulthood. These findings are particularly noteworthy, given how few other programs have been shown to improve outcomes among young adults formerly in foster care or juvenile justice custody. The results of this study provide evidence that interventions are available that can lessen some of the difficulties that many of these young people face.

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 young people 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 young people 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 young people who have been in juvenile justice custody. 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 young people compared with rural young people, 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 for young people who have aged out of their state's system.

In addition, it is likely that the individuals who were recruited into the study were relatively stable, motivated, or higher-functioning compared with young people 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 the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services) of young people with histories of state custody, many of these young people could not be reached or did not show an interest in the services. The requirement that all young people be at least 18 to consent to enrolling in the study may also have made it more difficult to enroll some relatively less stable young people, who might have been easier to engage earlier. In addition, because the program is not intended for individuals with a history of serious violence, intense emotional problems, or other “rule-out” criteria, young people who fell into those categories were not eligible for either the program or the evaluation. These selection mechanisms likely shaped the pool of young people 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 short-term 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. The results of this study provide evidence that interventions exist to effectively diminish some of the difficulties that many of these young people face upon aging out of foster care but suggest that longer term impacts may be more difficult to achieve.

Lessons Learned: How Youth Villages is Using Evaluation Findings to Advance Its Work

Youth Villages is an organization that emphasizes continuous learning and program improvement. As such, it is building on the evaluation findings documented in this report to strengthen the YVLifeSet model, formerly known as Transitional Living. This section outlines three specific steps that Youth Villages has taken so far: a review of its services related to criminal justice and education; refinements to its intake assessment process; and the launch of four new pilot projects that were designed to enhance the YVLifeSet model.

As a first step, clinical staff members at Youth Villages reviewed the cases of 496 program participants to better understand how program staff members were implementing services related to criminal justice and education. The intensive review process examined whether YVLifeSet specialists were completing expected interventions with participants, focusing sessions on clinically relevant discussions, and adjusting treatment plans in response to critical incidents — such as arrest, hospitalization, or assault — that occurred while participants were in the program. Management staff members at Youth Villages used feedback from this review to shape program enhancements that might improve outcomes for young adults.

Staff members from Youth Villages, with guidance from the Program Development Advisory Committee,¹¹ also revised YVLifeSet’s pre-enrollment assessment process to better target interventions and improve data collection methods for evaluations of future pilot tests. Specific improvements included changing the timing of assessments so that they could be completed over multiple sittings, before, during, and after program enrollment. In addition, assessment questions were altered and added to capture more details about a young person’s status and experiences with the child welfare and criminal justice systems. Youth Villages instituted the new assessment tool at all YVLifeSet sites upon completing a pilot test of it that revealed improvements to data quality and the enrollment process. The new assessment also seemed to encourage young people to become more actively involved in program services, at least initially.

Finally, Youth Villages launched four new pilot projects to appraise enhancements to the YVLifeSet model based on information from this evaluation and the subsequent case review, along with advisory committee guidance. The first project tested an adaptation of Collaborative Problem Solving, a therapeutic and collaborative problem-solving approach, which helps young people problem-solve, meet goals, and manage frustration, to address challenges related to education and criminal justice.

Youth Villages tested a second enhancement that provided legal education and representation. Another model was developed to test a mobile application technology that increases engagement with young adults, provides immediate access to important content,¹² streamlines communication between young adults and specialists, and helps to clarify the information that young adults provide about post-discharge outcomes. A final, fourth pilot test added an established behavioral therapy protocol known as Multisystemic Therapy for Emerging Adults (MST-EA) to YVLifeSet services. MST-EA provides intensive services to young adults with significant criminal justice involvement, substance abuse, or mental health issues. The results of these pilots will inform the next steps in YVLifeSet’s continuous program improvement process.

¹¹The Youth Villages’ Program Development Advisory committee is an outside group of experts who specialize in criminal justice and education programs for young adults.

¹²Such content included client-driven symptom monitoring and treatment planning, on-demand resources to meet clients’ basic needs, and crisis response forms that target a reduction in adverse critical incidents for young adults.

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Earlier MDRC Publications on the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation

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

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