

THE YOUTH OVERCOMING! PROGRAM

An Intervention to Reduce Incarceration and Reincarceration Among Young Adults

By Raul Armenta

Despite accounting for 12 percent of the U.S. population, young adults ages 18 to 24 accounted for nearly 20 percent of the people arrested for all causes in the United States in 2019, and have a higher probability of being reincarcerated than older age groups when they leave jail or prison.¹ California is a microcosm of these larger incarceration trends, with young adults overrepresented in its criminal legal system and likely to be reincarcerated after being released.² In Los Angeles (LA) County, approximately 9,000 young people have been referred to probation, with a disproportionate number of Black and Latino young people affected compared with their White peers.³

Significant evidence indicates that young adults have not yet reached a state of full neurological and cognitive maturity, shaping their decision-making.⁴ This fact may partly explain their overrepresentation in the legal system. Yet these young people are routinely processed by the same courts as older adults, overlooking their level of neurocognitive development—that is, their thinking and reasoning skills—and the extent to which they are able to make well-informed decisions. Additionally, young people’s involvement in the criminal legal system often leads to their growing distrust of the system when they perceive court outcomes as unfair.⁵

Various programs aim to reduce the involvement of young adults in the criminal legal system. These programs take into account the implications of standard court processes outlined above for young people as they attempt to implement the latest understanding of cognitive behavioral treatment, which asserts that helping young people change patterns of thoughts and emotions can support desired changes in behavior. Young people tend to respond positively to “credible-messenger” mentors—that is, mentors who share similar backgrounds to



the population they serve, including past involvement in the criminal legal system—who understand and respond appropriately to their different values, attitudes, and beliefs. Credible messengers also provide a sense of community and belonging that are critical at this stage of development.⁶ Programs employing credible-messenger mentors show promise for reducing reincarceration among young adults entangled in the criminal legal system.⁷

Youth Overcoming (YO!) is one such program aiming to serve young people who have been arrested, convicted, or incarcerated. It receives funding from the Senate Bill Community Corrections Performance Incentives Act (SB 678) and Assembly Bill 109. The LA County Justice, Care and Opportunities Department (JCOD), in partnership with the LA County Probation Department, invested these funds in YO! as a replacement for other programs for young people that were based on adult models of rehabilitation.⁸ MDRC conducted an exploratory study of two YO! program locations as part of a larger project that includes several implementation and outcome evaluations of JCOD’s reentry programs.⁹

This brief presents the findings from that study. It examines how program leaders, staff members, and participants experience the program, and describes successes and challenges across both program locations that could potentially inform program refinement and expansion going forward.

The YO! Program

YO! is a nine-month program in LA County designed to serve young adults ages 18 to 26 who have been arrested, convicted, or incarcerated. It is cohort-based, meaning young people enter as a group and move through the program together. Rooted in trauma theory—which examines the ways people process traumatic experiences—its objective is to “meet young people where they are” and integrate cognitive behavioral principles into a series of interventions to steer them away from antisocial behavior and strengthen their prosocial engagement with education, employment, and their community. The program emphasizes affirming young adults’ personal values to help them deal with challenging life events actively.

The YO! program is implemented at two different locations in LA County: Christ-Centered Ministries in South Los Angeles and The Catalyst Foundation in the Antelope Valley. (See Box 1.) Each location has a program manager who aims to understand and respond appropriately to participants’ diverse values, attitudes, and beliefs and who is responsible for coordinating the direction of YO! and credible-messenger staff members who recruit young people, conduct program intake, lead group sessions, handle case management, act as mentors, and help participants find social, medical, and mental health services. Each location has up to three credible-messenger staff members, contingent on the number of participants recruited. Each credible-messenger staff member manages a caseload of up to 20 participants.

The program’s service model is guided by a curriculum that explores the cognitive and emotional processing of trauma. That curriculum is designed to provide credible messengers with resources and knowledge to inform how they should approach providing young people with services, keeping in mind the traumas that participants may have experienced. It also provides credible messengers with tools for facilitating and managing interactions with participants either in one-on-one or group settings as they implement each model component listed below.

Box 1. Program Locations

South Los Angeles

The YO! program in South Los Angeles is located in the urban neighborhood of Inglewood in the southwestern region of LA County. YO! is implemented by Christ-Centered Ministries, a faith-based nonprofit organization that provides services including temporary housing, assistance searching for employment, medical care, and basic needs support for people experiencing homelessness, low incomes, substance use disorders, mental health issues, and reentry into the community after incarceration. Christ-Centered Ministries began implementing YO! in 2022. When MDRC visited in June 2023, it was serving its second incoming cohort.

The Antelope Valley

The YO! program in the Antelope Valley is based in the City of Lancaster, in the northern and more rural part of LA County. The only state prison in the county is in Lancaster. The program is operated by The Catalyst Foundation, which describes itself as “dedicated to decreasing the impact of abuse and trauma ... through direct service, public education, advocacy, policy reform, and empowerment of disenfranchised groups.”* Catalyst is a multiservice organization providing housing support, transportation, group and horticultural therapy, links to substance use disorder treatment programs, intensive clinical coordination, assistance with reentry into the community after incarceration, and in-prison programs. When MDRC visited in June 2023, it was serving its first incoming cohort.

*The Catalyst Foundation, “The Catalyst Foundation: Home,” (website: <http://www.catalystfdn.org/home.html>, 2024).

- **Case management:** Participants receive tailored support to address their specific needs, with weekly, individual, intensive case management sessions led by the credible-messenger staff members. Case management can occur in person or on the phone, depending on the participant’s availability.
- **Service navigation:** To help improve their health and well-being, program participants are connected to social, medical, and mental health services in the local community.
- **Credible-messenger mentoring:** Credible-messenger staff members develop strong and supportive relationships with YO! participants through shared experiences and understanding. Mentoring takes place in group settings or during one-on-one interactions and incorporates motivational interviewing—a communication style that involves active listening and guiding young people to explore and resolve ambivalence about their behavior, with the aim of eliciting positive behavioral change.
- **Group sessions:** Weekly sessions take place during the weekday and last 90 to 120 minutes with regular breaks. These sessions are centered on the psychological and emotional development of young adults, and educate participants in trauma theory to promote healthier behavioral patterns among them (for example, by improving their cognitive, emotional, social, and physical health). In the group sessions, credible messengers facilitate discussions with up to 10 program participants. The 36-week

curriculum includes various interactive and reflective elements, including handouts and assignments for participants to revisit and complete at their own pace, before the start of the next group session.

- **Participant stipends and incentives:** To promote their consistent attendance, program participants receive meals and financial stipends at every weekly group session and other incentives throughout the course of the program, totaling about \$900.

Study Methodology

This study explored the YO! model and its implementation through a series of one-on-one interviews conducted between June and November 2023 with YO! leaders, credible-messenger staff members, and young adults actively participating in the program. At The Catalyst Foundation, the research team interviewed 4 people in leadership roles or credible-messenger staff roles, and 4 young adult participants. At Christ-Centered Ministries, the research team interviewed 2 people in leadership roles or credible-messenger staff roles, and 2 young adult participants, for a total of 12 interviewees for the study. Young adult participants were chosen by credible-messenger staff members to highlight the diversity in their personal experiences and their connections to the program.

While leaders and credible-messenger staff members were interviewed once, the team conducted up to three follow-up interviews with YO! participants to hear about their experiences at different stages of the program (early, midway, and toward the end), and to gauge the consistencies over time in their perceptions, motivations, behaviors, relationships, and other factors related to the program. Interviews took place roughly every two months, primarily remotely, on Zoom.

The study also draws on hour-long observations of group sessions the research team conducted in person, once at each location, to shed light on the curriculum's content and how it was disseminated during the group sessions, paying particular attention to the way the group leader facilitated the session and the engagement among participants.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed.¹⁰ Additionally, observers of group sessions took notes on their visits and prepared brief summaries following them.

Findings

The subsections that follow describe how the program's components were implemented in both locations, and summarize the experiences of participants as recounted by YO! personnel and program participants.

Program Recruitment and Outreach

Both program locations approached recruitment similarly; both identified and recruited participants who had experienced arrest, conviction, or incarceration. The program was meant to have participants referred from the LA County Probation Department, but both program locations experienced challenges in reaching out to their local probation offices. While Christ-Centered Ministries' inaugural

group of participants came entirely from referrals from probation, when it was time to offer the program to a new incoming group, it did not receive those referrals. This reality required the program to adjust its recruitment plan to include referrals of eligible young adults from the active caseload of another program operated by Christ-Centered Ministries, also for people at risk of future involvement in the legal system.¹¹ The program also reached out directly to people at transit stops and in areas with people experiencing homelessness, among other places, and used social media to share information and communicate with young people about the program.

The Catalyst Foundation did all its recruitment by sharing information about YO! with young people at bus stops, food banks, college campuses, street intersections, skate parks, transit stops, grocery stores, and nearby community-based and nonprofit organizations. While Catalyst sought referrals from the local LA County probation office, it was unable to connect with probation officers on multiple occasions. YO! leaders indicated that the challenge might have stemmed from the probation officers' reluctance to meet with YO! credible-messenger staff members and learn about the program, or to allow them to display program flyers in the probation office lobby.

The Importance of YO! Personnel with Lived Experience Similar to Participants'

YO! hires people who have had experiences similar to participants—for example, people who have also interacted with the criminal legal system—so that they can engage young people authentically. The Catalyst Foundation and Christ-Centered Ministries regard this shared lived experience as critical to the success of the program. The intention of this model is to demonstrate to young people that like the credible messengers, they too can reclaim their lives and improve their well-being despite their past entanglement with the law. Acknowledging that many people with lived experience similar to participants' might not have formal educational credentials such as college degrees that might typically be required to serve young adults, the program provides opportunities for professional development and training in program management, case management, and cognitive behavioral interventions.

Most leaders and staff members interviewed said they had drawn on their lived experiences in their professional capacity. They said that being “relatable” and having “been through what they’ve been through” helped them keep the attention of young adults, and that they used that attention to “hopefully change people’s lives or get them to see where they can change their lives for the better, so they don’t end up in [the criminal legal system].”

YO! leaders and staff members at the two locations shared their experiences with participants in different ways, which seemed to strongly influence participants' sentiments about and perceptions of YO! staff. For example, staff members at The Catalyst Foundation were open about sharing their personal narratives, and YO! participants at Catalyst said they felt that staff members felt familiar to them and seemed authentic. They reported that the staff's transparency in telling their stories helped them feel more deeply connected to those staff members and helped them come to trust staff members over the course of the program.

Staff members at Christ-Centered Ministries were more reserved in sharing their personal experiences. One reported sharing lived experiences with young people in the third person, refraining from sharing too many details in the belief that doing so was not central to building rapport. Instead, Ministries' staff

members conversed with participants about popular trends, anime and comedy shows, social media, video games, and other topics they found relevant to the age group. While these approaches ensured some level of privacy and helped to maintain professional boundaries for the staff at Christ-Centered Ministries, the participants' perceptions and attitudes there were, while not necessarily negative, less positive than they were among participants at The Catalyst Foundation. These approaches might have shifted when one staff member was replaced by a new one about halfway through the program, and that change may have influenced participants' experiences.

Case Management

The Catalyst Foundation and Christ-Centered Ministries implemented individual case management to cater to the specific needs of each participant, and regularly checked in with participants in person, over the phone, or by text message. At both locations, case management was initiated shortly after recruitment and before group sessions officially began, so the program could create a care plan and provide some tailored support quickly.

At The Catalyst Foundation, case management usually began about a month before group sessions, with individual meetings between credible-messenger staff members and participants to build relationships and assess participants' needs. During these meetings, credible-messenger staff members and participants collaborated to develop personal SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound). These goals are supposed to align with the program's overall goals and to help participants reach their own. Participants reacted positively to developing SMART goals alongside credible messengers, indicating an interest in reaching these milestones. One participant referred to the goals as the "master plan," further stating, "[W]hen I'm not here, I'm striving to accomplish the short-term goals that we've established, me and the case manager here at Catalyst. So, we've put some goals in motion that I'm looking forward to accomplishing."

Case management at Christ-Centered Ministries was implemented a little differently. Most case management involved meeting young adults "where they were" in literal terms. For example, for participants who lived in the organization's interim housing, the YO! program credible messengers met young people at that location. The Ministries' general approach to case management, including for YO! participants, involved developing quarterly goals. For example, during the first three months of the YO! program, credible-messenger staff members encouraged participants to achieve a first milestone that involved obtaining documents (for example, retrieving a birth certificate, social security identification card, personal medical records, or driver's license). At this time, case management also focused on discussing the cognitive behavioral curriculum, developing a case plan and SMART goals, and seeking stable housing opportunities. The second quarter involved achieving practical goals such as building credit and financial literacy, fulfilling court mandates, securing public health insurance, and attending appointments with a primary care physician. The last three months of the program focused on seeking housing opportunities and the continual fulfillment of court mandates, among other goals.

Service Navigation

Both programs sought to make sure participants were aware of the resources available to them in their community to meet their needs in employment, housing, and other areas.

At The Catalyst Foundation, YO! credible-messenger staff members helped participants navigate services focused on behavioral support, employment, housing, and postsecondary education, among other areas. For instance, credible messengers arranged calls on behalf of participants who expressed an interest in attending community college, to inquire at Antelope Valley College about financial resources available and the enrollment process. In some cases, staff members also arranged transportation, such as Lyft or Uber rides, so participants could visit the campus. Several participants who were unfamiliar with the college enrollment process expressed gratitude for the support that credible messengers provided. One participant shared,

Sometimes your parents may not wanna help because they feel like you're an adult now, but then they never taught you. So, it takes people like these who's not even your family. But I'm gonna say, [they] hold your hand, where they basically guide you like a mentor. You know, it takes a village.

This help enrolling in college was one way Catalyst aimed to help participants improve their socioeconomic mobility. Other ways included referring participants to job placement and housing agencies, supporting application submissions, helping participants write résumés, and identifying other documents required to successfully navigate the job and housing markets. In other cases, staff members told participants about resource fairs that offered information on various community services, encouraging them to attend. Participants shared that service-navigation support allowed them to meet basic needs such as acquiring clothes for work, obtaining transportation to attend group sessions, getting food, and receiving medical checkups.

Christ-Centered Ministries included its service navigation in its quarterly milestone-based approach. As participants pursued their first quarterly milestones, staff members typically referred participants to employment-seeking services.¹² The last quarterly milestone included accommodating YO! participants to extend their stay at the Ministries' interim housing if needed.

Group Sessions

Catalyst and Ministries' staff members led group sessions based on the curriculum's facilitation manual and weekly topics. If participants were unable to attend group sessions, both sites offered make-up group sessions to allow them to complete assignments, cover missed topics, and satisfy attendance requirements for receiving their financial stipend. Make-up sessions were also made available during individual case management meetings.

Before a group session officially began at The Catalyst Foundation, participants secured their personal belongings in small lockers that Catalyst provided. While participants settled in, they were welcome to grab food or snacks. Group sessions also took place in a private room that was conducive to engagement and ensured privacy.

During the session researchers observed at Catalyst, participants were consistently engaged with the curriculum as the staff guided them in discussion of topics such as identifying trauma and group problem-solving. When participants seemed reluctant to take part in certain areas of discussion, staff members affirmed that it was fair for them to determine whether to participate and moved along to other topics. When there was an interactive opportunity for engagement in group problem-solving, the facilitator first shared examples in the form of personal narratives to break the ice.

In reflecting on their group session engagement during follow-up interviews, several participants from Catalyst described the sessions as a “safe space to be vulnerable.” One participant said,

[It] takes courage for all of the students to gather here because we’re all in different spaces of our lives. So, for the students to find this a safe space to want to engage in and share what’s going on in their personal life ... you still choose to be vulnerable. I really respect all the students in this classroom ... it really takes courage. And everybody shares from their own experiences and within their own timing. If someone doesn’t wanna share on a certain topic, it’s respected... [W]e come from different backgrounds, so you’re not raised like how I’m raised, I’m not raised like how you raised, but when we come in here, we set in the tone for each other as a unit, you feel me?

YO! at Christ-Centered Ministries also provided food and snacks and a private room for group sessions, and provided some additional, supplementary features as well: It gave young people access to desk-top computers for personal use and had two individual “quiet pods” that provided enclosed spaces for privacy and focus, where participants made audio recordings of their thoughts about the content of the group session or the handouts. This audio-recording practice helped participants process their emotions and informed staff about their developmental progress.

The observation of the first group session—focusing on orientation and setting rules with participants—took place in a space that includes a kitchenette where personnel from other Ministries programs walked through the session and disrupted attention. Several participants seemed reluctant to participate, perhaps on account of this setting with frequent distractions or limited privacy. At one point, one participant could not engage; he displayed high anxiety and a sense of uneasiness when a staff member asked him a question about the discussion, at which point he began to cry and stood near the exit door to find some comfort and safety. Recognizing his discomfort, the staff member thoughtfully redirected the discussion to other participants to help relieve the tension.

Participant Satisfaction Over Time

The follow-up interviews with YO! participants at The Catalyst Foundation and Christ-Centered Ministries revealed varying experiences in, satisfaction with, and sentiments about the program over time. Participants consistently reported positive engagement with the curriculum and the group sessions. Participants also reported that the curriculum was a significant factor in their social and emotional development and awareness.

While their engagement with the group sessions was consistently positive at both sites, some participants began to express varying, but decreased, satisfaction with service navigation over time. For

Catalyst, one participant described housing referrals as “dead-end linkage” because YO! repeatedly provided referrals to a housing service that was continually unsupportive, even though the staff member was aware of the situation: “[It] kind of feels like [the staff member is] not listening.” The frustration caused by referrals to the same housing service is perhaps an indication of the lack of available housing resources in the Antelope Valley.

Participants at Christ-Centered Ministries shared a similar trend in participant dissatisfaction with service navigation over the course of time. In part, the dissatisfaction stemmed from the turnaround time to follow up with service navigation. For instance, one participant followed up multiple times with staff for an update on the status of a job referral and received no response for a couple of weeks because no one had updated the participant’s phone number in his file. These experiences could be attributed to the staff turnover—replacing one credible-messenger staff member with another—which disrupted the continuity of service navigation. Nonetheless, delays such as this one influenced participants’ perception of credible-messenger staff and navigational support over time.

Considerations for Future Practice

YO! leaders and credible-messenger staff members at both The Catalyst Foundation and Christ-Centered Ministries consistently voiced a commitment to supporting young people who are entangled with the criminal legal system, and participants in both locations said they believed leaders and staff members were committed to that end. Staff members and leaders described their efforts to foster a sense of accountability and belonging, and to provide services appropriate for the developmental stages of emerging adults. They agreed that the YO! program benefits significantly from incorporating the lived experience of staff members and organizational leaders as a foundation for a shared experience with participants of similar backgrounds. Participants also said that they enjoyed the YO! program and hoped to continue their contact with organizational leaders and credible messengers even after it ended. This reaction suggests the staffing approach does create trust and could lead to more engagement.

To further enhance the YO! program, the providers at the two locations could consider exchanging implementation insights to draw on each other’s knowledge and experience implementing the same program model. Exchanging information could help credible-messenger staff members improve their knowledge of how to deliver the program and identify additional support mechanisms for young adults involved with the criminal legal system.

In addition, if feasible, providers could strengthen their relationships and networks in the youth justice landscape by carefully selecting referral partners and services based on participants’ experiences, fostering deeper relationships with those where participants have good experiences and diverting referrals from those that participants find unresponsive. Referrals to various organizations and external resources are important to YO!’s mission, and it is crucial to monitor how well those components are actually serving YO! participants, as their personal circumstances may differ from those of other populations who have not been involved in the criminal legal system or have other challenges that YO! participants may face. Furthermore, providers should continue to strengthen their relationships with the Probation Department as a means to increase referrals and expand their opportunity to support more young people.

Notes and References

- 1 The Annie E. Casey Foundation, "Adult Population by Age Group in United States," (website: <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/6538-adult-population-by-age-group#detailed/1/any/false/1095,2048,574,1729,37,871,870,573,869,36/117,2801,2802,2803/13515,13516>, 2023); Uniform Crime Reporting, "Arrests, Persons Under 15, 18, 21, and 25 Years of Age, 2019," (website: <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2019/crime-in-the-u.s.-2019/topic-pages/tables/table-41>, 2019); Matthew R. Durose and Leonardo Antenangeli, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 34 States in 2012: A 5-Year Follow-Up Period (2012–2017)* (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2021).
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- 4 Laurence Steinberg, "Risk Taking in Adolescence: New Perspectives from Brain and Behavioral Science," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 16, 2 (2007): 55–59; Elizabeth Cauffman and Laurence Steinberg, "(Im)maturity of Judgment in Adolescence: Why Adolescents May be Less Culpable Than Adults," *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* 18, 6 (2000): 741–760.
- 5 Laurence Steinberg, *Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014).
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- 7 Julia Lesnick, Laura S. Abrams, Cassandra Angel, and Elizabeth S. Barnert, "Credible Messenger Mentoring to Promote the Health of Youth Involved in the Juvenile Legal System: A Narrative Review," *Current Problems in Pediatric and Adolescent Health Care* 53, 6 (2023): 101435.
- 8 JCOD was established in 2022 to unify LA County's efforts to serve vulnerable people involved in the justice system through prevention, diversion, and reentry initiatives (that is, initiatives designed to prevent people from being incarcerated, divert them from incarceration, and help them reenter their communities after incarceration).
- 9 For more on this project, see MDRC, "Los Angeles County Reentry Integrated Services Project" (website: <https://www.mdrc.org/work/projects/los-angeles-county-reentry-integrated-services-project>, n.d.).
- 10 Interviews were recorded primarily to assist in note-taking and were professionally transcribed. Transcripts were coded and analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative methods software program designed to code interviews systematically. The research team used an iterative approach to code and analyze the data. While some codes were identified in advance, others emerged and developed during the analysis process. The coding scheme consisted of structural codes, reflecting important topics already established to explore, and thematic codes, tracing common themes and patterns that emerged in the initial and follow-up interviews (for example, a young person's level of satisfaction about group sessions over time).
- 11 This program—the Reentry Intensive Case Management Services program, which is also funded by JCOD and is being evaluated by MDRC—links people at risk of future involvement in the criminal legal system to community health workers. These health workers help clients navigate their way to a wide array of services and other forms of support. Participants may also be eligible for interim housing. See MDRC, "Los Angeles County Reentry Integrated Services Project" (website: <https://www.mdrc.org/work/projects/los-angeles-county-reentry-integrated-services-project>, 2024).
- 12 In particular, Christ-Centered Ministries referred participants to services from Chrysalis and INVEST. Chrysalis is a nonprofit, multiservice organization in LA County that assists people having difficulty

entering the workforce through a job-readiness program, individually tailored support, and temporary employment. The Los Angeles County Innovative Employment Solutions Program (INVEST) is a partnership among the Department of Economic Opportunity, LA County Probation, and JCOD to support individuals under probationary supervision. It is designed to address the complex range of employment and supportive service needs people may have and assist them in pursuing their employment and career goals. It is also the subject of an MDRC study. See Sophie Sanshory, “Supporting the Employment Goals of Individuals on Probation: Supportive Services in the Los Angeles County Innovative Employment Solutions Program” (website: <https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/supporting-employment-goals-individuals-probation>, 2023); Chrysalis, “Chrysalis: Home” (website: <https://www.changelives.org>, 2024).

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