

Randomized Controlled Trial Results



The largest program in the country showing multiple positive impacts for former foster youth



The MDRC study shows that former foster children who participated in the YVLifeSet program have a better chance to become successful, productive, independent adults.

MDRC's Study of YVLifeSet

Youth Villages' YVLifeSet program is undergoing a rigorous study by researchers, and their first report on the results shows that YVLifeSet has solutions for helping one of the country's most vulnerable populations — former foster youth — find more success as adults.

The study is conducted by MDRC, a national social services group, through a partnership with Youth Villages and the Tennessee Department of Children's Services. It is funded by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The study measures the Youth Villages program's effectiveness as compared to usual services available for young people who turn 18 and age out of state custody (foster care or juvenile justice) in Tennessee communities.

The randomized controlled study of the program's effectiveness in Tennessee began in 2010. With 1,322 youth enrolled, **it is the largest study of a program to help the aging-out or at-risk population in the United States.**

The Study's First Results

MDRC released the study's first results in May 2015. They show that the YVLifeSet program is one of very few in the country to demonstrate significant positive impact across many aspects of life for these very vulnerable youth. The study shows YVLifeSet boosted earnings, increased housing stability and economic well-being, and improved some outcomes related to health and safety for this population.

The study had a number of statistically significant positive impacts. Young people who received the YVLifeSet program had higher earnings and employment levels, increased housing stability and economic well-being, and improved mental health, including less anxiety, depression and stress. Key findings after one year of follow-up include:

- The program boosted earnings by 17%.
- It increased housing stability and economic well-being, including a 22% decrease in the likelihood of experiencing homelessness.
- It improved some of the primary outcomes related to health and safety, including improvements in mental health and a 30% decrease in intimate partner violence.
- The program was found to be equally effective across different subgroups of youth, including youth with and without histories of juvenile justice custody.

Significance of the Study Results

This is the largest random controlled trial ever done with this population — and it shows that YVLifeSet is one of the only programs that benefits this group of young people across many life aspects. These results show that the program may be beneficial to a significant number of the 23,000 young people who age out of state custody without ever being adopted or being reunited with their families. The program also can help the larger population of youth who are described as being “disconnected” or “at risk.”

Next Steps

In 2016, MDRC will release two-year impact findings based on administrative data in the education, employment and earnings, and criminal involvement domains, as well as findings from a benefit-cost analysis. The researchers believe some impacts will show up later for these young adults.

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization headquartered in New York City and Oakland, California, with more than 40 years of experience designing and evaluating education and social policy initiatives.

Who are the Study Investigators?

Erin Jacobs Valentine, Ph.D., is lead author of the MDRC study. Melanie Skemer is co-author, and Mark Courtney, Ph.D., is principal investigator for the study and professor of the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration. The country's premier researcher on life after foster care, Dr. Courtney says, "This study is hugely important. This program can clearly have an impact for aging-out and at-risk youth in many places in the country."

What is YVLifeSet?

In 1999, Youth Villages began providing a program to help former foster children make a successful transition to independent adulthood. The "transitional living" program was officially named YVLifeSet in early 2015.

The need for the program was, and is, great. About 23,000 children each year turn 18 and age out of state custody. The Midwest Study of Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth – the largest primary research on this vulnerable population – found that this group is less likely to succeed in adult life than their peers. They are more likely to experience homelessness and unemployment, more likely to be incarcerated, less likely to complete even a high school diploma, and more likely to be unemployed and have their own children at very young ages, often continuing the foster care cycle.

National Statistics on Youth Who Aged Out of State Custody



¹Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Lee, J., & Raap, M. (2010). Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at ages 23 and 24. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

²Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Cusick, G., Havlicek, J., Perez, A., & Keller, T. (2007) Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 21. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Youth Villages' YVLifeSet specialists help young people develop and achieve their own goals for the future. They help participants secure housing; pursue educational and employment goals; access health and mental health services; learn such independent living skills as budgeting, cooking, cleaning and shopping; and create and maintain healthy relationships with family and others.

The program is open to young people ages 17 to 22, most of whom participate for six to 12 months. Intensity is the key to the program's success. YVLifeSet specialists have small caseloads, working with only six to 10 young adults at a time. They meet face-to-face with the young people at least once a week and are on call 24/7 in case of emergencies.

- The YVLifeSet program has served more than 8,500 young adults since it began in 1999.
- Youth Villages employs more than 200 YVLifeSet specialists, supervisors and licensed clinical consultants.
- Youth Villages offers the program in Georgia, Massachusetts, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon and Tennessee.

"I think it's important to scale this program up and take it into other contexts. We don't have national child welfare systems; each state is different. This program was provided across the state of Tennessee, in rural and urban areas – and that's important. On the face of it, it ought to work in other contexts. This level of engagement with former foster youth just isn't what we typically see around the country. So it's important to try it and see. See if it succeeds in other contexts. I think if it does, it becomes harder for policymakers to justify not providing these services that work."

Dr. Mark Courtney, University of Chicago

FOR MORE INFORMATION: www.YVLifeSet.org

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Founded in 1986, Youth Villages is a leading national nonprofit dedicated to providing the most effective local solutions to help children with emotional and behavioral problems and their families live successfully. We help more than 23,000 children and families each year from more than 20 states. Since 1999, Youth Villages has helped more than 8,500 youth make a successful transition into adulthood through YVLifeSet. Youth Villages' proven approach for youth aging out of foster care, YVLifeSet involves a focus on strong relationships, measuring outcomes