

Executive Summary: Neighborhood Youth Center Program Evaluation: 2004

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The Center for Applied Research conducted an evaluation of the Neighborhood Youth Center Programs (NYCs) that were funded for the fiscal years 2001/2002 and 2002/2003. The NYCs were funded and administered by the Office of Policy and Management, State of Connecticut. Their purpose was to increase the range and extent of positive experiences for at-risk youth who lived in seven of Connecticut's largest cities (Bridgeport, Hartford, New Britain, New Haven, Norwalk, Stamford, and Waterbury). All NYCs provided recreational activities, leadership opportunities, skill training, and consistent contact with supportive adults and peers.

The evaluation team from the Center for Applied Research reviewed relevant literature on programs designed to foster positive youth development and finalized an evaluation plan based upon the review of this literature. The NYC evaluation project consisted of collecting information on youth attendance at different centers; conducting focus groups with parents in order to explore their overarching impressions of the centers; and, conducting an outcome evaluation to explore youth's satisfaction with the centers and to examine their psychosocial adjustment.

The results of the literature review on positive youth development (PDY) programs showed that NYCs included a number of PDY components. Specifically, each of these centers was conveniently located within urban neighborhoods and was open on the weekends and on the evenings. Further, each of the centers offered programs that provided opportunities for (a) getting help with schoolwork, (b) personal enrichment, and (c) skill training. In addition, the centers offered youth access to athletic/recreational programs and made an effort to involve parents and youth in the planning and management of the centers.

The results of the process evaluation indicated that the centers served a relatively low number of youth between the ages of twelve and eighteen and a relatively high number of younger children. In addition, the results showed that the centers differed considerably with respect to the numbers of youth they served during the average month and the numbers of youth they served on a daily basis.

The information collected during the focus groups with parents demonstrated that parents had very favorable views of the centers. They generally liked the staff and felt relieved to have a place that their children could attend. In addition, parents felt that the centers were responsive to their needs and to the needs of their children, and they observed positive changes in their children.

The results of the outcome evaluation showed that youth enjoyed attending the centers and they felt that they were helped by the centers. In addition, the youth who had positive attitudes towards the centers and favorable experiences with staff demonstrated relatively high levels of psychosocial adjustment. Put another way, the youth who scored highest on the indicators of psychosocial adjustment were those same youth who found the centers helpful, were satisfied with the centers and experienced positive and supportive connections to the staff at the centers. Lastly, the youth involved with the centers over time showed positive changes in their attitudes towards school. These data, taken together, all speak to the positive ways in which the NYC's influence youth.

Implications of the findings and recommendations for youth programs and future evaluation are presented in the report for the State of Connecticut, Office of Policy and Management.