Published in final edited form as:

Child Adolesc Social Work J. 2017 October ; 34(5): 443–459. doi:10.1007/s10560-016-0483-z.

“Coming from the place of walking with the youth -- that feeds everything”: A mixed methods case study of a runaway and homeless youth organization.

Noelle R. Leonard, PhD,

Center for Drug Use and HIV Research, Rory Meyers College of Nursing, New York University, New York, NY

Rob Freeman, BA,

Independent Consultant, New York, NY

Amanda Ritchie, MAA,

Center for Drug Use and HIV Research, Rory Meyers College of Nursing, New York University, New York, NY

Marya V. Gwadz, PhD,

Center for Drug Use and HIV Research, Rory Meyers College of Nursing, New York University, New York, NY

Lara Tabac, PhD,

Independent Consultant, New York, NY

Victoria Dickson, PhD,

Rory Meyers College of Nursing, New York University, New York, NY

Charles Cleland, PhD,

Center for Drug Use and HIV Research, Rory Meyers College of Nursing, New York University, New York, NY

James Bolas,

Coalition for Homeless Youth, New York, NY

Margo Hirsh, JD

Independent Consultant, New York, NY

Abstract

Organizations for runaway and homeless youth (RHY) provide essential services to highly vulnerable youth who have a wide variety of basic needs and complex psychosocial challenges.

Correspondence to: Noelle Leonard, PhD, Center for Drug Use and HIV Research, Rory Meyers College of Nursing, New York University, 433 First Avenue, New York, NY 10010; nrl4@nyu.edu; phone: 212-991-7167; fax: 212-993-3143.

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval: “All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.”

Informed Consent: “Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study”

We present a mixed-methods case study of an RHY organization to identify the specific mechanisms and processes by the organization successfully promotes engagement and positive development of the youth they serve. We analyzed the qualitative and quantitative data separately and then integrated these two strands of data. Our findings indicate a consistent convergence of responses across the data sources, in both the qualitative and quantitative strands, that consistently reflect the organization's youth-centered approach. Primary among these policies and practices is the emphasis on building and maintaining empathic relationships with youth, the promotion of youths' autonomy, and an institutional culture of continuous evaluation of how the organization is meeting their mission to provide services that reflect best practices.

Introduction

Runaway and homeless youth (RHY) are young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who have run away from, left, or been forced to leave their homes, residing without parental supervision in emergency shelters, temporary situations, or places not intended for habitation (NYC Commission on LGBTQ Runaway and Homeless Youth, 2010). RHY are recognized as a subpopulation of homeless individuals separate from youth who are with their families and homeless (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2015). Accurate data on the prevalence of youth homelessness are severely lacking but it is estimated that nearly 1.7 million youth under 18 have experienced homelessness (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002), and approximately 550,000 RHY under 25 have been homeless for a period longer than one week (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012).

RHY experience a constellation of lifetime risk factors combined with few protective factors for mitigating these risks. In their early years, RHY typically experience chronic stress, poverty, neglect, trauma, violence, and victimization which place them at grave risk for future victimization, involvement in the street economy (e.g., selling drugs, sex work), incarceration, and physical and mental health problems after leaving home. Once they are homeless, RHY have fundamental needs such as food and clothing, but they also have varied, complex, and interrelated psychosocial needs, particularly, mental and physical health issues, substance use problems, educational and vocational needs (Heinze, Jozefowicz, & Toro, 2010; Slesnick, Dashora, Letcher, Erdem, & Serovich, 2009). The lack of a connection to the systems and settings that traditionally protect and nurture youth, specifically family, school, and work, exacerbates these challenges (Heinze et al., 2010).

Despite these complex needs and difficulties, many RHY demonstrate extraordinary resilience that helps them survive on the streets but may make it difficult for them to engage in services for reasons typically related to this constellation of risk and resilience factors. RHY often feel judged and stigmatized by social service personnel, medical providers, and law enforcement and develop a general level of skepticism and mistrust which may serve them well on the streets but inhibits their ability to trust others (Darbyshire, Muir-Cochrane, Fereday, Jureidini, & Drummond, 2006; Ensign & Gittelsohn, 1998). Additionally, RHY feel that many social service settings have rigid and inflexible rules that are not aligned with their need for autonomy (Pergamit & Ernst, 2010) or feel ambivalent about accessing services as it is at odds with their desire to prove that they can succeed on their own (Garrett

et al., 2008; Pedersen, Tucker, & Kovalchik, 2016). Moreover, repeated experiences of being let down by critical adults and social service agencies, as well as long histories of trauma, negatively impacts their ability to build effective relationships with service providers (Hudson, Nyamathi, & Sweat, 2008).

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA; The National Network for Youth, 2015) provides federal funding to provide essential short and long term services specifically tailored to RHY including street outreach, transitional independent living programs (TLP), drop-in centers, crisis shelters, post-shelter after care, and youth and family counseling. The common broad goals of these services are to assist RHY to manage crises, stabilize their lives, develop goals for health, education, occupation, and obtain a secure and permanent living situation. RHY settings typically provide a variety of services including street outreach where RHY staff approach youth where they congregate or sleep and attempt to engage youth in site-based services, provide basic necessities (food vouchers, toothbrushes), or reduce the harm inherent in street life; supportive services, such as mental health care or substance use treatment; low-threshold opportunities to shower, store clothing, and make meals; social work services for job placement and entitlements; and support in maintaining, building, or rebuilding relationships with peers, social services providers, and critical adults, including immediate or extended family members. While connecting with services has been found to have positive impacts on youths' individual outcomes such as exiting homeless, mental health, substance use, (Barber, Fonagy, Fultz, Simulinas, & Yates, 2005; Slesnick, Prestopnik, Meyers, & Glassman, 2007; Slesnick, Kang, Bonomi, & Prestopnik, 2008; Thompson, Pollio, Constantine, Reid, & Nebbitt, 2002; Pedersen et al., 2016) and the majority (60% – 75%) of RHY present at these settings at least once in their lifetime, the extent of their involvement varies substantially (Kort-Butler & Tyler, 2012).

The RHYA mandates that RHY settings receiving federal funding provide services using a Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach to guide the manner in which they engage and work with youth. Positive Youth Development approaches aim to foster self-efficacy and resiliency by emphasizing youths' protective factors and strengths and stresses the primacy of providing youth with opportunities to genuinely participate in their own development (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sempa, 2006; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). An Institute of Medicine/National Research Council report, authored by Eccles and Gootman (2002), provides a theoretically and empirically derived model of the essential features of youth-serving settings that promote positive development: physical and psychological safety; clear and consistent structure; supportive relationships; opportunities to belong; opportunities for efficacy, mattering, and skill-building; positive social norms; and integration of family, school, and community efforts. While the RHYA directs settings to deliver services consistent with this model there is a dearth of research on exactly *how* RHY settings deliver effective services using a PYD approach.

The goal of this paper is to present an in-depth, single case study of a high-quality RHY setting and describe the specific mechanisms and processes by which the setting successfully promotes the engagement and positive development of the vulnerable youth they serve. While several published case studies have examined individual RHY and how they interact with a variety of RHY services and settings (Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis, & Nackerud, 2000; N.R.

Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz, & Jarvis, 2010), the present study examines one RHY setting in-depth through the perspectives and voices of the youth, staff, and program administration in an effort to develop a rich and nuanced understanding of these mechanisms and processes. The study was guided by the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA; The Forum for Youth Investment, 2011), an assessment tool that measures setting-level quality with constructs that parallel the PYD features in the Eccles and Gootman (2002) model (Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010).

To maintain the confidentiality of the youth and the setting, we call the setting by a pseudonym, Premier Adolescent Service Center (PASC).

Methods

We present an embedded, single-case study (Yin, 2016) of a RHY setting using a mixed-methods convergent parallel design (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2007). We collected both quantitative and qualitative data from multiple reporters: 1) an anonymous quantitative survey of youth; 2) focus groups with youth; and 3) qualitative interviews with setting staff and with the program director. PASC was selected from a random sample of twenty-nine RHY settings that were part of a larger study examining the impact of RHY services for youth. From among the 29 settings in the larger study, PASC was selected by the research team for this in-depth case study because we found in preliminary analyses that it was distinctive among the other RHY settings for its consistent positive youth development approach in numerous domains based on the convergence of responses across the multiple reporters in both the qualitative and quantitative strands of data. (Yin, 2016).

Setting and Participants

PASC is located in a mid-sized city in the Northeast United States where more than half the city's children live at or below the federal poverty level, and homelessness, high unemployment, violent crime, and gang activity are widespread (United States Census Bureau, 2016). PASC provides multiple services to approximately 700 youth per month, ages 12 – 24 years, through a variety of programs including street outreach, a drop in center (DIC), emergency shelter, independent living program, and a transitional living program (TLP). The organization primarily serves youth from the surrounding county (65% African American; 18% Latino/a; 8% White; 8% Mixed Race). Across all programs, approximately 70 full and part time staff provide case management, counseling, crisis services, and emergency assistance. The setting receives funding primarily from local, state and federal agencies and solicits individual and corporate contributions and grants from private foundations.

Procedures

The study involved three sources of data: 1) an anonymous quantitative survey with youth, 2) focus groups with youth and 3) semi-structured interviews with program staff and the program administrator (see Figure 1). Research staff administered quantitative surveys and conducted focus groups and individual staff interviews over the course of a two-day study visit. For both the survey and the focus groups, youth were eligible to participate if they

were aged 16–21 years, were active clients (i.e., completed intake at least one month ago, attended a program at least twice in the past month, or in residence for at least 2 weeks) of either the drop in center (DIC) or the transitional living program (TLP) and were not in foster care.

All focus group and staff interviews were conducted by experienced qualitative interviewers, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. For the focus groups, youth over the age of 18 provided written informed consent and for the anonymous survey, verbal informed consent. Youth ages 16 and 17 provided written (for focus group) or verbal (anonymous survey) assent for participation in the study with informed consent provided by a Child Advocate. Youth were provided with a \$25 stipend for their participation in the survey and \$25 for participating in the focus group and were eligible to participate in both research activities. The program director and staff members provided verbal informed consent prior to participating in interviews. The program director was provided with a stipend of \$150 and each staff member received \$40 for the individual interviews. The Institutional Review Board at New York University and Solutions IRB approved all study procedures.

The quantitative instruments and qualitative interview and focus group questions were guided by The Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA; Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, Fischer, & Shinn, 2009). The YPQA consists of five subscales that measure qualities at the ‘offering’ or point-of-service level (i.e., where the youth, staff, and setting’s resources come together) which include: Safe Environment, Supportive Environment, Interaction, and Engagement, and three subscales assessing organizational-level qualities, specifically, Youth Centered Policies and Practices, High Expectations for Youth and Staff, and Access.

Quantitative Methods

Youth Survey—Over the course of the study visit, research staff approached all youth who were present at the program’s main case management offices for participation in the anonymous survey. Of the youth approached to take part in the survey, 90% were found eligible to participate and none of those eligible declined. Fifty-four youth participated in the survey which was conducted using audio computer-assisted self-interviews [ACASI] and lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Socio-demographics. Sex at birth, age in years, race/ethnicity, transgender orientation, sexual orientation, education (including GED), history of police/criminal justice involvement, employment history (formal/informal), and history of homelessness and foster care/group home placement were assessed using the RHY Status Scale.

Supports and Opportunities Scale (SOS; Youth Development Strategies). The SOS was used to assess youths’ perspectives of program qualities using a 5-point Likert-type scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) across 12 dimensions which included emotional safety (“There are adult staff you could talk to if you are mad or upset”) and guidance (“Adult staff pay attention to what’s going on in your life”). Reliability coefficient alphas ranged from .56 to .90.

Mental health.: Symptoms of depression were measured using The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D 8; 8 items; $\alpha = 0.80$) and anxiety were measured with the anxiety subscale of the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; 6 items; $\alpha = 0.89$) (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983; Radloff, 1977).

Substance use.: Lifetime use of alcohol and illicit drugs (marijuana, crack, cocaine, heroin, nonprescription painkillers, other drugs) was assessed using the National Alcohol Survey (Graves, 1995).

Involvement in setting.: Number of months involved in any of the setting's programs was assessed using the RHY Status Scale.

Program Administrator Interview—We used Form B of the YPQA (The Forum for Youth Investment, 2011), a validated open-ended questionnaire designed for program administrators that assesses three domains of organizational-level characteristics (youth centered policies and practices, high expectations for youth and staff, and access). Questions are read verbatim by interviewers who manually record the program administrator's answers. Immediately after the interview, these qualitative responses are rated on the extent to which organizational supports are in place for each of the domains.

Four indicators of organizational supports are rated within each domain on a 3-point scale (0, 2, 4).

Qualitative Methods

Individual Qualitative Staff and Program Director Interviews—One program administrator and two front-line staff participated in individual semi-structured interviews each of which lasted approximately one hour. Staff members were eligible for participation if their primary responsibility was working directly with youth at any of the site's programs and were scheduled to work during the study visit. The program director had overall responsibility for the organization's programs, one staff member was a supervisor in the TLP, and the other staff member was a coordinator in the Street Outreach program. The goal of the staff and program director qualitative interviews was to elicit information about organizational policies, practices, challenges, and successes, as well as staff perspectives on how these factors affect youth clients and how to improve services to RHY. The interview guide also utilized probing and follow-up questions to elicit specific and illustrative examples.

The interview guide for the program director consisted of two parts. For the first part, open-ended questions from the YPQA Form B were used as described above. The second part of the interview consisted of semi-structured questions developed for the study regarding the barriers and facilitators of providing quality services to RHY at the setting from an administrative perspective. The program administrator's responses to both parts were transcribed verbatim and analyzed qualitatively.

Focus Groups with Youth—Prior to the study visit, IRB-approved recruitment flyers were posted at the DIC and TLP sites. Trained research staff conducted two focus groups

(Total N = 12 youth), segregated by sex, and one group comprising both sexes, with 4–6 youth in each group (Table 1). Each focus group lasted approximately one hour.

The focus group guide was informed by the YPQA to elicit youth perspectives on: 1) their experiences and opinions of the programs, practices, and policies of the setting; 2) ways in which the setting facilitates or hinders individual growth and development; 3) facilitators and barriers of access to programs; 4) suggestions for improving the setting and program offerings; and 5) specific challenges experienced by racial/ethnic and other minorities (e.g. LGBTQ).

Data Analysis Plan

Quantitative Data Analysis – Youth Survey

We conducted descriptive statistics of key sociodemographic variables from the youth survey to describe youth demographics and background characteristics. The mean score was calculated for each dimension of the SOS scale (youth) and for each domain and subdomain of the YPQA Form B (program administrator).

Qualitative Data Analysis – Youth Focus Groups and Individual Staff/Program Director Interviews

Qualitative data were analyzed using an approach that was both theory-driven and inductive using the Dedoose platform (Dedoose Version 7.0.23, 2016). First, team members created a “start list” (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of initial codes based on the research questions and the YPQA scales. Codes consisted of labels or tags (containing one to several words) assigned to sections of text that describe that code. The research team then met to review codes and develop the codebook. Coding was conducted by two members of the research team where the main coder read through 2–4 interviews, applied the start list codes to excerpts and created new codes based on emergent themes relevant to the main research questions or repeated in the transcript. This grounded, inductive approach to data analysis generated additional codes and the codebook was further elaborated and refined (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). A second coder then coded a selection of excerpts already coded by the main coder.

Through an iterative analysis process, the research team met regularly to discuss findings and refine the code list. Once consensus was reached on a consolidated and final list of relevant codes, interview transcripts coded at the beginning of the analysis were recoded to incorporate the final list of codes.

Integrated Data Analysis

First, we assessed concordance between the quantitative data of program quality (YPQA-Form B) and mean scores of SOS indices with the qualitative themes. We used an informational matrix (Dickson et al., 2011) to integrate the quantitative and qualitative data and examine convergence and divergence. Then, guided by the major domains of the YPQA, the qualitative data from the youth, staff and program director interviews were triangulated to derive categories that reflected program quality in preparation for relating these findings

to those from the quantitative analyses. Finally, in the third phase, we examined the results from the qualitative data sources and the quantitative results of the youth survey of program quality (SOS), and the program director interview (YPQA Form B) and gleaned an overarching theme, and three primary themes each with related secondary themes related to RHY setting quality.

Results

Quantitative Results

Fifty-four youth participated in the anonymous quantitative survey (Table 2). Among those interviewed, the youth were mostly female (65%), and youth of color (52% were African American or Black; 32% were Hispanic). The average age was 18.59 years ($SD = 1.58$ years). Most youth were either enrolled in school or in a GED program, fewer than half (46%) reported employment in either the formal or informal economies, and approximately three quarters of youth reported contact with the criminal justice system at least once in their lifetime. Close to half of the youth (46%) had a history of foster care or group home placement. Rates of clinically significant levels of depression (65%) and anxiety (78%) were high. Most youth used alcohol (80%) or drugs (74%) at least once in their lifetime. Recent use of alcohol was low (mean = 3.1 days; $SD = 9.07$), but drug use was higher (mean = 17.2 days; $SD = 26.25$).

Youths' experience at the organization, as measured by the SOS, are presented in descending rank order by mean score in Table 3. Physical safety, Emotional support, Practical support, and Emotional safety were ranked highest, while Decision making and Youth leadership opportunities at the Program were the lowest ranked dimensions. The YPQA Form B is the quantitative ratings of the qualitative interview with the program director. As shown in Table 4, the domains of High expectations for youth and staff and Access received the highest rating ($x = 4.0$) while Youth centered policies and practices was slightly lower ($x = 3.83$) which was driven by a lower score on the youths' influence on the setting and activities.

Qualitative Results

The overarching theme that emerged from the triangulated qualitative data is the primacy PASC places on the youth they serve, an underlying philosophy that is demonstrated in the manner in which staff interact with youth; the administrative policies; decision-making in both day-to-day and problematic situations; and in the organization's ongoing reflection of the ways and which they are meeting their mission. While a youth-centered philosophy is certainly the mission and mandate of all RHY programs, this theme was notably pervasive throughout all sources of the qualitative and quantitative data and equally understood and shared by youth and staff. As succinctly described by this male participant: *"I would say like, um, the most important thing is they put you first."*

We categorized this overarching theme of youth centered policies and practices into three conceptually distinct but overlapping primary categories each with related secondary categories:

1) Establishment of non-judgmental, emotionally supportive relationships which include, the provision of empathy, staff flexibility, the integration of instrumental and emotional support, and a low barrier approach to receiving services; 2) Youth-driven goals and expectations, including an authentic harm reduction philosophy and attention to normative developmental needs; and 3) Institutional practices and policies, including physical and emotional safety, funding decisions, and youth input and involvement in program governance and a culture of continuous assessment. Establishing Non-Judgmental, Emotionally Supportive Relationships

The primary vehicle by which PASC maintains their focus on the needs of the youth is by continuously engaging youth to establish, and reestablish, supportive relationships with youth.

Helping youth to develop trusting relationships with adults is vital for RHY, most of whom have been failed, neglected and traumatized by significant adults. Feeling “understood” by staff was a recurring theme and youth described how the program created an atmosphere that strongly encourages these safe and supportive relationships with staff members. As one young man noted, *“I’d say it’s supportive because, even though I might not realize it, they’re doing it because they care and they wanna see me successful... you’ll be like oh, I don’t want it ‘cause I don’t know how it’s going to be like. And then you’ve gotta warm up to it.”*

Youth repeatedly stressed how the staff engaged with them in a genuine, non-judgmental manner that in turn engendered trust and allowed youth to speak openly and honestly with staff. As one youth simply put it, *“Like, you can be really open with them; they won’t judge you.”*

Staff were keenly aware of the fragility of the relationships they had built with youth in light of the skepticism and mistrust RHY often have toward adults and service providers.

Nurturing these relationships requires sensitive, individualized management of building and maintaining engagement. For example, this male youth described how his case manager gently, yet consistently, exhibited her commitment toward him and kept him engaged: *“Yeah, she text me mostly every day, how you’re doing. Even though—even though we might not see each other or we might not talk, she’ll just text me to see how it’s going.”*

We found that as a whole, the staff demonstrated a staunch commitment to establishing and maintaining *authentic* partnerships with youth. They were also acutely aware that true partnerships necessitate acceptance of the risky and dangerous choices youth often make. While respecting youths’ autonomous decision making can be challenging for staff in some situations, it is at these moments that this commitment to the youth takes on even greater importance. The program director described how this philosophy drives their decisions in difficult situations: *“Coming from the place of walking with the youth --- that feeds everything. So... some of our partners in the trafficking world get all freaked out that we don’t make a kid to be turned in on a warrant... we’re going to work with her and ... if she runs back to her trafficker, we don’t take her cell phone away. That’s the time we want her to have her cell phone. Like, so it’s just kind of that hard work of being present and just walking with them as they make their choices, making sure they understand what all the choices are...”*

Provision of Empathy

Results indicated staff members' genuine and consistent expression of empathy toward youth and their concern was pivotal to youths' experiences at PASC and essential for facilitating the establishment of youths' relationships with staff. Moreover, many youth were able to internalize this empathy that in turn, helped to foster youths' hope for a more adaptive and stable future. This male youth was able to clearly articulate this link and how it promotes self-reflection: *"cause that empathy is really what push us in that position to think like maybe there is a chance for us to do something good. Maybe we don't gotta sell drugs and maybe we don't gotta be in the streets all nights of the hours just to, you know, get some money in our pocket."*

For many youth, this empathic concern stood in direct contrast to other service providers outside of PASC, who were often, as youth describe, *"just doing their job."*

Staff Flexibility

We found PASC also understood the pitfalls of a "one-size-fits-all" approach to service provision, and consciously worked as a flexible team aware that not all youth and staff members are able to connect in a meaningful way. While youth were initially assigned specific counselors or case managers, it was clear to youth and staff that youth might *"click"* with other staff members. This flexibility can reap enormous benefits for youth engagement as described by this male youth: *"Cause if you click with that person the best, you could tell like the deepest, the deepest stories."* Moreover, this approach demonstrates the staffs' commitment to maintaining youths' sense of autonomy within the context of emotionally supportive relationships.

Integrating Emotional and Instrumental Support

We found one further area of convergence between youth and staff perspectives was the unique ways that instrumental support (e.g. housing, transportation assistance, etc.) is consistently provided within the context of deeply felt emotional support. Through relationships, staff collaborate with youth to provide the instrumental support they need and, importantly, can manage at any given time. In other words, problem-solving and the provision of material support related to the daily issues that the youth face, grow out of the context of these trusting relationships. As one staff member noted: *"I show them the resources. I show them what they have—they have in front of them that they may have not seen before and how they can access these things and then walk that path with them, whatever it is that they want to do."*

This integration of emotional and instrumental support is also observable throughout comments made by youth who seem to move effortlessly between references to instrumental supports such as housing, food, or transportation and a feeling of being cared for or listened to by staff. For example, according to one male youth: *"...they help you physically, mentally, sometimes casually. Because they help you to find a part of yourself that you would never even think that you can even find."* These trusting relationships assist youth to ask for help and envision a different future for themselves as this female youth described: *"I used to have the attitude where I could find everything on my own or I could just do it"*

myself until I start realizing it got me so far... but then I kept thinking like I want more ... you know develop something for myself."

Low-Threshold Approach

Engaging youth in services is facilitated by the low barrier PASC sets for youth to access services. In practice, and consistent with most RHY organizations, outside of age, there are few, if any eligibility requirements for accessing one or more of PASC's services. Yet we found that this low-threshold approach is also demonstrated by PASC staff in more nuanced ways. Staff and youth articulated a sophisticated and marked acceptance of youth, wherever they are in their developmental trajectory, and however they construct and make meaning of their lives and experiences. For example, we found while staff provide time and space for youth to share their concerns and personal histories, they do not require youth to provide an exhaustive life history as a prerequisite for obtaining services. In fact, as the program director explained, because many of the youth have been involved with a variety of social service systems throughout much of their lives, they often believe that they are expected to "spill" their whole life story before they can receive services: *"We don't expect you to tell us everything, maybe you want to talk to them more about it, but all I need to know is, what are your resources now, where do you want to be, are you looking to get your own apartment, do you want to go into a program? We know a lot of these young people are institutionalized. They feel like people are in their business all the time. Some of them, we're trying to help them learn not to share all their business all the time."*

The program director's use of the word, "institutionalized" emphasizes the staffs' acute awareness of the fact that youth have been involved with numerous, often fragmented systems and institutions, many of which have not treated them humanely, failed to act on their behalf or, at worst, neglected or maltreated them. In an attempt to "deinstitutionalize" the youth they serve, PASC strives to treat youth as individuals, establish authentic collaborations, and provide youth with a respite from these institutions and structures.

Finally, we found a shared understanding among staff that accepting youth where they are at any given moment comes with the recognition that these states are dynamic rather than static, and influenced by changing intra-personal, interpersonal and environmental factors. This sophisticated understanding of both normative adolescent development and the complex emotional and behavioral challenges experienced by RHY is demonstrated by PASC's stance that the door is always open for youth. While there are indeed clearly articulated behavioral expectations and a code of conduct (consisting primarily of standard violence prevention and management policies), we found both staff and youth noted that youth are provided multiple opportunities to be reintegrated back into the program in cases where there are violations of these policies. For example, an outreach worker described an incident where a youth verbally threatened to kill the worker. The PASC policy for this behavior is to bar youth from the space for several days. A few days after this incident, the outreach worker called the youth, *"Then she, like, called me back and she was just like, 'I'm sorry, I overreacted.' And I was like okay, it's fine... do you want to go out for lunch and we'll sit and talk about what happened and why? ... So we never completely turn our backs even if kids act a little crazy. We'll just give them their space, give them their time..."*

sometimes they're going to lose their cool with us ... and feel like they're not being helped or that things aren't happening the way they want them to happen. Well, you go chill and when you're ready, come back, and we're here."

The above quote also illustrates how staff at PASC model adaptive ways of being in relationships, particularly how to manage and maintain relationships during periods of conflict, while never under-estimating the importance of safety for staff and other youth clients.

Youth-driven Goals and Expectations

The centrality of youth-centered policies and practices at PASC is perhaps nowhere more evident than in process by which long- and short-term goals are set by youth. We found a marked consensus among youth and staff that youths' personal goals, however broken down or fine-tuned by staff members, are primarily the directive of the youth themselves. Both youth and staff articulated how youths' goals are co-constructed in ways that place a premium on the youths' subjective reality of where they are and where they want to be in the near and far term. In the words of one female participant: *"You meet with your case manager once a week and they write down your goals and the goal that um, the goals that they want you to meet...but the goals that you're meeting are your goals, they're not their goals."* Moreover, attempts and efforts toward achieving youths' goals are highly supported and reinforced, even if modest. As the Outreach Coordinators explained: *"It's not about okay, I expect you to have your own apartment by this time, I expect you to have a job by this time. No, it's the fact that, like, you're setting goals, you're even trying, you're even coming in the door. Like, you've met the expectation already, you know?"*

We found that staff assist youth in setting and meeting goals with the belief that all youth possess internal resources for positive development, a hallmark of the positive youth development perspective. The program director pointedly articulated PASC's guiding philosophy that the core knowledge of what youth need lies within the youth themselves: *"they're the experts, we're not"*. The Outreach Coordinator remarked, *"They know what they can handle and what they can't handle and so my job, essentially, is just that; showing them the map and them deciding what path they want to take and me walking along that path with them so that in case they do fall, I-I can say well, let's pick yourself up, here are the other options that we can go."*

Similarly, one young man remarked on staffs' ability to increase youths' internal motivation: *"The way it is set up is it's not just you do it, it's you wanna do it... You know, I'll put—they give you that parental push that they do—that you need to get so they can get you in gear."* Again, here both staff and youth are in agreement regarding the importance of staffs' ability to encourage and motivate youth to work towards their goals while simultaneously strengthening their personal sense of agency.

Authentic Harm Reduction Philosophy

Results indicated efforts to increase youths' internal motivation to engage in services and set and accomplish goals were supported by the organization's use of a harm reduction approach to problem behaviors. We found youth felt comfortable asking staff about ways of

dealing with a wide range of situations, including their participation in illegal and potentially harmful activities. Staff and youth provided numerous examples where staff non-judgmentally assisted youth to focus on reducing potential harms. *“The goal is whatever they choose to help them be safe in whatever they choose. So if somebody does decide, um, to go back out, we at least can provide them a phone to make sure that if they ever need anything or if they ever decide that they do want help, they can always call us.”*

Attention to Normative Developmental Needs

Consistent with general best practices, if needed, staff accompany youth to appointments with government agencies (e.g., obtaining ID) and social and health services. However, in PASC, we found staff also recognized that many of the youth they serve have missed out on the normative developmental activities of adolescence. Thus, over and above referring and accompanying youth to typical appointments for basic necessities, staff refer youth to recreational programs such as art, music or wellness and often accompany youth to these programs to introduce them and attend future sessions with them if they feel this is in the best interests of the youth. More frequently, remaining attentive to the developmental needs of RHY takes the form of simply supporting and engaging positively with the youth during such seemingly mundane activities as driving them to appointments. The TLP supervisor notes the following: *“Like, when I drive with them, I always let them handle the radio. I’m like you pick whatever you want to listen to and we’re good and we’ll, like, sing and do whatever and so they like—they like that.”*

Youth Driven Institutional Practices and Policies

On an institutional level, we found PASC ensures that a positive youth development framework informs every aspect of their daily operations. In addition to the ways in which the staff interact with youth, the prominence of the youth and their needs extends to the physical and emotional safety of the building and the program environment as well as decisions related to funding.

Physical and Emotional Safety

While PASC is located in a small city with sharply demarcated gang boundaries, the PASC building is situated in an area of the city which is considered ‘neutral’ territory. Youth repeatedly reported feeling safe and *“at home”* in the agency, and that the organization as a whole felt like *“a family environment”* where, *“they see a different side of you.”* Another young man noted that: *“It’s not just the support, it’s like the whole energy in the whole building... that is just so positive... -you feel like this is where you needed to be your whole life.”*

As described above, the staff provides space for youth to share their concerns and their experiences, yet they are very mindful of imposing boundaries for sharing stories that might act as triggers for other youth and making the space feel less safe for other youth. The program director explained, *“...gang activity, uh, drug talk, like stuff that just triggers other kids that we don’t allow—or shouldn’t allow—but we don’t tolerate that kind of conversation in the middle of the living room at the shelter. You can’t sit there and talk about how you gangbanged and were part of a shootout or how, you know, your friend was raped.”*

As the program director explained, PASC also tries to promote a sense of safety in the community where they are located: *“And so because we can’t be everywhere all the time so we develop relationships with rec centers, with libraries, with corner stores, so these people know us and then will call us when we’re not there and say I’ve got a kid or they tell the kid to come back on Tuesday because [PASC] always here.”*

Funding Decisions

The focus on youth-centered policies and practices also extends to decisions related to the funding of various programs. Funding from certain agencies (e.g. foster care, child protective services) is declined based on concerns that the attached rules and regulations will be too restrictive and antithetical to the organization’s philosophy. According to the program director, the potentially stigmatizing effects of certain funding directives is an important consideration: *“We could get more money to do programming that was about, uh, kids being-having to come to us [...] We could get more. Um, not a lot more, but we could probably get another 10 grand if we identified the kids as delinquent. But we don’t. We identify them as neglected. And homeless. So even to our funding sources, we stick to that philosophy that we don’t label kids or have them force them into treatment or force them into therapies.”*

Youth also report feeling that funding concerns do not necessarily determine the services that they receive. As one participant in the male focus group points out: *“‘Cause like what he was saying about like other programs like, uh- ‘cause like a lot of it they kind of-like they try to- most programs try to fill up kids. They know every certain amount of ratio they get paid this, this, blah, blah, blah, and that... but like the PASC they help everybody.”*

Prioritizing the needs of the youth when considering potential funding opportunities gives the organization the flexibility to allow youth to make decisions that might otherwise run counter to the funders’ requirements.

Youth Input in Governance

As is the case with many RHY programs, staff also recognize the importance of encouraging youth input and participation. As the program director noted: *“So, you will see young people in and out of all the programs and all the buildings and all, um, we have them on the Board. We have special projects that they work with, we have peer outreach workers. We’ve hired young people into different places of departments to actually become employees of the center, so the-the sense really is, again, what is—what are young people saying they need and want.”*

Nonetheless, PASC’s program director also acknowledged that youth input and participation in program-wide decision-making remains one of the program’s ongoing challenges, noting that despite their efforts, *“there could always be more.”* Again, this sentiment was shared by the youth, who viewed their role in programming decisions primarily in terms of the ability to make informal suggestions.

Continuous Assessment of Program Quality

PASC continuously engages in both formal and informal reflection of how well they are working as a team and meeting their mission. Formal assessment occurs regularly within the context of supervision and training. The outreach coordinator also explained the questions the team asks themselves when incidents such as physical violence between youth occurs: *“The expectation is constantly reevaluating what could have we done differently. Never mind the kid, you know, how did we engage as a team? ... Like, what happened in that scenario that we might have done a little bit differently to not make something pop off like that.”*

This continuous self-reflection helps to turn problematic situations into ‘teachable moments’ where PASC’s youth-centered mission is reified and reinforced for both the staff and the youth. It also assists staff to respond to crises and challenging situations in ways that maintain their focus on remaining in relationship with youth rather than responding in ways that are antithetical to the mission.

An additional aspect of this continuous evaluation involves ensuring that all staff are ‘on the same page’ about specific terms and issues that youth bring to the setting. For example, at one point it was clear to the program director that staff had differing interpretations of what behaviors might constitute youth in the program ‘recruiting’ other youth to engage in sex trafficking: *“We just did two-day training on trauma and trafficking... because stuff was coming up [AMONG THE STAFF] like they’re [THE YOUTH] recruiting... That’s something that all teenagers do and could look like recruiting; just ‘cause you know that kid has that history... They were just sharing a phone number with another kid in the house... we realized that all staff didn’t have the same basis of understanding about trafficking, even though we’ve been working with these kids forever.”*

Integrated Data Results

As shown in Table 5, we compared the qualitative themes from all the data sources (youth focus groups, staff interviews, program administrator) and the quantitative youth survey results. This integrated analysis strongly supported the convergence across data sources for the overwhelming majority of primary and subcodes. A lack of convergence was found between youths’ quantitative ratings of their ability to take on leadership roles/make decisions about programming and the qualitative perspectives of the staff and the program director in this domain. In the quantitative data, these domains were rated lowest on the youth survey as well as on the quantitative ratings of program director’s interview on the YPQA Form B. In the qualitative interviews, both the staff and the program director provided many examples of the ways in which they involve youth in program governance, but both recognized that they could do more in these domains and as an area of programming that requires greater focus.

Discussion

The aim of the present report was to present a single case study of an RHY organization and describe the specific mechanisms and processes by which the setting successfully promotes

the engagement and positive development of the youth they serve. Using a convergent parallel research design, we analyzed and integrated qualitative and quantitative data from youth clients, staff members and program directors to gain an in-depth perspective from these multiple reporters.

The predominant theme across all domains we examined is the primacy PASC places on the youth they serve. This youth-centered mission, affirmed by the youth, staff, and program director, unceasingly drives the practices and policies of the setting. Consistent with best practices and other reports (Ferguson & Maccio, 2015; Heinze et al., 2010; Slesnick et al., 2009), PASC creates an organizational environment that firmly embodies the core principles of positive youth development. Primary among these principles is the establishment and careful cultivation of non-judgmental, emotionally supportive relationships with youth. Our results are aligned with other findings that emphasize the centrality of these relationships for building trust between the setting and the youth and increasing youths' ability to engage in services (Garrett et al., 2008; Thompson, McManus, Lantry, Windsor, & Flynn, 2006; N. R. Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz, & Jarvis, 2001). The emotional and empathic commitment demonstrated by the staff helps engender youths' trust in both the staff and the setting and serves to promote youth resilience (Werner & Smith, 1992). Building trust is critical for RHY who have experienced a wide range of traumatizing ecologies and thus are often challenging to engage in services, even those that are specifically tailored to their needs. Further, our results revealed distinguishing features of PASC that sharply reflect another core principle of positive youth development, that is, the importance of empowering youth as major actors in their own development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). With remarkable clarity and consistency, both youth and staff described how PASC privileges youths' autonomy and affirms their expertise and wisdom in relation to their individual strengths, assets, challenges, and developmental needs and desires. These features are evident at both the offering and organizational levels of PASC and include the developmentally appropriate and nuanced manner staff engage and interact with youth, the principled approach by which the program accepts funding, and the culture of continuous reflection and evaluation of how the setting is maintaining their youth-centered mission.

Our qualitative findings revealed that these policies and practices convey to youth that they hold the power to determine the course of their life and that PASC will stay with them on their journey, assist them in reducing the harms their choices might entail, and provide an open invitation to further engage in meaningful activities and relationships. Maintaining youths' autonomous decision making can be difficult for RHY settings in light of the challenging, often violent and re-traumatizing behaviors and choices youth may make (Larson & Walker, 2010). Our results demonstrate a shared understanding among the staff and the youth that PASC strives to balance a dual focus of staying in relationship with youth and supporting their autonomy in *all* situations while maintaining the safety of both youth and staff. These consistently applied policies and practices create a therapeutic milieu that can serve to re-parent youth in an organic, developmentally and professionally appropriate way.

By aligning their mission, culture, and practice, PASC seems to be able to transform many of the crises typically experienced by the youth in the setting into opportunities for

reflection, additional training, and to sharpen their skills and policies. In this way, PASC is accountable to the youth they serve as they render this praxis transparent and provide a model for youth of adaptive ways to turn problems into growth-promoting experiences.

The results of this study are limited by the use of a single RHY organization. Moreover, the relatively small number of staff members that were interviewed limits a full comparison of youth and staff perspectives. Despite these limitations, our results can inform self-evaluation efforts at other RHY programs, particularly in the domains articulated in the YPQA model.

While the YPQA was not originally designed to evaluate RHY organizations, our results highlight specific areas and examples of policy and practice that are germane to RHY organizations and the vulnerable youth they serve. Further research is needed that directly focuses on the hiring, training and supervision of RHY staff members and how organizations can support staffs' ability to consistently and genuinely implement the principles of positive youth development to help realize the potential of the youth they serve.

Acknowledgments

This study was funded by the W.T. Grant Foundation (182738) (Marya V. Gwadz, PI).

References

- Barber CC, Fonagy P, Fultz J, Simulinas M, & Yates M (2005). Homeless near a thousand homes: outcomes of homeless youth in a crisis shelter. *The American journal of orthopsychiatry*, 75(3), 347–355, doi:10.1037/0002-9432.75.3.347. [PubMed: 16060731]
- Benson PL, Scales PC, Hamilton SF, & Sempa A Jr. (2006). Positive youth development: Theory, research and applications In Damon W, & Lerner R (Eds.), *Theoretical models of human development*. Volume 1 of *Handbook of Children Psychology* (6th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publications.
- Corbin J, & Strauss A (2008). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Cresswell J, & Plano Clark VL (2007). *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Darbyshire P, Muir-Cochrane E, Fereday J, Jureidini J, & Drummond A (2006). Engagement with health and social care services: perceptions of homeless young people with mental health problems. *Health & social care in the community*, 14(6), 553–562, doi:10.1111/j.1365-2524.2006.00643.x. [PubMed: 17059497]
- Dedoose Version 7.0.23 (2016). web application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed method research data. <http://www.dedoose.com/>. Accessed August 17, 2016.
- Derogatis L, & Melisaratos N (1983). The brief symptom inventory: An introductory report. *Psychological Medicine*, 13(3), 595–605, doi:10.1017/S0033291700048017. [PubMed: 6622612]
- Dickson VV, Lee CS, & Riegel B (2011). How do cognitive function and knowledge affect heart failure self-care? *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 5(2), 167–189.
- Eccles J, & Gootman JA (2002). *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Ensign J, & Gittelsohn J (1998). Health and access to care: Perspectives of homeless youth in Baltimore City, USA. *Social Science & Medicine*, 47(12), 2087–2099, doi:10.1016/S0277-9536(98)00273-1. [PubMed: 10075249]
- Ferguson KM, & Maccio EM (2015). Promising Programs for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning Runaway and Homeless Youth. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 41(5), 659–683, doi:10.1080/01488376.2015.1058879.

- Garrett SB, Higa DH, Phares MM, Peterson PL, Wells EA, & Baer JS (2008). Homeless youths' perceptions of services and transitions to stable housing. *Evaluation and program planning*, 31(4), 436–444, doi:10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2008.04.012. [PubMed: 18554717]
- Graves KL (1995). Risky sexual behavior and alcohol use among young adults: results from a national survey. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 10(1), 27–36. [PubMed: 10155656]
- Hammer H, Finkelhor D, & Sedlak A (2002). Runaway/ Thrownaway children: National estimates and characteristics. *Human Trafficking: Data and Documents*, Paper 20,
- Heinze HJ, Jozefowicz DMH, & Toro PA (2010). Taking the youth perspective: Assessment of program characteristics that promote positive development in homeless and at-risk youth. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32(10), 1365–1372, doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.06.004.
- Hudson AL, Nyamathi A, & Sweat J (2008). Homeless youths' interpersonal perspectives of health care providers. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 29(12), 1277–1289, doi: 10.1080/01612840802498235. [PubMed: 19052945]
- Kort-Butler LA, & Tyler KA (2012). A cluster analysis of service utilization and incarceration among homeless youth. *Social Science Research*, 41(3), 612–623, doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2011.12.011. [PubMed: 23017796]
- Kurtz PD, Lindsey EW, Jarvis S, & Nackerud L (2000). How Runaway and Homeless Youth Navigate Troubled Waters: The Role of Formal and Informal Helpers. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 17(5), 381–402, doi:10.1023/A:1007507131236.
- Larson RW, & Walker KC (2010). Dilemmas of practice: challenges to program quality encountered by youth program leaders. *American journal of community psychology*, 45(3–4), 338–349, doi: 10.1007/s10464-010-9307-z. [PubMed: 20300824]
- Miles MB, & Huberman AM (Eds.). (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- National Alliance to End Homelessness (2012). An Emerging Framework for Ending Unaccompanied Youth Homelessness. <http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/an-emerging-framework-for-ending-unaccompanied-youth-homelessness>. Accessed August 17, 2016.
- NYC Commission on LGBTQ Runaway and Homeless Youth (2010). All our children: Strategies to prevent homelessness, strengthen services and build support for LGBTQ Youth. http://www.nyc.gov/html/om/pdf/2010/pr267_10_report.pdf. Accessed August 17, 2016.
- Pedersen ER, Tucker JS, & Kovalchik SA (2016). Facilitators and Barriers of Drop-In Center Use Among Homeless Youth. *The Journal of adolescent health*, 59(2), 144–153, doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.03.035. [PubMed: 27238839]
- Pergamit MR, & Ernst M (2010). Youth's Knowledge of Services for Runaways: Findings from a Survey of High School Students. <http://www.1800runaway.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/PART-B-Youth-in-Schools.pdf>. Accessed August 17, 2016.
- Radloff LS (1977). The CES-D scale a self-report depression scale for research in the general population. *Applied Psychological Measurement*, 1(3), 385–401, doi: 10.1177/014662167700100306.
- Roth JL, & Brooks-Gunn J (2003). Youth Development Programs and Health Development: A Review and Next Steps In Romer D (Ed.), *Reducing Adolescent Risk toward an integrated approach* (pp. 355–365). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Slesnick N, Dashora P, Letcher A, Erdem G, & Serovich J (2009). A Review of Services and Interventions for Runaway and Homeless Youth: Moving Forward. *Children and youth services review*, 31(7), 732–742, doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2009.01.006. [PubMed: 20161294]
- Slesnick N, Kang MJ, Bonomi AE, & Prestopnik JL (2008). Six- and twelve-month outcomes among homeless youth accessing therapy and case management services through an urban drop-in center. *Health Services Research*, 43(1), 211–229, doi:10.1111/j.1475-6773.2007.00755.x. [PubMed: 18211526]
- Slesnick N, Prestopnik JL, Meyers RJ, & Glassman M (2007). Treatment outcome for street-living, homeless youth. *Addictive behaviors*, 32(6), 1237–1251, doi:10.1016/j.addbeh.2006.08.010. [PubMed: 16989957]
- The Forum for Youth Investment (2011). program quality assessment handbook: Youth version. http://www.cypq.org/sites/cypq.org/files/Youth_YPA_HandbookSample.pdf. Accessed August 17, 2016.

- The National Network for Youth (2015). Fact Sheet: The Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act. <https://www.nn4youth.org/wp-content/uploads/Fact-Sheet-RHYA-2015-Reauthorization.pdf>. Accessed August 17, 2016.
- Thompson SJ, McManus H, Lantry J, Windsor L, & Flynn P (2006). Insights from the street: Perceptions of services and providers by homeless young adults. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 29(1), 34–43, doi:10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2005.09.001.
- Thompson SJ, Pollio DE, Constantine J, Reid D, & Nebbitt V (2002). Short-term outcomes for youth receiving runaway and homeless shelter services. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 12(5), 589–603, doi:10.1177/1049731502012005001.
- United States Census Bureau (2016). American Community Survey 5-year Data. <http://www.census.gov/data/developers/data-sets/acs-survey-5-year-data.html>. Accessed August 17, 2016.
- United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (2015). Opening Doors: Federal strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness. https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/USICH_OpeningDoors_Amendment2015_FINAL.pdf. Accessed August 17, 2016.
- Werner E, & Smith RS (1992). *Overcoming the odds: High-risk children from birth to adulthood*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Williams NR, Lindsey EW, Kurtz PD, & Jarvis S (2001). From Trauma to Resiliency: Lessons from Former Runaway and Homeless Youth. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 4(2), 233–253, doi: 10.1080/13676260123589.
- Williams NR, Lindsey EW, Kurtz PD, & Jarvis S (2010). From trauma to resiliency: Lessons from former runaway and homeless youth. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 4(2), 233–253.
- Yin RK (2016). *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Yohalem N, & Wilson-Ahlstrom A (2010). Inside the black box: assessing and improving quality in youth programs. *American journal of community psychology*, 45(3–4), 350–357, doi:10.1007/s10464-010-9311-3. [PubMed: 20300822]
- Yohalem N, Wilson-Ahlstrom A, Fischer S, & Shinn M (2009). *Measuring Youth Program Quality: A Guide to Assessment Tools*, Second Edition Washington, D.C.: The Forum for Youth Investment.
- Youth Development Strategies I Supports and Opportunities Scales. <http://www.ydsi.org/ydsi/measuring/index.html>. Accessed August 17, 2016.

Figure 1.
Study Design

Table 1.

Youth focus group sample characteristics

(N = 12)	Mean (SD) or %
Female sex at birth	50.0
Age (16–20)	18.33 (1.30)
African American or Black, non-Hispanic	66.7
Hispanic	16.7
White, non-Hispanic	8.3
Bisexual/Homosexual/Gay/Lesbian	0
Transgender	16.7
Years receiving services at organization (0.25–4.0)	1.5 (1.20)

Table 2.

Anonymous survey youth sample characteristics

(N = 54)	Mean (SD) or %
Female sex at birth	64.8
Age (16–21)	18.6 (1.58)
African American or Black, non-Hispanic	51.9
Hispanic	31.5
White, non-Hispanic	16.7
Bisexual/Homosexual/Gay/Lesbian	31.5
Transgender	5.6
Currently in school (if under 18 yrs. old)	91.3
Currently in GED program (if not in school)	36.4
Any job, formal or informal, in past 3 months	46.3
Ever picked up by police	72.2
Ever homeless	51.9
Ever in foster care or group home	46.3
Clinically significant depression	64.8
Clinically significant anxiety	77.8
Lifetime alcohol use (ever used)	79.6
Lifetime drug use (ever used Marijuana, crack cocaine, other cocaine, heroin)	74.1
Days of Alcohol use in past 3 months (0–60)	3.1 (9.07)
Days of Drug use in past 3 months (0–90)	17.2 (26.25)
Involvement in setting < 6 months	66.7

Table 3.

Rank order of SOS indices by youth respondents (range 0–4; N=54 youth)

SOS Index	# of Items	Sample Item	Cronbach's alpha (α)	Mean (SD)
Physical safety	5	<i>You feel safe when you are at this organization</i>	0.70	3.34 (0.58)
Emotional support	2	<i>Adult staff you could talk to if you are mad or upset about something</i>	0.67	3.28 (0.70)
Practical support	3	<i>Adult staff you could go to for help in a crisis</i>	0.90	3.27 (0.76)
Emotional safety	4	<i>You feel respected by staff at this organization</i>	0.84	3.11 (0.72)
Growth & progress	2	<i>You have a chance to learn how to do new things here</i>	0.84	2.99 (0.78)
Guidance	3	<i>Adult staff pay attention to what's going on in your life.</i>	0.75	2.97 (0.73)
Peer knowledge of youth	2	<i>You get chances to do things with other people your age</i>	0.70	2.92 (0.72)
Adult knowledge of youth	3	<i>Staff here know a lot about you</i>	0.68	2.92 (0.85)
Sense of Belonging	6	<i>You feel like you belong here</i>	0.90	2.84 (0.76)
Participation in interesting activities	3	<i>You get to do a lot of new things here</i>	0.56	2.77 (0.72)
Decision making at the Program	6	<i>You help to set rules for the organization</i>	0.77	2.10 (0.68)
Youth leadership at the Program	4	<i>You helped plan activities and events</i>	0.85	1.05 (0.85)

Table 4.

Quantitized ratings of qualitative responses from program director interview (YPQA Form B; range 0–4)

	Mean
High expectations for youth & staff	4.00
Organization promotes staff development	4.00
Organization promotes supportive social norms	4.00
Organization promotes high expectations for youth	4.00
Organization is committed to ongoing program improvement	4.00
Access	4.00
Staff availability and longevity with the organization support youth-staff relationships	4.00
Schedules are in effect	4.00
Barriers to participation are addressed	4.00
Organization communicates with families, other organizations and schools	4.00
Youth centered policies & practices	3.83
Staff qualifications support a positive youth development focus	4.00
Program offerings tap youth interests and build multiple skills	4.00
Youth influence the setting and activities	3.33
Youth influence structure and policy	4.00

Table 5.

Joint Display of Integrated data: Setting quality by data type and source

Primary and Secondary Themes	QUALITATIVE			QUANTITATIVE		Convergence/ Divergence
	Youth perspective	Staff perspective	Program director perspective	Youth Survey (SOS MEAN, SD) (0 –4)	(YPOA Form B Program Director Interview) Score (0–4)	
Establishing non-judgmental, emotionally supportive relationships Provision of empathy Staff flexibility Integrating emotional and instrumental support Low-threshold approach	<i>Safe, supportive, non-judgmental relationships Youth understood by staff, empathy</i>	<i>Establish relationships that promote youths' emotional and behavioral growth Material support provided in context of trusting relationship Forgiving, give youth multiple chances Integrate emotional and instrumental support</i>	Instrumental support based on youth needs at any given moment	Emotional support (3.28, 0.70): staff care about and encourage youth Practical support (3.27, 0.76): youth can go to staff for help Guidance (2.97, 0.73): staff pay attention to youth	Organization supports youth-staff relationships (4.0)	Convergence Convergence Convergence
Youth-driven goals and expectations Authentic harm reduction philosophy Attention to normative developmental needs	Youth set own long- and short-term goals Youth encouraged and supported to be autonomous	Elicit youths' own goals Expectations of youth based on youths' strengths and abilities Belief that youth possess internal resources for positive development	Respect youth as individuals, foster a sense of personal agency Youth chart own course, start from where they are	Adult knowledge of youth (2.92, 0.85): staff know what is important to youth Growth & progress (2.99, 0.78): youth learn and build skills	Staff supports a PYD focus (4.0) Program Offerings tap youth interests and build multiple skills (4.0)	Convergence Convergence
Youth driven institutional practices and policies Physical and emotional safety Funding decisions Youth input in governance Continuous assessment of program quality	Youth feel at home, staff like family Immediate, basic needs met with caring and understanding Trusting relationships enable youth to ask for help Space feels physically safe and comfortable	Youth feel accepted Promote sense of stability Efforts to involve youth in evaluation fall short Regular self-reflection helps staff keep focus on youth	Youth drive programming Youth spend time at the organization, feel safe Community relationships promotes safety for youth outside organization Funding decisions put youth first Need to better involve youth in governance	Physical safety (3.34, 0.58): youth feel safe Emotional safety (3.11, 0.72): rules are enforced Belonging (2.84, 0.76): youth feel part of the organization Decision making (2.10, 0.68): youth have a say at organization Youth leadership (1.05, 0.85): youth help plan and lead activities	Youth Influence the settings and activities (3.33) Organization is committed to ongoing improvement (4.0)	Convergence Convergence Divergence Convergence