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YouthZone Program Evaluation 2024

Prepared for
YouthZone

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Executive Summary

This third-party evaluation of YouthZone, a Colorado-based non-profit that aims to redirect youth from the juvenile justice system, was commissioned by the organization to inform its programming for clients.

Analyzing client responses to a survey measuring risks and assets taken between August 2019 and January 2024, the Augenblick, Palaich and Associates (APA) research team examined YouthZone's influence on positive developmental behaviors of middle- and high-school age youth. Five key risk areas were assessed by the survey:

- 1) Life Optimism and Social Support;
- 2) School and Community Engagement;
- 3) Alcohol Refusal Skills;
- 4) Marijuana and Other Drug Refusal Skills; and
- 5) Personal Safety.

The findings suggest that, on average, YouthZone is successfully reducing risks for clients of all types, and youth experienced statistically significant reductions in risks across all five risk areas after participating in YouthZone programming. With few exceptions, risk reduction was similar regardless of age, ethnicity, and poverty status.

The APA research team also conducted exploratory analyses to examine whether risk reduction was equitable for different subgroups of clients. Due to limitations, the data the team was only able to draw tentative conclusions. Some evidence suggests that, on average, clients who enter YouthZone at higher levels of risk experience larger reductions in risk upon exiting. Other exploratory analyses tentatively suggest that YouthZone may have room to grow in achieving proportionate impact for all clients. For instance, female youth may experience smaller reductions in risk than males despite entering YouthZone at higher risk. Additionally, White clients and older clients began and remained at higher risk for drug use compared to Latino and younger clients, and youth from Rifle and Aspen may also experience smaller reductions in risk compared to youth from other regions. Additional study and data analysis is needed to clarify or confirm these exploratory analyses.

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Introduction

YouthZone is a Colorado-based non-profit organization that aims to strengthen relationships between youth, families, and communities. For more than 30 years, YouthZone has worked to divert youth from the juvenile justice system and to intervene with clients facing charges in Garfield, Pitkin and Eagle Counties.

YouthZone believes that all members of a community share a responsibility to ensure the positive development of youth. Serving more than 1,000 children in the Roaring Fork Valley each year, YouthZone offers a variety of programs aimed at empowering youth including restorative justice initiatives, life skills courses, peer support groups, and substance education. Acting as a buffer between youth and the juvenile justice system, YouthZone works with local courts to intervene at multiple stages of the legal process. By participating in YouthZone activities such as community service and juvenile diversion programs, clients can avoid pre-trial detention or even have their pending charges dropped altogether.

Evaluation Purpose

The purpose of this report is to evaluate YouthZone’s influence on positive developmental behaviors of youth. The findings can be used to strengthen YouthZone’s programming and to inform community members and organizations seeking to contribute to this work.

This report addresses two main research questions:

1. Did YouthZone programs reduce risk factors for youth?
2. Are programs equitable in achieving similar outcomes for youth of different genders, ages, ethnicities, offense types, income levels, and regions of residence?

About the YouthZone Youth Survey[©]

The data in this report comes from the *YouthZone Youth Survey*[®], which is administered to youth prior to entering and after completing YouthZone programming. The survey includes 62 questions about clients’ beliefs, attitudes, and experiences. Some survey questions are multiple choice and ask clients to reflect on their experiences with a given scale. Others are “yes or no” questions.

Each question on the survey is coded under one of five constructs related to different risk areas. Survey responses (a, b, c...) are converted to corresponding numeric values (1, 2, 3...), which are then added together so that each construct receives an aggregate score. Guidance on interpreting survey scores is discussed below.

Evaluation Methods

Study Design

This analysis compares self-reported youths’ survey responses before and after participating in YouthZone programming. By observing patterns of change in each of the five construct areas, this evaluation estimated YouthZone’s influence on positive developmental behaviors.

Table 1 describes each of the five constructs. Lower scores indicate that a respondent is at lower risk in that construct, while higher scores reflect higher risks and fewer assets. For example, observing the minimum and maximum for the Life Optimism and Social Support construct in Table 1, the client with the lowest risk in that area received a score of 15 while the client with the highest risk received a score of 40.5.

Scoring criteria are not consistent across constructs, therefore survey results cannot be easily compared across constructs. For example, receiving a higher score in the Life Optimism and Social Support construct than in Personal Safety does not mean a client is experiencing greater risks with optimism than with safety.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Each Construct (Pre- and Post-surveys combined)

Construct	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Life Optimism and Social Support	22.2	5.1	15	40.5
School and Community Engagement	12.3	3.4	6	23
Alcohol Refusal Skills	13.1	2.6	11	26
Marijuana and Other Drug Refusal Skills	24.9	8.0	15	51
Personal Safety	11.9	2.6	9	21.5

Source: YouthZone Youth Survey©

Unanswered survey questions for individuals in the sample were imputed using the average score for each variable to preserve the maximum possible sample size. Less than 1% of all survey responses were imputed (0.8%). The survey was validated by YouthZone (see Youth Survey© Staff Manual).

The Evaluation Sample

This analysis describes 412 individuals who completed both pre- and post-surveys between August 2019 and January 2024. There were 392 middle and high school-age youth, 20 of whom were surveyed twice (in two different cases).

Evaluation Group Demographics

Of the 412 cases, 65% were male and 35% were female. Most youth in this study were between the ages of 13 and 17 at the time of intake. This group constitutes approximately 91% of all

respondents. 6% of respondents were under age 12 and 3% were 18 years old. The average age at intake of all cases was 15.

In terms of race/ethnicity, 51% identified as Caucasian/White, 45% as Latino/Hispanic, 2% as Multiracial, and less than 1% as Native American, African American, or Other race/ethnicity. As for family structure, 44% of youth respondents lived with both birth parents, 20% lived with a female birth parent, 18% lived with a birth parent and a step-parent, and 8% had parents who were divorced and split time between them. The remaining respondents lived with a male birth parent (5%), grandparents (2%), adopted parents (2%), or “other” (1%).

Source of Referral

Youths in the evaluation group were referred to Youth Zone from various sources. Courts represented 80% of all referrals, schools constituted 12% of referrals, law enforcement comprised 6%, and the remaining 2% of referrals came from other sources. The specific breakdown is listed below in descending order by frequency:

- Municipal courts = 58%
- District courts = 16%
- Schools = 12%
- County courts = 6%
- Law enforcement = 6%
- Self/parent = 1%
- Probation officers = 1%

Community of Residence

Table 2 shows the distribution of communities in which YouthZone clients reside. Most of the youth in the evaluation group reside in the Rifle (23%), Glenwood Springs (20%), or Carbondale (20%) areas.

Table 2: Communities where Evaluation Group Youth Live

Region	Percent
Rifle	23%
Glenwood Springs	20%
Carbondale	20%
New Castle and Silt	16%
Lower Colorado River Valley	8%
Basalt	5%
Aspen	4%
Rio Blanco	2%
Other	1%
Total	100%

Source: YouthZone Youth Survey©

Youth and their Legal Offenses

Table 3 shows the percentage of survey respondents that were referred to YouthZone for each type of legal offense. Alcohol and drug related offenses accounted for 51% of all referrals. The next most common reasons for referral were person offenses (17%), property offenses (15%), and petty theft (11%). Fewer than 6% of Youth Zone clients were referred for traffic, forgery, and fraud offenses.

Reasons for referral vary by gender. Compared to males, female clients were much more commonly referred for alcohol and drug related offenses (66% vs 44%) while male clients were more commonly referred for person and property crimes. Reasons for referral were relatively similar for White and Latino youth irrespective of gender.

Table 3: Evaluation Group Offense Types and Demographic Trends

Offense	All Youth	Gender		Ethnicity	
	Percent of All Youth Referred for this Offense	Percent of Male Youth Referred for this offense	Percent of Female Youth Referred for this offense	Percent of Latino Youth Referred for this offense	Percent of White Youth Referred for this offense
Alcohol and Drug Related (possession, use, distribution)	51%	44%	66%	52%	52%
Person (assault and battery, harassment and menacing, use of weapons, resisting arrest, sexual assault)	17%	21%	11%	20%	15%
Property (criminal mischief, trespass, motor vehicle theft, breaking and entering)	15%	19%	8%	10%	18%
Petty Theft (theft of item with value less than \$500)	11%	10%	12%	10%	11%
Miscellaneous (forgery, fraud, conspiracy)	4%	4%	3%	5%	2%
Traffic	2%	3%	0%	3%	2%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: YouthZone Youth Survey©

Research Question 1: Risk Reduction for Youth

To assess whether YouthZone has helped reduce risks factors for youth, the APA research team utilized paired t-tests to calculate whether there were statistically significant differences between pre- and post-survey means. The goal of a t-test is to determine whether two means are actually different or if the differences are due to chance. *P-values below 0.05 indicate a 5% or less chance that the differences are due to chance. This 5% standard is used to determine whether differences are statistically significant, and a negative difference in means symbolizes a reduction in risk.* Additional t-tests were performed to check for differences in risk reduction based on age, gender, ethnicity, FRL status, offense type and region of residence.

Overall Risk Reduction

On average, clients reported statistically significant reductions in risks across all five constructs after participating in YouthZone programming. Table 4 shows the difference in pre- and post-survey means where negative numbers represent decreasing risks. **In each construct, at least half of all clients reported reductions in risk from the pre- to post-survey.** These results affirm YouthZone’s positive impact on the developmental behaviors of youth and suggest that programs have been effective in reducing risks for clients.

Table 4: Difference in Pre- and Post-Means

Construct	Pre Survey Mean	Post Survey Mean	Difference in Means	% of Youth Who Improved
Life Optimism & Social Support	23.7	20.8	-2.9***	67%
School & Community Engagement	13.1	11.4	-1.7***	62%
Alcohol Refusal	13.7	12.6	-1.1***	52%
Marijuana & Other Drugs	26.4	23.4	-2.9***	63%
Safety	12.5	11.4	-1.0***	52%

p< *0.05 ** 0.01 *** 0.001

Source: YouthZone Youth Survey©

Research Question 2: Exploratory Analysis of Equity in Risk Reduction

This section examines whether risk reduction is proportionate and equitable within subgroups of youth. The results and discussion in this section are exploratory and rest on the un-tested assumption that the scoring system for each construct is based on an interval scale, meaning a change of one point indicates the same change in risk regardless of where on the scale that change occurs.

Q: Do Higher-risk Youth Experience Larger Reductions in Risk?

Table 5 shows differences in means by quartile of pre-survey risk. **On average, youth who scored in the fourth quartile on the pre-survey, indicating lower assets and higher risks, experienced much greater reductions in risks compared to youth who entered YouthZone with lower levels of risk.** Assuming scale scores are interval, these findings would suggest that

YouthZone has been particularly effective in reducing risk factors for youth at the highest levels of risk.

Table 5: Difference in Pre- and Post-Means by Quartile of Pre-Survey Risk

Construct	Q1 Difference in Means	Q2 Difference in Means	Q3 Difference in Means	Q4 Difference in Means
Life Optimism & Social Support	-0.37*	-2.11***	-3.8***	-6.19***
School & Community Engagement	0	-1.34***	-2.04***	-4.21***
Alcohol Refusal	0.41***	-0.44***	-1.37***	-3.53***
Marijuana & Other Drugs	0.21	-0.82*	-3.87***	-7.95***
Safety	0.17*	-0.74***	-1.36***	-3.05***

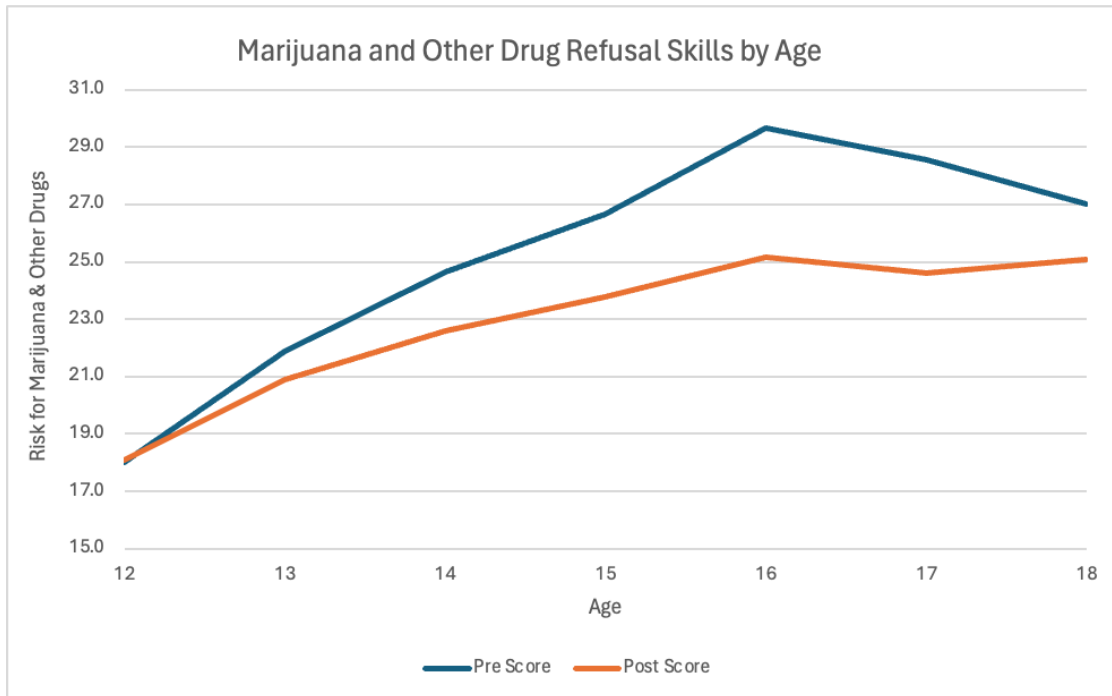
*p<.05, ** p<.01 and ***p<.001

Source: YouthZone Youth Survey©

Q: Does Risk Reduction Vary by Age?

In four of the five construct areas, positive pre- and post-score trends were consistent for clients regardless of age. Different aged clients entered YouthZone with similar levels of risk, and they experienced similar reductions in risk upon completion. The one exception is the Marijuana and Other Drug Refusal Skills construct. Older clients, particularly those 15 to 18 years old, entered YouthZone at much higher levels of risk for marijuana and drug use compared to their younger counterparts and continue to experience higher levels of risk in this area after exiting YouthZone (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Marijuana and Other Drug Refusal Risk by Age



NOTE: Age groups smaller than 12 people (10- and 11-year-olds) are not stable and not reported.
 Source: YouthZone Youth Survey©

Q: Does Risk Reduction Vary by Gender?

Reductions were generally smaller for females but were statistically significant for both genders. Table 6 shows differences in mean survey scores by gender. Male and female clients alike achieved statistically significant reductions in risks across all five construct areas. However, when considering differences in pre-survey risks for male and female clients, data suggests that YouthZone programming has been slightly more impactful for male youth.

On average, female clients entered YouthZone programming at a higher level of risk in each of the five construct areas compared to males, as shown by the pre-survey means in the figure above. Considering the research team’s previously discussed findings that clients with higher pre-survey risks experience steeper reductions in risk, we might expect that females should see steeper declines in risk than males. However, despite starting at higher levels of risk in all five construct areas, female clients consistently experienced smaller reductions in risks than their male counterparts. These findings suggest that YouthZone might have room to grow in achieving proportionate impacts for female clients.

Table 6: Difference in Pre- and Post-Means by Gender

Construct	Male Mean	Male Change	Female Mean	Female Change
Life Optimism & Social Support	22.6	-3.0***	25.1	-2.7***
School & Community Engagement	13.1	-1.9***	13.2	-1.3***
Alcohol Refusal	13.6	-1.2***	13.9	-0.99***
Marijuana & Other Drugs	26.0	-3.2***	26.9	-2.5***
Safety	11.9	-1.1***	13.5	-0.9***

p < *0.05 ** 0.01 *** 0.001

Source: YouthZone Youth Survey©

Q: Does Risk Reduction Vary by Ethnicity?

Positive effects were similar for White and Latino youth in all five constructs. Table 7 shows differences in mean survey scores by ethnicity. White and Latino youth enter YouthZone programming with similar levels of risk in four of five constructs. The one exception is Marijuana & Other Drugs, where White youth experience much higher risks on the pre-survey compared to their Latino peers. White clients remain at higher risk for marijuana and other drugs after exiting YouthZone, as shown in Figure 2, although the gap between risk levels for White and Latino clients is shrinking in this area.

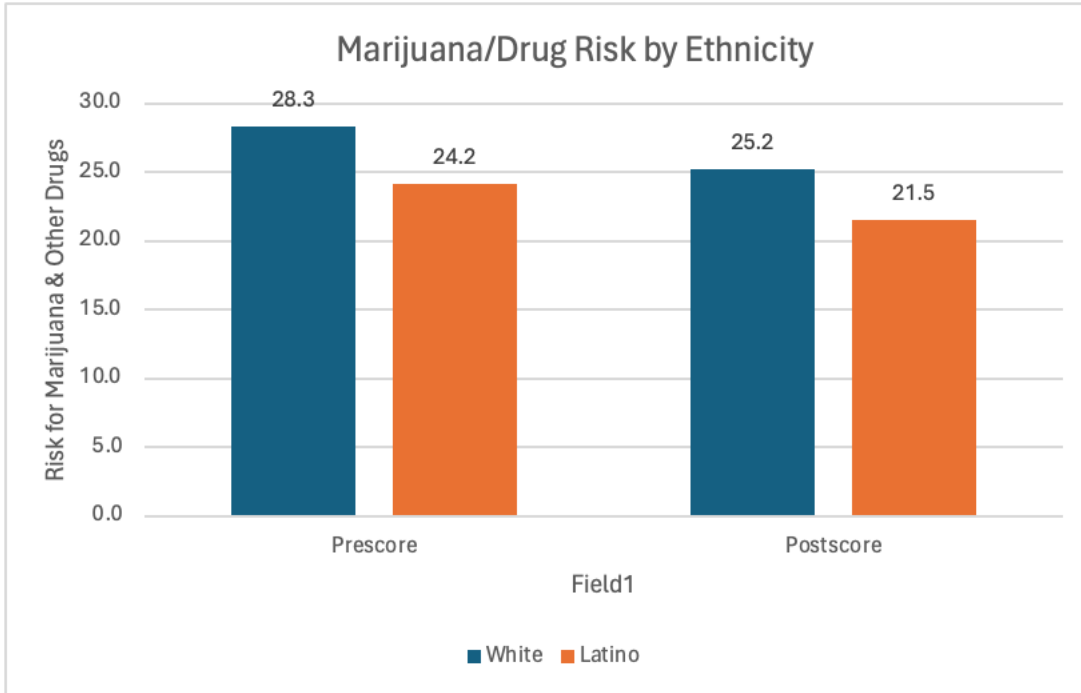
Table 7: Difference in Pre- and Post-Means by Ethnicity

Construct	White Mean	White Change	Latino Mean	Latino Change
Life Optimism & Social Support	23.4	-2.8***	24.01	-2.9***
School & Community Engagement	13.0	-1.5***	13.2	-1.7***
Alcohol Refusal	14.4	-1.5***	12.9	-0.75***
Marijuana & Other Drugs	28.3	-3.1***	24.2	-2.7***
Safety	13.0	-1.1***	11.8	-0.86***

p < *0.05 ** 0.01 *** 0.001

Source: YouthZone Youth Survey©

Figure 2: Marijuana and Other Drug Refusal Risk by Ethnicity



Source: YouthZone Youth Survey©

Q: Does Risk Reduction Vary by Poverty Status?

Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Eligibility, or FRL, is a common but very broad indicator of students living in low-income households. In recent years, FRL has become a less reliable indicator of poverty status because of recent policy changes within the National Free Lunch Program. Table 8 shows differences in mean survey scores by FRL eligibility. Initial risk levels are similar for both youth who qualify for FRL and those that do not. **Positive effects were similar for youth in all five constructs regardless of FRL status.** Together this suggests YouthZone participation, and impacts are similar regardless of whether a youth is from a low-income household.

Table 8: Difference in Pre- and Post-Means by Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Eligibility

Construct	FRL Pre Mean	FRL Change	Non-FRL Pre Mean	Non-FRL Change
Life Optimism & Social Support	24.2	-3.4***	23.3	-2.6***
School & Community Engagement	13.8	-1.9***	12.6	-1.6***
Alcohol Refusal	13.4	-1.1***	13.9	-1.1***
Marijuana & Other Drugs	24.7	-2.6***	27.5	-3.2***
Safety	12.3	-1.0***	12.5	-1.0***

p< *0.05 ** 0.01 *** 0.001

Source: YouthZone Youth Survey©

Q: Does Risk Reduction Vary by Region?

Table 9 shows differences in mean survey scores by geographic region. **Clients from Glenwood Springs, Carbondale, New Castle & Silt, and Basalt experienced statistically significant reductions in risks across all five construct areas. Clients from Rifle, the most frequent region of residence, experienced smaller reductions in risks in all five constructs compared to other regions.** Basalt clients experienced a large reduction in risks associated with marijuana and other drugs (-8.2 points) and life optimism (-4.6 points). Both Glenwood Springs and Basalt experienced above average declines in all five categories; Carbondale, New Castle & Silt, and the Lower Colorado River Valley experienced around average reductions, and Rifle and Aspen experienced smaller reductions.

Table 9: Difference in Pre- and Post-Means by Region

Construct	Rifle (n= 91)	Glenwood Springs (n= 81)	Carbon- dale (n= 80)	New Castle & Silt (n= 65)	LCRV (n= 33)	Basalt (n= 21)	Aspen (n = 15)
Life Optimism & Social Support	-1.6***	-3.1***	-3.2***	-3.3***	-3.4**	-4.6***	-2.7**
School & Community Engagement	-0.29	-2.8***	-2.3***	-2.0***	-1.2*	-2.6*	-0.6
Alcohol Refusal	-0.76**	-1.3***	-1.1***	-0.86**	-1.5***	-1.5***	-0.47
Marijuana & Other Drugs	-1.7**	-4.2***	-2.8***	-2.2**	-2.2	-8.2***	-2.5**
Safety	-0.41	-1.4**	-0.96**	-1.1***	-1.2**	-2.0***	-0.53

NOTE: Regions with fewer than 15 people were removed (Rio Blanco & Other).

p< *0.05 ** 0.01 *** 0.001

Source: YouthZone Youth Survey©

Program Evaluation Summary

This independent assessment of YouthZone’s influence on positive developmental behaviors of youth sought to answer two main questions:

1. Did YouthZone programs reduce risk factors for youth?
2. Are programs equitable in achieving similar outcomes for youth of different genders, ages, ethnicities, offense types, income levels, and regions of residence?

The findings suggest that, on average, YouthZone is successfully reducing risks for clients of all types. On average, youth experienced statistically significant reductions in risks across all five constructs after participating in YouthZone programming. These positive outcomes have been widespread; risks were reduced for between 52% and 67% of clients in each construct. With few exceptions, risk reduction was generally similar regardless of age, ethnicity, and poverty status.

Without confirmation that survey scores are based on interval scales, the APA research team was only able to draw tentative conclusions about equity in risk reduction. While less certain, the findings of our exploratory analysis yielded mixed results.

Some evidence suggests that, on average, clients who enter YouthZone at higher levels of risk experience larger reductions in risk upon exiting. Other subgroup analysis suggests that YouthZone may have room to grow in achieving proportionate impact for all clients. Female youth experienced smaller reductions in risk than males in all constructs despite entering YouthZone at higher risk; White clients and older clients began and remained at higher risk for drug use compared to Latino and younger clients; and youth from Rifle and Aspen experienced smaller reductions in risk compared to youth from other regions.

Main Findings on Overall Risk Reduction:

- Risks reduced in all 5 constructs
- Risks reduced for between 52% and 67% of clients in each construct
- Similar reductions regardless of age, ethnicity, and poverty status

Exploratory (Tentative) Findings on Equity:

- Larger reductions in risk for higher risk clients
- Generally larger reductions for male clients
- Higher marijuana and drug risk for White clients and older clients
- Smaller reductions for Rifle and Aspen