

RESEARCH BRIEF

Examining a Drop-in and Case Management Model for Youth Experiencing Homelessness

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Despite substantial social and fiscal costs of youth homelessness, little is known about the long-term impact of social services interventions. This study assessed whether YouthLink's enhanced drop-in and supportive case management model for youth experiencing homelessness resulted in improved outcomes over six years, and also investigated which aspects of YouthLink's model contributed to successful intervention.

BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

An estimated 7,500 unaccompanied Minnesotan youth experience homelessness annually (Pittman et al., 2020). Experiencing homelessness is detrimental to health and well-being, and future outcomes (Hatchimonji et al., 2021; Hodgson et al., 2014). To promote better outcomes for youth experiencing homelessness, drop-in centers like YouthLink provide a safe space and supportive services. Approximately 2,000 unaccompanied youth annually visit YouthLink, a nonprofit agency that is Minneapolis' largest drop-in center for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness. YouthLink offers basic services, case management and, due to an initiative of Hennepin County, enhanced onsite access to many services through the Youth Opportunity Center (YOC). Unique in the area to YouthLink, the YOC lowers barriers to accessing services from more than 30 affiliated agencies, including enrollment assistance for support programs such as Emergency Assistance (EA), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), General Assistance (GA), and the Minnesota Family Investment Plan (MFIP).

Supportive adult relationships are critical for healthy youth development, especially for youth experiencing homelessness (Sieving et al., 2017). Research shows positive outcomes associated with practice models, such as the drop-in case management model used by YouthLink, that feature relational case management including mentoring and youth development programming and high frequency engagement over multiple months or longer (Morton et al., 2019). Case manager-youth relationships are central to this approach (Alexander & Caring, 2009; Altena et al., 2017). These relationships, and the service model they support, drive the YouthLink theory of change, which posits that case management efforts based on (intensively) supportive relationships, that encourage normative social behaviors and that are focused on transformative services, will support youth experiencing homelessness to achieve their goals. In other words, this model relies on case management characterized by a) intensive case manager-youth relationships (relationship intensity), b) supporting normative social behaviors, and c) services across domains to transform youth outcomes (transformative services). As such, the goals of the current study were to assess whether YouthLink's enhanced drop-in and supportive case management model resulted in improved outcomes for youth experiencing homelessness, and to identify aspects of YouthLink's model which contributed to successful intervention.



photo: Danae Hudson

YOUTHLINK OFFERS BASIC SERVICES, CASE MANAGEMENT AND, DUE TO AN INITIATIVE OF HENNEPIN COUNTY, ENHANCED ONSITE ACCESS TO MANY SERVICES THROUGH THE YOUTH OPPORTUNITY CENTER (YOC). UNIQUE IN THE AREA TO YOUTHLINK, THE YOC LOWERS BARRIERS TO ACCESSING SERVICES FROM MORE THAN 30 AFFILIATED AGENCIES.

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. *What is the overall impact of YouthLink’s drop-in and case management services model on long-term outcomes for youth? (Aim 1)*
2. *What is the impact of the intensity of case management services and topically focused efforts by YouthLink’s case managers on long-term outcomes for youth? (Aim 2)*

METHODS

Using integrated administrative data available through Minn-LInK to examine housing, education, court involvement, and use of financial support programs for 1,229 youth experiencing homelessness, this longitudinal mixed methods study assessed outcomes over six years, much longer than other studies following such youth.

Through Minn-LInK, records of youth aged 16-24 years (as of December 31, 2011) who received services from YouthLink in 2011 (n=1,451) and were previously studied (Foldes & Lubov, 2016) were matched to records from the Minnesota Departments of Education and Human Services, State Court Administrators Office, Office of Higher Education, and the Homeless Management Information System using probabilistic and hand-matching methods. The sample was restricted to 1,229 youth, excluding youth 1) who were eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI), 2) whose records were unable to be linked to administrative data, and 3) for whom a matched peer could not be identified. A comparison group of similar youth (n=1,229) experiencing homelessness who never visited YouthLink was identified

for Aim 1, matched on age, gender, race/ethnicity, receipt of free/reduced lunch, participation in special education, last year of K-12 enrollment, documentation as homeless via shelter or educational records, and geographic area of last residence. Comparison group youth may have received similar services at other agencies without the advantages provided by the YOC. See Table 1 for sample characteristics.

Data included demographic information, as well as key outcomes during six year follow-up for: housing (use of emergency shelter, permanent housing, and average length of stay); education (high school diploma or GED attainment, higher education enrollment or degree); juvenile delinquency and criminal justice (court appearances resulting in adjudication and/or conviction, re-offenses, felony conviction); financial support program receipt and associated costs (participation in EA, SNAP, GA, and MFIP).

For Aim 2, information about transformative services provided by YouthLink case managers (e.g., housing, education, legal issues, employment, mental health or chemical dependence [MH/CD]), encouragement of normative social behaviors (e.g., advice to head off impending challenges, such as being evicted due to violation of basic rules), and relationship intensity (average minutes of interaction per unique month over each youth’s duration of YouthLink involvement) was coded from over 60,000 YouthLink case notes.

The research team used logistic and generalized linear regression to test associations and predict youth outcomes (2011-2016), using separate models for each outcome. Models were adjusted for age; gender; race/ethnicity; prior services received (special education, children’s mental health case management, child protection, out-of-home placements); years homeless (2008-2011); proportion of case notes focused on MH/CD (Aim 2); number of prior YouthLink visits (Aim 2); and prior educational attainment (Aims 1 and 2 for financial support outcomes). In Aim 2, separate models also examined the influence of each theory of change (relationship intensity, normative social behaviors, transformative services) on outcomes of interest.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics in 2011

	YouthLink Cohort (n=1,229)	Comparison Group (n=1,229)
Median age in years	20	20
Female	61.0%	61.0%
American Indian	5.5%	5.5%
Asian	0.8%	0.8%
Black	77.2%	77.2%
Hispanic	2.3%	2.3%
White	14.2%	14.2%
Last known residence in Hennepin/Ramsey counties	66.9%	53.0%
Financial program receipt	56.7%	51.1%
Years homeless or at risk of homelessness (2008-2011)		
1	35.4%	58.4%
2	28.4%	22.1%
3	17.2%	9.5%
4	19.0%	9.9%
Previous child mental health case management	15.5%	6.8%
Previous child protective services	50.0%	36.3%
Previous out-of-home placement	35.2%	19.9%
Previous special education services	37.5%	26.5%
Previously received free/reduced lunch for 2+ years	88.5%	87.2%
Earned high school diploma (as of 2011)	14.9%	15.3%
Earned MN GED diploma (as of 2011)	5.4%	3.6%

Note. All characteristics measured in 2011 unless otherwise noted. Characteristics described as “previous” indicate any childhood incidence through 2011.

FINDINGS

When compared with similar youth, the youth who visited YouthLink experienced substantially improved outcomes over six years on housing and education but were more likely to use GA in the final year of observation and have slightly higher financial program costs. More intense relationships between case managers and youth, encouragement of normative social behaviors, and focused work on specific transformative topics improved outcomes, especially in housing and education.

AIM 1: COMPARATIVE STUDY OF YOUTHLINK SERVICES TO OTHER COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES

Aim 1 compared outcomes experienced by the YouthLink cohort to those experienced by the comparison group. Findings are presented in text below and in summary form in Table 2.

- » For housing, the YouthLink cohort had greater odds of shelter ($OR=2.86, p<.01$) and permanent housing use ($OR=1.86, p<.01$) compared to the comparison group. YouthLink clients were estimated to have stayed nearly six days longer in emergency shelters and nearly 63 days longer in permanent housing than youth in the comparison group.
- » For education, YouthLink clients had greater odds of earning a GED ($OR=1.90, p<.01$) than their peers. No other significant differences in education outcomes emerged.

Table 2: Examining Youth Outcomes, YouthLink Cohort versus Comparison Group (Aim 1)

	Impact
Housing	
Shelter use (Odds ratio [OR])	▲
Shelter estimated mean length of stay (days difference)	▲
Permanent supportive housing use (OR)	▲
Permanent supportive housing estimated mean length of stay (days difference)	▲
Education	
GED attained (OR)	▲
Juvenile Delinquency and Criminal Justice Involvement	
Any court appearance (OR)	▼
Any court appearance resulting in adjudication and/or conviction (OR)	▼
Use of Financial Programs	
Use of GA program (OR) in 2016	▼
Cumulative estimated mean cost difference per person of EA program	▼
Cumulative estimated mean cost difference per person of SNAP	▼
Cumulative estimated mean cost difference per person of any financial program	▼

Note. In this table, a green arrow up or down indicates a statistically significant higher or lower estimate, respectively, and a clearly favorable outcome effect; a green AND red arrow indicates a significantly higher estimate but whether this is a favorable outcome remains open to interpretation. A single red arrow up or down indicates a statistically significant higher or lower estimate, respectively, and a clearly unfavorable outcome effect. All outcomes measured from 2011-2016, unless otherwise noted.

- » For court outcomes, YouthLink clients had greater odds of appearing in court for juvenile delinquency or adult criminal charges ($OR=1.51, p<.01$) and of being adjudicated/convicted of those charges ($OR=1.45, p<.01$). No differences were found in felony convictions or reoffending.
- » For financial support programs, the YouthLink cohort had greater odds of receiving GA in 2016 ($OR=2.48, p<.01$) than the comparison group. There were no significant differences in the odds for other programs. Estimated costs were substantially higher for the YouthLink cohort for SNAP (\$293 mean cost per person difference), and across all financial programs (\$532 mean cost per person difference) between 2011 and 2016.

AIM 2: EXAMINING YOUTHLINK'S THEORY OF CHANGE

Aim 2 examined the relationship among YouthLink's theories of change (fostering intense relationships, cultivating normative social behaviors, and providing specific transformative services) and outcomes of interest for clients of YouthLink. Findings are presented below and in Table 3.

Relationship intensity

- » In terms of relationship intensity, substantial and moderately intense relationships between youth and their case managers were each associated with greater odds of using permanent housing ($OR=4.16, p<.01$; $OR=1.57, p=.02$) than relationships lacking intensity. In addition, those with substantially intense relationships had an estimated average of 176 days longer lengths of stay in permanent housing.
- » For education, substantially intense relationships resulted in greater odds of high school graduation ($OR=1.73, p=.02$) than those lacking intensity.
- » For court outcomes, moderately intense relationships were associated with higher likelihood of re-offending ($OR=1.80, p<.01$) than relationships lacking intensity.
- » Relationship intensity was not associated with financial support programs use. YouthLink clients with greater relationship intensity experienced a reduction of \$51 in MFIP costs per person between 2011 and 2016, relative to those with no intensity. Relationship intensity had no impact on overall financial program costs.

Focus on normative social behaviors

- » Substantial focus on normative social behaviors (compared with no such focus) was associated with greater odds of emergency shelter use ($OR=2.48, p<.01$), and of permanent housing use ($OR=4.03, p<.01$); a moderate focus on normative social behaviors was associated with greater odds of

Table 3: Examining YouthLink Theories of Change and Outcomes, YouthLink Cohort (Aim 2)

	Greater Relationship Intensity	Focus on Social Norms	Focus on Specific Topics
Housing			
Shelter use (odds ratio [OR])		▲	▲
Shelter estimated mean length of stay (days difference)		▲	▲
Permanent supportive housing use (OR)	▲	▲	▲
Permanent supportive housing estimated mean length of stay (days difference)	▲	▲	▲
Education			
High school diploma attained (OR)	▲		▲
GED attained (OR)			▲
Juvenile Delinquency and Criminal Justice Involvement			
Re-offences (OR)	▲		
Conviction of felony (OR)		▼	
Cost of Financial Support Programs			
Cumulative estimated mean cost difference per person of MFIP (\$)	▼		
Cumulative estimated mean cost difference per person of SNAP (\$)		▲	▲

Note. In this table, a green arrow up or down indicates a statistically significant higher or lower estimate, respectively, and a clearly favorable outcome effect; a green AND red arrow indicates a significantly higher estimate but whether this is a favorable outcome remains open to interpretation. A single red arrow up or down indicates a statistically significant higher or lower estimate, respectively, and a clearly unfavorable outcome effect. All outcomes measured from 2011-2016.

permanent housing use ($OR=2.89, p<.01$). Youth with a substantial focus on normative behavior were estimated to stay 11 days longer in emergency shelter and 206 days longer in permanent housing; and those with a moderate focus were estimated to stay 126 days longer in permanent housing.

- » A focus on normative social behaviors was not significantly associated with any education outcomes.
- » For court outcomes, substantial focus on normative social behaviors considerably reduced the likelihood of conviction for a felony ($OR=0.34, p<.01$) as compared to youth without such focus, but was not associated with other outcomes.
- » A focus on normative social behaviors was not associated with financial support programs use. However, any focus on normative social behaviors resulted in a modestly \$106 higher estimated cost per person for SNAP benefits.

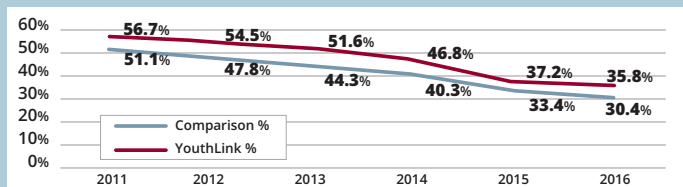
Focus on outcome-specific transformative services

- » A moderate or substantial focus on housing (as compared to no focus on housing), was associated with greater odds ($OR=1.56, p=.02$; $OR=2.01, p<.01$), respectively, of emergency shelter use, and greater odds ($OR=4.10, p<.01$; $OR=2.48, p<.01$), respectively, of using permanent housing. Similarly, those with substantial focus on housing spent an estimated 11 days longer on average

From a policy perspective, it is important to recognize that the rate of use of any financial support programs declined steadily and substantially from 2011 to 2016 by members of both the YouthLink and comparison groups (Figure 1). In the YouthLink cohort, for example, 697 youth (56.7%) used one or more programs in 2011, but only 440 youth (35.8%) relied on a program in 2016. The observed decline of 257 youth in the YouthLink cohort, a 37% decrease, and a similar decline in the comparison group, represents a substantial improvement, suggesting that some members of both groups had begun to find a foothold in the job market.

Along with the decline in the use of programs by members of both the YouthLink and comparison groups, the total costs also declined similarly in both groups. However, the adjusted comparison (Table 2) indicates that the YouthLink cohort used a modestly higher estimated average amount of support per person across all financial programs than the comparison group. Yet, the more important finding from a policy perspective is the substantial decline in both groups from 2011 to 2016 in the cost of these programs to taxpayers. For instance, the total cost of the YouthLink cohort's financial support was \$1,285,462 in 2011, and it declined to \$700,489 in 2016. This observed decline of nearly \$600,000, a 46% decline in costs, and a similar decline in the comparison group, represents substantial improvement and considerable savings to taxpayers who fund these programs. It is possible that continued declines in use occurred in both groups following 2016; if so, the long-term cost savings to taxpayers would be substantial.

Figure 1. Annual Use of Any Financial Support Program, 2011-2016, YouthLink Cohort versus Comparison Group



Note. Unadjusted numbers are presented.

in emergency shelters, and an estimated average 85 days longer in permanent housing, while those with a moderate focus had an estimated 181 days longer in permanent housing.

- » For education, a moderate focus on educational topics increased the likelihood that youth would earn a high school diploma ($OR=1.67, p=.04$), but having substantial focus – as compared to no focus – decreased the likelihood of youth attaining it ($OR=0.51, p=.04$). However, substantial focus on education significantly increased the odds of youth earning a GED ($OR=2.59, p<.01$).
- » Focus on juvenile delinquency and criminal justice topics did not affect those outcomes, nor did focus on employment-related issues affect use of financial support programs. However, any focus on employment-related issues, compared with no such focus, resulted in a modest estimated \$102 higher cost per person for SNAP.

Conclusion

Results from each aim have important implications for public policy on addressing youth homelessness. First, the drop-in and case management model for youth experiencing homelessness, as implemented at YouthLink from 2011 to 2016, is effective for achieving desired long-term outcomes, particularly in the areas of housing and education. This model is itself an intervention, providing for youth experiencing homelessness a space

..... THIS MODEL IS ITSELF AN INTERVENTION, PROVIDING FOR YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS A SPACE AWAY FROM THE DANGERS OF LIFE ON THE STREET AND ADULT-FOCUSED SERVICE CENTERS. IN THE DROP-IN, YOUTH ARE ENCOURAGED TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH CARING ADULTS WHO REINFORCE MORE SOCIALLY NORMATIVE BEHAVIORS AND WORK TOWARD HELPING YOUTH ACHIEVE THEIR GOALS... THUS, SERVICE MODELS SHOULD PRIORITIZE HOW TO SUPPORT CASE MANAGERS IN SIMILAR MODELS TO BUILD MEANINGFUL AND INTENSE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE YOUTH THEY SERVE.

YouthLink's experienced staff and organizational stability during the follow-up period, and their youth-oriented focus likely contributed to positive outcomes for members of the YouthLink cohort.

Second, the positive outcomes found in this study also resulted from significant case manager efforts. Overall, intense and topically focused efforts, together with encouragement of normative social behaviors, were effective at achieving desired outcomes in housing and education. Thus, service models should prioritize how to support case managers in similar models to build meaningful and intense relationships with the youth they serve.

Finally, while we did not find reduced use and costs of financial support programs for the YouthLink cohort compared to their peers, there was an observed substantial decline from 2011 to 2016 in both groups of the use and total cost of these financial support programs. It is possible that YouthLink's and other service providers' efforts around helping youth achieve their employment goals began to reduce reliance on financial support programs by the youth who experienced homelessness in 2011 and helped start many of them toward long-term financial self-sufficiency.

LIMITATIONS

We likely underestimated the impact of the service model, given this study's quasi-experimental design and our inability to select a control group whose members did not receive similar services. In addition, person-level information was not available to characterize the interventions provided by the YOC partner agencies. Finally, the results of the financial analysis presented here constitute only part of the picture on employment-related efforts, because information on the employment status and earnings of the members of both groups are not included.



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A multidisciplinary team of researchers conducted this study, including

Steven S. Foldes, PhD, Co-Principal Investigator. Dr. Foldes is a social anthropologist and Principal of Foldes Consulting LLC, an independent research consulting practice. He is also an Adjunct Associate Professor of Epidemiology and Community Health at the University of Minnesota.

Kirsten Hall Long, PhD, is a senior health economist. Formerly a Consultant in the Division of Health Care Policy & Research at the Mayo Clinic College of Medicine, she is President of K. Long Health Economics Consulting LLC, an independent consulting practice.

Kristine Piescher, PhD, Co-Principal Investigator. Dr. Piescher is a social scientist and Director of Research and Evaluation at the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) at the University of Minnesota, where she leads a number of large-scale and locally-based research and evaluation projects, including the Minn-LInK project.

Katelyn Warburton, MA, is a homeless programs administrator at the Office of Economic Opportunity (Minnesota Department of Human Services). Previously Ms. Warburton worked in various direct care and administrative roles in the non-profit sector—most recently as the Data Analyst/Special Projects Coordinator at YouthLink.

Saahong Hong, PhD, is an educational psychologist and an Assistant Research Professor at the Indiana Division of Mental Health and Addiction at Indiana University. Previously Dr. Hong served as a Senior Minn-LInK Researcher at the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) at the University of Minnesota.

Nina L. Alesci, PhD, MPH is an epidemiologist and an independent consultant providing evaluation and primary research study design, data analysis, and reporting services on survey and claims data for public health and health care clients.



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For more information, contact **Kristine Piescher (Editor)** at 612-624-4231 or email at casw@umn.edu