

Community Connections For Youth

A Grassroots Approach to Pro-social Adolescent
Development in a Neighborhood
of Chronic Disadvantage

Phase I: A Formative Evaluation

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Foreword

Community Connections for Youth (CCFY), a three-year pilot project, is guided by a theory-of-change that relies on the development of nascent resident strengths within neighborhoods of chronic disadvantage. By extending this strength-based approach to the pro-social development of neighborhood juveniles, CCFY changes the lens from “risk-focused” interventions to indigenous resources that can be effectively bundled in favor of resiliency.

The pilot, funded with a federal Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJDP) federal formula grant from the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS), was awarded to South Bronx Community Connections (SBCC), the lead agency for implementation of its CCFY program for court-acquainted juveniles. The pilot was funded at \$1.1 million, under the category “Breakthrough Research-based Strategies.” Funding was awarded with the proviso that CCFY’s potentially “game-changing strategies” be rigorously evaluated — an altogether reasonable expectation given the growing political importance of the project’s neighborhood context, concerns about the efficacy of out-of-home placements for court-involved juveniles, and the substantial size of the award. John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York (CUNY), was awarded a subcontract by SBCC to provide a comprehensive evaluation of its CCFY pilot project.

The technical report that follows is different from the original evaluation design. It does not provide an evidentiary chain that links CCFY’s theory-based program model to research-based strategies, to outcomes, nor is it a small “N” case study. Given an

ever-evolving implementation context, it was not possible to determine an evidentiary chain linking CCFY’s theory-based program model to research-based strategies and then on to outcomes; shifting priorities and unanticipated problems produced project modifications, which precluded the use of a rigorous methodology. A small “N” case study was jeopardized by changing policies, which challenged the consistency of the pool of juvenile eligibles.

Accordingly, the technical report that follows is more formative than summative. It provides meaningful, useful information that present stakeholders, policy-makers, and future implementers of innovative grassroots programs can use to increase the probability of success.

Simply summarized, CCFY’s grassroots model has several potential strengths deserving of continued experimentation and exploration. Conceptualizing, designing, and implementing a “game-changing” program is more demanding than CCFY providers recognized, or than many funders appreciate. In fact, a three-year time-frame — given the innovative nature of the project model — underscores both the legitimacy of many evaluators’ concerns with “evaluation-readiness” factors, and their desire to balance the information needs of stakeholders and decision-makers with methodological rigor.

After a planning year, and two years of implementation devoted to tweaking the pilot project model to increase effectiveness, the latest of four program logic models identifies several intertwined strategies — Family Engagement, Comprehensive

Grassroots Involvement, and A Strength-based Focus — each accompanied by relevant research-base activities. The activities are presumed to build neighborhood social resources via the capacity building technical assistance of CCFY and SBCC.

The outcomes at the conclusion of this first phase of what hopefully will become a stronger program model, buttressed by a series of increasingly rigorous evaluations, are summarized below. Some of the outcomes are already evidence-based and are identified by an asterisk (*). Others are suggestive and encouraging, but, in the absence of sufficient data, are not yet measurable. These are identified by the letters “ID” (ID). Still others, though intriguing, remain hypothetical, needing to be meaningfully crystalized and objectified. These are noted with the letter “H” (H). All are worthy of attention and continued development if progress with the pro-socialization of court-acquainted youth is to continue.

Implementation challenges that CCFY encountered, while unique to their circumstances, are broadly applicable to the field as a whole. The lessons they suggest as well as a complete discussion of the findings are contained in the technical report that follows.

Individual Juveniles

- Juveniles who were meaningfully engaged¹ in project civic activities with “coaches,” “mentors,” and peers for at least 60 days were significantly more likely to remain uninvolved in the justice system during the following year than was a borough-wide comparison group. Further, juveniles who remained active for at least 90 days were the most likely to remain uninvolved in the justice system. (*)

- Given the project’s reliance on official referrals for participation, an agency mandate is a compelling facilitator. (*)
- Given a timely referral (within a week of arrest), those with a 75% attendance rate within the generally imposed 60-day probation mandate, continued participation post-mandate, suggesting that juveniles can bond quickly and remain engaged for considerable time. (*)
- While youths were typically mandated to attend CCFY for 60 days, the project was able to keep them involved beyond the duration of their probation mandate. The treatment group (N=62) remained engaged an average of 209 days. (*)
- Similar to project-involved adults, juveniles appear to progress through three stages of social development: victim, survivor, and leader. (H)

Families

- Although superficially homogeneous, project-involved adults were not equally ready to participate in the evidence-based Family Strengthening Program (FSP). A second family focused group, the Family Support Group Meeting, addressed the unresolved issues raised by an unresponsive (to FSP) sub-group of interested adults. (ID)
- Within 14 months, several adult caretakers developed the interest and skill to obtain stipended positions as Parent Coaches, assisting the CCFY Family Services Coordinator to implement a new, borough-wide contract. (*)
- In the absence of social network analysis, several adult caretakers self-identified as belonging to a supportive social network by the end of the initial implementation period (ID).

¹ Meaningful engagement was defined as 75% attendance in site meetings for each 30 days of enrollment.

Neighborhood Providers (Partner Coaches)

- By the close of implementation year 2, CCFY had expanded into a second neighborhood, and an additional juvenile provider (coach) was added. (*)
- By the second year of the project all five provider/coaches engaged as a team: In addition to site-specific youth participation, all sites welcomed intra-site participation. (*)
- “Teaming” (providers and CCFY working as a team) and the concomitant familiarity among juveniles, coaches, and mentors facilitated the bundling of support provided to juveniles and their families during critical junctures of pro-social development. (*)
- By the conclusion of the pilot, all sites included CCFY juveniles in mainstream activities. (*)
- Two of the five neighborhood providers, lacking formal status as independent non-profits, submitted 501(c)3 applications, with assistance from CCFY. (*)

The Evolution Of Grassroots Lead Agency

- While CCFY’s MIS could not be developed rapidly enough to supply all the data that would be needed for rigorous, statistical analysis, there was sufficient data relevant to the implementation experience to suggest the following hypotheses:
 - ◆ Family engagement enhances the probability that juveniles will continue program participation beyond an official mandate;
 - ◆ Parent-to-parent support from neighbors facilitates the development of social capital;
 - ◆ Reliance on neighborhood residents for support facilitates a shift from a deficit- to a strength-based focus;
 - ◆ A strength-based focus ameliorates defensiveness created by “treatment” models;
 - ◆ To maintain grassroots integrity, grassroots groups, when partnering with government agencies, must also work continually with neighborhood level representatives so that operational logistics are understood and acceptably aligned with agency culture and practice; and
 - ◆ Personal relationships based on common experiences are an important factor when trying to develop social capital.