

# Pathways into Leadership

A study of YouthBuild Graduates



The Center for Information  
Research on Civic Learning  
and Engagement

Jonathan M. Tisch College of  
Citizenship & Public Service

Tufts University

[www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org)

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## Executive Summary

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This study tells the story of the transformation of a substantial group of young people. Today they are exemplary civic leaders. A significant number of them hold public office or are church leaders, such as pastors. More than one third are professional educators or youth workers. Almost all are leaders in their families, workplaces, and communities.

This is a remarkable outcome because just a few years ago they were on a very different track. Almost all had dropped out of high school or been expelled. Many were victims of violence, and a substantial minority had been members of gangs and/or convicted of crimes. Many had been homeless. Most predicted they would be dead by now.

We find that their life trajectories, and indeed their identities, changed as a result of enrolling in local YouthBuild programs—a combination of education, community service in the form of building homes, job training, personal counseling and mentoring, and leadership development—and joining the national pipeline for young leaders that YouthBuild USA organizes for the alumni of the local programs.

For the most part, these young people entered YouthBuild for practical reasons, such as the desire to obtain a GED and job skills. They found YouthBuild a radical alternative to the institutions and communities that they had known so far, characterized by caring and love (explicitly named as such), high expectations for achievement and service to others, opportunities for leadership within and beyond the program, and supportive relationships with adults and peers. Most of the young leaders report that those elements continued from their earliest days in a local program through to their advanced work in the YouthBuild USA leadership system.

This study is based on a survey of 344 alumni and detailed intensive interviews with a diverse sample of 54 of those survey respondents. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) conducted this study in cooperation with selected YouthBuild alumni. The graduates helped design the survey and the interview protocol and actually interviewed their peers. CIRCLE staff analyzed the survey data and audiotapes of the interviews. CIRCLE is solely responsible for this report.

Previous research has shown positive effects on the educational and employment prospects of YouthBuild enrollees as a group, compared to high school dropouts who do not enter YouthBuild (Hahn et al., 2004; Cohen & Piquero, 2010). This study is not intended to replicate those findings. The focus of this study is the graduates who found their way into YouthBuild leadership

programs at the local or national level. Their current contact information is known to YouthBuild USA, usually because they have had contact with the national office. They are similar to the entire YouthBuild population in terms of demographics, personal background, and challenges, but are unusual in that they have participated in YouthBuild alumni leadership programs. Although this report is retrospective (relying on the graduates' recollections of their own past) and may be selective (drawing disproportionately from active alumni), it demonstrates that YouthBuild has had a profound effect on the leadership and civic engagement of a substantial number of young people who recently did not even expect to live until today, let alone contribute to society. As one graduate said, *"Because of YouthBuild, I was introduced to leadership early on. I wasn't just successful in my life, I was able to give back and encourage other young people, not just in my hometown, not just in my state, but across the nation to be successful."*

These alumni, mostly young people of color from low-income households in urban centers, have emerged as civic leaders despite facing severe disadvantages and poor life prospects. They were certainly not on track to attend college when they first walked into a local YouthBuild program. Because opportunities for civic engagement and leadership development are now extremely scarce except for successful high school and college students, YouthBuild stands as a rare example of a program that helps poor and working-class young adults develop into active citizens. As such, it deserves attention and support.

This report was made possible by a generous grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.



## The Problem: The Collapse of Leadership Opportunities for Poor Americans

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Unions, religious congregations, voluntary associations, and political parties have lost most of their young members since the 1970s. As a result, civilian leadership opportunities for youth and young adults are now very rare (Flanagan, Levine and Settersten, 2009).<sup>1</sup>

The armed services provide leadership opportunities, but they enlist only about one fourth as many young people as they did from 1950 to 1973 and are quite selective: 98% of active duty personnel have high school diplomas or some college education (based on Pew Research Center 2011).

High schools still offer student organizations, civics classes, and service-learning, but such opportunities are most likely to be offered in schools with privileged student bodies; in diverse schools, they are often reserved for the most academically successful young people (Kahne & Middaugh, 2009). In any case, high school stops around age 18.

For young adults in civilian life, colleges and universities are almost the sole remaining institutions that offer civic education, clubs and organizations, leadership training, and formal alumni networks after high school. But colleges are dominated by people from advantaged backgrounds. American children in the top quarter of the income distribution have an 80% chance of attending college while they are young adults, whereas young Americans whose families are in the bottom quarter of the income distribution have just a 19% chance of entering college (Bailey and Dynarski, 2011, p. 120). The odds are even lower if one drops out of high school or is arrested as an adolescent (Flanagan and Levine, 2010).

These gaps in civic opportunities reinforce deep inequalities in democracy and civil society. All influential venues for discussing and addressing issues—from neighborhood meetings to the United States Senate—are now dominated by people from the upper strata of society, to a much greater degree than in the 1970s and before. As a result, working-class people lack political influence, and many poor communities are without robust organizations.

*“Because of YouthBuild, I was introduced to leadership early on. I wasn’t just successful in my life, I was able to give back and encourage other young people, not just in my hometown, not just in my state, but across the nation to be successful.”*

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<sup>1</sup> Community organizing has grown since 1970, but the number of young people involved is difficult to estimate and is certainly small in comparison to the national youth population.

*“Before I joined YouthBuild  
I honestly thought that  
the depression of my life  
would kill me by 30,  
if not before. . . . I didn’t  
care for nobody, not  
even for myself.”*

## YouthBuild as a Potential Solution

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YouthBuild is one of very few large-scale networks that has the potential to counteract these trends. It began in 1978 in East Harlem as a local, community-based solution to the plight of idle teenagers and the neighborhood scourge of hundreds of abandoned buildings, and was named “YouthBuild” in 1988 when the effort to scale it up nationally began. YouthBuild is now a network consisting of autonomous local organizations, a national nonprofit called YouthBuild USA that supports them, and a variety of funders with a stake in its success, with the largest one being the US Department of Labor. The network has sought to “unleash the intelligence and positive energy of low-income youth to rebuild their communities and their lives” through a “combination of education, skill-building, counseling, leadership development, community service, positive values and relationships, high standards of behavior, and clear pathways to a productive future” (Leslie, 2007, p.1).

The scaling process for YouthBuild began in New York City in 1984 when a citywide coalition persuaded the City government to replicate it in nine communities. Its national expansion began in 1988 with grants to YouthBuild USA from the Ford and Charles Stewart Mott Foundations to replicate it in several other cities. Its federal scale-up began when the Housing and Community Development Act of 1992 authorized YouthBuild with a status comparable to Job Corps, HeadStart, and the Peace Corps. Each year since, Congress has passed a YouthBuild appropriation, now managed by the US Department of Labor (US DoL). To obtain federal YouthBuild funding, local entities must apply directly to the US DoL, which selects them through a competitive process.

The US DoL has a contract with YouthBuild USA (also won through a competitive process) to provide quality assurance training, technical assistance, and data management to DoL YouthBuild grantees. In addition, YouthBuild USA independently raises a variety of public and private dollars to support innovation in the evolving network of programs. The result is an unusual public-private partnership designed for maximum leveraging of public and private resources.

Approximately 270 local YouthBuild organizations annually enroll approximately 10,000 highly disadvantaged young people in programs that combine education, job training, service, and leadership development. About 18,000 applicants each year are turned down for lack of space in these programs. Between 1996 and 2006 more than 1,600 distinct community-based organizations applied to the federal government for YouthBuild grants. Every year several hundred apply. Most are turned down for lack of sufficient funding.

Previous research has found that the basic, local, 9- to 12-month YouthBuild program benefits the participants significantly, enhancing their education and work prospects, lowering recidivism, and giving them hope and confidence. (Those impacts are discussed in more detail below, under “What Previous Research Finds about the Impact of the Programs.”)

YouthBuild USA recruits alumni of local programs into a leadership pipeline that can last for many years, offering significant national roles as advocates and leaders. As the alumni pool numbers approximately 100,000, this pipeline is the largest national investment being made in the leadership potential of poor and working-class adults. With continued support, the possibility exists that it could be developed to a scale and intensity comparable to a selective university or the grassroots civic movements of the past, such as the civil rights movement of the 1950s through 1970s, or the labor movement of the mid-1900s.

It is important to emphasize how unusual YouthBuild is today. Not only is it a very rare example of a large-scale leadership program primarily for young people who have dropped out of high school, but its philosophy challenges the dominant approach to that group. In general, major institutions, from schools to law enforcement agencies, treat them as threats to themselves and their communities, and offer—if they offer anything at all—a combination of surveillance, remediation, discipline, and punishment to try to alter their destructive trajectories. In contrast, YouthBuild treats them as potential civic leaders and invests in their leadership skills. The purpose of this study is to investigate whether that philosophy works.

## The Youth of YouthBuild

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The vast majority of the youth who enter YouthBuild programs have left high school before graduation and have experienced poverty and various types of personal challenges. A significant portion would be categorized as “disconnected,” because they are disengaged from school, work, and community (Belfield et al., 2012). According to the 2010 survey of entering YouthBuild students, 94% lack a high school diploma or GED, 78% are youth of color, 32% have been adjudicated, and 11% have felony convictions (YouthBuild USA, 2010). Furthermore, 45% receive public assistance and 19% live in public housing; on average, they read at the 7th grade level. Almost one third of the students are already parents. Hahn and colleagues found that over a quarter of YouthBuild students have been homeless (Hahn, Leavitt, Horvat, & Davis, 2004).

Many of the young people who come into YouthBuild have dealt with traumatic experiences in their families or communities, have lived in poverty, and have interacted with the criminal justice system in some way. In one estimate (Western, Kleykamp, & Rosenfeld, 2004, p. 774), “Young high school drop-outs are five to twenty times more likely to be in prison or jail than young men who have been to college,” meaning that adolescent boys who drop out of high school are at a particularly high risk for incarceration later in life (see also Western & Pettit, 2010).

Disconnected from networks that could provide them with opportunities to get involved in community or political life, these youth are consequently underrepresented in various forms of civic life. Without exposure to civic experiences such as attending groups or meetings, working on community projects, and participating in political life, most of these young people do not have opportunities to take on leadership roles or develop leadership skills (Flanagan, Levine, & Settersten, 2009).

A major report by Belfield, Levin and Rosen (2012) coined the term “opportunity youth” to describe young people who are disconnected from virtually all institutions. They are called “opportunity youth” because they need and are seeking opportunities, on the one hand, and on the other hand, they offer society an opportunity because both they and their communities would be much better off if they were re-engaged.

A young person who rises above overwhelming challenges can often become an inspiration to others, and the skills and knowledge that the YouthBuild program can provide can help young people become leaders in their own communities across the country. In aggregate, YouthBuild enrolls about 10,000 youth a year. Even if a relatively small portion of the youth go on to become leaders in their own communities, YouthBuild has a potential to change lives of many more individuals as the alumni inspire and impact others in their networks.

*“I considered myself to have leadership potential, but no outlet to express that potential.”*

*“People (at school) see me and they just see a gang-banger. They see a trouble maker. It didn’t matter that I had a summer job. It didn’t matter than I had an A in math class. I sat at the geek table, I was the only Mexican boy at the geek table! None of that mattered—when people saw me, they saw a trouble maker.”*

## YouthBuild Programs’ Theory of Change

Young people work in approximately 270 local YouthBuild programs across the country. These programs operate with a significant degree of autonomy, but they all enroll youth who have left high school before graduation and offer these young people academic and vocational skills training, community service through building affordable housing, mentoring and counseling, leadership development and civic engagement, and safe places where people feel a sense of belonging (YouthBuild USA, 2011b). These components are defined by the law governing the US DoL YouthBuild program and the Design and Performance Standards managed by YouthBuild USA, and are consistent with a holistic view of each young person and the Positive Youth Development approach (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, 1995).

One of the innovative roles that YouthBuild USA plays with private and unrestricted funds is to offer leadership training and opportunities to alumni of the local programs. Those alumni are the focus of this study.

YouthBuild programs and YouthBuild USA attempt to create a culture that is radically different from the neighborhoods where their students grew up and live, and from the other institutions—schools, prisons, welfare programs—that touch these young people. Although local YouthBuild programs write their own lists of core values and develop their own cultures, YouthBuild USA promotes highly distinctive values throughout the whole YouthBuild network. YouthBuild USA Founder and President Dorothy Stoneman cites the following as essential elements, which are also included in the Program Design and Performance Standards accepted by all affiliates of YouthBuild USA:

- A profound respect for the intelligence of the young people
- Power for them over their immediate environment
- Protection from disaster, or at least the support necessary to survive it
- Meaningful work
- Patient caring for their development
- Teaching of skills
- Firm and loving challenge to stop self-destructive behavior and negative attitudes
- Consistently positive values
- Family-like support and appreciation from peers and adults
- High standards and expectations

- Inspiring and caring role models who have overcome similar obstacles
- Understanding of the proud and unique history of their peoples
- Heightened awareness of the present day world and their important place in it
- A path to future opportunities
- A culture of positive rituals and practices shared in common by young people and staff
- Concern and action from the agency about changing the conditions that have affected them and the people they love
- Fun

Although some teachers and youth workers outside of YouthBuild would endorse these elements in principle (and some adults consistently honor these principles in practice), they are unusual ideals. For example, the training of teachers, clinical psychologists, social workers, and other youth-serving professionals often emphasizes the need for setting “boundaries” in their work with “at-risk” young people. Instead, YouthBuild emphasizes the value of love and caring and integrates these values into training events and discussions within YouthBuild. Stoneman refers to the transformational power of YouthBuild as based in the “power of love coupled with opportunity and high standards.” YouthBuild USA Vice President for training and leadership development, John Bell concurs:

Staff who work in YouthBuild programs have to know that showing respect and love to young people is their first job. . . . So it is essential that each staff be able to show that love. It doesn't mean that the love has to look the same. An ex-marine can show the kind of “tough love” that some young people really need at a certain stage of their development, maybe the caring father figure who believes in the student's potential and won't let him give in to his old habits of laziness or powerlessness. Other young people need the momma figure who says, “Come here, sweetheart, you need a hug.” In any form, the power of love is the main condition for transformation (Bell, 2012 unpublished manuscript).

**YouthBuild Founder and President Dorothy Stoneman writes that the organization typically makes the following points when presenting to YouthBuild staff:**

“When young people walk into YouthBuild, we need to immediately surprise them with the level of respect they receive and the level of caring that each staff person shows. They are accustomed to being disrespected, ‘dissed’ as they say. We need to reverse, to counteract the mistreatment they are used to.

“On day one, give them nametags as if they were VIPs, give them food, shake their hands, and learn their names. As time goes on, surprise them continually with how committed we are to their well being.

When they don’t show up, call them. Give them your cell-phone number. Show up on their doorstep. Go with them to court. Sit next to them at the bedside of their relative who is in a coma in the hospital. Find the money to help them bury the parent who has died.

“They will be amazed and will say, ‘I came here looking for a GED or a job, but what I found was a family, and hope for the future. Staff here care about me. I don’t know why. They care about me more than I cared about myself, but as a result I have learned to care about myself, and once I learned to care about myself I discovered I cared about others and now I want to give back and help the young people coming behind me.’

“That is our job, to offer so much respect and love that it awakens our students’ capacity to care. Teachers and social workers are often taught to set boundaries and keep their distance in order not to burn out. Here in YouthBuild we want you to surprise the young people with how much you are willing to demonstrate your commitment and your caring. We believe in the power of love coupled with opportunity. We don’t mind saying so. And, of course, it is your job to make sure you express that caring in acceptable ways that could not be misunderstood as sexual harassment.”



Leadership is seen as an intrinsic component of the YouthBuild programs because treating young people as leaders “calls forth [a] higher potential in young people,” thus contributing to their educational and psychological development. Further, leadership skills are understood as valuable workforce skills, young leaders are seen as assets to YouthBuild when they advocate for funding and support, and young leaders are viewed as problem solvers in their broader communities (Bell, unpublished document).

In addition to providing leadership opportunities during the 12- to 16-month standard program, YouthBuild USA enlists alumni in leadership initiatives. On the national level, active leadership development is sustained for a core of graduate leaders through their participation in one of YouthBuild USA’s structures:



- **The national Young Leaders Council (YLC).** This is a group of approximately 25 younger leaders, elected by their peers at the CoYL (the annual Conference of Young Leaders in Washington, DC, attended by about 100 current students from as many programs) when they are current YouthBuild students. They serve three-year terms, meeting twice a year in person and having monthly conference calls. The YLC provides YouthBuild USA with key feedback on policy questions and represents YouthBuild at national forums. Each meeting also gives attention to participants' leadership skills. Many YLC members serve as staff for the CoYL.
- **The National Alumni Council (NAC).** The NAC is the senior graduate group, about 15 in number, elected by their peers at the Alumni Xchange conference. They serve three-year terms and are the guiding force for the graduate network. They meet three times a year in various YouthBuild "hub" cities (with 4–6 YouthBuild programs within 90 minutes) and lead day-long leadership development workshops for current YB students in that hub area. In their own meetings, they focus on continued self-development, leadership skill-building, policy making for the graduate network, planning the Alumni Xchange, and helping to coordinate various national partnerships and leadership events.
- **The VOICES Council (Views On Improving Credential & Education Success).** These are graduates who are in college or other post-secondary education venues. Meeting twice a year, these student leaders inform YouthBuild USA about the necessary supports and resources students need to successfully transition from a YouthBuild program to postsecondary education. VOICES members provide input on three key areas: academics, financial aid, and student support services.
- **The National Speaker Bureau** is a network of YouthBuild graduate leaders who advocate for YouthBuild and highlight their own issues, struggles and concerns as well as their recommendations on how to rectify these matters. They are called upon to speak at conferences, appear on panels, serve on policy forums, or present workshops. There are currently 344 members of the Speakers Bureau.
- **Five graduate leaders** (two each from the YLC and the NAC, and one from VOICES) are members of the of the YouthBuild USA Affiliated Network Policy Council, a democratic decision-making structure. These five join five YouthBuild directors and four YouthBuild USA staff to decide policy and direction for the network of affiliated YouthBuild programs.
- **Five YouthBuild graduates** serve on the YouthBuild USA Board of Directors.

*"In high school, we were just the goods. It was a huge factory, and you're like a can of tuna that just comes out at the end of it. They just get you through, then push you out. I had a few good teachers, but their goal was to get you out the door, and once you were out, that was pretty much it."*

*“It’s been in my heart to help the men, women, and the youth, who are still in these penitentiaries and who are coming home from these penitentiaries. I think they have unique needs—I can certainly relate to those needs myself—and I feel like the community, or society by and large, has not taken the needs of the youth or the ex-offenders seriously, and as a result many are going back to the penitentiaries.”*

YouthBuild USA staffs, organizes, and funds all of the above activities. They vary in size and purpose, but all involve some degree of discussion and collective decision making, individual leadership skills such as public speaking and seeking office, and powerful relationships. The relationships are characterized by high mutual expectations and caring personal bonds. As in local YouthBuild programs, alumni in these bodies are treated with respect and love (explicitly named as such) and are still held to high standards and expectations. Such opportunities are particularly important for the civic growth of the YouthBuild graduates because many come into the program experiencing conflicts in their communities and a sense of civic and political disempowerment (Solomon & Steinitz, 1979; Stepick & Stepick, 2002).

The development of leadership among YouthBuild participants and alumni is deliberate and requires considerable investment of attention, staff time, and funding over an extended period of time. For example, at the local program level investments include staff training in youth and leadership development, staff time incorporating leadership into all aspects of the program, the director’s time and involvement in the program policy committee, creation of leadership skills training, and funds to support leadership opportunities like Statehouse Days and leadership learning field trips. This is in addition to all the informal staff mentoring and caring, and beyond the program time that staff invest.

On the national level, YouthBuild USA has invested approximately \$650,000 each year in event costs and staff time to support the CoYL, the Alumni Conference, three weekend meetings of the National Alumni Council (NAC), two weekend meetings of the Young Leaders Council (YLC), three Regional Leadership Gatherings, three weekend meetings of VOICES council for the Post-secondary Education initiative, travel and stipends for the National Speakers Bureau engagements, the virtual social networking community of graduates, the selection of Stoneman Scholarships, and more.

The point is that the development of young leaders from low-income backgrounds like the young people in YouthBuild takes sustained commitment, real funding, dedicated staff, and deliberate programming over many years to achieve the results that YouthBuild achieves. Though a return-on-investment calculation is beyond the scope of this study, the findings presented below point to a substantial, positive social impact from YouthBuild’s significant investment in leadership development.

## What Previous Research Finds about the Impact of the Programs

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Local YouthBuild programs have been shown to have a positive impact on young people's lives. Seventy-eight percent of the entering students complete YouthBuild, and of those, 63% obtained a high school diploma or equivalent by the time they graduate from the program and 60% are placed in jobs or pursue further education (YouthBuild USA, 2010). The program often alters the life trajectory of YouthBuild students. On entering YouthBuild, the participants estimate their own life expectancies at 40 (on average), whereas upon completing the program, that number has risen to 72; evidence that they have gained a sense of opportunity, optimism, and purpose by working together (Hahn et al., 2004). Furthermore, an evaluation of the YouthBuild Offenders' project found that staying in the YouthBuild program reduced the likelihood of recidivism by a substantial percentage (Cohen & Piquero, 2010). The study also found that every dollar spent on a YouthBuild student resulted in an average return on investment over the lifetime of the student of \$7.80, and for students with a criminal record the return on investment ranged from a minimum of \$10.90 up to \$43.80, based on a complex calculation of direct and indirect cost associated with a life marked by crime.

It is well-documented that high-risk youth, particularly those with an early offending history, create extremely high social and human costs if they continue on their negative trajectories. Cohen and Piquero found that changing the trajectory of one high risk youth is linked to a converted monetary saving of \$2.6 to \$5.3 million (Cohen & Piquero, 2008; 2010).

YouthBuild provides trade and job skills to the YouthBuild students by giving them opportunities to build or rehabilitate houses while also earning a GED or high school diploma. Hahn and colleagues (2004), in a study of local YouthBuild programming, find that 75 percent of respondents up to seven years after graduation are "successful," meaning that they are working at a job with an average wage, are in school, or are participating in some sort of job training. The job and life skills training helps the youth in the program to reach markers of the traditional transition to adulthood—that is, having a stable job, owning a home, and having children who attend local schools. According to Hahn and colleagues (2004), 87% of respondents have worked after graduating from the YouthBuild program; furthermore, "getting a job [was] highly correlated with the amount of job finding help that the graduates received from their YouthBuild programs, with those receiving a lot of help more likely to get into the workforce quickly" (Hahn et al., 2004, p. 22).

Vocational skills and job placement have further impact on young people's civic development. First, employment itself offers a setting in which young people can belong and potentially engage in a broader civil society. That may explain why young people who are employed are more likely to be civically engaged in at least one domain (Kawashima-Ginsberg & CIRCLE Staff, 2011). Skills that are learned through work are also important civic skills. Jarvis, Montoya, and Mulvoy (2005) find that for young working people, the development and practice of certain skills, namely making decisions in meetings, writing letters, and giving speeches, has positive effects on young people's civic participation. Being exposed to a workplace and diverse worldviews, experiences, and backgrounds can also extend young people's civic knowledge. Finlay, Wray-Lake, and Flanagan (2010) argue that, as a result of having work experience, young people may "start to think more systematically about larger political and social structures that affect their lives" (p. 263). Mitchell and colleagues found that YouthBuild participants were "often involved in all aspects of the work" which helped them develop "strong pride in the work" and the feeling that they had made contributions (Mitchell, Jenkins, Nguyen, Lerman, & DeBerry, 2003, p. 49). This aspect of the program can help the youth develop a sense of being stakeholders in their communities, which may translate into civic engagement (Kawashima-Ginsberg & CIRCLE, 2011).

Previous research also finds that YouthBuild's intentional education about the importance of service and civic engagement has an impact on the civic engagement of YouthBuild graduates, especially as it relates to voting and other forms of political participation (Hahn and colleagues, 2004). For instance, "70 percent of graduates have registered to vote and nearly half have voted in one or more elections" (Hahn and colleagues, 2004, p. 23).

## Findings

The methodology of this study (based on both surveys and interviews) is described at the end of this report. The following pages begin by describing our study participants' situations before they entered YouthBuild, move to their experiences in YouthBuild local programs, cover their activities as alumni, and conclude with their current leadership and civic engagement. Their own recollections provide our sole source of evidence.

In reading this account, it is important to keep the end in mind. The survey and interview respondents are overwhelmingly responsible and productive citizens and positive role models, and many are involved in important leadership roles today. Six percent hold public office, 19% are church leaders (sometimes pastors), 37% are professional youth workers, and 90% say they help members of their own families. The change in their life course is striking.

### YouthBuild Alumni were Marginalized and Alienated Before YouthBuild

Consistent with previous research on the YouthBuild population as a whole, the alumni in our study were on poor trajectories before they entered the program. YouthBuild graduates recalled a hard life and low expectations for themselves when they looked back to before they entered YouthBuild. Almost half (48%) of graduates said they expected to die before age 30 (30% before age 25), citing reasons such as “all my friends were dying or going to jail.” Many respondents recalled that they simply could not see the possibility of surviving, because they were heavily involved in violence, drugs, depression, or they did not care enough about themselves. These quotes illustrate their perspective on life:

- *“Before I joined YouthBuild I honestly thought that the depression of my life would kill me by 30, if not before. . . . I didn’t care for nobody, not even for myself.”*
- *“Being that my life has had more downs than ups, I figured there was nothing to live for. . . . I was a waste of air, energy, and life; I felt no purpose to be honest . . .”*
- *“I really didn’t want to live anymore. I thought maybe I shouldn’t have been born.”*

About 30% said they would live to see an old age (65 and older) but their reasons were often vague, such as “I thought I would die of old age” or “up to

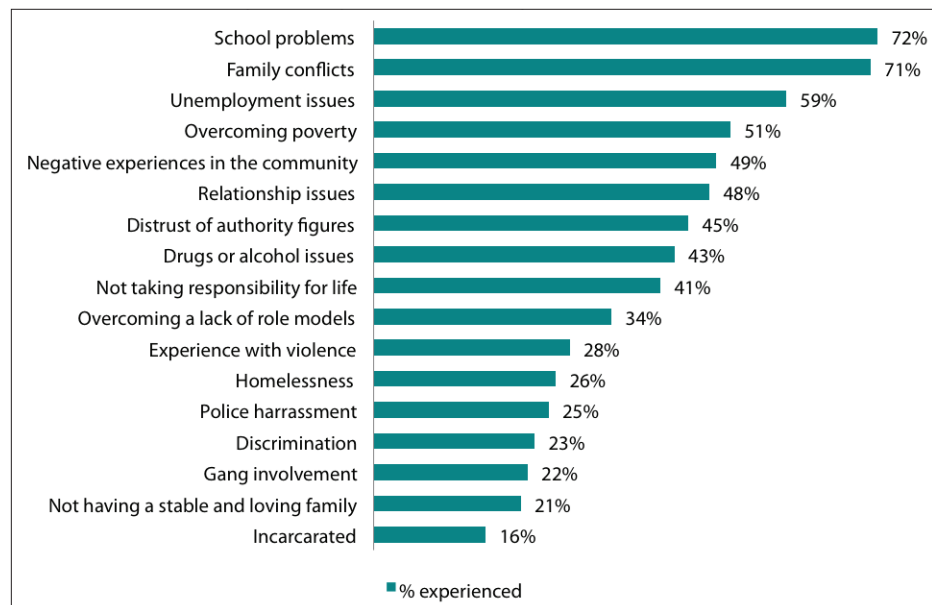
*“I had nothing—  
I was 20 years old and  
had nothing to show for  
it in my life. All I did was  
negative things.  
My brother was so mad at  
me, he would tell me that  
I wasn’t gonna be nothing.  
I didn’t have a father  
around, so my older  
brother was my father  
figure, and having him  
tell me that, and looking  
me in the face and really  
mean it, it made me feel  
like I was nothing.”*

*“I was involved in the streets, and I definitely wasn’t a positive influence in the community. I didn’t have anything good going for me. I was used to hearing that I wasn’t a valuable contributor to my community.”*

God.” Very few, however, felt that they had been making positive choices and therefore would live a long life.

YouthBuild survey respondents reported experiencing a wide range of challenges, summarized in the following table. Almost no survey respondent said that he or she did not experience any significant challenge growing up. Figure 1 details the range of challenges reported.

**Figure 1. Challenges Before Coming to YouthBuild**



The interviewees shared stories of the challenges they experienced prior to coming to YouthBuild. These stories echo what we found in the survey, but also elucidate just how difficult many of their lives were.

### Challenges with the Traditional Educational System

The most commonly reported problems were school-related. Over half of the interviewees reported feeling disengaged from school, and many described how they received no support for their educational progress, or were thwarted by the school system. Disciplinary problems were common: *“All throughout high school, I was always getting into trouble, always getting into fights, just being careless.”* Another said, *“As I entered my freshman year, I got kicked out for fighting.”* A graduate described how he felt judged, *“People (at school) see me and they just see a gang-banger. They see a trouble maker. It didn’t matter that I had a summer job. It didn’t matter than I had an A in math class. I sat at the geek table, I was the only Mexican boy at the geek table! None of that mattered—when people saw me, they saw a trouble maker.”*

In both survey and interview responses, most said that they considered themselves academic failures, that their schools did not care enough about them, or both. One recalled, *“I really did not know how to read or write before YouthBuild.”* A different respondent said, *“I never finished 7th grade. I was in 6th grade three times. By the age of 14, I was going into 7th grade, and I just couldn’t take it anymore.”* Such stories are common; they suggest that our alumni sample is reasonably representative of YouthBuild participants.

Some respondents explained that school was the last thing on their minds, because they faced so many challenges outside of the school (e.g., family responsibilities, homelessness, trouble with the law, or abusive relationships), while others just could not get fully engaged in their own education, saying things like *“in high school, I just didn’t care.”*

A handful of the graduates felt a sense of achievement in regular high school. One said, *“I was an A and B student in school. . . I had the highest grades in my math and English classes!”* But this was an unusual recollection.

A strong theme in the interviews was a perception that teachers and other authority figures had very low expectations. *“Instead of teachers telling me you can graduate and go on and be whatever you want in your life, they tell me that I’m a troublemaker, like you can’t finish my class. You are not going to be nothing in your life. I’m like, ‘What?’ I had a teacher tell me, straight up, ‘College is not for everybody,’ in the 8th grade. I automatically thought I’m not one of those people.”*

In general, their recollections of teachers and school were critical and negative. Some felt that they were fully capable of the academic work but saw no purpose to it, or that the school and teachers failed to activate their potential. One recalled that *“school looked like a jail and we learned nothing,”* and another said, *“teachers don’t really care about you.”* Sometimes teachers did not even know their names. When they remember dedicated teachers, these were adults who worked to get them out of school successfully. *“In high school, we were just the goods. It was a huge factory, and you’re like a can of tuna that just comes out at the end of it. They just get you through, then push you out. I had a few good teachers, but their goal was to get you out the door, and once you were out, that was pretty much it.”*

These highly critical recollections of teachers and schools are consistent with what CIRCLE is finding in national focus groups of non-college-educated young adults.<sup>2</sup> The interviewees’ comments do not necessarily demonstrate

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<sup>2</sup> We are conducting these focus groups in partnership with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation and with some funds from Carnegie Corporation of New York. CIRCLE will release a full report later in 2012.

that teachers and schools are actually uncaring—the challenges of working in public education have been amply documented, as have the difficulties of creating systemic change in the culture of schools. This report is based on subjective recollections by former students who were not successful in school. But at the very least, the YouthBuild interviewees demonstrate a high degree of alienation and anger that we have found to be widespread among young adults of similar backgrounds.

### Challenges at Home and in the Community

Seventy-one percent of survey respondents recalled family conflicts; often their relatives dismissed their potential. The interviewees described a wide range of challenges, such as having to care for a family member who was ill, having children themselves at a young age, parents with drinking and substance-abuse problems, and having abusive parents or partners. In many of the stories related to family, it is clear that the respondents never had a true childhood, partly because their own parents were unable to play the parental role fully, and in some cases because the graduates showed leadership attributes early on. Many of the female graduates of YouthBuild went into the program either pregnant or with children. Some of the men commented that they were also fathers going into the YouthBuild program. Another interviewee felt put down by her own family: *“I had nothing—I was 20 years old and had nothing to show for it in my life. All I did was negative things. My brother was so mad at me, he would tell me that I wasn’t gonna be nothing. I didn’t have a father around, so my older brother was my father figure, and having him tell me that, and looking me in the face and really mean it, it made me feel like I was nothing.”*

Survey participants reported a wide range of challenges outside of school and family, such as homelessness, involvement with gangs, and periods of incarceration. One interviewee recalled, *“I got a record when I was 16 years old and I had been on probation since. There had even been a time that I got locked up because I wasn’t following my probation.”*

Some interviewees acknowledged that they were threats to themselves and others. At the same time, they perceived that they were the victims of negative stereotypes, especially if they had been incarcerated. Being viewed as a problem in their communities and schools often mirrored how they felt about themselves; many felt “passed around” through various systems which reinforced the idea that they were problems. Often, the interviewees combined into a single thought recollections of their own bad behavior and other people’s negative assumptions about them. As one interviewee put it: *“I was involved in the streets, and I definitely wasn’t a positive influence in the community. I didn’t have anything good going for me. I was used to hearing that I wasn’t a valuable contributor to my community.”*



Note that this respondent was a bad influence and was “used to hearing” that from others. In the terms used by Cathy J. Cohen, these young people are conscious of both ‘structure,’ or the conditions around them, and ‘agency,’ their own responsibility for the way their lives turn out (Cohen, 2010).

Interviewees had similarly negative recollections of other aspects of their communities beyond the school, especially of the police. In the survey, one quarter of respondents reported being harassed by police, and 49% recalled generally negative experiences in their communities. “*Growing up in the inner city . . . , you get accosted with all types of situations, from police harassment to gang involvement.*” In the interviews, they criticized poorly funded schools and “neglected” communities.

Twenty-one percent of survey respondents had at least some experience with community service-learning before YouthBuild, and a few remembered service positively. For example, “*In high school, I played basketball and we were always involved in community service. The coach always had us doing things, like fundraisers and us giving back to the community. It made us feel like we were actually making an impact in our community.*” But positive recollections of service were rare. More commonly, they associated it with punishment. “*Even though I had never done community service before, I still had a negative perspective because of course I’ve heard of folks getting tickets, and you see them on the side of the road with the orange vests, and you think, ‘Oh God, I don’t want that to be me.’*”

Almost all of the graduates recalled feeling that they were outsiders, confused about their identity, and/or unsure whether and what they could contribute to the community. More than a third of the interviewees said that they had self-doubt or low self-worth before YouthBuild. Slightly over a fifth of interviewees said that they were motivated to do better or be better in their lives. These graduates said that they had internal hope for themselves, especially because they had other people to take care of.

The YouthBuild alumni in our study have experienced challenges typical of a significant proportion of young Americans. They most often come from poor or working-class backgrounds, were exposed to community or domestic violence, and experienced oppression at school and in the community. They had left high school or were expelled by the time they were in their late teens for a variety of reasons, ranging from problems with authority, fighting, or involvement with the criminal justice system to personal challenges such as substance abuse, parenthood, and homelessness. The stories told by the graduates suggest that dropping out of high school was just a part of a complex tale of hardships intertwined with one another. Though these challenges, described below, may seem daunting and extreme, they are by no means rare.

*“I think I was just trying to go the other way and break the cycles and choosing education, even though it was hard throughout the family struggles, throughout the transition struggles of life. . . . I was choosing a different way, allowing myself to walk through the doors of a different avenue.”*

*“YouthBuild found me,  
and the rest was history.”*

*“I was raised in this  
program; I became the  
man I am today.”*

Failing to complete high school is a real and urgent crisis in the United States (Swanson, 2004). The estimates of the national average drop-out rate range between 25% and 32% (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007; Seastrom, Chapman, Stillwell, McGrath, Peltola, Dinkes, & Xu, 2006a; Seastrom, Chapman, Stillwell, McGrath, Peltola, Dinkes, & Xu, 2006b; Swanson, 2004). The rates are substantially higher in urban centers and for African American, Hispanic and Native American youth, with estimated national rates of about 50%, ranging to upwards of 70% or more in some cities (Swanson, 2009).

A recent report that coined the term “opportunity youth” identified a group of 6.7 million 16- to 24-year-olds (17% of their age group) who neither work nor go to school (Belfield, Levin, & Rosen, 2012). Many of these young people face additional and serious challenges. In 2009, about 1.9 million juveniles were arrested in the United States (Puzzanchera and Adams, 2011). Homelessness is also a large-scale problem. Though inconsistent definitions and age ranges of youth homelessness make it difficult to estimate prevalence (Haber & Toro, 2004; Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson & McPheeters, 1998), one large-scale survey suggests that as many as 8% of youth report spending at least one night in a shelter or other non-dwelling place where their safety could be compromised (Ringwalt et al., 1998). This translates to about 1.6 million young people. Although a majority of cases of homelessness are short-term, some youth (14% among those experiencing any homelessness, or about 53,000 individuals) are homeless on a recurrent or chronic basis (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012).

### **These Youth Were Often Leaders Before YouthBuild, but in Negative Ways**

Looking back on their days before YouthBuild, many of the interviewees said that they were already leaders, but not in ways that were socially sanctioned or beneficial to their communities. Some cite “crews,” siblings, or other small peer groups in which they were the acknowledged leaders. Many mention being negative role models to younger people in their neighborhood or family, or being harmful leaders by getting friends or youth in the community involved in negative things such as drugs, violence, or gangs.

Indeed, if the alumni who have emerged as national leaders differ from other YouthBuild participants, it is not their demographic background or their life circumstances that set them apart, but rather their influence on peers. *“What I said happened, not like I was a bully or anything. ... they’d look to me for guidance on what to do, who to beat up.”* In fact, 54% of the survey participants said that they acted as leaders in their circle of friends, and 45% said that they were leaders in the family.

In well over half of the interviews, the graduates expressed some form of positive leadership, usually in family or peer groups. A handful said they made a positive contribution to the community before YouthBuild through church, other volunteer work, or by being a positive role model to children. However, very few mentioned the types of leadership that YouthBuild attempts to build: leadership as personal ethics and self-discipline and leadership in official groups like school-based or community-based organizations.

Many graduates acknowledged that they knew they had leadership potential, but lacked the skills, understanding, and outlet to realize that potential. As one survey respondent put it, *“I considered myself to have leadership potential but no outlet to express that potential.”* Instead, many channeled their leadership in a negative way. In the survey, 25% said they led peers in negative ways (compared to 12% who said they always led peers in positive ways) and 20% reported being negative leaders at school (compared to 9% who were positive leaders at school).

Some spoke of a lack of skill and understanding. *“I didn’t know how to encourage people to be the best that they can be within themselves. I didn’t know how to do it.”* This respondent continued by defining true leadership as *“help[ing] people rise above their circumstances that were negative in their lives. I didn’t know how to do that. And so, I wouldn’t say I was a leader, I was a survivalist but I wasn’t a leader prior to YouthBuild. YouthBuild helped me to use what I already had. . . .”*

### **Respondents Entered YouthBuild for a Mix of Reasons, Including Self-Interest**

People have traditionally joined civic organizations such as unions, activist churches, and political parties for a mix of reasons, including career ambitions, pressure from family and peers, and economic imperatives. But these organizations turn their members into active citizens by providing encouragement and training. Today, there is a dearth of such organizations, but YouthBuild stands out as a potential model.

Many of the graduates recalled coming into the program wanting a job or a GED. Some characterized this decision as an effort to change their lives. Some said they saw (and felt after they entered the program) that YouthBuild offered them a chance for a clean slate. The staff *“let me know that whatever was in the past is in the past, and that I’m here now and let’s move this forward.”*

Many alumni in our study said that they had no civic or leadership motives for entering YouthBuild. It was simply a source of income. *“I thought, I cannot work at Taco Bell and provide for my child. And then we had two cars, \$600 rent,*

*paying water and electric, and I said I can't do this, so I asked about the program.”* But others recall at least a latent desire to contribute to their communities. *“Even when I was getting into trouble, you know, I always wanted to do good—I’ve always wanted to lend a hand and, you know, help someone out but I was never able to.”*

YouthBuild defines good leadership as “taking responsibility to make things go right for your life, your family, your program, and your community.” Alumni give themselves some credit for leadership for having chosen to enroll in YouthBuild in order to advance themselves. *“I think I was just trying to go the other way and break the cycles and choosing education, even though it was hard throughout the family struggles, throughout the transition struggles of life. . . . I was choosing a different way, allowing myself to walk through the doors of a different avenue.”*

### **YouthBuild Created a Radical Alternative to the Participants’ Past Experiences**

Respondents reported overwhelmingly positive reactions to their experience with YouthBuild as a whole (including their local programs and subsequent activities as alumni). Some interviewees offered sweeping endorsements, such as *“YouthBuild found me, and the rest was history,”* or *“I was raised in this program; I became the man I am today.”* One graduate said, *“I’ve grown up through this program, and the resources that I’ve got nationally and locally, if hadn’t gotten those who knows where I would have been? I’ve been able to get through a lot of things, a lot of setbacks, and I’ve had a lot of positive memories and achievements in my life because of what I’ve been through.”*

We asked survey participants whether their experiences with YouthBuild helped them overcome any of the challenges they reported facing earlier in life. These questions were posed broadly, to get a richer sense of how YouthBuild was able to assist them in these areas. The interviewees shared many examples, from small acts of daily kindness to financial support for college education. But overall, the graduates described how YouthBuild helped them transform themselves into individuals who take responsibility for their own lives by seizing the opportunities that come to them and inspiring others. In the next section, we discuss how graduates described their experience with YouthBuild programs and YouthBuild USA opportunities. In the section after that, we will discuss how these experiences collectively affected them.

## YouthBuild Alumni Recall Experiencing the Essential Program Elements

Interviewees emphasized the uniqueness of YouthBuild. They said it created an atmosphere radically different from anything they had experienced before, and it exposed them to the kind of educational, civic, and personal opportunities they would not have received otherwise. For the most part, they did not report having found any other program or setting like it.

We cannot rule out the possibility that the interviewees and survey respondents happen to be former students who feel more positively than the alumni body as a whole about YouthBuild. But survey participants largely represent the overall YouthBuild population in terms of demographics and prior experiences, so it is likely that their recollections are fairly typical.

Interviewees and survey respondents identified particular aspects of the YouthBuild philosophy that make it unique. These aspects generally echo the YouthBuild staff's understanding of their program's core elements and "theory of change."

### 1. Family-like Support and Appreciation from Peers and Adults

The alumni described YouthBuild as a radically different kind of community from those they had experienced before. Sometimes they emphasized that they noticed the difference almost immediately. *"Even from the very minute I walked into Mental Toughness [a training module offered near the beginning of the local YouthBuild program as an orientation], I could tell this wasn't just gonna be a classroom thing. You know, I was going to be able to learn something by doing. And even from that very minute I felt like it was gonna be something pretty extraordinary. I didn't know what I had in store, but I knew I was definitely going to make something of it."*

Interviewees recalled that the other participants came from similar backgrounds and had similar struggles. But the mood or culture of the group was completely unlike what they were used to. Most interviewees spoke of a warm, supportive, and family-like community. For example:

- *"YouthBuild is a community; it's not a program. That's the mindset of the staff, of the youth, the founders, and the group of youth they got together to help found the community."*
- *"You know what brother, yeah we're from different neighborhoods but I love you and I got respect for you, and I'll do anything for you. And knowing that, in return, it wasn't just lip service. . . . You were my YouthBuild brother."*

*"YouthBuild is a community; it's not a program. That's the mindset of the staff, of the youth, the founders, and the group of youth they got together to help found the community."*

*“I thought that I would get my diploma, and that would be it. But then I got [into YouthBuild], and it changed my life as a whole. Not just getting this degree, in a sense, but it was about me becoming a better person; me transforming from thinking that everyone was out to get me in public school to being a program where people really cared about you. So YouthBuild was a stepping stone to where I wanted to get to in life.”*

- *“As the days went on, they became like my family.”*
- *“We get back to sitting down and eating dinner as a family, it’s always together. I think that really helps, because whenever a new student came in, and they hear that click, and they stand up and say ‘wow, we really are like family here.’ ”*
- *“Everybody met everybody’s family outside of school, it was really friendly, really warm—inviting.”*
- *“I wasn’t depending on them, but I could depend on them. It was a great feeling—you know—that you have someone there—you know—to guide you and get you to where you need to be.”*

Very few interviewees stood out because they did not perceive a family-like atmosphere. One person said, *“They didn’t really create a family atmosphere, it was more clique-ish, so you had to make your own family within. I feel like they weren’t trying to create anything like that.”*

In the survey, 66% said that they “always” felt supported by local peers (and 66% also said this was true nationwide). These are high rates, but lower than the near-unanimous recollections of the positive family-like program atmosphere that was attributed to staff support. In the interviews, some female interviewees say that they did not feel very supported in a male-dominant environment.

## **2. Protection and Patient Caring for Young People’s Development**

To their surprise, graduates said they soon realized that YouthBuild was a safe place where they would not be judged based on their past actions. Overwhelmingly, graduates recalled that the YouthBuild staff showed unconditional support and care for them, and would not judge them or allow them to carry negative reputations because of their past.

Respondents said that the staff built trust with them, and they were surprised they could trust the staff even though these adults weren’t family members. A very high portion of the survey participants said they felt supported and safe while they were at YouthBuild. Reflecting on the YouthBuild staff,

- 98.8% felt safe learning and working at YouthBuild.
- 98.8% said that staff were patient with the respondents’ progress.
- 98.8% recalled that staff believed in the respondent’s potential.
- 96.4% felt that staff cared about them.

### 3. Profound Respect for Young People's Intelligence plus High Expectations and Standards

National leaders of YouthBuild USA assert that adults must respect and recognize the intelligence of young people, and provide them with challenges and high expectations in order for them to thrive. That philosophy is consistent with the Positive Youth Development literature (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002, Lerner, 1995), which suggests that providing youth with environments where they can build trusting relationships with adults who expect achievement has a positive effect on overall youth development. It is also consistent with the growing recognition of the value of “nurturing young people’s sparks, giving them voice, and providing the relationship and opportunities that reinforce and nourish thriving” (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011, p. 263).

YouthBuild program staff are trained to respect young people’s contributions and to recognize talents (“sparks” in Scales’ theoretical framework). Graduates recalled specific times teachers or staff members recognized their assets, such as saying that they were gifted writers or speakers, that they were especially good at drywalling, or that their bilingual skills were helpful. Respondents often indicated this was the first time in their lives they had been recognized as having something of value to contribute. One graduate spoke of the profound change she experienced after staff encouraged her to speak out in public: *“I was kind of quiet at first . . . it made me a whole person—it taught me how to stand up and speak in my community and what I stand for.”*

Aside from specific talents, graduates consistently spoke of the high expectations that staff held for them, which eventually persuaded them to expect more from themselves. Almost all (96%) felt the program had high expectations for them. They also reported being inspired to give back (92%) and to do more with their lives (97%). *“I thought that I would get my diploma, and that would be it. But then I got [into YouthBuild], and it changed my life as a whole. Not just getting this degree, in a sense, but it was about me becoming a better person; me transforming from thinking that everyone was out to get me in public school to being a program where people really cared about you. So YouthBuild was a stepping stone to where I wanted to get to in life.”*

Several alumni recalled that YouthBuild staff insisted on their potential and continued to set high expectations despite their own doubts. One interviewee said, *“They never let me hold low expectations of myself.”* Another recalls, *“I would just say ‘I don’t care, I don’t know either way,’ but they would tell me—‘you have a voice and it needs to be heard. Whatever it is—your voice should be heard—your concerns are important.’ And they made me feel like I was important, like I did matter.”* Slowly but surely, the consistency of the support and high expectations transformed them into a different type of individual. Most graduates

recalled their transformation as gradual, citing daily interactions and the general attitudes of staff as the mechanisms for change.

High expectations went hand-in-hand with high standards. Love and caring did not mean excusing unacceptable behavior. *“They would have interventions for me all the time. They would not let me off the hook. If I came in, and they saw I was high, they would sit me down and figure out how we were going to fix this.”*

Program staff would not allow the students to make excuses that denied their own potential, power, and agency. *“I was always blaming something else: I’m not successful because of this, the man, because I came from an abusive household, I’m never going to be anything. Having a clear understanding that I have the power to do anything that I want to do and that my past does not make me who I am today.”*

Several interviewees used the verb “push.” *“They pushed me. They seen the potential in me and they cared more about my future than I did.”* Or, *“They saw something in me and they made me push, like they wouldn’t let me give up.”*

#### 4. Inspiring and Caring Role Models

The interviews and survey responses indicate that mentoring relationships were crucial components of the program’s success. For example, *“She became like a second mom to me. . . . I felt comfortable and safe around every staff member there, like I could talk to them about anything and they would be there.”* Some respondents recalled that staff cared enough to help beyond regular work hours and outside the YouthBuild site: *“One of my staff members, she actually helped me throughout the probation process, because it was coming time for me to complete it. She submitted a letter to say of the great things that I had been doing while in the program. And it just really meant a lot to me, because I wasn’t used to anyone really stepping up and taking my side. Or believing that I was headed in a positive direction.”*

Another important feature of role models was that many were similar to the students and had overcome similar obstacles. Many respondents reported that, for the first time, they were able to see people who were like them taking on leadership roles and making decisions in both the organization itself and on a policy level. They began to think that they too could be role models to new people entering the program. This realization seems to be connected to the graduates’ ambitions to work with young people and especially the strong desire to work at YouthBuild sites, an ambition that we describe in more detail below.



## 5. Opportunities for Civic Engagement and Developing Civic Skills

In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville argued that American democracy worked because citizens learned civic skills in neighborhood associations, local government bodies, and juries; recently Nobel Laureate economist Elinor Ostrom has shown that those skills have enormous value, but must be learned. Unfortunately, working-class people are unlikely to learn civic skills from community-based organizations because such organizations have shrunk badly since the 1970s (Levine, in press).

The Youthbuild Program Design and Performance Standards specifically address “concern and action from the agency about changing the conditions that have affected [students] and the people they love.” This philosophy is implemented at all levels—as specific opportunities for service and civic skills development, and as the leadership and governance structure of YouthBuild as an organization, which gives youth an equal voice. Furthermore, these civic and leadership opportunities offer important avenues to demonstrate other aspects of the program’s philosophy, such as respect for the young people’s intelligence, high expectations, and recognition of talents and contributions.

YouthBuild staff ask participants to deliberate, make decisions, and implement those decisions. We would characterize those experiences as “civic engagement,” and we find that participants’ civic skills and motivations improve as a result.

Some of the civic engagement occurs within YouthBuild local programs, where participants are given voice over policies and priorities—in stark contrast to their former high schools. Many interviewees served on the programs’ policy committees, where they learned how to review a budget, run effective meetings, interview job candidates, and make program decisions. More than 90% of the survey participants reported that their recommendations were taken seriously and that they were encouraged to take leadership roles while they were students. *“The grant ended, but they still wanted student input on how we wanted to change something about the smoking policy. We gathered input from other students to see if this was something we wanted to explore or not. And then after that, we wrote a proposal, gave it to the board, and eventually the smoking policy was changed.”*

Many recalled the opportunity to tutor or teach fellow students, or said they were asked to co-teach a YouthBuild class. This opportunity seemed to have affected them in several positive ways: by showing them that they did have the capability to benefit other students, by giving them leadership opportunities, and by showing them they were intelligent.

*“They never let me hold low expectations of myself.” Another recalls, “I would just say ‘I don’t care, I don’t know either way,’ but they would tell me—‘you have a voice and it needs to be heard. Whatever it is—your voice should be heard—your concerns are important.’ And they made me feel like I was important, like I did matter.”*

*“One of my staff members, she actually helped me throughout the probation process, because it was coming time for me to complete it. She submitted a letter to say of the great things that I had been doing while in the program. And it just really meant a lot to me, because I wasn’t used to anyone really stepping up and taking my side. Or believing that I was headed in a positive direction.”*

Graduates are now quite confident in their own skills as active citizens. *“If I wanted to start a whole movement in the neighborhood right now, I would be able to because I know the necessary steps and I have the skills, thanks to YouthBuild, to go about these things.”*

One alumnus listed some of the civic skills taught in YouthBuild, and depicted those skills as opening doors to rewarding engagement beyond the program itself: *“I never knew what a budget plan was, I never knew how to keep minutes, I never knew how to do all that, and when I got to the policy committee and they started showing me these things, it just kept motivating me more and more to just keep doing positive and wanting to sit on not only the policy committee at YouthBuild, but what committees can I get on in my neighborhood and can I be on a neighborhood association committee. . . . So it definitely just opened up my mind to what else was out there.”*

Civic engagement opportunities extend beyond the local YouthBuild programs. To an extraordinary degree, alumni reported that they were asked to represent the organization to external audiences. This made them feel truly trusted and valued as assets. For example, 83.6% of the survey respondents said they had an opportunity for public speaking, and 31.5% said they did so regularly. Over 70% of participants had an opportunity to attend a public meeting, and 14% attended regularly. Sixty-two percent recalled speaking about YouthBuild to the media, and 15.9% played this role regularly. Furthermore, a vast majority of the participants reported participating in advocacy activities that enabled them to represent their peers and YouthBuild, such as participating in the YouthBuild Statehouse Day (60.8%), fund-raising (51.0%) and policy making activities (57.9%). Although common, these public engagement opportunities were offered to fewer students than other YouthBuild leadership activities, such as community service, mentoring, recruitment and hosting for the local YouthBuild, and classroom leadership.

Resolving disputes was also mentioned as a civic skill obtained through YouthBuild. *“I’m not the one that’s fighting—I’m the one that’s helping now. You know, working with people and understanding them. I’m the one who tries to mediate things now.”*

As a result of their experiences in YouthBuild alumni said they gained a strong sense of the importance of service to their communities. *“I’m important to my community and my community is important to me. . . . I built everything off that premise.”* They are not only proud of their service but report that they enjoy it and find it fulfilling. *“I like the feeling, I feel selfish because I get so much joy out of helping others and being a leader—that’s what I’m doing—because that’s what I consider a leader to be—someone who will encourage and motivate—that’s how I plan on living the rest of my life.”*

In addition to beginning to view themselves in a positive way, many developed civic attitudes towards the construction work they were doing. Many reported that building houses started as just a job, but turned into an experience that changed the way they looked at themselves and their work, with the recognition that their work was a positive contribution to the community.

Alumni often connected their acquisition of civic skills and motivations to basic changes in their identities and characters. *“They talked about me being a leader in my community. Again . . . the community rising no higher than I’m willing to help it rise as an individual—these are messages that place you in the picture, when they say ‘it’s about you’ being the best you can be as an individual.”*

Public speaking was the most prominent example of a skill that seemed to influence a positive identity shift. *“I did multiple speeches while on the YLC [Young Leaders Council, sponsored by YouthBuild USA]. It also helped me learn how to conduct myself and be professional. I never wore a suit and tie before the YLC, and now I feel so much better wearing a suit and tie.”* In a few instances, graduates who recalled being quiet, shy, and sometimes unnoticed pointed to the public speaking opportunities as the most helpful in pushing them toward stronger leadership. Finding their own voices and having others genuinely listen seemed to effect this change in their perception of themselves.

## 6. Career and Leadership Opportunities

Participants reported that YouthBuild offered opportunities to discover and develop talents; it was often the beginning of a path leading towards career, college, and citizenship. *“The idea of higher education was never in my mind, that is to say that I wasn’t going to do it, but I felt like I didn’t need it. My family was just OK with that, because they hadn’t done very much. The whole idea of higher education was installed in me at YouthBuild.”* In many cases, graduates successfully integrated their identities as active citizens into a career by becoming youth workers, ministers, and serving in public offices.

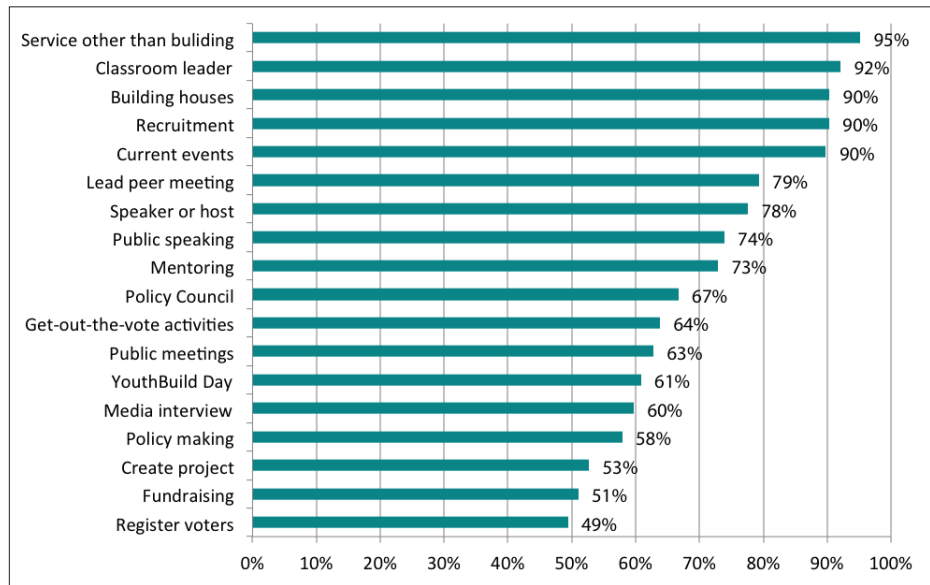
One graduate reported a whole career trajectory that she was pushed along by YouthBuild. *“YouthBuild would tell me, ‘You want to be a nurse—we can show you what to do.’ It was like, I could do more than be a CNA [Certified Nursing Assistant], because that was my focus at first. I want to be a CNA, I want to work with the elderly, I don’t want to work in a hospital. But then, they put in my head that I could be a CNA, that I could do that, but then I could be an LPN [Licensed Practical Nurse], and still do what I want, but be higher in rank. Then I could be an RN [Registered Nurse], then a director. Then I decided I wanted to own my own nursing home.”*

Close to two-thirds of the survey participants have pursued education after their GED or high school diploma. A total of 58% have obtained college experience since graduating from YouthBuild. Of those who have pursued college education, however, a majority are still without a two-year or four-year degree. Of those 58%, only 27% (and 16% of the entire sample) have at least a two-year degree.

Forty-one percent of the survey respondents said they are employed full-time, while 10% work part-time (only) and another 15% work and go to school at the same time. Just six percent are full-time students and 22% are unemployed and actively searching for jobs. Very few (3%) are on public assistance.

The graduates consider their leadership development to be the reason for their success in school and work. *“Getting involved in the policy committee activities and being a speaker for the program uplifted me, and gave me more motivation. And I thought, ‘I can be a leader.’”* The survey showed that a large majority of YouthBuild students have the opportunity to participate in a range of activities that nurture both civic and workplace skills, as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Participation in Local Leadership Activities While in YouthBuild**



## Different Paths to Leadership

Virtually all the alumni in this study have experienced the program elements of YouthBuild and have taken significant steps to be leaders, but their paths have varied.

**Daily practice of love and taking on new challenges.** A large number of graduates described their growth as gradual, saying that they did not recall specific events that changed the course of their development. Instead, they talked about a combination of small acts of kindness from the staff, such as saying “good morning” every day, calling them at home to make sure they were OK, and not giving up on them when they were having a difficult day.

**Many experienced a turning point.** Another large group said that they experienced a turning point in their development as a result of attending a specific event (most commonly the Conference of Young Leaders [CoYL], described in the next section), or through a specific experience that made them realize their own capacity and the potential to do better. For example, many said that Mental Toughness, a training module at the beginning of local programs, pushed them to recognize that they could be better. Some cited it as the moment that kick-started their journey to pursue leadership. Many said that the fact that they were chosen to go to CoYL made them realize, often for the first time, that they did matter and they had been contributing something important to the organization. Another turning point that they recalled was when adults asked them to tell their own story and did not give them a “script to read.” This show of respect affirmed their sense that their stories mattered and they were important. This recognition often changed their perceptions about themselves, and subsequently the trajectory of their development as leaders.

For some, YouthBuild offered an opportunity to put into practice abilities they already believed they possessed but had not been able to actualize previously. A notable segment consisted of new mothers who needed a way to advance themselves while raising a young family. For others, YouthBuild was a place to shine. For these graduates, YouthBuild played a comparatively less drastic, but still essential role.

More than one third of the alumni mentioned at least one interruption or obstacle along the path toward leadership. These graduates identified an important crossroads in their leadership development path. A number of them became staff members in their YouthBuild program, often starting with a second full-time year at their YouthBuild program as AmeriCorps members serving as peer leaders. A small but significant minority stated that this was a challenging year because local staff had trouble shifting their perceptions of them from “a great student” to “a competent colleague.” One graduate

*“They would have interventions for me all the time. They would not let me off the hook. If I came in, and they saw I was high, they would sit me down and figure out how we were going to fix this.”*

*“If I wanted to start a whole movement in the neighborhood right now, I would be able to because I know the necessary steps and I have the skills, thanks to YouthBuild, to go about these things.”*

*“I’m not the one that’s fighting—I’m the one that’s helping now. You know, working with people and understanding them. I’m the one who tries to mediate things now.”*

*“I’m important to my community and my community is important to me. . . . I built everything on that premise.”*

described the staff’s approach to her as “adultism.” However, virtually all of those who went on to take a leadership-development opportunity reported that their experiences during that year made a significant contribution to their overall development as a leader. A few graduates went on to serve a year in Public Allies, an AmeriCorps program designed to build leaders. Of the 17% of graduates who served a year as an AmeriCorps member in YouthBuild or another program, 93% said their experience was “very important” in furthering their skills and commitment as a leader. In virtually all of the cases, the graduates who discussed this challenging transition continued on the leadership path.

At the same time, a significant number of graduates faced life challenges that forced them to step out of a leadership role for a time. The two most frequently cited problems were unemployment and family issues. The many significant challenges that graduates continued to experience make it evident that YouthBuild alumni, though they are extremely capable, can benefit from continued support from YouthBuild. Some graduates wished that local programs would continue to engage more actively with them to encourage them to do better, or hold higher expectations.

### **The Conference of Young Leaders: A Moment of Transformation**

*“It got me man, it captured me, when I took that trip, I said I want to do this forever.”*

The Conference of Young Leaders (CoYL) is an annual gathering of selected YouthBuild students who have been recognized for their leadership by local staff and peers. Graduate interviewees recalled it as a turning point in their development. The conference is an intensive, multiday event for learning and deliberation and an important opportunity for bonding and solidarity building. The CoYL is also a pathway to formal national leadership for local YouthBuild students because the Young Leaders Council (YLC) members are elected at the CoYL. The YLC is a three-year commitment and members represent the voice of YouthBuild students nationwide to YouthBuild USA for important decision making.

According to our participants the CoYL is transformative, in that attending the CoYL gave them their “ah-ha moment”—the moment they realized they were leaders and had the potential to do big and great things. After that moment, they said, they never looked back. The CoYL appears to do this for multiple reasons.

First, it allows graduates to travel outside of their local communities and brings them to Washington, DC, where decisions on the most pressing national issues are made. *“I’m looking out the window, about to land, and I was*

*thinking to myself ‘man, I actually went to DC,’ and how many of my friends could say that they went to DC?’ I mean, how many of my friends back at home could say that they went to a senator’s office? Those were big, big things for me. If I could do that, I could do anything. It helped me put a real-life face to potential.”*

Second, being invited to an important meeting and being treated as an important guest at the meeting and at the hotel made them realize that they were important and they mattered. One graduate recalled of the CoYL experience, *“it all goes back to that first day in DC—I’ve never been on a plane, never been in a nice hotel, just never seen the world outside of my east side of Columbus.”*

Third, the CoYL exposes graduates to diverse peers who have had similar life experiences. *“At CoYL . . . I was allowed to meet other youth like me, who were in the same situation that I had . . . who were really committed to the program . . . the fact that there was this problem that I was going through that was so personal to me, that there were people nationally dealing with the same thing that I was. That was a big a-ha moment for me—opening up my eyes to not just my community but communities across the nation.”* This type of realization affirms the CoYL participants’ sense of solidarity with one another, and builds their commitment to the leadership path and urgency to contribute.

Fourth, the CoYL gives participants opportunities to shine through discussion, speeches, organizing, and other public acts. Many said that after these experiences, they wanted to make changes back at home and felt confident about doing so.

Finally, delegates to the CoYL go to Capitol Hill on the last day to speak to legislators about the federal YouthBuild appropriation. Preparing for the day, learning about issues, dressing up in business attire, walking the halls of Senate and House offices, telling their stories, reporting how YouthBuild has changed their lives, talking with people with the power to make decisions, and working as a team were all powerful experiences which connected them for the first time to the larger political process that affects their lives.

CIRCLE staff observed two annual CoYL meetings (2011 and 2012), and also one YouthBuild Alumni XChange (discussed further below). We found that these conferences were safe spaces for the emerging leaders. Some participants appeared shy, but the context was radically supportive. Everyone was expected to participate actively, but everyone got support from peers and adults for their participation. Applause was loud and sincere. An interviewee recalls, *“Dorothy [Stoneman] had me speak, and I didn’t even know I was gonna speak, and I was sitting on a panel—and that was my ‘a-ha’ moment. I didn’t realize I was going to speak, I had no knowledge of it and I was just pushed out there. But, you know, when I was talking, I was shown a lot of love, and a lot of appreciation for the ideas*

*I had.” At the 2012 CoYL, one participant told a CIRCLE staff member, “Here, it lets me know, it empowers you, to continue to being a leader because you’re in that environment of leaders, so it makes you strive for more—it makes you want more—this environment restores my spirit for continuing to want more [for his leadership]”*

At these events the participants spoke candidly in public about personal struggles and frailties. The interviewees remembered this kind of sharing as important to the success of the meetings. One graduate said, *“Everybody was sharing personal feelings and life stories. . . . It made me really want to share and open up . . . so that really helped me.”*

These meetings conveyed an infectious sense of solidarity, reinforced by regular chants of “Youth-Build!” At one of the CoYLs, the chair of the board of America’s Promise, Alma Powell, joined in the chanting.

We observed a “movement” framework. The discussion was about making big changes in policy and society, not just being supportive to the young people who attend. One speaker observed that the CoYL *“just shows that there is a movement going on—it’s a nationwide thing—everyone’s working together towards the same goal, to make sure this generation and the generation below us is successful.”*

Importantly to YouthBuild USA itself, CoYL is an opportunity for the YouthBuild USA leaders and youth to build a strong and long-lasting bond. The CoYL helps young leaders grow through intense meetings, but also builds strong, positive, emotional connections to YouthBuild USA national staff, including the president and vice president, who make a point of attending each year and get to know attendees personally. An interviewee recalled, *“I never could get that serious until I went to the CoYL that year—I didn’t know how big it was. Once you meet Dorothy, it’s a wrap, you have to be an advocate after that, you know? Once you find the meaning of what you’ve been through, you have to be an advocate.”* This genuine relationship of caring between the national organization and student leaders (who then become alumni leaders) is extremely important for the organization to continue incorporating youth voice, and to be true to the program philosophy of “profound respect for the young people.”

### **Graduates Say that YouthBuild Helped Them Overcome Obstacles**

As mentioned earlier, graduates often offered sweeping statements about how YouthBuild “changed their lives.” There was an overwhelming sense that graduates experienced change incrementally—they grew and matured as whole people—sometimes marked by transformational events like the CoYL, but other times through the daily experiences of support, care, and high expectations. As

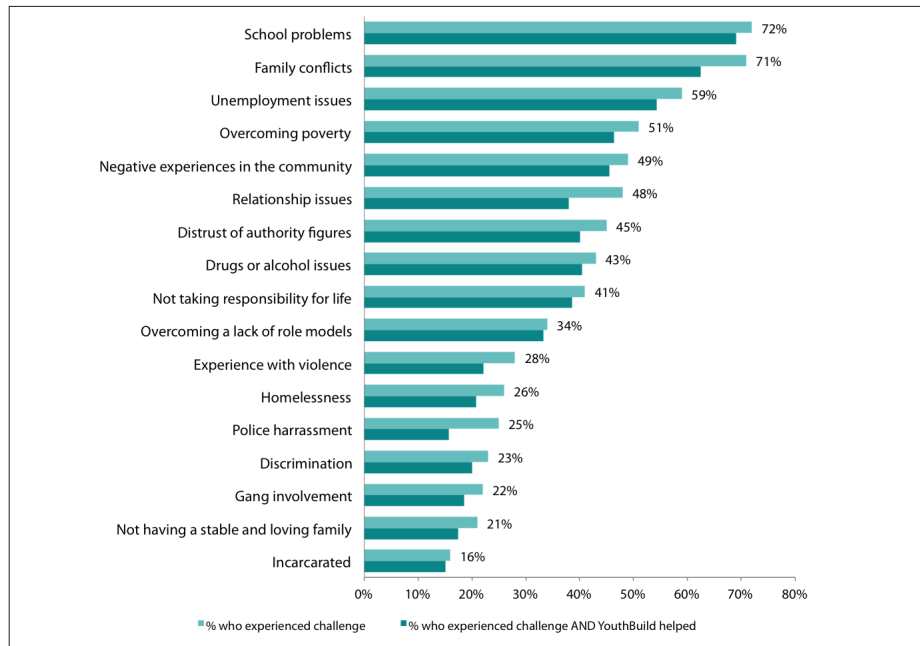


a result, a very high proportion of graduates reported that YouthBuild helped them overcome specific challenges they experienced. It is important to note that the questions were intentionally open-ended, because we assumed that changes could occur directly or indirectly, and at various times in their lives. In some cases, YouthBuild assisted graduates directly, for example by helping them expunge a criminal record, providing a positive school experience, assisting in a job search, or allowing them to move forward with their lives. In other cases, YouthBuild helped indirectly by giving them a set of tools to heal from past experiences or deal with new challenges.

Many graduates recalled finding a mentor who acted as a positive parent figure, such as one graduate who said, “I never had a father figure in my life, and there was one staff . . . who put it in my head that I was smart, brilliant and that I was going to make it in life.” In other cases, YouthBuild sent graduates to career and leadership pipelines that have helped them obtain employment, education, and ultimately more stable lives.

The survey shows the proportion of the graduates who experienced particular problems and felt that YouthBuild helped them with each problem. These problems are listed in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Percent Experiencing Challenges and Proportion Reporting YouthBuild Helped**



*“I never knew what a budget plan was, I never knew how to keep minutes, I never knew how to do all that, and when I got to the policy committee and they started showing me these things, it just kept motivating me more and more to just keep doing positive and wanting to sit on not only the policy committee at YouthBuild, but what committees can I get on in my neighborhood and can I be on a neighborhood association committee. . . . So it definitely just opened up my mind to what else was out there.”*

As mentioned earlier, YouthBuild graduates recalled having low expectations for themselves and short life expectancy before they entered YouthBuild. One of the most notable changes that graduates reported was their current life

*“I like the feeling, I feel selfish because I get so much joy out of helping others and being a leader—that’s what I’m doing—because that’s what I consider a leader to be—someone who will encourage and motivate—that’s how I plan on living the rest of my life.”*

expectancy, suggesting that YouthBuild changed their lives in fundamental ways. Ninety percent said they now expect to live to be 65 or older, while only 0.5% said they expected to die before age 30. Perhaps more important is *why* they think they will live longer. The reasons they gave reflect a completely different view of themselves and their surroundings.

- *“My decision-making skill has grown. I recognize unsafe situations and practice safe behaviors because I know the value of my life.”*
- *“I’m healthy, active, and doing what I never thought I would be doing—working, going to college, and expecting my first child.”*
- *“I believe in myself and therefore, I have a future.”*
- *“I see myself as an old man now and I know that it will take me that long to accomplish my goals so I have to live that long.”*

Graduates no longer rely on luck, divine force, or good genes to live long—they expect to live long because they have purpose, control over their own behaviors, and value their own life. Graduates show high self-confidence and life satisfaction, and are overwhelmingly interested in life. In the survey, 91% said they are often or always interested in life, 78% are often or always confident enough to express their own ideas and opinions, and 82% are fond of most parts of their personality.

They said that their life has a sense of direction and meaning (86%) and they have something they can contribute to the society (82%). A sense of movement and vitality emerged in both the interviews and surveys—respondents believed that they have much potential to grow, and are not necessarily satisfied with what they have accomplished so far. For example, a relatively low 55% said they are satisfied, and an overwhelming 93% said that they believe in their potential enough to work hard. Their motivation to do more may be driven by the serious, ongoing problems in their communities, including poor education, drugs, and violent crime. Many graduates’ future vision had to do with improving their own communities in these areas. In fact, 41% are often or always upset with the government because it is not supporting what is important in their community.

### **YouthBuild Students Continue to Grow and Contribute After They Become Alumni**

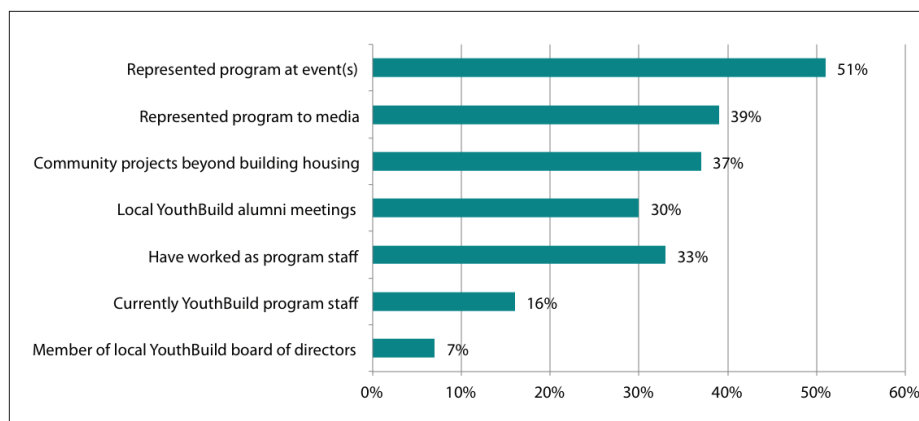
**Becoming Alumni of a Local YouthBuild Program.** Over half of the survey respondents said they support their local YouthBuild program in various roles, and many continue to keep in touch with local YouthBuild programs and staff after they graduate. A significant proportion support the daily function

and vitality of the local programs. Some return as staff members, or serve as local members, while others represent the program at events or to the media. Still others mentor younger YouthBuild students as staff or as local leaders. The main reason they offer is that they feel welcome in their program; many alumni say that YouthBuild was and always will be home to them, and staff will support and help them after they have graduated. This is evidence of the connection and care that was given to the students while they were in the program. A phrase often repeated among YouthBuild graduates is, “Once in YouthBuild, always in YouthBuild!”

Another reason graduates stay in contact with their local programs is that they are recruited to speak to current students, to assist with the program, or to give advice, and some have been employed by YouthBuild. More than half of the respondents indicate that their program personally reached out to them for at least one of these reasons. *“All the time, every year, they reach out to me—and I’ve reached out to other YouthBuild programs, so they do make me feel important because I can come back and give back.”*

Figure 4 shows the percent of YouthBuild graduates that are engaged in the local program in various ways.

**Figure 4. Alumni Engaged in Local Leadership**



Despite the positive experiences they report, keeping in contact with their local program is not always an option for graduates. The most-often cited reasons for not being involved with YouthBuild after graduation were the impact of personal issues, such as economic difficulties (45%), health problems (26%), and family problems (38%). Some cited barriers related to the stage of life that they are in, such as starting or taking care of a family (31%), or moving to a new community (27%). The interviewees who were not currently connected generally wanted to engage with YouthBuild, but they were either dealing with barriers or were not directly asked to be involved.

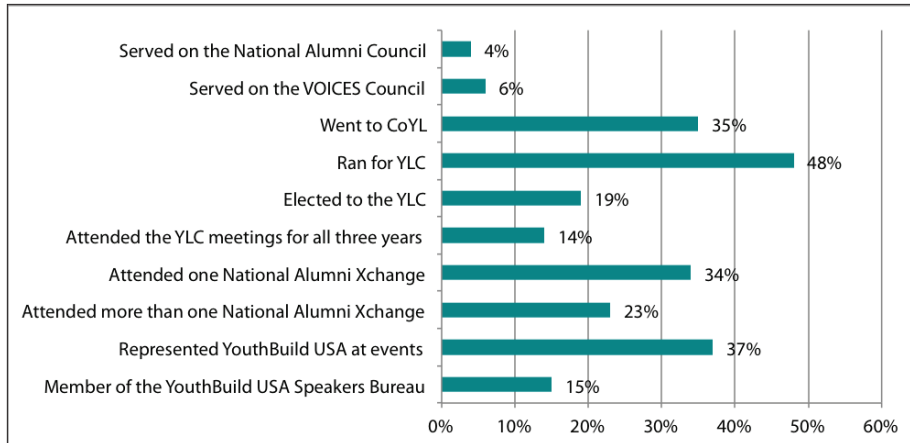
Several graduates did cite negative reasons for their lack of involvement. Not feeling welcome in their program was mentioned. One example was an individual who said he did not feel he was important once he graduated: *“Once you are in YouthBuild, you’re there, but once you are out of YouthBuild it’s like, who cares?”* A few others shared the opinion that they were unimportant to their local program after graduation. *“I always felt like, because I didn’t pursue my education first, they kind of gave up on me—I still feel that because I’m not going to school at the moment.”* Another said, *“After I graduated, it was like I was obsolete, like I didn’t matter anymore.”* But these were distinctly minority opinions. Some respondents felt disconnected from their local programs because of staff turnover, reporting that many of the people that were staff while they attended had left since their graduation.

YouthBuild USA has launched two major innovations in recent years to deal with the difficulties local program staff have had remaining adequately supportive of graduates and meeting the immediate demands of new cohorts. One of these is a mentoring program, wherein a mentoring coordinator links the graduating student with a volunteer who is available during their transition to the next stage of life. The other is a postsecondary support system in which an extra transition staff person is focused on support after the student lands in college or in a union apprenticeship. The US DoL is also providing funds for up to twelve months of follow-up for all students, and requires grantees to track graduates’ placement retention in employment and postsecondary education.

### **Alumni Leadership Opportunities through YouthBuild USA**

Once students graduate from YouthBuild local programs, they become eligible for a range of national leadership activities: committees, speaking opportunities, advocacy efforts, and national conventions and meetings. Almost half of the survey respondents have engaged with YouthBuild USA in one or more ways.

The graduates’ perception of YouthBuild USA is connected to their personal experience with the organization. For example, if the individual had a positive, meaningful experience at the CoYL, he or she was more likely to perceive YouthBuild USA as a welcoming, nurturing organization. This was the circumstance for most of the students who responded that they were still involved at the national level. The YouthBuild USA leadership activities that alumni were most commonly involved with are listed in Figure 5.

**Figure 5. Alumni Engaged in YouthBuild USA Leadership Activities**

Graduates chose to be involved with YouthBuild USA for a variety of reasons, but the one cited most often is that they feel welcome. As one individual said, “YouthBuild USA is a place you can always come home to.” Graduates felt welcome when YouthBuild USA informed them about opportunities to give back and to become involved at the national level. Contact between the national office and the individual seems to have an influence on the individual’s perception of feeling welcome.

Another significant reason graduates gave for continuing connection with YouthBuild USA was a desire to stay committed to a leadership role at the national level, such as a role in the National Alumni Exchange. This speaks to the sense of responsibility and accountability they gained as students at the local programs.

Other reasons for staying connected with YouthBuild USA included feeling re-engaged after a national event, feeling valued by YouthBuild USA’s staff, and believing that YouthBuild USA needed them for their assets, such as public speaking.

Interviewees collectively indicated that YouthBuild USA’s meetings played an important role in re-engaging alumni. The national YouthBuild USA events evoked fond memories of meeting like-minded peers, learning more about leadership development, and rediscovering a passion for community involvement. The Alumni Xchange is an important alumni event because it can help young alumni develop and hone their leadership skills on a larger scale, whether by being a workshop facilitator, serving a term on the National Alumni Council, or working for YouthBuild USA itself.

*“They talked about me being a leader in my community. Again . . . the community rising no higher than I’m willing to help it rise as an individual—these are messages that place you in the picture, when they say ‘it’s about you’ being the best you can be as an individual.”*

*“I did multiple speeches while on the YLC (Young Leaders Council, sponsored by YouthBuild USA). It also helped me learn how to conduct myself and be professional. I never wore a suit and tie before the YLC, and now I feel so much better wearing a suit and tie.”*

Several CIRCLE staff attended the Alumni Xchange in 2011 and observed the meeting’s atmosphere:

The discipline at these events was impressive. The Alumni XChange took place in a Las Vegas casino hotel (because of its affordability). It lasted several days. The betting machines and other distractions were audible in the background during the meetings. Yet participants arrived on time early each morning and focused intently on their discussions and on such business items as electing officers. The contrast between the atmosphere in the casino and the serious mood inside the room was striking . . .

YouthBuild alumni who stayed connected considered YouthBuild an important part of their identity. Some graduates who had not recognized their own leadership potential as students came to a realization of their skills and knowledge through contact with YouthBuild USA.

### **YouthBuild Graduates are Civic Leaders Today**

Overwhelmingly, YouthBuild graduates now identify themselves as valuable contributors or leaders in some way.

First, the graduates report a sense of control over their own lives, and many have very positive views of themselves and high self-esteem. Among survey respondents, 72.9% strongly agreed that they can be counted on to keep a schedule, and 77.7% strongly agreed that they are reliable and people can count on them. YouthBuild depicts these outcomes as forms of “leadership,” which begins with personal discipline or “mental toughness.”

To some, personal leadership includes being successful in school. Contrary to how they felt before YouthBuild, they now see advanced education as reasonably attainable. *“After that point [getting a good grade in a YouthBuild class,] I felt really good about myself. [YouthBuild] gave me the skills I need to be successful in education. Before YouthBuild, I would have never been in community college, I would have never been in an English course, I would never have had an experience of getting an A on a paper.”*

Many reported that YouthBuild explicitly advocated getting a college education. One recalled, *“I remember having a conversation with Dorothy Stoneman about how I’m at a place where I’m too old to go back to school, and how adamant she was about one never being too old to learn and get their education.”* Some said that with the practical assistance of YouthBuild they had been able to pursue higher education.

Many graduates reported feeling that they were now in control over their own educational attainment. Many said they know what they want to do and who

they want to be, and feel comfortable directing themselves towards their goals. For example: *“I know I need to be a licensed clinical social worker, so I need to start working on my masters in social work.”* About 58 percent of the survey participants have experienced some college so far.

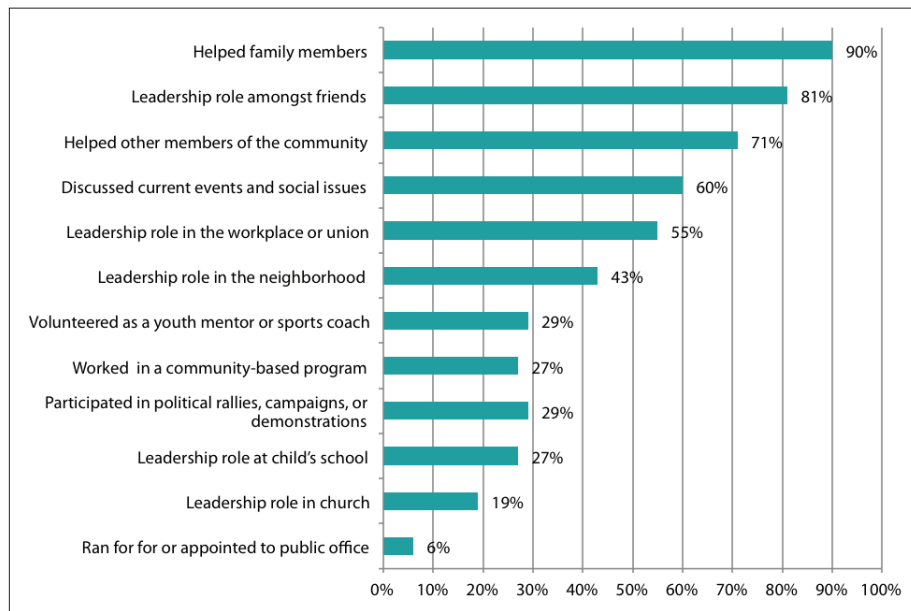
With regard to civic or public skills, 68.1% strongly felt that they could express their views in front of a group of people; 73.5% felt they could work with people with different opinions to make decisions together; and 63.3% said they could plan and lead a meeting for a group or organization.

A small group of graduates specifically identified themselves as “activists.” They usually used this word after discussing YouthBuild USA alumni opportunities, such as lobbying at the state house, talking to an elected representative, or some other opportunity related to addressing social issues on a larger scale.

Many graduates felt comfortable with ambitious forms of civic engagement. For example, 63.9% strongly agreed that they could contact or visit someone in government who represented their community. More than half felt they knew to whom to talk when there was a problem that needed to be addressed in the community, and could identify individuals or groups who could help with that problem. Like other Americans, they felt less confident about their knowledge of issues and public affairs; slightly less than half (48.2%) felt reasonably well-informed about issues that affect society today.

Figure 6 displays the rates of various forms of leadership among survey respondents.

**Figure 6. Civic Leadership Among YouthBuild Graduates**



Those who cannot participate in their communities often cited personal issues (such as unemployment or taking care of family), and said that leadership is still a part of their lives, either through family or peer leadership, and/or personal leadership.

The survey indicates that alumni are not just formal or official leaders, but are also positive influences in various contexts. More than 80% said they are often or always positive leaders for their families, among friends, at their school or workplace, and in their communities. Notably, almost no respondents said that they are negative leaders in any respect, and very few stated that they took no leadership roles.

These graduate leaders are change makers in their communities and influence many lives in important ways. When asked how many people they feel they have influenced, graduates' responses varied between *"all of my friends and family"* and *"500+ people."* Almost all responded by saying they will continue to make an impact as a positive role model. One respondent wanted to help provide others with a *"better chance at transforming [their] lives,"* and *"want[ed] to be a powerful icon in the world."* This is in contrast to the way the respondents recalled their leadership (or lack thereof) prior to joining YouthBuild.

The alumni who are involved at the national level tend to direct their energies to addressing large-scale social problems and are highly engaged in community leadership. Of particular importance, in their view, is the opportunity to speak in front of their peers or to represent their local YouthBuild or YouthBuild USA at an event. Both of these opportunities give the graduates a chance to develop civic skills (speaking, having discussion with diverse people) and gain civic knowledge (learning about larger social issues that are important to them). Many of these young people said they have brought the knowledge from these opportunities back home to their local YouthBuild or neighborhood.

The graduates who may not be as active in the national level are still engaged in some way. If they are not involved in directly addressing local problems, almost all suggested that they want to be positive role models, either to those in their community or to younger people in their family, whether their own children, younger siblings, or others.

### **Graduates' Ambitions for Future Leadership**

Many of the graduates emphasized that they are just beginning lives of service and leadership. Their career ambitions focused on helping others, especially younger people. *"I just want to be a role model to the people in the world that been through a lot and feel as if they can't do nothing because the system made them like this . . . , and everything they do, they continue to get shot down."*



One graduate said, *“It’s been in my heart to help the men, women, and the youth, who are still in these penitentiaries and who are coming home from these penitentiaries. I think they have unique needs—I can certainly relate to those needs myself—and I feel like the community, or society by and large, has not taken the needs of the youth or the ex-offenders seriously, and as a result many are going back to the penitentiaries.”*

When asked which types of career options appeal to them (multiple choice allowed),

- 52% envisioned wanting to help youth in some capacity.
- 30% wanted to pursue social work.
- 32% wanted to work at a non-profit and 31% want to start their own non-profit.
- 32% wanted to pursue community organizing.
- 27% wanted to start their own for-profit business.
- 16% wanted to work for a for-profit company.
- 22% wanted to work for the government, 17% in civil service, and 17% in politics.
- 16% wanted to teach.
- 19% wanted to go into a construction business.
- Just 2% were undecided.

Though these were not options offered in the survey, a few respondents wanted to go into medicine (nursing) and some wanted to go into criminal justice.

Our survey included an open-ended response about which problems respondents would address in the community if they were to take leadership roles. Unusually for this kind of survey question, most participants provided responses, suggesting that they had thought about social issues before. (Sixty percent said that they discuss current events and social issues with other people.) Some sample responses are:

- *“I want to get young people excited about learning, and get them to take an active part in the development of their lives and futures. I see a lot of young people be lethargic about their futures. And, of course, in the perfect world we would solve a lot of government issues.”*
- *“I would like to see more kids being able to have the choice to stay off the roads and away from drugs. We do not have a YouthBuild here due to funds not being disbursed because we were a rural YouthBuild back in 2007.*

*“Getting involved in the policy committee activities and being a speaker for the program uplifted me, and gave me more motivation. And I thought, ‘I can be a leader.’”*

*The CoYL “just shows that there is a movement going on—it’s a nationwide thing—everyone’s working together towards the same goal, to make sure this generation and the generation below us is successful.”*

*“I never could get that serious until I went to the CoYL that year—I didn’t know how big it was. Once you meet Dorothy, it’s a wrap, you have to be an advocate after that, you know? Once you find the meaning of what you’ve been through, you have to be an advocate.”*

*I would like to see more organizations in my community that get the youth to want to be there and also at no cost.”*

- *“I would like to make my community more green by creating eco- friendly homes.”*
- *“In my community young people are hopeless because the lack of family and community support. I want to develop a program that will help them to discover their full potential and apply those gifts to become innovators and future mentors to next generation.”*

Many graduates said there is no ceiling to leadership. They hoped to continue growing as leaders, had high aspirations for making social change, and did not think they had necessarily reached their potential, because there is always growing to do. The only perceived barriers to reaching their leadership potential were personal issues, of which the most frequently cited was not having a job.

It appears that these alumni interviewees now see themselves the way the YouthBuild staff, peers, and founders always knew them to be, as capable, skillful, dependable, and full of potential. Despite the internal and external obstacles, YouthBuild alumni have been able to break stereotypes and are growing as civic leaders in their communities and as voices and inspirations for the people that are marginalized nationwide.

### **The Graduates Seek More**

YouthBuild USA works to provide as many leadership opportunities to as many graduates as it can, given limited resources. It also endeavors to pay alumni for leadership work, offering a graduated scale from volunteer opportunities to full-time professional jobs at the national office. YouthBuild USA staff have expressed concern that the opportunities and rewards they can offer are too few to meet the need. They have discussed this issue with the graduates on the National Alumni Council, who regularly call for higher compensation, more responsibility, and more opportunities for graduates to serve as full-time staff.

Virtually the only negative comments interviewees offered to our open-ended questions concerned perceived scarcity of opportunities or inadequate pay for active alumni. These comments were made by a small number of alumni but are still noteworthy. We observed that most of their criticisms were basically requests for *more*. Alumni believed that the leadership opportunities that YouthBuild offers are beneficial, and they wanted to see a greater number of activities available to more of the graduates.

A small proportion of the young leaders expressed a sense of ambivalence, saying that they wanted to stay involved through many avenues of leadership, but they wanted more input in the direction the organization was heading. They said that YouthBuild should rely on the graduates more fully. Again, the graduates' desire to contribute was evident, but in some cases they felt that their opinions were not fully considered. On the local level, a few graduates felt that some staff members have not been able to see them as full-grown contributing members of the society. One graduate reported, *"To be honest, they were rude to me. The staff woman working at YouthBuild was looking down on me because I was a graduate."* She felt unwelcome and unimportant when she reached out to help at a local program.

Some older graduates reported feeling pressured by YouthBuild's focus on higher education. A few respondents said that they received less concrete and practical support, such as academic scholarships or assistance with loan applications, because they did not choose to go to college. They also felt guilty at times because going to college has been promoted within the network.

Several alumni were disappointed by the organization because they took a major leadership role in the past and felt their contributions were not fully recognized or compensated. A theme in both the positive suggestions and reasons for disappointment was that YouthBuild sites and YouthBuild USA do not hire enough graduates for professional positions.

Some alumni were aware of limited funds, citing an imbalance between the graduates' *"thirst to serve YouthBuild"* and the lack of resources for YouthBuild to pave a *"wider leadership pathway"* for graduates. Others saw room for improvement in the way the network deploys its resources. One graduate serving in a national leadership role said, *"There are a lot of graduates—a lot of alumni—across the nation whom we can utilize more efficiently than what we're doing right now."*

Finally, some said that not everyone is able to access the opportunities available to a minority of students and alumni. YouthBuild integrates youth and alumni voices into its formal governance structure, which gives opportunities to a small number of graduates who are elected to those positions. But far more graduates want to serve in those roles, and at present the network lacks the resources to replicate the alumni leadership structure at the local or regional levels. YouthBuild USA has prepared a proposal calling for this replication in five states, but so far no foundation has chosen to fund it.

Many graduates also said they wish that YouthBuild (not specifying whether they meant the local or national organizations) would hire more graduates. One graduate said, *"I'm a YouthBuild baby, I'm a testament to the product, I'm a*

*product of the system, and I want to be able to have the ability to be an executive director of the YouthBuild program where it all started at.”*

Two concrete areas for improvement came from graduates. First, they appreciated frequent communications from YouthBuild USA and wished there were more opportunities to become engaged. Second, many wanted to stay connected with their local programs and wished that staff would “check-in” a few times a year by calling them. One suggested having staff organize local alumni events to encourage more engagement.

## Conclusion

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Democracy is more than a system of representative government in which the leaders are chosen in competitive elections. It is a form of social organization that demands the active and responsible participation of all citizens in their communities. At the core of a citizen's responsibilities are three activities: (1) talking and listening to form views about public issues that are informed by other people's perspectives, (2) working together with other people in concrete ways that range from constructing houses to running agencies, and (3) building and sustaining civic relationships that generate power and meaning (Levine, in press).

These three core aspects of democracy have seriously eroded since the 1960s for most Americans, and nowhere is the decline worse than for young people in poor communities. Only if they are academically successful and able to attend college are they likely to be recruited into settings and groups where citizens communicate and learn about public issues, work on public problems, and form civic relationships.

But these are essential aspects of the YouthBuild leadership development model. We cannot estimate what proportion of entering YouthBuild students turn into civic leaders, but we have demonstrated that a substantial number have become exemplary leaders and assets to democracy as a direct result of YouthBuild's investment in their leadership potential. At the same time, their lives have become stable and productive. Policymakers and American citizens should make similar opportunities available to all our young people.

*"The idea of higher education was never in my mind, that is to say that I wasn't going to do it, but I felt like I didn't need it. My family was just OK with that, because they hadn't done very much. The whole idea of higher education was installed in me at YouthBuild."*

*"I believe in myself and therefore, I have a future."*

*“I want to get young people excited about learning, and get them to take an active part in the development of their lives and futures. I see a lot of young people be lethargic about their futures. And, of course, in the perfect world we would solve a lot of government issues.”*

## The Methodology of this Study

This is a highly rigorous and intensive study, using a mixed-methods methodology appropriate to the topic. It has quantitative, qualitative, and observational aspects, and a dimension of community-based participatory research. We sought to combine the special assets of YouthBuild alumni (deep knowledge of their own program, cultural sensitivity, and trusting relationships with peers), YouthBuild USA’s national leaders (grasp of the program’s origins, history, and theories of change), and CIRCLE staff (independence and rigorous methodological skills) by working together as a diverse team.

In brief:

- CIRCLE collaborated with YouthBuild alumni and YouthBuild USA staff to design a 30-minute survey.
- CIRCLE created the online survey and YouthBuild alumni staff and founders did an extensive outreach through the 1000 Leaders Network, social media, and personal outreach. The response rate was not particularly high at about 25 percent, nor was the number of respondents very large (total N = 344). In the past, we have found low response rates to other lengthy surveys administered to people not currently enrolled in programs, and a long online survey may have posed special burdens to low-income young adults. Thus we draw no conclusions from the response rate itself, and we put relatively little emphasis on the survey results in this report.
- CIRCLE collaborated with the same YouthBuild alumni and key national staff to develop an interview protocol.
- The interviewees were selected using two processes that were determined as a result of consensus between CIRCLE and the YouthBuild research team:
  - First, the core research team at YouthBuild USA (including the 10 graduate researchers) nominated YouthBuild graduates whom they wanted to interview. We sought their input because the survey yielded excessively rigid criteria for “leaders.” They did not nominate individuals who all had positive views about YouthBuild. In fact, the national graduate coordinators made concerted efforts to select at least some graduates whom they knew had some challenges. This list of nominees contained about 50 names.
  - The second group of interviewees was chosen from the respondents to the online survey. The survey was very valuable for allowing us to select interviewees who varied in their exposure to YouthBuild and their

responses to key survey items. These interview candidates were selected according to the following criteria:

- They had completed a large portion of the survey (i.e., at least 80%)
- They had agreed to be contacted for a follow-up interview in the consent form
- They had participated in one or more of the following:
  - The Conference of Young Leaders (as a student)
  - The Alumni Exchange (as an alumni)
- Using the two processes combined, a total of 97 graduates were eligible for an interview and 80 were randomly selected as a first set of contacts. Interviewers contacted all of the eligible interview candidates several times. In the end, due to logistical difficulties, a total of 54 interviews were completed.
- Six of the YouthBuild alumni conducted the interviews in person or by phone. They audio-recorded the interviews and sent them back to CIRCLE.
- CIRCLE staff coded the interview recordings. In order to take advantage of the richness of the response, CIRCLE decided to use thematic analysis strategy for this report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The goal of thematic analysis is to reduce a large body of qualitative information, such as interviews, to a smaller number of themes that are common or relevant across interviews. We followed a set of procedures recommended by Braun & Clarke (2006):
  - **Become familiar with the interviews by listening to each tape.**  
Generate initial codes and summarize each interview by summarizing the interview in caption.
  - **Collaboratively categorize theories under higher-order headings.**  
In our case, it was important to discuss experiences separate by both timeline (before, during and after YouthBuild experience) and type (specific events for local or national programs and experience vs. developmental process). Themes were then categorized within each of these structures.
  - **Review candidate themes.** For this project, the primary coders (three CIRCLE staff members) first met in successive meetings to determine the initial set of codes based on 5 representative interviews. These initial themes were used as a basis of subsequent coding, which were then revised iteratively.

- **Define and name themes.** The team then met weekly thereafter in order to review, refine, and add themes to maintain the iterative process. This weekly check-in also prevented “coder-drift,” a phenomenon wherein seasoned coders start to revert to subjective coding, away from the initially agreed-upon coding strategies.
- **Code checking.** Though it is not usually part of thematic analysis, we incorporated a process of having non-coders who were not intimately involved with the YouthBuild project listen to half of the interviews to check for the reliability and validity of the original coding. Three additional research staff participated as checkers and they also met with the main coders to discuss any disagreements and in some cases help revise the themes. Coder-checkers agreed with the original codes almost all the time, with a few exceptions being that the original coders missed some information that could be coded (e.g., a interviewee said that s/he engaged in the community through church but original coder did not hear it). In almost all cases, checkers added coding but agreed with all the original codes, indicating that our coding process achieved high levels of reliability and validity.
- CIRCLE staff attended one national Alumni XChange and two Conferences of Young Leaders, spoke to numerous participants, and took notes on what we observed.

CIRCLE wrote this report and is solely responsible for the findings and their presentation. YouthBuild alumni and staff provided input and reviewed the draft, but CIRCLE made determinations about what to say here.

**Demographics.** The survey respondents were racially and ethnically diverse: 42% African American, 23% Latino, 18% White, 9% multiracial, 6% other, 1% Asian and 1% Native American. Eleven percent grew up speaking Spanish at home and 29% have one or more parents who were born outside of the United States. Survey respondents and interviewees were predominantly younger graduates, under age 30. The median age was 24 (mean was 25.8), ranging between 18 and 48. Seventy-seven percent of the survey respondents were 29 and younger, and only 2% were 40 and older. Although the YouthBuild student body is male dominant, survey respondents were more balanced: 54% male and 46% female. The demographic profiles of the interviewees were on the whole very similar to the survey participants in terms of racial background, age, gender and immigrant background. The overall demographic profile of the survey participants generally match the demographics reported by all entering students from 2010, as reported by YouthBuild USA (YouthBuild, 2010).



**Limitations.** This study is retrospective: Alumni told us how they think they have changed over time, but we do not have before-and-after measurements against which to test their recollections. It is also a selective study: Respondents varied in their exposure to YouthBuild, but all had completed the local program successfully and had taken at least some steps on the national leadership pathway. Thus the study is not well designed to estimate the effect of YouthBuild on the leadership development of an average person who enters the program. We have no formal comparison with a marginalized adolescent who chooses not to enter the program. Even for a study of individuals on YouthBuild’s leadership track, our sample may be biased toward relatively successful leaders, because they may have been more likely to complete the survey and thus be contacted for an interview. (However, we did select among the survey respondents for a range of experiences.)

Despite these limitations, the study is well designed to portray a cadre of young leaders, all of whom entered YouthBuild on a very negative life trajectory—with extremely low odds of thriving and contributing to society, let alone becoming national leaders—and all of whom now display genuine leadership and service. Although we cannot use our data to estimate the odds of success for an entering YouthBuild participant or the costs versus the benefits of the program, we can securely demonstrate that the program has profound benefits.

Indeed, it would be difficult to identify any comparable sample in the United States: young people who are now genuine public leaders despite having been poor, disconnected, and often angry and alienated in adolescence. The very existence of this group, described in some detail above, proves that an institution can make leaders out of “at risk” youth. That conclusion ought to challenge state and national policymakers and leaders of other institutions to follow YouthBuild’s lead.

In this report, all quotations are drawn from CIRCLE’s transcriptions of recorded interviews or from verbatim responses offered on the survey. A quotation usually reflects several similar responses from different interviewees and was chosen for that reason. Whenever a quotation is inconsistent with another comment by a different interviewee, we also quote the contrasting view in the text. Thus these quotations should be taken as generally representative of the views of the survey respondents and especially the 54 interviewees as a group.

*“All the time, every year, they reach out to me—and I’ve reached out to other YouthBuild programs, so they do make me feel important because I can come back and give back.”*

*I’m a YouthBuild baby, I’m a testament to the product, I’m a product of the system, and I want to be able to have the ability to be an executive director of the YouthBuild program where it all started at.”*

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Chief among the YouthBuild USA national staff who contributed to this project were: John Bell, Annette Goodrich (also an alumna), and Dorothy Stoneman. The alumni interviewers were: Jamiel Alexander, Frank Alvarez, Mike Donnelly, Annette Goodrich, Joel Miranda, and Bea Sweet. Alvarez and Goodrich were especially active as interviewers and Miranda made significant contributions in the interpretation of the findings. Mike Dean, Nina Saxon, and Antonio Ramirez also contributed to the research.



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*Frank Alvarez*



*Mike Donnelly*



*Annette Goodrich*



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