BEYOND SUPPRESSION

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON YOUTH VIOLENCE

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Youth Violence Prevention around the World: The YouthBuild Case Study

Tim Cross

Everyone used to think I would wind up dead. But when I found people who believed in me, who showed me I could do something good and leave gangbanging behind, I began to see myself in a different light. When you are respected instead of feared, you are more powerful.

For everyone who experiences YouthBuild a seed is planted. YouthBuild made me stop hating the world. I discovered myself at YB. I am finally paying attention to what everyone at YouthBuild told me—that I can make something of myself. They’ve said it so often I believe I can do it. I challenge myself everyday to see if what they said about me is really true. To this day, I am still working on being a better person.

—Natalia, YouthBuild graduate and current staff member

ORIGINS

The seed for the creation of the YouthBuild was planted in East Harlem, New York, in 1978, and began, as all YouthBuild programs begin, with a question posed to young people by a caring adult. The question was simple: What would you do to improve your community if you had the resources you need to put your ideas for improvement into action? The young people who were asked this question had the same answer: We would rebuild abandoned buildings to create homes for homeless people and take back empty buildings from drug dealers. At the time more than 300 abandoned buildings blighted the East Harlem landscape, and thousands of idle teenagers and hundreds of homeless people roamed the streets. The young people’s answers provided an obvious solution to all three tragic problems. Why not train and employ out-of-school
unemployed young people to rebuild the buildings, creating affordable housing for the homeless? This is what YouthBuild does. At the same time, it educates and inspires the youth to become permanent community role models and leaders and educates policy makers regarding the valuable contributions young people are capable of making to the community development process. At the time, this question was posed to young people by Dorothy Stoneman, founder of an early childhood education program in East Harlem that serves low-income parents who are seeking quality, affordable education for their children. It took another five years for young people working with dedicated adults to rehabilitate their first building site. New partners had to be found to support the effort, including local residents, city officials, construction unions, public schools, and public and private donors. Many of these eventual partners resisted the proposed effort, not believing that poor kids from Harlem were up to the task, mistrusting the motives of other partners, and voicing skepticism of the “workability” of turning the completed structures over to formerly homeless adults. In adult-led forums where young people had organized their arguments and would speak up to describe and defend their vision, the presentations were dismissed as idealistic and unrealistic. This first effort, along with the many challenges and pitfalls that the leadership group confronted in those first five years, would provide essential lessons to guide the growth of what would come to be the national YouthBuild movement.

YouthBuild is grounded in the philosophy that given the right context—an environment filled with respect, a caring community, a positive peer group, a valued role in the neighborhood, an opportunity to develop skills, high standards of self-discipline and performance, and the means to a future education and employment—young adults with troubled pasts can transform themselves into productive citizens with viable futures. YouthBuild provides this opportunity through a unique combination of education, skill building, counseling, leadership development, community services, positive values and relationships, high standards of behavior, and clear pathways to a productive future.

YouthBuild students get a chance to build a positive track record that can outshine the difficulties of the past and to develop community ties as well as the skills and values that will enable them to succeed. YouthBuild meets their needs precisely and does so in a context that is not stigmatized, in which they can work alongside other youth as heroes in their community, building an important and visible community asset for their neighborhoods. YouthBuild demonstrates that marginalized young people—many of whom have been homeless, incarcerated, gang involved, or victims of forced migration and violence—can play a positive, contributing role in their communities when they are provided access to a program tailored to meet their many and varied needs. The program is infused with faith in the sacred value of every human being and guided by the knowledge that the power of love coupled with the power of opportunity can overcome enormous obstacles.
THE YOUTHBUILD DESIGN AND RESULTS

During the 9- to 24-month full-time YouthBuild program, youth spend half of their time learning construction trade skills by building or rehabilitating housing, schools, playgrounds, and community centers; the other half of their time is spent in a YouthBuild classroom advancing their basic education skills toward a recognized academic credential. Personal counseling and training in life skills and financial management are provided. The students are part of a mini-community of adults and youth committed to their mutual success and to improving the conditions of their neighborhoods.

In the United States, YouthBuild supports a network of 272 independent programs in 44 states, engaging 10,000 young people on an annual basis. Since 1994, more than 84,000 YouthBuild students have produced more than 18,000 units of low-income housing. In Canada, Mexico, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Jamaica, Haiti, Brazil, South Africa, Israel, Bosnia, Serbia, and the United Kingdom, the YouthBuild model is moving through a culturally responsive process of adaptation, implementation, and scaling, with planning efforts under way in another five countries.

Outcome data collected across YouthBuild sites show that 62 percent of students complete the program; 71 percent of graduates went on to continuing education or were placed in jobs. Research has shown a return on investment of at least $10.80 for every dollar spent on any court-involved YouthBuild student. Between 5 and 15 percent of these young people who completed the YouthBuild program ended up reoffending, compared with a national recidivism rate of 67 percent. In a study conducted with 900 YouthBuild graduates, students reported an average expected life expectancy for themselves of 40 years before joining YouthBuild and after completing the program reported an expected life expectancy of 70 years.

THE YOUTHBUILD PROGRAM CONTEXT

YouthBuild programs experience virtually no violence from or among its students. Although the program sites are located in the most crime-ridden urban and rural communities, there simply has never been any pattern of violence within or against YouthBuild programs. Even when students from rival gangs join YouthBuild, they leave their hostilities at the door. Students feel safe, valued, and cared for. There are no metal detectors, no security guards. Feeling safe means the world to the young people; it enables them to drop their hostilities from the street and focus on their future.

The YouthBuild program has been shaped and transformed over a 30-year period by the direct input of young adults, the majority of whom, before joining YouthBuild, have been the victims or perpetrators of violence in their families, among their peers, and in their local communities. The most fundamental cause
of the violence experienced by YouthBuild students are the conditions of poverty that YouthBuild students have, through no choice of their own, been born into. The physical manifestation of these conditions of poverty in the local communities where YouthBuild programs are located around the world include abandoned, dilapidated, or destroyed physical infrastructure affecting housing and all public gathering places; high incidences of crime; lack of access to public transportation, which reinforces a sense of isolation; lack of access to functioning schools and employment and training resources; lack of green spaces; and rampant degradation of the natural environment.

These physical realities exact a toll on young people, contributing to feelings of hopelessness and anger, driven by a sense of helplessness to affect change in their own lives and the world around them. Living in these conditions, young people develop an internalized sense of worthlessness borne out of the repeated experience of having few adult allies who are fully committed to their development and little or no access to the resources needed to acquire the basic elements of personal, social, and economic capital to enable them to break out of the cycle of poverty. These conditions of poverty conspire day after day to limit a young person’s options for development and to drive them down a narrow track of illegal activities, negative behaviors directed at themselves and others, and in many cases, leading them to commit acts of violence. They simply see no other options, given the hand they have been dealt, and strike out both as a means of self-defense and as the only means of exerting some sense of control over the environment around them.

Ely, whose family members are refugees of the armed conflicts in El Salvador, found his way to a YouthBuild program in Los Angeles. His story is typical of many YouthBuild students:

Like many people of color that are born and raised in L.A., I fit the statistics. At the age of eight I was abandoned by my father, so my two siblings and I were raised by a mother who fought with every bit of her strength to have not just a roof over our heads, but one in livable conditions. Due to her little time to discipline me and my brother, we took to the streets and found a gang lifestyle that embraced us and made us into so-called men. Once my life was in full force, initiating violent acts and lost in the midst of crime, the justice system came into my life and disciplined me with multiple incarcerations, and house arrest. But what they forgot to include in their discipline was love.

When YB came into my life at the age of 17, I was facing three years of prison and about to be a father. They embraced me with love. Never was I reminded of the crimes I committed in the past, but rather I was directed towards the changes I was going to make in the future. A space was created for me to find self discipline and positive leadership. You can visit any YB site and hear stories like mine. YB began as an idea to empower youth to change their communities and now we are changing the world... this transformation phenomena has become a reality to youth that were once trapped in cages of jail, oppression and failure, who can now provide for themselves and their families through positive means.
THE YOUTHBUILD APPROACH TO VIOLENCE PREVENTION AND CONFLICT MITIGATION

Ely's testimony illustrates many of the most powerful elements of the YouthBuild approach and program model that contribute to the process of transformation experienced by young people who participate in the program:

- Young people are introduced to an alternative learning approach that values their life experience, directly connects academic learning and advancement to real-world opportunities for the application of this learning; and demonstrates the connection of daily learning to future opportunity.
- Young people are given an immediate visible role in the community as leaders and creators of needed community assets and are given the opportunity to exercise their innate impulse to give back to their communities and derive the sustaining satisfaction of doing so.
- The orientation of the program is on the present reality of the young people who enter YouthBuild and on the development of a plan that will enable them to realize their future goals for personal, social, academic, and employment success; their history is not held against them, but is mined in productive ways for lessons that will instruct a productive pathway to the future.
- A strong program culture, starting with a two-week orientation called Mental Toughness, pushes and supports young people to discard the degenerative feelings of despair and hopelessness that previously imprisoned them and begin to take control of their lives.

Natalia, another YouthBuild student and now staff member at a YouthBuild program, elaborates on these parts of the YouthBuild approach:

Gangs controlled my neighborhood. If you were not with them, you were a rival. There were two ways to become part of a gang. You could jump in, and then get beaten up. Or you could get sexed in and get raped. I jumped in at 11, where they beat the girls for one minute. The gang leaders taught me how to fight with machetes and screw drivers and how to spit razors from my mouth. They made a fighter out of me. I saw people killed. After a while I was numb to it. It's just normal, nothing unusual about it. Why would you get scared or have any feelings for it? It was an everyday part of life.

I was 16 and had left high school, pregnant and homeless when YouthBuild came into my life. In YB, I had to learn to talk to people when they talked to me, to say hi when they said hi to me. I wasn't used to that being in a gang. I wasn't used to feeling safe either. But whenever I was in YB, I knew I would be fine for those few hours every day. I began to look forward to life.

The construction part of YB was the most amazing thing I ever did. We built a playground outside an apartment complex full of bullet casings, needles, drugs, and bottles. I kept at the work on the site until my body ached. As I dug up the ground I saw people looking out at us from their apartments. One old lady came outside and
said to us: “I have lived here for 30 years and I have seen everything that has happened here. I have seen bodies carried out of here. But I have never seen anything like this. You are just a blessing.”

The construction skills are not the most important skills I learned in YB. I learned to be thankful and tired. Not tired from running, not tired from crying, not tired from doing anything bad. Just tired from really working and making something good in a place that needed it... and people thanked us for it.

The YouthBuild program design consists of five components: education, technical skills training, leadership development, counseling support, and placement of graduates (placement in jobs, self-employment, or continuing education or training opportunities).

These five components, although distinct in their focus and outcomes, are experienced by young participants as tightly integrated and working in unison to support each young person's continual progress and eventual success. Taken together, the components comprehensively address the livelihood needs and aspirations of young people while addressing critical community development challenges. The core YouthBuild experience of young people creating tangible community assets, such as housing, community centers, schools, playgrounds, and so on, provides a vehicle for soft and technical skills training, applied learning, and leadership development, and is the best, most comprehensive, introduction to the world of work. Additionally, the young people have a direct, tangible experience of how their individual actions can make a real, visible difference in the world around them. Construction activities take place in the local communities where the young people, their peers, and their families live. As a result, the community at large starts to view young people as responsible leaders, taking responsibility for the development of their own lives and the life of their communities.

Again and again, YouthBuild students point to the program's ability, led by caring staff members, to create a mini-community rich in supports, responsive to students' needs, and infused with love and opportunity, and that calls young people to fully support each other as they move through a set of key developmental tasks. This mini-community often will stand in stark contrast to the communities in which the young people live, which often are highly fragmented, dangerous, and absent any activities that would prioritize the full development of young people. The success of many YouthBuild programs through the years has been compromised when the staff team hired to lead the program failed to coalesce around a shared vision of the role that young people are capable of playing in taking leadership in their own lives and in local communities and their abilities. Staff may not share a commitment to hold high standards for young people, while committing themselves to the task of supporting young people to overcome barriers to reach these standards. Lack of consistent communication among staff on these key points, so that all staff (teachers, counselors, construction staff, and executive staff) are deeply knowledgeable of the challenges and aspirations of each young person, has undercut program success.
A YouthBuild director has made this observation about the YouthBuild focus on community building:

Gang community is very important, and you have to have a really strong community, built on trust in order for you to be able to compete with their former community. If you’re asking them to do something different (to change their life), you have to offer them a better solution.

Rival gangs get to interact at the YouthBuild program, and even become friends and begin to see each other in a different light. There was a case of a student that was recounting the story of a shootout, only to realize that another young man in the group, a friend of his in the program, had also been involved in that same shoot. In this sense, the program allows for a different kind of interaction for the young people, very different from their lifestyles outside of the program, in the streets.

Sitting at the center of the YouthBuild design is a focus on leadership development. Leadership development infuses all activities taking place within the other four program components. It is the YouthBuild belief that the most important investment that must be made to eliminate the root causes of poverty is to invest in the development of skilled, courageous, ethical young leaders who are equipped to address these causes with hope, vision, and resolve. YouthBuild provides students multiple opportunities to exercise leadership within the program context, in the classrooms, on the construction sites, on the youth policy council, as well as in their communities. These program-based lessons of exercising leadership, taking risks, integrating the learning from inevitable failures, and developing the internal fortitude to convert the learning from mistakes into assets for life-long leadership sustain YouthBuild graduates as they navigate challenges after graduation.

Wilfried, a YouthBuild graduate, has taken the leadership skills he learned in YouthBuild and applied these skills toward efforts to support the development of young people from Portland, Maine, to Southern Sudan:

YB has helped shaped my life for the past 13 years. The oldest of seven children, I came to the US not by choice but as part of the lost boys of Sudan. Both my parents were killed in the civil war in 1997. My parents were refugees when I was born and when they were repatriated to Sudan, another war began. I was 11. By the time I was 17 I had lived displacement camps inside Sudan, jailed by the government in Khartoum, escaped and lived in refugee camps in Uganda and Kenya, finally coming to the US in 1994. Then I was introduced to YouthBuild. After completing my GED and receiving a certificate in construction, I graduated and began volunteering as a community leader in the Sudanese community. I have since received both my bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

After 18 years, I returned to south Sudan to start a youth development project modeled after YouthBuild. It engages war-affected youth ex-combatants in reconciliation, conflict resolution and reconstruction of the country through building and construction while at the same time getting basic education, job training and leadership practice and entrepreneurship. Initially the pilot project was for 15 students but it has since been overwhelmed with more than it can absorb.
All the accomplishments and progress I have made would not have been possible without YouthBuild, to whom I offer all the credit of my success and of many other youth. It can also give hope to youth in post-conflict Sudan and the world over, showing that we can be part of change we believe in.

In South Africa, a YouthBuild student has applied the leadership skills she has learned in YouthBuild to actively resolve conflict in her family and her country:

My participation in the YouthBuild program assisted me in dealing with my domestic conflict because I think if I was not in the program I wouldn't have healed. All I would do was to close myself in the house crying the whole day and not knowing what to do; feeling ashamed myself. The program opened my eyes and my mind for me to be able to take responsibility not only for myself but for my community. I was taught the skills to not jump to solve the matter, but get a clear picture on what went wrong; and to always try to solve a problem as a leader, not taking sides . . . not giving the blame to others but by coming up with ways to solve problems and misunderstanding and by looking at the root of the problem.

MAKING YOUTHBUILD AVAILABLE TO ALL YOUNG PEOPLE WHO WISH TO ENROLL

There’s a lot of love in YB, and some day we’re going to spread it around the world.

—Victor, graduate of East Harlem YouthBuild

According to the World Bank’s 2007 World Development Report: Development and the Next Generation,

The developing world’s 1.3 billion young people ages 12–24 are its next generation of economic and social actors. Making sure that they are well prepared for their futures—as workers, entrepreneurs, parents, citizens, and community leaders—is thus enormously important to the course of poverty reduction and growth. Because human development is cumulative, missed opportunities to invest in and prepare this generation will be extremely costly to reverse, both for young people and for society.

YouthBuild has a long track record of bringing together a wide spectrum of stakeholder groups and working with these groups to find common cause in addressing the needs of low-income, marginalized young people. Since 1994, YouthBuild has raised more than $700 million in federal funding, from a total of seven different federal agencies, to support YouthBuild in local communities. This federal investment has in turn leveraged an additional $1.2 billion in local public and private resources for expanded support of programs for at-risk youth. This flow of investment in addressing the needs of at-risk youth in local communities has held steady through four presidential administrations.
This outcome is also a result of the program design, which is holistic, comprehensive, relevant to the learning and employment needs of young people, rich in supports, and maintaining high standards of achievement and, which is designed, implemented, and managed by local residents and community based institutions. Every YouthBuild program, both in the United States and in the 13 countries where the model is being adapted, is created, managed, and “owned” by local institutional partners from the nongovernmental organization, education, training, government, and business sectors.

As the YouthBuild program has been identified as a key resource by partners in countries outside of the United States, four consistent adaptations to the U.S. model have begun to emerge. First, the community assets that young people are creating overseas have diversified well beyond housing to include community centers, schools, orphanages, playgrounds, and sustainable, “green” infrastructure. Second, youth lending and adapted business development support services are being offered as part of a self-employment pathway within YouthBuild programs in settings in which existing jobs are insufficient to meet the youth employment demand. Third, there is a greater variation in the length of the program and in the mix of time spent in formal classroom learning and on the construction site. Length of program and cost per young person also are areas of adaptation. For many of the young people served by YouthBuild in the developing world, it is impossible for them to commit to a full-time training and education program for any more than four to six months, given the need for them to earn a livelihood to support themselves and their families. Moreover, YouthBuild and its overseas partners have had to find creative ways to reduce the program cost per student, while maintaining program quality, to attract institutional investors and to expand the impact of the program by reaching greater numbers of youth who want to join the program. Fourth, YouthBuild programs that serve only young women are being studied for implementation in several countries where the unique challenges facing young women require a highly customized set of adaptations.

Although the trajectory of YouthBuild’s growth is admirable and a hopeful trend, the full scale of the challenges facing young people living in poverty-stricken communities around the world requires a much larger response. In the United States, according to the National Center for Children in Poverty, 29.2 million children or 40 percent are growing up in low-income families, and 18 percent or 13.5 million live at less than 100 percent of the federal poverty level. Some 3.5 million people live in communities with concentrated poverty that lack adequate affordable housing. There are 2.4 million low-income disconnected 16-to 24-year-olds in the United States and an additional 365,000 incarcerated youth. Crime, gangs, drugs, murder, and hopelessness characterize the street and community life of millions of American youth.

From the global perspective, we know that in the current decade the largest cohort of young people in history, 1.2 billion, will enter the job market. Ninety percent of these job-seekers will be under the age of 25 and will live in the developing world. The most optimistic projections show that only 300 million jobs will
be created to meet this demand. Globally, 88 million young men and women are unemployed; young people represent 130 million of the world's 550 million working poor who work but are unable to lift themselves and their families above the equivalent of the US$1 per day poverty line. Violence affects millions of young people around the world. An estimated 59 million young people are engaged in hazardous forms of work. Approximately 35 percent of the world's 14 million refugees are young people ages 12 to 24. Twelve of the 15 countries with the largest youth bulge have been home to either brutal conflict or large displaced populations, or both, in the past 10 to 15 years.

It is estimated that by halving the world's youth unemployment rate from 14.4 percent to 7.2 percent would add an estimated US$2.2 to US$3.5 trillion to the global gross domestic product. The peace and security of the international community depends on solutions to respond to this dire global mismatch between available jobs and young people seeking employment.

LESSONS LEARNED

Success in designing, implementing, and managing a high-quality YouthBuild program is completely dependent on the vision, dedication, resourcefulness, and compassion of the staff assembled to lead the program. Staff must be dedicated to the success of each young person, they must combine an ability to listen to young people with a belief in the capacity of all young people, despite the difficulties of their past, to overcome these obstacles and succeed as healthy, happy, productive human beings. Young people in YouthBuild programs draw their strength and direction to make crucial changes in their lives from their relationships with the YouthBuild staff. They further depend on these relationships to help them co-create a developmental pathway leading to personal, social, educational, and employment-related advancement and success.

The program design is complex and can involve managing the participation of a wide cross section of local partners, all of whom have key roles to play in implementation. The executive leadership of a YouthBuild program must combine a fundamental love of young people with an entrepreneurial approach to building support for the program and sustaining its presence in local communities. The improvement of program outcomes can be shown to directly correlate to the longevity of the director's experience as he or she accumulates knowledge and experience running the program over several cycles. Success is tied to the ability of the director to consistently lead the agenda related to tight, consistent integration of each of the program design's working elements, and the alignment of partners in implementing these elements.

The most consistent challenge for YouthBuild programs continues to be securing placement for young people in jobs, self-employment, or continuing education upon graduation. This most critical point of transition, when young people leave the safe, supportive environment of YouthBuild and must navigate
the workforce, has proven difficult to manage toward consistent success. Even those young people who are successfully placed in productive employment upon graduation often find it difficult to retain those first placements and must draw on their YouthBuild learning and graduate support network to manage their next transition. The challenge of placement has led programs to diminish their commitment to reaching the most marginalized young people who need the resources the most and instead choose young people who show a greater likelihood of success at orientation.

Three interventions have proven key to addressing this placement challenge. The focus on placement must begin from day one of the program, with staff focused on building relationships with employers that can lead to internships or jobs; follow-up support services should be an integral part of the program design for at least six months after graduation; and organized alumni networks of YouthBuild graduates can provide a powerful peer network of support and resource.

CONCLUSION

As stated by the National Alumni Council and Young Leaders Council of YouthBuild,

Most people who have fallen off the track, suffered losses, and made mistakes can recover. If given a chance, they can learn to cope with obstacles and care effectively about themselves, their families and their communities. They can gain the skills and attitudes to become strong successful leaders who will help others.

From its earliest days of activity in East Harlem, New York, to its present-day work in communities around the world, YouthBuild’s mission continues to be to unleash the intelligence and positive energy of marginalized young people to rebuild their communities and their lives with a commitment to work, education, responsibility, and family. The YouthBuild aim is not only to support young people to rebuild their lives, but also to inspire and train them to rebuild their communities through the creation of tangible community assets. As the program continues to expand internationally, YouthBuild maintains its commitment to work with partners to build livelihood pathways for all young people. Too often the experience of poor, marginalized youth is not given a voice in the forums in which decisions are being made to address the root causes of poverty. Because these youth are the victims of these conditions, failing to include their perspective in both the analysis of the root causes of poverty and in generating solutions to address these causes is a fundamental error. YouthBuild continues to multiply the numbers of young people who are prepared and inspired to raise their voices and provide leadership in addressing some of the world’s most intractable problems; problems that they and their children will uniquely inherit, either as passive victims, or proactive change agents.