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Improving Risk Screening in a Caribbean Youth Program

USAID/Eastern and Southern Caribbean



TRANSFORMING EVALUATIONS INTO ACTION

Impact evaluations can provide valuable information on how and whether program approaches achieve certain results and what factors may be influencing impact. The Eastern and Southern Caribbean Mission used the findings and recommendations of an impact evaluation to improve youth risk assessment tools and methods to apply in new programs.

CONTEXT

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Eastern and Southern Caribbean Mission's (ESC) Community, Family, and Youth Resilience program aimed to improve family support for high-risk youth in 15 communities in Guyana, St. Lucia, and St. Kitts and Nevis from 2017 to 2020. The program's Family Matters intervention identified young people at risk of involvement in delinquent behaviors using the Youth Services Eligibility Tool, an assessment of nine risk factors predictive of gang involvement. The intervention is grounded in research that shows positive behavioral changes in youth are more likely to last when embedded in and reinforced by family and the larger community. USAID/ESC partnered with the Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Center to conduct a multi-site randomized controlled trial to estimate the causal effect of the program.¹

¹ All impact evaluations in the Evidence to Action briefs follow USAID standards as defined in ADS 201.3.6.4. For more information, see the [USAID Evaluation Policy](#) and the full [CFYR Impact Evaluation](#).

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The evaluators randomized eligible, at-risk youth into 1) a treatment group, in which youth were offered enrollment in the Family Matters program for the 2019 year, and 2) a control group, in which youth were not offered enrollment in the program in 2019 but would be offered enrollment in 2020 at the conclusion of the evaluation. Once the treatment group was enrolled in Family Matters, the youth received counseling to strengthen family cohesion, improve their connection to the wider community, and adopt positive and safe behaviors.

Using the Youth Services Eligibility Tool, the evaluation assessed the risk levels for youths in both the treatment and control groups at three points: prior to participating (baseline), six months after baseline (midline), and after 12 months (endline). The youths' primary caregivers also participated in a separate survey. At the baseline, 567 youths were assigned to the control group and 566 to the treatment group. At the endline, 481 of the youths assigned to treatment were re-surveyed, and 499 of youths assigned to the control group were resurveyed.² (The remaining youths were unable to be resurveyed due to survey attrition.) For a full description of the evaluation methodology, [see the report](#).

EVALUATION FINDINGS

The evaluation did find some small impacts among youth in reported parental supervision, impulsive risk taking, and guilt neutralization, and survey results suggested high satisfaction with the Family Matters program. Eighty-six percent of program youth and 95 percent of their caregivers reported that they were happy with the initiative and would recommend it to a friend or neighbor. Nonetheless, the report concluded that, "Empirically, we can only say that the program has had a very small effect on the risk levels of youth, and no measurable impact on the caregivers;" the report went on to offer several recommendations to improve program design and implementation.

ACTION BASED ON EVIDENCE FROM THE FINDINGS

While implementing the evaluation, researchers identified limitations to the Youth Services Eligibility Tool. They found the tool took too long to administer (nearly an hour) and as a result some of the youth may have answered in ways that were not necessarily true but that they thought would speed up the process. The tool also did not appear to accurately distinguish between youth at high versus low risk of delinquency. Additionally, compiling results into a youth's risk score requires experts and special training.

Using the lessons learned, the Mission and the Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Center developed an improved youth risk screening

² The evaluators conducted an analysis of attrition and found that youth aged 15 and above at baseline were nine percent more likely to drop out of the program, and youth who reported being out of school at baseline were 24 percent more likely to drop out of the program. The finding that out-of-school youth were more likely to drop out of the program is concerning, considering that out-of-school youth are generally at a higher risk



tool using longitudinal survey data from a sample of 2,393 potentially at-risk youth collected as part of prior USAID-funded impact evaluations in the Caribbean and Central America. The team used machine learning algorithms and data from the baseline survey to predict self-reported delinquency behavior one year later. The factors studied included anti-social tendencies, weak parental supervision, impulsive behavior, negative peer influence, and past delinquency, among others.

Informed by these results and a review of recent literature on risk factors and screening, the team used the subset of the strongest, most accurate risk factors to develop a streamlined risk assessment tool, the Youth Risk Screen. Designed for youth ages 11 to 17 and young adults ages 18 to 29, the Youth Risk Screen includes just 39 questions and takes about 15 minutes to administer. The streamlined tool will be tested in future programs to assess improvement over the longer version.

LESSONS LEARNED

Impact evaluations can provide valuable information on how and whether program approaches achieve certain results and what factors may be influencing impact. In this instance, the ESC Mission used the findings and recommendations of Family Matters' impact evaluation to improve youth risk assessment tools and methods to apply in new programs.

Notably, Family Matters' impact evaluation required a change in how the implementer identified youth for intervention. In other Family Matters locations, referral networks—including schools, family members, clergy, and other community organizations—help identify youth for assessment and intervention, and a trained family counselor performs the initial assessment. The implementer viewed the counselor who performed the assessment as a key part of the intervention to build trust between the counselor and youth. However, to meet the impact evaluation requirements, researchers rather than counselors conducted mass Youth Services Eligibility Tool-based assessments of youth. Because the evaluation did not engage this referral network and eliminated this initial trust building, the evaluation tested a somewhat different version of the program from its original design, and it is unclear if and how these changes affected program effectiveness. The pros and cons of adaptations to accommodate randomization should be carefully considered in such situations.



Photo Credit: USAID Community, Family, and Youth Resilience Program

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