



# Evidence Supporting YAP's Model

**YOUTH ADVOCATE PROGRAMS, INC.**



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## A Data Driven History

*Since its inception in 1975*, YAP has attempted to collect and analyze data on its clients' outcomes. Beginning in approximately 1995, YAP made its first significant efforts to seek external evaluations of its programs and methods. During the 1995-2005 period, YAP programs in the U.S. were the subject of six studies,<sup>1</sup> most of which were conducted by county probation departments. In addition, three studies were done during this time period of advocacy programs offered by YAP-Ireland, a separate but affiliated entity that follows the YAP model.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the early YAP studies used pre-post test designs<sup>3</sup> rather than comparison groups. Nevertheless, these early studies helped to demonstrate, among other things, that YAP was fulfilling its core mission by reducing the likelihood that at-risk youth would be assigned to juvenile facilities or other residential placements.<sup>4</sup> In addition to avoiding involuntary placements and incarceration, young people in YAP programs demonstrated positive youth development by recording positive results in education;<sup>5</sup> enhanced links with community activities;<sup>6</sup> and improvements in social behavior.<sup>7</sup>

These positive results were achieved despite the fact that YAP has long served a high-risk and high-service need population. For example, juveniles tracked in the Philadelphia study reported high service needs, low self-esteem, low levels of school and family bonding in comparison to similar programs that were evaluated. In addition, youth in YAP's Tampa program<sup>8</sup> were more likely to have had a history of outpatient mental health treatment, a history of running away, a history of family violence and a history of substance abuse in their biological families than comparable programs. Youth in the Tampa program were also less likely to have received school based mental health services or alcohol or substance abuse treatment prior to intake. Researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that "cross-over," youth such as those served by YAP, who have been involved in both the juvenile justice and child welfare systems are at a greater risk of re-offending than are juvenile offenders without maltreatment histories.<sup>9</sup>

In the last few years, YAP has renewed and expanded its commitment to external research. Since 2014, four YAP studies by university or professional research entities have been completed or published. As described on pages 7-8 below, two were quasi-experimental studies that focused on YAP juvenile justice programs in the US. One related to YAP autism efforts. The fourth was completed about YAP's sister program in Ireland.

### YAP'S MISSION

is to provide individuals who are, have been or may be subject to compulsory care with the opportunity to develop, contribute and be valued as assets so that communities have safe, proven effective and economical alternatives to institutional placement.

## Incorporating Evidence-Based Practices and Interventions

The YAP services model incorporates specific practice principles, strategies and interventions from the fields of **wraparound and mentoring**, with more recent contributions from interventions supported by research in the growing fields of **positive youth development and positive youth justice**. What has evolved is YAPWrap, a unique and multi-faceted holistic services model designed to achieve positive outcomes for the highest need youth, grounded in evidence to support links between strategies, interventions and outcomes.

Within YAP's wraparound practice, youth and families are provided with voice, access and ownership of their own highly individualized service plans. Each plan engages a team of formal stakeholders and informal community supports to help the family meet their needs and build on their assets and interests.<sup>10</sup> Strength-based<sup>11</sup> and solution-focused<sup>12</sup> strategies are also utilized by staff to facilitate engagement, active participation, and success. Crisis plans are created immediately based on known triggers and existing resources. Positive and productive behaviors are reinforced and built upon through new opportunities to learn skills and to contribute to and participate prosocially within the community.

There is a growing body of research illustrating the effectiveness of wraparound processes, especially when processes are implemented with high fidelity. When compared to traditional practices, High Fidelity Wraparound (HFW) can produce significantly better outcomes for children and families with significant needs including increased permanency and stability for children; improved behavior and mental health symptoms, improved school and family engagement; and increased family resources to support their own children.<sup>13</sup>

High risk youth who are involved with at least one caring adult are more likely to survive the negative effects of socioeconomic disadvantage, parental addiction, and exposure to violence and mental illness.<sup>14</sup> Research also reveals programs often struggle to recruit caring adults for older, system involved youth. Due to the challenges in recruiting volunteers and the commitment necessary to address the multiple service needs of juvenile justice involved youth, mentors of high-need youth need to be paid or receive stipends for their work.<sup>15</sup> With this research support, YAP has embraced paying Advocates, caring, adult role models recruited, trained and closely supervised from their own community, to ensure commitment and sustainability of relationships with youth.

Finally, YAP has incorporated a number of evidenced-based group and individual interventions that both augment and complement our core wraparound advocacy model. For example, many YAP programs have incorporated **Peaceful Alternatives to Tough Situations (PATS)**, an evidenced based group intervention for older youth. The intervention, which uses cognitive-behavioral therapeutic strategies, is designed to help youth manage and reduce conflict and violent responses. YAP programs also may offer the **Strengthening Families Program**, an evidence-based family skills training program found to significantly improve parenting skills and reduce problem behaviors including substance abuse. In addition, YAP uses the Girls Circle/Boys Council, Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and other evidence-based interventions as appropriate in specific program sites.

## COA Accreditation and Repeated Best Practice Recognitions

Since 2009 YAP has been accredited by the **Council on Accreditation (COA)**. The COA accreditation process involved a detailed review and analysis of our operations and service delivery practices. YAP performance was “measured” against national standards of best practice. Among other things, these standards emphasize services that are evidence-based and outcomes-oriented.<sup>16</sup>



The Annie E. Casey Foundation has identified the YAP wraparound/advocacy program model as a “**promising practice.**”



In a bulletin published by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), YAP’s Tarrant County Advocate Program in Texas was recognized as a “**Best Practice Model**” for Alternatives to Secure Detention and Confinement of Juvenile Offenders.



The US based National Council on Crime and Delinquency recognized YAP’s Florida programs as an “**evaluated and promising program.**”



The America Youth Policy Forum identified YAP as a “**promising program.**”



The National Gang Center noted YAP as having “**an effective program structure.**”



The Research & Evaluation Center at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York has recognized Youth Advocate Programs as a “**Gold Medal Program**” that is informed by the science of adolescent development and built around the concepts of the Positive Youth Justice Model.

## Recent YAP Research

### UTSA RESEARCH FUNDED BY OJJDP “BEST PRACTICE IN MENTORING” GRANT

In late 2011 the University of Texas/San Antonio (UTSA), in collaboration with YAP, received one of five “Best Practice in Mentoring” research grant awards from the Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). Data collection from four YAP sites (in Camden NJ, Las Vegas, Lebanon PA, and Toledo OH) was completed in 2015. The 139 page, final technical report from this quasi-experimental study, which was directed by Michael Karcher, Ph.D., was published and made available on OJJDP’s website (<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/grants/250454.pdf>) in 2016. The UTSA study has two parts: the first estimated the impact of YAP advocacy efforts; the second considered which YAP activities and methods appear to be most beneficial.

□ **UTSA Impact Study.** The average age at intake of the 164 YAP youth who participated in the impact study was 15 years old. The youth were racially and ethnically diverse (Black-38%, White-27%, Hispanic-24%) and predominantly male (75%). Using a recurrent institutional cycle (RIC) design to investigate program effects, the UTSA researchers found reliable evidence (consistent across several measures, confirmed after data validity checks) that participation in YAP was associated with significant improvements in youth’s: (1) appreciation and respect for their teachers, (2) attendance and enjoyment of school, and (3) efforts to secure employment. Other strong evidence demonstrated that YAP participation reduced misconduct and “was associated with a statistically significant and large decrease in [youth’s] most serious disposition.”

□ **UTSA Methods Study.** The methods portion of the UTSA study used structural equation modeling (SEM) to assess the impact on misconduct of certain Advocate characteristics, including level of formal education, and activity choices. Findings were based on surveys completed by more than 100 Advocate-youth pairs. The UTSA researchers found that engaging in recreational activities rather than in problem-focused discussions was a strong predictor of declines in self-reported misconduct but only when those playful activities followed a period for individual planning during the first half of the mentoring relationship. The researchers also suggested that Advocates with teaching experience may be particularly effective in helping youth avoid subsequent misconduct.

### YAP’S WORK WITH THE JOHN JAY RESEARCH AND EVALUATION CENTER (REC)

In mid-2011 YAP began collaborating with Jeffrey Butts, Ph.D., an expert in positive youth development and the Director of the REC at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. This work helped YAP to fine-tune its theory of change and logic model, and produced a series of “Issue Briefs” in 2014 that addressed youth outcomes. Analyzing YAP data concerning more than 3,500 youth, one Issue Brief found that 86% of YAP youth were arrest-free while in the program, and 93% remained in the community at time of discharge. Another Issue Brief data considered 1,851 YAP youth 6-12 months after program discharge and found that 87% were still living in the community and 95% were not in secure placement.

Subsequently, a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation enabled the John Jay REC to conduct a quasi-experimental study of the YAP program in Orlando FL.<sup>17</sup> The study compared 249 Orlando YAP youth to 249 Orlando youth who were under the supervision of the FL probation department. Comparison and treatment groups were constructed using propensity score matching that contemplated juvenile justice (JJ) system characteristics but did not address the fact that the YAP youth were so-called “crossover” youth who were dually involved in both the JJ and child welfare systems. The YAP youth “had more mental health diagnoses, more frequent suicidal ideations, and more extensive histories of physical and sexual abuse.”

Prior research demonstrates that such “crossover youth” are at greatly increased risk for reoffending.<sup>18</sup> Thus, studies of youth in Arizona and Washington found that dual involved youth were twice as likely to be re-arrested when compared to those with no child welfare system involvement.<sup>19</sup> By comparison, the John Jay REC researchers found that the dual involved youth in the Orlando YAP program were not significantly more likely to be re-arrested for felony issues and were only 15% more likely to be re-arrested for misdemeanors.

Conversely, the John Jay researchers concluded that at two years post-discharge, the probation youth were **five times** more likely to have experienced a state commitment compared to the YAP youth (21% versus 4%). The researchers described this commitment rate finding as “the most consequential difference” in the entire study. It was not only the largest difference in any outcome studied, it was the result that most focused on YAP’s mission: to keep at-risk youth from being institutionalized. Moreover, the researchers estimated that FL counties could save approximately \$2.7 million for every 1,000 youth referred to YAP instead of probation.

## YAP IRELAND STUDY

In 2014 researchers engaged by Youth Advocate Programmes of Ireland published results from a study in which 102 young people and 94 parents/guardians participated.<sup>20</sup> The quasi-experimental study used mixed research methods, including demographic data and a series of phased Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQs) that were administered longitudinally to the participants. A mid-way fidelity study was also used with the YAP cohort. The researchers found a statistically significant and positive impact on the outcomes of YAP Ireland clients and families as measured by the SDQs.

## YAP AUTISM STUDY

YAP retained the Center for Outcome Analysis to perform an outcome study of the 128 young people with autism spectrum disorder who entered the YAP program in PA during one year. Study participants were predominantly young (average age 9), male (85%) and Caucasian (80%). In order to assess satisfaction with YAP services, COA created a survey instrument according to the Personal Life Quality Protocol. The resulting study report, which was published in 2016,<sup>21</sup> found that autistic youth indicated improvements in their senses of safety and happiness at school, at home and in their neighborhoods. Other areas of inquiry found improvements in youth’s senses of autonomy and adventure and in their relationships with friends. The researchers noted, “Similar studies done on different programs showed much lower perceived increases in QOL and satisfaction” than did the YAP Autism study.

## Endnotes

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