

## USING A STRENGTHS BASED APPROACH TO IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN REFERRED TO YOUTH ADVOCATE PROGRAM SERVICES FOR TRUANCY AND ABSENTEEISM

Much has been observed and written about the short and long term negative outcomes associated with truancy. Short term problems associated with truancy, such as poor academic performance, disengagement from healthy peer relationships and other high risk behavior are well documented. Moreover, these significant problems only get worse if truancy is not addressed. Researchers and practitioners have repeatedly shown that community-based alternatives are an optimal means for significantly decreasing truancy.<sup>1</sup>

Youth Advocate Programs, Inc. (YAP) has partnered with the University of Maryland in an effort to understand whether its services to youth are effectively addressing a range of predictors associated with truant behavior. Problems in individual mental and physical health, family functioning, school climate, and community-neighborhood conditions all have been shown to have a deleterious effect on school attendance. One of the critical components of the Youth Advocate Program service model emphasizes the importance of identifying opportunities to help youth develop and build interpersonal strengths.

If services are not successful in addressing the core youth issues driving truant behavior, the negative effects of chronic absenteeism have significant life-long impacts that not only affect the child, but impact the systems and communities related to the child. Children who miss school due to social, emotional, or behavioral problems often dropout before obtaining a GED; they also have a higher incidence of substance abuse; increased risks of teen pregnancy; increased risk of incarceration; and greater difficulty obtaining employment that generates a living wage. Dropouts are eight times more likely to be incarcerated, 40% more likely to be on public assistance, and 44% more likely to be unemployed. For all these reasons, it is clear that truancy may cost society annually in the billions.<sup>2</sup>

YAP incorporates a sophisticated outcomes management system (KIDnet) as one means of evaluating and improving its service delivery. Standardized measures are utilized to identify and target areas where strengths can be improved and problems can be reduced. For this analysis, YAP used the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessment to identify critical deficits to target services to improve youth strengths. Focus areas included family relationships and communication, interpersonal skills, optimism or sense of hope, school involvement with family, vocational skills if age appropriate, talents that build self-esteem, inclusion in community, stability of relationships in the child's life, and overall wellbeing.

For this analysis, the University of Maryland Division of Services Research analyzed data from 389 youth from YAP's Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Maryland programs. The average length of service was 9 months. Of the youth in the analysis, 67% were male, 35% African American, 25% white, with an average age of 14 years. Results of the analysis were statistically significant, showing a positive improvement in targeted youth strengths during the nine (9) month service delivery process.

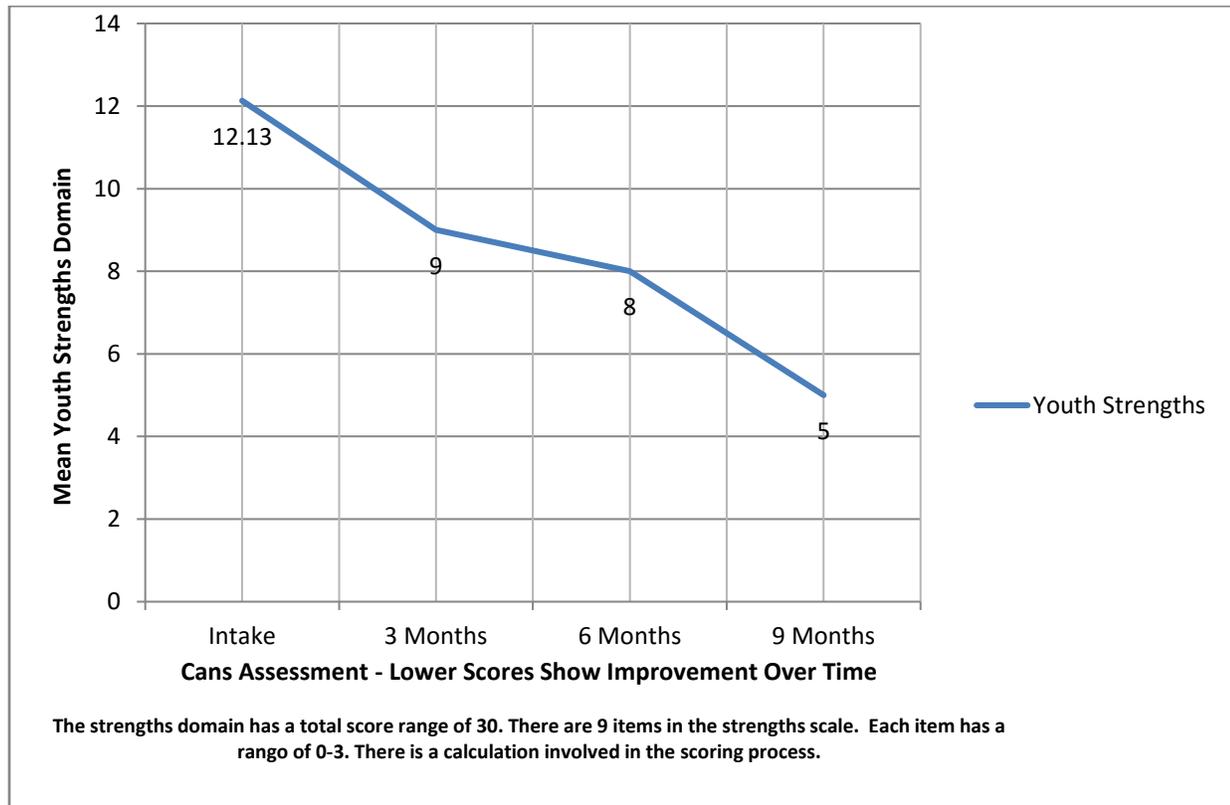
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<sup>1</sup> See Salsich and Trone (2013), From Courts To Communities, The Right Response to Truancy, Running Away, And Other Status Offenses

<sup>2</sup> See The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation. (2015). The Education Crisis: Statistics. Retrieved from [http://broadeducation.org/about/crisis\\_stats.html](http://broadeducation.org/about/crisis_stats.html)

**STRENGTHS BASED OUTCOMES**

The graph below illustrates statistically significant positive change over time. Lower scores delineate improvement in youth related strengths.



The CANS is a widely accepted measure that is used both nationally and internationally as a valid and reliable tool to identify areas of need, improve communication between the child’s family and the service, track functional outcomes, and drive a strengths-based approach to the delivery of service.