

The Link's POWER Program

Youth Participants: POWER is Positive, and Should Expand

The Link works with youth and families to overcome the impacts of poverty and social injustice. The Link is guided by a philosophy of youth first – especially in leadership. Among other programs, the organization runs Positive Opportunities for Women of Every Race (POWER), where female-identified youth age 12 through 20 on probation receive one-on-one and group supports. POWER is co-designed by a youth advisory committee and staff at The Link. This summary presents POWER's logic model and POWER participant feedback from calendar year 2019.

Background

The Link's POWER Program

Acting on the research that prior detention in juvenile jails is a stronger predictor of recidivism than gang membership, poor parental relations, and prior criminal offense history, the government of Hennepin County, Minnesota created the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) in 2006. JDAI's goals are to eliminate unnecessary secure detention of youth, prevent racial disparities, and invest in effective community-based youth and family services.

With these goals in mind, The Link designed the POWER program to serve justice-involved female-identified youth in a trauma-informed manner. At POWER, youth receive one-on-one case management and participate in structured groups, where they can build relationships with adults and peers, seek and give support, and explore the topics of restorative justice, relationships, health and wellness, and education and economic self-sufficiency. POWER aims to build girls' agency, opportunities, and prevent further contact with law enforcement and carceral systems. POWER is co-designed by an advisory board of justice-involved young women, and staff at The Link.

Current project:

Purpose, method, and limitations

In 2018, The Link hired Wilder Research to do an evaluation. This evaluation has two purposes. First, to develop a logic model and theory of change that captures the work that POWER does and the results it hopes to catalyze in participants. Second, to understand POWER participants' perspectives on the program's strengths, impact, and opportunities for improvements.

Between January and May 2019, Wilder Research interviewed 10 POWER participants. Additionally, 10 program participants completed an online survey. Both the interviews and surveys were voluntary; not everyone who completed the survey participated in an interview. **Because of the small number of youth informants, results here should not be generalized. However, clear themes emerged from the youth survey and interviews, and we present those ideas that two or more participants expressed.**

Logic Model 2018

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes -- Impact		
<p>Staff</p> <p>Community relationships</p> <p>Funding</p> <p>Safe spaces, including circles</p> <p>Child care</p> <p>Partnership with County</p> <p>Transportation</p> <p>Food</p> <p>Rituals</p> <p>Curricula</p> <p>Participants</p> <p>Youth voice (VOICE and RILE)</p>	<p><u>Staff:</u></p> <p>See participants holistically</p> <p>Model intentional behavior and relationships</p> <p>Trust, value, and center participants' voice/agency</p> <p>Build trusting relationships with participants and community partners</p> <p>Develop curriculum on 4 Key Areas (health and wellness, education and economic self-sufficiency, restorative justice, family and community connections) and grounded in youth voice and principles of positive, gender-specific, trauma-informed, youth development</p> <p>Provide safe spaces – groups, or one-on-one – for participants to explore, reflect on, and build self-efficacy in 4 Key Areas</p> <p>Provide for participant-defined needs, including transportation to POWER and goal-related activities</p> <p>Search out, reflect, and build on participant's strengths</p> <p>Search out, reflect, and build on participants' connections to supportive peer, adult, and community relationships</p> <p>Assist with individualized goal planning, skill-building, and network-building</p> <p>Celebrate participant-defined successes, grounded in community-building rituals</p> <p>Advocate for participants within systems</p> <p>Reflect, share learning, and de-brief with other staff, and engage in other professional development</p>	<p># participants served</p> <p># groups offered, by type</p> <p># participants 1-on-1s</p> <p># hours staff training</p> <p># participants graduating</p> <p># participants discharged for behavior</p> <p># participants discharged for attendance</p>	<p>Short term – first 4-6 visits.</p> <p>Participants...</p> <p>Are exposed to adults who center a youth's right to self-determination</p> <p>Begin to connect with staff, peers, and presenters</p> <p>Practice reflecting on decisions and their consequences</p> <p>Are exposed to the idea that their actions impact others</p> <p>Understand that others value and trust them</p> <p>Understand and commit to POWER expectations</p> <p>Understand 4 Key Areas</p> <p>Are exposed to a routine through groups</p>	<p>Intermediate term – successful POWER completion.</p> <p>Participants...</p> <p>Build trust in self</p> <p>Build trusting relationships with peers and adults</p> <p>Sometimes consider consequences, their effect on others, and options when making decisions</p> <p>Build sense of self-worth</p> <p>Are on track to successfully complete probation</p> <p>Graduate from POWER</p> <p>Implement lessons learned in 4 Key Areas</p> <p>Make some progress towards some goals</p> <p>Recognize some routines and rituals from POWER</p>	<p>Long term – 12+ months after POWER intake.</p> <p>Participants...</p> <p>Make decisions grounded in self-worth and trust in self</p> <p>Have a network of supportive peers and adults</p> <p>Regularly consider consequences, their effect on others, and options when making decisions</p> <p>Successfully complete probation</p> <p>Have no new arrests/citations/out-of-home placements</p> <p>Continue to set and make progress towards goals</p> <p>Practice routines / rituals where it serves participants' needs</p>

Theory of change:

If POWER staff support justice-involved participants through seeing participants holistically, positive relationship building, assisting in goal planning, and meeting participant-defined needs, then participants improve overall success by both avoiding negative outcomes and also making positive changes such as building self-worth and empathy; understanding that others value and trust them; building trusting relationships with peers and adults; improving positive decision-making skills; and, making progress towards goals.

POWER youth perspectives

From January through May 2019, Wilder Research staff interviewed 10 POWER participants and collected 10 surveys completed by POWER participants. Some, though not all, participants completed both an interview and a survey. Here, we present those themes raised by two or more interviewees. We also present survey responses.

Of youth who have been in other gender-specific programs, most preferred POWER

Four interviewees had experience in other gender-specific programs. Unprompted, most offered that they preferred POWER to other programs they'd been in.

I like POWER more because it's different, because it's working for us, not the system. They understand us more. It doesn't feel like it's through the county.

The other girls' group was more open. We could use our phones, we had more breaks, more fun activities. POWER is more strict and there's a routine to it. I prefer POWER because it's more helpful to me. There's more information that I need here.

Of the youth who had been in POWER before, all appreciated coming back

Some youth who participated in the survey or interview had been in POWER previously. All who had been in POWER previously reported being on track to graduate POWER successfully during this enrollment. Unprompted, all also reported gratitude for being able to try POWER multiple times.

I got kicked out but they kept giving me chances. It's great that they work with you if you mess up, if you need another chance. Before I wanted to just get it over with and be done with probation, but now I want to do it for me.

A large majority of respondents felt safe being themselves at POWER

All interviewees said that they felt safe and respected by POWER staff and survey data supported this theme. 78% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt safe sharing in POWER groups. Further, 89% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt safe saying they did not want to share during group. Interviewees expanded on what helped them feel safe and respected:

I can be myself. [Staff] listen. They're quiet and respectful. And in group I usually share a lot, and then [other POWER participants] saying 'Yeah, I agree' or 'Yeah, I get that' helps me feel like it's ok to share.

I feel like I'm respected and like I can be myself in groups. But you know what people can be like – like prejudiced but not racist. I feel that from other [POWER participants] sometimes. But I never felt awkward telling [staff] stuff, and she never made me feel bad about my skin color.

A large majority of participants connected with POWER staff and were satisfied with case management

Most interviewees reported feeling positively about POWER staff, including their case managers. Nearly all survey respondents felt that staff treated them well, trusted them, listened to them, and that they had a positive relationship with at least one POWER staff (Figure 1).

1. Survey responses about POWER staff

Please pick the best response for each of the following:	N strongly agree or agree (N=9)
POWER staff treated me with respect	8
POWER staff trusted me	8
POWER staff listened to me	8
I had a positive relationship with at least one staff in the POWER program	8

Most interviewees also reported that they liked the case management services and one-on-one meetings. Said interviewees,

I like meeting with [case manager]. She's straightforward and understands what I go through and relates to a lot of the things I say. She's interested in what I'm interested in.

She helps me do whatever I want to do. Whatever goals I have, she's helping me.

I liked that it wasn't just on her time. She made sure I was comfortable with the timing and whatnot. She never really got off track as far as helping me. I always felt like she worked with me, not for the county.

The one-on-ones helped me feel more comfortable saying what I wanted to say during the group and not worrying about what other people are thinking.

A large majority of respondents liked groups because of connections with others

Researchers asked interviewees if youth liked groups and, if so, why they liked groups. A large majority of interviewees reported enjoying groups because of the connection with group facilitators who share their stories, and because of the connection and support from other POWER participants. Additionally, in response to an open-ended survey question about what aspect of POWER had the biggest impact, youth reported that sharing and connecting was most impactful.

I like it when the speakers come. When they talk about things that I can understand like how her mom had bipolar and she didn't do great things to deal with that. It was helpful to learn from her story.

I like groups because you get to have a connection between peers. We're very open, and also listen to how you're feeling, and very accepting and gentle and nice.

I like that everyone can voice their own opinion without feeling judged, and it's confidential. Nobody's running to my PO if I'm venting about wanting to make a bad decision.

When asked “What part of POWER had the biggest impact for you,” survey respondents said,

Getting help connecting.

Sharing my stories.

The people there with the same problems I have and being able to relate with them.

Youth reported that POWER helped them learn about important topics

When asked why they liked groups, interviewees said that they learned new things about important topics. Two or more interviewees said that groups on personal finance, relationships, sexual health, and drug abuse were most helpful.

The sexual health stuff was really helpful. It was all new to me. The financial stuff was really good, too. It was all new and I didn't know about applying for financial aid or credit scores or anything. For people who are going to be 18 soon, that stuff really counts. Lots of people were really engaged with that so I wish there was a follow up with that.

The mental health and relationship groups helped the most. Not everyone has a perfect family. Someone in group was like, 'all my friends have perfect families,' and I had thought the same thing. But now I know. I'm not having that good life, and other people aren't, but I thought everybody else was.

Additionally, survey data supported this theme. The survey included close-ended questions that allowed respondents to select whether they learned at least one new thing about a variety of topics. All those who responded reported that they learned new things (Figure 2).

2. Survey responses about group topics

I learned at least one new thing about...	N agree
Physical health and wellness (N=7)	7
Mental health and wellness (N =7)	7
Schooling or education (N=4)	4
Jobs or careers (N=6)	6
Repairing harm (N=7)	7
Relationships with other people (N=6)	6

Youth reported that POWER helped them progress toward or achieve goals about important topics

In interviews and on the survey, researchers asked youth if they'd noticed any improvements to their health and wellness, schooling, jobs, relationships, or ability to repair harm since starting POWER. Both interviewees and survey respondents reported progressing toward goals having to do with their relationships, their schooling or jobs, and other aspects of their futures because of POWER.

I'm more open in group, and I'm more open with my friends. Before I would be quiet if they said or did something that bothered me because I didn't want to make them mad. Now I'm better about saying, 'hey, I didn't like that' because of whatever. It's been good and made me feel better about my friendships.

As far as school, I hadn't been going before. I hadn't been waking up on time. [POWER] helped me get an alarm clock and my attendance is way better. One of my probation things is to go to school, so it's helping there, too.

I've made progress on all that. I'm back on track at school after not being there for like a whole year. I'm making plans for community college and getting my AA. I'm also shadowing people who work in the careers that I'm thinking about and that's really good. With health and wellness, I wasn't taking care of myself. I wasn't on birth control and I was having unprotected sex. And you can catch that stuff from just one person or just one time. I really got on my health after sex ed here. It's nothing wrong to get tested every time, and I got on birth control. I feel way better about my health. Before I would hang out with anybody, and now I'm leaving people who weren't good for me and what I want to do. You don't wanna leave nobody in the dust, but if that's what's gonna get me somewhere then I need to. I've gotten out of an abusive relationship, gotten away from people that are like on house arrest or doing years in jail. And [POWER] has always understood where I was coming from. The staff didn't change. They're the only ones really in my corner like they are. I feel more forced when my family says to do something. POWER says things in a way that makes me want to do it for my own self and so I do.

Additionally, survey respondents answered close-ended questions, reporting that they had set, progressed toward, or completed a goal about a variety of topics (Figure 3).

3. Survey responses about group topics

I set, progressed toward, or completed a goal about...	N agree
Physical health and wellness (N=10)	6
Mental health and wellness (N=10)	5
Schooling or education (N=9)	6
Jobs or careers (N=9)	8
Repairing harm (N=9)	4
Relationships with other people (N=8)	4

POWER helped youth make more intentional decisions

Researchers asked youth if they had noticed any changes in how they made decisions since starting POWER. Most youth reported that POWER helped them make more considered decisions than they had previously.

Now it's kind of like I think more about how what I do is going to play out for me or for other people.

I'm pretty impulsive in general, but I think twice now. When I was here I was going through something that changed my whole life through much decisions. I learned how to turn that into a learning experience, and now I definitely think twice. I think about how I'll feel and about how other people feel.

Survey respondents also indicated that POWER helped them think through their decisions (Figure 4).

4. Survey responses about making decisions

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following: While in POWER I...	N agree or strongly agree
Thought about how my decisions would impact other people (N=8)	8
Can make decisions that help me reach my goals (N=8)	8

POWER impacted youth in other positive ways

Researchers also asked interviewees how else, if at all, POWER had impacted them. Some interviewees mentioned that POWER had helped them connect with other positive community groups or volunteer opportunities. Youth also responded to close-ended survey questions asking about the impacts of POWER (Figure 5).

5. Survey responses about impacts of POWER

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following: While in POWER I...	N agree or strongly agree
Learned that I'm the expert on my life (N=8)	7
Built a positive relationship with an adult (N=8)	8
Felt comfortable spending time with other female-identified peers (N=8)	8
Learned some strategies for making positive connections (N=8)	8
Will successfully complete my probation requirements (N=8)	7
Can set goals (N=8)	8
Know how to find community resources to help me when I need it (N=8)	8
Will reach out to friends, family, or other supports when I need it (N=8)	8
Feel more hopeful about my future (N=8)	7

Youth had some ideas for areas for POWER to improve

In response to various questions, interviewees and survey respondents told researchers areas where POWER could improve. Through the open-ended survey questions and interview questions, two or more youth mentioned:

- Having an inaccurate understanding of what POWER was, due to how their probation officer talked about the program.

Before I got into POWER I had all these thoughts about what it was. I thought it'd be a lot more boring. So maybe have it explained better by my probation officer.

At first I didn't want to do it because it sounded kinda dumb. But once I gave it a chance I really liked it.

- Struggling to find time to comply with one-on-one meeting requirements.

I liked my case manager, but it was hard with all the other things I'm doing with work and school to find the 2 hours a week to do that. I wish that was more flexible.

- Wanting to have greater participant input into topics discussed in group.

I want us to have more of a voice in what the groups are about. I want to be able to say, 'I want to learn more about this topic,' either in front of the group or just me because sometimes I don't want to say what I don't know about in front of other people.

Just that groups can do different things depending on what their goals are. So better at letting the group decide about what we talk about.

- Wanting to have greater participant input into group activities.

We should do more activities outside of the office. Group activities, volunteer somewhere, go to a homeless shelter and help their people. The group activities [inside] are good, but getting out into the community would be good, too.

Have more activities, and more of a youth voice to decide what the activities are – either physical activity, art, movement. Sometimes it feels good to move instead of sitting in the chair for like 3 hours. There should be more variety and more activities with movement and our hands.

- Wanting to have greater participant input into what food options there are.

- Wanting POWER to have a larger capacity, including so that there could be groups for younger teens and for older teens.

Other people need to be able to try it even if they're not on probation.

Just that it be available for more people.

Just keep the younger and older kids in different groups. I'm thinking about different things because of my age.

Additionally, researchers asked all interviewees if they thought POWER providing aftercare would be a good idea. The vast majority of interviewees said they personally would want to stay in touch with POWER after they graduate.

I just feel like it needs more time with all this stuff. More weeks in the program.

I want to have [my case manager's] number after graduation to have them in contact. Them saying that they'll be there for you. Some people literally don't have anybody. I don't want people to feel like if they leave they're not able to talk to people anymore.

Me and [my case manager] was just talking about this. They can't reach out to me, but I can reach out and they'll reply. They're still there – even if I'm not in POWER – and can talk to me if I reach out. It's not really a good thing. They should be able to reach out to us still. You don't forget about us the next day. I'd change it so they can check in on me.

Proposed next steps

Continue collecting and analyzing surveys

Wilder Research worked with POWER staff to develop an online survey grounded in POWER's logic model. We suggest that POWER staff continue to offer the survey to POWER participants, and that POWER staff work to analyze and learn from survey responses. This will allow a greater number of POWER youth to express their perspectives on their experiences in POWER, and whether and how POWER may be meeting the outcome goals outlined in its logic model.

Allow greater opportunities for youth to shape groups

The Link's youth-centered philosophy helps drive POWER program design, and young women on a youth advisory board co-design the POWER program. However, a number of youth interviewees mentioned that they would like POWER participants to have greater input in deciding what topics or activities are available to the groups. Based on this, it may be helpful for youth advisory board participants to come to group periodically to talk about the co-design process, and opportunities for youth involvement at The Link (if this is not already being done). It also may be helpful for POWER staff to check in with participants about once a month to see what the group would like to discuss, and build some flexible time into groups.

Pursue opportunities to provide aftercare to POWER graduates, and to allow POWER participation for youth not on probation

The majority of interviewees supported expanding POWER, and some open-ended survey responses were also in support. Youth clearly see the benefit to being able to access POWER supports after graduating the program, and in making POWER available to youth in a more preventative capacity (not only after youth have already been put on probation). The Link should pursue opportunities to expand POWER to youth not on probation, and to offer aftercare supports.

I'd expand the program so more girls can get help. I think it should be voluntary. There's girls not on probation going through the same stuff, fighting and stealing and getting into trouble in other ways. They should be able to put themselves in POWER, instead of having it just be through Hennepin County. Some [girls] aren't caught, but still want to stop.

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