



The Link Programs for Justice-Involved Youth

Evaluation Results

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Background

Wilder Research (Wilder) partners with Hennepin County’s Department of Community Corrections and Rehabilitation to evaluate culturally specific, trauma-informed programs that focus on African American male-identified youth and young adults. In 2024, the evaluation expanded to include four of The Link’s youth advocacy programs that serve justice-involved youth. These community-based services work in partnership with youth and their families to address underlying factors that contributed to youth’s justice involvement (e.g., past or current trauma, economic inequalities, racism) and prevent youth from dropping out of school or engaging in further criminal activity.

In 2024 and 2025, Wilder worked with these four programs to collect input from youth participants. This document presents findings from a survey of 34 youth participants, along with in-depth personal stories shared by three of them during an interview with Wilder staff. The percentages reported here are calculated using a denominator that corresponds to the number of youth who responded to each item.

Figure 1 describes each program provided by The Link and the number of survey respondents by program. Respondents most commonly participated in The Linked Circle (N=12) or the Community Navigator Program (N=11).

1. The Link programs

Program name	Services provided	Population served	Number of survey respondents
Community Navigator Program	Individual case management	Probation-involved youth age 13-24	11
The Linked Circle	Basic needs and housing support integrated with mentorship, case management, education, and holistic athletic programming	Probation-involved youth age 16-24	12
Marshall Reed Youth Center	12-week positive youth development program	Probation-involved youth age 14-18	8
POWER Program	Gender-specific, trauma-informed 12-week case management and structured group program	Probation-involved youth age 12-20	3

METHODS

The Link staff managed the parent/guardian consent and youth assent/consent process and invited youth to participate in the survey. Youth were able to complete the survey on paper or online, and they had the opportunity to enter into a drawing for a \$50 Target gift card. Stories were collected from participants identified by The Link, and these participants received \$20 e-gift cards that could be used at multiple stores. Stories are presented in callout boxes throughout this report.

Results

All respondents reported that they liked the program they participated in (Figure 2). Similarly, all survey respondents agreed that they felt comfortable sharing their thoughts with The Link staff and that they built positive relationships with staff. Most respondents also reported that they built positive relationships with other program participants (86%).

2. Please share whether you agree or disagree with the following.

	%
Overall, I liked [program]. (N=33)	100%
I felt comfortable sharing my thoughts with The Link staff. (N=30)	100%
I built positive relationships with The Link staff. (N=32)	100%
I built positive relationships with other program participants. (N=21) ^a	86%

^a This item was not applicable for Community Navigator Program participants, as this program does not include a group component.

Note: There were only two response options for these items (i.e., “agree” and “disagree”).

Respondents also reported that they learned new skills, including positive ways to deal with life challenges (94%), skills that can help participants find and be successful at work (100%), how to make healthy decisions (100%), and how to positively deal with stress (91%; Figure 3). Additionally, almost all participants agreed that staff helped connect them with services or resources and that they identified goal(s) they want to achieve (97% each).

3. Please share whether you agree or disagree with the following: While in [program]...

	%
I learned positive ways to deal with challenges in my life. (N=34)	94%
I learned skills that can help me find and be successful at work. (N=33)	100%
I learned how to make healthy decisions. (N=33)	100%
I learned how to positively deal with stress. (N=32)	91%
The Link staff connected me to services or resources I could benefit from. (N=32)	97%
I identified one or more goal(s) I want to achieve. (N=31)	97%

Participant voices

Before The Link, I wasn't doing much besides working, school, hanging with friends, doing what everybody thinks is cool. Smoking. What teenagers do nowadays. If I wasn't hanging out with my friends, I would be home, playing video games, helping my mom with stuff around the house.

I was nervous at first. New people, didn't know anybody. After a week, the workers made me feel comfortable. Everyone there was respectful. The workers would say, "Every day, show respect. If someone wants to talk, let them talk." I feel welcomed. They don't backlash me over what I've done or who I am. They treat me like another person.

We talked, shared life problems, how we're doing. Things about ourselves. What we can do to make things better. What path I can take that won't lead me to trouble. We talk about interesting things, real-life scenarios. Real-world situations, our opinions on real world things. Showing us how to be better. If you need an ID, they'll help you with that. Financial situations, they'll help you reach out to resources, rent, food. They're helping the community.

[Staff] was always giving good advice. Talking about changes, staying out of jail, do better with your life. He talked about his emotions, and how our emotions can lead us down the wrong path. Helped us think about them. We talked about maturity. "Your partner is cheating on you. Do you want to put your hands on your partner?" You can choose letting your emotions take over, go to jail, or be a mature person and let it go. I've used his advice multiple times.

The things I've learned and taken in, I would say I stress less. I think about things differently. I see problems in a different way. With The Link, they helped me release my stress, not get too overwhelmed. Understanding yourself, what your features are, what you're good at, what you're not, loving yourself more.

They're doing a good job. It's something you want to go to every day.

Most respondents agreed that participating in the program improved their relationships with family members or friends (78%), taught them about healthy relationships look like (97%), helped them feel more hopeful about their future (97%), and taught them how to find community resources (97%; Figure 4). All respondents agreed that the program encouraged them to think about consequences of their actions before making decisions.

4. Please share whether you agree or disagree with the following; [Program]...

	%
Improved my relationships with family members or friends. (N=32)	78%
Taught me what healthy relationships look like. (N=32)	97%
Encouraged me to think about the potential consequences of my actions before making decisions. (N=32)	100%
Helped me feel more hopeful about my future. (N=33)	97%
Taught me how to find community resources that can help me. (N=32)	97%

Respondents were asked to share more details about the responses to items in Figure 4. Most commonly, respondents made positive comments about staff or other participants or about the program (Figure 5).

5. Is there anything else you want to share about your responses to [the items in Figure 4? (N=6)

	N
Positive comment about staff or other participants	3
Positive comment about the program (e.g., I appreciate the [program])	2
Learned new skills	1
Accessed new resources (e.g., General Assistance)	1

Note: The data in this table represent summarized themes from open-ended responses. Individual responses may include multiple themes.

This program has helped me with my personal needs, like getting my life in order and looking for work. They're also helping me get a state ID and to get county benefits like General Assistance cash.

Great program. [I'm] actually going to change.

Learned a lot of things I could use in my day-to-day life. Staff are very respectful and kind.

Everybody treats you like family.

Most respondents also reported that their school attendance improved (72%); they are more interested in school (73%); and that their communication skills, ability to solve conflicts, and ability to manage and express their feelings improved (90%, 97%, and 90%, respectively; Figure 6).

6. Because I participated in [program]...

	%
My school attendance improved. (N=29)	72%
I'm more interested in school. (N=30)	73%
I'm better at making decisions that help me reach my goals. (N=33)	100%
My communication skills improved. (N=31)	90%
My ability to solve conflicts improved. (N=31)	97%
My ability to manage and express my feelings improved. (N=30)	90%

Participant voices

I mainly met with [staff person]. We went over career goals, housing goals, self-improvement goals. We would go out for lunch here and there. It was mainly spending time figuring out what I wanted to get done.

I was behind on rent, not making the most amount of money that I wanted to. We really hammered those out, got caught up on rent, got a new job. We were even able to get rid of a relationship that wasn't healthy for myself. With him helping, it was mainly easier to pick them out one-by-one instead of all of them at once. Having someone to listen to me. That things happen and you can't just dwell on it. You have to move forward, move past it, instead of doing nothing about it.

It's nice people that run it. They're not pushy. They're straightforward with you. It doesn't feel like a treatment program. Just something that can benefit you in the long run, whatever you put into it.

[Without The Link], I would probably be a lot further behind. Probably wouldn't have an apartment, not have a job. I wouldn't be able to comprehend how to do both. It put a lot of stress at ease. My money management is a lot better. I have a better credit score. I don't have an eviction on my record. There are plenty of things to be grateful for that I might not have had if I hadn't signed up. Learning how to live as an adult.

Respondents were asked to share the part of the program that they liked the most. They most frequently identified the relationships they developed or interactions with staff or participants (n=10; Figure 7). They also commonly shared that they liked everything (n=5) and identified specific activities or events (n=5).

7. Which part of the [program] did you like the most? (N=32)

	Number
Relationships or interactions with staff or participants	10
Everything	5
Specific activities or events (e.g., Saturday events, music program)	5
Group discussions	4
Food	4
Achieved goals	3
Learning new skills	2
The structure	1
Receiving help	1
One-on-one meetings	1

Note: The data in this table represent summarized themes from open-ended responses. Individual responses may include multiple themes.

Everything about it is perfect. [It's a] place to reflect and learn new tips on how to go about things.

Getting goals accomplished.

They were nice to me and didn't give up even when it seemed like we were going nowhere.

I liked the one-on-one meetings... To talk about the things that were weighing heavy.

I liked being able to come and work out. Just another place to take out extra energy. Learning new ways to deal with stress.

When asked what changes they would make to the program they participated in, respondents most commonly said they wouldn't change anything (n=17; Figure 8). Some made suggestions regarding using a larger space, a different location, or different hours (n=4).

8. What changes would you make to [program], if any? (N=29)

	Number
Nothing	17
Bigger space, different location, or different hours for programming	4
Improve specific activities or resources (e.g., better gaming consoles, bringing lunch, better snacks and drinks)	3
More resources	1
More frequent visits	1
Allow participants to give gifts to program staff	1
Lower caseloads	1
Incentives	1

Note: The data in this table represent summarized themes from open-ended responses. Individual responses may include multiple themes.

The person that comes to my house should come at least twice per week instead of just once.

[I] wouldn't [change anything]. It was an amazing program to be in.

Pay the teens money for being good.

Only have one client on caseload.

All respondents reported that they would recommend the program they participated in. When asked why they would recommend the program, respondents most commonly made general comments about how they liked the program or found it helpful (n=7; Figure 9). Some respondents also shared that the program helped them accomplish things, be more successful, improve themselves, or make progress in life (n=5) and build positive relationships with staff or other participants (n=5).

9. Would you recommend the [program]? Why would you recommend or not recommend the [program]?

Would you recommend [program]? (N=34)	100%
Yes	
Why would you recommend or not recommend [program]? (N=26)^a	
Program was helpful or I liked the program (unspecified)	7
Helps you accomplish things, be more successful, improve yourself, or make progress in life	5
Positive relationships with staff or other participants (e.g., they keep in contact with you, staff are nice, positive community)	5
Other people need the same help I did	3
Program is easy or fun	3
Keeps you out of trouble	2
Specific outcomes (e.g., my grades improved)	1
Program is better than others	1
Helps you access services or resources	1
Helps change your mindset or attitude	1

^a The data in this table represent summarized themes from open-ended responses. Individual responses may include multiple themes.

It is a very helpful program that can almost help with anything you need.

For some girls, it may feel isolating in the world. This program provides a positive community.

For the support and love.

They help get sh*t done.

Helped me get back on my feet from almost nothing, so it can [do the same] for someone else.

I would recommend this program because they helped me pursue things that I don't think I would have been able to do on my own.

Because your body's health and mental health goes hand-in-hand. I felt good coming, training my body, and also with coming to the programs, my grades improved.

It's very helpful and keeps you out of trouble.

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