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ENGELBERG CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Main Findings and Insights from an Evaluation Study of Three Models of Centers for Youth at Risk: Meitar, Ironoar and Muntada al-Shabab

Paula Kahan-Strawczynski ♦ Liat Vazan-Sikron

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Executive Summary

1. Introduction

The centers for youth at risk – Meitar in Haifa, Ironoar in Rehovot and the Muntada al-Shabab in the Arab communities (in Kafar Manda, Reine, Tamra and I'billin) – are frameworks for providing long-term, comprehensive responses for youth. Meitar in Haifa and Muntada al-Shabab in the Arab communities in the North target youth at risk who are disconnected from other educational frameworks, while the Ironoar model targets all youth in Rehovot and is designed to respond to the general needs of youth by integrating different services under one roof.

The evaluation study of the centers had four objectives: (1) to examine characteristics of the youth who actually come to the centers, and the extent to which they match the target population as defined in the centers' programs; (2) to provide feedback about the process of implementing the centers as a basis for initiating improvements in all aspects of operation; (3) to examine the changes in critical aspects of the youths' lives after a period of interaction in the center, and the way they and the professionals perceive the centers' contribution to the youths' lives; (4) to examine the role of the centers within the system of local services.

According to these objectives, five main areas were investigated: (1) Characteristics of populations treated at the center according to socio-demographic variables – educational and employment background, existence of risk situations in different areas of life, reasons the youth come to the centers, and their expectations from treatment. (2) Work processes at the centers, including ways of approaching/reaching the youth, intervention procedures and stages, activities offered, and the extent of consideration given to the needs and preferences of the youth. Team work practices at the centers were also examined, as well as the extent of provision of responses to basic needs such as food, clothing, and personal hygiene conditions. (3) Characteristics of the centers' employees, such as educational and professional background, on-the-job training at the center, and training needs not provided. (4) Collaborative work processes between the centers and other services, including the extent of continuity and follow-up established between the center and the other services, as well as the extent to which the centers complement existing services in the system. (5) Outcome of the centers' work on two levels: the first - treatment of the youth, such as matching needs and responses, and the extent of integration within normative educational and employment frameworks; and the second - youth services in the city where the center operates, i.e., its integration into the local system of services, and an evaluation of the added value of the responses it provides.

The evaluation had two phases: the first stage was conducted during the first year that the centers were in operation (late 2003 – early 2004); and the second stage was conducted a year to a year-and-a-half after the beginning of the study (late 2004 – early 2005).

Information about the centers' activities was received from various sources, which included center directors, youth who are participating in the centers, parents, directors of services at the executive level, and key people from local-level services.

During the first stage of the evaluation, center employees filled out questionnaires about participating youth in order to obtain demographic data, information about treatment and services offered by the center, and attendance patterns of the youth at the center. In the second stage, youth about whom questionnaires had been filled out during the first stage were located. Telephone interviews were then conducted about their satisfaction with the service they received at the centers, and about the contribution the centers had made to their lives and well-being. The study was conducted as a “formative evaluation” which allowed the centers’ staffs and steering committees to provide feedback and detailed information. Additionally, separate reports that included detailed information on each of the models were submitted to the professionals and policy workers involved in the development of each center.

This report includes integrative analysis of the information gathered on the various models. It addresses pivotal, common issues, with the aim of achieving insights into the implementation strategies, strengths, and challenges of these centers, which other similar centers are likely to encounter. In order to provide a broad perspective and put the lessons learned from this evaluation into a wider context, the international literature was reviewed: Principles and methods considered to be effective in providing services to youth at risk were identified. The centers' work was evaluated in relation to these principles and their implementation at the centers. It was evident that these principles are, in fact, utilized, to one extent or another, in all the centers.

2. Main Findings and Future Directions

2.1 Characteristics of the Youth at the Centers

Most of the youth come from families with a range of problems: Relative to the general population, a large percentage come from single-parent families or large families (having at least four children), as well as families that have experienced distressing events, such as the imprisonment, illness or hospitalization of a parent. The poor economic conditions of these families is noteworthy, particularly among center participants from the Arab communities, whose families find it difficult to provide basic necessities.

There were differences between Meitar and Muntada al-Shabab, on the one hand, and Ironoar, on the other. The youth attending Ironoar had fewer problems in their families, compared with youth at the other centers. It became evident that at Ironoar, which attracts a heterogeneous population of youth (and not necessarily youth at risk), there was a smaller percentage of reports of alienation and risk behavior. At Meitar, compared to Ironoar, there was a noticeably higher percentage of risk behavior and disconnection from normative frameworks; at Muntada al-Shabab, there is a relatively high percentage of youth involved in criminal behavior. Similarly, in comparison to the living conditions of the Jewish youth, those of the youth in the centers in the Arab communities (large families, unemployment of the major breadwinner, and problems providing basic needs) are noticeably poorer. The same applies to the comparatively higher percentage of working youth in the Arab communities.

These findings shed light on the needs of the youth at the centers, and on the issues that should be addressed by them, such as preventing and treating risk behaviors (such as drug and alcohol

abuse), connecting youth to educational frameworks, and helping them find employment and access other community services.

2.2 Accessibility of the Centers

One of the principles of implementing programs for youth at risk indicated by the literature is the need to find ways to increase the accessibility of the programs to the youth, as well as to maintain long-term attendance – not only physical accessibility (i.e., a location convenient to the area where the youth live), but also emotional accessibility. It is important to ease their integration into the centers and give them a feeling of belonging and of personal security (AYPF, 2006; Raley et al., 2005).

This principle is manifested, for example, by the attempts of center employees to bring youth centers “closer” to the youth living in outlying areas by providing transportation, as in the case of the Muntada al-Shabab and Meitar centers. At the same time, there is a feeling of satisfaction among the youth with regard to the physical structure and maintenance of the centers – evidence of an investment of resources in creating a pleasant and welcoming environment.

One way to increase emotional accessibility is to utilize professional practices that take into account the needs of the youth, and problems of integration and adjustment. At the Muntada al-Shabab and Meitar centers, the integration process showed consideration for the youth and their ability to persevere.

A social club, or an area for informal social activities, is another way to forge emotional accessibility among the youth. This space within the centers is a place for the youth to spend informal leisure time and meet with other young people, and invites them unconditionally to come into the centers. This area is also a place where new recruits can begin to feel at home in the center. However, in the Muntada al-Shabab and Ironoar centers, it turned out that young people use this space infrequently. The employees say that this stems from a lack of facilities - such as games, which would make the space more attractive - as well as the fact that the staff do not encourage the youngsters to spend their free time there.

Another issue that arose in all of the centers – and which may be a significant obstacle to creating accessibility – is violent behavior. Despite efforts to deal with the problem, a considerable percentage of young people at all the centers complained of violence and vandalism, making it difficult to establish a sense of security at the centers.

Follow-up of the youth who participate in the centers is also a way of expressing interest, of making the young people feel wanted and missed when they do not show up, of encouraging their attendance, and of strengthening the relationship with them. At Meitar, the daily encouragement of young people to come to the center took the form of follow-up of attendance, wake-up calls and contacting them by telephone in the mornings. At Ironoar, there is no systematic follow-up because of problems in creating differential follow-up that would focus on the needs of the youth

at the highest levels of risk. At the Muntada al-Shabab center, follow-up is mostly a means of supervision and creating boundaries, but does not increase the centers' emotional accessibility.

2.3 Suggested Directions for Increasing the Accessibility of the Centers

- ◆ From employee reports and from the sparse attendance of youth at the social club, at Ironoar as well as at Muntada al-Shabab, there is a need to find ways of improving the club and attracting youth to come and make use of this resource.
- ◆ At the Muntada al-Shabab and Ironoar centers, there is a need to reconsider the follow-up methods. At Ironoar there is a need to consider a more systematic approach to integration, as well as formulate a process that would enable more intensive communication and follow-up of youth who are at greater risk. In addition, as an integral part of the follow-up of the youth, it is also worth creating a central pool of information about those who participated in different activities and about their attendance, and to find ways of enhancing regular attendance. At the Muntada al-Shabab centers, the follow-up should not only be a means of supervising attendance but, more importantly, a means of increasing the youth's feeling that someone is interested in them - a way to enhance their sense of belonging to the centers.
- ◆ There is a need to formulate effective, agreed-upon ways to address the violence and vandalism that make it hard to create a sense of security at the centers.

2.4 Ways of Publicizing the Centers and Youth Outreach

In all the youth centers, doubts and reservations arose about publicizing and marketing the centers. At Ironoar, there was apprehension that publicizing the center would give it the image of a place merely for recreation. At the Muntada al-Shabab centers, they feared that publicity would encourage potential drop-outs to leave school. Nevertheless, in both these models, publicity measures were taken: Various community events were sponsored and advertisements were handed out, and at Ironoar they advertised in the local newspaper and on billboards.

At Meitar and Ironoar, the extent of outreach is rather limited: At Meitar a “children of the night patrol car” operates under the auspices of Sahlav which is entrusted with youth outreach, but there were doubts about its effectiveness in marketing the center to youth. At Ironoar, the limited outreach stemmed from lack of funds. Accordingly, only a small percentage of the youth came to these centers through outreach. In contrast, at the Muntada al-Shabab centers, more systematic consideration was given to outreach, which was the major strategy for recruiting youth for the centers – one of the only means of recruiting girls.

A review of the literature reveals that outreach is considered a most effective way of reaching youth (Herrera & Arbretton, 2003; Raley et al., 2005; Lauver et al., 2004; AYPF, 2006). However, it is considered difficult to implement. One of the reasons for this is the ease of working with populations who are already coming to activities on their own, as opposed to the energy required to go out into the field, find the youth and patiently recruit them.

2.5 Suggested Directions for Increasing the Recruitment of Youth at the Centers

- ♦ From the reports of the directors of both Meitar and Ironoar, and from the findings on attendance at the centers through outreach, there is a need to give higher priority to outreach at these centers. The centers should take this into consideration, particularly in relation to groups of adolescents who do not attend the centers (such as girls and Ethiopian adolescents at Meitar, as well as normative youth at Ironoar), and during times when the centers are not operating at full occupancy.

2.6 Offering a Variety of Activities

The importance of offering a variety of activities that will attract different groups of adolescents to the centers according to different areas of interest, and enable them to acquire a variety of skills, is noted in the literature (Garrett et al., 2003; Reid & Tremblay, 1994). However, there is some apprehension that an overly broad range of activities will come at the expense of focusing on promoting the main objectives in general, and advancing the youth in particular (Moore & Zaff, 2002). In addition to variety, the literature ascribes importance to the fact that activities be meaningful and enable the youth to acquire various life skills, such as time management, personal budget management, interpersonal communication, assertiveness, etc. (Eccles & Templeton, 2004).

The centers were defined from the outset as services that are supposed to provide comprehensive, therapeutic, educational-scholastic responses, as well as leisure-time activities. As such, they are supposed to provide a variety of activities and responses for adolescents.

Most of the adolescents reported coming to the centers for the purpose of participating in certain activities, not only for the opportunity to be with friends. It is evident from their reports that they participate in the range of activities offered by the centers. Moreover, the youth reported relatively high satisfaction with the activities, and found them relevant.

However, in Meitar and Muntada al-Shabab, the youth are usually involved in one type of activity – educational activities in Muntada al-Shabab through the Hila program, and skills and therapeutic activities in Meitar through leisure and enrichment activities (for therapeutic purposes).

2.7 Suggested Directions for Increasing the Variety of Activities

Full implementation of the holistic approach advocated by the centers must be addressed, in light of the problems and obstacles encountered in relations between partner services and the centers.

- ♦ More specifically: At Meitar, there is a need to supplement educational activities that will allow the youth to complete their education, on the one hand, and to acquire employment skills, on the other. This is mainly due to the fact that approximately half of the youth were not in any educational or employment framework when they joined the center. At Muntada al-Shabab there is a need to improve the therapeutic and prevention responses in view of the problems and exposure to risk behavior encountered by center participants, as reported at both stages of the study.

2.8 Building a Professional, High-quality and Permanent Staff

Though most staff come to the profession out of a sense of mission, the job nevertheless often has a high turnover rate. The literature refers extensively to the fact that this issue requires special attention. The reasons for professional burnout emanate, among others, from a sense of lack of appreciation of their work from their surroundings, the limited scope of the positions, poor remuneration, and the feeling that the job is not truly a profession. (Raley et al., 2005; Yohalem, 2003).

Reports by center directors indicate that all center employees have a post-secondary education, and most have the relevant education for their jobs. Additionally, most of them have some kind of experience – ranging from one to four years – in working with youth. Employees reported a high degree of satisfaction with their work with youth and their ability to influence their lives. However, there was ambivalence regarding the nature of their occupation, stemming from difficulties with demands and conditions of employment. Staff referred to the long work hours, personnel shortages, limited scope of the positions, lack of regular funding for positions, making job security problematic. All of these lead to difficulty in holding the position over time and result in burnout.

The literature points to the importance of having a permanent, experienced staff, and indicates that training can be a way of coping with burnout, a source of instruction for colleagues, a means of discussing hardships and dilemmas, building work procedures and sustaining staff. However, the study showed that the centers' financial problems prevented the establishment of regular, structured training for the multidisciplinary staff. In some of the centers, therefore, differential training models were created for every staff member employed by the organization. Although this resolved the problem of lack of training at the centers to some extent, it did not deal with the needs of employees who are rooted in the particular context of the center and, at times, even created differences among employees from different frameworks.

2.9 Suggested Directions for Building Staff

It is important to invest in preventing burnout among, and maintaining the stability of, an experienced and permanent staff. In light of the challenges confronting staff members, and because these are innovative models for working with youth at risk, it is essential to make staff training a top priority. It is vitally important to create training and instruction programs unique to the centers, focusing on a comprehensive approach and enabling the formulation of standardized work procedures and teamwork among the members of the multidisciplinary staff.

2.10 Establishing Meaningful Adult-adolescent Relationships

The literature indicates that a positive relationship with adults is a key element in successful work with youth. In different studies, such a relationship has been found to have a positive influence on scholastic achievement, modify behavioral and risk-behavior problems, and raise the adolescents' sense of self-assurance and self-esteem. This is crucial, particularly in services for youth at risk and for adolescents who have dropped out of normative frameworks, especially since this population is characterized by unsuccessful past attempts to establish relationships with other

professionals and significant adults (studies quoted in Moore & Zaff, 2002; Quinn, 1999; Jekielek et al., 2002).

Establishing positive relationships with adults is one of the goals of the centers; importance is given to creating warm and supportive bonds with the centers' employees. Reports from all the centers indicate that most of the youth were highly satisfied (90% and above) with their relationship with the staff, their availability and their willingness to help. However, it was found that lower percentages (between 60%-80%) of the youth view the employees as someone to whom they can turn in times of crisis or difficulty.

2.11 Courses of Action for Strengthening Emotional Support of the Youth in the Centers

A relatively high percentage of young people are satisfied with their relationship with, and accessibility of, the staff, and even indicated that they feel they can turn to staff in an hour of need. However, we must address the 20%-40% of young people at the various centers who did not feel that they had a personal relationship with staff or could turn to a staff member in critical or difficult situations. Ways to increase trust and establish more meaningful ties with staff members should be sought.

2.12 Empowering Youth and Enabling Them to Participate in the Ongoing Functioning of the Center

Much emphasis has been placed in the literature on the importance of empowering young people and giving them opportunities to be involved in program planning and decisionmaking (Reid & Tremblay, 1994; Quinn, 1999; NCFY, 2007; Perkins & Borden, 2003). Such collaboration is important not only to the youth, but also to the organizations themselves, in their efforts to adapt services to the needs and priorities of young people. It also creates an opportunity for adults to become familiar with how adolescents think and to derive innovative and original ideas from them (Quon Huber et al., 2003, Villarruel et al., 2003).

Significant percentages of youth at the different centers ascribe importance to their being included in the centers' decisionmaking processes, and even feel that they are currently being included in this process, to some degree. Youth empowerment is on the agenda of all the centers, and at most of the centers young people are partners in creating their own treatment programs.

An examination of the active involvement of youth in organizational decisionmaking at the centers indicated that only Ironoar had adopted the idea of involving young people in organizational decisions – manifested by the establishment of a committee integrated into ongoing center activities, made up of youth who were active in the various center frameworks. Yet, despite the extensive activity of the committee, it was found that one-third of the youth at Ironoar did not know about the existence of this forum, which was supposed to be representing them.

A different method of empowerment was reported at the Muntada al-Shabab centers – manifested mostly by community involvement through volunteer programs. There was no systematic

reference to this subject at Meitar, either in the community's or the center's organizational decisionmaking.

2.13 Courses of Action for Empowering Youth at the Centers

There is a need to create more opportunities and establish mechanisms for empowering youth in the centers themselves, and in the community, largely because the youth themselves ascribe great importance to their being included in the decisionmaking process. In addition, since the youth who come to the centers are at risk, having experienced many problems in their lives, it is possible that these activities may effectively change their perception of themselves as only being in need of help. They may learn to perceive themselves as being able to make a contribution to the community; as being partners in important and relevant decisions concerning the operation and improvement of the centers.

2.14 Cooperation among Services

One of the operational principles presented in the literature is the need for cooperation and involvement among the various community services. This applies both to the incorporation of a new service into the existing system and to the establishment of continuity of treatment through a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary approach to the needs and welfare of the child. The various frameworks should take joint responsibility (Reid & Tremblay, 1994; Walsh et al., 1999; Eccles & Templeton, 2004; Martin & Halperin, 2000; MacLellan, 2000).

From the reports of service providers and center employees, it is evident that although the centers were based on the idea of inter-service cooperation, in fact, there have been difficulties and obstacles resulting in problems in providing responses in different areas of life. The absence of an educational component to Meitar stems from a decision by the Ministry of Education, which did not recognize the need to set up the service within the center because other study centers already existed in Haifa. At the Muntada al-Shabab centers, the lack of therapeutic and preventive responses stemmed from non-payment of the social workers' salaries, which ultimately led to their dismissal during the period of the study.

Another aspect of the continuity of care is to ensure ongoing treatment after it ends at the center. From the findings, it is evident that only a small portion of the youth who no longer come to the centers continue to be in touch with, or continue to receive responses from, the various community services. Thus, only 44% of the youth at Meitar reported that they are in touch with another service. Although this is not an insignificant percentage, in light of the extent of the needs of the youth, there is an expectation that a larger percentage will receive care via other community services. At the Muntada al-Shabab centers, not even one young person is in touch with other services after completing treatment at the centers. Because most of these young people are over the age of 18, this finding may point to the problem of providing services to older youth, in general, and to Arab young people, in particular. Nineteen percent of the youth at Ironoar reported having some kind of contact with a service, but it is hard to estimate if this percentage is high or low in light of the diverse population attending the center.

2.15 Courses of Action for Achieving Cooperation among Services

There is a need to establish a mechanism that will provide continuity of care, examining and following up the integration and continued treatment of the youth in other services.

2.16 Changes that have Occurred in the Lives of the Youth during the Course of the Study

The study not only examined the youths' satisfaction with the centers, but also the centers' contribution to their personal lives and welfare. To this end, a comparison was made of the youth's primary activities and their involvement in risk behavior, between the two phases of the study.¹ However, in the absence of a control group, it was not possible to attribute changes directly to the program.

The findings indicate a significant decline in the percentage of alienated youth in Meitar, as well as an increased rate of youth at school and of those combining school and work. These findings are consistent with the center's goal of decreasing the alienation experienced by youth and increasing integration into educational or employment frameworks. At the Muntada al-Shabab centers, there was, indeed, a slight rise in the percentage of working youth compared to those studying, but in most cases this change can be attributed to completion of studies or the end of the period of entitlement for studying through the Hila program.

The findings indicated a decrease at Meitar in the percentage of youth abusing drugs between the two phases of the study, and at the Muntada al-Shabab centers there was a decrease in the percentage of youth who had problems adjusting to frameworks. Additionally, there was a considerable decrease in the percentage of youth involved in unlawful behavior (having a police record, being involved in crime, or spending their time loitering with street gangs), and the percentage of youth who attempted suicide also dropped. This significant improvement in the situation of the youth – particularly with regard to their involvement in crime and street gangs – is probably the result of their participation at the centers, which provided them with an alternative to roaming the streets.

¹It was not feasible to check these changes in the lives of the youth who participated in the activities at Ironoar because of difficulty of identifying those who had been interviewed in both phases of the study. This was due to the center's refusal to provide identifying details for the youth in the first phase that would enable reconstruction and matching of the information between the two phases. It was therefore possible to match only 26 of the youths, a number too small to draw any conclusions about changes in the situations of the youth at the center.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Evaluation Study of the Centers: Objectives, Research Tools and Data Gathering	2
2.1. Study Objectives and Areas Examined	2
2.2. Study Design	3
3. Theories and Approaches for Working Effectively with Youth – Review of Literature	3
3.1. Positive Youth Development – Background, Main Ideas and Methods of the Approach	4
3.2. Joint Operating Principles for Youth Programs Evaluated as Successful	6
a Expanding Accessibility of the Service and Increasing its Attractiveness	6
b Providing a Variety of Activities to Enable the Acquisition of Skills	11
c Professional, High-quality and Permanent staff	12
d Creating Meaningful Relationships between Youth and Adults: Emotional Support from an Adult	14
e Empowering Youth and Incorporating Them in the Processes of Planning, Integration and Decisionmaking for the Ongoing Functioning of the Program	16
f Holistic Community Approach – Collaboration among Services and Joint Responsibility for the Welfare of the Youth	18
g Systematic and Orderly Program Evaluation as a Means of Drawing Conclusions and Making Improvements	19
4. Description of the Centers	19
4.1. Meitar	19
4.2. Ironoar	21
4.3. Muntada al-Shabab	22
4.4. Common principles	24
5. Characteristics of the Youth at the Centers	24
5.1. Personal Characteristics	24
5.2. Family Characteristics of the Youth	25
5.3. Main Pastime of the Youth	25
5.4. Difficulties and Risk Behaviors of the Youth	27
5.5 Treatment History of the Youth	28
6. Work Principles and their Implementation in the Framework of the Centers	29
6.1. Making the Centers Accessible and More Attractive	29
a Physical Accessibility of the Centers	30
b Emotional Accessibility of the Centers	30

c	Ways to Increase the Accessibility of the Centers: Advertising, Marketing and Outreach as a Means to Reach Youth and their Families	33
d	Presence of Youth at the Centers – Frequency and Consistency of Attendance	35
6.2.	Offering a Variety of Activities to Enable the Acquisition of Skills	36
a	Integration Patterns of the Youth in Centers’ Activities	36
b	The Youth’s Utilization of, and Satisfaction with, the Range of Activities	37
c	Acquiring Skills in the Framework of Activities at the Center	37
6.3.	Building a Professional, High-quality and Permanent staff	38
a	Staff of Employees at the Centers	38
b	Educational Background and Employment Experience	39
c	Staff Satisfaction with their Work at the Centers	39
d	Training and Instruction at the Centers	40
6.4.	Creating Meaningful Relationships between Youth and Adults: Emotional Support of the Youth by Adults	41
6.5.	Empowering Youth and Incorporating Them in the Processes of Planning, Assimilating and Decisionmaking for the Ongoing Functioning of the Centers	42
6.6.	Holistic Community Approach – Collaboration among Services and Joint Responsibility for the Welfare of the Youth	43
7.	Changes that Occurred in the Lives of Youth between the Study Phases	48
7.1.	Main Pastime of the Youth in the Study’s Two Phases	49
7.2.	Changes that Occurred in the Problems and Situations Encountered by the Youth	50
8.	Main Findings and Courses of Action	51
	Bibliography	53
	Appendix A: The Study Design: Information Sources, Research Tools, Data- Gathering Times, Objectives and Areas of Investigation, and Response Rates	57
	Appendix B: The Process of Identifying the Youth and Service Employees for Follow-up and Response Rates	60
	Appendix C: Tables of the Characteristics of the Youth, from Phase 1 of the Evaluation	62

List of Tables

Table 1:	Main Pastime of the Youth up to the Age of 17 in Both Phases of the Study	49
Table 2:	Main Pastime of the Youth Aged 18+ in Both Phases of the Study	50
Table 3:	Problems and Risk Behaviors of the Youth by Gender at the Time of Interview in the Second Phase, Compared with the First Phase of the Study, According to Staff Reports	51

List of Tables in the Appendices

Appendix B

Table B-1:	Youth Interviewed at the Muntada al-Shabab Centers in Both Phases of the Study and the Reasons for not Identifying them, by Center	61
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Appendix C

Table C-1:	Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Youth, by Center	62
Table C-2:	The Youth by Population Group	62
Table C-3:	Family Characteristics of the Youth, by Center	62
Table C-4:	Occupations of the Parents of the Youth, by Center	63
Table C-5:	Situations that May Indicate Distress among the Parents of the Youth, by Center	63
Table C-6:	The Main Problems and Difficulties of the Youth, by Center	64
Table C-7:	Events and Risk Behaviors in the Lives of the Youth, by Center	64
Table C-8:	Behaviors Endangering the Physical Health of the Youth, by Gender and Center	65
Table C-9:	Youth who are Currently or have Been in Out-of-home Placement, by Center	65
Table C-10:	Contacts of the Youth with Various Services During the Past Two Years, by Center	65