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THE ENGELBERG CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

**From Risk to Opportunity –
A Program for Immigrant Youth
Findings of an Evaluation Study**

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The study was initiated and funded by Ashalim



RESEARCH REPORT

RR-515-08



Related Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute Publications

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Kahan-Strawczynski, P.; and Vazan-Sikron, L. Forthcoming. *Main Findings and Insights from an Evaluation Study of Three Models of Centers for Youth at Risk: Meitar, Ironoar and Muntada al-Shabab*. RR-511-08 (Hebrew)

Rivkin, D.; and Shmaia-Yadgar, S. 2007. *Evaluation of the KEDEM Program: Family Group Conferences for Youth Offenders*. RR-491-07 (Hebrew).

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Immigrant youth, aged 12–18, may find themselves at risk from the combined crises of adolescence and immigration. This awareness led to the establishment of an interministerial committee on immigrant youth at risk. Chaired by David Zioni, the committee was to prepare an operative program to address the youngsters' difficulties and, some two years later, it submitted the following recommendations: to implement a national project for immigrant youth – From Risk to Opportunity – that would offer responses to their particular needs. Although the project did not have an official goal, it sought to provide suitable care in at-risk situations and to enhance prevention by working with a whole range of community agencies that are in contact with immigrant youth.

The project's implementation is the responsibility of a national committee, which formulated its principles, sets policy, authorizes intervention programs at individual localities, and approves the warranted budgets. The national committee appointed a national coordinator who is accountable to it. The coordinator is in charge of setting up and implementing the project at the local level. Each locality has its own municipal committee, which acts under the auspices of the local authority. This administrative body develops and is involved in implementing intervention programs.

The national committee recommended several courses of action as a preliminary working model:

- ◆ Strengthening the participants' command of Hebrew and connection to Jewish tradition at cultural and recreational centers
- ◆ Hiring more cultural liaisons at information, counseling, and support centers for youth at risk, who are familiar with the language and culture of immigrant youth from diverse countries of origin
- ◆ Employing counselors who speak the youth's languages in order to identify, monitor and support juvenile offenders
- ◆ Training and developing a workforce and building appropriate treatment tools within existing services
- ◆ Broadening the fieldwork of existing services (*Kidum Noar* youth advancement program, the Service for Youth and Young Adults, and the Service for Girls in Distress), in order to identify, monitor, and provide care for immigrant youth at risk
- ◆ Promoting and encouraging the extension of successful intervention programs to additional localities with priority to programs encouraging parental and family involvement

These recommendations were to be implemented through cooperation among all the relevant municipal services for immigrant youth, based on a comprehensive systemic approach.

Risk to Opportunity was planned as a pilot in four cities – Ashkelon, Nazerat Illit (Upper Nazareth), Hadera, and Beit Shemesh – as part of the national project for immigrant youth. It was

prepared, planned, and funded by an interministerial committee (the national committee) comprised of representatives from the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services, Ashalim, and the local authorities. The Yedidim nonprofit organization was chosen to implement the project in the selected cities. In each city, a municipal committee (sometimes called a local steering committee) was responsible for implementing the programs.

The Engelberg Center for Children and Youth at the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute was asked to evaluate the project, its implementation and its contribution to participating immigrant youth so that a decision could be taken as to extending it to additional localities.

The evaluation study was conducted in two stages, in 2004 and 2006 respectively, in three cities: Hadera, Ashkelon, and Nazerat Illit.¹ It relied on varied sources of information, including youth, program counselors and coordinators, and key municipal and program staff. The interviews were conducted using quantitative and qualitative methods, and addressed a variety of topics: participant characteristics and needs, the project's responsiveness to the needs of immigrant youth in each city, its organization at the local and national levels, its success in identifying youth at risk and its contribution to them.

Findings

1. Project Elements and Goals – Planning versus Implementation

The national committee recommended several areas of action for implementing the umbrella project in each city: Activities at cultural and recreational centers (with the emphasis on improving Hebrew skills), the use of cultural liaisons, monitoring and lending support to juvenile offenders, developing culturally-sensitive approaches within existing services (including staff training about immigrant youth) and broadening fieldwork in order to identify, monitor and provide care for immigrant youth at risk.

Concurrently, the municipal committee in every city submitted program plans to the national committee. These included service provisions for some 500 of the 2,000 or so immigrant youths living in each. All the plans were consistent with the recommendations.

In fact, two-thirds (61%) of the programs were in place in the cities prior to the project's introduction and they subsequently came within the project framework. During the first stage of the evaluation study, around 40% of the programs were found to consist of recreational activity (e.g., sports and art) and 35%, of different forms of school mentoring implemented by Yedidim. Two areas that were meant to address youth at greater risk – Hebrew enhancement and programs for juvenile offenders – were being implemented to a lesser degree.

¹ The plan was to include Beit Shemesh in the evaluation, but at the time of the evaluation, the program was being only partially implemented; ultimately, it was discontinued altogether.

During the second evaluation stage, it was found that a large proportion of the activities that had been in place in Nazerat Illit and Ashkelon in the earlier evaluation stage, had now been discontinued, and the project had been reduced to youth club activities. This was due to cash-flow problems resulting from delays in the transfer of funds to the municipalities (because of bureaucratic snags in the inter-ministerial administration of joint funds). In Hadera, in contrast, the changes were relatively minor since the project there was financed and implemented by the Hadera Development Fund.

2. Target Population versus Actual Participants

Though the project was designed for immigrant youth at risk, there was no clear, consensual definition of this target group. One claim raised by the participating cities was that all youth are at risk, but immigrant youth are more so due to the compounded difficulties of immigration. Consequently, the program was opened up to a heterogeneous group of youth suffering from various levels of difficulty in personal functioning and scholastic performance.

The characteristics of the youth participating in the activities did not indicate high risk in most areas. In both stages of the study, it was found that most of them were attending school in normative frameworks and pursuing academic or vocational tracks leading to matriculation. The truancy rate was comparable to that of the general Jewish population. The same was true of at-risk behaviors: the involvement of project participants in acts of violence was found to be comparable to that of the general Jewish school population. These findings are further evidence that the project did not manage to reach higher-risk target groups even though it was developed and implemented with the intention of addressing also their needs. As regards alcohol consumption, however, the data did show higher percentages than those found in a national youth survey (Harel et al., 2002).

Another discrepancy between the envisaged target population and the actual participants was the relative proportion of nonimmigrant Israeli participants. In both evaluation stages, native Israelis were found to comprise about a quarter of the project participants. The issue was raised in the municipal committees and the national committee. Committee members noted the importance of responding to nonimmigrant youth as well, and the need to avoid stigmatic definitions that would deter immigrant youth from attending project programs. However, the question is whether the project originally intended to take in so large a number of native Israeli participants.

3. Youth Participating in Activities: Patterns of Participation, Satisfaction, and Project Contributions

Patterns of Participation in Activities

In general, lively participation was recorded. Participants attended youth club activities several times a week, totaling a weekly average of 4.5–6 hours. Most tried to attend activities continuously, but a third of the participants in Hadera and 15% of those in the other cities reported interruptions of several weeks to several months. In most cases, this was because they

were busy with something else or they needed to study. In the first evaluation stage, there was a gap between the number registered in programs and the number of actual attendees.

We also examined the extent to which the youth considered the activities to be an opportunity to meet others socially. The findings show that 40%–50% of the participants came solely/also to be with friends and talk with counselors. Most spent a considerable amount of time getting to know friends and counselors – from two or three times a week to every day or almost every day.

Satisfaction

The participants commended the approach of program staff. They expressed appreciation for the staff's emotional accessibility and availability and for their "being there" for them when needed. Most of the youth (approximately 85%) expressed appreciation for the congenial atmosphere at activities, and about 90% reported general satisfaction with an activity/activities. Note that Ethiopian-Israeli participants in Hadera were less satisfied with the staff's attitude and availability, they rated the activities lower, and they were less likely to recommend them to their friends. This finding suggests a need to check whether Ethiopian Israelis encounter different attitudes and if more culturally-sensitive services are necessary to meet their needs.

Project Impact

According to the participants' reports, the main impact in every city was to enhance the quality of leisure time, which is consistent with the nature of youth club activities (enrichment and recreation). A considerable percentage (45%–60%) reported emotional benefit or therapeutic value, including help in coping with difficulties, counseling and support. Relatively low percentages reported scholastic benefit (20%–41%), a finding consistent with the few responses offered in this area.

The coordinators, too, were asked about the project's impact on the participants. Their reports were compatible with what the participants said, i.e., that the project's chief contribution lay in its responsiveness in the areas of recreational activities, social ties and emotional support.

4. Patterns of Work at the Local Level

In Ashkelon and Hadera, municipal coordinators were appointed. They performed their duties in addition to their full-time jobs, which impaired the ability of the municipalities to promote and develop the project's implementation.

Cooperation at the municipal level was examined in the context of one of the project goals – to bring together all the relevant parties working with immigrant youth. In Hadera and Nazerat Illit, the main municipal services already had an infrastructure of cooperation before the project's introduction; upon the project's implementation, cooperation intensified. In Ashkelon, inter-service cooperation improved between the first and second evaluation stages. However, reports by key persons at the municipality revealed that the cooperation built had been limited in extent and goals, and that the discussions had focused largely on administrative and budgetary

problems. According to their reports, the forum scarcely served its members as a venue for mutual consultation and professional discussion. In addition, the decisions of the municipal committee were not properly communicated to the fieldworkers, impeding actual implementation.

The project evaluation examined the services' coordination at the individual level in order to establish individual treatment plans and assess their suitability. The reports suggest that during the first stage, the services did not coordinate treatment. During the second evaluation stage, the project coordinators reported improvement in the flow of information. From about a quarter to more than a third of the youth in the various cities reported that they had been referred to services through the project. However, no systematic work procedures were established for inter-service treatment coordination or mutual referrals. This suggests a need to formalize the working procedures.

5. The Work of the National Committee

The national committee comprised a broad range of professional and ministerial representatives responsible for providing and coordinating the care of immigrant youth. Nevertheless, their work ran into difficulties: some members of the national committee did not regularly attend the meetings, which, however, were attended by delegates whose influence on the system was unclear and whose responsibilities were uncertain. Thus, the national committee's decisions were not always conveyed to the field. Furthermore, the financial difficulties hampering the project focused the meetings too much on bureaucratic-budgetary aspects and less so on professional discussion. This problem also came up in the municipal committees.

One salient finding regarding the national committee's work with the project implementer, Yedidim, was the failure to coordinate expectations about the latter's functions and areas of responsibility. The national coordinator concurrently represented both the national committee and Yedidim, an independent organization that implemented some of the project activities. This sometimes caused a sense of conflict of interest.

6. Implementation of a Comprehensive Project for Immigrant Youth at Risk – Contributions and Difficulties

The strengths of the project came to light from the youth reports on their patterns of participation, on their high level of satisfaction, and on their perception of the project's contribution: it offered participants a variety of leisure and enrichment activities while the clubs provided a place to "hang out" in their free time. Here, they could interact socially with their peers and form meaningful relationships with available significant adults. As regards inter-service work, the project was found to have raised awareness of the importance of cooperation and dialogue and, in some cases, it managed to bolster cooperation and inter-service information exchange.

Nevertheless, the strengths were overshadowed by the problems in realizing its goal of creating a comprehensive, umbrella project for immigrant youth at risk. The actual implementation was lacking, first and foremost, owing to budgetary constraints that led to the downscaling and even

cancellation of many activities in all the cities. The efforts to create a widely-responsive comprehensive project were thus reduced to youth clubs and "warm homes" that focused, as noted, on leisure and enrichment activities. The number of youth attending them was relatively low in relation to the number planned (approximately 500 in each city) and to the number of immigrant youth in those cities (around 2,000 in each, according to the reports of the municipal committees in the project proposals they submitted). In addition, mutual distrust set in between the municipal services, the national committee and the implementing organization, Yedidim, further impeding implementation.

Challenges and Avenues of Action

Defining the Project's Target Population

Defining the target population clearly and consensually will make it easier to adapt responses and lead to more efficient use of resources.

Developing Mechanisms for Putting the Project Concept into Effect to Provide Comprehensive Responses for Immigrant Youth

From Risk to Opportunity was based on the concept that responses to immigrant youth, particularly those at risk, should be comprehensive and concurrently relate to several areas of life, such as language, schooling, leisure, and social integration. However, as the study indicates, this concept was not translated into a fitting action plan for the field.

Inclusion of Hebrew Enhancement and Scholastic Reinforcement Programs

As noted, the interministerial committee that formulated the project pointed to a problem brought up also by the youth interviewed: that their poor command of Hebrew was one of the main obstacles to the integration of immigrant youth into society and at school. Although the committee recommended that Hebrew studies be included in the project's areas of activity, the findings show that this resource was available to only a few participants. The difficulties experienced by the youth and the aspiration to create a comprehensive project show that these important responses should be incorporated as an integral part of the programs.

Consolidation of Work between the National Committee and the Implementing Organization

The difficulties that emerged in the functioning of the national committee and the implementing organization show that the two parties should coordinate expectations, with a clear division of responsibility and operative aims for each of them vis-à-vis the municipalities. The process must relate to the role of the implementing organization in structuring the municipal committees. Furthermore, when selecting the implementing organization, it is important that the national committee check for compatibility between the organization's area of competence and the nature and demands of the project.

With regard to the work of the national committee, the following issues need to be addressed:

- ◆ The professionals comprising the committees and their ability to influence the systems they represent
- ◆ The requirements on attendance at meetings (compulsory or elective) and the possibility of substituting delegates
- ◆ The ways that representatives transmit information to those working in the field or in municipal departments
- ◆ Checking and agreeing on the budgetary and professional inputs of each of the representatives.

There are a number of additional questions and dilemmas regarding the role and responsibilities of the implementing organization:

- ◆ Should the organization supervise the fieldwork or serve as a professional consultant to the relevant municipal agencies?
- ◆ Should the organization distribute inputs equally among the municipalities or should it allow for their differences, according to their needs and municipal structures?
- ◆ May the project's implementing organization use the project framework to implement also its own programs? If so, should the number and/or type of such programs be limited?
- ◆ Who is responsible for informing the municipalities about existing and deferred budgets available to the project? Is this the organization's job or should the national committee assume the responsibility to ensure that the information reaches the field?

Mechanisms of Coordination

Clear coordinating mechanisms must be set up, acceptable to all the agencies, in order to provide every individual teenager with personal care.

Learning from the Budget Problems

Lessons must be drawn from the budget difficulties that emerged during the project and efforts made to prevent similar situations in the future. To this end, expectations should be coordinated, municipalities must be kept informed of developments, and decisions must be taken about operative programs if such difficulties arise.

Encouraging the Municipalities to Take Responsibility (Phasing Out)

More thorough work needs to be done to promote municipality responsibility. Planning of the phasing-out process must be more careful, long-term, structured, and methodical. Given the misunderstandings between the national committee and the implementing organization over responsibility for phasing out, it must be decided in advance which agency will take responsibility for it. Attention must also be paid to the extent of knowledge and experience in implementing these processes and updating the relevant agencies about processes and changes at the local level: for example, does every municipality need to provide periodic feedback about reaching its goals?

The findings have been presented to the study's steering committee and to senior officials at the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, and they served and as a basis for consideration of the project budget and distribution of resources. The findings were also presented to the municipal committees in the three cities at both evaluation stages in order to improve and further the project.

The study was initiated and co-funded by Ashalim.

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