

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT  
INTERVENTIONS IN HIGH-RISK COMMUNITIES:

# AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE YOUTH READY IN GUATEMALA AND ECUADOR

KEY OUTCOME ANALYSIS SUMMARY

JANUARY 31, 2024

---

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

More than 20 million youth in Latin America are either out of school or out of work — the equivalent of one in five 15- to 24-year-olds (de Hoyos et al., 2016). This epidemic, of “opportunity youth” has been linked to widespread violence and organized crime and extreme inequalities in the labor market. Alarming trends in youth violence and risk behaviors have resulted in a proliferation of efforts by the development community and national governments to develop youth-targeted interventions, integrating Positive Youth Development (PYD) frameworks for enhancing youth agency. In 2017, World Vision Canada (WVC) launched the Vision for Vulnerable Youth Initiative (VVYI) using a World Vision (WV) created model called Youth Ready (YR). The project is currently implemented in seven Latin American (LAC) countries: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Bolivia, Perú, Colombia, and Ecuador. The VVYI aims to create an enabling environment to empower youth, through an integrated strategy with training, mentorship, internships, seed capital, scholarships, and peer support, drawing on studies indicating that exposure to positive resources from communities, schools, and parents reduces the likelihood of negative outcomes and fosters positive development (Guerra et al., 2008; Kia-Keating et al., 2011; Youngblade et al., 2007). The Youth Ready program is uniquely modeled as it emphasizes a nurturing environment that integrates Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) into the curriculum design and delivery during the initial six months. In this first stage, youth are guided to select one of three pathways; including employment, education, or entrepreneurship. During the second half of the one-year intervention, the program focuses on mentoring the youth and supporting them to implement their life plan of the pathway selected in stage one.

Research commissioned by WVC and conducted by The Johns Hopkins University (JHU) in Latin America in 2022–2023 examined the effectiveness of the YR intervention on youth agency, education, entrepreneurship, and employment as well as studying context-specific relevance and program practices.

## STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS

To determine the effectiveness of YR interventions, the research evaluation purposively selected Guatemala for Central America, and Ecuador for South America. The research employed a quasi-experimental study design, and the intervention and comparison sites were selected based on specific criteria to ensure comparability. The research was comprised of three components: (1) Quantitative baseline and endline surveys, (2) Qualitative assessment of the YR program with strategic stakeholders using Key Informant Interviews at endline, and (3) a desk review of evaluated grey and published literature on PYD constructs, YR frameworks and models, as well as existing survey instruments. This report provides key outcome analysis summary from the research.

The quantitative baseline survey was conducted in November 2022, before the experimental youth group began the Youth Ready training. The endline survey was carried out after the experimental youth group had received one year of Youth Ready implementation, in December 2023. Sample size and data collected from experimental and comparison site displayed in Table 1. In Guatemala, control group study participants who initially agreed to participate were later not interested in participating in the study. Hence, the final survey only included participants from the experimental site.

	ECUADOR		GUATEMALA	
	EXPERIMENTAL	COMPARISON	EXPERIMENTAL	COMPARISON
Received Whatsapp Study Invitation	175	175	175	175
Participated in Baseline Survey	149 (85.1%)	74 (42.3%)	127 (72.5)	1
Records for Baseline Survey	127 (72.6%)	74 (100%)	127 (100%)	1
Participated in Final Survey	98 (77.2%)	50 (67.6%)	65 (51.2%)	-

**Table 1:** Sample at baseline and final surveys

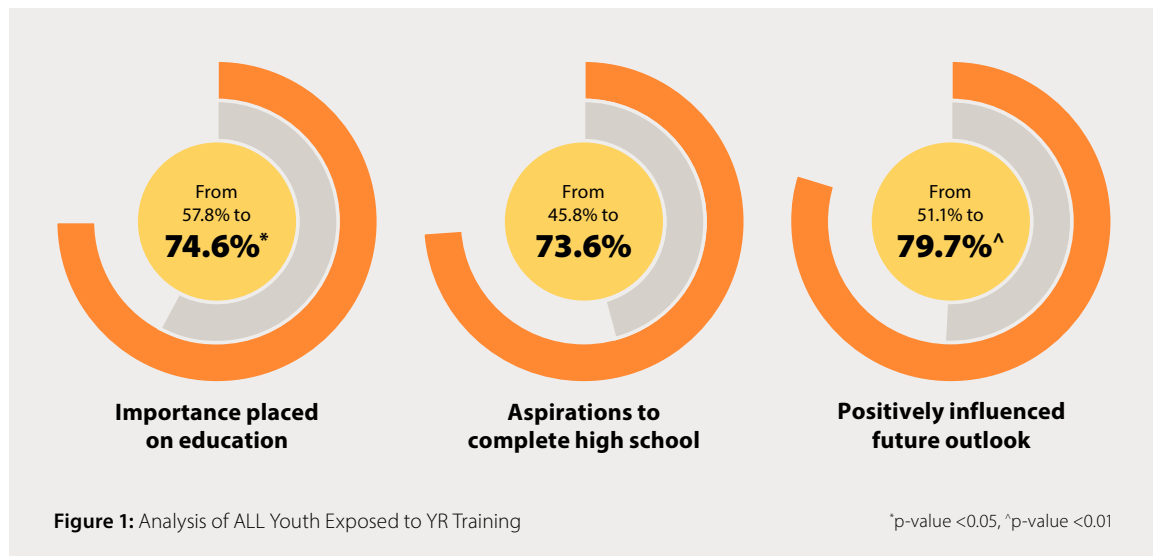
The primary reasons for non-acceptance and participation were fear of gang violence, reluctance to share WhatsApp information lest it be used for political or other reasons, participants leaving study sites for compensated work, or engaged in compensated temporary work assignments.

Two analytical approaches were employed: an intent-to-treat analysis based on initial treatment assignments, regardless of the actual participation in the YR training and, some intervention group participants reporting non-participation. This “as treated” analysis based on actual participation data reported at endline.

## KEY OUTCOME ANALYSIS

### EDUCATION

The analysis reveals that YR Training had a significant positive impact on various factors among participants. Notably, there was an increase in the importance placed on education (from 57.8% to 74.6%, p-value <0.05), aspirations to graduate from high school (from 45.8% to 73.6%), and an improved outlook (from 51.1% to 79.7%, p-value <0.01) among those who underwent the training. Specifically, in Ecuador, the experimental group showed a substantial increase for high school graduation aspirations from 45.9% to 72.4% but no change in the comparison group (24%) between pre- and post- period. A significantly higher proportion experimental group believed that participation in the YR program would improve their prospects from 47.3% to 71.6% (p-value <0.01), and a significant increase in self-employment aspirations from 23.5% to 41.8% (p-value <0.01).

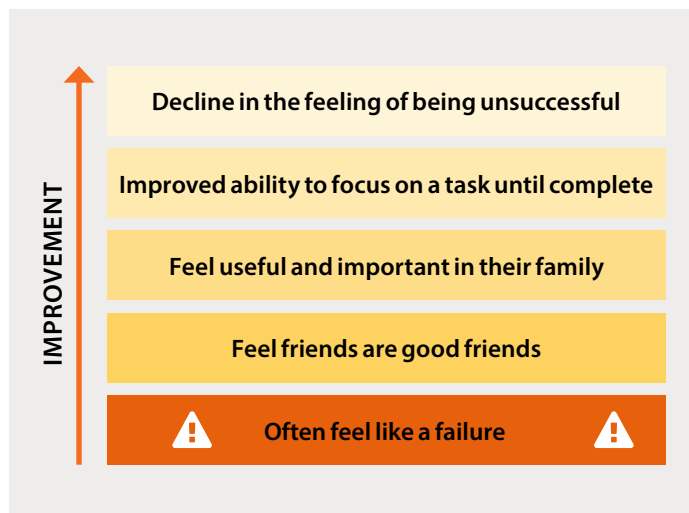


The WV YR program have positively influenced educational and post-educational aspirations and activities in Ecuador, with significant shifts towards high school completion, better outcomes from program participation, and self-employment. A significantly higher proportion of youth in Guatemala who believed that the YR program made a difference to their school performance increased from 40.9% to 100% (p <0.001). Additionally, consideration for dropping out of school reduced from 34.4% to 28.6%, indicating a positive but non-significant trend to education.

In Ecuador, the percentage of students missing less than 5 school days increased in the comparison group from 65.3% to 82.5% and decreased for the experimental group from 68.3% to 62.9%. In Guatemala, 70.8% indicated that financial barrier was the main reason for school non-attendance, 36.9% unable to afford school fees. While economic factors remain a barrier to education in both Ecuador and Guatemala, the intervention did not significantly alter school attendance rates. The data indicates that the program had a positive effect regular attendance.

Continuing education was ranked higher as a common goal for youths participating in the YR program, with rates reaching 100% in the Ecuador comparison group, 59% in the Ecuador experimental group, and 69.8% in Guatemala. Additionally, in Ecuador, a significantly higher proportion of youths in the experimental group identified culture as a barrier to achieving goals, particularly for girls, with a significant increase observed from 39.8% to 66.3% (p-value <0.001), while a similar but non-significant increase occurred in the comparison group. However, as a result of the YR intervention in Guatemala, there was a noteworthy decrease in the belief that girls are sent to school only if not needed at home (p-value <0.05), indicating a positive shift towards valuing girls' education.

## SENSE OF AGENCY



Improvements among Ecuador's experimental group were evident for developing step-by-step plans to reach their goals (74.5% to 85.7%, p-value <0.05). For Guatemala, there was a slight but non-significant increase in those who can handle life's situations, (70.8% to 73.8%), but a significant reduction in those who feel they are unsuccessful (40.0% to 16.9%, p-value <0.01), suggesting a marked increase in self-perceived success post-training. The proportion of youth who reported that it was

important to reach their goals also improved from 89.2% to 97.7%. However, there was a reported decrease in those who felt unsuccessful (Comparison: 28% to 22%, Experimental: 23.5% to 17.3%).

The data suggests that YR Training was associated with improved self-agency among youth in both Ecuador and Guatemala, with significant enhancements in their sense of competency and success. The most notable improvements were in the Ecuador experimental group's feelings of competency and in planning to achieve goals. These findings indicate that the YR Training program may positively influence youth's confidence and ability to engage with life's challenges effectively.

## EMPLOYMENT

Overall findings note that in Ecuador, 64.3% of the experimental group and 83.1% in Guatemala reported that participation in the YR training led to enhanced perceptions of employment options and skills, improved entrepreneurship skills, better future planning abilities, increased resilience in overcoming challenges, enhanced critical and analytical thinking, and improved job-seeking skills, including CV writing, job interviewing, and workplace behavior.

In Ecuador, employment indicators at post-intervention showed some differences in the type of work undertaken by youth and there was a rise in paid chores or activities. In Guatemala, there was a

significant increase from 53.2% to 69.2% (p-value <0.05) in youth reporting engagement in compensated chores or activities in the previous 6 months. Additionally, employment status revealed a highly significant increase in part or full-time employment from 11.9% to 51.1%. This dramatic increase could reflect the program's success in enhancing job readiness or access to employment opportunities.

In Ecuador, employment activities increased by 32.2 percent points (95%CI: 11.5, 52.9) among YR group compared to nonparticipants between pre- and post- period. There was a 27.7 percent point increase (not significant) for employment in Guatemala between pre- and post- period.

### IMPROVED FINANCIAL CAPABILITIES

- ✓ Ability to make financial plans
- ✓ Create a personal budget
- ✓ Borrowing from bank
- ✓ Protection from fraud



Over **95%** reported **IMPROVED** decision-making autonomy and financial independence

For Guatemala, lack of education as an obstacle for employment showed a decline from 19% to 16.9%, and ability to make financial plans increased from 55.4% to 84.6% (p-value <0.05).

In Ecuador, there was a significant decrease in the involvement of mothers in decision-making for the money earned by youth, suggesting improved financial independence. The decrease was not significant for Guatemala. Self-decision-making for earned income improved for Ecuador experimental group from 88.3% to 95.5%, indicating improved financial autonomy.

## ENTREPRENEURSHIP

In Ecuador, the experimental group saw a significant decrease in the preference for entrepreneurship over working for an employer, dropping from 68.4% to 40.8% (p-value <0.001), with a significant DiD (p-value<0.001). Similarly, in Guatemala, there was a decline in the proportion of youth expressing entrepreneurial aspirations, from 61.5% to 41.5% (p-value <0.05), and a decrease in the preference for entrepreneurship (from 40% to 33.8%). Moreover, significant decreases were observed in Guatemala for commitment to initiating a business (from 67.7% to 50.8%, p-value <0.05) and confidence in writing a business plan (from 69.2% to 52.3%, p-value<0.05).

### POTENTIAL CAUSES FOR DECLINED INTEREST IN BECOMING AN ENTREPRENEUR IN EXPERIMENTAL SITES

- **Realism vs Idealism** — Youth may have acquired a more realistic understanding of the challenges involved, tempering initial enthusiasm in entrepreneurship.
- YR program may have enhanced exploring of **alternative career paths**.

Family was mentioned as the main influence for entrepreneurial ventures for the comparison group (80%), with a decline in the experimental group (72.7% to 57.9%). WV staff or Youth Ready Mentors influence was evident for the Ecuador experimental group as there was significant increase (3% to 31.6%) of youth reporting to become entrepreneurs. This was also evident for Guatemala, (18.8% to 41.7%), the influence of businessmen for becoming entrepreneurs increased from 18.8% to 33.3%.

## **FINDINGS FROM KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KII)**

15 open-ended KII were performed from 5 different groups of interest in Guatemala including parents of the youth, schoolteachers, community leaders, youth ready mentors, and business mentors.

Overall, the Youth Ready program in Guatemala has made significant progress in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by the local youth. Before the program's intervention, key informants identified major challenges such as economic limitations, threats like violence and gang involvement (Maras), and general lack of resources. Environmental barriers and limitations included single parent homes, and remote locations of households. The program was praised by the key informants for its goals of empowering youth and providing them with essential academic and employment guidance. It fostered improvements in interpersonal relationships, particularly within families, and was seen as an inclusive initiative with a strong focus on gender and social equity. Recommendations included addressing the identified challenges, particularly resource availability and accessibility issues (like internet access and transportation). Partnering with the local authorities and other organizations was also recommended to scale up and expand the impact.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

- Evidenced effectiveness of the YR interventions to enhance social support, bonding and safety through family, community, school, and the WV program community must be highlighted and recognized and supported for future programming, as these have been shown to be highly successful.
- Close mentoring and follow up by YR mentors were also evidenced to be of immense value to assimilate the training content and operationalize the concepts and tools and foster appropriate decision making and innovate entrepreneurial ventures.
- Decreased drug use and gang involvement, improved family and peer relationships, illustrate enormous value of the YR modules, and integrated in government sponsored youth initiatives to expand competencies of local leaders.
- Contamination was evident, as 11 of the participants in the comparison study arm in Ecuador, reported receiving the YR training intervention. This could have minimized any real difference that exists between the study groups. Though the strength of the study was altered, the awareness, interest, and effort of youth in the comparison site, is a positive finding illustrating the enthusiasm to participate in the YR training.
- Buy-in by local communities and strategic stakeholders like teachers, business mentors, local political leaders are critical prerequisites for the uptake and scale up of YR programs

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Effectiveness of YR interventions must first focus on the intermediate outcomes of perception, behavior, and agency with an emphasis of outcome measures for education for younger youth and employment for older youth. Entrepreneurship aspirations may be considered, but post project longitudinal assessments must be conducted to determine effectiveness of the YR interventions for this measure.
- An incentivized results-based financing option may further enhance the value, acceptance, and successful completion of the YR program. A monetary incentive for participation in evaluation surveys may offset the very high non-acceptance rate and subsequent high attrition rate for urban/semi-urban settings.
- Education outcome measures need further scrutiny, with a focus on education completion for younger youth and employment opportunities for older youth. The YR program aims to guide youth towards continuing technical or vocational schools, higher education, or facilitating accelerated learning if they have dropped out before finishing high school and education is identified as a critical goal in their livelihood plan.
- Compliment psychological support with mental health screening and referral mechanism for high-risk youth, partnering with local clinical psychologists.